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The Execution of Fluffy and other stories from Las Vegas

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THE EXECUTION OF FLUFFY AND OTHER
STORIES FROM LAS VEGAS

by

Bliss Esposito

Bachelor of Science
University of Las Vegas, Nevada
2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
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Bliss Esposito

Entitled

The Execution of Fluffy and Other Stories from Las Vegas

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Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

The Execution of Fluffy and Other Stories from Las Vegas

by

Bliss Esposito

Pablo Medina, Committee Chair
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My MFA Thesis is a collection of six, linked short stories centering on a particular family who lives in Las Vegas. The stories span several decades, from the sixties to present day. They are based around the struggles of the family, both as individuals and as a unit, to overcome the unique problems of living in a city that is isolated yet filled with possibilities.

The central figure is Tommy, the patriarch, who came to Las Vegas as a young man looking to make a name for himself. He has a knack for getting into trouble, but has a greater desire to provide for his family and make them proud. In addition to Tommy, are his wife Sandy, ex-wife Sheila, daughters Teresa and Jean, and brothers Phil and Lou. These characters move in and out of the stories as the family evolves throughout each period.

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“Hello?”

“Hey Louie, It’s Tom.”

“What’s the matter?”

“We gotta make a hit.”

“Who?”

“Fluffy.”

“... I’ll be right over.”

THE EXECUTION OF FLUFFY

My baby brother, Tommy, has always been a little *confuso nella testa*—a little fucked in the head. It started when we were kids back in Brooklyn. He was always getting into fights and stealing hubcaps, but he was still a good kid. A good-natured kid. After the war, his temper got worse, harder. He got a mean streak in him that I’d never seen before. Of course, it was funny watching him glaze with rage and smack some schmuck who told him he couldn’t wear flip flops in the casino, or chase down some Mick for calling him a Wop, but it was time for him to grow up. He couldn’t kill Fluffy. What was he thinking? I told him, again and again, not to do it. I’d never turn my back on my brother, but I’m not a bad guy. I didn’t think he was either.

Tommy fastened the helmet onto his head. He grinned. “Now I’m ready for a murder.” He wore an old black and green camouflage t-shirt that was pocked with cigarette burns and a pair of faded blue jeans that looked like they came from the back of some wetback’s truck. He knocked on the helmet three times and kicked sun-burn red dirt into the air.

“You’ll regret it,” I said. I tossed a handful of sunflower seeds into my mouth. I spit the shells into the dirt. I hated Red Rock. I didn’t even want to be out there. The sticker bushes were as violent as Bouncing Betties. The air smelled like donkey shit. Plus, it was the middle of July, and I was sweating like a Russian spy in the Pentagon.

The Strip twinkled in the distance. It was only a couple of joints back then, so innocent and silent from where we stood. Nothing compared to the dinging and the shouting in the pit. The coked-up gambling highs that guys would get at the tables, hollering like they were Tarzan every time they hit a score. We all worked on The Strip: me, Tom and our other brother Phil. Until the night before, when Tom lost his gig.

“Listen, ya fat bastard,” Phil yelled. He stood beside the car, rolling a joint on the hood. “If you don’t want to kill him, you can sit in the car and jerk off. We’ll do it.”

“You didn’t even know who Fluffy was before today,” I said.

“My baby brudder needs my moral support,” Phil grinned. He had a gap between his bottom teeth you could fit a matchbook through. “And I wanted to make sure you didn’t talk him out of it.”

“You’re a real good guy,” I hollered. Phil giggled like a little kid in trouble and continued rolling the papers. I opened the trunk of the car, “Jesus Christ, Tommy.”

“What?” Tom asked. He blinked innocently then reached down his pants to scratch his balls.

“*What?*” I repeated. Inside the trunk he’d packed an M-14, a .38 snub nose, two rifles, a couple of bandoleers, the cooler, a shot gun, four cases of shells, an Uzi, some rope, a sword, six or seven grenades, and a bugle. “Are you going to shoot him or invade Da Nang?”

Tom readjusted his helmet and loosened the strap under his chin. Strands of hair stuck out like fringe from Ma's fancy tablecloth. "He ate my pot plant," he said.

"The Uzi's mine," Phil called. "I get to use it."

"How's a rabbit supposed to know your drugs are off limits?" I said. "They're all plants to him."

Tom grabbed the bugle and cut a few tinny notes of Revelry. Then he saluted me. "Forward March!" he yelled. He stomped a couple yards into the desert and took a piss.

"This guy and his helmet," I muttered as I heaved the cooler out of the trunk. "We're not in Nam, you schmuck." Tommy'd been out of the army for at least 15 years by then. He always talked about wanting to go to war one last time. To feel the rush. He acted like there were Charlie's around every corner, and wore his helmet every chance he got—hunting, fishing, trick-or-treating with his daughter Teresa. He tried to wear it at Sunday dinner once, but Ma hit him with a slipper.

Phil and I got in and out of the army under the radar, the end of Korea, but before those Vietnam gook fucks started blowing each other up. It was a good thing, because we weren't soldiers, like Tom. We were tough guys back home, at least I was. There's something else you need beside *caglioness* to be a good soldier, though. Phil had always been a pretty boy, didn't like to fight, so he joined the Air Force. He'd just barely made it through boot camp then almost drowned playing Johnny Weissmuller at the shore. Figures. He says it gave him asthma. For a week and a half after he got home he covered everything in Ma's house with plastic wrap. I've never heard the guy wheeze in my life.

I did my stint. Marines. Never had to go to war, but I loved target practice. Sharpshooter, First Class. I won all the competitions. I'm glad I never had to shoot a

person because I don't know if I could've done it, even if they were just gooks. After a year and a half, I got hit in the head with a pot while I was cooking eggs in the mess hall. I got discharged with a slight concussion and came out to Vegas. It was a big friggin' pot.

When Tom enlisted, though, they were already stirring up shit in Vietnam, so his stripes meant a little more to the old neighborhood than ours. He finally was doing something good and guys were shaking his hand rather than yelling at him to get away from their hubcaps. The responsibility was good for him. Then he joined the paratroopers and even earned a beret. It was the best he'd ever done at anything. When he came home on leave it was like Mahatma Gandhi was walking down our street. Ma would cry. Pop would pat him on the back. I'd shake his hand, looking for the thing that was different about him. I never figured it out. Phil would laugh. "Stupid schmuck," he'd say. "You look like a faggot in that cap."

"Stupid schmuck," Phil echoed as Tom screwed with the helmet. Phil turned and admired his reflection in the tinted windows of the car. He wore a black cowboy hat with blue jeans he called Dungarees. He twirled a revolver on his finger, stopping to stick-up his reflection. "Fluffy better watch out." Phil said. He aimed the six-shooter from his hip. "I'm a mean mother fucker. I'm gonna blow the cotton tail right off his ass."

"Have you thought about what you're gonna tell Teresa?" I asked Tom. "Or your wife?" I squatted in front of the cooler and dug for the provolone. I sliced a piece with my buck knife. The cheese started to sweat before I even got it to my mouth.

"I left the gate open." He shrugged.

Philly laughed.

"Unbelievable," I said. "You're gonna let her think it's her fault. You prick."

Tommy reached into the cooler for a roll. He dug his thumbs into the center and pulled out a ball of dough. He stuffed it in his mouth. "I'll buy her a lizard."

Fluffy was doomed. I scooted the cage further into the car's small halo of shade while he nibbled on a carrot. He had chocolate colored fur, so he couldn't be in the heat directly. His ears flopped forward. I thought maybe there was a chance I could make Tom feel bad enough about the whole thing to give it up, but when he got an idea in his head, it was hard to stop him. Especially with that other idiot, Philly, egging him on. Tom had been doing real good lately. Had a pit boss job at Foxy's, a small casino next to The Sahara. Tom had been a hell of a craps dealer, and a decent cheat when he started out. He made a great boss. Kept his dealers in line and sniffed out scams like a pit-bull. Until he landed the job he'd been out of work nearly a year. All part of the cycle. Dealers turned cheats. Cheats turned bosses. The only problem was no one paid your unemployment while the heat cooled down and someone decided to try you out again.

I got him the job at Foxy's. I was one of the only guys in town who made it to boss clean, so I had some pull. Lucky for Phil and Tom. Those two idiots were always causing trouble. The year before, I got Phil a job at the Circus Circus. He organized a labor union and started a strike. Then he quit. But Tom and Foxy's were a good fit. Even though it was his own fault, I still felt real bad that he got canned. I picked him up the night it happened. His face was as red as his knuckles.

"I don't want to hear it," he said getting into the car.

"You'll bounce back," I said.

"The asshole is suing the joint." He breathed roughly through his nose. "Says he had a contusion of the nasal passageway, a cracked jawbone, a concussion, a shattered cheek

bone, he couldn't hear outta one ear." He moved his hands as he talked. "A fucking cracked vertebrae. A torn optic nerve." He rocked back and forth.

"Tommy, don't you break anything in here. I'm sick of replacing shit you bust."

"Mother fucker," he growled. He popped the dashboard with quick right jab leaving a fist sized dent in the plastic. "All that from a punch in the head?"

"Fuck Tom!" I said. "Why do you always break my shit? You asshole?"

"Don't get upset, Lou," he said. He rubbed his knuckles.

"Now I gotta replace my dashboard!" I hollered. I grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it back and forth, like I was strangling someone.

"Calm down." Tom started laughing. "You're gonna rip it off."

I grabbed my sunglasses that hung from the visor. I bit my lip. "Fuck...fuck!" I mumbled and spit. Unlike Tom, I didn't get upset too often. When I did, it came on like a sneeze, hard and unexpected. I stayed out of trouble mostly, but guys knew when I was pissed to stay away. I cracked the glasses in my hands. The metal frame bent and gouged my palm. "*Cock...sucker!*" I tossed the glasses out the window onto the street. I took a deep breath.

"It's just a little dent." Tom laughed so hard he probably pissed himself. Something about me getting upset always seemed to calm him down. As long as one of us was mad; sometimes I don't think it mattered to him which one it was.

He sighed and looked out the window. The strip flashed past us. "Poor Sandy," he said. "She never gets a break. We were finally starting to get caught up."

"She loves you. She'll understand." I paused. "Just don't do anything stupid."

“I try so hard. Every time things are going well, I fuck them up again. Why can’t I just stay straight?”

I didn’t know so I didn’t answer. Tommy stared out the window as we turned onto the freeway.

I reached into my pocket. “You guys want some milk duds?”

“Friggin’ candy with this guy,” Phil mumbled. “What are you, in grade school?” He chewed on one of his toothpicks. He finished the joint with a few quick stabs of his tongue. He spit the toothpick into the dirt, stuck the joint in his gap and wiped the broken leaves back into a baggie.

“Watch the paint job,” Tom said.

“Get your wife to buy you a new one,” Phil said, waving him off.

Tom bit his lip. He started grumbling.

“I’m just jealous,” Phil continued. “I wish I had a wife to buy me nice things.”

“Watch it, Philly,” Tom said. “Or I’ll kill you after I kill Fluffy.”

Phil laughed. “Wait till you get some of this shit. You’ll want to punk me in the ass.” He lit the J and took a hit. ““Ere,” he said, handing it to Tom.

Tom inhaled. They passed it back and forth as I ate a few more Milk Duds.

“I’m sure she’ll get over it,” Tom repeated. “You think?”

“It’s her pet, Tom,” I said. “And Sandy’ll know for sure.”

Tom scratched the back of his neck and unclipped his helmet. He looked down at the dirt for a few seconds, kicking at it like he was on the schoolyard. “It’s friggin’ hot out here.” He squinted towards the sun.

I patted him on the shoulder. “You can’t kill your daughter’s bunny rabbit. C’mon.” I said. Tom usually took my advice. Not always. If I didn’t come on too strong I could usually get him to do the right thing. Deep down, he really was a good guy. When he was a kid he was soft, sickly. So he had heart for things that were helpless. Once he rescued some abandoned kittens in the back of Max’s Candy store when we were growing up. He brought them blankets and milk and even saved a few nickels to get some cat food. Named them Fe, Fi, Fo, and Fum. Then some guys used them to play football of the roof. Tommy didn’t eat candy for a month.

When I watched Tommy with Teresa and Sandy, I saw the same kid. He was gentler than I could ever be with my big clumsy fists. They looked at him almost desperately they loved him so much. I didn’t know how he did it.

Tom dug his heels into the dirt and wiped his forehead. “Maybe we should just get out of here,” he said.

“Oh, no,” Phil replied. He took the joint and held it in front of his lips. “Don’t get soft on me. I came out here to kill a rabbit, and I’m gonna kill a rabbit.”

“Shut up, Philly,” I said. “C’mon Tom. Let’s go back.”

Tom picked at his nails. “He ate my pot plant. Once they get a taste for something like that...” he trailed off.

“If you’re that worried about it,” I said. “Just let him go. He shack up with some wild bunnies and you don’t have to have a bad conscience.”

Phil threw his hands in the air. He pulled the shot gun out of the trunk and cocked it. “Well I’m gonna shoot him.” He reached for the latch on the cage.

“You insensitive prick,” I yelled at Phil, smacking him on the cheek. The joint spun out of his mouth like a helicopter. “Do the right thing for once, would ya?”

“Watch it you fat fuck,” Phil yelled. He dropped the gun and went after the joint.

“You shouldn’t even be out here,” I said. “It’s Sunday.”

“We changed our meeting to Thursday nights.” He ran his hands over the dirt.

“Where the hell did it go?”

“What was it Father Phil?” Tom asked. “Minister for the ‘Chapel of Revelations?’ Altar boy for the ‘Souls of God?’ Head jerk-off for ‘The Holy Cannoli’s?’”

“It’s Rector in the Church of Holy Sanctuary and Sanitation,” Phil replied. He found the joint behind the front tire and picked it up. “And when the end-of-the-world comes. Bam. Manna in my backyard. You two *cafones*,” he said wagging his finger between us, “Out of luck.” He grabbed the gun from the dirt.

“God’d have to be deaf, dumb and retarded to forgive all your sins.” I laughed.

“He has to,” Phil said. He dusted the joint like it was evidence. “I took the oath.”

“It ain’t the fucking boy scouts,” Tom said. “And while we’re on the subject, you mother--” Tom said. He bit his lip to keep calm. It flashed red then white. “You better quit telling Teresa that fire-breathing dragons are gonna come from the earth and eat us.”

“I didn’t tell her that,” Phil said defensively, holding his free hand up in surrender, the roach in his lips again. “I told her that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were going to come out of the sky with golden trumpets announcing the end-of-the—”

“Whatever,” Tom said back to fumbling with the straps of his helmet. “Lay off the revelations bullshit or I’ll knock your head off. She was crying for a week.”

Phil shrugged. "I'm just trying to prepare the kid. It's better that she knows what's coming. 1979. Boom. That's it. End-of-the-world." He fired the shot gun at a cactus and blew a chunk out of the side. "So we gonna blow this bunny to heaven or what?"

Teresa didn't deserve to have such schmucks for family. The kid could melt a New York winter with her big ears and brown eyes. She melted my heart. I didn't even like kids. Phil, that stupid idiot, was always feeding her his bullshit, probably because she was the only one that would still listen to him. Last summer, I had the family over for a barbeque. I was at the grill cooking the sausage, and Teresa was floating on a blow up Orca I bought for her. She liked whales.

"You know Niecey, that whale you're riding on?" Phil asked. He floated next to her, his arms thrown over a raft. "You know why it's called a killer whale?"

She shook her head.

"Because it *likes* to kill things. Most animals just kill for food." He dunked his head and smoothed his hair back. "Now when God created the universe, he made sure all the plants and animals lived in harmony. But the killer whale," Phil continued while he bounced Teresa's toy, "just kills other whales and seals and shit for fun. They jump on the other whales, like they do at Sea World, and hold them down until they die. Just for fun. You didn't know that did you?" He grinned. "See how smart your uncle is?"

"Alright," I said. "Sausage is ready." Phil got out and wrapped himself in a towel. Teresa floated towards the deep end on her whale. I'd been listening to Phil rant about this or that my whole life so I barely heard it anymore. Some bullshit. Some scheme. I'd forget that Teresa actually listened to that schmuck. The whale floated away from the

steps. Teresa slid into the water. I just started thinking that maybe that prick upset her when Tom came outside. He'd been watching her from the kitchen window. When she got off the whale, he came out to get her. He held open a towel and wrapped her in it. Phil was across the yard going on about why I had dry spots in my lawn. Tom looked at Teresa and the whale floating on the opposite side of the pool.

"Did Uncle Philly say something about your whale?" he asked.

She nodded and quickly repeated what Phil told her.

"He's so full of shit his eyeballs are brown," he said.

Teresa smiled a little. "So they don't kill for fun?" she whimpered.

"*Naw*, they only kill sharks to protect the baby whales," he said, winking.

Until then I always thought I could be a father. I could have kids if I ever found a broad that didn't drive me nuts. But Tom had an instinct. I still don't know how he knew Philly was yapping about whales, but he nailed it. I had a good instinct for staying out of trouble and spotting cheats at the table games, not for being a father. I thought being a dad was just love and protection, like I thought the army was just brawn. I was wrong again. I love Teresa, but she's Tom's life.

That's why it was killing me to see him do something that could jeopardize their relationship. And his relationship with Sandy. Being out at Red Rock was the exact opposite of what he should've been doing: hitting the streets, looking for work. Tommy wouldn't be able to go on if he lost their adoration. Even he wasn't tough enough for that.

But he was my brother, and I'd never turn my back on him. If he was going to fuck everything up, I was going to stand by his side while he did it.

“Okay,” I said, “When I open the cage give him a minute to run first.” I looked at Phil. “Don’t you fucking shoot until he’s far away from me. I still have that scar from deer hunting last year.”

They both started laughing. “You stupid prick,” Phil said. “I told you to move.”

“I’m serious Philly!” I said. “You’ve got the aim of a one eyed monkey with a stigmatism! Don’t shoot that gun until he’s ten yards away.” I paused. “At least!”

“Hey!” Phil said. “I’m a better shot than you are.”

“Philly, just shut the fuck up and do what you’re told,” Tom yelled.

“Don’t start with me!” Phil spat out, his finger in Tom’s face. “Besides,” he said. “I ain’t gonna shoot him that close. I wouldn’t do that to a helpless little bunny.”

Tom grunted and dropped a bullet into his pistol.

I got stuck releasing Fluffy from the cage. I hoped he tore outta there like a champ horse at the Belmont. He’d make a good wild bunny, I thought. Almost blend in. A *mooliani* compared to the light colored jacks, but that was alright; every crew could stand a token. He’d like the freedom in the desert. Eating juniper and shitting wherever he felt like it. I thought about asking Tom one more time to give it up and let Fluffy go into the wilderness as I hefted the cage. I changed my mind. I dragged Fluffy to the base of a small hill, and set the cage behind a sticker bush. It would be better for Fluffy if he didn’t know what was coming, maybe it would give him an edge. Phil couldn’t hit shit, but Tom was almost as good a shot as me. I turned around and faced my brothers. They stood side by side fully loaded. Phil was mouthing off about something, stretching and smoothing out his jeans. Tom stood there still and silent. I knew if Tom’s sights hit him, Fluffy didn’t stand a chance.

The wind whirled and tossed a piece of wax paper into the air. My shoulders throbbed like a couple of tom tom drums under the sun. I wanted this to be over, so I could get home and relax in my pool. Tom readjusted his helmet. Phil bounced his toothpick up and down between his teeth, and I slid a last sliver of salami into my mouth. I paused my left hand over the latch. I fingered the pistol at my hip with my other hand even though I didn't plan on firing. Instinct. Maybe nerves. Tom and Phil aimed forward. Those two better wait until I'm out of their sights, I thought. I could see Phil licking his lips. Tom was a statue. Fluffy bucked a few times, getting ready to run. Looking at them I mouthed *Three...Two...*

I know my brothers. I watched them both grow up. This was nothing to Phil. He was there because he wanted a nosh and to shoot his new gun. But Tom became a different man, someone I'd only seen shadows of when he told war stories of slitting a man's throat, without any pride in his voice. Somewhere inside him were stories he couldn't finish; a girl stepping on a landmine before he could get words of warning past his lips, the begging eyes of a Cong as he cocked his gun. As I watched Tom across the small patch of red desert, I realized none of us, not Phil, Sandy, Ma or Pop, had ever seen him like this. He tensed his body. He held his breath. I said a prayer. Tom went to war.

One... I ripped the cage door open. It squealed like a power saw. I stumbled a few quick steps back. Tom and Phil jerked their guns up the hill. I followed their sites. I couldn't find Fluffy. Any second they would lock on and blow him away. I put my fingers in my ears. I searched the side of the hill. I still couldn't spot him. Phil and Tom stared dumbly through their sights.

"Where the fuck did he go?" Tom said.

Phil dropped the M-1 to his side. "Is he behind that cactus?"

"There's a million fucking cactuses." Tom said.

"You stupid idiots," I said. I couldn't believe he managed to get away. I dared for a second to feel a little relief. "First rule, don't take your eye off the target." I laughed and kicked Fluffy's cage. "Holy shit," I said, looking down.

"What?" Tom asked.

I tilted the cage forward with my foot. Fluffy tumbled out ass over head.

"*Holy shit*," they repeated.

"Is he dead?" Phil asked, annoyed. "The hell's wrong with your rabbit, Tom?"

Tom was silent as Fluffy unraveled himself and very slowly got on his feet again. I picked him up by his scruff. He kicked once with his hind leg. He slumped back into his monotonous chewing. I'd never seen him so mellow. Usually, he was running around Tom's backyard like a kid getting chased by the cops. "*Maddona*." I said. "I think he's stoned." I laughed.

They stared at Fluffy in disbelief. Phil's mouth hung open and, for just a second, his toothpick threatened to fall out. "Well, I'll be damned." Phil said walking over to us. "I didn't know rabbits could get stoned."

"Anything could get stoned if they eat as much pot as *he* did," Tom said. He came up and poked Fluffy with his finger.

"Now what are we gonna do?" I asked. My eyes watered from laughter.

"Shoot him. Let's hit him. He ain't going no where," Phil said.

"I don't want to kill him if he's just sitting there," Tom said, his voice cracked.

"We can still just let him go," I said.

“Tom!” Phil said. “You better not back out now because I came all this way to kill that damn rabbit, and I’m not gonna go home until he’s dead.”

“Phil, I can’t hit the bunny if he’s just sitting here. Without giving him a running chance? Uh-uh. No fucking way.” Tom voice was hollow like a ventriloquist’s puppet’s. “I mean, Christ, even in the army the other guy had a chance to get away.”

“Louie will fire a shot into the air,” Phil went on. “Stoned or not, that’ll make him run. Then we shoot him. Just like planned.”

Tom didn’t look good. Whatever I witnessed in him moments before was gone. He was my brother again, the one that took care of the kittens and always threw clams back into the water at Coney Island. His helmet had fallen forward. He didn’t bother to readjust it. He took Fluffy from me and held him by the scruff. They stared nose to twitching nose. “I don’t think I can do it,” he said.

“No fucking way,” Phil shouted. His voice echoed down into the valley. “I am frigging sick of you not being able to keep your dick up long enough to get anything done.” He pulled the .22 from his holster and cocked it. He aimed at a creosote bush about ten feet away. “You’re such a fucking baby all the time. Can’t keep a job. Can’t support your family. Always leaning on us.” The creosote bush exploded. Fluffy bucked wildly in Tom’s grip.

“Philly,” I yelled. I could feel the sun soaking through my skin and getting into my blood. “You better back off.” The air wrinkled from the heat coming off me or the ground. I hit a thousand degrees in an instant. My throat swelled. I could hardly get out any words. “You...Fuckin’... Leave...Him...Alone.” I wanted to rip Philly’s head off.

“I don’t need you two to tell me what to do,” Tom said. He grabbed the gun from Phil and aimed it at Fluffy.

“Tom,” I spit out. I cocked my pistol, and aimed it straight up. “Tom,” I said again. “I’m gonna scare him away. That’s what you want.”

We stared at each other, my gun aimed in the air, his towards Fluffy. I could see him thinking, going back and forth, deciding what to do. The act of killing the rabbit was way more than he bargained for, and his manhood was all strung up in it. I straightened my arm. So did he.

I told him not to do it I thought.

Bang!

* * *

Fluffy was gone. It was over. When we got back to Tom’s house later that evening, Teresa sat on Sandy’s lap, her messy hair covering her face. She broke my heart. I would have bought her a million bunnies right then. As soon as she saw us, she ran to Tom. She cried as he picked her up and hugged her in his arms. He whispered in her ear. He rocked her back and forth.

A few days later, once Teresa accepted that Fluffy wasn’t coming home, we held a ceremony of remembrance. There in the back yard in which he had grown up, Teresa, her mother, her father and her two favorite uncles honored Fluffy, brother to Whitey, Hoppy, Blacky, Peaches, Winky, and Big Foot. Then, as if she had seen it in a movie, Teresa laid a single dandelion, Fluffy’s second favorite treat, in his hutch. But she didn’t cry. She was tough, just like her dad. With our pellet guns at our sides, Tom, Phil and I stood side by side. Silent. Respectful. Tom readjusted his helmet. Phil bounced his

toothpick up and down between his teeth, and I slid a sliver of salami into my mouth. As a sign of respect, we each fired a single round into the air. Then Tom pulled out his bugle and played Taps. Since Phil was a man of the cloth Teresa with her big puffy eyes asked him if he'd say a few words to wish Fluffy well.

"Sure kid," he pulled the toothpick from his mouth and used it to scrape some dirt out from under his thumbnail. "Uh, Fluffy," he began, "You were a good rabbit. A quiet rabbit. A friend to all. Uh. You were soft and fuzzy, and liked to eat Tom's plants." He snickered. I smacked him on the back of his neck. "I mean, uh, you enjoyed all of God's green plants and liked to run, um, usually." He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "I don't know where you are now, Fluffy, but wherever you are, I hope you are doing well. And stay away from coyotes." Tom glared at him. Teresa looked up, her eyebrows scrunched. "I mean, uh, I hope that there are no coyotes in heaven, um, if you go to heaven." Teresa's pink lips curved down at the corners. "Not that you'll end up in hell," he said looking at her, "because you were a good rabbit, um, as I already stated. But wherever you've ended up, Fluffy, be good and remember Mark 6:23 'Leaves of three let it be. Leaves of four eat some more.' Thank you, and good night." He smiled his toothy smile at Teresa. "Buck up kid," he said. "It ain't the end of the world." He hugged her to his side. "Well not yet anyway."

"C'mon guys, let's go in and have a nosh," I said.

"Wait a second," Phil said. He reached into his pocket, "I got something for you." He squatted down so he was level with Teresa. "Now close your eyes," he said. He dropped a string of dull metal beads over Teresa's head. At the center hung a little brown, clump of fur. "It's a rabbits foot necklace!"

Teresa looked up at him, confused, like a dog who doesn't understand a command.

"For luck!" he said. "Now none of your pets will ever get into trouble again!"

Sandy gave us a look made of pure ice and hustled Teresa inside.

"Phil, you jerk!" I said. I always got blamed for shit like this. "How could you give that to her?" I asked.

"I thought she'd like it," he shrugged. "Something to remember Fluffy by."

Tom paused for a moment. Then he pulled back his fist and punched Phil in the head so hard Phil's teeth clacked together like planks of wood.

"See, Lou," Tom said. He shook his hand and rubbed it against his thigh. "I told you. When someone pisses me off, I can't help it. I react."

"I know kid."

"Thanks for understanding."

MOM FANTASTIQUE

Most of the kids I go to school with came born with a mom that stuck around. The first time I met my mom, just a few years ago, I was playing beads on the gold shag floor of our old apartment at the Sunset Sands. She sat down and strung with me. I decided to hire her right away.

They're always asking me how come I got to hire her, what it was like to get to pick one out. They don't get it. It wasn't easy. I didn't get to pull up at a drive-through window and order one mom, extra pickles. I got lucky. My dad let me in on the process. He decided I should get to choose for myself, and over the year and a half we spent

together in between full-time moms, he introduced plenty of applicants. I fired most of them on their first night.

I didn't realize anything was different right away because women were always hanging around my dad, blowing him kisses while twirling my hair between their fingers, a little too rough with my tangles when he wasn't looking. They were around even before my first mom left. I thought they were her friends, but they continued to come and stay long after she took off. Finally, I asked, who were these women, and why did they come? Why did they fill up our ashtrays? Why did I have to stay with them when Dad was gone? That was when he told me about the ad.

"Teresa," he said. He scratched his ear. "I've needed to talk to you."

I calmly set down the container of sparkles I was using to decorate the picture of Uncle Louie's pool. I folded my hands in my lap. I needed answers. "Yes, Daddy?"

He sat on the edge of our old tan couch patterned with brown and orange flowers that looked like cartoons from Sesame Street. "The girls." He paused. "The women that are always around. You let me know if you ever feel uncomfortable around any of them."

I nodded, waiting. I could tell he wasn't finished.

He winked at me. "I put an ad in the paper to find you a new mom." He leaned in toward the shoebox lid on the coffee table. He sifted the green leaves for seeds. "That's why they're always here." He tipped the lid. The seeds rolled to the side like BBs, and he edged the leaves onto the white paper.

"Oh, I get it." I watched him put the joint between his lips. His mouth stayed serious, but dad had that happy look, like when we stomped across Uncle Louie's roof to wake him up. It made me realize that dad really wanted a mom for me too.

“I’m only doing it if you know for sure that you mean the most to me.”

“A mom?” I answered. “For real?”

He kissed my cheek. “You’re a smart kid.” The joint angled on his lips like a toothpick. “You’ll pick the right one.”

“A new mom...” I muttered.

“Listen,” he said. “Stevie Sickel is coming over, so go play in your room while we do this J.”

“Okay, Daddy.” I waddled away brushing sparkles off my nightgown. A mom. The first one I had was a bust. I didn’t really need one; I had a set of grandparents, two uncles and the best dad in the world. Maybe. If we could find one that fit in well. It might be nice to have someone who knew how to deal with my hair. Someone who would play with me when dad wasn’t home. Someone who wanted a kid.

My original mom was a hippie. That’s what everyone said. But she wasn’t really a hippie because she only loved my dad. She had light blond hair that she tied back in pigtails. She also had two other kids that she left back in England, before she came out here. One of my first memories was of her sitting at the kitchen table, trying to write her other kids a letter. Her usually fluffy hair hung limply around her shoulders.

“Oh, fuck it all,” she said. “They don’t care about me anyway.” She stuck a spoonful of peas into my mouth, tightened a belt around her arm, and stomped into the bathroom. I spit the peas into my napkin, insulted because I could feed myself. When she came back, she read fourteen books to me in a row so I forgave her a little.

On the night she left, I heard them fighting out in the kitchen. I was in bed listening to her clanking around noisily. Dad had just come home from work.

“Goddamnit,” she hissed. “I’m sick of this. Who is it now? Maureen? Emgard?”

“Mind your business, Sheila.” The fridge door opened. He was probably looking for the leftover spaghetti.

“C’mon,” she said. “Let’s take off. Just you and me. Get away from all this.”

I crawled onto the floor and grabbed a book from my shelf. My face felt hot like tomato sauce. I bit the corner of the book until my teeth ached.

“What about Teresa?”

“Louie ought to take her if we go on holiday.”

I bit my knuckle, so angry I wanted to rip it right off my hand.

“Are you fucking crazy? He wouldn’t know what to do with her.”

“Well, someone!” She moaned. “Tommy, I need to spend some time with you, just you. Not you and your family. Not you and your friends.”

“You better leave me alone.” I heard a plate hit the table. I was right. Spaghetti.

“Fuck you then!” she screamed. “Maybe I’ll go screw one of *your* friends.”

That night I dreamed I rode my bike down a street. I saw a road sign. I knew it was important, but I couldn’t read all the letters yet. Then I panicked. The ground turned to quicksand. I woke up freezing on the floor. I ran towards my parents’ room. I hoped dad was there and not just Sheila because he’d listen to the dream and let me sleep with them if I wanted to. Their bedroom was empty. I charged down the hall thinking she had convinced him to leave, that they’d gone. I was sure of it. The walls swelled and wrinkled as I ran towards the light switch. I wondered if the floors would turn to quicksand.

“*Facha bella!*” Dad said. “Are you okay?” He sat on the floor at the coffee table arranging clothespins on a piece of red felt. The room was dark except for the TV that rolled blue shots of *I Love Lucy* and a small lamp he’d set up on the table to make a spotlight across his project. I smelled the burning heat of the bulb. It was magical, seeing him there. All at once, our apartment was warm and filled again. Fibers from the felt mixed with the smoke from his cigarette to float through the air like fairy dust.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I wiped a mat of hair from my face. I tried to catch my breath.

“Hold this,” he handed me a jug of glue.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I scooted next to him for contact.

“I’m making a model rocking chair.” His tongue stuck out between his lips. “Do you want to help?”

“Yeah!” I said. I loved when Dad got in these moods. He’d stay awake for days, working on a project. Once, we made a jewelry box out of dice. Another time we used postcards to make a collage of The Strip. It took me a few years to connect these moods with his speed binges, but even now that I’ve got it figured out, the benders are still fun.

“Your mom went away,” he said. He pulled a metal pin out of the clothespin. It fell in two pieces. The air conditioner kicked on making the curtains flutter open. Outside, it was still dark.

“Oh,” I said. I held the glue in different positions experimenting with which angle could be the most helpful.

“She’s probably not coming back.”

“How come?” I asked. I rubbed my naked heels into the shaggy carpet. Glue rolled in the container.

Dad shifted. He broke another clothespin in two. “Because she doesn’t understand me.” He rubbed his fingers together and took a quick puff on his cigarette, holding it like a joint. “She wants to control me, Teresa. I’m not gonna let her do it.”

I unscrewed the cap so the glue would be ready for him when he needed it.

“You’re going to stay with me. I wouldn’t let her break us up.” He sifted through his toolbox. He pulled out some pinking sheers. Then he dropped the sheers, grabbed my arm and looked at me like he did when I was in trouble. He startled the glue container out of my hands. I watched helplessly as a white pool form on the carpet. He held me too tight for me to reach it. “You’re my girl,” he said. “The only one I need.” I could make out every whisker on his face, nearly see the heat rolling off of him like a bowl of soup. “I’ll fucking strangle her if she tries anything,” he said.

Then he dropped my arm. He picked up the pinking sheers. I stared at him. Then the glue. I was sure I would be in trouble. I started to cry. I shouldn’t have un-capped it.

“Daddy,” I said. “I spilled the glue.” I waited for him to yell, to be angry. To change his mind and make me go away with her. “I didn’t mean it.”

He leaned to look and exhaled deeply: casino, garlic and pot. “Here,” he said, unaffected. He pulled a rag out of his tool box. He tossed it onto the glue stain. “You know, Teresa, you can do anything you want. You’ve got such a unique spirit. I can tell already. I can see it. The hardest thing for you will be finding a being of comparable magnitude. Someone who is worthy of you. You’re just so high above everyone else.”

He said it all in one quick tumble while he edged the felt with the scissors. “That will be the hardest thing. Can you say that? A being of comparable magnitude?”

“A being of comparable magnitude,” I said.

“That’s right!” He smiled down at the mess on the table. “You and me, though. We’re comparable. We understand each other. I want you to know that I’ll never lie to you. If you ask me something, I’ll always tell you the truth to the best of my abilities. That means you can never lie to me, either. We have to be able to trust each other.”

I smiled as I smashed the rag into the glue with my toes. This would be great, I thought, just us together all the time. No one to get in the way. Outside, I could see the jagged outline of Sunrise Mountain as the sky faded from black to purple. I wondered if he would make me go to school that day.

The first applicant was Becky Highpockets. I’d never heard a last name like that before. I thought I must’ve been wrong, but my uncles kept saying they’d like to “give that Highpockets a jump.”

Everyone seemed to think she was okay, so I was excited to meet her. I took my red metal breakfast tray out of the closet and set it up next to the couch. I opened each leg with a mousetrap snap. On top, I placed my Etch-E-Sketch, a purple crayon, a pad of paper from The Silver Slipper, a stuffed killer whale and three tissues. I stuck my legs under the tray and folded my hands on top.

The Brady Bunch was on TV. I loved Marsha, especially her hair. Dad and I watched while he cuffed his black t-shirt and smoothed out his jeans.

“Did you finish your pastina?” he asked.

I nodded.

He stood in front of my tray staring down at me. “*Bella*,” he said. “We might have to go through a few before you find the right one, you know.”

“I know,” I said. I didn’t really expect the first one out of the gate to become my mom. Even when I was a little kid, I was practical. Still, I couldn’t help imagining my new mom walking around that corner, maybe even having long, pretty blond hair.

The bell rang. Dad let her in. I could smell her strawberry perfume even before she came into the living room.

“So this is your little girl?” she said to my dad. “Aww Tommy, she’s an angel!”

The first thing I noticed about Becky Highpockets was that she had red sausage curls that made her taller than my dad. She wore so much jewelry she tinkled like my ballerina music box, and she had legs that looked like corn dogs in her tight gold pants.

“Hi honey,” she said. She squatted in front of me. Her grinning, pink lips reminded me of a big slice of watermelon. She clicked her red nails against my desk. “Are you a little secretary?”

“No I—”

She pinched my cheek. “Well Tommy, she is just precious, and I just love kids.” Becky left me and bobbed back to dad. Everything jiggled. I twisted the knobs of my Etch-E-Sketch intently, furiously recording our meeting. She leaned into my dad to kiss him on the cheek. Then, watching her bottom bounce like foursquare balls, I noticed her pockets *were* high.

“And she’s so pretty, looks just like her daddy,” she said, like I was a baby.

“I’m five and a half.” I said.

““And a half.”” She smiled condescendingly. “Well, what comes next, smarty-pants?”

“Five and three quarters,” I said flatly.

“No honey. Six,” she gushed. “Look.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a slim gold tube. “Maybe your daddy will let you wear some of my lipstick to the movie tonight.” She spun the lipstick up and down like a drill. “We’ll be twins!”

This was not going to work out.

I scribbled a note to Dad. How do you spell *crazy*? I thought. I wrote *crz* but couldn’t tell if it was right or not. Then I added some *Ts* because I could do those. Some circles, too. Then I drew a bird. He’d know what I meant.

The movie that night was awful, because Becky wanted to sit in the middle. Her strawberry smell made me gag. She never stopped talking. Still it took Dad a few weeks to let Becky know she didn’t qualify. In the mean time, I had to stay at her house while he worked.

Dad didn’t work like normal dads. He dealt craps on The Strip mostly. On work nights, I’d sleep at Grandma and Grandpa’s. He’d sneak in and carry me out to the car after his shift. I’d pretend to sleep. Really, I’d watch the lights go by, smell the cigarette smoke from the casino that never quite left him, and just be glad to have him back.

But Dad had a big temper. He’d get fired every now and then because he punched somebody or yelled at a boss or something. A few years earlier, when I was just a baby, he’d been named the third best dealer in Las Vegas. He was still a little bit of a celebrity in town. Guys would always come up to us asking questions in dice and payout

language, shaking hands before they left. His fame made it real easy for him to get another job if he needed one, so getting fired never bothered him too much.

To me, though, getting fired meant he'd be leaving, going up to Tahoe with my uncle Philly and a few other guys, to rip off the casinos up there. "Don't shit where you eat," he'd say, packing his wires and chips. He'd go for a few days to a week. Usually, I'd stay with Grandma and Grandpa. They made me sleep in a room with a giant picture of Jesus that had eyes that followed me everywhere I went. I had to change clothes under the bed. When Sheila was still around, I'd stay with her if Grandma and Grandpa couldn't take me. I never liked it. Dad would make up for it by taking me fishing or shooting or by buying me some crayons. Since Sheila was gone, though, I'd knew I'd get stuck with one of the mom applicants because Dad didn't really like to let Grandma and Grandpa know how much he was gone. Since he trusted me, I would never say a word.

So this mom business was important after all, I realized, as Becky smoked her third pack of Camel Lights and yelled bets at Let's Make a Deal. I sat coloring my fifth picture of the morning at her feet. I didn't just need a mom for me, I needed one for dad. So he could relax. So I could have a regular mom to take care of me while he went away to support us. I wanted to shove the whole box of crayons into Becky's mouth to get her to shut up for a second, but I didn't. I was coloring for two.

After Becky there was Judy. Judy had curly brown hair and a huge set of teeth. She wore short tops and high pants and liked to bake. The first time I met Judy was at a party at my Uncle Louie's house. She showed up with a tray of brownies that no one let me

try. Uncle Philly tried to sneak me a piece, but Dad threatened to punch his face in so even he wouldn't let me have any.

I loved parties at Uncle Louie's house. He had the money in the family and made it straight, so he didn't go broke like we did sometimes. Everything in his house was new and clean smelling. I never saw another kid around. People would line up to pinch my cheeks and tell me how much I looked like my father. "Don't worry," I'd say to their delight. "I'm not half as bad."

That night I crossed my arms and stamped my foot whenever someone looked at me even though Uncle Louie played my favorite album, *Hair*, to make me feel better. Judy and Dad laughed and danced. Usually, I'd step in the middle just to see how thick her skin was, but I was too upset. Then Dad twirled Judy away. He leaned into me.

"Listen," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "They have grass in them."

"In the *brownies*?" I said.

"So quit acting like a brat and have fun."

Judy spun back to Dad. "You told her?" she asked.

"She's a smart kid. She understands."

I was confused. Drugs never came in anything appealing to me before. Pills, needles, gas, all the worst thing at the doctor's office. I crawled under the food table and crossed my legs. Why would they put it in brownies? Would they taste different? Better? I decided to sneak some anyway. The song changed on the eight-track. I looked out at the legs checking for any I recognized. I reached up, crushing my head against the underside of the table. I felt the edge of the tray. I just needed to get a small piece to taste. I almost had some in my hand. Then I got smacked.

“Ow!” I stuck my head out from under the table. It was Judy.

“You stay out of that,” she said.

“I don’t like you,” I said.

“I’ll tell your dad if you eat any,” she replied.

Oh, boy, was she fired, I thought as I glared at her.

I forgot about the brownies soon enough because Uncle Louie ate the entire tray.

Then he went to bed. I chuckled at the end of the night. Uncle Louie could be real naïve when it came to drugs, but Judy didn’t know anything about kids.

I fired a lot of women, but Dad never cared. I fired Mary Jane because she put peas in her macaroni and cheese. I fired Donna Ds because she refused to sing along to my Alvin and the Chipmunks album, and Helmet Head Harriet because she smelled like hairspray. I was in the business of finding a mom. I wasn’t out to make friends.

I liked Jeannie. For awhile I thought she could have worked out. She gave me a giant stuffed dog with a floppy tongue. I named him Marsha Brady. One night, Jeannie came over for dinner. I sat on the couch sizing her up.

“How do you like the park?” I asked, one eye squinted.

“I like parks.”

“And swings?”

“They’re fun.”

“Good to know.”

“Okay,” said Dad. “I need everyone at the table.” He carried a pot from the stove to the sink. A large steam cloud fluffed up into the air. The room was thick with the smell

of garlic. Dad and I loved spaghetti. Meat sauce, marinara, alio olio; we didn't care. I sat at the table twirling my fork in anticipation.

"Mmmm," Jeannie said. "I wish I knew what we were having."

"Don't worry," I said.

Dad set a plate in front of each of us. I dropped a scoop of ricotta in the middle of my plate. I mixed until the sauce went pink. Dad grabbed his plate and sat with us.

"What?" he asked Jeannie.

"Oh, nothing," she said, poking her fork into the pasta. "I'm just not a big spaghetti person."

"You don't like spaghetti?" I asked.

"What'd you think we were having?" Dad asked, dropping his fork. "Matzo balls?"

"It's okay." She set her fork down and smiled. "I'll just have some of that left over Chinese on the side."

I didn't have to fire Jeannie. Dad did.

I always felt special because I got to stay. No matter what, Dad would come back to me. I realized that if you weren't related to him, Dad could be hard to hold onto. He was like the prize at the arcade that cost 1000 tickets to these women. You could look at it, but you couldn't take it home.

The only time it ever struck me that I wasn't included, maybe not the only one who had a say in which one became my mom, was late at night when he would close the door to his bedroom. It didn't happen all the time. I'd know right away when she, whichever one, would be spending the night. We'd sit on the couch together watching Family Feud.

Dad would put his arms around me and her. He'd toss out a remark like, "Aw, my two favorite girls." I'd roll my eyes. Later, he'd tuck me in, rushing through my bedtime story. I'd lay awake until I heard his door quietly click shut, her giggles growing softer once the door closed. Then I would sneak out of bed, crack my door and watch his door across the hall, hoping it would open and he'd come check on me. It was never closed usually, always left ajar for me, if I needed anything. On these nights if I tried the knob it would be locked and if I knocked quietly, the heavy breathing would pause, and I'd get told to go to bed. So I would sit alone, while he was back behind that door, giving all his attention to someone else.

By the time I started first grade, I lost my zeal for finding a mom. I spent most of my day in school. Grandma and Grandpa were always nice to be with, even if we had to say a rosary every time someone mentioned Dad's name. Dad still didn't like it. I sort of got the idea that he wanted them to think he could make it straight too, because he never talked about the Tahoe jobs, not with any of the girls he brought home or even Uncle Louie. But no one could pretend something wasn't up when I was stuck staring into Jesus's eyes at Grandma's and Grandpa's.

That was right about the time Dad introduced me to Erlene. She was a cocktail waitress at The Sands and a fully ordained Priestess of the Salmonic Coven. Interesting. She had wavy blond hair, a nose that came to a pinprick point, and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. They were so clear that they glowed bright red in every picture she took, which convinced me that she was evil.

Despite the evil eyes, I didn't axe her right away. Erlene intrigued me. I couldn't help picturing her enchanting my bike so I could fly to school, or teaching me a little *alacazam* to get the boys off my back on the playground. Once Dad was up at Tahoe again, I ended up on her doorstep with my Brady Bunch knapsack and an open mind. I didn't think she could win me over, but I wouldn't say no if she wanted to try.

Her house was incredibly dark. My eyes took a moment to adjust after the bright sun. All the windows were covered with thick floor length curtains and the only lights she turned on as she ushered me through the house gave little more light than a candle. She smoked a cigarette taking huge drags like she'd been held under water. Her long dark robe tied at the neck. I looked up at her and she frowned.

"My coven will be here any minute. You are to stay in the room and not come out under any circumstances. *Got it?*"

I nodded and for a second Erlene's eyes flickered red. I wondered if it really had anything to do with the flash.

The room she stuffed me in was hot and boring. The light buzzed when she'd turned it on. It made everything look yellow and dirty. The window was covered with tin foil. Erlene glared at me then closed the door. I stamped on the tile floor and dropped my bag. I hated her. She didn't even pretend to be fun. Why did Dad leave me with her? I started poking around immediately. The dresser had sweaters and socks in it. The nightstands were empty. Under the bed I found some furry boots in a shoebox and three cook books. Up against the wall I noticed a small box, not quite big enough for a pair of shoes. I squeezed under the bed as far as I could, just reaching it with my fingertips. I

edged the box closer. Finally, I got a grip on it and pulled it out. It was wooden with curly lines etched into the sides. I knew immediately that it had witch stuff in it.

The doorbell rang. I heard shuffling, but few voices. I set the box down to check if anyone was coming. I pressed myself to the door. Only whispers. A cat meowed.

I kneeled next to the box again and opened it. Inside I found bags of herbs with little white cards giving the names. I kept digging. I pulled out another bag. I gasped and dropped it. It was filled with tiny, crooked bird feet. I peered closer. The feet were shriveled into tight fists. Some had clumps of downy feathers at the joint. I continued to sift through the box, unable to stop. I hoped I'd find nothing, but at the same time I hoped I'd find something terrible. Then, at the very bottom, I exposed another small box with more symbols on it. I slid the top open and gagged when I saw what was inside: a dried up human thumb.

Just then the door swung open. But it wasn't Erlene like I'd thought. It was Damien, her son. For a second I felt relief. Then I remembered I hated Damien. He was a few years older than me and whenever we were alone he'd hit me on the arm. "Hey," he said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing" I said. I pushed the things back in the box.

Before he closed the door, a thin black cat edged around his ankles and snuck in. She came to me and purred against my hand.

"That's mom's stuff. Don't play with it. I'm gonna tell her." He sat down and started pulling out the baggies again. "Angelica root. Lemon Balm. Mugwort." He named a few more. "Birds feet on the bottom because they're animal. It has to be in the right order." He stared at me. He had pale skin, white-blond hair and the same evil eyes

as Erlene. His eyebrows slanted downward and one of his front teeth crossed in front of the other. “I had to catch every one of these birds and pull their feet off of them while they were still alive,” he said. “Or else they wouldn’t be magical anymore.” He laughed.

“What happened to them afterwards?” I asked.

“I’d leave them there. They’d bleed to death or get eaten.”

I stared at my hands. The poor birds. I wanted to cry, get away from him. The cat curled onto my lap. I scratched her head. “What about the finger?” I asked softly.

He glared at me. “Don’t tell anyone,” he held up his fist, threatening me. “It came from my third grade teacher,” he grinned wickedly. “She hated me so I got mom her thumb.”

I shuddered. I petted the cat nervously.

“They’re gonna use her as the sacrifice tonight,” he said.

“The cat?” I asked, shocked. She purred and rubbed her face against my hands. I started to breathe faster. “Why?”

“Mom needed a sacrifice.” He shrugged. “So I stole her from my neighbor. They’re gonna hold her upside down then they’re gonna cut her throat and let her blood drain into a chalice.” He sneered. “You can watch. I’m gonna.”

I gripped the cat in my lap. I felt my eyes start to water. She stretched and pushed her paws against my belly. “No,” I said.

“Whatever.” Damien jumped up, punched me in the arm, and left the room.

I cried pathetically with the cat in my arms. Maybe I could hide her. If they couldn’t find her they couldn’t sacrifice her. The dresser drawers were all too small; she wouldn’t stay under the bed. I opened the closet door. Three brooms clattered at my feet. I stared

terrified, wondering if Erlene flew around searching for poor cats at night, choosing the ones she wanted Damien to steal for her. I shoved the cat inside. She scratched at the door and meowed loudly. “Shhh!” I said.

I let her out, trying to come up with a better idea. Maybe I could get her outside. I went to the window and tore a small piece of foil away. A shot of bright light landed on the bed. I could see the grass outside, but I realized the window was barred. I would have to take the cat out the front if I wanted to save her.

I listened at the door. I could hear low voices talking, maybe chanting. I hoped I could sneak by without being noticed. I emptied my knapsack and gently tucked the cat inside. She hissed and tried to get away. She clawed my arm leaving a large stinging wound across it. “Just shhh for a minute,” I said. “Then you’ll be safe.” I snapped the clips. Inside the cat yowled to get out. I tried to pet the knapsack to calm her down. Finally, she seemed to settle. I opened the door.

Erlene’s coven sat in a circle bowing to the center. They were dressed in cloaks and passing around joints. Erlene giggled and put her hands in the air. “I call on the forces of air, fire, wind, and water.” The black hood slid off her head and off her shoulders. Her breasts tumbled out. “Tonight we give you a sacrifice...”

The cat yowled again. Everyone turned to look at me. I screamed my guts out.

“You can’t listen.” Erlene got to her feet and charged over to me. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back into the room. “What do you have?” she asked grabbing for the knapsack.” She fiddled with the clips. “Fucking Tommy needs to get his goddamned shit together and stop leaning on me. What’s *in* here” She popped the snaps

and the cat leaped out. She looked at me with giant eyes. “What the hell are you doing?” she yelled.

I shank back. “Damien said you were gonna sacrifice her.”

“That’s *Percy!*” she yelled. “My *cat!*”

I stared at her. I didn’t know what to say.

She shoved me back into the room. When I realized the mess I made, I started shaking. The hole in the foil, the herbs spread out on the floor, my clothes and crayons dumped from my knapsack, the brooms lying in a heap. Erlene let out a shriek. Then she grabbed a broom and dragged me back into the living room.

“If I can’t trust you you’ll stay right here.” She kneeled on the floor and drew a pentagram with a piece of chalk. Then she pushed me into the center and shoved the broom into my hands. “Over your head,” she shrieked.

“Erlene,” I whimpered.

“*Over your head!*”

I lifted the broom.

“You stay like that. If I catch you putting it down, we’ll sacrifice *you!*”

I stood with the broom over my head for hours. The coven finished their meeting. One woman tried to say something to Erlene about letting me drop it, but Erlene screeched and swore she’d curse everyone there. My arms became metal pipes. Still I held on. Not just because I was afraid of Erlene, but because I wanted my dad to come back and find me like this, so he’d see what I had to go through when he went away. I didn’t care about him making money. He needed to take care of me himself. None of

these women wanted to be my mom. They only wanted dad. Just like Sheila. He knew it, too.

“I don’t want a mom!” I screamed. The broom shot out of my hands. I fell back and fell asleep.

After Erlene disappeared, I gave up on the mom business. I ignored the women who came over. I gave dad dirty looks when he tried to introduce me. He swore to me that Erlene got what was coming to her, and that I could stay with Grandma and Grandpa next time. But I didn’t forgive him. I refused.

Then one day I was sitting at my tray, making a necklace. I was so wrapped up in the order of beads, I barely noticed that dad let someone into the apartment. Then something happened. The energy in the room started to change. It was different, like nothing I felt before. Calm. Easy. Everything in the room glowed in the light from the windows, light that usually just burned. I looked up. Her name was Sandy. She was even prettier than Marsha Brady.

“What are you playing?” she asked. She had big bright eyes and a happy smile.

“Beads.” I said. “Do you want to make one?”

“Purple are my favorite.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and stuck her legs out under the tray just like I did.

“You have pretty hair.” I said.

“You have pretty eyes,” she said.

“Do you like spaghetti?”

“Only if it has tomato sauce on it.”

“How come you’re playing with me?”

She shrugged and smiled. “You seem fun to play with.”

I hired her on the spot.

CRAPS

I came to Vegas in ’68 because my brothers, Louie and Phil, were doing real well and making the easiest bucks of their lives. It was time to go straight. I liked the idea about settling down and having a square job after the 2-bit bullshit I did on my way out. But I wanted to start off like Jay Sarno, with broads and chips at my feet. I wanted action. I needed the best job in town. I wanna shoot craps, I told Lou. *Nah*, kid, he said, ain’t nobody got that much juice.

“Downtown, Tommy. Everybody starts Downtown,” he said through the phone.

“Schmucks work Downtown. I wanna start on The Strip.”

“Jesus, kid. You don’t get it.” He laughed.

“What about Phil? What can he get me in on? I need to make some money.”

“Philly can’t get you shit, you stupid idiot. He’ll get you landed in the clink. I’ll get you a good solid job. You take it, and you smile about it.”

That’s how I ended up working as a shill at the Four Queens Casino, Downtown, making eight bucks a day. I appreciated what Louie did; he always looked out for me. A good big brother. Each night, I’d take my dough home. Sheila, my wife back then, would deal the dollars like cards to our bills. If there was ever any extra, she’d suck her bottom lip into her mouth, turning it from pink to red. Then she’d stare at me with her storm grey eyes and start unbuttoning her blouse. In a moment I’d be chewing on her

lip for her. I never knew if it was her little pink nipples or the fact that I'd made an honest buck that turned me on so much.

She'd get antsy quick, though. I wouldn't screw her if Teresa was awake, even if we went into the bedroom or rolled the crib into the closet like we did when we had company over late at night. Just didn't seem right. She'd grumble and button up her blouse again. She always played dumb when it came to responsibilities. She expected life to be a big party.

"Let's take off," she said. "I hear San Francisco is wonderful this time of year."

"Listen babe. We need to be saving for Teresa's college fund." I picked Teresa up from her crib. It was pushed against the sliding glass door. I figured she'd like to look at the stars when she went to bed at night. I sat on the floor, using the coffee table as a desk. Teresa settled into my lap. She stuck my thumb in her mouth. With my free hand, I tried to roll a \$.25 chip over my middle finger. I spun it to the floor.

"Don't be such a *drag*," Sheila said. She sat on the corner of the coffee table. She stared at me. "Are you having an affair?" she asked. She took a strand of hair and started braiding it, her fingers fast. I could almost hear the clean strands of her hair rubbing together like a cricket legs as she laced them together.

I groaned. Sheila needed a lot of attention. If I didn't fuck her at least once a day she'd get upset and start accusing me of shit. At first I thought it was great that she'd jump me as soon as I walked in the door or rub my balls while we watched The Andy Griffith Show, but there were days when I came home from work, Teresa was crying, and all I wanted to do was sit on the couch, smoke a number, and eat some pretzels.

“Honey,” I said, trying to get the chip over my index finger. “I’ve just been busy.” Teresa crawled out of my lap towards the kitchen, stopping to inspect the chip lying on the floor. She stuck it in her mouth.

“Fuck!” Sheila shouted. She kicked a pile of folded towels across the carpet. “I could’ve stayed in England if I wanted to be a slave.”

If any other broad acted like Sheila, I would have tossed her out on her ass. I was just thinking about getting mad when she turned to look at me. Her eyes always did me in. She could give a eulogy with those eyes, they could get so mournful. I never knew a girl who could say so much with her mouth shut. I wondered why she yapped so much. But between the looks she was giving me and that morning’s Lortab still stretching me out like silly putty, nothing could really piss me off. “Could you get that?” I nodded towards Teresa who had the red crammed into her mouth like it was a hamburger.

Sheila sighed. She pulled the wet chip from Teresa’s mouth then tossed it to the coffee table. It clinked like plastic silverware. “She just doesn’t stop.”

I scratched my belly. It was true. As soon as Teresa could roll, she became a blur, whipping and reeling across the carpet. Sheila always seemed a step and a half behind her. Not getting one thing out of her hands before she had something else in her mouth. “Get over here,” I said to Sheila. I nodded towards the couch.

She sat rigidly behind me. She pressed one knee against my shoulder.

“You better quit riding my ass. I’m doing what I can.” I draped my arm across her legs. “In a few months, I’ll be on The Strip and making a ton of money. We’ll be set.” She leaned over me. I didn’t want to look back. “It’s your job to do the home shit.” I knew there would be a whimper in her eyes. It made me want to strangle her.

She ran her fingers up the back of my neck. I got Goosebumps.

“Babe, I’m a shill now.” I said. “That means I’m in. And with Louie watching my back, no one’s gonna stop me.” I closed my eyes, turned my head, and smiled.

Being a shill was the first step to becoming a dealer. There weren’t any dealing schools back then, so shills sat on the game playing with house money until we learned what to do. There were four games to break in on: twenty-one, poker, craps, and the Big Six. A guy could shill on as many games as he wanted. Most of them went for cards or the wheel because they were the easiest to understand. Those guys would usually hit the floor in a couple of months. Craps was the hardest game to break in on, but the money was in dice. It usually took guys about a year to get on a table full-time. Dice dealers had to keep track of the payouts, the odds, and the calls. I thought it would be easy because I was real good with numbers. In the army, I always got put in charge of inventory, maps, codes, locations. Shit like that. I could remember anything.

Some guys were too dumb to figure the games out. They’d get stuck shilling for years until they finally gave up and joined the teamsters. Not me. I did my homework. I carried around five chips in each pocket to get used to their feel as a unit. Chips were always laid on the table in stacks of five. If a player handed out a bigger stack, you’d cut the top five, and slide it to the side, making two piles. Same thing with the payouts. It made it easier to count. You didn’t have to know that this guy just laid \$2. You knew that he laid five reds and six greens. The first few games I sat on, I spilled the stacks all over the table like they were marbles. The dealers smirked at each other, saying, “Look at this idiot,” with their eyes, their expert fingers lacing stacks of chips together like

zippers. Eventually, I grabbed one schmuck across the table and threatened to punch his face in. Everybody wanted to be my buddy after that:

~ Tommy, C'mere. Lemme show you where they keep stripped dice.

~Nice hands Tom. You want to practice some odds?

~Hey Tommy, did you get a look at that new cocktail waitress?

I walked around all of Las Vegas, up and down The Strip, in and out of the casinos, through the walls of air conditioning, back into the hot skillet street, and to our apartment again with both hands in my pants jingling the chips. I looked like a real jerk off, like I was playing pocket pool, but I'd seen guys who looked like they were controlling the chips with their brains, not their hands. They'd roll chips across their knuckles and make them disappear behind their palms. Magicians. I'd roll the chips back and forth over my palm, between my thumb and middle finger and pop myself in the lip. Sheila got beaned plenty of times. I nailed Teresa on her elbow once and made her cry. It felt like I was trying to hold on to a handful of jumping spiders. The first time I finally made the pass from my index to pinky finger, I was pacing the pool outside Philly's apartment at the Sunset Sands. It was a warm night and I could smell the rain coming. "Jesus Christ, I made the pass." I said. "No honey," said the brunette in the water. "I've been waiting for that all night." She winked. Her tits bobbed like buoys. "Now quit playing with yourself and jump in."

Phil helped me out a lot in those days, keeping me supplied with amps and letting me stay at his place when Sheila was giving me too much shit. Most of the time, Phil could be a real prick. If you had a purpose, though, he could be a hell of a guy.

“Listen, Tom,” he said one night. We sat across from each other at his kitchen table which we’d covered with a craps layout from the Tally Ho. The table was too big for the room and I kept smashing my elbows against the wall. Phil shuffled a deck of cards. His specialty was blackjack. He was an idiot with numbers, but he knew cards pretty well. In 21, you win and double up or lose and lose, so it worked for him. He could deal from the top, bottom or middle of the deck. He cut the cards with one hand. “The broads coming over,” he said. “I want the red head.”

“I haven’t even seen them yet,” I handed him the dice. I put bets on the layout.

“Fuck you, I want the red head.” He rolled a hard 6. “Did I win?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You had 10 cents on 1-5 so that would be 15”

“I’m a millionaire.” He swept the table with his hand and palmed a few greens. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “Did you see it?”

“I saw.”

“Practice the handoff.” He held his hand out like he wanted to shake.

I stacked two sets of five, shuffled them together. I wiped my palm on my jeans.

“Thanks Mr. A, enjoy your night out on the town,” I said doing my best wise guy smile.

I shook his hand. The chips went from his palm to mine. I barely cupped my hand.

“Good,” Phil said. He took a drag from his cigarette. He held it like a joint. “But it’s gotta be smoother.” He took the chips and held the back of his hand up. His hand was so straight and easy, I wouldn’t have known he had chips behind them even if I had X-ray glasses. I had to hand it to Phil. He might have been a schmuck, but he was a real brain at being a cheat. “Like that,” he said. “The eye-in-the-skies, most of ‘em were ripping joints off a long time ago. They can tell. It’s gotta be perfect. Do it again.”

I angled the chips in my hand, "Louie would catch it," I said.

"He wouldn't catch me," Phil said. He shook my hand and took the stack.

"He'd catch you." I said. I took a couple in my palm and held up my hand. "He just wouldn't rat out his brother."

"Fuck him. You gotta be a crook to be an Eye." His sniffed and wiped his nose.

"And Louie ain't ever been a crook in his life."

The doorbell rang. Phil took a quick drag, snubbed the cigarette and checked himself in the mirror. He smoothed his hair. "I get the redhead." He opened the door.

I smiled at the girls. The one was pretty cute, but the redhead was gorgeous, with green eyes and a pinhole dimple in her chin. I decided I would take both. Screw Phil.

Those first few months in Vegas were more exciting than jumping out of C130 into the jungles with a buck knife between my teeth. I wanted a piece of everything. The drugs, the money, the broads. I loved the casinos. The cigarette smoke and the thick drunken hazes you could catch like a cold. There weren't any clocks or windows. You could think you're at a table for an hour and come out a day later. I spent any odd shift I could land at the Queens. The rest of the time, I practiced on my layout, or partied with Phil. Even as a shill, I was making smoother moves than a lot of the guys already dealing. Sheila was going nuts because Teresa was teething most of the time. A real handful. I couldn't wait to get away from Sheila sometimes. She kept wanting more of me, but I was having the time of my life. I wouldn't let her control me.

It was Teresa that kept me coming home each night, even if it was late. I never had any trouble with her even though I'd never even held a kid before. I was nervous the first

time I took her in my arms, with Sheila still laid out from the delivery. She just fit, though. It wasn't what I expected. All that bullshit you hear about supporting the neck and sitting down and making sure she feels secure just happened on its own. It was already there, like I knew it all along. I just needed the opportunity to try it. Just like shooting craps. When I'd come home, Sheila'd have shit stained diapers hanging over the shower rod and bottles burning in the pot. Teresa would be screaming her head off until I'd pick her up. With her balanced against my chest, I'd boil water for the bottle, one hand in my pocket working the chips. Nothing in the world made me more proud than my daughter, with her curly hair, big ears and farts that sounded like Jacuzzi jets. I couldn't get over how much she looked like me. I balanced chips on her knees and feet, to make her laugh.

Nights were our favorite. Even though I loved the ding ding ding of the casinos, there was something special about the desert after dark, how quiet it was. Back home, there was always some racket going on, someone shouting, a siren, a hubcap clanging down the street. Here, though, you could hear the pavement cooling, the dust floating to the ground like fog. I'd let Sheila sleep because she was at her wit's end. I'd usually be up anyway with something charging through my system. I'd sit with Teresa in my lap on our little balcony, looking out into the open desert. Sometimes, we'd hear coyotes howling if there wasn't any wind. One night, Teresa lay in my arms, pulling at my chest hair, while I stared at the lights of The Strip. I could see the flash from the Thunderbird sign lighting up one letter at a time and the twinkling, greenish cloud of lights that hung like gauze over casinos. I got a sick feeling in my stomach wanting to be down there, making things happen so my daughter would be as proud of me as I was of her. I

promised Teresa that Daddy was going to come home with a real job one night. Then she'd be set for life.

"You're gonna be set for life. You hear me, kid?" She stuck her arms up towards me. She grabbed hold of my nose. I rubbed my face against her hand. "Any night now. I'm ready." She pulled on my bottom lip. "I'm just a dumb schmuck, but you could be anything you want, kid. I can see it in you. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you have the life you deserve. I just gotta prove to your Uncle Louie I can stay straight. Then he'll get me in on The Strip." I stood up and sat Teresa on the rail. "No problem. I promise you I won't pull any shit. For you kid. And your mom, too. She tries hard. But mostly you." I squeezed my little girl. "Daddy just needs one shot."

Shills worked their way up a pay scale until they hit \$19.50 a day. A guy earned based on his worth. If he's still whipping chips across the table and stuttering on the bets he'd never break \$10. I was earning the max in no time. They gave me a regular shift. I was doing so well, I could deal without even thinking anymore. It was like changing a diaper or rolling a joint.

Phil came in once in a while. One night, a Wednesday, we were hooking up with a couple of cocktail waitresses after work. The casino was so dead I could hear the air conditioner shifting on and off, like semi-trucks driving through the joint. Phil sat at my table, nursing a scotch, putting three cents on the come line. Making me work.

"Try it," he said. He didn't look up.

I could still see the grin. "Not while I'm on," I said.

"Pussy."

Ernie Simms, a good guy and a wop out of Chicago, was my pit boss that night. He limped over to us. He walked with a cane because someone cracked his knee once in a bar fight. Sometimes, he'd smack guys across the head with it if they pissed him off and were in reach.

"Final rotation," Ernie said. He slapped me on the back. "You're off after that."

I nodded. I liked working with Ernie. We got along pretty well, same mentality. Plus, he had some connections at Caesar's and knew Lou. I'd take a good word wherever I could get it.

Ernie hobbled to the next table. Phil glanced around, drooling over the waitresses.

"Get outta here," I whispered. "You look like a fucking rapist."

"Just take a hit."

"I got twenty minutes left."

"Takes thirty to trip."

I usually had something in my system at work, but I'd never tried LSD before. Philly'd gotten some tabs and fell in love with it. He'd been trying to slip me some the whole night. Finally, I shook his hand, coughed and covered my mouth. The tab dissolved on my tongue. Phil grinned.

I never panicked when I took drugs. My heart was strong. I was young. No matter where a drug took me: into my head, outside my body, wide awake or right to sleep, I imagined I held on to a fishing line connected to reality. As long as I kept that line, I knew I'd make it back alright.

I stared through the empty casino. Tiffany, one of my girlfriends, walked by with her tray and winked. She moved like she was made of honey. I pushed the dice back and

forth across the layout with my stick. The green felt looked like the Astroturf by Lou's pool. I reached to touch it. Smoother than Astroturf, softer. Almost as silky as Teresa's hair. I stroked it, with one fingertip, then two, then my whole hand. I petted it like a cat.

"Tommy?" Phil said. He laughed. "Tommy, you scumbag, calm down."

I barely heard him. I looked up. His face was blurred with lights. All I could make out were his eyes, shining or laughing. What a prick.

Someone came up and placed a bet. It melted into the spread like a red pancake. I think I moaned. The air conditioner came on again in the casino. This time, it sounded like a jet was flying through the hotel. I may have ducked. Philly's hands were on me. They stretched around my body like a towel, but didn't feel nearly so good.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of Philly humming *Hava Nagila*. He wasn't in the same room, but close by. There was a woman's laughter. It could've been wind chimes. I was on the floor. Light came in through the window. I didn't know where we'd ended up. I was naked. There was a rubber ducky sitting on my chest. I smiled at it. LSD was officially my drug of choice.

I screwed Sheila on schedule. She still wasn't happy, though. She wanted it more and more, but I had to save something for the other girls I hooked up with. I decided she needed a hobby, something to do. Besides me.

"What about astrological charts?" I said. "You used to do those. The painting you started is good."

"Do you remember what it used to be like? Before we came here?" she said, bobbling Teresa on her lap. Teresa swung her arms out for balance.

"Sheila, I got a job." I paused. "One of us had to get responsible. Gimme her."

She handed Teresa to me. Teresa squealed happily. Three teeth had come in. I knew every inch of her face like I had her mug shot posted in my brain.

“Remember when we watched her spirit enter my body?” Sheila said. She slid off the couch. She sat cross-legged on the floor. “You smelled wildflowers.” She reached across my lap to stroke a curl of Teresa’s hair. “Or the time we stayed high on Nembutal for three days, and you made us togas out of the curtains?” She put her face in her hands. “We never do anything like that anymore.”

“I’m busting my ass. I don’t have time for that shit. I gotta take care of you two.”

“Oh, piss on it.” She crawled across the floor to lay her head on my knees. “What do you want? What can I be for you? Just tell me. Tell me,” she whispered. “Tell me.”

I hated when she got like this. I pushed her off my lap. “I want you to be a wife and a mother. I want you to take care of the house so I can relax when I come home.”

“Bullshit. I’m your fucking babysitter. Don’t you think I know what you do? The women you see?”

“What I do is my own business.” I turned the TV on. Teresa tasted the carpet. I didn’t feel good about cheating, but it was my right. It didn’t mean I didn’t love her. I was crazy about her.

She groaned. “I just want to *be* with you. I want it to be like it was before we had...” she faded and paused, staring at her fingernails. “I just want to take care of you.”

I tightened my grip on Teresa. The screen flickered on the television. As a kid, I always thought of marriage as the end of things. The goal. It’s where I’d be when I grew up. Get married. Have a kid. Sheila and I did it backwards, but it was the same idea. Maybe it wasn’t what Sheila expected either, because she seemed as restless as me. This

wasn't the end. I was just discovering life instead of tying it up. Somewhere in the static of the television, the Brady Bunch held a sack race. Sheila'd gotten it wrong, I thought. I was supposed to take care of her. And maybe I didn't get it right all the time, but I tried. She couldn't even spend the day with Teresa without calling my mother for help. I laughed, but directed it towards the TV.

A few nights later, I went up to visit Louie at Caesars. I wanted to lean on him a little bit. He was my juice, my ticket to The Strip. Once I got up there, everything would be okay. I'd have a real job, real money. Sheila and Teresa would be so proud of me. I could make it straight like Lou. If he just gave me a shot.

Caesar's was real glitz. People wearing evening gowns, and tuxes. Most of them looked like they just stepped off a movie set. The money they traded in the pits was crazy. I never even seen a five hundred dollar chip Downtown, but they flipped them around like dollars up there. I met Louie at Cleopatra's Barge. He wore a gray three-piece suit, his hair combed back into a tight ducktail. He looked like he owned the place.

"Hey," he nodded my way then touched the arm of a cocktail waitress wearing a little white toga. He whispered in her ear. I winked at her.

"Tommy," he said. He waved me onto the platform. Cleopatra's Barge was made to look like a boat and it floated on a shallow pool of chlorine-clear water. It was real happening at night when the band was playing. Lou sat on the bar stool next to me. "I got a call from Ernie Downtown. Said you're doing good?" He looked happy for me.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I got it."

The cocktail waitress brought over two Bloody Marys. Louie wasn't a drinker, but he liked Bloody Marys because they came with an olive and a stick of celery. "Thanks, honey," he said to the waitress. "*Salute.*" He popped the olive in his mouth.

"So, you think you'll have anything up here?" I asked. Lou didn't answer right away. I took a swallow of my drink. Spicy. The boat rocked back and forth, gently, like the buoys we'd swim out to at Coney Island as kids. I heard a hiss and mist started rolling up from under the boat. The lights from the water turned it green, like nerve gas. In a second, everything felt damp. The seats, the floor. The lacquered bar beaded up with water droplets. It looked like it had chicken pox. I held my drink in my lap.

Louie let out a sharp whistle aimed at a twenty-one dealer standing at an empty table. The guy nodded and clapped out. Louie crunched into his celery and pointed to the front of the bar. "See the tits on the statue?" He pointed to the golden bust at the stern of the barge.

"What about them?"

"They have to be painted once a week because every jerk off that walks by rubs 'em for good luck."

"No shit?"

"Caesar's toe, too. The one by the front."

"So Lou," I said.

"I told you, I got nothing up here."

"Jesus, I got a kid at home."

He sipped his drink. "It's not that easy. A lot of these dealers got juice."

"Fucking diapers cost more than the light bill."

He nodded towards my drink.

“Go ahead.”

He pulled the olive off the toothpick. “Just keep your head on straight.”

“I am,” I said.

Unlike Phil, who came to Vegas because he heard he could find trouble pretty easily, Louie came out because he heard he could make a decent living and still stay out of trouble. Lou didn’t want any part of the shit back home. He never pulled a robbery, not even when he was a kid. The worst he ever did was steal some hubcaps for Pop. It was good for me to have him around, though, because Pop never gave much of a shit about what we did as long as we didn’t get caught, and Phil was always running some scheme or another.

I never meant to come out to Vegas. It never occurred to me. Sheila wanted to get to San Francisco. We worked our way across the country, staying with hippies she hooked up with and doing any drugs we could get our hands on. A lot of that time is hazy. No responsibility, but I got sick of never having two nickels to rub together. Then she got pregnant. When I thought of raising my kid in some fucking commune, I wanted to reach for the closest hippie idiot and choke him to death. I needed stability to raise a family, and the only person I knew I could count on was Lou.

We had Teresa at the Denver Municipal Hospital. We took her home to an apartment we were sharing with three other couples. It smelled like pot and stale rice.

“Lou,” I said over the phone. “We had the baby.”

“Congratulations kid!” Then, off the phone, he said. “My kid brother just had a baby.” Guys hollered. “What’d you have?” he said, coming back on the phone.

“A girl.”

“Tommy. A girl? What’d you do that for?”

“I didn’t get to pick, Lou.”

“Jesus Christ, a girl?” he sighed. “What are you going to do with a girl?”

“I don’t know.” We were silent. “Listen, Lou, I need some work.” I said, hushed. “I don’t want to raise her in this bullshit.”

“Good, kid. You need to settle down.” He cleared his throat. “But listen, I don’t want any of your shit. You go clean. You hear me?”

“I’m a father now.”

“Nothing, Tommy. Nothing. Stay off the drugs. Don’t punch anybody. I don’t want any trouble from you.” He paused. “If I get you a job, it’s my name on the line.”

“I’ll be a friggin’ angel.” I cleared my throat. “So you’ll get me in?”

“Yeah. But you’ll start low.”

“I wanna shoot craps,” I told him. “On The Strip.”

“*Nah*, kid,” he said, “Ain’t nobody got that much juice.”

I was a dealer after only seven months of shilling. It was unheard of. But payouts still gave me trouble. Flat bets were all right—that’s where most people put their money. Come line, go line, the field, the pass. A win doubles the money. Once they started betting the odds, though—4 and 4, 6 and 3—I got lost. Odds paid three to one on 6 and 8, and five to one on 5 and 9. On hard and soft rolls, the odds could be as high as 20 to 1. You get the hang of the standard bets after a while, but then some smart-guy has to come

and lay down thirty-seven cents on 5 to 1 odds. I drove myself nuts trying to do the math in my head. Then I started seeing everything in color. Reds for reds. Greens for greens. When I got real good, I could change up the chips without even thinking about it. It gave me more time to play eyeballs with the broads.

One night, I was smoking pot over at Phil's. We were working the pass. I had it down as good as him by then. I could drop a chip from the table to the lip of my shoe, without anyone noticing.

"You're ready," he said. "I know guys that will be in as soon as I say the word."

"This is recreational. I ain't gonna get involved in that shit."

"My niece Teresa doesn't want her daddy to be a poor schmuck stuck Downtown for the rest of his life."

"That's why I'm staying straight. I got my family to worry about," I said. "I almost punched out one prick last week. Lou won't put me in if I fuck up."

Phil choked on the joint he was smoking. "Lou's never gonna juice you in," he said. "You want a hit?"

"What do you mean?"

Phil exhaled and passed the roach clip to me. "He told me," his voice was high like a little girl's. "He said he didn't trust you. You were too stupid to stay out of trouble. He doesn't want you fucking things up for him at Caesar's."

"I thought he didn't have the room," I said.

"Pit boss ain't peanuts," he said. "I tried to get something going at Caesar's, too."

"Yeah, but you're an idiot."

“So listen, I know some guys who say we could score thousands if we got a good dealer on the inside. That’s you. You just tell me when you feel comfortable, kid.”

I knew better than to trust Philly, but I always trusted Lou. Once when I was thirteen or fourteen, I was shooting my mouth off in front of a bar. A group of guys kicked my ass real good. I was in bed for a week. The night it happened Phil and Lou came in my room, late, after they got home.

“Look at the kid,” Lou said. I was facing the wall with a sack of ice on my head. My mouth still tasted like blood and my throat burned from the bile I kept spitting up. “We gotta find out who did it.”

“Fuck him,” Phil barked. “He needs to quit yapping so much.”

It was like a pair of brass knuckles smacked me upside the head. I was real offended. So what if I was shooting my mouth off? He was my brother and supposed to be on my side. No matter what.

“I’ll take care of it then,” Lou replied.

Me and Louie went to the bar every night for a week looking for them. When they finally showed up, my ankle was still twisted but my black eyes had faded to green. Even I had lost interest in getting revenge. But Louie beat the shit out of the guys, three at a time, until they were all laid out on the floor. I had to stand on the hood of a car across the street to see. I pumped my fist with Lou’s each time he cracked one of them on the head. I didn’t think about Phil then, while I was getting vindicated. As I got older, though, I couldn’t help remembering that he wasn’t there that night. Louie had no real reason to do it, other than he was looking out for me.

A week after Philly spilled about Lou not wanting me at Caesar's, we all met for dinner at Carluccio's. Both Phil and Louie went crazy over Teresa. They were two big apes trying to play with her, both of them, their knuckles too thick and twisted for her to suck on without cringing. She kept at it, pulling on their noses and ears enough to make them come back for more.

"Ernie says you've really got the game down," Louie said. He twirled a string of mozzarella around his fork.

"Yeah, it's nothing. I got enough of a brain to deal the chips without having a panic attack." I shoved bread in my mouth. "Did you know he's going to Caesar's?" I'd found out on my last shift. Ernie came in hobbling with glee. I was happy for the guy. At least I'd know someone pulling for me on The Strip.

Teresa squeaked as she pulled a handful of spaghetti over her head. Sheila sighed and looked at her own plate of chicken parmesan. "Oh, T," she said. "You just can't let me eat." She wiped Teresa's head with a napkin and raised her from the high chair. "We're off." She half smiled and headed for the bathrooms. Teresa flapped her arms.

"There goes my niece," Lou said. He took a drink of wine and swished it in his mouth. "But anyway, Tommy, I hear you might bump Rubenstien."

"No shit, Ruby?" I put my fork down. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Who's Ruby?" Philly asked.

"Wally Rubenstien," I said. "Third best craps dealer in town."

Philly put his fork down. "What do you mean third best dealer." He paused.

"I heard it from Carl Hawn down at the Nugget," Louie continued.

"What are you talking about?" Philly yelled.

“Jesus Philly, calm down,” I said. “There’s a local rating system, put on by the newspapers and the people with money. They name the top three dealers on each game. How long have you lived here?”

I could see Philly thinking. It made me nervous. I watched the whole plan go across his head like a film strip. This meant I’d get in on The Strip, somewhere, and Philly would have me ripping off the joint the first night. “Oh, yeah, yeah,” he said. He drilled his fork back into his spaghetti, “I knew that.” He took a mouthful. “So, what do you get for it?” Philly asked, smiling large. I could see the gap in his teeth. Always meant trouble. He wiped a piece of bread across his plate. “Money? Broads? What?”

“Look at this guy,” Louie said to me, his hand aimed at Philly. “This guy knows everything, but he doesn’t know shit.” He cut a piece of sausage with his fork. “He doesn’t get anything, Phil. You stupid idiot.”

“Then who cares?” Philly said.

“So Louie, give it to me straight.” I said. “Are you putting me in or not?”

“Gimme a break with this shit, will ya?” He held his hands up. “I’m eating.”

“I haven’t hit anyone since I been at the Queens,” I said. “And I haven’t got caught with any drugs, either.”

“You’re a good kid, but I’m in a tight spot,” he said. “I can’t put anyone in without it being suspicious.” He tapped his plate, and swirled wine in the glass.

“I’m a fucking genius at the game.”

Louie looked up. He sighed through his nose. For a second, he looked like Pop. I could see lines in his face I never noticed before. He was seven years older than me.

Already in his thirties, with a real job and a life. I wanted to get there so bad, but Lou was standing in my way. For the first time ever, he was looking out for himself instead of me.

“Alright,” he said. “You want it straight? I owe you that.” He folded and unfolded his arms. “I’ve worked really hard out here. I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t even know what a fucking slot machine was when I got here. I already put my name on the line getting you and Philly in Downtown.” His voice came close to yelling. He paused and started again, lower. “Jesus Christ, Tom. I just want to enjoy what I’ve got for a while. If you punch someone or show up high, I’m done, too.”

I wanted to stay calm, but as soon as the words hit my mouth, I was standing at the table with my finger in his face, shouting like I was on the school yard. “Listen, you prick,” I hollered. “I’ve done everything you told me to do. I haven’t gotten in one fight since I been out here.” I yelled. I caught my breath. “Plus, I got Sheila and Teresa to look after. This is how you treat your brother?” I grabbed for my wallet and threw a few bucks down on the table.

I looked over and saw Sheila watching us from the entryway to the bathroom. Teresa had her hands in Sheila’s hair. Their cheeks touched and they both stared at me, Sheila with her grey eyes, and Teresa’s only a little darker, but with the same look in them. Scared, hopeful and full of devotion. I nodded towards the entrance. Sheila hustled over, grabbed her purse and followed me out the front door.

“Louie’s been sheisting me,” I said.

“It’s okay baby.” She ran her free hand up the back of my neck and through my hair. I closed my eyes and leaned against her shoulder. “It’s okay, we’ll be just fine.”

The next night, some drunk schmuck was making a ruckus on my game, pinching the waitresses' asses and being a general prick. They'd called down to security about twenty minutes earlier. No one had shown. Ernie was in the pit trying to take the heat for me. He was getting so pissed off himself, I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

"All on the Come," the guy said.

"Sir, you're going to have to leave the table." Ernie said.

"Prick." The guy pushed his money across the table. "Come Line."

I could feel the heat coming off of Ernie through his suit. "We don't want your bet," Ernie said. He pushed the chips right back at the guy with his cane.

"Since when don't you want my money?"

Ernie leaned over the table. "Since I fucking said so," he shouted. He swung his cane at the guy. The guy ducked back. He threw a hand full of chips at Ernie's face.

Then I punched the guy. It felt good to smack somebody. Finally. Like I'd hit a Charlie, or one of my old drill sergeants. I'd been feeling backed up lately. It was all corrected by the quick twist of flesh and bone. I shook my hand as the guy stumbled back through the crowd and through the swinging doors onto the streets. The dinging and the bets all stopped for a moment as people turned to figure out what happened.

"You're a good kid, Tom," Ernie said. He slapped my back and laughed. "I like a guy who's got balls." He smiled widely as security came rushing across the floor. "You think you're ready for The Strip?"

"You're gonna put me in?" I asked, shocked. "At Caesar's?"

"You act like it's impossible."

I was at Caesar's for three months before Phil got to me. I think about it now and wish I could've stuck it out. I might've ended up as an Eye or a Host, like Lou did. It would've made my life a lot easier. Not had to bounce around so much. I should've listened to Lou, even if I was pissed. I was impatient. Wanted everything an hour ago. Phil and I made a lot of money with his gang. No one ever fingered me, but some of the other guys got caught. It's association that kills you.

The night our first strike went down, I fucked Sheila three times before I got ready. I wore my Caesar's gold chain, the silk shirt with gold stitching down the front, and the black standard issue apron. The casino was packed. It was the opening of new show. Everyone in town was there. I nodded to Lou as I walked on to my game. He wasn't my pit boss that night, but I could've dealt an anvil under his nose and he wouldn't have known. He looked at me and half-smiled. People laughed and cheered as scores were made around the room. The crowd was as thick as the jungle I cut through in Cambodia. Phil winked at me from a low stakes table he was playing at. One of his buddies approached my game. I dealt chips and called the dice with hands more expert than any other guy in the joint. I watched the back of Lou as he moved through the pit, schmoozing and shaking hands. A cocktail waitress wearing a sexy toga uniform smiled at me. Phil's friend scratched his nose and handed me a twenty. I handed him back two reds in the open and three blacks in my palm. Not a soul noticed. Even if he did catch me he wouldn't rat. He was still my brother. But I'd made my own name in this town. I could do whatever I wanted.

GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE

My dad taught me all the parts of a gun before I turned five. He showed me with oil smudged fingertips and a joint hanging out of his lips. "Teresa," he said. "Always hold it down, even if it's not loaded. Never point at someone unless you intend to kill."

I smiled and nodded, kicking my Mary Janes under the table.

He clicked the clip into place. "You can always trust me," he said. "I'll always protect you."

I believed him and before even learning the alphabet, I discovered invincibility.

Two days ago, I repeated those words to my son. He laughed through the blood dripping over his teeth.

I heard the door slam and James's strangled cry. "Mom," he yelped.

"Honey? What's wrong?" I was running to him before I finished the sentence.

James stood at the front door, his hands to his mouth. Blood came through his fingers in sheets. It streamed down his shirt, onto the carpet. There was so much. A bursting water balloon. He tried to catch the drops, smearing red hand prints across shirt to displace all the fluid. I could smell the sweat from his afternoon play mixed with the fresh ichor staining his arms and face.

"Jesus Christ," I said. I grabbed the throw off the couch and put it to his mouth. "Tilt your head back," I said. "Was it Kevin?"

He reached up to pull some hair from his eyes. "Uh-huh," he mumbled. Warm wet soaked through the blanket. My fingers turned red and sticky.

"Hold this to your mouth," I said. "Lay down on the couch."

"I'm fine here," he said. He pressed the blanket to his face.

I ran to the kitchen and grabbed an ice pack out of the freezer. Casey came in from his office. "What happened?"

"Kevin," I said. I ran the ice pack under the faucet.

"Not again." He sighed and pulled a dish towel from the drawer.

James was in the chair with his head back. Blood dripped down the sides of his face into his ears. It was starting to dry to his skin.

"Here baby," I said. "Hold this on it." I kneeled in front of him.

He laid the pack over his face. He groaned.

"I told you to stay away from that kid," Casey said. He handed me the dish towel.

"He's outside all the time!" James yelled. His eyes were enraged, the purple mushrooming around them.

"Then you need to stay inside more often," Casey said.

"Casey." I shook my head: *Not now.*

"I can't stay inside forever," James muttered. He slumped into the chair.

"Let me see," I said. I pulled back the ice pack. His skin was raw. His eyes were beginning to swell and turn purple. His nose still leaked a trickle of blood. I ran the wash cloth over his face. His skin was mottled: red, pink and white with streaks of blood smeared across it. Casey stood behind me. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

I wanted to protect James, like my dad protected me, but I didn't know what to do to stop the boy who'd been picking on him. I wanted to beat the kid bloody into the dirt. I wanted to press my thumbs into his throat until bright red bruises splashed across his skin. I wanted to kill him, if I had my way.

I learned early on it was the men who fought. What power did I have? A rub on the arm, a doe-eyed blink? I couldn't flirt the kid into submission. It infuriated me that I couldn't just reach out and take control, that I had to coerce and manipulate. When I was younger and used to take my little sister out in her stroller, I'd stuff my pockets with pepper spray, a safety whistle, Dad's buck knife and a billy club. I would have gladly traded my breasts for muscles so I could be sure to protect her then. I'd do the same now so I could intimidate this Kevin like he was intimidating my son. I watched James spit a mouthful of blood into the towel. I swallowed the impotence burning in my throat.

That night I changed into my pajamas while Casey lay reading *Forbes*. I could hear James getting ready to go to bed in the bathroom at the end of the hall. I sat down facing Casey. He peaked over the edge of the magazine.

"We've gotta do something." I said.

"He needs to stay away from the kid." He turned the page.

"He shouldn't have to be scared to leave the house."

"We can arrange to speak with his parents again. If you think it will help."

"His parents are schmucks. He runs the joint over there."

He set the magazine down. "This is what boys do. This is an important lesson for James. He needs to learn not to tangle with the wrong guy. Better now than later."

I stared at the back of the paper, stumped. I couldn't believe he was being so dismissive. But what could he do, really? I'd already talked to Kevin's mom and his dad, the teachers and the principal. They assured me everything would be okay, that Kevin would stop. Even though I'd glared at Kevin from across the street, I was still a parent, an adult. I didn't even make the little jerk's radar. The truth was, you can't stop a

mustached teenager who moves onto your street, who has a moped and a vengeance against your son. Not without fear. That was one tool I didn't have.

I stuck my tongue out at Casey from behind the magazine. He didn't look up again as I left the room, closing the door behind me. I walked down the hall to the closet. If my dad was in Casey's place, he would have fixed it. Somehow. Without words, maybe without even fists. Casey would probably try to reason with the kid if we ever got a hold of him. When we were younger, I was completely taken with Casey's approach to conflict. He talked steady and calm. Looked directly into the eyes of those who challenged him. Legitimized arguments. Shook hands afterwards. I thought he was the smartest man I'd ever met, and I was in love with him immediately. Before Casey everything in my life had been bristled with a slight sense of danger: where we lived, who we knew, even my dad himself. Casey's composure was a hell of an aphrodisiac.

As we got older, though, his resolutions began to make me nuts. Casey's civility dragged problems out forever, fraying a thread one strand at a time while I wanted to scream, to yell, to tear and bite. I didn't want to "come to an understanding" with the pizza delivery boy. I wanted him to go back and give me my fucking pizza the way I ordered it. I wanted action and response. Especially now.

I pulled the heavy metal lock box from the top shelf of closet. Dust shivered and clung to it. James was still in the bathroom brushing his teeth. I stepped over a wet towel, which lay in a heap, to get through the doorway. He glanced at me and spit in the sink. Pink. Black crescents with purple edges ringed his eyes at the bridge of his swollen nose. I pointed to the edge of the tub. "Sit," I said.

“What?” he asked. He ruffled his hair misting the mirror as he sat then touched a finger to his split lip. He winced.

I sat next to him, the box on my lap. “I want to show you something.” I leaned across the sink to tighten the faucet.

“Is that Grandpa’s—” he asked.

“Yup.”

“I thought Dad made you—”

“Nope.”

I clicked the code in the box. It opened with a snap. James leaned forward. I edged the top open. I could smell the oil. It made me remember sitting with my dad, at the kitchen table, oiling and cleaning his guns. “It was Grandpa’s favorite.” I said. “He wanted you to have it.”

I picked up the .44. It was heavier than I remembered. The white butt was worn and yellowing. The metal was flawless, though, shining like a new car. “I wasn’t strong enough to shoot it by myself. Still not,” I said. “I had to lean against Grandpa. You’ll be able to handle it on your own one day.”

“You want me to shoot Kevin?” he asked. He sounded irritated.

“No, dummy.” I said, smirking. “I do think you should know how to shoot it in case you ever had to. You’re gonna be a man soon. You have to know how to protect yourself. I don’t care what your dad says. Sometimes, a man needs to fight.”

He nodded solemnly. He leaned against me. I felt his skinny frame against my arm. Still just a little boy.

“This is your first lesson,” I said. “Take it by the butt. Don’t put your finger on the trigger. Press this release to check for bullets.” I modeled for him and swung the wheel open. I let the bullets fall into my hand. “Always make sure it isn’t loaded before you aim. Here.” I held it out for him.

He traced a finger across the mirrored metal. “I’m tired, Mom.”

I shrank back down, the gun going limp in my hands. I sighed. “If that kid touches you, ball up your fist and hit him as hard as you can. Then run.”

“Mom. He’s an *eighth* grader.” He said it like eighth graders swung batons and guarded mini-marts after hours. He raised his eyebrows then his battered face crumpled. He sucked in two shallow breaths.

I rested the gun on the sink. I wrapped my arms around him. He felt heavier, a lump of flesh. “We’ll fix this, honey. Your dad and I will fix it. I promise.”

After a moment he pulled away and stood up with a small stumble. “Don’t worry about it,” he said with a sniff. “I’m getting a lot of exercise running.” He smacked his belly. “Finally getting rid of some of that holiday weight.” He grinned.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t tell your dad about the gun.”

He made a knowing face and held up his hands. “I don’t want to hear about it either.”

I grabbed him for a quick hug then listened to him go into his room. The bathroom was a mess. His bloody clothes in a dusty heap in the corner. Dirty handprints on the tile. I wiped up some toothpaste and looked in the mirror. I pulled the skin under my eyes. When I was a kid, I would have taken any opportunity to examine a gun, practice my aim. Still, I couldn’t help feel a little impressed. I chuckled. Making jokes, damn kid. I put the gun back in the box. I went to James’s room, to tuck him in.

I was born in '68, five years before the MGM was built and two years after the first pair of dice rolled at Caesar's Palace. Back then, Vegas really was the Wild West, with tumbleweeds blowing down the teen-aged Strip. My parents both worked in the casinos. My dad bounced around a lot. Usually, because he couldn't stay at any one job too long without punching someone out.

Vegas was more visceral in those days. Now all the sharp edges have been worn down, sanded to a dull impression to make the town's tables more accessible. Then there was no glossy exterior, nothing to hide us from the fact that we lived in the middle of a desert, miles away from judgment. Guys got murdered for counting cards. Locals could get a comp to the buffet any time, day or night. There was no charade like there is now. No casino nannies or carnival games, no street attractions. No, in those days, Vegas was here for one thing: sin.

We lived five minutes from The Strip in a trailer park, before we finally got a house, before my little sister was born. The trailer park was the last thing between the town and open desert. Dad loved it because we just had to walk to the end of the property to shoot our guns. In the summer time, I'd trail behind him, my bare feet crunching the parched dirt, the rocks biting my feet like piranhas, the stickers hooking themselves between my toes. By fall, my feet would get so tough that I could walk across glass. The sun would scorch my neck well into October. At night, my mom would lay cold towels across it so I could sleep.

My parents traded shifts so someone could always be with me when I was still young. Mom doing cocktails days and Dad dealing nights. We were lucky. Dad and I spent a lot

of time watching reruns and cleaning his guns, talking and making snacks. Once, the July heat kept us from venturing too far. Dad had given up to go to the couch. I stuck outside to play with some neighborhood kids. I was 10 or 11. A teenaged boy I vaguely knew coaxed me behind the dumpsters.

“Show me your panties,” he said. He was wearing blue jeans and no shirt.

“No,” I said. I dug my bare toes into the powdery dirt.

“C’mon, just show me.” He pinched me hard on the arm.

“No. Leave me alone.” I turned to go.

“If you leave, I’ll chase after you, and I’ll hit you in the face.”

“You’d have to catch me.” I sneered.

“I’d catch you easy. I’m bigger. Show me your panties, and I’ll let you leave.”

I turned around and took off running as fast as I could. I heard my heart beating loud in my ears, but it didn’t cover up the stomping of his sneakers inches behind me. Get to the steps, I thought. I ran as fast as I could through the parking lot and the patch of desert between the dumpsters and my trailer. Inside, my stomach flipped with the idea that I had provoked this. I’d given the boy reason to think he could look at my panties. I wanted to stop and stand up for myself, but I was too scared. He was bigger than me. Then my stomach flipped again, thinking about Dad. I wouldn’t tell him if I could just make it home. I would be in trouble for going behind the dumpster with this boy who dad had never liked and had specifically told me to stay away from. As soon as I hit the grass at the base of our slot, the boy’s slapping footsteps died away. I kept running, hopping over the tomato plants and hitting the aluminum door with all my weight. I’m sure I shook the entire trailer.

“What happened?” Dad asked. He’d been lying on the couch, smoking a cigarette. His pink bowl was on the floor filled with potato chips and pretzels. M*A*S*H was on TV. I panted against the door. It didn’t matter what I said, I realized. There was no use lying. Dad always could read my mind.

“What happened?” he repeated. He sat up, already angry. I caught a sob in my throat thinking I was in trouble.

“You were playing with that boy, weren’t you?”

My face got hot. I gulped a nod.

“What did he do?”

“He, he,” I stammered and coughed. “He told me to show him my panties!”

Dad’s eyes clouded red. His fists clenched. He grew as big as the room. The walls rippled. I closed my eyes anticipating his roar. Even the TV laughter shrank away.

“But Daddy, I didn’t show him. I told him no, and he said he’d punch me!”

“*Mother fucker!*” he growled. He was outside before I could control my sobs. I followed, squatting to watch from behind the slats of our picket fence.

Kids dotted the street. Dad moved so determinedly that summer seemed to freeze. He walked like a soldier into combat across the pavement, barefoot in his dusty jeans. The boy was sitting on the steps of his trailer. He turned to go inside when he saw Dad coming for him.

“You stay right there you little cocksucker,” Dad said.

The boy froze too. Dad stomped up to him and grabbed his bare stomach, a full handful. He dragged him off the steps. The boy let out a moan like a dying cat.

“You listen to me,” Dad snarled, inches from the boy’s pained face. I could barely hear him, but I knew what he said. “If you ever come near my daughter again, I will rip your fucking balls off and shove them down your throat.”

The boy’s mother ran down the steps, screaming. “Let him go!” she cried. “He didn’t do anything! Let him go!” She cried into her hands unable to release her son from Dad’s grip. “Let him go!” she wailed.

“You understand me you little prick?” Dad said, shaking the boy back and forth.

The boy groaned, but managed to nod his head. His face burned bright pink.

Dad let go. The boy stumbled back. His mother engulfed him. She cried into his shoulder. Dad walked back towards our trailer as quickly as he had left. I felt a mingled sensation of pity for the boy and personal triumph. Dad picked me up when he returned. He asked me if I was okay.

“Yes,” I mumbled, still in shock.

“You know, boys do stupid things,” he said carrying me into the living room. “You’re getting older now and you’ll have to watch out for them.” As quickly as he had gone into the rage, he was back, Dad again. Even his thick mane had settled down to his normal messy hair. He set me on the couch. “But the lucky thing is, is that you are too smart for them, and you’ll never let someone tell you what to do. You’re tough.” He brushed some sticky hair away from my face. “I’m proud of you for sticking up for yourself.”

I felt like crying all over again, but I wasn’t sure why. I often felt like that when Dad told me something important. I wanted his trust and his approval more than anything.

I'd seen him angry, and I'd seen him rip guys apart. I loved that he was on my side, always.

I never respected a man so much until Casey came along, completely the opposite, but still worthy in his own way. Casey was kind of a big deal in town, doing energy consultations with the casinos, helping the buildings to follow FCC guidelines and save money on energy at the same time. It was the kind of job that wasn't around ten years ago. The days of covering its troubles with light bulbs and neon were over. Vegas had to grow up, and the town struggled just like I did to fit into mainstream society. Casey was helping us both.

The next morning Casey pulled back into the driveway after dropping James off at school. He didn't have any appointments until later that afternoon. I'd been pacing the kitchen, wanting to talk to him before I left for work. I was standing at the door when he opened it.

"Jesus!" he said, startled.

"We haven't prepared James for the real world." I said. "We've made everything too safe."

"Honey. This is what boys do." He set down his keys. He grabbed an apple from the fridge. He kissed me on the cheek then stuck it in his mouth.

I followed him. "Think about it. We live in this house, with an alarm system. We have air bags in the car." I folded my arms tight in front of me.

"You didn't want the Lexus because of the airbags." He smile and winked at me. He walked towards his office.

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not *prepared* for anything,” I said. I was at his heels.

“We have every kind of insurance you can imagine.” He pulled up the blinds.

“But look at James. The shit has definitely hit. He has no idea how to handle himself. He’s too insecure to stick up for himself. He’s terrified.” I sat on the edge of the couch.

“He should be terrified.” Casey said, sitting behind his desk. “Have you seen that boy yet? He’s a moose.”

“James should feel invincible.” I paused. “He should be feeling out his...” I grappled with my hands, trying to pull the words out of the air. “...his machismo. I don’t know.” I threw my hands in the air.

“We didn’t raise him like that.”

“That’s the problem.”

“What do you want to do, Teresa?” He dropped his hands on the desk. “You can’t follow him to school. You can’t spank the other kid.” He picked up a stack of papers and straightened them. “The boy doesn’t like James for whatever reason. James can’t help that. He needs to stay out of his way.”

I crossed my legs and stared at Casey. “I want to take James shooting.”

“What?” he asked, exasperated. “No way.”

“I think it will give him self-confidence.”

“You’re being incredibly impractical.” He turned towards the computer and punched in some data. “I think it’s a terrible idea. It won’t solve anything,” he said. “There’s nothing good that can come from it.” He was done talking. It infuriated me.

“You know, Casey, sometimes it’s nice to be the toughest guy in the room.”

“Yeah, *Honey*,” he said derisively, “but it’s better to be the smartest.”

I slammed the door as I walked out. Then I slammed the garage door and the door to my car. There was a part of me that knew Casey was right. A little nagging, weak part that I wanted to hit with a brick. I took a deep breath, a trick he’d taught me. I stretched against the leather of the car seat. I put my keys in the ignition then started the car. I did love the Lexus, but I still questioned my decisions when Casey let someone cut in line at the grocery store or talk too loudly during a movie. He may have the power of debate and banter. Still, no one ever saw Casey and decided not to get in our way.

On the way to work, I stopped my car in front of Kevin’s house, the engine running. It was nice house, like ours. Little assholes like him didn’t belong in these neighborhoods. Our home owners association could prod us about our lawns and our porch lights, but they didn’t help us with anything that mattered. I wanted to go in and strangle Kevin, maybe his mom and dad. I knew my small frame wouldn’t make the impact. No, I would have to do more; I would have to make a much larger statement to get the kid to back off. I revved my engine. I pulled off our street.

I was a complete waste at work that day. I kept checking my watch, wondering if James was in class or at his locker. If maybe we got lucky and Kevin stayed home. I owed Janet, my boss, a short script for a commercial that would be shot soon, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I sat in front of my computer, slumped over. I drew a sketch of the .44. Casey would never let me take James shooting. He’d make me listen to statistics about gun violence. He’d quote studies on children raised with guns in the home. I’d hear about it for days. By the end of it, he’d have me thinking it was time to

buy James a tutu. Guns never did me any harm. I etched in the front sights on my picture and wrote *BANG* down the side of the paper.

I remembered when Dad gave the .44 to Casey, at dinner a few months after we were married. Dad was streamlining his collection and couldn't imagine another man wouldn't want a shiny .44 like Dirty Harry owned. I'd shot the gun a few times growing up, always with my back to Dad's brick wall chest to absorb the shock. I knew the gesture was something special—his way of welcoming Casey into the family. I could tell Casey had no clue what the act meant. He told me later he thought it was some kind of Omerta, as though my dad had handed him a dead fish wrapped in a newspaper. *You take-a my daughter, I take-a you life.*

"Wow." Casey said. A half-eaten plate of pasta sat on the table in front of him.

"Thanks."

"I like knowing you can protect my daughter. And that can kill a wild boar."

"Boar attacks are up this year." Casey said, turning the guns in his hands. "Thanks Tom. I'll keep it in a safe place."

"Keep it by your bed. It'll make your place safe." He grinned.

Later that night Casey laughed about the absurdity of needing a gun. He put it in the closet. Then he tried to pull off my panties.

"Why, don't you want it in the nightstand?" I gripped my underwear

"It's too big." He worked on my bra.

"It makes me feel safe."

"Stop worrying." He kissed my neck and worked his fingers up my leg. "You're safe. You're safe with me," he whispered. "You're safe."

In the end, I trusted him and let him lock the gun away. Casey did what he said. He provided, protected. He worked long hours and gave us a stable home. I was safe by his side; I was safe in his arms. There was comfort in lying next to him at night, while the wind tossed the curtains around, knowing that I was important enough for him to love. I'd feel the muscles in his chest flex against my back as he moved into sleep. I'd smile. He gave me more security than I ever expected.

But Casey was just like the new Vegas. He had little connection to what it used to be. There was no grit to him and no way to adapt. Instead, he was making the town adapt to him, taking apart one casino at a time. Stripping their primitive wires and bringing them up to speed. There was something nice about the old ways, the plumes of smoke that hung over the slots, the burnt out haze of electric lights on Las Vegas Boulevard. The fact that I could walk barefoot down The Strip. The fact that my dad could bust a guy in the head and still find another job. I always wished a little that some old time aggression would find Casey. That he'd go blind with emotion, let something muss his hair, even if it meant we'd have some hard times. With Kevin harassing James, I wanted something to snap in Casey worse than ever. But when that bug of insanity hit, it wasn't Casey it got, like I'd vaguely hoped. It was James.

I'd been taking a stab at the copy in front of me when my line rang. It was the clerk at James's school. He'd done something, gotten in trouble. I needed to pick him up.

"Janet," I said, grabbing my coat. "I gotta pick James up from school. I gotta go."

"Is he sick?"

"No, he's in trouble."

“James?”

“I *know*!”

“You’re worthless today anyway.”

James had never been in trouble at school before. He charmed his teachers and got As on all his tests. His homework was always neat. He enjoyed presenting projects to the class. I wondered if there had been a mistake.

At the school, the secretary ushered me into the dean’s office. The dean was a tall man, balding. “Your son has something to tell you,” he said, leaning back in his chair. I felt almost as scared as James sitting in the light blue office in front of the big Oak desk.

James’s head drooped. “I peed on Kevin’s ball.”

“On the playground,” the dean said.

“You peed on his ball?” I asked, confused.

“It was a soccer ball.” Kevin replied.

I leaned back in the chair. Stumped. Then I imagined my son, fed up with the pushing around, whipping out his little pecker in a show of machismo, screaming at the bigger kid, *I ain’t scared of you asshole*.

“We’re going to suspend James for three days.” The dean said. “We have a no-tolerance policy to things as inappropriate as what your son did.” He stared at me as though I’d been there to unzip James’s pants. “I trust it won’t happen again.”

“He hit me at recess.” James said. He looked at me. “In the stomach.”

“Now, son, you need to take responsibility,” the dean said. “It’s not Kevin’s fault you violated his property. If you’re going to become a good young man, you need to not make excuses for your actions.”

“Bullshit.” I said. They both looked at me. I grabbed my purse. “Do you see my son’s face? That’s from Kevin. And he’s sitting in math class right with no repercussions.” I looked at James, threateningly, then back at the dean. “It won’t happen again. But do me a favor and make sure that other kid keeps his hands off my son at recess or we *are* going to have a problem.”

I had to sign something. James needed his back pack. Soon we were outside again, James at my heels, making our way to the car.

“That guy’s a prick.” I said as I started the engine.

James just stared at me.

“I’m not mad at you.” I said.

“You’re not?”

“Nope. Actually, I’m a little proud of you.” I smiled. We pulled onto the street.

“Why?” he asked. He pushed hair out of his face.

“Because you stood up for yourself.”

“But all I did was pee on his ball.”

I shrugged. “You didn’t let him push you around.”

“So I’m not in trouble?”

“When I was little my dad always told me that no matter what I did, he would stick up for me, even if I was wrong. He’d always be on my side. And he always was.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, even when I didn’t always do the best stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like when I threw a container of coleslaw at a boy because he was picking on me. Or when I punched a guy in the stomach because he called my friend Pimple Puss.”

“You did that?”

“Yeah.” I said. “Don’t think I want you to go around picking fights, but I want you to feel like you can stick up for yourself, if you have to. Whatever happens, good or bad, I’ll be on your side.”

He smiled down at his knees. I finally felt like I had gotten through to my son. “You up for ice cream?” I asked.

At home, James was quiet. Lights were off, books were closed. Drapes were drawn. We kept looking at each other and shrugging. Neither one of us knew what to do in the wake of his offense. I walked around gearing up for Casey and straightening pictures. He was going to be pissed, I thought. He would blame me and probably want to ground James for a month. I just couldn’t let him.

When Casey finally got home, the sky already turning purple like the fading marks around James’s eyes, he stared at us suspiciously. “What’s wrong?” he asked. He sat on the couch.

“Everything’s okay,” I said. “But James has to tell you something.”

James looked at me. I nodded. “It was recess and we were playing soccer,” he said. He sat up straighter. “I ended up on Kevin’s team, but he kept pushing me away from the ball. Then he said that it was his ball so I couldn’t play.”

“That little asshole,” I said. I couldn’t help feel triumphant. I practically bounced in my seat.

“Keep going,” Casey said to James. He looked confused.

“So I started to walk away. He took the ball and threw it right at me, and it hit me on my ear. Then he came to get the ball and punched me in the stomach too.”

“What a fuck this kid is.”

“Teresa! Let him finish!”

“I went up to the nurse’s office,” James continued. “And I must’ve not heard the bell, ‘cause I went back outside after they gave me the ice pack and everyone was gone.”

“Wait,” I said. “So when did you pee on the ball?”

“He did *what*?” Casey asked. He shook his head. “You peed on Kevin’s ball?”

James shifted nervously. “I thought about what Mom said. About me sticking up for myself, so I peed on it. The P.E. teacher saw me.”

“But Kevin didn’t see?” I asked.

“No he was in class.”

“So he doesn’t even know you did it?” I asked.

“No,” he repeated. “He was in class.”

I fell back into my chair, deflated.

“Well that’s not so bad,” Casey said. “I can understand wanting a little revenge.”

“Are you crazy?” I hollered at Casey. “*That’s* okay to you?”

“You seemed thrilled a minute ago.” He said, shocked.

“That’s when I thought he did it in front of everyone.” I looked at James. He looked terrified. “That’s just sneaky,” I said, and I walked upstairs.

When I was a kid, I'd stay barefoot until November, about the time my mom started wrapping me in jackets. The walks my dad and I took across the desert would continue all year. Dad always with the .44 on his hip, me carrying my BB gun then a .22 as I got older. Once we were about a mile from home checking out a nearly dried up spring. I was young, pattering along, choosing rocks to put on my windowsill.

"Look Teresa," Dad said. "A dust devil."

In the distance, a funnel cloud twirled and spun dust into the air. We watched it hop and bend, twisting itself like an exotic dancer. The wind around us picked up. Wrappers from our sandwiches lifted into the air. Dad kneeled next to me. Bullet casings rattled on the ground. The dirt devil continued twisting towards us. My jacket and my hair pulled away with the wind.

"Daddy?" I asked. I wanted to ask what would happen if it came straight at us. We were too far to run back to the trailer. There wasn't anything to hide under. The dirt devil came closer, like it was coming to shake our hands. Everything around us jumped and clattered. Our clothes flapped against us like loose tarps. My hair covered my face. My heart pounded. I wanted to run.

"Just stay next to me," Dad said calmly. The devil tore toward us, whistling and leaving rivets in the dirt. It was bigger now, as tall as a house. I looked up just as it was about to engulf us. Then it was gone. I was wrapped tightly in my dad's jacket, crushed to him in a comfy nest of chest hair and warm skin. I'd been plucked from the world and sheltered. Even though the earth rattled around us, I was safe and still.

I lay in bed thinking about the dirt devil the night James peed on Kevin's ball. I looked up at the high ceiling, the fan turning slowly. If it had been me and James in that

wind, I wouldn't have been able to protect him. The thing was, though, I hadn't seen a dust devil in years. Maybe the town was too built up now. There was no room. Maybe Las Vegas had advanced past the point of needing to be physical like it once was. Maybe being a man was something different now than it was 30 years ago. Was I trying to fit James into a mold that was no longer necessary?

Casey cracked the door and shut it silently. I watched the strip of light from the hall widen and disappear. I didn't move. I listened as he put his watch on the table, put his shoes in the closet and emptied his change onto the dresser. Then he went into the bathroom and turned the water on in the bath tub. The bath was for me; he must have known I'd still be awake. I peeked over the covers and watched him shuffling through my bottles of scented bubble baths, choosing something for me. He put one down and picked another. He poured some into the water. He dimmed the lights, lit candles. Then he came into bed and lay next to me.

I rolled over and rested against him. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too," he whispered.

I moved my leg over his and rubbed his chest. "You didn't do anything wrong." I put my lips against his ear. "You're right," I said softly. "James needs to learn the right way to handle these situations." I kissed the line of his jaw. I wanted to feel him submit. I needed him to forgive me.

He leaned closer. "I just don't want him to get into more trouble than he has to."

"I know," I ran my finger under the band of his boxers. I smelled lavender from the bath.

"He's a smart kid," Casey said.

“I know.” I lifted myself on top of him and bit the corner of his lip. I felt his arms move around me. “I want to take him shooting though.”

“Teresa,” he said. He unhooked his arms.

“Just so he knows what to do if he ever finds a gun or if someone broke in.” I kissed his chin.

“It’ll never happen.”

“Just once. Then I’ll lay off.” I sat up straight and pulled my t-shirt off. “I promise.”

I leaned forward and Casey gave in. I didn’t like doing it this way, but it was all I had.

The next morning James was sitting at the table, reading a book. I could hear kids out on the street shouting and playing. “Put it away,” I said.

He snapped to attention, and threw the book aside, like it was porn.

I dropped the box on the table. I clicked the code into place. The .44 shone before us.

“Pick it up,” I said.

James reached for the gun. He took it by the butt, careful not to put his finger on the trigger.

“Do you remember how to check if it’s loaded?”

He pressed the release. The wheel snapped open. Five bullets. The first chamber always empty, like I was taught.

“Pull them out. Careful.”

He carefully plucked each bullet out and laid them in my hand. I dropped them into my pocket. "Safe?"

He nodded.

"Put the wheel back. James, I want you to know that I love you very much. I would do anything for you."

His wrist bent awkwardly as he tried to support the weight of the gun.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to stop Kevin from picking on you." I touched his shoulder. "And I'm sorry I was mean to you last night."

"That's okay, Mom."

"It's not. But I realized something, your dad was right. You shouldn't have to fight if you're smart enough. There's always going to be a bully around so you have to figure out how to deal with guys like Kevin. You need to be smart. You need to be confident in yourself." I gave him a small smile. I felt awful for how I had acted. All this time, I wanted James to trust and respect me. I screwed up. "Pick up the gun." I said. "This is how you aim." I showed him the front and rear sights and how to center them. I told him to aim at the TV, the plant by the window, the fireplace.

"A gun is a very powerful weapon," I said. "Whenever you feel scared or vulnerable I want you to remember that you know how to use a gun. That makes you a little more powerful. If you feel powerful, it's gonna come out your pores and everyone else will feel it too. I guarantee you that guys like Kevin will take a powder. They only pick on people they know won't challenge them."

"Okay," he said, in a small voice.

"In the mean time, stay out of his way."

He nodded and smiled.

“Now go get some sneakers on and go find your dad. We’re going shooting.”

He jumped up and ran towards the garage.

I picked up the shiny gun lying on the table. It was heavy like a brick. I loaded the bullets into the chamber with soft clinks. Today we would kick up rocks and look for snake holes. We’d eat sandwiches while sitting on boulders. Then I’d lean against the car and fire the gun. It might blow my arm out of joint. Casey would be able to shoot it on his own. James would have to wait. I couldn’t support him the way my dad supported me. He’d be able to do it himself, one day.

I walked out to the porch to check the sky. Blue. No clouds. I held the gun behind me. Kids shouted up and down the street so I was careful not to let the shiny metal catch their attention. I leaned against the wall, the gun still at my back, my finger dusting the trigger. A boy playing in the street scooted in front of my house. He was throwing a football to some friends I couldn’t see, but I could hear their shouts. He was a big kid with a hell of an arm.

“*Mother fucker*,” I mumbled. It was Kevin.

I watched him move, swagger. Not a care. I pulled the gun in front of me. I held it in my palms adjusting it to catch the light of the sun. I bounced a few rays into Kevin’s eyes. He glanced over, involuntarily. But the glance became a stare. I watched the recognition change his face, ebb his pride. He looked away and threw the football again. I shot another beam of light into his eyes. He fumbled to catch the football. He looked nervously towards me. I held the gun up, so my message was clear. I nodded my head. I pointed my finger at the gun then back to him. He swallowed. His friends shouted for

him to throw the ball. He looked away and tossed it. If he looked back again, I was already gone.

THE STRIPPER COAT

Here's how it went: My mom would walk off the stage, trailing sparkles from her hair. She'd giggle and wave at the men staring lustily from behind the velvet rope. They'd blow kisses while begging for an autograph, a touch, a cigarette butt. She'd walk backstage to slink from her feathered costume into heels and a sexy black dress then laugh with the girls over a few drinks at the bar. She'd be the prettiest showgirl, but she'd never act like it in front of the others. Men would shyly come up to her saying how much they loved her show. She'd ash her cigarette into their drinks and wink slyly back. "Thanks buddy," she'd laugh. "I'll be here all week." On the way to her car she'd pass a two-story billboard advertising the show with her silhouette. Smiling back at her image, she'd pull her stripper coat more snugly around her waist.

In the closet, down the hall, across from the living room, I unearthed the stripper coat. Fall semester was starting in a few days. I hadn't seen my backpack since I threw it in the closet at the beginning of the summer. As I bent down to grab it, dust and lint assailing my nostrils, I noticed a panel of burgundy hanging below the rest of the clothes, pressed back against the wall. I cut through the tangle of sleeves using my shoulder as a spreader. The coat was stuck back behind my sister's peach taffeta prom dress. It was off the hanger and pinned against the wall. It must've been stuck that way for a long time. I pulled a chunk of clothes—less exciting shirts and jackets, ones I knew by heart—off the

rack, and tossed them aside. The coat stayed flat against the wall then slowly slid to the floor like a drunk. I stood back to give it some air.

My sister Teresa and I had thoroughly picked through my mom's old clothes over the years. First Teresa when she was a teenager, then me a decade later. We'd carefully decided if each garment was school wearable or would have to be designated for costume parties. By the time I could fit into Mom's clothes, though, my sister had taken everything interesting. I was left with the random bits and pieces of my mom's fashion that made me giggle to think of her wearing. The bizarre, the junk. I danced across our astro-turfed porch in black velvet platform shoes. I wore the pink handkerchief bell bottoms to school for Hippie Day. I played witch in front of my bedroom mirror wearing the floor length silver vest, and I wore the olive green body suit with epaulettes of gold tassel to a Halloween party in high school. I carried a rod with me and told everyone I was curtains. The only thing neither of us touched was the orange shirt with a picture of a bride on it, wrapped in tissue paper in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. It was the one she wore the day she and Dad got married, the only thing she might balk at if we ever tried to snag. But no matter what it was, it was all Mom. I recognized her in the folds of clothes even though I didn't know the smells intimately. It was her, but not quite. Pre-mom, from her days long ago as a single woman.

The coat had stayed overlooked in the closet, somehow, enclosed in a tomb of work shirts and winter coats, outdated prom gowns, and pom poms. It was a beautiful coat, long—it would go past my knees—with big lapels and silver star buttons. It was dark red, like the lips of a movie star. When I shook it, I could feel the air fluffing it back to life. I called my Mom from the kitchen where she sat at the table, paying bills.

“Mom, can I have this?” I said. The coat had a pull, a gravity. I wanted to get into it, for it to be mine. It was sure something special.

“I forgot all about that thing.” She stood in the entry way, her billowy hair in a bun and the multicolored glasses she got from the drugstore on her nose. “I wore it all the time when I was your age.”

“When you were a stripper, mom?” I smirked at her and gave the coat another shake. I couldn’t see the dust, but the back of my nose tingled. I sneezed three times.

“I was a *showgirl*. It was a big difference back then.” She folded her arms. “Really.”

“I know,” I waved her off. “I *know*.” I’d heard it enough. “So can I have it?”

She pushed her bangs out of her face. Her bun drooped down the back of her head. “You get more innocent as you get older, you know.” She pulled the glasses off her face. “You can have it. I don’t care.”

I pulled the coat on over my clothes. I tightened it around my waist. Under the dust, it had that same pre-dated mom smell deep inside the lining. I cinched the belt and straightened the lapels. The leather was worn, but still held its shape. The black lining was silky against my bare arms. I stretched and crossed my arms in front of me. A little stiff around my shoulders, but it would work. I couldn’t wait for winter.

My mom danced in Follies Bergère at the Tropicana for three years. It was the premier show on The Strip. People got dressed in tuxes and ball gowns to see it. Cocktail waitresses served martinis, in and tonics and Bloody Marys to the tables. She was nineteen the first time she danced topless across the stage. The girls in high school had

accused her of wearing “falsies” in her prom gown, but if any of them went to the show, they knew it wasn’t true. Mom never had any rhythm. She only scored the job because the producer wanted to get her into bed. She’ll deny sleeping with him, though, because she didn’t know any better at the time and “just kinda thought he was being nice.”

I found out when I nine. For a day and a half it upset me. Before then, I’d been unaware, knowing her only as a cocktail waitress who finally finished school and became a teacher, like she’d always wanted. But my grandpa got a hold of a picture of Mom out of an old Las Vegas magazine one Sunday dinner. It was the same magazine that announced my Dad as the third best craps dealer in town. I’d seen that article before, lots of times, had even used it to write a report about “My Hero.” I’d just never noticed that it was always carefully creased down the middle, never turned the other direction.

“How’d you like to have that for a daughter-in-law?” Grandpa snorted. He flapped the magazine open and smacked it with the back of his hand. He chuckled loudly. My great uncle Frank, his brother, whistled through his teeth.

We ate Sunday dinner at our house every week. Grandma and Grandpa only had a small condo they bought when they came out from New York, and neither of my dad’s brothers had families of their own so on Sunday mornings, we’d slide the leaf into the table and start chopping garlic. Our neighbors could probably smell it down the street. I always danced in front of the record player while everyone arrived, flipping between Billy Joel and Louie Prima albums. Dad stirred the sauce in his underwear so he didn’t splash and only put on pants when Grandma showed up. Mom would run through the house dusting and counting heads to make sure she set enough places at the table.

That day, I watched my Grandpa and great uncle Frank from the entry to the kitchen. They wheezed their appreciation to the picture in the magazine. Mom dropped a wooden spoon on the counter and ran past me to grab the paper from Grandpa's hand. "Jesus Pop" she said. "It was a long time ago."

Dad leaned into living room, grinning. He shrugged. "You should be proud, babe." He took the magazine from her, looked at it and whistled. He passed it to Uncle Louie, who shared it with Uncle Philly. They nodded their heads. My sister's boyfriend stood on his toes to see over their shoulders.

"You were a gorgeous girl," Uncle Frank added. He winked.

Mom laughed like she'd just walked away with the wrong grocery cart at the supermarket, and snatched the paper out of Uncle Louie's hands. She held it behind her back. Grandpa and Uncle Frank continued to grin and gasp for air. I snuck up behind my mom. I tilted my head to read the page, opposite from my dad's article that I knew down to the coffee mug ring and the spots of spaghetti sauce. Her picture took up the whole page, an advertisement for Follies Bergère. In it, she wore a full costume and stood in front of a waterfall—I could tell it was the one at the Tropicana.

"Tommy, I wish you wouldn't leave that lying around." My mom smiled, her voice rose a few octaves.

"Oh c'mon babe. You just look so hot." He batted his eyelashes at her.

I was used to seeing my parents flirt. They were pros at it by the time I was born. But it wasn't just my dad's attention on my mom. It was everyone's, and not on the picture this time, but on her. My uncles, my grandpa, Great Uncle Frank. Even Teresa's boyfriend was leaning in from behind a bookshelf to stare at my mom. I felt my heart

flutter. There was absolutely no attention on me. It was awful. They probably didn't even know I was there, these men that I trusted and loved. I could go into the kitchen and start slicing away at the drapes and they wouldn't notice. They stared at my mom as men, not uncles and fathers. I was sorely jealous of the attention. I was the baby. I was used to getting all of it: my grandpa slipping me dollar bills and calling me *Bellissima*, my uncles sneaking me meatballs. But I was forgotten because she was a woman. Just the shadows of her sex appeal drew every bit of awareness in the room, like a vacuum picking up dust. If she wasn't my mom, I could have hated her for it. I scratched nervously at my arm.

The lady smiled in the picture. Her eyes looked up and away from the camera. She wore jewels on her breasts and a pair of glittery panties. The fabric blended with her skin so it looked like the sparkles naturally rippled off her like starlight on water. Plumes of feathers spread out behind her. She was so beautiful. She had one arm up in the air and one leg bent at the knee as though she were about to kick. Mom never could pose on her own. Whoever had taken the photo must have spent hours getting her to look so naturally unnatural.

"Oh, my God." My aunt Linda came running across the room, dodging the freeze of men. She smacked her hand to my eyes. She'd been with my sister and Grandma in the back yard. Before her gold rings blinded me and smashed my nose, I saw her toss an evil look at my mom. "Don't let the kid see her mother like that you animals!" she said. "Your mommy's not a stripper anymore, honey," she whispered to me as she petted my hair.

“Linda, I wasn’t a stripper,” Mom said. I could tell she was annoyed. She usually was with Aunt Linda. Then Mom grabbed my shoulder and pulled me to her. “I was a showgirl. It was a big difference.”

Aunt Linda folded her arms. “She shouldn’t see it.”

“It’s not a big deal. Jean’s old enough to know.” Mom half grinned at me, so different from the brilliant smile on the page. She slumped forward and rubbed the side of my arm quickly. No one was here to pose mom now. The tension in the room slowly began to ease as she became a mom again. She stood up straighter and cleared her throat. My uncles glanced at her, me, each other and then away. Grandpa started talking about baseball. Dad kissed Mom on the cheek and went back to the kitchen. I realized I’d been given a piece of information, a family secret. No one else’s mouth dropped open; no one else seemed to care about what I’d discovered. I wanted to nod and smile, look at Aunt Linda and say, “Yeah, what’s it to you?” Instead I stared up at my mom and burst into tears.

I was confused and mad at myself for getting so upset. I’d watched my sister and mom get along so well, acting like friends, gossiping about relatives while I built Lego houses and braided my Barbie’s hair. I’d gotten an opportunity to get in on the action, to put the toys away and sit on the counter like Teresa did while my mom cleaned the kitchen and talk with her about what a dried up old bitch Aunt Linda was. I was ashamed at how I acted with this privileged piece of information. I especially hated the way they all looked at her. So I decided not to talk to my mom for as long as I could hold it.

That night I sat in the bath tub. I locked the door and filled it as far as I could without spilling water over. I threw in three Barbies, a comb, and a handful of barrettes. While I

brushed and braided each of the Barbies' hair, I sang "Uptown Girl" as loud as I could. It was the most words I knew to a song.

I'd refused to talk to anyone. I sloshed back and forth in the bath, draining the water, filling it with hot again, and singing at the top of my lungs. First my sister knocked on the door. "Hey Jeanie, I'm going to spend the night tonight. We can make cookies?" she said.

"Uptown girl! She's been living in a downtown world!" I sang back.

I danced the naked Barbies across the moldy track of the tub. I heard my mom clanking dishes in the sink.

Then my dad knocked. "Jean, don't get water all over the place," he said.

"Side street guy. He's been living on the other side!" I twirled each Barbie into the water and kicked off the front of the tub to make waves. I could hear them talking out there, my mom's voice high. The recliner creaked which meant Dad had given up. Teresa was probably up on the counter comforting mom while I just made a mess for her to clean up in the bathroom.

I jammed the Barbies' feet into the shower door track so they'd stand on their own, and I slid under the water. Water filled my ears with a whistle-pop. I kept singing so I didn't hear my family. I imagined my mom on stage with glitz and glamour sticking to her like spider webs, and men staring at her like everyone stared at her in the living room earlier that day. I danced one of the Barbies across the edge of the tub. She was naked. It didn't bother me or seem wrong. Most of my Barbies were under the bed or in my closet without any clothes on. But Barbies didn't matter. Then I looked down at my own

body—a round and fleshy belly and four stick limbs—more like a boy’s than a woman’s. I poked my nipple and wondered if they’d ever grow.

“Honey,” came Mom’s voice. “I’ll be here to talk to you when your ready,” she said.

I screamed my song and dropped all three Barbies in the toilet.

I didn’t talk to my mom until after lunch the next day. I spent most of the protest glaring at her from behind things. From behind my grilled cheese and tomato sandwich. From behind the sliding glass door. From behind the plant in the living room. She was too sweet and natural to have been a stripper. She cut the corners off my bread and wore buns in her hair. On the second day of the standoff, she sat on the couch folding laundry, her thin brown hair tied up on top of her head. She wore a long, faded blue t-shirt that said “Don’t mess with me before my coffee.” It had on it a picture of an angry cat with bows in its hair. Not one sparkle. Nothing like the picture.

“Talking to me yet?” she asked. She folded some socks without looking up.

She made me jump. I made the plant shake. I wondered how she knew I was there.

She patted an empty spot on the couch. I flopped in the recliner across from her.

“Jean,” she set a half folder pair of sweats in her lap. “I was a dancer in a show.”

“But you were naked.”

“Well, I was topless. I wasn’t a *pole* dancer or anything like that. It was a very classy show on The Strip.”

I didn’t know what a pole dancer was, but I was glad she wasn’t one of those, too.

“I was going to school and living on my own,” she continued. “I moved out when I was eighteen and had to take care of myself. I couldn’t serve cocktails yet because I was

underage.” She finished folding the sweat pants and set them on top of a teetering pile of boxers. “If I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t have had the money to go to school. Then I couldn’t be a teacher.”

I chewed my lip.

“I wouldn’t want to do it *now*,” she said.

I decided to forgive her. I was getting bored with being angry anyway. Plus, I decided that, one day, I wanted men to look at me the way they all looked at my mom the night before, so I would need her for information, tips. I paused for effect, tossed one more wounded look at her then crashed into her arms knocking towers of folded underwear to the floor.

For the rest of my adolescence, I teased my mom about it every chance I got. I learned right away that calling her a ‘stripper’ rather than a ‘showgirl’ could give me miles of entertainment.

“Did you like stripping?” I’d ask her while she was writing a letter or paying bills.

“No.”

“Did you have fancy costumes?”

“Yes.”

“What were they like?”

She’d put her pen down, trying to give me attention. “Heavy. With lots of jewels and stuff.”

At the gas station, I’d stick my head out the window while she pumped.

“Did you like all the guys looking at you?”

“Not really.”

“Did the other strippers pick on you?”

“No.”

“Did you ever give a lap dance?”

“Jean! No! Leave me alone!”

At Sunday dinners I’d beg my dad to tell the story of how they met. “Tell it, dad. Tell it. Tell it!” I’d whine. Aunt Linda would always roll her eyes and cross her arms. Everyone else would set down their forks and lean forward.

“So I was at this bar on The Strip,” my dad would say. “And I was having a couple of drinks, you know.” Here he’d pause to take another bite. “Then I hear this music, ‘Da-da, da-da, da-da. Lights started flashing. Blinding me almost.”

“Oh *God*, Tom. Not again,” Mom would say. She’d start clearing dishes no matter if we were done or not. She’d fix a tight lipped smile on her face.

“And then a big bra,” Dad continued with delight, “Hit me right in the head. Right in the head!” He’d point to exactly where it hit him.

Mom would scrape food into the trash can. The rest of us watched my dad, expectantly.

“I looked up,” he said, cupping his hands, weighing an invisible pair of breasts in front of him. “And there she was.” He’d smile. “The girl of my dreams.”

It never mattered that my parents actually met at The Bonanza when he was dealing and she did cocktails. This story was much better.

“It’s not true.” My mom would say from the sink where she’d prematurely started washing the dishes. “I wasn’t that kind of dancer.”

Other than the sheer annoyance factor, teasing her at that age was the only way I could talk about it without asking her directly. It fascinated me to think of my mom causing men to drool. I thought if I learned everything about it, I could do it, too. As far as I was concerned, it was a crown, better than anything from a pageant. My mom had the most glamorous job in the world. She was a showgirl. In a very classy show on The Strip. She'd been in all the Vegas magazines, and her tits earned her a spot in Sin City history. She was the actual girl, the one lies and legends were based on, who put herself through school while dancing in the shows. But girls could be respectable and still dance then. They were revered, beautiful. They had the Vegas dream at their dancing feet.

At nineteen, my life was a little different than my mom's. I lived at home. My parents paid my tuition. I studied during the week and played video games with my boyfriend on the weekend. When I needed twenty bucks, I'd ask my dad. Mom would slip me a little extra. I drove a car they bought for me. And I'd just found a really great piece of vintage leather that was going to make my friends totally jealous.

Still, I envied the nineteen year old version of my mom. The sexy woman who wore fake eyelashes and gave erections while she danced. She didn't have a curfew, didn't have to answer to anybody. Finding the coat brought back all the feelings I had at first: the intense desire to turn men down, the kernel of resentment that my mom got to experience it for herself. But I was already too old, and always too shy. I couldn't even change in front of my sister. I didn't want to be a showgirl; I just wanted the power.

The night I found the stripper coat in the closet, my mom stood in the kitchen making a meatloaf. She was bouncing along to the radio.

“Mom,” I asked. I watched her bop hopelessly out of rhythm. “Were the shows you were in choreographed?”

She leaned against the counter unwrapping a package of ground beef. “Why? Am I off the beat?”

“You never could dance.” I sat on the other end of the counter, knocking the heels of my feet against the cabinet door, on the beat.

“When I tried out they gave us this little routine to do with a feather or a cape or whatever it was.” She dumped the beef into a large pink bowl. “I thought I did all right.” She shook pepper on top. “But the choreographer didn’t want to put me in the show, because I kept stepping off beat.”

I thought of all the times I watched my mom bounce on her heels with her arms held tightly to her sides, saying, “Look, I got the beat! I got it! I got it! Right?”

“Well,” she continued, “the producer came out and he took one look at me and said ‘put her in the show.’” She cracked an egg on the side of the bowl and plunged her hands into the meat. “The choreographer did *not* want to do it.” Hair tickled her face. She blew it away while she kneaded the mixture. “The producer said, ‘I don’t care. She’s in.’ They actually argued right in front of me and the other girls. But I got the job.” She shrugged. “They made me go in early every single day to practice, though. It was hard, you know, because I had to get up for school then spend the extra time there.”

“You were in remedial stripping classes.” I laughed.

“It was quick, quick, slow. Quick, quick, slow.” She stepped in place. “That’s all I had to do. I repeated it the entire show. ‘Quick, quick, slow,’ in my head, all night long.”

“It sounds so glamorous,” I said. I imagined myself on the stage in front of hundreds of adoring eyes.

She shrugged. “It was fun. Sometimes.”

“Be proud, mom. Most women would kill to be put in a show like that just because they’re beautiful.”

“Maybe...” She trailed off into a hum.

I looked down at my chest then back at her. “Of all things, why’d I have to get your smile?” We grinned at each other.

Later that night, I showered thinking of the coat that I’d shut away in my room. I imagined what I could wear under it, and how men would react to me in it. Minus a few details—the fake eyelashes, the glitter and the thong—I’d be transformed into an updated version of my mom. A newer, fresher, sharper version. It didn’t matter that my own sexual history was made up of blind fumblings in the dark with my high school boyfriend. In the stripper coat, I would deny and tease, leave them guessing and wanting, until I found the one man who would pull me to him and teach me everything I needed to know. I pretended to tighten the stripper coat around my waist. I waved imaginary drinks away while the hot water poured down my skin.

After I dried off, I ducked into my room and locked the door. I leaned against the wall and sighed heavily through my mouth, already tingling. The coat lay on my bed. I dropped my towel and put on my favorite jeans, the tight ones, and a black tank top. I crowned the outfit with the stripper coat.

“Hi, I’m Jean. Nice to meet you,” I said to the mirror as I adjusted the lapels. Maybe I could have been up there on stage right next to my mom, if it were 25 years ago. I

smiled and flirted with my image. I blinked twice. I said the line again and changed my inflection, lowered my voice. Huskier. Lingered. “Do you want to kiss me?” I asked the mirror. She looked back cocking her head, smiling sweetly, a feigned innocence. I wasn’t as pretty as my mom was, but there was something there with the coat on. Something new. And I could make it better. I tore off my clothes and dove back into my closet. Something different. Sexier. But I didn’t have anything sexy. I only owned things that were non-descript. Things I could wear over and over without anyone noticing I was wearing it again. I decided I would have to get an entirely new wardrobe to match the coat. I pulled a dress out of the back. It was white and too short for school, so I never wore it. I leaned back to the mirror, stroking the lapel of the coat. “Do you want to kiss me?” I asked again, breathing through my open mouth. I blinked and dropped the smile. “Do you want to fuck me?” I whispered, accusingly. Then I giggled, embarrassed.

It still wasn’t right. I wasn’t right. I checked my door again to make sure it was locked. I stripped once more and put the coat back on. I stood in front of the mirror, coyly holding the leather together. “Do you want to fuck me?” I let the coat fall open, showing the skin between my small breasts and the vague muscle line leading down my stomach. Better. “You want me don’t you?” I opened the coat and stood with my hands on my hips. With the stripper coat surrounding me the lines of my naked body seemed seductive, slinky.

I dropped the coat onto the floor, hit the light switch, and dove under the covers. I’d never felt so undeniable in all my life.

There was a party over Thanksgiving break where I unveiled my coat. I was right. My girlfriends were all very jealous. When I was out, I usually ended up talking to the first guy that came along. I never knew how to get away, or how to get the right one to talk to me. But I was charged that night, with Mom's stripper ghost urging me on. I found a guy, the one that could teach me everything I didn't know. I stood confidently across the room, blowing off everyone else. I smiled and winked at him. The coat made me do it. It worked.

"I've never met you before," he said.

"I'm Jean." I sipped my drink and tried to look bored.

"That's a nice jacket."

"Thanks. It was my mom's."

"She's got good taste."

"She was a stripper."

His eyes got wide. "Wow," he said. "My mom was a typist."

I smiled up at him.

"Can I get you another drink?" he asked.

Perfect.

It's been ten years since I found the coat, and I credit it with a burst of confidence in my early 20s. Every girl could use one. I built an image of my mom, starting with the coat. That force empowered me to say no, or yes, if I felt like it.

Recently, we sat on the back porch of my house, our bare feet resting on a stack of towels between us. My husband was inside, making dinner. I topped off our wine

glasses. I wasn't cut out to be wild like my mom, and I was happy. The glamour still impressed me, though.

Her hair had grayed a long time ago. Her figure was fuller now, but she still held on to the classy beauty she had had all the way back when she took that Follies Bergère photo. The sky was heavy with stars that night. The wind rustled the fronds of the palm trees. We drank wine that was sweet and cheap which left me feeling light. Mom refused the nicer wines I offered, like she always did.

"Mom?" I asked.

"Yes?" Her voice was high-pitched and breathy from the wine.

"So, were you the prettiest stripper?"

"Oh, no. Don't start with this again." She put her feet up on the back of a chair.

"Were you the stripper with the nicest rack?"

"Jean! Don't embarrass me now."

"It's great that you were a stripper, Mom. I always wished I had the balls to do something like that."

"Oh no you don't." She gulped her wine hard and coughed. "Trust me. It was rough, you know. Being a single girl. Living alone like that." She took a smaller sip from her glass.

"You must have loved the way they all stared at you."

"I was just one girl, out of ten or fifteen. And I was in the back."

"But they noticed you, mom. You're gorgeous."

"Every once in a while. Not really. I looked like every other girl in the casino."

She'd started to frustrate me. "Mom, you never give yourself credit. You were really lucky to get to do something like that."

"I was lucky I got out of it alright."

"You had to have enjoyed it," I said. I tugged on the edge of a towel with my toe. "Getting to have fancy dinners with show producers."

"Oh, God." She chuckled. "They hardly spoke to us. We weren't anything to them. They just wanted to sell tickets."

I rolled my eyes. "C'mon."

"One time I was driving to Downtown after work, and it was late, you know, after I got off," she shifted in her seat. "The streets were pretty empty, and I noticed a car following me. I thought, 'Naw' I was just being paranoid or something, but he stayed right behind me even after I pulled off the main road."

I turned to face her. I rested my head on the back of the chair.

"So I was driving around and around." Her voice was rising and falling like a sonata as she talked. "I was afraid to stop the car and I didn't want to go home. And he followed me." She shook her head. "The whole way."

"You never told me this story," I said.

She shrugged. "So I pulled right into the police station." She continued, laughing. "Boy did he take off!"

"Mom, that's awful," I said. My stomach fluttered thinking of her, so young, with some creep following her.

"Yeah," she said. She brushed some hair back and sighed. She took a large swallow of her wine, finishing it off. "Another time, when I was living over at the Sunset Sands.

I had this long narrow staircase and my door was right at the top.” She sniffed and swallowed. “I’d just gotten off work, and I was tired, you know? So I’m going up the stairs,” she rocked back and forth. “And just before I got to the top, for some reason, I turned around—I must’ve heard something—and this guy was right behind me.” She set her glass down and moved her hands to the beat of the story. “So I opened my mouth and tried to scream but nothing came out.” She opened her mouth and acted the silent scream. “Then I tried again. That time, you know, I made some noise.”

“What did he do?” I felt protective of the girl my mother had been, looking at her now, soft and plump, sitting with her feet demurely crossed and tucked under her chair.

“Well, he just stood there, but my neighbor comes running out with his shot gun—he’d been trying to sleep with me for a long time—and the other guy just ran away.”

“Holy shit, Mom. Did the guy follow you from the show?”

“I guess. I don’t know where he came from. I didn’t even hear him coming up the stairs. That’s how high up in the clouds I was.” She poured some more wine into her glass. “Maybe he thought I’d sleep with him. Maybe he was gonna rob me. I don’t know.”

“Fuck.” I said. “I had no idea.”

“It all happened so long ago. But I was always really lucky.” She clicked her wedding band against the wine glass, tossing a few high notes in the air. The wind swirled and plucked a few sections of hair from her bun. “Another time,” she said, “And this one’s real gross.” She dropped her foot to the deck and tapped it a few times. “I was walking out to my car after the show. Usually I’d walk out alone, but I was with a group of the girls this night, for whatever reason.” She crossed her legs and pulled her sweater

close. “So I get up to my car, I never used to lock it, and there was a bag of cum—you know, semen?—hanging from my steering wheel.”

“Euuugh.” I grimaced. “God. Mom! That’s horrible. Seriously. Oh, my God.” The wine bubbled in my stomach. “What did you do?” I squeaked.

“I don’t know. I probably just threw it on the ground. It was in a baggie.”

“Ew, God.” I squirmed in my seat. “You never told me any of that stuff.”

“Well, what was I going to do? Say ‘hey guess what,’ to my teen-aged daughter. ‘When I was a nineteen-year-old stripper, some guy jacked-off in my car and left it for me in a baggie?’”

“Man, it always sounded so exciting.”

“Well, I only told you the good stuff. I mean, I had fun. I had a good time with the girls, you know.” She stretched her legs out and set the glass on the arm of the chair. “I was so insecure when I was a young kid like that. I wasn’t like you and your sister. You girls really had it together.”

“I always thought you had it together,” I said.

“I did okay,” she said. “I wouldn’t do it again. But it was fun.” She smiled. “The good parts anyway.”

When I was nineteen, I stole a piece of my mom’s history. I wore it so much I even stamped out her smell. When my mom was nineteen, she rubbed her smell into the coat for the first time and felt a little silly buying something so nice. But she’d earned it, and she needed something warm for after the shows. We were different people at nineteen; the coat was the same. For me, it was a way to break free and feel special. My mom

wore it to cover up, finally to become whole again, her again, rather than just an image of herself. To her, the coat meant that the night was over; she could make it home.

Here's how it went: After the show, she would change from heels to sneakers then close her locker. She'd brush the glitter out of her long hair and check the corners of her eyes to see if she was getting wrinkles. She'd make sure she remembered to take her history text off her dressing table. There was a 9:30 test the next morning; she wanted to read the chapter highlights one more time. She'd open the back door—the one that says “Emergency exit. Alarm will sound.” Her Capezio bag would hang over one arm and she'd carry her school books in the other. The pavement would be wet and icy from the street cleaner, the parking lot empty except for a couple of utility vehicles and her purple VW Bug with the stick-on flowers on the hood. She'd pick up her pace as she got closer to her car, her breath freezing in the air. She'd pull the stripper coat tight around her waist then she'd pause in front of the car to take her keys out of her purse. She'd long ago started locking the car doors, but she still felt the need to peer in the windows first.

KILA CHRISTAIN

Maybe Sheila's visit would have gone more smoothly if Mom hadn't started speaking in tongues while vacuuming. But she was doing it daily, with one hand on the vacuum and the other flung back like she was hitting the high note of an aria. If she had just kept the tongues to herself, Sheila could have come, stayed in town for a few days and gone back to England without causing any trouble. But my little sister was having dreams about serpents eating the souls of the sinners, and Dad just finished taking antibiotics for the clap. It was almost Easter.

On the bright side, our rug was really clean that spring. Still, Dad and I were weary of mom and her Christ begotten ways. The tension outweighed the clean laundry smell. If Sheila didn't come when she did, I don't know if Mom and Dad ever would have worked things out. I was seventeen in '85 and thrilled at the idea of meeting Sheila, this woman who was once my mom.

The kitchen smelled like vinegar from the eggs. Jean sat crossed legged on the counter. She squirted blue dye into the cup.

"Not too much," I said. I took a second carton of eggs from the fridge.

"We hide eggs because of Jesus," she replied.

I shrugged. Lately, religion and phonics were the only two things on my sister's mind. It drove me nuts.

"Mama said that we're going to have peace on earth on Tuesday." She scratched her ankle. The blue egg spun in the cup. "Does that mean I won't have itches anymore?"

Red patches of eczema covered Jean's skin. I could smell her scratching, like wet, old socks. Rotten flesh. The scent filled the room. It mixed with the vinegar. For a second, I thought I'd have to hang my head in the white porcelain sink and give up my lunch. I swallowed. Jean stared at me, still scratching, with pigtails dangling to her elbows. Her ankle started to bleed. I crossed my eyes at her. Then I grabbed her hands and clapped them together to take her mind off the itching. She giggled. Jean's eczema came on when she was ten months old. She'd had it solid for the last 5 years. Mom, Dad and I'd all gotten used to the little blood stains on the sheets and flakes of skin in the air.

We could hear her scratch behind a closed door, sand paper on a melon. “I think it’s going to take longer than a week to get rid of your itches, Jeanie,” I said.

Scabs dropped to the counter like sawdust. Jean stared at me, her eyes big and round, like slices of salami. “Today, I learned that *t* and *h* make the *th* sound.” She grinned triumphantly. She went back to prodding the egg. Her finger looked like she’d dipped it in a bruise. “What will you call her?”

“Sheila?” I said. In letters, I wrote *Dear Mum*, but on the phone I called her Sheila. “Maybe Mama Sheila.”

“Mama Sheila.” She paused. “Can I call her that, too?”

“You can ask her. I think she’ll say yes.” Jean stared thoughtfully at the blue water and continued to spin her egg. Jean had never met Sheila, just heard stories about the lady far away that was my mom and not hers. She shivered with delight, claiming another woman could have been her mom or, even worse, that she may never have been born at all. Didn’t it make us sad to think that Jean might not be here? Once she got so worked up, she scratched for an hour straight. Mom had to give her a bath to calm her down. Being so much older, I’d gotten used to Jean being the center of everyone’s attention, including mine. I’d get off the phone because she wanted to play, or stay home from a party because she was sick again. For once in our lives as sisters, though, this wasn’t about Jean. She didn’t realize it. She was still at the age where every new visitor meant some strange and unique present. Something she’d forget about in minutes, coming to the surface for more attention, like a guppy. Mom and Dad had been diligent about warning her that Sheila was here to see me. Jean had to give us time alone. I appreciated it, remembering the time my boyfriend, Warren, carried a pizza over on his

Vespa for us to share. Jean insisted on being giving a slice and sitting between us at her Mickey Mouse table. Mom and Dad didn't like Warren, but I'd have back up with Sheila. This was about me, for once. Just me. I indulged in the fact that another person had arranged her life to journey to me.

Dad came in the kitchen. He leaned over Jean.

"Daddy, lemme jump!"

"Just once," he said. It was Dad's night off. He was already in his pajamas, his black mane of hair sticking out in all directions. He backed up. The refrigerator made a few pops as he leaned against it. "Okay," he said.

Jean dove off the counter with a squeal. Dad swooped forward to catch her.

"Your sister used to do the same thing," he said. "Now she's just a big goof."

I smiled. I remembered the days of leaping off things into Dad's arms, never even considering something going wrong. Even when Sheila left, it was all about him. As long as I could jump into his arms, nothing else mattered.

"C'mon," I said to Jean. "Let's go show Mom the eggs."

"I dreamed there was Heaven on Earth," she said. "All the sinners went to hell,"

I couldn't tell if Dad was going to blow or ignore it this time. He bit his lip.

"Go on Jeanie," I said. "Go show mom." I handed Jean the carton of eggs and aimed her down the hall. She trotted happily away. I tore a paper towel off the roll, wet it and corralled the scabs Jean scratched onto the counter. I wiped them into the sink.

"I'll be glad when this shit is all over. So we can go back to normal." I didn't know if he was talking about Mom's new religion or Sheila's visit. He sighed deeply as he dumped the dye down the drain. His handsome face sagged under his mustache. He

stared at the drain then shook whatever he was thinking off. He brightened. "You better appreciate this," he said playfully. "It ain't easy letting her stay here."

"Hey," I wagged my finger. "Next time don't have me with another woman."

Dad laughed.

The memories I did have of Sheila were of her fighting for my dad's attention. She fought against the other women, even me. As a kid, I watched my dad go through women, sometimes two or three at a time. I never felt second. Dad had a good instinct when it came to daughters. I always knew I was his priority. Mostly. Later, as he calmed down, I got to share my priority with Sandy when she became my mom, and Jean, when she was born. We were a team, Tom's girls. He prided in us, even if he had a girlfriend or two. Dad always could juggle his women.

My parents' relationship only worked because Mom didn't have to be number one. Her parents cheated on each other. They were divorced before she hit puberty. Mom learned to feel comfortable in the background. Lately, though, something shifted. She got angry. Defiant. I didn't catch them kissing in the hallway anymore, or holding hands at the grocery store. It was ironic because, since he was diagnosed with gonorrhea, Dad actually cut out the girlfriends. It looked like it might stick. But maybe mom couldn't pretend anymore after she had to get tested, too. Negative, at least.

Mom was in the bathroom, getting ready for work. I could hear the hair spray can hissing as I went down the hall. Jean stood on the toilet. The bathroom was small, with little framed pictures of pioneer women on the wall. The three of us always ended up in it at the same time. Our bathroom, dad had his own. Mom's hair stood out in rigid strips as she teased sections of it to survive the night of serving cocktails. Her tongue flicked

quickly across her lips. I heard that prayer of hers. Babble. Babel? She could make a production of the prayers, flailing her arms about like she was on puppet strings, gurgling loud enough for the neighbors to hear. Or she could reel herself in, profess her prayers silently, tucked away, like a spider spinning a web.

“Mama, how do you flirt with boys?” Jean asked, not noticing mom’s behavior.

Mom’s mouth stopped moving. She fluttered her eyelashes. Jean did the same.

I leaned against the shower door. “How long is this shift going to last?” I asked.

“Until the next bid, I guess.”

“When’s that?”

She shifted closer to the mirror to put on eyeliner. “A few months.” An Aquanet halo hung around her head. Mom got shafted in the last shift bid at Bally’s where she worked cocktails. She and a couple of the girls who were also into Jesus had been talking to the customers about Christ. When the bid came up, Mom’s regular shift—Monday-Friday, 6-2, dice pit—was gone. She ended up with grave on slots, Tuesday, Wednesday off. The action was on the weekends, but really, the old ladies betting on sevens never bounced for much, so even Mom’s tips suffered. The worst part was that she and dad didn’t have the same days off anymore. Everything worked against them.

“Just don’t talk to anyone about...stuff,” I said.

“It’s my duty to spread The Word.”

‘The Word’ started creeping in a few months ago. A bible on the kitchen table, The 700 Club on TV, the 92.1 KILA Christian Radio bumper sticker on her car. She and Jean started going to Calvary Chapel on Sundays. She spent hours writing letters to Jimmy Swaggart, calling him a false prophet, warning him that his kingdom would soon fall. She

was having visions, making premonitions: Dad would shake hands with the CEO of Caesars, I'd get an A on that paper, Jean's eczema would go away, we'd have Peace on Earth on Tuesday.

After mom left, I tried to do my homework. I had a speech due for my English class that Monday. It was called "How to Care for Paper Dolls." I'd show my class the steps of using and playing with paper dolls. I got the idea from Jean's collection. A good one, I thought. The speech, though, was giving me trouble. The cursor on the black screen of the word processor mocked me with every blink.

I wanted to finish before Sheila arrived. I knew that no matter how hard I tried, though, I'd be up Sunday night, storming through it. Like always. Besides, that night, I could only think of Sheila. She would arrive the next day. I was useless. To hell with paper dolls. I went to bed.

I liked nights when my parents were home. It made the house seem filled up. I could hear Dad watching TV from his room while I fell asleep. A nice treat. Dad worked swing as a fountain engineer at Caesar's Palace. He got off around midnight. Until recently, he'd stay out much later, rolling in with just enough time to get into bed before mom. It stopped, though, all at once. The phone calls and the strange stories were gone. He'd seen the light. Mom didn't even have to give him The Word.

School was a blur the next day. I knew Sheila would be there when I got home. Thankfully, my best friend, Mary, distracted me by complaining about my mom's car all day. I drove it to and from school. It was a '76 red Vega, the one with the KILA Christian Radio bumper sticker on it. Every day I'd think about tearing that sticker off. Mom was usually fine to let other people shine, their wills win over, even if it meant her

own light had to soften. This born-again thing was different. It was something that mom took on as her own. Chose it for herself, not because Dad wanted it. I didn't want to be the one to tell her it was all bullshit, so I left the sticker alone.

On the way home, Mary was still ranting. "Why can't you just drive the truck?" she asked. "I don't want people thinking I'm all into God 'cause I hang out with you."

"My dad thinks this is safer."

She jerked the rear view mirror towards her to fix her eyeliner. "Doesn't, like, your *mom* get here today?" she asked. She started digging through her purse.

"She should be there now," I said. I readjusted the mirror.

"Weird." She pulled out a lipstick and rubbed it on her lips. It smelled like Tang. "Remember the concert's tomorrow. Don't flake."

"I know," I said, even though I had completely forgotten. Mary would kill me if I didn't go. She loved Agent Orange. Sheila would have to have a night on her own.

I dropped Mary off and took the long way home. My palms sweated against the vinyl steering wheel until it felt like I was gripping an eel. The last time I'd seen her, I was a baby. Jean's age. I knew Sheila with only my detached child's mind, a mind that still tagged memories with something fantastic: an emerald green hand, a dancing pearl necklace, a t-shirt that made me fly. Sheila was just a face in the clouds.

I stood in front of the door for a long time. I wondered if she would like me. If she and I could have been friends? In another time, would we have shared stories and locked arms and braided each other's hair? Did I look like her in person? Would she know things I never told her by looking into my eyes? Things like I didn't care that she left, that I felt lucky to end up with Sandy as my mom instead of her. That I felt guilty for not

really loving her; that I felt betrayed by Sandy's new religion? I gripped the door knob. I held my breath. I opened the door.

The first thing I saw was Sheila's eyes, ones I wasn't used to, on me. They were so beautiful and happy—storm clouds in the desert—just like Dad always said. My face got hot. I stood there, my cheeks feeling like they would burst. Jean stumbled off Sheila's lap. Everyone stood. Sheila walked to me with open arms. "You're so lovely. I've missed you so much." She was amazing, older than I remembered, but tinkling with incense and charms. An aging hippie, like a worn blanket, still special.

She hugged me. I managed to get my arms around her. Over her shoulder, I watched dad reach for Mom's hand. Even in all the emotion, I liked seeing them touch so sweetly. In the moment, all was well. He put his arm around her waist as Sheila held me in a warm embrace. Jean spun in circles and barked twice like a dog.

"I can't wait to get to know you again." Sheila said. Her hair was as fluffy as mine. When she pulled away, our tresses stuck together like sheets fresh from the dryer.

Jean grabbed both our hands. She led us to the couch. Her hair hung like corduroy around her shoulders. "There," she said. "Mama and baby." She flung herself onto the opposite couch.

My tongue had swollen to the size of a cat. I sat speechless on the couch. I worried that Sheila could feel how hot I was. The air conditioner kicked on in response. I didn't want to make the wrong move. I was paranoid, suddenly, worrying that everything I did had more meaning than I meant. I didn't want to insult anyone, especially Mom. Then I caught Mom's eye, as she sat with Dad's arm snugly around her waist. She winked at

me. Her stare was clear, like it used to be. She gave me a small nod. I knew I had her support.

“Mama Sheila,” I said. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

Once when Neptune was in the seventh house, Sheila wrote to me that it was a time for rebirth: I needed to try something new. I tried mushrooms in the ivy behind Mary’s house: I wrote Sheila a letter about it. She said I missed the point, but that she always preferred LSD as a hallucinogenic because it was a cleaner high. Plus, she hated the taste of mushrooms.

Sheila had done astrological charts since before she met my dad. To prepare for her trip, she did one for each of us. She laid them across the table. They looked like mathematical graphs, all straight lines and perfect curves, but with symbols I didn’t understand. It was after dinner. Jean watched while Mom and Dad cleared the table.

“This, here, shows that you are a great mind, a deep thinker,” Sheila said to me.

I nodded, interested.

“The descendent in the west would indicate that you worry too much about others. You don’t take good enough care of yourself.”

It was true. She was right, I thought.

“This part,” she said outlining a symbol with her finger, “shows that you will have many obstacles to overcome in your future, but because Venus is in your third house,” she continued, pointing to another mark on the graph, “you will always be a strong woman. You’ll always find strength and wisdom to overcome your problems.”

I leaned back in the chair, feeling like I was being slowly covered by a bag of sand. She knew me better than anyone.

“My turn!” Jean swung around the table.

“Alright, little one.” Sheila said. She pulled another paper over my chart. More symbols, more connections made than mine. Jean wiggled onto her lap. “You, love, have the most amazing chart I’ve ever done. You will lead a very charmed life.” She smiled warmly. Mom moved closer to look at the papers. Jean squealed happily and danced across the tile.

“Sandy, now you.”

“You did mine too?” Mom said. She seemed very thankful, even though I expected her to be upset by it. A month earlier, she had tackled me for the remote because I was trying to watch MTV, evil. Sheila could be so infectious, though, telling fortunes like an old gypsy woman. Mom sat down, eager to hear her destiny.

“It’s fine.” Sheila looked across the table. “Nothing spectacular. Nothing terrible.” She smiled the same warm smile at mom. “You’ll live a,” she paused, looking for words, “*peaceful* existence.”

“Oh.” Mom gave a quick smile. Then she was gone again, back to the dishes.

“Thanks, Sheila,” she said. There was a flatness to her voice.

Mom’s existence was anything but peaceful, especially at that moment. I felt a little stung for her, that Sheila would call her life average so easily. Sheila didn’t seem like she was intentionally being rude. Mom slipped away without another word, so I assumed I was overreacting.

The Agent Orange concert was the next night. They were playing at The Huntridge. Talking with Sheila had been very intense, hearing stories about myself I never knew. I welcomed the break. Mary and I drove the Vega. Mom had to drive the truck to work so we could go. The parking lot was packed.

“Over there by the light post,” she shrieked.

“That’s a handicapped!” I yelled back.

“Just fucking leave it *somewhere*. Teresa, I gotta get in there.”

I swung the car into a short space on the edge of the lot. We ran all the way to the door, our spiked heels making our ankles wobble.

The show was awesome. So was the release I felt. Sheila was very deep. She talked of souls, spiritual connections, my dad. A few hours with her left me breathless. I needed to scream, and Mary and I did, like idiots, trying to get the attention of the bass player. Coming out of the show, we were buzzed with music, sounds were muffled like my head was set in a Jell-O mold. As we approached the car I noticed a group of kids hanging out by the Vega. My music high floated away.

“That’s Mo and her friends,” I said.

Mo Cabaretta was a senior. Mary and I really looked up to her. We hung with the same group around school and at shows. She was small and cool. She had a tongue piercing and natural black hair. She wore a black trench coat, even in the summer.

“Hey T. Hey Mary,” she said. “Some Jesus freak boxed me in.” She pointed at the Vega. “Kill-a Christian. Don’t those idiots get it, or is God not funny anymore?”

Mo and her crew laughed. Mary and I chuckled softly.

“It’s mine, Mo.” I said. “Sorry. I thought it was a spot.”

“Yours?” She eyed me.

“My mom’s,” I stammered. “She actually didn’t realize it was a radio station. She just hates Christians.”

They laughed. Mary looked at me gratefully.

“Cool,” Mo said. She twirled her keys. “Move it. You guys coming to Chad’s?”

“We gotta get home.” I said. “We’ll see you at school.”

We left sheepishly. I dropped Mary off, after her tirade about how she was never, ever getting into my mom’s car again. Then I fumed my own way up the steps. Why did mom have to do this? Why’d she have to make me into an advertisement?

I snuck into my room careful not to wake Sheila. Without changing, I crawled into my sleeping bag. I knew I wouldn’t sleep that night, I was too pissed. For a second, I considered working on my paper.

“How was the band?” Sheila asked, startling me.

“You’re awake?”

“Can’t sleep.”

“I can’t ever sleep either.”

I was grateful that she was awake. Despite my careful attention never to say a bad word about my mom to Sheila, either in letters or on the phone, I couldn’t help it that night. All the trouble, every bit about mom speaking in tongues, filling Jean with crazy ideas and alienating all of us, including Dad, came out in one big tumble.

“I feel bad for Dad. He’s been trying to connect with her so hard,” I said. “She doesn’t want anything to do with him. He wants to make it up to her.”

“Your dad can be a hard man to be married to.”

“He loves us a lot.”

Sheila was quiet for a moment. “He cheated on me the whole time we were together,” she began slowly. “And I, one time, because I felt so hurt and betrayed, just once, I slept with a guy he knew. That was it. He’d completely lost interest in me. It was over. I’m surprised he’s trying so hard now.”

“Mom wouldn’t cheat on him,” I said, kicking out the bottom of my sleeping bag.

“Well, she is cheating on him. It’s just with God.”

I lay on the floor, staring at the sparkly cottage cheese ceiling. Mom cheating with God. Was that possible? Maybe Sheila was right. Mom stepped out, gave her love to someone else, someone even less attainable and more infamous than my father.

I didn’t say anything for at least twenty minutes, while my mind rambled. I assumed Sheila had fallen asleep. I was about to whisper goodnight when I heard the bed creak. “Teresa?” she said in a whisper.

I didn’t say anything. Even though she’d whispered my name, there was too much energy behind. I felt it. I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to know what it meant, what she planned to do.

The bed creaked again. The covers went back. Sheila stepped lightly onto the floor. In a moment, over my sleeping bag. I felt her stare cover my face like cake batter. I didn’t open my eyes. She turned the doorknob slowly and slipped into the hallway.

I knew immediately where she was going. No need to wonder anymore. I heard the click of my parent’s doorknob, like I’d heard so many times, lying awake in my bed; listening to Jean start an attack then go to their room for help. The street lights shone into my room through the black lace curtains. I wanted to block the light out altogether.

I lay in my sleeping bag with tears rolling out the sides of my eyes. I breathed through my teeth and sneered at the twinkling ceiling. I wanted to go to his room, to bang on the door. How could they do this to me? I couldn't believe I trusted Sheila. Or Dad. Mostly, I was upset for mom, who was serving cocktails to some old lady, oblivious, waiting dumbly for Peace on Earth this Tuesday.

I didn't sleep that night. A little after two o'clock, Sheila snuck back into the room as quietly as she'd left. Then, about fifteen minutes later, Mom's car pulled into the driveway. Her heels clicked up the cement walkway, steady strides, like a metronome. Her keys jingled. She opened the door. Then Jean's bed started bumping against my wall. She scratched like she usually did when mom got home. Mom went into her room to take care of her. I hoped Jean would have a full-on attack so mom would sleep in there that night.

After school the next day, I went straight to work. I was shoe department manager at Miller's Outpost. Luckily, I was only scheduled a few hours that day. I spent the first part of my shift finishing my Big Gulp and fixing damage done by the nighttime idiots. I had Converse, Vans, Nike all organized by size and color. A shoe grid of near Rubik perfection. I'd just started restocking the racks when I saw Dad and Sheila walking by the glass window. Sheila was supposed to be visiting some friends that afternoon so I didn't expect to see her. They looked perfectly happy, holding hands as they came into the store. I turned around and ran to the stock room, knocking over a stack of Vans on my way.

I crashed into the wall of shoes and squatted down. Mary came running after me.

"What the hell?" she said.

“That’s my mom with him.” I hissed. A pair of sketcher mules fell on my shoulder.
“The real one.”

“Ew.” Mary blinked. She looked out the stock door. “Teresa, they’re like totally snuggling in Little Miss.”

“Oh, my God,” I put my head in my hands and felt the Hi-Tops about to tumble.
“What the fuck?”

“Shit, Teresa, she just fucking kissed him on the cheek.” Mary spun the safe keys around her finger. “I’ll totally say I saw her shop lifting.”

A section of basketball sneaker crashed to the floor. The tissue paper and size charts made me want to cry. “Just go tell them we had a shoe emergency. I can’t come out.” Three pairs of One-Stars fell at my feet.

“Kay.” She marched out. I crawled to the door. I could only see from their knees down. Mary’s high voice rang out some nonsense. Sheila sounded disappointed.

I remembered the very last time I saw Sheila. It was the day Mom adopted me. Sheila had to be at City Hall to sign the papers. She showed up red-eyed but still smiling. I was the third kid of hers that she’d given up—she left the first two in England—but she cried anyway when she signed. I remember having the distinct feeling, as I watched her grip the back of my dad’s jacket, that she was more upset about losing him for good than me. What was she signing over, really, but her right to call on my dad and to hope they’d get back together? I wanted him away from her, holding my hand and Sandy’s. I wanted him on the other side of the railing with us. Up until that moment, I never questioned his loyalty. But there was something in the way he stuttered just for a second when Sheila held on to him in the courthouse that made me realize Dad was fighting not to be taken

away this time. I clung to Sandy's leg. She smoothed my hair while we waited for him to join us so we could be sealed as a family.

I hid in the shoe closet until Mom came to pick me up. I got into the red Vega, with the KILA Christian bumper sticker. Mom grinned at me, singing along to some Jesus song on the radio. *"Oh, I got saved! My road got paved! My Lord come down and save me cause I prayed, prayed, prayed!"*

"Mom," I whined. I slouched into the bucket seat. The beaded seat cover slid me down a few inches further. "Mom, seriously, I don't want to hear it right now. I had a rough day."

She turned the corner. We were on our way to pick Jean up from school.

"Let's talk about it." She said. She smiled benevolently at me.

"Did you know Dad and Sheila came into the store?" I asked, accusingly. The uplifting song on the radio pissed me off. I flicked the air vent towards my face.

"They said they might stop by." She smiled again and turned the corner.

"They're spending a lot of time together."

"They're catching up."

"Mom, like a lot of time together."

"I know," she said.

"Why don't you care?" I snapped. "Get mad or something."

"What am I supposed to do? I don't know. I can't watch your dad all day long."

"But mom," I yelled as I pumped the window down. "Dad wants to make up with you! He's trying! Why aren't you letting him make up for everything?"

"I've been praying to forgive." She pulled up in front of Jean's school.

“Have a real fucking conversation with me for once.”

Jean ran across the playground. Her too-big Big Bird book bag slapped against her back as her feet hit the blacktop. She dove into the back seat. “Guess what? Today we had to draw a picture of who we wanted to meet most, and I drew one of God, and on his shirt it said *The Truth*. Because I want to know the truth. Mommy see? See Teresa?” She shoved a picture of a bearded man floating on a cloud into the front seat. “And that’s me, Dad, Mom, you Teresa, and Mama Sheila.”

I groaned. “What’s flying around in the background?” I asked.

“Hamburgers,” she said. “I think heaven will have lots of them.”

Saturday night, Dad and I made meatballs and braggioli for Easter dinner. I always loved cooking with dad: he let me taste things. I don’t know if he knew I was upset, but he wasn’t asking me any questions. I decided to refuse to mix the meat. Sheila hummed around the kitchen then played with Jean in the backyard. I watched her through the sliding glass door.

I finally couldn’t stand the silence. “It must be hard for mom. Having Sheila here,” I said. I wanted to make him feel bad. I felt like harassing.

“Your mom’s too tied up in the Jesus bullshit she’s into lately.” He said dumping the Parmesan cheese over the meat.

“She’s not completely oblivious,” I said slowly, confused by his response.

“It’s just the way she is. Before this God shit, it was all about calcium and she shoved friggin’ calcium down my throat, in my ears and up my ass for a year.”

I rolled my eyes, thinking about the calcium pills that started showing up on my dinner plate a few years ago.

“And before that, it was vinegar, and that magic mushroom.” He broke an egg into the bowl. “Acupuncture. The juicer. Hypnotism. She’s always into something.”

“She’s just easily impressed.”

“Remember the magnets?”

I laughed blowing breadcrumbs into the air. I still have the magnetic rings and bracelets she made us all wear wrapped in tissue paper at the bottom of my jewelry box.

Dad wet a piece of bread. He choked out the water. “She’d eat ground up horse shit if someone told her it was good for her.”

“Dad,” I said, shaking my head, recalibrating my argument. “This isn’t about Mom.” I paused. “I heard Sheila go into your room the other night.”

He turned his head to me, his fingers squished into the meat. “What do you think happened?”

I lost my courage under his gaze. “I don’t know.” I stared at the breadcrumbs.

“Listen, Teresa, I’ll say this because I respect you. I expect you to respect me. Nothing happened with me and Sheila that night.”

“Oh.” I said. I dumped the crumbs on top of the meat.

“I didn’t have sex with her. Honest to God. She came in and got in bed with me. Scared the piss out of me. I wouldn’t do that in my wife’s bed. I never have. I’ve always kept your mom away from all that.” He stuck a spoon into the parsley container and dumped it on top. “I cut all that shit out. I mean it.” He shrugged. “We ended up

talking, about you, mostly. She thinks you've really turned out to be something special."

He tasted the meat. "I made her sit across the room."

I watched his profile without turning my head. I wanted to believe him. Dad had always been honest with me. He sprinkled the meat with garlic salt.

The next morning, Easter, Jean cried because she didn't find as many eggs as me. I gave her two, and she was happy again. We had dinner early, my grandparents and two uncles arriving minutes before the food was served. Sheila would be leaving the next day, so Easter dinner doubled as her goodbye dinner. I think everyone was relieved.

The smell of garlic was thick in the air. The sauce had the flavor of meat, which made it better than usual. I could see Dad was getting ready to blow. Every time he looked at mom, his face got a little more red, a shade closer to the sauce. The only one oblivious to the tension was Jean, who had an entire meatball balanced on her fork.

"Grandma," she said. "Did you know that when God gives us the truth we will have Peace on Earth? No one will ever suffer again."

"No, I didn't," Grandma said, with a small smile. Uncle Phil rolled his eyes. My dad had been raised Catholic, and my grandparents were kind enough to basically pretend my mom's religion didn't exist. No one talked about it. Active ignorance.

"I'll marry God, like all the other women," Jean said. "He'll be everyone's husband. Mine, Mom's, Teresa's, Mama Sheila. You too, Grandma."

Dad shifted. Uncle Louie gave him a pat on the arm. Grandma and Grandpa both did the sign of the cross. Mom tried to shush Jean, but Jean was on a roll. "When I get big enough God will make me pregnant with his children." She licked her meatball like an

ice cream cone. “But it won’t hurt when they come out because there won’t be any suffering anymore.”

“*God damn it!*” Dad yelled. He slammed his hands on the table. We all jumped. “Do you see what this is doing to her?” he shouted at Mom. He stuck his finger in her face. “Sandy that’s enough,” he yelled. His voice strained. His face went purple. “I don’t want to hear another goddamned word about God in my house anymore.”

He slammed the table again. Jean’s meatball rolled off her fork.

We were all still and silent.

“I want a divorce,” Mom said softly.

My stomach dropped. The sauce I’d eaten turned sour. I gagged into my napkin.

Dad got up. He left the table without saying anything. I glanced quickly at Sheila without meaning to. She was still staring down at her plate, her fork frozen halfway to her mouth. Jean burst into tears and ran over to sit on mom’s lap.

After Mom’s proclamation, Dad slammed the door to the bedroom. Everyone disappeared. Dad emerged a few hours later, ready for work in his white shirt, work pants and suspenders. He numbly kissed me and Jean good-bye, told Sheila he’d see her tomorrow. He said nothing to Mom. Mom cleaned, mindlessly. She looked about as glazed as a ham. She got ready for work, and left. Sheila sat out back, sketching the trees with her knees pulled tightly to her chest. Jean and I huddled on the couch the whole time, watching every one shuffle by.

At about eight o’clock I put Jean to bed. She was exhausted from crying. I was too, but I still had my speech to write. It was due first hour, the next day. I had less than 12 hours to get it finished. I lugged the word processor onto the kitchen table. Sheila was at

the stove making tea. I didn't really want to talk to her. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I was actually glad for the distraction of my paper. Nothing would matter except paper dolls. But Sheila felt like talking.

"Teresa," she said. "I'm terribly sorry. It's an awful thing to go through." She paused, gripping her cup of tea. "And you've already gone through it once before."

"You didn't really come here to see me," I said.

"I did," she said. "I did." She looked at me. "I've always felt terrible about leaving you."

I nodded, looking back at my notes.

"Do you believe me?" she asked. "You must. It's the truth."

"I don't know." I put my head in my hands. "This is way too much. I can't deal with all this right now." I started to cry.

Sheila wrapped her arms around me. "This is just one of those times, love. You will get through it. You have to be strong for Jean. And your dad. And your mom."

I looked at her. She smiled. "I don't want to lie to you, dear. I did hope that there was still something between me and Tommy."

"But we're a family now," I said.

"I know. I didn't understand the bond you all had." Then she smiled weakly, sheepishly. "You'll get through this," she replied.

After Sheila went to bed, I tore into my paper. In two hours I had done six pages. There was nothing to think about but paper dolls. My fingers clacked the keys, revising as I went along. I pulled in every source I had. It was a flurry of productivity. There weren't any questions I wanted answered about the future, not yet. Not what would

happen to Jean or if I would still be Mom's daughter. If it would go back to being just Dad and me again. A little before two, I typed the last period. It was done. I went into the den for paper. I found three sheets.

"Fuck."

I looked in the drawers, the cabinets, my room, the kitchen, the living room. I wouldn't make it to class on time if I had to get paper in the morning.

"Oh, my God."

I tore through the house getting more and more desperate. I started crying again. I couldn't believe it. I kicked the back of the couch, then collapsed, exhausted, into the chair. I heard mom's keys in the door. Then she was in the entryway, looking at me. She wore her regular clothes, her cocktail uniform in the oversized bag on her shoulder. Her own cheeks were tear-streaked. She came to me and hugged me, dropping her bag on the floor next to us. Her hug was warmer, more practiced, than Sheila's.

"Mom," I whimpered. Seeing her made me cry even more.

"I'm so sorry. I just didn't know what else to do. I don't know how to stand up to your father."

"Mom, why now? Why now, when Dad has been so good?"

"I never felt second. With all the women. I never felt second." She shook her head and took a clip out of her hair. "Except one time. The day I adopted you."

"I know exactly what you mean." I said, stunned.

"I shouldn't have agreed to let Sheila come here. Not now. Things have been so rocky." She smoothed her hair with her hand. "This was just too much, you know?"

"Mom, just talk to dad. He didn't do anything with her. He really loves you."

She wiped mascara off her cheeks. "I just can't," she said. "I can't." She shook her head then sniffed. "Here." She pulled something out of her bag. "God told me you'd need this."

It was a ream of paper.

I turned my essay in and gave my speech early on Monday morning. I don't remember much else from that day. Mary rode with me to school, still complaining. Dad took Sheila to the airport. Mom vacuumed and went to work. Jean colored. When Tuesday morning came, I wasn't sure if I'd slept. Jean snuck into my room. She crawled under the covers.

"Teresa, know what?"

"What, Jeannie?" She was all eyes with the covers pulled up to her chin.

"God told me Mom and Dad wouldn't get divorced."

"I don't know Jeanie." The paper had to have been coincidence. Jean didn't need more disappointment. She snuggled close to me. I could feel the scabs on her knees against my skin. "I think that God might only tell you things you want to hear. Remember when he told you He'd plant a hamburger tree in our yard?"

"Yeah, but He still might."

"Do you really believe it?" I asked. "That you can talk to God?"

Jean looked away and thought about it. "Sometimes," she said. "It's like a voice in the back of my head, but it still sounds like me." She turned abruptly to me. "Don't tell Mom. I try and try just to listen and see if anything comes from somewhere else. But mostly it's just my voice, I think."

“Then why do you say God tells you these things.”

She pulled the covers down a little bit. “It makes mom happy.” She paused. Then she flipped over onto her belly and began to whisper. “But Teresa, when my head said they wouldn’t get divorced, that didn’t feel like it came from me at all. Really.”

I smiled. “I believe you.”

We watched Bugs Bunny on my small TV. When it ended, I sent Jean to get ready for school. I walked blearily out into the living room. I looked out the back window. It was windy. It would be a hot day. I was glad Sheila was gone, though maybe I understood her a little better. I stared outside through the window, at the trees Sheila had sketched. That’s when I noticed my parents far back in the yard by the shed. I watched them for a moment, mesmerized, like I’d watch Jean’s sea monkeys. Dad looked like he had tears in his eyes. He grabbed Mom’s hand and pressed it to his cheek. They both closed their eyes. Mom leaned back and Dad took her around the waist. He pulled her close. She resisted. She tried to say something. Pollen fell like golden snow out of the trees. Everything glowed. I held my breath. She strained away, but Dad held her, firmly. Finally, she leaned in. Then for the first time in a long time, Mom’s tongue was occupied with something other than the word of Christ. Dad always knew how to handle his women. It was Tuesday.

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