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We disappear

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We disappear

by

Ariane Louise Sandford

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Mary Swander, Major Professor
Jon Billman
Amy Slagell

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2007

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ABSTRACT

We Disappear tells the story of the author’s experiences growing up in a diplomat and Christian Scientist family. Each chapter corresponds to a different chapter in the author’s life, as she moves from East Berlin to apartheid South Africa to Washington, D.C. to Munich to Minnesota. The opening and closing chapters of the memoir serve as bookends, and depict the author’s struggle to accept her grandmother’s Alzheimer’s, a disease unacknowledged by her Christian Scientist family.
CHAPTER ONE: A QUIET VANISHING

My grandma and I lift the old pictures gingerly, careful to avoid the disintegrating edges. “And this one was when we moved to Arizona,” she explains.

“You look pretty young there.”

“I think I was about three.”

My grandma in this picture is clutching her mother’s hand, a little blond girl with long corkscrew curls, squinting in the desert sun. “What’s this, Grandma?” I’m holding up a tiny white box, so tiny a standard rubber band is wrapped around it multiple times. When I pick at the rubber it snaps and the box opens like a clam, revealing an impossibly small ring. “Is this a doll ring? It’s so tiny – it won’t even fit on my pinkie,” I say, holding the thing wonderingly in my hand.

“Oh,” Grandma says, as though trying to peer through a fog. “That must be Heloise’s ring. She was my older sister, but she died before I was born. Spinal meningitis. She must have been about two. It was her baby ring.”

I look down at the ring in my hand, suddenly sad for an ancient dead baby I never knew. I put Heloise’s ring back in its velvet cushion carefully and place the box to the side so that I remember to find a replacement rubber band. We move on to another packet of pictures, these slightly more recent.

“So what are you doing these days?” My grandmother asks.

“Well, I’m finishing up school right now, and then I’ll be moving back to Minneapolis.”

“Minneapolis? It’s cold up there.”
“Yeah, it is, but I’ve lived there before so it’s ok.” I try to guide the conversation towards the picture I now hold in my hand, a large sepia-toned 8 X 11” glossy of a man with a round face and dark, almond eyes. “How about this?” I ask, waiting for her smile.

“Mmmm, let me see...no, I don’t think I’ve ever seen that before.”

I study her face for a minute. “Really, Grandma?”

She looks back at the picture, giving the dark-eyed man another shot, but her expression remains blank. “No...” She begins an apologetic laugh. “I just can’t remember, I guess.”

It’s a picture of my grandfather.

According to all accounts, my grandfather was a somewhat overbearing workaholic who didn’t tolerate backtalk. His mother had raised him as strict Baptist, and though as an adult he quit going to church, he didn’t approve of my grandma’s Christian Science. Never one for conflict, my grandmother quietly folded away her religion like last season’s sweaters when she shared her life with my grandfather. They were married for 18 years when my grandpa suffered a sudden and fatal heart attack in his sleep, leaving my grandmother widowed at 44 with two adolescent daughters. This happened in 1959.

A minute later Grandma asks me what I’m doing these days.

“I’m finishing up my degree, and then I’ll move back to Minneapolis.”

“Minneapolis? It’s cold up there.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Are you sure you want to live there? It’s cold.”

“I know, Grandma.”

“Well, that’s certainly the first I’ve heard of anyone moving to Minneapolis.”
It wasn’t always this way. Up until three years ago my grandmother continued to live alone in her big house in Fresno, California, hiring a cleaning woman to come in twice a week to keep the furniture dusted. Then she started doing strange things: leaving the freezer door open for days, wearing the same clothes for a week, forgetting which end to hold the phone. She was firmly against the idea of a nursing home, but clearly she couldn’t continue living by herself. It was decided that she would move in with my parents. Her youngest daughter, my mother, would care for Grandma around the clock. Going into it, I believe my mother had no idea what she was in for.

Alzheimer’s disease, especially in the early stages, is notoriously difficult to diagnose. In fact, the only one hundred percent positive diagnosis of Alzheimer’s a doctor can make is on a cadaver, once they can get in there and examine the brain to see where it’s deteriorated. They can give tests to living patients, sure, but since the disease overlaps with so many similar ailments, it’s difficult to ever know with absolute certainty what the patient suffers. Besides this, many of the early symptoms of Alzheimer’s (forgetfulness, mild depression) can easily be attributed to the natural aging process. So the best doctors can do is diagnose the symptoms as dementia, with a likelihood that the deterioration will progress and become Alzheimer’s.

Not that my grandmother was ever one for doctors anyway. She, like my mother, father, and sister, is a practicing Christian Scientist.

Founded around the time of the Civil War by a Connecticut widow named Mary Baker Eddy, Christian Science is a unique blend of 19th Century progressive philosophy and Biblical
interpretation. Its central tenets focus on the unreality of sickness, evil, and sin. To a Christian Scientist, Jesus was not so much a messiah (saving the world from sin) as a way-shower, teaching mankind how to deliver itself from the illusion of sickness and death. Despite its unusual teachings, in its early days Christian Science enjoyed a quick spike in popularity; around its zenith, in the 1930’s, estimates of the number of adherents came to around 270,000. Since then the Christian Science Church has experienced a slow and steady decrease in members. In today’s popular culture Christian Science is most commonly known as the religion that shuns modern medicine.

Back before she started to fade my grandmother could talk about the night my grandpa died in their bed beside her. I was always impressed by her silent strength and presence of mind; sensing something was wrong with him, she fetched a mirror and held it under his nose to check for the condensation that indicates breathing. When nothing appeared, she knew he was gone.

As we look through the pictures I ask her why she never remarried.

“Well, there was no time for romance, I guess – I had to make a living. Had to support the children.”

“Didn’t you ever get lonely, though?”

“I guess there wasn’t time to get lonely; I had to go to work. I had to make a living.”

“Look at this picture,” I say, holding up a photo of my mother as a little girl on a tricycle. “It’s so cute, her hair cut like that in a little pageboy.”
My grandmother’s brow is still furrowed. “I had to make a living. I had to support the children. I had to make a living.”

“It’s ok, Grandma.”

The great thing about Christian Science is that it engenders a great deal of mental discipline and self-reliance in its practitioners. Believers have had healings after virtually every type of disaster: terrible body burns, cancer, bankruptcy. As a Christian Scientist you are trained both to take matters into your own hands (by reading the Bible and Mary Baker Eddy’s Science and Health) and to trust completely in God. By being able to recognize whatever trouble you’re experiencing as an illusion, you are freed from the physical manifestations of that illusion, i.e. no more burns, cancer, or bankruptcy.

The terrible thing about Christian Science is that is requires a great deal of undistracted discipline and dedication in order to achieve a healing. During a recent visit home I asked my grandma how she was feeling.

“Oh, I don’t know...I’ve been better, I guess.” My grandma lifted a hand to her cheek where a blotch of concealer hid a gash in her skin. Now that she’s ancient her skin has developed the consistency of tissue paper; it tears and bruises so easily.

My mother immediately admonished her. “Now mother, that’s not exactly Christian Science thinking, is it?”

Like a scolded child my grandma hung her head. “No...” Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

Christian Science uses the principle of mind over matter to facilitate healings, but how do you heal yourself when it’s your mind that’s the matter?
During visits to see me my parents have been in the habit of dropping my grandmother off with me while they spend the night at a hotel. As always, this time after they leave I set Grandma up on the couch, arranging blankets around her, taking out her toiletries bag to help her in the bathroom.

“Are they coming back tomorrow?”

“Yes, Grandma, of course. They’re not going to desert you.” I try to sound jovial, but my grandmother’s eyes are huge and scared. I sit next to her and put an arm around her frail shoulders. She pats my hand. I tell her it’s time to get her ready for bed, and she takes my arm as I lead her into my tiny bathroom, one ginger step at a time. When we get there she starts making ineffectual clawing motions at the bottoms of her shirt, and I know I’ll have to undress her myself.

“Raise your arms up, Grandma.” Like a little child she complies as I slip her shirt over her head.

“There, that’s better,” she says, smiling. She pats my arm and I ask her if she needs a new pad at night. She looks confused.

“Alright, Grandma, let’s get you fixed up with one last thing, ok? Can you pull down your old pad? I’m going to put a new one on you for tonight.” This clicks, and immediately she begins trying to pull her Depends down, crouching slightly and occasionally needing a stabilizing hand. Finally she steps out of them, and I help her step into a fresh set.

Afterwards as she settled in on the couch she kept thanking me and worrying that my parents wouldn’t come back for her in the morning.

“Thank you, honey. Thank you.”
“It’s fine, Grandma.”

“Are you sure they’re coming back in the morning?”

“I’m sure.”

She pats my hand and stares into space.

I decide to distract her by asking her questions about her life with Grandpa during the war; her memories of this time are typically solid and since I never met him, I’ve always been curious about the man. “So how did you and Grandpa meet, anyway?”

“Oh – well, I guess we met at school. While he was studying to become a lawyer.”

“And you were in graduate school too, right?”

“That’s right.”

“What were you studying?”

“Business.”

“It’s really pretty amazing that a woman of your generation went to college, let alone graduate school.”

“You know, I can’t even see your face right now.”

This catches me off guard. “Do you need more light or something, Grandma?”

“No...”

I try to redirect her back to her life with Grandpa. I know that they married in June 1941, only months before the US joined World War II, and that my grandpa left to join the Navy. The first four years of their marriage they spent little more than six months together. “So what was it like being married those first few years? There was a war on, and Grandpa went to fight, right?
She wrinkles up her face, straining to think. “I guess that’s right... and of course during that time he was a college professor. He taught history.”

I swallow hard. “No, Grandma. That’s my father. My dad teaches history. Don’t you remember?”

My mother calls me up one evening and we chat for a while about school, the trouble I’ve been having with my car, the best place to buy seafood. I ask her about Grandma and my mother sighs.

“Oh God, she’s driving me crazy.”

“Oh no. How?”

“She follows me around all day, asking the same questions over and over. Constant fretting over little things. It makes me lose my mind. And on other days she just doesn’t ever want to do anything. She just lies there on her little blue couch and stares up into space – no TV on, no radio, nothing. She’s just staring at the ceiling. There is absolutely nothing going on in that head of hers.”

Another time my mother calls me up to offer more dire news of grandma: she’s taken to undressing in the dining room, carefully peeling down her pants and folding them on the table, then trying to start in on her sweater. Most distressingly, once when my parents went on a walk she decided to try to drive, getting bundled up in her coat and climbing into the car.

One night when I call home my mother is putting my grandma to bed.

“Well, it’s time for her nightly cry,” my mother says. “You can put money on it; she cries every night before bed now.”
My mother isn’t sure why grandma cries at bedtime. For a while she suspected my grandma might be afraid of the dark, and my mother went around plugging nightlights into all of the outlets in Grandma’s bedroom. Now she suspects even my grandma doesn’t know why she cries.

Back during the last time my grandmother stayed with me I experienced this trouble with her too. I ask her if she wants me to leave a light on for her and all of a sudden she’s crying, pathetic little sniffs and hiccups and tears dribbling down her chin.

“Grandma! What’s wrong?”

She’s worrying a crumpled shred of Kleenex that’s tucked in her sleeve. “Oh, I don’t know, I don’t know,” she moans between hiccups. For the next half hour or so she continues crying, each sob filled with unrestrained heartache. I sit with my arm around her and for a little while, I cry, too.

After the death of her husband my grandma took the notion of making a living very seriously. As the head guidance counselor at a large public high school, she never took a single sick day for over 25 years.

“She didn’t even take the full day off for my wedding,” my mother still gripes. “She made an appearance at the reception and then went straight back to work.”

Once she finally retired my grandmother took retirement just as seriously, traveling on guided tours every year to countries all over the globe: Japan, Kenya, Scotland. She would bring us back souvenirs, little paper fans from Japan, or shortbread from Scotland. She was an avid picture taker and dutiful journal-keeper, filling whole notebooks with even the most mundane observations:
Wednesday, April 4th. Sky was cloudy and overcast. Bus was late in arriving to pick us up though there was plenty of room on the bus for everyone. We set out at a quarter to ten.

Sometimes when I dream I dream of places that no longer exist. These places are where I grew up, and these homes of my childhood didn’t change in the gradual way that places change over time; they were countries that literally don’t exist any more. In my first childhood home, East Berlin, a song that was popular among the East Germans was called, “Die Gedanken Sind Frei”, or “Thoughts are Free”, and, for a people living under constant government surveillance, the song served as a comforting reminder that the mind, at least, is one possession that no one can take from you.

I have heard the affects of Alzheimer’s likened to that of a house fire, and in many ways I think that’s true. Every day my grandmother loses a little more; the memories of being a Hollywood “extra” in the 1920’s is gone one week, a few days later she can’t remember visiting us in Africa. I’ll ask her how she met my grandpa, and with a faraway glaze to her eyes she’ll tell me how my own two parents met, substituting my mother’s name for her own. Talking with my grandma is a lot like stumbling through the charred remains of a burned house. Bits and pieces are still there, and sifting through the ashes I discover undamaged bits; like a childhood visit to the St. Louis zoo and the time her friend Betsy Dee fell off a wall. But most of the important events in her life, the things she saw and the way she felt when she saw them, most of this is gone.

For a while I begged and pleaded with my mother to take my grandma to the doctor, to get someone to prescribe something that would slow the erosion of memory. I did
research on dementia, and read about certain pills and vitamins that sometimes halt the progression of the disease. But my mother felt strongly that my grandma wouldn’t want medicine. When asked herself about how she wanted to deal with her forgetfulness, my grandmother was always likely to agree with whatever solutions the questioner seemed to prefer. She’s never been one for conflict.

My parents don’t like to talk about my grandmother’s illness. Because they are good Christian Scientists, they don’t accept that what is happening to my grandma is actually happening. To them it’s an illusion, one that can be dispelled through lots of prayer and correct thinking. I sometimes wish I shared that staunch conviction, that absolute certainty and faith in the Mind. Instead I’m a doubter who worries that I won’t always be able to trust the reliability of my own memory.

In the second home of my childhood, apartheid South Africa, I was instructed in school one day to take out my school-issued Afrikaans textbook and a black marker. Our Afrikaans teacher explained to us that, from now on, every time we ran across the word “kaffir” in our textbook we should cross it out.

“What about if it’s the word ‘kaffirhond’?” Asked a boy in the front row. “It just means a kaffir’s dog. Do we have to cross that out as well?”

Mevrou mulled this over in her head for a minute. “Yes. It’s just that the word “kaffir” isn’t considered polite anymore.”

One of my earliest memories as a girl has me perched on my father’s shoulders above an angry mob of East German protesters. One night a few years before the Wall came down, a crowd of teenagers backed the East German police up against the Berlin Wall. A rock concert was taking place on the West side and the East German teenagers were furious that
they couldn’t go, that their government denied them even this. When the wind blew in the right direction you could hear strains from the concert wafting over the Berlin Wall. The teenagers hurled insults and coins at the police. I can still hear the jeers, and feel the sweat of the crowd.

Back in my grandma’s bedroom looking at old pictures my mother comes in to tell us it’s time to start getting grandma ready for bed.

“Well, I guess we should put all this stuff away for another time,” I say.

“So what are you doing these days?” Grandma asks.

“I’m getting my degree in English, then I’ll be moving back to Minneapolis.”

“Minneapolis? It’s cold up there.”

“It is. But I hope you’ll come up and visit me anyway.”

“Oh, I’d like to. I love you, you know.”

“I love you too, Grandma.”

This is why I write: because I was there. Because it happened, and I saw it. Because if I don’t I might someday forget.
CHAPTER TWO: LOOKING FOR BUNNIES IN NO MAN’S LAND

Cities I have known, Part 1:

I once knew a city of concrete and gray skies, of a thousand eyes watching, of a thousand breaths held in fear. A city of ugly sameness where people were afraid to laugh, were afraid to tell jokes. I once knew a city of soot and ash, where people coughed and waited in line for strawberries as costly as rubies, where the milk turned sour from sitting out too long and made the children sick. But this same city I’ve also known: a city of water that rusted in pipes and came out magical colors, a city where bunnies took over No Man’s Land, a city where strawberries were as cherished as rubies.

There is a photograph taken the moment my family disembarked from the plane that took us to our new home in East Berlin. We are all dressed well; my mother is wearing heels and a skirt, I’ve been buttoned into a jumper-dress, and my father strides beside us in a suit. My baby sister is just a bonneted blur in her stroller, but probably she has been fitted into something formal for the occasion as well. Except for my father, all of us look slightly disoriented and unsure. My mother pushes the stroller across the tarmac and I cling to the nearest handle, the three of us trailing my father slightly. None of us are looking at the photographer, because none of us know he’s there. The picture was taken by a member of the East German secret police, or Stasi, and the only reason we have a Xerox of the picture now is because my father went back to retrieve his Stasi files after the dissolution of East Germany in 1989.
My father joined the Foreign Service a few months before I was born; my mother gave birth to me during the first year of his very first assignment, on the island of Barbados in the West Indies. My father joined initially as a consular officer, making passports and visiting Americans imprisoned in the local jails. Later he became a political officer, meaning he tracked the politics of the country he was assigned to live in. Working as a political officer meant that every month or so he would log long hours at the office, sending detailed cables back to Washington with the recent local political doings. After two years in Barbados stamping passports my father is sent back to Washington for a year, and my sister is born. The following year we get sent to East Berlin. It is 1984 and I am four years old.

Our first home in East Berlin is a high-rise apartment on Leipzigerstrasse in the heart of the city. My life right now is all boxes and new faces leaning over me to say hello hello how are you hello. Grown-ups I don’t know are always coming in, sometimes carrying boxes, sometimes wanting to talk to my father. When I see these strangers sometimes I run and hide. Other times I’ll yell at them to get out. I don’t like all the new people coming and going and opening the front door and closing it again. One day my parents invite another stranger I’ve never seen before into our apartment, a woman about the same age as my mother, with permed hair and round apple cheeks. She smiles, offering me her hand to shake, and her blue eyes scrunch up. I realize she’s talking to me. My father says something to her in German, and she nods approvingly.

“Ariane,” my father says, “this is Tante Barbel. She’s going to be around for a while, helping your mother. Say hello.”
By this point I’ve had enough. Enough of all these intruders in our home, enough of all the boxes, the forced introductions, the new everything. So I do the only thing I know will drive this woman away. I scream “NO MORE STRANGERS!” at the top of my tiny lungs, run towards the woman at full speed and kick her in the shins. An hour later Tante Bärbel and I are sitting in an East German café, where she’s bought me a bowl of ice cream with whipped cream on top served on a fancy paper doily. After that things between us are good.

From the window in the new bedroom my sister and I share I can see the East German television tower in the distance. It’s a tall pole with a round ball and antennae attached at the top, but at night the round ball becomes a head, with two blinking red eyes staring at our apartment, seeing everything. It sends a shiver through my four-year-old spine to imagine this monster in the distance, and I climb on top of my bed and stretch up to the window to watch it. I have on footie pajamas, and my blonde hair streams down my back. Every time a red eye blinks I dissolve into shrieks, falling back onto my bed and burying my head in the sheets. After a while, though, when the monster doesn’t stop blinking and I notice that it’s moved closer to our apartment I become afraid. I start worrying that the next time I look out the monster will be right in front of my window, shining its red eyes into my room. “Daddy,” I call out. My sheets are pulled up over my head.

My father sits on the edge of my bed, pulling down the sheets to reveal my face.

“What’s all the noise in here?”

“I saw the monster with the red eyes again.”

“Really,” my father says, with a spreading smile. “With the red eyes?”

“Yeah.”
“Do you want me to sing you a song?”

“Yeah.” And then my father begins singing in his rich baritone, songs about shepherds showing me which way to go o’er the hillside steep, songs about dreaming when you’re feeling blue, songs about packing up your troubles in your old kit bag. I fall asleep with the red eyes receding back into the distance, where they belong.

I’m a big girl now so I get to start kindergarten. Every morning a bus arrives in front of our apartment to pick up the children of American diplomats and deposit them over the border in West Berlin for school. Crossing through Checkpoint Charlie twice a day means I have to carry important papers, and since I’m only five the best solution is for me to wear all this around my neck so it won’t get lost. Losing my German identification pass, or Ausweiss, would mean not being able to cross from one country into the other, and the border guards quickly send us back on the days when one of the kids on the bus messes up. So every day I head to school with my Ausweiss hanging around my neck, and when the bus pulls up to the border I know to press the picture side against the window.

After a few months, showing my pass isn’t even something I think about anymore. My attention at the checkpoint is now pulled towards a new wonder: the bunnies. Every morning when we reach No Man’s Land, before the guards come to look in the bus window, my eyes scan the ground. There are secret holes in the dirt, and just when you least expect it you’ll catch a glimpse of ears, a fuzzy blur racing from one hole to the next. The bus driver always gets quiet when the guard comes up to check our papers, and sometimes the older kids do too, but not me. Even though the guards carry guns and have big dogs and put their
cold faces right up to the bus window to look at each one of us, so that you can see their
breath on the glass, I’m not afraid. All I care about is looking for bunnies.

There is a playground a couple blocks away, and my mother sometimes takes us
there during the day. Like everything else in East Berlin, it is dingy and gray and covered
with soot. But I run around on the stunted grass anyway, calling out at my mother to watch.
A huge mural has been painted on the back of the building that encloses a side of the
playground. It’s Struwwelpeter, or Shock-headed Peter, the disobedient boy from German
nursery rhymes who never lets anyone cut his hair or trim his nails. On the mural he’s about
12 feet high, arms outstretched to show how long and sharp his nails have grown, blond hair
standing out stiff for several feet from every side of his head. If we stay at the playground
after it begins to get dark I feel like Struwwelpeter’s eyes begin to follow me.

After a year in our Leipzigerstrasse apartment my family moves into a cinderblock
house a few miles away. I’m happy about this because: 1) Now we have a yard to play in,
and 2) we don’t live anywhere where the red eyes can see me anymore. On the sidewalk
right in front and to the left of our new home is a weird telephone booth that doesn’t look like
anything I’ve ever seen before. It’s tall and thin and made out of the same kind of dark
mirror-y glass used in sunglasses. If you get really close to it you can barely make out a
shape in there. My dad says that there’s a man inside, sitting and taking notes. It isn’t
always the same man, either, because sometimes he comes out to smoke a cigarette and
sometimes I see two of them outside the little booth, dressed in the same uniform and talking.

My mother hates these men. She says they’re the reason she has to write notes to my
father about private things and then tear them up and throw them in the fireplace. Even if she
does this, mother says, they dig through the ashes. Sometimes when she’s angry she yells at
the walls; she told me this hurts their ears. It will be years before I understand what she meant when she talked about bugs.

Another reason I prefer this new house to our apartment is this: it has magical water. Every night my dad runs a bath for me and my sister, and every night is a surprise; what color will the water be this time? Sometimes it’s a regular see-through, but most of the time it’s varying shades of orange, brown, yellow, or even red. My sister and I giggle with delight at this. From now on I call it lollipop water.

Every Sunday morning means church, and since Christian Science is forbidden in East Germany, it also means another trip through Checkpoint Charlie. Once in West Berlin, my younger sister and I enjoy our favorite Sunday morning game, spot the Punkers. I love all the cool teenagers with mohawks in bright orange, purple, green, and, wanting to be just like me, my sister joins me in my search. She stares obediently out her window on the right, and I take the left. I scooch around in the backseat of our yellow Beetle, propping myself up on folded legs to get a better view.

“Wow, look at that one,” I squeal, delighted.

The outrageous brightness of everything in West Berlin is such a shock after East Germany’s dull gray.

“Mmm,” my father says. “Do you girls know what the lesson is about this week?” In Christian Science, four times a year the Mother Church in Boston comes out with a schedule of weekly lessons. Each week the lesson centers around one of the seven synonyms for God: Love, Truth, Mind, Principle, Soul, Life, and Spirit. This week the lesson is Truth. “Ariane, can you tell me something true about God?”
I fidget in my seat, buying time. “He loves us?”

“Ok, good. That’s true. How about Error? Is that true? Is that part of God?”

We narrowly miss hitting a car pulling out into traffic and my mother sucks in her
breath, a small scream that stays in the back of her throat. This always drives my dad crazy.
Clearing his throat, he asks his question again, louder, this time glancing at my mother.

“No, that’s not God.”

“Very good. Very good. Error is an illusion, and that’s not part of God. What else is
an illusion?”

I consider this, pulling my tights out where they’re bagged up around my crotch.

“Being sick?”

“Mmm-hmm, that’s a really important one, because error can trick us into thinking
that sickness is real.”

We arrive at church, an old cobblestone building that got bombed during the war. My
dad hands me a West German Mark to contribute to the collection plate in Sunday school.
My mother carries my sister to the nursery, and I join my table of first grade German
Christian Scientists.

In Sunday school we draw pictures of Jesus raising people from the dead and healing
lepers. We stand up to sing a song at the end of the service, and when the doors open to the
main room of the church I look through the crowd for my parents. My mother is hunching
her shoulders against the cold, waiting for my father to finish talking to one of the other
members of the church. She doesn’t speak German and will complain on the ride home that
she never gets anything out of the service.
Old Frau Scholle shuffles up to me on her swollen, ancient legs. “Kind,” she says, “Child, I have something for you.” She pulls a twisted fist out of the deepness of her fur coat, revealing a handful of colorful bon-bons.

“Danke, Frau Scholle!” I can’t wait to stuff the hard candies in my mouth. I unwrap and eat every one on the ride home.

“So what did you learn in Sunday school today,” my father asks, glancing in the rearview mirror. His eyes are bright and twinkle.

“We learned about God,” I say, cheeks packed with candy. “And also, that we love God. And that there is no fear. In God.”

My father nods. “Ok, those are very good things to learn.”

When we get home, there is a line of poop smeared across the front door. My mother takes hold of my hand as we enter the house, nervous about what we may find. She tells me that the long time we are gone for church service each week provides the man in the little booth with the perfect opportunity to raid the house and disrupt our things. They do this because they don’t like us, she says. Usually my mother finds they’ve either taken or broken something from her jewelry box, but we never know exactly what to expect. Every Sunday afternoon is like a nightmare Christmas morning; instead of new toys, sometimes you find your old ones have been stolen. Daddy carries my sleeping sister pressed against his chest.

“I think it’s ok,” he says.

My mother nods and I run to my room, already pulling off my itchy tights. When I get there I find my piggy bank on the floor, broken. I pick up the pieces and study them, wondering what happened to the few coins I had inside.

“Daddy,” I call. “My money from the tooth fairy is all gone.”
My mother is at my door, so mad her cheeks are red, with a torn string of pearls in her hands. My dad comes over and puts an arm around her.

“We’ll be able to fix everything,” he says.

There is a lot of illusion in my life right now, a lot of things that seem very real even though I’m supposed to know they’re not. For instance, the little chunks of blood I keep coughing up into tissues. I know these aren’t real, that it’s just Error trying to scare me into thinking I’m sick, but it feels so real when I cough that it’s hard to remember. Eventually my mother gets so scared by Error that she takes me to a doctor. We cross through Checkpoint Charlie and into West Berlin, ending up at an American army hospital where everyone speaks English and the walls are covered with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Donald Duck, and Alice in Wonderland.

“Whooping cough,” the American doctor tells my mother. She nods, and he writes a prescription. Even though we’re supposed to know the Truth, that there is no sickness in love, my mother buys me the medicine.

More Error. I don’t remember exactly how it happened. All I know is that at some point, suddenly, my mother is very sick and has to stay in bed all day. Tante Barbel looks after my baby sister, bringing her along as she shops for groceries, and I’m left alone to take care of my mother. She has pneumonia. I watch over her as best I can, checking in every few minutes to see if she needs a new glass of water or wants another blanket. Mostly she shoos me away gently, telling me she needs to sleep. But when I go back into the living room to
play with the My Little Ponies again by myself all I can think about is the next thing she
might need, and I always have to poke my head in and ask, just in case.

    I get good at being alone, at entertaining myself quietly in tucked-away corners.

Even though I like to draw, I’ve never been a fan of coloring books. Instead, I paste my
favorite sticker onto a blank sheet of paper and color a scene around it. I run to show my
mother, who smiles weakly and groans. I get ambitious, and start a series of sticker-paintings
that I then staple together to resemble a little book. I run to show my mother. Tante Barbel
shows me how to make puppets out of empty toilet paper rolls, and I spend hours drawing
faces on the dark cardboard, shredding pieces of toilet paper for the hair. I run to show my
mother my characters. I make princesses and babies, mostly, but there are a couple of
teachers as well. Soon I have a complete city. At some point my mother pats my hand and
tells me that she doesn’t need to be woken up to see each new toilet paper puppet.

    By the time my little sister gets sick with food poisoning from eating East German
ice-cream, I am a pro at self-amusement. This comes in handy, since whenever my parents
visit my sister in the West German hospital I am forced to wait in the play room. It must be
the room where they bring the sick children out to play with each other, because there is a
huge painting of a picnicking bee family on the wall. No one else ever comes into the room,
though, so I’m left wondering what the room is for. My parents buy me a small rubber
bouncy ball, translucent with little gold flecks trapped between layers of the clear rubber.
For the hours that I’m alone in that room with the bee family I bounce the ball back and
forth, back and forth against the wall, for what always feels like forever.
When I am in first grade my best friend is a West German classmate named Stella. She has pale brown hair that she wears pinned back with ladybug barrettes, and when she invites me to sleep over, her parents surprise us with a special treat: tickets to see the touring circus. I return to my parents babbling about elephants and peanuts and contortionists, eager to have Stella sleep over to return the favor.

“Maybe we could even go to the zoo,” I say, hopping around on tip toes.

“Maybe,” my mother says vaguely.

I invite Stella over the following weekend, and we jump up and down in excitement when my parents pick her up at her house. My parents talk with hers for a few minutes and we make plans for great things.

“You can see my guinea pig, Maggie, and you can even hold her if you want,” I offer generously.

“Do you have a garden?”

“Of course,” I reassure her. “We’ll play outside first, and then we’ll come inside for dinner, and then I can play with Maggie and then we’ll watch Pippi Langstrumf on TV!”

“Ok!”

We hold hands and dance in a circle. Our parents wave goodbye to one another, and Stella and I climb into the backseat of the car. Driving along through West Berlin, my father chats with Stella in German until we arrive at the border crossing. At this point my father advises Stella to pull out her identification papers as instructed, and the rest of us show the guards our diplomat passports. There seems to be a snag, and a guard asks my father to step out of the car. The two men talk for what seems like a long time; it never usually takes this long to get through the Wall. Finally my father gets back into the car and sighs.
“Stella, we can’t take you home with us. We’ll have to drive you back to your parents’ house. Maybe Ariane can visit you again some other time.”

Stella and I hug each other the whole ride back to her house. I whine to my parents when we get home, complaining that I’m the only kid in first grade who can’t invite her friends over to play.

Working for us seems to be good for Tante Bärbel; after less than a year with us she is moved to the top of the list for a new car, and her family gets a telephone for their house, the first one they’ve ever had. When she’s finally given the car, a bright and shiny white Trabant, she has her husband install a special horn that plays “La Cucharacha” every time she hits it. Sometimes now I ride around with her as she picks up groceries and runs errands. Riding in the back of her Trabbi is better than a roller coaster; there are no seatbelts to bother with, so I go flying around the back as she makes quick turns and zips over cobblestone streets.

When my parents go on a vacation to Greece, they leave my little sister and me with Tante Bärbel and her family. Tante Bärbel lives with a son my age, Basti, a quiet mechanic husband with black fingernails, an overexcited boxer that pees the carpet, and an old woman who looks about 200 years old and sleeps in a chair all day. The wallpaper at Tante Bärbel’s is greasy and peeling around the corners, the floors are a dingy pale green linoleum. There are a few brownish-red area rugs with frayed tassels and mystery stains. The whole house smells like a mixture of dog pee, rust, burnt coal, old people and potatoes. I spend most of my time at Tante Bärbel’s playing mildewed board games with Basti (who cries when he
loses) and tickling the old lady’s face with tissues so that she’ll wake up and give us each one of the cough drops in her pocket.

One Sunday a few weeks before Christmas we come home to find that someone has been through my parents’ closets.

“I can’t believe they would do this,” my mother says, picking up an empty box to peer underneath it.

“Do what, Mommy?” I ask, pulling on her dress. I lean around her left leg, trying to see.

“Well,” and she hesitates for a moment as my father enters the room.

The two look at one another, and from the empty boxes on the floor my father understands exactly what has been taken this time.

“Well, they ruined Christmas, that’s all,” my mother says, a trace of hysteria in her voice. “All the nice presents your relatives sent us from America, the presents from my mother, which were probably expensive...” She flings a box out of the way to reveal a small plastic container with a Christmas card, already opened. “Oh, do you want to know what Papa Harry would have sent you? It looks like it would have been a really nice watch. Well, they left the directions to it so you can see what it would have looked like.”

She holds out the tiny instruction manual for me. *A digital watch! The kind I always wanted with the tiny calculator buttons!*

“Oh,” I say when I examine the pictures. Then I don’t say anything more when I see the way my father is looking at me with pleading eyes, silently begging me to be a big girl about it, to help soothe my mother.
“Nancy, we still haven’t done our Christmas shopping for the girls. It’ll still be a good Christmas.”

My mother sinks down among the empty boxes and torn wrapping paper and stays there for a while by herself.

I secretly hide the instructions to the digital watch-that-never-was in my night-table drawer and take it out to look at sometimes, but I never tell anyone that I’ve kept it.

On Christmas morning as we start into our pastries and coffee my father wraps himself up in a coat and trudges out to the booth. Knocking on the two-way mirror, he gestures for the man to come out so they can talk. Minutes later the Stasi agent stands next to us in our kitchen, awkward with darting eyes as he wolfs down the pastry my father gave him. He finishes and hustles back out to the booth so he can continue spying on us.

Sometimes my mother pulls me to her when we are alone and whispers to me that she needs to tell me something important. She will begin warning me in hushed tones never to betray any secrets about America, no matter how much the Stasi might try to tempt me. Taking me by the hands, she’ll guide me over to sit on the couch, solemn eyes staring into mine.

“So you wouldn’t tell them anything, right, even if they said they’d give you Barbie’s Dreamhouse.”

Of course I nod and swear an oath of loyalty to America. I have absolutely no idea what types of secrets I might possess, but I know I’ll be faithful to my home country no matter what.
One chilly day at the end of autumn I’m the only kid on the bus ride back from school. We cross through Checkpoint Charlie as usual and merge onto the highway, but this time after only a few minutes the driver pulls over to the side of the road and stops. We are nowhere close to home or any shops where he might jump out to buy a pack of cigarettes. He unbuckles his seatbelt, saying nothing, and gets out. The gravel crunches underneath his feet as he stuffs his hands into his pockets and walks away. I haven’t been told what to do, so I just sit there with my seatbelt fastened and chubby hands folded, looking out the window, waiting for my bus driver to come back. Cars speed past on the highway, each one rocking the bus a little as it passes. Any minute now I know he’ll be back, I just have to be patient. The sun eventually dips beneath the trees, and I’m still sitting there hours later when the high school bus driver passes by and sees the grade school van abandoned by the side of the road. The driver coaxes me onto the high school bus and takes me home, but I feel like I ought to have kept waiting. Any minute now my driver will come back for me, any minute he’ll come marching back smoking a fresh pack of cigarettes with a fistful of candy for me.

When I get home my mother sweeps me up in her arms and bursts into tears. The bus driver is fired, but it doesn’t matter; the next bus driver hired will work for the Stasi, too.

It will be years before I understand certain things about my time in East Berlin. A few years after they tear down the Berlin Wall people’s Stasi files will become available; if they had a file on you, you will be able to visit the former headquarters and request it. My father will do this, and we’ll all learn a few things: that the Stasi thought my father was CIA instead of a diplomat, that they orchestrated the violent break-ins to frighten us into leaving, that they targeted my mother especially because they thought her particularly susceptible to terror.
We’ll learn that they broke into our house on nights when my father wasn’t home, that they tried to drive my parents off the road, that my abandonment on the bus was orchestrated to make my mother sick with fear.

The hardest thing to learn will be that Tante Bärbel worked for the Stasi. My parents will tell me not to be so surprised, of course she had to inform for them, how do you think she got that new car? But it will still come as a shock, and it will still hurt.

After they tear down the Wall the new German government will take a hard look at East Berlin and decide that most of it needs to go. They will tear down the house I lived in on Kuchoffstrasse; they will tear down all of the prefabricated houses on that street and build nicer, newer ones. Checkpoint Charlie will be dismantled and put on display in the city, a relic of darker days. The playground with the mural of Struwwelpeter, the ice cream parlor where Tante Bärbel taught me to love her, everything will be torn down or remodeled, so that everything I remember of East Berlin will exist only in my memory, as delicate and intangible as a dream.
CHAPTER THREE: A NORMAL YEAR

The summer I turn seven we move back to Washington, D.C. Without my father. He has work he needs to finish in Berlin, so my mother, sister and I fly back to the States and unpack all the boxes without him. He calls us to let us know how much longer until he can join us. At first he thinks just a few weeks, but the weeks turn into months and soon it’s almost fall and time for school to start. For the first time in my life I am terrified about the first day of school. My mother takes me with her when she registers me at the local elementary school down the street.

“See, this is the way you’ll walk every day. It’s not so bad, is it?”

It isn’t, but I still don’t want to go.

When we reach the front desk my mother chats with the secretary for a while, telling her that I speak German.

“Oh?” The secretary says. “We’ll certainly have some non-native English speakers in school, but they’ll probably speak Spanish. No German here, I’m afraid.”

My mother tells my father about my nervousness and worrying, and he sends a long letter from Berlin written just for me on yellow legal paper. I was hoping he’d be back in time for my first day of school, but from the beginning it’s clear that he won’t be.

Dear Ariane,

Mommy tells me that you’re nervous about starting second grade, and I’m sorry I can’t be there with you. But you’re a big girl now, and I’m confident you can handle the first day of school without me. Remember when you were little how you used to be afraid of that monster with the red eyes? During the day you always realized it was just a TV tower, but
every night you were afraid of it again. This is a lot like that. Right now it’s scaring you because you don’t understand it, but as soon as you tackle that first day you’ll realize all your worrying was for nothing.

Remember too that fear is just an extension of mortal mind. Because you are God’s perfect reflection of Love, there is no way for you to be afraid. There is no room for fear in perfect Love. Remember that when you start getting yourself all worked up over school. Man is not material, he is spiritual, and that means you, too. All of this fear is just an illusion and not something you need to believe. The next time you start getting nervous, just ask Mommy to read to you from Science and Health. You two can work on this and I know you can have a perfect healing.

I’m pretty busy here right now but hope I can be back with you soon. I miss you and think of you all often. Be a brave girl for me.

Love,

Daddy

I’m unable to decipher all of my Father’s handwriting and eventually ask my mother to read it to me. When she’s done I snatch back the letter, ball it up, and throw it at the wall. I stomp upstairs to my little bedroom and slam the door, dissolving into tears on my bed; fat, hot, angry tears that make the pillow wet against my cheek. I know I’m being bratty but I don’t care. I hate him right now but I still want my Daddy back. I’m terrified of having to start school in America without him.

The first day of second grade at Beech Tree Elementary School my mother walks me right up to the classroom door. I plead with her not to leave me.
“Couldn’t you just stay for a little while?” I beg, even though I know I’m being unreasonable.

My mother gives me a little nudge into the classroom, and the middle-aged teacher beckons me over to a desk with a soft smile.

“I’m Mrs. Webb, I’m the teacher for second grade.”

“Ok,” I mumble, looking over at my mother in the doorway.

“And you must be?”

I tell her my name but keep looking at my mother. More kids come in and soon the classroom is full of noise. A beep sounds over the PA system and the principal welcomes us back to Beech Tree Elementary. I keep looking at my mother, trying to keep her there in the doorway. I think that as long as I keep watching her she won’t move away.

“Now we’ll say the Pledge of Allegiance,” crackles the voice over the PA. Suddenly all the kids stand up next to their desks and raise their hands to their chests. Everyone else seems to know what to do, but I have no clue what’s going on. The kids around me all start muttering the same words in the same monotone voice. What’s going on? Am I the only one who doesn’t get it? I feel a tightening panic in my chest. This was exactly the kind of thing I was afraid of. When I can’t contain it any longer I burst into tears, sobbing as the kids around me stare with their hands on their hearts. I look for my mother, but she’s gone. Years later I find out that she had to leave because when I started crying, she did too.

A few months later I’m saying the Pledge of Allegiance by heart. Daddy’s come home, I’ve made two close friends, and I’m in charge of helping to feed the class pets, specially ordered crickets that live (but more often die) behind a glass cage. (That the teacher had required us
each to bring in five dollars to help purchase the crickets drove my mother crazy; we were always hearing hidden crickets in our house that spring. “I’ll give them crickets,” my mother would grumble.) I know all the neighbors on our street by now, and I roller skate up and down the sidewalks, waving to anyone outside raking leaves or gardening. My sister and I go trick-or-treating the way real American kids do, knocking door to door with bags and pumpkin shaped buckets and flashlights. For once, we aren’t the only people we know buying an enormous turkey at the end of November. In December the shopping malls are decorated with images of Santa Claus, not St. Niklaus or der Weihnachtsmann. In school I learn about Christopher Columbus, pilgrims, and Charlotte’s Web.

Towards the end of the school year my father starts bringing home travel brochures of sunny beaches and lush coastlines. My mother holds me on her lap one day after school and we study a smiling family splashing in the surf. Everyone on the beach is white. “Doesn’t that look like fun,” my mother asks, nodding. And then she tells me: we’re moving.

I tell the kids at school the next day that I’m moving to Pretoria over the summer, and they stare at me blankly before continuing to poke one another with crayons. They have no idea what I’m talking about. Neither do I.

Every time we move it becomes my mother’s job to sell the move to us kids. “In Africa,” my mother begins, eyes widening, “in Africa you’ll see giraffes and zebras and all these different animals out in the wild. We’ll be able to go on all kinds of neat trips. Won’t that be exciting?” And just like that, my mother transforms the family’s move to South Africa into a prolonged, exotic safari instead of our life for the next three years.
CHAPTER FOUR: IN AFRICA

Cities I have known, Part 2:

I once knew a city of tall fences and sharp gates, of barking dogs with flashing teeth and people scared to leave the house at night. Trees had thorns instead of leaves, and spiders grew as big as dinner plates. Strangers smiled with murder in their hearts. But those who survived were rewarded with milk and honey sunsets and golden sands.

When we step off the plane in Pretoria it is a midwinter afternoon, sunny but cold. When we got on the plane in Washington it was summer, but that was over a day ago. After 20 hours on multiple planes connecting through New York, London, and a tiny island off the coast of nowhere in the middle of the night for refueling, it seems like we could be on the moon. We are greeted at the airport by one of the Embassy drivers, a balding African man with a permanent toothy smile. He does a series of energetic half-bows as he greets us, shaking us each by the hand, smiling.

“Hello, welcome, welcome to Pretoria! How are you?”

It doesn’t seem right that it should be so bright out. “Fine,” I answer, blinking in the light.

The driver chuckles. He picks up a couple of our suitcases and ushers us towards a waiting van. My father is grinning and confident now, swinging some of our suitcases into the back of the van despite the man’s protests.
“No, really, I’ve got it,” my father keeps telling him. I climb up into a backseat next to my mother and press my face up to the window. My little sister is cradled in my mother’s lap, fast asleep. The man starts the engine, and we begin the drive to our new home.

A few minutes and we’ve left the busy streets of downtown Pretoria. There is nothing here but long dry grass and blue sky. “Oh,” my mother says, sighing. “This looks so much like my southern California!”

“Ja, madam, this is the veld. You like it?”

“I love it,” my mother says, sighing again.

“It is very dry here in the Transvaal. The Cape has more green.”

“No, I love this,” my mother says, almost dreamily. “It reminds me of home.”

For the next half hour she gives the driver a meteorology/geography lesson on the greater Los Angeles area while the driver nods and smiles.

I don’t realize I’ve fallen asleep until I hear the doors to our van slamming shut. We’re in the middle of an enormous brick driveway, and the driver is unloading our suitcases. My father plucks my sleepy sister off my mother and puts her on unsteady little feet. “Well, we’re home,” my mother says shrilly, brushing the wrinkles from her dress.

“Are they here?” A woman’s voice calls from the front door, and a round African woman eating a banana emerges from the house. When she sees us she breaks into a gap-toothed smile and opens her arms. “The girls are here! Come here my girls! Say hello to Beauty!”

Inexplicably my sister and I obey, running down the steps of the driveway and into the arms of our new “nanny,” Beauty. She hugs us and takes a bite of banana while we’re pressed against her. She tells us how sweet we are, such beautiful, sweet, obedient girls.
Using what’s left of the banana to point, Beauty says, “And this is the madam?” as my mother approaches.

“Well...is-yes.” My mother knits her brow for a moment and smiles.

The first few nights in our new home I wake up around four a.m. partly because of the time change, partly because I’m startled from sleep by the calls of the African birds. I’ve never heard anything like this squawking, layers and layers of different voices calling, crying, fighting. Sometimes I get up and wander around the empty house at dawn, watching light fill the purple sky through different windows.

During the days I like lying on the grass in our new backyard, soaking in the sun and looking up into the trees. The tree in the middle of the yard is by far the strangest plant I’ve ever seen, with thorns in place of leaves. The thorns are long and vicious, and if by chance I happen to catch myself on one, it rips open my skin.

The South African school year begins in January, so when we arrive in Pretoria half the school year there is already over. My parents decide to have me repeat the latter half of second grade again rather than skip ahead to the middle of third. I get a week or so to adjust to the time difference and sleep off the jet lag and then I must begin. Neither of my parents is completely satisfied with the schools in the area. Because the northern part of the country has a larger Boer population, most of the public schools hold instruction exclusively in Afrikaans, the language of the original Dutch (Afrikaner) settlers. The only thing I know how to say in Afrikaans is what my father (who had extensive language training back at the State Department in Washington) has taught the rest of the family how to say: *Ek kan nie Afrikaans praat nie* I don’t know how to speak Afrikaans. Besides the fact that I don’t speak
the language, my parents don’t relish the thought of their daughter becoming indoctrinated by the segregated, racist government school system. As it happens, many Germans also settled in pockets of southern Africa, and there is a private German school in Pretoria. My father is thrilled that I have the opportunity to practice my German and enrolls me at once.

My first day of school at the Deutsche Schule Pretoria I am terrified. I was never completely fluent in German (the West Berlin school was international, with mostly English instruction), and I haven’t spoken it during the year in Washington. My mother brings me to the door and confers with the teacher half in broken German, half in English. I stand as close to my mother as I think I can get away with before the staring kids in the classroom will think I’m a cowardly baby. When my mother leaves, the teacher, Frau Kramer, introduces me to the sea of new faces and motions for me to sit in the front row. “We are learning our division,” she says. “We’ll be playing a simple math game now and you can join in as soon as you understand. Ok?”

All of the students line up next to their desks and Frau Kramer begins firing off math problems. The kids eagerly shout out answers and Frau Kramer starts pacing between desks, pointing at random students for the answers. I’m in the middle of my worst nightmare: a public math competition in a foreign language. I slide down in my desk a little and think of my mother driving home. I look out the window, wishing more than anything I was with her. I don’t belong here. These kids aren’t like me. I feel tears pricking up and I try to order them back, but one slips out the corner of my left eye. I know my face has started to go blotchy; it always does when I cry. I pray that none of the other kids notice and run the back of my hand against the wet cheek. The class is still shrieking out answers when Frau Kramer comes to my desk. She’s out of breath, laughing.
“Ariane, why aren’t you playing?”

Eyes on the floor, I mumble something about still wanting to wait a few minutes. It sounds weak, and I know it.

“But you know how to multiply and divide, don’t you? Surely they must have taught you that in America, yes?”

“I think so, but it was different, maybe?” I can’t look her in the eyes because then she’ll know I was crying.

“It’s not a difficult game,” she says, encouragingly. “All the kids can play it. What’s four times twelve?”

The blood rushes in my ears, pulsing in rhythm with the beating of my heart. I know every kid in the classroom is watching. I feel the tears begin to burn around the corners of my eyes again. I don’t know the answer. I’m so dumb. I’m repeating second grade and I’m still behind the other kids.

“I don’t know.” Behind Frau Kramer I can see a girl mouthing the answer to a friend and a couple of boys kicking one another under their desks in boredom.

“But how can you not have learned this? Your mother says you learned multiplication.”

I finally look up, and when I see the expression on her face I know I’m stupid. My cheeks are on fire. Frau Kramer gives an exaggerated shrug and continues the game.

My mother is having trouble with the gardener, John. When we moved in and explored our new home we noticed a shed off to the side of the overgrown backyard. We didn’t pay it
much initial attention, noting it was locked so that we could tell someone at the Embassy and access a key. We would have been considerably more interested at the time had we known someone was living in there. Like Beauty, our housekeeper/nanny, evidently John comes with the property. The Embassy tells my parents that it is unofficial practice for Embassy employees moving into South African properties to retain the servants already working at the house. It is my parents’ choice, but the Embassy encourages us to keep paying for Beauty and John’s services. My parents keep John and Beauty, paying them as much as South African custom allows. They both live with us in attached servant’s quarters (although John prefers the shed), since the designated African homelands within the country are far away from the cities. Every month they send paychecks back to waiting families.

John doesn’t seem to speak much English, so my mother enlists the help of Beauty. But Beauty is Xhosa and John is Zulu, and Beauty isn’t sure he understands her. The three of them stand outside the front door in a circle.

“I am telling him only to cut back the yellow flowers, Madam. But he says he will cut around the bushes and leave the flowers.”

“No, no, no.” My mother shakes her head and makes broad sweeping gestures with her arms. “He has to trim the daisies; they’re way overgrown. Should I show him?”

Beauty sighs, shifts her hips, and says something to John. He looks at her with glassy eyes, giving no indication that he understands or cares to understand. There is a pause, and when he finally responds his voice is thick and croaking from all the cigarettes he smokes.

“Madam, he says he will cut the flowers.”

“Oh, wonderful. Thank you, Beauty. Thank you so much. Please tell him to stop dropping cigarette butts all over the place though, too.”
Hands on hips Beauty sighs again, smirks, and tells something to John that makes him actually chuckle. My mother goes back into the house to continue unpacking. Everything is fine for a few hours.

“Beauty! Beauty!” Later that afternoon my mother is running around the house searching for her. When she finds her, Beauty is outside laughing and chatting with a group of neighborhood maids.

“He cut down all of them, Beauty. Every last flower, cut down to the ground. We have no more flowers left in the ‘garden’. Why would anyone do that?” My mother searches Beauty’s face frantically, but Beauty just shrugs.

“I told him what to do, madam, but he did not understand.” The neighborhood maids are wide-eyed and silent.

My mother sighs and nods. “Alright. I suppose I should have shown him.” I stay behind on the swing on the front patio as my mother goes back inside to fix dinner. When she leaves the maids begin talking to Beauty in the Xhosa clicks and throaty vowels. They glance over at me and smile. All of them are missing some front teeth.

A month or so after we receive our sea freight (only a few boxes of essentials are shipped by air; the State Department ships ninety percent of our possessions by sea to save money) my mother begins to notice things missing. At first it is small things, things she might have misplaced: a thimble, some pens, a pack of gum. Then some of the dishes start to disappear. Beauty has the week off; four of her children are visiting from the Ciskei. One evening before my father comes home someone knocks on the front door. When my mother answers it, it is Beauty. She tells my mother she wants more money.
“What I do for you, talking to John, that is not my job. You must pay me more for this.”

“But Beauty, I don’t understand. You never mentioned anything about additional payments when I asked you to talk to him.” I move closer to my mother.

Beauty takes a step forward, looking my mother straight in the eyes. “I need money, Madam. My children are hungry.” I look over Beauty’s shoulder to a group of overgrown teenage boys lounging on the hood of a parked car in our driveway.

“Oh, well, if they’re hungry, I can give you some extra leftovers from last night...” My mother turns to me, helpless and a little scared. “We have all kinds of fruit?”

“We do not want your food, Madam. We need money.”

My mother sniffs the air for a moment. “Beauty, are you drunk?”

“I need money, Madam. You must pay me for the job I do for you.”

My mother straightens now and sets her jaw. “I don’t think I owe you anything, Beauty. You get paid a fair salary, and you were already paid last month. Furthermore, I don’t really like your tone with me right now and I resent your coming over here asking for more money. If your children are hungry I’ve offered them food but I’m not paying you another red cent.” My mother concludes this with a defiant little hum.

Over Beauty’s shoulder a couple of the teenagers slide off the car and begin walking towards us.

“This is really outrageous,” my mother says, still trying to sound angry, though I can tell she’s terrified. “Alright, wait here, and I’ll get my wallet.” And she grumbles off to the bedroom. Beauty and I pass an awkward moment facing one another. Her eyes are hooded
and lazy, and she gazes past me into the living room, never making eye contact. I’m about ready to pee my pants with fright but I can’t move.

My mother storms back up to the doorway and slaps a fistful of bills into Beauty’s hand. “I hope you’re happy now,” she says loudly.

Beauty’s eyes never waver; she continues to gaze at an invisible spot above my head even as she tucks the money into her dress.

When my mother shuts the door she looks like she’s about to scream. “This would never have happened if your father had been here,” she says. “But what could I do? Did I do the right thing? What was I supposed to do?”

I don’t know either and shake my head. There is something unmentionable about what just happened, and my mother and I never discuss it again. Soon after this my mother arranges a nanny switch, and Beauty goes to work for another family.

Parliament in apartheid South Africa moves every six months between the two capital cities, Cape Town and Pretoria, and because it is my father’s job to report back to Washington on Parliament’s doings, that means we move back and forth between the two cities every six months, too. My father already has to be at work the day after we arrive in Cape Town, leaving the three of us behind to unpack the essentials. My sister and I sleep in, trudging down to the kitchen for breakfast well past ten. My mother is in the next room dusting off the dining room furniture, calling to us to ask us how we slept. She’s reminding us to make our beds before we go outside to play when she suddenly goes silent.

“Mommy?” I walk into the dining room with my bowl of cereal, still ladling it into my mouth. My mother is staring in horror at a spot on the wall I can’t yet see.

And when I see what she sees, I freeze, too. In the middle of the dining room wall is the largest spider we have ever seen. Easily as large as a dinner plate, it’s black and furry with red eyes.

“What do we do,” my mother moans, wringing her hands. “How could something that big get in here?”

It’s quickly agreed upon that my sister and I will run next door and ask a neighbor what to do. Still in our pajamas, we set off down the street while my mother makes sure the spider doesn’t disappear. (“Can you imagine that thing running around the house,” she asks, and we all shudder.) The first door that opens to us belongs to a bearded man with a small son. The words tumble out as we describe the gigantic spider and the standoff in the dining room. The man laughs when we finish.

“Sounds like you’ve got yourselves a bobbejaan spider, hey? Let me see if I can find my son’s butterfly net. Ja, that would work. You should never kill a spider. I’ll be over in a minute, and we’ll catch that bugger.”

Nearly dizzy with all the excitement, Jeanine and I race back to my mother who hasn’t blinked since we left her. Ten minutes later our neighbor strolls in with his little boy and the promised butterfly net. “So what have we got here?”

My mother points a quaking finger towards the wall.

“Ja, that’s a bobbejaan, a baboon spider. You never see that in America, hey?” He chuckles. “You should never kill it. Let’s see, how do we get it in the net, now?” He and my mother discuss strategies for a few minutes until they come up with a plan to use one of our placemats to scoop it into the net. For a few ticklish minutes he inches closer to the
spider, then in one swoop he slides the placemat under the spider and drops the beast into the net. The three of us cheer.

“Ok,” he says, smiling triumphantly. “It was nice to meet you. I’ll go return this fellow to his proper home, and the next time you ladies will know what to do.”

My mother and I continue unwrapping dishes and silverware for the rest of the morning, and for the next week or so I have nightmares of bobbejaan spiders crawling up and down my body.

My mother is dissatisfied with the German school in Cape Town, so the second time we move there I am enrolled at Hershel, a British finishing school for young ladies. The first day at recess a girl with chestnut brown hair sits down next to me along the edge of a brick wall. She studies me for a moment, then places an arm around my shoulder.

“Dahling,” she croons, “my father owns a vineyard and we have more than 150 horses. What does your father do?”

I’ve never heard a girl my age talk like this before, but I tell her my father is an American diplomat.

“That’s too marvelous, dahling. I’ll have to check with mum, but you must come visit.”

Later, in between classes, other girls I don’t know warn me that this girl, Fleur, is a complete bitch. I’ve never heard little girls call each other bitches, but here it seems to be a popular expression. As it happens, our class takes a field trip to Fleur’s family vineyard a few weeks later, anyway, where my classmates, including the daughter of a European count, know to act bored by the wealth.
Classes at Hershel consist mainly of sewing, knitting, some basic “maths”, and being able to cut paper in straight lines. Presentation is everything. The girls with the neatest notebooks get revered as examples to us all, though behind their backs the rest of us secretly acknowledge that they are kiss-ups and bitches. Sitting in class and working on our knitting, my classmates profess their love of the American TV shows *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which they watch religiously with their mothers. Desperate to fit in, soon after arriving to South Africa I learned to mimic the proper clipped tones of the local British population, but my classmates remember that I’m American.

“Speak to us in American,” they sometimes plead, and when I give in, they sigh. “It’s just like *Dallas,*” they say.

I am learning that there is a huge difference between not only the blacks and whites in this country, but between different types of whites and different types of blacks as well. When we are in Pretoria, Mother drives us to school in the morning and a black Embassy driver picks us up at the end of the day. On the way to and from home we always pass a public South African school, the kind my parents didn’t want us attending. The kids who go to this school are real Afrikaners, coarse and tough and perennially barefoot. This is how we identify the Afrikaner kids everywhere; at malls, in supermarkets, on the streets, they are the ones without shoes. On rainy mornings we make anguished faces as we watch the Boer children running to school.

“Imagine all the slimy worms they must be squishing with their toes,” I say, and we both groan.
The British girls at Hershel are worlds away from the Afrikaner children. Nobody at Hershel even knows how to speak much Afrikaans, and even if they did, what would be the point in speaking it? Everyone knows that English is the proper language of South Africa. Afrikaans is for Boer farmers and their black servants. Still, since Afrikaans is one of the official languages of the country, we have to take Afrikaans in school. Our teacher points out that knowing some Afrikaans may come in handy someday when we’re running our own households and have servants of our own.

We get a new maid around this point, a gentle Xhosa woman named Rosie. Like Beauty, Rosie has many children living in the Ciskei, but she decides to move back and forth with us between Cape Town and Pretoria every six months anyway. Also like Beauty, I notice that Rosie always puts bricks under the legs of her bed. I ask her why, and she shakes her head. The bricks under the legs of the bed raise the bed higher off the ground, she says. This is good, because then the tokolosh can’t reach her while she sleeps. The tokolosh is a little brown man, she explains. Every night he goes looking for a woman he can steal and bring back home to make his wife. Because he is short, by placing your bed on bricks he can’t reach you.

“Rosie, should I be scared of the tokolosh?”

“No, muiskat. The tokolosh won’t take children.”

When I tell my mother about the tokolosh she rolls her eyes.

“Silly superstitions,” she says.

But I’m not so sure it’s all silly. There are a lot of strange things in this country. When I take our sheltie, Bonnie, for walks around the neighborhood, I notice that every
house is surrounded by huge gates. Some gates even have spikes or barbed wire on top. Snarling Doberman pinchers and Rottweilers bound from the houses and fling themselves at the metal bars as we pass by. If we walk in the evening, motion-sensored floodlights from some of the houses blind us temporarily. In public places there are bathrooms for three different types of people: blacks, coloureds, and whites. And there are the mirror checks under the car. Every time we drive to the American Embassy, before entering the compound a bunch of men run out and hold mirrors underneath our car, scanning the undercarriage for I’m not sure what.

We have a family password now, too, something I somehow doubt my other classmates have. My mother pulls my sister and I aside and explains to us very gravely that, because we often aren’t familiar with the African drivers who pick us up from school, we must never accept a ride from anyone until they tell us the family password.

“It’s very important you remember this,” she says, looking into each of our faces. “This country isn’t totally stable right now, and not everyone loves Americans.”

Rosie is taking night classes to learn how to read. I see her walking off to class sometimes from the stairway window in our Cape Town house, humming snippets of a song under her breath. I like to sit at this window when I’m feeling lonely or homesick or a combination of both. By now I’ve moved so often, I don’t always know where I’m really homesick for anymore. But on warm fall evenings, when the sky turns purple with the creeping of night and the trees rustle in the breeze, I feel a certain ache. I feel like I miss something, but I don’t know what. On nights like this, all I can do is watch the stars appear in the sky and sigh.
Our gardener, John, has grown increasingly strange since our second move back to Pretoria. Rosie finds him one afternoon in the servants’ bathroom, naked and sound asleep in the bathtub. The door is wide open when Rosie walks in to use the toilet, and she screams in surprise. After a few more incidents of this kind my mother tells Rosie to have a talk with John.

“Tell him at least he needs to shut the door,” my mother says, shrugging. “Anyone can see him in there. You’d think he’d want a little privacy.”

But Rosie doesn’t want to talk to him about it. She just casts her eyes downward and nods, a barely perceptible little tilt of her head.

After much questioning from my mother it finally comes out: Rosie doesn’t want to confront John because he’s Zulu. The whites and blacks may live in mutual fear and mistrust of one another in this country, but everyone, everyone is afraid of the Zulus.

Sometimes when I’m bored I wander over to the servants’ quarters to talk to Rosie. Her room always smells bad, like musty blankets and mold mingled with spoiling meat, but her room is always full of interesting things and she’s always patient, even when I ask lots of questions. Because Rosie’s stuck working for a family of Christian Scientists, she’s had to stock her own medical essentials. This is by far the best thing about Rosie’s room. Medicine already holds a certain “forbidden fruit” allure, but Rosie’s medicine is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before, and is used to treat ailments I’ve never even heard of, like scalp soreness. My favorite pill bottle is the one for “stiff veins,” and features a picture of its inventor, “Uncle Grandpa,” smiling in his rocking chair on the front label. One day I come across a
mysterious cream in a purple tube that says it is effective for lightening. I’m puzzled by that; what would you be lightening with a lotion? Then I read the instructions, which advise against rubbing too much cream onto any one area of skin, and I understand. Rosie is trying to lighten her skin. I’m suddenly embarrassed, like I’ve seen something I shouldn’t have, and back out of the room quickly when Rosie’s stoops to pick up her knitting. Whenever I think about Rosie’s medicines in the weeks that follow I feel sad.

I’ve come to hate the smell of cardboard boxes. Moving every six months, packing up everything we own and having to say goodbye to friends, I hate all of it even though I should be good at it by now. I dread the lonesomeness of those final days before we leave, after the movers have come, packed everything up, and left us with towers of boxes. The rooms take on a desolate echo, and the house itself becomes a hollow shell of the home we once made. There is also nothing to do in these final days; once everything is boxed up there is nothing to play with or distract from the bare white walls. Sometimes the total emptiness almost makes me crazy.

Moving back to Pretoria means I’m back at the German school, with instruction in German for all but two of my classes, English and Afrikaans. Even though English should be a snap for me, I get nervous before every class with Mrs. Knox. Just the smell of her cloying perfume makes my palms sweat. She demands total obedience. Once she slapped the girl sitting next to me for forgetting her scissors at home. When anyone stumbles over or mispronounces a word, she mimics the mistake until we oblige her with a few nervous laughs.
As much as I might dislike English with Mrs. Knox, I truly dread Afrikaans class with a primal, gnawing kind of fear that settles in the pit of my stomach. Many of the German kids speak Afrikaans at home, and all of them have taken the language since first grade. By joining them a few years after they’ve started instruction, I’m quite a bit behind. Every class I dutifully copy down the notes Mevrou Defur writes on the board, struggling to control my fountain pen. But it seems like no matter how hard I study the grammar rules and vocabulary she puts up there, I’m sure to get an F on my tests. This alone wouldn’t be so terrible, if only Mevrou handled the way she gives back our tests differently. Today, as usual on Fridays, we’re getting back a test. Mevrou licks a thick finger and flips through the stack of papers.

“Ja, the class as a whole did better than on the last test,” she says, straining to lift herself out of her chair.

Mevrou is a middle-aged Afrikaner woman with bloated legs and swollen feet that spill out the sides of her sandals. Her movements are slow and deliberate.

“And that’s good, because some of you did very poorly last time. I’ll read the grades.”

Here Mevrou pauses. She enjoys the anticipation of this moment, and stretches it out a little.

“Starting with the best, come up to the front when I call your name: Lila – ‘A’. Baije goet, Lila. Keep studying like that and you’ll get an ‘A’ in the class. Werner –‘A’. Excellent work.”

I know it will take a while until she gets to my grade. There are always a lot of B’s and a fair number of C’s to wade through until she gets to the really bad students. In the
meantime I look out the window at the veld, trying to imagine the worst situations I would be willing to swap for my current one. Buried alive? No, probably not. In a pool surrounded by sharks? Definitely not. In a pit of snakes? Well, maybe...

“Ariane,” Mevrou calls.

It’s finally my turn to take the walk up to the front, and I can already tell by the papers in everyone else’s hands I’m last. Which means that, in addition to receiving the very lowest score on the test, I also get a special little speech from Mevrou.

“Well, we’ve come to the end again, and that means the failing grade. I think we probably all knew who was going to get it again this week, didn’t we? Ja, I’m afraid it’s our little domkop again. Ariane – F.” Mevrou raises a large hand and pats me on the head a few times for emphasis.

I slink back to my desk, eyes burning with tears of shame. I’m nine and in third grade, definitely too old to cry, but I can’t help it. Mevrou begins the lesson for today, wiping her chalky hands across her dress. One hot tear slips down my right cheek. I try to flick it away so no one will notice, but it’s too late; Mevrou Defur, who has been scanning the class for someone to answer a question, calls on me. Now I face a dilemma: if I speak, everyone will be able to tell I’ve been crying, but if I don’t say anything I’ll get in trouble. I have no idea what the question even was.

“Could you please repeat the question?” I stammer. “I was just trying to get something out of my eye.”

“No, you weren’t. There’s nothing in your eye,” Mevrou snaps. “You weren’t paying attention again because you were crying, which is why you get failing marks in the first place.” Mevrou gives an impatient downward tug on the waist of her dress, which has
been creeping up and bunching around her stomach. She fixes a stern eye on me for a minute, then shifts her weight and calls on someone else.

Back home, my mother hits the roof when I tell her about the weekly grade giving ceremony in Afrikaans class.

“How dare she? How dare she?” My mother fumes. “In America she’d be fired for that kind of thing. I can’t believe it. This would never happen in America.”

My mother wants to march down to the school and have a meeting with Mevrou Defur right away, but Mevrou’s English is poor, and my mother’s Afrikaans is limited to a few shopping-related nouns. My father finally intervenes and has a chat with Mevrou, but she is adamant; she will run her class as she has always run it. It relieves me somewhat to know that my parents take my side, but I still dread Afrikaans class and worry that everyone thinks I’m stupid, a real *domkop*.

Lucky for us, because Cape Town and Pretoria are both large cities there are Christian Science churches in both locations. My parents quickly befriend a handful of couples with children the same age as my sister and me. Sunday school itself is boring; by now I feel like I know all the answers, so I spend most of my time watching Jeanine to make sure she’s paying proper attention. If it looks like she isn’t, I’m quick to tattle on the ride home.

“How do you know that unless your own eyes were open?” my father says. “Why don’t you take care of the mote in your own eye first.”

After the service our parents gather in a circle outside, chatting and yelling at us not to ruin our nice clothes. My parents enjoy talking to lots of the Christian Scientists here but
have become especially close with one couple in particular, the Van der Merwe’s. Beukes
Van der Merwe is a mountain of a man with a huge laugh. He loves to tease his two sons and
has an endless supply of jokes and stories, many of them having to do with his boot camp
days when he was training for the South African army. In the warm weeks before Christmas
our families invite one another over for pool parties, the four of us kids practicing our
cannonballs and shrieking with delight when somebody is caught during a game of Marco
Polo. When it gets dark Mr. Van der Merwe builds a campfire in the backyard and shows us
how to toast a perfect marshmallow.

He becomes almost reverential as he holds a stick over the flames.

“You’ve got to hold it just until it burns, until you think the whole thing is on fire,
then you pull it out and let the flame die. Now you have the perfect crispness on the outside,
but it’s soft inside, hey. You get it after a few goes.”

I’ve never seen my father as happy as he is talking to Mr. Van der Merwe. Usually
serious and reserved, everything about my father becomes more relaxed when our families
are together. He’s even taken to pulling jokes around the house, bundling up in his dark
green bathrobe and lighting his face from below with a flashlight to startle my mother, or
giving my little sister piggyback rides up and down the stairs. When my father gives Mr.
Van der Merwe a genuine Stasi patrol cap as a birthday present, the two of them mug in it
shamelessly for my mother’s camera.

My class at the Deutsche Schule Pretoria is going on a fieldtrip today to the Voortrekker
Monument. That morning all of us gather early at the school parking lot in excited clusters,
whispering and giggling and fighting over who will sit where on the bus. When we finally
get to the monument the teachers begin yelling about staying in orderly lines and not touching anything, but we’re too keyed up to listen. The Voortrekker Museum and Monument is imposing. Before even getting to the monument we have to climb up over a hundred steps, which takes the wind out of our sails a little. Once we pass through the iron gates we’re greeted by the six ton stone statues that surround the building: four Boer men armed with guns, guarding their fortress, and a bronze Boer woman sheltering two frightened children who bury their heads in her skirts. The woman catches my attention most, because while she’s comforting her children with protective arms on their shoulders, her face looks determined and angry. You wouldn’t want to mess with her, even if for some reason you decided to mess with a Boer.

We file inside, past the entryway and into the marble Hall of Heroes, where a female guide greets our class with smiles and begins telling us, in reverberating Afrikaans, all about how this museum is a tribute to Voortrekker strength and courage.

“They were very brave, the Voortrekkers. Each of these 27 marble panels takes you through the birth of the Afrikaner nation, all the way through the move from the Cape to the Transvaal, to the wars with the different tribes. Notice the detail in the work.”

The guide continues talking about some of the heroes, and I know I should be listening to the heroic deed of Dirkie Uys, but the entire frieze itself is too distracting. Who knew marble could be so violent and gory? Most of the panels show the Boers engaged in bloody hand to hand combat with various African tribesmen. Most frightening are the pictures of Zulu warriors stabbing little white children with their spears. The warriors faces are cruel and merciless. By the end of the day I’ve learned all about the Battle of Blood
River and the sacrifices and bravery of the Afrikaners in pushing northward into the African interior.

“It is because of the Afrikaners,” the guide tells us, “that we have civilized culture in Africa today.”

On the bus ride back to school I daydream about being on the great Trek and wish I was an Afrikaner.

My father’s job requires him to closely follow certain members of the South African parliament. They are all white, of course, and since my father is too they don’t mind that he’s there to observe them. In fact, they like him. One weekend my father tells us we’re going camping. We need to pack overnight bags because one of the men has invited us to his home out in the veld. This man lives a long way from Pretoria, out in one of the parts of South Africa that’s still wild. He’s having a huge braai and has invited all his friends to help him shoot some kudu and roast them up – the man also owns his own small meat-processing plant on the premises. When we get there, our white sedan is covered in brown dust. The first man to meet us greets my father with a warm handshake and says he needs a couple of brave volunteers to man the drink hut, where a couple of refrigerators strain to keep the stock of Sprites and Fantas cool. He winks at me and my little sister, and we begin begging my mother to let us pass out drinks in the hut. Once we get set up behind the little window the man comes back with a fistful of candy for the two of us to share. “Call me Onkel Piet,” he says.

For the next two days we go everywhere with Onkel Piet. The other children at the campgrounds speak only Afrikaans and eye us warily. But Onkel Piet is delighted with the
little American girls. He tells us our names are White Angel and Brown Angel, because we are sweet as angels and have blonde and brown hair. During the day he leads us on walks around the veld, pointing out interesting aspects of the topography and suggesting pranks we can pull on the adults.

“White Angel, Brown Angel, come here quick! Do you see this mark in the dirt?”

Piet crouches down, directing our gaze towards a dusty smudge on the ground.

We both nod.

“Do you know what that is?” He spreads his large hand out above the print, letting it hover there for a second.

Neither one of us has an answer.

“Ja, that’s from a leopard. It’s still quite fresh. So maybe he was here last night.” He smiles, full of this secret, and his deep crows’ feet crinkle at the edges of his eyes.

“Here’s how you do with your Ma. Next time she asks you to do some cleaning, you tell her, ‘Let me see the color of your money first.’” He laughs. “Ja, ‘Let me see the color of your money, then maybe I do it.’” Anything amusing we do or say elicits another sweet, until my sister and I become a vaudeville act, turning somersaults and telling knock-knock jokes to make him laugh.

At night he leads a group of us out past the lights from our camp to show us the Southern Cross. Everywhere he goes, my sister and I trail him like eager puppies, waiting for him to call his angels.

We ingest so many sweets from Onkel Piet’s pockets that by the big braai on Sunday night my sister and I have sore stomachs.
My mother rolls her eyes when we complain. “You wouldn’t feel sick if you hadn’t eaten so much candy,” she says. “I know Uncle Piet was just trying to be nice, I know he likes children, but enough with the sweeties, ok?”

Jeanine and I immediately protest. We didn’t eat that many, we tell her. It wasn’t Onkel Piet’s fault –

“You know,” my mother says, fixing us each with a hard glare, “I really thought I’d see more of you two this weekend. I thought you would have waited to go hiking with me and Daddy instead of rushing off with Piet. She looks at me for a moment before continuing. “You wouldn’t like him so much if you knew more about him.”

When we go to bed that night I notice that most of the other families are gathering around a campfire for some singing. I want to go to, and complain about having to go to bed before the other kids. But my father says no, and his voice sounds firmer than the situation warrants. I find this strange, since he sings so loud in church and has a deep, powerful baritone.

“Why can’t we go, too?” I know I’m whining, but I hate hearing the other kids laughing and playing outside.

“You wouldn’t know the words. It’s all in Afrikaans.”

“I speak some Afrikaans,” I say, my voice piping and hopeful. “Ek kan goet Afrikaans praat.”

“Well, then see if you can listen to the words and you’ll understand why I don’t want you out there.”

I’m intrigued enough by this to quit nagging. Lying in my sleeping bag in our tent, I strain to understand snippets of the songs. I fall asleep listening.
It will be years before I find out the truth about Piet, years before I understand why my parents don’t want me to sing around the campfire with those people. By then I’ll be old enough to wonder why I hadn’t figured it out at the time. Piet was one of the members of Parliament my father was watching, an outspoken super-conservative who thought that the system of apartheid was too soft on blacks. The songs, of course, were traditional Boer songs, all about the Great Trek and how they’d fought Blood River to save the land from the primitive Africans.

More strange things in this country: almost every day now African children missing arms and legs come to our door begging for money. Sometimes an adult accompanies them openly, but more often a grown man stands off in the distance at the end of our driveway, waiting for them to finish so they can move on to the next house. At first my parents don’t know what to do, and tell the children no, we aren’t giving you any money. But both my parents find this distressing, and anyway the broken children keep coming. After a while my parents begin to keep our fruits and vegetables well-stocked, so that we can at least offer the children something to eat. They are always happy to take whatever we’re willing to give. Sometimes after the children have come and gone I feel a little embarrassed, though I don’t know why. After the children leave our doorstep no one talks for a while.

It’s Saturday and I’m chasing my sister around the backyard when my mother calls me to the porch.

“Come here for a minute, I need to talk to you.”

I can tell it’s serious, because my mother is pressing her lips flat and her face is pale.
“Something happened to Rosie, and she won’t be around for a while.”

“Is she ok?” Rosie is rarely sick, and I can’t think of anything else that would take her away from us.

“Well, sort of. Some men - I guess her son was trying to go to school during a student protest, and some men got angry with him for that and...” my mother’s voice trails off, and she looks away. “They necklaced him.”

I swallow hard. Being necklaced is a particularly nasty way to die; after a victim is doused in gasoline a burning tire is flung around the victim’s neck. It’s a method of murder favored in poor black townships, places like Rosie’s designated homeland in the Ciskei.

“Who did it?”

“Other African student protestors. Please, please promise me, when Rosie gets back you have to be very gentle with her for a while.” My mother looks up, and I can tell she’s on the verge of tears. “I could never imagine losing a child,” she says, and pulls me to her.

Every time we are in Cape Town we make a trip up to Table Mountain, the magnificent flat mountain that is the Cape’s natural landmark. Our backyard has a great view of it, and on our last morning in Cape Town I walk up to the edge of our property and take a picture. I know this will probably be the last time I ever see it in person. “Goodbye Table Mountain,” I say. After I take the picture I think of the last time our family went up there with some friends from church. To get to the top of the mountain you have to brave a slightly scary cable car ride, but once you’ve reached the top you’re rewarded with an amazing view of the whole city. The last time we were up we had lunch at the café on top of the mountain, and just as we were walking outside a cloud swept in and engulfed everyone, making vision
impossible. Residents of Cape Town call this cloud coverage Table Mountain’s tablecloth, and from the ground it looks beautiful, but it can be frightening to be caught up in it. I couldn’t see for a few minutes, and felt my throat constrict in panic. There are no safety rails on the mountain, and I feared falling off. I closed my eyes and stood very still, trying to imagine that this was just an illusion, that Error was trying to trick me into being afraid. Even when the sun reappeared a few minutes later everything had a hazy cast to it, and I made extra-sure I watched where I was going for the rest of the afternoon.

In the months after we leave South Africa Mr. Van der Merwe will commit suicide. My family will have a long discussion about how someone who was a Christian Scientist could commit suicide. In the years after we leave South Africa Apartheid will end, Nelson Mandela will become the country’s first African president, and almost all the people we knew there will scatter to the other English-speaking regions of the globe: Canada, England, America, Australia.
CHAPTER FIVE: AMERICAN GIRLS

It’s recess on the junior high blacktop. Leaden sky, a biting wind that reaches through and finds all the tiny holes in my clothes, chilling even my blood. I hunch my shoulders every time a gust pierces through my coat. Autumn wasn’t like this in South Africa, where right now spring would be giving way to summer. The jacaranda trees would be in bloom, fragrant purple blossoms everywhere, covering the streets, the sidewalks, the roofs -

“Hey! It isn’t Halloween yet!” One of the boys in my class yells at me as he runs by with a basketball.

I don’t say anything because I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“You don’t need to be wearing that ugly mask,” he explains, pushing his face in so close to mine I can smell his lunch. He pretends to hit me in the face with the ball and runs off, head thrown back in laughter.

It’s been about a month since I started school here at Corpus Christi, and only a little longer than that since I moved back to America. It’s my first time back in an American classroom since second grade, and now I’m in junior high. I don’t have any friends. I’ve learned to spend recess by myself, sitting under a tree, watching other kids toss around a football or sit in clusters to eat lunch together. Sometimes I bring along a book to read, but on days like this my fingers get too cold holding the pages open. I wish I could sit inside, but they always shoo us out unless it’s raining.
A group of the most popular girls are standing across the courtyard from me, giggling and comparing the goosebumps on each other’s legs. A couple of them look around before rolling up their skirts. All of them have bagged out their blouses.

This same group of girls approached me and the only other new girl the first day of school during recess. A girl with honey-colored bangs sprayed up into a dramatic side swoosh had spoken first. “So, like, where did you guys go to school before?”

The other new girl was a no nonsense type with straight brown hair and an air of bossy confidence that I envied. “I came from St. Kate’s. They only go up to fifth grade, so I had to come here.”

The other girls nodded, and Jackie commented that she used to have a friend who went there. “What about you?” Jackie asked, turning the group’s gaze towards me.

“I’m not really from around here. I’m not Catholic. I went to school in South Africa.”

The group went silent. I might as well have told them I was from Mars. Everyone’s mouth hung open for a second before group attention shifted back to Bridget from St. Kate’s.

That night I spent about an hour in the bathroom trying to imitate Jackie’s side swoosh. I didn’t know what she used to make it stand up like that. I tried water, but my hair was lank and fine and fell right back in my eyes.

It doesn’t take long for the other kids to notice that I’m different.

“Why do you talk all funny?” One girl asks after I answer a question in class, and everyone laughs.

One day during recess a group of girls circle me under my tree. A large Hispanic girl named Adrianna points a foot in my direction. She has the biggest bangs I’ve ever seen in
my life, with a high ponytail on top held together by a scrunchie, something I’ve never seen before.

“Those shoes are totally gay.”

“Ok,” I answer. I have no idea what she’s talking about, but I already know my shoes are wrong. All the other girls wear penny loafers or doc martens, while I’m stuck with what my mother picked out: 1950’s style black-and-white saddle shoes that make my feet look disproportionately, almost clownishly, large.

“You’re really short. You look too young to be in sixth grade.”

“I know.” My cheeks turn pink, warming my whole face. I look down at some ants walking over a twig in single file.

“What kind of music do you listen to?”

This was a tough question. In South Africa kids didn’t have favorite bands. It had simply never been a topic for discussion. At the British girls’ school in Cape Town we’d traded Hello Kitty stickers on the playground, and at the German school in Pretoria I’d had to learn a complex jump rope game. None of that applies here. “I don’t know,” I say. I guess I like a lot of different kinds...?” This sounds weak and I know it.

“Oh, yeah?” Adrianna shifts her weight and raises an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“What’s your favorite Paula Abdul song?”

“I guess I don’t know who that is.”

I shake my head. “I guess I just don’t know a lot about music,” I say, looking down. I can already feel myself getting dizzy with repressed tears, my vision blurred like I’m swimming under water. I am drowning with my eyes open.

“This girl knows a lot about nothing,” she says, and when I look up they’re gone.

That night I decide to start petitioning my mother for new shoes.

“Why on earth do you need new ones?” My mother asks, stirring soup on the stove.

“These are almost brand new.”

I try to explain about how they’re all wrong, but I know I don’t sound convincing.

My mother sighs. “Well, see if you can’t wear those just a little longer.”

It’s a Friday after school and all of us junior high girls are crammed into the girls bathroom changing out of our uniforms and into our “street” clothes for the dance tonight. The air is thick with hairspray and perfume. Finally I’m getting to see how American girls craft their look, and I watch carefully as Jackie feathers up her bangs to the side and then sprays, piecing out sections of hair at the top so that they almost stand straight up. I notice as some of the girls begin to take off their blouses that all of them are wearing bras. Back in South Africa I’d only known one girl who’d had to wear a bra; the rest of us were happy not to have to bother. But here the girls are shaving their legs and comparing deodorants and shades of eye shadow. I realize there is no way I can take off my blouse to reveal my bare chest in front of these girls. Even though the stalls are full, I wait until one is empty to drag my backpack in and change.

“I hope they play LL Cool J tonight,” one of the girls says as I’m wiggling out of my skirt.
Another girl agrees. “I hope they play that one song by Whitney Houston I like so much – what is it called again?”

“Girl, I don’t know, but can you believe that Aryana chick never even heard of any of these people?” I recognize this voice as Adrianna’s. “I was like, damn girl, you need some education.”

I know that Adrianna is aware that I’m in the bathroom, that I can hear everything. My cheeks turn red and I make fists to stop myself from crying. I wait for other girls to change the subject and compose myself before I walk out.

“Well, maybe music just isn’t that important to me,” I say loudly, which sounds odd because the conversation has shifted.

Adrianna whips around from her spot by the mirror where she’s teasing her bangs into a gravity-defying poof. She looks me up and down slowly while I pretend to do something to my hair in the mirror. Because I haven’t brought any products I’m done getting ready in about two minutes. But I can’t go down to the dance by myself, and I definitely can’t be the first one down there.

“What are you wearing?” She says, raising her eyebrows at my plain blue sweatshirt and sweatpants.

“I think I look fine,” I say, continuing to do fiddle with my hair in the mirror.

“If you think so.” She laughs. “Anyone who told you to be yourself gave you bad advice,” she adds.

After the cool group of girls leave I’m still standing in front of the mirror, focusing on my eyes as hard as I can to make sure not a single tear escapes.
“She cut you down hard,” a slender Philippino girl named Rachel tells me. She sits a few desks away in class and is usually a passive member of Adrianna’s posse.

“What does that mean?” I ask, even though I can gather that it’s not good.

“Well, it means she cut you down, she put you down. You gotta say something mean back to her if you don’t want to look bad.”

A few days later at recess Adrianna starts in on how loud my mother barks and I snap.

“You’re a bitch,” I mumble, a word I know well from my time at the all girls’ school. I’m terrified and trembling even as I say it, but there’s no taking it back.

“What did you just say to me?” She tries to grab me by the arm but I flail away.

Now I’m not seeing straight. “I said, you’re a bitch,” I yell, and before I know it she’s knocked me to the ground. She gets her friends to hold me down and sits on me, forcing all the air out of my lungs. Last week, when we were weighed at school, she came in at 140 lbs. I was 58.

“Now you can’t talk, huh,” she says. She directs a girl to go and fetch the used condom some kids found on the playground and pushed into a puddle. A girl comes back with it dripping from a stick. I’m wiggling as hard as I can to get free, but it’s no use. Adrianna lifts the collar of the back of my blouse open and directs the girl to shove it in there. I try not to be here. As hard as I can I’m pretending I’m not here, that this isn’t me getting the dirty condom pushed down her blouse. When she’s done Adrianna finally gets up and everyone laughs as I try to get the condom out. For reasons I don’t understand, I start laughing too, like it was all a big joke and I was cool with it the whole time.

Later, at home, I still don’t cry about it. I feel like I’ve already used up all the tears I will ever have.
I arrive home from school some weeks later and my mother has a surprise for me in a brown paper bag.

“Let’s go up to your room and open it there together,” my mother says, which seems strange.

When we get up to my room I empty the bag on my bed and find a training bra and some makeup. “Do you know what this is?” My mother asks, holding up the little white bra.

I nod.

“Well, I just thought you’d want to be like the other girls,” she says. “I know that a lot of girls your age start wearing them, and even though you don’t need to I thought you might want to wear one.”

I look down. “Ok.”

“The other stuff, well, you might not need to wear a lot of makeup yet but I thought it might be nice if you fixed yourself up a little.” She puts a hand under my chin to lift my face and nods my head up and down for me. “Ok?”

That night, after everyone has gone to bed, I take a pair of scissors and cut the training bra into hundreds of tiny pieces. I’m angry with myself for doing this even as I’m cutting, but I can’t stop. The bra seems like such a cruel joke. There is no way I will ever be normal enough to deserve wearing it. The next morning I shove the pieces under my mother’s pillow.

When she discovers them, my mother raises a screaming fit, but I don’t care. I feel a hardening around my heart.

The best thing to do in class is keep my mouth shut. But one day we’re reading in our history textbooks about the Nazis, and Mrs. Berg calls on me to help with pronunciation of
German words. Then she explains the term “Aryan”, which happens to be both a perfect
description of my looks (blond hair and light eyes) as well as exactly how all of my
classmates mispronounce my name. From that moment on, it doesn’t matter what I do to try
to fit in. I’ll always be a foreigner. Sometimes I come in from recess and when I pull up the
lid of my desk I find swastikas and rotten fruit inside. Someone etches a swastika into the
wood on my desk and I have to explain to the teacher that I didn’t do it. I’m so relieved
when Christmas break arrives, bringing a fine dusting of snow, the first flakes I’ve seen in
years.

That Christmas one of the German families my parents had befriended through my German
school in South Africa comes to visit America. My parents have offered to let them stay with
us in Washington D.C. for the holidays, and they gladly accept. The daughter had gone to
school with me those first six months in Cape Town when I’d attended the German school.
Maja was a tall, thin girl with limp blond hair and crooked teeth. We’d always gotten along
well, though we’d never become close. Our families had gotten to know each other because
both of us went in for early morning math tutoring and our parents would take turns driving
us to school around the other side of Table Mountain at 7am, all of us bleary-eyed and tired.
At the time my parents were in the process of building a new bedroom for me onto the side
of the house. When my parents bought the house my sister hadn’t been born yet, and the
upstairs bedroom Jeanine and I were sharing was way too small.

That first day when Maja’s family arrived my parents decided Maja and I would share
my unfinished bedroom. As I lead her up the stairs I’m not sure how to talk to her anymore.
In school together we’d always spoken German, but we were in America now. I decide to try
asking her a question in German, and when she answers me in careful, measured English I let it go. We speak in English.

It’s selfish and not fitting with the Christmas spirit, but when the Keller’s first arrive I wish we didn’t have to spend Christmas with another four-person family crammed into our two-bathroom house. I also don’t really want to be reminded of South Africa and how much I wish I was still there. But soon I forget my bad humor, as our family spends nearly every day talking the Keller’s to all the fun tourist spots: the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Cathedral, and, best of all, the Smithsonian. Any awkwardness between me, Maja, her younger brother and my little sister dissolves instantly. The four of us have a blast making up goofy rhymes about the museum exhibits and racing each other around the monuments, scraping together snow for snowball fights. Their father teases us each night, promising us before bed that he will give a prize to the first one who falls asleep.

“But how will you know who wins, if you’re sleeping, too?” We ask.

“Simple, ja? The first one to fall asleep should whistle so we know who won.”

Christmas Eve all of us bundle up for a long walk around the neighborhood to look at Christmas lights. It’s dark and cold but the lights from each house are clear. I don’t want to ever have to go back to school I’m thinking as I slush my feet along the sidewalk. I hang back a little to talk to Maja, and we reminisce about the rhymes we made up at the Smithsonian while we were eating astronaut ice cream. Suddenly, for no reason at all I feel angry, and I turn mean. I decide to prove to her how different I’ve become, how sophisticated and American.
“So, Maja, what kind of music do you like?”

“Well, I like both the English Christmas songs and the German Christmas songs. They are both nice. I never hear some of them before.”

I snort. “No, no, no. I mean, what kind of popular music do you listen to? Like Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston.”

“I don’t know them.”

“Wow. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of them. Everyone in America knows who they are. South Africans are behind the times.”

Maja gives me a woeful look and stuffs a mittened hand in her mouth. I know I am being horrible, but I can’t stop.

“Do you like your jacket?”

Maja nods silently, not looking at me anymore.

“I was hoping you didn’t because it’s kind of gay. You should ask for a new one for Christmas.” I am on a roll and have never felt so angry in my life. “You also need to do something with your hair. If you lived here people would be barking at you.”

That finally does it. Her eyes start to swell with tears and her nose has gotten all red and puffy. “Ach, Mama!” She finally explodes and runs to bury her head in her mother’s neck, sobbing.
“Was ist denn?” Her mother is alarmed and pleads for Maja to tell her what’s wrong.

But Maja doesn’t say anything.

I go to sleep that night alone in my unfinished room because Maja won’t stay there.

She’d rather sleep on the couch than be near me. I don’t blame her. When I finally fall asleep that night I dream that I’m far away from me, too.
CHAPTER SIX: MY MORTAL MIND

I’m thirteen. Every night before I go to bed I take out my ruler to measure exactly ten open inches between my door and the frame. I don’t want to close the door, but I don’t want it all the way open, either. Just open enough so that when I start to swallow my tongue or have a heart attack, I can run out to the phone on the upstairs landing and dial 911. Just closed enough so that I don’t have to see too much of the yawning black outside the glow of safety from my nightlight. Once I get into bed the world grows still. It’s so quiet I can hear the blood pumping in my ear. I lie stiff, trying not to think about what I know will happen next. I feel something edging closer in the darkness. And then fear floods my veins, coursing through my blood with every pulse. I raise an arm towards the lamp on my nightstand, ready to snap it on. I hold my tongue with the other hand, trying to prevent it from sliding backwards into my throat. It’s no use, though; I can already feel it slipping backwards from between my fingers. I start to cry a little, frustrated, terrified tears tracing lines sideways down my cheek and into the pillow. My body is now slick with a fine coat of cold sweat. At some point I realize I will need to swallow the saliva pooling in my mouth, and I sit up, bracing myself for the leap to the hall phone that will be necessary after I’ve started to gag. I finally swallow. This time I was lucky. My tongue stayed in place. And then suddenly I’m crying again, big heavy sobs. Please, God. Please don’t let me swallow my tongue. Please don’t do this...

In the morning I wake up feeling stiff and guilty. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t allowed fear to enter my thoughts in the first place. It’s my fault this is happening to me. If I had been a good Christian Scientist, I wouldn’t have needed to wake my mother
up in the middle of the night, standing at the edge of her bed, tugging at the covers and begging to let me sleep with her. I’m the one causing my own problems, and I should know better.

In 1866 a Massachusetts woman named Mary Baker Eddy was hurrying home from a meeting when she slipped on a patch of ice and broke her back. Nearly unconscious, she was rushed to a nearby house where a doctor was called to examine her. He pronounced her condition grave; she had extensive internal bleeding as well as many broken bones. As soon as she regained consciousness, Mrs. Eddy called for her Bible. She focused on reading it for the next few days, and one day declared that her pain was gone. According to her writings, she was reading about one of the healings Jesus performed in the New Testament when she experienced her own healing. Mrs. Eddy believed that through this experience she had discovered the same method of “divine science,” or healing through thought and prayer that Jesus had used in his healings. After years of studying the Scriptures and applying this divine science on the sick, Mary Baker Eddy wrote the essential text for Christian Scientists, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, which outlines the principles of Christian Science. Essentially, Christian Scientists reject the notion that matter (what we take in through our senses) is real and purports that we are perfect spiritual beings who reflect a perfect God. Material ills such as sickness, evil, or sin are merely illusions, and not real. Therefore, it is actually impossible to be sick. (As much as we may perceive ourselves to be sick, our sickness is only that: a perception.)
Another night and I am awake in bed, lying face down tonight so that gravity will help prevent me from swallowing my tongue. I hear the beat of my heart again in the blood pulsing through my ears, and it’s so loud that I think everyone must hear it. I think about how easy it would be for me to start swallowing my tongue and how impossible it would be to even cry for help with my tongue blocking my throat. The blood in my ears beats faster, and this freaks me out because I know that I’m about to cause my own heart attack. If fear is just an illusion, then why is it affecting me this way? Why am I being such a baby about it, being terrified of something that doesn’t even exist? It would be impossible for something bad to happen in my body because I’m God’s perfect creation. There must be something wrong with me if something unreal is scaring me so much. I’m an embarrassment and a bad Christian Scientist. I don’t know how to defend myself against thoughts...I know I’m supposed to use Truth to get rid of them, but I’m too weak. How pathetic.

In many ways it is easier to define Christian Science through what it lacks. For instance, there are no ceremonies in Christian Science: no baptism, no communion, no confirmation, no last rights. Nothing. There isn’t even anyone in the Christian Science Church who can marry you; Mary Baker Eddy recommended that Christian Scientist couples get married in other Protestant churches. There is no clergy, because the Bible and Science and Health are meant to serve as the church’s only teachers. (During a Sunday service two community appointed lay “Readers” – usually one man and one woman – will alternately read pre-selected passages from the two texts.) There is no official creed, just as there is no official stance on hot-button issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and stem-cell research. Since
Christian Scientists don’t believe in the existence of the material world, the controversy surrounding evolution is completely irrelevant.

Though the reason most people have heard of the religion is because Christian Scientists famously eschew modern medicine, Mary Baker Eddy emphasized that the healing of physical ailments was not the only or even primary purpose of Christian Science. The central idea of Christian Science is that mankind is a spiritual rather than material reflection of God. The closest Christian Science comes to a creed is the “Scientific Statement of Being”, a passage written by Mrs. Eddy which is read at the conclusion of every service:

There is no life, truth, intelligence, nor substance in matter. All is infinite Mind and its infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual. (*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, p.468:9)

It’s the summer before eighth grade, and I haven’t ventured outside the house on Beech Tree Lane more than three or four times, not even to go out into the backyard. My elderly next door neighbor began giving me whittling lessons at the beginning of the summer, before I became afraid. I used to love the feel of the blade cutting with the grain, shaving small curls off into a pile at our feet. I’d carved a snake to start off with, just a thin curvy piece of wood, really, but I was proud of it. Then he helped me cut a giraffe out of a block of wood on his machine, and slowly I’d worked to soften the edges and bring the animal to life. I should be out there with him now, fashioning something even more complex
and elaborate, but I can’t. I watch him from our den window as he lowers himself down onto his porch swing with his latest project. It’s another duck, this one captured in mid-flight.

“Why don’t you go over there?” My mother says. “I know he’d like the company.”

It’s impossible to explain to her why I can’t. That I worry if I go outside I’ll have a heart attack and die, that something will happen and no one will be able to save me. “I just don’t want to right now,” I say.

My mother rolls her eyes and exhales loudly, straightening a pillow on the couch before she walks away.

Outside the wood chips gather on my neighbor’s overalls.

Tonight when my father gets home he is feeling elated and wants to take the family out to dinner.

“Please, I don’t want to go,” I tell them. “Why can’t we just stay here? What if something happens at the restaurant?”

“What could possibly happen at the restaurant?” My dad asks.

“Well, I don’t know, I mean, what if something happened to me? Like if I had, I don’t know, a sudden heart attack or something?

Everyone looks at me like I’ve gone crazy.

My mother laughs. “What? Sweetie, you’re not going to have a heart attack. For crying out loud.”

“But, please? Can we all just go another night?”

My father’s patience is beginning to wear thin. “No. We think it would be nice to go somewhere tonight, and you’re coming.”
In the end I’m dragged along to the restaurant, which I immediately scan for the nearest phone.

By the end of the summer I’m having difficulty walking upstairs, even though my bedroom is upstairs. I know how flimsy matter is, that it’s really just an illusion, and I’m terrified that my upstairs bedroom is going to crash down through the kitchen any minute.

One night in the weeks before school starts my parents are invited to a dinner party at a neighbor’s house. Even though I’m about to start eighth grade, I feel a tightening in my stomach when my mother tells me they’ll be gone for a few hours. I know that it’s babyish but I start crying. I feel as though the likelihood I’ll have a heart attack will increase if my mother leaves. “Do you have to go? Couldn’t just Daddy go by himself? I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“You won’t be alone. You’re babysitting Jeanine.”

“Well, how long ‘till you get back?”

“We’ll be right next door.”

“I know, but how long?”

My mother sucks in her cheeks. “Ariane. Come on.”

“But what if I need you for something?”

“You won’t. And don’t bother us unless it’s an emergency.”

My parents leave and my ten-year-old sister settles down in front of the TV with a bowl of ice cream, glued to a movie about little British kids who save mining ponies from being sent to the knackers. My sister is the one with the normal life: plenty of friends at school, trophies from her success at soccer, and sweet dreams every night. She’s the easy one, the one who gets along with everybody and shares her candy when other kids don’t have
any. I envy her confidence, her go-with-the-flow affability. I’m the scaredy-cat, the one who worries about grades and measures the distance between objects on my desk to make sure no one’s touched them in my absence. I watch as she stirs her bowl of ice cream. I feel restless.

Of course I feel restless – I don’t ever leave the house. My days are spent watching black and white reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show* and eating dry cheerios out of an empty butter container. I don’t touch much real food anymore.

At the beginning of the summer my mother decided to go back to teaching, which requires her to be in recertification training all day every day. My sister goes to soccer camp during the day; my dad is always at the office, so I’m alone. Alone all day and if something happens to me I know that no one’s around to call 911.

“Hey, Ariane, the phone’s ringing,” my sister calls out from the couch.

Since I’m standing right next to it I pick it up. “Hello?”

“Yes. Could I please speak to Mr. Sandford?” asks a pleasant female voice.

I fret for a second, twisting the cord between my fingers. I know I’m not supposed to tell anyone that my parents aren’t home, but I also don’t know how I’ll reach them at the party. I tell the woman, “Just a minute,” put the phone down and wring my hands, furious with myself for not taking any action. My sister just shrugs. “I’ll be right back,” I say, and grab a key off the counter. I’m going to risk the outdoors and my mother’s ire in order to deliver the message about the phone call. But should I really be doing this? I cry coward’s tears, punching my arms as I walk back and forth between the neighbors’ yard and ours, torn by indecision. Do I bother them or not? The fact that I’m behaving more like a child half
my age raises a frustrated sob from my chest. I dash back in the house and spend a couple more minutes fretting before I pick up the phone. But by now, of course, the woman is gone.

“I just can’t *stand* myself anymore,” I shout at no one in particular, and my sister looks up.

“What’s the matter with *you*?” She asks, sucking liquid ice cream from her spoon like it’s soup.

“I’m going to kill myself,” I say. I walk into the kitchen and study the knives in the knife drawer before taking out one of the largest ones, the knife my mother uses for cutting up chicken. I don’t know much about anatomy, so my plan is to stab myself in the gut.

Up until this point my sister hasn’t been paying much attention, but when I step out into the doorway between the kitchen and living room with the knife she looks up, brown eyes huge and round in alarm.

“Ariane, what are you doing?”

Tears are streaming down my blotchy cheeks. “I’m - going to - kill – myself,” I hiccup between sobs.

My sister is flinging her ice cream bowl down and bounding over, stretching out an arm to grab the knife. Except her hand closes over the blade instead of the handle. For a minute the only thing I hear is the blood rushing in my ears. Then I snap out of it and realize my sister has a huge gash across her hand. Blood is pooling in her palm. Now it’s her turn to panic.

“Jeanie, I’m so sorry,” I gasp. “It’s gonna be ok. I’m gonna take care of you.” We run to the bathroom where I think there’s some band-aids and gauze. Jeanine winces when I
run her hand under the water, but she’s still too shocked to say anything. I just keep apologizing.

Winding the gauze around her hand I start begging her not to tell our parents how this happened. “Please. Please, Jeanine. I’ll get in so much trouble.”

She nods. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell.”

When my parents get home she makes up a story about trying to cut something with the knife, and my parents praise me for wrapping up her hand.

“Do you need to work on it?” My father asks, meaning does she need to pray and study Christian Science to know the truth about her hand, to know that nothing bad ever happened.

My sister shrugs. “Not really. I already did a little praying about it. It doesn’t hurt.”

A few weeks later we’re sitting at the dinner table and I’m nibbling from my little butter cup of cheerios while everyone else has meatloaf. My sister is finished before the rest of us and runs to the living room to watch TV. *The Bodyguard* is on, and I can hear her singing along with the famous refrain: “...and I-ee-I will always love youuuuu...”

“I want to see a psychiatrist,” I announce, looking down at my plate.

“What?” My mother says.

“What do you think is wrong?” Asks my father, slowly setting down his fork.

“I’m having some bad times. I just want to talk to someone professional about it.” I wish I could have this conversation in a confessional booth like the kids at school go into to tell the priest their sins. If they choose to they can hide behind a screen while they’re talking, so that no one else can see their shame.
“Well, honey.” My father stops, and he and my mother exchange frustrated looks.

“You know our family doesn’t believe in that kind of treatment.”

I do know. I nod unhappily.

“We just happen to believe that modern medicine isn’t the best way to deal with problems.” He’s trying to get me to face him, edging his face downward towards mine, but I won’t look up. My gaze is firmly fixed on the cup of cheerios in my lap.

“I just -” and then I’m finished, because a huge sob bursts from my mouth. I know my parents are looking at each other, wondering what to do, because out of the corner of my eye I can see my father cover one of my mother’s hands with one of his.

After a moment he sighs. “Look, sweetie, why don’t we try a Christian Science practitioner. That way you’ll get someone to talk to and the treatment will be something we can all agree on.”

This is not what I was hoping for, but it’s better than nothing. Practitioners are members of the church who’ve undergone intensive training in Christian Science, and who are available to help other Christian Scientists work towards healings. Usually there is a small fee or thank-you gift involved, although this is always up to the person seeking the help. Practitioners are listed in many Christian Science publications, and they live all over the world, so that if a traveling Christian Scientist is ever hurt or in trouble he or she can look up someone local for help.

The ride to the practitioner’s house lasts about 45 minutes, and takes us deep into the turning leaves of the Virginia countryside. We pass many horses in fields and small farms and old plantation houses. I’m already starting to regret asking my parents to do this. I feel
foolish sitting in the backseat, a girl with an invisible problem taking up a whole Saturday of her parents’ time. I’m even causing them to fight when they can’t find the right address.

We finally get there, and her house is a mansion. (Since being a practitioner is not a lucrative profession, many practitioners are either retired or independently wealthy. She was both.) Inside everything is wood paneled and immaculate. Everyone shakes hands; she mispronounces my name and my parents correct her. They have a five-minute conversation about how my mother came up with my name, and then talk about children in general. Finally she leads me back to her office, a richly carpeted room with an enormous oak desk. She stations herself behind the desk and offers me one of the cushioned chairs across from her. It feels a little like I’m being interviewed for something, and I start fiddling with my hair.

“So what do you perceive as troubling you?” She has one of those very genteel voices that always comes out just a little too quiet, so that I find myself leaning forward to catch everything.

I feel guilty and silly sitting here in this magnificent house, telling this lady about being afraid that I’m going to swallow my tongue and how I need to have a phone nearby in case I need to call 911. I look out her window at the meadow beyond, where two squirrels are chasing each other up and around an old maple tree. Whenever I look back at her she’s just nodding, almost rocking back and forth as though she already knew what I was going to say. When I finish she keeps rocking a little longer and for about a minute there is absolute silence.
Finally she says, “Fear is an illusion, a non-reality, just like Error.” Her lips spread to a flat smile. “What you perceive as fear does not exist. What you are feeling may seem real, but it is not reality. You must wake up from the dream.”

“Ok,” I say.

On the drive home my parents want to know how it went, if I feel better and what I should go home and work on. The practitioner gave me some passages from *Science and Health* to study, notes and page numbers scratched on a yellow post-it. I tell them I’m fine and show them the post-it. My father nods, offering to help me find the passages in my book when we get home.

“What a gorgeous house,” my mother comments.

I throw away the post-it as soon as we get home, hot tears blurring my vision as I slam it into my pink wastebasket.

Even though I know my father is praying for my healing really hard I don’t get better. I continue holding my tongue at night and carrying around my little cup of dry cheerios. I never tell anyone else about my fears, so that sometimes during the daytime I forget that I’m different from everyone else.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER SEVEN: MUNICH/IDENTITY

I’ve blossomed into an angry, resentful teenager, rootless and lonely. I tell my parents I no longer want to be a Christian Scientist. Story about the move, who I now try to become, how it’s complicated because I’m not an American army brat, (I’ve lived in Germany before, and speak much better German than they do) but I’m not German, either. The confines of the tiny compound, the fights and screaming, night drifting in the city, fooling tourists/backpackers until I meet a group of St. Olaf students, and realize this is where I’m headed; I’ll have to fit in there someday, too.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER EIGHT: COLLEGE IN AMERICA

When I get to college fear grips me again, and I spend my first year there crying on the phone to my parents. My mother tries to turn me back to Christian Science, and in desperation I even call a practitioner, but I’m left feeling dissatisfied and hopeless. I become very involved in Theater on campus; the ephemeral nature of it feels familiar. I also begin seeing a campus psychologist, because I have a persistent fear that I’m getting stupider.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER NINE: LEGACIES FROM A LIFE ON THE MOVE

I discuss how my childhood moves and exposure to Christian Science continue to affect me as an adult. I have trouble staying put anywhere very long, holding down a job for more than a year, and maintaining a long-term relationship. I fear more than anything being “ordinary”, since my upbringing always made me feel different/special from everyone else. I worry about being bored, I worry that I won’t lead an interesting or important life. My father’s fascinating and significant career in the foreign service has given me a lot to live up to.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER TEN: WE DISAPPEAR

In this bookend companion piece to the first chapter, I will again turn to the present day situation with my grandmother, revealing how she came to be a Christian Scientist through a terrible childhood accident. I will wrap up the book’s themes of fear, (especially the fear of forgetting) illusion, and the impermanence of all things.