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**Sun:  
A Novella**

**Sarah Venart**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Sun: A Novella

Sarah Venart

This manuscript examines what it means for a child to find herself suspended between the desire for the truth about her origins and herself and the fear of autonomy that that truth may bring. I portray this tension in the central character, Meryl Leare, as she learns the lessons of origin, truth, love and hate from her manipulative and unstable mother, Julia Leare, a summer tourist-cum-resident and also the pariah of Garvey, a fictional tourist town on New Brunswick's Fundy Coast.

Meryl witnesses disturbing events from the windows and doorways in both her community and her home. As these settings fluctuate both emotionally (through the actions of her mother) and physically (as the logging industry wipes away the forested areas around Garvey and as the shores of the Bay of Fundy do what shores do – erode with each day's tide), Meryl seeks solace and comfort in what little control she can exercise on this environment. These secretive acts of control allow her to explore her station in the community and in her home and become the grounds for her eventual reflection on difference, responsibility and loyalty.

As Meryl lives the events of a summer that changed her life, she comes to understand the actions she witnessed and how they affected her in the following years.

*For P.*

## *Prologue*

I saw Aisling seven years later. It was August and I'd just turned seventeen. It was during the weeklong lobster festival; the booths that had been set up for the tourists were closing for the night as I drove down Main Street in Garvey. I was coming out of Hoegg's Quickmart. I recognised him right away; he was walking away from his father's booth, lifting his apron over his head. The apron was red with the words *Pane's Lobster Stop* on the front.

Aisling, I said. Hey.

He looked at me and paused a moment, trying to place me. Then his face changed, his mouth closed and his black hair swished forward over his eyes.

Meryl, he said. He walked towards me and then stopped.

Are you finished here? Can I drive you home?

He answered that home was a little far, a little out of my way.

I don't mind, I said. Come on.

We didn't go right away. First I put the milk I'd come to town to buy in the car and we walked down to the pier. We sat, our feet dangling heavily over the edge, for a long time not saying anything. Below us, the tide was halfway out and I looked down at all the muddy garbage in the water.

We talked about what we'd done since we were ten.

Do you still hate dulce? he asked.

How did you know?

That time on my birthday. I could tell.

You're right. I've never cared for it.

We talked about safe things, things that we knew we'd both been through in the last seven years. We talked about school.

Remember that eclipse in grade five? Aisling asked.

I nodded, remembering that we'd had learned how the sun over our heads wasn't just an innocent yellow ball. It was a gas ball, constantly exploding. We learned that if you stared at it during an eclipse, you'd go blind.

Aisling said, We built that gadget so we could see it happen.

Right, I said. I remembered he and I'd shared a viewer and watched the world go dark.

But think what they were saving in the wings for grade six, Aisling said.

What? I asked.

Those films we saw in school. Nuclear war and all that. Did you see those?

We had, but I'd forgotten how we'd been taught to survive disaster, to prepare for the worst. All that prediction and apocalyptic dread.

We were driving past Dennis Beach when he said, Wait. I have to take a piss.

I slowed and pulled over. He left the car and slammed the door behind him.

When his long body loped in front of the headlights and then cut out into the dark, I looked out at the poplars on the roadside and remembered I'd been here before with my mother. It was during a snowstorm and she'd stopped the car and gone out to fix the



wipers. She'd stumbled through the drifts on the road and then she was in front of the car, smacking the windshield to clear it. For a split second, we made eye contact and stared at each other like two strangers. Then the moment was over, the wipers were loose again and I was looking beyond my mother at the same poplars I stared at now, waiting for Aisling. They'd looked like silver toothpicks then. Now they were full of leaves.

Before Aisling came back to the car, I got out.

Let's go down to the beach for a while, I said.

We took our sneakers off and moved through the dark, each step we took toward the water a careful one. When we felt the slime of seaweed under our feet, we shivered and dared each other to be the first one into the waves, rolling our jeans, giggling as we waded into the salty water.

It was dark and at some point we lost each other and yelled into the roar and the dark, Where are you? Where are you?

I was silent, feeling giddy as I waited for him to find me. When headlights came along the road above the beach, the light swooped out over the water and for that glaring second, we stared at each other, our lips blue in the light. Our arms, extended and searching, dropped as quickly as if we'd been caught doing something wrong.

After, we lay on the sand and talked.

I told him about Kara because although he'd still been here then, he'd been concerned with bigger things.

He said, Tell me your happiest memory with her. What you remember.

I said it was the night Kara had taken my mother and me on the roof for the meteor shower. She pulled a mattress out there and we lay, exhausted and sweaty until

the night cooled us off. I was between them, both of them playing with my hair. They were being silly, pretending to argue about who I looked like and they kept saying that I looked like Brian, I looked like Steven, I looked like Brent, I looked like -- men that my mother had dated in college at Hillson. But it didn't matter that night who my father was. It was enough to be warm and between the two of them, their fingers running through my hair. I loved that I was there and the ocean sounded so close it felt like it was crashing in front of us and there was a breeze passing over us when we fell asleep.

It's funny, you know, I said. I don't even remember the meteors. It seemed they were just an excuse to sleep outdoors together.

Aisling's hand brushed against mine in the sand. I'd like to think that he felt like I felt then. I'd missed him. I wanted him back in my life. I'd always thought that when I saw him again we'd talk about that summer when we were ten and all that happened in it and somehow things would be made right. I'd thought that we would work together and come up with something: a neat plain answer that blamed no one.

I drove him home. On the highway, we passed the six oil storage tanks, hunkered down like a row of mammoth fathers in white coats, the letters I-R-V-I-N-E on them, one letter per tank. The first tank, the big red letter *I*, made me miss Kara. It wasn't only the fact that the letters on those tanks spelled out her family's name. They announced the Irvine's power and notoriety and wealth in our area but for me they were now also a reminder that all that money and power she'd been born into had been useless in finding her. So I couldn't go by those tanks without thinking of Kara and the hard reality that power is useless when someone chooses to disappear. Sometimes I'd catch myself hoping Kara was just playing a game of hiding, that she was being like a kid playing an

extended game of hide and seek and that one day she'd give up and come back to us. It was easier than thinking she really was gone from the world.

As we drove toward the city, I wanted to tell Aisling about Kara and how the grief of everything that had happened had left me divided, but I didn't know how to say that without bringing up everything. It was as if I'd been split in two pieces: before summer and after it. One half was the good things: my mother, shielding her eyes and turning in the sun as she tanned; Kara, restored and surfing the crest of a wave; the safe haven the Kinghorns had been; and Aisling too. The other half was darker: my mother, wrapped in that old fur coat in her closet; Mr. Pane dancing me down our hallway at that last party; Kara's wind-surfer upended, empty in the water.

***May***

*Hike up your skirt a little more  
And show the world to me.*

**Dave Matthews Band**  
*Crash Into Me*

She got out of the car, holding the edge of the door as she squinted up at the sun. Looks good, she said.

Where *were* you? I demanded. I'd been waiting, kicking at the dandelions that grew around the pebbling concrete of our front steps for what seemed like forever. I'd started to feel deserted.

Hey, Pie. She was still looking up when she slapped a hand on her stomach and said, Fat, fat, fat.

When she remembered I was there, she said, Oh. Brought you something. My mother held out a silver bag of salt and vinegar chips and I ran for it.

While my mother was inside changing, I set up her aluminium lounge chair. The joints where it folded were sticky and I pulled hard to get it to open. I looked up at the sun, looking for the best position. Beyond our front yard were the rock garden and the Kinghorn's house and beyond that the silent road, the traffic of lumber trucks silenced because it was noon and the truckers were at the Bigstop in Garvey eating hot sandwiches and peas and fries. I was hungry and wanted that too: an open slice of Wonderbread and a grey hamburger patty, over-cooked canned peas that were sweet and mushy.

Across the road, between the Marram grass and the grey wall of water, the beach had been swallowed by high tide. I moved the chair a little to the left and sat down to eat

my chips. A long bird sound made me look out to where the seagulls circled above the water and a grey one dove straight down towards the waves, bawling all the way.

I kept the empty chip bag pulled over my hand like a glove. I waved it at my mother when I opened the screen door.

It's all set up out there, I said.

What d'you want for a job well done, Sad Crab? My mother stood at the sink, drinking a glass of water in a yoga position, one tanned leg akimbo, its foot flat and balanced against the side of her other leg. She wore the pink bikini, the one with the parrots, and her red hair was pulled high in a ponytail.

I'm not a sad crab, I said.

Listen to this one. A horse walks into a bar, she began. She filled the glass with more water from the tap.

And the bartender says, *Why the long face?* I finished. I knew it already.

Uh-huh. She tapped her fingers on the counter where I'd put everything: the tanning reflector she'd ordered from a mail-order company in California; a greasy economy-sized bottle of baby oil; and a fat secret novel from the bookmobile she'd disguised with a quilted book cover.

You'd think I was going somewhere. She lit a cigarette and waved the smoke away with one hand.

What?

You'd think you wanted me to leave. She pouted.

Be serious, I said.

Before my mother left the kitchen, she positioned the fly-speckled radio on the windowsill so she could hear it outside in the yard.

The kitchen smelled like lemon because I was washing the floor. I'd tied back my hair in a red silk scarf that smelled like her hair because it was her scarf. At the sink, I let the water run and get hot. I stood on my toes to see out the window and saw my mother out there. I liked that she was where I could see her. I remembered an experiment we'd done at school: we'd each taken turns standing in our classroom doorway and pushing our hands against the doorframe as hard as we could. Each time, when we stepped out of the doorframe, our arms floated up on their own accord, lighter somehow. When my mother was late or missing like she'd been earlier that morning, that's what it had felt like. When she hadn't come back and it was noon and then one o'clock, I couldn't clean the kitchen anymore. Instead I ran up to the balcony off my mother's room and pushed open the door so I could see everything for miles around, so I could see our yard and the Kinghorn's house and the beach and the road in both directions and the ocean below the road with little white caps on the brown stretch of it. The balcony was the only place to be in the lightness of her absence, when everything around me became trivial and shallow. Up there on the white peeling balcony, in all that space, I felt that if I moved, something bad would happen: I'd fall over the edge or I'd float away. I'd crouched down against the railing because the view was frightening and too wide, but necessary: it was the place where I could see everything. I crouched and looked out, frozen with waiting. The lack of my mother and the emptiness around me was enormous when she could be anywhere. I was up high so I could see as much as possible, so I could see the Irvine Big Stop far away

and tiny to my left and the open arm of the Inlet to my right. I couldn't trust anything else but the road I knew my mother would come back on. Until she came back, until I saw our diesel Rabbit rattling over the hump on the Inlet Road and knew we were both okay, I sat absolutely still, my face between the railing, and waited. And when the relief of seeing our car broke over me, it was like I woke up suddenly. I looked down at my two white hands clutched frozen on my knees like they weren't mine. I looked at the quicks of my nails, bloodied and bitten, and couldn't remember biting them.

But my mother didn't know this about me because I ran down the stairs and went out on the veranda before our car turned in the driveway.

I watched my mother through the window and brushed my finger under the water tap to check if it was hot enough. The grass outside was brown and burnt-looking and my mother seemed unfairly calm out there. I watched her drop the reflector and look back over her shoulder at the house and knew she wanted something. I knew it was too bright for her to see me in the window watching her out there. I studied her and waited for her to call out. I could see under her lawn chair, the backs of her thighs pushed softly out between the plastic weave of the seat.

Look at her fat, I said to the empty kitchen. I knew it wasn't true but I wished it were because I knew she thought about things like that.

When my mother yelled my name, I reached to push the hot water tap on full blast to drown it, but heard my name anyway, stretched out: Mer-yllll! Mer-yl!

When I went to her, my body making a large shadow over her in the bright sun.

What? I asked.



Don't say *what* like that. She looked up from the reflector that reflected the hidden freckles under her chin. One tanned foot with pink toenails dangled over the side of the chair.

I ignored her. Any truckers honked at you?

Funny, ha, ha. She sat up. Hey, look. She reached over one shoulder to point at a black-fly bite between the freckles. I can't see what that is. Can you look?

I wanted to go back inside. It's nothing, I said.

It feels like something. She moved the reflector and it bounced a bright flash of sun into my face. I'm *thirsty*, Pie.

I want a dollar, I said. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jean shorts; I felt I'd cleaned all morning and she hadn't even noticed. You asked me what I wanted, remember? You said, What do you want for a job well done. Remember?

Since when do ten-year-olds tell their mother what to do? I never said anything about a dollar. A quarter, *maybe*. *Maybe*. She pushed her sunglasses back up. In each lens was a reflection of a tiny sun. My drink, she added. C'mon.

I knew what she wanted was in the fridge: a pink vodka drink in a pitcher marked *Adults only!* I'd tasted it anyway. It was sweet with a metallic aftertaste.

*You can't stop the lover boy*, my mother sang with the radio on the windowsill behind us. Her mouth spread into a wide, good smile. *I love this song*, she sighed. When you go in, turn it up.

Come *on*, Pie. She waved her hand in front of my face and I snapped out of it. I'd been staring at her breasts, oiled in their bright bikini cups, thinking they looked like dinner rolls waiting to be baked.

My mother's real job was teaching piano and, some days, teaching music at different schools in the area, but we were heading out to do her other job. The back seat was full of Mary Kay stuff: gift baskets and boxes and a pink leatherette trunk full of tiny perfume samples and doll-sized lipsticks.

She'd left an empty coffee mug rolling on the floor and a full ashtray so I carried these into the kitchen and dumped them. I peeled an air freshener open and hung it on the rear-view mirror to make things smell good fast. Then I just fastened my seatbelt, folded my hands and waited for her to come out.

I looked out the windshield. The rain came in at a slant and our house looked about to blow over. Our house leans like the pine trees around it, pushed back by squalls that whip up and try to flatten everything. Like all the cottages on Inlet Road, it's a narrow place, but ours is different because it's red and because it has a veranda that wraps around the bottom and a second floor with a balcony that sags off one of the upper windows.

I didn't like going out on the balcony unless it was foggy. If it wasn't foggy, I could see the top of the saltwater-beaten staircase that Dr. Kinghorn next door had built when he was a teenager, and the beach and the water beyond it and sometimes I could see farther to the humped shape of land across the inlet. If it was foggy, I couldn't see anything and only sensed that the water was there from the sound of a buoy clanging or

from the foghorn on an invisible boat as it warned its re-entry to the inlet. The world around me seemed smaller and I liked that.

Our beach isn't sandy. It's pebbled and has mud flats to one side that stretch out and smell bad when the tide's out. Summer people don't like our beach as much as they like Dennis Beach, farther up Inlet Road. My mother had a joke about that. They like Sandy Dennis, she'd say, and Dr. Kinghorn would groan. Get it? *Sandy* Dennis, she'd say, You know, the movie star.

C'mon, Mum, I thought. Hurry up. I looked out at the water; even with the rain, I could see the water snapped out like a bed sheet because it was high tide, the mud hidden under it somewhere like a dirty secret.

The wipers slapped back and forth, parting the rain and smoothing the glass.

What a mess we are, she said. I looked over. My mother wore her Mary Kay suit and wasn't a mess at all. Her tan wasn't too dark. She had on lip gloss and mascara. On her arms, she wore the bracelets that her best friend, Kara, had brought from Mexico on the *Mad Bad 2*, her sailboat. When Kara pushed one silver bracelet after another over my mother's bony wrist, she'd said, Anyone who uses her hands as much as you do when you talk needs bracelets to bang around. And they'll call the attention from your damn nails.

Mum, I said. You look good! You do.

Whatever, she said and pointed with her chin at her hands on the steering wheel as she turned out of the driveway. I've got to stop *biting*.

Mine are growing, I said.

Right. Sure. She said my nails looked like little beaten-up canoes.

I made fists to hide my cuticles before she said anything else and looked out the window.

The Wonderbread Graveyard! my mother wisecracked.

We were passing the trailer park. I sat straighter in the passenger seat, clicking and unclicking my seat belt.

You like that, don't you? She pointed at a bright plastic flamingo on one of the tiny patches of lawn. I can tell. You always get quiet here.

She was right. I liked the garden gnomes and cement Negro boys with fishing poles. My favourite thing was a dwarf maple that was strung with sawdust-stuffed animals on baler twine nooses. In Garvey, people won those kinds of toys -- pink kittens and purple ponies and orange puppies -- for their kids from the surly vendors at fairs. The woman who had made the tree full of toys lived in a pink mobile home. Her yard seemed to hold its chaos cheerfully; a rusted car body beneath the tree had more toys falling out the doorless frame, as if some kid played in there when it rained; a Big Wheel tricycle overturned in the unkempt grass seemed happily upended. Even the tree toys, strung up by their necks, were smiling their heads off.

My mother was always telling me that I was too dreamy, that I wanted too much. Maybe that's why I didn't see the trailer park as chaotic. The bright clutter caught my attention, but what I wanted was under it. I liked how one lot was like a container, exactly so many feet by so many feet, and each driveway was just wide enough for one sunken Ford. I was thinking about how you'd have to throw out everything but yourself to live in such a little space and how great that'd be.

My mother pulled me out of my thoughts. Well, here's *my* favourite part, she said. We were passing the pre-fabricated tool shed on which someone had painted a message that my mother liked to yell out in a dead-on mimicry of the Baptist minister, Lindsay Bagley.

ANOTHER DRUNKEN NIGHT WITHOUT CHRIST? my mother said and shook her finger at me. REPENT!

You caught me, Mr. Bagley! You caught me! I tried not to let my smile out and I wished for the hundredth time that my mother could always be silly like this.

Well, sober up and repent, my darling congregation! my mother railed. We're almost at Mrs. Carter's.

We stood at the Carters' bent storm door. My mother looked down at the new sandals I'd insisted on wearing with socks and shook her head. No *wonder* you're cold! What did you wear *those* for?

I crossed my arms and tried to stop shivering.

Cold or no, you look damn cute, Meryl.

As we waited for an answer to our knock, I hopped in my sandals. My mother's comment made me feel good until I saw my reflection in the glass of the door. I stopped hopping and fell back into myself. The truth was I had too many freckles, my front teeth were too big for my mouth, my neck was too long and my socks looked stupid in the sandals. The toes bubbled out the ends like empty balloons.

I'm not. I'm ugly.

Oh Pie, she said. When'd you get so critical? She really looked at my pinched reflection then. I could see her thinking about my pale skin that was almost blue, like skim milk. The hat, my mother said decisively, and she plucked my toque from my head. It's that skin of yours, she added. You look like a...a ghost girl.

Mum, I said.

Well, you do. She could do that, just flip-flop from nice to mean.

My reflection's hair stood in a wispy blond halo, but my mother didn't notice. She was staring at her own image in the glass.

You aren't even looking -- I started to say, but my mother had on her Mary Kay smile and Mrs. Carter, wearing a lavender sweat suit, had pulled open the inside door.

Well. It's Julia Leare, Mrs. Carter said, nodding. She looked down at me and smiled. And Meryl too, I see.

Hello, Mrs. Carter, my mother said.

Inside the door, my mother pointed at my sandals and mouthed, *Take those off*. She walked ahead into the living room and leaned over in her pale suit to open her pink sample trunk -- she always bent from the waist, straight-legged; she never bent at the knees. As she straightened and stood tall again, she pulled the suit jacket over her hips and smiled at the fan of pamphlets, at the pink bottles and cosmetics laid out on the coffee table.

The room was silent except for the clock on the mantle. Right-o, my mother said. And the sale began.

I wandered around the mossy carpet in my socks. What I liked the most about the houses we visited was how some wife and mother had made everything perfect. At the

Carters', everything was protected and smelled like fabric softener. The hall carpets were covered with plastic runners. Figurines stood on starched doilies. Three spotted Chinese dogs had gold link chains that hung against their shiny china necks. I stared at a red swirled glass jar that had little wrapped candies in it that looked like strawberries.

Go on, help yourself. Mrs. Carter smiled beneath the tightening clay mask my mother was applying to her face.

You've got great skin, Carol. You only need a really light mask.

Mrs. Carter had closed her eyes, but she smiled. You stop! When she slapped at the air beside my mother, my mother pretended to duck and looked over at me to roll her eyes.

Mrs. Carter was telling my mother that she'd ordered her sheer curtains from the Sears Sale Catalogue. While they drank their tea and my mother made out a receipt, I sat on the opposite couch and spaced out. I watched the way the light fell through the sheers and across the carpet. It fell in stripes across Phil Donahue's face on the television and the plaque of the Lord's prayer and all the studio photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Carter and the kids and grandparents. There were pictures like this in all the houses we went to. The backdrops in the photos were always the same corny backdrops. Behind the grandparents and mothers and fathers and kids were the same carpeted staircases, the same leafy autumnal or winter landscapes. And the families all grinned in eerie unison, like someone had told a joke and everyone had laughed and stopped laughing but continued to smile, like they weren't quite ready to let the laughter go because then there would be silence.

I knew it was time to go because the conversation across the room was petering out. My mother nibbled her last cookie to make it last. I knew what she meant. I didn't want to leave either.

At the Panes', I asked Viola if I could use the washroom please. We were there to drop off the cleanser set that she'd ordered and do a makeup consult with the new summer colours. I went into the powder room. As soon as I locked the door, I could tell this room wasn't used much. I tested the light switch and the fan. A third switch bathed the room in a red glow.

Wow, I said softly. A heat lamp. I sat in its red glow with my back against the tub. The carpet was tangerine coloured and cushiony. As I played my hands through the shag, I stared into the gold-veined mirror on the opposite wall. I imagined that this room was my own. It would be tiny and perfect. I'd put my bed where the bathtub was. I'd slip out of bed into tangerine slippers to pad across the tangerine carpet to the sink to put water on for my morning coffee. I studied the shell soaps, the towels, the shower curtain that was closed so it wouldn't get mouldy and my throat ached with wanting. I had a weird idea I knew I couldn't tell anyone: if you could get inside an egg without breaking it, it would be like this still and warm room. If only it didn't have a door and window; with no way in or out, it wouldn't get dirty or ugly.

Outside the door, my mother called. Did you fall down the toilet, Meryl? She and Mrs. Pane laughed.

I felt a pang inside. I knew it was impossible, but I wanted this room to be away from here, a place I could go and close the door and no one would know. The only



person, I thought, who would know about it would be my father. He could come in.

Only him.

My mother and I didn't have heat lamps or carpets or sheer drapes that made the light softer. On our walks at night, we'd walk by the houses we'd visited because of Mary Kay and I'd remember the things inside that I'd loved, like this room. Sometimes on those walks, my mother looked in people's windows and sometimes I asked her to boost me up so I could see inside. She held me there and I looked, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't like being able to just walk in and touch things like they belonged to you.

I got up from the tangerine carpet and looked in the mirror on the medicine cabinet. On the wall above the sink were two framed macaroni collages that the Pane twins, Aisling and Pamela, had made at school. They were in my class and I was in love with Aisling. When we'd had that art class, I'd watched him make his collage. He had been engrossed, kneeling on his chair so that he could shield his work and keep it secret, so it would be a surprise when he was finished. He thought of things like that. He liked to make things more interesting or funny. I think it was because I was watching him that my own collage turned out so badly. The macaroni noodles were wet and stuck to my fingers and so I'd hidden the mess of it in my desk.

Outside the bathroom door, I heard my mother and Viola in the living room. My mother said, For heaven's sake, you're hardly what I'd call chubby! More like you're a rail, Viola.

I looked at my pale face in the mirror. I wondered why people called thin people rails. My mother said that I was a rail, too; she was always trying to get me to eat more than I did.

My heart pounded when I peeled a piece of macaroni off Aisling's cardboard frame and hid it in the pocket of my windbreaker. I thought of Viola Pane finding the piece missing while I was still there in her house and imagined how that would look and how I'd ruin my mother's job, but it didn't stop me. I looked under the cabinet and in the small potpourri-smelling drawers on either side of the sink and when I saw the toenail clippers in the back of one drawer, I took them too. I followed that with a tube of Polysporin still in its package.

When I unlocked the door, I heard scrabbling behind the shower curtain. I pulled it back to find one of the Panes' dachshunds sitting in the tub. I felt a little panicky -- the dog had been there the whole time. What had she been doing, what if she'd been watching? I looked in at her. She was a long-haired rust coloured dog with eyes like clown eyes, done up in black. Her lip quivered into a snarl that made me stand back and give her the space to leap out of the tub. Once she was out and waddling across the carpet to the door, I recognised her.

Oh, I said. It's the dog from the dock. It's Fanny.

The dog scratched her paw at the bathroom door. I stood over her and whispered, Fanny wanna go pee? Her eyes brightened. She panted and swayed her wiener body when I opened the door an inch. Then I closed it.

Fanny lifted up on her back legs and clawed at my cords. Down, I said. Like a dwarfed clown with the most humiliated eyes I'd ever seen, Fanny rose again on her back paws and clawed the air. She swayed back and forth. What it looked like was one of those dances bees do outside the hive to tell the other bees what they need to know before they fly out. But it wasn't that kind of dance for her. It was a little dance of desperation.

We'd been on the dock by the Lobster Stop. We were going to buy mussels for dinner.

Mum, look! I'd said. A pair of wiener dogs with infant life jackets tightly strapped around their middles stood on the prow of Mr. Pane's lobster boat as it came in to the dock.

That's a weird sight, my mother said. They look like little girls. With pigtails, you know?

We'd walked down to the converted fishing shack where the Lobster Stop was. It had peeling blue walls and an uneven cement floor that held three giant tanks of lobsters and a cash register. A moment later, Mr. Pane was in the doorway. He stood tall and blinking in his black rain gear. The dogs minus their life jackets ran round and round his rubber boots.

Not too close now. I reek of fish, Mr. Pane said to the customers, grinning.

Everyone in the store laughed. My mother laughed too, her arms crossed tightly on her chest. In her white Keds and khakis, she looked too clean for the damp Lobster Stop, but she was oblivious. She pointed at the dachshunds. Now, she said to Mr. Pane, I know Muffin, but who's the new one?

Yep, that's Muffin all right. The older dog's ears lifted at her name. And the baby's Fanny. Atta girl, Fanny. The smaller dog looked up at Mr. Pane, her ponytail ears flapping. She panted.

While Mr. Pane talked with my mother and wrapped the mussels, I crouched down and snapped my fingers at the puppy. Here, Fanny, I said. Fanny gave me a look that wasn't playful. She stopped panting and waddled away.

Oh, she's a moody one, that dog.

I guess Fanny's only got eyes for Mr. Pane, my mother said.

When Mr. Pane had passed the blue bag of mussels over the counter, his hand touched my mother's hand. Oops, he'd said. Did I, ah, whack your hand there?

Hardly, she'd replied, smiling.

Viola Pane waved goodbye in her slippers, clutching her arms as she stood on the wet concrete path before tiptoeing back to her house. We sat in the car for a moment and my mother stared in the rear-view mirror and patted the pockets of her suit for her cigarettes.

She was lost in thought. You know, she said. Viola looks good for someone who popped out twins.

She's pretty, I said. I didn't know if that was the right answer. I added, Isn't she?

Sure, sure. But not as pretty as her husband.

I pictured Mr. Pane in his rain gear and felt uneasy.

Then my mother smirked and added. And he can dance. She never dances with him at parties, you notice that?

I knew my mother was talking about her parties, where Mr. Pane stayed later than Mrs. Pane and leaned over the piano to sing along and danced on the veranda with my mother. I didn't want to think about that. Mr. Pane and Mrs. Pane were Aisling's parents and it was wrong to be talking about them as separate; like they could be separated from each other. I changed the subject. Hey, Mum?

Yup.

Could I get *a little* shag carpet in my room? Just a little one?

My mother pulled off her clip-on earrings and looked at me like I was a stranger. She clenched the back of my seat to reverse the car down the Pane's driveway and I pictured our house with its cold hardwood floors and knew where she'd go with this.

Come on, Meryl! Holding her cigarette in her teeth, she explained that wall-to-wall is for people who can't afford wood flooring. It's not real *anything*! It's made out of plastic, she said. And you're not plastic. You're better than that.

I knew what *better than that* meant. It meant living in a house that was exactly like your mother had come to it when she was twenty years old. It meant thick velvet drapes on the windows. It meant heavy chesterfields with velvet upholstery and dusty oil paintings all the way up the stairs. And in the bathroom, next to the hot water heater, it meant a corkboard thumbtacked with curled photographs of strangers. Some of the photos were of my mother in a bathing suit that covered much more than her bikinis covered. In a few, she held hands with a woman who looked like the portrait of Queen Victoria in the dusty showcase in the hallway at school.

In one picture, that woman is sitting on our veranda. She's in one of the green wicker chairs. Behind her is my mother, hugging her over the shoulders.

I'd asked her about it when I was smaller. What's that, I'd asked. I'd been sitting on the toilet, looking.

My mother was washing her face in the bathroom sink and she peeked over the edge of the facecloth to see where I was pointing.

You mean in her hand? She frowned at the picture. It's a port-tipped cigarillo, my mother said. She smoked those a lot. My mother told me that the woman who

looked like Queen Victoria was my grandmother and that she'd been very funny and gruff. She went on, telling me that when she was eighteen and about to head off to college, she'd gone for a walk on the beach one morning and when she'd come back, she'd found her --the woman who looked like the queen-- *too late* on the veranda *with a cigar like that still going* in the standing ashtray.

Imagine that, Pie. My mother shook her head. I've never forgiven myself.

I didn't get it. Too late for what? I asked.

She was dead, Pie. She died in that chair on the veranda. My mother poked the photo. Right here at the summerhouse.

It isn't a summerhouse, I said. It's my house.

My mother rested her hand on my head and laughed. Okay, okay, but before you, this was my summerhouse. I lived here every single summer you know, with *my* parents and after Daddy died, with my Mum and after my Mum died, I moved here and had *you* here and *now* it's your house.

Oh, I said. It seemed like many strangers had lived in my house before me, but I wasn't thinking about that so much. The part that scared me when I studied the photos was that my grandmother smoked just like my mother. And she'd died. After, I remember that I went downstairs and hid all the packs of cigarettes I could find.

My grandmother's stuff -- the trunks of fox furs with heads and tiny paws still attached, and mink stoles and beaver hats, and the zippered garment bags stuffed with satin and velvet dresses and tennis dresses and the pairs of gardening overalls hanging in the hallway among the dozen or so men's moth eaten sweaters -- had no order. It was heavy,

the chaos that filled our house. It made me anxious. I was working on it, but so far, I'd only cleaned out the kitchen and part of my own room. I couldn't seem to get any farther -- everything I tried to throw out, my mother salvaged. When I was sleeping or at school, she'd undo whatever I'd managed to accomplish in my efforts to make things neater and less cluttered.

On the way home from the Panes', we passed the Bigstop and in the lot around the gas pumps, I counted lumber trucks: five empties and two fulls. A silver one pulled out behind us and swung in the opposite direction, towards the highway. We passed the takeout next, its blinking square sign of specials, and I was hungry.

They've got that apple betty there, I said, pointing at the flashing sign. It's good, Mum. But she wasn't listening. We drove along Main Street and had passed the high school before she reached over and ran a finger down my nose. Hey, do you need something? I do. I need a treat. She smiled like food was her idea.

Let's go back to the take-out, I said.

Don't be daft, my mother said. You're having dinner in an hour. How about a Freezee? she asked, but she'd already decided and was pulling into the parking lot beside Hoegg's Quickmart.

My mother strode across the gravel to the steps of the store where three or four kids were standing around. I knew a few of them and hunched lower in my seat. I sent my mother a telepathic plea: *don't be all buddy-buddy, please don't be all buddy-buddy.*

Hey, guys, my mother said. The kids shuffled apart to let her up the steps. One girl gave my mother a tiny smirk.

Dorks, I said. In the silent car, with no one to hear me, my voice was forlorn. My eyes welled up. I looked down at my sandals and socks and boosted myself so I could see in the rear-view mirror. I didn't look like I'd hoped I would. I looked blotchy and red. I cried some more. I imagined that my mother had forced me to go with her into Hoegg's, which she hadn't ever done, but still. I hated going into Hoegg's so it made me cry harder. I looked at the window of the Quickmart. Inside, sitting along the window ledge where they always sat, were Hazen Steeves and Tiger and the other men who were always there. My mother must have said something about me being in the car because Hazen Steeves turned in the window and stared out at me.

My mother didn't know that Hazen paid little girls at my school quarters and dimes so they'd sit on his lap. I hadn't told her.

Sometimes, when I went into Hoegg's with her, she said, Meryl, someone's winking at you. Say hi, Mer.

I'd lean against my mother's belly and look down at her arms around me but I couldn't look at Hazen. His eyes were too lonely. I couldn't stand it. I'd mumble, Hi, Hazen. But I couldn't look at him.

Waiting in the car now, I hung over the front seat to stare out the back window at the low buildings, the pier and Garvey Inlet and I thought about all of those men who sat around and smoked in Hoegg's store. I wondered if they talked about how my mother ordered liquor and wine by the box and walked downtown in cut-offs and dyed her hair red and had her parties and danced all night with fishermen and summer men and married men. I suspected everyone of gossip but didn't know where the suspicion came from; maybe they didn't even think about us at all.



Everything was a little blurry in the rain. Behind the Lobster Stop, on the rain-slicked pier, seagulls stalked around on the black creosote, barking and eyeing the fishermen in that sideways way birds do. The men who sold their seafood to Pane's Lobster Stop tossed the green traps from their bobbing grey boats. I sighed a little at the thought of Pane's. *Fanny*, I thought and for a hot moment, I hated myself and bit at the skin around my fingernail, pulling off a neat arc of it. My cuticle started to bleed and I held my finger tightly and looked out the window at the traps. I squinted but it didn't help. There was no way I could see the things I wanted, like the green-blue lobsters scabbling inside the traps. Even Aisling or a dog in a float jacket among the fishermen and the boats would have been enough. I liked looking at small things but everything on the dock seemed dangerous and adult, made of creosote or rubber, except a blue plastic bag that had blown out from inside the Lobster Stop. The bag was good to watch for a while. I waited for the sound of my mother's shoes to crunch back across the gravel and watched it as it blew end over end until it fell to the water and deflated.

Here, she said. She tossed a grape-flavoured Freeze into my lap.

What about you? I started to tear the plastic with my teeth.

I'll have some of yours.

I already had the taste of icy grape seeping a little through the torn plastic and I wanted it all to myself. I knew she'd take more than half because her mouth was bigger and because I didn't know how to tell her to stop.

Here, let me get that for you, Pie. She took my Freezee in her teeth and ripped the plastic straight across. She was good at things like that; impatient with me and my ragged half-opened things that wouldn't give in. *Here, let me fix that bugger*, she said.

And she did.

Later that night, my mother was standing on the dark lawn of the Bagleys' parsonage.

Look at the calendar, Pie. Just take a look at that, my mother whispered. She boosted me up so I could see into their kitchen. A Bigstop calendar was tacked on the duck wallpaper. What about it? I asked.

It's *three* months behind. So much for a pillar of the community. I looked in the window and asked, What's that verse say, the one beside the calendar?

Wait a sec, she said. It's a psalm, I think. It's too dark to read everything, but it goes *something something ... for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are thy works; and that my soul could knoweth right well....* she stopped, *Right well?* Sounds like God's from around here.

Mum, take that back! It scared me when she made fun of big things like God.

Okay, okay. Then it says: *My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written and --* I can't read the rest.

Actually, that psalm's kind of beautiful, my mother said thoughtfully as we walked around to look in the living room window. Inside, the Bagley family sat together on their sofa watching a sitcom.

Who am I? my mother asked. She aped the Bagleys' slack-jawed faces.

God, I hate this place sometimes, she said. One of these days, I'm out of here.

She walked from the dark lot.

I looked back to the blue-lit window and yearned a little to be welcomed -- I knew that Mary Kay was like a passport and with that gold name stamped on our leatherette trunk we were welcomed for as long as it took for my mother to make a sale. It didn't seem fair. I was born in Garvey; I should have belonged all the time, not just in the summer.

We moved on to the Carters' windows and watched Mrs. Carter click her manicured Mary Kay nails around the telephone dial. She walked from the telephone table in the dark hall to the kitchen and twirled the long chord with her finger. In the bright kitchen, she opened the fridge to peel a cheese slice from its wrapper. She rolled it up and ate it. From the window, we couldn't see the white carpet she walked on when she came down the darkened hall to the T.V. room, but we knew it was there. We could piece it together.

I waited in the bushes for my mother to come around from the back of the house. I daydreamed about my father, let myself slip into the impossible fantasy that Mrs. Carter was on the telephone with my father, that Mrs. Carter had a secret liaison with my father, who was out there somewhere and very worried about me and that was why she was talking with her hand almost covering the mouth piece, cradled into the crook of her neck when she opened the fridge to sneak another cheese slice.

Maybe he was calling to see how I was doing. I could almost picture the words she said, how she whispered I was getting this tall now, I had blond thin hair like his, and

was pale like him and that I'd be doing okay at school if I could just get a move on with my reading and spelling.

We were almost home when I stopped. It was hopeless, but I did it anyway. I asked her for the hundredth time to tell me about my father. She never gave anything away at night. I don't know why I persisted.

*Where's my father? Where's my father?* she sang back at me.

No, really, I said.

You've got a hair, she said gruffly. A cigarette was clenched in her teeth.

I could feel it in my mouth but I didn't care. I was standing in front of her in my sneakers and sweat pants, feeling dumpy.

She started towards me but I pulled away from her hand and told her, Don't.

When she saw that I was crying, she sighed into the dark between us and told me what she sometimes told me when she was mean: there just wasn't a father, and she pecked over the hedge into the Barchards' front yard.

I couldn't help it. I pressed until she snapped, told me to stop *asking* already. She took a final drag and tossed her cigarette butt onto the road and crushed it with her toe.

Hell, he's an asshole anyway, she said as she exhaled.

Last summer, when Kara was here, they were drinking wine and didn't hear me go from my room on the main floor to the bathroom on the second floor. There was a vent in the floor and I kneeled down. You could see and hear everything in the kitchen below.

Somehow I knew what my mother was talking about when she said, It was a mistake is all. I wasn't trying to catch him; I wasn't one of those girls who wanted to trap a guy.

No, I know, Kara said. I heard a lighter click and then my mother's voice, all sucked in because she was holding in the smoke.

I also wasn't some little flaky, scared-of-the-future girl. I'm not like that and I think that's what he thought. I saw more than the bottom of a washing machine or a... a kitchen sink or whatever.

My mother spoke of him to Kara when I wasn't in the room and when I was in the room, she sometimes joked about him if Kara was around to hear it, but when we were alone on our walks at night, she didn't like me to bring him up. I understand now that you can't joke about something as big as a father when the world is dark and open around you and you're watching happier people in windows. The loneliness of it all presses against you. It's too much.

But sometimes I was lucky. If she'd had the right amount of drinks and some afternoon sun, she'd tell me things about him. If she felt okay in the world, she'd feed me memories that I guess I'll never know from truth for sure. After she'd called my father an asshole, she must have felt bad because the next afternoon, she told me that when I was a baby, my first try at a sentence was *Daddy pretty*.

*Daddy pretty!* You said it just like that, I swear. My mother laughed. We were sitting on the lawn, waiting for nothing to happen.

I couldn't look at her. I was sure I'd be able to tell she was lying. Instead, I looked beyond her baby-oiled stomach and beyond the rock garden and across the road to where the tide was out. If I squinted, the beach and mud looked like a rusty wheel that had cracked and fallen into the grey horizon of water. A buoy clanged as it rocked in the waves; the blurred shape of it didn't match the sound it made. On the water, a motor boat sped by, followed by the long delighted scream of a girl. From the speed of the boat, from the scream, I knew she wasn't a girl from here; she was a summer girl like my mother had been.

My mother, the ex-summer girl, turned over onto her stomach. Her bum was striped red where it had pressed into the plastic strips of the chair. Without looking, she felt around on the grass beside the lawn chair and when she found the empty tumbler, she tipped it over so that a few pieces of melting ice slid out.

Oops, she said. She asked me if I'd mind getting more. Her voice lilted when she added, And my *new* pack. In my purse. She had many *new* packs of cigarettes; they littered the kitchen table and the top of the fridge and the highboy in her room. I picked up the glass and went into the house and through the window beside the fridge, I saw her twist over again in the lawn chair so that her breasts wobbled back and forth in her yellow bikini cups. She was yelling something, holding a hand to her ear. I knew the signals; she wanted the radio louder.

I sang along, Billy Jean *snot* my lover, she's just a girl -- as I turned up the radio and grabbed the cigarettes from her macraméd purse on the counter.

Above our kitchen counter is a photograph in a black lacquered frame. In it, my mother leans into the front of a man's chest. She's nineteen, so it's the year *before* I was born and the year *after* her own mother died. In the photo, she's at Hillson, at a beer garden with Kara and this boy and a bunch of kids who live in the residences (almost all the kids live in residences at Hillson. Most kids are wealthy; they come from the Westmounts and Rosedales and Lawrence Parks of elsewhere to go to this tiny school. Kara came all the way from Bermuda). So, they're at this beer garden and they're in their sophomore year. Kara's in Fine Arts. My mother's in a mixed program all of her own -- a few music courses here, some literature, some language courses. Mostly she doesn't go to class, she works on props for student productions in the theatre and as she paints and papers sets, she tries to decide what she wants to do.

In the photo, you can almost see that indecision. My mother's hair is curled-out at the ends and held back by a plastic tortoiseshell headband. She's wearing a sleeveless shirt. The chest she leans into wears studious clothing: a corduroy jacket, a light oxford-cloth shirt with a button-down collar. Under the shirt, the chest is thin like a studious, non-athletic chest would be. My mother had one hand tucked between that chest and her cheek, like she's either about to go to sleep there or use her hand to punt off this chest and float somewhere else. She looks out at Kara's camera as if she's asking, Should I stay here? Should I go? There's no answer to these questions. There might have been at one time, when there were more clues, when the chest that my mother leans on *had* a head and a face and an expression that could tell me something. But any head there may have been above that long, adam-appled neck has been scissored off.



I don't remember before this, but I have a clear memory from the summer after she cut it. The memory is fabricated; I'd have been too small. Either my mother told me what happened or perhaps Kara did, I can't remember, and now the memory is mine. What I remember is that it was summer and I was small enough that I was in a booster seat, clipped to the kitchen table.

What did you do to my picture! Kara dropped the dishtowel she was drying dishes with. She picked the framed photograph off the wall beside the cupboard.

You bitch! Kara lunged toward my mother. Her hair, in hundreds of little blond braids with beads at the ends, rattled. Why the hell'd you cut him out?

And my mother gave an answer that said so much. She looked down at the dishwater. I love the picture, Kar, but I couldn't stand looking at it.

But that was a gift, Jules. How could you?

I don't know. I just did.

I don't have the negatives, you know. I lost them when *Mad Bad* sank. You can't get his face back ever again. She shook her head. You're an idiot, Jules. Sometimes, you're such an idiot.

I was watching from where I sat in my booster seat, clipped to the side of the table. I couldn't get out and I wanted out. I felt juice on my hands, pushing up on the arms of the booster. I whined, Muh-uhm! My mother came over and picked me up and sat me on her hip. She pressed her lips against my hair and kissed. She said, Kara, leave it. Just drop it.

My mother told me this story. Now it seems true: the picture still sits on the wall above the counter in our kitchen. It proves the story. It's also proof that my mother loved

my father because if his face hurt that much to look at, they had to love each other. My mother would say, Not necessarily. That's crooked logic, Pie. But I believed that they were in love when they made me, wherever they were. I believed that my mother and this man were happy.

On the steps, I turned to close the screen door behind me and paused to watch a lime-green inchworm make its way across the screen and along the blistered wood. It was so tiny and dedicated to the direction it was headed. My hand was cold and a film had formed on the outside of my mother's drink, so I tucked the new pack into the waistband of my shorts to free my other hand. The inchworm moved along like it was blind, pulling half its body into the air and testing every which way before landing. I waited, looking at the bubbles of white paint until the worm was about to inch its way onto the crevice of the doorjamb. It lifted its fat green body and tested the air, pausing and dipping.

Behind me on the lawn my mother yelled, Hey... something-something, but whatever it was she said was lost in a long honk of appreciation from a trucker trucking past our house with a load of lumber.

I was thinking of how, the night before, I'd asked my mother on the road about my father. How I'd almost begged, saying, Really, though. You must know who. You must. She'd corrected my grammar. Who, whom, whatever, I'd yelled.

I clenched my teeth and felt the muscle jump in my jaw. Suddenly today in the sun, she had these stories.

The worm was still bobbing in the air when I let go of the door slowly, so it wouldn't suspect anything. The little green body was split between the inside and outside of the doorframe.

A tight pull to the door was all it took. And there was only the tip of its rear-end, like a miniature green thumb, sticking to the frame. It'd been something to do – but with that tip sticking out, not even moving, I felt awful. I didn't know why I did things like that.

Meryl! Where *are* you? My mother faced the ocean and the road where yet another lumber truck was rattling past; she hadn't seen anything.

I'm coming. I felt light as anything as I slid my bare feet through the carpet of grass, balancing the drink as I pulled her pack out of my shorts.

Where d'you want this?

Here, Pie. She squinted, adjusting her sunglasses.

She wouldn't hug me to say thanks, I knew I was too sweaty to hug. I smelled myself and moved away from the lawn chair so she wouldn't smell me too.

You know what he said to us, after that? She lit another cigarette.

Who? I pretended I wasn't interested and stretched out on the grass a few feet away, spreading my arms and legs so that no skin was touching. Above us, the sun was pulsing in the sky and I pulled my hair from under my neck and imagined its thin white blond fan around my head.

Daddy, of course.

I turned to watch her sigh out a trail of smoke. You don't want to hear this. I'll stop. She sipped the drink.

No! Go on! The sun beat down on us. Even if the stories weren't true, I wanted to hear them.

And of course, he was always one to get me going, he was. So he says to little you, he says, *Prettier than your mother?* I'll never forget that.

Then what? I felt a tickle on my leg and sat up to see an ant making its way along my thigh. Insects should know better. They should stay away, I thought toughly.

What're you doing up, Pie? She squinted down at me. Lie down so the tan's even on your belly. And take those off.

Okay. I kicked off my Keds with my heels. Go on, I urged. I lay down again.

Where was I? She sounded sleepy; her words were blending. And you, you had the nerve to say ... *you said...* you said... oh, I can't remember what you said. D'you remember? When she started laughing, I sat up again and glared. I waited for her to notice that I wasn't lying down, but her eyes were closed behind her sunglasses when she laughed. She slapped a brown thigh. Ha.

What's so funny? I said. I could tell she was laughing at me and I felt a sudden swing of hate and clenched my jaw so tight it hurt. I stared at the ant still scurrying along a freckled pass on my thigh. It was carrying something in its little jaws, something white.

Remember you asking him, Why didn't you marry a movie star instead of Mum? Her voice went high like it did when she made fun and I hated her.

Oh, right. Sure I did.

You did! You did. She laughed again. You were like, two maybe. It was when you watched that show about the police girls. You used to love that -- what was it called? You'd do the gun thing. Bang, bang!

She was laughing too hard so I ignored her. I closed my eyes and saw the wriggling inchworm and felt a rush I didn't want to have to explain to anyone because I knew it was bad to feel good about hurting things, even if it was followed by the knowledge that I was wrong or bad. I wanted to forget what I'd done, but the image stayed.

I opened my eyes and concentrated on the ant and how, if I squinted, it looked fuzzier and bigger. I moved my hand to make a shadow and the ant froze. When I took it away, it moved again.

That show was called...What? What was it called? D'you remember? my mother asked.

No, I said firmly. I put my hand back over the ant to make it freeze again. It was so stupid. Why didn't it run instead of freezing? Running made more sense if something was going to fall on you, I thought. I squeezed my eyes shut to make the picture of my fingers breaking the three little black balls of its body apart go away.

Ganging up on me, the two of you. Her tone changed and I looked up. My mother could be sad or angry suddenly, like she remembered something old or hurtful and then she wouldn't talk for hours. From where I lay in the grass, I couldn't see her face. It looked like there wasn't anything on the lawn chair beyond her one tanned, bent triangle of leg and hip. I stared at that leg, at the circle of plastic that held her bikini bottoms together at the hip. I pushed up and walked on my knees towards her. Oh, come on, I said. We wouldn't've ganged up.

No? Her voice was sleepy; it wasn't sad anymore so she was okay. Her stories like this made me feel heavy. I stared at the water beyond our yard and let my eyes go

blurry. I thought of the girls in my grade at school who lived simply, watching television in their living rooms. I was sure those girls had it easier than I did. I studied my arms and hands. I looked for the ant on my thigh but it had made a run for it after all.

My mother asked if I was alright. Hey. You okay? She fluttered one hand towards where she thought I was lying on the grass, but I was closer, looking at her oiled and tanned stomach, at her chin pointing . There was nothing else to do but watch for her to fall asleep and wait. The tide was coming in, changing everything that the shore had been a few minutes ago.

When the next lumber truck rushed into view, the trailer swinging and clanking emptily behind it, I jumped up. Hey! I yelled. I ran down the lawn towards the road.

Hey! I yelled again, louder. I stuck out my chest, flat in its red halter-top, and ran down to the ditch at the roadside. I yelled, Hi! and smiled hard and waved. I hoped I looked happy. I really worked it like I didn't care that the truck wasn't slowing.

When it passed, I was *this* close. I could have reached out and touched the empty clanking bed or one of the crazy huge wheels that blocked the whole ocean from me. When the trailer barrelled past, the wind it left knocked me sideways, covered me in fine dust. I squinted out at the sunny road, brushing off my arms. I was about to give up when I saw the shadow of the trucker inside through the back window of the cab. I climbed out of the ditch and ran to the middle of the road. I jumped up and down, Hey! Hello! I yelled again, hoping for even a curt nod from his shadow. It would've been enough.

It was the last week of school before summer vacation started. In the parking lot, the rattle of a diesel engine announced my mother's arrival to teach her afternoon music class. Out the window, I watched my mother close the door of the Volkswagen and mince across the gravel, hopping the puddles in her heels.

My teacher, Mrs. Clark, pursed her lips. Meryl, stop dreaming and read, she said.

I wanted to tell her that I wasn't dreaming, that I'd actually been watching *her* just before I'd looked out the window and I'd seen the look she'd given our car and my mother in it. But I couldn't do that. Instead, I looked at my reader. Reading was a problem I was having; the words kept getting harder and although other kids were unconcerned when Mrs. Clark wrote new vocabulary on the board, it was all too fast for me. When the class read out the new words on the blackboard, I faked it and mouthed along. It scared me when things were suddenly different; I liked things the same until you could master them. The story I was supposed to read was called *Helicopters and Gingerbread*. It was a silly title. My teacher would smile and say, Read it and you'll see what helicopters and gingerbread have in common, Meryl. But it seemed like a trick, a set-up for disappointment; you just knew gingerbread and helicopters would be linked together in some nonsensical way, just like in the poem we'd studied that held the promise of a purple cow and then, when you read it, no purple cow emerged at all.

*I never saw a purple cow,*

*I never hope to see one,  
But I can tell you anyhow,  
I'd rather see than be one!*

I whispered to Aisling, It's stupid. You could say anything, like I never saw a *retarded* cow. A *gaylord* cow. Anything fits.

Aisling had smiled a tiny smile and told me, *Shh!*

Mrs. Clark stood over me and clucked her tongue.

I put my finger under a word to show her I was working but she ignored me and said loudly that I needed to pay attention or visit an optometrist *or something* or I wouldn't catch up with the rest of the class.

My mouth opened, but I couldn't say what I wanted to say, that Mrs. Clark looked like a brick of fat in her belted black dress with its too-small Peter Pan collar. I wanted to dissolve into my chair. I wanted my mother to come tapping down the hall and save me from this like she sometimes did.

I knew her high heels on the green hallway; I knew her knuckles on the door to my classroom. When she came, everyone would look up from his or her work. Mrs. Clark would push back from her desk on her fat arms and answer the door. My mother's voice outside made me feel proud or something and I was already twisting out of my seat when Mrs. Clark said, Mrs. Leare wants you to run an errand, Meryl. Hurry back. She said *Mrs. Leare* like it was another teacher and not my mother at all.

I'd step out into the empty hall and the door would close behind me. Sometimes my mother would want me to run down to Stedman's for some note paper or to the bus



station for a set of violin strings sent on the express bus from the city, but I hoped for more: I hoped she'd say, *Guess what! Daddy's back!* Or that she'd have the tartan luggage set in the car and she'd say we were going on a little trip or moving to where my father was. My mother pulled me back into myself every time I saw her waiting, tall in her heels and dress, so that the sounds of chalk on chalkboard and kids shifting at their desks and the pencil sharpener going went far away, as if my classroom behind that closed door had been submerged in water.

Once she came just to say hi. She leaned down with her hands on her knees and smiled. I wanted to check on you. I don't know why. I just wanted to see you, she said.

I like that dress, I said. It was her green one with a loopy cowl neck and the way she was leaning down, the cowl neck made a tunnel to look down and see the tops of her breasts and the freckles there. I smelled a tinge of her perfume and it smelled right, better than how it smelled in the bottle on her vanity when I sneaked into her room. I don't know what I wanted to find when I opened her closet and brushed my face against her dresses and tried on her bracelets and lipstick. Things weren't the same when she wasn't in them. The lipstick that looked great on her tanned face looked orange on me.

She re-clipped my barrette straighter. You had your snack yet?

I had milk.

That isn't enough, Pie. You've got to eat your whole snack.

Now I asked to be excused and once I was out in the silent hall, I went to the music room. I just wanted to see her in there and then I'd go back. Through the square of safety glass

on the music room door, I watched her walk onto the raised stage and sit down at the upright piano.

What's the note? my mother asked, and she pressed a key. Call it out, go ahead.

She was teaching the grade-sixers. A girl in braids and a polo shirt put her hand up. F, she said.

*F*-what, my mother said. Another kid said, There's more than F?

I whispered outside the door, It's F-sharp, you retard.

Inside, my mother said, It's *F-sharp*, kids. *F-sharp*.

I didn't really like piano and I practised only when forced, but still. It was around me every day. I remember when I was small, my mother said, This is how you make music. She showed me a finger exercise book with stick men drawings above each exercise. I leaned on the piano bench like it was a little table and coloured musical notes on the lines in a creamy Hilroy. Then I held them up and showed her.

Very pretty, she said.

And on Christmas day, a waxy paper bag from Rick's Music waited for me on the piano bench. I pulled out the book inside and flipped it open. What is it? I asked. She showed me the red cover and pointed at the words that said *Leila Fletcher's Piano for Beginners*.

In the classroom, her back was arrow straight and her arms were perfect right angles. She was playing a new note. She played it three times. What is it? she asked.

Two girls in the back row were writing notes behind their composition books. A boy in the front was pretending to stab my mother's turned back at the piano with an invisible knife.

My mother said I wanted too much, that I was spoiled, but it had to be fair for me to want this boy to be caught so I could see it. I knew it would happen, I just wanted to be graced with witnessing it. My mother hit the key on the piano one more time and some students laughed.

She turned then, too slow for the boy with his knife-hand in the air. What's so funny, my mother asked the class.

The boy clasped his hands together on his desk and looked brightly at my mother.

It's him, Mum, I thought. That guy in the front. But I wasn't worried, I thought she was biding her time. I didn't have a doubt in my mind as I waited for her to walk down the row and grab the boy by the arms and look at him until he wiped the goony smile off his face and apologized. I was so sure she knew. I thought this power she had was something she could use on everyone, not only me.

Are you going to tell me what's funny? she asked the class again.

When no one answered, she looked at the piano keys and played another note. It was the last and lowest C -- a dark note whose sound usually sent chills up my neck. Right then it just sounded sad.

No one said anything. Everyone stared at my mother staring at the piano keys.

I had my hand on the doorknob. I didn't know what this painful helpless feeling was yet, that this is how your heart first truly breaks. I wanted to save my mother, but more than that, I silently begged her to save herself.

Nothing's funny, is what, my mother said. She pushed back the bench and stood. Surrounded by all those enemies, she walked off the platform and leaned against the edge of the stage. She clasped her hands and stared out the window at the playground.

When a hand clapped against the top of my head and then slid down the back to the nape of my neck, my first thought was that my mother had somehow split, had caught me outside the music room although I could see her through the glass. But the hand was too small to be hers and I felt something like relief and breathed in through my nose. It was a boy behind me, I was sure. One time, Dr. Kinghorn had spread beans to dry in an old bed sheet in his barn. The barn door had blown open in a squall and the rain had ruined the beans, making them go brown and spotted. The boy behind me smelled like that: brown and spotted and musty.

The hand lifted from my neck. Who you spying on, Weirdo? When he spoke in my ear, I smelled fish and I knew it was Aisling. I'd seen him at lunch, standing in the classroom beside his desk, his legs wide apart in his patched blue cords as he ripped into the soft white bread of a lobster roll. I tried to turn but Aisling grabbed at my neck again, with both hands this time and pretended to strangle me a little.

The teacher sent me to find you, Mer, he said, shaking me back and forth.

Stop it! I said. Aisling was being a clown, shaking all that seriousness I'd felt about my mother out of me. I tried to peel his fingers off but he let go and before I could fully turn around to get angry, he was running and sliding in his stocking feet down the waxed green linoleum. I was confused: I wanted to cry and I also wanted to forget about my mother and slide in my stocking feet after Aisling.

\*

And for the first time, I didn't want to go to the door when my mother came and knocked on my class door later that afternoon.

Can you tape my hem, Pie? It came out last class. She turned around and showed me where her hemline had come undone and I couldn't look at her when I took the tape and I kneeled there in the hall, looking at the broken thread hanging from her dress at the back.

I pretended to bite my lip like I was concentrating in case she looked down and saw me about to cry. I didn't care if her hem was straight. I stuck the tape on any which way and rocked back on my heels to wait for her to notice. I was looking at the back of her nyloned calves, taut because of her high heels and I knew her muscles would flex when she turned and saw that I'd just had enough and quit.

Walking home that day, I saw some little kid ahead of me on the Inlet Road and I knew where he was going. I didn't think I could go home and listen to the sounds of those kids my mother gave piano lessons to at the house. I wiped my eyes and pictured the whole parade of them traipsing though my living room. Suppertime seemed like a forever away and I couldn't listen to the noise of scales and sloppy *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and missed notes on finger exercises that would come through the living room wall into my bedroom between now and then. I stopped at the Kinghorn's instead.

Look what the dog dragged in, Mrs. Kinghorn said, without looking from her paper.

For a moment after I closed the door behind me, her silent good-smelling kitchen was enough. On the welcome mat, I pulled off my boots and closed my eyes and breathed. It was always the same at the Kinghorns'. The kitchen was hot and damp, like a kettle had just boiled. It smelled like toast and like butter going a little off. The pink couch in the corner had an afghan thrown over it. Mrs. Kinghorn read there with a filigreed plate of cookies and her fancy teacup. She held a cookie above her teacup, about to dip it. She was half-smiling with one eyebrow raised, looking at me like I was weird, but I didn't care.

Well, have a seat and tell me who had her heart broke, Mrs. Kinghorn said. She patted the place beside her on the couch, where she wanted me.

Earlier that spring, I'd come by the Kinghorns. You could see the snow that had come in the afternoon and capped the yellowed grass in the yard wasn't going to stay long. The sun was streaming in over the kitchen counter filled with cooling racks of oatmeal cookies, maids-of-honours and butter cookies.

Mrs. Kinghorn had decided what we needed to make now were sugar cookies. She stood, beating egg whites in a bowl. She was wearing her flowered housedress and a green apron. Her white hair puffed around her face and the chain of her glasses was caught sideways between the buttons of her dress. She wiped her hands on her apron thoughtfully and popped a cookie into her mouth.

I'll put you to work, she said. She told me to sit on the blue stool and she gave me an apron. I dusted a handful of flour over the tabletop.

There you are, she said and plopped a ball of cookie dough on the table. It'll take a while. It was still cold from the fridge. She passed me the rolling pin. Nice and even and not too thin. Then cookie cutter it with the Easter cutters. And this time, maybe try to use more of the ones you don't like so well. That tulip one's pretty, she said, pointing to a cutter.

She stood at the counter beating egg whites, the whisk going fast against the bowl. I think it was last year you did all those scottie dog ones. I never want to see another dog-shaped cookie as long as I live. I like the bunny one myself, but variety's important.

Mrs. Kinghorn was looking out the window over the sink and she picked a cookie and bit in thoughtfully. There goes your mother, she said.

Behind me, I heard my mother's car drive down the driveway.

Where's she off to? she asked. She okay?

I guess, I said. She's going to the Panes to drop off Mary Kay stuff. I pounded the dough with the rolling pin. It was still cold from the fridge and I was having trouble getting it flattened. I stopped pounding and pushed my index finger at the dough and worked it in to the centre of the dough where it was frozen still. I pushed. Where I had a hangnail, it hurt. I clenched my teeth and pushed in farther.

Anything you want to talk about, Meryl-Monkey?

Nope, I said. I pulled my finger out of the dough and patted it closed where my finger had been. I began rolling again.

Mrs. Kinghorn opened the fridge and shifted bottles aside. And I thought I had more butter. You got butter at the house?

I think so. I smacked hard at the dough with the pin. It felt good and I did it again harder. I did it one more time as hard as I could, with my teeth clenched, and Mrs. Kinghorn took my arms and spun me around on the stool to face her so my sock feet slipped off the stool legs.

Okay, that's it. We're having a talk right now. Listen. She put her glasses on so she could see me better and her eyes were bigger behind the glasses and she stared at me until I looked down.

Just you let me ever --I mean, ever -- catch you hitting anything, I mean anything at all, Meryl, that hard again and you'll regret it. You hear me? You can't go around hurting things just because you're bigger than they are.

It's just dough, I said. I couldn't look back at her eyes all magnified. I clenched my jaw. I held on to the rolling pin and squeezed it hard. I felt caught there in her arms.

I think you and I both know it isn't just dough. It's insects and ... and your dolls. Yes, I know about your dolls. And it's yourself. Look at your nails. I don't even want to start in about what you do to your feet-- yes, I know about that too. Then there's your poor Benny cat. Maybe you think your mother doesn't notice because she doesn't point it out, but I will. I see it, Meryl. Do you hear me? I see it.

I started crying when she mentioned Benny, a tabby I'd called mine since I'd adopted him from the feral family of barn cats that stalked around the Kinghorn's old barn. I adored him and I never meant to hurt him.



Mrs. Kinghorn gestured at the rolling pin I was still holding. And put that thing down. Her eyes were teary. There were bits of crumbs in the corners of her mouth. Give it now. Flour's going every which way.

She let go of my arms and I handed her the pin. What am I supposed to use to roll?

You'll use nothing for the moment; you just sit and listen to what I have to say.

The apron I was wearing was digging into my sides. Mrs. Kinghorn opened and closed drawers, looking for her potholders and I pointed at the stove where they sat.

Ah, there, she said. She came over to the table and stood, a potholder in each fist. Now back to you. Don't spread your grief by hurting things. You write down how you feel. You learn how to express it another way, you come talk to me about it, you do whatever you have to. But don't hurt things. Grab me my cardigan, would you?

Her arms jiggled in the sleeves of her cardigan as she put it on. Then she flicked a potholder at my knee and bent to check the cookies in the oven.

I leaned off my stool to look too. The cookies puffed in neat regimental lines. The patio doors made a white sunlit frame around Mrs. Kinghorn. There were dust motes of flour settling to the floor. I didn't know how she saw through me. I think if I'd been old enough to articulate why I did what I did to my dolls and to insects so small I didn't have to see their faces -- although sometimes after I imagined them and felt horrible -- I'd have told her. But I couldn't understand why I did the things I did and that frightened me.

What I wanted to know was *how* -- I'd have done anything to be good. Aisling was good, you could tell. He rarely said anything mean.

I want to be good, I said. I do.

You are good, Meryl. You are.

Down in the basement, someone coughed and we paused. I looked at Mrs. Kinghorn and she said, Didn't know he was home. I guess he's down there making wine. I should bring him to talk some sense into you.

Dr. Kinghorn coughed again and this time the coughing went on and on. We heard him on the stairs.

Jesus, Joyce, I'm dying inside, he said from the doorway where he leaned.

Likely story, she said, but she poured him a glass of water. A high-pitched bark, like a reprimand, came from the kangaroo pouch of Dr. Kinghorn's sweatshirt and Jimmy peeked out, trembling. Jimmy was the Kinghorn's ancient Chihuahua. I loved him as much as I loved Benny. Jimmy sat on my lap but if I tried to do anything else, he nipped at me.

Oh for -- does he mind being in there, you think? She looked from me to Dr. Kinghorn. The pair of you.

What did I do? Dr. Kinghorn asked. When he grinned, his cheeks glowed white where the scars were from an snowmobile accident a long time ago.

I'd have felt better if it were possible for me to inherit something from Dr. Kinghorn, I thought. He wasn't mean like I was; he carried Jimmy around but he didn't hurt him. Besides, as much as I pretended we were related, the Kinghorns weren't mine. They had real grandchildren. It wasn't often, but sometimes on weekends, they went away to see them. Other times, I'd look out the window and see the telltale green station wagon in their driveway and know the real kids were there, inside that house. Anything I

pretended seemed silly then and the next time I went over to see the Kinghorns, I felt shy all over again, knowing I didn't really belong.

Mrs. Kinghorn needed butter and so we left Dr. Kinghorn to mind the cookies in the oven and we walked over.

We walked slowly and Mrs. Kinghorn leaned heavily on my shoulder. I was after something. I needed to know that she loved me. I asked her about a song she'd sung to me when I was little. Remember? I asked.

Oh, well, she said. I don't know. But she did know. She sang:

*One monkey don't stop no show,  
One monkey don't stop no show,  
So if you still wanna go, go ahead,  
And I mean every word I said.*

She was looking at our front living room window while she sang, at the heavy drapes, but she didn't say anything.

She stopped at the steps, her hand on the railing. Whew, she said. That's it. I'm done with exercise for today. Get the butter like a sweet thing.

I ran into the still house, empty because my mother was out on the road somewhere selling Mary Kay. The fridge had smelled like leftovers gone bad, but I'd ignored it, grabbed the butter and ran back out.

But that had been in the spring and now, Mrs. Kinghorn loved me again. I stayed at her house as long as I could but then I had to go home to my mother.

Later, past bedtime, I was still trying to get ready for school. I was trying to cut carrots into sticks for my lunch. I just wanted the day to be over and the paring knife kept slipping off the carrot.

My mother wasn't helping. She was dancing around to a stupid Nancy Sinatra song on the hi-fi.

Baby Pie! You're my s-o-u-l supporter, and I'm your s-o-l-e supporter! She flipped my hair around.

Do one for me, my mother asked, Will you? She was taking a lunch the next day too, but I was angry with her. I had seen what had happened in the music room; I'd seen her. How could she be acting silly now?

I will *not*, I said. The knife slipped off again, slicing cleanly into my thumb.

What's with you? She walked me over to the sink and ran water over my thumb.

I winced. I hate you, I said.

Oh, do you now? She made a face. Well, I hate you too. She blotted my thumb hard with Kleenex before wrapping a Band-Aid around it.

A few minutes later, she came to my room. I was laying my clothes out for school. It was her way of asking to be friends again when she said, Hey *pardner*, how's that thumb?

It's okay, I said.

She sat on my bed and played with a pair of my socks, rolling it into a ball and throwing it in the air.

I pointed to the Mexican peasant blouse Kara had brought me when she brought my mother the bracelets. The blouse was white with turquoise peacocks embroidered around the neck. Is this okay with my jeans? I asked.

Yeah, I guess. She leaned back on my bed, propped on her elbows. Her breasts stuck out when she did that. What about the little wrap skirt I bought you. Wear that, she said and when she talked she had a little double chin, but I didn't tell her.

Oh yeah, the wrap skirt, I said. I tried to say it lightly, but I couldn't. My thumb hurt and the Band-Aid was too tight and I felt stupid for what I'd said about hating her.

She sat up. C'mere you.

I went to her. I stood between her legs and she brushed back my staticky hair and held my face in her hands. She looked into my eyes. Poor Pie, she said and made a sad face. Why're you so serious? What did I ever do to make such a serious kid?

Why d'you have to dance around like that? I asked. I was whining, but I didn't care.

She sounded defeated when she said, But no one's here, Meryl. Who cares?

I care! I wiped my nose on my sleeve. I knew that it would be too much to tell her what I'd seen in the music room, but I wanted to thrust some of the heavy feeling that I held back at her. And -- and you come to my door at school and ask me to tape your skirt. Someone could walk by. Why'd you have to do that? I sobbed.

I thought you liked it when I came to see you, she said. Her voice was flat.

I remembered when I'd first heard her car in the parking lot earlier, how I'd wanted her to save me, but everything was different now. I looked at my hands and clenched my jaw and said, I *used* to like it but now I'm older.

Oh, *really*? She laughed but her mouth was mean and she pushed me out from between her knees and stood. D'you know how bratty you're being? Her arms were crossed. She stared at her slippers for a moment and then she looked at the ceiling like she had a big idea and said, Y'know it's the first day of summer tomorrow? I'm going to get those summer clothes out. She was halfway across the floor of my room when she said, That's what I'm going to do right now.

It was bedtime and our summer clothes were in the attic so I ignored her, but when I went to the bathroom the next morning, I found her bikinis and a yellow nightie I'd worn when I was about two hanging damply over the shower railing.

I pulled the nightie down and smelled it. She'd washed it.

All down the hall, there were clothes hanging everywhere to air out the mothball smell of the attic. I went into the living room. She'd draped T-shirts and shorts over the brown velvet chesterfield. I found her there, wearing a red sarong, kneeling on the Oriental rug and going through a basket of mismatched socks. Mum, I said. I waved the yellow nightie at her.

I *know*! Isn't it cute? I found a whole bag of your baby stuff. Look at these. She held a pair of pink tights that had ruffles on the bum. I stepped around a garbage bag and took them from her.

I loved these, I said. I wished what I said was true. I wanted to remember them, but I didn't.

My mother was talking over me, saying, I haven't slept I've been so excited. You know, I still have these dresses from Hillson. I think I have Kara's stuff too. All the clothes that I'd forgotten.

My heart flipped. She was talking fast, as though I'd try to stop her if she paused and I knew. Mum, I said. You haven't slept at all? My mouth felt thick; I hadn't brushed my teeth yet. I looked around at all the garbage bags and boxes. Did you bring down *everything*? I tried to look at her face, but she stood and walked past me to the kitchen.

I knew that when the summer people came with their parties and flip flops and coolers and beach chairs, with their ice cream cone afternoons and their lobsters by the pound and their barbecues and chef hats and aprons, she was happier. And summer also brought Kara from Mexico or wherever she'd been; Kara would come sailing into Garvey Inlet from wherever, and when she was around everything was lighter. But it seemed too cold, too early for this. Outside, everything was dark; it didn't seem all that long ago that scraps of ice had been floating in the inlet like pieces of dirty Styrofoam.

Don't be a carp, Meryl. I mean what I said: I haven't slept yet. She said it slower this time because she was concentrating on filling her coffee cup again without her hand shaking like it did when she'd had too much coffee or like she got just before she wouldn't get out of bed and wouldn't stop crying.

My mother saw me looking at the goose-bumps she had. Her feet in their flip-flops were purple.

You're cold, Mum. I wanted to try to get her to go to bed.

She fixed the knot in her sarong and didn't say anything. I forgot about everything that had come before this and wished like I always wished in times like this that I had a name for her like her *Pie* and *Baby Pie* name for me. *Mum* wasn't good enough. I wished I had a name for her that I could use as a secret code between us that

meant: *whatever comes before this word or follows it is all about how loyal I am.* A word like that was magic; you could relax against it without a doubt

Mum, you're cold, I said again and this time she let me take her coffee cup away and lead her up to her bed.



***Summer***

*Now we sing, and do tiny dances on the kitchen floor.*

*Our whole body is like a harbour at dawn;*

*We know that our master has left us for the day.*

- Robert Bly

It was almost summer and my mother seemed to grow taller in her cotton dresses and high cork-soled sandals. To find my own summer clothes, I went through minefields of sweater sets and ski sweaters, wool toreador pants and seal fur boots that she'd shed in little pools she'd stepped out of on her bedroom floor, or that she'd hidden in drawers or in one of the closets she used in the two upstairs' bedrooms. While looking for my own things, I also gathered her dirty socks and underwear and nylons and threw them in the bathtub for soaking. The cleaner things I separated into piles before I bagged and labelled them and put them back in the attic. Once I found a bag of soiled sweaters stuffed between a dresser and a peeling papered wall. I broke the feast of tiny moths that fluttered out and I washed the lavender and baby blue wool with its beaded work along the collars and laid them on towels all along the veranda to dry. The last thing I did was lug bags of stretched and ruined clothes down to the Kinghorns. I left the bags outside and looked in one of the teardrop windows on the door. Inside, I saw Mrs. Kinghorn and Dr. Kinghorn leaning against the blue cupboards, glaring at each other.

I knocked and opened the door. Can you drive me to the dump? I asked.

Dr. Kinghorn jerked his head towards Mrs. Kinghorn. I guess I could. As soon as I get Miss-Moony-here's feathers settled.

Mrs. Kinghorn laughed. I guess that would be me, she said and she rinsed out her teacup and went into the living room.

Just lemme have a cigarette, Dr. Kinghorn said. When he walked by, he clapped his hand down on my head and I smelled his smell: Export A's and onion and peppermint all rolled together. I watched him sit in his chair out on the porch, hunched in his hunting jacket. Sometimes, I sat out on the porch with Dr. Kinghorn, balanced on his bent knee with my head against his shoulder, patting Jimmy or Benny. They were good lap pets. They lay patiently while Dr. Kinghorn smoked, tapping his cigarette on his boot, and I counted the sparse white stubble on his scarred cheeks. It was mostly quiet those times, except for the trucks on the road, and I'd get sleepy with contentment until Dr. Kinghorn's hacking cough forced him to push me off.

Look away, he'd say, his mouth hidden in a handkerchief. I gotta spit the rot out.

Now, Dr. Kinghorn tapped the window. The scars that zipped across his face shone faintly when he grinned. C'mere with Jimmy, would you? he asked through the glass.

I called Jimmy, but he didn't come.

Don't you call that dog, Missy, Mrs. Kinghorn yelled from the living room where I heard the soaring music that announced *General Hospital*.

Dr. Kinghorn asked me to.

I know it. I knew they were only play fighting but felt relieved when she added, You tell him the dog likes me better.

I heard a commercial I liked come on. In it, a monkey sat on a stool in a tiny lab coat with a nametag that said *Stephen*.

Come in if you're coming in, Mrs. Kinghorn called, like she could read my mind and knew I wanted to go in and watch the monkey. I liked his white coat; I liked his clutchy paws.

When I came home from the dump, my mother was on the phone with Kara in Bermuda, where she had a beach house. Kara had been my mother's best friend forever and she had been a summer girl too. She was supposed to be finding someone to crew, someone to sail the *Mad Bad 2*. My mother lit cigarette after cigarette, curled on a yellow velvet conversation chair in the hall.

But when? my mother whined. When'll you get here?

A week later she was here -- not by boat, but from the city where she'd taken a taxi all the way from the airport. The morning after she arrived, I crept out of my room to find cigarette butts floating like little white logs in left-over martini mix. It seemed fuzzy, like a dream, that Kara had come, that late the night before the curtains had really been left open and the lights had been shining out onto the lawn, that the music in the walls around me had been real and that I really *had* stumbled out to the kitchen and seen my mother dancing with a woman with blond fuzzy braids.

Meryl! She knelt down to hug me and I clung to her skinny body, breathing in her patchouli smell. I couldn't wait for a crew, she said and she held my chin between her thumb and forefinger and stared. My God, she's grown, she said to my mother.

We need some marties, my mother said. It was late but no one seemed to care and while they made martinis, I was allowed to stay. Put this on. Kara opened her

luggage, pulled a record from its sleeve and handed it to me. That's the new *Little River Band*, she said to my mother as I went into the living room.

I sat on Kara's lap and she leaned her hard chin into the crown of my head. She had long fingernails painted pink. I knew she'd paint mine too, not now, but tomorrow. I thought the little cigarettes that Kara rolled from a tin she'd brought with her were just that: cigarettes that she made instead of store-bought ones like my mother's. She carried the tin with her in the back pocket of her jeans. It had a cartoon of a black cat on the top. She was telling my mother that she'd hidden it in her bra on the plane from Bermuda.

Kara and my mother shared the cigarette, passing it across the table and when I asked why Kara had hidden it, they stared at each other with wide eyes and held in the smoke. Uh, that answer would be your jurisdiction, Jules, Kara choked out.

Because she loves the little cat tin so much, see Pie, that she thought someone might steal it, my mother said. Then they were talking over and under each other's words, finishing each other's sentences.

This is the one, Kara said. I slipped off her knee and she stood to dance in her bellbottoms, her hands above her head. She sang:

*Oh what a night, late December back in '63  
What a ve-ry special time for me  
As I remember what a night!*

I bet you could play it, Jules, she said. Their eyes looked heavy, but they were grinning and they ran into the living room. They didn't care that the curtains were open and so I didn't either; we were just happy, clapping and feverish. My mother skipped over the rug to the turntable to put the needle back to the beginning of the song and ran to the baby grand and tried notes. She started to jog over to the turntable again and then

froze: I don't need to do everything! I was beside her, but she called out loud, Mer, help! and nudged me to the hi-fi put the needle back to the beginning.

The second time my mother played it perfectly.

She's amazing! Kara crowed. C'mon, Pie. Come dance with us! I was sitting on the couch. I liked to watch them when they were like this; I didn't like to dance myself. But they wouldn't listen. They dragged me skiing across the wood floor in my socks. The song was good and suddenly I didn't care what they thought. I started spinning. The Oriental rug became a red blur. Watch me, Mum, Kar! I can go faster! I cried, and the world's sharp edges smeared into a mix of colour; my mother's sweater coat and Kara's patched bellbottoms smudged in with the book shelves and the baby grand, the brown chesterfield, the wooden hi-fi cabinet, the teak coffee table that Kara had pushed out of the way. Everything inside me went safe when I wobbled with dizziness and they caught me, laughing, between them, all their bracelets and hoop earrings clicking.

Kara always woke before my mother. She came downstairs in a T-shirt and underpants. Look at my frizzies, she said, trying to pull her fingers through her white-blond hair. We took out all the braids. It took *hours*.

She took two bowls out of the dish-rack, poured us granola and bent to look in the fridge. No milk? she asked.

There's powdered if we're out, I said.

Ick. Forget that idea. Kara sat across the table from me and started to roll a cigarette. Oh hey wait, she whispered. She went to her suitcase. I found this in a box of old photos at the beach house and I thought you'd like it. She handed me a sunny

photograph of a pink Bermudan beach on which a woman in cat-eye sunglasses and a patterned beach wrap posed. She looked like my mother but fatter and she held a delicate glass up for a toast in one hand. That's your mum -- Kara flicked her nail on the photo-- and that's a champagne in that bottle in the sand there and in that glass she's holding.

I didn't get why the photograph was for me until I looked closer and saw an unfocused smudge caught mid-flutter over one flap of the beach wrap. It was my mother's other hand, about to pull the flap closed over the bump of belly that peeked out.

That's you, Hon, Kara said. Inside her belly.

No one had told me this before. I studied my mother's stomach. So, I've been to Bermuda? I asked.

Kara laughed. Yah, I guess you've been all kinds of places you didn't know, hey?

We gave out invites for the party already, I said. I was standing at the ironing board, learning how to iron blouses. I'd already learned how to do pillowcases and silk scarves that gave off a musk smell when I pushed the iron into their corners.

Cool, Kara said. Who all's coming?

I told her that yesterday my mother and I had dropped off a bright pink envelope into each mailbox in Garvey, even if we didn't know who lived there.

First, it's good for Mary Kay business, my mother had said, smacking her lips and pushing an envelope into the Leduc mailbox. And second, how'd you feel to be left out? She looked down at me, waiting for a smile. A lumber truck had rattled by then and my mother had put her hands on my shoulders until the truck had passed. She pulled back her cuff to see her watch and the luminescent face flashed in my eyes. When she bolted

across the Panes' lawn, her hair scarf trailing behind her, I crouched down in the alder bushes to wait, pushing a stick again and again into the wet ground until I had a row of holes that you could plant something in, if you had something to plant.

My mother's voice floated to where I sat, They're having fish again.

I looked out. There was a full moon and you could see her perfectly against the window's brightness.

It's cod, she was saying, And potatoes.

I licked my lips and pulled the stick out of the mud again. Okay, I said to myself. Let's plant something. I was engrossed, pretending to sprinkle seeds and tapping my boot over the holes so they disappeared, until I heard a boat hum across the water, revving into a higher gear before it sped out into the inlet and faded away. I wondered what amount of time had passed. I couldn't see my mother on the lawn anymore; she'd gone somewhere, maybe to check other windows. I drew around one of my rubber boots with the stick before brushing my dirty hands onto my cords. In the pockets of my sweater, I felt the remaining invitations my mother had left with me and something new: a cellophane packet hidden and stapled to the side of my pocket with extra buttons. I liked the idea of them being there, just in case I needed them.

Hey, sleepy. I wonder if I can still piggy back you? Wanna try? my mother asked when she came back.

I shook my head. It seemed as if she forgot sometimes how old I was. No matter what she said about me being skinny and small, I didn't want her to know how heavy I really was. We were almost home anyway; we came around the bend in the road. Past the Kinghorn's orchard, I saw the silhouette of our house, the blurred outline of light



around the drapes in the front window. If you wanted to see in our windows, you couldn't. I thought of how, if I looked out my window over my dresser at home, I'd see that same moon hanging over the Kinghorn barn and the scraggly silhouettes of the apple trees. Sometimes when I came home from walking, I held my bedroom curtains open and pretended someone was out there watching me, thinking I was interesting enough.

There were never lights on at the Kinghorns' at that hour but I could still see the sets of mossy antlers bolted to the shingles of the back woodshed. A gust of wind blew in my face and I smelled brine and seaweed. I liked to label things like that.

My mother was talking. She said, She used to be something else.

I nodded, not really listening.

You ask her. Or take a look at the pictures in the bathroom. I mean, *look* at how big she is now compared to those ones of her and my mum in the sixties. She's let herself go. Never let yourself go like that, Meryl.

Like who? Who's let herself go? I coughed and my mother reached in her pocket for a breath mint because we didn't have lozenges with us. She peeled off the cellophane and handed it to me. Joyce, she said. Mrs. Kinghorn. I mean, all that weight. Those muumuus she wears don't hide it.

I knew what *letting go* meant. It had nothing to do with a clean uncluttered house or learning how to spell better or write cursive and the other things that concerned me. It felt like I'd already begun the descent into wherever people who let themselves go went. Already, I bit my nails until they bled while my mother bit hers neatly and polished the stubby pink parts so it didn't look half as bad.

Are you listening? My mother reached down and tugged on a belt loop on the back my cords.

I was. I was kind of listening. I sucked on the mint, knowing I'd disappointed her.

But my mother was kind. Anyway, Spacey, never mind. You're tired. She sighed. Oh, look, Pie. She pointed at the full moon, her arm so graceful and long it made the sky just heavy behind it.

We heard my mother coming down the stairs.

That's a lot of people, Kara said. I was spraying starch from a silver can on the napkins. When the napkins was still warm, I'd make them into fans. I was practising bunnies and swans but I'd wait until I'd perfected them before I made them for real people.

I invited summer people, even some Hillson people, my mother was saying to Kara. She was pulling an elastic out of her hair. The more the merrier, she added.

I looked at the picture above the sink; the one of my mother and the man at a beer garden, thinking about Hillson.

You know me. I already invited the guy I met on the plane, Kara said.

New M.A.! My mother looked at the ironing board. Hey, Mer, she said. Can you do my hair?

I did that sometimes. If her hair was too frizzy or if she slept on it wrong and it bumped weird and wrong at the back, I ironed it flat for her; right then I didn't feel like it because I knew her hair would stink of cigarettes. What's M.A.? I asked.

It's *my* M.A., Kara said to my mother, not yours. To me she said, It's an acronym, Hon. For Male Attention.

Oh, I said.

Wait, my mother said. I'll wash it first. After she did a shampoo in the sink, she leaned over the board and talked to us. Her voice sounded like it was coming from far away, like she was down a hole. I moved the iron over her hair. When she flipped it back, it parted perfectly in the middle and fell red and straight.

Wow, Kara said. Can you do mine?

I felt noble or something when I said, Only if you shampoo first, I said.

After I'd done Kara's hair, we sat at the table. While Kara rolled another cigarette, my mother opened a container of yoghurt for us to share, taking a spoonful and passing it around the table.

My mother passed the cigarette back to Kara and took the yoghurt container from me. We're sharing everything; we're a commune, my mother joked.

We are, Kara said. A women's commune. She stroked my wrist. Hey, you're almost a little woman, she said.

I knew what they were talking about. I couldn't look at my mother and then when I could again, she wasn't looking at me anyway. She was nodding at Kara. Yeah, she is. Soon she'll be a teenager -- another three years.

What, I said. What. But they kept grinning and nodding and staring at each other and then me.

She said, Sometimes, I think about that, Kar. It makes me a sad. I mean, she's already ironing and cleaning up. She pointed at the blouses on hangers that I'd hung on the doorknob. There were only two, it wasn't a big deal.

Kara squinted to take a drag. When she looked at me again, her eyes seemed really blue. I mean, *You've got* a very old soul. I can tell, Kara said.

Don't freak her out, Kar. My mother laughed. Oh, Pie. Are we freaking you out? She was scraping the spoon along the ridge of the yoghurt tub to get at the thick good stuff hidden there. Kara wasn't listening.

She reached over and took my chin and shook it gently. You know what I mean, don't you, Meryl? Just let your soul guide you, Hon, let it take you wherever ... wherever.... she trailed off. You know what I mean, right?

I didn't. I felt left out; not sad, just left out. I didn't get them sometimes. What was weird was when Kara leaned into my mother's ear. I was right there beside them, there was no way I couldn't have heard when Kara whispered, Shit, Julia, she's on high speed. She's got to relax.

Later, I was sitting on the toilet, kicking at the bathmat and heard more.

Kara said, Have you noticed how thin she is. Those scrawny arms. That pointy little face. She looks like a Siamese cat.

They're talking about me, I thought.

I'm more concerned about her temper, my mother said. I caught her smacking in the face of her doll. I haven't even broached that subject; I don't know how.

She's got to be told about things. You've got to tell her things.

What am I supposed to say? Pie, before you were born, I was in love with a man who loved me right back. I got pregnant. How can I explain this? The way I see it is I was here before her. I was here first. And for now, I have a right to my secrets. Do you think a little kid can understand that? I don't think so.

Kara was quiet for a long time. No, she said. I guess a kid wouldn't. Hell, I don't even understand it.

I've been to parties where no one has fun, where you're forced to sit in a horrid circle and stare at each other and trade strained stories. But at our parties, my mother does everything right. She's not uptight, she's busy. She's making drinks, making people comfortable: entertaining. You might not notice how drunk she is. Actually, you're probably too drunk to care. But this is the key to a good party and to her success.

Before everything heated up, Kara would say, Eat something.

Sure, my mother would grin. Throw a baby onion in my drink.

What a motto: No food, unless it's an onion in my martini.

By ten, everyone in the house was wasted and anything could happen. The whole lot were babbling, making no sense; everyone was so drunk, they didn't notice what she had done was make the bright swirling sloshed summer night a thing to remember later. Because later was when it was appreciated. When you were sad, staring out a frosted winter window, you should miss a person like her.

We'd take naps later because we'd gotten up early. The downstairs at least smelled as clean as a lemon and I was kneeling on a chair at the kitchen table, squeezing devilled egg through an icing bag, adding parsley sprigs to each little egg on the doily-covered tray. My mother clattered in from the dining room with another plate of hors d'oeuvres.

Where's Kara? She sounded annoyed.

It seemed like hours ago that I'd heard Kara sweeping the veranda for the dancing later.

We found Kara in the basement, newspapers spread around her, a bag of potting soil and a dozen clay pots on the cement floor.

What're you doing? We've got to get ready for the party, my mother said.

Who cares. Why haven't you done this? I mean, I gave you this stuff last year. I told you then your plants would die if you didn't re-pot. She held a begonia, carefully cupping the exposed roots in her palm.

What was I supposed to do? It's a plant. I watered it.

No, *I* did, I said. But no one noticed. I didn't even like the plants that ran over their pots along the sills at our house, but I watered them.

My mother slapped her thighs. What was I supposed to do, Kar? I didn't know.

It's almost dead. Its roots were freaking out. Kara said.

Just calm down, okay?

No. Listen to me about plants. They're dependent. Kara's eyes were welling up. *And* they were a gift, she added, waving her hand in front of her eyes. Shit, I don't know why I'm crying; I should have expected it. Kara looked at me. And you too Meryl. I gave you that aloe vera.

What aloe vera? I asked.

I put it specifically in the bathroom. And nobody's even touched it. It's dead up there.

It wouldn't change anything, but I bolted up both sets of stairs to the bathroom and touched the spiked leaves. Kara's gift tag was still on the tiny pot. *Sweet Clutzy: a present to help you heal faster! (Break off & squeeze juice on cuts - you only need a tiny bit!)* Love Kara. I looked at a white curl of exposed root and felt sick. It had tried to move out of the tiny pot it had outgrown but I hadn't noticed. I'd killed it every time I'd come in here and brushed my teeth and taken a bath and not seen. Plants were things I dusted and vacuumed around, but this one was just little.

I think we both felt bad. While Kara re-potted the surviving begonia and gave instructions on when to pot the ivy and bamboo clippings she'd managed to rescue, my mother watched her intently, her hands on her hips.

It's the girl guide in me, Kara shrugged. Remember what they taught us? Take only pictures and leave only footprints. Or however it goes.

I thought it was: Play only havoc and leave only dead plants.

They laughed as they went upstairs to get pretty. They went to the bottles and powders and oils and polish on the shelves in the bathroom and I sat outside the door and listened.

First, they waxed, ripping wax off their legs and bikini lines with cotton strips. In between, they talked about men. They always talked about men when they were getting ready because that's who the preparation was for.

It sounds messy, Kara said.

It's dangerous, my mother said. But she sounded excited.

I don't tell you what to do, but.



My mother was feeling charitable. But what. Go ahead, she said.

Don't get mad, but -- Kara paused and pulled and my mother sucked in her breath and said *Yow!* -- what if... how'll it be if you get bored and want to deke out of it? Imagine. Home-wrecking, they'll say. And it's not like he could leave and take the ocean with him, you know. Did you think about that? You'd be run out.

A singed smell crept under the door into the hall. It stung my eyes. *Now* what're you doing? I called. I wanted them to know I was listening. I didn't want to leave but I also didn't want to hear anything big right then; Kara and the plants had been enough.

Dyeing Kara's hair, my mother continued. Her head hair. Go get dressed yourself, how about. She was talking softer when she said, Why'd I say *head* hair like that to her?

They laughed. My mother said *I know, I know* it's bad. I just can't seem to stop.

Well you *have* to. No, really. You do. You can't -- Kara said something I couldn't hear. Then she said, At least promise that.

It must have been something serious because I could tell my mother wasn't joking when she said, Okay, I promise, Kara. I won't.

Wind came swishing through the willow bringing the sun speckling in and the smell of the water. I was hidden, the leaves falling in a curtain around me, when the men came, swinging six packs or bottles of wine. Their wives came too, carrying Tupperware.

Across the lawn, my mother waved her fingers at someone I couldn't see. Her ironed hair was flat against her back and fiery in the sunlight. She took a slow drink from her glass and called: What have you got, Joyce?

Mrs. Kinghorn walked slowly. I should have gone out to help her, but I didn't feel like it. Sometimes she leaned too hard on me. She was saying, Hold on now, just hold on, Julia.

My mother sat down on the top step. She looked into her glass before taking another sip.

Kara's new boyfriend, the one she'd met on the plane, had come while they were still getting ready. He stood in the doorway, dressed funny in shorts and a shirt and tie. He looked like a very tall little boy, but he had a good smile. He had a pretty accent when he said, *I'm Daniel*.

When I went upstairs to tell Kara, she put her hand on my mother's arm and shook it so her bracelets jangled and went, Eeeee! Dan's a graduate student; very bright. She smacked her lip-glossed lips at the mirror. He's a fantastic catch.

While they talked about the man who waited for Kara downstairs, I stared up at the shelf of books that went around my mother's bedroom walls. I couldn't reach those novels and poetry books and philosophy texts and that made them special. The only time I touched them was when she or Kara brought one down to read. Sometimes Kara and my mother played a game they called Answers. It was what I now know is stichomancy; at the time it seemed like magic.

Compared to -my mother was talking to Kara, sweeping eyeliner on with a tiny black brush. She looked at me behind her reflection in the mirror- Compared to you-know-who, is that what you're getting at? Her smile was short and flat, not really a smile at all. A good catch my ass: let's see you take him home to the Irvines, Kar.

Don't wreck this. Kara looked down at her hands. She twisted around on her stool and grabbed her little black tin from where it sat on the bed. She started to roll up a cigarette. I could take him home. She held the cigarette paper to the light. I could, she repeated, but she looked sad.

My mother said, You fall into things so fast. It's stupid.

It takes one to know one.

I knew you'd say that.

When Kara had come downstairs in a black dress and feather earrings, Daniel had sucked in his breath and said, Hey, beautiful.

Kara had held his long hand to her cheek like she knew him already. Just so you know, she said. You'll be the only handsome black guy here.

As long as you've got an ugly one, he said, I'll manage.

When he smiled down, she looked up. I just bet you will, she said.

The screen door slammed. Daniel stood there with bottles of vodka and gin in his hands. He'd been helping because he'd arrived early and now he'd started my job; I was supposed to be setting up the bar but I was hidden because I didn't want to, even if it meant that I couldn't clip down the tablecloth with the silver clips. The screen door slammed again as he came striding out with more glasses for the bar table and my mother winced. When he saw her sitting on the steps, he nudged her with his knee and said, I didn't realise Kara was an Irvine.

Yup, my mother said. Our resident rich girl.

What have I got myself into? It was a real smile Daniel gave my mother; bigger than the tight one she returned.

A tiny woman in a satin pantsuit interrupted. Julia, you're living room's so gothic! she said. All that dark velvet. I'd get so drepressed.

Whatever turns your crank, my mother said. She stretched and stood, suddenly towering in her fancy sandals, and pulled her hair up. She smiled charmingly down at the woman.

The woman nodded. I thought she was nodding at my mother, but it was to the music; *Poco* floated through the open window. She said, You know, I rescind. It's hip actually.

Rescind, my mother said. What a great word.

You could tell the woman was from the city. The difference was her brash outfit and those words: *rescind*, *hip*. I thought she looked a little like a jockey, sitting on the arm of a wicker chair in her satin pants. I could tell my mother that later, I thought. She'd get a kick out of it.

In the breeze, Mrs Kinghorn's caftan floated around her. She'd made it across the lawn. With Jimmy weaving a worried figure-eight around her feet, she was rounding the corner of our house where the barbecue was.

My mother leaned out over the railing to stop her. You didn't answer me, she said. What do you have in the Tupperware?

Mrs. Kinghorn squinted. Jesus, you're something. You *know* I've brought ribs. She frowned at my mother's martini. When did you girls start that up today?

My mother has this way of standing. She leans back with her hands on her hips, rubbing her bones there. I don't know if it's to make sure she hasn't gained weight or to make sure she's there. She was doing it now. In her off-the-shoulder white dress, she held onto her hips and gave Mrs. Kinghorn a puzzled look.

When did we girls start *what*? She wasn't really puzzled, she was pretending.

I don't know why it bugged me that she was standing there talking to Mrs. Kinghorn and rubbing at her hips with nothing on underneath but nylons, but it did.

Upstairs, Kara had said, That dress is excellent, Jules. Real excellent.

I look so virginal, my mother said the mirror. Kara snorted.

When she was ready, my mother twirled around and her dress went out far because of the slits on the side.

Mum, you're not wearing underpants, I said, but she wasn't listening or she didn't care and now she was standing in front of Mrs. Kinghorn like that.

Do you happen to know what your daughter's up to? Mrs. Kinghorn said.

My mother was smiling brightly at a man who waved from the lawn. She started walking towards him, her heels sinking into the grass. She called back, Meryl's somewhere. If you see her, tell her to get dressed.

I knew the tide would be coming in soon. The water looked all chopped up and cool compared to the shimmering lawn. I thought no one could see me under the willow, so when I scratched at a bite on my ankle and the scab came off under my nail, I sneaked my finger to my mouth and ate it. The water looked good and soon all the kids would get to go swimming. Kara would take us because she always did. I loved the beach more than getting in the water. I found things there: a limpet being eaten by a tiny crab, a

smooth brown piece of beach glass, white barnacles that swirled like microscopic worlds.

Sometimes I just looked at tiny things and pretended I was in them.

They look like a chain, I thought. A perfect chain.

I peeked out of the willow's leaves and saw Mr. Pane was first. He bobbed over the asphalt horizon, bent down towards his wife, Viola, who looked angry; her head was snapping back and forth. Aisling and Pamela were next, strung along hand in hand. They skipped to keep up.

I knew without looking that my mother was watching them too, a look of longing on her face. She had the same look everywhere she saw a couple touching like the Panes were touching. When she did it, I couldn't look at her. It hurt to see her staring. Sometimes on the street, I'd pulled on her pocket to make her snap out of it. It was like she'd lost something she couldn't believe she'd lost and wanted it back.

Down on the road, something was wrong. Aisling had dropped back to sit down on the roadside. He made his hand into a fist and hit at the edge of the asphalt, but the other Panes were oblivious, climbing the slope of lawn to the clutch of wives who stood admiring casseroles.

It was Mr. Pane who turned back. Aisling, get up here! he yelled.

Mrs. Pane only lifted her eyes when Mr. Pane walked back down to grab Aisling's hand and bring him up to the veranda steps where my mother stood, smoking. Say hello to your hostess, Aisling. Be polite.

Hello to your hostess, Aisling said. When I saw Aisling smile up at my mother in her white dress, I wanted to put on my dress too. But I didn't want anyone to notice it was because of Aisling. I didn't want to be teased.

She'd done it before. I'd gone to Aisling's house once for his birthday.

I went after school so we sat at the kitchen table and did our homework.

When Mr. Pane came in from the Lobster Stop after work that day, he stood in the doorway, wiping his nose and clearing his throat. There's a sight for sore eyes, he said.

He brought a bag of dulse over and plopped it down in front of us. Here you go. He reached out to clamp his hand on top of his son's head and gave him a little shake. That's my boy, he said. He ruffled Aisling's hair.

Okay, Dad. Aisling kept his eyes on his math book but he shimmied his hand inside the bag and grabbed a piece of the purple seaweed.

You like this stuff? Mr. Pane asked me. It's good for you, you know.

I turned in my chair and smiled at Mr. Pane. I love it, I said. The truth was that I hated dulse but I wanted to cover for Aisling's indifference.

Mr. Pane didn't seem to notice; he'd walked away and was calling, Pammy? Where's the pretty girl?

I looked across the table at Aisling. His pencil was poised above the math and his other hand was in the dulse. The bag was dirty; it had a milky residue. You could tell the dulse inside hadn't been cleaned. There were little baby mussels clinging to it. I guess I was jealous; thinking about Mr. Pane's hand on Aisling's head and how it had looked like an upside down crown.



The dinner table was crowded with the four Panes and Mr. Pane's partner, Jiggs Poole and his teenage son, Paul. I wanted to ask Paul if he liked that one of the Pane boats was called the *Mr. Paul*. Maybe it was no big deal --Aisling and Pam had a boat named after them too: *The Pam n' Aisling*-- but I'd have liked a boat called *The Meryl*. *Mer-yl* sounded like the way a boat sort of jumped up out of the waves and then went down.

When Mrs. Pane served everyone warm water, I sipped mine but it tasted funny warm so I spat it back in the glass. No one noticed because everyone was grabbing hands around the table to say grace and Aisling grabbed mine and held it and my face was hot. While we ate, everyone hunched over their plates and no one talked. I was hungry; it was something my mother would have hated: hamburger fried with tomatoes and macaroni. Paul Poole ate the fastest. He shoved a last piece of macaroni onto his fork with his thumb and pushed away from the table.

What're ya staring at? he said to me when he stood and I looked fast at my plate.

Mrs. Pane looked tired. She served my helping like she was angry, banging the spoon on my plate.

You didn't get a cake, I said to Aisling when we were outside.

Big hairy deal, he shrugged. Then we were running down to the dock and playing on the slippery rocks under it. I didn't mind how the Panes were gruff with me. I slipped from rock to rock, getting dirty and not caring, pretending that Aisling was my brother, that Mrs. Pane was my mother. When I slipped and fell and scraped my hand, I knew the reason I'd fallen was because I'd been pretending I was a Pane and because I'd forgotten my mother was at home, waiting for me to come back.

When Mr. Pane's drove me home, the truck's headlights swept over our veranda where my mother was waiting for me, bundled in an afghan.

Her white pants glowed in the dark when she walked to the truck and opened my door and after she'd teased me later while I got ready for bed. I was pulling my night-dress over my head, but still inside it. She seemed so angry when she spat out, So what, is that dirty Pane kid your *boyfriend*, Meryl? Is that it? Is he your boyfriend?

The sun made me squint when I brushed aside the curtain of willow to run to the back yard. My mother had told me before that I ran funny so I hoped no one was watching. A red tablecloth snapped in the wind and all the kids were congregated around it because Kara and Dr. Kinghorn were there, getting the barbecue ready.

Kara had an apron on over her dress. Have you seen Daniel? she asked Dr. Kinghorn.

Daniel who? Dr. Kinghorn's scars made him look like a puppet. Who's this Daniel? He said things other adults never said if you waited around. That's why all the kids were here.

My new *beau*, Kara said.

I see. Another one. His hand snaked into the pocket of his cowboy shirt for his lighter. Well, let's start the sucker up, he yelled. When I peeked in under his arm to watch the briquettes seep from black to white, he rested his arm on top of my head. Oh hello there, he said. Pam Pane stood on the other side of him and kicked at the dirt with her sandal. She saw me looking at her and made a face.

Now look at that. Dr. Kinghorn pointed at the briquettes. Note the lack of *red* hot. White is the colour we want here. *White* hot, like an old feller. Like me, right, Joyce? Tell them. Go on. Don't be shy, Lover.

*Lover!* Kids giggled.

Mrs. Kinghorn snorted. Oh, dream on, she said.

We got a problem, Meryl, Dr. Kinghorn said. It's called a cold, passionless marriage. He pulled the tab off a beer and took a long drink.

Oh I get it. Meryl's your straight man now, Kara said. That used to be my job.

Really, Kara? I asked. Her blond hair looked pretty. It was piled high in a ballerina bun. A girl I didn't know leaned against Kara. The girl had thick black hair and a weird eye. It didn't look right.

Sure she was. Dr. Kinghorn winked. A century ago.

I wasn't playing straight man anymore. I pointed at the girl. Who's she? I said. I was being rude but I didn't care.

Kara's lip curled. Meryl, that's rude. She looked at my shorts like she hadn't noticed before. In front of everyone, she waved the droopy brush of barbecue sauce. And why aren't you dressed? she said. Look at your stringy hair. I realised that she'd only been here a couple of days, but it didn't matter. Kara was as comfortable as if she'd lived here all her life. I clenched my jaw.

Look at your own, bun head, I said.

She gaped at me. Meryl!

I stared at my feet.

Dr. Kinghorn shushed most of the chorus of kids who laughed but Pam kept laughing and I hated her all over again.

When Mrs. Kinghorn whispered to Kara to be patient, that she'd seen me in the willow, watching my mother. I spun around to look at her. I hadn't see Mrs. Kinghorn even look in my direction when I was under the tree.

Oh, for Christ's sake, Kara said.

She was. She was in there counting her mother's drinks, Mrs. Kinghorn said.

I was *not!* I yelled. I wasn't counting anything! My face felt tight and mean.

Simmer down now, Dr. Kinghorn said. His cowboy shirt was unbuttoned and the St. Christopher medallion on his chain winked back sun when he moved. Pie, you'll get dressed now. He flicked his fingers against the top of my head and pushed me in the direction of the house.

I need a new beer. Dr. Kinghorn slapped his hands against his thighs, slid them up his stomach and slapped them again on his belly. He hooked his thumbs under his suspenders and slid them like two zippers to his shoulders. His left hand stayed hooked there at the shoulder while his right hand crept to cup his mouth and nose and he breathed out heavily and dropped his hands into his pockets.

Do you *have* to do that? Mrs. Kinghorn's back was turned at the barbecue but she knew from the slapping what he'd done.

Halitosis: number one killer of love.

Around the table, kids giggled.

The girl with the black braids whispered to Kara, hal-what?

Kara shook her head. Never mind, she said.

It was late afternoon. My mother was doing her best to get people to mingle as they ate. The fishermen stood by the veranda with their paper plates, dressed uniformly in short-sleeved plaid or pastel shirts and pressed work pants. She yelled encouragingly and they smiled back sheepishly but they didn't move.

Kara wanted to go swimming. Who wants to come swimming with me?

But you're all dressed. My mother crossed her arms. Isn't it dangerous?

Everyone just ate.

I'll get dressed again, Kara said. And the kids ate over an hour ago. She pulled the box of snorkels and water wings and flippers from the hall closet onto the veranda. Who needs stuff? she yelled. Aisling ran to her, and then took a step back. Do you have water wings? He asked. I can swim and all, I just like them.

Yup. But do you have trunks here. Or were you planning to skinny dip, sir?

Aisling blushed. He turned on his hip to Viola, who sat the picnic table, but she was looking away. I'll wear my shorts, he said.

The water rose to my shoulders all dappled with sunlight. I liked Kara again. We'd changed at the house, so we were in already, standing in the waves and waiting for a big one. Under the water, her legs looked like midget legs.

I treaded water and hung on to her forearm. A wave rose behind her and came down around us and her necklace floated on the water. It was little gold scales because that was her astrological sign.

Can't you touch bottom? she asked.

I can unless there's a big wave, I said as a little wave hit the back of my head.

Like this one coming? Kara grinned. Ready, Mer? Here it comes!

I gritted my teeth and she held my arms and we rose and fell with it like a ride.

Hurry guys, Kara called. I wished she hadn't said anything. Pam and another girl were shoving their hair into bathing caps and running awkwardly across the sandstone pebbles to where Aisling flipped the water's edge with his toes. Other kids were pulling off shorts and dresses and putting on their suits behind awkwardly-held towels. But the tiny girl with the black hair, Elba, was wading over.

Earlier, Kara had reminded my mother that she'd invited her friend from the city, a man named Dominic. It's his weekend to have his daughter, Kara said.

I asked Kara what that meant.

Let's just say that it means he's single, she said.

Are you trying to set us up?

Maybe I am, Kara had said.

I don't need to be set up, thank you very much.

You do too.

Elba was Dominic's daughter. She was jumping in the waves, grinning at Kara like a hotshot. When Kara asked her if she could swim she bounced up again and said, No.

Shit, you should have water wings then. This is too deep. She dropped my arms and took Elba's instead.

Aisling! Bring more wings!

Aisling ran on his tiptoes over the stones and into the water, one water wing dangling like an oversized bracelet from his wrist. He held another one like a donut in his hands.

The waves came in like a roller ride and the water was dappled but kids were bobbing and pushing and shivering and hanging off Kara and I couldn't get next to her. What bugged me was how Elba looked at Aisling with one eye, the other eye floating like it was looking everywhere. I stared hard but she didn't notice; she was just biting at her chapped lip, still looking at Aisling.

I'll put more air in this and then how about I flip you guys off my shoulders, Kara said through clenched teeth as she blew into a water wing.

Meryl, where are you going? Kara asked.

But I didn't feel like answering as I waded out of the water.

On the beach, on some of the bigger sandstones, I saw what I thought were probably Aisling's wet footprints from when he'd run out to us, but they were shrinking smaller in the sun. I searched out my own rolled towel and Kara's neon one from the pile of things that we'd lugged down. I spread mine on a flat piece of stone and pulled hers over my head and sat there. It was like a little tomb, silent and dry and lit green. It smelled like detergent because it was clean. I could hear the kids around Kara out in the waves, but I was okay now. It was just the leaving part that was hard. After, I wanted to be alone and I was glad I left. I'd pulled my feet in so no one could see any part of me and was wiping

the sand from my feet when I heard someone breathing right outside the towel. I peeked out. Aisling stood there dripping, his arms across his chest, shivering.

There are too many kids. Can I come under, he asked. His lips looked purple, so I pulled the towel over us. When he was lying down, I stayed sitting like I was the tent pole in a tent. I didn't mind. I could look at him because his eyes were closed.

That city girl flipped off Kara's shoulders. It was neat, he said. He crossed his hands like a mummy and sighed. What's her name?

Elba Weird-eye, I cracked. Even though Aisling gave me a tiny smile, I felt worse. With my mother, I'd say things like that and we'd go back and forth, shocking each other. But Aisling didn't say hurtful things and I always remembered that too late. I wanted to take back what I'd said about Elba. My heart flipped around like when I was scared. I let the tent drop and lay down and I closed my eyes. I had a flash of Elba lying at the bottom of the ocean on sharp rocks, lost down there like a fish, deep down but not swimming. It wouldn't go away. Her face stayed floating behind my eyes and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

I peeked out. The late afternoon sun made bright crescents on the waves out where Kara held one of the bathing-capped girls on her shoulders; she held the girl's feet tightly against her chest with her arms.

Ready, the girl said and Kara bucked her into the air so that she arched and fell yelling into the waves. Above the water, a seagull cawed in the still second that went by before the girl rose out of the water, gasping. Did you see me fall? she yelled. Could you see me falling?



The kids yelled to go next. It was good to see that it was Elba in her blue suit who went again; like I'd been given a second chance to watch her and say something nice this time.

I stood up, pulling the towel with me like a cape.

What're you doing? Come under. It's better under, Aisling said.

Let's watch for a second, I said to him.

No, Aisling said. He kept his eyes closed and I could have looked at his thin chest or his wet shorts but I didn't. I made myself watch Elba on Kara's shoulders instead. When she came up sputtering, she didn't yell, she didn't say anything. I sat down and turned on my belly. My teeth started to chatter and I tucked Kara's big towel closed around us.

Kara yelled, *Down you go!* followed by the happy scream as another kid slid off her shoulders and into the waves.

Aisling, I said. I take that back about Elba.

I knew you were joking.

I didn't know why Aisling was so generous. In the green light, I watched him and was grateful.

Kara's nice, Aisling whispered.

She is, I said. Outside it was cooling down to evening, you could feel it; but it was cosy like a nest under the towel. My uncovered legs bumped along the pebbles. I slid them out and in, like you do to make snow angels. We didn't know we had fallen asleep until after the other kids had come in from the water and dressed and walked back to the party and Kara peeked under. Aww, sweet, she said. You taking a nap, guys?

Uh-huh, I said, sleepily. Aisling didn't answer; he turned onto his side.

Okay, I'm going to swim to the point and back. I'll wake you when I get back. It seemed odd that it was twilight behind her.

Kara was still swimming when Mrs. Pane came down to fetch Aisling; it was time for the twins to go home to bed. She always left parties early but Mr. Pane didn't. He stayed late.

Mrs. Pane even smiled down at me when she asked if I was okay by myself.

Kara's things were piled neatly on the beach. I wrapped her towel around me and walked down to the edge of the water so she'd see me, but I saw her first. She was doing a butterfly stroke. I thought about how heavy the water was, how salty, and that she must be tired. She switched to a side stroke and pushed and blew out air, her hands ploughing through water.

When we walked back to the house, she put her hand on my shoulder. Aisling and you are pretty special, she said.

We're just friends, I said defensively.

Wait, she said. Don't make something like friendship small, Mer. You celebrate something like that.

I knew that my mother would make fun of a word like *celebrate*. But wasn't it something, wasn't it, how Aisling had chosen to sit in that green pease beneath the towel with *me*.

It seemed like it was, when Kara was around to point it out.

The music at parties swung a wide arc: Yves Montand. Andy Gibb. Rex Smith. Kenny Rogers. Supertramp. Electric Light Orchestra. So many ballads, so many sad songs about heartbreak and finding love.

Each of those songs trigger memories. Before that party, I'd listen to this one song, *Mandy*, by Barry Manilow, and close my eyes and picture the elusive Mandy living in a little cottage in a sun-streamed wood, alone and hiding from Barry because he'd been cruel. After that last party with Kara, when I'd hear *Mandy* in a mall or in an elevator on Muzak, the Manilow daydream that song had once brought to mind seemed absurd. I'd changed, I guess. The sharp face of blame Manilow morphed into the weathered face of Aisling's father, Mr. Pane, standing beside the baby grand in our living room, staring adoringly at my mother as she played that song for us. And what followed were images of the rest of that summer, spilling ugly as an oil slick through my head.

In my room, I peeled out of my swimsuit and put my dress on. Then I didn't know what to do. I wandered down the hall. Men were in the living room; they were sitting on the arm of the velvet chesterfield and slapping their knees to the music.

My mother was at the hi-fi. She pulled a record from its sleeve and put it on the turntable.

Hey, Julia, a man with a beard said. He bent his head back over the chesterfield.

You wanna have a little dance with me?

My mother saw me and said, Meryl, this is Dominic.

How do you do? The man gave me his tanned hand to shake. There was a big silver ring on his middle finger with a blue stone in it.

Kara came in, moving fast. Good, she said. You got dressed again too.

I asked her why she was in a hurry and she smiled.

I'm just hyper is why. Same reason you're biting your nails. She pulled my fingers out of my mouth. Her hair was still wet and piled on her head but she pulled a piece down and wrapped it around and around the end of her nose to make me laugh.

I walked back with her to the kitchen.

Can I help? I asked. I knew how to make two drinks and thought I was useful.

Oh yeah? She shook the blender and turned it on. She was making what looked like slush puppies but I knew were daiquiris.

I can make marties. I held a baby onion and an olive in my palm and rolled them around.

I know. How about you get some strawberries ready. Take the umbrellas there and stab' em.

Martinis are pretty boring, actually. I pulled open an umbrella. Just gin and vermouth.

Oh, are they now, Kara said. She pulled out a long wooden tray and started loading wide-mouthed glasses with ice.

When we walked back to the living room, she put the tray down on the coffee table and kissed the top of my head. Are you following me, Moony? she asked.

I guess, I said.

She pointed to a silver martini shaker on the tray and mouthed to my mother, Here's more! One of the men leaned forward and poured a drink. He said, Thanks, Lady!

Dominic said, Yeah, thanks, beautiful! and winked before he moved back to talk in the little circle that had formed around my mother. Kara walked over to Daniel and hugged him.

I sat down by the speaker and leaned against it so the music vibrated against my head.

I watched them laughing. The music was louder. The air was clouded from the smoking. The baby grand looked like a black elephant on dwarf legs. I said that to my mother once and she laughed. She put her hand on my head and rubbed at my hair and said, Right you are, love. Right you are.

The men sitting in a row on the chesterfield leaned in, talking fast. They played with lighters or tried to spin the little pottery plates of olives and strawberries.

My mother poured another martini. She saw me sitting and smiled.

Are you going to play soon, I mouthed at her.

Soon, she mouthed back. She hadn't danced yet either.

I sat beside my mother while she played that night. I liked to watch people look at her; I saw them do things that they thought no one noticed. They looked down at their ties or crunched ice-cubes in their mouths.

When her pinkie hit the first note, people stopped talking and their faces went funny and I wanted to laugh but didn't. They looked like they were playing frozen tag; they froze and held their glasses in front of them and waited for my mother to play the next note. They were trying to make my mother happy. And they did.

Dominic said, Julia! Honey! What else can you do with those magic fingers. He raised his eyebrows and grinned at my mother's hands on the piano keys.

My mother rolled her eyes. She shifted on the bench and her skirt slid open at the slit and I saw all of her leg.

That's a little sexy, Julia, said Mr. Pane. He was standing in the doorway and when he pointed at my mother's leg with his drink, the ice in his glass chinked.

Hey! Where's your wife! my mother laughed. Wait a second. She stood from the piano bench to fill her drink from the shaker and when she did, I watched Mr. Pane watching her. It was sneaky the way he looked at the slits in her white dress. She walked back across the room and sat down again beside me on the piano bench and took her pack of cigarettes from beside the green ashtray on the piano. She pulled off the little silver bit of paper to start a new side in the pack and handed it to me without even looking because she knew I liked to peel the silver from the white paper and roll it into a tiny ball. I smelled it because it smelled like her.

Hey Pie, she said. We ready?

She rested her cigarette in the green ashtray. She tested the pedals, pumping them. When she dipped her head down, I smelled perfume and her drink.

When we were between songs, people were allowed to talk. A woman in a blue dress was staring at me. She was across the piano and she pointed at me.

My mother said, Hey, don't point at my kid! It's rude to point! But she laughed.

What a cutie you are, the woman said to me.

Not always, my mother said. Hey, Pie? Not always. My mother didn't really look at the woman; she was smiling instead at Mr. Pane who was leaning on the piano too. My mother reached towards the ashtray to flick her cigarette. It was a long fancy one and she'd barely smoked any of it because she was warming up, playing little bits of songs and then stopping. It didn't need to be ashed; she was just doing it so she could reach over toward Mr. Pane.

What do you want to hear, people? my mother asked. When she smiled, she looked beautiful. I knew that Mr. Pane thought so too because of the way he was staring at her.

You know the Kingston Trio? The woman in the dress leaned in again. She was looking at Mr. Pane's wedding ring and then his face. The way she leaned over the piano, I saw the gold chain that looped down and was lost between her breasts.

Oh, Russ, Russ, Russ. She smacked her lips together. Where *is* Viola?

She took the kids home to bed, Mr. Pane said and he smiled at her.

Kingston Trio, my mother said. They're guitar, not piano. Her eyes went back to Mr. Pane's eyes. He didn't look sneaky now.

Of course, they're guitar. Right. The woman across the piano made a face but I didn't know what it meant. I looked down at my feet. I had on the scratchy party socks but also my slippers because the floor was sticky. My slippers with rabbit's heads on the toes. The rabbits had no eyes or noses because I'd picked them off, leaving little scabs of glue where the eyes and noses should have been.

I know. I'll play something and y'all try to guess! my mother said.

At first people were smiling and nodding, but then they moved away. Maybe my mother was drunk. Maybe they didn't know the song she played and they were bored. A man in a green suit walked over to the hi-fi and shuffled through records.

Daniel brought in another tray of drinks. Cocktails, people? he asked loudly. Everyone forgot my mother playing and looked at him because his voice was deep. And I stared at Daniel too; he should know better than to interrupt my mother, I thought. Kara should have told him. But maybe he was drunk too. He bumped his shoulder against the doorframe when he walked back to the kitchen.

Guess! Guess! my mother sang out to get people's attention again. She started to play a new song.

*Mandy*, I said. But no one was listening.

A woman's voice said, Um, I think we give up, Jules! A few men cleared their throats and everyone turned around to look at who said that. It was the woman in the blue dress. When she slammed the French door, she re-opened it and peeked back. Oops! she said. Sorry!



My mother was in the middle of *Mandy* but her hands just trailed off like she couldn't get through the song. The last note went soft. Outside on the veranda, the bug zapper zapped.

I heard Kara in the kitchen, yelling at someone. That was pretty stupid, she yelled. That was really pretty stupid! I heard the blender cracking ice, going on and off far way, like the kitchen was in a tunnel far away not just down the hall.

My mother said, It's after ten. It's bedtime. Get Kara to take you to bed. Get someone to take you.

What did she mean, *take me*? I wasn't tired; I'd had a nap with Aisling at the beach. I could go to bed by myself. I don't need help, I said.

With everyone else, she was staring out the front window where the woman who had slammed the French doors leaned against the railing, laughing. Her hair was long and bluish-black in the light of the paper lanterns my mother had hung in the morning when we were getting the house ready. Her makeup was dark around her eyes and she was laughing. She took a cigarette and held it in her teeth and leaned towards a man's hand with a lighter.

Everyone turned to look at my mother but she just waved a hand in the air and reached for her drink. Never mind that, she said. Never mind. She looked down at me again. It's bedtime. Didn't you hear me, Meryl? Someone *take* her to bed, she said again.

But I'm not ready to go, I whispered.

In the mornings after one of my mother's parties, I walked around and looked at dirty glasses and ashtrays. The mornings after, I sometimes dug in behind the cushions on the chesterfield to look for lost things: coins and paperclips; half pieces of popcorn, toy people from my dollhouse that I'd thought were long gone. I don't know why but I was lonely looking at all that stuff that I found back in the cushions, trying to try to decipher what I'd missed while I slept. That night I felt like something big was going to happen. I don't know why, but I did.

A man I couldn't see because he was sitting over by the hi-fi said something that sounded like, Of course, right. He came through the group of people around the piano.

Whoops, he said, tripping on the oriental carpet. It was Mr. Pane and now that it was evening he was wearing a sweater with leather patches on the elbows. He pulled it down over his hips as he walked over to where I was on the bench.

*Upsy-daisies*, he said. He tried, unsuccessfully, to pick me up. He held me in the crook of his arms for a few seconds, maybe. I was much too big. It must have looked ridiculous. When his arms were around me, I smelled him quickly – just to see. He smelled like sweat and that malt-hop smell of beer. When he recupped the backs of my legs to get a better grip and I saw his wedding ring. He tried to get a better grip, but I struggled and then slid down.

I'm going dancing, my mother said. She was still sitting on the piano bench. She looked away fast, like she couldn't look at Mr. Pane and me together. Well, I'm going dancing, she said again and finished her drink.

Music, someone! My mother had gold hoops in her ears, bigger than bracelets. They wobbled and touched her shoulders when she walked out of the room. Someone

put on a record for her specifically: it was *Dancing Queen* and Elba's father, Dominic, cleared his throat and stood from the chesterfield. He followed my mother through the French doors, trying not to be noticed, but everyone was quiet for a second before *Dancing Queen* kicked in and so we all noticed.

Mr. Pane held me in front of him like I'd try to get away. I looked at his arms. He had his sweater sleeves pushed up like he was going to do dishes. His arms were tanned and one vein stood out on his arm and I wanted to push my finger down on it. When I looked, everyone was looking at us and smiling. I thought that I wanted to run to the kitchen to Kara, but I couldn't because it might hurt his feelings if I did.

Poor sweetie. You tired? A new woman I hadn't seen before was smiling at me. She had a blue thing on that I'd never seen: a skirt and a cape together. She tapped a long red fingernail on my shoulder.

Tired thing, she said.

I'm *not* a tired thing. I turned away because she smelled bad and she was shaking her drink around so that the little white onion in the bottom of her glass bobbed like it was upset in there. I wanted her to move so I could watch my mother on the veranda. I could only see part of the window and part of her white dress under the red lantern that wobbled when she put her hands above her head and brushed it. I could only see a man's hands, his fingers snapping to the music, but because of the silver ring with the blue stone, I knew it was Dominic.

The sound of breaking glass and a man's voice saying, Whoa, there! broke the spell we all seemed to be under in the living room. Everyone laughed and a woman ran

in to turn up the music. We can't hear it! she yelled and she put her arms, full of bead bracelets, all jangling in front of her and ran out again..

Mr. Pane had his hands on my shoulders. He was wearing glasses with wire frames and they were tinted brown and because of the way the light fell from the lamps, I couldn't see anything behind them. I remember he seemed dowdy right then, compared to the veranda dancers.

I guess we'll find Kara and get you to bed. He took my shoulder and then my hand and did something that made me laugh. He turned me around to face him and then he waltzed me to the French doors. In the doorway, he held my hand to wave it at the people left in the room and they all smiled.

Good night, all, he said and waved my hand at the walls.

Everyone laughed. I felt silly, like a baby. But I also thought, This is how other kids go to bed, this is how Aisling and Pamela get to go to bed every night.

Kara and Daniel weren't in the kitchen. It was empty except for Benny, licking spilled water on a cutting board. There were fruit peelings everywhere.

Mr. Pane danced me down the hall. He stopped outside my door. This's your room, right? His words slurred. He led me to my bed and picked me up and stood me on it so I faced him.

Hug me goodnight, now, he said.

I hugged him and then I couldn't let go. I hung onto Mr. Pane's neck.

He said, Oh-hey-now!

As soon as I saw my mother behind us in the doorway, I wished I'd just let go. She shook her head. Meryl, she said. What the hell are you doing?

She wasn't careful when she pulled my fingers off his neck and gave my hands hard squeezes. She pulled the blanket tight under my chin.

There, she said. I heard the tail end of *Dancing Queen* in the living room, but someone in the living room at the other end of the hall scratched the needle up and started the song over.

My mother and Mr. Pane looked at me. I wanted that look to go on for a long time so that I could figure it out but she smoothed out the sheet around my feet.

Sorry about that. Russ, my mother said. And thanks a mill. They tiptoed across the carpet like they thought I was asleep already, but I saw everything. In my doorway, Mr. Pane touched her back, his hand on her white dress.

Julia, he said. Wait.

I didn't like the way Mr. Pane's voice was soft. I thought of Aisling and a lump rose in my throat. I thought of Pam and how Mr. Pane had danced me down the hall like he probably did with her.

Mum?

What now? She wasn't looking in at me in my dark room; she was staring at Mr. Pane and he was still touching her, making a little circle on her back with his finger.

Mum, are you going to play the piano again?

Meryl, what's with this baby talk?

I was whining, she was right. I cleared my throat. Are you going to dance more?

Maybe. Maybe I'll dance, my mother said.

I remember that when she closed my door I lay there a long time, much longer than  
*Dancing Queen* played out on the veranda.

There were lost coins to be found behind the velvet cushions of the chesterfield. Benny was sleeping on the conversation chair in the hall and I went to him, tripping on a beer bottle someone had left on the rug.

Hey, Ben. I picked him up and he purred against me.

I went upstairs, passing Kara and Daniel asleep on the pull-out couch in the room at the top of the stairs; his arm, thrown over her in sleep, was long and dark against the yellow sheet.

Last summer, I'd have just run in to my mother's room. I used to do that. I'd take the stuff I'd found in the chairs and the chesterfield and drop them in the hammock I made with my T-shirt and then I'd run into her room.

It seemed like a long time ago, last summer. I stood at her door, fingering the cut-glass doorknob. It seemed impossible that I could do the baby things I used to do -- climb to sit on her back like a saddle and say, Muh-uhm, wake up! She was patient with me when she was waking. It was amazing how patient she was.

She'd move a little under the pillows. You're at wit's end already?

Then she'd peek out and ask me, all gravelly-voiced, to get her some water and I'd but first I let her pretend to go back to sleep. I looked at her back. I leaned in close and smelled her pretty smell. I counted the freckles over on her shoulders and everywhere, even counting just the big ones made me tired, so I pretended her back was a flat place

where I could play. I took the things from my T-shirt hammock one at a time and warmed them in my hands and then lay them out on her back and looked at them. Sometimes I had a champagne cork or a dime with the schooner on it, sometimes my booty was only a carpet tack or a piece of popcorn or a cigarette butt. When I really was at wit's end, sick of waiting, I'd get her glass of water and find a space for it among the books and glasses on her bedside table. Then, if I was tired, I rested my head against her back, where she was warm, and with my ear pressed flat, I listened inside her where she made sounds and sighed and fell back to sleep.

I was too old to do that now. I was quiet when I squeezed through the half-open door. I'd thought I'd find Mr. Pane in my mother's bed and when I didn't, I was relieved but also sad.

I didn't go to her bed right away. First I sat on the pink vanity stool and watched her sleeping. There were streaks of black mascara and eyeliner under each closed eye, her hair was funny, puffed brightly against the pillow. I remembered her at the piano the night before, how sleek her hair was then against her back and how I'd touched it. She looked different that morning, sleeping. With no lipstick, her mouth was pale. There was a line of spittle that had dried in one soft corner of her mouth. Her body was tanned and crooked in the flowered sheets, all elbows and knees and hip bones. Her legs were splayed like she'd been dropped onto her bed from a high place, like she'd jumped off the high white bookshelf that ran around three walls of her room.

She looks really real, I thought. It scared me when I thought how she was just a sleeping woman in the waterbed, with bad hair and make-up all wrong. My thoughts



made her more real than the mother who'd entertained us all the night before. And more breakable, capable of disappearing too, like my father had gone and done. It wasn't the first time I'd thought about how I only had her, that we had no one else. She was always hammering that into my head. She didn't talk that way to frighten me; she said it because it was true. I remembered what my mother had said about Mrs. Kinghorn letting herself go and I could see why my mother wouldn't let herself go; she was scared what letting go would mean for us. Only when she was asleep could a person like my mother relax, let go.

If she'd known what I'd thought that morning watching her sleeping, breathing through her pale lips, I don't know what she would've done. I got up and walked to the window. I stood in my nightdress at my mother's window and looked out. It was early. I could see the few lights of the Bigstop gas bar in the distance and Garvey beyond it. The room smelled like our breathing had used the air. But her smell was alive in the room and that comforted me a little; if I left this room, everything would be all right because the smell of her breath, her perfume, and the mentholated scent of the Vicks and the cigarettes were on me too.

What I thought about as I stared out the window was last winter, when a girl in my class had lost her mother. The day Carla came back to class, we all watched her. We didn't know what grief was yet and we were curious. I remember thinking Carla seemed older. When she walked to her desk, I thought she looked like she was holding something invisible and delicate in front of her, the way you'd hold a bouquet in your fist at some stiffly formal occasion. But bouquet is the wrong image. It sounds too much like a reward or a gift. I know how wrong that is now but at the time I didn't; all I knew

about life was what I saw and what I saw was Carla walking to her desk. Her face announced its grief simply. It was her body I recognised; it was still there, razor sharp in my memory when I saw Aisling years later. Carla walked between our desks to her own. She looked as though she held an invisible bouquet, a painful, cherished something in front of her.

I understood.

Carla had found her mother dead in bed one morning. What would that be like -to find a mother silent and still. I think everything would stop or at least slow down. Would you touch her, or would you just know? I remembered my mother telling me how she'd found her own mother that morning on the veranda. I wanted to ask her and I'd wanted to ask Carla too but knew I couldn't. You weren't allowed to talk about things like that.

I tried to imagine it instead. I think I'd do what older kids who'd heard the gossip said Carla had done. They said it like it was disgusting, but I understood why she lay down on the floor beside the bed. How could your legs even hold you? The second of being abandoned must be as violent as a hand out of nowhere slapping you hard or knocking your air out. You'd fall. Of course you'd fall.

I left the window and began picking my mother's clothes off the floor. I lined up her Mary Kay jars and tubes, unfolded the magazines and stacked them. I closed her toenail clippers and screwed the top on a bottle of orange juice, the juice inside separated into pulp and yellow-coloured water. I wanted to do something good. As I reached to put a half-empty bottle of polish into a lacquered basket, she shifted behind me. It was the first time she'd moved and I froze.

I could have gone downstairs and tidied. Or I could leave the mess for my mother and Kara and do what I loved to do: get out the ironing board and a basket of napkins. I loved pushing the point of the iron into the little tough corners, spraying a misty stream of starch from the can. I wanted something simple and long to do. I wanted to go for a walk on the beach maybe or go see Aisling. You never knew; he might be awake too. Instead, I climbed onto the water bed beside my mother. I guess I fell asleep because the next thing I remember, Kara was shaking my shoulder to get me to come down and eat breakfast with her and Daniel.

My mother came down later, her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Ow, my head, she said.

We were already eating. Kara pointed at her plate of scrambled eggs. Want some? I can't eat any more.

I'll have something later. I can't even focus on my coffee cup yet. She sat down at the table, pulling her dressing gown closed.

Was I really bad last night, Kar? Let's recap.

Kara raised her eyebrows at my mother and stood. She took Daniel's plate and her own to the sink and turned on the hot water. The counter was littered with glasses.

Where to start, she said. Where to start.

In the afternoon, it rained. We curled together on the fold-out couch upstairs and watched the Saturday matinee. It was *Pillow Talk* with Doris Day. We sat in a row: Daniel and Kara and me and my mother.

It's really raging out there, Kara said. When the picture went scraggly because of the storm, she crawled down to the end of the bed and hit the top of the set and crawled back. At the very end of the movie, everyone was quiet. I was half-asleep, my eyes fluttering closed and open. I didn't want to move. The pillows on the couch smelled like popcorn and patchouli and I breathed deeply like people do when they're really asleep. No one moved for a long while and when we finally did get up it was all of us together and we went down to the kitchen and made hot dogs and sat at the table, eating. Outside, the squall seemed to have shifted directions, the rain pelted heavily against the kitchen window. The house was a mess but it would wait; Kara and I'd clean tomorrow. My mother was happy and Kara was happy, humming as she sat on Daniel's lap, rolling her cigarette.

I didn't know what it was she hummed, but they tried to guess.

It might be easier if you could carry a tune, my mother said dryly. Hum some more; I'm still hung-over. Oh, wait! She pointed at Kara. *Moon River!* my mother yelled. Of course. *Moon River.* Good song.

What is it, what's it from? I asked.

I thought that maybe I'd heard it before too. I thought maybe my mother had played it on the piano or that we had the record. They told me, each of them giving me a little bit of the story, of the movie starring Audrey Hepburn that they'd seen when they were teenagers. They passed the cigarette back and forth and told me about it. Even though the song sounded mournful when Kara hummed it, you knew that the movie it came from was one of those movies where, after a great deal of confusion and missed

connections, the boy is going to figure out what a great girl the girl is and take her in his arms and then they'll be together forever.

After the dishes were put away, my mother looked around the kitchen and smacked her lips.

God, I feel huge. She slapped her thighs. She asked me if I'd like to walk off dinner; if I'd like to take a little walk.

I swung the damp dishtowel around my fist. I felt, not for the first time, that I bored my mother. When Kara came, we soon were used to her being a part of our days; now we felt her absence like a yawning hole in the house; we were counting the days until she came back from the city where she was visiting Dominic and Elba and all the other people she knew.

Can I not this time? I asked. I didn't want to go walking with her; the thought of it made me feel lonelier. I liked the idea of being home. I thought that I'd push the window open in my room and sit and watch for her to come back.

I could tell she was hurt about me even asking this time. So I pulled on a sweater and I was ready. She took more time. While she searched for her paisley scarf in the hall closet, I stood at the screen door watching the sky burn from orange to pink. While she fixed her hair in her scarf and put on her lipstick, the sky went purple, fading to a dark prune colour between the toilet-brush branches of the pine trees on the edge of our property. Then she was opening the screen door and prodding me out onto the step. That was the way I remembered it: her arm a dark shadow high on the screen above my head,

her face eclipsed by shadow. She asked me if I was all set and I nodded and we walked down the driveway, the spruce trees on either side of the house blacker cut-outs against the dark sky. Beyond the front yard, past the Kinghorn's and across the road, I heard the waves punching on the beach. I squatted down to wait for her while she lit a cigarette before we turned onto Inlet Road. There was a scab on my knee and it wasn't ready yet in the middle but the edge was ready. I flicked at it with my finger and it hurt, but in a good way.

Hey, picky, she said. She exhaled and bent down and lifted my fingers from my knee. C'mon.

I felt like I'd been tricked when I saw Mr. Pane waiting with his dogs in the orange light of the street. My mother smiled like she'd been expecting him to be there.

I want to go home, I said. I stopped walking, but my mother pulled at the front of my sweater, Please, Pie. Don't do this.

I dragged my feet so they'd walk ahead, leaving me to follow behind, scuffing my Keds through the timothy and ferns and dandelions and the purple pods of flowers I didn't know the name of. I watched them for a while, their shoulders bulked around their ears, small heads low, like their voices. I noticed Fanny and Muffin kept their distance too, waddling along the shoulder, weaving in and out between the long shadows of my mother and Mr. Pane that stretched out behind them when we passed under the sporadic streetlights. They pointed their long wocbegone noses to snuff the breeze. I remembered that I used to love their feet and toenails but I'd learned my lesson. I didn't even try to get close to them anymore.

I closed my eyes, listening for my feet to tell me when I was near the ditch by the changed sound of the gravel under my Keds. When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find how off course I was, facing the ditch and the ocean. I skipped and when I was closer, I saw my mother reach out to touch Mr. Pane's sleeve. I didn't hear what they said but Mr. Pane was looking at her, nodding. He snapped his fingers and pointed at her as if he was pointing a gun.

My mother slapped his arm, but not hard. Stop making me laugh! Stop! She bent at the waist with her hands on her hips.

Mr. Pane grinned at me and shrugged, looking pleased.

My mother was shaking with laughter and I wondered if he was thinking what I was: if you didn't know that she was laughing, you'd have thought she was bowing for him.

I don't know what I was thinking when I pulled on the sleeve of my mother's sweater like a little kid.

What are you doing, Meryl? She asked. You'll rip it. She peeled my hand off and dropped it.

I kicked at stones that had broken free from the pavement. With my thumb and forefinger, I began snapping the heads off all the dandelions as we passed. I suppose I was trying to bug her when I sang loudly, *Mama had a baby and its head popped off, head popped off, head popped off* as I snapped away.

Excuse me a second, Russ, she said to Mr. Pane. She walked back to where I was standing. Mr Pane had turned away to watch Fanny take a pee in the ditch so I gave my mother a mean face, and popped the head off the dandelion I was holding.



Up ahead, Mr. Pane spun around, grinning. Oh hey, Jiggs told me a joke on the boat today. What did the snail say when he rode on the back of the turtle?

If he'd been looking right at us, it would have looked like she just had her hand on my shoulder. It didn't show how hard her fingers were digging into the wing of bone in my shoulder, how the pain froze any words I'd been singing and made me drop the decapitated dandelion.

My mother was smiling, saying, Honey, stop singing that dreadful song. Please?

I stared at her face, my mouth open.

For a second, she looked worried. She dropped her hand. Then she was walking back to Mr. Pane, her head tilted to one side, one hand on the string of pearls that looked like babies' teeth around her throat.

What did the snail say. Tell us, my mother said.

Mr. Pane said, The snail said, *Wheee!*

My mother laughed on cue. Whee! I get it!

I stood looking at the stem of the flower on the ground.

All the way home, I wouldn't talk to her. I swung my shoulder back and forth to remind her. I kept thinking of how she'd called me *Honey*. It wasn't something she ever called me. Kara did sometimes, but she meant it. With my mother it just sounded fake.

Jesus, I'm sorry, Pie.

When we arrived at the end of our driveway, we both looked up at our house. It seemed emptier than ever. My mother sighed.

I feel horrible, just horrible.

Good, I said. You should feel bad.

We're standing right here until you forgive me, she said.

We stood there, avoiding each other's eyes. I looked at the windows of our house, how the curtains held in most of the light. I was resolute. I didn't want to forgive her. I half shut my eyes and the house went fuzzy around the edges, almost invisible in the dark except for the wavering leaks of brightness that framed a few windows.

But when the moon passed from behind a cloud, and the lawn and house moved into moonlight, turning the house bright, its outside lit for a second before returning to darkness, we both sucked in our breath at the same time and all the anger I'd had for my mother seemed useless.

Well that's something, at least, my mother said.

After that night and for the rest of the summer, my mother was happy. I'd never seen her happier. In the grocery store, she hummed while she pushed her cart down the aisle. She moved her shoulders to the tinny music from the speakers in the manager's booth above the store. She stopped making fun of the people we passed in the aisles. Because she was happy, I was happy. I ran ahead and behind the cart, looking for bottles of prune juice, for a bucket of ready-made coleslaw. If I ran fast, the shopping trip went faster. We wanted to get home. Kara was coming back tonight and we were making a special dinner for her.

My mother didn't even make faces at me when the cashier looked down at the register. My mother was writing out a cheque when Mrs Pane seemed to appear out of nowhere her, breathing like she'd run from the Lobster Stop on the pier across the street.

Julia. Hi, she said. Mrs. Pane looked pale and I realised it was because she wasn't wearing any make-up, not even lipstick. I looked behind her to see if Aisling was with her, but she was alone. She didn't even have a shopping cart.

My mother's good mood seemed to drain out. Hi, Viola. I've been meaning to drop by, I've got an order for you-

Yes, Viola nodded vaguely.

-Mary Kay, you know, my mother finished.

Right, Viola said. Right. Exactly. I was coming to ask you. She searched my mother's face like there was a secret there or an answer she wanted. It reminded me of the way I'd seen my mother stare at couples on the street. She hadn't done that in a while, I realised.

Without looking down, Viola patted a cold hand on my forehead, brushing my bangs back like you do when a child has a fever. Hi, Meryl, she said. But she didn't look at me. Okay, then, she said. She didn't say goodbye, she just walked out of the Save-Easy and crossed the street.

My mother stood there with her chequebook in one hand, the checked off grocery list for our celebration supper with Kara in the other hand.

Shit, she said.

And the cashier's eyebrows went up and down when she took my mother's cheque.

It was early in September, a week or two after Kara had returned to Bermuda, that I came home and the house was empty. I walked into the dining room and hung onto the back of

a cane chair and looked around at the silver, all polished and sitting on the sideboard. I stood still and thought it was impossible that I could be alone. I couldn't even go to the Kinghorn's; they'd gone on a month-long Caribbean cruise a few days before. Mrs. Kinghorn had giddily informed me that she'd bring me back anything I wanted, what did I want.

I wanted bracelets like my mother's, like the ones Kara had brought her from Mexico.

Yours, she said. I'll miss you, Mer, she said.

I knew it was silly, but I thought how she'd miss her real grandchildren more.

How about I bring you back a tan? Dr. Kinghorn was saying as he hugged me. And take care of that mother of yours, he added. Keep her out of trouble.

It was odd to be alone after school. I didn't know how long my mother had been gone. Where were the sounds of kids and piano lessons? Or, if not those sounds, the sounds of my mother elsewhere in the house. Maybe she was sleeping in her room. Maybe she'd gone to get milk. Maybe she was in the bathroom reading and that was why it was so quiet. I hung onto that chair as though I'd fall if I didn't hang on tight. I waited for something to happen and a new thought came to me: when she was sad my mother said she hated it here. I thought, What if she'd left? Maybe she was gone.

When I heard a car come in the driveway, I went to the screen door and waited, watching the sleepy flies knock against the glass and fall buzzing down. It was Viola Pane. Behind the driver's seat, in the back, were Aisling and Pamela.

Hi, Aisling, Hi Pamela, I said. They couldn't hear me, but I said their names anyway. I watched Viola take the key out of the ignition and turn to say something to the twins and then she opened the door

Some things I regret. I regret that I felt feverish, that I really felt sick -- that morning I'd had a lump in my throat but my mother said I had to go to school anyway. Now my head felt buzzy. No one listened to me and I really was sick. If Mrs. Pane had hidden her tears instead of being so open, crying like that. If the amber sunglasses Mrs. Pane had pushed up in her hair hadn't been smudged and lopsided, something to concentrate on as she walked to the door where I stood like she was already broken and I'd already won something I didn't want to win.

And if, above me, as she approached the door, her eyes hadn't lifted to the little peeling balcony off my mother's bedroom at the precise moment that we both heard a sound coming from upstairs that was something like a drum repeatedly banging against a wall. It was a sound that wouldn't have frightened me if Mrs. Pane's eyes hadn't been there, quizzing my own eyes through the screen of the door.

Mrs. Pane asked, Is Julia here? She'd pulled her sunglasses down but the amber glass didn't cover anything. I could still see her eyes, red and sore-looking from crying and silently begging me to go find Mr. Pane in the banging bedroom above us.

At first, I climbed the stairs as loudly as I could. I wanted my mother to know I was coming. But I changed my mind at the landing and took off my Keds and tiptoed the rest of the way. I liked the idea of seeing her without her seeing me and I thought I'd scare

her and see what happened. I wanted to wake her if she was taking a nap; I could pretend it was a joke after, if she got angry.

She wasn't in the hall or in the bathroom. When I heard the knocking sound again, I went to her room.

I put my hand on the doorknob and turned until I'd seen enough in the crack of soft light, yellowed by the drawn blind, to stop. I saw a small triangle of floor. The patterned skirt my mother had been wearing when I left for school in the morning lay in a puddle like it had melted. I smelled the musty thick smell of my mother. Her humidifier was on, vibrating away by the window. And there was something else, a clove smell.

My throat really hurts, I thought.

What I wanted to block out was the sound they were making on the bed. It was like crying, but different and I knew, I just knew it was wrong.

The back asked, You like that?

I didn't see the man's face; he was kneeling with his back to me. He was the one making the noise on the wall. He held a tanned ankle in each hands. She had her legs in the air and I saw the tan lines on the hips and knew the sun, the bikini with plastic hoops had made them.

Ye-ess. The voice that answered was my mother's but not my mother's. It sounded frightened and out-of-breath.

You do, don't you? The man said, and he sounded out-of-breath too.

When I went downstairs to Mrs. Pane at the door, she was staring through the screen at the pile of sneakers and boots littered around the base of our coat rack. She looked like she was daydreaming.

I lied. I told her that my mother was sleeping.

Yes, Mrs. Pane said. Well, you tell her that I hope she sleeps well. Then she ran lopsided, as though her body wasn't even, back to the car. Inside, Aisling and Pamela were hanging over the front seat. They looked at me and I held up my hand; I wasn't sure if I should wave, but I did. They didn't wave back.

Viola threw her arm over the back of the front seat and backed the car down the driveway as calm as anything.

When I turned away from the door, I saw what she'd been staring at. Sitting beside our tangled pile of sandals and sneakers was a pair of Kodiak work boots. For a moment, I thought of kicking them all the way down the hall and then up the stairs somehow and then into my mother's room. But I was frightened too, and I wanted to hide in my room and sleep until Mr. Pane had left our house.

At dinner, I told my mother how I'd come home and how empty the house felt and that I'd fallen asleep.

She looked at me and nodded. She bit into her hotdog. Were you scared? she asked, mouth full. I was napping, you know.

No, I said. Not scared. I think that was the first time I really knew for sure for sure that she was lying.

If I was going to leave -- she paused and took a drink of cola -- *if* I was the one who had to go, I'd have the sense to take my Pie, my smart Baby Pie, with me. She chewed and swallowed. You know that, she added.

She was right that I was a smart. I remember watching cartoons at Mrs. Kinghorn's after school. I had a cup of what she called *white* rose tea -- it was real tea with a lot of milk in it -- and a plate of maids of honours that I'd dusted the coconut off of because sometimes it stuck in my throat. It's funny: in the cartoon, the good guy had been tied or tripped or caught somehow by the bad guy, but I never rooted for either one. What fascinated me was how the bad guy always laughed this evil laugh in front of the good guy, like he didn't know that he'd always get caught and have to pay for what he'd done. Every time he laughed, I wanted to just slap him.

I hadn't laughed, watching Mrs. Pane walking out to the car because I'd watched enough cartoons to know better.

We were almost finished eating when Kara's father called from Bermuda with the first news about Kara. I'd stood when I heard her cry out on the telephone and when she came back to the dining room, she sat down again and stared at the half-finished hot dog on her plate.

I can't remember what I said; I think I was asking her to tell me what was wrong, what had happened, who'd been on the phone, and she wouldn't answer. She grabbed my wrist and pulled it down and I sat.

She told me Kara had been windsurfing alone and that she'd disappeared.



I remember realising that we weren't sitting because we'd eat again, we were sitting because you can't stand with news like that. It was as if a part of ourselves that we'd depended on but never thought about had suddenly dropped off. Kara was that to us.

They'll find her, my mother said and I thought of Kara at the beach, how she swam and punched the water with her arms and I tried to make the words my mother said into truth but what we knew, that people could disappear, made this harder to do.

Pie, she said. She looked lost. She stared at the table like she couldn't look at me but I was still there with her, she was still there. There was no one to go to. We were alone in this. She held me arm and we sat there a long time. I'd always known that my world was my mother but I'd never realised until now that Kara was my mother's world. Kara's disappearance meant our chain was broken: my mother's happiness had been Kara, my happiness was my mother's. With Kara gone, we were broken.

Not that night but the next one, we were under the street light by the bridge waiting for Mr. Pane for a long time. When he finally came, he wasn't walking like he normally did; he was moving like he was tired. I thought they were telling jokes when Mr. Pane leaned to whisper in my mother's ear.

But then, for me, my mother was the only thing in the dark. There was only my mother in the streetlight bent and clutching her knees with her hands, bent forward like she was laughing, but I suddenly knew she wasn't.

C'mon, Julia. Enough of that, Mr. Pane said. He didn't laugh or pat her arm like he'd done on all the other walks we'd taken with him that summer. He sounded bored when he turned to me and added, She's hyperventilating. She's upset but she'll be fine.

You'll be fine, Julia, he said. He stabbed the toe of his work boot into the pebbles that had loosened from the asphalt.

When he looked back to me and when I gave him nothing but my blank face, he mouthed something that looked like the word *Jesus* and shook his head. It could have been pity or disbelief that he was with us and not at home with his family and my mother must have sensed it too because she looked up and her gasping breaths subsided.

Well. Mr. Pane cleared his throat and looked down at Fanny and Muffin.

You bastard. Kara's missing. And you pull this shit. My mother's red hair looked like it was cut out brightly from the darkness around her head when she looked up and down the road as though she didn't know where she was.

Don't say that. I'll miss this, Mr. Pane said. He held his hands out at his side and let them drop. And Kara... Kara will be found.

Don't say what you don't mean, my mother said. Don't say what you don't know. She was looking at me when she spoke and I was looking at her. She was staring at me like she was screaming so loud there was no sound, like it was that high.

I still went to school. One morning, Aisling's desk was empty. Aisling and Pam were absent for a week before our teacher told us that the twins had moved to the city with Mrs. Pane. They'd had no time to say goodbye.

How I felt walking home: I felt like I was floating, a hard grey wind in my face.

When I told my mother, she twisted her mouth. She was rolling out pie dough, of all things. She rarely baked. It was odd to see her like that, her arms fast and angry with the rolling pin.

Aisling was the only kid I played with, I cried. I don't like the other kids.

She didn't seem to care how lonely I'd be. Get used to it, she said. I don't like the adults here either.

I remembered thinking later that it was like Mrs. Kinghorn said: bad comes in threes. Every morning, I woke and remembered that Kara was still missing; that Kara had disappeared and the day went flat, veiled in that grim knowledge I'd forgotten while I slept. There were calls from Bermuda: they'd found her windsurfer bobbing off the shore a few miles from her beach house. They found a piece of her wetsuit.

It's just impossible. My mother bit at a nail. She's such a strong swimmer. She's so strong, right? She stared at me.

***Fall***

*So summer comes in the end to these few stains  
And the rust and rot of the door through which she went.*

Wallace Stevens. "The Beginning."

You think you'd know all about change and expect it, living on the water. In Garvey, you see land change every day when the tides go in and out. During a storm it was even more drastic how the shore shifted overnight, how the trees grew at slants from the gusting winds.

First, because it was fall and Kara had left us to go back to Bermuda, the days were open and strange: everything too quiet and not as bright without her rushing in breathless. But when she disappeared, the world she was missing from grew enormous to me because I couldn't understand how this was possible. It wasn't possible, unless she'd chosen to disappear. When I tried to go to sleep at night, I went over the summer, piece by piece. I remembered how Kara had taken me and Aisling to see a circus in the city. She couldn't believe we'd never been before. Aisling and I sat side by side in the dark tent. If we ate from the boxes of pink popcorn on our laps, I don't remember the taste. The three rings far below us were overwhelmingly magical. Everything was spangled in gold and glitter. The trapeze artists and jugglers were dressed in satin and sparkled costumes and feathered head-dresses. I loved all the glamour but the tigers and lions seemed unhappy. They lumbered off their gold platforms and roared like they hated everything, begrudgingly following their tamer's orders. When we got home, my mother was in a good mood and she invited Aisling in. We played circus for a while in the living room;

Kara was the trainer and Aisling and I pulled cushions off the chesterfield and pretended to be tigers. My mother came and stood in the doorway with this tray in her arms. When she sat it down on the floor, I was so proud. She'd spooned ice cream into fancy tea cups and we sat in a circle on the rug and ate it with tiny silver spoons, the kind of spoons other people collected in special little cabinets on their wall. My teacup was peppermint pink. My spoon handle was a miniature Eiffel Tower with a plaque at the base that said *Paris*.

Right, Kara had said. She pulled her tiny spoon from her mouth and slapped it on her knee. That's it. I'm running away to join the circus. Who'll I take with me?

Me! Aisling stood up fast. His spoon fell to the carpet.

Me! I said. My mother was sitting beside me and I felt her there. Me and Mum! I added. I hadn't forgotten the Kinghorns; I just knew they had their own real family.

Oh, I guess I could come, my mother said and then she smiled a silly smile. Kara, don't forget your man. You'll want Dan, won't you?

After Kara disappeared, I thought about that night a lot. How fast we'd thought, ticking away on our fingers who we'd bring and what we'd bring and what we'd do. We were so excited, so eager to run.

It stormed. The willow tree in the backyard cracked right down the middle. Usually my mother hated storms and in hating them, she changed into someone protective. I knew that I was safer because she was awake, watching the storm through her bedroom window above me and I slept through the night, no matter how hard the windows rattled

and the rain came down. But that night, the crack of the willow tree woke me and I lay awake, sensing something unsteady in the quiet above me.

I ran up the stairs. In the bathroom, there was a bottle on the sink ledge that I'd never seen before. My mother's name was on the prescription label and that made the tiny lavender pills inside grim. She must have had another doctor, but I didn't know that then. As far as I knew, we didn't go to doctors; Dr. Kinghorn looked at our sore throats and gave us aspirin for fevers and the flu. If my mother couldn't wait for the Kinghorns to get home from their cruise, the pills had to be serious. I slipped the hall in my slippers. The light was still on beside her bed and my mother was curled under her duvet. I pushed onto the waterbed, making it wave, and shook her shoulder hard through the duvet.

Mum! Mum, wake up!

When she stirred, relief flooded through me. Suddenly I felt silly and I sat back on my cold heels.

What? Her voice was gravelly from a cold she'd been fighting. It had been bothering me that she continued to smoke even when it made her cough. She pushed up on her elbows. Why'd you wake me?

I wanted to see if you knew about the storm.

Oh. She sighed and tented the covers for me to crawl in. You wanna sleep here for a bit?

In the morning, my mother was already at the window when I opened my eyes. She was wearing her yellow dressing gown with the raised white polka dots. It was such a bright

colour, I sleepily thought that she must be happy. But then I saw that her arms were clutched under her breasts and knew by how tight she held herself that she hadn't slept after I'd awakened her in the night.

Are you sleeping like a horse? Are you standing and sleeping, I asked her. I was trying to make a joke like one of her jokes, but she didn't laugh. She looked at me like she didn't know me. She looked at me for a long time. A barrette she'd worn in her hair the day before was still there but almost falling out. Her skin had lost its tan and looked like mine: blue-tinged and freckled and thinner, like a piece of loose-leaf paper held to the light.

She didn't answer. She turned back to the window and pointed down at the water. Look at how high it is. It's too high. Pretty soon it'll be on the road.

I stood beside her and looked out at the tide. She was right. The water was high and dark on the other side of the road. We heard the first logging truck roll by on the road below the house. My mother's eyes lifted to the window to watch it roar by, the back full of black tree trunks. She shook her head.

I just need a coffee, she said. I'll be fine once I've got coffee in me.

But later in the afternoon, I had to go and get her because she didn't hear the knock at the door. I went to get her in her room.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed, holding one sock. She'd taken off the yellow dressing gown and was sitting on the edge of the bed in just a T-shirt.

Reverend Bagley's downstairs, Mum. He wants to talk to you about having a memorial service. For Kara.



She looked at me blankly. Tell him.... She paused. You tell him to go to hell.

We didn't go to the memorial service. My mother stayed in her bedroom. When she did come downstairs, I tried to be noticed. I stood taller when she walked through a room I was in. I practised scales with tangerines under my palms for good hand posture. I did inventories of how I looked, how I smelled, if I was too sweaty to touch.

But mostly, she didn't see me. If I got desperate, I'd slip a note under her door. Sometimes, she'd see it waft across the floor. I could go in if she saw it and called out, but she didn't and I knew she was in there only when I listened for her and I heard the hard coughing I recognised not as hers but like Dr. Kinghorn's.

Later that week, I was sitting at my desk, trying to do my homework after school.

What's it like to be you? my mother asked from the doorway of my room. I turned in my chair to watch her walk on her knees across my floor. Who am I? She asked.

I didn't know what to say. She hadn't talked to me all day and now she was here on her knees in my room. I don't know, I said.

See, I'm trying to see the world from your eyes, she said. And you're a little taller than this. She held her hand above her head. You're about this tall, right?

Mum, I said. I didn't know what to do.

Okay, tell me this, then. What's it like to be so square?

What are you talking about?

You know what I'm talking about, you militant midget. You flushed them.

I did know what she was talking about. In the afternoon when she'd gone out for a walk on the beach alone, I'd gone through the whole house in a fit of anger and taken all the cigarette packs I could find. I'd flushed them. I'd even reached into the top drawers of the tall boy in her room and taken the packs that I knew were hidden there.

Flushed what? I said. She was lying on the floor now. She sighed and lifted her head to squint at me at my desk.

You're so square, she said.

I'm not.

Yes. You are. I have the squarest daughter in the world.

She didn't clean the house; that would have been too much. But I noticed things were different: the conversation chairs gone from the hallway by the phone. I'd come home from school to a slightly different house and a charged silence around me. I look back and wonder if any of it would have happened if the Kinghorns hadn't been away.

Somehow I knew they could make my mother better and so I marked off the days on the kitchen calendar in red marker, hoping she would notice my X's and see the days passing too. But she didn't notice. While I slept, she was busy moving furniture into the attic and out of the attic, painting trunks and moving boxes around, unpacking clothes and having them dry-cleaned, packing sweaters or sending them off to get mended. She stopped cleaning completely, stopped throwing anything out. She kept bags of used twist ties. I tripped on the piles of books and clothes she left on the stairs and in the hallway. But when I needed a glass and found none in the cupboard, I stomped around and picked her

discarded tumblers from the coffee table and her bedside. I left the sticky rings to gather dust.

I can't be involved with anything dying, she said one morning when I caught her in the kitchen before she went upstairs to her bedroom again. The plants Kara had given us were re-potted, sitting on the kitchen table when I came in to make my breakfast one morning. When a yellow leaf fell from the begonia, it was placed in a jam jar where it sat on the sill in the kitchen with ten other jam jars, each with a cutting and some green brackish water, growing mouldy. Aloes appeared, jades and ferns gradually filled the windows. They at least thrived.

The Lobster Festival came and went. No one called to invite my mother to the annual party at the legion. No one told us about Mr. Pane either; we had to read about it in the paper a week later.

My mother came into my room one afternoon with *The Rural Delivery*.

Talk about just desserts, she said, her voice cold and flat. She snapped the local paper open, and sat at my desk with her legs crossed to read aloud:

*Russell Pane was working by himself on his 40-foot lobster boat, "The Pam n' Aisling," about one mile off the coast of southern New Brunswick near Garvey Inlet. Hauling up his third set of double traps, his rope went slack in the heavy six-foot seas and snagged on his antiquated drum winch. While reaching for the winch cut-off switch, the right sleeve of Pane's slicker became snagged in the winding rope, pulling it into the winch head. In a moment of agonising terror, his hand and then his arm were drawn in and crushed in the machine, flipping him over and completely out of his boat.*

Halfway through the article, I ran out of the room, but she kept reading, her voice raised like she needed me to hear it too, like she couldn't shoulder it alone. I thought about how

alone he'd have been, in the heavy cold water, and at home without Viola and the twins. I remembered how he'd said, *My son*, and clapped his hand on Aisling's head. I thought of how I'd hated him in the streetlight, smugly looking at my mother bent and laughing in front of him.

I was walking home from school a few days later and saw a man who looked like Mr. Pane leaving Hoegg's Quickmart. At first, I thought he was someone else, his arm swinging too briskly as he walked for it to be Mr. Pane, after all that had happened. Then I remembered the story in *The Rural Delivery*. I must have stared when I realised that it was the emptiness of his coat sleeve that made it swing. Mr. Pane saw me and, without a trace of the old bright humour, as though his face had been wiped serious, he pulled his sleeve flat against his side to hide it from me and crossed the street to avoid our meeting.

I walked home after seeing Mr. Pane and slid a note under my mother's door. Like most desperate attempts, the note was simple and silly in retrospect:

*Hello!*  
*This is the Government of Meryl.*  
*We're here to help! Come see us!*  
*Downstairs Hall, Room Number One.*  
*If you need to LAUGH, call GOVERNMENT OF MERYL!*  
*WE WORK! CALL US! Just YELL and we'll RUN and make you*  
*LAUGH! WE guarantee it.*

Under these words, I'd pencil-crayoned a yellow sun with a smiley face.

I slid it under her door and paused to listen for movement inside.

I don't remember how long it was, but eventually she called.

She was in the closet, sitting on an old fur coat of my grandmother's, peeking out between her dresses and skirts.

C'mere, Pie, she said in a cloggy voice. She beckoned me with a handful of Kleenex and when I went to her, she pulled me into the closet and into the dresses and held me and said things.

Don't you hate it here? Don't you hate this stupid place?

I didn't say anything; I lay against her and listened to the rabbitty sound of her heart. I wanted to make her better but I didn't know how.

Oh, how can we stand it, how can we even stand it?

We played Answers. We left the closet and while I waited on the bed, she reached and ran her finger along the books on the white shelf that went around her bedroom, high on the wall, searching through the novels and poetry and philosophy shed had since she was a student at Hillson. Those books were like the things in and on her highboy dresser: blushes and powders and tiny bottles of perfume, cartons of cigarettes and stray packs, nylons and slippery silk slippers and her extra packs of special cocktail cigarettes. They were a part of her I didn't see until she held them or put them on, until she brought them down to me. It wasn't until later that these things became separate, became things I could have for myself, things I could pilfer away to my own room downstairs and try out and see what the magic was. They were a part of her and Kara and what they'd had that was separate from me.

My mother flicked her finger across those high books and picked one. The names -- *Leaves of Grass, Ariel, Pride and Prejudice* -- she said in a rush.

Quick, pick, she said. She picked Walt Whitman and sat down on the bed. We sat cross-legged, like Indians. I picked at the bedspread; the chenille tufts reminded me of pink cake icing.

She was chain-smoking and the smoke made the room smaller.

Dump my ashtray, will you? she said. And I ran fast to the bathroom with it, scared she'd close the door again while I was gone.

She slapped the cover of *Leaves of Grass*. Here's our bible, she said and closed her eyes and held the book closed between her hands like she was praying. She took a deep breath and said: I'm in a dull place with dull little people and I'm feeling -she paused and blew her nose and lit a new cigarette although one burned in the ashtray- I'm all... sick of this *shit*.

I didn't ask if I were dull; she'd lie anyway and say that I wasn't.

So the question is: What next? my mother opened *Leaves of Grass* and I held my breath. She ran her finger along the page and opened her eyes and read where her finger landed. Whatever it said on the page would be true. We both hoped for an answer that would say something that was for us alone, that we could hold and know was true.

*Listen, I will be honest with you,  
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new  
prizes.  
These are the days that must happen to you.*

I didn't know whether Answers had worked or not; I'd never done it with her before. I waited for her to tell me. I picked at her bedspread. After what seemed like a long time, the water in her bed waved when she leaned forward to stub out her cigarette.

My mother looked out the window and said, Oh, I don't know. I don't know about that. Her voice, thick and sad before, was a little better when she blew her nose hard and said, Okay.

She got off the bed and walked over and picked my grandmother's coat from the closet floor. She smoothed the fur down with her hands and looked at it like she hadn't seen it before. She hung it on a hanger.

She didn't smile, not yet. God, aren't you hungry? she asked. I'm starving. And in her clogs, she clomped downstairs to make something to eat.

I thought my note had made her well again. Years later, when I was packing to go to Hillson myself, I found a box at the back of my closet. I dumped it out and found that *Government of Meryl* note that I'd written to her along with the two pieces of macaroni from the Pane twin's collage, an unopened tube of Polysporin, the photograph Kara had given me of my mother, pregnant with me, on a beach in Bermuda, and a pair of toenail clippers. I studied the note, smiled at the childish scrawl, the elementary drawing of a smiling sun in one corner and tried to understand what it was about it that I'd thought was magic.

I remembered that ugly autumn day so long ago. After my mother had gone downstairs, I'd stood in her room, my whole body electric with hope. She'd left the note on the floor in her closet and I bent to pick up. I smoothed it out and took it to my own room and closed the door and sat staring at my words.

I thought about what Kara would say to me, if she was sitting beside me on my bed. She would say that I cherished that note for years because that is what you do with something like that.

She would push a whip of my hair behind my ear and say, It's a talisman, Mer. You keep a thing like that because you don't understand the power and magic of it and because you never know when you'll need a reminder of just what kind of magic you're capable of.

The next morning, what woke me was the veranda door slamming shut. It was just dawn, the sun coming cold over the water. I went to my mother's room. The door was open, but she wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere. I slipped on my rubber boots and went out. I was going to walk to the beach to see if I could find her and I did. She was just sitting on a flat piece of sandstone, looking out at the water and smoking. Her hair was braided. She had on her winter coat.

Well, here you are, Pie. She pulled her cigarettes from her pocket. Here we are. Her hands shook when she lit another cigarette.

I was scared because you weren't in your room. I didn't know, I said.

I was shivering then and she pulled me between her knees and took off her coat and wrapped it around me, rubbing my arms.

She looked out at the water and her eyes welled up. When she saw me looking, she gave me a weak smile.

I'm just going to tell you the truth, Pie. I'm scared is the truth.

Why're you scared? I managed.



Because, Pie. I love Kara. My mother seemed frail and real. She wiped her eyes. Because she was our family, right?

She took one last drag of her cigarette and frowned at the brown waves, she made an okay sign with her fingers and flicked the butt so that it sparked as it flew across the rocks.

It landed at Dr. Kinghorn's slippers. We stared for a moment before taking in the fact that he really was there on the beach in front of us. We weren't dreaming. His face was tanned from the cruise. He looked good, but sad. He had on his good wool overcoat over his pyjamas and slippers.

What news, Dr. Kinghorn said. About Kara.

We walked up the weathered stairs from the beach.

I saw Meryl from the bathroom window, Dr. Kinghorn was saying. His voice was stern. You scared the hell out of me, walking down the driveway in boots and pyjamas when it's barely light out. Don't do that to me again. Not ever.

Mrs. Kinghorn was on the porch, fingering the frost-covered chrysanthemums in the flower box. She said, They're hardy fellows but they can't handle this kind of cold.

We went inside. Dr. Kinghorn went to his study and came back with a little white pill. He went to the sink and filled a juice glass. Swallow that back, he said to my mother.

We stood around her at the table and watched her take the pill.

I think we all slept then -- my mother and I lay down on the pink couch in the kitchen and the Kinghorns went back upstairs to bed.

When we awoke, nothing was better, but gradually we just started again. Soon, the days were winter days. And we lived them.

As I drove Aisling back to the city, we eventually did talk about how what had happened had changed everything.

I didn't tell him everything, but I told him how some of us had grieved. That autumn, Dr. Kinghorn had taken a chainsaw to the dead wood at the centre of an apple tree outside their house. It was a tree I'd often sat in. In the summer, I'd sat with him on the porch and watched because every summer a family of hummingbirds came to it, their nest a little woven thumb sticking from the bark that only he could spot.

He was on the ladder, slicing off the branches well beyond the dead ones when Mrs. Kinghorn had come flying from the house crying, Bill! What're you doing! Look at what you've done!

The tree was a mess: half-dead and with no centre to speak of, but the worst thing was -and you could see Dr. Kinghorn saw this suddenly- that he'd cut the place where the hummingbirds nested. It was the only time I'd seen Dr. Kinghorn cry.

Aisling said, He was your ally, hey?

You think so? I asked.

While I drove, I leaned over to show Aisling a scar I have on my right arm. I told him the truth like it was my self-imposed punishment to do so. I said it was from that autumn too. I'd taken Benny, my beloved old cat who put up with so much, and placed his tail on the electric fence that kept deer out of the orchard. I'd never touched an

electric fence, what did I know? I knew better is what: I knew that the shock was going to hit Benny. Maybe I even knew that he'd scratch me deeply, leaving that reminder on my forearm. What I didn't know was that the shock would travel through him, searching for a way to the ground and I, both the root of the crime and the route to the ground, would get the brunt of it.

Aisling wasn't surprised by either of these stories. Or if he was, he hid it. He said again, remember those films we saw about nuclear war? He asked if our school showed the post-movie part, with Henry Kissinger reassuring the audience that what they'd just seen, the destruction of a place not unlike their own homes, by nuclear war, couldn't happen.

I said, Yes, I thought so. I was a gangly girl sitting in an auditorium with my legs stuck out in front of me. I remembered not being reassured by something that came after the film. I remember feeling lost and that events could very easily spin out of your control. That was how it could happen, how not only me, but a whole world could get locked into a path of self-destruction that, once initiated, couldn't be stopped. It wasn't like the horror films I'd caught glimpses of where the violence was thrillingly unlikely. That film had been familiar: the homes were like my home, but flattened like an ice cream box for the garbage. At night, I lay alone and felt what I'd now call panic. All that burning, melting and exploding that would attend the end gave me a free-floating anxiety and a general dislocation. But the worst thing was that no one else seemed to carry it. While other kids had talked during the film, or slept, I'd been transfixed with fear. While other kids walked out into the bright sun and jockeyed as usual for the few places on the playground equipment, I'd walked home and crawled into my bed where I'd had

nightmares of swinging on my childhood swing, the landing strip of dirt I'd scuffed into the earth between my feet becoming just a swipe of brown in the green grass as I went higher, pumping higher still, until suddenly that landing strip, that last piece of security just dropped away and in my nightmare, I was a free falling girl in an city elevator, a stewardess on an aeroplane that spun out of the sky like an oak seed.

I'll give you a similar story, Aisling said. You weren't the only one feeling lost. I still feel lost. Aisling told me how he'd gone on a road trip with boys from his graduation class to Buffalo, New York. At the *Grateful Dead* show they'd travelled sixteen hours for, he danced with a girl who'd reminded him of me. She was what he'd hoped I'd become: a whirling dervish in a silk dress made from old saris, dancing in her bare feet.

Really? I said. I couldn't believe he'd still thought about me.

All the time, Meryl, Aisling said.

Huh.

At the concert, we took acid, he went on. I don't know why. I guess because everyone expected me not to.

I turned to look at Aisling quickly, but kept quiet.

He smiled. I know what you're thinking. Good little Aisling, right? Can you imagine what people would say? But listen. Anyway, we took one smiley-faced yellow tab of acid each. He told me how, even as he'd smiled and danced with this girl and with his friends, he knew the other kids were enjoying the afternoon more, weren't feeling the nagging edge of worry that came in, he told me, like a flame comes in on a piece of loose-leaf when you light it. He'd had to escape to a port-a-potty and sit in the lit aquamarine transparency of it, lost in fear, lost in an acid-induced cacophony of longing

that had nothing like a high about it, nothing so safe that you could be talked down from it. What he'd felt was the anxiety of a hallucination packed like a train that goes on and on and appears to have no caboose: and every car has the same message written on its side: *you'll just have to get by by faking this.*

See, that's how I look so innocent, he said. It's an act. I'm just as bad as you think you are, Meryl.

No, you aren't, I said. I knew what he meant about that anxiety that went on and on, but what I couldn't tell him was how I'd read what I could get my hands on about a world gone wrong. I started with *The Diary of Anne Frank* and then I was going to the city with my mother and her boyfriend Dom, sneaking bookbags full of horror from the library: Nazi experiments in Germany, black and white photos of pits and people falling from buildings to be measured and tested where they landed and how they landed and looking at those pictures under my covered in my bed at night made the horror of it even more baffling and terrifying and I couldn't sleep for the images I'd filled myself with, the images of what humans are capable of and what I feared I was capable of -for wasn't it the same? I pulled my gangly knees, so bony I had to place a pillow between them so it didn't hurt, pulled my skinny bony knees up to my chest and wept, calling for Benny, who sat, a dark knuckle on my little flowered carpet and wouldn't come.

It started to rain as I drove and we talked like we were the only people in the world and we were still confessing. On the sides of the swishing wet highway, the black fields unfurled in our headlights. The wipers slapped and the distant vertical shafts of orange light on the horizon told us how close we were getting to the city.

What is all that called what we just passed through, anyway? I said. I was thinking of the bulldozed tree-less plot that stretched on the outskirts of the city; the billboard we'd just passed had advertised new homes, but there was no name attached to the space around it. I was wondering if it was a suburb.

What? Aisling said.

What we just passed through -- does it have a name?

A difficult period, he said.

I looked to see if he was smiling. I meant back there, I said, grinning too.

I know what you meant. He nodded, sitting back against the car's upholstery, his hands on his knees.

Then we were driving up a wet, tree-draped drive. So this is where you've been. We looked out at his mother's neat white house. A security light at the back door came on, flooding the driveway.

At first Aisling had his hand on the car door, like he was ready to jump from the car, but then he let go and slid across the black seat and kissed me goodbye.

The kiss Aisling gave me was a piece of what I'd been looking for. It was something he gave me to make me feel like I was better than I thought. My impulse had always been that I had to *get over* the way people really can just vanish. But there's no way to get over what you've lost or prepare for what you can lose. Kara existed. My father existed -if only in the few stories my mother had given me.

You couldn't *not* know your past; I realised as I watched Aisling walk into his house. When the door closed behind him, the passion I had for pinning all my life so far

on that summer lessened a little, like I'd had a crying jag and was suddenly calm; like I'd wiped something inside me that had been dirty and it came out a little cleaner.

There's something to be said for grief, the way you hold it. It's violent how you grip it and try to comprehend it. It slaps you hard, wakes you up. It doesn't let you relax against anything, grief. It makes you understand that what is taught and passed on is mostly fear of what could go wrong, of who could disappear and how you handle that, how you move on. Maybe it's all a lead up to making the moment of disappearance- because everyone goes eventually- a little less hard. I didn't know how this would appear next, but I knew I'd carry Kara and all the things that disappeared from life with me; they'd helped name my world. Even my invisible father was a part of me. And now I had Aisling back; he'd reappeared.

And I've always had my mother and the world she names still, the world she began naming when she made me.



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