

The Edge Of Things

2008

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THE EDGE OF THINGS

by

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ABSTRACT

The Edge of Things is what I like to call a love song to the dispossessed. Each of the eight stories in the collection is an examination of the lives of women who are exiled from modern American consumer culture, whether by circumstance or by choice. This separation brings them heartache, risk, and sometimes even hope.

The collection is fueled by the landscape of Florida, observed at its most beautiful and most corrupted, from highways, landfills, and trailer parks to housing developments, gardens, and secret forests. Setting is a constant source of revelation, the external landscape offering insight into the internal struggles of the characters.

Regardless of age, race, or sexual orientation, the women of *The Edge of Things* find themselves moving toward, or just past, incredible changes in their lives. In “Seed of the Golden Mango”, “Raising the Dead”, and “The Girl Who Loved Bugs”, young women deal with the loss of loved ones. The women of “Zyczenie”, “It Cannot Hold”, and “Wasp Honey” must deal with old losses in order to survive the realities of the outside world that they have long ignored. “The Edge of Things” and “The Secret Letters” both deal with love, and the consequences of an inability to communicate.

In each of these tales I hope to present unforgettable characters, women whose journeys will haunt, reminding readers that on some level, the love song of the dispossessed calls to us all.

This collection is dedicated to RKT
my one true love and my inspiration.

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ZYCZENIE

People say that the blood thins after time in the south, but Viviane was born in Florida and feels her blood pull like thick sap in response to the taste of winter. Even though the snapping turtles are hiding now in the cozy muck, even though the cypresses on the edge of the lake by her house have dropped their rusty needles, Viviane knows that the heat will be back soon.

And so she is driving. The sun is gone, hidden by office buildings and trees. The street lights are flickering to life one by one. The normal mildew stink of her car is washed away by the sweet, chill wind pouring through the open window. Her coarse white hair is tied back in a braid so that it does not obscure her vision. Her ears are tickled and numb. She is driving, her windows down, classical music on the radio.

The front has pushed back the clouds. More stars are visible than she has seen in years, glittering between the sharp fingers of the palm trees and the shaggy moss of tired scrub oaks, cutting through the dull purple glow from downtown Orlando. Viviane finds herself struggling to keep her eyes on the traffic lights instead of the sky. The DJ plays *The Moonlight Sonata*, and pain lances through her right hand. She keeps her left on the wheel and slides the right between her legs. The moist heat begins to relieve the tension on rheumatoid-swollen knuckles.

The first time her doctor suggested this remedy, her cheeks burned. The first time the pain in her hand was bad enough to make her weep, her need for relief quietly conquered embarrassment.

Viviane turns onto a side street and the periodic pools of amber from the streetlights grow farther and farther apart. Tiny cinderblock houses huddle together like rabbits in warrens, each lawn covered with cars, and in the cold, in the dark, there is something beautiful about their claustrophobic closeness. Viviane holds back tears as the sonata ends and the DJ introduces a new piece—*Adagio with Variations*. The song is rich, rolling and somber, a perfect contrast to the crisp solitude of the sonata. When the tiny dog—she thinks, *is it a Jack Russell, a beagle, a mutt?*—darts out into the street, she swerves hard to the left and into the path of the child chasing it.

The noise the child's body makes on the hood of the car is audible over the squeal of her brakes and the tremolo of the woodwinds. It is identical to the sound the sacks of flour made as they were dropped to the floor in her grandfather's bakery when she was a girl. The hood of the car will not even be dented. She is certain of it.

The *Adagio* is still playing as she slides the car into park. The grip of the gear shift is worn smooth with years and slick with sweat. Dust coats the dash in a light layer of gray. The metallic smell of damp is back, now that the car isn't moving. She never fixed the cracked rubber molding around the doors. It leaks with every rain. When Viviane opens the door, it gives a low, dry squeal. The dog barks somewhere in the night.

Even in the cold, Viviane sweats as she walks around to the front of her car. The white paint is gray with pollen and the summer's dirt. A small smear of dark on the hood trails up to the bottom of the windshield. No one has come outside. No one cares that the dog is barking, that a car is stopped in the middle of the street. The child is alive, lying on the border of the headlights and the night. A foot tap, tap, taps irregularly

against the pavement, over the mutter of the engine and the strains of music piping through the speakers.

Viviane winces against the pain in her joints as she goes to her knees. She loses her balance and stops herself with her right hand. Warm liquid pools under her fingers. Sticky. It is red in the glow of the headlights. The rancid scent of radiator fluid colors everything. Never got that crack fixed, and the black pepper trick that her father swore by isn't working. Viviane looks up. The stars are still there, framed by trees that line the road. The dog is behind her now, warm breath and snuffling against her shoes, calves, and backside.

She feels a flutter on her skin. Viviane looks down. A tiny, sun-brown hand is gently brushing the swollen knuckle of her index finger.

“Oh, oh dear God.” Viviane’s voice is a moan.

The boy’s sneakers are red with white laces. One of them is coming off, and his socks are gray. He’s wearing denim shorts and both his knees have been skinned on the asphalt. His left leg is twisted, his foot jerks spasmodically as he tries and fails to straighten it. A cartoon character is printed across the chest of his white t-shirt. His right arm is bent underneath his body; something is wrong with the angle of his shoulder. Viviane looks into large, almond eyes brimming with tears. The pink stains from the burst capillaries in the whites of his eyes make the green flecks in his irises dance. She cannot tell if his hair is dark or bloody. Viviane fights the gorge rising in her throat. She will not be sick. He can’t be more than six years old.

For the first time she finds herself glad that she has grown old, solitary and childless. She had quiet summers at the shore, not shrieking giggles stepping from the warm white sand to the chilled, ocean-pressed tide line. There were trips to New York, to Europe, instead of trips to the pier, or to feed the dolphins at Sea World. No homemade cupcakes for the myriad celebrations that life seemed to offer. Let her sister have these things, these memories of childhood. It's good she hasn't had them. It is good, because she never had to face this, this robbery in the dark.

His hand closes on her fingers, squeezes. His breath comes in a piccolo pant. "Momma, Momma, Momma."

And then it stops.

Viviane's hands are so slick that she almost drops her cell phone as she slides it out of her pocket. Her knuckles creak and pop as the numbers blink—9-1-1. His thin chest under the white t-shirt moves in irregular rhythm, making the cartoon character look like it's dancing.

"911. What is the nature of the emergency?" The man's voice is stiff, clinical. How many times he has received this call?

"A boy, he ran out into the street. I hit him with my car."

"Where are you located?"

Hell. Hell on a moonlit street. "Can't you trace that?"

"That takes time, ma'am. Do you know the location?"

The street signs are lost in the distance. The boy is breathing again, whistling breaths with a thick gurgle running underneath. "I turned off of University, a few lights

after Forsyth. I was just out for a drive. Please—” A vise grips her chest in a burst of heat.

“Is the child breathing?”

“Yes, but there’s blood.”

“Have you moved him?” His voice is sharp.

“No.”

“Good. That’s very good. Can you see a wound?” The operator’s voice shifts into a gentle cadence, almost sing-song. Operator training to sooth the horror-struck.

“No.” Where are the ambulances, the police?

“Ma’am, help is on the way. Do you know CPR?”

“I did. It’s been a long time. But I checked him, he’s still breathing—”

“It’s all right, Ma’am. Take a deep breath. It will be a few minutes before the ambulance arrives. If anything happens, I can help you help him.”

The boy’s hand is so still, so cold on her skin. His foot makes tiny twitches like a dog chasing rabbits in its sleep.

“Ma’am, are you still there?”

“Yes.” Her voice cracks.

“Don’t hang up.”

The operator continues to ask Viviane about the boy and she stares at the faded face of her watch, the cracked leather band, anything to avoid focusing on the child. In the dim flow from the streetlights the second hand moves around the face, time seems to jump--one minute, three minutes, five. Sirens sing high on the air. An ambulance and

two police cars race around the corner in bursts of red and white, white and blue. Porch lights snap on, up and down the street. A woman's voice echoes, trembling and faint, from somewhere in the night. She is calling for her son. Calling *Nicholas, Nicholas*.

The boy is quiet on the ground, blood pooling under his head, and then gentle, anonymous hands, murmuring voices, are helping Viviane to her feet, leading her to a squad car. Someone takes her cell phone, speaks briefly, hands it back. She trips once, twice; the ambulance people and some policemen lift the boy onto a stretcher. A woman darts into the light, slight with long chestnut hair and the boy's ruddy skin. She looks at the child, screams.

A police officer takes the woman's arm and at the same moment Viviane feels a hand grip her wrist. The policewoman holding her is black, heavy-set, with braids gathered up in a small ponytail at the back of her neck. The officer tips back her hat, smiles.

"Please, sit down here. I have to ask you a few questions."

Her car is shining black and tan. The back door is open, waiting. The off-gray upholstery has an odd smell that Viviane can't place, but her knees stop throbbing once she settles onto the seat. The officer lowers herself to one knee.

"My name is Officer Hobbes. What's your name, ma'am?"

"Viviane. Pearce. It's Viviane Pearce."

"Do you have your license in your purse, Mrs. Pearce?"

"Miss Pearce." The zipper on her bag sticks, but after a moment of struggle she pulls the wallet through the tiny gap. Her hands shake as she hands it to the officer.

“Miss Pearce.” Officer Hobbes balances the wallet on one knee as she writes in a notepad. “May I ask why you were in the neighborhood tonight?”

“The weather.”

The officer’s brow furrows. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s such--” Viviane pauses as the ambulance moves back down the street. A crowd of people is standing around her car. She imagines they are pointing, muttering, hating her, but she can’t see their faces. “It was such a nice night. I wanted to take a drive, enjoy the weather.”

“And you didn’t see the boy?”

“It was a dog.”

The furrow in the officer’s brow deepens.

“When I came down the street, a dog ran in front of the car. I didn’t want to hit it.” Viviane gasps for breath. “I didn’t—I didn’t see the boy.”

“How fast were you driving?”

“The speed limit. Maybe a little under. I never speed.” The officer’s face is round, smooth, and blank. Her dark skin gleams in the moonlight. Viviane wonders how many times the officer, like the 911 operator, has heard this story. “I’ve never had a ticket. You can look it up.” Viviane’s breath catches. Tears burn in her eyes. If only she’d stayed on University. If she hadn’t strayed for stars. “I’ve never even been in an accident before.”

Officer Hobbes pushes a stray braid behind her ear and hands Viviane a wad of tissues. “Give yourself a moment, Ma’am.”

“Is he going to die?”

“The doctors will do everything they can.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means they’ll do what they can to save that boy’s life.” Officer Hobbes pats her hand. “We have to finish these questions, then I can let you get home.”

And when the ambulance is gone, when her statement is done and she has taken and passed a Breathalyzer test, Viviane waits alone for a tow truck. She wonders if she will ever feel safe driving again. The blood is still on the hood. The man who comes-- tall, thinning hair, smelling of oil and fuel--is the Mike of Mike’s Family Towing. He asks her for her address and hooks up the car in silence. He helps her into the cab of the truck, but never says another word, even when he accepts her payment.

He has photographs taped all over the dash. In one picture he sits next to a golden-haired woman. Each of them has a chubby baby in their lap. Another picture shows those babies, now boys of six or seven, in waders, fishing with their dad. What is he thinking? Is it pity or disgust? Probably thinks that she or someone like her wasn’t driving on *his* street. Someone like her. Viviane curls into the seat, turns away from the driver, stares out the window. Tears slide down her cheeks unchecked. She is one of *them*. Like drunks, rapists, perverts, she has hurt a child. Intentional or not, it doesn’t matter.

Three days.

The car sits like some ancient beast, unblinking and full of wicked patience, waiting for her. Viviane's only company has been the never-ending drone of her television. There hasn't been any update about the boy, just a fifteen-second blurb the day after the accident, reporting that a boy struck by a car was at the hospital in critical condition. In the seventy hours since the accident, she has slept two. Each time she drifts to sleep her dreams are filled with flashes of dark and light, of orchestras that break into a screaming choir at every crescendo, calling *Momma, Momma*.

Viviane dozes, dreams. The six o'clock news sets her weeping again. She turns off the television, struggles out of her fading green recliner, and walks over to her stereo, a tiny white Bose. She slides her hands over the smooth white plastic and imagines the rich sound of Bach or Bacewicz, Winston or Chopin, filling the dusty corners of the house. Viviane hits play, closes her eyes, and she is behind the piano again. Her fingers ache and tense in sympathy with the music. Heat, either stress or fever, radiates from her bones. The music swells. It is Chopin's *Zyczenie*, The Maiden's Wish. As the mezzo soprano breaks into song Viviane sees her piano, shrouded in storage since her body turned against her almost two decades ago, hears the boy calling for his mother.

Viviane turns off the stereo. This maiden won't get her wish. She picks up the phone to call the local police station. She will call and ask for Officer Hobbes and see if she can find out more about the boy. Instead, when the solid weight of the phone is in her hand, she dials her younger sister, Madeline. It's the first time they've spoken in almost six months.

"Hello Sis," Viviane says.

“Viviane?”

“Yes.”

“Well how are you? What’s going on?”

Viviane waits, listens for some hint in Madeline’s voice that she might be angry or annoyed, any indication that she would like an explanation for the time Viviane has spent in the weeks since they last talked. But it isn’t there. Madeline seems surprised when Viviane asks her to come for brunch, but promises to be there right away. What would Madeline think if she knew her kindness caused Viviane a twisted disappointment?

A half hour later Madeline’s silver Camry pulls into Viviane’s driveway. Her sister pops out of the car, twig-thin and tiny in her heels, blue jeans, and a ruffled white shirt. Her hair is bigger and blonder than Viviane remembers. It’s unsettling, somehow. By the time she makes it out of her chair and to the door, Madeline is there, knocking the rhythm for *Shave and a Haircut*.

Viviane opens the door and finds Madeline standing with a plump, wriggling infant in her arms.

“Surprise.” Madeline’s voice is stretched by her sweet Alabama twang, and she looks relaxed and delighted. “This is my Jacob’s little Marie.” Madeline bounces the baby and talks to her instead of Viviane. “Yes you are, aren’t you?” The baby gurgles and Viviane wonders if it’s happy or if it has gas. “I watch her on Mondays while Jacob’s wife goes shopping.”

Viviane nods and stands aside so her sister can walk in. As Madeline passes, Viviane realizes that her sister is turning into a doppelganger for Mrs. Lacy, the vocal

teacher she paid to rid her of her own accent the last summer before she left home for Juilliard, right down to the dome of ash-blond hair. “She’s lovely,” Viviane mutters.

“She looks like her Grandma!”

She looks like every baby Viviane has ever seen, complete with the odd anonymity that can be found only in the chubby, bald, and drooling. The baby doesn’t have even a haze of the carrot-red hair she and Madeline had as girls. Viviane watches in silence as Madeline takes a seat on the gray sofa, cradling the baby in her arms.

“So, can I help you with brunch, Viv?” Madeline smiles down at the baby, clucks it under the chin.

Viviane shuffles into the kitchen and holds up a tray of sandwiches--ham, with the crusts cut off the way Madeline likes them. Her first attempt at lunch, horribly burnt lasagna, smolders in the trash can on the porch. “I made iced tea, too.”

“Well,” Madeline replies, rising to her feet with a grunt. “Let me go out and get Marie’s playpen. I don’t think I can eat and balance a baby at the same time these days.”

Schumann, Viviane’s tiger-striped tomcat, jumps onto the counter with a yowl and heads toward the sandwiches hopefully. Viviane shoos him off the counter, notes his pouting saunter with her first smile in nearly a week. She turns back to the plate and finds Madeline next to her, bouncing the baby.

“Hold her for me, okay?”

Madeline presses the baby into Viviane’s arms and is out the door before Viviane has a chance to protest. The door slams and Schumann runs hissing out of the kitchen.

Marie begins to wail. The baby's doughy face turns bright pink and her cornflower-blue eyes squint closed.

"None of that now," Viviane says.

The baby continues to cry. Viviane remembers visiting Madeline in the hospital on the day that Jacob was born. Viviane had recently signed with the Seattle Philharmonic as a concert pianist. Madeline's hair was still its natural auburn then, and Viviane was uncomfortable, too conscious of the sterile walls, the medicinal smell, the broad white streak in her own hair, her sister's giddy, glowing joy.

Madeline had told Viviane at the baby shower that she was giving up her teaching position to be a stay at home mother. She'd never forget Madeline's late husband, Joe, giddy with fatherhood and probably still tipsy from a birthday party the night before, pressing baby Jacob into Viviane's arms without any warning and asking her if that wasn't better than any old piano. She was too polite then to tell him that it wasn't, that the music was all she needed.

But Viviane doesn't have music any more. She's lost her hands to arthritis. Now she's lost her heart to a boy and a winter's night. Marie hiccups, falls silent. Viviane ignores the aching in her elbows and gives the baby a little bounce.

"Gracious, it is hot out there," Madeline says, struggling back through the door with a collapsible playpen in bright tropical colors. "How are you two getting along?"

"I hit a boy with my car on Friday night. It was dark, and I didn't see him."

“What?” The playpen clanks on the tile floor and Schumann runs across the back of the couch with his claws out. The tearing sound startles the baby, who begins to cry again. “My God, Viviane.”

Madeline comes and lifts Marie out of her arms. Viviane tenses, feels slapped, and watches her sister open the playpen and lay the baby down, a pillow propped on either side. Madeline caresses her granddaughter on the top of her head, then returns to Viviane and stares up into her eyes. Viviane waits for the recriminations, the indignation. Instead she finds herself pulled into her sister’s arms.

“I’m so sorry.”

“He might die.”

“You can’t think that way,” Madeline replies.

Viviane pushes away, brushes a strand of hair off her face. “We should eat.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I haven’t been hungry for three days.” Viviane wants to break down. She wants to weep and let her sister tell her that everything will be all right. But she doesn’t believe it.

Viviane and Madeline sit at the kitchen table and talk about the weather, housekeeping, and the crime rate. The closest they come to talking about the accident is Madeline’s offer to drive her anywhere she needs to go during the day, and to talk to Jacob about driving Viviane on any errands she might have after dusk, since Madeline isn’t driving at night anymore. After an hour Madeline packs up to meet her daughter-in-

law. Viviane kisses her sister on the cheek, and gives her great-niece a gentle pat on the belly. Marie slumbers on, oblivious.

“I love you,” Madeline says softly. Call me if you need me.”

Viviane nods.

“You remember what I said, Viviane. Don’t you blame yourself.” Madeline turns and walks back toward her Camry.

Viviane closes the door. The house is dark. She wonders who else can be to blame. Wonders if little Marie was lying bleeding on the road, would her sister be so generous?

Six days.

Viviane has been living on delivery pizza and Chinese food to avoid her normal daily trip to the grocery store, the produce market. She considers calling Jacob for a trip to the store, but quickly dismisses the thought as she imagines Madeline’s pity for her poor, childless sister. Today she fills a trash bag with leftovers in varying degrees of staleness, wonders if she can stand greasy pizza or tepid Chinese for one more night.

The day is bright, moist, and hot. She walks to the curb. The streets are empty with the kids at school and parents off doing the things that parents do. Lunch is peanut butter on wheat bread that will probably mold by the weekend. Schumann is napping on the recliner and Viviane cannot find a comfortable spot on the couch when the twelve o’clock news starts. Lumps and springs push on every inch of the dull gray fabric that

reminds her uncomfortably of the upholstery in the trooper's car. The normally cheerful co-anchor is solemn.

“We start off the news today with a tragic story. Authorities have reported that seven-year-old Nicholas Prescott, hit by a car on Friday night, has died. Memorial services will be held this Saturday. The family is asking that donations be made to the Nicholas Prescott Memorial Scholarship in lieu of cards or flowers. Over to you, Jack.”

The anchorman is distinguished, silver-haired, and mournful. “Sad news indeed, Meredith. Next in the news, a fire breaks out in Holly Hill, authorities—”

The snap of the TV shutting off makes Viviane jump. The house is perfectly quiet. Even Schumann doesn't make a peep from where he lies, drowsing in the chair, a little lion on his cushiony precipice. She thinks of calling her sister, being half listened-to and half-listening, of calling the church for directions. Her reflection is a specter in the blank screen of the television, slack and gray. The shade of death.

“I'm a murderer.”

She weeps with her hands clenched in her lap. No matter how much she washes, no matter how many coats of lilac lotion she layers on, Viviane still smells iron on her hands.

Seven days.

Officer Hobbes calls to inform Viviane that they need her to come by the station on Monday as part of the continuing investigation into the death of Nicholas Prescott. Viviane writes down a date and time. Before she can hang up, Viviane asks Officer

Hobbes for the location of the funeral. Once she's off the phone, Viviane feeds Schumann and spends the rest of the day in bed.

Eight days.

Viviane takes a cab to St. Augustus chapel. The sun is going down, and more people are walking along Colonial than driving on it. When the cab reaches the west side of town the traffic slows to a crawl. Cars are lined up on both sides of the street. Men, women, and children file down the sidewalks toward the age-grayed steeples of the chapel.

"You can let me out here," Viviane murmurs.

The cab driver pulls over, stares at her in the review mirror. His eyes are hazel—amber-brown with brilliant flecks of green. She holds out the money. The twenty feels like a brand of shame as he takes it from her hand. The heels of her shoes grind and scrape on the cement. Despite the crowds of people, the streets are eerily quiet. The chapel is packed, and here the murmuring is like a distant tide. Viviane declines a service program, a small card with a picture of Nicholas smiling, surrounded by toys and trucks. He's wearing the red shoes.

She finds a seat at the rear of the room. The tiny oak casket is surrounded by white roses. A tall, dark-haired man Viviane guesses is Mr. Prescott stands by the head of the coffin with two willowy teenage girls, weeping. People walk up and pay their respects, place a toy or rose into the coffin. There is no sign of Mrs. Prescott. Organ music begins to play. The music twists in her stomach. She has to do what she came to

do and get out of here. Viviane's knees protest as she stands. She feels a magnetic pull, steps out of the aisle, looks across the room.

Nicholas's mother isn't standing by the coffin. She is sitting on the far side of the chapel, in the glow of the candles lit for prayer and hope. The crowds of people part and merge like fish schooling, not random, but by the hand of God, pushing and pulling Vivian toward the mother of the boy she's killed. She looks up when Viviane clears her throat.

"Mrs. Prescott, I'm—"

"I know who you are." Mrs. Prescott's face is blank, but the apples of her cheeks begin to flush.

"I wanted to tell you," Viviane's voice is just above a whisper. She can't seem to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Prescott begins. The woman is obviously barely keeping herself in check. Sweat beads at her hairline and her voice shakes.

"I'll go," Viviane replies.

The woman stands and Viviane waits for the sting of this woman's hand on her cheek. Instead she finds herself being embraced by the mother of the boy she has killed.

Grief has the smell of dying roses. Viviane feels tears burn at the corner of her eyes. Her hands burn too, aching for music she will never make again. Perhaps this mother feels the same ache for the child she will never hold. Viviane imagines wailing with her, higher and higher, for that which was lost to be returned, till they are singing on the air like sirens.

THE GIRL WHO LOVED BUGS

This girl, she doesn't need a name, is sitting on the sidewalk and watching ants move down a line. They follow the cement to the grass, walking through one of the culverts carved in the concrete. The girl knows the trenches don't occur naturally, spaced along the fake stone, she knows that they--the construction men--just cut them in with a saw. The girl watched them do it when the sidewalk was put in.

The girl doesn't know why the culverts are cut, only that they are there. She wonders if maybe they are meant to channel the rain. Either way the ants love them, and so the girl loves them. The ants are small and shiny black. Some of them are carrying bits of sand, others have chunks of softer things the girl imagines must be food. Some of them carry dead ants.

The girl imagines magnificent ant funerals deep under the earth. She imagines that when it is time for a queen to die, there is a great sarcophagus built for her. The sarcophagus would be blue as the sky, with amber inlay like autumn leaves, and tiny bits of quartz clear as glass. The sarcophagus would be built of such a size that all of her children could fit with her, all but one. The last child that the queen laid would be the next queen, safe and warm in her egg.

And after the queen and her children disappeared into the cold stone of the sarcophagus, the ant baby would hatch, and this ant, this queenling would reach out to a blue mother with amber eyes, a cold, hard mother incapable of being anything but a memory.

The girl understands bugs.

She understands being raised by a memory of love.

The girl leaves the ants and steals a bag of sugar from her grandmother's kitchen. When she returns, she opens the bag and spreads fine white lines of sugar on the ground. Soon the ants are swarming on the sugar in black lines squiggling over the cement, over the earth.

I am fed by the memory of love, the lines read. I am the child of a dead mother, a mother who left me pictures and an apology, a mother who loved a gun.

She watches the ants eat her words, taking them down into the earth to be kept secret, to be preserved forever in a vault the color of a blue sky.

THE EDGE OF THINGS

The air was muggy and humid outside, definitely head-shaving weather. Kat could feel her hair kinking up as she walked, each step a crunch down the graveled street to the bus stop. As she moved toward the sound of kids laughing and fussing like a flock of seagulls wheeling overhead, she imagined the smooth hum of clippers running over her scalp. With each tread of her long stride clumps of hair would roll down her shoulders. Instead of a nappy, shoulder-length mass, Kat would have an elegant haze of stubble. But her mother, who didn't understand relaxer or braids, said she wouldn't have her daughter running around trying to look like a boy.

Kat reached the corner just as the yellow hell wagon was pulling up. A couple of kids pointed at her and giggled as she loped toward the bus, but she ignored them.

“Oh no, it's the anorexic Ethiopian!” Some girl shrieked in mock horror as Kat hurried up the steps into the bus. The door shut behind her, and the bus rolled into motion. Kat slipped into the small seat right behind the driver's chair.

A tiny girl in the seat across from Kat's leaned forward and whispered loudly to the girl sharing her seat. “Did you see that afro-puff?”

“If I were her, I think I'd just wear a paper bag over my head,” her seatmate said, pushing her glasses up on her nose. “Honestly.”

“Maybe if the two of you don't shut up, I'll kick your asses,” Kat said.

Both the girls went pale and stared at her, wide-eyed. She felt a brief glow of pleasure at their obvious shock. Kat tried to ignore people when they made fun of her,

tried not to let the words have any power over her. But it was harder as she got older. Kat imagined, all too frequently, lashing out with fist and foot at the people who picked on her because she was quiet and actually did her homework, because she escaped with books instead of beer, pot, and promiscuity. She hid with Frodo leaving the Shire, fighting to Mount Doom, then sailing off to the Gray Havens, with Billy Pilgrim as the Trafalmadorians taught him the truth of time. She hid in her math books with the fearful wonder of Fibonacci numbers, in her science books with photosynthesis and symbiosis. She hid; she fought her rage, because she was afraid of it--the temper she saw every day in her mother and her sister. Kat didn't want to boil with their violence.

Things at home were always worse in the mornings, and so every morning Kat lay in bed after the alarm clock went off and pretended that she was still sleeping. The amber-pink glow of light filtering through her eyelids gave her a sense of warmth and safety. With her eyes closed, she felt like it was already, and would always be, summertime. And there was blue sky and the murmur of the creek with sunlight sneaking through the trees like a shimmer of butterfly wings. Then the thunderstorms rolled in like the thick crash of the tide, water pebbling and popping down through the leaves. She could sit bundled in her favorite flannel blanket and watch as her lover Madison danced around, trying to catch rain on her tongue.

With her eyes closed she could pretend that her bedroom wasn't the smallest room in their tiny, three-bedroom, twenty-year-old house. That there was no matted gray carpet with paths in it from where she and her older sister Bridget had walked in and out

every day for almost seven years. No spot where Bridget burned a hole in the carpet with her cigarette and told their mother Kat did it, no plum splatters from a broken bottle of nail polish. And every morning when Kat heard the shrill whine of her mother's alarm clock going off, heard her mother cough and sputter and curse her way through the house getting ready for work at the drugstore downtown, Kat opened her eyes and let her dreams go for another day.

Usually Kat could sneak out of her room and into the shower without her mother realizing she'd been stalling, but not today. Her mother slammed open the door before Kat even had the covers off. Kat's mother stood there in the doorway. Her heavy body stretched at the seams of a dirty white t-shirt. Three inches of dark roots gave a greasy look to her bleach blond hair, and a cigarette was already hanging from the corner of her mouth.

Before Kat could say a word, her mother launched into a lecture about irresponsible behavior and told Kat that if she missed the bus she'd have to walk to school. Her speech was punctuated by dull thumps from the next room. Kat's older sister Bridget was pounding on the wall, calling at them to shut up so she could sleep.

Kat's mother and sister were still fighting when she went into the bathroom. She got into the shower after spending a few frustrating minutes trying and failing to pick out her hair. It was hopelessly tangled by the never-ending humidity. The hot water sent up a billow of steam, and she leaned her head against the cool tile, rubbed her aching shoulders. They were both so angry, her Mom and Bridget. Kat couldn't wait to get into college and the hell out of Dodge.

The frosting on the cake was Madison ditching her. When she didn't show up at a quarter past seven, Kat's mom went off, shouting at Kat to get out of the house and down to the bus stop before she really did have to walk to school. In ruffled clothes, with no breakfast, Kat walked down Pennsylvania Avenue in the early morning heat. Kat was almost grateful for the excuse to get away from her mother and her sister, so sure that Maddie would show up and rescue her long before she made the mile and a half walk down to the stop on the corner of New York. But Maddie never came.

The bus ride was far from quiet for the rest of the trip, but no one said anything to Kat. She stared out the window and watched the earth spin by, like it was running from her destination. School could be so great, Kat thought suddenly, if it was me, the teachers and the books. No one else wants to be there, anyway.

The bus screeched to a halt. All the other students on the bus struggled for the door even though it wasn't open yet. When it did open, kids poured out, still cawing to one another. Kat was left alone with the bus driver, breathing air heavy with the metal-sweet scent of diesel fumes. She slid out of her seat and walked to the exit.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Feinstein."

The bus driver was a sweet old man, bald and wrinkled with a round belly and spindly limbs. A little bus gnome.

"My pleasure, young lady. You should run along now, or you're going to be late for your class."

The bell rang for first period and Kat was still five buildings down from her classroom. She raced down the covered walkway, sidewalk and red brick walls a blur on either side.

A voice rang out behind her. "You're late for class, Michaels."

Kat stopped, smiled. "It's not my fault. I was supposed to get a ride with a real cutie, but it didn't pan out." Her voice was light, casual, as she turned around to face her lover.

"Ha, ha," Madison said. Her orange hall monitor sash clashed horribly with her long, honey-blond hair. Being a hall monitor was her father's idea. He said Madison needed to work on her level of responsibility.

"How come you left without me this morning?" Kat asked.

"I-I was afraid I was going to be late. I didn't want to get in trouble with Mr. Donovan again." Madison's brow wrinkled. It did that every time she lied. Kat had seen it happen a hundred times when she told her parents she was going to Kat's and they were really headed to the creek.

"I called. Your dad said you left an hour early." Kat resented the hurt she could hear in her own voice.

Madison looked at the ground, shuffling her feet on the sidewalk. "Well, I need-- I need to talk to you, Kat."

"I'm right here," Kat said, and took a step toward her.

Madison backed away. "We can't talk here."

"When are we going to talk then?"

“I don’t know.” Madison was wringing her hands now, clearly agitated.

“Maddie, babe, what’s the matter?” Kat couldn’t stand to see Madison upset.

“Don’t call me that,” Madison hissed, taking another step away.

“I always call you Maddie.”

“Don’t call me babe,” Madison said, still whispering. “Someone might hear you.”

Kat ran her hand down Madison’s arm. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Get to class.” Madison gave Kat a little push. “If a teacher sees us out here talking, I’m going to get in trouble.”

“Fine, but you have to promise we’ll talk on the ride home.”

“All right.” Madison’s eyebrows drew together, creating that sharp line on her forehead again.

“You mean it?”

“Yes. I’ll see you after school.”

Madison turned and walked away, her shoulders hunched. When Madison disappeared behind the doors of the Administration building, Kat headed to class. Kat’s first period class was pre-AP English with Mrs. Lee. When Kat walked into the room, the class stopped. Usually Mrs. Lee would send late students packing off to the round up--a period of detention for any student found wandering the halls after the bell. For a moment Kat thought it was coming, that she was going to get in trouble, but Mrs. Lee smiled, shook her head, and hooked her thumb towards Kat’s chair.

“Take a seat, Ms. Michaels.”

Kat's classmates did not seem amused that she escaped punishment, and she wondered how they would take their revenge, but the rest of the day was uneventful. Kat made it to all her other classes on time, and hung out in Mr. Weston's class during lunch. The cafeteria was never a fun place for her. There were too many opportunities to run into somebody unpleasant. Seventh period was a total madhouse. The French teacher didn't even try to keep any order. Kat sat writing quietly until the bell finally rang.

Free! Kat could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and she couldn't keep from smiling. She scrambled out of the classroom as quickly as the rest of her classmates. As soon as she reached the walkway outside, she burst into a full-out run toward the parking lot. She'd talk to Madison, cheer her up, and maybe they could go and catch a movie to celebrate the beginning of summer.

Kat was within thirty feet of the student parking lot when she tripped. She slammed into the ground, scraping her right knee and wrist on the sidewalk. Her book went flying. Kat groaned as the book hit the cement and flipped open. Its binding burst and white pages drifted all over the grass.

“Shit.”

Kat struggled to her knees and crawled toward the book. People were walking around her like she was invisible. She reached for the page of a story she'd been working on for weeks and barely missed having her fingers crushed by the heel of some guy's work-boot. He knelt down with a grin and pulled the paper out from under his shoe. It tore in half. Kat winced, and he laughed. She found herself focusing on the sole-shaped smudge his boot left on her words.

“Sorry about that.”

“Sure you are,” Kat said. She recognized him from her pre-AP English class. Mrs. Lee had sent him to round up the week before when he’d arrived late.

“Don’t be such a bitch.”

Several people laughed. A small crowd of people stood around, pointing at her and snickering. Kat stood, pulled the torn papers out of the boy’s hand, grabbed her book, and stuffed the paper inside. She was pulling other pages off the grass when a wind picked up and blew them. Kat made a wild grab for a few pages and nearly slipped on a patch of gravel hidden in the overgrown grass. There was more laughter. She straightened up to tell them all to fuck off, but the words died in her throat. Madison was standing in the crowd, between two cackling cheerleaders, staring down at her.

“Help me, Madison,” Kat whispered. But Madison didn’t say a word—she just turned and walked away. Kat felt a wail building up inside her chest, but she refused to let anyone see her weep. It was bad enough that they were standing there watching her.

We said we’d always help each other, Kat thought. We promised.

Kat and Madison found the creek in sixth grade. Madison lived in a ritzy housing development her parents bought into during a housing slump, when prices were cheap. It turned out that the house was so inexpensive because the developer had sold more than fifty acres behind it to the county for a water reclamation plant. On warm days, when the wind blew the right way, the neighborhood smelled like a carton of rotten eggs.

No one bothered to jump the fence and go exploring in the woods because of the smell--except Kat and Madison. They were both desperate for adventure, for a place to get away from the world. During one of their many explorations they found the creek. It was a beautiful finger of clear water winding its way through a stand of pines and on westward to Bryson Lake. It was their secret. They would never tell another soul about it.

When they were sophomores, after four years of climbing the fence to get into the forest, they decided to make a more convenient entrance. So, on the first weekend of the summer, Kat told her Mom she was staying at Madison's and Madison told her parents she was staying at Kat's. They hung out at Madison's until the sun went down. Then Madison stole a pair of tin snips from her father's toolbox, and they made their way down to the fence with sleeping bags strapped to their backs. Trying to be quiet, and failing miserably between giggles and shushes, Kat and Madison wriggled under a huge azalea bush growing up the fencing.

Within forty grunting, cursing minutes, Kat and Madison had cut a large circle in the fence. Madison laid the piece carefully to one side and shimmied out of the straps holding her sleeping bag, then pushed it through the gap and pulled herself through to the other side. Kat followed. As she crawled through the opening there was a horrible clang and burning in her collarbone. Her sleeping bag had snagged on the top of the hole.

“Ouch, shit!”

“What happened?” Madison dropped back down to the ground. Concern was clear on her moon-shadowed features.

“I forgot to take off my pack.” Kat pushed backward, but she couldn’t move. The fence rattled wildly. “I’m stuck.” Kat began to struggle more vehemently. “I don’t want to be down here, Madison. They are bugs all over the place. They’re going to get in my clothes.”

“It’s okay, Kat.”

“Help me.”

Madison climbed up and over the fence in a few seconds, then moved back under the azalea bush.

“I’m right here,” she murmured to Kat soothingly. “I’m going to get this thing off, okay?”

“All right.”

Madison’s hands moved over Kat’s sides, her waist, slipping between her stomach and the damp earth. Madison loosened the ties of the sleeping bag and slipped it off Kat’s shoulders.

Kat pushed out of the hole in the fence and rolled over on her back. “Thanks, Maddie.”

“For what?” Madison asked. Her pale skin glowed against the surrounding night.

“For not leaving me stranded,” Kat said.

“I’ll always be here to help you.” Madison’s voice was soft, intent. She leaned forward and brushed a lock of hair off Kat’s forehead. Suddenly Madison’s body was pressed against Kat’s. Kat held her breath for a moment, and then they kissed.

Madison’s lips were soft, sweet.

They parted and Kat panted for breath. “Why don’t we head to the creek? We can make camp before gets too late.”

“Okay.”

Madison pulled out the flashlight and they went back under the fence. Kat was careful to push her sleeping bag in ahead of herself. Neither of them said a word as they walked through the woods. When they came to their normal camping spot, Kat unrolled the sleeping bags and set them next to each other near the base of an oak tree. The creek was a ribbon of mother-of-pearl in the moonlight, and the trickling water set Kat’s mind at ease.

“Will you read to me?” Madison asked.

“Sure.” Kat reached into her sleeping bag and pulled out three slim volumes. One was a book of poetry by Elizabeth Bishop. It had their favorite poem in it—“The Shampoo”. The second was a book of Roethke’s poetry. The third was Kat’s hardbound journal.

“Should we start with ‘The Shampoo’ or one of Roethke’s?” Kat asked.

“Neither,” Madison said softly.

“No? Which one then?” Those were the two poets Madison requested the most often.

“Read me one of yours, Kat.”

Kat had read to Madison before, but only stories. No matter how much Madison pleaded, Kat always had some excuse to keep a little piece of her heart hidden. But now—

“Okay,” she said.

Madison’s eyes widened. “You mean it?”

“Yes. But you have to promise not to laugh.”

“I promise.”

Kat rubbed her hand on the cover of her book, then flipped it open to search through the pages for just the right poem. As Kat looked through the book, Madison didn’t stir or complain. All her attention was focused on Kat.

“All right,” Kat said after a moment. “This one is called ‘Ashes.’” She cleared her throat with a little cough.

Are you leaving?
but there
is the fire
and slipping
like sunshine
intensified
it creeps
across the tile floor
entwines us
in bracelets
of golden, bronze, red.

Are you bleeding?
It will stop
feel the warmth
of golden on your skin
up inside
blossoming everywhere

Is it burning?
It will cool
in the hour
between now
and mourning.”

Kat fell silent, and neither of them made a sound. The wind whistled through the trees. Madison shivered.

“Kat—”

“It’s okay if you didn’t like it.”

“It was absolutely beautiful. You’re a wonderful poet, Kat.”

“You think so?”

“I do.” Madison shivered again.

“Maybe we should make a fire,” Kat murmured.

“I don’t want anything but moonlight, and you.” Madison’s voice was husky.

Suddenly she slipped her shirt off. Madison’s breasts, gentle curving flesh, were framed in the silvery light, pale against the dark flush of her areolas. “I’ll keep you warm,” Madison whispered, and pulled Kat into her arms.

“Looks like you could use one of these.”

It was Mr. Gibbs, the school janitor. He was smiling sadly down at Kat, holding an empty paper grocery bag out to her.

“Thanks,” she told him, and forced a smile.

“You’re welcome. You missed the bus. Do you need to call somebody to come and pick you up?”

“I don’t have too far to walk.”

“All right then. You be careful.”

He walked away in a slow, arthritic shuffle. After a few steps he turned back and gave her a little wave. Once he'd disappeared down the hall, she slipped her book into the paper bag and headed toward home. It took her over an hour to reach her neighborhood. She came to a stop in front of her house and stared down the driveway at the paint peeling off its walls.

A flicker of color caught her eye. There was a thin strip of blue ribbon tied to the mail flag. She walked over to it and slipped it off, and then tucked the material into her pocket. Her mother would be home in two hours. If dinner wasn't on the table, if her homework wasn't done, there would be hell to pay. Katrina shrugged and headed to the creek.

The ribbon was their sign. No one was nosier than Katrina's mother, and so, instead of trying to talk in code over the phone whenever one wanted to meet the other, they'd tie the ribbon to her mailbox flag. When she made it past the last street of houses and came to the fence, Kat made a beeline to the huge azalea bush that hid their opening. She lifted the piece of cut fencing aside and slid through, pulling the bag in behind her. Once the hatch was back in place she headed off toward the creek.

Madison was waiting for her. She sat, staring into the water, her bag on the ground beside her. Her honey-colored hair was shining in a shaft of light filtering down through the trees. She had to be so damned beautiful.

“What do you want?”

Madison turned and clambered to her feet. “Kat, I—”

“Aren’t you going to start calling me the anorexic Ethiopian like everybody else? It’s so clever, don’t you think?”

“Don’t. I wanted to tell you I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want an apology. I don’t even want to know why you didn’t stop it. I just want to know why you didn’t stay and help me. Everyone else left. No one would’ve known.”

“I—I don’t know. I was so embarrassed.”

Madison reached out toward her, and Kat took a step back. She dropped the paper bag on the ground and fought the urge to look in Madison’s eyes. “I can see where my utter humiliation would be very embarrassing for you.”

“Angie Thompson was there.” Madison’s voice was plaintive.

The wind and the water and the rustle of leaves were usually a balm on Katrina’s soul. As she felt anger building hot and bright in her chest, the sounds all seemed to coalesce in a low roar.

“What the hell does it matter if that nasty heifer cheerleader was there, Madison?”

“Look at me.”

Kat shook her head. She refused to let Madison see how much she was hurting.

“Damn it, Kat. Look at me.”

Her voice cracked. Kat looked up and saw Madison’s face was red, tear-stained.

“Yesterday in homeroom she told me everyone thinks I’m a lesbian because I’m a junior, and I don’t have a boyfriend, and you and I hang out alone all the time. I told her she was wrong, but she didn’t believe me. She threatened to tell my parents.”

“So? You’re my girlfriend. We’re in love.”

“That sounds like we’re lesbians, Kat. We’re not lesbians.”

“We sit out here and read to each other, and talk, and kiss. What else can you call that?” Kat asked. She wanted to scream at Madison, but fought the urge.

“You’re my best friend, Kat.”

“Best friends don’t kiss, Maddie. Best friends don’t meet in secret and say ‘I love you’ to each other every time they have to part.”

“Stop it.” Madison’s voice took on a hysterical edge. “I’m not a lesbo.”

Katrina took a step toward her. “Do you remember when we were reading Bishop? When I got to “The Shampoo” and told you we could grow old together and I’d get a big copper basin to wash your hair in? You said yes. You held my hand and cried.”

“I always want us to be friends, Kat.” She kept staring at the ground.

Kat took another step and grabbed Madison’s hands, caressing the top of them gently with her thumbs. “We’ve been more than friends for a long time. How many times have we made love under that tree? I love you, and I know that you love me.”

“I don’t.”

“We’re going to go to senior prom together next year. We’re going to go to college together as far away from here as we can get, remember?”

“I can’t. Not anymore.”

“Madison—”

“It’s wrong!” Madison screamed and yanked her hands free. Birds, startled out of the trees, winged off to find open sky. “If my parents find out what we’ve been doing, they’ll never talk to me again!”

Katrina took a deep breath and stared around at the forest. Pollen flickered in the air like glitter. She knew suddenly that it would be easier to grab those flecks out of the air than hang on to what she was about to lose.

“Tell me you don’t love me.” She said it softly, still looking anywhere but at Madison. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t love me. That you never have.” She forced herself to look up into Madison’s pale gray eyes. “And I’ll believe you.”

Madison was so still, so silent. She swallowed, hard, and Kat knew she wouldn’t say it. She would throw her arms around her and kiss her and then it would be all right. They could be brave together.

“I don’t love you. I never have.” Madison’s voice cracked.

Before Kat could say a word, Madison was stumbling off through the trees. Kat stood there for a few minutes, then grabbed the paper bag and walked down by the water. Kat slipped the bag off her book and set the rough paper aside. Before she opened the book, she caressed the cover. The ruined binding creaked as she flipped it open.

Taking a deep breath, she tenderly began to pull the book apart. As each page slipped free, she laid it in the current and watched it glide out of sight. When Kat came to “Ashes,” she rolled it up, pulled the blue ribbon out of her pocket, and used it to tie the poem like a scroll. Kat pressed the poem to her lips, then gave it to the creek. The broken book in her hands was still half filled with blank pages. Staring at the white paper,

Kat could feel the poem floating away like it was attached to her with a line of spider silk.

Kat took a pencil out of her back pocket.

*It's summertime, she wrote quickly. And my past is in the water. I'm not awake,
I'm not sleeping. The sky is blue, but the rains are still coming.*

RAISING THE DEAD

Every tree on Main Street died when they built the new road into town. The oak trees went shriveled, gray and leafless, branches curling up at the sky like old, angry hands. Even the paving on the road died, fading from the rich midnight of asphalt to an ashy, crumbling white by the end of summer.

That's where Angie found him.

She was four and a half miles through a five-mile run. Each day Angie got off the school bus, dropped her backpack at home, and ran. With the wind whistling past her ears, and her muscles stiffening with exertion, with every slap against pavement stinging her feet through the soles of her shoes, Angie didn't have to think.

That day she took Main Street to get away from the traffic, so she didn't have to worry about the cars and trucks and buses. But instead there was a boy.

He sat in the middle of the street, cross-legged, staring up into the tangled nest of withered oak branches with his hands lying palm-up in his lap. He was pale, with dark hair to his shoulders. His shorts and tank top were the same moon-gray as the road, and he was barefoot. Goosebumps broke out on Angie's arms.

She waved at the boy, trying to catch his eye. He didn't move. The limbs of the dead oaks shook and groaned in the breeze.

The boy was perfectly still, watching the tree line. Another gust of wind blew down the road, kicking up dust and setting the dead wood creaking. Nothing moved in

the branches. The thick, cracked bark was covered in dried moss. There wasn't a squirrel or a bird to be seen.

"Hey," Angie said. She took a step then stopped, worried that he might be frightened. "What are you doing down here?"

The boy began to rock back and forth in time with the swaying of the trees, humming softly to himself.

She moved closer. Within a few steps she was standing right next to him. Angie crouched down next to the boy. "Are you okay?"

The boy finally looked at her. His dark hair was swept back from a high, clear brow, and there was a tiny scar, like a crescent moon on his right cheek. He had a long, straight nose over a thin mouth. Eyes the same bright pale gray as her own were framed by long, dark lashes. Angie knew his face, and it wasn't possible. This boy was the mirror image of her twin brother, Michael.

Michael had been dead for seven years.

Angie could hear her pulse in her ears, a low, drumming pound that drowned out the sound of the shifting branches. She wanted to reach up with her free hand and pinch herself, to make sure she wasn't dreaming, but she was afraid to move. Angie licked her lips. The boy--she couldn't think of him as Michael--the boy wasn't smiling at her, but he wasn't frowning, either. He just looked at her, silent and impassive, with beautiful, unblinking slate eyes.

Angie took a breath and tried to exude a sense of goodwill, of receptivity to the spirits. She spoke.

“Who are you?” Her voice was loud, like a crow’s harsh croaking. It echoed down the empty road.

He moved so fast. One minute she was reaching out to him, the next she was sprawled on the ground watching him disappear into the woods. At first she thought he’d vanished, but when she stood up she could see a small track, probably a deer trail, winding back into the scrub.

Angie took off down the path after him, ducking around branches and moss. He was just a few feet ahead, running and leaping to avoid chunks of fallen wood and slick piles of rain-dampened leaves. She tripped on a root and nearly went sprawling, and when she recovered the boy was gone. The only sound was her own breathless wheezing and the wind in the trees.

“Shit.”

Angie took a step, stopped. Further down the path she could see living trees growing, safe from the old, dead road. If she walked down that path the scrub would fill with faint sound of birdsong and squirrels skittering across branches. She might see her brother again. That thought was more than enough to send her into the woods.

Angie’s running pace was long and loping. It didn’t take her long to settle into the cross-country rhythm that served her so well on the JV track team. The path grew curved, wider, and then in three steps she found herself in a clearing, facing a ramshackle house. There was a quick movement, a glimpse of gray shorts and dark hair. The boy had run into the backyard.

“Look at this place,” Angie said to herself.

It was Esther Lansing's house. Folks didn't know Mrs. Lansing had died until one blustery March day, four years before, when an ambulance came and took her away. Angie knew it was a broken heart that killed her. Mrs. Lansing passed barely a week after her wayward daughter, Rebecca, turned up in town with a U-Haul truck. After being gone for a decade, Rebecca Lansing took a week to load her old things, and then she left.

Mrs. Lansing didn't come back from the hospital, and eventually Angie's grandparents drove over to close the storm shutters on the windows. Better that than vandals break them. The house was never put on the market. In time the brush took over the driveway and people just forgot the house was there. It was easy to forget once the road died.

When Esther was alive her house was beautiful, small but tidy, with roses in every shade of the rainbow trellised on either side of the house. The lawn was thick and evergreen, with statues of fat, grinning garden gnomes peeking out from behind mushrooms, and, at the center, a pond stocked with goldfish. Now the blue paint on the cottage was peeling and faded, the trellises and roses gone brown and bramble-choked. Weeds grew out of the gutters.

More ghosts.

When Angie was small, Esther Lansing had taught her to see them, to see ghosts.

It wasn't an unusual thing for kids growing up in the Parson Spiritualist Camp. While other kids were playing with dolls or joining Girl Scouts, Angie's parents took her

and her brother Michael to a different house in the community every weeknight. The host program was a staple of camp life. It brought the residents together to share their knowledge and their hospitality.

Mr. Plute was Mondays. He specialized in geologic harmonics, basically using stones and crystals to align the energies of the body. Mrs. Plute made great lasagna and the best pineapple upside-down cake in the camp. Tuesday was Ms. Mirahi; she was a master yogi and didn't cook, but she ordered tons of pizza.

Wednesday was Mr. and Mrs. Tisse. They did art therapy and a build-your-own fajita bar. Angie and Michael always enjoyed that visit because Mrs. Tisse believed food could be art. After the workshop was done, she let Angie and Michael use food color and sculpting tools to craft beautiful fajita creations, which were promptly eaten. Thursday was movie night at the camp theatre--Angie and Michael's grandparents, Nan and Pop, paid to rent an old screen and a few tattered couches in the hotel's basement. They even provided the films and popcorn each week.

Friday nights were auras, ghosts, and meditation with Mrs. Lansing, the medium. She was the only host who really encouraged children to take part in the workshops. Angie and Michael could gain a meditative state reliably at six years of age, though Angie tended to fall asleep if she'd been up too late the night before. Meditation was meant to open their receptivity to the energy in the world. With the mind quieted, the body could see the energy vibrating from everything--trees, rocks, people, even spirits.

The exercises had always come easily to Michael. He was confronted by the dazzling kaleidoscope of the spiritual world, while Angie struggled to see the pearl-blue

energy crackling around her own hands, or the translucent amber glowing from the old oaks. But Michael never bragged, and Mrs. Lansing never scolded; she'd gently coaxed Angie and Michael to do as best they could. Angie had learned more about understanding and compassion, more love for living things, from that woman than from any other person who had taught her.

And after a long evening of meditating and conversing with the present energies, Mrs. Lansing would lay out a spread of veggie burgers and tofu dogs for dinner. While all the adults were eating, she'd sneak Angie and Michael into the backyard to play on the swing and gorge themselves on fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. On nights when her arthritis wasn't so bad, she'd stay out and swing with them.

Weeknights at workshop ended after Michael died. Angie and her brother went to sleep on a Tuesday night, and when Angie woke up Wednesday morning, Michael wouldn't move. An aneurysm, undetected and likely present from the time he was in the womb, had burst. He died painlessly, sleeping, at nine years old.

When Angie's parents got busy with work, Esther Lansing was the one who took care of her. Sometimes when Angie came to visit, they watched movies. Sometimes they fried up tofu dogs and played board games. Then came the nights when Mrs. Lansing baked cookies and they sat on the porch and watched the wind move the swings. Those moments of silence Angie shared with Esther Lansing were all that let her survive Michael's death.

* * *

There was a high, slow squeal of metal on metal from behind the house. Someone was playing on Esther Lansing's swing set. Ignoring the thunder of her heartbeat, Angie headed toward the sound.

In the gloom she could barely make out the figure of the boy riding on the center swing. *Michael*, her mind supplied. The two swings that hung on either side were missing their seats. Each rise and fall he made sent the chains around him creaking with rust. He was facing away from her, from the house, so that the forward arc of his swinging brought him near enough to touch the trees crowding the back of the yard. When his fingers brushed the leaves, he kicked back down.

The swing set's support poles shifted and thumped in the loose earth. During the arc back, he lay nearly horizontal, his hair skimmed the ground. The ghost, the boy, swung back toward the trees, faster, higher, and then stopped in midair, clinging to a branch. It snapped in his hands and he swung back toward the ground in a shower of leaves. He made no attempt to swing again; instead, he dug his heels in the earth, leapt to his feet, and ran around the yard shaking his two fistfuls of leaves above his head with a gleeful hooting sound.

She wanted to ask him who he was, wanted this boy to tell her that he wasn't her brother. In the same breath she fought the urge to call Michael's name, to ask his spirit what he was trying to tell her. But if she spoke, even a word, he might run off into the gloom and vanish. Angie took a deep breath and let her eyes relax.

As the boy ran back and forth under the trees, she focused on a spot just above his head. At first there was nothing--then a fine line, like mercury, glistened around his

hands, his shoulders, his face. As Angie watched, the silver lightened to white, white which became tinged with the color of blush roses.

Silver for the mind, white for the spirit unfettered by death, and pink for love.

The light shifted to amber that rocked and swayed. The boy stopped running and stared at Angie. Then his gaze shifted to a point above her left shoulder. The golden glow wasn't coming from the boy. She turned around and found herself face to face with Esther Lansing. The woman's skin seemed odd and fluid in the flickering light cast from the candle she held in her hand. The dead woman spoke and her voice was solemn and slurred.

"Shouldn't you run on home, Angie?"

Cold washed over her like a wave. Angie bolted back down the path toward Main Street. The sound of her brother's ghost hooting in the darkness followed her for far too long.

Angie came home to an empty house. In the seven years since her brother's death, it was as if her parents had become frozen in time. Four stripped rocking chairs--one each for Mom, Dad, Angie, and Michael--were still waiting for paint on the front porch. The tire for the swing was rotted right off the rope, and just left sitting, propped against the base of the oak tree in their yard.

And every night at six o'clock sharp, her mom and dad left to open up the family bookstore, Parson's Pages, for the night shift. There were never any more customers at night then during the day, but before his death, Michael said they should try night hours.

Ever precocious, he'd told their parents it would help to build up the customer base with students from the local university.

Seven years later they were still trying.

Dinner was in the oven, a plate of desiccated vegetarian stir-fry. A note on the counter reminded Angie to make sure she'd locked the door behind her when she came in. Until Angie became vegan and gave up dairy, her nightly note had reminded her to be sure to drink her milk, too. Instead there was a glass of chocolate soymilk, poured and waiting for her in the fridge.

She took her food out into the living room, and turned on the stereo to drown out the quiet. One of her parents had left George Winston's *Autumn* in the CD player, so she ate her meal on their lumpy old sofa to the sound of melancholy piano music. Each bite of food was like a tiny lead weight dropping into her stomach.

When the wind blew through the trees, setting the house creaking on its old foundations, goose bumps broke out all over Angie's arms. She'd never been afraid in her own home before.

The back of the sofa was covered in a crocheted afghan her mother made, squares in red, orange, brown, and cream. Angie pulled it off and wrapped herself up. She'd wait there till her parents came home. In the warmth, with her stomach full, she dozed and dreamed.

Angie led her parents down Main Street, but it was Main Street the way it used to be: rich black asphalt, framed by mossy oak trees thick with leaves. Michael was sitting in the middle of the street, his dark hair trim, wearing a red t-shirt and denim shorts. Her

parents ran to Michael's side. Angie waited for her brother to speak to their mom and dad, to tell them that they had to start living again. But instead her brother faded, his hair grew long and unkempt, and his clothes gray as the moon.

And as he changed, Main Street changed all around them, fading and decaying. Angie called to her parents to come away, but they wouldn't. As she shouted at them, her parents grew insubstantial, ethereal. They disappeared with Michael. She was left standing alone on the road, listening to the distant sound of trucks on the highway.

Angie woke up sweating, twisted in the afghan. She pulled it off and draped it back over the sofa. The wind was still gusting, carrying the petroleum tang of asphalt in the air.

The next day Angie didn't go running after school. Even walking home from the bus stop left her unsettled. Cool weather had come through overnight, but the air was still thick with moisture, and the shadows seemed too deep under the trees. When she got home, Angie told her parents she wasn't feeling well and went straight into her bedroom. Under her white goose down comforter, looking up at a ceiling painted to mimic clouds and sky, Angie felt cozy and safe.

As it got closer to six, Angie waited for the sound of the front door that would signal her parents had headed out to Parson's Pages for another night shift. Instead, when the digital clock next to her bed read 6:00, someone knocked on the bedroom door.

"Come in," Angie said. She sat up in bed and pulled her books out of her backpack, spreading them across her lap.

The door opened, revealing Angie's mom and dad in the doorway. Both of her parents had shoulder-length hair, her mother's sandy and her father's dark. Angie was definitely her father's daughter, but she had her mother's gray eyes.

"What's up?" Angie asked.

"We wanted to see how you were feeling," her dad said.

They stood there on the threshold to Angie's room, but neither of them stepped in. She could count on one hand the number of times either of them had entered the room since her brother's death.

"I'm okay, just tired, I guess."

"Well, we don't feel right leaving you alone when you're feeling under the weather," Mom said, and Dad nodded in agreement. They each had an arm around the other's waist, as if they had to hold one another up.

Before Angie could thank them for staying home, her mother spoke again.

"We called Nan, she'll be over in a few minutes."

Angie said thanks, but her parents had already walked away. She waited for their truck to pull out of the driveway before leaving the bedroom. There was a can of tomato soup on the counter, but no note.

"Guess I'll have to pour my own milk tonight."

She split the soup into two bowls and took turns heating them in the microwave. When they were done, Angie put a row of saltines on a plate, and moved everything over to the dining room table. She poured two glasses of water, and got napkins and spoons. As soon as Angie was finished, the doorbell rang. Nan was standing on the porch

bouncing on the soles of her feet. Despite the cold, she only wore a t-shirt and Capri pants with Birkenstocks. The canvas bag she wore as a purse was slung over one shoulder, covered in buttons and pins that bordered a “Ban Plastic!” logo printed in bright green on the side. Nan’s flyaway white hair was being whipped around by the wind.

“Do I smell tomato soup?” Nan asked.

“Hi, Nan.” Angie smiled and held her arms out at to her grandmother. Nan was a small woman, her head barely came up to Angie’s collarbone, but her embrace was firm and warm.

“Hello, my girl,” Nan said. “Let’s eat and you can tell me what’s happened.”

Angie backed out of her grandmother’s arms. “What do you mean?”

Nan leaned toward her. “I can tell something’s wrong, Angie.”

They sat down together at the table, and Angie described her encounter with the boy, with Michael’s double, and her pursuit down the path that led to Esther Lansing’s old house. When she told Nan about being confronted by Esther’s ghost, Angie shuddered.

“I’m surprised at you,” Nan said. “You should know better than to be afraid of spirits.”

Angie’s cheeks burned. “I know that, Nan. It was just such a shock.”

Her grandmother hopped to her feet, walked to the door, and pushed it open before Angie could say a word.

“Are you coming?” Nan asked, turning back to Angie.

“Where?”

“Follow me if you want to find out.”

Nan marched into the night. Angie shut off the lights, locked the door, and followed after. Away from the porch the only light came from the stars shimmering overhead, and a sliver of moon that looked like an eye closing against the sky. They walked in silence for a while. The wind was still whistling through the branches, and pushing thin ribbons of translucent cloud across the stars.

“Why didn’t you tell your folks what happened?” Nan asked. Her voice seemed too loud in the starlit darkness.

“Because I didn’t know if it would make things better or worse.”

Angie waited for her grandmother to reply, but Nan just reached out and took her hand, swinging it as if they were two girls skipping down the street.

“I dreamed about it, what it would be like, taking them to him,” Angie said, squeezing her grandmother’s hand. “That Michael would tell them they have to move on, they have to live again.”

“That’s a good dream,” Nan said.

“Mom and Dad decided to stay with him.”

They drifted into silence, but Nan didn’t slow her purposeful stride. After a few minutes of walking, there was a strange shimmer in the air that grew brighter the closer they approached. Angie slowed, squinted. A large, square sign glinted in the middle of Biers Avenue, reflecting the starlight. It read: Road Closed. Angie’s grandmother had led her to the southeast end of old Main Street. She stopped in her tracks. Nan let go of Angie’s hand and walked on around the sign.

“Nan,” Angie hissed.

“Are you coming, or are you going to stand there?” Nan asked from the darkness.

“I can’t go down that road again. Not after yesterday.”

“Well, if you want to know the truth, you’re going to have to travel down this road with me.” Nan walked off down Main Street.

Cursing under her breath, Angie ran into the darkness after her grandmother.

They walked in silence again, and when Angie tried to talk, Nan hushed her. The skeletal oaks creaked all around them. It was terrible that a road where she’d run and played so many times as a girl, a road in her own home town, could feel so distant and strange.

Nan stopped so suddenly that Angie almost walked right into her. The old woman rustled in her bag for a minute and pulled out a small flashlight.

A tiny pool of blue light was cast on the street, and shadows pooled around the beam where it revealed the gray of the road. Nan tipped the light up onto the trees. The oaks looked leprous in the glow, chunks of Spanish moss like huge hairy spiders in the crooks of branches. The beam of the flashlight flickered and danced in rhythm with Nan’s footsteps as she continued down the road, Angie in her wake.

It was like being in a nightmare--there Angie was, in the dark of a dead street, while her grandmother led her under the skeletal trees. Nan stopped again, shifted the light back and forth till it settled on a small break in the scrub. Angie’s grandmother had brought her to the deer trail that led to Esther Lansing’s house.

Nan started fumbling with the flashlight as she walked toward the path.

“Nan, please, leave the light on,” Angie said, her voice high with panic. She didn’t want to be here, with these ghosts, in the dark.

The blue beam disappeared.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Angie.”

Nan’s warm hand closed around Angie’s again. Angie let her grandmother lead her off down the path to Esther’s house.

The trail was dark, even darker than the road, and the wind hissed through the leaves of the trees that lived beyond Main Street. Nan led Angie down, over sand and scrub and fallen branches. The sound of their passage kept time with the breeze, like an animal breathing.

When they stepped into the clearing it was filled with golden light. Every window in Esther Lansing’s house was open; the warm glow spilled from the windows and rolled out over the lawn. Shadows danced inside the house, fast and slow.

“Angie,” Nan said. Her voice was soft, her grip warm and strong. “Remember something for me. Remember that there are some secrets worth keeping.”

Nan let go of Angie’s hand and walked off toward Esther’s house. She took the steps slowly, clinging to the banister. As soon as she reached the top she knocked on the door, three sharp raps that echoed off the trees. Angie felt she’d lived a lifetime standing on the edge where the dark path bordered the light. When the door finally opened, her flesh felt strange and loose, as if she was turning into water.

Nan took a step into the doorway and Angie sprinted up the stairs after her, slipping past the closing door and into the house. She stood there, panting for breath, and heard the door click shut behind them.

Esther was sitting on her old plaid sofa with Michael at her feet.

“Nan, we have to go,” Angie said. She reached behind herself for the doorknob, unwilling to turn her back on the strange tableau.

Esther Lansing’s ghost stood up and walked across the room. The candlelight threw strange shadows as she moved. When the figure was close enough to reach out and touch them, Angie stepped in front of Nan. Esther smiled.

“Why do you wander?” Angie asked. Her voice shook and she could feel her cheeks flush with shame. “What have you lost?”

These were questions one asked the wandering dead. Angie never imagined she’d ask them of the person she learned them from. There was the sudden warm pressure of Nan’s hands against her shoulder blades.

Esther’s mouth opened and a long, low, croaking sound filled the room. Esther coughed, coughed again. It was laughter.

“I’m no ghost,” Esther Lansing said. “I’m just as alive as you are.”

“Then why is he here with you?” Angie pointed at her brother’s ghost.

“Michael,” Angie said, leaning over, trying to catch his eye. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

He didn’t move. Angie fought the urge to weep. She must’ve offended her brother somehow, in life or after.

“Michael?” Esther asked.

“You’d best sit down, Angie,” Nan told her.

And so Angie and Nan each took an old cane and wicker chair while Esther shuffled back to the couch. Michael still played on the floor, rolling marbles that flashed bright like the eye of the moon. Then Esther told Angie the story of her death.

Esther had married Wendell Lansing right after high school. Wendell was a solid, kind man, Esther’s childhood sweetheart. He worked as a groundskeeper at the local university. After four miscarriages they were delighted when their daughter, Rebecca, was born. She was a wild girl, always turning up with her hair in tangles and her jeans torn. When Rebecca was thirteen, Wendell died in a traffic accident, and she became wilder still, running around at all hours of the day and night, hanging around with the type of boys who vandalized the graveyard.

No one in town was surprised when Rebecca became pregnant before she was done with high school. In her fifth month, she miscarried--her mother’s daughter, after all. Rebecca didn’t run around with boys after that. She turned her act around and graduated salutatorian. A scholarship took her up to New York for college.

Esther coughed and wheezed as she spoke, her voice husky and indistinct.

Esther didn’t hear much from her daughter. Decades passed with Christmas cards and the rare phone call. Then, two weeks before her daughter’s thirty-ninth birthday, Rebecca called to tell Esther she was a grandmother. The baby, a boy named Toby, was delivered by caesarean, hearty and hale. Christmas cards came with pictures now, of

Rebecca and a plumb baby, but never mention of the father. Then one night, out of the blue, Rebecca turned up at Esther's door with six-year-old Toby in tow.

Toby, who Rebecca didn't want anymore, with his autism that brought on tantrums and fits of hand flapping, Toby who still wasn't fully potty-trained and screamed when his mother tried to hug him or move his toys out of line. Esther agreed to take her grandson without hesitation, and even had a lawyer handle custody arrangements. The last thing Rebecca did for her son and her mother was leave.

Toby, then, Angie thought. Not Michael. The boy spun a marble and flapped his hands gleefully, watching it dazzle and shine in the candlelight. Relief and sadness mingled, made her throat burn with bile.

"After she left I had the stroke," Esther said, wiping the corner of her mouth. "I'd had a few small ones before, but this one was a real doozy."

Nan nodded. "If it weren't for Amiya, I don't know if you'd be up and walking now."

"That's the truth," Esther said.

Amiya. Angie could see the willowy, dark-skinned woman who'd taught her lotus position and a love for deep-dish Sicilian pizza. "Amiya Mirahi knows that you're alive?"

"She's my physical therapist."

"Who else knows?"

"Only the old crowd," Nan said. "The workshop sponsors."

“But you never came home,” Angie insisted. “You went off to the hospital and didn’t come back.”

Esther nodded. “After the stroke my doctor wanted to put me in a nursing home. Luckily Daisy Plute was my care nurse. She convinced the him to release me into Amiya’s care so that I could convalesce here.”

The flickering candlelight and the rattle of the marbles on the floor made Angie feel dizzy. “Why tell people you died?”

“She didn’t really,” Nan said, and pushed her hair off her forehead. “An old woman got taken away by ambulance, friends bustled around, the storm shutters were down. People jumped to conclusions.”

“And you didn’t correct them.”

“They would’ve taken him away from me,” Esther said. “He’d have ended up in foster care.” The old woman leaned forward as if to reach out to Angie, but Angie kept her seat, arms crossed tight on her chest.

“How do you live out here on your own?”

“It’s amazing what you can order on Amazon.com,” Nan said. “Anything Esther needs, your Pop and I can get for her. And we’re a romantic couple--no one thinks a thing of it when we go for a moonlit stroll after our salsa lessons.”

She and Esther both laughed at this. The sound made Toby jump. The boy scooped up handfuls of marbles and rolled them across the floor.

“Ed and Natalie Tisse have done wonders with him. He loves art.” Esther reached down and tousled her grandson’s hair. He didn’t seem to notice. “If anything happens to me, they’ll be his guardians.”

“And until then you’ll stay here?” Angie asked. “Alone?”

“She’s hardly alone,” Nan said. Esther leaned forward and patted Nan’s hand.

“You should tell people the truth,” Angie said.

“Truth, truth!” Toby echoed.

The boy’s voice was deep, with the barest hint of a man’s gravel, completely unlike her brother’s voice. At the time of his death, Michael had still sung soprano in the school choir, his speaking voice was so high and sweet that some of the older boys at school had teased him.

“It’s not that simple, Angie,” Esther said.

Even with the storm shutters open, Esther’s living room smelled of wax and smoke, and the air was damp and heavy. Angie could feel sweat beading on her forehead, at the nape of her neck. Every sound--the clattering of the glass marbles on the wooden floor, Toby’s humming, the creak as Nan shifted in the wickerwork chair--was magnified a thousand-fold, bouncing off the ceiling and the walls.

“I can’t breathe in here.” Angie stood up and walked across the room without another word.

Cool air washed over her when she opened the front door, guttering the candles’ flames. There weren’t any chairs on the porch, so Angie sat down on the bottom step.

Moonlight filtered down through the trees. Old, broken trellises poked through the tall grass, casting shadows that looked like jagged teeth. The door opened and closed again.

“Can I join you?” Esther asked.

“It’s your house, you can do what you want.”

“Oh, you’re really and truly a teenager now, huh?” Esther gave a low, slurred chuckle.

When Angie didn’t respond, Esther sighed and edged down the stairs one by one, clutching the porch railing. Angie could see how difficult it was for the old woman to keep her balance.

“Let me show you something,” Esther said. She held out her arm. “Will you walk with me?”

“I’m a little tired.” Angie wrapped her arms around her knees. The porch steps were faded and peeling under her sneakers.

“I know all about your career as the star of the track team, young lady. So up you get. It won’t be hard to keep up with my pace, I promise.” Esther was trying to sound stern, but Angie could hear laughter in her voice.

Esther led Angie back to Main Street. They stood together on the faded asphalt, under the moon.

“Now tell me, Angie. What do you see?”

“Old asphalt and dead trees.”

Esther shook her head. “I taught you better than that. Don’t use your eyes. Look at this place with your soul.”

Angie slowed her breathing rate, letting her mind empty of the fear and anger twisting in her guts like a snake. She relaxed her eyes.

Nothing happened at first. The moon was so low now that the trees were nearly lost in shadow. And then a pinpoint of amber light appeared from behind the nearest oak. Angie took a step forward. The light would dip and blink if it were a firefly, a love call to others of its kind. But it wasn't. The globe of amber light hovered in the middle of that old oak, and then, in the space of a breath, each tree lining the road had its own light.

Like the stars had come down to earth, Angie was surrounded by hundreds of glowing points of life.

"The hearts of the oaks aren't totally dead," Esther said. "But they're not as bright as they once were. It is a light of struggle, and of pain." Slowly, with a shaking hand, she lifted her arm and pointed at Angie's chest. "It's the same type of light I see in you."

It was true. Angie had been half-alive since the morning she woke to find her twin brother's body cold in the next bed. At the funeral, he'd seemed too small for the walnut coffin with its blue satin lining, as if there was room enough for her to crawl in beside him. Every day since they'd left Michael under the earth and grass, Angie saw the pain in her parents' faces. And when they looked at her, they must see their dead son.

Angie wiped her face on her sleeve. "I'll promise to come back to life if you will."

Esther smiled. "I have a life, Angie. It may not be the one that I expected, but I'm living it as best I can. Now it's time for you to start living yours."

Angie took the old woman's hand and they walked away, leaving the old oaks to shine on Main Street.

WASP HONEY

Enterprise, Florida was a town with a secret. But the secret didn't belong to the whole town; it belonged to just one woman. Her name was Annie Ensley. Annie was born in Enterprise long before tract housing had spread everywhere, popping up like mushroom caps along the twisted web of mycelium streets. Fungal suburbia was eating Enterprise from the outside in, getting closer every day.

The secret had its roots in Annie's father, William, who was the finest exterminator that Enterprise had ever seen. He got rid of any kind of pest a person could run afoul of, right up until the day that William and his wife were rear-ended by a drunken trucker and died. Annie was seventeen. She dropped out of high school and took over the family business after that.

For the next forty-six years, Annie specialized in insect pests, everything from ants to weevils. She said that mammals were too unpredictable, something inherent to a closed circulatory system. People around Enterprise said that Annie was a miracle worker at getting rid of bugs.

Here's the secret: Annie never killed a single one.

On a Friday morning the secret took Annie over forty miles out to Ormond, to save a colony of bugs infesting a home built right on the beach. The owner swore up and down the trouble was carpenter ants. When the man called, Annie described the telltale differences between carpenter ant and termite infestations--the differences in carapace,

swarming patterns, and the wood chaff left behind. Annie wanted to be sure because she didn't take termite cases anymore, her arthritis was too bad.

He told her that all the signs indicated ants, but when Annie arrived she knew within five minutes that she was dealing with termites. The guy tried to argue, even when she pulled a handful of termite nymphs out of the wall and held them right under his nose. It was half a tank of gas down the drain.

And the day wasn't bound to improve. When Annie got home, she found a backhoe parked in her driveway.

"Well," she said to herself, and sighed. "There goes the last one."

Growing up on Pine Street, Annie had become accustomed to the line of trees that ran down either side of the road, a tiny swath of forest with scrub jays, cardinals, rabbits, squirrels, and a half dozen other flying or furry things. But two years ago the property around her sold, and little by little, cookie-cutter houses took over Pine Street. The only way one house could be distinguished from another was by the color of the stucco. Nine new homes had eaten up most of the oak and sand pine, replacing birdsong and fresh breezes with the rumbling stink of SUVs and the shrieks of roving packs of children.

Annie owned the three lots at the end of the dead-end street, and the long, low, ranch-style brick house built right in the center parcel. It was all handed down to her when her parents passed. The house was nestled under live oaks, and the lots on either side were untouched brush.

Now, the last wooded lot next to her property had been razed for yet another house. Gray sugar-sand was all that was left, lumpy with burnt umber roots weeping sap.

Only two trees had been left behind, a pair of scrawny scrub oaks that would probably die before the house was finished, giving the new owners the excuse to tear them up.

The backhoe operator was sitting in the middle of Annie's driveway, sprawled in the shadow of his hulking yellow machine. He ate fast food out of a paper bag. A sticky caramel-brown river of soda ran down the sidewalk from his overturned cup. Several of the neighborhood boys were climbing around on the fenders, poking thick black tread on tires taller than they were.

"Excuse me." Annie left her van idling on the side of the road. "I'm going to need you to move this thing."

The man didn't answer; he just kept eating his lunch. She got within a few feet of him and saw cords trailing out of his shirt pocket into his ears. Another marvel of technology--take away all the beautiful sounds of the natural world, and then blast it with noise to cover up the ugliness left behind.

Annie leaned over in front of the man and waved her hands right in front of his face. "Hello there." The man jumped and pulled out his headphones. "Can you get this out of my driveway please?"

"Sorry about that." The man spoke around a mouthful of hamburger, spraying crumbs all over his shirt. "I asked one of your neighbors where I should park and they said this spot would be empty during the day."

"These people aren't my neighbors," Annie said. "They just live on the same street." She walked back to her van without waiting for a reply.

At a gesture from the backhoe man, the boys left Annie's yard, skulking off with sour, angry faces. One of them stuck their tongue out at Annie as he went by. She smiled and waved.

It was the art of old age. Annie was unfriendly enough to keep the kids off her property, but not so ugly that they egged the place. For the adults, she was careful to keep her front yard trim, lush, and green. The landscaping was simplicity with purpose-- it left nothing to draw attention.

Sometimes she wondered what they would all think of the riot of flowers, of the lily pond and the beehives, hidden away in her backyard.

The next morning the boys took revenge for the premature loss of the backhoe. At a quarter to seven, Annie woke up to the sound of knocking on her door. She threw on a robe and walked to the front of the house, and all the time the knocking grew louder and more frantic. The peephole gave Annie a fuzzy, distorted look at a pale boy with curly blond hair. He kept frowning and looking over his shoulder.

Annie pulled her door open. "What do you want?"

The boy backed away from her, wringing his hands. The moment she stepped out onto the porch, Annie was engulfed in a foul stench.

Her doormat was covered with dog shit.

A pack of boys howled with laughter at the end of Annie's driveway. None of them could've been more than eleven or twelve. Annie stepped out of her slippers and the kids scattered, running off to hide in yards, or close themselves behind the safety of a

front door. One boy rode off on a bike, madly pumping legs taking him off of Pine Street all together.

“Sorry,” the pale boy muttered. “I’m sorry.”

He took a step back and completely missed the stairs, hitting the rough cement on his hands and knees.

“You all right?”

Annie got a glimpse of the boy’s scraped and bloody knees before he ran off behind her work van.

The van, pristine and white, was the result of ten years’ saving. Annie cleaned it from stem to stern each and every Saturday. To advertise the business she let the shining white paint be broken only by one line of five-inch high, sage green text: Ensley Family Pest Control--Serving Volusia County Since 1952. Now the words were buried in a smear of dog shit the same yellow brown as the stuff stuck to her slippers.

“So much for the art of old age.”

Annie rolled up her faded welcome mat, slippers and all, and dumped it in the trash. It would only be a loss for delivery boys and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

She was still cleaning the van when the pale blond child came back. He was being dragged down the street by a small, plump woman with sandy hair. The woman called out to Annie as soon as they reached the driveway.

“Ma’am, can I speak with you for a minute?”

Annie nodded. "I suppose." She waited for the woman to apologize, or to make her boy apologize, or both.

"I'm Cory Mills," the woman said, laying a hand against her chest. "And this is my son, Thomas. Say hello, Thomas." Cory nudged her son toward the van.

"Hello," the boy said. His large, gray eyes flickered from Annie's gaze to the side of the van and back again. Spiderman band-aids covered the scrapes on both his knees.

"Annie Ensley. What can I do for you, Mrs. Mills?" Annie ran her soapy sponge over the lettering on the van and the boy winced.

"We need your help. We've got a bug problem."

Annie wanted to tell the woman what her son had done, but she needed customers more than an apology. Instead she asked what type of bug they were having trouble with, but the mother didn't answer, it was the boy.

"I found a yellow jacket nest." He stared at the ground when he spoke.

Annie sent Mrs. Mills and her son home. She got the van stocked with all the supplies she'd need for a yellow jacket infestation, and pulled out her sage green work cap to pin down her flyaway white hair. It was a short drive to the end of the street. Mrs. Mills was waiting for her in the driveway.

"Thomas needed to finish his breakfast, Ms. Ensley," the woman said, waving to her. "So if it's okay, I'll take you around back. That's where he found the nest."

"Lead the way, Mrs. Mills."

"You can call me Cory."

As they walked, Annie found herself being subjected to Cory Mills's life story. She and Thomas had only lived on Pine Street for seven months. They left Orlando, and Thomas's father, to try and start a new life in the aftermath of an ugly divorce.

"I'm still trying to finish unpacking," Mrs. Mills said, leading Annie up to the gate set in the side of the fence. "If it's okay with you, I'll head back inside. Thomas said the nest is along the back of the fence line, somewhere."

As she spoke, Mrs. Mills pushed the gate open, revealing a lawn twice the size of Annie's backyard, with blackberry bushes running along the fence. A giant crape myrtle tree with broad clusters of red blossoms towered over the yard, and a porch ran along the back of the house. Annie wondered how the boy felt about living away from the city for the first time.

Before the woman could climb the porch steps, the French doors at the top burst open and Thomas rushed out. His upper lip was covered with milk.

"Hang on a second," Thomas said. "I'm done. I even put the bowl in the dishwasher."

"Well, you've got milk on your face." Cory frowned at her son. "Go clean up. And make sure you rinsed that bowl first."

"I have a question, though, please." He was staring at Annie, eyes bright and troubled. "Before you do anything."

Annie nodded. "I'll wait."

Thomas ran into the house.

“That’s so nice of you.” Mrs. Mills stopped at the top of the porch steps. “If you don’t mind, could Thomas watch you work? He’s not much help unpacking; I could get a ton of cleaning done without him under foot.”

“You’re sure you want him out here? He could get stung.” Yellow jackets, when provoked, could swarm in the dozens and even kill a child or pet that didn’t flee fast enough.

Cory laughed. “No, no, he’ll be fine. He’s forever watching nature shows on cable. That’s how he knew to back away instead of panicking when he found the nest in the first place.”

“Clever kid.”

“I think so.” She thanked Annie again for watching her son, and walked into the house.

When the boy came back he was wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled tight, gloves, and he had his jeans tucked into the tops of his boots. It was decent beekeeping gear--the only thing he needed was a veil to protect his face. Without a word, Thomas hopped down the steps. As soon as his feet touched the grass, he turned back and waved her onward. They were less than half way across the yard when the tight, glossy bodies of yellow jackets began to buzz around them.

“It’s there,” Thomas said.

He was pointing. Annie followed the line of his finger to a decomposing pile of leaves near the base of the faded pine privacy fence. Just under the front edge of the

browning leaves there was a swirl of gray, like a pile of ashes or a peppered meringue.

Yellow jackets were busy all around the quarter-sized hole that marked the entrance.

“Well spotted, Thomas,” Annie said. “It’s definitely a jacket nest. Let me go out the truck and get my things and I’ll get them taken care of for you.”

“Wait,” Thomas said. He stared at the ground. “You said you would answer my question.”

“I did, you’re right,” Annie said.

Thomas kicked the grass, tugged the zipper of his hooded sweatshirt up to his chin. When he finally made eye contact with Annie, she was surprised to see he looked teary.

“You’re going to kill them, aren’t you?”

He didn’t give Annie time to answer.

“I tried to tell my mom how useful they are. How they eat garbage and caterpillars and stuff.”

“You’re a real animal lover, huh?”

The boy nodded. “I’ve been a vegetarian since last summer. Mom buys all organic food, but she won’t let me be vegan. She’s worried I won’t get enough protein.”

Annie would never get the job done at this rate. “Thomas, if you help me get my gear out of the van, I’ll explain the removal process. How’s that?”

The boy nodded. They walked of the back yard together, and he watched, finally silent, as Annie unlocked the back of the van. She pulled out her gloves, two veils, her

upright with the dome attachment, and finally her smoker, a beekeeper's best tool that looked like an old metal coffee percolator with a small black leather bellows on the side.

She put her gloves on and then explained the smoker to Thomas, showing him the pine needles she'd bundled in the bottom. She let him light a wooden match and toss it in on the tinder. The smoke, released in measured doses when she pumped the bellows, would put the yellow jackets in a relaxed state, just as it did bees, making it less likely that they would swarm.

"And then you kill them?" Thomas asked, staring at the large plastic dome.

"Nope. I don't kill them. That dome distributes the suction of the vacuum to pull the yellow jackets out of the ground with no harm done. In a few hours the nest will be empty and I can dig up the queen."

"Then what will you do with them?"

"I only said I'd wait for one question." Annie put on a veil and then dropped the other on Thomas's head. "Does your mom have any extension cords?"

"Inside."

"Let's get to it, then." Annie handed Thomas the plastic dome and then picked up the vacuum and smoker and marched into the house.

When the vacuum and dome were set up near the nest, Annie gave the bellows a test pump and a curl of gray smoke plumed out of the end of the smoker. A tang of pinesap came from the needles she'd used for fuel. She crouched down over the nest, but before she could start smoking Thomas knelt down beside her.

“I heard that some people take up nests and then freeze-dry them for companies to do experiments and make anti-venom and stuff. You’re not going to do that, are you? Because that still counts as killing them.” He glared at Annie with his hands on his hips. With the bee veil on, he looked like an angry lamp. It was hard not to laugh.

“No, I’m not going to do that.”

“Good. Animal experimentation is cruel and unnecessary.”

“How old are you, forty?”

“I’m eleven.”

“You know a lot about bugs for an eleven-year-old.”

Thomas shrugged. “I like them. I had an ant farm, but my cousin broke it. Mom sucked the whole thing up in her Dyson. The dust suffocated them.”

“That’s a shame. These fellows will be fine though, once we get them in the dome.”

Thomas watched in perfect silence as Annie tipped the spout of the smoker into the yellow jacket nest. Smoke moved out of the hole in thin gray ribbons. After a few pumps of the bellows she pulled the spout back and aimed gentle puffs at the few fliers that had gathered around them. Some flew off, but most of them settled to the ground near the nest, lifting their legs and stretching their thoraxes in the sun. Their wings twisted and glittered. Annie moved the smoker back to the nest again, felt her breath fall into rhythm with the motion of the bellows. In, and the oxygen-rich air set the pine needles curling into cherry-red sparks; out, and the air rose in ribbons of cool, black smoke. Smoke to sleep.

After a few more bursts into the nest, and a dozen or so fliers herded down to the ground, Annie took the dome and placed it over the hive. It was a moment's work to twist the vacuum's attachment hose onto the mouth of the dome.

"Flip that switch for me, Thomas."

The boy turned on the power and the vacuum cleaner roared into life. Dozens of the bugs were sucked up in under a minute, scratching and buzzing away in the dust cup of the vacuum. The dome emptied and Annie turned off the vacuum. *One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand.* She counted to fifty, then turned on the vacuum again. Seven times over the next two hours she repeated this ritual, till the dust cup was a mass of yellow and black.

"Is that all of them?" Thomas asked. He laid his finger against the plastic, but didn't tap it.

"There's one more."

Thomas turned his head this way and that, as if he was counting. "How can you tell?"

"Because deep down in the earth, in her own special chamber, there is always a queen. And if we leave her, she'll hibernate through the winter and start the nest again."

Thomas sat back on his haunches and bit the tip of his thumb. There was some question that he wanted to ask and wasn't asking; at least, it seemed so to Annie. Maybe he would ask her to leave the queen, but that wouldn't be right. Mrs. Mills was trusting Annie to do the job. While Thomas sat and pondered and chewed his cuticle, Annie took

a small paint trowel out of her pocket and dug a tiny hole into the earth at the border of her dome.

The tip of the trowel punched through into an existing tunnel, and she placed the smoker's nozzle into the new hole. Three long pumps and smoke poured out of the main hole into the dome. No insects moved. Annie lifted the dome and in three small motions she excised the top of the nest. The gray, pulped paper was feather-light.

"Here," she said, handing the nest top to Thomas. "You can keep this if you'd like."

He examined the slice of nest on all sides, running his fingers over the small, empty chambers formed on the bottom.

"I'm sorry about this morning, about the prank." Thomas spoke almost convulsively, as if the words had been digging their way out of his throat all day and finally broke through to his mouth.

"Thank you for the apology." Annie wondered if he'd told his mother, if he was afraid that she would. The boy's knuckles were white. He held the nest to his chest like a shield. "Don't squeeze that so tight, the paper's fragile."

"They aren't even my friends," he insisted. "We just live on the same street."

Annie froze with her trowel inches from the earth. She'd said as much herself yesterday, speaking with the backhoe operator. But it was a terrible, lonely thing to hear from the mouth of a little boy.

"I said it's okay, Thomas. I won't tell."

"Thanks, Miss Ensley."

“You can call me Annie, Thomas.” She patted him on the back and smiled. Let’s get this finished up.”

The trowel made short work of the paper fiber clinging to the inside of the hole. Dirt showered down as she pulled the nest out, piece by piece. The sun was directly overhead, burning the skin on the back of Annie’s hands and neck, when she uncovered the queen’s chamber. The space hid almost a foot and a half into the earth, a smooth, white, kidney-shaped hollow in the sand. At the very center lay the queen, two inches long at least, with long, smoke-gray wings. Annie reached into the hole and pinched the queen gently between her fingers. The queen didn’t struggle--she was smoke-drunk, docile.

And the case to carry her was back in the van.

“Thomas,” Annie said, turning in slow motion so she wouldn’t jostle the yellow jacket. “Can you help me? There’s a small plastic case on a shelf in the back of my van that is exactly the right size for our friend here.”

“It would be faster if I held her,” he replied. His mouth hung slightly open as he watched the queen between Annie’s fingers. “You know what to look for and I don’t. Will you let me?”

This was the question he’d been waiting to ask, then.

“She could sting you, Thomas.”

“Here,” Thomas said, turning the nest over in his hands so the flat ceiling of cells pointed upward. “She can stand on this.”

Annie nodded. As soon as the queen was resting on the fragment of nest, Annie ran out to the van. The case turned up in the glove box after several minutes of frantic searching. She walked back to the yard and found Thomas was still crouched in front of the dome, watching the queen stretch her wings in the palm of his hand. She'd crawled off the nest top onto the pad of flesh below the boy's fingers.

"I've got it," Annie said, using the lid to tap the bug into the bottom of the box and closing the lid. "She didn't sting you, did she?"

"Only once. It's okay. I know she's just scared."

She'd never seen a child before who smiled after being stung.

The next morning, Annie got up early to putter around her front yard, trimming the hedges away from the house's foundation. After that, she'd take her trashcans to the curb for pickup the next day, and wind the climbing roses back on their trellises. It was only a little after nine, but she was already sweating in the morning humidity.

"Hello, Annie."

Thomas stood at the end of the driveway, twisting the corner of his t-shirt. His blond hair was even more kinked and curly than usual in the damp.

"Good morning, boy."

Annie took a few steps toward him and saw that Thomas's lower lip was split, and his eye was swelling shut.

"What happened?" Annie ran down the driveway.

"I got in a fight," Thomas replied.

No question about that. Dirt was smeared on his face and his shirt, and one of his knees was bleeding again.

“What was the fight about?”

Thomas didn’t look at her. Annie slid a finger under his chin and tipped it up, forcing him to make eye contact. When he spoke, his voice was so soft Annie could barely hear him.

“Because we’re the same,” he said. “You and me. All the kids think we’re strange. I’m a geek--I like books better than sports and I don’t care about video games. And you--” Thomas paused. “You’re old, and you live all alone, and you like bugs. Everyone thinks we’re strange,” he repeated.

“I guess you’re right about that,” Annie said. She laughed. “Though I don’t know what you mean about being old.”

Thomas’s head snapped up and Annie laughed again, louder. “I’m kidding, boy. Don’t be so serious.”

“Sorry.”

“And you don’t have to apologize either. There’s nothing wrong with being honest. Do you want me to walk you home?”

Thomas shook his head. “My mom’s going to freak out.”

The boy’s face was absolute misery. The apples of his cheeks were bright pink, and his breath came in short, sharp pants. Annie didn’t know what she would do if he began to cry.

“I tell you what, Thomas,” she said, taking him by the hand. “If you don’t want to go yet you don’t have to. Let me show you something that’ll take your mind off those bullies.”

She led him around the border of her white vinyl privacy fence, till they came to the gate around the back. It was a few seconds’ work to undo the lock she used to keep people or animals from wandering into the garden and getting hurt. Thomas fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, as Annie pulled her key out of the lock and pushed the gate open.

“Take a look,” Annie said.

Thomas walked into the garden and gasped.

Annie had built a British cottage garden in Florida. Puffball asters in every shade from white to violet elbowed against Filipendula that dipped and twisted with blooms like bundles of pink cotton candy. Blue bachelors’ buttons mixed with white candytufts, and brilliant fire tulips in creamy orange, deepening to dark red around the stalks. Lemony Baby Moon daffodils peeked out from fountains of Stipa feather grass, like frizzy green hair flowing from underground, and pale pink dog roses were trellised in each corner. Free space was taken up with bushy forget-me-nots or clusters of bright orange tick flowers that looked like an army of miniature black-eyed Susans. Winding through all the flowers was a river stone path that Annie had laid herself, circling in and in to the center of the garden, where she kept her honeybee hives.

The beehives were normal Langstroth hives, but she’d placed them inside of the tall, broad stumps of three old pine trees that she peeled and carved into the shapes of

houses, complete with hinged pine-shingle roofs and passages cut to match up to the Langstroth doors. Each beehive was varnished to a high gloss to keep out the damp and mites, creating the harmony of both function and beauty. They were replicas of the ancient beehives at the Stripeikiai museum in Lithuania. Fuchsia wildflowers grew around the base of each polished trunk.

Thomas walked up and ran his hands against the smooth wood, watching as a few bees crawled out of the hive to gather nectar. After tracking the flight of a fat, amber worker, he pressed his head against the trunk. Annie copied his gesture, smiling. The wood muffled the normal hum of the hive, creating a low rumble that Annie could feel in her bones.

“Why do you keep this a secret?” Thomas asked, straightening up. “Your garden is beautiful.”

Annie sat down in the grass. The sky stretched blue and cloudless overhead, and butterflies and bees moved in the corner of her eye. She took a breath, smoothed down her hair.

“Let me ask you, Thomas. Where do you think the bees came from?”

Thomas shrugged and sat down in the grass across from Annie.

“In all the years that I’ve been doing pest control, I’ve only been called out five times for nuisance honeybee hives. The owners paid me to come out, kill the bees, and take their nests away.”

Thomas ran his fingers through the grass. “That’s sad.”

“You’re right, Thomas,” Annie said softly. “That’s why I couldn’t do it.” She gestured toward the three stump hives. “I smoked each one to make the bees gorge, and then I brought them here and gave them new homes. There are two more hives up by the porch.”

Annie searched for understanding in Thomas’s solemn gray gaze.

“I’ve never killed a living thing, Thomas. Not on purpose, anyway. Now you know my secret.”

“You don’t kill any of the bugs people call you about?”

“Not a one.”

“You find special places for all of them?” he asked.

Annie nodded. “Yes.”

Thomas scooted closer, smiling. “Tell me how you do it.”

Annie told Thomas about the yellow jackets, how she smoked and vacuumed and dug to clear the hive, and then took her tiny, shining charges out into the Ocala National Forest to live with their queen in old abandoned nests she found in piles of pine needles and oak leaves. For roaches and weevils, it took hours of careful sweeping and vacuum work, and then she took them out to the landfills to help the decomposition process in the shifting soils. After three nights huddled in a tented house, luring termites out of a breached wall with her father’s patented oak pulp and cane sugar bait, Annie didn’t accept termite jobs anymore.

“There are plenty of fallen trees out in the forests for them to live on,” Annie said.

“But my old knees can’t take that kind of strain anymore.”

“What about ants?”

“That all depends on the type of ants, but it’s amazing what you can do with a back hoe and plastic rain barrels. As long as the queen is with them, they’ll settle into a new patch of land just fine.”

Thomas laughed out loud and threw himself backward. He lay in the grass, watching the sky with his arms tucked up under his head. The joy in this boy was all the richer because it was so rare to see. Being around him made her wonder what it would’ve been like to have children, grandchildren.

“Would you like some lemonade?” Annie asked.

“Yes, please.”

“Why don’t you come in and help me with it?”

Her knees crackled and popped as she stood and walked over to the porch.

Thomas trailed behind her. The porch steps were flanked with two more hive-sculptures, these carved from two live oaks that had lost their tops to a hurricane years before. Three steps took them into the dim environs of her screened-in porch. One lonely plastic lawn chair looked out onto the garden. Aside from that, the porch was clean and empty.

Thomas was the first person to walk into Annie’s house since the day her parents died.

“This is the kitchen,” Annie said, pushing the sliding glass door aside. “You can sit at the table if you like.”

The space that Annie’s mother had used for a dining room now held six oak bookshelves and innumerable books on gardening, home maintenance, and entomology. A small drop-leaf table with two old metal chairs was all that would fit in the breakfast

nook. Thomas sat in the closer of the two. A search of the pinewood cabinets yielded half a bottle of purified honey from the hives outside. Annie poured the honey into a pot, add two cups of water, and set it on the stove on low to dissolve.

“Do you know how to squeeze lemons?” Annie asked.

“I’ve squeezed oranges.”

“Close enough.” She pulled six lemons out of the refrigerator, cut them in half, and handed Thomas her old metal juicer.

It was quiet work stirring the honey. Thomas was slow and careful, squeezing until pith and peel were all that remained of each lemon. When he was done, the juice was poured into a large, blue, glass pitcher, followed by the honey-water syrup. As soon as the water hit the lemon juice, the picture frames in the hallway began to vibrate against the wall.

“What’s that?” Thomas asked.

“Lemonade first.”

Annie filled two glasses with ice and poured the warm lemonade. The ice tinkled and squealed as it melted. They drank, and the buzz of wood on drywall grew louder. Thomas guzzled his drink, leaning left and right, trying to look down the hallway. He finished his glass and set it on the table, but Annie’s was still half-full. By the time she was done, measured sip by measured sip, the boy was practically bouncing up and down in his chair.

“You asked me, Thomas, if every insect I take has a special place.”

The boy nodded.

“Well,” Annie said. “Sometimes they need a place that’s more special than others.” She stood and held out her hand. “Come with me.”

Thomas frowned at her, creating a deep crease between his eyebrows, but still he stood and took her hand. Annie led him out of the kitchen, past the bookshelves, and into the dark, narrow hallway that led to the front of the house. The pictures on the wall were yellow with age, images of relatives that were all dead now, of a girl that she didn’t remember being anymore. They turned left into a second hallway, passed a bathroom on the right, and then Annie stopped in front of a plain white door. The sound had changed, more of a buzzing now than vibration. Thomas’s palm was sweaty in her hand.

“Ten years ago I got a phone call from a man in Deltona. He said he had a yellow jacket nest that hadn’t caused any trouble, but he wanted it gone before it did.” Annie swallowed, marveled at the way the words were moving from her, like a tide. “I went to his house with all my normal gear, but he didn’t have yellow jackets at all.”

“He didn’t?” Thomas echoed, still clutching her hand.

“That’s right. He had a nest of bugs I’d never seen in life before, only read about in books.”

“What were they?” Thomas asked.

“I’ll show you.” Annie opened the door into a room of black and gray and green. Thousands of tiny black wasps covered the walls and flew through the air. Each one was shiny black with abdomens tipped in concentric yellow circles. The wings that flickered and danced were translucent, coffee-colored. The ceiling was covered in reinforced chicken wire that supported seven huge, globular nests. All the walls were covered in

paper pulp as well, gray cells that were fresh and empty mixed with white cells holding young and brown-tinged cells holding food, creating a sepia mosaic from floor to ceiling. Even the carpets were lost in gray, pulp shed from the nests that had faded to near white. The green was from small potted plants in each corner of the room. Wasps covered every bloom of a honeysuckle bush, a dwarf orange tree, and two pots filled with wildflowers.

“*Brachygastra Mellifica*,” Annie said. “The honey wasp.”

“Wasps don’t make honey,” Thomas murmured.

Annie patted Thomas’s hand. “These ones do, my boy, though I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of them. Most people haven’t.”

She took a step closer to the doorway. Thomas slipped his hand out of hers and edged back to the far side of the hall.

“*Brachygastra Mellifica* is native to Central and South America. It’s never been found in the United States farther north than Brownsville on the Texas/Mexico border. Otherwise the weather is too cold, or too damp.”

After a long silence, Thomas spoke. “I think I should go home.” The boy was pale and shaking.

“Don’t be afraid, Thomas.” Annie knelt down so she could look the boy eye to eye. “You have to understand--there was nowhere that I could take them, no special place in all of Florida, where they wouldn’t have died in the winter. So, I made a place for them here.”

Thomas didn’t answer. Annie straightened up and stepped into the room.

“Don’t,” Thomas pleaded.

“You just have to be calm,” Annie said. “Move slow and speak softly.” A flush crept up Thomas’s neck, into his cheeks, like a sunburn was rising up from his chest.

“Most of all, you have to think kind thoughts.”

“Kind?”

The room buzzed and whispered with the sound of the wasps’ passage over the paper nests that covered the walls. At the soft prickle of a wasp’s claws across the apple of her cheek, she smiled. The wasp flew off to join the dozens of others moving through the air.

“If they know you don’t mean them any harm, they won’t hurt you.”

Annie took long, careful steps across the room, nudging wasps aside when they got too close to her feet.

“They keep the honey in a few big chambers. It’s actually easier than dealing with honeybees, because as long as you leave a piece of nest, the wasps will rebuild.”

The globe of the largest hive was soft beneath her fingertips. She traced a slow line around the stem that connected the body to the ceiling, testing for wear and strain. Three wasps crawled up the nest and onto her hand. They walked over her skin, waving their antennae, a vigilant trio of guards.

“Won’t they sting you?” Thomas asked. He was standing near the doorway now, watching her.

“Not unless I make a mistake.”

The wasps were moving toward her fingers now. Annie turned toward the sound of tissue paper crumpling. Thomas was frozen with one foot in and one out of the room.

“You’re doing fine,” Annie said.

Thomas brought his other foot forward. Slowly, he turned his head to watch the wasps crawling back and forth on the ceiling. The guards left Annie’s hand for the safety of the hive, buzzing and fanning their wings as they went.

The boy’s warm, sweaty hand slipped back into hers.

“They’re beautiful.” Thomas never took his eyes off the nest.

“I see their beauty, too.” Annie chuckled. “Guess you were right, we’re both pretty strange.”

He giggled, high and soft. “Yeah.”

“Come on,” Annie said, leading Thomas back toward the hallway. It’s about time I show you this wasp honey I’ve been going on about.”

They went back to the kitchen. Annie poured them more lemonade then went into the pantry to get the honey. She picked a small, hive-shaped jar off the shelf and brought it back to the table with a spoon. Once the lid was off she used the spoon to stir the rich, mahogany honey inside.

“This isn’t like the bee’s honey we had in the lemonade. It’ll be bitter at first,” she said, pulling the spoon out and twisting it around to create a little ball. “That’s because it’s in the raw. Don’t swallow it; wait for your mouth to get it warm. Sweeter than any candy you’ll ever eat.”

Annie held out her wasp honey. Thomas reached out with a finger to poke it, but then leaned forward, licked the honey off the spoon, and closed his eyes. The muscles around his mouth and jaw twitched as he swirled it around on his tongue.

“This is our secret, all right, Thomas?” The boy nodded but he didn’t open his eyes, still moving the honey around. “And you can come visit in the garden whenever you like.”

Thomas swallowed and then opened his eyes, smiling. “Annie?”

“Yes, boy?”

“Can I have some more honey?”

Annie had the bottle in her hand when the doorbell rang. She told Thomas to help himself to the honey and headed off down the hall. The honey wasps were buzzing away. The doorbell rang again. Thomas’s mother was standing on the porch.

Annie opened the door and said, “Mrs. Mills?”

Thomas’s mother didn’t tell Annie to call her Cory. She leaned around Annie and stared into the house.

“Is my son here?” Mrs. Mills didn’t give Annie a chance to reply. She called Thomas’s name.

Annie heard the boy walk up behind her, his sneakers squeaking on the wood floor. Mrs. Mills reached past her and pulled Thomas out onto the porch.

“You go and wait for me at the end of the driveway.”

“Mom--”

“Now, Thomas.” As soon as he was down the steps, Mrs. Mills turned on Annie. “How dare you bring my son into your home without my permission, Miss Ensley? I would’ve had no idea where he was if his friends hadn’t told me.”

The silly woman hadn't even noticed Thomas was hurt. "Are those the same friends that gave him the black eye and fat lip? I only brought him in for a glass of lemonade, Mrs. Mills, to calm him down."

Thomas's mother looked back at him, wide-eyed and silent. Her surprise only lasted for a moment. As she watched her battered son, the woman rambled on about her rules, how the boy knew he wasn't supposed to out of line of sight with his house. *What it boils down to*, Annie thought, *is that I'm an old, strange lady who shouldn't be hanging around little boys*. It was okay for Annie to be alone with Thomas if she was doing his mother a favor, but she couldn't be his friend.

Annie looked over Mrs. Mills shoulder. The boy gave a quick wave, stiff like a marionette, before his mother could turn around and see. Then just as she'd dragged him over the day before, Cory Mills dragged young Thomas away, leaving Annie alone.

She walked back through the house, into the backyard, and took a seat on her porch steps. For once it was quiet, just the sound of the wind in the trees, and the birds singing, and Annie, crying in her garden.

THE SECRET LETTERS

Marissa is the girl who holds up a sign instead of talking. She isn't deaf or dumb she just won't speak. There are a hundred rumors why.

Here's one. She doesn't have a tongue anymore, just a fleshy nub in the back of her throat. She had to have it removed because she got mouth cancer. That's why she only eats applesauce, mashed potatoes, and soup at lunch. Otherwise her little tongue-nub wouldn't be able to handle the food and she'd choke.

That one's fake, no surprise.

Marissa's a vegetarian, and so she eats the only meat-free stuff the cafeteria serves. Anyway, I saw her stick her tongue out at Matt Harris on Friday during P.E. Nobody else pays attention.

There's another rumor that Marissa doesn't talk anymore because her mom killed herself. Some kids say that Marissa came home from school and found her mom with a rifle in her mouth, and the back of her head splattered all over the room. That's a true story, but it wasn't Marissa. It was Frankie Lord, and she still talks all the time.

It is true that the principal of Freedom Middle School tried to have Marissa expelled for bringing her sign on the first day of school last year. Since it's made of metal, the campus officer said it should be considered a possible weapon. Marissa's sign is like the ones crossing-guards use, a two-foot by two-foot square of metal with some type of white coating, bolted to a handle with a cushioned grip. Maybe she could fan someone to death?

That day Marissa stood in the hallway outside the principal's office, tall and thin and tan with her long, white-blond hair scraped back in a ponytail. She was wearing a sky-blue t-shirt and dark blue jeans. Her sneakers were spotless and white, with thick blue laces that matched her shirt. It was the perfect outfit. Marissa would be the most popular girl in school if it weren't for the whole not-talking thing. She cringed against the wall in her stylish clothes, with her beautiful hair, holding her sign out at the gathering crowd like a shield. The words on it were simple enough: "Will someone please call my Mom?"

Can a sign be plaintive? I think it can. It was the way she tipped the letters for *please* that did it, each plastic piece perfectly aligned, but leaning slightly to the right.

After three different secretaries and an assistant principal tried and failed to take the sign from Marissa, she began to cry in total silence, tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. The bell rang for first period and the teachers sent us all off to class. I heard later that after the hallway emptied out, Gleason finally called Marissa's mother to campus.

When Mrs. Tyson got there, I'm sure looking svelte and honey-blond and gorgeous in her business suit, Mr. Gleason told her that Marissa would have to use a dry-erase board, or a little chalkboard, instead of bringing her potential weapon and magnetic letters to school. Marissa's mom is a lawyer. She convinced Principal Gleason that he should make an exception in Marissa's case. Everybody thinks she threatened to sue him. That rumor's probably true.

I don't know whether or not it's true that Marissa hates the whisper-shuffle sound that erasers make on plastic or slate, but it would explain the magnets.

I do know that no teacher or administrator at Freedom Middle has questioned her right to the sign again.

I also know there are five different sets of letters that Marissa uses for her sign. Her first letters were children's alphabet magnets in every color of the rainbow. She still uses them when she plays with her cousins. At school Marissa uses black magnetic letters. The black capital letters are in Courier font and each one is two inches tall. They are thick, no-nonsense letters that are easy for teachers to read when she's answering a question. She even has punctuation--periods, commas, and question marks.

Marissa made the third set of letters for herself. Last year in art class, when all the other kids were making ashtrays and bad sculptures for their moms and dads, Marissa made letters. The letters are slender and arched in rich, brown-red terracotta that shines with glaze. There are hints of peacock blues and greens in every piece.

The art teacher, Ms. Aspen, helped Marissa cut and glue thin sheets of magnet to each letter. I've never seen Marissa use them. Maybe they're love letters, letters she only uses in private when she fantasizes about the boy of her dreams, some quiet boy who loves to read. I love to read too.

The fourth set came from her father. They're ridiculous. Marissa is fourteen, but her father thinks that girls in eighth grade still like pink, and so his letters are baby-pink plastic, huge and bubbly, and somehow the company he ordered them from online made them scented. They smell like bubblegum. I've seen Marissa use those words only for

her father, this time he was a chaperone on our trip to the Sanford Zoo. You could tell she was embarrassed the whole time because she spelled at half-speed. It was like she had to gather all her will just to lift a letter and place it. Marissa got this deep crease right down the center of her forehead too, each time she held up her sign to speak. Maybe that level of embarrassment is physically painful.

Here's another rumor: Mr. Tyson likes pink because of the testicle thing. On Sports Safety Day the gym teacher told everybody that Mr. Tyson only has one testicle because he forgot to wear his cup during a ball game in high school. A guy sliding into home base kicked Mr. Tyson's left one up so high it never dropped back down again. Maybe Mrs. Tyson didn't like her husband being lopsided. Maybe that's why he left.

Marissa has a set of secret letters. I think I might be the only person who has ever seen them. Last week Marissa came to school with a pile of birthday party invitations. Her mother had them made professionally. The envelopes were off-white, feather-soft, and slightly ridged from the different fibers of wood pressed together to make the paper. Tiny green leaves and wildflower petals were scattered in the pulp, like fairy wings in blue, lavender, and sunset amber. The card was made of the same type of paper, but instead of wildflowers there was a large watercolor sunflower painted on the center.

Inside there was a simple invitation to come to the Tyson house that Saturday for a slumber party, to celebrate Marissa's fifteenth birthday. When I slid the card back into the envelope, I found Marissa hadn't moved a step. She stared at me and held up her sign, which read, "Well..." in the big black letters.

"I'd love to come," I said.

Marissa smiled and dumped the rest of the invitations in the trash. The other girls at school aren't very nice to her, but I guess she hasn't told Mrs. Tyson that.

It's true about Marissa's house. Her mom must make a ton of money being a lawyer because the house is huge. The whole thing is covered in earthy brown stucco, and the second story is a bit smaller than the bottom and not quite centered, like a crooked layer cake. The entryway and the porch on the back are supported by these massive square pillars that looked bleached, almost ash gray, with the wood grain and knots still showing. There's a three-car garage too. The roof is dark brown tile. It looks like shaved chocolate. I won't even get into the yard. It's better than anything on television, green and flawless.

When my mom pulled up in the driveway the car made a weird chugging sound and I was afraid it was going to stall, but instead the air started blowing hot. Usually that gets Mom riled up, but she just stared up at that house with her mouth hanging open.

"This is the place?" she asked.

I checked the invitation for the third time. "It's the right address."

"All right, okay." My mom took a deep breath. "For god's sake just behave yourself, Rachel."

"Okay."

"And don't forget to say 'please' and 'thank-you'."

Mom was still watching the house. Her free hand crept up to pat her hair, an unruly mass of graying curls. I've seen this pattern before. Next she would've been trying to spit-wash my face and comb my hair.

“I won’t forget, Mom. Love you, bye.”

I grabbed my bag and was up to the door, waving, before my mom could even get the car to shift into reverse. I rang the doorbell and after a few seconds of grinding gears she backed the car out onto the road. The chime was distant and soft. I counted to five and rang it again. There was the patter of footsteps rushing up to the door, and low voices arguing. The fight sounded strange. It took me a minute to realize I only heard one person speaking.

“Hold it up and smile,” the woman said. Her voice was a rich alto, clear as day even through the door.

The door creaked open and there was Marissa, holding up her sign with a wide, glazed smile on her face.

“Hi friends,” the sign read. “Welcome to my birthday party. Come on in, we’re going to have a blast!”

Her mom had made her use the bubblegum letters. Mrs. Tyson was standing right behind Marissa, grinning at me over her daughter’s shoulder.

“Hi there,” Mrs. Tyson said. “I’m Marissa’s mom. You can call me Andy.”

Marissa slowly and carefully rolled her eyes.

“I’m Rachel,” I told Mrs. Tyson, struggling not to laugh.

“You’re the first one here,” Mrs. Tyson said. “I guess everybody is running a little late today.”

A blush crept up Marissa’s neck.

“Um, some of the other girls told me that they wouldn’t be able to make it,” I said. “There’s a carwash for the cheerleading squad today, and the coach wouldn’t let them miss it.”

I could say that it was my first time lying to an adult, but that would just be another lie.

Mrs. Tyson stopped smiling, her eyes narrowed, and her left eyebrow crept up. I felt sweat prickle on my forehead. I wonder if all lawyers have to be able to do that eyebrow thing.

Marissa tugged her mother’s sleeve and Mrs. Tyson’s smile slipped back into place. “Come on in, Rachel. Help yourself to snacks and drinks.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Tyson.”

“Call me Andy.”

Marissa grabbed me by the arm and steered me away from her mother. The inside of the house was just as beautiful as the outside, a minimalist kind of Asian feel with lots of black lacquered furniture and cream-colored scrolls with calligraphy in red and black, shaded by cherry trees in full bloom. On one long, low, black table, white porcelain bowls of chips, dip, and candy were carefully arranged on a broad strip of red cloth. Bottles of Jones Cola on ice were in a clear glass container that my mom would’ve used as a vase.

While I ate corn chips and tried not to get crumbs on Mrs. Tyson’s furniture, Marissa plucked the pink letters off her board and dropped them into the front pocket of the canvas bag she had over her shoulder. Each time a letter dropped, I smelled

bubblegum and plastic, not a good combination. Once the sign was clean, she reached into the center pocket and pulled out a few black letters. Marissa held it up.

“Sorry,” it read.

“That’s okay. I think part of the parent job description includes mandatory weirdness.”

Marissa smiled. She reached back into her bag and more letters clicked into place.

“Do you want to bring this stuff up to my room?” Marissa reached up and straightened the “s” in “stuff” as I was reading.

“Sure.”

Marissa dumped all the chips together in one bowl and put the dip on top of that while I got the sodas. Since her hands were full we couldn’t talk as she led me up a wide staircase to the second floor. There were only three rooms up there, a huge bathroom, a guest room with bright green walls, and Marissa’s bedroom.

It looked like my bedroom, if my room was three times its actual size and eerily neat. There weren’t even any shoes on the floor or books on her desk. Marissa set the bowls she was holding on the corner of the bed and fiddled with her sign, fingers swift, dancing to the steady click, click, click of letters.

“I shoved everything in the closet. My mom freaks if my room gets messy.” Marissa gestured toward her closet door with her free hand while I read.

“My closet is pretty small,” I said. “I used to hide stuff under the bed but my mom found out when she tried to vacuum my room and sucked up a dirty sock.”

Marissa smiled and nodded, but she didn't laugh. I wondered if she ever sneezed or hiccupped or coughed. Maybe she did all those things silently somehow, like her tears. We drank soda and ate chips and I told Marissa jokes about my older brothers. Mrs. Tyson, Andy, came to check up on us once, but when Marissa told her we were too full for pizza she didn't come back up again.

“What should we do now?” Marissa asked.

“Do you have any video games?”

Marissa lowered her sign and shook her head.

“Your mom doesn't like them, huh?” I asked.

Marissa held up her sign again, there was one word in black: “Violent.”

“How about board games?”

Marissa slid the 'n' and 'o' out of 'violent'. She wasn't smiling anymore.

“It's okay,” I said. “We can still have fun. How about truth or dare?”

There was the click of magnets against the board. “Yes!” Marissa's hair fell in front of her face as she placed more letters. She held up the sign. “You first.”

“Okay. Um, why did you stick your tongue out at Matt Harris? Truth or dare?”

Marissa blushed. She pulled out a handful of letters and held up “Dare?”

“Stick corn chips out of your upper lip like walrus tusks and go make faces at your Mom.”

Her mouth dropped open. I smiled and she pounced on the bowl, grabbed a handful of chips, and ran out of the room. Marissa's footsteps were like a muffled drumbeat as she pounded down the stairs. Andy shouted something about no running in

the house, and then everything went quiet. A few seconds later the house filled with laughter and Marissa walked back into the room. She glared at me with her hands on her hips, but the effect was definitely ruined since she still had the corn chips in.

We played a few more rounds, all truths and no dares after my corn chip challenge. I thought the game was winding down, but then Marissa asked a real tough one. She asked me why I'd agreed to come to her party.

When she held the sign out to me, my first instinct was to take the dare, but I couldn't. Marissa was smiling, but her eyes were filled with tears. I guess it's not easy being a girl who doesn't say a word.

"I came," I told her, "because I like you."

Marissa's eyes were cornflower blue, and bright. She blinked once, slowly, like she was trying to keep from falling asleep. I opened my mouth to speak and she shook her head. Then she lay on her stomach and pulled herself under her bed.

"Marissa?"

There was the sound of springs creaking. A chunk of beige foam rolled out from the bed skirt and Marissa's hand darted out and snatched it up.

"Are you okay under there?"

Marissa edged out from beneath the bed feet-first. She sat up and brushed flecks of foam off her shirt. There were two blue velvet bags in her lap.

"What's that?" I asked.

Marissa pulled her sign off the bed, then opened the first bag and began pulling out her handmade terracotta letters. She brushed her fingertips across the surface of each one before she placed it on the board. When she was done, she held it up.

“You really like me?” The sign was like white canvas brushed with burnt sienna paint.

Love letters, love letters, that’s all I could think. The beautiful, perfect, silent Marissa Tyson was talking to me with her love letters. A blush burned up my neck and into my cheeks.

Before I could reply, Marissa’s mouth fell open in a silent laugh. “Don’t worry,” she tapped letters down. “It’s not like that. I made these--” The smile dropped and she stared at the letters left in her hand. Slowly, carefully, Marissa placed the rest of the letters. “I made these to talk to my friends.”

“Why don’t you ever use them?” I asked.

Marissa watched me for a moment, shrugged. Letters slid. “Truth?” The sign shook in her hand.

I nodded. This was no time for dares.

“I haven’t had a friend for over two years.”

Two years. No coincidence in that timing. “Since you stopped talking?”

The ‘e’ from ‘made’ and the ‘y’ from ‘my’ and the ‘s’ from friends were pulled down to form a graceful, sad “Yes.”

The question formed itself on my lips. “Why did you stop?”

At first I didn't think she'd answer, but then Marissa started pulling letters out of the bag, forming line after line of text, cramped in together, the silent girl's version of speaking in a rush, I guess.

This is the story she told:

Marissa was twelve, about to finish sixth grade. After a day at school she got off the bus, walked home, and found her father's car in the driveway. It was weird, because her dad usually didn't get home during the week until Marissa was already asleep.

Marissa ran into the house and called for him, but there wasn't any answer. Mr. Tyson wasn't in the kitchen, or watching TV in the den. The last place she looked was her parents' room. Mr. Tyson was there. He was packing.

She asked him what he was doing, but Marissa's father wouldn't look at her. He kept packing, and asked her how her day had been at school. Marissa walked up to the bed and took the shirt he was folding out of his hands. Mr. Tyson met her gaze. Marissa could tell that he'd been crying. He told Marissa he loved her, and that he was leaving.

When Marissa asked her father why, he started to cry again. As his eyes puffed and his cheeks grew blotchy and red, Marissa's father told her about falling out of love with Andy over years of stress and tension. He told her about falling in love again. His name was Scott.

Marissa's father was waiting for his wife, for her mother, to get home so he could explain that he was abandoning his family for the love of another man. When Marissa's father said that he was going to take her to a friend's house, that he was trying to protect her, Marissa screamed.

She told him he was a bastard, and that he should just leave. Marissa said she would tell her mother that he'd left. That he didn't deserve to speak to the wife he was leaving behind.

Mr. Tyson didn't even argue. He finished packing and walked out.

Marissa went downstairs to wait for her mother to come home, waited to tell her that her marriage of almost twenty years was over.

She got sick at the thought of it and walked into the kitchen to get a drink of water, hoping it would settle her stomach. When she drank the water it burned, and five minutes later she was throwing it back up in the sink.

Marissa couldn't tell her mother. She couldn't say the words. She turned away from the counter and looked at the refrigerator. It was covered with pictures of the family together, camping, fishing, at a theme park. Marissa started ripping the pictures down, scattering them on the floor like fallen leaves. Soon all that was left were bright magnetic letters and the clean steel of the refrigerator.

Marissa reached out and moved the letters, one by one. When she was finished there were five words spelled out at eye-height. "Dad left, it's my fault." Even in silence, she couldn't tell the truth.

The Marissa Tyson who laughed, who danced and cheered and sang in the choir, died right there, staring at the refrigerator. And with his daughter's silence, Mr. Tyson found his own. Andy would never know the truth. The truth of his departure was theirs alone.

"I'm sorry," I said.

“It’s okay,” she replied. Marissa didn’t hold up her sign, she spoke to me. Marissa Tyson, hushed and beautiful, said the words. Her voice was a soft alto, with a jazz singer’s roughness, but that could have been the years of silence.

I didn’t say anything, I was afraid to break the spell. Marissa opened the second blue velvet bag and pulled out two handfuls of exquisite green glass letters.

“These are my truth letters,” Marissa said. She cleared her throat and smiled at me. “I ordered them, handmade, from a glassblower in New York. It took all the Christmas money I saved last year, and the year before. Someday, when I’m brave enough, I’ll tell my mother the truth about why my father left.”

“And until then?” I asked.

Marissa held up her sign, moved the terracotta words to form, “I won’t say anything.”

She added more letters, shifted words. “Do you promise not to tell?”

I thought about Marissa’s beautiful voice. It would be so easy to walk down those stairs and tell Mrs. Tyson the truth, and then Marissa could speak to me all the time. If she wasn’t so angry at the betrayal that she’d hate me forever. If she didn’t go back to her thin, peppy cheerleader friends and forget she’d ever used her friendship letters for me, the weird, frizzy-haired fat girl who liked to read.

Marissa waved the sign. “Truth or Dare? Will you keep my secret or take the dare?”

“What’s the dare?” I asked. I look her in the eye. I watched as her hands moved letters from the bag to the board and back again. Marissa held it up.

“Tell me your deepest, darkest secret,” the sign read. “It’s only fair, I told you mine.”

Marissa wasn’t smiling and her blue eyes didn’t swim with tears. It was a face that had known too much disappointment.

“I won’t tell.”

“Thank you,” Marissa said. “You’re a good friend.”

She hasn’t spoken to me again. I mean, we talk every day, but she uses the sign. I meant it when I said I’d keep her secret--I have to, it’s the only way I can keep mine. But on the day Marissa tells her mother the truth, I’m going to take those grass green letters and tell my secret, too. I’m going to tell Marissa that I wish the terracotta letters really were the letters of love, and that she’d use them only for me.

SEED OF THE GOLDEN MANGO

Frankie Lord found the seedling five miles back into the landfill, on one of the old mounds where the trucks don't come to dump anymore, where the discarded treasures of a million lives have been covered in a layer of soil and soft green grass. She called those mounds the Sad Mountains. Climbing such a mountain was not for the faint of heart. The earth beneath the bright, thin, gold-green grass was soft as putty, even after decades of wind and rain.

Her older brother, Perry, was the leader whenever they went into the Sad Mountains, tall and tousle-haired on his rusting blue ten-speed, then Frankie on her hand-me-down dirt bike. Her bike belonged to Perry too, but Dad spray-painted it forest green because he knew her favorite color. He even got a new front tire when he couldn't fix the slow leak Perry had complained about for months. Their father could do just about anything with his hands, including a good beating, of course, but a lot of fun stuff, too. Franklin Lord and his kids won the neighborhood soapbox derby three years in a row back home in Osteen, before they left to live in the landfill. Perry and Frankie didn't mind that they had recycled bikes. Money was tight, and old bikes were better than no bikes at all.

Pulling up the end of the line was Perry and Frankie's little brother, Caleb. Caleb was the whiner. He could always find something to complain about. Caleb was the slowest, but griped about being last because road-dust got kicked up from Perry and Frankie's tires and stung his eyes. Caleb asked for a different bike, but bellyached when

he got Frankie's old bike, a girl's bike, even though Dad painted the bike red, his favorite color. He said everyone knew, because the bike's top tube curved down, instead of straight. Perry and Frankie tried to tell Caleb the slant was for his own good, the family jewels and all, but he wouldn't listen, or didn't get it, one of the two. To top it off, Caleb couldn't corner, or barely steer, and so he kept wiping out and chipping the new paint, revealing patches of the old pink paint.

Frankie started exploring the Sad Mountains with her brothers at the start of summer. They were scaling up the side of the smallest peak, Minor Sad Mountain, when Perry was pierced in the hand by a sliver of metal. His hand didn't bleed much, and when Frankie pulled the steel thorn out of the mountainside it was actually the pin of an ornate silver brooch. The brooch was black with tarnish, but underneath a delicate pattern of leaves was visible, with a cluster of green stones that Frankie dreamed were emeralds, but were probably glass. She kept the brooch tucked safe inside a sock in her dresser, except at night, when she slept with it under her pillows. It brought her good dreams.

On the day Frankie found the seedling, the three children raced to the final conquest of the Sad Mountains, the tallest peak, which she and Perry called Sun-Kissed Mountain. Caleb thought it was named after that sticky-sweet orange soda their dad brought them sometimes, which Perry and Frankie both felt explained a lot about their little brother. No, the mountain got its name because back on the first day of summer, when their dad moved them out of the old house and into the landfill, Perry and Frankie rode their bikes out into the blue-gray dawn and watched the sun come up over that

mound of earth. Caleb complained later that they should've woken him up to go, too. All through summer the Lord children waited to climb that peak, exploring the lower elevations spread around it. Now, with only two weeks left before school started again, it was time.

The three of them got up before sunrise and crept out of the trailer. It wasn't theirs; the trailer belonged to the company that owned the landfill, where their father was now code enforcer, security guard, and fix-it man. He was sleeping inside, and there would be hell to pay if he got woken up before the alarm clock went off. The trailer sat on stacks of thin slabs of concrete placed sporadically, and it had peeling gray siding and a wooden porch jutting off the front, buckled in places from wind and rain. When they moved in, the stairs were made of the same wood, but their father replaced them with cement blocks when Caleb broke through the bottom step and cut his leg.

Perry, Frankie, and Caleb got their bikes off the rack on the side of the trailer and rolled them into the front yard. Frankie carried last year's backpack filled with sandwiches, apples, and a half a can of Pringles saved from dinner the night before. Perry wore a backpack too; his held an old milk container filled with water. They didn't make Caleb carry anything because he was, well, Caleb. It was only fifteen after six, so the sun wasn't quite up yet. The dim light made the landfill look deep and fey. The wind made the trailer siding shift and creak behind them.

"All right," Perry whispered. "On the count of three, we ride hard to Sun-Kissed Mountain. First one there is King."

"Or Queen," Frankie said.

“I should get a head start.” Caleb’s voice echoed, shrill in the still morning air.

“Quiet,” Frankie said. Her brother didn’t have a lick of sense. “If you wake Dad up, then none of us are going anywhere.”

“Ready?” Perry leaned forward on his bike, staring off toward the horizon. “One, two, three--”

Perry and Frankie took off. Their tires made a soft rasp against the sugar sand. With three pumps of his long, thin legs, Perry pulled into the lead. Frankie was close behind; she could feel the worn grips on her pedals sliding back and forth under the tread of her sneakers. As she passed out of the yard through the rusting gate, there was a crash and whimpering from Caleb. Frankie didn’t look back, heard the rattle of bike chain on metal as Caleb righted his bike and came after her, demanding they begin the race again.

Even with the sun hidden behind the Sad Mountains the air was hot, and so humid it was hard to breathe. Frankie could feel her shirt sticking to her back, sweat beading and slipping down her face. The dirt road was rutted. Deep grooves had been cut into the ground by the dump trucks that thundered back and forth all day until the sun went down. It was easier for Frankie to stand, to take the shocks in her legs and feet, hunched low over the handlebars. The bike tipped--left, right, left, right--moving smoothly with each shift in Frankie’s weight.

They passed the offload station, like a giant pavilion with a blue tin roof. Instead of spreading picnics on the stained concrete floor, trucks backed in and pushed construction debris into huge metal dumpsters lined up in a trench eight feet down. Frankie had a sneaking suspicion that their sofa was a rescue from the offload station.

The sofa was a lumpy brown and tan plaid monstrosity covered with tears their father had repaired with the only thread that made it from the old house--bright red.

The thread was the same shade of red as their mother's favorite party dress. Once, when Frankie was six, her mother had taken the dress out of the closet and let her hold it. The dress was silk, soft and light and warm against her cheek. Every time her mother let her touch that dress, Frankie dreamed of wearing it someday, for her first date or prom. She imagined the silk would move like a summer breeze. But her mother had taken the dress with her, into the mystery of her death.

It happened in the end May. Only a month left till the end of summer, the end of the rattle and hiss of the bus brakes, the hot, dusty trek down the crumbling dirt road that was so washed out from the spring's heavy rains that gravel was starting to show through the sand and trucked-in clay. Frankie knew there was something wrong as soon as she saw the thin band of smoke rising from their property at the end of the road. They didn't have a fireplace, and their father didn't burn trash anymore because the city had taken to handing out tickets.

No, it was their things, burning in the yard.

There were random clothes from every member of the family: shirts and pants, baby clothes, pictures piled together, still in their frames, an old bookshelf from the garage, mail, shoes, even the leash of their dog, Bo, who'd died the winter before. The flames licked higher and higher. When Frankie ran to get the hose she saw the front door of the house was open. Her brother Perry swayed in the doorway. She didn't yell at him

to call the police, or the fire department. She didn't ask him what he was doing, because she could see. Perry stood in a puddle of his own urine, staring into the house where their mother was lying, propped against the shattered remains of the sliding glass door, their father's twenty-two rifle in her mouth, the stock still cradled against her body. Frankie reached past her brother and closed the door.

Frankie's front wheel tipped into a pothole. She nearly flipped over the handlebars. Both feet slid off the pedals and she landed hard on her coccyx, bruising it on the tip of the seat. Caleb was close behind now; over her shoulder, Frankie could see that the handlebars on her old bike were crooked from her brother's latest spill. Stepping back onto the pedals, ignoring the needles of pain running hot up and down her tailbone, Frankie rode off into the dust after Perry. The weigh station came looming out of the darkness. It looked like a bare cement-block house with two porches on either side. The porches covered the large metal weighing plates where people stopped to get the per-pound fee for the stuff they wanted to dump. Perry was stopped halfway onto the right-hand plate, cradling his groin and groaning.

"You all right?" Frankie called to him.

"Slipped," Perry said. "I'm okay."

"Good."

Frankie kept the bike going as fast as she could, and when she came even with her brother she jerked up and forward, leaning back as her front tire left the ground. She braced the pedals and sailed up onto the weighing plate with a thud. A few seconds' slide

over the slick metal and she was back on the ground again, leaving her brothers behind. The road branched off into two sharp turns around the smallest of the Sad Mountains. Both boys called after her, their voices vague in the thick air.

Even though the sun wasn't up yet, the active dumpsite was already crowned with the wheeling shadows of crows, starlings, and seagulls strayed far from the shore. The stink of moldering wood and upholstery and the caws and shrieks of the birds were more disturbing somehow without daylight to reveal them clearly for what they were. The smells and noises faded as the Sad Mountains rose up, soft gray and rounded in shadow. Her legs were beginning to burn and her back ached from hunching over her bike, but Frankie focused on the hum of her wheels against the packed sand. There was no sign of her brothers when she left the main road for the overgrown path that led to Sun-Kissed Mountain. Her bike rattled beneath her as she pushed over hillocks of grass and rubble leading up to its base.

Frankie dismounted in the deep darkness and took a firm grip on the grass growing from the mountainside. Footholds were easy in the soft earth, but after negotiating a few feet, Frankie knew she couldn't climb the front face. The grass was too thin, sliding out in clumps as she tried to pull herself up. She dropped back to the ground, tightened the straps on her backpack, and ran around the side of the mountain, looking for an easier path to the top. Her sneakers scraped on the dry ground, and the hand she held against the mountainside, running through the grass, was soaked with dew.

The sun was high enough now to burnish the top of the mountain in a yellow-green flare. There was a sudden dip in the grass beneath Frankie's hand. Pressing both

hands against the mountainside, she realized the long grass was concealing the remnants of the old drive carved into the mound for the trucks to take to the top, a ridge that couldn't have been more than ten inches wide. She pulled herself up onto the lip, clutching handfuls of grass as she tipped side to side to see if the ground would hold her weight. Edging up the winding ledge made her fingers ache, and the muscles in the back of her calves trembled. When the earth finally began to slope upward, Frankie leaned into it, grateful to escape the extra weight of the backpack for a minute. She risked a glance down at the ground and smiled. There was no sign of her brothers.

“Queen of the Mountain,” she murmured, the grass tickling her lips.

Frankie pushed off from the ledge, scaling the rest of the slope with the sun beating down on her back. When she got to the top she lay there for a minute, letting the cool dew soak into her shirt. The grass smelled sweet, and dirt was moist and gritty against her fingertips. She pushed up onto her hands and knees, careful to crawl a few steps away from the edge before standing. The broad plateau of Sun-Kissed Mountain's top stretched away from her. Frankie had to hold a hand over her forehead to shield her eyes from the sunlight. The grass on the summit was tall and rich, almost evergreen in hue. With each step she made, pale little moths took flight, abandoning the grass for blue sky, where they floated like ashes.

A line of black caught her eye on the far side of the mountaintop. At first Frankie thought it was a piece of tubing or a cable pushing up through the grass, but then she saw leaves. Frankie laughed aloud and ran toward the tree growing out of her mountain. It was a baby, a sapling, only about four feet tall; the trunk couldn't have been more than

two inches thick where it pushed out the ground. The bark of the sapling was smooth, pebbled in black and grayish-brown, and covered in tiny cracks as fine as the lines on the palm of her hands.

Each branch ended in a clump of long, oval leaves. Some the leaves were curled and orange-pink, others brilliant red, fading to evergreen the same shade as the rich grass, and all soft as velvet. She'd seen this kind of tree before, she was sure of it. Mr. Coops, who ran Coops Nursery Exotics, was their closest neighbor back at the old house, just a few roads away. The wizened old black man with his close-cropped white hair had kept his yard full of all sorts of strange seedlings being prepped for sale. There was a tree like this in the Mr. Coops's yard, a massive thing with the same red and evergreen leaves.

“Hey Frankie!”

It was Perry. Both of her brothers stood at the bottom of the mountain where she'd left her bike. Caleb sat on the ground, pouting, and Perry stared up at her. Mud caked his hands and shirt.

“Having some trouble?” she called down to them.

“How did you get up there?” Perry said.

“Very carefully.”

“Ha, very funny.”

“Don't be sore, Perry.”

“But he is sore, Frankie,” Caleb shouted. “He crunched the family jewels when he was trying to get over the weighing scales.”

Frankie and Perry both laughed at this, and Caleb giggled, too.

“I found a path around the back,” Frankie said. “This way.”

She turned and walked back along the edge of the summit, pausing every so often to lean over the side and wave her arms to keep her brothers headed in the right direction. When the boys were within feet of the hidden ledge, Frankie stopped.

“So where is it?” Perry asked.

“I’ll tell you,” Frankie said. “But first, we have to make it official.”

“Make what official?”

“You and Caleb have to agree that Sun-Kissed Mountain is mine. I’m Queen of the Mountain, and you’re my loyal subjects. What I say goes.”

“A girl boss?” Caleb shouted. “No way!”

Perry didn’t say a word.

“That’s fine,” Frankie said, she walked away from the edge, out of their line of sight. “I didn’t think you were big enough to make it up here anyway, Caleb.”

Perry called out for Frankie to wait. She could hear him arguing, furious and low, with their younger brother.

“All right,” Perry said. “You’re Queen of the Mountain.”

Frankie peered over the edge and saw Perry jab Caleb in the ribs with his elbow.

“You’re the boss, Frankie!” Caleb echoed. He stared down at the ground with his arms crossed.

“That’s more like it. “

Caleb looked up and stuck his tongue out at her. Perry slapped the back of his head. Before Caleb could start crying, Frankie told them how to find the ledge. After a

little trial and error, Perry helped Caleb up onto the groove and then climbed up himself. It was slow going; the two boys had to stop a few times for Caleb to take a break. Once they got close enough, Frankie grabbed her little brother's hands and pulled him up the rest of the way. Perry made it the last few feet without any trouble.

“You're not going to believe what I found,” Frankie told them.

They played on top of Sun-Kissed Mountain all morning. No matter what game they started, rock-paper-scissors, Simon says, or leap frog, in the end the kids always drifted back to the seedling where it rose from its bed of evergreen grass. The different colored leaves fascinated Caleb; Frankie smacked his hand when she caught him trying to tug off one of the tender pink-orange buds hanging from the tip of a branch. They ate the lunches that Frankie packed, drank deep from Perry's jug, and then used what was left of the warm, milky water on the seedling.

After lunch they played a wild game of tag, screaming and laughing as they skirted the edge of the mountaintop. When Caleb fell asleep in the grass, Perry told Frankie they should head back. She could tell he didn't want to leave any more than she did, but they packed up nonetheless, pausing to take one last look at the tree before climbing down.

On the way back to the trailer, they waved hello to their father. He was pulling duty at the weighing station, billing customers and checking that they weren't dumping prohibited items like pool chemicals or car batteries. Before their mother died, Dad was a big man in every sense of the word, tall and broad-shouldered with ropey muscles in his arms and legs. Now he was getting a potbelly from the regular diet of fried chicken and

hamburgers he was given by his trucker buddies coming through to dump during the week. When he saw Frankie, Perry, and Caleb, he waved, balding and slump-shouldered in his overalls, squinting against the sun. Loneliness was like a weight on him. In one summer that weight had made their father an old man.

Frankie didn't have to cook dinner that night because it was Wednesday, which meant hodge-podge night in the Lord house. On hodge-podge night everybody got to pick leftovers, a frozen dinner, or a can of soup to eat. Since there was no room for a dining room table in the trailer, they ate together in the living room, watching television. Frankie sat on the sofa between Dad and Perry with a bowl of tomato soup in her lap, trying to ignore the heavy, greasy scent of the leftover country-fried steak her father and brother were eating. She ran her fingers absent-mindedly over the upholstery, watching steam whorl up from her soup bowl. The red stitching holding the fabric together was like scars under her fingertips.

"Something wrong with your soup?" Dad asked, around a mouthful of gravy-soaked chicken.

Frankie shook her head. "No sir, I don't want to burn my mouth."

He smiled. "Patience is a virtue."

"Something's wrong with my dinner," Caleb said. He was sitting at their feet, using the coffee table as a TV tray.

"You picked peanut butter and jelly," Frankie told him.

“Hodge-podge night is for leftovers, Caleb,” Dad said. His voice was soft.

“Don’t complain after your sister was nice enough to make you a sandwich.”

“I don’t like strawberry jelly.”

“I told you we were out of grape,” Frankie said. A flush crept across her father’s cheeks.

“I don’t care, I want soup.” Caleb pushed the plate aside.

“What did I tell you?” Dad said loudly. He slammed his plate down on the table next to Caleb’s. “You don’t like the food you’ve got; now you don’t have any. Go to bed.”

Caleb cried as he stomped down the hall, sniffing and fussing even after he closed his bedroom door. Perry kept eating, cutting his food into tiny bites before lifting a fragment into his mouth and then chewing and chewing. Dad stood up, staring off down the hall toward the room that Perry and Caleb shared. He ran his hands over his scalp; the thin fringe of hair he had left was almost entirely gray now, with no hint of Perry and Caleb’s curls.

When he walked out of the room, Frankie asked Perry if she should take Caleb some food, but Perry shook his head, eyes still locked on his plate. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face. Their father walked back into the room, his thickest leather belt curled around his hand.

“Perry,” Frankie whispered.

“Eat your soup,” he hissed back at her.

Dad was walking past her now, headed for the hallway, headed to her brother. Frankie reached out and touched his leg.

“Dad,” she said. “Your dinner is going to get cold. You know you hate white gravy when it gets cold.”

The flush in her father’s cheeks deepened. He dropped the belt on the floor and sat back down on the sofa, grabbed his plate, and started eating. He never said a word, but the hand holding his fork shook all the way from the plate to his mouth. Frankie gulped down her soup, scalding the roof of her mouth when she reached the bottom of the bowl.

“I’m going to start the dishes,” she said.

On her way back to the kitchen, she picked up the belt. Frankie could still feel the warmth of Dad’s grip on the leather. She left the bowl on the kitchen counter and took the belt back into her father’s dark, musty bedroom. Clothes were piled at the foot of the bed, waiting for her to run the laundry on Sunday. The quilt on the bed, large squares of white and sky blue and grass green, was one that her mother made, the only one to survive the fire because it was safe in the backyard, drying on the line. Frankie laid the belt down on the quilt and felt her breath catch in her chest. A tear slipped down both her cheeks, a line of warmth from her eye to her chin. She took a deep breath to keep from sobbing, staring at the quilt and thinking of open sky, her mountain, the tree.

“If you want that quilt, you can have it.”

Frankie turned around so fast that she nearly lost her balance and fell. She caught herself on the edge of the bed. Her father stood in the doorway. He was staring at her hand where it touched the quilt. She snatched it off the bed as if she'd been burnt.

"I'm sorry--"

"You don't have to apologize for putting my belt back for me, Frankie." Her father rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. "It's going to start getting cold at night soon, and lord knows this place doesn't have a bit of insulation."

The squares of blue, white, and green blurred through the tears in her eyes. "She made it. Mom made it."

"She made plenty of blankets over the years." Dad shoved his hands into his pockets and stared down at the bed again. "Crocheted baby blankets, too."

Frankie, Perry, and Caleb each had a blanket from their mother, stitched during the months of pregnancy. They were made big enough to fit a twin bed, and so they'd always used them during winter. In summer and spring they stayed folded at the foot of their beds. Rose for Frankie, sky blue for the boys. All three lost to the fire.

"It's the only one--"

"It's just a blanket, Frankie. Don't make it more than what it is."

"Dad," she said.

He made a quick movement, snatching his belt off the bed. Frankie tensed and waited for a blow. Instead, her father pulled the quilt off the bed with his free hand and thrust it into her arms.

“You should lay it out or fold it nice so it doesn’t wrinkle,” he said. “The kitchen can wait that long.”

When he left the room, Frankie buried her face in the quilt to quiet her sobs. There was no trace of her mother’s sweet scent in the fabric.

As soon as she was done with the dishes, Frankie went to bed, though it couldn’t have been more than eight o’clock. She left her father and Perry sitting in the living room watching a car race on the battered television. They got such terrible reception that the picture was always fuzzy, but the cable company didn’t run lines into the landfill and Dad said they couldn’t afford a dish.

She lay in bed for hours, listening to the wind whistling against the trailer’s siding and the occasional burst of static from the distant television. She listened to her father send her brother to bed, heard a half-dozen aluminum pops as he drank can after can of beer alone in the living room. After he shuffled off to bed, the house was silent. Even the wind stopped. There was the creak of the old trailer as it shifted and settled in the cool of the night, and then she heard the low squeal of the front door.

The cotton sheets were smooth and warm against her skin. Frankie shivered when she slid out of bed into the wash of cold air from the vent at her feet. She pulled on her jeans and made her way as quietly as she could down the hallway and into the living room. The front door was open a crack, and the porch light was on. Frankie moved across the old, brown shag carpet without lifting her feet. If the floor creaked, the sound might wake her father. The soles of her feet grew warm from the friction. She reached

the door and it opened under her hand with the same long, low whine of metal on metal that she'd heard a moment before.

Perry was sitting on the steps in his pajamas. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"Not really." Frankie eased the door closed and took a seat on the stairs next to her brother. The cement steps were cool and rough under her bare feet.

"Caleb's all right," Perry said. "He cried himself to sleep."

Frankie hugged her knees against her chest. They were quiet for a while. Perry fidgeted next to her, moving his arms, his legs, brushing his hair off his forehead. He pushed himself up onto the top step, then shifted back down next to Frankie.

"Look at that ring around the moon." Perry craned his neck to see the sky around the rusting roof of the carport. "That means it'll be a hot one tomorrow. We should bring some more water up for the mango tree."

"Mango tree?" Frankie asked.

"Oh come on, Frankie," Perry said. He pressed his palms over his face and rubbed once, hard.

The gesture was so much like their father that Frankie almost laughed.

"You know what kind of tree that is. It's a mango tree. Mr. Coops had one exactly like it growing in his yard."

The slender seedling, the curling fire of the new leaves. She shook her head. He was right. How could she have forgotten the barren mango tree?

Perry took a deep breath, flicked a piece of pine bark off the step where he was sitting. "*She* wanted one."

Perry hadn't used the word "mother" since the day she died. Sometimes, when he thought no one was looking, Frankie saw him mouthing it over and over, like he was calling to her, or trying to remember the way it tasted.

"But *he* wouldn't let her have it," Perry said.

Frankie wondered if their father knew just how much Perry hated him.

The last Sunday they visited Mr. Coops was in the beginning of May, three weeks before their mother died, when the first real wave of summer heat hit. The sun was so bright that the blue of sky was faded to a wash, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen. Mom and Dad laughed as they herded Frankie and her brothers to the truck. Riding in the back was allowed only on visit days--when Dad knew they would just be traveling up and down the dirt roads of their neighborhood.

Frankie, Perry, and Caleb slid and bumped and laughed over every hump and pitfall in the street, the heat of the sun cut by the wind streaming over the truck. The road to the nursery was quiet and shade-dappled, filled with the sweet and spice of larger, stranger trees replacing the pine and scrub oak. Nestled in the midst of all of this was a big plantation house. Mr. Coops sat in a rocking chair on the front porch, which wrapped around the front and sides of the house. His chair was the same dazzling white as the house's siding, and made Mr. Coops look all the more impressive with his long, lanky brown frame. He wore a denim cap over the tight cotton curls of his hair.

With a wave his only greeting, Mr. Coops stalked back into his orchards, leading them past the kiwi, pomegranate, and rambutan trees, leading them to what he called his

secret shame, his beautiful towering mango tree with its pebbly bark and rich evergreen leaves. The tree had never borne an edible fruit in the thirty years since he planted it; the green-red mangos it grew were fibrous and bitter.

But on that Sunday no green-red mangos dangled from the tree. Instead it was covered in smooth, fist-sized golden fruit. Honey mangos, he told them in his soft bass voice, and smiled his cheek-crinkling grin. As he spoke he lifted and pushed aside leaves and fruit, showing them the hundreds of tiny scars lacing the bark, a silent record of the grafts that had ended his shame at last.

When he took them back to the truck that day, Mr. Coops ran up to the house and came back with a black, plastic pot filled with soil. There was a tiny ivory hump coming up from under the dirt, and out of that a thin green stem was growing, crowned with curling oval leaves in pink and orange, fading to green. He held the mango seedling out to Frankie's mother, and she blushed from neck to forehead, right up to the line of her strawberry blond hair. She placed her hands around the pot and he told her to plant it in a wide, open space so it would have plenty of room to grow.

But Dad wouldn't let her take the seedling. He lifted it right up out of Mom's hands and held it out to Mr. Coops, told him that Mom was too busy being a wife and mother to worry about a garden. Mr. Coops didn't take the pot--he just watched their mother with his large, ink-black eyes. Dad thanked him again and sat the pot down on the ground. There was no laughing, no smiling on the ride back home. Frankie, Perry, and Caleb each held a honey mango, silk smooth and golden, in their laps. When they ate

past the peachy flesh down to the flat, oblong seeds, they planted them, but nothing ever grew.

“We should take care of the tree,” Frankie said, “for her.” She was careful not to say Mom, Mother. “It could be as big and beautiful as Mr. Coops’s tree someday.”

Perry stood up, stared out into the landfill. “Once school starts we won’t have time.” He sighed. “That thing is so small it probably wouldn’t make it through winter anyway.”

“You don’t know that,” Frankie said.

Perry shook his head and walked past her up the stairs. When he reached the door he stopped with his hand hovering over the doorknob.

“You’ve got to grow up, Frankie,” Perry said. “If you don’t, you’ll end up just like her someday.”

Her brother walked back into the house.

“That’s not true, Perry.” Frankie spoke into still darkness.

Frankie stood up and walked around the side of the trailer. She took her bike off the rack and rode away into the moonlight. It wasn’t hard to retrace her path past the weighing scales to the foot of her mountain. The ledge was slippery in the dark, and by the time she made it to the top the front of her t-shirt and jeans were completely soaked. It was bright on the summit, the stark white glow made the grass silver and gray. Frankie walked across the mountaintop to the seedling. Some of the leaves had uncurled in the

night, spread and feather-soft under her fingertips. She slid her hands over the trunk of the tree, brushing the edge where pebbled bark met warm earth.

“A golden mango.”

Frankie saw her father lifting the potted mango out of her mother’s hands, and then it became her brother, climbing to the top of Sun-Kissed Mountain and ripping her seedling out of the earth.

And then Frankie ran toward the edge of the mountain, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. The grass was slick under her hands. She nearly slipped as she lowered herself onto the path back down the mound. On the ride back to the trailer Frankie crashed three times. The first two were normal wipeouts. The landfill was full of soft patches of sand that were easy to miss in the dark, and each one sent her sprawling. The third spill was at the weigh station. A moment’s hesitation was all it took to send Frankie sliding across the cold, dirty metal. The bike’s chain and frame dug into her leg, sending pain shooting up her thigh.

Frankie walked the rest of the way.

The trailer was quiet now, a vague black box that was somehow more terribly sad in that silence, like a dying animal that had finally given in to sleep. Frankie chained her bike back with her brothers’ and then limped up the rough cement steps, making careful passage the living room to the small space she called her own.

Frankie took her secret brooch out of the dresser, polishing it with the corner of her shirt. She tucked it up under her pillow, then took her mother’s comforter out of the closet and laid it over the bed.

Under white and sky blue and grass green, with her treasure beneath her head, Frankie dreamed. The day was bright, almost blinding, but somehow the air was cool. Sun-Kissed Mountain stretched above her--towering, craggy stone covered in rich meadow grasses. At the top she found her mango tree, grown tall and broad under the sun. Every branch drooped with the weight of dozens of golden mangoes.

Frankie walked to the tree through high grass filled with wildflowers. There was only one mango low enough for her to reach, a heavy tear-shaped fruit that felt warm in the palm of her hand. When she raised it to her mouth the skin of the fruit began to fade. Within seconds the mango changed from gold to pale gray, crumbling apart in her palm.

As the flakes slid, began to float, Frankie thought of the moths she'd startled from the grass on Sun-Kissed Mountain. Her fruit had turned to ashes, carried away like moths on the wind.

IT CANNOT HOLD

The babies are dead, and they shine like stars. Like little sleeping stars. There are six of them. The smallest, Twixt, is as long as a pinky finger, two inches give or take, of curved translucent pink flesh. The blood vessels in her arms and legs, her cat-paw hands, are like lines of glitter in burgundy, gold, blue, and lavender. Yes, she is as big as a pinky, with cat-paw hands and feet, with glitter-black sleeping eyes. Twixt has five brothers, all lined up in a row. Each one is a bigger than the next, each one with lengthened spine, fingers, toes, each one with the net of veins that shimmer and shine. Each one is named for their father. Sunshine talks to them every night, after the exhibit has closed and the museum is quiet. She tells them stories to ease their sleep. She watches over them, because they are hers.

The stories that she tells them are the stories of their lives, though she doesn't tell them that. She tells the stories to her children in third person, as many of them are very sad, and she doesn't want them to feel sorry for themselves or for their mother. She tells the story of Sunshine, as if it were some other Sunshine than the one they lived in for such a short time. Each night she tells her babies the story of one child. She starts from the oldest, down to the youngest, so that Monday is for her first son, and Saturday for her last. The Gallery of Science isn't open on Sundays and it doesn't matter because she doesn't have a seventh child. She sees some poetry in that.

Each story begins with the same three lines:

#1. Sunshine didn't always know where her children had gone.

#2. The reason for that is simple enough.

#3. For a long time she wasn't old enough to know any better.

Tonight is Monday, it's William's story, and so it continues as such:

When she got pregnant for the first time Sunshine was almost thirteen. She grew up in Deltona, Florida. If you haven't heard of it, don't be surprised. For a long time it was a retirement community, a place of 1000-square-foot houses made of unadorned cinderblock, each one with a flat, gravel-crustrated roof, with one or two old people waiting to die, tending their wilting grass and hanging bird feeders from the scrub oak or sand pines in their yards. They all liked white, tan, slate, or gray for house paint. The town had no cheerful houses in the flamenco pinks and pastel greens and blues like the old apartment in South Florida where Sunshine had lived with her family before they moved.

Everywhere in Deltona there were roads, roads snaking into other roads, turning back on themselves, roads that went nowhere, dead-ending into stands of pine, or lakes, or cement foundations covered in carpet moss and garbage. Roads that snaked into nests of roads so twisted and tangled that it seemed like they were trying to lure something in so they could eat. Each one was a thin strip of asphalt buckled with tree roots or drowned in the rain, with gravel-coated corners that sent cars spinning off into the grass just as easily as a bike's tires. It was back there, away from the old folks, where her parents took Sunshine and her older brother Parker to live, in one of those road-nests. She was six, and he was eight.

They went to elementary school in the next town over, a tiny and dilapidated single-building school with two floors and a broken elevator. In Sunshine's kindergarten

class there was a boy named Daniel Plummer who had to be carried upstairs by the principal every day because they couldn't get his wheelchair up the stairs. At recess the principal would carry him down again and he would watch the other children run and play as he rolled himself back and forth on the sidewalk in his too-big chair.

Sunshine liked his thin frame, his ivory skin, his ink-black and board-straight hair. He was so different from her own plump ruddiness, her frizzy blond curls. Once, feeling sorry for him, she offered to share a peanut butter and blueberry sandwich her mother had packed for lunch. It was Sunshine's favorite--she loved the feeling of each plump berry bursting between her teeth. It was more satisfying than slimy jelly. He didn't say a word when she offered it to him, but he smiled, and he ate it. Later, she would wish that this pale and quiet boy was the father of her baby. But he wasn't.

Growing up, there wasn't much to do in Deltona when the breaks came--spring break and summer vacation, Thanksgiving and Christmas--and so Sunshine and her big brother Parker spent most of their time riding bikes all day to the convenience store, or the lake, and at night they ate TV dinners, snuck extra dessert, and slept feverish, heat-stroked dreams where they were happy, unlike most children, to find themselves in school again even though they were naked and hadn't studied for the pop quiz.

Things began to change the summer before Sunshine turned thirteen. First off, Parker was now fifteen, and so in the fall he would be moving out of their middle school, which housed fifth through ninth grade, into high school. It would be the first time that the two of them didn't walk to the bus stop together. He would have to leave the house

far earlier than Sunshine because he was being bussed all the way to the high school in Deland.

The neighborhood was changing, too. Other families had heard about the cheap living on the outskirts of the nearly-dead, and so the road-nests were all being filled up with houses, some big, some small, most of them with children. Many of them were babies, barely toddling around in their yards, filling the air with shrieks of delight or grief or rage as they saw fit. Every so often, Sunshine and Parker would see older kids too, mostly boys, on the roads or in the woods. Most of them were nice, even shy of Sunshine and her brother, because they were a pair who so clearly belonged, who knew all the best ways to navigate the labyrinth.

But some of the new kids were mean, too, setting up forts where they kept stolen stop signs and the chicken wire from housing sites where construction workers were about to pour the driveway. Sometimes these boys would sit in trees and wait for kids to come by so they could throw eggs at them, stinky with boy-sweat and sap and rotteness. The inevitable leader of this mischief was a massive, ugly boy named Billy Todd.

Rumors started up about this boy two weeks after his family moved to town.

First it was Mrs. Leman's cat, Fairmont, who turned up crucified to a tree with a nail gun. Then came the broken windows, a few robberies of costume jewelry and pocket change. Sunshine's parents tried to keep these troublesome events hidden, but at night, before bed, she and Parker would sit in the dark hallway outside the family room and listen to their parents talk about Billy. He'd repeated seventh grade, and now they

were making him repeat eighth, because he was too busy drawing pictures of fires to pay attention in class. Parker told Sunshine to stay away from Billy Todd. One night while they sat in the dark, when another cat had gone missing the same day three houses on the next street had their tires slashed, their father said Billy Todd had the makings of a serial killer. Sunshine had felt a sudden need to pee, and that night she had nightmares about Billy Todd's pudgy face, his strange bucked, gap-ridden teeth.

Billy Todd started teasing Sunshine the first day that she showed up at the bus stop alone. He pulled at the skirt she was wearing, trying to pull it up, and imitated her protests in a horrifying, squealing falsetto.

"Leave me alone," Sunshine said.

"Leave me alone," he screeched, doubling over with laughter.

"I'll tell my brother."

"So?" Billy stopped laughing. He leaned close to Sunshine's face. His eyes were like the ice that forms on the top of milk when the refrigerator gets too cold--flat, milky-blue.

"He'll--"

"Have you ever seen my father's tool shed?" Billy asked. His eyes were unfocused, as if he was staring right through Sunshine and into the dank interior of his father's dilapidated wooden shed. "He has a nail gun, and saws and drills, hammers too."

The bus came down the street in a cloud of diesel and squealing brakes. Kids running late walked around them and nobody, not even Parker's friends, said anything to

Billy. He tugged on Sunshine's skirt one more time and walked onto the bus, laughing and imitating her voice again.

Sunshine sat right behind the bus driver on the way to school. She got so scared thinking of the bus ride home, thinking of her brother nailed up to a tree like Mrs. Leman's cat, that she threw up after lunch and the school called her mother to take her home.

For the next three days Sunshine wore jeans to school, and Billy didn't say anything to her. He stood on the far side of the bus stop, kicking dirt and tussling with his friends. On Friday Sunshine's mother reminded her it was picture day at school and set out a dress for her to wear. She did Sunshine's hair, setting it in cushion-soft pink hair curlers for a half hour after her bath. Once she was properly primed it was too late to take the bus and so her mother drove her to school, and Sunshine was thrilled when her mother promised to pick her up from school as well.

That afternoon her mother picked her up, just like she'd promised, and dropped Sunshine off at the house with Parker while she went to the grocery store. When Sunshine got out of the car and started to walk toward the house, her mother tapped on the horn and waved her back over. She rolled down the window, and it was right below the edge of her deep red lipstick when Sunshine reached the car door. She leaned forward, thinking that her mother wanted a kiss goodbye.

"Don't lean against the door, honey. It's dirty."

"Okay."

"Your brother is studying for a big test, so try not to bother him, okay?"

Sunshine nodded. Her mother smiled, looking so long and graceful in her white pantsuit, framed against the dark grey interior of the car. Sunshine wished silently that she would grow into her mother's long limbs, subtle curves. That her hair would soften; take on that gentle honey-colored wave that framed her mother's face.

“That's my girl.”

When Sunshine came into the house she made a peanut butter sandwich and cut it in half, slicing a banana for her brother's half, and dotting her own with blueberries that were just starting to wrinkle--those were the sweetest. She took both plates through the house and knocked on Parker's bedroom door with her shoe. There was a hand-colored skull and cross bones with “Enter and Walk the Plank” written under it in her brother's messy handwriting.

“I'm studying, Sunny,” he called through the door.

“I know, mom said.”

“Why are you bugging me then? I'll play after dinner.”

“I made you a sandwich.”

“No thanks.”

Sunshine leaned her head against the door. “It's peanut-butter and banana, my dear booger-breath.”

Her brother laughed. His chair scraped against the tile floor, the lock turned, and Parker opened the door.

“Bribery, huh?”

“No, it’s not a bribery. I told you,” Sunshine said, and then laughed. “It’s a sandwich. That studying must not be doing you much good.”

“Hah, hah,” Parker muttered through a mouthful of peanut butter and overripe banana.

“Can I go bike riding?” Sunshine asked.

Parker shook his head. “You’re not allowed.”

“Oh come on. I’m almost thirteen. And I made you your favorite sandwich.”

Parker shook his head again, but this time Sunshine could tell it was resignation. “Stay within two streets, don’t get your dress dirty, and bring me a glass of milk first.”

“No time for milk.” Sunshine laid her plate on top of his and ran off through the house.

It was a beautiful, sunny day. Not too hot, not too cool, with threads of cloud in the sky like spider silk. Sunshine made her way down the road, counting all the leaves she could see hinting toward yellow. She’d seen a picture of fall foliage in Massachusetts on a postcard at the store that weekend, and she imagined how strange the sand pines would look surrounded by trees blazing in amber, red, and brown.

She turned the corner, leaning with her bike as it slid a bit on the graveled asphalt. Sunshine was half-way up the road, still counting leaves, when Billy Todd ran up and jammed a thick pine branch into the spokes of her front wheel. She was thrust off the seat and her stomach hit the handlebars of her bike. The rear wheel tipped, and then she was sprawled face first onto the road. The impact knocked the wind out of her.

“Boy, you sure are clumsy.” Billy laughed.

His sneakers scraped on the gravel. She tried to push herself up, but couldn't make it; she leaned on her elbows, wincing at the pain in her chest. It was so sharp she could barely feel the gravel embedded in her skin.

“Since you stopped anyway,” Billy said. “There's something you should see.” He pulled Sunshine to her feet, and when she tried to back away from him, Billy grabbed a handful of her wilting curls and pulled her off toward the trees.

“Leave me alone,” Sunshine said, gasping.

“Now that's not very nice,” he said. He giggled, high and loud.

Sunshine pulled away again and Billy tugged her hair so hard she thought her scalp would give way.

He dragged her further into the trees. Sunshine couldn't tell if they were heading toward the road her house was on, or down toward the lake at the end of the street. All she could see were her own shoes, and layers of fallen copper pine needles littering the ground.

“Here it is,” Billy said. He let go of Sunshine's hair, grabbed her by the shoulders, spun her, and shoved her to the ground.

The layer of pine needles and dead leaves were moist under her hands, it seeped into her dress. The canopy of trees was so thick that sunlight barely trickled through.

“It's nice,” Billy said. He sounded happy. “Don't you think?”

Billy had a clubhouse. Three panels of plywood had been nailed up to the trees behind him, making a kind of half-room in the middle of the woods. The roof was

chicken-wire with browning palm fronds woven through the mesh. Two rotting squirrel skins were hanging from the center board. When Sunshine looked at Billy again he was pulling the zipper down on his pants. He pushed aside his underwear and his thing poked out. He grabbed it, yanked once.

“You can’t do that,” Sunshine whispered. She’d only ever seen her father’s, once, by accident, because she didn’t realize that he was in the bathroom. She and Parker laughed about it later because she’d caught their father sitting down to go pee. Parker said that was weird.

“I can do whatever I want,” Billy replied. He pulled on it again. When he let it go it was standing up against the blue of his jeans.

Sunshine pushed backward, scrambling for purchase on the damp ground, but before she could find her feet Billy landed on top of her. She could feel his thing, hot against the fabric of her dress. She screamed and smacked at his face, but he just laughed.

“Shut up.” He giggled. He shook her, so that her head hit the ground. “Shut up or I’ll nail you to the wall like a squirrel.”

His face was so close to hers now that the gaps between his bucked teeth looked blackened, rotten, like untended tombstones. He leaned his whole body against her, pinning her down, and she could feel his hand moving up under her dress, into her underwear. She whimpered and he screamed at her to shut up, flecking her face with spit. Sunshine thought of the squirrels nailed to the board, of Mrs. Leman’s cat. She shut up.

When he pushed his thing into her, Sunshine felt a burning, felt something give up inside her, and she began to cry. Billy had his eyes half-closed. His mouth hung open, with little spit-ribbons running from his tongue to his teeth. He pushed against her so hard she could feel branches digging into her back, her scalp. Finally he grunted against her and lay still for a minute. Under his weight Sunshine had to fight for every breath. Billy pushed up so that he was kneeling over her. When Sunshine tried to push backward again, he slapped her once, hard, and then flipped her over. He reached up and grabbed her underpants with both hands and ripped the thin fabric almost in two, then slid them off. Sunshine could taste dirt and the bitter tang of pine needles. She felt one of his knees on her back and then found her face pushed so hard against the ground she thought she would smother.

“Say you aren’t going to tell,” Billy said. His voice was calm, happy.

Sunshine couldn’t open her mouth. Her face was too tight against the earth.

He put all his weight on the knee in her back. “Say it,” he repeated.

“What the hell are you doing to my sister, Billy?”

Sunshine felt Billy’s weight lift off her back and turned over. It was Parker, standing in the trees. His face was red and his fists were clenched tight. Billy walked toward her brother and she could see her underpants sticking out of his back pocket, the white now pink-tinged and torn. She began to cry again. Her mother always got so angry at her when she ruined her clothes.

“Nothing the little slut didn’t ask for, Park. What are you going to do about it?”

Billy walked right up to her brother, stood nose to nose with him.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Parker said.

Sunshine gasped. She’d heard Parker cuss before, but never the F-word.

Billy laughed. “No, no you’re not. Pick your little slut sister up off the ground and take her home. You aren’t ever going to tell what happened.”

“Fuck you.”

“Do you know why?” Billy leaned his back against the tree trunk behind him. “Because aren’t you supposed to stick with your sister, Parker?” He continued in a high-pitched imitation of their mother’s voice. “Parker James Bradley, are you allowed to let your sister out to play, without you?”

Parker was shaking, his hands were still clenched in tight fists, but Sunshine could see the color draining from his face. His mouth was open, but no sound came out but a gust of air, almost like he was breaking wind through his mouth.

“What were you going to say?” Billy asked. He blinked.

“I--” Parker looked at Sunshine. He shook his head, stared down at the ground. “Nothing.”

“Good boy.” Billy patted Parker on the back. “Smart. Now take the little slut home.”

Billy ducked through the trees. Metal scraped the gravel on the side of the road as he lifted his bike. Then there was the snapping sound of his blue spoke beads popping against one another as he rode off.

Sunshine struggled to sit up. Parker lifted her to her feet.

“Parker--”

“If Mom asks what happened to you, you tell her you fell off your bike.” Parker shook her. His cheeks were flushed. “You hear me?”

“I fell?” In her mind it was a question but Parker must’ve thought that she was agreeing. He nodded. The spots on his cheeks grew brighter.

“I told you not to go near him,” Parker said. “If I told you once I told you a thousand times.” It was the only time she ever saw her brother cry.

When she felt the baby move inside her, Sunshine knew what it was. She didn’t panic. She wasn’t one of those girls who tried to hide her pregnancy, to wrap herself in ace-bandages only to give birth at a school dance or in her bed. No, she was practical, punctual, and tidy--her mother always bragged to her friends. When Sunshine felt it move she went into the house, quiet and calm, into the secret space behind her top dresser drawer, and pulled out all the money left that she’d saved from Christmas and her birthday.

With thirty-seven dollars and sixty-eight cents in hand she went to her brother and paid him to punch her in the stomach as hard as he could. When he asked her why she didn’t say anything, she waved the money at him and dared him to do it. At first he said no, but when she shoved the money toward him and screamed at him to take it, his face changed. Parker looked at the money, then down at her stomach. He hit her again, and again, every time she asked. First the baby moved faster, like it was trying to avoid Parker’s blows. Then, when he was red-faced and gasping, when she was doubling over with pain, the baby didn’t move at all.

Sunshine was fine, able to go to school and play and behave perfectly normally, until she started bleeding and didn't stop. Then she had to go to her mother and tell her something was wrong. Her mother took Sunshine to the doctor, a pediatrician down in Sanford who looked like Orville Redenbacher, the popcorn guy. This old doctor, with the trembling hands, asked Sunshine to lift up her dress. She would always remember it because it was her favorite Easter present that year, grass-green cotton with small blue flowers. The blood had ruined it. Under her dress her stomach was already starting to bruise. Sunshine never told them that Parker had hit her, but she had to tell them about the baby. Her mother cried. She cried big, fat, ridiculous tears like tears in a cartoon. She asked Sunshine who the father was, but Sunshine didn't tell on Parker then either. He'd told her not to go around Billy Todd. If he'd told her once, he'd told her a thousand times.

Tonight there is a problem. The problem is Ryan, one of the staff members from the Gallery of Science. Like most of the staffers at night Ryan is a college student, young and opinionated and hyped up on sugar and caffeine from energy drinks. After the closing, Sunshine comes into the small prenatal section of the tour, enclosed in rolling walls of black fabric so that people won't stumble upon the babies by mistake. She tells William's story, goes off to get a drink of water, then comes back to say goodnight. When she comes around the corner she finds Ryan standing there, poking at Bee's glass cylinder.

“You aren’t allowed to touch that,” Sunshine says. “There is no flash photography, and no touching the displays.”

“It’s just glass,” Ryan replies. He pokes the cylinder again with his thumb. Sunshine imagines poor Bee colliding with the cold, hard surface. “It’s not like I’m touching one of those beef-jerky people out there.”

“The oils in your fingers can, over the long-term, cause damage to the glass,” Sunshine continues. She uses her tour voice, hoping to scare him off with some ghost of authority.

“So? If one of these things breaks they’ll get some other lady who aborted her kid to donate the body to science. Like that makes up for it.”

“The babies used in *The Human Life* were miscarriages or stillborn children, donated by loving parents,” Sunshine says. Her voice shakes with the deception.

“I’m not some fucking old lady tourist, Sunshine.” Ryan slouches and glowers. “What are you doing in here, anyway? None of us are supposed to be back here in the tour unless we paid for it.” He holds up his arm, shaking a yellow wristband.

Sunshine knows that Ryan got the bracelet from his friend, Matt, another college brat working for the Gallery of Science. He’s been sneaking his friends in for free all week.

“If you continue to touch the displays, I’m going to have to report you to the corporate office.”

But Ryan reported her first. Sunshine knew the rules. She had been warned before, back in the first days of her employment as a traveling cashier with the

exhibit. No one was allowed in the exhibit unless they were assigned to observe groups that day, or the observer radioed for extra assistance with a large crowd. Otherwise the gift stand cashier--Sunshine--was to stay in the gift stand at all times, closing the till only at the end of business day. Meanwhile, the observer was to sweep the exhibit after the last tour and then lock up. But Sunshine always convinced the observers to let her close up so they could go home early to their families.

All of these rules of procedure are repeated solemnly by Mr. Moet, the paunchy, graying liaison officer between Adams Research and the Gallery of Science. His office is in a tiny, windowless room on the first floor of the Gallery.

“You do understand the importance of these rules, don’t you?” Moet isn’t looking at Sunshine. Instead he flips through a pile of papers on the corner of his desk.

Sunshine nods, channeling all her sincerity into her reply. “I do, Mr. Moet.”

“It would be a terrible thing for a customer to exit the exhibit and find no one in the gift shop to help them with their purchases. That revenue helps to sustain the exhibit’s moving costs.”

“Yes sir, I know. I am very sorry.”

“Well,” Moet sighs, finally looking up at her. “Mr. Neal, the H.R. manager at Adams, put in a good word for you, Sunshine. He’s always seen you as a great asset to the organization with your background in law and political science. He says you’re a fine speaker, that you have a real way with guests of the exhibit.”

“Thank you.”

“Well,” he drawls, shuffling papers on his battered desk, “Since this is your first offense, your position is secure.”

Sunshine smiles. Relief moves through her like a warm wave. “Thank you, Mr. Moet. I really do love my job.”

“You’ll finish the rest of the day off site without pay,” Moet replies. His eyes are bloodshot and overly moist. “Tomorrow you can return to work as normal.”

“Thank you for your kindness.”

As she stands to leave Moet has already turned back to his papers.

And so Sunshine spends the day in her crappy extended-stay hotel room. All extended-stay hotel rooms seem to have the same decorator, someone with a deep and abiding love of tan and pink. Tan carpets, tan and pink bedspread, pink comforter, pink tiles in the bathroom. The only white things aren’t really white any more--the blinds are cracked and yellowed, the refrigerator is rusting, and the grout in the shower has the gray stains of old mold. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner she eats peanut butter sandwiches with blueberries. She has orange juice with her morning sandwich, water with lunch, and V8 with dinner, for the vitamins.

The TV runs all day, to cover the noise from the rooms next to and above her own. The walls are so thin that her first morning in the room she heard the British man in the next room have arguments with his wife and his mistress within minutes of one another. So now the TV runs all on a satellite station that airs children’s shows in Spanish twenty-four hours a day. Sunshine likes the piping Spanish voices. They never sound sad.

When the sun goes down, Sunshine brushes her hair and her teeth, takes a bath, and puts on her pajamas. She turns off the light and watches the alarm clock. At nine, when the exhibit would be closing, Sunshine turns off the TV and closes her eyes. With her eyes closed she sees her children lined up before her. She reaches out her hands and can almost feel the cool glass under her fingertips. Sunshine is the only one meant to touch the children.

First there is Twixt, miscarriage, labeled **2 Months**. Then it is Little Evan--Lee--abortion, labeled **3 Months**. The third cylinder holds Cameron, miscarriage, **4 Months**. William is fourth, homemade abortion, labeled **5 months**. The fifth holds Nicholas, miscarriage, **6 Months**. Big Evan--Bee--is the largest of her children, the fourth she carried, premature birth, labeled **7 Months**. She smiles, to see them all there together in her mind, and then she tells Little Evan his story.

#1. Sunshine didn't always know where her children had gone.

#2. The reason for that is simple enough.

#3. For a long time she wasn't old enough to know any better.

When Sunshine got pregnant for the second time she was in college. She earned a scholarship to Stetson, the oldest private school in the southeast, and majored in political science and pre-law. Sunshine planned to become a lawyer, eventually a D.A. someday, putting the bad guys behind bars where they belonged. All of her instructors encouraged her in this ambition. She had a keen mind and a gift for debate. And it didn't hurt that Sunshine's childhood wish for beauty had come true. She was tall and slender, just as her

mother had been, and in the years after puberty her hair softened to the same golden wave. Sunshine had a face that jurors would trust.

She was a senior. She'd been seeing a boy, Evan Donnelly, since the end of sophomore year. Evan was tall, pushing six feet, with dark hair and eyes, and just as slender as Sunshine. Every girl in their class wanted him, but Sunshine was the one who won the shy artist. Her secret? She went to the university art gallery each weekend when he was there working. He escorted her around, discussing the artist being featured in the exhibit that month. When he asked her to look at his sculptures, Sunshine told him she would only do it if he took her on a date. He blushed when he said yes.

When they made love for the first time, Evan admitted he was a virgin. Sunshine told him she'd never made love either. She told him that she hadn't bled when they made love, because as a girl she'd fallen while riding her brother's bike. The impact on the bar had torn her hymen. It was so painful, she told him, that she tipped right over on the side of the street. That she lay there for an hour, crying and bleeding.

The night they decided to have sex for the first time, Evan got a hotel room. He brought candles and flowers. The flowers were in a vase he'd made himself, glazed the same golden color as Sunshine's hair. When she wept as they entwined, Evan told her that he was happy, too. His teeth were white tombstones in the candlelight.

Their lovemaking grew more frequent as Sunshine began to trust her lover's gentleness. They always used protection, but at the end of the fall semester of their senior year, she stopped getting her period. At home, over Christmas break, she took a pregnancy test. When the blue plus line appeared, Sunshine's hands began to shake. She

avoided her parents and brother as much as she could for the rest of the vacation, afraid they would be able to tell that something was wrong. Evan called to wish her a Merry Christmas, but she didn't tell him.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” was all she said.

“Are you all right?”

“I'm fine, I just miss you.”

“Don't be silly,” he replied. “We'll be together soon.”

“And then forever?” she asked.

“Forever,” he replied.

The day the spring semester started, Sunshine had a full day of classes. She met Evan on the grounds as she walked from one class to another, and asked him to meet her in her dorm room that night.

“I'll cook you dinner,” she told him, kissing him on the cheek.

“I'm a lucky man.”

“You remember that.” She was smiling when she said it, but her stomach clenched like a fist.

In her dorm room that evening, Sunshine did her best to recreate their first night together as lovers. She lit candles and scattered them over the room, where they shone like stars. She took the vase that Evan made for her and filled it with wildflowers. She even cooked his favorite meal--spaghetti and meatballs--on a double-range portable burner that her parents gave her when she started college. She just had time to wash her face, brush her hair, and change into a nice dress before Evan knocked on the door.

“It smells fantastic in here,” he told Sunshine. He rubbed her shoulders as she closed and locked the door.

“Thanks. I made spaghetti.”

Evan smiled. “Did you make your special meatballs?”

“I told you, it’s just the Italian breadcrumbs. But yes.”

“Excellent,” he rubbed his hands together and looked around at the decorations. “So what’s the special occasion?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat first? We can talk later.”

“My grandpa always said, take care of business before dinner so you’re not trying to listen and digest at the same time. What’s up, babe?”

“I’m not going to beat around the bush, love.” She smiled, and laid the palm of her hand against his cheek. She loved the feeling of his stubble like sandpaper under her fingertips. “I’m pregnant. We’re having a baby.”

Evan walked across the room and sat down on Sunshine’s lumpy blue sofa. He looked down at his hands, flexed them like an old man checking for the beginnings of arthritis.

“Sunshine,” he began. He shook his head. “We, we can’t have a baby. Not now.”

“But I’m pregnant now.” She laid her hands against her stomach.

“We still have four months before we graduate. I may have to push my graduation back till the end of summer if I can’t finish that fucking stone carving.” He

rubbed his hands through his hair, violently, from scalp to crown, over and over. Sunshine usually teased him that he was going to make himself bald.

“You’ll finish it on time. You always pull it out of the fire at the last minute. It’s part of your charm.”

He smiled, but it didn’t last. He rubbed his hands through his hair again. “Even so.”

“Even so, what?” Sunshine asked. “What are you saying to me, Evan? You want me to abort our baby?”

He didn’t look her in the eye. “If you love me, yes.”

“I do love you, but that’s the point isn’t it? If you love me too, then why would we kill our baby?”

Sunshine felt like the room spinning. She walked over to the counter where the spaghetti was getting cold on the burner, watched a candle flicker in a tiny purple votive. She picked it up, letting the pain of the hot glass on her fingertips distract her from the churning in her stomach. She tipped the candle and let white wax run in trickles into the sink. The loose, fleshy tendrils of wax made her gag. She dropped the candle in the sink and the votive shattered.

“Sunshine, trust me.” Evan pulled her close. She smelled the spice of his cologne. His hands, rough with years of working stone and clay, moved over her hair. Evan told Sunshine how much he loved her. He got down on one knee and asked her to be his wife, to marry him on the Stetson campus where they’d met, and where they would soon graduate together. He told her that back in his dorm he had a ring, with a diamond,

in a little box covered in burgundy velvet. It was his grandmother's. He'd been planning to propose on Valentine's Day. He offered her a lifetime of happiness.

"We'll travel," he whispered. "During the summers when I'm not teaching you can take vacations from your firm and we'll see the world, one country at a time. We'll get a beautiful house with rooms for a library and an art studio, like we've always wanted."

All she would have to do in return was kill his baby growing inside her. They would have children after graduation, after he'd landed a job teaching. She agreed. The next day she made an appointment with a local abortion clinic. On the day of the procedure Evan went to the clinic with her and held her hand. Even when the doctor performed an ultrasound, to check on the position of the placenta and told them they were having a boy, Evan didn't change his mind.

And so Sunshine took off her clothes, put on a gown, and lay down on a table covered with sticky mustard-yellow vinyl. She let a nurse put her feet into stirrups, and she let Evan hold her hand as they pried her cervix open and sucked their baby out. Evan was true to his word. He proposed to her on Valentine's Day, and they were married in the fall. It was a beautiful wedding at his parents' house in Connecticut. Her dress was white and brilliant against the autumn leaves.

Sunshine whispers all of this into the dark. She remembers Evan's scent, his warmth, the strength of his arms. What she sees, floating in the darkness, is her Lee, Little Evan, like a candle's flame. Her breath is the wind, carrying the story to his ears.

In the morning she gets up early, has her sandwich and juice, puts on her Adams Research uniform--the teal shirt with the AR logo and black pants--and drives to work. It's only 6:30 in the morning, early enough to avoid most of the traffic on tired, gray Colonial Drive with its cracked pavement, fast food joints, and strip malls. Early enough to watch the sunrise from the top of the parking garage connected to the Gallery of Science.

Inside, Sunshine finds the gallery empty except for a few people from housekeeping. She wishes them good morning in their native Czech tongue. These are the only two words that she has learned to speak, but the bent, gray-haired women always break into smiles when she says them, and nod their kerchief-wrapped heads. She wanders around the lower floors, which have been transformed into an exhibit on coral reefs. Tanks line the walls, filled with dark, branching coral. The tropical fish living and feeding on the coral are just flickers of light and color on the edge of Sunshine's vision.

The exhibit takes visitors into a foam-sculpted underwater paradise, complete with a carved relief of waves, kelp, and shadowy sea-creatures. This leads to more tanks. Sunshine finds the soft pink and white of the juvenile octopus disturbing. She hurries thorough to the center of the exhibit, a large salt water pool filled with small live reefs, fish, and an adolescent nurse shark. Every morning she finds the shark sleeping on the bottom of the pool, which is covered in gravel and sand. By the time the shark wakes and makes its fitful way through the coral in search of breakfast, it is time for Sunshine to set up the gift shop.

When she comes up to the second level where *The Human Life* exhibit is housed, Ryan isn't working the ticket stand.

"Good morning, Flo," she tells the heavy-set black woman sitting behind the counter.

"Good morning yourself, Sunshine." The woman, Flo, laughs as if she has made a clever joke. "How are things?"

Flo counts silently as she makes small talk, the tickets and yellow wrist bands shuffling through her hands in a blur. Sunshine always wonders how Flo can maneuver so smoothly when her ruby-tinted nails are over three inches long.

"Excellent, now that you're back."

"I know you folks get lost without me." She laughs again. A smear of her red lipstick stains the brilliant white of her front teeth. "But my mother-in-law's been sick again. We were afraid she was going to have to start the dialysis."

"Is she okay now?"

"She's doing about as well as an old lady can expect."

"I'm glad," Sunshine said.

"Speaking of which," Flo replied, lowering her voice and leaning toward Sunshine. "Could you close for me tonight? I'd like to check on Mike's mother on my way home, and you know how that man gets if I'm late with his dinner."

"Of course," Sunshine whispers. She thinks of her children, sleeping a room away, and smiles.

That night Twixt gets her story with no delay, no troublesome boys or lingering visitors to hold things up. Twixt is twixt because she is betwixt and between, the middle child, third of six, her only girl. Sunshine breaks her own rule and reaches out to stroke the glass cylinder that holds the body of her tiny daughter. Twixt's story is a short one.

Four years after they were married, Sunshine and her husband Evan decided to have a baby. He stopped wearing condoms, and she stopped taking the pill. Their weekly love-making turned to nightly romps. Some nights they lit candles, and Sunshine wore lingerie, other nights they made love on the living room sofa without even getting undressed. Sunshine wasn't even sure that she was pregnant, at first. She had one very light period, and then missed one all together. This was right around the time that she had decided that she was going to take a break from law school to give teaching a try, and so she thought the skipped period was stress.

On a Sunday they skipped the sex and went straight to bed. Evan was exhausted from a day of sculpting and needed to rest up for school the next day. Sunshine was glad because she was feeling achy anyway. In the middle of the night she woke up to severe cramping. The pain moved down her abdomen in waves. She lay there in the dark, terrified, and felt something wet slip out of her body.

She went to the bathroom. She checked under the counter for tampons and pads, then pulled down her underwear. A round bloody sack, the size of a tangerine, lay centered in the crotch of her white panties, staining the cotton pink. Sunshine knew immediately that it was a baby. She stood up, blood trickling down the inside of her legs,

and held the sack under the faucet, rinsing it clean. A small chunk of tissue was connected by a thread-thin piece of flesh to the translucent sack. The baby lay inside of it, so still and quiet. Its eyes were black dots, its hands little cat-paws. She put the body in a sandwich baggy and put it in the freezer, then she woke up Evan to tell him the news.

He took her to the doctor the next day. The doctor took the baggie, offered his condolences, and told them that sometimes these things just happened. After running a few tests he told them they should try again in a few months. Sunshine always felt guilty that she hadn't kissed her daughter goodbye.

On Thursday Matt, college boy and giver of free tickets to his frat brothers, is manning the ticket booth.

"Hi Matt," Sunshine says. She smiles, hoping to start off on the right foot. "Where's Flo today?"

Matt doesn't smile, and he waits so long to answer that at first Sunshine thinks he is going to ignore her. She stands there, frozen, unsure of what to do or say, when finally Matt looks up from the magazine he's reading, shakes his nappy shoulder-length blond dreads out of his face, and shrugs.

"Her mom is sick or something."

"Oh, it must be her mother-in-law again."

"Could be."

"Well, it's nice of you to cover for her, Matt."

He shrugs; his eyes keep flicking back to the magazine.

“If you need me to,” Sunshine murmurs, “I’d be happy to close for you tonight. I know it’s difficult to change your plans at the last minute.”

Matt shrugs again. “Works for me.”

That night Sunshine goes in to close the exhibit. It is Thursday, time to tell Bee’s story. His is always the hardest for her to recount. Big Evan is the only child she didn’t miscarry or abort. Bee was born prematurely, at seven and half months, so small he could fit in Sunshine’s hands cupped together. She touched his velvet-smooth skin and pumped her breasts to give him milk. When he died from complications of a bowel obstruction, Evan said that they should let the hospital take care of the body. Sunshine didn’t argue. But she talked to a nurse that day, made her promise that they wouldn’t throw her child away. Sunshine signed papers so Bee’s body would be donated to science, to help other babies.

All these images are running through her mind when she walks through the exhibit. When she steps into her children’s room, she is smiling, ready and willing to present a happy face as she tells her children a story. But the room isn’t empty. A crowd of young men stands around the table. They’re all wearing Sigma Alpha Epsilon shirts and ball caps. All sport the yellow armbands that say they are paying customers, even though this is a lie. Sunshine knows it is a lie because Ryan and Matt are with them. And Twixt is not on her pedestal. Ryan and Matt are throwing her back and forth to one another, laughing. The other boys with them are poking and prodding the glass that shields her sons.

“No, no, you can’t do that.” Sunshine runs up to Ryan and pulls Twixt out of his hands, setting her back on the pedestal at the far end of the display table.

“You can’t do that.” He imitates her voice with a shrill whine. “What do you care anyway? Matt’s closing tonight; shouldn’t you be taking care of the gift shop?”

“I’m responsible to Adams Research for the condition of the exhibit. So are you. Get out. Matt told me to close tonight.” She draws herself up to her full height, fights the urge to wring her hands.

“I changed my mind,” Matt drawls. “My buddies wanted to see the exhibit.”

“Run along, Sunshine,” Ryan says, smiling. “Like a good little girl.”

He walks toward the end of the table, flicking each cylinder of glass as he goes. He wraps his hand around Twixt, but one of Ryan’s friends says that they should try the big one instead.

Sunshine turns. The tallest of the frat boys, a thick, dull-looking kid, is reaching toward Bee.

Precious Bee. It was because of him that she’d found her children again. She knew that Bee was her son the moment she walked into the Tallahassee Science Center’s exhibit of *The Human Life*. The little birthmark beneath his left eye gave it away, made her spend enough time there to see that all her children, somehow, had been gathered together. She’d quit her job teaching to work for Adams Research and be with them all the time. To protect them.

The frat boys are still laughing. Sunshine imagines her children's fear. She imagines glass breaking, bodies torn. She curls her fists up, so tight that she imagines her knuckles pressing white through the tan of her skin.

"If you don't leave my children alone," she screams at them, "I will fucking kill you!"

The boys are quiet for a moment. Several have gone pale, stunned. Ryan shakes his head. "Matt," he says, forcing a laugh. "I told you this bitch was crazy. You owe me twenty bucks."

They laugh, but it is muted, timid.

"It's time for you all to leave," Sunshine tells them, fighting for calm. "The exhibit is closed. If you don't go, I'll call the police."

When Ryan laughs this time, it is long and loud. "Are you seriously threatening us? Lady, you better get out of here, or I'll report this to the director. You'll be out on your ass."

Sunshine feels an eerie kind of calm. She actually laughs. "Ryan, who do you think is going to believe you?" He doesn't know that she was a bar certified attorney, or that she taught political science at a private university, but Moet does. She'll make her case and get rid of these spoiled brats.

One of the frat boys holds up his cell phone. The screen is blank, but when he pushes a button, a grainy picture appears. Sunshine looks at herself, ranting, flecks of spit flying out of her mouth. Her voice from the phone speaker is tinny, but unmistakable.

“If you don’t leave my children alone, I will fucking kill you!”

“Believe that,” Ryan says.

“You report me if you want,” Sunshine stares into Ryan’s amber eyes. “I’ll tell them my side of the story, and we’ll see who gets fired.” She swallows. “But for now, you and your friends get the fuck out of here before I call the cops.”

“This place is giving me the creeps anyway,” the fat frat boy says. He gives Bee one last tap. “I don’t care what the brochure says; this place smells like fucking formaldehyde or something.”

Ryan and his friends saunter out of the exhibit, a few muttering threats. Sunshine trails behind them, watches to make sure that they actually leave the Gallery. Her stomach burns as she goes back to the exhibit. After all this time, all these years, traveling from place to place with the exhibit, she knows she is going to be fired. She wonders who will take her place, wonders if her stories will be able to reach the children from half a world away, if her voice can reach that far. Because Cameron--named for her husband Evan’s middle name--should know that his parents tried again to have a baby, one more time. He should know that when Sunshine miscarried, his father divorced her. Nicholas should know that Sunshine slept with a near-stranger, just for one last chance to have a child. But her body is broken. It cannot hold.

She turns off the lights in *The Human Life* and goes into the gift shop. Sunshine closes out her till, and locks all the display cases, sorts the reference charts and books back into their proper places. When everything is where it should be, she goes to her locker in the break room and takes out her backpack. She pulls out her dinner sandwich

and V8 and stares at the TV, even though it isn't on. When she finishes eating, she pulls everything out of the backpack--her wallet goes in her pocket, she pulls on her Adams Research hooded sweatshirt. Everything else--a paperback book, pencils, pens, tampons, sneakers for her sore feet--she throws in the trash.

Sunshine walks back to the exhibit, through the main entrance, into the dark. She doesn't turn on the light. She locks the door behind her and feels her way through the exhibit, running her fingers along the carpeted wall. She trips a few times, shudders when her hands accidentally brush desiccated flesh. After a few minutes she collides with the black divider that blocks her children from the rest of the exhibit. She goes inside and creeps forward, arms stretched out, afraid she'll hit the table and knock the cylinders off.

When she feels the smooth wood of the table under her fingertips she slides them across the surface of the table until she finds the first pedestal, a circular ridge just above the table itself. Sunshine closes her hand around the tiny cylinder that is her daughter, and brings it to her lips.

"Mommy's taking you on a trip," she murmurs.

One by one she places her children into the backpack, taking care to peel off the tiny, magnetized alarm strip on the bottom of each cylinder. Twixt and Lee go into the front pocket, William and Cameron in the middle. She is barely able to fit Bee and Nick into the largest pocket of the backpack. Sunshine zips the bag shut, slings it over her shoulders, and walks out. She goes out through the gift shop, past the check-in counter, down the stairs, and to the parking garage. She gets in her car, and she drives. She

doesn't stop at her hotel. She drives out of the city, until she comes to the ocean, and she parks at the beach, to wait for the sun to come up.

Sunshine will sit here and wait, hugging her backpack to her chest. She will wait for her children to stir, to push against their cylinders of glass, to yawn and cry and call for her. To grow so large that the glass cannot hold them, to spill shining, wet, and loved into the world.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

Planning for this paper has been a rewarding experience. As I've read and compared my work to a multitude of authors, in terms of style, thematic concerns, and the use of imagery, I have found a sense of identification for myself and for my work.

I was born and raised in Florida, and so some may categorize me as a Southern author, but my parents and all my extended family are from New Jersey. I've never really felt a connection to the Southern experience. I'm a lesbian, I tend to write about women, and I definitely hold to a lot of feminist ideals, but I don't consider myself an author of "queer" or "feminist" fiction. In the end, like Ray Bradbury, I hope to be a "people" writer. Regardless of age, race, gender, or sexuality, my interest is in people, and how they grow and change.

The conclusion that I've come to is this: I am one of the dispossessed. Don't get me wrong, I don't give my allegiance to the Lost Generation, either--they are far too cynical for me. Besides, I don't have enough money to fly off to Paris in voluntary exile even if I wanted to. I am one of the dispossessed because I am a person whose beliefs and concerns lie far outside the normal worries of American consumer society.

And so my characters are the dispossessed as well. It can be seen in Viviane, a woman who chose her career over having a family in a time when that was almost unheard of. In "Zyczenie" it is also expressed through her continuing desire for solitude. The same sense of disconnect exists for Angie, a girl growing up in a world of auras and ghosts, lost in the shadow of her brother's death. There's Sunshine, a woman who gives

up a successful career to chase the dream of her children, forever unborn. Annie, who hides in her gardens and lives with bugs, as cookie-cutter suburban life takes over all around her, and Frankie, a girl who dreams of mountains and mango trees, even in the face of her mother's death. Though a part of middle class society, all of these women have concerns and conflicts that set them apart from the typical American experience.

Gay characters are to be found in these pages as well, and though that is enough to make one dispossessed in our culture, the objects of their affections are nigh unattainable as well. Kat, the biracial girl in love with her best friend, and Rachael, in love with a girl who literally refuses to speak, are both caught up in worlds of disconnect, where the inability to communicate the truth will bring a loss of love.

So who am I like? Who writes about the dispossessed? The first author that pops into my mind is Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. Walker's heroine, Celie, is an abused woman forced to give up her children and live with a man she doesn't love, a woman who manages to find independence, victory, and triumph in an era when women, especially black women, had little to no freedom. I think of Kurt Vonnegut's "A Deer in the Works", when David Potter realizes that he cannot give up his dreams for the security of medical insurance and a pension.

Two pieces from Salinger's *Nine Stories*, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "Teddy", truly resonated with me and share this theme. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", Seymour Glass is unable to reconnect with society after the horrors of war and eventually kills himself. In "Teddy" the title character, an amazingly precocious and wise boy, tries to explain the true nature of the world to a man who isn't prepared to

listen. The boy's untimely death is not a certain catalyst for change, but he still seems almost relieved to be leaving a life where so few understand him.

Annie Proulx's *Close Range* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* have both taught me about the power of nature imagery. The vast and desolate Wyoming landscape is a living, breathing character in Proulx's stories, a backdrop that is at once lush and desiccated, a source of comfort or a terrible enemy. *Surfacing* takes readers into the rural reaches of Canada, to forests and rivers and the swampy borders between. Nature becomes the force of transformation, and even salvation, for the protagonist as she climbs out of madness.

For my thesis I have worked to build in nature imagery through the flora and fauna of Florida, observed at its most beautiful and most corrupted. Stories in the collection have settings that run the extreme from highways, landfills, and trailer parks, to housing developments, gardens, and secret forests. My hope is that setting is a constant source of revelation, with the external landscape offering insight into the internal struggles of the characters. In "Seed of the Golden Mango" and "Raising the Dead", the settings are larger than life, silent participants which, in a way, are catalysts in the lives of the characters.

The process of going through this program has been incredible, both wonderful and excruciatingly difficult at times. I've learned that I'm not one of those writers that have a surety of their uniqueness in the universe. I'm certain that would make it easier to write, to push through those times of stress or self-consciousness, but it's just not me.

Writers with absolute confidence rub me the wrong way. It feels like they've stopped growing and they expect the world to take notice and congratulate them for it.

What I do know is that I'll always keep pushing to improve. Back in Contemporary Fiction I had a realization that people want to be geniuses, but don't realize that all the folks we think of as geniuses are actually craftsmen. Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Socrates, those guys worked their asses off all the time, exploring and watching and listening--always full of curiosity, always willing to observe. That's what I hope to be in the process of becoming, a craftsman.

Part of that life-long journey is going to be tapping into my muse. When I read Robert Olen Butler's *From Where We Dream*, I was drawn right away to the idea that there is a white-hot center we all tap into for our best work. I agree that writing every day is crucial to getting there, and that forcing things can cut our access off like flipping a switch.

Long before Butler, though, there was Ray Bradbury and *Zen in the Art of Writing*. His thoughts on feeding and keeping a Muse, tapping into and trusting our subconscious mind, and being happy when we write, have been revolutionary for me. Bradbury addresses most, if not all, of Butler's ideas in a third as many pages, with none of the air of cultish command and arrogance that Butler sometimes falls into.

In Bradbury's book he discusses Zen in terms of how to approach writing: "Work, Relax, DON'T THINK." (125). What's great is that the work Bradbury means isn't really "work"; it's just making the time to write every day. Bradbury suggests a minimum of 1,000 words, but regardless of the length the key is to relax, and not to over-think things.

He puts it the best: “So, simply then, here is my formula. What do you want more than anything else in the world? What do you love or what do you hate? Find a character, like yourself, who will want or not want something with all his heart. Give him running orders. Shoot him off. Then follow as fast as you can go.” (7)

When I read these words, characters from my stories started popping into my head. I saw Viviane, who only wanted to enjoy the autumn weather, plunged into a confrontation with death and the choices she made in life, and Sunshine, who wants to watch over her children, sacrificing “normal” life to be a very abnormal mother. There’s Frankie, trying to hold onto her childhood in a grim reality, and Kat and Rachel who want to love and be loved. When I wrote these stories I felt words flow out of me like water. I wasn’t thinking, I was relaxed and happy, and I only faltered when I tried to stop and analyze things along the way. *Zen in the Art of Writing* is a book that I will always keep with me.

Another work on writing that moved me was a Kurt Vonnegut essay from *Palm Sunday*, “How to Write with Style”. Within the larger body of the piece he encourages writers to find their own style by choosing a topic they care about, avoiding the urge to ramble about the topic, keeping things simple (in terms of the use of language), having the guts to cut anything that doesn’t illuminate the subject, sounding like themselves, saying what they mean, and pitying the readers.

One of the best compliments I’ve received during this whole process came from a friend and fellow writer who has been familiar with my work for almost fifteen years. Upon reading “Zyczenie”, she told me that she could tell it was my work, in style and in

voice, but just *better*. In that moment I knew I had learned to polish my writing without losing my style in the process. I still sounded like myself.

Vonnegut's plea to pity the readers is one that I intend to answer. In her article, "A Cage in Search of a Bird: The Elusiveness at the Heart of Story Structure", Catherine Brady suggests that for writers it is necessary to risk having works that are meaningless. Where Vonnegut would have a writer "simplify and clarify", Brady would have writers "dance on the boundary line between resisting a final interpretation and resisting any interpretation" (4).

As artists, particularly artists who aspire to write literature, there is a careful balance that has to be maintained, between giving the reader a sense of discovery, and burying meaning so deeply in a piece that only the most experienced literary theorist can tease it out. Vonnegut's advice isn't to lessen our artistic integrity, but to give readers a vision that is at once beautiful and comprehensible.

As I approach the completion of my MFA degree, I am filled with gratitude for the growth I have achieved as a writer. For six years, between finishing my bachelors' degrees and going back to graduate school, most of my output was fantasy genre fiction or absurdist plays. Now my fiction taps into authentic human experience, and when the fantastic is present it serves to illuminate, not to obscure. I hope to write every day for the rest of my life, to publish regularly, and to continuing to hone and tighten my skills.

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