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Passport

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in

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by

Stephanie Eileen Smith

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PASSPORT TROUBLE

I climbed into my thirty-second year out of the wreckage of divorce, like one stumbling, dazed, from a collapsed building. The life I had constructed over thirteen years was now terminally deconstructed: one husband, three cats, a circle of friends, one house and its contents, no longer a matching set. We waited eight years to get married, and then spent only two inflicting the kind of irreparable damage some people require decades to cultivate. We lived the last three years at opposite ends of various couches, in front of various counselors, learning terms like “active listening” and “systems of interaction” and “trial separation.” When I finally loaded up my car and pulled out of the driveway for good, I felt the competing polarities of relief and anguish fighting inside me, the way an animal, jubilant to have escaped the trap, still mourns the lost foot.

I was living alone for the first time in my life, in a tiny Spanish-style cottage near the beach in San Diego. It was drafty, flat-roofed, with cream colored stucco and red clay tiles arched over the peeling front door. Dusty rosemary bushes, aloe plants and tall cactus tangled in the flowerbeds out front. I propped open the screenless wooden windows with thick hard-backed books so they wouldn't slam shut, and let the salty air roll in. From my perch on the sofa, I spent afternoons watching the light change from yellow to gold.

The sofa was new, from Ikea, upholstered in a bright grassy-green. I assembled it myself using two screwdrivers and a hex wrench. Between the living room and bedroom I hung leafy drapes, letting them pool on the scuffed pine floor, and I covered my bed

with yellow pinstriped linens. These movements were a means of distraction. I hoped that being surrounded with pretty, unfamiliar things would lessen the feeling that I had fallen through a trap door.

Starting over was a tender calibration. I felt see-through, like a thin sheet of glass. I couldn't stop crying. I cried on the cheerful green sofa and beneath the yellow pinstriped bedspread. I scrubbed at the rust stains on the ancient porcelain tub, and wept in the bath until the water went cold and my fingertips wrinkled. At work, I struggled to maintain my composure—one sympathetic look from a coworker could unleash a new torrent. I tried to save my tears for the car. To and from the office and on my lunch break I wept, until driving and crying became one act: crying. Each afternoon I ran from the car into the house so my new neighbors wouldn't see my puffy, tear-stained face.

I had taken almost nothing from the house my ex-husband and I bought together, just books, clothes, and a few dishes. My memories of life with him were like a bowl of fishhooks, sharp and tangled. There was no consolation in remembering.

I didn't even have the hollow comfort of self-righteousness, since in the last of year my marriage I'd fallen in love with another man on the internet and sent him a picture of my tits. Lots of pictures, actually. A portfolio. A study of loneliness, in breasts and other parts. He lived in London so there was little risk of a clandestine meeting, but that didn't make my husband feel any better when he discovered the indecent correspondence on our home computer. Our marriage counselor asked if it had been an act of self-sabotage. Maybe I wanted to get caught, I don't know. If I'd thought

my indiscretion would move my husband to end our marriage, I was wrong; he only held on tighter to our broken pieces. In the end, it just made leaving harder.

After my husband and I finally split up, the Englishman came to visit me a couple of times. When I embraced him for the first time at airport, standing in a sea of people at the gate, I was overwhelmed trying to touch and smell and look at him all at once, this person I loved and had never met. He was tall and lanky, with worried brown eyes and a mess of unkempt brown hair, and long, thin fingers that clasped mine. We didn't know each other in any informed kind of way, but that didn't stop us from holding each other all night, whispering our love and promising ourselves to each other forever. It was a sweet, sad fantasy.

We talked about our future. I would move to London and we would walk in gardens all misty wet with rain. He'd teach me to drive on the other side of the road, and we'd pack picnic lunches and eat them on Wimbledon Common. We would have babies and they would call me Mummy in tiny English accents. I would slip out of my old life and into this new one, one with no sharp edges, five thousand miles away. "Just get on a plane, we'll figure everything out when you get here," he told me. I wanted it to be that easy, but I knew better. I had a history that precluded a quick escape.

The last time I'd thought about leaving the country, it was 2003, four months before I married. We planned to honeymoon in Italy, at a villa in the Tuscan countryside between Florence and Siena. I'd pored over photographs, imagining long walks among the olive groves, and dining al fresco in the gardens overlooking the vineyards. Our reservations were confirmed; our room would have a view of the village, its rustic bell tower and the dome of the cathedral.

Six weeks before the wedding, among the thrum and crush of a thousand unfinalized plans, my passport application was declined for insufficient proof of citizenship. I was sure there had been some mistake. I had provided my birth certificate as instructed, the same one that I had presented to get my social security number, my driver's license when I turned sixteen, and a few times crossing the border back into California after a day trip to Mexico. I was a registered voter, a taxpayer, an American, a good person. I wanted to drink Chianti with my husband and learn to say "just married" in Italian. I called the Passport Agency, certain that if I could just speak to someone I could straighten things out.

"The problem is that your birth wasn't recorded until 1990," said the fraud prevention manager at the Passport Agency. "That's fourteen years after you were born. You need to provide some evidence that you existed in America in 1976. Medical records, a birth announcement, school records. Evidence that your mother lived in California around the time you were born. Don't you have any family who can help you?"

I didn't. My family wasn't like other families. I grew up in a cult.

I hadn't seen my father, Bruce, since I was eight years old.

My parents lived in the same house, but they weren't a couple. Their brief romance ended before I was born, but we all remained in the communal home we shared with many others. My mother let my dad take me some days, but mostly I was her child.

The day he left, he took me to the park at the end of our street. Because there were so many people at home, it was rare to get one-on-one attention. I shouted for him to watch me as I played on the slide and the swings. After a while, he told me we needed to talk. I climbed down from the moon-shaped jungle gym and we sat in the shade at the edge of the playground, with our backs against a cool cinder block wall.

He told me he was leaving.

"I can't stay here anymore, sweetheart," he said. I could see tension in his face, and sadness. "Bad things are happening. Some of the people have lost their way, and I've tried to talk to them but they won't listen. I have to go." He asked me if I wanted to go with him. I was a just little girl, inseparable from my mother. There was no world without her in it. I told him I wanted to stay and tears ran down his face onto his shirt.

When we got home, he gave me a necklace with a little silver charm in the shape of a heart, and a bud vase painted with a big-eyed cartoon figure, arms outstretched, under the words "I love you this much." I stuffed them in a winter boot so my mother wouldn't find them and make me throw them out. Eventually she came across them while cleaning out the closet.

"Where did you get these?" she said, holding them out to me, studying my face. When I told her the truth, her brow creased into a triple arc. She looked away from me,

fixing her attention on the space between our feet. This was the face of censure. It always inspired in me the urgent need to win back her approval.

“I’m not telling you what to do,” she said. “It’s your choice, but these things are connections between you and Bruce, energetic connections. His ties to you are like leeches, sucking you dry. It puts a drain on everyone in this house.”

I knew what she wanted. I took the little vase and the silver necklace and went outside. It was just starting to get dark, and I could hear moms down the street calling their kids in for dinner. For a moment I stood on the back porch, where I could see the light still pink on the horizon. I breathed in the cool air and held it for a long time.

I walked to where the trashcans were lined up against the garage. I put my father’s gifts to me into one of the cans. They looked sad, sitting there, like they didn’t know what they had done wrong. I covered them up with a sheet of wrinkled newspaper and went back inside.

At the time of my wedding, it had been eight years since I had spoken to my mother, Hetha. I was nineteen when she told me, over the phone, that my karma was too negative for her to maintain a relationship with me. By that time she'd already been in and out of my life for a few years, disappearing and reappearing as it pleased her, always on her terms. We had only been in contact again for a short time when she decided that she didn't want to be my mother.

I was at work at my desk in a row of tiny cubicles.

"I don't need you to be my mom," I told her, my voice breaking a little. "I can take care of myself. I just want you in my life." I was losing her again.

The girl who sat next to me looked at me with sad eyes. I hunched down behind the grey-carpeted cubicle wall so she wouldn't see me cry.

"You are on the path of illusion and I am not a part of it." My mother's words hit like big, gloved fists.

"Then why did you bother to find me?" I whispered into the phone.

Tears caught against my eyelashes. My head was still ringing as I hung up the receiver.

Even if I'd known where to find Hetha before my wedding, I knew she wouldn't help me get to Italy. She would disapprove of everything about my life: my insurance company job, my house in the suburbs, the night school classes I was taking, my engagement. She saw social institutions like marriage and traditional education as roadblocks to enlightenment. She would look at my highlighted hair, pierced ears and makeup and see affronts to God, a judgment against the human body, His perfect creation. She would look at my big diamond engagement ring and tell me I'd committed spiritual suicide.

It was her fault I couldn't get a passport. She kept me off the grid on purpose, to protect me from The System. She'd kept me off of census records, out of schools, apart from the world. She'd only registered my birth when I was fourteen because she figured I'd need a driver's license some day. I'd been born into a cult life and I wasn't supposed to leave it. I had tried to separate myself from that past, to create something stable out of the chaos I came from, but the repercussions still rumbled through my life from time to time, like aftershocks of some great destruction.

The injustice of it stung me, but with my wedding day approaching, I didn't have time to fight. Under threat of non-refundable hotel fees, we cancelled our reservations at the Tuscan villa and spent our honeymoon in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where I was allowed by the government to go. We drank rum and lay in the sun, and when we returned to real life, I mostly forgot about my passport trouble. We never would make it to Italy.

I hoped this second time around my passport application would be approved. I needed it to be approved. Maybe the fact that I had been married to a US citizen would make a difference, or maybe because it had been so long since 9/11 the requirements wouldn't be so stringent. I had my picture taken and filled out the forms and sent in my payment, extra for expedited service. All I wanted was to get on a plane, shake off my ghosts over the Atlantic and have my despondency fucked away by a sweet, lonely Englishman.

My mailbox was one of the galvanized steel ones, black, shaped like a train tunnel with a little red plastic flag on the side. Every day when I got home from work, I'd open it with increasing anticipation, hoping for a light at the end. On an afternoon in April, it was bursting with a phonebook-sized Ikea catalogue, a cooking magazine, a handful of bills, and a half-pound of flyers that would be dropped directly into the recycle bin.

I tucked the whole lot under my arm, nudged the front door open with my knee and let my bags hit the floor. Standing in the light from the kitchen window, I quickly shuffled through the bills and letters, still clutching my keys. Finally, there it was, marked Official Business. The letter that I'd been waiting for. I slid my thumb under the envelope flap and ripped it open.

April 6, 2009

Dear Ms. Smalley:

Thank you for your recent passport application. We need your help in providing the necessary evidence of United States citizenship or nationality. The evidence you submitted is not acceptable for passport purposes for the reason(s) stated below:

- Your birth was recorded more than one year after your birth occurred. The certificate does not show what evidence was used to create the record, or the evidence is insufficient for passport purposes.*

Please submit the following documents:

- Early public records created near the time of your birth that show your name, date and place of birth, such as hospital, religious, school, medical or insurance records.*
- A notarized birth affidavit from a parent, older blood relative, or medical attendant (the affidavit must show the name, date and place of birth of the applicant, how the affiant acquired knowledge of these facts, and the circumstances regarding the delay in filing of your birth), plus at least one early public record containing the applicant's name, date and place of birth.*
- Records of your mother's pre-natal and postnatal medical care.*
- Evidence of your parents' residence in the United States at the time of your birth such as rent, tax, employment, medical or welfare records.*
- Certified birth certificates of siblings born in the United States (within 2 years of your birth).*

If we do not receive the requested information within ninety days or the information you submit is insufficient to establish your entitlement to a U.S. passport in accordance with the relevant provisions of Part 51 of Title 22 of the Code of Federal Regulations, your application will be denied and your evidence returned to you.

Sincerely,

*Thomas D. Reid, Jr.
Regional Director, Los Angeles Passport Agency*

It was the same letter I'd received back in 2003. I guess I should have expected it, but I had allowed myself to hope. I pressed my palms against my eyes and rested my elbows on the kitchen counter, breathing out my disappointment. I didn't have the evidence they wanted. It was maddening to be penalized for something over which I had no control. This wasn't my fault, I hadn't done anything wrong, but I was suffering the consequences of the choices my mother made for me.

My frustration was heightened by my urgency to get to England. On some level, I knew the life I was planning with the Englishman was only a dream, and I didn't want to wake up. I wanted for it to be real, despite the odds. Time and distance wore away the fantasy like a dog worrying a bone.

I had one advantage that I didn't have the first time I applied for a passport: my dad. In 2007, I'd typed his name into a search engine and came up with a number of hits. He owned a construction company in southern Oregon, and his name was listed on minutes to a meeting of a community planning committee. He had reviewed an electric drill on Amazon.

I didn't contact him right away. For so long, I'd been afraid to allow any part of my past into my present. I didn't know where my father went when he left. For all I knew, he had joined some other cult and was living in a commune somewhere with long hair and a stack of wives. I didn't want that in my life, the things I had worked so hard to wall off.

And there was my mother's voice in my head. After my dad left, Hetha told me if I ever saw him on the street, I should run. She said he would try to kidnap me and take me away. She said he was crazy, a vortex of negative energy, the walking dead, and that if I had a relationship with him, my soul would die. I had walked away from that life and rejected those beliefs, but those superstitions haunted some dark place in me. I tried not to listen when they rattled their bones.

I read my dad's review of the DeWalt 6" Magnetic Drive drill. "These things work well for driving long screws with one hand, and they can significantly speed up tasks like screwing down decking. They don't last forever: durability is not their strong suit. But worth it anyhow, I'm replacing my old one." I tried to imagine him living a normal life. Building a deck, writing an Amazon review. I read his words again, noted

his grammar and punctuation. He didn't sound crazy at all. He was a business owner. He was on a committee. Plus, he was using the Internet, which I took as a good sign.

For a few weeks I thought about calling him. Every few days I would Google him again, click all the links that contained his name, changing them from blue to purple. There was a phone number for his company, A Better Builder, in O'Brien, Oregon. I could just pick up the phone and call him, say, "This is your daughter." I didn't know what I would say after that.

There was an address too; I could drive there in a couple days' time. And in a twist I never could have predicted, my dad's address was about sixty miles from the last address I had for my mother, in Crescent City, California. My estranged parents had left Los Angeles a decade apart, and had managed to end up an hour away from each other. Maybe I could find them both.

I'd tried to find my mother a few times over the years. I was eighteen the last time I saw her, several months before that phone call at work. She was living in a camper parked inside a scrap metal warehouse in Ventura. She shared the camper with a man named Bob, who owned the scrap metal business. Bob looked to be in his late sixties and had long white hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a white-yellow beard that touched his barrel chest. He looked a little like Santa and seemed nice enough. He had a fat Labrador the same color as his beard who followed him around the warehouse as I sat on a bench near my mother, who was sorting industrial springs into piles, by size, on a plywood table.

Hetha had always been eccentric when it came to her living arrangements, but as I watched her separate her heaps of springs I wondered how she was getting by. She looked worn down, the creases in her forehead more pronounced, her thin brown hair a little greasy, held back from her face with a couple of bobby pins. Black crescents of grime had collected under her chewed-short fingernails and around her cuticles. Her teeth, which had always been prone to decay, were stained in shades of brown and amber from cigarettes and coffee and general neglect. She didn't look much different from the transient people I had seen on the street outside the warehouse.

I was nervous. She was the one in control of our relationship, the one who decided to stay or go, and I was always trying to figure out how to keep her. She'd taken off when I was sixteen, leaving me at home with the others, the handful of people who still believed. I lasted a year in that place without her, then I stuffed some clothes into a bag, snuck out the side door and didn't go back.

She tracked me down a year later, and now being near her seemed surreal, fragile. A dream that could evaporate if I said the wrong thing. I sat in the shaft of sunlight from the big sliding warehouse door and tried not to fuck it up. When I'd called her that morning from the motel by the freeway, she'd answered, "Is this a Shteph?" blurring the first letters of my name the way she used to when I was little. I pressed the phone to my ear and remembered what it felt like to be loved by her. I wanted to hold on to that feeling forever.

I don't remember much of what we said that day. I remember the light, and her fingers, and the tenuous happiness I felt in her presence. I remember hugging her, and how I fit awkwardly against her, not like a child anymore. How I had to bow my head to rest it on her shoulder. I remember breathing in the smell of her flannel-lined jacket and the little wave she gave me as I drove away.

I tried to stay in touch with her, but over the next few months she became increasingly distant. At first I would call her to talk, but I always seemed an inconvenience. After a while I'd call just to let her know I'd moved, or around the holidays, each exchange shorter and more awkward, each time the silence on her end more pronounced. My last question to her, in my cubicle at work, "Why did you bother to find me?" And her last answer, "I don't know."

It was a long time before I looked for her again. But whenever my life would fall apart, I would start looking. I don't know why I did it. I wanted a version of my mother that had disappeared long ago, or maybe never existed, except in the mind of a little girl. But she was the vacancy sign that stayed always lit inside me, and when things got hard, her harsh light shined the most.

I worried, too, about her well-being. I wondered if she was still living in that camper, and if she was warm enough in the winter when the temperature dropped. I wondered if she needed help, and if there was anyone in her life who could give it. When I saw a homeless woman on the street, I would wonder if she were somebody's mother. If that could happen to my mother.

I made a couple of trips up the coast, looking for her at addresses I'd paid for online. I drove around Ventura and Oxnard, to the scrap metal warehouse where I'd seen her last; at least I thought it was the place. When I knocked on the side door of the metal building, a Mexican man opened the door and stared at me, silent.

"I'm looking for Hetha," I said. "Do you know Hetha?" I tried to look past him into the darkness.

"No," he said. He shook his head. "No English." He pushed the door closed and left me standing there on the concrete stoop in the cold light of morning.

There was one address I hadn't checked, the one in Crescent City, but there was no phone listing and it was a fourteen-hour drive north. I wrote it on a piece of scratch paper and kept it folded in my wallet, and it stayed there until 2007, when I Googled my dad.

I would have to drive through Crescent City to get to O'Brien, which was just on the other side of the California/Oregon border. I arranged for time off work and planned my trip up the coast. My coworkers wished me luck; they were following my saga like a daytime soap. I would stop for a night in Eureka, a couple hours outside of Crescent city. That gave me a day in Crescent City to look for Hetha before heading to O'Brien the following morning. I meant to call my dad before I left, but as the days passed, I found I couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone.

The town of Eureka lies on an arm of the Pacific coast in northern California. Everything about the place belies its name. It is a sad, dingy place, with squat, faded buildings clustered around a main drag that suggests going out of business. It was like a ghost town, but worse, because people still lived there.

I pulled into town just before dark and drove down to the shore, where the splintered wood frame of an old floating dock stuck out of the water, shot through with rusty nails. A layer of grey hung over the empty beach and the abandoned pulp mill in the distance. I shivered and headed back to the car, the hair on the back of my neck prickling.

The hotel room smelled of stale nicotine. It was 9:30 at night. I'd eaten and showered and was now engaged in a staring contest with the phone on the nightstand. I was scheduled to arrive in O'Brien in two days and I still hadn't called my father.

Fuck it, I thought and picked up the receiver. I could feel the sudden kick of adrenaline as I punched in the number. The blood rushing to my ears made the phone's ring sound hollow, as if it were coming from a long distance. It was a business number,

surely at this hour I would get a machine. I just wanted to hear the voice, see if it was him, and I'd call back in the morning. I wouldn't even leave a message. Just a few more seconds and I could listen and hang up.

"Hello?" A man with a quiet voice answered.

I was not prepared for this. I had no plan, no words. I had the sensation of space collapsing in on itself. With a mouth full of ash I began to talk nervously.

"Yes...I'm sorry to be calling so late...I was expecting a machine," I stammered. "I'm trying to reach Bruce Donelson?" The statement became a question as the words passed my lips.

"You've got him," my father said.

It was my turn to speak. The room felt very small. I was annoyed at my heart for pounding.

"Um, yes. Well, so, this might sound a little weird." My palm was sweaty against the phone. "But, uh, my name is Stephanie and I think I might be your daughter."

"I think you might be," he said softly. "Wow." There was a pause. "It's so good to hear your voice."

I wasn't expecting the tenderness in his voice. It made my chest hurt. There wasn't enough room inside me to hold all my suspicion and doubt, and now this new feeling, something like the beginning of joy. I wound the phone cord around my finger until the tip turned white. We made a plan to meet in two days.

Crescent City is a small, flat town, all cracked asphalt and brown weeds tangled up in chain link fences. It didn't take long to find the house, dirty blue with faded Astroturf barely hanging on to the concrete porch. The two front windows were nailed shut and cobwebby, like a pair of rheumy eyes. A pile of sun-bleached newspaper balanced a few new flyers near the top, the only indication that the place was occupied. The house looked like a witch should live in it. I wondered if my mother was inside.

I knocked on the door and called for her but no one answered. At the house next door I asked if anyone lived there.

"An older lady, works at the school," the man said.

"Do you know her name?" I felt like a character in a movie I was watching.

"Nope. She's usually home around three, though. Drives a white car."

Three o'clock was hours away. I decided to get lost for a while in the giant redwoods of the Jedediah Smith State Park. I walked on a high bank along the river, the light slanting through the ancient trees and casting dark shadows in the thickets. My heart felt too big in my chest and my stomach was tight. I tried to forget why I was there as I listened to the crunch of my footsteps on the trail.

I had lunch in a small café that smelled of mildew but served a decent sandwich. At three o'clock I drove past the dirty blue house, but no one was home. I killed time in a marine-themed tourist trap that sold a wide array of kitschy items made of seashells and plastic. Every hour or so I would drive past the house, four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock. Every time my stomach twisted over on itself. Seven, eight, nine. Still no one.

I wanted to give up. At ten-fifteen I drove past the house and saw a white car parked on the dead lawn, and the blinds glowing pink with the light inside.

This was the wrong time to come calling. Would a sixty-five year old woman answer an unexpected caller at ten at night? Still, I climbed the steps and stood on the front porch. My hand was shaking as I knocked on the door.

After an unbearable few minutes a face peered through a crack in the curtains. Another moment and the door opened to reveal a large woman with a man's haircut standing squarely on the threshold. This was not my mother.

But if Helen Green were not my mother, she was glad to go through all the Greens in the phone book for me. She knew them all, the Greens of Crescent City, and she went through them with me one by one.

“Marsha Green, she lives over on the other side of town, *Native American*,” she said, whispering the last bit as though it were a scandal, but smiling to show that she didn't mind. “Bob and Louise Green, Bob works at the post office. There's Sharon Greene, but she's got an e at the end.” I thanked Helen Green for her kindness. The next morning I headed for O'Brien.

The town of O'Brien, Oregon is not so much a town as a place where they hung a single flashing yellow light between two telephone poles to alert drivers to the gas station/convenience store/post office on one side of the road, and the diner on the other. I sat at a picnic table in the parking lot and waited, eyes boring into the cab of each car and truck that pulled in, wondering if I'd recognize him.

A red pick-up truck pulled in and parked, and a small man with curly grey hair got out. As he approached I could see he was about my height, different than I remembered him, and the same. He had shaved off the mustache he had when I was a little girl, but he walked with the same gait, hands tucked in his front pockets. The way I walk sometimes. We shook hands and looked at each other, his pale eyes calm and direct.

"Hi," I said stupidly.

"Hi there," he said.

We sat down at the table, and I wondered where to start.

"It's so good to see you," he said. "I looked for you so many times." He told me how he'd called every Stephanie Green in the online directory lookup. "Even the ones who were way too old to be you," he said.

"I was always unlisted," I said. "I didn't want anyone to find me."

"I just want you to know that I looked for you," he said. "I didn't stop looking for you."

A couple walking through the parking lot called to him and waved. He returned the greeting.

“Everyone knows each other in these little towns,” he said.

I liked that. The way we had lived before was insular, isolated. Seldom were outsiders let within the perimeter. He was of the world, at least a little.

“Where are you living now?” he asked me.

I didn’t know how much I wanted to tell him, how much control I was willing to yield. I had cracked the door, but the chain was still latched.

“San Diego,” I said.

He nodded. I think he could tell I was being purposefully vague, but he didn’t press. He allowed me that.

“Do you find the stickers I left for you?” he said.

When I was around ten years old, two years after he’d left, he’d put stickers all over my neighborhood, kid-height. I found them on telephone poles, on fences, underneath the slide at the park where we’d gone the day he went away. The sticker said:

BRUCE LOVES STEPHANIE A LOT

If you want to talk to me, from a pay phone

dial 0 and tell the operator

you want to make a collect call to

Bruce Donelson in Talent, Oregon.

(phone number)

At the time, I never considered calling him. I was scared. He'd been in my neighborhood, looking for me, like they said he would. I wanted to peel off all the stickers and throw them away before someone in the house found out. I thought that they might get me in trouble. But in the years after I left home, I never forgot those stickers, the bold capital letters that ran across the top. BRUCE LOVES STEPHANIE A LOT.

"I found them." I looked up at him. "I couldn't call you then. You know how it was?"

He nodded. "I just wanted you to know that I was always there for you if you needed me," he said.

We sat at that picnic table for two or three hours, excavating our memories. How he used to call me Goose and I used to call him Weasel. He reminded me of how I used to like to help him work on his little Toyota. "I'd ask you to hold the washers and screws when I changed the oil, and you'd say, 'You couldn't have done it without my help!' You were so proud," he said, smiling. I remembered going to breakfast at a little French café that had a suit of armor near the door, and how we'd get butter croissants and big cups of hot chocolate with whipped cream. A camping trip to Joshua Tree, laying on our backs in sleeping bags and looking up at the night sky, an overturned bowl of stars. Occasionally we laughed. Occasionally we tried not to cry.

I told him I didn't have any pictures from when I was little. He said he had a photograph of my mom and me, taken when I was less than a year old. "It's the only picture I have of you," he said. "I've kept it on my desk all these years." I agreed to follow him to his house, a mile or so away, so he could make me a copy. The tires of his

truck kicked up beige clouds of dust on the dirt road that led away from the highway. In a couple of minutes the woods had swallowed us up. I followed his truck onto a rutted path, the long grass in between the tire tracks scraping against the underside of my car. We drove over a dilapidated wooden bridge that crossed a rocky stream, mostly dry.

I couldn't see any part of the highway or any houses, and the apprehension that had begun to melt away at the picnic table returned. I began to wonder if following my father into the woods was a good idea. After all, I barely knew him. Just then we entered a sun-lit clearing, with a small, slightly tumbledown house in the middle. I parked my car behind my dad's truck and followed him up to the front door, where a little tiger-striped cat was waiting for him on the stoop. "This is Chickie," he said, reaching down to scratch her head. The cat wound itself around his ankles as he opened the door. The cat made me feel less nervous.

Inside, the house looked unfinished but clean. There were a few panels of unpainted drywall and the wood floors were in need of refinishing, but it was tidy. In the corner of the living room was a dark wood table covered with blueprints. A white cat with gold eyes appraised me from one of the mismatched chairs. On the floor in the center of the room were an empty paper bag and a cat toy with a red feather at the end. "The cats love paper bags," he said. "The white one is Baybee." He disappeared down the hall to retrieve the photograph of my mother and me.

I sat on the edge of the sofa with the sun against my back. The white cat blinked sleepily. Chickie flopped on the floor in a pool of light and patted the feathered toy with a small white paw. My father was kind to animals. My father was tidy. My father had

kept my picture on his desk for twenty-two years. BRUCE LOVES STEPHANIE A LOT.

I heard his footsteps coming back down the hallway. He emerged holding a faded photograph in a black frame.

In the picture, my mother is wearing a tan short-sleeved sweater. Her thin brown hair is pulled back. A few wisps have come loose, making her look slightly frazzled, but her eyes are bright and she is smiling. She holds me on her lap, with her hands under my little arms. I am all peach fuzz and smiles in a little white onesie. We look happy.

“I can try scanning it but the quality might be lacking,” my father said. “It would probably be best if I took it into Grant’s Pass and had a copy made. I could mail it to you.”

I would need to give him my address. I looked at the photo in my hands in silence, considering.

“Let me try making a copy on my printer,” he said after a moment. He took the picture and disappeared down the hallway again. Immediately I wished I hadn’t hesitated. I wished I hadn’t been filled with fear and doubt for all those years.

He came back into the room with a grainy copy of the photograph. “Thank you,” I said, standing. “Thank you for keeping a picture of me.” I walked over to the table in the corner and found a blank piece of paper. “Do you have a pen?” I asked.

He pulled a pen from his front shirt pocket and I remembered that he always carried a pen there. I wrote down my address and email and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. He paused. “Can I hug you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

We hugged in silence for a minute. When we stepped apart, both of us were in tears.

Over the next few years, our relationship grew and flourished. He married his girlfriend, Elizabeth, and moved into the home he built for her in Selma, Oregon. We visited each other in San Diego and Selma. After I met Elly, she emailed me, writing, “I’m so glad to have a new daughter.” The week I left my husband, they were on vacation in Cabo San Lucas. They called me to propose Thanksgiving in Mexico with my husband’s family later that year.

“Dad, I’m at my friend Lisa’s,” I said. “I can tell you more when you’re back home and we’re not talking long distance, but I moved out. I don’t think we’ll be having Thanksgiving with the Smalley’s this year.” I laughed a little through the tears that sprung up whenever I tried to speak.

The next day, he left me a voicemail message.

“Hi sweetie,” he said. “Call me back when you get this.”

He answered the phone right away. “You don’t have to say anything, and we don’t have to talk about it unless you want to, but we want you to know that anything you need, be it a place to stay, or a lawyer, or financial help, we’ve got you covered,” he said.

I immediately began sobbing. It wasn’t just the offer of help that moved me, though for that I was deeply grateful. What touched me most was the unconditionality of the offer. He didn’t care what had happened or who was to blame. He wasn’t waiting to

pass judgment. I was his daughter and that was enough of a reason to support me. It was the first time I remembered feeling that kind of love from anyone in my family.

I was grateful again for my father's support as I tried for the second time to get my passport, because my mother had taken some creative license when she registered my birth at age fourteen. She didn't like the idea of my father's name on the document. "I don't want his karmic negativity in this house," she said. She'd filled in the space where my father's name was supposed to go with a name she made up, Daniel Bartholemew Green, and wrote down my fictional father's birthplace as Canada.

This was problematic when it came to proving my nationality. I'd already failed to provide census, education, or medical records. Every lawyer I talked to said they didn't know how to help me. I'd contacted my congressman but even his office couldn't persuade the Passport Agency.

"How do you know you weren't born in Canada?" one official asked me.

In order to prove I wasn't Canadian, I'd have to prove that my father wasn't Daniel Bartholemew Green. My dad immediately arranged DNA testing and we went together to have our cheeks swabbed. The same day, he legally adopted me, and signed a sworn affidavit that he'd been present at my birth. But even this wasn't enough to prove my citizenship.

"Affidavits are pretty much useless at this point, seeing as your mother provided a false affirmation on a legal document," the official told me. "We know where your father was in 1976, but we don't have any proof of your mother's whereabouts. If you can't

prove where you were born, you'll have to provide evidence that both your mother and father are United States citizens. Then you're a citizen by default.”

My dad sent me a certified copy of his birth certificate, but getting my mom's would be more difficult. I knew she was born in New York state and I knew her birthday, but birth records are filed by city, and I didn't know exactly where her parents lived when she was born. Further, birth records prior to 1950 weren't available electronically, so any searches would have to be done the old fashioned way, by going through boxes of filed documents. Anyway, even if I could fly to New York and go through every archive in the state, I wouldn't be entitled to a certified copy of her birth certificate without her permission.

It was October, six months after I received my rejection letter from the Passport Agency, and I was no closer to getting on a plane to England than I had been in April. Instead, I was stuck in California, trapped by a past I couldn't shake free of, and by my mother, whose absence never stopped haunting me.

In desperation, I looked up private investigators in my area. The website for A.T. Ulmer and Associates promised expertise with the following services: background checks, missing person investigations, driver's license information, and real estate property records searches, among a long list of others. I left a message and within thirty minutes I got a call back from Anthony Ulmer, private eye.

I told him everything. How I couldn't find my mother, how I couldn't prove my citizenship without her. How I was stuck in America against my will.

The detective was sympathetic to my situation.

“Finding your mother, that’s important,” he said.

I gave him all the information I had, which wasn’t much—Hetha’s date of birth and home state, the list of her former addresses, her maiden name and aliases. He told me his hourly rate was seventy dollars and said he’d see what he could dig up on my mother.

That evening I met up with friends for happy hour at a local Mexican food joint. I was two margaritas in when my phone rang. It was Anthony Ulmer.

“I found your mother,” he said.

“You found my mother?” I was dumbfounded. “How?”

“I checked to see who owned the properties at her last few places of residence. It turns out the same couple owned the last three places. I called them and they put me in touch with her. I spoke to her less than an hour ago,” he said. “Expect her call.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you.”

I felt light headed. The action in the bar seemed like a scene from a foreign film, everyone laughing and speaking in a language I didn’t understand. I grabbed my friend Candice by the shoulder and turned her to face me.

“He found her,” I said. “I have to go. She’s going to call me.”

Candice’s eyes grew big. “Oh my God!” she said. “Good luck! Call me!”

I was halfway home when my phone rang again, and a northern California number appeared on the screen. I pulled over to the side of the road to take the call. My hands were shaking as I answered the phone.

“Hello?” My hazards were on and my foot was still jammed on the brake pedal, though I had put the car in park.

“Is this Steph?” My mother’s voice piped over all those miles still sounded just as I remembered it. It had been thirteen years since I’d heard her speak my name.

My mind was full of static. I felt like crying. I tried to think of something to say.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” I said.

She laughed. I asked her how she was. She told me that she was living with two of the people I’d known from childhood. She was still in the life, though the group was down to three. As soon as she told me I could feel my defenses rise. Everything I said now would be a test, and if I wanted her help, I couldn’t fail it.

“Are you married?” She asked me. She sounded casual and a little disinterested, as if she was talking to a neighbor she hadn’t seen for a while.

“Divorced,” I told her. “Just this year.” Already I wondered if I’d blown it. I’d admitted to being married, an institution she despised, but maybe the subsequent divorce would nullify that wrong.

“Any kids?”

“No.” I should get points for this, since she believed that world was overpopulated.

“Too many kids in the world anyway,” she said. “The planet’s crawling with them.”

“Yeah,” I said. Score.

“So you live in San Diego now?”

“Yes,” I said. “And you’re in Crescent City. I looked for you there a couple of years ago.”

“Really?” She sounded surprised. I could hear her take a drag off of a cigarette, and then a long exhale. “Why?”

I suddenly wished I hadn’t said anything about looking for her. If I said something she didn’t want to hear, all bets would be off.

I stammered to answer her. “I just wanted to know if you were okay,” I said. “That you had a place to live.” *Stop talking.* “You know, that weren’t on the streets or anything.” *Shut up, shut up, shut up.*

For a moment there was silence.

“Well, what can I do for you?” she said finally.

I told her about my passport troubles and how my birth certificate wasn’t sufficient to prove my nationality. I told her that I wanted to travel, and that I needed a copy of her birth certificate in order to leave the country.

“Okay,” she said. “I don’t have a copy but I can order one.”

“Really?” I tried not to sound too surprised, but her willingness to help me seemed too good to be true. I wanted to get off the phone before she changed her mind. “Thank you for helping me,” I said.

“I don’t have any reason not to,” she said.

She said this as if she hadn’t left me when I was sixteen. As if she’d never told me that she didn’t want me in her life. As if she’d never told me that I was on a path of illusion, and she would have no part of it.

The following evening I called my dad to tell him the news. He was as surprised as I had been that she'd agreed to help me.

"Well, that's unexpected," he said when I'd finished recounting my conversation with her. I could hear my doubts reflected in his voice when the phone beeped to indicate a call waiting. It was my mother's number.

"It's her, Dad. I'll call you back," I said.

"Good luck," he told me.

I clicked over to the other call.

"Hello?" I said.

"Yes, Steph," my mother said. "I have something to say to you." Her voice was cold and businesslike.

"Okay," I said. I suddenly felt hot.

"You called me yesterday and asked for my help, but after I thought about what you said, I'm afraid I can't help you," she told me.

"Why?" My throat was closing up. She was doing it again. I had set myself up for this.

"You thought I was living on the streets?" she said, her voice rising now. "How dare you project homelessness on me!"

"What? No, wait," I said, panicking. "Wait a minute, please!"

"No, I don't want to wait!" She was yelling. There was nothing I could say now to stop this. "You have chosen your path. You are the most negative frequency I've ever met, and I reject you and your illusions."

She continued but I wasn't listening anymore. All I could hear was the pounding of my heart, the sound of a big base drum. I could still hear her chanting her litany of accusations as I hung up the phone.

I was crying when I called my dad back. I told him everything she said to me through guttural sobs.

"You know those things aren't true," he said. "This is not your fault, sweetheart."

"What am I going to do?" I said.

"We'll figure something out."

I hung up and sat on my green couch, crying. I hated my mother for leaving me and keeping me bound to her at the same time. She still had control over me. I had given it to her.

The next morning I couldn't face going in to work, where just the day before my coworkers had been so happy for me. I was humiliated and demoralized, and I guess some part of me felt that I deserved it. From under the covers I sent a text that said, "She changed her mind. I am a mess. Taking today off."

I was still in pajamas around lunchtime, when a pizza guy arrived with a big cheese pizza and a salad, compliments of my friends at work. In the afternoon, they sent a bouquet of flowers, big yellow sunflowers in a basket. I cried after each delivery.

For the next few days, I staggered through my normal routines like a sleepwalker. Every evening I would speak with the Englishman for a few minutes, but our conversations were growing stale with no plans to move forward. It had been seven months since we'd seen each other, and the distance felt immeasurable. I could feel him slipping away.

My mother hated me, my marriage was over, and my love interest was losing interest. I felt defeated and powerless. I imagined Hetha gloating over her victory, taking satisfaction from denying me, and I hated her.

Doggedly I began again. What else was there to do? I pored over websites explaining state laws around birth documents. In the state of New York, I could petition a judge to grant a subpoena of my mother's birth record, but it would mean appearing in court in New York, and I would need a lawyer. My boss gave me the number for an attorney friend in New York. The attorney advised me that it could take weeks to get in front of a judge, and I'd need to be able to prove that my mother wasn't mentally competent to grant me access to her birth certificate herself. Another dead end.

That night I didn't call the Englishman. I couldn't bear to tell him I'd struck out again, or listen to him console me half-heartedly. Instead, I poured myself a glass of wine and sat out on the back porch, watching the sun bruise the sky purple and red as it slipped below the rooftops. In the deepening darkness I closed my eyes and thought about the crooked path that had brought me to this place, tracing the years backwards, all the way to my mother. Always back to my mother.

My mother and her loud laugh, her cigarettes. My mother's stubbornness and rough hands. Her thin brown hair, the lines around her eyes, her stained teeth. Her ruthlessness. Her convictions. Her eccentricity, her violent mistrust of the authorities.

Her mistrust of the authorities. This thought caught in my mind and spun there. My mother had kept me hidden because she loathed authority: the government, the church, the police, the legal system. She lived her life on the periphery, with as little involvement in the outside world as possible. This had been for her a source of strength, and I had felt her wield its power, but suddenly I saw it as something else: a deep weakness. My way out.

With a rush of clarity, a plan began to form in my mind. In the morning I would call my attorney. For the first time since I'd set out to get my passport, I felt in control of my own destiny.

"I want you to threaten my mother," I told the lawyer the next day. I had arrived early to work, eager to enact my plan. "I want you to tell her that if she doesn't provide me with a copy of her birth certificate, I will have no choice but to sue her." I had no intention of following through on my threat, and I knew I wouldn't have to. My mother would never fight me in court. It went against her principles. Now I was using her principles against her.

My father burst out laughing when I told him my strategy. "It's genius! It can't fail," he said.

I imagined sending photographs of my trip to my mother: my extended middle finger in front of Big Ben and the London Eye. My middle finger, standing tall in front of Buckingham Palace and Piccadilly Circus. I dreamed of traveling the world and flipping her the bird in front of the pyramids and the Eiffel Tower. In these fantasies she never got to see my face. I would never show her my face again.

It took two weeks, but finally it came: her birth certificate. I held the piece of paper in my hands and ran my fingers over the raised seal. My right to citizenship. My ticket out.

CULT

We didn't speak in tongues or dress like characters from Little House on the Prairie. We didn't live in a bunker or a farmhouse or stockpile weapons or grow our own food. Our evolving fellowship didn't have a catchy name. We didn't pass out leaflets. We didn't believe that if we killed ourselves we could catch a ride on an alien spacecraft in the tail of a comet and save ourselves from the apocalypse.

We didn't think of ourselves as religious. Nobody went to church or pored over The Bible. Religion, Government and Law were considered forms of delirium, false postulates that emerged from the failure of the individual to separate himself from the Mass herd. Morals, Ideals and Ethics were rules and controls designed to keep the individual enslaved and unable to advance through the Levels of Consciousness. Mass Man lived in a state of spiritual misery and poverty, from which they did not want to be released.

We were not Mass Man. We had advanced in consciousness past the average human being. It was no accident that we had found each other, whether through individual paths leading from the outside world in, or more directly, by choosing, pre-incarnation, to be born into the life. We were old souls, and in this lifetime, we would be reborn and enter the kingdom of heaven within ourselves.

THE PATH

I didn't know I was raised in a cult. A child's world is small, and everything taken for granted. My mother didn't think she'd joined a cult, I'm sure; nobody *decides* to do a thing like that. You make your way inside a cult the same way you move through the rest of life, through an innumerable succession of small choices. My mother, for example, was following a man.

She met my sister's father, Mel, at a party in Greenwich Village. It was New Year's Eve, an artist's party in a loft, lots of young people trying to be writers, painters, performers. Neither Hetha nor Mel knew the host. Mel thought my mother was a knockout. Well-dressed, vivacious, lively, open. She was maybe twenty-six, he a couple of years older.

They were of the free sex, free thinking age. They slept together that night, and she moved in with him soon after. They came from different backgrounds. Mel had grown up in poverty, in the shtetls of the Lower East Side. He was separated from his wife, collecting a small salary as the boiler operator of a building in the village, making a little cash on the side selling pot.

Hetha had been living with her mother, a middle-class executive secretary who thought her daughter could do better than Mel and encouraged her to drop him. But my mother was enchanted, and in any case both Mel and Hetha felt that regardless of their class differences, they were both living in a phony world, with phony values and phony wars, and they both dreamed of getting out of it, going somewhere, and finding something that was real and true.

They were both seeking. So a couple of years later, when Mel got a call in the middle of the night from a friend who'd gone to California following a guru named Walter Browning, Mel went. And six months later, my mother went after him.

Me, I was born into the life. It was just home. Just family. Over the years I came to understand that my family was different, but then, doesn't everyone feel that way?

For years after I left, I didn't know how to describe the environment I grew up in. *I was raised by hippies*, I often said, though that wasn't strictly true. *I grew up in a commune*. But there are checklists to help you determine if you're in a cult, and if it's dangerous. You can Google it. I did.

CHECKLIST

Does central authority lie in a single, charismatic leader? Dangerous cults are commonly led by a single person whose authority cannot be easily challenged. *Check.*

Does the group encourage separation from contacts outside the group? Are members encouraged or even required to limit or break off contact with non-members, including family and friends? *Check.*

Does the group live in communal isolation? Dangerous cults often form communes where all property is owned by the group (often controlled by the leader). *Check.*

Does the group maintain a polarized, “us versus them” worldview? Does the group represent the only correct way of living, while everything outside of the group is dangerous and corrupting? *Check.*

Is the group elitist? Dangerous cults often claim a special exalted status for itself, its leaders and members. Often the group may claim to exist to serve an exalted purpose, such as saving humanity, or warning others of their inevitable damnation. *Check.*

Is there punishment for defection or criticism? The threat may be supernatural, or it may have more mundane sources, such as ex-communication from the group, blacklisting, physical punishments, humiliation, or general harassment. *Check.*

A survivor of Jonestown, Deborah Layton, put it this way: “When our own thoughts are forbidden, when our questions are not allowed and our doubts are punished, when contacts and friendships outside the organization are censored, we are being abused

for an end that never justifies its means. When our heart aches knowing we have made friendships and secret attachments that will be forever forbidden if we leave, we are in danger. When we consider staying in a group because we cannot bear the loss, disappointment, and sorrow our leaving will cause for ourselves and those we have come to love, we are in a cult.”

BIRTH

I was not planned.

When my mother became pregnant with me, she denied it for the first few months. At the time, she was having sex with a variety of partners. She didn't use birth control because she believed she was so attuned to the cycles of her body, she would know when she was ovulating.

After three or four missed periods, she conceded that she must be pregnant, but predicted that she would not carry me to term. She dismissed all references to her growing belly. "I've communicated with the baby, and it's not staying," she said. Certain that she would miscarry, until the seventh month she kept a bucket and rags in her car when she went anywhere. Finally, during a doctor's visit for something unrelated, the physician set down his clipboard and placed his hand on my mother's shoulder. "Lady," he said. "You must prepare. This baby is coming."

I arrived in June of 1976, at a little past two in the morning. I was born at home, in the house where we all lived—my cult family. My mother labored without medical aid on a blue foldout sofa bed in one of the upstairs bedrooms. The bed was covered with a vinyl mattress pad and the lights were kept low, the room cleared of extra furniture. A few of the women stood around offering opinions on how things were progressing. One of the men rolled up his sleeves and waited to catch me. My sister Robin, then ten years old, sat watching our mother strain to deliver me. When I was born, they put me in a large basin of lukewarm water. My mother jumped out of bed to see me. "I was trailing afterbirth everywhere, but I didn't care," she said. "You unfolded like a flower."

My parents had only been sleeping together a few months when I was conceived. By the time I arrived, their relationship, which had been casual at best, was over. The night I was born, my father was sleeping down by the beach, hidden in the scrub of the bluffs where headlights wouldn't reach. Sometimes he chose his sleeping bag over the chaos of so many people under one roof. One of the men who knew where he liked to camp went to find him and bring him back. I was lying on my mother's belly when he got home. In a chair by the side of the bed, he took a turn at holding me in the darkened room as my mother rested. I wish I could remember it. I wonder if we felt like a family.

KARASS

We lived in an old two-story house in the sprawling, low-income suburbs of Los Angeles County. Lawndale is a nothing town of strip malls and freeways and seedy bars where locals drink all day for something to do. Our house sat on the corner of 167th Street and Prairie Avenue, across four lanes of traffic from a run-down golf course. We were right there, in plain sight, among the normal people.

To three-year-old me, normal was twenty or more people living together under one roof, subculture youths and families looking for an alternative lifestyle. Looking for something. Some lived at the house full time, others came and went. Each of the eight bedrooms held two or three people. Others slept on fold-out sofa beds in common rooms, or in the gazebo in the back yard, or in a camper parked out back.

The regulars all worked together as housepainters, men and women alike, and pooled their earnings for the good of the community. Meals were served family style, with everyone squeezing around a large table. My mother and one of the other women were in charge of the cooking. Afterwards everyone would sit around and smoke cigarettes and talk about where society had gone wrong. Under the table, I counted feet.

Many of the people had brushes with the authorities at one time or another. Some people used aliases; I never knew their real names. Many had cut off contact with their families. Though my mother wasn't on the run from the law, she changed her last name from Lerman to Green, as a symbolic gesture: a rejection of the person she had once been, and the family to whom she had once belonged. And so my last name was Green, a name that belonged to no one.

I remember many names and faces, but mostly I felt invisible; thigh-high in a forest of grown ups, interactions occurring in the space above me. Despite feeling unseen, I know I was doted over. In baby pictures, I am held in many pairs of arms. A woman's hair cascades into her face as she leans over to help me take baby steps, my tiny hands clutching hers. A man with bushy blonde hair and a thick mustache holds me as I pull all the cigarettes out of the pack in his shirt pocket and arrange them in his mouth. I rest my head on the shoulder of a man in a white turtleneck sweater. In these early photographs, my eyes are bright, I am relaxed and smiling.

None of the unease I remember shows on my face until a few years later. In photos from when I was three, four, five, all the evidence of care is still apparent: I sit behind a pile of gift-wrapped presents wearing a pinafore dress and a paper party hat. My mother dresses me in Halloween costumes – I am a ghost in a white sheet with holes for eyes; I am a genie wearing bright scarves and clip-on earrings. I am searching the back yard for plastic Easter eggs. Here I am reaching up to pet the soft muzzle of a horse; here I am on tiptoes, peeking at a cake on the kitchen counter. And yet, there is tension on my face that shows in the furrow of my brow, and my eyes have turned sober. Tension that I feel again, in the pit of my belly, as I hold the photographs today. I didn't know it then, but everything was changing.

A SINGLE, CHARISMATIC LEADER

It's not a cult without a guru.

Walter Browning was born in a small town in Mississippi to a poverty-stricken family. On the way home from the hospital, cradled in his mother's arms with his father at the wheel, the car's tire went into a rut and baby Walter went flying out the open cab into a drainage ditch. The filthy water gave him croup. He grew into a sickly child, cursed with debilitating headaches.

His parents were Pentecostal Christians who spoke in tongues and danced with snakes at tent revivals. His father was an alcoholic and a brute; his mother made vacant by indigence and trauma. Walt was small for his age and scrawny. One day when he was eight or nine, his teacher sent him home from school with a crushing headache. When his father got home to find Walt alone in the house, he told him that he couldn't come home like that. Walt said that after that, in his mind, he never came home again.

As in the story of Jesus, Walt's years from adolescence through adulthood are blank pages. As an adult, he got a job working as an illustrator for Disney, a job that he promptly quit when he was told that he couldn't keep his mustache or ride his motorcycle. Eventually he would meet and marry his wife, Verna Dean Schmidt, in some mid-western college town. They would have two children, Ralph and William. They seldom stayed in one place for long, traveling around and keeping the company of folk singers and political activists and beatniks. They lived for a short time in a church building in Woodstock, New York, before moving to California, where I would know them years later.

He was a poet. On the night I was born, on a spiral bound steno pad, he wrote in neat script:

To Stephanie, My Littlest Friend

May your fingers always reach

Each solid truth that life provides,

And may your taste buds always teach you

What it is you take inside.

God grant you smell the growing earth,

And listen to its lilting song,

And see the never-ending births

That raise the weak into the strong.

May you, in worship of yourself,

Be self enough to worship life

Remembering abundant help

Comes but to they who stand in light.

On the back of the page was a small illustration, a smiling baby face with a single curl of hair, wide eyes fixed on the nipple of a pert breast. My mother kept the page in my baby photo album, the ruffled edge of the paper pressed flat under the cellophane, the once-sticky inside page dry and yellow with age.

My memories of Walt are faded and few. He wore pink button down shirts with the sleeves rolled up, and suspenders. His hair, once black, was gone grey at the temples,

slicked back like an old-time movie star, his mustache neatly trimmed. In his vicinity, there was usually a pink bakery box, and I when I asked for cookies, which was always, he'd say "Ask your mama." He mesmerized me and the other children with magic tricks. He would pull a quarter out from behind my ear and then make it disappear again.

When I knew him, his health was failing. Diabetes, kidney stones, I don't know what else. He didn't take care of himself and he didn't like doctors. From time to time he was hospitalized, usually pulling out his IVs and leaving before the doctors thought he was ready. I remember him, frail but sharp-eyed, through rising spirals of cigarette smoke.

He died when I was three years old. He died at home, in the house where I was born. They laid his body out on the couch in the living room and waited a few days before they called the morgue, so that everyone could say goodbye to his physical form. My mother took me by the hand and led me to his side. I remember that his cheeks were gaunt, his skin grey. I remember that I didn't like it. I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

They beatified him after his death. When people spoke of him, they spoke with reverence. *He was a prophet. He was a healer. He saved my life.*

How much of what I've been told is mythology, and how much is true? Maybe all families are like this. Maybe it's a human tendency to seek a hero to worship. Maybe in order to have heroes, we have to choose to erase the dark chapters in their history, or else our heroes are just men.

After Walt died, some people left. We rented the house across the street, another big two story place, and some of us moved in there. I didn't connect Walt's death with all of the changes at the time, I just knew that now, everyone listened to Verna.

ROBIN

Robin was my mother's first daughter by a different father. My memories of her are fragments. I've tried to keep them from fading, but every time I handle them I change them a little.

In a photograph, I am less than one year old and my sister is lying on the bed, holding me. I am sprawled on her stomach, my baby hands full of her flowered flannel nightgown. Robin's head is on the pillow, her face framed by soft brown hair. I am smiling toothlessly at the camera. I imagine it was our mother who took the picture. I imagine her adoring us.

I remember that my sister gave me big, wet, sloppy kisses. I didn't like the sloppy part but I liked knowing she loved me. I remember sitting on the kitchen counter, and her singing to me: *Take Me Out To The Ballgame*. "The old ballgame," she sang. "The *nice* ballgame," I insisted.

I remember her standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror, putting on makeup, getting ready for a date. She must have been about thirteen. The makeup and the date would have been frowned upon, but not prohibited, because she was over twelve years old, the age of accountability, and she could make her own decisions, though she may not have understood the repercussions. I was too little to understand why my mother wasn't happy. I thought my sister looked beautiful.

The boy arrived, some kid who worked at the gas station on the corner. I followed her outside and watched as she got on the back of his motorcycle. She waved to me and blew me kisses.

When I was three she went away. She came back to see me once, and gave me a big doll. It was almost as tall as I was and had curly brown hair and a blue and white dress and black Mary Janes. It would be many years before I would see my sister again. I wonder how long I asked my mother where my sister was before I stopped asking. I wonder what my mother said.

LETTERS

On my desk are two letters.

My sister sent one of them to me with an Easter basket in the spring of 1981, a few months after she left home. She was staying with her father, Mel, in Hawaii. My mother had not allowed Mel to see his daughter in ten years. My sister's letter is written in an adolescent hand, blue ballpoint on a small piece of yellow lined paper.

Dear Steph,

I am on an island way across the ocean. It's very warm here but it rains warm rain a lot. It starts and stops quick. There are pretty flowers all over the place and the water is very blue and warm.

In the house there are little lizards called geckos, and you have to sleep with nets over the bed so the bugs don't bite you. When I come back, first I have to go on a little plane and then a big-big plane.

I miss you, and I'll see you when I get back.

Love Robin

kisses hugs
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx oooooooooooooooooo

I love you Steph

You're wonderful

I didn't receive my sister's letter until October of 2011. My mother sent it back to my sister with the Easter basket and the second letter that sits on my desk. It reads:

May 4,

1981

Dear Robin,

After playing the role of parent for 12 years, I have released you to walk your own path and deal with its illusions on your own. I can't reject your illusions for you any more than I can pee for you. As a friend I am available as a resource should you ask me; and although you had closed your ears to anything I had to say when you left, you did call before leaving for Hawaii and ask where I was coming from regarding your contact with Mel. In fact, it was the only question you had as to how I saw anything, since your leaving. I answered then that the process was between you and Mel, that in truth I was not a part of it, and not to involve me. And because you did involve me in spite of my answer, and because I don't feel it was intentional or deliberate on your part, and especially because you asked, I'll do my best to let you know what I think.

Our relationships, our processes, are karmic law in action. I have a karmic exchange with Stephanie as I had with you, in which I am responsible for that process 24 hours a day until she is 12; to serve as a guide as best I can until she reaches the cycle of accountability – at 12. Your package and letter come from a world you are walking in and examining – part of your process. I am not there. She is not there. Yet that mail tries to connect that world and this one, this drama. That connection represents an illusion, an illusion I return to you, by mail.

In love and friendship,

Hetha

MOMMY

I was uninvited but you forgave me my trespasses. From the moment of my birth, you were happy to see me, your little lotus flower. You lavished me with fierce affection and kept me always close. In my earliest memories, you are singing to me. At night under the sweeping canopy of the old pepper tree behind the house, you wrapped me in a soft blanket and cradled me in your arms, singing, soothing me to sleep. As a toddler I would dream of *Rock-a-bye-Baby*. Of falling slowly in a wooden cradle from the highest branches of the tree, and landing softly on the ground below, unharmed.

In my child mind I was the center of my universe, but really you were the sun. Upon waking each morning, it was your location I first determined, from the confines of my crib where I would shout, waiting for my echo to be returned by you. When the crib could no longer hold me, I slept in your big bed, you and me at the center, me at the center of you, tucked warm at your middle and wrapped in your arms. If I awoke and you were gone, I would tumble out of bed, nightie-clad, rubbing eyes, and search the house until I found you.

Like looping scenes flickering from an old projector, I remember all the nights you read to me, your profile illuminated by the lamp on the bedside table so I could see the tiny hairs on your face, and the wisps of cigarette smoke that followed each word long after your exhale. Your face, reading, is imprinted on my memory along with every storybook illustration. You kissed the top of my blonde head when I worried that Corduroy was lonely and forgotten and button-less. You read to me even when you were tired, and if I was still awake after *Winne the Pooh* and *Frog and Toad are Friends*, you

would turn out the light and sing to me, Christmas carols regardless of the time of year. If you drifted off before I did, I would nudge you and like magic, the singing would begin again: *oh holy night, the stars are brightly shining.*

On laundry day when you changed the linens, you would lay me in the middle of the bed and shake the sheets out over me, letting them float down onto my wiggling body, complaining that sheets today were lumpier than when you were a girl, and gigglier too, as you attempted to flatten me with tickles. Sometimes you would wrap me up, cocoon-like, and hold me on your belly, rocking from side to side, singing sea shanties. My laughter made you laugh, like bells: mine high and thin and yours sonorous and deep. Big bell and little bell, ringing.

You worried about my nutrition. Before I knew better you fed me liver and onions, dense with protein and vitamins and minerals. You would allow me Top Ramen, but only if I ate all the cubes of tofu you added. I would eat them first, swallowing them without chewing, so I could savor the noodles and salty broth. I wanted grape jelly sandwiches on white bread, but you fed me peanut butter and fruited jam on sprouted wheat, with celery and carrot sticks. You made our meals at home and they were “balanced” before it was popular: protein, starch and vegetable, everything from scratch.

You took me with you everywhere. It must have been easier to leave me at home, but you rarely did. You must have sometimes wanted autonomy but I never knew it. I sat up front with you in your station wagon when you did errands. At the grocery store, you would take me out of the basket seat and let me pick one thing from the toy aisle. I dawdled but you were patient. You let me jump from one randomly spaced dark tile to

another, skipping the light ones, (the lava ones), though we progressed at the pace of a hop-sotch game.

Occasionally you would go to the market late in the evening, when the aisles were quiet and empty. On those nights you would leave me in the care of one of the other mothers, and I would sit with the other children in front of the television with big plastic bowls of ice cream, which we would stir until it turned to soup. You must have enjoyed that quiet hour to yourself, alone and unencumbered. You must have appreciated the silence, the vacuum of sound created by my absence. I would be fine until the ice cream was eaten and the show was over, and then I would remember you were gone and I would worry, sitting by the window in the stairwell, staring into the headlights of each approaching car, waiting for your return. I was afraid that you would die in a car accident. I was afraid something would keep you from coming home. You walked in the door with your bags of groceries, set them down, picked me up.

In the middle of a busy day you took me to a petting zoo, and gave me quarters to buy handfuls of green pellets to feed the animals. You taught me to be kind to all God's creatures and to open my palm flat so they wouldn't bite my small fingers. You didn't mind if I got covered in hay and you didn't worry that my hands got dirty because I wanted to pet *all* the goats.

Countless afternoons at the beach, hauling blankets and lunch bags and plastic buckets and shovels for making sand castles. You let me dig for sand crabs and when I wanted to take them home as pets, you told me no, but softened the blow with an orange and pineapple popsicle from the corner store. When the sun began to set, we played the

hugging game: we would run in opposite directions, then turn and charge each other, and when we collided you would pick me up and swing me around, wrapping me in your arms and spinning as the sun went down.

My early memories of you and me are sweet and easy. My mind has taken snapshots of us, clipped out the background, the parts that ruin the image. Leaving only you and me, smiling.

And yet, in the handful of photographs I have from early childhood, I am rarely smiling. In one, I am sitting on your lap and you are laughing and looking at someone across the room. I am about three years old. We are both wearing dresses; it's a birthday party or a special occasion. I am looking at the camera, my little face serious: lips pushed together, brown eyes sober, clutching a handful of popcorn.

When I look at the picture now I feel tense, remembering. I know the room must have been filled with people and smoke, because that's how it was then. I am sitting on your lap like a nervous cat. The chaos made me feel vulnerable. Did you know that?

I never doubted your love for me; I knew it as sure as I was alive. Even now, I know you loved me. I think some part of you must love me still.

HETHA

I remember the day she told me to stop calling her mommy. I was four or five. She was sitting on a chair in the living room and she called me to her side. There were people in the room, observing; their attention made me shy. I put my small hands in her lap and pressed up against her knees, fiddling with the hem of her sweater. My mother said something about relationships and karma and illusions, and told me she was my friend. She said I mustn't call her Mommy anymore. I was to call her by her name, Hetha. I didn't understand, but I whispered okay and she hugged me. All of the children called their parents by their names after that.

She let men come into the bed with us some nights. Different men, familiar and unfamiliar. Men who would appear in the doorway, naked, bathed in the light from the hall, and ask her questions. If she said no, they would leave and search out other bedrooms. If she answered yes, the man would get into the bed and they would have sex, with me right there beside them.

I hated it when she said yes. I hated the sounds, the smells of their bodies. I would scoot as far as I could to the edge of the bed, but sometimes they would roll into me. She knew I hated it because I would kick whoever came close to me as hard as I could. That she knew it upset me and did it anyway made me feel like what I wanted didn't matter.

One night I threw a fit, crying and scratching and punching. She got out of bed, naked, and dragged me out of the room by my arm, up the stairs, yelling for my father to come get me. On the landing she let me go and I fell on the floor, kicking at her. My dad

appeared at the top of the stairs. “You take her,” my mother said, breathing hard. “Tonight she’s your problem.” My father walked down to the landing and picked me up. Over his shoulder I watched her go down the stairs, back to the man who was waiting for her.

One man, Joe, I hated in particular. He would say things to me like, “Don’t bother me, I’m tired. I didn’t get no sleep because I was up all night ballin’ your mama.” I hoped he had received at least a few of my kicks. I hated his accent (Hayseed, Indiana) and I hated the way he spoke to me. I knew it was dirty and I knew he was getting away with something. He knew it too. One morning I woke up and he was in the middle, between my mother and me. I had been sleeping on my side, with my back to him. My nightie had ridden up around my waist and there was something soft between my legs. I touched it and realized it was his penis. I leaped out of bed and turned to look at him and my mother, sleeping. I never told her and I don’t know why. Maybe embarrassment, or maybe I didn’t think she would do anything. Maybe I didn’t want him to have that smug victory to hold over me.

Once when I was six or seven, I was alone upstairs and Joe spotted me in an empty bedroom. He sometimes wrestled with us kids, roughhousing, so it wasn’t completely alarming when he came into the room and pushed me down on the floor. I kicked and squirmed and battered him with my ineffective fists. Usually he would joke around and laugh when he played with us, but this time he wasn’t smiling. He said, “Quit kickin’ or someone’s gonna get hurt.” I kept kicking as he struggled with the button on my waistband. I dug into his arms with my puny fingers as he unzipped the zipper and

began to pull down my pants. Before my pants were all the way off, one of the other kids, Jeff, walked past the door and saw the scuffle. I shouted for help; it was always us kids against Joe when we wrestled. Jeff jumped on Joe's back and wrapped his arms around his neck, and Joe reared up to shake him loose. I pulled up my pants as Joe stood and Jeff fell to the floor. Joe's chest was heaving. "Somebody's gonna get hurt," he said before walking out of the room.

Again, I didn't tell her what happened; I wouldn't realize what had almost happened until years later. I escaped unmolested, and it would be so much easier to believe that she thought I was safe, and that had she known I was in danger, she would have protected me.

DOGMA

I guess you could say our philosophy was Christ-based, in the sense that people talked about Jesus a lot, but we weren't Christians. Our relationship to the Bible was ambiguous. It was declared that the text had been corrupted and manipulated over the centuries to be used as a tool of controlling the Masses. And yet, the words of Jesus, or "JC" as we called him, were accepted as unspoiled.

A different text that was looked upon with favor was *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, which purports to document Jesus's life from the ages of twelve through thirty. The author, Levi Dowling, who wrote the book in 1908, claimed to have transcribed the text from the Akashic Records, a body of mystical knowledge that only exists on the metaphysical plane.

Though we denied it, we were like most religions: picking and choosing from various sects the tenets that pleased and served us. Walt's writings carried as much weight as Jesus's, and while I never saw anyone reading the Bible, everyone had copies of Walt's books. The Virgin Mary was revered as the mother of Christ, but Verna herself was Holy Breath, the movement of God's divine energy.

I didn't think about Walt's teachings, or Jesus's, when I was little. Nobody sat the children down and explained the rules, said, "This is who we are, this is what we believe, this is how to be." As a child, I sought approval. I watched and tried to model behavior that would win me praise. I wanted to be told what to do, what was expected of me; I expect this is common to small children, though for me, the need may have been heightened because all of our rules were unwritten. Later, when I learned that Mass

parents told their children outright how to behave, I thought it wonderful. “It’s your job to clean your room.” “If you are bad you will be spanked.” How easy and straightforward. What a simple game to play. I would have gladly taken a spanking and the uncomplicated absolution it offered to the complex web of choices I faced.

I say that our rules were unwritten, but we professed to have no rules at all. Everyone was free to make their own choices, even us kids. It was just that every choice was loaded with a karmic consequence. Doors, for example, stayed open. A door was a portal; a closed portal blocked energy. The need for privacy was an illusion. If you were taking a bath, or a shit, dressing, undressing, having a fight or having sex, you should feel you have nothing to hide. You could choose to close the door, but then you would be challenged to address whatever illusions you were harboring.

The only exception to the door policy applied to Verna’s room. Verna’s room was on the first floor of the house, with a big pocket door, six feet wide, that rattled on its track when it rolled in and out of the wall. The door to Verna’s room was almost always closed. Behind the door, Verna held “sessions.” When a member of the karass was struggling with a spiritual issue, they would go to Verna for healing. When the door was closed, Verna was in session. The door was almost always closed.

I don’t know what these sessions involved. I never saw one. Once, during one of Hetha’s periods of spiritual struggle, I had been handed off to one of the other mothers while she was in session with Verna. I was little, maybe three years old. I’d been taken upstairs and given some toys to keep me occupied, but all I wanted was my mother. As the other kids built a cabin out of Linkin’ Logs on the braided rug in the bedroom, I

rolled a toy truck over to the top of the stairs and sat there making truck sounds until no one was looking. Then I slipped down the stairs, through the hall and around the corner to Verna's bedroom. I slid the big rattling door open and looked inside. Hetha was sitting on the end of Verna's fold-out bed, her back to me. She turned and I saw her face, red and streaked with tears. Then there were hands under my arms and I was scooped up and carried away, the door rattling closed behind us.

We all needed healing in order to cast out the possession. The possession served as shorthand for anything that wasn't God's will, and it was pervasive. It was made manifest in the disease that riddled Walt's body until he finally succumbed. It shone in the thirty pieces of silver that Judas received for betraying Jesus, and it was the swelling population that suffocated the planet, delivered anew with each new baby born to the Masses. If I failed to behave in a way that was pleasing, it was because the possession had ahold of me. It was the possession that claimed the souls of everyone who left our group, and it was the reason they could never come back.

Sessions with Verna weren't the only way to cast out the possession. More commonly, it was shouted out. Anyone could challenge anyone else's illusions, and these bouts were called blast jobs. Sometimes people came to blows; often furniture and household items were destroyed in the process. Blast jobs happened all the time when I was little, often enough that I don't remember being particularly scared when they occurred, beyond making sure I was out of the way of thrown objects. I was upset, though, when all the potted plants on the backyard patio were demolished during one round. I had been watching from the back door, hoping that my favorite, a Creeping

Charlie that I had named, appropriately, Charlie, would survive the battle. When Charlie was smashed into the cement, I cried.

For a while after Walt died, Verna attempted to cleanse the planet of the possession. She held sessions in which she and other members of her choosing would meditate to manifest worldwide healing. They bought big fold-out maps of the world, and colored in the continents with pink highlighter pens to apply a healing ray. Pink was the color of healing. All colors had meaning. I don't remember them all, but orange represented pain, yellow stood for joy, and black was the color of the possession—a barrier to positive energy. We were free to wear black, of course, if we wanted to repel God's love and absorb negative vibrations.

The outside world was shot through with negative frequencies. Some of these frequencies were repelled by the energetic bubble which God put over our house to protect us. But every time any of us went out into the world and interacted with the Masses, it put a drain us and those at home. Before we left the house, we had to cut our psychic connections to our karass so that we wouldn't siphon off their energy. "Imagine rays or ropes of energy coming out of your head," my mother would tell me. "Picture in your mind that you're cutting them off with a scissors." In my mind I envisioned a black silhouette against an orange background, beams extending out from the head, a black graphic sunburst. I didn't like the scissor idea, because you couldn't get a clean cut at the very bottom of the ray with a scissors. I pictured using a disposable razor like the one my mom used on her legs. Sometimes I would have to imagine cutting my ties more than once if I did a sloppy job.

It was important to cut ties, but it only served to reduce the energy drain on others, it didn't prevent it completely. Each individual was only given so much energy each day to deal with basic tasks, like going to work or running errands. God doled out this energy in what were called allocations. Allocations weren't like rations, with each individual getting enough to sustain them; one person could drain another's allocations simply by going out into the Masses, even if ties were cut. Want to go to the movies? Better make sure that those staying at home have enough allocations for you to go.

We used as many measures as possible to maximize allocations, block negative frequencies, and connect to God's energy. That was the reason that women were encouraged to keep their hair long. Hair was actually antennae that picked up God's loving frequencies. Men would have been encouraged to grow their hair long as well, but it was thought that we would get less house painting work if all the men wore long hair too. Most of the women wore their hair long, in braids. Verna wore her braids coiled and pinned in a crown on her head.

I knew that we used words that people in the outside world didn't know. I wasn't supposed to use those words when we were out in the world because the Masses might notice. One day, one of the mothers took me and the other kids to Chinatown in L.A. I was captivated by the paper stick yo-yos, a red scroll of paper with gold writing in Chinese wrapped around a wooden handle. When you flicked your wrist forward the paper would extend out, and then wind itself back up again when you jerked it back. "Can we buy one to show the karass?" I asked one of the older girls. "*Shhh*. Don't say

that word. These people will think we're strange," she whispered. "They don't know what a karass is."

In my mind, "karass" translated roughly to what I would now call "family." Family, though, was not a word we used. Family was an illusion—mother, father, son, daughter—these titles merely represented the role one was playing in a given lifetime and were of little importance. If taken literally, a soul could lose its way, inhabiting an illusory familial role instead of pursuing individual spiritual growth. I wouldn't know until decades later that had the employees in the Chinese souvenir shop been fans of Kurt Vonnegut, they might have recognized the word *karass* as one he coined in *Cat's Cradle*: a term for a group of people who, often unknowingly, are working together to do God's will. The people were like fingers in a Cat's Cradle.

I knew that some of our words were different, but I wasn't always sure which words. One morning at Norm's coffee shop with several members of the karass, I tried to explain to the waitress what I wanted for breakfast. I was shy and nervous when talking to strangers.

"I want eggs." I said quietly.

"I can't hear you sweetie, talk a little louder," the waitress said.

"I want eggs," I said again.

"What kind of eggs do you want?"

I wasn't sure if she would know sunny-side-up. What if I said sunny-side-up and it was one of *our* words? I didn't want to make a mistake. We weren't supposed to use

our words with Mass people like the waitress. The waitress and everyone at the table were looking at me, waiting.

“I want the kind that are white around the outside, and yellow in the middle, and the yellow part is runny,” I said, drawing circles in the air with my finger. I shifted miserably in my seat. The waitress stood looking at me blankly, pen motionless on the pad.

“Sunny-side-up,” one of the women said, glaring. “You know that.” She looked at me like I was an idiot. I wanted to disappear.

MOTHERS AND BROTHERS

In addition to Hetha, I had two other mothers. Often I was looked after by Josie or Lynn, who each had a little boy of her own. Lynn Rebbeck was a thin, soft-spoken woman, with an easy smile and big round glasses with plastic frames that made her blue eyes seem extra large. Her wavy brown hair fell to her shoulders, parted in the middle. Days with Lynn usually meant a trip to the beach, all of us carrying towels and plastic buckets, or an afternoon at the park, where she would spread out a blanket and watch us run after each other on the playground. Her son, Jeff, and Josie's son, Ben, had been born a few days apart, two years before me. I was always trying to keep up with them.

Josephine Love was olive-skinned, with a Roman nose and long, dark hair that she wore piled on top of her head in a loose bun, and a short temper that gave way to frequent shouting. She wasn't a particularly large woman, but to me she was looming. My memories of Josie are accompanied by sound: her footsteps coming down the hall, a rumble that preceded her. Her laugh, deep and throaty. Her voice, rising.

Despite Josie's temper, she had a nurturing side. Although public education and the conformity it required were regarded as spiritually hazardous, in my early childhood an effort was made to teach us basic standards, and Josie, who had been mostly unsuccessful at other jobs, took on a role as teacher. In her upstairs bedroom she seated us around a kid-sized table and taught us colors and shapes and letters. I recall her teaching us right from left. I was three or four, the boys would have been five or six. I can still see her silhouette, dark and tall against the white light from the window behind her, as she instructed us. We sat in our brightly colored plastic children's chairs as she

showed us how the left hand made an “L” shape in the crook of the thumb and index finger. She said “right” and “left” and each of us would hold up the appropriate hand.

SCHOOL

When I was five or six, Josie set up a school for us in three-room office building two blocks away from the house. The large front room of the building served as the office for the home improvement business, with a few desks for scheduling jobs and bookkeeping. In the middle room, Josie hung posters of multiplication tables and the alphabet in cursive and block lettering. Against the back wall, she hung a large chalkboard next to the table and chairs she brought from home. There was a reading nook with a small sofa and a tall bookcase filled with books, and a wall of cubbies filled with musical instruments and puzzles and an abacus with painted wooden beads.

The back room was for science, animals, and arts and crafts. An aquarium against the back wall held two turtles and some goldfish; another held salamanders with bright red bellies. We had a black and white rabbit named Buns in a large cage on wheels, and two brown and white guinea pigs, Mama and Papa, in a cage on top of a cabinet that held art supplies. For a while we had a pigeon coop outside the window over the science table, with rollers and tumblers and fantails that cooed and scratched at their seed while we looked at cells from the inside of our cheeks under a microscope. Against the far wall was a large table surrounded by tan plastic chairs where we made masks from paper mache and balloons, and mixed our own playdough with saltwater, flour and food coloring.

Josie made lesson plans for me and Ben and Jeff, using real textbooks she bought at a school supply store. Sometimes she would take us with her when she bought the books. I always felt nervous in the store. I worried that the people who worked there

could tell we didn't go to "real" school. I kept my mouth shut and stayed close to Josie and the boys when we were out in the world.

Josie and Lynn kept us busy all day, Monday through Friday, during regular school hours. It must have taken a significant amount of planning and effort, though I never thought about it at the time. When we weren't at school, they took us on field trips.

We went fossil hunting in the Santa Ana mountains, where we dug imprints of spiral ammonites out of the sandstone cliffs using small rock hammers and our fingers.

We took a tour of the Farmer Brother's Coffee factory in Torrance where bags of green coffee beans were stacked on palettes twenty feet high, waiting to be roasted. One of our guides was a woman who told me I reminded her of her daughter. She picked me up and carried me on her hip for a while before taking us to the break room for butterscotch pudding.

We visited a McDonald's restaurant where we watched videos showing how the food was produced and got shown around the kitchen and inside the freezers before being served a batch of hot french fries and chicken McNuggets.

We went to museums. I loved the Natural History Museum with its halls of scenic dioramas and massive dinosaur fossils. The Children's Museum, where we pretended to be news anchors, made shapes with our bodies on a photosensitive wall, and made our simple animations using a zoetrope. We went to the La Brea Tar Pits, with its morbid sculptures of ancient elephants being sucked under the bubbling black ooze.

We took a tour of a small dairy farm on the same day as a real school. There were dozens of children and several teachers and chaperones waiting for the tour to begin

on the grass outside. One of the teachers asked Lynn the nature of our visit. Lynn explained that we were part of a small private school, with only a handful of students. She gave the canned line: “We’re just blooming.”

Despite everything Josie and Lynn did for us, all the effort they dedicated to our education, despite all the thought and planning they put in to our daily activities, I watched those school kids sitting in circles on the grass, playing duck, duck, goose, and I wished I was like them. I didn’t want to be different and separate. I didn’t want to be an old soul.

VISITING GRANDMA

I loved visiting my grandma, but my mother seemed agitated on those days. She pulled my shirt over my head with too much force and brushed my hair too hard.

“Ow,” I said as she tugged out a tangle. “I don’t like this shirt.”

My mother ignored my complaints. “Remember to cut your ties,” she said.

“I did,” I said. “You already told me.”

In the car she was preoccupied, chain smoking as we inched along on the 405 towards Santa Monica. “Why are we going so slow?” I said. “Traffic is jammed,” she said. I pictured a goopy layer of strawberry jam covering all the cars on the freeway. “Jammed,” I agreed.

When we got to my grandma’s apartment building, I ran into the lobby and pressed the button for the elevator. My mother put out her most recent cigarette in the sand-topped ashtray by the door and straightened her blouse. Inside, the elevator car smelled musty and familiar. I pressed 8 for my grandma’s floor and jumped up and down as we rode, enjoying the momentary sensation of weightlessness as we came to a stop.

When the doors opened on the eighth floor I ran ahead of my mother. At my grandma’s door I waited for her to catch up so she could lift me up to reach the door buzzer.

“Here I come!” my grandma called. The door opened and my grandma appeared in a black velour tracksuit trimmed with pink piping. She cupped my face in her hands, smiling. “There’s my Stephie!” she said, bending down to kiss my cheeks. “Look at that

golden hair, just like a flower!” I hugged her legs and breathed in her perfume while she greeted my mother. “Come in, come in, I’ll fix you a snack.”

Inside, my mother talked with my grandma in the kitchen while I performed my customary survey of the apartment. First to the living room window that overlooked the parking lot, where I picked out my mother’s tan station wagon below. I examined the collectibles my grandma kept on the windowsill: a blue ceramic fish, a figurine of a boy and a girl holding hands. I ran my fingers over the fuzzy leaves of the African violets and studied the framed photographs on the credenza. My favorite was the picture of my mother as a little girl, holding a fat striped cat on her lap, two long braids tied with bows over her shoulders. On the white border at the bottom of the picture, someone had written *Hetha – Autumn – 1945*. I liked knowing that my mother had once been a little girl, just like me.

My grandmother came into the living room holding a plate. On the desk near the door, the typewriter stood waiting with a fresh sheet of paper. She pulled out the desk chair and I climbed up, taking my usual seat. I poked away at the stiff keys, spelling nothing while my Grandma fed me a bagel with lox and cream cheese. As I ate, my grandma sang to me in her New York Jewish accent. “You ah my sunshine, my only sunshine,” she crooned. In the doorway, my mother lit another cigarette.

After my snack, I pulled all of my toys out of the living room closet while my mother sat on the couch with my grandma. The routine was always the same: I played with my toys while they drank tea and argued about my sister.

“She came to see me, you know,” my grandma was saying. “She was wearing all white. She looked like an angel.”

My mother raised her eyebrows and sipped her tea. “I’ll bet,” she said.

“Why don’t you call her?” my grandma said. “She misses you. She misses Stephanie.”

“It’s none of your business,” my mother said.

It had been two years since I’d seen Robin. I had stopped asking my mother when I would see my sister again, but my grandma hadn’t given up.

“You should call her,” my grandma said again.

“If you can’t respect my decisions, we don’t have to come here,” my mother said.

I didn’t like it when they argued and did my best to distract them. “Look at what I made!” I said, pointing to the haphazard cabin I’d built out of Lincoln Logs. If that didn’t work, I tried sulking, sitting in the corner by the window, playing with the blue ceramic fish.

“Oh, look at poor Stephanie,” my grandma said. “She’s bored. What time is it? Is it time for dinner?”

Outside, my mother and grandma each took one of my hands and swung me as we walked through Palisades Park on the way to my favorite restaurant, a Japanese place where we sat at the bar and ordered miso soup and shrimp tempura. After dinner we walked back to my grandma’s apartment and said goodbye in the parking lot, my grandmother waving as my mom pulled away.

One day we just stopped visiting my grandmother. My mother never spoke to her again. I was used to people disappearing from my life, but every once in a while, in the grocery store or at the movies, I would smell my grandma's perfume and my chest would ache, missing her.

EXPANSION

When I was six or seven, we bought the house across the street, another big two-story place with four bedrooms, plus a den and a sunroom that we used as bedrooms as well. There were two bathrooms, a big eat-in kitchen and a formal dining room, and a living room with a fireplace. The backyard was enclosed by a block wall, seven feet high. I didn't understand why some of us were moving into the new house, but it didn't matter. My environment had always been in a state of flux, and if I ever struggled to cope with new circumstances, my mother would remind me that I was good at dealing with change. "You're one of the most adaptable people I know," she said frequently. I felt proud when she said it, determined to simply adjust, not question or complain.

For a while my mother and I shared the den in the new house, furnishing it with a sofa bed and a small dresser, which we shared. The room was too small for my collection of stuffed animals, so those went into a linen closet upstairs, where I could visit them whenever I wanted. People were still shifting from the old house to the new one. Some stayed put in the old house. Some left and didn't come back. A few new faces appeared. I rarely knew why anyone left, and I only had vague ideas about where the new people came from. It didn't matter. I was adaptable.

After a few months, my mother and I moved into the sunroom when someone else took the den. These realignments of space were not uncommon, and anyway, I liked the sunroom because it had pink gingham curtains and a door that opened into the back yard, where the boys and I would play with G.I. Joe action figures in the tall evergreens that grew along the north wall. We stayed in the sunroom for a few months until another

reorganization took place, and then, since there were no free bedrooms, at night we pulled the cushions off the sofa and made a bed on the floor in the living room. This arrangement was my least favorite, because of the open floor plan connecting the living room to the dining room. I often woke up to ten or twelve people filing in to eat breakfast. It was unsettling to wake up on the floor with a dozen people standing over me.

It was during this time that Joe began sleeping with my mother regularly, which meant that the sofa-cushion-floor arrangement was often sullied by his presence; but I didn't like it when my mother left me alone. On the nights she crept out of bed to sleep with him in some other part of the house, I sometimes woke up, afraid, in the dark. Once I called for her in the middle of the night, quietly at first, and then louder and louder until I was screaming her name and sobbing. After a while, when I realized that neither my mother nor anyone else was coming for me, I fell back asleep, exhausted, and ashamed to have been heard and ignored.

KARASS

The new house filled up quickly. Me and my mother, the boys and their mothers, and Joe, who was sleeping with Josie when he wasn't with my mom.

Then there was Ralph, Walter and Verna's oldest son. Ralph was quiet and gentle, rarely raising his voice, often smiling. He was nice to me, nice to everyone. He'd sometimes play games with me, tossing me in the air and flipping me around like a baton, trying to teach me to walk on my hands. I loved these games, and was sorry when I outgrew them.

He was a music enthusiast and had an expansive record collection, mostly classic rock, a lot of British Invasion stuff. I liked to look at the album covers and liner notes: the fine line illustrations of Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, the psychedelic imagery of Cream's *Disraeli Gears*. He knew a lot of music trivia, and I liked to listen to him talk about how everyone in Fleetwood Mac was sleeping together when they recorded *Rumours*, and how Eric Clapton kept quitting bands when they got successful because he didn't want to be a rock star, but it didn't matter because everything he touched became wildly popular.

Ralph was handsome, with his mother's Germanic features and large blue eyes, and a lot of the women sought his attention, perhaps in part for his looks and manner, and in part because he was Walter and Verna's son. I think in another life he would have been a good father and a good husband. But in this life, his gentleness just allowed him to be easily led.

His younger brother, William, had fallen from a second-floor balcony as a child, landing on his head. Some speculated that the accident was why William behaved how he did, but those who'd known him his whole life said that he'd always been a little off. Because he'd been born on April 1st, Walter called him "God's little fool." Verna said he was the reincarnation of William Shakespeare. As an adult, William chewed his thumb and picked the wings and legs off insects. Once, he told me he'd compared the flavor of blue bottle and green bottle flies. Both tasted bad, he said. He suffered from constipation and it wasn't unusual to find him squatting on the toilet like a frog, plumbing his anus with a finger and whistling.

He drew exceptionally well, and spent hours in his tiny room, drawing elaborate mazes and his own comic series featuring a black-cloaked villain named Nyah Hah Hah. He collected comic books, and kept each one in a plastic sleeve in special cardboard boxes in his room. He was obsessed with the Los Angeles Lakers and memorized every possible statistic listening to Chick Hearn's machine gun style play-by-play, and pounding his fists together and whooping whenever a player scored. He sometimes stayed up all night reading or drawing. "Going astral" is what Verna called it when he did this. He did seem, sometimes, to have come from stars.

Alex Harrison had wild blonde hair and a thick mustache and was seldom seen without a cigarette and a cup of coffee. He'd taken up chewing toothpicks once when he'd tried to stop smoking, but only ended up with another habit. He enjoyed word puzzles and crime novels and the morning newspaper. While he read and smoked and drank his coffee, he'd tug on the hair at the nape of his neck.

Alex Harrison wasn't his real name. He'd committed some crime in another state, and had assumed a pseudonym. I once asked him what he'd done. "If you don't know, they can't get it out of you," is all he told me. He smiled and tousled my hair, and I never asked again.

Alex sometimes read to me when I was small, and would let me help him solve crosswords when I got a little older. He did a great impression of Woody Allen and recorded old movies on VHS, which we'd all sit around and watch some nights. He was one of my favorite people, but every once in a while he'd say something truly terrible, like the time he said that black people were less evolved than white people, and that you could tell because they looked like apes. I didn't know how to reconcile such a hateful and inaccurate statement coming out of the mouth of someone I adored. I remembered seeing a billboard with a white baby and a black baby under the words "love is color blind." I watched as everyone else stood around nodding, and said nothing.

James Rebbeck was Lynn's partner. He carried himself with an aloof, cerebral detachment, or maybe it was plain arrogance. I remember having to run to keep up with his long-legged gait, and wondering why he didn't slow down. He drove a dark blue Alpha Romeo and was an airplane hobbyist, with a private pilot's license. The karass did not endorse the purchase of the car or the pursuit of the hobby, but Jim didn't seem bothered by the disapproval of others. There was a story that once, during a debate in which Jim wouldn't budge from his position, Walter had told him he'd never challenge him again. It wasn't a good thing for Walter to disengage with a person, but Jim took it as a win.

Jim sometimes took us kids to air shows, which the boys loved. I didn't like anything about them – the sun beating down on asphalt, the deafening noise, the nauseating smell of jet fuel – but I never wanted to be left behind, either. Jim also built radio controlled airplanes and model rockets, and would take us out to fly them. I found these outings to be more enjoyable. Launching rockets in the middle of an empty field, or flying toy planes in a gymnasium was better than sweating in a parking lot.

Holly was a soft-spoken woman in her mid-twenties who had arrived some years before with her brother, Drew. They'd been living in New Zealand before they came to California. Holly was beautiful. Slender and feminine, with straight blonde hair that fell in a glossy curtain to her waist, like something out of a shampoo commercial. Her symmetrical features framed delicate lips, perfect teeth, and grey blue eyes. There was a story that before she joined our karass, she used to take long walks on the beach alone, dreaming of being discovered by someone from Hollywood. If there was a flaw in her appearance, it was the sadness that showed in her eyes, even when she was smiling. A weakness, maybe. When I imagine her face today, it's the sadness I remember.

Holly got plenty of attention from the men, but she wasn't very popular with some of the women. Even as a child, I perceived this, though I didn't understand why. Once, looking out the screened window in the back door, I saw her resting on a lounge chair beneath the old pepper tree. It was a cool fall afternoon, and leaves were spinning to the ground around her. I turned to my mother, who was pulling laundry out of the dryer behind me, and said that maybe I should take Holly a blanket. I could see the displeasure in her face as she folded a sheet, pinning it under her chin as she brought the

corners together – the furrowed brow, the slight frown – but she told me to go ahead, if I wanted. I see her internal struggle for what it was, now. What reason could she have given me for denying my impulse to help another?

I got my favorite blanket, a soft purple thermal one that my mother had found at the beach one day, in a trash can. She'd brought it home and washed it, and I had slept with it ever since. I went outside and gave it to Holly. "I was just going to come in," she said, but she took the blanket from me and stayed outside a while longer. I watched her again for a few minutes, until my mother pulled me away from the door.

Holly's younger brother, Drew, was a barrel-chested guy with a sarcastic sense of humor and a hot temper. I got the impression that he didn't take anyone in the karass too seriously, and was just biding his time until he figured out something else to do. Once, he and Josie got in a fight in the dining room of the new house. I'd been lying on my couch cushions watching TV when the shouting started and plates and glasses began flying. I froze for a minute, debating whether I should stay where I was or get up and risk getting hit with airborne dinnerware. Finally my mother came into the living room and gestured for me to crawl over to her from her safe spot against the wall. I got out just as Drew and Josie came to blows.

Katie was a small, bird-like woman with straight brown hair and freckles and a collection of decorative plaques that denoted things she'd rather be doing: *I'd Rather Be Dancing*, *I'd Rather Be Hiking*, *I'd Rather Be In Jamaica*. She bounced between Alex and Drew, and shared the cooking and shopping duties with my mother, and when she wanted Alex to take her out to dinner, she'd make Shepherd's Pie because he hated it.

She was a little bit fragile and easily upset. Once, the boys and I, excited to have learned the lyrics to *Great Green Gobs of Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts*, found Katie in the kitchen and began to sing her an enthusiastic rendition. She told us to stop, saying it was making her sick, but we didn't take her seriously. She stood there covering her mouth until Lynn came in and yelled at us, but by that time we'd already finished. I think we were all a little confused as to why she hadn't just left the room.

Carolyn Kath had been working at the front desk of a hotel in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where she'd been cultivating a cocaine habit and sleeping with traveling businessmen. One of those overnight lovers was a guy named Don Carstons, who had a business making artisan tables and a wife and two kids and lived in Nevada. Don knew someone in our karass, and the whole lot of them, Carolyn and all the Carstons, just showed up one day. Don and his family didn't stay long, but Carolyn did, eventually pairing up with Alex after Katie left with Drew.

She was a pretty girl, but as beauty wasn't really an asset in our karass, she was often challenged for being too concerned with her looks. When her parents mailed her a sterling silver boudoir set consisting of a vintage hairbrush, hand mirror, and powder puff for her birthday, she sent it back saying a gift like that was like sending candy to a diabetic. Not long after that, she cut off contact with her parents.

Finally, there was Gail, my dad's younger sister. In her late teens, she'd started hearing voices coming from inanimate objects, like toilets and trucks, and she said she had conversations with the Devil. She had nightmares with visions of scorched fetuses hovering over the word "neonate." She sat in the bathtub for hours, saying she wanted to

die. Her parents called my father, talking about possibly having her committed. My dad related the story to our karass. “She’s not crazy, she’s a 21,” Verna said, referring to the twenty-first trait in the seventh level of consciousness. (For reference, Hitler was a 19, and Jesus was a 49). “Bring her to me. I can heal her.”

So Gail came to stay, and became a favorite of Verna, spending long hours behind the closed door of her room. She made various claims to past lives. Sometimes she was the reincarnation of Mary Magdalene, other times she was the sister of Jesus. She said she had psychic memories of entering the world through the Virgin Mary’s birth canal.

Verna’s endorsement gave her power, and she often used her influence in vindictive ways. Once, she poured salt water into all of the Josie’s houseplants, and then said they died because of Josie’s negative energy. (Josie believed this.) Another time, she conspired with Carolyn to get rid of a couple who’d settled with us briefly. She’d laughingly closed her eyes and dropped her finger on an open map, then told the couple that it was God’s will that they go to that town. When Gail wanted someone gone, she’d find a way to drive them out.

She didn’t want children but refused to use birth control, eventually having nine abortions. No one in the karass seemed to think this behavior was problematic. When our white cat, Lilly, had kittens, there was one white and four dark tortoise shell grey. Gail didn’t like the look of the grey ones, so she took them outside in a cardboard box, put them in a trash bag, and bludgeoned them with a shovel.

I hid in the house while she did it. In the bathroom, I sat on the floor between the tub and the sink, squeezed my eyes tight and tried to pretend it wasn’t happening. “I was

having second thoughts, but then they started doing the snake dance,” she said afterward, washing her hands at the kitchen sink. I made my face a mask, blank of emotion. Lilly was never the same after that. I’m not sure I was, either.

HOLLY

Finally, only a few people remained in the old house: Verna, my father, and Holly. I don't remember how it started, but it was decided that Holly was possessed, and the demon needed driving out. Looking back, I suspect that Ralph's affection for Holly bothered Gail, who wanted Ralph for herself. I suspect that Gail used her influence with Verna to direct her attention on Holly. I suspect that Verna was more than willing.

They started with her hair. They accused Holly of vanity, told her that she was using her hair to seduce the men. Holly acquiesced, went to a barber, had it cut to her shoulders with a couple of layers around her face. Unfortunately, Holly's new haircut looked great on her. Everyone said so. Verna told her that her hair was an instrument of Satan, and that she had failed to cleanse herself of vanity. So Holly buzzed her hair clean off, but she was still beautiful.

I didn't see Holly after that, but Verna started to perform sessions on her back in the old house. She enlisted Gail, Joe, and Josie to assist her, or maybe they volunteered. I never heard anyone talk about what was happening to Holly until later.

They starved her. Joe urinated on her, standing over her on the bed, and shoved cat food up her vagina. They wrapped an extension cord around her ankles, and drug her around the room, thrashing her. The extension cord left scars on her ankles, so they began beating her with a rubber hose so as not to leave marks. Once, they covered her in tar and left her to walk the two blocks to where the work trucks were parked to get turpentine to remove it.

This all took place over a period of eight or nine months. No one was holding Holly captive; she could have left at any time. She probably stayed for the same reasons a battered woman stays with her abuser: because she thought she deserved it, because she thought they acted out of love, because she was isolated. Because she didn't love herself, and they knew this, and exploited that weakness.

Verna had told my dad that it would be better for Holly's process if he moved to the new house, but he was stubborn. "If Holly tells me I'm getting in the way of her process, I'll be happy to go," he said. "Until then, I'm staying here."

During the day, he went to work as usual, stopping at the office to draft bills and work on estimates before returning home at night. Carolyn was posted at the office ostensibly doing accounting work, but when my father would leave she'd call the house and let Verna and the others know he was coming.

Mostly Holly stayed in her room, and my dad didn't see her much. One night, he picked up some Chinese food and brought some down to Holly. "That's the first hot food I've had in months," she said. But she didn't tell him what was happening to her, or ask for help.

One day, after a particularly savage beating, Joe told Holly that they were taking a break, but they weren't finished with her and would be back that afternoon. Holly thought that she might die if they beat her anymore. She went outside and got on the bus that stopped in front of the house each day. She had no belongings and no money. The bus driver looked at her and said she could ride for free.

She made her way to the house of a woman who'd left the karass years before. That night, my father got a call from the woman, explaining where Holly was and what had happened to her.

That was the last night my father spent in the house. The next day, he took me to the park and told me he was leaving, asked me if I wanted to come, knowing I wouldn't leave my mother. Hoping she would keep me safe. Not knowing what else to do.

A few months after my father left, I was looking for my mother and found her in the downstairs bathroom, smoking and talking with Gail, who was soaking in the tub. I climbed up on the counter to be near my mother and listen to them talk. Gail was saying something about how Joe had been instrumental in coming up with ideas for "handling" Holly.

"What ideas?" I said.

My mother took a drag off her cigarette.

Gail leaned back in the tub and smiled. She told me about the urination, and the rubber hose, and the cat food. She brightened when she got to the part about the tar. "It must have taken her hours to get it off," she said, laughing. "We covered her from head to toe." She squeezed some shampoo into her palm and massaged it through her wet hair. "The rubber hose actually did end up leaving some bruises," she said with some satisfaction. "The great thing was, we got rid of Bruce in the bargain."

I looked at my mother sitting next to me. "Good riddance," she said, rubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray that rested on her knee.

In my mind, I pictured everything that had been done to Holly: the beatings, the humiliations. With my whole body, I felt the wrongness of it; the dissonance between my horror and my mother's calm acceptance. I felt like a rope pulled too tight. I stuffed my horror down deep, and nodded. At eight years old, I already knew to hide my shock and sadness.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

That year, cancer bloomed in Verna's breast and began eating her up from the inside. She moved into the den of the new house, leaving the old house empty. She refused medical treatment, believing instead that she could heal herself through her divine connection to God. Instead, she grew weak and fragile, barely eating, requiring help to dress and bathe. I remember watching her walk to the bathroom, my mother and Lynn on each arm, each step labored. She stopped and looked at me. "When you see me like this, you remember this isn't me. It's just the possession giving me a hard time," she said.

Gail spent long hours in Verna's room, talking behind closed doors. Verna became more enamored with her, telling the others Gail had a special connection to the Creator. In those sessions, a new vocabulary emerged, and with it a new, darker worldview. We stopped celebrating holidays. Halloween, once a fun night to dress up and collect candy, became a glorification of darkness and evil. Christmas, a Mass celebration of commercialism and greed. Even Easter, once Verna's favorite, was no longer observed.

The Masses were no longer simply sleepwalking souls leading corrupt and destitute lives. Now they were Legion. Now, anyone who had not made their way into our karass was not merely doomed to emptiness and delusion; they were Cause, and the Effect was the cancer in Verna's breast. Now they could not be saved.

SEPARATION

During Verna's illness, Josie and Joe were targeted for elimination. I didn't recognize it immediately, but I sensed a tension in Josie that wasn't there before, a struggle between her and the others that manifested in little ways.

One night, the boys and I found a baby bird that had fallen from its nest and was tangled in the climbing roses that grew on the side of the garage. I carefully extracted it from the thorny vines, cupping its warm body in my hands. I could feel its heart beating fast through the gauzy skin of its breast, pinfeathers poking up through patches of down.

We had some eyedroppers and bird food down at the school, from our days of raising pigeons. We knew how to mix the bird food with water until it became gruel, and how to get the air bubbles out of the dropper before feeding the bird, and how to wipe its beak and feathers with a moist tissue. We asked Josie to walk the two blocks with us to retrieve the supplies, hoping to save the little bird. Josie refused to take us, despite our begging. "But the bird!" we pleaded. "Go ask Gail or Carolyn to take you," Josie said, turning her back.

Gail and Carolyn never took us anywhere, but we went upstairs to Gail's room, where she and Carolyn and Alex and Ralph were watching television.

"We found a baby bird, and it's hungry," we said, crowding in the doorway. "Will you take us to school to get the bird food?"

"You should just break its neck," Gail said without looking at us. "It would be more compassionate."

We stood there for a moment, silent. Finally we turned and went back downstairs. We put the little bird in a cardboard box with a towel and a bowl of water. In the morning, it was dead.

I don't remember the moment that my mother told me not to play with Ben anymore, but I remember avoiding him. And I remember finding my mother sitting on the back porch one afternoon, drinking a cup of coffee and smoking. I could see she was upset. "What's the matter?" I said. She looked down at the cup in her hands, her cigarette propped between two fingers. "Everything is falling apart," she said. "Verna is sick, I'm not in a relationship with any of the guys, my kid thinks I'm an asshole..." I knew she meant because of Ben. "I don't think you're an asshole," I said, even though I was sad that I couldn't be friends with Ben anymore. I hugged her and told her I loved her. I would have done anything to make her happy. I would have given up anyone.

DEPARTURES

Those days passed like vapor, memories dissolving before they had a chance to form. But one scene is vivid in my mind: Josie with tears in her eyes, talking to my mother at the foot of the stairs. “*I am killing Holy Breath,*” she said. She was shaking. Not long after that, she left, taking Ben and Joe with her.

With Josie gone and Lynn taking care of Verna, schooling for Jeff and me ended. We spent our days inside with the curtains drawn. A deep quiet settled over the house, adults speaking in murmurs, Jeff and I not speaking much at all. After Verna died, my mother wanted me to say goodbye to her body, as I had with Walt. This time I refused. I could see that she was disappointed but I didn’t want to see another dead body. For a day I resisted, but eventually my desire to please my mother outweighed my fear.

I peeked through a crack in the double doors of Verna’s room. She was laid out on the couch in a bathrobe covered with pink roses, her long hair braided and coiled in a crown on her head, her face slack and grey. When I told my mother that I’d seen Verna, she seemed glad, though it would be a long time before I saw her smile again.

The coroner was called. Two uniformed police officers arrived to ascertain the cause of death. My mother pulled open Verna’s bathrobe, revealing her breast, riddled with necrotic tissue. The coroner put Verna’s body on a gurney and rolled it out the door and into the van.

The three years we spent in the new house were defined by departures: Drew and Katie, Josie, Joe and Ben, Holly and my dad. Verna, whose passing left a void that Gail would fill.

LOSING MY LAST FRIEND

Gail blamed Lynn for Verna's death, and everyone else went along with it; Lynn, who had cared for Verna around the clock until the end, rubbing her back, bathing her, dressing the lesions that devoured her breast like rust eating metal.

So the cycle of expulsion began again, this time for Lynn and Jim and Jeff: the quiet building of tension, the barely concealed hostility. Conversations that ended whenever one of them walked into the room. They began to spend more time together upstairs while the rest of us gathered in the living room in the evening. We still shared meals, with my mother taking orders at breakfast like a short order cook. One morning I watched her catch a cockroach in the kitchen, then crush it and spread it on Jim's toast before delivering it to him in the dining room. "Enjoy," she said as he bit into the bread.

I was losing my last friend. I wish I could say I was kind to Jeff in those final months, or even that I ignored him, but by this time I was used to taking sides, and mine was always with my mother. She told me that Jeff's soul had died, and, like his parents, he was Legion. I didn't question her. Instead, I sought Jeff out and found him playing alone in the backyard. I sat on the back steps and waited until he approached me.

"Do you want to play?" he said.

"I'm not supposed to play with you," I said. "You're dead."

"No I'm not," he said.

"Yes you are," I said. "Your soul is dead and your mom killed Verna."

"No she didn't. You're stupid," he said.

"At least my soul isn't dead," I said. After that, Jeff left me alone.

RETREATING INTO OTHER WORLDS

Without playmates and without schooling, I was left mostly on my own. I had hoped that one of the adults would take over being my teacher, but no one seemed concerned about my education. I knew that kids in the outside world studied all the way through the twelfth grade, and then sometimes went to college. When my schooling ended, I was studying from a third grade book.

I missed the field trips and the daily lessons, but mostly I worried that I was falling behind in my studies. I never said it, but I wanted to learn what other kids got to learn. I was afraid that if I didn't keep up, my ignorance would be obvious, a mark I would wear on the outside that everyone could see.

I remembered the school supply store where Josie had purchased the fat textbooks we used, and thought that if I could get books for the fourth grade, I could teach myself.

I found my mother in the dining room with Gail and Alex, Ralph and Carolyn. I waited until there was a pause in the conversation.

"Can we go to the school store?" I said.

"The school store? Why do you want to go there, sweetie?" my mother said.

"So I can learn," I said. "I need the books for fourth grade."

Gail was sitting at the table with her knees drawn up to her chest. She twisted her braid as she spoke to me.

"There's nothing in those books that can help you," she said. "You're lucky not to have gone to school. It's a corrupt system, and it will kill your soul. Is that what you want?"

“No,” I said quietly.

“All of us barely made it out of school alive,” she said.

“It was terrible,” Carolyn said. “You should grateful you’re not in school. We’re protecting you from all that bullshit.”

My mother nodded. “You don’t need to know that stuff.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt ashamed, as though I had done something wrong by asking for schoolbooks.

I would never ask about school again, but I still wanted to learn. I didn’t have textbooks, but my mother brought me books to read, children’s books she picked up at yard sales and thrift shops, and she took me to the library sometimes. I spent whole days reading in the dim light of the living room, the curtains drawn so no one would know there was a child in the house during school hours.

I retreated into these other worlds. I quickly devoured everything by Beverly Cleary: *Beezus and Ramona*, *Henry Huggins*, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. I re-read *Charlotte’s Web* so many times the binding busted. I read the entire *Little House on the Prairie* series over and over until I could recount the entire life story of Laura Ingalls Wilder by heart. I adored *Harriet the Spy* and read it at least five times.

I liked books about animals, and burned through *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The Cry of the Crow*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. I was partial to books about witches: *The White Witch of Kynance*, and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. I was drawn to stories about girls making it on their own: *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*.

Sometimes the books were marked with a recommended grade level, and soon I was reading above my grade, a fact I never mentioned to my mother. I was proud when I read *Julie of the Wolves* and the nearly five hundred pages of *Watership Down*. Looking back, a lot of my favorites were survival stories.

And, even though I was a good reader, my mother still read to me sometimes, curled up on the couch with my feet in her lap. She liked a certain reincarnationist author, Joan Grant, who claimed that her stories were autobiographies of her past lives. Together my mother and I read a number of her books: *Winged Pharoah*, set in ancient Egypt; *Scarlet Feather*, about an Native American woman who becomes co-chief of her tribe; *Life as Carola*, set in pre-Renaissance Italy. It didn't matter to me if the stories were fact or fiction. I liked getting lost in them, and listening to my mother's voice on quiet afternoons, just the two of us.

NOEL

I was reading on the couch one afternoon when I heard a knock at the door. I heard my mother turn off the faucet in the kitchen, then the sound of her feet padding down the hall to open the door. A few minutes later I heard a child's voice.

"Can the little girl come out to play?"

A pause.

"What little girl?" my mother said.

"The little girl who lives here," said the voice.

"Well." A pause. "Just a minute."

I clutched my book, waiting for my mother to come into the living room. She stood for a moment in the doorway, holding a dishtowel, brows creased into arches.

"There's a little girl outside asking for you," she said.

"Asking for me?" This had never happened before. I knew no one in the outside world. "What should I do?"

"Well, you can go talk to her if you want," she said.

I set down my book. My heart thumped in my chest as I walked down the dark hallway. My mother stood a few feet behind me as I opened the door.

Waiting on the stoop was a girl about eight years old. She had pin-straight blonde hair, a galaxy of freckles across her cheeks, and a gap between her two front teeth. She was bouncing up and down.

"Hi," she said when she stopped bouncing. "Do you want to play?"

I turned and looked at my mother. I must have had pure concentrated hope in my eyes, because my mother just said, “Okay.”

“Okay!” I said and slipped out the door.

“Be back in one hour!” my mother called after me I ran down the steps and up the street with the little freckle-faced girl.

Over the next few weeks, I spent every afternoon with Noel Shemberg. Sometimes she would come and ask for me at my house, and sometimes I would walk to hers, a white stucco rental with morning glories that covered the hedges out front.

Most days we played in her front yard, practicing cartwheels on the lawn or making hopscotch boards with colored chalk in the driveway until the air got cool and the streetlights came on. Sometimes we played at the park around the corner, stealing loquats from the tree that hung over the block wall into the park, peeling and eating them and spitting out the big brown seeds.

I got to know her family. Her father, Wayne, was a plumber. He had a black goatee, a gold cross earring in his left ear, and a passion for professional wrestling. Her mother, Laura, was a bosomy woman who liked to talk on the phone and flirt with her across-the-street neighbor. Her baby sister, Katie, was still in diapers, which Noel was frequently called inside to change.

Noel’s parents yelled at her a lot, usually over some innocent mistake, like the time she used too much toilet paper and clogged up the toilet. That time, she got spanked, too. We’d been outside playing in the sprinklers when her dad shouted at her

through the screen door to come inside. When she came back, I could see she'd been crying.

“What did they do to you?” I said.

“I'm not supposed to say,” she said, puffy-faced, wiping her nose on her towel.

She didn't have to say. I could see the red blotches on the backs of her legs.

Laura took a liking to me, mistaking my quiet obedience for good manners.

“Why can't you be more like Stephanie?” she sometimes said to her daughter when scolding her. I wished she wouldn't be so hard on Noel, but the approval felt nice.

Noel wasn't allowed inside my house, which didn't bother me in the least. I liked being out in the neighborhood. The rush of new experiences was exhilarating, and after being inside all day, I was eager for three o'clock to come, for those few hours before dark to escape my world and enter another.

There were complications, though; intricacies I hadn't thought out, such as when Noel asked about the other people in the house. I'd always had coaching when it came to dealing with people in the outside world. Josie and Lynn had always told us what to say if anyone questioned us, but now I was on my own.

“They're my aunts and uncles,” I lied. Straight faced, unflinching. It sounded good. Aunts and uncles. Family, like everyone had. Just a normal family.

“Oh,” she said. “What school do you go to?”

My school had disappeared when Josie did, but I still had that stock lie on file for moments such as these. “Pine Brook,” I said. That’s what we’d called it. “It’s a private school,” I said.

I began getting questions at home, too.

“Have they questioned you about us?” Gail asked at dinner one night.

We knew we stood out in the neighborhood. Less now than before, since there were fewer of us, but there had always been a lot of people coming and going from our house. Plus, we kept to ourselves. The neighbors noticed all of this, and we knew it.

“No,” I lied. I knew if I said the wrong thing, they would make me stop being friends with Noel.

“Well, we should figure out what to say when they ask.”

“I thought we could say that you’re my aunts and uncles,” I said, looking at their faces. Wanting my story to be true.

“No,” Gail said. “That’s too complicated. Tell them we’re friends of your mom. Tell them your father died and we’re helping your mother run the house painting business. We rent rooms here. We’re not family.”

“Okay,” I said. I wondered how I was going to explain this to Noel, who’d already told her mother all about my aunts and uncles.

“What about school?” my mother said. “Have they asked you which school you go to?”

“I told them Pine Brook School,” I said. I hoped that answer would be okay.

“Good,” my mother said.

“You’ll need to have a story about how your dad died,” Alex said.

“Tell them he had heart problems,” Gail said. “Because he didn’t have a heart.”

Everyone laughed. I swallowed. The subject was changed.

“So...you know how I told you about my aunts and uncles?” I said the next time I saw Noel.

“Yeah?” she said. We were sitting in her room, cross-legged on the floor, trying to build a house of cards.

“Well, they’re not really my aunts and uncles. They’re just friends of my mom, but I’ve known them my whole life so they’re like my family.” I laid a card across the top of two others we had jammed in the carpet.

“Oh,” Noel said. I could practically see her brain processing this new information. I knew she didn’t particularly care who lived at my house, but she’d already told her mother my original story and now she would have to tell her this new one. I felt bad for putting her in this situation. She was just trying to stay out of trouble, like me.

She laid another card against our structure, for a wall. “Will you help me tell my mom?” she said.

“Yeah.” I laid a card against my side. “When do you want to do it?”

“I think she’s watching TV. Let’s do it now.”

We scrambled to our feet, knocking over our card house. Out in the living room, Laura was watching Sally Jessy Raphael.

“Mom.” Noel said.

“Yes, Noel,” Laura said, without looking away from the television.

“Stephanie’s aunts and uncles aren’t really her family, they’re friends of her mom.”

“What?” Laura refocused on her daughter, looking irritated. “Why did you tell me they were her family, then?”

“It was my fault,” I piped up. “I didn’t explain it right. I just call them my aunts and uncles sometimes. She didn’t know,” I said.

Laura looked at us for a moment, then turned back to her show. “Why don’t you girls go play outside,” she said.

After that, I was more careful about what I said, but it was tricky. I told lies in the outside world and lies at home, and hoped no one would find out.

BRANCHING OUT

Through Noel, I met other people in the neighborhood. Like Jay and Diane, a middle-aged couple with a Chinese pug named Mr. Magoo, and a cat named Wallace who'd just had kittens. Diane was an artist with a studio set up in the garage. She'd let us play with the kittens, and once she let us play with her paints, until we squeezed too much out of the small metal tubes and wasted it. "Um. Those are really expensive," she said when she saw what we'd done.

There was Old Mrs. Salmon, who appeared to be in her early hundreds but still managed to garden in her front yard. When she bent over her flowerbeds, we could see large folds of skin hanging down from inside her housedress, almost to her knees. Breasts? Stomach? We could never figure out what part of her body we were seeing.

Corie Larratt was a girl our age who lived with her parents, Deb and Tom, and her older half-sister Trista, from their mother's first marriage. Deb worked in the deli of a grocery store, and Tom hung drywall for a living. Trista played with us for a while until she became too cool to associate with her little sister's friends. Corie was a popular girl. She was good at gymnastics and wore fashionable clothes.

I had never thought about what I was wearing until one day when Corie pointed out my pants. "Um...are you wearing *bell-bottoms*?" she snickered. I was. I was wearing bell-bottoms with sewn-on patches all over them, flowers and hearts and peace signs. My mother had picked them up at a yard sale, like all my clothes. Corie laughed. "Oh my God. So dorky," she said. My face burned. When I got home that day, I hid my pants in the bottom of a drawer. I never wore them again.

MOVING

One day, Lynn and Jim and Jeff were just gone, and all their things gone with them. I stood in the doorway of their empty bedroom and watched the curtains move over the open windows. There would be no more trips to the park with Lynn, lying on a blanket in the sun while she passed out sandwiches. No more launching rockets and flying toy planes with Jim. And I would never get to play with Jeff again, my friend since birth, my brother. I swallowed my sadness. I was the only kid in the karass now, and it felt like life was getting harder.

That morning at breakfast, everyone was jovial. “We got rid of them!” William said loudly, pushing his thick glasses back on his nose and smiling. The general sense of relief was palpable, though there was also an air of urgency. The house had been purchased in Jim’s name, and we would have to get out quickly, though this wasn’t a bad problem to have: the mortgage was costly, and the old house was in Ralph’s name. The plan was to take whatever we needed and move back across the street. My mother handed me some trash bags and told me to fill them with my clothes and stuffed animals, and when I had finished she hurried me over to the old house. I watched from upstairs as the others lugged dressers and couches and boxes from one house to the other as fast as they could carry them. They looked like characters in a silent film, working in accelerated motion.

Everything was moved in a matter of hours, and over the next few months we settled in. Even though the house had been empty for over a year, it still felt more like home to me than the other house ever had. And now that we were down to seven in our

karass, there was enough room for everyone. The place needed repairs, but we could do them ourselves. Gail and Ralph took one of the upstairs bedrooms, and Alex and Carolyn took another. A wall was torn out between two of the other tiny upstairs bedrooms to make one decent sized room for William. Downstairs, my mother got Verna's old room, and I got the bedroom my mother and I had shared when I was a baby. At ten years old, for the first time in my life, I had my own room and my own bed.

My bedroom was something of a fish bowl, with two large pocket doors that opened to the living room, another door that led into the hall, and a large picture window that looked out onto the street. At ten years old, the lack of privacy didn't bother me much. After sleeping on the living room floor, having a room of my own, even one that was open into the main living area of the house, felt like a privilege.

My mother sewed yellow curtains for the window, and Ralph and Alex hung striped wallpaper with tiny yellow and white flowers on the walls. I pushed my bed against the wall with the two sliding doors to create a barrier between my bedroom and the living room. My mother found a drop down desk at a yard sale, and I filled it with sketch books and drawings, pencils and markers. At night after everyone went to sleep, I would lie in bed reading and listening to the traffic rush by on the street, the constant light from the street lamps illuminating the window.

WILLIAM

William was going astral more and more. During the day, he'd go on long walks. Once, he followed the power lines that ran down Prairie Avenue for five miles, just to find out where they originated. When he came home, he reported that the power lines came from the Sunrise Power Plant in Torrance. "Really?" Gail said. "Who would have thought." Her sarcasm was lost on William.

At night he stayed awake, reading Sherlock Holmes novels and organizing his comics. Days passed when he'd only get one or two hours of sleep each night, and then he'd be less lucid than usual, wandering into the kitchen and speaking incoherently before heading back to his room.

He still had a tendency to be cruel to animals. He made growling sounds whenever he saw our cat, Lilly, who had been traumatized by the loss of her kittens and was already skittish. Once, I caught him tossing one of my guinea pigs into the air and catching it with one hand, over and over, the pig's little feet frantically paddling the air. I ran crying for my mother, barely able to tell her what I'd seen. She ran outside and yelled at William, who put down the guinea pig and said he was sorry, but it was hard to tell if he understood.

Gail began talking about how William's astral nights were becoming a problem. "He's plugging in to negative energy, and it affects everyone in this house," she said one day at lunch, when everyone but William was sitting around the kitchen table. "We can't have him drawing in those vibrations." Everyone else nodded.

Over the next few weeks, Gail kept returning to the problem of William. “Would you be sorry to see him go?” she asked me one afternoon in the back yard. I was confused by the question. “I wish he’s stop bothering the animals,” I said.

Finally, Gail revealed her plan. “We’ll send him to Lynn,” she said. Lynn and Jim and Jeff had teamed up with Drew and Katie after they left, and had started a house painting business in the neighboring city of Lomita. We knew this because they advertised in the local papers, just like we did. From the advertisements, we knew their phone number and address.

“They’ll take him. He’s Walt and Verna’s son. They’ll think it’s some kind of victory.” We were all sitting around the living room. William was upstairs in his room, oblivious to the plans that were being made for him.

I looked around the room, at my mother, sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea; at Alex, holding a cat on his lap in an armchair. Nobody was protesting the idea of sending William away from the only home he’d ever known. Not my mother, who’d known William since he was a little boy. Not even Ralph, his big brother.

The next day, Gail told William about his new destiny. “You belong with them,” she said. “It’s what Verna would have wanted.” She told him to pack his things and get ready while Carolyn called a cab. William looked confused, but did as he was told. Thirty minutes later, he stood in the kitchen with a bag of clothes. “I guess this is goodbye,” he said.

My mother cried a little as he got into the cab. Ralph gave the driver some money and the address. As much as William sometimes bothered me, I couldn't believe this was happening. I stood on the porch and watched the cab pull away.

Two days later, William came back. Alex saw him hanging around out back by the garage and brought him in the yard. "What happened?" Alex said. "They sent me back," William said. Gail came outside. "You can't stay here," she said. "You belong with them."

Another cab was called, and William got in it. A few hours later we received a phone call. My mother answered. It was Drew.

"You can't keep sending him here," he said. "This is crazy."

"He belongs with you," my mother said.

"The hell he does," Drew replied.

William didn't come back after that, and we didn't hear from Drew again. Two years later, Alex and Carolyn and Ralph and Gail were on a job in Gardena and stopped to get lunch. As they were pulling into the parking lot of a diner there, they saw William on the street. He had a thick beard and his clothes were dirty. Ralph got out of the car to talk to him.

William had been homeless for two years. He'd been living on the streets and sometimes stayed in a homeless shelter where a man was trying to get him a social security number. He didn't always stay at the shelter because they wanted him to wear underwear and he didn't like it. Ralph talked to him for ten minutes while the others waited in the car, then said goodbye.

When Ralph told the story that night at dinner, I didn't say anything. After we finished eating, I went into the bathroom and sat on the floor between the bathtub and the sink, where I couldn't be seen from the door. I wanted to say, *you left him there?* I wanted to say, *how could you?* But I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything.

THE STATE OF BEING ERASED

It began one night in the kitchen. It was a weeknight, and my mother was preparing dinner, as usual. The crew had been working all day, painting houses, as usual. They had come home and taken their baths, as usual. And then Gail came into the kitchen and asked my mother if she could help with dinner. Unusual.

“Oh, no love, I think I’ve got it,” my mother said. “Dinner should be ready in about twenty minutes.”

Gail got that look on her face, the one that meant she had taken offense to something: jaw set, eyes glassy and unblinking, lips curled into a forced smile. I saw this from where I stood at the sink. My mother was stirring something in a pan, her back to me, so I don’t know if she saw the look, or felt it. I could feel it, her look. It penetrated the air all around us.

“Right.” Gail said. She walked out of the kitchen.

By the time we all sat down to dinner, Gail’s mood was obvious to everyone, and marked by silence. I listened to juice being poured, and forks scraping on plates. My stomach tightened into a fist.

Gail only ate a few bites of food before pushing away her plate. She swallowed as if it pained her. We all watched.

“Is everything okay?” My mother said.

“It tastes like shit,” Gail said, standing. She took her plate to the kitchen and scraped its contents into the trash.

No one said anything. My mother looked confused and small.

This event would lead to Gail challenging my mother about her attachment to the role of caretaker. The grocery shopping, the housekeeping, the home-cooked meals. The care of her daughter. These occupations were devouring her soul, and by refusing Gail's offer of assistance in the kitchen, she was rejecting the pathway to spiritual advancement that Gail had so generously extended.

It was a set up, of course. The subject didn't even know she was being tested. Before that moment, Gail had never expressed concern about my mother's role in the household, to my mother or anyone. She decided on a plan of attack, and then carried it out. That's how it always went. Some invisible transgression and then the slow wearing down.

It takes time to erase a person. For my mother, it took more than a year. I was still fourteen that first night in the kitchen, and for another few months as she struggled to understand what was expected of her, how to change into what Gail wanted.

I was fifteen the afternoon I found my mother in the kitchen with a fat lip.

"What happened to your face?" I said.

"I hit it on a cabinet door," my mother said without meeting my eyes.

I didn't say anything.

MY MOTHER, RECEDING

I began spending as much time as possible away from home. It was torture to watch what was happening to my mother, difficult to breath under the weight of it. I rode my 10-speed every day for hours, from three o'clock when I could leave the house until dark and sometimes after, breathless and flushed when I returned. Wishing I was still moving.

In the summer I rode my bike to the plunge in the neighboring town and swam every afternoon from noon until three. A few evenings a week they had night swims, and I went to those, too. I was in my room, stuffing my backpack with my swimsuit and towel one night while Gail was shouting at my mother in the adjoining living room. I must have made the mistake of looking upset because Gail turned her attention on me.

"Don't you dare feel sorry for her," she said. "Don't look at me like *I'm* the monster."

I held up my hands. "I'm not," I said. "I'm not. I just have to go."

I went outside and got on my bike. A couple quick sobs escaped as I pushed away from the house. I rode as fast as I could, bent over my handlebars, standing on the pedals, feeling the wind against my face under the glow of the street lights.

My mother started spending all of her time in her bedroom, with the door pulled mostly closed. Passing her room at night, I would steal glances through the crack in the door, to see her sitting on her bed, reading Walt's books. The light from the lamp on the nightstand illuminating her hair and the smoke rising from her cigarette, like it did when I was little and she read me to sleep each night.

For a while I tried to visit her. I would enter her room after the others had gone upstairs, sit on the edge of her bed and tell her about my day. Mostly she didn't say anything. She just looked at me like she was coming apart inside.

Finally she told me, one night as I tried to engage her, to stop.

"It's too painful," she whispered, her eyes filling.

"I'm sorry," I said. My chest felt broken open. I wiped my tears with my sleeve as I left the room.

PLANNING

I started spending more time upstairs with the others when I was at home. I wasn't comfortable in my room, where I had no privacy, and it hurt too much to be near my mother without being close to her. And I was worried that if I stayed downstairs, I would draw attention to myself. I had learned that attention lead nowhere I wanted to go. Yes, I was consorting with the enemy. Yes, I was trying to save myself in some way, though I already knew I would never be safe here.

At night, I lied in bed and wondered what would become of me. I could no longer count on my mother for anything. We couldn't go on this way forever. I saw what was happening to Hetha. My sister was gone, my father was gone. My mother was diminishing. If I got pushed out, I would have no high school diploma, no job history, and no one to vouch for me.

I needed to get a job, a real job, outside the karass. For that I would need a car. I began stealing the Penny Saver from the mail, going through the classified ads for used cars. I could buy an old Datsun or Toyota for cheap, but I didn't have any money. I was working with the crew during the summer, but I didn't get paid for it. I'd never received an allowance. I had no means of income. I would have to ask for help, but the prospect terrified me.

I didn't know what they'd say if I told them I wanted to get a job. A strong work ethic was important to them, but I wasn't sure how they'd feel about me getting a job in the Mass world. I had no reference for this, as no one had ever done it before. Mostly, I

was afraid that if I told them I wanted to get a job outside the karass, they would see through me. They would know I was planning to leave.

One night at dinner a few months before my sixteenth birthday, I put down my fork and looked at the others eating. My mother had taken her meal in her room. Across from me were Gail, Ralph, and Alex. To my right was Carolyn. I waited for a pause in the conversation. I felt nauseous but I knew what I had to do.

“I want to get a car,” I said. I could feel the blood rushing to my face as four sets of eyes turned to look at me. There was a long pause before anyone spoke.

“Why do you need a car?” Carolyn said.

“And what makes you think you’ve earned one?” Gail said. She stared at me as she shoveled a forkful of food into her mouth.

There was no turning back now. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans and ignored my pounding heart.

“I want to get a job,” I said quietly, looking at my plate. My throat felt tight, like my windpipe was closing up. Like there were hands on it.

For a minute no one said anything. I wanted to leave my body.

“Well, that’s about the realest thing you’ve said in months,” Gail said finally.

The others nodded in agreement.

Relief washed over me in a cold wave. I remember little else of what was said that night. The wheels were in motion. I was one step closer to getting out.

WHEELS

They bought me a 1962 Ford Falcon Futura for seven hundred and fifty dollars. It was a weird pumpkin-beige, with torn up upholstery and rust over the wheel wells. The floorboard had holes in it, so when I drove in the rain, water splashed onto my feet. The brakes were dodgy and the headliner was hanging down in places. I loved it.

It was presented to me on my sixteenth birthday. They told me to come out to the garage, and even my mother came out of her room to watch me receive my gift, lingering by the door. I covered my face and squealed, circling the car before I got inside. The steering wheel seemed gigantic. Through the windshield, they stood watching me, smiling. My mother slipped out the back.

Alex taught me how to change a tire and how to change the oil, how to check the fluids and the tire pressure. I learned a lot about auto maintenance because it broke down constantly in the beginning. Twelve times in one week was the record; I had to walk home each time, except for once when a woman at the mall called AAA for me when she saw my car wouldn't start.

“You remind me of my daughter,” she said.

The radiator busted, it overheated a lot. I learned how to test and install the thermostat. Once, the battery died at the grocery store. I approached a man coming out of the store and asked him if he could give me a jump.

“I have the cables,” I said.

He looked at me, one hundred pounds in shorts and a tank top, a ponytail planted high on my head.

“Are you old enough to drive?” He said.

He pulled his car around and hooked up the cables. When my engine turned over, he closed the hood.

“Be careful out there,” he said before I pulled away.

I started looking for jobs. I turned in applications at the mall, and applied to be a hostess at Denny’s. The manager sat me in a booth and asked me a few questions; where I went to school, if I’d ever had a job before. I told him I went to Torrance High School, and that in the summers I worked painting houses with my family.

“You seem very mature for your age,” he said. “You’re very direct.”

I heard this a lot. I was used to speaking with adults. I had none of the affectations of a kid who’d run the gauntlet of high school.

He gave me the job.

“You’ll have to get a work permit,” he said. “Because you’re under eighteen.”

“How do I do that?” I said.

“You’ll need to get permission from your school, and have your parents sign off on it,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

On my drive home, I tried to think of a way to get around this obstacle. Maybe I could forge a work permit. Maybe I could get a copy of one somehow. When I got home, I called Torrance High School and asked to speak to an administrator.

“I just moved here,” I lied. “I had to drop out of high school ‘cause my mom is sick. I have to get a job to help her but I can’t get a job without a work permit.” My voice cracked. I was acting, but the desperation was real.

“I’m sorry, dear, we can’t give you a permit unless you’re enrolled,” she said. “Surely there must be some way you can attend classes. Why don’t you and your mother make an appointment to come in?”

“My mom is sick,” I said softly before I hung up the phone.

Eventually, I got a job under the table, working as a waitress at a little coffee shop in Old Torrance. The owner was a tiny Korean woman named Lisa, who wore nylons under her shorts and was sweet to the customers but a tyrannical boss. She didn’t pay me for the two weeks I trained before going out on the floor, and she yelled at me and the other wait staff in front of the customers. If any of us broke a dish, it came out of our paychecks.

The coffee shop was a block away from Torrance High School, my fictional alma mater, and a retirement home. Consequentially, the tips were usually pretty bad. But on a busy Saturday morning, I could make seventy-five dollars cash. It felt like a fortune when I counted it out at the end of my shift.

“How much did you make today?” Carolyn said when I got home after one such morning. “Fifty dollars!” I said.

“Great,” she said. “We could use it.”

After that, I had to hand in any money I earned when I got home each day. It's true that money was tight. It was 1992 and we were just coming out of the recession. House painting jobs had been infrequent for over a year. We had some savings, though, about seventeen thousand dollars cash that we kept wrapped in a pair of nylons, inside a flannel bag, in a high cupboard over the sink in the upstairs bathroom. A smaller, more accessible bag of petty cash was kept in a closet in William's old room. That's where my tip money went. I quickly learned to lie about how much I made, keeping a little for myself before turning over my earnings.

HOLD ON TIGHT

I didn't know it, but my mother had been making plans, too.

I was listening to records in Gail and Ralph's room when I heard her coming up the stairs, the deliberate sound of her footsteps like a slow beating heart, making mine beat faster. She rarely interacted with anyone anymore, and I couldn't remember the last time she'd been upstairs. Gail, Ralph, Alex and Carolyn had been talking, but grew quiet when my mother appeared in the doorway.

She looked tired. The sadness in her eyes made my throat and chest feel tight. In one hand, an unlit cigarette dangled from her fingers.

"I'm leaving," she said. Her voice was low and soft. I wanted to catch her words with my hands and make her take them back.

"Where are you headed?" Gail said.

"I have a place," she said. "I've taken care of everything. I transferred the title of the car to Ralph's name. All the paperwork is downstairs." She paused, as though she was considering what to say next. "I shouldn't be here anymore. My negativity is destructive. But I'm grateful for each and everyone one of you, and the role you've each played in my life."

Panic was rising inside of me, a surge of pain and fear and misery that coursed through my body like electricity. In desperation, I spoke without thinking.

"But you won't be happy," I said, as though it might make her reconsider. As though she wasn't already gone.

"I'm not leaving to find happiness," she said. "I just have to go."

She turned around, and I heard the sound of her footsteps she walked out of my life.

I sat on the floor in Gail and Ralph's room, and I cried.

"Oh, sweetie," Gail said. "Both of your parents. You lost them both." She sat on the floor and hugged me.

And though she was the force that had driven them away, I held on tight.