

A Brief History of Florida and Other Stories

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A Brief History of Florida: The First Day of School

“Where are we?” I wake with a start and a jerk as my teeth snap together with an audible pop. Did I say that out loud? Shit, I think I did. I’m always talking when I shouldn’t. *Let that have been a part of the dream.* I wait behind my closed eyes and immobile body. I listen to them breathing and am very awake. They are all quiet. Mom, her boyfriend Robert and even my older sister Suzie are all sleeping. The car and the family rhythm are still, slow and steady. I can risk a few small movements. It’s past the parental-units-snoring stage, so it is near morning. It’s a Friday in the fall of 1976. I can almost taste a bit of chocolate in my memory. There are always Dilly Bars in my Friday dreams. Fridays were my favorite days, a long time ago. A memory isn’t very filling.

Using my sleeve, I rub a small circle on the glass to peer at the stars above and scan for a sight of day in the distance. So far, there isn’t any light or color anywhere. East or west, at some point the light will tell me the right direction. When I shift again on the back dash of the car I ignore the pain that is shooting through my shoulder. I look out over the trunk of the old four-door sedan for some sign of life in the darkness. We live here, or there, or somewhere. We’re carny’s. We follow the job.

The nowhere sea of night passes too slowly as I watch the night sky until the event I’m waiting for finally arrives. A small pink sliver of light drifts into the sky as the sunrise finally begins. I love the way the light reflects off of the condensation of the glass like little prisms. I learned about prisms at the school in Fort Worth. The sunlight bends in the water and breaks up into parts and then there’s a rainbow wherever you are.

Now that it is happening, I am of course looking out the wrong window, in the wrong direction like always, and the sunrise is hitting me on the back of my head.

“Go back to sleep, Katie,” Suzie’s soft voice whispers, startling me.

“The sun is coming,” I whisper.

“We have to work today, go to sleep.”

“The sun is rising, Suz. I don’t want to sleep.”

“Go to sleep,” she says.

“Screw you. You go to sleep if you’re so excited about it,” my voice cracking at the last. I hate sleeping. You have no idea what you’re missing when you’re asleep. Besides, I always dream. I don’t like it. It makes me think too hard and I’m too young to think this hard about anything other than storybooks, even I know that.

“Keep your voice down, Katie,” Suzie says.

The pre-dawn chill is what woke me as it crept into my body. You wouldn’t know we were heading south for the winter by the temperature outside. I shift silently, but gently on the back dash of the car and adjust the small throw pillow under my head. I tug briefly at my long-sleeve black T-shirt and wish I had more than orange gym shorts on. What I wouldn’t give for a large, warm beach towel right now. The slim pane of glass between the darkness outside and inside the cab of the brown ‘62 Ford Fairlane provides no real shelter, and my fingers shake as I reach to push my hair from my face to peer again through the misty glass.

“What do you mean we have to work today?” I whisper.

“We have to work today. We work every day.”

“We’re wintering now. School, Sis—what about school?”

“Shut up and go back to sleep.”

“I had the dream again, Suzie.”

“Dilly bars, huh?”

“Yep.”

“So it’s a Friday. Big whoop. Go to sleep.”

“Do you at least know where the fuck we are?”

“I have no idea. I’m tired.”

“Why were you awake just now?” Nothing. “Suzie?”

“Shut up already, you’ll wake them up.”

The smell in here is incredible. Today, it is a heavy mix of body odor and sex and dirt and straw - I have no idea where that last one comes from because it came with the car when we bought it last month. Why do old cars smell like straw? I ask too many questions about stuff. That’s what Robert says. I wish I didn’t have any idea where the other smells came from either.

Silence fills the small cab for a while, interrupted only by the occasional moan from Mom as she dreams and the flash of a set of headlights passing us. I don’t want to imagine what she dreams about. I lay still and watch the sunshine slowly chase the night into the west. I love it when the colors change from a soft pink to a peach at the bridge between the colors, and the yellow just moves above my head in a cloudless sky. There is a difference between a human kind of yellow, like Mom’s favorite pantsuit, or sunshine and natural yellow. It never looks right, Mom’s pantsuit, because she’s always wearing that black knit sweater vest no matter what the weather. Looks like a bumblebee or something. Colors should match.

Usually, I prefer to look into the sun as it arrives, but other mornings I like doing it backwards. I think most people miss the peach shade in all the lavenders, pinks, and

blues. I like seeing things that other people miss. There's that hint of peach at the small link between the day and night, and it's the only dream I want. The peach is the bridge forward from what happened last night and what might or might not happen today. I dream better when I'm awake. Life is backwards.

The peach is just gone and the blue shifting from baby blue to bright, and the green on the perimeter of the asphalt begins to actually take a recognizable shape apart from my sky-gazing when Robert groans in the seat and moves, waking up. I hold my breath, freeze, and listen to him fumble for the handle of the front door as with a heavy creak he pushes it open. The fresh air blows into the cab of the car as he climbs out to head towards the lone stand of trees at the end of the parking lot to piss or whatever else it is he does over there. Why can't he just use a john like everyone else? At least it's not the Mason jar. No one needs that image.

"Scoot, Katie," she whispers.

I roll off of the dash and practically land on her as she's scrambling for the door.

"Hurry," she says, "and grab the crackers. I'm starving."

I follow her as she scrambles over the driver's seat, grabbing a ball of white cotton socks for my feet as I go, I head over, making sure to grab the large square box of Triscuits laying on the front dash. I hate Triscuit crackers, but Suzie loves them. That's why I boosted the bright box at the little shop in Mississippi.

I stumble to the ground as I crawl over the driver's side of the front seat and out the front door and I fall to the ground while trying to work the circulation back into my legs. My mom says I've started to walk like an old woman and I only turned eight years old last month.

“Move it, Katie. Move it!” she says softly, grabbing me by the shoulder and pulling.

“I am moving.” I fall knee-first onto the asphalt. That’s gonna hurt.

“Get up, to the back, under the trunk,” she says. The pavement is ice cold under my bare feet. If I think really hard I can pretend I’m soaking them in a warm lake or, even better, a bathtub. It’s the night before the first day of school, I have my new pencils and my books and...

“Move it, Katie.” I move it.

The cardboard box of Triscuits rattles a bit, but I know Mom is too far out to hear anything. It is Robert we worry about, and within less than a minute Suzie and I are out the door and I’ve limped behind her and we’ve settled into a crouching position at the back of the car. The asphalt of the parking lot is smooth and very cold under my bare feet. The scrape on my knee is throbbing and wet. We listen to the sound of his boots crunching across the empty lot and hold our breath.

He stops outside of the door and we can hear the zipper of his pants going up. He scratches himself. Shit. I look at the ground and try to stay still as we listen to him cough. I hold my hands under my arms trying to stop the shivering, and I frown trying to keep my teeth from rattling.

We don’t breathe until the car dips and the door closes as he gets back into the car with a loud thump, sealing them in alone. They can have the smell of straw all to themselves. I smell fresh-cut grass coming from somewhere, and fresh paint, and I like it.

“Where are we, Katie?” Suzie asks.

“I have no idea. As long as we’re not in *m - i - crooked letter...*” I smile and wink at her though she doesn’t see it.

“Shut up with the damn song,” she says looking towards a small but intensely bright electric blue Volkswagen Bug parked at the far end of the parking lot. I scan the area but can’t find a person to go with it. There are two white cinderblock buildings centered on the grassy lawn that runs the length of the parking lot with a wall of trees going behind it.

“Ooh—you cussed, Suzie.” I cross my eyes and make a face, scrunching up my eyes and blowing out my cheeks. She still doesn’t see.

“Shut up.”

“Where are we supposed to be?” I say, giving up in order to seriously check out the lot.

“Huh?”

“You said we had to work earlier.”

“What?” Suzie growls, finally leveling me with a direct and firmly unhappy stare.

“But you said I had to go back to sleep because we had to work.”

“It’s too early for you, Katie.” She looks away, toward the smaller of the two freshly whitewashed cinderblock buildings about 200 feet to the east.

“You talked to me first.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Hey, Suz?” she ignores me. I love messing with her when she’s grouchy. Suzie is scanning the horizon. The long rest area is nearly empty but for the bug, but it’s newly paved. It’s funny how different places use different asphalt. This is smoother than it

would be in the northern states. No ice I guess. The fresh white paint is still bright and glaring against the black of new tar. Our old Fairlane is, of course, straddling the white line and missing the mark altogether. We always color outside of the lines on the coloring books. That's what Mom says. It's as if there are no lines framing anything. She says we're free spirits who cannot be contained by life. We just wander. It's all backwards.

The west side of the lot off of Highway 10, our side, is quiet except for the rare truck passing by. I know it's Interstate 10 because there's a large blue sign with the number 10 on it. On the opposite side of the highway there are long strands of lush green trees and dense, wet-looking undergrowth that reminds me of Louisiana. The underbrush is so heavy you could duck deep into the bushes and no one would ever see you. You could be invisible. I didn't like Louisiana much either, but at least now we are settling for the winter somewhere. A school and its library have to be on the horizon.

"M. i. crooked letter crooked letter, i crooked letter crooked letter i, hunch back hunch back i." I didn't say that one out loud. God, I hate that song, but it keeps running through my head. We spent a whole week in Winona, Mississippi, for a farm equipment convention, and it felt like a month. The worst thing of all is that I lost the book I'd swiped up in Missouri a month before that. It was only *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Anderson and not very challenging, but it was mine and I loved the pictures of the ladies in their fancy dresses. It was also a whole week of our mom making us sing *"m... i... crooked letter..."* as she tried to home school us again. Scary place, Mississippi. No money to be made, but I got a few cool John Deere key chains. Green is my favorite color, even if their hats are ugly. What kind of gullible guy buys those hats and actually thinks he looks cool? Gullible is a new word. I like collecting words.

“Hey, Suz?” I try again. The look in her dark eyes clearly tells me to shut up. At least she managed to grab a sweater and she’s wearing blue jeans. They’re high-water blue jeans but blue jeans nonetheless. Her mop of blond hair is always so smooth. Not like my mousy long brown hair. It blows every which way, even when there isn’t any wind. I stick out my tongue at her and blow a raspberry.

“I wonder about you, Katie.” She looks around the car to be sure it’s safe. “Let’s go,” she says, standing up and heading towards the smaller of the two white block buildings.

On the side of the too bright white building in green letters I read where they have painted “*Florida State Welcome Center!*” Reading materials at last. I hope the brat who got my copy of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* doesn’t even know how to read. They will never understand what it means.

“Wait here, Katie. I go alone,” she says, ducking into the women’s bathroom. Just once I’d like to see a real door on a rest area bathroom instead of these cinderblock windbreaks. The breeze one gets in these places is as bad as any port-a-john. It is still way too cold for me to face that. I’ll give the sunshine an hour.

I clutch at the yellow box of Triscuits in my hand and ignore the grumble in my own stomach. These things taste like paper, I know because I’ve eaten it. Paper that is. I avoid Triscuits. Triscuits are definitely not as good as Dilly Bars. Dilly Bars mean Grammy and Dairy Queen on Fridays in Grandpa’s old green truck back home. Grammy would pick me or Suzie or both of us up after kindergarten and take us out for Dilly Bars on Friday nights. Grammy isn’t my real grandma but she is. She is just a nice lady who was there when I was born. She’s my real Gram though. She has a Spirograph set in a

cabinet under her sink. I know exactly where she keeps it because it's always in the same place. A Spirograph set is good at drawing the shapes the way they're supposed to be, and even I can use it. Can it be only two years since then? I dream about Dilly Bars in my Friday dreams.

I wish I had my book. I listen to the water run in the sink and know Suzie is washing her face. My toes are freezing. I put down the box of crackers and sit down to put on the socks I'd grabbed on the way out of the car.

Opening the wad of white cotton up I find I have only one sock. One of Robert's tube socks no less. I look at it and stretch it out full-length between my arms and consider my options and wiggle my toes for the circulation. How ridiculous would I look in one sock? Not as bad as the John Deere hat guys. Eventually I just slide it (at least it is clean) over my left foot and the knee that isn't bleeding, all the way up one thigh and stand up as she emerges from the bathroom. Can't leave a bloodstain on Robert's sock; that's why it's on my left leg and not the right. Stains are permanent.

"Hey, Suz?" I ask as she's blinking into the early morning light and I start to follow her around to the other side of the building. I don't think the one sock thing is going to help. It's too weird having one warm foot and one cold one. Suzie doesn't see it. I have to hold it up with one hand. The problem is also that my toes are about to fall off from frostbite on the other foot.

"Don't you have to go?" she asks.

"No."

"You should wash up."

“I will in a minute,” I say, bending over to pull my sock up, trying to secure it. I pause wiping the blood from my knee with my sleeve. “Suz?” Finally resorting to holding the sock up with my left hand.

She stops dead in her tracks and I nearly trip over her. “What?” I can hear the threat in her voice but keep rolling anyway.

“Do you think all the buildings in Florida look like this?”

“We’re in Florida?” she asks.

“It said so on the sign over there.” I point, dropping the sock. “You didn’t answer my question.” I bend over to pull it back up.

“What question?”

I look at the back of her head and ask, “Do all the buildings in Florida look like this, or would they paint schools yellow so you can find them in the rain? You know, because of the hurricanes and stuff.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Even the schools are cinderblock?”

“I have no earthly idea.”

“Well they’re ugly. I hate cinderblock, worse yet when it’s painted. They never actually get warm. Always cold.”

“Don’t think about it, Katie.”

“What are we going to do here in Florida?”

“Pick oranges.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No.”

“Oranges?”

“Oranges in Lochloosa, Florida.”

“You said you didn’t know where we were.”

“They talked about it last night.”

“Then you lied,” I whine. Suzie ignores me as she heads to our right and toward the larger of the two cinderblock buildings. “What kind of place calls itself Lochloosa?” I ask, drawing my o’s out over ‘loosa and puckering my lips in a perfect ‘o’ wobbling my head from side to side. “Lochlo---osa” I repeat.

“Picking oranges, Katie.”

“Fucking oranges.”

“Stop cussing, Katie.”

“I am not picking any oranges. I can’t pick oranges if I’m in school all day.” I imagine my yellow schoolhouse and books being swallowed in wave after wave of silent oranges.

“I can’t pick oranges in a school,” I mutter. “I just won’t do it.” *m- i- crooked letter- crooked letter* runs in my head. “I... I... won’t do it goddamn it.”

“Hello girls!” a small and overly bright and musical voice cuts through our argument and both of us jump. The woman had emerged from a small door on the south side of the second building, facing a row of very young palm trees. Her plump 5-foot frame is definitely shorter than Mom’s, and the artificial yellow tint of her hair is anything but natural. It looks nothing like the sunshine I imagine had been plastered on the front of the box when she bought it at the store. Her black eyebrows tell me the rest of

the story as they hover over brown eyes that betray the worry at finding two girls alone in a parking lot on the side of the highway in Florida, not an orange in sight.

She doesn't seem to notice that one girl is stumbling along wearing only a long-sleeve black T-shirt, orange gym shorts, and a single, highly ridiculous, thigh-high white tube sock. Nobody notices me. The other blonde girl is obviously waiting for the hurricane flood in her high water jeans. Though I don't feel half as ridiculous in my outfit as this woman must feel in the amazingly, shockingly bright pink polyester suit with matching shoes. I know for certain there's a shiny pink patent leather handbag somewhere in the building to match. It's all about what you're wearing. At least my foot is warm.

"And how are you girls today? Y'all traveling with your family?" Her Southern drawl is unmistakable and heavy. Southeastern Alabama from the sound of it.

"Yes. We're just passing through," Suzie manages to croak.

"I saw your car when I pulled in this morning."

"Oh my God," I mutter, "it's pink." Oh shit, I've gone and said it out loud again. My jaw feels like it's nearly reaching my chest. Maybe I am trying to catch a bug. We are in the South after all. Grammy used to say that I was trying to catch a bug when I stared like this. I just can't help myself sometimes.

"Katie," Suzie nudges me with her elbow. "Say hello to the nice lady."

"Um," I look at Suzie for the words, "um, hello?"

"Didn't your momma tell you it was rude to stare, girly?" Pinky says.

"Uh huh." I look at her from head to toe and back again.

“Katie!” Suzie says softly but sternly while poking me in the arm. It is only after I drop the sock again that I notice the look on her face.

“My friend and I are giving away free orange juice this morning. Did you girls know you were in Florida? Our state drink is orange juice.” I watch the blond thing turn away, the whole 6-inch-tall orb of yellow hair bouncing like a formed Jell-O mold on her perfectly coifed head, and walk into the building through the Dutch door as Suzie follows. I stop outside and Suzie glares at me again. It is as if all that hair has a life of its own and I am not going into a dark room with it. Suzie can deal. Seriously though, what kind of state actually thinks hard enough about itself to *have a state drink*?

I stand leaning on the doorjamb, holding the Triscuits, as the woman inside proceeds to describe the virtues of Florida orange juice for Suzie. At least the blond’s partner’s voice sounds somewhat normal. She has a deeper, softer sound to her voice. Probably a brunette. Maybe she’s a princess? What is she wearing? I think about this kind of stuff way too much.

The heavy Southern shrill is singing through her lecture.

“Did you know,” she continues, “that orange juice always had to be fresh squeezed up until 1959 when the technology for creating frozen concentrate was invented? The wonder of fresh-squeezed orange juice is being lost in the modern world.” At least it is informative.

If orange juice is the *state drink*, does that make it a proper name? Would I capitalize it? “*m – I - crooked letter - crooked letter – I - crooked letter - crooked let...*” Is there a song for Florida? Will we have to learn it too? I think about my unhappy,

coffee-free and sleepy sister in the room enduring the lecture and smile a bit while I pull up my sock, yet again.

“...and so you can have a fresh squeezed sample for you and each member of your traveling party. How many folks are in your car, missy?” Oh, I’ll bet Suzie loves that one. Missy is such a lousy word. Insulting really, to women of the world like us.

A short while later Suzie emerges with a small cardboard tray supporting four bright blue Dixie cups full of fresh-squeezed Florida orange juice on it. I’ve never been able to handle a tray the way Suzie does. I do well enough, but I still have to use both hands. Suzie balances it perfectly on the tips of her fingers as she slides through the crowds. It’s elegant. I follow Suzie over to the small picnic bench set up under a very young palm tree and sit down across from her, facing north towards the door of the small building. The look on her face is pure thunder.

“How could you leave me alone with them?” Suzie asks.

“You handled it just fine.”

“You left me alone with that pink balloon and her friend.”

I do a silly hop-step and shrug, “You handle everything fine.”

“At this ungodly hour, I haven’t had any coffee.”

“I just couldn’t face it.”

“You know better, Katie. We don’t go alone.”

“I was waiting just outside the door.” I look at the ground and pull on my ear.

“Can I have some?”

“Go get your own,” she says.

I look up and around towards the dark space beyond the Dutch door and think over my options. “Oh come on, its orange juice,” I mutter.

“This is mine.”

“I’m gonna faint, I do declare!” I say, swooning and fanning my face. “I need sugar darlin’!”

“Go get your own, I earned this stuff.”

“No. You have enough to share.”

“You’re too chicken, aren’t you?”

“Am not!”

“They have a whole row of pamphlets on the wall, Katie.” Oh, now she’s just being snarky. “*Reading materials*,” she says with a crooked grin over the last bit, knowing I can’t resist it.

“Fuck you.” I set the box of crackers on the picnic table with a thump and turn with a swish, hobbling more than walking towards the Dutch door, pausing to pull off the one sock with a small stumble and a hop; I figure the women will look silly enough without me adding to the mix. The scab from my fall is forming nicely. I’ll have to pick at it later. I also stop long enough to toss the sock into the worn aluminum trashcan outside the door, tug on my earlobe the way I do when I’m thinking, and consider my options.

Shit, I just threw away Robert's sock. Mom will kill me. Shit. Should I dig in and get it? She is gonna fucking kill me. Maybe she won’t notice?

“Cluck, cluck...” I hear Suzie mocking me in the distance.

My stomach rumbles again and I'm back to the more pressing problem. If I don't go in, Suzie will know me for a chicken. If I go in, I am bound to have to talk to *those* people. I know I'll have dreams, and not the good kind, about the pink and yellow thing. Sunshine does not look like that, especially at sunrise. Besides, they might not even give me orange juice. I need sugar, not Triscuits, but sugar for sure. They've just given Suzie some and maybe there's not enough for both of us. What if the other woman is worse than Pinky? There's no way a brunette is as bad as Pinky.

The deciding factor is the possibility of new reading material. I won't give up hope of a school library somewhere in Florida, but who knows if there are good schools in orange fields or orchards or whatever they are, wherever oranges come from? What kind of books will they have there? Will they have *The Emperor's New Clothes*, or do orange pickers even want to read a book like that? I imagine they don't get to wear the fancy clothes the princesses wear in the book. Lochloosa sounded like a storybook name. Damn, but I need to get some reading materials, and eat. My brain never works right if I haven't eaten.

After making up my mind I attempt to stroll quickly into the dim room. After a moment my eyes adjust and I find my objective. A wall full of Florida maps: over-glossed state park brochures, bright with pictures of so many palm trees it would make a person sick. Palm trees are ugly. They don't even look like trees. Where on earth could a person hide under palm trees?

"Can I help you, miss?" The soft voice emerges from behind a counter at the back of the room.

I saunter as coolly as possible toward the wall of brochures, dawdling as I tuck the four from the bottom rack that I can easily reach into my hand. The tile of the floor is cool but not cold under my bare feet. I like it.

“*Welcome to Paradise*,” the top brochure reads in bright green letters over a sandy field of palm trees. No water in sight. What is with these people and green? I can also see a broad, cream-colored one on the top, almost the size of a real book. It definitely has more than five pages in all and looks interesting. I squint and read *A Brief History of Florida* printed in small black letters and wish with all my heart that I were taller. Maybe it’s the rest of the history of the orange? Are there pictures of hurricanes inside? They never give out brochures with pictures of hurricanes, only palm trees. I chew on my lip and think about it.

“Can I help you?” the woman’s voice asks again.

I make my way to the counter at the back of the room, deeply regretting the limited reach of my arm in this kind of situation. “There are four people in my car. Can we get that free orange juice too?” I turn towards the counter, looking over my shoulder at the small book.

“Certainly, little girl,” says the tall, willowy woman behind the wide fake-wood counter. I focus enough to see that she has ivory skin and a harmoniously small nose that floats above a perfect red mouth. It fits the delicate features of her face and the soft voice. The woman’s simple, button-up, cream-colored cotton blouse is all I can see from my side of the countertop, but I like it. If I wasn’t so distracted by *A Brief History of Florida*, I would be embarrassed by her kind brown eyes absorbing the thin girl before her without

comment. I hope my face isn't turning all red. I hate being called a little girl. I am *not* a little girl. Everything is backwards here.

I had turned and headed for the door and nearly made my own escape from the small room without further incident. Almost. The brunette—I was correct about her hair color—isn't all that interested in lecturing me about the origin of oranges. She keeps checking the small gold watch on her tiny wrist. Every delicate brown hair is in place and held safely there by a gold barrette. They match - the barrette and the watch that is. The blond is in the backroom plastering her head to preserve it for posterity. I can smell the aerosol from the can. I am not concerned because I have four small brochures safely tucked under the cardboard tray and four blue paper cups full of fresh-squeezed orange juice perched safely on the top. The problem is in getting my treasures to the bench where Suzie waits.

The bits of glossy paper wedged between the tray and my anxious fingers feel as if they're about to fall and I am determined not to lose a drop of either. I head into the bright light pouring through the open door and nearly lose both as a lean, middle-aged man steps through the door, barely missing toppling my tray.

“Whoa there, missy,” his deep voice booms. What is with the missy shit around here? I duck to the side of the entryway; checking my orange juice for signs of spillage with one eye and watching him enter the room with the other.

“You okay there, girl?” he asks me.

“I'm fine,” I say, making a beeline toward the door. Stopping just shy of the light, I turn and look at him more closely.

“Jack,” the soft woman says, her voice suddenly sounding like an Indian flute I heard played once. Soft and round like the echo when you whisper in a church.

He is older than I would have first guessed, possibly as old as sixty. His closely cropped white hair is more visible in the shadowy room as he goes to the wall to check out the collection of material. His crisp, white, button-down oxford is tucked into gray slacks, but he isn't wearing a tie. The last part is definitely the most interesting part. Florida, 1976, and no tie? Enough years out here and you notice these things.

“Orange Juice, eh?” he says as he gazes at the wall of papers. His voice is like a preacher I met in Colorado eight months ago. It was just at the beginning of summer if I remember right. The preacher's voice was deep and smooth like good coffee, but solid too. He had a stiff white collar that seemed to itch a lot and little red copies of the *New Testament* that he was handing out. I was just getting around to reading the hard stuff when I got it, so I remember. Some of it was very confusing, but I liked the stories when Mom explained them to me. I lost that book ages ago.

“They're giving them out for free,” I practically whisper. Why do I feel like I stole something?

“Are they now?” he says in that voice. It is very distinctive. I notice everything. I love the way they mix up their words here in the South. It's the only thing I love about the South. Well, that and the food. If the schools are all cinderblock, I won't like them. Can a person hide under an orange tree?

“The brochures are free, I mean,” I whisper.

“And the orange juice?”

“It's fresh-squeezed.”

“Really?” he says as I watch the back of his head for a sign of recognition.

“*A Brief History of Florida* looks good.” I look deep into my orange juice filled Dixie cups, shift from one bare foot to the other, wiggling my toes for warmth, and swallow hard, “if you like knowing about that kind of stuff.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, his deep voice drifting further into the room. What color are his eyes? He doesn’t shuffle when he walks. It’s a tap, tap, tap on the linoleum with dress shoes.

“What am I doing?” I mutter very softly under my breath inching toward the door.

“What was that again, sugar?”

“Nothing. I have to go,” I say, turning slowly to head out into the bright morning light. Sugar. He called me sugar. People confuse me.

“There are four people in my car.” God, did I just say that? I did, didn’t I? I’m such a dork, a dork in orange shorts and frozen toes. A goddamn rubbernecker too. I turn to watch him. The Emperor was an idiot.

“Carolyn,” I hear him call to the brunette and she giggles softly. His voice has changed. I hope he’s calling the brunette. He could never be with Pinky.

“You’re going to be late at the plant,” she says as I back up to the wall. Using it as a support, I lean back and slide down Indian-style on the floor. I don’t lose a drop from one Dixie cup. Not as elegant as Suzie, but cool.

“I don’t care. I am right where I should be,” he smiles and winks at her, scanning the door at back of the room. He turns, leaning his back on the counter to look into the light pouring into the front door, and I can finally see that his eyes are green. Watching the crinkle of his smile and the worn lines that frame his smile it’s easy to see that he

does this a lot. I can see his life on his face. I'll bet his car doesn't smell like straw. I wonder if he likes Dilly Bars?

"I had to ride in with Gloria," she says fiddling with a pencil, her long, white fingers nervously manipulating the yellow #2. "I hate that car of hers. Imagine a grown woman driving a bright blue car in that color. I swear."

I'd trade my whole tray of orange juice for that pencil. Where would I stash a thing like that? I should have kept the sock on.

"It's a crying shame they don't make those cars in, pink isn't it, Caro?"

And she laughs. Music.

"I thought I smelled her aerosol perfume. That stuff is awful."

"Is that all you can smell?" she asks, drawing a circle on a piece of paper with her yellow #2.

"No, I smell your perfume, roses, orange juice, and Jean Nate face powder."

"You really shouldn't have left them on the doorstep. Gloria is already suspicious. It took me twenty minutes to convince her that the roses weren't for me."

"Do you like them?"

"You shouldn't kill helpless plants to woo a woman."

"Ah, but do you like them?"

"I love flowers, you know that, Jack."

"I know roses aren't your favorite."

"No, they aren't."

“I looked for Calla lilies, but the florist was all out,” he says, leaning down on the countertop, resting his head in the crook of his arm so that he has to look up at her. “So, the wooing is going well?” he says, reaching out to take the pencil from her fingers.

“I don’t want to get fired, Jack. You know the rules here,” she says, looking over her shoulder where Pinky works her aerosol. The sounds of the aerosol can stops suddenly as Pinky starts to hum. Very off-key, I might add. He twirls the pencil in his hand, like a baton artist I saw at a state fair in Colorado, before he puts it down with a firm click on the countertop.

“You have to go, Jack.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“I need this job.”

“So, what is the source of the Jean Nate?” he says, stepping away from the counter, his shoes making small tapping noises as he turns to face her. “That’s not your scent, my dear Caro – sweet as syrup, that you are Caro. Like Karo syrup, but with a C. I have come to see you.” He smiles at his own joke.

“You need your job too, Jack.”

I try to look small in the shadow by the door as he turns and walks toward the wall of pamphlets.

“Jack. Come by tonight. I’ll fry up a steak,” she says. “Gloria is going to visit her mother.”

“And we know it isn’t Gloria’s perfume. She must spend her whole paycheck on hairspray. Jean Nate is nice too. Reminds me of my mother.”

“We have an audience,” she says, nodding her perfect brown head in my direction.

“Nice day, isn’t it?” he says, looking me in the eye with a wry smile. All those lines on his face belong there. Tap, tap, tap. He walks towards the wall of pamphlets. Most people have wrinkles from pain, but his aren’t. He is a morning person who would never scratch himself.

“I suppose it might be, if you like sunshine,” I respond with a gulp as I slide the paper tray to the side, nearly losing my pamphlets, and stand up.

“We have a funny one here, Caro.”

“I,” I snarl with my fiercest glare and set of my jaw, “am not funny.”

“No, I don’t suppose you are, sugarbug.” As the familiar shadow passes over his eyes, I can feel him taking in the small dribble of blood from the broken scab running down my left leg and the clothes. I can feel the goosebumps rising. Definitely time to roll.

“I am not a sugarbug,” I mutter and glare at the floor.

“It’s just an endearment,” he says. “People give nicknames to people they care about.”

I look at the floor. “I’ve gotta get going.”

“Ah yes, there are four people in your car, right?” he says.

“Katie!” Suzie says as she steps into the room startling everyone. “Mom is looking for us.”

“I have to get my orange juice.” I’m such an idiot. I should’ve eaten the goddamn Triscuits. I have shit for brains without food.

“Move it, Katie.” Her hand is on my shoulder pushing me through the door.

“Enjoy the sunshine - Katie is it?” he says, turning towards the counter. “Nice to meet you, Suga..” he says. “Katie.”

Listening to Suzie crunch away at her Triscuit crackers makes me nauseous. There might be a real breakfast in Lochloosa, and if it isn't very far I don't need to eat the Triscuits. The Florida sun is warming and rising fast. I am watching the entrance to the big building at the Florida Welcome Center. So far there isn't a sign of the man without a tie.

I've started to read the brochures in my small pile and am slowly sipping my second cup of orange juice and pulling on my ear. I really like orange juice, honestly I do. It tastes like sunshine and has a color I like. If you mix sunshine and orange juice you get peach.

My first brochure, *Welcome to Paradise*, seems to be just a bunch of photographs of palm trees and mobile homes. “Florida is the ultimate family destination,” it says inside, “with theme parks, nature preserves, and fascinating cities.” That's it. Nothing interesting at all. I'm rationing my supply. I'll read the next brochure when Suzie finishes her breakfast.

“You're going to get hungry,” Suzie says, startling me.

“I am hungry, just not for those things.”

“You don't eat enough,” she says, holding out the box and rattling it.

“You are a doofus.”

“Don't call me names.”

“We need nicknames, like code names,” I squint and shrug. I have a new word: endearment.

She just frowns. I scowl back at her.

I fiddle with my brochures to choose the next one. I decide on a bright and sunny vista of a sandy beach running along the borders of a city. “*Where Your Dreams Come True*” it says in glossy letters on the front of the three-way fold. I can’t even bring myself to open it and simply slide my fingers up and down the side creases. The last one reads, *Learn About Florida, Your Life Begins At Retirement.*

“I have to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,” I say, climbing off the bench to head around the building, setting my brochures by my tray. Screw the old guy. A short while later my mother’s disembodied voice echoes through the windbreak of the cinderblock bathroom as the last of the soap rinses free of my fingers.

“Katie, Suzie!” Mom’s heavy voice calls in the distance. If I wait here, will she see me? Would she notice if I went and hid in the luggage compartment of the baby blue VW Bug? If I ran away, would anyone notice?

“Katie, Suzie!” her voice is getting closer “We’re getting ready to roll girls, let’s go!” Her voice fades a bit as she drifts around the building. “Suzie!”

“Over here, Mom!” Susie answers.

I listen to them speak, their voices moving into the distance. I dash into a stall to stand on the toilet, closing the aluminum door behind me. They won’t see me.

I wait in the dark, breezy space on my perch while chewing on my bottom lip. I just know there won’t be any books in this Lochloosa. No place to hide under goddamn

orange trees or palm trees or cinderblock houses. We already have one sock lost. Where do lost socks hide?

“Katie?” It is Suzie. I hold my breath. “I know you’re in here. We have to go.”

I wait silently and wonder. What is it like to pick oranges? They won’t have a school. I just know in my heart they won’t have a school. No socks either. I will be cold and picking oranges all winter and my toes will fall off from frostbite.

“Katie,” her voice is no longer a question and I climb down from the toilet; the cement is cold on my toes despite the now warming day.

“Look, girls,” Mom says as we climb into the open door of the car, “they were giving away free orange juice. I got us each a cold cup of it.”

I take my bright blue Dixie cup from my mother’s cardboard tray and slide in next to Suzie in the back seat behind Robert. I don’t see the other sock. Maybe it was a loner. Maybe mom won’t find out about it. They won’t even notice. I stare at the back of mom’s head when she climbs in to the front seat. I think about the orange juice. I can see her sad smile reflected in the glass of the passenger window.

“The lady says that they invented the method for frozen concentrate in 1959. Did you hear that girls? This isn’t frozen, it’s fresh.”

“That was delicious, baby,” Robert says from the driver’s seat, smiling at my mom before tossing his empty Dixie cup onto the black asphalt of the Florida Welcome Center parking lot with a snort. “Just what I needed.”

“Reminds me of this job I had in a diner in San Fran’ when I was just starting down the road, a long time ago. I had orange juice every morning along with raisin toast,” she says. “It was on my morning list. Tastes perfect after that first smoke.”

He starts the car with the rumble of an old motor and I take a sip of my cup of Florida Orange Juice. It doesn’t taste the same.

“On the road again,” Mom sings. “A friend once told me: ‘Roads are important places. They are where everything meaningful happens,’ and he was right.”

I lean into the window and tug on my ear. *Welcome to Paradise* where your dreams come true. It is only as we pull in between two heavy trucks and a forest green VW Bug on the main drag of the midmorning interstate that I begin to cry. I don’t want to know *A Brief History of Florida* anyway.

Jimmy: Learning the Definition of Family

“Gopher!” Oh God, I need coffee.

“Hey Gopher!”

“Hey Gopher girl! I need ya over here.” Please shut the fuck up and let me get my coffee first.

The carnival workers’ world is so distinct that you can literally set your watch by the various aromas, if you have a watch, that is. Particularly in the morning, the day is new and brisk and wholly sharp. Coffee is my favorite smell. When the gates of the fairground first open there is the smell of a mix of fresh straw drifting over from the livestock buildings pairing up with the stale fry pit grease from the day before. The rows of port-a-johns behind the bleachers in the concert arena usually haven’t been pumped yet, and the foul mess of drunks sticks from the asphalt to the bottom of my grocery store sneakers. It’s relatively quiet out here when the day is beginning. By midday all there is to see is a blurry river of humanity that are cruising the midway going downhill.

Its midmorning now, and I haven’t had any goddamn coffee yet.

“Gopher!”

This part of the carnival midway is a rush of bodies, body odor, and screaming children. Ducking and bobbing, I make my way through on patrol for a job. The sounds just all blend together now.

“Hey, Gopher Girl!” The man’s voice finally breaks through, and I head over to his rig. Jimmy runs the Flukey Ball outfit. You toss a ball at a board with a silly grinning face painted on a board, and the ball falls into a basket or doesn’t. Except that we put a spring on the back of the board or just use a warped board. You’ll lose. The ball rarely goes where you want it to. It’s not a very popular game.

“Yeah?”

The round, unpleasantly fragrant, crumbling man spits a brown sticky wad of tobacco juice at my feet. “Two coffees and a burrito,” he says through his broken, nearly toothless mouth, dropping three bucks in my waiting hand.

Jimmy stinks, so there’s almost never anyone over here. I don’t mean stinks, like livestock. Jimmy stinks like he’s never used soap before in his life, even once. I gave him some travel bars of soap last week, from the Motel 6 in Iowa City, and he threw them away. I think his nose died from the reek, right there in the middle of his face. Suzie never runs for any of his stuff. I don’t give him time look me up and down before I’ve dashed off into the crowd heading towards the food court and Grace’s.

I don’t need to be told who to buy his grub from. What townies don’t know is that we carnys only eat at one rig: Grace’s Taco Stand. As far as the rest of it goes, y’all are on your own. Every gig is a little different, but there’s only one stand at each outfit. Grace, fortunately for us, plays all the big ones. Sometimes we travel together like a family, but not always. Grace Miller likes us gophers. She smiles a lot, too much, and when she can she makes sure most of us get one square a day. I like her blond hair, though it usually needs a new bottle of peroxide. She’s always trying to sell us Avon. Mom says that make-up is for “trashy whores”. I asked mom if there were good whores, and she just thumped me. I was being funny. She wasn’t.

Knocking on the side door, Grace’s kid, Nevi slides the door open.

“What’d’ya got girl?” she asks.

“Two large and a burrito for Jimmy.”

“Ha,” she smiles. Nevi is one of the oldest kids out here. She is all of fourteen years old and trying to look older than she’ll live to be. She’s beginning to show. “I’ll make it up fresh,” she laughs, but her face never looks right when she does. It looks like the

people on the Avon flyers. Wrong and crooked, as if sucking on a lemon but smiling anyway.

Sam is her dad, and he is an old wannabe biker in fake leathers. He's too tall the way that his wife's smile is too big. I think Sam is like forty-something. Older than my mom, and that's fucking ancient. His Honda is all shiny and parked under the flaps of their tent and usually rides in their trailer from town to town. Even I know a Honda isn't a real motorcycle.

Five minutes later I'm moving and trying to weave my way through the crowd back towards the midway with a coffee in each hand and the burrito tucked under my armpit.

I put the coffees down carefully and plop the burrito on the counter. I stare longingly at the coffee.

"Here ya are, Jimmy." I fiddle with the two quarters in my hand.

"Ya want some of this?" he asks with a drooling grin while trying to pat my head. I duck.

Never make direct eye contact with Jimmy, and never, ever, no matter what, let him touch you. He's one of the midway family, but he isn't one of *us*.

"No." I shake my head looking at the ground, knowing full well that Nevi's bound to have put some sort of special sauce into the burrito. Special sauce for special customers out here. Don't try to imagine what's in a special sauce. You'll never eat anything out here again if you do.

"You sure?"

"Nope. I'm not hungry," I lie.

"Where's my change?" I shrug drawing a careful circle in the dust with my sneaker.

“How much is it?”

“Just fifty-cents,” I answer thinking of the quarter I’ve already pocketed.

“Gimme a quarter. You can have the other one.”

I drop it with a clunk and make my getaway, tucking the quarter into my pocket. I love the reassuring clink of two coins together.

It is dinnertime for these people, and the sun is going down. The smells that emerge at the end of a long day weigh heavier on me. They move faster, like the people. They stick to my skin like rain that doesn’t fall or cheap Motel 6 lotion. The fry-pit grease tells you what time it is. Fresh in the morning. Dead and rotten by dinner. Then you add in the smell of cheap beer and the fun had in the back of the truck before coming here. Yuck.

The headliner just started down at the bandstand, and it’s time for a check in at home. I make my way to the bottle game at the far end.

“Hey Mom.”

“What’ya got?”

“\$23 and change.” I duck behind the canvas to drop my loot in the jar.

“Movin’ slow are you?”

“It’s still early.” Pulling my small tin tray out from behind her folding chair I tuck it under my arm, lean against the post, and watch her. I wonder whether I’ll be that short when I’m as old as she is.

“Three rings for a quarter, fifty-cents’ll get ya ten! Land a loop and get a pretty thing!” she hollers while waving her arm over the spinning table with the coke bottles on it. I watch the shapes her hard hands make as she points at all the glass bottles and tin

jewelry hanging from the walls. Each of the thirty-seven bottles are set exactly three inches apart. I set them up every day. I dust them too, with just the right bit of ladies face powder, making it invisible so the rings roll right off. Townies are such easy marks.

“Well... what’cha waiting for? Get back out there.”

“Mom, I...” my stomach groans. “Mom?”

“What?”

“I’m kinda tired; can I sit for a few?”

“Oh hell no! Get your ass back out there!” She barely has time to raise her arm, and I’ve already ducked out under the canvas. I am gone before she can strike. Gone is good.

“Half an hour, girl! Remember!” she calls after me. “And get real dough this time!”

The night weaves its way into early morning, still the throngs of townies move forward. “Damn,” I mutter, trying to weave through the mass of bodies with my tray loaded with hot coffee. The concert, whoever the hell it was, just let out, and people are headed for the exit gates. I can smell the coffee too. One of these is mine, and I need it. Coffee is the source out here. No matter who you are, you get it, and usually it’s the one thing that’s free at night. It’s no small thing either for a gopher to carry this stuff. Most of the kids out here can’t carry a whole tray. It takes coordination and muscle. I am a great gopher.

“Here ya go, Jimmy.” I stop to put a coffee on his counter.

“You’re getting really good at that,” he mumbles.

We’re both too tired to avoid or even try to make eye contact. I don’t even wait for a tip before heading off down the midway. I stop here and there to drop off a steaming cup with the midway crew as I go.

I've stopped to take in a good gulp of coffee steam in the night air when out of nowhere a tall, very young and very drunk cowboy in an oversized Kmart Stetson hat hits me as he fumbles his way towards the exit gate.

"Fuck," I scream, chocking an unintelligible sound out watching him chuckle a bit and stagger away while reaching for the ass of a teenage girl.

The scalding burn is following the trail of hot coffee as it pours down my face, chest, and arms, mixing with my tears. Oh god. I'm crying. I never cry.

Goddamn townies don't see anything.

"Where'd he go?" Jimmy huffs, appearing red faced and almost instantly.

"There, he went that way!" comes Sam's bellow from the dart game. More and more voices join in the hunt for the townie. Townies just move on. They don't want to see, they don't want to know. A crying kid is someone else's problem.

"No, he's over there!"

"I got him!"

I can hear the sound thudding of a struggle amid the carny chaos as their fists find flesh.

When I finally look up, I cannot help but be impressed by the tribe.

When carnys really do their thing, it is a sight to see. A dozen carny's are sliding over their counters.

"Katie, Katie!" it's her.

It's my mom ripping my T-shirt off and looking at the burns. The worry creasing her face makes me bite into my cheek to stop crying, but it doesn't work. Must stop crying, but I can't. I just cry harder. *I gotta get it under... Stop. Must stop the brain.*

The loud sounds of calls and scuffle break through my blur, and a few seconds later

I am looking this guy in the face. Hanging half off his now bloody head is the cheap, and now dented, hat. Sam and Jimmy have dragged him across the newly cleared space on the midway. Jimmy, Nevi, and Grace coming up behind him.

“You got him, Sam?” Grace asks. Her mascara is running.

“Take your hat off when talking to a lady,” my mom rumbles, knocking it from his head. Looking into his bleary dark and terrified eyes, I note the baby-faced stubble under his too large and bleeding nose. He should be afraid. I don’t know why I am.

I am never like this, never. I hear my mother order the man to apologize.

“Sorry,” he says, so softly I have to strain to hear it.

“Sorry for what?” my mom asks.

“Sorry for, um,” he looks around at the crowd and finally at me and the fallen tray.

“Oh... sorry, kid. I didn’t see you.” He spits a wad of blood on the ground, just missing my sneakers.

“I don’t think he means it. Do you think he means it Jimmy?”

“Nope” is Jimmy’s breathless answer.

“Apologize again,” her voice vibrates with barely contained emotion. I know that sound.

“It’s okay, Mom. I know he means it.”

Stetson man looks around as if waiting for his friends who’ve slipped into the oblivious crowd.

Mom growls in her trademark tone, “Apologize to the girl.”

“I’m sorry, really sorry.”

I look at my Mom and nod. She nods at Jimmy, and within moments the throng has flooded the midway again. Most of the townies are completely unaware that anything has

happened. The Stetson man is gone as quickly as he appeared. I can guess his fate. Jimmy and Sam have gone with him.

I flinch as my mother rubs the burn cream on my pink blistering neck where we crouch in the back of her rig, the bottles spinning about. This stuff reeks too.

I watch her closely.

“I was worried, girl. Don’t fucking scare me like that again. When you screamed, I swear to god.” Her voice is shaking.

“I never scream.”

“Well, you did. It happens like that sometimes girl, it just comes out of someplace deep inside of you without you knowing it. I think Jimmy about had a goddamn motherfucking heart-attack.”

“What about the guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy, that guy who ran into me.”

“Don’t you worry about that guy. He’s taken care of.”

I shrug.

“Ya know, if we didn’t have to be out here... well... What? Shit, we’re gonna have to pull out about nine tomorrow morning if we’re gonna make it to Nevada by Friday. Be there on time. You know the rule.”

“Yeah,” I know the rule. “With or without me...”

“Now get the hell out of here. We got work to do.”

“That guy though?”

“I said don’t fucking worry about it. We got him for you.”

Spit: A History Lesson

Tuesday. Week One. Oklahoma State Fair. Sand.

Two and a half hours northwest of Oklahoma City, and we're stranded.

I think my leg has fallen asleep and I'm holding in a fart. I have a rash all over my back and legs. Allergies, Mom says. I think we have bugs in the bus. I need to cough but I won't. Mom likes quiet. I take a swallow of my spit. That helps.

"It's too quiet, Mom."

"It is never too quiet."

"But..."

"Kit-Kat."

When we make the list of the towns or the states where we've lived we only count the places we stay at for more than two weeks. If we pass through a state slowly, moving from town to town every few days, take the long way through using only the back roads at night, or making a lazy tour up the coastline, then we count it. There are ways and rules to making it onto our list. We count it if we rent a room for a week or if we get to enroll in school there. We count them on a map in Mom's notebook. Mom loves her maps and she loves the road.

We will get three weeks in Oklahoma City, and that's a lifetime for us. We've contracted for the Oklahoma State Fair, and we have to be there by morning. We'd just finished camping at The Dunes at the Little Sahara State Park up near the Wyoming line and were heading southeast using the back roads when the bus stopped running. We made it twenty miles away from the state park when the motor sputtered, there was a small clunking noise, and we managed to limp to this wide empty slab of asphalt. The

white paint that once marked the parking spaces around the small building is faded from years of disuse and weather. The gas pump is gone, and all there is now is the cement rise where the pump used to be.

The space is wide and littered with garbage around the edges. There are empty milk cartons, abandoned coolers, big black bags of garbage, a dead rat, and poopy diapers. Gideon bibles, sports magazines, nudie magazines, and empty hamburger wrappers have blown up against the chain-link on the north end.

The small building used to have a door and a window, and there was a john in the back. The door was stolen, the window shattered, and there was a six-inch circular hole where the john used to be. I dropped my pants and peed. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time. The sky, however, was pretty. Pale green grass as far as the eye could see. The smell, well, I have learned to ignore the smell when I have to, especially after working with dudes like Jimmy, but the day was cool.

So, I checked everything out while Robert figured out what was wrong with the bus. No gas. The clunk was just something falling out of the gear we strap to the rack on the back. Then he yelled at Mom, and Mom yelled at him, and Suzie slept through everything. She took something from that pocket in Mom's purse. Or she's pretending to be asleep. She does that a lot. He waited for an hour, and no one came by, and then he left on foot. Mom smoked a doobie, and then I came back to the bus.

"One," she paced. "Bad things happen in threes," Mom had whispered in the afternoon light as she paced up and down the narrow aisle of the bus. This is the Snoopy Two. The Snoopy One died in Nebraska last year.

So we are now waiting for him to come back in an empty parking lot of an

abandoned gas station in the middle of nowhere. Suzie is still asleep. Robert is headed to the little town we passed five or ten miles back, to get help or gas. We tried the payphone. No go. He left midmorning. It is early afternoon. It's hard to know without a clock.

“Can we turn on the radio?”

“No.”

It's warm for September, but we opened up the curtains, and Mom is sitting across from me at the little camp table in the kitchen. Putting out her cigarette in the little glass ashtray. There are ashtrays everywhere in here. There are two by the double bed in the back of the bus, three on the little camp table, one by the sink, and the one they installed by the driver's door. I know because it's my job to clean them out. I get the good butts before Suzie even starts looking.

Watching Mom smoke a cigarette is one of my favorite things to do. It's like watching a religious woman pray in a church.

Out here we love to go to drive-in movies. All of us. When we only have a car, Suzie and me, we hide under the covers to save money on admission. When it's a bus we just get the back row of the drive-in and pull out the camp chairs, or if we're too broke we park behind the whole outfit and climb up on the roof and just watch it with no sound. Then we play the voice game. We each pick characters from the screen and pretend to be them and make up funny voices and do dances. Suzie loves the cowboy movies, but Mom loves the romantic stuff. The double feature classic nights are my favorites. We eat popcorn and watch Bob Hope and laugh. I like movies that make me laugh.

I wiggle and out comes the fart. It is very loud in the quiet space. Mom does not

laugh, but she smiles and she lights her cigarette. The rules say I have to be quiet, but it is hard for me to do. And I'm never quiet inside my head.

To start with, mom pulls a new pack from the carton and packs it exactly seven times. Her fingers pull the little plastic tab around the top of the hard pack. My mother is old, not really old, but I can tell. She doesn't have wrinkles on her face. I can always guess someone's age from just looking at their hands, and four out of five times I'll be right. It's a bar trick now. Like sticking my fingers into the foam of a beer or eating a lot of banana peppers without crying. Mom has me do it, and she bets things like a beer or a sandwich. You can't hide your age in your hands. Hard work, no work, or the wrong work, I can tell. Carny brats see everything.

"Why can't we turn on the radio?" I ask.

"Because I said so."

"Can I hum?"

She sighs deep, and the word "no" rolls out, turning into a growl. Today is slow, but that can change fast, like the weather or like Grammy's TV. She had a remote control. We never had a TV with a remote before, and sometimes Mom would just watch the same channel for days. She gets stuck like that. Other times she clicks through like Grandpa when there's nothing on that he wants to watch, but she goes on and on. Super-fast.

"Why can't I hum?" I ask.

"Because I said so."

"I am glad our bus has a radio."

She pauses to take a slow drag on her cigarette. "Not all buses have radios." She

taps the fingers of her hand on the table. Not the thumb. Using her fingernails, she drums once from pinky to index and then again. Then stops. She takes a deep breath.

“Ours does,” I say.

Suzie has started to snore. She doesn’t do that much, but when she does she really goes. It’s the dry air. It’s the only sound interrupting us. She does this thing where she’s quiet and then there’s a big honking snort as she inhales the air and then nothing for a long time.

There is nothing but sand everywhere, and it is in everything. We walk in it, sleep in it, and it’s in my peanut butter sandwich today. I know. It was crunching in my teeth. It’s in my underpants and when I go to sleep there is grit on my pillowcase. We closed the windows of the bus. We put towels around the gaps. We taped a plastic bag over the broken window on the driver’s side of the bus. The sand still comes in.

When we are in the desert I get nosebleeds, all the time. Mom says we can’t live where it is hot because I bleed too much. Back home in New Mexico, when I was little, I had to go to the hospital lots of times because of it. I just bleed and bleed. They say it’s because I was born too early, but Grammy says that I was born right on time.

“This is the best bus ever,” I say. Mom looks out the window. I know to talk softly when she does that. I swallow my spit.

“Did I ever tell you about your daddy, girl?”

“Yes,” I say. “All the time. He was a writer and a musician.”

“He was the *everything*,” she says. “I have never told you this, but you are named for him, you know.”

“His name was Kit-Kat?”

“No baby. But he wanted a girl named Katie after his mother, so he named you. It is good to be Irish, but I wanted to name you Adrienne. After Adrienne Rich. She was a poet who changed my world. It’s a French name. I never got to go there, France, but I always wanted to. I was asleep when you were born, but he wasn’t, so here you are: Kit-Kat.”

“So, I’d be Adrienne.” I look out the window and think about what she would be like. “Adrienne,” I say, rolling it around on my tongue. “Damn.”

“No, I planned to call you ‘Addy.’”

“Then why not just name me Addy?”

“Because no one names their kid Addy.”

“Why not? I think it’s a good name.”

“Because it’s a name people can tease you over. *Addy and subtracty*.” She giggles and sticks out her tongue at me. Mom’s face is wide and she has the same nose as me – the one with the bubble on the end. Her hair is short and almost black, but not quite, mostly really dark brown. Her eyes are like mine too. They change colors, but not like mine. Her eyes are dark brown or light brown. Mine are sometimes green and sometimes brown and sometimes both. She has on shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt.

“I hate math.”

“Your name is Kit-Kat. It’s a good enough name.”

“But it’s Katie. It’ll always be Katie or Kit-Kat.”

“No. You can be whoever you want when you’re grown. I have a secret name, baby girl. I wasn’t always your mom.” She grins at me and then gestures towards the cabinet under the sink. “I used to be someone else.” I know what she wants.

“You are my mom.”

“Before you were born, I wasn’t your mom.”

I get up and reach underneath the cabinet for the bottle of rosé.

“You were always my mom. I won’t believe anything else.”

“I was a person before you came. Before any of you came, I was a person.”

A quiet *snort* emerges from the back of the bus where Suzie sleeps.

“Not a person?” I ask and hand her the bottle along with a coffee cup from the sink.

“Not a *mom* person,” she says, and I sit back down. “I was a *person* person. I think kids forget that parents are people too.”

“Who were you then?”

“They called me Annie.”

“Like the little orphan?”

“No baby. I was not like a little orphan. I was a movie star and a dancer.”

“You were not.”

“I was so.”

“Naaaw.” I make a long face, open my eyes wide, and swing my arm across the camp table, and Mom laughs. She takes a drag on her cigarette, moving her hand to her mouth, puckering as if for a kiss, and makes a show of it. She winks and nods at me and shifts in her seat so that her bare feet dangle over the edge.

“I was a waitress, I was the girl in the diner who could carry four plates, two of them on each arm, and never spill anything. Then I was an actress in the movies.”

“What kind of movies?”

“The kind you are too young to see. Nothing big. I was just an extra.”

“What is an extra?”

“An extra is something you don’t need. But in a movie we are just people in the crowd. But you get a costume and make-up, and if you’re really good, the big guys notice you and you get a real job. I was an extra on the movie *The Wild Bunch* and in *Gunsmoke*. You remember seeing that?”

“A real job or an extra job?”

“With a real job you are the star, baby. When you are an extra you are just there as a placeholder. You are useful but not necessary. Anyone can be you. I took acting classes though. I was good.” She shrugs, and I listen to the wine pour from the bottle into the cup. She never splashes, ever. I hadn’t noticed that before. Even from far away, she always gets it into the cup. I have seen her pour wine into a cup that is sitting on the floor when she’s sitting cross-legged up on the kitchen counter-top.

“Were you in any romantic movies?”

She sits there for a few minutes. The lines around her mouth get tight, and she takes a drink from her cup and frowns.

“Well?”

“I guess you could say that I was.”

“I think that’s awesome,” I sigh and rest my chin on my hand and roll my eyes at her.

She smiles a crooked sad smile. “I was Annie Roads of the Mission District, girl. I was something.” She winks. “I was more famous than your daddy ever was. Your daddy was a deadbeat gambler but a helluvah writer. And baby, I loved the roads. I still do.”

“You’re still my mom too. You will always be my mom.”

“This was before you.”

I run my fingers along the ridge of the table, the place where the laminate meets the metal ridge that is the frame of the table. “Before me,” I whisper.

“Life is a long-winding and detour-riddled road, Kit-Kat. There is time before you and after you.”

“You weren’t you? You are always you, right?”

“No baby. In life we change. We are sometimes Annie and sometimes Patsy, and sometimes I am Mom. I used to think I could be anyone I wanted. I listened to poetry, the kind your daddy wrote, and I danced on tables. I read Adrienne Rich, and I thought about eating and wandering and living, baby girl. I was somebody. Men loved me for real. I was a star.”

I scrunch up my face.

“Don’t laugh, girl. Men noticed me. Men loved me, and it was wonderful. Your daddy loved me in his way. Robert loves me in that way, and I am his world,” she sighs, “his whole world. Someday men will notice you too.” She frowns in a crooked way. “Not yet though,” she says. “You won’t take the road I did. I will make sure of that. You will be a good girl and stay away from boys. You will work. You will be somebody.”

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I was somebody,” she says softly.

I smile brightly. “You are still somebody. You are my mom.”

She takes a drag and smiles in that way that says I need to be quiet. So I am.

Robert did not come back until after we had spaghetti noodles with oil and cracked pepper. Suzie was still asleep and I was supposed to be. The wine sloshed in the cup, and Mom read a novel until the sun went down. Then she just sat there drinking for a long time. I tried to stay very still, and I was very good at faking being asleep. She cried for a little bit, and then she snored from her spot on the bench too.

I only know what time he came home because the bus starting moving right when the sun was coming up. He came in quickly, the door creaking loudly. Mom started whispering in that way that isn't really a whisper, and I could tell she was mad at him for being gone so long.

"You were gone for too long," she said. "You said it'd only be two hours. Do you hear me, *two!*"

He didn't say anything, but he hit her hard twice. She fell down, then she was quiet. He got clothes from his bunk, which is at the back of the bus, passing me as he went, and changed his clothes, and then he took the trash out, poured a jug of gasoline into the tank, and we were moving. That's when I fell asleep. I try to stay asleep when we're moving. Keeps me from horking.

Tuesday. Week Two – And Bingo Was His Name-O.

Suzie sneaks out of the bus every day. Mom and Robert are usually up all night, and they sleep all morning when we have a gig, and even when we don't. She sneaks out before they wake up, and then she hides all day somewhere else. That doesn't make any sense to me – if she isn't here with us in the bus anymore, why does she need to hide? It is just what she does.

Each of us knows every inch of the small space. I have the top bunk of our bunk bed, and Suzie has the bottom. When I can, I try to be first out the door before they wake up. One of us gets out everyday. They only flip out if both of us are gone.

Some days I don't make it out at all, but today I did. Today I found Suzie. Some days she hides where I can find her. Today she either made herself easy to find or she found me because she was looking for me, I'm not sure. We have been here for six days.

Suzie has a bellyache. She ate something bad and is frowning at everything.

"You are a dork-dweezil," I mutter before digging knuckle deep up my right nostril. The dweezil end of it sounding a bit clogged up. I'm not actually knuckle deep in anything. Picking is grody, but I know it bugs Suzie, so I'm at it. I've gotten pretty good at faking it. The only one I can't fool is Robert. He wants me to be girly. I am not. I am, um, boyish. I don't have the word for me yet.

"That was a lame nickname," she says. "What's wrong with you today?"

Fake flick. "Nothing."

"You're disgusting."

I wiggle my toes and make a show of sucking on my index finger. "I am not."

"You always act like a boy." She steps from one foot to the other in her secondhand, lace-up buster browns and glares at me. The bells and whistles of the carnny music are rolling around and around in my head. We are standing in the gap between the Indian taco stand and the bingo rig. I love the bingo rig. I am planning to try to win the watermelon tray before the big nighttime crowds come through. The tray isn't made of watermelons, and it isn't made to be used with watermelons. It's just a tin tray. I want to use it to carry coffee at the end of the shift to the other workers. Coffee is free for carnys

with this outfit. Morning and night, and the tips are good. I had a tray, but I lost it when we did the gig in St. Louis.

I am a gopher. Not like the bucktoothed, born with a moustache and sideburns gopher girl in the freak tent. No, I go-fer things. I am not one of the freaks. I move coffee from one end of the midway to the other. I haul food to carnys and get tips, if I'm lucky. If I'm really lucky, they pay me with a meal or part of one. I also carry *stuff* – the pills Mom takes to keep her awake. Sometimes, when the days are really long, she shares pieces of them with me, whether I want to or not.

I give Suzie an elbow in the rib and make a slurping sound as I slide the digit out of my mouth, ending with a pop. I think about these things all the time. Sounds and slurps and music and everything else. I don't sleep much – and I definitely never snore.

“You will never fit in with regular people,” she says.

I make a googily face at her, flaring my nostrils and making my mouth crooked and wrong. I also get into trouble for making too many faces.

“Grammy would be so mad at you. You are not being very ladylike.”

I swallow my spit first, making a show of it, and say, “She's not here, so who gives a—” Thump! Suzie gives me a hard whomp on the back of my head.

“Don't talk about her that way.” She grinds her teeth. I can hear it. “Grammy is everywhere,” she says. It makes me glad my molars are gone. You don't want to know where they went. One of them went bad. Now I am missing two on each side. Four altogether, but they were all baby teeth, so that's okay.

“Grammy is nowhere. We are here alone,” I say. I manage a smile.

“Where are you working tonight?” she asks.

“Gonna try again for the *you-know-what* and then run for a while. Want to play bingo for a while?”

“No.” She looks into the crowd.

“You are an old woman. You never want to play with me anymore.”

“You are nothing but a monkey,” she says with a half of a grin. “A stupid midway-running monkey.”

“I’m a gopher, so fuck you, dork-dweezil.”

She makes the buck toothed face, does a little bobbing dance and “tsa tsa tsa,” the half chirping, half clucking sound comes from behind her front teeth, and then she grins, wiping the moisture from her bottom lip. “Play the name game,” she says.

“Stupid-head,” I mutter.

“Dork-dweezil just isn’t working for me,” she says. “Come up with something better.”

Great peals of laughter erupt from behind me, and I turn to see the gangly man who works the bingo tent watching us dance and laughing. I know he can’t hear us.

“He’d probably sell it to you if you asked.” She gestures at the tall man working behind the counter. I ignore him. “You have no luck with gambling, Katie. It’s inherited. No luck at all. You never win.” She gives me a parental look, and I want to kick her hard in the shins.

“It’s not gambling - it’s bingo. Old ladies play bingo.”

“It’s the kind of gambling they tell themselves isn’t gambling, but it is. They deal the cards, you play them and get what you get - win or lose. Buy it from him. Just ask him. I am sure you could have it for a dollar or less.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter and accidentally use my slobbery finger to scratch the inside of my own ear, and I jump like I’d gotten a real Willy. Damn. I still have a bit of an itch here and there, but we got new blankets this week, so things are better. Allergies my ass.

“Mom says his name is Anthony. She was there when the boss man hired him, and that’s what it says on his ID. She says he’s a WOP, but we’re not to call him one of those. He is I—talian,” she says, drawing out the I.

“The dude working the bingo?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not one of us. He’s a faker. Today is his first day, he’s just a townie.” I don’t know why they hire townies.

“Do we call him Tony or what?” I ask. No one is ever who they say. Names mean nothing.”

“Hi,” Suzie says, and she returns his wave.

“Names mean everything,” she whispers. “The name game means we are remembered. It means we remember.”

He grins a wide, laughing smile, framed by a half a day’s beard growth, and the sleeves of his shirt ride halfway up his forearms. His shirt is too small. The buttons stretch in the chest because it doesn’t fit, and the jeans are too big and held up with a belt. He has the apron full of coins but doesn’t know to sort the coins as they are going into the pockets. I watched him for a while this morning. He’s making change as he goes, digging out handfuls of coins and sifting through the mess, which is stupid.

“Don’t call him anything,” she continues.

I turn around and make sure he gets a look at my butt. “Why does he always

watch us?" I am wearing regular townie clothes. It's my good outfit, jeans and a plain blue T-shirt with my hair in a ponytail. I look like one of them.

"He watches for the same reason townies always watch strangers."

I mutter, "He wants something," and shrug, "else."

"He doesn't want that," she says. "I don't think he's like Jimmy. Be careful anyway. I think he's just a runner. He's not like us."

"A runner?"

"On the lam is a better word."

"Like 'baaa' lamb." I grin. "He's a farmer? E-I-E-I-O." I let out a giant laugh.

"No, he's running from something. Probably the law," she shoots me a conspiratorial look. "On the *lam*."

"He doesn't seem to know you and me are carnys," she says.

"Hmph." I shrug and look over my shoulder at him. Might be worth it to work a grift, just one.

"Don't play too long. Mom will flip if she finds out you wasted a whole day playing a game. We need money."

"Dork-butt," I mutter.

"Monkey-face."

She's dashing in one direction but looks back at me when I laugh and do a monkey dance. "Monkey isn't working for me, come up with something better!" I call.

"N-7," the caller yells. Anthony looks at my card and grins.

Oh yeah, he's definitely not one of us. I'm not sure if he's a townie or a runner,

like Suzie says, or if he's neither. He has perfect teeth. The kind of teeth you have when you have rich parents and braces, which is weird because his clothes are definitely not his own. I want to win the tray.

The only difference between church bingo and midway bingo is the speed. Midway bingo is pretty damn fast. It's not usually rigged like the other games because the prizes are all shit. It's not even a big money maker. It's just a place to park the people who don't want to be at the fair with their families but got drug along anyway. They sit and play while everyone else rides the roller coaster.

"What's your name, missy?" Anthony asks. He's been pacing back and forth in front of me for a while. He has a slight limp. I'm ignoring him. There are only three players, and the other two are on the other side of the outfit with the other worker.

I don't have the money to spend trying to win a watermelon tray, and I've now lost two dollars and twenty-five cents. I can't tell you why it is important to me to win it. It just is. I could steal something else that would do the trick, I suppose. I just want it to move coffees. I have a dream of being able to carry it loaded up with burritos and churros and potatoes, like the cigarette girl in the old movies, only with food.

"It's a beautiful morning, isn't it, missy?" he says on another pass, this time with a wink. I've been here for an hour. He's made quite a few passes. "I can't just keep calling you 'missy' forever, pretty princess girl."

"Play a little bingo and win a little ringo!" He calls out to the crowd, but not very loudly. The big black guy who calls out the numbers glares at him. Tony makes three passes by me as he walks the game, each time pausing to ask my name, to smile and look at my card, or to take my quarter and leave a new card.

I finally look him in the eye. “My name is Judy,” I say with a little smile, and my stomach flips.

“Judy,” he says. “That’s a nice name.”

“Like in Punch and Judy,” I say. His smile is more crooked when you see him up close.

“Ah,” he says, “I would not have made that connection.” He jingles the coins in his pocket like it means something. “I thought Judy Blume.”

“Who was she?”

“She is a writer,” he says. “She writes about girls. Girls with problems.”

“Why would you read books about girls?”

“I don’t read books about girls,” he coughs. “At least not like that. I like pretty little girls like you. I write stories about hobo’s. Hobo’s have fantastic stories.” He smiles, winks and shrugs. “She’s just the Judy I thought about. My little sister likes reading Blume in school.”

“That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“O-4,” the caller yells. The other side filled up because it’s on the food side of the set up. Think food on one street, the vendors who sell the magic can openers on the other side. We’re on the side with the vendors who have can openers and magic egg-crackers. I want one of those egg-crackers just because they’re cool.

“You’ll read it in school this year,” he says.

I just stare harder at my cards and lay down another quarter for a new card. When you win enough you get to get anything you want from the top shelf. Its bingo, not real

math, and I like it a lot. I like to play it even when there isn't a tray.

"Do you like books?" he asks.

"No."

"How old are you, Judy?"

I growl in my belly. He's ruining my game.

"So, are you here with your family? I've been watching you and your sister run around the midway all morning, but I haven't seen your parents."

"You sure are a curious dude, "I mutter and cough. I try to stifle the little growl, but it happens anyway.

He winks at me, calls to the crowd, and makes another pass. This time he leans against my counter, his head low, body bent over. He's bent low in a strange hook since the countertop is only just at his waist, trying to make eye contact with me. "I'll bet you're a really smart kid," he says as he lays his head on the counter with a heavy sigh and gazes at me.

"Will you please look at me, girl?" he asks. "Are you okay?" I can see the bulge of a notebook in the backside of his shirt. He is definitely not like any other townie I've known before. His shoes are old and covered in mud, so I'm pretty sure he isn't a cop. They wear sensible shoes. His hands are in a wide five and flat on the counter less than a foot from my cards. He looks older in his face than his hands say he is.

"What's your name?" I ask. "It seems fair that you'd tell me that."

"The Fair, little girl, is not a real place. The Fair is a place with corn dogs and funnel cakes and Ferris wheels. It does not exist in real life. You get what you get and you make the most of it. No sense wallowing in what is and isn't fair."

I look him in the eyes briefly. They are so close to mine I can smell the stink of the cheap cigs he smokes.

“If you want something in life, girl, you gotta get up and get it. That’s not something a cute little girl like you would understand.”

I look him in the eye again, only briefly. There’s something in there that I don’t like – he’s too curious. I haven’t had a number in the last ten that they’ve called.

“Name?” I repeat.

“Um,” he stands upright again. “Gary,” he says. I wiggle my toes. I wonder where Suzie has gone off to. I might have to give up on the tray soon. I’m down to my last two bits.

“Humph,” I mutter and roll my tongue around in my closed mouth. I got a plastic whistle in one round because I got three in a row but otherwise nothing. “And where are you from?” I ask and start off in the rapid-fire way that always pisses mom off. “Are you married?” I don’t look up from my cards. “Where are you from? Why do you like books? Do you eat regularly, or why do you have a limp, Mr. Gimp? And where are *your* parents?” My hands are shaking. “What are you writing in that notebook of yours?”

“Now, Judy,” he says, “that’s not nice,”

I will absolutely not look at him again.

“Girls should know their manners.”

No one has won yet. They’ve called a lot of numbers, I don’t have any of them, but no one has won.

“Pretty girl,” he whispers. “I think you’re in trouble, I’m not sure what kind but I think you’re in it. You’re in something, girl. You maybe ain’t got much but you’ve got

too much.”

“Katie!” Mom bellows, coming up the row of vendors. “Are you dicking around in here playing a game?” She looks and takes in the bingo game and drops her wine. It’s a Styrofoam cup that coffee comes in, but I know she has wine in it. “Motherfu—” she mutters. She makes quick eye contact and a scan of Gary or Anthony or whatever his name before Gary or Anthony or Tony ducks around to the other side of the game.

Mom smacks me hard on the back of the head and the front of my head hits the countertop. She grabs me by the back of my collar, and jostles me down the midway towards a job. “Talking to boys, are you - you, little fucking slut?”

Something just happened. Mom nearly chokes me with my T-shirt. “Talking to boys!” she shouts. “Three in the afternoon, not working and talking to boys - you will not take that road! I know where it goes! Lazy little shit!”

Thursday. Week Two. 3:00 PM.

Three days later, still in Oklahoma. Mom has a hold on me by my foot and is whaling on me using her other hand, open palm, of course, and I’m trying to hide underneath the steering wheel of the bus. I can’t work if she uses something else. No marks.

“You have to put away everyone’s shoes at night or we fall down when we come in after work!” she screams. I forgot one. “Ashtrays!” she goes on. “Ashtrays!” She’s incoherent on whiskey and high as a kite on pills. “Empty all the ashtrays! It stinks in here! Wasting your days on fucking bingo and boys! Little whore.”

I’m supposed to be at my job. Suzie has been bolting extra early, and she comes home after they are asleep, if at all. I haven’t seen her in two days. Mom has been angry

as fuck for the last three days. She's stuck on the same channel. She's also using the lock to keep me in during the day. Three days in here, and the windows won't open, and it's hotter than hell.

There isn't enough room underneath the driver's seat, but I know she can't get a good hold, and with the door closed she can't get the leverage to haul me out. She'll pass out soon enough, or I will.

"Little bastard, like your father. Gonna be nothing all your goddamn life. Little whore." She's beat me every day this week. That's a lot, even for her.

Trailways: An Apple a Day for Annie

Midmorning:

The to-do list was short that day: Laundromat, post office and the A&P for picnic stuff. Also, buy charcoal briquettes and lighter fluid and a last item she couldn't read clearly. It was terribly smudged. Then back to the Laundromat.

It only took a few minutes for it to happen, the leaving. It was much easier than she'd imagined it might be. In her right hand she clutched tightly the yellow piece of paper on which was written the day's to-do list and a Trailways ticket that read only: "Mrs. Jones, San Francisco, California."

The young woman, Mrs. Jones, a slight woman of only 5'4", with long dark hair, in the lime green polyester suit made it onto the Trailways bus in the midmorning light and hustled toward the back, stopping in the second to the last row, tucking the brown paper bag under the seat and ignoring the scowl from the old colored woman who looked her up and down while pursing her Revlon True Red lips. The old woman scowled as she watched her crouch in the seat, bent over like a pretzel so that there was no profile, nothing to be seen from the street through the wide window of the bus as it would pull through town.

The young Mrs. Jones waited for the bus to start moving for what seemed a very long time while trying to be invisible. Her body shuddered when the motor roared to a start, and she wobbled when it backed out of the loading zone of the Riverside, California bus depot. She remained pressed down into the seat as the bus bounced awkwardly over the curb, and slowly passed the A&P store a half a block from the depot. She mentally counted the two blocks between the A&P and the first stop sign, a boulevard stop on the

corner with the small library. Three more blocks, passing the Dairy Queen and a small strip mall. Then the turn onto the highway where the sound of the gears and the motor rose with the speed and finally settled into a steady hum.

She stayed there until she formed a cramp in her hip when the colored woman made a noisy show of tearing open a bag of potato chips and began eating them. It would be some time later, after the woman had finished eating the chips, crumpled the bag deliberately loudly and shoved it into her giant purse, that Mrs. Jones finally sat upright in her seat.

Mrs. Jones looked slowly around the bus for the first time, taking it all in, until she met the doleful glare of the old woman who then looked deliberately down the aisle at the front of the bus and then toward the back of the bus with a drama that meant to make a point. The point being it was 1964, and despite being in Riverside, California, there were places where the young white girl should sit and where she should not sit.

Mrs. Jones missed the point. "Thanks but," she paused with a crooked smile, "I don't have to pee just yet though, that is not why I was sitting this way."

The old woman simply rolled her eyes and harrumphed.

Then something happened. Mrs. Jones' hands went away. They went numb, tingling and began to tremble. Sometimes a person doesn't realize they've stopped breathing, and just shy of hyperventilating, comes numbness. One would think, given her crouched position on the bus, it would be her leg that would go to sleep, but no, it was her hands. It was a state of shock, one imagines, which brought it on.

She didn't realize exactly what was happening before that precise moment, perhaps not even now on the bus. She only moved. Moved away from the house to the

Laundromat – then laundry to the market – moved from the market towards the bus depot. No plan but the brown paper bag with a few supplies she'd bought with the grocery money, and that only happened because the market was on the list that day.

Anything that needed to be done had to go on the list. Without the list her mind would drift and important things would often be forgotten. Mrs. Jones is not dumb by any measure, simply forgetful, though that was what she thought people seemed to think of her. Everything went into her head, it just got lost up there in the scraps of paper and pockets of randomly squirreled away information. She'd been in the market, and as she'd struggled to read the last smudge on the list she thought to herself, *Today I will do something different. Now is the time. Now is where I am, and I will do something different. I can do something, anything. Just do it now.*

So there she is. She folds her numb and very bare hands together and looks out the window and hopes the old woman doesn't notice the shaking. The small white gloves with pearl buttons that her mother had given her are in the car in the lot at the A&P. The keys are under the visor, and the hamper is full of neatly folded laundry in the back seat.

Then her nose follows her hands, going numb. Her head then begins to spin in a disorderly way, which troubles her. If she'd been more settled she would have recognized it as the panic that sometimes came when she'd left a list at home or in the car, or when she'd forgotten an important chore. She rubs her nose, scratches it, wipes away the only tear and looks firmly out the window. The spinning happened often at home, when her mother would visit, or sometimes when she was alone with Dwayne. It would be easier to tell herself that he was a bad man, but he wasn't... he wasn't. It simply wasn't... It just isn't what she thought it would be. Married life had not turned out the

way she expected. He is supposed to still love her like *that*. The kind of starry eyed love he'd had for her when she was seventeen had long since faded. She'd followed the rules. She'd done everything right. She only knew she couldn't go home. The rest of the world was so much more than the sleepy town of Riverside. She believes this. There has to be more for a woman of twenty and, thankfully, childless. She'd read Kerouac. She'd read about the rest of the world in *LIFE* magazine.

The colored woman across the aisle is sucking on her front teeth when she tut tuts. She wiggles in her seat a lot and cracks her knuckles. If Mrs. Jones looks straight out of the window, she doesn't see the old woman. Mrs. Jones is certain that it shows on her face, the leaving, that she is failing.

Mrs. Jones pulls the bag from the A&P onto the seat next to her and begins to rummage through it. New packages of socks and underwear. Ladies black underwear that came in a plastic package; it had surprised her that they came in such a racy color. Underwear, those made sense. A package of snack size boxes of raisins makes less sense. Toothpaste and a roll of Lifesavers candy. One leads to the other, but without a toothbrush the process is incomplete and there isn't one. They are also assorted fruit flavor; peppermint would have made more sense given the lack of toothbrush. She'd gotten married at seventeen and had celebrated with a peppermint milkshake at the diner across the street from the courthouse. Just Dwayne, cheeseburgers and peppermint milkshakes. They'd thought themselves such rebels. They had only been children and she knew that now. They were still children.

In the green patent leather handbag, also pulled up from the floor, there is a copy of the Kerouac novel, an envelope with her twin sister Beverly's number at the teachers

college on it, along with the number for Weird Uncle Wally in Oakland. That isn't San Francisco, but on a map Oakland doesn't look too far from San Francisco. In the bag there is a pair of gray slacks from the laundry, a cotton blouse folded up tight and one of Dwayne's T-shirts. One bra. She plans to wear that to job interviews and she will cut her long dark brown hair off eventually. Her hair is so dark people often mistake it for black, but it isn't. It is only very dark brown. She loves it.

The shoes on her feet are all wrong and the walking shoes had been right there, behind the driver's seat. The white peep-toe sling-back pumps weren't very daring, apart from the rhinestone applique she herself had glued to the toe. Certainly not practical for job hunting but she'd felt flashy that morning. Who knows why? Life should be flashy when you're young.

She does not get off the bus in Bakersfield when the driver calls for a quick break, not even to use the restroom, instead choosing to use the bus toilet in the back while the other passengers were in the air-conditioned truck-stop. She'd never thought about the sounds from other people in the intimate space of a bathroom, but there they were. The bus trip was turning into a combination of both daring and over exposure. Sounds are not something you think about in a quiet house in Riverside. Or at Daddy's house in Escondido or at Mother's country club.

Midday:

She walks and down the aisle of the Trailways bus during the break in Bakersfield. Feeling brave, so far from home she even removed her bedazzled white shoes and walked up and down, enjoying the feel of the strange lines in the mat that make up the floor of the bus. She looks around. It is easy to see that there is a man traveling

alone in the second row from the front because of the hat and briefcase lying in the overhead compartment. Nothing else. A young woman left only her rose colored scarf in the seat two rows behind him. About midway there is what could only be described as a nest of baskets, bundles, and two worn denim coats. One with a sheepskin lining, several patches pinned to the material at the shoulder and under the lapel. She can't read what is written on the patches because the coats are wadded up. One belongs to a man, the other to a woman. This much is clear because of the wide red ribbon woven through the buttonholes of the smaller girls coat. Probably some of those *freaks* from Los Angeles. Daddy says... well. It's best not to repeat what her father thought of them.

She's made three passes up and down the aisle, slowing at the nest every time, but she hasn't lifted the lapel to read the patch.

It is the sound of two approaching voices that sends her back down the aisle toward her seat and she's halfway down the aisle when the man's voice comes up behind her.

"Hey there, pretty baby! How you doin'?" He gives her long hair a gentle tug and Mrs. Jones jumps and dodges.

"Leave her alone," a girl says.

"She was scoping out our stuff, Berry. You think maybe she stole anything?"

"No. Just leave her be. If she got anything she probably needs it more than we do," the girl says.

"I dunno, Berry. She looks like a real sketchy thief in all that polyester material and pantyhose. She ain't got no shoes," he says with a put-on southern drawl that slides in at the end of his sentence.

“She’s no thief, TS,” she sighs. “A Sears and Roebuck polyester dress is no thief. But with a face like that...”

“She is definitely a thief,” he says.

The raucous sound of the other passengers boarding interrupts them and she sprints down the aisle, slides into her seat, slides on her shoes and tears open one of the boxes of raisins as the bus pulls away. She’s moved to the right side of the bus, heading north, because the right side will give her the shade now that the old lady is gone. No one can see Mrs. Jones now. She has the row entirely to herself and she intends to see everything that she can.

Alfalfa – field after field of alfalfa and the smell of cow dung coming in through the window. So far, that’s all there is of the great wide world to see. The road between Fresno and Bakersfield passes quietly until Berry asks, “What’ cho-oo got going on way back here in the bus, girl?” sliding into the seat next to her.

TS climbs into the row in front, propping himself up onto his knees to look over the seat at the women. “You got any shoes back here, girl? I’d never walk up and down in one of these things with no shoes on. That’s revolting.”

Mrs. Jones frowns her sternest, “I have shoes,” she says, refusing to shift her gaze away from the window.

TS looks her up and down before locking on the shoes and the subtle rhinestone design.

“Those aren’t shoes. Those are sparklers,” he says with a toothy grin. He ate something with excessive amounts of green in it at the rest-stop and has a chipped front

tooth. This grin hovers above a strange beard which is pulled into two spikes of thick facial hair. He licks his lips.

“Um,” she says deliberately not looking at his mouth and at looks instead the back of the seat, “they are shoes.”

“So...” he smiles, his lips are wide and thick and rest below a hook shaped nose. “Where you headed, girl?”

She sits straight up, as properly as she knows how, and reaches into the box of raisins.

“The bus is headed north so we have a pretty good idea, don’t we, Berry?” TS states and then he watches Mrs. Jones delicately place a few raisins into her mouth, leaving her fingers sticky. She presses her thumb and index finger together several times; she pauses short of licking the sugars from the tip, aware that he is watching her closely. She moves as if to wipe her fingers on her skirt but stops.

“San Francisco,” she mutters.

“Got any money, girl?” TS asks.

Berry is a few years younger than Mrs. Jones and smaller by at least three inches. For average women that would not be much but even Mrs. Jones is petite at 5’4”, leaving Berry looking practically fragile next to her and the towering 6’ TS. Berry has her jet black hair tied back with a piece of a broken white shoelace. A pen is stuck in the knot of hair as if she had just been using it. She has on a white tank top and a wide denim skirt. It is the boots that are the most remarkable thing about her. Red cowboy boots. Blood red cowboy boots that must be intolerable in the summer heat.

TS flashes a toothy green grin and winks at her.

Mrs. Jones only blinks – a lot – and looks out the window of the bus.

“Shut up, TS,” Berry says, “You’re scaring her.”

He coughs through a laugh. “She isn’t scared. I don’t think she is anything at all.”

“So, my name is Raspberry,” she says. “But people call me Berry for short.”

“Rasp-berry,” TS says, while rolling the name across his tongue. “Raspberry wine. You should tell her that story, Berry.”

“That is not a real name,” Mrs. Jones mutters.

TS laughs that coughing laugh of his again, as if he’d inhaled smoke but something is super funny anyway, but you don’t know what it is. “This is a whole new world, my girl. You’re flying into the future on this here bus, girl. Names belong to the namers and, baby - if your life is going to belong to you then you need to call that for yourself. It’s the time of newness. San Francisco is the place; the new world is booming and blooming. The now world is happening. Polyester and twill are dead. Music now moves the world and it’s the adventure that moves everything in between.”

Mrs. Jones finally meets his stare. “I am,” she pauses and lowers an octave in what will become her trademark tone, “fine.”

His face is rough with a scraggly beard and dirty, long hair and the strange smell comes from his mouth. He grins wide as if having won a trophy. “How much money have you got, baby?”

Mrs. Jones just runs her fingers over the corners of the cardboard box in her hands, rubbing the sugars off of the fingertip thinking about the \$.45 in her change purse.

“Oh baby,” he says.

“Who’s looking out for you, girl? I mean, who’s going to meet’cha once you’re there?” Berry asks.

“I’m fine. I’m, um,” she says, “meeting a friend. Well, she’s meeting me there.”

“TS’s already long face gets even longer and his teeth disappear behind a frown. “You are a little frog-girl. Have you ever read any Mark Twain? Oh little Frog of Calaveras County, you ain’t got much, but you got too much,” he says sliding in and out of a put-on Southern drawl. “You think you’re going somewhere but you’ve got something inside of you that you’ll never get away from; a belly full of buckshot. I see right inside of you, frog girl.”

“Don’t mind, TS,” Berry says. “He thinks too much for his own good. TS is short for Tom Sawyer, without actually being Tom Sawyer. He has this thing for Twain, but Twain wasn’t even his real name, it was Samuel Clemens.”

“I am not stupid,” she says. “I know about Mark Twain and all that.”

“I didn’t say you were stupid,” Berry says.

“So, what are you going to do in our fine city, with your fine paper sack full of supplies?” TS asks.

“My friend will meet me and it’ll be fine. We’re going to get a room at the Y or something.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” he says.

She looks him in the eye, her mouth moving around the words deliberately. “My friend and I are meeting up to explore the city together for a few days. She lives in Oakland, but is meeting me in San Francisco. We will get a room at the Y.” Her eyes narrow.

“Rent a room! With what?” he says. “Oh, little frog girl of Calaveras County – you need help.”

“I do not.”

“You do,” TS winks. “You should come to the Magic House. You two, I mean, you and your little friend,” he sighs meaningfully. “The more the merrier.”

“She is not ready for the Magic House, yet,” Berry says.

“I can handle anything.”

“No,” Berry says, glaring at TS. “The Magic House is too much for sparkly shoes like those.”

“Oh, she would love it there,” he says. “Love is good, baby. And the Magic House, the house is where the soul is, in and out of bodies and transcending the plane of the physical. The house of magic is where the world is wild and free and full of adventures. Adventures, them’s the stuff, little frog. That’s the stuff.”

Peppermint, she thinks. *If I’d gotten peppermint Lifesavers then I’d give him one and they’d go away.* Berry lifts up a bit of Mrs. Jones’ hair before she can duck away.

“What’s your name?” Raspberry asks, twirling the lock of hair in her fingers.

“Annie,” she pauses for too long. “My name is Annie Jones.”

“Annie Jones, oh baby. Your name is Jones as much as mine is Raspberry Wine. Get rid of Jones. That is way too square. I dig the Annie though. Annie Road. That’s the best name for you now, girly. Annie Road.”

“Roads,” she says. “I like Annie Roads.”

“Roads,” TS says, stroking his strange two prong trimmed beard, and he slides into that over drawn Southern accent. “Roads are important places. Impermanent –

transitional – liminal – spaces. They are where everything meaningful happens, little frog.”

“Oh Tommy, leave the girl be,” Berry laughs without making a sound. “Me and TS we’re heading back up north. That’s home for us. We had a little time before Summer-Fest so we headed to this festival in San Diego.”

“Nothing in San Diego but soldiers and seniors, baby. Strange town that one,” TS says.

“What did you do there? Did you have a job?” Annie asks.

“Job. Oh we didn’t need a job. We traded stuff,” Berry says. “That’s the way of the world of the future.”

“Traded? What did you have to trade?”

“Everybody’s got something worth trading,” TS says.

“I don’t.”

“Oh yes you do, little frog,” he says, glancing away from Annie’s face to her blouse and back up again, with a grin.

It takes only a moment for Annie to absorb it and even her ears blush, she frowns hard.

Looking at Annie hard he says, “Bus tickets cost money.”

“There are things you’d do for no money too,” Berry says. “But if they’re willing to donate to a good cause, why not?” Berry says, gently brushing Annie’s earlobe. “How ‘bout I trade you my other pair of boots for those fine looking white shoes?”

“What’re you going to do with shoes like those, Berry?” TS asks.

“I will *wear* them,” Berry responds. “And she can walk better in boots.”

“I really couldn’t trade you these, I need the shoes.”

“Are you hungry, little frog?” TS asks. “Want me to catch you some bugs? Some Spanish Flies would be good for little frog girls.”

“I don’t like Mexican food,” Annie says softly and TS laughs so hard he ends up spitting on her.

When he finishes and is wiping the tears from the corner of his eyes Berry tells him, “Go get something for us to snack on.”

He grins and with a heavy sigh he flips around and shuffles forward on the bus. The girls sit for a minute or two before Berry looks directly at Annie, “Look at me, *girl*,” she says. “You are in something. I don’t know what it is but you need help.”

“I am fine.”

“You are about as fine as raspberry wine made in in a Mason jar with a cracked seal,” Berry says, with a sad smile. “Whatever it is that you got going down, you need to get with good people, get with the *beautiful people*. They aren’t much, but they’ll help you. I’ll help you. That’s one thing the Magic House can do for you. No one should be all alone, Annie of the Roads. Nobody.” The girls are quiet and the only sounds on the bus are the wheels and TS rooting around in their gear. Without asking, Berry reaches below Annie’s feet for Annie’s bag of supplies, leans quickly into the aisle to look out for TS, pulls a ten dollar bill from her bra and shoves it into the bag. She pulls the pen from her hair and writes something on the paper. “Just in case,” she whispers. The bus wobbles as it passes a slow car and she leans into Annie’s shoulder before dropping the bag back onto the floor.

“Ahngutferustoeat,” TS mumbles with a smile, arriving with a massive Granny Smith apple wedged into his teeth while flipping his head so his hair falls away from his face.

“Shut up,” Berry says.

It is hotter than it should be at 10:22 pm and Annie is hot in places she'd never thought about before, not like that anyway. The giant clock on the wall of the San Francisco train station says it is 10:22 and she's been sitting there, on a bench, for almost three hours. Annie has been thinking about pantyhose. There's something about sitting in public without them that she'd never thought about before. She sits there, thinking about her skin. She can't stop thinking about her own skin. Every inch of it feels simultaneously alive and numb.

Berry and her *old man*, TS, have been gone for three hours. TS handed Annie the seventy-five cents he had in his pocket and she now has another paper sack with a couple of turkey sandwiches in brown bread, one and a half apples (one with four large TS bites taken out of it) and Raspberry's pen.

“The Magic House, Annie,” she'd said. “You come to the Magic house if you need to. Ask for me or TS. It could be beautiful if you come. The house could be beautiful with you there. I can look after you,” she said. “Call us.”

“She'll be okay,” TS had said.

“I will be fine,” Annie'd reassured her.

“Listen, if you get into a jam, go to the diner I told you about. Ask for Estelle. She gives girls like us jobs if she’s got them or she’ll see to it you get dinner at least. It’ll be okay.”

“I will be okay, Berry. Really. My friend is just a little bit late. We’ll go to the Y and they’ll get everything set up. I’m here now.” Annie ran her fingers over the spine of the worn Kerouac novel in her purse. “I know what to do.”

“We need to take her with us,” Berry said.

TS is coughing, “We need to get outta here, baby. The cops are trolling this place like crazy.”

“Take this,” Berry said, shoving her own paper bag full of sandwiches into Annie’s hands.

“We gotta roll, Berry. She knows where to find us. Annie has a plan and a friend, right, frog girl?”

“I have a plan.”

With that, TS’s hands were firmly on Berry’s slim shoulders and he shoved her out through the double doors. They were gone. Annie was alone and in the world. This was the empty station in San Francisco. The great wide world.

After they’d left Annie made a bee-line straight into the women’s bathroom. The floors were green and Annie’s shoes made tapping noises on them. The doors to the stalls were short and narrow. She went into a stall, grateful for the tank, put her paper bags onto them, hanging her purse from her shoulder, and she peed.

She sat there with her pantyhose around her ankles and thought about her mother as she took them off. Sliding one foot out of the shoe and then the other – being certain to keep her feet from touching the foul floor.

Annie'd planned to throw the stockings away but she sat there, on the commode simply rolling them up carefully in her hands. An old habit from an old world.

She closed her eyes and thought about nothing. Nothing at all was moving.

That's when the crying started. It wasn't Annie though. There was a lone girl a few stalls over who started with a single loud honking sob and from there she just kept wailing. Annie waited and thought about what to do next. Now. The idea of only right now was an idea that was too tempting, too difficult to put down.

The girl kept wailing for quite some time and when she finally finished Annie lifted her feet off of the floor so that the girl wouldn't know there had been a witness.

So, now it is 10:22 and Annie is hot and feeling naked in an empty bus station. She hasn't cried. She hasn't moved around much, in fact her bum is going a bit numb. Not like her nose. The benches are hard and lined up in rows. She did eat one of the sandwiches.

She walks barefoot from the beginning to the end of one bench; then onto another row. The thinking about nothing is working out so far.

John 4:16-18: Learning About Love

9:00 A.M.

The knives are laid out on the table. We only have six of them in the bus. Robert keeps counting them and rearranging them. He sets them up first from the smallest to the largest and then in reverse. Then he takes the ones that have wooden handles and puts them in a group, the ones with the black handles in another group. I am eating crackers for breakfast, and I'm still wearing my pajamas. The curtains on the bus window are open wide, the sun pouring in. I have saltines straight from the plastic wrapper.

The first thing he did this morning was reach under the bed for the towel he keeps the knives wrapped up in. He started keeping them there about a month ago. The wrapper is too loud. I'm supposed to be working the midway today. I'm supposed to be working.

We have three steak knives. They are the ones with the black handles, and they used to be a part of a kitchen set. There is one small paring knife that is a part of that set. It is small and has a short blade. We now have a Scottish black knife too. It has a small silver stalk of wheat glued to the sheath. He bought it last week.

"That one is called a Sgian-dubh," he says. "It is time for today's lesson, girl." He pronounces it like sg-an dub. I know that's not how it is supposed to sound. "That's Gaelic, little girl. You're Irish. You should know that. I'm not Irish, and even I know that. You don't know anything, little girl. You need to learn these things. You need to learn a lot, little girl. You are a very stupid girl. You are, aren't you?" He pauses to wipe the spit from the corner of his mouth. "You are an imbecile. Can't even answer my question. Do you even know what the word imbecile means, little girl? Dull, slow, thick. You are thick."

He can't decide where the new knife should fit in with the collection. The handle is black with a silver band and has a small piece of green glass glued to the base. The sixth knife is generic. Long and not serrated. Very long. It used to be his favorite. Mom uses it for cutting up the chicken.

I'm eating my crackers. Crackers, soda crackers. Salty crackers. Think about the crackers. Eat them slowly.

He mutters, "Isaiah 54:16, Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose." He looks at me as if remembering that I am there. "My daddy was a man of God. 'God is love,' he used to say." I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows his spittle. Looking back at his hands, he slides the new knife in and out of its sheath. "Sex, sex," he whispers to himself. "It's like fucking. Making love." He draws the word out as he pulls the blade slowly from the sheath.

His long legs are bent awkwardly underneath the narrow table. He is wearing a pair of army-green boxer shorts and a worn-out white crew-neck T-shirt. We are alone. I don't have any margarine for my crackers. "John. John. John 4:16 Book of John, 'So that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because he is so' God,'" he mutters for a while, in and out of things I can hear. "'For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected.' *Perfected*," he whispers

He slides the knives from one end of the table to another, arranging them so that the sharp tips point to the wall and then so that they point at me. Then he giggles before rearranging them so that they'll face himself. This takes quite some time. All I can think about is how bad he smells.

“You never give a knife as a gift,” he says, his head is bobbing up and down. “It’s bad luck. Never receive a knife as a gift. Trade anything, even a penny, otherwise the knife is cursed. You will die by the blade. The knife is everything. The knife will get you anything. It will take everything.”

I am almost out of crackers. I need to get dressed.

“Are you going to kill me in my sleep, little girl?” he asks while looking at a blade.

I shake my head no. The crackers are dry without margarine.

“Answer me,” he hisses softly, his gaze settling on my face. “Do you think me weak?”

I have a mouth full of crackers. I can’t answer him.

“Answer me,” he repeats more loudly.

I manage to croak, “No, sir.”

Now he tests them one at a time. He arranges them according to how sharp they are. It takes several passes with the blades before he decides. Some on his fingers. Some on his arm. Thin red lines raise up and pucker in a row on the back of his left arm.

“The worst luck of all,” he goes on, “is when a lover gives you a knife. It means the death of the relationship. It means she will kill you. Especially if it is true love.” He wraps up the knives and staggers down the narrow hall to climb back into bed. “True love,” he mutters. “True love.”

I listen to the clunk that the bundle makes when he tucks it in the box he keeps for them underneath the bed. He groans a little as he rolls from side to side on the bed.

“Go to work, Katie,” he says. “We need money. Get twenty or don’t bother to come home.”

11:00 A.M.

I watched the preacher for a long time before I talked to him. He came in through the front gate, and he even paid for his ticket. We’re in Kansas, and all you have to do to get in for free is wear the collar. He’s a green hustler. Stupid fucker. I watch him watching the people come in through the gate. He’s approached only four families in the last hour. One man gave him two dollars. Then I watched him take the dollars and put them into an envelope he keeps in the front pocket of his rucksack. I learned that word from a hiker in Colorado. I like the way it sounds. *Rucksack*. Preacher isn’t as tall as Robert. He’s lucky that way. I’ll bet he can sit at any table he wants.

He is handing out small red books, and he has that rucksack full of something that he hasn’t touched except to put the money into it. I know it’s heavy only because I watch him set it down before running his fingers through his hair. He picks it up, walks three feet towards a family as if to get their attention. Then he stops and puts it back down when they look away. It’s hot. He’s a sucker. Everyone knows that you don’t go for a whole family. You wait for the woman and kids to be alone. That’s when you get them. The woman carries the money because the man will get drunk. She carries the money so they won’t spend it all. Green hustler.

In five years, they’d said, in five years he’d have a parish of his own. He laughs, a low, hollow laugh, and looks up at the rising noon sun and scratches at the itchy spot under his

collar. Stupid Fluff-n-Fold. Half a day's beard grown in thick and hot. Thirty-eight years old, no wife, no house, and no parish, the life on the road didn't even allow for a dog.

Checking his watch gives him the means to scan the crowd for potentials. Families are his best targets, and the way into one of those is through the woman. Usually. Catching a man watching his woman sometimes indicates a good candidate. Dedicated family men with solid incomes often kept their wives home caring for children. A man like that would buy a Bible. *Traditional values*. Calculating in his head, a man like that would make a donation. *Family values*, he thinks. This was not what his poppa had meant when he took him to church as a boy.

His home in the hills of West Virginia is a long way from the Kansas state fairgrounds in the summer of 1977, and four years in Pineville, Louisiana, at the Baptist College had left him ill-prepared for the competitive nature of the churches in the Midwest. A job. Instead of a calling to preach, this church, the parish he'd been assigned to, had asked him to do a job. The money he collects today will be his supper. Survival. He almost has enough for the bus fare home to the family. Julie, his sister, is getting married in two weeks. They're having a tiny wedding and no hall for the reception. Money. He sighs.

He rubs his eyes as if to ward off the emotions that always show there. He can't hide how he feels. He thinks of his family and how they always laugh at him for being too open.

"I will not lose faith in people," he whispers. "I will not lose faith in God."

Sliding his hand into his pocket, he fiddles with the stack of small New Testament books. Samples. Samples of faith and love proffered up like Gouda at the cheese barn. He

groans. The raised letters are small comfort in this summer heat over a growling stomach. He's drinking water. A lot of water is a good thing, or so he's learned. So far today, almost no one has talked to him at all. He thinks about the letter in his pocket from his mother. He will go home in a week.

"Home in a week," he whispers to himself. "A week, only a week," will be his mantra for the day. "Please, won't someone talk to me," he whispers, swallowing hard. *I am lonely. Home in a week.*

I sneak up on him from behind. He's sweating in the summer sun, but he doesn't stink. "What are you selling, mister?" I like watching him jump. Preachers are my favorite marks.

He turns to me with a strange smile. "I'm not selling anything."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not selling, I'm giving away these books."

"Everyone is selling something."

"I'm not. This is a free book. Well, part of a book. It's a sample, the miniature King James Version. Just the four gospels."

"Free," I suck on my front teeth with my tongue. "You're giving away a whole book?" I saw a girl in Missouri who had buck-teeth that went straight out to the front. I suck on my teeth anyway, but it's an added bonus that I'll have straight teeth. Also gets rid of the soda cracker residue that collects behind my two front teeth.

"Here you go," he says, holding out a copy. "Read the first page."

"I can't read it."

“You look like a smart girl. I’ll bet you can read it.

“I can’t.”

“What grade are you in?”

“Third,” I lie.

“A third grader can read this book.”

“I can’t.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“I’m an imbecile. I can’t read it.”

His face registers my new word. I know better than to react. The envelope is in the front pocket of the rucksack.

“Where are your parents?” he asks. I’m wearing new jeans and my H.R. Puff-n-Stuff T-shirt. *Come and play with me jimmy, come and play and I will take you across the sea...* I look like a townie.

“What do you want in exchange for the book?”

“Nothing. I’ll just give it to you.” He offers it.

I doubt that. Everyone wants something. I tilt my head and mouth the words, “Bullshit.”

“What was that?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They’re just over there.” I gesture towards the family craft 4-H shack, “They’ll be right back.”

“What is the book about?” Keep him talking.

“It is about God. Surely you know about God? In this book it says: ‘Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.’ That’s from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 40: 18-29.”

“Are you telling me that this book has forty chapters in it?” I ask. Forty chapters would be a month’s reading.

“Not this book, but the big book I am selling does. Didn’t you say your parents were just over that way or something?”

“This God of yours sounds interesting.”

“God is amazing,” he says. He makes an expression that is half frown, half smile. “No one is hungry in the house of the lord. ‘So we have come to know and to believe the love that god has for us.’ The book of John,” he says. “It’s my favorite scripture.”

“Everyone is hungry.”

“When you have faith, then you are never really hungry. God is Love.”

It’s time to get it going, “Bullshit,” I say. He’s one of *those* townies. That’ll get him.

“You shouldn’t talk like that.”

“You’re telling me fairytales and bullshit.” I watch him sweat more. His eyes are getting wider. “Bullshit and lies. You are a liar. A stupid-head liar.”

“I am not. God is everywhere.”

“I doubt it.” He’s really getting riled now. I smile. He sees me smiling.

“You should never talk about God that way. Where are your parents?” he asks again, scanning the crowd. He begins to pace, three steps, four. Rucksack on the ground.

“They are everywhere, just like your God.”

“That’s blasphemy. Your parents aren’t God.”

“Maybe they are? Maybe I am God?” I’m really enjoying watching him now. He continues to pace. “What if God is just a kid like me and you don’t know it?”

“Jehovah, God hear my prayer,” he says, looking up at the sky.

“Who is this Jehovah? Now I’m just confused. Jehovah is your imaginary friend. Isn’t God just God?” I watch him squint and rub his eyes. “I have an imaginary friend too. His name is Jamie. Should I talk to Jamie about you?” He looks at me in shock and then away into the crowd. That’s when I move. In a blink his envelope full of cash is tucked in the back of my jeans, another blink and my T-shirt is tucked down over it while I work the contents with one hand.

He goes on. “There is a unity which is called Jehovah the first, our God, Jehovah; behold! They are all one, and therefore called one.”

“Jehovah?” I make a googily face at him, and he glowers. Sweat is pouring down his nose, and he bellows at me.

“Nobody is hungry in the house of God. It says in this book, God’s book, little girl.” I cough softly to cover the sound of the paper folding as he goes on, ““And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments *is*, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord.”” His hands are moving in the air. “This house lives in your heart. God is love!”

“I see my parents.” I look sheepishly at him and point in the opposite direction. He follows my finger and the envelope is back in its place, the cash in my underpants.

I’ve already started to dash away when he turns to face me. “Where are your parents?”

It was a lot of money. I can get food and hide out somewhere and still have what I need too. Stupid sucker won’t even know what hit him.

3:00 PM

I am sitting alone in the dark. I like it.

There is a bright light as the door opens and swings closed. It takes a minute for me to adjust, but I thought to close my eyes when I heard them coming down the hallway so that it wouldn’t be such an adjustment for me when they came in. There is a light shadow floating around in my eyeball when I reopen my eyes in the dark. The door swings closed quietly and they are here.

The mirror bends what it sees inside of the carnival’s fun house. There are floors that move back and forth in one room and bridges that shake you so hard your teeth rattle. Bright colors add to the confusion in tilting rooms where the furniture is bolted to the ceiling. There are stuffed dogs that meow and neon-colored birds that slide tail first from one side of the room to the other on fishing line. In the dark room, the floor is made up of a large air bladder, with black rubber, and you walk across the space with glow-in-the-dark fish mounted on the wall. The only way across the space is to lean against the padded walls. They haven’t always padded the walls, but some rich fucker in California

sued the rig owner when their kid cracked their head open. Normally that isn't any big deal, but it made the national papers, and so folks got paranoid about it. Robert says they put crazy people and bad children into padded rooms.

I don't get lost in here. I am invisible but not lost. I can hear the rain thrumming on the aluminum roof of the tractor-trailer that is the fun house. The rain and the heat makes me sweat but I don't mind it. Kansas is a nice place despite the Bible-thumpers. I feel bad about preacher. If I see him again, I might let him give me one of his books. It would make him happy.

"I'll bet this room would be a great place to do it in," the girl's voice whispers.

The boy with blonde hair mutters, "I can't see anything in here."

"Just let your eyes get used to the light," she says. "Besides, I think I can find what I'm looking for in the dark." She giggles. "Ha... ha... ha..." Like she's beating a snare drum slowly. She has her wedge heels in her hands, and I see her bare feet trying to adjust to the slick rubber floor as the door closes behind them. Her toes are painted red, and her feet are wide. Her shoes are the kind with the four-inch heels made of heavy black wood. Long bare legs lead up to a too-short, white flowered mini-dress that is too small for her. The dress is easy to see in the light as the door slides closed, leaving us all in the dark.

She reaches for him but misses.

His voice is lower than before. "Maybe I am not in the mood."

"I'll bet I can put you in the mood," she says. "This is what love is, Johnny. 'this is love perfected with us'."

In the previous room there is a wall of bright fluorescent lights mounted in the wall. My room is pitch black when you first come in, and it stays that way – unless you're in here as long as I am, when you get a sense of the gray light coming through the tiny cracks.

“Why do you always have to do that?” he asks.

“Do what?”

Fun houses have themes sometimes. I've seen circus-themed rigs, jungles full of stuffed animals, with the sounds of monkeys running on the stereos mounted in the walls. The path you take through the jungle is like being on some safari. At the Oklahoma State Fair last month there was a whole Jesus outfit kind of rig that had the person heading towards salvation or some shit. God and Jehovah. I smile. Other fun houses are just random junk people threw into a weird space to scare the townies.

I have been in here for over an hour, and no one else has been through but these two.

This rig, I don't know the name of the gal who runs it, this one is just bright and full of music. It's not even music that I know, just midway music that never has a name. I like music with words. Who wants to listen to music that doesn't have a story? I'll bet that little Bible had good stories. I should have taken one. The big one was too much for me to hide. It would have slowed me down.

There is this one dark room at the center of the maze, and it's usually quiet in here. And warm. I like to be warm. It is small, but not too narrow, and rather long. People come in through one door and wobble across the space in search of the exit doorway, which isn't marked. From my position in the corner by the entrance, I can feel the gears

moving the sliding walkways that run along the front of the fun house. I have found a corner just inside of the dark room and am sitting cross-legged in the dark. I like the quiet. I'm not trying to hide, but it works out that way. I can feel her stumble forward in the dim light, trying to find him.

I make sure that the paper wrapper on my candy bar makes a noise as I tear it open.

"What was that?" he says.

"I didn't hear anything," she whispers.

He is reaching for the opposite wall with a lurch, and he lands with a thud.

"Damn."

I can barely see him, and only the flash of skin at his collar. Smart people stop for a minute at the doorway to adjust to the dark or look around before the door closes behind them. Most people see me. I've learned to be invisible. It's a habit.

"Do me," she whispers. I can feel them stumble around because the floor wobbles.

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"Pretty much." I can hear her groping in the dark for him along with a thud as she finds what she's looking for. The floor bounces as they move.

"Sex, sex, sex."

"I like having sex. There are worse things."

"Your daddy would be angry if he knew you were in here. Worse if he knew it was with me."

"Why are you bringing up my daddy?" I can hear her pouting.

“Your daddy can’t stand me. I don’t think you love me at all. I think you love making him mad.”

“Come on, baby,” she says. I feel the floor bounce as she pushes him to the floor.

“I’m just making a point,” he says. “Would you be in here with me if your daddy weren’t so protective of you? He doesn’t like me, and that’s why you want me.” I listen to the zipper. I hold my breath. I can’t get caught. That’d be worse.

“I’ll be quick,” she says.

“Oh God, Sally. Why do you do this to me?”

“Because I want to. Because I have to. Because God gave us bodies with needs. God made us for love,” she says.

“Somebody might come in. Somebody might see us.”

“That’s what makes it extra fun,” she giggles.

And then there is only the dark. I listen to them breathe heavily for a while over the sound of the music. The slick sounds of bodies moving against each other and a little heavy breathing. He gasps and it is done. Quick and quiet. She was right about that part.

There are footsteps coming, and I feel the floor bounce as they get up, both of them giggling, and they try to find the door. The entry door opens with a flash of light, and I am caught in the light, and for a minute we all stare at each other before they dash awkwardly for the exit door. I’ll stay in the room and finish my candy. I will stay here for a while.

Joyland: Geography Lesson

I shoveled shit at the Virginia State Fair last week. I'm small, even for my age, but I work hard. Real horses stink to high heaven, and while you may think road apples aren't too gross and slimy on the grody factor, as poop goes, it still stinks. The wooden ponies on the carousel do not stink, but they never hire carny brats to work on those. We left Virginia this morning and my clothes still reek. Robert says I stink. Mom says so too. Robert drove first shift, Mom drove second while Robert finished off the whiskey. He's muttering to himself now. Mom is smoking a lot. The smell of her More menthol cigarettes are floating to the back of the bus were we are.

I-40 Westbound

"Go suck on an egg, Suzie," I mutter.

It takes two days to get from Virginia to Lubbock, Texas, if you drive straight through. It takes four if you only drive at night and park on dirt roads off the interstate during the day. We're making the trip in two. We have a job there with Jimmy's Aunt something-or-other. That's what mom said.

"Fuck you," Suzie whispers back.

"Well," I twist around on my bunk bed and lean over the edge of the bunk bed to glare at her, "your brain is an egg." I hate my sister. People hear that and they chuckle like its cute or something, but I really do. She's a world-class dorkbutt. I'd spit on her, but last time I did that to her things got really bad. We don't whomp each other very often, but when we do... Robert even stopped the bus.

"Your brain is an egg? What kind of insult is that?" she asks.

“Yeah . . . well, fuck you.”

“Besides, I like eggs,” she says.

“I’m not playing. You’re super stupid.”

“Neither am I.”

“Your nose is freakishly huge and pointy up and— and—and your brain is all slimy, like an egg, empty and gross and it smells bad.”

“I’m not in the mood to fight with you, Katie.”

“You are so.”

“Cheese. Eggs with cheese, Katie.”

“You’re an egg. You make people need to fart.” I shake my head and scrunch up my face. “A lot.”

I watch her as she rolls over to face the wall. “I’m tired. You’re a genius. I’m an egg,” she says.

Big stinky farts.

We left before first light this morning and it’s dark outside now. The Virginia Fair runs late in the season. Last two weeks of September. Virginia always has a huge livestock shed and a ton of horses and a giant trampoline. I never go up on the trampoline.

I tried the trampoline once, the first fair we ever worked on. There wasn’t a net or anything, but the springs were tight and I went up high enough to see the tops of the tents and I remember laughing and giggling. That was before I fell off. It was just some rinky-dink parking lot carnival in Pueblo, Colorado. Mom got me a new doll that came with her

own pink stroller. I played with it for a month. Traded it for something a long time ago. I can't remember what I traded it for. I am not scared of heights. I get the top bunk.

Virginia never has a carousel. We have worked it two years in a row now, this fair. Carousels have brightly colored ponies and dragons and little frogs that are wearing blue suits mounted on sticks. The old ones are made of wood, but new ones are made of plastic. The solid foundations and sheer size makes it hard to move them. I've seen some outfits that haul small ones, but generally it is a permanent thing. Either the fairgrounds build one and it's just there or there isn't one at all. I love to ride on the dragons or to sit in the bottom of the chariot behind the white horse. There's always a white horse pulling a buggy or a chariot or something. It depends on how much I've had to eat.

The water in the sink is sloshing and eating food is not what is on my mind. The drain has been stopped up for a week now. We drain it out and then it fills up again because there's a leak or something. It reeks of beer. The sun went down hours ago and we're rolling down the road in our giant yellow school bus. We live in it. Robert let us name it the Snoopy Two and paint that on the side underneath the driver's window. The insides have been converted into a camp space with two bunk beds, a dining table, a sink, and a double bed in the back end. We had another bus, the Snoopy One, but that one wrecked last year in Nebraska. This bus is better anyway. The last one didn't have a john. This one has an actual john. Well, it's a camp john boosted from some ding-dong who was camping at a park in Missouri. Then we rigged it with duct tape, but it's a john. There's a curtain made out of a beach towel pinned to the plywood walls in front of the closet, and that's better than the aluminum bucket. We only have two beach towels for the whole family to share and one is pinned to the door. The towels are blue and pink.

I could hork on her instead of spit on her. I'm carsick. I am cranky when I'm carsick.

"Go to sleep," she says. "That'll help."

"Help with what?"

"Go to sleep."

"It's too quiet."

"Shut up, Katie."

"I am so sick of you, Suz. I think we should leave you behind and I'll just play with Jamie."

"Play with your imaginary friend. Play with anyone but me," she says.

"Fuck you," I mutter. "Jamie is way more fun you are, Suz. He never complains, or farts, or is anything but nice to me."

"Girls," Mom says. That's all we need to hear.

A thump on the bottom of my bunk tells me everything else.

We did that once—horked on purpose I mean. We were at a little parking lot outfit in Shreveport, Louisiana, and we ate apples. Better not to think about apples right now. I swallow hard. We had breakfast cereal for lunch today. I didn't want dinner. Dairy is bad in reverse. Chewed up crab apples go down alright if you're determined enough, but the body doesn't keep them down. Stupid townie kids never knew what hit them. Just looked straight up at the roof of the craft shack where we'd been lurking, choking down apples and cheese, swallowed with Grape Nehi. It made quite a splash. Almost as rank as Jimmy, but not quite.

Streets sound different on the interstate, depending on the state, when the wheels roll over them. Wheels move like a drum with a thrum, and if you listen to them long enough, you can tell if one is low or one is high and if the belt in the motor needs tightening again. The nights are colder now. It's almost October and we're finally heading south for the winter. Mom says just one more job in Lubbock and then winter and school and a house.

The wheels on the bus do not feel good.

It's quiet except for the sound of the road and my stomach is now officially empty. I hope there's a Laundromat in Lubbock. I didn't make it to the john. I had to borrow Suzie's blanket. The bus radio is broken. No lights. But I finally got to sleep.

Mom only screams when she wants us to run. And almost never when it is happening. I don't scream. I learned that fast. Don't freak out. Do that later. In the movies kids and women cry when bad things happen. I don't see the point of that. Deal with it. Deal with it and you'll live through it. Be a baby about it and you'll die. I don't cry, most of the time anyway.

I do run, but I never scream when I run.

In this part of the world they use broken concrete to build up a railroad berm. A berm raises the train tracks above the cow pastures. The fields of green stretch as far as the eye can see, and these large walls of stone and dirt raise the trains to a level above the fields where crops grow. Farmers grow corn in this part of the Texas. In Kansas it's

wheat. In Iowa its corn, but the kind you eat or the other kind that is used to grow more corn. In Texas they grow cotton and hay and wheat. But they mostly grow corn for grain. It's the cows. They have to feed the cows. I hate cows. Mom parked to get some sleep.

It's like a scene from a Wile E. Coyote cartoon. Not the beginning but the end. The bus has stopped and the yell comes. I go at a full run into the dark down the dirt road in my brand new flowered underwear after hearing her screaming and yelling "run, run, run!" and I scramble out of the bus. Their fight went outside. We never look when the order comes. Just run. Run as far as you can get. We're first and moving as fast as we can. Mom is on our heels. A few minutes later the engine is squealing as the motor grinds against the brake before he lets it go. Me and Suzie, we just run. The machine grinds and lurches its way down the little stretch of worn dirt road that leads to where the tracks are and we scramble our way up the steep railroad berm. The rocks are hard—the hill is practically straight up. Dash across the tracks in the pitch black to run bare chest first into the barbed wire and to then fly back flat on my back in the gravel. I clock my head on the track but have to keep running anyway. Wile-E-Coyote would be impressed.

Tennessee

The sun is rising and we're fueling up outside of Memphis. They slept it off.

We're headed to Corpus Christi for the winter after our job in this place called Joyland in Lubbock. Joyland is a real place in Texas. It's an amusement park. We've got to work for a month, helping the people there wind down for their winter season. I don't even know where Corpus Christi is except that mom says it's near the ocean. Our first

winter on the road was in Galveston. Galveston wasn't good, but the ocean was great. I'm excited. Mom says that the ocean just smells like the ocean, but it doesn't. In Galveston the ocean stinks worse than any place else, but Galveston is on an island. Islands are good. In Jersey it smells like salt. In Florida it smells like ocean. I won't swim in open water. We saw this dead kid once, after it was drowned. Bloated and crazy stinky.

"Eat your cereal, Kit-Kat," Mom says. She's smoking another cigarette and I want one. She's drinking her instant Folgers coffee. I finished mine already. He's pumped the gas and is now buying something in the grocery store. It's time for breakfast. Suzie is not a morning person. She's sleeping under the other beach towel.

I'm looking out the window. "I don't like this kind of cereal. I like cornflakes better."

"Don't you want to be a '*Cheerios Kid*'?" Mom sits cross-legged on the narrow bench of the little dinette. Cut off blue jeans and no socks, but a long-sleeved turtleneck. She's pulling at the sleeves again. Down over her arms and wrists. It's the wrists and the neck that get it the worst. He avoids the face. Can't work if the face is messed up. Sam and Grace tried to get in the way once. They don't do it anymore. They had to buy two new tires for the Honda after Robert took a blade to the wheels. Nailed on on the food truck too. Only one though.

I won't look mom in the eye.

"That's a dumb commercial, Mom." I'm scraping some dried up crust of something from yesterday off of my spoon.

"No, it isn't. The '*Cheerios Kid*' is practically a superhero, Kit-Kat."

“I don’t want to be a superhero. I just want to be Katie.” I will not look at her. Because I puked on my clothes last night, I’m only wearing one of her turtlenecks and my blue flowered underwear. The shirt goes past my shins.

“Help Kid!” she calls softly. I take a swallow of the cereal, but the crunch is gone. Only slurpy, silent cereal. The crunch means I can’t hear her, but without a crunch I can hear her.

“Help Kid,” she calls louder.

I’m chewing loudly and working the mealy oats around in my mouth with my tongue.

“Are you ‘powered up’ yet?”

“You’re going to wake Suzie up.” I drool milk on the S sound out of one corner. I will not swallow the mouth full of cereal.

Mom reaches across the table to try and tweak my nose with her two fingers, and I duck and swallow my food. Damn.

She says, “Suzie sleeps through almost anything.”

“Not everything.”

“Made you swallow your cereal.”

“It’s a stupid commercial.”

“Food is good for you, Katie.” I can hear her smile as she taps the lighter on the table. “*The Cheerios Kid and Sue*,” she says as she stretches her legs out so that they dangle over the edge of the bench. Mom is only 5’ 4”, which isn’t very tall unless you’re only 4’ 8” and you talk too much. She slides another cigarette from the case and directly onto her lips before lighting it with a flash. I take a deep breath when she exhales.

On the road again. It does not smell like ocean in here. The cereal was a bad idea. I am out of clothes and blankets and Suzie has the towel. I'm still on top.

Lubbock

I slept most of the rest of the way here, but we're here. I woke up in Little Rock and Dallas, but there wasn't any more cereal for me. Not today. Well, almost here. We're going to be a half day late, but we stopped outside of town for groceries and laundry and to clean out the rig. Crackers. I'm doing alright with them, so I get to eat all the saltine crackers I can stand. I get a whole box all to myself. No butter though. It's Friday and there's nobody but us in the Laundromat but there are three machines turned on. One is ours. I can't believe that people just leave their laundry in the machine and go out to breakfast. We ruined someone's whole washing machine full of towels just cleaning out the bus. On the plus side, I have a new Super Friends T-shirt and Suzie got the pants. We only borrowed one outfit. We are not thieves. I don't love the Super Friends, but it's bright. It's sunny outside where the bus is parked while mom is cleaning. It's the kind of over-bright blue sky and fluffy clouds that seem too big to be real.

"You're such a stupid-head, Suz."

"I'm going to run away, Katie."

"No you're not."

"I'm going to leave all of this and never come back."

"You're not going anywhere because I won't let you."

"Fuck you."

Joyland

I am crouched sideways on the seat of one of the chariots on the carousel and am watching the mirrored center column as we swirl past it. The lights are flickering and the daylight is gone. The tinny sound of the carousel music is incredibly loud and I am alone inside of it. I like it. It is the end of the day and the owners don't mind it if I take the last ride. There have only been a few people through all day and I have parked myself on the opposite side of the last group to ride today. I only hork in the bus.

When the ride is done, I watch as the old lady counts the money, laying out the bills on the countertop—all of them face up and in the right direction. Her fingers are short and stout like her body—nothing like my mother who seems to be taller and is bony. Wrinkles are all in the right places. She has grey hair but her face is young, like she's laughed her whole life. I don't think Mom ever looked like that. She has worn the same orange polyester suit to work every day that we have been here. Three days ago she wore a silver pin on the lapel and carried around single-serve packets of tissues all day. Sometimes it is with a cream colored blouse. Sometimes it is with a white blouse. We have only been here six days, but so far this is all she has worn. She smells like lemons.

The Lemon Lady and her husband own this place, but they don't have kids. Jimmy isn't actually related to them and I'm glad. She smells good. I like watching her. I've been following her for two days straight now. She won't give me anything to do and Mom is off doing inventory in the prize shack. Robert is working the roller coaster. I won't go on the roller coaster because it's too old.

“I’m so glad y’all came into town when you did to work for us.” She cuts up celery and puts it into the tuna salad she makes the sandwiches with. I don’t mind it because at least she makes sandwiches for me. I’m eating one right now and listening to myself chew it. It’s the most I’ve done all day. Lemon Lady won’t let Mom put us to work, so we just wander around. I haven’t seen Suzie since we went to bed last night.

She talks loudly. “I’ll bet you’re glad your momma is a teacher so you get to keep learnin’ while you’re out there in the summer.” She takes a sip of her lemonade and I watch as the bright orange lipstick gathers in the creases around her mouth as it puckers to take the straw in. “Your momma tells me you like reading and geography the best, but when I was in school I liked math, which is probably why daddy put me to work doing the books for our family business.” She keeps counting using a small yellow pencil to make notes on an index card once in a while. “Did you know there’s a Joyland park up in Wichita, Kansas? Though my people didn’t open up that one.” A straw is not like a cigarette. “So this traveling you do, that’s your family business, isn’t it? I’ll bet its so much fun to go all over the country and see people and the places that you read about in your books, places most people only dream about seeing and all the rides and animals in the livestock shed. I don’t know why you like the carousel so much. If it were me, I’d spend all day with the living animals, not the fake ones. This is our family business, like I said, so we didn’t get to have animals like chickens or rabbits or goats or anything. I always thought I’d marry a farmer, being from here, but instead I married old Joe after the war, and well, he wasn’t no farmer having come from up in New England and all. ”

She’s fascinating. That’s one of my new words. It’s the name of a kind of perfume. I saw it in a Woolworths. I asked Suzie what it means and she told me it means

to attract and hold power; Charming and enchanting. Then I had to ask her what enchanting meant and then she told me to shut up.

Anyway, I don't think the Lemon Lady ever breathes. She just talks and sucks down lemonade. All day she drinks lemonade. I've never seen her take a break to pee.

This amusement park uses tokens. You buy them when you come through the front gate. On most midways we use paper tickets or a hand stamp, but here they use tokens. They are made out of stamped tin instead of paper.

Suzie comes up quietly and sits next to me, picking up half my sandwich to eat it. I only notice because the wax paper crinkles when she gets it. She leans in to whisper in my ear. "She talks more than you do."

"I never minded that Joe was a Yankee though it was a problem for my daddy." The Lemon Lady makes a note on the card without missing a beat. "His people worked in a factory so being here he just wanted to spend a lot of time outside. After the war and all. The big one. Not this thing we had in 'Nam. My Joe was in the big one. Served in Europe. Lubbock was a much more quiet place back then. The world was a more quiet place back then. We wouldn't have let..."

I whisper back, "I know. What are you doing?"

I have only seen Joe once. He is tall and quiet and wears overalls all day. He drives them to work every day because Lemon Lady doesn't drive. All day long she walks the park telling people what to do and talking. I know she even talks when no one is around. I caught her talking to a giant plastic bear three days ago. I've followed her ever since. I think she likes it. She's lonely.

"Nothing," Suzie says.

“When I was a little girl, now that was a long time ago wasn’t it. When I was little we built the roller coaster. The carousel came in 1900 - can you believe it’s that old? We had people come out from back east to put the whole thing together.”

“I dare you to take it.”

“Take what?” Suzie swallows hard.

I’m the thief in the family. I’m small and can fit into the weirdest places. I tug on my shirt. “The pencil.”

“I’m not going to take it.”

“You can’t take it. You’d get caught.”

“She’s right there, Katie. Besides, I don’t need a pencil.”

“I got something and she hasn’t even noticed I took it.”

“What?”

I pull the little silver pin out of my pocket. “I’m going to give it back, Suz. I just wondered if she’d notice.”

“Why would you steal from a nice lady like her?”

“I took it to see if I could. I’ll give it back. Jeez.”

“You shouldn’t have stolen it from her.”

“Have you girls ever visited the Alamo?” she pauses to put a rubber band on a roll of bills. “You’d like the Alamo if you like history. Texas is a very important part of American history. There was this general, his name was President General Antonio Lopez De Santa Anna and he corned a bunch of Texans in this fort, the Alamo in San Antonio. This general he was terribly cruel and there was this battle that went on for thirteen days but these Texans, they survived those thirteen days. People argue over what

happened but those Texans, they are heroes here. They all died but they fought valiantly. We're all going to die anyway, right. You don't think about dying because you're kids, but I do. I'm not a kid anymore. Speaking of, you'll have to remind me, Katie, to order more rubber bands."

Suzie looks up like she ate a bit of onion.

I know Lemon Lady better though. She doesn't hear anything we've said. "You're chicken," I say.

"I am not chicken. I'm an egg, remember."

I pull on Suzie's pony-tail, "An egg is a chicken fetus. A chicken fetus is gross. You're gross."

"No it isn't."

"Yeah it is."

"An egg is an egg. To be a chicken you need a boy chicken and then an egg from a girl chicken. It takes two," she says.

I stick the pin in my pocket. "I don't want to have a boy chicken, ever."

Nebraska: A Lesson About Animals

Metal screams. I never knew metal it could do that before, but apparently it does. It screams when it tears. The last thing I remember is waking up to the sound of the kitchen match being struck on the dash of the bus and the flash of light as Robert lit up his joint. Just a snap and a flash of light in the very dark bus, and then everything was breaking apart, stoves and refrigerators flying through the air, things separating, stuff lost forever. And then there was the screaming. A lot of screaming. Until it stopped. It started again when the lights came on.

The early morning is cool. Just the right kind of cool, and the bedroom window is open. The mattress is big and squishy in just the right ways, and everything is white. I mean *everything*, well, everything I can see, is white. The pillows, the fluffy blanket that is full of feathers. I wiggle my toes in the clean sheets and make a cotton feather angel. That's like a snow angel, but I do it here instead. Starting with stretching my legs out and then my toes, testing. Then my arms, fingers finding my belly button, I'm an outie, and then back out to my sides in a wide arc. The sunshine is so bright from the big picture window that the white room feels yellow. Birds are tweeting, and a breeze is coming in through the open half window. It smells like nothing.

I take slow, deep breaths and float.

A spider begins to work across the ceiling in my field of vision. Daddy-long-legs. Grammy always says that those are lucky. They eat all the bad bugs and are super-duper poisonous, but their fangs can't break through human skin.

Nothing itches. I mean *nothing* is itchy. No bugs in the covers, and my face is clean. I can tell. I wiggle my lips, make a kissy-face at the ceiling and blink.

Sigh.

Maybe later.

The Red Woman is wonderful. I mean absolutely wonderful. I have no idea why.

I watched her as she reached into a basket for the individual serving packets of Sanka, tore two open, poured them into one white coffee cup, and then added water from the kettle. Two packets. She has little white saucers and cups with the words Lindbergh Motel stamped in blue on the side. It's a neat kettle. It plugs right into a wall, and then it cooks up the water super-hot. I want one. We couldn't use it. If we had electricity and a real house we could use it. But we don't have one, so, well. And we use Styrofoam cups.

Her short black skirt is too short, and it rides up the back of her thighs because she has such a big butt, but I don't mind it. She's pudgy, maybe even fat, but I don't mind it. The material is sparkly, like it has tinsel sewn into the material, and that's nice.

She smiles at me, and when she does the left corner of her mouth tilts up. She's kind of young, but I can already see a crease forming there.

Her cherry red blouse is too small, and it rides up at the waist, and the little black buttons are about to pop in the front, but she has cereal for me, so I don't care. Mom never wears red. I never knew that cereal could come in its own tiny single serve box. Ours mostly comes in big plastic bags or big boxes. She set me up with a bowl and a plastic spoon and a little brown plastic cup full of apple juice. She is fussing with the newspaper. We are alone.

She pulls one of the dining chairs out from its spot at the little square table and props up her feet, wiggling her little red toenails. The cup clinks as it goes onto the saucer. It clinks when she picks it up.

“Aren't you hungry?” she asks, gesturing at my full bowl of cereal.

Shrug.

Her cup clinks when she puts it down again.

“Do you want a different kind of cereal? You picked that one out of the basket. If you're not wahoo about it, you can get a different kind.” *They have a basket full of boxes of cereal. A BASKET full of the stuff.*

I shake my head, *no*.

“Your cereal will get soggy if you don't eat it soon,” she says.

I grin at her and show her my missing canine tooth, poking my pink tongue through the gap. “I slurp my cereal.”

“I don't mind it.”

“It will be noisy. I am not supposed to be noisy.”

“Eat your cereal. You must be hungry.”

We sit like this for a long time after I start to eat, and I move the loops around in my mouth while trying not to slurp too loud. One car goes by in the street out front and below. I can't see the car, but I can tell the make by sound. A Ford sedan of some kind. Their wheel-base is wider and makes a special kind of sound on the street. I prefer my cereal without milk. And I want coffee.

I watch her. I watch the basket full of cereal. I look at the packets full of Sanka. I think she's looking for something important in the newspaper. I look at the tree outside of the wide window.

The Red Woman's second floor apartment has a big picture window that looks out into the wide sunlit street, but I haven't heard but the one car go by since I woke up. The room smells like toast, but I don't have any.

“Mouse,” I whisper, pointing at a bit of gray along with a pink tail wiggling underneath a small chair, near the window. She doesn't see. If they had a cat then they wouldn't have mice. They need a cat named Jamie. Jamie won't stink or anything. Cats are always clean and never stinky.

I want to say she's pretty, but she really isn't. Her hair isn't red, just her clothes are. The Red Woman has a short flat nose and very pale skin, marked only by freckles across her nose and cheeks. They are flat and her neck is short. Not the way that Mom's neck is short. Everything on Mom is short, but it's balanced right. The Red Woman's body is tall and thin, but it's like her head is too close to her shoulders. And her face is round, her hair is a dull brown. I am too stretched out. I am short, but my legs are the longest half of me, and I often fall over my own feet. I wonder if that's what happened and that's why I am here. I do know one thing. The floor is vibrating and I want to know why.

“So, they tell me y'all were headed south?”

Silence.

“Don't you want to know where you are?”

“Nope,” I say with a little dribble going down my chin. Stupid tooth. A canine, Mom said.

“Do you want to know where your mom...?”

I look into my bowl and use my tongue to poke my cheek.

“We could call over to the hospital if you like? We have a payphone downstairs. Find out how they’re doing?”

The fruit loop is turning to liquid in my mouth, but I won’t swallow it. I just poke around my mouth with my tongue and look at the bowl.

She shrugs, and the newspaper makes the newspaper noise as she bends and folds and pulls and then turns the whole page. I can’t imagine being able to hold up a whole newspaper, even with my arms stretched wide. There’s a full-page ad on the back about a sale at the Lincoln A&P on Wonder Bread and cheese and bologna. Wonder bread is miraculous. Wonder Bread makes the best sugar sandwiches ever, but that’s another story. We never get Wonder Bread anyway. We get the stuff with the plain label that just says *White Bread*.

“No rain today, either,” she says.

Humph.

“We need rain, don’t you think? It’s been a long dry spell.”

“What?”

“Rain. We need rain,” she repeats. “Everything is dry. One spark and there’d be a prairie fire. Have you ever seen one of those?”

I listen to the birds outside. It’s spring, we were heading south. That’s it. South and I came out without a scratch. I didn’t cry. I don’t know how it happened and I am not

going to think about that. Nope. Her little leg covered in red. Not cherry red. Darker and stinking like copper. Where is she? Nope. Not. Nope. Mom screaming until she stopped screaming, and then nothing. And then screaming more. Nope. The Red Woman does not have a radio.

I blink and use my spoon to sift through the bowl of loops, in search of the last blue one in the quiet.

Again with the noise of the newspaper. I almost like it.

“You are in Lincoln. Right next door to the Lindbergh Motel. This is my family’s business. Our name isn’t Lindbergh, it’s Becker. Did you know that Charles Lindbergh slept right here, in this very building? Some people say it isn’t lucky, to name a place after him, but it is why I like working here. Charles Lindbergh went places. Did you know he was the first man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean? I mean, he was an explorer! He was a bad guy too, of course,” she says with a deep frown, “and his baby died and all that nonsense but,” she sniffs loudly, “he really went places.” The way she smiled when she said that nearly made me choke on the blue fruit loop.

“Lincoln where?” I ask.

“What do you mean where?” I watch as one corner of the paper flops as she fiddles with a stray lock of hair that hangs over her ear. It has escaped from the handkerchief she’s tied her hair back in. It is red and matches her blouse.

“I mean Lincoln, where?” I ask.

“Nebraska. Lincoln, Nebraska. How do you not know you are in Nebraska?”

“How do you spell Nebraska?”

“N- E- B-R—” she starts.

The milk runs out the corner of my mouth when I interrupt her. “Not like that. Is there a song?” I noisily slurp up the last of the pink milk and duck down lower in my chair.

“What?”

“There is a song for every state.” I can feel the milk dripping slowly down my chin to fall onto my plain black T-shirt. It's not an exciting T-shirt. I prefer clothes that are more fun, but this is what I was wearing when I went to sleep. My new orange shorts that are too big and this shirt. I have socks. “I learned the song for every state, like,” and I sing, “*M-I-crooked letter-crooked letter-I crooked letter-crooked letter-I-hunchback-hunchback-I*. That spells Mississippi. But you say it *Mis-ipi* when you're ordering in a restaurant or they'll spit in your pop.”

She just blinks at me for a few minutes and sighs. “So,” she continues with a little frown. “Charles Lindbergh slept in my family's hotel, right next door. Do you know who he was?”

“No. Was he a singer?” I ask.

She frowns with a little glare and sinks back down behind her newspaper. I watch as her pudgy toes crinkle.

“I like singers. We see all the best ones. We seen Waylon Jennings and Kenny Rogers and George Jones and Loretta Lynn, but I like the rock stars way better...”

No response. I stop. A big dog barks down the street and smaller one barks back. They have a sound you can hear too; a large one has a lower pitch woof. A small one has a higher pitch. Usually anyway. Cats are always quiet. Cats are good that way.

“Lincoln is a nice place,” she mutters, ducking behind the paper. The wrinkles on her knuckles tell me she's older than I thought at first glance. I watch her fingers tense around the edge of the page as she reads and then turns another page.

“So, his baby died?” I ask.

“Somebody killed it. It was murdered by,” she pauses, folding down the corner of the paper to give me a serious gaze, “a stranger.” I watch her eyes get round. “The world is a scary place,” she says. When I don't react, she shrugs. The paper goes back up. “And he was a racist, and that's very bad, so they say. The Jews are just fine people. I had a classmate in High School who was one, and she was very nice, and there's one of their churches up in Omaha. But Lindbergh was an explorer. He went to Paris. Paris, France! I'd give anything to see Paris!”

“Did you know that there is a Paris in Texas, too?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.”

“Have you been there?”

“Yep. We stopped for gas and bought bread and white sugar and margarine, two rolls of paper towels, and coloring books.”

“That's quite a memory,” she says. “I barely remember what I had for breakfast.”

“You had coffee and toast. I can tell because the room smells like toast.”

“That's great. Do you remember everything, I mean *everything*?”

“Only sometimes. My brain stores mostly the weird things, never the regular lesson stuff from homework, and it's hard to find again.”

“You live out there on the road?”

Shrug.

“I wish I could live out there. What was Paris, Texas like?”

Two trucks pass by while I suck on the plastic of my spoon.

“Lincoln, Kansas, is a nice place,” I say. “There's a Lincoln in Missouri and one in Louisiana. I love the way Louisiana sounds when you say it. Louisiannna,” I repeat, playing with the sound.

She frowns at me and folds up her paper. “There's a Lincoln in Louisiana?” she asks. “Really? I have never been outside of Nebraska.”

“There's a Lincoln in New Mexico too.”

“Have you been to all of those places?”

“Maybe,” I can feel her watching me. I'd give everything I have for a cup of that coffee. “This floor hums.”

“What?”

“The floor here wiggles, why does it do that?”

She blinks for a while. “You are a strange child,” she finally says.

“So what do you think?” she asks, getting up to move across the room and put her cup into the sink. She stops on her way back to the chair and pulls the bangs out of my eyes. “Does anything hurt too badly? I can give you a pill or something.”

I nearly drop my cup of juice. And look hard at the floor. The floor is black and white – black and white and squares, and I'm counting them.

She frowns and her make up creases in the left corner of her smile. “From the accident?” she goes on.

Oh. “What? Um, I'm fine,” I mutter.

“You haven't asked about them. Your people. The Sherriff has the number to the phone downstairs; it'll ring if something important comes up.”

Eight squares between the sink and the wall.

“It's going to be a hot day today,” she says.

“Why does the floor hum?”

“There's a Laundromat downstairs.”

“Really? You live *in* an actual Laundromat?” I ask.

“I live in an apartment above the Laundromat. My family owns the whole block. Did you know that? They call it the Becker Block. It belongs to my mother, and it belonged to her mother. I suppose I'll get end up with it. I don't have any kids yet, but I really want one, only one though. My mother only had one, me, and it was a fine life. She is wonderful, my mother. I know they say folks should have a coupla kids so they can play together, but I only want one. A girl, maybe a girl like you,” she grins at me. “But not until after I do some adventuring.” She talks like me – fast and squishing her words together.

“An actual Laundromat.” I sigh. “I'll bet your clothes are always clean.”

“Of course my clothes are always clean,” she says and sniffs loudly. “Not much happens in our little town in Nebraska, but Charles Lindbergh stayed here, in our family's motel.”

I dribble a bit of milk onto my T-shirt again.

The air is heavy even though the bus windows are open. The sun is setting to the west. I know it's west because that happens at the end of the day. Know where things are.

Mom's up to four packs a day, and that isn't a good thing. Mom smokes More cigarettes, the brand, not like more, but not less. Mom gave us English lessons all winter. I can compare like a champion now. This and that are connected, but only if you know. Be quiet as a mouse and hope no one sees you. That goes for in and out of the bus.

More cigarettes are long brown minty ones. We haven't had to pay for them since we figured out I can get them from the pull vending machines. The slots are small, but my hands are smaller. I can reach up and into the machine, get behind the glass, and since More cigarettes aren't very popular, they load them into the bottom. I can reach into candy machines and the little toy machines. I tried in one of those claw machines once, but I just couldn't get the angle right. I get a ton of shit toys on the midway for nothing. Candy is another matter.

Yesterday, we got to see the World's Largest Ball of Stamps in Omaha. It's at a place called Boystown. They take care of orphans there. That's what Robert told us. "Aren't you two glad you aren't orphans?" he'd asked with a laugh.

We're on the stretch of road that comes down from Wahoo, Nebraska. We're taking the scenic way south from Omaha. West to Wahoo and down. Mom saw the town on the map and knew we just had to go there.

"Hahaha," Mom'd laughed through her nose as she ate her doughnuts when we were looking at the map earlier that evening. "Wahoo... That'll be fun, girls, right? Nothing bad can happen in a place called Wahoo. We'll do the game. We'll do the game in Wahoo."

Suzie just sat there picking her nose with one finger and poking a jelly donut with the other. I like to lick the powdered sugar off of mine and then eat the cake. It's sticky

and it makes a mess, but no one is noticing right now. We got a dozen. We just finished up working a farm fair here in Omaha. Not the big static, just a little parking lot gig, but it was a regular pay job. Most of the time you get paid a base fee for operation of a game and then a percentage of what you earn. This was a set price pay-by-the-day job. Mom says if we get in with these people regular then the money'll be better and we'll have a real job. We can buy our own rig then, not just work for the hiring company. We'll be independent contractors. I want to get a bingo tent. Everyone plays those all the time, and they have a ton of prizes. I love the bingo tent, and bingo is almost never crooked. Someday, we could even get a building and have a regular business. And a house. A house with black and white floors, white sheets and cereal. And a great big window, and a washing machine all our own.

“Right?” she repeats.

Suzie and I elbow each other at the same time and just end up knocking the funny bone, which isn't actually funny.

“Hahahahaha!” Mom laughs with her whole body, her mouth so wide we can see the dark place where her back teeth used to be. It is a strange, shivering laugh. “South but not into, um, here.” She pokes at the big dot that marks Lincoln. “We'll turn west and take the route around town, head over to York, and we'll be in Kansas by midnight. That'll work, right, baby?” she asks.

“Down,” he picks at a sore on his arm, “woman,” he says. “You need to come down.”

The road map is laid out on the little camp table between us. Suzie on the inside of the bench next to the window, which I know she hates. She's on my right and I'm a

rightly, she's not. I am on the aisle, and Robert is drinking his coffee straight from the percolator. I don't know how he does it. It boils on the stove; he waits a few minutes and then just lifts the pot up and pours it down his open mouth, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. If it's not right off the boil, he just drinks it right from the spout.

“Wahoo girls! Roads full of adventures await us on the road to Wahoo.” Mom is rocking. Suzie and me are still in our work clothes and looking like townies. Newer clothes. Blue jeans and plaid shirts, and I even got to have a red headband. If we look like them, they never suspect that we've got something to hide. We had to pack up after shut down, so we're all just settling down for food.

“So, this place is west?” I ask using my finger to draw a line out of Omaha to the little spot mom has marked with her pen. “On the little road?”

“On the little road,” Mom repeats.

Robert turns and bends over the gas stove, pressing his face into the flame to light his cigarette, his jeans sliding down his bare right hip as he bends. Robert does not smoke More. He smokes Lucky Strike. I don't like those. No mint. Mom loves mint. Peppermint especially. Robert is getting skinnier. The cigarette hangs from his lower lip.

“So, we go down this road,” I point reading the upside-down map, “to this little town. What is in this town?” I ask.

“They'll have cheese there,” Mom says.

“Cheese. In Nebraska?” Suzie asks. “Cheese is from Wisconsin.” Suzie smiles at her own joke. Suzie remembers trivia like that. Wisconsin cheese. That, and Suzie loves cheese.

Mom does that thing she does. “Cheese will go with the donuts.” *The look*, we call it. “We need to keep something in our diet healthy.” When she looks at you that way, you have to keep quiet.

Suzie sticks her finger straight into the hole at the end of her jelly donut, pulls out a finger full of purple goo, and sucks it off her index finger while looking Mom directly in the eyes.

“Don't get sassy with me.”

“Yeah, don't get sassy with Mom, stupid-head,” I say before sucking the sugar from the tip of my finger.

Mom turns sideways in the narrow booth, her bare knee rising above the table-top. “Don't call your sister names.” Her head bobs quickly up and down as she speaks.

“Yeah, don't call your sister names,” Suzie mimics, also bobbing her head.

“Names!” I crow and make a face.

Suzie gives me a glare and stuffs a bit of dough in her mouth.

“Where to after that?” I ask. “More West?”

“Not more West, more is the wrong word. Further,” Robert interrupts. “Further. That's your word today. And we are not heading out that far west. The only people you need are right here.”

“We'll go to Texas from there.” Mom points to the place on the map she's marked. “Staying off the main roads is better. Better scenery,” she winks at me. Robert coughs loudly.

“Ain’t like that woman is your real Grandma anyway. Just some busted up lonely old broad in a singlewide in the middle of nothin’ desert,” he mutters. “Real family is real family, learn that lesson today, kid. Get over her. She’s gone.”

Holding the donut like an apple, I lift it up and twirl the soggy bit of flour on my index finger. I've licked the top, now the sides. My belly growls and I frown. I look at the donut and then I stick my tongue out and try to touch my nose. I have a very weird tongue. Suzie's is long, her tongue. Mine is wide. It's good for shooting gum or paper wads because it rolls into a perfect tube. I am not ladylike. I am waiting.

“You girls are a mess. Stupid, messy, terrible, worthless, little girls,” he says.

Suzie turns away and glares out the window. She frowns and lifts a piece of donut in her hand, carefully pinching the flour. Suzie's jelly donut is glazed like Mom's but with jelly in the middle. The fingers of her other hand are now knotted up under her lap.

Mom reaches under her T-shirt and scratches her boob before reaching for another donut. It is only as she shoves half of a long twist into her mouth, bites down with a wink and a smile that I strike, shoving a bit of sticky index finger into Suzie's ear and giving it a good dig, her head thumping against the glass of the window.

She whumps me hard in the ribs, and I'm ready, despite the tiny space, to whale on her, so I go for a fistful of hair and shove for the glass. A thump and I let go. Suzie swings a hard right just after and lands in the middle of my chest, and then I fly into the aisle because Robert gives my T-shirt a yank, hauling me out and onto the floor with a thud and a kick of his boot soundly on my back. He pulls back as if to give another and just grins down at me. I won't look at him. It is what he does. He hits. You ignore it and you survive. He puts his boot on my back, pressing me into the floor, and I am still.

Mom reaches across the narrow table to whack Suzie. "It's your fault, Robert. Give the kids a treat, you said."

"They are just little girls," he says before moving his foot.

I'm picking myself up off the ground; my knee went into a puddle of something sticky that soaked through the denim. "But they don't fight like girls," he says. "Girls are supposed to be sugar and spice and all things nice."

"They're feminists. They can fight anyway they want as long as it isn't when I have a headache."

"Don't start with that bullshit, Patsy!"

"Change out of those jeans, Kit Kat," Mom says. "They can practically stand up on their own now anyway. We'll wash them in the sink. Put on your pair of orange shorts. The jeans'll be clean by morning."

The percolator clunks as it lands on one of the two burners. "There are no feminists in this house."

"There is one," she says.

"No," he pauses, his back becoming rigid, "feminists in this house." He's wearing boots. Never fight when he's wearing boots.

The whole stretch of road from Omaha to Wahoo Mom chain-smoked and ate all the donuts from her spot in the passenger seat at the front of the bus.

When we pulled into town, Mom made Robert stop in front of their post office. There was only one yellow lamp over the small parking lot, and our school bus barely fit into the narrow space. Mom got Suzie to get out of bed, and the two of them went and

stood outside and said “Wahoo” together. We love the post office. A U.S. Post Office building looks almost the same in every town. I, for my part, was not getting out from under the covers and pretended to be asleep.

Apart from that, there was nothing to see there. It was not a Wahoo at all. Just a little stretch of road with a few short, worn buildings. I feel asleep as we got on the highway.

There was the flash. The smell of the weed lighting up. It was the flash that did it, not the grass. Robert used a kitchen match, and it flared too bright in the pitch-dark. The stove landed on top of Mom while the bus screamed and broke. Its insides were all torn apart, and the parts that were bolted down to the frame came off. Mom broke so much she couldn't get out of the bus. Suzie hollered only once when the glass tore open her knee when she climbed out the front window, and the blood came out. There was a lot of it. All I remember is the flash of light and then the screaming from somewhere. I just stood in the field of grass outside of the bus and watched as nothing happened. Just watched. Nothing. It took a while for the first trucker to come by and notice us. And it took longer for the police and the lights to come. I walked over near the tires to pee while I waited. After a while, I went back to sleep.

The Red Woman fed me grilled hamburgers for lunch with potato chips. There were apples with cheddar cheese for snacks. My belly is about to pop. She has been patting me on the head all day and trying to make little games out of everything.

Everything is a reason to cheer. If I got a roll of quarters done, she cheered. If I folded up a towel, she cheered.

The sun is beginning to set, and the Laundromat office is filled with a quiet music the Red Woman called “classical” when the payphone rings. The Red Woman is rolling up quarters in brown paper, and she is so startled that she drops the roll in her hand and the quarters roll across the office floor. She trades bills for quarters to people who come in to do their laundry. She keeps quarters in a bowl too, like the cereal boxes. She emptied out the quarters from the machines into this big bowl, and we’ve been rolling them up. I go down to the floor to collect the loose quarters while she answers the phone. She starts out with a cheery hello and then slides into a mumble while I collect quarters and put them into the bowl. I’ve put together two more rolls of coins before she comes back in. The phone does a little ding when she hangs it up. I know what’s what even when I don’t want to.

“Are you hungry, Katie?” she calls. “I’m hungry.”

She is making a dinner of grilled cheese sandwiches and is using the little pats of butter that come wrapped in gold foil for the bread and looking out the big picture window. Or at the blank wall above the stove. She reaches for plates in the cupboard.

She says, “You’ll stay with me for a week or so while we sort out your people, does that sound like fun? You can have the room you slept in last night.” She smiles and goes on in that squishing the words together really fast way. “Your sister is fine, they say. She’s awake and didn’t break any bones, but the doctors tell me the funniest thing: she won’t talk nothing’ at all. She knows you’re here, but they won’t let her come over until

she says something. She won't eat or anything." She looks at me briefly. Most townies don't make eye contact with me, but she's been looking closely all day, so I know something's up.

"Your sister needed a lot of stitches, they say. They say it was the strangest thing. She just stood there in the middle of the field and didn't cry or nothing. It was your mom's screaming that Sherriff George talked about when he brought you in last night. Goin' off like a cat with its tail in a mower, she was."

"You should have a cat," I respond.

"Once she got to the hospital, your momma passed out." She pauses and blinks for a while. "Your momma hasn't woken up yet."

"You need a cat to get rid of the mouse I saw this morning."

"Do you understand, honey?" she asks.

"Yep. But my mom does that," I say softly. "She sleeps a long time sometimes."

"They say her back is broken." She leaves the stove and comes to sit at the little table with me. "Her insides got messed up really bad."

"You need a cat to get rid of the mice. Otherwise, it's nice here. I don't mind staying for a while."

"She might not wake up. Do you understand that?" she asks. "Your daddy, they had to take him to the station to talk to him about um," she does that sigh again, "something. But he's not talking either."

"He ain't my daddy."

"Oh," she says. "Do you have a grandma or grandpa? An auntie?"

I swallow hard.

“Do you know how we can find your people, sugar?”

“I don’t have a grandma no more,” I mutter. “This is all I got.”

She frowns and her eyes close tight.

“You need a cat.” I repeat. “A little one. It’d be good and keep the vermin out for you. Vermin are rats and bugs and mice. That’s one of my words. Vermin. I get a list every week.”

“I’ve got one,” she says softly. “Comes in mostly during the winter. A feral that owns pretty much the whole block. Can’t get him to come inside to live but he hunts the mice pretty well. He’s always leaving dead animals on the porch.”

“I betcha I can get him to come inside. We’ll hunt mice for you and sort quarters every day.”

“I bet you can,” she says before getting up to move back to the stove. “You’ll be here a couple of weeks anyway. That’s a little bit wahoo, no?” She smiles too wide.

“Wahoo,” I say while looking out the window into the dark.

When she burned the grilled cheese sandwiches, I said Wahoo too.

The Magic House: Buy It for a Song

“The world,” TS begins while stroking his strange, now three pronged beard, “is not what it was when I was young. That world is long gone.”

Annie is wedged into a brown twill threadbare recliner with TS and listening to the voices and sound from a half a dozen couples buzzing in the room. If this were any other house this would be the living room, but this is the Magic House and this room is not meant for living. Pillows are scattered across the floor, rag rugs strewn everywhere and baskets filled up with people’s stuff pushed up against the walls. Loaves of bread are in plastic bags, peanut butter eaten with a spoon. The same spoon. There are fifteen people pressed into the small space and everyone is eating the same damn peanut butter from the same damn spoon – just passing it from person to person to person. This is the great wide world Annie Roads found. When flu passes through the house, there is an epidemic. It is the same with other less socially acceptable contagious diseases. If a person actually died from sex then everyone would be done for.

Annie is wiggling her toes in her boots trying to work out a rotten kind of itch between her toes. This is another feature of a large group shared housing situation in an old house, there is only one shower. Her ass is beginning to go numb in the narrow space and TS is just droning on in that fake drawl of his. Annie has learned to like the word *ass*. Her language is changing here, growing. Along with a bit of toe fungus - it isn’t much, but it’s a start.

Annie is watching TS’s mouth move without hearing what he says. Provided she touches his arm, nods and grunts with some kind of semi-intelligent response now and then, he is happy. It is not magic love but it’s a kind of something. She listens to the

sound of the bubbles as the bong is being passed from person to person. The few times she's tried to inhale she coughs. She only eats the grass in the cakes that Berry makes to sell at Golden Gate Park or shotguns it. That's a weed kiss – mouth to mouth. Berry is good at it.

She is waiting for a round of the peanut butter before heading to her job at the diner. She has been here for eight months and they feel like eight years. She shifts from one butt cheek to the other in the chair and looks back at TS.

“The language of the world is changing, little frog girl from Calaveras. The words and the way of words are floating on the air like the smoke from the dying world that ways, which *they* made.” TS shifts in the chair and nearly knocks Annie to the floor. “We know who they are and the way, the world of rules that was, they don't work for us anymore.” TS extends his bare feet and Annie smiles. His toes are painted fire engine red and Annie knows who painted them. Annie's toes are red too. And so are Berry's.

“I like the story about New Jersey, TS,” she says. “The one about the white elephant. Don't you like that one?”

“The world is wide, little frog.”

“The elephant disappears and everyone looks for it. It is a very valuable elephant on its way to the Queen of England. It is worth a lot of money.”

TS laughs a strange halting laugh.

“Do you know what I am talking about, TS? The elephant dies, TS.”

Riverside feels very far away. Annie has a job at Estelle's Diner where she works for fifty-cents an hour plus tips. Estelle is not so much a mountain of a woman as a mountain range of a woman who seems to have a crush of some kind of Annie. Annie

moves from the Magic House to the diner and back again. It isn't a lot of money. Berry works at the park selling the special cookies. TS checks on her while Annie is at the diner. Annie doesn't work as a cocktail waitress at the bar on the corner even if TS says that she would make fantastic money in tips, given her *rack*. "Learn fast, be strong and work hard," Estelle said when she hired Annie and Annie was doing just that. "Never let the streets see you stumble." Learning to be harder inside is something Annie has learned entirely on her own.

Thump TS gives Annie a poke in the ribs before going on. His glare tells her he noticed she's not paying attention. "I went to college," TS goes on, looking from Annie and then around the room to see if anyone else is paying attention. "I bought the bundle, I bought the package and I learned the words they thought were so fucking important. I started there until the day came when I asked an old man, a dude in a coffee shop, what it was all about? He said that this was what it's about." TS strokes his beard. "He said a lifetime of wisdom don't have nothing to do with how many books you've read or hallowed halls you walk in. It doesn't come from having jobs or by filling in the blanks on all the right forms. It comes from going out into the world. 'Live your life outside the lines', he said," TS coughs. "Life is about having women, lots of women, to take care of you. It's about love and free spirits, little frog. It's all about love." He wiggles his red toes. He has hair that actually grows on the tops of his feet.

"Do you love me?" Annie asks. "Do you love me in that magic way? Could you?" she tries to get him to make eye contact, but he won't, or he can't. She isn't sure.

"Love like that is a conceptualization. Love like that is an object that comes with a price. Love like that is not what we have here in the Magic House. We have something

more, something exciting,” he says. “We have love as a social movement. Not one to one but a whole new economy.”

“The elephant dies of starvation in a basement,” Annie whispers into his ear before kissing the soft spot behind it.

“That’s not a Tom Sawyer story, Annie Roads, baby. The white elephant thing is a Christmas game,” he whispers back.

“No. It was a story first.”

“I want to eat the sky,” Annie says.

“What?” the man asks, his hand brushing her butt through the red cotton material of her skirt as he helps her to sit down on the worn mattress. The attic room is small, less than a garret, and is shared by TS, Berry and Annie. The ceiling is unfinished and the girls have tacked pictures from Travel magazines to the beams. It is the cleanest room in the whole, often very crowded, Magic House.

“Are you already stoned?” he asks.

“Just a little,” she says. “I could use some more. It was a long shift at the diner.”

“I’ve got just what you need. TS told me you need some help,” he lowers himself onto the mattress, “with things.” His face is straight but his teeth are not. He is tall and round and his balding hair is tied back in a ponytail that is clearly just trying to grow in. He has a crooked green star tattoo on his left wrist. The inside of the wrist. Annie keeps touching it with her fingertips, tracing the lines. She’s never been with a man who has a tattoo.

“I want to have all of it, the whole world. I am so hungry.”

“We haven’t even loaded up the bowl with grass yet,” he says, first picking up the pipe and giving her a sideways glance before setting it back down on the floor.

“You don’t understand. I want to eat everything but food. I want experience. I want to see everything, taste everything, and touch everything. Just some here, some there and then go someplace else for more of anything. Life is *too* much. I want everything.”

“What do you know of everything, woman?” His voice is nasal and he smokes too much.

“Raspberry would understand what I am talking about.”

“Why do they call her Raspberry? Does she do something dirty?” he asks.

“I don’t know why they call her that. I met her and she told me her name was Raspberry. That’s all I know. She is beautiful and has the most marvelous jet-black hair.”

“It comes from bottle,” he says.

“What comes from a bottle?” Annie bats her eyes and laughs. “Berry can be anything she wants to be, too. The world is wide, wide, wide!” she says flinging her arms open in an arc. It was a long shift at the diner and she did not make enough in tips to make her share of the rent. It isn’t expensive in the Magic House but the Magic House is home, and everyone contributes. Their share of the rent is late and the community voted and they have two days to get rent or get out.

“Her hair.”

“Her hair, what?” Annie asks.

“Her hair color comes from a bottle,” he says.

“I don’t care. It’s still beautiful!”

He coughs, “Raspberry wine is a dumb name for a broad.”

“I think it’s a wonderful name.”

He runs his hands down her back, feeling for the bra clasp and doesn’t find one.

“Come on, baby.”

“Stop it,” she groans while pushing him away. “Raspberry and TS gave me a place to crash when I got here. They are my best friends.”

He grabs her neck and forces a kiss and then mutters, “Fuck me, baby girl. You know you want to.”

She gasps for air. “I want it all. All the words and the world too. The poet says that we need to make a new world out of the old one, throwing away the useless bits. I was down at the library reading the other day that…”

“People read in a library?” he interrupts.

“Yeah, they do,” she says. He kisses her neck this time more aggressively. “Stop it, old man. I want to talk for a while first. You promised me that you’d talk to me if I came up to smoke a bowl with you. It was a long shift today. I am tired of talking about hash and eggs. And TS just drones on. You said this would be deep and meaningful. Conversation, connection has to be. If you want sex to hit that magical plane, then we need to really connect, old man. That’s the way. Listen to what I have to say, talk to me.”

He strokes her arm, harder this time, his hand closing around her wrist. “I am talking to you now, baby girl.”

Annie chews on her lip and thinks about a radio. It would be better if there was a radio in the room. A radio and some weed. A radio, weed and some potato chips. Or

Berry's cookies. She's just made a list. She smiles. "What about that pipe? I don't smoke without hacking, but a shotgun gets me happy."

"Don't you want me, baby?"

"I want you a lot. I just want to move slower."

He reaches over and puts his hand on her throat this time and kisses her hard. His lips taste like the coffee she poured for him at the diner. She kisses him back, just as hard, just as hungry, wanting everything, before pushing him back, "I've never been kissed like that."

"You should be kissed like that all day every day, baby. I know it's not the way it's done, but those lips, baby, they're just asking." He gives her breast a hard squeeze and she jumps. TS is never like this. No one she's ever known is this impatient.

"Hey," she says in her sternest voice, "Not so hard."

"I didn't come here to talk about books, *baby*," he says. His voice shifting lower.

She shoves him hard. "Don't call me, baby."

"It is love, baby, and it's all alright," he says. "He told me you were the sweet one."

"Who did?"

"TS, girly."

The man mashes her face hard and uses his wide chest to push her flat onto the mattress on the floor, pulling up the red cotton skirt and unbuckling his belt, sliding his pants down. It's not bad. It's love and this is the new world. That's what she tells herself. It's a new world.

"No baby, not so hard," she manages to croak. *TS set up the date?*

“It’s love, baby. I just want to love you so hard.”

He doesn't even bother with her underwear; he just pushes them aside and fucks her.

“Go slower, baby?” she asks. This is the new world and this sex is different but it's good. She’s going with it. “Do you love me? This is the beautiful world,” she whispers as he does it and looks around the room for the radio. “So good, old man.”

“Fuck, baby - so fucking good.”

It's over fast. “What's your name?” she asks. The diner seems like last week, even though it was less than two hours ago that TS sat with him in the booth. He sat with the man. Annie poured the coffee for them, they drank it, and the three of them walked outside.

“They make a good steak over at Rudy's Diner,” she says.

He frowns at her and rolls over.

“Dinner?” she continues. “I didn't eat 'cause I was at work. I always get a hungry after making love.”

“Shit, baby. Don't you know what I am?”

“You're my lover, even just until morning,” she says pulling down her skirt. It's 1964 and she’s on the pill and love is good. Love is good. “This is the new world.”

He's pulling his pants back up over his hips, rolling from one cheek to the other, grunting with the exertion.

“Oh, baby,” he says with a scowl while she tries to cuddle.

He pulls five dollars from his front jeans pocket and presses it into her hand before pushing her away.

“For dinner?” she mumbles. Her mouth is dry. “I suppose I could head to the store and get some eggs and potatoes. I am considering trying out this vegetarian thing.”

“No, baby,” he says

“What's your name?” She is drifting, trying to remember if he'd told her before. “I think I'll call you... Starman, because of the tattoo on your wrist,” she wriggles uncomfortably. “Or maybe Bookman, you should read,” She is twirling her hair on her index finger. “Names are everything. That's what TS says.”

“Oh baby girl,” he says. “Call me John, baby.”

“John,” she repeats it, listening to the sound in her head. “That's not a very magical name and this is the Magic House. If not for dinner, when can we meet again?” she asks in a strange voice as if it's coming from someone else. “Just hang out, talk for a while. Smoke some grass.”

“Sure, baby. It was fun,” he says patting her on top of the head and walking toward the door. “Yeah, yeah baby, I'll be back.” He looks back briefly, holding the door knob in his hand, a peculiar expression on his face. He shrugs and leaves.

She scoots over to look out the window, down the street and into the lamplight and watches him jogging, no, running, across the narrow street in front of the Magic House. He heads towards Seventh Avenue and she sits cross legged on the mattress. Trying to sort it out. She runs through her list: weed and rent and a radio and, um, and eggs and potatoes. She runs her fingers along the crease of the five-dollar bill.

It takes her a while. She reaches for the pipe and gazes out at the fading light and listens to the voices from downstairs and wondering if anyone heard. She puts the pipe down.

The party downstairs didn't wind down until the sun came up, but she didn't sleep. When she left at sunrise to walk the seven blocks to Estelle's for work she found a silver zippo lighter and a pack of Pall Malls on the front stoop where someone left them behind and she lit one up as she walked. It took her four out of the seven blocks to stop hacking, but by the sixth block she could inhale without feeling like she might vomit. By seven she understood why people smoke.

Half a Clown: A Music Lesson

Robert got me a job as a ghost in the haunted house. Every morning for this past week he rubs paint on my face, hands, and legs with clown-white make-up, which hides the purple marks on my neck. Then I get to put on a ghoulish black-and-white little dress. The clown-white paint reflects off of my face and legs and hands in the black light. I am half a clown, but not a funny one. A scary one. The walls are covered in wallpaper that is black and purple and has white bits that glow in the light. The wallpaper isn't the scary part. It's just there. It's the things that move around or make noise that get you. I work hard to remember that sunshine is bright and to keep it inside my head even in here. The haunted house is like everything else here. It's on wheels and will be pulling out of here tomorrow.

My job is to hide in a little closet in the little room decked out to be the attic of a house. The room is dark and lit with black lights, and I jump out when people come through and scare them. I am supposed to be like the kids in *The Village of the Damned*, which is a great movie to play the voice game with. We've seen it both with and without sound, but I prefer it when we play it. I don't mind this gig too much, except for yesterday, when I really did scare a little kid who came through. She peed herself and ran out crying and her brother laughed. I went back into my closet and was just sad and the room smelled awful, just awful. I hate the dark.

The haunted house is a very popular joint in any town, for some reason it is especially popular here in the Bible Belt. I haven't had a lot of downtime. I think people are scared of what might happen when they die. Mom told me once that some people get a rush out of being scared.

These kids who use a ticket to come in here, they don't know what it's really like. The screaming on the roller coaster or the haunted house are fun games for the teenagers. The county fair is an adventure, and they come into haunted houses because they are curious.

Today is the last day of the fair here in Kentucky, and I am very glad.

"Katie," Robert yells from outside. "I want to talk to you!"

The giant plastic clown says, "So that's twelve Cokes?"

"No, that's *two* Cokes," Robert yells into the squawk box.

"Not twelve Cokes?" it repeats.

He leans out of the window of the truck. "Two Cokes, two cheese *burgers*, and two fries."

"There are no flies in our food, sir," the grainy voice says.

"So, that's two Cokes, two cheeseburgers, and two orders of french fries, asshole!" Robert yells.

"You don't need to be rude."

"Do you *have* my order?"

"That'll be three dollars and twenty-seven cents, sir. Please pull forward."

The midway, with all its flashing lights and brightly colored canvases, feels a hundred miles away, not just a few miles down the road. Of all things that could happen out here, this is not something I thought of. I knew it. I mean, it happened to other kids. And it isn't what people assume happens out here. Robert is driving a truck that is black and old and is not ours. He stole it, and Chubby Checker is cranking out of the broken

radio. Then we walked over to the edge of the lot where someone had parked a truck but not locked the door. He hot-wired it and here we are. I painted myself today and I went to work. I'm covered in white paint and wearing my stupid dress.

He tried changing the station on the radio, and that wouldn't work. He tried turning it off, but that wouldn't work. The only time the thing is quiet is if the motor is turned off. But it's hot, and weirdest of all, the air conditioner works. We're rolling along the edge of town, headed for an empty field in the hills with a Chubby Checker marathon blasting in the cab of the truck with the windows up. Seriously, just dust that sticks in the paint on my skin and sunshine and Chubby Fucking Checker. A few other cars, but not many. We just drive to a restaurant, buy these two cheeseburgers with fries, and drive out to the side of the road a few miles from the fairgrounds.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he says. I just sit still. "Do you need ketchup for your fries?" he asks.

I pick one up, knowing I'm supposed to, and just eat it plain.

"Can you see the hills sitting cross-legged like that?"

"Yes, sir," I mutter with a mouthful of fries. The sky is pale blue and the grass is green. I can see that. I won't tell him that, but I can see it.

"It's my birthday. Did you know that?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it is, and I thought we could go out to eat," he says. "You like to eat out, don't you?"

"Mm hmm, sir. I do." I smile at him and my make-up crinkles on my cheeks in a weird way.

He grins and snorts loudly. "I love cheeseburgers. Eat yours."

I unwrap it from the foil and stare at it. I hate mustard. It has mustard oozing from the sides and over the slices of raw onion. I stare at it for a good long minute. I hate onions too.

"Eat it," he says. "Put it into your mouth - and eat it."

I swallow the spit in my mouth and take a bite. He reaches over to pat on top of my head, lightly stroking my brown hair. Once. Twice. More. He kisses the top of my head. I swallow the bite of burger almost whole. The leather creaks as he shifts in the seat. I take another bite, and that's when a car slams into the back of the truck and we both fly forward into the dash. It isn't a big deal except I have a mouthful of cheeseburger and it goes down the wrong pipe.

The next thing I know Robert has hauled me out of the truck and has his fist in my belly, getting me to cough up my cheeseburger, and some teenaged white boy is staggering around and hollering at us, "Why are you out here in the middle of nowhere in the afternoon, you dumb bastard!"

I hork up the burger and look over at Robert, his arms covered in white paint, and see this boy, maybe twenty-years-old, stagger forward. "Shit mister, is the kid okay? Fuck, she's just a kid! Your truck is fine, man. The truck is fine! Fuck, was it broken down out here?" The boy comes for me as if to help me stand up. He reeks of beer.

It only takes a minute. Robert charges him. I am on my knees watching it happen. Robert pulls the knife out of his boot, knocks the kid to his knees and runs the blade across the kid's neck. It's precise, deep, and quick and makes the sound that the kitchen drain does when the last of the water disappears down the pipe. I smell the blood and

know it tastes like copper. Blood tastes like copper. I know. I see the boy. He's just lying there in a little gully on the side of the road. I don't have time to breathe, time to think. Freaking out, that's for townies. I stopped doing that after the first summer out here. Robert gives him a shove and he falls to the ground. I look at him lying in the dirt.

Robert drives back to the midway and parks three blocks away, near the livestock shed but on the backside. No cops. No nothing. I'm in the bus, stripped, washed, changed, and back on the midway in less than an hour. Crouched underneath the wheels of the haunted house and watching the bingo man play.

This is where Suzie finds me. "Where were you? I had to run the midway alone."

"I was no place."

"Any place where you are is someplace. Let's see, Dork-butt is a fail, Weeble is a fail. Chicken fetus. You called me that a few times. I need a new nickname." She tries to get me to make eye contact.

I glare at her.

"Play with me."

"I don't want to play the name game anymore."

"Play with me."

I take deep breath. "Shut the fuck up."

Snow: Storytime

Giant snowflakes fall from a nearly black sky to dust the hood of our orange '65 Dodge Dart. We've only had this car for a month. I like it. It is clean and right now it is warm where we are. It smells like menthol cigarettes, and I like those. Suzie and I are huddled in the front seat next to Mom under the old comforter, watching small flurries of fresh snow stand up and swirl to cross the street as if they were people. These small gusts of wind create whirling fairies that cross the street onto the brown grass of the park. I learned about fairies from a Peter Pan picture book.

Mom drove for a long time through the slow and empty streets of the city, away from the police station, looking for a place to park. The streets in this part of Philadelphia are nearly silent in the middle of the night. So late that it is morning too. Bail. We will bail him out in the morning. She finally settled on a large city park, surrounded on four sides by tall red brick buildings. Mom called them brownstones, but I think that's stupid; bricks are red, not brown. It took her five tries to get the car to park right. Parallel. That's what she called it. She gives us the word for everything lately. She was going to be a schoolteacher last year so we get lessons in everything, all the time. Words. Math. Whatever. We parked under the only broken streetlight we could find, where we are now cuddling, sharing body heat.

The houses surround the park, each with a tidy wrought iron fence in front. They are pressed in together, sharing walls and sounds. Not quite Thanksgiving and not quite Christmas. Thanksgiving was yesterday, but we didn't get to finish our turkey dinner at the church. Tall trees stand along the avenue, and the brightly colored lights of the holiday wink at us through their windows. The townie houses are quiet.

“We have a treat tonight,” Mom says softly.

I wiggle up to her underneath the stinky green comforter – Suzie gives me a quick jab to my right rib. I jab her back. It is warm in the car and the steam hasn't started to form on the windows. It is just us. I never jab Mom.

“Is it a present?” Suzie asks.

“Sort of,” Mom answers.

“Is it a good treat? Are there more than one of them?” I ask with a giggle and a sniff. I have a cold.

“You girls have to guess,” she says awkwardly, using her sleeve to dab at the corner of her bloodied lip with her corner of our blanket.

“Is it little or big?” Suzie asks.

“More than one,” I wiggle and try to pull my right foot up under my butt. “More than one is betterer.”

“Better, Kit-Kat, but best would be the right word. Words are important. Learn a new one ever day.”

“But betterer means a lot more than best.” I kick my foot back out in front of me, plop down and sigh with *emphasis*. Another of Mom's words. She says it means something important. Mom says lessons are important.

“Betterer is not a word, Kit-Kat,” Mom says.

“You're so stupid, Katie,” Suzie says.

“I am very smart for seven. That's what the church lady said.”

“Stupid-head.”

“Don't call your sister names, Susan.”

I wiggle my toes and try to slide my foot up again. *I like names.*

“Don't sit on your feet, Katie. It's bad for your circulation.” Mom reaches over to muss Suzie's newly short hair before reaching for the ignition. She sighs. Bubble gum war. We lose a lot of hair that way. “Next question is yours, Kit-Kat. You know the game.”

Vroom, the engine starts as Mom turns it over just long enough to run the wipers to clear the windshield and then she turns it off. This car roars both when you turn it on and off, and even when it runs. Ours has a good engine, but it breaks down a lot because it is old. Even inside of the cab, it is a loud car. I can see a swirling snow fairy dancing slowly across the street, picking up new snow and twirling into the park. The park is lit with small streetlights on lamp-posts, short hills, and stone walkways that lead to places we can't see. The wide line of the park is broken only by trees and the odd flicker of colored lights breaking through the tree line from the houses on the other side.

“So...” I ask. “Is there more than one?”

“They are little, Suzie. And there are several,” Mom says, putting her arm around us, laying her hand on Suzie's head again. “Sit still, Kit-Kat,” she barks, checking the rearview mirror of the car, as I slide up onto my knees to get a better view of the park and watch the colors change in the window of the house we are parked in front of. I slide down and try to be still.

“Isn't that pretty?” she whispers softly while watching the snow begin to drift on the stairs of the house. Another gust of wind carries a fairy across the street.

“Do we each get one?” Suzie asks.

There is only silence. Mom went away again. She followed the fairy into the street.

“I like fairies too, Mom.” I sniff and wipe my nose on the blanket.

“Mom?” Suzie asks.

“Hmm.” She coughs. “You’ll each get more than one. Yes, girls.”

I cough and bounce a little. “Are they hard or soft?” I ask while figuring the options in my head. I love to play twenty-questions.

“They can be either, but right now I imagine that they are hard.” I chew on my tongue and think about the possibilities. Mom pulls nervously on the buttons of her sweater. I watch as she checks the side and rearview mirrors of the car.

“What are they?” I ask.

“It is not your turn, Kit-Kat. It is Susan’s question right now. Use the time to think about smarter questions. Smart questions tell me you’re learning.”

“Are they shiny, or boring?” Suzie asks.

“Shiny and boring don’t go together, Susan. Use the right words.”

“Shiny is pretty. Are they pretty or are they not pretty?” Suzie asks. I can hear Suzie swallow. She sits very, very still, with Mom’s hand on top of her head. Mom’s arm is on the back of my neck, and I like it. I wriggle in closer.

“They are both pretty and shiny, Susan,” she says, sitting up to get a look in the rearview mirror.

“Um,” I stop, sniffle a big wad of snot hard and tug on my ear. “Do they have bright colors?”

“Damn. Hush girls, for just a minute, someone is coming. Duck down.” We all slide down in the wide bench seat and pull the comforter up over our heads to hide. Under here, my nose is finally warm. Suzie holds her breath for as long as she can, and with a *baa* sound, she lets it out. We all giggle. Mom pokes Suzie in her ticklish spot, and we all laugh out loud. We never poke Mom. We know better.

“Me next,” I crow.

“Be quiet, Kit-Kat,” she says. We listen as the car passes on the street outside.

I am not cold any more. I am too hot.

“Come on, Mom, please?” I ask with a bounce again.

“Why can you never be patient?” Suzie asks as she elbows me gently. “Can we look again, Mom?”

“Why?” I ask. “I like it in here, in the dark.” I squish myself in deeper on Mom's body.

“Stop it, Kit-Kat,” she says, shifting towards the door, pushing me away and pulling herself out from under the blanket. She pushes me back down and pulls the cover over my head.

“Why don't you ever just sit still?” Suzie whispers. “Ever?”

“Because I just *can't!*” I wiggle in the seat pulling my still-frozen toes up to sit Indian style and bent over in the seat while trying to warm them. I am small for my age. Small and scrappy. “I don't know how to be patient. Why is sitting still such a good thing, tell me that?”

“Would you look at that...” Mom says softly. Her voice is soft and round and as if coming from another body.

“What?” I say popping out. Suzie gives my arm a yank to pull me back down.

“Let your sister out, Susan. Come on up, girls. Do you see what I see?”

Mom just stares out the window looking baked and running her fingers through her short black hair. I know for a fact she's sober. She promised us a month ago. She's been good. He was the one who couldn't stop. When they try it means she tries and we all wait. I run my fingers through my hair exactly like she does and try to see what she is staring at in the snowy park. I learned a lot this month. The windows have developed a light fog. I can't see anything. She sees all kinds of stuff and points it out, shapes in the sky or weird plants and stuff, but sometimes I don't see it. I always look though. Mom sees everything, and someday I want to see everything too. I want to be just like her.

The green trees are stark and tall against the white drifts in the street and city park. She begins to crank the window down but stops halfway down and just looks. I can't see what she sees. I only see dark sky and the tops of trees. The lamp-posts cast a soft white light on the street. Something glitters.

“What, Mom?” I ask again.

No answer. I wait. I hate being patient. Rocks always roll around in my stomach when I have to be patient, and sometimes they want to come out through my nose

. After a long pause I ask again. “What do you see, Mom?” She chews on her nails, the ones on her left hand. She hasn't let go of us.

“Is it jewelry?” Suzie asks.

Nothing.

“Is it square? I ask

Nothing.

“Is it sweet or sour?” Suzie says. Her stomach rumbles. I know what she's thinking.

When Mom chews her nails we can hear the tic-tic-tic sound of her teeth on the nails.

“That's two questions, Suzie,” Mom says.

“Um.” I elbow Suzie – hard.

Starting cross-legged, I, very carefully, slide one leg out and start to get up to see over the window. “I can't see, Mom.”

“Look, Kit-Kat,” she says. And she rolls the window the rest of the way down. The snowfall has slowed, and a stream of moonlight is cutting through a hole in the clouds, leaving just one beam of moonlight standing in the middle of the park and reaching to the sky.

“Here you go, girls,” she says, reaching underneath the driver's seat for two small flat red boxes. “Happy December. It's a Christmas thing,” she says. “It's early, I know, but after yesterday, it seemed to be a good night for it.”

I hold the box in my hand. I can feel the hard cardboard of the frame, and using my thumbs, I can feel a thin sheet of plastic covering on the top. I rub my finger along the place where the paper meets the plastic and feel it. The sensation is interesting. Both are slick, but one is solid and the other is not. I haven't looked at mine yet. Suzie has already opened hers. I can hear the foil crinkle as she unwraps it.

“It is an Advent calendar. Do you know what ‘advent’ means?” We shake our heads no. “Advent means beginning, an arrival, a coming into place. An Advent calendar is used to mark the days until Christmas. This one is only good for the twelve days of

Christmas, so it's early. A-D-V-E-N-T,” she says. “So much to learn, girls. So much to teach you. You need to be prepared for the world. But... but today you needed a treat. You have been good girls.” Her words are slow and careful. She's like this when... well, she's like this.

I can smell the chocolate and can hear Suzie chewing on hers. She gasps a little because she eats it too fast. “Slow down, Sis, or you'll choke,” I say as I pat her on the back. I am saving mine like that kid in the Wonka book. Suzie has left little bits of melted chocolate at the corners of her mouth, and she's reaching for another.

“Look, girls,” Mom says softly, rolling the window down the last inch or so. The snow has picked up pace, just enough to put magic into the moonbeam. “It is a Dwywnen Fairy, girls. A Dwywnen is a white wave fairy. She is the patron saint of sick animals and of lovers in Ireland. She was a princess who fell in love with a young man named Maelon, but things go terrifically bad between them, and she is heartbroken. She prays to God that she will forget her love for him, and an angel comes and gives her a potion that she gives to Maelon. Maelon is frozen in ice, and this scares Dwywnen so much that she makes three wishes.” Mom chews on her nails again, and the car is quiet. We need to get her some cigarettes soon.

“Is this a Bible story, Mom?” I ask.

Nothing.

“What did she wish for?” Suzie asks. I lift the top off of my box of chocolates. There is a foil-wrapped sheep and a horse and a square with the colors of a present. Over each slot of the plastic tray, inside, there is a number, counting down to zero. Each piece of chocolate is wrapped in foil, and they are little Christmas treats. There are the three

wise men and a woman and a baby Jesus and a Santa Claus. Slowly. I have to eat them slowly or they won't last.

“She wished for Maelon to be set free, that God will look after all true lovers through her, and finally, that she would never fall in love with anyone ever again or marry.”

I unwrap the piece of chocolate shaped like Santa Claus even if it is out of order. I like to eat things in order. But this one, I eat it in one bite. It is hard and hurts my teeth, but it melts fast, so that's good. I'm moving it around in my mouth, and it's all gooey, and it's hard not to drool, but I like it anyway. I hate Santa Claus, so he dies first.

“I love you, girls,” she says.

“We love you, too,” I say and elbow Suzie.

“Me too,” she says.

“What happens to the fairy, Dwynwen?” I ask. I always ask.

“She goes away.”

“Away?” Suzie whispers.

“Yes. She goes away, completely and totally alone, to live on an island in a cave for the rest of her life, and when she gets old, she dies,” she coughs. “Don't eat too much chocolate, Kit-Kat. You are already hyperactive.”

I cough. She doesn't notice. I cough harder. Nothing.

She chews on her fingernails, and I eat the baby Jesus, taking care to chomp the head of it off first, in one bite. I thought I'd die on the big chunk of Santa trying not to make a mess.

After I finish chewing on the head, I say, “Fairies can't die.”

“She does. She only becomes a fairy after she is dead. And now she's there, in that park.”

“That's not a fairy,” Suzie says. “Magic is stupid.”

“Do you want to find out where she went?” Mom asks.

Suzie shrugs.

I'm chewing on my chocolate. Suzie is on her fifth or sixth one.

“Do you girls want to play in the park?” Mom asks.

I'm running as fast as I can through a pile of snow in my sneakers wearing Mom's black sweater that hangs to my knees, two tube socks on each arm and pulled up to my armpits. I can't catch up with Mom. She's running far ahead and away. Suzie is laughing.