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Songs From Happy Valley and Other Stories

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

Lisa Wootton Nagel

December 2013

Thesis Committee:

Professor Rob Roberge, Co-Chairperson
Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson
Professor Tod Goldberg

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To Sarah, Jack, Irene, Chris and Leslie.
You have my heart.

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Songs From Happy Valley

Thursday, October 13, 1976

Charlotte sat at the heavy oak dining table and stared out the window. She had been watching her daughter, Sophia from a distance as she wandered down the sidewalk after school. Charlotte had seen her round the corner with her friend Joanne. She had seen them stop in front of Joanne's house and talk for minute, had watched as her Sophia looked down the street at their own house as if she were studying something, or maybe looking directly into the room where Charlotte sat, looking directly at Charlotte.

She had remained silent as her daughter came in the house and rushed down the stairs. Briefly, Charlotte deliberated confiding in Sophia and decided, no she would not. Her daughter would never take her side. Not in a million years. It would be wrong to ask it of her and it would simply make Sophia hate her more. Even if she were not a child, Sophia would be incapable of seeing Jay for what he was. Incapable of ever being on Charlotte's side.

No one was ever on Charlotte's side. Maybe Kristy, sometimes Nick. But even with them, Charlotte could always see fear and mistrust in their faces.

Earlier in the day she had come home to find a note from Jay on their dresser. He and his lawyer friends were on their way to Mazatlan to celebrate the winning of his big murder case. He would be back by Monday. *"No wives were going. I'll bring you something nice. Love J—"* Charlotte stood very still in the bedroom holding the note and saw that her hand was trembling. It had been a very big case. In fact a career-making case for her husband.

"Son-of-a-bitch." It came out as a hiss and was all she could think to say. She sat on the bed refusing to cry. Then she felt the cold dark blanket starting to fold over her. It started at the base of her neck, travelled down her spine and then wrapped itself around her.

Now, the pale light slanted through the open drapes and made quadrangles on the Persian rug. She seethed at him. It would be dinnertime soon. She could hear her children talking and rumbling around downstairs to the droning of the TV. They always wanted things from her. The

wanting and needing never ceased. *"Mom, wake up...Wake up mom. What are we having for dinner? Are we going to go to swimming lessons? Do I have any clean socks? Mom, it's Christmas morning...."*

—ooo000ooo—

Sophia was sorry she hadn't brought a coat. As she said goodbye to her friend, the air felt colder now. She held her books tighter and pressed into the wind. It was a strange and brilliant day. Sunshine angled in from the southwest, making the dark clouds directly above turn pink and gray against a flat marble blue. Sophia didn't usually notice the mountains, but today, the first dusting of winter made a stark backdrop for the glittering yellow and red leaves. Even *she* had to take a breath.

Her day at school had been disappointing. No one on the newspaper staff had thought her restaurant review of the cheese fries at Parker's Drive-in was amusing. Her friend Heather, the editor of *Cave Talk* had read it stony-faced. Then she just looked at Sophia and said "You know those don't even taste like real potatoes, don't you?" She tried to help Colby Sweet write an obituary for the

deceased python in Mr. Allen's science class who had apparently asphyxiated himself on a large rat over the last weekend. Colby couldn't get passed the first line: "On the 10th day of October, we were sad to discover that our beloved friend and pet, "Julius Squeezer" had passed away."

Sophia helpfully added, "He was a good snake, very fond of mice and dog food. His favorite pastime was sitting very very still." Colby glared. She continued: "But he also enjoyed cuddling and loved to wrap himself around your neck." She let out a laugh that was a little too loud.

"You think it's funny to make fun of a dead snake?"

"Well, sort of funny. You're making it less funny now. OK, sorry!"

Other people in the classroom had turned around and were staring. Sophia felt bad that she didn't feel worse. Then she did feel worse for being such a heartless monster.

Now as she rounded the corner of the sidewalk, she saw her house, dark and slouching in the late afternoon along the row of tidy houses on the street. In the driveway was her mother's orange Firebird. The sight of the Firebird always made Sophia feel a little sick. The feeling

continued to grow as she got closer, and culminated when she put hand on the back screen door. At that point, she became someone else. She became the person who she was at home, the person who was very different from this one. Thoughts of things like math, history, or obituaries for pet snakes became abstract. Sophia's occupation, her concern now would be to avoid, to deflect, and if it came down to it, to absorb.

She hadn't always been two people. She had been five years old when they first moved to this house. Though they are vague and dreamy recollections, she was conscious of some things from before. Like how when she was three, she told her first lie. Her Grandma Jane had poured a glass of milk for her in the green kitchen with the large windows. She walked out of the room and Sophia poured the milk down the drain. When she came back Sophia told her she had drunk the milk. Grandma had doubted her. She just looked at her and she felt bad. But, Sophia didn't have to drink the milk.

She also remembered living in a four-plex before the house on Nob Hill. Her mom wore a lot of yellow then and

she seemed. ..Nice like she really liked her then. One day, Sophia's dad took a picture of Sophia and her mom sitting on the chrome and formica kitchen table, their legs crossed the same way leaning back like models. Sometimes her mom had made cakes and let her lick the bowl while she watched "Get Smart."

When they moved here to this house, Sophia was five and her brother, Nicky was two. The people in American Fork called it "Nob Hill" because when the houses were built in the 50s, they were supposedly the nicest in town.

In their new house back then, she still shared a bedroom on the main floor with her brother. Their parents were in the big bedroom next to them. She was a little disappointed with this house. She had been expecting a "Leave it to Beaver" sort of place with two stories and stairs that went up from the living room and big bedroom windows you could climb out of and sit on the roof. She had expected large trees, flat sidewalks and bright old style street lamps.

Instead the house had chain link fences, prickly bushes and giant red ants with black heads that latched

onto your thigh if you sat on the sidewalk with your little piece of chalk. There was no shade, only stubby little ornamental trees, which bore nasty apricots and bitter crabapples. There was no useful purpose for any of the caustic fruit except that Sophia could pluck it off the trees and pelt Nicky with it until he ran and told mom.

On the hill, the wind blew out of the canyons every afternoon. Downtown was very far away, though she could see it in the distance standing on her tip-toes on the sidewalk. Everybody's house had unruly evergreen bushes with thorns and they had to try hard never to let the soccer ball bounce into them. They also had to keep the ball out of the street. It was a large busy street where the cars went by very fast, and you could never ride your bike there.

When they first moved in, they had had a fluffy white dog named Happy. Sophia had named him Happy because he smiled all the time. Happy only lasted a few months before he chased a ball into the busy street and got hit. Sophia had watched as the car hit the lightweight grocery store ball and snapped it toward the sky, high and fast like a

balloon losing its air. Then she saw Happy chasing the car, trying to bite its bumper. She didn't actually see him bite the car, but then all at once, he was motionless on the blacktop. Sophia didn't understand how what happened with the car could have killed him. Yet there he was, still fluffy and whole, white and smiling with his eyes closed. Dad said he was dead.

Dad took Happy to their grandparents' house at the bottom of the hill and buried him next to Dobe who had been their dad's dog from long before. Nicky didn't know to be sad. But Sophia cried for a long time about Happy, for at least a day. Then she started thinking about a new dog, how it would be so fun to have a dog like Lassie. She asked their mom for a dog like Lassie and she said "We'll see." They never got that dog, but she was still mostly happy.

Before she got the orange Firebird, her mother used to drive a gold Camaro. Something happened to the gold Camaro. Sophia did not remember that day, but Nicky swore she was there. Possibly it occupied a separate place in her mind, where she used to be able to go, but not anymore. Nicky said he was eight so Sophia must have been eleven. From the

story he told, Sophia could rouse the memory of a night like this, when it was almost dark, when the sun was shining sideways from the west under heavy dark clouds directly overhead.

When Nicky talked about it for awhile, Sophia started to remember flashing lights in their driveway and neighbors gathering on the little stretch of grass next to the sidewalk. Her mom's Camaro was wrapped around the giant maple tree on the lawn. Sophia guessed that her mom must have been in the car before it got that way. She had no idea where she was or their dad, or their little sister Kristy for that matter. She had forgotten to ask Nick these questions. It was so weird that she did not remember. But she did not even remember to wonder about it so it did not bother her too much. Not long after that, they got the orange Firebird. And except for its color and newness, it was almost the same car.

Going into the house that night, Sophia hurried past the car trying not to look inside. Then she was at the back screen door with her hand on the knob. She paused, held her breath, and then went in.

– ooo000ooo–

Charlotte needed to go to the grocery store. She wanted to go to the liquor store. It would be open for another hour. This thought chased away the dark blanket and Charlotte was alert again. A drink would make things better. A cocktail. Just a drink or two after a long day. She would make Hamburger Helper for her children for dinner and have a cocktail. And then she would sleep. It would be OK.

She found her purse and keys and called "I'll be right back" down the dark stairwell. No one seemed to hear her over the TV in the basement family room. She rounded the backyard and got into her beautiful car. She loved her car. She loved the smell of the leather seats and the way the engine roared like a big cat when she started the engine. The grocery store was not very far away and stayed open until 9:00. She backed out of the driveway and pointed the car toward the liquor store.

As she drove, she listened to Jack Jones on eight track: *Hey, little girl comb your hair fix your make-up, soon he will open the door. Don't think because there's a*

ring on your finger, you needn't try anymore. For wives should always be lovers too, run to his arms the moment he comes home to you. I'm warning you....

—ooo000ooo—

Sophia heard her mother leave, heard the car roar out of the driveway. *Well, at least she won't be home until after dark.*

For now she would only have to worry about whether or when she came home at all, whether and when she should fix something for them to eat for dinner and whether she should go to bed or stay up and keep a vigil for her. Her sleep had become a fleeting thing anyway. Later she would worry about whether her mother would be angry when she came back through the door. But that would be later.

One afternoon last spring, she came home from tennis practice to find Charlotte passed out in the car. Sophia tried to call her dad, but he was nowhere to be found. Even by then, his presence had become a fleeting thing that was never discussed. Sophia missed him and this was *her* fault too. So, that day, she called their grandparents who lived at the bottom of the big hill, not far away. A few minutes

later, up came Grandpa Charles, floating along in his enormous forest green Cadillac.

She watched him pull up and she sprinted toward his car. Sophia believed he would save the day. He was a grown-up, a lawyer, he had been the mayor of American Fork once. He was the one in charge of their family. Grandpa was smart, and kind. He was like Atticus Finch. He would be mad at her mom for acting this way. He would make Charlotte stop drinking. Sophia couldn't even imagine a scenario where things happened any other way. And she was so relieved. Now that it was out in the open, things would be better.

"Grandpa, I don't know what to do. She's been out here in the car for a long time. I can't get her to wake up."

Grandpa climbed out of the forest green Cadillac and approached Charlotte's car. Grandpa wasn't scared of her. Sophia was sure he would fix things. He tapped lightly on the window. When she did not respond, he opened the door, touched her on the shoulder, then he shook her very gently.

"Charlotte?"

Sophia watched. Everything would be OK. She expected him to call an ambulance or to lift her out of the car and bring her inside. But he just kept nudging her and saying

"Charlotte, you need to wake up honey." Then he stood up, leaving the car door slightly ajar and went into the house. She followed him like a happy puppy.

"What are we gonna do Grandpa? Will mom be all right? Should we call dad? I tried to call dad, but I can't find him anywhere. Are you going to carry her in? Does she have to go to the hospital?"

She chattered away, but her grandfather did not respond. Instead, he went into her parents' bedroom and came out with a pillow. He proceeded out to the car opened the door and carefully wedged the pillow to the side of her head, positioning her against the window, as if in delicate repose.

"It'll be dark soon," he said. "She should be awake by then. Don't worry honey, It'll be OK. Your mom's just taking a nap...in the car." Then he got into the forest green Cadillac and floated quietly off down the hill.

Sophia was stunned as she watched him go. "Grandpa?" It came out in a whisper. The street was quiet. It was the time of evening when kids were inside bright kitchens helping set the table for dinner, peeling carrots or potatoes because their moms asked them to, hands and faces

washed, talking about their day. It was starting to get cold. Sophia looked back. Still no movement from the car.

It had been about that time in the Spring when Sophia began having them. They were like cocktail parties in her bedroom in the middle of the night. Except that the room was dark and all she could hear were the voices, harsh whispers that repeated like the cacophonous singing of a swarm of locusts louder, travelling back and forth across the room, faster and more shrill until she woke up. She didn't understand what they were saying or who they were. When she sat up in bed, a hush fell over the room.

One night last summer, Sophia had fallen asleep reading while it was still early in the evening. It was after dark when the voices woke her up. All the lights in the house were still on. The TV was blaring, the food still out on the kitchen counter. Nick and Kristy were there, asleep in their beds. But nobody else was there. They were alone in the house.

Their mother was gone. She had left them alone. Gone off, somewhere without a word. Sophia stumbled around in the brightness, confused, sweating, displaced. The house was too bright against the dark, the TV too loud against

the emptiness. Finally, unable to think of anything else to do, she turned off the TV and most of the lights, locked the doors and went back to bed.

That night, she stared up at the dark globe light fixture above her bed as it reflected the night-light in the hallway. In it, she saw the spherical reflection of something like the face in the Escher poster in her math class. Only this was a sinister face, like the devil or the evil scientist in that Bugs Bunny cartoon. She imagined the party going on inside the little dark globe and how it was like the portal to another room where hobgoblins mingled holding martini glasses, taking turns watching her, a scared little bunny, through a fish-eye lens.

Sophia went upstairs to the living room. She turned on the lamp and tuned the big wooden console stereo to FM100. It was relaxing, grown-up music that reminded her of her dad. She lay down on the yellow couch and when she closed her eyes, she could imagine him sitting at the other end, holding her feet, reading the paper. She slept there that night.

She tried to stay out of her room at night. Most of the time nobody noticed or told her to go to bed. But if she did have to sleep in her own room, it would be with the

light on next to the bed trying not to look up, trying to ignore the commotion going on inside the small orb above the bed. Nicky's bedroom was next door. Sophia never told him about the light. She figured he didn't need to know. She didn't want to share the couch with him anyway.

That night, she knew Charlotte would not be back. Not to fix dinner anyway. Not with groceries. Sophia fixed cereal for them and they sat together in the kitchen watching *Hogan's Heroes* and then the news and then *Happy Days*. Kristy and Nick did their homework. They were good about that.

— ooo000ooo—

Charlotte slammed the driver's side door shut. In her lap, she held a large brown paper bag. Inside were two narrow paper bags that held two gleaming Smirnoff's bottles. They had been merrily clanking themselves together through the brown paper from the cash register to the car. Charlotte had meant to go to the grocery store and she still planned to. She sat in the driver's seat thinking about it. She took one bottle still in the narrow brown sack and unscrewed the plastic top. Then she stowed the rest of the package under the driver's seat.

Of course she would go to the store and make dinner for her children. She was not a bad mom, even if *he* was an appalling father and husband. "Son of a bitch." She hissed it again, and the words and the hissing sound made her feel stronger, more powerful somehow. She would go to the store, but first, she really needed this drink.

In the parking lot of Allen's Super Save, Charlotte rose out of the Firebird, and tried very hard to not teeter as she made her way into the store. She yanked out a grocery cart and headed in, concentrating on her mental list: *Milk, bread, hamburger, Hamburger Helper, Tuna, orange juice....* Her mind wandered. She stopped and stared absently at the boxes of different kinds of Hamburger Helper.

"Fuck him." She accidentally said it aloud, causing a few people pushing carts in the same aisle to turn their heads. "I just hate that Chef Boyardee, don't you?" She laughed nervously and feigned light-heartedness. No one in American Fork ever said the word "fuck" out loud. Certainly not in the grocery store. This would get around. People knew her, sometimes even if she didn't know them.

God, she was such a freak, such a loser. She needed another drink. Yes, she knew she was beautiful. She

embraced it as possibly the one redeeming quality she had. She could have been movie star. A man had even said so once, one of the judges in a beauty pageant in 1959 when she was crowned Miss Lehi. That was before she had met Jay who had grown up here in the more upscale American Fork a few miles away from the farmers of Lehi, Utah.

What a bumpkin she had been back then. Charlotte had not even tasted alcohol until after she started seeing Jay. She had had her first drink when his parents had taken them to dinner at the country club. Up until then, she knew to how to be beautiful as well circumspect. She knew enough not to talk about things she didn't know about, and that seemed to make people believe she was smart too. But then, when she discovered vodka gimlets, she learned she was charming.

It was like a magic trick. It had made her better – at first. And when Charlotte and Jay went out together, it was as if they had flipped the “on” switch to a glorious and colorful billboard which hovered above them and read “Perfection” in fluorescent lights with a flashing arrow curling around and down at them as they moved on the dance floor. Together, they became Jack and Jackie Kennedy, Rob and Laura Petry. They had been everyone's favorite couple.

She had been stunning at the age of twenty-two. She made him look more brilliant and handsome than he actually was. She had done that.

Now Charlotte had been a married housewife for not quite half her life. The vodka gimlets and martinis on Friday and Saturday nights at the club were superfluous and residuary to the more abundant and regular swigs she took directly off of the bottle most days at home. Being the beautiful and charming wife of Jay Sterling, Utah County Attorney, made it impossible not to attract attention, even without erupting with obscenities in the packaged dinners section of the grocery store.

Embarrassed, angry and woozy, Charlotte peered into the frozen foods for a long time, trying not to let her head quiver back and forth. A box-boy finally asked her if she needed some help. She jolted alert. "Oh no, no, thank-you, I'm fine." She had to get out. She was starting to get a headache and her eyelids were getting droopy. She needed another swig.

The check-out girl eyed her cautiously as she rang up the groceries.

"How are you tonight Mrs. Sterling?"

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine. And how are you Marcy? Long day?"

"Yes, I'm happy to be going home in few minutes."

This was normal. She was being normal.

"Oh, yes me too. Just can't wait to get home."

Charlotte supposed she had said that last thing somewhat sarcastically. Everyone had to have noticed what a spectacle she was making there in the grocery store, trying to seem so normal, unremarkable, like she belonged with them here in this store, in this town, in this world of normalcy.

Back in the safety of her car, she pulled the opened bottle out from its place under the seat. She looked around the parking lot of Allen's Super Save. Nobody was there. She hoisted the bottle and took another belt. It burned its way down her throat in that way she so loved. She had hardly been able to stand the taste of alcohol in those early country club days. She still didn't really care for it. How could anyone? But its familiarity, its promise of better and beautiful moments was more than worth the tradeoff. Quickly, her head began to swirl happily again. She lay back and closed her eyes. And then somehow, dinner was over. It seemed like it was over. She opened her eyes

and looked at the clock. It said 8:45 and it was dark outside. She started the car and listened to it purr for a minute. Then she backed out and pointed it in the direction of Highway 89, to Lehi.

— ooo000ooo—

Charlotte struggled to open her eyes that were pasted shut with last night's mascara. The sunlight glared in, making her head hurt. She was so thirsty. Someone was there and saying something to her. *God. It was Kristy. Shit.* The child was standing just inside the room, dressed, ready for...something. "Mom?" She repeated the word evenly, "Can you take me to school? Mom?"

Charlotte did not move or respond for a minute. "Ummm. Go...get some cereal." She tried not to be sharp with Kristy, for the seven year old, her youngest, was the only person in the world who did not make her angry. *This was Sophia and Nick's fault, she railed. Can't manage to get their little sister up for school!* She rolled over and felt the wave of nausea. It was apparent that Kristy was not leaving the room. *Fuck. I just have to drive Kristy to school. That's it. Then I can come back and sleep.*

It was 9:35 when the Orange Firebird roared up to Harrington Elementary School. The grounds outside were

deserted of any life. The second grader pulled the chrome handle and pushed the heavy door with her foot. Then she looked at Charlotte.

"I need a note mom. When you're late you need a note."

"Oh come on. Can't you just tell them we accidentally overslept again?"

"Mom, I need a note."

Charlotte fumbled in her purse and then peered at the mess inside through sticky mascaraed eyes. She found her checkbook and ripped out part of a deposit slip. On the back, with a dried up pen, she scrawled "*please excuse Kristy for being late. We accidentally overslept, Charlotte Sterling*" and handed it to the seven year old.

"Bye mom." Kristy looked slightly pained as she pulled her little book-bag onto her shoulder.

Charlotte forced a cheery "Bye honey! Have a great day!" It sounded out of place, and so it was, but really, it was her last obligation to the child for several more hours. It truly was the least she could do. She watched her daughter all the way to the tinted glass doors. Then she stared at the steering wheel. The car still smelled like the "La Casa Club" from only hours ago —Cigarettes, beer

and perfume. The milk, bread and Hamburger Helper was still sitting in the brown grocery bag on the back seat.

She thought about the other bottle. It wasn't that she remembered it was there. It was that she had thought of nothing else that morning since being jolted out of sleep "Mom?...Mom, I have to go to school...Mom...Can you take me to school? now?"

God! At least she had *been there* when her daughter woke up. More than she could say for a lot of people. Her husband, for example, his ass-hole friends, all men who were well aware of their own power over others, over their wives who probably just took it and shut the hell up about it. But, these thoughts were secondary, not in the forefront of her mind as the car idled in the parking lot of the elementary school. They were helpful though, in the unconscious justification that she was not a "bad mom."

Her attention, her full awareness was of the second bottle still sloshing quietly under the seat. She wanted it. At first she thought she might have to open the door and hurl whatever was in her stomach onto the blacktop. But then it passed. Then she was filled with shame. How could she? What would this mean if she took a belt right now? If

she, right now, at this moment reached under the seat and pulled out that bottle?

What she was afraid of becoming, she already was. With that justification, Charlotte reached down, pulled it out and with a quick look around, took a long swig of the clear liquid. Again she knew the burning down the back of her throat. Charlotte put the car in drive and thundered out of the elementary school parking lot.

She was not going home. She wasn't sure where she was going, but it wasn't home. Charlotte continued to drive, past the farms and pastures, the cemetery, the high school, taking careful and discreet swigs from the bottle every few miles. As she drove, she listened to the sad worn crooning of Peggy Lee on eight track: *Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing.* She felt good now. Well, maybe not good, but better. Good would come soon enough. Then... invincible.

The car climbed into the foothills along the mountainside where the road looked out over the valley, nicknamed "Happy Valley," muttered sarcastically by some and conceitedly by others, pompous Mormons who never knew any other kind of life. Men who reigned over their little kingdoms and women who parroted words they didn't even try

to understand – a society of grandiloquent peacocks and peahens who'd never had a creative thought but who could quote scripture to answer every question in life. Charlotte had tried to believe – back when it did not seem so absurd that such portentous gas bags could possibly hold the key to everlasting life and selected to sit on the right hand of God. Still, she and Jay went to church. It was best for his career. And when they did not go, they sent the kids. So they would "fit in."

This was not her fault. He had made her this way. She thought about going to see Charles and Jane. They would be having coffee now. They were like that too. They had coffee, did not wear garments. They did not regularly attend church and felt no compunction about it. They were progressive. Charlotte would tell them what Jay had done and they would be angry at him for neglecting his family. For neglecting her. And yet she remembered when she had tried this once before.

One evening, not long ago, she had sat in their living room and told them everything. Sloppy, tears had spilled onto the green silk couch and Jane had handed her a lace handkerchief to blow her nose in. She had opened her soul to them. Charles sat regally in the wing backed chair

clinking the ice in his glass of bourbon. "I'll speak with him tomorrow" he'd said sternly. Then he added, "But honey, it wouldn't hurt if you made things nice for him at home. If you had a warm dinner on the table when he walked in, some soft music playing. Maybe the kids could already be in bed."

Jane, nodded in full concurrence. "Yes dear. It's very important to make a man want to be there with you in the evening. To make him feel like he is special and the king of the house." She said this triumphantly, as if she truly believed that this was the essence of womanhood. Charlotte just nodded through her tears.

*Hey little girl, comb your hair, fix your make-up. Soon he will open the door....*Charlotte turned up the stereo as the car ambled along the foothills at the base of Mount Timpanogas. She still believed herself to have been meant for better things. By God, she was a woman, who, in her late...no...mid thirties, still stopped traffic and turned the heads of high school boys. And she *had* tried. She'd ironed the sheets for God's sake.

It was not that Charlotte was unfamiliar with being abandoned. It was that she thought it wouldn't happen to

her again. That somehow, by virtue of no longer being a child, she would now have control over her happiness

She could never turn to her own mother. Delia had been mired in consternation and self-pity since 1949 when her husband, Charlotte's dad had died of lung cancer. Charlotte was seven then and she only remembered him as a tall, kindly shadow in a fedora and brown suit who had scooped her up in his arms as they walked to church on Sunday mornings.

"Poor Delia," everyone said. "What will she do with those four children to feed?" Charlotte's uncle Elwin had been so moved by his sister-in-law's unfortunate situation, that he offered her ten cents on the dollar to take the eight acre farm off her hands when she couldn't pay the taxes. Delia was left with the house and the children. She took a job with a local factory, plucking chickens for five cents a bird. Each night Delia dragged herself home, hands and arms scratched and bleeding. She had no time for Charlotte who was expected to continue with her childhood without adding to problems.

Charlotte had begun sleep-walking then. Every few nights she bumped through the darkness, into the tiny hallway, picked up the telephone and asked the operator for

"167-J." Then she sat in the little chair next to the phone and wept bitterly into the receiver when there was no answer. Of course there was no answer. She had not remembered in her dream, that this was their family's own phone number.

And then came the worst of it: Delia had gone and married Bill whom she'd met at the dance hall one Friday night – Bill with the brilliant white false teeth and the smell of booze on his breath. Bill who had kissed Charlotte goodbye on the lips once when she was twelve and leaving the house to go to the movies with her friends. Charlotte did not want to think about this anymore. She did not want to go to the dark blanket place again. Not now.

The second bottle was now half gone. She pulled off to the side of the road by the rifle range and looked out at the valley. Then she nodded off, her head swirling happily. Soon she was sleeping well, having a most pleasant dream.

She was startled awake at the sound of men and boys in hunting caps nearby who had begun shooting their rifles into the side of the mountain. What the hell? Something clicked in Charlotte's head. She was supposed to be somewhere, wasn't she? Wait. She was supposed to meet

someone. Her friend...Carol. She was supposed to meet Carol. At the hotel. The Hilton.

They would stay at the Salt Lake Hilton and go out tonight. They would have a cocktail at the piano bar and then some dinner. Maybe her other friends were there too. That was right. She had better hurry. It was getting late. Charlotte started the car, backed out onto the road and headed south back to American Fork. It was strange to see the sun so high in the east. To see mothers wearing sweaters and wheeling little blond heads in strollers. To see the mailman trotting from house to house with his big leather bag. It all seemed out of place. But this was not Charlotte's concern. She had to meet Carol.

The orange Firebird crept impenitently along Thornwood Drive, a lovely tree lined street in a better part of town with larger than average front lawns and stately homes. Charlotte felt wonderful. Soon, she would meet Carol. They would have a drink and some dinner and they would laugh and tell secrets and complain. Maybe she would see the tall dark-haired man with the Cigar at the piano bar. Maybe he would buy her drinks. Charlotte parked the car with seeming deliberation on a roundabout driveway lined with tall manicured bushes, and walked up the small sidewalk leading.

The large brass mailbox read 904 Thornwood Drive. *Odd*. She looked beautiful in her heels and pearls and black silk dress. Just beautiful. She wore the large tortoise shell sunglasses that hid any flaws. But this evening there were no flaws. Only perfection. She looked like a movie star. Really...she did.

Upon reaching the heavy oak door, Charlotte expected a doorman to tip his hat to her, to say, "Good evening miss. Allow me to get that for you." But no doorman appeared. So, she turned the brass knob herself. The door did not open. Where was everyone for God's sake? She stood for a moment staring. Then she rang the doorbell to the right. It was opened by an older, pleasant looking woman. Probably the concierge.

"Well, hello my dear. Can I help you?"

"Hello. I'm Charlotte Sterling. I believe I have a reservation." Charlotte stepped into the narrow hallway.

"I'm sorry, you're who?"

"I'm here to check in? Am I too early?" The concierge appeared to be confused.

"Check in?" Said the kindly woman, clearly baffled. "Maybe you should come in here and sit down for a minute. Can I get you a glass of water?"

"No thank you. I think I'd like to just go to my room and wait for my friend, Carol."

"Carol?"

"My friend, Carol Jensen. I'm sure you'll find a reservation for her too."

"Sweetie, maybe you should just rest here for a minute. Uh, what did you say your name was?"

"You know on second thought I'm a little tired. I think I'll just go to my room and have a bath now."

"Uh. Hmmm. I'll be right back, uh, Charlotte, was it? You just stay put." The concierge or desk lady or whoever she was bustled out, leaving her alone in the room.

Charlotte stood up and surveyed the lobby. It was nicely decorated -- A smaller lobby, but very nice. She walked toward a doorway at the end of the room leading into a darker hallway. Something seemed strange about this Hilton. It wasn't at all as she had expected or remembered. Something was odd, not quite right? Standing in the dimness her head continued to swirl and she was content. She looked to her right and saw what appeared to be a very nice bathroom and went in.

O.K. Here we are. This is nice. I'll just have a bath before Carol arrives. Charlotte closed the door and sat on

the edge of the tub. She was very sleepy. She turned the chrome faucets and flipped up the stopper. Then she stared into the steamy gush as it raced over white porcelain. She removed her clothes and stepped into the water, carefully lowering herself into the warm bath. To her left, was an open box of Calgon Bath Crystals. *How nice.*

She sprinkled the powder over her body and into the water, turning it a royal bluish-green. She rested her head on the edge and closed her eyes. So relaxed. So very relaxed. She may have slept for a minute. Then, Charlotte's eyes fluttered open. She gazed at the wallpaper. Velvet grapes and velvet leaves spilled over velvet vases onto a shimmery golden wall.

Where exactly was she? It was nice here. And relaxing. She wondered about it dreamily – the wall paper, the crown molding which bordered the bright white ceiling. Wait. Something was strange. Hmmm. She became very still in the bathtub, making no ripples in the water now. Where? . . . Where in the hell was she? Something about the Hilton. Something about Carol. Something. . . Something. She remembered the grocery store. Then there was the La Casa Club. Then there was Kristy? It was distorted, nonsensical. Possibly a dream.

She heard some bustling and then talking on the other side of the door of a room where she appeared to be taking a bath in blue water. A familiar voice and a somewhat familiar voice. Then there came a firm knock. "Charlotte? Honey, what are you doing in there?" Then the door opened itself. And her best friend Carol stood over her, hands on her hips, looking stern in her waitress uniform with its little name tag "Carol." Her lips were a flat red line and there was a deep furrow between her dark eyebrows. She regarded Charlotte for a minute as she floated naked in the luke-warm blue-green water. "Hey Char Sweetie. What exactly is it that you're doing here?"

Carol did not seem to want a response though. "Let's get you dried off and outta this nice lady's house. Sweetie, you really gotta get a hold a yourself." Carol held out an arm and hoisted Charlotte out of water. She stood dripping in the tub for a minute, her head alternately spinning and throbbing.

Finally, Charlotte looked into the eyes of her friend. Her head quivered a little, back and forth as she tried to focus. Then she said, "Promise me something . . . Whatever you do . . . don't tell Carol about this. O.K?"

— ooo000ooo—

Carol and Pauline had helped Charlotte find her clothes. They had each held onto an arm as she shuffled out of the handsome residence, only a few blocks from her own house, close enough in fact that Mrs. Price's neighbors were really Charlotte's neighbors too. Just down the hill and a few streets over. Pauline drove the Firebird home and Charlotte rode in Carol's Pinto. They were silent as the little car climbed the hill, past the cemetery to her street. She could not remember the events of the night before. She thought it might have started with a trip to the grocery store.

She had a shadow of concern in the back of her mind, in the place where thoughts were beginning to form again, and some latent neglect or offense was taking shape. It was like the dream she used to have when her children were little, that she was driving downtown and suddenly remembered she had left the baby sleeping in its car-bed on top of the car. But when she stopped and jumped out, the baby was gone.

"Oh my God, Carol! Stop the car!"

"What?"

"Stop the car – right now!" Carol slowed and pulled over.

"Wait. Never...never mind. I'm sorry."

"Charlotte, maybe we should take you to the hospital. Ya know? I'm kinda worried about you. We all are."

"No. I have to go home. Oh my God." And she began to weep quietly into the passenger door.

"I'll call Jay."

"Jay. I don't even know where Jay is."

"How about Delia, your mom?"

Then Charlotte became confused. Was she in trouble? Was she the perpetrator or the victim of this crime? Were people going to be angry at her or sorry for her?

"Carol, what has happened?"

Jays' blue Thunderbird was in the driveway when the Pinto pulled in behind it. Charlotte felt like she was going to barf all over Carol's floor mat. She opened the door and then spilled herself onto the driveway. Jay came out the front door and joined Carol in helping Charlotte into the house.

"My God Char, you always have to make such a big entrance don't you?" He laughed and joked with Carol all the way into the house.

"Her trips to the grocery store have become more and more elaborate. Next time we'll have to tie a string around

her wrist." Carol laughed, charmed by him – like everyone was. All he had to do is flash the smile and laugh.

Together they helped her to the bedroom and deposited her on the bed. Then Jay and Carol left the room and spoke in low voices for a minute. Jay raised his voice. She heard him say "Christ, really?" Carol returned to the bedroom.

"I'll see you later honey. I've got to run Pauline back home. D'ya need anything?"

"No. Thanks Carol . . . you . . . you are a good friend." Carol stood for a minute. She looked concerned, but turned and left. She heard the Pinto start up, back out and fade away. She guessed it was around 2:00 in the afternoon. She was lying on the bed her arm under her head and facing the door. Jay walked in. He was dressed for the office, crisp white shirt, French cuffs, navy blue tie with the tiny gold stars and gray wool slacks. He paced quickly back and forth in front of the bed and ran his hands through his dark curly hair.

"Christ, Charlotte. . . Good Christ. . . Where are the kids?"

"Don't you have them?"

"Oh, that's very funny. Very goddamn fucking funny!"

She was feeling more awake now, more like herself. She sat up on the bed, one leg on the floor. She found her cigarettes in her purse and lit one up, took a long drag and regarded him coolly. "I'm thinking they're probably at school. It *is* Friday isn't it? Friday? See I still know what day of the week it is." She sat back against the headboard and took another drag. Since when do you give a shit where any of us are Jay – *ever*?"

Then he moved in on her, grabbing her by the shoulders, shaking her hard. "Are you trying to ruin me? Do you remember there's an election's in three weeks?"

She spat back at him. "Oh, so what?! You're such a big deal – you think anybody cares what I do? Nobody cares Jay. Not you—that's for certain. None of the idiots in this po-dunk county! Nobody! They'll all vote for you because you're Jay Sterling. Bullet proof Jay Sterling! Completely indestructible! Took down the murderer Gary Anthony in a single bound – sending him to the firing squad! First U.S. execution in 25 years! Oh my! Isn't it true, Mr. Sterling that you've never lost a case?" He raised the back of his hand as if to strike her in the face and then stopped.

"Go to hell Charlotte." He turned and stalked out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. She heard him

fire up the Thunderbird and his tires spin the gravel as he roared away towards downtown. She sat back and closed her eyes. Her head hurt. She was sick and humiliated. But she could still go hand-to-hand with him even half drunk. In a way, that made her feel stronger. She did worry where the kids were. She would fix dinner. She would make it up to them. She would be a good mom. But Jay? He could go *fuck* himself.

— ooo000ooo—

October 21, 1976

Charlotte had been trying very hard to live an ordinary, conventional life since the morning after being fished out of Mrs. Price's bathtub the week before. As of today, for week now, she had maintained this sensibility. She and Jay had barely spoken since *the bathtub day* — as she now referred to it in her mind. Certainly other people had done similarly stupid things. She had been sleepwalking or had blacked out, that was all. Things happened. Maybe she should try and cut down the drinking. After all she didn't *have* to drink. She could stop whenever she wanted and she would stop. Not for him. But for herself. Because her kids needed her. Because she wanted to be a good mother

– *and* a responsible person. These were the things she repeated to herself as she went through the day.

It had been a week now, since *the bathtub day* and it was Friday again. Charlotte was having coffee that morning, watching *Donahue* trying not to think about vodka martinis. She had a beauty appointment with Gladys and was supposed to attend an Elk's Lodge dinner honoring Jim tonight. His secretary had called that morning to say that Mr. Sterling would be picking her up at 5:00. Maybe she would not go. She hadn't decided. In fact she did not care whether she went or not.

It was around 10:30 when the doorbell rang. She went to the living room. Standing on the front porch was an oddly familiar woman. "Yes, can I help you?" She laughed to herself how she hoped this woman would not announce that she was *here to check in*.

"You're Charlotte aren't you? Charlotte Sterling?" The woman was tall and slim, older than Charlotte, maybe forty-five-ish. She wore a silk tan pant-suit with a deep, fluid neckline, gold necklaces dangled over huge breasts. Her skin was very leathery and she wore heavy tan make-up and brown and bronze eye-shadow. She had gold bangles on her arms and bronze colored shoes. Even her hair had a kind of

metallic gloss and was high and poofy, making her appear even more statuesque than she was. She looked like she had been pretty once, perhaps Vegas showgirl pretty, except that her eyes were very round, bugged out and bloodshot. She spoke in a low smoker's voice – like a bronze, middle aged Lucille Ball.

"You don't recognize me do you?"

"Well, let me see. I know I know you from someplace," she said in her friendliest voice. Charlotte searched her mind. Was she an old friend from Lehi? Was she a second cousin from her father's side? Was she a neighbor?

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't remember me. My name's Violet – Violet Nuttall. I've waited on you at the Country Club several times."

"Oh, right," Charlotte pretended sudden recognition. "Well, Violet how are you? Would you like to come in?" Violet Nuttall looked nervous. In her hand, she held a package, a small yellow bubble-padded envelope. "I can't stay, she said. "This is for you." She thrust the envelope towards Charlotte's hand. "I'm sorry," she said and then turned. Violet Nuttall paused briefly and looked back, straight into Charlotte's eyes. "No. I'm not sorry." Then she hurried towards her also brown car.

Charlotte stood in the doorway and watched the woman drive away. She was numb and burning, cold. The dark blanket was starting to fold around her again, this time because of a stranger, this time because of something she knew had nothing to do with her, but would cause her destruction anyway, like a tiny robot-guided missile in the form of a bubble-padded envelope. It had already met its target. The thing inside was light-weight and rectangular. It was a cassette tape. She closed the door, shutting out the cold October morning air. Then she was kneeling, then falling onto the floor of the living room holding the envelope in one hand, looking up at the lurid writing. It said: To Mrs. Jay Sterling, Personal and Confidential.

Charlotte had lain on her back the front room floor, like a little kid for about fifteen minutes, holding the cassette tape above her, looking at it real closely, fingering the clear plastic and the tape. It was an old one, having been used before it bore the remnants of a label scribbled in pen and then torn off. The cassette clicked gently as she shook it back and forth. It was, an ordinary thing of plastic holding spools of magnetic tape visible inside. She could take it and throw in the garbage if she wanted and it would not hurt her, this thing – this

physical object which had no ability to inflict injury. But she could make it hurt her. She could animate the thing by snapping it into a player and pushing a button. And then untold hurt would be inflicted. It was not an innocuous plastic thing. The bronze woman had made sure she knew that.

She had fumbled around in the gloom of Sophia's basement bedroom until she found her daughter's tape player. Then she sat at the kitchen table with a cigarette in one hand. Vodka and ice had replaced the warm cup of coffee. They never smoked in the house. The kids had no idea she smoked at all. She didn't care now. She took the little cassette from atop the envelope and popped it into the tape player. She pushed play and listened. Then she sat motionless on the yellow bedspread staring straight ahead. She thought of *Mission Impossible* – how the tape would begin to smolder and the whole machine would self destruct after delivery of its message. Then she thought how strange it was to be thinking that. Sophia's clock said 11:15. The liquor store would not be open until noon

She somehow managed to also remember she had appointment with Gladys at 1:00. She stumbled up the stairs

to her own closet, pulled on what she had been wearing the day before, and found her car keys.

Two hours later, Charlotte sat in the chair like a mannequin, head quivering eyes bloodshot as Gladys back-combed, teased and smoothed the unkempt dark strands into an objet d'art.

"Honey, I know there's something wrong. Maybe you better tell me. I don't even know if I should let you leave."

"Oh no, I'm fine Gladys, really. I jusss umh. . . didn't get much sleep last night. And you know, things with the kids are always hectic and Jay's election's coming up soon. It's jusss been kind of . . . you know, difficult." She sounded perfectly fine to herself. She wasn't slurring her words, was she? Yes, she did look rough in the round mirror with all this harsh bright light. Her eyes were two green pools in two swollen puddles of red. She had tried to apply mascara in the car. The tears were spilling over now making black trails down her cheeks. But she dabbed at them with a tissue and didn't think anyone could see.

"Well, I want you to have some coffee before you go. Are you sure there's nothing you want to talk about?"

"No, no. I'm fine. I promise."

"You know Charlotte, we used to be friends. You can tell me things."

"Of course Gladys. Of course I can and if something were wrong I would tell you. But it's not. I'm fine."

She sat as long as she thought was required to sit and drank the coffee offered by Gladys. She pretended to be a part of the conversation Gladys was having with her next customer. She was sobering up now and this was unpleasant. Not acceptable. Gladys was telling the other woman about how beautiful she, Charlotte had been when she had modeled for her ten years ago. Charlotte nodded and tried to smile. "Those were some fun times. Yes, they were."

"Remember Char" 'member that time we did that show in Wichita? I still have the trophy over there in the case. It's that big one see? Three feet tall." Charlotte stared in the direction of the dusty trophy case in the corner, a wall of yellowing black and white photos hung off to the side. She was starting to feel sick. She had to go.

"Charlotte wait. Your coat and purse?"

"Oh, right." She hoped the receptionist did not see her hands shaking as she slipped on the light velvet coat and fumbled for her keys.

"Thanks Gladys. I'll let you know how the dinner goes." She thought she sounded fine as she went out the door. Like a normal person, a stylish woman who had just gotten her hair done, looking forward to an elegant dinner with her elegant and distinguished husband. She was sweating and nauseous when she drove in the driveway. She rushed in the backdoor and to the bathroom. Sitting on the side of the tub, she took a large swig off of the vodka bottle. Feeling better, swirly now. She wandered the house. This was where she lived. This was where her life was. She began picking things – random things in the house – the green candlesticks, the phonebook, some shoes, the tea kettle, her Betty Crocker Cookbook. These were all her things, all their things. She piled them up in a huge pile in the living room. Then Charlotte fell asleep on the bed.

When she awoke, the sun was low as it streamed through the gold curtains. The clock said 4:30. Her hair was crumpled and mashed. It reminded Charlotte there was something she had to do. Something had happened. Something terrible. Then came the rush of pain from earlier in the day, the vague plan. She pulled on the silver and pink dress and stumbled into the bathroom to try and fix the hair. She pasted the dangling strands back into place and

put on her make-up and heels between swigs. She smiled at the *Valley of the Dolls* image in the mirror. She had to admit it was ironically beautiful to watch herself, in her silver and pink dress drinking straight out of the silver and red Smirnoff's bottle right there in the bathroom. Then she went and sat in the living room to wait for Jay, and to have another cigarette.

— ooo000ooo—

Sophia's friend Joanne looked absolutely miserable as she leaned against the lockers. It was 4:00 on Friday afternoon. Sophia had stayed late to re-take a math test. Joanne had been waiting for Sophia and appeared, flushed and out of breath. "Sophe, you won't believe what happened. You can't tell anyone."

"OK, what happened?" Sophia was so used to it by now. It was probably something stupid like, Mr. Connors, her science teacher, had made a paper airplane for her in the back of the classroom while everyone watched a movie. Or Mr. Connors had stopped in the hall between class periods, pointed at her with two fingers and said "I'll see you in sixth period." Every little thing was such a big deal.

It had started a few months before, the first week of school. Joanne never stopped talking about his blue eyes or

how funny he was or what she saw him eating for lunch that day or how he was originally from Galveston, Texas. She never let up, not even for one second. Thanks to Joanne, Sophia figured she knew at least as much about Mr. Connors, the science teacher as she knew about any other person or topic of conversation. She had never before been possessed of so much useless information, including everything she had ever learned from spending her entire last summer watching *Match Game '76*.

And now they always had to go the long way after school because it was so important for Joanne to wave at him when he drove by on his way home. Joanne was pretty certain that someday Mr. Connors would stop along the gravelly road and ask if she wanted a ride and she would say "Sure, thanks Mr. Connors" in a little sing songy voice. Then as they were riding along, he would look deeply into her eyes and say, "Joanne, I've been watching you in class. You're special and perfect. So smart and sexy but not in that obvious kind of way, like all those other girls."

She would fall into his arms and they would kiss, kind of accidentally at first, and then they would totally make out. Sophia did not know what Joanne planned to do about

herself when that day came, since she dragged Sophia everywhere she went. Sophia figured she would just have to say "no thanks" to the ride and pretend that her house was right around the corner. Then, of course, he would confess he is completely in love with her and can't go on without her. Eventually, he would get divorced and marry Joanne because she could not possibly imagine a world where Mr. Connors would prefer his wife and kids over her.

What a pain she was. But they had a pact. They had been best friends since they were five. Joanne's family were the only ones in the entire neighborhood who were not Mormon.

Her parents played golf every day, drank bourbon and water every night and belonged to the Presbyterian Church. Her parents were older, sort of like the generation *between* Sophia's parents and grandparents. They spoke with gravelly smokers voices. Other people in the neighborhood thought they were weird, but Sophia really liked JoAnne's parents. They were nice. They were funny. They didn't get mad all the time and yell at them to "Play outside!" They did not fall asleep in odd places. And you could really talk to them. Joanne's parents were always in a better mood than Sophia's parents. And way more fun.

What was even better was that Joanne had no brothers and sisters to bother her all the time. She got to eat Hostess Os for breakfast, take golf lessons and go with her parents every year to the annual country club "Crab Crack" instead of stay home with the baby sitter.

Sophia had met Joanne, practically the first day her family ever moved in to the neighborhood. It had been kind of a stormy spring day. Sophia remembered her own mom being real nice to JoAnne and her mom when they walked down the five houses down to introduce themselves. Even at four years old, Sophia usually noticed the times when her mom was real nice to people, because it almost always surprised her.

That day, Joanne had brown pig-tails, bangs and a missing tooth. On her middle finger she wore what she bragged to Sophia was a super secret spy ring you could only get with a new pair of Buster Browns. Her mother said, "Yes, our Joanne is a tom-boy." Sophia had never heard that word before "tomboy." She liked it. She had always been bothered by the fact that boys got to do all the best stuff. They played ball, they were scouts, they went hunting, they got to be doctors when they grew up. In fact, Sophia couldn't think of a single thing about being a girl

that sounded appealing. She did not like playing with dolls, did not like playing house or wearing dresses.

Joanne's mom walked back up the street without her daughter and they spent the rest of the afternoon pushing each other off Sophia's new front porch. Practically every day after that, Joanne appeared at Sophia's screen door in a t-shirt, shorts, cowboy boots, hat and holster. For the first few days it was an awesome sight to see her chocolaty face and pigtails flying through her mother's pristine living room. She was a girl after Sophia's own heart. Charlotte disliked her from the beginning and within three days, Joanne had been banished from inside the house – a rule that had stuck for many years.

"Hurry up!" Joanne looked around as if for eavesdroppers. "I can't tell you what happened here. We have to go someplace else."

Sophia rummaged the locker for a book, zipped her gym bag and trailed Joanne out the double doors of the school. It was freezing outside, the last day of fall quarter. Joanne sort of ran ahead, refusing to talk. Sophia surmised that whatever it was, it was probably more than a paper airplane or extra attention in the hallway. They dropped their books at Joanne's house and she got her bike. Sophia

could see the orange Firebird in the driveway as They started down the sidewalk. She began to lose breath as she ran alongside the bike down the five lots to her house. Sophia was feeling kind of weak and sick now.

"Stay out here, I'll be right back."

"It's freezing. Lemme come in and wait."

"Look, I'll be right back!" Sophia said it more urgently than she meant to. Joanne gave her a queer look. Joanne knew Sophia's mom was mean. It's not like *that* was the big secret.

"Well, just hurry up!"

Sophia went in the back door. The little bell attached to the door window curtains made its happy little jingle. She ran down the back stairs two at a time. If she was going to get out, she had to be quick. It wasn't that Charlotte would have tried to stop her from leaving. It was more the stultifying gloom, the stagnant cheerlessness of the inside of the house, the fear of what might be inside that might grab a hold of her and make it too problematic to climb back up the stairs. In the dimness of her flowery yellow bedroom, she found some gloves, a ski hat and her shiny new ski coat from the closet.

Sophia ran back up the stairs. Then it gripped her and she stopped. The smell of cigarette smoke was wafting around the kitchen. She heard loud music coming from the living room stereo. She should have just gone out the door. She should have. But she stopped. Her parents did not smoke. Or if they did, they never smoked in the house.

"Mom?" She sort of whispered it to herself. "Mom?" She called to her mother hoping she would not answer. She walked toward the sound and the smoke. It was coming from the living room. Jack Jones was thundering out of the walnut console stereo. *"Hey little girl, comb your hair fix your make-up, soon he will open the door,"* his lusty voice echoing through a long smokey tunnel.

Sophia knew the song. It was one of her mother's favorites. Charlotte had played it over and over in the car. She'd kept pressing the rewind button. First she'd just listen. The next time, she'd sing along, seeming to pretend as she drove, that she was delivering a performance to some dark audience out ahead of her. She'd hold the long notes with Jack – *"you needn't try anymoooooore . . . for wives should al-lways be lovers toooooo, run to his arms the moment he comes home to youuuuu."* The base and drums, the kind of high strings that make you want to cry and

trombones, dissonant and playful swinging up, down and across as Jack Jones moved through a smoky tunnel building to a crescendo, then getting soft again.

Sophia and her brother and sister had heard it since they were little. When Sophia was seven and Nicky was three they used to dance around the living room with her, holding hands, her holding their hands, and twirling each other until they fell dizzy on the floor. Then they stayed put, the three of them. Charlotte sat back, her legs stretched out in capri pants, leaning back on her hands and swaying slowly to *Lollipops and Roses*. She'd have a kind of dreamy look on her face. They liked Jack Jones because he made their mom happy.

But today, she was sitting on the couch in her silver and pink evening dress. Her long dark hair was piled on top of her head in infinite curly-Qs. Tiny wisps that dangled down and twirled in and out of gold-hooped earrings. This was most likely a creation of Gladys'— her mom's friend. Her mom had once modeled hairstyles for Gladys.

She sat with her arms and legs crossed except for the cigarette that she held between two fingers, out and elegantly away from her dress. In front of both of the, in the center of the living room rug was a large pile of

various objects, amassed from inside the house and stacked as if to form a tower, five feet high of things that made up . . . all of them: her mom and dad, Nicky and Kristy. However frayed and weak the ties may have seemed, they were a family.

There were dishes and dishtowels, candlesticks, the clock that hung in the hallway, books, record albums, the copper tea kettle, the TV Guide, Charlotte's red plaid Betty Crocker Cook Book, her yellow cotton apron with the ladybug on it, the gold ceramic statue of a lady holding grapes, a pair of her dad's shoes, the phone book, a houseplant. On top of the pile was Sophia's cassette tape recorder, and spilling out the side was the corner of her old baby blanket with the satin ribbon. Sophia stood paralyzed at the sight of the jumbled mass.

Charlotte glared at Sophia. "What?"

She could have been sober, for how beautiful she looked posing on the couch. But Sophia knew right away she was not. This was because of the ever so slight quiver of her head and the hand that held the cigarette.

"Nothing." Sophia was pretty much afraid of Charlotte all the time, whether she was sober or not. She did not think her mother knew this though, since Sophia carefully

maintained the permanent attitude of 'indifferent little shit.'

"Where are Kristy and Nick?" She said.

"Your brother and sister are at Jane's house." Her speech was a little slurry and her head continued to quiver. She sounded formal, like she was talking to someone else besides her daughter. She took a drag off of her cigarette. Sophia met her gaze and glared back.

"What's this supposed to be?" Sophia pointed at the mass in the center of the room.

"How do you like my pyre?" The record player re-set itself and Jack Jones started singing again.

"I don't know what that means." Sophia was feeling sicker. Whatever it was her mother was doing, she didn't like that her baby blanket and cassette player had any part of it.

"Well, really it's more of a present for your dad. He should be here any minute."

Sophia could see Joanne now, coming up the steps of the front porch, cupping her hands to the sides of her face to peer in through the screen door. She started to panic. Joanne couldn't see this. Couldn't see her mother like this with her . . . pyre or whatever it was.

"I have to go. Joanne's waiting for me." She rushed to the door, putting her body between Joanne and the pyre and her mother. She stopped and looked at her mom. She didn't know what to do. Didn't know if this was the beginning of some kind of new and glittering nightmare. Yet what was she supposed to do. Was this an emergency? Did it require her to go running for help – to someone – next door or down the street? Should she have gotten on the phone again and started calling? Her mother was drunk, alone in the house in the middle of a Friday afternoon, and had made a huge pile of random junk on the floor of the living room . . . which she had referred to as a pyre. Sophia looked at her and felt a pang of sadness. "I'm sorry mom. Dad'll be here soon. Right?" Charlotte was no longer looking at her.

Sophia opened the door and almost mowed down Joanne. "Let's go." She brushed past her and got her bike. The sun was low in the sky and gave off no warmth against the bike in the wind. Sophia was freezing, but she felt less sick now to be out of that house. She trailed Joanne all the way to the cemetery. It was a mostly deserted place. Since kindergarten, they had played hide and seek among the headstones, along its empty roads, put on their *HR Puff-n-Stuff* shoes in the small amphitheater reserved for

Veteran's Day. They had run atop its stone walls on their way to Coleman's Candy Store, jumping over each capped flagstone every three steps.

Finally, Joanne stopped at their favorite spot, the top of a steep hill and marked by a box of four tall juniper trees. This was where they always sat and talked, while they looked out at the town and the farmland reaching all the way to the lake. It was the plot of Sophia's own great grandparents on her dad's side. There was also a baby who died at birth and her grandfather's younger brother Gareth who had died of Scarlet Fever when he was thirteen. Her family had owned the plot since the pioneers built the town. But they had never given much thought about who was buried there. It was a nice spot to stop and look out.

They sat on their bikes and looked over the valley in the freezing wind. "OK, what?" Sophia was shaking. It was freezing and something newly weird was happening at her house. This had better be good. Then she saw the tears that were starting to streak down Joanne's face.

"He's leaving," she said. "He's going away and not going to be a teacher anymore."

"Mr. Connors? Why?"

"I don't know why." She wiped the tears away with her sleeve. Joanne was a good cryer. She didn't get all sloppy like Sophia did. When she cried, her nose always ran, she started gasping, her eyes got bloodshot and she had to blow her nose a million times. But when Joanne cried it was just big droopy tears. She still managed to look presentable. Sophia noted that that was a handy quality.

"So, what happened?"

"I was hanging out in the science room after school, talking to him, and then he said 'Today is my last day.' And I was like 'What? Where are you going? You can't leave, Mr. Connors. He said, 'I'm so sorry. I'm going to miss you, but it's not up to me.' And I said, 'But, but Mr. Connors, you can't go. You're the best teacher in the whole world.'"

"You said that? . . . Really?" Sophia may have let a tiny, irreverent smile flash across her face. She folded her arms and put her hand on her mouth. She tried very hard to reflect her soberness, to mix it with her own authentic grief, to *not* let this moment be the comic relief that she wanted. To be a sympathetic friend, to maintain a look of serious concern. But it was no use.

"Shut up! You suck!" Jo turned away from her. Sophia tried to compose herself.

"I'm sorry. Really. . . I am. I'm not laughing." It felt good to laugh though. Even if it was wrong. "Ok, so then what happened?"

Joanne waited then turned to away again. "I can't tell you. I just can't."

"What happened? You have to tell me." She looked away. However much distress Joanne was in, Sophia knew there was something spectacular coming. She knew how much Joanne wanted to tell her about whatever it was, but she wanted the right amount of fanfare first.

"He kissed me."

Sophia was speechless. Frozen for a minute. They were fourteen. Neither of them had ever been kissed. Sophia smiled again and bit her lip. Joanne glared at her.

"You better shut the hell up! I am never going to tell you anything again."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Really. Don't be mad." Sophia sat down on the grass hugging her knees. Then, she really did try to make real sense out of this news. Joanne plopped down next to her. Her eyes were glistening.

"He kissed you on the cheek, right?"

"On the lips."

"How long'd it last?"

"About six seconds."

"No way."

"Are you sure it wasn't like a farewell, sort of 'see ya later kid' kind of peck and he accidentally missed your cheek and hit your lips?"

She stammered. "It was a real kiss. A real one. I swear."

"Was there any moisture?"

"Uh? Yeah!"

Then Sophia was stunned. All she could do was whisper it: "Wow." They were both silent for a while and they looked into the wind, out and down past the cemetery, the old high school, Sophia's dad's office, past all the houses, the park where the carnival had been, then the farms, to the silver, white and gray Utah Lake. All around them, the Rocky Mountains jutted out and up. Beyond the lake they tried to see more in the distance, those things that were vast and measureless. Joanne had learned something new that day. It was a strange and exciting concept – a kiss on the lips by a man – a teacher. Sophia thought about that for awhile, then turned back to other things. She could be sure of only one thing. She knew her mother was going to die soon.

— ooo000ooo—

It had made Charlotte sad to watch Sophia search her face for understanding, to try and find answers that were not there. This constant searching of Sophia's had always made Charlotte only angry and confused. She wanted an ally in her daughter but she would never have that and couldn't ask for it. She would have to sit silently and be judged by her.

She was glad when Sophia had gone. Charlotte turned back to staring at the glittering dust particles as they floated in the center of the room. It was as though she were watching her life, a single tiny star, as it floated away and out of her reach. She looked at the tower of things in the middle of the room. Then remembering, she got up and went to the pile taking the cassette player off the top. She went back to the couch with it and set it next to her. It couldn't hurt her anymore. It had already inflicted all the pain it had inside.

Jay would be home soon.

He walked through the front door at 5:00 p.m. exactly. Jack Jones was still playing on the stereo. Jay lifted the needle off of the record and looked at the scene in the living room. Charlotte stayed silent on the couch. She

watched his eyes land on the great mass in the middle of the room. She saw the so smug look in his eye. She knew it well.

"Have you been cleaning darling?" He was pretending to be Peter Lawford tonight. "Ah, and you've been drinking. How lovely." He leaned against the walnut console stereo. "Maybe, you have a headache tonight. Maybe you need to stay home. Am I right?"

"You son-of-a-bitch."

"Oh, now what's this? My God Charlotte. What is your fucking problem? Did you have to do your own nails today? Or was it that your appointment got you up before noon?"

"You bastard." She picked up the cassette player and put it on her lap. Without another word, she pushed the play button.

"Charlotte, what the hell? We have a dinner tonight. Now, are we going or . . ."

There was the sound of some fumbling on the machine, then a gravelly woman's voice:

"Today is uh, October 7, 1976 and I am in the elevator of the Hilton Hotel on my way to room 1037." There was more fumbling, then the sound of a key unlocking a door. The door opened and closed."

Charlotte watched him fearlessly. He looked confused. Then the little smile on his face started to fade.

"Hey baby. You been waiting long?" Said the gravelly voice.

"I've been waiting hours."

"Me too."

"Get over here. I've got something for you".

There was more fumbling, lots of jostling of the microphone and a clank.

"Oh my God, Ooh baby. Can I have you right now."

Charlotte watched the blood drain from his face, the pale kernel of recall blossomed into full recognition. Charlotte watched every twitch as Peter Lawford melted away. Now there was just Jay Sterling. JJ. He stood there frozen. Small, insufficient. Destructible.

"Oh fuck yeah baby." The tape continued. *"Oh God, JJ. Do you want me?"*

His voice echoed in groans and mumbles. *"Oh fuck yeah."* His voice. *"Fuck."*

Charlotte saw that Jay was completely soaked in his own sweat now and trembling. He raised his eyes from the recorder to meet Charlotte's stare. She was standing up,

holding the machine looking straight at him, her face completely sober.

The female voice fell into high rhythmic baby talk sort of whining that continued. She let the sex play on and on. Jay lunged at Charlotte, at the machine. Charlotte moved around the pile of stuff keeping it out of his reach.

"Give me that! Where did you get it?"

She did not reply but darted out away from him. The lurid machine continued to play – *"Oh fuck yeah baby."* Together, they heard his rhythmic primal utterances, climaxing, so personal and so familiar they almost did not sound out of place. The tape was quiet for a minute. Then, the gravelly voice said *"God, that was so fucking good . . . Do you love me Jay?"* There was a long pause. She watched her husband stop breathing.

"What do you think? Of course I do Vi."

Jay snatched the recorder out of her hands and hurled it against the big mirror over the fireplace. The glass shattered and the gilded frame crashed onto the brick hearth sending shards of mirror into the Persian rug and across the polished wood floor. Then, as if she had practiced the moves, she picked up the half fifth of vodka from beside the couch and turned it upside-down on the

pyre. She struck a long fireplace match and threw it on top. The yellow lady-bug apron caught flames, then the Betty Crocker Cook Book.

Jay remained bolted to the floor, hand over his mouth now, fear cemented to his face. The fire was building slowly, melting the long green candlesticks, burning the laces of his leather shoes. Charlotte sat back down on the couch and noticed that through the smoke and flames, the pieces of mirror still caught the sunlight and reflected up through the flotsam in the air. The tiny shards cast stars that sparkled brightly on the ceiling. It was such a sight to behold. She saw him finally turn and slowly move backwards out of the room.

— ooo000ooo—

Conversations about kissing teachers, kissing in general and how scary it would be to fall into an open grave faded away. They were freezing. Sophia thought of her mother sitting there with her "pyre" as the sun got lower in the sky. Joanne turned the bike in the direction of home. Sophia rode south down the hill. She wanted to ride her bike very fast the rest of the way to her grandparents' house but the cold hurt her hands, even through the gloves. Tears froze to her face. She thought how the thing about a

cold night was that it was so quiet. The sun was almost down now. The western sky was a mass of pink and orange pillows hanging just below a palate of crystal blue. The only sound was the zip and click of the ten speed's chain, the echo of the peddles through the spokes. She rode along barely fast enough to keep from falling over. Every few feet she spun the peddles backwards to make the zipping sound louder and faster. She didn't know what to tell her grandparents about Charlotte. She only knew they wouldn't want to hear it.

The streets were deserted even though it was still light outside. Somber cars made hollow shushing sounds as they floated by. The houses seemed so still and dark. It was the time of day, right before people notice they should turn the lights on. The time when, if you are alone on the sidewalk, you might start to disappear into the darkness. At least she knew the lights would be on at their house and it would be warm.

Her grandparents' house smelled of equal parts Camay Soap, percolated coffee and Chanel No. 5. It gave off warmth and light from the street. When she got inside, she found Nick and Kristy each wrapped in their own blanket and sitting on either end of the family room couch drinking

chocolate milk out of a straw. They were watching ZOOM on Channel 7, the stupidest show on the planet. Sophia was annoyed that they appeared to be completely hypnotized by a bunch kids running around Boston in striped T-shirts holding their arms out like wings.

The three of them spent a lot of time at their grandparents' house. Sophia knew this particular set-up was exactly the way her grandma liked things. She liked for them to "stay home and be quiet." A preference which Sophia always found annoying. It made her want to crash around, break things and leave. She had to admit, that night though, she could only muster so much hostility at anyone. She felt wind-whipped and scared. She was trying to make sense of Joanne's story. She wanted to run home and make sure nothing terrible had happened – or she wanted to tell her grandparents so they would go fix it. But she knew they wouldn't fix it.

Most of all, she just wanted to wrap up in her own blanket and drink chocolate milk on the couch with Nick and Kristy. She knew Nick would make a fuss if she tried to change the channel. But so what? Zoom. What a stupid show. Grandma was making steak with salad and Parmesan French bread for dinner. Her grandfather was sitting in his big

wing-backed chair in the living room, drinking scotch and reading the paper. FM100 played soft hits on the walnut consul stereo. She walked into the room. "Hi Grandpa."

"Well, Hello Sophie." She kissed him hello on his smooth warm cheek and sat in the other wing-backed chair across from him.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing really. I rode my bike down." He held up his paper to the light, shook it, and turned the page. She read the headline: "Final Debate – Soviet Domination of Eastern Europe." What she wanted to tell him was that her mom was sitting up at their house all dressed up with her hair done and that she had built something in the living room that she was calling "a pyre." That she seemed pretty drunk and mad at dad. But Sophia didn't know how to say it. It didn't fit with this scene. It would disrupt the normal unfolding of events, things she was not supposed to be in control of. Then she would discover she had been mistaken or had been dreaming or that things weren't what they seemed. What's more, all that was good and safe and nice about being here would be ruined. Why did it always have to be Sophia who saw it all when nobody else ever noticed a goddamn thing?

"Who do you think will win for president, Grandpa?"

"Oh, Ford probably. The incumbent always has the edge."

"Are you voting for Ford?"

"Sophie, you know you're not supposed to ask people that."

"He's the republican."

"You're right. He is the republican."

"I think I'm gonna be a democrat." His eyes never left the paper.

"Oh, I doubt that honey."

Sophia went into the family room, switched the channels until she landed on *I Love Lucy*. Then she plopped down in the middle of Nick and Kristy on the couch and leaned extra hard on Nick.

"0-2-1-3-4!" She sang it loudly in his face.

"Hey! Get out of here SoPheYa!" He shoved her hard. He was getting stronger even though he was still only in the fifth grade.

"Zoom's stupid." Sophia grabbed the remote and started clicking around. "Look this is a really good *I Love Lucy*." It was a good one too. In fact, it was her favorite one – the one where Lucy gets drunk on Vita-meata-vegemin.

"Grandma! Sophia changed the channel on our show," yelled Nick.

Kristy didn't care. She just kept on drinking her chocolate milk out of the straw and staring at the TV. Their grandmother came in.

"What's going on here? Sophia what did you do?"

"Grandma, me and Kristy were . . ."

"'Kristy and I. . .,'" Grandma said. Of course she said this. It was what she always said. And Sophia always thought *Oh my god, come on*. But saying such a thing out loud would have worked against her. "Grandma, *Zoom's* a stupid show and it's almost over anyway. Besides, this is the best *I Love Lucy* ever!" Sophia implored her.

"Oh, you kids. Just be quiet and watch TV. Nick, you can pick the next show. Dinner will be ready in a minute."

"That's not fair!" he said to her back. Then he bolted back on the couch in protest. Sophia slugged him, but not too hard. "Shut up Nick."

"You shut up."

"You better shut up." *Lucy* was getting to the best part now and she could not have him ruining it. Now, Nick and Kristy had better not make a move.

Lucy is smartly dressed and stands behind a podium which holds numerous bottles of an elixir that read *Vita-meata-vegemin*. She begins to deliver the scripted sales pitch:

Hello friends, I'm your vita-meata-vegemin girl. Are you tired run-down, listless?

Do you poop out at parties? Are you unpopular? The answer to all your problems is in this little bottle: Vita-Meata-Vegemin.

Vita-Meata-Vegemin contains vitamins, meat, vegetables and minerals.

It's so tasty too. It's just like candy. The TV commercial director says: "Now you take some." Lucy pours herself a large spoonful and downs it. She makes a face and gags. "No, No. You're supposed to like it," he says. She takes another spoonful, stifles a gag but gets it down. She forgets her line and has to start over.

The scene continues as she runs through the script, over and over again, taking more and more spoonfuls of the medicine. She looks a little dizzy. Her head quivers, like their mom's does sometimes. *Vita-meata-vegemin contains vitamins, meat vegetables and minerals . . . So why don't you join the thousands of happy, peppy people and get a*

great big bottle of Vita-Meata-Vegemin tomorrow? That's Vita-Meata-Vegemin. She gives the audience a giant wink and smile.

The director says, "All right that's going to be fine. Let's run through it one more time, faster and brighter."

Hello friends, I'm your vita-meata-vegemin girl. Are you tired run-down, listless?. . .The answer to all your problems is in this biddle lottle. . . uh, uh, little bottle. . . Uhhh, Vita-Meata-Vegemin contains vitamins. . .meat, megetables and vinerals. It's so tasty too. Just like candy. . .

She looks at the director, *Hey ya know, this stuff tastes pretty good once you get used to it.* She takes another spoonful and continues. "Ok, let's start again," says the director.

Wellllll, . . . I'm your Vita-Meata-Vegemin girl. Are you tired, run-down, listless? Do you pop out at parties? Are you unpopular? Nick and Kristy were giggling. *Well are you?* Lucy looked straight into the camera, at them.

It had been so long since Sophia had seen either of them smile or heard them laugh. Now they were bouncing on the couch and doubling over. Lucy was drunk. But instead of being maudlin and scarey, she made them feel happy. The

feeling was expansive and joyful. She wasn't angry or mean. She sparkled with life. She still loved Ricky and he wasn't mad either.

When the show was over, Kristy and Nick were still gasping with laughter. They had big mirthful tears in their eyes. It made Sophia happy too. It was like something had been set free in them, just for a second. Then, Kristy looked up at Sophia and was very serious. "Sophie, is this real?"

"Yeah it's real. Sure it is." It wasn't a lie. Somewhere in the world, things like this really happened. Things not terrifying at all.

— ooo000ooo—

It was past midnight. Charlotte lay in their bed now, in the dark. Jay had been gone for several hours. She had finished off the rest of the vodka and smoked a pack of cigarettes as the sun went down in the living room, the smoke dissipated and the little stars vanished off the ceiling. She was pleased with one thing: whatever else Charlotte did or did not accomplish in life, she gave herself credit for being willing to do whatever it took. Sure, he was the golden boy small town lawyer. He could run

for office in Utah County and fuck around on her, even during election season. He could do that.

But, she could always burn the house down. She did, in fact, have that much power. She could to destroy him. This made her smile in the dark. The house smelled like a bonfire. Jay was gone. Of course he was. All he'd had to do was go in the kitchen, get the small fire extinguisher from the closet and douse her fire just as it was getting underway in the living room. The trouble was that she'd chosen things based on their emotional significance, rather than their flammability. She could see this now as the room continued to spin.

After he'd put out the fire, he went down the hall to their room, changed clothes and splashed water on his face. Then, he left to go to the Elk's Club dinner without her. Here she'd gone to all this trouble and his evening had still proceeded as planned. But he was afraid of her now. Charlotte was a force to be reckoned with. Maybe he had not seen that until tonight.

She reveled for a minute, the room still spinning. Then again in the back of her mind, appeared the kernel of a flaw. The possibility of a problem. That perhaps there was pain lurking somewhere, nearby, rather than joy. It was

not just that something was wrong, but that something might be very wrong – dangerously and life alteringly wrong. But at the moment, she couldn't remember what it was and was feeling very tired. Charlotte fell into a pleasant, and boozy sleep.

When she woke up, the sun was shining through the East window very high in the sky. She was still wearing her silver and pink party dress and shoes. Her false eyelashes crunched themselves into her dry eyes. Charlotte lay for a moment, absorbing the warm rays of the East window, contemplating whether and how much her head would hurt when she finally moved. Then, like a sudden violent ocean wave, every memory from yesterday, every relic of last night rushed over her, and submerged her as if under cold, water. She froze, too afraid to move. Then she sat up and rubbed her forehead with a soot blackened hand. The house smelled toxic – a noxious mix of chemical and bonfire smoke. She kicked off the high heels, peeled off the false eyelashes and began wandering from room to room.

The house mostly looked normal, until she got to the living room. Foam was splattered everywhere, on the hard wood floor and Persian rug, a layer of foam covered the heap of shit, that she had used to build her pyre – her

tribute to Jay, meant to say "death to us, death to all we've created. Fuck you JJ." She remembered how she'd felt so satisfied when saw the terrified look on his face. The way he had stood frozen and then how he'd slowly crossed his arms, clapped his hand over his mouth and then backed away.

Yes, she had fucked him over good. Charlotte had shown him she could destroy him. He had run away like a little mouse. But then. . . Then there was the enormity of the situation, as a whole. He had slept with another woman . . . fucked somebody else. Had done it enough times for what was her name? Violet? To ask for his love. She had listened to the tape over and over again, heard him thrusting and groaning, rising and falling with this stranger. This cocktail waitress who crossed into *her* world only yesterday. This foreigner who had invaded *her* home, *her* life. Jay had told this woman he loved her. It didn't matter whether it was true. Amazingly, Charlotte felt sorry for the bronze woman. If it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else. And Charlotte knew how it felt to beg for Jay's love.

What he had done to her, what she had done to him, what Charlotte had become, gradually and without intending

to . . . was simply unfathomable. Some things were cloudy. But, after a minute, there it was, the final recollection: She had already destroyed herself. If not yesterday, then a long time ago. She couldn't deny it. She was certifiable now. Nice Mormon housewives, who were *not* crazy, did not start their own houses on fire.

Charlotte began to pace back and forth very quickly in the sunny kitchen, shaking her hands and sweating. She got a glass of water from the tap and drank deeply, then gasped into the glass, sobbing. What would she do? They might be coming for her. Jay was gone. The kids were at her mother-in-law's. The kids! They would be coming home. She wondered where the vodka bottle had gone. Was there any left? She needed a drink more than she had ever needed anything. She needed . . . wanted . . . someone, something to lean into, to make it so she was just not so fucking sick and alone.

She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello, Jane?" She tried to stop her voice from shaking. "Oh, I'm fine. Yes, we had uh, a lovely time last night. Uh huh. Say, you know I'm feeling a little under the weather this morning. Yeah, I think I might be coming down with something. Do you think the kids could stay there for awhile while I try to get some more sleep? Oh, gee. I

appreciate it so much. I'll give you a call a little later. Thanks, you're a lifesaver."

Again, she was amazed at how normal she sounded talking on the phone. So regular, like it was a regular day. It made it almost possible to believe just that – that she could just go have a nap and things would be OK again. How could the world fly apart like this and everything outside of these walls continue on like nothing happened? She got her purse and keys, and shoved her feet into the strappy silver high heels. She grabbed all the cash in the desk where they kept extra money. In the hallway mirror she caught a glance at herself. Gladys' fancy up-do was matted and falling out on one side, the loopy curls were frayed and ratty. She knew she looked crazy and tried to stick the falling pieces of hair back up into the frizzy mess with a bobby pin that just dangled in the wreckage.

Then she decided not to care how her hair looked as she stepped out onto the back porch. The silver party dress reflected the sun and little specks of sunshine danced on the driveway as she walked quickly to the car. Thank God for the dark glasses she found resting on the passenger seat. Along the street, husbands mowed lawns and kids made circles on their bikes in driveways. Mothers were in their

kitchens making green Jell-O salads with fruit and marshmallows.

— ooo000ooo—

In 1976, American Fork, Utah was a town of about 10,000 people. It had grown starting in the 50s, because of the Steel Plant that came to the valley and settled itself next to the muddy Utah Lake. Poultry and other farming were no longer the main sources of revenue of the town's citizens. This was good for Charles Sterling who had opened his law practice in 1934. The business had limped along for many years. He made a living. He worked as the City Attorney for American Fork. He was the mayor for two terms including during the war. Jane and Charles were among the most reputable citizens in town. She was the perfect wife. It was unclear whether he was more of a Ward Cleaver than an Atticus Finch. Maybe he was a mixture of both.

Of course, as might be expected, 96 percent of the population of American Fork was Mormon. The town itself was designed by the second most famous Mormon, Brigham Young. After the Mormons had settled the Salt Lake Valley, they sent people, little bands of members to build towns on the outer boundaries of the high desert and up and down the Wasatch Mountains. Brigham Young gave out specific

directions about how to build a town. In every town, a Main Street criss-crossed with a Center Street and created the center of town. Every eight city blocks equalled a mile. And all the streets had to be wide enough to turn around and entire wagon team of horses. For Charlotte, 100 years later, wide streets were an advantage.

She drove to the liquor store with a single-mindedness of purpose that surprised even her. Eyes on the road, anticipating the corner where she would turn, the place where she would park, the heaviness of the glass door, the cool darkness of the store, the silver and red labels on the clear glistening bottles. And then, the burning down the back of her throat as the heavy liquid flowed into her system, out to the tips of her fingers and toes, warming her head and every frayed extremity.

To Charlotte's extreme disappointment, it was only 11:30 and the liquor store did not open until 12:00. She slouched in the car, looking down at her hands, still covered in soot. In the rear-view mirror she saw streaks of soot across her face too. She was long past wondering how she'd ever arrived at this point in her life. Long past marveling at what a puzzling contradiction she was. She pulled some Kleenex out of the purse, a comb and some make-

up and did her best to fix up while she waited. She could not remember when she had last eaten, but food did not sound good. She turned on the radio. *The Eagles* filled the car with energy and lightness:

Take it easy. Take it easy. Don't let the sound of your own wheels make you crazy. Like to know while you still can. Don't even try to understand. Just find a place to make your stand and take it easy.

She searched the words to see if she could find any wisdom in them, something she could sing to herself for comfort, but they meant nothing to her. *Take it easy*. She would try to do that. Finally the hunched old man who ran the store ambled up the sidewalk and rummaged in his pocket for the keys. Charlotte waited hoping he did not notice her sitting there ready to be his first customer of the day.

— ooo000ooo—

On Saturday morning, Sophia slipped out without telling her grandmother. She got on her bike and started riding home. She needed to change her clothes because she and Joanne were going downtown. This was what they did on Saturdays. They rode their bikes downtown. They stopped at

the bakery for a maple bar and a Coke. They went to Taylor Drug to look at magazines and make-up. They stopped at Sprouse-Ritz just to nose around. Then Robinson's Sporting Goods and Reid's Jewelry Store. Sometimes they stopped bowling alley for some French fries and another Coke.

Sophia rode standing on the peddles, pushing the bike up the hill past the cemetery. It was warm in the sun and pushing up the hill made her even warmer. There was nobody home at her house. Good, she could get in and out without trouble. She parked her bike in the driveway, and went around to the back door. Inside, the house smelled like something chemical, something like turpentine and smoke. Sophia felt sick and weak. How could she have underestimated yesterday? How could she have assumed that the bad thing that could have happened never did? Why should she ever have been able to expect that?

She had been so willing to believe what the adults said – That her parents were going out to dinner at the Elks Lodge. All she wanted was to be able to hope for what everyone else just took for granted – that their parents would not be crazy. That they would act with at least some thought, if not regard for their children.

She walked through the kitchen and into the living room where it appeared that an explosion had occurred. The pyre sat half-burned up in the middle of the room, things were singed, melted and covered in some kind of foamy slush. The spider plant had toppled onto her mother's expensive rug where it sat upside-down in mud and debris, its dirt still in the form of the pot. Remnants of Charlotte's lady-bug apron and Betty Crocker Cookbook were charred and black. The green candlesticks were melted into her father's brown leather shoes. The gold ceramic statue of the lady holding grapes was in pieces on the floor. Some kind of foamy crap was all over the carpet and the chairs. Her tape recorder was smashed and broken along with her mother's huge gold-framed mirror. Pieces of mirror covered the floor.

All she could do was stand there and take it in. Next to the couch, a Smirnoff's bottle had tipped over onto an ashtray. Apparently Sophia's old baby blanket with the satin ribbon survived and she snatched it up. Did she? Did *they* ever think of them? Ever wonder how she and her brother and little sister were doing, what they were thinking? What might happen if say, one of their children came home to discover this?

In perfect daylight, the house was dark and vacant. It was the heart of where misery resided. It sat among the other houses on the street like a void, a decaying tooth in a mouthful of gleaming ones. And inside was only Sophia.

"What the fuck?"

She had never said the word before. It had never seemed exactly right before. Later, it would always be exactly right.

— ooo000ooo—

Charlotte was in the car again. The clanking of the three large bottles, each nestled in their own brown bag and clumped together in a larger brown bag filled her with relief. She twisted the red metal cap, broke the seal, lifted the bottle to her dry chapped lips and drank it like water. She looked around. No one was watching. She took another deep swig. "Oh fuck, yeah," she said out loud to herself and it reminded her a little too much of Jay's' and Violet's sex tape. "Fuck yeah!" She yelled it now, then started the car and turned the radio way up. The orange Firebird raged off towards the freeway. "Fuck yeah!"

It was a random decision that Charlotte chose to turn right rather than left and to go North, towards Salt Lake City. She pressed on the gas and felt the power of the V8.

This was what the car wanted to do. It wanted to fly. Her foot got even heavier. She and the car were a force now. She was doing 80 then 85 on the highway, passing all the dumb-asses in her way, good citizens, their hands at ten and two lumbering along in sedans and station wagons. Within minutes she was cruising along the Salt Lake Valley towards the center of the city. The signs read North to Ogden then Boise/ West to Tooele then Reno. Again at random, she bore the car West. Maybe it wasn't so random, but the amount of thought she put into it was about three seconds.

The stubby Ochre mountains tapered down to the shore of the Great Salt Lake and a giant smoke stack that was the gatekeeper between Salt Lake and the West desert. Interstate 80 ran between the smokestack and lake shore, and then the city disappeared in her rear view mirror. Ahead was a vast and silver nothingness – Sage brush and bleached earth to the left and the huge lake, dark and choppy to her right. The lake stretched to the west and soon became salt flats, flooded by with a thin mirror of water that continued for miles, reflecting the mountains and sky so that everything everywhere was an infinite, blue, white and gray.

After many miles the water dissipated and then valley floor was nothing but white and flat. It was the place where scientists and race car drivers tested the speed of rockets and dragsters. Charlotte sped on, still energized by the Smirnoff's and adrenaline. She had to go to the bathroom really bad. She pulled the car over to the side of the road, shut off the engine and swung open the door. The wind whipped her face and legs, swirled up her dress. It was freezing outside. She crouched in the weeds by the side of the road and peed, being careful to hike her dress up. When she was done, she stood up. In spite of, or maybe because of her condition, Charlotte was moved a little by the starkness of her surroundings. It was a little like being on the moon maybe. *It's like the goddamn Twilight Zone out here. Yes, this is what she needed, some fucking space, some time to think.*

She went back to the trunk of the car and got the wool car blanket. She draped it around her shoulders and walked out onto the white floor of the salt flats, wobbling in her high heels, the silver and pink dress shimmering in the brightness from under a red plaid wool. The rest of the first bottle sloshed along in her right hand.

Charlotte's mind was blank, except for some occasional mumbling . . . *fucking space, time to think, fucking Jay.* . . . She took off the shoes and carried them in her free hand. The ground was cold and hard but smooth with a light blanket of salt on the surface. Her sheer black pantyhose turned dusty white as she shuffled. She needed to rest for a minute. Without any point of reference, no logs or rocks to perch on, she sat down right where she was. There were mountains in the distance, barren rocks, seemingly devoid of trees or any kind of plant life. She noticed birds floating above her, drifting on the steady wind. It was freezing. She pulled the blanket tighter. The vodka kept her warm too. Thank God for that. It was her savior and her best friend, always there when no one else was. She patted the bottle gently. She started to drift off, feeling very, very tired. She hugged her knees to her chest, rocked back and forth a little and looked around.

Well, what now Charlotte? A small voice said it from that dark place in her mind. *What now?* She honestly did not have a clue. There was no one and nothing that would save her and she could not save herself. She took a swig off the bottle and looked around for ideas. There were no cliffs to drive off of. The lake was only a few feet deep. It would

be too cold anyway. Perhaps she could drive the Firebird across the salt flats and into that mountain at 100 mph. That seemed plausible. And sensational.

In the distance, from the north she saw something move. Something was traveling across the salt flats, coming toward her from the mountains. The image glistened like a mirage. Coming closer. She watched it with interest, maybe some concern as the thing got closer. It moved in a way that was familiar. The thing seemed to be gliding along the smooth surface of the flats, but she could see movement more like a person than an animal, but more like a procession than a person. Soon she could see that it was someone on a bike. It was a tall, angular man with a dirty beard and goggles.

He was wearing some kind of blue waistcoat and a captain's hat. He looked like a grimy Sargent Pepper. The bike was a sturdy cruiser bike, no gears or handbrakes. A kind of "souped -up" grocery cart was hooked to the bike by a thick rope and being towed behind the bike. *Good God, the last thing she needed was some kind of interaction with a crazy salt flats hermit.* And yet, sitting there in the salt dust, in her party dress and high heels, it was entirely debatable who was the authentic "crazy" in this scenario.

Moreover, in that she made such a distinctive landmark on the terrain, it was not as if whatever it was that was coming towards her would likely pass by without acknowledgment. *Maybe he would tell her she was about to be visited by three ghosts.*

She smiled at her joke, but then became fixated on the spectacle. As it got closer, his vehicle made three tire tracks in the salty powder. She could hear him muttering but, like a sleep talker, could not decipher what he was saying. Charlotte braced for the exchange. He wheeled himself straight towards her, glaring, still muttering. He came within six feet of where she sat, his black eyes fixed on her. He was covered in dust and dirt, his scraggily beard matted with a residue of salt dust. Among the things crammed into his cart she noticed a muddy sleeping bag and blanket, some cooking pots and several books.

As he approached he looked, both at her and through her. Then she could hear his mottled voice, hoarse and laboring,

"...Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools, the way to dusty death." He slowed his pace a little,

paused and looked directly at Charlotte. He held her gaze and continued: *"Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."* He looked at her as if expecting a response.

"Signifying Nothing!" he was louder and still staring at her. She looked away. Then he turned his bike to the west and he kept going. She heard him start the litany again: *"Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty place from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time . . ."* And then the muffled voice faded into the wind.

She could see him traveling, off to the side of the road towards Wendover, the tiny town that glittered on the Utah/Nevada border, where Salt Lakers went to gamble on weekends. Charlotte sat up shaking a little. "What the fuck was that?" she said to herself. "Crazy old bastard. God! where could he possibly have come from?" She said these things to herself, used her own words, her own language as a way of taking back control. Had he frightened her? Well, maybe a little bit. But that was all. He was just some crazy old guy riding his bike on the salt flats, some hermit who manages to survive in the mountains to the

North. Or something like that. Maybe he escaped from the mental hospital and was hiding out. She wasn't scared anymore. She wasn't drunk anymore either and in fact, now felt a little sick. Charlotte got to her feet and stumbled back to the car still draped in the plaid blanket, still carrying the bottle and her shoes.

No. She was not going home. Only despair lived at that residence and she wanted *no more of that, sir. No more.* Therefore, in that the car was already pointing in the direction of Wendover, she only had to put it in drive and let it roar away. Away from that point on the salt flats, where she'd sat, and where he had crossed. An apogee whose longitude and latitude would have revealed that sanity was far, far away now. The wind had already erased both sets of tracks. First she followed at the heels the odd man on the trike bike as he peddled and muttered. Then she left him in a cloud of imagined salt dust.

— ooo000ooo—

Sophia and Joanne flew down the hill and the wind and the late morning sun whipped their faces. They could get downtown in about seven minutes. It was not summer anymore. Sophia had to ride with one hand cupped on an ear. Then she had to switch hands every minute or so, convinced that the

blood in her other ear had frozen solid. It was not that she couldn't ride down hill with no hands. She was actually pretty skilled at that. But she was feeling shaky and exposed, like she might blow away if she let go. Their bikes thunked over the railroad tracks and then, they were on Main Street. It was around 11:30.

They turned west for half a block and parked our bikes in front of the bakery. The cowbell attached to the sticky door made a clanging and banging sound that alerted the woman in the back. It was warm and moist inside and smelled like maple bars. Sophia ordered one with a Coke. Joanne ordered a danish and coffee.

"That'll be one maple bar, one danish and two 7-Ups," said the counter lady.

"That's not what we ordered," said Joanne.

The woman looked at Sophia, incredulous. "Does your mom let you drink Coke?"

"Yeah." Sophia looked down.

"Well that's a shame if you ask me." Then she looked at Joanne. "And you're not getting any coffee either missy. You girls need to have better standards than that."

They took their food over to the little wire chairs and glass topped table next to the window. It was steamy inside

the bakery and drops of water rolled down the glass and forming shiny little globes on the window sill.

Joanne drew a peace sign on the glass. Sophia wrote J+J = TL and Joanne fiercely smeared it out. The bakery lady looked annoyed and probably would have yelled at them for that too if she hadn't already been so mean.

Joanne lowered her voice towards the window and said, "She is so lame. What's her problem?"

"I think that's Jenny Pierce's mom," Sophia said to the glass. "They're religious."

"No duh?"

"She's NOT gonna be CON-tri-butin' ta yer apostacy."

"O.K., Shut up, shut up!" Jenny Pierce's mom was glaring over at them. They looked at each other. Sophia cracked up first, then Joanne.

"Why'n't you girls just run along," said Jenny Pierce's mom.

Sophia had briefly had to play with Jenny Pierce for a time starting in the fifth grade. Joanne was in a different school that year. So, Sophia's two best school friends were Jodi and Susan. They stopped speaking to Sophia in fifth grade because she had suggested that it was stupid to draw faces on their yellow No. 2 pencils and then make them

pretend to have sex. For that and for refusing to take it back, Sophia was ostracized, ridiculed and talked about behind her back for an entire school year. It was not like you could just go make new friends. Girl cliques had been set in stone since kindergarten. Sophia wasn't 'popular.' For those first few days of her excommunication, she endured the humiliation of sitting by herself at lunch, of wandering alone at recess. Of trying to keep moving, to look busy. The only way she could secure friends was to be willing to move down, at least one notch in the social scale of girl cliques. The next clique or two down from her own happened to be Jenny Pierce and her friend Heidi Methena.

Jenny was a big-boned girl with a square jaw, washed out features and ill conceived home-made dresses. At first glance, she looked more like a healthy German "haus frau" than a child. She was bossy. Once Sophia was in the clique, she suffered through the stupid pretend games Jenny invented at recess like, "let's pretend we're married BYU students and we live on campus with our husbands." Once Sophia went to Jenny's house for a birthday sleepover. She tried not to be surprised to hear that Heidi and her family (and their party guests, apparently) all got up at five

o'clock every morning to have family prayer and read the scriptures. Then they ate cereal with powdered milk.

"My sister April and I both wear our bras and underwear under our nightgowns every night, said Jenny, while they were putting their pajamas on. "Our dad says it will help us get ready to wear garments after we get married in the temple.

"Oh, yeah. Right." Sophia said it in earnest, as if she were fairly well aware of the practice and agreed it was a good idea. It was never, ever wise to let on that you were less religious than someone else. You just agreed and went along with whatever that more religious person said. At fourteen, Sophia knew that if you were not Mormon, you had no social status. And if you *were* Mormon, your social status depended entirely on just *how* Mormon you were. To be branded "not very religious" was terrible. People talked about it in those terms – *They don't have the blessings of the gospel in their lives. They don't live according to our Heavenly Father's Plan for salvation.*

Errant members were discussed and judged, the ones who had been seen buying Folger's Coffee at the grocery store or who blatantly tossed the football on the front lawn on the Sabbath. *My mom says if Heavenly Father wanted us to*

have holes in our ears he would have made us that way. That was Jenny's assessment of the pierced ears Sophia showed off at school on her 11th birthday.

In that school year, Neither Jenny nor Heidi ever said one interesting or intelligent thing during the entire time Sophia hung out with them. Neither did they make her laugh. Not even one time. Sophia's fifth grade friendship was born out of necessity, of the small need to not stand alone on the playground.

After the bakery, they crossed Main Street. Standing on the pedals of her bike and coasting, she felt herself eroding like sandstone. They leaned their bikes against the brick wall and entered Taylor Drug. The glass door screeched on its aluminum hinges and then snapped shut. It was warm inside and the air was a clean mix of cough syrup, newsprint, perfume and tobacco. The store was empty except for someone vacuuming in the back. The sound of a vacuum usually made Sophia nervous. It usually signified her mother upstairs swearing in whispers as she raged around with the machine, bumped it across the floor and rammed the sideboards.

They nosed around up and down the aisles. Sophia liked to look at the used books in the back. Ray, the druggist

let you borrow them for free or buy them for twenty-five cents each. Joanne went up to the front to test the perfumes.

The vacuum clicked off and Sophia saw a boy come around the corner dragging the machine. He stopped at the end of the isle and started winding up the cord. She could hardly believe what she saw. It was him, Jack Barrett. Sophia had been more or less in love with Jack Barrett since last school year. It had been such a long time. Her memory of him had started to fade.

He had been in junior high last year. She saw him one time reading *Catcher In The Rye* in the cafeteria. Besides Joanne, Jack was the only other person Sophia had ever known who had read that book. Most kids had never even heard of it or didn't care. It wasn't approved Mormon literature – too many bad words. And the kid smoked. As for Sophia, it had changed her life. It had moved her, even if she didn't know why.

Maybe it was that she had never had anyone to talk to. Joanne understood a lot but she did not see everything. Sophia could never tell her about the drinking and the insanity. The words were just too terrible to say, and saying them would only make them more true. The only one

Sophia had ever told was her diary. At church the leaders had always told them to keep a journal, to record their thoughts and feelings after reading the scriptures. Sophia had tried to do that. She had tried to draw comfort from the Bible and The Book of Mormon. She had tried to write her true and genuine testimony of the gospel in the diary. Tried to say those words: "I know the church is true and that Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet of God, etc. But all of this had left her bewildered. She had not felt a thing. Truthfully, she had gotten more comfort out of reading *The Catcher in the Rye*.

After watching Jack for several weeks, she decided that he looked like how she pictured Holden Caulfield probably looked: tall, dark curly hair, sad eyes and a little bit stiff. You know, overly polite, sitting up straight in a dress shirt and tie. Jack often looked bewildered by the world in the same way as Holden might. He walked around alone a lot. She never dared talk to him. She watched him everyday at school, but his eyes never drifted her way when they passed in the hall. She never caught his eye in the lunchroom.

After she figured out where his locker was she found lots of reasons why she needed to walk down that hall several

times a day – the drinking fountain, the bulletin board. Nothing dramatic. She just couldn't do it. Really, all she would have had to do is tell Jodi or Susan Joanne for that matter, that she kind of liked this guy named Jack in 9th grade. They would have done the rest of the work for her, whether she wanted it or not. It wasn't worth the risk.

In a way, she sort of just liked having this secret. She liked believing that she had discovered Holden Caulfield. And only she knew about him. Sophia believed that sometimes she made up these kinds of stories to keep her mind off that other world. After school got out, and she didn't see him anymore, she tried to forget him. And it seemed that she kind of had until this moment.

"Can I help you?" he said. Sophia stood frozen. His voice was deeper, more manly than she would have expected, that is, if she had expected anything at all. After all her months last year, of pining for him, walking to and fro in the hall where his locker had been. Now he was here, standing in front of her. She had no time. No preparation.

"Uh, uhm . . . Yeah. . ."

"Are you looking for a book?"

She gathered herself together and seized the opportunity. Books. She knew them. Something she could talk about. "What

do you think of this?" Sophia grabbed the book on top of the nearest pile and held it up. He laughed a little and looked at the floor.

Then he said, "*Betty Campbell, Student Nurse*. I don't think I've ever read that one." Now he looked at her curiously, like he was wondering if maybe she was an older, larger special ed child. Sophia was burning red and could feel the sweat trickle down her back and into the crack of her butt. How could she have ruined it? This one perfect moment and it would never come again. She wanted to blurt out *Well, I really enjoyed The Catcher in the Rye. That's my favorite book of course. Have you ever read that? I really related to the character's stark disconnect from the rest of society . . .* But it – the perfect moment and opportunity, the one she had used to dream about – was ruined and gone. What was left was a picture of her frozen, holding up a copy of *Betty Campbell, Student Nurse*, in an effort to impress this guy she really liked, with – yes, her literary prowess.

Then Joanne appeared next to her standing there still frozen and holding the book. She peered over Sophia's shoulder and made a face. "*Betty Campbell, Student Nurse?* Didn't you already read that one Sophia? Ha ha ha ha."

"I know, right? Ha ha ha ha." Sophia tried to pretend she was in on the joke. She laughed again and tossed *Betty Campbell, Student Nurse* casually onto the pile. *Thank you God . . . I mean thank you Heavenly Father . . . for my best friend Joanne.*

Now he was laughing.

"I'm Jack" he said. "You guys are really funny. Do you go to A.F. High?"

"No, we're just in ninth grade – A.F. Junior. So lame," Said Joanne. She was casual. Not embarrassed at all. Sophia was relieved – first, that she had never told Joanne about Jack, second, that by mocking her Joanne had unwittingly saved her from disgrace. And third, she was talking to him. . . and now he knew she existed . . . and thought she was funny. Should she say something else? What? Should she jump in now with her thoughts on Holden Caulfield's stark disconnect from society? No. Something told her not to say that.

"I'm a sophomore this year. Do you guys ever go to the football games? I'm in the marching band. I play the trumpet."

"That's cool." Joanne and Sophia nodded their heads and practiced looking nonchalant. As if, you know, they had

casual conversations with super cool high school boys all the time.

"I'm Joanne. This is Sophia." She pointed at Sophia with her thumb. Joanne could be so cool.

"I'm in the band too," Sophia said.

"Oh, Cool. Are you gonna march next year?"

"I don't know maybe. I'm thinking about it." Sophia said this as if she really had been giving it some thought and not as if the one and only time such an idea had existed in her brain was right this second. Jack nodded and smiled.

"You should come to the home game next week." Jack leaned over the counter toward them, like a cat asking to be petted.

"Cool, yeah, we will for sure," said Joanne. She kind of nudged Sophia.

"Yeah, that sounds fun," she said.

Sophia decided not to buy the four candy bars she usually supplied herself with on these trips to the drug store. Instead she bought some Dr. Pepper flavored lip gloss and she got herself and Joanne out of there before anything could go wrong – before he could say something like, "Hey Joanne, I can't wait to see you again." She had, after all done most of the talking, and pretty much all of the

impressing while Sophia had stood there like an idiot. Sophia had liked him first. But she didn't want Joanne to know that.

Besides, Joanne just got kissed by her teacher. Let's just think about that for awhile. Outside of the drug store, the late morning sun had warmed up the world and turned it into a colorful Indian Summer day. She licked her Dr. Pepper flavored lips and thought how this was what it felt like to be happy.

When they ate lunch at the Hunger Hut, she was still thinking about Jack. She was in such a good mood that she did not object when Joanne wanted to go to the library and make a list of all the Victoria Holt novels she had not yet read. Sophia didn't mind waiting while she checked out six of them. She even agreed to help carry them on the bikes, as Joanne narrated for her the entire plot of *On the Night of the Seventh Moon*.

Those gothic romances were enough to keep Sophia on the couch for an entire Saturday, she had to admit. But her English teacher, Mr. Baldwin had said "no" to the turning in of book reports on them. She had no idea why. It was a shame, really. Mr. Baldwin was the hardest teacher in the whole school, but besides being hard he was mean. Sophia

believed that this was because his nose was smashed in and pressed off to one side. His whole face was messed up. He was quite scary looking and sounding. And because everyone was scared of him, this made him hate everyone.

You had to kind of look away when you were first in his class. Then later, after you got used to it, you just think about what he was saying. He was the hardest teacher Sophia had ever had. Last summer, she had to take his extended English for Honors and Newspaper Staff for the first part of the summer where he taught them how to diagram sentences, one branch at a time. At first it seemed almost inhumane to torture students with diagraming sentences in the middle of the summer.

It continued to be torture until one day when Sophia remembered one thing Mr. Baldwin had already said before. Then it was two things. Then three. It became less uninteresting. By the end of the six weeks Sophia knew how to write.

Still, Mr. Baldwin was mean and weird looking. It wasn't anyone's business what happened to his face. Still, the longer he went without ever telling anyone what happened, pretending he was *not* something extraordinarily bizarre, the more he was known for only those two things – being

mean and having a messed up face. It was sad, because he was a really good teacher.

Jack had been in one of Mr. Baldwin's classes last year, coincidentally. Sophia knew this from stalking him at school. Figuring out his class schedule took a little time. But while she was skulking around leaning up against lockers and lurking around corners, she realized that she would make an excellent spy. She had had years of experience from close observation of her mother's every move.

Joanne had helped a lot that way too in that she was a first rate stalker herself. One time Joanne took Sophia on a trip to find Mr. Connors' house. She had looked it up in the phone book, but there were two Sam Connors in the phone book. So, they had to go to both places. The first one was on the other side of town, the side that edged the swampland and tall grass that you could follow all the way to Utah Lake, if you wanted to – that is if you enjoy biting horse flies and mud that smells like sewage.

It wouldn't have surprised Sophia if a teacher lived on that side of town. When they got to the first Mr. Connor's house, it was obviously the wrong one. The only car in the yard was an old red Monte Carlo propped up on cinder

blocks. An old man was puttering around the mangy yard and being followed by fat old dog.

They sat on their bikes on the sidewalk a few houses away and watched the old guy work on the car. Joanne mumbled to herself that this probably wasn't it. Sophia started getting bored.

"Let's go."

Joanne ignored her.

Sophia started riding up and down the street. She sat upright and rode back and forth, with no hands as she passed and then flipped around. On the way back, she decided to sing:

"Oh the towering feeling, just to know somehow you are nearrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr. . ."

"Oh shit, you better not . . ." Joanne jumped on the peddles of her bike and began chasing Sophia down and yelling that she had "better just shut up right now!"

But that wasn't going to happen. Sophia continued. She belted it out: *"I have often walked on this street before . . . But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before. . . All at once am I several stories high, knowing I'm on the street where you live. . . . Ha ha ha ha ha ha."* By then, she had ridden most of the way down the block. Sophia

looked back to see her straddling her bike in the middle of the street with her arms crossed. She laughed at her own joke some more.

It was Joanne's own fault. She was the one who had been obsessed with *My Fair Lady* two years ago. She had made them listen to the movie sound track over and over and over on her parents' stereo during one whole Christmas vacation. They had waltzed around the living room to this song. They had both been thinking of it. Joanne was not fooling anyone.

Joanne rode up alongside Sophia. "You're such a jerk." She was right. But it felt good to laugh. They were dorks. But they were dorks together.

It was an artistry always driven by obsession. Sophia noticed every small detail about the object of her adoration. It was a powerful motivation, fueled by, not just lust, but by complete infatuation.

Knowing his schedule had helped her to a fountain of other knowledge, i.e. that he was smart enough to be in Mr. Baldwin's class, that he was good at math, that he was on the chess team, that he played the trumpet and that he was really kind of terrible at sports, unless you counted marching band as a sport (which nobody did except the

marching band.) So really, it had been worth it. Because, besides being the person in possession of the most information about Jack Barrett, useful or otherwise, she was now kind of like Nancy Drew too.

Joanne and Sophia meandered towards the Coral Theater. The 3:00 p.m. matinee was an old movie, *Lost Horizon*. Sophia had seen it when it first came out. But she didn't mind seeing it again. In fact, it was the kind of story she was really in the mood for. She got some *Sugar Babies* and a red *Lucky Sucker* and went in to sit down. The place was mostly full of little kids and moms. They sat towards the back, their shoes squeaking and sticking to the grimy floor.

The movie was about some people who got into a plane wreck in the middle of the Andes Mountains. They are rescued by some sherpas who take them high into the mountains to a valley called *Shangri-La*. The people are mystified as they walk into a cave from a snowy, winter wasteland and emerge out the other side into a perfect and splendid valley where it is beautiful and temperate all the time. Where nobody has any problems, there is no fighting, no sickness and where people pretty much live forever, or basically forever. So, the big point of the movie was to

beg the question: Whether it is better to live forever in a happy and perfect place or whether you should live the life you were meant to live even though it includes problems and imperfection and death?

The movie kind of made Sophia cry in some parts, not because it was sad but because of the music. Sometimes music made her cry. It was as if the chords reached in and grabbed her by the throat and then the tears came just because of a certain combination of strings and notes and peoples' smiling faces.

It made her start thinking of writing a story. It would be about a magic movie – something like this one – a movie about a place like Shangri-La. After the movie was over, you could decide for yourself whether you wanted to go into the screen and live in the world of the movie forever. If you did, you would be guaranteed happiness and everlasting life. But you could never go back. You could only see the movie and have the choice once. Sophia wondered what she would do – what she would choose if this were possible.

Then a really odd thought popped into her head. She realized that if she could have whatever she wanted, it would be to be able to send her mom to live in Shangri-La. That way Charlotte would be in a place where Sophia would

always know she was safe and where she could still be happy. Sophia would never have to worry about whether her mother was all right. She would never have to lay on the couch all night listening to FM 100 and waiting for her mother to come home.

She could keep living her life – the one she had always wanted – the one without fear and voices and darkness. Charlotte would be OK and so would the rest of them. She guessed she would feel bad that she never got to see her mother anymore. But she would know she was happy and OK. If she could just have that.

She felt good going home from the movie. It was cold again. The sun had fallen behind the mountains even earlier. The days were getting shorter. They rode their bikes slowly up the hill. She thought of Jack. She thought about how Joanne had rescued her today. She wondered if that was on purpose or if she had just been lucky. She decided to test it:

“What do you think of Jack?” Sophia tried to sound casual.

“Who?” Right, like she didn’t know.

“You know, the guy in the drug store.”

“He was pretty cool, I guess.”

"He was cool. I kind of like him." I paused. "You know who he reminds me of?"

"Uhhhm. Hmm. Let me see . . . Holden Caulfield?"

Sophia stopped riding the bike and Joanne rode ahead. How could she have known that? Then Joanne stopped riding too and gave her a look.

"Sophia, you're funny. You think you're the only one who ever sees anything. . . You think I never saw you watching every move that guy ever made? Besides, he does kind of seem like Holden Caulfield – you know, sort of lonely and weird."

"He's not weird." At least Sophia didn't think he was from her months of surveillance.

"OK, OK, he's not weird. He's just different. And, I think it's cool that you like him. I won't tell anybody."

"You think you're so smart." She yelled at her, mostly because it seemed that theatrics were in order. She felt exposed. But she also felt kind of happy that her secret was out. She really wanted to just talk about him to someone. To go on and on forever about his eyes and his strong hands and the fact that he was in Mr. Baldwin's English class so she was sure he was pretty smart. And on and on. Still, Sophia was amazed that she had figured it

out and it seemed appropriate to be upset. Was Joanne really that perceptive that she could predict the one guy in the school she had chosen for a crush?

She pushed her bike up the hill, secretly pleased and astounded. And, quite frankly impressed at how surprisingly observant her best friend was. Joanne waited for Sophia at the top of the hill by the cemetery wall. She sat, slumped over her bike and Sophia couldn't see her face as she topped the hill. When Sophia reached her, Joanne looked up with just the tiniest smirk.

"Promise me you won't be mad."

"What?" Sophia said.

"I read your diary."

— ooo000ooo—

Sophia sat on the grass with her back against the headstone of her great grandfather, looking out as the sky went from orange to purple to blue. She had been so stupefied by Joanne's revelation that she had to sit down. Meanwhile, Joanne had peddled herself all the way up the rest of the way home and beyond to her own bright warm house. She was probably enjoying a steak dinner with her two nice and normal parents now.

The meaning of her words had been slow in coming, but finally, after Sophia had parsed them, she felt a million little pin pricks in her stomach. *"I read your diary."* After they had set in, she gasped for air and had sat hunched over her bike. When the meaning had completely materialized, there was simply too much to absorb. It was cold and scary in the cemetery after dark. It was a place they had only ever dared each other to go at night. But now, sitting against the stone, looking out at the town down the hill, she really felt just too sick to be creeped out. She marveled at how messed up everything was. Sure Jack Barrett had actually talked to her. After all this time, he had recognized her existence. But that seemed so beside the point. Such a stupid inconsequential fact of her life that really meant nothing after all.

Of course she was angry at Joanne. But of the conflicted emotions swimming in her muddled brain, it was not betrayal or anger or even worry that surfaced. It was embarrassment. It was more the idea that what Joanne would have read in her diary would have reflected such hopelessness. It was pathetic and sad – the withering away of her mother's sanity, their family adrift in their misery and isolation, and Sophia clinging to a fixation on some guy she was

pretending was Holden Caulfield. Just so she could think she had someone who understood her.

It was that when she stepped back and looked at her life the way Joanne had, it just made her feel incredibly sad for that person she was. She looked pathetic and naked. The only bright spot in such a long time had been Jack talking to her today. So stupid and sad. And what if he ever even did "like her"? It's not as if she could let him in. Could not ever let him see who she really was. Considering all of the things she would have to hide. What would be left?

Regarding her mother, there had always been something wrong between them. A coldness maybe? Did Sophia pause in those moments when other children ran to their mothers' arms without hesitation? That they were not close was something she had never even thought about. Charlotte was her mother. Sophia knew she loved her. Didn't she? She had always known, believed or just assumed it. But she couldn't deny she had not often felt it. And maybe because of the assumption or of nature or because she had never thought about it either, she loved her mother back. Sophia thought she did. How would she have even recognized it? She had never looked for it. It had never occurred to her to do that.

Sophia did not cry – about her life or her family or Jack or how much she didn't belong to anyone or any place – not really. She wanted . . . She wanted. . . . There was no finishing the sentence. It seemed like her life had been a series of longings. She watched as light from the passing cars played along the headstones. The irony of the scene and of her own theatrics was not lost on her as she sat in the cold field of dead ancestors, feeling sorry for herself. She realized she should go home, though she wasn't sure where that was tonight. She decided she would continue up the hill, toward what, she could not imagine.

The house was dark and empty still when Sophia stepped inside the back door. She heard the telephone ringing in the kitchen.

– ooo000ooo–

Wendover straddled the Utah/Nevada state line just 90 miles west of Salt Lake City. It was once a railroad stop for trains on their way to more interesting places like Reno and San Francisco. The Utah side of town had been in an increasing state of decay since 1931 after Nevada had legalized gambling. Now, the Utah side had little more to offer than a gas station, a shabby Mormon church and a faded motel which boasted cheaper rooms than anything on

the west side. Behind the main street were shabby houses and mobile homes where "the help" mostly lived.

The Nevada side glittered like a super nova against a vacuous wasteland. Ten feet across the border a 64 foot neon cowboy, nicknamed Wendover Will, waived and pointed his giant finger down at the breadth and brilliance of the Stateline Casino.

Charlotte was very tired now. The first bottle was almost gone. She needed a place to take a nap. But the sight of the giant neon cowboy made her excited and energized. She pulled into the parking lot. She was glad she had not driven her car into the side of a mountain. She was here now. She pushed the car door open with her dainty shoe and teetered into the casino. The place was smoky and crowded, mostly Utah people there to engage in the discreet debauchery guaranteed by the fact that if you saw someone you knew there, you'd have no choice but to keep quiet about it. It was loud and colorful, drunken voices blending with the carrillon chimes and kak kak kak kak kak of the slot machines.

She wanted to go in and stand by the craps table or the roulette wheel and see if anyone interesting was there. Maybe she would see a tall man with a dark mustache. But

she was so tired. She decided to get a room and take a nap for a bit, her only luggage, her purse and the narrow brown paper bags. The room was musty and smelled of beer and sex. Charlotte fell onto the bedspread and stretched out her long legs. She was thinking of nothing at all when she took another long swig and fell asleep.

Eventually, a dream started to form, a familiar one – the dream about houses. Always the same, or not quite. Always in a different place she had never seen but knew from . . . well, somewhere. Everyone that lived in the house was dead but their things were still there. There was a room or a floor, a section where she didn't dare go. Then she was on a widow's walk, looking out, shading her eyes from the sun dogs, just looking and looking. She was looking down a hill where below, Nick and Kristy and Sophia were playing.

She watched them hit golf balls into the dark green ocean that swelled into a violent and crashing surf, heavy like an oil painting. The ocean threatened to wash them all away. She was afraid for her children and called to them, but they just laughed and shouted against the dark gray sky and green water. Charlotte thought she saw Sophia look up with the same expectant green eyes that matched her own.

But if Sophia did look up, she did not to see her mother or wave back.

Charlotte woke with a start. She was sweaty and shaking. Again, she had to wonder where she was. When she remembered, she became even more frightened. What had she done? Where were her children? She thought about how much she despised herself again as her eyes fell on the ivory colored telephone on the bedside table. She picked up the receiver and waited for the hotel operator.

"I'd like to make a collect call," she said. Her voice trembled and she saw that her hands were shaking. The phone rang and rang.

"There is no answer," said the voice. "Would you like to try again later?"

"Please..." She said it urgently. "Just let it ring a few more times." Somehow just knowing the phone was ringing in her house made her feel closer to it.

"I'm sorry m'am. There is no answer."

"Hello?" She heard Sophia's small voice far away in a darkened world. She heard her accept the charges. "Mom?" Charlotte could not answer. Her voice was a whisper.

"Mom?"

"Sophia?"

"Hi mom." Her daughter sounded like she always did, her voice a mixture of fear and disappointment.

"Sophia, are you OK?"

"Yeah, I guess. The house is really messed up. Nobody's here."

"I know honey. I'm sorry." There was a softness in her own voice that surprised even her. "Your dad and I had a little argument. I . . . did some damage. We were both wrong . . . Listen, I know I have not been very good to you lately or for a long time. I mean you and I, we've always had our problems and lately, it's gotten a little worse. Things . . . got out of control. . . It's not your fault Sophia. Nothing's your fault."

Charlotte suddenly had a pang of maternal regret like she had never had before.

"OK," Sophia said.

"I know things have been hard for you. And you've been just so good to take care of things for me. . . I . . . want you to know how much I love you."

There was no answer. There was some kind of struggle on the end of the line and little gasping sounds. Sophia was sobbing.

After a long pause she heard: "I love you too, Mom."

"I really do. You and Nick and Kristy, you mean everything to me."

"Are you coming home?"

"Yes, I'm coming home tonight. And I want to promise you something. I'm not going to drink anymore. I'm done. I know it's been terrible for you. I wake up in the morning all the time and I just wanna cry because I remember how I must have hurt you kids. It's not fair. You shouldn't have to deal with this. I'm not sure what's going to happen with your dad and me, but I'm going to be a better mom. I promise."

"OK."

"OK. All right. Good. I'll see you soon, Sophia. I'll see you in a few hours."

"OK mom. See you soon."

"I'll be home soon honey. And everything will be OK. OK. B'bye."

— ooo000ooo—

Sophia swiveled back and forth on the stool by the phone and stared at the yellow receiver. She heard it buzzing. Then she heard the buzzing get loud and harsh so she hung up. Her mother was coming home. And she kind of sounded. . . good. Her mom had never spoken to Sophia like that, that

she could remember. She was so nice and just so. . . nice. She didn't want to make it sound like she had never been nice before in Sophia's whole life. But there was something special in her voice tonight. She sounded really sober and normal. And she admitted about the drinking, for the first time ever. Had actually said it out loud. And even said she would quit. That she knew how hard it was for them and — everything. She said she was sorry and from now on she was going to do better. This was so big. It was what Sophia had hoped for so long.

Maybe things would get better. Maybe her mom would really change and dad would want to come back and be with them again. Maybe they would even go to church and act like normal parents. But even if that didn't happen, it would be OK. She didn't have to be mad at Joanne anymore even though, on principle, she knew she should be. But now, she could just say, "hey, you know what? All that stuff about my mom? It's all better now. She doesn't drink anymore and she's really nice. You should come over." And wow. Maybe she could like Jack Barrett for real and not have to worry about him finding out a bunch of terrible secrets.

She would try to make it good for her mom. She wanted her coming home to be easy. She and Nick and Kristy would have

to be good and try really hard not to make their mom upset. Sophia looked around at the bedlam her parents had created. She would clean it up. She opened all the windows and doors to let in the fresh air and get rid of the toxic smell. She got the broom and began to sweep up the pieces of glass and mirror and potting soil. She folded up the lady-bug apron so you couldn't see the burned parts. She scraped the green candle wax off the polished wood floor. She threw away stuff that couldn't be saved – the dish towels, the candles, the gold statue of the lady holding grapes.

She tried to put things back where they went – the clock in the hall and the Betty Crocker Cook Book. Then she vacuumed and mopped. She turned the stereo onto FM 100 because it made her feel safer, like when dad was home. She made everyone's beds, did the dishes and generally cleaned up. This would really help mom to feel better when she got home. She sort of heard herself singing along to *Lollipops and Roses* on FM 100. It was a stupid song, but she liked it. And she realized how she was feeling, well. . . just really nice. Almost like what it would feel like to be happy.

Finally, she put her pajamas on and went and layed down on the couch with her feet at the end where her dad usually

sat. She pretended he was holding her feet in his lap while he read the paper. It had been such a strange and terrible and amazing day. She didn't have to dream of wishing her mom to Shangri-La anymore. She could have real dreams. It was getting late.

— ooo000ooo—

Charlotte hung up the phone and began to weep. The tears flowed freely. She gasped and could not breathe. She was so sorry. She had never felt so sorry before. She had never felt such an overflowing of emotion for her children before. It had always been about her — Charlotte. It was as if for the first time, she saw that her children were not just extensions of herself. That they had their own wishes and desires. And she had hurt them. Yes, Jay had hurt her. Jay had cheated and lied and disregarded her for much of their marriage.

But she had never really been kind to her children. It had not occurred to her, the idea of being kind. It wasn't that she hated her children. Certainly not. She loved them. But she had been cheated by life so many times. There was no possibility of happiness for her ever again so she had taken it out on her children. It had only lately occurred

to Charlotte to feel bad about this. Now she was realizing that if she should care about it all, then she would have to accept the fact that what she had done was unforgivable, like a bad dream from which you could never wake up.

It was not about not feeling worthy to be a mother. It was about never having given it any thought at all. She had been sleepwalking for the last thirteen years. But more than that, she had done the unforgivable. She had never been there for her children. Not really. She had left them – her babies. She had considered killing herself. Why? Because Jay had cheated? She was doing it again – punishing her children for other people's sins. Her concern, no – her horror, was at herself. How would she ever be able to forgive herself? How would they ever be able to forgive her?

Charlotte had to hurry. After awhile, she finally stopped crying. She felt sick and her head was pounding. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. She pulled herself off the bed and remembered she been wearing the shiny pink dress now for almost 32 hours. Charlotte went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. It was a frankly shocking image – her hair in rats and tangles like Medusa, dirt smudges on her face from sitting on the salty

desert floor, mascara running down her cheeks. She washed her face and brushed her hair. She reapplied her make-up. Then Charlotte regarded herself again. Not bad. The dress was a little mussed, but it was passable. She slipped on her strappy heels and stepped out into the hall. She walked toward the exit and then remembered—

Charlotte had left the last fifth of Smirnoff's in the room, completely unopened. She stopped. She would just leave it. She was stopping all of that. Why would she ever go back to retrieve it? . . . But what if she did need it? Sure, she was stopping drinking. Of course she was, and she was on the way home to her children. There was no need for any more vodka to be anywhere near her.

The only way to try and redeem herself would be to go straight home and take Sophia in her arms and cry with her. Then to keep calm and get the other kids and go home. To not drink. To try and find happiness somewhere besides in Jay.

But still, she was feeling shaky. She might need a little nip just to take the edge off between here and American Fork. Just to make this pounding headache go away. It was a long way home. Two hours at least. She wouldn't drink the vodka. She would just get it, in case. She turned back

toward the room and retrieved the bottle, still in its sack on the bedside table. She would just have a small drink to make her head feel better.

The instant she felt the first burn, her headache receded. On the second, it disappeared. On the third, there was no longer any possibility that she would not consume the entire bottle that night.

Charlotte teetered down the hall towards the casino still talking to herself. She would stop being selfish after tonight. She would learn how to love her children the right way and give them what they needed. She tried to conceal the bottle in its brown sleeve inside her purse. Charlotte was going home. She was. But first she would stop in the casino and the restaurant and get something to eat. She wandered through the rows of slot machines where people slouched on stools, smoking and feeding nickels and quarters into carillon of chiming, dinging, clanging slot machines, and then tak tak tak tak tak of change falling. Someone winning. It made her excited. She paused at the Blackjack tables to steady herself and watch the men. They sat at green tables studying their cards. Women and other men mingled between sipping colorful drinks with umbrellas

and swords. All the way on the other side of the room, she heard music playing steered herself in that direction.

On a small stage at the end of the room, a jazz combo was playing back-up to a thin good looking guy in three piece suit and tie. He was singing: *Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. Let me see what's happening on Jupiter and Mars. In other words, please be true. In other words, I love you* It was a good Frank Sinatra impersonation.

Charlotte started to sway and then sat down at the small round table at the foot of the stage. The singer was tall and dark. He looked like Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*. She watched him closely. He was amazing. He did sound like Frank Sinatra but he was better looking. More sincere somehow. There was also a kind of wounded look in his eye that made her want him.

Charlotte had always been attracted to glittery things. She was a glittery thing herself. Who was this beautiful man? She saw that he was watching her now as he sang. He was singing and staring into her eyes. She had never cheated on Jay. She had never even slept with another man in her life. She regretted a little bit having slept with Jay before they were married. It would have been

disgraceful if they hadn't gotten married. In fact she was three months pregnant with Sophia at her wedding. No one could tell.

She had had some very odd moments where she could have cheated. She was propositioned once by Sophia's science teacher during a parent teacher conference just last year. The guy had simply come right out and whispered *I want to make love to you*, right during her meeting with him. He was a good looking guy. But what made him think that was O.K.? That she would even be willing to put up with that kind of thing let alone respond the way he wanted her to?

Even the first counselor in their own ward bishopric had appeared on her porch one early afternoon to tell her that his company was sending him on a trip to San Francisco and was she possibly interested in joining him on the trip? She had found it an astounding presumption. This man was married. He was in the bishopric and was supposed to be an example. Charlotte knew his chubby wife, the ladies Relief Society President who was constantly inviting her to Homemaking Night at the church. Just what exactly did those people think of her – just because she didn't go to church?

Tonight, she weighed the fact that she was on her way home to be a good mother to her children, to learn how to

love them. She remembered that. She also remembered that she had strayed a little because of her headache. That now she really ought to rest before heading back to town. Sophia could handle things and the other kids were with their grandparents. She did not give a flying fuck where Jay was and was fairly sure she did not love him anymore. And she had found this beautiful man.

The waitress came along and delivered her a second vodka gimlet.

"This is from Mr. Duran," she said.

"Who?" said Charlotte.

"Mr. Duran . . . Bobby Duran." She pointed at the man on stage as he crooned *Witchcraft* in Charlotte's direction. She nodded to him and smiled. Bobby Duran took several bows to thunderous applause. He said something to the band and then stepped off the stage. The band began to play something slow.

A voice from behind her whispered "Will you dance with me?" Charlotte turned around to see Bobby Duran standing very near and holding out his hand. She smiled and rose, feeling unsteady, but he grabbed her in his strong arms and held her there for a moment. Then he took her onto the floor, twirled her out and spun her back in close. All the

time he guided her with his hand gently in the small of her back. She responded. She had danced with Jay at the country club. They had cleared the floor a few times. This man, Bobby? He knew what he was doing. He smelled of musk, maybe a little too much, but she would forgive him. People were watching them and then applauding. The music ended but he still held her tight.

He walked back to the round table and sat down next to her. The band continued to play dance music.

"Baby you're the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." Charlotte blushed and looked down. She was very drunk. He took her hand, kissed it and said "I'm Bobby Duran." She looked at him and smiled.

"The Bobby Duran?" She gave him a look.

"Oh, you've heard of me?"

"Far and wide Mr. Duran. Why do you think I'm here?"

"And you must be the Destroying Angel then."

"Huh. Maybe." She sipped her drink.

"I'm finished for the evening, baby – that is, if you wanna go somewhere."

"She stood and took his hand." Her legs were numb and weak. She leaned into him and they walked together out of the casino and towards her room. They stopped several times

in the hallway to kiss some more. Inside her room, he leaned against the wall and he leaned against her. She felt his hard cock pressing between her inner thighs. The hunger that resided there was staggering. She felt dizzy and constrained. She wanted to go slow, but she wanted it now. She was so fucking wasted. She managed to break away and stepped out onto the second story balcony. There, she let the cold october wind whip around her. She began peeling off her clothes wondered at herself. She removed her dress. The wind whipped at her and caught the small pink and silver tafeta. She let it go and it flew away like a dishtowel. Piece by piece she fed her clothing to the wind, her slip and nylons, her bra and panties. She imagined them being carried off to who knows where, and to softly settle themselves on a sage brush or a sandstone hoodoo.

She went back into the room. Bobby was laying on the bed. She knelt over him and took in in her hungry mouth. He moaned and gripped her hair. She moved up on the bed and Bobby began kissing her nipples and she surged with pleasure. She let him make love to her, and she made love back to him. No. . . She fucked him. She fucked him hard with all of her heart and soul. Then they both lay spent on the top of the bed.

He turned on his side and stroked her breasts and then touched her face.

"God, you're beautiful," he said. "Where in the hell did you ever come from?"

"That never felt so good," she said.

After a moment, he whispered "Do you wanna feel even better baby?"

"What do you have in mind?" He sat up and reached for his jacket.

"Wanna get high?"

She had never done that. She had never even considered doing that. But as she lay on the bed watching him get out his gear, she whispered to herself "What the fuck?" She watched as he unwrapped a tiny black paper that contained the white powder. She figured it was cocaine. He got a spoon out that had been bent backwards and pulled a lighter from his shirt pocket. Bobby mixed the powder with water and heated it on the spoon with a lighter. There was a vague burning smell like vinegar. Then he took out a rubber hose and wrapped it around his arm. Finally he pulled out the syringe with a needle and began to suck the mixture out of the spoon.

Charlotte looked away. She was afraid now. She looked back in time to see Bobby, still holding the syringe, sitting back with his eyes closed. Then he looked at her. "Baby? Ha ha. Did you ever even tell me your name?"

"It's Dorothy," she said.

"Well Dorothy, wanna try a speedball? I fucking guarantee you've never felt anything like it before."

Charlotte considered it. She had never heard of a speedball. Sure, whatever. This wasn't who she was. But, then again, she did not consider the title of "raging alcoholic" to be very fitting or appropriate either. And yet it was. It was a dangerous thing to do. But this was it. After this, she was going home. It's not like she was going to get addicted and follow Bobby Duran from one crappy desert casino town to another. She could do it this one time. She was turning over a new leaf tomorrow. This was her last night. After that – cold turkey. She meant it too.

"OK. Maybe just a little."

"I knew you were cool, Dorothy. God, you are so fucking beautiful. I just wanna share everything with you." He got his preparations out again and repeated the process. He wrapped her arm tightly with the rubber hose. He dipped the

syringe in the mixture and loaded it. He held it up to the light and flicked. Then, gently he injected the salty white mixture into the green vein as she looked away. It was just a prick and some cold.

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And then Charlotte began to fall backwards. She laid down on the bed, but continued to fall. Down, and down and down. It was quite lovely. Yet she felt energized too. She wanted to make love again and she pulled him towards her. He entered her again and they fucked less urgently, deeper, harder, on and on, always falling down backwards, down and down. They came together, and again both lay on the bed.

"Whoa, baby," said Bobby Duran.

"Mmmmmmm." Charlotte could not form any words any words at the moment. Bobby sat up and lit a cigarette. Then he started talking in his Frank Sinatra voice and caressing her with his hand. She heard him talking but the words were not making any sense. It didn't matter. He wasn't waiting for her to respond. The mixture was flowing freely through her veins, her heart and lungs, her head, her clitoris. Everything felt perfect all at the same time. It was too good to waste trying to talk. Bobby leaned over and kissed

her deeply. He stayed with her for awhile. She sensed him getting up and putting his clothes on.

"Babe, I've got to get going." He nudged her. "You OK babe?" She made an audible sound.

"God, you sure look great laying there. I wonder who the hell you are." He kissed her lips and left the room.

Charlotte remained on the bed. She was dreaming now. There was a house that seemed familiar or not quite, a room or a floor, a section where she didn't dare go. Then she was on a widow's walk, looking out, shading her eyes from the sun dogs, just looking and looking. She saw smiling white false teeth. Then she heard her father's voice. He was singing. He had been dead 28 years, but she heard his voice clear as day, an old Irish Lullaby:

*Stay awake, don't rest your head
Don't lie down upon your bed
While the moon drifts in the skies
Stay awake, don't close your eyes*

Her breathing became more shallow but she was not bothered. Her eyes and mouth fell open and began to dry up. Her arm dangled off the bed. Down, down and down she was pleasantly falling. Her breath delicate and faint. Charlotte's chest began to lurch as her autonomic nervous

system tried to kick start. Still, her heart-beat slowed
and her breath was ever more slight.

*Though the world is fast asleep
Though your pillow's soft and deep
You're not sleepy as you seem
Stay awake, don't nod and dream
Stay awake, don't nod and dream*

She had to get home. She had promised Sophia.

THE X-RAY SPECS

Like some eccentric children, she had often wished she could be afflicted with some kind of physical ailment or imperfection that would set her apart. Once she bent a bobby pin around her top teeth and tried to convince everyone at recess that she had a new kind of braces, ones that looked like black bobby pins.

Once she paid Bonnie Anderson a quarter to break her leg so she could walk around on crutches. But Sophia laying on the grass and Bonnie sitting on her butt trying to wrench her leg the wrong way proved to be too painful and Sophia called it off. Bonnie kept the quarter. Sophia did legitimately limp around for a while – maybe five minutes. Not enough to impress anyone.

One day Sophia wore her mother's sewing glasses to school. They were black horn-rimmed, and to her surprise, hard to see through. The minute Sophia put them on everything went blurry. She could not imagine how they helped her mother see. She could not even walk around with them on. So, she decided it would be best to only put them

on once class had started.

In the middle of math, Miss Barker peered over her own horned rims and four or five rows of second graders and said "Why Sophia, I didn't know you wore glasses." Sophia turned red.

"Well, actually..." What was she doing? She knew she didn't wear glasses and any person with any sense, or who did not live in an imaginary world, would know that.

"They're my mom's glasses."

Miss Barker's laugh was loud and boisterous and carried across the classroom and probably out into the hall. The other kids laughed too. Sophia took the glasses off and put them in her desk. Richard Nichols, her desk partner laughed extra loud and gestured at Sophia. This was undoubtedly because Sophia had, at one time, perhaps exaggerated how bad it smelled sitting next to Richard the day he wet his pants. Richard couldn't take a joke – Nor could he make a joke, apparently.

The first day back after Christmas vacation, Sophia had on her brownish-gold ultra-suede jacket, one of her best Christmas presents ever. Sophia loved the jacket. She thought it made her look like a girl version of Donny Osmond. Sophia did in fact love Donny Osmond. She lusted

after him in Tiger Beat Magazine. But at eight years old, and, as previously noted, somewhat eccentric, Sophia's love for Donny was expressed in the desire to *be him* rather than *be his girlfriend*.

On the day after Christmas vacation, she sat at her desk wearing the ultra-suede jacket. Again, Miss Barker peered over the rows of desks and asked why Sophia needed to be wearing a jacket in a perfectly warm classroom. That Miss Barker cared what Sophia was wearing was a mystery. Miss Barker did not usually busy herself with that kind of minutia. All the kids would have agreed with Sophia on that if they had cared or been paying attention. So, Sophia really had to start thinking that she might have been being targeted.

"It's just that I'm, well, kind of cold." What was she going to say? That she was pretending to be Donny Osmond that day?

"Well, just take it off and hang it up in the back. It's not cold in here."

Sophia shook her head.

"Take the jacket *off*."

She shook her head again. Normally, Sophia was not

defiant with grown-ups. She had never been defiant with anyone older than herself, except maybe a bossy cousin or two.

She simply could not take the jacket off. She loved it. She loved it and it was not coming off. Miss Barker was glaring now, tiny black eyes trying to penetrate through coke bottle lenses. Sophia was hot, hot and cold with sweat trickling down her back. But somehow, she managed to glare back. It seemed like minutes passed. All the second graders were looking at Sophia and the interesting event unfolding in math class.

"Fine!" Miss Barker said, "keep it on! But it's hot in here and wearing that jacket looks ridiculous." So she did. Sophia kept it on the whole rest of the day even when she could feel them all staring at her, and she was hot sweaty, she kept the jacket on. She did not feel like Donny Osmond. She felt like the weird girl who would not take her jacket off in class.

Sophia wondered why it seemed that Miss Barker hated her. Maybe it was because she really was a defiant brat. Maybe it was because her mother was too pretty on parent's day. Maybe it was because Sophia had gone up to her desk four times in one afternoon to ask Miss Barker how to spell

the word "friend." This was when they were writing "get well" letters to Sheldon Jensen, a kid who really *had* broken his leg. Maybe it was because Miss Barker hated her bucked teeth, her poofy hair and the fact that at 25, living in Utah Valley, she was still a *Miss Barker*. Maybe she didn't know why herself. Maybe something about Sophia just *bugged* her. It happens.

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The day Sophia wore her X-Ray Specs to school was the day Miss Barker got Sophia back. She had transported them to school safely in the pocket of the ultra-suede jacket. Even though it was a freezing cold January morning, Sophia, Joanne and their friend Jodi walked to school anyway. Sophia's hands got so cold sometimes they couldn't feel them anymore. And if the truth were known, the ultra-suede jacket really wasn't all that warm.

Joanne and Sophia had sent away for the X-Ray Specs even before thanksgiving – so long ago, she almost forgotten them. She and Joanne had carefully clipped the tiny order form from the back of a Marvel comic book. They filled out both of their names and used Joanne's address, because it was her house and her dad was helping them mail it. Under quantity, they put "2 and enclosed \$4.50 -- \$2

for each pair of glasses and .25 cents for each shipping and handling, whatever that was.

They had waited and waited, for six weeks. Finally, the day before back to school it arrived. The envelope was sitting on Joanne's kitchen when they raced in the door. It sat there looking little bit too lightweight to really contain so much magic. Joanne ripped open the envelope and peered inside. She shook it and two thin cellophane packages dropped out. They each contained a pair of black plastic frames with cardboard centers lenses that swirled off-center in red and white, like the beginning of the Twilight Zone. In the middle of the cardboard swirls was a tiny hole with feathers filtering across the opening.

They put the glasses on and looked at each other. Joanne was a vague figure through the cardboard and the feathers. But, she still had her clothes on. Sophia turned to the wall. She expected . . . now she wasn't sure what she expected – at least that she should be able to see through the wall and out to the street. But the fact that she could not remained somewhat unsurprising. It was just Joanne's same old house. Nothing had changed except they were standing in the kitchen wearing plastic glasses with feathers over the eye-holes.

Sophia avoided her suspicion the specs could not deliver everything they had promised. They did not seem to be much good for walking around in. Nor were they much good for seeing at all, much less through clothes, walls or otherwise. According to the instructions, if you held your hand up to the light, it like you were seeing through your hand. But they got tired of doing that after about thirty seconds. Sophia wanted the glasses to work. She was willing to suspend a disbelief that had becoming heavier and more difficult to cast off. Sophia had waited for them to come in the mail for so many weeks. The promise had been made.

She was still willing to believe that possibly the magic of the glasses just hadn't "kicked in" yet. Maybe the power had to be activated in some way. Or something. Sophia's cheeks and hands and nose were frozen that morning when she walked into the second grade classroom. She took off the ultra-suede jacket and hung it on the back of her chair, a silent compromise between Miss Barker and herself. Besides, the gold ultra-suede was beginning to wear in places. Already, shiny bald spots were showing at the elbows.

The bell rang and the class began plodding through morning activities; the morning prayer, the pledge of

allegiance, reading, spelling and all the time the Specs burning a hole through the jacket. Sophia wasn't exactly sure when she would put them on. She didn't want to get in trouble with Miss Barker. She most certainly did not want that. But she did want to see if she could wave to Joanne through the wall and across the hall into the third grade. And she wanted to be the envy of all the kids in the class.

Recess came. She reached for the glasses in her pocket, anticipating the flurry of attention they would cause. People running in fear that she -- Sophia was able to see through their clothes -- ha, ha, like she even cared, being able to see through walls and doors. It would be momentous. It would affect the course of events at Shelly School for times to come.

Sophia slipped the plastic frames over her nose and leered around the room like the guy in the ad. She smelled the cardboard lenses and felt them pressing against her eyelashes. But still, she wasn't able to see anything much at all. Then, just as Sophia was turning in the direction of the third grade in hopes of waving to Joanne, the glasses were being violently plucked off her nose. She caught the specs in self-defense and wrenched them back.

"We don't bring toys to school!" It was Miss Barker in her most nasal tone.

"They're not toys! They're X-Ray Specs!"

She towered over Sophia in her little desk waiting for the surrender. Sophia did not move.

"Give them to me right now!"

Except for the jacket incident, Sophia was a good kid. She was the kid who got to go in the back room with Tammy Garrick and read the big books with the hard words. She was the kid who won the teacher appreciation poetry contest in first grade by penning this poem in the kitchen (while her grandmother dictated):

*"I love my teachers so much,
because they teach me how
to read and write,
and sing songs,
with kindness and patience."*

Sheer brilliance. Such talent at so an early age. Sophia recalled that the first three words "*I love my. . .*" were gigantically huge on the page – the result of poor planning. So, it probably wasn't her penmanship that won the contest either. Anyway, then added a large red heart on and flowers falling from the sky onto the happy teachers as they were having tea on a lawn.

The point is, Sophia was a good kid. But today, Miss

Barker was not getting the X-Ray Specs. She towered over her in her little desk and tried to snatch them away. She put her arms around the back of the little desk chair switching the glasses from right to left hand and back again. Miss Barker flailed back and forth. Finally, she got hold of Sophia arm . . . and then her hand . . . and then the glasses. She felt the cardboard lenses tearing away from the plastic frames. And she let them go. Then everything was quiet.

"There now," said Miss Barker. She was quite out of breath. "You just get yourself straight to the principal's office."

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The principal, Mr. Hansen looked at Sophia and his usual kindly expression was absent. He had even been kindly the day she had faked a sprained ankle on the playground. He had examined the ankle as she lay there moaning on the black top, the circle of concerned students becoming larger by the minute. Very satisfying. Mr. Hansen knelt down on the black top. He prodded the ankle a little. Then he moved it this way and that. Finally, he declared it to be "growing pains."

That had been embarrassing.

And now there was this. He looked baffled as he listened to Miss Barker's account of Sophia's subversion, disobedience and rebellion. Mr. Hansen almost frowned as he looked at Sophia.

"Now, what exactly was it you were wearing? X-Ray something or others?"

Sophia opened her mouth intending a lofty speech about the calculated and unfair targeting of certain students for no justifiable reason:

"Well, you see, Mr. Hansen, I ordered these X-Ray Specs in the mail a long time ago and they took forever to get here. And finally they came, and like I really wanted to wear them for awhile just to see if they worked, like you know, to see if you could really see through walls and stuff, and then Miss Barker, who for some reason unfairly. . ."

"Miss Barker was right to take them away," he said. He was not even really listening.

Sophia sat in the office for a while and then got sent back to class. Miss Barker's beedy eyes had flashed at Sophia's suggestion that she had been unfair. In Mr. Hansen's presence and now, she had taken on the coolness of a wise and authentic adult who had calmly dealt with a

minor discipline problem. In her tiny eyes Sophia could see victory, and smug satisfaction. Miss Barker was superior, stronger and smarter. Sophia was broken. Miss Barker had won.

The X-Ray Specs had disappeared, probably into her desk drawer or locked in the cabinet in the audio/video room. It didn't matter. They were gone. There was nothing Sophia could do but linger around the classroom and try to look pitiful.

After three days, she summoned the courage to approach Miss Barker's desk and ask, meekly if she could have her X-Ray Specs back sometime soon. Or *at all* would be good too.

"You'll get them back when I decide you've earned them," she said. So, every day or two, Sophia crept up to her desk after school.

"Miss Barker? Uh, I was just wondering, uh, if I could have my X-Ray Specs back now?"

"Maybe next Friday." That was a week away. Hope! There was hope, and a date certain. Finally, something to look forward to. For the next seven days she was a perfect student angel or at least invisible. She thought of the X-Ray Specs constantly. She had possessed them for such a short time, they still had their magic. Thinking about

their swirly lenses with the feathered centers, she remembered them as truly possessing the magical properties they were supposed to have. Sophia *had* been able to see through walls and clothes and whatever. She vowed that from the day she got them back (whenever it came), the magic glasses would be carefully protected.

Friday finally came. Again she waited until the end of the day. She had been hoping that Miss Barker would come to her at some point in the day, when the class was quietly reading or doing math or something. That she would solemnly bestow them on Sophia with a kind smile. Miss Barker would be penitent, recognizing the value of the specs and the harshness of her treatment. But the day went by and that never happened. It was 3:00 p.m. The classroom was empty and she sat at her desk. Sophia took a breath and approached her slowly.

"Uh, Miss Barker?"

"Yes Sophia, what is it?"

"I was just wondering if I could get my X-Ray Specs back. You said last Friday I could get them back."

"Your what?"

"My X-Ray Specs. You know, you took 'em away and you said I could get them back on . . . today. On Friday. Which

is today."

She looked at me blankly, as if she didn't have a clue what Sophia was talking about.

"My X-Ray Specs!"

Miss Barker looked blankly again at her and thought for a moment.

"Oh yes, those silly glasses." She paused. "I think I gave those to my niece to play with."

Sophia stared at her. Waiting. For clarification. Further explanation. A promise to find them and bring them back to me! God forbid, an apology? But nothing came.

"Was there something else, Sophia?"

"No." She turned and walked away.

Blindly, Sophia ran home across the frozen fields. Smoke and ice filled her screaming lungs. Tears streaked down her face and then froze too. She would have cried out if she had had the words to describe the precise evil creature that she was.

Later, when she was older Sophia would think about the Specs sometimes. She wondered what she would say if she ever saw Miss Barker again, if she ran into on the sidewalk or at the grocery store. She harbored a scene where she imagined herself as some kind of ethereal being wandering

the halls of Shelly Elementary School, able to see through walls and desk drawers and jacket pockets. She would enter silently and see Miss Barker crouched over her teacher's desk at the back of the room. Sophia would approach and watch her for a minute. She would stand over her shoulder and quietly say what she had been waiting a generation to say:

 "I see you Miss Barker. Even without them, I see you .
 . . And you know what? I know exactly who you are."

MATCH GAME

The summer of 1975 was the summer between 7th and 8th grade. It had started out the same as ever.

It was tennis team started up in June, just after school had ended for the year. Practices were from seven to nine in the morning, Monday through Friday. Usually Sophia and Joanne rode their bikes up to the school courts where the team practiced. Sophia was starting to get good at the game. It was one of those things she discovered she just knew how to do without having to work on it very much. She loved the hollow thwacking sound of the ball meeting the surface of the racket, the symmetrical squares of the racket strings, the felt ball, how it smelled like rubber and was so yellow it almost hurt your eyes.

Possibly, more than playing the game, she loved to hit against the wall, the meditative thwack-bounce-thwak/thwak-bounce-bounce-thwak, etc. It was solitary, repetitive, peaceful – a way to clear her mind. It allowed her to stop thinking, to just be with the forces of gravity and nature. And with the power of her own arms and legs and heartbeat. These days, even the mornings were mostly warm when the sun finally got up over the mountains.

After tennis practice that morning, Sophia had come home to find a bucket of fresh strawberries on the back porch. One day a few years ago, her little brother, Nicky, a solemn little boy, had planted a store-bought strawberry on the south side of their house and watered it a few times. Every summer after that, dozens of strawberry plants spontaneously multiplied on the warm sunny side of the brick house.

The berries had been freshly picked that morning and left sitting in the sun. Sophia took them in, rinsed and put them in a bowl. She poured cream in the bowl with a little sugar. The berries made a warm red swirl in the heavy cream that turned pink and strawberry flavored. Sophia ate the berries in the shade of the front porch. Every few minutes a car floated by. It was the beginning of the summer. She thought about how delicious it felt to hit the ball with the tennis racket. Sometimes she would hit the ball against the garage door on the driveway for hours and hours. In a way, she preferred the solitude. No talking, no planning. Just hitting – Thwack, bounce, thwack, bounce, bounce . . . It was just herself and the ball and the surfaces.

The garage door had ridges however, and quite often the ball hit a sharp edge and bounce out to the side, into the road and down the hill. Sometimes she hit it too high and it sailed over the garage and over the fence of the backyard and down to the creek where it would float away if you didn't hurry and climb the fence to get it.

This happened over and over again. And in spite of all the hardships that came with chasing the tennis ball down the hill or over the fence, Sophia kept it up. Just kept hitting the ball against the garage and then chasing it, wherever it happened to roll. It was a lot of work for not very much pay-off. And yet she kept doing it, almost like she kept believing that it would not happen again.

Today it was too hot to hit the ball against the garage anymore. And it was too nice of a morning to do more than enjoy just how perfectly sweet the strawberries had tasted. She thought of these things with all the brashness of a person who had no doubt about deserving lovely moments like this and who expected that in her long life to come, there would be infinitely more of them.

It was now 11:30 in the morning. She had only to wait two more hours for *Match Game '75* to come on Channel 5. She went into the house, put the bowl in the kitchen sink and

descended the stairs to the cool basement family room. She watched *Truth or Consequences* and *The Price is Right*. An hour and a half later she heard Charlotte, her mother stomping around upstairs. Sophia turned the TV down a bit so as not to attract attention. However, Charlotte was on her way out the door and apparently angry about something.

She yelled down the stairs, "If you're going to watch T.V. all day, you can just as well fold clothes!" Then she added, "all of it, every piece before going anywhere with friends." Sophia was still wearing her tennis shorts and pink shirt. She sat on the burnt orange rug and surveyed the laundry. She stretched her legs into the pile so she was now partially buried in load of whites. It was now 1:00 in the afternoon. She was home alone. She was hardly ever completely home alone. No, this was good.

Match Game '75 would be on in a half an hour. It was Friday. Then after today she would have to wait two days and two nights – the whole weekend – before she would get to see him again, her secret love, her most deeply felt passion. She knew that her feelings were unique, that no one had ever felt this intensely about another person – this was special. She looked down at her tan, skinny legs and tennis socks, mostly buried in the warm load of

laundry. She picked out a towel and reluctantly began folding.

There was a rapping on the back screen door. "What now?" She trudged up the stairs to see her best friend, Joanne peering through the screen her hands cupping her face.

"Hey Sophia. You wanna go to the carnival? My mom can take us."

"Um, I don't think I can."

"Oh right, I forgot, the Richard Dawson thing."

"No it's not. It's not that. I have to fold clothes. My mom's making me . . . Really!"

"Yeah right. Whatever." Joanne looked surly. "Come on, Sophia. You can watch your dumb TV shows any time. The carnival's only here for three days."

"Just let me wait until 2:00, O.K.? I have to finish folding these stupid clothes."

She left and Sophia was happy she was gone. OK. Yes. It was "the Richard Dawson thing." And he would be on at 1:30 for *Match Game '75*. Sophia was bothered that she would have to miss *Family Feud* at 2:30, but maybe she could still see *Hogan's Heroes* at 6:30.

She knew it was weird. And nobody understood. She didn't understand herself. Though Joanne was her best friend after all, and she really wanted to talk about him to somebody. It was possible Joanne wouldn't think she was completely crazy. It was just, she wasn't sure Joanne could be trusted with information this intense. Up until now, nothing to do with boys had been real – Not for Sophia anyway. She had had a thing for Donny Osmond starting in about the second grade. But this had been based largely on how pretty *he* was and how cool it was that he was Mormon and lived in Utah. This . . . whatever it was that Sophia felt for Richard Dawson was definitely real and needed to be explored – alone – in the basement.

They both had to admit they thought that Robert Shaw had been kind of sexy in *Jaws*. And we had both gotten a little more than hot over Joey Bonsignor, the golf pro at our parent's country club – especially when he personally showed them how to swing a club.

Whatever it was, they both had a thing for older men. It didn't matter that these men were 25 to 30 years older than they were. The boys they went to school with were just that: *boys*. They were dopey and stupid and shared a deeply mutual disinterest of each other. Not that the men ever

noticed them either, but there was something about men that the boys did not have and, with or without meaning to, they got the attention of some eccentric twelve year old girls.

Sophia's mother if she had given it much thought, would have assumed that her daughter had simply become addicted to television from watching it too much. But one day, in early June, when Sophia was watching Match Game '75 and looking at Richard Dawson, she realized that he was just . . . "*really cool.*" She had never seen anyone this cool, ever. This, in spite of the fact that he was eight years older than her own father. Sophia watched him MORE CLOSELY. In fact, she had watched every single move he made since June 7, 1976 (insofar as it had been available to her on television.)

On *Match Game*, he was moody and dark, but still funny, in that Rat Pack, wise guy sort of way. He smoked and wore turtle-neck sweaters, a gold bracelet and a big gold pinky ring. He puffed up his cheeks when he couldn't think of a good answer or joke. All the other women on the show flirted with him and the pretty guest celebrity always got to sit next to him and he flirted with her. On *The Feud*, he wore three piece suits made by *Botany 500* with the same gold pinky ring and, as the host, he dominated the show in

a strong and commanding way. . . And he kissed all the women and girls.

He was less cute on *Hogan's Heroes*, probably because he was much younger in the show and had stupid long sideburns. He was somewhat of a minor character, a bit too English, and usually, not a big part of the storyline. Nevertheless, Sophia scoured each episode for glimpses of him. There was nothing that went unnoticed by her budding little 13-year-old brain as she sat fixated on him during each half hour show.

Since the first week in June, life had begun to revolve around a television schedule that, with artful planning, would allow her to watch him for an hour and a half every weekday. She began skipping trips to the mall with Joanne and Jodi if it meant missing a single show, and on weekends, she moped and agonized like a sick cat. While on trips to the grocery store with her mother, Sophia disappeared to the magazine section. This was so she could read all the upcoming *TV Guide* plot summaries for *Hogan's Heros*.

Sophia was embarrassed. She knew he was way too old for her and besides that, he was a personality on T.V. She figured he probably lived in Hollywood somewhere. And he

was so handsome but in a "less-handsome-not-so-obvious-older-man" sort of a way. He was clever and sarcastic – Sophia loved sarcastic. He was also British but kind of American too.

In the past few weeks, Sophia had come to believe that merely by virtue of her loving him as much as she did signified something important in the universe. In other words, it could not go unrecognized by the cosmos or even by Richard Dawson himself. That is to say that these kinds of intense feelings do not occur unless they occur together, just like the orbital movement of pairs of electrons on either side of the planet, they would always have to move in concert. It was truly bigger than both of them.

Nevertheless, that day, Sophia also knew she loved the carnival. The child in her wanted to go so much it hurt. The new grown up woman with desires wanted to stay home in the cool basement family room. Only 20 more minutes to *Match Game*. But she would go to the carnival. After all, it was an episode of *Family Feud*. A daytime TV game show. She was not crazy. She would go to carnival.

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The carnival was slow in the mid-afternoon and it was hot. The breeze was more like a blast furnace. It smelled of cotton candy, hot dogs and dust. Not even the shade provided refuge. Sophia was sick from the heat and the smell, but mostly she was wretched about the fact that it was 2:37 in the afternoon and Richard Dawson had probably just interviewed the two families and kissed all the women on Family Feud. Then they would have had the first round and then there would be a commercial. And it was Friday. Soon the show would be over and not come on again until Monday, three days away. Three days! They sat on the dry grass under the large cottonwood trees.

Joanne pulled a large piece of pale pink and blue cotton-candy off of the rolled up paper cone. It stretched itself into a gauzy sheet. The sunlight filtered through the cotton causing it to resemble a shredded cirrus cloud. She picked off delicate pieces that turned dark blue and red around her fingers and popped them in her mouth where it sweetly dissolved and disappeared at the back of her throat. Joanne licked off all the dark little blue and pink bits clustered on the tips of her long tan fingers.

"Gawd, when are you going to be ready?" Sophia moaned.

"Just about," she said casually. Then she carefully pulled off another gauzy sheet and starting the process again.

"Geeze, we're gonna miss the whole day!"

"All right, let's go." She sprung off the lawn, pale dead grass sticking to the back of her legs, making itchy little fossilized dents that faded to a red rash. Joanne tossed the paper cone into a bee-infested garbage can.

They were not quite the teenagers who had come to the carnival in the cool of the evening to congregate in flocks on the sidewalk or blacktop next to "The Hammer" in order to be noticed or flirt with boys, nor were they the children who waited for their dads to come home so the family could go to the carnival together. At once too old and too young, they wandered together being careful not to spend all their ride tickets too fast.

They rode the Octopus and the Merry Mixer. Then they ate purple snow cones. After playing darts, they each had a poster rolled up under one arm. Sophia was dedicated to protecting her Donny Osmond poster. Joanne didn't care about her Partridge Family poster and had allowed it to become mashed and crumpled. After a while they searched the dry grass for silver coins that might have been dropped

under the rides or by grown-ups near the concession stand. The only thing Sophia cared about was that Joanne would let them go home before 6:30.

"How much do you have left?" Joanne asked.

"About \$2.75. How much do you have?"

"Let's see. . ." Joanne counted her scant change.

"Looks like about \$4.00." "Let's just go, I'm really hot!"

"In a minute! Why do we always have to do what you wanna do?"

"I only have 3 more tickets you know. Three more rides, one more game and that's it." Sophia was gaining ground. She might just make it home for Hogan's Heroes.

They stopped at a booth that contained two rope ladders stretched at a slight incline across a large inflated jumpy balloon. We watched as others tried to climb across the ladder before falling upside down onto the big rubber pillow. The winner, if there ever was a winner, would ring the bell at the end of the ladder and get a gigantic neon-pink dog. They eyed the game. It looked so easy, but the only guy who could do it was the concessionaire, who demonstrated the game's facility over and over after every paying failure.

"Let's do it," said Joanne, "I bet I could win that dog."

" 'K, you go first."

Joanne handed her quarter over to the guy, surveyed the rope ladder carefully, then began to climb. It was a game of balance. The idea was to balance your weight equally across the ladder to keep it from flipping over. Joanne got passed four rungs before the ladder began to quiver and wobble under her weight and she flipped upside-down, landing on her back onto the bouncy surface. The top was hot and Joanne scrambled off as the rubber stuck to her skin.

"I'm not doing it," said Sophia.

"Not fair! YOU said you would."

"Nope, it's just a big rip."

"Oh, thanks a lot. Let me waste my money. . ."

Then from a distance, they heard something that caught their attention, like someone announcing a sports event. They were both too tired to continue the fight. They started walking towards the sound.

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"Like to try ladies?" A silky voice on a microphone came from behind a shaded platform. The girls sat down at

swivel stools in front of a row of glass-topped pin-ball machines. Before them was a large panoramic scene painted on plywood of what might have been the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs. To the side were names and images of horses that seemed to be chomping at the bit to get out of the gate. Sophia and Joanne swiveled on the stools for a second. Then they each plunked a quarter on the glass of their own separate pinball machine. Each machine was connected to one of the horses up on the Kentucky Derby board. Below the big lighted board, displayed on a table in the middle of the booth were hundreds of different sized brass, copper, gold and silver horses. In the center, was a gold horse the size of cocker spaniel. Little chains hung from all of their bridles as they stood at attention.

According to Sophia's pinball machine, her horse's was named "Mongo." And there it was up on the board, third from the top. Joanne's horse was "Ridan," number 4 on the board. OK. This was good. If Sophia could beat Joanne at this game, she would want to go home. Maybe she would make a bet with her.

Then, from behind the platform next to the lighted board, appeared the silhouette of a man. A cigarette hung from his lips. He had a pearl button cowboy shirt, dusty

jeans and pork-chop sideburns. A pack of Marlboros appeared through his right shirtfront pocket. They tried not to gape at the way his right arm shirtsleeve hung limp and was folded in to the back of his jeans. He kind of looked like a cowboy-pirate. But, this was not the most amazing thing about him. The most amazing thing about was that from under the sweaty leather visor he wore, appeared the identical likeness of Richard Dawson.

"Are you ready to race for the roses?" he purred. "Ladies?" He tipped his hat politely as he scooped up our quarters. Sophia swiveled nervously, trying not to fall backwards off the stool and into the dirt. She was stunned and numb. Joanne giggled and shot a look at Sophia. Then he climbed onto the platform and sat down in front of a microphone. A loud bell rang.

They were supposed to begin shooting the little steelies through their pinball machines as fast as possible. At one point Sophia came out of her stupor and fiercely began shooting the pinball. On the lighted board, the little horses advanced towards the finish line. Into the microphone, the figure lapsed into an hypnotic well rehearsed litany:

"And they're off! . . . It's Mongo! It's Ridan! Now it's Mongo! They're neck and neck, racin, runnin, ridin, drivin and boundin, see-sawin back and forth! Around the clubhouse stretch!" Ding Ding Ding rang the finish bell. "It's Ridan by a nose! And a pretty little rider she is too."

The specter of Richard Dawson then climbed down off the platform and handed Joanne a little tan plastic horse. She beamed at him. Sophia felt sick and limp. She couldn't look at him. She couldn't speak to him. But, she, Sophia was not leaving either.

They played until all of their money was gone. Every time Sophia won a race, she managed a shy smile and said "thank you." as he bestowed upon her a little horse which she traded up in size and quality with each victory. She stole looks at him to see if it was really true. It seemed like it was. The little tin horse became a steel horse. Then it became a larger copper horse. Sometimes Joanne won the race. Sometimes Sophia. Sometimes it was some other kid who floated by and decided to plunk down his quarter.

By 6:15 p.m., theu each possessed a mid-sized shiny brass horse with a tiny chain for a bridal. Joanne christened her horse "Ridan." Sophia kept quiet. Once or twice she tried to catch his eye. She thought she had. It

seemed like she had, and that had caused a jolt of electricity to surge through her body. It was paralyzing and strange, but it felt good.

It was late in the afternoon as they made their way up the hill toward their neighborhood. They each had a sweaty handful of carnival treasures and a little brass horse.

After a long time of walking in silence, Joanne said "He was cool, wasn't he?"

Sophia thought she might spontaneously combust but she tried to make her reply sound casual. "Yeah. He was."

"I mean, except for being super old . . . and well, you know . . . the missing arm thing."

"I know."

"It's weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

They did not know how to talk about it beyond that.

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It was 11:30 p.m. The carnival would soon be over for the summer. Sophia gazed at the little brass horse that sat on the nightstand next to her bed. The words echoed in her head like a prayer, "racin, runnin, ridin, drivin and boundin, see 'sawin back and forth . . .". She lay in bed, too energized to sleep. The house was quiet. She took my

horse in her hand and lightly ran her fingers across his saddle and mane. Then she climbed out of bed, crept up the stairs to the back landing and slipped out the screen door into the night.

She walked down the driveway in her pajamas to the hot sidewalk where she stood on tip-toes, straining to see down the hill to the park where the shimmering neon was still spinning against the darkness, like a brilliant little super-nova. Sophia ached to be down there. She knew that this guy, this one-armed carny was no more real to her world than the brass horse or even Richard Dawson himself. It was an absurd fantasy, but she held onto it, accepted it, like a last vestige of childhood. And yet, life had somehow become more colorful, more vibrant and she could believe finally, that it was full of possibilities that had never considered before. She went back into the house, to her room. As she got back into bed, she pulled at the little bridal chain and ran her hand along the horse's brass mane again.