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**LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED**

**A Collection of Short Stories**

by

**Tanya Kuzmanovic**

**A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research  
through English Literature, Language and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

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## The Canadian Cookies

I woke up to Mom screaming Marcus' name. Every Saturday morning, he either crawled under his bed to the far wall so that neither Mom nor Dad could reach him or else he hid in the hall cupboard where all our shoe polish was kept.

On this particular Saturday morning, Marcus was under his bed.

"Come on, Marcus. Be a good boy," Mom was cooing, the tactic she resorted to when screaming failed to bring him out. "We go through this every week and every week we get you out and you go to Saturday school so why don't you just make it easy on everyone and come out?"

I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to Marcus' room. Mom was wearing her green silk dress and black shiny belt. She was leaning forward, on her knees, her bum in the air.

"Come on, honey. Before you wake Daddy up."

But it was too late. Dad came down the hall in only his underwear, muttering under his breath. Without a word, he stepped past me in a breeze of stale cigarette smoke. Not even hesitating, he roughly pulled the bed away from the wall and before Marcus could scurry away, Dad scooped him up from the floor and walloped his pajamaed bottom a few times until Marcus howled in pain.

When Marcus was placed securely in Mom's arms, Dad went back to bed without a word.

"See, honey? You've made Daddy angry," Mom said as she hugged Marcus and wiped his tears away. "Now come on. Let's get you dressed and ready for Saturday school. You're going to have fun today."

Mom's dress was wrinkled and dust bunnies clung to her skirt like part of an intricate

design.

"Maureen," Mom said to me. "Take Marcus and help him brush his teeth. I'll get breakfast ready."

I grabbed his little hand and led Marcus who was still sniffing, to the bathroom.

"See how good your sister is, Marcus? She never causes a fuss on Saturdays," Mom said as she headed for the kitchen.

I dragged over a stool to the bathroom counter and hoisted Marcus up onto it.

"I hate it, Mo. Hate it," he said and fresh tears welled up in his eyes.

"So do I. But soon we can come home again and watch cartoons," I said.

Marcus shrugged.

"And maybe Mom will give us money to go see a movie. And we'll get popcorn. Or we'll build a fort in the livingroom and see if Holly and Jeff can play? Huh?"

He shrugged again.

"It'll be good today, Marcus. Mom says it'll be fun."

Marcus seemed satisfied with this. Even though I had my own doubts.

In the kitchen, Mom had toast out on plates and two glasses of orange juice waiting for us on the table.

"Come on, kids. Hurry up."

We sat down and I nibbled on a piece of soggy toast. Marcus tipped his head down so his forehead touched the table. Silent tears rolled down his cheeks. Mom placed a hand on his

heaving back.

"Oh Marcus, honey. Why are you so bad, huh? You're too old to act like this. You're six years old now. You should be acting like a big boy.

"It's not that bad. Is it, Maureen?"

I shrugged and kept chewing the bread. There was a lump in my throat.

"I hate it," Marcus said in between gasps.

"Why? What's so terrible about it?"

Marcus sat up and wiped at his runny nose. He reached for a piece of toast while Mom combed his hair with her fingers. "Everyone's mean. They talk to us and I can't understand. And Tetka Ilanka said we're 'Canadians'."

Mom laughed. "So?"

"Canadians," Marcus said.

"You are Canadians, both of you. So what's wrong with that? And the point of you going is to learn about your culture. Learn the language a little. Why do you make it so hard on yourself?"

"No one talks to me. Everyone there hates me. Because I'm 'Canadian'." Marcus seemed about to cry again.

"Come on, Marcus. Don't be a baby. Anyway, don't you think it would hurt Daddy's feelings if you don't go anymore?"

Marcus shrugged. "I want to watch cartoons," he said quietly.

"Well, you can watch them when you come home." Mom cleared away our dishes.

"You're going to have fun today. See, I baked cookies for you two to bring with you and Ilanka



told me that you'll be singing songs today. Doesn't that sound like fun? Maureen?"

I nodded. "It will be okay," I said.

We pulled into the church parking lot and that feeling of dread hit me in the stomach. As I heard the gravel crunching under the tires I reminded myself that it would only be two more hours and then I would be free for another week.

Marcus' lower lip quivered as Mom stopped the car.

"Be a big boy, Marcus. You don't want everyone to see you crying. Listen, tell you guys what. Today, when I pick you up, we'll go to McDonalds for lunch, okay?"

Marcus nodded.

"I'll come in with you today. I think you'll need some help carrying those cookies in."

I held three burgundy cookie tins on my lap, each containing a different type of cookie.

There were the little sugar dusted bee hives that Mom called 'kipflis' and then the ones with a dollop of apricot jam in the centre. And then, there were my favourites and the ones I helped Mom with. Actually, they were really nothing other than doughy mounds of short bread with M&M's in them but to me they were the best.

Mom grabbed two of the tins and the three of us followed the stream of children and parents heading for the church door which lead into the basement.

We walked down the twelve steps and Mom helped us hang our coats up in the little cloak room off to the side.

The basement was divided into several different sections with tables and chairs and even blackboards in each section. In the middle of the floor was a big carpet with a piano in the

centre.

Mom set the cookie tins on a nearby table and kissed us goodbye when Tetka Ilanka strode over.

"*Dobro jutro*, Melanie," she called to my mother.

"*Dobro jutro*, Ilanka. How are you?" Mom asked.

"Good, good. You know. What have we got here?"

"Oh. I've been doing some baking and I thought you could use some extra snacks today."

"Baking? Your husband must be rubbing off on you then. No?"

Mom laughed but I knew it was fake by the way her lips pulled taut.

Tetka Ilanka pursed her wrinkled orange lips at us. "*Kako ci, dece?*" she asked through clenched white teeth.

"*Dobro*," I said.

"*I ti?*" she asked Marcus.

He clutched Mom's dress. "*Dobro*," he whispered.

"Okay, kids. Have fun. I'll be back for you soon. Goodbye, Ilanka." With a swish of her green dress, Mom turned and left.

Tetka Ilanka's smile leaked off her face. She glared at me until I shifted my eyes to the floor.

"Get going to your groups, *dece*," she demanded. "We need to get started, you know."

I left the cookies and moved toward the right corner of the room where all the kids aged eleven or twelve sat. Marcus moved to the table nearest the cloak room.

I knew it was going to be a bad day the minute I sat down on the hard wooden chair.

"*Dobro jutro*," called Mira, the girl who taught my group. She was young, probably no more than nineteen although at this time she seemed a woman to me. She had braces on her teeth that glinted when she smiled and snagged at her lower lip when she spoke. She was nice most of the time although she had very little patience.

"*Dobro jutro*," I whispered.

The two girls next to me snickered. "*Dobro jutro*," the one with the blonde braids, Vesna, mimicked to her friend, Jelena.

I smiled at them to let them know that I knew my accent was bad and that I was in on the joke. They glared back at me.

"Okay, class. Who memorized the prayer for today?" Mira asked the four of us around the table. She stood up at the front, nearest the wall and folded her arms.

No one breathed.

Finally, Bosko, a chubby boy, raised his hand timidly. "I can say the first part, but that's it."

"Okay, let's hear," Mira said.

Bosko shut his eyes and rhythmically tugged at his earlobe while repeating the memorized prayer.

"Not bad," Mira commented when he was done. "Anyone else know the whole thing? Maureen, *ti probis*."

I swallowed hard. "I only know a little," I whispered.

"*Uredu*. Go ahead," Mira prompted.

I swallowed again before clearing my throat. Vesna giggled and poked Jelena in the ribs.

"*Oce nas . . .*" I said, my voice nothing more than a squeak. I looked up at Mira. I could see a glint of metal sparkle from between her slightly parted lips. Her eyebrows were arched expectantly. "*Oce nas . . . ili . . . ja . . .*" I stopped. "I'm sorry. I don't know," I said.

"*Zasto?*"

"I didn't move a muscle.

"*Zasto, Maureen?*" Vesna asked.

"*Cuti, Vesna,*" Mira snapped. She turned back to me. "Why is that all you've memorized?"

I shrugged.

"That's not an answer, young lady."

"It's hard. I don't know what it means. I don't know what I'm saying."

"I don't care if you don't know - you memorize it. Next week, I want you to stand up here where I am now and recite the whole thing. Understand? *Razumis?*"

I nodded.

Later on, when we were supposed to be reading mimeographed sheets of smudged bible stories with a partner, Mira came over to me and kneeled next to my chair.

"Don't be angry with me, Maureen. It's the only way you'll learn. Wouldn't it be nice for you to speak your *tata's* language. Wouldn't he be proud?"

I nodded and managed to smile.

"Good girl," she whispered and left me to my bible story.

Bosko was my partner. I pretended to be reading the blurry letters which formed words I couldn't understand. He doodled on the edge of the sheet with his pencil and hummed quietly. I looked across the basement at Marcus' group. I saw that they had moved to the carpet and he was busy pushing a toy truck across the rug to another little boy. I slipped out of my chair and went over to him.

"Are you having fun?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "My teacher's sick today so we get to play."

"Oh."

He seemed content enough so I left him and went to the ladies' room. As I was running my hands under cold water, the door creaked open and Jelena walked in. She smiled at me before going into one of the stalls. She was never brave enough to make fun of me unless Vesna was at her side. I shut off the tap and turned to leave just as Vesna came in.

"Oh, I thought you'd be here," she said to me matter-of-factly. For a moment, I thought she was talking to Jelena. "I just heard Mira talking to Tetka Ilanka and next Saturday you're going to recite the prayer in front of everyone. I think they're going to have us sit on the carpet and you can stand on the piano bench or something so we can all hear you."

I felt tears spring to my eyes but I blinked them back furiously.

"If I were you," Vesna snarled. "I'd work on my pronunciation or else stay home."

She smiled at me, her head tilted so one of her braids hung lower than the other. Then she went into the other stall.

I left the bathroom and slowly made my way back to my section of the basement.

We spent the next half hour repeating words that began with "s" that Mira called out.

After that, Tetka Ilanka rang a little bell so everyone stopped what they were doing. I noticed a few of the older ladies who helped out were bringing paper cups of milk and paper plates with crackers and storebought chocolate chip cookies to all the tables.

*"Deca, molim vas cutite. Meza se servira,"* Tetka Ilanka said.

"Tetka Ilanka!" someone squealed in alarm. I looked across the room to see Marcus standing up in the middle of the carpeted floor with his hands on his hips.

"Yes, Marcus?" she asked, her orange lips folded over themselves briefly before reappearing.

"You forgot about my mom's cookies. My mom made cookies for us today."

Vesna and Jelena laughed. I felt my face burning hot but I was proud of Marcus.

Tetka Ilanka smiled and clicked the black pen she was holding a few times before sighing out loud. "Yes, I did forget. I'm sorry Marcus."

The ladies went over to the burgundy tins which were sitting on a shelf near the cloakroom and hurriedly began putting the cookies onto paper plates. Marcus seated himself back down on the carpet, satisfied. He took a sip of the milk and waved at me.

Tetka Ilanka cleared her throat and said something that I couldn't understand. When she was done speaking, she turned in my direction. "I know you can't understand so I'll translate. I just told everyone that we can thank your mother for making these lovely treats for us today." Her black eyes were hard and fast.

I nodded and shoved a stale cracker into my mouth.

A woman with white streaks in her hair and a gap between her two front teeth came over to our table and set a plate of my mother's cookies down. She tenderly touched my cheek with a

cold hand.

"You tell you mama she good baker. Very good baker." She smiled, the space beckoning to me.

"*Hvala*," I said.

Mira leaned over and picked up a kipfli which she nibbled on before leaving to talk to another teacher. I sat still, not daring to look up, knowing that Vesna and Jelena were staring at me. I snaked out my hand and grabbed a jam cookie.

"You know, I don't think Tetka Melanie washes her hands," Vesna said loudly.

"Oh no?" Jelena asked.

"No. Ever look at her nails? They're black. And once, my mother said she made *gibanica* for a picnic and there was a hair in it."

"Gross."

I ignored them and chewed my cookie slowly.

Bosko leaned over and put his chubby finger around an M&M cookie.

"Bosko," Vesna hissed.

He stopped, hand still outstretched.

"Didn't you hear what I just said?"

He wordlessly moved his hand to the cracker plate but I knew his mouth was watering for the M&M's.

I reached for another cookie, this time a kipfli. There was a lump in my throat so I chewed very slowly.

"Poor Ciko Mile," Vesna sighed out loud. "Being stuck with these Canadians. You

know, my mother says Tetka Melanie tricked him. Tricked him into marrying her. That's what they all do. Don't they, Maureen?"

"Really?"

I could tell by Jelena's tone of voice that she honestly believed everything Vesna said.

Jelena turned to me. "How did she do that, Maureen? I mean, how did she trick him?"

I said nothing.

"Look at her," Vesna snarled. "Can you believe someone is this ugly? But look at her mother, I mean . . ."

I couldn't stop the tears. I wasn't even sad as far as I could tell, just humiliated. I looked at the cookies on the table through blurred vision.

"Oh my God. She's crying," Vesna said in an eager whisper. "A baby too. Crying makes you uglier, *svinja*."

The half eaten cookie turned to a sweaty mush in my hand and when I tried to smear my tears, I got crumbs in my eye.

Tetka Ilanka rang her bell. "*Deca, doci vamo ovde*. We'll sing some songs now before you go home. Won't that be fun?"

Bosko scraped his chair back quickly and bolted for the carpet. Vesna and Jelena slowly got up and left me alone at the table.

"Maureen, why are you sad?" Marcus asked. He stood next to me with his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were wide in alarm.

I wanted to say something but I just cried harder.

"Don't be sad, Maureen. Mom will be here soon."



Tetka Ilanka strode over quickly to see what was going on. To my embarrassment, I noticed that everyone was sitting on the carpet looking over at me and Marcus.

"For Chrissakes, whatsa matter?" she asked.

I sniffled and sucked in my breath.

"What's wrong with your sister?" she demanded of Marcus who shrunk against my side.

She stood there for a few moments, her orange lips twitching, her pen clicking, not knowing what to do.

"Okay, enough of this. You two are holding up the songs. Go out there on the carpet with everyone else."

I focussed my eyes on the plate of uneaten cookies and ignored Tetka Ilanka.

"Do you hear me? Okay, fine. Be babies. Now you know why you have no friends here." She turned and went to the piano bench where she sat and began clumsily playing "Row your Boat".

Marcus and I stayed where we were through three turns of "Row your Boat" and a long version of "Alice the camel" before there was the awaited bustle of kids getting up off the floor to get ready to go home. I heard the outside door open from upstairs and the chatter of mothers coming to collect their kids.

I saw the swish of Mom's green dress before I saw her. She was talking to another mother as she stepped into the room.

"Come on kids. Let's go," she called as she walked over. "What's wrong? Are you crying, Maureen? What happened?"

Suddenly Tetka Ilanka was at her side. "Maureen's been having a bad day," she said.

"I can see that," Mom said coldly. "Kids, go outside and wait for me."

Marcus grabbed my hand and lead me to the cloakroom. He took down our coats and helped me put mine on before taking my hand again and leading me up the stairs and outside into the brisk air.

"I hate Tetka Ilanka," he muttered and looked at me for agreement.

I said nothing.

A few minutes passed. Marcus ran off to say goodbye to his friend Vlado. When the parking lot was cleared of all cars except a couple and Marcus was back at my side, Mom emerged from the church basement. Her eyes were red.

"Let's go to McDonalds, you two," she murmured and unlocked the car for us.

"Mom?" Marcus said once we were on the road. "I don't like Tetka Ilanka because she's mean."

"I know, Marcus."

"Mom? Can we not go there anymore? I don't think Maureen likes it," Marcus said.

Mom was quiet.

"Mom? Do we have to go back?" Marcus asked.

She was quiet for a long time. I was anxious for her answer as much as Marcus was but I tried not to show it.

"I don't know," she finally said. "We'll see."

She reached over and patted my knee without taking her eyes off the road. Without even smiling.

## Jeannie

Jeannie Klimsky lived next door to my grandparents. That's how she and I first became friends. She was a year older than I. To me, she was practically a grown-up.

For sixteen she was a knock out and could easily pass for eighteen. She was tall, as tall as my dad and had perfect round breasts that swelled against a t-shirt - even a sweat shirt. And she had perfectly curved hips that I once overheard Mom say she'd have problems with later on in life. Next to Jeannie, I felt like a mousy, gawky, fifteen year old. Probably because I was. I came up to just past her shoulders and my stringy brown hair hung limply compared to her curly, blonde mane. I didn't have hips or breasts for that matter. I felt like a child compared to Jeannie.

Whenever I was at Jeannie's house, she'd fling me down on her frilly bed and I would sit there, too afraid to move as she would hover over me and give me a make over. She'd carefully draw dark lines extending from the outer corners of my eyes toward my ears. She claimed it would make my eyes appear almond-shaped. However, it never came out looking as sophisticated as hers. She'd run a warm curling iron across my limp hair or sometimes she'd wind pieces so tightly around the iron that I could feel the heat singe my scalp. I'd sit there, scared out of my wits as she'd bend over me. I could smell her perfume and feel her breath on me.

Jeannie was in the same grade as me although at a different highschool. She had been left back in Grade two and was currently flunking all her tenth grade classes. She had been suspended twice, most recently for telling her math teacher to 'kiss her ass'. She saw a psychologist once a week whom, she confided to me, she was madly in love with. His name was

Walt Morgan and to secretly prove her love, she had shaved his initials in her pubic hair. I took this on her word as I was afraid that if I showed any doubt, she'd actually pull down her pants and show me.

Mrs. Klimsky told my mom that Jeannie had some behavioral problems. I actually liked hanging around with Jeannie though. Even when I was scared of what she was saying or doing, I was still thrilled to be her friend.

Mom told Grandma that she thought Jeannie's problems stemmed from being adopted. Some latent belief that she was unwanted or didn't belong.

The only reason Mom even allowed me to be friends with Jeannie Klimsky was because she couldn't say 'no' to Mrs. Klimsky. Sort of the same way I could never say 'no' to Jeannie. Mrs. Klimsky constantly told my mother how thankful she was of our friendship. According to her, I was the only friend Jeannie had who wasn't in trouble.

One particular afternoon, I was sitting on Jeannie's frilly bed spread as she softly brushed my eyelids with mint green eyeshadow and lily of the valley highlights. When she was finished, she stood back admiring her handiwork and I got up to inspect myself in her full-length mirror. I looked like an assault victim. She had coated my lashes with gummy mascara that was already smudging beneath my eyes.

I smiled and thanked her.

She clapped her hands together sharply. "Don't thank me," she stated. "I'm telling you, all you need is practice. Here." She thrust her make up kit at me. "Take this. It's yours."

I looked at her unbelievably. "But this has all your favourite colours in it," I stammered.

She shrugged. "Nah, I used most of them up. Anyway, Mom got me a new one."

I carefully placed the kit next to my purse and silently vowed to practice applying make up so that one day I'd come here and Jeannie would see no need to give me a make over.

"Are you girls almost ready?" Mrs. Klimsky yelled from downstairs.

Jeannie had her head turned upside down and was brushing her long blonde hair. She looked up at me and pretended to gag but ignored her mother. I picked at a scab on my knee nervously. Jeannie and I had made plans to see an early movie tonight but usually all our plans had some sort of hitch to them. With Jeannie, things never seemed to go according to plan.

"Stop that!" Jeannie snapped at me. "That's gross."

I blushed but stopped picking the scab.

There was a light knock on the bedroom door which was slightly ajar.

"Are you girls almost..."

Before she could finish, Jeannie marched over to the door, brush in hand, and slammed it shut. I could hear Mrs. Klimsky sigh and then move away.

"She drives me batty," Jeannie said to me, then went back to brushing her hair. "I've got like no privacy, you know? She's always and I mean always in my face. I just can't wait to get out of here."

It was Jeannie's plan to move to Toronto when she turned 18. She wanted to be a dancer or singer, whichever was easiest. She had already started signing her name as 'Jeanee K', which would be her pseudonym once she hit it big.

"My mom's pretty bad too," I said. I didn't really think my mom was that bad. I really didn't think Mrs. Klimsky was that bad for that matter but I wanted to offer Jeannie some sort of support.

"No," she breathed. "You don't know the half of it. You just don't know."

She fluffed her hair out onto each shoulder and then caught my eye in the mirror.

"Ready?"

I nodded. I'd been ready an hour and a half ago when I had first arrived.

"Let's go then."

I carefully picked up my purse and followed Jeannie's swift exit out her bedroom door and down the stairs. Mrs. Klimsky emerged from her own bedroom and followed us down the stairs, clearly flustered.

"Girls, are you ready to go now?"

Jeannie ignored her and opened and slammed a few cupboards in the kitchen apparently searching for something. Mrs. Klimsky hurriedly fastened an earring and looked at me questioningly.

"Are you two still going to the show, dear?" she asked.

I nodded, then glanced at Jeannie and shrugged. Jeannie had given up her search, grabbed a set of keys off a hook near the fridge, then made her way toward the back door.

"Come on, Anne," she barked at me over her shoulder.

I quickly padded after her.

"Jeannie, get back here right this minute!" Mrs. Klimsky shouted. Her voice was becoming shrill and crackly.

Jeannie glided over to the driver's side door of Mrs. Klimsky's car, and began trying to get the lock open.

"Now just what do you think you are doing?!" Mrs. Klimsky screamed in her shrill voice.

"You don't even have a licence!"

"Get in!" Jeannie barked at me.

I gingerly placed a hand on the passenger door handle.

"Jeannie, for Chrissakes get out of my car!"

The whole time, Jeannie acted as if she couldn't hear a word her mother was saying. I peered anxiously at my grandparents' picture window, dreading to see either Grandma or Grandpa peering out at all the commotion. But no one was there.

"Anne!" Jeannie screamed. "Get in the Goddamned car!"

I leaped into the car and quickly locked the door and put my seat belt on.

Mrs. Klimsky became hysterical when Jeannie turned the key in the ignition and the car started with a jolt.

"Jeannie, Jeannie, I'm begging you. Please stop the car!" She was at the window stooped so she could look right into Jeannie's face. "I'll let you drive to the show, I promise. Just let me get in the passenger side."

I went to undo my seat belt to let Mrs. Klimsky in but Jeannie grabbed my hand.

"Just ignore her," she said very calmly, then released the grip on my hand.

And with that, Jeannie eased the car down the driveway and we were off.

Even though Jeannie's driving was smooth and as far as I could tell, pretty good, I sat rigid in my seat with one hand resting as inconspicuously as I could manage on the dashboard.

"Calm down," she laughed. "I know how to drive. My boyfriend taught me."

This was the first I'd heard about a boyfriend but I relaxed after hearing that.

"Do you mind if I do one little errand before we go to the show?" Jeannie asked me as we

sped right by the movie theatre.

I looked at my watch and knew that if we were to make it on time to the early show, we'd have to skip any errand.

"I guess not," I muttered.

"Good. 'Cause I want you to meet Matt."

Jeannie had met Matt at the mall. He worked at the grocery store there collecting shopping carts from the parking lot.

"We went out a few times," Jeannie explained as she drove. "He picked me up, and then let me drive. He's really cool."

We were heading to the mall to pick him up from work.

"What does he look like?" I asked because silences between Jeannie and I were always uncomfortable for me.

"He's gorgeous, Anne. I mean really gorgeous. Every girl at the N & D wants him."

"Oh," I answered.

"And," she turned and glanced at me slyly, "he's really good in bed." She turned again to gauge my reaction to this statement.

However, I was used to Jeannie and her outrageous remarks so my face did not betray me.

"Out of all of them, he's definitely the best," she affirmed and smiled to herself.

"What about Walt?" I asked, curious.

Jeannie snorted. "He's old. Anyway, I've skipped my last three appointments. I mean I've got better things to do than to talk to some old fart about my problems, you know?"



Then we were turning into the mall parking lot and Jeannie headed for the N & D. She pulled over in front of the shop and a scraggly haired boy headed for the car. When he reached us, he stood patiently outside the passenger side, waiting for me to get out and let him in. So I got out and without a word to him slid into the back seat. Jeannie embraced him as soon as he sat down and he kissed her neck while glancing up at me. I self-consciously turned my head.

Jeannie and Matt talked quietly in the front seat while I slumped low in the rear wishing desperately that I had never gotten in the car with Jeannie in the first place. Matt was far from attractive but I could definitely see why Jeannie liked him. He had an attitude that was very certain. His face looked like he had been through hard times although I guessed his age to be seventeen at the most. His teeth were bad too. Yellow and crooked.

"So what are you up to tonight?" Matt asked. This he said loudly so I assumed he was including me in the conversation.

"Well, we're supposed to be going to a movie," Jeannie said but she stressed the words 'supposed to'.

"Aw, Jeannie, you don't wanna do that, do you?" He laughed. Then turned his head to me. "You don't wanna see no show neither, do you?" he asked.

I shrugged shyly and smiled.

"This is my friend Anne by the way," Jeannie said.

Matt glanced at me and winked.

"Listen, ladies," Matt began and as soon as he started, my stomach jumped nervously. "A buddy of mine's having a bit of a get together. His parents are out of town and you know how it is. Anyway, it should be fun. What do you say?"

Jeannie turned and looked at me and I knew that she wanted to go and I was terrified to get her mad so I said: "That sounds good."

"Great then." Matt clapped his hands together. "Well, my car's here so I'll drive there and you two just follow me."

With that, he quickly kissed Jeannie and jumped out of the car.

Jeannie didn't say a word to me until we were on the road following Matt. By this time, I was back in the front seat.

"So what do you think of him?" she asked eagerly.

"He's cute."

"Really? Do you think so?"

I could tell she was happy with my answer.

"You don't mind skipping the movie, do you, Anne? I mean, it didn't really look that good anyway. We can go see a movie anytime."

"Sure. I don't mind."

"If this party sucks, we'll leave. I promise. We'll go, check it out and you say the word and then we're gone. Alright?"

I nodded.

We ended up in a neighbourhood half way across town. The houses were all big and close together with brown patches for front lawns. The house we pulled up to had toys scattered all over the front lawn.

When we got out of the car, Matt ran over to meet us.

"Jeannie, I was thinking on the way here. You know who'd be perfect for your friend

here? Ricky. Ricky," he said, laughing.

"Oh my God!" Jeannie squealed. "Ricky would." She looked at me and then grabbed my sleeve to pull me toward the house.

The party consisted of four scruffy boys sitting on a sofa watching "Cops" and two toddlers in sleepers padding around on the floor.

Ricky turned out to be the pimple-faced boy who was throwing the party.

When we walked in the house, the guys looked up at us but said nothing, not even 'hello'.

Jeannie sat down in a chair across the room and I perched myself on the arm. I could see that she was uncomfortable and that made me really nervous.

Matt went over and sat with his friends. The dirty faced babies looked up at us briefly, then went back to playing in front of the tv.

"I don't really know these guys either," Jeannie whispered to me. "I only met Ricky once."

I nodded and looked around the room. The picture window behind the tv was cracked. Someone had taped over it with masking tape. By the look of it, the crack and tape had been there for a long time. The tv and VCR seemed very new and expensive as did a stereo in the corner but other than that, the house seemed ready to fall apart.

One of the guys got up and went into the kitchen. He came back with a beer.

"Anyone want one?" he asked.

Matt said he would.

The guy turned to me and Jeannie and asked us if we wanted one.

"I'll have one," Jeannie said.

I just shook my head, no.

Almost an hour later, nothing had really changed except for the tv program. One of the babies was now asleep on the floor. Jeannie was on her third beer and had become really giggly. She kept catching Matt's eye and he would lick his lips or wag his tongue at her obscenely and this just got her laughing harder. Matt's friends exchanged knowing smirks.

I whispered to Jeannie that I needed to go to the bathroom.

"Ricky, she needs to pee," Jeannie blurted out in a too-loud voice. Then covered her mouth with her hand and laughed.

"John's off the kitchen," Ricky said without taking his eyes off the tv.

I got up and stepped gingerly over the babies before going into the filthy kitchen. Dirty mismatched dishes filled the empty sink and counter. I noticed with distaste that the wall paper and linoleum were yellowed and peeling. I found the bathroom easily enough. It was half the size of any bathroom I'd been in before. The tub had a rust stain at the bottom. I sat down on the soft, fake leather toilet seat. I noticed a little wooden sign on the wall that said in black calligraphy: Best Seat in the House.

When I got back to the livingroom, Jeannie and Matt were gone.

"Where did they go?" I asked anxiously.

The guys in the corner looked at each other and smiled knowingly. I slumped into the chair Jeannie had been sitting in and waited for an answer. At least her purse was still there, on the floor beside the chair. That was a good sign.

"They're cooking," Ricky answered.

I turned and looked back at the kitchen, confused. The guys laughed.

"No, no," Ricky said. "They're upstairs." He indicated the rickety staircase with his head. "Cooking." He raised his eyebrows at me.

I could feel the blush spreading over my face. I quickly glanced at the tv and kept my eyes glued on the screen.

The more time that passed, the more I became afraid. I was scared of the situation I had let myself get into and I wondered how I'd get out. I thought about calling Mom to come get me but first that would mean asking Ricky where the phone was. Then I'd have to ask him for directions to his house. Mom would definitely not be pleased to discover I was not at the show but instead in some strange boy's house with Jeannie nowhere in sight. I figured the best thing to do was just wait. A little longer anyway.

I looked at the babies on the floor, both asleep now and wondered whose they were. They seemed too young to be Ricky's siblings. I assumed they were children of one of the guys here - maybe even Matt's.

Ricky got up off the couch and began fiddling with the VCR. He pushed in a tape and watched me out of the corner of his eye as he scratched his head. I heard the other guys' muffled laughter. And then I understood why. Ricky had put in a porno movie. My first instinct was to get up and leave the house. From there I wasn't sure. I didn't have much money on me but I could possibly manage to walk somewhere familiar and call home. But I knew all the guys were watching me, waiting for my reaction and I didn't want them laughing at me. So I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees and pretended to be partly interested in the naked men and women breathing heavily and moaning on screen. I tried to arrange my features into something that appeared to be boredom rather than embarrassment. I guess it worked because

the guys seemed to relax and actually began paying attention to the movie instead of me.

After a few minutes I got up and went to the bathroom. I didn't really have to go but I needed to figure out what I was going to do. Jeannie had disappeared with Matt over an hour ago. Knowing her, she could stay up there all night. I had just decided to leave the house and walk to the nearest phone when I heard loud voices coming from the livingroom. I quickly flushed the toilet, ran the tap and made my way back.

Matt was blocking my entrance, his back to me. He had no shirt on and I could see a blue inky tattoo on his left shoulderblade. It was obviously done by someone who had no knowledge of tattoos whatsoever because it was just a misshapen blob.

He was saying something to his friends and laughing but I missed what it was.

He turned and looked at me. His shirt was a crumpled ball in his hand.

"Where's Jeannie?" I asked casually.

He smiled. "Upstairs."

I stood there for a minute unsure of what to say or do.

Then one of the guys asked me: "Are you next?"

They all broke out in laughter.

I pushed my way past Matt and went upstairs. There was light coming from a room I took to be the master bedroom. I went in to find Jeannie sitting on the edge of the unmade bed with her head in her hands crying. She only had a bra on.

"Jeannie," I said softly and placed my hand on her shoulder.

She gasped but then settled down when she realized it was just me. She looked up at me and I saw her mascara running down her cheeks and her lipstick smudged all around her mouth.

I had never seen her looking like this and it terrified me.

"Come on, let's get you dressed and we'll get out of here," I said taking charge when I realized she wouldn't.

She sat there obediently as I helped her into her underwear and pants. I pretended not to notice the dime shaped sized spots of blood on the crumpled white sheets of the bed.

When Jeannie was dressed, I opened the bedroom door to leave.

"No, Anne!" she whispered fiercely. "I can't go down there! I can't face him."

I stopped. I went to one of the bedroom windows but we were too high up. There would be no other way to leave except through the front door.

I found a Kleenex and began wiping at the black streaks on Jeannie's face but she still looked like hell.

"Come on, Jeannie," I said in a quiet voice. "We'll just walk downstairs and right out the door. You don't even have to look at him."

She nodded.

She led the way down the stairs and without even turning to look at the livingroom, walked right out the front door and down the porch steps. I, on the other hand, couldn't help but glance at the guys one last time. The porno was still on the tv and Matt was sitting in the chair with one of the babies cradled in his lap.

He yelled outside toward Jeannie's departing shadow: "Was it good for you?!" Then turned to his friends and guffawed.

"Fuck you," I said in a voice that wasn't mine. Then I turned on my heel and followed Jeannie out the door.

Neither of us spoke on the drive home and there was no sound at all except for the low hum of the radio and Jeannie's occasional snuffles. When we got to my driveway, Jeannie put the car in park and turned to face me. She laughed and wiped at her nose.

"Pretty shitty night, huh?" she asked.

I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything at all. I just placed my hand on top of hers. This proved to be awkward since her hand still rested on the car's gear shift. She laughed nervously before bursting into tears.

I tried to hug her the best I could with the seat belt digging into my hip. She cried harder and returned my embrace. Her hair was getting into my nose and mouth and I stifled a sneeze.

"He's such a jerk," she said in between gasps. "And it hurt so much, Anne."

I patted her back and glanced nervously at my front door.

Finally, she pulled back and sat up straight.

"Well, you better go in before your mom comes out to see what's going on," Jeannie said.

It was the first sensible thing she had said all night.

I nodded. "Are you okay, then?" I asked before opening the car door.

"I'll be okay."

I opened the door and as I slid out into the night, I heard her whisper "thank you".

Three weeks later, I found myself at the Klimsky house again. It was arranged that Jeannie and I were going to rent a couple of videos and I'd be spending the night. After Jeannie finished doing my make up, she stood up straight and cleared her throat.

"Hey, Anne, I was thinking. And you can say 'no' if you want to but it's just that these



guys I know are having this bush party. Anyway, I figure we'll tell my mom that we're walking down the street to get the movies and then we'll just catch the bus to the party. I mean, we won't stay long or anything. She'll never know." She paused, her eyebrows raised and her lips parted, to get my reaction to her plan.

I managed to smile. "Sounds good," I said. And then silently counted the hours until my mom would be out front to pick me up and take me home.

## No Regrets

Whenever I think of Dad, I remember one event specifically. It stands out as the strongest and maybe even best memory I have of him. About a year after he died I told my husband Rob about it. He looked at me, his head tilted to one side like he did whenever I said something he found to be curious.

"Jeez, Mo, that's depressing," he said.

I shrugged.

"No. Not really." I thought about it. "It's really not at all."

I was thirteen, my brother Marcus was eight. It was a special day for some reason and for the life of me I cannot remember why. Only that we were all eating a roast in the dining room which was a room reserved only for special occasions. We had the good plates, the cream coloured ones, and the nice tablecloth - Dad's mother had crocheted it herself and sent it to Canada as a wedding present to my parents. Also, we had company over. It was Tetka Zorka and Ciko Vlado. They had just had a little boy and he was there too, sleeping quietly in a playpen.

Anyway, we had just started eating because I remember Dad had finished lighting the candles in the table's center when the phone rang. Mom answered it and after asking who it was in a loud voice about three times, she rushed back to the table.

"Mike, it's your brother," she hissed.

My father immediately went to the phone, without even excusing himself.

Dad phoned home once a month. They never called our house. Not once. Because, Dad

explained, they were poor. Dad had left his village which was a tiny farming community on the outskirts of Yugoslavia to come to Canada at twenty-one.

We all sat at the table, poised over our plates. No one said anything. No one ate. Everyone listened to Dad on the phone. He was speaking in Yugoslavian so I couldn't understand a word of the conversation. Neither could Mom or Marcus. Only Zorka and Vlado seemed to know. They lowered their gaze and didn't look at anyone.

"I think Baba's dead," Mom whispered to us, tears in her eyes.

Still, Vlado and Zorka were silent.

"No," I whispered back. Not in denial but because of Dad's voice. He wasn't upset. His voice was the same as it was anytime. A man receiving the news that his mother, a woman he hadn't seen in the last three years, was dead would be more shaken.

Mom cocked her head and listened to the tone of his voice.

"Uh huh. Uh huh," he was saying matter of factly into the phone. In agreement with whatever his brother was saying.

"No, no." Mom nodded at me. "I think you're right. She's probably just very sick. Her heart."

Zorka was wiping her mouth with her napkin and seemed to be subtly packing up the baby.

We all heard the phone hang up and Dad returned to the table. He resumed his seat, picked up his fork and began to eat.

"Your mother?" Mom asked when it became apparent he wasn't going to say anything.

He nodded, his mouth full of roast.

"She's sick," Mom said when he didn't elaborate.

He swallowed. "She died," he murmured. Then cut another piece of roast and shovelled it into his mouth.

Mom lowered her head and started weeping loudly as did Marcus. I think he was only crying because Mom was. Zorka and Vlado got up, offered their condolences and left quietly. Dad sat as stiff as a board in his chair eating his meal, glancing at the ceiling every so often. He ignored Mom and Marcus. I sat still at first, taking the scene in. Then, eventually turned back to my food.

Mom, still crying, gathered up all the dishes, except mine and Dad's and went into the kitchen. Marcus followed. It was just me and Dad. He ignored me and I ignored him. He asked me to pass the salt once. The sound of his chewing seemed to fill the entire house.

I admit it sounds depressing so far. But as I've tried to explain to Rob, there's more to the memory I have of my Dad. That's just the story leading up to it. But without the depressing part, the memory would not mean as much to me.

Later on that night, I got out of bed to go to the bathroom and from the hallway I had the perfect view of Dad sitting in his chair. It wasn't unusual for him to be the last to go to bed. He would be in the chair finishing up the paper or watching the news. Sometimes just smoking a cigarette before hitting the sack.

But this time he was just sitting there. Looking at the ceiling. He had a hand on either knee and he didn't seem to be moving at all.

I padded over to him but he was off in space because he made no movement.

"Dad?"

He looked at me. His face was solemn, his eyes were glass.

He patted his knee so I climbed onto his lap. He held me against him in an embrace but said nothing. I remember taking his hand. It was rough, especially his fingertips. And his knuckles were covered with fine hair. I gently ran my small, soft hand over his, back and forth. It was the only way I could think to comfort him.

More than twenty years later, the night after Mom's funeral, Dad shared with me the one memory that stood out in his mind when thinking of his own mother.

Dad was at my place. I thought it best for him to be with Rob and me for a week or so before returning to an empty house. We were both in the kitchen. I was putting away leftovers from the wake; he was sitting at the kitchen table staring at his hands. They weren't so rough anymore and the fine hairs had turned from the tan colour they once were to silver.

"Any regrets?" he asked me.

It was an unexpected question and his accent was still quite strong so I didn't understand what he was saying at first.

"Do you have any regrets, Maureen? I mean concerning your mother."

"Nothing stands out in my mind, Dad. I guess I could've told her I loved her more but that's hindsight really."

I wrapped foil over a pan of cheese pie that Zorka had brought over. It was Dad's favourite.

"I guess that's one good thing about the way Mom died," I added. "It was hard watching her suffer, especially these last couple of months. But we knew we didn't have much time left with her. We were at least prepared."

Dad nodded and sighed in agreement.

"It was time for her to die. I accept that," he murmured. "I have no regrets. She was a good wife and a good mother." His voice cracked.

I put the kettle on for tea and sat down across from him. I placed my own hand on top of his. It didn't strike me that I had comforted him this way once before.

"I told her everything I needed to," he whispered.

When the tea was poured and settled in mugs on the table I sat back down. Dad sipped.

"I vowed never to have regrets again," he said.

I wondered what he meant and waited patiently for him to tell me.

"I carry a burden here," he said as he flattened his hand against his chest. "And here," this time he pointed to his head, "ever since my mother died."

I remembered that day, more than twenty years ago. My father's calm grief. I pictured my grandmother, a wrinkled solid woman with a kerchief covering her hair. A memory I had formed by looking at old discoloured photos since the only time I had ever met her was when I was six.

"To this day, I cannot think of my mother without remembering what I said to her a long time ago. How cruel I was to her." He chuckled. "She probably forgot about it soon after, even forgave me but I never forgave myself. I never got to say how sorry I was. I didn't know. It was so sudden when she died. You know, we had planned on going to visit the following summer."

I warmed my hands on my cup and waited for him to go on.

"I was always the baby of the family," my father began. "That meant I was spoiled. I did not have as many chores on the farm as my brothers and what chores I did have, my mother usually did for me." He smiled at me.

I had trouble picturing this man who had raised Marcus and me in a disciplined, loving manner ever having been coddled.

"When I was eight, my mother told me she was going to have a baby. I was indifferent. What did I know? It didn't hit me that I wouldn't be the baby anymore. No more special treatment.

"A few weeks before the baby was to be born I realized all this. My mother could no longer do my chores and when I had a tantrum, my father explained to me that once the baby arrived the chores would be my responsibility because my mother would be too busy. Well, I did not like that one bit and I went to my mother in a rage."

He smiled at me over his teacup even though I knew telling this story was killing him.

"I told her I hated her for having a baby. And I hated the baby worse. I said I wished it wouldn't be born at all." He paused for a moment and glanced at the ceiling. "When I misbehaved, she would tell my father and I would be whipped but this time she just looked at me. I remember exactly how she looked. Stricken. But she just turned and walked away. Never told my father what I had said and how I had treated her.

"Well, the baby was a stillborn. I know she never blamed me. Maybe even she was relieved because she would not have to deal with my anger. And I hated myself because I was sure I had killed the baby. I thought at the moment I said those terrible things, it must have

heard me and just died."

He stopped talking and I refilled his mug.

"Later, when I was older, I hated myself for making her feel relief that her own baby had been born dead. We never spoke of it, her and I. I don't think the child was ever mentioned. My father buried it behind the house. He marked the grave with a big stone and pointed to it and told me never to pee there."

I laughed. So did he.

"Sometimes, I would go to the grave and beg the unnamed baby to forgive me. But I never asked my mother for this forgiveness. Never."

After a long silence I realized he had finished his story. I stood and resumed packing away the leftovers.

"Dad, I can't believe you've been carrying that all those years. Forgive yourself already."

I was embarrassed. I don't know why. Maybe because I realized how weak he was at this moment. That something that happened so long ago could affect him in this way. So I tried to make light of his story.

He nodded quietly, then stood up and kissed me good night.

After he went to bed I thought back to that day at the dining room table and the roast. The day Dad received the call telling him that his mother was dead. I remembered his calmness. But what I remembered most vividly was the way he looked sitting in his favourite chair. He had looked stricken.

About a month or so after my mother's death I sat down and wrote my father a letter. In



it, I told him what a good father and husband he was. I told him how much I loved him. And I told him that his mother had long forgiven him for what he had done and that it was time to forgive himself. I mailed this letter to him even though I could've just as easily handed it to him since I saw him everyday. He never mentioned to me whether or not he received it and I never asked.

When he died, the letter was found in the breast pocket of the shirt he was wearing. It had been folded and refolded many times. I tucked it in the pocket of the jacket we buried him in so it would always be there, close to him

Sometimes I find myself thinking about my father and the man he had been. I often think about the memory I have of him that stands out above the rest. It's the one where I am sitting on his lap. I am thirteen and my hand is resting on his rough one. And I am consoling him because he has just received word that his mother has died.

## Sailing

I first realized that Bellinda was my friend when she handed me the card. The card had a picture of a duck wearing a party hat on the front and was an invitation of some sort. I still have it, more than twenty years later. I keep it in my hope chest. Every time I pick it up and turn it over in my hands I remember the moment Bellinda slipped it into my hand, my heart leaping in excitement. An invitation! The way she passed it on to me so casually, as if she had parties all the time, passed out invitations all the time. I had taken it in my hand like someone who'd never been invited anywhere before. And I hadn't.

I was thirteen and even though I'd known Bellinda since I was eight, she wasn't exactly a friend. She visited me about twice a month and we did get along and play together. I'm sure she even spent the night once or twice, but a friend was a person you went to school with. Preferably someone in your own class. A friend could possibly go to another school from you but then she would have to live in your neighbourhood.

Bellinda was the daughter of Pat and Lou, my parents' best friends. She wasn't my real friend until that day when she nonchalantly slipped an invitation with a duck on the front of it, into my sweaty palm.

In June of that year, school was wrapping up. Kids were preparing to leave the world of elementary school for the much more sophisticated world of highschool. I, for one, was eager to attend highschool, to make friends. I wasn't friendly with anyone in my grade really. There was Tali Meyer, who would come home with me after school once in a while but only when she was on the outs with the other kids. The rest of the time she either ignored me or joined in with the

others to make fun of me.

Looking back, I realize that there was no real reason why I was the eighth grade target for ridicule, it's just something that happened. Kids that age need a target and I happened to fit the role.

Jane Smith and Adam Fox were the ringleaders. I'll never forget their names for as long as I live. They are the ones who single handedly made going to school one of the worst experiences of my childhood, of my whole life.

I took great pleasure years later when Jane dropped out of highschool and I later bought shoe laces from her at the local Biway. And during my senior year of highschool, Adam had phoned me to ask if I'd be interested in going to the prom with him. I had said "no thank you" and hung up.

I had the misfortune of sitting in between Adam and Jane in Mr. Midler's eighth grade classroom. Jane made a face and plugged her nose each time I would raise my hand to speak out loud.

"That's enough, Jane!" Mr. Midler would admonish.

And Jane would whine: "I can't help it, Sir. She smells."

Then she would dramatically scoot her desk and attached chair a few more feet away from me.

When I asked my mother if I smelled, she insisted I did not and that the kids at school were just being cruel.

Adam would make a face and plug his nose each time I opened my mouth to speak. When Mr. Midler would chastise him, he'd explain: "She's got bad breath, Mr. Midler." And

everyone would giggle.

Even though Tali assured me I didn't have bad breath, I started bringing a toothbrush and toothpaste to school with me and I would brush every chance I got. But when Mom found out, she said I was being silly and made me stop. I then began sneaking a tiny bottle of mouthwash with me but then Adam would squeal: "Her breath stinks like medicine!" Gum wasn't an option. Mr. Midler didn't allow it in his classroom. I could manage a mint in my cheek or under my tongue without attracting attention but this got to be expensive and my allowance of five dollars a week just wasn't covering it.

As for the B.O. situation, I started shaving my armpits everyday instead of every other day - against my mother's wishes. It was her belief that I was too young to shave - whether or not I had hair there didn't make a difference. I also started bringing a stick of deodorant with me to school which I'd apply during lunch and at recess in the girl's room.

One day, as I made my way toward my locker after lunch was over, Jane called sweetly to me from across the hall: "There's a gift from us in there." Then she snickered and went into the classroom.

Combination locks weren't allowed on the lockers. We just weren't supposed to keep anything of value in them. When I opened my locker, there was a large aerosol can of deodorant in the bottom, sitting on top of my winter boots. I fought back tears and quickly stuffed the can into my knap sack.

When I entered the classroom, all the kids smirked at me. I slid into my seat and blinked hard. But the most humiliating thing about that whole incident occurred when I got home later that night. Mom saw the can of deodorant nestled among my lunch remains in my knap sack

and demanded to know where it had come from.

I painstakingly explained how the kids at school teased me about having B.O. and that someone had left this in my locker.

"Well, it saves me from having to buy you a new bottle," she said.

I looked at her unbelievably.

"You can use this when yours is empty," she continued and handed me back the can.

I buried it in the bottom of my closet, under an old Monopoly board and saved up my allowance to buy a new bottle of deodorant for myself so Mom would never know I had wasted a perfectly fine bottle.

The last day of school was maybe one of the worst days of my life. Mom and Dad had been promising me all year that on the last day of eighth grade, I could ride my brand new ten-speed bike to school. Mom was nervous about my getting hit by a car so I had to promise I'd ride only on sidewalks the whole way.

During the day I felt like I was walking on clouds. Not only was it the last day of school but I would be home about a half hour earlier due to my bike.

When two-thirty came around, I joined the mass of screaming kids who raced for the double doors. As I turned the corner of the school and headed for the bike rack, I noticed a small clutch of kids loitering around the bikes. Adam and Jane happened to be two of them. I felt my knees grow weak and my heart beat quicken as I slowly approached. I stopped and bent down to retie one of my shoes, hoping that when I stood up, they'd all be gone. They weren't.

As I got closer, my worst fears were confirmed. They were encircling my bike.

"Oh no! Look what somebody did to your bike!" Jane called out to me in mock disgust.

Through blurred vision I saw that both my tires were completely flat. As I got closer, I saw two long jagged gashes in them.

"Flat as bananas," Adam stated and whistled. Then he shook his head sadly and the crowd dispersed.

I wheeled my bike home. It took me a good forty-five minutes.

Mom was out front of the house gardening and she took one look at my bike and started screaming hysterically. She thought I had been hit by a car.

"No, Mom. Someone did this. Someone put holes in my tires," I said and then burst into tears right there in the middle of my driveway.

Mom squatted and examined the gashes as I sobbed.

"Who would do this?" she questioned.

I shrugged my heaving shoulders and gasped for air. "The kids. The kids did it."

She wrenched the bike out of my hands and began to push it toward the garage.

"Well, that's it!" she screamed. "I told you something terrible would happen if we allowed you to take your bike to school, didn't I? And now look! This is going to cost money to fix, young lady!"

Too exhausted from the trek home and the tears, I didn't even argue with her accusing tone. Instead, I went inside to watch tv. Then I remembered, there was one more obstacle before I'd be free and clear of the eighth grade forever. The graduation dance. It was that night and everyone had to go. The principal would hand out awards and report cards and then we'd all head to the gym which would be dark and have a few balloons and streamers taped to the brick walls and basketball nets.

My mother had already laid out the outfit I was to wear. A baby blue polka dotted blouse with matching skirt purchased for eighteen dollars from K-Mart.

I didn't feel like going to the dance but I knew Mom would not believe me if I feigned sick.

After dinner, as I was getting dressed for the dance I stopped and looked at myself in the mirror. My long brown hair lay about my shoulders and forehead, greasy and stringy even though I had just washed it an hour earlier. A hot curling iron had proceeded to make certain pieces stick up awkwardly. Jane Smith had perfect blonde hair that was permed. My mother said I was too young for a perm.

My mother barged into my bedroom and caught me looking at myself.

"What are you doing?" she said in her usual exasperated tone. "It's time to go."

"Mom?"

"What?"

"Can I put on some lipstick tonight?"

I had two lipsticks sitting on my dresser, just waiting for the chance to be worn. Tiger Lily was one and Coffee the other. Both had been sent in a Christmas stocking from my Aunt in Vancouver. I had only ever applied them in the privacy of the bathroom and then immediately wiped all traces from my lips with a tissue which I carefully flushed to eliminate all evidence.

"No makeup until highschool," my mother firmly stated before disappearing down the hallway. "Hurry up!" she yelled.

Dad dropped me in front of the school. He waited in the car until I was safely inside the hallway and then drove off. He'd pick me up in the same spot at ten-thirty.

Once inside the school, I panicked. I could see Mr. Midler and a few of the other

teachers still setting up folding chairs in the auditorium and most of the kids from my class were milling around in groups of four and five in the hallway awaiting an okay from one of the teachers to head into the auditorium. I saw Tali in one of the groups.

I headed for the bathroom and once inside I felt relieved. Like I was safe from danger. I went into one of the stalls and sat down after securing the door. That's where I remained for the next twenty minutes. When girls came in, I'd hold my breath and be as quiet as possible so no one would detect my presence. And no one seemed to.

When I was sure the assembly had started, I slipped out of the girls' room and into the dimmed auditorium. All the folding chairs appeared to be occupied so I just hovered at the doorway, watching and listening as the principal spoke about what would be expected of us next year, our future and our entering into adulthood. He then proceeded to hand out the year's awards.

An hour later, we were being ushered into the darkened gym where music pummelled our eardrums and stale cookies and watery punch were being served in a corner.

I took a cookie and a cup of punch and sat on the bleachers in an inconspicuous corner of the gym. I watched as the kids I had spent the last year with, talked and laughed and danced in self-conscious childish ways. I was angry at the way they treated me. Then I fell into a deep self-pity for myself and imagined my next year in highschool. I'd get a perm and cut my hair chin-length. I'd also practice until my makeup looked professional. I would draw fine black lines on my eyelids and everything. I'd forget all about the horror of eighth grade. I'd have all the friends I could ever want.

A slow song came on and the gym was suddenly filled with swaying couples. Teenagers



who awkwardly clutched at shoulders and hips as they sidled to the music.

I pretended to enjoy my punch and not notice all the people dancing.

"Hi there."

I looked up. It was Mr. Midler.

He put his hand out to me.

"May I have this dance?"

I felt tears of embarrassment spring to my eyes and without so much as a word I raced out of the gym, shoving past several couples and out the school doors into the cool night. It was only eight-thirty so I began walking home very slowly, replaying the horrible moment when Mr. Midler's pity toward me overcame him and he had asked me to dance.

It wasn't until I was older that I appreciated what he had tried to do.

When I got home, I told Mom and Dad that I had felt sick and had decided to leave the dance early and walk home. Mom exchanged a look with Dad but thankfully said nothing. I went straight to bed.

Two days later, Bellinda pressed a sweaty party invitation into my hand and my life was different. Completely changed.

Once I actually closed the doors on grade eight, I felt like a weight was off my shoulders. I tried to push the whole graduation night scene out of my memory but to this day, I still blush when I hear the song "Sailing" by Christopher Cross. That was the song Mr. Midler had asked me to dance to.

Bellinda's party was the perfect way for me to begin my new life. My life as a highschool freshman. I was going to be different from now on. No more laughing stock.

Three days before the party, Bellinda called me up and asked me to go shopping with her because she desperately needed something new to wear as hostess. I had managed to save about thirty dollars from baby-sitting and decided I'd spend the money on something to wear to the party also. After all, there were going to be boys there. I couldn't just wear a boring old t-shirt.

At the mall, Bellinda and I squealed with excitement. We had the whole afternoon together. We weren't to be picked up until four o'clock from the donut shop. We raced from one store to another, trying on clothes we would never buy to the annoyance of all the clerks.

We were at Cute Girl and both of us were in change rooms that were next to one another. Bellinda was busy trying on a pale green summer dress and I was trying on the exact same dress in a salmon colour. We came out of the stalls and flounced around in front of the mirror. I noticed Tali Meyer in front of the mirror also. She had on a new pair of pants and she pouted as her mother knelt in front of her and pulled at the crotch to check the fit.

"What do you think, Bellinda?" I said loudly and twirled around coming within inches of Tali and her mother.

"Lovely, darling," Bellinda answered.

"You don't think it's too much?" I asked and pretended to deliberate seriously in the mirror.

I sneaked a peek at Tali. She had her eyes on the ground and was trying to wriggle out of her mother's iron grip.

"I think I'm getting this," Bellinda said matter-of-factly. She had fifty dollars to spend. A gift from her parents for finishing elementary school.

"Hmmm," I sighed. "I think I'll pass. I mean we can't both wear the same dress to the

party."

I stressed the word "party" to ensure that Tali overheard. Then I went back into my change room and took the dress off. When I emerged, Tali and her mother were gone and Bellinda was at the counter paying for the dress.

I felt great. Adrenaline was pumping through my system like mad. We stopped and got an ice cream from Dairy Queen and as we were walking by a hair salon, I stopped and glanced in. I breathed in the perfume of hot rollers and hair spray which always hovered outside salons.

"What?" Bellinda questioned.

I shrugged my shoulders non-comittally and licked my ice cream.

"I was just thinking about cutting my hair..."

Before I could finish, Bellinda was jumping up and down excitedly and clutching my sleeve.

"You know, it would be so cute if you cut it to here," she indicated my chin. "You could get bangs and oh - it would be so cute."

My heart started to pound just thinking about cutting my hair without my mother's permission. As my heart thudded, I knew that I would do it. Despite my mother's warning that short hair would never become my oval face, I knew that I would do it.

The next thing I knew, I was in a fake leather chair pumped a few feet off the floor, covered in a vinyl cape. The hairdresser had teased, enormous blonde hair and was chewing gum loudly. Bellinda stood behind my shoulder and instructed the hairdresser, whose name was Sandy, as to how I wanted my hair cut. Sandy sprayed my hair with water and chatted to Bellinda and me about school and boys. Ten minutes later, I was a new girl. My hair hung silkily

to my chin and gleamed. It even all curled under perfectly without one cow lick. I also had a thick awning of bangs over my forehead. I could just hear my mother's voice: "Bangs give you pimples, you know."

The haircut cost me twenty dollars and I tipped Sandy two dollars on Bellinda's insistence. She seemed to know about those sort of things. I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror as we left the salon and for one fleeting moment I actually wished for one more day back in Mr. Midler's classroom. With my new haircut. Just to show everyone the new me. The new me that couldn't be hurt by them.

I didn't have much money left but Bellinda talked me into buying a pair of barrettes from Biway so that I could wear the sides of my hair up. Normally, I wouldn't be caught dead in Biway but Bellinda said it was okay because we weren't with our mothers and we were going in of our own free will.

I chose a pair that were covered in gaudy fake diamonds that Bellinda called "chic". As we walked out of the store, Tali and her mother passed us walking in. Tali turned her face away from me quickly.

By the time we got to the donut shop, my heart was beating nervously. I hoped that Dad would pick us up, not Mom. The last thing I needed was for Mom to make a scene about my hair in front of Bellinda. It would ruin the whole day.

Sure enough it was Mom. As I slid into the passenger seat, she stared at me, mouth wide.

"Your hair..." she stammered.

"What do you think, Mrs. P?" Bellinda interjected from the backseat. She tugged at a piece playfully.

"I don't know," my mother began. "It's so...so different," she said. Then began driving.

A few minutes of silence passed. When we got to Bellinda's driveway, Mom stopped and Bellinda climbed out.

"Thanks, Mrs. P," she said. Then to me, "See you in three days." With that, she ran up to her porch but then turned suddenly and waved for us to stop.

Mom stopped and rolled down her window.

"I think it looks 'chic'," she said and tossed her fingers through her own thick curls before turning on her heel and disappearing in the house.

Mom giggled and we were off.

"You know, I think it really suits you," Mom said a few moments later. "It just makes you look so much older. It's a shock."

I smiled and said nothing.

The day of the party, I awoke to a damp drizzle. My first concern was that my hair would frizz. My second, that I'd arrive at Bellinda's wet and bedraggled.

I tore through the house like a mad dog, trying to decide what to wear and how to wear my hair.

I heard Mom on the phone comment: "You'd think she was getting married today."

I decided to wear my white dress shorts but was still undecided as to what top to wear. Everything I owned seemed too childish or casual.

I decided to work on my hair before choosing a top. I became frustrated because I just could not get my hair to go as smooth and silky as Sandy had, no matter how many times I ran a hot curling iron over it. And, to make matters worse, one side curled under while the other side

curled out. I was just about to burst into tears when Mom appeared in the bathroom door watching me.

I expected her to lecture me on making too much of a fuss over myself but instead, she gently took the curling iron out of my hand and went to work on my hair. Then she took one of my new barrettes and fastened up the sides of my hair on top of my head. When she was done, I had to admit, it looked very elegant.

"How's that?" she asked.

I nodded happily.

"Chic enough for you?"

I laughed and clicked off the curling iron.

Mom went to leave the bathroom but then stopped as if a thought had just then occurred to her.

"Oh. By the way, there's something on your bed for you."

"What?" I asked. My mind flashed back to the gift Jane Smith had left for me on top of my winter boots in my locker.

"Take a look," she said and then left the bathroom.

In my room, I found a long-sleeved red knit shirt with an alligator on the left breast. It was the trendy brand of shirt that all the kids at school wore. Mom would never let me buy one because she said all you were paying for was the little alligator. And next to the shirt, lay a shiny black case about as big as my hand. When I opened it, I was taken by complete surprise to find it was a make up case. There were three shades of eyeshadow, two blushes, a black eye liner, a mascara and two tiny circles of lipstick.

I looked up at Mom questioningly.

"Well, you're almost in highschool anyway," she said casually. "And, tonight's a special night for you."

I looked down at the kit to hide the tears welling up in my eyes.

"Thank you," I croaked.

And she left me to get ready for the party.

Dad was late getting home from work and I was panicking. Bellinda had specifically requested my presence an hour earlier than the party's start time so I could help her set up and now I would be late. By the time Dad arrived, ate dinner with Mom (I'd be having pizza at the party) and showered, I was near tears. But I didn't dare cry because it would ruin my mascara. I had spent forty-five minutes carefully applying eyeliner under my eyes and in thick smoky smudges on my eyelids. Then, I wore navy blue eye shadow with pink dusted under my eyebrows. I thought it looked chic but when I went to show Mom my handiwork, she pursed her lips as if biting her tongue and smiled.

By the time I arrived at Bellinda's, I was a half hour late for the party start time which meant I was actually an hour and a half late. Dad wanted to come in to visit with Pat and Lou but I begged him not to.

Bellinda's mother met me at the door.

"You look so grown up today," she commented. "I barely recognized you. And your hair is gorgeous."

"Thank you," I answered nervously.

I could hear laughter and music coming from the basement which was Bellinda's rec

room.

"Well, everyone's downstairs, honey," Bellinda's mom stated. "Go join them."

And with that, I slowly walked down the eight steps.

The rec room was transformed. Never again would I enter that rec room without remembering how magical it was on that night. Kids I had never met before were sprawled on the floor, talking and laughing, sitting on sofas, munching and standing and leaning in the corners. For a moment, I was the centre of attention and I realized how lucky it was that I was late. Had I been early, I would never have been the mysterious stranger to all these kids.

Everyone stopped and stared as I descended the stairs and although I was nervous, I liked the attention.

"Everyone, everyone!" Bellinda called and then I caught sight of her standing in a small group of people in the corner. "This is my friend, Beth," she continued.

I noticed Bellinda wasn't wearing the dress she had bought for the occasion. She was wearing black shorts and a white shirt.

The kids all mumbled a greeting and I shyly said "hi" before making my way to Bellinda and the two boys she was standing with.

I touched her sleeve and looked at her questioningly.

"I decided it wasn't right," she explained about her clothes. "Too fancy. But you! You look great!" she exclaimed. I smiled, embarrassed at the attention she was calling to me.

Bellinda's mother called her to come upstairs and she left me with a group of kids I'd never met before.

One of the boys turned to me.



"So, you're Bellinda's cousin or something?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Not really. Our parents are just real close."

He nodded solemnly. There was an awkward silence.

"So, what highschool are you going to?" I asked.

"Riverton," he stated.

"Me too."

"Cool."

His name was B.J. and he never once backed off when I opened my mouth or stepped away when I raised my arm to grab a chip from a nearby bowl. This made me feel more confident so after a quick bathroom break to check my makeup I sat myself on the sofa between two girls. I discovered that almost all the kids there, and there were about twelve, were going to Riverton High the following year. I sat back on the sofa in contentment. I had met my new friends. The ones I had dreamed about meeting in highschool.

When the pizza arrived about a half hour later, I found myself on the floor with a paper towel on my lap next to a boy named Fred. He made small talk with me. When he discovered what elementary school I had attended he asked me if I knew Billy Morgan. I did. It turned out Billy was his cousin and for a moment I became worried that Billy had mentioned my name to him. He had perhaps told Fred that I was a laughingstock who had bad breath and B.O. And Fred would tell everyone here at the party. But he didn't say anything further about it.

Bellinda began turning the lights on and off quickly.

"Everyone," she said in a loud voice. "We're watching the movie now and it's scary so prepare yourselves."

I moved across the carpet so my back leaned against the sofa and Fred followed.

Some time into the movie, I became aware of Fred's hand resting on the floor only inches away from my knee. I found myself staring at it, wondering what it would feel like if he put his arm around my shoulder. I noticed a few boys sat with their arms draped across the back of a girl's neck. Bellinda herself leaned into a boy whom I had never seen before and rested her head on his chest.

Because I wasn't paying close attention to the movie I was taken by surprise at a startling scene and I gasped loudly. In the process, I accidentally touched Fred's hand with my own. I quickly pulled it away, embarrassed.

A few minutes went by and I felt something. It was Fred's hand. He placed it on the carpet next to mine so that our fingers touched. This time, I didn't pull away. The next time there was a startling scene in the movie, I jumped and purposely leaned in closer to him. He put his arm around my neck and I was in heaven.

For the next twenty minutes I couldn't even concentrate on the movie because of his arm. I needed to go to the bathroom but I didn't want to move and take the chance that he wouldn't do it again. So it came almost as a relief when the movie ended and Bellinda got up to turn on the lights. Everyone stood and stretched including Fred and I. Then I quickly made a getaway for the bathroom.

When I returned, Bellinda had dimmed the lights and was fiddling in the corner with a tape player. Everyone else was milling around idly. I fished around in an icy cooler for a Coke. Bellinda had recorded a few cassettes strictly with slow songs for the party. I blushed profusely when the first song that she played was "Sailing". I felt panic start to rise in my chest as Bellinda

began dancing with the boy she had sat with throughout the movie. A few other couples began dancing and I contemplated going back to the bathroom. I didn't want to be the only person not dancing and relive graduation night. But to my relief, a girl got up from across the room and sat down next to me.

"It's always so awkward when the dancing starts, eh?" she laughed.

I laughed too but how was I to know about dancing at parties? This was my first party.

"I'm Stephanie," she said.

"I'm Beth."

"I know. Bellinda's mentioned you before."

I covered my shock at having been mentioned to someone. Before I could say anything, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was B.J.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked me.

I glanced at Stephanie but she laughed and said: "Go, dummy." So I got up and took his hand.

We found a spot in the middle of everyone and he gently put his hands around my waist and I placed mine lightly on his shoulders. I saw Fred watching us and my heart soared. I was overjoyed. I couldn't believe that this was what went on at parties, and I had been missing out. I thought about the kids from school and how they were all probably at Adam Fox's doing the same thing I was doing now.

When the song finished, B.J. and I looked at each other sheepishly, then walked back to the sofa.

Fred immediately came over and snatched my hand.

"Come on," he said and nodded toward the floor where everyone was dancing to a new slow song.

I got up and followed his lead.

My confidence was higher than it had ever been before in my entire life and later, when I returned from the bathroom to find almost everyone paired off and dancing, I walked over to a boy I had not yet met who was sitting on the floor by himself, and asked him to dance. And to my delight, he agreed.

Time flew and before I knew it, it was eleven o'clock and Bellinda's mom opened the basement door.

"Last song, everyone. Then it's time to go!" she called.

Bellinda made a face but yelled up: "Okay, Mom!"

She quickly ran over to the tape machine and began forwarding the tape. When she found the song she wanted she pressed "play" and ran back to the boy she'd been dancing with. The song was "Lady in Red" by Chris DeBurgh. I laughed because I knew the song was meant for me and my red shirt. B.J came over and asked me to dance with him and I agreed, still laughing.

This time, he held me close to him as we danced and I could smell his cologne. I closed my eyes and rested my chin on his shoulder. Then the song was over. He kissed me on the cheek.

"I hope I see you in September," he whispered in my ear.

I was stunned.

"Me too," I mumbled.

Then there was minor commotion as everyone said goodbye to each other and went upstairs to await rides home. I remained downstairs because I was going to spend the night. Only a couple of kids were left downstairs, saying their goodbyes. Bellinda was upstairs seeing others off. I found myself next to a boy I hadn't talked to at all, but I knew his name was Tom.

"Hi," I said.

He looked at me but said nothing.

"Are you going to Riverton next year?" I asked.

"Yup," he said and then looked away.

"Did you have fun tonight?" I questioned again.

He snorted laughter and shook his head. "You know what?" he asked me but didn't wait for my reply. "You are a big flirt. Do you know that?"

He looked directly in my eyes as he said this. I was taken by surprise.

"Guys don't like flirts," he stated and then stood and went upstairs.

I knew that he had intended it to be an insult but I was vaguely flattered by what he said. A flirt was someone who was pretty and who talked to boys naturally. Flirts definitely did not have B.O. I smiled at the fact that someone considered me to be a flirt.

Now, I realize that he was too hard on me. I was a thirteen-year-old girl unused to all the attention I was getting that night. I was just made aware that I had a certain power, that if I harnessed properly, could make me attractive and interesting to boys. I couldn't help but be clumsy and obvious at flirting. I was a beginner.

Even though that party was more than twenty years ago, when I visit Bellinda's parents sometimes, I'm still able to look at their rec room and remember how magical it had been on that

night. Not just a boring old room with two sofas and a tv. It had been a dim paradise where I had first danced, first been kissed and first been accused of being a flirt.

Every time I take out that invitation with the duck on the front and hold it in my hands I am reminded of a number of significant events in my life. When I flip it open to reveal Bellinda's loopy, girlish hand writing, I remember the can of deodorant nestled in between my winter boots, the Grade eight graduation dance, and the song "Sailing". I can smell the hair salon and B.J.'s cologne, I can feel his lips gently brush my cheek and I think of Tom calling me a flirt.

Then I wish I could do it all again.

## Nicole

When I was in kindergarten, we lived in a squat gray building which faced a noisy intersection. There was a laundromat below us and a greasy spoon next to that. To get upstairs to where the four apartments were you had to walk up a narrow flight of about twenty-five stairs which opened onto the street. It was a real rat's nest.

My parents had bought it with the help of my father's older brother who had helped my father emigrate from Macedonia years earlier.

A young Vietnamese couple lived across the hall from us. They had twin baby girls named Maggie and Rachel. A bachelor named Tim lived in the third apartment and Nicole lived in the fourth.

And, if you looked out my parents' bedroom window, you could make out Detroit across the river. That's about it when it comes to my concrete memories of that apartment building on Wincott Street.

Nicole was a girl of about seventeen but to me, she seemed old. A woman. She wore polyester dresses that were supposed to be shapeless but showed the strains of her bulging stomach and monstrous thighs nonetheless. Her thick ankles were so white that the freckles that covered them were all the more glaring. She had shocking red hair, the bad kind, not the rich auburn kind. Her brown eyes were set so far apart that her face looked unintelligent and the wide gap between her two front teeth added to this look.

When she spoke, which wasn't often, saliva welled up in the corners of her thick lips and loopy strands of it would connect from her upper lip to her bottom whenever her mouth opened.

I would follow my mother over whenever she went to collect the rent and I would watch, enthralled, as the ropes of saliva stretched and disappeared, stretched and disappeared, but never broke.

Nicole also had a baby. He had white, blonde hair and round green eyes. He usually only wore a diaper, sometimes he'd have a blue soother hanging from his mouth. Sometimes he'd have a stained t-shirt on but never anything over the diaper. For reasons I didn't exactly understand, my parents didn't allow me to play with Nicole's baby.

One morning, Mom was supposed to make a trip to Nicole's apartment to investigate a leaky faucet. I followed a few feet behind her as she walked across the creaky hallway and pounded her fist against the door. When Nicole opened the door, my mother greeted her the way she always did; head held up, eyebrows arched with obvious disapproval and mouth pressed into a white line.

I tiptoed into the apartment behind my mother and immediately went into the corner where I could watch everything that would transpire without being too noticeable.

Today, Nicole was wearing a dirty white nightgown that hung raggedly to the floor. It had huge red buttons running down the front and I could see her freckled flesh straining at them dangerously. When she turned, I could see her dimpled rear jiggling madly beneath the flimsy material. Suspicious brown stains marked the night gown offensively.

My mother marched over to the kitchen sink and began examining the tap. I scanned the dirty kitchen. Two brown grocery bags sat on the greasy yellow linoleum floor. Garbage poked out of both bags and I shuffled nervously when I noticed a brown foul liquid oozing from one bag.



The livingroom was divided from the kitchenette by a partial wall. The television was on and I saw Nicole's baby asleep on his stomach in a playpen in front of the tv. There was nothing else of interest in the apartment that I could see. Nothing personal. Just a shabby couch and mismatched chair. The walls were dirty and bare, there were no plants on the window sill, no curtains even on the windows.

I turned back to my mother and Nicole who were both leaning over the kitchen sink. My mother was peering at the faucet as she carefully turned it on and off. Nicole reached over to touch the faucet or to perhaps point out something to my mother. My mother angrily slapped the girl's hand away.

"Don't show me what I can see for myself!" she hissed between clenched teeth.

Nicole stepped away, stricken.

I watched all of this from my hidden corner, amazed.

My mother turned the faucet on and off twice more before wiping her hands on her pants. She turned to Nicole who was gnawing on her fingernails.

"Well," she began. Then she caught sight of me in the corner and gave me a dirty look before continuing. "Well, there is a leak. That's for sure. I'll have to send someone over to fix it."

My mother came over and grabbed me roughly by the neck of my t-shirt. I heard the seam wrench under her grip.

"Uh, Mrs. Dimovski?" It was Nicole. Her voice could barely be heard over the tv.

My mom stopped, turned around and glared at Nicole.

"When?" the girl whispered, glancing first at my mother, then at the floor.

Nicole, under the impression my mother hadn't heard or misunderstood, struggled to explain herself.

"When do you think someone will . . ."

Before she could finish, my mother interrupted her.

"What do you care?" she snapped nastily.

Nicole gasped and stepped back.

My mother released her grip on my t-shirt and I shrunk against the wall.

"You have garbage spilling onto your kitchen floor, no food in your fridge!" my mother yelled. "Your apartment stinks! Stinks! I feel like gagging whenever I come into this pig sty. You let your baby live in this dump and you wanna know when I'm sending someone over to fix your leaky faucet?" My mother laughed but I knew she didn't think any of this was funny.

Nicole's eyes were welling up with tears. She was looking down at her big ugly feet and trying not to cry.

"Somebody will come to fix it soon, young lady. That's all you need to know."

My mother grabbed me again and opened the door to leave.

"I suggest you tidy up this dump before any plumber gets here," my mother spat and then she dragged me into the hall and slammed Nicole's apartment door behind us. She pushed me in front of her and began muttering under her breath.

When we got home, Mom immediately lit up a cigarette and called Aunt Jenny to come over for a cup of coffee. She never smoked when Dad was home because he didn't allow it even though he himself smoked. He claimed that women who smoked were dirt.

Aunt Jenny was my mother's younger sister. Just like my mother, she had curly brown

hair and brown eyes but unlike my mother, her lips were full and when she smiled, her teeth were straight and white. She didn't have a nose as broad as my mother's or the tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Aunt Jenny's husband was Uncle Moe. We didn't see him very often because Dad said he was a "real bullshitter". I didn't know what that meant but I knew it couldn't be anything good. She had no children. She had been pregnant four times but had lost the babies before they were born. My mother told my father that it was "just as well."

Aunt Jenny showed up around lunch time. She had mascara and lipstick on and her hair was stiff with hairspray.

"Hi, honey," she cooed and came over to where I sat on the couch watching "Sesame Street". She hugged me for a long time and after letting me go, she looked at me until I started squirming.

"Why you all dolled up?" my mother asked and I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was ashamed at how ragged she appeared next to her sister.

"Oh, you know," Jenny laughed and placed a hand on her head nervously. "I might do some shopping later and you never know who you'll run into."

"Don't let Moe hear you talking like that," my mother warned.

Jenny laughed and slid into a chair at the dining room table. Mom got them coffees and an ashtray and the two began talking in hushed voices amidst a cloud of smoke. I lost interest in them until I heard my mother mention the morning incident with Nicole.

". . . And I get in there and you wouldn't believe it, Jenny."

My mother exhaled a long plume of smoke, enjoying the suspense she believed she was creating. "There was garbage on the floor and in the sink. There was brown goo all over the

floor. It was a pig sty. A complete pig sty."

Jenny clucked her tongue and tapped ash off her cigarette.

"Honest to God, Jenny. I damn near puked going into that hole. And can you believe the nerve? Asking me when someone would be coming to fix the faucet?"

Jenny shook her head.

"She's lucky you don't throw her out," Jenny stated. "You could, you know, Alice. No question. I mean, she's got a baby and no man for Chrissakes! That's enough of a reason. You got a baby too, you know. You don't need your kid seeing this crap."

My mother smiled.

"I know. But I feel sorry for the girl. I don't want her and her kid on the street."

Whenever Aunt Jenny agreed with my mother, my mother would change her point of view.

"She's on welfare for Chrissakes! What kind of example is that? Really, Alice."

And that was the end of it. Mom and Aunt Jenny went back to talking about Dad and Moe in hushed voices. They glanced over at me every once in a while to see if I was alright or listening to them.

A few days later, after Mom picked me up and walked with me home from school, she pressed two quarters into my grubby hand.

"Go buy yourself an icecream, okay?" she said. "But stay down here and eat it because I'm cleaning the floors."

With that she disappeared upstairs and into the apartment.

I walked over to the greasy spoon restaurant. They had a cooler in the corner filled with icecreams and popsicles. I chose a banana popsicle and after paying for it, went over to the stoop in front of the apartment's main door to sit down and eat it.

"Hi, Mary."

I looked up to see Nicole standing in front of me with her baby sitting in a squeaky buggy. She was smiling down at me so I could see all the gaps in between her teeth.

"How are you today?" she asked me in her quiet voice.

I shrugged and continued licking my melting popsicle. I noticed Nicole was waiting for me to stand up so that she could get the buggy into the tiny hall and then up the stairs to her apartment. I purposely remained seated, ignoring her gaze. She fussed with the baby, adjusting his diaper and spitting on her fingers and rubbing his cheeks. After a few moments, she looked at me directly.

"I'm sorry, Sweetie, but I have to get in there," she said and indicated the hallway which I was blocking.

I stood up and sidled off so she had enough room. I watched as she picked up the buggy and awkwardly placed it into the hallway. As she was straightening up, I felt myself becoming angry. Angry that my mother was so mean to her, angry that I hated my mother when I saw how she treated this girl.

"You can't tell me what to do!" I hissed, trying to mimic my mother's cruel tone.

Nicole turned and looked at me, shocked. I had always been polite when passing her before.

"You stink! You live in a pig pen with garbage in the sink and garbage on the floor! I

feel like barfing when I walk by your apartment!"

I can just picture myself. Six years old, hands on my hips, head held back, eyebrows arched.

Nicole blinked stupidly and I saw that her hands were shaking. This pleased me.

"And you have no man! You live here with a baby but no man," I calmly stated.

This time, Nicole's lower lip began to tremble and I was filled with satisfaction and a feeling of power when I realized she was going to cry. Then, she quickly turned away from me and dragged the buggy up the twenty-five narrow steps and disappeared into her apartment. I remained outside for another twenty minutes before heading upstairs to my own home which smelled of ammonia and lemons.

A year later, the building was sold. It was going to be torn down. We were building a house. I didn't know where but Mom said it was in a good neighbourhood. But until it was built, we had to live in another apartment. This one was smaller and uglier than the last.

A few days after moving in, we met the woman living in the apartment directly across from ours. Her name was Nicole. Unlike the previous Nicole, this one was tall and thin as a wire. Though not the nice kind of thin, I heard Mom say to Aunt Jenny. The kind of thin which means Kraft dinner for supper and a lot of drink. She had wiry black hair which she scraped into a tiny pony tail. Her face seemed stretched because of how tight it was. Her eyes were heavy lidded and always darting around, looking at everything greedily. She never seemed to move her head, only her black eyes. Her teeth were stained brown and when she opened her mouth to laugh, there was a gap at the side where she should've had two or three teeth but didn't.

We met her when she knocked on our door to introduce herself.

Mom opened the door to this lanky stranger wearing tight black jeans and a low cut black top.

"Hi," the woman said and smiled broadly. "I'm your neighbour from right here," she said and pointed with her thumb to the open apartment door behind her.

"Hello," Mom said.

There was a silence and I saw the woman's eyes dart around what she could see of our apartment: the kitchen, part of the living room, both still full of unpacked boxes. Her eyes rested on me for a second and then settled back on my mother who was self consciously fiddling with the kerchief she had tied around her head to keep the dust from her hair as she unpacked.

"I'm Nicole by the way," she said and slumped casually against our door frame like she intended to stay a while.

"I'm Alice. This is Mary. Mary? Get over here."

I shuffled over to the door and stood there awkwardly for a moment. I could smell Nicole's breath as she looked down at me. It smelled of smoke and mouldy bread.

"I gotta kid too," she stated matter-of-factly to my mother. "Maybe they'll play together."

My mother smiled and patted my head. "That would be nice," she exclaimed and then gently pushed me away from the door.

A wail came from Nicole's apartment. Nicole glanced toward her open door and then back at the tv.

"That'd be her," she laughed but made no move to return to her apartment. The wailing continued. No one said anything for a minute.

"I'd invite you in, Nicole, but it's just that we haven't got anything unpacked yet," my mother said in an apologetic tone.

"No, no, no," Nicole said. "I just wanted to introduce myself to you is all. Listen, come over for a coffee later on or maybe I'll come by later and help you unpack."

My mother nodded. "Sure, maybe. Sounds good."

Nicole smiled at me and then turned to go back to her apartment where her daughter's wailing had become louder. My mother had just started closing the door when Nicole gasped and turned back to us.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" she exclaimed. "Do you smoke?"

My mother looked puzzled. "Yeah," she answered cautiously.

"Thank God," Nicole sighed. "I'm dying for a cigarette."

My mother didn't go to Nicole's that afternoon and Nicole didn't come over to help with the unpacking. But after we'd been there a week, she did come by one afternoon for coffee.

She plopped down at our kitchen table and slapped a pack of cigarettes in front of her.

"Gawd," she sighed as my mother went to fill the kettle. "I'm having man problems."

"Go watch tv, Mary," Mom commanded.

I went into the living room but remained where I could see and hear what was going on. After the kettle was on, Mom went to shut the apartment door which was still wide open.

"Do you mind leaving it open?" Nicole asked. "It's just that Ginger's having a nap and I want to hear her if she wakes up."

My mom left the door open.



Two hours later and Nicole was still at our table smoking the last of her cigarettes and drinking her fifth or sixth cup of coffee. I had lost interest in them after a while and turned to the tv. Ginger hadn't awakened because there hadn't been a sound from Nicole's apartment. My mother, unable to ask her to leave, had given up dropping hints and just started cooking dinner while Nicole continued relating her life story and her history of troubled loves.

Dad came home from work and it was apparent he was not in a good mood. Mom introduced him to Nicole who stood up and smiled goofily at him. Dad grunted a greeting.

"What's for supper?" he asked my mother.

"Yeah, listen. I gotta go anyway. Alice, thank you for the coffee and for everything," Nicole said.

Dad turned the sink on and started washing his hands.

"Anytime, Nicole," my mother said and there was a definite look of relief on her face.

"We should do this everyday," Nicole said. And then she slunk out of our apartment as quickly as she had first come in.

Two weeks later, Dad was yelling at Mom. I don't know what exactly they were arguing about but I had an idea it somehow had to do with Nicole.

Aunt Jenny came over the next afternoon for coffee.

"So Dan took a total fit," Mom said to Jenny after they were seated at the table each with a coffee in front of them and a cigarette in hand.

Jenny exhaled slowly through her nose and pursed her lips. "Well, can you blame him, Alice? I mean, really."

"Yes. Of course I can blame him. She's lonely and what am I supposed to say to her? I can't hold it against her."

"You misunderstand me, Alice," Jenny sighed. "You know that Dan was raised differently than us. In a different country. His views are different. That's all. You can't blame him for having different beliefs. Even if you think they're wrong."

Mom nodded. "I just feel terrible though. I mean, I'm sure she knows what's going on because she hasn't been over since to have a coffee or anything. I just can't wait to get out of here."

Mom breathed out a lungful of smoke and stared into space.

The next night at around seven thirty there was a hurried knock on our door. Dad was at the Macedonian hall where he went from time to time to meet with friends and have a few drinks. Mom was in the shower.

I ignored the knocking and continued watching tv.

"Alice? Alice, are you home? I need your help!"

It was Nicole calling through the door. She wasn't exactly a stranger so I padded over and opened the door.

Nicole loomed in the hallway, a little black girl in pink and green pyjamas next to her. Her daughter, Ginger.

"Oh, hi," Nicole muttered. She pushed a greasy strand of hair behind her ear but it fell back onto her shiny forehead. "Where's your Mom?" she asked and the black eyes darted into the apartment, then down the apartment hallway.

"In the shower," I said.

Nicole pushed past me, Ginger in tow and strode toward the closed bathroom door. The shower was no longer running and I could hear Mom humming.

"Alice? Alice? It's me, Nicole," she called into the thin wood of the bathroom door.

My mother opened the door. She was wrapped in her terry cloth house coat with a towel on her head like a turban. Steam seeped out into the hall.

"Nicole?" My mother looked from Nicole to me. Then her gaze settled on Ginger who had begun whining.

"Alice, I need a big favour. It's an emergency. I have to go out for a while and I need somebody to keep an eye on Ginger for me." The stream of words just flowed out of Nicole's mouth, all the while her black eyes moving non-stop.

"Well, I don't know..."

"Please, Alice. It'll just be until ten o'clock. It's an emergency. I wouldn't barge in here if it wasn't," Nicole pleaded.

"Oh, alright," my mother sighed. She really didn't have a choice.

"Thanks, Alice. I owe you one. I really do," Nicole said while she stepped back into the apartment hallway. "See you at ten. Bye, Love," she said to Ginger and blew her a kiss.

Then she was gone.

My mother stood framed by the steamy bathroom looking confused. Ginger continued to whine.

"What's wrong, honey?" my mother asked her.

She looked up shyly and began rubbing her eyes.

"Mary, take Ginger into the living room and keep an eye on her please," my mother ordered, then disappeared back into the bathroom.

I took the little girl's hand and led her into the other room. She couldn't have been more than three.

"Do you want to watch tv?" I asked her.

She plopped onto the carpeting and stared at me blankly.

I went to the couch and pulled a few colouring books out from under the flounce and a set of crayons and slid them over to her. Her eyes lit up.

Mom came out a while later and made popcorn on the stove and brought some over in a little bowl for us. We were still on the floor, colouring, when Dad came home.

He threw his jacket on the table and looked at Ginger and me on the floor. Then at my mother.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"We're babysitting. Only until ten. Nicole had an emergency," my mother explained quickly.

My father sat down at the kitchen table and meticulously began to untie his shoes.

"What could I do, Dan? I mean, she barged in here. I don't want the baby left all alone in the apartment."

My father said nothing.

After removing his shoes he walked over to where we sat on the floor and glared down at our colouring. Ginger glanced up and smiled shyly.

"Nice picture, girls," he grumbled.

Ginger giggled. "He talks funny," she whispered from behind her hands.

My father smiled and looked up at my mother who smiled back.

"I couldn't say 'no', Dan," she said quietly.

"I didn't say nothing," my father said gruffly and then went into his bedroom and shut the door with a click.

Ten o'clock came. I was in bed, listening. Dad was in bed too. I could hear him snoring. Mom had brought a blanket and pillow to the sofa and tried to get Ginger to lie down.

"It's all scratchy," Ginger complained about the sofa. But eventually, she quieted down.

I woke up a little while later. My father's snoring was louder, probably because my parents' bedroom door was open. From my door, I could see a light was still on in the living room. I slid out of bed noiselessly and tiptoed out into the hallway.

Ginger was on the sofa, curled into a ball sleeping soundly. Her little mouth was open and she was breathing heavily. Sitting up next to her, dozing, was my mother.

A slamming door could be heard from the building hall. It rattled throughout our apartment. Mom's eyes fluttered open and she caught sight of me standing in the hall.

"Mary, what's wrong? Why aren't you in bed?"

Before I could answer, she yawned and looked at her watch.

"Shit, it's after one," she muttered.

There was a pounding at our front door.

"Ginger? Ginger, baby. It's Mommy." It was Nicole and she was obviously drunk.

My mother jumped off the couch and stormed to the door. She yanked it open while

Nicole was in mid-knock.

"Oh hi, Alice," Nicole giggled. "Did I wake you up?"

"You said ten o'clock. It's now one a.m.," my mother said in an angry voice.

"I got caught up, honey," Nicole said.

"Don't 'honey' me," my mother said in a controlled voice. "Some emergency you had, I see."

A cloud crossed Nicole's face suddenly.

"Where the fuck's my kid?" she demanded and burst past my mother.

She spotted Ginger on the sofa, still asleep and staggered over and began shaking her.

"Get out!" my mother yelled. "Take her and get the hell out right now!"

Nicole grasped Ginger's arm roughly and yanked her onto the floor.

My mother began yelling at me to get back to bed but I ignored her and remained transfixed, watching the scene before me. Ginger was crying as Nicole dragged her across the apartment and into the hall.

"Thanks for nothing," she slurred at my mother.

My mom slammed the door and marched over to where I still stood. Tears of anger were welled up in her eyes. She grabbed me roughly and spanked me before pulling me back into my room and into bed.

As I lay there in the dark, I could hear my parents arguing in low voices. Then I drifted off.

It was a few weeks later. Mom was making a point of giving Nicole the cold shoulder.

Nicole had crawled over here with her tail between her legs, as Mom put it, the morning after the incident. Mom had held the door slightly open and leaned against it as Nicole had apologized.

"Gawd, Alice. I am so sorry for coming here last night in the state I was in and going off like that." Nicole's eyes were bouncing crazily from the hallway floor to our kitchen but avoiding Mom's face. "I am so embarrassed by my behaviour and I never got a chance to thank you for sitting for Ginger."

After finishing, Nicole was quiet for once. Her black eyes remained fixed in one spot on the filthy floor.

"Are you finished?" Mom asked in a cold voice.

Nicole nodded sheepishly.

"Well then," Mom said, clearly savouring the power she felt she had over this poor woman. "I accept your apology."

Nicole smiled eagerly and looked into Mom's face.

"But..." my mother held up her index finger in warning. "I don't think it's a good idea if you come over here anymore. Just stay away from me and I'll do the same."

Nicole's mouth opened like she had something to say but nothing came out.

"Alright?" my mother questioned sternly.

Nicole nodded.

Then my mother shut the door gently and smacked her hands together for a job well done.

Mom was having coffee with Aunt Jenny in our kitchen. And even though the Nicole thing had happened weeks ago, Mom was busy recounting the saga to her sister who had missed the excitement due to being in Ottawa for the past couple of weeks.

I sat at the table with the two of them, a twice bitten cheese sandwich in front of me.

"She came crawling over here the next morning with her tail between her legs," Mom said and then dragged on her cigarette.

"No!" Jenny said in disbelief.

Mom nodded and stubbed her lipstick stained cigarette out.

"Well, what did you do?" Jenny asked.

Mom lit herself a new cigarette and arched her eyebrows dramatically. "I gave her what-for. That's what I did. I told her exactly what I thought of her and her ... life style. That's what I did."

Jenny laughed. "Alice! You didn't!"

Mom smiled. "Yup. Told her to stay away from me and my family. I told her she was setting a horrible example for her kid and that she was headed toward bad news."

"What did she say?" Jenny coaxed.

Mom shrugged.

"What could she say? She knew what I said was true. She went home and hasn't bothered us since."

Mom breathed smoke out through her nose and smiled. "I can't wait to get out of here," she said under her breath before getting up to refill their coffee cups.



I have never liked the name Nicole. The name calls to mind slovenliness and dirt under the fingernails and sweat stained blouses and the smell of pee. Nicole is a woman who rarely eats or else she eats too much. She smokes with shaky hands, sometimes she exhales the smoke from flared nostrils. Her teeth are yellow or brown and she's got unpleasant breath. She swears a lot or else doesn't say much at all. Nicole uses eyeliner on the inner rim of her eye so that her eyes appear to be pressed into the pockmarked dough of her face. Or else she wears no makeup at all and her eyebrows meet together over the tip of her nose.

Nicole is a woman who my mother cruelly arches her eyebrows at. She is a woman who is beneath my mother but still frightens her. She is a woman who has made mistakes and bad choices.

Nicole is a woman who is going nowhere fast.

## L'il Angel

### Summer

Two days after we moved into our new house, Mom told me I was on her very last nerve.

"I'm at my wits' end with you!", she yelled. "Moping around like this. Go outside. Get some fresh air!"

I shrugged.

Truth was, I really wanted to go outside and do some exploring. Check out the neighbourhood. But now that she ordered me to, I didn't want to give in. I would either have to wait for at least fifteen minutes or else until she physically dragged me outside.

"Jesus Murphy, Caroline!"

I could see she meant business the way her eye was twitching. "Get the hell out of my face and go outside and play!"

I slipped my red shoes on and slid our glass door open and stepped outside.

The air smelled like cut grass. It was a lot fresher than the dusty cardboard smell of our new house. This was the first house I had ever lived in. It was strange to have next door neighbours and people living down the street instead of one apartment over or down the hall.

I glimpsed red in the yard that bordered ours from behind. A girl, wearing a red shiny shirt, was picking raspberries from a bush and humming.

I kicked at the weeds and yellow grass until I made my way to a little crab apple tree in my new backyard. I grabbed one of its branches and pretended to study the dried up fruit.

The girl was old, probably a teenager. She had thick black eyelashes which reminded me

of feathers when she looked down at the raspberry bush. Her long brown hair was swept up in a ponytail and I noticed she was chewing gum.

"You're Caroline," she stated.

I gasped. Her feather lashes remained down as she stared at the bush yet she was speaking to me. And she knew my name.

I gulped.

"I watched your house being built this past while. Me and my sister did. Tim told us about you. He told us you were shy." She smiled.

I had never heard anyone call my father Tim before. Not even my mother.

"My sister's about your age. How old are you again?"

"Ten," I croaked.

"L'il Angel's eleven. She goes to the Catholic school and I know you'll be in the public. But still. You could be great friends."

I smiled and nodded.

"Wanna come over here and hold the bowl while I pick?" she asked and looked directly at me.

I eagerly crossed over to the fence which consisted of a few planks of wood and crawled through the slats.

The girl smiled and offered me the blue ceramic bowl she was holding which was half full. I still didn't know her name. I wanted to ask but was afraid to. She seemed nice enough though.

"What's your name?" I asked her finally.

She was bent over reaching for a couple of berries that were at the back of the bush.

"How rude of me," she said. "Here I am, I know almost everything about you and you don't even know my name. I'm Dominique."

She stuck out her hand for me to shake. I remembered that Dad told me to always shake with my right hand. Her hand felt cold and soggy but I didn't mind. Dominique pumped my hand up and down and then rubbed it on her jeans.

"There. That's it for now," she said and glanced at the bowl and then the bush which was still pretty full of ripe raspberries. "L'il Angel's gotta get the rest." She turned to me. "Thank you for your help, Caroline. Why don't you come over for lunch. Then you can meet L'il Angel."

I smiled and shrugged. "Okay. But I gotta tell my mom."

Dominique nodded. "Just come over when you're ready."

I slid back through the fence and started running toward my patio and heavy glass door when Dominique shouted at me.

"Caroline! Walk around the block to our front door. Mother would have a fit if she saw you climbing this fence, okay?!"

Mom made me change my pants and shoes before I could go over to meet L'il Angel.

"I know the girls," Mom said when I told her about Dominique. "Dad said they came over here often when he was busy building. The one's almost ten years older than the little one. I think they're fatherless but I can't be sure," she mused to herself. "Freeman, I think. Dad told me. Freeman or ... something Jewish anyways."

I walked around the block like Dominique had mentioned. Their house was different from the front. It was big and dark. It reminded me of a haunted house. I had never seen a real, live haunted house but this is what I imagined one would look like. There was a long, slanting driveway that I had to walk up and then a porch I had to reach by climbing nine steps. There was a towering, black door with no doorbell next to it. So I knocked.

I guess I expected Dominique to answer. But instead a small girl with white, blonde hair and black eyes opened the door. She looked like a dwarf in a giant's doorway.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"Are you Caroline?"

I nodded.

"Just making sure. Come in."

She had a orange smudge above her upper lip. Too much Kool-aid, I thought.

"L'il Angel? Is that your little friend?" a raspy voice called from another room.

"Yup!" L'il Angel called back.

I stood in the dark hallway awkwardly. I wished Dominique would rescue me. Instead, I just stood there looking around while L'il Angel's dark eyes bore into me.

There didn't seem to be any lights on anywhere in the house. Shafts of sunlight flooded the adjoining room which I took to be a living room. I could see dust like stars in a galaxy floating in the air. There were heavy pink curtains around the livingroom window and a white statue of a naked woman holding grapes sat on the carpet next to the sofa. Straight ahead of me, I could make out a dark kitchen.

"L'il Angel. Have your friend come in here, please," the raspy voice called again. I couldn't distinguish if it belonged to a man or woman.

L'il Angel turned her attention away from me and shuffled toward the kitchen. I followed.

The voice belonged to a woman. She sat on a tall stool next to a counter top. She had waist length brown hair with wiry streaks of white running through it and large black eyebrows which looked like they were crayoned onto her powdery face. A long white cigarette was held in between two of her long white fingers.

This is a haunted house, I thought. And she's a witch.

"Caroline. How nice to finally meet you. I'm Mrs. Freeman and I guess you've met Sissy and L'il Angel."

When Mrs. Freeman smiled, her lips formed a purple triangle.

I said nothing.

"Why don't you two girls sit down and have some lunch?" Mrs. Freeman asked.

L'il Angel slid onto a wooden bench at a wooden table which reminded me of a picnic table Grandpa had in his backyard. I slid onto the bench across from her. A plate sat in the middle of the table with chunks of sausage and cheese on it with toothpicks stuck into them. Another plate had sliced eggs, pickles, olives and carrot sticks on it. L'il Angel began eating so I followed her lead.

Mrs. Freeman inhaled her cigarette and smiled at us.

"L'il Angel, can you freshen up Mother's drink?" she asked.

L'il Angel slid wordlessly from the bench and took Mrs. Freeman's glass of ice. She took

a jug from the fridge and filled up the glass with what looked like water.

"Thank you," Mrs. Freeman drawled when L'il Angel set the glass down in front of her.

"You know, L'il Angel's been terribly excited about you moving in, Caroline."

I looked up at L'il Angel. She was sucking the pimento from an olive and didn't seem terribly excited to me.

"She doesn't get along with many children in this neighbourhood. Most of them are rascals anyway. But you're different, Caroline. I can tell. Just by looking at you I can tell you were raised properly." She blew smoke out through her nose.

L'il Angel shifted on the bench. "Wanna go upstairs and watch Sissy get ready?" she asked me.

I figured Sissy must be Dominique. I was anxious for her to set me at ease in this house.

"Okay," I said. "Thank you for lunch."

"Anytime, honey," Mrs. Freeman drawled. "I can tell that you and L'il Angel are going to be great friends."

I followed L'il Angel out of the kitchen and up a flight of stairs, then down a dusty hallway to a bedroom like one I had never seen before. It was obviously the master bedroom of the house because it had an attached bathroom as well as a terrace. The room was decorated in baby blue. There was a canopied bed in one corner and a makeup table with globe lights around the mirror just like a movie star's.

Dominique was in a housecoat sitting at the makeup table.

"What are you two up to?" she asked without taking her eyes off her reflection.

"Nothing," L'il Angel stated and flopped onto the bed.

"You wanna watch me get ready?" Dominique asked.

I perched uneasily on the edge of the bed and stared at her blankly.

"Well?" she asked and peered over at L'il Angel and me.

L'il Angel shrugged.

"Then get your bums over here."

Dominique had a selection of different colours of eyeshadow out on the table.

"Which colour should I wear today, Caroline?" she asked me.

I chose a mint green.

"And lipstick? L'il Angel, you can pick this one."

L'il Angel chose a silvery pink.

"Good choices, girls. You two are gonna do just fine," Dominique murmured as she carefully applied the make up.

"Sissy has a boyfriend. His name is Mike," L'il Angel explained.

Dominique stopped brushing on the green eyeshadow and smiled at L'il Angel.

"He's brown. And he walks on his hands a lot. It's neat," L'il Angel continued.

Dominique began applying tarry mascara to her lashes so that they looked like the feathers they had been earlier.

"Are you going to marry him?" I asked.

Dominique's reflection smiled at me. She shrugged. "Maybe. L'il Angel will be my maid of honour. And what could be my wedding song? L'il Angel, what's my favourite song in the whole wide world?"

"Lost in Love," L'il Angel piped up.



"I could find something for you to do in my wedding, Caroline. You could scatter rose petals at my feet. How would you like that?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Why don't you two play Othello while I pick out my clothes."

L'il Angel lunged under the flounce of Dominique's bed and pulled out a game. For the next twenty minutes L'il Angel and I played Othello while L'il Angel explained the rules to me. You had to block off the other person's chips and then you could take them over. The chips were double sided. One side was black, the other white.

There was a loud knock on the door downstairs and I could hear dogs barking from somewhere inside the house. I hadn't seen any dogs but there was definite barking coming from somewhere downstairs.

"Oh! That's him. L'il Angel, run down there and tell him I'll only be another minute," Dominique said as she brushed out her long hair.

L'il Angel bolted out of the room and down the stairs and I followed close at her heels. When L'il Angel lugged the big black door open, we came face to face with two upside down knees.

"Hi, Mike," L'il Angel laughed.

"L'il Angel. Thank goodness you answered the door." Mike's face was red and I could see trickles of sweat by his ears.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

"I'm Caroline," I said and stuck out my right hand. L'il Angel laughed, so did Mike. I hadn't meant it as a joke but I pretended I had.

"Can't shake your hand right now. I'm kind of busy. So, you gonna let me in or what, L'il Angel?"

We stepped aside and he carefully manouvered himself into the hall, then down the hall toward the kitchen, his legs waving dangerously to the side the whole way.

We giggled as one of his feet brushed a picture on the wall.

"Good evening, Mrs. Freeman," Mike said.

"Hello, Mike. God, you know I hate it when you do that!"

Mike lowered his legs so that his feet touched the floor and he was right side up.

"Phew." He swiped at his sweaty forehead. "Now I'll shake your hand," he said and stuck his hand out to me which I shyly shook. "Where's Sissy?" he asked L'il Angel.

"Sissy said to tell you she'll be one minute."

"You know what that means. We have time for a game of Monopoly," he laughed.

The three of us scooted onto the benches and L'il Angel produced a Monopoly board from a cupboard.

When Sissy finally came downstairs she joined in the game. Even Mrs. Freeman played as banker from her big tall stool.

It was six thirty before I knew it and Mom was knocking at the big black door to come and collect me.

## Autumn

L'il Angel and I were sitting together on her old, rusty swing set which was in her backyard. The weather had gotten colder so both of us were bundled up in heavy jackets and

woolen hats.

"Where's Sissy?" I asked.

L'il Angel shrugged. "With Tom," she muttered.

"Who's that?"

"Her new boyfriend, I guess."

"Is he nice?"

L'il Angel shrugged again. "He don't walk on his hands. And he calls me 'kid'. And he's not brown."

"Oh."

"Hey, L'il Angel, Caroline!"

We swung around to see Mattheu. He was a grade below me at my school. His mother, Mrs. Burns, was the Freemans' housekeeper.

"Hi, Mattheu," I said.

"Hey, L'il Angel. My mom said you've been peeing the bed again. Tsk tsk."

"You shut up, Mattheu Burns! You don't know shit!" L'il Angel screamed.

I had never seen her so upset before.

With that, Mattheu got on his bike and pedalled away laughing.

"Mrs. Burns is a big mouth," I said in consolation. "You should tell your mom."

"She knows," L'il Angel answered. "But she's a good housekeeper. My underwear is always white. Even the pee stains are gone when she does laundry."

"Wow."

"Mattheu don't know nothing. There's a reason I wet the bed, you know. When my dad

comes to see me at night, the next morning I wake up and my bed's wet. I can't help it. Anyway, Mothers says it's alright."

"Your father?"

"Uh huh."

"Ain't he dead?"

"Yup. But he still comes and sees me sometimes."

"What's he look like?" I was curious, having never seen a ghost before, let alone knowing someone who had.

"The same. Except he walks - or well - floats kind of. There's no wheelchair. And his teeth are real white."

"When did he die anyway?" I asked.

"He died when I was a bitty baby. But I seen pictures of him. Holding me on his lap and stuff. You know, he was seventy-four when I was born!"

"Wow."

Even my Grandpa was only sixty-one.

Just then a bright yellow car pulled up the slanting driveway. Dominique jumped out of the passenger side and ran over to us giggling. Her new boyfriend, Tom, trailed behind dragging his feet.

"Hey, girls! Wanna come for a walk with us?" Dominique shouted even though she was standing directly in front of us.

L'il Angel scowled and crossed her arms. I nodded eagerly.

"Come on then, Caroline. Let L'il Angel be a party pooper by herself then."

Dominique had her long brown hair combed straight and it hung to her waist. I couldn't believe how much she looked like Mrs. Freeman today.

"Come on, Tom! Come say 'hi' to L'il Angel and Caroline!" Dominique called.

Tom stood near the driveway shuffling his feet. He reluctantly came over. He had long blonde hair that hung in his eyes. And a mustache that looked like dandelion fluff clinging to his upperlip.

"Hi, kids," he muttered.

"Hey, Tom, won't it be fun if the girls come to the park with us?"

"Yeah, sure."

Dominique ran into the house to tell Mrs. Freeman that we were all going to the park. Tom glanced at us, panicked, and then trudged back over to the driveway.

"Why's she acting so weird?" I asked L'il Angel.

"I think she's drunk."

"Oh."

"Tom's ugly, eh?"

"I don't know. Yeah, I guess."

"I don't want to go to the park with them, do you?" L'il Angel asked me and looked out from the corner of her dark eye.

I shrugged. "What else are we going to do?"

Dominique was out of the house calling over to us. She held a large plastic cup filled with a drink.

"What the hell are you doing, Dominique?" Tom asked.

"Nothing. It looks like pop. No one will stop me."

And so the four of us started walking the three and a half blocks to the park. Tom and Dominique were in front, holding hands and L'il Angel and I lagged behind.

"This is gonna be so boring. There's nothing to do at the park. The fountain's closed up, you know. And I'm freezing," L'il Angel complained.

I kept my eyes on Tom. There was a square bulge in the back pocket of his jeans. It could be cigarettes. And I didn't like how his hand rested below Dominique's waist. Although Dominique didn't seem to mind.

When we got to the park, Dominique and Tom walked over to the river's edge and stood facing the wind and Detroit. L'il Angel and I came up behind them.

"Have you been to Detroit before, Caroline?" Dominique asked me.

"No."

"I was born there, you know," L'il Angel chimed in.

"You were not. You were born in Florida," Dominique corrected.

"Same thing," L'il Angel muttered.

Dominique drained the plastic cup in one gulp and tossed it in the churning gray water of the Detroit River.

"Who wants ice cream!?" she screamed.

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked.

"You know, the ice cream shop. At the other end of the park?"

"It's November for Chrissakes, Dominique. It's not open no more."

"That's what you think!" Dominique laughed and danced away from us.

"Here we go," whispered L'il Angel.

We walked all the way across the park to the ice cream shop which had a white sign taped across the front counter reading: CLOSED UNTIL MAY.

"Oops," Dominique giggled.

"Told you," Tom grumbled.

Dominique cupped his stubbly chin in her two hands and kissed him.

"Oh gross," L'il Angel muttered and turned away.

I couldn't take my eyes off them. Except in the movies, I had never seen two people kiss like that before. How did they breathe?

"Let's go," L'il Angel whispered and tugged at my coat.

The two of us turned around and started the trek toward home. When we got close to the park's entrance, I noticed a pink spot in the middle of the grass. I ran over to it and saw that it was some sort of flower.

"Look, L'il Angel. This poor little flower is all alone in the cold," I said and reached down to pick it for Mom. I snatched my hand back, stricken. It felt like I had been stung. There was a small black thorn in my finger embedded under the skin.

"A thistle," L'il Angel said. "Just what I thought." She was still cranky.

Dominique and Tom came up behind us.

"What's wrong, Caroline?" she called.

"The flower bit me." I held my poor little finger up for them to see.

"I can get that out kid, no sweat," said Tom.

He pulled out a bottle cap from his pocket and grabbed my finger.

"No thank you. My mom will poke it out with a needle."

"Suit yourself," he grumbled and tossed the bottle cap into the river.

"Come on. Let's go home," Dominique said. She touched her temple. "I think I need to lay down."

Winter

"How would you like it if Dominique came over here and sat with you tomorrow night, Caroline?" Mom asked.

She was standing at the stove boiling something for supper. I was tying my shoes.

I nodded. "I'd like it," I said.

But I knew there was no point in getting my hopes up. Dominique was busy. Every time I went over to L'il Angel's she was either not there, just getting home or getting ready to go out. There would surely be no time for her to sit with me. And why would she want to sit with me when she could be out on a date or at a party or something? Mom would call Dominique up and Dominique would probably laugh in her face. She wasn't that rude. She would probably explain why she couldn't spare time to come over and sit for me on a Saturday night. And after she hung up the phone, she'd probably scream with laughter.

Alice would end up sitting with me. She didn't allow me to have L'il Angel stay over while she was here. She told Mom and Dad she'd charge extra so Mom and Dad told me "no L'il Angel". And she talked on the phone all night even though Mom asked her not to tie up the phone in case of an emergency. And she always called me "young lady" which in my opinion was worse than "kid".



"Good, honey. Because I spoke with her yesterday so it's all arranged." Mom tasted the stuff she was boiling.

"You mean Dominique's going to sit with me tomorrow night?"

"I just told you that," Mom said.

"Oh. That's right."

I quickly tied my shoe and left to go over to L'il Angel's. I took the shortcut even though I knew about Mrs. Freeman's rule about climbing the fence. By the time I got to L'il Angel's front door, my excitement about Dominique died down. I was leery about telling L'il Angel because if she didn't know about Dominique sitting with me, there'd be a slim chance that I could have Dominique all to myself tomorrow night.

Our latest game involved forming a club house in L'il Angel's basement. Her basement was made up of a series of rooms that connected somehow. There was a laundry room attached to a room with a cobwebby pool table attached to a musty fruit cellar. The room we chose was attached to the laundry room also and had a stained linoleum floor and a smelly sofa in it. Mrs. Freeman said we could use whatever we wanted from the attic to decorate. So, in a matter of a few days we carted down an ancient lamp and two bar stools along with some sepia photos of forgotten relatives which we hung on the walls.

When I knocked on the big, black door I heard Mrs. Freeman's scratchy voice coming from the kitchen.

"Come in, Caroline."

I made my way to the dark kitchen where Mrs. Freeman sat on her stool sipping her drink and watching her miniature tv.

"L'il Angel's in the basement, honey," she rasped.

I worked my way downstairs and when I got to the clubhouse door I knocked four times.

"What's the code word?" L'il Angel asked.

"Tomato Banana," I called through the door.

"Come in," she said.

I opened the door.

L'il Angel was sprawled on the smelly sofa with a pad of paper and a can of pencils on her lap. She was wearing a silly turquoise hat on her head. The old fashioned kind with a veil that hangs over your face. Her veil was tucked up onto the hat's brim.

"Look at the neat hat I found in the attic," L'il Angel said excitedly. "Mother says it belonged to Grandmummy Freeman. I found one for you too." She held up a burgundy one. "I thought these could be our club hats."

She handed me the hat which I immediately settled onto my head.

"And look." She pointed to a vague area on the far wall. "I nailed two nails into the wall there. Those will be our hat hooks. Whenever we leave the club house, we'll hang the hats up."

I nodded.

"Okay," L'il Angel said and cleared her throat. She shuffled the sheaf of papers she held on her lap. I saw that the paper was blank. "The next thing is we need code names. Something we can call each other whenever we're in the clubhouse. I was thinking you could be 'Boo Boo' and I could be ..."

"I don't like 'Boo Boo'," I said.

L'il Angel didn't say anything.

"How about I be 'Lola'?" I said.

"No. 'Boo Boo's' better."

I was quiet. "Well, what will your code name be then?" I asked.

L'il Angel shrugged. "I was thinking you'd be 'Boo Boo' and I'd be 'Lola'." She looked at me out of the corner of her dark eye.

"Hey. That's not fair. I want 'Lola'."

"Too bad. It's my house. And my club."

I crossed my arms. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"If you don't like it, then you can leave."

"I think I will," I said in a quavery voice.

I got up to leave. I shut the club house door with a snick sound and slowly climbed the stairs. I thought about going back there and telling L'il Angel that Dominique would be spending tomorrow night with me at my house but then I thought better of it.

When I got upstairs I heard dogs barking from somewhere in the house. I had yet to see these dogs even though L'il Angel and I had been friends for four months now. L'il Angel said their names were 'Sweetie' and 'Wolfie' and that they were ferocious which is why they were always kept locked up.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Freeman," I called out.

"Bye, honey," she rasped from the dim kitchen. "Whatsa matter? You two have a kerfuffle?"

"No. Just tired. Bye," I called and slipped out the big, black door.

Mom and Dad were going to a wedding. Mom was boiling a big pot of hot water for her curlers. I watched as she scooped them out with tongs and laid them in a colander. Then, she rolled them into her hair swearing under her breath because she kept burning herself.

"They smell nice," I said.

Mom looked at me like she forgot I was there.

Then she painted her nails quickly and without even letting them dry completely she began putting on eyeshadow.

"I think you should wear this colour," I said and pointed to a violet.

"Honey, leave me alone for two minutes so I can get ready in peace. Maybe go and watch for Dominique. She should be here any minute."

I left the bathroom and went and sat with Dad in the den.

There was a knock on the door. It was Dominique.

"Hello, Caroline," she said.

Her hair had snow caught between strands and she had snowflakes on her eyelashes.

"I just made a snow angel on your front lawn," she said. "Come see it."

I went and peeked around the edge of the door to verify.

"It's not a very big one," Dominique explained. "It's just a L'il Angel actually." She smiled and winked at me.

I thought she was hinting that L'il Angel had come along to sit with me. But then she stepped into the hallway and shut the door. She was alone.

"Good evening, Dominique," Dad called from the den.

"Hi, Tim. How are you?"

"Just fine, thank you."

Mom came out of the bathroom in a flurry of perfume and Kleenex.

"Hi, Dominique. We're going to a wedding and won't be home till late so feel free to stay over on the couch if you want to."

"Sure." Dominique smiled and winked at me again.

Dad put his shoes on and then helped Mom with her coat.

"If she gives you trouble, Dominique, just spank her a few times. Works like a charm," Dad said and laughed.

"Oh. I'm sure there'll be no need for that. Will there, Caroline?" Dominique asked.

I smiled and shook my head.

And then the two of us were alone.

Dominique clapped her hands together.

"Okay. First thing's first. We're going down to the corner store. I gotta buy a few things," she said.

I looked outside. The sun had just set and it looked so bleak. "But it's cold," I whined.

"That's why we gotta bundle you up good," she stated and grabbed my winter coat from the closet.

Once we were outside, I perked up. It was cold out but it felt nice against my warm cheeks. And when I looked up at the navy sky I could see stars. I felt exhilarated - like I was doing something forbidden - and probably I was. I couldn't imagine my parents being happy that I was outside at night.

Dominique and I made a point of marching across the untouched blankets of front lawns

leading up the street to the corner store. When we got to Marty's Convenience, we shuffled inside and stamped our boots. Dominique went over to the magazines and thumbed through them while I stared at the containers of penny candy. Dominique bought a glamour magazine, a bag of salt and vinegar chips for later and she let me fill a tiny paper bag with sour watermelon candies and strawberry marshmallows. We walked home quickly, sliding along on the icy sidewalks. If we hurried, we'd make it home for "The Love Boat".

I noticed there was a black car in my driveway when we got closer to my yard.

"Who's here?" I asked myself.

"That's just Cookie," Dominique said.

"Who?"

"My friend, Cookie. He said he might stop by."

As we got closer, Cookie stepped out of the car. He was a lanky boy with bright red hair and freckles settled on his face like blobs.

"Hey you two! What're you doing out at this hour?" he asked playfully.

"Making snow angels!" Dominique squealed and fell onto the ground waving her arms and legs.

Cookie laughed.

"Hello. I'm Cookie," he said suddenly and stuck out his hand to me. It was covered in freckles also.

I shook it gingerly.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Caroline," I whispered.

Dominique stood and brushed off her legs.

"Come on. Let's go inside and watch some "Love Boat" and eat some chips, okay?" she said.

Cookie reached over and tickled her and she yelped and bolted for my front door. He chased after her. I followed behind.

We watched "Love Boat". I sat with my pyjamas on, trying not to watch Dominique and Cookie whispering to each other. I had a bowl of chips on my lap. After it finished, Dominique suggested we play a game of Twister. We played three games. The first two I had to be the spinner while Dominique and Cookie tangled their legs and arms together before falling into a laughing and gasping heap. After the third game, Cookie straightened up and looked at his watch.

"I gotta get going, Dom," he said in a serious voice.

"Oh, alright," she sighed.

"But I'll call you tomorrow."

Dominique nodded.

"Nice meeting you, Caroline," he said and winked.

I smiled at the carpet.

"Okay, Caroline, I'll be right back. I'm just gonna walk Cookie out to his car," Dominique said and then stepped out onto the front porch leaving the door open a crack. I felt a draft.

Dominique came back in a few minutes later.

"I'm sleepy," I yawned. "I think I'm going to bed."

"No. Not yet. You can't be a party pooper tonight," Dominique insisted. "We have to

have some fun first."

I shrugged.

"Come on. Tell you what. How about I do your makeup. I brought your favourite colours."

"Mom says I'm too little for makeup," I said skeptically.

Dominique smiled. "That's why I brought my face cream too. She'll never even know. Anyway, it's just for fun."

So Dominique painted my eyelids Wine Berry with silver highlights, my cheek bones Terra Cotta and my lips Candy Pink. Then she pulled out a bottle of Pumpkin nail polish and began painting my fingernails.

"Hey, Caroline," she said in a serious tone while she was carefully applying a stroke of orange to my thumbnail.

I looked at her but she didn't look up at me. All her concentration seemed to be on my one thumbnail.

"Maybe it's a good idea if you don't tell your parents about Cookie." She finished and shook the polish bottle so that I could hear the little ball bearings inside it rattle.

"Why?" I blew on my left hand.

"I don't know. Because. Maybe your mom wouldn't be happy about it."

I shrugged. "She don't care."

"Just the same. Maybe she shouldn't know about us going down to the store or about Cookie coming by."

"What's his real name?" I asked.



"Jimmy. Jimmy Cook. That's where Cookie comes from . Plus - he loves Oreos."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

Dominique shrugged. "I'm not sure. What do you think of him?" She finished with my nails and screwed the lid back on the bottle.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess he's okay. But he doesn't walk on his hands.

Dominique nodded solemnly and zipped up her makeup bag. "You're right about that."

Then, we smeared the makeup off my face with cream covered Kleenex which we then flushed down the toilet. When we finished, my face gleamed and I saw with cloudy vision from where the cream went into my eyes. Dominique told me my eyes would be okay in the morning. Sure enough, when I woke up the next morning I could see fine. When I got out of bed, I found Mom and Dad in the kitchen drinking coffee. Dominique was gone.

Spring

L'il Angel called me on the phone to tell me that she was busy helping her mother with the spring cleaning so we couldn't play. However, I was more than welcome to go join in with the annual cleaning at the Freeman house.

The phrase "spring cleaning" was exciting to me. It didn't conjure up images of toilet bowl cleansers, dusty mops or yellow rubber gloves. "Spring cleaning" had the eloquent sound reminiscent of white sheets flapping on a clothes line and the smell of bleach. Plus, things were always more exciting at the Freeman house.

I was tying up my shoes and getting ready to race out the door when my mom asked me where I was going.

"L'il Angel's, to help with 'spring cleaning'," I announced.

Mom raised an eyebrow. "Uh huh. Well, when you're done over there you can give me a hand vacuuming."

I ran out the door and around the block to L'il Angel's house. She was waiting for me in the hallway, the big black door opened a crack so she could spy me coming up the slanted driveway. She was wearing a brown bandanna around her head like a gypsy.

"Come on. We're doing Auntie's room," she said and turned and disappeared up the stairs.

"Hi, Mrs. Freeman," I called into the dark kitchen. I watched as dust swirled violently in the dark air of the kitchen.

"Hello, Caroline. How's your mother?" Mrs. Freeman croaked.

"Fine," I called.

The dogs started barking. I slipped out of my shoes and tiptoed up the stairs. L'il Angel had pointed out Auntie's room to me before but the door had always been closed. She had always made it seem so mysterious.

L'il Angel was inside the room holding a feather duster. My own mother used velvety cloths to dust, claiming that feather dusters only pushed the dust to settle elsewhere in the room.

The room was carpeted in thick burgundy pile and the wallpaper was white with soft black squares which felt like velvet. There was a big bed with brass bars almost reaching the ceiling. There were two night tables and an old fashioned scroll top desk in the corner. On one of the night tables sat a set of false teeth, on the other, an old fashioned pitcher and basin and a bible.

"This is exactly what it was like when she died," L'il Angel said. "Mother didn't change a thing. She says it's bad luck. And Sissy came in here and took a brush and mirror. Mother told her it was her own bad karma.

She died right in that bed, you know." L'il Angel half-heartedly began swishing the duster on top of the desk. "Look, here's a picture of Auntie when she used to dance in Las Vegas." L'il Angel held up a black and white photo of a young smiling woman wearing a hat with a bunch of feathers on it. "You know, back then, Auntie told me it was painful to wear makeup. You had to dip a toothpick in a black bottle and paint it onto your eyelashes one by one. And when you wanted to get it off, you practically had to rip your eyelashes out. And the curling irons aren't like today. That's why she was almost bald when she died."

"Wow," I said.

"Here, Caroline. You take this mop and take down the cobwebs in the corner," L'il Angel said to me.

I began swiping at the ceiling while L'il Angel continued waving around the feather duster.

"Look at this," she said suddenly and opened a door at the back of the room.

I couldn't tell what it led to. The inside was pitch black. L'il Angel pulled a chain and lit up a walk in closet filled with damp, musty clothes.

"Mother says Auntie would turn in the grave if she got rid of these clothes," L'il Angel explained. "Let's go through the pockets," she whispered excitedly.

"Okay."

We eagerly jammed our grubby hands into damp pockets but after finding only a

crumbling cigarette and a dirty penny, we gave up.

L'il Angel sat on the edge of the bed and sulked. I half-heartedly wiped at an end table with a blue cloth.

"What if ..." L'il Angel began. "What if ... Auntie wrote something on the wall. Like a message or something. And, now it's been covered over with wallpaper?"

I didn't think it that likely but L'il Angel's face was lit up and her eyes were shiny so I shrugged and managed a smile. She bolted off the bed and began working at a strip of the fake black velvet on the wall with her ragged fingernails. When she finally got a piece of it torn, she slowly ripped it about four inches across. The paper fluttered to the floor revealing a piece of gray wall beneath.

"Hmmm. Nothing here," L'il Angel muttered. She moved over slightly and began again.

After the fifth piece of wallpaper fluttered to the burgundy carpet, there was a soft knock on Auntie's door.

"What are you two brats up to?"

It was Dominique and she wasn't alone. A chubby blonde boy followed her in.

"This is Nick," she said.

L'il Angel and I were silent.

"Are you finished cleaning?" Dominique asked.

L'il Angel nodded. I shrugged.

"Okay then. Bye." Dominique slipped out of the room followed by Nick. We heard them walking down the stairs.

"That's her new boyfriend. Creepy, eh?" L'il Angel said.

"Yup."

"I don't like him one bit. And Sissy says he could be the one. She wants a Chicago song for her wedding song. I don't know which one though. I think 'Inspiration'.

"Wanna work on a puzzle? I gotta new one that looks like a pizza."

And the two of us slunk out of Auntie's room and into L'il Angel's.

Summer

There were two major announcements in the Freeman house that August; both came as a shock.

I knew something was up when the phone rang and Mom told me it was L'il Angel. She never called me. Ever. Sometimes I called her but more often, I just showed up at the big black door.

"Caroline?"

"Yeah?"

"It's L'il Angel."

I pictured her standing in the kitchen next to her mother's stool, holding the receiver to her white head.

"I know," I said.

"Oh. Get over here. I got something to tell you. And it's major."

"Okay then." I hung up the phone quickly. "I'm going to L'il Angel's!" I yelled and was out the door, running across my yard barefoot to the back fence.

L'il Angel was waiting for me at the old rusty swingset. I stopped running when I saw her, not wanting her to know how eager I was to hear the news. I sat on the swing next to hers and waited. She kept me in suspense for a few minutes.

"Someone came to visit me this morning," she said matter-of-factly.

"Oh yeah?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Who?"

L'il Angel looked around mysteriously before answering me in a whisper. "Mona."

"Who's Mona?" I asked in a normal voice.

"Ssshhh. You can only whisper the word."

"Who's Mona?" I whispered.

"You know," she said slyly. "Mona."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Don't you know anything?" she asked exasperated. "I'm a woman now."

"Oh." I was somewhat familiar with this although I had never heard of it referred to as Mona before.

"Anyway, I just thought you should know. Just in case you have any questions or anything. Now you know you can always come to me."

I nodded.

We swung in silence for a few minutes.

"What do you wanna do today?" I finally asked.

"Actually, I'm going to lay down for a while. Cramps. See you later, Caroline."

And she hopped off the swingset and left me alone in the backyard.

The second announcement came only two weeks later. This time when the telephone rang, Mom told me it was Dominique calling.

"Caroline! Get your bum over here!" she squealed through the receiver. "I've got big news. And I mean big!"

I rushed across the yard and over the fence. When I got to the big black door, Dominique swung it open and screamed: "I'm getting married!"

She held her hand out to me where I could make out a sparkling ring. She threw her arms around my neck and while jumping up and down somehow managed to drag me into the house, down the hall and into the kitchen. Mrs. Freeman sat on the tall stool, clinking ice cubes around in her glass and L'il Angel sat on the wooden bench, eyes glued to the tiny tv set on the counter.

"His name is Dave. Sorry he's not here to meet you but he's really busy. He sells cars, you know. Anyway, he asked me this morning and I said 'yes!'"

Dominique looked beautiful. Her hair was separated into two ponytails and her cheeks were rosy with excitement.

L'il Angel glanced over at us with her black eyes. "We don't get to be bridesmaids, Caroline, 'cause they're getting married in Vegas."

Dominique shot L'il Angel a dirty look. "Don't mind her, Caroline. She's just trying to rain on my parade."

When I went home later that evening, I threw myself onto my bed and cried until I made myself sick. When Mom and Dad asked me what the matter was, I had no answer.

## Autumn

L'il Angel was in the seventh grade now and the kids at her school called her Angie. I still slipped once in a while and called her L'il Angel and she would flash a look at me from the corner of her dark eye that would make my neck tingle. I eventually just stopped referring to her by name.

Since Dominique had married and moved to Ohio, L'il Angel inherited all of her make up hand-me-downs. She took great pains to make herself up every morning before she went to school and again when she returned home. Somehow, her eyelashes were always clumped together in sticky black points which left dark smudges under her eyes. And her lipstick ended up replacing the Koolaid stain on her upper lip.

We didn't work on puzzles anymore and our club was officially shut down. We spent most of our time watching tv. And, to make things worse, L'il Angel had new friends and when her new friends came over, I usually ended up going home.

It was a Saturday and I sat at the kitchen table, my chin in my hands. Mom sat across from me painstakingly trying to get a grease stain out of her favourite blouse.

"What's wrong?" she asked without looking up.

I shrugged and let my arm drop to the table. "Bored."

Mom looked up. "Where's Maryanne?"

Maryanne was a friend of mine from school.

I shrugged.

"Hey, why don't you go see what L'il Angel's up to? You haven't been over there in ages."

"I dunno."



"Come on. You used to love it there. I'm sure she's probably up to something fun," Mom said.

"I dunno."

But I got up and slipped my shoes on before heading out the front door and around the block. I started to walk up the slanting driveway to the big black door when I caught sight of L'il Angel and another girl out back. They were both laying on their stomachs on top of a pink beach blanket flipping through magazines.

"Hi," I called as I headed over.

L'il Angel rolled onto her side to get a better look at me before quickly rolling back and whispering something to her friend.

I stood at the edge of the blanket.

"You're in my sun," L'il Angel's friend said.

"Oh. Sorry." I sat down on the grass since there was no room for me on the blanket.

"Holly, this is Caroline - the girl who lives behind me. Caroline, this is Holly. She's in the eighth grade at my school."

Holly said nothing so I said nothing.

"What are you guys doing today?" I asked.

Holly snorted and flashed a shark-toothed smile in L'il Angel's direction.

"Actually, we're thinking of starting a club. Remember our old one, Caroline? Whatever happened to it?"

Holly snickered.

"I don't know. I guess we sorta forgot about it," I said.

"Yeah. Anyway, why don't we start a new one? We'll meet once a week. I'll be President. Holly, you'll be Vice President. And Caroline, you can be ... hmmm. You can be the subject."

"Subject?"

"Yeah. Third in charge," L'il Angel said.

"What will we do in this club?" I asked.

"Things."

"Oh. What will we call ourselves?"

Holly suddenly burst out in laughter. She sat up and crossed her legs. "Sorry," she sputtered. "Sorry, Angie. I just couldn't take it anymore."

L'il Angel had a strange smile on her face. Her black eyes flashed from me to Holly.

"Caroline, you poor pathetic child," L'il Angel said. "I'm just having fun with you. Clubs are for kids. God, you are so immature. Really."

I bit my lower lip. "I figured you were kidding but..."

L'il Angel cut me off. "Sorry, Caroline, but you'll have to go now. Holly and I have plans."

I stood up awkwardly and brushed at the seat of my pants. "Oh. Okay, then."

L'il Angel went back to flipping through the magazine she had in front of her. Neither girl moved to get up.

"Bye then," I said and slowly walked to the fence.

"Uh, Caroline?!" L'il Angel called just as I started to slip under the slat into my own yard.

"Yeah?"

"Do you mind going around the block? Mother would have a coniction if she saw you climbing through that fence."

I knew it would be easier if I just did what she asked so I made my way to the sidewalk and walked home the long way.

Spring

Except for the walk to and from school, I did not see L'il Angel again until May. Mrs Freeman sold the big, old haunted house about a month earlier. She told Mom that since it was just L'il Angel and her knocking around all alone in that house, she wanted something smaller. Their new house was a two bedroom bungalow about eight blocks away. This house had a gravel driveway leading up to a concrete porch. The front door was made of painted white wood with a metal screen door in front. This house had no basement or attic.

I walked over to L'il Angel's old house on the day they were moving out all the furniture. As I made my way to the bottom of the driveway, I caught sight of Wolfie and Sweetie for the first time. They were laying on the grass, tongues hanging out, taking in the action. Wolfie was a little yellow mutt with bald patches all over his back. Sweetie was a grungy terrier with crust on his nose and bad breath. He came over to me and sniffed at my crotch before whining.

"He likes you, Caroline," Mrs. Freeman called.

She was standing at the bottom of the driveway directing the movers who were carrying a vanity table down the front steps. This was the first time I ever laid eyes on Mrs. Freeman outside of the darkened kitchen. She had her long hair tucked into a bun and she held a tall glass in her hand which she sipped at every once in a while.

"All this crap's going into storage," L'il Angel said.

I hadn't noticed her sneak up and stand next to me.

"What's your new house like?" I asked. I sensed she was in a good mood.

She shrugged. "Kind of boring actually." Her black eyes sparkled at me and she looked like the L'il Angel I was used to.

"Do you wanna come over when the movers leave and have lunch at my house?" I asked.

"Me and Holly are going to the mall."

"Oh."

We stood there in the sunlight watching the movers load the vanity into the back of their truck. I looked at her from the corner of my eye. Her hair had gotten long. Almost to the middle of her back. I noticed the swell of breasts against her mint green t-shirt. And she had gotten tall. She towered over me now.

"Okay. Well, bye then, L'il Angel."

I thought for sure she'd let me have it for not calling her Angie but she turned to me and smiled.

"See you, Caroline."

And I walked home the long way.

## Summer

A family with a bunch of little kids moved into the old Freeman house. They tore off all the wooden shutters that had framed the upper windows. They painted the door a gray colour and they tore down the old fence that divided our yards and built a tall privacy fence.

It was a Sunday afternoon when the phone rang. Mom answered it and my heart pounded in anticipation until I realized it was for her. I went back to painting my toenails with clear nail polish and listening to Mom drone into the phone.

"Caroline," Mom called. She was holding the receiver out to me. "It's for you."

"Me? Who is it?"

"Come here and find out."

I recapped the bottle and carefully walked over to the phone, taking care to keep my toes spread apart.

"Hello?"

"Hey there, Caroline. Guess who?"

It was Dominique.

"Dominique! Hi. Where are you?"

"I'm at Mother's house. I guess I expected you would be here but you weren't. Anyway, I'm visiting until tomorrow and I have the baby with me. Why don't you come over and see us?"

"Okay. I'll be right there."

I waited until I was positive my nails were dry before slipping into my sandals. Then I got on my ten-speed bike and rode over to the new house.

Dominique was sitting on the front porch with the baby in a stroller next to her. At first I didn't recognize her. I thought it must be a neighbour. She looked nothing like Dominique. But when I ground my brakes to a screeching stop in front of the house, she stood up and jumped down the stairs squealing.

"Caroline! How are you? I've missed you so much!" she yelled and hugged and kissed

me.

I tried not to stare at her.

"What do you think?" she asked, indicating her hair cut. It hung around her chin in a bowl. And she had bangs now which were sticking to her shiny forehead in sweaty spikes. She wore no makeup and her cheeks seemed rounder than they had been the last time I had seen her. She had gained weight. Her doughy arms reminded me of my grandmother's and I could see where the fabric of her shirt bit into the flesh of her stomach.

"Come see the baby, Caroline. Oh my God, it's been a long time."

She ran back up the porch and proudly picked up the baby.

"He's so cute," I cooed and stroked his cheek with the back of my hand.

"Looks just like his Daddy," Dominique said.

There was an awkward silence between us. I sat down on one of the porch steps and fiddled with the buckle on my sandal.

"Wanna go for a walk? The baby could use some fresh air," Dominique said.

"Sure. Let me wheel my bike around back first."

The backyard was nothing more than a square of yellow grass. I leaned my bike against a rusty shed and made my way back to the sidewalk. Dominique had the stroller down from the porch with the baby tucked inside.

"Let's go to the old corner store," she said.

On the way, she talked about Dave and how Cleveland was nice but nothing like home. She hadn't made too many new friends what with being busy with the baby and all.

"It's nice to be back," Dominique sighed. "You know, I never realized how much I'd miss my old house until I got here. I guess I thought Mother and L'il Angel would live there forever." She was quiet for a minute. "But I guess things change. People change. I never thought that L'il Angel would grow up but here she is, practically a lady."

She stopped to fuss with the baby. "It's nice to know that you and I are still the same, Caroline."

Dominique looked up at me and smiled. I smiled back.

Mom told me once that magic leaves. Just disappears. But it happens gradually, day by day so that you don't notice for a while. Then one day, you wake up and it's gone. And sometimes you wonder if the magic you believed in when you were young ever really existed.

"One day you're going to wake up, Caroline. And you will have breasts and you'll be interested in boys and you won't want to play hide-and-go-seek or tag," Mom told me.

"No. I won't let that happen."

Mom smiled. "But it will, honey. You'll see."

I guess she was right in a way. But I refused to let the magic disappear. I clung to it and kept it around.

Whenever I look at the old Freeman house, I can still remember the big black door with the white head and black eyes peering out. I remember the maze of rooms in the basement and the statue of the lady with the grapes in the livingroom.

Some magic stays with you forever.

## Four Walls

Growing up, I always shared a room with my younger sister. When I was seven and she five, we had bunkbeds. I chose the bottom bunk and tacked a ratty sheet to her bed frame so I had privacy. I pretended it was my own room and would holler if I saw her face peering in at me as I wrote in my diary or whispered to my dolls. But that ended quickly after she fell out of bed one night. I made a fuss about moving to the top so the beds were separated and that was the end of my privacy.

I envied my friends who had bedrooms of their own. I marvelled at all their floor space. I imagined doing cartwheels and somersaults in all the space I'd have if Lucy's bed wasn't cluttering my room. I imagined dancing and lip syncing to Duranduran in front of a tall mirror as I combed my hair without Lucy snickering.

I wished I had a brother. It wasn't proper to share a room with a brother.

When we were teenagers, we moved to a bigger house. A house with three bedrooms. Mom promised me my own room at last and as oldest I got first choice. But then, about one month before we were to move in, Dad told us Baba was coming to live with us. My room would be hers.

"I know it's a disappointment, Mary, but you're going to have to get over it," Mom had said. "Baba's been lonely since Deda died and she needs us. She needs to be close to your father right now. Anyway, she's old. She won't be around forever. Someday, you'll have all the privacy you could ever want."

I secretly plotted to turn the basement into a room of my own but after taking one look at its dank, concrete walls and dusty floor, I knew it would never happen.



Lucy and I, united by our anger at Baba stealing our chance at separate rooms, did not make her life easy. Because she didn't speak English, we'd laugh and tease her, saying things to her we thought she couldn't understand. We could speak a few words of her language. Words that meant 'shut up' and 'go away'.

Baba was a short woman with long steel gray hair she braided and pinned on her head. At night she unwove it and it hung down to her waist like a girl's. She had enormous breasts that blended into one gigantic mound. Whenever she happened to be holding a cantaloupe or watermelon, Lucy and I would always reach for it and then deliberately grab one of her breasts. She would scream in her language and smack us. Sometimes she'd threaten to get our 'medicine' which was a wispy twig she kept behind the bread box. One slap with the twig and we would have a welt that would last for days.

Sometimes, Lucy and I would push our beds together to form a king sized one and we would whisper all night. Other times, we would push our beds together so that the foot of each touched. Then we would sit up, thumb through magazines and have meaningful conversations.

When we weren't getting along, the masking tape would come out and a line would be made to divide the sides of the room. My clothes weren't allowed on her side and vice versa. This still didn't stop us from meticulously placing our dirty socks and underwear on our sides of the room as close as possible to the other person.

At one point, I remember Lucy tacking old camping blankets to the ceiling giving the room the appearance of being in a hospital. But in the middle of the night, the blankets usually fell down.

Once in a while, I'd slip into Baba's room when I knew no one was around. I'd sit on her

bed and imagine it to be my room. My makeup would be cluttering the dresser, not her bible and bobby pins. My Duranduran poster would be tacked to the wall instead of some framed needle points. I'd lay down on her bed and rest my head on the huge down filled pillow she had. She had brought it with her from Europe. She had made it herself and forbade both Lucy and I from lying on it because, she had explained, only old women could sleep on it because it caused wrinkles. Nevertheless, it was the softest thing to lie your head on and I stole a chance whenever I could.

I married very young. I was nineteen. Lucy got the room to herself. At first I wasn't envious because now I'd have my own apartment. But, I had about as much privacy as I had with Lucy, only this time my husband was invading it. I remember visiting my parents one day and Lucy had changed the room around. Her things lay across the entire dresser top instead of only on one side. And clothes were no longer overflowing from the drawers because now they were all hers. And there was enough space on the floor to do cartwheels and somersaults.

My husband Nick promised me that soon we'd move into a house of our own and he would make sure there would be a room that could be my office. But when that time came around, we had a baby that needed the room. As our family grew, the more an office seemed a far off luxury.

Visiting my parents one day with the kids, I wandered upstairs to go to the bathroom and ventured into my old bedroom. The one I'd shared with my sister. Lucy was long gone, married with kids of her own in another city. But there were still traces of her in the room. Her bed, a faded photograph of her in an angel costume pinned to the wall, forgotten lipsticks on the end table. There was no trace of my childhood here. This was Lucy's room.

Baba came in and disturbed my self pity. She was pushing ninety-six and still alive and kicking. Her coiled braid was still intact, only completely white now. As she hobbled over to sit next to me I laughed remembering Mom telling Lucy and I that she was old and would not be living with us forever.

She had something in her hand which she gave to me. It was a little round pillow made from the same down as the one she still slept on. She explained that this one would not cause wrinkles as it was too small.

She died later that month and when Lucy came home for the funeral we slept in our old room. She in her bed and me on the floor on an air mattress. We whispered like we used to and for a moment in the morning, upon first waking up, I believed I was seventeen again and Lucy fifteen, living in our old room.

Both Lucy and I wanted Baba's pillow but Mom said it was bad luck to sleep on a dead person's pillow. Especially if it was the very same pillow they had died sleeping upon. But she did agree to open it and make several new pillows from the down inside. This way, we each had one.

Now, I'm able to sleep on that pillow without any worries. I'm as wrinkled as I'll ever be so now I can sleep in pure comfort. I still have the little round pillow which Baba had given me. It stays in my hand or under my arm as I sleep.

At last, I have the room I've always dreamed about. I have floor space on which to cartwheel and somersault. I awake in the middle of the night to silence instead of Lucy's snoring. But sometimes, I wake up in the morning wishing to find Lucy's bed touching mine; to hear her grumbling as she struggles to reattach the camping blanket to the ceiling; to see her

poking at my smelly sock with a ruler.

Then I realize; these are my four walls.

## Blue Ringer

As a little girl I was amazed by the stories my mother told me about her life, mainly her childhood. Given a spare moment, she'd unravel a magical story about her uncle who had a pig's tail secretly tucked into the seat of his pants or about the elf she once spotted munching on lettuce in her mother's vegetable garden.

She would stand at the sink peeling potatoes or rolling dough. I can still see her as she once was: curly blonde hair tucked behind her ears; dark, almost black eyes that called attention to the whiteness of her skin and the blondeness of her hair; and rough stubby hands that didn't suit her otherwise delicate beauty. She once explained that as a toddler her left hand had been caught in her mother's clothes wringer and had crushed her fingers. Her right hand had simply withered on its own accord so that her hands matched one another.

"One of nature's ways," she said after completing the story.

This phrase often followed her stories

As a child, I would soak up every word my mother said, every story she told. I was so proud that my mother had seen so many strange things and been a part of so many unusual circumstances.

My father once told me to take all she said with a grain of salt. He muttered this in his quiet succinct manner after I once asked why our pet cat never spoke.

Gradually, my pride turned to shame. I learned most of the stories she told because she would often repeat them. I began dreading them. My face would burn hot whenever she would tell one of her tales. But what I found even more embarrassing than the stories themselves, was the note of pride in my mother's voice as she told them. Her voice would begin to lilt over her

words and her face would glow and this would cause me more shame than anything else. My worst fear was that she would humiliate me by relating some ridiculous fairy tale about her childhood when my friends were present. But she never did.

As I grew up, her story telling became less frequent. My shame changed to contempt. How could she tell such lies and expect me to believe them? How could she think I was so stupid? And her stories never changed. She repeated them over and over as if they were favourite bed time stories.

Contempt turned into pity. Pity for a poor woman who felt it necessary to exaggerate to make life interesting. Pity for a woman who believed in her stories. And this belief was seen by the glow in her face and heard in the lilt of her voice. When she told these stories, she was reliving something and trying to explain it to me. And I found this sad.

Only now in middle age do I finally see the magic my mother possessed. If only I had noticed it earlier.

My mother had been born and raised in Queensland, Australia and the story of her conception is perhaps one of the most bizarre tales she ever told.

It was 1909 and, in a town called Crundoll, an eighteen-year-old bride and her groom were celebrating their wedding day in the backyard of the bride's parents' house.

The bride's twelve-year-old sister had gone missing about an hour earlier but eventually returned to the reception with her dress torn and slightly askew. After the commotion died down slightly, a young man was found responsible and was held down by several of the men present while my mother's grandfather beat him with an axe handle and spit on his face. He was then

forced to leave town.

Eight months later, my mother was borne of a thirteen-year-old girl who died two days after the delivery. Everyone said it was "just as well" considering how young a mother she'd be and having to live with the shame of rape as well as a bastard looming over her. The baby was given to the newlyweds, my mother's maternal aunt and husband, who raised her as their own.

Immediately following this story, my mother would never fail to add her own insight on her conception. She would mumble it as if it had just come to mind and she was thinking aloud but it was just as much a part of the story as anything was.

"I often wonder whether it really was a rape after all," she'd muse and scratch her chin. "I've seen pictures of her. Hmmmm. She was quite... developed for twelve. I think there's more to it. Oh well. I guess we'll never know.

"Just one of nature's ways."

When I was a teenager, my mother suddenly took up the notion of writing her stories down on paper. Of compiling a book of them. The ladies at the Women's Bowls Club had been urging her to record them.

"You have such a great gift, Janice," they told her. "You should record them for posterity's sake. Who knows? You might become a famous writer someday," they said.

But she was disappointed in the way they came out; flat and unbelievable. They didn't flow from her pen as majestically as from her mouth. Of course her voice probably had a lot to do with it. My mother had a voice of silk.

"Anne, I want you to write my stories for me," my mother said to me one day.

It had been years since she had decided to write them herself and given up. I had forgotten all about it.

"Me?"

"Yeah. You're the writer in this family. You got the gift. I'm just a talker. Talk is forgotten." This she said sadly.

"I'll think about it," I answered. "If something strikes me right I'll write it down. But I'm not promising anything."

This satisfied her.

But I didn't do it.

It wasn't until Mom was in the nursing home that I remembered my long ago promise to her. She was sitting on the floral print sofa, eyes focussed vacantly on the tv when I came to visit. She opened and closed her mouth silently. Her stubby hands, now covered with spots, trembled together in her lap. I looked at her and wondered what had happened to the woman she had been. When had she stopped believing in magic? And then I thought, Who will remember the stories when she is gone?

"Mother," I said firmly so that she looked at me. "Remember I promised to write down your stories for you?"

She looked at me and blinked.

"I'm going to write down your stories, Mother," I said loudly. I felt frustration building in my chest. Why hadn't I done this earlier? When there was more time? The frustration slowly



turned to panic.

"Tell me one of the stories, Mother," I commanded.

Her smile broadened and she raised a trembling hand and rested it on mine.

"Tell me about Puppy, Mother. Please." I knew I was close to tears.

"Puppy," Mom whispered and closed her eyes.

"Remember Puppy, Mother?"

"Puppy," Mom whispered again.

"When you were ten, your bitch had a litter of six. Remember, Mother? And one of them was a kitten. Five puppies and one kitten. Do you remember, Mother? And what did you name the kitten?"

"Puppy," she whispered and her eyes flicked open to look at me. Then turned vacantly back to the soundless television.

Mom's gone now. I've tried recording her stories but they seem ridiculous on paper. I struggle to recall how she looked and what she was doing as she told them. Maybe if I get a clear image in my mind of her telling the stories to me, they will flow better.

But it doesn't work. If only I'd really listened. If only I'd known it would be the last time I'd ever hear them.

There is one that is very clear to me. Especially now, it is the one I remember most vividly.

My mother is seven and she and her parents are at the beach having a picnic. Mom

wanders off, splashing in the shallow surf when she comes across a mottled sac in the water. She picks it up, relishing the soft feel of it in her hands and on her fingertips. She holds it in her little outstretched hand, letting water slide between her fingers. The sun glints blue and green and gold on the soft body.

It is the most beautiful thing she believes she has ever seen. On an impulse, she places the creature on her head and arranges its tentacles so that a few of them tangle in her long mane of hair. The other tentacles she carefully drapes in mysterious designs along her white forehead and behind her ears until she feels she is wearing a wonderful crown.

She saunters over to where her mother sits on a faded blanket. Her mother's mouth drops open in horror when she sees what my mother has done.

"Blue Ringer!" she screams and points at it.

My mother laughs and begins twirling around and around, enjoying the feel of the tentacles swinging heavily in her hair. Her father runs toward her and grabs the thing from her head, pulling her hair roughly.

The doctor later says it is a miracle she wasn't stung. A true, real life miracle that she is even alive.

"I am immortal, Anne," my mother once said to me.

She is standing at the kitchen sink. Her face is smooth and unlined, her lips full and rosy. She smiles and I see the beginning of laugh lines shadowed around her eyes and mouth. Her stubby hands wash dishes quickly.

She turns to me and smiles. Then shrugs happily.

## Mo's Rock

There was this rock that sat at the edge of my grandparents' backyard patio. It was a boulder really. I remember it was gray and not at all smooth so you couldn't really sit on it. It had rust coloured lines running along its surface like veins and when I placed my hand on it, it was always warm, even as the sun was setting and I could feel the coolness of evening coming on.

On the summer days when we went to grandma and grandpa's for dinner and we all ate outside on the picnic table, my brother and I would run around in the grass. Grandpa had hung a coarse rope from a tree branch and we'd swing on it until either our hands got full of splinters or one of us accidentally swung and kicked the other in the face. Sometimes, we'd crouch in the garden, overrun by weeds, and pretend we were in a forest looking for sustenance. We'd hoard green goose berries in our shirts and pull up yellow, hairy carrots from the dirt.

Mom would call us to the patio when it was time for watermelon or cake or when someone was opening birthday presents.

Marcus and I would always stand near the rock, our hands resting on the warm surface, fingers splayed to catch the warmth. Sometimes, our fingers even touched. When the cake was finished and the presents opened and the watermelon gnawed to the white (Marcus and I used to spit the seeds at each other until one time I got one lodged in my wind pipe and that was the end of that) Dad would come over and without saying a word, hoist the rock up on its side and then over so that it toppled into the grass where it rocked gently a few times. Marcus and I would crouch down and we were always amazed at all the life under it. The soil underneath was moist and there were always ants and potato bugs scurrying around for cover. Sometimes there'd

be a worm poking through the dirt or a snail.

"Where are they going?" Marcus would ask.

"Nowhere. That's their house," Dad would say.

Marcus and I would always laugh at such a silly idea.

"Don't laugh," Dad would say in a serious voice that never failed to quiet us. "This is what we look like to someone up there." He'd point up to the sky mysteriously and then back to the moist patch of dirt writhing with all sorts of creepy crawlies.

This is what I think about on the way to the restaurant to meet him. I am in my car stuck in traffic, at least five minutes late already, and this is what is going on in my head.

My heart pounds in my throat. I haven't seen him for nearly two years now. He never made it to my wedding. The RSVP had been mailed back to me with a piece of notepaper attached stating his reasons. His reasons could have been summed up in one statement: he didn't think it was a good idea that he be there.

And now, dinner. It had been his idea. Sort of. He had sent a Christmas card and in his scrawly writing had suggested dinner some time soon.

"Just like him," Rob had muttered after reading it. "He never wants to be the bad guy. See? He's extending an invitation to you, Mo." He had shoved the card at my face. "Now if you don't take him up on it, it's not his fault."

He had let the card flutter down onto the table. There was a star on the front and the message "Season's Greetings". Just like him. Always so politically correct.

It bothered me when Rob talked about him like that. He didn't know him. He didn't

know much about anything, really. So I called and left a message on his machine: "It's been a while. Got your card. Dinner sounds nice." Something like that.

And here I am, stuck in traffic, my heart in my throat like I'm about to meet a blind date.

By the time I get to the restaurant, I know he'll be angry. He was always so anal when it came to time.

I see him as soon as I step inside. He's sitting in a booth against the wall looking at a menu. He looks exactly the same as the last time I saw him. His dark hair is cut a bit shorter and his scraggly mustache is gone. But it's still him. Tears spring to my eyes because I miss him.

I am nearly two feet away from him when he looks up and catches my eye.

"Maureen." He says it like a complete sentence.

I don't say anything. I just hug him and catch him off guard because he is only half standing but he returns my embrace. But he is also the first to let go.

"You look good," he says.

I sit across from him and say nothing because I don't yet trust my voice.

"You too."

Where did things go wrong for us? I think this although I wish I could say it. What happened to force us to meet here like acquaintances. Two people who once had a lot in common, even took each other for granted, now making small talk, trying to fill up awkward silences with meaningless words.

I glance down at his hand and see the gold band on his ring finger. He instinctively touches it with his other hand and twists the ring nervously.

"How's Gary?" I ask.

"Fine." His voice is suddenly clipped. "I'll be sure to tell him you asked."

"Marcus, I didn't mean . . ."

"No no. I know. I didn't mean for that to sound snarky. I was being sincere, Mo. God, I'm so touchy. That's all."

He beckons over a waitress and we order. I silently promise not to ask him any more direct questions as the waitress nods and turns to leave.

"And Rob?" he asks.

The minutes we have before our drinks are served I spend telling him all the typical newlywed stuff. He nods and keeps his eyes on my lips or my nose. I can't tell which but I know it's not my eyes.

All through dinner, we discuss his job (he is currently sketching for an animated tv series) and his apartment. He does not ask about Mom and Dad. I don't ask about Gary. When it seems we have nothing left to say to one another, I say: "They miss you, Marcus."

He folds his hands seriously and looks at his thumbs. It is something I have seen Dad do a hundred times.

"I mean, they . . ."

"Do you know what they said to me? Do you, Mo? Do you know what he said to me?"

He hisses this through clenched teeth yet his hands remain calmly folded.

I shake my head, not even trying to hide my tears.

"If you can't forgive them, then forgive me. I'm sorry."

He laughs. "Forgive you? Forgive you for what? What did you do?"

"I don't know. Something. We don't talk anymore. It's like we're not related." I sniffle loudly. "I don't think you ever really forgave me for the gum incident."

His forehead wrinkles. "Gum incident? Oh - you mean . . . you're joking, right?" He sees I'm joking and laughs.

I reach my hand out to his, still folded, and he takes it.

When I was thirteen and Marcus eight, I accidentally lost the gum I was chewing in the backseat of our car. Later on that afternoon when Dad came across the melted grape flavoured gum stuck to the floor, I denied it was mine. So Marcus was the one spanked and sent to his room. He never said anything to Dad about it, even though he knew it was mine all along.

"I'm not angry at you, Mo. I know you probably think I am but I'm not. I think about you all the time. I'm just going through something right now. That's all."

I let go of my brother's hand when the waitress comes to clear away our plates.

"Hey, Marcus. Do you remember that rock out back at grandma and grandpa's?" I suddenly ask.

Marcus' forehead wrinkles in thought. "A rock?"

"Yeah. It sat at the edge of their patio. Dad would push it over and we'd watch all the bugs crawling underneath."

"I don't know. I can't remember it."

"You have to. You weren't that little. Dad told us that we looked like the bugs when God looked down on us. Come on."

"I remember the garden. We ate all those goose berries all the time. And the plums. Remember, I bit into one of those plums and saw that little white worm squirming around?"

"Yeah." I laugh. "You started screaming and Dad grabbed the plum and flicked the worm out with his nail. Remember, he said 'Don't worry about a little worm. It's the half a worm you gotta worry about'."

"Yeah. I remember that. I remember the rusty door on grandpa's shed. That horrible noise it made when we slid it open to get lawn chairs." Marcus' eyes are shining and focused on something I can't see.

"But the rock."

"I don't remember it. Huh."

I swallow the lump in my throat and remember a time when I was eighteen. I was at a house party with some friends. I left the party at about midnight to go for a stroll with a guy named John. I remember the sound of crickets and that sweet summer smell. We were holding hands and he was throwing out outrageous reasons why I should kiss him. He said I would be the one millionth girl he'd kissed and alarms would sound and balloons would fall on me if I would do it. When that didn't work, he said that he was a super hero and if my lips touched his, I'd be blessed with super powers. I was giggling and pulling away from him when I noticed we were on my grandparents' old street.

At this point, grandma had been dead for three years and grandpa was living in a senior's condo downtown.

"This is my grandparents' old street," I whispered excitedly to John.

"Whoopee."

"I gotta get to their old house. I want to check something."

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Then will you kiss me?"



I promised I would.

When we got to the old bungalow I was surprised at how different it looked. The windows had shutters and there was a dark awning over the porch. Without any hesitation I sprinted around the side of the house, opened the fence and went into the backyard. The rock was gone. So was the shed and the garden was no longer an overgrown jungle. A large terracotta pot with an oleander plant in it stood where the rock once had been.

I must have stood there looking at the oleander for a long time. John cleared his throat and then I remembered where I was.

We left the backyard and when we got back to the road I touched the back of his neck and kissed him. Then we held hands and made our way back to the party. I was crying - and he thought I was just drunk.

It is nine o'clock and we are drinking our second cup of coffee when Marcus says: "It's getting late, Mo, and I gotta work first thing tomorrow."

"Yeah. Me too."

"This was nice. I mean it."

"Yeah."

We get up to leave. On the street outside the restaurant, Marcus puts his hand on the back of my neck and pulls me to him.

"Don't be a stranger," I whisper hoarsely into his shoulder. I feel silly saying this to my brother.

"We'll do this again soon, Mo. I promise."

And then he is walking down the dark street. The street lights make his hair look navy. He stops every so often to glance in a shop window. I watch him until he turns down another block and I can no longer see him.

As I walk back to my own car, I think about the rock and its orange veins and the way it felt under my skin.

For years I had gone on believing that we shared the rock. Both Marcus and I. But I am wrong. It has always been mine. Only mine.

## VITA AUCTORIS

Tanya Kuzmanovic was born and raised in Windsor, Ontario. She graduated from the University of Windsor with a double honours degree in Communications Studies and English. Following a year of travels throughout Australia and Europe, she returned to the University of Windsor where she pursued a Master's in English and Creative Writing.