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Middle Story

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Bard College

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Middle Story

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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For my sisters, Eliot, Marikit and Gracie,
with whom I have had the joy of sharing my girlhood.

MIDDLE STORY

One

It was Independence Day and everyone was at the river. The sun was high, a white oculus blinking through the blue, watching as the rocky bank of Johnson's Beach became a tetris of blankets and umbrellas. Picnic tables piled with Saran-covered bowls of fruit and potato salad, platters of grilled meats, cheese boards and bags of chips. Bare chested guys with cycling shades and backwards Patagonia hats guarded every grill, tongs in one hand, sweating beer cans in the other. Graceful kayaks wove between the bobbing heads of drunken swimmers and doggy-paddling children.

Nino was the first in the water, jumping in to join his friend. Veta and I sat on our towels for a while. We ate tuna sandwiches in our bathing suites and watched the sweaty, high school boys hurl their glistening bodies off the high rocks. They did backflips and cannonballs,

whooping and hollering as they swung off the rocks on a fraying rope and plunged into green water. That was the day Veta kissed Nino on the river bank behind a cluster of manzanitas and I cut my foot on the diving rock. In the late afternoon Nino was sick behind those same manzanitas expelling mostly river water which dampened the front of his soccer jersey and his two long braids which fell into the splash zone when he doubled over. We laughed from the water and his friend heaved a slimy clump of algae toward him. It got tangled in the manzanita's cool branches. Nino raced down the bank with a wide grin, driving in to tackle his friend.

“Nino threw up,” Veta announced when we got in the car.

“Shut up,” he whispered, reaching over my lap to pinch her.

“Ow!”

“Oh honey, did you really?” My mom asked through the rearview mirror. He gave a shameful nod. “Here,” she passed him a bottle of water and got out to retrieve a tupperware of cubed mango and jicama from the trunk. “Eat, drink,” she demanded. “All of you.”

Nino twisted the cap from the water bottle, but before he could take a sip Veta reached over me and snatched it from his hands.

“Hey!”

“I just want a sip before you contaminate it with your vomit mouth.”

The car ride back to Santa Rosa was: 30 minutes, sweet mango warm on my tongue, burning my arm on the seat belt buckle, wet bodies on hot leather seats, windows down, hair whipping my cheeks, the iron stench of sweat and river sediment. We dropped Nino at the 4th Street Grocery Outlet where his sister had just clocked out. He unbuckled as we approached the

red Nissan Sentra. Muata was reclined in the driver's seat talking on the phone. *Thank you*, she mouthed to my mother through the open window when Nino got in her car. We waved goodbye and he stuck out his tongue.

My mom drew us a cool bath before dinner. We peeled our one piece suites off and threw them in the sink to dry. Veta lifted her arm to examine a sprouting of hairs in its pit. I checked my own for similar growth, there was a peach fuzz developing, but nothing like the long black hairs pushing up through her skin.

“Yuck,” she said with a curled lip. Our eyes met in the mirror and she wrinkled her nose in disgust. Yuck was the appropriate response. I knew that, but I didn't feel it. In the moment, I felt simultaneously curious and repulsed by the spectacle. Jealousy bubbled up from my belly, an acidic froth that left a sour taste in my mouth. She was changing without me. Her body curved and softened in places where mine was still angular and flat. I was jealous of her hips and the fullness of her thighs. I was jealous of her budding breasts and puffy nipples. Even her round potbelly, which she vocally disdained, was beautiful to me. But mostly I was jealous of her hair, all of it, that which thickened under her arms and grew between her legs and that which cascaded from her head to her waist in glossy waves. She tilted her head to the side to brush out her braid. It was still damp from river swimming. My own hair was too short to carry the river home. I ran my finger through the blunt bob and confirmed that it was dry.

Veta and I soaked in the tub until we rained. I peeled the flaking skin from her dark shoulders and she picked dander from my sunburnt scalp. With squinted eyes, we scrubbed our

brown faces with a slippery sliver of bar soap that got sucked down the drain when we unplugged it. The day was hot, but sunset cooled the night air and we moved to the roof to watch the fireworks. Fog obscured most of the explosions so they appeared to us: clouds of colored light, announced by deep, echoing bangs. We huddled under a red Costco blanket and listened to the medley: music, laughter, jubilant screams, the sulfuric popping fizzle of firecrackers in the street.

“Did you know you're my best friend?” I posed the question to the open air, scared to look into her face.

“Duh,” she replied, squeezing my hand with a smile.

The grand finale was loud. I liked the explosions which rumbled in my core. The neighborhood dogs did not. They yelped in harmony with one another, crying out a most tragic fugue. Clouds of red and blue bloomed all around us. It was like the end of the world and Veta was holding my hand.

Two

The timing was weird for a funeral. A Friday afternoon. On Fridays, when Nino doesn't have soccer practice, Muata picks us up from school. Veta and I were dropped off at my house maybe an hour before the procession began.

It's September and hot and Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie" is whining from every middle school girl's sticker-decked SANYO radio, except mine. I prefer my CDs to the overplayed radio tracks. My favorite CD, a copy of the *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* Soundtrack my uncle had burned for me, it's so badly scratched the first two tracks are almost unplayable. I always skip them.



TRACK 3:

“Down to the River to Pray” Allison Krause

"God, *please*, not *this* song again!" Veta pleaded. Her navy uniform pleats fanned out on my bed, where she reclined with her chubby legs spread and dangling off the edge. "Can't we just listen to some real music for once?"

"This *is* real music."

"*This is real music*," she mocked with a parodic lisp. "This dumb CD's so scratched half the songs are basically unplayable, lets just listen to the radio."

"I'd rather die!"

She rolled her eyes at my melodrama and twirled the paintbrush end of her long dark braid. "Fine, then pass me then butt."

The butt was what we called my CD binder. It was a funny, ugly thing my mom picked up from Walmart: blue denim with a faux waistband and pockets so that, when opened flat, it looked like the fat ass of a pair of jeans. **C.D. compact disc storage** was embossed on the leather brand patch. I dug under the bed where dust and monsters and the butt live.

"Here." I chucked the binder onto the bed. "Pick something." Veta flipped through the plastic sleeves. She sighed, dissatisfied by my collection. *At War with the Mystics*, *Back to Black*, *Come Away with Me*, *Dear Catastrophe Waitress*, *Extraordinary Machine*, *Flood*. None of my meticulously alphabetized albums excited her.

"Dude, where do you even get some of these?"

I shrugged.

"I don't even recognize most of this stuff." She said this like she was some kinda melophile with a knowledge of music far vaster than my own.

"It's mostly just stuff my 'unty and uncle send me for holidays. Some of it's pretty good, though." She flipped the sleeve, inspecting the disc art in section G.

"Yo, no way! My brother just got this album." *Which brother?* I wondered. It didn't matter, the three of them were to me one intimidating older brother, so I didn't ask. Veta slid a disc from the sleeve.

"What is it?"

"*Guero.*"

"Oh yeah, I just added that to the butt. My 'unty sent it for my birthday." Veta passed me the CD, careful like I taught her, with her thumb in the center hole and her fingers on the outer edge so as not to scratch its iridescent underbelly. I removed the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack from the disc player and slipped in *Guero*, a white disc with poor, wobbly line drawn animals on it.

"Play track 3!" Veta demanded, so I did. She danced her bare feet to the song's beepboop-chip-music intro. It reminds me of afternoons spent in her lavender bedroom listening to her brother next door as they played computer games in their parent's home office and practiced their teenage vulgarity, a thick batter of englishspanishfilipino whisked together with laughter and cracking pubescent voices shouting *Yoooo!* or *Coño!* or *Tabi!* When it got to the chorus, Veta threw her voice into the music calling out "*Heyyy! My sun-eyed gir-r-rl. Heyyyy!*"

My sun-eyed gir-r-r-r-rl. My sun-eyed gir-r-rl. Heyyy! My sun-eyed gir-oh-woah!" And then, mimicking the bass riff that followed, she sang "Bur bwa bur bwa burbwa burbwa burbwa," and we giggled. The next few songs were mellower. I laid down on the matted carpet and traced pathways with eyes, through the valleys of the popcorn ceiling. Veta broke the stillness as the distorted voices on track 6 faded out.

"Got any snacks?" She asked, peering down at me from the bed.

"Doubt it." It was Friday, my mom and I go shopping on the weekends. A stale pot of rice, half a head of cabbage, a tupperware of boiled eggs and a fridge door overflowing with expired condiments, is all we have to come home to on Friday afternoons. I often enjoy spoonfuls of peanut butter or kewpie mayo spread on a heel of bread.

"Wanna go to mine?" She offered.

"Are your brothers home?"

"On a Friday afternoon? Not unless they're grounded."

It was brutally hot. The ten-minute walk from my street to Veta's was a pilgrimage across blazing asphalt, which threatened to melt the gum soles of our Mary Janes when we stopped at the crosswalk. Earlier this week my mom read me a report from *The Press Democrat* which claimed this summer to be California's worst heatwave in fifty-seven years, *statewide*. I opened my mouth to share this impressive fact with Veta, but it was too hot to speak so I sucked the sour metallic yin-yang pendant that hung from my neck on a tarnished chain and pulled down on my backpack straps to let the air cool my back while we waited. The sun's burning rays pulsed on the

back of my neck. Veta stood at the nose of the curb, her poppy print JanSport slung over one shoulder, anxious to cross into the shade.

Once we'd passed the church, it was a steep incline. We scaled the hill up to Veta's sun yellow house, whose second floor, swollen with rooms (four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a home office), appeared top heavy, like Ms. Jamison, our busty math teach with a pencil thin waist, who all the boys had jokes about, and dreams that made their mothers launder their sheets separate from the rest of the family's bedding. We arrived to the back door agape, beckoning us in with the promise of refuge from the heat. We climbed the pallet porch steps and entered, colliding with a wall of humidity and the smell of dirty socks, wet laundry, and lavender Fabuloso which attempted to mask the latter.

"NOPE! Uh-uh, you girls can't come in. The carpet cleaners just left and everything's still wet."

"But we're hungry!" Veta protested. Threads of sweat unraveled from my underarms and stitched my uniform polo to my skin. Neither one of our houses has the comfort of air conditioning so being inside's never much of an escape from the heat. When we were younger, playing make-believe with our Barbies, we would always specify that our houses were climate controlled with central air and heating, an important detail of luxurious living—*life in the dream house!*

"Here." Mrs. Perez handed us a floral summer quilt. "Sit out front under the trees. I'll bring you girls some watermelon after I flip the wash."

We spread the quilt in the dry grass shaded by the leaning sycamore. Laying back, I discovered a pleasant coolness, a wet spot where sweat had gathered in the small of my back. The afternoon sun broke through the tree's serrated canopy and spit across my face. Squeezing my eyelids just a little, I imprisoned it between my lashes. A cardinal splash of light. The soft, raveled patches of the quilt tickled the backs of my scabbed knees as I lay flat and listened to the traffic below, the rasping whoosh of tires against asphalt.

"Ugh, these ants!" Veta, holding a fat watermelon wedge between her fingers, licked drops of its juice from her wrist. I turned on my side to face her as she lifted the watermelon bowl with the other hand and brushed her lap with her forearm. She was sitting cross-legged on the edge of the quilt so that, by accident, I glimpsed the cotton of her underwear beneath her school skirt. She didn't have to wear spandex underneath? I was jealous. My thighs were sweltering in the double-layer skirt/shorts-combo. I drew my eyes up to her face. Watermelon juice stickied the corners of her mouth and tacked loose wisps of hair to her round, brown cheeks. The rest of her hair, a black rope, curved down the length of her back.

Around 4:00 pm, the mean sun that had spit in my eyes and burned the back of my neck glinted off glossy cedar wood as six pallbearers escorted a casket from the church below. Family and friends, donned in black, spilled through the double doors behind them.

"Yooo," Veta grabbed my arm with a sticky hand.

"What?" I sat up and followed her gaze down the hill. "Ohmygod, is that...?"

"Yeah, dude, a funeral. You ever been to a funeral before?" She was looking into my face for some reaction, but all I could give her was another "Ohmygod."

“I went to my uncle's funeral a couple years ago. Pretty weird. He was buried in one of those double wide caskets for fat people.”

I listened blankly until a question formed.

“How'd he die?”

“I don't know,” she shrugged. “Probably cancer or something, didn't really know him. He was my *great*-uncle technically.”

A hearse drove the casket a short distance up the street where the pallbearers transferred it to the burial plot and suspended it over the grave on a web of straps. We watched cohorts of mourners, marching their way up the street to the plot, like penguins in migration.

"God, why's she wearing that shawl?" I pointed to a small hunched woman, shrouding herself in a wooly black cloth. "She must be bacon in the sun."

"What?"

"No, I mean, like, I know she's supposed to wear black and all, I just think she must be overheating."

"No, how did you say it, though?"

"Huh?"

"What was the expression you used?"

"Oh. I said she's probably bacon in the sun." A wide grin broke across her face.

"Bacon?" She laughed. "You think the phrase is 'bacon in the sun'?" She laughed again and threw her head back, snorting.

"*What?*"

"It's *baking*, *B-A-K-I-N-G*, *baking* in the sun," she corrected, still giggling. I felt my cheeks flush. *Baking* in the sun.

"Bacon," Veta said, shaking her head. We locked eyes and broke into shrill, stupid laughter.

Later I asked if she thought he would go to heaven. Veta shrugged and sank her teeth into another watermelon wedge.

"You think there's even a heaven for him to go to?" Her nonchalance at this proposition at once impressed and scared me. What an awful thought, that there would be no palace of light. No welcoming white angels. No homecoming to an endless, peaceful dream.

"What would there be instead?"

Again, she shrugged.

"My grandma told me that right before death, all our memories come back. You think that's true?"

"Sounds overwhelming." Veta tossed the watermelon rind into the bowl and wiped her hands in the dead grass. I picked at the yellowing scab on my knee, ignoring my mother's droning mantra, *Don't pick! Melanated skin scars*. A small bead of red surfaced as I lifted the layers away, wondering if death feels as abrupt for the dying as it does for the living. I dipped the edge of my skirt to my knee and allowed it to drink the blood.

"Look! They're putting him in the hole."

I looked up from my debridement to watch as the priest, and a few of the pallbearers, steadily released the straps and lowered the casket. The view must be nice from down there, like

looking up through a large skylight at your own private slice of sky. Leaning back on my elbows, I closed my eyes to the sun, and I imagined death, a rich blanket of light, balmy and candy apple sweet.

Three

Thick slices of greasy fried spam crowded the eggs, sunny-side-up, on my plate. I pierced the yolks with my fork to yellow the mound of white rice hidden below. A birthday breakfast, complete with strawberries and dorayaki on a small side plate.

"This came for you." Mom placed a pale pink envelope on the table.

"Thank you," I said, with a mouthful of eggsricespam. She sat down with a cup of coffee, which fogged her thin, rectangular glasses when she brought it to her lips.

"Can I have some Orange Juice?"

"Aw, I'm sorry Gigi, I went out early to get breakfast things and forgot the orange juice."

"That's okay."

"Want me to get you some water?"

"I can get it." I balanced my fork on the edge of the plate and stood.

"Your favorite's in the drying rack," she pointed. I ran the water until it was cold on my fingers, filled my favorite strawberry painted glass and returned to the table where the pale pink envelope enticed me. I tore it open.

"It's from Grandma, you should give her a call later, say thank you." I nodded. On the card front, nestled in a border of flowers, the words: *Wishing A WONDERFUL Granddaughter Every Happiness ON HER Birthday!* I pretended the fold of bills I could feel inside was *not* the thing which most delighted me. The inside, in a wide looping cursive, read, *Giliw, may God watch over you in grace and love, on this special day and always! Happy Birthday from Grandma and Sadie* (her yappy, white miniature-schnauzer). As always, the signature was embellished with a heart and a paw print.

On the floor, in the privacy of my bedroom, I counted the money: \$12, six two dollar bills. Each year on my birthday my grandma mails me the same card containing a dollar for each of the years I've lived. The bills were crisp. I retrieved the round butter cookie tin from my sock drawer that housed my journal, my savings, and a yellowed photo of my dad in his early 20s, straddling a motorcycle. He was brown like me, wearing a dumb boyish grin, hair a bleached mess the color of sour-ed milk. I paper clipped the bills to a slowly growing stack.

"Have you brushed your teeth?" My mom called from the kitchen.

"Mhm!"

"I'm making my way to the car." The jangle of her keys threatened to leave me behind.

“K,” I called back to her as I fought the cook tin that’s dented lid was often uncooperative. I was not even dressed yet. I rotated the lid around the mouth of the box until I found the right position. The box let out a sigh as I pressed the lid down.

“Giliw?”

“Almost ready, one sec!”

“Please don’t make me nag you on your birthday.”

“Okay, I’m coming!” My voice escaped with more irritation than intended.

“I’m in the car, lock the handle on your way out.” The door swung closed behind her with a heavy choke.

We arrived at the mall ten minutes late. Veta and her mom were waiting for us outside, standing in the shade of the large, white hand statue that guarded the Santa Rosa Plaza’s B street entrance. My mother dripped with apology as we entered.

“Hana, it’s really okay. We got here a little late too.”

Veta squeezed my hand and we walked ahead.

“Where are you girls off to?” my mom questioned as we tried to slip away undetected.

“We should do Claire’s first, right?” Veta looked at me for approval and I nodded yes with an open grin, barely able to contain my excitement.

“Okay, go ahead, we’ll meet you there.” Her mom released us and we sped off towards the central escalators. Claire’s was located at the west end of the second floor, a preteen’s purple paradise. Everything glittered.

When our mom's finally caught up to us, a young woman, maybe nineteen or twenty, helped me into the tall leather chair.

"Would you like to hold Princess?" She asked, tossing her blond ponytail behind her. I nodded and accepted the bear in my arms. The fluffy tops of her ears and stiff vinyl of her glittery tiara tickled my chin as I pressed her into my chest.

"Ok ready?"

I nodded, but I wasn't.

"Ready, One... Two... Three..." and then *guduh-chnnn*: the loud punch of the piercing guns, one on each ear. Veta was watching. Her eyes lulled me. I swallow hard, gulping back the wet shock welling behind my eyes.

"Awww, you did it! See, wasn't so bad, was it?" Molly (as her name tag read) grinned at me with pink braces. Her hair was slicked so tight it pulled the corners of her eyes in an upward slant. "She did so well," she said to my mother. And then to me, as if I hadn't heard her the first time, "You did really well." She placed a reassuring hand on my back. "Do you wanna see?" Steadily she held out a hot-pink mirror. I peered into its heart-shaped glass and examined the delicate blue crystals embedded in my earlobes.

"What do you think, huh?" My mother prodded. I gave her a tight-lipped smile and nodded.

"Yes, thank you, I like." She craned her neck forward and squirting through her glasses to examine what she'd paid for, checking first the earlobe which faced her, then pulling my chin toward her to get a look at the other.

"Mmm, yes, very nice." They were okay, but what I really wanted were white diamonds, like the ones Veta wore. The foggy blue specks weren't bold enough, didn't contrast my skin the way I knew diamonds would. And they didn't glitter the same either. Molly turned to Veta.

"You next?"

She nodded with a big grin and approached me in the tall chair. "Lemme see."

I turned an ear to her, and she touched it with a gentle, cool finger.

"Wow, I love them!"

"Me too! What are you gonna get?" She pointed to a pair of dainty studs in the glass case, sterling silver with a rainbow-refracting white stone.

"Opal, that's *my* birthstone."

"Opal" I repeated. The name was sweet on my tongue and melted in my mouth like rich, untempered chocolate. Like the half-dome chocolate chips Whole Foods sells in bulk and which Veta and I steal handfuls of when accompanying her mom on grocery outings.

"What's yours called again?"

"Sapphire." The name was sharp. It parted my lips and cut them on its way out. I climbed down from the chair, still clutching Princess with white knuckles.

Veta didn't need to hold the bear. She sat up straight with a perfect calmness that shamed my performance. This was her second earlobe, piercing. I was jealous.

Afterwards we browsed Claire's' purple walls lined floor to ceiling with vibrant, glittering preteen pleasures: a creative assortment of hair clips, bows, ribbons; cheap plated friendship necklaces and charm bracelets that would stain the skin green after a month of wear; sequined

purses and makeup kits packaged in clear vinyl zipper bags. Veta picked out a shopping bag's worth of hair ribbons and accessories (her mom even let you get some lip gloss and a couple shimmery eyeshadow quads) which she purchased with a blue plastic card. My mom used cash and coupons, drawn from folded legal envelopes she kept in her handbag. Along with my piercings, I got one new headband, a plastic pearl laden arch with tiny comb teeth that bit my scalp and smoothed my hair out of my eyes. I tore the tags off and put it on as we exited the store.

Next stop, Starbucks.

"Two ice waters please!"

Veta and I sat in a booth chewing ice chips and dipping our earlobes into our cups to dull the pain.

"For you girls," Mrs. Perez said in her warm, generous tone as she delivered two boxed chocolate milks and a paper pastry sleeve of cookies. I wanted the snickerdoodle, but I waited for Veta to take her pick before selecting mine. She broke a piece off the white-chocolate macadamia nut, so I did the same.

"Can we share a frappuccino?" Veta batted her long-lashed doe eyes.

"Oh Veta," her mom said, cocking her head to the left, which we knew meant, *yes, but only 'cause it's a special day*. Most days seem like special days for Veta. My favorite of her pleades is, *please, it's the weekend*, as if the weekend come only once a year.

"Pleeeeeease?" She pressed. "Please, it's Giliw's birthday." With that statement, she fluttered her lashes and squeezed my hand under the table.

"Would that be alright, Hana?"

"Hm?"

"Can Giliw and I share a frappuccino, please, for Giliw's birthday?"

"Oh sweetheart," my mom was addressing me. "I don't know. Don't you think you've had quite enough sugar already?" It was a trap. I wanted to agree with my friend and I didn't want to embarrass my mother by protesting her in public, so I stayed quiet. My mom lifted her glasses and squinted at the menu.

"How much are they? You can get a small."

"It's okay, Hana, it's my treat," Mrs. Perez assured.

We ate the cinnamon-dusted whipped-cream off the top, scooping it with our green straws. The drink was sweet and cold. Veta wrinkled her nose, "BRAIN FREEZE," she cried out and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

"Veta Sweetheart, no shouting," Mrs. Perez reminded over her shoulder. She and my mom were sitting in the booth behind us. "And take that thumb out of your mouth," she demanded when she turned to look at us. Veta wiped her wet thumb on a brown paper napkin. "And Giliw darling, how are you enjoying your birthday so far?"

"A lot I'm enjoying it!" I replied with an enthusiastic smile, "Thank you for the drink."

"You're very welcome. Pretty girls deserve special treats on their birthdays, don't you think?" Veta watched her. The moment her mom's head swiveled away from us, her thumb was back in her mouth. I scooted close to her so I could whisper.

"What are you doing that for? She told you not to."

Veta rolled her big eyes at me and removed her thumb to speak.

"I told you, I got a brain freeze."

"So?"

"So I put my thumb on the roof of my mouth to stop it." I didn't know what she meant, but I stopped my questioning 'cause she put her finger back in her mouth and my sugary ice blend was melting.

"Can we go to Häagen Daz?" Veta asked before we'd finished clearing our tables.

"Veta, sweetheart, you just had a caffeinated milkshake."

"So?"

"So, we're not getting ice cream today."

Veta made pleading puppy eyes, but her mom pretended not to see.

"Let's stop at a couple more stores and then we can think about lunch, sound good?"

"Ok," Veta moped.

Sears. My mom loves Sear, she couldn't wait to browse their clearance rack.

"Land's End always has such nice, modest swimwear, and they're probably having some end-of-the-summer sale. We should take a look since we're here," my mom suggested walking close beside me. She made a sweeping gesture with her arm to pull me in, but I moved out of reach, denying her the Rory Gilmore daughterly affection I knew she craved. I didn't want to go to Sears. I didn't want to look at old lady swimwear with my mom. That was a chore, I didn't want to do chores on my birthday. Ahead of us Veta was giggling with her mom, pointing out a

manikin in the front window of American Eagle that had two left hands. I increased my pace to join them.

At Sears, my mom made me try on three one-piece swimsuits, all the same cut, just varying in color and pattern.

“The striped one is too busy,” she remarked, as I begrudgingly modeled the final suit, my boney knees hugging together for warmth in the store’s frigid climate. “I think the yellow one was best, you agree? You like?”

I did not, but let her buy it anyway knowing that if I protested I would have to try on three more and so the process would repeat. Veta had abandoned me and gone to Justice to browse with her mom. *I* wanted to go to Justice. Why couldn’t we look at swimsuits there? “Everything there is so...’glitzy’.” Not understanding the word or how to use air quotes she nonsensically used both and I wanted to disappear, dissolve, escape.

We rejoined Veta and her mom at the food court for a late lunch, jumping in line behind them at Panda Express. Veta leaned into me and spoke in a low voice.

“You get the honey sesame chicken and I’ll get the Beijing beef and then we can share.” Her airy breath tickled my ear. We often spoke softly to one another when our moms were around, not because we had anything to hide, but because their presence alone made reason for secrets.

“Are you gonna get the chow mein or the fried rice?”

“Chow mein obviously.”

We moved up to the counter and placed our order. A pimple-faced asian boy rang us up at the counter and handed us a heavy plastic disk. His eyes told stories of heartbreak. I thought they were quite beautiful.

“It’ll buzz when your order’s ready,” he explained. “Paying cash or card today?”

With flushed cheeks, my mother fumbled through her collection of envelopes. She withdrew a coupon and a few limp bills, but before she could hand them over, Veta’s mom jumped in.

“We’ll pay card,” and she passed her blue plastic card over my mother whose face darkened. The boy accepted it.

“Paying together or separate?” the boy asked, addressing my mother, who opened her mouth to speak, but was again cut off by Veta’s mother.

“All together.” The boy nodded and ran the card.

“T-thank you,” my mom stuttered. “I can give you cash for our meals.” She retreated from the counter with her face turned down.

“No need.” Veta’s mom placed a kind hand on my mother’s shoulder. “It’s my treat.”

Veta and I chose a four person table across the food court near the Sumo Dogs, a “Japanese inspired” hotdog vendor. The table was dirty. A loose pile of brown paper napkins had been left behind along with a scattering of sesame seeds and bagel crumbs and a smear of something sticky. The ghost of former eaters. Veta brushed the table clean with her forearm before we all sat down. From my seat I could watch the hotdogs rolling across the heating bed, their savory, smokey scent pulling me from my dry noodles and syrupy, lukewarm chicken. Veta

doused her chown mein in duck sauce, then sucked the remaining sweetness from each plastic sauce pouch. The food court was loud, but the four of us ate with little talk.

I was acutely aware of the table of high school girls sitting behind us. It was their hair that first caught my eye, long and straight, with peek-a-boos of pink, and blue running through the ends. I watched over Veta's head as they shared their snacks and drinks: junk food served family style. One girl, bone thin and blond, squinted into a small compact mirror as she re-powdered her nose and forehead and sucked blue slushy through a fat red straw. "Can I try?" and she passed her drink across the table to a pale girl with black hair and raccoon eyeliner who in turn shared her packet of sour gummy worms. "Guys this is literally communism." The third girl at the table had natural brown hair styled with a deep middle part and a thick side fringe that obscured half her face. The others giggle at her remark. "Literally," emphasized Blondy as she returned the compact to her studded leather clutch.

"Can I have some chicken?" Veta asked, pointing her fork at my cold untouched bowl. I nodded, not looking away from the girls. The one with the raccoon eyes was hunched over a cell phone mashing the buttons, then waiting til it blipped and chimed in response. She held out the small screen for the others to read and the table erupted in laughter.

Veta glanced over her shoulder, only just becoming aware of their presence. I averted my gaze playing disinterested in their girly giggles.

"You're not hungry?" My mom asked, leaning into me.

"No, no I am," I reassured her, splitting my wooden chopsticks. I poked at the sticky meat, mushing it around in my bowl. Veta turned to me, rolling her eyes. *What?* I mouthed. She shrugged in the direction of the girls and rolled her eyes again. I didn't understand.

“Ey-thay are-ay o-say umb-day,” she said at a surprisingly elevated volume.

“Eta-vey!” I ducked my head and whispered. “Other-ay people-pay eak-spay ig-pay atin-lay,” I felt my face flush. At school, Pig Latin is ours, a secret language only we share. Other kids marvel at our fluency and beg for us to teach them. But out in the world a lot of people speak it, or at least understand the simple word scramble.

“O-say?” She replied, “I-ay on’t-day are-cay if-ay ey-thay an-cay under-ay-and-stay. Ey-thay are-ay umb-day!” She said it again, louder this time.

The blond girl glanced at us, sitting there, small next to our mothers. She leaned towards her friends.

“Ook-lay,” she said, nodding, and the girls turned around, tossing us expressions of mawkish pity.

Veta didn’t notice, with her back with her to them, but I did. Blondy threw out one word to let us know we were caught, that she understood and then flipped it so quickly. We were small, we were dumb. “How cute, they’re on a mall date with their moms.” For a moment our gaze met. Instinctively, my eyes darted away, resting, again, on the hotdog vendor’s roller grill. I watched the meat turning over and over and over, their greasy lengths reflecting the red and yellow lights of the neon *Sumo Dogs* sign.

More painful than the moment they caught us was how quickly their attention shifted, how easily we faded into the food court backdrop of their American teen movie. A quick chime from the raccoon-eyed girl’s cell phone and they forgot we were even there.

“Darek’s at Cinnabon!” She read to the group.

“Ugh, that shit’ll make me bloat,” Blondy complained.

“You don’t have to get anything, we’re just gonna meet him over there,” the brown-haired girl explained.

“I do though,” Blondy whined. “If we go down there, I can’t not get bonbites.”

“Okay, then stay up here,” the raccoon-eyed girl sighed, typing a response as she spoke. “We’ll meet Darek and come back up, and then, I dunno.”

“HotTopic, can we please go to HotTopic?” The brown-haired girl pleaded.

“Sure, HotTopic, and Darek I think wants to go to Spencer’s.” The raccoon-eyed girl folded her cell phone and began to gather her things into her Skelanimals tote. The year before I had asked my mom for a Skelanimals hoodie for my birthday, or maybe it was Christmas. Anyway, I didn’t get one. “It’s kinda ugly” is a common response to the clothes I like so I stopped asking for things. I let her buy me the clothes she wants and I try my best to style them how I want.

“Why don’t you just meet us over at HotTopic in like ten?” the raccoon-eyed girl suggested.

“Kay,” Blondy moped, slurping the last of her slushy. The brown-haired girl was collecting the remaining trash from the table and stuffing it into an empty Ruffles chip bag, when the cell phone rang. The raccoon-eyed girl rummaged through her tote for her phone which rang out a dark, synth rhythm, with a chiming top melody. It sounded like something out of a video game. Veta and I locked eyes, smiling. We know most of the Motorola ringtones from playing with her mom's cell phone on our rides to and from school. “*Moonlit Haze*” she mouthed to me through grinning lips.

“Hello?” the raccoon-eyed girl answered in a pinched voice. “Yeah we’re literally walking over right now,” she gave Blondy a lazy wave as she left. Walking back from the trash, the brown-haired girl skipped to catch up to her raccoon-eyed friend. Effortlessly, their bodies swayed in a coquettish unison, their slender hips dipping with every step, and peaking above the lowrise of the raccoon-eyed girl’s skinny jeans I spied a lip of pink lacy. *Lingerie*, was the word that came to mind, a word I learned a few weeks ago and have yet to find an appropriate situation for its use. I pinned this new word, to the image of the girls leaving.

As we cleared our own table I realized I never saw the blond girl go, she was just there and suddenly gone. I would wonder later if, for a brief moment, she noticed me, not noticing her.

Four

The cafeteria is a jungle at lunch time, especially on Fridays. Everyone is antsy, teachers talk faster and students squirm in their seats, everyone counting down the hours to freedom. Veta and I weeded our way through the rows of connected picnic tables, holding our gray lunch trays with extended arms so we could watch the floor and avoid tripping over backpacks or impishly extended legs. Veta led the way, scouting space at a table with some kids we know from homeroom: Aminata Jones, Cooper Simms, Eric Madden and some long haired blond kid with a snotty nose, who's rubber toe-ed Keens were definitely a uniform violation.

“I think maybe I'd like to be a teacher when I grow up,” Aminata was telling the group when we sat down.

“Why?” inquired Eric. She shrugged.

“I don’t know. I guess ‘cause I like children and school and I also heard it pays real good.”

“Oh yeah, where’d you hear that?” Cooper asked with skepticism.

“I don't know, I've just heard it.”

“No she’s right.” The snotty-nosed boy interjected. “You know Mr. Chicarelli?” We nodded, “Heard he’s got a butler.”

“So?”

“What’s a butler?”

“You mean like in those movies, the guy in the tux that answers the front door?”

“Yeah.”

“So what he's got a butler?”

“So what? So what is that he’s so rich he can afford to pay someone just to open the door for him!”

“I don’t believe you, don’t you gotta like, live in a mansion to have a butler?”

“Yeah, wait, Chicarelli doesn’t live in a mansion, he lives down the block from me in this little gray house with a broken fence and weeds all growing in the front.”

“I’ve heard that’s just where he lives during the week so he can be close to the school,” the snotty-nosed boy explained, “But on the weekends he stays at his mansion in Palm Springs.”

“Why doesn’t he just teach in Palm Springs?”

The snotty-nosed boy shrugged.

The bell rang and we stood to clear our trays.

“You gonna finish that?” The snotty-nosed boy asked, pointing to my half eaten jell-o cup.

“No.”

“Thanks,” he said and snatched it from my tray. I watched in shock as he crushed the cup and sucked up the remaining green jell-o. If it was red, I would have finished it myself, but I didn’t like the green so much, it left a sour taste in my mouth. He walked away scraping the last jiggles of jell-o from the bottom of the cup with his finger. I stood there stupid with my tray waiting for Veta to finish the last few bites of her Uncrustables sandwich.

Ms. Nickels, who’s frizzy red hair barely peaked over the sea of middle schoolers, raised her hand and her voice asking us to “PLEASE MAKE SURE YOUR TRASH GETS INTO THE BINS, WHAT I DON’T WANNA SEE IS TRASH ON THE FLOOR OR LEFT AT THE TABLES! THANK YOU!”

Veta and I have Chicarelli fifth period for pre-algebra. The class itself, *BORING!*, but I like him. He’s young and thin and clean-shaven and wears rimless rectangular glasses. He’s the kind of adult you know you can trust, the kind of teacher that shows interest in his students, who you can’t wait to talk to on Monday about the movie you saw over the weekend. He’s the teacher you go to if you notice someone being bullied, the teacher you naturally open up to about your problems at home. Unlike our other male teachers Brown and McNally, who always wear full tweed suits, Chicarelli dresses more casually, shirt and tie, sometimes with a vest on top, brown slacks. And the ties he wears are fun. Like he haa this one with the first 1000 digits of pi on it that he saves specially for pi-day (March 14th) and he has this other one I really like that’s blue

and, from afar it just seems checkered, but if you look closely you can see that all the lighter blue “checkers” are actually delicately embroidered Millennium Falcons. He also has a poster of the R2D2 blueprints on the back classroom wall. An unabashed StarWars nerd.

“Alright very good, now, can anyone refresh our memory on what a proportional relationship is? What is a pro-portion-al re-la-tion-ship? Yes Aidan?” Chicarelli calls on us like a news boy conducting an interview, extending his chalk stick as one might extend a mic.

“It’s like when you buy a lot of food at the grocery store so you have to pay more money than if you bought less food.”

“Okay, good. So what Aidan is referring to is the real-world example given on page 126 of the textbook, let’s all turn to page 126. Does someone wanna read that for us?” Veta’s hand shot up, she loves to read aloud in class and is always the first to volunteer. “Yeah, Veta.”

“Consider an example of a proportional relationship in your daily life: When you go grocery shopping there is a relationship between the amount of apples you need and the amount of money you will have to pay for them. In other words, the more apples you load into our shopping cart, the more you will have to pay at check out.”

“Thank you Veta, now does everyone understand this? Do we all understand what we mean now by proportional relationship? Yes? I’m getting some nods in the front here, good. Miles, you seem to really get it,” we giggled, turning to look at Miles who threw his head back and forth with exaggeration. “Excellent, okay. So, now let’s make a table to express a proportional relationship. Someone give me an example?”

“Marshmallows!”

“Okay, what else?”

“Gumballs!”

“Alright.”

“Hippopotamuses!” Everyone laughed. Hippos are Miles’ favorite animal and he makes sure they lumber their way into our math studies whenever possible. Veta tugged my sleeve and tossed a folded scrap of graph paper into my lap.

Ur mom or mine 2day? The question was scribed in sparkly purple ink, each letter round and evenly spaced.

I wrote back in pencil: *My mom, she’ll get us from the library at 5.*

Again with her glittery GELLYR□LL, she replied: :) *wanna stop @ Rite-Aid otw?*

I don’t have any money

I’ll pay \$\$\$

Ok, thnx ♡

At 3:20 we were released by the incessant, shrill freedom song that rang through the crowded halls. I found Veta waiting for me on the front steps.

“Watch this,” she greeted me, blowing an impressive pink gum bubble that popped and stuck to her nose. “Vincente’s been teaching me.”

“Lemme try.” She cut me a long strip of HubbaBubba tape from the pink roll and we started to walk. I couldn’t blow a bubble, but the sticky smacking noises that accented my speech made my stomach flutter with ecstasy.

“What are you gonna ask for for Christmas?” I asked purposely smacking my gum.

“Christmas? Dude, that’s so far away, I don’t know.”

“My mom always has me make my list early so she can prepare.”

“What’s on your list?”

“I think I wanna ask for an American Girl Doll.”

“Which one?”

“I dunno, I like Kit, I think she looks the most like me.”

Veta stopped walking.

“What?” I stopped a few paces ahead of her.

“You’re joking right?”

“No,” I said, matter of factly.

“Dude, have you seen yourself? You’re *Filipina*, you’ve got *moreno* skin.”

Moreno. I’d never heard the word, but from the context I guessed at its meaning: brown, dark, not the same color as Kit with her blue eyes and freckled cheeks.

“Yeah okay, but we have like, the same hair.”

“Her hair’s *blond!*”

“Yeah, I know that, I mean style. It’s cut kinda like mine. Besides, I just like her, I think she’s the prettiest one.”

“What about the new asian one, Jessica something?”

“Jess McConnel?”

“She doesn’t look any closer to me than Kit.”

“If you want one that looks like you, why don’t you ask for a mini-me?”

“Yeah, but I like the ones with stories, the mini-me’s don’t come with stories.”

“Isn’t their story, like, your story?” Veta punctuated her question with a snappy pink bubble.

“I don’t have a story.”

Veta sighed. “Aren’t we a little old for dolls anyway?”

“No, and I just want one, everyone else has had an American Girl Doll and I’ve never had one before.”

“Why don’t you ask for like, an mp3 player or a DS or something cool?”

“My mom would never buy me that stuff, and even if she did get me an mp3 player, she’d have no idea how to put music on it, she can barely figure out how to change the channels on our *television*.” I used the word mockingly, because no one says that any more, it’s tv, everyone says tv, why can’t my mom just be modern and normal and say tv like everyone else? I think she says it to be fancy and proper, but it makes her sound old. Even my grandma says TV.

We were rounding the corner to cut through the Safeway parking lot when Veta suggested we stop into Crystal’s. Crystal’s Corner was a donut and sandwich place next to Safeway, a hole in the wall that also served burgers, breakfast and Chinese food. We often stopped there on the way to the library. If Mason was working he’d give us cups of tap water free of charge, sometimes even a donut hole or two. He’s the shop owner's son and friends with Vicente, graduated from Montgomery in June so now he’s here all the time.

The shop’s front left window was decorated with one of those cool neon signs, the shape of a donut outlined in blue with arching red letters inside that read: DONUTS FRESH DAILY. New advertisements had been pasted to the glass below announcing that Crystal’s was now proudly

serving Snapple and Wolf Coffee. The right window had a large painting of a steaming hamburger and below, in boldface the shop's seven digit phone number. Veta swung the door open inviting its heavy bells to clanged embarrassingly against the glass.

"Whudda you beggars want?" Mason asked, barely glancing up from his *Claymore* volume. He leaned against the counter in his pale yellow polo and blue apron, reading and sucking the last sweetness out of a disintegrating lollipop stick.

"I want to buy a donut actually," Veta announced.

Mason put his book down with raised eyebrows. "Which kind?"

Veta was already peering through the sloping glass of the display case. "My god, they're so beautiful, Giliw aren't they beautiful."

I agreed, but found her ogling act artless and embarrassing. Mason, sighed impatiently, still chewing his lollipop stick while he waited for her to order.

"What should I get?" She asked, turning to me.

I shrugged.

"You want anything?"

I shrugged again.

"Oh, you know what I could really go for? An *éclair*." Her eyes bulged with the enunciation of French syllables. I half expected a dribble of drool to run down her chin.

"Not a bakery kid," Mason grumbled.

"It's not a Chinese restaurant, but you guys serve Chinese food," Veta snapped back.

"Just sayin we don't sell *éclairs*, that's all."

"Well I wasn't gonna ask you for a fucking *éclair*."

Mason put his hands up, it was his only appropriate defense. The shift of energy made the hairs on my arms and neck rise. I became aware of every corner in the small shop. We were not alone. A stout elderly man in a frayed baseball cap, who I hadn't noticed when we entered, sat at the single table in the corner by the drink case. He peeked at us for a moment before returning to his sloppy burger. My ears sharpened to a background chatter, the cooks' Chinese pidgin English banter. They paid us no mind. There was no one else in the shop, but I felt hundreds of eyes watching.

"I'll have an apple fritter, she'll have a cinnamon-sugar twist."

Mason bagged our treats and Veta paid for them and the bells on the door clanged behind us as we left and we walked without speaking, past Rite-Aid, straight to the library. We assumed our usual spot on the brick stairs out front. She handed me the paper pastry sleeve. When I took it I saw that she was crying.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine," she said, turning her head away and wiping her tears with a frustrated fist.

"Thanks for the donut." I peered inside the paper sleeve at the twisted dough. I couldn't remember the last time I had a donut.

"You can also have some of my fritter if you want." She sniffled and sunk her teeth into the lumpy, glazed mess. "Damn Mason." She cursed him with her mouth full. "He's a real shithead, but he sure sells a good donut, try this." She extended the sticky mess toward me and I leaned forward taking the sugar straight from her hand.

"Damn, that *is* good. Wanna trade?"

"Have as much as you want," she said, handing me the fritter. I took another large bite.

“Can I try some of your twist?” She asked, licking glaze from her fingers. I passed her the other bag.

A cool breeze brushed past, plucking dried brown leaves from the overarching trees. The sky was dull and overcast. I watched a pair of small brown birds leap from a telephone wire, ascending to the street where a togo container had been spilled. Quietly they nibbled at the mound of yellow rice and black beans. I took another bite of the fritter. As I watched them eat, I got the sense they were watching me too.

“This is pretty good too, but I always find cinnamon sugar donuts a little disappointing ‘cause I expect them to be like chiro’s, but they don’t have the same oily, crispiness, you know?”

“Mmhm,” I nodded, still watching the birds.

“We should go to El Paise for dinner and get chiros.”

“Is this not enough fried dough for you in a day?”

“What are you, my mom?”

I rolled my eyes.

“You don’t have to get a chiro if you don’t want, but I want one. Also been craving una quesabirria.”

“I can’t tonight, my mom’s making chicken adobo.”

“I thought your mom was Japanese.”

“She is, but she actually never cooks Japanese food. Just Filipino recipes sometimes. Simple stuff my dad taught her, adobo, arroz caldo, nilaga.”

“Oh. My mom makes pancit sometimes, and one time she made lumpia, but my dad doesn’t like it. He always complains about her Filipino cooking so it’s easier for her to just cook Mexican or get take out.”

“Do you prefer your mom’s Filipino cooking or Mexican?”

“Honestly? I prefer when my dad cooks.” We giggled. Veta’s house is a Michelin Star restaurant in comparison to the humble flavors of my mom’s kitchen. Every dish she makes is some variation of vinegar and garlic and loads of salt, but I like it. It’s nice when she’s home early enough to cook. There’s only so many leftover rice and fish stick meals I can stand to reheat.

We sat on the brick steps for what felt like a long time, licking our fingers until there was not a trace of sugar left and then licking them some more just to be sure.

“What happened?” I finally asked.

“What do you mean?” Veta asked, staring at me through daydream eyes.

“At Crystals? Why did you freak out at Mason?”

“I did not *freak out* at him,” she defended. “I just, I dunno... I feel bad, it was like a last straw kinda thing I guess. I’m just so tired of being treated like a child, I’m not you know? We’re *not* children anymore, and yet, we get talked down to, *especially* by boys and it’s not fair. Boys get to be boys forever, but they’re treated like men the second they start walking and talking, it’s ridiculous. Living in a house full of ‘em is really driving me mad.”

“Yeah I bet.”

She sighed a long sweet breath and slumped her head against my shoulder. “Can I just move in with you and your mom for a while, we can start a girl house.”

“Technically my mom and I are already a girl house, it’s already started.”

“Okay, then invite me! Let me join that shit.”

“Okay, I’ll ask.”

“Or you could move in with *me*,” she invited. “Then it would be three girls to four boys, a little more even.”

“Maybe,” I giggled.

“You think you can sleepover tonight?”

“I dunno, my mom’s cooking and I’d feel bad.”

“Pleaaase?” she begged with fluttering lashes.

“Ok, I’ll ask.”

“Yay!” She squeezed me and laughed. “Oh, and we just got a blu-ray player which my dad’s been dying to test out so he’ll probly let us rent something.” The corners of her smile were speckled with crystals of sugar and her eyes were big and warm. “We should walk over to Blockbuster and see what they have.” She suggested.

“Now?”

“Yeah!”

The air was dry and smelled of stale popcorn and decades of dust.

“Hi. Welcome to Blockbuster.” A tired voice greeted us from behind the counter. It belonged to a small girl with brown curls that puffed out from under her blue and yellow employee cap. I’d seen her working a few times before. She didn’t seem much older than us, high school age maybe. I liked her nails, shimmery pink stilettos. She was slumped on a stool with her

face fixed to the computer monitor. She blew a large gum bubble which she sucked back into her teeth with a loud 'POP'.

New releases were displayed right up front so we browsed those shelves first.

“Oh shit, the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, remember when we went and saw at the Rialto that with Nino?”

“Oh yeah, that was fun, I barely remember the movie though, just that scene where the barnacle guy gets whipped by the squid-face man.”

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

We passed under a hanging TV screen playing some Batman movie. The sound was muted and the dark picture barely visible under the store's fluorescent lights.

“What's *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*?” We were in the romcom section.

I shrugged. “Never heard of it.”

“Wait, is that that girl from *Gilmore Girls*?” Veta asked, pointing to the cover.

“Oh yeah.” Alexis Blendel.

“Oh we should rent *A Cinderella Story*,” Veta said, picking up the plastic case.

“We've seen that like 5 times.”

“So?”

“No, let's pick something new, or at least something we've only seen once.”

“Fine.”

We settled on a movie called *Almost Famous*. Neither of us had seen it, but I was intrigued by the synopsis and Veta was persuaded when she saw Zooey Deschanel was in it.

“We’ll have to send my dad to pick it up later ‘cause he’s the one with the membership card.”

“The membership card,” I repeated to myself. That’s why my mom and I never rented from Blockbuster, we didn’t have a membership.

“You wanna get some popcorn for the walk back?”

“Sure.”

We got a large from the self-service machine. Veta piled a bit extra on top and I carefully balanced the bag as she paid at the counter.

“That it?” the girl asked.

“Yep, thanks.” Veta crumpled the receipt in her fist and took the popcorn bag from my arms, spilling the extra bit off the top. The girl at the counter frowned at us as we left. In the end it was too much, we only ate about half. Veta rolled the bag closed.

“We can have the rest later when we’re watching *Almost Famous*.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

But we didn’t watch *Almost Famous*. That night, curled up on the couch we found ourselves again watching *A Cinderella Story*.

“Pero Papa, we’ve seen this movie like a hundred times, you *know* that!”

“You girls were trying to get me to rent you an R-rated movie. You thought I would fall for that? Just be grateful I got you anything at all.”

“We didn’t know it was R-rated,” Veta defended. “And wait, last week you let the boys rent *Donnie Darko* and *that’s* rated-R.”

“The boys are older than you. Maybe I’ll let you watch rated-R movies when you’re sixteen, but right now you’re thirteen and you can watch movies with a PG-13 rating.”

“This is so unfair!” Veta sank herself into the couch with her arms crossed.

“Blu-ray,” her dad said with giddy excitement, reclining in his arm chair as the Warner Bros production sequence ran across the flat screen. “You girls tell me if you notice a difference in the picture quality, alright?”

Veta got up from the couch and went to the kitchen.

“Mija? Can you get the lights while you’re in there?”

I could hear her rummaging in the freezer.

“Where the hell’s the ice cream?”

“Language,” her dad cautioned. If only he’d heard the other words she’d said that day.

“Did the boys eat all the ice cream?”

“I dunno.” Her dad shrugged, pausing the movie.

“Who let them eat all the ice cream?” She swung the freezer door shut. “Mmmm,” she grumbled and returned to the couch with the bag of stale popcorn.

“Las luces?”

Veta ignored him, reaching her arm into the popcorn bag.

“Mija?”

With admitted defeat, he got up and turned the lights off himself. On his way back to the armchair he passed us and reached his hand into the popcorn bag.

“Lemme get summa that.”

“Hey!” Veta slapped his hand away.

“Alright,” her dad said sitting back, “Are we alright?” He looked first to me. I smiled politely. Then he looked at Veta. “Are we alright?” he asked again. His soft features were illuminated by the TV’s blue glow.

“Yeah we’re alright,” Veta replied with a reluctant smile.

“Alright!” her dad said with enthusiasm, “Then let's get this blu-ray going!”

Five

She turned off the lights. In the dark, with the comforter pulled to my chin, the top sheet bunched up and buried at the foot of the bed, I felt safe. I could hear Veta, fumbling her way to the bed. She crawled in beside me and tugged a corner of the pillow where she lay her head next to mine.

“Are you asleep?” Her breath ruffled my bangs.

“No.”

“Are you tired?”

“No. Are you?”

“No. I’m annoyed.”

“Why?” I roll onto my side to look at her. She was digging around her mouth with her fingers. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” and she wiped her slobbery hand on the comforter. “I have this damn tooth that’s sore and loose, but won’t come out.”

“Can I see?” She opened her mouth to me, but I couldn’t see a thing in the dark.

“God, I’m starving,” she said, closing her mouth and turning onto her back. “Are you hungry at all?” I was a bit.

I hate the sound of snoring and Veta’s dad’s snore is the worst. It scares me. It sounds like a clogged vacuum choking on carpet dust and hair balls. Or sometimes it’s grating, nasally and wet. The offensive echo of his breath made my insides coil as we crept from Veta’s bedroom. We balanced our weight on the balcony banister tip-toeing past the long stretch of upstairs rooms. Pin pricks of red and green light blinked in the dark of the windowless home office. That room gives me the creeps at night. We scurried past the open door, keeping our eyes forward. Slipping past Vicente’s room I caught a taste of his redolent boy smell. It seeped through the crack under the always locked door with its cool, crooked BEWARE OF DOG sign announcing danger beyond. Veta was the caravaner. I diligently followed her quiet moving. As we passed Landon and Lorenzo’s smelly, shared room, my untrained feet disturbed the warped subfloor and it let out a bitter moan. Veta’s head whipped around, eyes bugged in exasperation. I held my breath to trap a rising laugh in my throat. She turned forward again and the stifled laughter dissolved in my grumbling stomach. The snoring was loudest when we crept past her parents’ cracked bedroom door, a mucousy growl rising and falling with each heavy breath. The stairs squeaked if

you placed your weight in their center, so we clung to the railing and walked on the outer edge of each step.

In the kitchen, moonlight dripped through the window above the double basin sink. It pooled on the linoleum and stretched our fragile shadows long across the floor where we sat cross-legged in the refrigerator's warm glow and spooned peanut butter straight from the jar. I held my spoon between my teeth and watched Veta's dark eyes as she scraped the walls of the jar clean with her spoon. They were black and glossy like the ocean's midnight waters, sharp like the obsidian chucks we sometimes dig up in her backyard and used to bring for show and tell in elementary school. She sucked her spoon and handed me the jar. I reach down to the bottom scraping at the sad crusted remains. Veta rose silently. She hoisted herself onto the counter to open one of the high cabinets where her mom stores the "extras". She stood precariously on the counter top, holding her spoon in her mouth while she grabbed a sleeve of OREOs and a new jar of Skippy. Still focused on my peanut butter excavation, I only heard the cabinet close, the crinkle of OREO plastic-foil and the slapping thud of Veta's body hitting the linoleum. She let out a short squeal and then was silent. I dropped the empty jar and crossed the kitchen to flick on a light. Veta sat hunched over, clutching her left cheek, spoon still in her mouth. My stomach twisted.

"What is it? What happened?" I squatted next to her. When she lifted her head there were tears in her eyes. She removed the spoon from her mouth, dribbling saliva and blood down her chin.

"What happened?" I asked again, touching her wet chin. She held my palm flat and spit into it. Enveloped in a thick, frothy blood sat the jagged pear of a molar tooth.

“It came out.”

I rinsed the tooth under the cold kitchen tap, placed it to the side and washed my hands with the foamy, blue dish soap. It smelled of lemons and lavender, a comforting scent that soothed me and untwisted my stomach. With the water running we didn't hear the squeaking of the stairs which would have warned us that someone was coming.

“What are you creeps doing up?” Vicente's voice whipped my heart into a gallop. I shut off the water and turned to face him with dripping hands. An island stood between us, diving up our territory. Slouched in the doorway in only his boxers and a thin cotton tank I thought he resembled those black and white Calvin Klein ads you sometimes see at bus stops or in light-up mall displays. Of course he was younger than those men, 16 or so, and darker with Veta's same black eyes. Eyes that bore into my skinny frame, sucked the air from my lungs and pinned me ridged against the sink.

“The fuck happened in here?” he asked, slumping down to pick up the OREO sleeve which had unsealed and scattered cookies on the floor where Veta fell. With his eyes still burrowing into me he advanced a few paces to lean against the island. He peeled the dark face off an OREO and licked away the white filling.

“What's up with her?” he asked me, nodding toward Veta who had not turned or moved or made any acknowledgment of his presence. She was still, facing me with a bloody paper towel wadded in her mouth.

“Please don't tell ma.” Her plea was muffled and she did not turn to face him.

“Tell her what?” Vicente piled the black OREO faces on the island’s wooden countertop and split open another. Again he licked away the white filling and grew the black stack, aligning them neatly like poker chips.

“Tell her *what?*” He asked again, this time impatient. His suave had dissolved and he stood tall and serious. Veta turned to face him.

“Oh fuck Veta! What happened?” He set down the OREO he had just defaced, the white cream undisturbed. His sudden compassion confused me. In an instant he had flipped from teasing, nagging older brother to compassionate and protective. He rushed over to her and she began to sob, loud child sobs. He crouched to her level and stroked her hair back, looking into her face for an answer. I didn’t understand what was happening.

“Wet a paper towel for me,” he instructed without looking away from her. I nodded and turned and could not remember what to do. This kitchen, which I knew better than my own, became foreign. I stared out the dark window. Veta’s sobbing, which Vicente had calmed to a sniffle, sounded far away and for a moment it was just me and the moon. I searched for its face, but saw only a rabbit, tilted sideways, leaping. The warmth of Vicente’s body startled me. He reached over my head, tore a paper towel from the roll and ran it under warm water. The towel buckled, saturated and went limp. So did I, his radiant heat slackened my knees and softened my rigid spine. With his large angular hands he squeezed the excess water from the towel. And then he noticed it: the rinsed-clean tooth, resting beside the sink. He picked it up and rolled it gently between his thumb and forefinger.

Our heads all jolted when we heard the squeak of the parents bedroom door.

“Veta?” Mrs. Perez called down from the top of the stairs.

“Yeah?” Veta replied, steadying her voice.

“What’s going on down there?” Veta and I stared at one another.

What do I say? Her wide eyes asked. But she could see I didn’t have an answer. Neither one of us knew how to succinctly describe the situation in a manner that wouldn’t send Mrs. Perez bounding down the stairs.

“Nothing,” Vicente finally replied.

“Vicente? What are you guys doing up?”

“Nothing, Veta’s tooth just fell out, we’re about to go back to bed.”

“Veta’s tooth fell out?”

“Yeah, ma, it’s literally fine ok.”

“Okay, make sure she rinses with salt water.”

“Ugh, mom no!” Veta protested.

“Yes, rinse with salt water and go back to bed,” Vicente rolled his eyes and grabbed a glass down from the cabinet. “And don’t forget to turn off the lights.”

“Ma we got it.”

Veta swished and gargled and spit the salt solution into the kitchen sink.

“Okay, I’m done,” she said, pushing the glass back to Vicente.

“You didn’t even do half, come on, one more time.” She glared and took another reluctant swig.

I grabbed the tooth from the counter while Veta loaded her glass into the dishwasher. And then the lights went out.

“Vicenteeee!” Veta whined. But he was gone, squeaking up the stairs.

“Vicente!” She called again. “Watch, he's gonna try and scare us.” She grabbed my empty hand and we maneuvered through the dark and up the squeaking stairs. I twisted my neck to peer through his cracked door as we passed it. We were almost to Veta’s room at the end of the hall, when we heard scratching, the sound of nails dragging along the textured walls inside the home office. We stopped.

“Vicente, knock it off!” Veta begged, and the scratching paused. But when we resumed our footsteps the scratching continued. My hand was sweating in Veta’s and the other one which clutched the tooth was squeezed so tight it went numb.

“Just ignore him,” she said looking back at me. As we approached the mouth of the home office the scratching grew louder, faster, more violent as did the beating of my heart which pulsed in my throat.

“Rahhhhhh!” Vicente bellowed, jumping out, pouncing on Veta. She shrieked even though she knew it was coming. Our hands slipped apart and I stumbled and fell, both hands opening flat to catch me. I dropped the tooth.

“Girls!” We turned to see Mrs. Perez standing in her mumu at the other end of the hall. “What’s going on?”

“It was Vicente!” Veta blamed. “He’s trying to scare us.”

“Do you want me to get your father out here?” We were silent and I noticed the snoring had stopped.

“I didn’t think so,” Mrs. Perez said, crossing her arms. “Now go back to bed, all of you!” She retreated back into her room, closing the door behind her. I was still sitting on the ground. I combed my fingers through the carpet fibers searching for the tooth. Vicente passed me and slipped into his room, closing the door hard. I heard the lock click, then the creaking cry of springs when he threw his body down on the bed. He let out a long sigh and then everything was quiet. Veta came over and grabbed my arm to lift me.

“Wait,” I paused, resisting her help.

“What is it?”

“I dropped something.”

“You dropped something?”

“Yeah,” I said, crossing my fingers she wouldn’t ask what.

“What did you drop?” *Shit.*

“Nothing, I’m just looking for it.” I was too embarrassed to look into her face so I pretended I could see in the dark, scanning the carpet with my eyes and open palms. My eyes were useless and my palms revealed no hints of the tooth’s location.

“*What did you drop?*” She asked again. When I didn’t respond she disappeared into her room. I stayed seated, but my eyes followed her. I could hear her rummaging through a drawer, then another. Then a rhythmic whirring sound, electric, almost like a quiet printer spitting out an inch of an image at a time *frrrrree, frrrrree, frrrrree* and she emerged from the darkness with a wind up flashlight.

“It’s not very charged up,” she said, still winding the crank, “but we’ll have a couple minutes of light.” She switched it on and I squinted under the shock of its white glare,

momentarily intense and beating, then dim when she released the crank. We held the light close to the carpet pausing to take turns winding it up.

“What are we looking for?” Veta asked again.

“Your tooth,” I finally admitted.

“My tooth?”

“I grabbed it from the counter before we came upstairs.”

“Ew, why?” I couldn’t see her face, but her disapproval was detectable and I wished I hadn’t mentioned it. Nevertheless, Veta kept on searching while I sat immobilized by embarrassment.

“Is this it?” She finally asked, holding up a small shape to the dim light. She opened my palm and placed the shape inside so she could crank the flashlight, increasing its brightness which revealed the pearly tooth. Instinctively, as one does with lost things that have been found, I closed my hand tight around it, fearing it might slip away again.

“There’s a trash can over there.” Veta said as we entered her room. She flicked on the light and pointed to the plastic lined wastebasket under her desk. I made no motions toward it.

“What?” she asked, climbing up on the bed.

“Can I keep it?” I asked sheepishly.

“Why?”

I shrugged, “Cause it’s a part of you.” She considered my words for a moment.

“Fine, then you have to give me a part of you.”

“What?”

“Well, you can’t just have a part of me if I don’t get to have a part of you, that’s not fair is it?”

“I guess not.” I moved over to the bed and stood beside her.

“What should I give you?”

“Maybe a fingernail?”

“I just cut them.” I extended my hands to show her. She glanced at my stubby nails and frowned.

“Mmm.” I climbed up on the bed while she studied me. “Gimme a piece of your hair,” she decided.

“My hair?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“My mom will kill me.”

“She won’t have to know, I’ll just clip a small bit from underneath,” she explained, already crossing the room to retrieve scissors from her desk. “I’ll use my grandma’s special ones.” She unsheathed a small pair of gold handled thread scissors and placed them in my hand which was not holding the tooth, then returned to her desk for something else.

“I don’t know. What if she notices?” I opened and closed the scissor’s smooth, sharp jaws.

“She won’t,” Veta reassured as she rummaged through a cluttered desk drawer. “Adults only pretend to be observant, but they don’t notice half the things they claim to. Besides, if she does notice it’s a good thing, it means she loves you.”

“No, it means I’m in trouble.”

Veta rolled her eyes at me and returned to the bed with a hair clip and a bobbin of red thread.

“Turn to the side.”

I turned and dangled my legs off the bed. Veta pinned my hair back, adjusting the clip several times until it secured the short wisps of hair above my ear. She worked a tight, thin braid behind my ear, and fastened each end with a wrap of red thread.

“Scissors?” It was more of a command than a question. I hesitated.

“What’s wrong? You don’t wanna do it?” She asked. I looked down at the tiny scissors, gleaming in my palm. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.” But I did want to. “And it’s ok, you can still keep the tooth.”

“No I want to, I want to,” I closed the scissors and handed them to her. “I’m just nervous.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to be nervous, it won’t hurt or anything.”

“I know it won’t hurt, I’m just nervous.”

“About your mom? Dude, it will literally be fine, she won’t even notice, just don’t let her touch your head ‘til it grows back.”

“Yeah, but that will take ages, my hair doesn’t grow like yours does.”

“So do you want me to do it or not?”

“No I do, I do.”

“Okay, then turn your head and sit still.” I turned my head forward resting my gaze on the flutter of white butterflies stenciled on Veta’s lavender walls. She pulled the braid away from my skin. It actually did hurt, but I sat still. In one clean snip the hair split away from my scalp. I turned to look at it. She was right, it really wasn’t that much hair. I hopped off the bed and over to the vanity to take a look. I could feel the short stubble behind my ear, but from the front I couldn’t see that anything was different, even when I tilted my head to the side.

“You’re right, you can’t even tell.”

“Told you.” She’s never wrong.

“What are you gonna do with it?”

“I don’t know.” She was stroking the intertwining strands between her fingers. “What are you gonna do with my tooth?”

I shrugged.

“Here, I might have something,” she said, scooting off the bed. Again she rummaged through her cluttered desk draws. “Oh this would be good,” she said to herself and fished out a clear plastic Christmas ornament. She placed it on the ground and continued digging through the drawers until she found a small navy box. “There it is.”

“What is it?” I asked. Leaving the drawer agape, she returned to the bed. We opened the box together and inside, nested on a strip of white felt sat a gold ball locket. Veta removed it from its bed and unclasped it.

“Here,” she held it open to me. “Place the tooth inside.”

The tooth rattled inside when she slipped the chain around my neck. I held the gold ball in my hand studying its simple clasp.

“Is this expensive?”

Veta shrugged, “Doesn’t matter, I never wear it, it’s better that you have it.”

“What’s that for?” I asked, nodding toward the plastic ornament.

“Oh, it’s just some dumb thing my mom wanted us to do, she gave me and my brothers all these plastic ornaments to decorate for the tree this year, but I doubt anyone’s gonna do them.” She removed the ornaments silver cap and stuffed my braid down inside. It curved against the plastic walls. She reached up and hooked the bulb to the paper butterfly garland strung above her bed. The garland sagged a little under the ornament’s weight.

A shard of sun tore through the morning curtains, slashed my cheek and pulled me from my dreaming. I kept my eyes closed and let the red glow cradle me. Down stairs, the sounds of frying, dishes clinking, warm, muffled conversation. My body felt heavy, embedded in the mattress and my stomach was tight and aching. Probably hunger pains. I touched my throat, fingers searching for the gold locket. I untwisted the chain and squeezed the cold metal ball in my palm. The peaceful seal of my eyelids broke when heavy footsteps came bounding up the stairs and down the hall. Veta burst in, trailing the sweet smokey scent of bacon behind her.

“Breakfast’s almost ready!” She cried, jumping on the bed beside me.

The breakfast spread was elaborate. Pancakes, warm blueberry syrup, nutella, peanut butter, jam, sliced cantaloupe, sausage *AND* bacon, a box of lucky charms. It was beautiful, but I

felt sweaty and a little nauseated. Mrs. Perez leaned across the table with her frying pan to slide two perfect sunny-side-up eggs onto Mr. Perez's plate of beans and tomato sauce.

"La crema?" He asked as he squeezed lime over the vibrant platter. Mrs. Perez plated her own eggs and returned to the kitchen for the sour cream. Veta and I took our seats. Across from the boys.

"You girls help yourselves," Mrs. Perez called from the Kitchen. The boys had already started. Landon and Lorezon were quiet only when their mouths were stuffed with fluffy pancakes and greasy bacon. Vicente sat at the corner of the table in a plastic folding chair to make room for me. He poured milk over his lucky charms, then, leaving the bowl disappeared into the kitchen as Mrs. Perez came out with the sour cream. She sighed and smiled, settling down in her chair, then scanned the table and frowned.

"Honey," she called to Vicente in the kitchen.

"Mmmm."

"Can you grab the orange juice and glasses for everyone?"

"Ugh," He groaned. I eyed his cereal, milk already turning a pale pink. He came out to the table with a carton of juice, then returned to the kitchen for the glasses. Veta speared two pancakes with her fork and dragged them onto her plate.

"There's banana-chocolate chip and regular," Mrs. Perez voiced proudly.

"Thanks Mom," Veta said, with her mouth full.

"Help Giliw, will you?"

Veta looked over to my empty plate.

"What do you want, banana-chocolate chip or regular?"

I wanted banana-chocolate chip, but felt gluttonous admitting it out loud so I said
“Regular's fine.”

“Hold up your plate.” Veta slid two evenly golden brown pancakes onto my plate.

“Bacon?”

I nodded. She used her fingers to plate my bacon, dripping grease onto the mahogany table top.

“Come on Veta, where's your manners?” Mr. Perez scolded, looking up from his crossword.

Veta flashed me an *oops* grin as she reached for the syrup and Mr. Perez resumed his puzzle and loud chewing. Vicente entered the dining room with a stack of glasses. His hand brushed my arm when he placed one down beside me. Energy rippled through my body sending my heart into a skip. I kept my eyes glued to my plate worried I might be blushing, or worse, smiling. A few times, I allowed myself to glance in his direction, but only to steal brief glimpses of his shape. I wanted to stare at his face until I could hold his image in my mind. I wanted to study the slope of his nose, the crescent of his chin. But I didn't allow myself to stare.

The table was quiet while everyone ate. I was hungry, but the doughy, greasy meal only increased the nausea, so I took small, slow bites. Veta was already on round two, dragging her last piece of bacon through the syrup puddle on her plate before grabbing another pancake. She glanced over at me.

“You're not hungry?”

“No I am, I'm just not feeling too well.”

“Why, what's wrong?”

“I don’t know, it’s just my stomach. I’m fine.”

“Do you need a TUMS?”

“No, I don’t think it’s that kind of stomach thing.”

“Okay, well tell me if you need anything.”

I nodded. Landon broke the peace with a loud belch. Everyone giggled except Mr. Perez who set down his fork.

“Who raised you boys to be such animals?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Lorenzo protested.

“Because you encourage him.” Mr. Perez had a stern creased face, but it was also kind and round like his belly.

“Did Lorenzo tell you guys he’s got a girlfriend?” Landon asked, diverting the attention to his brother.

“Shut up, I do not.” Lorenzo jabbed at Landon’s ribs with a closed fist.

“Yes you do! I saw you sucking face with Maria Piña after the fall dance.”

Lorenzo caught Landon in a headlock.

“Yo, Maria Piña?” Vicente asked. “Isn’t that the girl that always has food stuck in her braces?”

“She doesn’t have braces anymore,” Lorenzo defended, “And we were not ‘sucking face’, we kissed like one time.”

“Was it good?” Vicente prodded.

“Boys that’s enough,” Mrs. Perez interrupted. “Maria Piña is a very nice girl, I will not listen to you slander her at my table.”

“Ma, we’re not ‘slandering’ her, I just want some details.”

“Well you can discuss details elsewhere.”

Landon jabbed his elbow into Lorenzo’s ribs and wriggled free from the headlock. My upper lip was sweating. I glanced at Vicente’s face as he tilted the milk bowl to his lips. My vision was becoming stary. I took a large swig of orange juice. It was cool going down. When he returned the bowl to the table our eyes met for a splinter of a second. I felt sick. So sick I feared I might puke or shit my pants or pass out. I pulled my body up from the table. Veta caught my arm.

“Where ya going?”

“Bathroom,” was all I could answer.

“Can I eat the rest of your bacon?” She asked, letting go of my arm. I nodded and I stumbled down the hall.

The downstairs bathroom had no lock. I shut myself inside and cracked open the window. A symphony of bird cries poured in, the scrub jay’s shrill and scolding solo, strident over the orchestra: Ahheeeet! The morning air was still cool and I pressed my face up to the window screen to let a passing breeze kiss my sticky cheek. The intoxicating perfume of a neighbor’s fence-climbing honeysuckle swelled my pores. Ahheeeet! I wiped my brow with the fraying hem of my pajama shirt, and moved away from the window. In the mirror I examined my dark eyes, normal, unchanging, my skin, oily and pale. I slicked my hair away from my face, pushing my bangs up and dragging my fingers through the short length. They lingered on the bristly patch behind my ear, a part of me I gave away. Ahheeeet! I splashed cool water over my face,

Ahheeeet! and flopped my weight down on the toilet lid. There was a dampness under my butt, had I sat in something? I stood to check. Stamped on the white toilet lid, a ghostly red print. No, no, no no n—Ahheeeet!

In front of the mirror again, balanced on my tip-toes, I twisted my body to get a look at the damage. An offensive ruby stain leaked from between my legs and spread across the seat of my pajama shorts. Ahheeeet! How long had it been there? Did anyone else notice? Oh my god! Did I leave a mark on the dining chair?! In an attempt to escape, my heart jumped violently around in my chest, banging again and again against my ribcage. All her small pounding efforts were futile. Ahheeeet!

The blood inside my underwear was dark and gelatinous. I wiped it out with wads of toilet paper and rinsed them in the sink. I rinsed my shorts too, ringing out as much water as I could. In the bathroom I figured out what to do. I slid the damp underwear over my bony legs and stuffed the crotch with toilet paper. I scrubbed the blood print from the toilet lid and wiped a few drops of blood off the gray tiled floor. What I didn't know was what to do outside the bathroom. How to walk, how to act, how to leave without causing alarm, making a scene, disrupting the morning. How to say good-bye. I slid on my damp shorts, washed my hands and crept out of the bathroom. If I could sneak upstairs and gather my things, maybe I wouldn't have to say anything, I could simply slip out the front door while everyone was still eating. That was my plan, and it was mostly successful. I made it upstairs, unseen, and slipped into the previous day's clothes. My long floral skirt hid the mess well. I rolled my shorts into a small ball, stuffed them into the bottom of my backpack and I was ready to go. I snuck back down the stairs

undetected and closed the front door softly behind me. It was on the last step of the porch that I got caught.

“Leaving already?”

I whipped my head around to see Vicente, lounging on the porch swing with a Bomb-Pop in his mouth. Saturday chores was the excuse I gave.

“That blows.”

“Yeah.” I slowed my voice in a desperate attempt to sound cool and casual, but my knees were shaking and sweat was running down my sides.

“You want one for the walk home?” he asked, raising his popsicle.

“Ok.”

He rose and disappeared leaving the front door open behind him. The porch swing swayed, knocking gently against the house. Outside in the morning sun, the scrub jay’s cries were louder. Ahheeeet! I loosened the straps of my backpack so that it hung low over my bum, hiding any potential staining.

“Hope cherry’s ok, we’re outta the other kind.”

“That’s fine.”

He slunk down the steps to hand me the plastic sheathed popsicle. I took it with a trembling hand.

“Thanks.”

In the sun, his brown face had a radiant, golden glow. His eyes too, reflecting the warm light. Staring a moment too long, I noticed a scar above his left eye. It cut down through his brow, then stopped.

“What’s that?” He asked, pointing down to my chest. My eyes followed his finger to the gold locked strung loose around my neck. It dazzled in the sunlight and made my yin-yang pendant look dingy and old. I shrugged.

“Something Veta gave me.”

“It’s pretty,” he said, reaching out to touch it.

“Thanks.” My face flushed and I could feel my breakfast crawling up from my stomach. I swallowed hard to push it back down.

“What are you guys doing?” Veta asked, an air of disgust in her words. Vicente dropped the pendant against my chest and stepped away from me.

“Giliw’s got chores,” he mocked, hopping up the steps.

“You’re leaving?” Veta whined with disappointment.

“Yeah, sorry, I have chores.”

“Can’t you do them later?”

“I promised my mom I’d do them before she gets home.”

“No fair! I was gonna see if my mom would take us to the mall to get our nails done. You don’t wanna get your nails done?”

“I can’t today, I’m sorry.”

“Ok, well will you at least come round tomorrow? Maybe we can go tomorrow.”

“I have to get home now, but I’ll ask.”

“Ok!” She said, waving, her voice full of hope.

I waddled down the hill, the popsicle melting in between my fingers.

The house was dark and cool when I got home, the curtains still drawn. I sighed and let my backpack slip to the kitchen floor. The sour aroma of vinegar and garlic from last night's cooking lingered in the air and I drew it in with a deep breath, grateful to be home. Without undoing the laces, I slipped off my shoes, discarded the melted popsicle and dragged my heavy body down the hall to my mother's bedroom.

A bare window bathed the room in hazy light. I slipped off my skirt and crawled between her sheets burying my face in the pillow. It's worn cotton case smelled sweet like jasmine and patchouli, milky like breath, salty from sweat. I cocooned myself in her scent, quickly dropping deep into sleep.

Six

I woke to the silver chimes of rain and a cool hand on my cheek. In sleep, my eyes had sunk deep into my skull. Slowly they resurfaced to meet the light. I pressed my hot cheek into my mother's palm. She was bent over me, her coarse black hair reaching down like branches of a woeful willow.

“When did you get home?” she asked, brushing my hair from my face. I wriggled my legs from under her weight and shrugged telling her,

“When it was still light.”

She exhaled a long held breath and gazed out the window at the distant hills, haloed in the sun's departing light. Low clouds darkened the sky, licked rooftops and water driveways.

“I'm so hot.” I tried to peel the covers off, but they were pinned under her.

“You feel a little warm.” She pressed the back of her hand against my forehead. “Do you think you’re catching sick?”

I shrugged.

She leaned in close to look at my skin, nudging my head left, then right inspecting my face with diligence. You can tell a lot about a person’s inner health simply by looking at their skin. This is something she tells me often. She tells me, “I always know my alcoholic clients, their skin is weak and dry like paper and often very congested. Lots of blackheads to squeeze and pick.” Her tone is gleeful, she’s an esthetician, picking and squeezing is her pleasure. I pressed my face into the pillow, retreating from her dangerous gaze. It didn’t take much for her to start in, picking and squeezing at my tender flesh.

“Relax, I don’t have my glasses,” she rose from the bed. “You’re probably fine but I’ll make you some hot tea.”

“Hot cocoa?” I asked, offering a more delicious alternative.

“Hot tea,” she repeated.

“What about dinner?”

“You didn’t eat dinner at Veta’s?” She called to me from the kitchen. I rolled out of bed to find my footing on the stiff carpet. That’s when I remembered I was bleeding. *Fuck*. There in the center of the white sheets, a generous scarlet bloom. I slipped on my skirt and rushed to the bathroom.

“Giliw honey, your tea’s on the table.” Her voice came through the bathroom's plaster walls, high and thin. I balled my soiled underwear and wrapped them in a swaddle of toilet paper, disguising them among the other trash.

A trickle of blood inched down my leg as I stood at the sink. I pressed my thighs together to halt its downward progression. Warm water ran from the faucet. I stood there, collecting heat in my cupped palms and watching my curious face. I was expecting to look older, to see a woman’s face, but the mirror reflected back the same round cheeks I’d had the previous day, the same *Dora* haircut.

“Giliw sweetheart?”

“I’m in the bathroom.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, fine. Be out in a sec.” I turned off the water and dried my hands on my skirt still looking at my soft, girl face. I hoped I would at least feel older, but the unknownness of it all made me feel naive and immature.

I came out and peaked into the kitchen, thinking I might find my mother at the kitchen table or standing at the stove fixing dinner, but then she called me.

“Sweetheart?” Her voice came from the bedroom.

My heart retreated deep into my chest, beating a violent rhythm that made my body hum.

“Yeah?,” I choked, my throat closing as I approached the bedroom door. She stood there, still in her work clothes with her arms folded. I braced myself against the door frame in preparation for a lecture, but instead she exhaled a long breath, then walked past me, out the

room and into the bathroom. I could hear her shuffling things in the cabinet. She returned with a square of folded pink plastic. She handed it to me.

“You know how to use?”

I shook my head.

“Go get a clean pair of panties.”

I brought her a yellow, cherry patterned pair.

She sat down on the floor. I stayed standing, afraid to open my legs and stain the carpet.

“Like this,” and she unwrapped the plastic to reveal a plush sheet of cotton.

“You peel it off, the back is sticky and then you place it like this, in the crotch of your panties.” She handed them to me with a smile.

“Thanks.” I squished the pad between my fingers.

“Now come have tea,” she said rising, from the floor.

“I think I need to shower.”

“Oh okay, yeah.”

I let the hot water soak my hair and run down my back. It settled my heart and washed away the blood in rusty streams. My chest was two sore lumps, my stomach rounded in pain, and the pungent odor wafting from my underarms was that of sour milk and cat piss. I exhaled a breath I'd been holding since breakfast and with it came the tears. I wanted to crawl out of this unfamiliar skin. I wanted to go home, back to the body I knew yesterday.