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# The Tasmanian Devil
## a novella in stories

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in

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of

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ABSTRACT

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This collection of short, linked fiction develops themes such as race, memory, betrayal, and solitude, explored through the lens of how the young protagonist Rika Noordzij navigates her troubled environment. Somewhat hybrid in terms of genre, these pieces work as self-contained narratives, while also forming a fragmented whole (novella), through the strong thematic, metaphoric and stylistic links, as well as the unifying force of the main protagonist Rika Noordzij. The central challenge of this project has been to hone a narrative technique which aligns the reader closely with the child protagonist. Rika's observations are a primary tool, especially those of the adult interactions around her; though she may not fully comprehend this larger world, her perceptions of its mysterious violence establishes layers of meaning and suggestion. Throughout the collection, my primary interest has been in the use of language and imagery to establish the perspective of Rika Noordzij.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kathleen Moore for the use of her poem at the end of "Three Bald Women Snorkelling in the North Sea".

# Contents

# walking and falling

We are hurrying along the pavement. Either we have just seen this movie, or it has been promised to me and it hangs, memory or anticipation, in the glassy platinum air. Something about a lot of spotted dogs and a nasty woman I like the look of, with a storm of hair and long red nails. I don't say anything out loud because we are hurrying and I can see how the words would just get lost, trailing our clattering footsteps uselessly. I squint at the sidewalk to make stray shards of glass and mica chips in the stone gleam brighter, shining specks blurring to fill up my whole sight.

My legs are tired and we are approaching a row of houses I don't like. I'm not sure I've been here before, maybe with my father, but I know there is something I definitely dislike about this row of buildings. I tug on the hand grasping mine firmly but I am ignored except for a distracted shake of the head. "*We really don't have time.*" The houses squat sullenly in this milky spring light, staring blindly from dusty windows. They are not all run down, but nevertheless all possess the same sour, defeated air. I know that inside they will smell of old men and cat pee, that there will be a lot of anemic plant cuttings in jars filled with cloudy water and decaying roots. The linoleum in the kitchen and bathroom will be yellowish green and brown, cracked and sticky. Somebody will sit on a hard, stained sofa on the other side of a murky room and stare at me without speaking. I will crouch in the corner, far from the TV muttering to itself beneath its layer of dissolved time, squat frame perched on four tapering legs. I will look at my hands on my brown scabby knees or stare out the ashen windows.

I cannot talk about it because I don't have the words, and anyway we are hurrying and I will not be heard. It all careens past, dizzy treasures like something glimpsed by a girl falling headlong through a tunnel, all the way to the other side of the world. I don't know what to do—trying to keep up, ahead of myself and falling behind.

She loves them. Can't remember who gave them to her, she thinks maybe it was a neighbour. She even likes the name: *flip-flops*. These are bright coral, with a large pink and yellow plastic flower on top of each foot, where the straps cross. Very elegant. The part underneath her feet is white and she can just glimpse bits of it when she wiggles her toes. She has been wearing them constantly for days now (how long has it been? she can't tell, she can't keep all the days apart to count them) and when she can be persuaded to take them off for a few minutes, to clean her feet properly, there is a pale footprint in each sandal. She watches her swinging, dusty feet admiringly.

*one two buckle my shoe*

*three four shut the door*

*five six pick up sticks*

*seven eight lay them straight*

*nine ten—*

They have been driving forever and when she looks up from her wonderful feet, she sees that they are nearly at the top of the mountain now, driving along a narrow, twisting road with a sheer drop to the turquoise glare of the sea hundreds of feet below. They slow, briefly, to let a couple of knobby goats cross the road. The animals start nibbling on some olive-coloured shrubs, turning their triangular little heads and slanty eyes when the car starts up again.

One of the women in front asks the girl if she is thirsty. She does not give any sign that she has heard and continues to watch the glittering water. The waves burn and

clatter under the strong sun, so that it is difficult to stare down for too long. She closes her eyes briefly and watches the red-black flowers explode against her eyelids. When she was hiding in the bougainvillea this morning, she heard one of them say that anyway she wasn't like a proper child, too quiet, always looking at you and you could never tell what she was thinking. Her aunt sighs now and asks the little boy if he'd like some juice, tells him to offer some to his cousin as well. She feels him slide the bottle of pineapple juice towards her, across the warm, cracked vinyl of the back seat. Without looking, she reaches for the bottle and takes a sip, returns it. She likes him actually. He doesn't try to get her to speak, and they play silent, intense games involving hieroglyphic messages left for each other on scraps of paper and hours of hiding in dark, cramped spaces. She likes his skin which looks like chocolate, though it only tasted of seawater and dust when she licked his shoulder.

When the older girl who lived upstairs pointed out once that she and her mother were different colours, they nearly got into a fight. She finally brought the neighbour over triumphantly to show how the skin on the inside of her arm (where it wasn't dark from the sun) was the same colour as her mother's. They'd spent the rest of the afternoon being singing stars, jumping on the bed with towels on their heads and hairbrush microphones. She took the yellow towel for long blond hair and made the other girl wear the faded green.

Snowy streets, her red boots, the scratched yellow kitchen table, the orange and brown living room carpet. Chocolate milk and the tattered scrap of flannel from her baby blanket she keeps under her pillow. She realizes she doesn't know the name of the place where her mother is now. Still staring fixedly out the window, she pinches the little boy

hard. She does not react to his surprised yelp, frowns sternly and whispers the word *snow*. The name of the place where she lives is lost. She does not answer when he asks her what snow is.

She thinks perhaps this is her fault, being here, because when her father came to pick her up at nursery school one afternoon, she panicked and went with him, though she was sure this wasn't meant to happen. Trotting to keep up with her father's rapid, scissor stride, she clutched the bag with her precious sandals—it was lucky she'd brought them to show the teacher that morning. When they got to the airport, he phoned her mother, muttering quietly into the receiver, ignoring her insistent tugs on his pant leg. She sobbed finally that she wanted to talk to mommy too, to tell her to come get her, but her father did not seem to hear, and hung up quickly. Before they got on the plane he bought her some french fries which she carefully did not eat. She decorated them with small strips of ketchup from foil packets until her father took the plate away. They sat next to a glass wall until it was time to leave, and on the other side planes were sucked up and away into the blue.

She hasn't spoken to anyone since, except for a few whispered words to her cousin. She pinches him again, still staring out the window. The aunts are talking about her in the front seat, as if she couldn't understand. Well actually, sometimes she can't, because they switch back and forth to a kind of singing language whose slithery rhythms remind her of the noisy sea. The softer one with plump hands like grapes sighs again and says he should really bring her back to her mother, it's not right. The pointy one with skin like ashes dropped in coffee says something about *white people*, and *unnatural* and *not family*, spitting out the words like little stones so that they prickle in the girl's eyes, blown grit.

Nobody has seen her father in days. The aunts' voices grow fine edges around his name, the softer one using words like *disgrace* which she pronounces richly and rolling like the name of a poisonous fruit, while the pointy one reprimands—he was always the naughty boy, this place had always been too small for him and what harm was there in going to the casino on the next island. Eventually, they lapse into tight silence.

The girl swings her feet more quickly and feels her heart galloping along: flip-flop, flip-flop. It leaps and shivers in her chest. The boy has fallen asleep in a tangle of spidery arms and legs, curled up in the other corner. Her legs stick to the seat as she tries to move closer to the window. The hot wind billows and rushes against her face like a large hand covering her nose and mouth, so that she has to turn her head slightly to get enough air. It smells like dust and all the prickly dense green things that twist out of the sandy dirt here. Her cousin showed her how they had a secret inside—you could tear them open and they'd be full of clear slimy juice that soothed your skin if you had a scratch or a burn. She wanted to know what happened if you drank it, but her throat felt creaky from all the words stopped up.

She watches the shiny black road being swallowed up by the car, which spits it out again behind them. She thinks of a story someone read to her a long time ago, about a small girl and her brother who lose their parents somewhere in the snow and they have to look for them in the woods and they leave a trail of bread crumbs so they can find their way back to the candy house. There were pictures too, and a witch, but now it has all become tangled up with other stories and she just remembers the trail of crumbs clearly.

Flip-flop, flip-flop, goes her galloping heart, clattering across red fields on its little rubber hooves. She reaches down and pulls off one of her sandals. She holds it in her hand for a moment, then throws it out the window. She turns to watch it land on the hot tar behind them, rapidly shrinking as they fly on. Quite soon it disappears behind a curve in the road.

Snow. Fine cold granules sting her eyes like white pepper. The girl squeezes them nearly shut and peddles the trike faster. The world through her wet lashes is swirling diamond chips, white on white. She shuts her eyes completely and pictures the courtyard, steering carefully to avoid broken glass under a neighbour's gaping window that overlooks the enclosed space.

Covering the hole, until the landlord comes, is a large square of cardboard. It might take *weeks*, the old lady who lived there confided. This was when she grabbed the little girl by the arm in the dim hallway once, peering at her and breathing thick, soupy breath into her face. The long hairs at the corner of her mouth trembled and the eyes were surprisingly bright in their skin pouches, like sucked stones held in the palm of your hand. "Weeks," the old woman repeated, finally released the wriggling child. "Do you want some mints," she called after the girl, already running down the hall. A warm spot the size of a penny glowed between the girl's shoulderblades until she turned the corner, away from the woman's eyes.

She wriggles her shoulders at the memory and the trike veers left and right; she has to open her eyes and steer carefully to get back on track. Her breath escapes in a cottony trail and she imagines it hanging behind her, tracing her path like the hazy scrawl of an airplane panting through high blue.

Mostly you can't even see them, the airplanes, only their trails. If she were invisible, if she were invisible too. It would be so much easier to avoid the old lady—the long minutes stretching like strings of tired gum, a silent spy crouched on the steps, listening for the distinctive wheezing. This means the old woman is standing just behind her door facing the first floor stairs, waiting for someone to go by so she could whip open her door, grab you with her rickety fingers. The shock, how strong they are, the fingers. Twigs, bumpy with veins. If she caught you, you had to listen while she told you about all her stomach problems, her moldy teeth, her legs. "She's just lonely. Be nice," says her mother. Her mother always up the worn marble steps so quickly, not clattering her heels, so by the time the old woman gets the door open, her mother is out of reach, halfway down the corridor. "Hello How are you today Can't stop to chat Bye," she calls.

Slowing to take the corner, the girl turns the handlebars slightly to the left, makes a wide U and continues back down the other side of the courtyard. She peers through her lashes briefly—whirling, blurred white—then screws her eyes shut again.

A long, concrete rectangle, a grey gap between two buildings, with three walls of dusty apartment windows overlooking the enclosure. A splintered wooden door, child-sized, only leads, disappointingly, to the laneway. Weeds and gravel, and sometimes the other kids from the buildings who play there. She doesn't ride her trike out back anymore. Once a car turned into the lane though it wasn't supposed to and the driver honking his horn, yelling at her and she fell off her tricycle and bit her tongue. The surprise of so much blood in a tongue. It was warm and salty, filling her mouth as she climbed the stairs, overflowing till the key on the string around her neck was slick and sticky red. It slipped as

she tried to turn it in the lock. When she managed to let herself back into the apartment, she went to the kitchen for a chair and dragged it to the bathroom. She pulled it up to the sink, knelt, leaning against the cold porcelain, and tried to clean the blood out of her t-shirt. Swirls of red and pink, a candy cane dissolving down the drain.

Blood on the doorknobs, though, she forgot about. When her mother got home from work that night, they sat on the couch together and discussed what happened. It wasn't a good idea to ride in the lane anymore. Her mother pulled the girl into her lap then. Curled up small and sideways in her mother's arms, imagining herself a tight pink shrimp. "Tell me about when I was a baby," murmured into warm green sweater, the sleepy mix of wool and skin and her mother's spicy perfume. Rocking slowly, her mother repeated the story about the time she had managed to pull herself out of her highchair when no one was looking, onto the kitchen counter, and from there, the top of their fridge. Giggling, the girl nuzzled her face into her mother's soft breasts, then sprang squealing out of her arms as her mother began to tickle her. Abruptly standing as well, her mother headed for the kitchen, not looking at the girl who now stood scowling in the center of the navy shag rug: "Mummy just needs a little break now. Why don't you watch TV for a while..."

It was later and she lay in bed and listened to everything folding itself down and in for the night—her mother turning off the news and the lights going out one by one until the hallway beyond her door was completely dark. The floorboards creaked as someone came unsteadily down the hall, then paused by her door. The girl pretended to be asleep when her mother came in and stood by her bed. Scotch fumes wafted thick and sour over her face, so she turned her head away when her mother bent to kiss her, pulled the covers up under her chin. Her mother swayed, trying to straighten up, then fell heavily onto the

bed with a soft groan, pinning the girl beneath her. Kept her eyes tightly closed and did not move as her mother finally managed to get herself upright again. Her cut tongue still throbbed, especially when she swallowed and it pressed against the roof of her mouth.

"I know you're awake honey, " her mother whispered. "Talk to me." She listened to the words buzz against her mother's teeth, a mouth full of sleepy bees. The girl said nothing, breathed deeply and evenly, imagining herself far away at the bottom of the sea, suspended in warm blue. Gold and silver fish nibbled the ends of her hair.

"Forgive me..."

Her mother stopped talking after a while, and just stood there, watching the little girl's smooth face in the wavering light of the aquarium. "Ok," she said finally, "sweet dreams, kiddo." She left, carefully pulling the door closed.

With a jolt , the trike stops suddenly and the girl opens her eyes. She has forgotten to steer around the fire escape on this side. Not getting off, she stands up, pulls the trike over to the left, then sits down and continues pedalling. Shuts her eyes again and turns before hitting the back wall. Feeling herself veering slightly to one side, she opens her eyes briefly to re-set her course in a straight line. It is completely dark now. The only light in the courtyard spills from the bright gap between her own living room drapes. Sometimes she thinks no one else lives in this building; it's just her and her mother and the old lady from downstairs, who goes into the other apartments through a secret passageway and turns lights on and off and plays the radio for noise. "Nobodynobodynobody," she chants in time to her flashing feet. A fine layer of snow gleams on the rough concrete, moon dust criss-crossed by wet black tire tracks.

Cold nibbles at her bare arms, pushes through the worn flannel of her nightie. Stops cycling again to pull her sleeves down, covering the cuffs of her red mitts. A boot is loose as well, so she tugs awkwardly at the rubber strip that runs through the buckle on the side. She is supposed to be in the bath now. She ran the water for a while, watching the foam spread in frothy mounds. Shut if off and pulled on the nightie folded on the toilet seat, shut the bathroom door behind her. Boots and mitts in the hall. She leaves the scarf trailing from the hook, a blind wool snake.

Her mother was crying on the phone in the living room, "no. . . you can't do that . . . I'll have the police after you. . . I'm not afraid." Not noticing as the small figure slipped past into the kitchen. And only the sound then of her mother's ragged breathing, the faint clink of ice as she took a sip of her drink. The latch on the back door was a little stiff and the girl jiggled it patiently until it gave. Paused to tug on boots and gloves, before going out onto the fire escape and pulling the door closed. Her Big Wheels trike waited at the bottom of the metal stairs, bright yellow plastic seat and low slung red frame muted in the dingy winter dusk.

1. . .2. . .3. . .4. . . 5 times now around the courtyard with her eyes closed, not bumping into anything. This is lucky. She is five years and three quarters old. The hard plastic tires scrape and rattle over the gritty debris that litters the courtyard: fragments of glass, pebbles, broken pottery, torn cardboard and chewed-looking metal scraps.

It stayed clean for a while, over the summer, when the new family moved in upstairs. Every morning the mother would come down wearing a mauve flowered scarf over her long black hair and an apron, carrying a broom and dustpan, like a picture of a

mother in a book. She would smile and wave at someone who apparently watched her from a window above the girl's apartment, then start cleaning the courtyard. In the first week she filled two garbage bags, which she threw out into the lane through the small wooden door. Satisfied, she stood with her hands on her hips and looked around. She noticed the girl watching her and waved, smiling and nodding. The girl slipped down from the back of the couch where she had been watching this woman work all week. There had been a fire at the daycare last week so it was closed, and the babysitter was sick, so the girl had been home by herself. She drew for hours, or looked out the windows at the weather and her mother phoned a lot and always at lunchtime to remind her to take her sandwich out of the fridge because once she had forgotten to eat.

Tugging open the door with the glass in it, she pressed her mouth to the dusty screen. "Why did you clean it," she called down.

Wiping her hands on her apron, the woman picked up her broom, and climbed the stairs until she was eye-level with the girl. "Very dangerous," she said seriously, "small kids get hurt. Now is clean. You coming play with David." She smiled then, came up the rest of the stairs to the landing and held out her hand to the girl. Their footsteps echoed loudly on the rusting fire escape as they climbed the two flights to the top floor. The girl wondered who David was. One of their neighbours had a massive, striped cat named Rachel, who waddled around the building like a bad-tempered raccoon. It often wheezed outside their door, scratching to get in, and sometimes left small, powerful-smelling puddles in the hallway.

David wasn't a cat. The small boy was waiting for them at the back door, sucking the first two fingers of his right hand. A bright green crust encircled both his nostrils. Stopping abruptly at the threshold to their kitchen, the girl glanced back at the woman on

the fire escape landing. "Your house smells funny," she said softly, not wanting to go in. "Is very good, lunch. Come eat, you like," the woman reassured her, pushing gently until the girl stood on the beige linoleum floor. The boy had retreated and was now sitting expectantly at the formica table, tapping a pair of sticks on a faded Mickey Mouse plate. The woman moved rapidly, washing her hands, dishing out food from various pots on the stove, setting an assortment of small bowls and dishes on the table. Pulling a chair out to sit, she said something to the little girl who just stared at her blankly. The woman repeated herself then laughed, "Of course, you not speaking Chinese! Come, sit, eat." The food didn't taste like anything she knew, except the soup which was like ravioli without the tomato sauce. The girl ate steadily with the small spoon by her plate, glancing at the woman for approval as she made her way through two helpings.

6. . .7. . . 8. . .9. . .10. The girl cycles so quickly she almost cannot feel her legs. Not even trying to remember where the corners are, turning by instinct.

Their living room window must be open slightly, because she can hear her mother distinctly. "I'm hanging up now. . .No, you can't, she's in the bath. . .That's not true! She's not a baby, you know. . . She knows what's going on. . . Oh really? Fine! Ask her yourself, then—" The courtyard catches and magnifies sound, bouncing it off the damp brick and cement. It is mostly silent, but the girl sometimes hears conversations, TV jingles, arguments and vacuum cleaners from the open windows overlooking the yard.

She always knew when Mrs. Li received mail, because the courtyard would echo with jangly music, high women's voices and strange instruments that sounded like a mixture of guitars and harps. "Chinese opera," Mrs. Li told her once, "sad stories. This one about girl, she lost ancestor's ring, must find and..." The girl studied the woman's slippers. Dark red fabric, soft like the brush they used to clean the opera records, with gold

monsters sewn on top in shiny thread. Dragons, Mrs. Li had told her. But they weren't even green. The girl never pointed out the mistake—Mrs. Li often used the wrong word for things. She listened to the jangly music and imagined herself wearing these slippers, climbing through the snowy mountains, finding the tiny circle of gold. The bright O glinting in the palm of her hand, Oh Oh Oh—

When they finished lunch that first day, Mrs. Li had gone downstairs to check the mail, leaving the girl alone with David. Clambering onto the scratchy tweed couch in the living room, he settled back against the cushions and sucked his fingers placidly, watching her. The girl hadn't paid much attention to the boy until then. She stood facing him and stared back. His mild, black eyes and the shiny soft hair that stood up in tufts like wet bird feathers made something twist in her chest, an excited ache that made her finally grab his face and kiss his cheeks, hard. She would often be overcome by this feeling as they played together, and he never moved, waiting until she was finished. Mrs. Li didn't understand. Every time the girl rang their doorbell she would open and exclaim "ah, David's little girlfriend!"

Sometimes, when his mother wasn't looking, she would pinch him, or grab his hand and squeeze the fingers together as tightly as she could. He never protested, only looked at her with his inky eyes, frowning slightly until she stopped. Then something like a fever filling her head, she would cover his floury cheeks with a torrent of kisses until she felt calm again. Sometimes she even imagined herself like the old lady on the first floor, wheezing and hiding behind doors until David would walk by, then jumping out and grabbing him, digging her fingers into the soft arms.

Her mother's voice, first distantly, drowned by the noisy tires, then stronger,

calling her name. "Where are you honey? Rika? There's someone on the phone for you..." The back door shudders open above her head. Feels her mother standing there, watching. Footsteps descend the metal staircase and a hand brushes her shoulder as she rattles by without stopping. Eyes screwed shut, she turns the corner roughly, scraping a booted ankle on the wall. Her mother's tentative voice floats through the chill air. "Honey? What are you doing out here? It's so cold. . . your daddy's on the phone, you know. He's been waiting and waiting to talk to you. Honey? You really shouldn't be out here like this—you'll catch cold—" The girl brakes abruptly at the far end of the courtyard, not facing her mother. "I'm *busy*," she says. "Take a message."

Gripping the handle bars tightly, she starts pedalling again. Ignores the sharp teeth that gnaw away at the warm inside of her stomach.

"Well. . . come in soon, then—" Her mother falters. "It's past your bedtime," she tries as the child careens by once more. It isn't even nearly her bedtime. They just had dinner, canned soup the girl heated up and toast. Why couldn't her mother even tell the time. "It's far too cold to be. . . at least let me get your coat. . . " The girl shakes her head violently and after another moment, her mother sighs and climbs the stairs to their back door. "Five more minutes, Rika," she calls down softly, "then you really have to come in." The door scrapes shut.

The girl had just spoken to her father the week before. He was in california, he explained, and it was beautiful and sunny. He would come back to pick her up and they would live together there in a house with stairs inside and orange trees all around. The girl

said nothing, twisting the curly phone cord around her fingers. Her mother took a sip of amber liquid, ice tinkling, then put the glass down to blow her nose. Strands of wavy ginger hair had escaped from her long braid, clung to her flushed, damp face. Closing her eyes, the girl saw her father in his yellow bathing suit, standing knee high in light blue water, waving, just like the photo he had sent. Enormous teeth, dangerously white against black skin. His voice came from the bottom of the sea. "Did you hear me, boefje? Orange trees! Vind je dat niet leuk? You can climb them and pick your breakfast!" Shaking her head rapidly, the girl dropped the receiver on the floor, went back to her room.

She stood in front of the aquarium and watched the shimmering striped fish flit through bright water. Thin candy shards, breathing bubbles. She tapped gently on the glass until one of the fish swam over to kiss the tip of her finger, tiny "o"s pressed against the side of the tank. Her mother's voice came faintly through the door ". . .you see! I told you. . . she's scared of you now. . . you can't just come and go like that. . . well who do you think has been working two jobs to support her. . . she knows who really loves her—"

The snow dwindles, stops altogether. Aching legs and it really is very cold. Just seven more times around for extra luck, then she will go inside to have her bath. Probably her mother will have fallen asleep on the couch again, and she will have to drag the heavy blankets from the bed and the alarm clock. Tuck her mother in and pull out the little knob for the alarm so she'd get up for work on time. Sometimes she curls up at the other end of the couch and they sleep like that, head to foot, Siamese. When she can't sleep, she watches the clock hands moving the time forward: 10, 11, 12, (and not 13, but) 1, 2, 3. Listens to its little teeth biting off the minutes until morning, tick, tick, tick.

How long have they been gone now? Before she descended the fire escape to her trike, she'd climbed the two flights up to David's apartment, to check again. The empty kitchen still looked back at her blankly. Empty for a long time already, since before all the leaves had fallen, since before the snow. Pressing her face against the cold glass, she peered into the shadows, trying to see if anything had changed since the last time she'd checked, if there was a letter for her on the floor, maybe. It would be on thin paper, with complicated stamps, from Mrs.Li's sister. David once showed her the shiny black box filled with letters like this that came for his mother, from her sister in China. It made her think of a picture of baby birds she once saw, this pale pink transparent paper. Turning her back on the little boy, she gingerly touched one of the letters with her tongue, then carefully nibbled off a corner, swallowing so quickly that she didn't even taste anything.

It didn't matter if her letter still wasn't there. She knew what it would say, anyway. They were gone because David had finally told them how she had been hurting him, how bad she was. They were gone to California, where they would all swim in brilliant water every day and eat oranges right from the trees.

Her mother came to her room that evening, after the girl had come hurtling down the fire escape, slammed their back door. She'd knocked and knocked upstairs and no one came through the empty kitchen to open the door. Her mother hesitated, then crouched awkwardly next to the girl who appeared absorbed in a drawing she was making with felt tip pens. "Honey..." The words swirled over her head: "job transfer" "Mr.Li" "hallway yesterday" "said goodbye" "Vancouver." She put down the purple marker and frowned at the blob with four lines dangling from its underside. Definitely not a horse. Crumpling the paper impatiently, she threw it to one side and concentrated on a fresh sheet of paper. After a while, her mother stopped talking and sighed. Without looking up,

the girl jerked her head away from the hand that reached out to stroke her hair. "Well, I'm going to go relax for a while... I'm sorry you're feeling bad. Don't go to bed too late." The door clicked shut.

The snow is already melting. Moisture spits from the tires, soaking the hem of her nightgown. Red flare against her eyelids and she is suddenly afraid they are somehow stuck shut, sewn or glued. She stops cycling and incredibly her eyes fly open. Lights. Windows now lit up all over the building, staring back at her in surprise from shadowy brick. Closes her eyes, relieved, and concentrates on the last few laps. 13... 14... 15... 16... 17.

The whole family waves to her, Mrs.Li and David and Mr.Li who she'd never seen and her father, all knee-high in light blue water, dazzling in yellow bathing suits.

Aren't you afraid, Israel marvelled, the first time he knocked on their door and she opened it after dragging over a chair to look through the peephole. But I knew it was you, she said. Yes yes, he said, yes yes, but aren't you still afraid. Rubbing his hands together then snapping his fingers, rubbing them again as he waited for her answer.

So she thought about the rat that lived in the wall by her bed once and how it scrabbled through the gap and jumped over her head, one night, landing in the middle of the floor and staring at her in the light of the aquarium. Bright. Red. Eyes. She thought about the time her father couldn't stop screaming, high so high like a forgotten tea kettle, screaming after he'd pushed her mother into the glass coffee table and all the shiny red and glass and her mother very still. The girl in the doorway on her tiptoes, not breathing, then quietly to the kitchen to phone 9-1-1. She thought about the enormous stuffed dog, purple and green plaid, someone had given her for Christmas one year, that she insisted her mother keep in the back of her closet. How she always walked a bit faster when she passed the closet and was careful not turn her back on it if the door was open.

No, she said, bending down to struggle for a minute with the lace that had come undone on her shoe. The bow wouldn't work, so she tied it in a large knot and stood up. I'm never afraid.

Israel admired her very much and once when his social worker came, he rang their bell and introduced her: This is my very best friend. The girl shook hands with the woman and when her mother came to the door to see who it was, Israel added happily, And that's her mother.

What do you guys do all the time, her mother once asked, combing and twisting the girl's cloud of hair into stubby braids. She leaned back against her mother's knees, running her fingers over the auburn freckles that dusted the tops of the long, pale feet. A ribbon of sweetish, minty smoke drifted past her head as her mother exhaled, then reached down to crush her cigarette in the ashtray on the floor. Whenever her mother asked her the answer to a question she already knew, the girl was wary because it meant she wanted a different answer. The girl shrugged, moving her head away slightly, so her mother sighed, tugging to get her daughter to sit up straight while she finished.

Before the basement he was an occasional sound only, a rushed thumping of heavily shod feet on stairs, echoing through their building. Once she'd run to her door, out to the landing and peered down into the stairwell to catch a glimpse of the person attached to such ponderous feet. She caught a glimpse of a black hat and a whiff of something warm and musty from two floors down, like the dimes and shredded kleenex wedged into the bottom of her mother's purse.

Before the basement they lived on the second floor, above the old woman waiting behind her first floor door, and below the Lis walking over their heads. There was the late woman always running past their door clickety clack on her heels, late every day for work. There was the scorched current of cooking smells that wafted peppery from under the door of the tiny people down the hall. Both with black hair and buttery brown skin slightly darker than hers, always smiling but they never spoke. Once, though, the man came to their door with thin cookies that tasted like Christmas. She held the blue and white flowered paper plate and he bowed slightly, then went away.

And when they moved into the basement there was Israel. Even there, however, she knew him first as series of sounds—before his two curls of red hair and twisting hands, before his stained black coat and the way his feet never stopped, even when he was standing still. The first sound was always the door, SLAM, followed by the stampede of boots up up up the stairs then— pause —even faster crashing all the way back down. Rattle rattle rattle the door and a soft sing song muttering like worried birds; race back up the stairs— pause —hurtle down again. She counted: often as many as 15 times before he'd finally race up the stairs and continue down the hall and out the front door.

The first thing she noticed when they'd spoken a few times was how afraid he was of so many things. Opening the door was difficult, even when they had agreed that she would come over to visit at four o'clock and then she crossed the hall and knocked and leaned against the door to whisper *it's me.* She could always hear him, nervous and shuffling behind the scratched, glossy wood, but sometimes he wouldn't open at all.

The answer to her mother's question, which she knew, was that mostly they talked a lot. It started the first time he rang their bell, nervous and stuttering, asking if please maybe, please someone could come over, it was so dark in the house. Studying him through the chain-width gap between the door and frame, the girl assumed he was scared of the dark and told him to just turn on the lights. But I can't, he said, it's the shabbas. She had stared at him for a moment, then went to get her mother. Just go over and help him, honey, it's ok. Come back the *second* you're finished. She waited in the doorway for a bit, chewing the shredded skin on the side of her thumb, but her mother was submerged in her book on the couch, and didn't say anything else.

At first she thought he just wasn't allowed, like when she was younger, but he explained to her it was only on Friday and Saturday, the rest of the time was fine, even though the stove always made him a little anxious, so he tried to use it as little as possible. When she asked about his two long curls and his black hat and the little pieces of wood on the doorframe that he kissed and talked to, he explained that it was for god, very important, that his father the rab-eye knew everything about it. It wasn't visible in the picture of his parents that he kept with some papers by his bed, so she imagined the third blue rab-eye of the old man, squinting and weepy, kept hidden under the brim of his round hat.

The hands of her friend moved in concert with his speech: curling and uncurling on the dusty black knees, tapping, twitching, the right rising often to tug on the end of his long beard, a spray of bristling copper threads. He was impressed every time she was able to guess what he'd had for breakfast or lunch, but it was easy, because there were always remnants caught in the rusted whorls of hair.

They would sit on the two milk crates he had, pink and brown, the only furniture besides the bed on the floor and a small table beside it. The first time she came to visit, she was struck by the clothes everywhere on the floor in boneless heaps. When he made a sandwich, he ate standing at the kitchen counter. On particularly hot days you could smell his apartment from the hallway: stiffened socks in clumps, sour milk, green bread, the teetering piles of unwashed dishes, dust, wet towels.

And then one day there were the rats. It wasn't clear at first what the matter was, when she found Israel on the basement stairs one afternoon, weeping and twisting his hands, all hunched over his lap. Is it a stomachache, she asked, but he shook his head and

continued to cry. The fluorescent hall light flickered and buzzed and the scab on her elbow itched. Fingering it gently, she decided to save picking at it for later when her cartoons came on. After a moment, she climbed the stairs until she was level with him, fished in her shorts pocket for a crumpled tissue and handed it to him, then sat on the cool marble step. Someone was vacuuming over their heads and the fat dog in 4C barked hysterically for a minute, then was quiet. Israel sniffed wetly, taking off his glasses to rub at the steam with her grubby tissue. Almost as if he'd forgotten she was there, he began talking rapidly under his breath, alternately twisting his hands and tugging on his shredded beard. A small curl of dried egg yolk fell onto his lap.

It's not my fault, *not* my fault Not no nonono They *aren't* mine my my my my my my *Why* did he say that my my my my no not nononono I'm not even *allowed* to have a pet, Cheryl said so.

The girl knew this was true because she'd asked Israel more than once to keep the stray cats they sometimes encountered around their building. Her mother refused to let her even bring them into the apartment and she thought maybe she could just keep one or two at Israel's place. It was no use trying to convince him, however: his social worker said it was a lot of work just to take care of himself, he couldn't have an animal too. Clearly these rats he was talking about didn't belong to him. The girl watched him sniffle into the shredded kleenex, hiccups shaking his rounded shoulders under the stained black overcoat he wore year-round. His feet never stopped their itchy dance, trying to wear a hole right through the stone.

Mr. Lubar, their landlord, had come by that morning, but when he knocked on their door the girl ignored it until she heard him mutter and shuffle across the hall. Standing on her chair, she'd watched him through the peep-hole, trying to get Israel to

open the door. She imagined his fat little belly swelling up like the wolf's, sucking up a blast of air to blow the door down with a hot oniony cloud. He left, finally, grumbling *stupid friggin' retard*, after bending over to slip something under Israel's door.

Leaving him still sniffling and shuddering, the girl hopped down the steps and went into her apartment to get something, then climbed up the stairs backwards, not holding onto the railing, until she was level with Israel again. He had stopped muttering by this time, and merely shuffled his feet on the worn step, hands clasped tight in his lap. The speckled stone was cool beneath her knees as she carefully balanced and tore open the box of candied chocolate disks. The Smarties skittered out gently, forming a bright, ragged pool on the step. She hesitated, looking at the candy, as she realised that the stairs were kind of dirty and it might get on the chocolate. A metallic, dusty taste flooded her mouth as she imagined having to lick the undersides of all the shoes that went up and down the stairs.

After a moment's contemplation, however, she just rubbed at her mouth and proceeded to sort through the candies: lining them up, red red red, orange, yellow, yellow, one green, two greens, the browns and one purple. She sorted until she had six columns, arranged according the colours of the rainbow: ROY G BIV. Israel had explained this to her once, how the first letters of all the colours spelled out a name, so you could always remember. He got quieter and quieter now, watching her sort.

There were always a lot more browns and oranges, about as many green as yellow, slightly less red and at most three purple. Here, he said, you missed one, and handed her a last yellow disc that had landed next to his shoe. She sat back on her heels and surveyed her work, something expanding inside, like a furled sponge tossed into a pool of water.

She could tell Israel began to feel it as well, as he rapidly counted under his breath, multiplying, adding, subtracting candy: *Een, tway, dree, fear...sibbenteen, achteen...*

(numbers are important, she knows, and counting things keeps them in order. school isn't for another 3 months, but she knows about adding things and dividing them, tallying them up and keeping them in groups, balancing things out. like if you are kicking your heel against the rungs of a chair, you must count, then do it the same number of times with your other foot. otherwise.
some nights she lies in bed and reviews all the things she has counted that day, sliding down a gradual incline of numbers, sliding all the way down into sleep: cracks in the sidewalk; letters in her name; tiles in the bathroom; legs on an insect; freckles on her mother's back; people on the bus with gold teeth; windows on skyrises; holes in her sneakers; steps it takes to get from her house to the corner; steps it takes from her room to the kitchen; the yellow wool hairs on her oldest doll, going slowly bald; how many times her heart jumps in her wrist in a minute, the way the doctor showed her once, two fingers pressed tight against the skin)

We each get 27, he said finally, with one left over, maybe we could do something special with the last one, depending what colour it is. He clearly hadn't figured out how this worked, so she straightened the columns one last time, then began removing Smarties, handing one to him, then one for her, only from the rows that had the most of one colour. Israel held up his hand then: just wait though, not yet. She waited. He rocked and began murmuring over the candy in his hand: *baruch atah Hashem elokeinu melech ha'olem she'hakol ni'hiyeh bidvaru.* And that was all. There, now we can start, he said. This addition

to the ritual pleased her, the fluent syllables full of air and spit, much more convincing than the magic words she routinely tried to make up. She decided to have him teach her the spell too.

Starting with the brown, they ate until the column was even with the oranges—or rather, she ate, and he slipped them into his pocket, since he wasn't allowed to eat it if it wasn't approved of by the rab-eye, he said. When the longest row was even with the second, they alternated between the two until the brown and the orange were even with the greens, alternating between these three, one for her, one for him, until they had reached the yellows, continuing this way until they had just three rows left, a complete, even spectrum. They paused for a moment and admired their work. Good, good, he said, yes, (rocking and tapping his fingers on his knees, the movement releasing rhythmic puffs of his particular bouquet of smells), yesyes this is *much* better.

What are you going to do about the rats, she said, crunching a brown between her molars, feeling the thin sugar shell splinter and dissolve, leaving only a small lump of chocolate to be slowly sucked. When the traces of chocolate were gone from her tongue and teeth, she added: we had a rat in our house once and a man had to kill it with a broom under the sink. Israel just shook his head rapidly, *no no onon nononon.*

Ok then, she said, ok this is how we finish. You have to listen carefully. She looked down at the neat rows remaining on the step, nudging an errant purple back into line with her index finger. *Listen.*

Swept up a row of candy, a complete sequence, and held out the handful to Israel, demonstrating. You close your hand and lean back your head and let them fall into your mouth at the same time and chew them all and swallow. It has to be very quick or else. And she did it, mouth full of splintered sugar and the chocolate a waxy resistance between

her teeth, completely filling the still tender hole where one had recently fallen out. Israel looked at the candy uncertainly until she nodded, *go on go on*, and he followed suit, pretending to swallow and chew the candy he'd put in his pocket. You see, she said. There's one row left. We have to go outside and take this with us, if we want to get rid of those rats. *Do You Understand*, she said like a father on television, and waited for his mute nod. Ok then. Ok.

Dusting off the seat of her shorts, she held out her hand for Israel, which he took after a moment's hesitation, led him down the rest of the stairs. But where are you going, he asked, I thought we had to go outside. She didn't answer, tugging him past his door, down the corridor. At the end of the hall there were two doors, one to the dimly-lit laundry room where she was never to go by herself, and just next to it, another door in dented metal, covered in peeling dark green paint. Oh no, he said, oh no, not this way, I can't I can't lets go back up. His hand worked in her grasp, trying to free itself.

She dropped his hand abruptly and whirled to face him. Now you stop that this instant! This is for your own good, Israel. We have to get rid of those rats, right? Well, this is the only way and you can't be a baby. There isn't anything to be scared of in the alley. Not one single thing. She stepped forward and tugged open the door. Besides, she added, I'll be with you the whole time and afterwards, we can go up the street and talk to Min at the store. For some reason, this lure always worked on Israel; he loved the quiet owner of the corner store who occasionally gave them a free bagel if the delivery had just arrived. Still reluctant, he fiddled with the strings that hung from beneath the hem of his white shirt.

Fine. I'm leaving you here with the rats.

As she crossed the garage to the small door that led into the laneway, she heard his footsteps hastening to catch up, but when she turned back from the open doorway her eyes were dazzled by the flood of light from the alley behind her, and it looked like there was no one there at all.

After the chill of the basement, the summer day hit them in a wave, warm and thick with moisture and all the smells of the laneway. Dogshit, rusting scraps of metal, trees, weeds, a few cans of paint missed by the garbage truck. Squinting, Israel stood in front of the bright blue garage door, brilliant black and white with only his pink face for colour. A hectic spot on each cheek like a smeared lipstick kiss. You know Cheryl doesn't like me to come back here, he said, holding onto the front of his coat with both hands, as if it might fall off. Not at all not at all, he repeated. She doesn't like it not at all. *I might get hurt.* His eyebrows were raised high in fine gingery arcs over his pale blue eyes that had begun to water behind his glasses. She doesn't like it *at all.*

Suddenly tired, the girl looked around the laneway, wondered what to do with the handful of candy that was beginning to melt in her warm grasp. She had a book about that man with the flute who came to lure away all the rats, but she couldn't remember, maybe he charmed away all the town's children too. The girl imagined leading the rats out the building, a silent, bright-eyed procession, and all the people following out of their apartments too, wearing fur pajamas, sleepwalking with their hands on each other's shoulders.

If she didn't do something soon, she knew Israel would start to cry, and when he got very upset, it was impossible to calm him down, worse than any temper tantrum she'd ever thrown. She'd have to wait until her mother came home, to talk to him and sit with him in his house until he was quiet again, like the time the telephone guy came to fix the

phone and told Israel the police would come if he didn't open the door right away. Her mother had heard the yelling and went out and got sobbing Israel to open the door and the phone was fixed and the guy went away muttering *fucking loons should all be locked up.*

Israel's hands fluttered at the front of his coat and he squinted at her in the slanting sun, swaying over his tireless feet. Are we almost finished now? Can we go to Min now? She nodded and after a moment's reflection, strode over to a clump of weeds growing by the next set of garage doors, farther down the alley.

See this spot? Not turning to see if he was looking, the dusty smell of gravel and crushed weeds wafting up beneath her sandaled feet. Right here is where we have to leave the Smarties, and say the spell, then cross our fingers until we get out of the alley. That should do it. She knew this was less than satisfactory, probably wouldn't work at all, but it was hot in the narrow alley, and she was tired of this game, and of Israel never stopping. How easy it was to make him cry.

Making their way to the street, they passed the other buildings' garage doors, their chipped, faded colours echoed in the palm of her hand, where the skin was stained a sticky spectrum. She rubbed the residue of her charmed handful down the side of her shorts. It seemed like hours since she'd met him on the stairs.

Min was busy at the store, directing some delivery men to the store room, so there were no soft bagels, only time for a quick nod to them both when it was clear they hadn't come to buy anything. It was time to go home, the girl realized, and Israel didn't protest when she left the store and headed back to their building. His lips moved rapidly in the blurry nest of copper beard, perhaps counting or saying one of his rab-eye charms. She couldn't tell. His pace quickened and in the gusting wind that had suddenly picked up, his

coat and pants billowed and his side curls streamed back. From behind she saw a scarecrow being blown down the empty evening street.

It was two long blocks and when they were about halfway, Israel suddenly began to run, forwards and backwards, circling, flapping his scarecrow arms. The stove, the stove! he screamed at no one. Pigeons wheeled above their heads in drifting loops. She watched a feather that one had lost, first black against the grainy apricot dusk, then white mottled gray when it settled in soft eddies at her feet. You don't pick up feathers because they have germs.

She wondered what it would be like to have a rab-eye, if you could see different things out of it, if she would keep it covered like Israel's father, hot and scratchy under a band of felt.

Israel was crying at this point, rubbing at his face, inconsolable because the building is on fire, he left the stove on, he said, tears and snot glistening in his beard, the stove has caught on fire and the apartment will be burnt down. The windows had metamorphosed since they left the building, blank sheets of gold, beaten thin and shimmering, beckoning them forward and warning them off. Yesterday she'd taken a small mirror from her mother's purse and shone it out the window, catching the light and pointing it everywhere, into the eyes of the old lady at the bus stop across the street so that she'd blinked and stared around, as if someone had called her name. The light shivering and darting, trailing up the side of a car, then down the sidewalk until it disappeared.

A passing car slowed briefly as it approached them, a woman leaning over to see if there was something wrong, or perhaps just to get a better look at the weeping man and the child hesitating a few paces behind him. The car picked up speed, leaving a sharp trail

of exhaust in the warm air. The girl glanced over her shoulder at the falling sun, soaking the building now in breathless red, like the colour just under her skin, like a fruit she once tasted somewhere hot but could never remember the name of.

All the cartoons and even the news would be over by now and her mother would be home from work soon. Weeping and tripping, Israel ran towards the building and she followed his billowing silhouette, an untidy black bird in a round hat. Looking down at the sidewalk, she lengthened her stride awkwardly, counting, 1, 4, 7, 8, all the cracks she carefully stepped over.

*Hi*, he says. Leaning in the doorway. *hey. Hi there kiddo.* He grins briefly and she shuts her eyes, snowy fear weighting her limbs. His teeth glow in the dark, so that his smile hangs suspended where there is only a suggestion of face in shadow. She breathes in slow motion, lying flat: one—two—three—four, barely moving her chest, a slim paper doll, almost not even here.

He's not really fooled.

*Hi*, he says again. And waits.

When she finally opens her eyes again it's no longer dark and he is gone. The shadows are slowly sucked up by morning, hoovering it like dust. There is the white chest of drawers, the matching highboy. There is her row of dolls and animals along the radiator. There is no one in the doorway and it's almost time to get up. She touches each of her fingers to her thumbs three times, then holds her breath, counting to thirteen. Just in case. Balancing on the end of her bed for a moment, she calculates the distance, then jumps, flying, right over the carpet that might still be dangerous, lands, heart crashing, on the cool floorboards.

Her clothes are in a neat pile on the chair next to the closet: she pulls on the panties with blue flowers, the scratchy nylons darker than her legs. The stiff dress, tiny white dots on peach. To do up the zipper is difficult behind her back and it often stays half-undone, like today. The girl in the mirror has hair that puffs up in all directions, escaping from stubby French braids. She studies her reflection for a moment, then turns

away, trying to smooth the top part with her hands, not bothering to undo any of it, to try to braid it again.

The house is silent and filled with bleached verdegris light. Late autumn dawn filters through the living room curtains, down the long hall to where she stands, hesitating in the doorway. Is anybody home? She vaguely recalls something about her mother having this weekend off, but it often happens that work calls at the last minute, to fill in for another waitress. It is, as her mother often explains, money. The door to her mother's room next to hers stands ajar, and the girl strains to catch any sound of breathing, a light snore. The quiet fills her ears with cotton wool. Creeping past the room, she peeks in to see the bed neatly made and no sign of her mother's purse, usually hanging on the rocking chair in the corner.

In the kitchen, the girl drags her stool over to the cupboard above the stove and pulls down the glass jar of instant coffee. A cup of water spins slowly in the microwave, coming alive with bubbles when she opens the door, carefully pulls it out and sets it on the counter. It is only half full. Measuring, always precise, she stirs in one level teaspoon of coffee powder and fills the rest of the cup with milk. It is not that hot anymore with the cold milk in it, but she carries the cup as if it is still burning. Takes it into the living room where she blows on it for a few seconds, standing by the radiator, facing the window. The sky weak blue streaked with yellow and something warmer where it disappears behind the buildings across the street. This is her favourite time of day, and she is happy, holding the warm cup, feeling the quiet apartment stretching out behind her. Grimacing faintly, she swallows her coffee in quick gulps, milky medicine coating her tongue, the back of her throat. Sometimes, afterwards, her heart will start to thump harder, pounding hooves

tripping over rib bones for a few minutes, then slowing to normal. She does this every Saturday morning before church, unless her mother's there. In which case she has to force down a malty cup of Ovaltine and a piece of toast.

*hi there. hey.*

She spins round, nearly dropping the empty cup, but there is no one there. Her father will be ringing the buzzer any minute now, and she has to brush her teeth. Last week he was impatient because there was still a crust of sleep in her eyes and something white at the corners of her mouth when he picked her up. She'd forgotten to wash, drinking her coffee and looking at a new book she'd found at the library. It was all about the black plague and how people lived in the middle ages. *How do you think Jesus will feel, if you come to his house looking like that?* The slap on her arm tingled while she brushed and washed, thinking about fleas biting rats biting people who all got sick. She watched the trail of toothpaste foam swirl down the drain. The only time she's allowed to skip church is when she's ill enough to stay in bed, and even then sometimes he thinks she's not that sick and anyway church is good for you.

In the middle ages, she has been reading, they believed many things like that: you could be cured by praying and punishments and even the smell of flowers. There was a song about it too, about a ring of roses, and a pocket full of posies, a dizzy song lurching round and round, ascha ashca we all fall down.

The buzzer rings just as she finishes cleaning up. She grabs her jacket with the keys pinned into the pocket, locks the apartment door, then runs downstairs to where her father waits outside, *hurry hurry, what's the matter with your legs, Jesus hates little girls who are late.*

*when are you going to learn some respect.* Her father is as tall as the trees, darker than dark. One of his front teeth is outlined in gold and it glints when the sun catches his mouth. They hold hands, but she dangles from the end of his arm because she does not walk fast enough. Even his words cannot keep up with him; they follow her all the way to church, a tangle of wasps with their sharp ends caught in her hair and the hem of her dress.

☆☆

THE ceiling is not as high as you would imagine from the imposing dome outside, but still higher than any other building she's been in. The curving walls arch upwards, meet in shadow. She has given up trying to lean back to look up because someone invariably reaches over to swat her, to make her sit up straight and face forward. It doesn't even have to be her father; sometimes he's at the pulpit, thundering and banging his palms on the wooden lectern, and anyone at all who is near her is allowed to administer discipline, because that is how it is here. Especially because her mother is a Catholic and will burn in hell. Her mother's also white, though they rarely mention that part, since there are a couple of white Sisters in the church, rickety old ladies who nod and dab their eyes during every service. Sister Rodney, the colour of caramel candies, always clucks and shakes her head with the mauve nylon hat if the girl happens to get stuck next to her at the potluck afterwards. Her wispy beard shivers in sympathy. *The poor lamb.* Not her mother, but the girl. The sisters and brothers in the church tell her all the time how lucky she is to have such a righteous father to guide her, to prepare her heart so Jesus can come in. *But don't keep him waiting too long, child.*

It is an image she hates: that skinny pale man with his ratty beard, reaching his hand into her chest, long and grasping, delving past the rib bones and muscles to knock

knock knock on her heart clenched in a stubborn ball. That's how her father describes it when he's preaching, or when he comes over for Friday night bible study. *And you know what that sound is?* leaning forward with eyebrows raised high, one hidden hand knocking on something hard. *That's Jesus knocking on your wicked wicked hearts, just knocking to get in. And he won't give up, you know, not Jesus. He* ***will*** *wait for* ***all*** *time, just waiting to be let into your house.* And the crowd would sigh and shake their heads, fanning themselves with programs, *Amen, amen Brother Noordzij!* Perfume, sweat, and hair pomade mingling with the prayerful exclamations that rise in a collective wave of admiration, of sorrow for their sinful ways, of their shame for keeping poor Jesus waiting so long. It reminds her of the joke she read on the back of a cereal box, the one about lettuce.

*knock knock*
*who's there*
*lettuce*
*lettuce who*
*lettuce in it's cold out here*

☆☆

OF the many things she dislikes about going to church with her father every Saturday morning, the worst, for the longest time, was missing all her cartoons. As far back as she can remember, she has been getting up early on Saturday to watch her shows. She didn't even like all of them that much, there was just something about the whole ritual, something that she waited for all week, an anticipation and its satisfaction, better than Christmas or snow days off school because it happened every week.

It started with something tight and jittery in her stomach, as she turned on the TV, poured out her cereal and milk and settled in to eat in the nest of pillows she'd build on the carpet. There was usually no one around and in the winter it wouldn't be quite light. Either her mother would be asleep or at work, and her stepfather (who only slept at their

house a few nights a week) never came home on the weekends. Sometimes, though mostly when she was smaller, there would also be scattered around her fortress a number of three-limbed dolls, a chewed woolen snake, a leaning koala with hardly any fur.

Gradually, as the bowl was emptied, refilled, then emptied again, gradually, the knot of anticipation loosened and a delicious wave of something thick and warm would wash over her. By the end of the first hour, she would be sprawled nearly motionless, in a rapt trance in front of the flickering screen, only getting up to change channels, or run to the bathroom during commercials.

Loony Toons was the most interesting, with its interconnected web of characters and relationships. There was a witch she liked, fat with pointy boots, her twinkling greed and hairpins always flying; there was a small, studious chicken called Son, who silently worked out complex mathematical equations and solved seemingly impossible problems. Quite often, however, it was simply frightening. The slanted interiors, angular shadows, empty deserts, the tireless dynamic of all the hunters and prey. It was somehow exhausting, the same scenarios of pursuit and capture and escape each week: Roadrunner sly and wordless, always on the run from Coyote, Tweety from lisping Sylvester, the rabbit himself eternally teasing the stuttering, befuddled hunter.

Most compelling of them all was a barrel-chested, short legged whirlwind, burrowing in and out of the ground in a bad-tempered blur. When she asked her mother once if there was such a thing as a tasmanian devil, if it was a real devil or just a kind of weird dog, like in Disney cartoons, her mother just said yes, yes it's real and never looked up from her newspaper. The end of a pencil clamped between her teeth as she scanned the Classifieds section, circling jobs for the stepfather who hadn't been home since the

beginning of the previous week, when her mother had bumped into a wall during a fight and given herself a black eye.

The following weekend, however, her mother presented her with a pair of metal roller skates she could strap onto her feet, and they spent the afternoon together, shuffling up and down the block, over pavement sticky with tree buds. See, her mother said, you should try spending more time outside for a change. *Those cartoons just wind you up.* Her mother's cheeks were pink and the uncertain spring sun had already brought out a sprinkling of freckles on her long nose. Crouching, she smoothed the frizzy strands that had escaped the girl's braids. Her mother's hand was warm, left a whiff of lemony soap trailing in the air between them. *Can I sleep in your bed tonight?* The girl held onto her mother's hand tightly, imagined the warm white back to lay her cheek on, the masses of hair spilling apricot and silky over pillows that smelled of toast. *You know there's nothing to be afraid of in your room. You're a big girl now and you have to sleep in your own bed. I'm going in to watch the news now.* There were cobalt smudges under her mother's eyes, from nights and nights awake in her large bed, waiting for the stepfather's key in the front door.
You slept in your own bed because there was nothing to be afraid of.
And that was that.

☆☆

OFTEN the girl doesn't get home from church until after dark, when all the prayer groups and potluck dishes are finished in the church basement, or in the home of one of the Brothers or Sisters. Tonight there is only time for an hour or so of TV, lying on the couch with her mother, until it is time to have her bath and get ready for bed, where she generally reads until very late, waiting for sleep.

When her eyes begin to smart and the words scuttle and blur in front of her eyes, she switches off the flashlight, tucks it under her pillow, and stretches out one hand from beneath the blankets to lay her book on the floor. It is crucial to do all of this making as little noise as possible. After a few moments, however, she realises that it is already too late. Probably as soon as she switched off her flashlight, as a matter of fact.

*Hey. Hi there. What's up.*

Tonight he's wearing a snorkeling mask, pushed up on his forehead, one hand tucked into the pocket of his flowered swimming trunks.

He's relaxed, leaning in the doorway as usual, waiting.

*Hey kid. Are you just going to lie there all night. Hi there paper dolly.*

It's a trick, she knows: she musn't move a muscle, otherwise he'd be released, whirl across the room, a muscular, pungent tornado. Scoop her up and burrow through the floor to the other side of the world and she'd have to walk upside down. Her only chance is to summon all the right secret words, chanting silently. Will him to dissolve into thin air. He laughs, showing all his teeth, rows and rows of them, each set whiter than the last.

*Ha! Nothing doing kiddo. Come on, you know better than that.*

She can smell him from here, not as strong as the last time, but still a discernible waft of sulfur and sweat. The library book she's just been reading says the tasmanian devil smells strongest when it is upset. He seems to be in a pretty good mood tonight, which explains the milder scent.

Shifting in the doorway, he pulls a shining toothpick out of nowhere and sets to work on his impressive dentura, smiling contentedly all the while. He must have just eaten, she thinks, perhaps that's why he's so pleased with everything tonight. There was a picture of them eating in the library book, a whole pack of devils crowding around a dead sheep. They keep their habitat clean and tidy, the book says, eating all the leftover dead things. It makes sense, the girl thinks. All the bad people (like everybody who didn't go to her father's church), need to be cleared away once they die. The devil knows she doesn't believe anything she hears at church, so he's just hanging around, waiting.

He keeps up a steady patter around the probing splinter of wood; he's easy, expansive, commenting on the way she's decorated the room, on other kids he knows, how he hates the weather here.

*Now where I come from, that's what I call a place to live. Not much happening there, that's the only problem. See, what we have there is the ideal climate, nice and hot, but breezy, that's the key. And dry. Cause it's never the heat, it's the humidity that gets to people, drives them crazy. So it can be say two, even three, hundred degrees, but it's dry and breezy, nice. When you hang your bathing suit out, it dries in a couple of seconds.*

This is by far the longest speech he has made so far, but she still hasn't moved, not even her eyes beneath their lids. The whole time she's been peering at him between her lashes, so he can't even see if she's awake. Of course, he's never fooled, but he often seems to get bored, wanders off before she falls completely asleep. Other nights though, he just waits. Arms folded, giving off waves of sharp, angry scent, and behind the compressed line of his mouth, she can sense all the rows of teeth, crowded, fencing in his tongue.

Devils used to live in Australia, she has just read, but now you can only find them in Tasmania. The Europeans and wild dogs called dingoes chased them there, though the girl finds it hard to believe devils are really afraid of anything. They hide during the day, come sniffing around at night, looking for food, coughing and trying to intimidate each other. The devil in the doorway shifts restlessly, sneezes twice, gives off a small puff of smoke.

*Ok kiddo, ok. I gotcha.*

Tonight he just chuckles indulgently. *ok.*

*Better watch it though–you keep reading so much, you'll go blind.*

*heh, heh.*

And when she opens her eyes hours later, it is still dark but the doorway is empty. Her belly is tight and hot like a small loaf of bread, the pressure of her bladder preventing her from drifting straight back to sleep. There is no way she can get up now, though, go to the bathroom. He is probably crouched in the hallway, right outside her mother's room, frowzy head nodding over his wide chest. She eventually sinks back into dreams in which she is looking in the bathroom mirror and all her teeth fall into her cupped hands,

but none of them will fit back into her sticky gums. They are bits of paper that flutter from her palms, lie glimmering on the tiled floor. The room fills with a rushing sound, like a train is coming, but it is a green surge of water crashing through the window and she is waist deep in floating glass and warmth that slowly becomes cold.

☆☆

EACH week the days seem to fly forward to the Sabbath, but once there, stop. Time stretches and stretches in church. It yawns interminably, is longer than anywhere else she's ever been. There is always a fly wrestling against a stained glass window somewhere and from the basement you can hear the small babies crying in the nursery, the ones who are even too little to sit on the plastic chairs around Sister Esmerelda with her felt boards showing bible stories in dog-eared fabric scenes. Her father decided she was old enough to sit upstairs and hear the real sermon with the adults, even though there are kids in the bible school 2 and 3 years older than she is, like Sister Rodney's son Weston with a dirty blur already on his upper lip.

At least upstairs with the adults she is mostly left alone, as long as it looks like she is paying attention. There are no songs about hiding your light under a bushel, or quizzes about the Israelites or the Last Days when the Beast shall come with the Number upon its Head, Six Hundred Threescore and Six. A real book smuggled into church is sure to be confiscated, so most Saturdays she flips through the fragile, nearly transparent pages of the small red bible her father gave her when he came back from California and announced they would be going to this church together. That he'd found Jesus in the desert, well at the bus station in Sacramento, and that the kind Sister had given him this very bible to teach his little girl about the Good Word, so that she too may be saved.

(when the girl begged her mother, crying, to stay home that first Sabbath, her mother looked tired, rifling through the girl's closet amongst the corduroy and denim for something suitable for church, as the father had instructed. *you know I can't say anything, sweetheart. you have to tell him yourself, he'll never believe it otherwise.* the girl knows this is true, they've had the same argument about her visits to him for years, he never listens to anything the girl's mother says. she's a witch and tries to brainwash the child against her own father. so every Saturday the girl goes downstairs when her father rings the buzzer, and together they go to the Seventh Day Adventist church.)

Nobody has noticed the partly undone zipper on her dress this morning, and she wriggles against the back of the pew where it digs in between her shoulder blades. Glancing around quickly to make sure no one can see, she slips her thumb into her mouth, and turns the pages of the Bible in her lap, fumbling a bit with her left hand. The best chapter is the one her father preaches from the most, actually. Revelations is full of storms and fires and beasts with many heads; there are serpents and dragons and angels bearing golden keys. There is no droning about commandments and you don't have to remember who begat who. It is her favourite section, next to the Song of Songs, which never gets mentioned in any of the sermons, filled with breasts and lips and bellies. There is someone whose nose smells like apples, with milk and honey under their tongue. This always makes her hungry, sliding down on the glossy bench, stomach hollowed out entirely, waiting and waiting for the everlasting service to end.

If she gets a seat in the right pew, and there is sun that morning, the light falls on the thin pages in multi-coloured shards. It is a brilliant fall morning today and the words

swim in Mary-blue, halo-gold, hot wounded red. She reads about the smoke of bottomless pits, about angry nations, earthquakes and glass cities, harlots in lakes of fire. She reads about the locust army like miniature horses in breastplates of iron, with long women's hair and the teeth of lions. The brothers and sisters fan themselves around her, sometimes standing up to shake and praise the holy spirit, throwing up their hands and tossing their heads. *Amen, amen! Let him in, let the holy spirit fill you with heavenly peace!* This is called testifying and it is a sign of god's blessing if it happens to you.

She wishes for an earthquake and an army of locusts to chew the whole congregation to dust. It's excruciating, she can't even look at them, almost always the older women, the same ones week after week. Moaning and clapping, faces tight with ecstasy, huge soft bodies that wriggle and twitch, like they might jump right out of their clothes. She keeps her eyes fixed to the page, week after week. No chance she'll be dragged into the aisle to sweat and dance and pray while the Brothers and Sisters nod approvingly.

Silent is how she imagines it, a deserted city of glass, this New Jerusalem they're always singing about with its pearly doors and streets of gold. Who could ever be good enough to go? Perhaps one could end up there by accident, like the time she wandered off from her mother in a department store once and was swept up in a herd of legs, into an elevator, then stranded on another floor in a sea of plastic-covered sofas and chairs with no one on them.

Her footsteps would echo on the shining treeless avenues, light trapped and ricocheting between sapphire and ruby walls. And God always invisible, off in his dress with the angels somewhere. She would find her mother and bring her. Maybe David Li who moved away to Vancouver. Maybe not. Her father always so enthusiastic about this heaven, in response to her half-hearted questions: oh there's everything there, just

everything you ever wanted, more beautiful than any thing on this earth. All the friends you could dream of, every wonderful thing to eat, and no one ever gets sick or is angry or dies.

This has made her suspicious from the beginning—clearly this can't just be one place because everybody must have a different picture of it, and if that's the case, probably it isn't any place at all. Just something people like her dad dream up, to get people to do what they want before the Final Judgment. And you never know when it will be, her father warns near-weekly, quoting: "Behold, I come as a thief." She hates the thought of this almost more than Jesus and his knocking. It seems entirely unfair, cruel and sneaking, like some sort of club dreamed up by the bigger girls at school: you have to look out behind you all the time, because at any moment you could be breaking some invisible rule, and the punishment is often worse than your worried imaginings.

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IT'S been brewing all evening: purple-bellied clouds gliding up in knotted masses, veined with bilious light. Always a bad sign when her stepfather stays in for the whole evening, sits in the living room with her mother and the succession of tinkling glasses, a steady stream of scotch. By the time the girl goes to bed, they have started fighting outright, after hours of insidious jabs, tiny barbs that neither will admit to between drags on cigarettes. They stare at the TV. muttering to itself across the room in a faint halo of blue.

He rarely drinks, so the words are clear; they echo down the hall, chewing right through the blankets, through her hands clasped tight over her ears. Her mother is a stupid white bitch always trying to control him *where you going when you coming back* fucking fat drunk all the time wishes he never met her that he never came to this damn freezing

country full of racists. Her mother wishes she never met him either useless loser just married her to get citizenship and don't think she doesn't know about the money missing from her wallet and all the women she can smell it on him when he gets home next time one of those whores calls up she's going to tell them he's got a venereal disease and they better get checked out.

It is warm under her pillow and she turns her head to one side to get enough air. She slips her thumb into her mouth and sucks, the side of her index finger rubbing the soft skin beneath her nose. She thinks about the middle ages, about her book on the plague. Living in a castle sounds good, wearing a metal suit and riding a horse. Even a tiny cottage with a straw roof would be nice, a dirt carpet and a goat in the front yard. But overall, it seems like it was a dangerous time to live, people dying all the time, not just from the plague, but from things like chicken pox, which she had just last year.

The book about tasmanian devils said that when people complain about the devils being in "plague proportions", it just means that there are more than people would prefer to see. It happens during the hot summers, when the babies come out of their mother's pouch after four months, start wobbling around and finding their own food. They don't get any more milk after six months and they only live to be about seven or eight years old.

Her devil seems a lot older though, the way he talks. There's something tired, worn down about the slope of his shoulders, in the set of his wide jaw, like how her mother looks when she's been doing 12-hour shifts at the restaurant. They were talking about the devil last week in church, how you had to watch out for him all the time, (just like Jesus sneaking up, like a thief), and she wondered if it was the same as Santa Claus: he didn't really exist, though it's a nice idea her mother explained. There were just millions of

people dressed like him, at parties and shopping malls, so he was everywhere and nowhere at once.

She is slipping through layers of sheets and blankets, burrowing through layers of dirt, stones, and twining roots, emerging on the other side somewhere vast, wind slithering around her ankles, someplace hot and the taste of salt, a silhouette in a doorway, she is very big then very small, flies away from the rows of pointy gold teeth, swimming in gritty swells, fish everywhere and a large hand clasped tight round her ankle, struggling, rubber flippers making her clumsy, the hand dragging her down, shaking her, shaking

her father is standing over the bed, with his finger to his lips. *It's just me. Go back to sleep, schaatje. Ga slaapen. Ik zieh je morgen, boefje. Wel terusten.* A mountain leaning down over the bed, cold fabric from his jacket brushing her cheek, a kiss, a shadow in the doorway and he is gone, down the hallway to where there is light, and voices, and smoke.

She is painfully awake now, bolt upright in her bed. Her father came over most Fridays to do bible study with her, to celebrate the beginning of Sabbath at sundown. Occasionally he had church business and couldn't make it, but sometimes he'd still stop by on his way home, like tonight. He and the stepfather got along very well, so the father would stay for a drink afterwards, apple juice for him, a beer for the stepfather, and they would talk for hours.

Often it began with the places they were from, how it was so cold here, how miserable white people were. As they talked, both would begin to slip into accents that only emerged when were talking to other black people. It always sounded kind of silly to

the girl, her father saying Yah Man to the Jamaican stepfather, and Jah Love; they weren't even from the same place. Her father's family all spoke Dutch and another language she can't remember the name of. She's not sure why it makes her faintly uncomfortable, like when the kids at school pretended to speak Chinese.

As usual, their conversation begins tonight with the father trying to convince the stepfather to come to his church, to Give Jesus a Chance. (There are orange pamphlets about this too, that the father encourages the girl to bring to school. She has a large cut-out menagerie of orange animals that hold hands and fold up accordion style, which she is careful never to let her father see.) The stepfather affable and evasive, sipping his beer and nodding, yah man, irie! but never committing himself to anything. After an hour of this, however, the conversation would generally turn. They both like to tease the mother, chuckle at her attempts to defend herself, the place she lives, because if it's so terrible, she says, why the hell have the two of them busted their asses to get here.

The girl lies perfectly still, straining to catch the low conversation. It's hard to hear tonight, to know what's going on. She sits up, pressing the pillow to her stomach, holding everything in. It's important not to fall asleep, because then anything could happen.

There was the time she woke blearily to her mother shouting and crying, the two fathers' laughter indulgent, shutting the mother out, who had clearly been drinking steadily the whole evening. The girl was frozen to the bed for a second, then shot up, down the hall and into the living room, squinting in the smoky light. Her mother slumped on the pink-flowered couch, face wet and flushed. Grabbing the limp hand and trying to haul her mother to bed. STOP IT she shrieked at the fathers, a choked garble of threats to call the police I HATE YOU HATE YOU hating her mother too until her throat was raw with sobs and rage and all the adults abruptly clear and quiet, bundled into the mother's bed

and the men leaving together, shaking their heads. Can't control that child, don't know what to do. If this was the islands, she'd soon feel the switch on her backside, teach her some respect. Do that here, they call social services. These Canadian kids spoiled rotten. Her mother crying in the dark bed, with her wide back to the girl, *You really mustn't interfere, Rika. You should be asleep.* The almost imperceptible hum of elevator going down to the lobby with the fathers, taking with them all the heat and light and noise.

Tonight the girl sits rigid and upright for hours, it feels, waiting for the slightest shift in tone, for the swell of laughter and her mother's cry, determined to intercept it this time, distract them before it got too big. But it never comes. She sits like that until her muscles blaze with tension and she has to lie down, still struggling to stay alert, to monitor the living room. But from the words that drift down the hallway, mixed with reggae music turned down low, it seems that everything will be all right tonight. The parents are talking about food, and how strict their grandparents were and how they miss living by the sea. Her mother sounds dreamy, describing her Acadian father's fish stew and both the fathers are excited, how similar it is to favourite dishes that their own mothers made, minus the pepper sauce. They all swam often as children and they tell stories the girl has never heard, about times they nearly drowned, being caught in little boats with their siblings during a storm, about the local stories of water monsters and giant fish.

Sleep is sudden and complete, and she dreams of nothing. White on white, a succession of blank pages turned by invisible fingers.

☆☆

SHE'S standing in the middle of the darkened room and there is an enormous crashing, wood groaning against wood and a cacophony of hard objects skittering and sliding,

smashing onto the floor. It goes on and on, so loud that she can't focus, see what is causing all this noise. In the split second before it is quiet again, she gets a whiff of something sharp and burning.

A light snaps on in the hall and her mother comes running down the corridor, stopping short at the entrance to the girl's room. The doorway is blocked by overturned furniture, her highboy dresser toppled over and spilling t-shirts, books, marbles, crayons, socks and papers. The girl's mouth is open but no words come out. She's holding her pillow in one hand and the nest of blankets trail off the bed, lie twisted at her feet. Her mother is saying something, but the words can't make it all the way across the room, over the choppy sea of carpet, all the space between here and there, the years and years that she will remember this moment, the toothy shadow behind her mother, grinning and nodding at the girl.

☆☆

WHEN it is many years later and the girl is talking to her father, walking by the sea wall in a small, damp town in Holland, she will ask him about that night. It takes a while, her father rubbing his jet-lagged eyes, a cramp in his leg slowing their pace. At the deserted beach caféé, they pause so her father can go in for a bottle of juice to wash down his pills. The wind sucks at the moody water, drives a fine stinging rain of sand against their pant legs.

They have a few days together here, while her father attends a religious conference and she takes time off work to see him. He seemed so disappointed when she'd just suggested dinner one night. So they've spent Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday wandering around the cobblestone city under a polished metal sky, ending up each evening by the water. Her father tries to buy her chocolate milk and popsicles, bubblegum.

Sometimes she says yes, sometimes she says no. She is surprised to see they are the same height, and by the way her father takes her hand when they cross the street, hangs on until she gently removes it to find something in her purse, finds anything at all to point to in the distance.

It occurs to her, the first time this happens, that they have almost never touched, beyond the occasional spanking as a child and times he took her hand to make her hurry up on the way to church. She mentioned this to her mother once, about how her father never used to let her crawl into bed with him when she stayed over and woke up from a nightmare, wouldn't even hug her. It was the first time the girl could remember her mother defending her father, or at least trying to explain his behaviour. There was a long story about her father's unhappy childhood, how he ran away on an oil ship to Europe as a boy and never went back to his family. *That's why he has a hard time being a nice father, honey. He didn't really have one himself... of course that doesn't let him off the hook for being such a—* The girl, who was unimpressed and adolescent in regulation black at the time, shrugged, flipped on the Walkman she kept hooked to her belt at all times. Protected by a wall of blasting sound, she left her mother possibly still talking to her, and wandered into the kitchen where she opened the refrigerator door and leaned against it for a while, staring in.

So they walk and don't talk much, and the girl, who is now more than old enough to be a mother herself, chews some of the green and pink balls of gum her father keeps buying for her.

*Remember daddy? That night when my furniture fell over, and you were there?* She hasn't thought of that night in a long time, but for some reason the image pops into her head as they stroll slowly by the water. The word *daddy* feels strange in her mouth, baby talk, but

they have seen each other so rarely since she was a child, she has no other word for him. He, in turn, continues to call her *boefje*, which she thought, as a child, had something to do with roast beef, perhaps because of the trussed-looking fat rings around her wrists and knees in baby pictures. Leafing through the dictionary soon after she moved to Holland, she accidentally discovered she was *little rogue*, or *scamp*. It seemed improbably light-hearted, more fun than anything she'd ever associated with her father.

He shakes his head after a while. *Nou boefje, dat was so lang geleden. . . maar ik ben zeker dat ik al weg was.* No, he definitely wasn't there when it happened, but he vaguely remembers the mother telling him the following week that he shouldn't rearrange the furniture in the girl's room, because the one of the legs of the old highboy was wobbly, and unless it was balanced just so, could easily fall over. It was fun, he says now wistfully, wasn't it, how we used to visit on those Friday nights. *I just wish you would have come to live with me part of the time too. We've missed too much, haven't we, these past few years.*

There is something in the girl's stomach, something heavy and inconsolable, when she remembers how he used to be so disappointed every time she feigned illness or too much homework to avoid visiting before he finally moved out west for a job in the church.

And it comes back to her, as they stop by the seawall sweating salt spray in the nicotine-coloured dusk. She remembers getting out of bed after her father left that night, pushing over the furniture that he'd carefully rearranged to make space for a chair next to the bed, so he could sit with her when they read the bible. She glances over at him now, slightly stooped in his trench coat. The skin around his eyes is pouchy, and he blinks into the wind, tearing slightly. There is grey under the deep brown of his skin, and when she

suggests they turn back, head for the conference center where the other Adventist ministers are staying, he nods and takes her arm.

THEY floated under a hot white sky. As the afternoon progressed, shards of gas blue emerged where the cloud cover thinned to the west. The girl's fishing rod, at first held carefully upright in both hands, now lay propped against the side of the boat, barely anchored in place with one sneakered foot. A strong fish would have no problem tugging the whole thing into the water, if one managed to get itself caught on her hook. She leaned over the side of the boat, trailing a hand in the amber water.

Almost ready to give up?

She craned her neck around to smile and shake her head at the woman squinting at her.

I'm o.k., Sylvie. Just a bit sleepy.

The woman shrugged.

Suit yourself. You know I could spend the whole afternoon out here, Rika, but if you're bored we can leave.

The girl shook her head again, and turning back, made a show of picking up the pole once more and sitting up very straight. Despite the muted breeze ruffling the water, the top of Rika's head felt hot in the filtered sun. Small insects bobbed around them, attached to the water by invisible strings.

I don't know how you can chew that stuff. It reeks.

Rika glanced over at the woman, who made a face, wrinkling her sunburned nose. Positioning it correctly with her tongue, the girl exhaled a sugary globe of watermelon, then awkwardly sucked it back in, leaving a few sticky shreds on her lower lip.

You should really spit that out. You're attracting black flies.

Taking the scrap of kleenex from the woman's outstretched hand, Rika obligingly spat out the offending pink wad and shoved it into her canvas bag under the seat. Her fingers slid over a tightly folded square of paper, and she hesitated, fingering one corner, then pushed it further down, under the long-sleeved shirt Sylvie had made her take along in case it got cool. The boat lurched mildly as she straightened up again and she felt her stomach's echoing dip and slide.

It was almost deafening, how quiet it was out on the water. An occasional desultory wind, the intermittent whine of an insect. Against the sides of the wooden boat the glutinous slapslap of waves. No cars, no people, no radios. They were bobbing in a sea of gauzy warmth. The last time she had been anywhere this quiet was years ago, at a sleep-away camp. She'd wandered off from the cabins when everyone was supposed to be getting changed for swimming, getting further and further away from the whistles and shrieks, ending up finally in a patch of forest behind the camp. She'd sat under a tree for hours, building things with twigs and drawing in the dirt, until one of the counselors had found her, exasperated and angry when Rika couldn't explain why she'd just taken off like that without telling anyone.

Squinting, Rika concentrated on the far shore, trying to see if she could figure out where they had parked among the indigo smudge of fir trees. They could be anywhere, really. She imagined what would happen if there were some kind of accident, Sylvie dead or injured and she, Rika, would have to get them home. It would be storming, of course, and she would have to drive with the seat hitched all the way forward, face set and toes straining for the gas pedal and brake. Sylvie slumped and enormous in the back seat. No,

Sylvie couldn't be dead, so that afterwards, as she lay in her hospital bed, she could put her wide hand on Rika's shoulder for the newspaper photograph, whispering through tears how grateful she was to this kid, what a tough cookie. *I don't know what I would have done without her.* Rika smiled faintly to herself and bobbed the fishing pole in the water.

By late afternoon, Sylvie had caught nearly half a dozen smallish fish that flopped and squirmed disconcertingly against the splintered bottom of the boat, for much longer than Rika had imagined it should take to choke to death. In response to her timid question, Sylvie snorted and told her not be such a sissy, it's not like they were *bullfighting.* The fish had no clue what was going on and barely felt a thing.

The girl looked away, something hot creeping up her cheeks, and concentrated on reeling in her line. She untangled her second catch from the line, a jellied clump of marshy weeds and a bit of tin. Her first catch had been a fish so tiny they decided it belonged back in the water.

I'm sure that'll taste much better once we fry it up in some butter and garlic.

Sylvie smiled cajolingly, trying to make up. Why don't we pack it in for today, salamander. It's going to rain soon, anyway. Your mom'll get worried if she thinks we're out on the lake in a storm.

Sure enough, despite the expanse of blue that had emerged from the haze, an oily grey smudge was creeping up from the horizon behind them and an uneasy wind had picked up. The boat began to rock fitfully, a sleeper caught in a stubborn dream. Sylvie wiped off the small beads of moisture that had collected on her upper lip and flushed cheeks, dried her hands on the flowered cotton of her dress and grabbed for the oars, wide shoulders working powerfully as she swung them back towards the shore.

☆☆

BY the time they got everything stowed away in the back seat and the fish neatly packed in the cooler still half-full of melting ice, the light had taken on an olive tint, and the tall grass beside the car lurched and bent, flashing silver spines.

Just in time, Sylvie muttered, satisfied, as she started the ignition and a couple of fat drops hit the windshield. She pulled off the floppy straw hat she'd been wearing in the sun and tossed it in the back seat. A flushed band across her forehead showed where it had been jammed too far down.

Perfect. The dust will all be washed off to boot and he'll never know it was gone.

What do you mean? Rika felt a twinge in her chest. I thought you said Mr. Shapiro lent us the car for the day.

Sylvie had a habit of simply not hearing questions she didn't like. She was so good at it, creating an utter absence of awareness around her that just swallowed up your question whole, neat as a cat—it was as if nothing had been said at all.

They drove in silence, Sylvie peering through the rain that had begun to come down in earnest, navigating the car down the weed-choked back lanes that would get them back on the main road to Montreal. After a few minutes Rika had no idea whether or not she had even voiced her question, but something about Sylvie's face prevented her from taking a chance and trying again, just in case.

Rummaging around in her bag for the extra shirt, she felt the small square piece of paper again and pulled it out as well. After tugging on the top, she fiddled with the bit of paper in her lap for a moment, toying with the idea of smoothing it open, reading the contents out loud to Sylvie. Actually, she could do it without opening it at all. In the

three weeks since she'd typed it up, she had memorized the poem, backwards and forwards. Rika jammed the paper into her shorts pocket and settled back in the seat, drawing her legs up and resting her cheek against her knees. Wet fields hissed by the streaky window. The air turned from brown to green to blue, then it was dark.

☆☆

SYLVIE had first come to visit them the week after they moved into the new building. It wasn't much of a move, really, only a few blocks, but it still left Rika off-kilter, like when she was younger and would try to walk down the hall wearing her mother's glasses, the wood floor warping and rising to meet her wobbling steps. It was this feeling that there was no neutral place to rest—everywhere you looked, it was all this new apartment, unmoored, lonely with other people's smells.

On the fifth evening, just after they finished their plates of macaroni and cheese sitting on the remaining unpacked boxes facing the TV, the doorbell rang. Rika's mother raised her eyebrows and frowned slightly before putting her empty plate on the floor and going to answer the door. If it was some religious person, Rika knew, her mother would say that she was Jewish and would they like to come with her to synagogue next Saturday and by the way, where did they live so she could come by for a visit to discuss the Torah. If it looked through the peephole like they were selling something, Rika's mother simply didn't open the door.

The only other person who ever came to their door was the paperboy, and this wasn't his night, so Rika was surprised to hear her mother open the door, then start chatting with whoever it was. As she moved to turn down the television to hear better, the door closed, and two sets of footsteps came down the hall.

Rika, this is the nice lady I mentioned to you the other day—the one who got our mailbox open when it was jammed—

She looked at her mother blankly for a moment, then smiled at the woman standing beside her in the living room doorway. Her mother hadn't mentioned anyone. What was she supposed to understand? The pleasant look her mother directed at her was impossible to read.

Hi, I'm Sylvie. The woman crossed the room in two steps and was suddenly towering over Rika, hand outstretched. Rising to shake the woman's hand, Rika was impressed by the sheer size of her, and the strength of the warm ringed fingers that grasped hers briefly, then let go.

This yours? Sylvie had spotted a half-naked Barbie wedged under a couch cushion and held her up for inspection. Poor thing, she needs a decent outfit. You come by my apartment one afternoon this week and we'll whip her up something smart.

Her eyes, Rika noticed, were muddy green, swimming behind the thick lens of silver-framed round glasses. Pancake makeup quivered in the dark hairs at the corners of Sylvie's mouth, an orangey-pink film that ended abruptly just below her chin. The effect, with her over-sized striped man's shirt and long khaki skirt, the dangling feather earrings and multiple rings of various sizes and brilliance, was of a disconcerting collage: none of the elements quite fit with any of the others, colour and texture slapped together at random.

Nodding mutely, Rika edged away and finally turned and went into the kitchen with the empty dishes. The skin of her neck prickled, and she felt the urge to skip or maybe just clap her hands together quickly, anything to release this bolt of excitement that had suddenly percolated up from her toes.

Oh it's the age, she heard Sylvie's amused voice. I was just like that at her age—she's what, 10, 11? They can't figure out if they want to stay and listen to the grown-ups talking or go play with their dolls.

She couldn't make out her mother's murmur, and after a few more minutes, two sets of footsteps went back down the hall and the front door closed.

☆☆

YOU never knew whether or not Sylvie would answer her door. Rika still found it slightly shocking the way Sylvie could just carry on with whatever she was doing, and completely ignore the ringing phone or knocking at the door, and not even be curious who was there. It was like when she was small and used to visit the shy man across the hall from them in their old building, except Sylvie didn't seem to be afraid of anything. Rika had asked, once, why Sylvie hadn't answered the door when she was clearly home earlier that day, but the question just hovered in the air for a moment, then dissolved when Sylvie glanced up from her sewing only to frown and shoo one of the cats away from a battered fern.

The day after the fishing trip, Rika tried four different times without success. She could hear Sylvie moving around in the apartment, the clatter of typewriter keys, the sewing machine's throaty whir. But no one came to the door.

Sylvie's apartment faced a different street than theirs, overlooking a narrow tree-lined side street that filtered the light into her apartment so that the air was always faintly green in the summer, submarine. In the winter charcoal lines shivered and lurched across her walls, shadows flung by the bare branches of the trees that pressed up tight against her

windows. Her troupe of cats could sit for hours, crouched and expectant, mesmerized by the dancing play on the walls, echoing the movements with their tense, switching tails.

The first thing you noticed was the smell. It had two main components: a powdery cosmetic note, something floaty and sweet, mixed with the acrid tang of pet odours. Kitty litter, cat pee, and the congealing plates of food Sylvie scooped out of cans in gelatinous mounds and left on little saucers in different rooms.

After a few visits, Rika noticed that Sylvie rarely seemed to cook, but her fridge and cupboards were always full—there was a dizzying trove of cookies, chips, soda, instant soups in pouches you could just tear open and dip your fingers into, salt burning your tongue. Jars of olives, only the kind Rika liked, with the squishy red bit in the middle. The bags of chips were always family sized, usually a thrilling 3 or 4 bags going at the same time, and often slightly soft and tasting of the air in Sylvie's house.

Other children who occasionally came over to play at Rika's house always commented on the number of books they had—a pair bookcases spilling over in the hallway and vertiginous piles by the beds of both Rika and her mother. Always a few more scattered in the kitchen and dining room, where Rika and her mother liked to eat with books propped up in front of their plates.

Sylvie, however, had even more books than they did, towers and piles and shelves and boxes full, covering most surfaces in her apartment. The coffee table was four piles of over-sized books, covered with a slab of glass. To look at one of them was a precarious endeavor, involving careful balancing and another book to slip in its place in the

meantime. Any space not occupied by a book was either buried under scraps of paper, a dish of cat food, or some costume-like garment in need of repair. Every few weeks, however, Sylvie would suddenly notice the mess and go into a day-long cleaning frenzy, leaving the apartment eerily tidy and bright, stripped of its softening nimbus of cat hair.

Rika was never allowed to help—interfering, according to Sylvie—her only task being to keep out of the way. Once, while she was scrubbing at something embedded in the carpet, she looked up at Rika who was sprawled on the bed with two of the cats, half-asleep, surrounded by dog-eared paperbacks. The best books were in Sylvie's bedroom, stacked haphazardly on a leaning construction of boards and brick. All of her old children's books, her science fiction, fairy tales, and adventure stories, all of these Rika had carte blanche to borrow and return whenever. Sylvie mostly let Rika come over and just wander around, look at books and play with the cats, or lounge in the room where she was working on some project, if it didn't require much concentration. Now she had stopped cleaning and sat back on her heels to watch the girl.

Doesn't your mum mind that you spend so much time here? Surely she must miss you, sitting in your apartment all by herself in the evenings. She works so hard slinging food at that greasy pit, and gets to come home to an empty house. Not that nice, I would imagine.

Sylvie was waiting for an answer. She rubbed the small of her back, and frowned slightly.

When Rika opened her mouth to reply, nothing came out. She closed her mouth and thought about all the ways she could answer Sylvie. The thought of telling someone. Her scalp prickled and she went light all over.

She was talking.

Rika was telling Sylvie about her mother, the scotch and the fighting, her stepfather. When she finished, Sylvie wasn't even looking at her at all. She had gotten up while Rika talked, crossed the room and stood by the window, absently gnawing at a thumbnail. Her silhouette was nearly black against the colourless January twilight.

No fun, hmmmm? was all she came out with after a few minutes, apparently addressing someone on the other side of the window. Sylvie turned then and smiled, bending to flick on a table-lamp. The filthy sponge lay abandoned on the carpet.

Let's get some dinner, eh salamander?

Relief and disappointment filled Rika in equal measure. What had she expected? For Sylvie to wave her glittery wand?

They went to the kitchen, where Sylvie tugged open the fridge and considered the sparse contents.

I can cook, you know.

Sylvie smiled and shook her head.

Not in my house, kid. You're off duty here. You know, I am capable of putting together a fairly nutritious meal.

They finally decided on chopped egg sandwiches with extra mayonnaise and pickles on the side for vegetables.

What are they, Sylvie mused while they stood by the stove, watching the eggs bob and spin in the boiling water.

Surprised, Rika was about to say eggs when Sylvie dreamily continued, and she was glad she hadn't said anything.

How about... three blind fish in a subterranean river, or a gang of old guys swimming at night... a trio of half moons in a starry enamel sky.

Why not ladies?

Sylvie looked at her questioningly.

How about three bald ladies? That would be better. And snorkelling, for the bubbles.

You know what, Rika, you're absolutely right. You're a real poet.

Rika flushed.

And we'll have them swimming in the north sea, since that's what Noordzij means. "Boiling Eggs in a White-flecked Black Pot", for my friend and fellow poet, Rika Noordzij.

And years later, when Rika has almost forgotten that evening, she gets a large brown envelope in the post with her name scrawled in a familiar looping flourish. Inside there is a literary journal, with Sylvie's name in a list of others on the cover, and right on page 11, there it is, complete with the dedication. Her bald women, snorkelling in the North Sea.

☆☆

THE fishing trip seemed like years ago already. The heat just didn't stop, layer upon layer of sweltering damp, coating everything in sticky varnish that warped and yellowed. Rika got to sleep with her mother in the air-conditioned bedroom, her sleeping-bag laid out on the floor under the wheezing vents wedged into the window. When the stepfather came home, it was usually just to pick up clean clothes and he stepped carefully around the girl, who lay, like her mother, not saying anything until the front door closed again.

It was a good summer, too hot to fight. Even too hot to drink, it seemed. Often, those days, her mother came home from the restaurant with some cake or frozen pie for Rika, and they'd curl up on the couch together while her mother had a single scotch and watched the news. Afterwards they'd play cards or Snakes and Ladders until bed. Two weekends in a row she'd had evening shifts and they spent long days going to movies and walking around downtown like tourists. She'd even thought up the fishing trip, after she found out Sylvie used to fish a lot as a girl in the Eastern Townships. Summer camp in the community center downtown had already finished, so her mother was trying to find things for Rika to do until school started again in a few weeks. Sylvie had tried to convince Rika's mother to come too, skip work, Lynn!, but Rika's mother just laughed, slightly pink at Sylvie's insistence.

There were a half dozen fans in Sylvie' apartment, all churning the soupy air at once, cooling nothing. Listless, Rika picked up books, old lipsticks, Sylvie's jewelry box, then put them down again, trying, finally, to rouse one of the drowsing cats with catnip toys, string and a chopstick. When she'd driven it off, battered tail stiff with irritation, Rika sighed and went to see if Sylvie would be free soon.

*Horny old cretin*, muttered Sylvie, rapidly paging through the thick pile of paper on her desk. Her heavy cheeks were faintly mottled and two deep lines framed her mouth. She glanced up at the creak of a floorboard and seemed surprised to see Rika in the doorway. Yawning hugely, she pushed at a fried-looking hank of blond hair, newly dyed, that had fallen from the clump on top of her head, anchored in place with a pencil. It was startling, the first weeks Rika came over, Sylvie's rapidly changing hair colour, but now,

after a year, she was only surprised when Sylvie kept the same shade for more than a couple of weeks.

Still here? Been playing with the cats all this time?

Rika nodded, then crossed the room to lean against Sylvie's chair.

What are you working on?

Oh editing this stupid manuscript for that goat, Shapiro.

Mr. Shapiro was the famous poet Sylvie worked for sometimes, helping with his paperwork, editing poems, arranging readings, even working out his messy finances. He was apparently pretty ancient, and fought with everyone who ever worked for him. According to Sylvie there wasn't another woman in the city who would take the job (including his new wife, number five), and he refused to work with men. It was the challenge, Sylvie explained, that kept her at it—plus the fact that the old fart left his chequebook out all the time. Rika never mentioned that part to her mother.

What's horny mean?

It means, Sylvie paused and reached over to gently bat Rika's hand from her mouth. Sylvie hated to see people gnawing at themselves. She grinned and looked Rika in the eye:

It means he doesn't have the sense to know he's a smelly old pompous fool and shouldn't be chasing after girls young enough to be his granddaughters, never mind writing dated, lecherous drivel about it.

Rika didn't quite understand what Sylvie meant, but she could tell it was supposed to be humourous, so she snickered loudly, casting a scornful glance at the manuscript covered in Sylvie's red pencil marks.

What are you doing in here on such a nice day, anyway. Shouldn't you be off with a gang of pre-teens somewhere, tormenting witless beasts and making smaller kids cry? What happened to your new roller-skates?

Rika shrugged. Don't feel like it.

*Don't feel like it,* Sylvie mimicked savagely, and made a face.

The girl hesitated, then pulled the damp wedge of paper and unfolded it, careful not to tear it where it had worn thin at the creases.

I wrote something—

Sylvie raised her eyebrows.

That's wonderful! Why didn't you tell me you were working on something, you sneaky thing? Come on then, let's hear it.

Rika stood up straighter and waited a moment, like the poets she had seen at a reading Sylvie once brought her to. Eyes fixed on a spot just beyond Sylvie's left shoulder, the girl recited the poem quickly, then shoved the paper back in her pocket. Scooping up one of the cats, she buried her face in its patchy fur and waited for Sylvie to say something.

Wow. You must have been practicing a lot in private. Sounds pretty polished. You'll have to let me see more of your stuff, sometime.

Rika was waiting for more, but Sylvie had turned back to the pile of paper in front of her and anchored her sliding hair more securely with a pen. Something shook out its wings in the girl's stomach and she let the squirming cat drop to the floor. Her face grew warm. Sylvie rifled through the pages rapidly until she found the place she'd stopped working, then looked up, holding her red pencil like a pointer.

I don't want your mom thinking I'm turning her kid into an anemic little mole—why don't you scram for a while, get some colour in your cheeks. Isn't that what people always say? If you take off now, I'll show you some new sci-fi I picked up at that shop, later. And maybe... just maybe if I'm good and finish all this work, we'll go on an adventure.

Rika was clattering out the door in seconds. They hadn't had an adventure in ages! It meant Sylvie with all her makeup on (even the gold or silver eyeshadow—with a tiny smudge for Rika) and her cloak, possibly even one of her hats, and them sailing down the street hand in hand on the lookout for something good. Sometimes they just ended up eating ice cream sandwiches in the park, Sylvie reciting dirty limericks between licks, but sometimes they'd happen on something truly extraordinary. There was the woman with the long long hair, down to her knees, dancing in the crumbling theatre on Monkland avenue. It had been a free performance, and the theatre was only half full, but everyone there had seemed utterly rapt, the hall silent except for the slap of the woman's bare feet on the stage and her catching breath. It was the pictures Rika had seen in National Geographic, the dervish priests whirling and ecstatic, the blurred, damp faces giving off light.

☆☆

THERE was a game they played. Well, a game Sylvie seemed to like and Rika wasn't sure she minded. It had started with the elaborate outfits Sylvie began sewing for Rika's Barbie soon after they met, though Rika had long ceased to play regularly with the battle-scarred doll.

There, Sylvie had murmured, giving a final tug to straighten the pink and black flamenco dancer dress, frothy tiers of lace on candy-hued satin. Rika reached for the

Barbie despite herself, entranced by the intricate costume. Even when she had occasionally played Barbies with an older girl in her building, years ago, there had never been much emphasis on the outfits. Most of their games involved the doll being naked, or clad in a tissue paper dress that could be easily ripped off by an attacker.

Now don't let all those girls wreck that with their grubby paws. When you take it to sleepovers, make sure you put the outfit away nicely before someone makes off with it, or the dog barfs on it. Sylvie stared at the girl almost accusingly, eyes swimming behind her thick glasses, and rose abruptly to begin cleaning up her sewing table.

At first Rika had been genuinely confused. What girls? She had never even been invited to a sleepover. When she'd been quite small there was a boy she'd loved who lived in their building, but, like the older girl she'd played Barbies with, his family moved away after only a year. There were two kids who lived around the corner she occasionally played with, less and less since they went to different schools and Rika began to get irritated by their age difference, no longer willing to indulge their endless make-believe sessions. Generally, it was just easier not to invite anyone home anyway, since she never knew if her mother might be there, and if so, what state she'd be in.

The next outfit was something Sylvie called "damsel in distress," a multi-layered silk and tapestry affair complete with conical hat that kept slipping off Barbie's crew-cut head. She'd gotten the idea leafing through a history text at the office where she was supposed to be working for a few weeks.

Now if your rowdy friends wreck this one too, you just bring it back for repairs. But really, try to be more careful this time. If they want to borrow your things, you tell them they have to treat them properly! I'm not a factory, you know.

This time Rika was ready.

OK Sylvie, she nodded. I'll tell them.

Sylvie handed her the doll and tugged one of the girl's braids. So whose birthday do is it this weekend?

Rika willingly invented an elaborate afternoon at MacDonald's and a video arcade, followed by roller-skating at a rink with disco lights and music.

Sounds awful. Sylvie shook her head. I'm sure you'll love it. Now scat, I bet it's way past your bedtime.

When she went over the next afternoon, Sylvie didn't seem to remember that Rika was supposed to be eating french fries with "Amanda" and the other girls. She just let Rika in and gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze, before going back to her tiny study off the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

It had occurred to Rika, when she first started to go over to Sylvie's regularly after school, to complain to about the teasing, the way she was largely shunned at the wealthy school she ended up attending due to a zoning fluke and her mother's conviction that she'd get a better education. The more she thought about it, though... It was too frightening to imagine what Sylvie could come up with. She was afraid of no-one it seemed, didn't care at all what people thought of her. When mad about something, Rika discovered, Sylvie would do just about anything.

One afternoon soon after they moved in, Rika and her mother had been on their way home from the grocery store, when they saw Sylvie across the street in front of the drycleaner's, screaming at a short man who screamed back, shaking his fists in Sylvie's red face. Dried leaves scuttled around their feet, like dust clouds enveloping warring cartoon

characters. Rika couldn't quite make out what they were saying, and tried to dawdle, but her mother grabbed her firmly by the hand, hustling them into the building.

They weren't speaking English, were they mum? Rika handed her mother a can of tomatoes to put away. She couldn't tell if her mother knew what had been going on. Her mother just shook her head and didn't answer. Later that night, however, when Rika brought it up again, her mother told her about Sylvie's ongoing battle with Mr.Papadopolis, the drycleaner, over a stained coat. Sylvie had apparently been practicing with Greek tapes and a dictionary she'd taken from the library and had come up with complicated insults that seemed to completely enrage the tiny drycleaner. Rika couldn't see how this would get him to fix Sylvie's coat.

Sometimes Sylvie would come back upstairs with Rika in the evening, bring her mother homemade iced tea or a book she might like, and they would chat for half an hour or so, mostly in the doorway. Rika's mother rarely invited anyone in, but she seemed to like hearing Sylvie's stories, and often told them to Rika later.

Amusement mingled with something cautious in her mother's voice as she'd recount tales of Sylvie impersonating people to cancel their credit cards, re-routing their mail to Inuvik, putting their houses up for sale, ordering elaborate Chinese dinners and forging signatures, sending religious canvassers over by the dozen. One time she'd even called in an anonymous tip on a hit and run she'd witnessed, giving the police the license plate number of a former boss she'd memorised for just such an occasion.

Rika listened to these stories, ears burning, moist palms clamped under each arm. How could you have the courage to do such things? How angry you must be to go through with it. She thought of the time she'd hit Sabrina Demchuk over the head with her lunchbox and the endless, shimmering moment of terror, watching Sabrina crumple

and slide silently to the sidewalk, before colour flooded her cheeks and, to Rika's breathless relief, she let out a shriek.

Nodding fervently when her mother giggled after telling her all this the first time, a bit uncomfortable, saying they should make sure never to cross Sylvie! They'd only known her a few weeks then, but it was something you understood right off the bat with Sylvie. Her mother took another sip of her drink and drew Rika closer on the couch.

I shouldn't be telling you this stuff anyway. Give you weird ideas. You know, anyway, Sylvie's really not a bad person, just sort of...unhappy. But smart as hell. God. All those clothes she makes! Wish I was half that talented. And she's so good to you, isn't she.

Rika's mother smiled mistily then, draining her glass. She considered her daughter, head cocked to one side, and narrowed her eyes playfully.

You listen to too much, don't you, sugarbum.

Rika wriggled free then, before her mother could start crying, saying what a lousy parent she was, or worse, get angry and start saying awful things about Rika's long-gone father, or start a fight if the stepfather happened to come home. The best scenario was for her to simply finish off the whole bottle and have to be dragged to bed, or at least tucked in on the couch for the night.

I'm going out to skate around before bed, she called out over her shoulder, escaping down the hall. Her mother on the couch going wherever it was that she went most nights, dissolving like candle wax.

☆☆

THE heat finally broke the week before school. Sylvie had started coming over most evenings to visit with Rika's mother, sometimes coming just as the stepfather was leaving again for the evening. Whether he had work or not, the stepfather generally came home at about suppertime, sometimes picking Rika's mother up from work. He would shower, change into clean clothes that he had carefully pressed, then leave again—for the evening, for the night, occasionally for days at a time.

Sylvie never asked Rika about him, but was extremely polite when their paths crossed, detaining the stepfather sometimes as long as 15 minutes as he fidgeted on the stairs or in the doorway, wherever she'd caught him. She seemed to have an endless series of questions: about the origins of his name, recipes from his country, discussing weather patterns and the role of women in his culture.

It's very matriarchal, isn't it, all those powerful grannies, holding the family together, working till they're ninety, full of knowledge about everything from farming to traditional medicine. You must miss your mother very much. And your kids.

Her smile always impenetrable, standing in his path, so he'd have to edge sideways round her to make his escape. The stepfather would curse her behind her back, but was never able to be less than affable to anyone outside his family.

Why don't she have a man, anyway? he fumed one night, after Sylvie had been there four evenings in a row. Why mus' she always be hangin' roun' here chattin all de time? She hate men or sometin? Sometin not right about dat woman. He stood in the doorway of the living room, giving his belt buckle an irritable yank as he finished dressing. And how da *fuck* she know about my kids. What de *ras clot* business of hers is dat.

Rika's mother said nothing. The newscaster continued to speak in measured tones, describing a military coup somewhere faraway, dusty and feverish. The girl was lying at her

feet, looking at a new library book, careful not to move or indicate that she was listening. Something vibrated in the air for a moment, making it precarious, a construction of spun glass.

Then the stepfather sucked his teeth loudly and slammed out of the house. Rika turned the page in her book and her mother picked up the empty glass beside her, then put it down. She switched channels when the news was finished to another channel showing a documentary about polar bears. She turned up the volume slightly, then patted the couch, so the girl climbed up, wedging herself into the crook of her mother's arm. A tremor ran through the hand on her hair, then it was still.

☆☆

IT was almost impossible to see them, a fine, irregular rash of bites scattered across her belly and dotting both ankles. She scratched for a whole day, absent-mindedly digging her fingers into the woolly blue school socks, rubbing at the front of her tunic uniform. During French class the verbs jittered and scattered on the page, impossible to translate or conjugate, itchy bits of ink that refused to sit still.

She supposed they were from the cats though she hadn't played with them much lately. The last time Rika was over, two of the older ones had slunk away from her caresses, distracted and irritated by the new, bitter smelling collars around their necks. Sylvie almost never answered her door anymore, and the girl rarely tried, going down once in while mostly out of habit. Last week she'd sat on the front stairs talking to Rika for a few minutes, watched while the girl showed her how she could skate backwards and lift one leg and keep her balance. Sylvie didn't have much to say, except to mention, when she

stretched and stood up to go in, that's she hadn't been feeling well, and was working on a big project, so she wouldn't be free to visit for a while.

Rika noticed it right after the dinner Sylvie made for them a few weeks ago, to celebrate her entering high school. Rika's mother had been strangely reluctant about going.

The girl had watched her mother getting ready to go downstairs, brushing her hair so it hung dead straight down her back, in a staticky ginger cloud. Frowning into the mirror, she put on a plastic hairband that made her look much younger, like someone's sister, and rubbed a bit of rouge on each cheek. She muttered something, then tore off the headband and swiftly gathered her hair into a knot, skewering it in place with a large barrette. She hesitated, then grabbed her perfume and dabbed some on each wrist.

I just think socializing with neighbours is a mistake. Chatting in the doorway once in a while is fine, but no more. Asking for trouble.

Rika hadn't said anything and had no reply to this. She just watched her mother stride over to the closet to pull out a baggy sweater to wear over the scoop neck t-shirt that showed her breasts when she bent over.

Well then, let's go get this over with, come on. Her mother just stood there, though, arms folded until Rika got up and went to put on her shoes.

How come you said yes then, Rika ventured as her mother locked the door.

No pockets in this thing. Her mother patted the sides of her long denim skirt, then handed the keys to Rika. They were only going down one floor, but her mother went over to the elevator and stabbed the button. She didn't say anything until the elevator clanked to a stop one floor down.

Good question. I don't know. It seemed so important to her... and she's so... I'm just shitty at saying no, I guess. She took the girl's hand as they stood in front of Sylvie's apartment, waiting for her to come to the door.

It had been strange, sitting at Sylvie's kitchen table with her mother, eating pot roast and vegetables that came out of Sylvie's oven. Rika hadn't even known it worked. Sylvie did most of the talking, telling the girl's mother about a play she'd seen, about a group of women artists who live on a farm together and something about emancipation and healing, but Rika found it hard to follow. Her mother just nodded and after a few mouthfuls of food, laid her knife and fork neatly on the side of her plate, pressing her lips together.

"Lynn! You can't be finished already! Come on...just another few bites, you'll blow away in a stiff wind, you're so thin." Rika had never seen Sylvie like this, her cheeks dark pink and eyes brilliant behind her smeary glasses. Tendrils of dark brown hair escaped from the elaborate mass on her head, curling against her neck. She had looked, just at that moment, pretty.

The girl knew that scratching any kind of bite just made it itch worse, but she kept forgetting, immersed in the book she kept hidden from the teacher just under the lip of her desktop. She'd suddenly be aware of a stinging and find that she'd scratched her ankles raw while reading. Just as she was about to finish her chapter and slip the book back into her desk, she became aware of an expectant silence around her. Looking up, Rika saw that most of the class was staring at her, and her stomach clenched, waiting for the hand to swoop from behind her to confiscate the book. But the teacher was still at the front of the class, with a tall woman standing next to her, looking at Rika.

Awkwardly slipping the book away, Rika stood, then advanced quickly when the teacher beckoned her with an impatient frown. The other children snickered and a rustling followed the girl all the way to the front of the class. The woman nodded at the girl and revealed a mouthful of long yellow teeth.

Let's just go out into the hallway for a bit, shall we Rika? Have a little talk?

This woman knew her name. There was an enormous gold-coloured brooch in the shape of a teddy bear on the label of the woman's green jacket. Rika shook her head when the woman asked if she'd prefer to go outside, maybe sit on the steps. The woman had moist grey eyes and blinked rapidly, a rabbit thrust suddenly into the light.

Well. I'm Mrs.Grimanis and I was told you might like to talk to somebody... maybe you're having some problems at home, need a friendly ear?

Rika had no idea what this woman wanted from her. There was a roaring in her ears, drowning out the rest of the rabbity woman's words. She tried a vague smile, turning her head slightly to avoid the woman's sour coffee breath, then studied the scuffed toes of her sneakers. The bites throbbed, but she resisted the impulse to scratch.

Ok, Ok then. I can see you're feeling shy. I'm pretty shy too you know! But we will have to have a little talk soon. Make sure everything's fine at home. We're going to have to have a chat with your mother, you know. And you can still have a chance to talk to me alone, then. But sometimes kids find it easier to talk to me one-on-one beforehand, when other grownups aren't around. Maybe there's something about your mom you'd like to talk about, maybe something that gives you a funny feeling...

In bed that night, the girl counted as she waited for sleep to wash up over her, weighting her eyes and mouth with its grainy accumulation. Windows in the building

across the street, squares of pavement between the front stairs and the corner store, the number of seconds she could hold her breath, steps between her apartment and Sylvie's, how many times the elevator sank and rose to their floor before the stepfather's key turned smoothly in the lock.

☆☆

WHY didn't you *tell* me.

Her mother spoke through her teeth, squeezing the girl's hand tightly in her own. They were almost late for the appointment, her mother striding down the sidewalk so fast it was like Rika was four again, struggling to keep up on short legs. They passed sagging, once stately houses that demarcated the end of the wealthy residential area, and the beginning of downtown, where the Social Services office was located. Her mother had had to leave work early and pick Rika up from school.

That crazy *bitch*. You *realise* who did this, don't you? Her mother didn't even look at the girl, squinting straight ahead, as if she were aiming them at a red and white target somewhere on the horizon. They flew down the block, followed, Rika imagined, by a pack of winged monkeys, heartlessly spurred on by the cackling woman in a cloak and pointed hat.

A fucking *phone call* out of the blue. At work. Thanks Rika. Thanks very much.

There was no room in this for her to cry, Rika knew, and blinked rapidly, swallowing a hot ribbon of snot. The sidewalk gleamed through her watery vision, shiny things trapped in the concrete swelling and refracting, filling up her whole sight.

There was something about this block, about the row of houses they were passing. A memory within a memory, trapped and reflecting like a series of mirror images

retreating ever backwards. Each level murkier than the last, rimmed in thickening turquoise. The girl remembered rushing past these houses, remembered remembering that she had done so before. It was not that she hadn't taken this very route countless times in the past few years—it is the way to the metro from her daycamp. But something about the light today, and her mother's grip, about hurtling past. They soon reached the end of the houses, however, and the moment was gone, only the lingering sense of some narrowly avoided misery, smelling of old linoleum and rotting plant shoots in jars of thick water.

A tunnel of office buildings, of beige and grey stone, isolated lozenges of slanting sun breaking up the deep shadow. There was an elevator and hallways, expanses of nubby orange carpet under the flickering buzz of fluorescent tube lights. When they reached the right door, finally, Mrs. Grimanis was waiting, came out from behind her desk to shake the mother's hand.

Mrs. Noordzij! I'm so glad you could make it today.

Did I have a choice?

...a choice? Mrs. Grimanis hesitated, glanced at the girl, then back at the mother, her teeth retreating once more behind her lips.

Sorry—I mean. Excuse me. The mother drew the girl closer, so that she stood with her back pressed to her mother's stomach. Brightly coloured posters on the walls, and a row of stuffed animals on the radiator. Despite the mild fall afternoon, the heating was on, and the girl got a whiff of something sharp, vinegary, mixed with her mother's perfume.

Please sit. Mrs. Grimanis waved at the chairs facing the desk and retreated to her own, smiling again, but without any teeth.

I understand how difficult this must be—no file, I checked, of course—first visit. Well. We just want to make sure that everything is as it should be. So hard, nowadays—mothers working, families scattered. Sometimes we need a little—help.

Paid vacation and a maid is more what I would have chosen.

Oh. Mmmm—Mrs.Noordzij, maybe we should talk about why we're having this meeting.

After Sylvie had taken their half-eaten dishes away, she pulled a huge tub of ice cream from the freezer, and against the mother's protests, fixed them all heaping bowls with chocolate syrup and chopped nuts. Handing Rika her bowl, Sylvie gave her a pat on the bum and grinned.

Why don't you go see what I have for you in my room. Leave the boring old grownups to talk for a bit.

Um, we can't stay too much longer, Sylvie, Rika has school in the—

Lynn! Eat your dessert and let the kid play. This is her last night of freedom before the Big Leagues. High school's stressful. Let her have fun.

Careful not to meet her mother's eye, the girl had poured more syrup on her ice cream and left the room.

Rika?

Mrs. Grimanis seemed to be waiting for the girl to say something. The gold teddy bear on her lapel flashed as she leaned forward to pick up her coffee cup.

I know this is hard dear, but we really—

She touched my bum once.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and the social worker's moist gaze darted rapidly between the girl and her mother.

Would you like your mom to wait out—

It was Sylvie. Rika sat up straighter in the wooden chair and stared at the row of leaning animals below the windowsill. She wondered if it could melt the fur, if the radiator got really hot in the winter.

She sews stuff for me and I have to get undressed. And one time she touched me for a second and my mother walked in and caught her and they had a big fight, that's why Sylvie's so mad at us.

Well. Mrs. Grimanis put down the cup, and straightened the papers in front of her. Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

I never *said* who made the—who called us. I mean. It's *anonymous*, you see, dear. The point is just to make sure—

Also my mum said that Sylvie didn't mean it badly, only she doesn't have any kids and she's lonely, plus her uncle wasn't very nice to her when she was little, so she just got confused. We decided it was best if I didn't go visit Sylvie on my own anymore. It was really sad, because she was always really nice to me before that.

For a moment Rika almost believed it, watching the social worker scribbling furiously to get it all down. The cobbled-together bits of overheard conversations, when Sylvie and her mother hadn't thought she was listening, like the time Sylvie had come over in tears when she got news her uncle had died, and Rika, who was supposed to be in bed, had crouched in the hall and listened for hours.

She almost believed her story, watching the social worker write, until she caught her mother's eye, the wild relief and surprise and sadness there, and something else,

something like the time she'd taken the afternoon off to teach Rika to ride her new bike, but the girl had been practicing in secret all week, and sailed off before her mother even realized she'd let go.

When she'd gone into Sylvie's room with her ice cream, that night before school started, there were two new books waiting for her on the bed, and the girl immediately climbed up and settled against the pillows to look them over, careful not to drip syrup, engrossed in dragons and wizards and girls with telepathic powers. It was only on her way out that she'd noticed it, the worn, leather-bound volume face down by the bed. Sylvie had many old books like this, mostly kept in a glass cabinet in her study, they were so delicate. Rika had been about to shut it carefully and put it back with the others, when the something on the page caught her eye.

*I wandered lonely as a cloud.* It was her poem! When she'd been flipping through an old school textbook of her mother's, it had caught her eye—better than any of the stuff Sylvie had showed her in magazines and friends' collections. This rhymed and sounded old. It had been bothering her lately, how Sylvie often referred to her as a writer, but she never had anything to show her. Rika hadn't thought it possible that anyone would know a poem from a dusty textbook—even her mother hadn't recognized it when the girl read it out loud, saying she was practicing for school.

After placing the book carefully back where she found it, pulse thudding in her ears, the girl had stood for a few moments, clutching the sticky ice cream bowl. Something like a sunburn covered her face and chest, so that she wished she could lift off the skin, escape the hot tightness.

There was no way to slip out without anyone seeing. She would just say goodnight and run out before anyone could stop her. Sylvie wouldn't care and she could just tell her mother later that she had a stomach ache.

Oh Lynn...please, *don't.*

The girl had stopped short in the dark hallway, apparently invisible to the two women in the kitchen. Rika's mother was shaking her head, pushing away Sylvie's hand that had been resting on her shoulder. She had taken a wrong turn, somehow, on her way back. There was something entirely different about the kitchen, as if each object had been moved one centimetre, or painted a slightly different shade. Like those dreams of people or places that are supposed to be one thing, but in fact are another: your room is actually in a hospital, that woman is not your aunt. Or, the girl realised, as if there had been some large object, a chair or a painting, that had been there all along, and she'd somehow never seen it before. The poem was suddenly insubstantial, a distant babyish thing, easily dismissed.

Sylvie's face had changed as Rika's mother kept shaking her head and stood up quickly. The pained brightness disappeared and it was Sylvie's normal face again, but with a look Rika recognized. Abstracted, paper-smooth. The mother's words, her halting apology as she edged backwards from the table, the words just melted, or perhaps they froze, little flakes of crystallised water that floated towards Sylvie and then disappeared.

**Boiling Eggs in a White-flecked Black Pot**
*for Rika Noordzij*

Bald women are snorkelling
in the north sea
where an ice floe breaking
up awakens
white blind fishes in a sub-
terranean river
on a strange world
where three slim crescents
of moonlight float
among the flecked enamel
stars.