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## Ball and Chain

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BALL AND CHAIN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
College of Arts and Sciences  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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In

The Department of English

by  
Eloise Holland  
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## Abstract

*Ball and Chain* is a coming-of-age story that explores the pain and joy of an unusual first love. Patsy is a twenty-six-year-old virgin. As her body begins to deteriorate as the result of an unknown ailment, she finds herself intrigued by the beautiful and vibrant Anita. Initially unwilling to admit her attraction, Patsy distracts herself with work, her best friend's quest to find the perfect tattoo artist, and the politics of her wealthy Houston family. When Patsy grows increasingly ill, she decides that she must find a way to get Anita's attention before it's too late.

## House of Pain

At our first stop, The Skin Lab, a guy leaned against the counter and looked us both up and down. He was maybe an inch taller than Charlotte. His shorts fell below his knees to reveal thick, tattooed calves. A tuft of dark curly hair peeked out from the neck of his T-shirt.

“Can I help you sweet ladies?” He smiled and stroked the steel rings in his lower lip.

“I *am not* a sweet lady,” Charlotte said. She adjusted her glasses. “Come on, Patsy, let’s go.” She motioned for me to follow as she headed back out the door.

“Charlotte! You didn’t even ask any questions.”

“I saw enough,” she said.

“Just because he called you a sweet lady?”

“Calling me a sweet lady annoyed me, but did you notice his fingers? Filthy.”

Charlotte was getting her first tattoo the way she did everything, as a conscientious consumer. She’d picked me up after work to tag along. We were in Houston, and even though we’d just had Thanksgiving, the air was summery warm and damp like puppy breath. Everywhere I went people were walking around in tank tops to do their Christmas shopping.

Charlotte and I didn’t spend much time at the next few parlors, generic places with fat binders full of art that was guarded by hip, inked receptionists who stared at us knowingly. At Southern Tattoo Emporium, I asked to use the restroom. The bored

employee in vinyl pants pointed to the back where I found a bright, spacious bathroom and a bowl of potpourri on the windowsill.

I ran my hands under warm water. The week before, I'd strained a tendon in my ankle, but now my fingers were aching too. Tell-tale signs that I was inheriting Daddy's arthritis. I watched myself in the mirror as I massaged my fingers. The fluorescent light emphasized the translucence of my pale skin. My stepmother, Dorothy, would send me gift certificates for the tanning salon soon, as she had every year since I was fifteen. I stuck my tongue out as I turned to leave, and my reflection sneered back with bared teeth and a coffee-stained tongue.

"You ready?" Charlotte asked when I came out. She was by herself.

"Sure," I said, wondering how Charlotte had alienated the vinyl-pants girl. Something about the way she'd disappeared without a trace made me sure that that was what had happened. I told Charlotte about the immaculate bathroom, but her mind was already made up, and we hurried on.

We had a nice chat with the owner of Montrose Mama's House of Pain. Paul was a sinewy, middle-aged guy with dragons running up and down his arms and a pink, leathery neck. Charlotte looked around, discussed fees, and took his card. I thought it had gone pretty well, that this time we'd found the one. He was polite, he seemed smart, and he had clean hands. But when we were back in her Camry, Charlotte picked up her clipboard and crossed The House of Pain from her list.

“What was wrong with that place?” I asked. Charlotte cranked the engine and turned on the air-conditioner before answering. Her short black hair was pulled into a ponytail. She tucked stray hairs behind her ears and wiped away the sweat gathering at the bridge of her nose under her glasses. She sighed.

“If you wouldn’t want to eat your lunch on their floor,” she said, “then you probably don’t want to bleed there.”

“It looked okay to me.” I flipped the blowing vent toward Charlotte. Everyone complained about the heat, but I was still freezing and aching. “Then again, I don’t want to eat my lunch on anybody’s floor.”

“I wasn’t happy with his personal hygiene. He smelled funny.”

“He did not!”

“I was closer to him,” she said. She ran her index finger down the list to check the next location. “I know it seems like a bit much, but I’ll thank myself when I don’t get hepatitis.”

“You’re not going to get hepatitis.”

“Well, I’m also including things like diversity of employment, and you *heard* him say that they don’t recycle. I really think I’d like to have it done by a woman, if I can find one.”

“Whatever tickles your goose.” I shrugged, borrowing an expression from my grandmother. Charlotte didn’t need affirmation every five minutes like some people. She’d been confident since I met her in high school. Now that we were both back in

town, we were hanging out a lot. She taught high school English, hated corporate America, worked with her church's youth group, and never tried to set me up on dates. Sometimes, though, she had weird ideas about men, which might have explained her desire for a female tattoo artist. I'd always thought it was a holdover from her Korean mother, who often told us that men, especially white ones, were only out for one thing. I guess being married to one, Mrs. McKay would know. When Charlotte was on the cheerleading team in high school, her mother almost had a heart attack the first time she saw Grayson Moore lift Charlotte up with both hands placed firmly under her skirt.

Then again, maybe I was the one with weird ideas. Unlike me, Charlotte had a serious, committed relationship. She and Richard had been engaged for a year and were getting married in August. Never having had any kind of boyfriend at all, I was one to talk. "There's got to be a woman tattoo artist somewhere," I said finally.

"That's the spirit!" Charlotte squeezed my shoulder and turned on the stereo. She sang along to her favorite Janis Joplin, "Ball and Chain." Pressure gathered behind my eyes. For a tiny girl she had a very loud voice. I rested my head on the window.

"What's wrong now?" she asked.

"I don't feel so great."

"You should have had a flu shot." *Tsk, tsk*, her wagging head lectured.

"It's not the flu."

"Well, you'll know soon enough if it is," she said. "Half the school is out with it now. I'm so thankful I got mine."

“I know. You’re *so* smart,” I said just as I had the sensation that an ice-cold nail was being wedged between my skull and my brain. I rubbed my head and shivered.

“I’ll forgive you your sarcasm, but only because you’re getting sick.”

“I’m not getting sick,” I said.

Charlotte stopped at a red light. On the median, a man sat on a fold-out camping chair holding a sign and a bucket. Charlotte waved and he waved back. He started to stand so she shook her head and held up her hands, palms to the sky. He nodded and settled back in his chair.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Sometimes I give him my change in the morning.” She yawned and put her hand to her mouth. “Hey, have you still not had your period?”

“No.” I closed my eyes. It had been several months. A couple of weeks ago I’d told Charlotte. She’d wanted me to go to the doctor, but I thought I’d wait a little longer. Sometimes these things worked themselves out.

“That’s it. You’ve got to make an appointment. You could have cancer or some STD. Your uterus could turn to jelly.” Charlotte’s voice had gone high and wiry. She was reverting to mother-hen mode, a role she played with her students when she forgot that she was supposed to be the cool teacher who let them say “shit” and eat lunch in her class. “Are you sure you’re not pregnant?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

“It could all be related. Weird stuff happens when you’re pregnant.” She bit her lip. Her voice was softer now. “It’s better if you find out early. That way it’s easier to take care of things, you know?”

“Charlotte! I’m not a kid. I’d know if I might be pregnant.”

“Fine, but you still need to see a doctor.”

“I will.”

“So do it,” she said.

Maybe I should have just laid down the facts to ease her mind, but it was nobody’s business but my own. Plus, her condescension irritated me. She often did things like remind me to vote or leave my faucets dripping before a freeze. In any case, it turns out she’d given me some pretty sound advice. It was too bad I didn’t follow it sooner.

By eight o’clock that evening, we’d seen a total of six places, and Charlotte wasn’t happy with any of them. Charlotte stared at the list in disappointment.

“So what’s the deal?” I asked. “Are you going to do this thing or not?”

“This was a scouting mission, Patsy. I wouldn’t think of actually getting it done tonight. Besides, I want my man’s opinion. Richard’s going to have to look at this for the rest of his life just as much as I am.”

“Then take me home. I’m done.” I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was collapse into my bed and fall asleep holding *my man*, Mr. Charm, the stuffed koala bear

I'd had since elementary school. His matted fur was washed-out gray, and patches on his cheeks and belly were worn through to his orange foam stuffing. He was as soft and loyal as a dog or a boyfriend, but better because I didn't have to feed him or clean his hair off my sweaters.

## Prospects

The next day, I didn't feel much better. I worked for an insurance company in one of those squat four story buildings uptown with lots of brown marble and an atrium in the lobby. As I walked through in the morning, it felt like the broad leafy plants were sucking away oxygen instead of producing it.

"Patsy. Come here a sec." Dan, another claims adjuster who worked on the other side of my divider, waved me over when I walked in. I leaned against his desk and ran my hands over the column of rainbow-colored pens he used to code his client files.

"She borrowed my stapler yesterday afternoon." He rubbed his goatee as he talked, dislodging crumbs of muffin that had apparently been his breakfast. "I think that's a good sign, don't you?"

"Depends," I said. I was about to ask what else she'd said when our office manager walked through with a new woman. Red lipstick bloomed against her olive skin and short, dark hair. Her orange dress looked more vintage 60s than modern day office wear. Glass bracelets jangled up and down her arm. As she passed by, she nodded good morning to us, the peons slaving in our cloud gray cubicles. Our eyes met just before she disappeared around the corner. I could still hear the office manager chattering on about the plan to put together a company softball team.

"Who was that?" I pulled together the lapels of my black jacket and hugged myself.

“I don’t know.” Dan frowned. He prided himself on knowing all the office gossip, and clearly he’d been caught off guard. “Someone new, I guess. She’s pretty.”

“Was she?” I asked. I picked up an orange pen and opened the cap. I drew a small circle on the palm of my hand.

“She was indeed.”

“I couldn’t tell,” I said, coloring in the circle. “I was blinded by the dress.”

Dan pulled on his beard. “You should find out who she is.”

“Looking for Trish’s replacement?” Trish was the hopeless crush and borrower of office supplies who Dan spent hours obsessing over.

“You never know,” he said. He swiped the pen from my hand. “You ruin them that way.”

“*Excuse me.*” I straightened up to go to my desk, but before I left I looked at Dan. “I’m surprised you didn’t know someone new was coming on.” I said this as a challenge, knowing that Dan would take it up eagerly and without suspicion. Days were long at Pierson so he came up with investigative projects to keep the two of us busy. Last month, I’d spent a week casually trying to get Trish to show me a picture of her boyfriend. The idea was to get a photocopy for Dan, but Trish almost caught me sneaking the picture out of her desk drawer. I aborted immediately for fear of losing my job. Dan, on the other hand, was hardcore. If he wanted, he’d know the orange woman’s social security number by the end of the day, and for some reason, I was curious to see what he would find out. Something about her thirty-second walk through had me caught.

“How about you see what you find and I’ll see what I can dig up? Whoever gets the least data buys lunch.” He sent me away so he could start his inquiry. As for me, I had no intention of doing any more snooping. I knew Dan would do the work for me.

At noon, we walked to the salad buffet place in the nearby strip center. Dark thunderheads piled in the west. Gorged with water and electricity, they moved slowly, while in the other direction, the sun still glared down like a hot coal in the sky. I took a deep breath and wiggled my fingers and toes, thankful for the tingle of warming skin and bones. Pierson kept the offices chilly year round.

“I got to get out of here,” he said, wiping sweat off his brow. “I can’t stand this place.” He was talking about the south in general and Houston more specifically. He romanticized about the mountains in Denver where he lived as a kid and New York where he wanted to live as soon as it was economically feasible. These were cities he called “civilized places.” He would say he couldn’t stand it another minute, but then he always stayed. I think he just liked to complain.

“At least the rain will cool things down a little,” I said. Personally, I’d liked the warm winters and flat roads and the way my dental hygienist always told stories about my grandmother because the whole family had been going to the same doctors since before I was born. When Daddy helped me get the interview at Pierson, I hadn’t thought twice about coming back home to live.

At lunch, Dan was depressed because Trish had been in meetings all morning. “I haven’t seen her once all day.” He stabbed at his egg salad with a plastic fork until one

of the prongs broke. I put my hand over his and tried to think of something to cheer him up.

“Did you find out anything about that woman we saw?”

“Actually, yes.” He dropped the plastic pieces on his tray. “Her name is Anita, she’s the consultant for some software project. She does computers. I’m still working on the details.”

“What do you think an *Anita* is like?” I asked to further distraction from his misery and broken fork.

“Someone who grabs attention. Passionate.” He tapped his chin with his finger, pondering. “I think: *West Side Story*.”

“But not aggressive, right?”

“Maybe a little aggressive.” The pitch of his voice fell as he answered.

“Maybe a little,” I said. “Probably not the whips-and-chains type, though.”

“No. More the fuzzy handcuffs type.”

“I bet she’d bring you homemade chicken soup in bed when you’re sick.”

“Or vegetable noodle.” Dan was a vegetarian. “But I’m not sure she’d go for me. I think she might be more likely to go for Katy, know what I mean?” Katy was the receptionist and the office lesbian. When I first started working there a year ago I noticed her giving me looks. Maybe I’d been giving her looks, too.

“Oh?” I asked casually. “Did you hear something?”

“No. Just a feeling. It would be my luck to have the new girl be a dyke.” He tossed a cherry tomato in his mouth.

“Well,” I said, forcing a laugh, “everyone Pierson hires can’t be a romantic prospect for you.”

“I guess,” he said. “But you’d think he’d be more careful about who he hires. Not that I care. It just seems weird, considering his views.”

“He’s not that bad.” Through the big picture windows I could see outside where it was beginning to sprinkle. The sidewalk soaked up the drops and turned a mottled gray. A woman with curly red hair put a newspaper over her head and hurried to her car. Under her skirt, her hips moved back and forth, back and forth.

“I forgot he’s like your surrogate uncle.”

“It’s not that.” I returned my gaze to Dan. “Daddy and Pierson both lean to the right politically, but it’s more on the economic issues than the social ones.” Dorothy, on the other hand, was a different story. She probably had Pat Robertson’s number on speed dial. Dorothy’s life mission wouldn’t be accomplished until my younger half-sister Brooke was wearing a Vera Wang wedding gown and marrying a Christian man in church. Anyone who knew Brooke, however, knew Dorothy had a long way to go on all counts.

“As though the two aren’t related,” Dan scoffed.

“That’s not what I mean. I just don’t think he’s particularly homophobic.”

“Sure,” Dan said. “He’s probably out there right now campaigning for gay marriage.”

“I just don’t think he thinks about it at that level. Even if he knows Katy is gay, I don’t think he cares.” I spoke quickly, with irritation. For some reason I was increasingly annoyed by his allegations. There had been times when I may have said almost the same thing about Pierson and my father, but coming from Dan, it made me defensive. “Besides,” I added, “you’re no better.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your dyke comment a few minutes ago.”

“Dyke is a perfectly acceptable term. My cousin’s one so I know. Dyke, queer, gay. It’s all the same these days.”

“It was the way you said it, I think.”

“Whatever.” Now Dan made a show of sighing patiently. “In any case, I hope Anita isn’t a *lesbian*. What a waste. But like I said, I’m still working on the details. And I think you owe me lunch.”

“Sure,” I said. My mind was still on Anita. Dan had been right. She was the type to catch your attention. But it may just have been the shimmer of her bracelets under the bright office lights. Who knew what she looked like in the sun. I considered her for a moment more before turning my attention to the grilled chicken falling out of my sandwich and Dan, who was telling me to meet him and some others for drinks that night. He winked as he told me that someone named James was also coming.

“Who’s James?” I asked.

“You know,” he said. “You’ll recognize him.”

“I don’t want to be set up.”

“It’s just drinks.”

“Don’t tell him I want to meet him!” I picked up my butter knife and pointed it at Dan’s nose. “I’m serious.”

“I won’t.” Dan winked again. Maybe some new tic triggered by the stress of his romantic failure? I didn’t trust him, so back at my computer I e-mailed Charlotte for support. I begged her to meet me at the sports bar on Richmond, where Dan and some of the others liked to go for cheap beer and fried appetizers.

“I kiss enough ass at my own job, thank you very much,” she wrote back a little while later. “But call if anything interesting happens.” I pushed away my keyboard and stretched. Now I had a headache, the persistent throb of my swelling ankles and fingers, and a night out with God-knows-who because people were always introducing me to romantically inept men, in hopes that two dating outcasts could somehow make it work together. This just made me think, as it always did, about how if I ever did hit it off with someone, I would have to explain my unique situation. I would have to tell them about my virginity.

Virgin. I hated the word. It sounded dirty. I hated the magazines and the psycho-babble talk shows that made it sound like you had to be emotionally deformed to make it to twenty-six without having sex. I could have done it with my high school boyfriend,

Mathew Rose, a pale-skinned boy who played football badly and hated his father. He was cute. I liked him.

“Come here,” he’d say, his voice wavering as he guided me to his twin bed where sheets and blankets piled in lumps that positioned me in awkward, uncomfortable angles. My body grew warm with excitement and possibility. But after a while, the kissing became monotonous. As he felt around under my clothes, I listened for noises, afraid his parents would come home and find me rolling around in dirty laundry with Mathew while his shih-tzu, Becky, barked outside the door. The one time I came back from a date with my face pink and raw from his stubble, Dorothy sent me to my room, and I missed eating dinner with the rest of the family. Later that night, she sat me down and gave me a talk. A real lady walked into a room without everyone knowing where her mouth had been.

“You decide what you do, Patsy,” Dorothy said. “He’ll like you better for it. No boy wants a girl who looks like this.” She cupped her hand under my chin and pushed my face from side to side. Her lips pursed critically, and I could just make out the wispy trails of lipstick that had bled into the wrinkles around her mouth.

“Dorothy,” I began. My eyes brimmed with tears of anger and embarrassment. I tried to move my head away.

“Not another word.” Her grip on my face tightened, and her fingernails dug into my skin. “Have you ever thought about where *his* mouth has been? And God knows about his other parts. If I find out you’ve been doing anything else, we’ll sit down with your father, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded and looked at the ground. The idea of having my father witness to this horrified me. Afraid of another confrontation with Dorothy or worse, Daddy, I found ways to keep from going to Mathew’s room. After a few weeks, he dropped me for a public school girl he met at a party at Randy McDonald’s house. Later Charlotte heard from one of her cheerleader friends that they’d had sex that very night in the McDonald’s hot tub.

It seemed that Dorothy had been at least partially right, and I had the idea then that I might wait to make love until I was *in* love. In college, I went to sorority date parties and mixers. My first year, I tried to get interested in sweaty-faced frat boys who petted my hair and pleaded with me to spend the night. I played along at first, usually at the insistence of sisters bent on finding me a boyfriend. On the rare occasions that I actually went out with one of the boys, he never called me back after the first couple of dates.

Secretly, I was grateful. I preferred to stay home with Beatrice Press, who lived in the house and smelled like honeysuckle. We watched television and pretended to study. We never braided each other’s hair or had pillow fights in our nighties, but sometimes our fingers touched when we both reached for a piece of pizza, in brief and thrilling moments of contact.

## Double Dave's Lucky Shot

Inside, big-screen TVs played ESPN and ESPN2 while the waitresses jogged around the room wearing red-and-white-striped jerseys that fit snugly over their breasts. Whistles dangled around necks and swung out in small arcs when the women bent forward to place drinks on the tables or pick up empty glasses. When someone ordered the shot special, the delivering waitress tooted her whistle, and the others followed until the place vibrated with high-pitched shrieks and hooting patrons. By the time I found Dan's shock of brown curls, I'd already witnessed this ritual twice.

"I love Widespread Panic, *too!*" James was saying. I recognized him immediately as the guy from payroll. He was tall with dark brown hair and nice clothes. At first glance, he looked normal, attractive even, but so far I knew him as the man who pointed his finger at me each morning and made clicking noises with his tongue.

"They kick ass," Terrence agreed as he pulled up a chair for me. For a while, he'd been obsessed with describing his wife's recent cesarean, but lately he seemed to have cooled to the topic. Now he focused more on the twins' feeding schedules and diaper rash. Dark crescents drooped under his eyes so that he resembled a snuffling panda. "Hey, Patsy," he said and kissed me on the cheek. Dan pushed a beer in front of me, and it was only then that I saw Anita sitting in the corner beside him.

"I'm Anita," she said. "We watched you walk in. Dan and I are thinking about ordering you a Double Dave's...what is it?"

“Lucky Shot,” Terrence, James, and Dan said together.

“Because you seemed to enjoy it so much.” She smiled then, and extended her hand, which I took.

“Patsy,” I said. “Nice to meet you.” Her skin was warm and soft, like the velvet underside of a leaf. Up close, she looked older than I’d thought at first. The start of what would be laugh lines barely creased the skin around her eyes. Her lips, which had appeared almost dewy this morning, now looked normal, just colored and slick with gloss. I felt tongue-tied as a blush crept up my neck.

“You remember James, right, Patsy?” Dan interrupted as I was about to speak to Anita again. He winked and gave James a sideways glance, which I tried to ignore.

“Hi, James,” I said politely.

Once you agreed to be set up, people held on to the idea like a kid with a package of firecrackers. Every now and then, they’d light one and throw it out to explode in your face and scare the shit out of you. Mostly to appease Dorothy, I occasionally let people set me up with “the perfect guy.” I had gone out to dinner with Daddy, Dorothy, the Hendersons, and their son Ross, the efficiency expert. I remembered him from third grade because he’d given me a bloody nose during a recess game of dodge ball. On purpose, I recalled at dinner, as his teeth gleamed across the table from me. I’d even gone out with Dan’s cousin, who taught music theory at the University of Houston. He was very pleasant and had beautiful hands with perfect half-moon nails, although he

tended to prattle a bit in conversation. I was not terribly disappointed when two weeks into it he got a tenure-track job in Sacramento and decided to move.

James was probably an okay guy, better than a lot of people Dan could have shoved in my face. I decided to give him a chance, but when I opened my mouth to speak, he held up a finger. “If you don’t mind,” he said, “hold on just a minute. We have something we need to settle.” It seems he and Terrence had been having a heated discussion about something called lyrical persona, which they promptly launched back into. Whatever. I drank the beer I’d been given and asked Anita where she was from.

“Is it hot enough for you?” she asked, not looking up. She examined her hands, and picked at her cuticles with her fingernails.

“What?” I said.

“You know. *Where’d you go to school? Where you from?* I hate small talk.”

“Anita is from Houston originally,” Dan said. “But back only recently.”

“Thanks a lot, Dan.” She gave him a slight shove. I’d never once shoved Dan, and I’d known him for years.

“I didn’t mean to be so boring,” I said, rolling my eyes at Dan. Who did she think she was? “I apologize profusely.”

“Oh, I didn’t say you were boring. In fact, I was excited when Dan told me you were coming.”

“Why? What did he tell you?” I glared at Dan, but his head was cocked toward the discussion between Terrence and James.

“No, no.” Dan broke in. “You just can’t say the same for a band like Phish. *Don’t you see the difference?*” He slapped his hand on the table, and Anita turned back to me, shaking her head.

“He didn’t say a thing. Let’s just say I noticed you.” She sipped her drink, something brown with ice, and watched me for a moment. “But how come I’ve been at Pierson almost a week, and you haven’t even said hello. *Dan* said hello.” She held her drink up to Dan who did the same before turning back to the conversation.

“I hadn’t seen you yet,” I said.

“Didn’t you?” Anita raised an eyebrow.

“Today I did.”

“I know,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. We looked at each other without speaking for a moment. Her eyes were dark like her hair but a deeper brown that was almost black. There was a small mark on her cheek, right below her lower lashes. I thought it was a mole until she rested her chin in her hands and smiled at me. When she moved her hand, the mark had been replaced by a faint, ashy smear of mascara. She straightened up and began to talk about the weather, how strangely hot it was, an effect, apparently, of El Niño. As she spoke, her arms stretched out in front of her, and her fingers swooshed through the air, mimicking the Gulf Stream. She made herself bigger than she was. She took up as much space as Dan although she was half his size.

“Don’t you think?” she said before she drained her glass. She swallowed, looking at me expectantly.

“I thought you didn’t like small talk.” What was weather if not the ultimate topic of small talk? But mostly I said it because my mind had wandered. I was thinking about the smear on her cheek and didn’t know what she was asking me to agree to.

“Well how else are you supposed to get to know people? Want another drink?”

I shook my head. She took orders from the rest of the table. I stared into my beer as the men watched her in awe, muttering their appreciation.

“Nice dress,” James said.

“She is *hot*,” Terrence added.

“And pretty.” Dan got a look from the other two for that one. He ignored them.

“And smart.”

“Spare me,” I said, as though I were disgusted by their display or at least offended that they’d do it in front of me. Really I was trying to distract them from seeing how hard it was for me not to watch her myself. I could imagine how she appeared, with her orange dress swaying among the grays and blacks. Her sure, easy movements as she gently pushed her way to the center of the bartender’s attention. Because certainly, she would be the center of attention.

“Come on, now,” Terrence boomed, grinning at me. “You ladies seem to be getting along just fine.”

“She seems nice enough,” I said. Anita was already nestled into the litter of customers squirming at the bar like kittens waiting to suckle. “Of course, this is the first time I’ve met her so I can’t really say.”

“She’s a great girl from what I can tell,” Terrence said. “Right, James? Dan? Look at us here with these two beautiful women. Aren’t we the luckiest guys in the bar?”

“Sure we are.” James cocked his finger at me. What did he mean by that? What did he ever mean by that? For almost two years he’d been pointing his finger at me, and I still had no clue what he meant to communicate.

Terrence cleared his throat and continued. “You know, Patsy, you and James have a lot in common.” I looked at Dan, who had become very interested in reading the plastic triangle that displayed photographs of party tray platters, chicken wings with thick red coating and meatballs the size of small rodents.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“For example, you both went to UT,” Terrence said. He looked hopefully back and forth between me and James while James shyly gulped his beer, his one method of seduction having been used too recently to repeat.

“Oh. Neat,” I said. I flicked the back of the display Dan was holding. “Hey, Dan, thinking about kicking the veggie habit? I hear this place has *kick-ass* chicken nachos.”

“Just looking.” He scowled and put it back in the center of the table.

“And you’re an athlete, aren’t you?” Terrence asked. “James coaches a little-league soccer team.”

“Sounds...fun,” I said.

“What sounds fun?” Anita had returned, clutching three more beers. She placed one in front of each of the men.

“James coaches a soccer team. Tell James what kind of sports you do, Patsy. I can’t remember off the top of my head.” Terrence moved in closer as though I were going to tell him a story. I glanced at Anita, but she was looking over her shoulder at the bar.

“What sports?” James asked.

“I did track in high school.”

“Oh yeah? Me too.” Anita waved to someone and then sat down. “Where did you go to high school? Maybe we competed against each other.”

“Webster.”

“Oh.” Her mouth curled into a knowing smile. “Private school.”

“What’s wrong with private school?” I asked.

“I went to St. Mark’s,” James said.

“Nothing’s wrong with private school.” Anita leaned across the table and put her hand on my arm. I caught my breath. “I just should have guessed that’s all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her hand slipped away. I tugged at my jacket, crossing my arms in front of my chest. I dug in my fingernails, trying to get a hold of the

skin under the fabric to pinch myself. It didn't matter what some strange woman thought of me. She wasn't going to get to me. James made a small hissing sound, like a cat, under his breath, which sent Terrence into another giggling fit.

"It's just high school, ladies. Let it go," Dan said. "Next thing you know we'll be comparing SAT scores."

"1240," James spat out. We all stared. "Just kidding. Sort of." He mumbled something and shoved a fried mozzarella stick in his mouth.

Behind me, the whistling started again. "God, that's so annoying," I said. It seemed that the whole point of this place was to make everyone as uncomfortable as possible. Weren't we doing a fine enough job on our own? As I twisted in my seat to frown upon the entire bar for being obnoxious and drunk and stupid, a pony-tailed waitress presented me with a test tube and another one for Anita. All around us women blew with feigned gusto, while actual enthusiasts clapped and chuckled. Anita knocked back her shot. The waitress held the other one out insistently, and I finally took it out of her hand. She waited, metal perched on lips, beckoning to the crowd with her tray, so that they would encourage me.

"You don't have to drink it," Anita said. "I just thought it would be fun." The tube was filled almost to the rim with glowing pink liquid.

"I don't think so," I said. I held it up as an offering. James, flushed by the sudden attention, drank it in one quick gulp to the sounds of relieved whistling and a smattering of applause.

Dan shook his head and swallowed the last of his drink. He seemed ready to give up on his matchmaking effort. He threw a few bills on the table. “Yeah, well, I should probably get going. Anita, you need a lift?”

“I think I can catch a ride, right?” She looked at me. I nodded. Terrence also stood up to leave. He had a wife to get home to and babies to feed. I said goodbye, though I probably should have left myself. Whatever Dan’s intention for the evening had been, it seemed as though something had gone terribly wrong. Even so, I couldn’t tear myself away quite yet. I stayed nursing my beer with the feeling that something was going to happen.

After they left, the waitress came by again, but no one wanted anything else to drink except James, who crunched the ice in his Jack and Coke and told a very long story about how one of the five-year-old girls on his soccer team (named Ochre?) scored a point for the other team and it was so cute. I stopped listening, but Anita enjoyed the story. She cooed and ahhed in the right places. Her eyes widened right before she laughed so she looked skeptical for a moment. Her full attention had switched to James, and for a moment I felt almost jealous. Ridiculous, I thought. My beer had long been warm, but I drank the rest anyway. The only thing that would happen as a result of this get together was that James would have a headache in the morning.

“I should get home,” I said, standing up. My knees and ankles had stiffened from sitting so long. I shifted my weight.

“You’re leaving? Already?” James gave me a sad-eyed look. “Who’s going to drink the rest of these beers?” He gestured towards the glasses Anita bought for Terrence and James.

“You and Anita,” I said. “Have fun.”

Anita stood up too. “Actually, I think I’ll go with you. That ok?”

I nodded as she gathered her sweater and purse. James appealed to us to stay for another drink, but we both assured him that we were ready to go. I walked slowly, waiting for my joints to warm up. Anita fell in beside me on our way to the parking lot. Darkness and rain had eased the heat. A breeze touched my cheek the right way and goose bumps tickled my skin. I shivered next to Anita and tucked my fingers under my arms.

I was nervous on the ride home. I drove too fast and then too slow, turned on the heat and then started to sweat and had to open a window. A slick of rain reflected the lighted store signs on Westheimer, while up and down the street, the red and green streetlights glowed, shiny and festive. We caught whiffs of smoky meat and hot grease from the fast food and Mexican restaurants we passed.

Cars zipped from lane to lane. A black pick-up truck with wheels as tall as me honked before squeezing into the next lane. The driver waved his hand ambiguously before he vanished among the other Friday night cruisers. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Anita stretch her arms up over her

head. She took a deep breath and sighed. Though I kept my eyes on the road, I could tell that her skirt had moved up her leg to reveal several inches of skin.

“The smells make me hungry,” she said. “Want to stop and get something?”

“Eat?” I took a quick look and saw, for the first time, her kneecap. It was round and full, sturdy and brown. I saw a flash of muscled thigh before returning my attention to the road.

“Unless you’re busy.” Anita crossed her legs and straightened her skirt so that it covered the length of her leg like a veil.

“You don’t want to go home?” I asked.

“Mostly I just wanted to get away from James. He’s a sweet guy, and I can handle baby stories. And sports stories. But baby sports stories?” She shook her head.

“You looked like you were having fun.”

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to be pleasant when having drinks with your boss,” she said.

“James is your boss?”

“Kind of. He’s my on-site supervisor. I’m doing some contract work on the computer payroll project. I can handle that office for a few months, but if I knew it was indefinite, I think I’d kill myself.” We stopped at a red light. Next to us, a car full of girls climbed over each other and made faces while the driver looked at us and laughed until her face turned red. “Webster girls,” Anita said.

“You don’t know that.” My voice came out defensive and whiny. Horrified, I shut my mouth as Anita gleefully pointed to a sticker on the back window. “Oh,” I said.

“Plus they’re driving a Mercedes. Not unlike this one.” She ran her fingers over the dashboard, which I kept clean and oiled with a special moisturizer. I wished that at least she might find a little bit of dust or an empty Coke can on the floor. Or that there was a huge dent on the side or cracks in the windshield, anything to suggest that I didn’t take pride in this extravagant piece of materialism. The car, however, was in excellent condition.

“It’s a hand-me-down from my stepmother.”

“Nice hand-me-down,” she said.

“I like it.” The light turned green, and I pressed the accelerator hard. Driving, I didn’t have to look at her. I squinted at the road instead. My temples pulled tight, and my reoccurring headache surfaced with a vengeance.

“Are you offended?” She touched my arm for the second time that night.

“No.”

“I’m just jealous, you know.” She squeezed my shoulder. I stayed completely still, as though her hand weren’t even there, and after a moment she took it back.

“So...food?”

“I think I’m going to head home,” I said.

“That’s cool.” Anita shrugged. She directed me to her apartment, and a few minutes later we pulled into a red-brick complex.

“If you ever need a ride to work, give me a call.” I bit my lip as soon as I said it. The mere idea of having a meal with her made my hands sweat. How could I drive to

and from work with her without behaving like a complete moron? Not to mention the fact that it would add an extra hour to my commute in the morning. And what would people say? I rubbed the steering wheel with my palms, hoping she wouldn't accept. And hoping she would.

"That's okay," she said. "I usually have my car, but I shared with my aunt today." She made no move to open the car door. She looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." She put her hand on the door. "You didn't want to get my number or something?"

"Oh. I don't know. Sure." I put the car in park, and hesitated a moment before leaning across her to take a pen from the glove compartment. She didn't pull back the way my sister or Dan would if I were to do the same thing. She stayed in my way where she was, and I felt half a breath leave her mouth and tickle my ear. I snapped shut the glove compartment as soon as I'd opened it. "You know, I don't think I have a pen after all. It's a mess in there."

"Put it in your cell phone," she said.

"I don't have it on me," I lied.

"Oh." She opened the door, illuminating the dim, overhead light. I may have been projecting, but it seemed that she was giving me a look of deep disappointment.

"I'll see you around the office anyway, don't you think?" I asked with fake cheer.

“Yeah, sure. See you around.” She slipped out of the car, and slammed the door. I watched her walk to a door on the ground floor. Before she went in, she turned back and offered a little flip of the hand. I couldn’t tell if she was smiling. I couldn’t tell if she still wanted me to have her number. Maybe in the last two minutes I had destroyed all possibility of her ever looking my way again through her blackened eyelashes and dark eyes. Blood hammered against my head as I watched her slide through my fingers and into her apartment.

On the drive home, I searched for answers in the movement of her hand, the alignment of her shoulders as she offered that last gesture, not even a wave really. Her purse had been dangling from the other hand, her sweater slung over the same elbow. Her house key rested between the fingers that told me goodbye.

The night sparkled with wet roads and streetlights. I felt nervous and bruised. I hadn’t had my period in months, my job bored me, and I couldn’t tell if the ache in my stomach was from hunger or something else. I hadn’t felt this way about a girl since I’d stayed home from the Pike fraternity retreat to help Beatrice Press study to retake her calculus midterm. I’d given up looking for the special guy who would make me want to go out instead of stay home and watch a girl wearing too much perfume study math in vain. I gave up and watched the girl.

In the end, she wasn’t that much more interesting than watching fraternity boys do keg stands. Nothing ever happened, and I was never even sure I wanted it to. I studied, graduated with okay grades, and moved back home to work for my father’s friend. By

the time I'd decided that I didn't want to be a virgin anymore, I felt as if the whole world had already passed me by. And at twenty-six, I'd waited long enough that it seemed a waste to throw it all away on someone I wasn't at least a little bit excited about.

## The Invasion

That weekend we had a cold snap, the only kind of winter we ever got in Houston. I woke late Sunday morning, shivering and restless. Although my ankles still felt tender, I decided to go on my usual long weekend run. I remembered hearing that if arthritic bones weren't exercised, they withered at a faster rate. So if this was going to be a lifelong problem, I would have to deal with it. I'd slept fitfully the last couple of nights, becoming conscious every few hours from dreams I couldn't remember. I only had the feeling that they were strange and unfamiliar.

At least once, I woke up with Anita's face in my mind and the touch of her phantom hand on my cheek. Sweat dripped down my forehead and between my breasts. It had been a sticky, uncomfortable sleep, and I looked forward to the cool air outside. As I tied my shoelaces, I decided to banish these disturbing thoughts from my head. After this, I would no longer think of Anita. Banishment complete.

The temperature hovered above freezing, and the air stung my cheeks and ears. I started off with a slow jog. It was a beautiful morning. The sky was crisp, brilliant blue, and the sun shone hard and bright. Even though it was almost Christmas, spicy smells of autumn lingered in the air. Rotting leaves and dying grass mixed with smoke from fireplaces. As I made my way through the neighborhood, I could see the chugging puffs of smoke, rising nostalgically from chimneys. No one really needed a fireplace here, but given half a chance, they'd be piling on the Duraflame and making hot cocoa. I

wondered if Anita liked hot cocoa. I wondered what she would look like drinking hot cocoa.

Shit.

Then, something weird happened. I felt a sharp pain in my gut. I kept going. I could run through it. A few minutes later, it hit me again. It started in my stomach and seemed to rip through until I felt it between my legs. Breathing hard, I stopped and bent over. I took deep, slow breaths, and after a few minutes, the pain subsided. I walked a block or so, and started to jog again. Again, the slash through my midsection returned. I returned to my crouch. A few minutes later, the buzzing reminder of discomfort in my belly, I decided to give up and walk the mile home. So much for my banishment and my long, Sunday run.

After a hot shower I felt a little better. The heat never worked in my place when the weather decided to turn cold. I lived in an old complex in West U, and unlike the huge blocky places springing up all over town, it was small with a central courtyard and a gossipy landlord named Edna who lived in a unit downstairs. My neighbors all seemed to know each other, and had patio parties that I was never invited to. Sometimes I sat in my apartment on Saturday and listened to music vibrating through the walls and the twittering voices of young professionals.

There was at least one doctor in the group and a couple of lawyers. I knew this from Edna, who asked probing questions about my career and whispered about the neighbors when I brought my rent to her at the beginning of the month. I tried to slip it in

her mailbox, but she always seemed to be by the door, waiting for a fresh audience. For the past few months, I'd taken to delivering it sometime late the night before it was due. This way, I figured, she was already in bed. If she heard me on my midnight runs, she'd never say anything. As long as she didn't swing open her front door with her nightgown swaying in the breeze, wanting a chat, I didn't really care if she heard me or not. If I'd had money like I imagined the young professionals did, I would move to one of the huge blocky places just for the anonymity. The community of this place was beginning to get to me.

Out of the closet, I pulled sweatpants, sweatshirt, and a pink-and-red patchwork quilt that had belonged to my mother. She was now living it up minimalist-style in New York, and couldn't make an exception for this, handmade almost a hundred years ago by her grandmother. For twenty years, Mother had played Bobbie Sue Hicks, the bombshell on a soap opera called *Lovely and Tender*, which focused on a theater company in Dallas. It was certainly past its prime and not the most popular of the daytime serials, but it had a loyal following. Bobbie Sue had gone from a lovely and tender stagehand to the star of the show to now, the director of the company. Twenty years of television stardom had made Mother particular about her image off-screen as well as on, which meant more heirlooms for me.

I wrapped the quilt around my shoulders and hobbled to the couch. My ankles, especially the left one, throbbed. The skin, tight and swollen over the joint, hid the bone. I pressed them with my cold hands. My stomach felt strange and tight. Next door, I

heard the first thumps of the aerobics junkie followed by the metallic blasts of her workout music. She was a financial consultant, a little on the plain side, but a sweetie according to Edna. Every weekend, she dragged her step aerobics equipment from the closet and blasted techno music for an hour or so in the afternoon. Afterwards, she'd take a shower and sometimes have arguments with her boyfriend, who wanted to stay home and watch TV. She usually wanted to go to Home Depot or out to dinner.

The walls in this place were pretty thin. I often thought about buying earplugs, but I never actually did it. I might have missed something good. After the financial consultant started pounding on the floor, I called Charlotte to complain, but she was distracted by trying to convince Richard that he should also get a tattoo.

“It's a symbol of our commitment,” she said. “Right, Patsy?”

“Sure.” I pulled my quilt tighter around me. Sometimes they got like this. All I had to do was make an occasional supportive noise. Richard's voice murmured in the background.

“He says that's what the diamond was supposed to be. He's still mad about the stupid diamond!”

“The diamond is important to people,” I said wisely.

“Patsy, it's disgusting.” Her voice became faint as she put the phone down to address him. “Getting a tattoo doesn't contribute to anyone's exploitation or death, Richard. Furthermore, I would rather put my money towards something more practical than a diamond, like a down payment on a house. A tattoo is a very small financial

investment but can be a huge gesture, symbolically. *We're not even talking about the same thing.*" There was muffled pause. "Fine. Leave. Go be a fascist Republican somewhere else."

"Charlotte?"

"I'm here." Her voice trembled.

"Are you okay?"

"It's my own fault for falling in love with a stupid, Texas hick. How can I do this to our unborn children? They won't know if W. is a god or the antichrist."

"I'll make sure they know," I said. "When you turn conservative, I'll pick up the slack and be the crazy old-maid aunt who slips them pamphlets on pro-life and socialized healthcare."

Charlotte laughed. "But, Patsy, there's no such thing as an old maid anymore. You'll just be fabulously independent, and I'll be jealous."

"Right." A surge of nausea choked through my body. I slid down so that the quilt also covered my face. The red patches glowed, and my breath warmed the cocoon I'd made. My cheeks were hot. I turned to the side and curled up with the phone. I took deep breaths, trying not to puke while Charlotte updated me on her search. She'd run across a woman in Bellaire who inked permanent commitment rings, and that's what she wanted Richard to look at. My head throbbed to the faint thump of the music next door as she talked.

“It’s perfect,” she said. “The actual wedding ring covers it completely, so if Richard felt like it was too weird, his clients would never have to see it. Doesn’t a permanent piece of art seem more romantic than a cold, removable piece of gold?”

“Sounds great.” My stomach was tight and churning. I scrunched further into my igloo of blankets.

“Patsy? Are you even listening to me?”

“I think I have to let you go,” I said. I kept my voice steady as tears salted the corners of my eyes. I didn’t particularly feel like hearing her nag when she found out I wasn’t feeling well again. “I need to run a few errands before it gets too late.”

“Oh, okay.” She sighed. “I’ll call you later if the jerk doesn’t come back soon. Maybe we can go to a movie.”

After I hung up, I stayed on my couch watching old movies and infomercials. I tried to eat, but felt nauseous. Several times, I picked up the phone and dialed home, but no one answered. I didn’t leave messages. As the light faded, the shadows outside turned an ashy gray. From the window facing the street, I watched two women in brightly colored fleece vests jog by. One wore spandex down to her ankles, the other was in sweatpants. They chatted back and forth, their ponytails swinging as they passed. I couldn’t make out their words, just an easiness that they had together. I swallowed and picked up the phone again. Still no one at home. I had the alarm code and a key. I could get in and wait until someone showed up.

I packed a bag and drove to my father's house in River Oaks. I thought again about Anita and her face the way it was when she was waiting for me to get her number, the slight movement of her lips, the lines around her eyes. In the semi-circle drive of my father's house, I touched the passenger seat, running my fingers along the head rest where she'd rested her cheek when she turned to talk to me. The veins in my wrists throbbed with the memory of her being so close. I couldn't explain this. I didn't even know her. What might she say about Daddy's neighborhood? If she thought Webster was bad, it was only the beginning. I took a look around to try to see the houses objectively or at least from her point of view.

In River Oaks, decorating for the holidays was more than just family fun. Multicolored lights thrown haphazardly through the bushes or placed in crooked lines along rain gutters were not to be found. Here icicles dripped artfully from the ledges of three-story roofs, and glowing crystals wrapped around the trunks of thick pine trees and magnolias. Brilliant angels hovered above yards, and at least one house always had a trumpeting Gabriel taller than the family mansion and shining brighter than the North Star.

While Daddy and Dorothy were usually more subtle than that, they always had their yard done professionally. True to tradition, the delicate white lights Dorothy favored were shimmering like fireflies in the front yard. Anita, I was sure, would be disgusted. I put my head on the steering wheel and took a breath. I felt terrible. What I

wanted was to walk in the door and have a mother there to fuss over me, wrap me in a blanket, and feed me hot soup and wise, motherly advice.

Instead Brooke, my seventeen-year-old half sister, met me at the door. “You look like shit,” she said.

“Thanks.” I stepped into the foyer and dropped my bag on the ground. Brooke pushed away her black slash of bangs. Even Dorothy didn’t try to make Brooke tan – it would have been a blistering, cancerous disaster. Except for her often-flushed cheeks, she was milky white from the top of her head to her tiny, pale toes. Dying her hair black was a recent development. Together with her black baggy pants and long sleeved T-shirt, she could have been one of those street kids who smoked crack and didn’t eat for days. The only things that gave her away were her plump cheeks and the healthy body barely visible beneath the sags of her clothes. Really, she looked like the singer of a band who was *trying* to look like a street kid who smoked crack and didn’t eat for days. The bangs fell over her forehead, and she pushed them away again.

“I’m serious. You look terrible. You’ve got these big circles under your eyes and your skin’s all yellow.”

“Well, I feel terrible,” I said.

“Are you sick?”

I stared at her.

“I guess so. Jesus.” Brooke shrugged and walked through the foyer and ballroom toward the den. It was designated the “kid’s” room, with a big screen TV, an antique

gumball machine, and a mini-bar that Dorothy kept stocked with soft drinks and snacks. In high school my friends and I had spent hours in that room – watching movies, making signs for pep rallies, and hanging out before and after formals. Watching Brooke plop down on one of the plump leather couches, I knew it wasn't used for the same kinds of things anymore. Maybe Brooke brought her dirty-clothes friends here to listen to depressing music and talk about why their parents sucked. “Do you want to watch a movie?” Brooke asked. “It's called *Intergalactic Psycho*. It's really fucked up.”

“Is Daddy here?”

“No. He's at some party with Mom.”

“Oh.” I sat down on the other end of the couch.

“Well, I'm happy to see you, too.” Brooke picked up the remote and un-paused the movie. A sweaty-faced man grimaced into the camera as he followed a pretty hooker into a motel room.

“I didn't mean it like that.” I felt bad for hurting her feelings. “I just haven't seen him in a while.”

“Join the club.”

“I think I'll stay here tonight,” I said.

“Why?” Brooke stared at the screen, engrossed. Blood spattered against the walls. The sweaty man screamed, and the camera closed in on his bright, red mouth, where a drop of blood rested on his lips. He licked it clean with a snake-like forked tongue. My stomach churned, and I turned away.

“I didn’t feel like being alone. I haven’t eaten all day.” I said this angling for some kind of sympathy but knowing at the same time that it wasn’t likely to come from Brooke. I was not to be disappointed. She grabbed a handful of potato chips from the bag on the coffee table and then shoved the rest at me.

“Have some chips,” she said.

“No, thanks. I meant I didn’t feel much like eating.”

She shrugged and plunged her hand into the greasy, crinkling bag. “Brain food. I’ve got a final tomorrow.”

“Why aren’t you studying?” I looked around the room for books or papers or anything to suggest that this might be a study break of some kind. All I saw was a pile of strange-looking comic books and a sketch pad.

“It’s just Spanish...esta espanol solamente.”

“Is that correct?” I asked. Brooke shrugged again, her attention back on the movie. Over the shrill screams of dying prostitutes, I considered whether I should try to make Brooke study. Dorothy would have a fit if Brooke failed any more tests, and I would be the one to hear about it. At the same time, though, I was tired. My stomach hurt now, a tight coil of pain that made me want to curl into the fetus position. The maniac alien’s shrieking wasn’t doing my head any good. “I think I’m going to bed, okay?”

Brooke finally looked up. “If you wake up early, don’t eat my bagel, okay? There’s only one left.”

“Sure.” As though I would. The blood rushed to my head when I got up. I waited until I wasn’t dizzy to pick up my bag. Slowly, I made my way upstairs. On either side of the ballroom was a wide staircase that led to a landing right before the second floor. Like the yard, they were decorated for Christmas. Garlands, run through with more twinkling lights, wrapped around the banisters, and red velvet bows perched in key locations on top of lush green imitation pine needles. We’d lived here since I was ten when Brooke was on the way. The first time I stepped into my new bedroom, I almost cried. My old room had been bright and yellow with a twin bed tucked into the corner of the room like a fat, cozy pillow. The new room seemed vast and stark. The wallpaper was pink and white vertical stripes, like the uniform pattern for Prison Barbie.

Dorothy had waddled around with her hands over her round stomach, showing me the bathroom suite, the walk-in closet, the sunken in place where my new four poster bed would sit. Daddy stood at the door, smiling and expectant, on one of those rare occasions when he was actually paying attention to me. I swallowed hard and smiled back. Really, I’d been a lucky kid, and when I got into school I was constantly impressing new friends with my big, showy room. Now, though, when I stayed over, I used the guestroom because Brooke had taken mine when I left for college.

After I’d been asleep for a while, I couldn’t tell how long, I woke up with a start. Chilled and uneasy, my stomach knotted and unknotted. I curled under the covers and looked around for something familiar and comforting. I hadn’t closed the drapes, and the security light from the yard shone just enough so I could make out the sketches on the

walls. They matched the hunting theme and showed lean, muscled dogs pointing for their masters or carefully cradling soft, dead birds between their teeth.

I shifted under the warm sheets. I shivered. Something was wrong. Acid bubbled in my stomach, caught at the back of my throat, and I knew I would vomit. I reached the bathroom just in time for what seemed like a gallon of liquid, an exotic green bile, to gush out of my body. I huddled over the toilet, shaking. I flushed away the puke and brushed my teeth. I crawled back into bed exhausted. Half an hour later, I repeated the entire process.

My stomach felt split open like an infected wound, as if an alien had laid eggs in my stomach and they were hatching. The third time I got up, I dry heaved until my arms and legs shook. When it seemed to be over, I slumped on the bathroom floor, cheek against the wall, my feet resting on the cold. After a while, I tried to drink from the tap, but that came up too. Bent over at the waist from the cramps, I stepped into the hallway and called to Brooke. It took several tries and much effort from my burning throat for her to hear me. She opened her bedroom door, sleepy-eyed and frowning. She wore the same baggy pants and ripped T-shirt. Her hair stuck out on the sides like the down on a newborn chick.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m really sick. Could you get Daddy?” Brooke nodded and rubbed her eyes. She padded down the hall to the master bedroom. When she came back, her eyes were open.

“They’re not back yet. What time is it?”

“I don’t know.” I sank to the floor with my knees to my chest.

“Do you want some Tylenol?” she asked. “Pepto Bismol?” Brooke bit her lip and shifted from side to side. Her hands were tucked inside the long sleeves of her T-shirt. She ran to her room and came back with her cell phone. After a few seconds, she punched the off button fiercely. “Neither one of them has a phone on! What the fuck are they doing? I could be getting murdered in my bed. Are you okay, Patsy? Do you think you’ll be okay?”

I started to nod but instead threw up on the hall carpet.

“Oh, yuck.” Brooke took a step back. She brought a sleeve-covered hand to her mouth, and I started to cry. “Do you want me to call Dr. Green?” she asked. He was a friend of the family. I nodded and put my head on the floor, away from the vomit. I couldn’t remember what it was like not to be in agonizing pain. Brooke disappeared downstairs, and when she returned she seemed almost cheerful.

“Bad news, punk.” She crouched on the floor a few feet from my head. “He said that if you can’t keep any liquids down, you have to go to the emergency room. He said it might be a virus or it could be some kind of infection, like your kidneys or something. Either way, you might get dehydrated, which would be bad. But there’s good news, too.”

“What?” I groaned. A foul, sticky substance coated the inside of my mouth.

“If I take you to the emergency room, then I won’t have to take my goddamn Spanish final tomorrow.” Brooke put her hands on her hips. “So let’s see if we can get some liquids in you, mi hermana. If not...adios la examina!”

I let Brooke lead me back to my bed, where she tried to feed me orange juice and then water, neither of which I kept down. Brooke shrieked and held her nose, but she also found a trashcan for me to puke in so I wouldn’t have to stay sprawled on the bathroom floor. After a few tries, we decided it was time to go to the hospital. I watched deliriously as Brooke busied around the room and re-packed the bag I’d brought from my apartment. She added things like an extra pair of socks and underwear from her own wardrobe. Just moving my head was a struggle, not just because of my heavy, throbbing skull but because anytime I shifted at all, a shot of pain exploded in my abdomen. With my face smashed against a pillow, I tried to tell Brooke that I was proud of her.

“Doing great, Brookie,” I said.

“I’m good under pressure,” she said. Her hair had flattened out some, and she didn’t have quite the look of a bewildered baby animal. She zipped my overnight case and headed back to her bedroom. “One more thing, and I’ll be ready.”

I thought about the time Brooke sliced open her wrist on a rock at the lake when she was six. Dorothy had calmly found the opening through the gush of blood and applied pressure correctly. She called the ambulance while gripping Brooke’s tiny wrist. I had been too terrified to move, transfixed by the bloody mess of my baby sister, who I was certain would die. After Brooke was okay, Dorothy took to her bed for a week,

refusing to let anyone in the room but Daddy. One day Brook sneaked in and tried to crawl into bed with her mother. Dorothy slapped her and dragged her to my room, where I was told to watch her until the next morning when Lucy, the housekeeper, would be back.

“Ready?” Brooke said. She had pushed her sleeves to her elbow and slung a black messenger bag decorated with patches and safety pins over her shoulder. In one hand she had my bag and in the other she held my car keys. At two in the morning, we were on our way to the hospital. We left a note for Daddy and Dorothy, who hadn’t come home and still weren’t answering their cell phones.

We parked in a twenty-minute spot outside the hospital because Brooke wanted to walk me inside so I wouldn’t collapse. It was quiet, and the first door led us into wide fluorescent-lit hall. The corridor was empty, and we followed arrows on the wall that led to the ER.

“This place is creepy,” Brooke said. I held my stomach and walked hunched over, trying to ease the cramp. At the sign-in desk, a nurse with curly blond hair and pink fingernails clucked at the sight of me. She pointed to a chair next to her, and Brooke went to park the car. The nurse alternately typed my information into a computer and sipped from a can of diet milkshake. Milky brown drops rested in the corners of her lips until she wiped them away with the tips of her fingers. She made sure she had my insurance. Brief notes on my symptoms – the pain, the vomiting, the missed period.

“Do you think you might be pregnant, honey?” she asked.

“I’m not pregnant.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” I brought my knees to my chest.

“All right, sweetie. Have a seat in the waiting room.” The chalky, chocolate smell reached my nose. I turned away and put my hand over my mouth. The nurse made more twittering noises and leaned closer. “We’ll get you in as soon as possible. Poor thing.”

The smell of the milkshake, the hospital disinfectant, and the brightness of halls were too much. I threw up again, more over the floor than myself. The nurse called for an orderly, who came with cleaning supplies. The orderly handed me a plastic tub in case I had to puke again and helped me to the waiting room. It was divided into sections outlined by ugly purple chairs. Matching corner tables held health brochures on heart disease and osteoporosis, along with meager stacks of *US News and World Report* and *Jack and Jill*. I settled into a chair in the farthest corner, pulling my knees up and my sweatshirt over my legs. Around me, people were frowning and crying and passing out. The pain was a constant stabbing that was only bearable if I didn’t move. When I did move, tears sprang to my eyes from the sharpness in my gut.

A red-faced man with a scruffy beard and a ponytail sat very still and held one of his arms wrapped tight in a yellow towel. Blood seeped through in spots, and I was relieved when they called his name quickly. Across from me, a skinny old woman with

flyaway white hair patted the knees of her husband, a withered man slumped in a wheelchair. Occasional soft moans accented his raspy breath. The woman sat with a magazine in her lap, but looked up every few minutes, as though afraid she might miss her name being called. When Bobbie Sue Hicks had unexpectedly developed brain cancer during her tenth year of *Lovely and Tender*, she'd been in the hospital a lot, but it never looked like this. Her hospital was decorated in pink and yellow, and they didn't need a waiting area because everyone was automatically admitted to private rooms, even little Gina O'Reilly whose grandmother had no money to pay for her much-needed heart transplant.

I wished Brooke would hurry so I wouldn't be one of the sick loners like the man coughing incessantly in front of the television. Every now and then his eyes shifted, and he scanned patients' faces with reproach. I willed the phone in my pocket to ring. It would be Daddy, on his way out the door to meet us at the hospital. He would take care of everything. He would take care of Brooke so she wouldn't have to take care of me and I wouldn't worry about not taking care of her. He would deal with the insurance and the doctors, and he would get me a private room like Gina O'Reilly's. I let the tears slide halfway down my face before wiping them away with my swollen fingers. For all Brooke's earlier efficiency, wouldn't it be just like her to get lost on the way to the parking lot or become distracted by someone strange she met in the elevator?

Just as I was imagining gruesome scenarios inspired by *Intergalactic Psycho* starring Brooke, she arrived. She swung a plastic grocery bag as she crossed the room and threw herself into the seat next to me.

“Caffeine,” she said. “And snacks. I got some ginger ale too, you know, if you feel like drinking anything. Sometimes when I feel sick ginger ale helps.” I shook my head and nodded to the plastic bucket. “Still pukey?” she asked as she opened a liter of Coke and drank directly from the bottle. She reached in and pulled out a chain of individually packaged cracker and cheese snacks. She snapped one off and pulled back the plastic cover. The red wax spread the orange gunk with ease. I turned my head to avoid the over-pronounced smell of artificial dairy. Brooke bit into the cracker and chewed loud enough for me to hear over the moaning of my neighbors.

“I guess you haven’t heard from Daddy?” I asked as I hugged my knees tighter.

“Nope. You?” Mouthful of crackers.

“No.”

“Well, they’ll come home eventually. Unless, of course, Dad’s been into the tequila. Then we may not see them for a while.” Brooke wiped crumbs from her mouth.

“Do you feel any better?”

“A little. I don’t know.” The tears started again and I closed my eyes.

“Damn the margaritas.” Brooke tried to make a joke.

“Damn the margaritas,” I repeated softly.

Brooke took another swig of Coke. “But it’s not like they’d help. Mom would just get all frigid and weird. Dad would tell you a story about the Navy or hunting in South America or something. It would just be annoying. Much better that I’m here.”

“But you should be studying.” I closed my eyes through a blossoming of nausea that made me break into a sweat. I reached for my plastic tub. Brook pushed her unfinished crackers into the bag.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. She patted my hand and hurried in the direction of the nurse’s station. I kept my eyes closed and tried to will myself not to throw up. I envied the patients who drooped unconsciously in their chairs. I tried to think of pleasant things like diving into the water at my grandparent’s lake when I was little and finding the patches of cool at the bottom. How nice it felt on warm summer skin. But then I thought of how my grandmother had sold the house and now lived in an assisted-living complex where the dining room smelled not unlike this hospital.

Grandmother sometimes called me Jean, my mother’s name, and wouldn’t let me eat dessert because she said she knew that Jean struggled with her weight. It wasn’t true, of course. Since I could remember, Mother had always been rail thin and ate like a seventeen-year-old cat on its deathbed. Grandmother just never liked Mother much, and had found many small ways to pick on her when she’d been married to Daddy. Maybe I hadn’t forgiven Mother for leaving, but at times I could understand why she’d done it.

I was trying to think of something *else* pleasant when Brooke fell into the chair beside me, jiggling me painfully.

“We’re in!” Brooke was triumphant.

“What happened?”

“I told them you were about to puke all over the waiting room and infect the whole hospital. The nurse said she’d get you some medication for the nausea. They’ll try to put you in a bed, at least.” Someone did come after a while. The little old woman with the crazy hair waved her hand to get the nurse’s attention. The nurse called my name instead. The old woman’s fingers curled in frustration.

“If we could just see Dr. Flinn. Dr. Flinn knows us. Or Nurse Debra?” The woman said in a high, trembling voice. She stood now and clasped her hands together, pleading.

“Someone will be with you as soon as possible, ma’am,” the nurse said. She was a petite woman with a muddy-blond ponytail and lavender scrubs. She motioned for me to follow her. Brooke and I looked at each other and moved toward the door. I felt guilty, but I was also glad that I was the one who was being led away. As we passed by the woman, Brooke held out a cheese and cracker pack.

“In case you get hungry,” Brooke said.

“Thank you,” the old woman said politely, looking at the nurse. “But what my husband really needs is to see *Dr. Flinn*. Or Nurse Debra.”

“Soon,” Brooke said, pressing the snack into the woman’s hand. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Miss Grant.” The nurse stopped several steps ahead. “This way, please” They put me on a cot in the hall. As the muddy-blond nurse inserted the IV in my hand, I saw that she was Nurse Debra. Or at least she was a nurse and her nametag said that she was Debra Donner.

“This is something for the nausea, okay, sweetie? It’ll make you feel better.” Nurse Debra administered the medicine and left. Brooke stood over me and held my hand. I tried to focus, but her face began to blur. Her mouth was moving, I was sure, but no sound was coming out. It was the medicine, I realized in a slow panic. They hadn’t told me. Now I wanted to stay awake as much as I’d wanted to sleep earlier. My eyelashes fluttered like winged creatures against my cheeks. I wondered if Anita would come to my funeral. It was the last thing I thought of before I lost consciousness.

“Wake up, dear.” Nurse Debra shook me. “The doctor’s here.”

“Hey there, sleepyhead.” A tall man in a white coat talked at me jovially and showed his very white teeth. Sandy brown hair parted to the side and swept across his pale forehead. I was in a room, the only patient. I moved my hand and touched the sleeve of the paper hospital gown that I was now wearing.

“Where’s Brooke?” I asked. My tongue moved thick and swollen in my mouth.

“We asked your sister to step outside. We’ll be doing a pelvic and thought you’d prefer privacy.” Nurse Debra prepared instruments at the end of the table. My eyelids slid down. My brain slowed. The voices faded. Nurse Debra nudged me.

“Sweetie? Come on. Wake up. You need to slide down to the end of the table. That’s right, dear. Feet here. Okay. Very good.” I felt my body being moved. And pain. I’d almost forgotten the pain. I started to cry.

“That hurts,” I said.

“Mmmhmm,” he murmured. He didn’t stop. It felt like he was going to rip me apart.

“Stop it!” I tried to yell, but it came out a hoarse whisper. I appealed to the nurse. “Really. It hurts.” The woman took my hand and squeezed it.

“Almost over, dear, I’m sure.”

“Okay, then!” And it was done. The doctor snapped off his gloves and began writing on a prescription pad. He tore off two sheets and handed them to the nurse, asking her to explain them to me. “We’ll have you feeling better in no time,” he called over his shoulder on the way out. I wiped my eyes and rolled onto my side. Nurse Debra looked over the papers and back at me. Before I could ask any questions, I drifted away again, and the look of Nurse Debra’s pity was absorbed into my dreams.

The next time I woke up, Brooke was beside me and the nurse was gone. I looked around, aware of my surroundings for the first time. Bright, STD-themed posters covered the walls. Symptoms of Chlamydia to my right, HIV prevention directly across, and herpes to my right. Brooke’s eyes were pink around the edges and indigo smudges stained the pale skin under her eyes. She was humming and picking a hole in the seam of her pants. Anyone else would have looked terrible, but she just seemed her usual

beautiful messy self. The eyes added mystery. What has the pretty girl been doing up all night? Why has she been crying? I cleared my throat.

“You’re awake.” Brooke scooted the chair closer.

“How long has it been?” My voice was weak and scratchy. I swallowed several times

“It’s a little after five. They fucking knocked you out, man.”

“I didn’t know that would happen. I’m sorry.”

“And I still haven’t talked to Mom or Daddy.” Brooke’s voice caught and she took a deep breath. “I’m worried about them too. I think they’re dead. Isn’t that stupid?” She started to sob. Her hands covered her face, and I reached out my hand to try to pat her. I hadn’t seen her cry since she was a little girl

“It’s okay.” I said. “They’re fine.”

“If they are, I’m never speaking to them again.” She wiped her nose with her hand. “Patsy, I really want to go home. I want to sleep. I’ll take my fucking exam. I just have to get out of here. Everyone is so disgusting.” She said this as Nurse Debra came in the room. Brooke glared at Nurse Debra, who took a pile of clothes from a chair and placed it on the bed.

“You’re up! Great. When you’re done dressing, I’ll give the prescriptions and tell you what to do.”

Moving slowly, I went into the attached bathroom while Brooke and Debra waited outside. My stomach didn’t hurt anymore, but the muscles in my abdomen were

sore, and my hand was beginning to bruise where the IV had been. When I put my clothes on, blood from the exam spotted my underwear. It made me angry that he'd been so rough. It wasn't like I'd never had a pelvic exam before. I knew they didn't have to feel like that. I hated the doctor already, but the blood gave me physical proof and made me feel justified. I didn't tell anyone about it though, especially not Brooke, who was about to lose it, or Nurse Debra with her abetting little smile. When I came out, she explained the antibiotics and told me I had to make a follow-up with my primary physician the next day.

“What's wrong with me?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It's an infection. You can talk about it with your doctor at the follow-up.” I nodded. Like Brooke, I was tired. I just wanted to go home. We didn't leave until almost seven. The morning was dewy and cold. The quiet light of day glowed surreal. Brooke drove more carelessly than usual and ran two lights. I was unconcerned. With the heater blowing directly in my face, the passenger's seat felt like a warm cocoon. I wished I could always feel this detached.

When we pulled into the driveway, the Christmas lights were still on, their brilliance faded with the early sun. Daddy's car was back in its place in the carport.

“Fuckers,” Brooke said. We walked to the back door. We could see faint clouds of our breath. Brooke wrapped her arms around herself. Her mouth was hanging slightly open in a way that reminded me of when she was very tired as a child.

“Thanks, Brooke.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. She pushed open the front door.

“I’m proud of you. I mean...” I stopped. I wanted to reach out to her, but we were not a touchy family.

“Okay, okay. I get it.” Brooke shrugged. “I’m going to bed.”

“Me too.” We climbed the stairs together. Brooke flipped her middle finger as we passed the master bedroom and didn’t speak to me again before slamming the door to her bedroom. I closed my own door carefully so that it barely made a click when it latched in place. I got under the covers with my clothes on, thinking I would stay awake for a little while to call work, to explain to Dorothy about Brooke, to make the follow up appointment. Instead, with bird dogs watching from the walls, I fell asleep again.

## The Chlamydia Room

*If Dolly Covington uses him*, Dorothy said the next morning when I made my follow up appointment, *then certainly he can fix whatever's wrong with your...delicate parts*. She wanted me to see a man named Dr. Taft, who was apparently the hippest gynecologist in Houston. I was supposed to be grateful that she could get me in to see him. Other than being exhausted and sore, I felt much better, but since I still hadn't had my period, I told her I would go. This was how, the next day, I found myself wearing another hospital gown, being examined by a doctor whose cowboy boots peeked out from under his white lab coat.

Dr. Taft asked me if I thought I might be pregnant. Here we go again, I thought.

"No. That would be impossible," I said.

"Are you sure about that?" The white-haired doctor had large, warm hands that gently pressed my neck, examining my glands. His face was round and pink. He wasn't fat, but he was tall and thick. Except for the white hair, lab coat, and the way he moved like a sloth, he looked like he could be the thug in a Mafia movie.

"Yes," I said.

"I see." He looked at me as though he did not see. "Are you sexually active?"

"No." I ran my fingers over my ponytail and shifted on the exam table. My paper gown rustled as Dr. Taft shook his head and picked up a clipboard from the counter. His movements were deliberate. Very slowly, he rubbed his broad chin. He raised his eyes to mine.

“Do you know, Ms. Grant, what they’re treating you for?”

“An infection of some sort.” I shrugged.

“Specifically, Chlamydia.”

“But I’m not…” I stopped and took a deep breath. I remembered the room with all the posters and the look the nurse gave me, the skillful way she’d avoided talking about my diagnosis. I couldn’t blame her exactly, but she was a nurse for godsake! I’d been put in the Chlamydia room and no one had bothered to tell me. If the whole experience hadn’t been so awful, it would have been funny. Here I was, a miserable virgin, being treated for an STD I couldn’t possibly have. I looked at Dr. Taft seriously. “I’ve never had sex,” I said.

“Did you tell that to the staff last night?”

“No.”

“Why not?” He peered at me.

“They didn’t ask.” It sounded weak, even to me. “Then they knocked me out. I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Hmm.” He thumbed through the pages on his clipboard again. “We’ll do a pregnancy test anyway. You understand, just a formality. We like to do our own blood work. We’ll test a few other things. You probably just had some kind of virus, but the amenorrhea is a concern.”

“I’m not pregnant, and I don’t have Chlamydia.”

“Of course it’s likely to be hormonal, if what you say is true, but you’d be surprised what some women try to hide. Healthy twenty-six year old women don’t just stop menstruating. Have you been gaining weight?”

“No.”

“Losing weight?” He assessed me from behind the chart.

“A little maybe. I haven’t had much of an appetite lately.”

“You’re awfully thin. Do you have an eating disorder?”

“No.”

“You don’t make yourself throw up? Count calories obsessively? Exercise excessively?”

“No!” My face flushed. He really had a terrible bedside manner. I wondered what it was that made all the ladies recommend him so highly.

He made a note on his chart. “How much do you exercise?”

I told him about my last run, the pain in my abdomen and groin. “So lately it’s been less, but usually three or four times a week for a few miles.”

“Good for you,” he said, suddenly seeming satisfied that I wasn’t starving myself. He put the clipboard down and went to the sink to wash his hands. “Used to be a runner myself until the knees went. Ever run Memorial Park?”

“I have a route in my neighborhood,” I said.

“Nice little path at the park. Too crowded on the weekend, though, and you have to watch out for the crazies. Stay in the lit areas, especially being a pretty young

woman.” I tried to picture him in running shorts, jogging on the path at the park. Instead I saw him lumbering through the woods in cowboy boots and a lab coat like Frankenstein’s monster, scaring away young women runners.

“Yes,” I said when I couldn’t think what to say. “Being a woman I’m not much for the crazies.”

The doctor murmured in vague agreement before excusing himself for a moment. So far, I didn’t love this guy. Maybe you had to be old like Dorothy to appreciate his qualities. Even his exam room seemed a little off to me. While he was gone I stared at the framed print on the wall across from me. An old-fashioned, house-calling doctor bent over the bed of a sick child, whose mother was holding his hand. The painting was very dark, almost all shadows. Only a candle on the bedside table illuminated the faces. Cheerful, right? Dr. Taft came back into the room. He tapped his pen against his teeth, the sound even and steady like a metronome.

“Tell you what, Patsy. We’re going to do an exam, see what’s going on. Then you’ll get dressed and head down the hall to have some blood taken. As soon as Nurse Scott comes back we’ll get started. I would go ahead, but you know how it is. I have to have a woman present.”

“But I just did this. Can’t you just look at that?” I pointed to my chart, open on the counter next to a box of rubber gloves. The idea of another exam tired me.

“*They* are treating you for a sexually transmitted disease,” he said, speaking slowly as though communicating with a small child. “*You* say you’re not sexually active. It might be helpful for me to make some first-hand observations.”

After my feet were in the stirrups, but before he’d begun, Dr. Taft motioned Nurse Scott over. The small woman peeked under the paper blanket draped over my knees.

“Do you see?”

“I see.” She nodded.

“Could you get the virginal speculum, please? I’ll stand at the door here until you get back.”

“Of course.” She disappeared into the hallway while Dr. Taft and I waited in silence. My face warmed and turned bright red. I felt as if I was going to cry so I bit the inside of my cheek until it felt raw. From his place in the doorframe, the doctor noticed my discomfort.

“Nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you,” he said. “It’s a smaller size. It’ll be more comfortable for you. Would you like to put your feet down while we wait?”

A few minutes later, the doctor performed his exam while I stared at the ceiling. He explained with each step what he was doing. I bit my cheek harder, silently pleading with him to shut up and finish as fast as possible. At least it didn’t hurt this time. Nurse Scott caught my eye and smiled encouragingly. “It’s not so bad, is it?” I nodded and turned back to the ceiling. I like her better than Nurse Debra in the ER. I found it

unsettling to trust my life to someone who looked the same age that I was, even if she did call me sweetie. Nurse Scott, on the other hand, was comfortably into her forties.

“There. All done,” Dr. Taft said. He patted my knee and rolled away from the table. “You can stop taking those prescriptions.”

“I already knew that,” I said sharply.

He smiled as though I’d just said something conversational and pleasant. “Well, everything seems fine, so we’ll just have a look at the blood work. See if we can figure this out, huh?”

After I dressed, Nurse Scott handed me a piece of paper and directed me to a room down the hall that had a row of seats with desk-like arm rests. A technician drew blood from an older woman whose bright blue veins showed through translucent skin. A few seats down sat a man with slick black hair whose face was so pale he looked like he should be sucking blood not giving it. I handed the blood order to a tech in dark blue scrubs who pointed me to a vacant station. He pulled up a stool and sat across from me. His hair was cut very close to his head, and delicate black fuzz sprouted on his upper lip. He hunched his shoulders self-consciously as he pulled on latex gloves and began placing different sized vials in front of me.

“Have you eaten today?” He opened drawer after drawer, looking for something.

“Yes,” I said. I was still defensive from the conversation with Dr. Taft so I softened my voice. “I mean, yes, I had breakfast.” By that, I meant I’d had a couple of

saltines, the only food that didn't make me feel sick to my stomach to smell. Saltines and hot tea had been my staples for the last two days.

“Faint easily?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Nervous?” He smiled, more comfortable now as he watched my reaction to the needle he produced from one of the drawers.

“I'm fine.” He couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. I considered that he would soon stick me with a needle the size of a hatpin. “So,” I ventured, “how long have you been a...how long have you worked here?”

“About six months, I guess.” He wiped down my arm with a cold, brown liquid the color of dried blood. He tied a rubber cord around my arm until I could feel my fingertips pulse.

“You like it?” I asked.

“Sure. Beats working at a desk all day.” He examined my veins, tapping the skin with two fingers. “Ready?”

“Okay.” I turned my head. The prick of the needle brought tears to my eyes, but I blinked them away, embarrassed that the man might see me cry. After he filled three or four tubes, he stopped and took the needle out of my arm. He snapped off his gloves and put his hands on his knees.

“Feeling all right? Dizzy at all?” Concern wrinkled his forehead

“No, no.” I sat up straight. “I'm good.”

“They need a urine sample too. I’ll get the cup, and you can sit a minute until I get back.” He touched my hand and his eyes moved over me in a flash of up and down, a movement that suggested interest. He had one of those smooth, angular faces that some boys have and a full, soft mouth. I willed myself to think about how his lips might feel touching some part of my body, the tickle of his scruffy facial hair. I tried to give myself shivers or make myself excited with the idea that in a few minutes he would be coming back. Sure it would be to give me a pee cup, but shouldn’t that make the whole thing even more nerve wracking? It didn’t happen, though. As pretty as he was, I wasn’t attracted to him. When I was trying to think about him, it wasn’t him I was really thinking about at all. I consoled myself with the idea that it wasn’t my fault. Clearly, I could never be interested in someone who already had such intimate knowledge of my bodily fluids.

## Mother Love

Wednesday morning I opened my eyes, aware all at once of dryness in my mouth, pounding behind my eyes, emptiness in my stomach, and the feeling that I was missing something important. Daddy had insisted I stay in the guestroom even after I had my follow-up appointment. The bird dogs watched me mournfully from the walls all night, and I was starting to feel trapped in a hunter version of my childhood that felt oppressive and guilty. So, I was glad to be going back to work today. On the other hand, part of me was glad to have an excuse not to see Anita for a few days. The more I thought about Friday night, the more embarrassed I was. I had behaved like an awkward adolescent. I hoped that if I didn't see her again for a while she might forget that she'd ever tried to give me her number. Maybe she'd just been drunk anyway. Every time I thought of it, I felt slightly nauseous. It was hard to tell if that was because of humiliation due to my social ineptitude or if it was lingering illness.

I stretched under the thick, soft comforter and tried to motivate myself to roll over and get out of bed. The shrill ring of my cell phone broke through the air. The caller ID showed Dorothy's number. I picked up.

"Patsy." Dorothy's tone was brisk. "Are you still sleeping?"

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Downstairs. By the pool." The clock by my bed showed that it was a few minutes before seven. "You really should do water aerobics with me. The water feels brilliant this time of year."

“Sure,” I said dismissively. Even in the heated pool, it sounded like torture. It may have been warm in Houston, but it wasn’t warm enough for me to go swimming at the crack of dawn.

“Don’t give me that tone. I don’t have to tell you that you need to do something. You need to get healthier.”

“I know. You *have* told me.”

“Anyway, get dressed and come downstairs. We’re having breakfast together. As a family.” My stomach rumbled uncertainly. Yesterday, I tried to eat a cup of broth in addition to saltines. It had been a greenish brown color, similar to something you might scrape off your shoes if you’d been walking in the woods for a while. According to something Dorothy read in *Ladies Home Journal* it was brimming with antioxidants. Besides being aesthetically displeasing, the flavor was similarly organic, much like I imagine the shoe itself might have tasted had you tried to eat it. I only had a few spoonfuls, and I was starving now. I dressed in the clothes I’d brought to wear to work on Monday. In the mirror, my skin looked yellow next to the pink oxford shirt. The black slacks hung loose at my hips. I brushed some color on my cheeks and put on a jacket, which hid the baggy waistband of my pants.

Downstairs, Daddy was sitting with coffee and toast reading the paper. Except for two strips of short, gray hair behind each ear, he was almost completely bald. In deep thought, he occasionally ran a hand over his head, which he did now as he read. Brooke

was hunched over a bowl of cereal. She raised her eyes briefly and grunted before returning to her breakfast.

Next to her, Dorothy rotated half a grapefruit on her plate, delicately slicing the pink fleshy sections from the skin before she began eating. Her hair was wrapped in a towel and she wore a thick, white bathrobe. It had been a long time since I'd seen her without her make-up. The skin around her eyes sagged more noticeably, and without color, her cheeks and lips were washed out and indistinct.

I sat down, and she placed the other half of the grapefruit in front of me along with a spoon and a cup of green tea. The smell of fruit mingled with the heavy scent of Giorgio Beverly Hills. Daddy looked up.

“You still look ill,” he said.

“I'm feeling much better, Daddy.”

“You look too skinny.” He folded the paper and rested it on the table.

“I've lost a few pounds, I think.”

“If she took better care, she wouldn't catch everything that goes around. That's what I was trying to tell her earlier,” Dorothy said, gesturing at me with her spoon.

Daddy nodded in agreement.

“I'm not sick all the time,” I said.

“Aren't you going to eat?” Daddy asked.

“Yes.” I put a piece of fruit into my mouth and chewed slowly. It felt cold and slimy. I forced myself to swallow it. I took a sip of tea, and poked at another piece of

grapefruit. Dorothy poured herself a cup of coffee and refilled Daddy's cup. When I asked for some, she told me that coffee was too harsh on a sensitive stomach. Jealously, I watched them sip as Daddy continued to muse about my health.

"We'll just see what the doctor says." He turned to Dorothy. "Dory, who did she see?"

"Michael Taft."

"Don't know him."

"Yes, sweetheart, he's Dale Anderson's first husband."

"I wasn't aware that Dale had a first husband."

"Yes, you've met him. He's married to Suzie Arnold now, you know, the columnist? They've got children at Webster. Right Brooke?" She addressed her daughter.

"What?" Brooke's elbow was on the table, and she squished soggy shredded wheat with her spoon.

"Isn't the younger Taft girl a class below you?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do." Dorothy put down her coffee cup and looked at Brooke.

"Well I don't *care* then," Brooke said.

"That's it." Dorothy slammed her hand on the table. She turned to Daddy. "I'm sick of being treated like this."

“Brooke, apologize to your mother.” Daddy folded his paper and placed it on the table.

“For what?” Brooke glared. She dropped her spoon in the bowl and pushed the whole thing away from her. Milk sloshed over the sides, making a grainy puddle.

“Brooke,” Daddy warned.

“She behaves like an animal, Tom, you see that?” Dorothy touched her head with her fingers and gently massaged her temples. “It makes me physically ill to watch her behave this way.”

“It was an accident! Jesus Christ, you people. Who the fuck cares whether Patsy’s doctor’s daughter goes to Webster? Does that make him a good doctor? Because he can afford to send his kid somewhere where they’ll pretend she’s not retarded? Yes, Mom, she does go to my school and she’s only in the grade below me because she’s a fucking moron.”

“Unacceptable,” Dorothy hissed. Her arm shot out and grabbed Brooke’s wrist, as she stood up to leave. I held my spoon frozen above my grapefruit as Dorothy pulled Brooke back to the table. Dorothy’s red manicured talons flashed against Brooke’s skin. Brooke wrenched her arm away, and Dorothy’s grip loosened. Pink scratch marks began to form as Brooke backed away. Blood bubbled up in tiny dots along one of the scratches.

“Enough,” Daddy was saying. He’d raised himself up enough to put his arm between Dorothy and Brooke. It was unclear whether he was talking to one or both of them. “That is enough.”

“You psychotic bitch! I hate you!” Brooke cradled her wrist and ran from the dining room.

“Get back here!” Daddy called after her with his eyes on Dorothy, whose mouth was set in a thin, straight line. She stared back at him, accusing, her eyes cold and gray. Brooke’s steps pounded quick and heavy on the stairs. I put my grapefruit spoon down carefully so that it wouldn’t clink against the plate.

“She’s out of control, Tom.” Dorothy stood up and started gathering the plates from the table. She took mine away, too, although I’d only eaten a bite.

“She’s just being a teenager,” Daddy said.

“Well, I can’t take it anymore. It’s not the same for you so don’t treat me like I’m being unreasonable.”

“I know, Dory.”

“We can’t even have a decent breakfast together.” She dropped the plates carelessly into the sink for the housekeeper, someone new whose name I couldn’t remember. Lucy had been with us for thirteen years, from the time I was five until I left for college. After she moved to California to live with her daughter, Daddy and Dorothy had employed a series of women, usually from somewhere in Central America. Dorothy treated the women badly and then had Daddy fire them.

“Should we talk about seeing Dr.Siegelke again?”

“I don’t know anymore. I’m going upstairs.” Dorothy wiped her hands on a dish towel, and her eyes rested on me. She shook her head, looking sad. “My stepdaughter

treats me better than my own flesh and blood.” She left the room. I sat there for a moment and blinked until the tears went back where they came from.

“Are you okay?” Daddy asked. He picked up his briefcase and stood next to me with his hand on my shoulder.

“Sure.” I tried to smile.

“I know.” He leaned over and kissed the top of my head. For a moment I thought he’d been paying attention, that he understood how much it hurt that after almost twenty years, Dorothy still felt the need to distinguish so clearly, so biologically between Brooke and me. Then he added, “I hate when they fight too.” I suppressed my disappointment as he ruffled my hair and fled the house for the important and probably less contentious world of business.

Once again, he had missed the point. When I was little, I used to watch Mother on her show when I stayed home sick. But after Dorothy and Daddy got married, no more *Lovely and Tender*. Dorothy flipped out the first time she caught me watching. She’d dragged me to his study after dinner. I stood before him, snuffling and red-nosed with Dorothy’s cold fingers gripping my wrist. “Tom,” she addressed my father. “This is not entertainment for a six-year-old girl. It’s not entertainment for anyone! It’s disgusting, and I won’t have it in my house.”

“But it’s her mother,” he said uncertainly. He sat behind his desk and peered at me, a confusing and tiny specimen in a pink nightgown.

“I’m only thinking of your daughter,” she said. She pulled me closer. When Daddy asked me if I minded, I was too terrified to speak. I shook my head. All I had to do was agree, and for him, the problem was solved.

Pierson was the only one in the office when I arrived. From behind his closed door, classical music hummed through the empty office, filling the space with its quiet murmur. I passed without saying good morning. Daddy had talked to him about my being sick, and I knew that he would come find me today to see if I was okay. Even though I would rather see him now to avoid the embarrassing scene of being fussed over by the boss, I also knew that bothering him in the morning was unacceptable, even for me, his best friend’s daughter.

I put my stuff down, and went to the kitchen to make coffee. As I was scooping grounds, a hand touched my shoulder. Thankful that we could get it over with, I turned around. Instead of Pierson, though, it was Anita. I fumbled with the scoop and knocked the can over on the counter, spilling the grounds everywhere.

“Oh, hi,” I said. I put down the spoon and brushed the coffee into a pile, glad to have something to busy my hands so I didn’t do something dumb like point my finger and click my tongue in the style of James from payroll.

“We’re here for the same thing, I guess.” She held up an insulated mug.

“Looks that way.” I pushed the grains into my open hand.

“Dan told me you were really sick.” Before I could finish cleaning up, she’d filled the machine with water and flipped it on. “You must be feeling better.”

“Yeah, I am.” Awkwardly, I held the hand with the grounds cupped in front of me. She was standing between me and the trash can. Beside me the coffee maker sputtered.

“Oh,” she said. She moved over, and I slid past her. I was very aware of how far away I was from her body. At least a foot even though the kitchen was a small space. We didn’t come close to touching. “Well, you’re certainly here early.”

“I thought I would do some catching up.” I brushed my hands together over the trash.

“I like it here at this time of day, with no one to distract me.” She leaned against the counter. Today she was wearing gray pants and heavy black boots, similar to ones I’d wanted when I was in high school but wasn’t allowed to have because Dorothy thought they looked unfeminine. Her short hair was gelled up into short spikes. Even though I knew it was based on stereotypes, the whole getup made her look more like what I thought lesbians usually looked like. I busied myself pretending to find the exact right mug in the cabinet above the counter.

“Right,” I said. “I promise I won’t bother you.”

“I didn’t mean you. *You* can distract me.”

“I’m afraid I’ll be too busy.” There was enough coffee now so I grabbed the closest coffee cup and filled it. “It’s all yours.”

“That’s what you were looking for?” She seemed amused so I looked down. The mug in my hand was black with a white sketch of an old woman with saggy breasts and no teeth. The caption read “Thank god you don’t chew coffee!” It had been an over-the-hill present for a colleague who’d turned forty last summer. Very sexy, I thought.

“Sentimental attachment. It’s my good luck mug.”

“I see,” she said, smiling. “It was nice to see you again, Patsy.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Hope the mug works.” She was looking right at me, not pouring coffee. There was a small dimple on her chin that I hadn’t noticed before and also a series of small holes along both her earlobes. It looked like she had at least five holes on each lobe, maybe more. All she was wearing now was a pair of silver drops, one in each ear.

“Thanks,” I said. “Bye then.” I went back to my desk. I sat down and fingered my earlobes. I had one piercing in each ear and a pair of tiny diamond studs, a birthday present when I’d turned sixteen. As much as I’d thought about Anita over the last week, I hadn’t seen the piercings or the dimple. I stared at the screen for several seconds wondering what it would feel like to put my finger on that dimple.

By mid-morning, I’d made it through Monday’s stack of paperwork. That wasn’t the hard part. The part that took time was waiting for people to call back and then dealing with them when they did. My phone rang, and I answered, hoping it would be Mr. Crowley, who’d been avoiding me on a worker’s comp claim.

“Babydoll!” Instead the voice of Bobbie Sue Hicks drawled in my ear. Although she’d been living in New York for over twenty years, Mother had an accent that surpassed those of her parents, also Texas natives. Since she’d been on *Lovely and Tender* as the Southern belle, her pronunciation had been cultivated to be more Deep South than west Texan, presumably to match the audience’s idea of what a Southern accent was. As a result she now sounded more like Scarlet O’Hara than George W. Bush, though she’d been raised in the same part of the state as the latter.

“Mother,” I said, surprised by the call. This was a rare occasion.

“Your father’s secretary called my assistant. She said you were ill. Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine now. I had some sort of stomach virus.”

“That’s all? Of course, Beta didn’t write down any of the details. I don’t know what I’m going to do with her.” Beta had been Mother’s personal assistant for years, and although Beta was a meticulous organizer, Mother blamed her for a regular parade of misunderstandings and oversights. It was part of Beta’s job to accept responsibility for these mistakes and keep marching graciously.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly pleasant.” I lowered my voice, aware that everyone around me could hear even when I spoke softly. Sometimes Dan and I could hear the guy next to us clipping his fingernails. “I had to go to the emergency room.”

“I know, darling, you poor thing. I didn’t mean it wasn’t bad, but I mean, I thought you were *dying*. Dorothy probably put what’s-her-name up to it to show what a bad mother I am.”

“You’re not a bad mother.” I sighed. This was where the conversation stopped being about me, if it ever was.

“I know! I meant by *her* standards. Sometimes I wonder how your father married that woman. Really, darling, I sit and ponder it for hours practically.” Mother did not ponder anything for hours, much less anything that had to do with something as far removed from herself.

“She’s not so bad,” I said.

“I find her terrifying. Every time I see her I’m afraid she’ll slap my knees with a spoon if she thinks my dress is too short. I’m so glad you have such a wonderful sense of yourself, darling. Otherwise, things could have turned out disastrously.” I made a non-committal noise in response. If Mother knew the intimate details of my life (meaning the lack of intimate details) she certainly would have considered it a disaster. “Well, anyway,” she said, already bored with the topic, “Have you been watching?”

“I watched some yesterday when I stayed home. I saw you in a hospital scene with....” I couldn’t remember the character’s name. He had smoldering eyes and full, sensuous lips. Even with his head bandaged, you could see his thick, black hair. I hadn’t followed the show for a while, but they were pretty easy to pick up if you knew the core characters and the types of plots the writers were partial to. In high school, one of my

friends agreed to tape it for me, and I used to watch it secretly in binges on overnight stays, the way other girls drank wine coolers or smoked pot.

Even when I didn't get to watch, I'd always known what Bobbie Sue Hicks was up to, either from Mother's occasional phone calls or the teasing of my friends whose parents hadn't banned *Lovely and Tender*. It seemed the young man in yesterday's scene had been in a car accident. Bobbie Sue was consoling him for the loss of his sister, who'd died in the crash and had been one of the company's lead actresses.

"Miguel! Isn't he gorgeous? They want to make him my long lost son, but I say make him my next lover. Our viewers would love it, don't you think? Plus, we already have a little thing going on." Mother giggled. "Oh God, it's fabulous."

"Great," I said. I tried to picture the man more clearly. He'd been very young, I was pretty sure. Now all I could see were his heavily made-up eyes, and those shiny curls peaking out from under the bandages. He'd looked like an after-shave commercial.

"You sound tired, darling. Should I let you go?"

"Probably. I need to get back to work."

"I have to do wardrobe stuff, anyway. But first tell me this – it's been so long since we had a nice chat! – quick, yes or no, just so I know, are you seeing anyone special now?"

"No," I said. "No one special."

"I think I hear a different story in your voice." Her voice turned playful and teasing. She lived in the hope that someday we would bond over men. Really, it hadn't

been until Mathew Rose that she'd started being interested in me. As much as Dorothy encouraged me away from the boy, Mother begged me for details about him and any fleeting relationship that followed. Lately, I had been quite a disappointment.

"Mother, please."

"You can't kid a kidder, especially not one who's your mother."

"There's no one." I said this vehemently enough so that she would leave it alone, but still trying to whisper.

"Well, that's all right. Are you having fun at least?"

"Sure, I'm having fun," I said.

"Really? You know I worry about you."

"I know, Mother."

"So loosen up a little, okay? For me."

"I will."

"Love you," she said. "Don't forget to watch."

"I'll try. Love you, too." I hung up the phone and closed my eyes.

"Patsy." As I'd expected, as soon as the phone was in the cradle, Dan called to me. Pushing with his legs, he rolled his chair around so that it was on my side of the divider and we were facing each other.

"Yeah?"

"Was that your mom?" He leaned forward eagerly.

“You know it was, eavesdropper.” I flicked a paper clip at him. “She called to see if you’re ready to run away with her and live on a goat ranch in Costa Rica. I told her you’d let her know.”

“I just saw that print ad she did for Planned Parenthood.” After dodging the paper clip, he crossed his legs, his ankle resting on one thigh. He tapped a pen on his shoe. “It was good.”

“Great,” I said. I hadn’t seen the ad myself, but I knew that she was going to do it. Her publicist had called weeks ago to ask if I wanted to say anything about her part in the campaign for the press release. I declined.

“And did you see the dress she wore to the Emmy’s? That was hot.”

“Thanks, Dan. That’s enough.” While all my high school friends and sorority sisters knew that my mother played Bobbie Sue Hicks, Dan was the only person I’d told since I started work here. Otherwise, it was a secret. For one thing, there was Pierson, who’d been friends with her before she’d dumped her old friends and taken up with New York theater people. Unless he was drunk and sentimental, he didn’t seem to like to talk about her much. Also, it was bad enough being practically related to the boss. I didn’t need a minor celebrity parent on top of that.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” Dan shrugged and swiveled in his chair to roll back to his desk.

“I’m just not in the mood, okay?”

“Fine, but if you talk to your mom again tell her my bags are packed and I’m working on my Spanish.”

“Sure,” I said. When he was back in his place, I crossed my arms across my desk and put my head down. Even in normal circumstances, when I hadn’t been puking up my guts all weekend, I found it exhausting to talk to her. Even so, every now and then it was nice to be reminded that out there somewhere was a woman who admitted to being my mother.

## Hunger

A couple of days later, Anita came by to ask me to lunch. Her hair was spiked up again. Silver hoops and studs ran up the side of her ears, filling in the holes I'd noticed before. Every time I saw her, there was something new to notice and contemplate in great detail, which was what I was doing as she stared at me, waiting for my answer. Dan had left half an hour ago to meet some friends who were in town for a conference so I was on my own.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll come to lunch.”

“Mind if I look around?” She pointed to the few photographs I had and stepped into my cubicle.

“Not at all.” I scooted my chair back, but our legs were still almost touching. She smelled minty. My head felt light as I breathed her in.

“Is this your family?” Anita picked up the frame on my desk. “They’re cute.”

“Thanks.” The impromptu family portrait showed us at a Fourth of July picnic in the country when I was fourteen. I’d planned to visit Mother that summer, but she got a role in some Christmas special and couldn’t take me. Months later, I watched her screech and mug and laugh adoringly as the mother of a precocious kid named Oliver the Genius who set out to prove that Santa Clause really did exist. It was a pretty bad movie, but worse than that, it meant I had to spend the holiday with Daddy and his family instead of with Mother in New York.

In the photo, Daddy and Dorothy sat behind us on a blue blanket. Dorothy's arms were wrapped around eight-year-old Brooke while I sat off to the side next to the picnic basket. Daddy was leaning back with a plate of spare ribs, smiling happily at his girls. We were the perfect family. Shortly after the photo was snapped, mosquitoes descended, Brooke was bitten by a cousin's Chihuahua, and Dorothy swore she'd never again consider going to a party without air conditioning and catering.

Anita wiped a smudge from the glass and set it back down. "You look tired," she said.

"Thanks."

"I didn't mean it in a *you look like shit* way, more in a *hey, you ok?* kind of way."

"I'm fine," I said. "Thank you." To change the subject, I suggested we go to the salad buffet for lunch. Anita shook her head.

"How about Mexican instead? There's this place you should try."

Anita drove since she knew where we were going. It was still chilly outside, and her car's heater had the power of one of those travel-sized hair dryers that folds and fits in your hand. It was cramped and dusty, and I had to move a nest of laundry to sit down. On the floorboard next to my feet, a dead beetle was flipped on his back with his crunchy little feet in the air. She took us to a taqueria near 610 and Westheimer, no place I'd ever noticed before although I must have driven past it a million times.

Inside, almost all the seats – red, swiveling chairs connected to the tables – were taken by groups of blue-collar Hispanic men. Bits of meat, lettuce, and fried tortilla

combined into a wet sludge under the un-bussed tables. The menu, written in Spanish, hung above kitchen on a dry erase board. I felt slightly...out of place.

“I don’t speak Spanish.” I whispered to Anita. The rest of the patrons clearly didn’t have that problem. Since we’d come in, I hadn’t heard a word of English spoken. And we were the only white people in the place, which made me feel strange, especially since I just then realized that I didn’t actually know if Anita was white or not.

“It’s not hard to figure out,” Anita said. “What do you want?”

“Salad?” I wasn’t feeling adventurous or particularly brave considering the only thing I’d eaten in forty-eight hours was a piece of grapefruit and some crackers.

“*Ensalata*, see?” She pointed. “There are pictures.” We ordered from the waitress who came to our table. She looked at me kindly when I pointed to the menu, as Anita had suggested, and mispronounced the word. I smiled back, too widely, and said thank you with awkward enthusiasm. I pretended not to notice that Anita was laughing at me. Once we got our food, I picked at my salad, while Anita worked away at her chicken torta, a huge sandwich with chicken, avocado, lettuce, tomato, and what looked like sour cream. She added extra hot sauce that dripped out the sides when she bit into it.

“So do you usually not eat?” she asked. “Or is it just this place?”

“I don’t have much of an appetite right now.” I stabbed a piece of diced tomato with a fork.

“Don’t want to eat with all the Mexicans, huh?”

“That’s not it at all!”

Anita swallowed. "I'm kidding. Most of these people are from El Salvador." I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and looked around to see if anyone was listening.

"Does that bother you?" she asked. "You don't like them either?" She made her hands into a triangle, rested her chin on them, and looked at me gravely.

"No!"

"So you're not a racist?"

"No. Why would you say that?"

"Geez. I'm trying to mess around with you, but you keep taking me seriously. It's becoming awkward."

I took a breath. The clatter of silverware, the din of eaters filled my ears until it was the only thing I could hear. "It's just, I didn't know you were Hispanic, and I don't want you to think I don't like...people who are Hispanic."

"I'm not Hispanic." She wrinkled her forehead. "Why did you think that?"

"You speak Spanish. And you made those jokes. Someone who wasn't Hispanic wouldn't make those jokes"

"First of all, I don't speak Spanish. I know how to order off a menu, for godsake. I'm part Greek, and I have a Jewish great-grandmother."

"Are you kidding again? I can't tell."

"I'm serious," she said. "I swear I'm not Hispanic."

I sat there, my face burning with embarrassment. When I didn't smile, she laughed. "I know I don't know you that well, but you seem really uptight."

“I’m sorry.” I covered my face with my hands. “I’m going to stop talking.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s worse for you than it is for me. Actually it’s kind of endearing to watch you squirm.”

“Can we change the subject?”

“Please.” Anita took another bite of her huge sandwich and chewed. I picked up my fork again and made myself eat a piece of lettuce. After a minute Anita asked, “So was that like a dating ambush the other night or what? Before you got there, I thought it was a set up, but apparently someone forgot to tell you.”

“Great new topic,” I said. “Do we have anything to talk about that doesn’t involve my public humiliation?”

“You should have seen your face,” she continued. “ You looked mortified. It was adorable.” I blinked at the adjective, which seemed suddenly intimate. What right did she have to use that kind of word? We hardly knew each other. With a paper napkin, I wiped a blob of salad dressing off the table. Besides, no one thought I was adorable. If anything, people said I looked responsible or sweet or just like some distant relative with whom they’d always had an amicable relationship. Maybe that’s what she meant. I probably reminded her of her little sister or baby cousin who lived in Wisconsin and raised heifers for 4H.

“It’s embarrassing to always have people setting you up,” I said. “I told Dan not to do it.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, are they blind? Why don’t you just tell them and put an end to the suffering? Imagine the look on poor James’s face when he finds out you’re a lesbian, right?” Anita laughed while my heart went quietly crazy in my chest. My fingers turned to ice. The tomato I’d been playing with squished under my fork.

“Excuse me?” I asked softly. “I’m *what*, did you say?”

“Gay?” She was speaking at the same volume as before, but the word seemed to bellow forth as it would from an announcer at a soccer game. Gaaaaaaaay! The woman I’d ordered from was leaning next to the cash register and wrapping her ponytail around her wrist. She glanced at me and smiled shyly, straightening up behind the counter.

“No.” I put my fork down.

“Bisexual? I’m sorry. I should have known by the way you dress.” I stared at her, and Anita sighed in exasperation. “That was another joke. About the way you dress, I mean. I knew I wasn’t hilarious, but I didn’t know how *unfunny* I was until just now, here at this lunch today.”

“Not that either,” I said, finding my voice. “I’m not anything.”

“Oh. I see.” Her voice had an edge.

“See *what*?” I asked. My voice had an edge too, but it was more an-about-to-cry edge than a I-want-to-punch-you-in-the-face edge, which is what hers sounded like to me. At the moment, it didn’t seem as though she found me endearing or adorable in any way, not even like her cousin in Wisconsin. Why was I lying to her like this? Was I lying? I didn’t know. I wasn’t ready. All I knew was that I had to deny it. Deny. Deny. Deny.

“You’re a straight girl who flirts with women,” she said, as though realizing it for the first time herself.

“Flirts?” Deny.

“That’s right. With me.”

“I did not.” Deny. “I’ve been friendly, that’s all.” Deny.

“Are you kidding? *I definitely noticed you.*” Anita cooed my words back to me and fluttered her eyelashes. “Not to mention the way you’ve been gaping at me all week.”

“I think I’d better go.” I put my purse over my shoulder and stood up while Anita stared. Then I remembered that she was the one who drove us there. I sat back down.

“We came together.”

“Yes we did,” she said. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “And I guess I don’t mind if you flirt even if you are straight.”

“Can we just go?” I studied my watch, unwilling to look her in the eye. “I’ve got work to do. And you’ve seen that I’m not very hungry.”

“My mistake, okay? I’m sorry,” she said. She had apologized, but she still looked mad, which made me nervous. Who knew what she’d do? One minute she’d called me adorable, the next a lesbian.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m just not, that’s all.”

“Obviously.”

“Listen.” I looked up. “I’ve been sick. I’m acting strange. You seem like a nice person, but it’s a bad time. I just want to go. It has nothing to do with your sexual orientation.”

“I didn’t say anything about my sexual orientation.” She stared at me. Her eyes widened. “Did you think I was a *Hispanic dyke*?”

“I didn’t say...” I stopped.

“Jesus christ! I’m messing with you. You are so dense.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Okay. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to *me*.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I sighed, and put my head in my hands. Whatever I said turned on me. I shut my mouth, refusing to let myself speak another word.

“Don’t get upset. We’re just setting things straight. So to speak.” She ran her fingers through her hair and shook her head. The smile she’d been suppressing suddenly broke through. Anita wasn’t really mad at all. She wasn’t judging me. She was just playing. She looked at me as if I were a puppy and she could see my tail wagging even though she’d slapped me on the rump. She knew that I wasn’t annoyed at her, even while I was just figuring it out myself. Somehow underneath all the frustration, I was enjoying myself, although I would never admit it to her. Not that it mattered. She already knew. I had to put a stop to this thing before it went any further.

“That was a really stupid joke,” I said.

Anita shrugged and picked up a tub of creamer from the table. She flipped it over and over with the tips of her thumbs and forefingers.

“Nervous habit,” she said. She studied me through long, dark lashes. “I play with things.”

“We really should get back to work.” I kept a somber face to keep up the illusion that she wasn’t melting my insides like honey. I didn’t want to encourage her. She challenged my gaze for a moment, the creamer flipping over and over, her fingers quick and slim.

“Fine.” Anita dropped the container on the table. “I was trying to keep you from storming away angry, but I guess I failed.”

“Can’t very well storm away when you’re my ride, can I?”

“Guess not,” she said. On our way out, we passed a group of four or five white men in suits. One of them held the door open for us and smiled. “Ladies,” he said. We thanked him, and went through. As the door closed between us, I heard one of the men ask how his friend had come across this place. *It’s so authentic*, he said. The door holder chuckled and said he’d always loved a good dive. *Plus, they have the best tortillas in Houston*. Anita looked embarrassed as we walked to the car, but I couldn’t tell if it was for the men or for us being like them.

We rode back without talking. The heaters whirred and I could hear a ticking coming from somewhere in the dashboard. The whole lunch had been a disaster. I’d come across as a bigot, a racist with no sense of humor, a closeted homosexual, and a

picky eater on top of all that. And at the most only two of those things were true. When we got back to the office, we said goodbye and went our separate ways, me back to my cubicle and she, to the payroll office at the other end of the floor. I felt a sudden, desperate urge to say something else to her before she disappeared. Anything. I tried to grab at words floating in my brain like fruit in a jello mold.

“Hey, Anita,” I said, remembering my conversation with Dan about whether or not Pierson would care that Anita was gay.

“Yeah?” She turned around.

“You should tone it down. No more than two earrings per ear. Less spikiness in the hair, that sort of thing.” I was such an asshole. Why say that, of all things?

“Fashion tips?” She looked disappointed. “Now I am offended.”

“It’s not that *I* don’t like it.” I caught myself before I went on. Was that flirting? Didn’t I tell people all the time that I liked their clothes, their hair, their shoes? Just this morning I told Dan that his deep red tie made him look presidential. I certainly wasn’t flirting with Dan. Stubbornly, I defended my stupid, jerk suggestion. “I know you’ve been getting away with it, but Pierson’s had people fired for less. It’s the kind of thing James might not think to tell you.”

“I’ll take it into consideration.”

“It’s a conservative office.”

“I understand. Nothing personal.” She gave a little wave and continued on her way. I held my purse tight to stop my hands from shaking.

Safe back at my desk, I got a cup of coffee and took a few deep breaths. As much as I'd wanted to be away from her before, now I wondered when I would see her next. I started a spreadsheet database I'd been putting off. As I transferred information from files to the computer, my body warmed. I started to feel feverish and sweaty. I thought of Anita sitting in the red plastic swivel chair, saying *you're a lesbian*. I saw her smile, the dimple on her chin, the disappointment on her face when I told her to dress more conservatively.

It was such a strange feeling I had now. Was I angry that she'd said it? Sad? Thrilled? I felt like I couldn't breathe. I went to the bathroom, where I splashed water on my flushed face and took two Tylenol. At my desk, I picked up the picture frame that Anita had held just a couple of hours ago. The frozen smiles in the photograph bit into my heart. I put the photograph down and took another file from my desk. I began to type. The orderliness of the spreadsheet calmed me. Each category had a column, each client a row, and all I had to do was fill in the blanks. It was that easy.

I stayed at work late that night knowing all that waited for me at home was an empty apartment and the aimless thoughts in my head. By the time I got home, it was already dark. Edna, my landlord, was in the courtyard smoking a cigarette and watching her toy poodle *do its business*, as she said. Ralph was a pathetic little thing with cataracts and scaly bald spots. Once his curly fringe might have been called white, but it had long turned yellow like the edges of crumbling newspaper clippings. If, by accident, he

happened to stray more than a few yards from Edna's feet, he yelped and turned around in circles until she called to him and he could find her by the sound of her voice. If he wandered too far, he couldn't even do that. He was also a little hard of hearing.

"Hey there," she said.

"Hi, Edna."

"I see you got some company." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and Ralph's ears perked up. "Good for you. Some people might judge, but not me."

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"It's nice to have a nice friend, if you know what I mean." She nodded toward my apartment, where, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure passed by the window. I felt a rush of blood in my ears.

"No one's supposed to be in my apartment," I whispered in alarm.

"Oh, dear," she said. She dropped her cigarette and ground it into the patio with her heel. "I just assumed."

"What should we do?"

"Call 911. C'mon, Ralphie." She whistled, and he was at her heels. She picked him up, stroking his head protectively. He leaned his head back and licked her chin.

"Wait," I said. "Let's call from my cell phone, and then we can try to see if they pass by again. Then we can get a description"

"Okay, but act natural. We don't want to call attention to ourselves. Pretend we're talking about the weather or something." Edna's fingers picked at Ralph's fur, and

she smiled excitedly. For once, I was glad that she hated to be left out of any drama. I didn't want to be left alone to deal with this. We kept our eyes on the window, and I rooted through my purse to find my cell phone.

"Did you see them at all?" I asked. My fingers trembled past day planner, compact, gloves, lipstick.

"She was a little odd-looking, now that I think about it. Probably one of those street kids, looking for drug money. Poor thing." Edna shook her head and kissed Ralph on his crusty head.

"It's a girl?"

"I know," Edna said. "I always thought women didn't do things like this. Crazy world." Just then, the figure passed by the window again. Edna and I drew in a collective breath. She held Ralph closer and he began to squirm. Of course, it was a girl. I dropped my cell phone back in my purse.

"I'm sorry, Edna. It's my sister."

"*That's* your sister?"

"Half-sister."

"Well, thank God," she said. She put Ralph down and fished another cigarette from the front pocket of her blousy-button down shirt. "I almost had a heart attack. Poor Ralphie, too. You look nothing alike. I never would have thought you were related."

"Different mothers," I said. By this time tomorrow anyone in the complex who cared would know that I had a drug addict half-sister who'd broken into my apartment.

Now that the shock of discovering an intruder in my home was wearing away, I started to wonder what Edna would have told people if I hadn't come along. That I was lecherously shacking up with a homeless teenager? *A girl, at that*, I imagined her whispering to them as they passed over their rent checks. It was like my worst nightmare, Patsy-is-Gay-Day, where everybody suddenly decided that I might not be as heterosexual as I tried to seem...or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe I was just now discovering what everybody else already saw.

"Edna," I said, "Who did you think it was in there before?"

"A friend, like I said."

"That's not so unusual. I have friends." I crossed my arms over my chest, hugging myself. "I don't see why you were making such a big deal about it."

"You just seem lonely, that's all. I was happy for you."

"I live alone. Aren't people who live alone lonely by definition?"

She sucked on her cigarette and shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not lonely, and I live alone. Maybe you should get a dog."

"Maybe," I said, remembering another reason why I didn't like to talk to Edna. Not only was she a gossip, she was also depressing as hell. "Edna, did you think Brooke was my friend or my girlfriend?"

"I thought she was your girlfriend." She flicked ash on the ground and gave me a tired look. "Is that so wrong?"

“But *why*?” I asked, seeing an opportunity. “Have you always thought I was a lesbian? If so, why? Do other people think that?”

“Who knows about these things? You get a feeling about someone. Sometimes you’re wrong. Sometimes you’re right. All I know is that I never know, that’s one thing I’ve learned on God’s green earth.”

“Okay, whatever that means,” I said. “Goodnight, Edna.”

“Goodnight, dear.” She called again for Ralph, who was sniffing under the azalea bushes.

I opened the door to my apartment, and Brooke was settled on the couch watching television and eating a carrot stick. Already, my living room looked like the aftermath of a hurricane. Crumpled tissues and plates were strewn across the coffee table. Clothes were hung over the back of the couch, and the contents of her bag had slid out across the floor on the way to the kitchen. From the mark on a piece of paper, I could tell that her schoolwork had already gotten in her way. For Brooke, that was no problem. She just walked where she wanted and worried about things like foot-printed term papers later.

“Do you know how bad you need cable?” She looked at me, shaking her head in pity. She held up the Tupperware of cut celery and carrots. “And better snacks.”

“Do you know I almost just called the police because I thought there was a serial killer in my house?” I threw my purse on the floor. Brooke crunched a stalk of celery, looking pleased. My whole body was tense and sore and I eased myself on to the couch, feeling a small relief when I sank into the cushions. “It’s not funny. I felt like an idiot.”

“I ran away from home. I needed a place to stay.”

“You’re too old to run away from home.”

“Says who?”

“You just are.” I closed my eyes, exhausted. The bones settled like rocks under my skin, rubbing against each other, heavy and uncomfortable. “*I* never ran away from home.”

“That’s your problem then,” Brooke said.

“You can’t stay here. Dorothy will kill me.”

“Mom’s all bark. You know that.”

“Well, I’m not taking you to school. You can find your own ride.”

“Fine, bitch-sister.” She swung her legs happily “Besides, how do you think I got here? Frank brought me.”

“Who’s Frank?”

“Glad you asked,” she said. “Frank’s my new boyfriend. He’s a freshman at HCC. He’s in my Wednesday night drawing class, and he’s totally hot.”

“Are you waiting for me to be impressed?” I asked. Each thump of her legs against the couch heightened the storm of resentment roiling in my chest. “Because I’ll tell you what would impress me, if you finally passed your driver’s test and people didn’t have to keep carting you around all over the place.”

“Jealous,” Brooke said dismissively. She continued her explanation. “Anyway, Mom caught us making out in the pool house. She went fucking nuts, and forbade me to see him again. So we left together. It was very *Romeo and Juliet*.”

“So why didn’t you stay with him if you’re so in love?”

“I could have, but you know, we’ve only actually known each other for a couple of weeks. Plus, he lives with his mom. I didn’t want to impose. Besides I never said anything about love.”

“What about imposing on me,” I said.

“Oh, please, you have no life to impose on.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t try to make me feel bad for being honest. It won’t work anyway.” Brooke propped her foot on the coffee table, next to a dirty plate, and was distracted by the television where a woman in a sports bra was eating worms.

Brooke’s torn canvas sneakers left dirt smudges on my shiny wood. I pushed her feet off and wiped away the smudge. “Jesus,” she said. “You’re so fucking anal.” In my head Brooke should still have been mutilating baby dolls and getting make-up stains on Dorothy’s five-hundred-dollar pants suits, not running away with some artsy community college punk. I was quiet for a moment as I considered that the most interesting thing I’d ever done in the pool house was sneak a cigarette with one of my friends in junior high.

“You’ve only known this guy two weeks,” I said.

“So?”

“So, can I meet this kid before he picks you up for school and you start having babies in a trailer park?”

“Now you sound like Mom. His name is Frank. He doesn’t live in a trailer park.” With her mouth clenched, Brooke stared at the television. She flipped through the channels one after the other without stopping.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m just concerned.”

“And even if he did live in a trailer park, I wouldn’t care.” She threw the remote next to her on the couch. “There’s nothing on.”

“I’m just saying you shouldn’t jump into the pool house with the first cute guy you meet.”

“That part just sort of happened.” She picked at the threads on one of the cushion. I’d bought this couch just last year, my first big purchase for the apartment. It was no Target throwaway or Daddy hand-me-down. No, it was all mine, a blue Pottery Barn rip off I’d found at a furniture outlet mall down I-45 on the way to the beach one weekend. I made Charlotte call Richard, and he met us there on the return trip so he could load it into his truck. I fought the urge to swat Brooke’s hands away.

“Stop picking,” I said. “You’ll make a hole.” She curled up her pink hands and folded them in her lap. They curled together like baby mice sleeping.

“Do you want to know what he said to me? He said, *I could imagine being happy with you*. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Oh, Brooke. That’s such a line.”

“Well it worked.” Her chin jutted into the air. “I believe him.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“So? I trust him.” Suddenly her face relaxed and she pretended to let it go. She laughed. “Who do I think I’m talking to, right? What would you know about any of this?”

“What does that mean?” I asked carefully.

Brooke’s mouth stayed clenched, the muscles working in her face as she grinded her teeth. It was the way she looked when she was fighting with Dorothy. I realized that was who I’d become tonight. Part of me wanted to go back to when I’d first come in and do everything exactly the opposite as I’d actually done it.

“As far as I know,” she went on cheerfully, “you’ve never even been felt up.”

“Oh, God.” I started to stand. “You’re such a child.”

“No, really.” Brooke reached for my arm. She mimicked me. “*I’m just concerned*. Do you want me to explain to you how it all works?” She blinked, wide eyed, her mouth in the shape of an exaggeratedly innocent O. I could still see the pulsing of her muscles in her cheeks.

“Look, stay on the couch. Fuck whomever you want. I’m going to my room.”

“Ooh, the virgin said *fuck*, she must be really mad.”

“Why do you always have to be such a little shit?”

“Why do you always have a stick up your ass?”

“Fuck you.” I snatched the Tupperware container out of her hand. “I’m taking these.”

“There she goes again!” Brooke’s singsong voice followed me to the bedroom. “All this cursing, one thing leads to another, and who knows what she’ll do next? Forget to wipe her feet on the mat? Wear a color other than beige? Give some guy a blow job?” She shouted the last part as I slammed the door to my bedroom, but I still heard it. I took a carrot stick from the container and took a bite. I knew I must be hungry, but it hardly seemed worth the effort to eat. I tossed the half-eaten carrot back into the container and fell asleep with my clothes on.

A few hours later, I woke up with my face burning and my breath hot in my mouth. At some point, I’d wiggled out of my pants, which were stuffed under the covers in a lump at the end of the bed. Even though my skin was hot, inside I felt frozen to my aching bones. I pulled the covers tighter around me and fell back asleep. A little while later, I woke up again, this time, covered in sweat.

My thighs slid together, and my shirt and underwear were soaked through. I lifted the hair off my neck, where it stuck in long sticky strands. The sheets around and under were hot and moist like used bath towel. I threw off the covers, and the air chilled me. Goosebumps prickled sharp like needles. From the living room, I could hear murmuring voices from the television. I moved in the dark for a T-shirt and another pair of underwear. I put my sweatshirt on and a pair of sweatpants. I slept on top of the damp covers and pulled my mother’s quilt over me. It was the first of countless such nights.

## Blood and Sweat and Barbie

“I’ve got to do this,” Charlotte told me over the phone. “And you have to come with me.” It was a sunny Sunday afternoon a week and a half after my first experience with the night sweats, which were now a part of my sleeping routine. At least every other night, I had the same hot then cold, sweaty sleep where I woke up first freezing then drenched. The night before I’d changed clothes twice. In the morning, my clothes were heaped on the floor in soggy, sour-smelling piles, and my body was wrung out like a dishrag. I agreed to go with Charlotte to get her tattoo because I’d already promised and because I hadn’t been out of my pajamas since the Friday before when I got home from work. My body was beginning to smell a bit moldy, and it seemed like a good idea to air the whole thing out.

Charlotte drove us to the studio in Bellaire where she’d found the woman for the job. She was a female, vegetarian, recycling, socialist stay-at-home mom, who ran her own business out of a studio in the house. Charlotte had been completely smitten in an hour phone consultation when they’d decided that the perfect thing for Charlotte would be a small heart over her right shoulder blade, which is where Charlotte said she felt like her heart would be if how she felt the weight of the world had anything to do with it. “Richard may be pissed off now, but if I can’t do something like this for myself before we’re married, then what does that say about how willing he is to let me be myself?”

“I thought he didn’t care about the tattoo. I thought you wanted him to be there with you.”

“That was before I showed him what I’m getting.”

“It’s just a heart, right?” I hadn’t actually seen a drawing of her proposed body art, and now I was starting to wonder.

“Well, sort of,” she said. “It’s a special heart.”

“What are you not telling me?” I asked.

“I want it to be a surprise.” She smiled nervously. I hadn’t seen her this excited since she got picked to lead our school’s delegation at the Model UN our junior year of high school. She spent weeks researching proper attire and speaking patterns. She moderated one of the smaller caucuses and even spoke a few words in the native language. From all reports, it had been pretty impressive. Charlotte liked to dazzle people.

“Whatever you want,” I said, watching out the window. The rain had cleared up, leaving behind soggy, fall-type weather and sunny skies. I seemed to be feeling the change in temperature more acutely than others were. Charlotte had a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, while I was bundled in my pea coat, wool socks leftover from a first and last terrible camping experience.

“So,” Charlotte said after she’d run through her most recent conversation with Richard about the idea of permanent-ink wedding bands, “What’s with the outfit?”

“It’s freezing.”

“It’s not that cold.” With one hand still on the wheel, she reached over and put her hand on my head. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

“I didn’t think I did.” I pulled away so her mothering hands couldn’t reach me.

“And you’re better?”

“Sort of.” I tried to explain the most recent things happening to my body.

Besides the strange sleep, my left ankle was now swelling enough that I could see the skin puffing out over the bone, my hands almost constantly ached, and I had a painful nodule on one of my ribs. I thought I’d bruised myself somehow, but when I went to look, I didn’t see anything. Feeling around, I found a tender knotty ball that rolled under my skin. Even though it hurt, all morning I kept putting my hands under my shirt and feeling around to see if it was still there. None of these things seemed related, but they were all uncomfortable and unwelcome.

“What did your doctor say?” Charlotte asked.

“I haven’t asked yet.”

“Patsy,” she scolded. “Why not?”

“I have a follow-up next week, but I’m hoping it all just goes away. What do I say? My ankle hurts, I have a cyst on my ribs, and I’m having night sweats? After a nightlong vomiting incident that somehow got me diagnosed with chlamydia? It sounds like I’m one of those hysterical Freudian women.”

“I see what you mean.” Charlotte nodded thoughtfully. “It does seem like a classic case of hypochondria.”

“Dr. Taft will probably send me to a psychiatrist. I’ll have to talk about my father a lot.”

“What about your mother? Maybe your internal organs feel abandoned. I’ve always thought you could blame everything that’s gone wrong in your life on your mother leaving you. Plus, she’s an odd woman – maybe it’s genetic.”

“You should talk,” I said.

“My kidneys don’t feel forsaken,” she said. “They just feel guilty.”

“And culturally confused. *Am I Irish Catholic? Am I Korean?*”

“That too.” She checked her reflection in the rearview mirror as we stopped at a light. She wiped the corners of her lips with the pinky and straightened her glasses. “But I think other people are more confused about that than I am. They bring it up more than I ever do.”

“People like me?” I asked.

“Yup.” She re-adjusted the mirror.

“Maybe I *should* go to therapy. Not only am I confused about my own identity, I’m confused about yours too.” I sighed and looked out the window as we pulled in front of a little blue house with a gigantic inflatable Santa Claus anchored to the lawn with stakes and twine.

“Might not be a bad idea,” Charlotte looked out the window at the yard we’d parked beside. “Oh my,” she said. The windows of the blue house were fogged with canned snow, not just the corners the way the photo on the cans demonstrates, but thick all the way to the center of the windows. You could see where people of various height had rubbed away circles of the chemical fluff so they could see outside. A pink tricycle

was overturned at the end of the driveway, and a plastic tee-pee with water filling the folds stood partially collapsed in one corner of the yard.

“This is it?” I asked.

“I think so. Is there an angel on the roof?” Charlotte checked the address in her notes. She looked up. “Yup. This has to be it.”

“I missed the angel,” I said. Sure enough, a fat, half-naked cherub sat perched on the flat part of the roof just above the front door. “So, let me get this straight. You wouldn’t get a tattoo in what basically looked like doctor’s office, but you’ll do it at this house turned child care center?”

“She has a studio in the garage. Barbara assures me that it’s completely sterile.”

Despite Charlotte’s confident words, I could tell she was having second thoughts. She chewed her lip and slowly opened the car door. Seconds after she rang the doorbell, a smashed face appeared in one of the lower spaces cleared of fake snow on the window next to the door. The mouth was wet and red and opened into a yell that fogged the window. Black holes of smashed nostrils pressed against the glass. Charlotte jumped back, and I laughed. The door opened, and the monstrous face disappeared. A woman wearing a black leather vest and jeans with ripped knees and paint smears held the door open. Her hair was cut into a triangular bob, and a girl about three years old was hanging on to her pants leg. The kid stared up at us, red hair frizzing around her face like the head of a dandelion.

“I’m Barbie.” The woman held out a warm, strong hand, which we both shook as we introduced ourselves. The muscles in her arms flexed visibly. Her jeans were tight across her narrow hips, and they gave me the impression of someone ten years younger until I took a closer look at her face. The kid had come relatively late in life, it seemed. “And this is Autumn. Can you say hello to Miss Patsy and Miss Charlotte?” The girl shook her head.

“Hi, Autumn,” Charlotte leaned over to greet her. She pressed her face into Barbie’s thigh.

“She doesn’t talk much,” Barbie said and tousled her daughter’s hair. The curls sprung back, snapping into place with military uniformity. Barbie led us to the kitchen. She set up Autumn at one end of the table with sandwich cookies, milk, and a plastic place setting. Charlotte’s eyes roamed. She was noting, I was sure, the crumbs on the floor, the overturned dish of mushy pet food, the pile of dishes, the sticky place on the table where she accidentally placed her hands before folding them in her lap, the faint smell of burned cheese. Her eyes rested on a picture posted on the refrigerator of a smiling Indian man with a scraggly afro and an orange dress.

“Barbara,” Charlotte began, her eyes still on the photograph.

“Call me Barbie, please. Do you know him?” Barbie gestured toward the refrigerator as she pushed aside piles of paper on the table in order to place cups of coffee in front of us. We shook our heads. “That’s Sai Baba,” she said.

“A friend?” I asked. She laughed while Charlotte smiled cautiously.

“A guru. I saw him in Puttaparthi before Autumn was born. He’s amazing. Have either of you been to India?”

“No,” Charlotte said. “Barbie, I’d like to talk about the work I’m going to have done today.”

“Charlotte,” Barbie said. “Drink some coffee and don’t worry so much. You’ve chosen a really beautiful design. I can see that even more now that I’ve met you in person. I think you’ll like some of the alterations I’ve made to the fax you sent.”

“Can I see what you’ve done?”

“Autumn has had me running around like a mad woman all morning. She’ll be ready for her nap soon, and then we’ll get started. Patsy, why don’t you tell me about yourself? I’ve already heard so much about Charlotte over the phone. We had an intense conversation earlier this week.”

“Not much to tell,” I said. I glanced at Charlotte who seemed unusually subdued. I couldn’t believe we were still here. I raised my eyebrows in a question, which Charlotte ignored by continuing to stare at Sai Baba.

“Of course there is!” Barbie reached for the tray of cookies that had been precariously balanced on a box marked *STERILE ROUND LINER TATTOO NEEDLES*. She held them out for us. “No hydrogenated oils,” she said. When we both declined, she took two for herself and set the tray back down on the box. She examined my face.

“Hmmm,” she said after several seconds.

“What?”

“I read auras a little bit. I’m worried about that light green, Patsy.”

“Why?” Charlotte asked. “What does that mean?”

“Well, she may be getting sick.” Barbie opened one of the cookies and licked out the frosting while Charlotte nodded. Barbie turned back to me. “You should take it easy for the next few weeks, let it try to pass without incident.”

“She *is* sick,” Charlotte said.

“I am not.” I glared at Charlotte. Autumn, I noticed, had not eaten either of the cookies her mother handed her. Instead she was grounding them into dust on the table in front of her. She stuck her little hand in the milk glass and pulled it out, rubbing the liquid into the cookie powder until it started to form a paste.

“You are too.”

“Don’t worry, Patsy. The body has an amazing ability to heal, and you have such a wonderful friend to help you along the way.” Barbara leaned over and put her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “Would you like to hear one of Sai Baba’s thoughts for the day, which I think might be helpful? He has a website. Let me think how it goes...*Perfect freedom is not given to any man on earth, because the very meaning of mortal life is relationship with and dependence on another.* Isn’t that nice? It lets you know it’s okay to be dependent in this life because you have to. But freedom will come in the next. I know it helps me to remember that.” She reached over and touched Autumn’s cheek affectionately. Autumn continued to use both hands to create a smear of sticky goo on the table.

Charlotte was nodding again and she even reached for one of the cookies. This was ridiculous. How could she be falling for this spiritual quack? “So are you Hindu?” I asked.

“Patsy.” Charlotte brushed her hair away from her face. “Don’t be rude.”

“You’re wondering about the Santa,” Barbie said.

“Well, yes.” And the angel and the guru and the aura-reading, to be perfectly honest, I was thinking.

“I don’t like to feel constrained by the doctrine or traditions of any one religion.” She turned to Charlotte. “It’s okay. I don’t think it’s rude at all. I see the light blue in her aura. She’s searching, that’s all. She wants something she feels like she can’t have. She’s dissatisfied.”

“She *is* dissatisfied.” Charlotte reached over and took another cookie. She seemed to be getting comfortable in this very unlike-Charlotte place.

“Well, who isn’t?” I asked. “And will you please stop talking about me in the third person?” I shifted in my chair. Apparently I’d been loud or distracting in some way because Autumn took a break from her food play to stare at me. She blinked at me, orange irises flashing like Monarch butterfly wings, an impish hue that matched her hair. I tried to smile at her, but she simply stared back. She probably sensed with either her childish intuition or inherited second sight that my smile was a fake.

“That’s an interesting question, Patsy.” Barbara smiled. “Are you sure you don’t want a cookie?”

“Thank you, no.” Little Autumn held out a handful of her chocolate goop and placed it under my nose. I wanted to be amused at how cute and earnest she was, but my brain was hammering in my head again, and my throat felt thick and sore. Even in the house, I felt cold. I wanted to be back home in my bed where I could pile on covers and turn the heat up until my face glowed and the aching in my bones eased with the warmth. I wanted to be where I wasn’t being attacked by an aging hippie biker chick and her creepy daughter who rightfully should be starring in her own horror movie.

“Look she’s offering you *her* cookies. What a sweet girl, Autumn! Mommy is very proud of what a nice girl you are.” Autumn looked at her mother and smiled for the first time since we’d met her. Her white cheeks, pale as mozzarella, squished up under her eyes and a pair of dimples revealed themselves along with a set of pointy, spaced out teeth. She was both hideously ugly and painfully adorable. She giggled, a high animal sound, and covered her eyes with her hands. Unfortunately, cookie mush still coated her fingers, and a smear of chocolate flavored mud appeared across her forehead in clung to straying wooly hairs. Now she looked like something from a Dickens novel. A cookie clump dropped into her eye and she began to blink furiously. She cried and held her hands out for Barbie.

“Oh, fudge.” Barbara scooped the child up and placed her on her hip. “I’ll be back.” After the Autumn’s wailing dwindled to a muffled sob at the other end of the house, I looked at Charlotte.

“You want this woman to take a needle to you?” I whispered.

“She’s fascinating, don’t you think?.” Charlotte pulled a paper towel off the roll in the middle of the table and began wiping the table around her.

“Are you kidding? You’re cleaning her table.”

“She’s an artist, that’s all, a little absentminded. Her web site is really impressive. I’m sure her studio looks completely different than this.”

“Fine,” I said. I sat back in my chair. “We can wait and see.”

“Besides, Autumn will be asleep so Barbie won’t be so distracted.” Charlotte got up and dumped a handful of crumbs into the tall garbage can by the sink. She wet her towel under the faucet and began rubbing the table.

“Would you stop cleaning? It’s weirding me out.”

“I hate stickiness.” She wrinkled her nose and continued to scrub. “Besides, I’m kind of nervous about the tattoo.”

“It’s like you’re some sort of slave to Barbie Baba. Have you been brainwashed? Let me see your eyes.”

“Patsy, sometimes you really disappoint me. Just because someone’s been to a guru doesn’t mean they’re in a cult.”

“I just think this whole thing is weird. And I’m not in the mood to be psychoanalyzed or have my energy read or whatever.”

“You’re uncomfortable because she’s hitting a little too close to home.”

“She just said I was sick, and it’s true. Anyone with half an eye could tell that. Look at me, I’m wearing like five layers of clothes. Obviously something’s wrong.”

What a way to spend my Sunday. And later I was supposed to go to dinner at Daddy and Dorothy's to discuss Brooke's situation. She'd been staying on my couch and so far, had refused to go home.

When I took a deep breath through my nose, I sniffled. Great, I thought, now I was getting a cold on top of it all. But the sniffle didn't go away. Instead it burst forth in a warm flood through my sinuses. I put my finger to my nostrils, and the next thing I knew my cupped hand was filling with blood.

"Shit, Patsy." Charlotte looked stunned for a moment before she unrolled two feet of paper towel and stuffed it towards me. I held it under my nose, and the blood kept coming until it soaked the wad. Charlotte held another under my face, and I took that, too, tossing the soaked one into the trash. I leaned forward, but I still felt the blood drip down my throat. I tasted the metal saltiness like a penny on my tongue.

"Try to press the bridge of your nose firmly." Charlotte hovered over me. "And don't lean back. You don't want to swallow too much blood."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." My curses came out muffled. It wasn't just blood, it was clots coming out. The feel of them made me want to gag. We sat there in the kitchen for a while with our new ritual. Charlotte handed me a clean fold of towels, and I threw the soiled one away while pressing the new to my face. My hands were sticky with drying blood. I closed my eyes. "I want to go home," I said. "I'm so tired."

"I know, Patsy. I..." Charlotte's voice broke. I opened my eyes. I'd expected the mother hen, but what I got instead was a trembling chin and snotty rasping. Her

entire face was crumpling like a fresh sheet of tin foil. Her nose crinkled, pushing up her glasses. Her eyes narrowed to watery slits. A tear slipped out.

“Charlotte, what’s wrong?” My voice was a nasal growl under the layers of paper towels.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” She looked at me like I was crazy. She wiped the tears from her glasses. “I’m worried about you. Look at you! You’re like the love child of Ichabod Crane and Morticia Adams. You’re whiter than that weird-looking kid back there.” Charlotte touched my face, and I flinched. “And those circles under your eyes. And now this. You’re bleeding like a hemophiliac.”

“That’s why you’re crying?” I asked. “It’s no big deal, Charlotte. See? It’s stopping. I’m fine. I probably need a multivitamin or something. And this? This is just a nosebleed. It’s probably the change in the weather.” I chattered on to convince her of my health, but mostly so she’d stop crying. The more I talked, though, the less convinced I was. I hadn’t had a nosebleed since third grade when Ross Henderson had nailed me with that dodge ball.

“I want you to go to the doctor, Patsy,” she said.

“I have been,” I said. My voice rose in frustration “You’re acting like I haven’t been doing anything, but I’ve been to two doctors and I’m going back next week. I’m doing the best I can.”

“Don’t yell at me!” More tears dripped from under Charlotte’s glasses.

“What’s going on here?” The face of a changed Barbie appeared in the kitchen door. Instead of a kind, holy smile, a dagger of wrinkles formed a V between her eye, showing her age. She frowned back and forth between us. With her hands on her hips, she hissed at us. “I’ve got a three year old asleep in there, and I’ll be damned if you girls wake her up. Do you have any idea what it’s like?”

“We’re so sorry, Barbie,” Charlotte began, but just then Barbie registered the towel at my face and the pile of blood-soaked rags in her garbage. Unfortunately, she also saw what I had just now noticed, that a few drops had escaped onto her kitchen floor. While it wasn’t exactly immaculate in the first place, I could see how that might be upsetting.

“No, ma’am,” she said, pointing her index finger at me in accusation. Out of a cabinet, she whipped a box of rubber gloves and some antibacterial cleaner. She put the gloves on and sprayed the floor. She began scrubbing away the blood. “This is my home. Complete strangers do not bleed in my home where my child plays, where my cats eat. No way.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I pulled the towel away from my face to talk.

“I understand that, but now you can be considerate and take it outside. I don’t even have an appointment with you. All I know is that there’s something wrong with you. I don’t know what it is, but I don’t like it.”

“Enough,” Charlotte put her hand on my shoulder. “We’re leaving.”

“Now, Charlotte,” Barbie said, “you understand. I have to be careful. This is my family.”

“There’s no reason to make Patsy feel bad. You make people bleed all day.”

“Not in my kitchen, I don’t make people bleed. And I don’t even know this girl. You and I, we talked, we had a connection, but I don’t know Patsy from Adam.” As she talked, Barbie hefted the trash bag out of the container and tied it up. She handed Charlotte a second pair of rubber gloves. “Since your friend has her hands full, why don’t you take this out for her.”

“This is crazy,” Charlotte said. She dropped the gloves on the table and picked up the trash. “I’ll be fine without the gloves.”

“Suit yourself.” Barbie put a new bag in and stripped her gloves off so that they were inside out. She dropped them in the fresh bag. She stood up and followed us out the front door.

“Can I leave this on the curb or something?” Charlotte asked, holding the trash bag away from her body. It was almost as big as she was, and her arms shook from holding it up.

“We don’t have pick up until Tuesday, so I’d rather you take it with you. We have a raccoon problem.” Barbie stood with her hands on her hips, making sure we didn’t leave without her garbage. Now that we were outside, I was preoccupied by the cold. I stood by the car waiting while Charlotte had it out with Barbie. I pulled the paper towel away from my face to check the bleeding, which was slowing. The reflection in

the passenger's side window showed a monstrous face – thin, pale, covered with dry blood. I shivered and my hand began to turn white with cold.

“This is such bullshit.” Charlotte dropped the bag by her car and unlocked the door and then the trunk. I stood by with my blood-covered hands as she moved around the contents of her trunk, a box of clothes to donate to goodwill, an emergency pump, a first aid kit, to make room for the trash. She started to laugh. “I can't believe I'm putting this woman's trash in my car.”

“I'm so sorry, Charlotte,” I said. I picked it up and hefted it into the space Charlotte had made.

“It's not your fault she's insane.” Charlotte slammed her trunk. She yelled up to the house, though Barbie was now inside watching from the window. “Did you hear that, Barbie? You're crazy.” As soon as we got into the car, I flipped down the visor and looked in the mirror. I licked a clean part of the paper towel and began wiping my face. My hands felt numb and shaky.

“Maybe we just encountered some Christo-Hindi-New-Agey taboo,” I said, trying to make light of the situation.

“Like it's bad luck to bleed in the kitchen?”

“Something like that. Or maybe it was just plain rudeness. I should have held in my bleeding until I got home.”

“Like a burp?”

“Exactly,” I said. “I'm ashamed at my poor etiquette.”

“So the bleeding’s stopped?”

I nodded. “I guess you won’t be using Barbie as your artist.”

“Probably not.” Charlotte reached out and put her hand on my knee. “Do you feel sick? Should I take you somewhere?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Do you mind taking me home?”

Charlotte drove in the direction of my apartment. She pressed play on her CD player, and out hummed Janis with her sad voice popping and biting like kicked-up gravel. Charlotte sang along softly, her head swaying back and forth when there were no words. The voice so full and so empty sank into my gut. As I cleaned the final, stubborn dabs off my upper lip, I started trying to scrub the blood from the tiny lines of my bloated hands and fingers. My fingers stiffened, and I finally quit in frustration and let my hands fall into my lap. I took a deep breath until the lurking hiccup of a whimper lay down in my throat.

“Do you ever change the CD in your car?” I asked irritably.

“I like this one. It make me feel good.”

“But it’s so sad.”

“It’s good sad,” she said. She turned the volume down. “Is it bothering you?”

“No,” I lied. I leaned my head on the glass, which was cold and felt good on my head. The sun was rolling in tree-speckled bars through the car. We passed a strip mall full of Sunday shoppers, cars shuffling slowly up and down the rows, waiting for a space. For a second, I thought I saw Anita. A tall woman with short hair outside a gas station

who I could have sworn was staring at me from down the block, a knowing expression on her face. We were moving in stop-and-go traffic past the mall. As we neared, I kept my eyes on her, trying to make eye contact. Right before we were reached her, she turned and yelled at a couple of kids who were kicking each other in the parking lot. I saw her face. It wasn't Anita, of course, and she wasn't looking at me. God, I was going crazy. I was crazier than Barbie, even.

“Do you think Barbara could really read auras?” I asked.

“I don't know. Why?”

“I guess I'm just wondering why she freaked out about the bloody nose. It made me feel like she knew something that I didn't.”

“You know something's wrong,” Charlotte said softly. “You said so yourself.”

“I know.”

“But also, I guess when people become parents they can get a little bit overprotective.”

“Sure.”

“Well, most parents, anyway.” Charlotte glanced over at me. She tilted her head to the side and seemed to consider her words carefully before speaking again. “But, Patsy, you're an adult now. You don't need anyone to be overprotective about you. You can take care of yourself.”

“Of course I can,” I said. “Isn't that what I do now?” The words jerked from my mouth, bitter and tasting like blood. I was afraid I would start to cry. I turned to my side

so that my back was to Charlotte and I was facing the window. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see anything anymore. The rage trembling in my fingers was unfair to Charlotte. She hadn't done anything wrong, and she wasn't wrong. I was going to have to learn to take care of myself.

## The Inquisition

Daddy and Dorothy had decided that Brooke could stay with me until Christmas. After a week, we seemed to be having near-constant battles about cleanliness and food. On the morning of my next doctor's appointment, Brooke clutched a Pop-Tart in one hand, a can of Coke in the other. When we got into my car, she tore open the shiny wrapper of the toaster pastry and broke off a piece. Crumbs rained down on her legs and into the cracks of my ivory leather seats.

"Please don't eat in the car," I said, plucking breakfast out of her unsuspecting hands. It was a little early, and she was still moving slow. She scowled at me as I tucked the package into the pocket of the driver's side door. "You always make a mess."

"Come on," she whined. "I'm hungry."

"You can eat it when we get there."

"This is the first day of my vacation. I'm doing you a favor. You should be nice."

"I'm being nice to my car."

"You care way too much about this stupid car." She slumped down in the seat and pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head.

"Well, if it's so stupid, maybe you don't want to borrow it after all."

"Oh, shut up, Patsy."

"Fine. We won't talk." I turned on the radio, which was tuned to a local morning show. An even-voiced woman was giving a traffic report.

“Oh, Jesus. Not this shit. These people make me want to gouge my ears with a screwdriver.” Brooke scooted down farther until her ears were even with the door locks. With her head all bundled in a sweatshirt hood and all that eyeliner, she looked like ET.

“Good thing we’re going to a hospital then!” I said cheerfully. I’d promised Brooke that I would let her borrow my car for the next week whenever she wanted if she came with me to this doctor’s appointment. Since she didn’t have her driver’s license yet, this was an illegal and stupid thing for me to promise. However, at the time, I really hadn’t wanted to go alone, especially after I’d called with an update of my symptoms, and Nurse Scott called back, suggesting that I bring someone with me. Dr. Taft had decided to do a whole run of tests, and she said I might want someone else to drive me home after they took that much blood. Since the weekend, I had a lot more energy, and I hadn’t woken up sweating for two nights. Now I felt a little silly going through with the appointment, but when I called back to say I was feeling better, they told me to come in anyway.

Instead of putting me in a freezing cold paper gown like the last time, they mercifully let me keep my clothes on. I flipped through the most interesting available pamphlet, *Everything You Need to Know before Your Spinal Tap*, while I waited in the exam room. Dr. Taft shuffled in fifteen minutes later. The heels of his boots clicked against the floor. He rolled the cushy doctor’s chair in front of me and sat down, clipboard in lap as usual. He smiled.

“Good morning, Patsy. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I said. In the small space of the room, his physical presence felt very close. I could see three nose hairs sticking out of his nostril. The pores on his cheeks glowed pink and shiny.

“It sounds like you’ve been having a rough time.”

“I’ve been feeling better,” I said.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Dr. Taft looked down at his notes. “Let’s take a look at these test results, shall we? You’re not pregnant. You *are* anemic so I’m going to recommend a multivitamin with iron or I can write you a prescription if you prefer. White cells are okay, no infection indicated. Otherwise, your hormone levels look normal. All the stuff we looked at seems okay, so we’re going to run a few more tests. It’s probably just a virus that’s running its course. I’m still concerned about your lack of menstruation. We might start experimenting with some birth control pills, see if something helps.” So far this guy hadn’t told me much I didn’t already know. *I’m not pregnant and it’s bad that I haven’t had my period.* Brooke could have told me that on the car ride over.

“Do you want to tell me about other symptoms you’ve been experiencing?” he asked.

This would be the third time I’d had to repeat this information to someone in his office. I summarized. “Let’s see. Several nights this week, I’ve sweated through my clothes and even through my sheets. I wake up in the morning tired and achy. That’s the main weird thing. Also, my ankle has been swollen. And I had this knotty cyst over my

rib, which really hurt, but it went away. That's it. Except I had a bad nosebleed the other day." While I talked Dr. Taft nodded and referred to the chart, where all of this was certainly already written down since I'd just told the nurse the same thing twenty minutes ago.

"What was your temperature when you felt like you had a fever?"

"I don't know."

"From now on, take your temperature when you feel like you have a fever and write it down. Always write it down. Now climb on the table and take off your shoes. Let's see that ankle." He pressed one foot and then the other. He put them next to each other. "Yes, I see this one is definitely swollen. Actually, they're both a little swollen, but this one is worse. How are your fingers?"

"Okay." I held out my hands, which hadn't been hurting as much. "I've been taking Tylenol, which seems to help."

"I see a bit of swelling here too," he murmured to himself. "Okay, Patsy. When I leave, you change into the gown there and a Dr. Price will be in to see you. She's going to take a look and ask you a few questions. Just to get another perspective, okay?"

Dr. Price turned out to be as small and thin as Dr. Taft was tall and wide. She had a pinched face like a gerbil and thick silver hair parted in the middle and pulled back in a braid. She wore glasses. A nurse followed behind her.

"Hi," I said.

“May I see your hands?” she asked without introducing herself. I held out my hands, and she felt up and down my arm, squeezing my forearms and elbows and then each finger individually. Her hands were cold and dry. “Now, ankles. Please scoot back and lift your feet.” I complied and she repeated the same process with my legs and toes. She took out a stethoscope to listen to my heart. She asked me to breathe several times and then asked a series of questions.

“Have you traveled outside the country in the past year?”

“No.”

“You haven’t traveled anywhere outside the U.S. in the past year?”

“No.”

“Have you been camping or to the woods?”

“No.”

“Have you traveled anywhere in the Northeast area of the country?”

“No.”

“Do you use IV drugs?”

“No.”

“You have never used any intravenous drugs?” She glanced up at me and added for clarification, “No needles?”

“Uh...” Didn’t I just answer that question? “No.”

“You’re sure? Never?”

“Never,” I repeated.

“Have you ever had unprotected sex? Meaning without a condom?”

“No.”

“You always use a condom?”

I sighed. “I’m not sexually active.”

“You’ve never had sex?”

“No.”

“Do you engage in other sexual behavior?”

“No.”

“How old are you again?”

“Twenty-six,” I said. My heart filled with a sudden and deep loathing. I looked at her for a long moment with the meanest, squinty eyes I could manage. I disliked her more than the idiot in the ER who’d knocked me out and given me a prescription for suppositories to cure my phantom case of Chlamydia. That’s how bad she was. I tried to make sure the terseness of my next “No” reflected my hatred appropriately.

“And you’ve never engaged in any kind of unprotected sexual activity?”

“No.”

“And you’re sure you’ve never used any kind of IV drug?”

“I can’t believe I forgot.” I put my hand to my mouth and I shook my head. “I can’t. It’s too embarrassing.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing I haven’t heard before,” she said, looking bored.

“Well, there *was* that time that my friends and I bought some heroin and shot up in a back room at the Coco Loco. And then the Watermelon Bust when I fucked all the guys from Sigma Nu...without condoms.” I heard the nurse take a sharp breath, but I couldn’t tell if it was in disapproval or if she were trying to stifle a giggle. My hands were shaking as Dr. Price stared. I went on, calmly. “But those were just social things. I don’t think they count, do you?”

“I think this is not something to joke about.” Her eyes were cold, glittery shards.

“Well, Dr. Price,” I said, trying to keep the shakiness from my voice. “I think I’ve made it clear that I have never had sex, done intravenous drugs, or been out of the country in the past twelve months. Is there anything else you’d like to ask?”

“Do you have any rashes or skin lesions?”

“No.”

“I see,” she said. Her rodent mouth twitched. “Dr. Taft will be back to talk to you. You may get dressed now.” As quickly as she’d come in, she was gone, and I shivered from the cold in the room and my nervous sweat drying on my skin. I was trembling with anger, and my stomach burned. I didn’t know what I’d been thinking, but her questions, the same questions over and over, were about to drive me insane. And the insinuation that I might have AIDS, that’s what she’d been driving at. But why wouldn’t she just come out and say it?

I started to wonder if maybe I could have somehow contracted HIV. Maybe I’d been born HIV positive and I had just now developed AIDS. That would mean that

Mother had it. I imagined Jean G. Honey (the *G* was for *Grant*, she always claimed to want to keep a name in common with me, but also there was another actress who did horror movies named Jean Honey) as Bobbie Sue Hicks becoming an international AIDS activist. She would tell the story of how I had been infected in the womb. Tearfully, she would hold my hand in front of Oprah, and talk about her regrets and we'd co-write a book about chronic disease and mother/daughter relationships. On the other hand, maybe I was adopted and got it from an entirely different biological mother.

While I was thinking about this, I slowly pulled on my gray pants and the pink cashmere sweater Dorothy had bought me last Christmas. It was less than ten days until Christmas now, and I hadn't even begun to think about buying people presents. Instead I was fantasizing about meeting Oprah and dying. Someone knocked on the exam room door.

"Come in," I said, as I pushed my feet into my shoes.

"Hello again." Dr. Taft stuck his head through a crack in the door, and seeing that everything was covered, trudged into the room. He sat down. Was I imagining it or was he giving me a look of disappointment? Perhaps Dr. Price had told him about my outburst. Where I had felt empowered and angry only moments ago, I now felt childish and immature.

"Have a seat, please, Patsy, when you're ready." I sat on the hard plastic chair again. "Dr. Price and I have discussed it, and we think it would be good to go ahead and test for HIV." Big surprise, right? I was way ahead of him. I nodded for him to

continue. “Another thing we’re looking at is Lyme Disease. You have the arthritis and the muscle pain. Have you had any ticks in the past few months?”

“No.” Ew. Ticks.

“Have you been in the woods, maybe?”

“I’m not really the camping type.”

“We’ll probably do some tests to explore that possibility, just in case, but it seems pretty unlikely.”

“What about the HIV? Doesn’t that seem unlikely?”

“It’s just something we have to do for the record, get it out of the way, you know, like the pregnancy test.”

“Fine.” I stood up. I wasn’t going to argue anymore. What was the point? Maybe I did have AIDS. Maybe I’d caught it from a toilet seat somewhere. “I want to get started with the blood letting. Do what tests you think are best. I’m sure this will all be gone by the time you figure it out.”

“That may be true, Patsy. I hope it is.”

“And Dr. Taft?”

“Yes?”

“Please apologize to Dr. Price for me. I’m afraid I lost my temper.”

“I will,” he said. “But really, don’t worry about it. We know that being ill can be stressful.” He smiled, and I could see that he wasn’t disappointed in me after all. He gave a lingering shrug. He didn’t say anything, but right then I knew that he also disliked

Dr. Price. He couldn't say anything because it wouldn't be professional for him to tell a patient that he also despised the bitch internist who obviously had something heavy and uncomfortable shoved up her ass. Just knowing that I wasn't alone gave me a warm, glowing feeling, and I didn't even mind when they stuck me behind a curtain, attached a plastic spigot to my arm with a needle, and took out nearly twenty vials of blood.

After ten, they made me sit for fifteen minutes to make sure I didn't pass out and another fifteen after the second round. When they finally let me go, I made my co-payment to a blond woman with orange juice colored curls. She circled the nine-hundred-and forty-eight dollar total at the bottom and said, "Thank God for insurance, huh?" I nodded as I ripped out a fifteen-dollar check.

In the waiting room, Brooke saw me and stood up.

"Can we go, please? Oh gross, that's blood." Her face paled. She pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her hands. She pointed with a covered up finger. "Can you cover that up? Jesus."

"It's just a spot." I touched the cotton pad taped to my arm. Some of the blood had been absorbed and was seeping into a corner of the bandage.

"I might be sick."

"You're such a baby." I led the way out of the waiting room. My head felt light and scratchy like a fuzzed over radio station. "I'm the one who had to be proked and podded..."

“Proked and podded!” She laughed, the color returning to her cheeks, and then stepped in front of me to get a look at my face. “Are you okay?”

“...*poked* and *prodded*, I mean, accused of having everything from a pregnancy to AIDS.”

“What?” Brooke put her hand on my shoulder and stopped me in front of the elevator for the parking garage. “What?” she asked again.

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m not pregnant and I don’t have AIDS. I swear. You know that, Brooke. You said it yourself the other day. I’m more than practically a virgin.”

“No needles?” she asked suspiciously, her grip loosening.

“No!” I yelled. “I have never done drugs of any kind.”

“Well, maybe *that’s* your problem,” she said. She jumped from one foot to the other and held her leg up like she was going to kick me in the stomach. She held it that way, the way she used to hold a finger in front of my eye when she was little to see how long it would take for me to slap it away. I ignored her as the elevator dinged and began to slide open.

“Please, Brooke.” I gestured for her to move out of the way of the doors. She hopped back on one foot as they opened, her other foot still up and aimed at me in the elevator. Inside, a man in a sweater vest held the arm of a shrunken balding woman. He shifted his eyes from Brooke to me, and scooted nervously past us. Brooke lowered her kick and walked in. I followed, feeling trapped by the closed space of the metal box. It was the first time I’d told somebody, even if it was in a round-about way, that I’d never

had sex with anyone. I always assumed that certain people, people who knew me like Charlotte and Brooke, would figure it out. But while I assumed they knew the truth, they assumed I'd had sex, and we were all wrong. Except now Brooke knew the truth. I'd expected some kind of crack, but she didn't say anything as we walked to the car. I held out my keys.

“Here. You drive.”

“You seem fine,” she said. She kicked the ground with her toe. “I don't want to drive anymore.”

“Why not?” We both knew that ultimately she wouldn't pass up the opportunity to drive, that she was being difficult. I just didn't know why. I took a deep breath and reminded myself what it was like to be seventeen. When you were seventeen you did things for mysterious reasons that didn't make sense even to yourself.

“You seem fine,” she said again. “I don't even think you're sick at all.” So that's what this was about. She was worried about me. She was mad at me for being sick. “Besides,” she continued, “you'll just yell at me and tell me everything I'm doing wrong.”

“Please? They took a lot of blood, and I still feel a little strange. I'll be good. I'll only comment if absolutely necessary.” I dangled the keys in front of her face. She watched them like a dog eyeing table scraps.

“Fine. Ok.” She snatched the keys out of my hand.

After she paid the parking attendant with the bills I handed her, Brooke became noticeably happier. She sped out of the lot and through the medical center, making quick maneuvers to avoid traffic cops, the orange cones of street construction, and older patients with walkers who padded deliberately along the crosswalks. I slid across the leather seat as Brook veered one way, then another, breaking at a moment's notice when we reached stop signs and red lights. A squeal caught in my throat when we almost ran into a garbage truck as Brooke merged onto the freeway.

“Just a tip.” I braced myself with the armrest as the road curved. “Since I’ve so graciously given you the opportunity, you might want to practice how you’re going to drive when you actually take the test again.”

“See?” she said.

“I’m trying to help.”

“I’ve never been in an accident, have I?”

“No, but this is a question of getting your license.”

“Fuck my license.” Brooke sped up and changed lanes without signaling to pass a slow-moving mini van. She waved at the driver as she passed. “Asshole.” I hid my face with my hand as the other driver honked.

“God, Brooke! Look at it this way, there’s no way Daddy and Dorothy will buy you a car for college if you don’t have a license. Being a freshman will totally suck without a car.”

“I’m going to New York. Nobody drives in New York.”

“Since when?”

I would have remembered New York if had been under discussion. Dorothy would have made sure I didn't forget it. She believed that New York could be a fun place to visit (and shop) but an unthinkable place to live. It was overrun with Jews and gays and drug addicts and people like my mother, who was obviously deprived in other ways. When one of her best friend's daughters moved there after college, Dorothy took the grieving mother out for a sort of consolation lunch. “Poor Sarah,” she said later. “What's the point in living a thousand miles away from your family among filth just so you can get a job? There's plenty to do here. It's cleaner. The people are nicer. The weather is better. Mark my words, Lindsay will come back. Nice girls like her always do.”

“You didn't even apply to schools in New York,” I said. I knew this because I'd practically written the applications myself. It wasn't that Brooke was incapable of doing it; it was just that Dorothy had been complaining incessantly to me. It made things easier for everyone if I wrote an essay here, a statement of purpose there. It had been kind of fun, actually.

“Jesus fuck, Patsy!” Brooke slammed on the brakes as she came to a jam of stopped cars.

“What?” I looked ahead, sure we were about to plow into the SUV in front of us.

“You don't get it. I don't want to go to school in New York. I want to *live* in New York. To do my art.” She added the last part in a faltering voice.

“Your art? You can’t live off your art. How will you find a job?”

“I can do anything. I’ll be a waitress,” she said.

“Waitress!” The girl couldn’t even find her way from the dining room to the dishwasher. I was thinking of a way to say as much without making her so angry that she crashed my car out of spite. She stepped on the gas as she flicked off a purple convertible that was in the process of trying to cut her off.

“So what if it doesn’t work out? What did college get you that Daddy can’t arrange with a couple of phone calls?” I looked at Brooke expecting a malevolent smirk, but she was concentrating on traffic again. It seemed that she’d made the comment without any unusual amount of hostility.

“Does Daddy know what you want to do?”

“Not yet, but he’ll be cool. We understand each other.”

“You *do*?”

“Sure. He let me get away from her, didn’t he?”

“Coming to live with me for a couple of weeks is entirely different than living by yourself in New York.”

“Who said I’d be by myself?” She grinned. “You forget about Frank.”

“Oh, God. *Frank’s* coming with you? Do you really expect this to work?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“It’s not that easy. You have to think about money, about your education, about finding an apartment, about the fact that you don’t even know if you’re going to be with

this guy in a few months much less whether you'll want to live with him at that point. You don't just say you're going to do something and then it happens. That's not how it works."

"Maybe that's exactly how it works," Brooke said.

"You're being immature."

"Well it's better than being a pussy and doing what everyone tells you to do."

She shook her head, and her black bangs fell into her eyes. When we got to the next light, she turned to look at me. "It's sad. I always thought I was supposed to be the screw up, but you're way worse. You're so fucked up you can't even admit you're fucked."

I opened my mouth to speak, but closed it when a flash of pain shot across my eyes, white hot and flaming. I shut my eyes and my mouth, waiting for her to drop me off so I could start getting the day over with. My ankle throbbed with the come-and-go pain, which was now apparently coming again instead of going. As I reached out to rub it, the cotton ball came un-taped on one side and hung against my arm. The skin underneath was smeared with dry flakes of blood.

"Patsy?" Brooke said. "Say something."

"What do I say to that?" I pulled the cotton ball back over my arm where bruise was already forming around the puncture wound where the needle had pricked my skin.

"It was too mean, wasn't it? I'm sorry. I take it back, okay."

"No," I said. "It was fair. Don't take it back."

## Holiday Cheers

Anita and I began emailing each other at work. I started it by sending off a brief message to see if she knew which day we were having the office Christmas party, Wednesday or Thursday. “Wednesday,” she wrote back. “I’m pretty sure we have Thursday off.” Thursday was Christmas Eve. “Oh, that’s right!” I replied. “Silly me. Thanks.” They were innocent back-and-forths, one-line office chatter. As the week progressed, our emails barely did, but it meant something, didn’t it, that they didn’t just stop? We began having conversations in electronically messaged fragments. Example:

A: Hey, P, who replaces coffee? Just used the last. Wanted to let someone know...

P: Katy? If not, she’ll know who.

Later in the week:

A: Does K have girlfriend? I know someone who might like her.

P: Is this someone you want to keep as a friend?

A: That bad? She seems nice...

P: Depends on your definition of *nice*.

And then:

A: Did you see what Trish is wearing?

P: Dan’s horrified. As strong as his love is for her, the green blazer may have killed it.

A: Sure Dan’s not gay?

P: You think everyone is.

A: Well...

P: Total homocentric.

A: I'd rather be that...speaking of, do you have a boyfriend yet, miss  
heterosexuality?

P: ...

I ignored that question and logged out for the day. Usually I hated when people asked that, but Anita asking was different. I wanted to think about how I would answer.

“Patsy!” Two days later at the Christmas party, Ruth Pierson looked me up and down and nodded approvingly before kissing my cheek. She was making her annual appearance as gracious hostess. She supervised the strange assortment of catered food – tomato aspic, finger sandwiches, shrimp cocktail, brisket, and jalapeno cornbread – and swept around the room to replenish drinks and remind us to support the Society for the Performing Arts. “You look beautiful. Have you lost weight?” she asked, giving my bicep a pinch.

“I don't think so,” I said. This was a lie. I'd certainly lost weight since the last time I saw her. My once-sexy red sweater didn't cling quite so nicely and my skirt hung too low on my hips. Mrs. Pierson was not the only one who had complimented me lately on my figure. Apparently it didn't matter if you had circles under your eyes and

yellowing skin as long as you could fit into a size four. The only ones who seemed concerned by my heroin chic were Daddy and Charlotte.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s working for you.” She took my arm. “Walk with me around the room. Remind me who these people are.”

The office party, as Anita had so helpfully reminded me, was the day before Christmas Eve. After much consideration, I had decided to pull on a tight sweater, drink some alcoholic punch, and talk to Anita in person. That was the extent of my commitment to this thing, whatever it was. I’d decided that it was time to do a little exploring. I didn’t know what was going on in my body, but if it were some horrible disease that was going to kill me, I wasn’t going to go down without ever having gone down. Not that I had any designs for the Christmas party. I just thought it might be a good first step.

On office party day everyone dragged into work a bit later than usual. The women brought tins of holiday goodies: sugar cookies, fudge, candied nuts, and fruitcake. The men licked their lips and had rum balls for breakfast. The women wore red or black dresses and Christmas tree earrings while the men sported ties with reindeer and blinking lights. The party started around three-thirty or four, and out came the wine and Mrs. Pierson’s famous champagne punch.

As Mrs. Pierson and I strolled around the room, I whispered the names of the unknowns to her, and she would call out to them and say, “Merry Christmas, Dan!” “Happy Holidays, Monica!” “Have you tried my punch yet?” “Go get a plate of brisket,

honey...you're simply wasting away." Her hair was freshly worked into a soft pillow of graying blond curl, and I could barely see her tinted foundation amassing in the creases around the corners of her mouth. She and Mr. Pierson were older than Daddy and Dorothy, and I used to pretend that they were my true grandparents. Mother's parents died when she was young, and Daddy's mother was always telling me to watch my weight. The Piersons had seemed like an attractive alternative.

"Now who is that?" she asked. She nodded slightly to the corner where Anita was standing with Terrence and Katy. Anita caught my eye and waved. Her eyes were brilliant and brown, her hair shined, and a black dress smoothed itself over her body. Her muscles rippled like an anxious cat as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. I tried to swallow, but my throat had gone dry; it was like trying to put jeans on over wet skin, and my efforts came to a squeaky halt. I coughed and started to choke on my own tongue.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Pierson said as she patted my back. She pulled me into the conference room where mounds of folded ham had been reduced to shredded specks on the tray and the holiday pies were a mash of oil crust and sticky filling. Mrs. Pierson poured me a glass of water from a pitcher as I coughed and sputtered.

"Thank you, Mrs. Pierson," I said finally when I could breathe. I drank the water she handed me and looked up, searching for Anita, but I could only see a small window of the office from inside the conference room. Everyone was over by the fax machine

where the caterers had set up the mini-bar. I started to head back in that direction, but Mrs. Pierson put her hand on my arm.

“Wait a minute, Patsy. I’m wanted to speak to you privately.” She pulled out two chairs and gestured for me to sit. “Jim and I have been worried about you.”

“I’m fine now,” I said. I wished someone wanted another sausage roll or slab of gelatinous aspic, anything that would allow me to avoid this conversation.

“Of course, Jim is aware of how much work you’ve been missing.”

“That’s done now. I won’t be taking any more sick days.”

“Oh, no.” She patted my hand. “That’s not what I meant at all. Take all the sick days you need. Jim’s not going to give you a hard time about that. What we wanted to let you know, and I’m afraid I’m doing a poor job, is that if you need *anything*, we’re here. I told Dorothy the same thing at lunch the other day, and now I’m telling you.”

“Thank you.” I took another sip of water. “I appreciate that.”

“Jim and I are proud that you’ve worked out so well here. We feel like we helped raise you. It’s only natural that we’ve been thinking about what’s next for you. Have you given it any thought?”

“Well,” I said. I didn’t know how to answer. What did she mean?

“Listen to me! It’s a party, and no time to be talking about business.” Her penciled-in eyebrows rose in a conspiratorial expression. “I’ll see that Jim makes an appointment with you after New Year’s.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I said again, although I still was uncertain about what I was thanking her for. She stood up this time, and I followed her out the door. We were standing at the edge of the party. People’s plates were emptying, co-workers with latent attractions were talking loudly and standing closer than they did during the workday. Last year, a lot of the single people had gone out afterward, and they’d been living off the stories for a year.

It looked like things were headed in a similar direction this year. Mrs. Pierson patted my cheek. “Well, I’m off. I’ve got to make the rounds before Jim wonders where I’ve disappeared to.” I walked all around the office, into the kitchen, the bathroom, the offices in the back, even the disgusting little smoker’s balcony that hid behind the sliding door next to the kitchen, looking for that shimmer of black fabric. Disconnected pieces of conversation hurtled past me:

“Did she *paint* that dress on?”

“God, I’d kill for those thighs.”

“Is egg nog Atkins-friendly?”

“But she’s engaged! And Paul is such a sweetie.”

“Okay, then. Look at where his hand is.”

“Oh. Right....Is Paul here?”

“How many calories in a martini?”

“Looks like someone’s gonna get some tonight.”

“Do you know how many toy stores I’ve been to for goddamn Glitzy Pups Makeover Magic?”

I said hi to Dan, who was learning about a co-worker’s quest for a plastic dog with brushable hair, and hurried past, trying to look busy so I wouldn’t have to stop. But Anita wasn’t in any of the rooms. She wasn’t even back in the conference room, where I ended my search, hoping she’d simply had a craving for another deviled egg. She wasn’t anywhere. She was gone.

On the day before Dorothy’s party, I woke up with my sheets tangled in a sweaty knot at my feet, and a headache that tore through my eyeballs. I rolled over to hit the alarm clock, 7:30 AM. I was supposed to wake up Brooke, pick up her dress, which was being altered, and be at Daddy’s by nine. The crew to set up the tent, the tables, the stage, and the bar were due by ten, and Dorothy had a hair appointment for nine-thirty. All I had to do was let them in and supervise. Daddy would be golfing with Mr. Pierson, as was his Christmas Eve tradition. For the rest of us, it was the day of preparing for the party, and then that evening, we would have our family meal.

As of five that morning, when I got up to take some Tylenol, Brooke had still not come home. I closed my eyes as a flash of pain ran from my head down my neck to my lower back. If I didn’t have her in tow when I saw Dorothy, there would be questions, accusations, and a possible outbreak of hysteria. I would lie, of course, but it would only do so much. The least Dorothy might say was that Brooke was ruining Christmas. Other

possibilities (if she knew the truth) might include helicopter searches and pleas to the local news complete with displays of Brooke's eleventh grade class picture.

I kicked the sheets away and pulled myself out of bed. There was still no Brooke in the living room. I called her phone. No answer. Now I was angry *and* worried. I left a short message, "Get your ass up and call me NOW!" Then I added, "I'll pick you up anywhere. Call me." Between my shower, coffee, and the drive to the tailor's, where the clerk seemed thrilled to be spending her Christmas Eve, I called Brooke about fifteen times. Never an answer. Never a call back. Even though I didn't put it past Brooke, it wasn't like her to spend the night out without letting someone know where she was. I didn't want to rat her out, but also I didn't want to keep it to myself if something was wrong. If she hadn't called by the time I made it to Daddy's, I would tell Dorothy.

Clouds covered the sky in a gray, rippled blanket. It was supposed to clear up, but now the house looked gloomy under its shroud. The Christmas lights were not on yet, adding to the ominous effect. I let myself in the side door to the kitchen, where everything was in upheaval. Trays and pots and silverware had been emptied onto the counters. Food sat out in various stages of preparation. The housekeeper, Carolina, was sitting at the table with a Big Gulp. Next to her was a stack of silver to be polished, the candlesticks that would go in the foyer, and the picture frames that decorated a table in the kid's den.

"Hi." I smiled. "Getting ready?"

“Yes,” she said and smiled politely back. She was wearing black pants and a white button-down shirt, her required daily uniform. If she were working tomorrow night at the party, she would wear a black skirt and blouse, something Dorothy had picked because it looked classy and was machine-washable.

“Is Dorothy around?”

“Mrs. Grant? She’s in there?” Carolina pointed to the ballroom, which abutted the kitchen.

“Okay. Thanks.” I hung up Brooke’s dress on a hook in the laundry room, along with my dress for the family meal in case I didn’t have time to go home before then. I went to find Dorothy. The foyer led to the ballroom, a large open space with hardwood floors and a three-story ceiling. It then opened up into the back yard through two pairs of French doors. There was a large plot of green space on one side and on the other, the pool and patio with barbecue pit, which was next to the kid’s room. The ballroom was the central point of any party. The fifteen-foot tree sparkled in the corner, and soon another corner would be arranged for the mariachi band. Tables would be placed in a heated tent outside, the pool lit with an armada of floating candles.

I found Dorothy with her hands on her hips surveying the back yard through the windows. Her mouth was stretched in a grim line. A silk Indian scarf wrapped around her head, signaling the impending trip to the salon.

“I’m here,” I said.

“Hello, dear.” She kissed me on the cheek.

“What’s up?”

“Does the pool look dirty to you?”

“No.”

“You don’t see that green on the tile there?” She squatted and pointed. “It looks like mold or something.”

“I don’t see anything. It looks fine.”

“Because I just had it cleaned last weekend. I think I’ll call the pool man.”

“They won’t be open.”

“I’ll call him at home.”

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

“So? He should have done a better job when he had the chance.” She stood back up. “Anyway, you’ll have to do it. I’m on my way out.”

“Fine,” I said. I had no intention of calling the pool man, but it was easier to agree. Later, if she remembered to ask, I would say he wasn’t answering his phone. Chances were, though, once she heard about Brooke, her mind would be on other things. I took a breath. “Dorothy, I wanted to talk to you about Brooke.”

“Now? Do you want to give me a nervous breakdown before the party? I have a million things on my mind.” I followed her to the kitchen where she picked up her purse.

“I know, but it’s important.”

“Of course it’s important! It’s always important, but we can’t let her run our lives. She’s spoiled enough as it is. Anyway, she’ll be home from now on, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not that.”

“Speaking of nervous breakdowns, do you know what time she came home? It was four-thirty *in the morning*. I thought we had an intruder.” She stared at me, one hand on the back door. My heart swelled with gladness. I thanked God many times in my head. “Well? What is it?” she asked.

“You’re right, it’s nothing that can’t wait.”

“Good. The numbers are on my desk. Everyone should know what to do, but call if there’s any question. Carolina, don’t forget to check on the turkey.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Carolina said.

Dorothy closed the door behind her. As soon as her car started, Carolina and I both sighed. I looked at her and we giggled.

“Well,” I said. I smiled and shrugged. “Guess she’s gone.”

She nodded. I climbed the stairs and opened the door to Brooke’s room just to make sure. There she was, a lump under her comforter with a tuft of black hair peaking out by her pillow. I didn’t have to do much when the guys came to set up, but I had to stay around in case they needed to ask questions. Most of the morning, I lay on the couch and watched movies like *A Christmas Story* and *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* until Mother called me for her annual holiday conversation.

“Merry Christmas Eve, darling! Wasn’t I good this year? I’m calling you practically on the day.”

“Very good, Mother. Merry Christmas.”

“Tell me what you’re up to. I can’t wait to hear everything. I blocked out a whole half an hour of my afternoon just for this conversation.”

“There’s not much to tell,” I said. “Just getting ready for the big Christmas party.”

“Oh, that thing. What a nightmare. It’s wonderful that your father found someone willing to do that year in and year out.”

“I think Dorothy likes it.”

“Well, shmoozing for someone else’s career is not *my* idea of time well spent. What a bore.”

“Anyway, that’s what I’m doing.” I turned the television back on and muted it while she told me the latest gossip of her cast. One of the up-and-comers had complained about Mother getting better scenes, and it resulted in a behind-the-scenes showdown with the producers. This happened every three or four years, especially if a particularly hot young actress’s ego swelled faster than her returns to the show. Mother usually handled it well, and it was the same story every time so most of my attention was still on the television. I’d heard it a million times before.

For some reason, Daddy and Dorothy had about five hundred channels. I flipped one after another: sitcom, shoe sale, teeth whitener, toilet bowl cleaner, Christmas movie,

sitcom, *Law & Order*, another Christmas movie that looked familiar but I couldn't think why. I stopped to watch, and suddenly, there on the screen was my mother. In my ear she was saying, "And that chubby little bitch actually had the *nerve* to say that I was too old for sex scenes." In front of me, though, she was considerably younger, forty-five playing thirty, plenty of make-up and a fresh chin lift (though I was one of only five people who knew that for sure). Her hair was feathered softly, the lens filter warmed her skin, and she was holding a little boy in her lap. If I recalled, she was explaining why they wouldn't be having presents that Christmas. She looked beautiful and very sweet. I kept the movie on while Mother and I talked.

"Hey, Mother," I said when she finally finished her story. "Guess what's on TV?"

"I don't know. *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

"Better. It's that Christmas movie you did with Ted Danson. Remember, with that kid?"

"Please! Don't remind me. I look like a cow in that movie."

"No, you don't. You look good."

"It was right after I started on Paxil. No one told me they'd make me blow up like a supermodel in rehab. I should've sued."

"I think you look good. You look very pretty."

"You're a sweet girl. How did I get such a nice daughter? I must have done something right."

“It’s true,” I said. Rather than argue about how fat she looked, I tried to change the subject. “So do you have any fun plans for Christmas? New Year’s? Don’t you always have some exciting party to go to?”

“That’s right! That’s what I forgot to tell you. Next month, I’ll be in New Orleans for a month. It’s a period piece set right before the war. I’m a plantation owner’s wife who’s been in love with a slave for twenty years. While I’m not exactly the lead, it’s a very sexy role. Anyway, the director wants us to go down right after Christmas, and I’ve already decided that you are going to visit for New Year’s.”

“I might have plans.” That wasn’t entirely true. Charlotte and Richard were going to be in Mexico. Dan and I had talked about going downtown to New Year’s Eve Houston where a couple of top 40 bands played on an outdoor stage and you paid double the price for beer from booths. It would probably suck, but at least if I stayed in Houston, I could go home and go to sleep whenever I wanted.

“Nothing like this, I promise. It’ll be fabulous.”

“I’ll let you know,” I said. On the television, she was looking with love at the face of a rugged Ted Danson in cowboy boots who’d just brought her son a Christmas tree cut fresh from his family’s farm.

“We’re having a huge party, and you can bring anyone you like. We can go shopping and drink Hurricanes. I haven’t been to New Orleans in ages!”

“Have Beta call me with the details, okay? I’ll let you know by Monday.”

“Fine. Be coy, if you must, but I won’t take *no* for an answer.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “You’re about to kiss Ted Danson.”

“Stop watching that!”

“I like it.”

“I mean it, Patricia Healy Grant.” She used a stern tone, but I could tell she was pleased. She liked it when I paid attention to her work, even if it was just a crap movie a decade old. When I hung up a few minutes later, I turned up the sound and watched until the final scene when she hugged her made-for-TV-son and Ted Danson in one embrace. A lump of homesickness for her caught in my throat. I didn’t even want this version of her with the soft brown hair and apron, but the real thing, bony and bronzed and vibrant. I started considering a trip to New Orleans.

Brooke came downstairs around two. Dorothy was back and had taken over her supervisory role. I was watching the dorky kid on television stick his tongue to a pole for the third time that day. She grunted a good morning and curled up on the couch next to me.

“Glad to see you’re alive.” I refused to look at her. I was still mad.

“What did I do now?” She threw her head back on the couch and groaned.

“Besides not coming home last night, not telling me where you were, and not answering your phone when I was calling you frantically this morning knowing that Dorothy would have a conniption if she found out you were missing?”

“But I was here.” She rubbed her eyes and gave me a sleepy, wounded look.

“I didn’t know that! Why didn’t you answer your stupid phone?”

“The battery’s dead. Jesus. Sorry.”

“Great,” I said. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Patsy!” she called after me half-heartedly, but she knew I would forgive her soon, especially at a time like this when we needed to band together to survive the family meal, the trip to Dorothy’s church, and then the party tomorrow. Just thinking about it now made me exhausted.

After my shower, I changed into a brown A-line skirt, a tailored white shirt, and my shiny brown rounded toe pumps. Unlike for the office party, I didn’t want to look sexy at all. I wanted to look young and pious and church-ready. I didn’t want Dorothy to make any comments about the length of my skirt, and I didn’t want my other relatives to remember that I was a marriageable age. If I were lucky, they’d forget and think I was still in high school.

The first to arrive was my Aunt Mary Jo and Grandmother, whom she’d picked up from her retirement village in Clearlake. Mary Jo was Daddy’s sister. Her ex-husband, Glen, had the kids for Christmas Eve this year, for which we were all grateful. The miracle of fertility drugs had blessed Mary Jo and Glen with triplet boys who were now eight years old.

“Patsy!” Mary Jo kissed me. “You look lovely.”

“Thanks, Mary Jo. So do you.” I took their jackets.

“Merry Christmas, Grandmother,” I said as I helped her with her winter coat, a full-length mink that dragged the ground now that she was a little smaller and not allowed to wear heels “Kind of warm for this, isn’t it?” Underneath she also had a cardigan on over her dress.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s chilly out today, and your mother keeps this place like a meat locker.”

“Dorothy, you mean.”

“That’s what I said.” She put her cold little hand on my cheek. “Have you gained weight?”

“Mother!” Mary Jo took Grandmother’s arm. “She’s skinny as a rail. You’ll have to tell me your secret,” she said leaning into me. Ever since the triplets, Mary Jo had been soliciting diet tips at every family gathering. Everyone told her she looked great except Grandmother who handed her a pile of weight loss-advice, clipped from the newspaper and *Reader’s Digest*. I led them to the living room. Mary Jo wanted a martini, and Grandmother had her traditional eggnog with an extra shot of rum.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Grandmother asked after I’d retrieved their drinks. She took her first gulp of the eggnog, holding the glass precariously in both hands.

“No, ma’am.”

“Why not?”

“Patsy’s particular, right, Patsy?” Mary Jo winked at me.

“Picky is more like it,” said Grandmother.

“Well, what’s wrong with being picky?” Mary Jo asked. The doorbell rang again and I was happy to get up to answer the door. They continued arguing about me in the third person until the next round of relatives was settled and Mary Jo asked Dorothy’s sister, Tricia, about the South Beach diet.

By the time all the guests had arrived and we were sitting down for dinner, everyone was on their second or third drink, including Brooke and me. We had hijacked a bottle of vodka and were making screwdrivers in the laundry room so Dorothy wouldn’t see. She didn’t approve of drinking beyond a glass of wine with dinner. After years of debate, however, she had learned to acquiesce to Daddy’s family or else none of them would show up for the holidays.

“Tom, go find the girls.” We heard her voice from the other room. “They were supposed to be getting the rolls from the oven.”

“Shit!” Brooke said. “The rolls.” We downed the rest of our drinks and hurried into the kitchen, where Daddy met us with a grin and a double Scotch.

“What have you two been up to?”

“Nothing, Daddy.” Brooke gave him a kiss. “We’re getting the rolls, right?” She went to the oven to pull out the rolls, which were about to burn.

“Right,” I said. “Hey, Daddy. How was your game?”

“Fine, fine. Pierson’s been practicing. Does the bastard ever show up at work anymore?”

I shrugged.

“He asked about you,” Daddy said. I let my head rest on his shoulder as he gave me a hug with his free arm. I could feel his warm, liquored breath on the top of my head. The vodka tumbled through my body.

“Yeah, Mrs. Pierson and I talked at the office party yesterday. What a nag.” My lips tingled and the pain in my joints was beginning to numb. I was feeling good for the first time in a long while. I wanted to stay with Brooke and Daddy, warm and cozy in the kitchen drinking screwdrivers and scotch until the end of Christmas.

“We’re all a little bit worried,” Daddy said and patted my shoulder. “You can’t blame her for wondering how you are.”

“I’m fine,” I said. I went over to help Brooke. She’d pulled the tray out of the oven and was now tossing a roll back and forth between her hands.

“This is hot!” Brooke spit it out. “I burned my tongue.”

“What did the doctor say?” Daddy asked.

“Not much.”

“Just that she needs to get laid,” Brooke said, wiping her hand on her pants. Unlike tomorrow, tonight she got to choose her own outfit, provided there were no holes or rips, she didn’t wear jeans or tennis shoes or T-shirts. Since everything Brooke normally wore didn’t fit within those parameters, she’d had to wear some of the clothes Dorothy bought periodically and placed in her closet. Brooke had chosen black pants, black V-neck sweater, and her boots. The clothes fit so you could see that she had an actual body underneath her usual layers and folds. She kept tugging at the V in her

sweater and crossing her arms in front of her. Daddy frowned. She stopped and put her finger to her chin. “Oh, wait, that’s what I said, not the doctor.”

“Brooke,” he said.

“It’s true. Everybody knows it.”

“Well, then,” I said, “it doesn’t bear repeating, does it?” I reached over and gave her hand a pinch.

“Ow!” She held it up to her mouth. “Daddy! She pinched me.”

“Girls, please behave. Your mother has enough to worry about with the party tomorrow.”

“Yeah, Brooke,” I said. “*Your* mother.”

“You know what I mean,” Daddy said, looking at me. “You’re acting like three year olds. What has gotten into you two?”

“Screwdrivers,” Brooke said.

“Oh.” Daddy rubbed the back of his head. He looked back and forth between us.

“Don’t look so worried,” Brooke said and smiled. She helped me finish putting rolls in a basket by throwing the rest in. She folded over the napkin and held the basket up over her head like a waitress with a serving tray. “Shall we go, then? Carbs for everyone, Jesus says and he’s the birthday boy!”

“Is she okay?” he asked as we followed her to the dining room. Uncertainty shifted in his eyes like mud. He wasn’t exactly lucid himself.

“She only had two, and you can’t really blame her.” I understood his concern, but family events had been so much worse before I was allowed to have a glass of wine to take the edge off. Looking down the line of familiar, unforgiving faces, Daddy must have sensed it too because before he went to his end of the table and I went to mine, he whispered in my ear, “Okay, I’ll ask Dorothy if she can have a glass of wine with dinner.” We watched Brooke pretend to sit in Grandmother’s lap and then feign surprise and embarrassment when she realized there was someone already in the seat.

Grandmother stared up at her with irritation. “Well, maybe a little later,” he said.

Dorothy’s younger sister, Tricia, was flitting around, keeping tabs on her five-year-old daughter, Sophia, and her husband, Hal, who was at least twenty years older than she was and could be the girl’s grandfather. Brooke was next to Grandmother at the head of the table and little Sophia stared up at her with an open, mouth of wonder and awe. Tricia sat next to Sophia and kept reaching over to fluff the red and green bow attached to the girl’s ponytail. Dorothy asked Grandmother to say the prayer.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this beautiful food we’ve been blessed with, and the family we are so thankful for....” Brooke let out a guffaw, which she passed off as a cough. I raised my eyes to catch Dorothy giving Brooke a death stare. Sophia began to giggle, and I felt a scuffle of feet under the table. Tricia was trying to kick Sophia? Or maybe Brooke was trying to kick me? When would the wine be served? It was all unclear at this point. I kept my head down. Grandmother rattled on for a minute

or so and finally concluded, "...and we offer our prayer to those less fortunate and hope that they find salvation in God. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," I said softly.

"Thank you, Evelyn," Dorothy said. "That was lovely."

"Who wants dark meat?" Daddy asked. Sophia and Brooke raised their hands.

"I would, but it's so fatty," Mary Jo said regretfully. "Patsy, you should have some."

"No, thank you. Could you pass the wine?"

"So," Grandmother said, leaning in close to me so that her spit flecked my cheek.

"Now that your cousin Heather is engaged, Patsy, what about you?"

"I'm not seeing anyone, Grandmother." I looked at Mary Jo. "Didn't we already have this discussion?"

"Yes, Mother, we pretty well exhausted this topic." Mary Jo smiled at Sophia.

"Is anyone else dying to see the next Harry Potter movie? The boys are counting the days."

"I'm a little surprised by you, Mary Jo." Tricia put her napkin to Sophia's cheek and wiped away a smear of cranberry sauce. "I don't allow Sophia to read them or watch the movies. The glorification of witchcraft and demonism is rather disturbing, don't you think?"

Mary Jo laughed, but Tricia stared back. "You're serious?" Mary Jo said.

“I happen to agree with her,” Dorothy said. “It’s one of those things that strikes you if you take the time to think about it.”

Tricia nodded.

“Oh.” Mary Jo looked down at her plate.

“I don’t give a damn about Harry Pottery. I want to know why you won’t find a boyfriend. You never bring anyone home.”

“I’m picky, Grandmother, like you said.” I drank my wine.

“She wants to become a nun,” Brooke said in a stage whisper on the other side of her. “She wants to marry Him.” She pointed to the plaster swirls on the ceiling of the dining room.

“What?” Tricia’s attention was caught. She struggled like a salmon moving upstream. “You can’t be a nun unless you’re Catholic!”

“I know,” Brooke said and raised her eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh, Brooke, stop.” Dorothy smiled. “She’s being silly, Trish.”

“It’s true, don’t you want to be a nun, Patsy?” Brooke asked.

“Absolutely,” I said, avoiding Grandmother’s gray, pencil sharp eyes.

“What’s a nun?” Sophia asked Tricia in her shy, breathy voice.

“It’s something Catholic people do,” Tricia said. “Eat your green beans if you want pie for dessert.”

“What’s a Catholic?”

“We’ll talk about it later, honey.” Hal said. At the same time, Tricia said, “John Burger from your class is Catholic, just like you’re a Baptist.”

Mary Jo asked if anyone else wanted another drink while she was up. I asked her to make me one of whatever she was having, and she brought me back a tall gin and tonic with a twist of orange.

“Thought you might need this,” she said in my ear as he took his seat. I caught Dorothy looking at me as she asked Hal how his furniture was doing.

“Sophia, are you friends with John Burger?” Brooke asked, her voice booming across the room.

“No. He has warts,” Sophia said loudly, excited that Brooke was paying attention to her. She held her fork in front of her mouth. A piece of turkey was on the end, and she chewed it while she looked back and forth from Brooke to her mother. Tricia pulled the fork from her hand and started to cut the meat into tiny bite-sized squares.

“Yup,” Brooke said. “All Catholics have warts.”

“I know,” said Sophia.

“Brooke.” Dorothy shot the name across the table, cold and steely. “Enough.”

“I’m just saying,” she said. “She’ll learn it eventually. At school, on the street, kids these days, they know everything.”

“Brooke, behave,” Daddy said.

“Okay, okay. Sophia, it’s all a lie. Catholics do not all have warts. But some, as you know yourself, do. And Patsy doesn’t want to become a nun...she might want to do one, though.”

I coughed on my gin and tonic.

“Oh, shit,” Mary Jo said under her breath.

“What did you say?” Grandmother complained. “I can’t hear a thing in here. The walls echo and everyone’s talking at once. Are you okay, Patsy? You look like a beet.”

“Fine,” I said.

“I said that Patsy *doesn’t* want to become a nun after all, Grandmother.”

“Of course she doesn’t,” Grandmother huffed. “Chew your food,” she said to me.

Tricia’s mouth was tight. Dorothy picked up her conversation with Hal as though she hadn’t heard anything, and Daddy became suddenly absorbed in carving more turkey although there was enough sliced to feed each of us dinner and lunch for the next day.

I finished my drink and turned to Mary Jo. “This was good,” I said. “Can you make me another?”

“Patsy.” Mary Jo held out the basket of rolls. “Why don’t you have some bread first.”

“No, thank you, Mary Jo,” I said. “It’s not on my diet.”

“I want one too!” Brooke sang as she stuffed a gravy-covered piece of meat into her mouth. Although Mary Jo did not bring Brooke a drink, she managed to go back to the kitchen for more vodka and orange juice, which I only remembered vaguely, due to

the fact that I was on my third gin and tonic at that point. I sneaked into the downstairs guest suite and fell asleep on the bed while everyone was opening Christmas Eve presents in the ballroom.

Dorothy shook me awake to tell me that everyone was leaving for the Christmas Eve service.

“Patsy!” Her weight on the bed pulled me towards her, and her icy fingers gripped my calf. “We’re going to church now.”

“Okay.” I sat up and pushed my hair out of my mouth. I hadn’t passed out. I was just so tired, my body so heavy. “I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“You *must* be joking,” she said. “You’re not coming, and neither is Brooke. Your behavior tonight has been an embarrassment. I’m only telling you to get up so you can wash your face and go to bed. We have a lot to do tomorrow and I won’t have things ruined because you and your sister decided to humiliate me in front of the entire family.” She stood up and was gone.

## A Second Opinion

In the dream my arms and legs were being twisted by a huge, hairy thing with dripping eyes and stubby, brown teeth. He didn't want to eat me. He wanted to eat my pain. He slobbered on me until I was soaked through and shivering. I fought my way out of the dream, swimming toward consciousness. I opened my eyes. I was still shivering, but now I was back in the guestroom with the dogs. My skirt was wrapped between my legs and heavy with moisture. The sweater stuck to my skin. I touched my face and my hand screamed with pain. Tears sprang to my eye. The bedroom door swung open. The knocking must have been what woke me, although I was vaguely aware of being awake off and on all night. I remembered waking with my back clenched in pain but then falling asleep before I could do anything about it.

"Merry Christmas!" Dorothy sang. She opened the window shade and a blade of light sliced through the room. I closed my eyes. "Get up! Get up! We've got things to do. It's almost eight."

"Dorothy." My voice came out a sandpaper croak.

"Well," she called from the bathroom. "Maybe someone's learned her lesson, hmm?" I heard the sizzle of water on tile like an egg frying. She'd started the shower for me. She expected me to get up. I wanted her to look at me. I could barely move. I could hardly speak.

"Please," I said. Now tears were running down my face because I hurt and I was scared. But my voice was only an insect peep, and she didn't look.

“Dress in jeans, in case we have to move things, but a nice sweater because I may have to send you out to get a few things. Is your dress laid out? Do you have your shoes?” She stopped on her way out. “Patsy, I know you’re hung over, but are you listening to me?”

“Something’s wrong.” I held up my hands. The fingers were thick and swollen. Every muscle in my body ached with fat, pulsing pain that pressed against and tightened my skin. I felt like the monster in my dream.

“Oh my God,” she said when she finally looked. She was still wearing her workout clothes, and her hair was in a small ponytail at the nape of her neck. She put one hand to her mouth. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know.” She came over and touched my forehead. Her fingers sent a chill across my skin. My teeth began chattering, but my face was still burning.

“You have a fever. For godsakes get out of those clothes and put a nightgown on. I’ll send Carolina up with a thermometer and some tea.” She turned off the shower and left. I sat up. My head pounded. In the bathroom, where I’d thrown my overnight bag, I fumbled with the buttons and zipper to get out of my clothes. My fingers felt clumsy and raw. When I finally pulled on a T-shirt and sweatpants, I felt thankful for the lack of constriction. In the mirror, my face was sweaty and flushed. I held my hands up in front of the mirror, checking to see that they actually looked like that. Every time I tried to grip something, the buttons on my shirt, the handle of the faucet, the comforter to pull it up over me, a shot of pain stunned me. Back in bed, I fell into a restless sleep. It

couldn't have been that long, but Daddy woke me when he came in the room. He had a tray with a thermometer, orange juice, water, and tea. He placed it on the table beside me.

"Patsy, honey, let me see your hands," he said. He sat on the edge of the bed. Since I'd moved out, I never saw him wear his glasses anymore. I forgot how they were so thick and square like a 70s newscaster. My head felt foggy and heavy. He hadn't combed his hair that morning, what little there was to comb, and it stuck out over his ears.

"Your glasses," I said.

"What about them?" he asked as I pulled my arms out from under the covers and placed them on top of the covers. He squinted and put his nose down to the bed. He placed his hands next to mine, but did not touch them as though examining a delicate artifact.

"I forgot how funny they look."

"Yeah, yeah," he tried to smile, but his face was pinched in concern. He carefully moved his hands and reached for the thermometer. It felt cold against my lips. He folded his hands together on one of his legs. "This is strange. Do you have any allergies that you know of?"

"I don't think so." I shook my head. This *was* strange. Neither of my parents had ever taken care of me when I was sick. When he saw that I wouldn't be comfortable holding the glass of water, he went downstairs to find me a straw. He told me not to

move the thermometer until he came back. I closed my eyes. Every time I did that, I had the sensation of spinning and then sinking into myself. It felt hard to breathe. Why would my hands make it harder to breathe? When Daddy came back, he slipped the thermometer from my mouth.

“103,” he said. “I’m calling someone.”

He left, and I closed my eyes again. When I opened my eyes, Brooke was sitting on my bed. I flinched, startled because I hadn’t heard her come in. My head was still pounding and my body ached, but I didn’t feel as delirious. My stomach boiled and popped in anger. It had been hours since I’d eaten anything other than the lime in my gin and tonic.

“What are you doing up so early?” I asked.

“It’s noon, crazy,” she said. “I’m hiding out. If there’s one place Mom won’t come to get me, it’s the sick room. She thinks you caught hepatitis from going to the hospital last month.”

“Hepatitis doesn’t even look like this, does it?”

“You know Mom. Always reading the health section of the paper.” Brooke shrugged and stretched next to me on the bed. “They had a fight about what to do with you. Mom thought your shit could wait until a more convenient time, but Daddy wanted to take you to the hospital.”

“God, no,” I said. “I won’t do it. Unless I’m unconscious, you can’t make me go.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Good.”

“So he called our old friend, Dr. Green, who agreed to come by and give you a look.”

“He’s coming now?”

“He’s come and gone. You were out like a drag queen at the gay pride parade. They decided not to wake you because Dr. Green says it’s pretty clear that you have a...wait, I wrote it down.” She rolled over and pulled a sheet of folded notebook paper from her back pocket. “...collagen vascular disease, which sounds scary but he said basically it means you have really bad arthritis. You have a prescription. Daddy went out to get it filled.”

“That’s it? It’s arthritis?”

“And probably a cold and a hang-over all rolled in to one. You’re supposed to take the pills, drink lots of water, and lay off the booze. He said that sometimes alcohol can make arthritis flare.”

“And Dorothy still won’t come in?”

“She’s just sort of busy in general.” Brook threw the piece of paper at me, and it landed on my chest right below my chin. I picked it up. Her messy handwriting was scrawled from margin to margin. There was an angry little cartoon star next to, “no alcoholic beverages!” The star’s face had Dorothy’s pointy chin and high cheekbones. I smiled.

“What?”

“All this for arthritis.” Relief welled in my chest, opening and spreading. All this for arthritis. It seemed like such a simple solution that the doctor’s would have named it ages ago. I let go of the piece of paper, and it fluttered to the floor, landing upside down. All I could see were black ink splotches that had seeped through the back. I rolled over and rubbed my head against the pillow. “Thanks for doing that,” I said.

She yawned. “You were unconscious and all. I figured it would be in keeping with the spirit of the season. Plus, when I made myself look concerned enough, Daddy told Mom that I didn’t have to help with the party.”

“You’re mooching off my suffering?”

“Only because you get the fucking gold ring. *You* don’t have to go to the party.”

“All these years and this was all it took.”

“Believe me, I’m taking notes,” Brooke said. “You won’t see *me* at this stupid fucking party next year.”

“You’ll be in New York, right?”

“Fuck yeah,” she said.

That night, I took the pills Dr. Green had prescribed, some kind of anti-inflammatory, and they seemed to help. Brooke dragged her TV into my room and set it up so I could watch DVDs she’d picked for me from her collection. We didn’t have much in common in terms of our taste in movies, but I settled on *Harold and Maude*,

which I'd seen before and liked. I remembered it as a comedy, but this time it seemed very sad, and I found myself crying as they lay in bed together, crazy Maude and fresh-faced Harold.

I turned the television off, and the sounds of the party came vibrating up through the floorboards. I pushed back the covers, wincing some when my feet hit the floor, my ankles still sensitive. Wrapped in a blanket, I walked to my old room, where we used to watch the people arrive. Now Brooke's room, it smelled musty and unfamiliar. I shuffled along the floor so I wouldn't trip over the piles of laundry and shoes and books. Her bed was pushed up against the wall, right under the window. Outside, shiny sports cars and SUVs lined the curb all along our street. The valet guys were sitting in the porch. One had a green windbreaker on over his shirt and tie, the other was smoking and trying not to look cold.

Brooke stood next to him, bare-armed and comfortable in the scoop neck black dress with asymmetrical skirt that Dorothy had ordered from Saks. Brooke had slipped off her heels and was standing barefoot on the cold marble front steps. She looked gorgeous as she smiled at the boys and bummed a smoke. Of course that's where she was. Brooke was always exactly where she meant to be. I watched them for a while. The guy without a jacket put his hand on her waist, which he moved after a brief, chilly look from Brooke. Then she smiled again and said something that they all laughed at.

I decided I would take the next week off and go to New Orleans to see my mother. I drove the five hours the Monday after Christmas. Pierson told me to take off as much time as I needed, and Daddy slipped me two hundred dollars. Dorothy and Brooke were after-Christmas shopping, and left to his own devices, Daddy had been wearing sweat pants and nothing else. Even though it was just a little chilly and overcast, not really raining, he'd thrown on a raincoat to walk me outside

“Daddy, it’s too much.” I tried to make him take some of it back.

“Gas money,” he said as he put my bag in the trunk. “Tell Jean hello and get some rest. Don’t forget your follow up is in a week.” That’s when he scheduled my appointment with the rheumatologist, which was apparently what kind of doctor I needed to see. Usually it took at least six months to get an appointment, but Dr. Green called a friend and got me in.

“I know,” I said. “I take care of myself all the time, you know. I’m an adult.”

“Still. Call if you need anything.” He hugged me goodbye. His eyes were moist, and he stood in the driveway until I turned the corner at the end of the street.. As I drove away, I couldn’t help but thinking he looked senile, crying shirtless in the driveway with a raincoat and bare feet.

Mother, on the other hand, appeared to be insane in a completely different way. Something was different, and I suspected more cosmetic surgery, perhaps the eyes. It didn’t show up so much on screen, but in person, she looked scarily like the more glamorous older sister I never had. I had gone up to her room after I checked into the

hotel in the French Quarter where she'd gotten me a room. She was no Meryl Streep, but everyone knew Jean G. Love, and she'd secured a room even though the place was booked for the New Year.

"Oh, sweetie!" She threw her arms around me and held me tight. I could feel the ribs in her back and her bony hips through her hip hugger jeans. She kissed me on the cheek and wrinkled her nose. Apparently she'd been thinking the same thing about me. "Do you eat your food? Or do you just sniff it and walk away."

"You should talk," I said.

"That's my job." She held my hands and stepped back to look at me. "You, on the other hand, need fattening. What happened to the barbecue and enchiladas and steak in Texas? Did they run out?"

"Sadly, yes."

"Well, that's too bad. I guess we'll have to have turtle soup and gumbo instead. How do you like this place?" She gestured to the extravagant but small room. Everything was some shade of pink, including the canopy on the four-poster bed. Somehow, they'd also crammed in a refrigerator and a tiny love seat with heart-shaped cushions. "Isn't it a riot? I'm only staying here for the weekend. Beta's apartment-hunting, which is ridiculous, she doesn't have time for that, but the place they set up for me was completely inappropriate."

I sat down on the stiff little love seat and rubbed my eyes. Mother sat on the bed, fluffing the pillow behind her. "How is good ole Beta?" I asked. Beta had made me

insanely jealous when I was younger. She'd been confident, beautiful, and she'd had the complete attention of my mother.

"Traacherous. She's leaving me to become a housewife."

"She won't leave you. You'll convince her to stay in the end. You always do."

"Unfortunately, no." Mother picked up a pack of cigarettes from the bedside table. She lit one and groaned. "She and her *partner* are moving to Washington state to be hippies."

"Partner?"

"Her fiancé, wife-to-be, girlfriend, whatever it is they're calling themselves these days. Personally, I think she could do better. *Melanie* is the woman's name. She's an environmental something-or-other. What on earth is Beta going to do in Washington, that's what I want to know."

"Really?" I asked, interested by this news. I watched Mother's face, but she seemed unimpressed. "I didn't know Beta was a lesbian."

"She's bi. Everybody's bi in New York." She appeared to think about this for a moment, blowing smoke in front of her. "Except me. I'm the heterosexual stronghold of the city. But enough about Beta and her depressing betrayal. What's new with you? Tell me all."

My throat felt dry and I went to the mini fridge and took out a bottle of water.

"I don't know," I said. "Not much to tell."

“I remember you were sick.” She tapped her fingernail to her teeth, making a show of dragging her memory for the carcass of my little life. “The flu, is that right?”

“Not exactly.” I gave her the run down of recent events, including a comical version of the ER doctor and the bitchy Dr. Price, both of which entertained her as I hoped they would. Mother liked amusing stories about other people’s incompetence. By the time I reached Dr. Green’s diagnosis, her attention was flagging.

“Weird, isn’t it?” she asked absently. “You’re so young.” She stubbed the cigarette out in the heavy glass ashtray next to her and stretched. She wasn’t thinking of me any more. That was the thing about Mother. She was always very excited to see me for about five minutes, like a child with a new and complicated toy. Before she got the box open it seemed great, but then when she realized she’d have to take all the parts out and put them together to play, she’d lose interest and go back to her old, familiar games. In Mother’s case, this was usually work or boys.

“I guess so,” I said to be agreeable.

“Well, I’m glad you’re better now.” She stood up and gestured for me to go to her. “Come, give me a kiss, and then I’ve got to get to bed. 5 AM on the set. What a nightmare, right?” I stood up and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Goodnight, Mother.”

“Goodnight, sweetie.” Before I closed the door behind me, she added, “Tomorrow, I’ll ask about your love life. Be prepared for questions.”

Despite her promise, Mother was busy shooting during the day and schmoozing at night. She habitually stayed out later than my body was allowing and woke up hours earlier. Two other movies were being filmed in the same area, and every night, the participants of each film would graze the city trying to be seen with their hotter counterparts. We were always in a group of actors, producers, directors, writers, and assistants. Since Mother was busy, I mostly hung out with Beta, helping her when she needed it. Beta's job was to make sure that Mother's eighteen-hour days went smoothly from before sun-up until her highlights hit the pillow, a task that seemed to me to require the labor of more than one person especially since Mother herself refused to participate.

We drove around one afternoon I was there looking for silver shoes to go with the outfit Mother was wearing to the New Year's Eve party. I'd called around that morning to get a list of places that had the kind of thing we were looking for, and then Beta and I went around the city buying up dozens of pairs of shoes, one of which Mother would choose for the party.

Beta had a wide, sturdy body and red spiral curls she wore twisted up and pinned to the back of her head. Although her mass was made up of muscle, thick bones, and very little fat, she was easily twice my size. As she bit her lip and sped up at a yellow light, her determination felt vaguely familiar. "You remind me of someone," I told her as she barreled through traffic. We already had five pairs of seemingly identical pairs of shoes in the backseat. Beta could see subtle differences among them, and she assured me that she was not the only one.

“Oh yeah?”

“My friend, Charlotte. You’re both perfectionists.”

“Well, if you’re not going to do something right, why do it at all?” She said this automatically, as though she’d said it several times a day, every day no matter what people said to her first. We pulled into a parallel space in front of a mall, one of the last places on our shopping list.

“I guess,” I said.

“You don’t think you should take pride in what you do?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I sat back, surprised by the earnestness of her question. “I don’t think about it much.”

“Let me ask you something, Patsy. Your mother doesn’t think you’re happy. Are you happy?”

“I don’t know.” My fingers rested on the door handle. I pulled it toward me so that the door cracked open and a chime dinged on the dashboard. Beta pulled the keys out of the ignition. Her pale lips were pressed together as though she was thinking about something.

“Well, that’s ok.” She shook her head apologetically. “It’s not really the point, anyway. Jean just wanted to know.”

“I’m trying to be happy.”

“It’s ok,” she said. “Say, would you kiss me if I wanted you to?”

“What?”

“Theoretically, would you be interested in kissing me?” She moved over toward me a little.

“Why?” I shrank against the door. It wasn’t as though I felt threatened. Just confused and a little bewildered. I didn’t think I wanted to kiss Beta. “Did my mom put you up to this? I thought you had a girlfriend.”

“I do,” she said. “I do. You’re right. Never mind. I was just asking. Don’t worry so much, Patsy. Life’s a dance, and all that. It’s not important what Jean thinks.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Is this the part where you give me life advice from country songs? After hitting on me on behalf of my mother...” I trailed off. It was too weird to go on.

Beta laughed. Her smile was easy and wide and white. I remembered why I used to think she was so gorgeous when I was a teenager. “I guess I’m saying that there’s no point in chasing funny-looking trophies. The sooner you realize that what the rest of the world wants from you isn’t necessarily what you want from yourself, the better.”

“Is that why you’ve spent the last eight years being a minor celebrity’s personal assistant?” I asked. Beta jangled the keys in her hands for a while and didn’t answer.

“Exactly,” she said finally. “Yes. Do you think my parents were happy when I graduated from Smith to be someone’s gopher, but you know what? I’m good at it. I am. I’ve done a good job for your mother.”

“She’ll miss you. She won’t know how to get dressed without you.”

“I know. But I need to get away from New York. I love Jean, but I need to get away from her too. I need to have my own life. I need to have real relationships.”

“If you want that, you’ll *have* to leave Mother.”

“She’s not so bad,” Beta said. “She wants to be closer to you. She talks about it all the time.”

“Well, she has a listening problem. That’s not my fault.”

“Jean is insecure. She thinks she’s a failure so she overcompensates by paying more attention to herself than she thinks anyone else will.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “Did she tell you that?”

“No.” Beta looked at me. “I think it’s true.”

“She really thinks she’s a failure?”

“Sometimes.” Beta leaned over and gave my shoulder a friendly punch. “And just so you know, Jean *did* ask me to find out if you like girls, but I already knew the answer to that. You should tell her yourself. She’ll introduce you to Ellen Degeneres.” Beta smiled. Her big teeth worked for her, maybe because everything about her was so big. “Also, I came up with the kiss on my own. Sorry, Patsy. I thought maybe there was something there.” I smiled back, feeling flattered and, suddenly, not so opposed to the idea as I’d originally thought. Especially now that I knew it hadn’t come directly from my mother.

“Thanks for telling me, Beta,” I said. I put my hand over her hand, and that was how, outside a mall in suburban Louisiana, I had my first girl kiss.

## My Heart Swells (Along with the Rest of Me)

Later that night I got a call from Daddy. I was in my hotel room dressed in heels, a black cocktail dress, and new earrings that swung against my neck. Mother and Beta and Melanie, who'd just flown in to be with Beta for New Year's, were taking much longer to prepare for our dinner reservation. I was looking forward to meeting Melanie. I'd never seen two women be together. During the wait, my book had fallen open on the bed beside me. I got up and opened the mini-fridge. The cool air curled around my face, as I squatted down to examine the caffeinated offerings. The phone rang before I could decide if a Jack and Coke would perk me up or knock me out.

"Hey, Daddy," I answered after checking my caller ID.

"Patsy, I have something to tell you." His voice sounded rough and thick.

"Daddy, what's wrong? Is it Brooke?" It had to be bad for him to call me like this, crying and telling me he had something to tell me. I put my hand out to steady myself against the bed. The wood of the four poster frame was cool and solid. "Daddy?"

"No. Brooke's fine, baby." He cleared his throat. "It's about you."

"What about me?"

"I talked to Dr. Green today. He consulted with Dr. Taft about the results of your blood work. You don't just have arthritis. You have lupus."

“God, Daddy, you almost gave me a heart attack. I don’t know even know what lupus is.”

“It’s an autoimmune disease. It’s what Sheila had.”

“Sheila who’s dead?” Sheila was my dad’s cousin who died when I was a baby. She and Daddy had been raised together.

“I think you should come home as soon as you can.”

“Did she die of *this*?”

“Yes.” He sobbed. I started to cry too.

“Are they sure?”

“They’re pretty sure.”

“How did I get it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, how do we fix it?”

“There are ways to control it, but there are no cures yet.”

“Do they think I’m I going to die?”

“Of course not,” he said sharply. “We’ll take care of you, Patsy. You’ll be okay. Get on a flight, and we can talk to someone about it tomorrow. We’ll take care of your car later.” I didn’t say anything for a long time. “Patsy? Are you there?”

“But I don’t feel bad right now,” I said. “Maybe they made a mistake.”

“I don’t think so, sweetheart.”

“I don’t know if I want to come home right now.”

“The sooner you get this under control, the better your chances are to be healthy.”

“I’m fine.” I wiped tears from my cheeks. “I have to go meet Mother for dinner.”

“At least tell her so she knows what’s going on, so she can take care of you if the need arises. Or better yet, tell someone who works for her.”

It was one of those jabs at her motherhood and character that I had long ago decided to ignore. I waited for him to say something else.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That wasn’t fair. I just want to make sure you’re taken care of.”

“Daddy, no one needs to take care of me. I’m going to dinner now. I love you. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Almost as soon as I hung up, I got another call. It was a Houston number that I didn’t recognize. I let it ring until the voice mail picked up. I thought it was Daddy trying to call me again. Or maybe one of the doctors. I lay back on the bed and turned to the side, curling up into a ball, so my dress wrinkled. My earrings bunched and twisted. I was very quiet and still. I heard the refrigerator whir and bump, and through walls I could hear the shuffling of feet. I ran my hands over my body, over my wrists and fingers, which were tender but not hurting exactly, and another cyst on my rib that twinged when I moved the wrong way. Underneath my skin, the shallow flutter in my lungs rasped when I was lying down. Lately I’d been waking up coughing, although I hadn’t had night sweats in days. Even with the discomfort, none of these things told me that I had an incurable illness or that I was going to die.

My phone beeped, and when I listened to the messages, I was surprised to hear Anita's voice at the end of the line.

Half an hour later, my clothes were stuffed in a suitcase in the trunk of my car and there was a message for Mother at the front desk. I could have told her that I was leaving, but I was afraid Daddy would get in touch with her and convince her that it was a bad idea. Before I left, I also slipped a note under Beta's door. I thanked her and wished her luck and told her I was sorry that I wouldn't have the chance to meet Melanie.

The drive back was long and dark. I was still wearing the dress for the party and the earrings, though I'd slipped out of the heels and was wearing flip-flops. It was eleven-thirty when I stopped at a gas station outside of Beaumont. I'd been driving for almost four hours. My eyes burned, and my thighs and neck and lower back felt stiff and bruised from sitting in the same position for so long.

"Hey there," the cashier said when I put the coffee down. She had thick glasses with pink frames and wore a blue smock over her clothes. "You look tired to be driving so late. Where you headed?"

"Houston." I took out my wallet to pay.

"That's all you're getting?" I nodded. "Well, Happy New Year then," she said. She pushed the coffee toward me. "On the house."

"Thank you." I picked up the coffee and smiled politely.

“You and me are in the same boat. We’re both going to be alone. Free coffee is the least I can do to make myself feel better about it. Do you want a party hat?” From behind the counter, she pulled out a stack of cone-shaped New Year’s hats in a rainbow of shiny colors. They were outlined with glitter and had elastic strings across the bottom. She held one out.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Thanks though.”

“Nobody wants them.” She put the stack back under the counter, but kept one out for herself. She put it on her head. “If someone gave me a free hat, I’d take it. One guy said the glitter would get all over the car. Guess I don’t have a nice enough car to worry about that. It’s okay, though. I’ll just give the leftovers to my son. He’s little. He likes stuff like that.”

“How old?” I asked. I didn’t really care how old her son was, but she’d given me free coffee

“He’s four.”

“That’s nice. A good age.”

“He’s got a little brother, too, but he’s just thirteen months. Too young for that sort of thing yet. You got kids?”

“No.”

“You just wait. I’m twenty-one now, and I feel like I’m forty!” She laughed like it was a joke. It was only when I paid attention that I could see the roundness of her cheeks, the smooth skin and baby fat.

“It’s hard work,” I said, taking another step toward the door.

“It sure is.” He face slackened for a moment, and she looked sad and alone there behind the counter. It was just for a second that she seemed miles away, maybe at home playing with her kids. Maybe in a car like mine driving to a party in Houston. She looked at me and shrugged. “You have a good night. Happy New Year.”

“You too. Happy New Year,” I said. My car was parked around the side of the building, away from the view of the cashier. Once inside, I waited for the overhead light to fade so that I was in the dark. I put my coffee in the cup holder and put my hands to my face and cried. One of my hands was warm from holding the cup and the other was cold from holding my keys. Half my face was warmed. Half my face was cooled. The more I tried to stop the sobs that welled from deep inside my guts, the harder they shook me. I cried because I was cursed. And I cried because I was lucky. I cried for the woman inside who’d given away her youth to babies, and I cried because when she got home, there would always be people waiting for her. To at least two of them, she was the most important thing in the world. I cried because I’d finally kissed a girl, but she wasn’t at all the one I wanted.

When I finally got to Houston, it was already one AM. The bridge to the New Year had come and gone. The party was winding down. There would be no kiss at midnight for me. Even so, I drove to the neighborhood Anita had named in her message and stopped at an all-night grocery store. I walked through the fluorescent-lit aisles, my

flip-flops smacking the floors. When I found the bathroom in the back next to the butcher, I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, re-applied make-up and perfume. The purple circles under my eyes were concealed pretty well. At least the dress was new and it wasn't hanging off my body like the rest of my clothes. A little wrinkled from the drive maybe, but by this time a night, who would notice? Considering how I felt, I looked pretty good.

Anita's directions took me to a small blue house with white trim in Montrose. The windows were lit with an orange glow, and I knew it was the right place from the people passing back and forth, the faint sound of music, and the wide-open front door. When I stepped inside, I understood why. Outside I was cool, but inside the house had turned into a sauna. Sweaters and jackets scattered like textile carnage over the sides of chairs and tables. All around women and men (mostly women ) were stripped to T-shirts and tank tops. I kept my jacket on and looked around for Anita, but the first familiar face I saw belonged to Katy. She came over, simultaneously hugging me and shoving a beer into my hands.

"Well if it isn't Patsy Grant!" she cried. "Who I've *never* seen away from the Pierson hellhole. Happy New Year, Patsy Grant."

"Happy New Year," I said. "How're things at the reception desk?"

"Ha!" she said. "You missed midnight. I guess you had a better party to go to first, huh?" She swayed in front of me.

“No,” I said. She was scanning the room looking for someone. She noticed I wasn’t talking and turned back to me.

“So! What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“Anita invited me.”

“That’s right.” She frowned and took back the beer she’d put in my hands. She took a swig and then gave me a look as though I’d protested. “Geez! Don’t freak out. I’ll get you a fresh one, okay? The keg’s in the kitchen.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You think I’m drunk, don’t you?” She pointed an accusing finger at me.

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Not hardly. Just wait an hour or, then you’ll see something!”

“Is Anita around?”

“Sure.” Katy took another swig and looked over my head to the rest of the party. It was not at all the type of crowd I was used to. There were tattoos and piercings and girls dressed like Brooke, but also older women and people who looked more like me.

“You know, I told her not to invite you,” Katy said. Her eyelids drooped, and she swayed a little as she spoke. She reached her free hand out to steady herself and hit a tall woman with a shaved head who looked over and smiled at her. Katy didn’t seem to notice.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “You don’t like me?”

“I thought I’d save her the trouble. She’s developing a thing for you.” Katy jabbed me in the shoulder. “What do you think about that?”

“I think I’ll get that beer now.”

“Wait!” Katy followed me while I searched for the kitchen. She spoke loudly so that the people we passed turned around and looked at us curiously. Or maybe they were noticing that she couldn’t walk two steps in the same direction and kept bumping into people and spilling her drink. “I mean, you don’t date girls, right? I’m not wrong about that, am I? Huh?”

I ducked into the kitchen, which was empty for the moment, probably because it was about a hundred degrees in there. I noticed that the oven was on, but nothing was inside. I flipped the dial to OFF. God, what a nightmare. I was having a loud argument with a co-worker at a lesbian party that was minutes away from going up in flames. The last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself as a trouble-making heterosexual. The next to last thing I wanted to do was die in a house fire. However, at least that would be less confrontational. I got a beer and planted myself in the kitchen. It felt good and hot on my joints, and I hoped that Katy would be flushed out by the temperature.

Unfortunately, she was not so easily defeated.

“So?” she asked, appearing in front of me again. “What’s the deal with you?”

“Why do you care?”

“Everyone hates a tease,” she said. “You did it to me, you did it to Dan, and now you’re doing it to Anita. Soon, everybody’s gonna hate you.” As Katy said that, she

stepped up and got right in my face, pointing at me with her index finger. A giggling couple came in with their arms wrapped around each other. They looked at us and then at each other. "Sorry, ladies," the shorter woman said. She turned and pulled her teetering girlfriend behind her. From the living room, I heard someone shout, "Catfight in the kitchen!" Normally, I would have been mortified. I would have left or tried to smooth things over, but I was angry and hurt, and the anger rolled over my skin like a fever, hot and prickly.

"I didn't *do* anything to you, and if you think I did, you're warped. And Dan doesn't hate me. We're friends."

"That's what you think."

"Anita doesn't hate me either. You're the only one who hates me, and that's only because you're jealous. You want what I have, but you can't have it."

"Ha! Look at you," she said, spit flying in my face. I turned my head in disgust as she pointed to my dress and my hair. "With your sorority clothes and stupid yuppie hair. Who would want *that*?"

At this point, she'd backed me into the corner of the kitchen. She was standing so close that I could feel her breath on my face. Sweat beaded on her upper lip, and her body smelled like sweat and alcohol and some kind of sickening cologne that made me want to gag. I put my beer down on the counter and leaned forward, suddenly realizing that what I'd said was true. She did want what I had, what I hadn't even known I had.

I felt a power when I whispered in her ear, “I think you know who wants *that*, and it’s driving you crazy.” Then I pushed her away with both hands. Pain shot through both wrists but I kept going past her, out of the kitchen, to the back of the house where I hoped I would find a bathroom. My hands were shaking and I thought I might puke.

I squeezed past groups of laughing, hugging, touching women. In the hall, the world started to spin. I saw lights flash and the smiling faces of the strangers. I put my hand out for balance and suddenly my body was pressed against the wall. I stayed that way with my eyes closed for a several seconds. When I opened my eyes, I was okay again. No more spinning. I straightened up, using the wall for support. Behind me, someone put her hand on my waist. At first I thought it was Katy, but the touch was gentle, not angry.

“You okay, baby?” I looked over my shoulder. The woman had a head of curly brown hair and freckles across her nose. Her face seemed very close to mine. “Do you need to lie down?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, but I leaned against her. She led me to one of the dark bedrooms. “I’ve been sick.”

She cleared a space on the bed. It was piled with sweaters and jackets. “You just rest here for a while, and you’ll be fine.” I sat on the edge of the bed. The woman left and came back with a glass of water. She sat down next to me and handed me the glass. I took a sip. It was lukewarm and tasted like dirt. I drank a little bit more to show my appreciative.

“Thank you.” I handed glass back. I started to stand up, but she put her hand on my shoulder.

“You stay here.”

“Listen, I don’t even know whose party this is. I feel a little weird sleeping on their bed.” The woman reached up and twisted her hair around her hand over and over and then pulled it into a knot that stayed.

“It’s hot as hell,” she said as she looked at me carefully. “You know, you don’t seem drunk.”

“I’m not.”

“Well,” she said. “I know one of the girls throwing the party, and I don’t think she’d mind if she knew you almost fell out in the hall and I gave you a place to rest.” My head felt weird, and a wave of heat rushed through my body so that I broke out in a sweat. I leaned forward as sparks tore through my joints like they were ripping. Maybe she was right. If I lay down for a while, I would feel better. The woman stared at me, her forehead creased with worry.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll stay for a while.”

“Good girl.” She waited until I stretched out on the bed to close the door behind her. I put my head on the stranger’s pillow. It was cool and smelled like unwashed hair and something else familiar but un-placeable. I pulled off my jacket and laid it across to cover the pillow. All I could see were shadows and the outlines of unrecognizable objects and the window that flickered before me like a television screen. Because it was

so hot inside, most people had gathered in the backyard. They had tiki torches and lights strung across the patio so I could see them and they couldn't see me. I searched the crowd for Anita's face, but I couldn't find her. My eyes were heavy, and after a few minutes, I buried my face in my jacket and fell into a heavy sleep.

When I woke up, it was quiet. The lights outside had been turned off, and the room was dark. And cooler now. I could hear the house shift and the click of central air. It took me a moment to realize that someone else was in the room. As my eyes became adjusted, I could see the outline of a woman slipping off her clothes by the closet.

"Hello?" I said. I sat up too fast. Behind my eyes, a blackout of static appeared as the blood rushed to my head.

The figure jumped and yelled. "Who the fuck are you?" Her voice was rough and scared. She took a step toward me with her arm raised. She sounded like she would beat the shit out of me if she felt it was necessary.

"I'm sorry," I said hoarsely as I waited for the head rush to be over. "Someone told me I could sleep here."

"Motherfucker." She let out a deep breath and slumped against the wall. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I wasn't feeling well and I fell asleep. I'm sorry." I scooted to the edge of the bed. My shoes had come off and I was searching with my hands frantically. "I'll be out of here in two minutes."

"Patsy?" The woman asked. She stepped forward and started to laugh.

“Anita.” I put my hand to my head. Was I dreaming? Was I dead? “What are you doing here?”

“I guess you came to my party after all.” She came over to sit next to me on the bed. I could feel the warmth from her body when she sat down, though she didn’t touch me. She was wearing only a sleeveless undershirt and a pair of underwear. She leaned forward so that her forehead was almost touching mine for a moment and then she moved back again. She was still laughing softly. “I didn’t realize when I invited you that you’d just head straight for my bed.”

“No,” I said, flustered. “Really, I didn’t realize it was your party. I almost fainted and the woman told me I could lie down in here. I’m so embarrassed.”

“It’s okay.” She pushed the hair out of my face and put her hand on my cheek. I took a sharp breath and my heart slammed in my chest. “I’m just saying I wish I’d known earlier. I might not have wasted so much time. Did you drink too much?”

“No.” I was still confused. “I thought you lived down Westheimer, where I dropped you off that time.”

“That was my mother’s apartment. I was staying there until I found my own place. Are you feeling better now?” She stroked my hair, and I felt it like she was stroking my whole body. I closed my eyes.

“Yes.” I was, too. Anything that hurt in my body was overpowered by the impossible, quivering thrill of sitting so close to her. The hot fever on my face, the ache in my joints, and my exhaustion became indistinguishable from the flush of sex, my

longing, and weakness from wanting too much for her to keep touching me, so much that it hurt. Was it hard to breathe because I was sick or because I would die if she took her hand away? I reached out, uncertain what I was reaching for. My hand found her free hand, the one not touching my hair. For a moment, our hands locked, fingers intertwined, and she squeezed so hard I thought my bones would break. I pulled her toward me so that we were nose to nose. Her breath was soft against my skin, and I could tell she'd been drinking. Eyeliner smeared above and below her lashes, and in the dark her pupils were large black discs, fierce with her want. When she smiled with her mouth that close, her teeth shined in the dark.

“Patsy,” she said.

“Yes?” My voice had been whittled away to a rough, uneven whisper. My question turned into an answer and I whispered again. All I could say was yes. I pressed my lips together and nodded. *Yes, Yes, Yes.* Anita's fingers tightened through my hair until my scalp stung with the pulling. The first kiss was hard and deep and endless. Somewhere in time I think it's still happening with our hands locked together and her other hand in my hair and my other hand on her leg working its way up her thigh, firm and soft and warm and thick. For that first kiss, I lost my head. I lost my body. I was floating and dizzy, and I felt like I would never come back to the place I'd been before she took those steps and sat beside me on the bed.

Then things came back to earth. She was drunk and horny, and I'd never gotten laid. She tugged at my dress until I unzipped the side and pulled it off over my head.

She slipped out of the rest of her clothes. Air from the vent blew onto the bed and I shivered as she pushed me down. Her thumb was in my mouth and I sucked it while she ran her other hand down my face and breasts, resting on my belly for a moment while she kissed me again. Her back was wide and strong. The muscles moved under her skin. Her curves of thigh and breast were soft and I wanted to squeeze them and lick them until she turned pink and raw. I wrapped my legs around her and pulled her closer while my hands went down and found her waiting, soft and wet and hot like me.

I rubbed against her and she moaned. She thrust herself against my hand, her head buried in my neck. She put her hands on my shoulders and pressed down while she moved against me. I was terrified, but she put my hands where she wanted them. One hand stroked while the other one entered her. She wanted them both, and I could feel her throbbing on the inside as she fucked my fingers, pushing them deeper inside her. She sat up and fucked harder, and my hands felt like not enough. I wanted to give her more, as much as she wanted, as much as she could ever want. I did what she said when she told me. Harder, faster, more. *Yes, Yes, Yes.* She looked down at me as she moved, her breaths shallow and quick, she closed her eyes and came, shuddering and sweating and I was aching and sweating and hot for her, and I could feel my fingers tighten and cramp, but I didn't care. I didn't if all my bones broke if she had come knowing it was me inside her.

She kissed me again, and our bodies slid together in our oils and sweat. My hands were shaking. My body was trembling as her teeth grazed my skin. I wanted her to

touch me, but she teased me with her tongue from my swollen nipple, my ribs against her teeth, licking where my bony hip jutted. My whole body felt surrounded by her. How was she everywhere at once? It made me hungry for more of her everywhere all the time I wanted her everywhere, and when she finally put her tongue there in the most delicate, careful touch, my whole body shuddered. *Yes, yes, yes.* I wanted her on top of me, inside me, between my legs, sucking my fingers, fingers tangled in my hair, pulling me closer, my skin burning with her. Somehow she did it, she was everywhere soft and hard, and she didn't stop until I was crying out and shaking and my whole body hummed.

Afterward I could barely move, which was not entirely a good thing. Yes, there was the paralyzing after-sex glow, but there was also the cramping in my back and fingers, the ache of a growing fever in my bones. Anita got up to go to the bathroom. She smiled at me as she pulled on her T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. While she was gone, I shakily put my underwear back on wishing I had something other than the dress to wear. I didn't know if I was staying the night or if she expected me to leave. I was exhausted and in pain, and I didn't want her to know. I was sitting on the edge of the bed with the dress in my lap when Anita padded back into the room. She held a tall glass of water and a bottle of Tylenol. She held them up for me. When I nodded my head, she sat down next to me and twisted the top of the pill bottle. She threw a few in her mouth and shook a couple out for me. We passed the water back and forth in silence.

“Are you leaving?” She put her hand on the dress and began rubbing the inside of my leg through the dress. I closed my eyes. “Because you can stay, if you want.”

“I should probably go,” I said.

“You look tired.”

“I am.”

“So stay. You can get some rest, then go home in the morning. I have to be out of here in a few hours anyway.”

“You do?” I asked, suddenly feeling as though she were the one leaving me. Even if I wanted her too, she wouldn’t stay with me?

“It’s my aunt’s birthday. We go over to her house, watch football, have some cake. It’s a family tradition.” She yawned. “I would invite you, but it’s pretty boring.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay, then. Maybe I’ll just leave now.” I wanted my anti-inflammatory and a hot shower, but even more I didn’t want to wake drenching her bed in my sweat or crying out at whatever new, unfamiliar pain would jar me awake that night. I didn’t want to feel rejected in the morning when she left without me.

She walked me to the front door, and we kissed again. “I’m glad you came over,” she said. “I’m glad you stayed.”

“Should I call you?” I asked.

“Sure. Give me a call. I’m sure we’ll bump into each other again.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“I’ll be really busy. My aunt’s birthday, remember?” She touched my chin with her thumb. “Why don’t we just see?”

## Telling

“Thank God it’s over,” Charlotte said when I opened the door for her a week later. She’d come over bearing casserole and gifts to trade. It was the first time we’d seen each other since before Christmas. “I was so fucking sick of hearing ‘A Red-White-and-Blue Christmas’ every place I go. Shame on Britney Spears. Has she no integrity?”

“It’s not Britney Spears,” I said, swallowing hard to keep from sobbing at the sight of her friendly face. “It’s the other blond one.”

“Well, Britney should have stepped in and done some peer counseling if you ask me. Want something to drink?” I’d taken the casserole dish, and in her other arm she held up a Macy’s bag with three bottles of wine inside.

“Of course,” I said.

“I wasn’t sure if it was okay with...you know, the lupus. We don’t have to open it.”

“No,” I said, my face burning. “It’s okay. I can still drink when I want.”

“Good. That gives me an excuse to open a bottle of wine.”

“You need an excuse?” I asked as she helped myself to my corkscrew.

“I try not to drink alone.”

“Right,” I said. Since she had moved in with Richard, she didn’t really have the opportunity to drink alone, but she’d never been above it. I put the dish on my counter. She put down the bottle of wine and peeled back the tin foil cover to gesture like a Price

is Right hostess. Steam wafted up from the thick cheese top layer. I held out a glass for her and admired her culinary skills.

“It’s beautiful, Charlotte.”

“It’s from a kit, you know, one of those boxes with everything already in it. All I had to do was throw it in a pan. And I did add organic vegetables. For your health.”

“Still,” I said. “It looks delicious.” We filled our plates, and I sat on a pillow on the floor next to the coffee table while Charlotte sat cross-legged on the couch. I tried not to show how difficult it was to get up and down, but I sat there because it’s where I always sat. I didn’t want her to worry any more than she already had.

“I rented bad movies that Richard would never watch with me, but first I want to hear how you’re feeling.”

“Much better.”

I took a tiny sip of wine and picked at my food. My stomach fluttered, and I took a deeper sip. I needed courage if I was going to talk to Charlotte about Anita. I had been thinking, for some reason, about our trip to visit Barbie, and the quote from the guru about depending on your relationships with other people. I knew that I didn’t have perfect freedom on earth, but I wasn’t sure that I was taking advantage of my relationships. If this was the meaning of life, then I was in danger of having a meaningless existence. Even with my closest friends, I’d been afraid of losing them by trusting them. But what if the old guy was right and this was it. No one knew me. I hardly knew myself.

“The drugs are working?” Charlotte asked.

“So far.”

“You know it’s weird because I’m teaching ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ in class this week.”

“Yeah?” I said, thinking she was making some kind of comment about my love life. Maybe she was more perceptive than I was giving her credit for.

“Remember that story?” She rolled her eyes in frustration as I shook my head.

“Well, anyway, Flannery O’Connor, the author, had lupus.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

While everyone else was thinking about this thing, this illness, all I could think about was Anita and that night. I’d called her once, but she hadn’t called back. And then a couple of days after I’d spent the night with her, when I was still using up the days I’d taken off to go to New Orleans, I’d had another flare, as I learned the periods of intense inflammation and illness were called. My hands and feet ballooned, and my fever rose to 102 degrees three days in a row. Daddy got me in to see a rheumatologist who diagnosed me with systemic lupus erythematosus based on my previous blood work and the visible symptoms.

I learned that it basically meant that my body had become allergic to itself. My antibodies were attacking the tissues in my joints. Dr. Steele, my rheumatologist, a lovely lady with an appropriately graying bun and a jaunty walk, said that it was most likely non-organ threatening, which was good. She put me on prednisone, a kind of

steroid, and within two days, I felt a thousand times better. But because of the presence of protein in my urine sample, I had to do a twenty-four hour urinalysis to determine if my kidneys were being damaged. This was why Charlotte had come to hang out with me. For the next twenty-four hours I had to collect all my pee in a big orange jug, which wasn't exactly convenient for carrying around.

“What about all the other things?” asked Charlotte.

“What do you mean?” I hadn't been listening. It was better now that Charlotte was here, but still, about every five minutes, I imagined Anita's lips brushing against my stomach and a rush of longing went through me.

“The period, the vomiting, the fever? They were all because of this?”

“They were all related,” I said. “I stopped getting my period because my body recognized that I was sick. They said I should get it back as soon as everything is functioning normally.”

“You took a team of doctors,” she said with admiration.

“I know. I was a medical mystery.”

“You must feel pretty darn special. It's like that time that they thought Bobbie Sue Hicks was dying of cancer but then it turned out she was just pregnant with twins.”

“One of the early shows. You are a true fan.”

“Ah well, I have the *Best Of* box set.” Charlotte threw her wadded-up paper towel at me. “At least you're not pregnant.”

“Yup,” I said, not feeling at all lucky about that. I peeled off the top layer of cheese on Charlotte’s casserole and began cutting it into little pieces.

“Patsy?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay? You seem kind of quiet. Am I being obnoxious? Do you not feel well?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked.

“First tell me your biggest secret, something I don’t already know.” I put my plate down on the table and looked up at her. She placed her food next to mine. She rested her hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently, and brushed my hair away from my face. She looked at me carefully.

“Are you *sure* you’re okay? You’re acting really weird.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay.” She twisted her hair around her finger and put it next to her mouth, brushing her lips with the bristly ends. “I’m nervous. Why are we doing this?”

“Forget it. We don’t have to.” I started to stand up, but she put her hand on my shoulder again.

“No. It’s okay. I’ll tell.” She looked tiny and vulnerable with her feet curled up underneath her on the couch. Her mouth was straight and serious until a nervous smile broke through. “Here I go. Remember junior year how I stopped eating and had a

nervous breakdown and everyone said it was because I was taking too many AP classes and I was stressing about the SATs and Mrs. Fagan made me reduce my course load? Well, I wasn't freaking out about SATs or AP classes or being a cheerleader or any of that. You know me. I've always been able to handle that shit, no problem, right?"

"Sure," I said. She breathed in deliberately before she went on. I was about to tell her again that she didn't have to do this, but now I wanted her to go on. I stayed quiet. My insides ruffled like tall beach grass in the wind, tickling and nervous. I drank more wine as I waited.

"I was freaking out because I was in love with Mr. Field, and I found out that he liked me back." Mr. Field was the world history and quiz bowl coach. He wasn't the oldest teacher in the school, but he wasn't the high school heartthrob of choice. Most of the girls had a crush on Mr. Hughes, the twenty-five year old drama teacher, who had curly black hair and let us spend half the class talking about the latest movies we'd seen. Mr. Field, on the other hand, wore sweater vests in a variety of earth tones and had gray sideburns. He wasn't unattractive or unpopular as a teacher. He was just old. Plus, his wife taught music in the middle school.

"What does that mean, *he liked you back*? What happened?"

"Not much. We kissed once. He was a chaperone for the cheerleading tournament, and I went to talk to him in his room. I don't even remember now how it happened exactly. I told him how I felt, and then we were making out. After that he sort of just stopped talking to me. I think he was scared. I know he liked me. I never told

anyone. My mom thought that I was secretly dating some boy she wouldn't like, but she never guessed who. She just thought it was someone who wasn't Christian. I didn't want him to get in trouble. Teaching kids that were my age then, I see how young I really was. He and his wife moved away while we were in college so by the time I figured out that maybe he had problems, he was gone."

"Charlotte, my God." I got up and sat next to her on the couch. She was still brushing her hair over her lips again and again. I put my hand around her and gave her a hug. "Are you okay now?"

"Sure." She laughed. "It's just a big thing I never told anyone but Richard. I didn't want to be gossip, you know? I'm not scarred or anything."

"You seem a little upset."

"Do I?" She looked down at her body curled tight in a ball and laughed again. She relaxed and let her arms away from her body, her hair dropping against her cheek. She shook out her hands and feet. "There. Better? I think I was just nervous to tell you. To see how you'd react. Do you think I'm a horrible person?"

"For what? You didn't do anything."

"For kissing a married man, for not telling anyone. For being a hypocrite."

"You were just a kid."

"I know. But I don't like to think of myself as a victim." She picked up her glass and drained it in one long swallow. Her cheeks flushed and tears came to her eyes.

“Wow. I was thirsty. Want some more?” she asked as she got up to retrieve the bottle from the kitchen.

“I don’t think so.” I was still working on my first glass. My throat constricted around the food and wine. It was increasingly difficult to swallow. When Charlotte came back she settled back into the couch and looked at me. It was my turn.

“Well?” she asked. “What’s this about?”

“I’ve started so I have to follow through, huh?”

“You don’t have to, but it seems like maybe you want to. It might make you feel better.”

“I should just say it.”

“Okay.”

I closed my eyes. I pulled one of the cushions from the couch and held it in my lap tightly. I would just say it, I thought, but when I opened my mouth what came out was, “I made out with Mr. Field too.”

“What?”

“Just kidding.” I opened my eyes. “I never made out with Mr. Field.”

“Jesus, Patsy.” Charlotte’s voice was hurt. “That was an asshole thing to say.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to do this, whatever it is.” She picked up her plate off the coffee table. I could tell she was annoyed. Make the connection, I told myself. Let her help you. She sighed. “I think I’ll eat now, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay. Here goes. Here it is.” My body was shaking on the inside, my guts turning and trembling. My hands froze. I could feel my heart beat, a quickening rhythm that pulsed through my ankles and fingers. This time when I opened my mouth, it felt like all the air in my body came out carrying the very faint vibration of my voice, which I sucked back in as soon as I let it out. But still, out it came, the tiny audible whisper. “I might be gay. Or something.”

“What?” She’d been chewing. She hadn’t heard my voice. “What?” she asked again.

“Gay,” I said.

“Who’s gay?” She stared at me. I took small, nervous sips of wine.

“Me,” I said.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You’re saying *you’re* gay?” Her mouth opened and she put her plate down again. She stared at the food and then looked at me incredulously. “I thought you were telling me that Brooke was gay, and I didn’t know why you were freaking out so much. I thought I was just mis-hearing you. Since when are *you* gay?”

“I don’t know. How did you not know this? I thought for sure you knew. Now that I realize you didn’t know, I know how much I thought you knew. How could you not know?” I found myself feeling angry that she was so surprised. Beta knew, and I wasn’t even friends with her.

“I don’t know!” she shouted back. “Why are you yelling at me? It’s not my fault.”

“I don’t know.” I lowered my voice. “I got excited. I’m terrified. I don’t know if it’s true or if I’m just saying it. It could be true. I’m pretty sure it’s true, but if it were, I thought you’d know. I wanted you to know already and say: *Patsy, I’ve known it all along. I was just waiting for you to figure it out for yourself. Now let me introduce you to all my lesbian friends who will help you adjust to your new sexual orientation.*”

“I don’t have any lesbian friends.” Charlotte took her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I know some gay men, though. Maybe they know some lesbians. I can’t believe this. I thought you were just private. And really picky.”

“You sound like my grandmother.”

“Well, that’s what it seemed like. I mean, have you dated women? Do you have a whole secret life I don’t know about? What does this mean?” Her voice wobbled in its high-pitched stress tone. Charlotte put her glasses back on and looked at me. A crease dimpled her forehead, a dark slash between her eyebrows that puckered when she was angry or thinking very hard. I could feel a coldness in my chest. It seemed as though she were angry with me. Please don’t be mad, I wanted to say.

“Charlotte, are you okay?” I asked instead. I would not apologize for this.

“To be honest, I’m a little hurt.”

“Because?”

“Because you didn’t tell me sooner. What does that say about what you think about me? It’s like you think I’m close-minded or homophobic.”

“I don’t think you’re homophobic,” I said. “I just didn’t know.”

“Well, I’m sorry. That hurts my feelings.”

“I *mean* I didn’t know about myself.”

“What about your family?”

“I think Brooke has some idea, but nothing I’ve told her.”

“Why are you telling me now?”

“Did you say you wanted to know?”

“Yes, but...has something happened?” She reached over and grabbed my hands excitedly. “Have you met someone?”

“Yes,” I said. “There’s this girl.” A shiver ran up my spine as I closed my eyes and pictured Anita. This was the part I’d been trying to get to.

## *This is Love?*

The next two weeks was spent enduring alternating forms of torture. Some of the time I was dealing with the diagnosis, my family, and the ever-appearing side effects of using steroids including, but not limited to, acne, weight gain, and slow healing wounds. A freaking paper cut took a week and a half to heal now. Other times, I was thinking about Anita. While my father now seemed to call me every five minutes, Anita still hadn't called back. I finally went back to work, and she seemed to be avoiding me even there. I replayed in my head the scene where we said goodbye at her house. I decided that she'd obviously been telling me that she didn't want anything more to do with me, not any more than what we'd already done. What does *We'll see?* mean if not *I'm too much of a pussy to tell you the truth to your face*. When I wasn't thinking about that, I went back to worrying about the lupus and the prospect of having to have a kidney biopsy.

Charlotte suggested keeping it simple – a straightforward confession of my desire to spend more time with her. I didn't have to say anything more than that. Just, *I like you. Want to hang out sometime?* Instead I found myself watching her from a distance and giving what I considered long, meaningful looks, which she probably considered demented and obsessive. I wrote emails to her while I was supposed to be calling clients. When I'd finished writing them, I hit the delete key immediately. I never put her email address in the send to line, afraid that some slip of my hand would send her a ten page rant on why I might or might not be in love with her.

On my third day back at work almost two weeks after we slept together, I heard her laugh on the other side of my cubicle. My heart seized. I looked up to see her head bob up and then down. Dan stood so she could sit, then his head bobbed down too. Presumably to lean over and whisper in her ear? I put my head up and strained to hear their friendly, barely audible chatter. It seemed that she had come to help him with a computer problem. I imagined him leaning over next to her so that they could peer into the screen together, their shoulders almost touching, and the scent of her shampoo strong in his nose. My stomach burned with jealousy.

When Anita left his desk twenty minutes later, I stared open-mouthed like a fish waiting to be fed. She had no choice but to acknowledge me. I expected an intense emotional scene, something worthy of *Lovely and Tender*. She would tell me she never cared for me, and I would burst into tears and later attempt to throw myself in front of a bus. Instead she joked.

“What now?” She felt around her face and head dramatically. “Did I grow an extra head at lunch?”

“No,” I said, smiling at her not-so-funny joke. I pretended that my heart wasn’t being shredded into bloody, pulpy globs. The truth was that she looked beautiful. Her eyes were shiny and her skin glowed. Her hair was getting longer, and I liked the way the dark hair curled around her ears. Only her mouth was cruel, turned upwards as it was into a friendly, distant smile. “I just haven’t seen you around much.”

“I’ve been really busy,” she said. We heard a guffaw from the other side of the cubicle. Anita rolled her eyes. “What’s that, Dan?”

“Busy getting drunk off your ass with me and Terrence last night.” Dan’s voice floated over. He rolled his chair around, pushing his heels against the floor like a toddler in a walker. He’d shaved his goatee off recently to reveal a soft babyish face. “Sorry,” he said, looking at me. “Couldn’t help but overhear. We would have asked you to come, but I know you’ve been beat lately. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Yeah, Dan told me about that,” Anita said, clearly happy to change the subject. She yawned and stretched casually. “Sorry you haven’t been feeling well.”

“Thanks,” I said. I tried not to watch the way her breasts pushed against her shirt as she pulled one elbow behind her head and then the other. I picked up a pen on my desk and started fiddling with the clicker, as though I were having trouble making it work.

“You don’t look sick,” Anita said.

“No?” I asked, barely breathing. I glanced up. Half an inch of skin just above her pants was exposed. Did she have to do that now? Could it be possible that she was doing it just to tease me? Back to the pen.

“Are you crazy?” Dan pointed at me. “Look at how skinny she is.”

“She’s not skinny. I think she’s just right.” Anita winked. The pulpy pieces of my heart started to come together a little bit. I was annoyed that they were talking about me in the third person and hurt that I’d been excluded from their night out, but she

thought I was just right. And she'd winked. I put the pen down and smiled shyly.

Cheesy or not, that wink was for me.

"Damn *Cosmo*," Dan said. "You'll all be skeletons soon."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "Once these steroids kick in, I'll be packing on the pounds. Average weight gain is twenty pounds."

"That's what I like to hear!" He threw his hands up triumphantly.

"Is that true?" Anita asked.

"That's what they say."

"You'll look great, Patsy, better than ever. We're just glad you'll be feeling better, right Anita?"

"Right," she said. She looked at me. "I should go now, but I'll call you, okay?"

"Okay." I watched her walk away, and Dan watched me. He rolled over so that we were knee to knee. He gave me a little shove, and I swiveled around so that I was facing my desk again.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Nothing." I looked back at him.

"Not *nothing*. This morning Katy told me you were at Anita's party on New Years." Dan's newly exposed chin shined fresh and pink. He kept rubbing it, as he'd done with the beard, but there was no hair to protect him from his chafing fingers. Normally this might not irritate me, but I was restless and frustrated, thinking about Anita. "She couldn't remember the details, though."

“Stop touching it,” I said. “You’re making it worse.”

“You’re changing the subject, and besides, I’m not sure I *can* get used to it.”

“It makes you look younger.”

“Great,” he grumbled. “That’s how I’ll find a girlfriend, by looking twelve.”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

“As a matter of fact, no.” He picked at a dry spot on his chin until the skin broke and a red spot bubbled under his fingers. “But I do think about it a lot. I’m a lonely guy.”

“And now you’re a lonely guy bleeding from the face, which is really attractive.”

“Do steroids make you bitchy too?” he asked. “Because something’s up with you.” He pushed his way back to his side of the divider. I pressed my eyes with the palms of my hands, trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry, Dan.” I leaned forward so that my mouth was by our partition and spoke just loud enough so that he could hear me. “I’m being a jerk.”

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I think I understand.”

“You understand what?” I listened for his answer. The noise of the office – keyboards clicking, phones ringing, people chattering up and down the rows of desks – seemed deafening. He poked his head around the corner so all I could see were his eyes and his brown mop of hair.

“We can talk about it later, okay? I got to get back to work.”

“Okay,” I said.

But by mid-afternoon, I was feeling depressed and tired. I couldn't keep from occasionally putting my head down on my desk. I went by Pierson's office and told him I was leaving early. I told him that I was thinking about taking an extended medical leave. He said not to worry about it, to go home and rest and that we'd talk sometime next week. Before I left the office, he kissed me on the forehead with his moist, wrinkled lips. "Don't come back until Wednesday," he said. "I'll cover for you. And go by to see your mother. My wife says she's worried." I stopped in the door, confused.

"My mother?"

"You know who I mean. Dorothy."

"Dorothy's worried?"

"Of course, she is. We all are."

"Dorothy isn't really the worrying type," I said.

"You kids." He sat down and waved me away. "You'll never know what we go through until you have your own."

So I went by Daddy's house. It almost looked like fall now. Brown leaves blew from the trees and scattered across the dying grass and muddy yards. I'd mostly just watched the cold from inside my apartment with the heat turned up and Mother's quilt wrapped around my shoulders. These last few days, stepping out into the cold, wet air brought a sharp movement in my ribs as if a seashell were lodged in my lungs and scraped when the air moved. A coughing fit followed and tearful eyes. The doctor said it

was mild pleurisy, fluid in my lungs. It was something the steroids would probably take care of, but if they didn't, Dr. Steele would give me an antimalarial medication called Plaquenil that would decrease the inflammation over a several-month period.

Dorothy's car was in the driveway, which didn't necessarily mean she was in. I let myself into the front hall.

"Hello?" I called out between coughs. The Christmas decorations were long gone. The house was back to its normal state – floors waxed, furniture polished, crystal figurines sparkling. My heels clicked against the floor of the now hollow ballroom when Dorothy came from her study.

"Patsy, hi." She clasped her hands together in front of her. "Your father isn't here. He's at the office."

"I was just coming by to see if I left my sweater." I lied, feeling suddenly nervous.

"What sweater?" She frowned. "I don't think Carolina has found anything. What does it look like?"

"It's my gray cardigan. It's probably somewhere at home, and I just haven't come across it. You know how crazy things have been..." I trailed off. Standing in the ballroom felt awkward especially with Dorothy staring at me that way, like I'd eaten a baby for breakfast. "Am I interrupting something? Should I go?"

“No, not at all. I’m working on sponsors for the church Easter supper. Nothing that can’t wait. Would you like to come sit down and have a cup of coffee? I have something I want to discuss with you.”

“Okay.” I pulled my purse closer to my body.

“Why don’t you go into my study, and I’ll bring along the coffee.”

Dorothy’s study was as sparse and cold as the rest of the house was rich and ornate. She felt strongly that the furnishings of a house should reflect the architecture, and therefore filled Daddy’s house with warm colors, overstuffed couches, and leather bound books. This was her room, however. She used a steel-topped desk and a sleek ergonomic chair. On the surface of the desk were a computer, a desk calendar, a bible, and a pen. In one corner, she had a sitting area with bug-like chairs and a shiny amoebae-shaped coffee table. I sat in the white wingback, which gave me the sensation of being embraced by a large moth. Dorothy followed shortly with the coffee and sat across from me on a slanted bench that seemed to serve as a couch.

“I suppose you wonder what I have to say. Here it is, Patsy. Over the years, I have come to think of you as part of my family. If not my own child, at least I have considered you under my care and guardianship, and I’ve always tried to do what’s right for you. The fact is that you are an adult now and no longer living under my roof so I have very little say in what you do or who you associate with.” Dorothy handed me a cup of coffee. She poured another cup for herself and dropped in a spoonful of sugar. She stared into the cup and then looked up at me. “Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Does this have to do with my mother?” I asked. Dorothy shook her head.

“Let me be blunt. I care about you, Patsy, and of course, I want to continue to be there for you in your time of need, but I’m not willing to sacrifice my child to that end.”

“What are you talking about?”

“In the past, because of your father’s ambivalence, I have not urged you as strongly as I should have to accept my values as your own. I thought that by providing an example and exposing you to my beliefs, it would be enough. Clearly I was mistaken: I know about you and your leanings. Your *temptations*, I should say.”

“My what?”

“Don’t treat me like an imbecile, Patsy. I listen to you and Brooke when you think I’m too stupid to understand. I’m willing to help you, but I won’t have Brooke exposed to immoral choices, thinking that it’s okay. Now do you understand?”

“I think so.” I gripped the coffee cup, not knowing what else to do. I picked a spot on the coffee table, a smudge from a hand or maybe a dried drop of coffee that Carolina had missed the last time she cleaned. I watched the smudge, how it stood out from the rest of the table, so smooth and clean. If only I could take it back and never have come here. If only Pierson hadn’t said that Dorothy was worried. If only he hadn’t called her my mother. Then I wouldn’t have come like a Charlie Brown, starving for attention, only to have the ball pulled out from under my foot again and again.

“I’m offering my help to you. Your father doesn’t ever have to know. This could be something that we do together. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about this the last

few weeks. I've spoken to my pastor. It's important for you to know that you are not alone. If you are willing, this is something we can fix."

"There's nothing to fix." I put my coffee down too hard against the table. The glass against glass made an unpleasant scraping sound.

"Patsy, calm down."

"You just said I was immoral."

"Am I the one calling you immoral or is it God?"

"What do you know what God thinks?"

"I know the word of God. I'll show you." She put down her coffee, and walked over to her desk. She flipped to a page that had been marked with a pink post it note.

"Dorothy, I don't want to know what the bible says."

"I'm trying to help you, Patsy."

"This is not the kind of help I need right now." My voice cracked with anger.

"I'm sick and scared. I wish you'd help me with that. You know, bring me soup or my prescriptions. Sit with me while I wait at the doctor's. That's all I want from you."

"It's not about what you want from me." Dorothy closed the bible and shook her head. "Has it ever occurred to you that the two things are related? That you've brought this illness on yourself? Open your heart, Patsy. Listen to what He's telling you." I started to cry, and the crying started me coughing. The rage gathering at my throat fell away replaced by sadness. She'd been my mother for years, although she would never admit it. But she wouldn't be my mother anymore. As I gulped coffee to calm my

throat, Dorothy kept talking. “He loves you. He wants to help you. You’re crying because you understand that it’s true and that unless you ask for forgiveness, you are turning your back on Him.”

I wiped my face with my sleeve. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

“It’s hard to hear.”

“Stop it!” I stood up. “You don’t know anything about me. I don’t care anymore what you think. I’m done with it. God doesn’t think I’m wrong. God made me this way.”

“Patsy, wait.” She stepped in front of me before I reached the door. Her hand landed like a hook into my shoulder. “I’m not finished.”

“Let me go.” She pinched until I could feel her fingernails digging through my clothes.

“I’m going to speak to Brooke, and I’m going to tell her that she may not see you anymore. And I’m going to talk to your father. He may choose to continue his relationship with you unchanged, of course, but I’m sure he will want what’s best for Brooke. The two of you can work it out. As for me, I want you to know that you are welcome back when you decide to accept Jesus and get the help you need. I will be there with open arms, rejoicing on that day.”

“This is bullshit. You can’t make them stop seeing me.”

“This is love,” she said sadly. “You don’t even recognize it when you see it.”

I pulled away from her and ran out of her office and through the front door. I was

hot and shaking with anger. The air outside felt refreshing. My skin breathed it in gratefully. I took deep, cold breaths that rattled my lungs and sent me into a coughing fit. I leaned against the car with my head down. From the corner of my eye, I saw her outline in the entryway, but I refused to look up. I finished coughing. My fingers were turning white and numb from cold. When I finally looked back, Dorothy was gone and the door was closed. I called Brooke's cell phone. She wasn't supposed to bring her phone to school, but I knew she did it anyway.

“Are you *spying* on me?” she asked, not bothering to say hello.

“What?”

“Are you trying to figure out where I am?”

“Aren't you at school?”

“Ah ha, you're *not* spying on me.” She shrieked with laughter. “Stop, Frank! Lisa, distract him, will you? I'm on the phone.”

“You don't sound like you're at school.”

“Spare me, please,” she said. “It's fucking tedious to listen to you lecture.”

“I don't want to lecture you.” With my free hand, I brushed crinkled leaves from the hood of my car, which used to be Dorothy's car.

“Then why are you calling?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“That sounds like the beginning of a really boring conversation,” she warned.

“Listen,” I said. “Dorothy is going to talk to you soon about me. She’s going to tell me that you can’t see me anymore.”

“Why? Because you’re a lesbian?”

“Yes.”

“She’s such a crazy, fanatical bitch,” Brooke said, almost fondly.

“She just believes things differently and…” I realized I was defending her again. I was always defending her to Brooke.

“And what?”

“It’s not funny!” I said.

“And actually, I’m pretty upset about it.” But she just laughed. “We just had this huge fight and…Brooke! Stop laughing. It’s not funny.”

“Oh, Patsy. *It is* funny. It’s just…fucking hilarious.” She gasped into the phone, barely able to speak. “It’s hard not to.”

“Are you high?” I asked. I’d said it sarcastically, but as soon as the words escaped my mouth, I knew I was right.

“Yes! God, yes! Thank God, yes.” She laughed some more and sighed luxuriously. “So you’re a dyke and Mom doesn’t want me to see you, and I don’t give a fuck about either, do I? Since when do I listen to what she says? Since when do I care who you fuck except for Jesus Christ’s sake, please, I hope you’re fucking someone.”

“Okay,” I said. “I get the point. You’re supportive.”

“Goddamn right, I’m supportive. You’re a beautiful person. I love you like a sister, but I have to go now. Lisa’s trying to make out with my boyfriend.” Five seconds after I hung up, my phone rang. Anita had decided to finally call me back. All the relief I’d felt from talking to Brooke slipped. I decided in that moment that this thing would be resolved today. I was through playing games.

“Hey,” she said cheerfully. “You disappeared.”

“Where are you? I want to meet you.”

“I’m still at work. Not all of us just leave in the middle of the day.”

“Meet me for lunch in half an hour.” I was still standing outside my car, my hands getting colder and my cheeks tingling. The house I’d grown up in stared back at me like a great monster, gray under the clouds. There was no sign of Dorothy, but upstairs I saw Carolina picking up laundry from Brooke’s floor.

“I don’t know,” Anita said. “I’m kind of swamped.”

“Please,” I urged as tears filled my eyes. I willed my voice to come out smooth.

“How about that Mexican place?”

“You sound weird.”

“Just a cold. Meet me.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Maybe you should be in bed or something.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m not okay. I am absolutely not okay. Will you just fucking meet me for lunch and talk to me for two goddamn minutes?”

Her voice dropped to an angry whisper. “*Don’t you dare* talk to me that way.

What is this about?”

“Please,” I said, my sob breaking through. “Just meet me.”

“Fine,” she said. Her tone was cool. “I’ll see you in forty-five minutes.”

## A Broom and a Brush-off

When I got to the restaurant, it was packed. In one corner remained the lingering remnants of Christmas, a green foil tree and paper cutouts of fat-cheeked Santas. A group of white men occupied a couple of tables. They were loud and wore gray suits. I wouldn't have noticed them except they seemed to take up the entire space with their booming voices and laughter. They registered in my mind as slightly annoying until I saw Anita already seated at a table, and any thought of them was swept away like the crumpled napkins and broken taco shells the busboy was carrying away with his broad-lipped broom.

I watched Anita for a moment while I waited for the busboy to pass. She had a cup of coffee in front of her and she was working on a yellow legal pad. She wore a tweed skirt, and as she stared intently at the paper, she stretched her leg to the side so that her toe was pointing to the floor and the calf muscle of her leg flexed. She wore black-framed reading glasses that I'd never seen before. My breath caught when I saw them. When she noticed me, she put down her pen and slipped the glasses off. She folded them and placed them next to the pen.

“Well?” she asked as I sat down across from her.

“I didn't know you wore glasses.” It made me sad, somehow. There were a million things about her I wanted to know that I didn't. Even the little things felt urgent – did she floss regularly? Was she a dog person? A cat person? Was she close to her family? Did she believe in God? What did she look like when she was thirteen? But most

of all, did she want to know these things about me the way I wanted to know them about her? “They’re nice,” I said. “They suit you.”

“What I meant was, what am I doing here?” She fixed a cold gaze on me. “And what was with that phone call? I mean, really.”

“I just wanted to talk to you.” The waitress came by. I ordered coffee, too. Anita watched and waited for me to speak again. I took a napkin from the metal holder at the end of the table, and I wiped the table free of crumbs. I pushed them into the corner of the table. “I want to know if there’s a chance that something could happen between us.” I balled up the napkin and placed it next to the crumb pile.

“Something did happen between us.” Anita smiled. “Did you mean something different?”

“Maybe something more. I like you. What do you think about that?” There. I’d said it. *I like you*. Straightforward, out in the open, just like Charlotte told me.

“You want me to respond right now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Unless you don’t want to for some reason.”

“We had a good time. We might have more good times. Can’t you leave it at that?”

“But I like you,” I said again.

“I see,” she said. She took a sip of her coffee. “So you’re ready for a relationship?”

“Yes.”

“You’re ready to bring me home to the folks and introduce me? To show up at the next office party holding hands and calling each other *sweetie pie*? Would you kiss me right now, in front of all these people if I asked you to?”

“I don’t see what any of that has to do with anything.”

“Would you do those things?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “If things work out between us.”

“A couple of months ago, you wouldn’t even admit to being attracted to me because I’m a woman and now you want the right to call me *sweetie pie* in front of a large group of our mutual acquaintances?”

“That’s not what I want.”

“So you *wouldn’t* take me home to the folks or hold hands with me in public?”

The waitress came with my cup of coffee. I put my hands around it, the warmth radiating into my fingers.

“I mean that those things aren’t important to me. I just want to get to know you.”

I couldn’t keep the pleading from my voice. I blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. Anita’s eyes were rich and deep brown and cold as they stared back.

“It’s not that simple,” she said. “I’m not going to baby-sit you or coddle your insecurities about your sexuality. And don’t say you don’t have them because you’d be lying.”

“I know I do. But I can change.” I looked down at my coffee, a warmer reflection.

“And you will. I’m just not sure I want to be the lover you experiment with. You’re so young.”

“You’re not that old,” I said.

“I’m old enough.”

“I’m not experimenting. I *like* you.”

Anita sighed. “God you *are* a child. I like you too, Patsy, but that’s not the point.”

“So you do like me?”

“I don’t fuck people I don’t like,” she said. She leaned across the table and reached her hands out so that they were almost touching mine. “But you’re just figuring things out. I don’t like that. It makes me nervous. But more than that, it annoys me.”

“I’m not always like this. I’ve had a hard time lately.”

“That’s another thing. You’re a walking soap opera. You lose weight, you gain weight, you get sick, you miss work. Are you starving yourself? Are you sick? Are you mental?” As Anita talked, her brow wrinkled. These were the things she wanted to know about me, I realized with disappointment. I could see tiny lines near her mouth, where her lip turned down. I wanted to reach out and smooth the worry lines away and cover her mouth, muffle the words. Instead, I listened, my hands still and quiet around the coffee, as Anita continued. “Pierson doesn’t seem to care, so you must have some excuse. Maybe you should tell me what it is.”

“I have lupus.” I shrugged. “It’s an auto-immune disease. It’s not contagious if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I know what it is,” she said. She leaned back, and shook her head.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, that pretty much does it, doesn’t it?”

“What ?”

“You’re insecure, immature, in-the-closet, and you have a life-threatening illness. How could you possibly be a worse choice for me?” She drank the last of her coffee, picked up her jacket, and slipped the notebook and reading glasses into her purse.

“It’s not life threatening,” I said. “Not necessarily.”

“Well, at least you have that, right?” Anita’s smile seemed forced as she stood up. “But if I were you, I’d wait until after people are in love with you to tell them. No one want to get involved with a sick girl.”

“So that’s it? You’re going?” I took her hand so she would look at me. If she would just look at me, she would understand how she was hurting me.

“I have to get back to work, Patsy. Not all of us have a free pass from the boss.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Tell me about it,” she said.

“Why are you being so mean?”

“I’m being honest, Patsy.” She let me pull her hand so that she was standing next to me. Her skirt brushed my arm, and I could smell her. A rush of memory of her soft

skin and tightening muscles washed through my brain like a wave on the beach, receding as quickly as it had come. I wanted to do everything one more time.

“I would have kissed you here if you’d asked,” I said.

“Yeah?” She smiled, looking amused. “So do it.”

I stood up, blocking the spattering of English and Spanish voices that mixed in the air with the sound of frying food and Latino pop coming from the jukebox. I didn’t look around. I didn’t want to know who might be watching. Anita had her purse in one hand and her jacket in the other. She didn’t move. She just stood there, grinning at me, laughing at me. I wished it made her ugly, but for me it didn’t. I still wanted to kiss her. I still wanted her to hold me.

We were standing face to face only a couple of inches apart. I put one hand around her waist and pulled her closer. Her eyes stared and I put my other hand on her face and stroked her cheek with my thumb. Her body shook against mine. It seemed that she couldn’t stop laughing, so I put my lips to hers. They were warm and soft. I pressed lightly, not knowing what kind of kiss this would be. She finally moved, opening her mouth and splitting the kiss open like a ripe piece of overripe fruit. She tasted bitter from the coffee. She never put her arms around me, but she kissed me back. She wasn’t laughing anymore.

When she pulled away, she looked at me, wondering. She shook her head. “No,” she said. “It’s not enough.”

“I’ll be who you want,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure anymore if that was what I wanted. It just seemed like an important thing to say in that moment.

“You can’t.” She folded her jacket over her arm and put her hand on my cheek. “You’re not that person for me.” As her hand slipped away from my face, her eyes shifted to someone behind me. “Someone is staring at us,” she said.

“I don’t care. Let them.” I touched her fingers with mine, tracing the outline of her hand. “Give me a chance.”

“I’m done, Patsy. I’ve got to go.” She turned around and walked away. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Ma’am?” It was the guy who’d been pushing the broom.

“What?” I snapped. A dirty apron wrapped tight around his black work pants, and he had purple acne scars like bruises under the brown skin of his cheeks. Something about the concern on his face, the greasy, worried brow made me burst into tears. I covered my hands with my face and cried.

“Ma’am,” he said again. His eyes lowered, and he scratched the thin mustache sprouting on his lip like a line of tiny fleas. “Sorry, but my manager don’t want you here.”

“Fine,” I said. A tear dripped ran into the corner of my mouth so I could taste the salt. I opened my purse and pushed around for my wallet. The tears blurred my vision. I leaned against the counter.

“Ma’am,” he said again.

“I am trying. To find. My wallet.” He took a step back, looking helplessly at a large woman with gray-black hair who stood watching us from across the restaurant. The woman glared at him, her face a mask of caked over wrinkles and orange lipstick. She made a waving motion with her hand.

“You don’t have to pay,” he said. “Just go.”

“No,” I said, sniffing. I wiped the tears off my face and shoved my hand back into my purse. I began taking things out, slamming them on the counter aggressively.

“Lady, just leave,” he pleaded. He looked nervously back at the orange-lipped woman.

“Is there a problem?” The deep, kind voice came from behind me. It was intimate and familiar, and in the second it took me to turn around, a ripple of apprehension rose up in my throat, and I wondered *who* – co-worker, boss, classmate, teacher – had just witnessed my first public coming out. I didn’t know, and I didn’t care. I just wanted to leave. I thought that I might just walk out the door without paying and without acknowledging this person who was trying to save me when I turned around anyway. I recognized, in a surreal dreamlike serenity, that the voice had come from my father. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Patsy,” he said.

“Daddy.” I stepped away from him. “Where did you come from?”

“There.” He tilted his head and gestured toward the table of obnoxious businessmen. He took out his wallet and handed the man a twenty-dollar bill. Without asking for change, he put his arm around me and led me to the door. Outside, cars on the

freeway roared by and the noise rushed in my ears like blood. Daddy faced me and put his hands on my shoulders. He pulled me toward him and gave me a hug. His arms felt heavy around me, and I felt him take in a sharp breath. His suit jacket was smooth and smelled sweet like wool and cigarettes, like it had since I was little.

“How long were you there?” I whispered.

“A while.” He cleared his throat. “Do you need me to take you home?”

“I have my car,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“I wouldn’t have interrupted. I just...I was worried.”

“None of this was supposed to happen this way.” I slid down and sat on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. A couple coming out looked at me, then my father. They exchanged glances as they stepped over my legs.

“Get up, Patsy.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s really dirty. For another, I have a table full of colleagues in there. Jim Locker is in there. Teddy Billings. Come on.” He put his hand out for me to take, but I ignored it. I did not want him to be there. I did not want him to have seen what he saw. “Patsy, please.”

“I wish you hadn’t seen that.”

“We don’t have to talk about it.” He put his hand in his pockets and glanced inside through the picture windows.

“It’s not just that.”

“It’s okay,” he said.

“It’s not.” I pulled my knees up to my chest and put my head down, with my arms holding my legs. I could feel water from the damp concrete soaking through the bottom of my pants. It was cold and uncomfortable, but I wanted to stay because as soon as I left everything would be different between Daddy and me. Everything would be different with everyone, and that idea was too much to carry right now. I had to sit and wait for a minute. I didn’t want to leave with him. I wanted to leave on my own. Daddy looked again inside. He was becoming agitated. He rubbed the bald top of his head with the palm of his hand.

“We’ll take care of things.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Please just get up.”

“You can’t fix this,” I said. “If Teddy Billings saw what I think he saw, he’ll tell Mavis, and Mavis will tell everyone. Dorothy will be horrified. She may divorce you.”

Daddy laughed. “I think you’re exaggerating slightly.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Maybe not.”

“I imagine it feels like the end of the world. It’s not.”

“Dorothy told me I wasn’t allowed to see Brooke anymore,” I said to shock him. Brooke and I would keep seeing each other as much as we wanted, but I said it to hurt him for witnessing my private life without permission and for never taking my side against Dorothy even when he knew she was wrong. I stayed quiet while Daddy’s shoulders rolled forward. He looked back toward the window, paused, and after several

seconds, he flipped the coat of his jacket up and lowered himself slowly to sit next to me on the sidewalk. He looked awkward with his knees partly bent, and his legs sticking out in front of him. He folded his hands together and rested his elbows on his knees.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because she thinks I’m gay and that I’ll rub off on Brooke.”

“I see.”

“Not much we can do about that, is there?”

He folded his hands together, staring at a smashed pack of cigarettes on the ground in front of him. He nudged it with his shoe and then said, “Dorothy has very strong reactions. But she’s not without compassion. She’ll come around. This is her way of processing this...information.” I was starting to shiver from the cold, wet ground and the wind blowing. I hugged myself tighter.

“Patsy, I’m afraid I’ve handled this whole thing very badly.”

“You didn’t know,” I said.

“I had an idea,” he said. “Your mother told me...”

“She’s *not* my mother,” I said. Usually he was the only one who could get away with calling Dorothy that. I never wanted to hurt his feelings, but not today. Today everyone’s feelings would be hurt.

“Okay. Dorothy,” he said.

“I don’t care what Dorothy thinks anymore. I’m through with her. I don’t care if I never see her again.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t mean it.” He looked wounded, and his eyes shined as though he might cry.

“I do mean it.”

“The way she was raised, her faith tells her things are a certain way.”

“This has nothing to do with faith,” I said. “Charlotte’s a Christian.”

“Charlotte’s from a different generation. Dorothy....” His voice trailed as he stared into a puddle for the right words. The slick layer of oil on top reflected a dark, luminescent green.

“Dorothy can fuck herself.”

“Patsy, please.” If there’s one thing he couldn’t stand, it was insults against Dorothy. I looked him straight in the eye, pushing him away with my words. I didn’t want his help this time. I didn’t want his diplomacy. He stood up and brushed his pants off. Instead of looking hurt, now he just looked angry. His face was pink from the cold, his mouth turned in a shallow frown.

“I’m disappointed in you, Patsy.” He shook his head, pressing his lips together. He turned around and walked back toward the front door of the restaurant.

“And I in you,” I called after him. I saw his head nod slightly, but he didn’t turn around before he got back inside. I stood up then, but refused to look through the window to see what he was doing. He could explain himself however he chose. Let Mavis Billings tell the world if she wanted.

## This is Love

I took the paid sick leave Pierson offered, which gave me a couple of months to figure out what I was going to do. It wasn't exactly company policy, which made me feel like I was being kept by Pierson the man instead of the company, but I didn't see any other choice but to take advantage of his offer. I couldn't go back there, but I needed a job and health insurance to pay for the prescriptions and doctor's appointments.

For the first week I sat in my apartment and watched television. I stared at the screen and wrote long letters to Anita. One told of the razor of sadness, scratched down my heart and the unfurling of blood as she shoved the blade in deeper because obviously, she was the love of my life. Another was casual, an apology for my behavior and a nonchalant invitation to lunch sometime. A third was angry. How could she treat me this way? How could she be so cold? After I'd written about ten versions of the Anita letter, I thought that maybe I should do something more useful. I ate quick oats for all my meals while half-heartedly searching the Internet for jobs. I didn't want to sit in an office anymore, but I'd never had any other kind of job. I didn't know what I wanted.

My rheumatologist told me that I could start low-impact work-outs for exercise. If I was going to be out in the sun, I had to wear SPF 30 or higher and cover any exposed skin because around half of people with lupus are photosensitive, which means that exposure to UV light makes them sicker. A week after I left the office for good, I took a walk around the neighborhood, my first in months. I felt stupid. I had on a baseball hat, sunglasses, long sleeved shirt, sweatpants, and gloves. It was in the forties, so the long-

sleeved shirt and pants were okay, but the rest made me feel like a little old lady. I hobbled along the street where I used to run. A woman in spandex shorts and a sweatshirt passed me coming from the other direction, humming to the song on her Ipod. A man old enough to be my grandfather zipped around me, his arms pumping, his calves bulging and sweaty.

I walked until my ankle started to throb. My eyes watered. My head pounded. When I got home, my breath was ragged and I was coughing from the sharp cold in my lungs. My hands were turning white from the cold, another lupus-related symptom. As soon as I got inside, I sat on the couch and threw my hat against the wall. It bounced off with a weak, unsatisfying thwack. "I'm sick of this," I yelled. I put my head down on the sofa cushions and cried until I fell asleep.

When I woke up, someone was banging on my door. The slats of sun from my window had moved across the room already and left while I was sleeping. I stood up slowly. My joints were stiff. The skin around my eyes felt stretched across my face like a drum skin. My apartment felt cold, and I flipped up the heat as I walked to the door. Brooke was outside with her eye to the peephole. I knew it was her by the dark eyeliner and long, glossy lashes.

"Let me in!" she yelled. I unlocked the door, and opened it. She threw down an enormous, tattered Army bag and gave my shoulder a shove. "Long time no see, Fatsy."

"Hi," I said shyly. It was the first time I'd seen her since my confrontation with Dorothy. Even though Brooke had already known about me, it felt different now that it

was out in the open. Apparently not so for Brooke because first thing, she headed for the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door as usual. She stared at the assorted condiments, a bottle of ginger ale, browning lettuce, and a half-gallon of milk that had turned sour approximately a month ago. I'd been meaning to clean the thing out. I'd been meaning to get some food.

"This is pathetic," she said. I sat back down on the couch in the living room. She followed me, and stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. "What exactly are you eating, Skeletor? Roaches and spiders?" She slammed the refrigerator door shut and started looking through the cabinets. She found my carton of oatmeal, the only thing I'd eaten in three days.

"I'm not hungry, anyway. I feel like shit."

"Well, maybe you feel like shit because you don't eat." She sat down next to me on the couch. She put her hand to my hair and ran her fingers over the knots and tangles. My hair had always been baby fine and prone to sticky nests, and with my fingers aching in the morning and no reason to make myself presentable, I hadn't brushed it in the past week. I just washed it every couple of days and put it in a ponytail. "Jesus, Patsy. Glad you're not letting yourself go."

"Shouldn't you be in school?" I asked.

"It's almost five, Baby Jane. Give me some money and put your shoes on."

"Why?" I leaned back and closed my eyes.

"We're going to the store."

“I already went out today,” I said. “It was exhausting.”

“Well, now you’re going out with me. You won’t even have to walk. I’ll carry you around the store like a real baby. We’ll rig up a sling, and you can sleep at my belly. I’ll pat you on your bird infested head and say, *that’s my girl!*”

“Sounds great. I’ll be ready in five.” I kept my eyes closed and stayed on the couch.

Brooke stood up. “Oh well. If you don’t come with me, you won’t get to know what your mother said when I talked to her on the phone.” Mother had called me twice in the past week. This was unusual for her, even considering that I’d walked out and left her in New Orleans, that I’d been diagnosed with an incurable disease, and that we hadn’t spoken since. I wasn’t angry with her. I just didn’t want to talk to her. Like the grocery store, it fell under the heading of exhausting and depressing. Brooke sighed again. “Oh well,” she said. “Guess you’ll never know about how she said I could come stay with her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Give me your car keys, get ready to go, and find out.”

“Fine.” I grabbed my purse, which was half stuck under the couch and spilling. “Ready.”

“You’re going like that?” she asked, looking me up and down. For once, Brooke and I were dressed almost similarly, in baggy pants and shapeless long-sleeved T-shirts.

“You care?” I asked.

“Not at all.” She took the keys from my purse. “Let’s go.”

I followed Brooke downstairs, where Edna was letting mangy Ralph lick the roots of the hedges around her apartment. His fur seemed even sparser than normal, and his legs moved back and forth like one of those battery-operated toys that constantly move but never get anywhere. Edna saw me and waved. Her smile curled up as she gave me a once over. I waved and hurried by as though it were important to catch up with Brooke.

“So,” I said in the car, “what’s this about my mother?”

“Well.” Brooke adjusted the mirrors slowly and happily. “Like everyone else in the world, she’s been calling you but you haven’t been answering your phone. Charlotte called too. And Daddy. And me. I was sent as a sort of goodwill ambassador. Charlotte’s coming over later tonight.”

“You people don’t have to baby-sit me.”

“Well maybe when you stop acting like a baby, we’ll think about it.” Brooke hit the brakes at a red light, and my body slammed against the seatbelt. “Personally, it’s starting to fucking bore me to worry about you all the time.”

“Well, then don’t.” I rubbed my shoulder where the belt cut in and left a bruise.

“No one asked you.”

“I can’t help it,” she said.

“So what did Mother say?”

“This is the good news,” she said. “You know how I told you that I was going to move to New York and you said how would I afford it and where would I live and what would I do?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s all worked out. I’ll live with Jean until I can afford a place of my own, and I’ll work as her new assistant at least for the summer. Then I may or may not go to college. I may just take art classes or something. I’m not sure. The point is, that I’ll be in New York. I’ll have a job. I’ll have a place to stay. One, two, three...tada!”

“Brooke, no.” I sat up. My mother would devour her. If Beta was a tough piece of New York rawhide that Mother played around with, Brooke was a tender morsel of crated veal. “My mother is a tyrant.”

“Your mother is amazing.”

“You don’t understand. She *is* amazing. Amazingly self-centered, amazingly insensitive. She doesn’t care about your future. She just wants your cheap labor, and something she can shove into Dorothy’s face.”

“It’s even better when you put it that way.” Brooke refused to be discouraged. “I’m looking to be someone’s cheap labor and I’d love to have one more thing to rub Dorothy’s nose in. Besides your mother is an artist. She understands what it’s like.”

“What about Frank?”

“Oh, Frank.” She wrinkled her nose.

“What does that mean?”

She pulled into the parking lot of the gourmet grocery store where Dorothy shopped and everything cost a dollar more than it would at a normal grocery store. “He’s always getting jealous. He doesn’t like me being with other people. He calls me and says, *Brookie, let me pick you up. You’re wasting your time with those pricks*, even when I’m just at home with Mom and Dad. I’m like, dude, I’m not *with* them, I’m just eating dinner or drawing or whatever. Anyway, it’s getting old. I don’t think I’ll be taking him with me to New York after all.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I wish it had worked out better.”

“It’s worked out fine as far as I’m concerned.” Brooke shrugged. “It’s not like we were married or anything.”

We’d just stepped onto the shiny hardwood floor of the produce section, which Brooke was ready to bypass altogether, when I saw Anita. Six feet in front of me, she was picking up a four-dollar avocado and squeezing it lightly in her hand. I wanted to turn around and run the other way, but my legs stopped working. Then I wanted to say her name, but I couldn’t make a sound. Brooke was chattering about what it would be like to be a personal assistant to a television star, and she walked a couple of yards ahead of me before she realized I wasn’t following.

“Patsy? What the hell is wrong with you?” Her voice carried so that even if she hadn’t said my name, Anita would have looked up. Which she did. Her fingers curled around the dark, soft skin of the fruit. She didn’t smile. She just looked me up and down, and I knew what she saw. A tangled, dirty, blotchy-faced, swollen woman with a

sorority T-shirt and sweatpants. What I saw was Anita, haughty and confident, her delicious body rippling with energy and sex and cruelty.

“Hi,” I said and took a step forward. She glanced at Brooke with mild interest, put down the avocado, and walked away. I called her name, but she didn’t turn back. I watched her go, and Brooke was beside me.

“What was that about?” She put her arm on my shoulder. “Patsy? Are you okay?” And for what felt like the millionth time in the past few months, I burst into spontaneous, inappropriate, uncontrollable tears.

We left the store without buying anything. Brooke took me home. I walked to the bathroom without speaking to her and turned the faucet handles on full force. I wanted to peel away the layers of the crusty clothes I’d been wearing and wash away the tightness in my tear-stained face. Steam unfolded from the shower where hot water drummed down, and in the mirror, a face stared back at me, disgusted and alone. Why hadn’t I been able to do the thing that would make her turn around and stay? Why hadn’t I spoken something better than just her name? Stepping into the spray, I remembered again how hard it was with my aching fingers – the scrubbing with a washcloth, using the palms of my hands instead of my fingers.

I stared at the bottle of shampoo. The pain would be bearable, of course. I’d been doing it for weeks, but suddenly I didn’t want to anymore. Hot water pounded against my back and tears of frustration poured from my eyes. I was angry at my body for

turning on itself. I was angry at Anita. I was angry at the slippery, hard-to-hold shampoo bottle. I plunged my soapy fingers into the knotted wilds of my hair and ignoring the little explosions up and down my fingers and wrists. I dug my fingernails into my scalp, scratching away the dirt and grime and anything on my skin that wasn't new and fresh. I was done with all that. What emerged as I washed away the old, the self-pity, the helplessness, the fear, the sadness, was more and more anger.

Red-eyed and raw, my hair washed twice under scalding water, I came out and rubbed a circle of fog away from the mirror. Drops of water worked their way down the black and slippery strands of hair until they plopped on the bathroom floor or slipped onto my pink skin and rolled down my back or over my breasts. In the cabinet, I found the pair of scissors I used to use to trim my hair when I had bangs. I worked away a piece of the hair right in front, held it away from my body, and clipped it right next to my ear. Then I did another. And another. And another until my fingers stiffened with the motion, and my head was a spray of different length hair, and I was covered with sticky black clumps that clung to my skin and itched like water bugs. When I was done, I looked like a massacred Chia pet. I took another shower to rinse the hair from my body.

I put on jeans and a T-shirt and draped my towel around my shoulders. In the living room, Brooke was watching a rerun of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. She looked at me in shock. A smile broke out across her face.

“Holy shit!” She jumped up from the couch, fell over with laughter, and then jumped up again. “That’s fucking awesome.”

I handed her the scissors. I felt shaky and nervous. “Will you fix it?” Brooke took the scissors happily and ran her fingers through my head, rubbing my scalp and pulling at the tiny hairs. She examined me from all angles.

“I can’t believe you did this,” she said.

“Do you think you can make it look good?”

“How do you want it? I mean, it looks pretty crazy.”

“I don’t know.” My voice broke.

“Are you crying?” Brooke whirled me around to look at my face. “For Christ’s sake, don’t cry! It’s fucking fantastic. It’s the best thing I’ve seen all year.”

“I know,” I said. I drew in a breath and threw my shoulders back. “It *is* fucking fantastic.”

“Fucking right,” she said as she continued to caress my head like a sculpture examining a slab of marble. “I think I know what I’m going to do.”

We went into the bathroom. I sat on a kitchen chair while Brooke moved around me, pulling at strands to compare lengths, snipping off millimeters at a time. I stared at the floor while her warm body moved around me. A perfume of cigarettes and Dorothy’s laundry detergent hung over her skin. It was a smell that reminded me that she was standing on the edge of her childhood, and really she was probably already gone.

“So that was the girl, huh?” she asked as she smoothed down the hair by my ear to see how long it was. “She wasn’t even cute.”

“Really? You think so?” I closed my eyes. The scissors slid against the skin above my ear, cold and hard, the snipping like the sound of a blade being sharpened.

“Yeah. She looks like a cross between Brooke Shields and Laura Bush. Those eyebrows? That pinched little face? And something weird was going on with her eyes. Creepy eyes.”

“Her eyes are fine,” I said. Her eyes were exquisite. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Honestly, I was terrified.” Brook stopped cutting and stepped away. “If you’d ended up dating her, I probably would have tried to put together some kind of intervention. Those eyes, man. Something was definitely wrong there.”

Charlotte came by a little later with bags of groceries and a bottle of wine. She made macaroni and cheese and pan of brownies, which Brooke couldn’t keep her off. It had been weeks since I’d eaten a full meal, and afterwards, I felt full, but good. I was satisfied. For the rest of the night, I sat weighted to the couch, listening to Charlotte and Brooke’s murmuring chatter. Sleepily, I ran my fingers over the top of my hair. My fatigue was somehow different now. It wasn’t an aching, sickly tired. It was more like I hadn’t slept in several days. My eyes burned, my muscles twitched, and my scalp tingled at the touch.

“Are you okay?” Charlotte asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Keep talking. I’m going to rest my eyes.” With eight hours of sleep and a cup of coffee the next morning, I felt like I might recover. My doctor said I would feel that way, that I would doubt her diagnosis when I started to feel better. No one believes at first that she will be sick for the rest of her life. But I didn’t care that my reaction was typical. In remembering what it was like to feel healthy, I was grateful. Lupus might color every moment of the rest of my life with watercolor shades of rashes, cold fingers, and swollen joints, but I wouldn’t let it be the permanent-marker delineation. I would take the color and make my own definition.

## Cycles

Charlotte had stocked my kitchen with something to eat for every meal. Breakfast was orange juice, whole-wheat all natural donuts, fruit, and cereal. I ate two donuts and a banana before I took my prednisone. I liked to take them with orange juice or else the bitter coating of the little, white pills stayed in my throat and I could taste it when I swallowed. After a shower, I went for a walk and to the grocery store, where I bought more food and a weird tub of gunk to style my hair. Dan called me in the afternoon while I was standing in front of the mirror trying to see if I could make myself have a mohawk.

“Feeling any better?” he asked.

“Sure.” I wiped my hand off on a towel. My hair was now stuck looking like something a cat would hack up. “Are people still talking about me?”

“The latest is that you’re dying of cancer, but there’s a large faction that still holds with the pregnant-with-Pierson’s-love-child theory. That’s my favorite, personally. It’s so much more life-affirming.”

“Poor Pierson,” I said.

“I’m sure he loves it, the old bastard.”

“Actually he’s been really great.” I had to give Pierson credit. At this point, even knowing everything that was going on, which he probably did because of Mavis and her big, fat mouth, he’d still agreed to give me the sick leave. It was probably *why* he’d given me the sick leave.

“Oh yeah? So he’s going to set up a college fund for the kid, help him get into Yale and all that?”

“Only as long as I call the baby Junior.”

“Fair enough,” Dan said. “So when are you coming back? It’s no fun around here without you.”

“I’m sure you’re finding ways to amuse yourself.” I thought of Anita helping him with his computer the last day I went to work. We hadn’t ever talked about it, although he’d obviously known something was going on. “Anyway, I might not be coming back at all.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m finally getting out, Slim!” I joked. “I guess I’ll find another job. It’s what we always dreamed of.”

“You can’t let her control you like this,” he said. His voice was small and tentative. In my mind, I could see him rubbing his chin. I plucked at my gelled hair and twisted the front until a little horn appeared.

“It’s not just that, Dan. I’m not happy there anymore.”

“We always had a good time.”

“It’s not about you.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll miss you, that’s all.” He told me about how Trish was now officially broken up with her boyfriend, and how he was thinking of asking her over to watch some obscure Russian movie that she’d mentioned. He’d managed to get a copy

of it by searching the internet for two weeks. It seemed like a pretty good plan to me. If he could keep her around long enough for her to realize how great he was, then he would be fine.

Charlotte didn't tell me where we were going when she picked me up that evening. It took me a while to realize that the house we'd pulled in front of was familiar, despite the fact that it no longer boasted a six-foot-tall Santa in the yard. The fake snow, however, still clung to the windows in chipped clumps that made it look more like a mold problem than decorations for the holiday passed. A Happy New Year Banner hung on the flagpole by the front door.

"Why are we here?" I looked over at Charlotte, who was sitting with her hand poised above the door handle, ready to get out.

"Barbie specifically asked me to bring you. Don't be mad."

"What the hell is going on, Charlotte?"

"You wouldn't have come if I told you. She called last week, and we got to talking...she's giving me a twenty percent discount on the tattoo. Not only does that make it the cheapest, but she's a woman, she's an environmentalist, and she's still the best artist I've come across."

"But why do *I* have to be here?"

Charlotte reached over to rub my prickly head. "You're the one who finally inspired me to just do it, even if it doesn't seem quite perfect. Plus, I have a surprise for

you for after. If you really don't want to come inside, I can drop you at a coffee shop or something and pick you up in a couple of hours."

"No." I undid my seatbelt. "I'll go. If only to hear what Barbie has to say."

It turned out that Barbie wanted to apologize. She met us at the front door and gave us both hugs as though we were old friends. Apparently, she told us, as we sat down to homemade lavender and chickweed tea, she hadn't been getting enough of some kind of amino acid, which made her short-tempered and irrational. Over the past few weeks, she'd been thinking back over her behavior and trying to atone, when possible, for any unkindness she may have visited upon others. She was trying to set her karma straight.

"I've been thinking about you often." She leaned over to squeeze my hand. "I was wrong when I thought you weren't supposed to be here. Obviously there was a reason or else I wouldn't be thinking about you so much. I was too blocked to see it at the time. I want to make it up to you." Barbie did seem more relaxed. The kitchen was clean, and she was wearing jeans and a tight "Not *My* President" T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. Her daughter was gone this time, spending the evening at the Galleria with her father, she told us with a sigh. She didn't like little Autumn being exposed to the unbridled materialism of the mall, but her husband had really wanted to take the kid ice skating. She went on to offer free labor on a small tattoo, something for me to remember her by. "I want our lives to intertwine as they were meant too," she said. Barbie sipped her tea and waited for me to answer.

“I don’t know,” I said, swallowing. After the bitter floral taste spread over my tongue, it was a challenge not to make a face. I put my cup down. “I’ve never considered getting a tattoo.”

“But isn’t that exciting,” Barbie asked. “Your first time.”

“She can take a raincheck, maybe?” Charlotte asked. She nudged me. “So she can think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.” I held the warm tea in my hands and let the steam rise up to my face. It smelled good. The trick was to remember not to drink it. “Thank you for offering.”

I was left in the living room to read magazines like *Hot Ink* and *Tattoo World*. Barbie also had *Reader’s Digest* and *Ranger Rick*, neither of which interested me much. An hour passed, and I’d been staring at the carpet trying to make patterns out of crumbs when Barbie and Charlotte came back from Barbie’s studio. Charlotte’s skin glowed with a kind of amphibious green tinge.

“How does it look? Can I see?” I asked.

Charlotte glanced at Barbie who shook her head. “We’ve bandaged it for now, but you can see it in a few hours. It’ll need to be exposed to air so it can heal. It’s a little bloody right now anyway.” Charlotte’s face paled. She took her purse from me and occupied herself by fishing out her checkbook.

“You like it?” I asked her. “Are you okay?” Her hand seemed unsteady as she wrote.

“I think so,” she said. She gave me a shaky smile.

As she was walking us out, Barbie put her hand on my shoulder. “I want to express my sympathy, Patsy,” she said. The wrinkles around her eyes were leathery and deep, but her steely blue eyes danced. “You should know that you’re healing now. I can see it in the darker green. You also have some breathtaking orange emerging. It’s gorgeous, Patsy, it really is.”

“Thanks.” I took a step back. “Charlotte, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sure,” she said. Sweat beads were popping up on her upper lip, and she seemed to be taking very deep breaths. She pulled her hair back and tied it in a ponytail.

“She just got a little woozy at the needle, that’s all.” Barbie smiled patiently at us both. “It happens all the time. She’ll be fine. So will you.” She hugged us goodbye, and I ended up driving while Charlotte rode as passenger, her head halfway out the window.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she moaned twenty minutes later. We’d stopped at a gas station so she could vomit in the bathroom. Back in the car, she chewed on breath mints and tenderly reached back to touch the place between her shoulder blades where she’d been marked. “I can’t believe the blood made me sick. It’s just that I could feel it, all warm and gushy on my back. She would wipe it away and then keep going. It was so revolting.”

“Stop thinking about it.” Having had enough blood drawn in the past few months to replace the entire vital fluid supply of a small child, I probably wasn’t sympathizing as much as I should have been. On top of that, I still hadn’t seen it, which was making me insanely curious. Rather than evoke another round of nausea, I decided to wait before making her show me. “Do you want to go home? Or do you want to sit here a while until your stomach settles?”

“No!” Charlotte took a long drink of water from the bottle she’d bought inside. We’d opened the windows of her car, so it was freezing and I’d had to put on my gloves and a borrowed hat from her back seat. “I have a surprise for you, remember?”

“Can’t you tell me what it is?” I asked. “I might not want to go. And you’re not exactly in great shape.”

“If I told you, you’d say no. But if I *don’t* tell you, you’ll go and thank me in the end. See how well Barbie’s turned out?”

“She gave me a free tattoo that I don’t want.”

“And she set her karma straight, which is good for the whole world.” Charlotte leaned back against the seat and breathed in the cold air. She directed me back to Westheimer where we passed hipster coffee shops. Teenagers and college students smoked clove cigarettes on the patios and peered at each other through thick, black eyeglass frames. My friends and I had gone places like that a few times when we were in high school, but we were always being stared at. Maybe it was the pastel Ralph Lauren

shirts or perhaps the fact that a few of my friends then actually wore pearls with their jeans. I noticed one of the tattoo parlors Charlotte and I first looked at.

“Hey!” I said. “Is this the surprise? Are we going to say hi to hairy Bob from Sue’s Tattoo?”

“Nope. But we can do that later if you want.” She opened her day planner to check for an address. “Keep going. We’re almost there.”

When she finally told me to turn into a parking lot, I found myself in front of a bar.

“We’re going to a bar?”

“Not just any bar,” she said. I didn’t get it until I saw the rainbow flag hoisted above the door. Two women approached the front door. One had a shaved head and her tight long-sleeved shirt was tucked into jeans. The other wore a baseball cap. The first woman opened the door for the baseball-capped woman, who rubbed her friend’s bristly head affectionately as she passed.

“Oh God.” I groaned and put the car back into reverse. Charlotte grabbed my hand and tried to put the car back into park. We struggled for a few seconds until I let go. “What exactly do you expect to happen here?” I asked.

“Nothing. It’s a bar. We’re just going to go in, have a drink, and go home. It’s no big deal.”

I put my hands over my face and pressed into my eyes. “What if we run into *her*?”

“So what?” Charlotte said. “You’re with a hot girl. I’ll whisper things into your ear that will make you blush. Besides, do you think all the lesbians in Houston hang out at the same bar on Saturday night?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what lesbians do.”

“Exactly,” she said, nodding. “That’s what we’re here to find out.”

We went to the door where we’d seen the other women go in. It opened into an outside courtyard, and at first it seemed like no one was there. I grabbed Charlotte’s sleeve. “Let’s go,” I whispered. “How did you manage to find the most unpopular lesbian bar in Houston?”

“Give it a chance,” she hissed. “It’s only eight o’clock.” We walked to another door where a middle-aged woman in a hooded sweatshirt was checking IDs. Inside, it was not as empty as it had first appeared. On one side of the room, customers sat at the long bar and clustered around a pool table. On the other side, a couple of people sat at tables that were set up around an empty dance floor. It looked like any other bar with dark wood paneling and a strand of twinkling white lights strung above the liquor bottles. The only difference was that everyone in the place was a woman.

Charlotte went up to buy our first round of beers. I felt awkward sitting at a table alone with nothing to do. I examined my phone as though someone had just called. Then I called my voice mail and listened to old messages. The first was from a month ago, Brooke telling me that she was locked out of my apartment, starving, and wet from the

downpour, and she was about to dog-nap Edna's scrawny bitch to trade for food and shelter. As I pretended to listen, I scoped out the room.

At the pool table were a group of four young woman. The leader of the group seemed to be the androgynous-looking girl with black hair, a white racer back T-shirt and leather pants. Two of the girls at the table had a hippie-chick look (long, messy hair and back-less shirts) while the fourth looked...sort of like Charlotte and me. Casual, but a little bit on the preppy side. A table a few feet away from me served a couple of older woman wearing jeans and sweatshirts. They drank light beer and chain-smoked. Every now and then, they would laugh uproariously until one or the other started to cough.

When Charlotte returned with the beers, her face was flushed and proud. "All in the same day, I got my first tattoo and ordered beers from my first lesbian bar!" I had no doubt that the women behind us could hear every word. A cackle erupted from the table. My face burned. I loved Charlotte, but at the same time, I wanted to melt into a puddle under the table. I sneaked a glance at the women playing pool. They were either too far away or too engrossed in the game to notice the jerks who'd never been in a lesbian bar before. I thanked Charlotte for the beer. There was no reason to make her feel bad just because I was nervous. I would probably never see any of these women again, so what did it matter? I decided that I was retiring my sexual life. I would become a celibate asexual, and I would focus on my career. Once I got a career. Maybe I could join the Peace Corps. Or learn Japanese. Or take up gardening.

I was considering the possibilities of how to channel my extra energy when someone joined our table. Oh God, I thought, afraid to look up. Was it the old lesbian with the mullet? Had Charlotte flirted with someone at the bar? When I raised my eyes, though, a pleasant, familiar face was smiling at me.

“Hey,” she said, looking at me. “Mind if I join you girls?”

“Please!” Charlotte jumped up and pulled out a chair. “I’m Charlotte and this is Patsy.”

“I’m Tessa.” She held out her hand to Charlotte and then to me. She sat down and turned to me. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Sorry.” I shook my head. I knew she looked familiar, but I couldn’t say why.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “We were never properly introduced. I’ll give a hint: you look like you’re feeling much better.” In a flash it came to me. Her long curly hair was now braided into pigtails. The freckled nose and kind smile. She was the woman from the party, the one who put me into Anita’s bed. I felt like a block of ice had been plunked into my stomach. I took a deep breath.

“Maybe I spoke too soon. You okay?” Tessa glanced at Charlotte.

“She’s fine,” Charlotte spoke up. “See, I just got a tattoo this afternoon, and she hates the sight of needles so she’s been feeling out of sorts. She’ll be fine. The beer will settle her stomach.” Charlotte spoke in a cheerful voice. When I gave her a look, she raised her eyebrows but kept the voice. “So tell me, *where* did you two meet again?”

“Have you remembered yet?” Tessa asked.

“The party,” I said. “I never got to thank you. So...thank you. You were really nice.”

Tessa nodded. It was the first time I really looked at her. I was expecting to see the cynicism of Anita, and was surprised when instead I saw that the expression on Tessa’s moon-shaped face was fresh and sweet. Her hair was the burnt orange brown of sunflower pollen, and her wide, soft lips parted in a smile. Her freckles weren’t the faded, watercolor blotches that some people have. Tessa’s freckles scattered, dark and singular, as though someone had purposely flicked a brush, heavy with strong brown ink. Her beauty was the kind that you had to look at twice before you could see clearly that it was in fact beauty.

“It was my pleasure.” Her smile was wide and generous. “See, my New Year’s resolution was to come to the aid of beautiful strangers, so you did me a favor.”

“Glad I could help,” I said.

Charlotte stood up, scraping her chair against the floor. “Can I bring you all another round? I was about to get one myself.”

“Okay,” I said. She asked what Tessa was having and marched off to the bar. I could see the triumph in her steps as she approached to make her sophomore order at a lesbian bar.

“So what was wrong with you that night?” Tessa asked conversationally.

“I was sick. I have lupus but I didn’t know that then.” I shrugged. There was no reason to hide it. If anything, telling people outright would keep away the jerks.

Probably the non-jerks too. “I shouldn’t have been out that night.”

“Is that like...what is that?” Tessa asked.

“It’s an auto-immune disease. Not contagious,” I added.

“Like MS?” She sipped her beer.

“I don’t know. I don’t know much about MS.”

“Well, it’s a non-contagious, auto-immune disease.” She laughed. “And that’s about all I know. So how do you get lupus?”

“They don’t really know. Probably a combination of environmental and genetic factors. Some people have a predisposition and aspects of their environment or lifestyle can trigger the disease.”

“Like cancer.” She nodded to herself. She turned the clean ashtray on the table upside down and spoke matter-of-factly. “My mom had breast cancer. She smoked for twenty-five years. She died when I was little. Is lupus fatal?”

“Not usually,” I said. “More so forty years ago than today. I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Thanks,” she said.

Charlotte came by and plunked down our beers, saying that she would be back in a minute. She was making friends at the bar. After that, Tessa and I backtracked to the less-personal parts of our lives. I told her that I was looking for a career outside of the

insurance industry. She was twenty-two, a first year graduate student in public administration at U of H. Every now and then I looked around to check on Charlotte, who was now deep in conversation with a tall woman with short gray hair. That was Charlotte for you. Put her anywhere, and she would find a way to make herself fit. I turned back to Tessa who was frowning at the table. She picked at the label on her beer bottle, balling up the wet strips and placing them on the overturned ashtray.

“Worried about your girlfriend?” she asked.

“God, no,” I said. “Charlotte’s just a friend.”

“That’s what she’d say if I went over and asked her?”

“She’s engaged.” I lowered my voice. “See, she’s never been to a lesbian bar, and I’m just watching out for her, but no, we’re definitely not together.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Tessa said. “I would have been disappointed.” As I was thinking of and rejecting appropriate responses, the friends Tessa had been waiting for walked in and sat down by the pool table. Tessa waved. “I should go over there,” she said. “But don’t leave without saying good-bye, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. “It was nice meeting you again.”

When Charlotte joined me a few minutes later, her face had rosy, tell-tale drinking cheeks. She put a martini glass on the table and hugged me. “I love you, Patsy,” she said before she kissed my head and sat down. She ruffled my hair. “I love your hair too. Your fun, fun hair.”

“I love your hair too, Charlotte.”

“You may have to drive home.” She held up her drink. “Sandy and I did some shots. And now this.”

“Charlotte, were you *flirting* with that woman?”

“Silly, I know Sandy. She teaches world history. Did you know that she’s been with the same woman for fifteen years? Isn’t that amazing? I’m going to call Richard.” She put her palms on the table to push herself up, but I put my hand on her arm.

“No, wait,” I said. “We can leave soon, but first you have to finish your drink and I want to get that girl’s number. And then, I want you to show me your tattoo.”

“That’s right!” she said, excited. “You haven’t seen it yet. And you’re going to get that girl’s number! I’m so proud of you.” She hugged me again, her martini sloshing out and splashing onto the floor and the table. “She’s so *cute*.”

While Charlotte downed the rest of her drink, I walked over to the table where Tessa was sitting with her back to me. One of her friends saw me first and nudged the woman next to her who smiled and threw a straw at Tessa to get her attention. By the time I reached Tessa, she was already waiting for me. I greeted her self-consciously knowing that the whole group was listening.

“Hi, again,” I said.

“Hi.” She looked up at me. “Are you going to sit down or just stand there all night?”

“Actually, I’m leaving.”

“No, stay!” said the woman who’d thrown the straw. “And get your friend over here.”

“Crystal thinks you should stay,” Tessa said.

“I think I should get her home.” I gestured toward Charlotte. “She’s had a tough day. But I wanted to say thanks again. And maybe get your number if that would be okay?”

“I’ll give you her number,” Crystal said. She began dictating loudly.

“I guess I have no choice.” Tessa smiled.

I made Crystal repeat Tessa’s number and then I gave Tessa mine. We didn’t say when we would call but left it open.

Charlotte and I walked out of the dark bar so she could show me her back. We stood outside under a street lamp.

“Are you sure you want to do this here?” I asked. “We can wait. You’ll freeze your ass off.”

“No! I can’t wait to see what you think.” As she pulled her shirt up over her shoulders, a woman walking out of the bar hooted, and Charlotte raised her head in acknowledgment and waved. I helped her undo the bandages, slowly un-taping the sides. There was a little bit of dried blood and something that looked like petroleum jelly smeared across the black ink. The skin raised around the etching, irritated and blotchy. Her skin prickled with goosebumps.

The tattoo was a heart the size of a silver dollar with a small Korean word hanging below it on the right. It wasn't just any puffy, cartoon heart. It was an intricate, black-and-white sketch of the anatomical human muscle with the pumping valves, veins, arteries, and all.

"It's beautiful, Charlotte," I said as she stood up and pulled down her shirt.

"What does the word mean?"

"*Friend*. Because that's what's important." She stumbled forward to give me a hug. "I wouldn't be who I am without you and Richard."

"It's beautiful," I said again, my own heart feeling full.

"Do you think Richard will like it?"

"Of course he will." I squeezed her hand. "You're freezing, Charlotte! Let's get in the car."

I could see our breaths in the air as we walked to the car. I pulled the sleeves of my sweater over my hands and hugged myself. Two twinkling bodies shone in the sky, probably planets, though even this was a rarity with all the lights and smog of the city. A block down from the bar an all night drive-through was clogged with trucks and low-riders that backed up all the way to the street. Alternating drifts of country music, techno, and hip hop crossed back and forth through the air and mingled like cigarette smoke. I would call Tessa, maybe even tomorrow. It didn't matter if it didn't go anywhere. In a year I could be in New York like Brooke. I could be gardening or speaking Japanese.

## Vita

Eloise Holland grew up in Houston, Texas. She was diagnosed with lupus at the age of twenty-one and has been officially in remission for three years. Her illness was the inspiration for this novel.