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Suspended in Bedlam

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Amy Marie De Vore

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The Thesis of Amy Marie De Vore is approved:

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University of California, Riverside

For Grandpa Larry

Earflaps are for assholes. That's what my grandfather said when his best friend asked why his new Ushanka didn't have them. He liked the word asshole. He also liked moron, bastard, cocksucker, motherfucker, and schwartza.

It was his sixty-fifth birthday. The year was 1985. I was ten, and I was in love with him. Everyone was. The truth is, he was a goddam God. He was my God.

When he walked into his party, handing off his ankle-length beaver fur coat to Lila, his late forties, live-in maid and pot contact, he smiled with a half head tilt that made me want to be near him.

Then he walked up to my parents. My father, his son, wore a dress shirt leaving the first four buttons open, like he always did. My mother, the goy, wore a black, ribbed tank top and black high-waisted, shiny, skin-tight pants that she purchased at Frederick's of Hollywood.

"Carol, be careful on Sunset Boulevard, they might confuse you for a working girl," he said.

My mother smiled, "I don't think anyone would confuse me for a girl that works."

My grandfather threw his head back in laughter. Then he kissed her on the cheek.

"Dad, I want to talk to you about the Henderson deal," my father said.

"It's a party, son. Have a drink. Relax. Enjoy your blonde wife, before someone else does."

Henderson was the deal of the deals. My father couldn't stop talking about it. It was Henderson this and Henderson that. Mainly the "this" and "that" were that we were

going to be rich. Not that we weren't rich, but we'd have F.U. money. That was always my father's dream. My mother's dream on the other hand, well, truth, she was mostly living it. My mother wanted to be a wife and mother more than anything, but only if they came with boozy brunches and manicures and pedicures and diamonds.

Aunt Bea, Uncle Dave, Aunt Parry, and Uncle Jason went up to my grandfather and each kissed him. The boys were his.

My mother whispered to my father, "Do you think I look like a prostitute?"

He shook his head, and said, "Your thighs are too thick. You look more like a roller derby chick."

My mother examined herself in one of the mirrored columns.

My grandfather looked at Aunt Bea, tapped his nose, and said, "Looking good."

"Dad," Aunt Bea said, as her eyes grew wide.

"Come on. We all can't be lucky enough to have Carol's nose."

He had bought matching nose jobs for Aunt Bea and Aunt Parry for their birthdays the year before. They were a two-for, because Doctor Marks had just performed my grandfather's third face-lift.

When he finally made it to me he said, "Kid, you know what I need. Meet upstairs in five."

He had just had a double bypass and my grandmother insisted that he didn't smoke. I slipped away from the party in my stupid pink dress that hung on my straight body, clinging to nothing. Many of the women at the party were way into their fifties and sixties, and their breasts were large and pointy, so their mod print dresses clung to them.

He hid his emergency stash of Benson and Hedges under the landing of the main staircase. I opened the latched gate and walked on the indoor grassy area, careful to not step into the pond that housed the yellow and orange Koi. I lifted onto my toes and pulled down a black lacquer box with his initials LSD engraved on the top. I lifted the box and the smell of tobacco was warm and woodsy. I put two cigarettes in the pocket of my dress. And then I carefully stepped back to the gate. I had to get on my knees to avoid the eyes of my aunts just a few feet away from me, as they walked through the kitchen out onto the balcony. Then I snuck up the side stairs.

The stairs were past the indoor sauna I sat in the summer prior in my one-piece tie-dyed bathing suit watching as the colors bled together. He had told me, *You're taking the heat like a man*. I made my mother promise not to tell him that after I ended up in bed shivering for half of a day.

Upstairs was the billiard hall. Atop the built-in bar was a penny slot from the Sands Hotel and against the wall was a Wurlitzer jukebox with a cascading waterfall that appeared to move when I walked left to right.

I went over to the salmon pink pool table. I looked around, and I chalked up my cue stick like he did with three quick, rhythmic swats, getting blue dust on my fingertips. I bent down, ran the smooth wood through the bridge of my hand, aimed for the right corner pocket, let go, popping the cue ball in the air and onto the paisley carpet. I got on my knees and the painting of Jesus stared down at me. My grandfather once told my Uncle Jason it was *irony, pure irony, for a Jew to have the scariest fuckin' picture of*

Jesus in his house. I grabbed the cue ball putting it back on the table. My mother walked in as I racked the rest of them. Her eyes were watery.

"What are you doing up here, Puss?"

"Just wanted to use the bathroom."

"You know you're grandfather doesn't want you to play pool until you're older."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Okay, but you should get back to the party."

"I will."

She went to the stairs, but turned back.

"Do you like these pants?"

"Yes, you look like Sandy from *Grease*."

She sniffled and smiled. Then she turned back to the stairs. I watched as her big blonde hair disappeared down to the party.

I ran to my grandfather's room as fast as I could. My Mary Janes picking up static, shocking my finger when I sat in one of the chairs that my father and mother would sit in on Sundays, as my grandparents would hold court from their bed, naked, only covered by a sheet. Naked grandparents is a goddam bizarre thing. But this was before all the hype about parenting kicked in. This was a time when kids were born from wombs filled with nicotine and vodka.

The floor of his bedroom vibrated from the music downstairs. I looked at the portrait of my grandparents' wedding that hung on the wall next to their bed. My

grandmother's permed, dark hair cupped her face, accenting her sultry eyes. His arm wrapped across her back, showing his well-manicured hand that rested on her hip.

"Money shouldn't dictate style," he said.

My shoulders sprung up.

"Didn't mean to shock you."

He walked over to the photo and with his back to me he said, "I didn't have a pot to piss in, but your grandmother looks like a movie star, doesn't she?"

I nodded. He turned around to face me.

"You have the goods?"

"Grandpa, I played with the pool table." I showed my shaky palms.

"That's okay, we got a special deal, you and I."

I reached into my pocket and handed him a cigarette.

"Good girl."

He lay back on the bed, pressing a button that elevated his back, and then another button that lifted his legs and bent his knees. He opened his nightstand and pulled out a gold lighter and a Snickers bar.

"Candy?"

"No, thank you."

He took a bite and put the rest on top of the nightstand, and then he lit his cigarette, then he exhaled hard.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about a thing or two. First, you know the sun is setting on me. This means that spring is almost here." He inhaled again letting out a thick cough. He caught his breath with a smile and said, "You, kid, are the spring."

I looked at the lavender silk fitted sheet and how perfectly it was tucked into the mattress.

"You know what I mean, right?" The cherry of his cigarette glowed bright.

I didn't know.

"Here's the thing, I have seven grandchildren. Most of them are simple, loving but simple. And they don't understand the meaning of loyalty."

He opened the bottom drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a miniature diamond encrusted light bulb. He lifted it to the light. The diamonds reflected tiny rainbows around the lampshade.

"You will be the one," he said. He stretched out his arm, and I stood to take the pendant.

It sat in the palm of my hand, weighing more than I thought it would. My grandfather started a lighting business thirty years before, selling to the City of Los Angeles, Sears and Roebuck, and Zody's, that was until they went B.K. But he always said they were a good company. This business allowed him to invest in property in Houston, Vegas, and South Central. This is what he left me with, the entrepreneurial spirit to go from less than a middle school education to millionaire. He always said *all you need is smarts, fuck the education*. There is some truth to that.

He put out his cigarette and continued, “I know you’re a girl, but goddamit I never met a smarter shit than you.”

I climbed onto the edge of the bed. I pulled at the hem of my dress, as my feet dangled at least a foot above the white shag carpeting.

“We good?” he said.

“We good.”

He reached over to kiss my forehead. Then he stood and slicked his silver hair and said, “We should hit the party.”

He left first and I stayed on his bed admiring my gem. I slipped it into my pocket, refastened my shoes, and then walked down the main staircase.

Downstairs the party was really taking off. There were about seventy-five people standing around holding cocktails and dropping ash on the black and white floor. By one of the columns, two men stood smoking cigarettes and one opened his hand to reveal a vial, then the two of them walked off.

I think of them now, in the downstairs powder room snorting a line off *How to Regain Your Virginity* that was stuffed behind a copy of *Vogue*. This was a time when a gram of coke would cost four times as much as a one bedroom apartment. Hollywood parties in the 80’s were all cocaine –it showed you had made it.

My cousins all gathered by the bench against the wall next to the marble fireplace. We were seven all together, raised like brothers and sisters. My cousin Jeremy was the oldest. Back then I used to flip through The Broadway catalogue and imagine myself

swelling to fill out an Indigo blue tube top and a pair of Sergio Valente's; how those jeans would swoosh together and Jeremy would think boy thoughts.

Jeremy shoved a glass into my hand. I swallowed hard, then my eyes watered.

He laughed and said, "Vodka and Coke."

I took another sip and passed it to my cousin, Aaron, who passed it his brother. We went in a circle, until only the ice clinked at the bottom of the glass. My only girl cousin, Jessica, then took a sip.

"Ewww. Backwash."

"Shut up, Aaron," Jessica said.

Then Jeremy said, "Shut up, both of you. I'll get some more."

My grandfather's best friend, Roy, walked over, smiled, then knelt down so that his face was close enough to mine I could taste his whiskey.

"You're very pretty."

"Thank you."

I hiccupped.

"When you are a few years older no one will have it on you. You're pretty enough to be a starlet."

He twisted his yellow sapphire pinky ring.

He would, some months later, be found in the maid's room, long after Lila was fired, covered in butter, and furiously yanking on himself to pictures of a naked girl not much older than eight. I didn't see him again until the funeral, where he stood in the back, still afraid of my grandfather from the beyond.

The lights of Hollywood were below that house, shining through the glass doors. He turned my face to him.

The music abruptly stopped. My grandfather's maid, Lila, had run the needle across the record, and was waving an 8-track. She put it in the stereo system that was built into the wall with large speakers that my father bought off a man in an alley. She stepped onto the long rectangular glass coffee table.

"This is for you, Lenny."

"The Stripper" played loudly and seductively. My grandfather sat down in front of the fireplace and rubbed his hands together like a fly.

"Take off your heels," my grandmother said. "That table is imported."

"Oh, Phyll," my grandfather said waving her off.

My grandfather's best friend winked at me as he stood to put his arm around my grandmother. Lila kicked off each shoe, and stood in her silk stocking feet. She wiggled her curvy figure. She slowly unbuttoned her leopard print blouse, keeping her eyes on my grandfather until she revealed her huge breasts strapped in by a rose colored bra. Aaron whistled with two fingers, which made Lila smile. She continued teasing my grandfather by opening and quickly closing her blouse, finally slinking it down her arms until it fell unto the table.

My Uncle Jason hollered, "Titanic titties!"

Aunt Parry slapped him, but couldn't help herself from laughing.

Lila reached around and unzipped her beige pencil skirt sliding it down her legs. As she tried to kick it away, her stockings were slick against the glass and she stumbled.

“A little too much sauce for Lila,” she said.

My mother rolled her eyes. My father eyes glued to Lila’s body as she stepped off the table and walked over to my grandfather. With Lila’s back to my grandfather, he looked at my grandmother who was shaking her head, and then he unfastened that rose bra. Lila opened her mouth wide playing surprised. She let the bra straps roll down her arms and then in one quick movement her bra was clear across the room on my Uncle Dave’s shoulder. He lifted it up to smell one of the cups.

“Take your panties off,” Uncle Dave said.

My cousin, Corey, just seven at the time, had moved from the bench to a few inches from my grandfather. Jeremy drank from his cup, never taking his eyes off of the dancing maid. And Jessica, his sister, thirteen, was shaking her C-cups at me. At the time, all of this was normal and exciting.

Lila turned around and put my grandfather’s face to her breasts. He was growing red. Someone threw her a blue gauzy scarf and Lila lassoed my grandfather, pulling him to his feet. She spun round and pressed her fleshy butt against him. Her nipples were large and brown, as he slipped his arms around her waist, she lifted hers in the air, and tiny moons of paler skin showed.

Uncle Dave walked over and tried to pet her, but Lila gave him a no-no with her finger.

“This is just for your daddy.”

Everyone laughed. It was a laughing kind of night.

The song ended and Lila took a bow. Then she collected her clothes as she walked through a sea of kisses from the male guests. My grandfather looked at me and lifted his eyebrows twice with a devious smile. I hiccupped again.

I was a little stoned on the four or five swigs of Coke and vodka. I swayed when I walked up to Lila.

"I liked the dance."

She bent down and held my face in her hands. She smelled of tea rose oil and cigarettes. It was about the sweetest smell I ever smelled.

"I'm glad you did, darlin'. I think everyone is having a good time, don't you?"

"I do."

A man with a dark mustache pulled her up and kissed her on the cheek. Lila beamed and touched his coarse hair. I stood there waiting for her to bend down and tell me more things, women things, but the mustached man took her by the hand. My grandfather watched as Lila was led away, then he shrugged.

"Women are fickle, kid," he said with a wink.

I put my hands in my pockets and felt that extra cigarette. But he walked off to talk to Aunt Parry and a few friends.

Bumping into people and tripping over pointy heels of the curvy women, I found my cousins who were all still near the fireplace. My brother, Nicky, six at the time, was stretched out on the bench sleeping in his double-breasted pale gray suit.

"Come here," Aaron said as he waved me over.

He huddled up Jessica, Jeremy, and me.

"Jessica, are you a turtle?" Aaron said.

"No."

"Then why do you snap," he said as he pulled on her bra strap.

"Aaron!"

I watched as my grandfather walked up the stairs, slow as if counting each step.

"Okay, okay, don't leave the huddle." He hugged us in closer, and then said, "I think grandma is mad at grandpa."

"No shit," Jeremy said.

"Wouldn't you be?" Jessica said.

"But he'll set her straight," Jeremy said.

"You're right." Aaron said as he took a bite of his bruschetta dropping little chopped tomatoes and oil on his shirt. "Damn it. Jeremy we need another drink."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the oldest."

While Jeremy went to retrieve another cocktail from the bar and Aaron was snapping bras, I snuck away before he realized I had nothing to snap.

I went up the main staircase, rubbing the thin paper of the cigarette between my fingers. The music soared up the stairs, *Good times never seemed so good,* and the crowd sang *so good*, *so good*. At the top of the staircase I heard my grandmother's voice and the door was open a few inches.

My grandfather was sitting on the bed and my grandmother was in front of him. She stepped to the side and leaned a little. His silk tailored shirt was unbuttoned,

exposing a hash mark scar from his navel to his heart. His head hung low and she kissed his lips as she replaced the vitamin E cap, then handed him a purple pill with white ends. My grandfather's eyes raised and met mine, he attempted a smile, but I turned away and walked down to the party.

The air was thick with smoke, as the women's heavy makeup smudged, leaving weathered skin, and false eyelashes adhered to droopy eyelids, and the men's designer shirts wrinkled and untucked, revealing ashen guts. I walked onto the balcony, a yellow neon sign flickered *American Legion* before it burnt out, and I reached into my pocket gathering up the tobacco leaves that settled at the bottom and threw them over the railing.

2

If someone were to have asked, I would have said my life looked gold. Not like I had a gold aura. I didn't, and don't, believe in that hocus pocus. But the hue of my life was gold. All beautiful and shiny and rich. We were a big family. Stuff like that doesn't happen in Los Angeles, especially not in Hollywood. *All the imports are out for themselves*. That's how my grandfather described anyone who moved to L.A. to be an actress or director or something in the business. I never told him I wanted to be an actress. He could really turn on you fast. Like one time, my father said that my Uncle Dave was a moron for putting green tile in his bathroom and my grandfather flipped. He told my father that he would never be the man that Uncle Dave was. We learned later that my grandfather had picked out the tile.

We all lived within two miles of each other. In the hills. In Hollywood. A phone call and anyone could be anywhere within five minutes. This was by design. When my parents first married, my father was the last of the bachelor Daviches, my grandfather wanted to create his own Hyannis Port in the hills of Hollywood. He found five lots next to each other, two for himself, and one for each arm of the family. My mother convinced everyone that this was the worst of the worst ideas. But Aunt Bea privately went to my grandfather and told him that she wanted to live next door to him. My mother lost it. She shoved Aunt Bea and said, *Just because you're bigger than me, doesn't mean you can push me around*. Aunt Bea didn't say a word. This is how my mother tells the story, because I wasn't even a thought in *baby heaven*, as my mother liked to put it.

My parents were just about the two most beautiful people I had ever seen. My mother was this tall gorgeous blonde with a huge smile. She had once been Miss Rancho Cucamonga. It was a big deal to her. She kept her tiara and sash on display in her walk-in closet. My father was dark and handsome and lean. He wasn't the smiling type, but that's where he got his strength from. At least that's what my mother told me.

It was a really goddam beautiful thing to be surrounded by a village of people who love you. I felt sorry for the other kids out there who didn't have it. Like my friends whose mothers worked, I felt real bad for them. Or the ones who only had a stray aunt or uncle in Temecula, and saw them maybe once a year. It all seemed pretty sad at the time.

I went to a school that bussed its kids in from as far North as Pacoima to as far South as MLK Boulevard. These kids had to get on a bus around six am to be on time. Their mothers worked as clerks and secretaries and seamstresses. The weekends were filled with beach adventures, because as my mother said *the beach doesn't cost a thing. That's why poor people love it so much.*

I did have family I didn't see much. My mother's side. They were a really lovely group of people. Sweet and wholesome. Church-goers. Some of the nicest people a person could meet. *Your husband and his family are the priority once you get married.* This what my mother told me when I asked why we didn't see my other family that often.

One of my favorite things to do with my mother was to play dress up with her jewelry. She was real delicious about the whole thing.

The morning after the party she laughed and laughed as I draped Nicky in her sapphire and diamond necklace and ivory bracelet and slid on as many rings as his stubby

little fingers would hold. Then on my own head her Miss Rancho Cucamonga tiara and a ruby choker around my neck. Not that is was a choker on me.

Nicky was this beautiful, angelic child. I know people say that, but with him it was really true. And he would come up with these genius plans. Like when my parents would tear each other apart with the meanest things they could think of to say to one another, Nicky and I would hide in the closet and pretend we were pirates looking for treasure. He was Captain Bartholomew and I was Lady Penelope. He would pretend he had a long mustache and twirl the air on the side of his upper lip. Then finally when my parents' headboard would bang against the wall we knew their screams, well the angry screams, would be over, and Nicky and I would come out of the closet and place our imaginary jewels on the bed and watch Benny Hill until we fell asleep.

On the floor of her walk-in closet, we cheered mini princess tea cups –Nicky's and mine filled with Pepsi, hers gin and OJ. One of the rings on Nicky's finger rolled off into his cup.

"Sorry, mommy."

"It's only an amethyst." My mother fished the ring out and placed it back on Nicky's finger. "That's play jewelry, but you be careful of the one with the big yellow stone."

"What is that one?"

"A canary diamond. Your father gave that to me when you were born."

"What did he give you when I was born?" I asked.

"The pink sapphire one."

"It's smaller than the canary one."

"Well, we didn't have quite as much money then."

In her dressing room surrounded by her beautiful dresses and designer shoes and dripping in jewels I felt as if I were just about the luckiest goddam person in the world.

My mother was all class. She may have had a drawer full of baubles but she would only wear one big piece at a time, and maybe one or two small pieces.

"Only the gauche wear lots of jewelry at once," my mother said.

"Am I gauche?" Nicky jingle-jangled his hands in the air.

"No, my love. You are a beautiful little boy who is having fun."

My father slid the door open to the dressing room. He was only wearing his briefs.

"Look at all those jewels." My father scratched his groin. "Nicky someone might confuse you with Elton John."

"I'm Elton John!"

My father winked at my mother.

"Did everyone have fun at the party last night?" He asked.

Nicky and I jumped up. "Yes!"

"Who's ready for some Greenblatts?"

My mother starting removing the rings from Nicky's fingers. "Alicia, this will all be yours one day."

I used to look through brochures and circle the furniture that I wanted in my house as an adult. I'd choose sofas, rugs, and lamps, and even knickknacks of little owls.

Then I would cut them out very carefully and put them in a Diorama. I even imagined the type of shampoo I would use. Always Prell. I imagined myself in my house with all of my mother's jewelry. But I knew once I had it, she would be dead. I hated thinking this way. I hated knowing any of this world I lived in would die.

I thought about this all the way over to Greenblatt's and as we arrived at my grandparents'.

Snubbed out cigarette butts and broken glass lined the cement walkway and wall which was built to separate my grandparents' home from their neighbor's, a dentist, whom my grandfather caught telescoping into their living room while my grandmother was vacuuming, naked, as she liked to do.

My father sent me upstairs to wake up my grandparents. My grandmother lay across my grandfather's bare chest and he had one arm around her back. I watched for a few moments, and then knocked on the doorframe.

"I'm up. I'm up," my grandfather said as he shook himself awake.

"Hi, darling," my grandmother said.

My grandmother uncoiled herself from my grandfather with a yawn and slid over to her side of the bed. She pulled the sheet back to cover her bare breasts as she sat up. I remember thinking she looked like a beautiful flamenco dancer lying there covered in lavender silk, which reflected on her olive skin. She patted the bed. I went over to her side, and she kissed me on the lips.

"Sit down," she said.

I pulled myself up

"Hey, kid, how's your morning?" My grandfather said.

"Grandpa, it's one fifteen."

"It's morning to me," he said with a big smile.

My grandmother wrestled a foot from under the covers, placing it near me. My grandmother didn't know much kid stuff. She was a see-through blouse kind of woman. It seemed weird that we called her Grandma. The things she did share with me were how to use her bidet or how the nail ladies massaged her feet or how to pluck a single hair from her chin that the electrolysist missed.

My mother came into the room. It made real annoyed whenever she interrupted the little alone time I had with my grandfather. It always felt that he was one of those Stretch Armstrong dolls that the limbs were pulled so taut it seemed like he was going to break into ten pieces.

"Good morning," my grandfather said from behind Saturday's *New York Times'* business section.

"Puss, what are you doing?"

"I'm doing like the nail ladies."

"Well, when you're done, everyone is downstairs."

I continued massaging my grandmother's feet. The feet that would one day have three toes amputated due to poor circulation, fostering a lifelong fear in me that someday I will be toeless. This amputation could be purely by my own abuse to my body from years of smoking and cocktails and late nights or an alligator attack. No matter the way they go, it is something I spend a lot of time thinking of.

Then my grandmother told me to close my eyes. The springs of the bed rose up, and I could feel my grandmother pass by me with a quick wind that carried a faint hint of Chanel No 5.

"Lenny, get up. They are all waiting on us."

I heard the paper fold, heard the patter of my grandmother's feet walk across the long-haired rug to my grandfather. Then I felt her thick, blunt acrylic nails tapping my shoulder. When I opened my eyes they were fastening their robes. My grandmother was in a long waffled cotton robe, and my grandfather was in a mid-calf, gold silk robe that clung to him. He always wore these garish outfits. They were rather ridiculous, but they suited him.

Downstairs it was all laughter and hugs. My brother ran past me to chase after Corey, snaking around the mirrored columns.

In the kitchen, my mother was neatly placing pickle quarters on a crystal plate, while my father was talking to Uncle Dave and Uncle Jason, and I could see Aunt Bea through the sliding glass door as she stood leaning her soft waist on the wrought iron balcony.

"Where's the corned beef?" Jessica asked.

"Corned beef is the poor man's pastrami," my grandfather said as he popped an olive in his mouth.

Aunt Parry came from the living room carrying a trash bag and a red party cup filled with cigarettes and paper roaches.

“Well, look who’s decided to get out of bed,” Aunt Parry said as she dropped some of the water out of the cup onto the floor.

“Look who’s giving me shit already,” my grandfather said.

“Hi, honey,” my grandmother said as she kissed Aunt Parry.

Aunt Parry’s mascara from the night before was speckled on her cheeks and stuck to the corner of her eyes, which was fitting since all the adults had an odor of perspiration and stale whiskey and cigarette smoke that filled the kitchen air once they all entered, as it already stunk of smoked meats and cheeses. We weren’t the Kosher keeping Jews.

“Henderson is a good deal, Dad,” my father said.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in a deal in Vegas,” Uncle Dave said.

“Dad, I’m telling you, Carol and I and the kids drove there a few weeks ago, it’s a fucking goldmine,” my father said.

My father then followed my grandfather into the living room, leaving Uncle Dave behind. He quickly piled on his pastrami to thin, soft, steamy rye slices as fast as he could.

Uncle Dave put a can of Pepsi between his left arm and his armpit, so that he could carry his plate into the room with everyone else. He quickly glanced at himself in one of those mirrored columns. Vanity was a trait than ran in our blood.

I sat on the floor next to Aaron as he put black olives on each of his fingers and stuck one of his fingers into my ear.

I clumsily slapped him and he smiled at me. His teeth had bits of black olives in them.

"This pastrami is delicious," Uncle Jason said.

My mother massaged my father's neck, as he ripped off small bites of his pastrami sandwich.

"Alright Carly, tell me about Henderson," my grandfather said.

My father began talking about Henderson with the same excitement he had when a pretty woman walked into McDonalds, and he'd whisper to us kids, *call me Uncle Carl*. And we did. They always liked him. Like I said, he was a real handsome guy. He usually sat with them, and sometimes she had a kid or two of her own, and we were seated three or four tables away smelling the frying oil and dehydrated meats, trying to make out what my father was saying to this one. But if he caught me looking at him he would shake his head and I would put a Chicken McNugget into my mouth. Which back then were gray and gummy, and I would chew until I gagged, spitting the remains onto a napkin with the golden arches that were raised cameo style. Sometimes, I would just eat fries.

"It's a great deal," my father said as he lit a cigarette. "There's these two guys, Howie and Phil, Phil has AIDS, Howie is all broken up about it. I guess they're lovers, but Howie doesn't have it. Or maybe he does. I don't know. That doesn't matter. But this Phil guy has this property near Lake Mead, he needs to sell it before he dies so that Howie can have the money. Phil's worried that his parents will step in after his death and put a hold on the property. So, they've got three acres for sale. It's C3. Ready to go."

"How much?"

I loved listening in on their deals. It made me feel like an adult.

"That's the gem of the deal. The land's worth three mil but they need to sell it fast, so, one point five. Thirty day escrow," he ashed into the glass ashtray with my grandfather's initials buried beneath Benson and Hedges. "But, the kicker is they have a deal with Embassy Suites to build on it. It could be worth ten times what it is worth now."

"I wouldn't do it, Dad."

Uncle Dave chewed the skin around his nails, a habit so grotesque that when he died, the mortician named Bubba, a name I never forgot, tried to apply makeup to the raw skin, but eventually closed Uncle Dave's hands in loose fists atop his pin-striped suit.

My mother handed my grandfather a roll of developed pictures. He swiftly shifted the pictures from the front to the back. Without looking up he said, "Let's get out there next week."

Uncle Dave looked at Uncle Jason who shrugged.

"Alright, who wants some black and white cookies?" My grandfather said.

A chorus of "me's" sounded.

"Well go get them."

My father lit another cigarette with his personalized lighter that he received as a gift from my grandfather when my brother was born.

I stood up and followed behind John who was walking like his legs were stuck together. He kept saying I'm *Charlie Chaplin. I'm Charlie Chaplin.* I didn't acknowledge this, but Aaron did.

"Stop waddling you look like you have to crap."

"I look like Chaplin!"

"We also have chocolate chip wafers," my father said.

My grandfather called me back, "Kid."

"Yes, Grandpa?"

"Bring me back a few wafers."

When all seven of us ran into the kitchen, Lila was already in there, she wore short shorts and a tight, long sleeved shirt. Jeremy elbowed Aaron, cluing him in to watch as she bent over. All three of us noticed her skin, fair and lovely, doubled over each other by her hairless vagina. When Lila stood up, she smiled that big toothy smile of hers. She held in her hand a spongy rainbow cookie, and with her *mmm*, Aaron reached into the box and took two for himself. Then she walked back toward her room, each barefoot lifted softly, toe to heel, until the entire foot was almost erect. She told me once that she used to be a dancer in London. When I told my mother about this, my mother said *what kind of dancer*?

"What's the hold up, kid?"

With his left arm my grandfather playfully shoved Jeremy to the side. Then he reached into the box and took out a handful of wafers.

My father followed my grandfather into the kitchen. He was fidgety. This was unusual for my father. His single chocolate chip wafer crumbled into his hand.

"It's just us, right?"

"Of course," my grandfather said.

"Jason and Dave aren't in on this?"

“Son, my word is gold.”

My grandfather walked into the dining room, but turned back, kissed me on the forehead and whispered:

“You’re my special girl.”

Then he reached over Aaron’s shoulder, into the box, and claimed more of those wafers, and deposited them into the pocket of his robe as he walked back to rest of them.

3

My grandfather's word wasn't gold. My uncles were in on the deal, too. And, he brought in his best friend's niece, L.P.

The women I had known with jobs were poor. Like the woman with the chunky gray birthmark that stood out from the rest of her black hair that fell in front of her eye as she served us See's candy, or the woman with the wrinkled hands at Savon's, or my teachers at school and they usually quit once they got a rock (no matter how small) on their fingers. I had never known a female doctor or lawyer or businesswoman. So when I met L.P., I didn't know what to make of her.

"Everyone, this is L.P. She's our go to guy. Sorry, gal for Henderson." My grandfather said.

L.P. was as tall as my grandfather. She wore jeans and a white men's t-shirt. She had a scar on her face. She claimed it was from the forceps used to remove her from her mother's birth canal. But the rumor in the family was that she got it in a bad drug deal. Either way this scar ran from one side of her face, across her upper lip, and curled around like a permanent, thin, red mustache. L.P. was unlike any other woman I had ever met. She didn't wear pumps or lipstick or any makeup, for that matter, and she certainly didn't sit like the women I knew, with one leg crossed over the over. But even with all that, she was still beautiful. Beautiful in a way that my aunts with their nose jobs and my mother with her perfectly primped hair and my grandmother with her thousand dollar outfits would never be.

All fifteen of us surrounded her on the lot in Henderson. My grandfather's word about it just being us didn't follow through, like I said, but my father swore he was okay with it. My mother certainly wasn't. It was a fight all the way to Henderson. It got real heated in the car. But it was my grandfather's money that backed us. We couldn't say much.

There is nothing less settling than someone agreeing with someone because of money. I've had to do this in my life. When I was a waitress or a cashier and the person could be almost penniless, but because they were handing you a dollar you had to shut your mouth and take it as they yelled at you or whatever. That's probably why people hate bums so much, because they can. Everyone needs someone lower than them. Maybe not everyone, but a lot of people do. This is how my grandfather kept all the sons and daughters-in-law in line. Money.

"Henderson's a helluva deal, boys." She smoked skinny cigarettes that looked disproportionate in her large, unmanicured hands.

"I don't know. I hate the goddam desert." Uncle Dave swatted a mosquito.

"Who doesn't?" L.P. said. "But if we only purchased things we'd like than we have a room full of whiskey and cocaine. Am I right?"

I looked at Jessica to see if she was hearing what I was hearing. But Jess was nose deep in some teen magazine.

"L.P. knows what's up out here. She's spent a few months out in the desert and thinks this deal could make us some serious dough." My grandfather patted L.P. on the back.

I could taste the salty, grainy sand as it filled my lungs and mouth. A dust cloud whirled up into thick sheets as a silver Porsche drove up. The driver, Howie, who was about twenty-five, removed a wheelchair from the trunk and then opened the passenger side. He bent down and helped the passenger into the wheelchair. The passenger, Phil, was the one with AIDS. There was a fluid filled bag attached to a metal bar on the wheelchair.

My father introduced my uncles and L.P. to the dying man and his lover. We, my mother, Aunt Bea, Aunt Parry, and the seven grandchildren, were rounded up into *these are the wives and kids*.

The dying man wore flannel pajama bottoms with a stained t-shirt, and a white turban. Wheeled next to him, by his partner, was an oxygen tank with a sticker that said *Fags Do it Better*. Phil's face had four or five boil-like lesions. He wore a thick mustache that was neatly cared for, but when he attempted a smile his mustache spread exposing one more lesion.

This was my first time seeing a decaying person.

The land was barren except for patches of browning shrubbery, crispy, thirsting for air, just like the sick man.

Phil took my grandfather, father, and L.P. in a circle as he sent his lover to walk the perimeter of the property. The rest of us stood in the searing heat.

"It's hotter than hell," Corey said.

"He said 'hell,'" Nicky said.

"If Aunt Bea doesn't mind that he says such things, then why should I?" My mother said.

Nicky kept repeating hell over and over. Until it sounded like helly.

Aunt Bea had been real quiet since the party. I didn't know what was going with her, but I hated her silence.

I stared out over the five cars that were lined up. She didn't hear what her seven-year-old son had said or what my mother had said to bother her, or, at least, she didn't let on.

A small tumbleweed rolled by and got my brother's attention. He ran after it, then from side to side, but gave up when he couldn't catch it.

"What the fuck?" Uncle Dave dangled a Marlboro from his lips.

I wanted Uncle Dave to shut up. I wanted to listen, to hear what was being said.

"You know Carl is like this," Aunt Parry said to him. "He wants to do this alone with his *daddy*."

"Parry, you know this was our deal," my mother said.

"All differences aside, why does L.P get to be in on the deal?" Aunt Bea said.

Aunt Parry kicked a small rock toward my mother. Although I don't think she meant to actually hit my mother's shin, she did.

My mother shook her head slowly at Aunt Parry. I looked at my aunt, then at my mother. I swear my mother was getting ready to take a running jump at my aunt, but instead she coolly turned around, popped the trunk and pulled out an old blanket. My mother handed warm Pepsis to Nicky and me.

"It's important you keep hydrated," she said.

"I think L.P.'s a lesbian," Aunt Parry said.

My mother nodded. "One hundred percent dyke."

Nicky kept repeating dyke over and over. Little kids do this. I understood that, what I didn't understand is why all the women in my life thought she was one.

My mother shuffled a deck of cards. The cousins started gathering around our blanket and my mother, who clearly had not let go of Aunt Parry kicking a rock at her Louis Vuittion's, ever so slightly stuck her tongue out at Aunt Parry. Aunt Parry laughed a silent, breathy laugh.

Each of us cousins were dealt one card face down.

"Why are there women in bikinis on the cards?" Jeremy said.

"You know your Uncle Carl. He loves the ladies," my mother said.

"But they're all brunettes, and you're blonde," Jeremy said.

"He thinks brunettes are the prettiest." My mother put a card to her forehead. "Now this is called Indian Poker. Each of you put a card to your forehead."

My father was always pointing out pretty brunettes and red heads, and never blondes. I wanted to be anything but blonde and pale and flat chested. This made me feel dumb that I was in a tank top that clung to me, the same as Nicky's tank top clung to him. To our nothingness. And it made me feel even worse that I was thinking about this while the dying man was near,

and we were playing a ridiculous game with cards stuck to our foreheads.

I watched on as Phil pulled a to-go cup from a sack attached to his wheelchair.

"Carol, unfold these," my father said.

My mother got up from our game of Indian Poker and pushed each of the folding chairs open, then with her hand she dusted them off, rubbing the excess dust on her tan colored nylons that she wore under culottes. My conservative mother never lost her Goldwateresque modesty (she was on a drill team for Goldwater). In her mind he never lost.

Phil dropped the cup. He tried to bend down but his knees wouldn't let him. No one helped him. He just stood there, thirsty, and no one, not my grandfather or father, or L.P. would hand him his cup. I put down my six of hearts and ran over to him. I dusted off the Styrofoam cup on my pants.

"I'm Phil."

"I'm Alicia."

I said it so softly. The words didn't even feel like they were my own.

"Thank you." Phil put his hand to his heart. "Thank you."

Then of course Uncle Dave yelled across to my father.

"We're in on this, too, Carly."

My grandfather smiled at Phil and Howie and said, "We're a close family."

"Alicia, stop bothering the man," my father said.

I turned back to the women and children, and quickly prayed that my father would walk into quicksand.

I picked up a new card and put it on my head. I watched as my father reached into his pants' pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He packed them against his hand in

three thrusts to the base of the palm, like he always did when he was nervous. He unwrapped the foil and offered the men a cigarette. Phil took one. This must have pissed off Howie, because he crossed his arms and looked away.

My father lit Phil's cigarette, ignoring Howie's disapproval. Phil took a hit, and immediately he coughed a phlegm-filled cough, but when he caught his breath he took another.

"I love these goddam sticks."

From Phil's back pocket came a stapled and folded packet, creased neatly in the center. He handed the papers to my grandfather. My grandfather took off his thick black framed sunglasses with gold hardware, and wiped the lenses against his shirt. He replaced the glasses and had a cursory look at the papers.

"Embassy Suites, huh?" My grandfather said.

"Yes, they are on board. Want to start building in the fall," Phil said.

"But why on this land?" My grandfather said.

"Why would the Suites want to be here? Is that what you're asking?" Phil said.

"Yes. I mean it's just a desert."

"Because it is close to Vegas, without all the bullshit of the strip, close to Lake Mead, without all the bullshit of the drunks, but because it is close," he coughed. "Excuse me. Kids, never go to a bathhouse without a pocketful of rubbers."

"Close…" my grandfather engaged him.

"The companies want to have retreats that they aren't responsible for gambling or drugs or prostitutes, but within fifteen minutes of it."

"So the wives let them go," L.P. said. "Smart."

My grandmother looked at her emerald ring. This was the present my grandfather gave her in exchange for her forgiveness. He had a three day tryst with a pretty redhead he met while my grandparents vacationed in Tahiti. As my mother recalled the story, my grandfather did not return to my grandparents' room once, and my grandmother had to each lunch, swim, parasail, all by herself.

I watched as she brought the ring to her mouth, and cleaned the prongs with her tongue. Her tongue was long and pointy as she wrapped it around the green stone. She caught me staring. She smiled, and continued. It made my stomach turn to look at her skinny tongue wrapped around her ring. My grandmother never brushed her teeth a day in her life. Didn't even own a toothbrush. Scope was good enough for her. When she spoke directly to me, which wasn't often, the words came out in stale accents of Chanel Number 5 and bacteria. My grandmother was not a kid person. I don't even think she liked being a mother.

I wonder if she thought about the women my grandfather bedded. I never knew if the rings and furs were enough. They sure were pretty enough. And I wonder if my grandfather bedded other women because she was cold. I was pretty sure of it at the time.

My grandfather put the papers on the ground.

"We are definitely interested," my grandfather said.

"Mainly, we are looking for a guarantee that Embassy won't back out," my father said.

"Well, this is their own paperwork," Phil said.

Uncle Dave bent down and picked up the folded papers. He flipped through them.

Jessica whispered to me, “He can barely read.”

This wasn’t a lie. Uncle Dave really had trouble reading. It wasn’t that he was Dyslexic; it was just that he was a bad reader. I didn’t understand how he could be so bad when reading always came so easily to me.

“I can bring in Motel 6,” Uncle Dave said.

“The deal is with Embassy Suites,” Phil said.

Uncle Dave dropped the papers, bent down so that his face was in line Phil’s.

“We want Embassy Suites,” my father said.

This is when things got loud.

“But my friend, Chuck, can get us a deal with Motel 6. It’s better than anything this guy can get us. I can knock 300 grand off this deal today. That’s why I’m here. That’s what I do,” Uncle Dave said.

“Dave, that’s a good deal, but Embassy Suites will bring in more money,” my father said.

“Motel 6 brings in year round travelers. Embassy Suites is a shit ton more per night. We’ll have too many openings. Don’t let this guy dictate what we should do here,” Uncle Dave said.

My grandfather shot Uncle Dave a look.

“I’m a family man. That’s what I am. I’m all about making sure my family is taken care,” Uncle Dave said.

"We're all family men." Phil coughed. "This is the most important thing I've ever done in my life."

"Men," Uncle Dave said with a laugh.

"I think we are done here," Phil said.

Phil tried to bend over and to pick up the papers that Uncle Dave had thrown on the ground, but he couldn't. His partner helped him stand.

"Sir, please, Dave is a little overzealous, he just wants to get us the best deal," L.P. said.

I hadn't noticed until that moment that she didn't say much, but when she spoke the men listened to her. They listened to her as if she were my grandfather speaking.

"Jason, Dave, please wait with the wives," my grandfather said.

"Dad, but I didn't even say anything," Uncle Jason pouted.

"Jason."

Uncle Jason and Uncle Dave walked back over and sat with us. Each one took a card and put it on his head. This ridiculous game now made sense. Not that the game had any purpose, really. But that Uncle Dave had to sit with the wives and kids must have made Phil real happy. Uncle Jason put his card to his forehead and Uncle Dave looked at his face side and threw the card to the ground.

My grandfather by that time had gotten Phil to sit back down.

"Don't let Dave's bullshit get you worked up. We know you aren't feeling well, we know this place means a lot to you, we know that the Suites *is* the way to go."

Uncle Dave was really worked up. He was walking back and forth and in the middle of our blanket. Aunt Bea never went to him.

My grandfather showed the dying man and his lover a check.

“My card is higher than Aunt Carol’s,” Jessica said.

Our cards came off our heads in quick slaps to the ground. Nicky’s card flipped and Jessica pretended his King was hers. She was joking, but Nicky started to cry.

I watched as my father stood, placed both hands on his lower back, and arched back.

“Gentlemen, do you mind if I talk to my father alone?”

“That’s fine.”

L.P. stayed with the men. Her body lankier and longer than the lover.

My father and grandfather walked closer to us. My father was whispering, but I made out:

“Dave needs to be out of this,” my father said.

“Don’t worry. We got this,” my grandfather said.

L.P. left the two lovers and walked over to my father and grandfather.

“Offer them another fifty k,” L.P. said.

I was pissed that L.P. wanted to offer another fifty thousand. That money was my jewels and dresses and everything else. I was pissed that Uncle Dave pissed off the men.

“You think?” My grandfather said.

“You don’t got this,” L.P. said. “Plus I might have a connection to do some gambling here.”

My father and grandfather said a few more things that I couldn't hear, and then walked over to the men.

"Alright boys, here's the deal: if Embassy is in, we're putting an extra fifty k on the table, and we want to move forward."

Howie spoke for the first time that day, "That's very generous. But, this may not be right for us."

Uncle Dave meandered through our four cars, fastening and unfastening his Rolex.

"We want to be the kind of men that you want to work with," my grandfather said.

"You are. He isn't," Howie said motioning with his head toward Uncle Dave.

"Look, every family has a piece of shit," my L.P. said. "He's theirs."

We all heard this. Including Uncle Dave who kicked the tire of his own car. I would have understood it if he kicked the tire of my father's car, but his own was really a dumb thing to do.

Phil nodded his head. It was a deal. My father finally smiled. My mother got up and walked over to my father and grandfather. My grandmother followed her.

Howie kissed Phil's forehead with a tenderness that I had never seen my father kiss my mother. Phil, caught me watching them, and began to walk over to where I was sitting. I picked up the Queen of Spades and examined the torn ridges and worn edges from the years of play, not knowing what to say to him. I closed my eyes, but when I opened them his thin shadow shaded me from the late afternoon sun. He knelt down.

"You're lovely," he said.

I looked at his face, it was kind. I took his hand in mine. There were two small lesions.

"Fuckin' AIDS," he said.

"But we would never have met." I didn't even know what any of it meant. I had seen the news reports, but it was different than seeing someone behind a television screen. I had never met someone with AIDS. In the years to come I would watch several of my grandfather's friends succumb to AIDS. Their obituaries always said the cause of death was pneumonia, but we all knew that their poor bodies destroyed themselves.

"It's a bitch of a disease," he said. "You know, you don't realize how a moment can change your life. Or in my case many moments."

"Does it hurt?" I said.

"Only when I breathe." Then he smiled. "Remember everything you choose matters. Don't sit idly by and don't buy into B.S."

I examined the small lesions on his gray hands. The tiny wounds that gave away his secret. His hand squeezed mine weakly.

"You will always matter," he said. "You're the only person here who would have touched my cup. You don't know how much that means."

The man's gray-blue eyes blinked rapidly. Then he stood up.

The two men got into their Porsche and left.

L.P. walked up to Uncle Dave. "Listen, you, this is a big deal. You don't ever pull that crap again."

Uncle Dave opened his mouth to say something but L.P. turned around before he could respond to her. L.P. looked at me and nodded her head.

My father came over to me. I smiled at him but he wasn't smiling back.

"I want you to wash your hands immediately," my father said. "Carol, give me some water."

My mother went to the car and pulled out a gallon of water that she always insisted we have in case we overheat. My father pulled it from her fingers and covered my hands and face in the warm water.

"Don't touch that man, you hear me?" My father said.

"Yes, Dad."

"Carol, do you have any soap?"

"No."

"Bea, any alcohol?"

Aunt Bea pretended not to hear.

"Bea!"

Bea reached into her purse and took out an airplane-sized bottle of vodka. My father twisted off the top and doused my hands and arms with it. I could feel the paper cut I had a received a few days before sting under the eighty proof liquid.

"Don't ever do something stupid like that again," my father said.

My grandfather watched on. I wanted to hide my head in the sand. I didn't want my grandfather to see this happen to me. I didn't want the cousins who all stood silently

as the clear liquid dripped from my fingers making the sand swell into dotted beads. I started to cry.

"Why is she such a crybaby?" My father asked my mother.

My grandfather called over my father. My grandfather said something, something I couldn't hear, and then patted him on the back.

My father walked up to me. Bent down and said, "Didn't mean to embarrass you."

I looked at my grandfather and smiled. My grandfather turned back to Uncle Dave.

"But don't fucking touch that man again," he said in a stern whisper.

I watched as the sand below me was being moved slightly by the soft wind over my red converse. I imagined being buried under the warm sand.

"Carl, come here," my grandfather said.

My father got up and walked away with the men. The cousins began piling into their parents cars.

L.P. sat next to me.

"Your father is just scared. You know that, right?" L.P. said.

I shrugged. It seemed there was always something he was scared about or stressed about. I didn't remember him ever happy. My mother used to show me love letters that he would send her. I couldn't imagine my father ever saying those words without a demand in return.

"I don't know why I make him so mad," I said.

She touched the top of my head.

“Oh, girl. He’s a man. They are that way. You don’t have to do anything. Just being something they don’t understand is enough for them.”

I didn’t really understand what she meant at the time.

“I’ll tell you this, if there was any question about them selling the land to us you finalized the deal.”

“When do you think he’ll die?” I said.

“I don’t know much about AIDS and HIV, but I think six months is the usual prognosis. He looks pretty ill. Maybe a few weeks,” L.P. said. “But don’t you worry about that. Think about all the pretty party dresses you’ll get once this deal goes through.”

“I do like dresses.”

“I’m a jeans and t-shirt girl myself.” L.P. stood up. “Know your daddy was just worried about you. Family is very important.”

“It’s the most important thing.”

With the back of my hand I rubbed the tears off my cheeks.

4

"A helluva break." That's what my father said when Phil died.

I was watching Gumby.

I remember thinking about how pliable Gumby's body was and poor Phil was stiff and thin and covered in lesions inside of a coffin with dirt being shoveled on his head. I would never get a chance to say anything else to him. I know I didn't really know him, but there are moments in your life when you feel goddam close to someone, so goddam close, and you only shared a smile with a stranger after an old lady tripped in the street. I remember once seeing this kid, maybe nineteen, with socks up to his knee and Dickies and a LA Dodgers cap riding a bicycle and a woman in a BMW slammed on her breaks to avoid hitting this guy, but he still fell off his bike. She jumped out of her five series with her jeans that made her butt look a mile wide and her real estate broker haircut and she hugged this kid tight. I was maybe twenty at the time and I watched the whole thing. This exchange between two disparate worlds hugging each other because they shared something unique and frightening and no one else, no one else in the world would understand. This real estate haircut started crying and the kid tried to act cool but he got it, because when she pulled away he hugged her again. That's the goddam beauty in the world. This is the gorgeousness that surrounds people every day. That's just how I feel about Phil. And then I think of my father's words, it's a helluva break. And I think of the goddam He-man analogy he would use to explain his place in the world. That he was He-Man and every other schmuck was a Ken doll, emasculated and weak. He-man would offer Ken some pennies for gold deal and Ken would kiss his ass from here to Tuesday

because what He-man and Ken knew was that Ken needed He-man. A helluva break. A death. AIDS. Loss. It didn't matter.

I wanted to go to Phil's funeral. My parents thought it was a smart idea to show good will. I wanted to throw a flower into his grave, a white rose without the thorns. I imagined myself next to the hole in the ground, dressed in a black dress and Mary Janes, holding that white rose as I dropped it down, but Phil's parents were embarrassed that their only son died of AIDS and that he was gay and they didn't want to *grieve with some fucking faggots* –as they told Phil's lover, who was forbidden to attend. Phil had it right. And my father had it right. And it was just me and Gumby and that was it.

It didn't really matter that Phil was dead. It mattered to me, but it didn't matter to the Henderson deal. It was solid. The paperwork was done, his was lover was covered, and all the Daviches were about to get richer than they already were. Of course they didn't foresee the issue with the Indians and the L.P. and everything else that happened shortly after they signed everything.

The Indians were a thing. The Shoshone Indians were all up in arms claiming that the property extended onto their land. Luckily back then all of Vegas and its surrounding areas were greased with a handshake and cash. But it didn't mean there weren't problems. The truth was about one hundred square feet was on their land. Seems small, but it was enough for it to be a problem.

"The fucking Red Skins," my grandfather said.

We were all eating pizza at a long table at Barone's Famous Italian Restaurant – that is the actual the name. The rectangle pizzas with their curved ends that all us kids fought over.

"Pass a slice of pepperoni," Uncle Jason said.

My grandfather shook his head. "We don't order pepperoni. It's cheese or sausage."

My grandfather was particular about his cured meats.

"Grandpa," I said. "I think they just like to be called Indians."

Uncle Dave had a piece of cheese dangling from his chin. "Who cares what they want to be called. When you wear a dot in the middle of your forehead you are making a fool out of yourself."

My mother said, "Those are Indians from India, Dave." The Dave was drawn out.

"That's confusing," Uncle Dave said.

My father ordered another two medium pizzas for us. Barone's is only good for a medium.

"Grandpa, can't you give the Indians that little bit of land?" I said.

My grandfather put down his slice, the slice he had so carefully chosen, and looked at me. He was about five seats away.

"Kid, you're ten, so, I'll let you get away with that foolishness. The law says that land is mine. I paid good money for it. And I'm not going to give a tumbleweed to those shysters."

On the way home, I stared out at the strip malls that lined Ventura Boulevard with their white washed exteriors. And I thought about how I made my grandfather mad.

"There's a building I want to check out," my father said.

He made a left on Vineland and stopped in front of a large apartment complex that looked sad with its peeling coral paint and weathered steps.

"They want to condemn it," my father said. "But it just needs some TLC."

Nicky's fingers pulled him up to the window to peer out. "It's ugly."

"You get the best deal on ugly, son. People don't have an imagination." My father lit a cigarette. "How do you think I got your mother?"

"Mom's not ugly," I said.

My mother looked out the window. "He's kidding, puss."

"Always on your mother's side." My father laughed and then exited the car.

He walked along the sidewalk until a car pulled out of the garage and he ran in. His steps were closer together and more delicate than his normal, long stride. I have never understood this about people. It's as if they have tricked themselves into believing this actually worked. That this semi-jog was faster.

"Your father works so hard for us," my mother said.

"He always seems unhappy," I said.

Nicky looked at me and I knew what he was thinking. I knew it because I was thinking the same thing, too. I shouldn't have said it.

My mother turned around and faced me. "Alicia Marie, do you understand what it takes out of your father to make sure you're happy? Do you?"

I didn't say anything.

"Answer me."

"He works hard," I said. But I couldn't help myself. "I was just saying he seems unhappy."

"Goddamit, Alicia. You pissed off your grandfather tonight and now this. What is going on with you?"

My father started back to the car.

"Puss, don't ruin the rest of the night," my mother said.

Poor Nicky wanted to take care of me. "But, mommy, she just said daddy seems sad."

"Quit poisoning your brother."

My father opened the door and he was pissing with excitement. The whole way home it was diamonds and private school and Porsches for Nicky's and my sixteenth birthdays.

As we walked into the house the phone was ringing. My mother answered and then yelled for my father who was only about ten feet away.

"It's Lenny, honey," my mother said. "He's being taken in an ambulance."

My father took the phone from my mother's hand.

"Dave, what?" My father looked horrified.

Nicky, who was six and naturally a crier, didn't. I think we were both in shock at seeing my father so upset.

My father hung up the phone. "My father's dead."

"What?" My mother said.

"Dave said he died." My father grabbed his keys. "Let's go."

My father drove crazy-like down the hill and only paused for red lights. We didn't talk to each other, but my mother gently rubbed the back of my father's neck deep into his dark curly hair. I remember being in the back seat and sliding all about, this was before kids wore seat belts. Nicky and I were all over each other. Arms and legs hitting each other, heads knocking, but we didn't say a word, because up in the front seat my father cried. It was soft, almost the softer side of silent, but it was the first time we had seen our father show any emotion beside anger.

At the Good Samaritan Hospital, Nicky and I stuck close to my parents as we found our way through the elevator up to the eleventh floor and saw my uncles and aunts and cousins trickling out into the corridor of beige walls lit up by the burdening fluorescent light. My father stopped. He just stopped walking all of the sudden and then his shoulders moved up and down. I thought about how I made my grandfather mad and how it wasn't okay.

My father entered the room first and I followed behind to find my grandfather sitting up in bed eating a tuna fish sandwich.

"Dave!" My father said.

Uncle Dave's hand shifted in his front pockets. "What Carly?"

"You said he was dead," my mother said.

"He died. His heart stopped for fifteen seconds," Uncle Dave said.

My mother shook her head.

"What's all the fuss about? I just was feeling a little ill," my grandfather said.

My grandfather looked worse than I had ever seen him. It wasn't uncommon that my grandfather or grandmother were in the hospital. But it had been a bit since his open heart surgery that I had been inside these walls. I constantly had a fear that I would be in school and the in-house phone would ring in my classroom that one of them had died. There I would be standing alone without my family.

His naturally grey-yellow skin was greyer than normal. I didn't understand at the time why my mother was so upset at my uncle, but later I realized it was because my father cried. And that hurt worse than seeing my grandfather filled with tubes and needles and bandages while wearing a cheap polyester hospital frock.

The nurse came in and asked all of us to wait outside the room. In the hallway a woman, maybe my grandfather's age, but who knows when people get older, was all hunched over pushing an IV down the hallway.

Aunt Bea looked down. "How sad."

"They should be able to put people down like cats and dogs," Uncle Dave said.

My mother touched Uncle Dave's shoulder. "For once, I agree with you."

Here was my grandfather surrounded by fourteen of us who were teary-eyed and scared, and I thought of poor Phil at his funeral of two witnesses and maybe a straggling aunt who wasn't afraid to be near him. I had heard that they had to go to seven funeral homes before one would agree to handle a body with AIDS. Here was my grandfather, sixty-five, and surrounded by people, and I thought if he were the same person and gay we wouldn't be here.

The doctor spoke to my father and uncles in a whisper but I could still hear the words. “I’m not happy about the smoking, but he’s doing pretty well.”

My father said, “But his heart stopped.”

The doctor said, “No. No, it didn’t. He had indigestion.”

Uncle Jason who had been quiet most of the evening leaned his hand against the wall. “Barone’s. We’ll have to take a break from there.”

“We’ll keep him for observation, but he’ll be able to go home in the morning,” the doctor said.

They all shook hands with the doctor. But when the doctor walked away my father said, “Fuck you, Dave.”

By then I was sweating thinking that I had made my grandfather so upset that he was now in the hospital. I snuck into my grandfather’s room while everyone else was still in the hallway bitching and snapping at each other.

“Hey, kid!” My grandfather said.

My whole body started to shake.

“I’m alive. No reason to get all worked up. Just too much cheese pizza. I think the seventh slice pushed me over the edge.” He shook his IV.

“I made this happen.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I let you down about the Indians. I was talking crazy and I made you all upset. I’m so sorry.”

My grandfather lifted his head just like he did at his birthday party, but this time the bed had rails and was smaller than a twin. His gown fell a little in the front and I saw all these buttons attached to his chest.

"Look at me, kid." My grandfather picked up his cigarettes and then put them down. "Goddamit, can't even enjoy a smoke."

He took the straw out of his water and chewed on it.

"Kid, you didn't do this. This is from the facacta cigarettes and taco bell and my goddam genes."

"But I made you mad. And Mrs. White said that heart attacks can happen after an argument," I said.

My grandfather laughed. "You call that an argument? I'll tell you about an argument. Your crazy grandmother bought these bras. One hundred dollars each. Didn't try the things on and they were too big for her. She's convinced she's a D, when we all know at best she's a C cup. But instead of returning them for the right size she gives them to Lila. So here's Lila making maybe two hundie a week and walking around with four hundred dollars' worth of lingerie under her fifteen dollar outfits." My grandfather coughed and the wires attached to the buttons danced. "Well, your grandmother and I screamed and screamed at each other. I screamed more than her because as you now she's more about the stink eye than the yelling, and that happened a week ago and nothing. The ticker was just fine."

"But you got so upset with me," I said.

He threw the straw at the trash but missed.

"I had boys. Boys ram their heads into things and call each other names, and it's all fine. But you're a girl. I forget that." He waved his hand for me to come over to him. "I love you so much. More than you could ever know. There isn't a thing you could say or do that would make me love you less."

5

My grandfather's doctor forbid my grandfather from visiting Henderson for at least a week.

"This is some bullshit."

No matter my grandfather's protest, my grandmother put her foot down. She didn't have much control in that household, but when it came to his health, he listened to her. She always said *pick your battles*. If it were me, I would have picked my battle over the redhead in Tahiti.

Of course my grandfather found a way around visiting Henderson. He rounded up all his sons and his best friend, Roy, to go fishing. My grandmother insisted that one grandchild go along. My grandfather chose me.

Roy was already on the boat when we got there. He wore these short shorts. He fancied himself a European, but he was really a working class shmuck from the Bronx who made it big in textiles.

I stood looking at the brown water that rippled below the plank that lead to the boat. It looked like rust and sadness, not the ocean that one thinks of. It was like the Skid Row of oceans.

Besides me and the men there was a young, Portuguese hand with a tattoo of a busty woman, and an old white captain, wrinkled from so much time in the sun.

The captain noticed my grandfather and saluted him. It was all respect. Everyone knew what I knew about my grandfather.

We played poker while waiting to get far enough out in the ocean to send our lines in.

"Come here." Roy patted his lap for me.

The truth was my father trained me to know what was a good hand and what wasn't. My job was supposed to be to walk around the table and give him a pull on my ear if someone could beat him.

"Let her roam," my father said.

"She's my good luck charm," Roy pulled me onto his lap, "We're a team."

His grey, wiry leg hairs itched my hand.

"I declare bullshit. She's my girl," my grandfather said.

The men played with shelled peanuts as chips.

"Ten dollars for each peanut."

Roy pulled me closer to his beltline and wrapped one arm around my waist. My hips swayed as the boat road over the wake and into open water.

"Want to hold our hand?"

I took the cards from his hand. There are good hands in poker and great hands, we didn't have either one, but Roy did anyway.

"Traitor," my grandfather said with squinted eyes at me.

I'd rather have been sitting on my grandfather's lap, but I never knew how to say no or ask for what I really wanted. But I sure as hell was glad that I no longer had to help my father cheat.

Uncle Jason was the dealer. Roy took two cards and threw them in the center. He motioned for me to retrieve the new pair that Jason dealt to us. My father tilted his head attempting to see which I cards I pulled up.

"Carly, tsk, tsk," Roy said.

"What?" My father did neck rolls. "I have a crick in my neck."

The middle of the table filled up with shelled peanuts. Roy threw in five.

Roy had a gambling problem. Once betting away his Maserati in a home game. Resulting in his wife of thirty-five years walking out on him, and when he finally called my grandfather two weeks later, he was staying at a motel on Sunset Blvd., in a cocaine induced mania, convinced that the neighboring room was housed with midgets who were planning on coming through the shared door to stab him with Swiss Army Knives. Apparently Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory had aired, and he became fearful of the Oompa Loompas.

Uncle Dave was cracking open the shells with his teeth and spitting the papery seed coating onto the deck of the boat.

"Those are ten dollars each," Uncle Jason said.

"You only charge me for what I have missing in my hand."

"Exactly. You've eaten a hundred dollars worth of peanuts."

"Shit."

My father looked at Uncle Dave, took a deep breath, and then said, "We won't count those, k?"

"Thanks, Carly."

We lost that hand, and the next, and the next after that. Uncle Jason sat with a pile of peanuts in front of him.

"I'm sorry," I said to Roy.

"It's alright. You being close to me is a win."

The captain announced that were anchoring in a few minutes. The men counted their losses and paid Uncle Jason. We would have been the big loser, but Uncle Dave couldn't stop eating the peanuts and owed another hundie.

"Don't squeeze the Charmin," Roy said as he bounced me up and down on his knee. "Don't squeeze the Charmin." We both laughed as he said this tagline. I don't why he said this, but he always used to say it when he bounced me on his knee.

He picked me up high over his head and he stood up.

"I like pretty pink dresses on little girls." Roy put me on the deck.

"I do, too," Uncle Jason said.

"Overalls are too cumbersome, don't you think?" Roy yanked on one of my suspenders.

"It's hard to go to the bathroom," I said.

"What happened to the dress I gave you?"

A year before, Roy gave me a gold box with a pink silk dress and a rose that rested on the waist sash. He told me to go change into it right away. When I came out of the bathroom he lifted me up and said *I see London I see France*. Then he laughed and said *we're family, it's okay to show our strawberry underwear to each other*, and offered to show me his.

“I can’t wear that fishing. I’d ruin it.”

The men baited their lines. Roy showed me how to stick the pointy hook through the worm. Then he helped me throw the rod back and release it into the water.

The air was thick with smog and sea salt. Across the sky swam a seagull, then she dove quickly into the water and gathered up a fish with her mouth. It was sad and beautiful.

“How’s Embassy Suites?” Uncle Dave said.

“Fine,” my father said.

“Anything biting?” Pepe said.

I stared at his tattoo. He noticed me looking.

“Want to see her dance?”

I nodded my head. And he rolled the muscle in his arm to make her wiggle her stomach so her breasts that were covered only with a tiny triangle bikini over just the nipples expanded back and forth. Her belly button came at me and pulled back.

“You’ll look like her one day,” he said. He bent down and kissed my cheek.

“Pepe, that’s my girl,” my grandfather said.

“She’s too old for me, anyway,” Pepe said.

My grandfather came up behind me, whispered in my ear, “No spics.”

I wanted to correct him that Pepe was Portuguese not Mexican, but I knew he was serious. He wiped my cheek with his thumb that smelled of cigarettes, and went back to his pole.

“Well, she’s my girl,” Roy said as he shined his pinky ring. “You’ll have all this someday.”

“Even the yellow ring?”

“You’ll have hundreds of yellow rings.”

“I have something,” my father said.

His line was taut from the fish on the other end that fought for its life. My father reeled forward and back, shifting his feet to hold the weight. Uncle Dave stepped in putting his hands on the pole. My father shoved his shoulder at him. The pole bent in an almost semi-circle.

“It’s a big one,” Uncle Jason said.

“Let me help,” Uncle Dave said.

My father grunted. He gave more line, then pulled back. Pepe joined us as we watched my father reel in a fish that was at least four feet, flopping its fin furiously. Uncle Dave pulled the pole from my father, snapping the line and dropping Zeus, as we called him years later, into the brown and cloudy water.

My father, who I had expected to scream, instead stood dumbfounded. Pepe was not.

“Mister, you could have pulled him in by taking his pole. There are sharks all around us.”

Uncle Dave stood with my father’s pole in hand. The clear line curly Q’ed up.

“You’re such a schmuck,” my grandfather said. “Give Carly your pole.”

“Why? He broke it because he fought with me.”

"It broke because you don't take another man's pole," Pepe said.

My father walked to the front of the boat leaning on the metal railing. Uncle Dave shrugged it off.

I followed after him. I tapped his waist. His mouth was turned down with spit on either side, his brown forehead beaded in sweat, and between his eyebrows was a pronounced crease. Then he turned back. I tapped him again.

"I told your mother you weren't old enough to come," he said.

I placed my pole next to him and walked to the hatch. I stepped down the tiny stairs that reminded me of the Anne Frank house I visited the summer prior. They were narrow and close together, feeling as if I was going to fall at any moment. I reached for the railing that collapsed to one side. Under all the people I was in the dark with the smell of fish and urine, I felt my way to the bathroom. I turned on a small lamp, and only after I had taken down my overalls did I read the sign that said: *All body fluids and shits must be dumped overboard*. I heard the sound of water hitting plastic and I looked down and floating in the stained toilet was a Tupperware container collecting my urine. I wiped, and walked back up the rickety stairs. I whispered to Uncle Jason, who called over Pepe. Pepe went under and returned with my yellow water and waded up toilet paper, and reached his arm long on the side of the boat to let it release in the water. When he turned back he carried the plastic container and there were little drops of urine on his face.

"Not the first time I've had a little piss on my face," he said.

"Me neither," Uncle Jason said as he patted Pepe on the back.

Pepe went back down, and returned with hands that smelled like vodka.

“Better than soap,” he said.

My father walked up to Uncle Dave and snapped his pole in half.

“Carly,” my grandfather said.

“I would have done the same thing,” Pepe said.

“Fuck you,” Uncle Dave said.

My grandfather put his arm around my father and walked him to the other side of the boat. He spoke in a quiet voice, too quiet for me to hear. My father looked to the ground, as he dragged his toe in circles on the floor. My grandfather lit two cigarettes and passed one to my father, but my father denied it and took one from his own breast pocket. The extra lit cigarette was tossed into the water. They chain smoked two or three cigarettes.

They walked back, and my grandfather knee’ed Uncle Jason in the buttocks.

“Alright, boys, let’s talk business,” my grandfather said.

I yanked on my grandfather’s sweater. “But grandpa, grandma said you need to take it easy.”

“Kid, don’t worry about me so much. But don’t tell your grandma, okay?”

“Of course not.”

My grandfather looked at Roy. “Best kid in the world. Smart as shit and loyal.”

“And pretty as a juicy peach.” Roy said under his breath.

“Let’s kibitz.” My grandfather lit another cigarette.

“Yeah, I want to hear what’s happening in Boulder,” Roy said.

“Henderson,” Uncle Dave corrected him.

“Carl is the genius behind this deal,” Uncle Jason said.

Uncle Dave held the railing with one hand, and the other was clenched into a fist that released and tightened.

“We got L.P. out there, but the fucking Indians are causing us some problems I don’t think she can handle. Don’t get me wrong she’s a gem. But this is something even I don’t know how to handle,” my grandfather said.

Roy said, “I might be able to help.”

Pepe swept the deck with long sweeps. His tattoo moved with him, as did the broom. I spent many nights imaging returning to the boat in a tight sweater and short shorts and he would dance with me like he did with that broom. He swept through Roy and my grandfather, sweeping up the ash that grayed the deck, and with two quick swats he hit Uncle Dave’s long swooshed Nikes’, leaving gray bristle streaks.

“What the...”

“Sorry, mister,” Pepe said, and then raised one eyebrow at my father.

My father twisted his mouth to conceal his smile. Dave bent down and wiped his shoes with his hand, but it only made it worse. He untied his sneakers and spit on them.

“Peepee, you got Windex?” Uncle Dave was a real bastard about it. He knew his name wasn’t Peepee.

“Sure thing, mister.”

Pepe handed Uncle Dave the glass cleaner.

“This isn’t Windex.”

“It’s the best we have. And here’s some paper towels.”

Uncle Dave sprayed the shoes until the power of the aerosolizing mist melted the ash away. He folded the paper towel into thirds and pulled it from either end to get a strong grip.

Pepe continued sweeping the deck. Roy pulled out a whiskey filled flask and stainless steel collapsible cups. He let me smell the tiny hole that poured out that sticky, sweet liquor. He looked around and then offered me a sip. I took it.

"Remember what Uncle Roy does for you."

My grandfather and father, and uncles stood in a circle as Roy poured a nice swallow into each.

"I've known your father since we were fifteen and driving milk trucks. Look at us now, boys. This man has been my life."

Everyone raised their drink to cheer, except for Uncle Dave.

I raised a Coke can and said, "It's good to do this as a family."

"Here, here," my grandfather said.

My father and Uncle Jason clanked their cups, and then Uncle Dave raised his. Each of the men took a swig. My grandfather put his arm around Uncle Jason and Roy. My father patted Uncle Dave on the back, and Uncle Dave gave him a gentle elbow.

"So what's the deal?" Uncle Dave said.

"Like I said, I might be able to help. He's a real rootin' tootin' cowboy sonofabitch, he cools the heat if you know what I mean. And he helped my mother build her house for about fifty K less than the best deal she found. And it's beautiful. Which was great because when she passed, me and Louise were able to clear a cool two hundred

thou," Roy said as he looked down. Then he continued, "Of course, that would have been good if she didn't take half of everything. Or if she just stayed and shared it. Prenup, that's the only advice I have to the young ones."

"But it was inheritance, how'd that happen?" my father asked.

"I'm an idiot. I put it in both our names right after my mom died."

"Note to yourselves when I pass, don't share." My grandfather looked at all of us.

My grandfather's boys shook their heads in agreement, as did I.

The men went back to their poles. My father picked up the pole that rested where I left it. He never said thank you. He just threw that line back in as if I never gave it to him.

Pepe brought out an extra, little kid fishing pole for me. I had to get on my knees to get the line deep enough in the water.

Almost immediately after tossing my line it pulled. I twisted the reel as I had seen my father do, back and forth, planting my knees as firm as possible on the wading deck. The other end felt heavy and I fought the urge to release the reel. Round and round it went back and forth, until only back, and my line was as short as my pole. The fish showed his face just over the railing, wiggling and moving about.

"She's got one," Roy said.

My grandfather shot me a smile from behind his Benson and Hedges, while my father took a glance from the periphery of his sunglasses.

"Good job," Uncle Jason said.

I removed the hook slowly from the side of his mouth. His gills were slimy and cold against my fingers. His mouth opened and closed in pouts. With the hook out, I put him in the smelly barrel with the rest of the catch.

Pepe high-fived me, and said, “She’s a natural fisherwoman.”

“Nice work, kid,” my grandfather mouthed.

I nodded.

When my grandfather went down the hatch and everyone else was focused on the water, I bent down to look at my fish. He was a pinkish orange color, with orange eyes that looked at me as he gasped. Picking him up in my hands I slid him through the hole between the deck and the railing, and pushed him overboard. I figured he needed his family, too. But since I didn’t want my grandfather to know, I put my line back in the water.

6

We met the real rootin' tootin' cowboy sonofabitch. The bastard lived up to his stereotype. He wore this huge cowboy hat and said things like "I reckon'" and "y'all".

"I got some boys out here. Some real live Mexicans that snuck over the border. They got the barbed wire scars to prove it." Jonny Rae spit black tobacco on the ground. "They are cheap as the dirt they sleep on."

"No can do," my grandfather said. "Don't get me wrong. I don't give a shit about exploitation. But these Indians are fucking with us, and we don't need one blowing a whistle."

"I've got some other things cooked up."

I didn't know what Jonny Rae had in mind, but I thought things being cooked up couldn't be a good thing. What I did like to think of was all the rubies and diamonds I would have. All the beautiful things that Henderson would bring to me. I would be one of those women with the pointy breasts and gold and platinum bracelets and necklaces.

Jonny Rae put his cowboy hat on my head. It fell over my eyes and I had to kick my neck back to see the rest of my family, all real beautiful sitting together, as they ripped ribs apart with their teeth. The ribs of some bull that was slathered in tangy barbeque sauce.

House of Cattle was Jonny Rae's favorite spot. It smelled of garlic butter and hot peanuts, and there were all these heads of animals on the wall, as if they were Monets and Kandinskys.

"These are tender." Uncle Jason's face was red with sauce.

“Best in town.” Jonny Rae rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “Vegas sure as hell has some of the best B-B-Q.”

“Alright. So Jonny Rae, what’s the plan?” L.P. said.

Very quickly the flat footed L.P. was as much part of the family as my aunts and mother were, less than my cousins and I, because we were blood. But she was there, and people listened to her. Listened to her more than any woman I had ever seen.

Jonny Rae jumped up from his seat still with a rib in hand. “I’m going to make this a profitable venture for you boys and your kin.”

Man did I get a kick out of how he talked. It was all folksy and ridiculous, but it suited him.

“How you planning on doing that?” L.P. said.

“I cut costs.”

“As long as you don’t cut corners.” L.P. took a rib from Jonny Rae’s plate. “These people are family to me. Can’t have one of them end up in prison for some hack construction job.”

“Why prison?” Nicky asked.

“L.P.’s exaggerating,” my mother said.

“Nicholas,” L.P. said. “Sometimes in this world people think a few dollars is worth more than doing something right. Those people can end up in prison.”

“I don’t want daddy to go to prison,” Nicky said.

I thought of my father in prison. Having to bang out license plates with his perfectly manicured hands.

“Carly’s too pretty for prison,” Uncle Dave said.

My grandfather reached for his whiskey. “No one is going to prison. Stop scaring the boy.”

If my father did go to prison all the pretty dresses and Porsches and private school would all be gone. Everything I had ever wanted would be gone.

“I think L.P. has a good plan,” I said.

My voice came out shaky. It was thin and withered, but I didn’t want everything to be ruined. I had to say something.

Jonny Rae took his hat back from my head. I knew he was mad that I didn’t want him to do whatever he wanted to do. That all of us were against him. And I felt bad about it.

“Where did all this Folsom Blues talk come from?” Jonny Rae said. “We got nothin’ to fret about. Look, Nick, your daddy isn’t going to prison, and neither is your grandpa or uncles. They’re just going to pay a little extra to get the same job done. It’s their prerogative.”

“Okay,” Nicky said.

“I got some recently reformed willing to do the job. They’ll cost you a little more but the state break will be worth it.”

Jonny Rae had a bunch of petty thieves, drug users, and wife beaters to complete the job. It was actually a brilliant solution to hiring illegals, because the state gave my family a tax break for hiring the unhireable. Not as good as paying under the table, but the best the books could show.

"If you'd be willing to hire a re-tard or disabled they'd give you even more money," Jonny Rae said.

"We don't need some cripple making a crooked building," my father said.

And that was that. It was all small time criminals and some bastards that hit their wives. I'd like to think of the ways that their hard work would make them a better person. Maybe one of them would become something. Something really beautiful and meaningful to the world. Or maybe one of them would have enough money to buy some whore for the night and she would in some miraculous way, the way all pregnancies are miraculous (in that it's a goddam miracle that one sperm fertilizes a single egg, this isn't to say that children should be or are miracles), get knocked up and raise a person that would change the world. Maybe we were paying it forward.

There we were outside the barbeque joint while my uncles and grandfather smoked cigarettes and Jonny Rae spit his black tobacco on the sandy blacktop.

Above our heads flew a cast of turkey vultures. They circled like witches above us. One, with a dark maroon head, dove down and the others followed. Some of the large birds landed on the carcass of a coyote and others on the wooden fence that separated the barren land from the strip mall. They picked at the skin and matted fur, yanking red, slimy bits of the insides into their mouths. It was disgusting and beautiful, as are so many things in life are.

Everyone was quiet, even Nicky and Corey didn't say a word, as the birds on the fence waited their turn impatiently with guttural squawks.

I began to walk closer to the large birds and the stench of the coyote was strong. He must have been dead a day or so. I don't imagine much longer than three because the desert heat was strong against his body.

When I got a few feet from the fence, a vulture turned to me and loudly grumbled. It shocked me and I ran back to the laughter of my family.

"Thems just doing what God intended," Jonny Rae said. "They make use of the dead."

"Just like us." My grandfather threw his cigarette down.

Jonny Rae and all the men shook hands, and of course L.P.'s. We women and children sat on hot leather seats with the air conditioning running, to cool down the car for our fathers and uncles and grandfather.

7

Every few weeks my mother would be too hung over to take me to school. She would smell of whiskey and sex. These were the best days.

This particular afternoon my mother lay in bed, a bucket next to her, and General Hospital on.

My mother talked about Luke and Laura as if they were one of the neighbors. Women to gossip about and men to think of. It was all so exciting.

The men and L.P. were in Vegas because the Indians were protesting on our land.

Nicky sat at the foot of the bed as my mother told us all the gossip. Who had a few too many martinis at the last party, who didn't wear underwear, and who was cheating on their husband. I felt like a woman in those moments. I felt privy to the language of adults.

"I would never cheat on your father," my mother said.

"Even if Tom Selleck asked you to?" I said.

"You think I would ruin everything I have?" My mother sat up. "Puss, relationships aren't about looks. Even though your father is one handsome man. But relationships are about shared experiences. A history."

I thought about what this meant. I think of the moments my father was aggressive with her. When my father would call her a loser and throw things. I knew my father was good looking, but I was starting to question what my mother saw in him.

"Do you know your father calls me every day to tell me he loves me?"

I still can't imagine my father being loving.

"'Licia likes Jamal," Nicky said.

"I don't!" I said.

"Are you a lesbian?" my mother said.

Everyone thought I was a lesbian. When I got into my teen years no one understood why I didn't have a boyfriend and the whole family said I was into chicks. Little did they know I was having sex with a boy named Jeremy Cohen. My first and last Jew. Something happened that turned me against my own people as I got older.

"Tell me the names of actors you think are attractive," my mother said.

"Mom," I said.

"Tell me," my mother swallowed her Diet Sprite. "Look, it's important you like boys. It's too difficult the other way around."

"Would you love me if I loved girls?" I said.

I'll never forget how my mother looked at me when I asked her this.

"I'll love you. Yes. Of course I'll love you. But don't like girls okay?"

I didn't say anything.

"Why are you playing this game?"

"I'm just asking."

"I love you because you are perfect."

"But what if I just had one eye. Right smack dab in the middle of my forehead."

"Your father would have paid someone to fix it." My mother reached for the remote. "Will you hand me the remote?"

"Mom, what's it like to be a woman?" I said.

"It's nothing like what anyone tells you," my mother said. "Each day you figure it out."

"Like what's it like to be around men?" I said.

"They are just people. For instance, Nicholas will be a man one day. Does he scare you?"

Nicky got all excited that he was part of the conversation now. "Do I scare you, 'Licia?"

"No, Nicky. Nicholas. You don't scare me," I said.

"Puss, I don't have much advice, but beauty matters. Don't let anyone tell you any different. It will open doors for you that would never be opened even if you were the smartest girl in the world." My mother sipped at a her warm Diet Sprite and continued. "Take care of your skin. I'm serious about this. You only get one skin. You have to make sure it lasts as long as it can. Also don't eat too much. No one wants a fatty."

"Fatty, fatty, two by four." Nicky sang this over and over.

My mother came from an age that women went from their parents' homes to their husbands' homes. The prettier the woman, the prettier the home. They got knocked up fast. They stayed no matter the consequences. This isn't to say my mother is not smart, rather she used every bit of smarts she had to not have to work a day in her life. It was lip gloss and nylons and low-cut dresses and curled hair. This was better than an investment in university for my mother. For those women. For they were brought up in one car homes with one toilet, fathers in the union, and mothers who saved coke cans for pies.

It's what I wanted. But I didn't have anything to offer at that point. I was flat chested and doll faced, nothing like the sexy, mysterious women I had come to know.

The phone rang.

"Hi, daddy," Nicky said. "Mommy, daddy says it's an emergency."

That was it. My mother had to pop two Aspirin and we were on the road as soon as her Lady Clairol curlers could heat up.

8

Feather headdresses and large turquoise necklaces seemed to engulf the Shoshone Indian men and women that set up protest on our piece of land.

"Why are they wearing that, mommy?" Nicky asked.

"That's their jewelry."

"It's pretty."

"Maybe. But it's not worth much." My mother applied her lipstick. "Everyone out. Scooty scoot."

My father ran over to my mother and kissed her on the lips over and over.

"Did you bring it?"

My mother handed him an envelope. Inside was thirty thousand dollars. Money my father hid in a safe under the carpet in their bedroom. It was his just in case someone-broke-into-the-house-and-wanted-to-kill-him-leverage-money, but apparently this was time to use it.

My father kissed my mother again, then ran up to my grandfather who was pacing about fifteen feet from the silent Indians. I'd seen protests from the '60s on television and it was loud and bright, but this was just about the most silent thing ever. And they didn't have any signs. They just stood on their ground. The one hundred square feet that was theirs.

There were about twenty of them. All with this beautiful black hair. They were firm traditionalist. Reminded me of the Jews. All of us hanging onto a life that no longer existed, but nothing made sense without it.

My grandfather walked up to one of the Indians. He was the one with the largest headdress and he had bones for a necklace. This was Chief Whitecrow. We all watched on as our two patriarchs tried to fix the problems of their children. My father, L.P., Jonny Rae, and my uncles hung back.

The two men walked off from the others. I couldn't hear a word that anyone said. The wind was loud and the dust was all over my new dress.

"Mommy, can I get feathers?" Nicky said.

"Sure, for Halloween. Why don't you get one of your friends to play cowboy?"

"No, I want them for every day. They're so pretty."

"Honey, you don't want people to confuse you with them. They drink too much."

"But you drink," I said.

"Everyone drinks, Puss." My mother wiped dust from her pants. "But there's a fine line between fun drinking and drinking the way Indians do."

"Is it okay if Nicky drinks?"

"Nicholas." My mother corrected me. "And, no. He's too young. So are you."

"When is it okay?"

"By law, twenty-one. But in reality, probably fourteen or fifteen. Depends on the person."

Chief Whitecrow smiled at my grandfather. My grandfather could charm the pants off anyone. It all seemed to be going well.

Everyone else was restless, like children. All of them, on either side, were fidgeting and swatting flies and rolling their eyes in tiredness. I don't know how long all

of them had been there, but it must have been at least five or six hours before we got there.

Uncle Dave walked over to my grandfather and the chief. This I could hear.

"We're offering you good money, you fuck. Take it."

The chief dropped the envelope to the ground and shook his head. He looked at my grandfather, then at his group, then back at my grandfather.

"This is our ancient land. Your money isn't going to buy us off."

An Indian woman ran up to the chief. "Please, we need the money."

He waved her off.

Uncle Dave looked at her. "Listen to the woman. She knows."

"Respect our land," Chief Whitecrow said.

"We do respect your land," my grandfather said. "That's why we're willing to work with you."

A young Indian man joined them. His bare chest was brown and muscular. A beautiful man and he was the only one not dressed like the others. He had a bandana around his head and blue jeans on. I hoped he had noticed me standing over by my mother's Mercedes.

"Chief, may I speak with you," the young man said.

Chief Whitecrow nodded. Even though he looked nothing like Phil, he reminded me of him. Calm and full of peace and pain and trying to protect this same piece of land.

My father, uncles, grandfather, L.P., and Jonny Rae huddled in a circle like the vultures from a few weeks before. The envelope still on the ground with all that money.

All that green paper. I don't know why no one picked it up. It just sat there on the barren land.

I've never been a visual person. Standing on that lot for the umpteenth time I still couldn't picture anyone wanting to come there. It was just looked sad and thirsty.

Nicky played with a rock that he found. He was kicking it around my mother's Salvatore Ferragamo pumps.

"Nicholas, these are very expensive," my mother said.

"Sorry, mommy," Nicky said, then looked at and continued, "I'm bored. Aren't you bored, 'Licia?"

"I'm not bored, Nicky."

"I'm going to talk to that girl over there."

I hadn't noticed that there was a little girl standing with the group. She was just about Nicky's age. She had this long black hair and it was separated into two long braids.

Nicky walked over to her and kicked the rock at her. She giggled. I don't know what I expected, but I didn't expect that. Then she kicked the rock back and they played while the Chief spoke with the beautiful man. Nicky and the little girl sat on the ground and rolled the rock back and forth.

The man without the shirt walked up to the circle.

"No deal."

"What the fuck?" Uncle Dave said.

"We can't give up this land. We've already been ripped of too much land."

"You're not giving it up. We're handing you more money than you'll make in a lifetime, Tonto."

My grandfather called to Chief Whitecrow, but the chief shook his head.

Uncle Dave got in the man's face. "Listen, you piece of shit. I don't need to give you a goddam dime. I have people out here who can break your knee caps and take that pretty lady out and make her unmarriable."

"Dave!" My father said.

L.P. said, "Don't listen to him."

The man turned around and looked at his group and then back at my Uncle and then back at his people. They all started running at my family. All of them, but the little girl who played with my brother.

My father and Uncle Jason threw their hands in the air. Uncle Dave pushed my father in front of him to block the blows. The feet pounding the ground shook the ground under me. It was this loud rumble.

Jonny Rae pulled out a gun from pants and let out a single shot into the air. Everything that had just gotten loud was just as suddenly quiet. As if the bullet somehow turned all the sound off in the world. Everyone's face moved in slow motion. Their bodies froze as if tar had been poured over them

I had never heard a gun go off before. It was louder than it is in the movies.

"Back off." Jonny Rae pointed the gun.

The Indians retreated. It was like some Western, but I didn't feel like we were some John Wayne hero fighting the savage Indians.

Poor Nicky just sat there crying and waving to his little friend as she was scooped up by her mother. The mother and little girl climbed into the bed of a banged up pickup.

"Showed them," Uncle Dave said.

"You're a real asshole. You know that, Dave?" My father said.

L.P. pushed Uncle Dave. "I warned you. Lenny, he needs to be out of this."

My grandfather lit a cigarette, like he always did. "Dave, don't you ever do something like that again. You understand?"

L.P. shook her head. "He's already done this once."

Jonny Rae tucked his gun back into his pants.

"Good thing Jonny Rae was here." Uncle Jason ran his hand on Jonny Rae's back.

"I don't know what you're all upset about." Uncle Dave lit a cigarette. "They left. That's what we wanted. You should be thanking me."

"This won't be the last of them," my father said.

"Don't worry," L.P. said. "I'm going to stay out here. Make sure things get done straight."

"Thank God for you," my grandfather said.

My grandfather shook hands with Jonny Rae and L.P. Then he walked up to me and kissed me on the forehead.

"Some scary shit?"

I hugged him. My body shook. I didn't realize how I didn't feel safe until that moment. It's the strange thing about God or whoever makes our bodies that we go into

some kind of shock when something intense happens, but the moment we're safe we lose it completely.

9

In those days a car could drive right on Fremont Street. The lights surrounded our car with their large and obnoxious colored bulbs, which was just about the greatest site ever to a kid.

"Do you know there are two and a half million bulbs in these signs?" My father said.

"I didn't, honey," my mother said.

"Too bad this shit is run by the mob. I could make a killing here, selling bulbs."

"Yes and get killed."

They smiled at each other. We passed the Golden Nugget, my favorite place in all of Vegas. It was all glamorous and dirty. It is the real Vegas. But we weren't staying there.

"Daddy, why did that man shoot the gun?" Nicky said.

"To protect us."

"But why? They were nice to all of us."

"Nicholas, it's business."

"I was scared."

"Nothing to be scared about," my father said.

"But the noise was so loud."

"Talk to your sister."

I pulled Nicky into me. I whispered to him, "I was scared, too."

Nicky looked up at me. Then he buried his head in my arm.

I wanted to take this all away from Nicky. To make him safe from all the gunshots and the people who said things like break your knee caps, but there were too many of them.

My father looked at my mother. “I would buy you anything you ever wanted if I could just light up this street or just one of these signs.”

“I only need you,” my mother said.

I felt a little embarrassed to be there. As if I was on a private date with them.

My father placed his arm on the back of my mother’s seat.

My mother smiled. “And of course a new tennis bracelet.”

“You want a new tennis bracelet? I’ll get you one. I know a guy that was just in Africa. He gets the best diamonds. All H and above.”

My mother slid across the front seat and put her head on my father’s shoulder.

I tried to think of the diamonds and Porsches and pretty dresses that would all be mine. But I kept thinking about the Indians and their beat up pick up and that sweet little girl, and the handsome man with the bare chest.

When we finally pulled up to all the white lights that lined the valet I couldn’t enjoy it. We piled out of the car, and stood as my mother’s Louis Vuitton luggage was stacked onto the curb and onto a brass clothing rack.

Inside, the smell of cigarettes and cigars filled the room. Clank clank, ching ching, went the slot machines, and my father walked us over to the reception. As soon as he checked us in, he left us for a blackjack table.

"That's your father," my mother said to me. Then she continued, "I'm going to take Nicholas up to the room. Why don't you find your cousins?"

My aunts and cousins met us at Circus Circus.

"Alicia, you okay?" Jessica said.

Aaron turned around from the ring toss. "My dad said you pissed your pants."

"Were you scared?" John asked.

"Of course she was scared," Jeremy said. "She's a girl."

Jessica pushed Jeremy.

"What? She *is* a girl."

It's then that I realized *girl* had taken on this derogatory meaning. It was like a curse word. All the bad things a person could be were wrapped up in *girl*. I hated that I was cloaked for life in this negativity. I wanted to be a boy. To be all the things boys are supposed to be: tough, loud, funny. And, yet, I was a girl and if I acted like a girl, everyone made fun of me, and if I acted like a boy, I'd be in trouble, because girls are supposed to pretty. This prettiness encapsulates being quiet, polite, and lacking an opinion.

"Come on, girly," Aaron said.

Aaron and I split from the rest of our cousins.

As we tossed rings at the head of coke bottles, missing every time, I realized the ring toss was a trick. It looked easy enough with so many glass bottles packed tightly in, but each time we tossed one of the wooden rings, it circled the lip of the bottle, banged

into its neighbor, and fell below into the thousands of rings by little kids just like me. It was a trick like being a girl was a trick. It looked easier from far away.

"This is some bullshit," Aaron said. "We should do the baseball toss."

I wound up my arm playfully and threw the softball at the metal milk bottles. Nothing.

"I play T-ball, I got this."

Aaron threw his hard and the top bottle fell.

"What do I get for that?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Look it's all in the angle. You need to hit it right at the bottom of the lower bottles," the carney said and then threw the ball, collapsing the bottles. "Now you try."

Aaron tried again. But this time none of the bottles went down.

"This shit is rigged," Aaron said. "Come on, I'm hungry."

I followed behind him. I watched as the skin of his back pinched his red t-shirt.

"Pizza?"

I nodded. I didn't really care what we ate.

Aaron ordered us four slices of pepperoni and two Pepsis. But they didn't have Pepsi. Aaron eyed the soda seller with a look of disgust when he blankly told us that it was RC Cola, but we took it anyway.

I took a bite of the thickly-sliced pizza. It tasted of Ragu sauce and sliced American cheese. Aaron didn't seem to mind.

With a sliver of pepperoni dangling from his lips he said, “Have you ever kissed a boy?”

“No.”

“Me neither. Well, a girl. You know what I mean.”

I sipped at my straw that stuck right into the blue can. Aaron took my soda from me and took a sip. I gave him a look.

“What? Mine was done.”

“I don’t share drinks.”

“We’re cousins. Our spit is all the same.”

I shrugged.

Aaron tugged at the cheese on his pizza with his front teeth. The cheese long and rubber band like sprung against his chubby chin. His tongue in one quick pointed stretch pulled the cheese into his already full mouth. His cheeks round, puffed out with the excess.

“Do you mind?” He said as he took his third slice.

We sat there watching the other kids walk by. There was this one girl, maybe fifteen with a pink flowery dress on holding the hand of a boy with slicked back hair.

“Man, I’m never going to get a girl like that.”

“Who wants a girl like that?”

I said it. But I knew that is what they all wanted. What I wanted to be.

“My Bar Mitzvah is in two years. You know that? And Jeremy says if you can’t finger a girl on your Bar Mitzvah, you’ll stay a virgin for life.”

"What's fingering?"

Aaron looked left, then right, and whispered, "It's when you make an e' er, e 'er sound with your fingers in a girl's vagina."

I pulled the straw out of my soda, placed it next to my plate, and drank from the lip of the can.

"I don't even know why a girl would want that," Aaron said.

"I don't know."

"Wanna try and throw some bean bags in a hole?"

"Sure."

We got up from our table, leaving behind napkins and paper plates, and cheese crusted onto the cocktail table.

I picked up a bean bag and threw it. It hit the board and fell down. Aaron threw one over the board. Then I threw one and it hit the middle hole and slinked out. Aaron took his bag, threw it hard, and it knocked over the board, but didn't make it into one of the holes. I turned around and threw it between my legs, and somehow, somehow it made it in the smallest hole.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Aaron said.

I won a life-sized Bugs Bunny.

"You are the greatest. I swear. I've never seen anything like that." Aaron went on.

He was jumping up and down as if he won. I forgot all about the girl stuff and remembered how important family was and his cheering me made me feel like the most wonderful person in the room.

We walked the circular pathway that hung above all the adult games clinging and clanging below us. We must have walked it three times and decided to take a seat in a corridor. Aaron sat on the floor and I sat on top of Bugs, his carrot knocking me on my arm.

"Why is it you're so skinny and I'm so fat?" Aaron said.

"I'm not so skinny."

He pulled out M&M's from his pocket. He looked at them as they sat in his hand and then he threw them against a door that said "Employees Only."

"Melt in your mouth, not in your hand. That's some BS."

He rubbed his hand against the side of his Bermuda shorts, with one leg scrunched up into his thigh.

"You know kids say mean things about me? Well, they do. They call me wide load, and fat ass, and Aaron the Eat Everything."

I smiled.

"That last one is stupid, I know. But it doesn't feel any better."

We both laughed. Then I got up and sat down next to him. I put my hand in his.

"Who is ever going to want to kiss this face?"

"Lots of girls. Remember that girl in Mexico? That pretty girl in the red bikini, she followed you everywhere."

Aaron lightly tapped his head against the pink wall, tilted it towards me, so that his neck looked as if it had an under bite, and he just stared at me as tears ran down his face. Then he choked out the words, "She made out with Jeremy."

I leaned toward him and kissed him softly on the lips. They tasted of marinara sauce and the salt of his tears, moist on his cracked thin lips. I moved my mouth away and rested my forehead upon his. He then hugged me tight against him, I could feel his breath as it heaved in and out in heavy successions. His tears ran down the back of my tank top. I drew circles with my finger along his lumpy back.

"Hey guys," Jeremy said. "What you doing?"

Aaron let go of me.

"Why were you hugging?"

Aaron rubbed snot away from his nose.

"Alicia, was being a girl about things."

10

Jonny Rae was taken into custody for tax evasion. It was two days after we got back from Vegas. Uncle Jason, in his Uncle Jason way, kept saying but we're the chosen people. He was as simple as they came.

My parents had a long, awful fight after we found out the news. It was all about how my grandfather screwed us over. That's what my mother kept saying. And my father called her family a bunch of fucking losers and that he wasn't coming to Christmas in a few weeks. I knew how this would be.

She was too hungover to take me to school. Instead we went for ice cream.

My mother ordered each of us our scoops in waffle cones. The boy behind the counter drew a smiley face out of red decorator icing. It made Nicky's whole day. That kid smiled brighter than I had ever seen.

The warm waffle cones smelled just like the carnival my grandfather had taken me just a year before. The carnival with the woman with one eye. She wasn't a Cyclops, but rather one eye was all scarred up and closed, the other was large and dark lined in black. She wore a dress with hundreds of pockets in the skirt filled with surprises. My grandfather gave me a fifty-cent piece and said *Go for gold, kid*. I carefully choose my pocket. In it I found a plastic compass. I used that damn thing all day. So focused on the small gadget that I kept bumping into little kids and grandmothers –not like my grandmother on my father's side with her see-through blouses, but the kind of grandmothers I saw in commercials with cottony, white hair and polyester suits. Thinking back it was a small carnival, a makeshift one, the kind where bolts and screws are applied

in haste. It was in an abandoned parking lot that later became a Pic N' Save. Organ music played in the background as a child younger than Nicky danced about, kicking his short, chubby legs in the air. I followed my compass to where the music played. I was headed North-North-East. Amazed that the little plastic compass that didn't even fill the palm of my hand was that advanced to distinguish NNE. Thrilled, actually. This was a time when kids walked alone in big places. There weren't the overwhelming news stories of children abducted on each street corner. There I was with a waffle cone in one hand and that compass in the other when I came upon the one-eyed woman who was off behind a brown trailer, out of sight from the rest of the carnival goers. Her surprise skirt lifted and a man touched her dark place. *I'm on a break,* was all she said to me.

When I got to where my peanut butter and chocolate ice cream dipped into my Baskin Robbins waffle cone, I couldn't eat it. I still haven't had a waffle cone.

My mother dipped her cone into a cup. So the pointy end was up. "Do you know how lucky you are to skip school today?"

Nicky licked the melted ice cream from his hand. "I do."

My mother laughed. "You skip school every day. I was talking to you sister."

"Mommy, aren't I supposed to be in school?" Nicky said.

"You're a boy, so I held you back."

Nicky stared at his ice cream. "Are boys not smart?"

"Oh no, honey. Boys are the smartest. They invent everything. Are the best chefs. And only men are president." My mother licked off her spoon. "But sometimes when your birthday is on the cusp it's better for boys to be the oldest in class."

Nicky said, “What did they invent?”

“Just about everything. That ice cream you’re eating. The car we’re driving. The chair you’re sitting on,” my mother said.

Nicky looked confused. “Then what do girls do?”

My mother wiped the corners of her mouth. “Girls are supposed to be mothers.”

Nicky was all confused. “Then why do girls go to school?”

“To give their mothers a break.” She laughed and then continued. “Girls go to school because they teach their children before their children go to school.”

“What if ‘Licia wants to be president?” Nicky said.

“It’s A-Licia. Annunciate.” My mother repeated the A-Licia three times.

“Alicia,” Nicky said. “Can she be president?”

“Not in my lifetime there won’t be a woman president, a black, an Oriental, certainly not a Mexican, and unfortunately for you, Nicholas, not a Jew.”

“Why? I mean aren’t black people and women and everyone just as smart?” Nicky said.

I said, “Did you know Nicky, just twenty years ago, black people had to drink from different water fountains?”

Nicky’s face was all surprise.

“Ms. Drake told us.” I went on, “White people didn’t like black people so much they hung them from trees. It’s called lynching.”

Nicky licked his fingers. “Why would people do that?”

My mother put her ice cream down. “Don’t scare Nicholas. He’s just a little boy.”

I shrugged. “I’m just telling him what school told me.”

Nicky was just about upset as his could be. “I don’t want to be white anymore.”

My mother rubbed his head. “You feel that way now, but you’ll be thankful later that you are.”

11

We sat in the car outside of Rock n' Roll Ralph's. It had all the same items and décor as any other Ralph's, but all the longhaired heshers with their skin tight black leather pants and ripped tank tops shopped for their apples and asparagus.

"Kids, don't dilly dally. We have to get home to make a special dinner for your father."

"Because of your fight?"

"Puss, did you say you wanted fruit roll-ups for lunch?" My mother said.

"Yes," I said.

"Nicholas, anything special?"

Nicky was all cross-armed and pouty. "Mommy, are we being mean to the Indians because they aren't white?"

"Okay, I guess all the strawberry fruit roll ups go to A-licia." My mother said.

Nicky stomped his feet. "Why?"

"Nicholas, stop that right now." My mother then looked at me. "Look what you've done, with all that ridiculous talk about black people."

"Mom," I said. "But it's not ridiculous. Everyone would stop fighting if we just gave them what they want."

"Do you know what your father is doing right now? Do you? He had to catch at 6 a.m. flight to bail out Jonny Rae because those Indians you love so much are trying to take everything from us."

"But, mom –"

"Everyone scooty scoot. Let's get in the store so we can have dinner ready for daddy."

Nicky swung his door open hitting the car next to us. "I want roll ups."

"Oh, alright. You can have fruit roll ups." My mother sashayed into the store. "Don't let me forget that your daddy wants pretzels."

I laughed, "I won't. I remember how mad he got last time we forgot them."

My mother didn't laugh at this. She just put her purse into the cart. She double-checked to make sure she had her check guarantee card.

"Mommy," Nicky said. "Can I have some of daddy's pretzels?"

"No, honey. Those are just for daddy," my mother said. "But I'll get you a little bag just for you."

It was bright as hell in the market. All fake and infuriating with some type of Kenny G mixed with pop in the background.

As soon as we walked in this black guy carrying a six pack of beer came running up to the blonde security officer who was already balding, even though he was maybe twenty-four.

"I'm sorry, man. I stole these. I had a fight with my girl and I just wanted to bring it back."

The man handed the six back to the security officer who was about an inch shorter but all muscle.

The security officer said, "We have to call the police."

The man who returned the six pack said, “But, I’m bringing it back. Come on, man, I’ve been gone five minutes.”

The security officer pushed him. The black guy had a real sweet face. It was soft and kind.

I said, “Mom, he didn’t mean to take it.”

My mother said, “Puss, security will take care of this.”

“Please, my girl’s a cashier here. Let’s not do this.”

The security officer pushed him again. “All the better. I hate guys like you.”

The guy who stole and returned the beer stood there. He just took it. Then another guy with a shaved head and pink skin pushed him.

Then another man came up. He had this brown mullet and he wore a purple tank top with a surfboard on it. His back had all these red pimples. He said, “What’s going on here?”

My mother turned to me, “See he’ll help.”

Nicky covered his eyes with his little hands.

The security officer said, “This nigger stole beer.”

The word rang through my ears. I hated it for him.

Then the man in the purple tank top punched the guy. He hit the floor. Then the security officer, the shaved head man, and the purple tank top guy kicked and punched the guy who returned the beer, as the poor sonofabitch tried to cover his face.

People just stood around. I stood around. No one did a thing. This was right by the charcoal at the front of the store and they were all covered in black dust as bags fell to the ground around them.

"Hey!" Said a mother with identical twins in identical outfits. "Someone needs to help him."

My mother stood at our cart, protecting her purse with her check guarantee card and our list of pretzels and cashews and gummy sharks, all for my father.

The other mother ran up to every box boy and screamed at them to help. I was all tears and so was Nicky. We shook together as we watched the blood from the man splatter onto his clothes and the men's fists and footwear.

Nicky slipped away from me. He went right up to the man with the purple tank top and kicked him in the shin. "You stop that. You stop that right now."

Nicky was hysterical. But so brave.

The purple tank top man nudged Nicky away. I wanted to tell the man to stop but I couldn't. I was afraid he would kick me or worse.

The twins' mother said, "Isn't anyone going to stop these barracudas?"

The man with the shaved head took the man's sweaty mangled hair in his hand and banged his head against the linoleum.

A plump, red-headed woman yelled, "Jesus Christ."

From behind her an old man said, "Jesus ain't gonna help him now."

There we were, a room full of people, a market full of people and fear stopped each and every one of us, except for Nicky and that mother with the twins. No one did a

goddam thing as three men punched, kicked, and eventually spit on the poor guy. What surprised me the most was that his girlfriend, this heavyset cashier with thin, high-arched eyebrows didn't leave her counter. Not once. I knew it was her because I heard one of the box boys say it was. She watched like the rest of us. I wanted my mother to offer the men money to stop beating the poor man who was all compact with his knees close to his chest and his hands clenched in fists as his forearms blocked his face. He never took a swing. Not one. I wanted the girlfriend to say stop. But the only person making any noise beside the man on the floor was the woman with the twins and Nicky. They were both crying loudly. The funny thing was, in that it was real sick and sad and painful, was that in the background, while these men clobbered the poor man, played *We are the World, We are the Children.* I didn't think anyone, but I had noticed, then I saw that my mother's hips sway slight right and slight left to the beat. *We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let's start giving*. I don't know still if she was aware of what she was doing, but it doesn't really matter. She was dancing.

When the police finally arrived Billy clubs in hand, whacking each of the bastards on the back. The security guard fell to the ground, hitting his knees hard and loud against the linoleum. The one with the shaved head stood still as each policeman took a turn at him. The purple tank top took one hit, looked at one of the officers, and ran out the door. He didn't get far because in the parking lot there were about three or four cop cars.

The amazing thing to me was that all these people, myself included, didn't have a goddam word to say, but once the police were there, it was like a bunch of Chatty Cathy

dolls clamoring and whinging all at once. Some sort of Twilight Zone episode. It sounded like tin and nails scratches and howls.

My mother finally spoke, “Well that was exciting, wasn’t it?”

Nicky looked at me and I didn’t know what to say. I put his hand in mine.

My mother pushed the cart into the produce section. “Apples. Carrots. Plums. Yes, your father loves plums. And, it’s finally plum season. Strawberries. Alicia, Nicholas, do you want bananas?”

Nicky rubbed his runny nose against my arm. “No, mommy.”

I shook my head. The sound of the siren blared as the ambulance backed up to the automatic doors. I watched on as the poor man was lifted into the stretcher all covered in deep red blood and sweat. His hair flat against his head. His arms and body crumbled inward. Two box boys mopped up the blood on the floor into yellow buckets. People entered the store and had no idea what had just happened.

I thought of the Indians and lynching and all the other atrocities in the world and people just go on buying their goddam Cream of Wheat and Ding Dongs and Coca-Cola. It doesn’t seem to matter to anyone. Maybe that’s why they did it. Or maybe, the other shoppers were like my mother weak and helpless and they knew the only thing they could do was be pretty and buy goddam groceries and bare children while white men became the President and inventors and start all the wars.

12

"I'm not saying you're fat." My father piled mash potatoes onto his plate. "I'm saying you've looked better."

My mother sipped on a rocks glass filed with ice and just enough 7-Up to dilute the gin.

"You could give me an eating disorder," my mother said.

"Sweetheart, you're still pretty. It's just, a few months ago your arms were toned, and now they're not."

My mother looked at Nicky and me. "Do you think my arms are fat?"

My mother's arms were always lovely, just like her legs. They were not too thin, like those women who you feel you could snap their body parts over your knee. They were these beautiful, womanly arms.

"Mommy, you're the prettiest," Nicky said.

"Why do you insist on making a big deal out of nothing?" My father said. "I'm just trying to help you."

My mother didn't say anything. I wanted her to tell him what a bastard he was, but she didn't. She knew her place, and worse yet, I knew her place. I knew by then that women were supposed to be pretty and sexy and thin, and that they didn't mean much to the world if they weren't. They weren't supposed to fight back. They were supposed to take criticism about their figures and vocal tone and attitude and then adjust it accordingly. I wasn't sure how the hell I would made it out alive and blossom from a flat-chested ten year old in overalls to a woman in fitted dresses and four inch heels.

"Did you see the chick who moved in down the street?" My father said.

"No, not yet," my mother said. "Is she nice?"

I knew she had seen her. We had all seen her. She was maybe, maybe ten years older than I was, but she was all busty and perky and married to a man in his late fifties. Even then it seemed dirty to me.

"Yes, you have." I couldn't help myself. "The one with the old husband."

"Oh, yes. She's such a kid. Are you sure they're married, Puss? Maybe it's his granddaughter."

"They're married. Remember she told us?" I said.

My mother sipped at her rocks glass.

"She's pretty," Nicky said.

My mother looked at my brother. "She's okay."

"Jesus, Carol. It's okay to say another woman is pretty."

"I think a lot of women are pretty, but I think she has sort of a big forehead." My mother picked at her veal. "Plus she's so young. I don't get that."

"I do," my father said.

"You would want to be with a young girl like that?" my mother said.

"Look, I don't make the rules. It's human nature. Men are more attracted to women who are more fertile."

"Where'd you learn that?" My mother said.

"I read it at the dentist's office."

"That's just sick."

"You call it sick. I call it sexy. I think we'll have to leave it at that."

This was the usual for them. I had heard this as long as I could remember, but this fight had a significance to it. I think it was because I was finally aware of how wrong it was, and how powerless my mother felt. She was powerless because she didn't have a career or a way out. This is how it was. Men bought women things, called them pretty, put them up in a house and offered them the dream job of housewife, complete with manicures and pedicures, boozy lunches, and vacations anywhere in the world, and in turn he gets to berate her and mold her and shatter anything she was before giving her hand to him.

And, worst of all, she was powerless because she thought this was love.

I felt miserable for her. I wanted to tell her how pretty and lovely her arms were, and that the busty twenty year old down the street was nothing compared to her. I wanted to tell her that we would be better in a two bedroom apartment in Van Nuys than living here. I wanted to hug her.

My father went on. "Her husband invited us over dinner. I thought it would be neighborly of us to go."

"That would be neighborly of us," my mother said.

"I told them tomorrow night."

"Who will watch the kids?"

"Dave said he could."

My mother began to clear the table. As she did she dropped her fork, which flung her mashed potatoes at my father.

"You ruined my fucking shirt," my father said.

My mother jumped up to get a towel and wet it from the sink.

"It's silk. You can't wet silk."

My father took his napkin and a spoon to get the potato off him. A round stain was left on his blue silk shirt. I was glad it happened.

"Alicia," my mother said. "Why don't you tell your father what happened at Ralph's today."

I knew right then that my mother didn't want to be in trouble anymore, because she never included me in the conversation.

"Daddy," Nicky was all excited. "These awful men beat us this guy because he was black."

My father grunted.

"Really, dad," I said.

"They beat him up because he was a thief, not because he was black," my mother said.

"Talking about thieves, these Indians are really busting my balls. I don't have anything more to give them."

Nicky was standing on his chair. "Daddy, they were punching him like crazy. And they called him a 'nigger'."

Nicky whispered the last part.

"Carol, bring me a glass of water."

And she did. She always did this for him. Even though deep down I think she hated him, she never wanted him to leave her.

"It was scary." I pushed the extra veal to the edges of my plate.

"Black people are thieves," my father said.

"But he was bringing it back," Nicky said.

"Alicia, why don't you take your brother outside," my mother said.

"Daddy will you play us?" Nicky asked.

"Nicholas, your father works very hard all day. He doesn't have the energy when he gets home."

I don't remember a time when my father played with us. Not once throwing a ball or tossing a Frisbee or even just watching us play. It seemed his contribution to fatherhood was his sperm and paycheck.

"But your mother can play with you."

"Kids, you know I would, but I have to do all the dishes."

"That's okay." I said. "Nicky, we'll just play outside for a bit."

"Nicholas." My mother corrected me.

Nicky and I tossed a pink rubber ball outside. We pretended he was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and I was Magic Johnson. We didn't have a basketball hoop, or a basketball for that matter, but it felt good to pretend to be someone else.

13

"Orange nail polish is for street walkers." My mother scolded Angelique from her chair.

Angelique put the orange polish back, and opted for the cherry red color.

We were at Star Nails Shop #4. A little hole in the wall spot on Melrose Avenue. This was before every third shop sold sweatshop-made Lycra dresses, before the pink and purple Mohawks, and before fat free yogurt shops lined the streets..

Angelique lived four doors down from us in a house twice the size of ours with her husband, Marty, and two sons. One of them brutalized my neighbor, Pakshani, but this didn't seem to bother my mother, or Angelique. It sure as hell bothered me.

Angelique was a tell-it-how-it-is-kind-of-person. But I never got why she didn't tell Harry to stop yanking on Pakshani's little deformed arm. However, I still liked her. She always gave me Jolly Ranchers when I saw her. She would save the watermelon flavor ones for me. You can't hate a person who does something like that. It was too generous.

She had this gloriously wavy black hair. This was before all the blow out shops popped up. It was dramatic and sexy, and all the men liked her. My father would find ways to touch her hair. Surprisingly my mother still liked Angelique. I didn't understand their friendship, but looking back, I think it was because Angelique never encouraged my father.

The whole nail place smelled of cheap lacquer, some type of fried egg dish, and an aggressive odor of oils and perfumes. It made me sick to take it all. In the background

on a small mounted television set played a Vietnamese man dressed in a pink suit singing "Blowing in the Wind."

"I love Dylan. I told Marty, before I married him, that if there was chance to see Bob Dylan I would be there," Angelique said. "I said, 'Marty, if he's within driving distance, I'm going.'"

My mother laughed. "Bob Dylan?"

"I know," Angelique said. "I hate marijuana, long haired men, and I am a goddam card carrying Republican, but Dylan just speaks to me."

"I love Neil Diamond," my mother said. "There's just something about him."

"I didn't know you were a music person." Angelique blew on her nails.

"Carl, isn't one." My mother clicked her nails against the counter. "And I'd never get away with telling Carl I'm doing anything."

"Marty doesn't like it." Angelique flipped a magazine page. "He lost his ever loving mind when I told him I was seeing Dylan with or without him on his mother's birthday." She looked at my mother. "I'm nothing but honest. You know me. You know what you're getting with me. I told him before we got married about Dylan, and he was all, 'Whatever you want, Ange. Anytime he plays you can go. Why would I ever want to stop you from doing something you love?' Cut to, 'You're a selfish cunt.'."

The word cunt has always bothered me. It has this heavy-handed derogatory way about it that the word "dick" and "prick" don't carry.

Betty always did my nails when my mother took me with her. Betty was beautiful. Really a gorgeous woman. *She's pretty for an Oriental* is how my mother described her.

My mother always had disclaimers for other races. They were pretty for, not just pretty.

Betty filed and buffed my nails into a shape between a square and round. Blowing off the excess nail dust with her perfectly lined lips.

She had this really narrow body, no butt, but these fake boobs that looked hard and round, but still small. I wondered what she looked like under her fitted t-shirt. If her nipples were the same as mine.

"So, I left him," Angelique said.

I pulled my hand away. I wanted to say something to Angelique, but like always I didn't. I was quiet. But the room wasn't. Immediately upon Angelique's confession, the women doing our nails started ping-ponging their conversations in quick and excited Vietnamese.

"It's America, not Saigon," a woman with big large curlers tucked under a lavender scarf said.

"It's so rude," my mother nodded at her.

"Did you hear me, Carol?" Angelique said.

My mother moved her foot out of the water and onto the lap of the plump woman who was doing her pedicure. "Yes, I heard. Everyone heard. What do you think they're all talking about?"

"Well?" Angelique said.

"I don't think fifteen years of a marriage should be thrown away over a concert."

"It wasn't the concert." Angelique pulled a tissue from her bag. "He's allowed to play golf whenever he wants. And go out for poker night –with topless cocktail waitresses. Topless. And he gets to have a weekend with just him and the guys in Vegas every year."

"Marty works very hard for his money, to support you," my mother said.

"You know he never even changed a diaper," Angelique said.

"That is our job." My mother laughed. "I never expected Carl to do that."

"So my job is supposed to be a mother and a fuck machine and…"

"Angelique, Alicia is here," my mother stopped her.

"I don't care. I don't care anymore. Alicia, cover your ears," Angelique shook her head.

But I didn't cover my ears. And she didn't even wait for me to do so before she went on.

"He wants me to bend over anytime. Anytime he wants. I even let him film me." Angelique fidgeted with a bottle of nail polish. "I didn't mind changing the shitty diapers, being the friendly hostess to his business associates, and cooking meals five nights a week, as long as I got to see Dylan." Angelique took two dollars out of her bag and handed it to her pedicurist.

Betty massaged my hands with lotion that smelled like Fruit Stripe gum, the kind sold at Toys R Us, with the giraffe on the packaging, rock hard strips, and the best two point five seconds of flavor my mouth had ever tasted. The smell was so strong I couldn't smell the other odors anymore.

"But if I can't get someone to ask me more than just what is in my Chicken Piccata that makes it have such a kick…I went to UCLA for god's sake. I can't get one of those people at the parties to ask me more than goddam decorating questions and cooking tips and who does my hair. All I ask for is Dylan. Maybe, maybe, one night a year he's at the Bowl or in Santa Barbara."

"It's not so bad, Angie," my mother said. "Sure there are things we give up, but think about all the women, like these nail girls, who have to work every day. Honestly, I feel lucky. So what if I miss a concert?"

"I'd rather work and feel like a whole person."

My mother shrugged her shoulders.

Betty took a warm towel and rubbed off the excess lotion in long strides. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"Good. Your mother's friend is right." Betty painted on clear polish onto my fingertips. "They are all like this."

"Like what?" I said.

"They don't appreciate anything," Betty said. "They think because they have thingy between their legs and ours goes in we are supposed to take everything. My husband said to me, Bian."

"Bian?" I said.

"That's my real name. You said it perfectly. Most Americans can't say it. So, when I started working here he made me change my name." Betty put the fan on my wet

nails. “He said, Bian, your work is very easy. You sit in a chair all day. Then he makes me give him all the money, and you know what he does? He goes to the track. He throws it down on the horses. Call Me Lucky and Brighton Beach Mare and who knows the rest of their names.”

“Is he Vietnamese?” I said.

“No, he’s American.” Betty painted pale pink moons on the tips of my nails. “In American movies men were always so kind.”

Betty must have only been twenty-two at the time, but there was something really womanly about her, and until that moment, I hadn’t noticed what that womanly thing was –it was sadness.

Any real woman I had known was sad. Something happened between fifteen and twenty-five to most of them, that changed a face of sweetness into this thing we call womanly.

Angelique click-clacked her nails against the Formica counter. “Are you happy with Carl?”

“Of course.” My mother dangled her toes at her pedicurist. “I think this color might be too pink. What do you think, Tammy?”

Tammy didn’t answer her but immediately poured acetone onto a cotton swab until my mother’s toes were flesh colored.

Angelique said, “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Angelique spun her swivel chair right at me. “Do you think that’s true, Alicia?”

I really hate when someone does something like this. They put you on the spot to contradict someone else. Nothing pisses me off more. Well, maybe nothing pisses me off more than someone knowing the answer and only asks the question to see if you'll be truthful or agree with them. That's some bullshit right there. Maybe it's a tie. But either way I was really beginning to hate Angelique for asking me this. I had already disliked her for not dealing with her terrible son who threw bottle caps at Pakshani and called her freak, but now she was asking for me to be honest, when she sure as hell knew I couldn't be.

"It's true," I said.

"Just because your marriage has gone down the drain, doesn't mean mine has to," my mother said. "You know Barrie told about all of us how great being single was again in her thirties, and Lisa left. Guess what? They're both living in two bedroom apartments in Van Nuys. Van Nuys, of all places." My mother pushed her blonde away from her face. "That will not be my fate, and don't try to talk me into it."

"I'm not trying to talk you into anything," Angelique said. "It's just that I see how he talks to you. I see the face you make when you think no one is looking."

"What face?"

I knew exactly the face Angelique was talking about. It was the face that made her sit in the dark drinking gin.

"I don't want to fight," Angelique said.

Betty whispered to me, "Your mother is not a happy person. She is very pretty, she smiles a lot, but her friend is right, she is not happy."

But my mother wouldn't let it go. "What face? I'm asking, because I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Alicia, back me up."

Now everyone's chairs were swiveled in my direction, it wasn't just my mother and Angelique, but the woman with the rollers and the other nail ladies, and all those perfumed women in the shop. Everyone was waiting for me.

"Sometimes you seem sad," I said.

"I'm not sad."

"I don't know. It's just sometimes, daddy says things and it really hurts your feelings."

"That's marriage, little girl."

"He calls you fat."

My mother looked around to the other women. "He doesn't say I'm fat. He says, I have thick thighs. And, I do."

14

My father started banging the twenty year old down the street.

Her name was Lana.

This was unlike any of the other women he had bedded. My father didn't have a type –well they had to be sexy –but they could be black, white, Asian, Indian, he didn't give anything. Mind you, he would never settle with any woman who wasn't white, but he sure enjoyed all the women. She wasn't unlike the other women because she looked different, but because he fell for her.

My father was a real bastard about the whole thing. He didn't even hide the receipts or the pink frosted lipstick on his briefs. It was all right in your face. He didn't seem to care.

What really pissed me off was my mother. She still brought him his water to bed and massaged his feet and told him she loved him. I wanted to yell at her. I wanted to hit her. I wanted her to leave. But she stayed.

"Honey, your father and I have too much history."

"But what about Lana?"

"He's a man. They all look at other women."

"But…mom, he likes her. Likes her likes her," I said.

She folded his underwear meticulously into three folds. She never questioned him about his late nights or smudges on his dirty laundry, instead she washed his Calvin Klein's with a cup and a half of Clorox, and a side of gin, for her.

"Don't worry so much," my mother said. "He'll never leave us."

“I don’t care if he leaves,” I said.

Nicky came running into the laundry room. “Daddy’s leaving?”

“Alicia Marie, stop worrying your brother.”

Nicky started to cry.

“See! This is what I’m talking about.” My mother bent down to Nicky was crying onto his Superman Underoos. “Honey, daddy is staying with us.”

“No, no, no.”

That’s all he said. No, over and over and over. He was on his stomach kicking and flailing his arms and legs on the Spanish tile. His peach legs were now a reddish color, all hot with upset.

“Alicia, why do you do this?” My mother said.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You made Nicholas upset.” My mother tried to pet his back. “It will be a wonder if any man ever loves you. I have to love you, and it’s hard for me.”

Nicky flung up hitting my mother in her chest with his head. She held onto her small breast, covered under a pink blouse. It must have really hurt because even the gin didn’t seem to ease the pain.

Nicky then looked at her. He was square to her eyes because she was sitting on the floor.

“I hate daddy. I don’t want him to live here anymore,” Nicky said.

My mother took Nicky’s thin little peach and red arms into hers, and then slapped him as hard as she could across the face.

"Don't ever say that again. Do you understand me, Nicholas James Davich?"

He plopped back down onto the tile wailing. The saliva in his mouth stretched like a cobweb over his tiny teeth.

Through his screams and cries, "But he's mean to you."

My mother took the laundry basket up stairs and slammed the door to her bedroom.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for my mother at the same time that I hated her for being so weak. My bastard of a father even made my mother become friendly with that Lana. That way he could spend as much time with Lana as he wanted. The sad thing was my mother went along with it. She knew what I knew, what Nicky knew, that this Lana wasn't just another fling. My mother would have thrown things and threatened to leave like she did so many times in the past, if she thought it was just a momentary pleasure. The thing is, she knew if she pushed on this, just a bit he would actually leave her. It was the most disgusting and pathetic and a weird way, somehow the most romantic thing I'd ever seen.

The mornings were abuzz with my mother on the treadmill. She had cut her meals down to small salads, Diet Coke, and Dexatrim. She had always taken Dexatrim, but she was now doubling up on the diet pill. It was pure mania.

"I'm in love with her."

My father was on the living room phone with Uncle Dave. He didn't think anyone could hear over the swooshing of the treadmill.

Back then I didn't know what love was. I knew I got a funny feeling between my legs for Davy Jones of the Monkees. On school days they used to play reruns of the show at 7 a.m. I would practice their walk, like they did during in the credits. My legs long and extended. But I didn't know what it was like to feel like you couldn't live without someone. That feeling that nothing matters if you can't be with them. That sick feeling. I had never felt it, yet. But what I did know was that my father felt it for Lana.

It seemed so rash and impetuous since she had only moved in three weeks prior, but I didn't know that love doesn't need time –at least not that initial feeling of love.

I may not have known what love was, but I what I did know was this would kill my mother. I don't mean in the melodramatic way people say 'I could just die' or 'I was scared to death' but in that this would actually kill her.

"I've never felt this way before, Dave," he went on.

I thought about ways to kill Lana. I had seen a movie about a boy who poisoned his mother with arsenic, but didn't know where I would get it. I thought of shooting her. Maybe I would sneak Jonny Rae's gun from him. I thought about setting fire to her home. That wouldn't have worked because her husband seemed real nice –even if he was a dirty old man.

My father whispered into the receiver. "Of course I still love Carol. It's just this is different. It's as if mother fucking cupid shot me all up with arrows."

I couldn't hear what my uncle said on the other line, but I could tell my father was thinking about getting out this marriage. And this would end my mother –and then I would have to live with him and Lana.

15

The dirty old man rang our doorbell.

His name was Henry.

I was watching The Smurfs. It always struck me odd that there was a whole town of blue men fighting for the attention of Smurfette. I never understood why the creators only made one woman. Like it was supposed to show something about men and women, but as a kid, the only Smurf that was like me was totally helpless and lusted after.

I sat at the top of the stairs.

"Your husband is sleeping with my wife."

"I don't think so."

My mother was a liar. I had seen her lie about little things like if someone asked if she colored her hair to big things like swearing she didn't pocket the bartender's tip off the bar in Mexico. She really could lie about anything, but she definitely would lie anytime her pride was on the line.

"I found this."

Henry handed my mother a card. She looked it over and handed it back to him. His trembling hands took it back.

"He's very charming, Henry. Don't read too much into this."

"Would you mind if I had a glass of water?"

Henry and my mother sat in the living room on opposite sofas. Water quickly turned into gin –my mother had Jesus beat.

"Do you think they'll leave us?"

"You need to calm down. Carl is a friendly guy. He's always loved the ladies. But I promise you, cross my heart, that he would never leave me."

"I hope you're right. Lana is my whole life."

"Didn't you two just get married?"

"We met about a year ago. I know, I know what people think. She could be my daughter. And, it's true she is young enough to be my daughter."

"Granddaughter." My mother was really pushing it.

"I think you've had too much gin."

"Never enough."

"I was producing a pilot and in walks this woman. You have to realize I've been around beautiful women all my life –"

"What show?"

"It never made it past the network suits. But it was a good show. All about sexy women who are funny and fight crime. It was an updated Cagney and Lacey."

"I wanted to be an actress."

"You, my dear, would be wonderful on screen. Look at those cheekbones."

"You think so?"

That really got to me. She knew she would be wonderful on the screen. But she, like my father's mother, had given it up for marriage and children. Both forbidden by their husbands to work in the *whore's profession* –as my grandfather called it.

"I could get you on a show tomorrow."

"That would really piss off Carl."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then you will be working by next week. Maybe just a few lines, but you'll be working."

That's all my mother needed was more lights and attention on her. I mean, I knew she needed this ego boost through the whole thing, but it really wasn't I needed from her.

"Well, Lana walks on the set. I swear I was hit by something. I'd been married in my twenties, and confession, I have a son older than her. But it's not that she's sexy and beautiful. Okay, it's that she's sexy and beautiful, but she's also remarkably passionate and compassionate and you can never tell her what to do."

"You have nothing to worry about then. Carl would never go for that."

"Men want that."

"No, they don't."

"We will attempt to control, but in the end what gets us is the uncontrollable. The woman who knows who she is. And, I will tell you this, Lana, is the only woman I've ever known that truly knows who she is."

Henry lit up a cigarette. My mother who never smoked, took one. Watching her smoke between the wrought iron, staircase railing was dark and sad. But even then, at ten, I wanted to put a cigarette to my lips and inhale. It seemed that there was something about cigarettes.

I imagined myself sixteen or seventeen with pointy breasts and a cigarette. Something sexual and womanly was in the cigarette. But I didn't know then it was a habit

of nervous people. People who didn't trust themselves to behave correctly. I know this because I've been a smoker for over twenty years.

"That's true for short periods of time."

My mother coughed out her exhale.

"No. My dear. A good man, a man who is confident in himself wants someone to challenge him. He doesn't need to be the head of his domicile."

My mother snubbed out her half smoked cigarette into the ashtray that had my father's initials.

"Of course, we try. But the interest is gone if she isn't her own woman."

"But doesn't that mean you fight all the time?"

"The opposite. We both know we are strong personalities and we don't push the other. One doesn't feel, well, until our dinner the other night, a disparity in power, therefore no one is resentful."

Henry swallowed down a large gulp of gin.

"I guess I was a fool to think it would last forever."

Just then I kicked my brother's He-Man off the step onto the tile below. I pulled my feet up, as not to be seen.

"Who's there?"

I put my feet down and walked downstairs.

"Henry, this is my snoop of a daughter, Alicia."

I waved.

"I have a daughter about your age. How old are you, twelve?"

"Ten."

"I have a fourteen year old. Not the same mother as my son. A makeup woman on a set I was working on. Crazy as all hell." Henry pointed at me. "That's why you always have to have the guy bag it."

He patted the sofa next to him for me to sit. He smelled of caramel and cigarette smoke.

"My daughter is great. But her mother is a real piece of work," Henry said.

"I've never seen her," I said.

"That's the screwy thing with the courts, the women always get the children, even if they are on Quaaludes."

"What's that?"

"Just a handful of magic."

After Henry left, my mother sat in the dark living room drinking gin until my father came home. She showed him the card and cried. He hugged her and swore that he would stop it.

16

My father was really good that week. I didn't hear him sneak phone calls or come in late. He even agreed to go a party at my mother's friend's house before we headed to my other grandparents' house for Christmas Eve.

I sat at the bottom of the stairs bouncing a clear Superball with swirled blues, greens, and purples against the tile that was the same as my parents' favorite Mexican restaurant, El Cajon. Of course when we went with them we were sat in an adjacent booth.

I could hear Naima and Pakshani joking with each other as they threw a Frisbee out front. They were my Pakistani neighbors, but half that, and half Mormon. That's how my mother put it. No matter how many times someone explained to my mother that Mormonism is a religion not a race or nationality my mother would say the half and half bit. She would introduce them at parties as *the only Paki's who left their godforsaken country to join a cult*. Then she would laugh. Everyone else would laugh too, because that's what adults did back then when someone said something crappy. Their mother would laugh, because she didn't want to be left out, or maybe she thought it was funny. I never knew.

Naima was a year older than I. She was a tall, beautiful girl with these lanky limbs that made her look like a model, and was *smart as a whip*. Whatever that means. It's what my father would always say about her.

It's what people say, but it's a pretty goddam terrible expression.

Her elementary school wanted to move her straight into UCLA from fifth grade. Her mother, Afia, who grew up in a small village in Pakistan, where she kept shaded from the sun in a clay two room abode after a long day of tilling the land, wanted her daughter to have the full experience of being a child and declined the university offer. This was not to say Afia was indifferent to her daughter's education. Besides Naima attending Westlake school for girls, her mother employed a private tutor three afternoons a week and all day Saturday.

Then there was Pakshani. She had some sort of deformity that made her one arm shorter than the other. It was short, like way shorter than the other arm, but with a normal sized hand. She could throw with that arm like no one I had ever seen. One time she took a tennis ball and flung it across her pool clear over the barbeque, at least two hundred feet away. It was like God or whoever makes these mistakes made it up to her by giving her superhuman power. Her mother even hired a coach to clock her arm speed, and at six she could throw at 45 mph.

The other neighbor kids were scattered between the homes of Russian mafia men, producers, and the gays, as my mother would call them, or fags, as my father would, these neighborhood kids, like Angelique's son, would call Pakshani names. Pakhandy and Weirdo and Freak and Inbred. One of the boys, this awful boy named Jorgen Knud, the son of a Danish diplomat, walked from his home that sat atop the hill, to Pakshani's and Naima's. He found Pakshani playing on the sidewalk alone, as she did when Naima was working with her tutor. He then told her that her arm could be fixed if he tied a piece of rope around her shoulder and tethered her to his skateboard. Pakshani held onto a tree

with her other arm. Jorgen skated down the hill until the rope was completely taut. Her arm was pulled out of the socket. Jorgen laughed at her and called her a dumb Paki, then spit into her crying mouth before he ran up the hill back to his house. *Kids can be real assholes*. That's what my grandfather said when I told him about it.

I heard them open and close the gate to my house, the gate that was never locked. The wrought-iron frame would shake the entire house when it the gate's door was closed. And I heard a little tap at the front door. I was only a few feet from it, bouncing that damn ball. I was waiting on my parents to head out to some party at my mother's friend Julia's house. Julia still lived in *white trash Rancho Cucamonga*. That's what my father called my mother's birthplace. She had this itty bitty yellow house with white trim. My father said *I don't trust people that don't take baths.* Julia had a toilet and a shower, but the itty bitty house was a three quarter, as my mother put it. That is what led me to sitting on the bottom step for over half an hour fully dressed in a lame yellow party dress while I listened to them yell back and forth until finally my father agreed to go.

I opened the door and Naima held Pakshani at her hip.

"Hey, Alicia," Naima said.

She was popping her gum.

"Hey!" I said.

"Can we play in your playhouse?" Naima said this as she lightly kicked the door-jam with her white Keds.

"We are supposed to go to some party at my mom's friend's. So I don't know."

Naima blew out a big purple bubble and Pakshani popped it with her normal sized hand with the tiny arm. Naima had purple gum stuck to her chin and cheeks. And we all started laughing.

"Purple people eater," Pakshani kept saying. And we all kept laughing.

My mother came downstairs with her hair still in hot rollers and no makeup on.

"Hi Auntie Carol," they said in unison.

"Oh, girls. I must look awful. You've never seen Auntie Carol look like this," my mother said as she tapped her large rollers.

This was a thing. We kids all called our neighborhood mothers, "auntie."

"I think you look like Barbie," Pakshani said.

"Ah, I knew I liked you for some reason," my mother said.

"Mom," I said, but she wasn't listening to me.

"Where's Nicholas?" My mother said.

I pointed to him sleeping sitting up on the sofa in his little sweater vest.

"Auntie Carol, may Pakshi and I play in your playhouse?"

Naima always said may and knew the proper use of who and whom. She was mostly a nice kid, but she would do these annoying things like correct you for saying something the wrong way. It was annoying when you just want to play ball or hang out and someone was correcting your English.

"Of course, honey," my mother said as she squeezed Pakshani's chin. Then she looked at me and said, "Ten minutes. And don't mess your dress." Ten minutes was enough time, because my mother's ten minutes was always at least thirty minutes.

My mother went into the kitchen and made a ham sandwich with extra mayonnaise and split it into triangles, just the way my father liked it. *As long as he needs me he'll never leave.* That's what my mother said when I asked her once why my father didn't get his own water.

The three of us went outside through the side door. Naima first untied Pakshani's shoes then her own. I bent over and unbuckled my own white patent leather shoes. My mother had just bought them for me at Payless. *You can take the girl out of the dumps, but she'll take her style with her*. That's what my grandmother said after my mother gave her a Mikasa glass vase for Hanukah. I had more work to do than that because my mother always insisted little girls wear tights. I reached up my dress, but made sure not to hike it up too high and pulled down my opaque white tights.

"Strawberry Shortcake," Pakshani said while pointing at me and laughing. She was laughing so hard it came out like Strawbee Shorkak. Then Naima was laughing with her.

I looked down and realized that along with my tights I pulled down my underwear with little smiling Strawberry Shortcake faces and mini strawberries on it. It was pretty funny. I untangled my little underwear from the tight, ribbed elastic, and shimmied them up my legs. But I was laughing so hard that I thought I would pee myself. I didn't, but I really thought I was going to.

Pakshani fell to the grass and rolled from side to side until that her normal sized arm got caught behind her back. The other arm couldn't catch the ground to gain traction to pull herself up. Naima had to roll Pakshani on her side then pull her arm out. Then we

all laughed when Pakshani waved her tiny arm wildly like a fish flopping about, while she kept opening and closing her mouth as if she was gasping for air.

That was the thing about Pakshani, she didn't let a thing like a bum arm get her down. If it had been me, I would have worn long sleeves all year long and kept my short arm's cuff in my pocket. My father probably would have hired some dirty man with missing teeth and ratty hair to chop off some poor kid's arm and get Doctor Marks to attach it to my shoulder. Not because he loved me so much, but because he would have been embarrassed I was a product of his Davich chromosomes. But not her. Pakshani never even let those neighborhood kids get to her. They got to Naima, but never Pakshi.

We all giggled our way onto the grass. I made sure to sit rock style on my knees, careful that my dress didn't touch the moist ground.

"Whose house are you going to?" Naima asked as she yanked at the freshly mowed blades of grass.

"Naima, please don't do that. My father gets mad about it," I said.

My father insisted that his lawn was perfectly manicured. Which was difficult to maintain in the hills because of the lack of nutrients in the ground. Just a few feet below was pure granite. It was one reason we never had a pool installed, because the excavation was so extensive. Though, my father talked about it all the time.

You're giving the lawn fucking cancer. This is what my father said to Nicky when he found a handful of grass in my brother's hands. Nicky, who was three at the time, told his preschool teacher at Hollywood Israel, *I gave fucking cancer to the grass and might be killing the poor little worms and lady bugs that live in it*. A note from his teacher was

stuffed into his Pee Wee Herman backpack which detailed what my brother said. My mother read the note out loud to us, then took a bar of Ivory soap and scrubbed the inside of his mouth.

Naima playfully took her handful of grass and threw it at my face. The serrated blades tickled my nose.

"It smells so good!" I said.

All three of us got on our hands and knees to dip our faces down to smell it.

"Best smell I've ever scented," Pakshani said as she took long deep whiffs.

"Smelled. Not scented," Naima said. "It does smell quite wonderful."

Quite was a word that Naima said a lot. Too much if you ask me.

"We only have a few more minutes. We should go play," Pakshani said.

"Whoever makes it to the teeter totter first wins," Naima said.

We took off running. It wasn't farther than thirty feet and there was nothing to win but bragging rights, but we were eleven, ten, and six and reaching that damn teeter totter was just about the most important thing we could have done.

Naima made it first. Those long, lanky limbs of her gave her an advantage that Pakshani and I didn't have as the two of us arrived at the same time.

"I win! I win!" Naima said.

"Who cares?" Pakshani said as she stomped her foot.

I removed the detachable piece of sod that laid below the seat of the swing. It covered the circular brown, barren section of ground. I kicked, mindful to keep my bare feet only in the circle, then used my arms to create more velocity. I swung up, down, and

back, high in the air, arching and pointing my feet as I straightened and bent my knees, like a circus performer flying high above an audience. My grandfather had taken us all to a circus in Camalu, Mexico. It was a one ring circus with a monkey that wore a top hat and tails. A beautiful Mexican woman swung back and forth in her sequined leotard that caught the spotlight and created speckles of light on the white and yellow tent with tears in the canvas top. The dangling pieces of ripped canvas allowed the stars that were ever so far away, to shine in. She flipped her limber body all the way around the straight seat of the swing as the monkey pointed up to her. The emcee said something in Spanish and she dismounted by flipping twice in the air before her feet landed on the sawdust floor. The monkey jumped into her arms and kissed her smack on the mouth. I jumped to my feet and applauded. Just then Aunt Bea took a hold of my arm and escorted me out of the tent to meet the rest of my family who were waiting impatiently for me. *It's too goddam hot and come on, it's not that hard to throw in a little English*. That's what Uncle Dave said when I asked him why we were leaving after only seeing two acts.

Pakshani and Naima went up and down on that teeter totter. Naima never went very high as Paskshani's slight frame and age only could lift so much of her sister. But Naima didn't seem to mind. She smiled brightly every time her long black hair flung off her back.

"Where did you say you were going, again?" Naima said.

"My mom's friend's house. She is someone my mom grew up with," I said still swinging.

"Where?" Pakshani said.

“Rancho Cucamonga,” I said.

“Where that?” Pakshani said.

“Where is that located? Not, ‘where that,” Naima said. “It’s on the way to Vegas, Pakshi. We stopped there once for a malted and for you to use the toilet.”

“I don’t remember,” Pakshani said. “I don’t remember a lot of things from my childhood.”

I could tell Pakshani was really upset by this thought that she had gone to the bathroom somewhere, enjoyed a malted, and it was as if it didn’t happen. But Naima and I just laughed.

“Why are you laughing at me?”

“When we’re little our brains are smaller but they are more absorbent. They can…” Naima said.

“Absorzant?” Pakshani said.

“Absorbent, not absorzant. It means that the younger we are our brains act like a sponge soaking in all the information,” Naima said.

“Like mommy’s blue sponge she washes dishes with?” Pakshani said.

“Just like that,” I said as I stopped my swing. “They say little kids can learn language much easier than adults or even someone as old as Naima and me.”

“However, with that comes an almost blank slate. So, your brain is taking in so much knowledge, but it is only through experience and repetition that you will remember. Don’t feel bad, baji. Alicia and I have lost much of our younger years,” Naima said.

“Phew! I thought I was losing my head,” Pakshani said.

Naima and I smiled at each other, but I knew better than to laugh at Pakshani again. I didn't want to make her feel bad.

"Want to climb the back hill?" Naima said.

"I can't. I have this stupid dress on," I said. "We can go up to the clubhouse though."

My parents' house was an acre and a half of land, but almost a full acre of that was a sloping hill with cement support beams that separated its three levels. We would climb up it and discover snake holes and little bunny rabbits, and while we knew coyotes were up there they didn't come out during the day. The reason I knew they were hiding up in the hills is because at least once a week I would hear a cat or dog screaming for its life as it echoed through the canyon.

Up in the clubhouse we sat around a mini card table my father carried up a few months before, for Nicky and me to play with. We each sat on one of the colorful Moroccan pillows and I offered them soda from the fridge. That fridge wasn't plugged into anything but the warm Pepsi I poured into plastic martini glasses my mother gave me last Hanukah tasted damn good.

"Cigarette?" Pakshani said.

We all took one of her King candy cigarettes from the maroon packaging. Naima pantomimed striking an imaginary matchbox to light each of our cigarettes. We all blew into the candy stick until little clouds of dust came out the red tip. Pakshani mimicked me as I held the cigarette between my index and middle finger and bringing it to and from

the side of my mouth in a slow deliberate fashion, while Naima held hers between her thumb and index finger like her father did.

"I feel like a sexy lady," I said.

"Me too," Pakshani said. "I'm for sure going to smoke real cigarettes when I'm a grown up."

"It's like we're one of those women my father watches in those black and white movies. You know the ones who only have stars on the boobs with tassels that spin when they dance," I said.

"I've never seen that," Pakshani said.

"I know exactly what you mean," Naimi said as she took a puff.

I lifted my martini glass and said, "To being sexy ladies."

"What's going on with your Lana and your father?" Naimi said.

"I don't know."

I put my glass down.

"My mother says that your father is going to leave your mother."

"He isn't spending anytime with her anymore."

"I saw them today," Pakshani said.

"Who?" Naimi said.

"Uncle Carl and Lana. They were up really early."

"Oh," I said.

Pakshani and Naima clinked their glasses against mine.

"Hey," someone called.

But this someone wasn't just anyone, it was a boy's voice and it certainly wasn't Nicky's. Pakshani, Naima, and I slid down the white pole made of PVC. Pakshani still holding her martini glass was crawling around on the grass looking to see if someone was hiding down low. I don't know how she slid down with that thing, but Pakshani always amazed me. Naima looked in the bushes.

"Up here!" the voice said.

Standing on the other side of my parents' brick wall was a boy about my age. I had never seen him before

"I'm Alicia," I said.

"I'm Rocky," the boy said.

"This is Pakshani and Naima."

"Where did you come from?" Naima said.

"I'm staying with my Aunt Yeta for a few weeks while my parents, well, my mother and my stepfather, they aren't technically married, but we live with him, are in Australia visiting my grandmother," Rocky said.

Yeta was a hooker. A high-class one, but a hooker all the same. I learned this when my mother accused my father of sleeping with Yeta during Thanksgiving dinner. *I don't pay for sex*. Was all my father coolly replied as he reached over my grandmother for the cranberry sauce. I started noticing the Bentleys and Maseratis and Excaliburs that would pull into her garage while I played out front. When they left a few hours later, Yeta would wave from the driveway in one of her many silk robes.

Rocky was at least twenty-five feet above me, but his voice carried strong down to us. He was just about the most handsome boy I'd ever seen with his tan face and sandy blonde hair.

"Your aunt is so pretty," Pakshani said.

"Yeah, I guess," Rocky said. "What you guys doing?"

"Just hanging out," Naima said.

"What's in that martini glass?" Rocky said.

"Pepsi," I said.

"I want some," Rocky said.

"We have Pepsi and you don't!" Pakshani said.

"Come on, let me have some," Rocky said.

But Pakshani kept chanting about us having Pepsi. She even took a sip out of her glass and let out a breathy "aah."

"Shut up!" Rocky said.

But Pakshani didn't shut up. She was six. That's what little kids do when they think something is funny.

"I love Pepsi!" Pakshani said. "Too bad you don't have none."

"Too bad you don't have some," Naima corrected her.

"It's so fizzly," Pakshani said. "We have Pepsi and you don't. We have Pepsi and you don't. We have Pepsi and you don't."

"Stop it," I whispered to Pakshani.

“I have two arms and you don’t. I have two arms and you don’t. I have two arms and you don’t,” Rocky said mimicking her sing-songy voice.

“I’d rather have a Pepsi than two arms,” Pakshani said, happy with herself as she could be.

“Leave her alone!” Naima said.

Rocky picked up a rock and threw it. It hit me in the head and knocked me off my feet.

“I meant to throw it at her,” Rocky said. “Man, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Ask her how many fingers you’re holding up.”

“Your aunt’s a whore,” Naima said.

I had never heard Naima say anything like that before, but she was defending Pakshani and me. But for some reason I still felt bad for Rocky. I really did. He did throw a goddam rock at my head, and he was mean to Pakshi, but he looked really lonely. There’s nothing worse than being a kid and lonely.

I couldn’t talk because the wind had been knocked out of me. That’s when I saw the red in my eye. Funny thing it didn’t feel like what I thought it would feel like. It was more like a thick tear than blood.

“Alicia, can you hear me?” Pakshani said loud and close to my face.

I just nodded my head. Just that little movement ran the blood into my mouth. I could taste the warm metallic liquid on my tongue.

“Give her some room,” Naima said.

“I’m so sorry. I really am. She was taunting me and I got mad,” Rocky said while pacing from behind the wall. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done it.”

And I could tell he really meant it.

My mother came out just then. She was all done up with her blue eye shadow and all.

“What happened?” My mother said.

“That kid threw a rock at Alicia,” Pakshani said.

I was sitting up then. And even though I had blood in my eye and I felt a million miles away from him, I could tell he was crying. He couldn’t have felt worse.

I looked at my mother as she stood over me, tall in her four inch pumps, and I started to cry, too. I don’t know if I started to cry because I finally felt the pain, or if I was crying for poor Rocky, or if I was crying because it all just became real.

“Your dress is ruined!” My mother said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Auntie Carol, he was saying mean things to baji,” Naima said.

“Baji?” My mother said.

“Sister. He was saying mean things to Pakshani,” Naima said.

My mother took me by the arm to lift me to my feet. She bent down to my face and said, “Go inside and change.”

“But, Mama, it hurts,” I said.

I was really crying by then. The kind of tears that get caught in your throat.

“Naima and Pakshani, please go home,” my mother said.

But they didn't go. They just stood there waiting. Waiting for something.

"I want you to go upstairs right now and change. I told you not to dirty your dress. Your new dress," my mother said.

"But Auntie Carol," Naima said.

"And don't go inside and get your father all upset about this. This party means a lot to me," my mother said to me. "Be ready in five minutes."

My mother turned to walk back to the house but she tripped on a sprinkler head. She didn't fall down or anything, but I was happy it happened.

Once my mother was gone, Naima and Pakshani started asking me a bunch of questions. I don't remember them all, but what I do remember when I looked back up Rocky was gone.

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The little house with the single toilet was filled with men in polyester shirts and women who hadn't lost the pregnancy weight, at least that's what they kept saying to each other. I had seen pictures of my mother's friends. They were once pretty. The kind of pretty with dimples and perfectly permed hair. But I felt sort of sorry for them standing around the wood paneled living room in their cheap fabrics that made their shoulder pads look like there were maxi pads glued to lining of their blouses.

"Carol!" Came the screeches of women day drunk on wine coolers almost as bright as the color of their hair. I didn't know who they were. I didn't know much about any of my mother's friends, except for Julia, the woman whose house I was at.

My mother grew up in an all-white neighborhood. This was important to distinguish. *And here's the other Mexican. No blacks. It was a very good school.* My mother told me once while she flipped through her old yearbook.

Julia was about five two with the tiniest little frame and wore these dresses that touched all the right parts. About a year before this party, I came running out of her above ground pool, the kind with little pink and blue fish at the top. I forgot to knock. I found Julia kneeling over the toilet with two of her freshly manicured fingers rammed down her tiny throat. *It keeps you skinny*. Julia's eyelashes had little beads of black water. I didn't tell my mother about it. She would have enjoyed it too much. I couldn't do that to Julia. After all Julia always asked me about me. That's the thing when you're a kid no one talks to you. You're like this little alien in the room and no one talks to you. But Julia did. She would ask me real questions about me. So, I couldn't tell my mother.

My father wore his wayfarers and lit a cigarette in a yellow corduroy chair reading *The Times*. My mother's friends' husbands took turns walking up to my father to shake his hand. He nodded back at them as he took their hands in his.

"Carl, saw the Jagwar you drove up in. That's a good looking piece of steel," said Rich.

"Jag-u-ar. It's been a year," my father said.

Rich was Julia's husband. A real schmuck. A real punch the clock guy.

"Julia told me. That's great, man," Rich said.

"How's pipe cleaning?" My father dropped his cigarette into someone's unmanned red party cup.

"My brother and I are thinking about branching out on our own."

"Family business?" My father stood, patted the poor sonofabitch on the back, and then said, "It's good to have a dream, Rick."

My father was the type of man who couldn't remember your name unless he could buy or sell or bang you.

He then stepped over a small child sitting on the floor. A mere millimeter from the top of the child's head. My father then went outside to where most of the women were sunning themselves in high cut bikinis.

"Alicia! Alicia!" Julia came to me. "Darling, oh my precious darling. I have missed this face."

Julia couldn't have children. Rich and she had tried. She even got pregnant right after the bathroom incident, but it exploded inside of her fallopian tube. Her insides were

hollowed out after that. I imagined how the emptiness carved out of her women's parts left a gaping hole between her intestine and thigh muscles. I pictured it deep and red and spacious inside of her. This was the first time my mother had seen Julia since the loss. *She doesn't want to be reminded of a normal family*. That's what my mother said when I asked if I could see Julia.

"Come with me," Julia said.

I followed her through the narrow hallway lined with pictures. Pictures of her and Rich, of my mother and her, of her parents. I didn't realize until that moment there wasn't a single picture on display in my parents' home.

"This one is Greggy. Did your mother ever tell you about him?"

I shook my head.

"He was our neighbor. Just a few doors down. He's quite the looker, don't you think?"

I nodded.

"Oh, honey. I shouldn't have embarrassed you." Julia waved off the question and then said, "Greg had a thing for your mother. All the boys did. I used to be so jealous of your mother. Don't get me wrong I love your mother like a sister. A real sister. But it would make me crazy. I'm sure your mother never told you that I was jealous of her. She probably never knew."

My mother collected jealous women like some people collect stamps. I think it was a prerequisite for friendship with her.

"Vietnam took him. Just like many of the boys your mother and I knew. What a handsome boy. Sometimes I wonder what he would be if he was still with us."

Even though I was ten, I knew he was too young. The picture Julia showed me of the boy standing next to a beater of a car. But I couldn't help but think of his last moments. A boy only a few years older than Jeremy. I suddenly felt really sad. It still makes me feel real sad to think about it.

Julia stood there petting my head. "Oh my god, I almost completely forgot why I was taking you here. Come! Come!"

She swung open the door to a room next to Greg's picture.

"You like?" She asked.

It was a yellow and white room. A girl's room.

"It's yours."

"Really?"

Julia sat on the bed and patted it. I sat next to her.

"Rich and I talked about it. We love you so much and we never get to see you, so we thought if you had your own room here you might want to stay with us for a few weeks. President's Day Weekend is pretty soon, maybe you can stay then?"

"My father doesn't like for me to have sleepovers."

"After we lost the baby, we kept thinking we would see you. I hope you weren't afraid. You know because of what you saw in the bathroom that day. I'm so sorry for that. I don't do that anymore, Alicia. I don't." She was now crying. "It was a bad time for me."

"I never said anything." I kissed her hand. The hand with the tiny diamond.

When Julia got engaged my mother drove Nicky and me out to meet her at Denny's. It was a halfway point between our place and hers. Julia showed my mother the ring. *It's the love that matters, right?* It's all my mother said when she saw the ring. On the car ride home my mother explained that money doesn't buy happiness but it's hard to be happy without it.

"Honey, that wasn't your place to keep a secret. I shouldn't have put you in that position."

"You're better now," I said.

Julia slapped the bed three times.

"It's your room. You get to change anything you want. You want to paint it black, Rich'll take you down to the paint store and buy you anything you want."

It was half the size of my room at home, but it was just about the most beautiful place I had ever seen down the yellow and white polka dotted wall paper.

A knock came at the door. It was Rich. -

"Honey, Rita needs you."-

Rich made a guzzling motion in the air.

Julia squeezed my face and then made her exit. Rich picked up a mechanical pencil that was on the little white desk. It made a click click noise. Nothing is more annoying than someone repeatedly making a noise like this.

"It's a helluva room, right?" Rich said.

"It is."

Rich sat on the bed next to me, clicking that damn pencil. I felt the bed lower with his weight.

"She needs this," Rich said.

I repeated, "My father doesn't like me to have sleepovers."

"Julia will talk to your mom. Maybe they can work something out. Even if it's just for a few days." Rich jumped up and went over to the desk. "I almost forgot the best part. Come here."

I got up and walked the few feet to my new desk.

"It's a candy drawer. Every kind of candy you would ever want," Rich said.

The drawer was filled with chocolate, gummy candies, jelly beans, and those paper dots. Rich pulled out a ring pop. He then got down on one knee.

"Miss Alicia, would you do me the honor of staying at my house." He unwrapped it from the packaging and slid the strawberry-flavored candy over my ring finger.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Mr. Rich." I giggled.

Rich spun me in the air. It felt like I was flying. Like when my brother and I would climb to the top of a ladder with an umbrella. It was maybe only six feet, but when the umbrella would catch the air at just the right moment I would float. Nicky's little face killed me when he did it. Every time it was pure shock and joy.

Rich threw me down on the bed. His heavy body landed on top of mine.

"One day you're going to be the girl that every guy wants. I can see it now." I could taste his beer as he spoke.

I coughed.

"Am I too heavy?"

But he didn't move. His legs hung off the bed, but his chest was against mine. One hand held my arms above my head. The other hand moved my underwear to the side.

"You're so beautiful. Do you know that, baby?"

I coughed again. This time louder and harder. But his hands were fumbling around my dark place. I could feel his callouses. Rough and scratchy. Then it really hurt.

Julia called to him from the hallway.

"Such a pretty dress." Rich lifted off of me and pulled down the skirt of my dress.

He left me lying there on the bed. The pulse that ran my body, between my thighs made my face hot. I stayed in the yellow room for a few minutes before entering the party again.

When I walked back into the living room my father had one arm on his hip and the other against the wood paneled wall, blocking a raven-haired woman from moving. But she didn't seem to mind. They never did. She had the brightest red lipstick I had ever seen. She had these puffy lips, this was pre-collagen, and every time my father leaned in her lips puffed out more. My father said something that made her laugh. Her big lips opened to show these large crooked teeth that crossed over each other like a car crash. And even though I was across the room I could see a smear of red lipstick on her front teeth. As she laughed her silver charm bracelet jingle jangled against her wrist.

The space between my thighs ached. There were people everywhere. I just wanted to find my mother in the crowd. I knew if I could just tell my mother, everything would be fine. She would take me in her arms.

I found her against the makeshift wet bar with its open, yellowish beige shutters that peekabooed the space between the brown wood kitchen cabinets with its avocado green refrigerator and the living room. She was talking to a woman wearing a paisley head scarf that covered her chemo bald head. This woman had this very soft voice that made me think of death.

"Mom?"

"Puss, I'm talking to someone."

"But, mom, I need you."

"Not now."

"It's really important."

"Go find Nicky."

When we finally left, my father snubbed out his cigarette on their walkway. He was always doing things like this. Nothing bothered me more than this. He was the kind of guy that if your car leaked oil on his driveway he would make you scrub it with bleach until the faintest oil stain was gone, but when he was at someone else's house he didn't care anything.

My mother said all of her goodbyes. She seemed to hug and kiss a thousand people. My father stood on the porch watching the *poor schmucks* who mowed their own lawns. As my mother wildly waved, her bag slipped off her wrist.

"Clumsy me," my mother said.

She collected her wallet, lipstick, and that raven-haired woman's jingle-jangly charm bracelet. I don't know how she took it off her, but my mother certainly had a gift

for poaching things. I looked at her and she slyly smiled as she put that bracelet back into her bag. Then she stood and waved again.

Between my thighs still ached and I wondered why anyone would want to be touched in their dark place. And why all these women wanted my father to touch them there.