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Old News, Unverified

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JENNIFER BOWEN HICKS

OLD NEWS, UNVERIFIED

We hunted her ghost despite Mama's eye rolls. Dee and me wanted to know what remained of the long-haired dead lady who burned up in my backyard shed. Nights we called for her under the glow of a bandanna-covered flashlight. *Tell us who did this. Who can we avenge?* We watched for her from Dee's next-door apartment hoping to see her come forward as a burst of flames or a puff of sorrow. *What burned you? When the wind rattled, we'd scream. How bad did it hurt?*

Come back from the dead, Shed Lady, I promised, and I will watch you. I stuck my head out the window and yelled into the hot Texas night: "Hey! I want to write a story about you!" I would write it for Dee before she turned forty and I would write it for Shed Lady and I would write it for myself. When I was done, it would be a front-page newspaper article that Mama would clip and show off to her professors at school.

Mr. Markham, my sixth-grade teacher, said reporting starts with *facts*. Getting the scoop can be awkward, embarrassing, even painful, but a crackerjack reporter must keep showing up. So I watched. Instead of finding Shed Lady or her trailing soot, we saw Mama and her boyfriend Phil, two dark spots across the street, moving in the upstairs window. I caught them in person once when I came home—saw too well Mama's fleshy, flexible body sprawled over Phil's fleshy, inflexible body. That night I stayed in my room, not gracing them with so much as a hello, but they knew I knew, and Phil made amends by getting interested in me. Not interested like *that*, just interested like, "Hey Ruthie, how goes your shed lady?" He had an annoying Texas accent that I swear made him seem ten years stupider than he probably was. "How goes my shed lady?" I said. "How goes she?" I stared through him for a long silent minute before answering: "She's dead, Phil. *Steel day-ed.*"

Dee lived for cheap in her apartment because she cleaned the Laundromat—that's how I met her after we moved to Texas for Mama's scholarship. We were sorting laundry and saw Dee pushing wire carts under tables. Something wasn't right in her head, that was clear, but you knew she was kind because she hummed while she worked. She wore a long skirt that showed only the toes of her slippers beneath, so even with her heavy body she moved like a dancer. She watched me put wet jeans in the dryer but said

nothing. When I looked up from folding, she was smiling at me like I was an old friend from seven lives before.

That same night she knocked at our front door holding a box of mismatched socks in front of her. I peeked through the window and told Mama, "It's the Laundromat woman. She brought us a box." Mama studied for school at the kitchen table, rubbing her finger up and down her freckled nose, rocking in her chair as she read. It had been four sitcoms since she'd spoken.

"What are you waiting for?" Mama said as I stood watching through the crack in the miniblinds. Dee stared through the peephole from outside, like her olive-green eyeball could see in reverse. If I'd stood there all night, she may have kept knocking steady.

"She's only special," Mama said. "Not dangerous. Open the door and see what she wants."

I did and Dee grinned. She said, "Little friend, hello." She pushed her box toward me with a smile. "You are missing socks?"

My glasses steamed with heat when I opened the door. Dee wore a sleeveless T-shirt and no bra. She smelled like dryer sheets and body odor. "I haven't lost any socks," I said.

Dee pushed the box toward me. "Look again."

I put my hand into the box and swished a bunch of socks around. "Not mine."

Dee held the box like it was quite holy, like it held a magnificent gift and *how did I like it?* It reminded me of the time I made brownies on my own, cracking the eggs, stirring by hand, slipping the pan into the oven, then cutting them carefully after they cooled. When I brought them to the living room and offered them to Mama, she said, without looking up, "Next time ask before you turn on the oven."

I chose a red sock with a thin gold thread woven through it, then stretched it over my hand and admired it in front of Dee.

She patted me on the arm. "Quite a sock, that one." Mama and I laughed as Dee sat on the floor and showed us one after another orphaned sock, laying each one out on the table and listing its merits as if she were the only person in the world who knew its true worth.

"Suicide," Dee said after school one day. We stared out her window into my backyard and listed possible causes of the fire in the back of my binder:

Who: Shed Lady.

What: Unfairly dead. Murdered. Suicide?

Where: My own shed.

When: A couple of months ago? Before we moved in?

Why: Lonely.

“We need the How, Dee.”

“She lit the lighter, lit her light.” Dee sat on a pull-out bed that was never made or folded into a couch. She was most excited by her own theories, which I guess everyone is. “Did a match,” Dee said, “and grew the flame in her hair.”

“OK, good. Why do you think she did it?”

“Just she was sad or mad. Lost and lonely witchy woman, burned.”

“I think we’ll get on TV if we bring her back, Dee.”

I wrote:

How: Flame, singed her ownself?

Where: MY shed!!!

Why: Crazy? Lonely?

From the window I saw Phil step out of his car in the driveway and Mama come right up and wrap her arms around his scrawny waist. Dee came up from behind and did the same to me. I laughed like Phil—snuffing air in and out my nostrils—and Dee and I pretended we were a dorky old couple in love.

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At dinner that night, Phil presented me with a pair of wax lips as Mama put tacos on the table. But before he would hand them over, he pretended to wear them his own self. He fluttered his eyelashes at me, then held my lips in his mouth. He leaned forward and kissed the air. Mama laughed like it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen. “What kind of pervert wears a kid’s wax lips?” I asked, dropping my fork. That made everyone more hysterical. Dee, who I brought to dinner without asking permission, looked at Phil and the fat set of lips hugging his mustache, and she covered her own mouth and laughed. I took my notebook and wrote in it, shielding the page so no one could see:

Who: Mama, Phil (who I don’t like and Mama probably won’t like much longer anyway), Dee (who is, actually, *truly* a little retarded).

What: Laughing at something stupid that’s not even funny.

Why: Because they are morons with a bad sense of humor. Phil likes to make Mama laugh. (She does have a pretty laugh. It sounds like the color yellow.)

Where: Kitchen table, crappy rental house, Canyon, Texas, a.k.a., Armpit of the world.

Next day I showed my notes to Mr. Markham. He smiled at me and rocked back in his chair. “What are you, Ruth, a rookie? Where’s the story? *Why* is that mustachioed yo-yo making a fool of himself? *Why* does the girl get so upset?” Then he told how his neighbor Agnes once piled all her husband’s shoes and suits and socks and sweaters onto the middle of their lawn, then put up a sign: *Cheap Wares. Help yourself—he did.*

“Is that a good story?” he wanted to know.

I nodded.

“Sure it is,” he said. “Neighbors talked around dinner tables that night after folks pulled their curtains tight. But that pile could only hold people’s interest for so long. The sign tells the story. For a story to work, people need the facts, not a jumbled-together heap of debris. Delineate the particulars or you haven’t got a story.”

When Mama tucked me in, I pulled meeting notes out from under my pillow and began reviewing.

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She scanned the page, then looked at me. “That shed is just a shed, Ruth,” she said in a strained voice as she sat on the edge of my bed. “Dee has a good imagination, but she’s not grounded in reality. It is a tiny building that housed a mower and a gas can. No one lived there.”

“Then why is there a bed?” I asked. “And a picture on the wall?”

“Landlord’s storage.”

“Maybe she was searching for something when the fire started?”

“Ruth.” She turned her whole body and looked at me. “There was no fire.”

“Then why are the windows covered with soot?” I asked, raising my head from the pillow in excitement. “And why does it stink like a campfire?”

“God, you’re dramatic. It’s not soot, it’s dirt. Dirty windows on a useless shed.”

“You couldn’t walk in there without stepping on ash,” I said.

She sighed. Phil was waiting downstairs with her books and a bottle of wine.

Phil turned the music up. He was probably chewing the corner off my lips for his dessert. Mama looked like she was about to stand. “Dee told me the shed smells like burned hair.”

“How would Dee know? It’s locked.”

I started to dig more papers from under my mattress. Mama stared up at the corner in my room and shook her head. "All right, know what? You win. There *was* an accident. An old blind lady who wanted oatmeal for breakfast. Oatmeal she made only in her shed. The sleeve of her nightgown caught the flame and she passed out unconscious before she even felt the fire." She stood up. "Is that what you want to hear?" She took my hand and patted my open mouth, like I would've patted it if I were actually tired. She walked out of the room, not waiting for my answer.

"Mama!" I called after her. "Mama, will you lay with me for a little bit?" She kept walking. "Mama!"

"What?"

"Don't let Phil chew my lips, OK?"

I heard her laugh. For a second, her feet stopped moving and I thought she might come back and lay with me. We used to make nonsense poems where I picked a word and she rhymed it. We had a *fine time with rhyme*, she used to say at the end of the game. I heard her feet go down the stairs and she didn't lay with me.

I yelled louder. "Mama!"

The music got swanky below my room so I yelled again. "*Mama!*" It grew quiet and I lay there, swallowed by the air in my room. When I was little, I remember somebody used to wrap me in a towel after my bath, pulling it so tight my arms and legs fused to my body. Snug as a bug. Swaddled. I'm not sure who that somebody was. I was about to get up and ask Mama if she thought swaddled was the opposite of swallowed or the same thing. I stepped out of bed, and Phil hollered from downstairs, "Get your sleep, Ruthy Peep!"

"No. No stove," Dee said, sitting against the wall in her room the next day after school. She didn't feel comfortable with other people's ideas. "Folks were after her for want of something. Bet they watched her in her window, watched her think her thoughts to herself and nobody else. No stove was found around." She moved her hands firmly, one hand pulling on the other, like she was milking her fingers. "Woman lit the light and grew a flame. Suicide," she said, confidentially. "Murder of *self*."

"Could be her boyfriend got mad when she left, so he tried to off her."

I ran the idea past Mama that night as we washed dishes. She told me Phil would do my chores and I should relax, then she kept on telling Phil about

her professor and the nice thing he wrote on her test and Phil sucked up and Mama ate up his sucking up. She took a psychology class at the college, not to become a shrink, to become a graduate. But that made her an expert anyway. *Projection*. There was *sublimation*, *suppression*, and *disassociation*. Whatever. She loved these words and couldn't even use them without getting a proud lilt in her voice; she tried sounding bored to muffle the pride, but they were new words—not her words. I hated that sound in Mama's voice. And I hated talking about school. And I hated Phil.

"Don't you think we're on to something, Mama?" She didn't answer. As she moved back and forth from the sink to Phil, her cheeks, honest to God, looked lit up. I never felt so distant from Mama as I did when she smiled at something that was not me.

I made a megaphone with my hands and yelled right into her ear. "DO YOU THINK Shed Lady got murdered?"

"Lord, you've really regressed, Ruth," she said, rinsing a plate. She handed it to me to dry. "And you're interrupting."

"*Regressed*," I said, raising my eyebrows in approval. "That word's worth about five bucks." The water ran in the sink, and steam filled our corner of the kitchen. Phil was pacing, trying to figure out how to squeeze his furry mustache back into our spot.

"Don't patronize me." She handed me another plate.

"*Patronize*. Keep talking like that, you're going to get *rich*." Phil stepped toward me and reached for my dry plate so he could put it away. I walked past him and put the plate away myself, and he stayed there, smiling, with an outstretched hand.

It was *passive-aggressive* of me to do that.

I left the kitchen and sat on the couch with my notebook. I tried to write out the five Ws. *Who* came easy enough—that was Mama. Or me. Or us. *What* had something to do with her making me angry. *Why* turned out to be a joke. Like I know the *Why*. She's tired? Her mama before her? (And hers and hers, going back to Mary?) Phil makes her horny? I talk too much?

No way would I make it as a reporter. I got confused thinking the *why* was the *what* and the *what* was the *why*. Sorting out the particulars is supposed to make it a believable story, but somehow answering all those questions makes it seem less true. I remembered how yesterday at school Jane Hinson raised her front-row hand and explained to Mr. Markham that her Nanna

gave her the idea of writing an article about Christ dying then resurrecting all because he loved every single person. “Sorry,” Mr. Markham said. “Tell Grandma it doesn’t fit the most important criteria: One, it’s old news. Two, we can’t verify it.”

The two things I like the most, he’s saying you can’t prove: love and ghosts. Who would want to read a story without either of those things?

We had four days until Dee turned forty, four days to resurrect and interview our shed lady. “Save these beans, girl,” Dee said as she came over for the séance; she never visited empty-handed. “Kidneys are the best, but I brought you refried and a pork and beans, too. Save one for your mama, the refried, but eat the kidneys, Ruth, those are very much a bean.”

I stacked the cans on the coffee table, then got out the notepad. We sketched new scenarios for how her death took place. Gun, pills, knife. But if she killed herself, how did she also start the fire? Was the fire the weapon?

“One thing about the fire,” Dee said. “There are good husbands and bad husbands. Bad ones harm. Good ones are wives.”

“Were you married, Dee?”

“Yes,” Dee said, picking at the hem of her skirt.

“What was his name?”

“Paul Simon.”

“Like the singer?”

Dee nodded yes. Then she stood and held her hand toward me.

“Dance, girl?”

I laughed, but when I looked up, she was waiting for my answer like she meant it.

“Oh,” I said, taking her hand. I’d only ever danced with my grandpa once, and he’d moved me where I needed to go. I did a little curtsy. “It would be my pleasure.”

Dee started us in a slow dance across my living room—one two three, one two three, one two three. I laughed at first, but then it felt nice being held tight. For some reason I cried. Dee’s skirt flowed and her socks flashed beneath. I saw the mate for my red one on her right foot. I stared at her feet so she wouldn’t see my eyes. Dee sang, “*When you’re weary, feelin’ small...*” One two three, one two three. She really knew about dancing, floating. She put her head on my shoulder and I moved in tighter. I could smell it was time for her shower. *Sail on silver girl, sail on by. Your time has come to shine...*

“Quite a night at my wedding, Ruth. I went flying, you know. Up around flying. Take the air, Ruthie, under me, and fly on top of it. I fly like a bird. A shiny, large blackbird. Best night, tonight,” she said, whirling me around the living room harder, like there was suddenly a big hurry about it.

When she stopped, I tried to step out of her hold, but she pulled me closer. Her arms that I’d always thought fat when she was washing down tables in the Laundromat felt soft and sticky and surprisingly strong as she swung me around and around.

Mother taught me “penultimate.” We celebrated Dee’s *penultimate* day as a thirty-nine-year-old by beckoning Shed Lady, by throwing her a Come Back Party with an unopened box of fabric softener. Dee handed it over when I answered my door.

“Do you think she’ll fly out? For these?”

Dee nodded.

“Because if she’s torched, you get to be the one to hose her down.”

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“Don’t wet the woman. Dry. Dry is how she wants to die around, flying around. Sad old lonely woman burned for flames’ friends.” Dee was adamant and becoming angry. She rubbed her cheeks in circles. I’d never seen that before.

“Fine, we don’t have to wet her.” I raised my voice and looked to see if Mama was watching us. She wasn’t. “I doubt she’ll come anyway.”

Dee clutched my hand and pulled me outside toward the shed. I had the fabric softener under my arm, ready to lay it at Shed Lady’s doorstep.

“Do you really think she’ll want this?” I asked, gesturing to the fabric softener. Dee looked as alive as I’d seen her, tiptoeing through the grass, her long skirt trailing the ground.

“Little house stinks of smoke. It could eat this smell up, nice and hungry soot, and odor the air less black,” she said, as if we were discussing rearranging furniture in her apartment.

“You go first,” I said to Dee.

“Together, we circle,” she said. “Take some smelly sheets—circle the ground around and around.”

We placed sheets of fabric softener on the lawn. Forming a ring around the shed, I tried to finish quickly in case something appeared. Dee seemed convinced Shed Lady would actually want our flimsy offering. And if she did? Would I interview her? *Who did this to you? How bad did it hurt?* Could I brave

a dead lady's charred face? To witness and report every detail—the smell of burned hair and the heat? A crackerjack reporter must keep showing up. Would Mama stay home in her pajamas the day my article came out, cross-legged holding my hands, hanging on my every word as I told the same story over and over: and then, Mama, and then, and then and then?

Dee laid softener sheets end to end carefully, gently. The wind blew, and as it lifted one sheet off the ground, she would go to it, pick it up, and place it back in its spot, oblivious to the clanking gate or the rustle of the nearby bush.

"Are you scared?" I asked. I swear I heard the wind whispering warnings: *You. Go away.* It grew louder still, and it seemed Dee hadn't heard me speak. "Dee, this is only for practice, OK?" She wasn't looking at me, and her body was still working deliberately as if it were a machine absent its operator. "Dee, you scared?"

"No," she said without looking my way.

"I might leave," I said. I had finished placing softener sheets on the ground, and my imperfect circle was already missing links because of the wind. Dee kept working, slowly and happily; she was half-done.

"Stay," Dee said, grabbing my wrist without looking up. She was holding on so hard I could feel her nails pressing into my arm.

"Visit the shed lady," she said.

The clouds were sliding across the sky. As I strained to move away from Dee and the shed, a weed blew past. "*Dance,*" I heard.

"It's too windy, Dee," I shouted. "I'm going in." She didn't look up from her circle. I shouted again. "Dee, I'm going inside." Then I pulled my wrist from her grasp. There were little red half-moons on my arm where her fingernails had been.

She placed another white sheet on the ground, then another. Each flew up the second it left her hand, but she continued.

I went inside the house and locked myself in the bathroom. My stomach turned and I wanted to get away, whether from Dee or Shed Lady, I wasn't sure. I stood behind the window and watched outside. Fabric sheets flew in the air. Dee twirled around and around, her upturned arms reaching for the sheets in the sky. She smiled and spun, and maybe, I thought, in her own mind, flew.

"That woman," I heard Mama say from the other room. Mama was talking to Phil. "No other friends," she said with a tired voice, and "How was I

to know?" Phil's heavy feet moved toward the back door before it slammed shut. I could hear his voice in the backyard talking to Dee, saying, "Go on now. Get home!" It sounded as if he were scolding a dog.

The bathroom steamed with radiator and the musky smell of Mama's perfume from just outside the door. I heard feet as I leaned against the cool toilet. From behind the door I heard her whisper to Phil. For a minute or two, voices sounded tense, like a fight.

"She's left, Ruth," Mama said. Their heated talk turned to giggles, and soon their feet disappeared.

The next morning was Monday. A school day. The house was empty—Mama was at work. There was a note on the table.

Ruth,

Phil is coming over to watch you after school. You're not to leave the house or answer the door.

Love You.

PS: It's my late night. Be sure you get your homework done before going to bed.

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Phil came over the entire week, skipping his nap before starting his night shift at the cookie factory. He breathed through his mouth when he ate bananas. He scarfed cereal like it was a nervous habit and used up all the milk in two days. He picked his teeth with a toothpick about ten thousand times per minute. He watched *The Facts of Life* and *Family Ties* with me and patted me on the knee when I laughed—annoying, but whatever. He let me eat butter and sugar sandwiches if I didn't tell Mama. He refused to let me go outside.

There was a strong knock at the door the first day, Dee's birthday, and neither of us got up to answer. I looked at Phil from the corner of my eye and saw a cornflake dangling from his mustache. He patted my leg a few times and cranked the volume on the TV while the knocking continued at the door. When the pounding stopped, he leaned down and tapped the side of his head softly against mine.

I wondered what Dee made of the wind that raised those softener sheets off the lawn. If she thought it was Shed Lady. After I felt sure she'd left the door, I went up to my room and heard her pacing below my window, maybe twenty times a second. I lay down with a book, keeping my head low so she wouldn't see me. I heard her feet on the sidewalk, scraping along, complaining without words.

Phil tried to read my book—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—so we could talk about it. He asked me questions and he laughed in places, but by Thursday he was falling asleep after about six words. I watched the book fall from his hands as he fell deep into sleep. Then he startled himself awake and pretended to enjoy it. I wrote a story for Mr. Markham about how hard it is to stay awake when you're a worker on the night shift. The *Why*, Phil told me himself: *A body just gets tuckered out.*

He sat with me like that for three weeks. Dee was officially forty. I never raised a dead woman from ashes in her honor. So much for my front-page story. In that short time, I'd already forgotten the particulars of Dee's face. When I closed my eyes I could only conjure a cross between Pippi Longstocking and Shed Lady—a smiling burned skull with red braids and bright green eyes.

The knocking happened again on a cloudy Saturday, right after Mama and Phil ran for pizza. They'd left holding hands and said *ten minutes, just around the corner, and don't open the door.* No doubt, my house arrest crimped their smooch time. The knocks weren't forceful, just steady and polite. For a long time, I did not so much as peek. Then the knocking quieted and I imagined Pippi Longstocking's black skull sulking from my door. I lifted the mini-blinds, just barely, to remind myself what Dee looked like. She was standing at the window as if she knew I'd be looking through. "Ruthie! Surprise!" she said. It was Dee looking strange now in familiar clothes. Not dead, not wrinkled or burnt. Same Dee but different. Her green eyes were jumping like wild; she looked so glad to see me. When you see someone that happy seeing you, it's very hard not to feel happy seeing them back.

"Dee," I said, not able to keep from smiling. I remembered being whirled in her strong sticky arms. I opened the door and felt shy. "You had your birthday, didn't you?" I asked.

"Here's a gift," Dee said. Her whole stinking face smiled, but there was nothing in her hands.

"I'll come outside," I said, shutting the door behind me.

"Yes, give my giving in the outside by our shed."

We went around to the back porch and I looked again at her hands. I saw no beans, no socks, no fabric softener. Dee was moving her feet back and forth like she had to pee, then she reached deep into her skirt from the waist and pulled out a small box that appeared to have been tucked in her under-

wear. It was blacked out with marker, save one small square that showed the word CAMEL. Dee sat beside me on the porch.

Without looking my way, she took the black box and placed it quietly beside me. "Ruthie smokes. Fire cigarettes breathing deep inside you."

I looked at my lap and said nothing.

"Ruth take one for the mouth? For Dee, breathe a fire?"

"I can't, Dee," I said. "Mama would kill me."

"Mamas breathe deep inside too." She pushed her pack of Camels next to me on the step. Her nails were short-bitten and covered in a chipped black fingernail polish that I felt homesick for and angry about at the same time.

"I can't." I said. Then I slid the cigarettes back, beside Dee's leg.

"*Together*, burn a smoke. One time breathe deep and burn. You'd like one taste for the mouth," Dee said. She picked up the cigarettes and packed them against her palm. She looked at me in this adoring way that for some reason made me want to puke. When I shook my head, she set the pack on my thigh. She was sliding her feet back and forth on the step.

"I don't want one," I said. I set them back on the porch.

12 Dee picked them up and put them, *again*, in my lap. "Dee is good."

She looked at me with this awful love. Her same old affection felt new and embarrassing to me like some naked body. The *what* and the *why* of me—I promise—does not add up to a love story; that Dee thought it did made me not trust her. On top of it, the stale skin stink of her body didn't smell like just Dee anymore, it smelled like neglect. Yes, she was just like Mama said—crazy-off.

I stood up and told her, "Sorry, you are not allowed here."

She stared at me with no expression, put the pack of cigarettes back into her skirt, tucking them, I guess, into her underwear.

"Mama said so."

"Ruth says," Dee whispered as she got up and walked out of the yard. I watched her leave, closing the gate carefully as she left.

"*Absolutely starved!*" Mama said, laughing between bites of pizza as if her hunger were somehow funny. I saw a ring on her left hand that hadn't been there before they'd left for pizza. It was a delicate gold band with two tiny diamond chips snuggled inside. Mama and Phil kept looking at me, then at each other and grinning. I pretended not to see the ring and ignored them completely. I was about to leave the table when I heard crashing sounds coming from

outside. Dee stood in the backyard poking the shed windows with the long end of our rake. Calm with each jab, she didn't flinch as the glass broke.

When I walked toward the door, Phil wiped his mustache with a paper napkin. "Oh girl," he said, standing up so firmly his cheeks wiggled. I stepped outside the door and stood on the back porch. Mama went to the phone. Phil turned to say something to Mama, who was holding pizza in one hand, the phone in the other. Dee broke another shed window with the rake, calm and steady. I imagined her handcuffed and shoved into a police car, and I felt my tongue turn bitter. Mama watched on tiptoes, never stretching the cord to stand near the open back door. The shed window broke, and glass fell softly across dead grass. Dee chucked loose shards toward the house. She had horrible aim. I remembered how much she loved seeing me answer the door an hour ago. Then I remembered the smell of her unwashed hair when we danced, the look of love on her face when she tried to give me another gift, her love, which I suspected couldn't be worth much if she gave it so eagerly.

I wanted to yell at her like Phil had. "Go!" I wanted to say—strange lady who wore my other red sock and talked of witchy women and made me feel nakedly adored—"GET!" I wanted to holler till my throat burned. I knew how sad that would make Dee and I did not care.

Mama stood inside, but Phil walked toward me, his forehead creased in worry. I looked to Mama. She stood with the phone to her ear, chewing her last bite of pizza. She said: "Corner of Forty-Sixth and Hamline," glancing at her new ring as she spoke.

A piece of tumbleweed stuck to Dee's skirt as she lifted her leg to climb inside. I heard a whoosh and saw a flame and I knew Dee was giving me my shed lady. I looked at Mama and she was not looking at me. I took off toward the shed as if my existence depended on it, and I was not frightened; I was simmering. Giggling. I giggled from deep in my stomach like I had as a child crouched under the rack of long coats at J.C. Penney when Mama touched every pretty thing in that store until the second I disappeared. The way she called for me in a voice so scared, so bordering on breaking, I would've stayed hidden forever to hear it again and again. Silent giggles running over. *Ruthie? Mama's worried. Ruthie! Mama needs to see your face. Right now!*

Smoke seeped out the shed window and fire tips reached for the fence. The crackling grew. Somewhere underneath those sounds I heard Phil's voice. For a single second I imagined reporting this story, but the *where* and the *why* and

the *who* and the *what* all mixed together in a pile of debris as I knew they shouldn't but must: scars, fire, scars, fire, scars.

Some real reporter would show up, as it turns out, and fail to note, as I would've, the way Dee struggled to get through the window just before she lit the flame. Instead the reporter would go on and on about the time of day and my age and Dee's low IQ and my burned arms and poor Phil—his face. She'd never write: *Verbs are a fair test of love: run, listen, see; light, cry, almost die.* Instead she'd write: *All were rushed to County General by ambulance.* But don't you think a true crackerjack reporter should also have noticed Mama's unsure eyes and asked *Why didn't that woman chase after her daughter?* It's hardly five Ws, but it's the story I want to read. Especially if it could explain Mama shaking her head while she stood stupid still, while a black cloud of smoke swelled up and out, filling our yard and the sky above—smoke that, even as I climbed inside, kept pouring out, not beautiful and mysterious like a ghost story, but hungry and angry like a real, live fire.