Plastic stars

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PLASTIC STARS

by

Hilary W Remley

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the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

This story collection centers on coming of age and childhood narratives. These stories challenge the use of memory as a framing device for such narratives, refusing larger biographical context. Instead, the stories within this collection focus on the immediate experiences of childhood and adolescence. Additionally, these stories focus on a specific time and place. Each story takes place within the American Southeast during the early 2000s. This specificity of setting, especially as it exists as a period piece, serves to further challenge the effect of memory and historiography of many childhood narratives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These stories are for Linda Fay, my mom.
Introduction

“We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory.” The final lines of Louise Gluck’s poem, ‘Nostos,’ point to a central fact of so many narratives, both personal and cultural. Childhood is the central factor in the formation of our view of the world, and this certainly plays out in many pieces of literature, from bildungsroman and memoir. For my thesis, I have written three short stories, each of which centers on childhood as both a primary subject matter and as narrative trope.

My stories are structurally influenced by Margaret Atwood’s 1988 novel, Cat’s Eye, and Mary Karr’s seminal 1995 memoir, The Liars’ Club. Both works reflect on the need to return to childhood in order to reconcile oneself with the present. These pieces make childhood the center of a larger story, one of both discovery and mystery that centers on returning the adult protagonist/author to a formative conflict or event in their childhood. Each of the stories within my thesis center on these two countervailing forces of bildungsroman narratives: that of the intentional construction of identity, and the indelible impact of childhood experiences on one’s sense of self.

All of the stories included within my thesis focus, in some way, on the formative nature of childhood. But this focus is not fixed to a simple assessment of the importance of childhood as a vague concept, viewed from a distance as recollection. Instead, and to the spirit of Gluck’s poem, I have made it the central fact of each story. However, rather than approaching childhood as Karr or Atwood did, through recollection. My stories are told within the ether of childhood, revealing the singular experience of actually being a child, brushing away, through narrative proximity, the veil of memory that is so often attached to stories surrounding childhood and adolescence.
Each of my stories, which consist of one solo piece, ‘Redneck Riviera,’ as well as two companion pieces, ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ and ‘Plastic Stars’ take place from the perspective of childhood and early adolescence. I’ve worked to make the narrative as close to this very particular perspective as possible, and have taken inspiration from both ZZ Packer’s 2003 short story ‘Brownies’ and Julie Orringer’s 2001 story ‘Pilgrims.’ Both of these stories center themselves around the perspective of a child or group of children, prioritizing their worldview over the adults that surround them. Both stories carve out narrative spaces which intentionally exclude the perspective of adults, and preclude any sense of biographical context. Essentially each of my stories, with the exception of ‘Redneck Riviera,’ which is framed, briefly, by memory, immerse the reader into the perspective of childhood without the context of development beyond the moment. These stories are not memories, as so many narratives about childhood are fixed into being, always framed by a predesignated end point. Rather, these stories make childhood an immediate, unfixed experience, unbound to the endpoint of adulthood.

‘Redneck Riviera’ is minimally contextualized within a recollection on the part of my protagonist, Kimble. However, the story itself remains unfixed in terms of its effects on Kimble. I do use recollection as a framing device within the story, as seen below:

The girls had a game of fighting over these small things, whose memory worked best, whose story won out. But of course, at least on this point, Kimble had the advantage. She had been the one to remember what had happened, after all. Dede blanked that whole summer out not long after they got home, slept constantly for a month, and cried when she slept, and screamed when she was awake. Mom and Dad spent months, afterwards, taking her to a special doctor to stop her crying at night. Still, she couldn’t remember a thing about the bulk of that summer. But Kimble could (Remley 1).
This framing device serves to center Kimble’s perspective in the story, and the story does not expose any further context or closure for what the significance of the story might hold on Kimble’s life, only that memory itself, the act of remembering, is central to her character, and to the story. The story indicates only the fact that the event being recalled is traumatic, but not the actual trauma itself which is ultimately left out of the story entirely, reduced to implication, ultimately countering Kimble’s claim to narrative authority.

Both ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ and ‘Plastic Stars’ take a different approach. They focus on two friends, Megan and Natalie, and take place at different points in their childhood and adolescence. These stories, which are influenced by such childhood narratives as ZZ Packer’s ‘Brownies,’ take place from the perspective of the characters as children, without contextualizing it within a larger trajectory of personal development. These stories are not memories, flattened to a larger narrative of biography. Rather, they stand in and of themselves, embodying the lack of context, the world-forming experience of childhood.

Both ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ and ‘Plastic Stars’ take place at pivotal moments in the adolescence of Megan and Natalie, two girls growing up in the Atlanta suburbs during the 2000s. ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ is set late in 2001, when both Megan and Natalie are nine years old, and are beginning to shape their own identities. This story focuses on the point in childhood in which one starts to break down the narrow view of one’s home as being the universal experience of life. This is explored through the plot of a sleepover, in which Megan spends the night with Natalie, a classmate whose home life challenges Megan’s own narrow, and safe, view of the world. This story in particular borrows from the perspectives favored in both ‘Brownies’ and ‘Pilgrims,’ which assume the world view and cultural reference points of children. In particular, ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ uses a similarly idiosyncratic perspective in telling a story that is specific to a nine-year
old’s frame of reference for understanding the world, making the adults in the story into background elements, holding immense power but little interior access. Both Megan and Natalie, in ‘Goo Goo Clusters,’ occupy the center of our story, as seen in Orringer’s ‘Pilgrims,’ which centers itself on this same division between adults and children in processing trauma.

‘Plastic Stars,’ on the other hand, focuses on the point in adolescence when the posturing of maturity and identity begin to melt into an actual, embodied reality. The story takes place in 2006, at the tail end of Megan and Natalie’s friendship, as they are pulled apart by diverging socioeconomic class. Both Megan and Natalie, at this point, are between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, at the end of middle school. Both are beginning to explore the actuality of the adult self, and the possibilities and freedoms that might hold, while also finding themselves bound by the ways in which they are seen by others. Megan, new to a wealthier school district, is being pulled in conflicting directions, as seen by this excerpt:

Natalie knew Megan, how she worried about these things, hated uncertainty. She held her breath when driving past graveyards, avoided thirteens, and never stepped on a crack in the sidewalk. If she was careful enough, the floor wouldn’t fall through. If she was good enough, Clay would propose. But also, by the same logic, if she were to falter, he would revoke his promise. And, in the same turn, to keep her place with Jordy, she had to contort herself into another, contradictory shape (Remley 64).

This points to the precariousness of adolescence, how, at this pivotal juncture in identity formation, girls know that their success in life is directly influenced by their ability to play a certain role, to assume identities based on audience, rather than personal preference. This tension also plays out in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, in which the protagonist, Elaine, looks back at her troubled childhood friendship with a girl named Cordelia. This novel explores the effects of
childhood on our view of the world in adulthood. My stories explore similar themes, although without the benefit or distance of memory which, even in Atwood’s novel, is warped by a switch to present tense during flashback chapters. Atwood presses the childhood portions of the novel into a more urgent, present tone than the present day, further serving Atwood’s assertion of the importance of childhood in later life. My stories attempt the same level of urgency, not through contrast with an end result, or a reach at the characters as they will be, but by prioritizing their experiences without the benefit of biographical context.

Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* is another influence on my thesis. Her memoir, like Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* is an act of reflection on unresolved childhood trauma. And, like *Cat’s Eye*, it also serves as a portrait of both a certain period of time and a specific regional culture. Karr’s memoir specifically, however, is particularly focused on depicting a certain geographical region. Place also influences the stories within my thesis. Each of my stories takes place within the American Southeast. ‘Redneck Riviera’ takes place in Gulf Shores, a beach town on the Alabama coast. And both ‘Goo Goo Clusters’ and ‘Plastic Stars’ take place in the suburbs of Atlanta. Each story takes place in the early to mid 2000s, making its setting in both time and place specific to a very particular cultural reality, which is no longer accessible through anything other than memory.

All of my stories, in fact, take place the years directly preceding several region and nation defining events. ‘Redneck Riviera,’ for example, takes place in 2004, six years prior to the BP oil spill that would devastate the region. And ‘Plastic Stars’ takes place in a newly developed Atlanta suburb in 2006, shortly before the housing crisis that would freeze construction projects and empty developments all throughout the city and its outskirts. This sense of foreboding, of tragedy both realized and on the cusp, exists simply by putting my stories within this particular
historical context, even if these issues aren’t directly addressed. The early to mid-2000s were, in fact, a time of great avoidance. In the years after September 11th, and all throughout the wars that would start and carry on for decades in its wake, pop culture was shifting towards absolute artificiality. ‘Redneck Riviera,’ in particular, reflects this avoidance, as Kimble, the main character, is confronted by the struggles of her less privileged cousins, which her parents, through vilification or avoidance, are unable to recognize. Kimble’s realization, that her cousins Cody and Dustin are facing struggles that seem impossible to her, which she is unable to comprehend, mirrors a more insidious culture of avoidance within the time period. The early 2000s were a period in which popular media was shifting into narratives of excessive wealth and consumerism.

But beyond reflecting a specific time period, my stories are also about the South itself, and more specifically, about Atlanta as a region embodying more prevalent trends in America. I have taken inspiration from Mary Karr’s memoir *The Liars’ Club*, and ZZ Packer’s ‘Brownies’ in my approach to my regional focus. Karr’s memoir in particular, which uses personal narrative to drive at the specific of her hometown of Leechfield, Texas, has inspired my take on regional writing within my stories. ‘Redneck Riviera’, like *The Liars’ Club* takes an irreverent look at the specific realities of its setting through humor and observation. Additionally, I’ve taken inspiration from ZZ Packer’s ‘Brownies,’ which ties the titular Brownies troop to a very specific reality of geographical segregation in Atlanta. Packer’s work in particular has guided my approach to the companion pieces of ‘Plastic Stars’ and ‘Goo Goo Clusters,’ both of which approach Atlanta from the immediate perspective of children, and their uncontextualized experience of place. This diverges from Karr’s memoir, which serves to contextualize experience within the framework of memory.
Suburban poverty and sprawl are two ideas specifically addressed within my stories, as they reflect a particular reality within Atlanta and its suburbs. This can be seen especially within ‘Plastic Stars,’ which tackles isolating effects of suburban sprawl, and the tendency for Atlanta to build outwards as a way of escaping from proximity to impoverished populations. The story of Atlanta is, essentially, one of constant retreat. In ‘Plastic Stars,’ Megan has just moved to a new housing development, only ten miles from Natalie’s apartment complex, but the distance, cut through by tangles of roads which obfuscate one place from the other, proves to be an irresolvable strain on their relationship. This distance embodies the retreat that is central to Atlanta’s spiraling outwards development, which exposes the racism inherent to even the physical layout of the city and its suburbs. This can be seen in the growing rift in Natalie and Megan’s lived realities, as seen in the following excerpt:

“I don’t know,” Natalie said. She resented the line of questioning, the thing that Jordy wanted to shape the girl into. This was her use to them, to report from the freakshow, what tepid concept they had of ghetto, which really only meant a cluster of apartment complexes, words were tossed around in her school like majority-minority. Natalie’s school admins were always going on about diversity: a word which flipped, for Crest kids, into ghetto.

Whatever drama happened at Crest: rehabs and overdoses, Homecoming Queens driving into telephone poles, was tragedy. At Berman, it was a comedy. The ten miles that separated the two schools, cut up by off roads and strip malls split them into being separate worlds entirely. The only current that flowed between them was in innuendo, rumor. What monster lived there, at Berman? The slow, outward crawl of the city, which was only to be touched with a controlling hand (Remley 67).
These realities, which are specific to a particular place, are central to the stories within my thesis. My characters’ lives are irrevocably tied to their place, both geographical and historic. Racism as a structure, as pretext, as setting is essential to these stories, and how my characters perform in the world, and how they relate to it.

Over all, the stories within my thesis work to close the gap between experience of childhood and our reflection on it, through which we inevitably view our present reality. I do so by breaking down the narrative distance between the events within the story and the perspective taken within each story, as each story takes place from the perspective of the present, without a definite tether to a particular present reality. However, at the same time, and through use of a very particular setting of the early to mid 2000s South, my stories encourage the reader to view these characters from their own, sometimes overlapping view of the time. Though my stories offer no historical context that indicates their positionality within larger historical events, each story implies a larger historical narrative. The impending housing crisis is present through sheer proximity within ‘Plastic Stars,’ which takes place within a new housing development in 2006, shortly before the housing crisis began. This proximity, then, makes clear the role of memory on experience, and the inability to ever access a memory, whether personal or cultural, without placing it within a larger narrative.
Bibliography


Dad took a picture of the girls in the shark’s mouth.

“It’s one of those pictures,” he said, coaxing them into position, “that you’ll put on the wall, maybe keep for a lifetime.”

Dad would say things like that a lot. Anyway, they did keep the picture.

Dede could swear that it was 2005, reasoning that her hair was too long for it to be 2004. But Kimble knew it was 2004.

“Your hair,” Kimble would say, “was long up until you were ten.”

“No,” Dede would say, “just check my third grade picture.”

And so on.

The girls had a game of fighting over these small things, whose memory worked best, whose story won out. But of course, at least on this point, Kimble had the advantage. She was the one who remembered *what happened*, after all. Dede blanked that whole summer out not long after they got home, slept constantly for a month, and cried when she slept, and screamed when she was awake. Mom and Dad spent months taking her to a special doctor to stop her crying at night. Still, she couldn’t remember a thing about the bulk of that summer. But Kimble could.

They stopped at Souvenir City because Dede had a thing for sharks that summer, and the big shark that constituted its front door was too much to resist. Dede watched *Jaws* and *Deep Blue Sea* on a loop, all day. Anything shark shaped sent her into a tizzy.

Of course, they saw the Souvenir City shark every summer, but this was the only summer that they took a photo in front of it.
They went to at least four shops that day. It was their first day at the beach and they had two hours before their condo opened. So they perused the shops: the wizard, the shark, the octopus. On the outside they looked fantastic, but inside they were all the same. Mom said that it was a waste of time, so she stayed in the car and read her magazines.

Ronald Reagan had just died. Her mom purchased a memorial copy of Time from a gas station. On the way down, she’d broken down crying at the thought of it.

“What a man,” she said, turning down the radio. She just said it and sat there in the quiet, waiting for a response. But Kimble didn’t know who he was, other than that he was the president a long time ago. And that he liked jelly beans, a fact lodged so deep into her memory that she wasn’t sure of the source.

Dad said nothing, which made her mom mad. So she said that she wasn’t going into the wizard or the shark or the octopus. Which was just fine as far as Kimble was concerned. Dad would buy her the stuff she wanted.

You’d think that no town could furnish so many of the same thing, but somehow Gulf Shores managed. There were four different souvenir shops in the span of two miles, a marvel of the free market, Dad noted, sorting through a rack of Big Johnson t-shirts.

All of the shops smelled like mildew, and were stocked with rows of these identical novelty T-shirts and bumper stickers. You could go dizzy just looking at all of the things that Calvin was pissing on: Osama Bin Laden, for one, on Uga, and on Big Al, but not Aubie, because this was an Auburn town. They even sold tiger tails to stick out the back of your car. And, near the airbrush station, there were aquarium tanks filled with hermit crabs that smelled like something dead and wet, which Kimble liked, and walls of boogie boards with American flags and dolphins printed on them, which Dede liked.
At the shark store, which was the final store that they looked in before Dad got the call that the condo was finally, at last, ready, Dede picked out a board with a shark on the front to match her shark t-shirt, and a resin replica of a shark’s tooth to keep in her shoe box of shark memorabilia. She was dead set on finding a shark in the ocean this summer, but Kimble said that was a fat chance.

There were no sharks in the gulf of Mexico, just broken up bits of jelly fish. That’s all she’d seen. Anyway, the girl who’d lost her arm to a great white the previous summer had done so in Hawaii, and there was a big difference between Alabama and Hawaii; things happened there, for one.

Nothing much ever happened in Gulf Shores, except for one year, when someone pooped in the condo pool, giving Dede pink-eye and Kimble a phobia of underwater swimming.

Kimble picked out an orange tankini with sparkles mixed into the fabric which looked better, she thought, than the skirted one piece her mom had bought her from Big Dog.

The unit that they rented this year was on the fourteenth floor. It was really the thirteenth floor, but it was called the fourteenth out of an abundance of caution. Still, Kimble held her breath on the ride up, to prevent the wires from snapping.

The interior of their condo was painted yellow and decorated with fishes and splintered wicker. Dede and Kimble called dibs on the bedroom with two twin beds: Dustin and Cody would have to fight over the pull out couch. But they weren’t getting there until the next day anyway, so they had no say in the matter.

But when Mom went out for groceries at the Publix across the street, Dad sat the girls down and told them that they would have to sleep in the living room for the week.
When Dede asked why, he just said, “it’s the nice thing to do,” and went into the bedroom to unpack his suitcase. He didn’t want to hear complaints.

Usually, he brought up something about how he would have died to spend a week on the beach as a kid, that he hadn’t seen the ocean until he was eighteen, that his dad’s idea of a vacation was a hot hike up the side of stone mountain, a sip from the communal water spout and, if he was lucky, a crushed penny to put in the cigar box under his bed. But this time he just said his piece and grumbled off to the bedroom. He’d been doing a lot of that lately. Dede couldn’t understand why, but Kimble knew.

It was Aunt Lu. Mom said that losing a sister was a hard thing, even for grown ups. And Dad and Lu had been close, as close as Kimble and Dede were. Maybe closer.

Dad had once, as a kid, saved Lu from an oil fire. It was a fact that Lu brought up a lot, especially when she got drunk. She would show Kimble the ripple of shiny skin on her thigh and make her run her hand along it.

“No need to go to the gator farm,” she’d say, and Kimble would laugh.

The girls rolled their luggage back out to the living room. They put on the TV. Nothing good was on. And since Dad was in a mood, they didn’t dare ask him to go explore the condo grounds.

Instead, they went out to the patio to look out at the ocean from up high. Kimble found a sand dollar on top of the railing. It was the kind of sand dollar you would buy from a souvenir shop, bleached and brittle, not like the kind she’d found last summer. Those had still been alive. Aunt Lu was the one to find them. She was good at sussing out those kinds of things. They took
turns holding it, rubbing their fingers along their small, fuzzy spines. Even the boys joined in. Dustin giggled at the strange texture, and Cody had helped Lu to put them back into the water, so they wouldn’t die.

Kimble tossed the sand dollar off the railing and waited to see if she could hear it break on the pavement below. She couldn’t.

“We should get the beds,” Dede said. She turned to look at Kimble, and waited for her to nod in approval. “We’re girls.” Dede was big into that excuse these days, the only silver lining that she could find on the sad fact that she was a girl.

Kimble looked out to the beach, she hated when they got condos so far up in the building. It made the ocean look both too big and too small, like taking in so much of it all at once only pointed to how much of it she couldn’t see, really.

“It’s because they’re orphans,” Kimble said.

Dede scrunched her nose, “but their dad is still alive.”

Kimble shook her head.

“He doesn’t count,” she said. “He’s a no good,” she turned her head back to inside the condo to make sure the coast was clear, “sonofabitch,” she whispered.

“Oh,” Dede nodded, “makes sense.”

But, the more Kimble thought about it, the less she thought so.

That night they were all determined to have fun. They ate at the Silver Dragon, as was tradition. Mom and Dad ordered beers and laughed at every joke that Kimble and Dede told them. And Mom said nothing when Kimble got two plates of desserts, only going on about just how much she loved the beach, how much she loved this place, how much they had needed this
time. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her voice dropped into a heavy drawl that Dad called Savannah Syrup Mouth, a term that only deepened her flush.

“It’s been a hard year,” she said, and Dad nodded in agreement.

“We deserve this,” she said, and again Dad nodded in agreement. Mom was saying that a lot lately. With every pour of wine after dinner, or slice of cake, or cigarette poached from a friend, she would say that they deserved this, this one indulgence, as if any small bit of joy you managed was something to do with deserving.

At the end of dinner, Kimble and Dede read their fortunes.

“The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese,” Dede said. “I don’t get it.”

Mom laughed so hard that her egg drop soup came out of her nose.

“Have you ever seen a mouse trap?” Dad asked Dede.

Dede shook her head no.

“With the wooden board and the bit of cheese at the end,” he continued.

She thought about it for a minute, and then flushed. “Poor mouse,” she said.

“What’s yours say, K?” Mom asked, wiping egg bits from her nostrils.

“How much deeper would the ocean be without sponges?”

“Now that’s a thinker,” Dad said, handing a passing server the check.

The cousins came knocking before sun-rise. Dad thought, in his sleep fogged stupor, that there was a fire, and so shook the girls awake and told them to get hauling ass. It took a few minutes of calming down before Mom actually managed to get to the business of answering the door. She let them in and told them to hold on and wait in the living room.
Then she asked Dad to join her in the bedroom.

Neither the girls or the boys said hello. The girls sat, sleepy and confused, on the couch bed and looked at the boys. The boys stood in the kitchen, holding their luggage in overpacked bookbags. Cody wore a SlipKnot t-shirt, the kind Kimble had seen once in the Hot Topic at the mall. The one time she’d gone into the store, she ran out squealing like a little baby pig not two minutes afterwards, chilled to the bone by the throaty scream-singing that was playing on the speakers. Her friends made fun of her for the rest of the day. Of course Cody would wear a spooky shirt like that, she thought. It’s the kind of scary he was.

They hadn’t spoken to the boys since Aunt Lu’s funeral. Cody had set the buffet table on fire at the wake. On the way home, mom had said that the boys were trouble. Dad said they were troubled, and that there was a difference.

After a few minutes of cloistered arguing, their parents came out and declared that the day might as well be started. Mom put on a pot of coffee and Dad made them all some scrambled eggs. Dede and Kimble took their pillows off the bed and folded it back into a couch.

The boys went into their bedroom and closed the door.

“I thought they were coming tonight,” Kimble said.

“I want Cap’n Crunch,” Dede said.

“There was a misunderstanding,” was all Dad would say. “Go ask the boys if they want cheddar in their eggs.”

Kimble got up and went to the boys’ bedroom. She opened the door slowly, “knock, knock” she said. When she got no answer, she poked her head in. They were laying on their individual bed, facing sideways, their bags, still packed, flopped like dead animals on the floor.

Cody lifted his head and turned to look at her, “get out,” he said.
“Do you want cheddar in your eggs?” she asked.

“Fuck off,” he said.

She closed the door and went back to the kitchen counter.

“What’s the verdict?” Dad asked. She nodded her head yes, and reached for Dede’s hand under the table. Cody was meaner than he had been, even last year. There was a sharp tack in his voice that hadn’t been there before, something adult and hollow.

They went down to the beach at around eleven or so. They’d meant to go earlier but Kimble had locked herself up in the bathroom after Cody told her she looked like a tangerine in her new suit.

“I’m just surprised,” her mom said, blotting away Kimble’s tears “that he knew the word tangerine.”

She took the edge of Kimble’s suit in between her fingers.

“I can’t believe Dad bought you this thing. Really, you should wear the suit I bought you. It hides your tummy.”

Once at the beach, Mom rented two chairs and an umbrella by the waterfront. The girls carried enough towels for them and the boys to spread out on, and Dad carried the cooler, which was packed with beer, water, and soda. The boys carried nothing but a net between the two of them. Dustin wanted to collect some jellyfish heads.

The parents were blotto by one, passed out from a mix of sun and Corona beer, as was Gulf Shores tradition.
The boys had long since wandered off down the coast line, taking their pall of bad feelings along with them. And Dede was busy trying to catch waves on her boogie board. She had made friends with a few other, littler kids whose parents hadn’t been cool enough to buy them a shark face boogie board, only the Dora the Explorer kind.

So Kimble was left on her own. She sat on her towel, watching out for Dede, and covering and uncovering her feet with sand, capping packed sand over her toes and wiggling them free.

The day went by slow and bland. Lu had been the spice on the whole thing. She took them to the sauna and hot tub, to the nail salon to get french tips, and to the outlet mall to buy any one thing they wanted. It bored Dede, who still had not fully accepted that she was a girl, but Kimble loved it. Last year she’d picked out a small red leatherette purse with a pink suede K stitched on the side.

“It’s lovely,” Lu said, examining it in the checkout line.

Kimble wore the purse to her funeral. After that she kept it in her closet. It still had the service pamphlets packed into the front pocket. It didn’t seem right to wear after that.

Lu being gone had put a pause on all of her big plans for that year. Kimble was going to get her to take her to get highlights put in before the new school year. Mom would never let her do something like that. And she was too young to go to the hot tub unattended.

Kimble laid on the towel and tried not to look at the sun. She’d been about to go to sleep when Dede came running up, kicking sand in her face.

“Kimbie,” Dede cried. Kimble got up on her elbows and blinked quick, trying to adjust her vision. Dede was standing before her, gripping her knee. A long strip of red ran down her leg.
“It got me, it got me!” she cried.

Mom roused from her sleep when she heard Dede crying. “What’s wrong, Dede bean?”

“It got me,” was all Dede could get out.

“She got stung by a jellyfish,” Kimble said, looking through their beach bag. She pulled out a tube of toothpaste and told Dede to sit down on the towel.

Mom sat on the towel and held Dede’s hand as Kimble applied the toothpaste.

“I don’t think it’s working,” Dede said.

“Of course it’s working,” Kimble said. “Now just sit back and wait for it to sink in, it’ll feel better in a few minutes.

“Oh baby,” Mom said, kissing Dede’s head. Dad, in the midst of all the action, shook himself awake.

“Oh dear,” he said, lifting his arms straight above his head. “I think it’s about time for lunch.”

Mom nodded her head. “How would you like that?” she asked, looking to Dede, who nodded her head in a delicate fashion, as if her neck had been stung, too.

They had almost finished packing up their bags when Kimble asked where the boys were, which stopped Mom and Dad plumb in their tracks.

“Oh,” Mom said, “they’re probably off down by the pier.”

Dad nodded. “I think they went down to the pier,” and kept on packing. “Why don’t you go and get them? Let them know we’re having burgers and dogs.” he said.

She nodded and said ‘ok,’ and made her way along the beach, turning back once to see if they would really leave her, which they did. Dede turned and poked out her tongue. She knew clearly the advantages of being the baby, even if she was getting a bit long in the tooth.
Kimble walked the length of beach between their condo tower and the pier with her
breath held, only opening her mouth for a wallop of breath when she got to the point of absolute
agony. The family had made a point of not walking further than Sunset Condos III, which laid
two condos pier-side to their condo tower. After that, things got scummy. The condos got shorter
and turned into walk up hotels. Families on these beaches didn’t have rental chairs, but sat out in
rusted lawn chairs and smoked cigarettes which they dropped directly into the sand. Babies
wandered around unattended, in saggy, sand dragging diapers, crying and reaching for anyone
who passed by, kids waived around fishing rods with the hooks still on them, occasionally
hooking each other in the hand.

“Cut the string and pull it through,” one boy said to another boy, who held his bleeding
hand like a prize. “Or else you’ll rip the skin straight off.”

Kimble kept her eyes down. Kids in this part of the beach were rough. They were, as her
mom said, trash. And this stretch of beach was covered in it.

She found Dustin and Cody under the pier, like Dad had said she would. Dustin was
sitting, alone by the lip of the tide, squatting over a pile of torn off jelly fish heads, like some
sort of bridge troll, or sad child in one of Kimble’s history books, something from a tenement
house or shack in West Virginia. Cody was up further, away from the water, with a group of
other boys, smoking cigarettes

Kimble went to Dustin first. “It’s time for lunch,” she said, holding out her hand to him.

“No!” he yelled, tossing a jellyfish head at her, which she just barely dodged.

“We’re having hamburgers and hotdogs,” she said, as if that made a difference.
He threw another jellyfish head and hit her on her thigh.

“You shit!” she yelled.

At this, Cody and his friends emerged from their conversation to notice her.

“What’re you doing over here?” Cody said.

“Dad’s making lunch,” she said,

He shrugged, “So?”

Kimble didn’t know what to say to that. She put her arms around her tankini top.

“He’s making hamburgers and hotdogs,” she said.

He threw down a cigarette butt but didn’t respond. The boys stood there looking at her until one of them, a boy who had the look of a big boned slim-shady, asked Cody if she was retarded.

“I’m not retarded,” she said.

“Look at her,” the big slim shady said, “she looks like a pumpkin.”

“Look at her titties,” another boy, with a purple earring said.

“Those aren’t titties,” Cody said, smiling. “She’s just a fat fuck.”

At which point she decided to head back to the condo on her own. She cried, but not until she’d gotten two motels down the beach. They could munch on jellyfish heads for all she cared.

About halfway back to the condo, she found what looked like a broken dinner plate lapping up on the beach in the foamy tide. An odd site, but not all that out of place for that point on the beach, where people let their picnic accoutrement catch wind instead of putting it in the trash. But when she came closer, she realized that it wasn’t a dinner plate at all, but a stingray.
It was lying face up with its cookie-dough smile looking up at the clouds. The whole left side of it was almost all gone, a semi circle of flesh cut out in a scalloped pattern, small bits of tissue wiggled as a small roll of water came in, pushing it closer to her feet. She bent down to look at it. It was almost too perfect, like something she’d see in one of Dede’s shark movies. It was one, clean bite. Just a chunk cut out of a whole, like a wobbly little crescent moon.

It had to be a shark, she thought. There was nothing else that it could be. She couldn’t wait to tell Dede.

But when she got home for lunch and told the family, Dad told her not to lie, and not to get Dede riled up. She’d had a hard day, after all.

And when the boys finally rolled in through the front door, he reheated them some burgers, and apologized for Kimble’s rudeness.

They went to Carlo’s for dinner. Dad ordered a meat-lover and a veggie-lover Chicago-style pizza for the table which would take about an hour to get out. Dad said it was lucky that the place was also an arcade, and handed each of the kids a roll of quarters to use on games. The boys went off straight away. But Dede refused to go play, citing her injured leg. Kimble stayed just long enough for Mom and Dad to order a bottle of white merlot to split.

“Why don’t you go join the boys,” Mom said.

“Yeah,” Dad said. “Didn’t you guys used to be so close?”

She shrugged. They had been close, when they were little. Her and Cody and Dustin and Dede were well paired in age. Whenever Lu and the boys came over to stay she would invite them into her tree house and they would play cards. Or they would play sardines in the house
when it rained. Kimble had a book of 100 fart jokes that she would read to him and he had an electronic fart machine that he would hide behind unsuspecting adults. They had fun.

But then Lu started getting sick. That’s what dad said. Mom said that she was an addict. Kimble told Cody that once, when they came over for Christmas, that Lu spent the whole trip in the guest bedroom because she was a drug addict.

Lu yelled at Mom for that comment, saying that it was none of her business. But she didn’t say anything to Kimble, which made it worse. She didn’t even look at her for the rest of the visit. And Kimble felt bad because Lu was her favorite, really, and she didn’t know why she said mean things about her favorite aunt.

Dad handed her Dede’s roll of quarters.

“Here,” he winked, handing her Dede’s roll, “take extra. It’ll curry good favor.”

“It’ll make them like you,” Mom said, clearing up any confusion. “There’s a pinball machine,” she said. “If you’d rather be alone.”

Kimble took the quarters and went over to the arcade portion of the restaurant. Cody and Dustin were racing in a motorcycle game. She waited for them to finish.

“Hi,” she said, as they dismounted the bike. “Can I play with you guys?”

Dustin picked his nose.

Cody shook his head, “nothing in here for three players.”

She looked around, he was right.

“But we’ll take the quarters,” he said, holding out his hand.

She’d wanted to play Mario Kart, at least by herself. But she handed him the coins instead.
“Can I watch?” she asked. Going back to the table would only get her a talking-to. She needed to be a good host. It was the nice thing to do. And Mom was busy with Dede, so she didn’t have any attention to spare.

“I guess,” he said, and they went to go play ski ball. He didn’t talk to her the entire time, but didn’t say anything mean to her either, which she counted as a win.

They played three rounds and then went back to racing. Kimble followed, feeling like something less than a shadow.

When the pizza was ready, Dad called them over to the table. He asked them if they had fun, and she smiled and said that she’d had a great time.

Kimble woke up that night to the smell of cigarette smoke. It was dark out still, and the DVD menu for Jaws was playing on the TV. The music, that ba-num-ba-num-ba-num sound, had set her into a state of confusion and alarm. She hated the music so much that she’d refused to play it in orchestra class. But Dede couldn’t sleep without it, so it stayed on.

She let her eyes adjust to the dark. Once she could finally see, she noticed that the door to the patio was open. Clouds of smoke came curling into the doorway. She got out of the sofa-bed and walked onto the patio. Cody was sitting at the outdoor table, smoking from a crumpled pack of cigarettes that he’d placed on the table. He looked up at her.

“Go back to bed,” he said. He looked like he had been crying, she thought. His nose was puffed and red.

“You’re not supposed to smoke here,” she said.

He flicked the lit cigarette at her shin.
“Ow,” she said, swiping away the spark.

“My dad let you come here. He didn’t have to.” She knew that that was a mean thing to say, that if Dad heard her say it she’d be grounded, and if Mom heard her say it she’d at least criticise her for being rude, but she was feeling just mean enough to poke him.

He lit another cigarette. She stayed standing in the doorway.

“You know why my mom was so nice to you?” he asked.

She stood and waited for an answer.

“It’s because she felt bad for you. You’re an ugly little shit.”

She shook her head.

“No,” he said, nodding his head. “you are.”

“I’m going to tell dad you’re smoking,” she said, and turned to go back in.

“Wait--” he said, “come back.”

She came back. He pulled out the chair next to him. She sat down.

“Have you ever smoked?” he asked.

She shook her head no. He handed her his cigarette and she took it. Her mom said smoking was bad and, despite a few drunken swipes at communal cigarettes, claimed total abstinence from the drug. Gramgram and Aunt Lu were heavy smokers, but that was Dad’s family. And Mom said that cigarettes made you ugly. School said they gave you cancer.

“C’mon,” he said, taking it back to puff on the dying light. “You have to keep puffing or it will go out.” He handed it back to her.

She took it and, this time, determined to actually take a puff. She breathed in as hard as she could until she choked on the smoke.
“It’s ok,” he said. “I coughed until I threw up the first time.” He rubbed her back with the flat of her hand. She nearly flinched from the tenderness of it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, lifting his hand from her back. “About this afternoon.”

She nodded.

They passed the cigarette back and forth. She took drags of smoke and held them in her mouth like puff fish, holding it for a few seconds before letting it go, feigning inhalation.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” she said. It was all she could say, and she hadn’t said it to him yet, come to think of it. Not even at her funeral.

“Yeah,” he said. “I got the card.”

He snorted up a sob.

“Can I ask,” she said, coughing out another puff from their shared cigarette.

He looked at her.

“Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“At the thing,” she said, “the funeral. The buffet. Why did you set it on fire?”

He took the cigarette from her hands, “maybe I like fire,” he said, waving around the lit end of his cigarette.

“No,” he said, “I’m kidding,” and coughed out a laugh. “It was an accident,” he said. “I was just trying to scrape out a little mac n cheese. The light, the little candle underneath, you know-- next thing I know, the whole table is on fire.”

“My mom said,” she started.

“Yeah,” he said. “Your mom is kind of a bitch,” he said.
She wanted to hit him across the face for that, but that would be sinking to his level. Plus, her mom had been mean to Aunt Lu, and so he had a right, in her opinion, to some bad feelings.

She let the comment slide, “I’m sorry,” she said. “You know, Lu was always my favorite.”

“I know,” he said.

“Even if she only liked me because I’m ugly,” Kimble said.

He laughed at that, a really deep, mucousy laugh, which rolled quickly after into a cry. She watched, frozen stiff, as fat tears rolled down the sides of his face. It was so quiet then that she could hear the Jaws music from inside. And some part of it, maybe she was still in dream logic, but some part of it seemed exactly right to her, seemed very appropriate.

He dipped his head down, letting big drops of tears roll off the tip of his nose. He cried big, ugly, boy tears, the kind she’d only seen in movies about World War II, the kind of movies that put Mom to sleep and left Dad tight throated and misty-eyed. Usually, in those movies, there would be two best friends, very green, very young, who joined the war to be heroes. And everyone around them was already hardened up to the ways of war. And, anyway, one of the boys would usually die, and the other one would be left crying tears like the ones Cody was crying right just then.

And then the crying stopped. He sat up and wiped the tears from his eyes and the boogers from his nose. He took a big swallow, and like the surviving boy at the end of the war movie, set his jaw at a hard angle and narrowed his eyes into distant little slits, as to not let any feeling in.

“Are you ok?” she asked, putting her hand on his back.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, shaking her hand from his back. “You fat fuck.”
He went inside and closed the sliding door behind him. She sat there for a moment, biting her tongue so as to not cry.

She cleared the cigarettes from the table, brushing them off the ledge, and tossed the box of cigarettes as close as she could to the ocean. But they only reached a clump of bushes.

The plan for the day was to divide and conquer. Dad would drop the girls off to go shopping, as they had done every year they’d gone to Gulf Shores, and then he’d take the boys to go to the Track Fun Park, to play arcade games and ride go-karts. But Cody was refusing to cooperate.

“I’m not a kid,” he said, again and again, as Dad tried to coax him with rolls of quarters he had left over from Carlo’s. He wouldn’t budge, only stood cross armed in the doorway of their bedroom, still in his tattered flannel sleep pants.

Dustin was sitting at the kitchen island, crying into his bowl of Cap’n Crunch. He did want to go go-karting.

Dad was standing at the counter, pretending to be ok with everything, when Mom declared that the girls were going to go ahead and go shopping.

“Y’all can do what you want,” she said, “I don’t care. But we are going out.” She grabbed the keys to the car and left.

Mom drove the whole way to the outlet mall in silence, turning down the radio to stark effect, though Kimble could hear the ebbs and flows of the music, some of which she could make out: Kelly Clarkson, Outkast. “Toxic” by Britney Spears played twice.
“Trash,” Mom said, glancing at the radio. “Nothing but trash.” She was mad at Britney Spears for getting married in Vegas, and then for calling the thing off not two days later. *Marriage,* she’d said, as she was reading the special edition copy of US Weekly, *is not some game. It’s dead serious. It’s forever.*

They parked in the far corner of the outlet mall, by the Tommy Hilfiger store. And Mom briefed them on their to-buy lists (khakis, jeans, new sneakers, shirts both henley and polo) before they went in.

The problem with mom, according to Kimble, was that she never let them go to the fun shops. It was always The Gap and Old Navy and never Limited Too or Delias. Lu had always taken the girls to the fun shops, and bought them things that Mom called *frivolous,* which is a word that Kimble did think fit a pink feather boa.

Kimble and Dede followed her along the stacks of clothes. They didn’t dare go off on their own. Anything picked out on their own would immediately be labeled excessive.

Mom made her try on the clothes she picked, all sensible, made of thick fabrics, pants cut just a touch long, so that they could grow into them.

Kimble tried on a pair of jeans and a polo top. She came out to the gallery of mirrors and turned for Mom.

“Hm,” Mom said, lifting the bottom of her shirt to view the overworked jean button, “we might need to move you up to juniors.”

They went to Aeropostale and bought Kimble a pair of boot cut jeans. “You’re a young lady,” Mom said, brushing her cheek. Kimble didn’t like her mom’s idea of being a young lady. It was all baby pink and khaki.
For lunch, they went to Ruby Tuesday and Mom ordered a glass of white wine. It had been tradition to go to the food court and spread out, dividing and conquering both pretzels and pizza, and hotdogs and Chinese. But that was when Lu was around. Mom had never liked the tradition, and always ate a single slice of sad cheese pizza, blotted with a napkin.

“We deserve this,” Mom said, swaying along to “Walking in Memphis”.

“I miss Lu,” Dede said, poking at the beet that she had mistaken for jell-o at the salad bar. *This is not the Silver Dragon,* Mom had reminded her. *Not every colorful thing is jell-o.*

“Oh,” Mom groaned, taking a sip of her wine “We all miss her, honey.”

Kimble knew better than to think that Mom was telling the least bit of truth. She said nothing on the matter, wanting to avoid another talk about ending up like Dad’s side of the family. They were the type to take public assistance, she said. All they did, she said, was make trouble for Dad. And hadn’t he had enough of that?

Kimble ordered the Alfredo and Shirley Temple.

“Just one,” Mom said.

But Kimble ended up getting three, and she swayed along to the music, pretending, just to herself, to be drunk, and with a straw sheath she pretended to hold a cigarette. And it was all just fine, she thought.

On the way back, Mom’s mood went sour once again, the way she sometimes did after a few glasses of wine. She just went quiet and her mouth drew to a small, black point. When they arrived back at the condo, the whole place had been upended. The coffee table moved to the hallway, the wicker chairs were stacked in front of the fridge.

“We’re going to paddle out,” Dad said making little rowing motions with his plastic paddle across the area rug in the living room. “past sand bar.”
Cody and Dustin sat behind him in the boat. Cody held the second paddle. Dustin held a wooden spoon and a pout.

“Where in hell did you get that?” Mom asked, handing the shopping bags off to Kimble. She didn’t want to know, of course, Kimble knew that voice meant cut-it-out, meant stop-it-now.

“We got it from the Souvenir shop,” Dad said, “a real beaut. Came with its own air pump.”

“Well, ok,” Mom said, and went to put their shopping bags down in her bedroom.

Late that afternoon, after Mom had time to nap off her bad mood, everyone had managed to coalesce into the shape of a happy family. And so they went to the beach.

Even Dede, inspired by the boys’ daring-do, had managed to work her nerve up into boogie boarding again. And Cody, unable since morning to look Kimble in the eye, had worked his avoidance into enough of a vigor to set out into the open waters, which made Dad happy, and gave him the rare pleasure of thinking that, for once, he might have done something right.

But the joy was short-lived, for when they tried to get the boat out into the water, they found that the load was too heavy, that the thing went sag belly just as soon as it hit the water. So, with no small amount of reluctance, Dad decided to sacrifice his spot aboard, and the boys went off paddling into deeper waters.

Once back ashore, Dad joined the girls at the beach chairs, trying to not look disappointed, and took a beer from the cooler.

“Hey Kimble,” he said, toying with his beer’s bottle cap, “what’s say you want to make a sand castle?”
Kimble considered. They had not made a sand castle together in some years. She didn’t know why, come to think of it, just one of those things you lose when growing up, like a desire for toys. But Dad looked, sitting there all slumped in defeat, like someone in need of a task. And so she said yes, she would love to.

“We can make it with a moat, I’m thinking,” he said. “So it can catch the tide.”

So they sat together on the sand and made their castle. Dad was responsible for establishing structure, and Kimble carved in the windows and doors with her fingers.

Every once in a while he would point her attention to the boys.

“Look how far they’ve gotten,” he’d say. “Do you see how far they’ve gotten?”

And she’d nod yes, that she’d seen.

It wasn’t until they had nearly scooped out the whole moat that she noticed something was wrong.

She used to wonder, watching Dede’s movies, how people stayed calm for so long, as the trouble moved closer and closer. But afterwards, she knew, things move a lot slower than you’d think.

It really only started with a few not-right things, a glimpse of a person screaming, a little girl crawling out from the tide with an oblong mouth and scrunched up eyes, things that could be dismissed as a jellyfish sting, a swallow of salt water.

But the first odd thing that Kimble noticed was a scream. It was a small scream, from far off down the beach. She almost couldn’t hear it, and it almost faded into the blur of so many other, good spirited screams, but it was a scream. And it didn’t stop.
Then she noticed people moving, not just moving but hustling, tripping their way out of the water. At first it was only a few, not that many but enough to notice. And that’s when the word started to get around.

Shark.

There was a shark in the water. That’s when people really started to clear out. That’s when Kimble spotted Dede coming down on a wave a few yards down the beach. Kimble got up.

“Dad,” she said. Dad was yelling for the boys, he’d smashed down the moat on his way up.

“Dede,” she said, running down to the lip of the beach. Dede was out in the water when Kimble got to her, waiting for the incoming wave, which pulled her up and then under. Kimble walked knee high into the tide, scanning the water for her.

“Dede!” She called, the water had taken her under. A woman pulled Kimble from the water.

“There’s a shark,” the women said, wild eyed. Kimble pulled her arm away, and waded back in, forgetting the spot, the exact spot where Dede had been.

What she saw, the first thing she saw, coming out of the water, was the shark boogie board, and Dede flopping her body on top of it, her face covered by a flap of wet hair. Kimble made her way over to Dede, and grabbed her by the arm. She pulled her out from a crested wave, tearing off the velcro ankle strap, and releasing her boogie board out into the open waters.
As Kimble carried Dede back to their chairs, Dede just kept on crying out for her lost boogie board.

“My shark, shark!” Dede yelled, grasping her hands out to the dinkie board, which bobbed along further and further out.

As soon as they got back to the chairs, Mom grabbed Dede and held her tight in her arms.

“How’s Dad?” Kimble asked.

“The boys,” Mom said, pointing a wobbly finger to the mass of people who had formed in front of their bit of beach.

Kimble pushed her way to the front.

The water was all empty except for the boys, who were out by the sand bar.

Kimble could see the shark’s fin, cutting like a razor through the flat of the water.

Dad was standing a few feet away from her, and tried, several times, to run out into the water. But each time was pulled back by the mass of onlookers.

“How’s the boys,” he cried. “Those are my boys,” he cried.

“There’s nothing you can do,” one woman yelled. “Except get yourself killed.”

And so he went back to screaming, along with the rest of the crowd, for the boys to paddle ashore.

Kimble looked out to where the boys were, they were so far out, they were so small out there. And they just kept paddling along. And she realized then that they were simply too far out. They couldn’t hear any of their calls.
Megan had cried and squealed and begged her way out of every sleepover she had ever attempted. It wasn’t that she didn’t try to overcome her fears; she did. Or that she didn’t have a desire to complete a sleepover; she did. But, when it came down to it, she was a bit of a baby.

She had, with the help of her mother, devised several strategies for coping with her sleepover anxiety: a book of breathing exercises, plug-in night lights, attachment objects, a roller of lavender oil, and several other items purchased with great hopes attached, later to be resigned to the junk drawer beside the sink. And, any way, even with all of these strategies, her mother knew to keep dressed and ready to pick her up when she received the weepy call.

But there was no getting out of this one. Megan herself had insisted on the double bind. She was nine years old, nearly grown, and was dead set on finishing a sleepover. Her mother had accepted a night shift at the hospital. She’d asked Megan more than a few times if she was ok with it, if she might just want a sitter to come over.

“You can always stay home,” she said, running her brush through Megan’s thick hair, soaked through with v-05 and tea tree oil which, her mother said, repelled lice. It also, Megan knew, repelled people. More than one kid had told her that she smelled like their grandma.

“I could have Lynn come over, make you some Macaroni,” her mom continued. The thought had tempted Megan, the thought of cancelling plans would surely cut her taut nerves, and she could puddle into jelly, and relax like the coward she was. But Lynn, their upstairs neighbor and Megan’s occasional babysitter, bored her to tears. She was the kind of woman to turn off the TV during dinner, the kind of person who could fix their entire concentration on the task in front of them, without need for comfort. A night with her would amount to something like
poetic justice. The prospect of giving up a chance at a sleepover just to spend the night with an absolute dullard had only set her intentions into a more rigid point.

The plans she made with Natalie would have to hold. Another chicken-out would brand her a coward, and surely foil any attempts at further socialization. She would surely rot into the sad kind of person she often saw wandering the grocery store, wearing mail-order sweatshirts and covered in a general sense of loneliness and desperation so thick that it could be touched on by a nine year old girl.

Her mom’s night shift clinched it. She would have no way out this time, barring, her mother said, immediate physical danger. And, at first, this seemed to be some sort of providence, a way of keeping her flakiness in check.

But as they approached Natalie’s house, Megan clutching her Pocahontas sleeping bag -- too small, very old, and with not even the cool Disney Princess (Mulan)--she began to feel a familiar sense of dread carve out a little notch in her stomach.

And by the time they parked in front of the house, she was near tears, trying to figure out a convincing way of imitating anaphylactic shock.

Her mother turned off the car and looked at her.

“I told you,” she said, shaking her head. She put her hand at the back of Megan’s neck.

“It’ll be ok, Megan. You know that, right?”

Megan nodded her head, trying to will herself away from tears. Would it be ok? What if she had an aggressive dog? What if she pissed her sleeping bag? What if--

“Oh look,” her mother said, sticking her arm in front of Megan’s face and waving.

“It’s too late now.”

Megan turned and looked out the window. Natalie was waiting to greet her.
They gathered together in the living room for the drop off ceremony. Natalie’s mom insisted, wanting to get to know who her daughter was spending the night with.

“Natalie is so excited,” Natalie’s mom said, taking a long draw from her cigarette. “She hasn't talked about anything else all week-- nothing but!” She squeezed her daughter’s knee.

Megan had been near knocked over by the smell of smoke that had seeped into absolutely everything. She could almost see in the furrow of her mom’s brow, the plans that she was making to wash every article of clothing brought into this place. Megan herself found the smell intoxicating, it aroused faint memories of her grandparents house, the low ceilings, the wood paneling, the brown crystal ashtrays scattered throughout.

This house was similarly shabby, with popcorn ceilings and shaggy carpet, not changed for several decades. But unlike her grandparents house, which was mostly floral or avocado green and filled with small numbers purchased from Rich’s on credit, the furniture in Natalie’s house was loud. That’s what her mother would call it. It all looked like something from the furniture catalogues they received in the mail: lots of white leather and cherubs carved and plastered on nearly everything. Megan had liked these items in the catalogues, but her mother said they’d look ridiculous in real life. And she was right.

It took her mom a good minute to conjure her responses, distracted as she was by the staring baby faces.

“Oh yeah,” Megan’s mom said, scratching her eyebrow with her key hand. “Megan too, yeah.” Megan noted her eye twitch. She was late for work, and had aimed to drop Megan off in a quick and dry fashion: a kiss on the cheek, a quick brush up of the ER desk’s phone number. But Natalie’s mom had insisted on meeting the mother of the girl that she was taking in.
“So,” Natalie’s mom said, brushing a bit of cigarette ash off of her white jeans. “Would you like a drink, maybe?”

“Oh,” Megan’s mom said. “Oh I would, I really would. But I’m running late for work.”

“Oh damn,” Natalie’s mom said, biting her lip. “I’m sorry. You’re a nurse, right?” She asked, pointing to her Snoopy scrubs.

“Yes,” Megan’s mom nodded, checking her watch. “In the children’s ER, at Gwinnett Medical.”

“Wow,” Natalie’s mom said. “That must be thrilling. I haven’t gotten a job here yet. In Nashville I worked at this bar. My mom, she owned it, she was a card, you know. Kind of a star, you know, in the country scene.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Lerlene Sharpe--do you know her?”

“Lerlene Sharpe,” Megan’s mom considered. “Oh the moon? Something something... it rises nightly--is that it?”

“Oh, oh yes!”

“Wow,” Megan’s mom said. “My mom, she loved Lerlene Sharpe. She used to cry to that song. Pour her a gin martini and put that song on and she’d be gone. Me too, come to think about it. After my divorce. God. I’d almost forgotten. We-- Megan and I, we moved in with my mom for a little while. It was right after my divorce, and of course Dad had just died. Anyway, yes. I’ve listened to her quite a bit.”

Megan couldn’t remember what her mom was referring to. The time after the divorce was foggy for her and she must have glossed over that aspect of it anyway, as it sounded so very old and boring, requiring a level of melancholy that a four year old simply couldn’t muster.
Megan, hoping to escape from the toil of grown up conversation, looked at Natalie and rolled her eyes. Natalie smiled back but looked down at the carpet, mouthing the words to the song that Megan’s mom had just been singing, her lips pursing up real tight on the double ‘o’ of ‘moon’.

After a few minutes, the mothers’ conversation wore brittle and Megan’s mother realized, again, that she had been running late.

“I’m sorry but I’ve really got to be going,” Megan’s mom said, shaking her keys. Megan followed her to the door.

“Love you,” She said, kissing her on the forehead. “Be good.”

Megan wanted to say, please don’t go, please come back. But she was gone before she could muster a peep.

The first item on the agenda was a tour of the house, which took all of five minutes, as the living room took up a bulk of the usable space, and the parents’ bedroom was off limits. The backyard was mostly unusable, a continuation of the downward slope that the house sat on, leading to a small creek.

“Does it have crawdads in it?” Megan asked.

“Crawdad?” Natalie asked.

“Yeah,” Megan said, “little lobster looking things with feelers that go out like this,” she said, poking her two pointer fingers out under her nose.

“Oh,” Natalie said. “You mean crayfish.”

“No” Megan said, “crawdads. They’re crawdads.”

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“Not in Nashville,” Natalie said, starting her climb back up the hill.

The house tour finished in Natalie’s room. Before entering, Natalie asked that Megan remove her shoes. Megan obediently removed her shoes and carried them over to the front door.

“Oh,” Natalie’s mom said, glancing at Megan from the side of her eye. She was all smiling and rosy, holding a drink that smelled, to Megan, like a licorice stick and leather belt combined. “Natalie is so funny, isn’t she? You’re in for a night, sweetie,” she said, turning back to the business that was on TV.

When Megan got back to Natalie’s room, she found her standing in front of the bed.

“So,” she said, “let’s begin.”

She began with her set of powder pink furniture: a powder pink bed, powder pink dresser, powder pink night stand. She was very insistent that Megan know the shade, because her grandma Lerlene had the set made special just for her. This was supposed to be impressive, but it all looked so sad sitting on top of the oatmeal beige carpet, butted up against the yellowed walls. Still, Natalie seemed proud of it. She stood before each item, arms crossed over her front, and when describing each piece, floated her right hand over the particular points of interest.

“This is my music box,” she said, picking the piece up and turning the small crank on the bottom. They stood together and listened to the sad little tinkling tune that played in the box as the plastic ballerina twirled around and around.

“My grandma gave it to me,” she said, pointing to a framed album on the wall. The woman on the cover looked like Natalie’s mother: blonde with big white teeth and an upturned nose, but also looked, somehow, younger, and softer. The name Lerlene Sharpe was scrawled across the bottom of the album, along with the words, Moving in the Dark.

“She was a music star,” Natalie said after a while.
“Oh,” Megan said, “ok.” She didn’t know what to say, it being such an absurd kind of thing to know about another person.

“We lived in a big house in Nashville,” she said. Megan had heard this part before, in school. Everything, to Natalie, led back to Nashville.

Truth be told, Natalie exhausted Megan. They were friendly, insomuch as neither of them really looped in with any of the most cohesive groups of kids at recess. Neither played soccer or had the upper body strength to play on the monkey bars. And they didn’t have the social prowess to get a spot on the swings.

They instead gravitated towards the outcrops of granite that sat near the woodline. They sat together sometimes and talked, both being in Mrs. Carmine’s third grade class, they had at least a few shared interests, they noticed the same snafus. They’d gotten a few good minutes of conversation over the mess a kid named Dylan had made when he threw up on Table #6. The weirdest thing was that it was all pink, and had almost no chunks. And they both liked that a little had gotten on Jordan’s Lisa Frank trapper keeper, she being the most popular girl in the grade, as evidenced by the fact that she dotted her i’s with neat little hearts. Handwriting was everything, and neither Megan nor Natalie had the talent of writing in a straight line.

The idea of a sleepover had been, at first, an exciting prospect. It was hard to say which one of them had suggested it. The idea had really germinated quite organically, and independently, in both of their minds. It started with the fact that Jordan was throwing a sleepover birthday party, and they weren’t invited. Their shared grief culminated in the idea of them having their own sleepover, and by the time Megan had the chance to parse out the actuality of such a plan, the whole thing had come down to choosing socks and underwear. She had been blinded, it seems, by the thrill of the concept, she had not thought about Natalie at all.
“Anyway,” Natalie said, apparently peeved by Megan’s lack of interest in her dead grandmother, went over to her computer, a PC, she’d pointed out, for whatever that meant, and sat down. “You can put your sleeping bag by the closet.”

Megan rolled out her Pocahontas sleeping bag on the floor. And Natalie waited for the internet to connect.

“Is this your own computer?” Megan asked, pulling up a butterfly chair that had been lodged in the corner of the room. “You don’t have to share?”

Natalie shrugged, looking intently at the screen as the internet dialed up. Megan had put her in a bad mood. Megan wanted to maybe point to the album and say ‘So Lerlene Sharpe, she was very famous?’ but knew that the moment had passed. Any attempt to rectify it would only result in Natalie going even further into her huffy mood. Megan’s mom did the same thing when, say, she asked Megan about the dress she was planning on wearing for a date. Anything other than immediate and complete approval would put her in a sour mood.

She instead decided to move on. “It’s really cool that you have your own computer,” she said.

Natalie nodded, “I can go on it whenever I want.”

“That’s really cool,” Megan said.

“Yeah,” Natalie nodded, clicking on the internet browser. “I can go on whatever site I want, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” she said. “There’s this site where you can build dolls. It’s really cool-- do you want to see?”

“Yeah,” Megan said.
“I go first,” Natalie said, waiting for the page to load.

They took turns at the computer, each crafting their doll into a specific theme, worrying over eye and hair color with an intensity that, at first, Megan could not match, but which she quickly invested in once she took her place in the driver's seat. The dolls were all pixelated with large, sparkling eyes and arms crossed behind their backs. The clothing was organized by theme, Natalie chose bridal and preppy while Megan chose mostly from the general section, and some from Goth and Punk. She had debated putting a brow ring on her second doll, Candi, but Natalie insisted that she didn’t.

“It’s ugly,” she said.

“No it’s not,” Megan said, but she took it off anyway. Of course Natalie had also hated most things about Megan’s dolls. She had hated the name Candi, as well. All of Natalie’s dolls had names like Joelle and Mercy, and they were all blonde with blue eyes, only varying in the cut of dress or length of veil.

After Candi, Natalie declared that she was bored with making dolls. “Are you hungry?” She asked.

“Yeah,” Megan said. She’d been hungry since she’d gotten there, at five, and since then her hunger had grown into an ache, a faint but gnawing nausea. Only she had been too nervous to bring it up. But now it was well past eight, and she was near willing to chew on a block of styrofoam if it would fill the hole in her gut.

Natalie opened her bedroom door and stuck her head out to check the situation. A rush of cigarette smoke came rolling into the room, Megan could hear tinny voices and recycled laugh tracks from the TV. A few hours ago, she’d heard laughing coming from Natalie’s mom that echoed the track on TV. But she had since gone quiet.
“Mom?” she called out. There was no answer.

“Stay here,” Natalie said, walking out into the living room. She came back after a minute or so. “Well,” she reported. “She’s asleep. I can make us something.”

She followed Natalie into the kitchen. They looked through the fridge, and the cabinets, and found next to nothing, except for a few cans of beans, a stack of spoiled take out boxes, and a whole drawer of sandwich meat in the vegetable crisper. The sparsity of the kitchen, with the exception of the stacks of beer and clot of liquor collected on the kitchen counter, made Megan uneasy. At home, her mom’s kitchen was both well stocked and well organized. Her mother spent hours at the kitchen table clipping coupons and arranging them in a plastic index card holder, arranging them by category and store. Most of their purchases consisted of boxed and canned foods, and frozen meals. Fresh foods were purchased only for special occasions, and with specific recipes in mind. Her mom could spend thirty minutes squeezing peaches, checking for bruises and worm holes. These habits had annoyed Megan to no end. The weekly chore trailing her mother through aisle after aisle filled her with dread, and for what? A collection of off-brand food that tasted all the same, like powdered cheese and salt. But looking at the insides of Natalie’s kitchen, and its general lack, made her ache for a box of Mak-n-Cheez.

It was, like so many other aspects of the house, odd, incongruous somehow to an ordered way of living, to her own way of living.

After a few minutes of debating, of smell testing, and brainstorming, they agreed on making fried bologna sandwiches.

“Have you ever made them?” Natalie asked.

“No,” Megan said. “I’m not allowed to use the stove when my mom’s not home.”
“Well,” Natalie said. “My mom is home. And anyway, I can use the stove whenever I want.”

“Wow,” Megan said, looking into the living room, where Natalie’s mom was passed out on the couch. “That’s really cool.”

Megan watched as Natalie put together dinner. The kitchen, after all, was adult sized, and she was not. Even for her age, Natalie was small. On her first day in class the teacher had initially asked her to go back to the registrar and get her placement corrected. She worked her way around the kitchen mostly by climbing on top of things: cabinets, buckets, and balancing on her tippy toes, trying to reach eye level with the cabinets and stove top.

It made Megan nervous, but she didn’t say anything. She was too hungry. But she kept thinking of the horror stories that her mother had told her about from her shifts at the ER: bubbling hand burns from a misplaced touch to a stove top, broken ankles from a fall off of a counter, severed fingers from knives tossed around in a willy-nilly fashion. These stories were pointed to Megan as a warning.

She had seen this all as an incumbrance, a way of limiting her scope. She was nine and grown enough to do what she wanted, no matter what her mother said. But watching Natalie stand on her tippy toes to glance at the doneness of the bread, she couldn’t help but want to reach for her, to stop her, to pull her away from the heat source and scold her for her lack of responsibility, and basic fire safety.

Once the sandwiches were done, mercifully, Megan helped Natalie to plate their dinner. Natalie had made her mother a sandwich as well. She chose to put it on a small pink tea plate with gilded edges.
“Isn’t it lovely?” Natalie asked. She said the word lovely in a voice that was not her own, but more like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, her mouth willing out every syllable with intent.

Megan nodded. It was a beautiful little plate. It had a small chip on the edge of it, which Natalie kept going over with her forefinger.

“It’s the only one left,” Natalie said, shaking her head. She took down a large plastic plate for their sandwiches.

Natalie put the pink plate down on the coffee table and sat down next to her sleeping mother. She put her hand on her shoulder and jiggled it a little.

“Mom,” she whispered. “Mom.”

Her mother lifted her head a little. “I’m not asleep,” she said.

“I made you dinner,” Natalie said. Her mother lifted her hand and patted Natalie on the head.

“Oh, good,” she said, and went back to sleep.

Natalie took the remotes from the coffee table and changed the channel to *Spongebob*.

“Is this ok?” Natalie asked.

Megan nodded. She liked *Spongebob* ok, but really she would have settled for anything even remotely familiar to her. She had gotten tired of talking to Natalie, and mostly she just wanted to shake her and ask her how she could live like this, how anyone lived like this. It was something like when she and her mother were staying with her grandma, after the divorce. It was the only time she had spent any amount of time away from a place that wasn’t her own.
She was only four then, and didn’t really remember anything too solid, but when she did think of it, that place, it made her uneasy. She remembered, mostly, crying a great deal over a floral print couch that looked, to her, really quite threatening.

“Do you like Spongebob?” Natalie asked after a few laughless minutes.

Megan started crying. She couldn’t explain why she was crying over Spongebob, but watching it here in this house seemed absolutely wrong, like a reminder of the home she was denied at this moment.

“I want to go home,” she said, wiping a stream of ears and boogers from her face.

Natalie kept her face pointed down at the carpet, “Am I not a good hostess?”

The word hostess caught Megan like a jagged edge, such an odd word, causing her to let out a noise that qualified as neither laugh nor shriek, but something in the middle.

She saw Natalie’s face pruning up into a sob that she guessed would end in her being kicked out any way, regardless of her own request to go home, and wished that she could take it all back, erase the past few minutes entirely, so that she didn’t have to live with her actual feelings as they existed in relation to others.

She had prepared herself for the mess that was coming, the phone calls, the transportation arrangements, when, without warning, the garage door peeled open, setting Natalie’s scrunched up face into a flat line. Her upset swallowed up into a glassy blankness. She got up and began cleaning off the coffee table with robotic efficiency.

“I think we should go to bed,” she said, reaching out her hand to help Megan up. But once up, Megan realized that her legs had gone all numb and fuzzy. She tried taking a step forward but nearly fell.

“I’m sorry,” she said “my legs went to sleep.”
“Come on,” Natalie said, trying to pull her forward.

But it was too late. Her dad walked in the door talking to himself about something or another, his eyebrows set into a knot. He was carrying two bags: one paper, one plastic. He set the paper bag down on the cherub bureau, and tossed the plastic bag at Natalie.

“Hand daddy the cigarettes,” he said, “Those aren’t for you.”

Natalie fished his box of Marlboros from the bag and handed them over.

“Oh,” he said, looking now at Megan, who stood hunched by the coffee table, her legs still wobbly and numb, as if her presence, just now realized, were a surprise, which she very well guessed it was. “Well who is this, Bumppo?”

“This is Megan,” she said. “Mom said she could come over.”

He rubbed his hand over his stubbled chin.

“Well,” he said, looking around. “This is my house, Bumppo. You know that.”

She nodded.

“My house. This is my house. I bought this house.”

She nodded again. Something in his voice was hollow and jagged. It reminded Megan of her own dad, the way, whenever she had dropped a sippy cup of juice or threw up on the rug instead of her plastic bucket, his voice got mad well before he himself did, like warning shots. Her mother knew, then, when his voice changed like that, that it was time to move. To find a door to hide behind.

In those moments, she was scared, and didn’t feel all that protected. The door held against a flat out rage rather impotently. But as she stood here now, without anyone to protect her, caught on the other end of a grown man’s frustrations, she felt the full strength of her mother’s protection, and what it meant not to have it.
“No one told me,” he said, walking over to Natalie’s mom. “No one told me,” he said, shaking her awake.

“No one told me,” he said, dropping her shoulders onto the couch. Natalie’s mom sat up on her elbows, her face blank and mouth open like a gash. “No one told me, Darla, that we were going to have company.”

Darla looked at him and then looked at Megan, to which he was pointing.

“She’s just a friend,” she said. “She needs friends.” she said.

Natalie was standing still, her body was rigid and her mouth collapsed to a small point. Megan wanted to tell her that her legs were back to normal, no longer jelly. She wanted to tell her that they were good to go, could leave, could go somewhere. But fear had frozen her in her spot.

“You never tell me anything, Darla.”

“It’s just a little sleepover,” she said, lighting herself a cigarette.

“It’s my house,” he said.

Natalie took Megan’s hand.

“They’ll go on like this for awhile,” she said in a whisper, and pulled her forward, looping around her dad, who was now talking, with vivid detail, about all of the things that Darla had not thanked him for.

Once in her room, Natalie sat on her bed, tossing the bag of candy behind her. The voices in the living room wavered in and out of coherence, and wobbled over the taut line that divided their moods between anger and amusement at each other’s retorts.

“It’s usually fine,” She said. “After a few hours.”
Megan sat down on the bed next to her, pushing away the bag of candy. She thought of the baby proof knob, now understanding its purpose. She repeated to herself the number of the ER desk. She looked around the bedroom. There was no phone.

“They should settle down,” Natalie said again, “after an hour. Maybe two. You can call your mom,” she said. “If you want.”

Megan looked at Natalie. She was crying. Not in a stuffy nose, puff-eyed sort of way, but like some sort of statue, new tears rolling down with every blink, catching in her long eyelashes. Megan considered her face, which she had never really thought about too much, but which she now realized was actually very pretty. Her eyes were almost as blue as Lerlene Sharpe’s, that artificial blue, the blue applied over the black and white image taken for the album cover.

“It’s ok,” Megan shrugged. “I’ve seen worse.”

Natalie pulled her shirt sleeve over her hand and wiped away some boogers.

“Besides,” she said, dangling her feet off the side of the bed. “I can’t go home anyway. My mom’s at work. She’d kill me if I made her come all the way back over here.”

“Oh,” Natalie continued, turning to face Megan. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok,” Megan said, “my dad was the same way.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Natalie said. “Please don’t say anything at school. Could you please not tell?”

“I won’t say anything,” Megan said. She tapped her hand on Natalie’s shoulder and, after a few minutes, Natalie stopped crying.

“It wasn’t like this,” she said. “At my grandma’s house. It was beautiful. I had my own bedroom. It was pink, everything was pink. In Nashville, she was a star. She had the biggest
house on her street and everyone loved her. And I look just like her,” she said, getting up. She went and stood in front of the album on the wall.

“I look like her, right?” she asked.

“You look just alike,” Megan said.

“I do,” she said. “My mom says I don’t, but I think that she is jealous because grandma loved me best.”

Natalie jumped back on to the bed.

“Do you want to see what my dad got me?” she asked, pulling over the bag of candy.

Before Megan could answer she’d already dumped its contents on to the cover. It was all hard candies, caramels, and lemon drops; disappointing, in other words. Natalie moved her hands through the candy as if it were a pile of jewels.

“He buys me a bag every week,” Natalie said.

“Why?” Megan asked.

Natalie shrugged, “He always wanted to outdo grandma. Even though she’s dead. It makes mom mad, I think that helps, too.”

“What do you do with it all?”

“Come here.” She got up and walked over to her closet. Megan followed her.

“I put it here,” she said, opening the closet door. There was a pile of plastic bags in the left corner.

Megan tried to figure out what the pile meant, what Natalie was meaning to signal here. It seemed to her an odd thing to brag about, like a jar of fingernail clippings or a sentient mold grown over a bag of shredded cheese, but something in the gesture touched Megan. It was, in some way, Natalie’s way of making herself, and this place, into a home. It didn’t matter how
ugly the thing was to her, Natalie was seeing something very different. And Megan would try to understand what that was.

She knelt down beside the pile, each bag was tied shut and completely full with smaller bags of hard candies, some loose, cheaper, nameless candies: approximates to Red Hots and Peanut Butter Bars.

“Do you eat them?” she asked.

“No,” Natalie said, “mostly no.”

“Why not throw them away?” Megan asked. She’d regretted it instantly, felt it was beyond good manners.

Natalie sat down on the carpet and looked at her pile. “I don’t know,” she said, looking at the bags reverently. “It’s nice though, isn’t it?”

Megan could not say that it was nice. She knelt by the pile, absorbed by the amount of it, a full heap. It wasn’t nice, but it was something. She put her hand out to touch it, running her fingers through the cellophane wrappers.

“My dad,” Megan said. “I don’t think he ever bought me anything.”

“Well,” She continued, sitting down into criss cross apple sauce. “He does, well. He’s gone now. He moved out to Texas. But he does send me cards, you know, for my birthday and Christmas.” She looked down, pulling at the carpet. Those cards were all she had left of her father. And most of the time she didn’t mind it. Her mother said that he was garbage, that he was no good. Certainly, Megan did not have many good memories of him, or with him. There were some flashes maybe of kindness, or something. But she looked forward to those cards more than she liked to admit.
In the weeks before Christmas and her birthday she’d get all giddy about getting the mail. She didn’t want her mom to know that that was what she was waiting for, but she knew, of course, and when it arrived she would slip her the envelope, and Megan would take it into her room. And they were always the good kind of cards, made of thick paper with glitter, and always, at the end of the pre-written message was the word Love written in his hand. And she spent hours tracing that word. And she kept the cards stacked, neatly, in her bottom dresser drawer. Thinking of it now, she felt very close to crying.

“It’s ok,” Natalie said, putting her hand on Megan’s shoulder. “Sometimes I wish my dad was gone-- and he’s gone away a few times,” she said, biting her lip.

“But he always comes back,” Natalie said, reassuring herself, and tapped her hand on the bag of candy, as if it were some grand bounty.

“I think it is nice,” Megan said. She could not exactly reprimand Natalie for this one quirk. Was there not some magical thinking in her own habits? The cards she kept, she knew, were proof of something, of what she couldn’t tell. But their presence made her feel tethered, in some way, to the idea of father. If someone walked into her apartment and asked, where is your dad? She’d point to the bottom drawer of her dresser. Those notes were proof. The word Love was proof.

Natalie nodded in agreement.

“Anyway,” Natalie said, closing her closet door. “He can’t find what I really want.” She walked over to her night stand and, after a few minutes of rifling through its contents, pulled out two off-white packets.

She sat down again on the bed. “Goo Goo Clusters,” she said, and waved Megan back over. Megan crawled onto the bed and sat next to her. She handed her one of the two packets.
“Goo Goo Cluster,” Megan said, reading the red script.

“Have you ever had one?” Natalie asked.

“No,” Megan said.

“My grandma bought these for me every Saturday,” she said, tearing open her package. “Bags full. She’d send me home with the bags every Sunday. I only have a few left. I like to save them,” she said. “For special things.”

She got up from the bed and went over to a small CD/cassette combo that sat on her computer desk. She pressed rewind. “Do you mind if I put on some music?”

“Sure,” Megan said, holding her Goo Goo Cluster in her hand. After a minute, the music started with a slow pluck of a guitar, it sounded like the sad cowboy music her grandma used to put on—had it been Lerlene Sharpe? It must’ve been, that’s what her mom had said. She wasn’t sure, and then she heard the voice, that low and sad voice, singing about the moon. It sounded so familiar and also incomplete, and she knew what it was missing, the sound of her own grandma’s voice, gin-thick and wobbly, the gentle hum of her voice reverberating through her chest and into Megan’s back as she sat with her on those long visits.

Natalie got back on the bed and they sat together, listening to the music, to their grandmas’ voices.

Megan turned to look at Natalie. “I love this song,” she said.

“It’s my favorite,” Natalie said.

Megan unwrapped her Goo Goo Cluster and took a bite. The candy was good, crunchy, chocolate and marshmallow and caramel. She closed her eyes as she ate it, conjuring the way Natalie’s furniture must’ve looked in Lerlene’s house: tall ceilings, pink paint, large, open windows, the home that she must’ve made there. And now, what was left.

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“This is the best candy in the world,” Megan said, opening her eyes. She looked over at Natalie, who looked at her in turn, and nodded.

“You know,” Natalie said, and smiled. “I think so too.”
Plastic Stars

It didn’t matter. She chose to sleep on the floor, but her body would not let her. She could line the carpet with pillows, wrap herself tightly with blankets, and still, she would flinch, would toss, and undo the promise that she had made herself.

And she would wake up exactly where she wanted to be: in bed, next to Megan.

As always, Natalie woke up before Megan, at the crack of dawn, too early for a Saturday. And getting up before Megan meant morning conversations with Megan’s mom, talking about grades, about her own mom (*how is she?*), or, worse, she would be trapped with Clay, Megan’s mom’s boyfriend.

He didn’t know her, and was confused by her presence. He was scared shitless at even the prospect of minding a child. Natalie had, once, seen him pat an approaching toddler on the head like a dog, and declare “good boy, good boy,” until the child tottered away.

Left alone in a room with Natalie, he made shaky conversation for just long enough to pour a cup of coffee, then shuttle back upstairs until Megan or her mom came down, as a buffer. Megan said that it had taken him several months for him to willingly stand in a room with her alone. He’d just recently started driving Megan to school when her mom couldn’t take her: a big deal, apparently.

In the new house, Natalie felt like a tumor, something gunking up the works of their house. It was different, when Megan and her mom still lived in their apartment. Natalie’s mom rented an apartment two complexes over from Megan’s place, in a cluster of apartment complexes shunted into a swampy backroad by the mall. The physical proximity was a boon.
Megan and Natalie rode the same bus to school, swam in the same pools, played team soccer games on tennis courts. And Natalie slept over, a lot.

Natalie cut holes through the fences, forming a short path to Megan’s apartment, where she could always go when things weren’t good. She used to stay with them all the time, going with them to buy groceries, to the movies. Megan’s mom kept her favorite foods in their refrigerator, a pillow and blanket in the hall closet for sleeping, a spare coat for her to wear in the cold.

But then they moved in with Clay. Megan changed schools. Visits required planning, coordinating pick up and drop off. Natalie tried not to think much of it, she and Megan had sworn to stay friends, and Megan’s mom promised that she could come over as much as she liked.

But still, in the evenings when Megan’s mom picked her up, she was tired and curt, exhausted from work, she said, but also wearing close to a nerve. The thirty minute drive, a series of turns and backstreet cut throughs past shopping centers and newer and newer housing developments that curved through no more than ten miles of actual distance had become a burden. And Megan was getting her own friends at Crest. Natalie saw pictures of them on her MySpace. There were times now when they sat together and didn’t know what to say, lines of conversation would go dry, references not gotten, their memory, once a single thread of experience, had started to fray.

Natalie was determined to make herself small, helpful. So now, when she woke up early, she waited. She looked up at the plastic stars on the ceiling which, at night were a milky radium green, but now, in the morning, were a sickly phlegm yellow. She counted the small ones (24),
the large ones (12), and the medium ones (30). Some of the small ones had fallen off. There was always the hazard, in Megan’s room, of stepping on a little plastic star.

The night before, Megan said that she was thinking of taking them down. But Natalie convinced her not to, at least for now. They had put them up together. Megan spent hours drawing up the plans for where each star would go. Natalie said it would be a waste. Megan relented, but made no promises for once high school started the next August.

“I’ll be a different person by then,” she said. But Natalie wasn’t so sure.

She lay next to Megan in the quiet, she turned to watch her sleep. Her mouth kept slightly open, and she often complained about her sore throat. Megan was always on the verge of strep, or at least that was the worry.

After a few minutes of waking, and deciding how to best shimmy her way out from the heap of their bodies, she got to work untangling herself, how they got all mixed up in the morning, their arms and legs collapsing on top of one another. Sometimes Natalie would get an itch and scratch Megan’s leg, her shoulder, and it would take a minute to recognize the fact. Sometimes she convinced herself that she could feel the scratch.

Once on the floor, Natalie assumed a pose of exaggerated rest: chin up, mouth open, knees cattywampus.

“Morning,” Megan said, jutting her chin out from over the side of the bed. “You know you're a bed hog. I was up until three because of you.” She smiled, and Natalie smiled.

Natalie got up on her knees and stretched out her arms, making what was at first a pretend yawn, but which manifested into the real thing. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Megan got up out of bed and sat down next to Natalie. Her hair was all messy, a bramble of curls shaped by sleep into the vague shape of a teapot, the spout pouring out over her left ear.
She pulled a magazine that she had been looking at the night before from under her bed, and turned to a page on hand shaped ice cubes and cheesecloth ghosts.

“Do you think this would work?” She asked, pointing to the ice cube in the shape of a hand. “Or do you think it’s too-- I don’t know. I showed it to Jordy and she said it looked stupid.”

Natalie shrugged, “It’s Halloween, Megan. It’s all a little stupid.”

Megan bit her lip, “Well it’s my birthday and I don’t think that’s stupid. I told my mom I didn’t want to do a Halloween thing this year.”

“But you do.”

“Well,” Megan took in a big inhale. “My friends at Crest, they do different things for Halloween. And I’m tired, anyway, I don’t know. I’m going to be fourteen. I’m not five any more. She whispered. I told my mom that this was my party.”

“It is your party.”


“It’s not strep.”

“How do you know?”

“You always have a sore throat.”

“Not always just this morning.”

Natalie just nodded in agreement. Megan was getting antsy.

“You’re almost fourteen,” Natalie said. She nudged Megan’s shoulder. “Do you feel different?”

Natalie tried to glance any changes, a sharpening of the jawline, protuberance of the breast, an overall glow of adulthood. She could discern none. Megan looked, as usual, her soft,
lumpy self, if a bit padded by the training bra that she wore at all times. *I don’t want my boobs to sag,* she’d said as reasoning. Natalie thought it to be sound reasoning, although it might help if there were boobs to sag.

Megan looked into the mirror that hung on her bedroom door, she considered.

“Yes,” she said. “A little.”

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Natalie worked the knots out of the back of Megan’s hair. She started by taking small sections of hair and working through the knot from the bottom up, careful not to pull her scalp. Megan relied on her to get the back of her head when she came over.

Natalie wondered if Megan’s mom still brushed her hair in the mornings, the way she did when they lived in their apartment: sitting criss cross applesauce, eyes closed to the pitch black morning, as some court tv show played. She always offered to comb Natalie’s hair too, but she declined. She was used to doing things on her own.

When Natalie was little, her grandma Lerlene had made a doll of her. Whenever she stayed over night, her hair was set in curlers, sprayed to a plasticine stiffness. After Lerlene died, Natalie went two whole weeks without combing her hair, as protest, the point of which she still wasn’t clear on. But her mother hadn’t noticed and, at the end of it, she was the one to have to undo the damage.

“So,” Megan said. She smiled in the mirror, looking back at Natalie. “Jordy says,” her voice dropped to a whisper. “She has a boyfriend in high school, you know.”
Natalie nodded. Girls at Berman were always bragging about their boyfriends. Having a high school boyfriend was a big get, but most often a lie.

The previous year, when Natalie was in the seventh grade, a classmate did have a high school boyfriend. But she got pregnant and disappeared in the middle of the third quarter of their seventh grade year. Their homeroom teacher only said that she had transferred schools, but everyone knew.

A few months after the fact, Natalie saw her in the grocery store with her mom, carrying the child. She looked tired. Natalie used to ride the bus with her and remembered her as a generally happy, nice girl. She liked the way she her put on lipgloss like it was an art, the way her laugh carried all the way from the back of the bus. And she remembered how she had once made the bus driver stop and wait for Natalie to run down to the bus stop one morning when her alarm hadn’t gone off. It was an act of kindness that she always brought up when gossip of her pregnancy bubbled up to the surface, as if it added any depth to the story. But she thought it did.

It took Natalie a minute to register who she was, she looked very sad, she wasn’t wearing lipgloss. When she saw Natalie she waved to her.

Natalie did not wave back.

“Is that the girl?” her mom asked when she saw her.

“Yes,” Natalie said.

“Does she know you?” she asked, cutting a sharp turn out of the aisle.

“No,” Natalie said. “She just rode the same bus as me.”

“Good,” her mom said, “it's always them. You stay away from them.”
Natalie’s mom told her not to use racial slurs, not like her dad did, drunk as he’d get going hard on the r’s. But all her mom had to say was them. And to Natalie it sounded just as violent. Still, she had turned around as well. She didn’t wave back.

“Anyway,” Megan said. “She says that he wants to come over with some friends. They have to go to another party first, but Bryce, her boyfriend, he has this friend-- Chris-- who is really cute. He has a car. He’s a junior. And,” she looked to see if the door was locked. “A few weeks ago, Jordy and I went to a party and I made out with him.”

Natalie pulled her brush through a thick knot.

“Ow,” Megan said. “Don’t be jealous.” she smiled.

“I’m not jealous,” Natalie said.

“Well don’t embarrass me,” Megan said. “This is the kind of thing that could be a big deal, you know?”

Natalie nodded.

“You didn’t show me your costume,” Megan said, turning, hair brush stuck in her hair, to Natalie. “Last night I forgot to ask-- what are you dressing up as?”

“I’m going as Lerlene,” she said. Lerlene Sharpe, her grandma the country singer. A reference that no one would get but Megan.

Back when they were kids, Natalie liked to arrange dress up parties for them. They would dress up in glittery country western flare, all the leftovers from Natalie’s stage shows with Lerlene, and sing her grandma’s whole catalogue in duet. She thought that it would be a fun throwback. It fit with the theme. She’d imagined the party to be kitsch: slime, fake blood, paper cutouts and streamers, and not much more than the two of them and some Crest classmates. And
maybe that’s what Megan had wanted at first. But with Jordy’s influence, Natalie suspected, it had mutated. There was talk of drinking. There were high school boys.

Megan squinted at her, “no,” she said.

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The thing with Lerlene had become, to Megan and Natalie, a sort of inside joke. When they first started being friends, Natalie made everything about Lerlene. Now, Natalie figured that it was probably some way of getting over her death. The school psychologist told her as much after she’d been sent to his office for wearing a sequined Western shirt for two weeks in a row.

It didn’t matter, she kept on doing it, wearing those sequined shirts until she grew out of them. But the thing was that Megan didn’t care, and always went along with Natalie’s costumes. The duets.

From a baby, Natalie was Lerlene’s whole world. Her mother, her father were more like ghosts to her: not real. She lived, as a small child, mostly with Lerlene. And even as she got older, she spent weekends with her, where they spend hours at her vanity, working on looks. She tufted and back combed Natalie’s hair, applied hot curlers, shaped her face with blush and powder. She taught her to keep her eyes open when she came at her with a mascara wand.

And sometimes, on days when she looked very pretty, Lerlene would let her up on stage for her nightly shows, and they would sing together, in that hot little dive, on that narrow little stage, those hokey little songs that Lerlene held on to like so much gold.

It was never something that Natalie really understood. She clung to Lerlene like a clenched fist.
Natalie stood in front of the wall of costumes and considered wax lips, white body paints, black lace and spider webs, what thing to become. Megan’s mom had left them alone to consider, as she did some shopping at the Publix a few shops down the strip mall.

“What are you going as?” Natalie asked Megan, trying to discern the different shades of Naughty Nurses.

“W43,” she said tapping the square titled *Perky Panther*. The costume consisted of a velveteen black dress with fluffy fringe around the bottom, a long tail that hooked into the shape of a question mark, and a pair of cat ears. The model in the picture cupped one hand over one of the false ears, and was licking the other. There was a smudge of red lipstick on her teeth. The costume was sold out. It was October 29th, slim pickings.

“Just go as a witch or something,” Megan said, eyeing the man behind the desk at the costume center. He was older, a high school boy; thin as a beam pole with tufts of face hair jutting out in an approximation of a beard.

Megan was always, lately, going on about boys like this. They’d go somewhere, anywhere, and Megan would find a boy and try to get them to come over to her. She would walk through, say, the Hot Topic, fingering leg warmers and jelly bracelets, hoping to catch a glance. And if they came over, she’d hook them in, practicing points of conversation, ways to keep them cornered: How much are these with tax? Does this come in pink? Is that your only piercing?

Natalie moved down the wall, trying to find a costume that wasn’t sold out. Megan walked over to the counter.

Natalie tried to keep her ears perked to the conversation. She heard little over the spooky sound effects CD playing over the speakers, except for Megan’s laugh, which rippled over the shaking of chains and boiling of cauldrons.
She chose the Alluring Alice costume and went over to the counter. Megan was saying something about liking Slip Knot, a lie. She preferred Hilary Duff, and had once made Natalie listen to “Come Clean” on repeat for thirty whole minutes as she cried. The man at the counter noticed Natalie and turned his attention to her.

“Can I help you?” he asked, cutting away from Megan’s spiel.

“W127, medium”

“That one is in low stock,” he said, “let me check the back.”

Megan turned to Natalie.

“You seriously couldn’t’ve given me a few more minutes?”

Natalie was supposed to say sorry, but didn’t. She hated the way Megan looked, striking these ridiculous poses.

“He was going to give me his number,” she whispered.

“No he wasn’t,” Natalie said. “He’s, like, eighteen.”

“And?”

And you look stupid, and your skirt is too tight, and I can see the rumple of paper hanging loose under your training bra. “And,” Natalie said, trying to stitch her thoughts into something less hurtful.

But Megan seemed to catch her meaning. “You wouldn’t understand, Natalie.”

“I’m fourteen,” Megan said.

“You’re fourteen on Tuesday.”

“So?”

“You’re not fourteen.”

“Whatever. I’m basically fourteen. And anyway, you wouldn’t understand.”
“Why?”

“Because we’re not the same.”

“Here,” Megan said, pressing the forty dollars that her mother had given them into Natalie’s hand. “I’ll be outside.”

The man came out with the costume in a plastic sheath.

“We only have small,” he said. “But you can try it on in the back if you want.”

“Ok,” she said, taking the plastic bag.

He walked her back to a row of makeshift dressing rooms. She took the last room on the left, and slid the shower curtain partition closed.

The costume was cheap, a shiny, bright blue, the fabric smelled like formaldehyde, reminding her of biology class, the small spiral of frog guts, its little heart, its little gray lungs. The costume was tight at the waist and chest, the skirt unfolded in an awkward way, deformed by its plastic packaging.

There was no mirror in the dressing room, the only one was outside by the wall. She stepped outside, her hands trying to pull the skirt down, but the fabric had no give, and the stitching was delicate. Already there were several loose threads. She considered how the dress pressed her into a shape she had never considered her body having. She stretched at the false white apron, her waist tapered down in a line, and flared out at the hips. It was not the Alice she remembered from the movies. And yet it was her, boiled down to the marrow and stretched out into an alluring shape.

It reminded her of the drag queens Lerlene used to have on at her bar. They all dressed up like this, in distortions of popular artists or characters: Dolly Parton, Dorothy from the Wizard of
Oz, Diana Ross, Cher. Recognizable characters twisted further into themselves, a costume of a costume.

Of course, the drag queens looked less raggedy than she did, their sexuality was playful, intentional. As a kid she used to sometimes sneak backstage to watch them put on their makeup, Lerlene discouraged this, said if she kept going back there she’d be liable to see something a little girl shouldn’t, but she didn’t care. She liked the way they looked, the way they did themselves up. She liked the transformation of it. It was more playful than Lerlene’s get-ups, which seemed to Natalie, less knowing, less intentional.

She could make it into something, she thought. Maybe she could have fun with it.

“I like it,” the man behind the counter said.

Natalie turned around. She looked at him looking at her. She smiled.

“Thank you,” she said. She took her ponytail down. She stood in front of the mirror for another minute, feeling the thrilling disconnect between herself and her reflection. She watched from the mirror, too, as the man caught glances of her. She felt like a lure on a reel: shiny, dangerous.

“So, do you like it?” The man asked. He walked up to her from behind. She watched him through the mirror. “You look really pretty in it.”

She smiled.

“You’re shy,” he said, brushing a bit of hair behind her ear. “You shouldn’t be. You’re really pretty, you know that?”

She recoiled from his touch. Couldn’t he see that she was not the girl in the mirror, in the skirt, the one who liked being watched? He should have understood this.
But also, in that same flush of anger was a rush of satisfaction, his hand on her shoulder, the word pretty, the way he looked at her. It was not the way he looked at Megan. It was more, it was some kind of want. He looked at her, and saw something worth wanting, something he could transfigure into the vague shape of his own desires.

It was what Megan wanted. But watching Megan pander for looks, like Lerlene’s crackling warble of a voice, latching on to any look that curled her way, repulsed Natalie.

But she’d gotten what Megan couldn’t, and that fact alone made Natalie smile.

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Making up the living room was a satisfying task for Natalie. She was tired of Megan’s cloudy mood. She was in charge of streamers and plastic table cloths.

Clay came back to the house with lunch. And afterwards set out to help out with decorating the living room.

Clay helped Natalie in putting up the HAPPY HALLOWEEN banner behind the TV: tricky business, a two man job. She was thankful for his help, and he was happy to be in on the task. They worked together surprisingly well. Neither needed to fill up silences with small talk. All they had to say to each other was ‘a little left’, ‘a little right’, ‘a little up, or ‘a little down’, and the other would move to the desired spot.

They each liked just working on the task at hand.

And when they were done, they looked at their work together.

“A fine job,” he said. Really beautiful.” And called in Megan and her mom to see what they had done.

When they came in he smiled, and wrapped his arm around Natalie’s shoulder.

“Look at this!” he said, “look what we’ve done. Spooky, isn’t it?”
“It looks fine,” was all Megan said, and went back into the kitchen to set out the snack plate.

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The grown-ups left at 4:00 pm, an hour before the start of the party. Megan’s mom had written down the address and phone number for the hotel, as well as her and Clay’s cell phone numbers on no less than five post-it notes scattered throughout the house.

“What’s the hotel number?” she asked Megan, while Clay was putting their bags in the trunk.

Megan repeated the number without stopping to reflect. Megan’s mom had been drilling her for weeks.

“If something happens,” she said. “You call me.” She had worked in the children’s ER before meeting Clay. She had seen many broken bones healed at odd angles, cuts gone to sepsis, small accidents spiraled into tragedy: the result of children too shy to speak up, masking pain until it became unbearable. She insisted on Megan knowing all of the ways to reach her.

“Oh,” she continued, pulling out her stack of post-its, “here is the restaurant’s number.” She copied the number from a note in her planner. “Just in case you can’t reach us.”

Clay joined Megan and her mom in their good-byes. They all hugged in turns: Megan and her mom, Clay and Megan, and then all three. And before they left he squeezed her shoulder and said have fun, snorting up a tear before stepping into the car.

Megan joined Natalie on the doorstep, and waited until the car turned out of their line of vision.

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“I forgive you,” Megan said, her face as still as a corpse, trying not to move as she drew out cat-eye makeup. She sat slumped, her stomach building at the lycra cat-dress. “I don’t want to fight tonight.” she said.

“I don’t either,” Natalie said, rolling out tubes of lipsticks, of Estee Lauder blushes Megan had swiped from her mom. Natalie wasn’t sure what to do for her own make-up. She only ever wore eyeliner, mascara. Her one attempt at foundation had turned her face orange, and she’d ended up having to scrub it off in the school bathroom. There were oblique references to Oompa Loompas for weeks afterwards.

“This is my party,” Megan said. “Don’t expect me to babysit you.”

“Babysit me?”

“Do you remember last summer? When you came over to our pool? You were so sulky. You looked like a real brat.”

She did remember. Megan and Jordy spent the whole time trying to chat up the lifeguard, a high school boy. Natalie ended up crying in the bathroom so loud that the whole pool heard her. And the lifeguard suggested that they take Natalie home ‘for a nap’. She wasn’t invited over for a whole month after that.

“Ok,” Natalie said. “Ok.”

“Thank you,” Megan said. “And you should go simple, for Alice. I can do your makeup if you want.”

Natalie agreed, and waited for Megan to finish her own face, so that she could begin to sketch out what should be made of hers.
“You look so good,” Megan said, patting out the lipstick that she smudged on the apples of Natalie’s cheeks. “To give a nice flush,” she said. The taupe pink powder blushes that shaded simply wouldn’t do. Not for Alice. She had to look fresh: milk and cherries. No glitter, no smoky blacks or dark blues. She sat before Megan in mute supplication, her face lax, eyes closed, and let her get to business.

Natalie kept her eyes shut, wondering at the feel of foundation being patted on, the line of the eyebrow pencil feathering in between the gaps in her eyebrows. Since Megan had started on makeup, her mood had lightened, but Natalie worried that she was still mad at her, that she would open her eyes to some ridiculous look, a penciled in mole, blue eyeshadow brushed in a patchy fashion all the way up to her brows. But she let herself go for her, a form of apology, and kept still and good, so that Megan could make her the way she wanted her to be.

“Ok,” Megan said. She snapped the lid back onto the lipstick. “All done.”

Natalie opened her eyes.

“No, no,” Megan said, taking Natalie’s hand. “Keep them closed, follow me.”

Natalie gripped her hand and moved to a standing position. She followed her into the bathroom.

“Here, here,” Megan said, inching her over. She cupped her hands over Natalie’s eyes. “Are you ready?”

Natalie nodded.

“Ok, ok,” Megan said. Natalie could hear the smile in her voice, and she smiled too.

“Open your eyes.” Megan pulled her hands away. Natalie opened her eyes.

Natalie examined her reflection, turning it from one side to another, tilting her chin. She looked not like herself. The look was simple: blotted out clouds of blush on each cheek, like a
natural flush, warm peachy gloss on her lips, and a slick of mascara across each eye. It was undeniably Alice. The look, somehow, elevated her costume, smoothing over the cracks of the electric blue dress that only approximated Alice’s tea dress.

‘Do you like it?’

Natalie nodded, “I really, really like it.”

Megan squealed, and pulled Natalie into a hug.

“I think this is going to be good,” Megan said. “I think, I think this is going to be ok.”

“Of course,” Natalie said, squeezing Megan. “It’s going to be ok.”

They held each other for a while.

“I’m sorry,” Megan said, pulling away. “I just feel so stupid. I’ve been so nervous all day. Like, my mom and Clay, they got so excited about this. You know, they were so happy. But, I don’t know. Everything with Jordy. It has to be perfect. I told her that this would be a real party.”

“It is a real party,” Natalie said.

“There are fucking goody bags! There will be high school boys here and I made goody bags. Fucking bat erasers. Spider rings?”

“Well,” Natalie said. “How long do we have before everyone shows up?”

Megan shrugged, and pulled out her Razr, “thirty minutes.”

“That’s plenty of time.” Natalie said. “We can tone it down a little, if you want.”

Megan nodded. “Ok,” she said. “Ok.” She took a deep breath. “I just don’t want to ruin anything. Clay was so excited. They asked for pictures. What if he sees and gets upset?”

“I don’t think they’ll notice.”

Megan looked at Natalie. They both knew that Megan’s mom noticed everything.
“Well, I mean, so what if they do?”

“Come here,” Megan said, walking out into the hallway. Natalie followed her into the master closet.

“Reach up there, to the Birkenstock box,” Megan said. Natalie was a few inches taller, always reaching for her. She took the box down and handed it to Megan, who opened it and pulled out a smaller box, from which she pulled a ring-box.

“Here,” she said, opening the box. Inside was a diamond ring. “Clay and I picked it out together. Isn’t it beautiful?”

It was heavy, and glistening, a real sparkle, deeper than a rhinestone.

“Is it real?”

Megan nodded. “He’s going to propose this Christmas. We’re going on a cruise.”

“Oh,” Natalie said.

“I can’t ruin this,” Megan said. ‘What if he gets mad? I can’t ruin this.’

Natalie held the ring box in her hand. She wanted to slip it on her finger, feel the weight of it. It was a lock on this world for Megan, a guarantee set into whisper, promised but not fulfilled. Natalie knew Megan, how she worried about these things, hated uncertainty. She held her breath when driving past graveyards, avoided thirteens, and never stepped on a crack in the sidewalk. If she was careful enough, the floor wouldn’t fall through. If she was good enough, Clay would propose. But also, by the same logic, if she were to falter, he would revoke his promise. And, in the same turn, to keep her place with Jordy, she had to contort herself into another, contradictory shape.

“Don’t worry,” Natalie said. “It’s your birthday.”
They went down to the living room to tone down what they could, taking a few photos as they went, feigning spontaneity: holding empty paper cups to their mouths, looking out the corner of their eyes to guests that had yet to arrive.

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The ice hand bobbed in the punch bowl, thumbless. Natalie and Megan were the only ones in costume.

“I didn’t think you were serious,” Jordy said, consoling Megan. The flock of girls surrounded Megan in the living room: Jordy, Bekah, and Tiffany. All of them in their usual clothes: polos, henley cuts, and denim.

Natalie sat at the kitchen table, eyes fixed on the ghost hand. Their arrival had been a rupture. For a few minutes Megan had tried to paste over it, to go on with the thing, show them around the house, pour them cups of punch. But she could not hold, her words began to crumple, her manners giving in to a wobbly chin. She smashed the round end of the ladle on the ice hand when serving Jordy and it set her into tears.

“It’s a Halloween party,” Megan said.

“Megan,” Jordy said. “We thought you were kidding.”

“I’m so stupid,” she said, smearing her cat-eye make up.

“No,” Jordy said.

“No,” Tiffany said, and Bekah too.

Jordy took her hand, “let’s fix this.”

“Tiff,” Jordy said, “did you bring the Goose?”
Tiffany nodded, unzipping her backpack. She unwrapped a bottle of vodka in a plastic jug, Sam’s Club, not Goose, the same kind that Natalie’s mom drank: economical, clean, good with juice, or, after a bad shift, alone.

“See,” Jordy said. She squeezed Megan’s shoulder. Megan smiled through the smear she had made of her face. “And there will be boys later.”

Jordy took Megan upstairs to change.

Tiff nudged in front of Natalie and poured a healthy dose of vodka into the bowl, giving it a stir.

“What’s this supposed to be?” she asked, pointing to the bowl. “an octopus?”

“See the thumb,” Natalie said.

“Do you want a cup?” Tiffany asked, pouring herself a glass.

“Yes,” Natalie said. They all knew each other from Crest. Natalie had met them before, once or twice, when hanging out with Megan, but they never remembered her.

She took the cup in her hands and swallowed: eyes shut, pushing against the collapse of her throat. She’d go in soft on the edges or else she’d have to put her finger on the pulse of anger that rippled outwards from her center, the urge to throw these girls out, take the streamers from the trash and put them back up. What right did they have to be here?

“I like Alice,” Tiffany said, gesturing towards Natalie. “Are you going to stay as her?”

Natalie shrugged.

“I think you should, you know, it fits.”

---
Megan came down fresh, undone from her cat costume, her mood lifted. Drinking was already under way. Bekah shepherded them over to the living room, where they sat, sipping at spiked punch, and tumbling over subjects that Natalie had no grasp on: cute teachers, class placements, which girls in class were sluts, and which were lying about being a slut. She sat, mute, on the floor by the coffee table, discarded, like so many of the decorations from the aborted theme. She took the cup up as her friend. The first sips had unfurled a nice velvet warmth over her, a calm, a distance from herself.

Natalie watched, a barnacle on their hull, waiting for anyone to go after a refill, so she might be excused to do the same.

“So,” Jordy said, her voice lilting in affected drunkenness. “Natalie. You go to Berman?”

Natalie looked at her and squinted, trying to pick up the scramble of her words.

Megan nudged her on the shoulder.

“Yes,” Natalie said.

“Is it true that a seventh grader got knocked up there?”

“That’s so ghetto,” Tiffany said. “Is it true that everyone there has syphilis? I heard that they had to replace all the toilet seats.”

“Shut up,” Jordy said, shoving Tiffany. “I heard there was a girl who had a baby at thirteen. My mom, her friend works in delivery or whatever and she says that girls from over there come there all the time, like girls our age having babies. It’s wild. Did you know her?”

“Yeah,” Natalie said. “A little.”

“Mmm,” Jordy said. She took a long sip from her drink, a bite of an Oreo. “So was she like a huge slut?”
“I don’t know,” Natalie said. She resented the line of questioning, the thing that Jordy wanted to shape the girl into. This was her use to them, to report from the freakshow, what tepid concept they had of ghetto, which really only meant a cluster of apartment complexes, words were tossed around in her school like majority-minority. Natalie’s school admins were always going on about diversity: a word which flipped, for Crest kids, into ghetto.

Whatever drama happened at Crest: rehabs and overdoses, Homecoming Queens driving into telephone poles, was tragedy. At Berman, it was a comedy. The ten miles that separated the two schools, cut up by off roads and strip malls split them into being separate worlds entirely. The only current that flowed between them was in innuendo, rumor. What monster lived there, at Berman? The slow, outward crawl of the city, which was only to be touched with a controlling hand.

“And what about you? Are you a slut?” Jordy asked, her mouth closed around a maraschino cherry, picked straight from a jar she’d taken out of the fridge.

Megan laughed, getting up to get another cup of punch.

---

Natalie and Megan had spent a whole weekend putting plastic stars on Megan’s ceiling. It was her way of making the place her own, as Clay had encouraged her to do.

Megan had always wanted them, the glow in the dark stars, but she had never been able to put them up in her old apartment. She had never lived in a place that was all her own. She asked her mother for a blue wall, and was answered with all of the complications a blue wall might bring. If they painted the walls blue, they’d have to paint them white again when they moved. If she put stars up on the ceiling and they peeled off the popcorn ceiling, they would have to pay a fee.
Before they moved into Clay’s house, he had her room painted blue, and her mom bought her a bubble pack of stars.

Natalie looked at them now, the milky green lights, put up in clumps. They had attempted to make it look random.

_It has to look natural_, Megan said. Stars too evenly placed were untacked, moved closer. Stars jammed too close together, moved outwards.

Natalie hadn’t intended for things to go like this, but maybe she had. As the night went on, things got fuzzier, intentions blurred.

Now Natalie was laying in Megan’s bed, on the pile of Megan’s cat dress, confused. She was attempting to make out Megan’s design, what little patterns she could parse out. She was trying to make sense of anything, of what had become of the night, such a slippery thing.

Chris and the boys came over around six. The girls had gotten anxious about their arrival. Jordy called Bryce three times, but was sent to voicemail. Jordy had been on the edge of tears, the girls huddled around her, patting her back, a lot of _it’s ok’s_ passed between them. But when the boys did arrive, Jordy showed none of her worry. She pulled Bryce over to the couch and got him a drink.

“This is weak shit,” he said. Chris pulled out a bag filled with cans of Four Lokos.

All of them were so tall, they looked so much bigger than any of them, with whiskery chins, smelling like cigarettes.

Chris must have singled Natalie out immediately. She couldn’t remember the exact moment: but there it was, his hand on her thigh, the wet sop of his breath on her neck as he spoke to her. And then there was Megan: sitting in the corner all alone, and Natalie, looking at her
sometimes, but unable to fix a glance, her eyes kept wandering, and Chris kept pawing. She tended to her Four Lokos, but she was already drunk by the time the boys arrived.

Introductions dissolved into cloistered off conversation, hands slipped up skirts, conversations bubbling up and fizzling out. She had to keep reminding herself where she was, that she was with Chris. His name was Chris. She thought of Megan’s story. Chris had made out with Megan before. The thought jingled in the back of her head, but she struggled to connect it to anything.

Megan kept trying to start a game, or something. She pulled out some boxes, Jordy and Tiff gave some tentative interest, but were drawn back by their boys, who pulled at their hair, nibbled at their ears. Megan eventually gave up, and plunged her hopes for the night into the punch bowl.

At some point, Chris led Natalie up the stairs, his arms supporting hers, she looked down and saw Megan sipping from a cup of punch, and Jordy, looking up from her man, a smile, almost a laugh.

His kiss was all tongue. Natalie felt as though she might choke on it, but liked the obliterating attention, how he laid her down and got on top, and pressed his teeth to her teeth, he moved his hand up and down her body, grabbing, digging into her.

And she was up in the stars.

She didn’t mean to bite him, or maybe she did. She’d been trying to tell him: please, stop. Something like that. There was blood in her mouth, he was pressing too hard. At first, she enjoyed the intensity of it. But then it turned, and she felt as though she were being blotted out,
that she might be smothered, crushed flat, so that he might come up for air in thirty minutes or an hour, and find her dead. And then he might continue on.

And what would he say about her? That she let him do it, that she asked for it. There were a lot of stories about the girl, the one who had the baby. Thirteen and a mom. She let a high school boy go too far. And since then she had evaporated into a sad story.

In the version on this night that she would tell herself, patched together from so many disjointed memories, she was simply trying to talk, and his tongue got in the way. Remembered maybe trying to press her hands against his chest, but he was too heavy, and she was too drunk to realize the mechanics of speaking with a full mouth. But, regardless of the exact events, she remembered one thing clearly: the clamp of her teeth on his tongue, and the large walloping breath she took in once he was off of her, it felt so miraculous that for a minute or so she didn’t realize, couldn't fathom, that anything could be wrong.

But then she surfaced.

He was yelling at her, she looked up at him, he was standing in front of the mirror that hung on the back of Megan’s door.

“Fuck,” he yelled, cupping his hand to his mouth. “Fuck. why did you do that?”

He spoke with a lisp, delicately maneuvering his vitriol through a pulpy tongue. She laughed. She could not make sense of what she saw, what she heard, something about it did not add up, some bit of time had slipped between her fingers.

He turned on the light and looked in the mirror, examining the damage. She winced at the light.

“Turn it off,” she said, throwing a pillow over her face.

“What is wrong with you?” It wasn’t a question.
After a few minutes, he turned off the light and left, slamming the door on the way out, shaking the mirror on its hinges.

After a few minutes, Natalie managed to muster some presence of mind. She sat up in the bed and bit her tongue to alleviate the overwhelming feeling of nausea.

Of course she was a slut. There was no question, and why he took her up there to begin with. It was easy, she was another Berman slut. *Does everyone at Berman have syphilis?* Why had she not waved to that girl? She didn’t want to be like her. But it must not have mattered. They both went to Berman. The district lines she lived within meant everything.

She went to the mirror and looked herself over. Her face looked displaced. Mascara smudged, lipgloss smeared past their targets, leaving a gap, where she could see the start of her real face.

Chris would tell them something, maybe a lie, maybe the truth. It was all fuzzy to her, anyway.

“Slut,” she said, turning her face. He’d made a chain of hickies across her neck, that looked like purple flowers, were wet still, sopping little spit bubbles dripped down her chest. She pressed her forehead to the glass and looked. She looked until she saw nothing, a blur: some lights, some darks, little blotches of color.

“Slut,” she said.

She pressed further, until she felt a crack.

Natalie took care in redressing. She had to sit down, putting her jeans back on. Her body was numb and wobbly, and kept shifting around, against her intention, like an ill fitting dress.
She wiped away her makeup and put on her hoodie, that smelled, within the context of this big, clean house, like home, like mildew and damp.

She stepped outside, onto the landing, and listened to the goings on down stairs. She heard laughing and whispers, and thought she might have caught the jagged end of her name a few times.

“She just does it for attention,” Megan said, and laughed.

Natalie leaned over the landing and saw Megan, now in Chris’s lap, one hand moving up and down her leg, the other holding an ice pack to his mouth.

Natalie thought of going back into the room, of staying there forever, like if she went back into Megan’s room she would never have to come out, she would never have to face what she’d done.

She went into the master bedroom instead. She stood in front of the bed, rubbed her feet over the vacuum lines in the carpet. She’d once had a room of her own. She tried to remember. She had lived in a big house with Lerlene. Once, but that was a long time ago. It seemed impossible to her now.

She slipped into the closet.

She took down the shoe box, took out the ring box, took out the ring. She slipped it on her finger, the correct one. She stood in the closet, looking down at her hand, how beautiful, the way the light reflected, not like glitter, not a cheap shine. The was depth there, in the light it produced. It was real and valuable, and didn't smell like tarnish, like pennies, like all of Lerlene’s jewelry, like her mother’s.

Natalie didn’t have one beautiful thing, but she would have this.
Natalie came down stairs. The party had gone past its prime. Bekah and Tiffy sat clumped on the floor, laughing at a skit the two of the high school boys were putting on, hands on hips made of air, miming conquests, or maybe her, what Chris had said. Jordy sat in Bryce’s lap. Megan sat with Chris. She looked at Megan, who looked at her and smiled, then turned away and laughed.

Everything was ruined.

Natalie went into the dining room and sat at the table. The poor ice hand had been whittled down to a pathetic stump, the punch reduced to a puddle. There were few snacks left, some grapes, some strawberries, a few Reeses cups. All too sweet, she needed something real to eat. She opened the fridge and gathered some food—cold cuts, cheese, a jar of sweet pickles—and began to eat.

Her head ached, that throbbing ache that she had seen in her mother so many times. No loud music, no smells. Be quiet, Natalie. Turn off the light, Natalie. The way her mom would slump for hours. She could understand now, she felt sick and still woozy. Her body still numbed at the edges, an alien thing for her to trudge around.

She took the ring off of her finger and rolled it around her hand. It was heavy, in the way that real things are heavy. She rubbed the tip of her thumb on its inside, there was a small ripple, an engraving. She looked closer.

Family Always: Clay, Michelle, Megan.

“What are you doing?”

Natalie dropped the ring on the table, and tried to cup her hands over it, but only tipped it onto a slice of cheese.
“What are you doing?” Megan asked, she looked down at the ring, sitting now on a bit of muenster.

“I was just looking,” she said, grabbing up the ring and cheese.

“Give it back,” Megan said. She held out her hand.

“Give it back,” Megan said.

Natalie held it closer to her. “I was just looking at it.”

“It’s not yours, Natalie.” She started to cry, her hands cupped in front of her. Jordy came back into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?”

“My ring,” Megan said. “She took my ring.”

Jordy went over to Natalie.

“Give her her ring,” Jordy said. Her eyes were glassy, empty, she lunged at her. “You little fucking cunt.”

Natalie pulled away from her, backing into the wall. She pressed the ring, softening in its cheese envelope in her hand behind her back. Jordy came forward, reaching to grab at her hands.

“Give it back, give it back,” Jordy said, trying to pull her hands forward.

“Stop, stop,” Megan said, pulling at Jordy’s shoulder.

Jordy turned around then and looked at Megan.

“Fuck you,” Jordy said.

She turned to Natalie, “and fuck you. Piece of shit.”

Jordy rolled her throat to gather a loogie. But by the time she could gather enough snot for her aims, Natalie had already punched her in the face. Natalie wasn’t sure if it was on purpose. It must’ve been, though there was no thought behind it, just her hand rolling towards
her face, those suckered in cheeks. And when she hit Jordy, square on the cheek, she went down, and out flopped the loogie, arcing into the punch bowl.

Natalie stood for a minute afterwards trying to comprehend the situation. She looked at her hand, there was a small blot of blood on her knuckle. Jordy was writhing on the carpet below her, her nose bleeding out into the carpet.

“What the fuck,” Megan said.

“What’s going on?” Bryce said, ambling over from the living room.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie said.

“What the fuck did you do?” Bryce yelled.

“Fuck,” Jordy squealed, holding her hands over her face.

Natalie ran.

She ran out the front door and kept on running. She ran in the dark of the subdivision, lit only by the occasional street lights. She counted them: one, two, three. She didn’t know how many it would take before she felt safe. Surely they were all chasing her, they would chase her once they saw what she did to Jordy. The blood. Each time she thought of it the blotch got bigger and bigger. She turned left, then right, indiscriminately, expecting to be followed by all of them, to be trampled, pulled down and beaten to a pulp.

She thought she might run forever, invigorated by the burst of action, the bits of memory that she could not even stretch into a sketch of what had happened, what she could recount were the movements, the draw of her arm, the sharp crack of the punch, and her feet landing hard on the pavement, cutting through air like a razor, like and arrow draw from a taut bow, into the dark.

“Natalie.”
The call came in in a sharp warble, like a tinkling in her own head.

“Natalie.”

The voice was small, but familiar, and growing as her own speed declined, the first jolt of energy wearing off. Her chest burned.

“Natalie.”

She turned around, Megan was close behind her. She kept running.

And then the smack, and quiet. It sounded like a wet thump, it barely registered but for the stop of Megan’s calling out to her. She turned around and at first did not see her. She walked back.

“Megan,” she called. She saw a small lump at the edge of the sidewalk. Megan’s face lifted up from the sidewalk, she looked up at Natalie and then threw up a spray of acid green vomit onto the ground, and started to scream.

Natalie knelt down by Megan, watching the ooze of vomit spread out over the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Natalie asked, cupping her face.

Megan did not answer, but morphed her scream into a sob. “Why,” she said. She looked at Natalie, “why.”

“Where are you hurt?”

Natalie helped her up to a sitting position. She cupped her hand around her ankle. Natalie wrapped her arms around her, trying to squeeze out the hurt, another nonsensical thing, a drunken urge to fix things in an oafish way, like a child’s safety ritual (if I keep a stack of presents in the closet then that’s proof. Then they love me. I can keep them here if I do this. If I squeeze Megan tight enough then she will be fixed).

“Why?” Megan asked.
“I don’t know,” Natalie said. “I’m sorry.”

She lifted Megan’s chin from her chest and wiped her tears away. She looked at her, Megan looked away.

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t know.” Megan said, evening out her breathing.

“Do you want to try?” Natalie asked.

“In a minute,” Megan said.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie said.

Megan shrugged, snorting up a bunch of snot. “Why do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Ruin things,” she said. “When something isn’t about you. It’s my birthday, Natalie.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. It’s just-- you have everything.”

“I don’t have everything.”

“I’ve missed you,” Natalie said. “I miss you.”

“What do you mean? Do you know how hard it is to get my mom to pick you up? But we do.”

“it’s just different.”

“Yeah,” Megan said.

They sat together on the curb. Natalie looked up at the sky, but could only see a few stars. It was cloudy out, and threatening rain.

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know.”
Natalie used the post-it on the fridge to call Megan’s mom. She told her only the bare facts. Megan had hurt her ankle. She should come home.

She got to work cleaning up the mess she made while Megan rested on the couch, her ankle lifted and iced. By the time they stumbled back into the house, everyone else was gone. Natalie took the ring from the pocket of cheese, washed it off, and put it back in its box upstairs.

“They’ll never know,” she told Megan, who nodded and turned back to the George Lopez rerun on TV.

Natalie knew that this was her last time here. She could clean up everything, hide the drinks, scrub out the blood stain (an impossible task, blood stains always left a mark). But she could not hide the fact that something had gone wrong.

“What did you do?” Megan’s mom had asked when she called, stored up in the pantry so that Megan wouldn’t hear. “Oh, Natalie, what did you do?”

Natalie cleaned up all evidence of the party, and put it all in the trash outside. The parents were on their way already. They would be back soon.

She sat down next to Megan on the couch.

“How do you feel?” She asked Megan.

Megan shrugged, and turned to look at Natalie.

“Was she mad?” Megan asked.

Natalie looked at Megan, so sleepy, her hair already clumping at the back. She was also tired. She wanted nothing more than to go to bed with her, to sleep. But she could not. There was risk of a concussion, and Megan had to go to the hospital. Natalie was being sent home.
Megan’s mom didn’t say it to Natalie, she didn’t have to, but the fact was that this whole thing was her fault.

“No,” Natalie said. “She wasn’t mad.”

“Good,” Megan said. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Oh,” Megan said. “You know.” He yawned.

“You have to stay up,” Natalie said, jiggling her shoulder.

“Mm,” Megan said, lifting her head. She looked at Natalie and smiled. She put her hand on Natalie’s knee.

“Do you remember that song?”

“What song?”

“The song you used to play me. Lerlene’s song?”

“Which song?”

“You know,” Megan said. “You know, the one about the moon, the stars, or something. Something about the night— that sad song.”

“That’s like half of her songs,” Natalie said.

“No, but you know the one.”

“Yeah,” Natalie said. It was the song she played for Megan, at their first sleepover. It was an embarrassing story, something they made fun of often, what weird kids they were. The pageants they used to put on. And back then Lerlene’s songs were the only ones she knew by heart.

“Can you sing it for me?”

“I’m no good at it.”
“Bullshit,” Megan said. “You love to sing it. Remember? You used to dress up, you would dress both of us up, and make us duet.”

“No I didn’t.”

“You did. And I know you can sing. Sing for me,” she said. “Or I’ll go to sleep and die.”

By the end of her life, Lerlene’s voice had gone brittle and raspy. But she never stopped singing. If she ever stopped singing, she said, she would die. When people stopped hiring her to sing, she bought her own stage. If she could see one smiling face, she said, if she could make one person smile. And Natalie saw Megan, and she was smiling.