

ABSTRACT

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BRINKMANSHIP

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Florida is so important to the United States that if you detached the state from the rest of America, the whole country would tilt back and sink into the Pacific Ocean. The Sunshine State is a peninsula, tenuously yet critically connected to its country. The fiction in this collection mirrors that relationship. These characters are tied to their families, their communities, their own identities by feeble but necessary threads. They exist in the pinewoods and scrub of North Florida, the prairies and swamps of Central Florida and the beaches and cities of South Florida. Like their home state, these characters struggle with their identities and how to maintain their individualities while still being a member of their communities. However, one of these stories is not set in Florida. It takes place in Georgia. But of course that's just as fitting. Florida always has room for non-natives.

BRINKMANSHIP

By

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Chapter 1: Smarter than Dogs

I was riding my bike around Coral Gables, admiring the Mediterranean houses and the draping bougainvillea and Spanish moss and the canopying trees and shade shade all over the street. Even though I'd moved there several months ago, I still didn't know the city very well. It was difficult to get to know the city very well, because every time I'd try, every time I'd unfold a map or go exploring, I'd be assailed by fragments of my parents' recollective conversations and my own memories of their memories from when we lived here when I was a baby. I had to duck in order to not be hit point blank by "we got the B&W from the Dadeland Mall Burdines, Fred ... no, no, no, it was Errter's on Dixie, I remember it clearly, the game was blacked out, that's why we bought the set in the first place. I remember watching Greasie throw for 375 yards and five touchdowns". Directions were like Chinese stars in my family. "No, you're wrong, Carol, that Pollo Tropical is on Calle Ocho, not Tamiami Trail." Parry four to evade that one. "Please call it Eighth Street, Fred. We've always called it Eighth Street". In my head it was all a jumble. So, when I made a right on Red Road, trying to pedal back home, it was no surprise that I ended up going south instead of north.

The pencil thin queen palms bending in the warm, salty breeze were familiar. So were the cactus shrubs that lined the road.

"Fred, Matheson Hammock is north of here. Honey, why don't you just pull the car over and let me drive?"

“I know where I’m going, Carol, I’ve driven this road hundreds of times.”

I’d lean against the window in the backseat, staring up at the street lights. I never knew what to do. Dad said I was a quiet soul. He liked to tell that to people, and then share some old folk legend about the boy who everyone thought was mute. When the boy was six, he surprised his family by asking his mother to pass the peas at dinner. His mother asked why he’d never spoken, and the boy replied, ‘I never needed to before now’. Dad would laugh, squeeze my shoulders, and say, “just like my Margot.”

I made another right into a parking lot, preparing to turn around, when I saw a strange stony building that looked more like a Swiss chalet than any South Florida architecture I’d ever seen. I locked my bike around a black olive tree, and walked up to the front. There was a ticket booth, and beyond, a jungle of palms and banyans and gumbo limbos, and shade shade everywhere. *Graaaaak!*

“You ever been here before?” A kid behind the glass partition had shut his comic book. He was wearing some kind of parks uniform, but he couldn’t have been out of high school yet.

I shook my head.

Graaaaak!

Marvel Boy slid a brochure across the counter. *Parrot Jungle, our birds are smarter than dogs ...*

I could feel it coming. I immediately crouched down. “You’d get the eggs benedict, I’d get pancakes, and Margot would get the French toast squares.”

“Carol, first of all, I would never order eggs benedict, you know very well what happens when I eat eggs. And the Parrot Jungle didn’t serve eggs benedict anyways.”

“I specifically remember you eating it, because we were sitting by the window looking out at some cockatoos or something, talking about how you were eating eggs and they were laying eggs.”

Behind the ticket booth I saw a restaurant, empty, all the chairs were stacked on the tables. Through the far windows was a family of small yellow birds, all perched on artificial branches.

Graaaaak!

“What is that noise?”

Marvel Boy had returned to his superheroes. “Huh? Oh, that’s just the parrots. They can get kinda loud sometimes.”

I flipped through the brochure. *Home to more than a thousand stunning macaws, mynah birds, cockatoos, parakeets, and peacocks. A pioneer attraction from the golden age of South Florida tourism. Chariot races, high-wire bike acts and many more shows daily. Admission three dollars per person.*

I pulled three dollars out of my back pocket and set it down on the counter. Marvel Boy was battling intergalactic aliens. I pushed the money across the counter. His razor sharp super hearing powers noted the movement.

“Oh, hey, it’s free now. They’re gonna move over to Watson Island in a few months, so they’re not charging admission anymore. I guess with all the changes and stuff.” Back to interplanetary warfare.

I slipped my cash back into my pocket and proceeded into the park. There were sand walkways snaking through the banyan shade. I spotted a baby orangutan hanging from a branch. Further along I identified a few peacocks hiding behind some shefalara leaves. The path wove around, past a bubbling waterfall, over a wooden bridge crossing a creek, and finally to a large open-air amphitheater. There were some families in the audience, kids with balloons and cotton candy, old couples either cuddling close together or ignoring each other. No one by themselves. Everyone's attention was focused on the amphitheater stage. A very colorful bird, some kind of parrot, with a bright orange chest and long teal feathers, pedaled a doll's house bicycle across a tight wire strung ten or twelve feet above the stage. When the bird reached the opposite side, it dismounted the bike and bowed. The crowd, all fifteen of them, burst into applause. A little boy clapped so hard that his balloon string slipped off his wrist. The green balloon floated up, up, up, and stopped at the amphitheater ceiling. It collided with a light and popped. The boy shrugged his shoulders and snatched his sister's cotton candy.

"Hooray for Linda, the high-wire bicyclist extraordinaire!" A showman let Linda perch on his arm as he waved her around for the audience's adoration. "Our next act is Gertrude performing her famous pull up the bucket trick. This trick has been performed at Parrot Jungle since its inception in the 1940s when Winston Churchill saw Butch perform this very act."

I spotted a small bird crouched down in the corner of the stage. He was by himself. His feathers weren't orange and teal like Linda's, or vibrant green and yellow like Gertrude extracting grapes from a tin cup. His feathers were simply red,

with a few flecks of blue at the top of his head. Our gazes connected and across the amphitheater I stared into his beady black eyes. They shone like obsidian. My heart erupted. My arms were tingling and soon all a-gooseflesh. My knees buckled and I popped down on one of the plastic audience benches. I scanned the amphitheater for a trash can in case I vomited. I knew this was how I was supposed to feel with Colin. And this time it wasn't one-sided.

“He proposed! Fred, Fred, what *are* you doing with that toaster? Get on the extension, our daughter is engaged! Oh, congratulations, congratulations, Margot. We think Colin is just terrific.”

“Mom, Mom, slow down. Yes, he proposed, and I said no, because I realized-“

“*What?* You turned him *down*? Fred, get that knife out of that toaster, you're going to electrocute yourself. Why in the world did you turn him down?”

“Because, as I was saying, I realized I don't love him. I'm not in love with him. I thought I was, I wanted to be, but I'm not.”

“Oh, goodness, Margot, you and your expectations. I swear, they'll be the death of you. *Fred!* Stick with it, Margot, you always give up on things too easily. This is just like when you quit the trumpet.”

“Mother, this is nothing like when I quit the trumpet. The two are-“

“Margot, are you still thinking about this whole moving to Miami scheme of yours?”

“It's not a scheme, Mom.”

“What are you going to do, work at some *library*?”

“Maybe, probably. I like what I do.”

“You know you’re going to have to speak Spanish, don’t you. Everywhere. Pretty soon they won’t even print the *Herald* in English anymore.”

“I know, Mom. I’m excited.”

“Excited? Fred, Fred, do you hear this, your daughter is excited that her birthplace is some Latin American drug capital. It’s not all black beans and rice and Cuban coffee, you know. Is Colin moving to Miami?”

“No, Mom, he’s not.”

“”Why don’t you just give it another shot with him? Then you can stay right where you are and your father and I won’t have to worry about you forgetting to lock your doors at night.”

Graaaaaak! I opened my eyes. The show was over. All that remained of the crowd was empty popcorn bags and footprint stamped brochures. I was standing next to the stage. The birds were all gone. I stretched to find him.

“Can I help you?” The showman approached me, dragging a broom behind him.

“I was just looking for one of the parrots, a red bird, with blue spots on the head?”

“Oh, you must mean Horace.”

“Horace.” The name smelled of fireplaces and moor heather and cross-meadow embraces.

“He’s a South American hyacinth macaw. Not one of our performers. He doesn’t fly.”

“Can he fly? I mean, are the birds allowed?”

“Oh, sure, Horace’s wings aren’t clipped or anything. Probably some accident when he was really young. He just *can’t* fly.”

“Is he around? I mean, can I see him?”

“Nah, we’re closing up. It’s almost five. You can go take a look at the flamingos before you leave. Just take the left path out.”

I took the left path out, and strolled by the pink flamingos sunbathing on the shores of Flamingo Lake. They were pleasant to look at, but nothing special. My skin remained smooth and I was able to walk past them erect and steady.

I rode my bike back home. The roads in Miami were so flat, nothing like the hilly terrain of North Florida where I had learned to ride. I made it to my apartment in under fifteen minutes. I lived in a small studio above a Haitian deli and dry cleaners. It was cheap rent for Coconut Grove, and I could easily walk to Biscayne Bay or Vizcaya. The door was shielded by a slightly rusty wrought iron gate and the windows by sea-green hurricane shutters. The room inside was always filled with the stench of curry and coconut and industrial cleaner.

I ducked.

My mother demonstratively sniffed her nose. Her nostrils flared to the size of quarters. She held out her hand as if she was trying to touch the toxins she sensed in the air. “Margot, your apartment smells like a third-world country.”

“Mother, you’ve been to Canada. To Toronto, once.”

My father patted my back. “It definitely has character, sweetie. And it’s in such a fashionable location. There was this article in Triple-A magazine about what a *hip* place Coconut Grove is these days. Very trendy to live here.”

“Well, I just like it, Dad.”

“Don’t bother going to the art festival, dear. The one in downtown Gainesville, that you’ve been going to you entire life, is just as good. And they don’t try to swindle tourists with fancy prices.”

“You know, Margot, when we lived down here Coconut Grove wasn’t as glitzy as it is now.”

“Remember that wedding, Fred, we went to on Charles Avenue? Whose was it?”

“Evelyn and Bob’s.”

“Of course, Evelyn and Bob’s. They bought their house for what, thirty thousand dollars? And Evelyn just a schoolteacher. You sure you have enough money to afford this place, Margot? Living in this fancy neighborhood on your library salary?”

There were two messages on the answering machine. I hated that answering machine. It was all high-tech and digital and beeped incessantly. My mother gave it to me for my birthday. “You can’t live like a heathen anymore, Margot.” I secured my bike kick stand and played the messages.

“Margot, this is your mother. Are you at work? I thought the library was closed on Sundays. I can’t believe you have a college degree and have to work on the

weekend. Honey, you really should try to find a job where you get paid properly. Anyways, just wanted to tell you I love you. Bye!”

Beep! Graaaaak!

“Hi, Margot ...”, my mother must have given Colin my number, “just want to see how you’re doing. I’m going to be in Fort Lauderdale next weekend, for business, and I thought maybe I could swing down and we could have lunch? What do you think? Your choice, whatever makes you comfortable. You know my number. Hope to hear from you soon. You know I really do still lo-“ Beep! Graaaaak! I hit pause.

The machine beeped all night, as it always does. But I didn’t hear that electronic signal as I usually did. Instead I drifted off to sleep listening to Horace sing me a lullaby: *Graaaaak! Graaaaak! Graaaaak! Graaaaak!*

The next day at the library, I read about parrots in between helping patrons. The South American hyacinth is the largest of all macaws. It is also the gentlest of all breeds. And the most talkative, incorporating its tender disposition into the words it says. *Margot, I am so proud of you living all by yourself in this city, finding things that make you happy. Margot, you do such a good job of helping people find the knowledge they’re looking for.* When I came back from the 613’s, patrons are always so embarrassed about asking for sex books, Pam was paging through the tropical birds guide that I’d left open on the desk.

“Brushing up on the local wildlife?”

I nodded and resumed my seat. Pam's shoulders were always covered by a crocheted shawl pinned in place by a rhinestone broach. Her lipstick was a too bright shade of red, a color that looked eerily unnatural on her lips, but would look perfect on a hyacinth macaw. Pam was a librarian, not an assistant, and liked to tell me about the school in Tampa where she had gotten her masters, where I should go to get mine, so I could be a librarian, too, and not an assistant.

"You know who else is interested in wildlife? My son, Edgar. I'm sure I've told you about him. He's a stockbroker. He works on Brickell Avenue. His office has a window and a view of the Bay. When he was little he loved going to the MetroZoo. We'd take him there and he'd stare forever at the white tigers. Of course, he liked to bring pebbles in his pockets and throw them at the tigers. That became kind of a problem. But I'm sure he wouldn't do that now." Pam reached into her pocket. "I can give you his number, if you'd like. I have his business card."

"Miss, can you help me? I can't for the life of me find books about Africa. My wife and I are taking a safari in Kenya next month."

"Kenya, how exciting. I'll be right with you, sir." I slammed shut the book and walked around the desk. "Thanks, Pam, but I'm not interested." The patron was inspecting the mouse at the database computer.

"I miss card catalogues."

"So do I. Let me take you over to the travel books. Also, you might want to read some Isak Dinesen or other colonial literature."

I wasn't able to return to the Parrot Jungle until Saturday. I had to work all week. But I studied about hyacinth macaws, and dreamed about Horace every night. In the mornings when I'd ride my bike along Old Cutler, I'd extend my arms and flap them. A few times my tires would lift off the sidewalk for a few seconds. I couldn't think about anything other than seeing Horace on Saturday. My mother's messages piled up on the answering machine and composed a long-distance serenade from Horace to me: *Graaaaak! Graaaaak! Graaaaak!*

When I finally did return on Saturday, I ran through the entrance, barely waving to Marvel Boy. I skipped down the path, past the albino alligator and giant tortoises, straight to the amphitheater. Gertrude and Linda were practicing on stage. Mr. Showman was training some other birds in the wings.

"Graaaaak! Margot! Graaaaak!" Horace was sitting on one of the plastic benches, about halfway down the stage. I hurried forth and slid in beside him. We sat there watching Mr. Showman and Gertrude and Linda and the future stars do trapeze tricks and all kind of circus acrobatics. Horace and I talked about my mother, my job, Colin, his job and how he hated to perform, but we spent most of the time just sitting next to each other, being close. I'd never felt so happy.

"Well, little missy, you're back, eh?" Mr. Showman walked up the audience steps to retrieve a ball that Linda hadn't been able to catch. "Good thing you stopped by today, it's your friend's last day."

I looked at Horace. *Why didn't you tell me?* His beady black eyes were dull and sad, no lava embers in sight. *I didn't know.*

“We’re taking some of the older birds to the wildlife refuge on Key Biscayne. There’s no room at Watson Island for the ones that don’t perform.”

“Is it a public refuge? I mean, can I go visit him there?”

“Visit him? Lady, you’re crazy, he’s just a *bird*.” Mr. Showman tossed the retrieved ball back and forth between the palms of his hands. “Uh, and nope, it’s run through UM. Not open to the public.” He outstretched his arm in front of my one true love. “C’mon, Horace.”

Horace looked at me, troubled and terrified. I nodded for him to comply with Mr. Showman. *Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out.* I raced out of the Parrot Jungle, straight for the library and checked out books on locksmithing. There was information about how to open locks, how to pick locks, how to jimmy locks. I stashed them in my satchel and laid them out on the floor when I got home. I was memorizing bobby pin techniques when the phone rang. The machine caught the call.

“Margot, this is Colin. Hi, how’s it going? I’m in Miami, in Coconut Grove, actually, with some guys from the office, we came down here to grab a bite to eat. Your mom told me you live in this neighborhood, and I was hoping we could meet up. Get a cup of coffee, go for a walk. Don’t worry, I’m not stalking you. I’d just like to see you. If you get this message, please call me. You know the number. I do still love you.”

Graaaaak!

I packed a few essentials in my satchel, along with a bag of sunflower seeds. When the sun set, I exited my apartment and tiptoed down the stairs. It was Saturday

night in Coconut Grove and there were lights everywhere, neon signs from the trendy shops, tiki torches from the trendy restaurants, white Christmas lights strung across the streets. My black pants, black long sleeved shirt and black beret wouldn't conceal my presence here.

“Margot!” It's not the voice of a gentle hyacinth macaw. I mount my bike and push off, pedaling as fast as I can in the balmy night towards my destiny.

The front gate to the Parrot Jungle is old, probably from the 1950s, and easy to climb, no barbed wire. At the top of the fence, I glimpse a light in the restaurant out of the corner of my eye, and hope Marvel Boy forgot to turn it off before he left. I stealthily jump to the ground, expecting an attack wave of parental conversation, the argument about what to do when I fell out of the acacia tree, perhaps. But the air is still and soothing. I sneak down the san path to the ampitheater. The bird cages are behind the stage backdrop. I peer behind the tropical set and spy Horace, asleep in a very small, very metal cage. He senses my presence and awakens. I creep over to his cage, and insert a bobby pin and a tiny Philips head into the lock. Twisting the tools I feel the lock give. But the locksmithing books hadn't mentioned anything about the noises picking locks creates, and my heart stops for a moment when the lock *creeeeeeeaaak* as I open it. Horace climbs onto my arm and we wait for a moment. Nothing. All clear. Then, *Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak! Graaaaaak!*

Linda and Gertrude and the whole ensemble of Parrot Jungle performers wake up and start screeching. Their cries have tripped the security alarm, which blares my presence through the night to Marvel Boy and Mr. Showman and Pam and her son,

Edgar and my mother and Colin. I run off stage, Horace clinging to my arm, down the back stairs, and scan the property for an alternate exit. We cross the lawn to Flamingo Lake and I see a gate in the distance beyond the petting zoo. A police car, blue and red lights spinning round and round and round, pulls up to block our escape. I hear fast footfalls approaching from behind, and it's Mr. Showman flanked by two security guards. The only place to flee now is the castle turret overlooking Flamingo Lake. I run up the stone steps, two at a time, and stop at the top, out of ideas.

Mr. Showman yells into a megaphone. "C'mon down, little missy. Where do ya think you're gonna go?" The police car points a spotlight on us.

Horace whispers in my ear, softly. I let him crawl down my arm to my hand, and grasp his talons with both my hands. He then flaps his beautiful red wings, up and down, and up and down, and slowly I lose the feeling of stone beneath my feet, and sense nothing, just air and distance. And he keeps flapping his wings and we keep rising, and the security guards and police car and Mr. Showman and the pink flamingos and orangutans and banyans all dissolve into a giant mass of color that is no match for Horace's wings. Past the Parrot Jungle property I spot the downtown neon splendor and Coconut Grove and Miami Beach and the University of Miami, and hospital, where I was born. I can see all the way down to the Cape Florida lighthouse. My parents have only ever seen its rotating light from land.

As we continue to rise above the city, I whisper in Horace's ear. "I thought you couldn't fly."

He smiles at me, and his eyes are volcanic and sparkling again. "I never needed to before now."

Chapter 2: Sorghum is an Acquired Taste

I caught sight of another one of those slimy lavender lizards darting across the floor. I think there must have been something, some kind of magnetic or electric charge on the hardwood floor, because I don't think the lizards' feet even touched the ground. They just flew: horizontal lightning. Zwip! There went another one. This was unacceptable. I like lizards, of course I like lizards. My new best friend is Oroville, a chameleon, he sleeps on the piece of driftwood that Daddy found on Jekyll Island, the weekend before I started kindergarten. He's only been living in the old tropical fish aquarium for two days, Oroville, and he seems to like it, he says the purple and yellow and green gravel makes him happy. But when he talks about his family, and he does, he likes to tell me about his sister Sadie and the adventures they have hiding in the plumbing pipes under our house, he gets this faraway look in his eyes, like Mama does whenever Christmas or May 14th come around. So I think I'm gonna let him go real soon. I heard a phone ring. Zwip! So I like lizards, but not when they're running like crazy around my bedroom and crawling all over Rainbow Brite and Shy Violet. That's unacceptable. I saw another one, sneaking in from behind the radiator. I tiptoed over to him, and crouched down behind him, very, very quietly, and reached forward, my thumb and pointer finger in position, but right then, one of his buddies must have alerted him with a sound that only lizards and beagles can hear, because – zwip! – he sprinted away. Traditional catching methods would just not work with this one.

I scanned my room for a glass or a bowl, but all I found was a plastic cup that still had last night's orange juice in it. Then I glimpsed my laundry hamper at the foot of my bed. Empty. Each night after I change into my jimjams I throw the day's outfit into the washing machine. Dirty clothes give me the heebie-jeebies. Well, I used to do that until one day after bringing in the mail Mama told me I couldn't keep my clothes so clean anymore, and I'd have to wait a few weeks to do laundry and it would be a full load. Now I just hand wash my clothes in a bucket in the tub each night and hang them out on the front porch to dry. I don't care if the mailman or the neighbors see my undies, at least they aren't lying around in the hamper collecting germs. So I snatched the hamper and waited. Zwip! Finally, one of those little lavender beasts scampered out of my My Little Pony castle and stopped in the middle of the floor. I confronted him from behind and raised the hamper high above my head.

I felt a rap rap rapping on the door vibrate through the floor through my feet up my legs. "Wake up, Ruthie, you need to get up." It was Mama. Her voice in the morning sounded like sorghum on ice cream. "Not now, Mama! I gotta take care of this lizard."

"Sugar, you need to get ready, c'mon." The door handle creaked and I watched as it imperceptibly turned, visible only on the atomic level. "I'm coming in."

I glanced back and the lizard had scooted off to who knew where. I plopped the hamper on the floor and curled up inside it. Mama walked in.

“Good morning, Ruthie. How’s about you get on up and come have some breakfast? I’ll make oatmeal and cinnamon toast.” She smiled. I liked that. Mama ended all of her sentences with a smile.

“Okaaaaaaaaay.” I stretched and let out the last of my sleep with a yawn.

Mama leaned in towards me, real close. “And guess what, you don’t have to go to school today.” Smile.

“What? How come? It’s Tuesday.”

“You bet it’s Tuesday and today’s a real special day. We’re going to go up to Macon. I have an appointment with the government to talk to them about helping us out by giving us some money for food.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? Today we’re going over electricity and energy. I could have told Miss Ventriss I’d be absent.”

“Well, I’m sorry, sugar, but I just found out right now. The man from the government office called me only a few minutes ago. The appointment was scheduled for next week, I would have told you beforehand then, but he was able to fit us in today. Don’t worry, I’ll go over electricity and energy with you when we get back.”

Mama heated up some oatmeal on the stove for me. I sat on the counter and watched as the maple sugar she poured into the pot slowly lost its swirly shape and blended into the oatmeal. A long time ago, Mama was making oatmeal and ran out of syrup. She asked me if I minded if she put sorghum in the oatmeal instead. Back then I didn’t know what that was, so I asked her, Mama, what’s sorghum? She turned to me, smiled and said, sorghum is an acquired taste. Mama was good at doing things

herself. She said you never need to buy flavored instant oatmeal when you could fix maple and brown sugar oatmeal at home just as fine yourself. Mama fixed the car when it was broken, and it was an Oldsmobile, so it was broken a lot, she said. I liked laying down, back flat, on the skateboard and sliding in and out of the underbelly of the car whenever Mama went inside to go to the bathroom or take a phone call. She didn't know about that. Mama fixed the upstairs toilet when it leaked and soaked the dining room ceiling. We never had company come anymore, we ate in the kitchen, but she fixed the dining room ceiling, too. Mama said it didn't matter if company never came, we were mighty important ourselves and deserved a respectable looking dining room. Mama fixes outside of our house, too. She works at the hospital and helps doctors deliver babies. She fixes the mothers' organs and sews them up inside if something goes wrong. She used to work at the clinic, with Daddy. He fixed things, too.

I ate up my oatmeal and cinnamon toast, and grabbed my backpack. Mama was still inside, collecting papers and forms from the roll top desk. I got in the back seat. It was exciting to go to Macon. Mama and I used to drive up there to go shopping. There aren't any stores around where we live. She liked to go to Rich's and let the perfume tester girls spritz her with a burst of scent. She said it made her feel like royalty. We went there with Daddy the weekend before I started kindergarten to get new school clothes. I got a jumper with cherries on the front, a couple pairs of culottes, a plaid dress for picture day, and a pair of Lad 'n' Lassie loafers. Daddy carried me on his shoulders throughout the mall. Whenever Daddy would ask if I wanted a piggyback ride, he meant did I want to ride on his shoulders.

I would tell him, no, Daddy, that's not a piggyback ride, but he never got it. Mama would just laugh and laugh. She still laughs, and smiles all the time, but I don't think I've heard her laugh and laugh since then. We don't go to the mall in Macon anymore.

"Alright, sweet potato, are you ready?" Mama looked over her shoulder to check that my seat belt was buckled. It was. "Today's a fine day, we're real lucky today. Let's get a move on."

I stared out the window at the cotton fields. When I was younger I used to pretend that those white balls were snowballs stuck in the bushes. It doesn't snow in southern Georgia. Even though now I know, for sure, those aren't snowballs, it's still weird to think that it's cotton out there. It's fun to see it in its raw form. For my birthday last year Mama gave me a set of books about raw materials. I learned how the bricks that make up our house started out as clay and were baked in an oven, just like Mama bakes pecan pies in the oven. She lets me put the pie in the oven and take it back out as long as I wear oven mitts and am very very careful. I also learned how cotton is transformed into textiles and how that puffy white stuff in the fields turns into three-pack t-shirts that are sold at Wal-Mart and the five and dime.

Mama stopped for gas along the way, she hadn't known we'd be driving up to Macon, sixty miles, so she hadn't known to fill the tank. When she came back to the car, Mama was carrying a box of peanut brittle. She broke off a piece for me. We could afford a treat today, she said. Smile.

It didn't take us too long to get to Macon. We didn't drive to the west part of town, the part of town I remembered with the mall and the Dairy Queen. Instead,

Mama turned right. We passed some old houses that were big and stately and belonged in a scene from *Gone With the Wind*. I like our little row house back in Cordele. These old houses that were big and stately were pretty enough, but they sure weren't cozy. Scarlett O'Hara would have clashed with our makeshift décor in Cordele. I liked that. There were lots of houses and then a school with old-looking brick buildings and big green spaces and statues and fountains.

“What's that, Mama? That school.”

“It's a college, Ruthie. Mercer College.”

“Maybe I'll go there one day.” Kids, big kids sat around the fountains holding thick textbooks. I bet they were talking about electricity.

“You'll be able to go anywhere you want, Ruthie pie. If you want to go to Mercer, you can, if you want to go to Harvard, you can go there.”

We crossed over a hill and left behind the college I could go to if I wanted. At the top of the hill I could see the whole city, downtown Macon. It was spectacular. It looked nothing like Cordele. That summer before I started kindergarten, before Alexis Lambert and Laura Colbert and all the other Baptist kids at school ever said anything about Daddy and the clinic, we all went up north: Mama, Daddy and me. Mama and Daddy wanted to visit the Jimmy Carter museum when it opened. After that, we went up to Stone Mountain and rode the train and sat out at night watching the fireflies and the laser light show at the same time. On the way back we drove through Atlanta city. There was a building, a great big building with a gold pyramid at the very top, all lit up. When I saw that big building and its gold pyramid, I got goose bumps on my arms and started feeling a little sick, but in a good way. It was

like I could feel potential energy inside me turning into kinetic energy. Of course, I wasn't in second grade then, so I didn't know about energy, but that's how it felt. And that's how I felt when I saw downtown Macon spread out with all of its streets and old buildings and sidewalks, just for us.

“Okay, now the department of family welfare is on Peachtree and Carter ...” Mama talked out loud to herself a lot. I wasn't paying attention to the rest of what she was saying. I saw a barbershop with a real live old-fashioned pole. The red and white striped were turning round and round but there weren't any men inside getting trims or cuts or close-shaves. I saw a dress shop, with fancy seafoam and lace dresses on mannequins in the window, but I didn't see any girls inside with their mamas pulling white gloves on their hands.

“Mama, how come there aren't any folks in these shops?”

“Nobody comes to old downtowns like these anymore. There's so much built up out by the interstate now, Wal-Mart, the mall. Most folks go to chain stores out there. It's a miracle shops like these can still stay in business.”

Mama parked the car under a big live oak tree. She always said it was lucky if you could park your whole car in the shade, even if the shade moved away during the day. We went inside a very tall, very gray building. Mama held my hand real tight and promised we could take the stairs on our way down.

The family welfare office was enormous. There were six rows of ten orange bucket chairs each, that's sixty chairs, all facing a wall of T.V. sets that featured different programs: news, weather, sports, soap operas. An alcove beside the T.V. housed a small play area with squeaky toys and cartoons and building blocks. I

followed Mama past the T.V.s and to the reception desk. A very tired looking woman with bifocals sliding halfway down her nose glanced up at Mama.

“I’m Beverly Gilchrist. I have an appointment for 9:30. Mr. Collins called me this morning and told me to come in.”

The very tired woman pursed her lips. “Hmmm.” She scribbled on a scrap of paper then slammed a yellow stamp on it. Bam! “Take this. You’re C-24. Come when your number’s called. And if you have to use the restroom, go now. We won’t be able to hold your spot if we call you while you’re tinkling.”

Mama clasped the paper and nodded. “Thank you very much, ma’am.” She scanned the room and led me over to a set of chairs by a window, the only window in the office. “Alright, Ruthie pie.” She sat down and withdrew a book of crossword puzzles from her purse. Smile.

I pulled my science book from my backpack and placed it on my lap. A lightning bolt crisscrossed the cover. I wanted to find out more about electricity and energy, but there was so much to do, so much to look at in the waiting room. Along the wall were posters of families, of children, of old people, all smiling and showing off very white teeth. Another poster declared itself Your Declaration of Independence and showed a woman holding a booklet and looking for very very happy. People slowly filled up the orange bucket chairs but they didn’t look as happy as the people in the posters. An older woman with a feather boa constricting her neck occupied her hands with knitting needles tending to a scarf. She looked just as tired as the woman behind the counter. Another woman, this one younger, dragged two children behind her into the waiting room. They whined and stomped their feet and

complained about not being able to eat at Po' Folks. The woman placated them by leading them to the play area, but even when they were building a castle they didn't look happy. The kids had wanted grits and sausage biscuits and bacon for breakfast.

I turned my back to the whiny kids and the tired ladies and all the other folks who I heard entering the room. I looked out the window and saw the same type of view I'd seen from the hill, only from the opposite side. Near that hill was a giant church with a dome shaped roof all encrusted with gold and black and designs that I couldn't make out from this distance. It was beautiful and very very scary. We don't go to church, so I didn't know what type of church that was. We celebrate Christmas but that's just because Mama likes the house smelling of evergreen and cinnamon. Sometimes if it's cold enough out to wear sweaters, Mama and I huddle real close next to the tree and pretend it's snowing outside, just like it does up north. Mama just likes to be festive, she doesn't believe in religion. She said she might have, once, been on her way to believing something. When those people with their crosses and posters blew up Daddy's clinic, she decided that she'd never be able to believe.

“Mama, what's that church over there?”

Mama immediately looked up from her crossword. Her eyes focused on the church. “That's not a church, that's a mosque.”

“What do they believe?”

“Oh, well, they believe in God, they just call him by a different name. It's basically all the same, religion, people just use different names for the same thing. Like synonyms, you studied in language arts, remember? Muslims,” she pointed at the mosque with her crossword, “have a holy month where they don't eat from sunup

to sundown. They do it to purify their bodies and become closer to God.” Mama lowered her head and her voice. “But all it really does is deplete the body of essential nutrients.”

I stared at the mosque. It was so well decorated and looked so fancy. Why did they spend all their money on fixing up their building? Even when Mama started crying after she brought in the mail, we always ate dinner. It might not have been a whole mess of food, but Mama always made sure that we didn’t skip meals. I wondered if I took a holy month and didn’t eat from sunup to sundown if I could become closer to Daddy.

An hour passed. Then another. And one more. Every orange bucket chair was occupied by a very tired looking person. Mama had finished her crossword puzzle and progressed to reading today’s *Constitution*. I read my science chapter, twice. As I eyed the clock, I noticed a sign that instructed clients to arrive their scheduled appointment time, but to be prepared to wait up to four hours to see a caseworker. I went in the restroom and played with the automatic seat covers. The back-and-forth whirring and crinkling of the plastic made me happy. Only one of the four stalls had toilet paper and the soap dispensers were empty. I did jumping jacks next to the air dryer to turn my potential energy into kinetic energy. I was up to sixty-two jumping jacks, feeling pretty energetic, when Mama burst into the restroom.

“Ruthie pie, what are you doing? C’mon, they called our number!”

I stopped, mid-jack, and hurried after Mama. She was standing next to the reception desk talking to a woman with crazy curly blonde hair. “You must be Ruthie. I’m Miss Glimmer.”

“Miss Glimmer? Nice to see you.”

“Nice to see you, too, Ruthie. Now y’all come on back with me.”

We followed her down a corridor that was decorated with more posters with too-happy people. Helping Central Georgia Eat Healthfully. Independence: One Stamp at a Time. The walls of Miss Glimmer’s office were stark and boring. The only sign of life was a chart on the wall with salary figures. She scooted into her desk chair and began typing and scrutinizing the computer screen. There was only one other chair in the room, and Mama pulled me on her lap. Miss Glimmer shuffled through some papers on her desk.

“Okay, let’s see what we can do for you, Mrs. Gilchrist.” She brought the papers up closer to her face and squinted. Miss Glimmer was myopic. I am not. Last week instead of P.E., our class went down to the clinic and everyone had their eyes tested. It was fun reading the letters, all upside down and twisted. The nurse said I have perfect vision, but Mama says I’ll need gasses soon enough. I guessed Miss Glimmer would need them even sooner than me. “Alright your application says you are the sole wage earner in your house, but are married. Is your husband unemployed? He needs to be present if he’s unemployed.”

There was little to entertain my eyes with in the room. The ceiling panels were arranged in eight rows of eight, that’s sixty-four. Square roots make me happy. Every other panel held a fluorescent light. The ceiling was a giant checkerboard. Daddy and I used to play checkers. He called me his Aryshire Lassie. He’d let me be red. “Yes, I need to clarify that. I am married, or was, my husband was killed two years ago, but there was no option on the application to check for widowed.” The

fluorescent light in the middle right corner flickered. It needed a new tube. Red opens. I closed my eyes and concentrated very very hard and all of a sudden I jumped my piece to the next square and it started flickering. Red moves from square nine to square thirteen.

Miss Glimmer let the application flutter down to the desk. The paper in free flight interrupted my game. “I am so sorry, Mrs. Gilchrist. I ... I had no idea. I can’t believe these forms don’t have that as an option. It must make clients extremely uncomfortable, and the whole mission of this office is to make people feel comfortable about-“ Grown-ups, grown-ups who were strangers, always started rambling on like that whenever they found out Daddy was killed. Mama would just sit there, nodding and fake smiling. Sometimes I liked her fake smile even more than her real one. She didn’t like to talk about it with other folks, she didn’t like their reactions. Sometimes when a mother or an old lady would find out how Daddy was killed, they’d stop rambling and touch the gold crosses around their necks. They’d shake their heads. Mama hated that. She said it made her blood boil, and if she weren’t a lady, well, then ...

“Yes. For the past two years I’ve been the sole wage earner. I’m a nurse, I work in Cordele. Now that the school year’s started back up I can’t work full time.” Mama looked at me and grinned. “My Ruthie is a second grader now.”

Miss Glimmer nodded and returned to the computer. It looked like the computer in the A/V lab in the media center. I wondered if Miss Glimmer ever played MathQuest on the computer. It’d be fun to have your own computer with which to slay dragons with long division instead of being poked in the back in the

school lab by Alexis Lambert and Laura Colbert who just want to play Barbie games. Mama thinks Barbies give girls unrealistic body images. I think they're boring.

“Did you bring the papers, Mrs. Gilchrist?”

Mama nodded and extracted some papers from a folder inside her purse. I returned to the game. I'd been distracted and missed Daddy's move. It was the Old 14th, a classic opener. Daddy always liked knowing the terms for checkers moves. Nomenclature is the key to understanding the game, he'd say. Mama would glance up from her crossword and laugh and laugh. I memorized all of the names, I was just waiting for the strategies to follow. I blinked and a fluorescent light flickered. Square eleven to square sixteen. Daddy countered me by moving his piece from square twenty-three to square nineteen. He always liked to let me have the first capture, and I never at all got mad at him for doing so. I liked it, too. But I didn't want to make that capture just yet, it was nice having the lights flicker side by side and having our pieces almost touch.

“And that's it?” Mama held a booklet in her hand. It looked like the booklets of Kroger green stamps, what you see before the clerk rips out the stamps and hands them to you. Except the stamps in Mama's booklet were brown.

“Relatively painless. And you can use those at any grocery store: Kroger or Winn-Dixie or Piggly Wiggly, or convenience stores. Just come back here and renew the stamps. You shouldn't have to wait for so long each time. An hour, tops.”

“Thank you, thank you very much, Miss Glimmer.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Gilchrist.” She leaned forward and winked at me. “And it was nice to see you, too, Ruthie.”

“Nice to see you, Miss Glimmer.”

Mama stood me up and took my hand. “Let’s go, sugar.”

I looked up at the checkerboard. “But, Mama ... “

She crouched down and whispered in my ear. She whispered in my ear so Miss Glimmer couldn’t hear. “You’ll be able to finish your game with him next time.” Mama always believed in next time. I fastened my gaze on the ceiling and blinked. Square sixteen to square twenty-three. Capture.

Mama gripped my hand as we descended the stairs. I observed the emergency exit signs and fire alarm bells and exposed piping. Stairwells make me happy. Before we exited the stairwell, Mama retrieved the booklet of stamps from her purse. She ripped out a few and handed them to me. Happy Tuesday, Ruthie pie, she said. I inspected the stamps. They were just like regular dollar bills, just a little smaller, and brown, not green. They looked like Confederacy money or the foreign bills that I’d seen in textbooks when we were learning about currency back in first grade. I smiled. When we arrived at the car, it was still covered in shade.

On the way back to Cordele, Mama stopped at a fruit stand. She let me pick a watermelon off of the back of a green pickup truck. I chose the greenest, plumpest-looking watermelon I could find. Mama said when we got home, we could spit the seeds off of the front porch. See if we could hit any Baptists. When she said that she laughed, and she almost laughed and laughed.

I wasn’t able to think about snowballs or textile factories on the way home. I fell asleep lying down on the backseat. Mama always let me lie down and just put the seat belt around my waist if we were on the highway.

Mama didn't cry when she brought in the mail at home. She didn't look very very happy like the folks in the posters at the family welfare office, but she didn't cry, either. She rested the bills and her purse on the kitchen counter, and grabbed a knife from the utensils drawer.

"You want some watermelon now, sugar?" She penetrated the green skin with one long cut. Pink juice dribbled out from the incision.

"I'll be right there. I gotta take care of something first." I ran to my room and stepped over to the old tropical fish aquarium. Oroville was sunbathing on the multicolored gravel. "Are you ready to go home, buddy?"

Oroville gazed up at me, and that faraway look in his eyes was slowly receding and becoming closer and closer. "I can't wait to see Sadie and my mama." He smiled, although most folks probably couldn't discern a lizard smile.

I cupped Oroville in my right hand and walked him to the back porch. I flattened my palm to the ground. "Bye, Oroville. See ya around."

He looked over his shoulder at me. "I'll stop by your window and say hi." Then he scampered off under the house.

"Ruthie, are you coming? Your slice is ready."

"Be right there, Mama." I returned to my room and stood in front of the old tropical fish aquarium. I pulled the brown magic money out of my pocket and set it down in the aquarium next to the piece of driftwood that Daddy found on Jekyll Island, the weekend before I started kindergarten. Then I turned on my heel and skipped out to the front porch to eat watermelon and spit the seeds at Baptists with Mama.

Chapter 3: At Least Two Hundred a Minute

“You really ought to go to the dentist, you know.”

Sonora’s finger was characteristically in her mouth, shoved all the way back on the left and massaging her gums. “Yeah, yeah, I know.” She flipped through the *Sun* and swallowed her Instant Breakfast through a bendy straw. There wasn’t even one article on the weekend’s shower. “I can’t believe there’s nothing about the Geminids.”

“I’m just saying ...” Nate gulped loudly as he downed his coffee. Sonora glanced up from the paper. It was odd seeing Nate in the dusty sunlight coming in the east windows of her apartment. But it was Friday, the day he had class in the morning. She hated that he slept until noon every other day of the week. Sonora didn’t care that Nate was lazy. Much to her chagrin she had gotten used to that, or just overlooked it, she wasn’t sure which. But if they stayed at her place and he sleepy late, it meant that she couldn’t make the bed until after she got home that evening, and she’d spend the entire day struggling with coefficient linear equations, tormented by the bunched-up sheets at home mocking her.

“You know I don’t have insurance, Nate.” Sonora sipped again. She hadn’t eaten her meals with knives or forks in weeks. Her latest strategy was to fix her Instant Breakfast a half hour before she was ready to eat it, and let it sit on the table, allowing the beverage to warm to room temperature, while she read the paper in the

interim. Newsprint blackened her hand as she smeared the local news shut. “At least two hundred an hour, it’s going to be great.”

“What is going to be great?”

“*Nate*. You still haven’t asked to leave early tonight, have you?” He knew about the shower. He was supposed to have asked for that night off weeks ago. The year before Sonora had been sick during the Geminids. That and the sudden cold snap had prevented her from seeing any meteors. The year before that, the skies had been overcast all night long.

Nate grinned. He looked ten years old when he grinned like that. Sonora had fallen in love with that grin because she thought he only *looked* ten years old when he grinned like that. “Don’t worry, babe. I’ve got it all under control.”

Sonora seized her jaw with her hand. That term of endearment made her cringe. She trembled a moment until the acuteness relented. Nate massaged her shoulders. It was nice to have someone there to massage her shoulders.

“You could just go over to Shands, you know. The dental school, their students do work on you for free.” Nate shuffled around to face Sonora. He had a limp, supposedly from a track injury in high school: an unfortunate encounter with a hurdle.

“Maybe I could pull it. I’ve read *Tom Sawyer*.”

“That’s ridiculous.” He leaned over the table and moved in to kiss her. “Maybe I could just take care of it for you.” Sonora brushed his lips with hers and returned to her straw. Her breakfast was nice and lukewarm.

“It’s been two weeks.”

“You’re keeping track?” *Ow!* Sonora clutched her cheek. She never knew which would be worse: the spasms or the continuous dull pain. Usually it was whichever she was experiencing while trying to decide.

“No, I’m just saying ...”

“Nate, I don’t think that’s a record.”

“But it’s been two weeks. I really need to-“

“Then go take care of it yourself.” She waved her hand at the bathroom as she finished her breakfast. *Sluuuuuurp!* The last few sips were the toughest, but she was committed to the straw. “Or you can stay here, if you prefer. Besides, I have to get over to campus. Professor Manguson wants to see me.”

Even though Bryant Hall wasn’t on the close side of campus, it only took Sonora twenty minutes to ride her bike there from Nate’s place. Fifteen from her own. She hit a red light at West 6th. Sonora hid from the sun in the shadow of the Seagle Building. It was ten o’clock, Sonora could tell, from where the building’s shadow struck the road from thirteen stories above. Tallest building in town. Folks said that during World War II, a government espionage unit was stationed on the top floor. Now there was a For Lease sign in the ground floor window. Sonora turned from the Seagle Building to the intersection. Still red. The remains of a tabby cat were continuing to meld with the asphalt. Sonora had been observing its progress for the past several weeks. When she first spotted the remains, it was a full cat body, simply inert on the part of the road where the railway used to run. At first Sonora panicked, convinced it was Module, her cat. But Module would have been back at her parents’ house and he had died four years ago from cancer. Sonora exhaled relief

and was thankful that her cat was already dead. As the days passed, the body slowly deflated until it was barely a raised surface of the asphalt in the shape of a cat. The light changed to green.

Professor Manguson wanted to discuss Sonora's requirements for graduation.

"You're ahead of schedule in terms of astronomy classes. Satisfactory grades there, as well. But you are lacking several of the necessary math and physics courses."

One of Sonora's classmates, April Culpepper, took Linear Algebra as an elective. She sat next to Sonora in a few classes, for alphabetical purposes, and talked about combinatorial theory and Bernoulli's theorem as she tap tap tapped away at her graphing calculator. Sonora interpreted the noise as an extraterrestrial message that only she could interpret.

"You know, Georg Cantor said that 'the essence of mathematics ... resides in its freedom'." Tap tap taptaptap tap: *Don't worry about April, she is not chosen. She only sees life in zeroes and ones.*

"Who's Georg Cantor?"

April returned to the real world and stared at Sonora. "Oh, that's right, you haven't even taken Diffy Q yet."

"One of the math requirements that you've missed is Differential Equations. I don't know how you failed to take that, astronomy majors are supposed to enroll in that course during their junior year. Aren't you a fifth year senior now?"

"I like to learn."

“Well, you must register for that course this spring, or ...” Professor Manguson shuffled through the papers in Sonora’s file. Nate wouldn’t admit that his limp was artifice. He shuffled around, tenuously forcing his left foot back. His limp was one of the reasons Sonora had been attracted to Nate. It was alluring to have a disfiguring past. One week last year he was bedridden, a terrible flu that made him febrile and delirious for seven straight days. He was so dehydrated and famished that he didn’t once use the toilet. On the eighth day, Sonora fixed her signature beans. The aroma from the stovetop edged around the refrigerator, through the kitchen doorway, across the living room, under the bedroom door and up and over into Nate’s stuffy nostrils. He perked up instantly and ate. When he discarded the sweat-soaked afghan and comforter and electric blanket (no, Nate, your sweat will not cause the electric blanket to short circuit and electrocute you), Sonora was taking his dishes back to the kitchen. A spoon fell to the floor. As she bent down to retrieve it, she saw, upside down and between her legs, Nate place all his weight on his left foot to stand. He didn’t fall or tremble or shake. Sonora had continued on to the kitchen and washed the dishes.

“You need to complete your lower level instruction. All graduating seniors have to this month. I have an introductory course, just general astronomy. I’ll pencil you in to come and teach the class on Monday.” Professor Manguson withdrew his day planner from his vest pocket and penciled Sonora in. “We’ll be discussing stellar evolution.”

“Monday? Are you kidding?” She hadn’t even realized her toothache had subsided until it returned right then.

“This works out well. My wife and I are going up to Augusta this weekend, get a little golfing in. Now we’ll be able to stay an extra day.”

“How’s the light pollution up there?” Sonora could feel her heart beat in her tooth.

“What?”

“The Geminids.” For a moment, Sonora couldn’t perceive her toothache. “There’s this myth, or urban legend, or stellar legend, I suppose, that there’s always a peak moment during the meteor shower, when it’s possible to see at least two hundred a minute. Isn’t that incredible?” Professor Manguson stared at Sonora, the way Nate stared at her when she rambled on about stars. “Will you be able to watch them?”

“Sonora, I hate to sound like a cliché, but when you’ve been in this field for as long as I have, if you’ve seen one meteor, you’ve probably stayed up too late and stood out too long in the cold.”

Sonora had befriended Ottoman during the first semester of her freshman year. It was the day of her first astronomy class ever. The Space Sciences building was new to Sonora. Her class was on the fourth floor. She stumbled into the lobby and cringed when she saw the Out-of-Order sign on the elevator doors. She panted and sweat dribbled into her open mouth.

“It’d do you good to climb those stairs.” An albino janitor was dunking his mop into a bucket and then sloshing it around on the terrazzo floor.

“I’m late. I didn’t realize there was a building called *Bryan* Hall. No ‘t’. I just ran over here from there.”

“And maybe if you get used to taking the stairs, you won’t be so out of breath next time.” He blinked his pale eyelids over his pink nictitating eyes. He looked like an alien. Sonora liked that. His alabaster arm directed her to the stairwell.

She descended those same stairs an hour later surrounded by classmates, April Culpepper and Warren Yulee and Jasper MacLeod, and others who knew all about resonance and linear independence. They scoffed at the sticker on Sonora’s notebook, one of her prized possessions, the sticker that declared: Astronomers Do It At Night. “Real mature, Sonoma.” April Culpepper passed a note the next class to Jasper MacLeod: “Those who can’t do put bumper stickers about it on their binders.” Sonora descended the stairs with those physics whizzes, she exited the building and crossed the Plaza with them, but Ottoman the albino janitor could tell she was different.

“Did you watch *Voyager* last night?” His voice in Sonora’s ear was as ashen as his skin.

Sonora clasped her hands to her chest. She grinned and squeezed his arm, the one that was powering a duster. Flecks of his skin, miniscule stars, lifted off his arm, twinkled in the overhead fluorescence then were vacuumed away into the air conditioner vents. “You *do* understand.”

Over the past four years the marble stairs of Bryant Hall had defined her calf muscles. When she did well on an exam Sonora took the stairs two at a time. She trudged down from Professor Manguson’s office. Ottoman was cleaning the lobby windows. His mop leaned against the elevator wall. Sonora tiptoed across the shining floor to the windows.

“How’s Nate doing, Sonora?”

Nate. Her boyfriend, Nate. “Oh, he’s fine.”

“What’s he up to these days?”

Sonora shrugged her shoulders. “I have to teach a class on Monday. General astronomy. Freshmen.” She sniffed Ottoman’s window cleanser spray. Orange blossoms and Nate forgetting her birthday.

“Lucky them.” Ottoman smiled. Sonora rolled her eyes. Ottoman gripped her shoulders and forced her eyes to roll back and make contact with his. “You’re not just proofs and figures in a lecture-hall.” He released her,

Sonora unwrapped a piece of dental gum and offered it to Ottoman. He refused. She positioned it in her mouth, between safe teeth, and gingerly churned it soft. She waved goodbye to Ottoman and pondered stellar evolution. She knew the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram, knew all about the sequencing of stars and red giants and white dwarfs, but she didn’t understand the science behind it. And she had no idea how to explain it.

Yellow leaves crunched under Sonora’s boots as she shuffled down the curb of Stadium Drive. From high above the carillon chimes rang Christmas carols across campus. It was pleasant, but too festive to hear the bell tower resonate holiday music. A stab of pain besieged Sonora’s tooth. She clenched her jaw and doubled over, kneeling in on the curb. She peeked up at the sky and swore she saw faint streaks of light against the blue. When the blow had waned to mild discomfort, Sonora put on her headphones and listened to Holst as she continued her walk to Shands. It was a blustery day, even cold enough to warrant a sweater or coat, neither of which Sonora

had brought with her. She enfolded her arms around her body and walked downhill to the hospital. Couples passed: girls dressed in argyle sweaters and tweed hats holding gloved hands with boys in plaid scarves and leather jackets. Sonora let her arm fall to her side and could feel Nate's fingers entangle hers.

At the end of Newell Road, Sonora approached the hospital parking lot. *Whiiiiirrrrhhh! CRUNCH! Whiiiiirrrrhhh!* The chorus of drills and scalpels and calipers heralded her arrival. She fled the lot and sought refuge at Lake Alice. Squatting on the bank of the lake, Sonora observed the alligators warming themselves on the small island in the water. Their toothaches must be excruciating, those teeth so long. Sonora could see their dinosaur ancestors in those sunbathing alligators, those dinosaur ancestors who had been around when the giant meteor struck thousands of years ago and obliterated them all. The toothaches would be tolerable, just to be able to see that ball of rock and fire blaze though the sky.

There was a message on Sonora's answering machine when she returned home. Nate had been able to get off early, see, he *did* have it under control, and could she pick him up at eight. Sonora located a box of matches and, *shhhhhhhoooo!*, started up the heater. Nate had always done that job, Sonora grew up an electric girl, until one day last winter when she stopped to watch him ignite the pilot light. Inside that little space heater was the birth of a stellar giant. A burst of blue then orange flame and the reddening of the coils that followed. Sonora witnessed the protostar of the match flame expand and expand becoming denser and hotter to engulf and light the heating coils in a visible moment of nuclear fusion. After that random day, no one but Sonora would be responsible for generating supernovae in her house.

Sonora couldn't remember how she met Nate. She couldn't remember how he began starting up her heater, either. Their relationship mirrored the Big Bang. One day it just came into being with no knowledge of any universes or memories preceding it. When they went to parties, a situation they rarely found themselves in now that the few friends Sonora made at college had graduated last year, on time, people would inquire how they got together, them, nateandsonora. Nate would wrap his arm around Sonora's waist and squeeze her side and recount an anecdote about a hot chocolate machine out-of-order in the engineering building. Sonora would wiggle a little in his clutch and stare out the window at the quarter moon. Then Nate would punctuate his story with a guffaw, and, he wouldn't be a stranger anymore, so, Sonora, in turn, would laugh.

At a quarter of seven, Sonora headed out to the mall. Hours ago she had loaded the car with blankets and two folding chairs, with her red light flashlight and her promotional orange and blue opera glasses she received as one of the first one hundred attendees at a Gators volleyball game last season. A few months before that game, Sonora was out in the front yard, tracking the Hale-Bopp. She lived on the southeast side of town, and the city rarely ever came out there to replace street lamps. There weren't any trees in her front yard, either. Sonora tracked the comet through her Bulovas, the binoculars her parents had given her for her high school graduation. They were good, sturdy stargazing binoculars, light enough to handle without a tripod and powerful enough to clearly detect satellites and planets. Sonora's peripheral vision was blinded by the binoculars' rubber eyecups suctioned to her face. She didn't notice Nate's presence until he snaked his arms around her torso and kissed her

neck. Abruptly Sonora was whisked back to Earth. She lowered her binoculars and secured them in their case. Nate pried the case from her hands and rested it on her car hood. Then he kissed Sonora. Nate was trying to be romantic, he was trying to be spontaneous, and Sonora appreciated his endeavor and succumbed to his embrace. She passionately kissed him.. She was there, in his arms, in their kiss, until THUD!, she opened her eyes and saw her binoculars case on the driveway Nate didn't know Sonora's didn't have a hard binoculars case, or, if he did, he didn't realize the implications of setting a not hard binoculars case on a not level car hood.

Sonora parked outside the north mall entrance and reviewed her general astronomy textbook chapter on stellar evolution. The book opened to the chapter on moon phases and tides. Sonora sighed, and then, did laugh, when she spotted doodled hearts and Nate's scripted name in the margins. She flipped to stellar evolution. Sonora could see the progression of the stars and could easily envision the Sun shrinking to a white dwarf, but how to explain it? Stellar evolution was like grammar or love, it just *was*. Explaining the scientific reasoning wouldn't be a problem for April Culpepper or Warren Yulee. On the first day of optics last term, the students shared what drew them to astronomy. Furthering of science. Medical possibilities in space. Commercial potential of other worlds. Sonora quoted Walt Whitman. "I like to look up in perfect silence at the stars." Warren Yulee told Sonora that with a wishy-washy answer like that, she'd be better suited for a career in astrology.

It was ten past eight, so Sonora slammed the textbook shut and then slammed the car door shut and marched to the sporting goods store where Nate worked nights. On weekends he worked at the pet shop across from the food court. When Sonora

entered the store, Nate was sliding a new pair of cleats on a little boy's feet. Nate spotted Sonora and grinned, the same grin that the little boy wore a moment later when he jumped up and down in his cleats. Nate raised his finger at Sonora. One minute, I swear. Sonora wedged her hand in between the throng of discounted football jerseys commemorating the previous year's national championship. Seventy-five percent off. The televisions above the cash registers were broadcasting a basketball game. Sonora squinted. Orange and blue stripes lined the floorboards. A home game. She passed the O'Connell Center on her way home from the observatory, where she volunteered most Saturday nights. Hearing the cheers and applause emanating from the gymnasium, the white biosphere, Sonora wondered if any of those fans knew there was an observatory just at the bottom of the hill where anyone could look at Jupiter's satellites and Saturn's rings. Nate never remembered. Sonora lamented the fact that they didn't know and, at the same time, was glad they were at the basketball game, instead.

“It's a conference game tonight.”

“What?” Sonora withdrew her hand from the pile of jerseys that had been trying to consume it. She stuffed her hand in her coat pocket and saw Nate over her shoulder.

“Yeah, it was kinda hard to get Ray to let me go early.” Nate waved goodbye to Ray, the manager, who was juggling a tennis racket and a hockey stick, as he ushered Sonora out of the store. “What a goofball. But, yeah, all the other guys are at the game. So I'm gonna pick up one of Stan's shifts next week, but I'll do it gladly

for you, babe.” Sonora let Nate kiss her cheek. He said he’d ask for the night off three weeks ago. “Now let’s go watch some shooting stars!”

Nate tuned Sonora’s car radio to the basketball game. Sonora had planned to thematically listen to “The Planets”. Dribbling and screaming and talk of Razorbacks and Gators on too-loud AM radio were no way to launch the evening. She stared at the very clear dark sky through the windshield and decided to not risk an argument that would puncture her mood.

When they reached Payne’s Prairie, Sonora was thankful once more that in Gainesville, like in most towns, sports took precedence over astronomy. There were few cars alongside the road that bisected the prairie, some family night station wagons and a couple of sedans belonging to local amateurs who frequented the star parties that were advertised in the back of magazines.

“Now I brought blankets and coffee. I think we’ll be warm enough. There’s a path over there that leads to a clearing. It doesn’t look like anyone else has found it.”

Nate’s seatbelt was still buckled. “Do you mind if I stay in the car? Just until half-time? It’s a really good game. And you don’t need me out there anyway, do you, babe?”

Sonora snatched the flannel blankets and hoisted her backpack over her shoulder. The invisible new moon obscured the path, but Sonora used her red flashlight to guide the way. She was walking through a hammock, canopied by spindly mangrove branches. The marsh under her feet was thick and gave way at each step. Sonora pushed through hammock and a few minutes later arrived at the clearing. There was no one else on the flat land. Sonora was at the edge of a dry

savannah and there were no lights or people to disturb her. She lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes. When she reopened them she couldn't see the prairie grasses surrounding her or hear the families and local amateurs positioned beside the road. She was hovering above the ground, just her and the sky, nothing else. Little points of light raced across the sky, streaming from zenith to horizon. *Whish! Whish! Whish!* Sonora started counting them, then quickly abandoned quantification. It was better to watch. *Whish! Whish! Whish!* Sonora could see the comet from which those meteors originated and those little fragments of rock following the comet, coursing around the sun.

“SONORA!”

Her body slammed back to Earth. The collision provoked her toothache. She fingered her gums.

“SONORA!”

“Nate, I'm over here!”

“SONORA, I CAN'T SEE YOU!” Impetuously a beam of white light erupted from the hammock. It blinded Sonora. She blinked repeatedly and let her eyes widen. Even after that she could barely see any meteors above.

“Nate, turn that thing off!”

He stumbled into the clearing. Sonora seized his flashlight and shut it off. *“You can only use red light.”* She waved his dormant flashlight above her head. *“This messes up eyesight.”*

“Sorry, babe. Do we have to whisper?” Nate plopped down on the blanket she'd set up. “So, where's the show?”

Sonora sat next to him. Sometimes his arm was around her, sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes he slurped coffee. Sometimes he played with the opera glasses that, besides, were no use to her. He enjoyed looking at her through the opposite lenses. Sometimes he put on his coat, sometimes he took it off. Sonora sat next to him and admired the sky.

“Hey, babe ...”

BAM! Back to Earth, again. “*What is it, Nate?*”

“I need to ask you something.”

Sonora listened to him with her ears and surveyed the skies with her eyes. The meteors were increasing in quantity and intensity. She knew any moment now would be that flash of brilliance, that peak moment of the shower where the sky lit up all at once.

“*Yes, Nate? What is it?*”

Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish!

Nate jostled Sonora. “Look at me, this is important.”

Sonora forsook the Geminids, for a moment, to look at her boyfriend. He was trembling. Seeing him tremble reminded her of her toothache. She felt a sharp pang in her mouth and she began to tremble too.

“We’ve been going out for a long time now ... and, since you’re graduating in the spring, well ... I don’t want to lose you, babe, I really don’t, so I ... I was wondering ...” Nate produced a black velvet box from his coat pocket. The hatch opened and inside was a ring. Sonora didn’t know what kind of ring, but it was shiny and sparkled.

Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish!
Whish!

Sonora turned her head skyward. Nate used his hands to guide her gaze back to him. He held her face. *Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish!*
Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! "... if you'll marry me." *Whish! Whish!*
Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish!
Whish!

Excited voices traveled across the prairie:

"Wow, that was incredible!"

"Did you see that?"

"Man, the Fourth of July is the pits!"

"At least two hundred at once, holy ..."

Sonora rose and saw a handful of meteors dash across the darkness. "I missed the peak."

"So, what do you think?"

"I think this is horrible. I missed the peak! I missed the peak."

"Babe, my question. What do you think, about marrying me?"

Sonora's tooth burned and charred her entire body. She fell to her knees, inert on the grass. With determination she lifted her hand, accessed her tooth and massaged her gums. Her finger pressed through skin, to enamel and loosened the tooth. Without pain or blood, the tooth was dislodged. Sonora removed her saliva-covered fingers from her mouth and examined the tooth that lay in her palm. It wasn't enamel at all, but gray and resembled the pieces that were on display, behind

Plexiglass shields in the geology department. Sonora squinted and realized it wasn't a tooth at all, but a meteorite, a stony-iron meteorite, one of the rarest of all. Her mouth and her entire body broke free.

“C'mon, babe, I'm getting worried. You still haven't answered me.”

Sonora glanced at Nate across the blanket. She stood and pocketed her red flashlight and field guide. “I hate it that you call me that.”

“I'm sorry, Sonora.” He was trembling. She was not.

“I bet one of those families can give you a ride home.” She turned and disappeared into the hammock. The quagmire was gone, and Sonora passed through waving prairie grasses. Maybe April Culpepper and Warren Yulee could explain the physics and mathematics behind stellar evolution. Maybe Sonora couldn't. She really didn't care. She could identify when she saw it, and when she didn't. She had her own meteorite to bring in for show-and-tell on Monday.

Chapter 4: Wendy Gildermeister and the Christmas Tree

The lady was dressed in peach. Peach jacket, peach skirt, crossed legs, peach pumps. Actually the shoes were more a salmon color. She gnawed at the end of a pencil, FaberCastell, yellow, there was no eraser anymore, and tapped her fingernails, unpainted but manicured, on the yellow legal pad, college ruled, that rested on her lap.

“How about some music? Maybe that will help us talk.” She pressed a button on a remote control and classical music began to emanate from the shelf system compact disc player across the room. It was positioned beside the gas fireplace, which had likewise been activated by the same remote control. The gas fireplace was below the faux antique pendulum clock. Half past four. The lady in peach rested both heels on the carpet, gray, closed loop, wall-to-wall, and leaned in towards her client. “Would you like something to drink? Juice or water?”

Wendy Gildermeister nodded. “May I have a cappuccino?”

“Cappuccino? I think you should wait until you’re at least twelve before you start drinking coffee, don’t you?” She threw her head back, slightly, and laughed.

“I have been drinking cappuccino since I was seven. Also, I am not sure if I would really call cappuccino ‘coffee’. It *is* made from steamed coffee, and then combined with steamed milk, but the result is quite different than ordinary coffee.”

“Well, then, how about lemonade?” The lady in peach reached into a cooler beside the coffee table and extracted a bottle of lemonade. Wendy Gildermeister set the bottle on the floor beside her satchel, gorged with books: a couple novels, her father’s childhood Hammond atlas, a Jacques Prévert collection, and a ratty old French dictionary *sans couverture* and missing several pages of M’s. Textbooks remained in her cubby at school. Wendy Gildermeister’s parents were always urging her to leave the other books at school and bring her textbooks home.

“Now, Wendy Gildermeister, you do know why your parents want you to come here, don’t you?”

Wendy Gildermeister shrugged her shoulder and withdrew to the window. It had just started to snow. She twisted her right thumb. This was the coldest and fastest winter she could ever remember. The flurries bounced down toward the street, passing the bells and angels and snowflakes and candy canes attached to the lampposts. On Friday Wendy Gildermeister woke up early, as she did every year on the day after Thanksgiving, and sneaked out of the house and ran through the ferns in the vacant lot across the street, which was not a vacant lot at all, but a dense forest, her forest, of magnolias and live oaks and acacias, and down to the end of NE 4th Street, her street, where she could see the holiday decorations downtown. The downtown Christmas decorations were tradition. They returned every year. Her thumb cracked with another twist. She loved holiday decorations. She hated Debussy. All that plunking up and down on the piano keys, and the music was so slow, it put her to sleep. Not in a good way.

“I know you heard me, Wendy Gildermeister.” The lady in peach leaned back in her leather chair, it was tan and appeared soft, probably from the hide of an antelope or an impala from Zimbabwe. The July 1983 *National Geographic* featured an article on impala poaching in Africa and how their hides were used to upholster chairs sold by Ethan Allen and Pier 1. The type of chairs often purchased by architects and lawyers and pediatric neurologists to furnish their offices.

Wendy Gildermeister shrugged again and made eye contact with the lady in peach. She extended her thumb as far as she could from her hand. “My parents are concerned.”

“Do you know what they are concerned about?”

The music reached the crescendo in “Prelude to the Afternoon of the Faun”. The lady in peach reached for the remote control again and lowered the volume. One lousy climax in the whole piece. Bach was full of crescendos. Up and up and up and louder and finally BAM! and down and then it repeated itself all over again. Wendy Gildermeister loved the repetitions of the Brandenburg Concertos: triplets and quarter-notes and four-four time. Debussy was easy and flat and monotonous. Debussy was not for Wendy Gildermeister.

“Yes. They think that there is something wrong with me.” Wendy Gildermeister twisted and cracked her right thumb, again. Andrew was double-jointed. He could perform amazing feats with his fingers and thumbs, twist and extend them so it looked like his bones were about to snap. The kids at school called him circus freak. Andrew loved that. When the kids at school called Wendy

Gildermeister circus freak it was for different reasons. She was convinced that, with practice, one day she could force her thumb to be double-jointed, too.

The telephone on the coffee table rang. The lady in peach rolled her eyes and smiled at Wendy Gildermeister, raised her right index finger, one moment, please. “Barbara, what is this, I’m in the middle of a session ... Yes, yes ... That can wait until I’m finished. Please don’t interrupt again.” She returned to Wendy Gildermeister. “That’s what I’m here to help you figure out.” The lady in peach sipped her coffee out of a purple Northwestern mug. Northwestern was in the Big Ten. Karen wanted to go to Indiana, music school, she was waiting to hear back from them, any day now. Unless she didn’t get a scholarship, a full-ride. Karen played the oboe and sometimes the cello. Andrew played the flute. Teachers were always shocked that Wendy Gildermeister didn’t play any instruments, children like you can usually play an entire piano piece by ear. But no one played the clavichord anymore. “Wendy Gildermeister, try to listen to me, alright? Now, why don’t you tell me about your friends at school ...”

The snow continued to fall outside. The flakes didn’t so much fall as dance, really dance: dropping a few inches and then springing back up again, over and over, until finally one solo flake reached the ground and joined the white mass chorus line on the sidewalk. Last year Wendy Gildermeister and Gabbie Bell attended the Christmas assembly of the *Nutcracker*. It was a puppet show and all of the characters were marionettes, legs and arms dropping and springing back up again in tune to the music. Tchaikovsky was an acquired taste. Wendy Gildermeister would readily admit that Bach was easily accessible, but he wrote Christmas sonatas and oratorios,

too. A light breeze blew the snow beyond the window and the flakes began to fall side-to-side. Wendy Gildermeister heard “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” as the winter scene’s soundtrack.

“Wendy Gildermeister, can you look at me, please? I’d like to know about your friends, at school.”

Wendy Gildermeister abandoned the Bach snowfall symphony outside. The players exited the orchestra pit. She regarded the lady in peach. “Gabbie Bell.”

“Who is Gabbie Bell?”

“My best friend.” Wendy Gildermeister flexed her left thumb. Maybe it could do the trick. “She moved, in August. Her father got transferred to Belgium. He is a scientist, solar power. You know it is when panels on roofs of buildings collect sunlight and convert-“

“I know what solar power is.”

“- into energy. It is good for the environment. We write letters to each other in French.”

“I didn’t know you could speak French.” The lady in peach cupped her chin in her hand and arched one eyebrow over her tortoise-framed glasses. Skeptic.

“Bien sûr. C’est une langue très simple à apprendre. Je m’a l’appris. Vous parlez français, aussi, n’est-pas?”

The lady in peach’s eyebrow resumed its at-ease position. “I’m not sure what you just said, Wendy Gildermeister. I only speak English. Your words were quite impressive nonetheless. But tell me more about your best friend, Gabbie Bell. You must have been sad when she left.”

Wendy Gildermeister stared at the gas fireplace. She loved it when her father would light a fire in their wood-burning fireplace. He loved lighting fires. He said there was an art to lighting the perfect fire. They used to buy special logs that contained chemicals that made the flames turn iridescent colors when ablaze. Not anymore. Lately they didn't even buy regular logs. Electric heat is always cheaper. "We used to play together all the time. We built train sets and used my sister Karen's telescope to watch meteor showers, the Leonids were the best, and just look at simple objects, like Venus and the Galilean moons and the stars. We saw Halley's Comet a few years ago. That was fantastic."

"But now Gabbie isn't around anymore. How does that make you feel?"

"She moved, in August. Her father was transferred to Belgium."

"Are you friends with any of the other kids in school?"

Wendy Gildermeister stared at the lady in peach. Direct eye contact. Nothing. The faux antique pendulum clock chimed. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Wendy Gildermeister retrieved her satchel from the carpet and got to her feet.

"Yes, that is all the time we have for now." The lady in peach stood to escort Wendy Gildermeister out, but Wendy Gildermeister had already exited the room. The office door was ajar, and Wendy Gildermeister's mother was in the the waiting room. "Mrs. Gildermeister?"

"Yes, Doctor, hello. How did the session go?"

"Well, your daughter is reluctant to talk, but that's expected." Wendy Gildermeister occupied one of the waiting room chairs, not soft impala hide leather,

bending her thumb and reading. *Jane Eyre*. “But I think we’ll be able to make a good deal of progress in the coming months. Is this a good time for you?”

“Yes, this works fine. And the sessions are covered?”

“Yes. And they’ve decided to waive the office fee.” The lady in peach examined Wendy Gildermeister and cocked her head. “You’ve had her I.Q. tested?”

“She’s in gifted.”

“Classic symptom of the disorder. There’s no mistaking that that’s what this is.” The lady in peach eyed Wendy Gildermeister again. “There’s no danger of her becoming violent, either to herself or others. Fortunately that’s not one of her symptoms. However, I think without treatment she will just continue to withdraw further and further into her imagination.”

“It’s gotten worse since the beginning of this school year.” Wendy Gildermeister’s mother paused. “I’m sorry. Treatment in addition to therapy, right? You were talking about medication earlier.”

“Of course.” The lady in peach reached for the pad in her pocket. She scribbled down a prescription and handed it to Wendy Gildermeister’s mother. “Dextrophenidate. It’s a standard medication for this disorder. Let’s start her out at one pill day. In a few weeks we’ll discuss if we need to increase the dosage.”

“Dextro ... is that available in a generic drug? Do you know?”

The lady in peach shrugged off the question.

“Well, thank you, Doctor.” Wendy Gildermeister’s mother squeezed her daughter’s hand. “Are you ready, sweetie?” She turned back to the lady in peach. “We’ll see you next week.”

“Yes. It’s unfortunate that her best friend moved away. I’m sure working through that loss will be the first step in the right direction.”

“Best friend?”

“Best friend. Gabbie Bell.”

Wendy Gildermeister’s mother’s smile collapsed. She would have to provide explanations to the lady in peach. This doctor couldn’t help her daughter. She stepped towards the lady in peach and whispered, ineffectively: “Doctor, there is no best friend. Gabbie Bell is imaginary.”

Wendy Gildermeister and her mother walked through the snow shower to the station wagon. Yellow paint, brown wood paneling, honor roll and basketball and orchestra bumper stickers. “So the doctor seems nice, doesn’t she?”

Wendy Gildermeister shrugged her shoulders. Snowflakes landed on her sweater. The one on her shoulder: that was Odile, gray and misshapen.

“I have a good feeling about her. I think she’ll be able to help. Maybe we can finally get those grades up.”

The snowflake that was perched on Wendy Gildermeister’s elbow was Prince Ziegfried, noble and ignorant. Odette settled on Wendy Gildermeister’s forearm, beside her tragically destined love.

“Did you have a tough day at school? Andrew told me some of the kids weren’t being too nice to you during recess. Because you were reading.”

Wendy Gildermeister didn’t know what her mother was talking about. Recess had been spent with Bertha in the attic, fuming at Rochester for attending to his orphaned governess, and not her. And scouring the sky for signs of snow. She found

none then, but now Wendy Gildermeister's sweater was covered with frozen swans and maidens and ballgoers.

They reached the car. Andrew and Karen were waiting inside. He was in the backseat, wearing his old Chuck Taylors, green, laces wrapped tight around his ankles. She was in the front seat, penciling notes on sheet music. Wendy Gildermeister sat next to her brother and started reading.

"Why don't you ever wear a coat? Mom, why don't you ever make her wear a coat? She's gotten my jersey all wet!"

"Stay in your lane, *person!*" Wendy Gildermeister's mother swerved the steering wheel to the left. "What, Andrew?"

"God, Andrew, don't blame her. It's just *your* sweat. If I had my own car I wouldn't have to ride home everyday with you. Mom, a car would make a nice Christmas present. Or I could even wait for graduation. Who needs a new dictionary?"

Wendy Gildermeister peeked up from Thornfield Hall. She did. But Wendy Gildermeister's mother just eyed her eldest daughter and sighed. "You know, Karen, I think we'll be getting a second car before you get your own. And that won't even be anytime soon."

Karen squeezed her mother's hand. "Sorry, Mom."

"Why doesn't you *boyfriend* have a car?" Andrew snickered. "Kyle's older brother is a year younger than Jake, and even *he* has a car. And not just any car, a Carmen *Gia*."

“Yeah, a 1968 Carmen Gia. That thing barely runs. Sierra Finnegan had to get eight stitches in her thigh because of that trim sticking out of the side. Anyway, Jake is saving up for one. God, he’s at Leonardo’s all the time. And he gets home covered in pizza sauce. I mean, I’m glad he’s working-“

Wendy Gildermeister screamed and cut her sister off. “BARBARA, I’M IN THE MIDDLE OF A SESSION!”

Andrew smirked at Wendy Gildermeister. “You are so weird. I know you do it on purpose. Mom, I can’t believe that you’re wasting money on therapy for her.” He raised his hightops. “You know I can’t play in these things.”

Karen scowled at Andrew. “The appointments are free, bonehead. *You’re* the one who *really* needs therapy. And, anyway, Mom, I’m not so sure about what this doctor says. In psychology today Mr. Mackenzie was telling us that there are a lot of misdiagnoses these days because psychiatrists are so afraid they’ll miss a diagnosis, so they just go ahead and prescribe medication for everything. Like manic depression. Everyone is bipolar these days.”

Wendy Gildermeister’s mother shook her head. “We’re not talking about manic depression, Karen.”

“Well, still, I’m not sure I trust it.”

Andrew laughed. “I think *she* wants the drugs.”

Karen reached into the backseat and shoved Andrew. She looked at Wendy Gildermeister and winked. “*Who’s peeking out from under a stairway, calling a name that lighter than air ...* When we picked him up from practice, he was so sweaty, he just stunk up the car. We had to stop and get air freshener and fumigate.”

Andrew hit science against the head with his science folder. “Band nerd!”

Wendy Gildermeister winked, double winked, at her sister and giggled. Karen winked twice back. “There’s supposed to be a foot of snow tonight. Maybe we won’t have school tomorrow ... *who’s bending down to give me a rainbow, everyone knows it’s Wendy.*”

The lady in peach’s office was downtown, so it didn’t take long for Wendy Gildermeister and her family to drive home. They lived in an older section of town, away from campus, called historic; carriage step-down blocks in sidewalks, the duckpond, neighborhood preservation newsletter, century-old initials carved into oak tree trunks. Nobody even lived down in the southern part of the state a hundred years ago. The shingled roofs were lined with Christmas lights: colored, white, flashing. Candles, real-live candles, sat on the ledges of bay windows. Fire hazards. The station wagon pulled up to Wendy Gildermeister’s house. Wendy Gildermeister’s mother parked on the street. Since Wendy Gildermeister’s father started staying home all day long, he set up his train set in the garage. The garage was also filled with remnants of Wendy Gildermeister’s father’s other projects: an ax, chicken wire, scarecrows, and whirligigs. Wendy Gildermeister opened the car door. The vacant lot across the street was no longer vacant. It was occupied by rows and rows of Christmas trees.

“What’s that?”

Wendy Gildermeister’s mother looked over her shoulder and smiled. “There’s been talk about that Christmas tree lot going up for weeks now. I think Stan Buford’s going to run it. There was a write-up about it in last week’s newsletter.”

Wendy Gildermeister's mother actually did see the trees there. "Looks like they finally did it. You never know what'll sprout up while you're away from home."

They went inside the house.

"MOM! DAD!" Karen stood at the mailbox, shaking, clutching an envelope, barley clutching it her hand shaking so much, more like dangling it.

Wendy Gildermeister's emerged from the house. No suit, just jeans, yard work jeans, and a paint-splattered Gators t-shirt. Suits hadn't been around for months, and ties, ties even longer. "What is it, Karen? Is everything okay?"

Karen waved the envelope high above her head. It nearly grazed the telephone wires above. "Indiana! It's from Indiana. I ... I don't know if I can open it."

Wendy Gildermeister's mother followed her husband down to the mailbox. She clasped her eldest daughter's free hand. "Would you like me to, sweetie?"

Wendy Gildermeister did not move.

"No, that's okay. I can."

Wendy Gildermeister did not move. The envelope rip, the separation of adhesive and paper, was deafening. As was the unfolding, the straightening, of the letter, folded into three, inside.

"I GOT IN!"

Karen jumped into her mother's arms. "Oh, Karen. Oh, Karen, this is wonderful. I'm so proud of you."

Karen released her mother and returned her attention to the letter. She scanned the lines. "I got a FULL RIDE!" She would be leaving for college in eight months. "And I got into the summer program!" Five months.

Karen hurried over to the station wagon and hoisted Wendy Gildermeister up into her arms. "You better come visit me all the time." She swung Wendy Gildermeister around, legs dangling above the sidewalk.

"Congratulations. Karen."

"Thanks." So Wendy Gildermeister had said the words out loud. "*Who's tripping down the streets of the city, smiling at everybody she sees, everyone knows it's Wendy.*" Karen spun Wendy Gildermeister around and around and around for a few more minutes before letting her down, before running inside to share the news, the good news, with Jake.

Wendy Gildermeister reached into the backseat to retrieve her satchel and spotted the Christmas tree lot through the way way back window. She deserted her books and wandered across the street. A forest of evergreen and Douglas fir and spruce filled the half-acre lot. Had Wendy Gildermeister's mind made her forest come to life? Strings of lights bulbs spotlighted the trees, the trees were protected by the snow, the snow fluttered to the ground, sparkling in the light from the bulbs. Wendy Gildermeister inspected each tree: its height, its breadth, its scent, the texture of its needles, clutching the branches to see how easily needles were released. They were all nice trees, all typical trees, all easily imaginable at the base of a spiral staircase, trimmed with glass balls and shiny icicles and popcorn. Wendy

Gildermeister was content drifting through the aisles, crunching her feet on the packed snow and breathing in evergreen, which wasn't as fresh and pungent for real trees as it was for imaginary ones. Wendy Gildermeister was about to conclude that her forest, that had occupied the same vacant lot yesterday, was better than the Christmas tree forest that occupied it today, when she spotted Persy.

Wendy Gildermeister rounded the corner to a new row of Christmas trees and the first conifer she saw wasn't nice, wasn't typical, and she couldn't imagine any types of decoration hanging from its branches. This was not a tree for ornaments. It was smaller than the others, maybe six feet, one inch, the same height as Wendy Gildermeister's father, and thick, huggably, shroudingly thick. She held this tree's branches, its needles were soft, the cheesecloth that Wendy Gildermeister's mother wrapped the good silver in, and so strong, just like Karen, when she beat all the boys at her school, even weightlifters, at arm wrestling, no needles fell to the snow. Wendy Gildermeister smiled, she grinned, and she inhaled. The scent of this tree was just as fresh and pungent as those of the trees that Wendy Gildermeister had smelled yesterday. Wendy Gildermeister had found a friend. His name was Persy.

There was no school the next day. Andrew shot hoops with Kyle at the rec center. Karen went to Jake's house. Wendy Gildermeister's mother went to work, city offices never closed, which was fine. Wendy Gildermeister's was home, like always. But she didn't spend time inside playing chess with her father as he suggested. And she didn't want to spend time roaming Thornfield Hall. As soon as she awoke Wendy Gildermeister raced across the street to see Persy.

“Maybe we can take you home. I mean, I don’t think I *want* to decorate you. “You’re just not that kind of tree. Well, you know that.” Wendy Gildermeister giggled and squeezed one of Persy’s branches. “Maybe you could stay in my bedroom with me. By the window. I have a great window, and a rocking chair right there, so I’d sit and talk to you all the time.

“But I don’t think they’d want to have *two* Christmas trees, my family. We always get our tree from Publix, there have never been any lots around before, this one’s the first, but they might agree to get a tree here.”

A couple passed by Wendy Gildermeister. The woman was pregnant and cradled her stomach in her hands. Characters always did that in films, not in real life. He husband followed, pushing her, his hand on the small of her back.

“Oh, George, let’s get that one!” The woman pointed to a Douglas fir, eight feet, maybe even nine, proportional, unhuggable, perfect for Baby’s First Christmas ornaments.

“You sure, sugar? The tree that little girl was standing next to is nice.”

The woman’s hand abandoned her stomach to cover her mouth. She scoffed. “Really, George. That tree? That tree is ... well, look at it. No, I want this one.” She laughed with pity and nick-of-time relief. “You definitely won’t be choosing the colors for the nursery.”

The man passed by Wendy Gildermeister, again, to fetch Mr. Buford and twine. Although the couple, the woman, had rejected Persy, Wendy Gildermeister understood that someone else might take Persy home. Someone who would strangle him with twinkling electric cords and ropes of dried cranberries.

“What *if* someone else takes you home? I heard what that lady said, But don’t listen to her. I like you, just the way you are. I know most people probably don’t think so. But most people probably don’t think a lot of things.” A few families were sauntering through the lot, inspecting height and freshness. “I better get home. I’ll see if my parents are okay with it. But I’ll be back tomorrow, Persy.” Wendy Gildermeister gave his branches a final squeeze.

“WE HAVE TO GET OUR CHRISTMAS TREE FROM THE LOT ACROSS THE STREET!”

“What? Sweetie, we were in the middle of a conversation.” Wendy Gildermeister’s mother dabbed the corners of her mouth, turkey gravy, with her napkin. Paper, leftover from Halloween.

“Mom, she is such a *freak!*”

“That’s enough, Andrew.” Wendy Gildermeister’s father placed his hand on top of hers. “I don’t understand, sweetie. You love getting the tree from Publix.”

Wendy Gildermeister squirmed in her seat. Her legs swung widely under the dining table. She pushed back her chair and stood. After nearly a week, four days, of acting out the conversation in her head, following around her father and whispering, and attempting telepathy, this time unsuccessfully, her desire had ejected itself in an outburst all majuscule and loud.

“I know. But this year, this year we have to get our Christmas tree from the lot across the street.”

“How come?” Karen sat across the table from Wendy Gildermeister. She had rested her spoon in the soup, potato leek, and waited, attentively.

Wendy Gildermeister sat back down. She tugged at the edge of the tablecloth that was an extra napkin in her lap, green with red ribbons intertwined throughout. She flexed her thumb. “Because there are a lot of nice trees there.”

“The doctor did say that change would be healthy for her. Maybe breaking tradition this year would be a good idea.”

“YES!” Wendy Gildermeister ran to the other side of the table, snatched her sister’s arm and yanked her up from her seat. “Come on, everybody!”

Wendy Gildermeister’s parents looked at each other, smiled and followed their daughters across the street to the lot. At his parents’ insistence, Andrew trudged along. By the time they reached the lot, Wendy Gildermeister was beginning to introduce Karen to Persy.

“Isn’t this tree just the BEST?”

“It’s nice. There are a lot of full, hearty trees around here.”

“Maybe. But look at this one. He has a name.”

“A name?” Andrew appeared from behind a cluster of trees. “A Christmas tree with a *name*? *This* Christmas tree? This Christmas tree stinks, look, it’s all deformed and stuff. It’s needles are all weird and soft.” Andrew snapped in half one of Persy’s branches. Needles crashed to the ground.

“STAY IN YOUR LANE, *PERSON!*” Wendy dropped to her knees and gathered the fallen needles.

Andrew burst out laughing. “Oh, my gosh. *Look* at her.”

Karen knocked Andrew aside and kneeled down beside Wendy Gildermeister. “You really like this tree. I’ll go tell Mom and Dad that we’ve chosen this one.”

Andrew was still laughing. He laughed so hard that Wendy Gildermeister could no longer hear his laughter, just his wheezy breathing and see his red red face. “No. It’s not going to work.”

“Should we pick another tree?”

Wendy Gildermeister dismissed it. Karen helped her up and even cupped some of the fallen needles in her hand. The two sisters joined their parents, who had selected a tall, full, ordinary tree.

Wendy Gildermeister had a new routine. Wendy Gildermeister had not had a new routine for a very long time. After school she fled to Christmas tree lot to be with Persy. As the days passed fewer and fewer trees filled the lot, but Persy was there. As was Wendy Gildermeister. Wendy Gildermeister’s parents would let her stay across the street until dinnertime, when it got too cold and too dark and too late and too long to be out anymore. Wendy Gildermeister’s father would stroll over, nod at Mr. Buford, who rarely noticed Wendy Gildermeister over his *Hemmings Motor News* and his dwindling business, and he would lead her by the hand back home.

One evening Wendy Gildermeister was curled up in the family room window seat, flipping the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, staring across the street at Persy. In the dim moonlight reflected pink off the ground snow, she could discern that Persy’s needles had a tint of brown and were shedding slightly. Close up she hadn’t perceived the change.

“We’re another month behind on the mortgage, Jim.” Wendy Gildermeister’s mother was sitting at the kitchen counter, studying the bills, while Wendy Gildermeister’s father washed dishes at the sink. Since the dishwasher broke last year, Wendy Gildermeister’s mother cooked dinner and Wendy Gildermeister’s father washed the dishes. It was a new family tradition.

“I know, Carol.” Squirt of detergent, scrub of sponge, splashing of plates in standing water. “I’m still waiting to hear back from Chesnut. Hopefully I’ll know something by the end of the week. Thank goodness we don’t have to worry about Karen. I was so scared that she’d get in and we wouldn’t be able to afford for her to go.”

“I’ve been talking to Diane at work, you know her husband’s a lawyer, and she says lots of couples file for bankruptcy and end up just fine.”

“Well, we can wait a little longer before deciding that. There are still some other companies and even universities I’m waiting to hear from. Carol, I was thinking maybe I’d get a part-time job. I used to work at a diner in college, you remember, Plato’s. I could work with Jake at Leonardo’s.”

CRASH! A glass shattered on the kitchen floor.

“Oh, Jim, you’re barefoot, don’t move. Let me get the broom.” Footsteps, bristles against glass pieces against linoleum. “Jim, Plato’s was twenty-five years ago. You won’t need to resort to that. The market is tough right now, but you’ll get something. Soon. I know you will.”

“She seems to be doing a little better.” Wendy Gildermeister’s father peeked into the family room. Wendy Gildermeister’s eyes darted to her book.

“Well, Persy the tree has just replaced Gabbie Bell the invisible. I don’t know. Hopefully this therapy will help, but we only get twelve months waived. After that we have to pay for both the medication and the visits.”

The lady in peach had nearly filled the college-ruled lines of her yellow legal pad with notes. Wendy Gildermeister hadn’t spoken the entire afternoon. Nods and shrugs. Maybe not notes then, maybe sheet music, maybe quarter notes and clefts, maybe she was applying to music school, too. She’d never get into Indiana. Winters were long in Indiana and the schools there never closed for just one foot of snow. Last week’s snow had almost entirely melted, and downtown the snow, the dirty, rocky snow, was shoved aside in massive gutter piles. White garbage bags, just precipitation, waiting for heat collection. There were no descending flakes to watch out the window.

Dong! Half past four.

“Wendy Gildermeister, when you come next week, I’d like us to start talking as soon as you get here. Alright?”

Christmas was in two days. Next year it would be special that Karen was coming home for Christmas. If she even did come home for Christmas.

“Wendy Gildermeister, you need to answer me. It’s important that you answer when I ask you a question. Okay? Here goes. Have you been taking your medication regularly?”

Wendy Gildermeister nodded.

“Have you noticed any changes, any different feelings since you started taking your medication? It usually takes about a month to start working, but sometimes you notice effects earlier.”

“I’ve been going to see Persy everyday. I get home from school and go across the street and just hang out with him. He knows all about Gabbie Bell, and he isn’t jealous or anything. Sometimes I read to him. He likes Jane Austen better than the Brontës, but that’s okay. I still like him.”

“Persy? You have a new friend. Is he an ...” the lady in peach started to speak in slow motion “... i-m-a-g-i-n-a-ry friend?”

“He’s real.” Wendy Gildermeister twisted her thumb. She could almost bend it back all the way to her forearm, just another inch, maybe two. Not three, she had past three weeks ago.

“And he lives across the street from you?”

“Deforestation is a big problem, all over the world, you know. Not just in rain forests. Everywhere trees are being cut down. And then they have these farms, these Christmas tree farms, where they plant trees just so they can cut them down. Those trees don’t even have a chance. Like veal, which live for only eight weeks or so before they are slaughtered. I should become a vegetarian. McDonald’s wipes out forests all over the world to have grazing land for their cattle. So they cut down all of these trees just to feed cows, which become hamburgers. It’s all a big waste. Native Americans, not like Seminoles, but the tribes out west, they would hunt buffalo, but they wouldn’t discard the part they didn’t eat, no they used everything, the hide and the bones. Nothing was wasted. That’s how it should be.”

The lady in peach looked seasick. Her face was green and her body was swaying side-to-side. She gripped the arms of her chair. “That’s interesting, Wendy Gildermeister, but let’s get back to talking about Persy.”

Wendy Gildermeister frowned. “I just was.” She flexed her thumb, again.

“Does Persy have any other brothers or sisters that you also play with?”

Wendy Gildermeister grimaced. “He had brothers and sisters.”

“*Had?*”

“They were killed, murdered. All of them. His parents, too.”

“Now, Wendy Gildermeister, I want to believe you, but I’ve got a hunch that you’re making this up. Maybe you’re creating this story because you’re not yet fully comfortable in your friendship with Persy. Since Gabbie Bell left, maybe you’re feeling separation anxiety, worried that Persy will leave, too.”

“Persy is going to leave.”

“I thought he was a new neighbor. Didn’t they just move in?”

“Yes, but he was murdered, too, and now he’s DYING!”

“I don’t think that makes sense, Wendy Gildermeister. He *already* was murdered and *now* he’s dying. I think I would have heard if a little boy in Gainesville were murdered, especially if he lived across the street from you.”

Wendy Gildermeister bolted out of the office into the waiting room.

“Hi, sweetie. This is a surprise. Isn’t there still ten minutes left in your session?” Wendy Gildermeister’s mother set down an issue of *Discover*, from July, with the cover feature on manatees, and stood.

“I want to go.”

The lady in peach emerged from her office. She beckoned Wendy Gildermeister's mother over. "I think we made some real progress today. She's clearly suffering from separation anxieties due to the loss of her imaginary friend. We'll go more in depth with this next week."

Karen was at rehearsal for the high school Christmas concert, and Andrew was studying at the library with Kyle, so the ride home from the lady in peach's office was free of conflict and silent. Wendy Gildermeister's mother said nothing, just sent her daughter smiles at each red light. When they pulled up to the curb next to their house, Wendy Gildermeister spotted that there were only two other trees on the lot, besides Persy. And the snow beneath Persy was covered with a natural skirt or green. And brown.

"How about you come inside and help me make dinner, sweetie? Tuna casserole. You can smash up the potato chips."

Wendy Gildermeister followed her mother inside. When they entered the family room, they halted. Wendy Gildermeister's father was sitting in the armchair next to the dormant fireplace. His face was shrouded by his hands, and his body was bent in two. Andrew looked like that after he ate two chili cheese dogs and then went on the Scorpion at Busch Gardens last summer. But Andrew didn't shiver like Wendy Gildermeister's father was shivering. And he didn't cry, either.

Wendy Gildermeister's slid off her shoulder and crashed to the floor, lipstick, pens, mints, and tissues, all used, scattering across the tile. "Jim. Oh, my god, what happened?" She rushed to her husband's side and knelt beside him.

“Chesnut called today. They decided to give the position to Marshall. He was very nice and decent about it. And I understand. Marshall has a B.S., and I only have a B.A. One letter, that’s what’s important to them.” He looked up at his wife. His eyes were bubbling with tears and his cheeks were red, bright red, he hadn’t even been out in the cold. “I just, I just thought this one would work out, Carol. I am so sorry, sweetheart.”

Wendy Gildermeister’s mother wrapped her arms around her husband. Wendy Gildermeister’s mother was very huggable. “It’s alright, Jim. We’ll get through this. Everyone is healthy, everyone is safe. *That’s* all matters. You *know* that. I love you. We’ll get through this, together. You don’t ever have to be sorry about it.”

Wendy Gildermeister’s father’s tears were decreasing, but he was still shivering. His cheeks remained red, bright red. His Florida sweatshirt, the orange and blue faded to pink and gray for as long as Wendy Gildermeister could remember, wasn’t keeping him warm. Wendy Gildermeister tiptoed to the garage.

She rummaged through batting helmets and badminton nets and inflated pool rafts, music stands and batons and Styrofoam life preservers, until she located her father’s ax. It really wasn’t an ax, more like a machete with a handle. Wendy Gildermeister had only seen it be of use once: a few yeas ago there was a cottonmouth on the back porch and her mother grabbed the ax and chopped the snake in half. Wendy Gildermeister had insisted on a funeral. She crossed the street with the ax in hand.

The snow-stained copy of *Hemmings* rested on the folding chair, but Mr. Buford wasn’t in sight. He must have given up for the night. Most people in the

neighborhood purchased their Christmas trees by the middle of December, so it was unlikely that these last three trees would find homes. Even if people did come to the lot to find trees, they wouldn't choose Persy. Wendy Gildermeister would not let Persy spend Christmas alone on a vacant lot.

She wrapped her arms around Persy's middle. He was still huggable, but not as huggable anymore. Needles showered the snow. "I'm sorry, Persy. I'm really sorry." She raised the machete, and when it fell it split open the trunk.

Wendy Gildermeister's father was still sitting in the armchair by the cold fireplace, but he was relaxed, feet up on the ottoman, hands flipping the day's *Sun*. His cheeks hadn't regained their usual color. Wendy Gildermeister's mother was in the kitchen opening tuna fish cans.

"Sweetie, is that you? Where'd you do? I thought you were going to help me with the potato chips."

Wendy Gildermeister's glanced up from the newspaper. "What are you holding there?"

Wendy Gildermeister's arms were loaded with logs. "There are more outside."

Wendy Gildermeister's scrutinized his daughter. "How did you carry these? Wait, let me help you." He lifted the logs, all but one, one just for Wendy Gildermeister, from her clutch. "Where did you get these?"

"I thought you might like to light a fire."

Her father beamed. He leaned down, careful not to drop the logs, and kissed her cheek. "Thank you. Will you help me?"

“What are you two doing in there? Am I going to get any help with dinner?”

“We’ll be there in a minute, Carol. First we’re going to start a fire.”

Wendy Gildermeister’s father set up three logs in an A-frame shape in the fireplace. He then crumpled up the newspaper from his chair, “it’s just the *Gainesville Sun*, after all,” and ripped off the local section, midnight robbery at the 39th Ave Lil’ Champ, twenty-year old college kid running for mayor, shredding the pages and lining the bottom of the fireplace with the strips.

“The trick to a good fire, one that lasts, is that you have to keep feeding it. More and more kindling. You must be attentive.” He struck a match and the local news came ablaze.

Wendy Gildermeister’s father leaned back against the armchair. He motioned his daughter over to him and she cuddled up against his chest. Wendy Gildermeister’s father was huggable, too. They sat like that, father and daughter, watching the fire, getting up every so often to add kindling, they sat like that through the classifieds, the business and style sections, the sports headlines, and finally, the front page.

Chapter 5: The Feederbands

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we-“

“Disciples say ‘sins’, Trixie.” Jillian had been following along with me. She set down the Bible and returned to *Cosmo*.

“Shit!” I extracted my gum from my mouth, three pieces, all pink and bubble, and perched in on the rim of my Coke bottle. I ran my tongue across my retainer. Regroup. “Okay, okay. Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our *sins* as we forgive those who *sin* against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” My gum was still moist, flavorless, but moist.

“Hey, Trix, there’s an article in here about what colors are good on redheads. You really *cannot* get away with wearing pink anymore. I checked my shirt. Yellow. Close call. “Or yellow. There’s also this story about some girl whose friend was raped by her uncle, the friend’s uncle, not the girl’s uncle, and then couldn’t get an abortion because she lives in fuckin’ O-hi-o, and her uncle, what a creep, he was her guardian, so she ended up ... oh, man, this is fucked up. What the hell is *wrong* with people?” Jillian kicked the magazine off the bed. She retrieved a compact from her

purse and began applying eye shadow. A sweep of lavender across the whole lid, then a line of indigo near the lashes. She eyed me in the mirror. Midnight cowgirl sparkled around one eye. “Danny Vega’s really not all that cute, you know. You’re memorizing all this stuff, no wonder no one goes to church anymore, it’s like conjugating verbs for Madame Cailler. And this language, it’s so dated, it sounds like goddamn *Shakespeare*, and who knows what Danny’s really like anyway? *Youth group*? He must be a freak.”

“I’m not *memorizing* the Lord’s Prayer right now. Just practicing. My mom and I used to say it before I went to bed. I *did* go to Sunday school, you know.”

Jillian smacked her lips with Asphyxia lip gunk. Mwah! in nuclear purple. “Trix, that was *ten years ago*. And you stopped going, like every normal kid.”

I opened the Bible and thumbed its chapters. It wasn’t an old, tattered copy. It wasn’t a family heirloom with the names of ancestors illegibly scratched on the inside cover. It was a Bible I bought a few weeks ago off the bargain table at the Waldenbooks in the St. Johns Mall. “Well, I’m going *now*. They seem really cool. Nicole Rybzick said you don’t even have to attend services to go to youth group.”

“Nicole Rybzick is a whore.” Jillian tightened her bra strap. Better cleavage. “Besides, you don’t believe in God.” She plucked the magazine off the pile of dirty clothes where it had landed.

I flipped the pages of the Bible and processed the holy words quickly passing in front of me. New paper-scented wind brushed across my face left to right. It stung my eyes. I blinked and they stung less. “I don’t know. Maybe I do.”

“Do you have to make those arm movements across your chest like nuns do? It looks like they’re doing the Macaraena. That’d be rich, wouldn’t it, dancing nuns. Maybe that’s only for Catholics. I’ve never understood that, for real, why they separate it into three parts. The Father. The Son. The Holy Ghost. Aren’t they all supposed to be the same thing?”

“They are. It’s just that people believe that the trio is one ultimate being.”

“People. Exactly. *People*, not *you*. And it’s called the Trinity, Sister Voyles, not the trio. Man, I know more about this crap than you do.” She scanned the table of contents with her juicy tomato-painted fingernail. Jillian was a proud hussy.

“What are you reading, anyway?”

“Check this out, *Cosmo* has this whole article on séances. That’s more their style. I think you’d like this. How to conduct them and shit ...”

I leaned over and examined the page. *Select a medium. Decide on whom to call over from the other side. Charge the candles. If you are holding a white candle, picture peaceful strands of smoke curling up from it. Join hands. Repeat: ‘Our beloved [name of spirit], we ask that you commune with us and move among us’, until a response is received.* “That’s actually kinda cool. It explains what different types of incense symbolize. Cinnamon is for warmth and energy. Sandalwood helps ground the participants and lets everyone focus. Frankincense is for-“

“Frankincense, hmmm? Do they mention gold and myrrh in there as well?”

Jillian chuckled. She smiled and spread out her hands, palms up. “Sorry. I guess that’s too much. But, c’mon, seriously, Trix. Are you really gonna go to that church

thing tonight? What about Charlton Heston and me? I already rented *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*. It's no fun to make fun of dumb movies by myself."

I slid the magazine back across the bed and snatched my Bible. "I don't have time for dumb movies. I have to focus on my spirituality--"

"Spirituality my ass! You're not going to ... to this youth group, I forget that damn Egyptian name, but you're not going because you want to be more spiritual. And this isn't one of our science experiments, either. You're joining this cult because you want to get it on with Danny Vega. You want to be his *giiiiirrrl*friend. And I don't even know why. You don't *know* him. Trix, you can't even get up the nerve to talk to him about this youth group thing without going through Paul Wilkerson."

"It's called *Chi Rho*. You know, like the Greek letters? Not *Cairo*! And it's not a cult. Disciples are a denomination of Christianity. But I guess I'm just not as lucky as you. Have you ever seen boys lie down in the hallway to look up *my* skirt?" I headed for the door. I knew I was acting childish. If this were a movie, I'd be the character that we'd laugh about and mock mercilessly. "Some of us have to work to get the boys we like to like us, much less kiss us. God, Jillian, it's not like I've been lucky enough to make out with half the boys in eighth grade."

Jillian scowled. "Lord's name in vain. Isn't that commandment number one?"

"It's number six!" I slammed her bedroom door behind me.

I didn't really know Danny Vega at all. I fell in love with him at a water fountain. Danny was brand-new to our school then, just moved up from Miami. His

family came here after Andrew. He had dark eyes and dark hair and no accent and was thin. Thin so he could turn sideways and hide behind flagpoles, which he did. My mother told me to be proud that I was big-boned. My grandparents, during the Depression, they would love to have been as hearty and well-fed as I was. No matter which way I turned, I could always be seen.

It was between classes that I first saw Danny. I was late to social studies, and out of breath, running from the cafeteria to D-wing. I'd been setting up my project, radon testing, for the science fair. I stopped for a sip of water and reached the fountain at the same time as he did. He stepped aside and motioned me first. I was smitten. I curtsied. I leaned forward to take a drink, and was still blushing and still staring at him, so when I turned the lever, water shot straight into my eye. I had disregarded the possible vectors. The cold water burned, and I was terrified that the water had dislodged my new contacts. It had taken me a half hour to put them in that morning. I backed away, squinting. I never expected to see him again, especially not five minutes later, in social studies. Maybe if I'd seen him five later in science. I would have won his heart then and there. But I never expected to fall in love that day either, and not at a water fountain.

That was three years ago. I don't take social studies anymore. It's called history in eighth grade. Danny Vega sits next to me now. Alphabetical order. Sometimes I relay notes between Danny and his best friend, to my right, Paul Wilkerson, when Mr. Mackinaw is writing on the chalkboard. That's how I found about youth group, from a boat lift boy's note, during the Twenty-Sixth of July Movement.

“Hey, Trixie.” Danny whispered at me urgently and tossed a folded piece of paper onto my desk. Mr. Mackinaw drew a map of Cuba, Danny’s birthplace, on the chalkboard. Danny pointed to Paul. I don’t know why he pointed, we’d been engaging in this routine for months now. I nodded and slid the note into my lap. Mr. Mackinaw faced the class.

“So, who can tell me what type of economy Cuba had before Castro seized power?”

I peeked down at my lap. Danny hadn’t folded the note properly. Usually he used an intricate process of layering the wide-ruled paper so that the note was in the shape of a star or a rhombus. This one was a simple square, with the writing on the outer flap. I could read what he had written without even opening the note.

“Nicole?”

Paul, are you going to Chi Rho tonight? Danny.

“Monocrop. They had one crop: sugarcane.”

“Exactly.” Mr. Mackinaw turned and chalked *monocrop* on the board. I tossed the note onto Paul’s desk. Paul scanned it, then looked up and nodded at Danny. Danny grinned and picked up his pencil. I scooted forward in my seat. If I propped my head up on my elbow, securing my elbow on the far corner of my desktop, I could squint and see into Danny’s composition book.

He had beautiful handwriting. Extremely legible cursive. *I wonder if Beatrice is thinking about me. She looks so pretty today. I love her red hair. I know that the other kids sometimes make fun of her hair, but I think it’s majestic and I love her all the more for the grace she exhibits when she teases her. Yes, I said it. I love*

her. She is a Siren. When she walks into the room, all the thoughts vanish from my head, and I can think only of her. "Trixie?" Maybe she glimpsed the note to Paul, maybe she'll want to know what Chi Rho is, she is a curious girl, always seeking out new knowledge, maybe she'll find out, and come and then I will find the courage to kiss- "Beatrice!"

I blinked. Mr. Mackinaw was staring at me. I looked around. Danny was still scribbling in his composition book, Paul was signaling to the board. I glanced at the chalkboard. *Platt Amendment.*

"The Platt Amendment," Mr. Mackinaw nodded, "basically gave the U.S. the right to tell Cuba how to run its government, to establish naval stations in Cuba, like Guantanamo Bay, and to interfere whenever it thought it was necessary."

"Exactly. The Platt Amendment also restricted Cuba's trade with other countries, thus that, along with the factors Trixie mentioned, made the Cubans realize that they were not in charge of their destiny. It became a symbol of paternalistic domination ..."

I glanced back at Danny's composition book. Just drawings of sports cars. No mention of me.

After class Danny went over to talk to Nicole Rybzick. She'd gotten her first kiss in fifth grade from Eric Umbach. He was rumored to eat cockroaches, and he kissed her on a dare. I went over to talk to Paul. A few weeks back he and Jillian had both gotten detention for public displays of affection in the hallway.

"So what's this Chi Rho thing you guys were talking about?"

Paul smirked. "Isn't reading someone else's notes like invasion of property or something?"

“It’s not invasion of privacy, it’s self-defense. What if this Chi Rho is some kind of anarchy group? I need to be informed. I don’t want to be an accomplice in any nefarious plot.”

Paul laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. “You and your big words, Trixie. Chi Rho is just youth group. Danny and me, we go to the same church, Tropical Sands, you know on Burns Road. In Palatka. By the medical center.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s a pretty cool building.”

“It’s old and needs repairs. But you should come sometime. Tonight, even. It starts at six.”

“What do you guys do?”

“Usually Craig, he’s our sponsor, he’s really cool, he’s young, and new. So, Craig picks a Bible passage, and then we talk about it for a little while. Just stuff like what we think about it, how it relates to everyday life, easy stuff. Then there’s always refreshments, sometimes just lame food like punch and cookies. But last week Nicole made brownies.”

“Trixie Voyles, I am impressed with you. You always hated going to church. You’re grandmother will be so happy, you’ll have to write and tell her. I knew we were right not to have you baptized when you were a baby.” My mother set her purse down on the counter and started sifted through the mail. “Another notice about that Honda getting towed? We sold that car over a year ago.”

“Yeah, so can you take me? It’s at six. In Palatka.” I popped open a can of Coke. Some soda spilled on my forearm. I licked it off.

“Six? Six tonight? What about Jillian?” Mom looked up from the mail to the clock. “In fact, aren’t you supposed to be over there tonight?”

“I was. I was over there, but I came home.”

“I thought you girls were going to have a movie marathon. Wasn’t there even a theme?”

“Charlton Heston. I might write my final paper for English on gun control. Mr. Spiner liked my idea about Canada.”

“I can’t believe my baby is going to be in high school.” My mother stared at her hands. She tried to iron out the wrinkles with moisturizer and depress the blue veins with her fingertips. “Charlton Heston? And you want to go to church tonight.”

“Yes, it’s terribly ironic.”

“Did you get your chemistry test back today? What was it again, elements?”

“The noble gases and the halogens.”

“How did you do?”

“I got a 97%.”

“Only a 97%?” Mom squeezed my cheek and smiled. She liked doing that. She liked it that I still had chubby cheeks.

I scowled. “It would have been a hundred if I’d remembered radon. God, I can’t believe I mixed it up with astatine. Who *does* that? It’s so easy: atomic number 86, atomic weight 222, symbol Rn, nobody’s gonna-“

“Your science project, the county fair one, wasn’t that on radon?”

“Yes!” I belched. Loud.

My mom removed the Coke can from my grip. “Beatrice, you drink far too much soda. Dr. Floyd said one a day, tops. I’m not going to have any sympathy for you when you come out of his office crying.”

“Mom, he yells at me ‘cause I don’t floss properly. I floss, who cares how I do it?”

My mother ended the discussion with her right hand in the air. “I don’t want to see you drinking soda around me. I know you have more than one a day, it’s all I can do not to imagine what you eat and drink when I’m not around, but none at home. Got it?”

“Sure, Mom.” I dug out my retainer from my mouth. Some pink-fleshy dinosaur protection. I rinsed it under the faucet and popped it back in my mouth. “Paul said that youth group would last about two hours.”

“Paul? Is that Paul Wilkerson? He’s such a nice boy. I ran into his mom the other day when I got you those new jeans. You know, when you two were little, you used to swim together, at the Holiday Inn pool. He looked so cute in his little orange swimmy. And you with that Rainbow Brite suit with those pretty ruffles. What ever happened to that suit?”

“I got a Speedo. So, you’ll take me?”

“Sure, sweet pea. I need to stop by Publix to pick up batteries, a new flashlight, and some gallons of water. Next week is June first. But, of course *you* know that.” For as long as I could remember we put up the tracking chart on the refrigerator. It was my job to write down the coordinates and monitor the movements on the map. Just for storms in the Atlantic. I wasn’t a typhoon girl.

“Mom, you’re paranoid. Hurricanes never hit us. There was a program on T.V. the other day about the history of hurricanes. They always change course and go up and hit North Carolina. Sucks to live *there*.”

“Trixie, don’t say ‘sucks’. And I am not paranoid. I have several friends from there that had to leave Miami after Andrew. Aunt Betsy and Uncle Don had to move to Tampa. Isn’t that why that Vega boy’s family came up here?”

“Maybe.” I didn’t like to think of Danny’s life in Miami. It made him exotic, mysterious even, that he was from Miami, not unincorporated Putnam county. Still, whenever I thought of his past, I pictured the girls he might have known there. I didn’t know his history. “So, we’ll leave soon?”

I was hoping that Tropical Sands would look by Bethesda-by-the-Sea. When I was in third grade we stopped off at Palm Beach when we were driving back up from the Keys. We toured the chapel on the island. It was all gothic and stone, with a calliope stretching from the cold floor to the vaulted ceiling. I didn’t know what religion Bethesda was, but I told my mother that I would convert just so I could get married there one day. She likes to tell that story on Christmas and Easter.

Tropical Sands was a simple church. No stones, no history, and a portable Casio keyboard. I peaked around the empty sanctuary. Maybe everyone had already left. Maybe I was late. Every time we drove over the Memorial Bridge to Palatka, I’d make my mom stop at the park on the other side. I could stare at the St. Johns for hours. Sometimes I saw manatees swimming in the water and spoonbills flying low just above. My mom once told me that I was like the St. Johns. I was much younger

then, and I thought she meant because I was wide, like the river. She dismissed that with a smile and told me that the St. Johns was one of the only rivers in the world that flowed north. It was defiant and original. And it was peaceful and quiet. It was peaceful and quiet in the sanctuary, too. The lights were off and the last sliver of daylight was filtering in through the west-facing windows. I lowered myself into one of the pews, on the stained orange cushioning, and closed my eyes. I waited.

“Trixie? Is that you?” The lights flipped on. I turned around and saw Nicole Rybzick. Her arms were precariously weighted down with jugs of orange juice. I knew that I should have run up to help her, that was probably the Christian thing to do, but I remained seated. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for Chi Rho. Am I early? Isn’t that why you’re here? I thought Paul told me six-“

“You’re right. I just came in here to get the refreshments from Fellowship Hall. Chi Rho meets out in the log cabin. C’mon, give me a hand.”

There were about twenty kids in the log cabin. I spotted Paul Wilkerson and a few others I recognized from school. Danny wasn’t there. The kids all knew each other and eyed me with friendly suspicion. I smiled and helped Nicole Rybzick pour the drinks.

“You must be Beatrice Voyles.” I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was warm and it was strong and it wasn’t Danny’s.

“It’s Trixie.”

He was tall and he was handsome and he wasn’t Danny. “Welcome, Trixie. I’m Craig, Chi Rho sponsor extraordinaire.” He laughed. I didn’t know people

actually spoke like that. He was a good deal older than all of us, twenty-five, at least. Plenty of co-eds to kiss. “We’re glad you’ve come tonight.” He clapped his hands. “Alright, guys, let’s get started.”

Everybody sat down Indian-style in a circle. I hesitated and ended up sitting between Craig and Nicole Rybzick. Everyone held hands and closed their eyes. Nicole Rybzick and Craig each reached out, so I fit my hands into their grips. I closed my eyes. I waited. I heard deep breathing. I waited. I opened my eyes. Everyone else’s eyes were closed. Paul’s face was devoid of expression: it looked completely open, completely ready. Nicole Rybzick’s hand was clenching mine, too tightly, her oil-slick green lacquered nails were puncturing my palm. I looked at my own fingernails, gnawed down by stress and boredom.

The door slammed. Everyone emerged from the trance. I closed my eyes and then reopened them. It was Danny. Craig turned to me. “That’s Danny. Always late.” Danny was always on time to school. “Well, we’re done with prayer, so you’re on your own for that.” Craig laughed. He raised his hand. Danny ducked and pivoted. He turned back around and gave Craig a high-five.

“Oh, my goodness, I almost forgot to remind you guys. Hey, wait, get back here for a minute. The summer retreat is in three weeks: the weekend of the 14th. That’s right, just before the last week of school. You need to get your registration forms back to me by the 7th to guarantee you a spot. And if you’ve already lost your form, and that means you *Paul*, just stop by, I’ve got extras. Okay, cool, see you guys next week. God bless.”

The others filed out of the cabin. Nicole Rybzick lingered by the door. I approached Craig. “What’s this retreat all about?”

“Oh, Trixie, I’m sorry. I forgot you didn’t know. Usually twice a year all the Chi Rho groups in the state get together for a retreat. It’ll be a great way for you to meet other youths from around the state and develop closer bonds with the Tropical Sands kids. In winter it’s down at Jonathan Dickinson Park, in Jupiter, but in the summer it’s up at Little Talbot Island, by Amelia Island. Have you ever been there?”

I shook my head.

“It’s really gorgeous. We stay in cabins by the beach and bring up all sorts of food to cook, that’s what the registration fees cover, there’s a kitchen there, too.”

“Is it mainly just a lot of praying?”

Craig rolled his eyes. “Well, there is *some* praying. You caught me.” He reminded me of the boy in movies who was picked on in high school and decided to be a coach or a Big Brother, so that he could be the cool guy, the one the high school kids, even though they were ten years younger than the ones who’d teased him, respected and emulated. “But the retreats are really about fellowship. Sometimes we watch movies, last summer we watched ... oh, what was it ...”

“*The Fisher King!*” Nicole was still in the doorway, carving her initials into the frame with her nails.

“That’s right. Thanks, Nicole. *The Fisher King*. We watched it and then talked about the religious or spiritual aspects of the movie. Usually there are a lot of campfire discussions, mostly about teen issues like sex and school and abortion and

friends and parents. And then we do outdoors stuff: hiking, swimming, scavenger hunts. I bet you'd like it, it's tons of fun."

"I don't know. Don't you think it might be weird? Me being new and all?"

"Oh, that's not a problem. A few years ago I was dating a Jewish girl. I brought her along, and she didn't know anyone, and she had a good time. It's one night, maybe we'll camp out on the beach, *sssshhhh*, under the stars. Who knows? Oh, and if you have your own Bible, it would be good to bring that, too."

I nodded, and blushed, and turned to leave. Nicole Rybzick was still there. "Hey, thanks for waiting." Her nails had left shiny green claw marks in the door jam. Nicole Rybzick is a whore.

"Oh, sure, of course." Nicole Rybzick squirmed. She paused then started walking beside me. I could see undulating lines on her forehead and her eyes were squinty. Sex-face, that's what Jillian would call her expression.

"Is everything okay?"

"What? Yeah, yeah, sure. I was just thinking about finals. I've got lots of work to finish before school's out. Oh, and hey, my birthday is the weekend after school's over--"

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks, I'm having a party. You should come."

"Okay. Thanks." Nicole Rybzick may not be a whore.

"You're going to a *retreat* this weekend? And you're just telling me *now*? What the hell are they going to do to you there?" Jillian slammed her locker door

shut. It sprang back open. “God, I swear, if high school doesn’t have better lockers than this shithole ...”

“It’s only a few more days, and then ... we’re outta here for good.” Jillian shrugged and let the door swing back and forth. “And I don’t know, I think we’re going to watch movies and talk about them. It’s supposed to be beautiful up there, Little Talbot Island. And there’s hiking, and marshes and dunes.”

Jillian took my hand. “Are you going to be holding hands around a campfire singing Kumbaya?”

I dropped her hand flat. “*No!* We’re also there to experience nature. I might even sleep on the beach, under the stars.”

“You and Danny in the same sleeping bag?”

“*Jillian!* There are *people* around.” I surveyed the hall. Gina McDonnell, I had seen her first kiss Ryan Siddies last year, when I was locking up my blue Free Spirit at the bike racks, she was stuffing books into her backpack. Marni Cohen and Abby Kaufeldt, rumored to be lesbians, very scandalous, I didn’t know anything about their kissing history, were giggling by the broom closet. All clear. “You can come along if you want. Craig said he once brought his Jewish girlfriend.”

“I’m not Jewish, Trixie, I’m an atheist. Like you used to be.” Jillian glared at me. “What happened to making fun of people like them?”

“You know, Jilly, I don’t think I ever was an atheist. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m agnostic. At least for right now. Maybe this retreat will change my mind.”

“What do you think, that you’re going to have some kind of spiritual awakening while you’re there? *Beatrice*, this is so fuckin’ stupid. Why can’t you admit that you’re doing this for a boy?”

“I am *not!*” I read classics and listen to public radio and watched the local forecast on the eights. When I finished reading at *Marie Claire* in Publix, I *always* picked up the *Atlantic Monthly*. Jillian’s locker was wide open. On the inside of the door she had taped up a photo of us. It was taken on the first day of seventh grade, the first day of high school, when we were so grown up and very mature. I shut the door and made sure the lock engaged. “I don’t know why you can’t close this yourself.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to sleep under the stars. Or have you even listened to the news? We’re under a hurricane watch through Monday. This one’s named Bernardo. There’s never been a Hurricane Jillian. I’d like a hurricane named after me. A mild one that hits land and doesn’t trail away. Some minor flooding. But now they’re all politically correct with using ethnic names. I bet there’ll be a Hurricane Beatrice. Not Trixie.” She smiled. “Of course it’ll probably be Beatrice. How terribly exotic your hurricane will be.”

“It’s just a tropical storm. I don’t think it’s even 60 miles per hour. And it’s still just a tropical storm *watch*, not even a warning.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Just be careful. And don’t go drinking any Kool-Aid.”

Where we go swimming on St. Augustine Beach, the barrier islands are developed and settled by condominiums and chain motels and local surf 'n' turfs. Pick-ups and minivans drive on the beaches year-round. The kids playing chicken and riding body boards catch collective sea lice. The lights from A1A disorient the loggerhead and leatherback hatchlings, so they rarely make it to the water. You have to watch your path on the beach. I once stepped in tar. My feet soaked in a bucket of turpentine for hours to get the stuff off. And if it's not tar you step on, it's rusty beer cans or plastic shovels sticking scoop-side up out of the sand or still burning cigarette butts.

Little Talbot Island was different: no condos, no motels, no restaurants, no cars. Just seagrass and Australian pines and mangroves and sand. Sand everywhere, and not coarse sand like I was used to burning my bare feet on, but white, fluffy sand that erupted into powdery bursts with each footfall. We left the cars at the main parking lot and strolled along the beach to the campsite. Danny was up ahead, with Paul at his side. They were laughing. I strained my muscles and stretched my ears.

"I'm glad Beatrice came with us, Paul. I can't believe it worked! Ever since I saw her at the water fountain that day, three years ago, she looked so pretty, ever since then I've wanted to talk to her, wanted to ask her to go out with me. I've been too scared. But she's not just any girl, she's Beatrice Voyles. Isn't that funny, a tough Miami boy like me, afraid to talk to a girl."

"But you're not just any boy!" I blinked. The sun reflected off the waves, off the whitecaps, off the sand. In the distance the sky was dark, but on the beach there was sunlight everywhere. I blinked again, and I could see. Danny and Paul had

turned around and were staring at me. Nicole Rybzick and Craig had turned around and were staring at me. Everyone was staring at me. I swayed in the sunlight.

“Voyles. You okay?” Paul dropped his backpack and sleeping bag and walked over to me.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. A little dizzy I guess. It’s really bright out here.”

“What were you saying before? Something about a boy?”

Oh, dear. “Weren’t you and Danny talking about ...”

“Just now? We were talking about Wuerfell and how he’s totally gonna get the Heisman next year. Peyton Manning’s a wuss.” He put his hand on my shoulder. His hand wasn’t Danny’s. “Do you remember what you were saying?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, Craig was saying that sometimes when you’re out in nature God will speak to you. You look up and don’t see sky anymore, you just see Heaven. Who knows, maybe that’s what just happened. But, you’re okay?”

“HMMMMM. Yup, I’m good. Thanks. Paul.”

“Great. Too bad Jillian couldn’t come.” He slapped me on the shoulder and jogged back to Danny. “She’s fine. So, anyway, what were you saying?”

“Just that’s there’s no way Tennessee’ll beat Florida this year. I mean, c’mon, we were almost undefeated last season. Hell, we made it to Arizona. Yeah, Mannings’s got a quick release and good footwork, but Wuerfell, now he’s got an amazing arm ...”

The campfire that night was scrubbed. About an hour after we arrived at the cabins, while everyone was still unpacking and settling in and napping, it started to rain. Hard. The youth groups from the other churches called to cancel: they didn't want to risk driving a busload of kids in the storm. Everyone from Tropical Sands gathered in the main cabin, where there was a lit fireplace and a card game. We sat Indian-style in a circle holding hands. Everyone closed their eyes, me too. I didn't know what was supposed to happen. I was concerned that the other kids might start chanting, and if they started chanting, I would probably burst out laughing,

"Our Father," Craig began and the circle's echo of his words soon timed in unison, "who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name ..." I peeked and saw Danny, his face so calm and so true, he really believed in the words he was saying, the words meant something to him, "... and forgive us our sins-trespases ..."

"Oops. Sorry." Danny's eyes opened. Dark brown.

"It's okay, Trixie. Let's continue. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Eyes open. Craig jumped up and clapped his hands. "Alright, I think some of our veterans here," his eyes scanned the group, "Laurie, Michael, and Scott, can you guys come help in the kitchen?"

The group snickered. Craig rubbed the tips of his finger together and leered at those of us on the floor. "Don't gloat yet. Everyone's going to help out while we're here. The rest of you guys, just entertain yourselves until the food's ready, 'kay? I think there's a deck of cards in one of those end table drawers over there."

As Craig passed me, I was still sitting on the floor, my legs were having trouble folding and kept tumbling onto the carpet, Danny was hunting around for the cards with Nicole Rybzick, Craig squeezed my shoulder. “Common mistake. It doesn’t matter, *sins, debts, trespasses*, they all mean the same thing. God’ll get the message no matter what word you use.” My cheeks burned. Craig winked at me and carried on to the kitchen.

“We’ve played hearts, we’ve played spades, we’ve played gin.” Nicole Rybzick stretched her long, tan legs. Danny sat beside her, across from the fire. He was trying to build a house of cards. “I’m sick of cards.” She stared at the kitchen door longingly and sighed. “When *is* Craig going to be done in there?”

Paul pointed to the television set. “Too bad there’s no VCR. Then again, I guess we don’t have any tapes.”

My stomach growled. “How do y’all watch movies here normally?”

Nicole Rybzick stood and stretched her long, tan arms to the exposed-beam ceiling. Her tank top lifted up with her arms, revealing her flat stomach. “There’s a big flat rock face out in the woods. They use that as a screen. But First Christian from Tallahassee brings the projector.”

A draft stormed down the chimney and assaulted Danny’s house of cards. It imploded. “Doesn’t anyone else know any games? Or not even games, just something to do?” He picked up a box of matches and lit the utility candle on the mantle. *If you are holding a white candle, picture peaceful strands of smoke curling up from it.*

“We could charge the candles.”

“What, Trixie?”

I had spoken aloud. “Um, sorry, we could charge the candles. That’s what I said. You know, conduct a séance. I read all about how to do it. Pretty simple.”

Nicole flashed her eyes and grinned. She had perfectly straight, perfectly white teeth. “A séance. *It is* a dark and stormy night. What do you guys think?”

Paul and Danny nodded. Some of the other kids, a Kyle, a Robin, two Jennifers, and some whose names I didn’t know, shrugged their shoulders.

Nicole started clearing the circular dining table. She shoved Danny’s architectural disappointment aside and placed the plastic cups and plates on the floor. “What do we do?”

I pictured the article on Jillian’s bed. *Select a medium*. “First, we need to choose someone to be the medium, to conduct the séance.”

“Well, that’ll be you, of course, Trixie.”

“Oh, okay. So that’s taken care of. Now, we cover the table with a sheet of white cloth or paper, this color will help attract benign spirits.” I was impressed with myself. I had only glanced at that article, a few weeks ago, on Jillian’s bed. *You don’t believe in God, anyway, Trixie*. “Everyone sit around the table, and we need candles.”

“How many?” Nicole set one down on the table, the one Danny lit.

“It has to be a number that’s divisible by three.”

Danny brought over two lit candles from the coffee table. “Let’s do three. Like the Trinity.” *It’s called the Trinity, Sister Voyles, not the trio. People believe. Exactly, people, not you. I know more about this than you do.*

“So, now everyone sits around the table and we decide, oh, incense, I guess there’s no incense here, cinnamon or frankincense or sandalwood ...” *Frankincense, hmmm? Do they mention myrrh and gold in there, too?* “... no, I guess not. That’s fine. Then we just have to decide who we’re going to call over. Usually it’s wise to pick someone who has recently passed away. Spirits that have been dead for a long time often don’t want to be bothered.”

Danny’s face was not calm. “That’s kinda creepy, Trixie. Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport, *Daniel*.” Nicole playfully punched his arm. I had only touched him once, in October, when Mr. Spinner announced on the intercom that the Gatoers were going to the Fiesta Bowl. Danny raised his hand, I thought to high-five me, but he was actually trying to high-five Paul, so all three of our hands collided above my desk. No playful punches, just a mangled high-five. “This will be fun. Hmmm. Who can we choose? I’m not sure if I know anyone who’s died.”

“My Uncle Gordon died last year. But he really wasn’t my uncle, I think he was my great-uncle, or someone my dad worked with.”

“I don’t think it counts if you’re not sure who the person is.”

“What about Cuddles? She died a few years ago.”

“God, we’re not doing your *dog*. No pets.”

It is not necessary that the spirit contacted be someone that the participants know personally. “We could pick a movie star. Like Cary Grant.”

“Trixie, aren’t his movies in *black-and-white*? No, if we pick someone famous it’s got to be someone we all know.” Nicole adjusted her hair clip. Her straight blonde hair stayed neatly affixed. I hid my fingers in my bushy orange ponytail.

“We should pick a Biblical figure.” Paul cradled a Bible which he had produced from I didn’t know where. Nicole sighed and took Paul’s Bible and laid it on the floor.

“No, seriously, isn’t what this trip is about. Getting closer to Jesus? Let’s do Jesus.”

“Look, Paul, I don’t think Craig would like that.” Danny leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, his dark and hairy arms, over his chest.

“Yeah, Paul, maybe that’s not such a great idea.”

“You were just telling Vega not to be a spoilsport, Nicole. That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? To deepen our faith.”

Everyone around the table nodded, including me.

“Okay, I guess there’s no harm in trying. Is that alright with you, Trixie? Maybe this will be good for you, you know, since you’re new to the church.” Nicole reached behind Paul and snapped off the lights. Flickering candles and the dying flames in the fireplace were the only lights in the room.

I nodded and blushed. “Okay, everyone. Hold hands.” I should have assisted in the seating arrangements. I was the medium. I could have assigned Danny to sit

beside me. Instead, he was two chairs down. I had to hold Nicole's hand on one side and one of the Jennifers on the other. *Are you going to be holding hands around a campfire singing Kumbaya?* No campfire, no singing, just praying. Completely different.

“And to summon the spirit of Jesus, we all must be open-minded. We breathe in and out slowly through the nose and mouth. Try to remain calm and comfortable and keep your minds blank.” The storm passed, and I am climbing on the rocks, scaling the outcroppings of Anastasia limestone along the shore. Danny is up ahead. It is only the two of us. He slips. I reach out and catch him. He looks at me and smiles because I saved him and because it is me. Then he leans forward and kisses me, full on the lips. I could see it. It would happen. Only losers leave junior high without being kissed. “Good, we all should be in touch with our senses. Now, everyone's going to repeat after me, and we'll chant this until we get a response from-“

“What kind of response, Trixie?” Nicole whispered in my ear and loud enough for the circle to hear. “Sorry for talking.”

“That's okay. A response could manifest itself in any form: a drop in temperature, a rapping sound, a gust of wind. That's why we all need to be in touch with our senses. So we can observe anything.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” I inhaled and opened my eyes. Paul and Nicole were concentrating: their expressions were blank. Danny's brow was furrowed and his eyes were shut tight. His pink lips were drawn. I didn't think Jillian would call his expression sex-

face. “Now, repeat after me: *Our beloved Jesus*,” my throat was dry and burned. I coughed and continued, “*we ask that you commune with us and move among us*,” I began and the circle’s echo of my words soon timed in unison. Danny’s lips were still drawn. “*Our beloved Jesus we ask that you commune with us and move among us. Our beloved Jesus we ask that you commune with us and move among us. Our beloved Jesus we ask that you commune with us-*“

“Okay, picadillo it is, who’s hungry? Why are the lights off? What the hell are you guys doing?” The lights flipped on. Craig stood in the kitchen doorway wearing an apron and carrying a stack of paper plates.

“We were just fooling around, Craig. No biggie.” Paul leaned back and propped his chair against the wall.

“Paul, chair on all fours. Now.” Craig put down the stack of plates and untied the apron. “Whose idea was this?”

I raised my hand. “Mine. I’m sorry, Craig. We were just ... kinda bored.”

Craig scowled. “This makes me quite uncomfortable. I don’t want you guys to ever do this again. Séances themselves are bad enough, practically witchcraft, but this is...” His gaze swept around the circle at everyone and kept landing on me. “C’mon, let’s eat. The food’s getting cold.” He turned and carried on to the kitchen. He didn’t wink at me and he didn’t squeeze my shoulder.

Nicole Rybzick slapped Paul’s hand and hissed. “I *told* you it was a bad idea.”

He shook his head. “Don’t you even try. You were just as into it as I was.” He smiled at me. “Don’t worry about it, Trixie, you’re cool.”

“Yeah, Trixie. Craig’ll get over it. He’s fickle that way.” She grimaced.

I looked to Danny. He wet his fingertips with his tongue and extinguished the candles. Then he looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, and left.

It was the last day of junior high. Mr. Spiner had just returned my final paper, applauding my research on Canadian gun control: “Quite impressed with your resourcefulness, Miss Voyles. I don’t even know where to start looking for such up-to-date statistics.” I was walking to the water fountain next to the seventh grade lockers, scanning my paper for additional praise. Someone was there taking a cool drink.

“Why, hello, Trixie. We must stop running into each other like this.” His hair was dark and shiny, and his eyes were dark and shiny. He extracted a red rose from his back pocket and slipped its stem between his teeth. Then he stepped aside and gestured me forward to take a cool drink. My gallant Latin lover.

The water was refreshing and moistened my lips and mouth. “Tastes good, doesn’t it? The water rushing into your mouth.” Danny offered the rose to me. “I’d like you to have this, Trixie. Beatrice. I’ve been wanting to approach you ever since our last water fountain rendez-vous. I dream of kissing you. But before I do, I need you to answer a question. Have you been baptized?”

“C’mon, Trixie, it’s cleared up!”

“What the hell?” Clearly this was a joke. Jillian must have put him up to this. But she wasn’t that cruel. She wasn’t cruel.

“Baptized? Have you been baptized? *We’re going on a scavenger hunt.* I don’t think I can kiss a girl who hasn’t accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior. So, have you taken the plunge?” Danny grasped my arm and started shaking me. “Have you taken the plunge?”

“*Trixie! Come on, wake up!*” Nicole was gentling jostling my arm. The first bit of daylight was filtering in through the cabin’s east-facing windows. “Everyone else is already at the trail. I’ll wait outside for you.”

I cleaned up and hurried outside to join Nicole. Craig, Paul, Danny and the rest of the kids were waiting for us at the trail’s head. Craig and Paul smiled at me. Danny didn’t. *I don’t think I can kiss a girl who hasn’t accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior. So have you?* “Glad you girls could join us.” Craig winked at me. He *was* fickle. “We’ve already paired up, and I’ve explained the rules to the rest of the group, it’s really simple. Just follow the designated trail and look for the items on your list. When you find them, take a picture.” He handed me a list and Nicole a Polaroid camera. “Everyone has different lists and different trails, so you should all be hunting separately. This is a time to bond with your partner and learn about your environment. Okay, we’ll meet back at the lodge in two hours. Good luck.”

Nicole and I headed out on the red trail. It crossed the dunes and weaved in and out of the seagrass. Nicole steadied the camera an arm’s length away and snapped a picture of herself. She ripped the photo out of the camera and shook it in the air. I wondered if the salt in the air would affect the development of the photo. My lips tingled with salt. It tasted like the saline solution for my contacts.

“So, what’s first on our list?”

The list contained different types of organisms and trees and flowers.

“Melaleuca.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a tree, Nicole. Aren’t you *from* Florida?”

“Yes. But I grew up in Fort Lauderdale. We moved here when I was in third grade.”

“I didn’t know that.” Nicole had attended a different elementary school. We met at the beginning of last year. “Did you know Danny when you lived there?”

“Trixie, Fort Lauderdale and Miami are two pretty big, pretty different cities.”

“Yes, Fort Lauderdale’s in Broward County, Miami’s in Dade. But they’re close. I don’t know, you guys could have had the same friends.”

Nicole laughed. She tilted her head back and thrust her breasts out when she laughed. There was no way that her breasts were that big. She must have been wearing one seriously padded bra. I wore an undershirt. “You’ve got to be kidding, Trixie. Danny and I would *not* have had the same friends. He’s going to spend the whole summer at some Christian camp on Calle Ocho where they build houses for like refugees or something. Not my scene.”

Danny would be in Miami for the summer. I wouldn’t see him until I was in high school. I wouldn’t see him until I was in high school unkissed. I spotted spiral rows of dark green leaves. “There’s a melaleuca. You wanna take the picture?”

Nicole squatted and squinted. “Say cheese!” She snapped the shutter and yanked the picture out of the camera. We continued on the trail ducking beneath some errant Brazilian pepper branches.

“I thought you guys were friends. Don’t you like him? I mean, *like like* him?”

Nicole gagged. “Barf! Absolutely not. Danny Vega is so ... what’s the word I’m looking for ... boring! And so damn religious. Church is like, his life.” *I don’t think I can kiss a girl who hasn’t accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior. So have you?*

“Wow. I had no idea he was so into it.”

“Yeah, he is. But, anyway, I like someone else.” Nicole grinned at me and batted her full ‘n’ soft eyelashes. She feigned a swoon.

“Okay, so who do you like?”

“I figured it was obvious.” She stood on her tiptoes to peek over the breezy grasses, but her sandals sunk into the sand so she didn’t reach any great heights. “*Craig!*”

“Really?”

“Of course! He is so hot!” She snapped a frond off a saw palmetto and fanned herself.

“Isn’t he kind of old?” We approached a gumbo-limbo. Its bark was peeling in curls like apple skins or shredded cheese. “That’s number two on the list: tourist tree.”

“That thing’s called a tourist tree? What a screwy name.”

“No, it’s called a gumbo-limbo. It’s nicknamed the tourist tree because it’s bark peels.”

Nicole took the picture. “He’s twenty-five. When I’m twenty-five, eleven years will be nothing.”

We documented and photographed osprey and Spanish moss and aningas and armadillos and lantana and even some panther tracks. When we reached a cluster of cabbage palms Nicole asked if Cabbage Patch Kids got their names from those trees. She still had her Cabbage Patch Kid, Susannah Alice, on her bed at home. I told her I thought the two were simply a coincidence. The trail wound through mangroves and around cypress knees along Myrtle Creek back up to the lodge. When we finished the hunt the lodge was empty. Nicole poured herself a glass of water *-the water was refreshing and moistened my lips and mouth. “Tastes good, doesn’t it? The water rushing into your mouth”* –and plopped down in one of the overstuffed easy chairs.

I leaned against the dormant fireplace. “Nicole, have you been baptized?”

She nodded. “When I was twelve.”

“I thought people get baptized when they’re babies.”

“Some people do. But Disciples have this thing, like this philosophy, they call it ‘believer’s baptism’. It means that when you’re baptized it’s supposed to be your own personal choice, not just what your parents want when you’re a baby. It’s kind of a big deal to some Disciples.”

“And where do you get baptized? At Tropical Sands?”

“Yeah, me, I got baptized at the church. There’s this little bathtub thing behind where the choir sits. I guess you can do it anywhere. A few years ago

Reverend Hilton baptized Paul at the beach when we were down at Jonathan Dickinson.”

“Can Craig perform a baptism?”

“”Yeah, I guess so. He *is* a minister. And a damn *fine* minister at that.” She giggled.

“So he could baptize me. Here. Right?”

I don't think I can kiss a girl who hasn't accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior. So have you?

“I don't know. I don't see why not.” Nicole pulled her self-snapshot from her shorts pocket. “Check *me* out. This is one good picture.”

I stepped out onto the porch and ducked back under the overhang. In the few minutes that we had been inside the sky had darkened and it had started to rain. The live oaks and banyans were swaying in the oncoming wind. Melinda Apple and Craig were approaching the lodge, shielding their heads with the scavenger hunt packets. Melinda Apple was only in seventh grade, she had one whole more year of junior high, and she already had a full-fledged boyfriend, Greg Zavalacki, who regularly made out with her in the courtyard before homeroom.

“Hey, Trixie! Are you and Nicole done with your list already?”

I pointed inside to Nicole. “We finished a little while ago.” I leaned forward and squinted at the sky. From east to west the sky was darkening. The gradations would soon be indiscernible. “Craig, I was wondering-“

“Man, it's really coming down on the other side of the island!” Paul and Danny emerged from the brush, running, soaked, and sheltering their equipment

under their shirts. Danny's wet clothes clung to his body. I wished that I could be small enough so that he could carry me under his shirt along with the Polaroid. He looked skinnier than ever.

“Okay, guys, c'mon, let's get on inside.” Craig ushered us into the lodge.

“Hey, Craig, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Danny eyed me as he passed by.

“Sure, Trixie. What's on your mind?”

I waited until it was just Craig and I on the porch. “Nicole said she thought you can perform baptisms. Have you ever?”

Craig smiled. “A few at seminary, a few back at Tropical Sands.” His smile had grown to a downright grin. “Why do you ask?”

I breathed in and closed my eyes. “I'd like you to baptize me.” I opened my eyes. Craig was still grinning. I had said the words out loud.

“Let's sit down first, Trixie.” We took seats in the only two chairs on the porch. Craig sat in the director's chair. I sat in the rocking chair. We were positioned at different heights. Looking down to me, he leaned in and clasped his hands together. “You understand that baptism is a serious undertaking. It means that you are pledging not just your faith, but your life to Jesus. You haven't been attending this church very long. Are you sure that you are prepared to make this commitment?”

It was just a few drops of water on the head. “Yes. Yes, I am sure. And I'd like to get baptized right away.” The storm shutters banged against the cabin. Maybe that was a response from the other side.

“Great! I’ll talk to Reverend Hilton about it when we get back, We can probably doing it on Sunday. It’ll be mentioned in next service’s program, too.”

Craig patted my knee and stood, turning to take shelter in the lodge.

School ended on Wednesday. “Sunday’s too late.” I rose and grabbed his sleeve. He halted.

“Too late?”

“I need to be baptized here. Nicole said that Paul was baptized at a retreat once down south. That’s what I’d like. Here. Before we leave.”

Queen palms’ fronds thrashed in the wet wind. Craig pointed to the trees, he pointed to the beach. “Trixie, we’re in the middle of a hurricane.”

The sunbathers and sandcastle builders had abandoned the beach. The surf swell was all foam and force and high, two, maybe three feet. The flags on the lifeguard stand whipped around in the squall. The flags were green. “It’s just a tropical storm, Craig. Look!” I pointed to the lifeguard stand. “Hurricane flags are red and black. And it’s not like the storm itself is coming ashore. These are just the feederbands. If you do it now, everything’ll be okay. You could do it really quickly. Please, it’s very important.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t you wait until we get back to church? It’s only one week.”

No he couldn’t understand. He was twenty-five, he wasn’t fourteen, and he had had a Jewish girlfriend, a Jewish girlfriend serious enough to bring on a Christian youth group retreat. No, he couldn’t understand. “I can’t wait until we get back.” I stared out at the ocean and the contrast between the whitecaps and the dark waves.

The black clouds were disintegrating at their edges, running off into wispy trails. A lone wave crashed against the rocks. *What do you think, that you're going to have some kind of spiritual awakening when you're there?* “This retreat, being here, on this island, with all of you, has really changed me. I feel like I've had some kind of spiritual awakening while I've been here. I am sorry about that séance. It started out as a joke. Something I read about in a stupid magazine, *Cosmo*, the models, the women, on the covers are always standing in such ridiculous poses. I read about how to conduct a séance and I thought it would be fun, but then I began to think about religion and spiritualism and the occult and how they all are kind of similar, just different aspects, different interpretations of the same thing, so it didn't really seem like a bad idea, it didn't seem wrong to summon Jesus. And then, when I was in bed, last night, I started thinking about it all and where I fit in, and when we were out on the scavenger hunt today, in the marshes, I heard the crickets and the woodpeckers, and then I saw the sky, and it was all dark because of this storm with a violent wind, which seems so scientific, and maybe it is, but there's some kind of force at work there, and it must be God. So I think I've come to really believe it, believe in Jesus and God, and I want to be baptized, I know my life will change if I am, and I want to do it here, now, before we leave, so that I can be part of this, this force, this place that's made me believe.” I plopped back down in the rocking chair, which immediately keeled forward and reeled back.

“It means that much to you, does it?”

I nodded.

Craig scrutinized the shore. The surf swell was increasing in foam, force and height. “Okay, well, if we do this, it has to be now. Feederbands or not, there’s a tropical storm out there. It even has a name-“

“Bernardo.”

“Exactly. We better do this soon before the storm gets any worse. I’m not going to have you washing out to sea at the moment your Christian life starts.”

I laughed. It seemed like the kind thing to do, the Christian thing. “Okay, let’s go.” He was really going to do this. Maybe it was because he was new and inexperienced. Maybe he received commissions on baptisms or there were quotas to meet. Maybe I was just that convincing. Maybe I did believe. I jumped off the porch and landed in a swampy puddle. Mud splashed and soaked my legs.

“Wait a moment, Trixie. We need to get everybody else.”

“What? What for?”

“It’s customary to be baptized in front of the congregation. Granted, a bunch of junior high schoolers don’t equal a congregation, but it’s the best we can do. And it seems fitting since it was while bonding with these kids that you found God.” Craig retreated inside to inform the others.

I wandered down to the beach. The rain had subsided, momentarily, and the wind was languishing. In a short time another band would move in and lash the coast. The sky was still menacing. The ocean was still inhospitable. The sand was strewn with seaweed, not tar and man-o’war. I buried my feet in the mixture of soft seaweed and soft sand. I looked out to the ocean, and imagined Africa over there, just past the horizon. I felt grateful to know that the Earth was round, grateful that I

didn't believe that the world just stopped over there, past the horizon. I looked skyward. Above me were deep convective clouds.

“I'm very honored that you've chosen me to be the minister who baptizes you, Trixie.” I hadn't heard Craig approaching. I pivoted, my heel sinking deeper into the seaweedsand, and saw the other kids nearing the shore. A few of them held battery-operated lanterns above their heads. Craig was wearing long whites robes over his jeans and t-shirt. Golden crosses were embroidered on the chest. The others reached us and stood in a semicircle, a rainbow, protecting Craig and I from the dunes. “Now, Disciples practice baptism by immersion. This is powerfully symbolic because it represents Jesus' own baptism, and, in submerging into the water and reemerging, you are beginning a new life and adopting Christ. You'll burst into new life with the sound and the feel of rushing water. Typically the baptized descends into the baptismal and the minister dunks them completely into the water, so I think you and I will just walk into the ocean, I'll hold you in my arms, lower you back and submerge you. Now, everyone, before we welcome Trixie into her new life as a disciple of Christ, I'd like you all to bow your heads and say a silent prayer and reflect on your commitments to your own journeys of faith.” I looked down at my legs. They were coming to halt in the kelpy quicksand. “Are you ready, Trixie?” It would be more than a few drops of water on the head, but not much more. I nodded.

Craig escorted me into the water and after a few yards he stopped. He held my biceps and supported my back with his arm. Then he began reciting a prayer. “Dear Heavenly Father, today we would like to welcome ...” he dipped me and I closed my eyes as I passed beneath the choppy surface and into the tranquil water.

The world was still. Suddenly my head was bombarded with a wave and I was dislodged from Craig's clutch. My head was scraping against the sand, but I couldn't figure out which way to swim to the surface. I knew you were supposed to stay calm when caught in a current, so I stopped struggling.

I felt suction on my lips. When I was five my mom took a bathroom break while vacuuming. I tiptoed up to the vacuum cleaner and picked up one of the attachments. I put it up to my face to see what the swooshing air looked like inside. When I turned the machine on, the nozzle sprang at my face starting sucking my lips down the tube. My mother stumbled out of the bathroom, her pants caught around her ankles, and hit the off switch before my lips were gone for good.

Air rushed down my throat and back up again and my body jerked and I started coughing. Water spilled forth from my mouth. My eyes were stuck shut with salt. I slowly forced them open. I was on the beach, sitting on the sand, sinking into the mirish sand. The Chi Rho kids surrounded me. Craig was across from me, kneeling. He wiped his mouth. I coughed and more water issued forth from my body.

Craig reached over and rubbed my back. "How are you doing? I am so sorry I lost you out there. I didn't hear that wave coming."

I nodded. The sand was undulating under my body. It was trying to pull me down. I coughed again. The water wasn't refreshing. It was briny and dried my lips and tongue.

Paul hunched down beside. “He saved your life, Voyles. Craig was a lifeguard in college. He did CPR.” He hadn’t needed me to explain the warning flags.

“Just mouth-to-mouth. I’m sure you would have been fine even without it. But it’s good to be safe.” Craig squeezed my shoulder and removed his hand. “Well, I guess we’ll finish then? Beatrice Voyles, do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and proclaim him Lord and Savior of your life?”

I nodded. Craig leaned towards me and whispered. “You say: ‘I do’.”

“I do.”

“Then I welcome you to our church, and baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” “Amen.” Craig rose and offered me a hand up. “We should head back to the lodge and start getting our gear together, guys. It looks like this was just a break in the storm. We want to get on back to Palatka as soon as we can.”

Paul ran up to Craig. “Can we make s’mores before we leave, Craig? We haven’t made s’mores *at all* since we’ve been here.”

Craig laughed. “You mean since yesterday? I suppose ... just be quick about it. And no catching the lodge on fire.” He left the beach with the others.

I squinted and scanned the shore and the dunes and even the ocean for Danny. He wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere. *Danny offered the rose to me. “I’d like you to have this, Trixie. I’ve been wanting to approach you ever since our last water fountain rendez-vous. I dream of kissing you. But before I do, I need to know something. Have you been baptized?” I smiled. “At the peril of my life. Don’t you*

see what a sacrifice I am willing to make for you?" Danny embraced me. "I couldn't kiss a girl who hasn't accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior. Thank you for taking the plunge." He met my lips with his. We kissed. It was wet and juicy and wonderful. Then I spotted him, he was already up at the campsite, transporting a bag of marshmallows from the boys' cabin to the lodge. "I can't believe you, Trixie!" Nicole Rybzick grabbed my arm.

I loosened her clench. "What? What are you talking about?" She knew I heard noble gas data and not prayers, she knew I saw deep convective clouds and not heaven.

"I trusted you. I *told* you I liked him. And then you go and get baptized in the ocean. So he can hold you in his arms and kiss you on the mouth."

"WHAT?"

"You don't fool me for a second, Trixie. I know Paul told you about Craig before you even came to Chi Rho, that's why you joined. I thought you were different than that slutty friend of yours. But you and Jillian are exactly alike." Nicole Rybzick stormed off. She looked over her shoulder. "And to think, I was going to invite you to my birthday party next week!" She stumbled in the sand as she ran up to the lodge.

I traced my lips with my fingertips. They stung and cracked. I tasted blood seeping into my mouth. If Paul hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known Craig performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on me. Jillian and I had taken a CPR course for baby-sitting at the rec center last summer. We practiced mouth-to-mouth on inflatable dummies. The dummies were reused for each class, and the hole that was

their mouths had to be sterilized after each session. I turned my shorts pockets inside-out and deposited the contents of wet sand on the beach.

“Despite the storm, or perhaps because of it, this has been a successful and memorable Chi Rho retreat. I’d like once again to welcome Trixie to our church and congratulate her on the decision she has made here today.” Craig tipped his head to me. Paul grinned at me. Nicole glared at me. And Danny Vega gave me a look of indifference. “Now let us join hands and say the prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples. Our Father, who art in Heaven ...”

Chapter 6: The Happiest Cruise that Ever Sailed

I speak fifty languages. I have stayed in the same building for my entire life. I have been wearing the same dress for over three decades. There used to be an enormous toile tutu around my skirt when I was a can-can dancer. But that was only for a short while and when the humans converted my nationality from French to American, and my name from Sylvie to Sally, they ripped off the tutu and left me in the same little pale blue dress.

Out of all of us, and we number around one hundred and fifty, I am the only one who sings in an American accent. Nobody is interested in an American doll. Greta and Fritz frolic in their wooden shoes in a field of tulips. Giuseppe steers his gondola. Jose and Maria tango and fan dance. The little kids who sail into our room, our indoor Europe, want costumes and colors and novelty. Nobody oohs and aaahs over an unadorned American doll who has no props.

But that is irrelevant. It has been thirty years now that we have all been trapped in here singing the same simple song over and over and over again. I want a second tune in my repertory. And I think I have finally found a way to achieve that dream.

“Sally, you better get back into position. It’s almost nine.” Noni waved goodbye as she hurried out of our room, through Asia and Africa and the Americas back to her home in the South Pacific. Kids love Noni. She is the cute, tan hula girl who smiles aloha as the ride ends. Their final farewell to Small World. I like Noni,

too. Most of the South Pacific dolls keep to themselves and their surf boards and leis and wild fire dances, but Noni's boyfriend is Mikhail, one of the fur-capped Cossaks. She comes all the way over to Europe every night.

I was sitting on the astroturf river bank splashing my feet in the no longer turquoise water. William motioned to me with his staff. William is a Tower of London guard and is supposed to remain very very still throughout the day. "Sally, get back into place. You're going to get someone in trouble."

"What does it matter, William?"

"You are far too cynical, Sally. Hurry it up, they're starting the boats."

I sighed, shook the water off my feet, and ran back over to my spot next to Sean who picked four-leaf clovers and Bruce who played the bagpipes. The lone American that they couldn't find anyplace else to deposit. I heard some humans working in the launch area, pulling levers and making mechanical noises. One of them shouted: Cue music! I grimaced. Everyone began to sing.

"It's a world of laughter, a world of tears, it's a world of hopes and a world of tears, there's so much that we share that it's time we're aware ..."

Mommy, look, it's 'Small World'!

The first boat of the day, sea green and plastic, glided into the room. The craft was filled with families: moms and dads and grandparents and kids kids kids. The kids pointed at Sean and Bruce, most clearly overlooking me. They marveled at Babette and Brigitte who kicked their fishnet stockinged legs high in the air. I was never a very good kicker. *There is just one moon and one golden sun, and a smile means friendship to everyone.* The first boat winded along the waterway past Spain,

see, honey, this isn't just a little kids' ride, they have real literary figures here, a mother pointed out Don and Pancho and their windmill to her teenager who just rolled his eyes, past Lisel and Kurt who yodeled their versions of the song, and out of Europe into the Middle East. Daddy, look at the flying carpets! *Though the mountains divide and the oceans are wide ...* Goodness this ride is politically incorrect.

" ... it's a small world after all. It's a small world after all, it's a small world after all, it's a small world after all, it's a small, small world ..."

That's how we spend the day, every day. Even on Christmas. Boat after plastic boat sails into our little European room and out into Asia. We sing and sing all day long until we aren't even trying anymore. *It's a world of laughter, a world of tears, it's a world of hopes and a world of fears, there's so much that we share that it's time we're aware it's a small world after all.* Our mouths move on their own and emits the same melody and words that is more impressionable of the ride than we are. I figured that's how it would be forever until finally our circuits shorted and audio-animatronics became a nostalgic antiquity. Parents and older kids cringe when they first hear the music and groan, this song is going to be stuck in my heard all day. Me, I have to hear that and just sway side to side to side to side and smile. At least Bobo, he's the clown at the very end of the ride, his face was painted with a perpetual frown, so he doesn't have to fake it for all eternity as he travels twenty feet up and down and up and down in his hot air balloon. Until last week I assumed I would always have to believe, and never actually know, that there is just one moon and one

golden sun. Until last week when I wasn't able to get back into position quickly enough.

It was early evening when one of the boats malfunctioned. Just stopped on the track. The humans, that day it was Mike and Kim, escorted all of the passengers out of the ride through the emergency exits. For twenty whole minutes in the middle of the day, we had a break. While the humans were at the control board in the launch area trying to solve the problem, our continent rooms were completely empty. Everyone rested but I hurried over to Africa. I hadn't visited my friends Tanganyika and Mamou for days so I wanted to say a quick hello before we had to start singing again.

We were chatting, and I was petting their hyena when Mike walked into the room. Everyone froze in place. Mike was checking something mechanical on the underwater track. He nearly electrocuted himself as he fixed the malfunction. Humans. Mike stood and glanced around the room. I think he liked all of the animals in Africa and the drummers and of course Cleopatra. Every male human has a thing for Cleopatra and oogles over her as they pass through Africa. He was grinning and almost didn't see me as he left the room. But he peeked over his shoulder for one last lustful look at Cleopatra and instead spotted me.

KIM! He hurried over and yanked me up and under his arm. *WHY DO YOU KEEP MOVING THE AMERICAN GIRL! SHE BELONGS IN EUROPE, NOT AFRICA!*

WHAT?

Mike sighed. *Nothing.* Mike emerged from the jungle and we passed the camel drivers. They winked at me.

DON'T FORGET TO CHECK THE EMERGENCY EXITS! WE'RE ABOUT TO REOPEN!

Mike sighed again. What did he have to sigh about? He had a mom and a dad and everyday got to leave the Magic Kingdom, got to leave the *ride*, and go home to them. He didn't have a permanent smile and an ancestry of wood and plastic.

The emergency exit was in Asia, by the snake charmer. The waterway forked there and the passenger boats continued on through the rest of the ride. But a small canal turned to the right, a small canal that led old or broken boats to the employee only area where they went to be dismantled. Along the bank of that canal was a small corridor that guided passengers to the emergency exit. As Mike trudged over to the emergency exit to check if it was unlocked, I spied another exit. In the wall, on the side of the canal was a small flap that let water in and out. It probably served for drainage or something similar, but it resembled a doggy door, or at least what I imagined a doggy door to look like. It was too small for Mike's body or even Kim's, but it was just large enough to let a child or an audio-animatronic doll escape.

Mike plopped me back into my spot on the hill beside Ireland. Sean rolled his eyes at me. Bruce grinned. Nobody else ever teased the humans. Everyone else had compatriots and dolls who shared their accents and cultures and attention from the passengers aboard the happiest cruise that ever sailed.

The motors of the underwater tracks began to spin and bubbles gurgled forth from the two foot depths of the river. Sean started to tend to his clover patch and

Bruce raised his bagpipes. The stereo system turned on and our voices blasted out of the speakers. *“It’s a world of laughter, a world of tears, it’s a world of hopes and a world of tears, there’s so much that we share that it’s time we’re aware ...”*

For once, though, I didn’t join in the singing. All I could think of was that very small flapping door leading to I didn’t know where, anywhere, *outside*. I concentrated on the voices of my fellow dolls in an attempt to ignore the voice inside my head, it will never work, you’ll never be able to escape, what will you do once you’re out? As natural as it always had been to continue on to *“it’s a small world after all”*, I could barely force my mouth to move to lip sync the tune. All I could think of was the sunshine that I know I saw on the other side of that flapping door, and Mike’s hands as they reached down to grab and reprimand me once I was discovered outside.

Look at the can-can dancers, Billy!

Years ago I had scoured the building for a way out. None of us were tall enough to reach the emergency exit doors, and they were too heavy to push open anyways. The main entrance and exit, through which guests launched their courses charted for adventure and then disembark, are gated and locked at night. The flapping door must have been installed recently. The flapping door was revolutionary.

I stared at the passengers in the next boats. Pale skin, fanny packs, camcorders, runny noses. They snapshot and videotaped the room, but why I didn’t understand. *It’s a world of laughter, a world of tears*. These humans could go

anywhere. Why would they waste their time in this air-conditioned stereotypical replica when they could actually go to Europe themselves?

At night Noni left her people and joined Mikhail and the other Russians. Babette and Brigitte giggled and cooed and shared secrets in French. *Est-ce que tu as vu cet homme japonais aujourd'hui? Il était si mignon!* I understood their secrets, but they weren't mine to share. Don and Pancho chased their windmill, and José and Maria twirled around in a slow dance holding each other tight. Often Sean and Bruce would invite me over to participate in their gaelic games, and that was fun, most of the time. But I still could never be included in their cronyism.

So that directs the course back to the revolutionary flapping door and the very imaginable unimaginable: what lay beyond it. Some people wouldn't want to leave. The dolls in the Americas enjoyed basking on the Mayan temples in their artificial sunlight and tending to their llamas and coffee fields. They kept to themselves. But I could get all of the European dolls to follow me, and then probably the Asians would conform and so forth. Everyone of us had at least gone for a dip in the river once, so swimming out through the flapping door would not be an issue. I almost told Sean and Bruce, but decided to keep my discovery to myself for awhile. I needed a little more time to quell my pessimism and fear of getting caught.

The next day attendance in the park was unusually low. Most of the boats that sailed past were half empty. Flash bulbs blinded the room left and right as passengers preserved into memory the charming and whimsical representations of Greece and Spain and Ireland and France. It was nearly impossible not to blink.

In the evening the ride cleared out even more. Every evening at sunset fireworks shoot into the sky above Cinderella Castle. All the park visitors rush outside to crane their heads for a good twenty minutes. All the park visitors rush outside and abandon the rides. Usually granting us a half hour of freedom.

Empty vessels sauntered in and out of the room, mindlessly following the underwater track. Everyone relaxed and I sat down on the riverbank and stared at my reflection in the water. Short brown hair, pale blue dress, sneakers. The others, Sean and Bruce, Noni and Mikhail, were quite striking in their ethnic uniquenesses. But I, the lone American, would never stand out in a crowd. I could blend in, right then, amidst the masses of humans, and no one would ever know. Through the exit from Europe into Asia I sneaked a peek at that beckoning emergency exit corridor. Then I glanced around at my fellow dolls. Brigitte and Babette loved to gossip. Jose and Maria lived for their tangos. William liked to guard our wooden Buckingham Palace. Everyone else was happy here. Maybe I didn't need to take them with me, endanger them. Maybe I could slip out of that flapping door and never get caught.

"Sally, attention!" William must have spied some passengers around the corner. I stood and started singing and swaying, carrying on with my plan until something even more revolutionary took place.

There were just three people in the pale yellow boat that rounded the corner and entered our world. A mother and father and little girl. There was absolutely nothing extraordinary about them. The father held his camcorder on his shoulder and documented Brigitte and Babette's high kicks. The mother remarked on London

Bridge and tried to draw her daughter's attention to William in his very adorable soldier costume. But the little girl's attention was focused on me.

"Mama, look at her!" The little girl extended her arm and pointed her finger directly at me. For the first time in my entire life I made eye contact with a human.

The mother shook her head and smiled. She whispered to her husband. We bring her here and she likes the boring dolls. But the little girl heard her mother's dismissal and defended me.

"Mama take that back. She's not boring." She talked to her mother, but stared at me. "She looks like Corinne Gabrielson. Doesn't she? She's so pretty." The mother laughed and encircled her arm around the little girl's shoulder. Yes, sweetie, she does. I take it back.

The little girl didn't break her gaze as they sailed around France and past Spain. I could see her straining to look at me as their pale yellow boat glided out of the room. A few minutes later the fireworks stopped. And the boats started filling back up again. And more passengers sailed in and out, oohing and aahing over everyone else's costumes and colors and novelty.

I still dream about what lies beyond the flapping door. Sometimes I do. Mostly I dream about that revolutionary little girl. She hasn't sailed by since that evening. But I know she remembers me. After all, I look like Corrine Gabrielson.

Chapter 7: Brinkmanship

Trick-or-treating is important. Preparation for trick-or-treating is equally important. So that October, in sixth grade, it was Paula Jean Hammond and me hanging out at the Prado gate two weeks before Halloween, figuring out what our costumes would be. It was just Paula Jean and me because Fritzie McGillicuttie who triangled out our trio was in the hospital breathing with the help of an iron lung. Each year the three of us spent the weeks leading up to Halloween planning our costumes, our door-knocking strategies and our routes. Fritzie and Paula Jean did most of the costume collaboration themselves. I dressed as a witch each year, fully ensconced in black with white face paint and blood red lips: Agent Charlotte Shepherd blending into the darkness of night. It was the ideal cover for an aspiring spy: no one would ever remember my costume or suspect me. I only assisted Fritzie and Paula Jean with whose bell to ring and which streets to take if we were being shadowed. Unlike Paula Jean's, my costume was already set that year, so I tightrope-walked on the four-foot-high coral rock wall that shielded the sunken park from the road. Across Red Road, past some apartment buildings, I could see Variety Children's Hospital rising from behind a queen palm orchard. The hospital was only a few blocks away, but we hadn't been able to see Fritzie since summer. Paula Jean straddled the wall further down and was studying her spread-out *Photoplay*.

“What do you think of Natalie Wood?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I never thought of Natalie Wood. Paula Jean, she worshipped movies and film stars: especially Alfred Hitchcock pictures and his starlets du jour: Grace Kelly, Eva Marie Saint, Kim Novak. We were only ten when *Psycho* played at the Miracle, but Paula Jean's older sister Lorraine sold popcorn at the theater concession stand and sneaked us in for a late night showing. Still today I will only take baths, but the film electrified Paula Jean. That year she was Janet Leigh. It was her fourth year dressing as a Hitchcock leading lady for Halloween. As Paula Jean and I descended the stairs from her bedroom to go get Fritzie, her mother passed through the front hallway cradling a mixing bowl. She glanced up and saw Paula Jean dressed in a bathrobe. Her hair was wet, and fake blood covered her face and arms and legs, our concoction of corn syrup and red food coloring. "Paula Jean Hammond, *what* are you wearing?" Mrs. Hammond scowled up at us. At Paula Jean. "Mother, it's my costume. I'm Janet Leigh. From *Psycho*." Mrs. Hammond yanked the wooden spoon out of the mixing bowl and started waving it above her head, flinging bits of cake batter against the walls. "*Psycho!* You mean that horror film *Psycho*? How do you know what people in that movie look like? George! George, turn off that set and get in here! Your daughter apparently has been to see a *horror film*." Mr. Hammond hollered back from the family room. "She works at the Miracle, what do you expect?" The blood drained from Mrs. Hammond's face. She wasn't even wearing white face paint. "Did Lorraine get you into that theater?" Paula Jean was grounded for two weeks, Lorraine for one. If only we had gotten dressed at my house, instead of Paula Jean's. My mother was a dutiful parent and housewife, but she would never have made us miss trick-or-treating. My mother

understood important things that other mothers did not. I dragged my broom and crooked hat over to Fritzie's. The two of us stayed in her room playing Scrabble all night. We cringed each time we heard the McGillicuttie's doorbell rang and placed together the wooden tiles as a sign of solidarity for Paula Jean.

Fritzie, too, was always terribly original with her costumes. Polio forced her to wear leg braces and walk with a cane. The leg braces were easy enough to conceal under baggy garments, but she couldn't forego the cane. One year Fritzie wore a suit and tie and hat and spectacles and declared that she was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her hero. Fritzie admired President Kennedy, too, and believed in him. "He can be as great as FDR. They both go by three names." Nobody else I knew much cared for Kennedy. My parents were Republicans and Paula Jean only favored him because she thought he was dreamy.

Another Halloween Fritzie dressed as a fireman and used her cane as the pole. When she first contracted the polio, back when we were so little that we weren't allowed to ride our bikes out of the neighborhood, Fritzie only needed the cane occasionally. Daddy found her an old propeller in a hangar out at Opa-Locka and suggested she dress up as Amelia Earhardt. In fifth grade Fritzie donned Dickensian garments and sought pity as Tiny Tim. That was a few months before the polio progressed to its acute stage and Fritzie had to be hospitalized so an iron lung could help her breathe. She was allowed to receive visitors on Sunday afternoons, but only two at a time, mostly her folks. Paula Jean had been able to see her once or twice at the beginning of the summer. I had gone to visit Fritzie more than that. Unlike Paula Jean, I didn't wince when I saw Fritzie in the iron lung. I imagined she'd been

taken prisoner by some notorious villain: Le Chiffre or Goldfinger. This was just the part in the story where James Bond was trapped. But it would only be momentarily, and soon Fritzie, like Bond, would get out. She just needed an ally.

I scanned the park. Marianne Van Buren and Donna Wenschmen were sitting by the reflecting pools, watching some of the high school boys practice on the tennis courts. I jumped down and peeked out at them over the wall. I snatched my walkie-talkie from my book bag. Last year, when Alan Shepard became the first American to go into space, I told all the kids at school that he was my uncle. Everyone believed me and noticed me, and I was an instacelebrity in the cafeteria and on the blacktop of Coral Gables Elementary. I even wrote away to NASA and, in return, received some signed prints of Alan Shepard. I distributed them to the kids who seemed most interested, including Marianne and Donna. They were such suckers that it took them a good year to realize that Alan Shepard, and I, Charlotte Shepherd, spelled our last names differently. Perhaps because of their stupidity they tortured me the rest of the school year, calling me, “Mrs. Alan Shepard”, an epithet I’ve never really understood, since I claimed I was his niece, not his wife. Thankfully they were seventh graders at Ponce now and there had been no encounters since before summer.

“What are you doing?” Paula Jean glanced up from her glossy spread and stared at my sleuthful stance.

I put my finger to my lips and whispered into my walkie-talkie. “Van Buren, Wenschmen, two o’clock.”

Paula Jean’s walkie-talkie was not in sight, no doubt crushed by textbooks at the bottom of her book bag. Even though my father was the expert in electronics, my

mother knew a thing or two as well and had helped me make those walkie-talkies last year. All three of us had one: Fritzie, Paula Jean and me. All three of us were supposed to carry them around with us at all time. Back in June, when Fritzie had to go into the hospital, she left her walkie-talkie at my house. She had been sleeping over the night before her doctor's appointment, before her doctor and her parents had decided the iron lung would be best for Fritzie for the time being.

“Truth or dare?”

“Truth.” Fritzie always picked truth. I preferred asking truth questions. Although coming up with dares was also fun, especially since Paula Jean always picked truth. Paula Jean grew up to be one of those women who retorted to liquor store clerks with “a real lady never reveals her age.”

“Okay ... if you had one wish, for anything, something selfish, just for you, what would it be? And you can't say to be cured. Polio doesn't fit into truth or dare.”

Fritzie sighed. Polio and getting cured and being normal were always on her mind, so I knew this would be a tough one. She squirmed and cracked her knuckles. Fritzie was constantly cracking her knuckles. Years later when I went to my fancy Christmas parties, I'd hear the host break open walnuts and turn around, expecting to see Fritzie flexing her fingers.

“Isn't that bad for your knuckles? I mean, especially for *your* knuckles?”

“Not you, too, Charlotte. Geez! That's just a myth. And anyways, I figure if my bones are going to go, at least my knuckles will feel relaxed in the process.”

“Okay, sorry. Now answer my question.”

Fritzie took a deep breath. "I'd want to not be scared of the water."

I was puzzled. Fritzie wasn't scared of anything. She'd ran up to a flamingo at Parrot Jungle and tapped it on the nose, just because she thought it would be fun. "What do you mean?"

Fritzie kept talking. Paula Jean, she would have stopped, would have jumped up and suggested we play Clue, denouncing truth-or-dare as a stupid game. But Fritzie stayed put and kept talking. "I mean, you guys go swimming all the time. To the beach, or the Venetian Pool. I'm so jealous, but I've never been swimming, I'd be scared to death of being in the water like that."

It was true; I had never seen Fritzie swim. Whenever Paula Jean and I would go down to the Venetian Pool together, Fritzie would always have other plans. We'd show our pool passes, hide in the grottoes and lounge under the waterfalls and wish Fritzie didn't have a doctor's appointment or an afternoon at her grandmother's. I couldn't understand how I'd been so dumb, so ignorant. Of course Fritzie couldn't go in the water. Her metal leg braces would rust. And her legs themselves might not even work. She was the only kid I'd ever seen who wore pants in the summer.

The next day Fritzie went into the hospital and the next weekend I went to visit her there. I brought her walkie-talkie. Variety was near home, I rode my bike past it all the time. If our walkie-talkies were powerful enough, I could ride over there at prearranged times, sit outside and talk to Fritzie. It was a brilliant plan.

Mrs. McGillicuttie escorted me to the polio wing. The corridor telescoped out in front of me. Everything was very bright and very clean. Light managed to reflect off every surface. The polio wing sounded like the submarine movies Dad and Larry

used to watch. There was this whirring noise coming from all around. Fritzie was in a room all by herself, Mrs. McGillicuttie told me, until they decide what her treatment will be. She led me by my elbow. My mother never did that.

We stepped into a nice sunny room and I saw Fritzie. I saw her head, resting on a padded board, poking out one end of a giant tube. I had never seen an iron lung before and had only assembled a vague idea of how they worked. At first the sight was amusing. Fritzie looked like she was lying in a Soviet space capsule preparing to be launched to the moon. She heard our entrance and turned her head to greet us. Her neck straining to move sounded like when Daddy closes the hurricane shutters and forgets to oil the hinges. She couldn't bend her neck to see us, so I walked forward to enter her line of vision. A clear plastic board jutted out from the top of the tube, a few feet above Fritzie's head. *Life* magazine was laid down flat across it, cover side up. Fritzie had been staring up at a photo of the Kennedys in Palm Beach. She had been staring up at that photo for hours. Fritzie's polio had been part of our lives for years, so of course I knew she was sick, I had known the seriousness of her condition. But it wasn't until I saw that Fritzie might never be able to turn a magazine page on her own again that I realized how trapped she was.

I withdrew her walkie-talkie from my backpack and positioned it on the bedside, iron lung-side table. "You left this at my house."

"Guess I won't be using it anytime soon. But, thanks for bringing it."

Her arms were tucked away in the machine along with the rest of her body. I hadn't factored that into my plan. Maybe we could solicit the aid of a kind nurse to hold the walkie-talkie up to Fritzie's head and operate it for her. But everyone, even

a kind nurse, is potentially under opposition control. Every good spy knows that. No one could be trusted.

I pointed to the magazine. “Want me to turn the page?”

Fritzie smiled. “Nah. The Kennedys feel like home.”

“My dad saw President Kennedy last week.”

Fritzie’s eyes widened. If she’d been standing, she would have been jumping up and down. She probably was trying to inside that iron lung. “Really?”

“He had to go up to the airport in West Palm, my dad, and he and some people went over to Palm Beach for lunch. President Kennedy was there, going to the movies. At the Paramount theatre.”

“What did he see?”

I grinned. “*Doctor No.*”

Fritzie grinned back at me. “I always knew President Kennedy was a Bond fan.”

“Charlotte, it’s already four thirty. What are you talking about?” Paula Jean was pointing at her watch. She was only about fifteen feet away from me, so this time it was permissible that she didn’t have her espionage hardware.

I rolled my eyes. Paula Jean watched too many Hitchcock films and not enough James Bond. “Marianne and Donna, over by the reflecting pools.”

“Oh, them. Charlotte, you really have to stop viewing everyone as an enemy. Especially those two.” Paula Jean was wrong. Marianne and Donna were definitely

under opposition control. Never go against your gut, it is your operational antennae. Every good spy knows that.

Paula Jean pointed to a still from *West Side Story* in the magazine. “But seriously, what do you think about Natalie Wood? I could go as Maria. Say ‘trick-or-treat’ with an Italian accent. ‘Treeek-o-treeeet’.”

“She’s supposed to be Puerto Rican.” A few of the tennis players had called Marianne and Donna over. They were talking to the boys through the green court fence, twirling their hair around their fingers and digging the toes of their shoes in the sand.

“Well, I could be Puerto Rican.” Paula Jean’s eyes drooped deflatedly. Neither of us knew any Puerto Ricans, so we didn’t know how their accents sounded. Cuba we knew. My aunt Mildred visited Havana for her honeymoon well before the Twenty-Sixth of July. She brought me back a pair of wooden castanets and a collapsible fan that unfolded to reveal José Martí’s face. Cuba we knew, and even Jamaica. In the summer Fritzie, Paula Jean and I would ride our bikes down to Coconut Grove and charm the Jamaican sidewalk vendors into giving us free chocolate-covered shrimp. But as for Puerto Rico, to us it was just some random island in the Caribbean.

“Just don’t do the accent, and you’ll be fine.” I had pulled the purple foam handlebar cover from my bike and was using it as a telescope to survey Van Buren and Wenshmen’s behavior. So far, just flirting with boys so old that their mothers would ground them if they ever found out.

“So, I guess you can come over after school and we can get ready. Gosh, Charlotte, you don’t even need to get ready. Same face paint, same dress, same wig every year.”

“It’s tradition.”

“Well if I’m going to be Maria, even an *American* Maria, I’ll need time to get into character. Maybe I can talk to that friend of yours, you know Blanca. She could help me get down all those Puerto Rican moves. ”

“No. Blanca’s from Cuba.”

Blanca ran a coffee shop-convenience store on Eighth Street, back before it was known as Calle Ocho. Blanca said she was a college professor in Havana, before the Twenty-Sixth of July, before Castro. But in America, in the States, her degree wasn’t recognized. So she opened up a convenience store that also sold Cuban coffee and guava pastries. She called it *Siete Onze* until she received a letter from the lawyers of 7-11 threatening to sue her for copyright or trademark infringement. From then on it was just called Quik Mart, or some generic name like that. I stopped noticing the sign.

I liked going to see Blanca for several reasons, but these were my top three: 1. She had a transistor radio that picked up the national station from Cuba. Whenever President Castro delivered one of his marathon speeches, Blanca, and several of the frequenters of her place, construction workers and janitors would listen with screwed up faces and occasionally shout *hijo de puta!* I like profanity in any language; 2. Blanca knew everyone and had connections everywhere. She was the perfect contact for a spy, better than the J.C. Penney catalog; and 3. If business was slow and there

weren't too many people in the shop, she let me finish her Cuba Libre, which she would mix at the beginning of the day and abandon on her desk in the storeroom, revisiting it whenever one of the surlier customers pinched her and asked for her hand in marriage. I liked sipping the beverage and imagining it was poisoned by some Russian agent who wanted to subdue me before prying me for intelligence information. I also liked to circle my fingers around the water rings the condensated glass formed on the mahogany surface. Moments later they'd fade away, like disappearing ink.

Even though I was usually the only American in the store, no one much paid any attention to me. I'd lean on the counter and watch Blanca as she rang up customers. After they left, brown bag in hand, she'd share secrets about them with me.

“That one, Hector Hijuelos, I knew him back in Cuba. You know how he met his wife? He caught her while he was fishing. He has no depth perception; you saw how he missed my hand when he gave me the change? Well, he was casting and whoosh! the line flew out and the hook got caught on the dress of this girl. She was washing her clothes in the river. Hector Hijuelos felt the line tug and he yanked it back, ripping the girl's dress straight off. He didn't even see what he done, and all of a sudden this pink satin skirt flies back in his face. He ran down the bank and saw this girl, naked. She said no man had ever seen her naked before, so, since he had now, he better marry her. And he did.”

No one knew I stopped by Blanca's. It was my own top secret. If I were to tell anyone, I'd tell my mother. She'd understand and keep the information

confidential. But I didn't tell her. I savored my double life. And a double life's cover is blown once one of the sides is no longer in the dark. I'd been riding my bike down Eighth Street one day, just exploring and enjoying the trumpet music emanating from the salsa clubs when my back tire hit a nail and blew flat right outside of Blanca's. I went in the shop to ask to use the phone and get Larry to come and fetch me, even though I'd get in trouble because my folks didn't like me riding my bike in Little Havana. Blanca wrung her hands when I asked her if I could make a call. "Phone? Are you kidding, just for a flat tire? Here, let's see what we can do." Blanca gathered a rubber hose, a blowtorch and some chewing gum and fastened a tourniquet for my bike tire. We walked the bike across the street to a filling station and Blanca got the attendant to let us use their air tank for free to inflate the tire. Her solution worked. I made it back home with no one who knew me the wiser. And I learned one of the most important rules of espionage: rely on yourself first, or at least your Cuban convenience store contact.

"Oh, right, what do they call them?" Paula Jean clapped her hands. "*Los tenias?* What does that even mean? My dad says it all the time."

I grunted. "The 'used-to-have-people'. It's not a very nice thing to say."

"Well, don't get mad at me! Anyways, back to Halloween. Do you think we should try a different neighborhood this year? Maybe my mom can drive us up to South Beach or something."

"Well that might kind of be hard for Fritzie." I let the handlebar cover slip from my grip. It bounced around on the coral wall before tumbling onto the grass.

“Fritzie? What are you talking about?”

“She’s coming with us.” I hopped back on the wall and marched over to Paula Jean. I crossed my arms over my chest and stared down at her. “Two years ago Fritzie and I purposely didn’t go trick-or-treating because you couldn’t come with us.”

“I know, Charlotte, but what are we supposed to do? She can’t leave the hospital yet.”

“Can you breathe, Paula Jean? Does your body keep working on its own like it always has?”

“Charlotte, what are you talking about?”

“I’m not going. It’s not fair for us to be out trick-or-treating when all Fritzie can do is lie in that stupid machine and look at a picture of FDR or listen to televis-” I slapped my forehead. “Shoot!” I hopped back off the wall and onto my bike.

“What is it?”

“Television!” I shouted over my shoulder as I pedaled away. “The Series!”

My dad and my brother Larry loved baseball. My mom, too, but she concealed her enthusiasm to allow Daddy and Larry to share something all their own. Daddy was the only parent who went to watch Larry catch in every one of his team’s junior high games, even the away ones. Larry was a very good ball player. In his senior year of high school he was offered a scholarship to play ball at the community college. He turned it down because he received a full ride academic scholarship to go to college up in Gainesville. Larry was very good at everything.

Back then the only professional baseball nearby was the Miami Marlins farm team. Sometimes we'd go to their games or to watch the Hurricanes play at Miami Stadium, before Mark Light Field was built. I liked baseball fine enough, I really only went to games because I liked the corn dogs and snocones the concession stand sold. College and minor league games satisfied Daddy and Larry for in-person watching, but nothing compared with watching the Yankees on our RCA set. If Mantle hit a 500 foot homer Daddy would shake his fist and mutter, "Why did I take that PanAm job?" A few years before I was born, Mother and Daddy moved to Miami from Indiana. Daddy had also been offered a job with TWA in New Jersey, but they opted for Florida because they hated the snow. "Think how many Yanks games we could have gone to if we lived in New Jersey." Mom would rest her dishrag on the counter and walk over to him. Encircling him from behind with her arms, she'd whisper in a tone that indicated she wanted to believe what she was about to say, too, "but you couldn't build a boat in New Jersey," and point to the photo of the four of us, fishing in Biscayne Bay when I was a baby one Christmas, in the boat Daddy had built. He'd nod. But I knew he would have preferred Yankee Stadium in snow over Biscayne Bay in December.

I always figured that when I grew up and became a famous spy I'd have enough money to buy my parents a house in the Bronx and season tickets. Or at least fly them there for a game or two a year and put them up at a Holiday Inn. My dad was still alive when Major League ball finally came to Florida, but he was in the hospital, too sick to ever go to a Marlins game. If he had lived to see the dawn of Inter-League play, traditionalist that he was, I know he would have yanked the IVs

from his arm and gotten a cab to take him to Joe Robbie when the Yankees came to town.

It was a house rule that everyone had to be home and in the family room during a World Series game, and there were absolutely no exceptions made when the Yankees were in the Series. The Series also served a dual purpose for Larry. Since the Series predated Halloween by a week or so, Larry always dressed as the Series MVP as his costume. He never really looked like the player, more often than not he'd just be wearing a Yankees jersey with a different number sewn on the back each year. Once he got to high school and went to Halloween parties instead of trick-or-treating, his costumes were considered a bit lame, but I was proud that he stuck with tradition. If I were to have dressed as a ball player, I'd have chosen Moe Berg, baseball's answer to James Bond. Moe didn't have the fancy gadgets or debonair of James Bond, but he had the sleuthing skills. Of course Moe worked for the United States, but whenever I watched a game, I thought what a brilliant idea it would be if the Russians infiltrated the Major Leagues. No one would ever suspect a ball player, and if he was good, or at least on a good team, he'd be invited to the White House and all sorts of functions where he could spy on American goings-on.

There were tons of Shepherd family traditions followed during Series play. We'd eat T.V. dinners (my favorite: Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and applesauce; my second favorite: macaroni and cheese with green beans and fruit compote) off the coffee table. Daddy and Larry would sit side by side on the ridiculously long green couch. Mom and I would curl up on the gold loveseat that smelled like dog. I usually colored or read while Mom covertly kept score,

pretending to be making up the next day's grocery list. Dad and Larry shoveled popcorn and pork rinds into their mouths and argued. During the 1961 season, the house was divided into two camps: those who favored Maris (Larry and Mom) and those who favored Mantle (Daddy and me, by default). Daddy called Roger Maris a "gold-digger". Larry would laugh and say, "Dad, do you even know what that means? The guy's just doing his job." Mom liked Maris because he was someone nobody had ever believed in. Years later, after Daddy finally conceded that the asterisk next to Maris' sixty-one home runs in the record book was nonsense, he heard an interview with Maris on T.V. Maris confirmed what Larry had said all those years before, that he *was* just doing his job, baseball was a livelihood for him, and if he'd been skilled at mining coal, he'd have done that instead. Daddy went crazy and kicked in one of the RCA set's speakers. His slipper got wedged in the rattan grating of the speaker, and he had to slip his foot out to free himself. Daddy jumped up and down retracting his concessions and screaming that Mickey Mantle was born to play baseball and jut who did this Roger Maris think he was anyways? Mom wanted to get a new T.V. anyways, or at least remove Daddy's slipper, but Daddy was adamant that his slipper remain, as an homage to Mickey Mantle. For five years the two of them watched television in mono sound with an argyle slipper poking out of the speaker, until one day the set mysteriously stopped working and Mom brought home a nice new Sony with a remote control from Sears.

I rested my head on Mom's lap, listening to Daddy and Larry debate the Yankees' wisdom (Daddy) or lack thereof (Larry) of starting Ralph Terry in the final game. Mom penciled in the lineup on her scoring sheet. Once I had spotted Larry in

his room with a book about rockets propped on his lap. His pants were bunched down around his ankles. Larry was holding onto something under the book and yanking it back and forth. Peeking out from the book I could glimpse magazine pages with photos of naked girls on them. I started to giggle. Larry turned around and threw his space book at me. The nudie magazine flew across the room with the book and landed spread-eagle at my feet. His underwear was clinging to his thighs and his private parts were showing. I had never seen a boy's private parts before, except for Ralphie Bonet who was two and sometimes ran around naked in his front yard next door. I remember the first time I saw Ralphie's private parts I was baffled as they bounced up and down. It seemed like such a precarious and completely unnecessary system. Larry's was a little bit bigger, but still just as weird. "What were you doing?" I burst out laughing. Larry grabbed his letterman jacket and covered his lap with it. I giggled even more thinking about his private parts and how they were right there, right behind that big red G for Gables. Larry hurried across his room, using one hand to secure his jacket and one to shove me out the door. If he wasn't so embarrassed, I wouldn't have figured that anything was wrong with what he was doing. But he was mortified, so I blackmailed him with that information for months. Mom used the same technique as Larry, concealing her scoring sheet behind the protection of a cookbook. I liked listening to her fill in or check the boxes with that pencil. Listening to her rub lead on paper was always like a lullaby.

My mother would have made an excellent spy. Before she married Daddy, she was an actress back in Indiana. "Just in school plays and local productions, Charlotte, don't make it into something it wasn't." She'd dismiss her work whenever

I brought it up, but nonetheless she *was* an actress. And a good one, too. She always was cast as the lead in her high school plays. One year her part was the stage manager in *Our Town*, but after casting she found out she was going to be in South Bend on opening night. She was a bridesmaid in Aunt Mildred's wedding. Mom's drama teacher, Mr. Feldman, who had been known to light up the stage in Washington and Baltimore in his day, postponed the opening of the play to the following weekend when Mom would be back. If she had kept at it, Mom would have made it to Broadway or Hollywood. A few months before Daddy took the PanAm job Mom started acting with the Indianapolis Theatre Company. She was only in one production there before she moved to Miami, but she played the lead, Katharine, in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play sold out to standing room only every night of its run. "Goodness, love, it was *Indianapolis*, what do you expect? Folks didn't have anything else to do." But she was great, I know it. Sometimes I'd ask her what she thought would have happened if Daddy had taken that TWA job in New Jersey. Mom would just smile and try her best not to look wistful. There just weren't many opportunities for unknown actresses in Miami.

Every Halloween night, when we were all gathered at the dinner table, before Larry and I were let loose, Mom would recite "The Tell-Tale Heart". Daddy dimmed the lights and lit a few candles around the room. Mom would enter and sit at the head of the table. She did it every year, and every year I expected the same thing. But about half way through the story, I'd start to forget that I was listening to my mother and not some gypsy medium channeling the spirit of old Edgar Allen Poe. I'd glance at Daddy and Larry for familial reassurance, but I'd have forgotten again by the time

Mom reached the last lines and in that eerie voice exclaimed, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! -here, here! -it is the beating of his hideous heart!” I’d be drained of all blood in my face and arms and almost too terrified and immobile to leave the house. But trick-or-treating *is* very important.

Mom volunteered at church one night a week. She helped organize rummage sales and fellowship dinners. On Tuesday evenings she met with some of her friends, mainly other housewives she had met at PTA meetings and school bake sales. In the afternoons she’d drive Larry back and forth from practice or me to Jackson Byrons to buy me new culottes or dresses. Friday nights she played bridge at the Women’s Club. And during the day, I don’t know exactly what Mom did during the day. When I got home from school the house was clean and dinner was in the oven. That’s all I knew. When I blabbed on and on to Mom about my future career in the intelligence business, I could tell she was trying her best not to look wistful. Sometimes I imagined her sitting alone all day on the plastic sofa on the back porch, just staring out at the mango trees. I didn’t like to think about that.

That day ended the season for baseball and ended the six weeks marking period. Report cards were distributed the next day in school. Mrs. Sutherin passed them out during homeroom. When she reached my desk she stopped and slipped my report card under my composition book. She frowned at me. “Larry got straight A’s when he was in my class.” Larry was very good at everything. I examined my marks. Bs in spelling, math and science. Cs in language arts and social studies. A lone A in handwriting. A spy must be able to read her notes and encode them.

Excellent handwriting is a necessity. Mrs. Sutherin did not have excellent handwriting. Her pen must have scratched at the card as she wrote *Charlotte's imagination alone is not strong enough to create a report card where she earns straight A's. If she stops doodling in her composition book perhaps she will be able to aim for grades as high as her brother earned when he was in the sixth grade.* My brother had terrible handwriting, but his teachers looked the other way when it came to penmanship for Larry because he excelled in all of his academic subjects. When I got home that day, Mom would scan my report card and shake her head. "Handwriting is not an academic subject." I'd have to hide it before she saw it. I had to spend the rest of the school day formulating Operation Report Card Curtain in my composition book.

The next day was laundry day. Mom would empty out all my pockets before tossing my clothes in the washing machine. Pockets were out of the question. I could throw it away. Somewhere discreet, away from home. A simple dead drop, just without another operative to retrieve it. But a good spy never relinquishes sensitive information. Someone could find it. I refused to be blackmailed over a few lousy grades. That ruled out stashing it somewhere outside of the house. Inside the house my room was out of the question. Too obvious, too suspect. The report card needed to be concealed in a common area, no one would think of looking for it there. Under the oven, where Mom kept all the extra pots and pans, there was a loose plank in the floor of the cupboard. When I used to conduct my kitchenware symphonies, I would peek under that plank. The ooze of lard and bacon grease and congealed cheese that

had trickled its way down the cupboard walls and collected under the cupboard floor fascinated me. That was the least conspicuous place in the entire house.

I swiped a few pieces of masking tape from Mrs. Sutherin's desk and, slouched down in my seat, used them to affix my report card to my stomach. The cardboard paper revealing my marks written in visible ink did not bend well and poked my ribs. The dossier protruded into my skin even more as I pedalled my bike home and shifted, rustling against my skin. All good spies must accept physical discomfort and prevail.

The station wagon was in the carport when I reached home. Mom wasn't supposed to be home. Wednesday was grocery day and I had an full free hour until Mom came home and made me get off that swingset young lady and go out and help her unload the Publix bags from the way way back. Paula Jean's parents dismantled her swingset in fifth grade at her insistence. Fritzie never had one.

I parked my bike in the driveway but must not have engaged the kickstand properly. The bike keeled over into the front yard. My dad bought me a bike lock for my thirteenth birthday. "These Cuban kids will steal anything you know and then go sell it. For parts." I chained my bike up to the rack outside the Serpentarium and, when I emerged an hour later with a rubber coral snake slinking around my shoulders, I had lost the key to the lock. Mom drove over with a saw and we tried to cut the bike chain in half. It didn't work. My bike stayed put there until I was in high school and one of the snake handlers backed over my bike and smashed it flat. The parts weren't worth selling.

“MOM!” She was in the kitchen, in the kitchen and fixing tuna casserole, blocking my drop location.

“Oh, good, Charlotte, you’re home. Now at about half past five put this in the oven, at 350, for an hour. Okay?” She wrapped aluminum foil around the Corningware and stuck it in the fridge. “I have to get a move on.” Mom untied her apron and tossed it on the bar.

Wednesday was grocery day. Nothing else. “Where are you going?”

“Just over to the Women’s Club. Bridge night. They moved it to tonight. Pamela Thornhill has a hysterectomy on Friday.”

Mom never went out on Wednesdays. I figured she’d abandon the kitchen and go get dressed. But she just opened a book and started studying it, reading it with her finger and mouthing the words.

“Mom, are you home?” I heard Larry slam the front door and dribble down the foyer.

“We’re in here, Larry. And what did I tell you about basketballs in the house?” She didn’t even look up.

He guarded the ball under his arm. “Check this out, Coach Brawley says there’s this playoff, a city All-Star thing, sponsored by the *Herald*, in a few weeks and guys from all the city schools, Edison, Jackson, Gulliver Prep, are going to be there. You know who’s going to be representing Gables?”

I could tell the concealed dossier was causing a rash to develop on my stomach. It itched. “You.”

Larry bounced the ball on the kitchen linoleum and jumped up and down with it. “You bet it’s me!”

“Larry, hold that ball tight.” Mom waited for him to pick up the basketball and then went to hug him. “Congratulations, honey.” She pointed to the ball. “Now go put that thing away.”

Larry rolled his eyes and laughed. He opened the door to the carport and went to return the ball to Dad’s toolbench cupboard. Mom followed him to watch. I sprinted over to the oven and yanked the cupboard door open. I reached in to prop open the loose plank but it didn’t move. It had been too long since I’d conducted a pots and pans symphony. The plank had been fixed. I shut the door and scanned the kitchen. Tennis racquets and baseball gloves had made a break from the toolbench cupboard, but Larry was almost done picking them up. I spotted the toaster, tore the dossier from my body and deposited it in the appliance. Mom and Larry returned inside.

Mom left for bridge, Dad arrived home and he and Larry chatted and chatted at the bar about the wonderfulness of the All-Star game and how it would do great things for Larry’s future.

I put the casserole in the oven at half past five and we ate an hour later. Larry might have been chosen as Gables’ best basketball player, but that didn’t exempt him from his chores. So while my brother scrubbed the dinner dishes, I rode over to Variety to scout out an escape route. The Women’s Club is on the way to the hospital and I didn’t see the station wagon in the parking lot. Maybe they were playing at Pamela Thornhill’s house. Happy hysterectomy.

It wasn't dark out at seven. There was enough light to throw a softball. But the hospital's visiting hours ended at six and the nurses wouldn't even let me wander the halls aimlessly. I remounted my bike and decided to come back the next day after school. There was time, Halloween was still two weeks away.

I should have ridden straight home, that's what I should have done. Instead I rode over to Calle Ocho. Blanca was busy, chatting in Spanish with two customers. She let me play with the cash register. I liked pressing the buttons.

Blanca paused for a moment. I leaned up and whispered in her ear. "What are they saying?"

She grinned at me and turned to her friends. "Let's speak in English, girls, so my little Charlottita won't feel so left out." She smirked at the lady on the right who had an overbite and enormously tall hair. "And, Mili, you could use the practice."

Mili rolled her eyes and scowled at me. "Well, Julio gets home from work, all day long under cars without even a thank you, and Himilce's there, sitting on her suitcase, and tells him she's leaving him. Just like that. She's been sleeping with her dentist for three months. Julio says why have you been sleeping with your dentist, is he better than me, and Himilce, she says, no I've just been bored keeping house for you."

The other lady stared at Mili dumbfounded and Blanca reproached her in Spanish for talking about such things in front of an impressionable young girl like me. I can understand scoldings in any language.

Mili chuckled. "Isn't it your bedtime anyways, *gringita*?"

Blanca walked me out to the sidewalk. “Don’t mind Mili. She just caught her husband cheating on her with her sister. She’ll probably tell us that story next. Again.”

I shrugged and hopped on my bike. Blanca slipped a Baby Ruth in my pocket.

There are several routes home from Blanca’s. I decided to ride by the Miracle Theater. The lights that vertically spelled M-I-R-A-C-L-E looked like fireworks if you squinted your eyes the right way. I stopped across the street from the theater and leaned my bike against a screw palm. The sun was setting, you’d lose a softball in the dusk and the theater sign’s lights sparkled and lit up Miracle Mile. I squinted and pow-pow-pow it was the Fourth of July and I was with Mom and Dad and Larry and we were watching the fireworks over Biscayne Bay. I squinted again and saw Mom. Right there in front of the Miracle Theater. I opened my eyes wide and saw her walking in front of the theater, not with Pamela Thornhill and the Coral Gables Women’s Club, but with a man. He wore a brown cordorouy suit and opened the theater door for Mom and as she walked in, he put his hand on the small of her back and followed her. I squinted again and tried to watch the fireworks once more but only read M-I-R-A-C-L-E.

The Yanks won the Series in seven and a week later World War III almost began. Things must have happened during that week in between, other than the Shepherd Family World Series party, which consists of deviled eggs and chili burgers, the highlights, but I don’t really remember. Of course during that week I

discovered my mother was having an extramarital affair. Just like Himilce and Mili's sister. Everyday when I returned home from school I expected to find Mom waiting on a suitcase to confess. I tried my best not to think about that. A good spy never jumps to conclusions. A good spy gathers as much information as possible before shooting. It just seemed like the Yanks won the Series and then the world was about to blow up.

I was at the kitchen counter covertly writing a letter to Fritzie. Larry was watching T.V. It was my night for chores, I was supposed to be snapping green beans, but I hate snapping green beans, and only buy frozen ones today. Mom wasn't really paying attention to me anyways, and thinking about her going to watch some play with a man who was not Dad made me see green bean snapping in a whole new light. I kept eyeing Mom as she was trying to figure out what else we should have for dinner. "Meatloaf and green beans just isn't enough. You guys need some starch on those bones." She smiled at me. I cringed. "Toast. We haven't had toast in awhile." She withdrew sliced of two pieces of bread from the loaf on the counter and lowered them into the toaster.

I returned to my letter when Mom turned her back to me. There was so much news to report to Fritzie. Louise Crenshaw had a crush on Tommy Rafferty and it had become public knowledge that day. Someone had smashed up a dozen or so pumpkins at the pumpkin patch in front of Trinity Church. It was too much news to write up in a little letter and trust Fritzie's mom to read it to her on Sunday. I needed to come up with a good plan to relay the intelligence myself. And while I was

at it, I needed to hatch a plan that would enable Fritzie to come trick-or-treating with us. No way would I boycott another Halloween.

I smelled smoke. Flames were shooting up from the toaster. “Mom!” She saw the fire, unplugged the toaster, yanked the fire extinguisher from under the sink and put out the fire all in one motion.

“Do not touch the toaster, Charlotte.” Mom glowered at me. “Why did it catch fire?”

“How am I supposed to know?” But then I remembered, I did know. The dossier.

Mom peeked into the toaster. “There’s a piece of paper in there, Charlotte. Why is there a piece of paper in the toaster?”

“I don’t know, *Mom*. Just because something happened doesn’t mean I’m to blame. I’m not the only one who does things wrong around here.”

“Mom, Charlotte, get in here!” Anything to possibly further delay the discovery of my charred report card. I raced into the family room. Mom trudged in a moment later. “We’re not done talking yet, Charlotte.”

But President Kennedy was on the television. He was talking about nuclear missiles in Cuba and the Russians putting them there, and the U.S. blockading any shipments from entering Cuba. Mom set the basket down on the coffee table and covered her face. Larry groaned and sighed. I didn’t know why they were reacting that way. It just seemed to me like moves from one of the board games that used to be in the hall closet.

“Hey, where is Battleship anyways?”

“Charlotte, love, turn up the volume.” I was standing nearest to the T.V. I spun the volume dial.

“Medium range ballistic missiles ... DEFCON 3 ... Bay of Pigs ... Cuban refugees ...” Mom and Larry were staring at the screen, completely engrossed in the Presidential address. “Unmistakable evidence ... Chairman Krushchev ... blockade ...” I listened, too, but try as I did, all I could concentrate on was how President Kennedy would rescue his friend from an iron lung.

I rode down to Blanca’s when school let out, the day after President Kennedy announced the blockade. It was an exciting school day. During reading and science and even social studies (right in the middle of Janet Eggertortion’s oral presentation on the Boston Tea Party, I swear, some kids are so lucky), the air raid siren interrupted class. We filed into the hall and crouched down beside the walls with our fingers entwined on the back of our necks. We hadn’t practiced nuclear bomb drills in awhile, and when we had, we always stayed in the classroom. In fourth grade Fritzie and I were in the same class: Mrs. Dettman’s. Whenever the air raid siren blared, everyone dropped and hid under their desks. One time Eric Umbach, a dense kid with an overbite who got busted and spent time up in Raiford years later when called the cops because the burglars who broke into his house were stealing his homegrown marijuana, dared Fritzie to chew one of the very hard and gray pieces of gum stuck to the bottom of her desk. She found the hardest and grayest piece and popped it in her mouth. She chewed it for the rest of class and even blew a bubble once when Mrs. Dettman was writing on the chalkboard. That was Fritzie.

We didn't get much done in school that day, so I didn't have any homework. I rode over to Blanca's, passing Variety Children's Hospital on the way. I stopped for a moment of silence and saluted Fritzie.

"How did you escape Cuba?"

Blanca was balancing her account books. She wrote in pen and was always scratching out figures and covering them with liquid paper. But she never could wait long enough for the liquid paper to dry and ended up making an even bigger mess.

Decorations of bride and groom skeletons holding hands and flowers replaced the standard *Cerveza Sol* advertisements on the walls of the shop. Blanca said Halloween was a rip-off. Why should she give out free candy to the same kids who tried to smuggle it out of her shop in their pockets every other day of the week? But Blanca enjoyed being festive, so she hung the skeletons for *El Día de los Muertos*. She could forget her Cuban heritage and be Mexican for a day.

"I flapped my wings and flew." There were never any fans in Blanca's place. Her face was coated with a thin layer of sweat. She pushed her glasses back up her nose. They slid right back down.

"I'm serious, I need to know. I need pointers."

The glasses slid all the way off Blanca's nose. They landed on her account book. The perspiration from the frames stained the paper and smeared the ink. Three hundred dollars became eight hundred dollars. "I've told you this story I don't know how many times." She smiled at me and lowered her voice. "And I don't think you'll get very far with all those navy ships out there." She gestured towards the

front of the store, which faced west. Maybe she was so used to being on an island that she still didn't realize Florida was a peninsula.

Blanca favored James Bond over Alfred Hitchcock, too. Mainly because she thought Sean Connery was a sex god. Whenever any of the Latino kids would act all bold and arrogant, their mothers would tease them by saying, oh, he thinks he has *la pirulla de James Bond*. Blanca was the only one I ever heard who said *la pirulla de Sean Connery*. I adopted this expression and employed it whenever I could. Blanca would shake her head at me when a snobby white woman would walk by and I would groan and mutter "oh, doesn't she think she has *la pirulla de James Bond*." I realized why she would shake her head at me years later in high school Spanish class. It was the first day of eleventh grade and we had a new teacher, Señorita Walker. She was young, probably brand new to teaching, schoolmarmy and a prime target. Most of the jerks who sat in the back, especially Steven Thiggle, teased her, asked for the bathroom pass over and over again and farted the Spanish alphabet, that's three more farts than in English class, with their armpits. At the end of class I approached Señorita Walker. "Don't worry about those boys. Especially Steven Thiggle. He's an idiot, he thinks he has *la pirulla de James Bond*." Señorita Walker gasped and wrote me a detention. When I left school that day, two hours late, I rushed to the unabridged Spanish-English dictionary in the library. In very small print I located *pirulla*: slang word for male genitalia. I figured the expression was just an idiom, I had never bothered to look the word up before. If only I had known what that expression meant all those years, I would have used it less sparingly.

Blanca's voice became all husky, like the rustling of sugar cane stalks, and her eyes swelled to be sand dollars. "Well, Charlotte." Her English was great, but she pronounced the first part of my name with a hard sound, like the beginning of the word church. I loved it. "Carlos Ramirez was my handler. He owned a shrimp boat. *El Intrépido*. But he never caught anything. Some of Castro's opponents, many of whom are here today, dug massive tunnels under the city all the way to Sabana, a tiny speck of an island. If you were lucky and knew the right people, or if you were smart, Carlos would be waiting in his shrimp boat off the coast of Sabana."

"What if you couldn't get out on your own? What if, say you were in a hospital, and couldn't move. What would Carlos do then?"

Blanca nodded. She understood my situation. "He probably would have dressed as one of the locals, one of Castro's guards or police officers. In green military uniform. The best way to fool your enemy is to become him."

I leaped up. "Blanca, I don't have any money right now. But I need gauze and some fish tank tubes and some Ace bandages. I can pay you back. Some time."

Blanca gathered my tradecraft. I stowed it in my book bag. "On the house. Good luck."

As I turned to leave, Blanca called me back. She offered me the rest of her Cuba Libre. "One should never spy on an empty stomach."

Daddy made Larry and I move our beds into his and Mom's room. Well, actually we just set up the cot in their room, the twin bed sized cot which I used to lie down on, pretending I was an injured soldier on a French battlefield awaiting a field

medic. I used to pretend that until Fritzie had to go into the hospital. So Daddy made us sleep together in that tiny cot because if Russia decided to launch nuclear missiles from Cuba, we'd be goners, so at least we would all be together in our last moments.

Larry had experienced a growth spurt of four inches over the summer. When fall came around he was too tall for the catcher's gear, so Daddy was having him practice as an outfielder. Those newly long arms would be good for stealing batters' home runs. Those newly long arms also were good for taking up most of the cot, as were his newly long legs. When I finally fell asleep that first night of somnolent family togetherness, it wasn't to a peaceful sleep. In my dream I was Fritzie, in the hospital, lying inert in the iron lung. I couldn't move, except my head a little bit to each side. Mr. Feldman, my mother's drama teacher, was in the room, telling me the great times I would have experienced if I hadn't contracted polio. I turned my head away from him, to the window and saw an orchid in a vase on the sill. Suddenly the orchid slumped over and there was an enormous flash of light and boom. The orchid was gone, Mr. Feldman was gone, and it was just me in the iron lung.

“So how long do you think it would take?”

Paula Jean and I were sitting outside of the A&W on Dixie. I was enjoying a root beer float and a corn dog. A&W corn dogs ranked second best after stadium ones. It was fun to dip my corn dog in the sippy foam of the melting ice cream.

“How long ... ,” I finished chewing and swallowed, burping demonstratively, “do I think what would take?” I wiped my mouth on my arm.

Paula Jean had been skimming through some of the Hollywood magazines she had swiped from her sister’s bureau. She had closed the magazines and was staring out at the road. A military caravan passed, heading south to the Air Force Base in Homestead. It was the third one we had seen that day. “How long do you think it would take, for us to die, after a nuclear bomb? I mean, are we talking minutes or hours? What if it’s longer? I heard on the news that sometimes it’s worse to survive. You know with the radiation and all.” She sighed, her fake swoon sigh, and returned to her movie stars. “I guess we’ll be killed right away since we’re so close to Cuba. Look at this dress Debbie Reynolds is wearing.”

A few more olive green trucks crossed the intersection. The Yankees had won the Series, the Hurricanes had hired a new baseball coach, and Paula Jean was fawning over celebrity hairstyles and romances. Fritzie wouldn’t have just let things pass like nothing was happening. She would have met with President Kennedy, or at least written him a letter. “Don’t you even care that we haven’t seen Fritzie since before school started? She’s spent all of sixth grade so far in that stupid machine!”

Paula Jean slammed shut her magazine. “You’re always saying that, Charlotte. What do you want us to do? I write her letters. I’ve gone to visit her. There’s nothing else we can do!” I wish I’d stayed friends with Paula Jean. In eighth grade her family moved up north. “That George Hammond, lucky bastard,” my dad said. If we’d stayed friends I could have gone to visit her. Daddy got free airline

tickets on PanAm. I could have seen snow for the first time. But Paula Jean and I didn't stay friends. She found a new crowd, and I adapted. All good spies have to.

I checked my back and lowered my voice. "We're going to rescue her."

Paula Jean never tolerated my theatrics. "Rescue her? Oh, come *on*, Charlotte. That's just plain nuts."

"No, no, no ... think about it. We can go as hospital patients. I'm prepared to knock tradition if you are. We can sneak in, wearing our disguises, no one will suspect a thing."

"Even if we get in there, even if this plan of yours is a success, do you know how much trouble we'll be in? Our parents will kill us."

"If the world is going to blow up, who cares? If this is going to be our last Halloween, we are going to go trick-or-treating together."

My logic was irrefutable, even for Paula Jean's cynicism.

"Fritzie would want us to have a good time, Charlotte."

I skyrocketed off the bench. "She's not dead, Paula Jean! And Fritzie would not want us to have a good time, she'd want us to stick together. That's what matters."

Paula Jean sighed. She extracted a hairbrush from her purse and ran it through her hair. I prayed for tangles. "I didn't want to tell you this, but, I got invited to a Halloween party. At Marianne Van Buren's. I'm going to go. You should come, too. I mean, she wouldn't invite you, but if you come dressed as a ghost or something with a mask, she probably wouldn't even know it was you."

Paula Jean didn't know me at all. "First of all, I'm not going as a ghost or something with a mask, I'm going as a ghost. Geez, Paula Jean, really! And secondly, a party, and at *Marianne Van Buren's*? What about trick-or-treating?"

"Charlotte, don't you think we're too old for trick-or-treating? I mean--"

"No."

"Well, I do. And I want to go to Marianne's party. It'll be fun. There's going to be boys there. Junior high boys. And you know every boy in our class has a crush on Natalie Wood."

My body fell back on the bench. More military caravans passed. A camouflaged soldier waved. Paula Jean blew him a kiss and giggled at me.

"I got to get home. I was supposed to stop by Publix and pick up some milk. My mom's going to kill me when she finds out I spoiled my dinner." Paula Jean replaced her hairbrush in her purse and rose.

"You're going to tell her?"

"It's not top secret, Charlotte." She swung her purse over her shoulder. A purse isn't worn the same way a backpack is. A purse distributes weight unevenly on the shoulders. "I'll see you tomorrow. In school."

Paula Jean walked off. Her errand would be quick; there wouldn't be any milk on the shelves at Publix. I had to get home, too. I got up and noticed my corn dog buried in a sloppy mess of melted ice cream. I hadn't even realized I'd knocked over my cup. I mounted my bike and pedaled home, very angry at Paula Jean for betraying me and Fritzie and making me spill my root beer float.

Attention and apologies:

This story doesn't want to end. I know precisely what's going to happen. Charlotte's attention will turn away from springing Fritzie as she starts to focus on finding out about her Mom's affair and dealing with this information that she has uncovered. She never expected her spying to reveal any harmful information, much less anything about her mother. Meanwhile Charlotte's relationship with Paula Jean becomes more and more fragile. The threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis persists, but Charlotte is more concerned with her mother's secret life and Fritzie's situation. Charlotte continues shadowing her mother and learns her mother is not having an affair, but is acting in a play. She is a member of a local theater company. This opens up Charlotte's eyes to her mother, her mother has a secret rich life and does not merely lead the dull housewife life Charlotte feared she did. On Halloween night Charlotte goes to spring Fritzie, but Fritzie doesn't want to leave. She feels safe in the hospital and has bonded with one of the polio nurses whom she doesn't want to leave. Charlotte is hurt and flabbergasted. Paula Jean is at the junior high party and Charlotte does not want to go trick-or-treating alone. So instead Charlotte foresakes her traditional Halloween activity and goes to the theater and watches her mom act in the play. Charlotte is enamored with her mother's performance and keeps her mother's secret, not even letting her mom know she knows about her double life. I am working to reach the end and hopefully will do so soon.