"The boogie man"

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"The Boogie Man"

by

Jennifer Jane Grace

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Home Again

When I am finally home
and my mother opens
the door, letting me bring
in the smells of travel -
cigarettes, french fries,
exhaust and dust -
and I have carried
my baggage, books,
and pictures to the second
floor, washed my hands
and face, taken one last
first look at everything -
the clean linoleum, just-made
bed, towels in the bathroom -
I will open the cupboards
and shy around, lurking
in my mother's kitchen,
facing canned fruits, jars,
meat in the refrigerator,
the like of which I
haven't known for months,
and I will eat
and eat - leftover swiss
steak, potatoes, the old
cushioned sofa, chintz
curtains, china
cabinet, rugs on the floor;
I will eat and eat
because this is my home
and it tastes good.
My Mother Has Taken to Bending Forks

After learning it on a TV talk show
and filling the kitchen drawers with bent
utensils, she chatters over morning coffee
and cigarettes about psychic power, kinetic
energy. A staircase of smoke spiraling
her head, she speaks of white light running
down her body through her arms,
rolling heat into her fingers into the metal.
She folds the spines of spoons and forks, breaking
eight place settings, gifts wedding-won.

At the breakfast table, looking out the window,
I wonder if the birds gather in the back
yard because the wind brought them
or because my mother called them here.
Aunt Patty Gets a Job at the Bakery

Her mind clicks, seeing the rows and rows of glassed-in glossy cakes, crullers, confections, elephants ears and long johns. “You must taste everything we sell so you know what to tell the customers,” the baker says and Patty flips.

Oh, with what care she handles the eclairs, with perfect ease she drops cream puffs into white waxed bags, a smile on her face, a jelly roll sugaring her stomach.

Everyday her diet’s gladly led astray by the elegant lisp of croissants, the thump of tortes onto trays, the knock of new Vienna breads into bins, all beckoning her to make love to them with her lips, her teeth and tongue and throat, finally deep inside her, satisfied and dunked.
The Spring's First Robin

In this dream,
my grandmother dives
off the edge of the balcony
of our old flat on 56th Street.
I know it's her by the flopping
night cap, stockings loose
around her ankles, shuffling
bed slippers. She has rouged
and powdered her cheeks,
drawn in her eyebrows
as she does every day,
but her hands are no longer
shaking. She is steady,
face the front sidewalk
with resolve, toeing the gutter,
and suddenly she snaps,
precisely bending and unfolding
in a perfect jackknife.
At this I turn away.

* * *

This morning I call her,
her quiet wishing voice
finally answering. The receiver
rattles in her hand
against her mouth and jaw.
I think of her, boxed away
in the flat below my mother's,
shuffling across the thick
shag, her hand flapping
against her thigh.
And in the kitchen,
the linoleum tight
on the bottom of her feet.
She looks out the window
at another spring's first robin,
imagine flight, the clean cut
through air and the sky.
Summer Tornado

I stand up to the windows, the storm throwing its body at the glass in a violent fury.

It is now I want to open my chest, unhinge my ribs and let that tornado in.
Praise Song for a Little Girl Alone

This little girl skated beneath the maple trees, her metal wheels sparking on the sidewalks, crushing helicopter seeds.

Too hot for playing and summer desires, she read books beneath the honey locust, cicadas sawing in the spires.

She found antique violet blossoms under the evergreen bushes like a hidden cave of jewels, and crouched and sang to gather what she'd seen.

She hummed secret songs under the aspen, songs blown into the street, where they scattered along white curbs and the sun glanced off concrete.
Spring on the Playground
(for Kristen)

children clamber up
the monkey bars the oil
of their hands greasing
the cold metal pipe their boots
fiercely ringing the rungs
jumping like sacks
into the sand below

the red kickball whacks
against the brick convent wall girls clap
and twirl playing 7-up counting
one clap two clap three clap clap

someone's hiding
under the slide
hiccup stuck
sucking his red mittens
the seat of his snowpants
wet in a puddle

girls nest among the brittle
lilac bushes whispering cats
cradle wandering in groups
like small solar systems planets

the backboard quivers
and the boys scuffle
in black sneakers chase
the ball in the street
between the woosh of cars

I forgot about this until I met you
caught the grumpy smell of children
come in from playing outside
and the bite of cold on your cheeks
felt your hand warm in mine
when I walked you home from school
Crocuses

One spring, the crocuses did not open.
When their small succulent heads poked from the clay
in my mother's flower bed, we held our breath
for their struggling, hopeful climb, checked
them every day for signs of opening, counted
and compared them, muddying our good school
shoes, dragging our knapsacks through back yard puddles.

Then the temperature dropped and it snowed again,
a wet late-spring snow, winter wringing out
his final hurrah, and the crocuses suffocated.
As the season rolled warmer toward Easter
and summer vacation, the snow grayed and melted
and their green blades bored through the crust.

But they did not grow any higher. The spring
rains trampled them and the summer sun
dried and broke their leaves. My mother frowned
each time she passed the flower bed and we walked
to the back door around the other side of the house.
We missed the crocuses that spring.
The Boogie Man

The boogie man is a skinny man in a purple shiny bowler. He grabs children's legs when they jump the cellar stairs and yanks them to his corner.

He's the one who plants the crickets who scurry up the heating vents or crick under my bed, shiny black under the book I set down the night before. He kills them in the basement, littering their brittle carcasses like nut shells in the cobwebby concrete corners.

He calls the mice from the fields, showing them the tomatoes in the preserve jars and leads them to the traps baited with peanut butter.

I think I've seen him driving around in an old Buick, offering candy to little girls, but I don't go near because I know he spits on their schoolbooks, tears their dresses, takes them far from their mothers.

He's been to my bedroom, hanging the June bugs in the corner of my ceiling on the hottest nights of the year. My ears strain to hear their clicks above the fan, the hum of air conditioners from the neighbors' houses, the moist towel muffle of the humid air.
Standing in my back yard at sunset, I hear the creak of zucchinis heavy on their vines, the occasional pass of late-working fathers on the highway, the other children's mothers calling them home. The dusk is broadening; I can barely distinguish the tangle of clothesline with the horizon, the glow of neighbors' televisions in their windows. Gnats hover in a cloud over my head. I wait for my mother's call to break the sun, to drop it deep behind my friend's house, to hear the sigh of crickets and the first sputters of nighttime sprinklers.

I dread the final lock of the back door when I go in, boxed in sticky plaster walls, the fan whining in the corner, the smell of leftovers and disturbance of my parents' talking. I want to cry, Let me stay for once. Let me take this evening and keep it. Let me fold this dusk in my arms and lock it up as it blooms, this flower, this other child: night.
Cupboard

My kitchen cupboard, windowed, 
white and straight, latches its doors 
after breakfast, keeps the morning air in 
all day, holding its breath 
against the papered, flowered shelves. 
The cans and boxes, the bear-shaped 
bottle of honey, bowls and plates 
and glasses and vase—all content, 
quiet, filling their volume of space 
and silence, wholly holding their place. 
This is where I want to be, 
this calm, dark place 
in the cupboard, rolled up in the pink 
mixing bowl, spacing my breaths 
across the refrigerator's rumbles. 
This is where I want to rest, 
where only the moths flutter 
in dry agony, where the hardness 
of the light is held off 
by the clean, clear glass.
Summer, Trying to Get to Sleep

She turned on all the lights in the house so that, stepping from window glass to glass, we could see her small bare feet, so petite, treading on yard and yard of smooth plush carpet. We coveted her cool as we spied, sitting on the curb outside, gravel scratching our thighs, crickets' sighs, heat laying his tongue on the smalls of our backs, night breathing close in our ears with mosquitoes and gnats. We envied her as she traipsed from clean room to clean, not a smell to injure her nose, not a buzz in her ear. Dry and smiling in her air-conditioned talcum-powder as we wet our heads in the heavy breeze.
Summer, Awakening

rolls over, his belly
against my back
sweaty, tangles the sheets
around my ankles, drools
warm in the corner of my neck
behind my ear.

He’s in my mother’s garden
crouching in the weeds,
plucks open the flowers, one by one:
snapdragons, nasturtiums,
sweet william, moss roses,
petunias, begonias, geraniums.

Eases through the slip
of sprinklers, cools
himself at the base
of the stone birdbath.
On the edge of the envelope
of sunrise, he spreads

himself like the sun
like an easy blanket,
digs his toes in the coolest
kiss bottoms of the sheets
and steals from me
sleep.
"The Very Thought of You"
(for Wynton Marsalis)

breathed lights low
back throat warm
cool fingertipped
silk tied starched
collar weak
with sweat and I am
anticipating
the smell of your mouth
on my lips and palms

because I am
thinking of the taste
of tarnish on your lips
the wrinkle of pleats
comfort of the fullest
note and I am
anticipating
the loosening
and slide
Cantaloupe Song

Opening a melon
on Saturday morning,
I am amazed
by the ribs of seeds
delicate, the rain drops
dotted on my window,
one lousy bird chirping
for all he's worth
in my neighbor's broken tree.

I am amazed
by how this cantaloupe
breaks herself open,
yawns orange and sunny
on my blue kitchen
table, despite the weather,
despite the news on TV.

If I take
to sniffing her rind
like a new baby's neck,
burying myself
in her fragrant flesh,
who will stop me?

My lover in the other
room, will he
understand? Will he
know my desire
for something sweeter,
more tangible?
Peeling Apples

I know what got Eve, these hollow fruits, colored inside like an autumn sunset, skins mottled.

These apples are Winesap, from Ohio, not shiny, engorged like the fruit at the supermarket, but dusty, like the plastic apples in the bowl on Grandma’s table, dull as the furniture at the cottage, warm and yielding as her heart to the snake.
Vacation
(for Paul)

After I've relieved my luggage
of its responsibilities, slept
off the crick of leather seats,
the cocktail, the panic of take-off
and landing, I will settle
and think of you, your cat, both
your eyes as cool and blue
as plates in a winter cupboard,
and I will take this moment
to travel from there to here,
to bring you where I am.
The Day the Lottery Went Up
(October 23, 1971)

I don't know -
I guess I was goofing
around in the yearbook
office, smoking cigarettes,
having smoke ring
competitions with my buddies.
I knew the numbers
had to be posted soon,
kept tipping back in my chair
to peek out the door
to see if they were up.

The Union was crowded,
guys milling around like cattle
in the stockyards. It
was such an odd thing,
Here we were, just college
kids, the taste of Mom's
apple pie and all that
still in our mouths, and this one
chance thing in the blink
of an eye could just ruin
our whole day, you know?

One minute, you're standing
in a stairwell, puffing
on a cigarette and talking
existentialism, your hand inching
down your girlfriend's ass,
and the next thing, you're
at Fort Dix, standing
in some raggedy line,
a big mean drill sergeant screaming
at you about HIS Army,
honor, all that shit.

* * *
Yeah, I was against the war, but for no reason really except I didn't want to get my ass blown off, didn't want to hurt my mom, didn't want to miss seeing her peeling apples before Thanksgiving, say.

I finally went out, shouldered my way through. There was no way to avoid it. I mean, they'd come knocking on your door anyway, some morning when you least expected it. Some guys were turning away, their faces looking all blotched and raw, knew they were fresh meat for the conflict. Some were quiet.

I peered over all the shoulders, saw a 320. Could have just as easily been a 20 with a smudge in front of it. I stepped back to get my shit together. I went back the next day when everyone was gone and touched the paper where my number was.
The Gideon Bible Man

He stands on the sidewalk, save
his shoe, which is in a puddle of water
in the mud. This is his beat,
the west side of the street, the light
behind the trees just starting to hit him, ticking
in patches through the leaves. His breath

is coming out in small white knocks, the way breath
will on a cold day like this. He's on this side to save
time giving out Bibles, the stacks ticking
away quickly, students like a rush of water
for ten minutes, then his rest, the light
flow of walkers between

classes. He paces the sidewalk in slow beats
now, catches his breath
after preaching God and His Light
and takes out a single from the little he's saved,
planning lunch - a hamburger, water
(no money for milk). The bubbles in his stomach tick

and grumble with hunger. He notices small ticks,
pocks which look like rain on the concrete beaten
by walkers, but he wishes it were real water
to break the day. He likes the rain, his breath
pulling moisture from the air, feeling safe
and free, clean, light,

light, and filled with light.
He flips the pages of a Bible, tickling
his fingertips, careful to save
the cracking of the new spine for the person who might be beaten
by life as he once was, his breath
barely coming at times, swimming through like it was water.
He found God in a hotel room, in a drawer under the water glasses. He couldn't believe this small book, so light with vinyl cover and breathless pages, such comfort. Once again he could hear the clock tick, so much to do, so many evils to beat. That afternoon, he drove to the church to be saved.

And he can still feel the water, the ticking underneath, the lightness of his heartbeat, and feel the new breath he took as he came up, saved.
Chicago, February, One in the Morning

In a car parked behind condos, unlocked
--a message there's nothing to steal--
he finds his nighttime home,
no one there but the digital clock's
blank sideways stare, the indifferent wheel,
and the scent of the owner's soap or cologne
breathing warmly from the plush
seats. Lying down, he can feel
his bones click into place, find his own
silence in this large city, the cold muffled, the wind hushed.
Looking for Home
(for Jesse Jackson)

how it must be
this walk to the stage
your face lighted
by camera lamps
and bright blinding flashes
the press of eager people
their minds also flashing
their eyes pulling you

before you take the podium
remember the walk
the trudge from Selma to Washington
over hot asphalt
how their feet must have burned
in those tight black shoes
the clothes crawling on their backs
the stares of enemies
on the gravel shoulder
also climbing their backs
perfect targets

or another walk
from Georgia to Oklahoma
the sting of salt and dust
the children crying and tired
the low hum
of moaning and singing
and the shimmer
of whispered negotiations
refraction of heat
on the trail

*   *   *
the sudden trip
from San Francisco to encampment
the hasty drop and packing
leaving behind home
businesses familiarities
for flat wood beds
and land and days
moving slowly
as subterranean plates

or think of my own
and my mother's
wander between buildings
and offices saved nightly
by the Salvation Army with warm
beans cots a shower
we hide our hands in the pockets
of our free Goodwill
parkas displaced distressed
and still looking
for home

how it must be
to stand up
to be exposed
to testify
to a bouquet of microphones
on days when you are tired
of strange rooms and languages
when trouble
lies like a lump
in your stomach
and better memories jingle
like the coins in your pocket
Hot Sylvia

Sylvia's hot, hot as a sun-heated car seat
in the summer - she makes me sweat
with her stiletto pumps,
her heavy, kohl-lined Peruvian eyes.

Her thighs, oh they're tight
and when she salsas, she salsas
in sly sidewise turns,
the ruffles of her skirt licking her legs.

And now she's looking at me.
I would fall to my knees
but I want to be cool.
I hope she can't see
the heat flushing my face.

She's as old as my mother.
with her cracked make-up smile,
her smoky cigarette voice,
but I don't care.

When I hold her dancing, I hold her
like I would a bird and I can feel age
clicking in her bones,
making sparks,
burning hot as coals, hotter
than the flames that came before.

I walk her to her car.
Steam comes off us
in the cold night air.
She kisses me goodnight
and I know I have held fire.
The Gardener Finds a New Flower

His favorite women
are daffodils, their heads bowed
dumbly, all softly powdered pollen,
innocent lightness, frilled
and long-stalked, folding their leaves
about themselves coyly.

She is more like a hyacinth,
filled with fragrance, bright
and encumbered with blossom,
competent in the clay
soil and full of a purple
that he can not touch.
After She Left

He falls awake wet,
looks at his clock,
isn't sure whether it's
morning or evening.
Is he late for work or dinner?
What was that dream
and how can he pull himself out?

Can't remember
the last time he slept.
He slept last with his wife,
when he couldn't see light
past the pulled shades,
hadn't breathed air not filtered
through air conditioners for weeks.

Her broad back was turned
to him, silent as an island
in the darkness, the heat
from her sunburn coming
through the sheets between them.

The last time he slept
with her, he couldn't sleep,
the red blinking dots on the clock
tapping the night,
the vacuum of air in their bedroom
pulling his chest. He yearned
to feel the humidity
beyond the window, the water
in the air, everything coated
with the night.

Now, the windows are open
and he swims in the air,
gasping, wondering
is he late for work or dinner,
what was that dream
and how can I pull myself out?
Home

A burglar broke into an Alton, Illinois, home, baked a cherry pie, ate a slice, and left. According to police, the intruder left the uneaten portion of the pie in the refrigerator.

*Alton Telegraph*

Let's say a man, mid-forties, divorced, far from home, a traveler with wrinkled shirt and suit, a simple-looking man, often geographically confused, wanting directions from kind folks on street corners at each new place he finds, losing track of the first right, the third left, seeking he doesn't know what, maybe just that smile from pious neighbors. He visits all too many diners, eating his pie first, gulping down cups of grainy coffee, "home cooked" mashed potatoes loading his stomach. He always leaves a good tip, pulling faded bills from his simple, empty wallet, but he hates these places - not the meals, but the flat dusk and exhaust wanting to cloud his lungs when he pushes out the glass doors. He wants so little, for once clean clothes, the same bed, half-eaten pie waiting in the refrigerator when he enters his dark kitchen late, his place hushed and sleeping, this evening safely home. He desires hardly anything anymore, simply things not the way he left them in the morning. He left what seems a long time ago, wanting to see endless fields, the simple bloom of flowers, the road stretched out long and wide before him, pine trees lining the road like witnesses. He quit his home, packed his car and luggage and slipped from that place.

* * *
One day, he again finds this place,
a white house so much like his, after a left
turn taken wrongly (as usual) on a block of homes
landscaped and watered. Tiredness breaks his bones and he wants
nothing more that day than that pie
hiding in a dark kitchen. He parks his car, simply

strolls the walk and enters, the screen door latch clicking in his hand. So simple
and right it seems to place
the ingredients for pie
on the counter, finding the canned cherries where his wife would have left
them. He wants
to come home:

it is that simple. He couldn't believe he'd ever left,
everything still in its place, all that he wants
tasted in a slice of pie, what he can remember of home.
My Brother Arnold

The day I met Arnold was the day I wet my pants on the way to school. He was soon to become my only sibling for a short time. That day at five minutes after seven, my mother bundled me up as usual in my Frange's bargain basement snowsuit, wrapping the red scarf my grandma knit for me tightly around my face, popping on my mismatched hat and mittens, wiggling my K-Mart boots on, and kissing me goodbye as she got in her car. I toddled up the driveway alone, out into the gravel road, and across busy Highway A at the end of our street in small town Howard's Grove, Wisconsin, to the gravel road of the next neighborhood.

Our house was just inside the bus limits and I had to trudge 1.9 miles to school every day. When we had first moved to Howard's Grove five months earlier, the walk to school didn't seem that horrible because I had walked to kindergarten in Milwaukee, but when school started, I could see that the gravel roads of Howard's Grove were not like the sidewalks and crossing guards of Milwaukee. As usual, I rambled down the long residential street which led to downtown Howard's Grove and Riverview, the elementary school for all the first, second, and third grade children in the district. I saw the ends of pinecones that had dropped from the evergreen trees poking out of snowbanks, and I dug them out, freezing my fingers in the process, and crouched and poked them into the drain at the end of the street. I often poked around like that to
avoid facing school alone as the still-new city kid. That day, I was so intent on the job that at first I didn't notice that I was wetting my pants.

A warm dampness spread down my thighs quickly when I stood up. I remained in place for a moment, staring at the bread bag holding my black patent shoes that I had set carefully on a snowbank so I could gather more pinecones. I didn't know what to do. I had no one to ask. I knew that my mother had already left for work and that, although I knew where she kept the key to get in the house, I couldn't return home. Returning home meant having the school's secretary call my mother at work to find out where I was and also missing a day at school. It meant letting myself into a cold, empty house to sit on the floor and watch TV all day alone until my mother came back from work.

I wiped a snow-soaked mitten across my running nose. It was very quiet and I could hear the plop of another pinecone in the snow as I stood there, trying to decide what to do. I moved one leg tentatively and the itchy wetness was nearly unbearable. I didn't want to move, but my damp legs were already turning cool and I knew that they might freeze if I remained there. I decided to continue on to school, the warm and itchy dampness around my thighs turning cold and finally icy as I reached the corner.

Walking was excruciating. Everything was wet—my legs, my mittens, the place where I breathed into my scarf. And the thought of revealing the shame of my wet pants to my teacher was making the oatmeal in my stomach turn into a heavy lump. As I rounded the corner on to Main Street, I could see buses in the distance turning into the driveway of Riverview. I gulped as I realized I would have to walk with a wet seat past all the kids getting off the bus or risk being late
and bring even more attention to myself. I stood on the corner, trying to figure out how to get into the school and to Miss Reyer before anyone could see me.

I didn't enjoy being an only child. The children and adults of my childhood and the Catholic community of my home always blinked twice when I told them I had no siblings. They would often tilt their heads and scrutinize me, as if I had just told them that I was missing a leg and was using the leg of my mother's dining room table to walk. "Don't you miss having sisters and brothers?" they'd ask. I hardly knew what I missed. Being an only child is like living on a peaceful, broad field with the nearest neighbors a mile away. It's very quiet and private and familiar.

I often fantasized about having sisters and brothers. I was bombarded by sibling sets - the Bobbsey Twins, Hardy Boys, Trixie Belden and her brothers, even the six aunts and uncles on each side of my family. Watching reruns of "The Brady Bunch" and "The Partridge Family," I was convinced that the only way to be a real kid was to have real sisters and brothers. I knew that having sisters and brothers also meant fighting a lot and having to share everything including sleeping quarters, but I knew no other only children like myself, so I had no one to compare notes with. I dreamt of a kind older sister or brother, a sibling who would protect me from the dangers of growing up. Without a sibling, a sympathizer, a mate to walk to school with, it was difficult to face choices, for example, how to get to school with wet pants. My dream came true, briefly, in first grade when I met Arnold.

"Hey!" I heard a boy call behind me. "Hey you!" I turned around slowly to peek at who was calling whom. An older boy pulling a pock-marked silver flying saucer sled on a rope was running down my side of the street towards me.
"Hey!" I turned back to see if there was someone in front of me whom he might be calling to, but there was nobody. I felt even worse as I realized he was about to run me over with his big flying saucer. In Milwaukee, big boys like that had followed me home from school one day, calling me names and throwing stones at me. I had walked on without looking back or even showing that I noticed them, but for the next three weeks, I was so scared to walk home alone my mother had to pay an older girl to accompany me every day.

The boy clumped up to me in his heavy black snow boots, puffs of breath popping out of his mouth. He had a round, round face and he looked almost bald. Only the thin fuzz of a dark crewcut covered his head. "Why're you just standing there? Are you lost?" the little boy lisped. His front teeth were missing. He tilted his head to the side and squinted. "Are you Kenny's little sister?"

"No," I said. "I'm no one's sister."

"Oh." He peered into my face. "Are you new?"

I looked down at my feet. "Yes." I could feel the cold wind chilling the seat of my pants, but it was such a relief to stand still, I didn't move.

"Whose class are you in?"

"Miss Reyer's."

"Oh, I had her in first grade. She's nice. Now I got Mrs. Larson. She's really crabby." The bell rang at the school. "There's the first bell. We're gonna be late. Come on. I'll show you where to go." He started walking toward the
school. I still didn't want to move, so I stayed where I was. He stopped and turned around. "Aren'cha coming?"

I could feel a warm tear rolling down my face and into my already wet scarf. "I can't," I sobbed.

"Oh, come on," he dropped his flying saucer sled on the ground and came towards me. "Don't cry. Why can't you go to school?"

"I just can't," I cried, looking at his round face.

"Is it 'cause you fell in the snow and your seat is wet? Don't worry. They have an extra pair of pants there."

How could I tell him why my pants were really wet? "I-I didn't fall in the snow."

"Then what happened?"

"I-I can't tell you," I hiccuped.

"Didya wet your pants?" Arnold peered at the darker spot on the legs of my snowsuit. I started crying harder and my knees buckled out of emotional fatigue so that I was sitting on the snow and gravel. "It's no big deal. They have an extra pair of pants there--underwear too. I laughed so hard once I peed in my pants--really. They just gave me another pair of pants. Come on," he took my red mittened hand in his black gloved hand and pulled me up.

"Someone'll see me," I sobbed.

"I'll take you to the principal's office and no one'll see ya. Come on," he said, pulling my hand. He picked up the rope of his flying saucer sled and starting tramping towards the school, the sled and I tracing unsteady paths behind.
When we got to the school, he led me to a door on the side of the school opposite from where the bus kids came in, the side where the principal's and counselors' offices were located. I could hear the shouts of the kids coming in through the halls, the thuds as they took off their boots, the whisper of nylon jackets being unzipped. I toddled as well as I could in his tow, trying not to let my wet legs meet.

He took me to the door of an office and propped his sled against the wall. "This is the principal's office. I'll go in with ya. Nobody's gonna laugh at ya," he whispered to me. He walked in, but I lingered in the hallway. "Hi, Mrs. Miller," I could hear him say. "This little girl...," he stopped short and came back out into the hall. "Come on. Ya gotta talk to Mrs. Miller."

An older lady in a blue dress followed him out and crouched down to look to me. "Hi, Jenny. Do you remember me?" I did remember my mom talking to her on my first day at the school. "What's up?"

"She wet her pants on the way to school," the boy said. "I told her it was no big deal."

"Oh, no, not a big deal," she smiled. She expertly wiped my running nose with a piece of tissue she had pulled out of her sleeve. "I bet we can find something for you to wear. Let's get you out of that snowsuit first. You must be very cold and uncomfortable. Arnold," she turned to the boy, "thank you for being so nice. You can go to class now."

"OK," Arnold said, "but first I gotta tell Jenny something." He cupped his hand and whispered in my ear, "Don't worry. I'll come and get you for lunch. You can be like my little sister." He waved and walked out of the office and I could hear the clang of his sled as he dragged it down the hallway.
Mrs. Miller ducked into a back room of the office and came back out with a pair of black corduroys, white socks, and a blue down coat with white fake fur on the edge of the hood. "Let's go into the bathroom and get you changed right away."

I followed her down the long, dark, unfamiliar hall to a door marked "WOMEN" which I had never seen before. She pushed open the heavy oak door and led me in. "Let's get your boots off first, so we can get your snowsuit off." She was humming as she pulled off my boots and unzipped my snowsuit. She didn't mind handling it. "What a pretty jumper you're wearing. These pants will match perfectly." She wet a washcloth and produced a pair of new underwear still wrapped in the plastic. "I need you to go in that stall and wipe yourself off and put these on."

I went into the stall and closed the big metal door behind me. I peeled off my wet tights and underpants and washed myself with the warm water, finally relieved and comfortable. I could hear Mrs. Miller still humming as she took my tights and underpants and washed them out in the sink. The underwear she had given me was pink and had lacy frills--nothing like the kind my mother bought at Woolworth's. Mrs. Miller passed the corduroys and socks under the door and I put those on. The pants were warm, as if they had been lying on a radiator or had just come out of the drier, and the soft material soothed my chapped legs. When I came out, I saw my tights hanging up in front of a frosted window, the two white skinny legs dripping like icicles. My wet snowsuit was draped over the sink. "No one will see those because this is the principal's bathroom," Mrs.
Miller said. "You can just pick them up before you leave for home tonight." She helped me buckle my Mary Janes, straightened the hem of my jumper, and took my hand and boots.

We walked into my classroom just as everyone was moving chairs to make reading groups. I was disappointed to see Mr. Kramer's bald head. "Jenny had to change into her school clothes when she got here today," Mrs. Miller said to him. "Hope you don't mind that she's late." I walked easily to the circle of my reading group and settled into my chair with the pleasure of a dry, clean seat.

At lunch, when Mr. Kramer let us out to get our dripping boots off the long low racks that lined the wet-wool-smelling hallway, I saw Arnold and a group of third grade boys standing across from my classroom door. "Hey, Jenny," Arnold called. I pretended I didn't hear him and sat down on the tile to unbuckle my Mary Janes and pull on my boots. There were so many boys with him and they were so much bigger than me, so noisy and laughing and punching each other. "Jenny?" Arnold tapped me on the shoulder with his hat. "Areya going over to the high school to eat lunch with us?"

"Do you really want me to go with you?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, yeah. Hurry up and get your coat so we can get a good seat before the second graders come." He helped me up and put my shoes on the rack for me.

I clumped back into the classroom and Mr. Kramer held out the blue coat. "No one will know this isn't yours," he smiled. He helped me loop the red mittens that my grandmother had knit and had connected with a long string so I wouldn't lose them through the sleeves of the coat. "Now, you have a good lunch."
When I walked out into the hallway, Arnold shouted, "Hey, you guys. This is my little sister." He put his arm around my neck and hugged me very tight, so I couldn't tell them that I wasn't really his sister. He loosened up when he felt me squirm. "Sorry."

"No way, Arnold. You don't have a sister," a short rat-looking boy in a Packer's hat said. He had a rolled-up red plastic sheet sled under his arm and he looked at me suspiciously.

"Yeah, I do. She's in Miss Reyer's class," Arnold replied.

"Then why ain't we seen her around before," another kid asked, looking me up and down. He had white-blond hair and a faint, faint blond mustache.

"Cause she's been staying inside at recess to help the teacher. She's gotta eat lunch with me today, so she's sitting with us," Arnold said. Arnold adjusted his sled under his arm and took my hand. "Do you have your lunch ticket?" he asked me. I pulled out the yellow ticket and showed it to him. "Put it in your mittens and put them on," he ordered.

I walked to lunch that day in a swarm of third grade boys. We stepped outside, crossed the bus road, and entered the high school, where we ate our hot lunches every day. The herd of boys carried me through the legs of the tall high schoolers, who generally scared me. The smell of tator tots, meatloaf, and peas that greeted us at the door of the cafeteria, a smell that normally made my stomach turn because I knew I'd be eating alone, made my stomach growl. I finally had friends, and they were the most powerful boys at Riverview.

During the next few weeks, Arnold was my best buddy. He told everyone that I was his little sister and made sure that his pals treated me nicely. Everyday, they would meet me at the door of my classroom at lunch and I
would walk outside in the middle of a herd of bigger boys. After lunch, I often followed them to their section of the playground, the far corner behind the baseball diamond.

At Riverview, we had the benefit of a small slope which dropped gently into the high school's football field, one hundred yard's worth of prime but safe sledding area. All winter, the children of the town descended upon school with any number of sledding devices: old-fashioned toboggans, Ronco's metal flying saucers (advertised on television), small wooden sleds with red runners, rolled-up red plastic sheets, and even flattened cardboard boxes.

Arnold would sit me down on someone's red plastic sheet and tell me to keep my eyes peeled for Roman, the bully who flunked third grade and whipped snowballs with ice in them. I sat there like a princess all through recess, watching the big boys sled, listening to them cuss like men, like my dad, saying things that I wouldn't even think to say.

Arnold would trot over to the other boys and plop down on his pock-marked flying saucer. "Watch this, guys," he'd shout, turning the saucer vigorously with his arms so that he'd be facing away from the hill. With a small push, he would slip down the slope backwards, arms waving in the air. He'd come to a slow, gliding stop at the bottom and the other boys would laugh and begin to go down backwards on their own toboggans. All of them scrambled clumsily back up the small hill, tripping over the cords of their sleds, to plunge back down "our mountain."

Every once in a while, one of them would run over and say, "Didya see that? I went down backwards!" Arnold would thump over through a snowbank
and lisp, "Areya cold? Here's my scarf. Here's my hat. Hold 'em for me. They're just getting in the way." A mountain of scarves and hats slowly grew around me as all the boys discarded them in the heat of play.

I sat on that red plastic sheet each day, my stomach full of hot lunch and chocolate milk, until the snow started melting. Arnold and the boys could no longer sled and they turned to making rivers and tributaries in the mud and slush. I could not participate in this game because my mother didn't like to have me come home with muddy shoes, so I would often sit on a swing and watch the boys play. I'd also spy on the girls from my class when they took out twin plastic jumpropes so they could try jumping double Dutch. They were horrible at it, but they kept trying. I learned how to double Dutch in Milwaukee, and some days it was all I could do to keep from running over and grabbing the ends of the jumpropes so I could show them how to do it.

One day, Arnold did not come to school. The boys were waiting outside my classroom as usual. "Where's Arnold?" asked the rat-faced boy when I came out.

"I don't know. Where is Arnold?" I giggled. I thought Arnold might be playing a joke on me.

"Is he sick?" the blond boy asked.

"I don't know." Now I could see they were serious.

"Why not? You're his sister," the blond boy said.

I really didn't know what to say. I didn't know where Arnold lived, what his last name was, or why he might not be at school. The boys pressed around me. Their boots were so big. They rustled impatiently.
"She don't know where he is. She ain't his sister," the rat-faced kid said. 
"Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire," he chanted in my face.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire," all the boys started shouting. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire." They began dancing around, waving their arms, spitting s's between their missing teeth. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire!"

I was trapped in the middle of the dancing boys. They pulled my hat over my eyes, tugged my hair, stepped on my toes, spun me around so I was dizzy. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire." I kept thinking that this was all a trick and Arnold would come to rescue me, but he didn't. He wasn't there. I was suffering for my lie and for my wish for an older brother. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Nose is longer than a telephone wire."

For the next two weeks, I felt like a pariah as I walked through the halls of the school. The kids in my class still didn't talk to me. Walking out to lunch was nearly unbearable. Once again, I sat in the corner of the lunchroom, quickly cramming dry mashed potatoes in my mouth so I could escape the sight of Arnold's friends. I spent my recess sitting on the step of the back school door, reading a book or watching the other children play, the lump of hot lunch turning hard in my stomach. My exile from the playground was self-imposed. I could still see the boys aping around me in the hall and hear their taunting voices. "Liar, liar..." In my stomach, I knew they were right.

"Hey!" I heard a familiar voice croak behind me two weeks later in the empty school hall. At first I was so happy to hear his voice, I wanted to turn around, but remembering his friends, I gripped the paddle pass tighter and
walked more quickly towards the bathroom. "Hey, Jenny! Hey! What'sa matter. Are you deaf? Jenny?"

I turned around. "What?" I said as if I were deaf and hadn't heard him.

"Well, hi!"

"Hi." I didn't know what to say to him. I felt my stomach clenching and unclenching like a fist.

"Bet you've been wondering where I was. I had tonsillitis and that's why I ain't been here for a while," he said a little hoarsely. He wasn't lisping as much and when he smiled, I could see that his front teeth had grown in half way. "I went to the hospital in Sheboygan overnight and everything— you know, just like that book about the sick kid."

I shrugged and pretended to look intently at a purple construction paper hippopotamus pinned to a bulletin board in the hall. It had a broad, front-toothless smile just like Arnold had once had. I thought about the doctor wedging his thumb under Arnold's two front teeth to open Arnold's mouth so he could get at Arnold's red tonsils. "Are you OK, Jenny? You seem kinda sad. I'll tell you this funny joke I heard, but it's kinda dirty. Wanna hear it?" he said.

"Hurry up. I gotta go." I wondered if my teacher would come out to see what was taking me so long and I shifted from leg to leg, needing to go to the bathroom, hoping I wouldn't wet my pants again.

"This kid has to go to the bathroom and the teacher says, 'First I gotta hear you say the alphabet.' So the kid says, 'ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZUVWXYZ and Z.' And the teacher says, 'Where's the P?' And the kid says, 'Running down my leg!' A huge smile broke across his face. "Ain't that funny?" he started giggling and laughing.
He knew. He knew I was a liar. His friends had told him that I was a liar and he told me that joke to get back. My stomach flopped and shame washed over me hot and itchy. Erupting in tears and sobs, I ran to the bathroom, my Mary Janes slapping the floor loudly. "Jenny? Jenny? What'sa matter? Jenny?" I heard him calling behind me. I slipped through the heavy wood door, hid in the farthest stall, clanging the metal door behind me, and sat down just in time to find the toilet.

After that school year, Arnold went to the fourth grade at Northview. By the time I made my way to Northview, he was in junior high. I never saw him again. I wonder about what has happened to him sometimes. Coming from small-town Howard's Grove, he's now probably a truck mechanic or a farmer, a husband and a father, an upstanding member of his community. And sometimes I wonder if he remembers me, wonder if he cares to know that I forgave him.
Ladies' Turn

Dad was already up to fly. He set the plane out in the middle of the field and started it up with the chicken stick, throttling it high so that it was tugging at the air. Then he stepped back, and it sped up and took off, a demon with its own power. He went through the maneuvers: Touch and Go, the Triple Loop, the Immelman, the Eight Point Roll, the Cuban 8, completing everything with ease. As the plane circled around for a Slow Roll, we heard the engine cough, and I could see his thumbs press on the sticks of the radio a bit more tensely, his toes curling in his canvas shoes as if he wanted to get up on his tiptoes to snatch the plane from the sky. The plane successfully completed the Slow Roll, but as it climbed straight up into the sky for the Spin, it stalled briefly. The people laughing and talking on the field suddenly became quiet and everyone's face was turned up, hands shielding their eyes. He pointed her down, switched the engine off, and it twirled straight down like a heavy leaf, the engine catching at the last minute, swooping the plane up victoriously. Bringing the plane around, he landed it bouncing breathlessly on the grass, and this is when he was my hero and I loved him the most.

It was a typical summer Sunday, and we were at another model airplane contest, this one a Fly-in, for relaxation and family time, or so Dad said. Pebble Creek, a section of cornfield about thirty miles from our house, was an area of land my father had purchased jointly with other fliers so as to have a space to fly without the worries of telephone poles or angry neighbors. The grass was short in the middle of the field like a crewcut, and we had parked in a gravel parking area and unloaded the car, setting up camp near the other awnings and lean-tos.
I suppose it was a weekend family thing to do, but the singular dedication my father and the other men had for their nasty little planes was ridiculous. It was like being at a dog show with a pack of angry poodles and their overprotective owners. The planes themselves sounded like big, furious bees buzzing and whining in the air, circling in threatening paths. On the ground, they were even more frightening. The pilots would pull out thick yellow pencils with coated rubber ends—chicken sticks—and whack gingerly at the propellers as if they were about to lose a finger until the engines caught. The planes whirred like small angry animals, anxious to fly as the pilots moved the throttles up and down on their radios. The pilots caressed their planes with soft towels, wiping the pungent fuel off the fuselages after flights as if they were wiping the sweat off beloved pets.

Despite Dad’s order to relax, I was not thrilled about being at the Fly-In. Model airplane contests made me nervous. It was really no place for a child. The planes were made of soft balsa wood, delicate and nose-heavy because of their engines, tipping head first into the grass at the slightest breeze, taking dents and gouges easily in their shiny fuselages. The transmitters that controlled them were equally as fragile and expensive. All the planes and radios were corralled into an area away from the tents, so the wind could not pick up a tent and accidentally drop it on the planes, destroying the whole fleet like Godzilla stepping on a city street. I couldn't run around because the airplanes seemed to be everywhere, like Christmas ornaments the day of decorating the tree. Tension would coil up in me like a spring.

* * *
Quite truthfully, I felt jealous of my father's plane and the careful attention he gave to it. It was his love child, his creation and perfection, the object of his complete control. It didn't talk back; it wasn't unpredictable; it only caused him trouble when he caused something to go wrong first. It was the perfect relationship: one in love with the other who is too dumb not to love back.

I, on the other hand, seemed to cause my father nothing but problems. I was always in the way, always too loud, always an absent-minded klutz, tripping over something important, or a slob, leaving my things spread all over the house. Looking back, I often think that my movement around the house when he was home was similar to my walk among the planes: quiet, tentative, sure of failure. I felt that any misstep would result in my father's anger or disappointment, as if I were stepping on his hand to cripple him or stepping on his chest to break his heart.

When we arrived, my mother and I would wait in the car while he carefully pulled the wings and the fuselage from the trunk, and we would not emerge until he was well on his way to the field. Although we hated sitting in the car, we knew that we had to give my father his space, or he'd lose his temper because we were in his way. Then I would help my mom unpack the car and pitch the "tent,"—four metal poles with a striped canvas awning stretched over it. We hauled out the big orange cooler, all the lawn chairs, the foam vinyl bleacher seat cushions that said "Koss" on one side and "Brewers" on the other, and my mom's big purple bag, which held cigarettes, sunscreen, mosquito spray, and seedy paperbacks. She would settle into her chair, oblivious to the contest and me.
Meanwhile Dad registered with the judges, clipping his blue frequency clothespin on the rack and his blue flag to the antennae of the radio, unwrapping his plane from the zippered orange terrycloth covers my mom had made for them. As he joined the wings and fuselage, he yakked with the other men, kibitzing about fuel, comparing radios, checking out paint jobs. Other men were already flying their planes or getting them ready for flight, studying the cards with the order of maneuvers to be performed according to ability. Dad was rated an Expert, and he had a difficult series of maneuvers to perform. The drawings on his card traced complicated loops and turns for the plane with plain dotted lines.

Thinking about those cards makes me laugh. My father kept every single card from every contest neatly wrapped in a rubber band in a shoebox next to his back issues of "Model Airplane" magazine in the basement, even though each card looked the same. They all had the same maneuvers in the same order. The entire basement, his workshop, was my father's favorite roosting place. Everything—the hand-made particle board shelves, the metal tool racks straight on the peg board, the wide, clean workbenches, the spotless concrete floor—echoed his constant vigilance against disorder.

Dad had a methodical, precise system for building an airplane. Everything was laid out, examined, adjusted, and then the assembly began, slow but sure: sanding, trimming, fitting, gluing. Tasks proceeded in a logical manner and everything was put away or replaced immediately after it was used. At the end of a night, he'd carefully put his tools away and leave his work spread out on the tables, gripped by anxious little black clamps that looked like those two
two crow brothers on the cartoons, Heckle and Jeckle. Nothing was out of place or messy. Building airplanes in my father's shop was like a slow and patient surgery.

Dad spent a lot of time on his airplanes, buying $100 kits of precut pieces of balsa wood and retiring to his basement workshop every night to craft them. He took about six months to work on an airplane, sanding all the balsa wood pieces and shaping the fuselage, heating and mixing epoxy to join the pieces together, finally searching in hobby stores for the best engine. The plane he was making for the Fly-in only took him two months to make, though, a job rushed for the beginning of the flying season but nevertheless, a job that had to be completed perfectly. Two weeks before the contest, he began fitting the gears in the fuselage of the plane.

That evening I went down to sit with him because my mother was paying bills in the kitchen upstairs, chain-smoking and muttering under her breath, and I was afraid of being in her way. When I thumped down the stairs, Dad was watching TV on the old black and white while he worked on his plane.

"Hi, Dad."

He didn't look up. "Hi. What's up?"

"Mom's messing with her stuff from work," I said and peeked over his shoulder. I was close enough to feel the roughness of his brown wool workshirt and smell the mustiness it had absorbed from the basement.

"Don't stand so close. I can't work when you're hanging over my shoulder," he said. I stepped back, to the wrong place, because he stood up and bumped into me. "Go sit on the sofa if you want to be down here," he ordered.
I dragged my feet over to the old mod aqua couch. It was in our living room at one time, but the minute it got to the basement, the smell of paint thinner, balsa wood sawdust, and especially epoxy permeated the cushions. I put my arms around myself in that chilly basement, and started watching the PBS documentary about England that Dad wanted to see (he was always interested in self-education), while he patiently moved around his work area to measure this piece, cut that stick, mix the epoxy.

I can still hear the sound of Dad switching on the heating glass behind me, which meant he was mixing epoxy. The two tubes of epoxy, yellow Part A and orange Part B, lie on the heating glass like two plump sunbathers. Once they were warm, Dad carefully squeezed a uniform blob into two separate medicine cups. "Dad?"

"Uh-huh?" He was pouring A to B and B to A, one to the other, back and forth, like a scientist, trying not to drip any on the floor because he didn't like spots on the concrete.

"When are you going to teach me how to fly?"

"We'll see. Don't want you to crash it," he smiled, quickly stirring the epoxy with a tongue depressor with flourish, like he was stirring a martini. "Say, I need another one of your Barbie doll heads for the cockpit." He carefully pulled the stick out and scraped it on the side of the cup and laid it on a piece of paper towel that he had neatly ripped off and folded into perfect fourths. Sinking a thin broken rod of balsa wood in the epoxy, he daubed it onto the fuselage. He crouched with his head level with the fuselage, examining his work, peering intensely through his thick glasses.

"Dad?"
"What?" The "t" in the word came out sharply and that meant that I'd better shut up.

I watched the TV silently as long as my patience would hold, and then I spoke up again. "What's this?"

"Masterpiece Theatre. 'I Claudius.'"

I particularly hated Masterpiece Theatre, an atrocity I was exposed to every Sunday night of my childhood. The actors spoke in pained British accents about banal, ancient subjects which were not the least bit interesting to me. "I can't understand what these guys are saying," I complained.

"Neither can I when you're talking all the time. Oh, shit," Dad muttered. He was carefully scoring his knife along the edge of a piece of tape.

"Well, what's going on?"

He sighed and looked up, his eyes uncrossing themselves behind his glasses. "Don't you have homework?"

I shook my head.

"Can't you go out and play with your friends?"

"It's dark."

He glanced at the tiny window near the ceiling. "I see. Well, go upstairs and bother your mother. I've got to get this painted this weekend or I can't go to the Fly-in in two weeks."

"She told me to come down here and bug you."

"Well, isn't your mom a peach? Go play in your room or watch TV and keep quiet," he said and bent down to his work again.

* * *
Such particularity was my father's hallmark, such painstaking precision. A small sign hung on the shelves behind his head. "Use head before putting mouth in gear." It was a little litany that I repeated to myself every time I went down there, having some compulsion to read the sign. For Dad, every move had to be carefully considered and weighed. Opportunities slipped by, and impatience filled him like molecules in a reactor, until he was about to explode.

It was this constant fine line between potential and kinetic energy that clung to every word and action in our house. Mom and I moved to my father's whims. We listened closely to his activity in the basement to detect a tool slammed down, an angrily uttered profanity, so we could be ready to face the storm when he stomped up the stairs at the end of the evening. My mother was tense and cranky, I was quiet and peculiar. And my father was the dragon hiding in the basement.

The next day he painted the plane sunshiny yellow with dark blue stripes, the usual choice. He was up at six to dig through my mother's linen closet for old sheets, calling to my half-asleep mother because he couldn't find them. After parking the cars in the street and covering the bicycles, the grill, even the garden rake, he set up sawhorses in the garage, got out the air compressor, the paint gun, and carefully mixed the paint. Then he dressed in the old paint shirt and jeans and shoes he saved for these occasions and donned his goggles.

When everything was just ready, he began painting, and the ungodly thundering of the compressor hummed through the house. I stayed in the house because I couldn't get my bicycle out of the garage. Watching TV in peace was impossible too because the sound of the compressor overpowered it. So I
decided to lie down on the sofa in the family room and watch cartoons with the sound off, trying to fall back asleep to the hum of the compressor.

I feel asleep on the sofa until he opened the back door and shouted, "Hey, come here!" I heard my mom flop down the paperback she was reading at the kitchen table and the scrape of her chair. She opened the back door and said, "Oh, that's nice, Bob."

"Jane," my mom called. "Your dad wants you to come and look." She sighed and plunked back down at the table, picking up her book again.

"Aw, do I have to?"

"You know your father will get mad if you don't," she said, without looking up from her book. "Just go look." I rolled off the couch and got up to go outside.

"Look at this. Look at this," he said happily. "That paint gun Mort lent me is doing the trick." I admired the pieces, oohing and aahing, secretly watching his cowlicks tipped with yellow paint bobbing up and down to his excitement. I couldn't see what was so great about the paint. It was yellow, same as always. I tiptoed between the squares of newspaper, crouching to look at the other plane pieces. "Don't get any fingerprints on them," Dad warned.

After helping my mother set up camp, I had nothing to do, so I carefully picked my way through people's lawn chairs and the corral of planes to the main tent. A crowd of people at the registration table frightened me away, and the standings lists were still big blank pieces of paper flapping in the wind, so I decided to look at the table of trophies. There were only four: 1st place, 2nd place, 3rd place, and one that said "Ladies' Turn." That was a new one, tall, blue,
the silver plane on top floating at attention. I had never seen that category at another contest, but it was beautiful, so I hoped my father would win it.

"Gonna get that one today?" a voice said behind me. It was Mort Miller, one of Dad's flying buddies. I could see the mole on his face slide up as he smiled at me.

I shrugged and chewed on my thumbnail, trying to make myself less noticeable. Dad always said proudly that I had been taught that children should be seen and not heard, and I tried to adhere to that.

"Know what it's for?" Mort pursued me. He had eight daughters himself and I couldn't understand why he cared to talk to another little girl. I shrugged.

"It's for the daughter or wife of a pilot who keeps a plane up in the air the longest. My Sherry is gonna try to do it. You should try too." He ruffled me on the head and walked off.

I hated Sherry. I hated her pigtails, her blond hair, her polished nails and older sisters. I hated her stupid, boring interest in boys, and I hated her most of all because I knew she was exactly what a little girl should be.

After all the misery Mom and I had to go through while Dad was making the plane, we were glad that it didn't crash during his first flight. Dad was simply pleased that his flight had turned out well. He took his repair box over to the plane corral and tinkered with the engine, finally pulling off a clear plastic tube, blowing through it, and putting it back, grimacing at the taste of fuel on his lips. He groomed his plane, stuffed the towel in his back pocket so it was hanging out like a huge handkerchief, and walked over to me. "Well, what did you think, kiddo?"
It was the first time all day he had addressed me, so I wanted to sound mature and competent enough to keep his attention. "I think you did really well. I really liked the spin. What was wrong?"

"The fuel line was a little clogged. But it's OK now." He looked over my head at a plane that was doing three loops in the sky and buzzing in crazy intensity.

Mort Miller walked over. "Hey, Bob! Saw that flight. A little trouble in the spin, hey?"

Dad laughed. "Yeah, just the fuel line. How'd you like the paint job? That paint gun really did the trick."

"Yeah, it looks really nice. Told you it'd work," Mort shifted. I could see the silhouette of his head with the sun behind his head, high in the sky. The mole formed a strange island on the geography of his face. "You got that plane together awfully fast, Bob. Are you sure you should be flying it?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah. It's fine," Dad laughed, squinting to look up at the same plane, which was doing an exact Eight-Point Roll. "My plane isn't going to take a tumble today."

Mort shifted again. Talking about crashing always made them a little nervous. They were an uptight lot. Mort laughed and moved to change the subject. "Well, you should get Jane flying it. She'll show you a thing or two."

"You talking about that trophy?" Dad looked down at me. "Are you going to win that trophy for your poor old dad? It'll probably be the only one we'll take home today."
I shrugged. I liked the trophy. I would have liked to see it on my dresser, or better yet, next to Dad's trophies in the den, proof of my own intelligence. "My Sherry's going to be doing it," Mort said.

"Oh, yeah?" Dad looked suddenly serious. Mort was always bragging about his daughters, how pretty one was, how smart or athletic the other. Dad somehow thought that I could compete with all eight of them. "What say, kid? How 'bout taking it up? You said you wanted to fly."

I shrugged again. The thought of holding the leash to one of those little animals was tempting, but I knew how easy it was to crash. I remembered several horrible crashes I had seen at other contests. One man's plane had flung itself out of a loop, fluttering against the clouds like a doomed fly before it plunged straight down, splintering on the ground. Another man's plane hit a bump in the field during a Touch-and Go which caused the nose to turn down, the propellor spitting up turf as it bored its way down, cracking the fuselage with the force of its pull into the ground. Luckily, one man's engine just stalled, and he glided the plane down into the corn field where the corn caught it and the men disappeared among the stalks, finding the plane nestled in the arms of the stalks.

Most of the men shook their heads and walked away. None of them cried or carried on, but Dad would surely be the exception. I could imagine the temper tantrum he'd throw, the terror of seeing him stomp through the cornstalks, waving his hands in the air, beating a wild thump on the ground. I wanted that trophy and wanted to get my hands on the airplane, but I couldn't take the risk of crashing the plane.

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During the contests, I had nothing to do. It seemed that no one else brought their children, or if they did, their children were silly, stupid girls like Sherry or older boys who I couldn't play with. Because I couldn't run around, I spent a lot of time contemplating life or, much more often, watching the people at the contest, watching their faces to detect their feelings so I get out of the way at the right time.

From my patch of grass near the registration tent, I could see Dad sitting under an awning with my mom, talking to his friends and their wives while he waited for his next flight, the plane parked like a docile creature with the others near the field. He pushed his glasses up his nose again, his skinny elbow poking out his short sleeve shirt. He was a young father, a lot younger than his other flying friends. Many children at school asked me if my dad was my brother, and I thought it was a funny question because he seemed too irritable to be a brother. I never mentioned the other children's remarks to my father because my mother told me once that he felt uncomfortable about how young he looked. "That wimp is so insecure," she once hissed to me after they had had an argument. "He can't accept imperfection in anyone." I looked at my round, freckled arms propping me up, my short, fat fingers with dirty fingernails buried in the grass. Everything—my freckles, the blades of grass—lay in disorder.

Mort and Sherry were under another awning, sitting closely together looking at the radio. She was holding it in her lap and he was alternately pointing to the radio and the plane, explaining how it worked. I could see that Sherry was indifferent, and she often flipped her blond braids around, looking in other directions as he was bent toward the plane saying something. Her thumbs half-polished with pink moons barely held the radio. The antenna was in danger
of being snapped off as her wrists relaxed and tightened, bobbing the radio up and down, tapping the flag to the ground. I wanted my dad to explain the plane to me, but he was deep in conversation with someone, and I realize now I was afraid of getting in his way.

In retrospect, I can't figure out why my father was so competitive, so angry, so particular. There are few clues for me to decipher. I could analyze him up and down, like my amateur-therapist mother often does now that she's divorced him. I could guess that his skinny, nerdy appearance made him the brunt of childhood teasing, that his glasses subjected him to the name of "four-eyes," that, as one therapist once suggested, he did not have a manly enough role model in my grandfather, who was raised by a single mother. I could point fingers at my grandmother, who set aside certain silverware sets and cups for each child in the family, or at my uncle, who supposedly dropped him on the side of his head when he was three and caused the legal blindness in his left eye, or at poverty, which caused him to own only one pair of underwear and his brother's cast-off Army boots when he was sixteen.

I'm tired. I don't want to think about it or whatever horrors he faced when he was a child. I don't want to think about his frustration. I know my instinct is to ignore it or not deal with it, to run away from it. It's tempting to never call him again for help, to never tell him another thing and shut him out of my life quickly and easily, by changing a phone number, by changing my address. I'm fed up with being an inconvenience to him. I am sick of that face that always says, "This is not enough. You are not enough."
What bothers me, though, is the inheritance of perfection and anger. I hear my father's voice in my mouth when I become impatient sometimes, a voice edged with explosive anger, a voice that punches through my own ear drums, startling me. I feel my father's disapproving breath on my neck when I weigh myself, and I feel his shame when I make a mistake, when I break the rule of flawlessness. I am imprisoned by the legacy of my father's anger and self-hatred, just as he was trapped in his basement with his beloved plane by his fear of exposing us to it.

He once told me that he never wanted to have children. It hurt me then and it still does, but now I know why he said it. The anger consumes my energy and ambition, it makes me hesitate needlessly some days and burst out inappropriately other times. I fear passing on the same anger to my children. I fear the error of transmitting this dangerous disease to those whom I love most.

I successfully made myself disappear by being quiet for a good portion of the contest, but when the Ladies' Tum was being set up, my dad hunted for me and found me listening to the radio in the car. He tapped on the window. "Open the window."

I surveyed the doors quickly and saw that they were all locked. That would stall him for another minute. I had decided that I didn't want to fly the plane, no matter how tempting the trophy was. I knew that I would crash the plane, my Barbie doll's head popping off and soaring into the cornfield, my father's head also popping off. I figured I could hide out until the contest was over, and, being so concerned about his score and talking to the other adults, he'd never remember. "Open the window," he said more authoritatively.
I obeyed. He poked his head in the window. "What's up? They're setting up the Ladies' Turn. You have to come now or I won't have enough time to teach you about the radio."

I wanted to say no, but I could hear my mom's often repeated phrase: "You know your father will get mad if you don't. Just do it." The locked doors of the car didn't seem enough protection anymore, especially with my dad's head poking through one window, so I unlocked the door and got out, following my dad to the awning for lessons.

We stood around Herb Salowski, the head judge. "Each pilot should get the plane in the air and then hand the radio over. Now you all understand that the trophy goes to the gal who keeps the plane in the air the longest without having the pilot take over the transmitter or without," he laughed, "crashing it." A murmur ran through the group and the pilots smiled at their wives and daughters. Dad's fingers tensed on my shoulder. "Mary Krueger is up first. The order is posted near the tent."

We backed away and Mary Krueger giggled and took her husband's radio in hand once he got his plane into the air. "Come on," Dad said.

We walked over to the corral of planes, and Dad picked up the radio. "Now watch," he ordered. I looked at the transmitter, its sticks protruding from its two round eyes in sorrow. "The left stick is generally for the rudder and engine, and the right stick is generally for the elevator and ailerons, but I have my plane wired differently. I put the ailerons and engine on the left stick, and the elevator and rudder on the right stick. Now, if you want to make the plane go up, you do this." He wiggled the sticks with his thumbs. "Are you listening?"
I nodded. I was listening, but I couldn't tell the difference between the rudder and the elevators. I didn't know what the ailerons were. I looked at the plane sitting quietly and sent a telepathic message to it: "Please fly. Please don't crash."

Herb Salowski yelled, "Hey, Bob, you're up." Dad took the plane out to the middle of the field and whacked it with his chicken stick, making it buzz with a dangerous energy. He walked back and stood beside me, using the transmitter to make the plane take off and go up and up so that it was finally just a gnat in the clouds. Before he handed the radio to me, I wiped my hands on my pants. The radio was heavier than I remembered, and my thumbs could barely reach the sticks.

The plane circled hesitatingly around in the clouds, and the engine sputtered. "Throttle the engine," my dad ordered. I wiggled the right stick and the plane darted towards the next cloud. "Not that way!" Dad yelled, flapping his arms down to his sides. "Now fix the aileron and throttle the engine with the left stick!" I could feel his hot, exasperated breath on my neck, and I could not move as I watched the plane fly and fly farther away from us. "Bring it back! Bring it back! It'll get out of range!" Dad screamed. I knew his face was turning red behind me, but I didn't know what to do.

I turned around and handed the radio to him. I ran and ran towards the car. I didn't look at anyone and kept myself from crying until I had gotten into the car, rolled up all the windows, locked the doors, and buried my face in the back seat. I bawled and screamed, my shrieks muffled by the plush of the car seats, but I could still hear the angry whine of the plane through the windows of
the car. By the time it landed, I had stopped crying, and I heard the silence of the cornfield after the plane's engine stopped.

When everyone was finished flying, about 4 o'clock, the judges finished tallying the scores and the winners were announced and trophies were given out. From the sanctuary of the car, I watched Sherry walk away with the "Gal's Turn" trophy under one arm and her other hand in her father's, and I was sick with the thought of it. People were congratulating each other and packing up to leave, the men getting their planes together, the wives cleaning up the food, etc. Mom was cleaning up the garbage from our lunch, folding chairs and talking to the other wives. Dad was in the middle of the field, alone, wiping his plane, disassembling it and putting the pieces in the covers. I felt sorry to see him like that, and I thought that everyone had abandoned him because his kid couldn't fly the plane.

When Mom and Dad finally came to pack the car, I had situated myself so that I looked like I was sleeping. They tiptoed around the car. "Bob, look at that," Mom whispered. "That whole business just tuckered her out. You should have never made her do that."

"But I thought she wanted to learn how to fly," he shrugged. I pretended to sleep and finally fell asleep for the whole drive home.

I once challenged him: "What am I, then, if I'm not a child?"

"You're a person," he said. "You're different. You're special." If we could only believe that about ourselves.