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Ordinary Mermaids and Other Stories

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Desiree Sholes. ORDINARY MERMAIDS AND OTHER STORIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, July 2007.

The purpose of this thesis is to portray characters that are, in various ways, constantly searching. This thematic approach is woven throughout the pages of each story, where characters search for understanding or explanations to the issues they encounter. Many of my characters are young children faced with situations that inevitably alter who they become. Childhood and the teenage years are all about change and development, but much of what children are forced to learn is overlooked. I like to bring attention to those small, subtle moments in peoples' lives. Those moments that make us realize who we want to be and who we don't want to be. I'm drawn to characters who feel as if they are living on the outside of where they should be, or that somewhere in life they've been cheated. These characters seek out redemption and reasoning, and are forced to look carefully at themselves in the situations they meet. Sometimes the characters find something they never wanted to find, sometimes they make decisions they never wanted to make. When they do that, I want the characters, and the readers, to see and understand the importance in every decision they make. The history of my characters tends to be brief, as I am not a lofty or high rhetorical writer. Flash fiction, its subtle suggestiveness and sometimes lack of dialogue appeals to me, but I am also amazed by the short story and imaginative details in writers like Julie Orringer and Pam Houston. My stories develop out of the two craft elements that I am most comfortable with - exposition and voice. Exposition or summary is where I often begin to discover and understand my characters. I tend to write voices of the middle-class, primarily young females whose voices are, in many ways, drawn out of the people closest to me. The questions I've asked or experienced about life, acceptance, or about change are often the questions my characters ask and encounter. I want these nine voices to reveal truth, to create hope and to provide understanding when none seems available.

ORDINARY MERMAIDS AND OTHER STORIES

by

Desiree Sholes

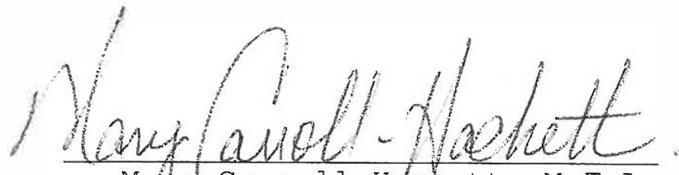
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requirement for the degree of


Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

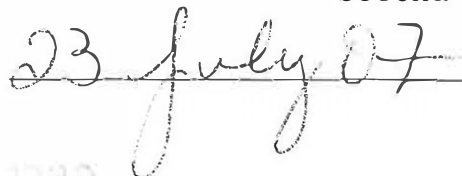
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July 2007


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Ordinary Mermaids and Other Stories

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Desiree Sholes

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July 2007

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Dedicated to my husband, Jay, and my parents, Warren and Wanda Bunnell, who have supported me always, even when they didn't understand exactly what I was doing. I could not have done any of this without your constant love and encouragement.

With special thanks to Mary Carroll-Hackett, professor, director and mentor. Thank you for opening the door to a world full of words and pages I had yet to discover. Thank you for challenging me, for pushing me into places I feared, and for believing in me all along.

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Folded Sheets

They had nothing else to say to each other. She'd already packed her things, said goodbye to Lucas, the Jack Russell terrier, and removed all the pictures from the refrigerator that she wanted. He told her he changed the voice mail message first, then removed her name from all utility bills and memberships, threw her Pottery Barn and J-Crew magazines in a plastic bag and asked her to change her subscription address.

The lawyer called it clean, which basically meant no children were involved and no faulty accusations or arguments came out. But out of the seven years of her marriage, it seemed that four were spent planning for this, planning for their individuality and their own checking accounts.

Growing up, she'd never wanted to be anything in particular. Maybe just a grown-up with money, but she never really thought about a career like pharmaceutical sales or teaching. Nothing about being in an office for eight hours

a day appealed to her, but neither did being on her feet all day. So, she ruled out any sort of job that involved cubical walls or wrist rests on the keyboards, cosmetology or nursing. He always called her a disaster waiting to happen. No plans, no goals, nothing substantial except a hope chest her mother gave her when she turned sixteen, and even that was empty.

In the beginning he'd smiled at her inability to decide between two restaurants; he joked about her constant tardiness and even went along with her one-day-notice weekend trips. Then, slowly, he tried to tame her with budgets and daily planners, tried to guide her toward a career in retail management, and even offered school as an option.

"Why do you love me?" was the last thing she asked him.

He said, "I'm not sure that I do. I mean, I wanted to, but you made it so damn difficult."

"Well, at least you only spent seven years trying," she said. She considered sarcasm a gift. That and being blunt. Those two things wove their way into many of his complaints.

That's when he asked her, standing outside the lawyer's office, "Why do you love me?"

She already knew her answer. She knew it in the beginning, but he'd never asked her until now. "Because you asked me to, because you said no one ever made you laugh the way I did and because you fold sheets as if they'd just come out of the plastic store bag and I've never been able to do that."

She expected no response, but felt like a begging child stranded on the streets of Africa when he walked away. They'd said everything they needed to say.

Mrs. Mitchell's Daughter

Family reunions only happened when someone died. And deaths, like the chicken pox, came in threes for the Mitchells. Their old white farm house sat on twelve acres of land and always became the gathering place for family functions. When Uncle Tom died, Claire's mother baked two hams, four pies, and the largest pot of green beans Claire'd ever seen. All the children, nieces, nephews and cousins, some she didn't even know, wanted to ride her four-wheeler or the horses. The adults stayed inside, but had plenty of places in the big house to escape from one another, if need be.

During the funerals, the women took turns staying at the house, cooking and heating up the food, setting it all out on a buffet table, outside if the weather cooperated. Appetizers, main dishes, vegetables and sides, breads, then desserts - always in that order. Three months after Uncle Tom died, a second cousin died, and her mother made four dozen homemade biscuits and macaroni salad. And five months

later her uncle's mother-in-law died in a car accident and Mrs. Mitchell started cooking again.

Claire was twenty-four with auburn hair that turned shades of red in the sunlight, pale skin and freckles covering every inch of her thin arms and face. As a little girl, the freckles looked like connected dots made from a brown magic marker, but now they had faded and even seemed to blend together. Her mother used to comfort her by saying that freckles were a sign of character, or strength.

Claire called her mother from her small apartment in town. "I don't think I'm going to come tomorrow, Mom." She held her cordless phone between her shoulder and chin while she sorted through her mail. Two bills she couldn't pay and the new Taste of Home magazine her mother had signed her up for a year ago.

"What do you mean you aren't coming? You know you don't have to go to the funeral if you don't want, just come eat and visit with everyone," Mrs. Mitchell said.

Claire took a deep breath. "I just saw everyone a couple months ago, for what's-her-name's funeral."

"Evelyn. And you know this could be the last time for a quite a while." Her soft voice sounded anxious. "Where is that thing?" she mumbled.

Claire could hear silverware clanging together, drawers being opened and shut. "Everyone'll be getting together soon for Thanksgiving anyway," Claire said. "What are you looking for?"

"That new spatula I bought."

"It's next the stove. I saw it last night." Claire flipped through the pages of recipes, looking at the pictures.

"Thank you," her mother said. "Claire, please come, okay? I need you to be here to help me get things together."

"Mom - "

"Oh, and don't forget your lemon pound cake," her mother said as she hung up.

Lemon pound cake was the only thing Claire could bake successfully. She'd tried other things, casseroles and mashed potatoes, but nothing ever seemed to work out.

* * *

"Mom," Claire called as she walked into the house.

"Mom, where are you?"

"I'm out here, on the back porch," her mother yelled.

In the kitchen Claire smelled the barbecue basting. Her mother had lined up the cold foods on the table and placed the hot plates out with labels so she knew where each hot dish would go. "Sorry I'm late," Claire said as she put her dish on the table. "I had to work late at the library."

"Didn't you tell them you had a family emergency?" her mom asked.

Claire hadn't said a word to anyone at work. Just as she hadn't all the times before that. She'd never been able to explain the whole family reunion after a funeral thing to anyone. "No, I guess I didn't."

"It's okay. I think I've got everything just about ready," her mom said. "You can go on upstairs and change."

"Change? What's wrong with what I have on?" She wore her favorite pair of thrift store jeans with one back pocket missing, frayed hems around the bottoms and a grey long sleeve shirt with a black tank top overtop.

Her mother began washing vegetables under the tap water and ignored Claire's question. "Just put your cake on the table and pre-slice a few pieces," she said. "Not as big as last time though. I noticed leftovers on some plates."

"Actually, I brought cookies this time," Claire said. She picked up a handful of green olives and popped one in her mouth.

"Cookies?" her mother asked turning toward her. "What happened to the cake, Claire? We've already got cookies?"

"It's not a big deal, Mom."

"Everyone expects that you'll bring your cake, like always. Now we'll have more cookies than we need and no pound cake." She turned toward the phone. "Maybe I can get Lisa to stop by the store and pick one up."

Claire sighed and grabbed another handful of olives and left her mother in the kitchen. She sat in the quiet living room, flipping through the three fuzzy channels on her parents' television, until people began to arrive. Little by little the volume in the house grew. She was used to the quiet library, the murmur of whispers, and music so soft people never knew for sure what was playing. Claire had suggested having the music because it helped to drown out the awkward silence of old pages turning and people mumbling to themselves or reading aloud. In the library, children's voices seemed loud even when they tried to whisper. In her family no one ever tried to whisper, unless they whispered a secret that everyone would find out about eventually. The children ran in one door and out the other,

chasing each other, laughing, or crying because they couldn't ride the four-wheeler or because somebody pushed them in the pool.

Claire sat on the front steps, staring at the rock sidewalk she'd helped her dad build years ago. They'd replaced the plain cement sidewalk not long after her grandma died. That was around the same time the family began moving out of their small hometown. Now, her Uncle William came out of the front door, cigarette in hand and sat down next to her. William was her dad's youngest brother, an old local football star and Army soldier. When she was little, she had believed that the reason his stomach was so hard was because he ate rocks. They still teased her about that. "Didn't you get something to eat, Claire?" he asked.

"Not yet, but I will." Claire said.

"I didn't see your famous pound cake out there," he said, smiling.

Claire sighed and dropped her head into her hands. "Are you serious? I can't believe you actually noticed."

He laughed. "I'm kidding with you. Your mom told me to give you a hard time."

A string of children ran down the steps between the two of them. The smallest one trailed behind, her red pony

tails bouncing up and down. She tried to get her chubby legs going at the same pace as her cousins. "Careful, Elizabeth," William called to her.

"She's yours, right?" Claire asked.

"Nope, that's Lisa and Jim's youngest. I'm sure mine are around here somewhere though." He looked from side to side and behind him as if he wanted to introduce them to Claire.

"Sorry. I can't seem to keep them all straight."

"Oh, don't be sorry, I got lucky on that one," he said smiling.

Claire sat for a minute and listened to William pulling in deep drags of his cigarette. Through the open window, she heard some women inside talking about their favorite character on a soap opera that got killed off because NBC wouldn't increase her pay or something. She recognized one of the voices as Gracie May from down the street, one of the cousins everyone tried to avoid. Gracie would corner Claire with questions that, coming from her, seemed condescending. *How old are you now? Why didn't you go to college? There has to be something you want to study. Are you still at the library? Do you have a boyfriend?* One after another. Claire's answers of "good" and "fine" were never quite acceptable. Everyone tried to talk to Gracie

from a reasonable distance, but the old woman liked to be up close, close enough that you could smell the shampoo in her hair or the wine in the glass she always carried around. Claire had seen her questioning William once about a recent debate over a politician or something and at first glance, Claire would have thought Gracie was making a move on him.

"Can I ask you a question?" Claire asked, breaking the silence.

"Sure thing. Fire away," William said.

Claire turned on the steps a little to face him. "What do you think about these?"

"These what?"

"These reunions we have when someone dies. I mean, don't you think it's kind of weird?" she said.

He pulled another cigarette out and lit it. "I don't know, I guess it's just something we've always done, so I never really thought about it being weird."

"No one else I know does anything like this. I mean they might get together with immediate family, but not a full-blown reunion with distant relatives and this much food. It's just strange. I bet half these people didn't even know Aunt Lisa's mom; hell, I only met her one time."

William leaned back on one arm and tried to blow the smoke in the opposite direction of Claire. "This family has been doing these reunions for a long time, way before your mom and dad started having them out here," he said. With one hand he held the cigarette and sipped his drink. "You remember Grandma Mitchell's house at all?"

"No."

"Her house used to be up Jackson Road just over the big hill. I think they'd painted it yellow at one point, but it wasn't as big as your parents' house. In the summer time, everyone sat outside in beach chairs, or those wrought rod iron chairs your mom still has out back. I remember how green the lawn looked, like carpet or something you'd see on a painted football field. The ladies always drank mimosas." He looked at Claire to see if she knew what it was.

She nodded, not wanting him to stop.

"When I was kid," he said, "we played in the woods, climbed trees and pretended we were lost." He laughed and Claire thought he must have remembered something that happened a long time ago. "If it rained, Grandma's basement was big enough for the adults to sit down there together and all us kids played in the attic with books or board games."

"Back then Grandma Mitchell made all the food, even the desserts. When she started getting sick, your father suggested that people bring food so it wouldn't be so hard on her. Grandma still organized everything. Probably did more than she should have. I don't know if I ever saw her eat. She always walked around, making sure all the men had their food and full drinks and that the kids had more than just desserts on their plates." William stopped and tapped the long ash off his cigarette. "Sometimes when you're mourning, the last thing you want is to be left alone."

"Yeah, but it just seems like we're celebrating when we shouldn't be." Claire pulled her hair around to her shoulder and combed her long fingers through the tangled strands.

"It's not that kind of celebrating. Besides, it's a hellavua lot better than sitting around in a suit and tie with a tissue in my hand saying *Sorry* and being solemn," he said. "It's not like we're thankful that someone passed away."

Little Elizabeth trudged toward them then, walking as if she'd run out of energy. Her pony tails hung loose and uneven and her dress seemed dirtier than before. Claire reached out her hand and helped Elizabeth up the steps.

"Thank you, Aunt Claire," she said. It sounded more like "ant care."

For the first time, Claire noticed Elizabeth's spotted face, the bright brown freckles covering her nose and cheekbones. Even beneath her thick bangs, Claire could see her forehead speckled with dots. "You have freckles," she said.

"Yep, lots of um," Elizabeth said as she walked past them into the house.

"I guess I never noticed them on her before," she said to William.

William stood up and turned to walk into the house behind Elizabeth. "I hear it runs in the family." He patted Claire's shoulder.

Claire nodded and laughed, wondering how many times her family had said that to outsiders, family doctors, and babysitters. Elizabeth was still too young to be self-conscious, too young to learn to roll her eyes when women in checkout lines asked how many freckles she had, or if she counted them. Maybe Elizabeth would be different; maybe she wouldn't mind them, or get teased at school, or try and hide beneath long sleeves and make-up.

"Claire?" Her mother stepped outside, closing the screen door behind her.

"Yeah," she said.

Her mother's blue apron looked covered in wet spots and barbecue stains. "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet, but I will," Claire said. Before her mother had gotten all the way back inside, Claire heard her asking if anyone needed anything, more drinks, a napkin, or another sandwich. Her voice was soft and kind, the way Claire pictured Grandma Mitchell's to be. Her mother took orders like a waitress and in her voice, Claire heard happiness, not anxiety or nerves. Claire pulled herself up with the railing, brushed dirt off her butt and walked inside. The air in the living room felt dry. The coffee-colored walls reminded her of wooden slats in a sauna. People packed onto the sofas holding plates of food, sitting along the fireplace, and on the floor. Five or six different conversations went on at once and Claire couldn't understand how anyone could pay attention to anything.

"Mom?" Claire walked through the kitchen.

"Yes?" Her mother held an ice tray by its ends, attempting to crack the ice out.

Claire took the tray from her hands, ran the bottom under a stream of tap water, then turned the sides and cubes of ice popped out. "Who is going to do all this when you can't?"

"What do you mean?" her mom asked.

Claire filled the cups in front of her with ice and poured the tea. "I mean when you get sick or when you're gone, who will host all these reunions?"

"I don't know, maybe Gracie or one of your brothers," she said. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

Her mother picked up all four glasses of tea and delivered them back to the living room. Claire nibbled from the vegetable platter, avoiding the cauliflower.

"Would you refill the carrots and celery sticks, Claire?" her mother asked as she came back into the kitchen.

Claire opened the refrigerator and pulled the baggies of vegetables out. She poured the rest of the carrots onto the plate and then dumped the celery sticks out, arranging them so they all faced the same way.

Her mother handed her an empty plate with silverware on top. "No one expects you to do it, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know. I mean I wouldn't mind, I guess, but I don't think I could." Claire took the plate. The idea of offering to help seemed hard enough, and now she found herself practically asking to be the next Mrs. Mitchell.

"Why not?" her mother asked, taking the empty bags from Claire's hand.

"Well, for one, I can't cook." Claire dropped a helping of chicken casserole on her plate.

"You can too cook, you just don't try," her mother said. "The first time we had everyone here, I dropped a glass container of cole slaw and it shattered all over the place. I've undercooked, overcooked and busted so many dishes, you wouldn't believe it."

Claire stared at her mother and they both laughed over the time she ran out food, forgot to buy plates, didn't add peanut butter to the peanut butter cookies, and cracked the glass table top after setting a hot casserole dish on it.

"Nothing was ever perfect, but I figured it out eventually." Her mom's smile grew wide and beneath the silver-framed glasses, she wiped tears of laughter from her bright blue eyes. "Family doesn't mind the mess-ups anyway."

Claire never had, and couldn't remember hearing anyone complain about what had been left out or broken. In the midst of sorrow, there'd been laughter, long talks about little league games, and new recipes. It was never about the lemon pound cake or the mashed potatoes, it was about family and how loss bound them tightly together.

Mrs. Mitchell stacked the empty serving platters and bowls to make room for more, until smiling, Claire reached out and took the dishes from her mother's freckled hands. "I can get these, Mom."

On a Dare

Something about being on the back side of the thick red curtain, standing in the shadow of the stage, made Curtis more nervous than before. Ten minutes ago he stood in the boys' bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror, almost confident, thinking about the other nine contestants, their essays, and their families sitting in the crowd. The words to his essay floated in his mind like scrabble pieces he'd memorized. Once he left the empty bathroom, though, beads of sweat began to form on his hairline. He checked his fly three times, remembering Fly Boy Eddie, who stood on the front row of their sixth grade choir concert singing "America the Beautiful" with his zipper down and stretched wide open. Curtis reached into his pocket and pulled out his last mint. He'd eaten a whole pack within an hour and yet his mouth still tasted like cotton, like the dentist packed his gums with gauze and sucked out all the spit.

Curtis could smell the musty red curtains and wondered how often someone had to wash them and what they would wash them in. His stomach rolled and ached and a drumbeat echoed in his ears. "Do you hear that?" he asked a girl in front of him.

"Hear what?" she said, "I don't hear anything."

Drums - he swore he heard them. He thought of his sister, trying to keep up with the drum roll his mom gave him before he practiced reading his essay. It seemed easy standing in front of her. He knew if he wrote *I like green eggs and ham*, his mom would choke up and attempt to hide the pools of tears in her eyes. For the spelling bee last year, she gave him a brand new two-dollar-bill and told him it brought people luck. "Your Uncle Tom," she told Curtis when she handed it to him, "carried a two dollar bill with him everyday and just last year he won \$500 in the lottery, you remember that?"

Curtis hadn't won the spelling bee; he just barely made it through three rounds and lost on the word *delicatessen*, but he still carried the folded bill with him. He turned it over and over now in his pocket.

When he practiced his essay last night, Curtis's father first turned the volume up on the television, then left the room altogether. He said he'd rather just hear it

once. That's when Curtis' mom elbowed his dad in the stomach and tilted her head the way a dog does when it's alarmed.

She whispered through her teeth. "Can't you pretend this one time to be interested?"

"I am," his dad said. "I just want to be surprised, that's all." His father turned to him as if Curtis hadn't been able to hear their conversation. "You want some advice from a pro?"

"Yes sir." Curtis stood up a little straighter.

"Maintain eye contact and speak slowly and clearly. That's how you win over an audience," his dad said.

Curtis saw his dad speak once at a history conference about Ulysses S. Grant in the Civil War. He'd walked all over the stage without any notes or anything, had memorized the entire thing. Curtis didn't understand the fascination with all things history, but he tried. At school, history became his best subject but not his favorite. It was the only subject he had to study for. He forced himself to memorize paragraphs of information, dates, names, and battles. The War of 1812, the Revolutionary War, the Spanish American War, he got them all confused. Every couple of days, Curtis snuck into his dad's office, stepped over stacks of books, old newspapers and articles to find

something he could read, something that he could talk about, something to make him feel like a natural.

* * *

Last summer, after his dad returned from a speaking conference, Curtis sat on the ottoman next to his dad's propped up feet. "I borrowed your book about Frederick Douglass while you were gone," he told him. "Do you think he knew he could have been arrested for that?"

"What's that?" his dad asked.

Curtis noticed the shiny cover of his dad's book and thought about leaving. A new one - - *The Ancient World*. He repeated his question, trying to remember what he'd read about it. "Frederick Douglass, do you think he knew he could've - "

"Douglass once said, 'I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence.' You remember when he said that?" He lowered his book to stare at Curtis.

"Abhorr- what? I don't know what -" Curtis stumbled over his words.

His father raised his book again. "Go look it up. You should always look up words you don't know."

* * *

The music beyond the curtain stopped. Curtis peered past the six people in front of him and saw the large stage. He pulled his two-dollar-bill from his pocket and looked at its worn creases, then back at the empty stage. Ten metal folding chairs, one small podium and a microphone waited in the middle. He watched as a single beam of light shone on the microphone, then expanded across the stage. Two men dressed in all black pulled on rough pieces of rope hanging from the ceiling. The bottoms of the red curtains swept across the stage, then finally rested on either side, puddling in the floor.

Principal Lee walked onto the stage from the opposite side and began talking into the microphone, leaning toward it like she wanted to touch it with her red lips. She welcomed everyone and talked about some kind of bake sale or yard sale coming up. Then she pushed her brown hair behind her ears and cleared her throat. "These students," she said, "have worked very hard this year and have earned a place in our seventh grade essay contest. The development

of student knowledge began with a suggested reading list, given to them at the beginning of the year. Twenty students completed all seven books; some chose to read even more."

Curtis tucked his head, hiding a grin. He read fifteen books in all, more than anyone else and that didn't include the ones he read from his dad's library.

"Those twenty," she continued, "were quizzed on the content and overall understanding. Then every student submitted an essay based on their favorite book." She stopped and motioned to the first person in line to walk out on stage. "Ten of those twenty were chosen based on their knowledge and their writing skills."

Stepping into the spotlight on stage, Curtis stared straight ahead at the girl's long blonde hair in front of him as he walked out of the curtains' shadow. It swayed back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. He felt his cheeks grow warm and was glad he'd worn an undershirt. He held his paper tight, trying not to crumple or tear it. A tremor rumbled in his stomach and he wished he was back in front of the mirror practicing. For a minute, over the strong applause of the audience, he couldn't hear the thump of his heartbeat. But it didn't last. After they sat down, someone introduced them all and the blonde girl wearing the ugly yellow dress in the first

seat walked up to the microphone and began reading her essay. She chose *Number the Stars*; the next two students had both chosen a Harry Potter book. Curtis loved Harry Potter but knew he couldn't pick one for his essay. The four he'd bought so far with his own money he kept hidden in two boxes under his bed. His father's idea of a book worth reading did not involve spells, magic and evil wizards.

The boy on his right huffed and bent over to rest his chin on his hand.

"What's wrong?" Curtis whispered.

"Mine's about Harry Potter too," the boy said.

Curtis looked to see the fourth student walking toward the microphone. "I'm sure yours is better." That's all he could think of to say. The next three essays could have been about alien life on Mars and Curtis wouldn't have even known. He thought about his essay, repeated the beginning over and over again in his head, rubbing his sweaty palms one by one on his khaki pants.

"Curtis, Curtis, you're up. It's your turn." The girl next to him with the long swinging hair nudged him.

"Once again, our next reader will be Curtis Wayne," Principal Lee announced.

He stood up, straightened his knees and felt an impulse to check his fly one more time. Walking toward the podium, he found the lights seemed more intense. He reached up and adjusted the microphone, pulling it down just a little, then regretted touching it at all. A loud painful shrill echoed through the auditorium. People covered their ears at the sound. The ringing stayed in his ears, like singing or whistling. He wished he had some water. He wished he never written an essay in the first place.

"My book." He paused to look up then looked back down at the essay in front of him. "I mean, my favorite book *Hatchet*." The words seemed impossible to say. He'd messed up already. Everyone stared at him. His palms left wet marks on the podium, and he felt his stomach tightening. He found his mom in the audience, center aisle, fifth or sixth row back. She nodded her head up and down and widened her eyes, while beside her, his father stared at him, not blinking. That's how his father looked when he watched television sometimes, the History and Biography channel seeming to mesmerize him, and Curtis wondered if he'd even heard his words. Hopefully not. Curtis turned to the principal, "Can I start over?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, "go on."

He swallowed what felt like another cotton ball in his throat and leaned over the podium to read the first sentence on the paper. "My favorite book was *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen." That's all he could get out. He almost repeated the first sentence again but remembered his father saying, *Never repeat yourself*. He stared at the piece of paper on the podium, trying to remember why he'd chosen this book. He wasn't anything like Brian in *Hatchet*; he'd never survive landing a small plane, or a tornado, or even being alone in the wilderness. It must be worse than this, worse than the night he rode his bike through the Hillside cemetery on a dare, worse than standing in front of a crowded auditorium reading a double-spaced paper. The principal walked toward him and bent down, her perfume making Curtis cover his nose. "Curtis," she said laying her hand on his shoulder, "Just read what you have on the paper."

He looked up at her red lips, trying not to breathe until she walked away and nodded.

Starting over at the first sentence, now with one hand in his pants pocket, holding tightly to his two dollar bill, Curtis read the whole thing in what seemed like one breath. When he finished, he felt worse than he did when they ran the mile in gym class. He turned around as the

audience began to clap and hurried to his metal chair. It felt good to sit down. He felt cool air encircle his cheeks and hands for the first time since walking on stage. He looked to middle aisle again and found his mother smiling and clapping her hands. The look on his father's face, however, was one he'd never seen before. His head tilted, his eyes stared in Curtis' direction. He adjusted his glasses, then reached over to push his mother's clapping hands down. From the bright stage, Curtis watched his father and mother argue in whispers and glances. His mother gave in first.

For half of the next student's essay, he stared down at the paper in his hands and fought the urge to fold it up in little pieces. He remembered seeing his dad fold a three-by-five note card in half and stick it in his coat pocket after a speech. Key words, he'd say, that's all you need to have. Move around the stage, go first, if you can, so they'll remember you, and use your hands to gesture. Curtis needed more than that. He needed every word in front of him; he needed at least one hand in his pocket; he needed to go in the middle, and he needed to stand in one place, right behind the podium because if he moved around, he might have to pee. Curtis wanted to stand behind the red curtain again, or in front of the bathroom mirror, but

he never wanted to do this again. He wondered if his dad ever read *Hatchet* or if he'd ever been lost in the woods. If he had, he would have known what to do and how to make it through. He'd probably tell Curtis stories about meeting a bear just like Brian did, and how, even though he felt scared, he did the right thing. Curtis remembered riding through the dark cemetery, seeing the street lights ahead of him and hearing his own breath crowd the silence. For those two minutes, like the minutes he stood on stage, Curtis realized he'd never survive on his own, not like the Brian in *Hatchet*, and not like his dad.

Becoming

Somewhere between twelve and twenty-three, Eileen lost count. She sat in the middle of the carpeted staircase, held her empty Food Lion bag, and waited. Long strands of messy blonde hair hung over her blue eyes and she wiped them away with a quick brush of her fingers. Instead of starting over at one, Eileen hummed along to the sound of her twelve-year-old sister playing Christmas carols on the piano downstairs from where she sat.

She waited until Ruby played *Silent Night* and the hard one, *Carol of the Bells*, all the way through. That would be close to counting to one hundred.

"Daddy, are you ready?" she yelled. Eileen prepared a list of all the places she would look: under the big brown couch cushions, behind the red and yellow striped pillows, in her mom's big plant with full green leaves, maybe in the tall wooden shelves stacked of thick, dusty books.

He didn't answer. She called again, louder this time, "Daddy, are you ready yet?"

"What?" His harsh voice surprised her.

Eileen took a deep breath and repeated herself. "Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"For me to come find the eggs?" Eileen heard her father lift himself out of the old recliner, and then seconds later, a great thud let her know he had collapsed back into his gray, squeaking chair.

"Come on," he yelled.

Eileen jumped to her feet and ran two steps at a time to the top of the stairs. The knees of her hand-me-down blue jeans appeared covered in marker drawings. A gold moon and navy blue stars spanned the whole top of her thigh. Words like *I hate Luke* and the letters BFF appeared upside down stretched across the other knee. She wore her tie-dyed shirt, stained with drips of ice cream. From the top of the stairs, she counted all sixteen pink, purple, blue, green and yellow plastic Easter eggs lying on the beige, worn carpet of the living room. Her dad sat, feet propped up on the ragged chair, watching *Jeopardy* on television.

"Daddy." She walked toward the eggs and dropped to her knees to gather them in her arms. "You didn't even try to hide them."

He didn't move. His tie hung loosened around his neck; he stared into the television, and the grip he had on the remote reminded her of how he used to hold her hand when they walked through Food Lion, or the park, or into her school. That seemed like a long time ago, before his new job, before he started enjoying leaving in the morning more than coming home.

"Daddy?" she asked, looking at him.

"What do you want, Eileen?" He slammed the foot rest down. "I haven't been home forty-five minutes and you're bothering me with some stupid hide-n-seek Easter egg game. It's November, Eileen. Easter isn't until April or something."

Eileen leaped to her feet and dropped her bag to her side. "Throwing the eggs on the floor is not the same as hiding them. You're supposed to hide them hard, so I have to search for them."

"Aren't you too old for this damn game?" he said, slapping his fist down and leaning his head back against the chair, turning Alex Trebec's voice up with a touch on the remote.

"No. You used to play with me." Eileen's eyes widened as she remembered the day it rained, the day he hid the eggs four different times all in different places. "One

time you hid a green one in the basket hanging on the wall and it took me almost two hours to find it. Remember?"

"Move, Eileen, you're standing right in front of the T.V." He hadn't remembered, but she almost felt better that he didn't pretend to.

"Sorry," she said as she stepped to the side and sank down into the couch. How old was too old? On her tenth birthday party, instead of games, and stuffed horses or teddy bears, her parents gave her a gold necklace with a heart charm and a collection of books about a girl named Anne she would never read.

Eileen sat in the living room and watched her father. He answered the trivia questions on television, sometimes with confidence, sometimes with hesitation. "Who is L.B. Johnson?" he yelled out. He didn't even notice Eileen until she spoke again.

"Daddy, can you try to hide them again?" she asked.

"Damnit, Eileen, would you leave me alone for two minutes?"

Eileen's shoulders hunched over and her head dropped. She stared at the bag of eggs that lay in her lap and felt a tremor taking over her bottom lip. But she bit her lip. She would not cry.

After several minutes, her dad spoke without ever looking her way. "Why don't you go call one of your little friends or get on the computer until your mom gets home?"

"Where is Mom?" Eileen asked as she stood up.

"She went to pick up pizza, I think," he said, pushing one black shoe off with the other foot.

Eileen took her bag of eggs and left her dad in his recliner.

Upstairs, in her yellow painted room, Eileen dumped the plastic eggs on the edge of her bed. Stuffed animals gathered in every corner and space except for the small area where Eileen slept. A little Winnie the Pooh and a fat, worn brown teddy bear with a green shirt lay across her flowered pillow.

"I'll hide them myself then," she whispered. Maybe she wouldn't remember where she hid them in a couple days.

Eileen stuffed a colored egg under the shirt of the teddy bear, one between her mattress, and one in her old blue sneakers. Searching for another hard place, she opened the china doll cabinet in the corner. Ruby had cried when their mother put the old glass cabinet in Eileen's room, saying Eileen would just break it or ruin it. "She needs a place for her dolls, Ruby," her mother said.

"But she won't even take care of them," Ruby cried.

Ruby was right. Eileen couldn't even remember what the dolls' names were or if they had names. They were porcelain dolls she never played with, never held, never even asked for. Grandma gave her the first doll, Goldilocks, and never stopped giving them to her. Grandma said that first doll looked just like Eileen. Its cheeks blushed a light pink color like sunburn, bright blue eyes looked highlighted with blue paint, and the lips of little Goldilocks glowed red, the color of sweet, ripe strawberries.

Eileen took the pale doll down from the shelf and held it in her hands. She stood in front of the long mirror that hung on the back of her door and decided they looked nothing alike. Goldilocks, who was still young like her, seemed smart and grown-up. Goldilocks wouldn't hunt Easter eggs or play silly games. She would read books, play the piano like Ruby, talk on the phone like teenagers, or wear makeup like older girls.

Eileen set the doll on the clean space on her bed, then searched through her bottom drawer, full of purses and things she never used, jewelry people gave her, scarves and bows. She found an unopened pack of play make-up including a tube of brightly colored lip gloss. Looking around, she spotted the plastic bag of Easter eggs, grabbed it and stuffed it into the drawer where she'd found the makeup.

Daddy was right, she thought, shoving the drawer closed. Crossing the floor on her knees, Eileen sat in front of the mirror, Indian style, then pulled the porcelain doll into her lap, studying the paint covering the doll's cheeks and lips. Using the plastic brush, Eileen rubbed a line of blue shadow across her clean eyelid, the color of the blue egg still hidden beneath her mattress. Staring again at the doll in her lap, she slowly rubbed her finger in the shiny gloss, and wiped red paste over her pale, chapped lips, rubbing again and again until the color stained her finger.

Ordinary Mermaids

Laura watched her son, Conner, play in the neighborhood pool. On a normal day, the cool chlorine water and pool side chairs would be full, but today, the clouds hung heavy and damp in the air. Days like this, when people stayed inside their air-conditioned houses, Laura didn't mind taking Conner to swim. She watched as he rammed a small replica of the Titanic into a make-believe iceberg, made from pieces of a blue noodle and a plastic bag, and then sunk the ship down to the bottom of the three-foot shallow end. Mumbling to himself and making crashing and screaming noises with his mouth, Conner seemed to enjoy the emptiness of the large pool. Over and over he played out the wreck of the ship, watched it sink, and then resurrected it to start over again.

When Conner stood up, the water hit him mid-thigh. This year he must have reached at least six feet and the difference in him from now and a year ago seemed unreal. Until recently, Laura saw her son as a little boy crippled

with Asperger's, not as a growing teenager unaware of what surrounded him. His sixteenth birthday, and instead of begging for a car or a cell phone, he was satisfied with small things, like lousy weather and an empty pool.

Just thirty minutes after Laura got comfortable, she watched as a group of boys, just about Conner's age, ran through the pool gates. Jumping into the water with no fear of getting hurt, they practiced their back flips and belly flops while Conner sat on the pool steps, flapping his legs in and out of the water like a mermaid. The boys stayed in the deep end laughing, pushing and pulling one another in the pool, average fifteen and sixteen-year-olds.

Laura had tried to get Conner to jump off the diving board once. He stood on the end of the board trembling, elbows held tight against his sides, hands clenched together in front of him. The other kids grew impatient, waiting for him to make up his mind. He froze, wouldn't move, and Laura grabbed him from behind and pulled him off. He didn't cry, but he didn't say anything either. She pushed Conner in everything; helping him, she called it. She tried to get him to play video games, play basketball, make friends, and be a normal teenager. It didn't work. Conner watched the same five or six movies every week; he drew the same picture on every piece of paper he found, and

Laura punishing him didn't change things. She felt this mental disease challenged her even more than it challenged Conner.

Laura bent over the side of the pool and spoke in a low voice. "Conner, we have to go."

She watched as he paused to listen to her, but then went back to building his iceberg with broken pieces of a blue noodle and a plastic bag. "Daddy is coming home early with your birthday cake."

"Ten more minutes, okay, Mommy?" he said.

The pool became quiet and looking around, Laura noticed the other boys watching Conner and laughing. Everything about his exterior, his lean body, messy hair cut, and his new long swim trunks, seemed to be a typical sixteen-year-old boy. Laura found it more difficult to deal with him now. His body portrayed something his disease would never allow him to be. The other boys mocked him. They pretended to play with their own make-believe ship wreck, saying in high-pitched voices, "Ten more minutes, Mommy."

Laura felt her face flush with both anger and embarrassment. She wanted to grab her boy out of the water and go home, but Conner continued to play, unaware of the mockery going on behind him. He smiled each time he pulled

the ship up from the murky sea waters and terror struck him every time it crashed and sank again.

Last year Laura took Conner to the pool only once and she vowed she would never take him again. He begged to go, promised he would not take any of his toys with him. He kept his promise, and took something else, something much worse. As Laura read her book that day and tried to relax in the sun, she heard an eruption of laughter. Conner had brought his green sweatpants and had managed to put them on with both his legs in one leg hole. The empty pant leg was tucked behind him, his T-shirt rolled up and wrapped around his chest like a bikini top. He sat on the pool steps, his mind somewhere far away, flapping his legs in and out of the water, leaning back on his hands, singing softly as if he sat perched upon a rock. Laura's anger grew, she felt it in her face and in her stomach. Conner saw her coming toward him; he tried to get up, the sweatpants dripping wet and heavy. She knew the other mothers would be watching her every move, judging her.

"Take them off, now," she said to Conner.

"I... I can't. I think they're stuck on me," he said with a slight grin.

Laura bent down and pulled the wet mermaid pants off her son. "Get your stuff and meet me outside the gate," she

whispered to him. She took the dripping pants with her and left.

Laura had only brought Conner today under strict rules, no toys that involved mermaids and no extra clothes. Her rules didn't stop other people from laughing and teasing though. The boys in the deep end continued to mock and provoke him, jumping from the diving board pretending they were passengers of the Titanic falling from the ship.

"Conner, it's time to go." Laura's harsh tone got Conner's attention. "God, I can't go anywhere," she mumbled. She gathered up their things, stood at the gate and watched as Conner walked up the steps of the pool, ship in hand, and shook each leg like a dog. She took a deep breath, rolled her eyes back, and turned away.

Conner caught up with her on the sidewalk. "I thought you said we could spend the day at the pool for my birthday?"

"I did." Laura didn't even turn to face him. "But I did not mean the entire day."

"What else are we going to do then?"

She took a deep breath, "I already told you once. Dad is coming home early with your birthday cake."

"What about Granny? Isn't she coming for cake?" Conner had one question after another - it was like answering a three-year-old.

"I don't know, maybe."

Laura felt Conner's cool and damp arm around her shoulders. He smelled like chlorine. Next to her, he stood two inches taller. Seeing him grow to look more and more like his father should have made her proud, but it didn't. If Conner could only stay the size of a child, not experience growth spurts or the effects of puberty, maybe she could learn to understand and deal with him. She watched as Conner struggled inside his own skin. He appeared lanky, not able to control his coordination, and always seemed preoccupied.

The last doctor they went to said Conner's mind was on the level of a six or seven-year-old child. In school, he would not exceed a fourth grade level in most areas. The doctor called it Asperger's Syndrome, but all Laura needed to know was that his condition would never go away. When she and Jerry found out almost ten years ago about the disease, she'd thought about leaving. She knew Jerry wouldn't put Conner in a care center or send him to special school. Every day Laura reminded herself that Conner would live at home for the rest of his life.

"Mom, when we get home, can I watch a movie?" he asked.

"I don't care; just watch something different this time. I don't want to see Peter Pan, The Little Mermaid, or any of those other movies you always watch. Dad just bought you the new Harry Potter movie. Why don't you watch that instead?"

Conner took his arm down. Every day, at least once, Laura yelled at him about acting his age. Conner could do nothing more than pretend to act his age and pretend to do the things that he knew would make her happy. A few weeks ago, just after she discovered that Conner gave his younger cousin three dollars for her Ariel doll, she heard him repeating to himself, "Those are girl's toys, I'm a teenager. Those are for babies. Grow up."

She sat outside his bedroom door that day, crying and cursing herself for saying cruel things to him. She had caught him in the bathroom with the sink full of water, splashing the doll around and singing under his breath the words to some song from the movie. He changed his voice to sing the lines of Sebastian and the other characters. His fascination with mermaids drove her crazy. Jerry found it funny and tried to tell Laura that he would grow out of it.

She leaned her head back against the wall and repeated, "He doesn't understand. He doesn't know what he's doing."

Now, Conner's voice sounded fake, high pitched, as if he attempted to put on excitement about watching something different. "Yeah, Harry Potter will be good."

He didn't say anything else for the rest of the walk home. As they approached the house, Conner saw Jerry's car. "Dad's home already!" he yelled.

"Good, maybe he started dinner," she mumbled as Conner ran ahead of her to the house.

Only special events brought Jerry home early from work. He had not been home long though; the engine of the silver sedan, backed up in the driveway, still made clicking sounds.

Walking into the kitchen, Laura took a deep breath, searching for the smell of chicken or spaghetti sauce. The store-bought cake sat on the counter. She rolled her head from side to side trying to release some pressure in her neck and shoulders, then sat down at the kitchen table, and cupped her hands over her face.

"Hey, I thought you'd be making dinner by now." Jerry walked toward her from the hall, loosening his red tie. His white button-up shirt was still crisp after a half day's

work and his dark hair still had a shine from the expensive hair products he used.

"I didn't expect you home until five."

"Slow day. Where's Conner?" he asked.

"I'm sure he's somewhere watching a movie. It better be Harry Potter though."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I just want to see him watch something other than a mermaid movie for once."

Laura didn't know why he asked, he knew what the problem was. The past couple years had gotten worse since Jerry started working more hours and taking long business trips with the law firm. Laura showed signs of exhaustion; she needed time away. Brown and gray hairs grew in over her salon blonde hair and her bloodshot eyes reminded her of her high school days when she hung out behind the cafeteria. She wore the same thing every day, old jeans and a ribbed cotton tank, which she had in several colors. She woke up every morning with a kind of sadness and resentment growing inside her. Laura didn't understand how Jerry could deal with Conner the way he did. He saw Conner in a way she could not, sympathetic and understanding.

* * *

"Would you look at him?" Laura wanted to scream.

"Laura, calm down. He's just pretending," Jerry had told her.

She pointed into the living room where Conner was.

"He's fifteen years old and he is pretending to be a mermaid. A mermaid for Christ's sake! What are we supposed to do with him?"

"Calm down, would you? I'll take care of it," Jerry said.

Jerry walked into the living room where Conner sat sideways on the edge of the couch, blanket wrapped tight around his legs. With the support of his arms behind him, he sat waving his legs back and forth into the air. It infuriated Laura. No matter how many times she told Conner to stop, he wouldn't listen. As Jerry walked in front of Conner to sit on the other end of the couch, Conner jumped back covering up with the blanket, as if he hadn't been doing anything at all. Laura sat in the kitchen, listening to Jerry talk to him, once more, about trying to act like a grown-up. He praised Conner for his creative mind, told him how proud he was of him, that his imagination was a tool that adults didn't have. Somehow, Jerry never had to raise his voice and never made Conner feel ashamed of who he was.

* * *

Laura felt Jerry watching her as she sat at the table staring out the glass sliding doors. "Are you making dinner, Laura, or do you want to go pick up pizza?" he asked.

She looked over at him, a blank and irritated look on her face, and said, "Whatever Conner wants. Just ask him."

"Shit, Laura. Do you even care that today is our son's birthday?"

"Of course I do. What kind of question is that?"

"The kind of question I ask a mother who has nothing prepared for her son's party."

"Party? You think this is a party? Where are his friends, Jerry? Where are the presents, and the rest of the family?" Laura's voice grew louder and louder. "This isn't a party; it's just another damn birthday that doesn't change anything."

Laura walked back to the kitchen table and sat down. A group of flowers sat in a glass in the center of the table, flowers Conner picked for her yesterday.

"I can't do this anymore," she said putting her fingers to her forehead. "It just gets harder as he gets

older. He needs patience and understanding. He needs you, Jerry. He needs you to be around more. Maybe it would teach him to be a man."

"Someone has to work Laura, you know that."

Laura continued, "I can't do this anymore. I don't have the tolerance for him. His sensitivity frustrates me, his pictures and random gifts frustrate me. I'm...", she began to stutter as a single tear ran down her cheek. "I'm embarrassed by him. I'm envious of other parents who have normal children. I can't explain him to everyone we come into contact with. I can't say, sorry my son thinks he is a mermaid, or sorry my son sometimes pretends to have magical powers." Laura stopped and laid her forehead on the table. The television played Sebastian and Ariel in the other room. She recognized the familiar voices and knew Conner was not watching Harry Potter.

"What do you want me to do, Laura? You've been to group meetings, you've been to counseling. He's not going to wake up tomorrow and suddenly be a normal sixteen-year-old. You know that." He took a deep breath, "Do whatever you want for dinner, I'm going to change." Jerry walked away, like always. He never wanted to talk, really talk to Laura about it, or about anything.

She leaned back in her chair and picked at dried paint. Rings of yellow paint covered the oak table from where Jerry had painted the kitchen last week and never thought to cover the table before setting down the buckets. Laura got so mad at his ignorance that she threw the paintbrush at him one morning and got a stripe of yellow paint down the front of his suit pants. Conner must have thought it was funny because later that day he painted a stripe down his blue sweatpants.

Conner came into the kitchen with a piece of paper in his hand. "Here Mom, I drew this for you." He handed her the paper, drawn with colored pencils. He called himself a serious artist and spent a lot of time getting every thing as perfect as he could.

"Wow," she said with sarcasm so strong even Conner picked up on it, "another mermaid picture."

He tried to reason with her, "But it's a new one because she has a special tail that makes her different than other ones."

"Okay, Conner. Thanks." Laura watched Conner walk away, head down, swinging his arms in deliberate step with his legs. He tried so hard to please her. Why can't he draw something ordinary? Laura wondered as she put the picture

on the table. The air from the ceiling fan blew it onto the floor and she didn't bother to pick it up.

Laura heard Jerry coming back down the hall. He stopped to talk to Conner, asking him about his day. Conner was excited about something, a new toy or sketch pad Jerry had brought him. Laura got up and leaned against the door frame in between the kitchen and the living room, watching Conner and Jerry.

"Mom took me to the pool, but we had to leave early."

"Why?" Jerry asked.

"I think she must have gotten mad at the noise the other boys were making." Laura heard Conner begin to remove the plastic on the present his dad brought him. "How was your day, Dad?"

Jerry looked up and glanced at Laura, as if she had asked him. "It was okay, but I would have liked to be with you," Jerry said.

Conner, in his blue Nike shorts and basketball jersey that Laura's mom bought him, smiled at his dad. He seemed proud that Jerry would have rather spent the day with him than been at work. Jerry began to draw with Conner, mermaids or ships, one of the two.

Laura backed out of the room and walked toward the front door. She sat outside on the warm concrete steps, as

heavy clouds began to release large drops of rain. The smell of damp grass filled her lungs as she drew in a long slow breath. People mowed their lawns almost every other day. Laura looked around and compared her front yard to her neighbors. The weeds needed to be pulled, the flowers needed watering, and the bushes needed trimming.

"Laura?" Jerry called from the hall. "Laura?"

"I'm outside."

"Well, come on, I'm lighting the candles on Conner's cake," Jerry yelled.

Laura stood up, felt her knees and back crack, tightened up with frustration. She started back inside and heard Conner singing, "Happy Birthday to me, happy birthday to me."

Jerry joined in and finished the song with him. Laura stood silent in the hallway from the front door to the kitchen. She didn't move. They sung the song already; he blew the candles out, and now he would eat cake before having dinner. Vanilla cream cake with chocolate icing and vanilla ice cream. Jerry had it under control. Conner would eat it too fast and then complain about a head-ache. Jerry already knew that. Laura stepped backwards, then turned and walked back toward the front door, grabbing her keys and her purse from the bench at the entry way. The door slammed

behind her as she walked straight through the yard to the silver sedan. Jerry called her again but Laura didn't stop. She climbed in and started the car. Looking up, she saw Conner at the storm door, staring at her, another picture in hand. When the car jerked forward, Laura was afraid to look back, afraid that Conner would still be there, calling her to come back, for cake, for him, a call floating to her across a distance she simply couldn't cross.

Reasons to Stay

"I think you should go," Jeanne said. "I'll go with you, if you want me to." She sat on a barstool in her sister's kitchen, eating celery and peanut butter sticks. The long beaded necklaces around her neck clicked against the counter top every time she leaned forward.

Lauren filled a glass with ice water and sat down beside Jeanne. Her legs ached and itched with an after-run-burn. Jeanne had gotten her addicted to running not long after her divorce. They usually ran together, three miles to Baker Lake, but Lauren needed today by herself. "You don't have to go everywhere with me. I just don't know if it's a good idea. I mean, it's not like Denise and I were close, right?"

"How'd you find out about it anyway?" Jeanne asked, licking peanut butter off the knife.

"Mom." Lauren could feel her body cooling down. The sweat drying on her body gave her the chills. She pulled an old Tarheels sweatshirt over her head.

"How the hell did Mom know? Did she ever meet Denise?" said Jeanne.

"Yeah, she went to Denise's parents' anniversary party or something. Mom knows more people than we think." Lauren dropped her head down and rested it on her fist. "I hate funerals."

"I know, who doesn't?" Jeanne jumped off the barstool and picked her black purse up off the table. Her short orange dress fell down over her tight blue jeans. "But, it's not really about you and Denise, it's about you going to support Mark. Granted, he lost you out of stupidity, but now he's lost his second wife, and he's probably feeling the same way you did." Jeanne hugged Lauren from behind and kissed her head. "I've gotta go. Call me later and let me know how it goes, okay?"

"Fine," Lauren said picking up the last celery stick.

"You're going to go though, right?" Jeanne asked, standing at the front door.

Lauren shrugged and licked the peanut butter from the celery.

"Just go, Lauren, if you don't, you'll regret it." The door slammed behind Jeanne as she left.

Lauren hadn't talked to Mark in three years. She always thought she'd run into the two of them, arm in arm,

at a movie or in a restaurant. Denise with her long, blonde hair and blue eyes, maybe even pregnant. Turns out they never even had children. Denise was diagnosed with severe liver cancer not long after they married and struggled through treatments. Lauren read an article in the local paper about some church helping to support them and pay medical bills. The article listed the date of her first treatment- Tuesday August 23rd, the same day Lauren received the divorce papers from Mark, a Post-It note on top: *Sign beside the pink tabs- Mark.*

* * *

Seven months into their marriage Lauren started taking her mother's advice on things to do to make Mark happy again. Lauren had made green beans, fresh butter biscuits and barbecue chicken with bacon. She mashed potatoes just the way his momma made them, with chives and cheese mixed in. She expected Mark to be walking in the front door of their two bedroom apartment soon. "I promise I won't be late this time," he'd told her that morning.

Around nine forty-five, Lauren blew out the candles on the table, took off her black dress and slipped into a t-shirt and shorts. She crawled into bed, leaving an empty

place setting and a glass of melted-down sweet tea on the small, white dining table with all the food in covered dishes.

"Roxy," she called. "Come here, kitty kitty." A gray and white cat jumped up on her bed and snuggled up near her pillow. At two-thirty the purring woke her up and she remembered why she disliked sleeping with animals. Mark still wasn't home and Roxy had spread out, pushing Lauren closer and closer to the edge. "Fine, you can have the bed," she told the cat, taking her pillow with her.

He'd never stayed out this late. To one maybe, but never past two. She started to wonder if everything was okay. What if he was in a car accident or something happened at work? He would have called then. As much as she tried to believe it was something else, she knew where he was.

Lauren grabbed a cold biscuit off the table and lay on the couch to watch television. Thirty minutes later, she awoke to the key turning the deadbolt outside.

Mark walked in slowly holding his keys so they wouldn't jingle. When Lauren sat up on the couch, staring at him, he stopped trying to be quiet and flipped the living room light on.

"Home early, huh?" she said.

"Sorry," he said. That seemed to be the first word out of his mouth every time they talked. "I picked up Charlie's shift cause he called in sick."

"Then why don't you call me when stuff like that happens? Shit Mark - how hard is it to do that?" She folded the small blanket and hung it over the back of the couch, then hugged her pillow to her chest.

Mark dropped his keys on the floor next to the door and walked toward the bathroom. Lauren saw him glance at the kitchen table. "You expect me to call you every fucking time something changes in my schedule? I'm working late to save money, Lauren, it's not like I'm out blowing it at the mall." He slammed the door.

Lauren sat back down on the couch. She never told him that she had called the restaurant. Charlie answered, said Mark left at eight.

* * *

"Her name is Denise," Mark said. He sat at the kitchen table, wearing jeans and his green work shirt stained with grease spots and salad dressing. He'd been twisting the ring on his finger and bouncing his leg up and down since

he sat down, three hours late with another story about an accident or something on Route seventeen.

Lauren expected it. She'd stopped making dinner, stopped wondering if he'd call, even got used to sleeping alone. She hadn't thought that the sound of another woman's name out of his lips would make it seem so real. "So when are you leaving?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't figure I'd stay here anymore," he said.

Lauren leaned against the back of the couch for support, her arms crossed, and faced Mark sitting at the table. "I know that. I mean, when are you moving all your shit out?"

"I'll come by tomorrow while you're at work and get everything," he said.

"No, I want to be here. Noon, okay?" She walked into the bedroom and shut the door. Sitting down on their queen-sized bed, on the comforter they got for a wedding gift, she held her pillow against her stomach and waited for the front door to shut before she cried.

* * *

The lawyer's office smelled like the cigar shop downtown, musty and strong like her grandfather used to smell. Lauren dropped the packet of forms on the crowded mahogany desk. "I'd like you to look over these for me, one more time," she said.

"We've been through them together, Ms. Baton, everything is fine." Benjamin Hartford, a small man in his early forties, leaned back in his chair and turned it side to side. With his elbows propped up on the arms and his hands joined together across his stomach, he seemed delighted in his own confidence. "You've signed everything you need to sign. Mr. Baton has signed everything - this was an easy one comparatively. No child custody stuff to work out or - "

"What about the cat? Do we have to decide who gets the cat?" she asked.

"The cat is yours. He clearly stated last time that he didn't want the cat," he said.

"I bet she's allergic to cats," Lauren mumbled.

Mr. Hartford cleared his throat, stood up and put his hand out. "Ms. Baton - "

"You can call me Lauren, you know?" she said, standing to shake his hand.

"Okay. Well, Lauren, your part is done now. If there are any problems, I promise I will call you."

Lauren pulled her purse strap up on her shoulder.
"Thank you," she said.

* * *

For a week after she took the gold rings off, Lauren could see small indentations, like white tape hugging her finger. The band always felt too tight, but it seemed the ten pounds she'd gained between the wedding day and the day he left made it even worse. She rubbed the skin constantly, trying to massage out the dents.

The apartment felt cold without all Mark's stuff, and sometimes Lauren heard her voice echo through the living room. Lauren had never known how to tell him, but she hated most of it anyway, especially that blue chair. She bought a new television and a toaster the day after he left and figured she could do without the rest. The last thing Mark asked for were the rings, the gold half carat diamond ring and the band. She'd met him at a Starbuck's close to his restaurant and refused to let him buy her coffee.

"You never intended on this lasting, did you?" Lauren asked him as she handed him the rings. She remembered him

laughing when she suggested getting their bands engraved. What a stupid idea, no one does that anymore, he'd told her.

He never answered her question. Just dropped the rings in his pocket like leftover change. Maybe because she'd caught him, finally threw something his way that he couldn't smartass about. Maybe she should have said no, said they're mine. Or that she'd pawned them for money already.

* * *

Now, Lauren twisted the peanut butter cap back on the jar and washed the small plate. She stood at the sink, staring out the little window of her townhouse into the backyard of a new housing development. The people had decks with massive grills, swing sets, motorized child-size jeeps, soccer balls and basketballs scattered over the yards. They were family houses, with children and big meals cooked in the kitchen, people to pick up after, and everything she and Mark were supposed to have. Everything he had promised they would have. She dried her hands on the towel next to the sink, then held her left hand up. The indentions had finally faded away, blending together to

erase any hint of what used to be there. Before this week, and the news of Denise's death, she felt like things were normal, like the days of waking up and remembering the smell of Mark lying next to her or the number of jeans he could go through in a week were finally gone.

She picked up the phone and dialed Jeanne's cell phone number. Holding the phone between her shoulder and chin, Lauren pulled a pizza out of the freezer. She turned the oven to 400 degrees, then left a message for Jeanne. "You know what, I don't want to dress up tonight or have to take a shower or put on makeup, or see Mark again, so I'm not going. I'm making pizza instead and maybe I'll send him a condolences card next week. Why don't you come over and bring a movie and a bottle of Mom's wine? Call me."

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Andrew, Jackie's date, listened to Beck's "Loser" over and over again the first time they went out. Riding in his 1992 Chevy Cavalier, windows down and the chill of the Florida night air curling around her, she listened to him chant the lyrics the same way she used to memorize scripture for her Sunday school classes. She remembered learning all the Beatitudes from Matthew 5 by plugging them into song tunes like *Happy Birthday* or *Jesus Loves Me*. Now, she couldn't even remember how they started.

Andrew stopped the song once to take the AC adapter out of the cigarette lighter so he could light a Jack, then he pushed repeat on the portable CD player and sang it again. He mumbled the words and it reminded Jackie of the way her grandma recited prayers from her little books. Jackie thought he must have felt something inside him and she couldn't figure out if this was meant to impress her or not.

"Do you know how the Beatitudes start?" she asked him.

Either he didn't hear her or he didn't like that she talked during the song, kind of the way her dad didn't like it when anyone talked during football.

Jackie wiped her hair out of her face and held it behind her head with one hand, resting her elbow on the window seal. She tried to tuck it behind her back to keep the wind from blowing it, but it didn't work. The bleached blonde curls flew back into her face and tangled around her head.

The song ended and Andrew held the CD player on his right thigh. "What'd you say?" His left knee pressed up on the steering wheel and guided the car while his other hand held the short cigarette.

"The Beatitudes - do you know how they start?" she said.

"A song?" he asked.

"No. From the Bible."

"No idea." He turned into the Pizza Hut and finished the cigarette, taking one final pull. "Never read it."

"Oh." She wished she hadn't mentioned the Bible. "So, is that your favorite song?" she asked.

He nodded. "You know it?"

This had to be one of those tests that boys give girls before they consider dating them. "Of course," Jackie lied,

"I got the CD at home." She pulled at the hair just behind her ear, straightening the tight curls between her fingers and tried to remember if "Blessed are the meek" went with "shall inherit the earth" or with "they shall see God." It didn't matter now; she needed to think about Andrew. He might offer her a cigarette or ask her about movies, like if she'd seen *Fight Club* or *American History X*, which she'd never been allowed to watch. Jackie borrowed the book *Fight Club* from the public library once, but her grandma looked over it and said it seemed inappropriate. Everything she wanted turned out to be inappropriate to her grandma.

"Pizza Hut okay with you?" Andrew asked.

"Sure, sounds good." When she stepped out of the car, Jackie pulled at the purple shirt she borrowed from her friend, afraid it appeared too small or short, or that Andrew would think she looked fat.

A pick up truck full of kids pulled into the parking lot and into the space next to Andrew's car.

"That's dangerous, you know?" Jackie said walking toward the front door.

"What is?"

"Riding in the back of a pick-up like that. Any one of those kids could easily fall out."

"Yeah, but it's fun," Andrew said as he opened the Pizza Hut door.

Jackie followed behind catching the door in front of her and found herself repeating phrases from the song - *my time is a piece of wax, chokin on the splinters*. Somehow she could recall the random and meaningless words, yet those verses she'd memorized and recited over and over again were gone. The Beatitudes were supposed to be easier than the other things her Grandma made her memorize, Psalms 23 and the Apostles' Creed. She remembered all of those.

Andrew chose a booth in the back, away from the families crowded around the buffet.

"This okay?" he asked, sliding into the red seat.

"Yeah, perfect."

A waitress with long black hair pulled into a tight pony tail came toward them. She looked familiar and Jackie guessed she probably went to their school.

"Hey, what can I get you guys to drink?" she asked.

"We'll have a pitcher of soda," Andrew said.

"Sure." She walked away and stuck her pen into the top of her pony tail.

For the first time since Andrew picked Jackie up, he looked up at her across the table, his faded blue eyes hidden behind dark circles. "Soda okay with you?"

"Yeah, that's what I normally get," Jackie said. The words to parts of the Beatitudes were coming back to her but they seemed way out of order. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted* - that one was easy.

"Cool." He nodded his head and looked around the restaurant.

Jackie didn't know what else to say, so she started on a subject she knew he'd talk about. "So, when's your next baseball game?"

"Tuesday," he said, "You comin'?"

Tuesday. Something was planned for Tuesday but she couldn't remember. "I might be able to come. I've already been to a couple but you only pitched at one, I think Brandon pitched at the other one." Tuesday was piano, her spring piano recital. Her grandma would never let her skip.

"You like baseball?" Andrew asked.

"I love it." Jackie pulled at the strands of hair hanging just over her shoulder. She couldn't even remember the last time she watched baseball. She'd read about Andrew's baseball games in the paper and knew her dad occasionally followed the Atlanta team, but that wouldn't be enough.

"Do you play?" he asked.

"Baseball?"

"Well, no, softball, I guess?"

"Oh, well, no. I mean, I used to, but it's been a while." She felt her face warming and wondered if the sweat forming beneath her arms was noticeable. "I don't really have time to anymore." *Meek, mourn, poor* - they were in there somewhere.

"Why?"

Jackie held her clammy hands together in her lap, squeezing them. She wanted to excuse herself and go to the restroom, but she thought Andrew might watch her walk away. She looked around, hoping the waitress would be coming back to ask for their order, and then Jackie could change the subject to movies or Mrs. Howard's English test. No luck. "Since my dad and I live with my grandma, and he works all the time, she needs someone to be home with her and help with stuff around the house. It's not too bad, but I wish I could do more at school and stuff."

He nodded. "It's cool that you help her out though." He glanced over the menu again, and folded up the edges of the paper placemat. "Do you like pepperoni, sausage, and green peppers on your pizza?" he asked.

"That's fine with me," she said, thinking about how to eat around green peppers without him noticing.

After they ordered, Andrew sipped on his soda, refilling it to the rim every once in a while. Jackie watched as a young boy at another table shoved pizza into his mouth while his mother blessed their food. Was it wrong to stare at the woman's green eye shadow while her head was bowed? Jackie tapped her feet against the wood floor and tried to think of what to say next. Maybe Andrew liked it when girls were quiet, maybe he thought they talked too much and was pleased with how little Jackie opened up. Her mind still wandered back to remembering the Beatitudes, but right now they seemed like jumbled words in a game of Memory. The only thing she could remember was that they started with "Blessed are the" and went on for seven or eight lines.

When the pizza came, Andrew pulled four slices onto his little plate and ate two at a time, one on top of the other. Jackie ate two pieces and tried to swallow the peppers without thinking about it. Andrew talked about his friend Alan, and the prank they played on Mr. Hobbs; he complained about the four-page English test from Tuesday and asked Jackie how she did.

"I did okay," she said. "I didn't really study though."

"Don't lie, I saw your grade. Weren't you the only person that got an A?"

"No, I don't think so," Jackie said.

"Yeah, you were." He took another bite of the pizza sandwich. "Have you written your paper for next week?"

She nodded, chasing her green peppers with soda. "I've done most of it. What's yours on?"

"I haven't started." He wiped his mouth with his hand. "Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Really?"

"Alan and I were wondering if you could help us with our papers. I mean, we'll give you the topic and whatever else you need."

Jackie held her drink in front of her with two hands. "You want me to write your papers for you?"

"It's just that with baseball and everything, we don't have a lot of time, you know? And neither of us did very well on the last test. It doesn't have to be perfect, not like yours will be, just good enough to pass."

Jackie held her purse in her lap. She wanted to ask Andrew to take her home, wanted to look up Matthew 5 and relearn the Beatitudes she'd forgotten.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

"I - I don't know. I mean I wouldn't mind helping you, but I'm not sure that I can just write the whole thing for you."

"We would pay you. Twenty dollars for each paper. You'd really be helping us out, Jackie."

It wouldn't matter what she said; Andrew would just take her home, listening to Beck, and at school on Monday, nothing would change. He and Alan had planned the whole thing, probably drew straws to see who would have to ask her. "I don't think so, Andrew. I just don't feel comfortable with it."

"Oh, come on. Really? You won't do it?" Andrew swallowed the last of his first two pieces and threw the other two back on the pizza dish.

She nodded and stared down at her lap.

"Fine." He slammed his empty drink on the table. "You ready to go?"

"Sure." Jackie dropped the rest of her piece on the plate and watched Andrew pick up a box from the front counter while he paid. At least he didn't ask her to pay, or ask her to find a ride back home. She twisted her purse strap between her fingers and felt her stomach turn the way it did when she sang a solo at her grandma's church, only this time not saying anything felt worse than singing.

As she followed Andrew to the car, phrases to the Beatitudes came back to her and she repeated three parts over and over again in her head knowing they were out of order. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted - Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.* That was her grandma's favorite, the one she wrote in birthday and Christmas cards. The last one Jackie could remember, she said aloud in a soft whisper, over and over, blocking out the words to Beck's song - *Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, Blessed are you when men cast insults at you.*

Sisters

When Jolene first arrived in America I thought she looked like a little boy. Her black hair had been cut down to the scalp all the way around her head, like William's hair after daddy takes the buzz cutter to it. Mom says they cut it all the time where she came from, that everybody's hair, boys and girls, looks the same. I don't think it bothered Jolene the way it did me.

In the airport, where we sat waiting, Jolene came out with her dark hand resting in my mother's. She carried a green tote bag that read "Uganda's Children" and Mom said that was all she brought with her. I watched Jolene walk under the bright terminal lights and her skin seemed dark, darker than any person's I'd ever seen before, but somehow bright too. In the middle of her forehead and on the tips of her sharp cheekbones her skin shined like someone pointed a flashlight on just those parts. I watched her smile and shake hands with strangers. Her smile was wide, as if laughter filled her up and covered her entire face.

In the two pictures hanging on our refrigerator, taken eleven months ago when my parents visited, her smile is the first thing I see. In one, Jolene is standing between my parents holding their hands. The other is just of Jolene, her head tilted to the side with that big smile on her face gleaming under what must have been a hot day.

I stood across from Jolene in the airport trying to smile, my thin brown hair hanging down over my shoulders. We hugged the way people hug someone they don't know and the only thing I could look at was her eyes. Deep, dark, round eyes that glowed almost as much as her smile.

Standing in the airport, I listened to my aunts and uncles introducing themselves and laughing, asking Jolene questions just to hear her thick accent and broken English. I stood behind my parents, watching Jolene between them still holding tight to my mom's hand.

Aunt Helen tapped me on the head, and then began pulling and twisting my long hair. "Sarah, it's about time you had a sister, huh?" She laughed and I squinted in pain as she jerked my head around. "Four brothers are tough for a ten-year-old to handle all by herself. Hell, four boys are tough for anyone to handle."

"We've done all right," I said, grabbing my hair at the base of my neck and pulling away. "They aren't so bad."

Aunt Helen kept talking but I didn't turn around. "Momma," I called. I reached for her shoulder, and then pulled at two strings of her blue dress tied in a loose bow at her back. When she turned to me, her smile seemed as wide as Jolene's. "When are we going home?" I asked.

"Soon. Dad's gone to get our luggage and then we'll go home." When she said home, she looked toward Jolene and kissed the top of her head. "Get your brothers together for me, okay?" she asked me.

"Sure." I walked away wondering what Jolene's hair felt like against my mother's lips.

The gate had emptied out, and only the small group of our family remained. All around us, crowds of people rushed through the terminals to other gates. I spotted Grayson's red hat and made my way through the crowd and found William and Bryan sitting next to him and little Josiah asleep across the blue chairs.

"Come on guys. It's time to go home." I stood in front of them snapping the rubber band around my wrist.

No one moved at first, and then William spoke up. "Is she going to boss us around too?"

"What?" I asked.

"Well, she's the same age as you, so she's older than us, does that mean she gets to boss us around?" William was

almost nine, and already a half-inch taller than me. That morning, Grandma dressed all the boys in ties and collared shirts to meet Jolene, and William appeared to be the only one whose tie was still around his neck. The twins, Grayson and Bryan, who had just turned six, had their ties wrapped around their heads like bandana's, Grayson's hanging out beneath his hat, and Josiah's was balled up under his head like a little pillow.

I sat Josiah up, trying to wake him, and stuffed his tie into my skirt pocket. "I doubt she is going to boss anybody around," I said. "She probably doesn't even know what that means." Josiah wrapped his legs around my waist as I lifted him and struggled to hold him up as we left the airport.

* * *

In the van, I sat between Josiah's car seat and Jolene, and it was the first time I'd been really close to her, close enough to touch her skin. She smelled different, but not bad. Almost like a cardboard box or a blanket that's been stored in the attic for the summer. We squished together in the seat and I realized how skinny she looked. Her black legs hung from a pair of red shorts and seemed to

be the same size from top to bottom, with a knot in the middle where her knees stuck out.

Jolene's tennis shoes were laced only through the two top holes with a small piece of string. They seemed worn down to the soles and she didn't wear socks. She saw me staring and tucked them under the seat. "Dirty shoes," she said. "Miss Kathy says I get a new shoes soon."

My mom turned in her seat, patted Jolene's skinny legs and said, "You can call me Mom, Jolene."

A long breath rose up from my chest and came sulking out. Mom calls it huffing, or sighing and she's always getting on the boys for doing it. She shot me a look that said we would talk at home, privately. Jolene had only been with my parents for a week, and I didn't think calling them mom and dad would come so quickly.

"Where's her real mom?" Bryan yelled from the back seat.

"Bryan," my dad yelled. He glared back at Bryan through the rear view mirror and I smiled, thinking this may make mom forget about what I did.

"What? I was just asking," he said. "I thought we were allowed to ask questions. That's what you said before."

My mom gave dad a look that said Bryan was right.

"What is wrong?" Jolene whispered to me.

"Bryan wants to know about your parents, you know, back in Uganda."

Jolene concentrated for a minute and I wasn't sure if she understood what I'd said. She turned a little in the seat and lifted her head back toward Bryan. "My mother and father die when I was young. I do not remember them very much."

"What did they die from?" Bryan asked again.

"Bryan, that's enough for right now," dad said.

"I do not know," Jolene said. "I think they were very sick."

For the first time in a really long time, the rest of our ride home remained quiet. I stared at Jolene's shoes again, wondering what color they used to be, and how long she'd had them. Mom had said in Uganda people didn't get new things very often, so the shoes could have been in that condition when Jolene got them. I wanted to ask her where she got them, or if her mother gave them to her but I knew I would get the look from my dad if I did. I straightened my legs out and held up my blue flip-flops. They had a little wedge heel that mom said I could wear this year since I'd turned ten. Next to Jolene's they must have looked brand new, but already I'd asked for a new pair, complained that these were getting old and dirty. Nothing I

had compared to Jolene's tennis shoes, I'd never worn shoes down to the soles, never had hand-me-down clothes, or been able to fit all my things in one small bag.

I leaned toward Jolene's ear and whispered, "Wanna switch?"

She looked at me with her eyebrows turned down and her big eyes searching.

"Shoes," I said. "Change our shoes. You wear mine and I'll wear yours?"

"No, these too old," she said, looking down at her ragged tennis shoes.

"So are these," I said handing her my green sandals.

Her dark slender fingers touched mine and she handed me the old tennis shoes. I watched her slipping her feet into the green sandals and saw her struggle with the feeling of the plastic strap between her toes. She stretched her legs out in front of her, flexed her feet back and forth, and smiled.

Her tennis shoes were damp around my bare feet and I thought about the dirt in them coming from her country. How my feet were walking in the same dirt she walked in, wearing the same grimy shoes that she used to wear and I didn't even care.

Learning to Stand

The startling bark of the dog across the street wakes you up, and you see red tail lights out your window. You hear familiar voices in the kitchen downstairs, whispering at first. Then you hear your big sister's voice grow louder and you can tell she is crying. Darkness surrounds your room; your Superman clock says three-fifteen. You're afraid to get up, or move, because you know how the bed creaks and how the swollen wooden planks beneath your blue rug make too much noise. Your mother is calming her, saying "Shhh, it's gonna be okay." You want to run downstairs, see your sister again, and tell her you miss her, but something tells you not to get up. The way your mother talks to her reminds you of the time you got lost in the store. When your mother found you, she held your shoulders with firm hands, shaking them, trying to punish you. Afterwards, she hugged you tight for a long time.

Putting your ear into the thin mattress, you listen. All the crying makes it hard to understand. Your sister's

words are messy and you only hear pieces, "Sorry... loved me... come home." You wonder if your sister will leave again, if your mom will cry after you go to bed, the same way she cries when her own boyfriend slides out in the middle of the night, slamming the door. The roar of his engine, the spin of his tires pulling away, lets you finally sleep.

Trying not to make any noise, you turn over on your back and pull the blankets up around you. The night your sister left, she came to your bed. She lay down beside you, curled up, her arm hugging you. That's how she said goodbye. Then, when she thought you fell asleep, she tiptoed out and got into the car of a boy she knew, a boy your mother called a SOB. You knew what SOB meant, like you knew your mother spelled out a-s-s-h-o-l-e when she talked about men.

You wish your sister would come upstairs again, and lay next to you and then, in the morning, your mom would make pancakes and bacon, and when you began to smell the cooked bacon, you could come downstairs together and sit at the table. Just the three of you.

No one is whispering anymore. Maybe now is a good time to go downstairs. You can pretend you didn't hear your sister crying, just say the dog woke you up. You can ask your sister how long she is going to stay, if she'll come

see your school, and meet your new friend across the street. You decide to wait until you smell bacon, or at least until you hear the whistle of the tea kettle on the stove.

You watch the big red numbers on your clock change over and over. It's been a long time; you can't remember if you fell asleep. Leaves rustle outside, like a big wind circling, and you hear the sounds of a truck engine and the squeaky brakes and you know he's back without even looking. He's been gone for just six days, after he left that bruise on your mother's arm that she tried to hide beneath long sleeves.

His feet sound heavy. The dog across the street, the dog you used to be afraid of, barks again and again at him. He slams the door and you hear him yell, "What the hell is she doing here?" You jump, your stomach shakes and the grip you have on the covers grows tight.

Your mom tries to calm him, saying "Shhh" and offering him hot coffee. You hope he says no and slams the door again on his way out, but you hear the television click on - loud - and you think now, no one will hear the creak of your bed. You think about going downstairs, asking him to leave, the way you wished you had last week. The way you tried to once before, saying "Get out," but got scared when

he yelled at you, so he won. Now you hear small footsteps coming up the stairs. You turn on your side, close your eyes tight, but not too tight, and breathe deep and slow like you are asleep. The bedroom door opens. Your sister crawls in beside you, under the old yellow blanket you stole from her room, careful not to shake the bed too much, and places her head next to yours on the small pillow. She smells like cigarette smoke and dirt. Her brown hair is long and tangled. She lays her thin arm across you and you wonder if you should say something. Your eyes are open a little and you see her hand, silver rings on every finger, balled up in a fist, shaking. You can't tell if she is cold and dirty or if maybe her hand is bruised.

"Are you gonna stay?" you ask her.

"Not this time," she says. She waits a few more minutes, then she leaves, steps out the window, just like before.

You lean up and watch her climb out and when she disappears over the edge of the house, you see his truck and remember your mom is downstairs, alone. You throw back the heavy covers on your bed and run downstairs, barefoot, dressed in your Power Rangers pajamas. You don't care what time it is, or how much noise you make. He is sitting on

the couch, drinking out of the hand-painted mug you gave your mom for Mother's Day.

"'Bout time you got up, boy," he says to you.

"Shut-up, asshole," you say. And before you even get off the bottom step, you know you're in trouble.

Your mother sends you back to your room and says, "Why in the world would you say that?" But she knows already. Her eyes are not angry, and she holds you by the arms, her fingers rubbing the back of your shoulders making you stand a little straighter. And when she says you won't get breakfast, you don't care. She's making oatmeal anyway.