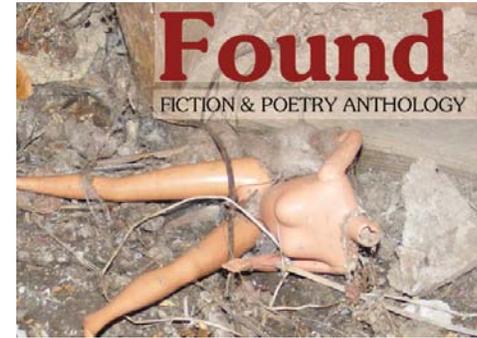


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Laura Loomis, Mary McCluskey, Susan Meyers, Victor Arnoldo Perez,
Lucille Shulklapper, Sara Toruno-Conley



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Desiree

Susan Meyers

The girl, Desiree, was perched on the front steps when I arrived. Although we'd never met, I recognized her. She was lean and dark: a tan, black-haired child a little too tall for her age. The pants she wore were cut off crooked around the knee; her skin was muddied and her shirt stained. As I pulled into the driveway, she sat brushing the hair of a naked Barbie doll, her expression dull and unamused. The rest of the house lay still. Good. Home briefly from college, I'd told my mother that I didn't want to be interrupted.

But my chore, I realized, would be more difficult than hoped. The garage was a disaster of other people's belongings: a duffle bag of hockey sticks, a canister of old cassettes; boxes of magazines and hiking maps; a record player; a French horn. Most of it belonged to tenants who had moved out long ago. Ever since Mom had begun renting rooms to augment her alimony, she had lost all sense of boundaries. And now this: an unkempt little girl pushing her way past the hedgerows and rhododendrons over toward where I worked. She tossed her doll carelessly onto a cardboard box and set herself down atop another one. After a minute more, she blurted: "I'm eight," thrusting up her hands, fingers spread wide to show the years.

I tried ignoring her.

"Hey," she moved closer: a more brazen girl than I'd ever been. "I'm *eight*."

I lifted a box from the top of one pile and set it aside. "Ummhmm."

"I'm eight and I bet I could whup you." She shrugged toward the box I'd just set down. "What's in there?"

"I don't know. That one's not mine."

"Open it."

"No—it's not *mine*."

“Do it anyway.” She leapt up, pointing her sharp little finger down at the dilapidated box. “*Now.*”

My mother’s handwriting scrawled along the cardboard flaps: “Lease agreements /app. forms.”

“No, Desiree. Don’t touch it.”

“Hey!” She stood back for a moment. “You know my name.”

I nodded, shifting aside another box.

She studied me, unimpressed. “Maybe so. But you still have to do what I say.” She stomped her sandaled foot as proof; a naked slap sounded across the cement floor.

“Shhh, Desiree,” I tried a stern tone. “You need to stay outta the way.”

She plopped back down on a box, grabbed up her Barbie doll and sat stroking the plastic hair in quick, violent sweeps. Desiree hadn’t lived with her mother for years, not since she had left the three-year-old Desiree alone in a shabby apartment for nearly a week. After that, the otherwise absent father had stepped in—after encouragement from the authorities—and the little girl had weathered his piecemeal life until four years later, when her grandmother—my mother’s new lover—had agreed to take her. Now that the two women were living together in our old family home on Beech Street, Mom hadn’t wasted any time explaining Desiree’s story when she’d declined, once again, to let me stay at the house that summer. The rooms were full. Always, always they were full, she’d tell me—and did I really want to displace a poor little girl whose mother had abandoned her?

After a while, Desiree piped up again, “Know what?”

“What?”

“I hate you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Uh huh. I bet you hate me, too.”

I didn’t even swivel around to look at her: “Not really.” Finally, I’d uncovered something of mine: an old box of photo albums. After shoving it into the bed of my pickup, I finally turned to look at her. She sat cross-legged atop a box marked “Christmas

Treasures,” also labeled in my mother’s tightly curled penmanship.

“Well,” she huffed, “you should.”

I wiped my brow and looked to the sky; the day was hot already. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m a bad girl.”

“Why are you bad?”

“Because I break things.”

“Really?” I hoisted a crate of old books into the truck. “Like what?”

“Stuff. Like I broke my dad’s guitar. That’s why I came here.”

She sat peeling up the tape at the edges of the Christmas box. I could have told her to stop, but didn’t feel like it.

“And because he hit me. They said he couldn’t do that. So I came to live with my grandma. Both grandmas.”

“And do you like it here?” For a moment, I tried to imagine Desiree in fifteen years: like me, just out of school, and already a bit dubious about the world.

Desiree shrugged, “It’s okay. They don’t hit you or yell. But they’re pretty boring. I hate them too.”

“Yeah,” I nodded sharply.

Her eyes rounded large; she stopped peeling at the box. “You hate them too?”

“Well, I don’t like them very much right now.”

“Same thing,” she chirped, settling more comfortably onto the box, her legs crossed. “Why do *you* hate them?”

“They’re selfish.” I shoved another box into the truck.

Desiree thought about that. “Oh,” she breathed, still fingering the shredded tape. Then she brightened: “Yeah. Hey, do you know what? My mom was selfish, too. She a-ban-don-ed me.”

“So I heard.”

“Yeah, but my name was in the newspaper. It said I was an *abandoned child*. And there was a picture and everything.” Desiree popped up from her seat on the box and examined other unused objects in the garage: a flattened soccer ball, a broken coil of garden hose, Mom’s old treadmill.

“I could show you the newspaper,” she said. “Maybe next time you come.”

She stood peering into a box of rusted tools—my dad’s.

“I’m not coming back,” I said carefully.

She stopped. Looked up at me. “Why not?”

Inside a box marked “Mementos,” my high school diploma was shoved between old certificates honoring various school awards—honor roll, track meets, choir competitions—and a picture of me with both of my parents somewhere along the coast. “Because I’m moving away.”

“Where? Where you gonna live?”

“Denver.”

“Where’s that?”

“Colorado.”

“Is it far?”

“Yeah, pretty far.” I pulled the photo out of the box. The coastline boasted the same beautiful and jagged rocks we’d seen every year on our summer expeditions. Dad grinned at the camera, squeezing a ten-year-old me, affectionate and content. Mom stood beside us, tilting her head loosely toward the happy father-daughter couple.

“Well, I’m going with you.” Desiree laid her doll on the truck’s tailgate, the doll’s legs prickling the air at odd angles and its pink, pointed face grinning up at me.

“Desiree, you can’t come.”

“Yes I can.”

I slipped the picture back inside the box and refolded the flaps. “Why, Desiree? Why would you want to come with me?”

“Because you’re nice. And I don’t hate you anymore.”

Beneath my fingers, the box flaps felt smooth as worn leather. I wondered what kind of photograph a small town community newspaper would print next to a story about domestic abandonment: Desiree, reunited with her father? A small, dark child and her punk dad, himself barely twenty?

“Desiree,” I turned to her. “You wouldn’t like it there. It’s real different from Oregon.”

“But isn’t it nice?”

“Yeah, but different.” The box was heavy. I grunted lightly, lifting it up into the truck.

Desiree was unconvinced. “Then why’re you going?”

“Because I got a job there. And my dad lives there, too.”

“Oh,” she paused. “You gonna live with your dad?”

“Not exactly.” Dad had been enthusiastic when I’d told him about the job: an HR intern at Quest. He was proud, he said, and happy for me. The next week he’d sent a copy of apartment listings from the local newspaper.

I slid the box into the truck. “But he’ll be around.”

“I used to live with my dad,” she said, running her fingernails roughly up and down the corrugated box front. “But not anymore. He says I shouldn’t be allowed to live with Grandma ‘cause there’s no man here.”

“Well, he doesn’t sound too generous, either.”

Desiree agreed, then caught herself. “Yeah, but you’re not, neither. You should take me with you.”

She flipped the Barbie doll legs back and forth in a swimming motion.

“Desiree, I don’t have anything to do with you.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“But that doesn’t make you my responsibility.”

“Hey,” she pouted. “You’re bad.”

I turned away, and after a few moments of silence, she gave up. Angry and restless, she looked around for something to do, grabbed the Barbie doll and threw it skidding out into the driveway: *So there*. Then she disappeared into the tangle of trees and underbrush that lined the side of the garage.

With Desiree absent for several minutes, I finished loading boxes and was starting to rope them onto the truck. Then the sound of sandals on the driveway caught my attention. Desiree was dragging a huge, rotting tree limb—nearly as long as she

was—behind her: “I’m gonna fight you.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna fight you. C’mon, we’re fighting now.” She lifted the limb a few inches off the ground and let it thunk back down, with what, I supposed, was meant to be an intimidating thud.

“What are you talking about?”

“Ready?” she smacked the truck tires with her stick.

“No, stop it Desiree. I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Hey,” she looked up. “Where’s your weapon?”

“Stop it, Desiree. You’re giving me the creeps.”

“You gotta have a sword.”

“I don’t have a sword.”

“Then I win.”

“OK.” I pulled a length of rope in place and tied it off with a firm square knot. “You win.”

“Yeah, I win, so you gotta stay here.”

“Desiree, go put that stick away. I told you I’m leaving, like permanently.”

“I know what that means.” She was smiling now, as she swished the “sword” back and forth in the gravel.

“What *what* means?”

“Why you’re leaving.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yeah, it means you’re in trouble.”

“I’m not in trouble, Desiree.” The quick clap of my voice surprised me.

“Everybody goes away when they’re in trouble. When they do bad things. Like my mommy.”

“Desiree,” I stiffened. “I’m not your mother.”

Four years ago, I’d stood here in the driveway, this same truck piled high with my belongings. After my first year of college, I’d come home for the summer, but Mom had forgotten: “Oh, Gracie, all the rooms are full. I guess you’ll have to go back by the university and rent there.”

“But, Mom, you invited me here. I mean, you’re my *mother*.”

“I’m not your mother anymore.” Her voice sounded like a recording, something she’d said to herself in a quiet room. Something she now believed. “You’re a grown person, and so am I.”

“But Mom, what am I going to do? You’re supposed to care about where I live!”

“Oh Grace, don’t get bitchy.”

And I didn’t. *Not me. Not bitchy*. I shut my mouth, put my extra things in the garage, and went back downtown, like she’d told me to.

“I know,” Desiree didn’t miss a beat. “But you’re like her.”

“Christ, Desiree, I’m not anything like your mother!”

“You’re leaving, like her.”

My head hurt. “Desiree, go put that stick back where you found it. If your grandma finds it out here, I bet she gets mad.”

Desiree’s brows lifted in a resigned “I told you so” expression, as she sadly, melodramatically dragged her weapon back to the bushes. By the time she got back, I was already in my truck, starting the engine and rolling down the windows of the heat-baked cab. “Hey!” I heard her frantic voice behind me. Desiree had been fooled, and she knew it; I was getting away from her.

“Don’t leave me!” she shrieked.

I craned my head out of the window to look back at her. She stood stared terrified at my truck, idling in the dirt.

“I’ve got to go now, Desiree.”

“But you can’t go leave me,” she yelled again. “I . . . I’m an abandoned child!”

Because I was unsure of what she’d do—whether she’d stay put or run foolishly after me—I eased the car forward slowly. And because I sat eyeing her in my mirror instead of watching the road, I hit something: some small plastic thing that gave a quick, sharp snap as I rolled over it. Desiree heard it too. I edged forward and watched as she scrambled after me to rescue her Barbie doll. I’d run right over its little neck and snapped off the head. Desiree looked at me in horror. And that’s when I made my error: “I’m sorry, Desiree. I didn’t mean to.”

In that instant, she saw her opportunity. “Killer!” she screamed. “You killed it! You can’t leave! You gotta stay and buy me another doll!”

“Desiree. . . .”

“Killer! Killer!” she raised her head and her voice, yelling for all the trees to hear, the too-hot sky, the red-breasted robins and dirty, scattered crows. “You’re a killer! Killer! Killer! Don’t go away killer! Don’t run away!” In her tirade, she threw the headless doll at the truck, where it thunked mildly against the metal and fell back into the dust. Then she leveled her eyes with my mirror. She could see me watching her, my mouth agape. Her expression was narrow, tough, unforgiving.

“I can’t, Desiree. I’ve got to go.”

When I slid the car forward again, Desiree lost it: “But you can’t go! You can’t leave me! I’m an abandoned child!” She ran toward the truck and began slapping it, then grabbed the side door, and as it swung open, she fell backwards onto the gravel driveway. I slammed the door and locked it, my foot pressed hard against the brake. Desiree was screaming. *Jesus. Jesus Christ.* I looked up at the house: no movement. *My God,* I thought suddenly, *I wonder if they’re even in there.* Then Desiree was up again, smacking her fists against the truck. Blood stained the palms of her hands where she’d fallen; but otherwise, she was unhurt. My own heart was pounding and I was breathing hard as I told myself. *Good God, I’ve got to get out of here.* I eased my foot off the brake, and Desiree jumped back, grabbing handfuls of dirt and gravel and flinging them at the cab. “I hate you! I hate you!” she screamed. “Killer! You killed me! Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Never have I so vehemently wished away the old potholes that line that road. They slowed me, but I didn’t pause again until I’d reached the main road a half mile away. Shaking, I pulled onto the shoulder, turned on my hazard lights, and stepped out to check the boxes. *Goddamnit. Goddamn.* My breath was still too short and too fast. The pit of my stomach lurched. *Bitch. Bitch. You little bitch.*

Desiree had dirtied the cab with gravel and smeared the side panels where she had smacked it—one small, greasy handprint

stained the very front—but there was no other damage. I crawled back inside the pickup and lay across the seat, holding my arms against me and shutting my eyes. “I hate you. I hate you,” I repeated under my breath. No cars passed. I choked against a sob, and let myself cry louder: *I hate you. I hate you!* The sun boiled down through the windshield; my face burned in the heat. The Sunday seclusion around me was perfect, mute. And there along that county road, with all of my history packed up behind me, I pressed against the pebbled seat and screamed and screamed and screamed.

In the Beginning

Sara Toruno-Conley

The first sign was your handwriting. Like a child's it slanted left then right, letters unevenly placed, lines falling off. The endearing attempt made.

Everything else was normal.
You drove by yourself 433 miles, sometimes along the coast.
You maneuvered up hills casually taken for granted,
created self-portraits along the cliffs, ate at cafes,
ordered exactly what you wanted.

Life is easy at this stage. Handwriting is hardly used,
barely noticed. Words
are still pronounced easily, you recall names
of childhood friends and solve complex formulas,
problems left finished.
We barely noticed.

Meeting Angel

Laura Loomis

The first abortion was necessity. The second also, I think. When it came to the third one, I told my husband we should be reconsidering. He was a well-established psychiatrist by then, making good money, and a daughter's dowry was not completely out of reach. We had moved to Chicago, and Indians in America are not as exorbitant about dowries as they are in India.

Still, when the test showed another girl, he began talking about having the procedure again. It was five years since my last pregnancy, and I worried that we might not have another chance. Something felt wrong inside me. Nonsense, he said, of course we'd have a son later.

I could have refused. Krishnamoorthy was not a cruel man, not intentionally, and he would not have insisted. But refusing would have been the same as admitting that we had been wrong the first two times. And so we went to the hospital, talking about the sons we would have some day.

Month after month, year after year, no baby. There would be no son, and no other daughter. And then, the year I turned forty-two, the letter came.

Not a letter, exactly. The envelope had no return address, and contained only an official document with an embossed seal: *Certificate of Live Birth*. The child's name was Angel. Our neighbor's name was Angel; maybe I'd gotten his mail by mistake? But no, the envelope was addressed to me.

Then I saw the father's name: Krishnamoorthy Patel.

The page seemed to be radiating heat, singeing my fingers and spreading across my body. I let the paper slip from my hands and flutter down to the table. I stared without touching it, wondering why it didn't burst into flames. The date was fourteen years ago, after my second abortion, before the last one. The mother's name I didn't recognize. The child's name was Angel

McLogan. I almost missed the box checked underneath.

Female.

A daughter. Not the coveted son. I had offered him three daughters. Even the name, Angel, offended. Who was he to call this girl an angel?

It would be hours before he got home from work. I wandered upstairs, laid my hand on the phone but didn't call him, reached for a bag but didn't pack it. Nothing cooled the burning in my skin, as if my fingerprints had been scorched off, leaving me unidentifiable.

When he arrived, it seemed to take weeks for him to close the door and hang up his coat. I couldn't find any words. Anything I said would have softened the injury I wanted to do him. Anything I said might have to be denied and disavowed later. I waited for him to sit down in the kitchen, then I picked up the birth certificate by its edges and placed it in his hands. Heat blurred the air between us.

"Where did you get this?"

This was all he had to say? I refused him any answer. He raised his head until his eyes were level with my chin. "Minda?" I waited, and finally he looked up and met my eyes, then quickly looked away.

"It's true then."

"I'm sorry. It was a terrible mistake. It was over long ago. Years ago." Pathetic words from him. Small words.

My throat was scorched dry. "You lied to me for how many years?"

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"You didn't want to hurt me. Well, that makes it all better then." Why wasn't the paper setting him on fire? Did this man have no shame?

"I am sorry. Truly sorry." He was sorry. Would that put a child in my womb?

"Do you still see her?"

"I see Angel. Her birthday, Christmas, that sort of thing." My Hindu husband was celebrating Christmas with his daughter. How American.

An idea came to me from nowhere. "Show me her picture."

"What?"

"I want to see what she looks like."

"I don't have one."

"Then get one from your lover. What kind of a man doesn't have a photograph of his only child?"

"Because I didn't want you to know about her! What would you want her picture for?"

"I want to know who she is. She is your only child, and I have none. It's the least you could do." Would she have his round face and his crooked little mouth?

He refused, and when I asked again later, he refused again. Perhaps he thought I meant the girl some harm. I didn't, usually. I coveted her, I wanted her to be the child who would give me a purpose. On days when I was home alone, I fantasized about going to her school or wherever girls go on the weekends. I pictured myself getting to know her, becoming her friend and confidante, without her knowing my real identity at first. Perhaps she would whisper that her mother wasn't taking good care of her, and we'd bring her home and I'd finally have a child.

I did nothing of the sort, of course. In fantasies, you don't have to explain the sudden appearance of a teenage daughter to your family. And I would have had no idea what to say to a fourteen-year-old girl if I saw her.

For years we rarely spoke of her. Every year on her birthday, Krishna would say he was meeting with a colleague, or some other errand that took him out of the house for a few hours. I never corrected him. I don't know if he went to her high school graduation, though he did tell me when he went to the mother's funeral. Angel was twenty by then. The mother had suffered a stroke. "She smoked a great deal," Krishna explained. And for all the silence between us, I found it strange I hadn't known that.

Today I have to find Angel's phone number. I have his leather address book, grabbed earlier from his desk amid a pile of letters from colleagues and notes for the articles he writes for important

professional journals. Here, in the hospital lounge, I can finally make the call. Her number has been crossed out and replaced a number of times, as if she moves often.

“Is this Angel Patel?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Excuse me. Angel McLogan.” Krishna’s address book has her right last name, McLogan, just like her birth certificate.

“Speaking.” Her voice seems to be squinting at me, trying to puzzle out why a woman with an Indian accent is calling her. “Can I help you?”

“This is Minda Patel. I am...” I cannot possibly say *your stepmother*. “I am your father’s wife. He is in the hospital. A heart attack.”

The silence stretches a long distance between us.

“Oh my God. Is he all right?”

“They don’t know yet.” He may not survive, they told me. “He will want to see you, I think.”

“We’ll be there right away.”

I hang up dully, only afterwards wondering who she means by we. I go back to Krishna’s hospital room. He’s sleeping noisily. His sister’s children are there, three girls sitting in a row like brightly colored birds on a branch. Mandeep, the oldest, got married last June. It will be years before the family can afford dowries for the younger two. Rohana stops talking when I walk in, trying to conceal a guilty look. Gossip is one thing all families are good at.

I hold Krishna’s hand, though I really don’t feel like it. A few hours ago, no one in the family knew he had been concealing a daughter for more than twenty years. Now I’ve been humiliated to all the American relatives, and by tomorrow the ones back home will all have heard different versions. I have to call my mother in Ahmedabad before one of my sisters does.

There are other calls I need to make. The clinic where he is the director now, greatly respected by his colleagues. They will need to make plans for his absence.

If I keep thinking about this, maybe I can forget for a moment that Krishna may not live through the night.

They’ve taken him for tests, again, when the girl arrives. She’s tall and fair-skinned, two things my daughters would not have been, if I’d had them. She has a thick mass of curly black hair, a dark blue dress that’s too short, and a gold cross glittering around her neck. The man with her is perhaps ten years older, with hair that odd color in between gold and brown.

“Mrs. Patel? I’m Angel. This is Roy.” I have no idea who Roy is, and I don’t want another stranger in my husband’s hospital room. But I don’t protest. If I were her, I wouldn’t want to walk into a room full of gossipy Indian relatives by myself either.

I tell her about the tests, about finding my husband on the kitchen floor. The nieces are whispering among themselves, the story a delectable morsel to be passed from one relative to another. Sudha smirks and says in Hindi, “Can you believe she let the whore’s daughter come here?”

Roy turns around and responds in perfect Hindi, “Is that the way you speak of someone’s mother to her face?” Sudha stammers an apology and scurries from the room. After a minute, Rohana and Mandeep make excuses to follow.

“Sorry about them,” I say in Hindi. “They are young and rather rude.” And still, I didn’t want them to leave. I could have had three girls like that, difficult and infuriating but real, permanent.

Angel is giving me a blank look. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak the language.”

I look from her to Roy. “But you do?”

“I speak a lot of languages.” He’s switched back to English. “I’m a translator.”

“I’m really tired,” Angel says. “Roy, would you mind getting us some coffee?” He looks surprised, and doesn’t get up right away. There’s no graceful way for him to ask her if she’ll be safe alone with me. “Please,” she says.

He rises. “Would you like some too, Mrs. Patel?”

“Tea would be nice. Thank you.”

Angel gets up and stretches. Her skirt rides up, and I see a tattoo of the goddess Kali on her thigh. I wonder if she has any idea

who Kali is. “I’m sorry,” she says, “for all the trouble I’ve caused you.” It’s obvious now she was being polite when she pretended not to understand the girls’ gossip. Some things don’t have to be translated to be understood.

“You were not the one to blame,” I say reluctantly. I am finding her harder to embrace in person than in the fantasy. “There are no illegitimate children, you know. Only illegitimate parents.”

“I hate that word. I’d just as soon be called a bastard.”

I can’t imagine how to respond. After a silence, I offer, “You look like your aunt Harpreet.”

“I have an aunt Harpreet?”

“Your father has two sisters and four brothers. Those girls are your cousins.”

“That’s sort of weird. I’ve never had cousins before. Mom was an only child. I think there are some other relatives on Roy’s father’s side, but I’ve never met them.”

It’s been too long since they took Krishna from the room. He should be back. “Roy is your cousin?” I’m so stupid. She just told me she doesn’t have cousins. I need to not think about what’s taking so long.

“He’s my brother. Half brother,” she amends quickly. “His father died before I was born. That’s when Mom started seeing Dr. Patel.”

“Ah.” That is not a subject I care to be discussing. Another silence. “Your brother seems to take good care of you.”

“He pretty much raised me.” Quickly, before I can ask what she means by that, she adds, “It was kind of you to call me.”

“You are his only child. What else could I do?”

“How come you never had children?”

I’m too stunned by the audacity of the question to pull a response together. I don’t think my face changes, but the girl sees her mistake right away.

“I’m sorry, that’s none of my business. When I was a kid, I always wondered about the rest of Dr. Patel’s life. I knew he was married, but that’s about it. I never really knew what to say to him when he came around.”

She hasn’t asked me the obvious question, how I knew about her. I had always assumed it was the mother who wrote to me. Staking her claim against her rival. But Krishna claimed the affair had already been over for years by then.

There’s a possibility I had not been considering. Fourteen would have been old enough to resent a father who was never around, old enough to imagine that an inconvenient stepmother would get out of the way and clear a space for her mother.

“There is something I’ve been wanting to ask. Why did you contact me all those years ago?”

She looks away, guilt splashing across her face. “I...I don’t know. It made sense to me at the time. I never meant to hurt you.”

“You never meant to hurt me.” Bloody hell, she really is his daughter. Are those words genetic?

“I’m sorry,” she says. But I’m feeling triumphant. Now I know something about her that Krishna doesn’t.

She adds, “I never felt like I belonged in my family, being so dark and all.” She’s not dark, except when compared to her not-quite-blond brother. “I could be standing right next to my mother and people would ask whose little girl I was. We weren’t exactly a normal family anyway, but even there I didn’t fit in.”

“And sending me your birth certificate was supposed to be changing this?”

“No, I guess not. You know how teenagers are.” I don’t, except from a distance. “I was angry that I was the dirty little secret, angry that he’d give Mom a few dollars but wouldn’t help pay for my braces because then you’d find out. Angry that he’d come to our home and act like it was totally normal for him to be there, and then he’d borrow the phone to make some call in Hindi so you wouldn’t wonder where he was.”

“Aha.”

“I think that’s how Roy got interested in learning Hindi. Of course, Roy picks up languages the way this skirt picks up lint.” She’s steering away from a touchy subject, but my irritation is growing. Krishna was there enough for the other woman’s son to learn his first

words of Hindi from him. The boy wasn't even his, and yet somehow he was part of Krishna's family too. My husband may have been telling the truth about the affair being over, but it wasn't the whole truth. He had, he still has, a whole other life that I have no part in.

If Krishna dies, I muse, I will not have to see this girl again after his funeral. I don't know where that thought came from and I try to quash it, hoping she can't find it in my eyes.

Roy is back with coffee and tea. "Here you go, Mrs. Patel," he says, handing me my cup. I should tell him to call me Minda, we are related somehow or other, but I don't.

They wheel Krishna back in, and he looks leaden and crushed, sleeping with his mouth open like a dead man. I am ashamed that I thought of his death, but the images keep intruding. What the funeral would look like, Angel sitting with her brother, away from the rest of the family with the nieces whispering among themselves. Me staring straight ahead, wrapped in a protective blanket of anger. With the life insurance, I could go live somewhere else for a while, or return to India. Maybe I'd find a new husband, one who didn't lie to me, and if he had children it would be in a respectable way.

"Maybe we should say a prayer," Angel suggests. She takes her father's hand on one side, and Roy's on the other. I awkwardly complete the circle, taking Krishna's and Roy's hands. Krishna's cold hand is heavy in mine. "Heavenly Father," Angel begins, "Please bless Dr. Patel and get him through this." I'm distracted by Angel's choice of whom to address as *Father*, so I don't pay attention to the rest of the words. The girl has a pretty voice, comforting. It takes me a moment to absorb her final words: "In Jesus's name we pray, amen."

Roy murmurs an amen. I slip my hands free. Maybe it was the unselfconscious we that offended. Surely she knows that Krishna and I are Hindu? There is no point in being ungrateful for a sincere prayer for my husband. Why do I think a prayer would make any difference anyway? He will live, or he will go on to the next life.

The night is the longest of my life. Longer than the week after I found out about Angel and I left to sleep on my sister's couch,

wondering what to tell my family about the separation. Even longer than the day my father died.

When the doctor says Krishna will live, I tell Angel and Roy to go home and rest. But when I step out to the waiting room two hours later, they are still here. It looks a bit like my image of Krishna's funeral, both of them in a corner away from the other relatives. Sudha and the other girls are in the opposite corner, managing not to look at them. "He is doing better," I tell Krishna's sister. She sends the nieces home.

At one-thirty in the morning, Krishna finally opens his eyes. I'm the only one in his room. "You are at the hospital," I tell him. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Couldn't breathe."

"A heart attack. But you will be fine. You should rest." Only now does it occur to me that bringing Angel here will be a shock for him, especially with the whole family talking about it. Or was that what I wanted? A shock for him, to avenge the one I got all those years ago? Funeral music is intruding in my mind, and I push it away.

"Is there anyone you would like to see? Anyone at all?"

He gives me an unfocused look.

I try again. "I thought you might want to see your daughter, so I called her. I hope that is all right."

"Angel?"

I think of all the sarcastic responses I could give, asking if there are any more I should know about. "She is in the waiting room with her brother. Already two of my cousins have made marriage offers." That last part was an attempt at humor, I think. "Your sisters are here, and the nieces and nephews."

"Am I going to die?" The question seems to come from a long way away.

"The doctors think not."

"You didn't really call Angel?"

"Of course I did. Do you want me to send her in?"

Krishna's eyes well up. "Yes. Thank you. Truly, Minda, thank you."

I'm uncomfortable with his gratitude. He thinks this means I've forgiven him, that underneath it all I still love him. I suppose I do. But I don't want to surrender my right to be angry later. "And the brother?"

"He hates me. He was the one who sent you Angel's birth certificate, you know."

"You're certain of that?"

"Yes. Ellie didn't have that kind of anger in her." I've never heard him say her name out loud. On the birth certificate it was Eleanor.

"Ah." This, too, I will spare him. "Did you love her? The mother?"

He searches for a response that won't sound cruel. Which is worse, to have loved another woman, or to have betrayed me with a woman he didn't love? He gives the only possible answer. "I... thought I did."

I go back to the waiting room, speak briefly with Krishna's sisters, then approach Angel. "He wants to see you."

She gives me a big-eyed look. For a moment I think she's going to look behind her, to see who else I could possibly be addressing. Finally she stands up and reaches for Roy's hand. "Just you," I tell her.

She still has her hand out. I think she's forgotten it's there. "Go ahead, *Pharista*," her brother tells her. "I'll be right here."

I want to go in with her, if only to see how Krishna looks at her. To hear if he calls her *Pharista*, "Angel" in Hindi. What does he say to this child he has never claimed?

I sit down next to Roy, shielding myself from the relatives. He looks surprised, but it shields him too, alone in a room full of Angel's cousins. "How are you holding up?" he asks.

"I have had better days. But I think the worst is over."

The room isn't loud, so I drop my voice, then feel ridiculous, secretive. "You do not have to stay. I got the impression you and

my husband are not always getting along well." I don't know what prompted that, except that I suspect that my anger at Krishna is not really appeased. Let Roy be angry for me.

He gives a rueful smile. "No, we never have. I mean, I can't very well be sorry that they had Angel. But he was supposed to be helping my mother when she got sick, not sleeping with her."

I am slow to realize that Angel meant something different when she said her mother was seeing my husband. "She was one of his patients?"

Roy swallows. "I thought you knew."

"No." Things shift around in my mind. This is wrong, terribly wrong. I had imagined their mother a crude woman who selfishly seduced a married man. But she was his patient, someone he was responsible for. And Krishna's patients were not bored housewives wanting to talk to a psychiatrist to find meaning in their lives. The clinic where he'd worked back then was for serious mental illness. "Who raised you and your sister?"

"Mom did. Well, I helped with Angel. I was eleven, so I kind of looked out for them both."

"But..." I'm not sure what I was going to say, and it's not as if my objections matter, twenty-odd years ago or now. My fantasy of taking Angel away from a mother who couldn't care for her was not so far off the mark. She would have been better off with me than with a patient who had to rely on a child to help her. I indulge the fantasy one more time, telling myself I would have been a good stepmother.

These thoughts are completely insane, of course. Three abortions, just to raise another woman's child? Even in my daydream, common sense intrudes.

Roy says, "As a child, I always had this fear that he would take Angel away from us. I know, that's ridiculous, he couldn't exactly come home with a baby in his arms and hand her to you."

"No." He could have. I reached that point somewhere. And Angel would have been a different person, without the cross or the short dress.

Krishna left her to be raised by a sick woman and an older child. Because he didn't want me to know. I want it to be because he loved me, because he wanted to spare me the pain. Not simply because he was afraid of the disgrace. He is a man who thrives on others' admiration, and while mine might have faded over the years, he still had that from others. But not from Angel, I think.

"Your sister," I ask, "Does she ever call him *Father*?"

Krishna's sister Harpreet comes back in. She hangs back in the doorway, unsure if she should disturb Roy and me. My first impression was right: Angel looks like a paler version of Harpreet, with generous lips and undisciplined curly hair. Harpreet wants to be polite, but she is dying to know what we are talking about.

Her daughter Mandeep is with her. Mandeep is what you might call assimilated: she goes by "Mandy" and hasn't worn a sari since her wedding. Still, she married a man from her own caste, after a proper vetting by both families. She is carefully not looking at Roy.

"How is he, Auntie?"

"Better. Your cousin Angel is visiting with him just now." I am trying to see the places where Angel fits into the family: cousin, niece, granddaughter. Stepdaughter. Stepdaughter is still sounding like a foreign word.

Angel finally emerges and asks Roy to take her home. She makes a point of saying a polite goodbye to the other relatives. Roy adds his farewell in excruciatingly formal Hindi. Mandy fiddles with a button on her cuff.

Krishna is sleeping again, and despite relatives urging me to go home and rest, I stay. We are alone when he wakes. He slides his hand toward me, and I still don't feel like holding it, but I do.

"It is late," I tell him. "Most everyone has gone home."

"It was kind of you to bring Angel."

"She is not what I expected."

"What did you expect?" Something in his tone annoys me, a touch of the arrogant psychiatrist probing at me. I'm tempted to say, *Someone who was not the daughter of your patient*. But that

will wait until he is stronger, saved as a weapon for the next time he hurts me.

"The tattoo of Kali was rather odd."

I can see him working up his courage to speak. "Minda...I told you, I am not sure if what I felt for Ellie was love. But she loved me, she loved me in a way that was almost absurd. It was an intoxicating temptation."

Like the temptation to slap his round face, a face that begs forgiveness at a time when only the most hateful person could fail to give it. I feel very small, falling into a pit of anger where I can't climb out. Three times I gave up the chance at having a daughter, and now that I have met Angel, she no longer belongs to me as she did in my fantasy.

It is years too late for leaving him, and too soon for forgiving. "I am glad that you are better, Krishnamoorthy," I say. "You need to rest now. I should go home and rest as well." But as I leave, I know that I will be on the phone to India the rest of the night, trying to soften the edges of the story, make myself the hero, or at least feel like I have some part in it that matters.

Growing Neurons in the Desert

Sara Toruno-Conley

Her ideas are now like fog in an awkward environment
such as the desert
yet she's never been good with detail:

this idea she had—to plant a garden in the Mojave,
watch it grow with little water, watch it
perform miracles, watch the neurons sprout
from little to nothing, appearing as a storm, a tornado.

The doctors have said these will never come back,
it will never come back, but the garden grows
in the back yard by the patch of dead grass.

The detail is gone; the fog remains
over the widely spaced creosote bushes of the Mojave.

Manoeuvres

Tania Hershman

I don't understand it, she said, knowing that somewhere, in some
country, rockets were falling, bloody world, getting bloodier. She
looked at you. I don't understand it. And you were supposed
to explain it? With your sagging cappuccino, your sad hands,
your small face?

Me? you said, and she looked down and down into her tea as
if your answer was the single greatest disappointment of her life.

In bed later, there was a silence. You had been allowed to
touch, with your sad hands, your small face, and she touched
you too and it was mutual, you hoped, the feeling inside your
belly. A whimper of a feeling, a spark-to-be, surrounded by your
particular brand of defences, walls and armed guards. You won-
dered whether it would grow, while your armed guards paced
around it and around its fortifications.

I don't understand it either, you whispered into her ear, and
inside you something lit up.

Later, when the big guns had come out, when you and she
had made declarations and parties were amassing, she watched
the news.

Look, she said as she scanned the parade of burned faces and
torched cities. Look, and she pulled you so hard down towards
her you thought she might snap you. She made you watch it with
her, but from the side you were watching her, the way her skin
shivered as the minutes passed, her eyes flicking from one thing
to another, jumping and startled. You wanted to say something
about destroying the television, about creating a sanctuary, but
the words wouldn't come out. You held still.

Over the years, she flared up less often, dulled by the infinite parade of catastrophe. You observed her as each day ended with the nightly broadcast, waiting for eruptions, planning your strategy, but they become less and less. Her surrender was such that, when the television, a replacement of the original, finally expired, she raised no objection to leaving its spot unfilled.

She turned to jigsaws, remembering a childhood passion, spread them out on the dining table and plotted their construction as a general planning manoeuvres. You were calmer too, then, as the images appeared: church scenes, flowers, complicated paintings which she furiously assembled.

When she finished, when order was restored, she sat on the sofa, holding your hand, her face alight with accomplishment, her tired eyelids falling, and outside the moon completed the world, quiet as it was in your own small corner.

Mother's Aftermath

Sara Toruno-Conley

I am still able to speak the way I dream,
a stream of abstract, fully relevant thought.
I've only forgotten your name.

Your face is still concrete as my routine, my feeding
of the dog, the bird's chirp from the clock
above the kitchen window,

noticing the way the leaves brush
against the glass. I am still able to think of time
as linear, to remember
what I ate for breakfast, to think of breakfast
as a morning activity. I am still

able to think of love as a verb
when remembering faces, I still laugh
at the same jokes.

Yet I don't understand why the days have changed,
voices are calloused; people
move quickly as though I'm a thought to be forgotten.

The knobs on the stove have been removed.

Things Not Seen

Jeff Haas

Jasmine Roberts hated working at the Lost & Found counter at the Sugarville airport. She rarely helped anyone find anything, and as an aspiring actress she felt that her time would be better spent auditioning for ingénue roles in downtown Atlanta. At 32, Jasmine thought that her drama degree from Spelman, incredibly good looks, and light skinned black complexion should have led her to leading lady roles in Hollywood by now, but her greatest triumph so far was playing a bit part in a racist musical at the Alliance Theatre. Still, she needed to pay the rent, so she bought a skinny latte and a yogurt parfait from the airport coffee shop and settled in for another boring day in the boring suburbs.

She was just about to take another bite of yogurt when a dazed middle-aged white man in a rumpled raincoat wandered toward her.

“Can I help you?” she said, setting the parfait down next to her computer keyboard.

“Um...no, no thanks,” he said, looking surprised that someone had spoken to him. He was ashen-faced, unshaved, and bedraggled, like he hadn’t slept for days.

“Have you lost something?”

The man looked down at the faded “Lost & Found” sign that Jasmine had taped to the front of the counter.

“I lost my wife,” he whispered, more to himself than to her.

“Your wife? I can have her paged.”

“No, you don’t understand. She’s *dead*.”

“Dead?”

“Yes,” he said, looking off into the distance. “She died in that...that plane crash.”

“Oh, my God.” Jasmine had been at the airport three days earlier when a small commuter jet crashed in a beet field on approach, killing everyone on board. The NTSB had the area

cordoned off, and everyone at the airport was still talking about it. “I’m so sorry.”

“She was everything to me. I don’t know how I’m going to raise Mikey and Katie on my own. They’re at her sister’s house right now. The funeral’s tomorrow at Sugarville Baptist, but I just keep coming back here...hoping...”

Jasmine had never seen anyone in such a state of grief before, and she felt powerless to help him. “Have you spoken to your minister?”

“My minister? What good would that do? He’d just try to fill me up with useless platitudes. He wouldn’t be able to make any more sense of this than I can...because...because it just doesn’t make any sense.”

Jasmine considered calling the airport psychologist, but she knew that he didn’t come in until nine. She decided that if anyone was going to help this poor man, it would have to be her. She stood up, leaned on the counter, and spoke from the heart.

“You know, my Great Granny Anne was the most righteous Christian lady I’ve ever known. She led a very difficult life. She lost her son in Vietnam, and her husband committed suicide. But she remained an optimist her entire life. She used to say that ‘everything happens for a reason.’ We may not understand God’s will at certain times during our lives, but God always knows the reason, and eventually we’ll understand, if not in this lifetime then in the next, as long as we have faith.” Jasmine sighed as tears started to well up in her eyes. “I miss her terribly. We were very close, and when she died I felt completely lost. I think about her every day, so I understand what you’re going through.”

Taking a deep breath, Jasmine reached behind the counter and pulled out a framed cross stitch picture. The cloth was embroidered with a biblical verse in black letters and two hands folded in prayer. The frame was cheap metal made to look like wood. She walked around the counter and handed the cross stitch to the man. “She gave this to me on her deathbed.”

The man took it from her, held it out in front of him, and read it aloud. “Faith is the evidence of things not seen.”

“Great Granny Anne never gave up on her faith, and neither should you.” She gently placed her hand on the man’s arm.

He started to choke up, then sobbed openly. Jasmine hugged him as he wept. “It’ll be okay,” she said, patting his back.

After a few minutes he stopped crying and seemed to remember something important, like he was waking up from a dream. “I have to get back to my children,” he said, attempting to return the cross stitch to Jasmine.

“You keep that as a reminder.”

“But it’s from your Great Granny Anne.”

“I insist. She would want you to have it.”

“Thanks,” he said, placing the cross stitch inside his raincoat. “Thanks for everything.” He wiped the tears from his eyes and quickly headed for the exit.

Jasmine sat back down behind the counter with a smile on her face and a feeling of satisfaction. Although she was pleased to have helped the man, she was simply thrilled with her awesome performance. She had almost believed the story herself, and was certain that her drama coach at Spellman would have praised her for being “in the moment.” She logged into her desktop computer, entered the cross stitch as “found,” and returned to her yogurt parfait.

Maybe it was time to quit her job at the airport and start acting full time.

Genealogy

Angela Corbet

There in my pocket diary—
notes like crops
baled in the barn loft.

There, farmers drove to towns
in the soft countryside—
Holyrood, Mildmay, St. Columba.

Their children snug
on the front page
of family bibles
like diminutive work shirts
on the clothes line
warm in the sun.

There
Alma—

lined up next to her sister Ada
and brothers Gabriel,
Samuel, and William.

Alma, already thinning
her kitchen garden
and gathering the eggs
in the basket of her apron.
She tracks the sun
across the polished floorboards
and closes off the front parlor
when cold days come.

Roommates

Lucille Gang Shulklapper

The day Rochelle moved out, I first thought: great. Miss Holier Than Thou is gone...for good! Wendy has her own bedroom, the other's mine, though I had thought about sharing it with Rochelle. Now we'll buy a new black leather sofa to fill the space where Rochelle's cot stood in the living room. That lumpy pipe-legged cot with its sheets sticking out from the cover.

Two seconds later I wasn't sure. I kept seeing skinny Rochelle leave the apartment in her torn jeans. Her knee stuck out of a big hole. Pointed jaw set. Moving, she called it...taking a toaster that never popped, one of three placemats, and her cot. She reminded me of Wilma, who wore an old, ill-fitting dress back when we were kids back in elementary school. Pale yellow with fading flowers and gray-green sprigs, it had a hole where the label had been cut.

I pulled open the kitchen drawer so hard it almost fell off its tracks and tilted toward me. Grabbed a soup spoon. Hesitated before taking the whole pint of butter pecan cream ice cream from the freezer...did that visualization exercise...saw myself as bones in a bikini...but I pushed open the lid, and dug into the cream until I finished it.

Then I leaned my elbows on the new butcher block table Mom said didn't fit into her new kitchen. I held the spoon in mid-air and thought about Wilma. Wilma and her brother lived with an aunt in one of those attached houses in Queens. Her parents were dead. If you played with Wilma, and I did, at least sometimes, you'd know you couldn't go into her house. Her aunt wouldn't let you. Not even a cookie. Wilma told me her aunt didn't have much money and she owed her life to her.

We were ten when we met in the fifth grade. We had to line up to go to gym or music class. "Stand up straight, shoulders back, tummies in," Mrs. Darringer called from her desk chair. "You too, Wilma."

Rochelle's another story. I thought it was a good idea at the time and asked her to move in with Wendy and me. A few months seem like a lifetime ago...June, graduation...all that stuff. "Make up your mind, Karen," everyone said, so I straight out asked her.

"You really asked **her**? Why?" Wendy asked me in that snotty tone of hers. We were in our dorm room. She casually tossed her cap and gown into a corner. Mine still hung in the closet, mixed in with stuff from four years.

While she waited for my answer, she piled cashmere sweaters, designer suits, and ski jackets like they do in a department store. She patted them the way she patted Peaches, after the dog fetched and then sat facing her.

The sweaters reminded me of Wilma, who stood in front of me on line. Her shoulders drooped underneath a black wool cardigan she wore on winter days. Her only wool cardigan. All the girls laughed at her funny clothes, thick-soled shoes. They were heavy into the latest sneakers, thinking about blonde streaks. Wilma's hair always looked dirty, hanging straight down from a middle part. Her nose was too long. Even her glasses, a real fashion item, were ugly. We wouldn't be caught dead without the latest movie star fashion, but hers...ugh...fake tortoise shell harlequin frames. "Stand up straight, Wilma." It made me uncomfortable when our teacher repeated it. "Please try, Wilma," I whispered. I could see her shoulders trying.

"Why not?" I asked, before I started thinking about something else. Not about Wilma but the jackass in the Aesop fable. The part I remembered best was where the man and his son carried the jackass over the bridge, the rope came untied, and the jackass fell into the water. Mrs. Darringer made us say the moral in one sentence: something about pleasing everyone or maybe it was pleasing no one. I came home from school that afternoon and fed my fat face.

Wendy's thin-edged voice brought me back. "I'll ask you again. Tell me **one**, just **one** reason why you asked **her**?"

I blinked, conscious of my eyes watering over my new contacts. “You know why. Our parents agreed. Pay so much...” I started to mumble.

“Speak up,” Wendy said evenly. “I can’t understand you.”

“Manhattan’s a fortune. We don’t have jobs. Rochelle already has a good one. She’ll share expenses.”

“You’re hedging again,” Wendy told me, folding and stroking her black velvet pants as she spoke. “Giving me half the story. The half you can live with. Come on, Karen, get it all out.”

She struck a familiar pose. I was a little jealous. I imagined myself wearing her black velvet pants, leaning against that old grand piano in the frat house, a femme fatale. I could be if I could lose some weight. Lord knows I had enough stuff of my own. Never wore it.

I reached into my jeans pocket, found a crushed tissue with a lipstick smear, and dabbed at my tears. “O.K, I’ll tell you. It was right after a phone call from my mother. Don’t I know how lucky I am and all that. Why do I keep putting everything off... interviews, packing, finding a roommate?”

Wendy wasn’t even listening. I know her. She was thinking about clothes and the new closets she’d fill. What she’d get rid of.

“Soooo,” she said to me, “You couldn’t stand up to your mother, and Rochelle walked into our dorm room at that moment. Wish I’d been there.”

I hung my head. Why was I so obvious? “Yes. Rochelle walked in to borrow a sweater. That’s when I asked her.”

Silence fell between us. I knew Wendy would forgive me. We were old friends. My mother was always right and Wendy was too.

Why did I ask Rochelle? She made me feel uncomfortable. I saw her like some character actress. I almost wanted to laugh when she tripped into our dorm looking like a Yugoslavian immigrant: blonde hairs straggling from under her black-tied babushka, a shapeless, faded tee shirt underneath the frayed black sweater, and those torn jeans. Then, I hated myself for thinking about her appearance when she didn’t own much more.

She walked in just as I was hanging up the phone. “Oh,” she said, in that finishing school voice she tried to cultivate, “I do hope you didn’t hang up because of me.”

“Just talking to my mother.” I tried to sound casual. “She offered to pay the moving service to pack for me, too.”

“Mo ther.” Rochelle dragged the word into a sentence.. “Wish I had one. Never did. Just this woman who gave birth to me and left. A lemming.”

“Lemming? I didn’t understand. Where’d she go?”

“Followed my father, the great naturalist, always about to write the great book. I’m not even a word in it. You’re on your own after college, daughter, he told me. Lucky you got a scholarship so you can go at all.” She bent down to tie the long black shoelaces escaping from her high-topped sneaker.

I’m glad I couldn’t see her face. I didn’t want to feel sorry for her. And that affected speech. “But what about your mother?”

Oh, **her**...Rochelle’s finishing school voice changed to her southern drawl. “Ah told you. Followed mah father around. A lemming. One of those small, ahctic rodents she and mah father studied . Hawdes of them mahgratin from the mountains to the sea.”

Then she paused and waited for my reaction. I saw my mother in four words through her eyes: independent, money, spend, me.

“You know what happens to lemmings?” Rochelle answered herself in that finishing school voice, as if she were quoting her father. Overly dramatic. “They destroy all vegetation in their path, swimming when they fall into the water, until they die from exhaustion. The birds eat their floating bodies.”

I didn’t understand why at that very moment I ask her to room with us. Maybe she was like vegetation. You know, mowed down, or something. Anyway, I thought she’d make a perfect roommate, willing to sleep on a cot in the living room, and pay enough for Wendy and me to afford this great apartment our parents found for us.

When we moved into the apartment a few months later, Rochelle told us she couldn’t afford to share phone expenses or

grocery staples. She ate her main meal at lunch, and kept a can of tuna fish or a bag of apples in a separate kitchen cabinet for her dinner. Night after night, she sat on that dumb cot in the living room while the smell of broiled fish or my special lasagna assailed her nostrils. I wondered about her great job, how much she was paid, or saved. She began to buy more costly clothes.

When the phone rang, Rochelle turned up the volume on the TV. It was never for her except when her boyfriend, Gary, phoned. Wendy had met him at the trendy bar he frequented. She said Rochelle hooked up with him when she went there, too. Wendy knew him as one of her old school friends. She said he was a “player,” wealthy, and good-looking. Lived on Park Avenue.

Once I shouted “Ro che el” real loud. Embarrassing...because Rochelle expected that call and it was quiet for a long time, while they chatted. Wendy had a fit whenever Rochelle got a phone call. “Someone could be trying to reach us,” she told me, staring at her watch, and flicking her wrist every few seconds.

One night we were sitting in the living room watching a movie on TV, when Rochelle uncurled herself from her cot and disappeared. When a commercial came on, Wendy wanted a snack. She moved quickly into the dark kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and gasped when she saw Rochelle in the shadows, whispering into the phone.

“I didn’t hear the phone ring,” Wendy said.

“Can’t you even wait ‘til I get off?” Rochelle hissed, covering the receiver, then, she changed her tone to say good-bye. She slammed the phone down and changed her tone again. “I’m sick of phoning my parents from the corner deli.”

Wendy smiled sarcastically. “I suppose you’re calling them in the Amazon.”

“I’m surprised you’ve even heard of it. I thought you wouldn’t recognize the Amazon unless it was the setting for a fashion show.”

Rochelle’s right...about Wendy...and clothes and money, but it’s not Wendy’s fault if her parents give her everything.

Rochelle moved in with Gary about a week later. A few months of living with her was enough for Wendy, but the break upset me. Rochelle threw her clothing into a sheet and tied up the corners. Two weeks later, I found a can of tuna fish hidden in the corner cabinet. I wanted to cry.

The hidden can brought Wilma to mind. Perhaps because I was the only one in class who spoke to her or because I stood behind her in line...she told me about...having diabetes, giving herself injections, and how her back hurt.

I didn’t even miss Wilma when she was absent for a week. I enjoyed returning to the “in” group again, talking about boys and clothes.

It was a shock when her little brother handed Mrs. Darringer the half-filled cardboard box everyone else filled weeks ago with money they collected door-to-door for UNICEF. I could tell it wasn’t full because the coins jangled. “Wilma would want you to have this,” he told her. “I’m the only one who knows where she hid it.”

Mrs. Darringer said “passed away.” I didn’t eat cookies for weeks.

“Daydreaming, again?” Wendy asked. She danced into the kitchen in red-flowered leggings and a short, swingy skirt. “Good riddance!” she sang. “We’re both working. Let’s enjoy life. Do more for ourselves.”

Another month goes by and I’ve got this great date. I’m getting all dressed up, jewelry and all. Feeling excited. It doesn’t last long. I start slamming drawers, spilling things.

In the middle of it all, Wendy comes in. “What’s the matter?” she asks.

“I can’t find my gold and diamond chain. The one my grandmother gave me for graduation. It’s real old. It was hers.”

“Rochelle took it.” Wendy says.

“She wouldn’t do that. She’d never steal.”

Wendy gives me one of those superior looks, “Of course, she would. You think she’s so hard-working and content with what she has but I know she’s jealous. Wants everything we have. She’s not Miss Sweet and Innocent.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’ve found things missing before. A couple of Freebies I left on the hall table. Subway tokens. She even drinks our vanilla cream diet soda.”

“How would you know that?”

“Sometimes the bottle’s almost empty when I know I just opened it and you weren’t home. So, one night before you and I went out together, I took a pen and made a line. Checked it when we got back.”

“I don’t believe you did that.”

“Why not?” We’re paying for it. Remember the night I caught her making a call from our telephone? Hey, it’s your money, too.”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts...once I even found my black cashmere sweater rolled up in my sweater drawer. And you know how I fold everything. Well, a week before, Rochelle asked if she could borrow that sweater, and I said, ‘no.’ She must have taken it, anyway.”

“And then, from the back of my head, I see Wilma...her shoulders drooping, her wool cardigan hiking to the middle of her back. She turns around and smiles at me before she disappears.

Within a week, Wendy has a plan to get my necklace back. I don’t know if I can go through with it.

She says Rochelle hangs out in one of those trendy bars on Madison Avenue. One of those places with green hanging plants and a piano player. Wendy goes there a lot. Come to think of it, she thinks she saw Rochelle wearing my necklace. One just like it.

“We’ll go to the bar, Karen. Then, when Rochelle goes to the ladies’ room...she always goes there and comes out with her hair just perfect...you’ll follow her in and see if she’s wearing your chain.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“What!” she exclaims. “You owe it to yourself to get back what’s yours.”

There’s that word again: ‘owe.’ What do people owe one another? Themselves? Wilma said she owed her life to her aunt. Wendy says I owe it to myself. Wendy’s a really good friend. I’m not sure if the plan will work but I’ll give it a try. I want my necklace back.

“Thanks,” I tell her, wishing I could tell her more. Like thanks for standing by me, for encouraging me to want what’s mine. But before I can tell her, she’s out of the room.

It’s two in the morning and I just had this weird dream. Rochelle’s mother and I are lemmings running over rocks toward the sea. I stop to lick the blood off my tiny paws. I bend down to get a better look, and I’m amazed to see I’m not a lemming but a mole. I dart behind a bush and burrow into an opening in the ground. I lie awake and remember moles are slow-moving and can only see in the dark.

Tonight’s the big night. Wendy and I leave for the café. The weather’s so beautiful we decide to walk in the still, crisp, cold air. Manhattan dazzles. Darkness covers the cracked sidewalks. Skyscrapers blaze.

We go into the bar. It’s a large, crowded, noisy place. I don’t know why they have a piano player. You can hardly hear him. “Let’s leave. I can’t stay another minute,” I mutter after sipping two diet cokes. I start to get up.

Wendy’s arm shoots out and pushes me back. “Stop fussing. We have to stay a bit longer. She’s here. I’m telling you...she’s here. Oh my God”...Wendy put her hand against her breast... “she is! I see her coming toward us. She’s going to use the ladies’ room.”

“What if we’re making a terrible mista...,” I start to say but then I see Rochelle, walking quickly, looking straight in front of her. She doesn’t see us.

“If she’s not wearing it,” Wendy whispers, “you can ask her if she’s seen it. She knows you sometimes leave valuable things lying around.”

Just then Rochelle walks quickly past us. All I see is this gorgeous blonde hair piled on top of her head: I can't tell if she's wearing the necklace. Her body's poured into a tight black dress... very short... and she's holding a costly lizard purse six feet in front of her so you can't miss it.

"She looks great, like a model, so sophisticated.. Must have gotten contacts. Wonder where she got the money, if Gary..." I think. Then, I look down at my jeans as though I'm seeing them for the first time. Rub my sweaty palms over my fat thighs and make a few resolutions.

I wait a few minutes before I follow her into the ladies' room. The door flies open at my touch. Rochelle's standing at the sink. I move toward her. She drops the soap when she sees me. A steady stream of water pours from the open faucet. For a moment, her hands hang in the air, then move toward her neck to cover the chain. The small diamonds glitter through her fingers.

Not a word passes between us. Her stare is frozen as I walk backward and put my full weight against the door. No one can enter and I'm blocking Rochelle from leaving.

"Karen" she starts to say something more and stops. Her fingers unfasten the necklace. She's holding it loosely in her hand, moving toward me.

We're like actors in a silent film. I offer my cupped palm and feel the weight of the necklace in my hand. I step aside; she does a little dance around me, opens the door, and leaves.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I walk toward a large pier glass: one of those old oval mirrors they used long ago, but this one's a new version with little lights all around it. I look into it, smile, and put my necklace on. Then, I comb my hair and rummage through my purse for my lipstick. When I uncap it, it makes a popping sound like the cork on a champagne bottle.

Finds

Bianca Diaz

I walked into my grandmother's dream, it's not uncommon, and saw her tearing envelopes open with a trowel. She reached into them and grabbed fistfuls of pollen. I worried about paper cuts but her skin remained undisturbed. She looked up at me and said *elm, sorrel, willow, alder* in perfect English.

I awoke, intact, one hand on my chest, the other almost touching my hip. When she returned from her last trip to Cuba, my grandmother didn't recognize my mother. She looked at her arms, where my mother was holding her, and said *todas son heridas nuevas*. A week later she told us the details: the remains of her street, more than a dozen tailless cats, rusted bicycles, her entire city an artifact.

Last night she walked into my dream, her arms folded across her chest, then she recorded something in a notebook, maybe the frequency of rain or the appearance of tin or bronze.

The Inheritance

Lucille Gang Shulklapper

Leah Blume belonged to The Will of the Month Club. In the one year of our actual relationship, she threatened to change her will (I'll cut you out of it... I thought you were such a bright girl) every time I wouldn't visit her instead of my mother. She dangled butchered relatives before me to demonstrate her razor-edged skill.

"Look at my cousin Mildred," she'd say, "So what if she has trouble walking. She doesn't have to walk to California. I needed her to take care of me. I'm the one in so much pain. I cut her right out when she stopped visiting me. She doesn't fool me with that arthritis story."

At times Leah clutched her heart when she spoke. It looked like theatre to me, the classic motion to engender guilt, but it wasn't, it was real... cramping that shut out blood, left her gasping. The cramping pinched her face; surprisingly, the skin was smooth, even soft, as it fell back onto its own familiar lines. The eyes were sharp, focused clearly; the voice plosive, unfailingly clear.

As for me, I thought I'd been written out a long time ago. I don't mean written out of her will. I mean written out of her life. She was pretty surprised to see me, her brother's child, when I turned up in Los Angeles a year before she died.

I wanted to tell her how much I needed some connection to the father and family I sorely missed, and how I yearned for photographs and stories. Would it matter to her that I was expecting my first grandchild, that I was in my early fifties, and still felt like the "girl" she called me?

I glanced around the room and didn't see photographs anywhere. Aunt Leah's eyes drilled through me.

"I don't know why you're here, Joanna. It's seventeen years since I've seen you. I'm leaving all my money to charity. You're too late. You're not getting a penny."

"I didn't come here for money," I stammered. It sure was hard to believe she even had any, looking at the threadbare brocaded chair, the worn slippers.

"Where were you when Uncle George was dying? Didn't you know he was ill? I had round the clock nurses for him. Didn't your mother tell you he died?"

"No," I answered but she went on as though I hadn't.

"I never thought I'd see you again. After all I did for you... giving you all those beautiful things from my home... the damask tablecloths, matching napkins. Your sister told me you never wanted to see me again."

"I never said that. I never understood why I didn't hear from you after my sister died. I never said that. Ardyth told you I never wanted to see you again?"

"Yes."

Anger filled me like air pumped into a flat tire. "Did you know Ardyth was institutionalized?" I shot at her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you know Ardyth lost touch with reality? Mad," I yelled into Leah's stunned face. "She went mad. You know, craaaazy."

"No," Leah protested.

"It happened in early March. It had been raining all night and into the next morning. Ardyth, was wearing a thin nightgown when she got out of bed, walked out the front door, and stepped barefoot into the puddles all the way down her street. The police..."

"Not Ardyth. She had so much promise. She had..."

"The police picked her up. She spent six weeks in the psychiatric wing of the local hospital."

"What about her children? Her husband?"

"Oh, God. Stuart! Cheap bastard! Never bought her a thing. Used to count the meatballs when we ate there. And love.... he... wouldn't sleep in the same room with her when she needed him most. I never saw him kiss her."

"Why didn't..."

"I can't talk about it anymore. Too painful. I'm only telling

this to you now because Ardyth lied to you. I never said I didn't want to see you again. She was sick when you saw her last."

"I didn't know."

"She died a year later," I said, reaching desperately into the deep pocket of my skirt for a tissue. "Suddenly. On a bus in New York."

"I... didn't know."

"And I didn't know why I hadn't heard from you. I felt so alone. Didn't have the strength to pursue my relationship with you. Too grief-stricken. But, I've looked for you many times."

"Where? Not here. You never called here."

"Last year, when Florence's daughter Beth was married, I looked for you at the cousins' table. I never said I didn't want to see you again."

Leah turned her head away, then, back again.

I met her gaze. "Aunt Leah," I said softly, "I've always wanted family and you're all I've got. That's why I'm here. I want to hear stories about my father, what he was like when you were children. A young man. I want to see photographs. I was hoping you might even give me a few."

"I don't have many photographs. Don't even know where they are."

"O.K.," I said, angered by her coldness, her measured tone, and by my own need to know, "I'll tell you something else. "I always wanted to know if... you would have given Ardyth and me a home... after my father died... when I thought my mother..."

"That selfish child," Leah muttered under her breath.

"Might abandon us."

I had revealed my deepest childhood fear. Her response revived my anguish. A little child, again. Abandoned, again.

"How is your mother?" she asked.

"Going blind. Walks with a cane. Sometimes she needs a wheelchair."

"I hear she has emphysema."

"That, too."

"Does she have money?" Leah asked. "Joyce married my brother for his money."

"She has enough to live on. Her last husband left her with a comfortable income."

"Your mother always lived it up. Wouldn't make lunch for your father. He'd eat that greasy food at the luncheonette when he had a bad heart. I used to come all the way from Brooklyn to bring him lunch. He loved the way I made chicken soup. And she had a maid, too. My poor brother. I don't know why he married her."

I caught my breath. "Maybe he loved her," I said.

Leah didn't hesitate. "She was a good lay, even in those days. Everybody knew it. Charlie Sonderman told me, 'Leah,' he said, 'Arnold doesn't have to marry her.' And Charlie was your father's best friend."

Her anger fueled my feelings about my mother but I remained silent. She continued, "Maybe he married her because she told him she was pregnant."

"I never thought of that. It's possible," I answered.

"Yes," she added, confirming her own idea, "Your father was too good. He fell for every little story."

"It wasn't easy for Ardyth and me after his death. We couldn't understand why our mother left us alone so much, always traveling, going out with different men."

"I just told you why, didn't I? Anything for money. A common slut."

"Maybe I'm like my father. I felt sorry for her... widowed... no income... constantly worried about money."

"No money for you but whenever I heard about her, she was gallivanting all over the world."

"And where were you when Ardyth and I had no one?" I asked.

"Once," Leah responded, "my father and I came to visit your father when he was in bed, recuperating from a heart attack. I'll never forget your mother, blocking the stairway. I don't know what made her so angry. She just stood there, hands on her hips, refusing to let his own father see him. Not wavering before a heartbroken old man pleading to see his son."

“I remember when my father was sick. Bedridden for two months.

I didn't tell her how I could still hear him crying. How one morning when I was nine, I ran into his room and tried to comfort him; but, I didn't know how. “You never came to see Ardyth and me,” I said. “You never even sent me a birthday card.”

“Your mother was too much for me. Not even his own father would she let him see. I tried. Too much...”

Aunt Leah looked directly at me, her hawklike eyes probing. “What's the good of all this talk, anyway? I'm an old lady now. My money's going to charity.” A sly smile broke out, then disappeared. “Tomorrow's my birthday...91. My doctors don't give me long to live.”

I sent a huge bouquet of flowers for her birthday.

“They're beautiful and I should thank you,” she said over the phone when I was back in New York, “but what an extravagant girl you are, Joanna.”

I smiled. “Ardyth was the practical one. I've been called extravagant all my life, just for wishing. My father understood. He bought me a doll I longed for. ‘She's too old,’ my mother said, ‘it's a waste of money.’ But I cried when he bought her for me, my very own baby to love.”

Leah heard me, a little girl in the presence of her father, again.

“Your father was like that to me.” Her voice softened. “My big brother. Always looked after me. Thanked me for living at home after I married Uncle George. I took care of my mother for almost five years. There weren't any nursing homes, then. That's why I never had children. I never wanted to take care of anyone again.”

Several months passed. I sometimes wished Ardyth and I could have been her children; yet, in those very moments, the adult in me reclaimed itself. A fragile love grew between us. While she

kept threatening to cut me out of her will, I threatened her with flowers and phone calls.

At times, when Leah felt up to it, she drove the rusted Buick she kept in a space she paid extra for; sometimes she asked the doorman to bring it around. She'd drop off one blond wig to be washed and set, wear the other one to a luncheon. She liked driving. Once she drove out of the bank's parking lot and ran right into a tree. “Imagine some dope planting a tree there,” she said.

When she wasn't making bank rounds, (she had opened accounts in every bank which gave her a set of dishes or a television set) she was home polishing her jewelry, playing a mean game of bridge, or totaling the estates her family had left to her.

But her bad heart got worse. “I was up all night in pain, Joanna. Last night, they rushed me to the hospital but I insisted on going home. I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't live in such pain.”

A few weeks later, she had a second heart attack. I flew down to be with her while she was in the hospital. As soon as she opened her eyes, she complained. “You'd think for all this money I could get hot coffee.”

“Thank you, darling,” she said when I brought it to her.

I fed her. Put her dentures in and took them out of the water. Watched her sink in and out of consciousness. Listened to her talk to Uncle George, dead six years, her shrill voice girlish and sweet. She opened her still sharp eyes, smiled at me. Told me to drive to her apartment and get the pearl cluster necklace she always wore. I was to wear it unless she came home from the hospital. I hooked the clasp, rubbed the pearl as though its glow surrounded me, and wore it to sleep.

A few days later, I put it back.

Leah phoned me in New York to say “Good-bye” the night she died. When I entered the apartment after the funeral, I saw a half-empty bottle of scotch on the bathroom sink. Leah didn't drink. An empty pill bottle had tipped over and fallen against a

can of roach spray on the cold tile floor.

Feeling like a thief, I went into her bedroom and opened the closet door. Old handbags hung from hooks, change slid out from side pockets, used and unused tissues wedge themselves into corners. Behind a faded beach umbrella stood a chest of drawers.

The photographs were in a worn brown grocery bag jammed underneath an old toaster. I sat down on the closet floor and wept until my nose began to run and I fumbled for her purse and reached in and found a tissue.

There were two pictures of Ardyth and me when we were children. We stand next to one another but do not touch. Neither do we smile.

And here is Leah, young, smiling into the camera, an arm enfolded around my father's waist. He grins. I see my mother, staring straight into the camera, tight-lipped, almost grim. My father's arm is around her shoulder. In that jumble of photos, my mother never touches my father, never smiles.

There is one photo of Leah standing at my father's grave. Her lips are etched with acid in a straight line. Dark glasses cover her eyes. Her clenched fists rest on the headstone as though they could never let go.

Brother Bougainvillea

Bianca Diaz

Kin because you were the sentinel forever at my door.
You tumbled over gates and concrete walls,
unabashed bracts holding small albescent moons.

You held taut against humidity, panic.
The city braced itself for hurricanes,
battening and re-battening.
The rain an accomplice.

One storm had a two-syllable male name, creeping
up the Atlantic, parallel to us.
Satellite view like a galaxy.
We all expected a celestial pummeling.
It would angle west and fall upon us.

I drove to a park to meet a boy. I don't remember who.

The palms seemed to bend
at the waist, fronds bowing like ladies.

The boy was a shadow,
reduced, un-menacing.
Crows staggered in black ranks,
waiting for the air's electricity
to sink to the grass.

I belonged to those hurricanes the way you belong to thorns
along your vine.

Even the constantly windblown lighthouse
remained indifferent to the swells skirting its base,
the storm that skirted you and me.

Who Are You?

Mary McCluskey

Kat's first instinct, when she saw the woman step from the bus, was to hide, slide under the table, vanish like a phantom. Or run. But her husband sat next to her in the noisy pavement café, watching the kaleidoscope shapes and shades of the busy *Firenze* street.

They had noted the UK logo on the tour bus, watched the vehicle come to a stop outside the Hotel Caravaggio, just yards away. Minutes later, a party of middle-aged Brits, in a surge of primary color cottons and new sun hats, stepped off. The tourists stood together, stretching, looking across the wide piazza, gazing at the stunning symmetry of architecture with a bright and determined interest.

"Your countrymen," Tom said, grinning. "On the lookout for fish and chips and a nice cup of tea."

The last woman to step from the bus had a frizz of blonde hair, a sunburnt face and wore a sundress in vibrant pink. She carried a beach bag, so wrong for this Italian city: the Vespa gangs would snatch her purse right off the top. The woman removed her sunglasses and squinted at the hotel sign.

Kat felt a sharp tremble of shock and instinctively dropped her head, crouching low in the café chair. That face. Angela.

Don't see me, please don't see me.

"You gonna drink that coffee, sweetheart, or just stare into it?" Tom asked. "You look like you're reading tea leaves."

Kat lifted the mug, hid her face behind the cup of cooling cappuccino.

"Why don't you hit the exchange now, Tom? So we don't run out of cash."

"We can do it later. Sophie will be here any minute."

"She'll be late. She's shopping."

He shrugged, pushed his cup away and began to gather up the newspaper. Out of the corner of her eye, Kat saw a blur of

pink cotton, too close.

Then a voice, loud, rising on the question: "I don't believe it. Kat?"

The woman was at their table.

"It is you. Blimey. You look so posh."

For a moment, Kat considered a blank look, a shake of the head. She could pretend one more time. She had been pretending for nearly twenty years. But — Tom had turned when he heard his wife's name. Kat looked up and found that when she tried to smile her mouth was trembling,

"Angela," she said. "What a surprise."

That same face, twenty years ago, had been sunburnt then, too, freckled, nose peeling. Angela had been fifteen years old, lying on a blanket in the Monument Park, her knickers tangled around one ankle, her breasts, a ghostly white in the shadowy light, pulled free from her bra. Kat, wine-heavy, body sore, wanted only to be away, far away. She had raced to Jed's motorbike, climbed onto it.

"Let's go," she said. "Quick."

He hadn't needed persuading. She placed her arms around his waist, held on tight. As the bike engine revved, she heard Angela's voice behind her, urgent, screaming.

"Kat!"

Kat introduced Tom.

"This is Angela Wilson," she said. "I knew her years ago."

Her voice sounded odd in her ears, too high, too bright. Tom, always the courteous Texan, jumped to his feet, urging Angela to join them. He pulled out a chair and Angela squashed into it, settling herself.

"You're on vacation, Angela? A tour?" Tom asked.

"Yeah. My first time, would you believe. Never been abroad before."

Never bin. The accent was the same.

“So how long you here in Florence?”

“Just one day, one night. Then to Rome. Five city tour. I wanted to see everything.”

Kat took a breath, nudged her husband.

“Currency exchange? While we’ve got time,” she said.

He looked at her, puzzled a moment and then smiled.

“You gals want to chat? Okay. Fine. Back in a minute,” he said.

Kat watched him as he threaded his way through the tourists and crossed the piazza, heading towards the *Bank de Change*. She felt her breath easing. When he was no longer visible, she turned back to the woman who now regarded her steadily. Angela’s smile had faded. The blue eyes were small stones, cold and unforgiving.

“So you married an American?” Angela said. “Look like one yourself now. Where’d you meet him? You dump that Jed for him?”

Kat ignored the questions, said instead: “How about if I call you later, Angela? At the hotel.”

“Haven’t forgot you know. That night. How could you just take off?”

Jesus.

“Sorry. I have to go.”

Kat stood, placed too many Euros on the table for the tab.

“Not a word. Didn’t even come back to bury your ma,” Angela continued, solid and unmoving in the café chair. “Never did understand that. Nor did my mum. After she took you in and all. She told the Social she’d done her best.”

Kat could hear the voice in her head: *After all I’ve done for her.*

Just a confusion of snapshots in her memory now. When she thought back to those days it was as if she was seeing through a filtered lens. The last day of school was the only time with clarity. A good student, Kat liked school, always dreaded the long difficult days of summer, and so she was already anxious when she stepped into the dank hall of the council flats, hurried past empty bottles, syringes, all the detritus of despair and neglect. The bulb on the third floor corridor was out again. It was dark.

Kat pushed her key into the door of the flat and stumbled into the large rug, for some reason rolled up in the hall. She heard a low moaning sound and she stood, confused for a while, unable to locate it. Then she understood. Her mother had rolled herself into the rug, trying to hide. Kat had known the breakdown was coming. The wild mood swings, the purple painted walls of the kitchen, then the slow descent, the dead log sleeping. It had happened before. When the doctor arrived and an ambulance was called, the moaning had stopped. The doctor said he would telephone for help for Kat but Dora, Angela’s mother, appeared from next door and offered to take her in until the Social could be contacted. It was Dora who told her that night that her mother had died.

“We was going to ask the cops to find you,” Angela said now. “But Mum said you’d come back after a bit.”

“Look, Angela, I’ll call you later. Okay?”

“Isn’t your husband coming back here?”

“No,” Kat said, her eyes fixed on the street.

“Didn’t give a bugger, did you?” Angela said. “You knew what was going on. You saw. I know you did.”

She had gone to the park with Angela that night to get away from Dora’s grimy council flat, crowded with children and Dora’s visiting boyfriends, and to escape the haunting image of her mother’s body wrapped in that rug. The social worker, a brusque middle-aged woman, who talked while scribbling notes in a file, had said decisions must be made about Kat’s future; a plan must be made for the funeral. Kat had stared at the woman, her mind blank, not knowing where to begin. How could she decide about a funeral? A future? She was sixteen years old.

The park was the gathering point for the teenagers of the neighborhood. They met in a copse between the wide oaks, drank cheap wine and cider, smoked. Harry, a skinny boy from the next street, was Angela’s most recent crush. But on this night older boys from the estate joined them and then very late, when most of the

boys and all of the girls except Angela and Kat, had left, a new boy rode up on a motorcycle. Older, almost a man, Jed lived in the city, and had couriered a package for one of the gang leaders on the estate. His motorbike and black leather clothes, his very presence, spurred the younger boys into showing off with smart talk, sexual bragging. Jed said little but looked from Angela, who was leaning forward, her breasts visible, to Kat, who had drunk too much and could only smile. He chose Kat, finally, pulled her away from the group to a dark spot behind a drooping birch tree and began to touch her. She didn't say yes, but she didn't say no either. She remembered the wind picking up, the howling in the trees, scudding clouds across a narrow moon.

She heard the low murmuring of the boys, a strange tribal sound, as she and Jed walked back to the group. Angela was in the center, the boys crowded around her.

"Let's go," Kat said to Jed, heading for the motorcycle, wanting only to escape.

"You ever think about it?" Angela asked.

Her face changed then. She looked beyond Kat, into the crowd.

"Here's your husband," she said.

Kat turned, fast. Tom was only yards away. A gap in the crowd allowed her a glimpse of a pretty young woman with dark curls, swinging her shopping bags. Sophie. Her daughter waved, spotting her. Too late to run. Too late.

"Look who I found hanging about on the Ponte Vecchio," Tom said.

Kat picked up her bag, attempted a smile for her daughter.

"Glad you found her," she said. "We have to go."

"Hey, what about a drink?" Sophie asked.

"We have to call Jack."

Their son was river rafting in California with his best friend's family.

"Mom, it's the middle of the night there!" Sophie said.

Sophie turned to look curiously at Angela, still sitting stoically at the café table, her eyes flickering from face to face.

"This is Angela," Tom said. "Your mom's friend from England."

"Angela's just leaving," Kat said. "She needs to unpack. I'll call her later."

Sophie smiled at the woman.

"Hi," she said, studying her.

Angela, equally open, studied Sophie back.

"Pleased to meet you," Angela said. "You must be Kat's daughter."

Kat felt her heart leap with fear.

"I've paid," Kat said, indicating the notes on top of the check. "Let's go."

Angela stood then, slowly.

"Damn shame you've got to run," Tom said. "Never met any of Kat's friends who knew her when."

"We were kids together," Angela said. "Weren't we, Kat? Oh, I could tell you tales."

"You're kidding," Tom said, delighted.

"About Mom?" Sophie asked, grinning.

"Why don't you join us for dinner, Angela?" Tom asked. Kat turned quickly to look at her husband.

"Not tonight, Tom."

He returned her look, puzzled.

"Oh, right. We were going to cook in. Well, Angela could join us. Barbeque. Change from hotel food?"

"Okay. Yes," Kat said, thinking — *Get rid of her, call her later and cancel. Anything. Just make her go!*

"They call it a villa," Tom said, as he wrote down the address. "It's not. It's a little hacienda, a cottage. But it's charming. Just off the Piazzini de Pitti. Any cab driver will know."

Angela took the address, studied it and nodded.

"See you later," she said.

They watched her as, plastic sandals flopping, bag banging

against her side, she headed towards the hotel. Kat weak with relief, leaned into her husband's arm.

"You okay?" Tom asked.

"Mom, you really did not like that woman," Sophie said, laughing.

"Hated her," Kat lied. "She was a bully."

"She's in the city of Machiavelli," Tom said. "She should fit right in. Anyway, we won't let her scare you."

"For God's sake, Tom," Kat said.

Jed had taken her to the city that night, to sleep on the floor of someone's squat. The darkest, ugliest place, even the council flat seemed palatial in comparison. Three months later they rented a bed-sit in the basement of an old building and Kat found a job working for an American law office as photocopier, odd jobber. It paid well. Kat and Jed lived together for almost a year, squabbling over money and Jed's frequent disappearances, until Jed was arrested for assaulting a shopkeeper he had attempted to rob and bail was denied. Two days afterwards, Kat discovered that she was pregnant and one afternoon, as she worked late at the office, Jefferson Chandler, a senior partner in the firm, found her sobbing over the photocopier.

"Hey," he had said, touching her shoulder. "What's all this about?"

His kindness surprised her. She had caught him looking at her a few times but many of the men in the office looked at her. In those days, she had the kind of body, the kind of face, that men noticed. She had not intended to seduce him. When she told him about the pregnancy, he invited her to move into his large house in North London. Empty and echoing, he said, since his wife died. She married him six weeks before Sophie was born, and two months before his contract required that he move back to the US.

"You don't mind?" he'd asked. "It'll be kinda strange for you. New country and all."

"No. It will be wonderful," she said, meaning it. A new life.

A respectable, caring father for her child. She never contacted Jed. She never told him of the pregnancy.

And so she found herself in a small beach community within an hour of Los Angeles and a life that was a learning curve. She learned quickly, created a believable persona, an Avatar with manicured nails, perfect teeth, salon-shaped hair. She had always loved to read; now she read with a purpose. She studied things she could talk about in company: books, music. She memorized movie reviews and became known as a movie buff. When Sophie was four, Jefferson, at sixty one, had a stroke, and died within weeks.

Tom, an associate in Jefferson's law firm, was respectful of the young widow of the man who had been his managing partner. But it was not long before they were lovers, not long before he proposed. He said he would not try to step into Jefferson's shoes as Sophie's father, but he would love her daughter, then five years old, as he loved Kat. Two years later their son, Jack, was born. The perfect family, Kat often said to herself. Just perfect.

Now, in the villa off the Piazzia de Pitti, Kat waited until Tom and Sophie were swimming in the small pool and then called the Hotel Caravaggio. There was no reply from Angela Wilson's room. Kat paced the tiled floor of the lounge and then tried again. She moved restlessly around the place, stood at the window in the bedroom staring at the view of the skyline, dominated from this angle by the *Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore*, the outline of the *Duomo* softened by the late afternoon light. The noise of the traffic, the musical car horns, all the background clamour of the city, resounded outside the villa but Kat, lifting the phone again and again, heard only the futile ringing of a hotel telephone. Finally, she left a message for Angela at the reception desk, pleading illness, promising she would call in the morning. Then she stood, unsure. A fine trembling began at her fingertips. When her husband and daughter emerged from the water, towelling themselves, she was waiting.

“Let’s go out,” Kat said. “Instead.”
 Tom frowned.
 “You’ve forgotten Angela?”
 “I really, really do not want to spend time with that woman.”
 “Come on, she might have changed. She looked a bit — well, sad.”
 “I’ve already left a message cancelling. I don’t want her here,”
 Kat said. The words sound harsher than she intended. “Come on, get dressed. Let’s go.”
 “Not me, Mom,” said Sophie, “I promised to Skype Amanda.”
 “You have to come!”
 “No. I don’t,” Sophie said, dark eyes flashing.
 Kat leaned back against the wall, closed her eyes.
 “I’ve got such a headache,” she said
 Tom came to her, lifted her chin to look at her face.
 “So, why go out? If she comes, she comes. It won’t be so bad. We’ll protect you.”

The doorbell rang an hour later. Angela wore a cotton skirt, too short, and a top that dipped down over her freckled breasts. Her hair, frizzy from the sun, gleamed with something she had used to try to tame it.

Kat took her arm.
 “Let me show you round this villa,” she said. “While Tom does all the cooking.”
 Tom laughed.
 Out of earshot of the others, in the hallway outside the bedrooms, Kat paused. Angela turned to her, arms folded.
 “So?” she said.
 “Angela, please. My husband — he doesn’t know anything about my old life. Okay?” Kat said.
 Angela regarded her without expression.
 “She looks like him, don’t she?”
 “What?”

“Your daughter looks just like that Jed.”
 “Don’t be ridiculous.”
 “Ah, she does,” Angela said, nodding. “She definitely does. Those eyes. You don’t want to know what happened to me? After you took off? I’d really like to know what happened to you.”
 “My mother had just died. I needed to get away.”
 “Oh, get over yourself. You were glad to be shot of her. You were always glad when they took her way for a bit so you could have the place to yourself.”
 Kat stepped back, shocked at the words, knowing they contained a pinch of truth. Maybe as a teenager she had felt relief. It helped to have the burden of her mother carried by someone else for a while. But not when she was a child. No. Then, in a stranger’s house or the children’s home, she would cry herself to sleep every night.

“Please,” she said, quietly. “Please.”
 “They raped me you know. You saw. And you just rode off. I saw your back. Holding onto him. Racing away. Left me there.”
 “Angela, come on. They were just boys.”
 “There was three of them! It was a line-up.”
 A *snap* as the scene focused for Kat. She remembered Angela on the grass, her bra pushed up, her breasts visible, her pants around her ankles. Harry off to the side, his jeans still unfastened, watching. A dark boy, a stranger to Kat, knelt between Angela’s open thighs, while another boy waited his turn, his penis huge in his hands.
 “Did you go to the police?” she asked now, a tremble in her voice.
 “What? Are you daft? They didn’t care what happened on the Copthorne Estate. You know that. No. God, it hurt, though. And it bled. I was *fifteen*, Kat. You could have stopped them. That Jed could. You could have asked him.”

This truth lay heavy in the air between them. Kat turned
 “Angela, please, let’s just have dinner. Then — maybe we can get together for breakfast tomorrow. Just the two of us. And we can talk.”
 “What do I say when he asks me about how I knew you?”

“Just say at school. Something like that.”

“You so smart and me so stupid? That what you mean?”
Angela asked.

“Just simple stuff. Tom believes my father and mother died in an accident when I was ten and I went to live with an aunt. Now dead. Okay?”

“Jesus. And a father, too? Proper little family you had,” Angela said. “Bad luck them all dying like that.”

During the meal, Angela did not talk much to Kat at all but focused her attention on Sophie, inquiring about the teenager’s school, whether she liked music, whether she had a boyfriend. She was clumsy and fumbling and Kat saw that Tom was warming to her, sorry for her. Even Sophie smiled, as if making allowances for a slightly dotty aunt. Kat felt as if her entire body was stretched like a high wire, ready to snap. Finally, she touched her head, touched it again and winced as if in pain. Tom noticed, as she knew he would.

“Kat? Headache?”

“Bad, really bad. I think — well, we better do this again another time. Sorry, Angela.”

Angela looked at her hard for a moment, eyes narrowing. Then she picked up her wine glass, sipped at it.

“What happened to that Jed boy?” she asked. “I heard he went to jail.”

Kat lifted her head.

“Angela, I’m so sorry, but I really must lie down. Did you have a jacket? No, of course not. Too hot. Tom, please call a cab for Angela.”

“I can drive her,” he said.

“No. No. You’ve been drinking.”

“One glass —”

“Taxi, Tom,” Kat snapped. “Please,”

He was on his feet at once, dialled a number, but his eyes were on his wife’s face.

Sophie, seeing an escape opportunity, jumped to her feet.

“Nice to meet you, Angela,” she said, and skipped upstairs to her laptop, her social networks and friends. Angela called good-night to the young woman, then returned to her wine.

“Yeah,” she continued. “Good looking lad, though, weren’t he?”

“Angela. Please.”

“Those eyes,” she said. “Funny color, like dark beer. Remember them?”

She leaned back in her chair.

“I’ll call you in the morning, Angela,” Kat said, standing. “When I feel better.” *Get her talking about something else, anything else, until the taxi comes.*

“So, what’s your hotel like?”

Angela blinked, confused.

“The place you’re staying?” Kat said. “What’s it like? Does the package give you full board?”

Angela spoke briefly about her holiday package, the meals included, the day trips, but soon returned, relentless as a Rottweiler puppy, to the subject of Jed.

“So, what *do* you remember about that Jed and the old days?” she asked.

“Nothing much. Sorry. Don’t want to talk it. Unhappy memories for me. You know that.”

Kat could hear the pleading note in her own voice, a child calling to her mother — *please don’t go out, don’t bring men back, don’t drink, don’t* —

The taxi beeped outside.

Angela moved slowly to the door, then turned. She spoke in a voice so quiet, so tense with anger that she seemed to vibrate with it.

“You don’t remember your ma going crazy? You don’t remember who took you in? You don’t remember Jed? How you ran away with him while a bunch of boys were raping me? You don’t remember any of that?”

She turned and ran down the stone steps of the villa to the waiting taxi.

Kat watched the taxi pull away, did not look at Tom.

“Tom, could you get me a drink, please? Gin and tonic.”

He seemed to hesitate, then he left the room and seconds later she heard the hard snap of the ice tray, the clinking of cubes and bottle. She could hear the ice tinkling in the glasses as he returned. Kat remained at the window, looking out into the fading light. The bougainvillea, set against a silver sky, looked inky black. A tilted half moon was rising, a cloud crossed it.

“Look at me, Kat.”

She turned. Her husband’s face was closed, tight as a fist. She had seen him angry before, she had seen him irritable. This cold hostility was new.

“I think you better tell me what all that was about,” he said.

“Oh, she’s always been crazy.”

“Who’s Jed?”

“Just an old boyfriend, nobody really.”

“Is Sophie his child?”

She stared.

“Angela pretty much spelled it out,” Tom said. “When she said he had eyes like dark beer.”

Kat took a breath, then sat down abruptly on the sofa. Her limbs felt weak and unreliable. Tom remained standing, watched her, unmoving. Kat swallowed a mouthful of her drink.

“Yes. She’s his.”

“You said she was Jefferson’s child.”

She sighed.

“I didn’t actually say that. You assumed it.”

“Did Jefferson know the truth?”

“Jefferson knew Sophie wasn’t his. He never asked who the father was.”

“And the rest? Your mother?”

“My mother was in an out of hospitals most of my childhood. She was schizophrenic. And she drank.”

“Schizophrenic? You didn’t think maybe you should have mentioned that?”

“Of course I did. I’ve worried about it for years.”

“And your father?”

“Never knew him. My mother died when I was sixteen and Angela’s mother, Dora, said I could move in with them. We lived on a council estate. We were — well, poor. Very poor. You would probably call us trailer trash.”

He frowned at that.

“And this Jed?”

“I ran away with Jed. I got pregnant but then Jed went to jail and Jefferson was kind to me. So I married him. The rest — you know.”

“And rape? Angela said something about rape?”

“The night I met Jed. It was a group of us, just kids, just playing around.”

“Angela didn’t think it was playing around. How old was she?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen? Younger than Sophie.”

Younger than Sophie.

Kat looked at him, remembered Angela’s cry, the wind howling, the boys feral, out of control.

“You won’t understand.”

“No. I won’t,” Tom said. “All these goddamn lies. You ever tell the truth about anything?”

“I love you. I never lied about that.”

“Did you love Jefferson?”

Kat thought about this for a moment.

“No. I admired him. He was a good man.”

Kat leaned back on the sofa, closed her eyes. The fabricated headache was now a pounding reality.

“Tom, can we talk about this in the morning? Not now? Please.”

He didn’t reply for a long time.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked at last, and walked out of the room.

She listened to his footsteps on the stairs, waited for the pain that would surely come. How could she have thought it would last? A normal life, a happy family. For someone like her? Two beautiful children. Then the pain did come, mixed with fear. She would have to fight for Tom; she might have to fight for her kids. She would beg if necessary. She settled back onto the chair, aware of an odd lightness in her head. Maybe it was the wine mixed with the gin. A strange weightlessness. Like the first time Tom took her skiing. She had been so clumsy and uncoordinated but loved the crisp air, the clarity of the light, the mountains etched against a clear sky. And the best part, removing the thick jacket and gloves, dropping them to the floor, and then taking off the ski boots.

"I'm so light," she had said. "I feel as if I could float up to the ceiling." Tom had laughed.

She sat for a long time, sipping at the drink, thinking back.

Younger than Sophie.

She said the words again, aloud. They had *both* been younger than Sophie. She reached for the phone. It was late but she had a call to make, an apology, before she could talk again to her husband; before, one day, she must talk to her daughter. She dialed the number of the Hotel Caravaggio and waited a long time for the operator to answer.

"I need to speak to Angela Wilson," she said, finally. "It's urgent."

Photograph of Mexico, 1953

Victor Arnoldo Perez

My mother said this part of Mexico is like desert. The trees huddle at shore with thin skeleton arms, forever leaning, gasping. Her sepia eyes stare back at me, knowing no secrets to her predawn.

The world burnt to a crisp; your hair only a spirit on your cabeza; the river, a steady commerce of hatred. And someone's Popsicle home off in the background: made with tired hands, with windows that hang

like the old eyes of a net, over black earth firmament.

This land is unbroken somehow, like a preparation before meal, before reconciliation, before soaking, before harvest, before gathering,

before being diced and keyed up, searing in a pan. And she in white
cotton dress

and curtsy, offering her blue flowers to the world, with marionette hands holding a spot light around her.

And on this part of Mexico, the river will defecate on itself, revealing a small colony on the edge; an asylum for dank dolls dropped into the currents; a prayer, made up of old rags and sacks, with steel pins

in eyes rusted. There are so many people to hate on this side of the river. And their cactus bodies tell the tale, with porcupine feet to make him lame, make her stay, make it right again.

A colony pillowed in-between the wet earth and then gathered
Into my mother's young hands. From underneath, some kind of evil,
and uncontrollable writhing, a stone In the gravel of my mother's heart.

One more trip to California, and you're almost there.
Sometimes they buried money under the homes to keep safe
from the soldiers, and the ghosts never came.

Sometimes they told you not to lift the rocks, to beware of the stage
under boulder,
a playground for bewitched snakes and scorpions.
Stay close to the home, and you did.

About the Authors

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