



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

My Father's Daughter

Item Type	thesis
Authors	Rafus, Eboni G.
DOI	10.7275/610974
Download date	2025-04-02 12:03:53
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/45073

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

A Thesis Presented
by
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Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

September 2008

Graduate Program for Poets and Writers

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

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by

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PREFACE

My Father's Daughter, part bildungsroman, part family drama, is the story of Tabitha Robinson, a successful writer on a hit prime-time teen drama in Los Angeles who is called home to northern New York to say good-bye to her dying father. Tabitha and her father, Ray, a retired military soldier and Southern Baptist minister, were once quite close. As a girl, Tabitha idolized her father despite his long absences and philandering ways. In turn, Ray favored Tabitha and encouraged her ambition. Their relationship changes however, when Ray divorces Tabitha's mother and remarries. Already strained, the relationship is threatened further when Ray, after battling cancer, suddenly sees the error of his ways and attempts to reform Tabitha as well.

The novella begins with a short vignette about the incidents surrounding Tabitha's conception and birth. This vignette, told from Tabitha's point of view, illustrates how Tabitha becomes bonded with her father as an infant. This also establishes the notion that this novella is Tabitha's story from her limited perspective. It is meant to unfold as if Tabitha is telling her story around a campfire or confiding in a close friend.

The next thirty-three pages take place in the present and are told in the present tense. Tabitha is twenty-seven years old and hasn't spoken to her father in nearly

two years. Yet, at her mother's request, Tabitha visits her father and discovers that his cancer has progressed and thus he has little time left in this world. This tragic realization causes Tabitha to look back at her relationship with her father and how that relationship affected the relationships she has had with every other man in her life.

The next eighty-nine pages are essentially a series of flashbacks told in the past tense. In these vignettes we see how Tabitha's relationship with her father evolves and devolves from the age of seven years old until the age of twenty-four.

The last six pages of part one bring us back to the present tense and back to Tabitha as an adult before she takes her trip down memory lane. She leaves her father's house to give her family the news and reunites with her childhood best-friend, and sometime lover, Michael.

This novella is, admittedly, not written in the traditional narrative form. Instead, it consists of thirty short chapters or scenes that give the reader insights into Tabitha's life and character through short snippets that are separated by months or years. I liken these short chapters/scenes as quick punches to the gut: they are quick and painful and get right to the heart or core of the matter.

I've been writing this novella, on and off, for the past four years. In that time, I have changed tenses, points of view and writing styles. Yet after four workshops

and almost fifty pages of comments, I seem to have returned to my original vision for this project. In the beginning, I tried to workshop this novella in twenty-page increments in a traditional short-story workshop fashion. As you can imagine, this didn't work out too well. In fact, I was so frustrated by this process that I abandoned the project for over year and a half. Yet, because I still felt called to tell this story, I decided to try again during my third year in the program. Thanks to Chris Bachelder's understanding and flexibility, I was able to submit large chunks of my novella (90 pages or so) and have an entire class session dedicated to my work much like in a workshop focusing on longer works. The comments I received in these workshops helped me better define my project and choose the direction I wanted to write in.

I have a newfound enthusiasm for this project, and now that I have completed the novella, I am interested in expanding it into a novel. To that end, I plan to write a second part to the novel which would take place in present tense with the exception of one vignette that centers around Tabitha and Ray's last fight before they stop speaking. While part one spans twenty-seven years, part two would take place over a period of ten days. The second half of the novel would be concerned with Tabitha's attempts to forgive her father and herself and prepare herself and her family for his inevitable death and therefore it would be written with a slower pace and a more reflective tone. This part of the novel, which I estimate would be another one hundred pages, would be written in a more traditional, continual style

and would include scenes of her father's death, funeral and burial as well as scenes of reconciliation between Tabitha and Michael.

As I move forward, I have a lot to navigate. In this story about a woman and her father, I also find myself also attempting to speak to/about military life, the African-American religious culture, and the modern woman's relationship with food and body image. My challenges are numerous. I know that I have a tendency to be a little melodramatic. I am heavy on dialogue and short on physical description. I must be careful not to be too expository in my language and I must loosen the narrator's grip on the story. Having said that, I am quite pleased with my novella as a completed work and yet, I am excited to see it evolve further. I hope that you enjoy reading it.

CONTENTS

Page

PREFACE.....iii

CHAPTER

PART ONE

1.....2
2.....7
3.....13
4.....19
5.....27
6.....32
7.....37

PART TWO

8.....42
9.....45
10.....49
11.....54
12.....59
13.....63
14.....67
15.....71
16.....75

17.....	79
18.....	86
19.....	91
20.....	95
21.....	101
22.....	105
23.....	109
24.....	114
25.....	121
26.....	126

PART THREE

27.....	133
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Part One

1.

My story began in the middle of the country, in the middle of the state of Kansas, where Daddy was stationed with the 1st Brigade Infantry Division of the United States Army. In the beginning, my mother, who was 24 at the time, wanted me, but my father, who was 26, did not. After I was born, they both changed their minds.

At first, Daddy wanted to wait to have a second child until my sister, Gidget, was a little older. However, my mother desperately wanted a son and so decided not to wait. Also, she decided not to tell Daddy she wasn't going to wait and merely stopped taking her birth control pills. I guess she reasoned that Daddy, never having carried a girl child for nine months, all the while hoping for a boy, couldn't possibly understand her disappointment when Gidget was born. She had gotten over it easily enough, being grateful for a healthy child at the very least. Besides, as a sheltered only-child who had never baby-sat a day in her life, she was too busy learning how to change diapers and test the temperature of baby formula to fret too much. Yet, by the time Gidget was three years old, and Daddy,

being the eldest of ten, had successfully taught my mother how to sort laundry and braid hair, she was ready to try for a boy again.

I don't remember what the weather was like in Kansas because we moved to Panama when I was two years old, but when I think of Kansas, I think of the Wizard of Oz, and thus farm land and tornadoes. So, I've always imagined that it was really windy the night my parents fought over me. I imagine my mother sitting on the bed propped up on pillows and Daddy leaning across the doorway with his camouflaged jacket unbuttoned and his boots unlaced. The window next to the bed is cracked open and the pale, sheer curtains are blowing towards Daddy as my mother begs him to lower his voice because Gidget is sleeping in the next room.

I imagine the scene unfolding much like those in a black and white grainy film as a younger, thinner version of Daddy shakes his head and asks my mother how she could do something like this, how she could get pregnant behind his back. Without his glasses or gold tooth he looks innocent. Mother, who I imagine looks exactly the same as she does now, dark and regal in her long silk robe, tells him that he knew that she was ready to have another child and asks him what he thought was going to happen if they continued to sleep together.

Daddy narrows his eyes at Mother and she knows better than to say anything more. Through the window, I hear leaves blowing across the front yard. Twigs and bramble scrape the dry, flat earth. Daddy just stares at Mother mutely shaking his head, and uncomfortable under his gaze, Mother pulls her robe closed over her hardening belly. The door to their bedroom begins to creak closed. Then

suddenly, Daddy turns on his heels, cursing loudly and stomps out the house. He slams the front door shut, waking Gidget, and speeds out of the driveway, toward town.

Even after Mother soothes Gidget back to sleep, she lies awake in bed wondering just how drunken Daddy is going to be when he returns, and wishing she had waited to say anything at all. I imagine that she stares at the white washed walls of her clapboard sided farm house or out the window at the tree-less fields anticipating his return, although, realistically my parents must've been living in modern military quarters with aluminum siding, in an over-crowded housing subdivision with small, well-manicured lawns.

She doesn't have to wait long because within an hour Daddy is back. As she hears him fumbling around in the kitchen, she considers for a moment pretending that she is asleep when he enters the bedroom, but is unable to stop herself from sitting upright in bed as soon as she hears his footsteps approaching. She is anxious to find out where he went and what he has to say for himself. But he doesn't say anything. He doesn't even look at her. He simply lays his jacket across the back of the vanity chair, and undresses. She watches his back as he sits on his side of the bed, takes off his watch, and places it next to his alarm clock. He pulls the blankets over him and goes to sleep.

Mother doesn't sleep. She waits all night for Daddy to turn towards her in bed and scold her again. Yet, he snores through the night undisturbed. Each time she begins to drift off to sleep a shift in his sleeping position or in the sound of his breathing jerks her awake. When his alarm clock rings in the early morning for

physical training, she rolls over to face him, expecting him to resume their argument. Yet, he merely gets dressed and goes to make himself some breakfast. She follows him to the kitchen, frustrated by his stubbornness. He really knows how to get under her skin. She is absolutely infuriated and is about to tell him so when she sees the packages on the kitchen counter: boxes and boxes of diapers, cans and cans of formula, a rattle, and a mint-green bib that says “Little Slugger”.

Perhaps someone else’s mother would have been relieved to see that her husband was preparing for the birth of his second child. Perhaps someone else’s mother would have been so happy to know that instead of going to the bar, my father went to the Post Exchange to buy diapers, that she would throw her arms around his waist as he stood at the stove scrambling eggs and say “I love you, I love you, I love you!” Not my mother. Silly man, my mother thinks, we won’t need any of this for at least another seven months.

Seven months later my mother was even less interested in baby supplies. When I made my debut at Irwin Army Community Hospital without the appropriate genitalia, my mother was horribly disappointed. The term the doctor used was “post-partum depression.” She wouldn’t feed me, she wouldn’t hold me. The nurses wheeled me into her hospital room, they wheeled me right back out. My mother didn’t want anything to do with another girl. Daddy took time off of work for the first two weeks I was home from the hospital. While he fed and

bathed and rocked me, Mother cried. Not in loud, shaking sobs, but in large silent drops that splash upon her hands.

Concerned that I wouldn't properly bond with my mother, the doctor advised her to strip both of us naked and then lie down with me curled on her stomach. He said that, although it may take weeks for the depression to lift, simulating what it felt like when I was inside of her would help us both to connect with one another. My mother dutifully obliged.

I can't imagine what my mother saw when she saw me lying in my crib that day. From the one picture left of me as an infant, I assume she noted my chocolate-brown skin, grey eyes and fist-full of curly black hair. Yet, I am not sure if she saw her daughter or just another girl-child that she would have to take care of. I do know, by her own admission, that when she lay down with me, skin to skin, she really wanted to feel something. She desperately wanted to feel connected and bonded and satisfied and happy and all the things a mother is supposed to feel towards her newborn. She felt nothing. She waited for the contentment to come over her. She rubbed my back and closed her eyes, No connection. No contentment. Soon the emptiness was replaced by a panic that began to bubble up inside of her and as if that panic was transferred to me through our line-up belly buttons, I began to cry. My crying caused my mother to cry and we both lay there wet and wriggling in fear until Daddy came to get me, rescuing us both.

2.

The problem with Los Angeles is that it is too damn sunny and bright. Even on your day off you can't sleep in, because as early as seven o'clock a.m. rays of light sneak around the edges of the window blinds and invade your eyelids, making it impossible, or at least uncomfortable, to stay in bed. I stick my head under my pillow to block out the light, but being slightly claustrophobic, I can only stay under for so long before I start to panic.

I throw the pillow onto the floor, roll over to my side and marvel at how peacefully Josh is sleeping. One toned arm is thrown carelessly over his head, the other rests on his stomach, fingers relaxed, as if they are tracing the faint line of wiry brown hair that travels down from his chest, over his abdomen to disappear under the tangle of blankets. His breathing is deep. His eyelids are unwavering. It hardly seems fair.

I crawl out of bed, annoyed, and march across the hardwood floor to the bathroom to pull my hair into a pony-tail and wash my face. In the bathroom mirror I can see Josh turn his head towards my absence, but he doesn't reach for

me so I brush my teeth in circles and recall the notes I received from Peter on my latest draft of episode twenty-one. There are many and they are mostly vague: “sex it up”, “less preachy”, “more dramatic”. I slept in my contacts again so my eyes are dry and pink around the edges. Instead of taking them out, and switching to glasses, I simply place a few drops of saline solution on my eyeballs and rub. This is definitely a coffee morning.

After throwing on a pair of jogging pants and a t-shirt that says, “Prose before Hos,” I walk into my barely furnished living room. Sepia-toned photos of Manhattan lay across black picture frames on my coffee table. I keep telling myself that when things slow down, I will frame and hang them. I have no idea what I did with those nails now.

I pause at the door to slip on my flip-flops and listen for any signs of stirring coming from the bedroom. There’s not a single sound of disorder, so I slip out into the sun.

Since silver is the new black, my car is the same color as most of the cars parked on my street. I have to read the license plates to determine which one is mine since there are no bumper stickers or dash decorations to distinguish my simple and elegant vehicle from everyone else’s simple and elegant vehicle. I release the parking brake, pull a u-turn onto Wrightwood drive and coast down the hill towards caffeine.

Ventura boulevard is just waking up, so instead of sneaking across it to the Starbucks on the other side, I join the line of cars traveling east towards Laurel

Canyon and Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf. Their espresso seems stronger, their vanilla syrup less sweet.

The truck in front of me slows down to pull into the gym parking lot on the right and I honk my horn and swerve into the left lane, just because I can. I ride the ass of the coup in front of me although I'm not in any particular hurry, unless you count the hurry that I'm always in, the hurry that we are all always in. The quaint but exorbitantly expensive shops along the street haven't opened yet, so there is no one walking in L.A. today. There is no one to gawk at as I wait at the light on the corner of Ventura and Vineland. I am reminded, however, by the bright blue and yellow Blockbuster sign ahead, that my movies are overdue.

When I get to Coffee Bean I have to circle around twice to find parking and stand behind some B-list celebrity, that I recognize but can't quite name, for seven minutes before I can order two skinny vanilla lattes, no foam, extra hot. As I wait for my name to be called, I sit at a table next to a young Writer/Director/Producer having, what seems to be, his first production meeting with his crew. The DP is late.

I smell bacon and eggs when I open my front door. Josh is cooking breakfast in his boxer briefs and mumbling to himself, and the thought crosses my mind, that perhaps I'm allowing him to spend the night too often. He seems to be making himself right at home. I hand him his latte, he tries to hand me a plate of

eggs. I decline it with a flick of my hand and then head into the dining room to begin working.

Since I haven't finished unpacking the spare room, the dining room is doubling as my office for now. In the middle of the dining room table is a vase of wilting daffodils which separates the table into two halves. One half of the table has place settings and folded napkins. The other side is a make-shift desk: Laptop computer on the table next to a pile of scripts. A handful of brass brads next to them. A coffee mug full of pens, pencils and highlighters next to that. I pass my china cabinet full of books almost tripping over computer and printer and fax machine wires and have a seat. I burn my tongue on my latte as I wait for my computer to boot up.

I've just gotten to my document when Josh comes in and sits on the wrong side of the table, crowding my office space with his plate of eggs, bacon and toast, his fork, his latte, his orange juice. I sigh a couple of times, as I read and re-read what I've already written, but he doesn't get the hint so I am forced to use my words.

"Josh, honey, I'm trying to work," I say with a smile.

"Don't worry, I won't talk," he smiles back.

"No, I mean... Will you just move over there? I just can't have your right next to me when I'm working."

Now it is his turn to sigh. He gathers his dishes, but instead of moving to the other end of the table, he goes into the living room and turns on the television.

On the week-end edition of the morning news, an anchor reports that another Hollywood power couple has filed for divorce. The wife has recently won an Oscar. The husband has recently lost his first-look deal with Paramount.

I fidget for a few minutes, reading and re-reading. The anchor announces an exclusive about the latest young starlet to enter rehab before the show cuts to a commercial for teeth whitening. I yell out, “Josh! Can you turn that down a little?” A few seconds later the television is turned off and Josh comes stomping past me and into the kitchen. Without first scraping his food into the garbage disposal, he drops his plate into the sink, half-eaten toast and all. He stands in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room waiting for me to notice him. I don’t want to give into his tantrum, but I can’t work with him hovering like that either. I look up from my flashing cursor.

“I’m going home,” he says.

I wonder if I’m supposed to ask him to stay.

“Okay,” I say. And wait. He waits too, his eyes narrowing.

“I’ll call you later,” I say, but like a question, wondering if that is what it’s going to take to get him to stop looking at me like that. If there is something he wants from me, I wish he would just come out and say it. Sometimes, I think our relationship was much easier before he dumped his girlfriend.

He doesn’t say anything. He goes into the bedroom and begins to throw on the jeans and t-shirt he arrived in last night. Once, he mentioned something about leaving a few articles of clothing here for when he spends the night but I

pretended not to hear him. He jingles his keys loudly as he slips on his flip-flops and opens the door. He stands in the light that washes in for a few breaths, but before I realize that he expects me to come kiss him goodbye, he slams the door behind him.

3.

“Call your father” Mother says as I sit idling in Monday morning traffic. “He’s back in the hospital.” Then she holds the line while I look in my glove compartment for a pen. She says she knew he had gotten worse because she hadn’t heard from him in over a month. He usually called her once a week, early in the morning after Janice left for work. Mother was glad that they had been able to become friends again after their divorce, but hated being treated like she is the other woman. They had three children together; it was only natural that they would be in contact with one another. Yet, although she had no reason to feel guilty, she could never bring herself to call his house. So, she waited for him to call her. By the time he did, it was bad.

As I lean across the passenger seat, reaching for my glove compartment, my foot slips off the break and my car rolls down Laurel Canyon towards the BMW in front of me. I slam on the brakes again, but not before I lightly graze the BMW’s bumper. In seconds, the owner of the car steps out raising his hands in

the air, pressing his palms against his bald head, asking me through my windshield what the fuck I am doing.

“Are you there?” Mother asks.

“Hold on a sec.” I hold my breath.

The owner of the car looks at his bumper, at me, back at his bumper. Satisfied that there isn't a scratch he walks back to the front of his car looking at me the entire time. I lift my hand, in a salute or a sign of surrender, I don't know. By the time he is back behind the wheel, my mother is screaming in my ear.

“Tabitha! Are you listening to me?”

“Jesus, Mother! Yes, I'm listening.”

“Don't you use the Lord's name in vain like that!”

“I can't talk right now, Mother. Can you just give me the number?”

She gives me the number of Daddy's private room at the veteran's hospital and I give her my promise that I will call him today. After I hang up I try to think of what I would say to my father after two years. Would I ask about his new wife, his new house, his new job, his whole new life? Or would I go straight to the point and ask about his health? Would he tell me about his medications, his chemo and radiation treatments, the prognosis? Or would he protect me by lying and say that he's feeling just fine? I know that he will ask me about church, and if I'm going. He'll ask me about my soul, and if it's saved again. And I'll protect him and lie and say that God and I are just fine, although the truth is, God and I haven't been speaking either.

The traffic creeps forward and as I snake down Laurel Canyon towards Hollywood Boulevard, I am disappointed that the best part of my morning commute is over. I have never been one to gripe about the traffic in Los Angeles, but I admit it is sometimes annoying that the sheer number of cars on the road can make a thirty-minute drive stretch into an hour. I'm lucky that I live just over the Hollywood Hills from where I work, so my drive only takes thirty-five minutes with traffic, the least annoying stretch being between my apartment on Wrightwood Drive and the spectacular view on Mulholland. There is something exhilarating about zigzagging up the hill, turning left on Laurel Drive to Dona Lisa, taking another left onto Dona Pegita, and zooming all the way up to the peak at Mulholland. Even better is the short jaunt westbound along Mulholland to Laurel Canyon because it is in that four minute stint that I can see, through the passenger window, all of the San Fernando Valley stretching out below me from Studio City, to Sherman Oaks and Toluca Lake, to North Hollywood and Van Nuys and beyond. There is something about that zip up to the top of the hill that makes the slow crawl back down the other side worth it.

Once I cross Hollywood Boulevard, and make a right onto Sunset, it is a straight shot to the Beverly Hills sign and my 22nd floor office just past Doheny. Yet, the closer I get to Sunset, the less I want to go to work at the job I love. I don't know where I'd rather be, but I know I don't want to be there. Quickly, I take a u-turn at Mount Olympus, pulling away from the line of cars traveling down the hill and start heading back up. Just as quickly, the car behind me

screeches forward to claim the space that my Toyota leaves behind although the light ahead is still glowing red.

The flow of traffic leaving West Hollywood is a lot lighter and in no time I'm back on top of the hill. I coast along Mulholland, looking down at the valley below me, trying to decide where I want to go. I have no idea where I am headed even as I make my decent down the other side of the hill.

Twenty minutes later, I find myself parked outside my first apartment in Los Angeles. It was Becky's apartment first. She graduated from NYU a semester early and moved out to Los Angeles four months before I did. Since she paid the security deposit she got the bedroom and I got the lumpy metal futon in the living room. I slept surrounded by her things: ceramic castles, 1000 piece jigsaw puzzles, knitting yarn.

No matter how much I vacuumed and swept the floor and dusted the furniture, I could never get that place clean. Just as, despite the fact that the entire north wall of the living room was a sliding glass door that opened onto a balcony, the sun never shone into that space.

I was always hungry in that apartment. Hungry for food I shouldn't have: bread and butter and chocolate and ice-cream. Hungry for places out of my reach: studio lots, red carpets. Hungry for more than what I had: a pass for the city bus, a job at a video store, coupons from the penny saver. I was desperate, in those days, to be more than what I was.

Desperation smelled like chicken flavored Ramen noodles. At twenty-five cents a package, they were a staple of my diet. I ate them so much that I imagined

that the electric yellow-orange powder of the seasoning packet stained my fingers, the stench of salty bouillon seeped into my pores and hair follicles.

And of course there was fear. Fear of running out of money, of time, of chances. But mostly, I was afraid of dissolving into the gray carpet, of being absorbed by the water-stained walls of my dingy shared apartment. Every afternoon when I stood out on our concrete balcony and looked past the gas station at the intersection to the brown grassless hills, I imagined that they were closer to me than the day before. It was as if they were inching forward each day, encroaching on my space, threatening to suffocate me. I was certain that if I didn't get out of there, one day soon I would be swallowed up by them. I would be buried under those brown hills, just another nameless dreamer in the city.

I pick up my phone and dial the show, and when the production secretary picks up, I tell her that I will be late to the office because I had to diffuse a family crisis. I give her my lunch order and assure her that I will be in the office in time for my afternoon meeting with Peter. After she hangs up, I take the receipt I wrote Daddy's number on and program it into my cell-phone. I look up at my old building and count balconies across the third floor to find my old apartment. Now, there's a standing plant shading a small patio table and chair on one end of the balcony and a small grill a few feet away. The current residents have replaced the institutional vertical blinds with light blue drapes that match the area rug that is hanging over the railing to be aired out. In the almost two years I lived in that apartment, I never thought to get that comfortable.

I watch the building, and its residents enter and exit its iron gate for at least half an hour. Then I put my phone back in my purse and drive to work.

4.

I hold my breath until Peter says, “Good Work. These new pages are...good.”

Good. No more. No less. Not exactly high praise, but I’ll take it.

With his desk in the northwest corner of the office facing the door and a sleek aquarium of blue and black fish in the southeast corner facing the Hollywood Hills, Peter’s office would make any Feng Shui guru proud. Peter stands in the middle of his work space in the Warrior I pose, his voice traveling up to his aligned hands. He pauses to take several hissing Ujjayi breaths and I know not to disturb him while he is focusing and directing his breathing. One would never guess that the enlightened man before me, on a continual quest to find balance, is the same Executive Producer who threw a cup of coffee at a production assistant just last week because it was delivered to him lukewarm.

“Of course, the network has sent over some notes,” Peter continues. “They won’t air ‘jerk off’. They suggest using ‘walk the dog’ instead.” Peter transitions into the Warrior II pose.

I roll my eyes. “So, Paige can take a hit of ecstasy at her sixteenth birthday party, but Asher can’t talk about masturbation?”

“Paige’s drug use was a cautionary tale,” Peter reminds me.

I laugh out loud and then realize that he’s completely serious.

“Okay, walk the dog. What else?”

“There are some continuity issues in Act Three. Asher can’t offer Olivia the promise ring again because he pawned it in episode 313 when he caught her kissing Jackson. You’ll have to explain how he got it back. Or else, find something else for him to offer her.”

“Of course. I’ll have those changes ready to fax to Vancouver by the table read on Thursday.”

“Great. Nicole will handle your travel arrangements while Melanie is on vacation. Make sure you are back for the Studio exec meeting on the fourteenth. I’d like you to pitch your ideas for Season Five.” Peter moves into the Extended Side Angle Pose.

“My ideas?” I stammer. As a lowly staff writer, there isn’t any guarantee that my contract will be renewed for next season, so I certainly can’t imagine contributing to the direction of the show in such an integral way. I wait while Peter takes ten Ujjayi breaths.

“You don’t have to outline the entire season. Just be prepared to discuss themes, and general storylines for the first eight-episode story arc.”

“Wow. Okay. Thank you. Should I run my ideas by you before the meeting?”

“No. I trust you. Just don’t disappoint me.” And with that Peter transitions into the triangle pose, and closes his eyes to indicate that our conversation is over. I stand, gathering my script and notes and bowing awkwardly, and back slowly and quietly out the door.

The ding of the microwave interrupts my dazed channel surfing and I go to the kitchen to fetch my low-calorie, low-fat frozen dinner. I pull the cellophane off the sectioned tray, and stir the contents around with a plastic fork before covering it back up and putting it back in the microwave to nuke for two more minutes. The phone rings and the caller id flashes “Josh Harrison” in red letters so I let the call go to voicemail and pour myself a glass of red wine. Yet, just as soon as the ringing stops, it starts up again. It’s still Josh.

“Hello?” I pant into the phone as if I am just running in the door.

“Oh, Hi! I didn’t think I’d get you. I was just about to leave you a message.”

“Were we supposed to get together tonight?”

“Uh...Well, no.”

“Because I don’t have you in my book.”

My microwave dings again and I take out my perfectly portioned food, throw the cellophane into the sink and begin cutting my meat into bite-sized pieces.

“I was being spontaneous. I thought you liked it when I was spontaneous.”

“When did I say that?”

“Come over.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I really can’t. I just got a promotion, I think. And I need to prepare a presentation.”

“That’s great! We should celebrate. Come over.”

“I can’t. I just got in the door and I have to make dinner.”

“You can. We’ll order in.”

“I’ve got to get some work done tonight, but I’ll call you later.”

I hang up the phone before Josh can make another objection and dig in to my dinner. I eat my breaded chicken, mashed potatoes and vegetable medley, standing hunched over the kitchen counter while tossing around ideas for Season Five in my head.

Asher discovers he has a half sister? Jackson’s father risks losing the family fortune to gambling? Paige does something scandalous...again?

The phone rings. I jump, then catch my breath and look down at the flashing red letters. What does Mother want now?

“You didn’t call your father,” my mother says after I say hello. The panting trick doesn’t work on her. She doesn’t care how busy I am, she knows I have to make time for her. “You promised me a week ago that you were going to call him.”

“What would I say, Mother? I can’t think of what we would actually talk about.”

“He asked about you today. He needs to know how you are doing.”

“Tell him that I’m fine.”

“Come back, Tabitha. He doesn’t have much time left.”

“I can’t come now, Mother. Don’t be so melodramatic. What does that even mean?”

“Maybe weeks. Maybe less.”

“What does the doctor say?”

“The doctor says the cancer has spread to his brain. The doctor says to prepare ourselves.”

After my mother hangs up, I stand in the kitchen running my fingers over the telephone key pad. I turn it off and put it on the counter. Then I pick it up, turn it on, and call Josh.

“I’m coming over,” I tell him when he answers after the first ring, and then I hang up.

I look like a mess by the time I arrive at Josh’s door. I’m wearing the sweatpants and tank top I changed into after work, and my hair, once in a neat bun, has come undone and has tumbled haphazardly over my shoulders. Josh doesn’t seem to notice and pulls me to him as soon as I get through the door.

“Are you hungry?” he asks. “We can order from that Thai place.”

“No.” I pull away and, kicking off my flip flops, walk towards the living room.

“Do you want to watch a movie?”

“No.”

I shrug off my denim jacket and let it drop to the floor behind me. I pull my tank top over my head, toss it on the couch and continue walking through the living room to the bedroom. I unsnap my bra and as soon as it hits the floor, Josh is behind me kissing the back of my neck and cupping my breasts in his hands. He whispers something about how crazy I am. I allow him to kiss my shoulders, run his hands over my belly and hips, but when he reaches under the waistband of my sweatpants I twirl out of his arms and sit on the bed. He watches me from the doorway as I take off my sweatpants and underwear. He gives me that look—that look Palek gave me, and Gray before him—that confused, yet amused look.

I don't let him stare too long. I pull him under me. I claw off his clothes. I scratch and bite to egg him on, but he is still too gentle with me, so I slap.

“Hurt me,” I hiss. I want to cry.

He rolls me onto my back and, holding my legs back, enters me roughly. I wrench his hands off my thighs and roll him back under me. I lift and drop my hips hard, bearing down with all my weight, pushing my hands against his chest, holding him down and away. He tries to pull me down to him, but I hold my shoulders back, lift my chin up, so only the ends of my hair are within his reach. He tugs at them, wraps the strands around his hands, and I beg him to pull harder

and harder until my head is pulled back, my eyes are fixed to the ceiling, his fist is against the back of my skull.

I collapse, heaving hot breaths onto his chest. I close my eyes, but the tears don't come. Josh sweeps the hair off my face, kisses my forehead. I roll over onto my side and pretend to fall asleep.

Once Josh has drifted off, I slip out of bed, naked, and tiptoe on bare feet into the living room to find my jacket. In the pocket is my cell phone. I sit on the couch, shivering, holding my phone in my lap for several minutes before I gather the courage to dial. It's two am in New York, and yet I am surprised when Michael doesn't pick up.

His pre-recorded voice says, "Hello. You've reached Michael Barnaby. I'm sorry I can't take your phone call right now, but if you leave a message, including your name and number, I'll return your call as soon as possible."

I hang up at the beep.

Moments and moments later I am still on the couch when Josh shuffles into the living room.

"I thought that maybe you left," he says.

"Not yet." I put the phone back in my jacket pocket and throw the jacket over my shoulders. Josh sits down and puts his arms around me. He is still warm from the bed.

"What's going on?" he asks.

I shake my head and say, "I'm going home."

5.

After two rings, Peter's assistant picks up the phone saying "Prospect Pointe!"

I say, "Hi Nicole. It's Tabitha. Is he in?"

"He's in a post-production meeting. Would you like his voicemail?"

"Yes, thank you." I try not to sound too relieved.

Peter's voice is very sorry to have missed my call and asks me to wait for the beep. I haven't planned what I am going to say, and since I don't have enough time to think of anything else, I tell the truth:

"Hi Peter. It's Tabitha. Um...my father is very sick. I have to go home to see him. I'm leaving today. Uh...I don't know how long I'll be gone. I'll check in at the end of the week."

I know I should call Daddy next, but I need time to work up to it, so first I pack my bags and call to arrange for a car to pick me up and take me to the airport for my red-eye flight. In the meantime, I wash the dishes, vacuum the floors and change the sheets on my bed. It's only two-o'clock here, five o'clock there.

Daddy is probably being served dinner now, and I don't want to interrupt that, so instead of calling him, I pad into the spare room to unpack a few boxes.

I unpack a few boxes of books, throwing them on a shelf in no particular order. I put aside a box labeled linens, as I haven't yet bought the guest bed for this room. Then I come across a box that isn't labeled. I slice through the clear packing tape with a pair of nail scissors and find a box of memories: letters, pictures, childhood diaries, award certificates. I close the box.

My chest hurts. I stand in the kitchen and drink a tall glass of water. I walk around the apartment unplugging all the appliances. I roll my suitcases to the door. It's 3:30. I find myself leaning against the doorway of the spare room, just breathing. Then I find myself sitting on the floor next to the unlabeled box. I reach in blindly and pull out a small picture album. It is only half-full.

There is a picture of Gidget, Fabian and me sitting on my grandmother's bed. Gidget and I are wearing matching red gingham dresses which clash with Grandma's pink and green floral bedspread. Fabian is sitting in Gidget's lap with the barrel of a toy gun in his mouth.

9 years old. I'm the "Military Child of the Month." The photo of me sitting at a banquet table with a medal around my neck is in black and white and it looks like a photo of my mother from when she was eight years old. Same nose. Lips. High cheekbones.

There's a picture of Daddy and Fabian standing next to a Canadian Mountee who is working security at the Alberta tourist spot we stopped at on our way to Alaska. Daddy is giving Fabian bunny ears. Fabian looks as if he is afraid of the horse.

Here's the whole family in front of our little log cabin church in Alaska. It is autumn and behind the church, all the leaves in the Aspen trees are bright yellow. We are wearing heavy coats and the wind is picking up our hair.

Daddy's asleep on the couch with Frosty, the white kitten we surprised him with when he returned from Selma, on his chest.

Michael and I are hugging each other at our high school graduation. I'm in white, he's in blue: the Indian Creek Warrior colors.

There are various pictures of Gray and me:

Here I am with his friends at the lake the first summer we were dating. We are standing in front of Lanigan Hall at SUNY Oswego. He is wearing his graduation gown, but I'm wearing his cap. God, he is good looking: thick black hair, hazel eyes, square jaw. We are standing in front of his family's fireplace the winter we got engaged. There are even some nude photos of him that I shot for a photography class I took my sophomore year of college. In every pose his body seems strong and solid. He has broad shoulders and large hands.

This is the picture I took of Mother and Daddy at Fabian's high school graduation. Daddy is sitting in a wheel chair next to Mommy on the football field. They are both flashing wide smiles. They are not leaning towards each other.

I'm standing with Daddy in the reception hall at Gidget's wedding. He's still in the white robe he officiated in and he has his arm around my shoulders. The color of my bridesmaid's dress is celadon.

There is a knock on the door; the car has arrived.

"Ms. Robinson?" the driver asks when I answer the door.

"Yes," I reply. "There are my bags. I'll just get my purse."

As the driver loads up the car, I make a quick call. After three rings, Janice picks up the phone. I tell her what time to pick me up from the airport the next morning and ask to speak to my father.

"It's Tabitha," I hear her whisper. "Are you sure you're strong enough to talk?" And then he is breathing "Baby?" on the line, "That you?"

And I say, "Yes, Daddy. It's me. I'm just calling to say that I'm coming to visit. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Where are you?"

"I'm still in L.A. right now."

“Do you need some money? Bring me my wallet.”

“No, Daddy. I have money. I’m fine.”

“How’s work going? Don’t let them push you around.”

“They don’t push me around anymore. I’m a staff writer now. I even get vacation days. So, I’m coming to visit, ok?”

“Okay, baby,” he says like when I was a child and stood at his side of the bed early in the morning to ask for cookies or favors when he was too tired to say no.

“I’ll be there soon, okay?” I say, asking for permission.

“Okay,” he answers, drifting back to sleep.

6.

It's cold when I step through the sliding glass doors at Syracuse's Hancock Airport. I tried to pack light, but somehow I still arrived with two suitcases. The weather is fickle in central New York; it is never the same from week to week, or year to year. Like a rebellious teenager, it defies patterns, predictions and the writers of the Farmer's Almanac. To be safe, I packed layers of black, white and tan: t-shirts, button down shirts of various sleeve lengths, sweaters of various materials and heft, one denim jacket, one wool coat.

As I lug them to the curb to wait for Janice, I silently curse myself for not bringing gloves. The sun is out, but a vicious wind snaps at my nose and ears. I button up my light jacket and sink my neck down into my collar as far as it can go.

The sun reflects off the melting snow and shines into my eyes and I consider for a moment digging through my carry-on bag for my sunglasses. Instead, I shield my eyes with my hand and scan the incoming traffic for a

burgundy Fifth Avenue New Yorker. She will most likely be driving Daddy's pimp mobile since it has better brakes than her blue-gray Honda Civic.

Even though I've always teased Daddy about his taste in automobiles, I must admit that the large luxury cars he prefers suit him. While I was growing up, he always owned wide cars with leather interior. He said it was because he was a big man who needed a lot of room, but that doesn't explain why he always had to have electronic windows and door locks. He was just trying to be fashionable, or at least what he considered to be fashionable.

"You're a pimp," I said once, when I was 16. I was trying to drive Daddy's silver Crown Victoria. Learning to parallel park in his boat of a car was not an easy task.

"No, Baby," he said, "I'm just a poor Southern Baptist Preacher."

Although it was true that since he retired from the Army, his only occupation was that of a preacher, he forgot to mention that he was the pastor of the largest Baptist Church in Watertown, NY and therefore had to arrive to Bible study in style. After all, he had a reputation to uphold and the shiny car went with the fedora hats and the diamond studded cuff-links.

"Well, only pimps and preachers would drive a monster like this!"

I am not sure if I was more frustrated by his insistence to remain living in the seventies, or my inability to fit his car between my mother's Cutlass Sierra and the neighbor's Toyota.

Daddy showed me no mercy. "Try again" he simply said, "and this time don't back up until you're at a 45 degree angle."

I sighed and turned on the radio for a little encouragement. Yet, as soon as I moved my hand to the gear stick to shift the car back into drive, he had shut it off.

He recites, “No secular music...”

“...on Sundays,” I chime in. I know, I know. I was just hoping he would let today slide. He had his drill sergeant face on that day, his eyes slightly squinted, his lips slightly puckered, and I knew that he meant business. There was no use in trying to butter him up, so instead I pulled up next to my mother’s white, and considerably smaller, car. I tried again, and in one relatively smooth motion, I parked Daddy’s car along the curb in front of our house. I clapped my hands, delighted with myself, but Daddy merely nodded and said, “Again.”

Again and again, I parked and re-parked Daddy’s car, and with each success he nodded and told me to do it again. When the street lights came on he decided that I had practiced enough, but it wasn’t until he called the Department of Motor Vehicles the next day to schedule my driver’s test that I knew that he was pleased.

A horn blares in my ear and when I look up, there is Janice, same scrubbed face, same matronly bun, sitting up high in a sleek SUV. I am dumbstruck as she hops out of the car and runs over in her practical loafers to help me with my bags. I brace myself for her hug. She always hugs me hard, like we are long-lost sorority sisters meeting again at a class reunion. Sometimes, she

rocks me from side to side as she squeezes me. This hug seems especially long as I choke on her cheap vanilla body spray. She holds me close to her bosom as she asks me about my flight, but all I can think of is that she smells like a Rice Krispie treat.

I'm hungry, but I don't dare tell her that. I know she will insist on going back to the house so she can fix me a plate of ham, cabbage and cornbread and a glass of Kool-Aid, but I am anxious to see Daddy.

"What happened to Daddy's car?" I ask after we've climb into the black behemoth.

"Oh, we traded that old thing in" she replies. "I told your father it was time to step it up." She puts on her turn signal and taps her fingers to the beat of the blinker as she waits to merge into traffic.

"Hey Baby", Daddy says weakly from his hospital bed. He smiles his gold-toothed grin, and for a moment he is just Daddy, my short, chubby, teddy bear of a father I used to watch old westerns with. I remember sitting next to him, both of us eating two chocolate chip cookies with a slice of American cheese in between them like a sandwich, and wondering if I should just pretend that I don't know that the Indians in the television show were really white people wearing makeup. He smiles at me, but it doesn't reach up to his eyes, once a chocolate brown and now the color of shit. Above them, his eyebrows are thinning.

“Hey Daddy,” I try to be cheerful. I lean down, give him a hug and breathe in his scent. I try not to see the tubes coming out of his arms or the machines he’s hooked up to. I hold him close and try not to think about how fragile he feels in my arms.

I remember taking naps with him every Sunday after church until I got my period and my mother said I was a woman, and too old to take naps with my father. She said it was inappropriate. So, she probably wouldn’t approve if she knew that right now, at twenty-seven years old, all I want to do is climb into the hospital bed and cuddle with Daddy until we both fall asleep. I want to lay with him, close my eyes, and imagine that I am eleven again.

Twelve years old is the age of accountability. It was the age Jesus taught in the temple. It was the age Jesus took on the role of savior telling his earthly mother when she scolded him for not following her home to Galilee, “Didn’t you know that I must be about my father’s business?” Jesus had to choose between the mother that he loved and the father that he served.

I wish I could go back to before I turned twelve, before I got my period, before I knew that Daddy was an earthly man. I close my eyes and wish hard, but Daddy begins to cough and I reluctantly open them again. I have to let him go so that he can sip some water. As I watch him struggling for breath, all the tubes and machines come back into view. I know I can’t go back to being eleven years old again. And he can never go back to being just Daddy.

7.

Janice unlocks the door to my father's home and I go inside and straight up the stairs without taking my shoes off. My suitcases bang against each carpeted step, but I don't bother lifting them up. Let her get mad. I'm mad too. How could she just sit there and have dinner as if nothing is happening? How can she watch a movie and eat popcorn and laugh with her friends?

I didn't think of anything at first when we pulled into the Henrys' driveway. Surely, we are here to drop something off or pick something up. It'll just be a minute. I'll go inside too, and say hello. Lisa and Wade are Daddy's friends. I don't want to be rude.

But then there was talk of PTA meetings, and bake sales while Lisa and Wade's two boys played video games. Lisa made dinner. Everyone ate. Wade ran out to the video store with a movie and everyone gathered in the living room and dimmed the lights. I stood there in the darkened entryway wondering what was going on.

Janice's chubby cheeks and beady eyes reminded me of a cartoon chipmunk as she nibbled on a handful of popcorn, white specks getting caught in the corner of her mouth. She didn't look at me, standing in wonder. She didn't look down into the popcorn bowl on her lamp. As if she were a crude wind-up doll, she rhythmically dipped her hand in the bowl and then brought it to her mouth, over and over again.

Perhaps she didn't know. Did she not notice how much weight he had lost, his hospital gown falling loosely around his ashen body? Perhaps she had not seen him drugged up on morphine, absent-mindedly grasping at his anus to dislodge the feces that caused his constipation. Had she not talked to his doctors, heard the prognosis? Perhaps she didn't know.

It seemed as if I stood in that entryway for a long time though I must have sat down at some point. At some point I must have said goodbye to the Henrys, gotten into the car and rode home with Janice. But I don't remember that now as I stomp up the stairs past the garage sale oil painting of Black Jesus. I'm thinking of Daddy's fingernails clogged with excrement.

When I reach the guest bedroom, I close the door behind me, and throw my bags onto the bed. The furniture is too large for the room, which can barely contain the matching queen-sized bed, chunky nightstand, dresser and mirror that are obviously remnants of Janice's life before my father. Leaning against the door, I concentrate on the ornate filigree carved into the headboard and breathe. I breathe and press my palm into the corner of the dresser, hard. I came home to see Daddy but he is nowhere to be found. He wasn't in that hospital room; he isn't in

this house. I walk over to the dresser and open all the drawers one by one. Daddy kept some of his clothes in here because there isn't enough room in the master bedroom. Daddy always had too many clothes.

“You're just like a girl,” I teased him once when I was in junior high. We were on a shopping trip to Fairbanks and had spent the better part of an hour searching for a dress shirt in the perfect shade of purple to wear under his white Easter suit. “No one is going to see it under your robe anyway,” I reasoned.

“God sees everything,” he joked.

I laughed and said, “Ok, ten more minutes.”

He agreed, pulling out a lavender shirt with white buttons. “What about this one?”

That lavender shirt isn't in any of these drawers, but I do find an old army green T-shirt Daddy used to wear under his uniform. It's worn so thin I can almost see my fingers through it. It's not nearly as warm as the flannel pajamas I've packed, but I take off my sweater and jeans and put it on.

I open the jewelry box on the dresser and finger the gold and silver cufflinks inside. One set has his initials engraved on it. Which set was the one that I gave him for his birthday last year?

I open the closet and run my hands over his expensive suits in various hues. Blues, grays, browns, some with thin stripes, some without. A few black suits, a white suit and my favorite, a mustard-colored suit Daddy likes to wear when he preaches his sermon about faith. A mustard-colored suit to remind them of a mustard seed.

I sit on the floor and put my hands inside each one of his many shoes, opening and closing my fist, reaching my fingers down towards the toe.

I hear Janice coming up the stairs, and I quickly reach up and turn out the light so that she'll think I'm already asleep. Yet, instead of getting into bed, I climb into the closet with Daddy's clothes. There on the closet floor, a plastic bag full of his silk ties on my lap, I wonder where all these suits will go. I shake my head hoping that the sight of Daddy wetting himself on the way to the bathroom will fall out of my memory and into the plastic bag. But the shaking just makes me dizzy. I can still see him struggling to get out of the hospital bed. I can still hear him ask, embarrassed, "Where's Tabitha?"

I press my face against the cool closet wall and try to take deep breaths. I swallow hard and blink, blink, blink. But it's too late. I know. I close the closet doors as if the aluminum doors can keep the truth out. But I know.

Part Two

8.

I was almost ready for bed. I'd taken my bath, put on my long army T-shirt, and brushed my teeth. My skin was slick with Crisco, because we were out of body lotion again. But I didn't think about the lack of beauty supplies in my house as I tiptoed past the night-light glow of Fabian's room and trotted down the stairs with the Crisco can in one hand and my stuffed unicorn, Starbrite, in the other. I was six. Too young to care that my legs smelled like fried chicken or, the fact that it was the third time that week that my legs smelled like fried chicken. I also didn't mind that for the past two days, I'd been wiping my butt with paper napkins because we were out of toilet paper again. I did mind though, that when I got to the den, Mommy made a joke about my glistening limbs and everyone laughed but me.

She said, "Dang girl, how much grease did you use? You're so oily a poor fly would slip and break his leg if he landed on you."

She laughed so hard, barely any sound came out. I could scarcely hear her wheezing in the dark, her mouth flung open wide, white teeth reflecting the flickering of the television screen. Gidget laughed too. Just like Mommy. Always just like Mommy. Even Daddy, without taking his eyes off the television

screen, let out a low chuckle. I know he wasn't being mean, but I got mad at him anyway for not letting me in on the joke.

“What's so funny?” I asked.

I knew Mommy would just swat the air and say, “Oh, never mind,” and go back to watching TV. Even though I was old enough to get myself ready for bed, and didn't ask for a bedtime story every night like Fabian did, I was still not a part of the big girls club that Mommy and Gidget belonged to. But I said my part so that she could say hers knowing that once we do we can move on to the next step, which was Daddy braiding my hair for bed.

“Oh, never mind,” Mommy said.

I placed the Crisco can on the coffee table in front of Daddy and sat on the floor between his legs. Then I placed Starbrite in between mine. Daddy laughed at something on television and dipped his hand into the can to dig out a scoop of lard. He mashed his hands together, and rubbed them back and forth, back and forth, until the scoop became a thick coating of grease on his palm and fingers. He pressed his hands along my hair, making it all smooth and shiny.

“Kitchen,” Daddy ordered and I bent my head down so he could grease the hair at the back of my neck. I closed my eyes as he rubbed grease onto my scalp. His fingers were soft and warm and I liked it when he moved his hands in circles on my head.

He took the comb out of his own head and I leaned back into his lap bracing myself for what was going to happen next. He combed my hair out, tugging at the naps, from my forehead down to the ends at my shoulders. My

head bobbed back and forth with each tug as the teeth of the comb scratched and scraped my scalp where his fingers had just been. He closed his legs in on me, squeezing me with his thighs to warn me when he was about to tug hard. And because I knew he didn't mean to, I pretended it didn't hurt. I felt better when he put the comb back in his head.

“Two?” he asked.

“Two,” I answered.

He knew I hated to have more than two braids in my head at one time. Other girls had six or seven braids hanging down all over. They thought they looked pretty because their braids were closed with shiny barrettes or colorful ponytail holders. But I thought it made them look like an ant or a spider with legs coming out of their head. I'd rather just have two braids, one on either side, like Anne of Green Gables. Anne and I had a lot in common. Both of us were not boys. Both of us talked too much.

But, I'm not an orphan like Anne. I used to think that maybe I was adopted, too; I used to wish I was, but everyone always said how much I look like Mommy, so I'd given up on that.

Daddy braided my hair just the way I liked it. Afterwards he pulled my head back, kissed me on my forehead and said, “Goodnight, Baby.” I stood up and gave Daddy a kiss on the cheek. His eyes were already fixed on the TV again, but I knew he heard me when I said, “Goodnight Daddy.”

9.

I had two quarters in my hand and I was circling the section of plastic seats that had small, static-y televisions connected to them, waiting for my turn. The floor of the bus station looked dirty despite the fact that it had just been mopped and my sneakers left small prints on the ammonia-washed linoleum. As I circled around I peeked over the shoulder of the television viewers: a lanky gray man with a long gray beard, a wrinkled woman with a sleeping kid on her lap, a little boy who wasn't even watching, just playing with the knobs. They were all watching the same day-time talk show but I couldn't hear what the host was saying over the announcements coming from overhead about what buses were coming and what buses were leaving. I needed my own television.

Daddy caught my hand mid-circle and, kneeling beside me, asked, "Don't you want to stay with Daddy?"

I nodded, yes, and then looked at Mommy to see if that was ok.

She was so angry last night, yelling and throwing things, showing “proof” in Daddy’s face. I was shaken awake by Fabian who came down from the top bunk with his cabbage patch doll, Larry, because he heard a noise. I thought that he’d had another one of his night terrors, which was why he was sharing a room with me in the first place, so I scooted over to make room for him in my bed. Instead of climbing in, he tugged at my hand, wanting me to go with him and Larry to investigate. Before I could get out of bed, there was another sound, like breaking glass. I thought whoever broke that glass was going to be in trouble. I thought it had to be Gidget since I could see through her open door that she wasn’t in bed. The thing was, Gidget never accidentally broke anything or got into trouble.

We found her at the top of the stairs curled up in her pink Miss Piggy pajamas that matched her pink Miss Piggy canopy bed. Then I heard the screaming. Mommy was yelling at Daddy because he was late again. Mommy was talking so fast I couldn’t hear everything she was saying, but I knew that she was cursing, and Mommy only cursed when she was really, really mad.

Gidget tried to shoo us back into bed, but Fabian started crying. Gidget pulled him into her lap and I sat next to her on the floor. We couldn’t see Mommy or Daddy, but we could hear them in the kitchen. Daddy was yelling now and Mommy was crying. Gidget was crying. Fabian was crying. But I wasn’t. I didn’t cry.

In the bus station, surrounded by luggage, Mommy was quiet. “We’re leaving,” she said. Not mad or sad. Just plain. Decided. She looked toward the glass doors where Fabian was playing a game. He tiptoed toward the doors slowly causing them to open automatically and then ran away from them fast, so that they would close again.

“Fabian, please stop that,” she said, more tired than annoyed.

“*You’re* leaving” Daddy replied. “Tabby is staying with me. Aren’t you, baby?”

Again I nodded. Again I looked up at my mother for permission. But she wasn’t paying any attention to me.

“Don’t be silly, Ray.” Then a sigh. Then “It’s here. Let’s go Fabian. Say goodbye, Tabitha.”

She didn’t have to call Gidget, she was already right behind Mommy holding our bag of bologna sandwiches and juice boxes.

Daddy stood. He talked back: “I said Tabby is staying with me.” He put his hand on my shoulder. But Mommy wasn’t listening. She was halfway across the room, pulling a suitcase toward the glass doors where the attendant had appeared to take tickets.

“I’m going to stay here with Daddy, ok?” I called out. She kept walking. The attendant took the tickets. Gidget stood behind her with our lunch.

“Carolynn!” Daddy cried. She didn’t look back. She made the doors open. I wondered what would happen when I got hungry. I looked up at Daddy to ask if

he was going to make me lunch, but he was watching Mommy disappear behind the glass.

I couldn't see her anymore and I was scared. Was she really going to leave me? Leave us? Daddy finally looked at me. His eyes were watery; he was scared too. I wanted to stay there with him.

"Bye, Daddy," I said. And then I ran from under his hand towards the glass doors. Open fast, I prayed.

10.

There was a loud bang that sounded like a gun shot and I climbed into the back seat with Gidget and Fabian. I couldn't see Daddy's office that well from the back seat, but then I couldn't see much from the front either. Just two patches of light on the third floor and long shadows moving across the windows. It was all darkness in the steps between the car and Daddy's office and even though there weren't any other cars in the parking lot, and no one walking around outside, Gidget checked all the doors for a third time to make sure they were all locked.

It had still been light outside when we dropped Mommy off at Zayre's for work. After Mommy got out of the car, I climbed into the front seat with Daddy and yelled out the window for her to bring home a box of chocolate malt balls. Mommy was always buying us something from work to make up for leaving us: candy, gum, trading cards, little bouncing balls, spider rings. She smiled and then blocked the sun with her hand to wave back her answer.

Mommy started working part-time when we moved to Georgia a couple of months ago because she said she wanted to “contribute to the household income.” She told Daddy that she needed something of her own. When Mommy worked during the day, Gidget walked over from the fourth and fifth grade wing of the primary school to the first through third grade wing to walk Fabian and me home from school. Gidget read us the note that Mommy always left for us on the kitchen table. The note was always the same: Eat snack on counter, Watch the Great Space Coaster and the Land of the Lost, Don’t leave the house or open the door for strangers. Don’t let anyone know that you are home alone. Mommy wrote the instructions out again each day, and each day we read them, excited about our new responsibilities.

When Mommy worked at night, we all piled in the car with Daddy and drove her downtown to work. She felt better working at night when she knew that Daddy was home with us, but, that didn’t stop her from hesitating at the glass doors of the store before she went in to work. When she looked back and waved goodbye on those nights when she wouldn’t be home until long after we were asleep, her expression was a strange combination of sadness and relief.

Tonight was going to be a good night. Daddy was making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner and we could eat them on TV trays while watching *Facts of Life* and *Different Strokes*. Daddy said we could stay up a little past our bedtime, but first, he had to stop in at the company for a few minutes.

He told me he would be right back before he closed his door, but then he opened it again to tell Gidget in the backseat to make sure all the doors were locked.

That had been a long time ago and there had been a lot of weird noises since then. With each metallic scraping or hollow click, I sank deeper and deeper into the safety of the soft leather car seats. Fabian didn't seem too scared but then he hadn't seen the same movies that Gidget and I had, the ones about Russian terrorists waging wars against U.S. soldiers, or ones about spies hired by the government to find top secret files in dark offices. Sometimes those spies got caught by the bad guys and were shot in the chest. Fabian hadn't seen the movies I had about Russian spies and middle-eastern. Mommy didn't let Fabian watch those movies because he was too sensitive.

I knew that Daddy was a top government official. He was a First Sergeant in the Army and that made him important. He probably had top secret files in his office that some pretty bad guys needed for their evil mission. Who knew what they would be willing to do to get them? Daddy could be hiding under his desk with his gun cocked while the bad guys were trashing his office looking for the secret codes they needed to release a deadly bomb. Or maybe Daddy was tied to a metal folding chair while the bad guys pulled out his fingernails one by one until Daddy told them where the government was hiding a stash of money.

Gidget must've known that we could be in danger, because after a while, she announced that we were going to walk home. She swore she knew the way,

and even though I felt bad about leaving Daddy, I figured it was probably best if we all stuck together.

Gidget walked closest to the street and held Fabian's hand. I walked closest to the woods. I was a little scared too, I wanted to hold hands, but I didn't let on. I just put my hands in my pockets because I was also a little cold. We walked and walked and walked. We walked by the Class Six and the Post Exchange and the Commissary. We turned and walked by the Fourth of July field where Fabian and I ran with sparklers before the fireworks began last summer. I kept looking back to make sure no one was following us. There was a long stretch of land where there was no sidewalk so we had to walk in the road a little. Fabian started shivering so Gidget gave him her jacket. I looked into the woods and listened for coyotes even though my teacher said there weren't many in Georgia. There was no moon, and no breeze and no one else in sight.

When we got to our housing area, I ran towards our house hoping Daddy was there already. Gidget yelled for me to slow down, but ran too, dragging Fabian. The house was dark and locked when we reached it, so we went next door to the Mitchell house. When Mrs. Mitchell opened the door, Gidget told her that something had happened to Daddy. She was talking really fast and kept on talking even when Mrs. Mitchell gathered us inside. Gidget was saying "He's been shot or kidnapped. Call the MPs." And she wouldn't let go of Fabian's hand.

But the police didn't come. We had dinner with the Mitchell's. Pork chops and eggplant and squash. I pretended to like the squash because Grandma told me that I'm one-quarter Indian and Indians eat squash. The police didn't come by the

time Mrs. Mitchell put us in bed either. We lay in Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell's room in one big bed that smelled like baby powder but Gidget kept getting up to look out the window.

And then there were blue lights shining into the room and Mommy was scooping up Fabian and Gidget was wiping away tears with the back of her hand.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked.

"He's outside straightening things out with the MPs," Mommy said.

Her voice was all trembly like she might cry too, but she yelled instead. Not right away. She waited until we get home, but as soon as we get in the house, Mommy was yelling at Gidget and pulling up her dress to spank her and Gidget wasn't even trying to get away. Daddy came in and I ran to him.

He picked me up and ran to Mommy, telling her, "Don't spank her. Don't spank her."

It was too late. Mommy had already pulled Gidget's panties down and was slapping her butt with her ringed hand. But Daddy was the one who was crying. Gidget was silently stretched across Mommy's knees with her head near the floor and Daddy was the one begging, "Don't spank her, Carolynn. Don't spank the girl."

11.

When you are the new kid in town, it's your job to find friends. They're not just going to come to you. Since I'd been the new kid a lot, I knew this from experience. If we moved during the school year, it was easy because I would meet all the kids my age in class. But in the summer, it was harder because I had to find them where they were playing. Daddy said that I was a go-getter so he wasn't too worried and he drove me around our new neighborhood so that I could find out where all the playgrounds were.

When Mommy told us that we were moving to New York, I pictured tall buildings and bright lights, but it turned out that the military base Daddy was stationed to was actually six hours north of the New York I saw on television. The New York I dreamed of was home of Broadway and Wall street. Yet, the New York we moved to was home to shaded lakes and dairy farms. Although Daddy was only driving thirty miles per hour, I rolled down the windows and stuck my head out in the wind to take in the manure-scented air. I counted all the brightly

painted water towers in the distance. I scoped out all the tall-grassed, dandelion-picking, grasshopper-catching fields. I picked out the best climbing-trees.

Even though Mommy said it looked like it was going to rain, I begged and begged and begged her to let me go out after lunch the next day to find some kids to play with. She said okay, but I had to come in as soon as any rain fell, and put my plate in the sink first. I ran out the screen door before she made me take Fabian along.

I went to both the playgrounds Daddy showed me but there weren't any kids there. I guessed their mothers thought it would rain too. So, I walked along the backs of houses thinking that maybe they are all playing in their own yards. I cut through the clinging air, thick as molasses, with a stick I found on the edge of a neighbors driveway. But the air was winning, leaving its mark on me in balmy beads and sweat stains. Thirsty dogs barked hoarsely at me, their panting making them look more pitiful than predatory. After a while, I decided to give up and go home but since I really didn't want to finish unpacking, I zig-zagged between houses and followed the sidewalks around loops and dead-ends, taking my sweet time.

It was on one of those loops that I heard the drumming. It wasn't music. Just drumming. The tappity tap tap breaking up the solid gray day. So I followed the taps around the loop to an open garage where three boys played in a band, singing and dancing to a tape player while a little girl, younger than Fabian, danced around with her doll. The Beatles' "Come Together" was playing under the drums the biggest blonde boy was beating. He was older than Gidget, at least

in high school, and he stopped playing his drums when he saw me watching. The other blonde one, Gidget's age probably, at least in junior high, turned then with his guitar in hand. The guitar was real, but his playing wasn't. He pretended to touch the strings but fingered the air instead. He turned and saw me, and face scrunched against his freckles, asked, "Who are you?"

Before I could offer my hand and introduce myself the way Daddy taught me, the smallest boy, my age, stepped between us. His hair was dark while the other boys' hair was light, and his eyes were light while the other boys' eyes were dark, but he had the same freckles over the same broad nose. He smiled and said "We're playing The Beatles. Wanna play?"

The scrunched-faced kid said, "You can't just ask her to join the band. You have to ask *us* first."

The high school kid got up and put his hand on the scrunched-face kid's shoulder. "Chill out," he said. "We need a George, anyway."

And then to me he said, "I'm Scott, this is Brian and this is Mikey."

"Michael" corrected the dark one.

"Michael. Whatever," continued Scott, "We're working our way through Abbey Road."

I said "Tabitha" and offered my hand and Scott filled it with a fake guitar, plastic body, rubber band strings. I couldn't hide my disappointment.

Michael showed me his toy guitar and informed me that, "We don't get real instruments until we're 12. That's what Mom says. And then we get lessons too. Scott plays the drums so he's Ringo. And Brian is John, but he just started his

lessons. Scott says I should learn the bass and be Paul. But I like George better because he wrote 'Here Comes the Sun' and that's my favorite song. And also, 'Something', which is Mom's favorite song. Plus, he's the youngest and I'm the youngest so it makes sense. And also, George is the quiet one, like me."

"Why don't you be quiet right now?" Brian shoved Michael back into his position on the other side of the propped up broom they are using as a microphone. Michael looked at his conversed feet and then looked up into Brian's eyes. He set his jaw, opened his mouth, but then closed it again. His eyes flittered around rapidly, but he seemed frozen in place as if he was suspended in the moment, opening and closing his mouth like a hooked fish.

Daddy said never to back down from a bully when they teased me for being smart and Michael seemed smart too, and nice enough to be my friend so I stepped between him and Brian and said, "You don't have to push him. I'll be Paul and Michael can be George. I like Paul the best, anyway."

That was a lie. I didn't know which one was Paul and which one was George. I'd only heard The Beatles a few times at my Grandma's house and she never told me who was who. Grandma also played Elvis Presley and Kenny Rogers a lot, but I'd learned not to ask her too many questions about her music because she'll start telling me a long story about when she was a kid and forget what my question was in the first place.

"Whatever," Scott said. "Let's just play." and he went to rewind the tape.

Michael pointed to the girl with the doll. "That's Jenny. But she's not in the band, she just dances." Jenny hid her face behind her doll and waved the vinyl

arm at me. I waved back and then got into my place, ready to play bass. “Come Together” started again and Michael turned to me, grooving and smiling, happy to be George. That’s when I noticed that his eyes were army-green.

12.

“Tabitha, Tabitha, I’ve been thinking,” Daddy sang.

“Tabitha, Tabitha, I’ve been thinking,” I repeated.

“About what to stop your breath from stinking,” he continued.

“About what to stop your breath from stinking,” I giggled.

“Crest and Colgate just won’t do.”

“Crest and Colgate just won’t do.”

“You’re gonna need some Listermint too!”

“You’re gonna need some Listermint too!”

We sang as we pulled out of the movie theater parking lot, on post where we had just watched *Action Jackson*. Before the movie started Daddy had sworn me to secrecy because we both knew it was not the kind of movie a 10-year-old should be watching.

“No way, Ray!” Mommy would have said if Daddy had told her of his intention to take me, “Too much cursing and violence.”

Under normal circumstances Daddy probably would've agreed. But, he had already planned to see it today, and since he was suddenly stuck with me, due to a Home Interior party my mother was going to, he took me along. He refused to change his plans, partially out of stubbornness and partially out of spite.

"Tabitha, Tabitha, I've been thinking"...we sang as we passed by troops of soldiers running alongside the road, "about what to stop your breath from stinking"...we sang as we drive by a convoy of tanks on their way to the artillery field, "Crest and Colgate just won't do"...we passed by the armed soldiers that guard the gate to the military base...."You're gonna need some Listermint too". We headed northeast on route three, away from Ft. Drum and toward the village of Carthage.

We stopped. I looked out my window and saw a dilapidated diner barely standing under a rusted sign that read "The Golden Unicorn." We had driven by this diner many times since we moved here last year. It was one of those greasy spoons that always had a fresh pot of coffee on the burner and two waitresses, one really skinny and the other really fat, ready to pour you a cup. Rumor had it that the Golden Unicorn Diner served pancakes as big as your head for fifty cents apiece. Mommy always pleaded with Daddy to stop in sometime for breakfast, but we never did.

It wasn't breakfast time and Mommy wasn't with us, so I didn't understand why we were stopping now.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Daddy. We had just eaten a large popcorn and a box of Rasinettes at the movies.

“I have to meet with someone. I’ll only be a few minutes. Do you have your book?”

Daddy knew that I carried a book with me at all times. Today was no exception. I reached into my coat pocket and held up The Babysitter’s Club #57 “Mary Ann vs. Logan” and nodded. Daddy nodded back and slipped out of the car.

I was so wrapped up in the break-up of Mary Ann’s junior-high relationship that I didn’t notice the time passing. It was only when I got to the last chapter that I looked up at the dashboard clock and realized that fifty minutes had gone by. What was Daddy doing in there? From where I sat in the car, I could only see the fat waitress walking back and forth with a coffeepot in her hand and an old trucker smoking near the window, so I decided to step out of the car and take a closer look. I peered through the dirty pane glass window and scanned the padded booths for Daddy. The place was empty. I was just about to panic when I spied him sitting in the back corner. His back was to me, but I recognized him by the clothes he wore and the wrinkle at the back of his neck.

He was sitting across the table from a woman with long fingernails painted in loud colors. Through the window I can see them holding hands. Daddy rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at his watch. He must have lost track of time as well, because he suddenly jumped up to leave.

The painted woman lost her smile and reached for him. She grabbed him by the arm, and tried to pull him back down into his seat. He pried her hand off his arm and bent down and kissed her on the mouth.

I didn't want to watch that anymore, so I went back to the car, put my seatbelt on and opened my book to chapter fifteen. Moments later, I heard his footsteps on the gravel parking lot. I didn't look up when he opened the door, put on his seat belt and started the car.

“Good book?” he asked.

“Uh huh,” I answered and then turned the page.

He threw the car in reverse, put his arm around the back of my seat and looked behind him. I saw nail marks on the inside of his arm, above his elbow, as we rolled backwards.

“Tabitha, Tabitha, I've been thinking...” he sang as he pulled out of the diner parking lot, “about what to stop your breath from stinking” he continued as he headed southwest on route 3 towards the army base. I didn't feel like singing anymore, so I kept my head in my book and let him go on without me. “Crest and Colgate just won't do. You're gonna need some Listermint too!”

13.

“Book sale! Book sale!” I called down the street, “Get your limited edition book by local writer, Tabitha Robinson for only fifty-cents!”

I tried to sell my handwritten stories to the neighborhood kids, just as they had sold me their cups of lemonade. I thought it was a fair trade; refreshment for entertainment. I thought we could just pass quarters from palm to palm all summer.

“Book sale! Book sale!” I called out to them as they played kick ball in the cul-de-sac, but they didn’t buy my books.

“We get enough books at school,” they said.

They said, “Reading is for nerds.”

The mothers in the neighborhood were much more interested. They stepped down from their porches with their paper fans and ambled towards my painted ply-wood stand.

They said “Oh look!” and picked up my homemade books, leafs of lined notebook paper folded and stapled together. I sketched illustrations on the left

page, and wrote the text on the right. The mothers flipped from the table of contents to the “About the Author” Page.

“How precious!” they said, when they saw my hand-drawn self-portrait.

They often paid the fifty cents and then took the books back to their porch to read my bound stories in the shade. Sometimes they handed me all the coins in their purses and told me to keep the change. Michael counted and sorted my money. He kept it safe in a toy cash register he borrowed from Jenny’s Grocery Store play-set. He acted as my agent, manager and publisher, letting the mothers know when I had a new title coming out, helping me copy and staple the books. I gave him twenty-five percent of my profits. I knew it was more than most business partners earned, but Michael was also my best-friend.

We sat in my front yard, pulling up dandelion spores and making wishes as we waited for our customers to arrive. Michael wished for money, I wished for fame. I wished for Mason McCullers to notice me, Michael wished for Amanda Beady. We both wished for a 3-foot swimming pool for our back yards. We blew the white feathery seeds all around us, transforming our private bubble behind the book stand into a snow globe, letting the seeds cling to our hair and stick to our sweaty necks and shoulders.

Car by car, fathers returned from a month of field training. The kick ball game got interrupted when the kicker at the plate took off across the asphalt to greet his father who had just pulled up in the driveway. Younger children met their fathers at the door, nodding emphatically when they were asked: “Did you mind your Mama while I was gone?” As the camouflaged wave of soldiers began

to flood Davis circle, Michael and I continued to pluck weeds. Michael wasn't too eager to see his father again, and despite how eager I was to see mine, I knew Daddy would be the last father home that night. We made wishes, dreaming of cool pool water, until Mommy came out to tell Michael that his mother called to say it was time for him to come home.

Mommy kicked off her satin house shoes and tiptoed barefoot across the grass to help us pack up our books and signs.

"I haven't read this one," Mommy said as she picked up a story about two teenagers who find a baby in a basket while their parents are out of town for the weekend.

"It's new," I replied. "I only have three copies so far."

"I'll take one." She fished two quarters out of her pocket and handed them to Michael. He put the money away and wrote out a receipt for her. I put the rest of my books in my back-pack.

As I watched Michael make his way down the street, Daddy's burgundy car roared into view. Mommy and I quickly skipped over to the driveway to meet him.

"Miss me?" Daddy said as he pulled out two large pizzas from the passenger seat. I hugged him around his waist and breathed "Yes! Yes!" into his stomach.

"I cooked," Mommy said, perturbed. "I made all your favorites."

"You cooked chitterlings and cabbage and cornbread?" Daddy didn't seem to believe her but kissed her on the cheek anyway.

“Yes. Well, it’s probably cold by now anyway.”

Fabian came running outside yelling “Pizza! Pizza!” and jumped in circles around Daddy. Gidget remained inside, pressing her forehead into the mesh screened door.

“Okay, we’ll have both,” Daddy said. He handed Mommy the pizzas and she gave him the book in her hand.

“Tabitha wrote it,” she explained.

Daddy looked down at me and put his hand on my head and I stood up on my tiptoes to lift myself into his touch.

“Will you read it, Daddy?”

“Sure. I’ll read it after dinner.” He rolled up my book and stuck in his back pocket, ripping the cover a bit, before I got the chance to ask him if he wanted me to autograph it.

14.

When the intercom buzzed in Ms. Newton's room, I already knew what Mrs. Dixon, the secretary, would say: "Please send Tabitha Robinson to the office. Her mother is here to pick her up."

Every month, I got called down to the office at school because my mother was there to pick me up. I knew the drill: I must go straight to my room to pack. And not just books. I couldn't call Michael to say goodbye, because that would be embarrassing, but I could write him a letter to send in the mail from Grandma's house. I had one already written and in an envelope just in case the leaving ever stuck. But we never quite made it to Grandma's anymore.

One time, after we had gotten on the bus, Daddy got in his car and followed us for two hours to the next stop. When we got out to stretch out legs he was there waiting for us, and we went home. Another time, we had gotten on the bus and were about to leave until Mommy looked out the window saw Daddy looking up and waving his whole arm at us. She made the bus driver open the doors so we could get out.

Lately, we hadn't even made it to the bus station. We started driving there but Mommy and Daddy usually made up on the way and turned around. Last month they made up while I was packing. I really wished they would have made up their minds about whether we were going or staying before they pulled me out of class. I missed a lot of school that year.

I packed up my book-bag and shuffled my feet past the spring-themed bulletin boards to the office where Mommy was waiting with Fabian. Mrs. Dixon gave me a knowing look as Mommy signed me out, and I looked away and focused on the trophy case that lined the hallway outside the office. Fabian was happy to be getting out of school and ran to the car as soon as we exited the double doors of Faith Middle school. We were going to the high school next to pick up Gidget. I was dragging my book-bag, watching Mommy's long legs, her high-heeled shoes scraping the asphalt like scissors ahead of me when I remembered the spelling bee try-outs, and stopped.

"Hurry, Tabitha. We have to get your sister," Mommy said as if this wasn't the seventh time this year that we'd played this game. She unlocked the door for Fabian and threw her purse in the car.

"I can't come this time," I said, "I have the Spelling Bee try-outs after school today, remember?"

Mommy sighed. She smoothed her eyebrows with her fingers. She had forgotten too.

"I'm sorry. You're just not going to be able to be in the spelling bee this year."

“But I have to be in the spelling bee! I’m the defending champion!”

“Well, you can’t. We’re going to Grandma’s.”

“No, we’re not,” I said.

Mommy looked at me then. I wasn’t supposed to say no.

“We never really go to Grandma’s. We just play like we’re going. We always tell Daddy that we are leaving, but we never actually go anywhere.”

Mommy looked around the parking lot to see if anyone heard me. But everyone was inside. It was only 5th period.

“Get in the car, Tabitha,” Mommy said it quietly like a scream.

Fabian propped himself up on his knees in the backseat of the car and peered out the rear window at us.

“It doesn’t really matter. We’re just going come back anyway, but by then I’ll have missed the try-outs.” I put my book bag on my shoulders.

“Tabitha...” Mommy started, looking at the school behind me to see if anyone was watching us through the windows.

I looked back too. “You go ahead without me. I’ll get a ride home after the try-outs with Michael’s mom. I can stay at his house until you get back.”

I turned to go back inside and Mommy slammed the car door and followed me. She caught up with me before I even got to the sidewalk. She grabbed my arm but didn’t pull me back to the car. Instead she leaned in close shaking her head. “You are your father’s daughter, you know that?” she asked. “You can’t see anything beyond what you want. You are just like him.”

She said it like she was speaking some truth that we had all been afraid to name: I belonged to Daddy.

“I know,” I said and she let go of my arm, stunned, as if I slapped her. For several seconds, we stood facing each other with nothing left to say. I had made a choice, but this time, she was the one who asked me to.

I could feel the weight of the books on my back, so I shifted my bag and took a step towards school. I waited to see if she’s going to grab for me again, and when she didn’t, I turned and ran inside.

15.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked. Church was so long and I always came home starving. All that singing, and clapping and getting filled with the Holy Spirit worked up an appetite, Mother said. That’s why she always cooked a good meal on Sundays. Well, she started cooking the night before and usually just had to warm it up on Sunday.

“Chicken, pinto beans, greens and cornbread,” she said as she picked up all the coats and bibles the rest of us had carelessly flung onto the couch. She had just learned how to cook the greens so that they weren’t so bitter. She was so proud of herself that we’d had them for three weeks in a row.

The rest of the week we ate frozen pizza, Chef Boyardee or Hamburger Helper for dinner. On the nights when Mother and Daddy both worked, Gidget let us have the MREs Daddy brought home from work. She explained that they were Meals Ready to Eat, which was why all we had to do is put the package in a pot of boiling water so that they warmed up and came unstuck. She would let me and Fabian do that by ourselves and eat on the floor in front of the television. We

used to eat under the table and pretend we were camping in a tent like Daddy did when he ate MREs in the field, but at twelve years old, I'd grown out of that.

On Sundays we all ate together in the dining room. Once all the food was on the table there were no phone calls allowed until we were all done. That's why Gidget always ran into the house first to grab the phone and call her boyfriend before dinner was ready. She could only talk to him on the phone so far because she couldn't go on a real date until she is 16, which was in twenty-two days.

That day, the phone was already ringing when we got into the house.

"I'll get it," Gidget yelled as she ran towards the phone in Daddy's office, dropping her Bible on the couch. She returned a few seconds later, destroyed.

"It's Sister Jenkins" she told Daddy, as if it was weird that he would get a phone call at his own house. "You forgot about the programs for next week."

Gidget knew this meant she'd have to wait until after dinner to talk to her boyfriend, but she didn't have much time to mope because Mother put her to work heating up the greens and beans while she fried the chicken. I had to set the table. Fabian never had to help with dinner. And he never had to do the dishes. Mother said he helped in other ways, but I knew it was because he was the baby and the only boy.

But I didn't mention that because I didn't want to ruin her good mood. I circled the table, setting it perfectly, and even put the butter on the table to soften before I asked her my favor.

"Mother?" I said sweetly, innocently.

“Yes, *Daughter*,” she teased. She thought it was funny that I was suddenly calling her “Mother” instead of “Mommy.” I tried to explain to her that I was growing up and now that I was in sixth grade, I couldn’t go around calling her “Mommy” like I was some kind of baby.

“Remember you said you would think about me being able to start baby-sitting?” All the girls in my grade had started baby-sitting. It was only fair.

“I’m still thinking,” was her reply. “And I will continue to think while you go get your father for dinner.” The heat on the stove was too high, so cooking oil sizzled and popped over the cast iron skillet onto Mother’s arm. She rubbed her arm and frantically reached over frying chicken for the stove dial.

Well that didn’t work, I thought as I walked down the dim hall towards Daddy’s office. I knew I should have asked Daddy first. He could always get Mother to do what I wanted. I stopped in front of his door to practice how I was going to ask him. I was so busy trying to figure out how I was going to get him on my side, that I didn’t hear what Daddy was saying at first. It wasn’t until he raised his voice in anger that I began to pay attention. The door wasn’t closed all the way and although I couldn’t see him through the crack in the door, I knew by the shifting light that he was pacing back and forth behind his desk.

“I can’t! Not today. You know that”

then

“Ok, Okay. I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”

then, softer

“You have to stop calling here.”

then, whispers

“I miss you too”

I threw the door open and let it bang against the wall.

He jumped. Then looked at me to see what I wanted. He moved the phone away from his ear to hear what I had to say. But I didn't know what to say. I just didn't want him to say any more. I wanted him to stop, but I didn't know how to say that. I wanted to tell him that I knew, but I wasn't brave enough.

So I just looked at him. And in my head I told him, “I know what you're doing, Daddy.” I said it over and over again, wishing he could read my mind, “I know. I know. I know what you're doing. I know what you're doing, Daddy.”

I didn't stop until he spoke.

“I'm gonna have to let you go, Sister Jenkins. Dinner is ready.”

then

“You too.”

then

“See you next Sunday.”

16.

We always had to sit in the very first pew because that was where the First Family sat. It went Gidget, Mother, Fabian and then me. Sometimes, if there were important guests, like visiting pastors from other churches, their family would sit in the front pew as well. Then, Fabian and I could sit in the second pew behind Mother to make room. Otherwise, we had to be in the front as an example. I used to be able to daydream or doodle in church when we were just a normal family, but now that we were the First Family I had to pay attention. There were too many people watching what I was doing so I had to make sure that I stood and sat and prayed and sang at all the right times. Sometimes, if Daddy prayed for too long I worried that I was going to fall asleep with my head bent and my eyes closed. I said “yes, lord” every once in a while to keep myself awake and when he said “in Jesus’ name” I said it too and lifted my head. That was when Daddy was most proud because I sounded devout.

Daddy was afraid that there were problems with us as a First Family. Other families had begun to talk about the fact that Gidget didn’t want to be in Youth Group. Mother said that Gidget was just shy and that she wasn’t going to

force her to participate even though it made Daddy mad. Instead, Gidget helped out in the daycare. Also, Mother didn't wear hats and the other ladies had begun to talk about why her head wasn't covered. Mother said she didn't like hats and she didn't see why she had to wear one. It didn't seem scriptural to her. But she bought a white pill box hat to wear on communion Sundays, just to keep the ladies from talking too much. Mother said the women in the Ladies Auxiliary were just a bunch of gossips so she let Sister Thorton be chair of that committee and was in charge of the Usher board instead. That was highly irregular.

I was a good preacher's daughter because I was a member of the youth group and I sang solos in the youth choir. Every once in a while I was even brave enough to testify if I had something to be thankful for, which was pretty holy for someone who is only thirteen years old. Fabian didn't have to do anything because he was the youngest and he was a boy. Boys didn't have to do much in church until they grew up and became the head of the household.

Reverend Borders and his wife and five children were visiting from Fairbanks for our church's one year anniversary, so I sat in the second row. The sun shone through the stained glass of New Hope A.M.E Baptist church casting an ethereal glow in the sanctuary as Reverend Borders, in his white robe, wiped beads of sweat off his forehead with his white handkerchief. I hid between Melinda and Tylanda Borders, scrawny twins two years younger than me, and wrote a letter to Michael on notebook paper stuck in between the gospels Mark and Luke. It said:

Dear Michael,

How are you? Do you miss me? Are you excited about eighth grade? School starts for me in 3 days! I hate the fact that we start school so early in Alaska. But, at least we get out for summer vacation earlier too.

I'm in church right now, so this letter may be shorter than usual. I just wanted to give you the good news. Last night I heard Daddy telling Mother that he wants to go to Seminary school, which is a school for ministers. He says that he is going to retire from the Army next year and move us to Alabama so that he can go to Selma University and preach full-time. Then he could have "Doctor" before his name and get a big church instead of this rinky-dink log cabin. Mother argued with him saying she doesn't understand why it's so important for him to go to an all black college in the south. Wasn't the whole point of him joining the army about getting out of the south? Wasn't the whole point of the civil rights movement so that black people didn't have to attend separate schools? She says she's not going to go back there, that she'd rather go back to New York. So then Daddy said, Ok, maybe he'll take us back to New York and leave us there while he goes to school and he can come up for vacations. Mother didn't like that either. But then Daddy said how much do I have to give up for you? So then Mother said fine. But she still wasn't happy about it.

They haven't told us yet, so I'm worried that they will change their mind. But I'm telling you now so that you can help me pray that it comes true. If we come back in a year, we can go to Spencer High together. And the best part about being a civilian is that I won't have to move away again. At least not until college.

Reverend Borders started the grunting that meant it was time to get filled with the Holy Spirit. The wide-brimmed hats of the sisterhood nodded towards

the altar to the beat of “Amen” and “Preach on.” Deacons stomped their feet, the organist played a few trembling notes as the white uniformed nurse stood guard in the aisle, eyeing Sister Thorton who at any minute would be speaking in tongues and dancing in the aisle. I knew the tambourines would start soon. So, I closed the letter:

So cross your fingers and toes and pray everyday that we come back to New York. Write back soon.

*Your BFF,
Tabby*

17.

Michael rang my doorbell at 6:50 am, and of course, I wasn't quite ready yet. I wanted to look perfect on my first day of high school but as I was getting dressed, I suddenly realized that the outfit I had picked out weeks ago for this momentous day was inappropriate for my first foray into the scholarly halls of Indian Creek High school. Everything from my eye shadow to my plastic hoop earrings to my skirt were in the same shade of muted green. The green alligator barrettes I had bought especially to match the green alligator of my white polo shirt seemed...too much, as if I was trying too hard to impress my fellow high schoolers. I shook my head at the mirror knowing that I looked all wrong.

When we had all gone shopping last month to buy new clothes, Daddy and I were both nervous about starting a new school. Gidget's grades weren't high enough to get into a good college so she was going to work during the day and

take a few night classes at the community college for a year or so until she raised her G.P.A. Fabian would be going back to the same school he attended here before we moved to Alaska. But Daddy and I, well, we were about to start a whole new chapter in our lives. Daddy said that we had to think of ourselves as adventurers. We had to be brave.

Daddy said, “From now on, everything counts. The next four years could determine the rest of your life. What college you get into. What job you have. But I’m not worried about you. You’re smart. I know you’ll do well.”

We stood in line waiting to pay for my clothes as Mother helped Fabian pick out school supplies from the list his teacher had sent home to all her students. Daddy had taken half the day off from work so that we could shop during the week and miss the crazy Saturday afternoon crowd at the mall, and he was still wearing his BDUs. Mother once said that when I was a toddler I used to think that every brown skinned man I saw in green and khaki camouflage was my father. I embarrassed her by running up to them in the commissary crying *Daddy! Daddy!* and hugging them around the legs. This made most men nervous, and most of their wives suspicious. Mother always had to make excuses for me as she pried my fingers off these strange soldiers.

I guess when I was little I couldn’t see what made Daddy special. I didn’t recognize what made him, and not those other guys, my father. Now I could pick Daddy out of a crowd fifty yards away. There was something about his stature that made him seem taller than his 5’9” frame. His wide strut was unlike the stiff walk of other men.

I said, "I don't think I'm gonna fit in. The other kids think it's weird to like school."

"I like that you're different," Daddy said. "I'm different, too."

Daddy and I went through the check-out and then waited with our bags on a bench for Mother and Fabian. I leaned against him, hugging my purchases against my chest. Even though Daddy said that it was good to stand apart, I knew that sometimes it made you lonely. Daddy was going to be all alone in Selma. I was lucky that I had Michael.

Michael rang the door bell again and I knew he was getting impatient. It was his idea to walk down to the bus stop together at six-fifty even though the bus wasn't scheduled to pick us up until seven-oh-five. When I pointed out that it wasn't going to take us fifteen minutes to walk four blocks to Applewood lane, he that he didn't want to risk being that dorky freshman who missed the bus on the first day of school and had to be dropped off by his mother. Or, heaven forbid, we have to run for it, climb up the bus steps out of breath, only to find out there wasn't an empty seat for us to sit together. Nothing could be more mortifying than having to sit with a complete stranger for twenty minutes all the way to school.

I begged Michael to ask Brian to take us to school in the used car he worked all summer to buy. There was no cooler way for a freshman to arrive to school but in the car of a senior. What a boost it would be for our reputation! But Michael thought that there was no way that Brian would agree to it, and although

their mother might appeal to Brian on Michael's behalf, their father would never force him to take us.

"Tabitha! Michael's here!" Mother called. I pulled some toilet paper off the roll and wiped away my eye shadow. I tore the barrettes out of my hair, took off my white bobby socks and Mary Jane shoes and slipped on my white keds.

"About time!" Michael sighs when I finally get to the door. "We'll have to walk fast."

He grabbed my hand to pull me along and then abruptly let it go. He stopped at the corner, looked both ways and then turned to me.

"You look nice," he said, and then hurried ahead of me.

We were in sight of the bus stop, and the nine or ten kids milling around it, when Brian came cruising up behind us in his car. Gray Talbert, a junior who lived in the next street over, was sitting in the passenger seat wearing a denim jacket even though it wasn't cold at all.

"Hey guys. Hop in." Brian said casually, which was about the nicest thing Brian had said to either of us since I had moved back to town. I looked at Michael and he looked down the street at the approaching bus. The kids were starting to line up.

"That's okay," Michael said. "The bus is coming now. We'll just catch that."

Brian was a bully, just like his father, and all the kids in the neighborhood knew to stay away from him. As his younger brother, Michael couldn't keep

enough distance, so he always pretended that his taunts didn't bother him. Yet, I could tell by the way Michael clenched and unclenched his fist around the shoulder straps of his book bag that he was nervous.

“Yeah, no thanks,” I added. “If my mom found out she'd probably get mad.”

I continued walking behind Michael who was moving faster and faster towards the bus. I kept my head down and my eyes on the back of Michael's sneakers but I could hear Brian's car chugging along beside us.

“C'mon, don't be such a baby. Get in,” Brian said. He stopped the car and Gray got out and opened the door for us. “What kind of brother would I be if I let you ride the bus like a loser?”

Michael stopped and turned around. Perhaps because this logic made sense to him, or perhaps because the bus had already stopped to let kids board, and Michael's plan to get a good seat had already been foiled. He nodded at me, and when I hesitated he nodded again, so I got in the car.

We rode in silence for a while, but after Brian nudged him in the ribs several times, Gray turned around and faced me.

“Hi,” he said. He smiled at me.

“Hi,” I said back.

Then he turned around and faced front. I looked at Michael, who shrugged.

Brian nudged Gray again. Gray turned to me and asked, “Are you glad to be back?”

“Sure,” I replied.

“I’m glad you’re back. I mean, the family that rented your place was weird.”

“Uh, thanks”

“So, are you nervous about high school?”

“I guess we are. A little,” I looked at Michael as if he could tell me why Gray Talbert was suddenly interested in how I felt. Why were Brian and his friend being so nice to us?

“Don’t worry, we’ll show you around. Won’t we Brian?”

“Yeah, sure,” Brian mumbled.

Gray punched Brian in the shoulder and then winked at me. I couldn’t help but smile. Gray faced front again and turned up the radio. He nodded his head to the beat, looking at me through the rearview mirror every once in a while. We got to school before the bus did and Gray let us out of the car. Brian and Gray ran ahead to meet some friends that were hanging out on the side of the building.

“Catch you dweebs later!” Brian called out. Gray kicked him hard in the shins.

“Oww, Man! Alright, fine,” he relented. “I’ll see you after school” and he slipped around the corner, pulling his cigarettes out of his bag.

“What was that about?” Michael asked. It was the first thing he had said since we got in the car.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully.

I reached out and grabbed his hand, suddenly afraid. I knew, although we had yet to even walk through the doors of the high school, something had already changed.

18.

“You must not tell anyone,” Mother said “what I’m about to tell you.”

“Okay,” I said my mouth full of cookie.

I was on a diet, determined to fit into a size 6 prom dress. Getting asked to prom by a senior was a really big deal. It took me almost a week to convince Daddy to convince Mother to let me go even though I wasn’t 16 yet. He’d been really sad ever since Mother made him come home from Selma and it was hard to get him to do anything these days besides work and watch television. After all that work to convince him to convince her, I had to look good.

Between the almost constant rain that barred me from exercising outside, and Daddy’s grip on the television remote keeping me from watching Mother’s exercise videos inside, I had to maintain a very strict diet. One chocolate chip cookie a day was my reward for having subsisted on yogurt, salad and carrot sticks for the past 17 days.

I usually liked to have my cookie alone so that I could really savor it. Sometimes, I nibbled around the edges with my front teeth, like a rabbit, turning it

around and around inside my mouth like a wheel, the cookie getting smaller and smaller, yet keeping it's circular shape.

Other times, I stuffed the whole cookie in my mouth, chewing furiously like a starved animal. I even made noise. "Mmmm, Mmmm" as if it were the best chocolate-chip cookie I had ever had in my entire life. "Mmmm, Mmmm", as if it was the last chocolate-chip cookie I would ever have again.

But this day was different. I was in the kitchen breaking my cookie into pieces and separating them into two piles, one pile for the pieces without chips and one pile for the pieces with chips. I had just stuffed the chip-less pieces into my mouth when my mother came in and interrupted my daily ritual.

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you."

"Okay," I said, flecks of cookie spraying from my mouth. Ever since Gidget transferred to SUNY Plattsburgh, I had become Mother's new best friend, yet I was a bad substitute. I was still eyeing the other half of my treat when she said:

"You have a baby sister."

I knew Mother was getting at something, but just what I didn't know. Obviously, she couldn't really mean I had a baby sister when my only sister, was almost four years older than me. I'm sure that if I was really paying attention I could figure out what she was trying to say, but I wasn't really paying attention.

"Did you hear what I said?" she asked.

“Mmhm,” I answered, not willing to sacrifice any more of my precious cookie to this silliness. Perhaps, I would allow myself one more to make up for this interruption. As I reached for the cookie jar, my mother put a letter on the kitchen counter beside me and leaned against the refrigerator waiting for me to read it. Fine, I wanted to say, if I read the letter, then will you go away? But I didn’t. Instead, I impatiently pulled the letter out of the envelope, glancing quickly at the baby photo included, and skimmed it for the main ideas.

Dear Ray, blah blah blah. I tried to respect your wishes and be blah blah blah you leave me no choice but to write you at home. Blah blah blah blah blah blah. After you abruptly ended things blah blah I found out I was pregnant. Blah blah daughter was born on March 11th. Her name is Cheyenne and she wants to meet her Daddy.

I didn’t have to finish the letter to understand what my mother had been trying to tell me. He did it again. And this time he had gotten the poor girl pregnant. I looked down on the counter where the wallet-sized photo lay face down. The back of the photo simply reads “Six Weeks.”

I didn’t want to turn the picture over. I didn’t want to look at her for fear I would recognize his deep set eyes and wide nose on her infant face. I didn’t want to see what he had done, but I had to.

I turned the picture over and took a good look at my father’s daughter. I had a baby sister.

“I don’t know what to do,” she began. “He denies it, of course, but how can I believe him after all of this?”

For a very long moment, I hated my mother. As she went on and on about the trust that Daddy betrayed and all the second and third and fourth chances he had blown, I looked at her yapping, weeping mouth and hated her. I hated her for telling me about any of this, for showing me all of this, for needing my help.

“I don’t even know who this girl is. Sherry. The postage is stamped in Selma.”

I tried not to listen to her, but she just wouldn’t stop talking.

“There’s no return address. How can I find her?”

“What do you want from me?” I shouted suddenly. By the look on her face, I knew that I’d just said that out loud. I braced myself for a slap but she just looked at me, frozen. I couldn’t take it back so, I went even further.

“Just leave me alone!”

I was out the back door and through the yard before I realized I was running. When I got to Church Street, I turned left and ran faster. I ran past Schell Road, Cole Road, and Antwerp Street. My chest was pounding, I couldn’t breathe, but I didn’t stop. I hit Main Street and turned right towards the river. The post office and barber shop whizzed by. I saw Michael coming out of the grocery store with his mom and Jenny, but I couldn’t stop. I flew right by him. I flew over the bridge, and through the trees along the river. I couldn’t feel my legs anymore but I know they are carrying me out and away.

I collapsed when I got to the cemetery on the edge of town. Sweat and mist mingled on my face and arms and, although my chest was on fire, I was cold.

I crouched on all fours, digging my fingers into the soggy ground, my nails clogged with dirt, struggling to catch my breath. The cool air was like glass shards in my lungs yet I couldn't help but suck it in. I sucked it in and held it in as long as I could.

I finally exhaled, and then I took another deep breath. Although it was slowing down, I could still feel my heart pulsing in my ears. I leaned over and rested my head on my muddied hands. I was not going to cry. I was just going to breathe. I was just going to rest here for a moment. I kneeled in the dirt with my forehead to the ground and as I closed my eyes, I remembered: I left my second cookie on the kitchen counter.

19.

The capital building was only thirty-three miles away. I gripped my index cards tight, curling the edges under the weight of my palms. When Albany was 52 miles away I began to get a little nervous. At 45, I could feel butterflies doing somersaults in my stomach. Now that it was only 33 miles away, I felt like I was going to puke. I rolled down the window. Daddy tried to get me to calm down.

“It’s just another speech and debate competition, baby. So what if there is going to be hundreds and hundreds of people there, more people you’ve ever spoken in front of in your whole entire life. The only person in the auditorium you need to worry about is me, and I’m on your side.”

He wasn’t helping.

“Daddy, you are so cheesy.”

“You used to like when I was cheesy. Cheesy was good. Now all of a sudden you’re too big to appreciate the cheese?”

“No. It’s just…”

“You’re representing the whole school.”

“Yeah.”

“And making it to nationals would really impress that Admissions officer at NYU.”

“Exactly.”

“You will. There’s a reason why you were chosen out of everyone else on the Forensics team to compete at the state competition.”

“Because I’m the captain?”

“Because you’re the best”

“Daddy…”

“I know. Cheesy. You know what you should be worrying about is the duet we got going on tomorrow. Let’s practice.” He turns down the radio and pretends to warm up his vocal chords.

“Daddy, we’ve sung that song a thousand times.”

“So one more time ain’t gonna hurt. C’mon.”

He sang his line:

“Precious Lord, take my hand”

But I didn’t sing mine.

“Daddy, I don’t feel like it right now.”

He smiled his gold-tooth smile and starts again.

“Precious Lord, take my hand”

“Daddy, I can’t. I’m too nervous.”

“I don’t believe it. Now you’re too big to sing with your father! You used to love to sing with me.”

“I still do.” I know he’s not really hurt, but I played along.

“It’s that boy. Ever since that Gary came into the picture...”

“Gray, Daddy.”

“...you don’t want to stay home and watch movies with me on Saturday night. You don’t want to sing with me at church. I don’t know if I like this guy. I’m telling you this Gary guy is bad news.”

“First of all, his name is Gray. Gray! And second of all, you said the same thing about Michael.”

“And I stand by that. I don’t particularly trust him either”

“Daddy, for the thousandth time, Michael and I are just friends.”

“That’s what you think. But he’s got something up his sleeve. You can see it in his eyes. They’re shifty. He’s got little shifty eyes.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Daddy had been warning me about Michael ever since he caught him snapping my bra strap the summer before 9th grade. I didn’t think he meant anything by it. It’s just that I moved away for two years and came back with these huge, foreign.... boobs. When I left I was in a training bra and when I came back I was a C cup. I think he was confused.

“You’re such a goober, Daddy”

“Ok, then. Why are you applying to NYU all of a sudden? We didn’t talk about NYU. We decided on Northwestern, Emerson, Syracuse”

“It’s a great school with a great Communications department. They have great internships-”

“Great, huh? So it has nothing to do with the fact that Michael is applying to Columbia?”

“It has absolutely nothing to do with Michael whatsoever.”

“Uh huh.” We sat in silence for a moment. 19 miles. I didn’t think I can grip my notes any tighter, but I tried

“*Precious Lord, take my hand,*” Daddy sang. He poked me in the ribs, but I was too busy staring out the window to sing my line so he did it for me. Imitating my soprano, he sang in falsetto.

“*Lead me on, let me stand.*”

His line: “*I am tired.*”

I smiled out the window. He wasn’t going to give up on me. It was my turn again.

“*I am weak,*” I sang.

And together: “*I am wooooooooorn!*”

20.

“Your father and I are separating.”

That’s what she said. But I knew what she meant. Daddy was leaving her.

Usually when Mother caught him, confronted him, he ended it. She would let him get away with it for a while. When he got too comfortable, staying out until 3 am, letting the girl call and hang up, getting sloppy, being obvious, she would threaten to leave. Daddy would have no choice but to give the other woman up, reluctantly, of course, often with tears. Sometimes, I thought he actually loved these other women. But he loved Mother more. She trusted this.

This time it was different.

Mother didn’t confront Daddy. She didn’t have a clue Daddy was having an affair. He went to her and confessed. And said he was leaving.

Yet she said, “Your father and I are separating.” As if they discussed it over tea and came to a mutual decision.

I didn't understand how she could be so calm.

I got off the phone with Mother, and called Gidget. She would know what was really going on.

"It's been going on for a while," Gidget told me. "Her name is Janice. She lives in Syracuse. He's moved in with her."

Wait! Wait! Wait! This isn't the way it works, I wanted to say. They always talk about leaving, they are constantly on the verge of leaving, but neither of them ever actually leaves.

She didn't wait. "He's left the church and is starting a new one there."

I got off the phone with Gidget, and called Michael.

"Get here as fast as you can," I said. I was not calm.

I wondered if Fabian knew. He was probably too stoned to care. As a matter of fact, all my friends were probably too busy partying to listen. It was spring break and I should have been home with Gray or lying on a beach somewhere. Instead, I was in an empty dorm room so I could work and save money and be responsible. Thank God Michael's break wasn't until next week. Thank God he was only 17 subway stops away on the 1/9 train.

By the time Michael got to me, I was in bed. I opened the door for him and then, without a word, crawled back in. Michael stripped down to his underwear and joined me. He didn't ask me what was wrong. He deserved to know since he came all the way downtown just because I asked him to. But I didn't offer it, and he didn't ask.

Gray would have freaked out if he saw Michael and me in bed together, spooning. At that moment I didn't care. Gray wasn't there. Michael was. Michael was there, had always been there. So I let him hold me while he sang "Golden Slumbers" to me over and over until he fell asleep.

The next day, Michael skipped class. I called in sick to work. We lay in bed until noon, talking. I told him about Daddy and he said what I was thinking:

"They've been married for, like, 25 years. What's the point of separating now?"

He said what I hoped:

"He'll come back."

We went to Bagel Bobs and ordered toasted sesame seed bagels with lettuce, tomatoes, and cream cheese and watched the skateboarders in Washington Square Park perform for a mixed audience of homeless veterans, students and lost tourists. Michael ate half of his bagel while I was still picking off and nibbling seeds. We jaywalked in crooked lines across the streets of Greenwich Village, dodging cabs and bike messengers. Pausing to admire the knock-off handbags and stolen watches, we wondered up and down Broadway. We browsed for hours at The Strand. Michael mumbled something about getting back to school. It was getting late. I picked up a book about Film Noir and pretended not to hear him. We stopped for slice of pizza on our way back down to Bleecker. Knowing that there wasn't anything we hadn't already seen at The Angelika or Film Forum, we

went to Kim's Video and rented two movies. We turned north and went to the deli on University Avenue that didn't card and bought wine.

I wasn't drunk. Not even close. Michael wasn't either, but we went crazy anyway. Jumping on the bed. Blaring music. Who was going to complain? Smoking inside the room instead of out on the balcony. We were wild. We stopped drinking out of glasses and chugged from the bottle because it seemed more rebellious.

We lay on the floor and said the inane things we would say if we were drunk:

"Why *isn't* the plural of moose, meese? Who makes up these rules?"

"How do they know what color to make things when they colorize old black and white movies? I mean, how do they know the girl's dress is supposed to be yellow? Do they make it up?"

Then we moved on to more serious topics.

His dilemma: "Why is it that the girl you like never likes you back, but of course, the girl you don't like, is crazy about you. Is God fucking with me or what?"

My gripe: "Why do parents always stay together for the children and then get a divorce as soon as the children are old enough to really know what's going on? They should have separated when I was eight. At least they would've been more protective of me then. They would have sheltered me from all the ugly details. And I would be over it by now."

Michael was quiet for too long. I looked over at him and his eyes were closed. His lashes were thick and dark. His eyes fluttered open.

"You're falling asleep. Do you want to get in bed?"

“No, I’m awake. I’m listening.”

But, even as he is said that his eyes closed again. He had French and Macro-economics the next day and he wouldn’t have any of his homework done because he’d been with me all day. He was cute curled on his side; his bottom lip twitching just a little. I wished I were really drunk, because then I could kiss him and have an excuse. He probably wouldn’t even bring it up the next day because he would think I didn’t know what I was doing.

I was sober, but I kissed him anyway, softly, my lips just brushing against his fuller ones. I pulled back and waited for him to open his eyes. He didn’t. He was really asleep. I snuggled into him tucking my head underneath his chin, breathing on his throat. He was warm. My heart was beating double-time as I slid my tongue out and tickled his Adam’s apple. He stirred, but quickly, before he woke up, I reached up and sucked his chin into my mouth. He awoke then and lowered his head to look at me. I kissed him full on the mouth, hard. He opened up and I dove in deep.

When we pulled away, breathing quick breaths, his fingers lingered on my lips as if he couldn’t believe they were just entwined with his. I couldn’t believe it either.

He had a look on his face that I’d never seen before and for the first time since we were nine I had no idea what he was thinking. I didn’t know what to do next. It just happened with Gray. He did all the work. How do I seduce someone?

I decided not to say anything at all. I stood and went to my dresser. I undressed with my back to him, wondering if he was as scared as I was. I crawled into bed, careful not to make eye contact and waited.

He stripped down, taking off his underwear, and joined me.

And it was as if his skin knew my skin. My mouth recognized his mouth. He knew how to touch; I engulfed his fingers. I knew where to bite; my head was in his hands. He was snug inside, a perfect fit. We moved and it was if my body remembered his. His words were so close that they buzzed against my ear and I was inside a seashell with the breaking waves. I caught his rhythm and we rocked and climbed together, rocked and climbed. I hung on for dear life.

21.

The phone rang. It was Mother. She said, “Your father called me at work today.”

I closed my psychology text. So much for studying for the mid-term.

“Not just once. Three times! Three times they had to call me into the office!”

I stretched the cord and went into the hallway so that I didn’t disturb Heather, who was studying for biochemistry. As I flung my legs out on the fraying carpet, I thought I would have rather listened to Gray complain about not being able to find a good job with his generic business degree. He should’ve specialized in Human Resources he understood now. That’s where the money is. Instead, he was working at Montgomery Wards and following new career paths every day. Last week he was going to be a physician assistant. The week before last, he was going to get his MBA. This week he was going to join the Army. Or maybe the Air Force. And then he could use the G.I. Bill to pay for his MBA.

If I couldn't reach Gray, I could return Michael's call to finally answer his questions about where all this sneaking around was going. We could have another long conversation about the state of our friendship, our history, our future, our feelings, our fears. Maybe he'll hold the phone up to his speakers playing The Beatles' "Two of Us" and then we'd say everything and nothing all at once.

Instead, I ran my fingers against the grain of the carpet as Mother went on:

"I can't have him calling me at work and being rude. It's bad enough that he served me the papers there. Everyone is talking."

"Mother, why don't you just sign the papers? Don't you think it would be better for you to just to get it over with?"

"No, I don't. And I won't. He said I could take some time to get used to the idea."

"Yes, Mother. But that was almost a year ago. I'm sure he never meant that long."

"Oh, am I taking too long? Well how long is it supposed to take to me to mourn a twenty-four year marriage? You tell me, Tabitha."

"Mother, I didn't mean that you--"

"You know, by the time we were your age we had been married for three years. We already had Gidget."

"I know, Mother. I'm not saying--"

"Talk to him, Tabitha. Call him and tell him to stop bothering me at work. He'll listen to you."

But he didn't listen to me. He didn't even talk to me. Not much. Not like he used to. Not since Janice.

"Mother, I would, but I have this test tomorrow. Can't you ask Gidget to do it?"

"Gidget isn't speaking to him because of the way he is treating me. She's loyal. And if Fabian calls he'll just yell at Fabian about his grades. It has to be you. He'll listen to you. Call him and then call me right back and tell me what he says."

I knew she wouldn't let it go until I agreed. So, I agreed.

After we hung up, I sat in the hallway looking at my slippered feet for several minutes. Julia came out into the hallway, and stepped over my legs saying that she was going to the dining hall before it closed and do I want to come. I shook my head no.

After the elevator doors closed, I picked up the phone again. It rang three times and I was grateful that Daddy was the one that finally answered.

"Daddy" I said, handling him with care, "Mother called."

"Of course she did." Daddy sighed. "Don't you have a paper to write?"

"It's done. I turned it in three days ago."

"How was your sociology test?"

"Psychology. And it's tomorrow. Daddy, listen to me. You have to be nicer to Mother."

"That woman is infuriating. Do you know that she still hasn't signed the papers?"

“I know, Daddy. But it’s hard for her.”

“I want to get on with my life, Tabby.”

I tugged at a once-beige carpet thread. I knew what he was about to ask of me. The elevator opened with a ding, and sat there on the fifth floor, gaping and empty with no one getting on or getting off.

“Can’t you talk to her, Tabby? Convince her to sign the divorce papers. She’ll listen to you.”

After we hung up, I considered going back inside my dorm room to finish reviewing chapter nine of my Social Psychology textbook. I was tempted to blow the whole thing off and use my new driver’s license and newly legal status to buy a few drinks at the gay bar down the street. Instead, I switched the phone to the other hand and dialed Mother’s number.

22.

The bus smelled like my childhood. Like rubber and oil and McDonald's. The sound of the air brakes was soothing, like a mother's hush. The rhythm of the rolling wheels on the slick, ploughed highway rocked me gently and by the time New York City was just a skyline behind me, I was lulled to sleep. I opened my eyes five hours later to see the burnt out and abandoned factories of Syracuse, stark against the snow, looming over me like hollowed demons. I dared to lift my arms toward these ominous watchtowers for a long stretch, feeling indestructible now that I only had one more semester until I graduate with my bachelor's degree. After New Year's, I intended to spend the rest of winter break planning the rest of my life. I sat up and ran a comb through my hair, rolled some toothpaste onto my finger and brushed my teeth with my finger sucking off the excess. I poked my pinky finger into the tiny inside pocket of my jeans and touched the ring there, a question to be answered. When I rubbed the gold, I began to panic and feel relieved at the same time, a perplexing mix of dread and longing hovered over me as we rolled into the Syracuse bus terminal.

Daddy was there, hat in hand, to have lunch with me in the bus terminal while I waited for my connection to Watertown. I could see him there, behind the glass doors and it felt so good to be riding the bus towards him instead of away. We sat down with sandwiches, but neither of us was eating much as we talked about my grades and my internship and my graduation plans. We debated the pros and cons of graduate school versus gaining work experience after NYU. I confessed that I wanted to move to Los Angeles and he didn't object but wondered if I should wait until I'd saved enough money for a car.

He reached into his trench coat pocket and pulls out a package of our favorite chocolate chip cookies, two for me, and two for him. As he broke his cookie in pieces, telling me about which cars are reliable and which are junk, I saw his ring.

It was right there. On his left hand. On his ring finger. In plain view.

I didn't look away for a long time. I was trying to think. I was trying to put the pieces together. Something about what I saw and what I knew didn't match up. Finally Daddy stopped talking about Toyotas and Hondas and why I shouldn't feel pressured to buy American and watched me stare at his ring.

"You married her?" I asked.

Daddy, with his hands in cookie crumbs was a caught child. He was guilty and defiant all at once and began to clean up our sandwich wrappings and empty coke cans as if to distract me from his bad behavior.

"You got married and you didn't tell me?"

I'd seen this happen before, I thought, on a television show. It must have been one of those soap-operas Mother and Gidget used to watch together after school. People on those shows were always running off and secretly getting married. But this wasn't really happening to me. Fathers didn't really run off and get married without telling their daughters. Not my father. Not without me.

"I didn't think you'd want to come," he said.

There was a pricking at the back of my eyes and I looked away. A homeless woman with matted hair walked in circles between the sandwich shop and the newsstand dragging a trash bag in one hand, and waving the other hand frantically. She was lost or looking for something or both.

I couldn't look at Daddy. I couldn't sit with him. Yet when I tried, I found that I couldn't stand either. I sat back down. I tried to gather my bags but my shaking hands fumbled on the handles.

"Baby," Daddy took one of my bags from me, "You still have twenty-five minutes."

I yanked the bag back. I pulled my coat off the back of the chair, and when I stood this time I forced myself to ignore the feeling of vertigo that rushed to greet me.

"Tabby! C'mon. You know how our family is..."

"*Our* family? What do *you* know about *our* family? What do *I* know about our family? I chose you over them. I chose you. And you chose her."

I struggled towards the doors and he knew not to try to help or to stop me. He merely called out: "I'll call you on Christmas Eve, okay Baby?"

I kept moving, through the terminal and out the doors to wait in the cold.

23.

“I knew something was wrong” my mother said as she flew into my room too early in the morning. “Are you ready?”

“No.”

And I pulled my comforter over my head to shield myself from the invading light. The vodka was making the bed spin. Too much vodka.

“It’s your father,” she said. And waited.

“What did he do now?” I asked from behind my flowered armor. I didn’t really care about the answer to my question, but I knew I had to ask it if she was ever going to turn off the damn lights.

And then she said it, just like that, standing just inside my doorway: “He got cancer.”

Someone turned the sound off. I opened my eyes. The cotton on the inside of my comforter was beading off in some places and the light shone through it a bit making the world pink. And that’s when I realized that it’s really hot under the covers. It was really hot, the world was pink, and the sound was off. For a second

I thought I might have gone somewhere else. But then I heard my mother crying softly and I knew that I was in my bed, hung over, on my last day at home before I moved to California.

“I told you something was wrong. He hadn’t called in so long and he always calls,” she said and came over and sat on my bed.

I pulled the comforter off my head and sat up. The light attacked my skull. “How bad is it?” I asked

“What do you mean how bad is it? It’s cancer!”

“I know, but some cancers are better than others. Like skin cancer. That’s not so bad to have if you have to have cancer. What kind does he have?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. All cancer kills.”

“Maybe not” I said “Not always. Not if you catch it early. What did his doctor say?”

Mother just shook her head and cried: “I knew something was wrong.”

“Mother, there’s no use worrying until we know everything.”

Mother looked at me then, and then stood up and shouted down at me: “What’s the matter with you? Didn’t you hear me? Your father has cancer!”

She turned her back to me but before she got out my door, I threw my comforter to the floor and jumped onto my knees, nausea crashing down on me, and screamed back:

“You can’t tell me when to get upset! I’ll get upset when I want to get upset!”

And then vodka and bile rushed up and knocked me forward and I vomited all over my flowered comforter.

Michael didn't sound happy to hear from me when I called.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. Why would you think something was wrong?" I answered

"Because lately, you only call when something is wrong."

"I thought we were going to try to be friends again"

He laughed a laugh that's not actually a laugh. "That's just what people say when they are done sleeping with you but don't want you to feel bad about it."

"But we've always been friends. And I'd like to see you before I leave tomorrow."

"Are you still with Gray?" he asked.

"My father has cancer."

And there was pause on the line. Then:

"What kind?"

"I don't know," I said.

I said, "I just really need to see you."

There's another pause on the line, and then:

"Come on over"

We lay naked on our backs, all the blankets and pillows knocked to the floor. A corner of the fitted sheet had come untucked and was creeping towards Michael's shoulder. He lifted my left ring finger, examining my diamond. It was marquis cut; exactly what I wanted. I took off the ring and hid it under an overturned public policy textbook on his nightstand. He cradled my right leg between his.

"I'm still going to California" I said to the ceiling.

Michael rolled over on his elbows and put his palm on my chest, his fingers stretching up between my breasts. He waited for me to meet his gaze before he said: "Of course, you are. He wants you to go."

I shifted my eyes back to the ceiling, trying to convince the stucco. "He understands how important this is to me. I've been planning this since graduation."

Michael agreed. "There's nothing you can do at this point even if you stayed."

"I'll just be a phone call away. I can just hop on a plane and come home if I need to."

"You don't even know how bad it is yet," Michael said. "There's no use worrying until you know everything."

His hand was heavy on my chest, holding me down in place when right then I wanted to go, wanted to be somewhere else. And then I felt my eyes leaking. And then I felt myself emptying out, and then I felt myself being pulled

in, and held together. And although I kept my eyes fixed to the watery stucco, I knew that I was in bed with Michael but that I would be gone tomorrow.

24.

I left the agency at seven o'clock with everyone else and listened in the elevator as my co-workers shared their weekend plans: movie premieres, product launch parties, dinners at Kate Mantilini's. While the tenured assistants bragged about their latest finds at Fred Segal, I calculated how much money I had saved that week from my weekend video store and occasional evening telemarketing jobs. I had enough for my weekly dinner at Asia de Cuba with the girls and, if I found some good deals at Goodwill and the Fairfax Flea market, a few articles of clothing that I could dress up for work.

Clothes had never been a problem before. Most temporary jobs lasted no more than a week, so I could wear the same six outfits over and over again. Then my temp agency placed me in a longer position to replace a second assistant to a talent agent who had gotten pregnant and moved back home to Missouri. Lucky me, the search for her permanent replacement didn't seem to be going well. I'd

been on the job for three and a half weeks now and I was running out of creative ways to mix and match my limited wardrobe.

When the elevator opened everyone else rushed out to greet their freshly washed, waxed and detailed vehicles, but I stopped by the security desk to wish Rodrigo a nice weekend.

“Make any friends, yet?” he asked. When I just shook my head, he continued. “It takes a while before they let you into their exclusive club; they have to make sure you really want it first.”

I shrugged and changed the subject. “What are you doing this weekend?”

“I’m taking the kids down to San Diego to see their Grandparents. You?”

“I’m going shopping.”

“See what I mean? You’ll get there.”

I waited until my co-workers pulled out of the parking garage and then changed out of my buttoned-down shirt and slacks and into a dress and high-heels in my Toyota before I pulled out onto Sunset. Once I got as far down the boulevard as Whiskey-A-Go-Go, I knew that with Friday evening traffic, I had about twenty minutes of driving until I reached the restaurant. Twenty minutes was just enough time to talk to my mother. I dialed her and right after I said hello, before she could say a word, I told her to get a pen.

I got the business out the way first, giving her my flight numbers and itinerary. It was the same as the previous two years. I would fly into Syracuse on the twenty-first and stay with Daddy until the twenty-third. Then I would take the

bus north to Watertown, and would stay with Mother through the twenty-eighth before taking the bus back to Syracuse and flying back to Los Angeles on the twenty-ninth. I made her write everything down and then I let her ask me her questions.

How was my diet going? She wanted to know. The wedding was only seven months away. Didn't I want to look good in the pictures? Gidget and her fiancé, Chris, were due to arrive on Christmas eve and Gidget was bringing swatches of fabric from the bridesmaid's dresses so that I could see the exact shade of purple that I would be wearing as her maid of honor. Wasn't I excited? When I came home would I speak to Fabian about getting job? He's been out of rehab for over two months now and wasn't doing much but sleeping and playing video games. He kept telling her to stop nagging him, but he would listen to me. When was the last time I talked to my father? She means really talk to him, not just "hello" and "how are you". He asked about me when they were on the phone the other day and it was strange that she knew more about me than he did. Wasn't I tired of being angry at him? Forgiveness was for me more than it was for him. And when was the last time I went to church, anyway?

I arrived at the Mondrian hotel before she started quoting scripture but not before I promised to call Daddy that weekend. She was right; it had been awhile. It had been my ritual to call him every week when he was in treatment, but after he recovered from the chemotherapy and radiation treatments and the doctor pronounced him in remission, Daddy stopped worrying about his own life and began a crusade to save mine.

Last Christmas season, I sat in Daddy's dusty church office helping him fill the communion cups with grape juice before the congregation arrived. Mt. Sinai had lost a lot of members while Daddy was sick and the lack of members meant less people to clean his office, sweep the sanctuary and polish the stained-glass windows. When Daddy was first diagnosed the worshipers rallied around him, claiming a miracle, praising the Lord for the strength to endure the trial that was before them. When the miracle didn't come and Daddy became too weak to preach, turning over his pastoral duties to his deacons, the worshippers began to lose faith, the attendance numbers dwindled and the offering plates became lighter. During the months when Daddy was hospitalized most of the women stopped coming altogether, and soon the men followed. There were only a couple of dozen worshippers to witness the miracle when Daddy went into remission. I thought he would be discouraged, when he again took his seat at the pulpit, to see that he was going to have to build his church up again from scratch, but Daddy didn't seem to mind. He hummed while he tore open the package of communion wafers.

"What ever happened to Gary?" he asked. I could scarcely believe it.

"First of all, his name is Gray. Gray! Secondly, you never liked him. You always said he was too old for me. And finally, you know what happened. I broke up with him. Months ago."

"I know. But I always thought that you kids would get back together."

"Why would you think that?"

"Well, he was pretty serious about you. That was a nice ring he gave you."

"Are you kidding me, right now?"

“He was a nice guy,” Daddy insisted.

“Daddy, what are you talking about?” I screwed the cap back on the grape juice. Thirty communion cups seemed like enough.

“I’m talking about getting your life together.” Daddy put his hand on mine. “You’re not a child anymore, Tabitha.”

I pulled my car up to the valet and slipped him the spare key. I walked past the gleaming glass walls and diaphanous curtains of the hotel lobby with the confidence and grace of a starving starlet and entered into the twinkling wonderland of fashionable cuisine. I waved to Martin as I walked passed the Maitre d’ table.

“23?” I asked.

Martin nodded.

Through the chic white-on-white décor, I sashayed past the four-tops in the center of the restaurant and toward the large windows along the south wall. I had yet to be promoted to the semi-private cream cushioned booths at the back of the restaurant, but after a year of spending way beyond my means, I at least had a table with a view. Besides, I didn’t require a semi-private booth. The allure of a fine-dining establishment like Asia de Cuba was that it was the place to be seen.

Because I was late, as per usual, I knew that Becky and Laurel would already have a drink waiting for me at our table. What I didn’t expect was that

there would be two men there as well. The darker man in a gray suit stood as I approached.

“Ah, you must be Tabitha” he said in an accent I couldn’t quite place. His eyes were the exact same color of his suit. “We’ve heard all about you.”

He turned and gave Laurel a wink. Laurel giggled, as she did whenever she received male attention, and turned red. For once, I didn’t blame her. He was gorgeous.

Laurel was small and pale, her voice just a whisper, and when she wore bold colors, like the bright green dress she wore that night, she seemed frail. Laurel used her air of innocence to her advantage, knowing full well that helplessness could draw just as much attention from men than beauty. Time and time again, men had rushed to her side to take care of her.

“I’m Palek,” said the winking man. He pointed to the less attractive man at his side, obviously the side-kick character. “This is Henry. I hope you don’t mind that we invited ourselves over to your table tonight.”

Palek offered me his chair and motioned for the bus boy to bring him another. While his head was turned, Laurel mouthed: He’s so hot! She was apparently pleased with herself.

Henry resumed talking to Becky, apparently understanding his function in this equation: keep the less desirable one occupied while Palek worked on the pretty one. Henry seemed well practiced; Becky was glowing under his gaze.

Palek squeezed between Laurel and me and the waiter brought our menus. I had decided what I wanted to eat in the elevator, so now I took the time to

decide whether or not I wanted Palek. I sipped on my drink and took him in.

Hair: full. Hands: large. Nails: clean.

“So what do you do, Palek?” I asked once he put his menu down.

“If I tell you, you’ll judge me.”

“I’m already judging you.”

Palek laughed and took a sip of his drink. I noted his lips: nice.

“I’m a day trader. We both are. We used to work for T.D. Waterhouse, but then we went out on our own.”

“Because what you really want to do is direct?”

He leaned closer and in a false whisper replied, “Actually, I’m a screenwriter.”

Yes, I decided, he’ll do. I turned my body towards him, giving him my full attention, inviting him to do the same.

“Are you really? Anything I might have seen?”

“Actually, I just finished a screenplay. I’ve been shopping it around a bit.”

“That’s really impressive!” Now, I leaned in. I knew how to play this game, “What is it about?”

I knew full well that being breakable wasn’t the only way to appeal to a man’s ego. Soon, Palek was pitching his script with both hands, and before the waiter returned to take our orders, Laurel and I both knew, I had won.

25.

I thought that Daddy would be happy for me when I came home in May with a glamorous job in prime-time television. Of course, Daddy didn't know what a production assistant was, or the fact that it wasn't actually all that glamorous. I was, however, making significantly more money. I was also getting screen credit, which meant all my family and friends, and complete strangers for that matter, could see my name flash across their television screens at the end of every Prospect Pointe episode, every Tuesday. When I told Daddy that I would have my own office he seemed less than impressed. We were in his pimp-mobile and there was a half empty fountain soda in the passenger-side cup holder. I wondered when Daddy started allowing people to eat and drink in his car.

“Maybe now I can afford to buy you a whole suit instead just a tie or cuff-links.”

“If you need to get some more work clothes you should go shopping with Janice,” He said. “She has great taste. You can go tomorrow while I'm at work.”

All the ice had melted in the fountain soda. I rolled down my window and chucked it out onto the highway.

I called Michael while on the bus north. After asking how graduate school was going, I asked if he had plans for dinner that night. Hours later, we sat in Cavallario's. When the waitress came to take our order I asked for a few more minutes to decide.

"What was that about?" I could tell he had been researching all day because he was still wearing his reading glasses. He lifted them to rub his eyes while he waited for me to make up my mind.

"I just need more time," I said. "I want to try something different."

He chuckled a little, but I was determined. I flipped through the menu as if I hadn't seen it a hundred times before.

"Tabitha," He sounded exhausted. "Tabitha, look at me."

When I did, he leaned in close, lowered his voice and told me our secret.

"You get the eggplant parmesan. I get the chicken alfredo. You eat a little bit of mine. I eat a little bit of yours. Then we share a slice of Tiramisu."

"I know. I know that's what we usually do. But this time, let's be different Don't you want to be different?"

I studied the menu and when the waitress returned with her little pad, and I was ready for her.

“How is the gnocchi?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s pretty good. Honestly, it’s not that great.”

“What about the vegetable lasagna?”

“That’s my favorite,” she said. “You want that?”

I knew what I wanted, but I couldn’t bear to look at Michael when I said it.

“No. I’ll have the eggplant parmesan.” I said. I looked down at my raspberry iced tea.

“Sure thing” she said. “And you?”

I heard Michael sigh. I heard him hesitate. Then he said, “I’ll take the chicken Alfredo.”

My mother’s call woke me up at ten am. She said, “Get dressed. Church is in an hour.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said and then hung up the phone and climbed back in bed with Michael for twenty more minutes. His body was warm and firm like sun-soaked stones and I pressed against him, my cooler body filling in all the spaces left by his arm pits and bent knees, my softer skin caulking all of his crevices. I pressed hard trying to get closer, wishing I could crawl inside his chest. He pulled me in tight.

When I rolled away and sat up, he offered me a shower and breakfast but I told him that I didn't have time. I clasped my bra closed and told him that I would call him later.

"You can't keep doing this, you know," he said from his pillow as I tugged the neck of my sweater over my head. I bent over to pull on my boots. Michael's alarm went off and he moved away from me to smack it silent. Then he returned to me, his fingers lightly swept across exposed sliver of skin exposed between the top of my jeans and the bottom of my sweater, distracting me from my boot laces.

"Did you hear me? I won't keep doing this."

"I know," I said.

Later, I was surprised that I didn't feel like a doomed sinner while I sat in church wearing the same skirt and sweater that I wore the night before, Michael's scent still on my skin. I thought for a second that it might be because I was sitting next to my brother who could very well be high right now, although I couldn't tell by his eyes. But that shouldn't be because sin was sin to God. It didn't matter who was the fornicator or the drug-addict. We were both going to hell.

Perhaps, it was because we sat on the hardwood pews of Mother's new white "God is Love" church which was much different from the black "God is God" churches that I was accustomed to. There was hardly any talk of God's wrath, his jealousy, his vengeance, his awesome power. The sermons delivered in this church often skimmed over the fact that God destroyed the earth with wind

and rain in three days to get to the enduring promise of the rainbow he gifted Noah and his family.

I zipped and unzipped and zipped again the leather case that bound my hand-me-down bible. I had inherited it from Daddy when I was fourteen and had graduated from the translated youth bibles. I had spent the first few months of my fourteenth year flipping through this bible reading all the passages that Daddy had highlighted or underlined but never underlined or highlighted anything of my own. Mother leaned forward whispering “Amen” just under her breath as the pastor, wearing a long pony-tail and jeans, stood at the alter preaching from Matthew. The pastor was saying, “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Above the pastor, his blue-eyed Jesus gazed down on me, his sacred-heart in flames, and I couldn't help but think that Jesus looked a lot like Michael did when he returned from his summer abroad in Ecuador with long hair and a beard. He thought it made him look tough and rugged, but his eyes gave him away. He had shaved and cut his hair by the start of our senior year.

The pastor said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

“What about an STD?” Diego asked and I blinked twice and turned back to my computer screen to type in that suggestion —the first in, what seemed like, fifteen minutes.

The writers were stuck, all eight of them swaying slightly in their ergonomic office chairs, trying to rustle up some compelling storylines for February sweeps. Prospect Pointe was in its third season and had already exhausted most of the typical turns of a teenage drama last year: boy gets girl (at the beginning of the season last September), boy loses girl (during November sweeps) boy gets girl back (February sweeps), girl cheats on boy with his best friend (May sweeps). This season we introduced new characters to spice things up a bit: Slate, a college-aged hunk to dial up the sex appeal and his sassy and spoiled younger sister, Paige, to heighten the competition and drama. We were saving the reappearance of our main character’s absentee mother for May sweeps, so we needed to produce some exciting stand-alone episodes to keep viewers hooked until we wrote our final episode arc.

Staring at their own hazy and warped reflections in the large mahogany table, didn’t seem to help the writers conjure up ideas. A few of the writers

studied the character chart drawn on the white board at the front of the room. Others flipped through their notes from other meetings, which I had previously typed, printed and distributed to each of them. I looked around the Writer's room—the only room in the office that didn't have huge windows exposing postcard perfect views of Los Angeles- at the first-season cast photos that lined the walls. I've seen these photos at least a hundred times in the eighteen months I've worked on the show. Asher, the working class hero, played by Carson Heffron, is leaning across a diner counter and smiling directly at the camera. There's a long-shot of Jackson, the rich kid, played by Jonathan Trinder, on a beach, toes in the sand, the laces of his docksiders tied together and draped over his shoulder. Annie, the beautiful dreamer, played by Lauren Adams, lies in a field of wild flowers, her eyes focusing on something far off. Olivia, the tomboy, played by Jessica McShane, looks down at the camera through the canopy of a tree, smiling shyly.

It was this last picture that I am re-examining while Peter, our Showrunner, began to rock in his chair impatiently. I was thinking about the character of Olivia, how it was she who got me hooked on the show when I first moved to Los Angeles. The possibility of eventually writing for that character was why I made it my mission to get a job on Prospect Pointe in season two. I recognized in the character of Olivia the same quality that Grandma once said that I had: gumption. I watched the show to see what was going to happen with her from week to week because even in the first season I could tell that she was really the star of the show. Just as I predicted, Olivia had evolved from sidekick to siren over the course of two and a half seasons. She had finally realized how gorgeous she was, and more

importantly, she came to appreciate the power that kind of beauty gave her. Whether this character development was more due to Jessica McShane's own blossoming or the increased sexual content on the show now that our network time slot had been pushed back an hour to nine o'clock, I didn't know. Either way, Olivia had come a long way from that girl in the tree.

I began thinking about my own show, the one that I would create and run in five years. Like this one, my Writer's office would be housed near the top floor of a sleek high-rise building. Like this one, I would have half a dozen small offices, one for each staff writer, a large conference room, a theater room for screening dailies and a kitchen stocked with sugar and caffeine for long days writing into night. My show would also be one of the highest rated dramas on primetime television, helped of course by my stable of unrealistically attractive actors. Yet, on my show the women won't be shrinking or sheltered, or put on a pedestal. My female characters will be clever, cynical, complex, creating more spaces for women outside the virgin-whore binary. I was just thinking that on my show, there will be no girls hiding in trees when Diego started talking about STD's.

Peter perked up at this idea, "Who would have it? Not Paige; that's too obvious."

"I was thinking of Annie." Diego was tentative. Peter kept rocking in his chair, mulling it over. We all watched him rock, wondering if Diego would be declared brilliant or insane. Peter's face held no clues. When he stopped and leaned forward, his forearms on the table, Diego explained.

“Of course, she wouldn’t actually have to have an STD. She just thinks she does. All the symptoms are there, you know. But then it could turn out to be something else.”

Emboldened by Peter’s silence, Diego continued. “First she’ll be scared and then angry at Slate thinking that he cheated. She could be conflicted about whether not to tell him or even how to tell him. So instead she’ll turn to Olivia. But Paige will overhear part of the conversation and tell Slate, who will assume that *she* cheated.”

Peter nodded his head once, then twice, and then vigorously. “Yeah, Yeah, I like that.”

Diego was on a roll. “In the third act, she’ll get tested, find out that it’s something else and decides not to even tell Slate about her suspicions, which of course will heighten his. Until the fourth act, when he’ll confront her, they’ll fight about trust and keeping secrets, you know, and make up and...

“...live happily ever after until May sweeps,” finished Peter. “Good. Good. Go with it. And throw in some stuff about safer sex,” Not exactly high praise, but with Peter you took what you could get.

Diego beamed and leaned back in his chair relieved, as Rich, our production assistant came into the conference room with lunch. Rich served Peter first and as Peter looked over his bun-less soy burger and vegetables he pointed at me and said, “Find us the perfect disease,” then to Rich, “What the fuck is this? Don’t you know by now what size I like my broccoli? Jesus Christ!”

I swooped up my laptop and, hoping to miss Peter's inevitable tantrum, dashed to the door. From the corner of my eye, I could see Peter wagging a steamed stalk at Rich. "This is too big! Take this in the kitchen and cut it up. Think broccolini! Broccolini!"

On the way to my office, I chuckled a little at Rich's expense and felt cruel.

My office was just big enough to fit a desk a chair and a bookshelf, a glorified cubicle, really. Yet, I did have a spectacular view of Sunset Boulevard and the downtown Los Angeles skyline. It was that view that often kept me there at night, sometimes as late as ten o'clock, doing research, updating the website, writing articles for the fan newsletter, even working on my own writing projects. I could do that all from home, but my apartment didn't have that sparkling view. My Studio City apartment, a double-master just six floors above a gym and a pool, was definitely a step up from the studio apartment I shared in North Hollywood two years ago, but still far from where I was going.

Rich knocked on my door and popped his head into my office.

"Portobello mushroom burger?" he asked.

"Come in," I replied.

He did, and closing the door behind him, leaned against it and sighed.

"I'm going to quit," he threatened for the sixteenth time in the past six months.

“No, you’re not,” I said and reached for my lunch. I figured that I should eat before I began researching the symptoms and side-effects of gonorrhea and herpes. There may be pictures.

Rich handed it over and then sank to the floor to eat his own lunch within the womb of my office.

He shook his head, and crossed his sandaled feet. Rich looked classically Californian: blonde hair that flopped into his blue, blue eyes, long-sleeved t-shirt, long shorts and even sandals, even now in late November.

“I don’t know how you did it for a whole year,” he said and then, taking his frustration out on his turkey club, devoured it in four bites, knowing full well that there would be another errand- coffee to fetch, dry-cleaning to pick up- for him to run very soon.

“I need someone to write an article on the new locations and how we recycled old props and scenery and stuff for the newsletter.” It was all I had to offer.

“Thanks,” he said.

He was still shaking his head, so I added, “Just hang in there. It gets better.”

Part Three

27.

The house is sleeping when I crawl out of the closet, yet I still feel watched as I slip over to the jewelry box on the dresser and select a pair of cuff-links. I put them under my pillow and then crawl into bed, knowing that I'm not going to get much sleep.

The next morning I stuff the cuff-links in the pocket of my jeans, make the bed, and then carry my suitcases down the stairs. In the kitchen, Janice is making breakfast.

I speak to her back. "Good morning."

She says nothing, and at first I think that she might not be able to hear me over the popping grease in the skillet. But then she turns around with a plate full of eggs and bacon and buttered toast.

"I thought that you should have a full breakfast before you catch the bus home," she says with a smile.

I smile back. “Thank you. I was thinking of leaving today but I want to stop by and see my father for a few hours first.”

Her smile almost falls but she catches the dragging ends of her mouth quickly. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? We don’t want to tire him out.”

“Of course not,” I reply, “But I can’t leave without saying good-bye.”

“Ok,” she relents, “But only for an hour or so.” And then before I could think her a bad hostess, “Do you want any coffee?”

Mother isn’t in the house when the cab drops me off. Yet, she must be nearby because there are scented candles burning. The house is immaculate as usual. There are fresh flowers in crystal vases and porcelain figurines in lighted curio cabinets. I climb the stairs to my old room, step over the treadmill and throw my bags into the closet where mother has stored all my old dolls and stuffed animals. I take off my coat and go down to the kitchen for a glass of water. There isn’t any food in the fridge.

I stand over the sink and look out the window at the backyard. That’s where I see her. She is under an umbrella sipping lemonade and reading a book. She is sitting perfectly straight in a sky blue pantsuit with matching shoes. She tucks her blue black hair behind her ears and exposes a simple pearl earring. She is lovely. I run out to her.

She doesn’t stand up to greet me. I kiss her cheek and sit across her on the garden furniture.

“You’re shivering,” she notices.

“That’s because I’m freezing” I reply.

“You’ve always been such a baby when it comes to the weather. Do you want my suit jacket?”

“No, I’m fine,” I say through chattering teeth.

She puts down her book and folds her hands in her lap. “So. How is he?”

I look past her at the blossoming apple trees. There are more than I remember.

“Not well.”

Beyond the apple trees is a rhubarb patch. Every year the sisters from Mother’s church come to harvest the fruit and make pies and preserves. Otherwise, they would just rot. Mother wouldn’t know what to do with rhubarb.

“He forgot that I was there. An hour after we had been watching TV together, he turned and discovered me sitting next to him. He called my name and hugged and kissed me as if he was seeing me there for the first time. As if I had just arrived.”

She focuses on something behind me. I am not sure if she is looking at the bird feeders in the trees or the empty tool shed beyond that.

“He’s gotten worse,” she says, and then, “we’d better call Gidget.”

Mother calls Gidget and tells her to come home. Fabian comes home from class and we order pizza and talk about the colleges he wants to transfer to after

MCC. He goes down to the den to watch television and I call Michael. After the Hellos, Long times, and How are yous, I say simply:

“I’m in town.”

“Dinner tomorrow?” he asks.

“Pick me up at 7:00.”

When tomorrow comes, he’s on time and I’m not ready. I’m still in the bathroom trying to make my eyes smokey and my hair look perfectly imperfect. My mother entertains him for a while with remember when stories.

“Remember when you wanted to be a marine biologist? You used to come over with heavy books about Jacques Cousteau to do research.”

“Remember when I told you that you were too old to spend the night with Tabitha anymore? You were so upset when I made you sleep in Fabian’s room.”

“Remember right before we moved to Alaska, you and Tabitha put together a proposal with charts and graphs on why Tabitha should stay and live with your family until she finished sixth grade? You called all us parents together and had a little conference. You had a briefcase.”

It’s as if she can’t see that Michael is a grown man now. Even from the top of the stairs I can see his broad shoulders. I wait there for a moment watching his head nod and listening to his voice.

“That one was Tabby’s idea.”

I breeze down the stairs mumbling apologies. I fumble in my purse to make sure I have the keys. I keep my body stiff as he hugs me and count. One

one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one thousand, let go. I tuck imaginary hairs behind my ears and smile at the floor as he tells me I look nice.

“Goodnight, Mother,” I yell over my shoulder. I’m moving fast, out the door and to Michael’s car. He chases after me.

In the car I ask him about his family. He gives me the abbreviated version:

“Mom and Dad just celebrated their thirty-fifth anniversary; Scott and Leslie are expecting their third; Brian and Meredith are talking marriage; Jen is reading Harlequin romance novels.”

“And how is yours?” he asks.

“Mother is doing well, as you can see. She has a lot of self-help books. Fabian is doing well in school the second time around. Gidget and Chris are talking about babies, but then, they’ve been talking about babies for two years now.”

“Did they ever move to Massena?”

“No, they’re still in Vermont.”

Silence falls around us as I scramble for more to say. Things aren’t as easy as they were on the phone.

“How is the dissertation going?”

“I’m almost done. My chair says it looks good, so I just have a little bit of editing left.”

“Then what?”

“My chair would like me to stay on at the University, but I’m ready for a change.”

More silence invades.

“How’s the show?” he asks.

“Good. Season four is almost wrapped, so now our big dilemma is trying to find a way to keep all the characters together now that they’ve graduated high school, you know, without it being really corny, like them all attending the same fictional college. It’s a little unnatural. One hand you think it’s a high school show, it should end after high school. But on the other hand, it’s a successful show. Why cancel it while it’s still making money?

I know I am rambling now but it’s fighting off the silence so I keep going.

“Although, I think Lauren wants out of her contract. She keeps showing up to set late, unprepared and doing the whole demanding diva thing. It’s as if she’s trying to get fired.”

I finally shut up when we get to the restaurant. He parks the car and then turns to me and smiles as if to say, *it is awkward, isn’t it?*

He amazes me. Why is he here even after all I’ve done, haven’t done? I am weak. I push him away. I’m ashamed. I run. He waits while I figure it out, come to my senses, crawl back and put my head in his lap, realize what I’ve done, and run again.

I smile back my apologies and thanks. We sit looking at the restaurant. The same one we always come to. People walk in and out. We don’t move. He’s waiting for me to start.

I put my hand on his knee, palm up. He covers it with his. I tell him all that I know.