Cane Burning Season

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Cane Burning Season

It was cane burning season when Darly first saw the child, deep in the middle of cane burning season when the whole town smelled like something roasted over a camp fire then hung out on the side of the road for sale. She’d been easing down the steps of the house with her cleaning supplies, trying to shut the door and balance the overflowing bucket all at the same time when she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps in the gravel behind her. The Wilbert house, Darly’s family home, was directly behind their cane property, so no one ventured out to visit without calling first. It was just too long of a drive to leave everything to chance.

She tried to turn around to see who was behind her, but her left foot slipped on the cracked front porch step and she tipped over, landing hip-first on side of the stairs, spilling the bleach solution all over her work clothes.

“Shit!” She froze for a moment, out of habit, then remembered that Momma couldn’t come down the stairs anymore, and Daddy was always at work. And anyway, Momma wouldn’t know to care if she caught Darly cussing now. All
she knew about was some life she’d lived when she was younger and making up crazy stories about it.

Darly threw one of the cloths at the house, where it stuck on the cheap white siding with a sucking noise, then slid down slowly to the ground. She’d begged her mother to hold off on the housecleaning until after the burnings, but Bernette Wilbert was nothing if not clean, and since she’d been bedridden her standards had risen considerably. It was the one characteristic she’d kept during this long illness, the one thing nothing could peel off her bones. Even though she couldn’t see it, she couldn’t bear the thought of her stately white plantation-style home being covered with soot and ashes.

“The smell’s bad enough,” she’d whispered to Darly the night before, once everyone else had gone to bed. “Smells like Sunday afternoon on Bourbon Street.” Darly agreed, but it burned bitter in her bones that she was the only one responsible for keeping the house clean. Her daddy was Sheriff and her brothers were brand new deputies, so they all had reason to leave the house from time to time, or all the time, as it seemed to be. It was her and Dotty, Momma’s nurse, that got stuck with the worst of it, and Darly herself who got stuck with most of the manly outdoors-type duties.
As she looked at the huge white splotch quickly working its way upwards on her coveralls, she heard a muffled giggle behind her. Turning, she saw a small black girl in a frilly pink dress and white patent leather purse—church clothes. Darly carefully climbed to her feet, bracing a hand against her aching hip and wincing at the stinging in the joint. “What’re you doing here, little girl?”

The little girl shook her head and kept giggling, slapping her hands over her mouth with an audible pop.

“What’s so funny?” Darly felt her face pink, then redden. Where the hell did this kid come from, anyway? Wasn’t any churches nearby, no black churches, for sure.

“You’re all white, huh?” The little girl doubled over laughing, nearly dropping her purse. Darly noticed that her dress shoes weren’t even dusty from the walk up the long, loose-graveled drive.

“You’d better get on out of here, girl. This is private property, understand?”

She smirked but nodded, standing up straight and tall. She looked from Darly to the house behind her and smiled even bigger. “Your family’s sure got a nice place,” she said. “It’s way bigger than mine.” She giggled again, then turned and ran into the cane field.
“Hey!” Darly ran after her, but the pain in her hip was too much and besides, you can’t find someone in a cane field unless they want to be found. Her father told her stories about chasing criminals in there in the old days, and how scary it was. One minute, you might be hot on their trail, but the next minute you might be wondering if they were going to sneak up and surprise you instead of the other way around.

She limped back to her overturned bucket and picked up the cloth that had fallen from the house by now. The bleach solution almost sizzled where it hit the dirt, and Darly wondered if maybe it was like peroxide, killing all the germs in everything it touched.

“Girl, what on earth did you do?” Dotty asked, looking over the spreading purple fingers that wrapped around Darly’s body from buttock to mid-abdomen.

“I fell off the steps ‘cause some little girl scared me.” She was careful not to say “black” in front of Dotty. She knew her family was racist but she wanted to make sure the old woman knew she wasn’t like them, not at all.

“A little girl?” Dotty laughed as she applied stinging ointment to the spots where skin had broken. “You been hangin’ round your Momma too much. Getting just as crazy as
she is.” Dotty laughed to herself and shook her head. “What would a little girl be doing around here?”

“I don’t know, she wouldn’t tell me. But she was there in her church clothes and she laughed at me then ran off into the cane fields. The part that’s not burning yet, Dotty, I’m not crazy. She was there.”

Dotty kneeled down and Darly could almost hear the bones creaking and joints squealing. Nobody knew how old the nurse was, but she was eighty plus if she was a day, that was sure. She’d been working for the Wilberts for generations. “Listen, honey. I know this is hard on you. Your Momma needs you and you the only one not old enough to bring in any money, that’s why you got pulled out of school and stuck here. It’s not gonna be too much longer, and when the time does come that it’s over, you’ll be wishing it wasn’t, I promise you that. But don’t start letting your imagination run away with you.” She rolled her eyes upstairs toward Mrs. Wilbert’s room. “Lord knows that happens enough in this family as it is.”

Darly checked the list her Momma kept posted outside the master bedroom. “Whitewash house,” was number one on the list, but that would just have to wait for tomorrow. “Check fire divisions for problems.” That could work, Darly
thought, as she tossed on a pair of jeans and a ragged T-shirt.

“Dotty, I’m going ride the lines on Hank. I’ll be back soon.” She let the door slam behind her to drown out the woman’s protests. She knew she always took too long when she rode, but it was her favorite chore to do.

The stable behind the house was ramshackle even by Westraux standards, but the horses in it were the pride of the parish, her Hank in particular. She’d won many a junior barrel racing championship on his back, and now that she’d hit a growth spurt at fifteen and finally grown into him, she couldn’t wait for the next round of competitions. She wanted to go national this year, if daddy could raise the money. If Momma wasn’t sick, it’d be a given.

“Hey, big boy,” Darly ran her hand down his spotted nose. He was a purebred Appaloosa, the only purebred they owned, and a leopard one at that. His entire body was speckled with little white dots over his dark base color, making him look like an inside out Dalmatian. He nickered as she ran a brush across his dappled back then tossed the heavy saddle over. “Quit sucking in.” She poked his belly until he let loose with a heavy sigh. Tightening the latigo with three quick wraps and a knot, she slid the thick stirrup back into place, completely covering the leather
straps and protecting her legs from chafing. As she mounted, though, she kept hearing that giggle in the back of her mind, that confidently childish voice saying, “You all white.” She wished she could make Dotty believe her, but the chances of that were slim. Dotty’d been around so long she didn’t believe anything she hadn’t seen existed, and Darly couldn’t really blame her.

She nudged Hank forward with her legs and soon they were loping through the green fields, dodging rabbits and cane snakes, the latter causing Hank to snort and try to bolt. Ahead was the field that had just burned, safe to ride through even though the charred remains still smoldered on either side of her.

She reined Hank down to a walk and looked around. She loved this part, the jagged stumps of fallen cane sticking out over charred mounds of earth. Thin streamers of smoke wove through the air like those airplanes she’d seen on TV, the ones that wrote messages in the sky, only these seemed to be in some foreign language. The ground was singed crisp and crunchy, every step of Hank’s hooves audibly breaking the fragile artifacts of the grass that had once thrived here.

When she was younger, her mother had a team of horses, and she would drive the children around the fields and tell
them stories about their great-grandparents and how they’d farmed the land, too. Darly’d always loved her mother’s stories, loved how they grew with the seasons. Christmas brought about charitable stories about the good deeds Wilberts had done for the parish over the years. The story of great uncle Nell and his murderous wife (not a true Wilbert, she’d only had right to the name by marriage) came out at Halloween, right at the end of the burning season when all the fields were bare and the lines were ridden at night for a special treat. The fires covered the field with tiny tendrils that looked like giant flaming ants marching toward their house, and the air smelled like corn on the cob, and the brisk breeze always made it feel colder than it really was.

Darly stopped her horse and turned him around, looking back at the house so small and cloudy in the distance. Mother’s stories weren’t so good anymore. After last week, Darly tried not to listen when she spoke, tried not to remember anything her mother had told her since she’d gotten sick.

Hearing a rustle, she wheeled Hank back around and saw the little girl again. She stood only yards ahead of Darly, with her back turned as if she were unaware of her
presence. Another girl crossed the ditch to join her. This one was older, also dressed in church-going clothes.

“This is private property!” Darly yelled. She meant to spur Hank on but was shocked to feel her body shaking. Hank pranced nervously, feeding off of her uncertainty.

The girls turned to face her. The new girl was older, closer to Darly’s own age, but she had a streak of white running through her slicked black hair. They joined hands and giggled, the smaller one standing on her tiptoes to whisper in the other’s ear.

“This is Wilbert land!” Darly was almost screaming. Her mother’s voice cranked up in the back of her head, telling stories again, and she shouted it again to drown out all the voices. It was all she could do to keep her hands from clamping over her ears.

“We know.” The older girl smiled, leaving Darly confused. The girls turned and jumped over the ditch, then skipped through the smoldering fields, swinging their joined hands and singing something just out of earshot. It didn’t sound gospel, really, but sadder than that, and just catching a piece of the rhythm made Darly’s eyes tear up. Shimmery heat waves made their dresses dance out of sync with their bodies, and Darly swore that when the black bottoms of their shoes came off the ground they were
smoking. The farther away they got, the more the smoke washed them out, making their rich black skin look gray and dirty. She watched them until they disappeared, acres and acres away.

Hank backed up, and Darly realized she’d been holding the reins so tight that they were touching her chest. She loosened them and gave him a good kick, and they were off, racing through the rest of the paths. She only reined him in for a moment when they came to the fields that were still blazing fully. Those needed to be ridden, too, to make sure that the flames hadn’t crossed over the ditches and ignited any of the fields not ready. But it was dangerous, it stunk, and flying bits of cane always burned and blistered her skin. Hank tried to turn the other way but she urged him forward, letting him fly through the smoke. The only fun part about it was that no one could see you. You could pass right next to them and they’d only get the impression that something had come close. If you stood face to face with another person then you’d be hard pressed to tell if they were a man or a woman. It was also pretty hard to breathe, though, so if you stayed too long you’d get into trouble.

When the smoke lessened, she slipped off Hank’s back to give him a rest. The smoke was hard on his lungs, and he
needed to be in top shape for the races coming up. It was strange walking through there. The fire ate all sounds, even its own, so that you felt like you were walking in a hallway of dark clouds right before they burst. Underfoot she saw several small dead animals and knew that these would be picked over once the fires were done. It was a regular buffet for all the scavengers nearby – fried snakes and field mice for all. She picked up her pace, wondering how many dead animals lined the singed rows of cane, how many carcasses she’d passed by in one ride without noticing.

Dotty was at the clothesline behind the house when Darly returned, pinning Mother’s sickclothes up to the fraying wire. The housedresses, which Dotty called “mommy’s moo-moo’s” were cheap and overworn, threadbare and see-through in some places. Darly tried to convince her father last week that they needed to purchase some new ones before Mother noticed how tattered they had become, but he’d refused to even respond, simply shaking his head stiffly back and forth in a way she’d never seen before.

“You’d better just let up on him,” Dotty had whispered when Darly went into the kitchen to ask for help. “The man’s stressed enough, what with your momma up there
telling crazy stories all day and him working extra to pay the doctor bills.”

“We can’t afford new dresses for mom?” Darly’d asked, confused. She knew that just last week she’d gotten a brand new saddle pad for Hank that her father had bought just on a whim when he’d stopped by to have a beer with Grant down at the feedstore.

“There’s no reason to, Dee,” Dotty replied, and would say no more, even threatening her with no supper if she kept “hounding an old woman.”

“You’re back pretty early.” Dotty spoke clearly even with four clothespins between her teeth. Her eyes never wavered from the clothes in front of her. “Everything okay out there?”

“The lines looked fine.” Darly unsaddled Hank and freed him in the little paddock adjacent to the barn. She rested the saddle on the fencepost and watched Hank roll in the sloppy end of the pasture until one side of his body was caked in dark mud.

“I hope so. You know your daddy don’t take nicely if those lines aren’t checked just so, little girl. It’s a dangerous thing, living in the middle of a cane field.”

Darly rolled her eyes as she walked over to Dotty. “It’s not like I haven’t heard that before.”
Dotty turned around, looking directly into Darly’s eyes. “See any more little girls running around?” Dotty’s face remained expressionless, but the wrinkles seemed turned down by more force than gravity could summon, and her back was straighter than Darly ever remembered seeing it.

Darly stepped back, feeling her lungs burn as if someone had sucked all the air out of them. “Why?”

She shrugged her rigid shoulders. “No reason. Just wondering if what your momma’s got is contagious.” Turning back around, the force faded from her and she shrank down to her usual petite stature. Her hands shook as she pried apart the wooden pins to pinch them around a particularly ratty gray gown. She began humming to herself, a familiar tune that soothed Darly until she realized that it was the very same song the girls had sung when running through the burning fields.

Darly stared at Dotty’s back, her spine a bolt of ice down her middle. Dotty’s voice, beautiful, ageless, and somehow knowing, rose louder and louder, reaching pitches threatening to shatter glass. She ran for the house, then stopped at the door, fearful of her mother’s voice.

She slouched against the house, feeling the soot and ash grinding into her clothes and skin, and let the sobs
take over her muscles. Dotty’s voice still sang strong from the yard, and the steadily strengthening wind slapped cane debris against the siding. Her fingers pressed spots into her eyes, dancing white spots that brightened the darkness behind the lids.

When her breath slowed and her eyes dried, she raised her head to see the little girl staring at her. The spots danced over the child’s face, but the dress and the shoes were the same. She was crying, too.

“What are you doing?” Darly’s voice felt dry and strained against her throat. As her eyes cleared, she saw the girl shaking her head slowly.

“It’s just so sad,” she said.

“What is?”

“Everything about you people.”

“Who are you?” Darly whispered, leaning forward, hands on her knees.

“So much history here. So many lies.”

“Who’s lying? About what?” Darly’s hands clawed at her own hair, but the little girl took no notice. She turned and walked off into the cane again.

“I wish you’d stop doing that!” Darly shouted after her, wishing for something hard and heavy to throw after
her. She hurried inside, and for the first time ever she was glad when Dotty didn’t follow.

Nightfall came earlier than usual, it seemed, and darkness settled around the yard as if someone had flicked a switch. The flames glowing in the fields didn’t actually project any light, but instead seemed to suck the remaining illumination out of the air. Darly stared out of the living room window, but the old red Dodge carrying her father simply wouldn’t show itself. In the distance, police sirens wailed over and over again, promising that he would be even later than the night before.

Flopping over, she forced her eyes to ignore the flight of stairs, humming loudly to cover the sounds of Momma’s impatience. She’d been yelling things all afternoon, asking Darly to sit on her bed and listen, but as the hours went by, her voice grew louder and the words stopped making sense.

The telephone rang, deafening in the suddenly cavernous home. Darly stood slowly, taking measured steps toward the phone. Nobody called anymore except for her Daddy. What if she just didn’t answer it? Would he worry then, and come on home?

“Hello?”
“Hey, hon, it’s me. We’ve got a missing person up here so me and the boys will be late getting in. I just didn’t want Dotty worrying about fixing dinner for us, we’ll just grab something from town.”

“Ok,” she swallowed, trying to decide what the least babyish approach would be. “It’s kind of —”

“You rode them lines like your Momma asked you to?” His voice was always stern when he mentioned his wife, and when he referred to her it sounded like she was royalty.

“Well, yeah, Daddy, but,”

“Don’t you ‘but’ me, girl. You know how important that is. If you like the house you’re living in and the money that buys you saddles and feeds your horses, you’d better damn well make sure that those lines are holding.”

“They were fine, Daddy.” The phone cord twisted around her finger turned her upper knuckle more purple than the beets Dotty forced her to eat as a small child.

“Good. Now you take care of your Momma and we’ll be back as soon as we can. Goodnight.”

“’Night, Daddy,” she whispered, then dropped the phone back into its cradle. She rolled her head, stretching her neck and trying not to think about little girls and cane fields and fires.
The back door creaked open then, slowly and stealthily. Darly felt locked into position, her ears straining for identifiable sounds, but there was only the dry rustle of the wind through the fields and the far off roar of burning plants. The door shut, and Darly’s knees gave out. She barely caught herself before she hit the floor.

Dotty’s head appeared around the corner. “Get up off that floor and go check on your momma. It’s almost suppertime.”

“Yes’m.” Darly ran the stairs two at a time, feeling her hamstrings quiver and complain. The door was slightly ajar and the smell of bedrest and sickness oozed around its corners. It was the smell of crazy, she thought, then pushed the door roughly and walked through, smiling at her mother.

“Hi, Momma, how are you to--” Her words shut off when she registered that her mother was sitting in a chair by the window. She hadn’t been out of bed in weeks.

“Momma, what are you doing out of bed like that? You’ll catch a cold!” She grabbed a blanket and crossed the room in three quick strides, shaking her head the whole time.
Bernette reached back and grabbed her hand with skeletal strength, slowly turning around to look her face to face. Darly was shocked at how much like a paper doll her mother looked. Feverish cheeks, whispy hair, and just papery, like you could crumple her up and toss her out the window and into the fire if you didn’t like what she had to say.

“She’s here. They’re both here, I know it. They been here all day, and they been talking to you, haven’t they?”

Darly tried to pry the fingers off her own but couldn’t. They ground into her bones until she felt sure something was breaking. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re confused.”

“You remember what I told you. My girls—”

“Never mind all that nonsense. The only people here are me, you, and Dotty, and Dotty ain’t no girl.” The painful grip lessened, allowing Darly to breathe again. Chatter flowed from her mouth with no effort, and she worked to quickly slip Bernette back in bed. “Now you just go on to sleep, Momma. I’ll bring you up some food shortly.”

As Darly turned the light off, she heard her mother mutter, “I know what they’re here for, but they can’t have it. It’s just too late.” She shut the door and leaned
against it, fighting the bulge in her throat. She peeked out of the hall window, relieved to see nothing but strips of smoke waltzing out of the cane.

Dinner was waiting on the table when she got there, thick, syrupy red beans with rice beneath them next to yellow triangles of buttered cornbread. Her mouth watered as she sat down, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten all day. She wolfed the food down as she had seen the men in her family do after hard work; forkful after forkful so that your mouth was always chewing but the rhythm wasn’t broken. It was also the way she’d seen poor kids with no food at home eat when they got school lunches, but she didn’t care about anything at the moment except for the angry growling rising up from her stomach.

Once her stomach was full and her plate empty, she poured herself a glass of milk and leaned against the counter, sleepy and satisfied. Dotty had apparently gone to bed early, something that was happening more and more as old age grabbed hold of her. It was time to stop worrying about things and imagining problems for the family. As Dotty said, there were enough of those in real life to go around.

She woke up drenched in sweat. Not beads on her forehead or dampness under her arms, but full on rivulets
running from every pore in her body. Her hair hung stringy like after a shower and her nightgown was plastered to her body. Sitting up, she swung her legs over, ready to stand, but when they touched the floor she drew them back. The floor was warm. Very warm. Darly ran toward her window, but before she reached it she saw the orange reflecting in the glass. The fires had spread and reaching flames surrounded the house.

Pausing only long enough to slip into jeans and boots, Darly ran down the hall, screaming the alarm and checking rooms to wake everyone. “Fire!” Her brothers weren’t back yet, which meant her father wasn’t there, either.

“Momma, wake up!” she cried, rounding the hall corner only to see that the bedroom was already open. “No, oh, God, no.” The room was empty. Darly lifted the sticky window open with strength that would’ve put her father to shame, sticking her head out as far as possible.

Movement below caught her eyes. Bernette paced at the edge of the burning cane, screaming words that were lost in the fire. She looked back at the house, then disappeared down one of the cane alleys, ringed with flames.

“Shit!” Darly ran downstairs, out the backdoor, and to Dotty’s shack. She banged on the doors and windows until
she saw the lights come on, dancing impatiently while Dotty unlatched the door.

“Good Lord, child, what do you want?” The scowl on her face disappeared as she looked over Darly’s head and saw the flames.

“Dotty, listen, Momma’s in the fields,” Darly panted.

“How?”

“I don’t know how it happened. The wind must’ve shifted too much or something. But Momma’s out there. I’m taking Hank to go and get her.”

“No, you’re not.” Dotty reached for her but Darly dodged quickly.

“Yes, I am. I can get in and out quick with him, and it’s the only way I can carry her back. You need to go to the big house and call Daddy and he’ll bring help. Don’t stay in the house long, though, it might go too. Take Momma’s old car and wait out by the road.”

Dotty grabbed her with hands like Momma’s. “Girl, now’s the time for you to listen to me like you ain’t never listened to anybody before. Sometimes you just got to let things take their natural course. Your momma’s sick, yes, but she’s old enough to understand that.”

Darly blinked, dodging well-aimed bits of flaming cane leaves. “What are you talking about? You’re not making any
sense, and there’s no time to argue. Just do what I say, Dotty!”

Hank and the other horses were pressing against the paddock fence, nickering nervously. She slung a halter over his head and unlatched the gate, pulling him aside as they watched the herd rush past. “We’ll round them up tomorrow,” she promised Hank as he stared after them longingly. Darly climbed up onto the fence post and jumped onto his bareback. With only the leadrope for guidance, it might get tricky, but there was no time for anything else.

He balked at the fiery lane she aimed him at, but she screamed and used the leadline as a whip until he gave in. They raced through the flames, and she could feel the hair on her arms crisping, could see Hank’s mane steaming. Please let us find her soon. She was lightheaded already from the heat and lack of oxygen, and Hank was probably feeling it worse.

She stopped him at each intersection they passed, checking for ways her mother could’ve taken. How a crazy old woman who’d been bedridden for months could move this fast was unimaginable, and the fire was burning up time along with everything else in its way. The first two crossroads were useless. They were completely consumed,
even the dirt appeared to be on fire. The third one offered an option, though, and Darly took it without hesitation.

Hank was slowing and she felt herself melting. His back felt like warm wax between her thighs. The heat was simply too much. If Bernette wasn’t around the next corner, they’d simply have to turn back, and she wasn’t sure even that would save them.

But, suddenly, there she was. Her nightgown was smoking and her hair was loose, whipping only inches from the raging cane. She faced the wall of burning plants, one arm stretched out in a wave.

Darly and Hank drew up beside her, Hank balking so strongly at her he nearly flipped over backwards. “Get on the horse, Momma!” But Bernette wouldn’t look at her, just kept waving at the field of fire. “Momma, come on!”

“They found me, Darly. The girls finally found me.”

“Take my hand, and I’ll help you up.” Darly hadn’t really thought of the logistics of pulling her mother off the ground, but then, the fire made anything seem possible.

“You go ahead and get out of here, Darly. I gotta tend to some things. I’ll see you later.” She had her taking care of business face on, one that Darly hadn’t seen since months before the illness had taken her.
She didn’t know she was crying until the tiny puffs of evaporated salt fogged her vision. She tried to keep her ragged and failing voice even and calm, but reining Hank in was distracting her. He snorted at Bernette and shied sideways, nearly dumping Darly into the fires.

“Come on, Momma, we’ll talk later. We gotta get to the street.”

“No, Darly, my girls are out there. I gotta go get them.” She pointed to the fire, but for once Darly didn’t see any little girls, heard no laughter or footsteps. All she could see was swirling vortexes of red and orange. She grabbed for her mother’s arm, but Hank reared tall, standing upright on his hind legs, belting out a panicked whinny. She clung to his neck, knowing he’d bolt back to the stable if she fell. Even if she didn’t, she’d never be able to get back on him without stirrups.

Bernette waved to her, then turned and walked into the burning cane field.

“Momma, no!” The fire took her words for more tinder. She stared at the spot where her mother disappeared, but there was nothing left, no trace.

Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around Hank’s neck. “Go!” she whispered, and he wheeled, galloping as he’d never done. His strides came so close together that
they were inseparable. Her hands blistered simply from touching his coat. She looked up at one point, trying to use the moon for direction, but the fire had built up so much that it formed an arc over their heads, blocking out the sky with orange flames. Putting her faith in Hank’s sense of direction and animalistic self-preservation, she knotted her fingers into his mane and gave up. She felt her eyes go black but even behind the darkness there was fire.

Cool air slapped her face and eased into her lungs. Her eyes adjusted slowly, the red-orange haze fading mistily into the real colors of the nighttime world. Darly took her time, unraveling her fingers from Hank’s mane while trying not to aggravate her blistered palms. Sounds of movement behind her made her gasp, burning her parched windpipe, but it was only the other horses. They were in the neighbor’s pasture, watching the fire feed on their home.

The house collapsed as Darly watched, but the only thing that really registered was the absence of Dotty. The car wasn’t there. Had she just gone back to sleep?

Feeling lightheaded, she hugged Hank’s neck for support and in gratitude. Picking up the leadrope again, she whistled shortly to get the other horses’ attention, then started walking up the road toward town. When she
heard the sirens coming nearer, she asked Hank for one more
gallop, and the wind ripped out the tears that the fire had
stolen.
The Gift

She was rinsing her coffee cup for the thirty-second time in a row when the postman finally arrived. She held her breath as she peeked through the kitchen window, watching as he stopped in front of her wrought-iron mailbox, reached into his shoulder bag, and pulled out the long, cylindrical package. He dropped it carelessly against the metal post and she gasped, but it remained upright and intact, leaning at a perfect 45 degree angle.

She dressed quickly in pre-pressed khaki pants and a navy silk shirt she’d kept in new condition since her fiftieth birthday, stopped at the mirror for a moment to dab on some lipstick, blush, and just a dash of eyeliner, then stepped into her shoes. After one last inspection in the hallway mirror, she walked out the door, smiled at the neighborhood street, and strolled casually over to the mailbox.

Her heart was pounding as she stopped to sniff her prize-winning hibiscus bed. She peered over the bridge of her nose while casually pulling dead petals off of a plant. What if they’d mixed up her order? The gift had to be ready by tomorrow. It would have been Victor’s sixtieth birthday,
and two weeks later would bring a Tuesday that might have
given them their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. The
package grew closer, inch by inch, as she concentrated on
the length of her strides (not too long, not too short;
wave at Mr. Nelson across the street, he’s always
watching). Then, it was in her hands, and she couldn’t
resist uncapping the tube and allowing herself one look. No
good, only packing material, curvy Styrofoam pellets and
clear plastic covering. Her red-shellacked nails gripped
tight against brown paper and she counted the seconds until
she reached her house again.

Once inside, she leaned against the door, allowed her
legs to cave and her body to slide. She ignored the snaps
and pops of her joints on the way down, didn’t notice her
quivering knees knocking together from exhaustion, caring
only to rip through the opaque materials and get to it –
yes, it was right! A tear carved its way through layers of
foundation and powder to dangle from the end of her chin.

The roll of wrapping paper stood calf-high, and the
shine of the metallic foil could penetrate cataracts. It
looked like a coiled sheet of platinum. Tiny flecks of red
and blue accented the pure silver wonderfully. She slid her
hands from top to bottom, watching the heat from her palm
leave a ghost that disappeared without a trace. It was time
to get ready – preparing the package would take the rest of her day if she were to get it just right.

Lightly cradling the gift wrap, she escaped into her work room and shut the door behind her. Her heart settled back into its normal rhythm as she sniffed the scent of mulberry paper, craft glue, and plastic organizational bins that rose above her head to line the walls. In the center of the room was a long rectangular table, the finish on it so thick you could touch up your makeup in the reflection if there weren’t so many dents and grooves from hard use. She had it refinished once a year so that the glossy shine returned. She rested the paper there, then opened the top drawer of a bin directly across from the table’s solitary chair.

Ribbons – chiffon, opalescent, satin, silk, wired, unwired – you name it, she had it. Victor used to call it her palette when they’d first gotten married, back when he would still come into the room every now and then to check on her. In the first year of their marriage he’d insisted on having a sneak preview of everything she produced: scrapbooks, birthday cards, home décor, everything. The room still looked the same. Every color of the rainbow, plus a few more she had created one Friday evening after experimenting with dozens of bottles of Rit dye, sat coiled
neatly around their cardboard wheels, securely pinned down. Red was Victor’s favorite color – she’d chosen to have it as her bridesmaid colors, and Nancy had worn red flowers in her hair when she and Victor married almost ten years ago. Nancy wouldn’t be able to compete with this gift, though. Not after all of Becky’s planning.

She selected the shiniest red ribbon she could find, with silver streaks running down either side making the red even more vibrant, then shut the drawer firmly. The ribbon was placed next to the paper, then Becky hurried to the corner of the room, to the closet, to grab the final ingredient. Boxes of all shapes and sizes were stacked, from biggest to smallest, on the plastic shelves she had purchased for her birthday two years ago. A large, off-white box sat directly in front, waiting for her. It had come to her last year, holding the new Christmas decorations she’d purchased in hopes of beating the Thompsons in the neighborhood’s decorating contest. She and Victor had argued bitterly every year about his gracious acceptance of defeat. She’d noted the perfectly squared edges (not one crumpled – very rare), the perfect dimensions and the overall solidity of the box (it was quite heavy, and the thick resin coating disguised the fact that it was made of pulp) and known that it was the box.
She was almost ready to begin, but first she walked back into the hall and switched the phone’s ringer off. Her daughter, Heather, always called on the anniversary of Victor’s death to make sure that she was okay and to talk about him, but Becky was simply too busy to be distracted with phone calls. She briefly considered leaving the phone off the hook, but didn’t want to seem unavailable.

Once all of her tools were spread about the work table in order of use, she sat down, feeling her body mold into the cushion of the chair. With shaking hands, she unrolled the wrap until it completely covered the scarred top of the table, then positioned the box in the exact center. She grabbed her ruler and measured the length she’d need to wrap the box, not too much or the paper would bunch and become conspicuous, but not too little or else the box would show through and the paper might be wasted. The pencil lines she made were light, invisible on the other side.

She couldn’t sit anymore – the best part had arrived. Gripping the scissors with blue-veined hands, she held them up to the light to see if there were any nicks in the blade that might cause a rip or tear. No, still flawless, and the blade remained sharp as the day she’d bought it. Heather had commented on their razor edges one day, teasing about
how often Becky must file each blade. *Never,* she’d huffed, insulted that her daughter would say such a thing. The moments she spent sharpening the blade weren’t to be shared. They were her scissors, and Heather knew nothing of how to keep things in presentable order. Try as she might have with that child, Victor had negated everything she’d tried to teach her about etiquette. She remembered the day of Heather’s thirteenth birthday so clearly it could have been yesterday. It was the passage into womanhood, and Becky had set up an entire day of gifts. One hour training seminars with the makeup artists at Chanel. A two-hour hands-on appointment with a hairstylist, to teach Heather how to fix her hair to accentuate her face and body style, what color might look best with her complexion. And, the finale, a meeting with a skin care specialist at Aveda, because it was never too early to start preparing for the effects of aging on your skin. Heather had come home from softball practice dirty and disheveled, opened the package that held the certificates without even commenting on the wrapping, and promptly made a face.

“But, honey, this way you’ll learn it the right way on your first try!”

“I don’t want to,” was all she’d say, and Becky was shocked.
She tried to convince Heather of the good this would do, but they argued until her daughter was crying and Victor had come home from work.

“It’s her birthday, Becky,” he’d said, hugging Heather to his chest and stroking her hair. The two had never looked more like father and daughter, he filthy from a long day at the site, she still wearing her grungy, ill-fitting team uniform. “If she doesn’t want to, she shouldn’t have to.” The memory still made Becky’s eyes tense with frustration.

She held the roll at an almost ninety degree angle from the table and carefully worked the blades. The paper separated from the rest of the roll with only the slightest sound, a comforting whisper in the silence of the workroom. The line was impeccable, not even the tiniest snag would have to be patched. It took time, though, and she counted each breath, sure to stop cutting at each inhalation. She’d learned the technique after Victor had taken her to the firing range during a rash of burglaries in the neighborhood. She’d hated the idea of being seen with that clunky, cheap pistol, but had enjoyed it only if for the techniques that could be applied elsewhere.

Shaking her head to scatter the thoughts like tiny scraps of useless paper, she honed her concentration so
that she saw nothing but the scissors meeting paper, nothing but that edge falling away from the rest.

When it was done, she allowed herself a moment to massage her fingers. Only months ago, her doctor warned her that overusing her hands should be avoided, that soon the arthritis would become unmanageable, but the thought of an untended garden or a store-wrapped gift made her physically ill. That would be the day she’d give up all hope and check herself into a retirement home far away from her neighborhood, where she could fade quietly away into anonymity. Right now, there was too much at stake. Years ago, Victor would rub her hands with cream after she’d worked with them. That had been the only thing that had ever helped, but he’d stopped after she refused to be gentler with them. She’d tried applying the medicine herself, but the image of an old woman rubbing her hands together all alone was too much for her to bear.

She walked around the table, eyeing the paper to the box. It was the best job she’d ever done, she’d known it would be. It was all coming together like the picture in her head. Nancy’s yearly contribution of a dozen red roses would wilt in comparison to this stunning offer. Nancy would understand the depth of her devotion and wither away in the shadow of such dedication.
It was time to wrap the edges. She picked up the tape, sliced off the seventeen pieces she’d need then lined them up at the edge of the table. The tape was invisible, not that travesty that Scotch passed off as clear but special-ordered tape that was completely unnoticeable. It was the only kind Becky would use.

She folded edges, using the ruler to sharpen creases where necessary, paying special attention to the origami-like contortions of paper on the ends of the package, securing each edge with tape she smoothed on slowly, cautious of bubbles of air between paper and plastic. The ribbon was last, the finishing touch. Loops were secured tightly with bits of florist’s wire, which was in turn obscured as each flourish was patted and arranged into appropriate order.

Clutching her pained hands that seemed to shrink and swell with the onslaught of cramps, she stared at the gift. The overhead light hit it at just the right angle, casting sparkles and shimmers onto the tired cream wallpaper. She smiled, content, and felt her cheeks cracking from the strain of concentration. Checking her watch, she realized it was ten o’clock – long past her usual bedtime. She turned the light out and locked the door behind her. Tomorrow would be quite the interesting day.
It was one in the morning when she gave in to her insomnia and wrapped a robe around her thin body. The house was always preternaturally silent, but at night it became like a tomb, every step echoing from the sandstone colored tile to the vaulted ceilings. She could barely keep her breathing normal, sure that the tape had come undone or something had fallen in the night, crushing the packaging. The lock stuck for a moment, and she cursed, shocking herself into immobility. Then she threw her weight against the door, nearly falling into the room where the gift sat, still in the center of the table, the room still shot with sparkles from the paper even in the dim light. The dancing color even touched her skin, like metallic freckles frosting her lotion-coated arms. Nothing had been disturbed. Her eyes became weighted with relief, and her knees begged for a moment’s reprieve from holding up her slight body. She moved the chair to the opposite end of the table from the gift, where she watched it, saw the bow shiver when the fan kicked on, saw the colored specks dancing in her exhausted eyes blend into those already embedded in the paper.

She woke early, her cheek cold and stuck to the lacquered tabletop. Panicked, she leapt up, a hand jumping to her side in instant pain. A glance at the clock showed
her that she hadn’t overslept, that everything was still okay.

She went to her bedroom, her eyes immediately drawn to the outfit she’d laid out the night before. It hung from a brass-toned hook on her closet door: black pumps, black jacket, black pants, cream colored satin faux-turtleneck to go under the black button down shirt she’d pressed a few days in advance. The jacket was one of her favorite purchases – it looked like Chanel but was a Kathie Lee rendering.

Makeup took a half-hour, as did styling her hair. It was a tricky business, being careful not to overdo things for such a somber visit. She curled her lank brown strands not in bouncy ringlets but in loose waves, and used all natural-toned makeup. She chose high quality water-based mascara, so it would run if she cried, but not too much.

Wardrobe took less time, zippers and buttons included. The jacket hugged the lowest part of her waist, giving her figure a curvy look, and the contrast of the dickie against the all-black outfit was, if she could say so herself, stunning. Looking at herself in the mirror, she saw the image of a grieving widow. She felt tears pressing against her lower lids and blinked them away. Now wasn’t the time.
She placed her palms flat against the sides of the gift and slid it to the edge of the table, where she was able to get one then two supporting hands on its underside. This was the safest way to carry a package without ruffling the ribbon or paper. Getting it outside and to the car was a bit of a challenge, but she carried the slight weight proudly, back arched and head up, nodding at the neighbors up early to mow lawns and water gardens. She knew that most of them would remember what day it was, could imagine their whispers.

“She was such a good wife.”

“Even after he remarried, she still does for him.”

“If he’d only known.”

The gift got the entire passenger seat to itself. She thought about buckling it in so that it wouldn’t fall or be crushed in case of sudden stops or turns, but worried that the belt would rip the paper and flatten the bow.

Highway driving proved to be difficult in the early morning sun. Becky jumped every time she shifted lanes, certain that she heard the paper crinkling or that the ribbon had been flattened. As she took the exit for the graveyard, the changing angle of the sun brought its own difficulties, bouncing off the metallic wrapping and momentarily blinding her.
Unable to see where she was going, she swerved, tried to slow but ran off the road anyway, heard a pop and felt the thump-thump-thump of a flat. She stepped out of the car, counting to five, then ten, then one-hundred and fifty as she stared at the rapidly deflating tire. The graveyard was still more than twenty minutes away, and she needed to be there before Nancy could possibly arrive. It had to be at Victor’s side when Nancy arrived, and Becky didn’t want to be caught. She thought about calling a mechanic, a tow truck, anything, but couldn’t bear the thought of actually having to speak to anyone.

Gritting her teeth, she settled back into the old Buick and eased onto the gas. The tire could be fixed afterwards.

She accelerated as much as she dared, but the car still limped along slowly. Every bump caused her to worry more for the well-being of the package, but it held its own, sitting stoically in the passenger seat, obstinately shooting glittery daggers into her eyes. By the time she got to the gates of the cemetery, her head ached so badly it felt as if it might actually burst at the next thump of the tire. Only the promise of Nancy’s chagrin kept her going. Damn that woman! If she had buried Victor at Grace Memorial, none of this would have happened. That cemetery
had newly-paved roads right off of the interstate and at least three groundskeepers whose job included assisting visiting mourners.

She parked in the back lot, wanting to be sure her car couldn’t be spotted from the road. If she did confront Nancy, she wanted to have the advantage of surprise. As she wrestled the gift out of the car, she realized that she hadn’t found out what Heather’s plans for the day were. She’d turned the ringer on that morning – why hadn’t Heather called then? What would it look like if Nancy saw Becky all alone at the gravesite, without her only daughter? More likely than not, she soothed herself, Heather was sleeping in and would call her later. Perhaps they could have coffee in the afternoon, or Heather could come to the house, where they might sip lemonade on the patio and reminisce about their lives with Victor.

The day warmed quickly as Becky lugged the box across the graveyard, avoiding the sticky mud from freshly upturned patches of earth. Her cramping elbows and swelling fingers begged her to stop, to put the package down and breathe for a moment, but the ground was too damp, the grass too spiky. Just a few more steps and she’d be done, she told herself, the plan complete, the game won. She went down on one knee in the middle of the winding gravel road
that cut through the area, a rock stabbing through her pants. She felt blood trickle down her leg, but there was no rip in the fabric and Victor’s grave was directly ahead. No one had arrived yet, no offerings had been laid.

With a yelp of triumph, Becky reached the site. She stood over it, trying to decide where she thought his heart might have been, when she heard the crunch of tires on gravel. Nancy! Her heart screamed along with the muscles in her hands as a sudden cramp attacked her palms. She fought to keep control of the package but the first onslaught of pain was too much, and it slipped from her hands. Panicky reflexes kicked in only a second later, and she caught the box by the sides. Tears welled in her eyes from the sheer strain and she staggered over, ready to deposit the gift when she felt the paper give. The box slipped out of the packaging and tumbled to the ground, spilling open. The flaps were propped up against the headstone and the dark cavern of the naked empty box gaped back at her. In her hands, the gift wrap still maintained its shape but for the jagged hole in the bottom. Even the bow stayed perfectly perched atop the vacant paper. Turning her head, she saw a shiny silver Cadillac driving toward her. It was Nancy’s car, she knew it.
With little time to think, she threw herself behind the largest object in near reach, a large stone angel monumenting someone’s beloved something. She fought to keep the paper from further damage but worried about its brilliance reflecting in the morning sun and attracting attention to her hiding spot. The empty box still lay on Victor’s grave, but at least it didn’t have her name on it.

As she tried to fold herself into the least obvious position possible, she wondered if perhaps the reason Heather had not called her that morning was because she had already made arrangements to visit Victor with Nancy. It clicked with her mind, sending goosebumps racing down the papery skin of her arms. What difference did the gift make then? If her own daughter showed up on the arm of Victor’s widow, what bigger prize was there? She pictured them getting out of the Caddy together, the sunlight making her squint as the doors opened. She felt Heather reaching for Nancy, both distraught, neither dressed appropriately but still looking stricken, still looking like a grieving daughter supporting her mother. Becky even smelled the aroma of drugstore roses steaming in their cheap clear cellophane as they sat on the dashboard, forgotten in the overwhelming misery shared by Victor’s beloved duo.
She bit down on her wrist to stifle a cry as she waited for the footsteps to approach. Her teeth clenched so tightly that her skin broke, blood flowing into the fabric of her favorite jacket. *Cold water will get that out,* she told herself as she watched the spreading stain of black on black.

The footsteps came then, loud and unselfconscious, and the voices of two women carried over them, somber and resonant. Becky shouted prayers in her mind, begging that she not be found like this, hiding behind someone’s grave leaking tears and blood, holding only the carcass of her gift. She could see the pity in their eyes, see Nancy’s patented head tilt and worry-pursed lips as she asked, “Oh, Becky, are you alright?” She could feel Heather’s contempt at seeing her mother as she’d never seen her before, with grass stains on her pants, unprepared for company. Looking at the ground, she noticed that her fears were indeed realized, that the wrapping paper was reflected on the ground all around her, like the outer circle of a spotlight. The sounds drew nearer, and Becky panicked, flipping the paper inside out to its plain white backing so deftly that the corners still held. The bow flopped onto the grass and she pulled it into her lap as well.
She rested her head on the statue behind her and tried to keep her body from shaking. The footsteps drew nearer and nearer until they seemed like they were right next to her. She slowly turned her head, making sure that she kept her profile in line with the monument, and saw two young women carrying arrangements of flowers walk by. One looked at her, nudged her friend, and continued walking. Becky’s eyes felt connected to them, following the women without her control. When they passed her, both looked back, then put their heads together and walked faster.

Becky stood and brushed her pants down. She’d never seen those women before in her life. No doubt they had seen her and thought that she was grieving at a loved one’s grave, having no idea of what had actually happened. From a distance the wrapping in her hands probably still appeared to contain a package!

She hurried back to her car, feeling her skin tingling with the beginnings of sunburn and the grinding in her hips from crouching for so long. She stopped at Victor’s grave, but decided against trying to save the box. There was no way she could carry it without further damaging the gift wrap, which she was sure she could save. Since only the bottom had been damaged, some careful patchwork would
disguise the rips and tears. There was always another box to be found.

She made it back to the car before she realized that the bow was still stuck to her pants. She placed it squarely atop the plain paper, directly above its original position, and situated everything onto the passenger seat. As she started the car, she checked the console clock. Only a little after noon. If she hurried, she could still make it back before Nancy arrived.
There should be music, he thought as she walked through the door of his shop, something classical, instrumental.

“I need some advice.” She leaned against the counter casually, smiling, teeth brilliantly white. Her skin was make-up free but showed no flaws, and her golden hair was natural and shiny. He’d had nothing to prepare him for someone like her to walk into the store – he’d had nothing to prepare him for her to even exist. She was what he never expected to find.

She waited expectantly, and after he didn’t respond – dammit, what’d she say? What can I say? I have to say something – she spoke again.

“I’m looking for an editor for my documentary.” He’d never loved his job more than at that moment.

Say something. You’re taking too long. “What’s. . . what’s your documentary like- I mean, what’s it about?”

Her face lit up, like someone had suddenly put a filter over the lights, pink or rose colored, softening the edges of everything.

She spoke, asked more questions, something about references, and he nodded at all the right places, even managed to find the box full of his resumes.
“I also need one of these,” she said, holding out an empty field light box.

Oh, no, I’m out of stock! “I, um, I don’t have any right now, but I can get one for you in a day or so.”

“Thanks so much. It was nice to meet you.” She reached out with her hand, tiny fingers coming across the desk, frame by frame, slow motion – going toward his own, her soft, supple skin filling the crevices in his own large and awkward palm.

He waved as she walked out of the store, loving her even as the door swung shut behind her. Why? Why couldn’t I have acted confident, professional? Like I knew what I was doing. And then he did.

He hurried to the door, flipping open to closed, locking it, and hurried back to the interior of the house.

His studio was the biggest room in the house, biggest by far, computers and cameras everywhere. He had lots of cameras throughout the house, as well. He sat in his chair for a moment, fidgeting, his head spinning, unable to concentrate on his current project. He couldn’t even get started. Usually the subject matter of a film didn’t matter, he would just become entranced in his own interpretation of the piece, his own way of fitting together the pieces of the puzzle, finding the true meaning. Remembering the days before digital technology, Bill could feel the slimy celluloid beneath his fingers, almost hear the satisfying snip! as his scissors sliced
through imperfection to create beauty. His mind still wandered back to the blonde hair, the perfect smile.

He switched on one of the television monitors, bringing up the documentary he was supposed to edit. Indian mounds, dead bodies and treasures buried beneath rounded hills of dirt. He’d had to hear much about this subject from the man who brought the tape in. He believed that secrets to long-lost societies were held in the clay and mud, but the government owned the land and wouldn’t let him dig. But Bill knew there was nothing underneath but skeletons. Anyone with sense would keep their treasures above ground. He tried to run a few filters over the scene to soften the lighting, then tried to picture the piece as a whole, tried to imagine what other tools he might use. But even those thoughts couldn’t satiate him for long. Concentration escaped him and Alison walked away again and again.

Finally, he hurried across the room, to the corner, unlocking the cabinets and grabbing that day’s tape labeled storefront. Looking at it for a moment, thinking about what it would show when he watched it, he knew how to make things right.

Going back to the store, he sat behind the counter, remembering the scene. He stood, reached out, smiled, nodded at all the right places. Then, back to the studio.

Piecing things together didn’t take long at all, not with the new footage he’d paired with some quick voice-
overs on his part, and then he was satisfied, things being set right, finally reaching an accurate representation of the feeling of the moment. He watched it only once more, then turned back to his work for the night. Before he went to bed, he’d complete more than three-fourths of the video.

The next day was uncomfortable. Bill rose early, much earlier than usual. He wanted her to call, to hire him, but the store remained empty that day. No customers, no phone calls, nothing. Silence. Night arrived finally, and Bill retreated back to his studio, where he picked up yesterday’s tape again and decided to clip out some of the distance between him and Alison. That’s nice, that should do the trick.

The next day, she called, early. He picked up the phone, answering mechanically, but it was her - he knew it immediately, that soft throaty voice he would never edit, already perfect as it was, the highs just high enough, the lows not so low as to be inaudible but still sexy, almost a whisper. Every word perfectly enunciated, coming through the phone, filling his ear canal, tickling as it took up space. Her voice sounded like she knew everything about him.

“Hello, Mr. Vale, this is Alison Hart. Do you remember me?” She ended the statement like a question, throwing Bill. What now? It was all planned out, scripted, but it’s gone!
“Um... yeah, sure, I remember you.” Shaking, my voice is shaking. Pathetic.

“I’d like to come by and pick it up, if possible.”

“Of course.” Better.

“Also, I’ve made a decision. I’ve heard a lot about you, I’ve been asking around. And I’d like to hire you to edit my documentary, if you’re willing, that is.”

“Well, sure. I mean, I’m not so overworked that I can’t take another project on right now.” Much better. He smiled at the sound of his own voice in the phone, sounding deep, resonant, like it had been run through many, many filters. Bill was shocked – he’d never thought about the reality of her hiring him.

“Great. When should I bring the footage by? Now?”

“No time like the present.”

“Wonderful. I’ll be by later today.” She hung up, and Bill sat there, hearing that throaty voice still in his ear – “today,” “now,” “like,” “willing.” They swirled together in his ears. I’d like you now, if you’re still willing... I’ve made a decision, I’d like you to come to me now.

He sat behind the register, looking down at a magazine but watching the door from the corner of his eye. He saw movement, shadow, and with effort forced his attention down onto the page. She walked in, sunlight pouring into the store through the open door – yellow filter – and she was smiling, carrying tapes under her arm.
“Hi, Mr. Vale.” She set the tape down on the counter, her breath coming quick and fast. “I rushed to get here, I’m so excited about this. I hope you like what I’ve done so far. It makes me very nervous to have someone look at my work.”

I hope you like me. . . I rushed to get to you. . .I’m excited that you like me. “You shouldn’t be worried, I mean. . .you shouldn’t be nervous.”

“Thank you. Do you have that light? I’ll just go ahead and buy it now.”

He picked up the light for her and she handed him the money. No money, I don’t need money from you . . . I have to take it though. She won’t believe why I don’t want to.

“So I’ll stop by some time later in the week to talk to you about the documentary, right?”

“Sure. . .or, um, you could just give me your number and I could call you when I’m ready.”

“No problem.” As she reached into her purse, her hair fell across her face and she shook it out, tossing her head. Filters, music, lighting . . . it could be perfect. She handed the card to him, this time only barely brushing her fingers against his, but it was enough for the time being. It’s like a scene break . . . we’ll pick back up next time like there was nothing in between.

“Thanks.”

“Great. Well, then, please call me and let me know when you want to get together and talk. I’m really looking
forward to hearing what you think. This documentary really
means a lot to me. I’ve cut it down to a series of
sequences that I would like to keep, but I’m not
experienced like you are, I couldn’t make it a real piece
of art, you know?"

“I should be able to tell you soon, or, yeah, well,
soon.” Stop stuttering!

She waved goodbye and disappeared out of the store,
back the way she came, into the sunshine.

You mean a lot to me. . . You are a piece of art. . . I
want you. He stared at the empty doorway, then closed down
the store, heading for the studio, where today’s tapes
waited for him. It was much simpler this time, watching her
hair swirl around her face as she tossed her head. Making
himself look calm and cool actually took less work that
time. He could almost smell her hair again, could smell it,
actually, could feel the breeze brushing against his cheek,
wanting to step forward and smell the hair, feel the
texture, but couldn’t. Instead, he watched the footage
again. And again.

Her footage was horrible, absolutely awful. This can’t
be hers. He’d put it off until late, working on his own
personal project until he could put hers off no longer,
just because of the anticipation. He could make it
beautiful, sure he could – would – make it work, fit
together, become one connected piece where the editing
faded away into the background and the viewer simply
accepted what was seen on the screen, but as it stood, it was bad. If he didn’t start right away, it would take much longer than he’d originally thought.

There, we need a soft fade, nothing too startling. Here, we need a quicker one, maybe a fade to color, something a little dazzling. And there, finally, there we just need a clean cut, a strong, jarring cut, so that the audience understands we’re changing subjects, changing moods. That’s it, right there. With a little music, it’s perfect. A perfect sequence.

He called her immediately after finishing, even though it was very early. The dial tone seemed loud in his ears – too loud, needs to be regulated . . . breathe, remember what to say – and then she picked up, breathless.

“Ms. Hart? This is Bill Vale.” Good, but watch the tempo.

“Mr. Vale? Hi? Is there a problem?”

“Um. . .no, not at all. I just wanted to let you know that your documentary is ready.”

“You’re finished already? That’s amazing!” Her voice became excited, and he could hear the valleys and peaks in its waves. “It only took you two days?”

He peeked out of his window, then looked at the clock. He had indeed sat in front of the screen working on it for two days. He hadn’t even opened his store.

“You can come by tomorrow to see it, talk about it, if you would like to.” Almost done. Stay calm.
“That sounds perfect! I’ll be there tomorrow evening, if that’s alright.”

“That sounds fine. I will see you then.” He hung up. Almost perfect . . . good job.

Bill woke early the next morning. Coffee or tea? She looks like she would like tea. But which kind? Earl Grey? Green? English Breakfast? A combination? He poured the water into the pot and put it onto the stove, watching the water, still at first, then little bubbles forming at the bottom, slowly rising to the top and breaking the surface, until finally reaching a true boil, huge bubbles violently exploding, nearly spilling over the top of the pot.

The doorbell rang. It was Alison. He hurried to open it, smiling – breathe naturally – “Hello, Ms. Hart.”

“Hello, Mr. Vale. May I come in?”

Shit. “Oh. . . of course, please do.” He stood back, watching her walk by. “This way. Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you, I stay away from caffeine.” Damn it.

He hurried ahead of her, picking up the remote control. Make it look good, you have to present it. The presentation is everything. “Are you ready to see what I’ve done?”

Alison sat down on the sofa, nodding. “Definitely. I can’t wait.”

Sitting back, he pressed play, and the documentary began. He let it run through without saying a word, watching closely as the scenes fell flush against one
another, no breaks in dialogue, no continuity issues, nothing to confuse a viewer or extricate them from the reality of the film, the drastic improvement of the aesthetic quality of the film making him flush.

“Wow.” Alison’s voice was even more quiet than it usually was, more husky, more whispered. She’s in awe. “I can’t believe you were able to do that. That’s amazing! I have more footage I’d like you to work with, if you don’t mind. I didn’t think it would fit until I saw this.”

You were amazing . . . “That’s no problem.”

She stood, swinging her purse over her shoulder, her face radiant. “I’m so eager to see the whole thing together now, to see what you can do. It’s funny, you know, you put so much energy and effort into something but you never really think it will be finished, and then, wow, it looks like what you’ve always pictured it as. I’ve got to run, but I’ll be back tomorrow as soon as I can get over here.”

I’m eager to see you tomorrow. . . I’ll be back as soon as I can. . . He escorted her out, unable to say anything more, to do anything more than nod at her as she walked out of the door. He waited until she turned the corner, shut and locked the door, then hurried back to his studio. The tape was there, waiting, and he watched it, watched the mistakes, but saw the potential. Nearly running back to the living room, he sat on the sofa next to Alison, where her scent still lingered, smiled, nodded, laughed engagingly,
then hurried back to the studio, unable to wait a second longer.

He cut, he added, he filtered and transitioned, he added voice-overs and took out space, until finally it ran through, and he saw her walk in, saw himself sit next to her, watched the smooth interaction, watched it again and again and again.

It was late in the afternoon when Alison finally called, and the ringing of the phone made Bill lose track of what step he was on as he paced up and down the storefront. Three hundred sixty. . .what?

“Hello?”

“Mr. Vale, it’s Alison. I’ll be there as soon as I can, but I’ve run into some traffic and it’s going to take a little longer than I expected. But I’m still on my way, I just didn’t want you to think I forgot about you.”

“Well, I’ll, uh, I’ll be here when you get here. I’m not going anywhere.” He hung up. What to do now? She’s coming, I’ve still got some time to prepare.

Running to the back of the house, he jumped into the tub, pouring the bath oil his sister sent him every year for Christmas so that she wouldn’t have to actually come and visit, trying to get ready for Alison. Which scent, what would she like? Lavender? Patchouli? Vanilla? He decided on a combination of the three, jumping into the tub. The oil was thick in the tub—too much—a rainbow like film over the top of the water, but he was in a hurry,
no time to think about that. He jumped out a few moments later, nearly breaking his neck when his feet hit the floor, skidding and fighting for balance. He lost, falling over and banging his head against the tiles. As he tried to stay calm, tried not to get angry, he realized that he could see the oil on his skin, a thick film matting down the hairs on his arms, water beading up and running off down his fingertips.

He dried quickly, the pain in his head throbbing in rhythm with his heartbeat. He looked at the clothes hanging in his closet - too fancy, too casual. . .don’t want to clash with the setting - finally settling on a nice pair of pants and a polo shirt. Then, looking at his watch, he decided to run back to the studio for a moment.

He reached for the Indian mounds documentary, but his eyes caught on the living room tape from the day before. I have enough time - it could always use a little more work. He grabbed it, put it in the machine, and leaned back.

He didn’t pause the tape, just watched it, marking better cuts, noting where transitions were needed. I was a little sloppy last night. What’s wrong with me?

Music was an important choice, and he had a collection in his studio of what he called mood music, different composers, different styles. He looked under the heading “Romantic” and grabbed a compilation disc.

Pressing play on the CD player, he sat in front of the screen, watching Alison walk into the room, himself looking
suave and confident, hearing his own deep laughter while the focus was on Alison. The music behind him swelled to a feverish pitch.

“Mr. Vale?”

Bill turned around to see Alison standing behind him, staring at the screen, her eyes wide. “What are you doing back here?”

She didn’t respond, just began backing slowly away. The tapes in her hands fell to the floor but she didn’t look down, didn’t even flinch. She couldn’t seem to stop looking at the screen, where her face showed up under a rosy filter in a scenario that never happened. “I waited up front for awhile, but you never came.” He didn’t recognize her voice now, it was high-pitched, wavering, as if the sound technician had fallen asleep on the job.

Bill stood quickly, walking toward her. “I’m just running through the surveillance video for the past couple of days.” He wanted to sound calm and collected, but he had to yell over the rise and fall of the music.

Alison shook her head, her mouth opening and closing as she tried to talk, no words coming out, still backing away from him. She bumped into the door frame and yelped. “You’re sick.”

Sick? Bill couldn’t believe it. She of all people should understand – but no, maybe his worst fears were true, then – maybe there was no perfection, maybe no one
would ever understand real dedication. “Alison, wait, let me . . . please let me explain.”

Alison turned and ran, and Bill chased after her, frantic to talk some sense into her. She must have gotten confused about the layout of the house, though, because she turned left instead of right and ran into his bedroom before she noticed anything. He saw her freeze inside of the room, looking around, then going back out, seeing him coming, and running back in.

She turned toward him as he entered the room, and he nearly ran into her, well, did run into her, knocking her backwards. She flew onto the bed, immediately scrambled to get up, and he caught her, her weight throwing her body over his arms in a sort of dip, and she tried to pummel his chest as he kissed her, but he held her too tightly. The skin of her neck was even softer than that of her hands, filling the crevices of his palms soothingly.

The song playing in the studio ended.

Later, when he could see again, breathe again, he sat in the studio, today’s tape in front of him, head in his hands. It had all gone so wrong. Why had he done that? Why had she done that? And then he remembered the music, the sweeping dip, the kiss. Inserting the tape, he watched it, watched her enter the room, watched her turn to face him, and after seeing the whole tape in its entirety, he saw the potential, saw the real meaning behind the scene.
He set to work, staying up until dawn, when, finally, he watched her enter the bedroom, turn toward him and fall into his arms. Then he dipped her, they kissed, and next, the two of them lying next to one another in bed, a rose filter over the scene. And, in the end, she exited the room, again and again. It was beautiful, a perfect sequence, a work of true art.
Submergence

I stood in the shower, naked and shivering, with rivulets of steadily cooling water running down my back for a full three minutes before I remembered the heated bathmat I’d bought the day before. Reaching out delicately with one pointed and freshly pedicured foot, I patted the icy linoleum until I the felt the fuzzy warmth of electric heat. Once I was out, curtain closed, toes wriggling through the baby blue shag and bright red robe wrapped tightly around my body, I opened one drawer after another, setting out moisturizers, makeup, and styling products in a predetermined, very specific order. Soon, products fanned out from the sink, devouring nearly all of the generous counter space. The clock in the corner read 8:45, which meant that I would be more than late for work even before I left the house. Oh, well. Eric should be used to it by now. Besides, he should’ve known better than to hire an ex-girlfriend, anyway.

The phone rang, the old-fashioned shrill making the floor vibrate just as I was painstakingly smudging my eyeliner to give it that careless, it-only-took-me-five-minutes-to-get-ready look. I stopped, staring at the gap
I’d made in my makeup and gritting my teeth. Everyone knew not to call my house before noon. I’d made that rule way back in high school. But the intensity of the constant ringing insisted that I either unplug or answer the phone, and since both required leaving my sanctuary, it just made more sense for me to pick up the receiver and say hello.

“Hey, Sissy, what’s up?” Barry’s voice felt as if it were echoing throughout the house, just like when we were teenagers shouting at each other from across the room. He had perfected the type of booming deep voice that rattled windows and made Daddy’s friends smile.

“You know better than to call this early,” I said, smiling against my better judgment. “What’s wrong?”

“Stop whining, you sound like you’re twelve. Anyway, I thought you’d be up. You’re working for your boyfriend, now, aren’t you?” He sounded overjoyed at this prospect, and I flopped down in my father’s old armchair, already exhausted from the prospect of explaining my life to Big Brother Barry.

“He’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“Smart man.”

“I’m doing him a favor by working there, you know.”
“I can tell, since you’re obviously very busy taking care of pressing business matters as we speak. It’s about eyeliner time, isn’t it? Didn’t interrupt, did I?”

“I’m overqualified for the position.” I knew my voice had risen to a squeaky pitch, but that’s what conversations with my brother inevitably brought out. Even from the opposite coast, he had the ability to yank my ponytail and look completely innocent.

“I’m sure you are. Socialites are overqualified for everything these days. But, enough fun. I just wanted to let you know that I have to go to Germany for business. I’ll be gone for at least two weeks, so if you need anything, just e-mail me. I don’t think my cell phone will get great reception while I’m there.”

“I’ll be fine, but thanks for checking in on me, Dad. Shouldn’t you be checking in on your wife and child?”

“Done. You should check on them yourself. You haven’t seen Brady since he was six months old.”

“That wasn’t too long ago.” I pulled at a string sticking out of the chair’s cushion and winced as it unraveled, opening over half of the seam and exposing the stuffing inside. I’d have to get that fixed, and quickly.
“He’s three, now,” Barry sighed. “I just hate to think of you floating around that big old morbid house. Why haven’t you redecorated yet? It’s been almost ten years.”

“I’ve changed things.”

“I don’t mean in your room, I mean altogether, Ray. Why don’t you just sell the place and buy something more your style?”

I stood up, stretched up toward the ceiling, then hurried out of the living room. The heavy crystal chandelier always felt threatening if I lingered there too long, like it was simply waiting for my first catnap on the couch to break its chains and crash down on top of me.

“Barry, we’ve been through this. Just yesterday I moved their anniversary portrait from the living room to the foyer.” I didn’t mention that I moved it right back two minutes later, as I had the first five times I’d attempted the move. “I’m going to sell it, eventually, now’s just not the time. Not everybody can just float around the world like you do.”

“It’s called work, little sister, and nobody’s ever expected it from you. Listen, I’ve got to run, but drop me a line when you get a chance.”

“Bye.” Germany. That certainly didn’t sound like a very fun place to go. All it made me think of was sausage
and Nazis. If he ever went anywhere interesting, maybe I’d visit him. Maybe then we’d see each other more often. “Oh, well,” I told my reflection as I took back my post in the bathroom. Taking a deep breath to steady my hand, I concentrated on correcting the gap in my eyeliner.

I was thirty minutes late for work when I skidded into my bedroom, naked from the waist up. Although I had actually, for once, had the forethought to set out work clothes the night before, I had not noticed that the blouse was missing three out of its five buttons. While I wasn’t opposed to showing a bit of cleavage here and there, that would have been overboard, even for me. Besides, Eric would probably think that I was flirting with him again, and that was one car I didn’t want to start up again.

“There!” I snagged a fabulous shirt I’d bought last week on my lunch break then completely forgotten about. Tags snapped off and fluttered to the ground as I pulled it over my head. It wasn’t really dressy enough for the office, but it was that or not show up at all.

I stepped into my heels, shrugged into my white wool coat, grabbed my purse and ran down the hall, fishing for my keys as I went. There was nothing worse than having to run for the door in that house. The pounding of my heels echoed out to the walls and ceiling, then crashed back down
on me. My mother’s voice was still so fresh in my head that I always had to turn back at least once, expecting that slim and upright shadow to be standing on the stairwell, hands folded, quiet voice filling the room. “Rachael, don’t run. It’s enough to make you look like a man.”

Catching a glimpse of myself in the foyer mirror, I stopped, nearly toppling over myself. “Smile,” I told my reflection, patting my hair down and checking my make-up for unnecessary smudges. Eric wouldn’t be able to stay long today. I kissed at the mirror, readied my keys and braced my backbone, ready to greet the cold air. “Okay,” I sighed, then opened the door and clattered down the steps.

I saw it immediately, but couldn’t get my legs to stop moving until the fourth step. My breath formed giant clouds of ice crystals that floated out and up, fogging my panorama of the yard, which was filled with icy clear water.

It wasn’t a leak, not a puddle or even a pond, but five or six feet of water that covered the front lawn, and lapped at the edges of my house. Even the last two steps had been drowned.

I noticed that my vision had cleared and pinched myself, forcing deeper breaths, or any breaths at all. I felt as if I were being strangled or smothered, every
breath a painful effort. Inside, I needed to go back inside. Turning quickly and carelessly, one of my heels slipped on a tiny patch of ice and I felt myself become weightless and airborne. The water felt closer even as I ascended, and with my last clear thought, I grabbed for the banister with dry, cramping fingers, ignoring the bite of splinters like tiny shards of glass breaking into my skin and burrowing there.

My keys went flying as if I’d meant to throw them across the yard. My house key, long and almost skeletal, caught the sun and momentarily blinded me. Covering my eyes, I heard the splash and cried out. When I gathered the courage to peek from between my clenched and bleeding fingers, all that was left were rapidly diminishing ripples that indicated the general area where the keys had landed. When the ripples hit the stairs, they made a lapping noise, like a kitten drinking from a large water bowl, and I felt my throat close as if it, too, had been filled with water. I clambered back into the house, all fingernails and kneecaps, slamming the door behind me.

Inside again, I leaned back against the wall, pulling my knees to my chest and allowing my body to feel some warmth, even through the dark wood floors. Impossible. “Impossible,” I said it again, out loud, and felt down to
my bones how true it was. There couldn’t be water outside, especially that much. It had to be some kind of hallucination, brought on by too much partying and Barry’s pushy phone call. It hadn’t rained in months, and besides that, it was cold out. By all rights, even if there was water outside, it should be frozen. Solid.

“Alright, then. Time for work.” I stood, smoothing my skirt down, ignoring the tiny spiderwebs of blood my splintered palms left on the khaki material. Gritting my teeth, I twisted the doorknob, but my hand flew off of it as if the metal were greased. Taking a step back, I put my hands on my hips and tried to project my voice softly, like my mother. “There’s nothing out there.” But the heater clicked on then, sending a burst of warm air up my skirt as well as against the curtains. They danced to the side, moving only just enough for me to see the sun glinting off of the tiny whitecaps that filled my property. “There’s nothing out there,” I said again, but this time I sounded much more like Barry than anyone else.

Eric could help. He kept a calm head in emergency situations. He’d even been able to find tickets to sold out shows in the city when I’d decided I had to see one at the last minute. Walking quickly, but not running, I counted my breaths until I reached the living room again. Eighteen.
I dialed the number without looking at the phone, unable to take my eyes from the front door. I felt that, at any minute, the water might simply crash through the door and take over the house.

"Hello," Sally, Eric’s receptionist, breathed into the phone. She always had sounded more like a sex-line operator than a secretary.

"Eric, please."

"He’s on the phone, now, can I-"

"I’ll hold!" I shouted into the phone, ignoring Sally’s impatient sigh and the click of slow-moving Muzac. I remembered my mother’s insistence that I learn to swim, because swimming was the only sport that was really for ladies. Swimming didn’t make you sweat and you could look graceful doing it. But even at age four, my head would swim and my eyes would fill at the sight of a swimming pool. Family vacations to the beach left me a trembling mess in the hotel lobby while my parents and Barry barbequed in the sand. Every Christmas, my parents bought me a new swimsuit, until even that brought out bouts of nausea and chills. But I hadn’t even thought about swimming, or even about water, for such a long time, even years before my parents had died.

"Eric Masters." His voice was curt, not a good sign.
“Eric, it’s me,” I said slowly, trying to keep the quaver ing out of my voice. “I’m having a bit of a problem.”

“Rachael, do you know what time it is?” I could hear him lean back in his squeaky leather chair, rubbing a hand against his goatee.

“Eric, I’m—”

“No, of course you don’t know what time it is. Why would you? It’s not like you have anywhere to be, any obligations to uphold. Christ, Rachael, you know I pay you for this, right?”

Of course, Eric had to pick now to pitch a fit. “I deserve all that and more, okay, but I’m having a serious problem.”

“What is it?” I heard the concern in his voice, and my knees went weak. “It’s my yard, Eric. It’s flooded, the whole thing. I can’t get out of my front door.”

Silence. More silence. I couldn’t even hear him breathing. “Did you hear me?”

“Listen, Rachael, I gave you this job because it looked like you needed some direction, some purpose. You threw that right back in my face. I’m tired of all these crazy excuses. I just don’t think I can deal with you any more, at all.”

At all?
“I mean it. You’ve got to get a grip on things. Why don’t you go out and see your brother, spend some time with your family. It’ll be good for you.”

I stared at my parents’ portrait and felt my fingernails digging into the lifelines in my palms. “But—”

“Seriously. You need some help, somebody to talk to. Something. I mean, do you ever listen to yourself?”

“I’m flooded in!” The words jumped out of my mouth, and I clapped my hand over the gaping hole to stop the leak.

“Good luck, Rachael. I hope you get things sorted out, but I can’t be the one who helps you do it anymore. I’m all tired out.”

The dial tone sizzled against my ear for a while before I replaced the receiver. A noise from outside made me whimper, and I collapsed into my father’s chair, bundling myself into a tiny package, and stared down the hall, waiting for water to start leaking from beneath the door like blood in a horror movie.

When my eyes finally came back into focus, the house was darker and even more still. It was mid-afternoon, but I had turned off all the lights when I was preparing to leave, and the windows were situated in such a way that
little to no natural light added to the ambience. Barry, I thought. He could help.

Picking up the phone, I walked through the kitchen, avoiding windows without blinds. Barry’s voicemail picked up immediately, and I remember that he was on a plane, on his way to Germany at that very moment. He’s got to have a layover somewhere, I thought, and then he can call and tell me what to do.

“Barry, it’s me, you’ve got to call me as soon as you get this. The yard, it’s flooding, and,” I paused by the back door, then flung it open and rushed out onto the porch as if I thought I might surprise the water. “I think it’s rising,” I finished, my voice trailing back down my throat, fingers disconnecting the lines without preparing my ears for the shock of dial tone. Mom’s prize-winning winter flowers were only a bright red blur, like coral on a reef, in the middle of the yard. They waved slightly as I watched them, as if there were a strong current rippling along below the surface.

I dropped the phone onto the white railing that wrapped around the spacious porch where I’d had my sweet sixteen party almost ten years before. The sky and its fluffy white clouds floated opaquely across the glass-like liquid, and it dawned on me that the day was becoming
beautiful, one of those cold winter days that looks
tropical from inside an office cubicle. But the temperature
was dropping steadily, making my nose burn and my fingers
creak. My coat was new and relatively warm, but the length
was designed more for style than for coverage. I retreated
inside, backing slowly toward the door, one foot directly
behind the other. When the metal doorknob jabbed me in the
small of my back, I screamed and laughed at the same time,
feeling silly because I was expecting it to happen but
surprised by it anyway.

Once inside again, I shivered as my body readjusted to
the temperature. I needed something warm to wear, because I
knew now that I was going to have to figure this out alone.
Barry was out of reach, and Eric didn’t believe me. There
was no one else for me to call.

Mom’s winter set! I realized that I hadn’t thought of
that in years, her mink hat, muff, and ankle length coat.
The morning of each winter’s first hard freeze had been
it’s annual unveiling, and she would take Barry and I to
school that day, wrapped in the supple, blindingly shiny
furs. Sometimes, she would schedule parent teacher
conferences for the same day, and would stroll casually
down the school hall like it was Fifth Avenue or some other
equally prestigious place. Barry would duck in the boys’
bathroom the second he was through the double doors, but I would trail behind mom. I wanted a coat of my own, one that I could take down from the attic each year and stroke with a down brush as if it were Rapunzel’s hair. Dad always said she looked like Elizabeth Taylor when she wore them, and he promised me that I would get one for graduation, and that Mom’s furs were the reason they were married.

I stripped off my white coat, kicking it into a corner. Looking at the crumpled pile of fabric, I wondered why I’d spent so much money on that instead of going ahead and getting the minks I’d forgotten I wanted. But there was no time for that now.

The upstairs hallway that led to Mom and Dad’s master bedroom had always felt too narrow, too claustrophobic, to belong in our oversized, sprawling house. Dad always said it was because there should only be two people who ever needed to use it, and they didn’t take up that much space. Now, it looked shrunken, shriveled with age, as if the years of disuse had actually taken a toll on it. The carpet was stiff and crunchy underfoot, so I stepped lightly and quickly, waiting for a patch of the fabric to rip up with my clumsy heel.

The heavy wooden doors were closed like tightly pursed lips. The doorknob was cool in my damp palm, and I wondered
if it would actually turn, or if whatever mechanisms living inside that tiny ball might have actually rusted over, become unusable. I sweated at the prospect, the closet breathing humid air onto the tiny hairs that lived on the back of my neck. It appeared that I couldn’t escape from water no matter where I went, and the wallpaper fairly rippled in the moisture-charged air. I threw myself into the door, falling face first into the plush carpeting behind it when it turned as easily as a freshly oiled hinge.

There it was, the huge king sized bed beneath a canopy that brought to mind desert kings and Bedouins. The curtains were dark and heavy, but tiny slices of sunlight slipped out from the corners, falling onto the navy carpet and burgundy bedspread. There was still a pack of cigarettes on my father’s night table, and a lighter beside that, and I still smelt my mother’s favorite perfume, Chanel No. 5, lingering in the stale air. Her closet door was open, flung carelessly to the side, and I could see her, head cocked, as she thumbed through a wardrobe that couldn’t fit into my childhood room. My father’s closet was closed, his favorite tie strangling the antique knob.

Mother’s closet smelt of the dried lavender sachets she’d hung between every ten or fifteen outfits. As I
walked to the back end of the room, hand reaching out for the decorative ball attached to the attic door string, I remembered my old room, painted light green with white accents, remembered staring at those walls for over a week during the confinement that followed mom catching me in her closet. I yanked on the string, then ducked quickly as the ladder came flying down at me as if someone had aimed for my head. My shoulder slammed into the wall, but I didn’t cry out, just clenched my jaw and breathed deeply until the pain floated away.

The attic was arid, the air that filled it almost painful. It was as if no one had ever entered the room before. There it was, Mother’s special chest. The dark mahogany finish reflected my face back at me before I looked away and lifted the lid. There was no smell, just fur wrapped in protective cloth swaddling.

I ripped the fur from the chest, scattering the cloths as I planted the hat on my head, yanking at it until it covered my ears. The coat was next, and I walked into it, testing the surprising weight it threw onto my shoulders and back. With the muff in hand, I stepped down the ladder, rung by rung, ready to face the situation. In the bedroom, I hurried past mirrors, not wanting the distraction of my reflection to dissuade me from taking care of this problem.
Stopping at the door, my hands tingled, and I felt that I had missed something, forgotten some key to helping me combat the water.

The cigarettes! Never having been a smoker, it surprised me that they should have jumped into my mind, but Daddy always smoked as he mulled over problems in his study, and Eric always puffed on imported cigars when business deals turned bad. This was a crisis situation if there ever had been one, and if the side effect of smoking was clarity of thought, then I’d just have to deal with the rotten taste and acrid smell.

The porch didn’t seem so frigid as I stepped outside, leaving the door open to air out the smells. The mink caressed my ankles, hugged my head, and held my hands as I tiptoed toward the edge. The sun was almost directly overhead now, leaving the porch shadowy but the water dazzling, as if it had rained rhinestones while I pilfered through my mother’s closet. In fact, the water had retreated a bit, leaving a few of the porch stairs dry.

I sat at the head of the stairs, keeping my body directly on the line between porch and stone, leaning back against the wood railings. Flipping the pack of cigarettes over and over in my mink-covered hands, I watched a leaf float lazily on the water, its stem a rudder in choppy
seas. Another detached from the largest tree in the yard, narrowly avoided the water, and skittered across the porch planks, into the kitchen and out of my sight. I’ll have to get that later, I thought, pulling the mink from my hands. Reaching over, I grabbed the phone from the railing and set it on the top step, next to the muff.

Daddy’s Zippo was silver and shiny, not a speck of tarnish anywhere on its surface. I flicked it a few times, then pulled a cigarette from the pack, planted it between my lips, and held the flame to the tobacco. Setting the Zippo aside, top open like a little campfire, I sucked in hard on the spongy filter and wondered how to get rid of the water.

The world grayed, then blacked, then came back gray again as the smoke filled my lungs to capacity. I coughed, choking as the smoke plumed back out of me, gagging at the taste and the overwhelming feeling of evacuation that the process left me with. It didn’t enlighten — instead, I felt overburdened, like some of the smoke had decided to set up camp in the fibrous, once pink sacs of my lungs.

When the world cleared finally, and the color bled back into the sky and the water, I felt a strong, bone-rattling chill. Looking down at my feet, I saw the left one looked detached, far away. I jumped up, shaking it
frantically to get rid of the water clinging to my skin. I stopped under the doorframe, halfway ready to go inside, but my foot stopped me again. It felt different, sizzling, alive. I had been cold before, of course, but nothing like this. The bite of water and wind was real, and I imagined people in foreign countries, Germany, even, sitting in little cottages and shanties bundled up with no wood for the fireplaces. People who struggle, people who knew what life really meant.

I stepped down into the water again, one foot at a time. I saw my heartbeat in the vibrations of water running away from my calves, in my wrists and the insides of my elbows. Tears ran down my face and I let them go, tracing maps of their paths in the lines of ice they left behind.

Once waist deep, I remembered the mink coat. No longer a comfortable burden but a formidable weight, I shed it, taking warmth in the blanket of water. I turned around once, twice, watching my clothes catch up to my body like tiny Russian ballerinas dancing to my rhythm. I kept walking, watching my blue fingers write tales in cursive below the surface, watched them rip mother’s winter flowers out one at a time for an underwater bouquet.

When the water reached my neck, I stopped, a glaze of ice over my eyes. What would it feel like to completely
submerge yourself? Just for a moment, to be totally under the water, away from the air, suspended between the clouds and the earth. I tried, but my knees wouldn’t bend, and my chin strained toward the sky. Taking a deep breath, ready to try again, I caught a funny scent in the air. A patch of blackness rippled ahead in the water, and for one irrational moment I looked for a dorsal fin, for shiny interlocking teeth made for the single reason of ripping flesh from bone. Laughing, I turned to see the source of the mirage and whispered a quick prayer for my first impression to be correct.

Behind me, while I danced in the water, Daddy’s Zippo danced on the porch. The house was old and wooden, and whatever varnish had been used to cover the porch was apparently still quite flammable. Black smoke plumed over the porch roof and into the sky, while the railings blazed until, one by one, they collapsed. The open door sucked fire, melting linoleum and igniting oil canvases. Splashing forward, I cupped my hands and threw water at the fire, one sharp motion after another, until I heard it sizzle into evaporation before it even hit the orange and red target. The water around me warmed quickly, and I backed away, scared of the heat.
My foot tripped over mother’s flower bed, and I fell, hands grasping for something to support me but finding nothing but air filled with sparks. I went under, feet flying from beneath me, and the roar of the fire went away. My flailing produced millions of tiny bubbles that shimmered like sequins in the sun. For the second before my feet found land again, I was weightless, my back parallel to the ground, and I saw the fire through blue-tinted haze, saw the water nearer the house turning fuzzy with steam. Then, I stood, breathing air like a newborn, gasping and wiping water from my face. My arms dimpled in goosebumps, but my cheeks didn’t. I’d never known that faces don’t get goosebumps. I jumped about it the water, feeling the hesitation before my body grounded itself again.

The phone rang then, and I was surprised to hear it. Somehow, the water had let it survive this long. But shouldn’t it have melted? It didn’t matter. It was Barry, no doubt, ready to rescue his little sister from whatever whim she’d fallen prey to this time. I smiled, feeling the water run up and down the crevices of my dimples, and dropped beneath the surface again. I kicked, trying to swim toward the house, curious to see how much heat I could handle, and the ringing disappeared as the water filled my eardrums and silenced all other distractions.
A Trip Around Town

Two blue lines. Two blue lines so perfectly parallel that they could go on forever without converging. Jill sighed, and cracked her knuckles. Unable to shake the image, she closed her eyes, but the lines were still there, floating behind her lids. Who would have thought that yesterday’s trip to the pharmacy would end like this? She’d only gone to support her friend Lisa, and now it was Lisa who was celebrating even though Jill was the one on vacation.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.” Lane shivered, then flipped the left blinker on. Their turn seemed to be two miles away.

The clicking made Jill wish she could rip the damn thing out of the steering column and throw it out the window, but she’d have to wait until Lane moved his arm out of the way. “Wish I wouldn’t do what?”

“Crack your knuckles like that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll make your knuckles so fat you won’t be able to wear any of your rings!”

“Why?” She smirked, her eyes glued to his.
“Because you won’t stop cracking your knuckles!” He stepped on the accelerator roughly and the car surged over the swell of a large hill. His own square knuckles turned white against the black vinyl of the steering wheel.

Jill cracked her thumb loudly and turned her head to avoid his anger. She looked back at their rent house, watching it disappear into the dark. Bye, bye house. She pinched her lip between her teeth to buckle her laughter inside. When the blinker sounded again, she bit down until it hurt.

Lane’s head jerked toward her as if he were a puppet and she the puppeteer. “Jill, you’re bleeding!”

“What?” Her heart seemed to stop for a moment. Touching her face, she felt dampness, saw bright red blood staining her fingers. Her skin seemed paler beneath the blood.

“Look in the glove compartment. Should be some Kleenex or a napkin in there.”

She popped the latch, looked inside. The light didn’t come on. Inside, no identifiable shapes, only bloated lumps buried in the dark. Reaching in, she jumbled things about, her fingertips touching only metal instruments, sharp and cold. She jerked her hand away. Lane always kept his tools in the strangest places. Taking a deep breath, she plunged her hand back into the tangle, ignoring the sharp jabs, hurrying to find something that might take care of the mess.
Shaking her head, she withdrew her hand. “There’s no tissue in there.” Feeling drops of blood dangling from the end of her chin, she wiped them away impatiently with her shirt sleeve.

“I can’t believe you just did that.” Lane cringed away, pressing against the car door. “That’s disgusting!” He stared at the smear of red against the white material of her shirt until she held it behind her back to block his view. “If you had just told me that you couldn’t find a tissue, we could’ve found something more practical than that.”

“If I had waited any longer, it would have dripped all over me.”

“Well, it’s all over your clothes now, anyway.”

“No, just my shirt. I don’t even like it. Mom gave it to me like five years ago. I’m not even going to worry about washing it, I’ll just throw it away.”

“Wasteful.” He stomped on the accelerator again, and the whining sound of the transmission swelled to a shrill pitch before shifting. They rode in silence until the early morning departure caught up with her, fogging her brain like the streets ahead of them. She slumped back in her seat, her hands limp in her lap, and let her head bob with the rocking motion of the car’s tires carrying them over the uneven back roads.

Then, she felt her body fly forward, her nose smash against the dashboard.
“Ouch!” She cupped her nose, gently rotating it to make sure it wasn’t broken. Her law school interview was only two weeks away, and she didn’t want to have to explain a puffy, deformed face. “What is your problem, anyway?”

“Jill, look around.”

Lane’s face was screwed up into an expression she’d never seen before, the skin of his cheeks almost transparent. His veins traced dark blue lines across his nose and forehead. As she looked out the window and realized she didn’t recognize the landscape, her body lurched as if she’d stepped off a treadmill without slowing down first. “Where are we?”

“Well, I don’t know, that’s kind of why I stopped. I’ve never seen this place before.”

“Neither have I.” The tendons in her neck creaked as she turned her head, taking in everything. Tall buildings with broken windows and bright graffiti were visible even through the thick fog and diluted dawn sunlight. “This can’t be Darton.” Rolling her window down, she stuck her head out and squinted through the brightening sun and dense fog. The houses that hid in the alleys between the deserted warehouses were ramshackle and decrepit. I’m glad I don’t live somewhere like that, she shook her head, kneeling on her seat to gain a better view. No grass grew in the yards, only gray dirt like dust and scarecrow trees, rusted tricycles planted in the dust. The air felt forceful,
pressing against her face, flowing past her, filling the car.

“Does anyone live here, you think?” Lane let off the brakes and the car rolled slowly down the road, hesitating every few feet as if someone were pushing against the bumper.

“I don’t see how you could.” Jill turned completely around and saw empty roads and early morning fog behind them. “There aren’t any lights in any of the buildings.”

“I’m turning around.” He pulled on the wheel sharply, running the wheels off the road in his eagerness to turn.

“Well, wait a second. Isn’t this the quickest way to get to the interstate?”

“If you haven’t noticed yet, this place doesn’t seem very welcoming.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“Yes, the way I planned on taking . . . .”

“Which is the way we came, right?”

Lane rolled his eyes, glaring at her. “It’s the way I thought we came, but apparently we took a wrong turn somewhere because I don’t recognize the landscape. It looks like a bad neighborhood. I don’t want to take a chance and go through.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m an infant. Neither of us have been in this part of town for awhile, it’s probably just gone down a little since then. I mean, if we want to
get to Florida as fast as we can, then we should take the fastest route, right?"

   “Not if it’s dangerous.” Lane floored it, warily eyeing the rearview mirror.

   “Well, I just want it known that I think we should’ve gone through. And if we are lost, it’s because you took a wrong turn somewhere.”

   “We’re not lost. We only left the house like ten minutes ago. How could we be lost in our own town?”

   “Whatever . . . .Let’s just go to the house and start over.” Jill folded her hands together and rested them on her stomach.

   Maybe they should just go home and try the Florida trip later. She settled down in her seat and looked at the stained ceiling. Her body felt warm. They could rent a few movies and spend the weekend being lazy on the couch. She kind of missed their little rented bungalow already.

   Lane flicked on the blinker and turned the car onto their street. “Almost there.”

   Well, okay, so maybe it was kind of small, only one bedroom, but at least it was a real house, not one of those overpriced cookie-cutter apartments like all her friends had. It even had a yard. She cracked her thumb, then stiffened, but Lane didn’t seem to notice. Only minutes later, she saw the light green paint of their house, though it was barely visible through the fog.
No, it wasn’t too bad at all. Well, except sometimes the toilet kept running after you flushed it, so you had to watch out for that, and the heater was broken, so they would be in for some cold times . . . . She sat up straight and stretched her hands out in front of her until blue spots danced in front of her eyes.

“Okay, we’re back to the drawing board.” He turned the car into the semi-circular driveway and drove out without stopping.

“Hey, we’re going back the way we came!”

“I know.”

“Why?”

“I want to make sure that we didn’t make a wrong turn.”

“Then it’s my turn to drive!”

“What do you mean, your turn?”

“I mean that you need to pull over and let me drive. You got us lost.”

“Now you’re talking to me like I’m a child. It’s not like you know where we’re going any better than I do. If anything, I know this town better than you do because I’m older.”

“Well, you may be older but I don’t know how the hell you got us to that shithole.”

“By following the directions you decided on last night before we left.” He kept his eyes straight ahead, but Jill knew that he wanted to glare at her.
Jill looked out of her window and raised her eyebrows at her faint reflection in the window.

“Fine.” Lane slammed on the brakes, put the emergency flashers on. “Drive.” He opened his car door and stepped out. Jill stared after him for a moment, then yanked on her door handle, but the door didn’t budge. After a couple of jerks, she kicked it and the lock disengaged with a wrenching sound.

Stepping out of the car, she looked across the roof of the car to the vacant field of wildflowers she admired every morning on her way to school. Stepping closer and squinting to see through the mist, she saw that they were all wilting, losing their vivid white color. She cocked her head and walked closer, sure that the stress of the trip had somehow affected her eyes. Only yesterday they had been bright and blooming.

“Hey, Jill, watch it!” Lane’s voice vibrated in her ear. She didn’t take her eyes from the wildflowers. She felt his hands close over her shoulders and then she was falling, but he caught her and helped her back up. She shook him off, her breath hot in her throat.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” She shoved him. “You almost made me fall!”

“You didn’t even see where you were going, did you?” Lane pointed. Against her will, her eyes followed the direction of his gesture to the deep trench that separated...
the road from the flowers. Her feet were only inches from
the drop-off.

“You act like I need you to point everything out to
me.” Stepping away from him, she bent, untying her shoe and
then tying it again, breathing deeply so that he couldn’t
see her shoulders shaking. From that level, the road and
the field of wildflowers didn’t seem to be separated.

Even the grass in the field seemed to be sparser. Jill
wondered if someone had sprayed the field with poison.

“Weren’t those flowers totally fine yesterday?” She
tried to pull him closer to the edge but he stood firm,
staring down at the ditch as if it were waiting to swallow
him up.

“No, they weren’t any different than they are right
now.”

“Yes, yes they were.” She felt the words bubbling out
of her throat as she nodded over and over again. “They
were, I’m telling you, they were. You’re just not very
observant.”

“Jill, they were never all that pretty, even at their
best. You know how polluted that field probably is? It’s
right behind a sugar cane field, it probably gets sprayed
with pesticides twice a month. Nothing good grows there.”

She shook her head until she felt her brain might tear
loose from her skull. “You’re wrong. I’m telling you, they
were perfect yesterday. Somebody must have done something
to make them die so quickly.” She felt fat tears hanging
over the cliffs that were her eyelids, and she looked up at
the sky, blinking rapidly, but they still fell down her
cheeks.

“Hey, baby, what’s wrong?” Lane pulled her to him and
hugged until she felt as if she would cave in.

Jill shook her head, looking over his shoulder, down
the road. Where was everyone this morning? It wasn’t so
early anymore, the sun had already begun to burn away some
of the fog.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She thought she saw a car
approaching, but no, it was just a trick of the churning
fog.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” She gave him a quick kiss, looking to
his left at the field of dying flowers.

“Do you still want to drive?” He held her at arm’s
length and stared at her carefully.

“Absolutely.”

“I don’t believe it.” Jill felt numb, like she’d been
given a shot of Novocain.

“We didn’t take a wrong turn this time, right?” Lane
looked out the window, face pale, lips pinched.

“I’m sure we didn’t. I was driving, I would know.” She
felt as if she were biting the words off. Looking out of
the window was painful. Crooked telephone poles stood over
scattered shacks -- rusty tin roofs, doors without knobs,
the skeletons of old fences. An empty parking garage rose up into the skyline, blocking out the late morning sun. An hour’s worth of driving had landed them there. Across the street, a small building with plywood over the storefront windows read “Darton Grocery” in faded, hand-painted white letters, shattering any illusions that they weren’t in Darton.

“How is this possible?” Lane scratched the bridge of his nose. “Darton’s not that big.”

“Well, obviously I don’t know, or we’d be half-way to Florida right now.” She drummed her fingers against the steering wheel and stared hard at the vacant landscape before her. “Let’s drive through.”

“Are you kidding? No way!” As Lane reached for the wheel, she slapped his hand away.

“What exactly are you afraid of? I don’t even think there’s anyone in this place.”

“Well, what if we get a flat tire, or the car breaks down? Anything could happen. There’s no one to help us.”

“You are such a scairdy-cat.”

“I’m not scared, I’m being sensible. You never think clearly when you want something so badly. Just slow down, ok?”

“I want to get there.” Jill beat her head against the steering wheel, setting off the horn. Lane jumped, then looked around as if the horn might have signaled something.
“I’m not going through there, Jill, and I’m not going to let you go. I’m taking over. Get out of the car and let me drive.”

She opened the door and got out, fighting to swallow through the dryness of her throat. She hated dealing with Lane when he got mad. Walking around the back of the car slowly, she took in the neighborhood. It really did seem completely empty, but she still felt as if someone were watching her.

Lane didn’t speak as he drove, and Jill didn’t offer any directions. If he thought he could do better, then he could get lost without any help from her. Looking out the window was like looking out into another world. There were no houses, only empty landscapes that she had never seen before. Her head seemed to spin and she felt seasick. She wrapped her arms around her body as if hugging herself. The beach didn’t even sound exciting anymore anyway. Taking a trip around town and actually finding a store that she’d seen before sounded exciting. Home sounded exciting. She pulled her knees up to her chest and laid her head on top of them, closing her eyes. She finally felt calm inside, almost settled.

“Hey, hey what’s the matter?” Lane’s face was only inches from her own. Jumping up, she looked around. They were on the side of the road in Darton. The street was familiar, it was only about a block from their home. Cars were passing by as on any day.
The road. She jumped out of the car and ran around to the edge of the road. Good old gray asphalt with fading yellow lines. She smiled until she felt her skin stretch. For some reason, she’d pictured them being blue. Walking back to the car felt triumphant, as if she had won a race. She slid back into the car and looked at Lane.

“I don’t guess there’s any way I was dreaming about how we keep getting lost, is there?”

He smiled and shook his head. “You’ve been sleeping for a long time though. I had a hell of a time finding the way back here. For awhile I just kept finding new places that I had never seen before, but then all of a sudden I found our street. That was only a few minutes ago. We’re almost back home now.”

She looked out of the window, smiling at the small, badly painted houses. Almost home. It felt good, not having to worry about anything for the moment.

“Do you want to give up and stay home? We can go to Florida next weekend.”

“I can’t go next weekend.” She frowned. “I have my law school interview.”

“Really?” Lane wrinkled his face. “Well, I can’t go for the next month after that because my boss is going on vacation and I have to work double shifts.”

“But after that, it’s going to be too cold to go to the beach. Besides, that’s just too far away. If we say
we’re going to go in two months we’ll probably never get there.”

“Sure we will. Sometimes things just don’t work out the way you want them to.”

“Well, then you make them work for you. I say we go to Florida now.”

“Okay, Jill.” Lane sighed as they drove through their driveway again.

They rode along in silence for awhile. Jill tried to remember her dream, but all she could recall was that the lines in the street were blue. She smiled and shook her head. Dreams were so weird.

“Why don’t you get the map out of the glove box.” Lane didn’t look at her.

She could feel his anger radiating like heat waves from their holey gas stove back home. She knew that he was really mad at her, not annoyed or exasperated but pissed off. He wanted to go home. It was tempting after the strange turn things had taken, but this was their one and only chance for a real vacation. Once he saw the ocean and the white sandy beaches, he’d get over it.

She opened the glove compartment and pulled out the map. “Ooh, gum.” She grabbed the pack and unwrapped a piece, popping it into her mouth while she crumpled the shiny foil with her free hand. “Want one?” She held the pack out toward Lane, but he shook his head, still not looking at her.
The gum was strong and cinnamon, and it made her
tongue feel swollen. She unfolded the map in her lap and
began tracing out a path, but Lane pulled the car over at a
stop sign and took it from her before she could argue. He
grabbed a pen from the console and she turned away, looking
out the window, biting down hard on the gum.

They were at the same place that they had stopped
earlier that morning. Jill saw the flowers more clearly in
the late afternoon sun. Things had gotten worse already,
the flowers shriveled, browning, almost doubled over. She
didn’t understand how the stems managed to keep standing at
all when the flowers were so obviously dead. A shadow fell
over the field, making the blossoms seem even darker.
Looking up, she saw dark clouds staining the blue sky.
“Hey, Lane, I think that it’s going to rain later.”

Lane looked up and nodded, his lips drawn tight
against his teeth. “One more reason we should just go
home.”

“You take things too seriously, Lane. Lighten up.”

He muttered something under his breath, then turned to
her. “Hold the map for me and tell me where to turn, but
don’t make any changes.”

“I won’t.” She already saw several ways to shorten the
trip. Lane stepped on the gas and Jill watched the field
disappear behind them. When it was out of sight, she closed
her eyes briefly and saw pure white flowers bobbing in the
gentle breeze.
Jill gave Lane directions and he followed them almost robotically. She began to feel hopeful that whatever had gone on this morning wouldn’t happen again, that she would get her beach sooner than they’d feared.

“You know, we should get a pet. Like a cat or something.” Lane smiled at her, looking excited at his idea.


“Just to have something around the house. To play with, you know, for companionship.”

“We have each other.”

“It can’t hurt to have something extra.”

“You mean we’ll never be able to go on vacation again, we’ll have to spend months house-training, and spend hundreds of dollars on vet bills when we could be spending that money on ourselves, having a good time.”

“Yeah, because this vacation is turning out to be quite the wonderful time.”

The gum in her mouth turned sour and hard, and she rolled her window down, ignoring the gust of wind that pushed her hand back and tangled her hair. She spit the gum out the window and almost immediately felt a slap behind her ear. “Shit!”

“What?” The car swerved as Lane jumped and then leaned over to see what the problem was.

Her fingers poked through her hair until they found a sticky wad with hair snarled all around it. “I’ve got gum
in my hair. Damn it!” She slammed her fist against the glass but it didn’t even shake.

“Gum? Where . . . Oh, I see it. Damn.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the heat behind them. “Well, you could be a little more sympathetic.” She rolled her window up, hoping that no more hair would become tangled though it seemed as if every move she made caused more hair to stick.

“Why do you say that? Of course I’m sorry that you got gum in your hair.”

“Oh, so it’s all my fault.”

Lane raised his eyebrows. “Well, it’s not mine.”

“I know.” Turning away, she ground her teeth. She knew no such thing. “Is there a knife, or better yet, some scissors in here?”

“I think my hunting knife is under your seat. Why?”

“I’ve got to cut this gum out of my hair.”

“What?” His voice raised chills on her arms.

“Turn left here.” She reached beneath the seat and found the knife, hoping he’d forget what they were talking about. She pulled the sheath off, uncovering the blade, a shiny surface almost like a mirror. She held it up to her face and looked herself in the eye. Even though it was clean, she knew that it had been covered in blood many times before and would be again. There was blood on it now. Even though she couldn’t see it, she knew it was there. Hunting was such a strange and disturbing sport.
“Why are you cutting your hair?”
“Because it has a big wad of gum tangled in it.”
“Can’t you get gum out with peanut butter?”
“Where am I going to get some peanut butter?”
“A store.” He looked at her, eyebrows raised and mouth opening in a small, tight O.
Jill shook her head. “Well, where is a store? We can’t even find our way out of town.”
“We’ll pass a store sooner or later, Jill.”
Jill pulled the tangle of hair that held the gum away from her head and held the knife to it, as if threatening it. “Look, Lane, if this stays in my hair any longer I’m going to go crazy. It’ll grow back.” With three quick back and forth motions of the knife, the hair was loose in her hand. The reddish piece of gum was almost completely covered by layers of her dark hair. She rolled down the window and threw it out.
He groaned. “Jill, you really freak me out sometimes. Now you’ve got a big bald spot in your head. If you’d had just had a little patience, we could’ve got the gum out and your hair would still be normal.”
“Whatever.” She was careful to turn her head so he couldn’t see the freshly cut parts.
“We’re lost again.” His voice was flat, no emotion.
Jill looked around. Nothing but flat, empty fields of gray dirt, no grass, no trees, no buildings. What looked
like a small toy village was several miles down the road, backlit by the last sliver of the sun.

“Did you give me the right directions?” He looked at her closely.

“Yes, of course. You might’ve missed a turn while you were yelling at me about my hair, though.” Serves him right for lecturing me.

He sucked in his next breath loudly and turned his head, looking out of the window to the left. “Can we please just go home now?”

“No. Let me drive. I’m going to save our trip.”

Lane got out of the car without saying a word. The trip seemed to be draining his power of speech. Jill looked at his empty seat for a moment, then stepped out into the stagnant air.

“So you’re going to drive through this deserted road, to that town that’s probably deserted, just because you can’t let go of this trip?”

“It’s not that I can’t let go. It’s just that I really want to go. I thought you really wanted to go, too.” She walked past him and slid into the driver’s seat, feeling comfortable immediately.

Lane sat down across from her and muttered something, looking straight ahead.

“What?” She turned her head quickly to look at him, ready for anything.

“I just said, ‘Not that bad’.”
She rolled her eyes and put the car into drive. Lane laughed harshly “We’re finally here.”

Jill didn’t even look at him. He was being a smart ass. It was almost four in the morning. The city that she had seen in the horizon had grown closer and closer, but after hours of driving toward it she had decided it must have been a mirage. But finally, they were rolling into the town, in the middle of a pouring rainstorm on an almost empty tank of gas. Jill’s jaws ached and her eyes were heavy.

“I see people!” She felt her eyes open wider than they had all day. Cars, intersections, lighted buildings. She and Lane looked at each other and grinned. “People!”

As they pulled into what seemed to be the beginning of the town that had taken so long to get to, Jill saw that a city limits sign read “Darton.” She rubbed her hands over her eyebrows and squinted through the rain.

“Watch out!” Lane reached over and tried to yank the wheel. Jill spun it the opposite way, then slammed on the brakes as a car rocketed through an intersection without even flashing its brake lights. It was like the driver hadn’t even seen them.

“I guess they didn’t notice us because of the rain.” Lane’s voice was quiet, the way Jill felt. Her heart beat too rapidly and her skin felt cold and clammy. She pushed her foot gently against the gas, then pressed harder, ready to get off of the street.
Traffic was congested, bumper to bumper. Smeary red taillights of the cars around her reflected all over her windshield. The whole interior of the car took on a red hue. Tears welled up in her eyes and she swallowed slowly. “You want to just go back home?” Her voice sounded tired even to her own ears. She saw the beaches of Florida, white sand and bright blue surf, slipping away.

“I would love nothing more than to be in our bed right now.” He grinned at her, but she ignored it. The last thing she felt like doing was smiling.

She reached for the blinker and looked down at the instrument panel. A bright red light blinked on and off rapidly. “Oh, no!” She slammed her fist against the steering wheel. “Dammit!”

“What?”

“We’re out of gas. The light’s on.”

Lane looked close to tears. “You’re kidding.” He looked out of the window, his head turning from left to right so fast that he seemed to be blurry. “I don’t see a gas station anywhere, do you?”

“No.” She saw only smeary taillights and neon signs along the roadside. “I do see some motels, though.”

“No, I don’t want to stay in one of these motels. I’ll bet they’ve got roaches, probably even lice. They probably rent rooms by the hour.”

She laughed. “You’re being over dramatic. It won’t kill us to stay one night in a questionable. I don’t like
it either, but I like it better than the idea of sleeping in the car on the side of the road. C’mon, it’ll be an adventure.”

“We’ll be wasting money.” He leaned toward her, looking into her eyes. She knew he thought that the idea of wasting money on a dirty hotel room would scare her away. Actually, she thought it was their only option. Besides, then they could start over and leave for Florida in the morning.

“What else are we going to do, Lane? We have to stay in one of them. Pick one.” She pointed to the left side of the road where four motels were, one behind the other.

“No.” He shook his head, crossed his arms over his chest and looked away.

“Be a baby then.” She goosed the gas and pulled into the parking lot of the first one, the tires squealing around the corner. She hated when he acted like that.

“You get the bags and meet me in the lobby. I’ll get our room.” She left him the keys and walked to the glass door that was propped open with fake palm tree, grimacing as she walked into the damp air reeking of stale smoke and body odor.

She walked to the counter, leaned over it, then pulled away from the sticky feel. A sign on the wall read “$35 an hour, $60 a night.” She rang the bell twice, then jumped as a door opened. An old man in an open-chested shirt stuck
his head out, looked around and then disappeared back into the room.

“Hey!” She rang the bell again.

“Hour or night?” His profile appeared, jutting out from the door frame. He chewed on the end of an unlit cigar, his eyes passing over her without stopping.

“A night.” Walking toward him, she tried to catch his eye but he didn’t look toward her again.

“You want one bed or two?”

“One.”

“All we got is rooms with two beds.” He smacked on the cigar and she caught a glimpse of the blue band around the gummy, muddy end. She shivered.

“Then why . . . Never mind. I’ll take it.”

“Whatever.” He took the money and gave her a key.

“Have fun.”

She gave him a tight smile and met Lane at the door.

“Room 28.”

The door was bright red, the knob rusted. Lane took the key and tried to unlock the door, but it wouldn’t turn, probably because he didn’t really want to be there. She pushed him out of the way and stuck the key into the slot, jiggled it twice and the door popped open. “Easy.” She smiled at him as he carried the bags past her.

He dropped the bags onto the rust colored carpeting.

“Two beds?”

“They didn’t have any open rooms with single beds.”
“So we have to sleep in separate beds?”
“Looks that way.”
“You know I have trouble sleeping without you.”
“It’s only one night. I’m sure you’ll survive.”
“We can squeeze into one of these.”
“No way, they’re too small.”
“We can try. Come on, please?” He smiled at her, reaching for her hand.

She knew he wouldn’t give up until she said yes.
“Alright.”

Leaving Lane alone, she went into the dimly lit bathroom. The tiles were dry but even after she put a towel on the floor they felt damp. Sitting on the toilet, she put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. Two blue lines. She shook her head.

She walked out of the bathroom, squeezing against the frame to let Lane pass by. The bed was made, the sheets turned back. Sliding under the covers felt like being swallowed by some rough-tongued beast.

“Ready for bed?” Lane came out of the bathroom in boxer shorts. Jill turned onto her side and closed her eyes. She heard him turn the lights out and then he slid in next to her, pulling her close, letting his arm rest over her. She stretched her legs out again and again. The feeling wouldn’t go away.

“Do you mind taking your arm off? I’m really hot.”
She wiggled beneath his heavy arm, but it didn’t budge, not even an inch. She lifted it and rolled out of the way. It was dead weight, falling limply down to the too-soft mattress and bouncing. She pushed herself up onto one elbow and looked at Lane, then eased out of the bed, leaving rumpled sheets in her place. Lane rolled over onto his back, folding his hands over his chest, his face solemn and handsome. She waited, but he didn’t move again.

Tiptoeing over to the other bed, she threw back the covers, then thought again and ripped them completely off, throwing them on the floor. The pillows joined them. She left one transparent white sheet hugging the faded blue or green mattress and crawled on top of it. Turning onto her side, she pushed her body over until she was nearly touching the wall.

She closed her eyes, hoping to drift off to sleep as quickly as Lane had. They needed to wake early in the morning. There was so much to be done if they were still going to make it to Florida.
Fear

People always say: fear makes you do crazy things.

But that’s not the whole truth. You learn what that is Monday when you come home after school, turn on the television and find that the rumor is confirmed: the missing girl was taken by the same man who took the last two victims. All of these women strongly resemble you and about eighty-five percent of your friends. You absorb the truth on Thursday, when you come home and police cars line your street. Your neighbor’s house has been broken into, the neighbor that looks very similar to you, dark-haired, tall and tan. Nothing of any value was taken. Whoever did it was apparently just looking around.

Fear doesn’t just make you do crazy things. Fear also has a negative energy; it has a tendency to stop all previous action. You stop walking home the way you have for three years now, past the lake brimmed with algae so green it brightens your day. You stop packing smashed and half-moldy bread slices into a Ziploc back in your backpack for the ducks that meet you halfway home. No longer do you listen to music to narrate your daily activities; instead, your Walkman gathers dust on your headboard, the fuzzy gray
lining of the earpieces a clear indication that one day soon, you should really break out the Pledge. Screening phone calls becomes a long-lost pastime – now, each unanswered ring means to the caller (your best friend, your mother, your sister who hasn’t called you since your birthday) that you’re certainly dead, or, at the very least, under attack at that very second. You stop enjoying the novelty of living all by yourself, because living all by yourself has suddenly become a very heavy liability.

Here is what you do, not simply because of fear, but to fill the void of negativity: you wait outside of your classroom for hours until at least two of your male friends (preferably the bigger and burlier of the bunch) are free to walk you home. They listen to your worries, walk you inside your house, and let you sit on the couch while they check closets and corners, just in case. You buy everlast light bulbs, the ones that come with ten-year guarantees on their lifespan, and screw them into every available socket. You create a language between yourself and your house: the closet door stays cracked a quarter inch, the shower curtain stays half pulled back so that only the red stripes show, and the chain lock on your backdoor is bent slightly to the right with the help of a green thumbtack. If these things change, you know something’s wrong.
You revert back to childhood, when flying solo meant that you simply didn’t have any friends. Sleepovers become cool again – there’s usually one a week at the very least. Grocery shopping, never exactly a pleasure, becomes something close to what you imagine walking a tightrope without a net must be like. Maybe nothing happened this time, but what about the next go-round? You make new girlfriends while you’re checking out, waiting for each other as you pay your bill and then helping first her, then you, to unload your groceries into blinding apartments. A new streak of adventurousness arises in you, one that you never expected. Why not go blonde? Platinum? The pixie cut, yes, that went out years ago, but isn’t retro cool now? In the end, you succumb to your conservativeness and simply shorten your hair, if for no other reason than you can’t stand the impending irony of completely shattering your personal image and ending up dead anyway.

Dating, something of a shark pit for you anyway, becomes no-man’s land, literally. However, there is suddenly a resurrection of that old standby: Girls’ Night Out. All of your friends are available, even Sue, whose first year of law school has mandated that she be completely unavailable for any type of social activity. You and the girls huddle quietly in not-so-crowded campus bars,
sharing scare tales of friends and friends of friends (Girl 1: Someone tried to get in her window. She was sure of it, she’d left a stack of cards right on the sill just in case. Girl 2: Doesn’t she have a cat, though? Girl 1: Yeah, but she’d had three hang-up calls the day before. Group: Ooooohhhhh). You order drinks in packs, leaving an equal number of women behind in the booth. After all, there’s safety in numbers.

The men, smelling the fear and vulnerability in the room, somehow react sensibly and stay away rather than pounce. They seem to understand the concept of a one-night stand no longer applies during a crisis. Or maybe, it’s the open key fobs of mace you each carry in your right hand, palmed not quite all the way, that speaks more plainly to their common sense.

Four out of your six best brunette friends have already gone blonde when the news bulletin comes on at ten. The most recent victim, just found today, had her hair died platinum two weeks before she was taken. Turning off the TV, you realize that there is nothing left that you can do. You no longer look in the mirror, because you can’t see your own reflection. You’re too busy looking behind you into the corners of the room that even hundred watt bulbs won’t brighten.
You realize you might be getting a little carried away when you miss turning in a very important essay after you find that your Mace, or your closest ally, no longer works. This realization comes about on your new and improved walk to school, when a man in khakis and a polo shirt races toward you and you squeeze, but nothing happens. He was running to beat the crosswalk light, but then, he should know better. Instead of finishing the walk, you run home, even though you’ve never run anywhere before that wasn’t on a treadmill, and even then not without some grumbling, jump in your car, and speed to the nearest Army surplus store. There, they sell a combination of Mace and tear gas, or at least that’s what the commercial said right after the news.

Six months fly by in a coffee-colored haze of sleepless days, white knuckled walks, and group grocery shopping trips. But, now, everyone else seems to be forgetting. Not you. You remain vigilant. You continue speaking to your house on at least an hourly basis, walking the new path, and finish by permanently retiring your headphones to the top shelf of your closet. Your electricity bill spikes because the lights never go off, but you’re never more certain that it’s worth the expense when you wake up each morning at 3 am, wondering what that noise was. Three of your friends have dates, the rest are
busy studying at home, alone, venturing out to the coffee shops, or simply not answering their phones. When check-in phone calls lose their popularity, which you only realize after you encounter several exasperated friends, you call your mother, celebrating your newfound closeness. In fact, you call your mother when you leave the apartment, when you arrive at your destination, and when you get home again. That way, if you go missing, they’ll at least be able to pinpoint a time.

Another month goes by, and you cave in and go to the salon with a friend, where you ask for thick platinum streaks through your black hair. And a trim, too, while you’re at it.

It’s been eight months, and no new victims since the fifth. Even your mother doesn’t answer her phone anymore. Your friends keep forgetting to meet you after class, making the walk home darker and more threatening than it would’ve been if you left as soon as you were done. The girls are tired of girls’ night; eight months of celibacy is apparently a lot to ask of anyone. The UPS man forgets to leave packages at the door and knocks now, but after another futile phone call to your sister, you answer even though you don’t recognize his voice. You stop answering your phone, change your answering machine back to it’s
original message (the one that says your name and indicates you live alone), go grocery shopping completely unchaperoned, and while there purchase a bottle of hair dye, #57 Mahogany Silk. Your hair’s already grown an inch or so since your last trim.

When you get home, you don’t break the silence to speak to the house. You leave the door unlocked, turn a few lights off (you can almost hear a sigh of relief from the sockets), and unlatch a window to let in the breeze. The night is cool, and the rapidly dropping sun gives the sky an ominous red tint.

You unload groceries by looping bag after bag over each arm until they’re weighted down around your hips, and you can only open your door by kicking it. Turning the television on, you sit back on your couch, the couch you just moved back to its original position where you can’t see the picture window behind you. With the curtains up, you pick up the phone and call your mother’s work. Even though you know she won’t be there until the morning, you think she might want to have a timeframe then, after the morning news. You prop your feet up and tune in to the forensics network, and try to imagine what the scientists will do to your house to catch the bad guy, when the time comes.
Girl Scout Cookies

After Momma stole my Girl Scout troop’s cookie money and headed off to Vegas to marry my brother’s friend, Curtis, the rest of my family fell to pieces. Randy, my brother, was so pissed off at Curtis he couldn’t think about anything else. He quit his after-school job and sat on a beach chair, one of those lounger-types, on the porch all day, every day, just waiting for them to come back. After a week, his face and chest was so sunburned you couldn’t stand to look at him without sunglasses on, but his back was just as white as the skin between your toes.

I kept on going to school, because I really liked sixth grade, and, anyway, Ella, my older sister, wouldn’t let me quit. She said Randy was old enough to do whatever he wanted, but she wasn’t going to let me grow up to be trash. “It’s probably just as good Momma left when she did,” Ella told me, brushing the tangles from my hair. “I mean, look what she’s done to Randy and me. At least you’ll have a chance.” Ella actually made good grades, but her part-time job at the shoe store in town didn’t pay for much more than bread and canned meat.
Our Aunt Gray, Momma’s oldest sister, came on out every other day or so and brought us something or another she’d tried to cook for us, but we always crossed our fingers and counted on the Pastor dropping by and bringing us some money. Aunt Gray had never learned how to cook properly, anyway, but now she was so old that she couldn’t even tell the difference between spices. Cakes came out salty and bitter, meat loaf just as sweet as blackberry cobbler. Ella handled each covered dish that came out of Gray’s hand and into our house as if someone had just handed her a pile of three-day-old roadkill, but she always thanked her very kindly just the same. Even the dogs wouldn’t come near that food, not even for a curious sniff or two, and they were just as hungry as we were. Sometimes, they’d watch Randy until he fell asleep in his chair, then they’d rush him, licking the sunblock off his body as fast as they could.

Ella wasn’t very happy when the Sheriff came by at the end of the month to tell us that there wouldn’t be any foster care for Randy or me. “But, Nat’s just twelve years old. I can’t take care of a twelve year old.”

Sheriff Brown took off his hat and scratched his bald spot like he was picking ants out of it. “I understand your feelings, Ms. Hunter, but you’re eighteen, and as the state
sees it, you’re the rightful custodian of these kids. We always like to see families stay together, you understand.”

“Randy is sixteen years old. He won’t listen to me.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure he didn’t listen to your momma, either, but that’ll work out in time,” he chuckled. “Now, you kids let me know if you hear from her, anyway. You never know, those newlyweds might just pop back in town.”

“If he pops back in town, I’ll pop him right back out,” Randy yelled from his lounge chair. I giggled, picturing Momma’s hands over her mouth while Curtis flew threw the air like Superman, but Ella shushed me before I could really get into the drama.

“See, you’re getting the hang of it already,” Sheriff said, shoved his hat back down hard until little gray hairs crawled out over his ears, and left just as suddenly as he’d come.

Ella sat down on the front steps without even checking for dirt, like she usually did. She put her chin in her hands and just stared after the tails of dust the sheriff’s car kicked up as he revved his engine to get it over the hump in the road. He just barely missed Aunt Gray puttering down, the tin foil covering whatever she’d cooked for us this week catching the sun and throwing it straight in our
faces. Even Randy squinted, and I’d figured he must be sun-blind by then.

“Great, more people who ain’t doing us a damn bit of good.” Randy pulled a piece of newspaper over his face to hide from the sun.

“I sure wish Momma would at least have left some of those cookies,” I said, putting my hand on my stomach and feeling it work.

“Jesus, do you ever shut up, Nat?” Randy cried as Ella sobbed sharply, like a dog barking, and he threw his new bottle of sunblock at me so hard it left a bruise that went straight down to the bone and stayed for almost a month.

My real name’s Rita, but everybody’s called me Nat since I could walk. Ella says that Momma would have friends over and I’d just wander around by their feet. Once, when I was three, her girlfriend Darlene backed into me, and she flipped over, heels over head, breaking her collarbone without so much as ruffling my hair. Momma sent me to my room because she said I was buzzing around like a little gnat. Randy says I ain’t changed yet, so it just stuck. It never really bothered me until the summer after she left.

Lucky for us, Ella had graduated and managed to get a really nice job working at the grocery store in town. She said she liked it okay, except that her boss kept on after
her about going on a date. Aunt Gray loaned us her car until she could get her driver’s license again, since the state told her she had to buy new glasses before she could get it renewed. But I guess Ella didn’t make as much money as we thought she would, because we could only turn the air conditioner on for one hour a day, and that was only when it was absolutely necessary, the days that people were passing out on the sidewalks up in Janston and getting burned by the sidewalk after they fell.

At night, we left the windows open, but it was usually so hot we couldn’t sleep. I still hadn’t gotten used to having my own bedroom, but since Momma was gone, Ella moved all her stuff into her old room and we were all on our own. I’d sit and look out the window and watch the bats swoop through the yard. Those bats had given me nightmares until I realized they were eating the gnats that swarmed my room each night, finding me no matter how I suffocated myself under layers of flannels and quilts. Then I figured that more bats meant more sleep. That’s when I realized just why they called me Nat, and it felt like I guess Einstein must’ve felt when he suddenly understood one of those problems he always was solving. Like when something you’ve been working over in your head for just about ever just clicks into place and you realize that it’s almost simple
common sense. I could see Momma’s face as she called me that name for the first time; for some reason, it was clearer to me than what she looked like on the day she left. I saw everything from her gray hairs, which were few and far between back then, to the little lines that spread out around her eyes like those cheap Chinese fans Mr. Wong’s gives out to the kids if you get the buffet. I could even smell her breath, beer that always smelled a little like overripe apples and cigarette smoke topping it off. I didn’t even realize I was crying until the gnats rushed me. I guess they smelled the salt in my tears. I buried myself under the sheet and rubbed my face against the mattress. If they liked salt so much, they should’ve went for the strawberry pie of Aunt Gray’s that was sitting on the kitchen table, because I wasn’t going to cry anymore.

That next morning, my friend Brady came over, knocking on my window because Randy slept like a dead turtle and Ella’d been gone to work for hours already. She was never home anymore. Sometimes she was so tired when she got in that she’d eat supper alone in her room, I guess so she could go directly to sleep after.

“What?” I opened the window, scratching my head. My hair felt like straw, and I realized I hadn’t washed it in days. It was kind of interesting, and I kept playing with
it, rolling it between my fingers until it turned into a knot.

“Why isn’t your brother out on the porch yet?” Brady leaned into the windowsill like the old men do at the pharmacy when they’re chatting with old Mr. Peters.

“Brady Monroe. Did you wake me up to ask me that? Why do you care what my brother does? Anyhow, everybody knows he don’t come out until noon or so. Then he don’t leave till the sun’s all the way down.”

“Well, you wanna do something?” He wasn’t looking at me, but I could tell by the tilt of his head and the way he kept pinching his own arm that he had something up his sleeve.

“What is it?” I didn’t let on that I knew he was up to something because I wanted to save some time to think. Brady’s family was famous for just being flat-out crazy, and even though he was just a year older than me, he was well on his way to really earning the name Monroe. But, then again, I hadn’t left the yard in weeks.

“Okay, you can’t tell anybody, though.” He paused, looking at me and waiting for me to get excited.

“For God’s sake, Brady, will you just tell me the damn secret. Who am I gonna tell, anyway?”
“Okay, okay. So, Mr. Geffy left one of his old barges in the river out past the island. It’s pretty tall, and some of us are going out there to jump off it. Into the river, you know?” He picked at a scab on his elbow.

“That don’t sound like nothing,” I pouted, feeling let down. “We jump from the old rope swing all the time.”

“This is way bigger than the rope swing, Nat.”

“Don’t call me Nat no more. Call me Rita.”

He laughed without even covering his mouth, leaning even farther into my room. “What, you got all grown-up since you don’t have a momma no more? I remember when you were plenty scared to jump from the top of that old rope swing.”

“I was not.” I stood up on my bed, pushing my sleeves back. I felt the fabric scratch against the gnat bites that covered my arms like goose eggs. “And don’t talk about Momma.”

“You don’t need your momma, stupid. Daddy says ya’ll much better off without her. Anyway, what’s she gonna do, come back and Curtis’ll be your Daddy?” He shook his head, then pulled back from the sill. “Get your clothes on. I’ll be waiting on the porch.”
It was August, that late part of August where the world feels like it must’ve just stopped spinning, like the air was boiling and things would never change. The time between the sun rising and when it fell behind the little hill we called Mount Crawfish could’ve taken up years of our lives. I’d outgrown most of my summer clothes, though, and Ella didn’t have enough money to buy new ones yet, not unless she wanted to take up with Mr. Henry, her boss, that is. None of us wanted that. The man had money, sure, but he was not a nice person. At least, that’s what all the grown-ups said. All I knew is that he looked at me like he was expecting me to steal every time I went down the candy aisle of his store.

“So, who all’s gonna be down there?” I panted, trying to keep up with Brady, who always walked like he thought the devil might be right behind him. I kept my hands together in front of me, even though I know it must’ve looked silly, like I was praying while I walked, but if I didn’t I kept fussing with the hem of my shorts where it felt like the fabric was biting my skin to get back at me for stretching it so thin.

“Just the usual. Jesse and Kenny, Neil and Sarah.”

I felt my cheeks crack and realized how long it’d been since I’d smiled. Probably just as long of a time as it had
been since I’d seen my friends. They all lived closer to town – none of them lived down gravel roads or around dead man’s curve. Most of them had houses, real solid houses made of cypress and painted fresh every few years. Jesse and Sarah had been in Girl Scouts with me. I was pretty sure their mommas didn’t know they were going somewhere with me. Neither of them had been too happy when the news came that all their hard-earned money was being spent on a Vegas wedding instead of new uniforms for the troop.

Up ahead, I could see the island. It was a real island, technically speaking, but it was only separated from the mainland by about ten feet of water, none of which reached over my knees. On the other side, though, was a steep dropoff, where the water went cold enough to give chills and numb toes. It made your heart skip a beat, like when you’re half asleep but suddenly just know you’re falling down fast.

“You ready?” Brady stopped, stripping sneakers and socks so fast at first I wasn’t sure what he was doing. We could hear voices, and Jesse’s screeching laugh echoed off the riverwall. “They’re already here.”

He peeled his ratty shirt off as I slipped out of my shorts. My old swimsuit still fit okay, only because it had been too big last year, and as I looked at Brady’s stomach
and saw all the muscles he’d grown since last time we’d been swimming, I was glad.

I tossed my clothes on top of his and felt him staring at me. “What?” I felt my face redden.

“You’re getting boobs,” he giggled, and I threw my shoe at his chest.

“You’re an asshole.” I turned and stepped into the lukewarm water, feeling the mud slurp between my toes, filling every gap it could reach.

“Walk light,” Brady’s voice sounded funny as it came over my shoulder, cut short by the wall of trees in front of us. “Neil cut his foot wide open last time we came through here.” He reached out and tried to take my elbow, but I shook him off.

“Neil’s a baby.” I squinted down at the water. Even that shallow you couldn’t see to the bottom. It was nothing but tiny little flecks of brown and green scum that scattered every time I lifted my foot, like they were scared I’d step on them. Maybe they were. Maybe that wasn’t scum but little minnows or bugs or something. Maybe every time somebody came through here millions of them died. Then, I felt them, as if they were clawing up my leg hairs, shinnying up and biting me with tiny little teeth, and I
took off, trying to run, but tripped over a big clump of mud and fell face down in the water.

“Holy shit, are you alright?” His voice came muffled through the mud in my ears. The slimy riverwater coated my face like one of those gooey green masks Ella put on Thursday nights in high school, right before she had a big date. She’d put two in a row on the night before she went out with Trey Daniels, the quarterback. I wiped at it, wishing I had a shirtsleeve to really scrub with. “Nat, are you alright?”

“I’m not deaf, Brady Monroe. I’m fine, I just tripped, is all. Must be a can or a bottle under there.” My hand tingled and I peeked into the palm. There was a deep cut there, a puncture wound. I squeezed my fist tight, hoping Brady wouldn’t notice the blood. “Let’s go, I’m ready to get out of here.”

When we finally reached the island, my thighs were cramping as if we’d hiked all the way into town and back. I stretched, trying to get rid of the feeling, but Brady grabbed my elbow and pulled me through the trees. “They’re waiting.”

The barge really wasn’t much to speak of except for its height. It had layers and layers of rust flaking down
into the water, and it sat on an angle, tilted from being run into water not deep enough to keep it afloat.

Jesse, Sarah, Neal and Kenny were sprawled out on the ground in front of it, just looking up.

“There you are!” Sarah shouted, jumping to her feet. “We were wondering what was taking so long.”

“Yeah,” Neal sneered, elbowing Kenny, who always looked like he’d just woken up, “what were you doing, making out in the woods?”

“Yeah,” Brady said. “Hot and heavy.”

“Yuck.” I shuddered and walked over to the girls. “What are we doing?”

“Jumping,” Jesse said, nudging Sarah. “Off the top.”

I felt something in my chest then, something pulling at my ribcage. Everybody was acting so strange, and it was all I could do to keep from looking down at my swimsuit every ten seconds to make sure nothing was hanging out.

“Let’s get up there,” Neal said, and took a running jump, skidding onto the deck of the barge. His shoes left a trail through the thick flakes of rust that reminded me of the way our road looked when the parish came out and put a thin layer of new gravel over it once every two or three years.
The rest of the boys followed, slipping and falling as they hit hard against the metal. Kenny fell as he landed, skinning his knee. “Yeah!” he shouted, showing off his wound as the rest of us slowly hauled ourselves up the side of the boat. “Maybe I’ll get tetanus.”

“That’s not funny.” I wiped myself clean of the rust and stretched, looking around.

“You’re still a party pooper. I guess your mom leaving didn’t lighten you up any,” Neal sneered, flicking his blood at me like he used to do with boogers in second grade.

“Oh, gross!” Sarah and Jesse ducked, scuttling to the back of the barge. “You’re such a jerk, Neal.”

“Well, I told you she wouldn’t be fun.”

The girls looked at me for awhile, and Jesse shook her head. “Don’t be stupid,” she said, and I wasn’t sure if she was talking to Neal or to me.

“Hey, move your asses!” Brady’s voice floated down to us from the captain’s seat in the top cabin.

“Man, how’d you get up there?” Kenny ran around the corner, almost falling over the edge trying to be second to the top. “Stairs!”
“How else did you think he got up there?” I muttered, kicking at the rust, trying to leave a trail like Neal had earlier. Sarah pinched me. “What?”

“Stop being such a whineybaby. You’ll make the boys mad.”

“So what?” I called after her, but she was climbing the stairs two at a time and wouldn’t look back.

“No.” I wrapped my arms around my chest and walked over to the window and waved one hand through the opening to make sure there wasn’t any glass there. “I won’t.”

“Well, we can play without her.” Neal spun the bottle. “Okay, Jesse, you have to kiss me.” He puckered his lips like he’d just bit into a lemon that wasn’t even ripe yet.

“No, not yet, Neal. Calm down.” She frowned, and all of sudden she looked so much like her mother that the size of her body scared me. I closed my eyes for a minute, and when I opened them again, she was back. “Na – I mean, Rita, it’s not a big deal. My sister used to do it all the time when she had parties at our house.”

“Yeah,” Brady came up behind me, but I moved away from him. I watched his hands and fingers, ready to swat at them if he tried to put them near me. “You just put your lips on somebody else’s. It’s simple.”

“I thought we were going swimming.”
“Later.” Jesse’s voice was thin, and it vibrated against my skin like the school principal’s did whenever he yelled at you for being bad. “I swear, girl, you ought to be glad you got people willing to hang out with you after what your momma did, much less kiss you.”

“My momma’s got nothing to do with this, Jesse Baxter, and maybe your momma would like to know how easy it is to convince you to kiss a bunch of boys.” I stared at her hard, waiting for her to say something back. Everyone knew how strict her mother was. I felt taller all of a sudden, and all I could think about was how I didn’t even want to cry. “I bet she’d love to hear all about it.”

“You wouldn’t.” She left her eyes on the floor covered in peeling pear green paint.

“No. I wouldn’t, and I’m not. I’m going swimming.” I ran out of the room.

“Son of a bitch,” Kenny muttered.

“Jesus, Nat, wait!” Brady’s footsteps sounded like they were right behind me, and I ran faster, nearly jumping up the stairs to the roof.

“Don’t call me that anymore!” I turned to face him and saw that they were all there, crowded together at the top of the stairs.
“Look, calm down.” They slowly filed up, Brady leading the pack. “Don’t jump yet, nobody’s even checked how deep the water is out there.”

“It’s deep enough.” I didn’t look down, but across, at how far away the other side seemed from this height.

“You don’t know that!” Now Sarah was concerned, her eyes taking up most of her face like they did back when she peed her pants in third grade. “Don’t you remember the story about that girl who dove into the ocean where it was too shallow? She got paralyzed!”

I turned back to the river and just stood, quiet, for a little while. When the breeze picked up again, I yelled, “See you downstairs!” and ran off the edge of the roof.

It’s funny how things change in your mind when something big happens. Like the day Momma left. I don’t remember what she had on, or what her last words were when she walked out the door, but I do remember the color of her suitcases and how the handles squeaked when she carried them. One was navy blue and the other one a dark orange color. I think I noticed them so much just because I’d never seen them before. I didn’t even know we owned luggage.

When I jumped off the boat, everything went silent at first. I couldn’t see anything or feel anything, I just
felt high, like I was caught in a spiderweb that I never even saw. Then, I started falling, and the wind screamed into my ears and my hair snapped at my eyes. My heart tried to escape from my chest by simply beating its way out; when that didn’t work, it tried squeezing through my throat.

But, once my eyes cleared up, I saw the water jumping toward me and I noticed how pretty it looked from up where I was. The water looked clean and almost greenish, like the ocean did on TV commercials. I’d never gone swimming in that particular part of the river, and I had time to wonder if the water would be warm, or if it might be cooler than our regular swimming hole.

I don’t remember hitting the water, but I do remember coming up for air. My right leg stung horribly, but it sort of felt numb-like, too. I tried to swim back to the boat, but I couldn’t move. The word *undertow* floated through my mind like litter in the wind, but I knew this water was way too calm for something like that to happen. And, anyway, it wasn’t deep enough. Then, I thought, *gator!* and I saw one, just for a second, latched onto my leg, all green-brown scales, chalkboard black eyes and dirty long teeth. Brady says I screamed like I was trying out for a Hollywood picture. “*Gator, help me! Help!*” But I don’t recall the sound of my own voice at all.
I think what I remember best was looking up at the top of the barge, where only the girls stood, staring down at me, their mouths like giant cheerios and their hands halfway to their faces. None of them said anything, and I wanted something to throw at them. I looked around, feeling through the water for a stick or a patch of lilies or anything, and found a thin, rusty pole right next to me. It had a spirally texture that ran down it, but when I tried to pick it up, my leg exploded. Everything from the thigh down felt like it had been shredded into piles of raw meat.

I looked down at my leg, finally, and saw the problem. That metal pole had somehow gotten inside of my leg, or, actually, through it would’ve been a better word. I turned my head, trying to take in the neat little hole, like Uncle Jake’s old bullet scar he used to show us when Aunt Linda kicked him out every other Friday night or so. I remember reaching through the water to touch my leg, my hand moving so slowly under the water, and so deep below that it looked like it must belong to somebody else. My skin still seemed to belong to me, though, and when I touched my leg, just to make sure it was still attached, everything turned off.

When I opened my eyes again, everything was so white. I couldn’t focus on anything, but I could smell alcohol,
the rubbing kind that feels so cool against your skin, and I felt a small pinch on my arm.

“That’s it,” a woman’s voice said, and I tried to work my jaws into a word or two, but they just wouldn’t cooperate.

“It’s ok. You’ll feel better tomorrow,” the voice promised. “Your mother’s coming to see you tomorrow.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t have a mother anymore. I wanted to tell her that my favorite Girl Scout cookies were the ugly ones, with coconut and caramel and chocolate all together. I wanted to tell her that $250 of the money Momma took, the most I’d ever seen at once, had been raised by me. But Ella’s voice broke into my head, and at first I thought she was going to let me use her voice to say those things, but she went off in her own direction, as usual.

“I told you not to tell Nat about her coming to visit. That’s not going to help anything. Isn’t she going to wake up soon? It’s been a long time!”

I felt the nurse walking away, and wanted to grab at her, ask her to stay next to me, pull up a chair and just talk in that pleasant voice.

“The doctor says that, given the nature of the trauma, it’s not so unusual for patients to stay under for up to a
month. Also, from what you’ve told me about the things that have been going on in your family, that might play a little part in this, too.”

“Don’t worry. She won’t get in this room.” The voice was deep and strong. I couldn’t place it. Randy? I must really be in trouble if Randy’d peeled himself off the porch to see me. But it wasn’t quite right.

“Oh, Henry, can you really stop her from coming in here?”

Henry? I recognized the voice then, from years of hearing it sneak up over my shoulder as I walked down aisles of cold, off-white linoleum.

“She won’t come in here. We’ll spend the night, if we have to.”

“She’s only coming because she heard we’re going to sue Mr. Geffy.”

My eyes came unstuck, and I peeked out through my tangled lashes. I was in a hospital, alright, but it looked as if I was in the middle of some awful experiment. Bags and machines were stacked on top of me, wires criss-crossed each other on their way into my body, and my leg was wrapped up like a mummy from ankle to thigh.
Trying not to move, I looked over at Ella, pale and trembly, standing next to Mr. Henry. He had his arm around her, and that alone made me feel dizzy again.

We were going to sue Mr. Geffy? Why? For what? It wasn’t his fault I got hurt. Besides, he just owned a shipyard, he didn’t really have that much money.

“Well, either that or Curtis got tired of an older woman and ran off on her.” Mr. Henry’s voice sounded happy, like he thought he was delivering good news to Ella.

“Poor Nat.” Ella sighed, and I felt her hand on my head. “I wonder when she’s going to wake up. She’s been through enough as it is. What am I going to tell her if Mom gets in here?”

Mr. Henry started to answer her, but I closed my eyes tighter and his voice faded as if he and Ella were running down a long hall that sloped down and away. I felt myself sliding, too, quickly, as if I was lying down on a clay hill after a rainstorm, and I waited for the slushy red mud to cover me at the end of the ride.
Vita

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