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Writing a Novella

Keri A. Phillips
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Spaces Off

A Novella by Keri Phillips

There were codes / in our house. —Louise Gluck
Writing A Novella

A THESIS

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by

Keri Anna Phillips

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Writing A Novella

by Keri Anna Phillips

Approved by:

Dr. Michael Opitz
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Mara Faulkner, O.S.B
Assistant Professor of English

Dr. Kaarin Johnston
Professor of Theater

Dr. Ozzie Mayers
Chair, Department of English

Dr. Margaret Cook
Director, Honors Thesis Program
When she finally came home, I saw her come through the door not as Rose, my estranged older sister, but as ten hot pink plastic fingernails fluttering through the doorway like party confetti. I knew they were plastic, even from a distance, because they looked too big for her fingers. Later that day, when she put her long, oddly familiar hand over mine in a gesture of affection or understanding or pity, I saw that they almost covered the entire width of each finger. Rose became the first person I ever knew who glued fake fingernails over her real ones.

I see Rose's return in detail, as if it were my own memory, as if I, for a few minutes, took over Rose's body, and walked in to see myself looking dazed, a large kid sucking on the ends of her hair. I see Rose stepping out of a taxi on a damp August afternoon, one of the two Estes Park has, and turning around slowly, taking in the cool, blue mountains stacked against each other as far as she can see. She sees our gray, metal-like house matching every other house on the street, perhaps a little flatter since the last time she saw it. Only our porch posts have changed, now having huge, dirty yellow ribbons tied to them to relay the message "Bring Back Our Troops." She may have taken them as a welcome for her. At this point, she must have felt a bit unsure of waltzing back in as she did when she was sixteen, into the musty, used light of our house. She had a throbbing ache in her side, as if she had just run a mile or two. She must have bit her pink nails or ran them through her mess of bangs, sprayed to stand up as straight and unwavering as possible-- her bangs must not falter. I'm sure her footsteps sounded too loud and meaningful on the scratchy tar road as she approached our house. Here Goes Nothing, she must have thought, or Hang on For One Hellava Ride or Please Dear God. She must have sucked in her stomach and pulled back her shoulders like she does when she remembers to and wondered if she should knock or just walk right in, finally deciding that walking in would be more appropriate for a
home-coming such as this one. When she walked through the door, the warm smell must have filled her head and made her dizzy with something like melancholy with hints of regret.

At this point, the memory is mine again.

When she actually walked through the door, I was slung across the couch waiting for the buzzer to signal that my reuben roll was done. I had just watched a cooking show on how to make a giant reuben sandwich with a pizza crust, then roll it up so the insides swirl around the center. I was making one to surprise Dad. I was visualizing my roll cooking, the outside turning crispy brown, softly bubbling and popping as it cooks, the heat waves traveling round and round to the very center of the roll, when I heard the door open and saw the fingernails. Then I recognized Rose’s legs, which used to look everlasting to me; two long columns of smooth skin and golden hairs, bent a little outward.

Dad used to tell her, “if you don’t walk right, you’re gonna look like a cowgirl the rest of your life.”

Rose would roll her eyes and say, “Big hairy deal. Maybe I want to be a cowgirl.” But I would see her walking as straight as she could, putting one foot right in front of the other, locking each knee for one moment before moving on, trying to bend her legs the other way.

As soon as I recognized the duffel bag, I knew for sure it was Rose. The bag had aged, grown thin and faded, the torn zipper flapping loose against the bulging sides. *The Denver Broncos* was written across it in block orange letters. Rose had never watched an entire football game in her life. Neither had I, but I had my Broncos duffel bag in my closet full of old pictures. Dad had given them to us for Christmas one year. I had sat with mine in my lap all morning, occasionally holding it up to the light to inspect the stitching of the fuzzy letters so as not to cry from disappointment.

As soon as Rose saw me, a moment passed where her face went blank and her bottom lip hovered in midair. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, the whites stained pink.
In fact, her whole face seemed an off shade of red. But every color was a little skewed in the living room of our house, where light didn’t do what it was supposed to.

When the moment passed, her face stretched into an expression of pain and I thought she might scream or collapse, but instead she flung her bag against the wall and stumbled towards me, making strange sighing sounds. She wrapped her arms around me, buried her face in my neck, and shook. She said, “Oh my God. Oh my God, Lil, I can’t believe it. I can’t believe I’m here.” I couldn’t believe it either. Her body felt smaller than I thought it would be, sharp and quick in its shakes, dangerous. She smelled sweet and antiseptic, like the perfumes in the plastic palm tree bottles at the drugstore. *Malibu Musk* or *Electric Youth*. A gold charm strung on a thin gold chain swung back and forth as she shook. It was a curvy heart with a small purple stone in the middle. “*Amethyst,*” I could hear her say to me loudly and clearly, years ago—“my birth stone.”

“Lil, you look just like Mom, you do, I swear!” Rose said. And she kept shaking, at a maddening pace. Her elbows dug into my legs, but I didn’t know how to get them off. I hated her that moment. I hated her tears running down my shirt, the smell of her hair, like stale cigarette smoke, her bare teeth pressed against my shoulder, the way she came in without a phone call or letter for six months. But I patted her head and tried to look concerned. Finally she looked up, her face smeared with a variety of pastel colors and she asked, “What’s wrong, Lil?” She sniffed and touched her twitching nose, maybe to make it stop. “Jesus, don’t you remember me?” and she let out a laugh that sounded like a cough.


“Well, that’s good, because I wanted to catch up with you first anyways. My God, Lily, I was thinking on the way up to the door how long it’s been! You look so grown up and and just like Mom. I saw her, you know.”

I felt my throat close.
"She really misses you. She told me to tell you that." Rose's voice was high and fierce, as it always was after she cried.

I wanted desperately to say something right, to tell her something meaningful and mature, to show her that I had changed. But I didn't know where to start; I couldn't come up with a first word to say. *Rose, I thought, Rose Rose Rose is here.*

And then, suddenly I thought of my reuben roll, my long lumpy roll that took all afternoon to create. I imagined the middle getting hotter and hotter, the crust snapping and shrinking, the sauerkraut withering, turning black, until the whole thing almost disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

During the few hours before Dad came home, I pondered what I should do. How I could let him know before he came in and saw Rose sitting on the couch, her skirt pulled down to cover her most upper thigh region. I considered calling his school and leaving a note with the secretary: *Rose is back.* I also thought of leaving a post-it stuck on the front door. But Rose never left my side. So I set her Broncos bag on the sill of our front window, like a secret flag, in hopes that Dad would see it and prepare himself sufficiently.

"So, Lil, we have so much catching up to do," Rose said as she attempted to cross her legs, realized her right thigh would be fully exposed, and decided against it. "What do you do in school? Did Dad get you to join basketball this year?" she asked, her eyes darting around the room, finally resting on a seam of the carpet, where the sides of one piece were shredding, seeming to grow up out of the floor like thick, blue grass. "You said in your letter that he was obsessed about getting you to play basketball." I was suddenly painfully conscious of the way the house looked--we had the same pieced together furniture we had when Rose left, only with more stains and deeper sags; the same school
pictures framed in gold metal frames that were turning black in the corners, only my junior high ones now added in black, plastic frames; various statues of wolves and ducks lining the shelves, mostly presents Rose and I got for Dad when we couldn’t think of anything else. Not a lot had changed since Rose left. I felt a flush of shame.

“Well, no, actually, I don’t really do sports anymore. I was in softball for awhile but it wasn’t really my thing,” I said. “I was in the school play last semester. We did *Bye Bye Birdie*. It’s a musical. It was pretty fun, I guess.” I didn’t want to tell Rose about *Bye Bye Birdie*. I could see the corner of her mouth flinch up. But I had to talk about something.

“So did you have a big part?”

“Well, I was just in the chorus, but we had a lot of scenes. We built these boxes, for a scene where we’re all on the phone to each other. So we built these boxes stacked on top of each other, then each box lit up when it was that girl’s turn to sing. So I was in a box and it lit up for my line.” I couldn’t stop. “In my box, I had to lay down and put my legs up against the side, but my skirt would always fall down, so I was basically flashing the whole audience, so I started pinning it right before I went on.” To my surprise, I laughed like Rose, in a forced sing-song way that seemed to stick to the walls long after I was done. Rose was scratching the side of her nose, staring at my feet, smiling in a way that looked painful and fake.

As soon as I finished, she started quickly as if she just remembered, “Hey, do you remember that time when Dad took us out to the backyard to hit grounders to us when we had our new mitts, and he ended up breaking that window in the garage? Shit, that was funny. He was walking around, all ‘Fuckin’ A! Fuckin’ this, Fuckin’ that!’ Rose did an impression of Dad, her head pressed into her neck, her mouth twisted into an odd shape, her lips like a rubber band stretching different ways.

I laughed politely. “Yeah, I remember that.” I remembered standing in the back yard, putting my face into the web of my glove and inhaling as deeply as I could. My face
had fit perfectly, and the smell of the new leather mixed with the smell of leftover sun made me drowsy. When Dad broke the window, I started to cry. I can't remember why, but I remember seeing the window pieces through tears, a pile of light bursting in a million directions. I didn't know why Rose brought this up. Of course I remembered. She knew I remembered. It was like saying, "Remember when I used to live here? It happened. I have documentation."

I reflexively turned on the TV. I flipped through the channels until I found The Money Pit. "Have you seen this?" I asked her. Her perfume seemed to surround me, like cartoon smell waves. It gave me a dull headache.

"Umm, I don't think so. I don't really have time for movies, since I started working and all." We both watched for a couple of minutes, Rose staring at my reflection in the screen. The Money Pit's bathtub had just fallen through the floor when Rose said, "So do you have a boyfriend, or are you dating anyone?"

I knew she'd ask this question. "Well, no, not really. I have some guys who are friends but no boyfriends really." I had gotten to the point where my answer was automatic. It was like the computer programming I had learned in class: input x, output y. I am a human computer, I thought.

"I had this boyfriend, Scott, but things didn't really work out I guess."

I realized I desperately wanted Dad to get home. I tried to send a psychic message to him. I thought, very hard, Come Home Now. Come Home Now. Rose would not stop staring at me, looking me up and down, thinking of how much weight I had gained, how thankful she is that somehow, by some miracle, she avoided my genes.

"He was a lot older than me anyhow. Things were getting kind of messy, so I thought I'd come see you. And Dad. But mostly you, you know. I mean... Lil? Are you listening to me?"

"Mmm-hmm," I said. I tried to follow the events of the Money Pit in my mind, to trace
the plot up to this point. I tried to remember why they even bothered with that crappy house in the first place.

"Then turn the TV down. Geez. It won't take too long. It's not like you haven't seen this, right?"

I turned the TV down and watched the construction workers yell at each other, fling their arms around in disbelief. *How could this happen?*

"Okay, I just wanted to say, we're still sisters, right? We'll always be sisters. And you're the only one I have, so I think we should have some kind of relationship." She put her hand on my knee. "I want to, anyway."

I looked at her briefly. Her face seemed so different, so sharp and mean. Her eyes seemed to move constantly, scanning, assessing, setting in memory. Her mouth was an unnatural, sickly orange, as if she'd just eaten a popsicle. She looked so old, like someone I'd see shopping at the grocery store or working in a gas station. I couldn't believe she was Rose, who was so smart and strong and funny.

"Are you pissed at me? Didn't you get my postcards and stuff? I never forgot about you or ignored you." Her throat clicked in frustration. "You're being really weird, Lily."

Later, I realized I should have looked her right in the eye and said, "You don't even know me, Rose, so how do you know this is weird?" or "Maybe it's weird how I haven't seen you in four years and you still think I'm your sister."

But instead, all I said was, "I'm sorry." And for some reason, I believed I was.

Much to Rose's surprise, Sandy arrived before Dad did. We heard the front door open and close, and turned around to watch over the top of the couch for someone to
appear. But, we saw skinny, curling fingers of smoke from her cigarette creeping above us before we actually saw her. She followed her smoke into the living room, breathing out, “Hey, Lil,” with the rest of it. Sandy was Dad’s girlfriend, whom he met at the Y. She was short, thin, knobby, and much too wrinkled for her age. She always looked nervous, or distracted, or troubled. After I met her for the first time, I asked Dad what was wrong with her, if she had an uncontrollable tick, or a problem with her blood sugar level, and he just said, “Nah, she was just anxious to meet you, that’s all.” But it never got better after that.

“Oh, hi Sandy,” I said.

She gave Rose a quick smile, and averted her attention immediately to the TV. “Oh God!” she said when the Money Pit’s stairs collapsed and left Tom Hanks dangling from the rails. “So, who’s your friend, Lil?” she asked and took a long drag from her cigarette, and exhaled, her mouth twisting to the side of her face to blow the smoke behind her. Maybe Rose and Sandy would start taking smoke breaks together.

“Oh, this is Rose actually.” Rose was smiling pleasantly at Sandy, sitting up straight and awkwardly, her hands on her knees, like she was about to tip over.

Sandy rolled her eyes to the top of her head for a minute, deep in concentration, conjuring up the name Rose. “Oh yes! Really?! Its so nice to meet you!” She held her cigarette behind her back with one hand and shook Rose’s hand with the other. “Oh, wow. I’ve heard so much about you. Does Roger know you’re home?”

“No, I just got here an hour or so ago. I thought I’d surprise everyone and just kind of show up.”

“Well, I’m sure you did that. I know Lily will be happy to have you around the house again, huh Lily?” Sandy spoke in a voice that sounded like metal rusting, growly and grating.

“Yes,” I said, and glanced back at her. She cupped her hand to hold her ashes that fell through her fingers anyway.
“Roger will be glad too. He always mentions you. He’s always talking about raising
you girls in this house and all the good times you had.” I couldn’t imagine Dad saying
anything like that. I never heard him mention Rose.

At that moment, a bird flew smack into the window behind Rose, making a loud thud.
Sandy gasped and the ashes billowed from her hand and and sparkled as they fell into the
carpet and disappeared. “Oh, Goddammit!” Sandy croaked. “If Lily here wouldn’t keep the
windows so spotless, maybe she could save a few bird lives! And spare me a few heart
attacks!” She winked at me, bending over to rub the ashes with the palm of her hand.
When she leaves, I thought, I will take out the vacuum and listen to the satisfying clicking
sound of Sandy’s ashes being sucked up.

Rose laughed. “I don’t really clean the windows,” I said. “That happens all the time
actually. There’s always a couple dead birds laying out there under the window.”

“That’s pretty morbid,” Rose said, staring at the feather stuck to the window. She
said the word morbid with her voice dipping on the first syllable like she had an accent or
was singing.

“Dad picks ‘em up and throws them away,” I said as casually as I could.

Rose stood up, pulled her skirt down, moving her hips as she did so, and walked to
the bathroom. I hoped I’d picked up all my pajamas and underwear. Sandy sat in Rose’s
place on the couch and watched TV with me. She kept glancing at me with a little smile on
her face as if she wanted to share something, but I wouldn’t indulge her. I fixed my
expression to convey that Rose’s return was perfectly expected and normal to me.

I imagined Rose sitting on the toilet like she used to before she left, with her elbows
on her knees and her chin in her hands, as if she was thinking very hard about something.
When I would come in the bathroom she’d yell at me to get out, say that she was
“obviously busy,” that she was “thinking about things.” I wondered what she was thinking
now.
Two days after Rose had left, four years ago that summer when I was only ten, Dad had taken me camping in the mountains near our house. It was the first time I'd ever been. Before that I used to think of the mountains as part of the sky, or like long slides in the park that I could bound up if I had a running start. But Dad told me it was time that we actually did something a little adventurous instead of hanging around Estes Park all day.

So we went to the store and bought beans, marshmallows, beef jerky, and hot dogs and packed them in the backpacks that we borrowed from another teacher at his school. I also packed emergency supplies such as band-aids and disinfectant in case of any punctures to the skin, and emergency fruit roll-ups, lining the corners of my bag, in case we got lost and ran out of provisions. Dad didn't pack too much; his bag hung limp and deflated on his back, and halfway up the mountain, I transferred the emergency supplies to his bag.

He didn't speak the whole way up, walking in front of me, stopping and staring ahead when the sound of my footsteps got too faint. When I tried to make conversation, my voice sounded ridiculous and out of breath. "Look at that huge rock. If it started rolling down, I bet it could crush half of Estes Park!" I thought perhaps he started walking faster when I said something, so I remained silent and listened to Rose's voice in my head. Back then, when I wasn't with Rose, when I was at school or she was spending the night with a friend, I would always have imaginary conversations with her in my head. I couldn't help it; she was just always there.

When I was walking up the mountain, I heard Rose say, "Look at Dad's butt. Its kind of the shape of a square. I think a lot of men have squarish butts and women have round
"Yeah, that's because they're built differently," I'd have said to her, if she'd really said that.

"People aren't built Lily, houses are. People just are. Let's stay up all night tonight and tell ghost stories," she'd have said.

"Dad won't let us, I'm sure," I said. My legs were throbbing and I couldn't feel my feet anymore. "Can you feel your feet, Rose?" I asked.

"No, I wish Dad would stop being a butthole and slow down a little." I always laughed when Rose called Dad names with the words butt or dick. I laughed out loud and Dad turned around and looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time, secretly following him up the winding trail of a mountain.

That night, we made a fire and roasted the marshmallows and hot dogs. Dad still wasn't talking or hardly looking at me. I didn't say much either, but instead concentrated on roasting my marshmallows, letting them turn violent orange and red for a brief moment, then blowing them out before the fire got too out of control. Sometimes I glanced at his face, across the fire. It seemed distorted, wild, his features flickering with the flames. I thought I could see all his blood vessels through his skin, straining and pulsing, like they were about to burst.

The same thing happened to his face when he walked in and caught sight of Rose eating a piece of reuben roll in the kitchen, propped on the edge of the counter, her high heels swinging back and forth. She stopped chewing as soon as she saw him, jumped off the counter, and quickly swallowed. She had a pool of thousand island dressing in the corner of her mouth. I stared at it instead of looking at Dad and his morphing face.

I could hear Sandy sucking on a cigarette and exhaling, before saying, "Oh, Rog! Look who's here!" Her voice sounded strange, not at all like her normal voice. It was small and far away. I turned to look at Dad who was looking in his brief case, ruffling through
papers, his mouth hanging slightly open.

"Hey Dad," Rose said. "Its good to see you. I can't believe it." She ran her finger and thumb around her mouth, snagging the orange glob. I was grateful for that. "I can't believe how Lily's grown."

"Yeah, well she can't stay the same size for four years, can she?" Dad said, and laughed too eagerly, too forcefully. He didn't smile, but he started whistling.

"Its so great to see you two sisters together like this," Sandy said. "I have a sister that I don't see too much, but when we get together, it's like nothing's changed, you know? I think that's just amazing how family bonds work."

"So are you in town for awhile? Are you going to stick around and hang out with your old Dad?" Dad asked, still looking into his brief case.

"Well, actually, I thought we could all talk about that later-- I'm just so excited to be back here and see everyone," Rose said, looking at her arm as if she was searching for something.

Dad turned and looked at Rose. He ran his hand over the back of his neck, which had turned a festive pink, and cleared his throat. "So, you've met Sandy, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. We've been munching on this reuben roll Lily made. Jesus, I don't think I could make anything near that good," Rose said and put her hand on the hip she had thrust out.

"Lily's quite the cook," Dad said and glanced at me uneasily, as if he was embarrassed to say so.

"She's an actress now, too," Sandy said. "I went to see her show this Spring and she was dynamite." Sandy was always using words like dynamite and groovy and super. "She was the best screaming teenager in the whole thing, that's what I told your dad."

"Yeah, maybe because she was typecast," Dad said and and poked me with his elbow, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Rose was smiling strangely at me.
Suddenly, I felt sorry for her. In one instant, I seemed to have forgiven her for everything. I wished that Dad would hug her or tell her something nice, like he missed her or was happy to see her, or call her *Rosie*, her old nickname. I had the urge to take their bodies and smash them together, as if they were dolls, and make them kiss each other. But Dad stood as straight and rigid as he ever had and Rose sunk deeper and deeper into herself, getting shorter and more angular.

That night, Dad took us to the Cattle Ranch Steakhouse, and Rose ate an entire sirloin. Dad talked about the high school and the basketball team and the damned administration and Sandy talked about working in a dentist’s office. Rose was polite and interested. But she let out long, shaky sighs every once in a while. I wanted to touch her to see if she was shaking, but I didn’t. I kept telling myself *Rose is here. My sister Rose is here.*

Later that night, when I was lying in bed, trying to sleep, I thought of our sisterhood. I remembered lying in bed with Rose one night, when we were young, and playing the drowning game. I had asked Rose, “If we were on a boat that wrecked and you could only save one person, your mom or sister, who would you save?” Rose had looked at the ceiling, slightly nodding her head. She said, “Oh, probably Mom, no offense, because I’d want her to explain why she left, you know? I kind of owe it to myself to find out.” Then she’d heave a long sigh, turn away from me, and pretend to sleep.

And I could feel the water rush into my nose and ears, filling my lungs. I could see Rose through the top of the ocean, smiling down at me, waving, as I sank deeper and deeper. I couldn’t swim. I couldn’t even remember to hold my breath.
The next morning, I woke up feeling thick and gauzy as if I hadn’t slept long enough. But I thought of Rose and my heart struck one terrible beat that woke me up instantly. I felt slightly nauseous, but perhaps I was just hungry. I got out of bed and put my ear to the door to listen for any sign of movement from Rose, Dad, or Sandy, who usually stayed overnight on Fridays and Saturdays, but all I heard was the steady buzzing of the refrigerator coming from the kitchen-- the tainted silence of our house.

So I lifted the doorknob slightly as I opened the door, to prevent the creaking of the hinges, and went to the kitchen to eat some Little Debbie cupcakes. On Saturdays, Dad and Sandy usually lay in bed until lunch time, talking and laughing. I would turn Saturday cartoons up loud and eat cupcakes until I felt sick, tearing each one in half and sucking the white fluff out first. This was my routine. I knew that I couldn’t do that anymore. I could feel Rose’s presence in our house like the buzzing of the fridge, which seemed to have gotten louder and more intense since her arrival. I only noticed it when she was out of the room, or caught in one of her silent thought lapses, and I could take a breath and develop a plan of action. Now, I felt like I couldn’t hear over it.

I sat down at the table with a cupcake and waited for Rose. The Sports page was spread out on the table so I read the captions and gazed at the pictures of baseball players who looked too old to be good at sports. They mostly looked like Dad, with guts hanging over the tops of their pants and extra skin under their faces. They were serious and intent. My life depends on this ball, they must be thinking.

I looked out the window and saw Myrtle Mae sitting on her porch steps, painting her toenails. She had cotton balls between each toe to keep them spaced apart. I stared at her stomach and tried to remember if it looked like it was supposed to, or if it was at all inflated. There were rumors going around school last spring that Myrtle Mae was pregnant with Ryan Scott’s baby. I decided that it looked the same as it always had. I tried to imagine a baby that looked like a combination of Myrtle Mae and Ryan. It would be an ugly baby
with disproportionate features. Myrtle Mae was small and thin-faced, her cheeks were always pink and her hair was so blond that you could see her scalp through it, white and flawless as an eggshell. Now she wore pink frosty lipstick and blue eyeshadow and curled her hair with a small curling iron that left her ends bent and straggly. Ryan was squatty with a wide nose and excessive acne. They walked through the halls together with Ryan’s arm around her waist and Myrtle Mae’s pink fingers tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. They walked by me once last year and I could hear Myrtle Mae giggle and make whistling noises as she sucked air down her throat and rolled her eyes back to glance at me before she passed. She had bad asthma and always shook after she laughed or got excited.

One summer, when Myrtle Mae and I were still friends, Rose and I had to take her to the emergency room because she couldn’t breathe. I thought of this now as I watched her blow on her toes, her gasping, “Lily! I can’t breathe! My lungs have closed!” I wondered what she’d think when she saw Rose. For a second, I wished Rose had turned out differently, like I thought she would when we were little, so Myrtle Mae would see her and feel stupid and sorry for treating me so badly. But I felt ashamed for thinking such a thing, because Rose was still Rose.

I unwrapped my second cupcake and licked off the twirly white icing on the top. As I was about to take a bite, Rose walked in, yawning, sliding her feet across the warped linoleum. “Morning,” she whispered after her yawn.

“Hey,” I said and set the cupcake down and pretended to read the sports page.

“So what do you guys eat around here anyway?” She stood in the middle of the kitchen, her legs spread apart, her arms crossed over her chest. She seemed to be made of triangles. She was staring at me through her bangs, which were now sagging in her eyes. She saw my cupcake. “Oh God, are you eating a cupcake for breakfast?”

Her voice was too loud and it occurred to me that Myrtle Mae might hear her so I said overly quietly, “I’m going to eat some cereal, too,” even though I never ate cereal on
Saturdays. I kept my eyes on the newspaper, but the cupcake seemed to be twinkling from the corner of my eye—I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I wanted to eat it, to fill my mouth so I wouldn’t have to talk or think about how Rose was looking at me, just chew and swallow. But I knew I couldn’t eat it. I couldn’t risk crumbling it into my lap, getting black deposits between my teeth, or making moist smacking noises as I chewed. So I let it sit solidly on the table, as a symbol of my dignity.

Rose found a bowl and made some instant oatmeal, dyed primary colors so that kids would eat it. She squinted as she read the directions on the package and made the oatmeal as if she’d never seen a microwave before. I tried to ignore her, but finally got up to show her how to enter the time on the digital screen and hit start.

She sat beside me with her bowl of bluish oatmeal and sighed loudly. “Wow, is this real food?” she asked. “It looks like smurf-meal or something.”

I smiled at this and glanced up at her. I couldn’t imagine Rose watching the smurfs or any other cartoon. When we were little, she used to watch only shows “with real people” like “Three’s Company”. We used to talk about which female roommate John Ritter, the male roommate, should date. I thought he should date Chrissy, who was blonder, prettier, and nicer than Janice, but Rose called her a “bimbo.” Then she called me a “bimbo” too.

“You can go ahead and eat that cupcake, Lil. I didn’t mean to tell you what you can eat,” Rose said, talking into her oatmeal.

“Oh, no, I know,” I said so quickly and excitedly that Rose looked up at me, surprised, her plucked eyebrows forming two little rainbows. “I mean, I know you didn’t mean that,” I said more casually. “I’m not really hungry just yet.” Rose twisted her mouth to the side to let me know she thought I was weird and didn’t say anything. It was as if I’d said the magic words to make the walls and ceiling start closing in, to suck the oxygen out of the room. I was forced to speak. “So do you remember Myrtle Mae?” I shot at Rose. I didn’t wait for her to answer. “She’s pregnant.” Once I said it, I couldn’t believe how callous I
sounded.

Rose looked relieved that we were talking about something other than breakfast. “Myrtle Mae, the neighbor girl?” She smiled wickedly and looked out the window at Myrtle Mae’s house. “Okay, now she looks different,” Rose said, balancing on her elbows to get a better look at Myrtle Mae who was now slapping the bottle of nailpolish on the palm of her hand to mix it up, her mouth scrunched into a small space right below her nose. “I totally forgot about her,” Rose said, her mouth hanging slightly open in amazement. “So do you two still hang out?”

“No, not really. She’s going out with Ryan Scott and they’re together all the time,” I said. “We don’t really have the same interests anymore,” I said.

Rose must of thought this was funny because she laughed a strange staccato laugh that I had never heard before. But I was pleased I made her laugh, so I thought I’d try again. “More than just our Barbies are having sex now.” It didn’t quite come out how I wanted it to, but Rose laughed anyway and I liked her more for it.

“I always felt so bad for the pregnant girls at school,” Rose said. “Everyone talked about them and stared at them.” There was an uncomfortable silence while my cupcake seemed to get limper and dryer, still sitting in the striped sun coming through the window. “I just can’t believe that’s sweet little Myrtle Mae.”

It occurred to me that I didn’t even know if Rose graduated from highschool or not. The last time I talked to her, she was a senior in highschool, but we never heard of her graduation. I didn’t know if I should ask her, but it finally came out, in the outward appearance of an afterthought: “Oh, did you ever finish highschool?” I asked, still staring at Myrtle Mae.

Rose took her first bite of oatmeal and got an exaggerated look of horror on her face. “Oh shit, this is fucking terrible!” she said. She swallowed and looked traumatized from her bout with blue oatmeal. She answered as an afterthought as well: “Not yet, but I’m getting
my GED. Which is basically the same thing."

She ran over to the sink and dumped her oatmeal down the drain, yelling, "Ughh!" The sink was tinted a smurf-meal blue for weeks after. Even though I wasn't looking at my cupcake, I could see it, like a pattern of light that remains on your eyes after you've looked away. I wrapped my hands around the edge of the table, squeezed hard, and thought to myself, My life depends on this cupcake.

A few mornings later, Dad woke up in an exceptional mood, most likely because of the parade. He wrapped his arm around my neck and gave me a wet kiss on the ear that seemed to fill my whole head with its sound. I could feel the scratch of his whiskers on my cheek long after he left. Sometimes, after he kissed me, I'd be sure that he left spidery red scratches across my cheek, that my skin would be on the cusp of breaking and bleeding, but then I'd look in the mirror and see nothing but perfectly sealed skin.

I squirmed out of his grip and gave my obligatory "ewwww, Dad!" before he went over to Rose and put his hand on her head and gave it a shake, mussing her hair, which already looked mussed. I was glad that he finally touched Rose, even if he seemed to touch her as he would a friend's pet, or a niece he barely knew. Rose sat up straight and glanced up at him, baring her teeth. I could tell she wanted to play back, to let him know that everything was alright, that she was the same, but wasn't sure how.

Dad started singing his Good Morning song that he sang in moods like this one, his voice thick and sonorous, his face rising and dipping with the music, as if he was a star in a musical. When I was younger, I would sing back-up vocals, chirping "to you", after each "Good morning," but now I would just listen and feel safe and content, even lucky to have a Dad like mine, one everyone loved. It was true-- everyone in the community did love Dad,
and the basketball games got the highest attendance ever recorded for any event at Estes High. Some thought it was because the team was doing better than it ever had, but I knew it was because everyone loved to see Dad cantering back and forth at the sidelines, doing dances when our team scored and putting on gestures of incredulity when the referees called fouls against the team. After the game, he would shake hands with the dads of the players, his forehead as red and shiny as a beating heart. And it was then I felt I loved him so much; in the words of our neighbor Mrs. Wetting, he was such a good man. I knew at the parade that day, in front of the entire town, he would speak solemnly about honor, crack jokes about weather, and be such a good, good man. I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t wait for Rose to see him like that, and know that he wasn’t so bad that she had to leave, and we’ve gotten along just fine, thank you very much.

Dad had been nominated by the Coalition of Concerned Citizens for Supporting Under Pressure Our Rising Troops, or 3C-SUPORT, to head up a local parade to honor the troops over in the Gulf. The committee was founded by Dad, his brother, my Uncle Ron, and the other basketball coach at Estes High, Terry Wisk, who came up with the concept and name during the 1989 crisis in Panama, when he felt the need to “avoid future Vietnams.” When Iraq invaded Kuwait a few weeks earlier, the committee was reactivated in a burst of enthusiasm and call to duty. Since early August, they were responsible for the distribution of one thousand yellow ribbons throughout the community of Estes Park, Colorado, and the display of posters of the silhouette of a soldier against the background of an American flag that read “Honor the Men and Women Who Honor the Flag”. I had suggested that there be two silhouettes, one of a man and one of a woman, just to make it fit the slogan, but Dad said they only included the women part to be “politically correct” and rolled his eyes and rubbed the bald crown of his head that looked red and irritated from such repeated gestures of annoyance. Sandy, Dad, and I had put them up one afternoon early in the summer, driving from business to business in Sandy’s blue Rabbit reeking of the
pinetree air freshener dangling from her rearview mirror to counteract the permanent stench of Virginia Slims cigarettes. After I put each one up, I smoothed it over a few times with the palm of my hands, making sure it looked as dignified as Dad intended it to.

Dad was proud of being a head committee member. When he spoke of the troops or impending war, his voice would lower and his eyebrows would come together into one ominous line that would move up and down as he spoke of Damn Saddam, scud missiles, gas masks, and justice. “It’s time we play straight and give Saddam something to think about,” Dad would say. When I had asked him when we didn’t play straight, he told me about his friend, Gary, who was a pilot in Vietnam. Gary said that his fleet knew the location of fuel and ammunition deposits, but weren’t allowed to bomb them and end the war too quickly. “It’s all politics,” Dad had said about Gary’s story. “This time Bush isn’t standing for that. And Saddam’s going to find out pretty damn soon.” I’d never met Gary, but had heard several of his Vietnam stories. Sometimes I thought Dad wished he had fought in Vietnam with Gary-- but he was still at UC, getting his degree.

I didn’t know too much about the “operation” except what he and Sandy talked about and the stories I heard from reporters, who usually stood in front of an expanse of gray sand, looking wind-blown yet soggy. I knew there were two troops from Estes Park “over there.” One was Dusty Sinclair, who had been a star player on Dad’s team four or five years ago. His parents were speaking at the rally at the end of the parade, when one hundred red, white, and blue balloons would be released into the sky. Rose and I got the job of untying the net which contained them, making sure none got caught on their glorious ascension.

Sandy walked into the kitchen fluffing her wet hair with a towel, spraying Rose and me with sweet, pinkish hair gel. I didn’t mind so I let the mist soak into my skin and hair, not wiping away a drop sitting on my eyelash. Rose jerked around, her back towards Sandy, and started rubbing her eyes with her thumbs, the rims of her eyes seeming to be pulled
open more than seemed normal. Sandy didn’t seem to notice. She was wearing a red T-shirt, bright blue, pleated jeans that accentuated her wide hips, and a flag bandana tied around her neck. She reminded me of a little dog with a kerchief tied around its neck to be cute. Only she didn’t strike me as cute. “Well, good morning girls. Are you ready for the big parade?” she drawled. Sometimes it seemed to me that Sandy had a southern accent, but she’d lived in Estes Park her whole life. Her words seemed to last longer than everyone else’s, as if she were trying them out for sound.

Rose finally turned around and smiled absently at Sandy. It was obvious she didn’t feel like answering Sandy’s question.

“Oh, yes, definitely,” I said, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. “I need to figure out how exactly the balloon thing works though.”

“Oh, its not a problem, kiddo,” Dad said, looking pleased at its mention. “All you got to do is take the end of the twine that holds the flaps of the net together and just run with it. Literally, run with it,” he said and laughed.

“So I have to run?” I asked. My task suddenly seemed less glorious, as I pictured myself lumbering with the grace of an old man, in front of a crowd waiting intently, silently, for the balloons to signal the start of the National Anthem. I didn’t really want to do it anymore, but I knew I had to. I couldn’t tell Dad otherwise at this point. Or any point, for that matter.

“Of course you have to run! That way the balloons will be released in a big burst instead of a trickling effect, see?” He illustrated each way with his hands, his face reflecting the expressions of the crowd for both potential releases.

“Oh, Lil, I don’t think its going to ruin the effect if you don’t run fast enough. God won’t strike you down for letting the balloons trickle or anything,” Rose said, mostly speaking to Dad, her words twisting in sarcasm, her eyes narrowed in a way that was striking in its familiarity. She was trying to tease Dad, but she had gone about it the wrong way; she was making fun of the parade, an event that Dad packed with dignity, seriousness, and meaning.
I tried to think of something to say, but all I could do was laugh under my breath, which I later realized probably made the situation worse.

Dad looked confused for a second, as if he was openly contemplating what he could possibly say to such a comment, and then said, "Okay, Rose, if your son was overseas prepared to fight for your country I think you'd want to see the fucking balloons rise at the same time, huh?" He looked at Rose with his bar of eyebrow raised all the way, his palms open to her, one big gaping question mark. The silence seemed to stretch thin and waver, like Sandy's words, while Dad stood frozen in his pose, waiting. We were all waiting, though not for an answer from Rose--just for something to happen. For a bird to crash into the window and send Sandy gasping, or for the telephone to ring, or for Uncle Ron to walk through the door, bumping the edges of the furniture, cursing, as he crossed the living room. Dad finally laughed out of his nose and said, "I'm just kiddin." He only spoke to Sandy now. "Lily will do just fine. That's the last thing I'm worried about." He walked out of the room whistling, his hands deep in his pockets. "The last thing," he muttered in the doorway. Rose was staring at the table, her lips pressed so hard together they were rimmed in whiteness. I sighed loudly and cheerfully and asked Rose what she was going to wear today. Without looking up, she said, "I'm not going."

After a few vain attempts to get her to change her mind, I decided to go for a bike ride. I got on the rusted, red Huffy that Rose had gotten from Dad for her fourteenth birthday, when she was five months younger than I was now. Now she was twenty--an adult. Years earlier, I had taken off the miniature Colorado license plate that said ROSIE, and made it mine. The sound of the tire tread on the tar street turned from a muddled ticking into a steady whir. I peddled faster and faster, headed in no particular direction, letting the wind fill my ears and set my hair flying, letting my circling feet take me away and away and away.
Rose did end up going to the parade with us that afternoon, only she refused to wear the button with the yellow ribbon on it that Sandy had made on her new button machine, bought expressly for the purpose of selling buttons at the parade. Rose said she didn't want to poke holes in her shirt.

Dad had somehow restored his good mood and was whistling in the car on the way over to Memorial Park, where the parade started. "So do you girls want to hit the Dairy Barn after the parade is over? It's one heckava day for ice cream. We couldn't have had better weather if we would have put the order in to God Himself." The day was so bright and clear that colors seemed to vibrate in their vividness. I imagined how the balloons would look against the candied blue of the sky. And how I would look running into the distance, my shorts riding up my butt as I ran.

"Yeah, let's go!" I said. Sandy was messing around with the radio dials, muttering to herself about *crappy music*. Rose was staring out the window, her forehead pressed against the glass, her breath making disappearing patterns of fog. "I haven't been to the Dairy Barn in forever," I said.

"Well, that's probably a good thing," Dad said. "You don't want to go to the Dairy Barn too much." I wasn't sure what he meant by that, if anything at all. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Wow, I bet you really haven't been there forever," I said to Rose. She rolled her head towards me and lifted it off the glass. She had a blank expression on her face as if she had no idea what I was talking about. "You know, the Dairy Barn on County Road 9, with the blue booths and huge banana splits?" I couldn't believe she could forget the Dairy Barn. We used to ride our bikes there and use money we found in the cushions of the couch or on the floor beneath the toilet to buy towering cones of chocolate ice cream,
precariously swirled in upon itself so there was a hollow tunnel through the middle. After Rose left, I started getting more complex treats, like Banana Splits and Peanut-Heaven Sundaes, solid all the way through, smothered with toppings and whipped cream, dripping with hot fudge.

Finally, it registered on Rose's face. "Oh, totally!" she said. "I'm sorry, for some reason I couldn't figure out what you were talking about." She looked embarrassed. "Duh," she said and made the motion of shooting herself in the head with her finger. "We got those humongous cones there that we could never finish."

I was so grateful she remembered that for the first time I felt like touching her, just to verify that it was Rose, her skin felt the same as it used to, she was the person who ate melting chocolate cones with her mouth stretched wide open, never quite finishing them. I remembered a time when Rose, Myrtle Mae, and I all bought cones and went to Memorial Park to eat them, riding our bikes with no hands in order to hold the cones, a feat which took me years to master. At the park, in a moment of rebellion, Rose took her cone and smashed it headlong onto the immaculate, cherry red surface of a sports car parked in the parking lot. I remembered running as fast I could, my heart pounding out of my ears, my legs feeling like rubber, bending all ways instead of the way I needed them to go. Rose and Myrtle Mae were far ahead of me, their legs long and wild, their hair rippling behind them like flags. I looked over the seat at Rose and wanted to hug her. But I didn't want to make a scene.

"I could always tell when you two snuck off to the Dairy Barn because you'd be walking around with little brown mustaches," Dad said. It occurred to me that Dad wasn't supposed to know that; we did sneak off. He had never said anything. We had gotten away with nothing. I looked over at Rose and knew she must be thinking the same thing because she was staring at the back of Dad's head, her ears twitching.

At Memorial Park, the parade was already lining up to go. We got a cardboard cup
of orange drink provided by the Lion's Club and went to find Dad and Sandy's float. The parade would consist of the Estes High Marching Band, the Estes Junior High Flag Squad, the 3C-SUPORT float made by twisting pieces of tissue paper into wire netting modeled to form a cross and American flag, and a few various floats made by local businesses to show their support of the troops. Dad and Sandy were going to ride on the 3C-SUPORT float, waving and throwing Dum-dum suckers to the kids. There wasn't room for kids on the float, though I thought it might make their organization look more family-oriented to have kids, so I had to watch the parade from the street until my balloon-releasing duty called.

After we found the float and inhaled a fair amount of black smoke emitting from the rusted tractor that was pulling it, Rose and I set out to find an empty spot on the curb of Maple Ave. It turned out there was plenty of curb space. In fact, the only people who seemed to be awaiting the parade were old people who brought lawn chairs and little dogs strung on leashes. We sat down and propped our chins on our knees.

"Do you think Dad even cares that I'm back?" Rose asked, making formations with her finger in the gravel dirt. I had hoped she wouldn't mention Dad or being back, that we could just pretend she had never left, and we were just going to a parade together, like always.

"Of course he cares," I said, not because I knew he did, but because that's what she expected me to say. There wasn't really an option.

"He's just such a prick sometimes. God. You'd think he could be a nice guy for, like, three little days or something," Rose said. She had disturbed an anthill built along the curb, and black ants seemed to spout out of the cement, crawling up her finger until she shook them off. She wouldn't look at me. She was pouting.

"Well, it doesn't mean he doesn't . . . love you," I said. "I'm sure he does. You know how he gets. But, actually, he's a lot better even. From when you left. Today was the first time I'd seen him do that in months. He's usually really good. I'm serious." She still wouldn't
look at me and I felt like laughing at her. "That was really weird for him," I said. I started peering down the street, looking for any sign of the parade. But the police were just putting up the cones across the side streets.

"It was stupid of me to think he might have changed," Rose said. "I was talking to Mom about this, and she told me stories how he would get so pissed off over nothing that he wouldn't speak for days. She would try to reason with him and she even tried to make him go to therapy or some kind of anger-management group, but he wouldn't. He knows what he does and he doesn't even care." I felt my tongue dry up and hang limp in my mouth at the mention of my mother. I imagined Rose talking to her, in a room lit with blue light, smelling of her musky perfume, bonding with her, talking about Dad and how bad he was and how I was still stuck with him, like a poor, helpless kid.

"Whatever Dad does, at least he's still here, Rose," I said. My throat felt so tight that it started aching. I could feel pain behind my eyes and knew that tears were soon to come. So I hurriedly said, "You don't really know him anymore and he doesn't know you." My tears started to trickle down my face, falling on the ants who ran for cover beneath the scattered remains of their fallen hill.

The parade lumped by us in a matter of a few minutes. Sandy threw a dum-dum right at me. It turned out to be root-beer, the flavor I hated most, so I gave it to Rose who ate it in two loud bites. We hadn't talked since I'd started crying and I think Rose was feeling guilty or sympathetic, because she kept looking at me and laughing at the old Lions Club men who were dressed up as clowns, even though they weren't funny at all. I needed to pull myself together in time for the balloon release so I decided to break the silence.

"Wow," I said. "That was the shortest parade I've ever been to."
“Oh, yeah,” Rose said. “Me, too. But I s’pose its pretty cool that Dad puts these together anyway. Do you think there’s going to be a World War?”

I hated talking about Operation Desert Shield because I felt stupid about it. Dad had CNN on for a couple hours a day at least, but I got bored looking at the tanks and planes scuttling around and the military spokesmen talking about things I didn’t understand. I couldn’t imagine that there were real men inside those machines, making them move and perhaps soon making them shoot missiles and drop bombs. It was as if there was a war about to be fought on another planet with gleaming, futuristic machines being controlled by little men sitting in booths made of bullet-proof glass. I thought this was a clever observation and decided to tell Rose. I said, “I just thought of something. What if there really were no soldiers sent to the Gulf? Its not like we ever see them on TV. Maybe just a few guys running around doing drills or something, but we never actually see men carrying machine guns or building trenches or anything. What if it’s only machines that’ll do the work? Then the war wouldn’t really be that bad, you know? Whoever loses the most tanks loses the war, of course, but they’d get over it. Maybe technology is going to solve the problem of war!” I was quite proud of my conclusion and thought I would look over and see Rose deep in thought, slowly coming to realize that I may have discovered the route to world peace. But instead she had a look of shock, her overly plucked eyebrows consumed by the folds of her forehead and her orange mouth deliberately hanging open in a punishing look of disbelief.

“Are you kidding? Do you realize what the Iraqis have done to the Kuwaitis?” She was waiting for an answer. I was sorry we’d started talking about the Gulf. I consciously tried to shut my ears off and decided to concentrate on an elderly couple across the street who were folding up their lawn chairs while trying to eat apples at the same time. The man held the apple in his teeth, his eyes open wide to see over it, as he struggled at collapsing his plastic lounge chair.
“No, not really,” I said and dug my heels into the dirt of the curb and put my hands underneath my knees and squeezed them.

“Well, Iraqis are going into Kuwaiti hospitals and taking little newborn preemies out of their incubators, stealing the incubators, and then leaving the babies on the ground! They just leave them there to die! I don’t think machines are responsible for those kinds of things. Honestly, Lil, if there’s people who are cruel enough to kill babies, I don’t feel too guilty about killing them.” She had taken on the tone she got when she was defensive, accentuating every other syllable like she was reciting a dramatic poem or something. She sat and thought about what she just said awhile. She was breathing rapidly and running her hands through her hair to fluff it up. “We have to do something. We can’t have another Holocaust, for God’s sake.” She said this last part so loud that the elderly couple wheeled around to stare at her and the old man took the apple out of his mouth and squinted his eyes at Rose, his upper lip curled in confusion. I looked down and wished she would shut up.

“I guess, huh. We’d better get to the park. I don’t know when I’ll get to perform my glorious deed,” I said. Rose let out a shrill sigh and shook her head as if to shake off the previous conversation. She laughed a hearty laugh and wrapped her arm around my neck, much like Dad did earlier that day. But she didn’t kiss me. Instead she pulled my head into her neck and held it there until the sound of a heart beat filled my whole head. I knew it was hers— it was beating so fast I thought it would explode.

We walked to Cement Square, as it was called, to take our places by the balloons. Rose said she would help me with the timing, and make some kind of emotional show of patriotism to distract the crowd from watching me run. It was her gesture of apology for saying what she said about Dad, and I was grateful.

Cement Square was located at the edge of the downtown area. It was a town mystery why anyone would bother to create such a useless, ugly thing. It was a raised
square of cement, with random holes where leafless shrubs poked out of it. There used to be a few wooden benches on it, but kids had trashed them one way or another. I remember walking downtown once when I was little and seeing one of the benches from Cement Square sitting on top of one of the buildings. I was amazed and thoroughly impressed that someone was adventurous and smart enough to get the bench all the way up there. I was sure they must have sat on it up there a long time, gazing at the entirety of Estes Park, beaming with pride. I would have.

But there were no benches left on Cement Square at the time of the 3-C SUPORT rally and balloon release, so everyone had to stand. When we got there, we were surprised at the turnout. Cement Square was almost full of old people, young couples with kids all wearing matching visors, and random oddballs I had never seen before, leaning against the sides of the surrounding buildings, their arms crossed over their chests, intent on the empty platform. Dad was talking to a small group of admirers, ruffling the deck of note cards with his speech on them. He was wearing a dark blue polo shirt, ringed under the arms with long, oval pit stains that almost reached his waist line. He was waving his arms as he talked, opening his mouth wide to laugh, his face turning white when he did. Sandy even looked animated as she was talking to another woman who also had a bandana tied around her neck, though hers had little Holstein cows dotted all over it. She was telling the woman exactly how the float was put together, twisting the air in the way she twisted hundreds of pieces of tissue paper. "Then we just poked 'em in there according to the diagram that Roger drew up." I thought back to building the float and how for days afterward I saw twisted tissue paper in my mind every time I closed my eyes.

Rose and I stood on the outside of the circle of chattering adults, watching Dad and Sandy perform. I was beginning to get a little excited for Dad's speech- my stomach fluttered for a brief second. I was even a little excited about the balloon release, now that Rose said she'd help me out. I glanced at Rose who was staring at someone across the
Square and followed her gaze to the back where Myrtle Mae was standing, wearing a
terry-cloth hot pink tank top, her mouth smudged in hot pink lipstick. She seemed to be a
shirt and pair of lips floating in the crowd, her skin was so white and translucent. Her zitty
boyfriend was standing next to her looking bored. He was wearing a T-shirt with the
sleeves ripped off, his clumpy armpit hair sticking out from under his arms. “Oh look, its
Bruce Springsteen,” I said to Rose, trying to sound as dry and sarcastic as I could. She
didn’t seem to hear me. All of a sudden, her face stretched back into a dazzling smile and
her nails fluttered through the air, much like they fluttered through our door, waving too
enthusiastically at someone. I looked again at who she could be waving at, and to my
horror, Myrtle Mae was waving back! “Rose! I told you about Myrtle Mae! She’s trashy
now!” I said desperately. I instinctively looked at Dad for help, but he was already
stepping onto the warped wooden platform, wiping the stream of sweat from above his
eyes. “Come on, we have to take our places,” I said to Rose, taking her arm and trying to
pull her to the suppressed balloons. She yanked her arm away from me.

She glanced at me with the same ferocious smile she gave to Myrtle Mae and said,
“Oh, Lil, I think you can handle it. I’m going to go talk to Myrtle Mae. I can’t believe how
different she looks! Good luck, Hon!” Rose slipped into the crowd and ended up clawing
onto Myrtle Mae— they hugged as if they were long lost sisters. I felt my face get so hot
that I imagined my skin bubbling up like the skin of a reuben roll to let out the heat. I turned
my back to them and instead concentrated on my job. I approached the balloon net and
found the end of the piece of twine that was strung through the net to keep it together.
When I was given the signal by Dad (he would put his hand to his heart and stand in silence
for a brief moment) I was to hold on the piece of twine and run off Cement Square and
along the sidewalk as long as I needed to, until the length of the twine was free from the net.
I wrapped the twine around my hand as tight as I could without it cutting my skin and waited.
I hated Rose. I couldn’t help but watch Rose and Myrtle Mae, their chromatic mouths
moving at the same time, both talking at one another, Ryan standing there looking stupid. It occurred to me that Rose and Myrtle Mae were alike. They were the same person as far as I was concerned. They both just cared about how they looked to people, their image, their hair, their bodies. They didn’t care about other people, especially other females, and their smiles were as fake as the smiles of billboard models. I stood there hating them both, mocking their boney bodies in my mind, thinking them ugly and obscene. Dad’s voice was bouncing off the sides of Cement Square, and I forgot for a moment that he wasn’t speaking just to me about some thing or another, but to a whole crowd of people who were actually listening. I tried to pay attention.

“These are the men who are willing to sacrifice their lives,” Dad bellowed as he pointed to a corkboard where two eight-by-ten senior class photographs were tacked. “Not for their families. Not for their friends and loved ones. Not for their community.” Dad paused, his hands passionately clasping the edges of the podium. He looked as if he was about to pick it up and throw it into the crowd. “But for their country. For the ideals and beliefs of their country. For the insurance of democracy and protection of humanity’s well-being.” I had a feeling that what Dad was saying wasn’t entirely true, but I didn’t know what was true. I thought of him as a college student in the 60’s, watching Vietnam footage on TV, hearing the same kind of speeches, wondering what he was supposed to do. I looked around to see if anyone else was doubtful, but the crowd seemed mesmerized in a thick haze of patriotism. Even the kids had shut up and were staring up at Dad, with intimidated looks on their faces. I glanced at the spot where Rose and Myrtle Mae had stood seconds before, but they were gone. I scanned the crowd for Myrtle Mae’s hot pink top, but all I saw were red, white, and blue T-shirts and polo shirts. I started to panic. Rose couldn’t just leave in the middle of Dad’s speech! What if he saw her leave and became distracted and hurt? I looked up at him but he showed no sign of anything except undying devotion to the United States Armed Forces. He was composed and his gestures were
packed with meaning. This is the moment I should have felt proud, I should have stood up as straight as possible and admittedly foolishly thought to myself that everyone was in fact staring at me, thinking what a strong and admirable daughter Roger Stotts has. What a wonderful family. But all I could think of was Rose’s disappearance and I hated her even more for ruining it for me. I knew I had to calm myself and wait patiently for the sign, for my turn was approaching quickly. Dusty Sinclair’s father mounted the platform and said a few words on his son’s behalf, though I felt sure that the crowd was losing interest, because he wasn’t near the speaker my dad was. In fact, I could barely hear him mumbling about his son’s duties in the Navy into the microphone. Mrs. Sinclair stood to the side of him, her clasped hands constantly moving as if she had an imaginary towel, drying them until they were raw. She stared at the planks of the platform, her salon-styled hair standing perfectly erect in the breeze that collected in the three-sided Cement Square. I thought about mothers in World War II movies, who became sallow-skinned, frail, and defeated through the course of the movie as their sons fought bravely on the Front. But, nobody was fighting in the Gulf yet-- just building one big shield of soldiers in the desert, waiting for their sign to attack. I felt a little better now that my mind was wandering naturally into things I usually thought about. I wasn’t going to let Rose ruin the release of the balloons.

After Mr. Sinclair finished his speech, Dad approached the microphone once again and said, “Please join us in a moment of silence as we pray for our troops sent to the Persian Gulf to return home safely.” He put his hand, which seemed puffy and white in the shaky rays of heat, to his heart and looked solemnly at the sky. I took a deep breath and clenched my fist tightly to make sure I had a good grip on the twine. I couldn't feel my hand anymore. I thought back to hiking up the mountain, when my legs were so tired I couldn’t feel my feet. It was strange to be missing a body part. I aimed in the direction of the sidewalk and started to run. I could feel the surprised faces of the near crowd turn to me, wandering what I was doing. My legs suddenly felt strong and powerful, my butt guiding
my legs exactly where they needed to go. I hoped that Rose was somewhere in the
crowd watching me run down the sidewalk like a track star. I held my arm high in the air so
the twine wouldn’t get caught or tangled, and bounded off Cement Square in one deft leap.
I thought back to Rose and Myrtle Mae running away from the ice-creamied sports car, their
legs a virtual blur in their strength and speed. That’s how I felt then. I saw the peaks of the
mountains in front of me and I truly felt that if I would only keep going, that I would bound up
a mountain by sweet accident, that my inertia would carry me far, far above the realm of
Cement Square and Rose and Myrtle Mae, to a space off of everything. I finally realized
that my heart was beating wildly and my breaths were harsh and burning. I stopped,
turned around and saw the sky dotted with red, white, and blue balloons, rising tipsily,
meaningfully, higher and higher. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

I got up early the next morning and decided to make some cookies. The night
before I had gone to bed early after Dad, Sandy, and I had gone to the Dairy Barn for
treats. Sandy and Dad were feeling loud, affectionate, and proud of themselves. Dad kept
calling us “his girls”, asking what kind of treat could he get for “his girls” and if “his girls” were in
the mood for chopped nuts on their treats. They hardly seemed to notice that Rose wasn’t
there, that she hadn’t even told anyone where she was going. My cheek muscles hurt by
the time I got home, from the painful smile I kept on my face to deter them from asking me if
anything was wrong. Sometimes I felt as if my sole purpose in life was to avoid that
question. Sandy would sometimes comment that I looked “troubled” when I was feeling
perfectly fine-- I decided my natural facial expression must look “troubled,” and to make it
look normal, I had to contort it in some way or another. Mostly by smiling. But, I had
succeeded in carrying out a pleased appearance. The truth was, in fact, I was feeling quietly
proud of myself for the job I did with the balloon release. I had received two compliments, one from Terry Wisk, the other basketball coach, and one from a nice little old lady, whom I didn’t even know. If they noticed how evenly and majestically the balloons went up, I’m sure everyone else did too. On the way to the Dairy Barn, I had concluded that Rose had to have seen the balloons, no matter where in Estes Park she was. She had to have seen them and known that I had released them without her help. I secretly hoped she and Myrtle Mae had a really terrible time together, and Rose realized that Myrtle Mae was now the kind of person who thought she was too good for everyone else, and felt guilty for ditching me on Cement Square. Truthfully, I was feeling a bit guilty myself, for hating her so much when Dad was giving his speech. I decided to show her, and myself, that I wasn’t that hurt by making Wheaties Drop Cookies.

I used an old recipe of Grandma Stotts. When she died, Dad and Uncle Ron were instructed to split up all of her few possessions, but since she had been living with us when she died, we kept most of it. I don’t remember too much about her. She was quiet and unsmiling with fuzzy white hair that sometimes would stick straight up. Sometimes she called me Rose and Rose, Lily. We laughed to ourselves at the way she freely passed gas and belched. I always suspected that something was wrong with her, that she wasn’t quite right, but I didn’t know what it was. She seemed so sad all the time. When she was in a coma, in her last stages of the cancer, I held her hand for the first time. It was so soft I could barely feel it. But here was her own hand-written recipe, her shaky cursive handwriting under the title Wheaties Drop Cookies spelling out Treats for Young Champions. It struck me as odd that she would bother to write that, but there it was. I’m a young champion, I thought to myself. I found a box of Wheaties that had been sitting in the cupboard for months. I rationalized that you wouldn’t be able to tell that they were stale when you mixed everything up and cooked them.

I had started mixing the ingredients together when Rose ritually stumbled through
the kitchen door in her T-shirt and panties. I wished she would wear some pants. I got embarrassed for her when Dad and Sandy got up. She didn’t seem to care. I thought she could at least shave her bikini line if she insisted on doing that. She sat down at the table and released a long, groany yawn, to say that she was ready to talk.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” I said sarcastically. I found myself being more and more sarcastic around Rose. Trying to be sarcastic, anyway. I wasn’t always sure it worked.

“Hey, Lil.” Rose put her head on the table as if she was going to fall asleep again. Sometimes I sensed that Rose was putting on shows for me, not for any particular reason, just to act a part. I couldn’t imagine her being as exhausted as she was acting, but she carried out her role, breathing steady and loud as if she had already fallen asleep.

“Are you asleep or what?” I asked. I noticed that the Wheaties hadn’t broken up like they were supposed to, but instead just bent in upon themselves, so they were soggy lumps instead of crispy bits. I kept mixing, in hopes that they would somehow evolve and become crispy.

“Noooo-oooo,” said Rose. “Not exactly.” She rolled her head towards me and watched me beat the dough with my spoon. I was trying my mixing technique that I had designed for situations such as that one-- striking the dough with the bottom of the spoon, then grinding it back and forth until the spoon hit the bottom of the bowl. “What are you doing?” Rose asked in her most disapproving voice.

“Grinding up stale Wheaties to make Wheaties Drop Cookies,” I said.

“Why didn’t you grind them up before you put the rest of the shit in there?” Rose asked.

I was getting annoyed with her. I wanted to say Shut up, Rose. You don’t know anything about cooking. But, instead I said, “Well, maybe.”

“You know what you guys need around here?” Rose asked.

“What?” Things Rose would say flew through my mind: new kitchen tile, a mug rack,
fresh Wheaties, a sense of humor.

"You need a cat. Or a dog. Or at least a stupid little hamster or something," Rose said. She seemed inspired by her idea. "Let's get a cat. Dad wouldn't mind, would he?" She was now fully awake.

"Well, I don't know," I said. I had always wanted a cat, but Dad had said that we didn't need the "stinkin' fur" all over our furniture and carpet. "I don't think Dad wants one," I said.

"Do you remember Ruff?" Rose said. When Rose and I were little, we had a dog named Ruff. He was hyper and stinky and jumped on me a lot. Dad eventually drove him to the pound. Nobody cared too much.

"Yeah, kind of. Nobody really bonded with him. I feel kind of bad for the dude," I said. I felt dumb as soon as I realized I called a dog "dude." That had been the word at school that year. Everyone who signed my yearbook called me or themselves "dude."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too. But I was talking to Mom about it, just reminiscing about when she lived with us, and she said that Dad loved Ruff and felt sorry taking him to the pound! Can you imagine Dad being attached to a dog?" Rose said.

"Oh, really?" I said. I didn't see how this could be true. I didn't see why our mom would say that or how Dad would've actually felt that way. Maybe Rose was a liar. I was shaken at this thought, but I couldn't get it out of my head. I thought of everything she'd told me about our mother and about what she, herself, had been doing. She'd hardly said anything. I didn't really know anything about her. It was as if four years didn't exist in her life. But she had changed. She'd changed so much that I could only see the old Rose if I stood back, squinted my mind, and thought of how she was supposed to be now.

"Yeah! I'm going to ask him today," Rose said. I noticed that one of her fake nails was missing. Her hand looked strangely incomplete, as if she was missing an entire finger.

"You know, Lil, you should really call Mom. I know she'd love to hear from you," Rose said,
eating one of my cupcakes.

"She could call me," I said plainly. I hoped that would end it. I had called my mother
a year ago. I got her phone number from Information, and dialed it, almost in a daze. When
she answered, I couldn't say anything. My voice box simply wouldn't vibrate in the correct
way to produce language. I just sat there holding the phone like an idiot. I'm not even sure
if the woman who answered it was my mother. "I'm the kid," I said to Rose. "Parents are
supposed to call the kids." Dad had said this to me a long time ago, when I asked him if I
could call her. Whenever I experienced the slightest hint of curiosity or longing for my
mother, this thought immediately seized and smothered it.

Rose sighed and took a deep breath as if she were about to embark on a serious
emotional voyage. I cringed. My Wheaties were looking worse than ever. I started rolling
them into balls and placing them neatly on the cookie sheet. They might taste like hell, I
reasoned, but at least they would be perfectly round and separate from one another.

"If you think like that, Lil, you'll probably never meet your mother. Not that she
doesn't want to meet you, but she feels weird about calling here. I think she's scared that
Dad will answer, or even Sandy. She knows about Sandy somehow." Rose pulled out a
cigarette and lit it. I couldn't stand the face she made when she lit a cigarette. It was sour
and angry, as if sucking on that cigarette would change everything that went wrong.

"I don't know if I want to meet her, Rose," I said. I said it in a childish way, but I
couldn't help feeling defensive. I couldn't believe Rose was sticking up for a woman that
didn't care enough about us to keep in touch after she left.

"You shouldn't judge her, Lil, if you don't know the facts," Rose said. "Mom's not the
bad guy and Dad the good guy. It's not that simple." I didn't buy it and I tried to let Rose
know that by my facial expression. I put the Wheaties Drop Cookies in the oven and
stared at them for awhile, to make sure nothing went wrong right off the bat.

Rose shifted her weight on her chair and uncrossed and recrossed her legs so that
she faced me completely. The hollow metal chair frame squealed and her bare thigh made sticky peeling noises on the brown plastic covering. She said, “Mom told me this story when I was over there last and I’ve been thinking of it ever since. She was talking about being pregnant with me and how every night, in the middle of the night, she would get up and eat an orange to make sure I had enough vitamins and food.” Rose stared thoughtfully into the plastic faux wood table top. “This is probably the table she sat at.” She ran her incomplete hands over the top of the table in a sickeningly dramatic way. She looked up at me, suddenly, as if she had memorized stage directions to do so, and said, “She probably ate them with you too, Lil. I just thought it was remarkable that she was so careful. I guess that’s why we turned out so good, huh?” Rose gave me a sort of wink that involved her whole face, and settled into a satisfied smile.

When we were little, Rose once said to me, “I think you take after Dad, and I take after Mom. You don’t look like a boy or anything, that’s not what I’m saying. You’re just kind of a girl version of Dad. I have curly hair and am skinny like Mom. So you got all Dad’s genes and I got all Mom’s genes. We probably have some of the same ones too, though.” For years after she said that, when I felt like I hated Dad the most, I imagined his genes clustered inside of me, a hairy, ugly ball pulsing in my innermost region. When I was really mad, the ball would turn red and light up like a flaming fireball, and I felt that Rose had been completely right in her reasoning. When Rose left for California, there was no doubt in my mind. I imagined her genes spread out evenly throughout her body, like the pattern of pink rose buds all over my sheets.

“Yes, or maybe we turned out like this because of our genes,” I said. I was testing her to see if she remembered saying such a thing, or if she would gloss over what she said like it never happened. I was sure she remembered. She remembered everything else. She didn’t say anything, but kept tracing the pseudo wood swirls on the table with her hands, still smiling a distracting smile that seemed out of place and too obvious. I looked at
her for quite a while. She must have sensed that I was staring at her, but I couldn’t help it. I was seized with sudden panic and disbelief that Rose was sitting right in front of me, that she had come from out of nowhere and brought my mother along with her. The longer I looked, the stranger she looked to me. I couldn’t figure out what was so disturbing about her appearance until I thought of the story she had just told me about our mother eating oranges. Rose seemed to almost glow with an orange tint. I looked at her as closely as I could from a distance and seemed to see the round pores of oranges covering her face like skin.

August came to a close with tension in the Gulf getting thicker, and Dad getting more aggressive in his 3-C SUPPORT efforts. “A war is coming,” he told us to fill silences, or hear his own voice. He seemed to stand straighter, his movements more mechanical, as if he, himself, were in training for this war.

I had to go back to school. Rose took me shopping at the mall and helped me pick out a first-day-of-school outfit. We picked a pair of frosted jeans and a ruffled top that Rose called “a peasant blouse.” Soon I found that 9th grade was not too different from 8th grade--same people, same long days, same desire to be home, cooking or watching TV or riding my bike. But I went everyday, and tried not to think too much about it. I put myself on automatic, became a human computer.

That October, Rose got a cat and named him Jose, after San Jose, California, where she had lived for awhile. I asked her what she did there and she told me she worked in a tanning salon called “Maple Tan” and at a grocery store. Before she left, I couldn’t have imagined Rose as becoming anything less than an actress or a pop star. But now she was thinking of applying at the local Wal-Mart in Estes Park, just “to help out with the bills” and
such. I was relieved at the prospect of occasionally having the house to myself.

When Rose asked Dad about getting a pet, all he said was, “We don’t need another goddamn dog stinkin’ up the house like that Ruff. He was about as smart as a doorknob, and stunk to high heaven.” Rose took this as an okay to get a cat. She went through the *Estes Park Globe*’s classifieds, circling free kittens ads. She decided on one that read, “Cute orange tabby kittens. Will lick you to death.” We borrowed Sandy’s car and drove to a small, rotting farm outside of town and picked up Jose, who had boogers encrusted around his nose, and a gummy substance knotted in his fur. Rose cleaned him up, all the while talking in a high, slippery voice, saying embarrassing things. Sandy was pretty excited about Jose, and even brought over cans of tuna to feed him. Dad didn’t say much after his initial proclamation of disgust and annoyance. He would occasionally sniff the air and crinkle his face to show us that Jose was stinkin’ up the place. I’d always wanted a pet, so I was filled with a need to bond with Jose, to get him to recognize me and prefer me over others. So, I would hold on to his squirming body until he gave up and relaxed, and would look in his eyes and try to establish a cosmic connection or understanding. He seemed indifferent as to his choice of humans. He was equally aloof to everyone.

Now that Rose had Jose, she was staying. Maybe she bought Jose so she would have to get a job to earn money to pay for his shots, food, and cat litter. Perhaps she needed a reason to be needed at our house. So she applied at Wal-Mart for the position of Sales Associate, and bought Jose a pink collar studded with rhinestones while she was there. The pink clashed with his orange fur but Rose didn’t seem to notice. She held him up under his arms, close to her face and cooed, “You look *fabulous*, Jose. You are one *sexy* cat.” She got a job in the jewelry department and a bright blue pinafore that shouted, “ASK ME! I’M HERE TO HELP!” Everyday, before she went to work, she rattled and sprayed her hair as high as possible. She became diligent in replacing her shedding nails too. She looked neat and courteous, I thought, if not a bit over eager. She seemed a little
more easy-going and stopped talking about our mother, Dad's temper, and our sisterly relationship. Instead, she’d tell me about her adventures in California and her boyfriend named Scott that she had left there. “What a dickweed,” she’d say about him. It sounded like something she would’ve said before she left, so I loved her for it. Dickweed Scott, we called him.

“You wouldn’t believe Dickweed Scott,” Rose said one afternoon, as she was painting my nails with a new shade of nailpolish, called Tigress, she brought home from work one day. “Okay, get this. One morning, after I spent the night with Dickweed, I woke up and put my pants on-- the ones I wore the day before. Well, I found that all my money was gone from out of my pockets-- like eighty bucks. I figured that he must have taken it, or at best borrowed it or something. So, I go about my day, go to work, come home, whatever, and that night I’m at the bar with my friend Sheila, and he’s there! With another woman, buying her drinks!” She stopped painting my nails, held the nail brush between her two fingers, as if she meant to smoke it, and looked at me, her mouth hanging wide open. “With my money!”

“Oh my God,” I said. “That’s so terrible, I can’t believe it.” I tried to keep my face wide open like hers, my eyebrows stretched way up. I felt sad, though, that a man was spending Rose’s money at bars. I didn’t want to look at her mouth anymore, for fear that it would falter in her sensational telling, realize that what she was saying was sad. “What did you do? Were you okay?” I pictured Rose crying and shaking, holding onto Sheila like she held on to me her first day back.

“Well, you know, I was fine-- I just walked up to him, called him a few choice words, and left.” She didn’t look at me, but started painting my nails again. I didn’t quite believe her story, but I couldn’t figure out why she would lie. It was as if she was speaking in codes, expecting me to understand her.

Dickweed Scott became a joke between us, the epitome of a bad person. That
was the reason I believed Rose’s life was in danger when one Saturday afternoon in mid-November, Dickweed Scott showed up at our door.

I didn’t realize it was Dickweed Scott right away, for I had never seen a picture or even heard a physical description of him. But I imagined that he must be fairly beefy, with a red, scratchy face, and a short army haircut. The guy who showed up at our door was small and angular, his shoulders two impossibly agile, pointed balls that bobbed up and down when he talked. He had dark, feathered hair, grown out to form little awnings jutting out over his ears. He had traces of facial hair scattered in patches across his chin and upper lip, but I couldn’t tell if it was there because of stylistic purpose or ambivalence.

I had been sifting through the neatly stacked piles in my closet, looking for a letter my mother had written me years ago, getting caught up on all the postcards I found that Rose had sent me. There was one with two muscular, greasy men wearing only cowboy chaps and hats standing on the beach-- it read “Howdy Partner”. When I first got it, Sandy stuck it on the fridge so that whenever I went to get something to eat, I would be at eye-level with the two beach cowboys leering at me, their teeth unnaturally white. Rose had written on the back, “Well, wouldn’t I like to meet one of these hunks on the beach? I’ll take the blond one and you can have the dark one.” The dark one was the squatter of the two, who had a large unibrow similar to Dad’s. I was embarrassed that Rose assigned me a “hunk” for Sandy, Dad, and the mail man to read. I shoved it in my closet the first chance I had. By that time, I had memorized what she’d written anyway. “California is AWESOME. I love it. I miss you. You have to come visit me sometime! Love, Rose (Your Favorite Sister)” I faintly suspected that she inserted the sister reminder because she was worried that I may have forgotten her-- she signed all her postcards and few letters with our sisterhood cupped in parentheses. When I wrote her back, I did the same thing. She always wrote emphatically that she missed me and I believed her, but I didn’t understand why she never came back.
I figured something horrible must have happened with Dad, but whenever I asked
him, he would say, "Rose is just like your mother. They need to be where there's parties
and action all the time." But Rose had never really gone to parties or expressed any
interest in doing so. Before she left, she spent most of her time driving around with her
friends, hanging out in Memorial Park at night smoking cigarettes. Once, Dad and I got in the
car to look for her and found her by spotting the cluster of orange lights, moving up and
down, to mouths and down, over and over, like trained fireflies. It was soon after that that
she packed up her Broncos bag and left mysteriously, telling me she was going to visit our
mother. I admired her and secretly cheered her on, imagining her telling our mother off,
calling her names, making her feel guilty for ditching us, and then coming right back home,
more settled and motivated to be truly great in life. That's what I thought.

After Dad and I went camping, I gradually came to realize that Rose would be gone
a long time. I tried to send her psychic messages and real messages through the mail,
telling her that she should come home. But she never acknowledged my requests in her
letters or even acted like it was strange or unexpected that she was not home. She acted
as if leaving for good had been the plan all along. Pretty soon, I began to believe that it
really had been, that I had been confused and misguided in my younger years.

When I first answered the door, the vision of the dark cowboy was present in my
immediate consciousness, so I was a bit startled when I saw a man who looked kind of like
him, minus the bulk and clean shaveness. I opened the door enough to stand in the crack
and waited for him to speak. I could see the sharp bumps of his knuckles rippling back and
forth through the pockets of his tight black jeans. He looked too nervous and interested to
be a salesman or a Jehovah's Witness. I remembered too late the protocol Sandy had
taught me about dealing with strange men-- I was supposed to keep the chain on the door
intact and speak through the small crack until I knew it was safe to expose myself by actually
opening the door. He didn't look too dangerous, though.
“Uh, hi, is Rose here?” he asked with a peculiar accent, his mouth barely moving.

“No, she’s at work,” I said. The man looked taken aback as if he was prepared to hear anything but that. He stood thinking, staring at the drooping eaves of the house, a breeze cleverly lifting the sleeve of his T-shirt to reveal small, white arms sprinkled with solemn moles. I shuddered. The sight of skin abnormalities made my legs and hands tingle. I had nightmares of waking up with the skin of a fish or my own skin turning into long flakes that peeled off my arms and legs like a banana peel.

“Uh, could you possibly tell me where she works?” he said in a condescending tone that made me want to make up a lie. I wasn’t sure I should tell him anyway, but I wanted him to leave and not come back tomorrow and ask the same thing. I reasoned that Rose was safe at Wal-Mart, where they even had their own security guards patrolling the parking lot in duded-up golf carts.

“She works at Wal-Mart.” The man looked no less anxious or relieved.

“Where’s Wal-Mart?” he said.

“Its down Co. Road 25 a mile on your right,” I said. As I spoke the words I had the sinking feeling that I was leading something very evil to Rose. When the man said, “Okay, thanks. In case I miss her, tell her Scott stopped by and wants to see her,” I felt like crying I was so overcome by guilt. As soon as he left, I rushed to the phone book to find Wal-Mart’s number and call Rose to warn her. They paged her over the loudspeaker system several times. Scott must have raced over there, because after several pages, the woman finally got on the phone and told me that on the way to the phone, Rose had been intercepted by a personal visitor and was occupied for the moment. For the entire two hours until Rose came home, I sat on the couch and jigged my leg, envisioning all the possibilities that could come of this visit.
Rose walked through the door, her Wal-Mart pinafore slung over her shoulder, hanging on her crooked finger in the most casual of manners. She flung it over the couch and headed for the fridge, her flats making gravelly sliding noises on the kitchen floor. The house seemed so much dirtier since Rose got there, though Rose herself was not particularly messy. The bathroom sink had splotches of face powder covering it, as if someone was molting. There were more crumbs, more dust, and even more mildew growing in the cracks of the tiles in the bathroom. She never really cleaned anything either. I tried to think of her as a guest when this annoyed me, but I couldn’t help resenting her a little when she ate corndogs in the living room, twirling them about for emphasis as she spoke, as if she were conducting our reactions to what she said.

She didn’t mention Scott, though she knew he had to have stopped at the house first and someone had to have told him where she worked. She grabbed a block of cheese and started sawing off pieces and eating them. She was sawing more than she could eat so she had a pile of uneven cheese chunks in front of her, fat on one end, thinning down to the other end, which you could see through. They reminded me of huge orange teeth. I watched her eat them, examining each one thoughtfully before putting it in her mouth. Before Rose left, she used to take big bites out of the hunk of cheese, leaving her teeth marks all over it.

“So,” I said as nonchalantly as I could without slurring my words, “you got to see Dickweed Scott, huh?” Rose looked at me for the first time since she got home and rolled her eyes at me and kind of laughed, kind of scoffed. I couldn’t tell if she was disgusted with her visit, or with me for bringing it up.

“Pretty unexpected, to say the least,” Rose said. She started chewing her cheese more loudly and with more gusto, like it was made of a delicious tasting rubber. A cloud had suddenly passed over the sun and the kitchen became soft and rounded. The refrigerator
seemed to buzz more shrilly and loudly now than it used to, before Rose came back.

Sometimes I would get to the point where that sound would be my only intense thought, that it would occupy every little cell of my mind. That's how I envisioned it, anyway. Rose's eyes seemed to twinkle, shoot out rays of light into the matte finish of the kitchen-- I briefly wondered if she was about to cry. Before I could ask her if everything was okay, she said, "I just can't get over the fact that he drove all the way from San Jose to tell me he wants me back. It's like from a movie or something. It just doesn't happen in real life, you know?" Her eyes were indeed twinkling, and it made me feel sad. "He drove all those hours in his crappy little Pinto just to tell me he loves me! It's like Pretty Woman or something." Rose was touched by Dickweed Scott's tactics. I couldn't believe he had won her over just like that. After all that he did to her, she was willing to forget it all, because he took a stinkin' road trip to Colorado. I suddenly felt sorry for Rose, that she was so easily won, so easily fooled.

"Rose," I said, my voice dripping with sympathy, "isn't Scott the one who cheated on you and who stole money from your jeans pockets when you were sleeping?" Maybe she'd forgotten in the drama of the afternoon.

"Well, yes. I'm not saying that everything's okay now, Lily. Christ, give me some credit. We're not together now or anything. But I just can't ignore him when he came all this way, you know? I think..." Rose said and went to the fridge once again to get a can of soda, pop it open, sip the foam, and continued, "I think Scott is a sweet guy who has a lot of problems. He doesn't do what he does out of pure malice or bad intent. He does it because he's just kind of messed up in a lot of ways. His dad was this abusive alcoholic-- I do know that much. I don't quite understand the rest, I s'pose, but he's here and he's staying for a few days anyway, so maybe I'll figure it out by the end of his visit, huh?" She looked at me as if she expected me to nod and feel sorry for Dickweed Scott. I must have failed at my efforts to remain expressionless, because Rose kept going.
“He says he wants to take the whole family out to dinner or something. He’ll pay for everything. Sandy too, of course. Since he’s paying, maybe we can avoid the steak house and go somewhere a little more exciting.” I couldn’t think of a single exciting restaurant in Estes Park. “Something a little more ethnic maybe. Like Senor Guadalupe’s or that Chinese place down on Lake Street. We ate quite a bit of Chinese in California.” The only Chinese I’d ever eaten were the egg rolls, fried rice, and fortune cookies I bought at the Hot Wok stand in the mall. I didn’t want to go eat it with Scott, though, and be forced to talk to him and be interested in what he’d say in exchange for the dinner he’d buy. I was sure Dad wouldn’t be too interested in going either, but I didn’t say so to Rose.

“Where is he now?” I said.

“He’s staying at the Thunderbird Motel downtown. They have an indoor pool, if you’re ever up for swimming.” I’d rather have gone swimming in a swamp than in the Thunderbird pool. There was a group of old, incontinent people who lived at the Thunderbird Motel and spent most of the fall and winter in or about the pool. Myrtle Mae and I used to sneak swims in the Thunderbird pool until we learned that it was more poisoned than the Municipal kiddie pool. It had become a joke between us. When coming up with the absolute worst ways to die, we had both named as number one drowning in the Thunderbird Motel pool. “We’re going out for dinner tonight though. Just me and him, this time. We have some things to talk about. Maybe he’ll pay me back, you never know,” Rose said.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said bitterly. “Or maybe he’ll steal some more.” I felt it my duty to remind Rose what she had said about Scott only days earlier. It was as if all of her convictions and efforts at self-preservation had gotten snagged in Scott’s slimy words and gestures. He wouldn’t give them back until he got something from her, used her somehow. Even though I didn’t really know Scott, it was so clear to me what was happening, and Rose’s reasoning was so ridiculous! I felt desperate. My body suddenly became very hot
all over and it felt as if someone was squeezing my head as hard as they could.

"Lily!" Rose cried in exasperation. "Just trust me, okay! I know what I'm doing. Unlike yourself, I've actually had a boyfriend and I know what to do in these situations. I'm not putting myself out there for Scott to trample. You're being completely irrational about this." The sun came out from the cloud and bars of light highlighted certain areas of the kitchen. One struck Jose, who was lying on his back, his back paws spread wide open, rubbing his head on the dirty linoleum. Another struck my hand, which was on the table, making it look like someone else's hand. One hit Rose's face and she squinted violently and turned her chair so the light came from the back of her head, making every strand of hair poking wildly from her head glow. "You're just overreacting, that's all. I appreciate your concern," she said curtly.

"Do you want a Wheaties drop?" I asked. I had to stop talking about Scott and calm Rose down.

"No," Rose said. "I just ate cheese." She laughed at what she had just said and so did I. Maybe I was overreacting. It wasn't like she was moving back to California with the guy. Maybe he was okay, or trying to be okay. Rose knew what she was doing. She was a "self-assured, independent woman of the nineties," as she said to me once when I asked her if she wanted a new boyfriend.

"Alright," I said and went over to the counter to get one for myself. They weren't so bad, really. A little mushy, but who ever said a good cookie had to be crispy?

When Dad got home that evening, it was evident he had had a bad day. His lower jaw jutted out and his sparse, usually unbehaved hair was pressed to his head, indicating he had run his hand over it many times in frustration. I offered to make soup and grilled cheese
sandwiches for dinner. I figured he needed to be buttered up as much as possible before he found out Rose was going on a date with the man who forced her back to Estes Park. When I served him his dinner and Jose curled himself around Dad’s leg (it was joyfully known in our house that Dad was becoming fond of Jose), his jaw had returned to its normal position and he looked a little relaxed, even grateful for his food. He winked and smiled at me, and said, “You’re a sweetheart, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know,” I said and began to eat my own.

“Where’s Rose? Didn’t you make her one?” Dad said. He opened his mouth wide before pouring a spoonful of tomato soup in it. I couldn’t stand to watch Dad eat. His mouth became a huge, terrifying machine that made hollow, resonant noises. I had to concentrate on my own food and the process of chewing and swallowing it.

“She’s in her room,” I said. “I think she’s having dinner with a friend tonight.” This is what Rose told me to say if he asked.

Dad’s eyebrows raised and he waited to swallow his food before he said, “Really? Who is it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Some guy.” He had to find out sooner or later.

He said, “Hmmm,” and kept eating, though his eyebrows remained tight together and his nostrils wide open for the remainder of the meal.

I answered the door when Scott showed up in a button-down denim shirt with a stiff collar, and a bouquet of roses, which already looked a little brown around the edges. Rose came sashaying into the room wearing a tight, faded white dress with a pattern of daisies all over it. Her nipples were showing embarrassingly clear. She laughed a little when she saw him and went in to tell Dad she was leaving. I felt like the dumb little sister watching her sister go off on a date in an Afterschool Special about date rape.

I could hear Dad and Rose talking in the kitchen, Rose saying, “He’s just a friend from California who’s in town,” and Dad saying, “You’d better be back in this house tonight,” and
Rose saying, "Of course I'll be back in this house tonight Dad. Christ." Scott twitched his upper lip at me, which I interpreted to be a smile, or some gesture of acknowledgement. I shrugged my shoulders at him and thought hard of something to say.

I finally came up with, "So how long did it take to drive here from California?" Before he could answer Rose bounded back in the room and he slid his papery little hand around her waist, over all those washed-out daisies stretched to deformity. I noticed she'd painted her fingernails a glittery brown to match the faces of the daisies, and wore dark lipstick to match. I imagined her as one of the cheap, shallow women on the B-movies that I sometimes watched late at night, fascinated with the low quality of the plot and actors, utterly amazed at the dehumanization going on, though at the time I didn't think it was dehumanization. I thought it was just a whole other realm of life going on somewhere else that I had no part of. Rose seemed to have this kind of life now. After she left, I went off to my room, curled up as tight as I could, and said to myself "Oh Rose" over and over until they were just two hollow sounds that began and ended, began and ended with one single movement of my tongue.

The only evidence I had that my mother and dad ever liked each other was a faded square photograph of their wedding, which I hid in my top drawer in a pair of underwear, like contraband material. I seemed to naturally take it out when I was bored or frustrated. It wasn't even much of a picture. Dad stood in a white tux with a baby blue bowtie and cummerbun, looking right at the camera, his face redder than I had ever seen it at any basketball game. He looked almost ridiculous with a head full of hair, done in thick, glistening waves, combed like I would have drawn waves of the ocean. Our mother was looking to the side with her hand up in some kind of gesture, her mouth caught in the movement of
speaking. I had always thought she looked like Cher in this picture, but when I looked at it then, the night of Rose's date, she looked nothing like any movie or pop star that I knew of. She looked normal. Like an old picture of someone's mother getting married. Only she was a mother just by myth, by old lore told to me over and over that I kept as religion. Her hair was over-flowing and dark, held under control by a wreath of flowers. She was wearing a dress that resembled an old lady's nightgown, with no waist and a barrage of lace, the collar dipping in a V, showing her skin that had washed yellow on the old picture. They weren't holding hands, or even touching or looking at each other. They stood side by side like so many pictures of Rose and me, in front of a mountain, or a cave we visited, or in front of Uncle Ron's trailer house, aware of each other only in the way that we were together by necessity, by habit, by means out of our control. Maybe Dad had burned all the romantic pictures in a big fire, or our mother had taken them with her when she left, leaving this one for me to hold as proof that she did exist. "This is my mother," I had told friends who came over to our house when I was little. "She's a vet," I'd say, even though later I found out she was only a veterinarian's assistant, not an actual vet. I had imagined her taking care of sick pets, rescuing homeless ones, putting casts on the broken legs of kittens and puppies. Instead, she was probably just filing things or answering phones, which was a relief to me—the kinder and more caring towards animals I imagined her, the more rejected I felt.

I didn't have any memories of my mother, except for one vague image in my mind that I couldn't distinguish from memory, dream, or something I'd made up somewhere along the way. It was of her holding me up on a trampoline somewhere in a huge, sparkling field of wheat, bouncing me just a little. Since I was turned away from her, I don't remember her face or the way she looked. Just her hands on my waist.

I asked Dad about it once and he only said, "A trampoline? I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know anyone with a trampoline in a wheat field. I have no idea why you'd be in a wheat field. I think you're thinking of something else, Lily." Perhaps I
was. I asked Rose and she told me I could be thinking of the house of our mother’s friend, Linda. She had a farm an hour away from Estes Park, and two kids, so they may very well have had a trampoline. It was a nice image, anyway, and I liked to think it was real.

When I went to bed that night, thinking of my mother and wheat fields and veterinarian clinics in California, Rose hadn’t gotten back yet. I realized that Dickweed Scott had been in Estes Park a whole week now. When I woke up that Saturday morning and crept to her door and cracked it open just a touch to check on her, she still wasn’t home. I made some scrambled eggs and ate them with ketchup, not thinking too much about what Dad would do or say when he would wake up or what Rose did or was doing that moment on her date with Scott. Instead, I looked out the window and wondered what Myrtle Mae was doing. I thought about what I could do that day to get out of the house, what school friend I could call up and coerce into inviting me to her house that day. I eventually decided to go the public library and do some “research”. A couple summers ago, to invent a project for the summer, so I wouldn’t feel so guilty about quitting girl scouts, I decided to do “research” at the library every day for a couple hours. My plan lasted about a week and a half and I still have my findings written up in a notebook under my bed. I had researched tropical fish, photography, and chess strategies (I had just learned how to play chess and I was determined to be the only female chess player on the Check Mates club at school). Today I could research California, or look up articles on Operation Desert Shield and try to figure out exactly what was happening, so I could talk to Dad in his own military language. He would be impressed.

Before I could make my move, I heard Dad lumbering through the house, opening and closing doors, mumbling under his breath. It was times like these when I expected smoke to start pouring from his ears and the whites of his eyes to turn bright red and a fire bell to start going off somewhere in cartoon land. He came into the living room, briefly shooting me with an irritated glance, and settled on the couch, turning on CNN.
Occasionally, he'd pick up a magazine or ashtray, as if he were looking for something under it, and throw it back down, swearing. I thought it best to keep quiet.

"What are you eating?" Dad threw at me behind his back, so that I didn't get the turn of his head to warn me.

"Scrambled eggs," I said.

"Why the hell didn't you make me some?" he asked, and kind of laughed after he said it, as if it were a stupid question.

"You usually don't get up for a couple more hours," I said. I caught myself speaking as if I was scared of him, and I hated myself for it. I sat up straight in my chair, pushed my hair back from my face and bravely waited for what he would say next. But he didn't say anything for a few minutes. "You usually make your own breakfast anyway, don't you?" I said. I don't know what pushed me to say anything else, except some kind of will to not be afraid of him, to make him respect me, to speak to me nicely.

As soon as he turned his head around and I saw his face, I knew I had made a grave mistake. "Listen girly," he said, his lips strong and wild as he said his words, "I don't need your mouth this morning. I have enough to deal with with your sister disobeying me every chance she gets. What the Hell did I ever do to deserve behavior like this from my own daughters? And can't you do something else besides sit on your big ass every single second you're in this house?" After he said it, he looked desperate, genuinely hurt, and a little surprised. He turned back to the TV. I could hear his breathing loudly through his nose, his mouth clamped tight shut. I felt nauseous, like I was going to throw up eggs all over the table. I remembered what Rose said our mother had said about Dad and how angry he got. If she knew that, if she knew he got so mad that he couldn't see straight, that one could barely recognize him, why did she leave us with him? Why did she have us, and pretend that she didn't? I started feeling sorry for myself, imagining myself as a prisoner, a POW as Dad called them, in our gray house, as someone who had nothing to offer but her own
self-defense. I started thinking of everyone who left me, and I couldn’t think of anyone who actually stayed. I felt tears running down the sides of my nose, the edges of my lips, and onto the table. The stupid table where my mother ate oranges to make us so healthy. I felt my whole body contracting so tightly that I couldn’t breathe.

I walked quietly into Rose’s room. I don’t know why I went there instead of my own room, but I lay on her bed and shook so hard that I felt as if I were convulsing, as if I was truly crazy. I imagined my ball of evil genes flaring up, expanding and contracting within me, bouncing off the walls of my insides in anger. I looked around Rose’s room for something to destroy, to tear to pieces. I saw her makeup sitting on top of the dresser and I felt strangely calm. I stopped crying and walked up to the dresser. With the tip of my finger, I started grinding the little sections of eye shadow, blush, and face powder, grinding my finger back and forth, turning the neat little palettes into powder that I then pounded with my fist. I took her lipsticks and pressed their curved tips flat onto the top of the dresser, pushing them into the dresser until they were just a mess of pink and red goop. I mixed it all together with the palms of my hands, working it into the the wood of the dresser and the skin of my hands until it was powdery paste that wouldn’t stick anymore. I couldn’t believe I had just done it. I stared at my hands which were sparkling with blue, red, pink, and flesh colors swirled in upon each other. I felt like I had been fingerpainting, only the paint was glitery and pastel and wouldn’t stick to paper; only I wasn’t supposed to be finger-painting, the finger-painting clearly showed I was crazy. I cleaned the mess up quietly and quickly, threw away the empty makeup containers, and went to the library. I read about Colorado agriculture, mainly wheat production, only to find it was almost nonexistent.

Jose, as if in protest of Rose’s bad behavior, developed some kind of disease or
nervous disorder that caused his hair to start falling out. I felt so sad when I saw huge orange hairballs placed in unlikely spots throughout the house, as if Jose meant to leave them there as little surprises for us to find. There was one sitting on a burner of the stove, one on the bath matt that ringed the base of the toilet, one on my pillow, and one in the window sill. In addition to the neat, self-contained balls, he left hair all over the carpets, bedspreads, linoleum, and every surface he traversed. We knew it was normal for cats to shed hair, so we weren't too concerned until we noticed that Jose was developing pink bald spots, ruffled with goose bumps. I held him a lot and tried to console him, but he acted as if he didn't notice that all his hair was falling out, that it was perfectly normal to have large gaping holes in his fur.

Rose had finally returned sometime the day after her date, and nobody had said much of anything about it. Dad was out with Sandy somewhere, celebrating a promotion that Sandy received. She was now the Office Manager of the dental clinic where she worked. I hadn't said much to Rose, nervous that she would discover that her make-up was missing or find the bent, empty containers in the trash, even though I had tried to bury them as deep as I could, and throw a fit, demanding to know what happened. I thought of saying I lost them, but where would I lose her entire collection of make-up? Fortunately, she didn't even mention the fact that her make-up was missing. Maybe she thought Dad had taken it away in punishment or something.

The next few days, I caught glimpses of Scott, lurking outside the front door, waiting for Rose, or sitting in the driveway in his puttering Pinto with a green racing stripe painted on it. Rose was always in a hurry, always talking to herself, giving me sideways smiles as she ran out the door, or excuses why she couldn't talk for long. I was truly surprised when she mentioned dinner at Senor Guadalupe's again, this time to Dad, Sandy, and me over dinner one night.

"He's willing to pay for everything, he said, and you can get whatever you want, of
course,” Rose said. Sandy and I had made spaghetti that night, and Rose was cutting hers into manageable pieces with the edge of her fork. Who ever cut spaghetti up?

Dad was acting as if the answer to everything lay in his plate of spaghetti, intently watching each twisting fork full closely from the plate to his mouth, his eyes becoming wide and surprised as his mouth closed in around it. He paused to say, “I just don’t understand, Rose, you know?” He was taking on his nonchalant voice, as if what Rose was doing didn’t really matter, that whatever he said, his spaghetti was the most important issue at hand. Rose made it worse by caring too much.

“What don’t you get?” Rose said, putting her fork down, her mouth held slightly open to show her dismay, her protest at Dad’s nonchalance.

“I don’t get,” said Dad, as he took another bite that was especially big and unruly, causing him to control his movements more carefully and consciously, “I don’t get, why all of a sudden, I’m supposed to think of Scott as your boyfriend or fiancé or something, when the whole time you’ve been home you’ve been shooting things out the side of your mouth about what a complete asshole he is and how he’s the scum of the earth.” As he spoke, his words became more swaggering, more lilting, as if he had forgot completely the substance of what he was saying, as if he wanted to hear himself speak, and wanted us to marvel at his power over language. I hated it when he spoke like that. I always knew that at times like this there was no reasoning with him. But I also knew that that’s exactly what Rose was determined to do.

“Well, I know, and I never really explained the whole situation to you. I s’pose it’s pretty confusing if you just see everything and take it at face value,” Rose said. She had bought new make-up and some new clothes, now that she had a pay check coming in and no bills to pay. Now her make-up was all sweet pinks and beiges, sugary, sparkling shades that made her face look softer, rounder, more likeable.

“Scott and I don’t have a relationship relationship. We really just have a friendship.
I've talked to him about everything he's done to me and how much he hurt me, and how I can never really forgive him for all that. That has nothing to do with now, though. He's here because he felt guilty, because he does really care about me, in some way-- it might be a way that's hard for other people to see, maybe, but I know he does, and that's all that matters right?" Rose stopped and looked at each of us for a few seconds to make sure we were paying close attention. We were all eating our spaghetti, and that frustrated her-- it frustrated her that her words didn't move us to put down our forks and eat up her words instead. I tried my hardest not to look sympathetic, to play Dad's game and pretend I wasn't really listening. Rose became more and more desperate to perform for us, to explain herself in the most dramatic way possible.

"Scott really wants to meet you all. I've always talked about you and he's excited to be able to meet you finally." I didn't think Scott was capable of excitement. Only Sandy looked halfway interested, eating her spaghetti, but keeping her eyes pointed towards Rose, encouraging Rose to persist. "It's not like either of us wants you to do anything but eat dinner with us one night. Just one little night of your entire lives you spend with us," Rose said. "That's it," she added for emphasis, holding her hands up, her fingers spread apart, all curved gracefully upwards, completely in synch with one another. I was convinced that my hands would never look graceful or womanly, like Rose's. They were square and short, just like they were when we were little and Rose warned me I might be a dwarf. The only dwarves I knew of at the time were the Seven Dwarves, and I didn't know how that could possibly happen. But I did start hating my hands, and even tried painting my nails for awhile to make them look more acceptable. I eventually gave up and settled for the mere longing for slender, effortless hands that said something about your personality, that gave people a glimpse of your inner beauty. I wanted hands that could mesmerize people by being raised, as Rose's did to me then.

"That's it, you say. Well, that's it, Rose. That's exactly it," Dad said. Nobody knew
what he was talking about, including himself probably, but they were words packed with
importance and that's all that mattered. Rose glared at him, her face held in a way that made
her skin full of wrinkles, imperfections, scars, and mysterious indentations. I could see her
pink eyeshadow clustered in the wrinkles of her eyelids, her pink lipstick gathered in the
cracks of her lips, magnifying them in the revealing light of the breakfast nook. The breakfast
nook was really just the corner of the kitchen with the table in it, the corner with the windows
covered with butter yellow curtains, the light squeezing through them in sickly, tired shades.
It felt like morning all day long in the breakfast nook.

"You can do whatever you want," Rose said, making a lot of noise with her
silverware, her eyes flitting across the table and back, as if she were looking for something.
She got upset in the same way that I got upset as an obsessed teenage stalker of Conrad
Birdie in the musical last spring. When I found out I couldn't see Conrad Birdie, my lower
jaw stuck out in disappointment and my blinking eyes sprinkled the stage with disbelief and
hurt. Only Rose's neck and knuckles were flushed red and her ears twitched periodically.
Maybe people really reacted like that-- maybe Rose was completely sincere.

We did go to dinner with Scott and Rose a couple days later. We had to wait thirty
minutes to get a table at Senor Guadalupe's, so everyone got a margarita at the bar
except for me, who got a flat Sprite with a wrinkled lime floating in it. Scott appeared to
have gotten a personality make-over before dinner. He was conversing attentively with
Dad about the build-up in the Gulf, basketball, 3-C SUPORT, and the granite business.
Scott worked in a granite plant in California, where he cut hunks of granite into gravestones
and tables. Dad was intimidating and only mildly interested in what Scott was saying. He
occasionally threw jokes to us as one would throw morsels of food to a pack of hungry
dogs. Scott talked to Sandy about the dental industry and, in particular, the managing of
dental offices. Sandy had a pastey smile on all through the margaritas, nodding
enthusiastically at Scott and laughing loudly at Dad's jokes.

Scott told a couple too: "A horse walks into a bar and the bartender asks, 'Why the
long face?'" Sandy loved that one. On her third margarita, she started making her own
jokes, most of which were terribly unfunny.

She even started doing impressions of people who came into her dental office,
holding her face, loosely resembling someone in pain, and growling, "Ah bit a appuh seed
and my toof is fawing out!" Scott and Rose laughed at her and exchanged secret looks
when her face was taken in by the wide swoop of the margarita glass being tipped up. I
mostly stared into my Sprite, stabbing my lime wedge with my straw, waiting for a table to
open and food to come to divert the attention away from embarassing conversation. Rose
tried to shoot me a secret glance that I once would have found delicious in its conspiratal
edge, but now I found just plain mean. It was as if she brought us here to make fun of us, to
exploit us, to get Sandy nice and drunk and laugh at her when she wasn't looking. Scott
ignored me. Every so often, Rose would make a point of asking me something or making a
comment on the decorations, atmosphere, or manners of the bartender. I said as little as
possible.

We finally got a table, and soon had baskets full of nacho chips and salsa. For a few
minutes it seemed as if all conversation had been exhausted at the bar, and even Sandy
seemed to sober up into an awkward silence. Dad ate chips in a rhythmic fashion, steadily
feeding his mouth a new chip as soon as the last was swallowed. Rose lapsed into an
uneasy zoning state, where she stared emptily at the colorful fans hanging on the wall over
Dad's, Sandy's, and my head. Scott was busy looking interested in all the decorations,
slowly scanning the room, his upper lip ambiguously twitching. Frolicking Mexican music

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was pumped throughout the restaurant, and for a short time it seemed impossible to speak over it, so everyone sat in loaded silence, the tension dripping off every pinata, stringless guitar, and brightly colored skirt hanging precariously from the walls. It was a relief when our somber, jaded waitress came to take our order. Dad asked if they could possibly turn down the music and the waitress replied that the volume was standardized and could not be changed without "extensive effort that would require a fair amount of time not available to the employees at the moment." After she left, Dad complained that she didn't even bother to apologize and that her tip would suffer.

"Oh, don't worry about the tip, Roger," Scott said.

Without looking up, Dad said, "I'm not worried, Scott." Dad was wearing his school pants and a light blue button-up shirt that he'd had for so many years that his stomach pressed up to the front, creating a pink glow around his middle, as if it desperately wanted out. His hair was combed back with gel. I thought of his hair in his wedding picture and how his hair now was that same hair, only thinner, sparser, more exhausted. I looked at Sandy and tried to imagine what she had looked like in the seventies. Probably the same with longer hair and a less affected voice. I couldn't imagine her skin without wrinkles-- she would look unnatural and freakish with smooth, tight skin, I reasoned. That night she was wearing a tubular leather skirt that made me think of pigs in a blanket, whatever those were, and a flowing white blouse with traces of flesh colored make-up on the collar. I thought right then of the high degree to which Sandy was flawed. But that's what I liked about her. She was so obviously mistaken about so many things: fashion, humor, make-up, appropriateness, familial relationships. Dad never seemed to mind too much, and even seemed to like her for it, too. He called her "Sugar Cheeks" and wrapped his arm around her waist, kissing the back of her neck, making loud sucking noises that made her laugh and double over his arm like I used to when I was four. After the age of eleven or so, he avoided touching me on any regions except my head and arms. When I watched Dad and Sandy cuddle and flirt, I
didn't think of my mother, whom I never really remembered being with Dad; I thought of Rose and me playing with him, jumping on him, burying our faces in the warm hair on his chest that smelled like the most secret, lovely smell I knew, putting our ears up to different parts of his body and listening to them work. I thought of doing that now and how different he would smell and how different his body would sound.

Rose snapped out of her zone and a flash of panic took over her face as she realized the state of the situation. “So is there any news about the Gulf lately, Dad? Or those two Estes guys over there now?”

Dad put his half eaten chip back into the basket and cleared his throat. “Just the same kind of aggression on Saddam’s part. He’s backing us into a corner. He’s pushing us to declare an all-out bombing, and frankly, I don’t know how we’re going to avoid that now. There’s a lot at stake. And I even heard that Iraqi soldiers are voluntarily lining up at American encampments for food and protection from the bastard. He doesn’t even take care of his own men!” He looked right at Rose when he spoke. When he spoke to Scott, he avoided eye contact, and instead paid all his attention to his forehead, chin, hair, and ears.

Scott gasped at Dad’s words and shook his head as if he couldn’t believe Saddam would do such a thing. He said, equally impassioned, “I hope to God they don’t have a source of chemical warfare. You wouldn’t think so, but I wouldn’t put anything past them.” I’d heard Rose say almost the exact same thing a couple days ago. I wondered whose thought it originally was.

“I just don’t understand why someone doesn’t assassinate Saddam Hussein,” I said. “It would basically solve everything.” I’d wanted to say this for a long time. Scott’s already-used thought gave me the confidence to say it. Everyone turned to look at me, a bit surprised.

Rose laughed emptily towards me, then Scott, then said, “That certainly would help us out a lot, but I think there are international rules and laws against that kind of thing.”
secretly felt a bit disappointed—there was some part of me that believed I might be the first to think of it, or that it would be something to seriously consider.

"Jesus," Dad said, "If they're not going to observe international laws, why should we?" I wanted to shout, "Yeah!" at Rose for laughing, but I settled for smiling as smugly as I could. The 3-C SUPORT Chairman was on my side.

"We observe them, Roger, because it's our moral obligation. It's something we do for our own integrity, not theirs," Sandy said. Dad usually liked it when Sandy challenged him; he usually made a whooping noise to tease her, and shot back his response in a tone that grossly mocked her, making her more serious and passionate about whatever she had said. This time, Dad looked genuinely annoyed and defeated. He just let out a "Tsssh," and shook his head, as if we were all idiots. He picked up his half-eaten chip and finished it, wiping the corners of his mouth with his forefinger and thumb, then wiping his wide, surprisingly short hands on his gray pants. Scott said something unmemorable about the brave troops and Dad tiredly nodded his head, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"So, how did you two meet anyway?" Sandy said, in a painfully blatant attempt to change the topic. Rose and Scott both stared into the empty plastic basket that once held chips for help, but realized that one of them had to say something.

"Well," Rose said, "we actually met in a bar in San Jose. I was with some friends who knew some of his friends, so we all just hooked up that night and Scott and I hit it off." Rose paused and leaned back in her chair and yawned, stretching her ever-flowing hands to the ceiling, smiling at Scott throughout the duration of the yawn. She looked nice tonight. She wore a dress that wasn't as clingy as her normal wardrobe. The fabric moved in a different way than she moved, which became her well. Her hair was french-braided, with tufts breaking free from the braid here and there and sticking straight out like the little pink pom-poms we used to attach to our hair. Her make-up was more subtle, more like
shadows than florescent lights, and she was in control of her smile, her eyes, and her words. It occurred to me that this would have been like the Rose I had always expected would turn out. She looked like the confident independent woman that appeared in pantyhouse ads or one of the shiney college kids who came to the junior high to give us the occassional French or Spanish lessons, since our school couldn't afford a language program, but strove to Let the World Be Our Oyster, as this year's action slogan read. I had stayed after school for every lesson available, mouthing in unison with the teachers, Bonjour mon ami. Ca va? Ca va bien. That's all I knew. That and Merci beaucoup mademoiselle. Rose took French in highschool, and used to call me names in French, then laugh at me when I tried to call her them back. For the first time since she'd been back, I could picture her speaking French, gazing off the highest platform of the Eiffel Tower, and lounging at Parisian cafes, tossing her french braid behind her back before she daintily bit into a croissant. I could see her impressing people, making people listen to her, her pink mouth commanding attention just by the way it moved around her teeth, by the way it revealed her inner beauty. I couldn't see her with Scott, though. He cramp her style. But here they were, quite together, talking about how they met in a bar in California.

"That's sort of how your dad and I met," Sandy said. "Not in a bar, though-- ten years ago I swore that I would never date another man I met at the bar and thank God I stuck to it," Sandy laughed as if she expected everyone to identify with her. "But we did meet through mutual friends. Actually, what happened was, my good friend Tina was briefly, and I mean very briefly, dating your uncle Ron. I think she's the last one he suckered into buying him dinner all the time." Dad grunted at this, in a failed attempt to laugh. Uncle Ron had always been our family joke. He was bordering on obesity, always unemployed, and lived in a decrepit trailer house on the outskirts of town. His life uniform was a faded black sweat suit with old high-top sneakers that were literally falling apart. When I was little, I hung out at Uncle Ron's sometimes, and he grilled burgers and hotdogs in his backyard and
taught me magic tricks. As I got older, and Uncle Ron became less and less functional as a citizen of the USA, Dad didn't really want me going over there anymore, so we had to wait for Ron to come to us, which turned out to be fairly often. Sometimes he brought me novelty candy, like Pez dispensers, or bubble gum shaped like dollar bills, or plastic, purple tongues full of sour, powerful candy. I liked him for all the reasons that Sandy didn't—he was easy-going, low-key, and he didn't really care about what he ate, as long as it tasted good. He wasn't particularly unhappy—just disrespected.

"Uncle Ron is a children's magician, who rarely gets work," Rose told Scott, as if that said everything about Uncle Ron's problems. "I remember when Lily wrote me in one of her letters about you two getting together. At that point, I never thought Dad would date anyone ever again. She was really mysterious about it—she wrote something like, 'Dad has a girlfriend now and her name is Sandy' and that was it! I knew that Mom would probably start dating again, because...well, it's her nature I s'pose, but you're different, Dad." Dad opened his mouth to change the subject, but Rose slid in, "But I'm so happy for you. Really, I think it's great and so does Lily." I resented the way Rose casually talked about our mother as if we all knew her and "her nature" and the way she just couldn't stay single too long, as if she hadn't done anything wrong. Rose was showing off, but I didn't know why. Why would she want to compete with me, who had no chance of even talking to our mother, stranded with Dad and Sandy in Estes Park?

"So how long are you staying, Scott?" Dad said, as if it was the logical question to follow Rose's comments.

"Mmmm, well, I'm not quite sure actually. It's kind of up to Rose," said Scott, who crossed his arms across his chest and managed to flip his front ridge of hair up over the rest with one sharp, animal-like movement of his head. A horse walks into a bar.

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you all about that," said Rose. Sandy and Dad sat up a little straighter in their chairs, and I slouched a little lower. We all knew what was coming.
Scott and Rose brought us here to lube us up with some enchiladas for the big news. Scott was moving in with us. “I decided to give Mom a call last night. I’d been thinking about her ever since I got here. When I left San Jose, she was having some problems. She was working through them, so I wasn’t too worried at the time, but when I talked to her last night, she just sounded so... I don’t know...” Rose’s eyes grew big and her hands fluttered through the air, digging for a word, “...scared. She sounded scared. And she told me she wants me to come home-- to California. That home. This is home too, but I meant my San Jose home.” Her San Jose home: 409 Agling Street NW. I had written this home many times, in sentences that read like an instruction manual. *I am taking swimming lessons. I can’t backstroke. But I can breaststroke. Dad’s team is winning. He is real proud of everyone.* I mostly hated writing them, condensing my life in terms of school, Dad, and the things I do for fun. But I wrote Rose faithfully for all four years that she was missing. Every month or so, I’d write her on pink paper with ballerinas in the corners or with flower pots of sweet little rosies at top and center. Then I would add stickers and ink stamps on the envelopes with meaningless phrases like, “You’re my sweetheart!” and “I miss you like crazy!”. I would send these away and wait. Then, different letters (mostly post-cards) would appear in the mailbox to “(My Sister)”, candied with their own goofy drawings and brightly colored ink that was hard to read. These letters usually read like Harlequin romance novels with grammatical errors all over the place. But she always told me she missed me and that she thought about me all the time. When I hated Dad or Estes Park for whatever reason, I would think of Rose or my mother as my savior, who were waiting in the wings to jump out and save me when I needed to be saved. Now I found out that one was “scared” and one was leaving for the second time. Nobody wanted to save me. Nobody felt sorry for anything. This is exactly what they intended to happen.

“What is she scared of?” I said. I pictured my mother, as she existed in her leftover wedding photo, huddled in a corner, rocking back and forth, muttering things under her
breath. I imagined her in bed under covers, her legs pulled as straight and unbending as possible, careful not to move a tiny bit, hoping that utter stillness would solve everything.

“She’s scared of being alone,” Rose said, her eyes blinking so emphatically that I could make out traces of pink dust suspended in the air between her eyes and the table, winking in the red glow of the restaurant. Dad seemed to be staring at it, too, his mouth closed tightly, his nostrils pulsing, as if breathing came with difficulty now that he knew that Rose was leaving and that our mother was still in California, still the same, or maybe completely different. I had no idea.

I wanted to yell out a variety of things: “It’s her own fault!” or “Big fucking deal!” or “She deserves it and so do you!” But I didn’t. I surprised myself by saying, “That’s too bad.” It was as if my mouth moved on its own, completely separate from my thoughts or my will. Input A, Output B. It was really quite amazing.

That night, I decided to call my mother. I had no intentions of starting a relationship with her, or getting her to invite me out to California with Rose; I was just curious. I wanted to hear her voice, to see if it was familiar, hear the way she said her words, and what words she chose to say. I just wanted to talk to her for a few minutes, to get it all over with at once. Rose was happy to give me her phone number. “She’s going to be soooo-oh-oh happy to hear from you, Lily!” she said. And I thought maybe she would be. Maybe if things went well she would tell me why she was scared and I could comfort her and empathize with her, unlike Rose, who would listen with her eyelashes constantly flickering, her tongue making distracting, pseudo-sympathetic clicking sounds at the insultingly wrong time. Then she would realize that she and I are not all that different, that I’m not just like Dad and Rose just like her-- how stupid she’d feel. How regretful.
I dialed each number, placing my finger squarely and solidly on each button, making the tones sound a bit too long, just until they wavered, before I took my finger off and moved to the next. I remembered calling her a few years ago, when I couldn’t say anything, and thought of how the numbers sounded then-- like a long, carefully orchestrated processional, rising in intensity. Perhaps that’s what made her voice unapproachable-- it was too anticlimactic; there was nothing I could say. I wondered what I’d say now, and everything that I’d previously thought of left my mind as soon as the last tone ended and the first ring set in. I grasped for words that sounded logical in my head-- I needed them to hover perfectly between eagerness and indifference, desperation and flipness. She answered.

“Hello.” It wasn’t a question.

“Hi, may I speak to Renee?” My voice was leaning on the desperate side, so I adjusted mentally.

“Speaking,” my mother said. She sounded put out and impatient. Not at all scared.

“This is Lily,” I said.

“What?”

“Lily Stotts.” This was where I was supposed to say Rose gave me your number and I just thought I’d give you a ring and say hey. Just check in and see how you are. This is where my voice was supposed to sound mature and in control, my speech breezily pleasant and appealing. But, as easy as they sounded before I dialed the numbers, I couldn’t say the words. Panic seized me. What the hell was I doing? She didn’t even know who I was! I didn’t really know who she was either for that matter. Her voice could have been absolutely anyone’s.

“Oh my God,” she said, the three words progressively fainter, as if she had to hold the phone away from her face, she was so shocked I was on it. “Oh my God, Lily!” she said. “How are you doing?” With these words, her surprise seemed to already have
faded. They were relatively level, smooth, meaningless.

"I'm good," I said. "I'm doing good, you know." She doesn't know, I realized. She doesn't know anything. "Rose is here." I thought I'd mention Rose, just to let her know I was for real.

"Yes, I heard actually. She called me last night from Estes Park. It's hard to believe she's back there. It just seems like a weird dream being back there." She spoke as if she didn't realize that I was there--that I'd been there all along. She seemed to inhale slowly as if she was nervous or gearing up to say something life-changing. Then I realized it was the sound of smoking a cigarette. "Wow, Lily, this is unbelievable," she said. Her voice sounded higher and more shaky than I had expected--almost like an old lady's, a woman who has aged too quickly, like Myrtle Mae's mother. Mrs. Munroe was only fifty, but she wore creased polyester pants and satiny button-down blouses with distracting paisley and floral prints on them. She walked a little too carefully and looked a little too worried for her age. She dyed her hair a glaring black.

"Well, I'd always meant to call you and just kind of...introduce myself." I kind of laughed here, as if an introduction was a ridiculous concept, a dumb joke. "Then Rose was saying that you weren't feeling really well, so I thought I'd call and let you know I was thinking about you." I felt uneasy, even guilty saying these words, as if I were betraying Dad or some part of myself, acting as if I cared so much about her when maybe I really hated her. She was quiet for a few seconds, except for her deliberate, vacuumous breathing. I felt angry all of a sudden, as if she was making fun of me, secretly laughing at me as Rose and Scott had done at Sandy. My face muscles tensed up so that I could feel the expression on my face as if it were imposed upon me, contorted and ugly. Desperation had sucked me in and I knew it would be hard to pull myself back out. "Hello?" I said. I would make her speak instead.

"Yeah, I'm here," she said. I heard the soft pop of her lips off her cigarette. She
must have been smoking it as if all her words came from inside that cigarette. “You have to tell me about yourself. I always read the letters you sent to Rose-- I hope you don’t mind--so I have an idea of what you’ve been doing all these years.” It struck me that I didn’t really want to talk to her anymore. I thought about just hanging up the phone, perhaps in the middle of one of my own sentences so it would appear as if we’d been disconnected somehow.

“Well, I’m going to school,” I said. “I just started my freshman year about a month or so ago-- well, I guess a month a half now. So I’m at the high school.”

“That’s what Rose said! She says you’re a good student-- you sure don’t get that from me,” she said. Though she spoke in staccato syllables, she sounded vaguely disinterested and patronizing. “What do you want to do when you get older-- what kind of subjects are you interested in?” I pictured her reciting questions adults ask every child. What’s your favorite color?

“I have to go,” I said.

She was quiet. She even stopped smoking. The cordless phone had started picking up random signals, so that I could hear phrases of a man and woman talking. It sounded like an argument. “I have so many things I’d like to say to you sometime, Lily. It’s not what you think,” she said. I felt my face relax and I could feel the bottom of my stomach quivering in anticipation of words that I’d waited my whole life to hear-- these words were going to change everything.

“What’s not?” I said.

“Me, I guess. I’m not what you think. I’m not what your father says I am.” I tried to think of everything that Dad said she was: foolish, messed-up, wild, dumb.

“Dad doesn’t say you’re anything,” I said.

“Your father has a lot of hateful feelings where I’m concerned and I know that,” she said. She spoke as if she knew her words well, as if she’d broken the news to several
daughters already. "I don't think its right for me to call you there."

"Okay, bye," I said. My eyes were throbbing and the corners of my mouth pulled back in order to let tears go.

"Lily, please don't be upset," she said.

"Okay, bye," I said. I hung up the phone.

That night I lay heavily in my bed, my arms and legs as straight and numb as possible. The letters of the word MOTHER stood out in my head as if each was propped on four curled legs, plated in metal. They were like Sesame Street props, those letters. That was my MOTHER. I spoke to my MOTHER. I kept thinking of our conversation, her voice, the texture of her sentences, and realized I had no idea what she was thinking the whole time. I could have been talking to someone reading a script. I was just thankful that she didn't see my face pull back, tighten up, fall in upon itself.

Those letters stood with such vengeance the whole night and for days after. They still stand there.

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The next day, after school, I vacuumed the entire house, sucking up even more of Jose's fur. I thought he must be growing more at a constant rate to be shedding this much and not be completely bald. His bald spots did seem to be getting wider and more painful to look at. I thought of emptying the vacuum bag when I was done and doing some kind of art project with all the loose fur-- this is the kind of thought I would have had five years ago, but still crept into my consciousness to disgust me with my own weird tendency to save everything and then use it again. When I was little, I had decided to start a club that packed and stored snow to melt and use as water in case of an emergency. No matter how many times Dad had told me that it was the most "goddamn stupid game" I could ever think up, I
thought perhaps it might be useful someday. Just as someone might like to look at a picture of a cat plastered with authentic cat fur that I wisely salvaged from the vacuum cleaner bag.

When I was done, I decided to reorganize the pots and pans in the kitchen so that each cupboard had its own thematic belongings. Maybe Dad was right-- maybe I watched too much TV, sat around the house too much, ate too much junk food. I turned on the pop radio station and set out to make a plan of action for the pots and pans of the kitchen. The Operation Desert Shield song was on. The radio station had made a remix entitled “Freedom” with George Bush’s voice repeating the word “freedom” over and over, with some other sounds of guns and babies crying in the background. I wasn’t quite sure what its message was supposed to be, but I did realize that I should probably take a more active stance in “Gulf-Support,” as Dad called it. Maybe I could start a 3-C SUPPORT chapter at Estes High. I wouldn’t really know what to do, though. Maybe I should just read some read some articles and take some notes.

I sat down at the table with a pen and piece of notebook paper and made columns representing the different cabinets, and started categorizing the pots and pans according to their function. I looked out the window and saw Myrtle Mae getting out of Ryan’s car and walking slowly up to her house. Her hair was wet and sticking to her neck, and there were two wet spots on her purple T-shirt, on the top of each of her breasts where her hair must have laid for awhile. I figured the wind must have been turning it to icicles, but she didn’t appear to care. She had on bright red jeans that were rolled and pinned at the ankles, with a black belt that had a silver buckle shaped like a heart. Her eyes were ringed in black make-up. She didn’t turn to wave at Ryan, who still sat in his car, watching her walk up the sidewalk to her house. She climbed the stairs of the porch and stood facing the door, her hands curled into pink fists that looked like carnations from where I sat. Ryan drove off and she turned around and sat down on the first step, her arms bending outward behind her,
two arches holding her at a 45 degree angle to the porch. She peeled the hair off her neck and crossed her legs down the edges of the splintering steps, so that it looked like it hurt, the sharp edges of three steps stabbing her skin. A couple cars drove by and she followed each the length of the street with her eyes, her bottom lip tucked under her top teeth. She looked like the old Myrtle Mae, the one that sat on her porch eating grape popsicles, her mouth and fingers turning a shocking dark violet. She looked like the Myrtle Mae I could talk to, to whom I could propose an idea about packing and storing snow, who would ride bikes to the Dairy Barn with me and Rose. She looked like the Myrtle Mae whose whispy smile would dimple and pucker her whole face, like the smiles of kids on vitamin commercials. But now she looked sad--resentful at sitting on her porch by herself in chilly November wind. It had gotten bitterly cold the last few days, making me stay indoors as much as possible--Rose had even been giving me rides to school in Dad's car. But Myrtle Mae stretched on her porch as if it was July. I considered trying to talk to her. After all, she had talked to Rose at the parade, and it didn't seem like she had too many girlfriends. Maybe since Ryan was gone, she would act normally, like she knew who I was. If I talked to her then, right to her face, standing at the foot of the porch, she would have to talk to me. There would be no getting out of it, no pretending that she didn't see or recognize me. I'm not sure why I wanted to talk to her. Maybe I felt there was something to resolve between us, to point out that we were actually friends at one point, that she liked me before junior high started. Maybe I didn't really want to organize the pots and pans in our kitchen. Maybe I just wanted to talk to someone to rinse out the residue my mother had left in my immediate memory. Maybe I was willing to do anything to feel better, to distract myself, to change the way I thought about people.

I slipped on my sneakers without tying them, and walked slowly but steadily towards Myrtle Mae's yard, the brown, crunchy grass tickling my bare ankles, the sun feeling surprisingly sweet on the top of my head and shoulders, though the wind whipped my hair
in my face, making it stick to my mouth. Myrtle Mae turned to look at me walking towards her and drew her legs up in front her and leaned forward into them, a startling physical contraction for me to witness. I looked down and watched the grass giving way just before my shoe finally squashed it, until I was just feet in front of her. I looked up at her face. She was squinting her eyes against the wind or sun and her hair looked shiny, almost ethereal against the chipping gray paint behind and under her. She seemed to be squinting at me, at the fact that I was right there in front of her. She ran her hands over her thighs, back and forth, as if she was wiping them off, getting ready to plunge them into something very thick and slippery.

Before I could say anything, she said, “Oh, hey,” as if it was completely normal that I had walked in her yard and stood awkwardly in front of her, my arms crossed over my chest to keep them from twitching or hanging hazardously at my side, capable of doing anything when I wasn’t paying attention.

“Hi,” I said, my voice unintentionally dipping upwards in inappropriate enthusiasm. “What’s up?” I said. Wassup? we used to write to each other in notes, sometimes with an arrow pointing up and two or three question marks for attitude.

Myrtle Mae sighed and said, “Oh, not much. I’m probably in trouble, actually. I stayed at Ryan’s last night, when I wasn’t supposed to. Mom’s probably sitting in her chair in the living room, still waiting for me to walk in so she can bitch me out.” She spoke softly. I was almost lulled by the way her words came out of her mouth as if they could barely make it off her tongue. Even the word “bitch” was memorable in its disarming softness.

I didn’t know what to say to this. I didn’t know anything about staying at boys’ houses all night or staying out all night at all, for that matter. “Oh,” I said. “Did you go to school?”

Myrtle Mae was staring into a tree, her eyes narrowed as if she was watching something specifically, but then they relaxed to normal and skittered all around me, her legs
stretched back out to full length. “Nah,” she said.

I thought about turning around and walking back to my house when she said, “So how long is Rose staying anyway? When I talked to her last, she was thinking about taking off any day.” I felt my face go hot and tingly at the fact that Rose had told Myrtle Mae things she hadn’t told me, but I pulled it together to answer, most knowingly, “Actually, she’s packing right now. Her old boyfriend drove here to whisk her back to California,” I said.

“Oh, I was wondering who that guy was. I figured it was something like that,” Myrtle Mae said. Every minute or so we happened to make eye-contact that seemed to trigger a loud buzzer, or an emergency horn like the one Sandy carried around in her purse that I misguided set off one time to hear what it sounded like. For as soon as we made eye contact, we looked away, embarrassed, maybe guilty. I couldn’t tell if she thought it overly strange that I had come over, or if she was a bit relieved. I marvelled at my complete inability to understand people, to have to create their reactions in my head because I couldn’t sense any real ones.

“Well, good luck with your mom,” I said. I thought of telling Myrtle Mae to tell her mom “hi” for me, but it might insult her, since it was her mom who was keeping her on the porch.

“Yeah thanks,” she said. “Good luck with Rose. With her leaving, I mean.”

“Okay,” I said. I walked back to my own yard, Myrtle Mae’s eyes making my back feel slumped and shapeless and my butt feel big and hilarious in its movements. I didn’t feel relieved or disappointed, glad or sad. I just went back to organizing the pots and pans, the sun having made me feel a little better about the whole state of things. During the school year and for a couple years after that, Myrtle Mae and I would talk in the hall, making sarcastic comments about our parents or the people we went to school with, saying we were so excited to be at school that day. She never did get pregnant, but she clung to Ryan through all of 9th grade and maybe a little after that. Sometimes she would see me
and smile, her face briefly becoming something wonderous and startling in its expression, full of unexpected shapes and turns, dimples and balls-- her face would change absolutely everything.

The night before Rose left, I couldn't sleep-- I laid there in bed thinking of things to say to Rose, words that would stay with her, a look on my face that would be as permanent as a photograph in her mind, so that years down the road, whether I saw her again or not, Rose would remember me as the one standing in the door as she walked away. I felt I was going to lose Rose for good-- she was going to slip gracefully and smilingly out of my life, perhaps to return years later all wrinkled and saggy, wanting me to believe everything she said.

I was restless and completely awake-- my eyelids twitched when I tried to keep them closed. Every part of my body that I lay on ached under my own weight. I had to keep saying words, nothing-phrases, just so I wouldn't jump up and scream. I'm going crazy. This is crazy. I can't be here alone anymore. I'm so alone. Panic had seized me. I seemed to sit back in my mind, strangely calm and knowing, and watch myself thrash around on the bed, push my face as far as I could into the pillow, shake with the beginnings of sobs that never quite made it into realization. I rubbed my legs together until they were so hot I felt for sure I could spark a small smokey fire. I remembered grinding Rose's make-up under my fingernails the last time I felt this way, and all of a sudden I felt tired and ashamed. I got up and walked around my room, picking up various trinkets I had spaced out evenly on my dresser and window sills. I brushed the dust off the cool, hollow faces of my old dolls who looked a bit shocked and betrayed at the way I had just been acting. I shook my old ceramic bank out of habit, even though I hadn't kept money in it in
years. I put the coin slit up to my ear and heard the moist hum of the silence, the movement of tiny dust particles rising and settling as I moved it up to my ear. I felt I could hear through layers of sounds to something very profound in that bank. Without thinking too much about it, I made my way to my closet, and then to my own Broncos bag on the top shelf. I started unpacking stacks of photographs, mostly ones of me and Rose when we were little, and fanning them out on the floor, so that I could see every single one at the same time. Hundreds of orange faces looked up at me like scattered pennies on a sidewalk.

I decided to make Rose a picture collage. I thought if I could fit all these pictures of me and her onto a piece of paper she could take back with her, she'd have the evidence she came here to get. But she'd also remember she left something firmly established, that it was she who had broken off our sisterhood. I found a fresh piece of paper Dad had brought home from school for me to draw on. I cut around the edges of Rose's and my bodies over and over, until the sound of the scissors became the scrape of bone on bone, until we were surrounded by nothing but the edges of the other, or earlier or later edges of our own selves, until we managed by our history alone to cover every centimeter of that glowing piece of white paper. I looped paper arms around heads and legs over and under the shoulders of others and glued until we were a tangled mess. I hastily titled it "Flower Garden" in red ink at the bottom. A few seconds later, I hated myself for such a bad play on words.

I snuck into the hall and slipped it under her door. I stood there listening as hard as I could for the sounds of Rose sleeping, her steady sleep-breath, but I couldn't hear anything. Just the damn fridge. Perhaps she had already left-- maybe there was no need to think of something to say tomorrow after all. With this thought, I crawled back to my bed and fell asleep before I could reason it all out in my head.
The next morning, it was impossible to avoid the fact that Rose was leaving, because her packing efforts shone through our dark little house like an overpowering light you couldn’t escape. She ran around from room to room, bumping into things, stubbing her toes, overturning cushions and lifting up chairs and couches to make sure that nothing was left underneath or between or on top of anything. She blasted loud, intrusive music that always seemed to be relevant to the situation; Bon Jovi sang “Oh, you’re halfway there, oh-oh, living on a prayer, take my hand and we’ll make it I swear, oh-oh, living on a prayer,” and I thought of Rose and Scott huddled together in Scott’s racer Pinto, their hands clasped together, an abused road map of California spread over both of their laps.

Dad let me take the morning off of school to say goodbye and make some cookies for their trip, as a gesture of good will. I made Peanut Blossoms, but instead of Hershey kisses in the middle, I put a spoonful of strawberry jelly and called them “Rose Blossoms” instead. When I gave them to Rose and told her their name she “awwww”-ed, thanked me, and told me in a drippy voice that I was the best sister anyone could have. She never did mention the collage, though I knew she took it with her because I never saw it again. Neither one of us mentioned it, but silently took it as fact, like the disappearance of her make-up.

I couldn’t help but see the dull gleam of scissors traveling around the outer lines of everyone. I thought of them then as dolls, as paper people I could make hug, or beat each other up, or talk nice or talk mean to each other. I thought of folding Rose up and putting her in a drawer, making her stay here. But then I wouldn’t quite know what to do with her, or how to make her act. She’d be resentful if I made her stay. Not that I could.

Dad and Sandy were curled up together on the couch watching the news. Dad was rubbing Sandy’s feet, pinching each of her toes until they turned white. George Bush had
declared the night before that "all means necessary" must be used to "eject Iraq from Kuwait". His announcement was followed by a solid barrage of debates, news coverage, and graphs showing popular opinion polls on almost every channel. Dad watched as much of it as he could, muttering comments and expressions such as, "You asked for it, Saddam," and "God save those boys over there," as he kept his eyes on the series of pictures being flashed across the news. I watched and felt nervous, my hands and forehead sweating, at the thought of real war. The worst part was, as the decision was being declared, I realized I should be excited-- I was getting what I wanted, what I let all those balloons go for. After all, they wouldn't bomb where people lived. Just the machines. Just the cool metal machines all parked under a camouflage tent, or the ones chasing each other around fields marked with metal fences, like playgrounds.

After Rose left, and Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm, Dad became more and more fervent in his involvement in 3-C SUPORT, doing fundraisers, more parades, and even radio and TV appearances at the local stations. I avoided him as much as I could, scared to do or say the wrong thing. He was tense and high-strung, giving off his own explosions when the time called for aggression. I had to be careful. After the war was over, and there was no real need for 3-C SUPORT anymore, Dad gradually stopped talking about it and wearing his T-Shirts plastered with Gulf War slogans done in red, white, and black (I don't know what happened to the blue in those T-shirts). A few years after it was over, Dad never even mentioned it. It was as if it never really happened, except for all the leftover buttons that Sandy had made filling up random drawers and boxes in our house like old medals, rusting and turning dull in the damp light of our house.

Rose was leaving not only with her Broncos bag, but a whole other bag besides, full of stuff she bought with her short-lived WalMart employee discount. She had also bought a "Pet Taxi" so she could take Jose with her. He didn’t seem to mind it too much.
He just sat there, looking out at everyone as if he had known his fate all along-- he didn't even look melancholy, which cats tend to look unintentionally anyway. After Rose was fully packed, she came into the kitchen to talk and say goodbye.

"I heard that you talked to Mom," Rose said. She was wearing frayed jeans that fit tightly around her bony hips, and a button-down men's shirt, the front tails tied together in a big knot over her belly-button. She had sunglasses tangled in her hair on top of her head. She was ready to go.

"Yeah, just for a few minutes," I said. "It was pretty weird." I didn't mind talking to Rose about it, as I thought I would. She had to know that our mother is a little weird and "messed-up," no matter how much she tried to defend her in front of Dad and me.

"Well, yeah, I guess. You haven't talked to her since she left here. You probably don't even remember it," she said. Her lips formed a little spout aiming upwards and she blew her bangs up off her forehead for a few brief seconds, but they settled in exactly the same place when she ran out of air.

"It was okay. I guess I'm glad I did it and got it over with. She's always kind of been there hanging over me, you know?" I said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. And she does have her problems. I'm not going to deny that, and neither will she. But she said that you sounded really grown-up and mature. And she told me to tell you that she's sorry."

"For what?" I said. I knew for what, but I wanted to hear what Rose said.

"For everything, I guess. I was surprised to hear her say that anyway. She's never told me she was sorry."

"Really?" I said. I would think Rose would feel a little hurt by this, but she didn't seem to mind. I realized what frustrated me so much about Rose was that nothing made her mad enough to drive her away for good. She forgave everything eventually. Every single little thing that anyone ever did to her. She held nothing against anyone. Not even
against me for ruining all her make-up or against Dad for treating her like shit or against Scott for stealing her money and cheating on her or against our mother for leaving us to go to California, because supposedly (Rose told me this only days before she left) she heard the Joni Mitchell song “California” and knew her destiny lay in the West. Rose was okay with it all.

“You have to come and visit me,” Rose said. “For real, this time. You have to come. I’ll help pay for the ticket or whatever and you can come up and we can cruise around San Fransisco or LA or wherever you want to go. We can go to Sea World! Hell, we can go to Disneyland!”

“I will,” I said. And I meant it this time. I even cleaned out an empty coffee can and made a paper cover for it that said “California Cash,” and started saving as soon as Rose left.

Dickweed Scott showed up at the door. He had gotten a haircut for the trip. He looked even smaller and more bony now, but Rose appeared to love it. She kept running her fingers over the top of his head like he was some kind of kid or pet or something.

Dad and Sandy muted the TV and said goodbye. Dad looked a little distracted and uncomfortable-- he kept pinching his nose and adjusting his pants-- but he hugged Rose for the first time since she’d come back and said something I couldn’t hear into her ear. Sandy was crying, which didn’t seem odd at all. Sandy cried a lot. Rose started to cry too. But they weren’t shaking, overwhelming sobs, like she cried when she first got here. They were muffled, earnest sobs that transformed her whole face to look serious, honest, and truly sad that she was leaving. I loved her for those sobs.

Rose hugged me, running her fingernails up and down my back. “I love ya, Hon,” she said. She put her face up close to mine, and I saw tiny freckles sprinkled under her eyes, something I’d never noticed before.

“Me, too,” I said. And I did love her.
When the door shut behind her, the house took on a loud, fuzzy silence for awhile. At first I thought it was just the fridge buzzing its usual buzz, but then I realized the silence was even thicker than that. It was as if it was hiding something, or had something to say, that Rose leaving was the most protestable thing that could have happened-- but silence can't protest or speak, so it becomes full and meaningful, almost perspiring in its effort to keep to itself. That's what happened. Even Dad and Sandy seemed to notice, because they were talking a little louder, trying to cover it up.

Dad called to me, "Hey, Lily-of-the-Valley, why don't you come over here and watch the news with us?" I sat between Dad and Sandy, in the middle dip of the couch, and thought of everything except the war that was now about to take place oceans away.

That night, I went to my room to think about things alone. I had forgotten what it would look like with the clippings of photographs all over my carpet. As I looked at these outside edges of our lives, I saw old, dated lamps I didn't remember, chunks of wall that had since become chipped or washed yellow with time, toys on the floor that I vaguely recalled. The pieces showed only the spaces off, peripheral details I didn't remember until I looked at them, space that we had lived over without paying too much attention. These were the spaces I grew up in, where I lay in corners staring at the intersection of wall and floor; I ate Cheetos in complicated patterns, breaking one in half with my tongue-- then two, then three all at once; I baked hamburger casserole and cake brownies; I named and renamed drawers and cabinets until I knew where every single thing I owned belonged. These spaces packaged the buzzing of the fridge, the whirring of my bicycle tires. These were places that existed where everyone else didn't.

I put them in a shoe box and stuck it under my bed. Sometimes I thought of it when I was trying to go to sleep, a big tomb full of spaces off, full of the non-sound that had gotten so loud since Rose left. But, as time passed, this noise became thinner and sheener, so that it was easy to ignore. Eventually, I couldn't even hear it until I strained my
ears and listened specifically for its silver hum.