
Sherry Decker
Hook House
and Other Horrors

Hook House and Other Horrors

Sherry Decker

Silver Lake
Publishing

These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, entities, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

"Hook House" was first published in *Cemetery Dance #49*, 2004.
"Hicklebickle Rock" was first published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, June 1998.
"The Clan" was first published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, November 1999.
"Heat Waves" was first published in *Black Gate*, Issue #8, Summer 2005.
"Chazzabryom" was first published in *Space & Time Magazine #98*, Spring 2004.
"Shivering, We Dance" was first published in *Not One of Us #25*, March 2001. It also appeared in *City Slab #1*, October 2002 and *Book Of Dark Wisdom*, Summer 2005.
"Twisted Wishes, Twilight Dreams" was first published in *Black October*, 2001.
"A City in Italy" was first published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, December 2005.
"Jessica Fishbone" was first published in *Implosion #7*, August 1997.
"Tarissa" was first published in *Matriarch's Way #4*, 1998.

HOOK HOUSE AND OTHER HORRORS
Published by Silver Lake Publishing
http://www.silverlakepublishing.com

SLP Electronic edition / January 2006
ISBN-10: 1-933511-08-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-933511-08-5

SLP Trade Paperback edition / January 2006
ISBN-10: 1-933511-09-5
ISBN-13: 978-1-933511-09-2

This book is dedicated to my sweet Rachel, July 1987 – Dec. 5, 2005.

Rachel helped write every story in this collection. She was my buddy, my muse, my comforter, especially in troubled times. Rest in peace, Rachel. See you in heaven.

I want to thank my husband, Dick for his love and support, Nathan and April, and Mom and Jim for believing in me. Thanks to Becky Warden, Kerri Hakoda and Carol Morrison for their critiquing and fun times. Thanks to Evelyn Gratrix for always being there for me. Thanks to Jack Remick for being an influential teacher. Thanks to Stephanie Weidner for her fine editing and for understanding.

Special thanks to my sister, Barbara — a very fine artist on her way up.

Contents

Hook House

The route Mother took to the coast wound and twisted through valleys, beside farms and rivers, and around the south end of the Olympic Mountains. During that three-hour drive from Seattle to Aunt Jessie's house, she repeated the things she had been repeating for several weeks.

"Remember to say *please* and *thank you*, and to use your table napkin. Never shout or run inside the house. Wash your face and hands and comb your hair before coming to the table and be sure to eat everything on your plate, even if you don't like it. And I'm not saying that you shouldn't talk, Sara, but don't ask questions. Aunt Jessie is a very private person and she wouldn't like to be questioned by a six-year-old. We've been invited. We're her guests." I knew Mother was nervous about taking me to meet Aunt Jessie. It was obvious by the way she kept clearing her throat and licking her lips.

And now, years later, my mouth felt dry, realizing that I was headed to that place and taking Richard there to meet my mother. I could barely swallow.

While Richard drove, I studied his profile. He was everything I admired in a man. Not only did his blond good looks captivate me, he was smart, courteous, and kind. But most importantly he made me feel special. Not special in the way I'd felt as a child. He made me feel *normal*.

Richard caught me studying him and smiled. "You're positive you remember the way, Sara?"

I nodded. "Up ahead there's a big old barn beside a lake with an island and a sign that says, NO FISHING."

I had hoped for clear skies because I believed sunshine might, somehow, bring good luck. The weather was cooperating. Sunlight sparkled and seagulls circled overhead as we approached the coast. Everything seemed perfect, except that straight ahead, a red, scythe-shaped cloud crouched on the horizon.

"The first time my mother and I drove along this road together I was only six years old," I reminded him.

"From what you've told me about your mother, it sounds like your aunt's approval was very important to her."

"It still is."

Richard glanced at me again. "But your Aunt Jessie is dead, right?"

I nodded, wondering how I could explain it all to Richard. How could I describe Mother, or Aunt Jessie, or Hook House? Richard would have to meet Mother and see the house for himself. But then I felt a sudden chill and pulled my summer-weight cardigan closer around my shoulders.

"There's the old gas station," I said, "where Mother always stopped so we could use the restroom. She said it would be rude to arrive at Aunt Jessie's and to rush in to use the bathroom before a proper conversation."

"That sounds awfully formal considering you were visiting family," Richard said.

"When you grow up formal it feels normal."

We both laughed at my accidental rhyme.

The sun painted a golden triangle on my lap through the windshield, and I slid my palms back and forth across it, seeking heat. I wondered if I should warn Richard about things he might see or hear during this visit, but decided against it. He wouldn't believe me anyway.

My faith in the sunshine withered as we crested the last foothill and I viewed the Pacific Ocean. It was streaked gray and green with angry-looking white caps.

"Suddenly, I want to protect you instead of introduce you."

"She can't be any worse than my mother," Richard reminded me, "and you survived that introduction."

I was barely listening to him at that point, though. I was reliving my first visit to Hook House as a child of six.

Aunt Jessie's house sat on an eighty-foot bluff overlooking the ocean in a dreary little town called Hook—named after my great-grandfather, William Hook. The town squatted between two windblown coastal hills. There was a post office, a grocery store, a hardware store and pharmacy, a small white church, an old Community Hall, and a gas station with *adequate* restrooms, according to Mother.

Mother's car climbed a long, blacktop driveway that wound up through trees like a flattened snake. The house was like a well-kept secret, concealed

from view except from the side facing the ocean. A carved, weathered sign hung at the entrance to the driveway, nearly hidden by thick salal and rhododendrons. *Hook House - 1905*.

It was raining and windy, and Mother parked her car under the portico. At our knock, a woman wearing all black with a white apron opened the door and offered to take our coats. I shook my head because chills swept over me at the sight of her. I stared and yet couldn't see her clearly. It was as if she were made of shadows.

"This way please," she said, in a voice that was neither feminine nor masculine. She led us down a hallway to a room with large windows facing the ocean. The wind shook the twisted evergreens on the ledge outside, and raindrops slapped the windows, leaving chalky-looking streaks on the multipaned glass.

"Salt," Mother explained, without my having to ask. "The rain here is salty."

I don't remember being introduced to Aunt Jessie. I remember standing there, shivering, with her staring at me as if searching for something familiar in my features. She eventually nodded as if I had passed some kind of inspection, and then she struck a match against the mantel and stooped to light a fire in the fireplace. I tugged on Mother's sleeve and whispered, "Why are the trees crooked?"

"The wind," Mother said. "The branches grow away from the wind."

I studied the stunted, twisted trees outside the big windows, wondering how they would look if they grew somewhere else, away from the wind that cried tears on the windows.

"Ordinary," Aunt Jessie said. "Things that withstand adversity have strength of character." I remember thinking that my aunt had no business answering my unspoken question.

Even after she had accepted me as family Aunt Jessie always frightened me a little. She was taller than most women, and she strode instead of walked, even though she used a cane and had a slight limp. She never wore pants, always silk dresses that rustled and had collars of embroidered lace and were hemmed at mid-calf with gold or silver buttons up the front. Her hair was wavy and silver. She always wore earrings and brooches, and she smelled like the storage area in our apartment building back home. Her eyes looked icy-

blue through her silver-rimmed glasses, and whenever those eyes were aimed at me, I shivered.

Aunt Jessie wasn't just my aunt, Mother explained. She was my great-great aunt, my deceased great-grandfather's sister. She had never married and had no children. We were her closest blood relatives.

Mother and I slept together upstairs in a big brass bed under an ivory satin quilt. The room's window faced south, and we kept it open. I heard the ocean's rhythmic pounding all night long as if the waves were breaking closer and closer. I pictured the waves washing away the bluff beneath us and the big house being swallowed by that midnight water. I nudged Mother and confessed that the ocean frightened me.

"This old house has stood on this cliff for nearly one hundred years, Sara. One more storm won't knock it down."

After breakfast I hurried down to the beach and saw that not a single wave had reached the bluff. The sand there was dry. From then on the sound of the surf seemed soothing, and every night I fell asleep to its muted roar.

At times, Aunt Jessie's house smelled wild and foreign to me, like fog, rain, wind, and sand all mixed together with ocean-soaked things that washed up on the beach. In the middle of the night, with my feet pulled up inside my nightgown, I decided that the place smelled like time itself.

The housekeeper-cook, Mrs. Soul, didn't live at Hook House. She arrived on foot early every morning and left after dinner, although I never saw from what direction. I remember deciding that she didn't approve of children, that she probably expected me to slip up, to forget the rules. She expected me to chatter, to be loud or clumsy, to maybe break something valuable. A few times I caught sight of her watching me in the hallway mirror. It was a wide, full-length mirror in a pewter frame. The glass looked deep, and the rooms behind me were concealed by bottomless shadows. At first I didn't recognize her. She looked younger, thinner, with black hair instead of steel gray. When I turned around, she wasn't there.

I was determined to *not* make the mistakes she anticipated. Instead, I took my shoes off at the door and banged the sand off them. I always tiptoed through the house in soft slippers, the same way Mother did.

On our second evening, Mother called me in from the garden because it was time to wash up for dinner. We headed upstairs and when we reached

the first landing, I saw an old man at the top of the stairs. He had a gray beard and was wearing gray flannel pajamas. I halted and Mother bumped into me from behind.

"Who is he?" I whispered.

"Where?"

"Up there. That old man in pajamas."

After a few seconds Mother passed me on the stairs. "Silly," she said. "There's no one there." She reached the top and walked right past the old man. He seemed to say something to her, but I didn't hear it and Mother must not have heard him either, because it wasn't like her to ignore someone who spoke to her. That would be rude. Seconds later he was gone.

The old man appeared twice at the top of the stairs during that first visit, and both times Mother didn't see him. I didn't mention the old man again because there had to be something *wrong with me* if he wasn't really there. People like me were locked up in padded rooms. Normal people whispered about people like me.

On our last night there, Aunt Jessie suggested we come back soon and stay longer. Mother smiled and said that we would return after school let out for the summer.

There were things about Hook House and its gardens and the ocean that I loved, and I was glad to be invited back. But deep inside where I kept my secret thoughts, I shivered, as if cold fingers had stroked my neck.

Aunt Jessie reminded me of a woman I'd seen at Christmastime stuffing money into the Salvation Army kettle. That woman wore a long fur coat and matching hat as she stepped from a limosine. She looked out of place, stooping down, jamming money into the blood-red kettle, as if she felt guilty about something, as if she were trying to buy something with all that green paper.

It was June when Mother and I returned and stayed for three weeks. We went for windy walks on the beach and collected shells, but we didn't take them back to Hook House. Instead, we decorated stumps, logs, patches of moss, and big rocks with them, all along the trail back up the hill.

Halfway between the dunes and the house, before the trail through the woods grew steep, lay a private glen. I named it the *fairy garden*. Mother said there were no such things as fairies, but that if there *were*, it would be the

perfect place for them. In that place grew maidenhair ferns and woodland hyacinth, glowing white trilliums and bleeding hearts, forget-me-nots and soft, delicate huckleberry bushes—the kind I'd seen growing from the tops of stumps like bouquets stuffed into brown vases. The trail wound through clumps of blue star creeper, johnny jump-ups, and trembling windflowers. I would have spent hours there, inspecting every plant and flower, every tree and fern, waiting for magic sprites to appear, but Mother always hurried me, saying that it would be rude to delay lunch for a child's fantasy.

"Does Aunt Jessie ever come to the fairy garden?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Mother said. "She has a bad hip and the trail is steep."

After that first visit Mother and I spent every summer of my childhood at Hook House and I learned some family history during that time. Before building the house, my great-grandfather, William Hook, had been in business with a friend. His friend died under mysterious circumstances. Some people believed that my great-grandfather killed him and built Hook House with 'blood money.' I pictured paper money, wet with slick, red blood.

My own father died when I was two years old. He was an orphan raised by foster parents who were elderly when they took him in, so there was no one to mourn him except my mother. Mother never remarried although she was very pretty with wide green eyes and dark auburn hair. Men often smiled at her, but I remember her saying, "I'll never love again." In photographs my father was tall and blond and very handsome, and his name was Derek Inverness, but his name was never spoken at Hook House. Except for me and the photos, there was little evidence that he ever existed.

The old bearded man continued to roam the second floor and sometimes managed to startle me, but by the time I reached my early teens I ignored him and Mother seemed to forget I had ever mentioned him.

I was given a room of my own on the third floor. Though small, it had a fine view of the ocean through a dormer window, and there was my own bathroom right across the hall. My room was creamy yellow with a thick Persian rug on the wood floor and an oak rocking chair in the corner. The bedroom furniture was old but fine quality, Mother said, and I felt very grown-up.

During meals Aunt Jessie always sat at the head of the table with her back to the sideboard. Mother sat in the middle of the table facing the ocean, and

I liked to sit at the far end, with my back to the fireplace. Mornings were often foggy, and fires were built in the midst of summer. By noontime the fog had usually lifted and the fire was a pile of orange coals.

The summer I turned fourteen, Aunt Jessie drew me into the lunch time conversation for the first time.

"What do you think of my gardens, Sara?" she asked.

Surprised, I put my lemonade down. "The rhododendrons are beautiful, but I like those pale blue iris best. They're my favorite color."

"That's Cambridge blue, like your eyes."

"I'd grow them at home," I added, "but we don't even have a balcony for pots."

"What would you grow if you had a real garden?" she asked.

"Definitely the blue iris ... and roses."

Aunt Jessie's expression changed then. "I used to have a rose garden." She sounded melancholy. "Out where the small fountain is."

"After lunch let's take a stroll there."

"I haven't been out of this house in fifty years," she murmured.

"Fifty years?" I repeated.

Mother caught my eye and frowned. Surely, I could be forgiven *one question* in all those years.

Aunt Jessie's eyes focused on me again. She picked up the little brass bell beside her plate and rang it. Mrs. Soul came from the kitchen, and for the first time I realized that the strange woman hadn't changed since I was six years old. She looked exactly the same.

"We'll take dessert in the garden room," Aunt Jessie said, and Mrs. Soul nodded.

I helped Aunt Jessie from the table and took her arm. "Sorry, didn't mean to pry," I whispered.

She patted my arm and I felt relieved.

Mrs. Soul served a strawberry trifle and more tea from a brass cart as we settled into wicker chairs with blue-striped cushions. The gardens outside steamed in the sunlight, and the hired gardeners packed their shovels, rakes, and hoes into their truck and left.

The garden room was actually an enclosed porch on the east side of the house, away from the ocean and the wind. The hinged windows were propped

open with thin screens separating us from the gardens. I realized that this was probably as close to being outside as Aunt Jessie ever got. I bit my tongue to keep from asking *why*, and I studied my great-great aunt between sips of tea and mouthfuls of trifle.

On the table lay a thick album, its cover of tooled leather. In the center was the name *Hook*.

"May I look?" I asked.

Aunt Jessie nodded.

I glanced at Mother. Her lips were pressed flat together, and her jaw appeared to be locked tight. But she didn't say anything and I knew Aunt Jessie was waiting for me to open the album.

I lifted the cover.

"That's a photo of my brother, William," Aunt Jessie said. "Your great-grandfather. He was only sixteen in that photo, long before he built Hook House."

With blood money, I almost blurted, but bit back the words.

"And after our parents died William raised me. He was already a wealthy, successful man by then."

Great-Grandfather Hook was handsome but severe-looking even as a young man. He wore a dark, snug-fitting suit buttoned clear to the collar with a small bow-tie beneath a trim, dark beard. He held a short-brimmed, round-topped hat in his hands.

"It's called a bowler hat," Aunt Jessie said, again reading my thoughts.

I turned the page.

"That's William's only child, Bernice, your mother's mother, and that's her husband, Henry. When Bernice married Henry she gave up the last name of Hook. As a result, William left Hook House to me."

"Your brother didn't like Henry?" I asked.

Aunt Jessie shrugged. "He neither liked nor disliked him. William simply didn't want Bernice to change her last name. No one can inherit Hook House unless their last name is Hook." I glanced toward Mother who was picking invisible lint from her sleeves.

"Mother's and my last name is Inverness, so neither of us can inherit," I said and turned another page.

After a brief pause Aunt Jessie said, "Names can be changed."

"Who is this?" I asked.

"That's Bernice again, but by the time that photo was taken Henry was dead, buried alive in a landslide below the house."

"Oh, that's so sad," I said.

"Yes. Bernice was pregnant at the time with their second child, and when she heard Henry was dead she developed a fever and lost the baby. The doctor called it 'hysteria', but I knew it was grief. Your mother was only three, so she doesn't remember."

"How awful."

"Bernice buried the child with her own hands at the site of the landslide, and then cultivated the place into a garden—you've gone through it on your way to the beach."

"You mean ... the fairy garden?"

Aunt Jessie shrugged. "Bernice was obsessed with that garden. She slaved over it for the entire summer. Hardly slept or ate."

The fairy garden would never again feel lovely and magical. From then on it would be a place of terrible sadness and loss.

"Grandma Bernice looks awful in this photograph," I blurted. "Like a skeleton with hair."

"She lost her mind," Aunt Jessie said. "She often forgot to get dressed and wandered around the grounds in her nightclothes."

"I think Sara has had enough family history for today." Mother took the album from my hands, closed it, and put it in a cupboard.

The next day, while running to avoid an approaching storm, I saw Bernice's husband, Henry, in the fairy garden. He sat atop a boulder in a shaft of sunlight holding a tiny, naked infant in his hands. The baby waved its arms and kicked its feet and legs. They were there for a few seconds, and then black clouds erased the sunlight and their image vanished. The wind sounded like an infant squealing, and I ran to the house pelted by rain.

At bedtime Aunt Jessie asked me to her room. Unbuttoning her collar, she pulled a chain from beneath her bodice and asked me to undo the clasp.

Nervous, I fumbled but managed to pry apart the golden claw.

"Here," she said. Loops of gold chain draped my fingers.

"How pretty," I said. At the end of the chain was a two-inch long key. It felt warm in my palm.

"Your great-grandfather gave it to me for my fourteenth birthday. Now that you're fourteen, you should have it. It used to unlock a hope chest, but I gave the chest away a long time ago." Aunt Jessie shrugged. "William said it would bring me luck. It didn't, necessarily, but I believe it protected me somehow. Perhaps it will protect you now."

I wanted to ask, *from what*, but instead murmured my thanks as she fastened it around my neck.

When we returned home for the school year, Mother informed me she was changing her last name from Inverness back to Hook. She asked me if I wanted to be included in that change. I wavered, remembering how my father looked in those old photographs, smiling and handsome. I didn't want to betray him—all I had was his name.

"No," I said, wondering what Aunt Jessie would think. I acquired the habit of fingering the gold key every time I thought about my great-great aunt.

Aunt Jessie paid the tuition for me to attend a finishing school. Before moving into the dorm, I spent the last two weeks with Mother at Hook House. One night I heard a sound I'd never heard before—slow, deliberate footsteps outside my door. The footsteps traveled in only one direction, over and over again.

Barefoot, I tiptoed to my door. Light from a bright moon fell through the stairwell window, shoving the darkness into the corners. I was startled by the sight of Great-Grandfather Hook and by the sight of wall sconces, the storage room door, and the newel post directly *through* him as he passed by.

Fear chased shivers up my spine, but determined to learn where he came from or where he went, I followed. His head and shoulders looked solid, as if I could touch him. But from the waist down he was diaphanous. Below his knees there was only the sound of leather slippers on the hardwood floor.

I followed him down to the second level where he paused and appeared to gaze toward the landing below. His shoulders slumped as if in resignation. Then, in an instant he was gone and I was alone—until behind me the foot-

steps began again.

He came toward me from the end of the hall. I backed up and around the newel post with my heart pounding in my throat. Again, he halted on the top step and then faded. I spotted his twisted body on the landing below, and I realized that decades ago he had died on those stairs.

Aunt Jessie announced that she wanted to clear out the storage room upstairs.

"Antique dealers should evaluate some of it," she said. "But go look before I call them, Sara. If you want anything, set it aside."

Again, Mother's expression was bitter looking, as if she felt *she* should have been offered first choice of anything there. After all, she was a Hook. I wasn't.

The storage room was directly across the hall from Mother's room on the second floor. I had never been inside although I had always been curious. Narrow paths zigzagged between stacks of boxes, crates, and trunks and around furniture draped with heavy cloths. I opened a trunk near the door, recoiled at the odor of mothballs, and dropped the lid. Framed photographs and paintings leaned against the back wall of the room. I brought each frame, one by one, closer to the single overhead light. Eventually, I held an intriguing photograph of Great-Grandfather Hook in one of his snug-fitting suits. He held his bowler hat in one hand, and his other hand rested on the back of an ornate chair. A young girl sat in the chair wearing a dark, silky dress, the collar edged with lace. I carried the photograph downstairs and into the Garden Room.

"Where did you find that?" Aunt Jessie asked.

"Way in the back. May I have it?"

She studied it for a moment and then nodded. "Go ahead, I'm certain there are others like it up there."

"Who is the little girl?"

"That's me. I was eight and William was twenty when that was taken."

"How old was he when he fell down the stairs?" I asked.

Aunt Jessie looked startled. "Did your mother tell you that?"

I had never heard her sound so angry. I couldn't allow her to blame

Mother.

"No, I see him walking around, and I've seen him lying there, on the landing."

As always, Aunt Jessie's cold stare made me shiver. Finally, she said, "It's as I always suspected, Sara. Hook blood runs in your veins. You have the gift, with or without the name."

In the middle of the night, I awoke to see Mother standing at the foot of my bed. Her face was pale and her eyes wide, their whites glowing like little moons with black hearts.

"Aunt Jessie is gone," she whispered.

"Gone?" I sat up, picturing Aunt Jessie flinging open the door and running through the garden in her nightgown, outside and free for the first time in decades.

"She died in her sleep."

My hand found the key at the end of the gold chain, and I couldn't help but wonder if my great-great aunt should have kept it a while longer, for its luck.

I felt sad but I didn't cry. Aunt Jessie wasn't really gone. I knew I'd see her somewhere in the house, in some room, some doorway, because I *had the gift, with or without the name*.

Mother seemed well prepared, even eager, to handle the duties that fell to her. The coroner arrived and took my aunt's body away. Mother called a lawyer whose name she had found in an address book, and we soon learned that she had inherited the entire estate, except for a small stipend in my name, enough for tuition. I stayed an extra week to help Mother.

"When will you come back to Seattle?" I asked.

"Not until things are all settled here, Sara. Did you find anything else in the storage room you wanted?"

"No."

Mother used the dining room as a temporary office since it was centrally located and had a phone. One end of the long table was covered with papers. While she arranged for the funeral, I wandered into the garden room and paused beside the little table where so recently the three of us had shared

lunch on a sunny day. I opened the screen door and stepped outside.

The flower beds alongside the house bulged with white impatiens and blue lobelia. Forest birds called from nearby trees, and bees buzzed in the poppies. Something smelled sweet and I followed the path toward the fountain.

"Sara? Sara?" Mother's voice sounded frightened. "Sara!"

I hurried back. Through the screens I saw Mother in the garden room, beside the mosaic table, her hand trembling. She opened the screen door, and then jumped back as if from the edge of a precipice.

"Mother, I'm right here. What's wrong?"

"Sara?" she repeated, as if she couldn't see me even though I stood directly in front of her, barely an arm's length away. I stepped through the door.

"Oh, Sara!" Mother grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. "For a moment I couldn't see anything."

"I'll call a doctor."

"No. I'm fine now. The sunlight must have blinded me."

I led her to the wicker sofa with its striped cushions, but she shook her head no and lowered herself into one of the flowered chairs.

Two days later, in the small white church on the hill, I attended Aunt Jessie's funeral alone because Mother had a severe headache. I told her she was trying to do too much and that she needed to get some rest. I had expected to see Mrs. Soul at the service, but the austere woman never arrived.

"There weren't any roses at the service, were there?" Mother asked later. "I specifically told the florist, *no roses*."

The small publishing company in Seattle that offered me employment was on the second floor of the Goreston Building. I met the owner of the building one morning in the elevator. I remember noticing his eyes—a mix of green and gray, like a stormy ocean. The elevator doors had barely closed when the power went out and we were briefly trapped there together.

"Sara Inverness," I said. "Editorial assistant at Skyline Publishers."

"Richard Goreston," he said. "Remind me to reward the electrician."

We shook hands, and my fingers tingled. When our eyes met I was drawn

to him in a way that I'd never been drawn to anyone before. He held my hand a moment longer than necessary. A week later he invited me to dinner. Seven months later we were engaged.

"Richard wants to meet you, Mother. Can you come to Seattle for a weekend?"

It was then that she admitted her vision had grown even worse and that she didn't drive anymore.

"Have you seen a doctor about your eyes?" I asked.

"I see well enough, and besides, I know every inch of this house. Bring your fiancé here, to the beach. I'll tell Mrs. Soul that there will be three for meals."

As Richard drove around the central fountain and parked beneath the portico, golden sunshine and a gentle breeze greeted us. In the courtyard birds chirped and a cheerful frog croaked. Even so, I shivered.

We carried our overnight bags inside with Mrs. Soul holding the front door open for us. I found myself scrutinizing her appearance, searching for *something* about her that had aged in the past twenty years. I wondered, if I reached over and touched her, what would I find? Flesh or shadow?

Introductions with Mother went smoothly, and at dinner Richard complimented her for raising such a fine daughter.

"I can't take credit for the way Sara turned out," she said. "She could have been rebellious, but instead she chose to be agreeable. A preacher's child can become a killer, and a killer's child become a saint. I don't think it has much to do with parenting. It has to do with intelligence. Sara is very intelligent."

It was the kindest thing Mother had ever said about me. It was the *only* thing I had ever heard her say about me.

"When I lived in Seattle," Mother said, "I knew a woman with the last name of Goreston. Her first name was Carolyn. Any relation?"

Richard refolded his napkin and placed it beside his plate before nodding. "Yes, that's my mother," he said. "I know how she can be, and I apolo-

gize for any rudeness she might have shown you."

Mother picked up the bell and rang it. "Your mother and I had acquaintances in common and we sometimes attended the same social events. But actually, I don't believe your mother has ever spoken to me."

Mrs. Soul shoved open the kitchen door.

"We'll take dessert in the garden room," Mother said.

The three of us stood and Richard took Mother's arm. "I apologize for my mother," he said. "She may have been jealous because you were the lovely and famous Hook heiress."

Mother patted Richard's arm—the same way Aunt Jessie had patted mine.

"One of the *infamous* Hooks," Mother said with an amused smile.

Mrs. Soul followed with the dessert cart. It was laden with sponge cake, raspberries, custard, a pot of coffee, and cream and sugar. I volunteered to serve.

The early evening sunlight cut through the tree trunks and across the lawn, painting everything with gaudy, surreal colors—the grass chartreuse, the sky turquoise, the peonies candy pink. It was one of those moments I knew I would remember, along with the smell of fresh coffee and the delicate chime of silverware on china. Mother seemed content in Richard's presence, and he in hers. Maybe things would work out after all.

"This place is ... I'm searching for the right word," Richard said. "Amazing, wondrous." He shook his head as if those words were inadequate. "From the moment I first turned into the driveway, I've felt a sense of déjàvu—but I'm certain I've never been here before."

"The first time I saw Hook House," Mother said, "I knew it was enchanted."

"That's it—enchanted." Richard finished his coffee. "If you ladies don't mind, I'm intrigued by that quaint stone path." He exited through the screen door.

A moment later, I decided to ask Mother the question I had wanted to ask for so long, "You saw Great-Grandfather Hook, too, didn't you—on the stairs when I was six?"

Mother avoided my gaze for a moment before she nodded. "I thought if I denied seeing him, he'd go away and you wouldn't see him anymore either." Then, she tilted her head and turned her ear toward the window, eyes

wide and full of expectation. "Who is that whistling?" she asked.

"It's Richard."

She smiled, but she looked disappointed. "He's a handsome young man with such nice manners. In some ways he reminds me of your father."

Whenever Richard entered a room I noticed a change in Hook House, as if daylight grew brighter and shadows withdrew. Rooms appeared bigger, as if the walls shrank back as he passed by. I soon realized that Mrs. Soul avoided entering a room when Richard was there. She skulked in the shadows or disappeared altogether for hours at a time.

The old photo album had vanished from the garden room. I wanted to ask Mrs. Soul about it and went to find her, but even though it was only an hour away from dinner, she was nowhere to be found. The lights were off, and there was no sign of food anywhere in the kitchen or pantry. Not even spices on the shelves. I searched the house, even the closets. Mrs. Soul was not there.

I entered a large bedroom at the end of the hall on the second floor, a room I had never entered before. Mother once told me that she and my father had shared that room, but that she never entered it again after he died. The room had peach and cream wallpaper, a four-poster bed with a crocheted bedspread, and dressers made of cherry wood. No drop cloths—everything was coated with thick dust. It seemed strange for the window to be open and for the lace curtain to be waving in the draft.

I heard Richard whistling outside in the garden. I stepped to the window and pushed back the curtain. He stood below in that odd, late-day sunlight that turned the grass chartreuse and the sky turquoise. His blond hair looked wavy instead of straight, and he wore old-fashioned clothes I'd never seen before. He bent and picked a red rose. All around him were rose bushes heavy with blooms of every color—pinks, purples, whites, yellows, oranges, and blood reds. He turned and looked up at me, twirling the rose.

It was my father.

Then he was gone and the rose garden was gone. Instead, I saw the small fountain with water spurting from the mouth of the stone fish. In my fist I

held tattered strips of the lace curtain. The window was closed, and the latch was coated with thick dust.

Dinner was served on time. Roasted chicken with wild rice dressing, asparagus, baby carrots, and button mushrooms in a light sauce. When Mrs. Soul brought the dishes into the dining room from the kitchen, I stood up. Caught by surprise, Richard scrambled to his feet.

"Sorry, Richard. Mother, I'll be right back." I hurried through the kitchen door. A roasting pan soaked in the big sink, and the crockery butter mold sat on the counter, damp with chilled condensation. Boxes of spices crowded the shelf above the stove, and one of the oven lights glowed. I smelled something sweet baking.

"Is something wrong?" Mrs. Soul said from behind me.

Without answering I returned to the dinner table.

Had the stark, empty kitchen been an illusion?

Mother moved into Aunt Jessie's old room on the main floor, explaining that the stairs were getting to be too much for her. Mother was only forty-three years old. But from constant squinting the fine lines around her eyes had deepened and she looked older. More like sixty.

Our first evening there, I led Richard up to my old room on the third floor. "Do you like it?"

He turned from his view of the ocean. "I love it. Especially since you slept here as a teenager."

I hugged him. "Mother approves of you."

"I had a million questions I wanted to ask her, but I took your advice and bit my tongue instead."

"You can ask me anything." I leaned against him, loving his smell.

"Not a question, exactly. More like a confession—I kept waiting to be introduced to the silver-haired lady in the silk dress and wire-rimmed glasses," Richard said. "Until I realized that she wasn't real." Richard shrugged. "I know it sounds crazy, but she looked as real as you do ... well, almost."

"But, Aunt Jessie never sat on the sofa. She always took the big chair with the flowered cushions."

Richard shook his head. "She sat on the striped sofa."

I couldn't bring myself to tell Richard about the ghosts I'd seen at Hook House.

It seemed wise to let him think his one sighting of Aunt Jessie was a singular experience. After a month or so he'd begin to doubt it happened, or distrust his memory of it.

The next day Mother and I had our first cups of coffee in the living room while Mrs. Soul prepared the dining room for breakfast. Richard was on the phone in the hall.

"Richard saw Aunt Jessie," I told Mother. "He described her perfectly." I sighed, trying to relieve the tension in my chest. "I might have been a happier child had you told me the truth sooner."

"Tell a child that she lives with ghosts?" Mother made frowning eye contact in the mirror.

"At least I wouldn't have thought I was insane."

"You thought you were insane?"

"No one else admitted seeing ghosts."

"Breakfast is ready." Mrs. Soul appeared in the entrance just as Richard entered. Mrs. Soul backed away, eyes averted.

Richard helped Mother into Aunt Jessie's old chair with her back to the sideboard. I took Mother's old position in the middle of the table facing the ocean, and Richard sat in my old chair with his back to the fireplace. I tried to picture myself at the head of the table, ringing the little bell and saying, *we'll take dessert in the garden room.*

Later, Richard and I hiked down to the beach. We ran barefoot across the sand toward the lighthouse and returned with the wind at our backs. He listened to the story of the fairy garden and agreed that it lessened the charm of the otherwise magical place. When we reached the house, he said a nap sounded more appealing than food, so Mother and I ate lunch in the garden room without him. Several times I glanced at the wicker sofa, expecting to see Aunt Jessie, but she never appeared. Mother repeatedly tilted her head, as if listening for something outside, and I knew she listened for the sound of my father, whistling as he picked a rose.

"I thought about what you said, Sara," Mother said, "about how you might have been happier had you known the truth. If you want to know anything now, ask."

"Tell me about Bernice."

"My mother died when I was three. I don't remember her, and I didn't want you hearing how she went insane from grief. Besides, that was just Aunt Jessie's opinion. So many sad things happened before you were born. I didn't want you dwelling on them."

"How did Bernice die?"

"The doctor said she suffocated in her own pillow after taking too many sedatives—according to Aunt Jessie. Doesn't mean it's true, of course."

"And my father?"

Mother stood up suddenly and rested her chin on the edge of the mantel. "The last time I saw your father he was standing in the back yard with sunlight on his hair ... holding a rose." Her voice trembled. "He died of a gunshot wound to the head. There was an investigation afterward. *I* was a suspect, but eventually it was listed as a suicide." Mother sighed again. "He would never have killed himself. We were happy together."

"It must have been awful for you."

"It was in all the newspapers. People shunned me afterwards."

"How did you cope?"

"Having you helped. You gave me a reason to carry on. A few weeks after his death, I secretly scattered your father's ashes in the rose garden. I thought that would be a fine resting place for him, but two weeks later Aunt Jessie had the rose garden torn up and the fountain built. There is no grave for your father."

It was just before dinner that Mother reminded me that no one but a blood relative with the name Hook could inherit Hook House.

"The entire estate will be yours someday, Sara, but only if you change your name to Hook. If you stay an Inverness or marry and change your name to Goreston, the entire property and investments will pass to cousins out of state."

Richard halted in the entrance to the living room wearing a stunned expression.

Mother went to him and placed her hand on his arm. "Richard, please understand this isn't my decision. It isn't uncommon these days for a married woman to keep her own name."

"Our children must be Hooks also?" he asked.

"If you want them to inherit Hook House, yes."

"But then," Richard said, "the name Goreston dies with me. Personally, I think such an inheritance clause can be broken by a good attorney. I'll look into it."

Later, he admitted that his lawyer hadn't sounded optimistic. Richard hardly spoke or touched his food at dinner. We sat in uncomfortable silence as dark clouds raced inland from the sea. Rain lashed the windows as Mrs. Soul pushed the dessert cart into the room. She kept her eyes down, and as soon as I offered to serve, she fled.

The china cups and saucers rattled with a cheeriness that ill-matched the mood of the room. Mother didn't suggest moving to the garden room, and I think Richard was relieved.

"I'm sorry to have ruined your first visit, Richard," Mother finally said.

"You didn't," he lied.

Mother said she was tired and retired early. Richard and I exchanged speechless, disappointed glances, and then we also retired early.

That night I was awakened by the sound of footsteps outside my room again. Moonlight filled the hallway, and I immediately saw Great-Grandfather Hook heading for the stairs, except this time another apparition followed him. I followed them both. When he halted at the edge of the top step, the second shadow ran quickly up behind him. It was a woman, bone-thin, with wild, colorless hair. She looked like she had been crying, like she was still crying. She crashed against my great-grandfather, shoving him headfirst down the stairs. His hands clutched and clawed the black air of the stairwell as he fell. I leaned over the railing and for a few seconds saw his twisted body on the landing below. I gasped, looked back at the woman, and our eyes met. I felt a sense of panic when I realized that she saw me. She turned and ran

down the hall and into the shadows.

Clouds swept across the moon, and the hallway was again dark. I stumbled back to my room and locked the door. I don't remember sleeping that night. All I remember is standing there, barefoot, terrified and shivering, and later waking up in bed. But in the light of day I knew what I had seen—Great-Grandfather Hook murdered by his own daughter, Bernice.

One month after we returned to Seattle, Richard admitted that he couldn't accept the idea of me or our children not being Gorestons. He wanted me to give up my inheritance. I refused.

"Is Hook House more important to you than I am?" he asked.

"Am I less important to you than a last name?"

A week later, after he hadn't phoned or knocked on my door, I mailed the engagement ring back to Richard. I was hurt. I had expected him to fight harder for me.

I didn't tell him that I already carried his child.

Seven months later, Sean Richard Inverness was born with strawberry blond curls and big blue eyes—my coloring but Richard's features.

"He looks like you," Mother said, but I knew Sean looked like his father. "At least he's not a Goreston," she said. And that, sadly, was true.

Mother arranged for me to receive an allowance from the estate. I resigned from my position at Skyline Publishers, afraid of running into Richard in the Goreston Building.

"My health is failing, Sara," Mother said one day on the phone. "Who knows how much time I have left?" She sounded lonely and afraid, so Sean and I moved into Hook House. Sean was a quiet, thoughtful child and wasn't ever loud, fussy, or rude. He was bright, sensitive, and handsome.

"What a beautiful little boy," I often heard people say.

When he was five years old, he came to me one day and said, "Make the silver lady go away, Mama."

"Silver lady?"

He led the way to the third floor, into the room that was once mine,

briefly Richard's, and was now Sean's. I paused in the doorway. At first I saw nothing, but then a hazy beam of sunlight gleamed on floating dust motes—and on something else. Gradually, I saw the curved back of a wicker chair and a striped cushion, then the lenses of a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, the bridge of a nose, and finally silver, wavy hair.

"Make her go away," Sean said. "She won't talk to me."

"Go downstairs, but don't tell Grandmother about the silver lady." I said.

Aunt Jessie stood up, leaning on her cane with one hand and waving at me with the other. *Go*, she said, without making a sound, but I read her lips. *Get away from here.*

"Why?" But clouds covered the sun, and Aunt Jessie was gone.

Sean seemed to have forgotten about the silver lady by the time I arrived downstairs. Instead I heard him describing to Mother what he saw outside in the garden through the screens.

"The fountain and flowers and the driveway and the path into the trees, and ... a tall man."

"Where?" Mother said. "Where do you see the tall man?" She licked her lips.

"By the fountain," Sean said.

I looked out across the yard but didn't see a man.

"Mother, please don't encourage Sean to see things that aren't there," I said.

"We were just playing a game," Mother replied, "naming things that we can see from here."

"The man is gone now," Sean announced. "I want to go outside, Mama. This morning there was a little green frog in the birdbath."

"Stay where we can see you," I told him as he raced outside.

When I told Mother about seeing Aunt Jessie in Sean's room, she sighed and said, "We seem to accumulate a new ghost every generation."

That night I couldn't sleep, and I finally got up and opened my door. Within seconds, Aunt Jessie materialized in the hallway like the strike of a match. She looked different this time, younger. She passed straight by as if she didn't see me. I followed her to the end of the hallway, finding the door to my parents' old room open. Inside, she stood beside that same spectral

wicker chair in which a blond man now sat, his eyes closed, his hands on the armrests, apparently asleep. My father.

Aunt Jessie raised the barrel of a handgun, leveled it at his temple, and pulled the trigger. There was no sound, but I saw a burst of flames and smoke, and my father pitched to one side as if he'd been kicked. There was a black hole above his left ear and blood on the wall to his right. Then Aunt Jessie turned and saw me.

I backed out of the room, stumbling, realizing, *Aunt Jessie had murdered my father.*

I wondered if Mother knew.

Sean developed a cough, and his prescribed medicine made him sleepy. After lunch he napped on the porch swing with a pillow and light blanket while I nudged the swing with my toe to keep it swaying. Mentally I listed the history of Hook House—as much of it as I knew.

Great-Grandfather Hook murdered his best friend for money and built Hook House, disinheriting his own daughter, Bernice because she married and changed her name from Hook. Instead, Great-Grandfather Hook left the estate to his unmarried sister. But did he foster hopes that Bernice might change her name *back* to Hook—if she were widowed? Great-Grandfather Hook may have murdered his son-in-law, Henry, and in revenge Bernice killed her father by shoving him down the stairs. Years later, Aunt Jessie killed my father so that Mother would change her name back to Hook. Would Mother have changed her name had my father lived? It seemed like such senseless reasons to kill someone—for a name—for an heir.

By now I believed that Mother knew these things, too. Like me, she *had the gift.*

There is a difference between the sounds of a house settling and the sounds of ghosts.

One night I heard human footsteps and saw Mother outside the room where Aunt Jessie had murdered my father. Mother entered the room, and a moment later she ran back and down the stairs, eyes wide, fingertips pressed

against her lips. How many times, I wondered, had she returned to witness my father's death? Why did she keep returning? Why did she feed her grief? Or was it grief she nurtured?

At unexpected times I saw Bernice and Great-Grandfather Hook. Every time I witnessed the scene, I noticed something new. Bernice wasn't simply crying—she was saying something. I read her lips. "You killed him. I hate you!" And then she would shove him and he would fall. It was always the same, and yet more clear.

I asked myself, what would I have done under such circumstances? I couldn't imagine.

Sean didn't see the silver lady anymore; at least when I asked about her, he shook his head. As long as he was happy, we would stay. If I suspected that he was frightened, we would pack and leave. I wouldn't risk his health or happiness to rule Hook House.

One day I asked Mother how long it had been since she had been outside the house.

"Since the night Aunt Jessie died."

Ten years.

Eventually, Mother's health began to fail even though she wasn't yet sixty. She asked me outright to change Sean's and my last name from Inverness to Hook. "Do it for Sean," she said. "And this will all be his someday."

"Give me some time to think about it," I said. "A month."

I didn't want Hook House, and I didn't want Sean to own it either. Nothing good ever came to those who did. Mother wouldn't give in, however. She was determined for me to inherit. Finally, in order to make her happy, I agreed to chang Sean's and my last name from Inverness to Hook. She spent the next day on the phone with the lawyer. He handled the legalities, keeping one copy of the will for his files and sending two copies to Hook House, one for Mother and one for me. Not only was I to inherit the entire property, but all investments, too. The sum staggered me.

That night I dreamed of Sean clinging to the outermost edge of the bluff while far below the surf churned and roared. Waves crashed around the jagged boulders and white spray leaped against the face of the cliff as if

reaching for him. I cried out, but the wind whipped my screams away.

The dream haunted me every night. I knew it was a warning.

I sat up late two nights in a row, reading the will. There was nothing in the inheritance clause that said I couldn't sell the house and property once it was mine.

The next time I saw Aunt Jessie she looked even younger. Her hair was glossy brown, and she didn't yet wear glasses. She strode along the hallway without a cane, apparently unaware of me, carrying something in her hands. She stepped into the doorway of the bathroom. I hurried closer and saw her empty a glass of frosty-yellow liquid into the toilet. It looked like lemonade. She washed the glass before smashing it in the waste basket. Next, she opened a bottle of pills and dumped them into the toilet. She washed the little bottle, and peeled off the label, and dropped the label into the toilet, and flushed it along with the pills and the lemonade. The pill bottle was smashed in the same waste basket before she returned to the hallway. I stepped aside, but not before her arm brushed mine. As we touched I felt a penetrating, aching cold.

She knelt in the hallway and lifted an unconscious woman, dragging her along the floor and through the closed door of the storage room like smoke through a sieve. I opened the door and saw the storage room as it must have looked seventy years ago, with Aunt Jessie hoisting the woman from the floor and into an open trunk. It was Bernice. Mother's mother. My grandmother.

Barely in time, Bernice jammed one shoe beneath the lid, holding it open. Although drugged, she was fighting for her life. She managed to force the trunk open, tumbling Aunt Jessie backwards and down between stacks of wooden crates. Aunt Jessie pulled herself to her feet, favoring one leg, and after a violent struggle, she forced Bernice back into the trunk and slammed it shut. Aunt Jessie collapsed across the lid, gasping, and finally locked it. I recognized that key—she gave it to me when I was fourteen. Then, she concealed the trunk behind a dozen storage boxes, some of them heavy, because she had to heave herself against them again and again in order to move them. Then, with one exhausted, backward glance, she turned off the light and limped from the room. Seconds later the room changed back to present day,

containing only the few things that Mother had brought from our old apartment.

Mother seldom got out of bed. I arranged for a retired nurse who lived nearby to attend her during the day. When Mother did feel strong enough to leave her room, she traveled around in an electric wheelchair. The garden room became her favorite place. Even on cloudy or rainy days, she sat wrapped in blankets, facing the windows. I knew she saw a garden instead a fountain—she saw my father with a rose in his hand.

Mrs. Soul now avoided me the way she had avoided Richard, and I enjoyed antagonizing her.

"I wonder why I've never seen you leave or arrive. Or how a woman *your age* manages to keep a house this size all by herself."

She shrugged.

"I wonder why you never age. Mother looks older than you, and before long I'll look older than you."

"Perhaps some things are beyond your grasp," she said. I caught the sound of challenge in her voice.

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But, *when I own* Hook House ... *things will change*."

She glared at me and fled the room.

Hook House grew even more oppressive, and storm after storm battered the cliff. I was plagued by the nightmare of Sean standing on its crumbling edge.

Sean needed to spend time around other children. I signed him up for kindergarten in November as a late enrollee. He was excited and spent one afternoon organizing his little school backpack. It was filled with things like round-tipped scissors, crayons, rulers, writing and drawing tablets, and his three favorite books. I left him in the living room with that project and went to check on Mother. It was the nurse's day off.

I found Mother dozing in her electric wheelchair beside the little mosaic table. I lowered myself into the wicker sofa and listened to the outdoor sounds until I nearly fell asleep myself. Things were so very quiet that day—

like a lull between storms. Sometimes when the wind was calm like that, I'd hear the sounds of traffic on the blacktop road below the hill. But not that day. That day there was no traffic. I dozed briefly.

I opened my eyes in time to see an owl fly through the yard on silent wings. The day was so hushed I heard the fountain out in the yard, the water trickling from the mouth of the stone fish, even a stray droplet hitting the cobblestones outside the bowl—and over a murmur of phantom pruners clipping the stems of long-dead roses, I heard the soft, steady *tick* of the grandfather clock at the far end of the hall.

"Mother?" I finally said.

I was relieved Mother had died peacefully in her sleep instead of in pain or hooked to machines—or shoved headfirst down a flight of stairs or suffocated in a trunk. Mother deserved a painless, peaceful end. Surely, I wouldn't see Mother again. Her spirit wouldn't be trapped inside Hook House, wandering its halls.

After the lawyer handled my inheritance, I contacted a realtor and put Hook House on the market. I could hardly believe what he said it was worth. Who would want to live here? Who in their right mind?

I relished the fact that I could now fire Mrs. Soul and practiced a short speech. But she didn't respond to the ring of the little bell. There was no sign of her anywhere in the house; in fact, there was no sign that she had *ever* been there. And yet I knew she was there, somewhere. She was above or behind me when I climbed the stairs, watching me from every mirror, through every closed door. She stood at the foot of my bed at night, although I didn't see her.

"I'll find a way to get rid of you," I promised, and I knew she heard me.

Sean woke screaming almost every night and was so terrified in his own room I dismantled his bed and brought it downstairs piece by piece, reassembling it in my room. During the night, he tossed and kicked and cried out, and I rose many times to replace his covers. He missed day after day of school. The bus from the Early Days Academy pulled up in front every

morning, and I waved them away through the window. Two weeks passed with no change in his health.

As always, groceries and supplies arrived on Tuesday mornings at the kitchen door, delivered by a young man who carried boxes into the house and piled them on the counter. He seemed eager to leave, nearly slamming the kitchen door and leaping into his truck. I unpacked and stowed the supplies myself since Mrs. Soul wasn't around anymore.

One day while I read to Sean on the porch swing, a chickadee flew into one of the windows and fell into the flower bed.

"Oh, Mama!" Sean cried. "Is he hurt?"

"I'll go see." I opened the screen door and discovered that the outside world was *gone*. There was nothing outside except a gray fog, and far below, a sickly light. If I had taken even one step, I would have fallen, perhaps forever. I staggered back.

"Mama?"

"It's all right, Sean." I heard the quiver in my own voice. "The bird is okay. He flew away again."

The outside world *was* there—I saw it through closed windows and locked screens, but not through open doors. This was why Mother and Aunt Jessie had never left Hook House after they inherited it. They were its prisoners.

Now I was its prisoner. But how? And at what moment had the house captured me? When had it won?

How I hated the house. With every breath and every terrified shiver. To keep my mind occupied, I went through Mother's things, emptying drawers and closets, packing everything into boxes and marking them for several charities.

Sean dozed in the adjoining room with a blanket and pillow. He seemed so small, so helpless. He needed to be where there were better doctors and better medicine—and no ghosts.

I sat on the vanity stool in Mother's room, and it was then I saw Aunt Jessie again. She slept in the bed with her satin comforter pulled up to her shoulders, half asleep, one hand fumbling with the neckline of her gown as if searching for the key.

Mother tiptoed into the room in her soft slippers, a striped cushion from

the wicker sofa in her arms. She stood gazing down at Aunt Jessie for a moment, and then she pressed the cushion against Aunt Jessie's face. She leaned down, adding her weight, and held the cushion there. Aunt Jessie fought. Her bony arms waved and her hands clawed, but she was no match for Mother. After a minute Aunt Jessie stopped struggling, and Mother flung the cushion on the floor and straightened Aunt Jessie's nightgown and bedding. She smoothed her aunt's wavy, silver hair and closed Aunt Jessie's twisted, gaping mouth and eyes. She tucked the comforter under the old woman's arms and placed one dead hand across the stilled breast. Aunt Jessie looked like she had died peacefully in her sleep.

Mother had seen Aunt Jessie suffocate Bernice in the locked trunk. She had seen Aunt Jessie shoot my father as he slept. I suspect every generation has seen the evil history of Hook House played out on that ghostly stage.

After killing Aunt Jessie, Mother never left the house again. The outside world no longer existed through open doors. But now I was a prisoner, too, the same way Mother had been, and Aunt Jessie, and Bernice—all of us—one after another trapped by the house. I owned Hook House. But somehow, it owned me, too.

The key on my necklace unlocked the trunk that Aunt Jessie had given away decades ago. Inside that trunk, wherever it was, would be scratches and claw marks from Bernice's struggle to escape. I took the necklace off and dropped it into one of the charity boxes.

Eventually Sean would get well and he would want to go outside. The thought terrified me. If he went outside, I couldn't follow. Something could happen to him out there. My nightmare might come true.

Soon, another thought terrified me. How exactly had Mother died? Every night, my dreams seemed more disturbed and yet more real. In my dreams I emptied an entire bottle of Mother's medicine into her tea and handed her the cup. In my dreams, I stood beside her, my hand on her shoulder as she finished the tea, and then I took the cup and saucer to the kitchen and washed it.

In the light of day I convinced myself they were simply dreams, but every morning when I woke, I wondered. Were they dreams, *or memories?* I doubted my own sanity, and I feared for my son. Had I murdered my own mother? Or was Hook House simply tormenting me?

Frantic, I called Richard from the phone in my own room.

"Sara?" He sounded very surprised. "How are you?"

"I'm ... okay."

"And your mother?"

"She passed away."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Sara. Did she ever tell you that I called?"

"You did?"

"Several times. Once, I even drove down there, but the housekeeper threatened to call the sheriff if I didn't leave. She said you refused to see me."

"I never knew. They never told me." My voice sounded strained, even to me.

"Is something wrong, Sara?"

I could barely breathe. "I should have told you, Richard, years ago ... you have a son. His name is Sean."

"... a son?"

"Richard, I'm afraid," I whispered. "I think Sean is in danger."

Richard said he was leaving for the coast immediately.

The house was hungry for us. It wanted to devour us. I believed that Mrs. Soul lived within its shadows. Sometimes I thought I heard her in the upstairs hall or on the stairs.

I packed Sean's things into three suitcases and placed them near the front door, strapping them all to my wheeled luggage tote. In one suitcase, I enclosed his birth certificate, the papers showing his name change, my will, and a note that Sean was to never set foot inside Hook House again, not even after my death when he would inherit all of it.

It was dark when Richard arrived. He hadn't changed much in six years, except he looked even more handsome. He surprised me by throwing his arms around me and holding me tightly, and I realized what I had lost by not trusting him.

"Why didn't you tell me about Sean?" he asked.

"Because I was hurt by your silence and I wanted to hurt you by keeping him a secret. And because I was terribly foolish."

"No, I was the foolish one," he said. "I was prideful and stubborn."

At that moment Sean came into the foyer, dragging his blanket.

Richard's eyes widened. He smiled.

"Sean," I said, kneeling down. "This is Richard, a very dear person to me."

"I understand you've been sick, Sean," Richard said.

Sean nodded. "Bad dreams."

"We'll go to my house, okay?" Richard said. "There are no bad dreams there."

Sean nodded again. "I'll get my backpack." He ran toward the garden room.

"Is this all your luggage?" Richard asked, noting only three small suitcases.

All of a sudden I started crying and telling Richard everything—babbling about the generations of murder and the ghosts and how there was no longer a world outside for me. My words spilled out. I sounded incoherent and insane, even to myself.

Sean returned with his backpack, and Richard scooped him up and carried him outside. I heard Richard's shoes on the cobblestones outside and Sean's voice, and more than anything else I longed to go with them. I dreaded the thought of never seeing Sean again, dreaded losing Richard a second time. Dreaded staying there alone. I leaned against the wall beside the door, tempted to leap into the fog.

Upstairs, footsteps plodded out of the storage room, along the hallway, and then down the stairs. They reached the bottom landing as Richard arrived inside again.

"Come on, Sara." He pointed into the swirling, amber-gray fog. "The outside world is still here. *I'm* still here." He took my hand and stepped back into that bottomless, swirling mist. I felt his hand, but could not see him.

The footsteps were in the living room seconds ago, but now they're in the hallway—running straight toward me. I know it's Mrs. Soul.

Richard is somewhere in that mist, outside the open door. His voice calls to me as if from a great distance. I grip his hand. *Is the world truly out there?* My eyes tell me no.

Talons rake my shoulders like metal hooks. Mrs. Soul is pulling me away from the door. I hear her gurgling breath—like leeches sucked through a straw.

Preferring death, I leap through the door—and fall and fall, with the freezing mist stinging my face like needles ... but then I feel solid ground under my feet. From under the portico I see the headlights of Richard's car and Sean in the back seat, waving. The car doors are open, and the interior lights are glowing. The night is clear with stars and a three-quarter moon. Richard wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads me to the car.

As we circle the fountain and exit the courtyard, every light in the house flashes on bright white. Grotesque shadows leap and thrash at every window. We coast down the driveway, and all the lights flicker and burn out. The black silhouette of Hook House crouches on the edge of the cliff like a massive pile of coffins.

Later that night the cliff collapsed, taking with it the house, the fountains, and the fairy garden. I sometimes wonder what it looks like there now, with Hook House gone. But I'll never go back. Let the sea have it. Let the sea wash it all away.

Hicklebickle Rock

Cassie lay on the roof of a long-dead '48 Chevy fifty yards from the house, watching her older brother sharpen his knife. Ben sat in the open front door of their house, his black-booted feet on the steps. He dragged his knife blade across a square of gray stone again and again, and then he lifted the knife to eye level, squinted at the shining edge and pressed the soft part of his thumb against it. Smiling, he slid the knife into a leather sheath on his belt and rose to his feet. He disappeared into the black interior of the house.

Cassie rolled over on her stomach, relishing the car's warm roof. It was eight o'clock on Saturday morning. By noon the metal roof would be a skillet and the inside of the car an oven, even though Ben had shot out all the windows last summer. Blackberry vines covered the front end of the car right up to the missing windshield, and vines grew through rusted-out holes in the floor, coiling and looping and filling the front seat like pale green snakes with thorns. There was one corner in the back seat where Cassie sometimes crawled when she wanted to hide from Ben, when he was feeling mean and looking for someone to tease.

Sometimes Ben chewed his lower lip as if he were unaware of what he was doing. Sometimes he chewed his lip until it bled, and then he would lick the blood away with his tongue. Sometimes he drummed his fingers on his knees in time to a rhythm only he heard. When Cassie saw him doing these things, she found a place to hide and stayed there until he gave up calling her name, until he leaped on his black and chrome Harley-Davidson and skidded out of the yard in a cloud of dust and flying rocks. His motorcycle rumbled like thunder. Even when Ben was a half mile away, the familiar growl of his bike was unmistakable.

Cassie slid from the car roof and ran across the front yard, down toward the mudflats. A big alder tree towered from a rise of ground in the strip of land between the dust of the driveway and the edge of the mud. She stepped behind the tree as Ben jumped from the doorway to the yard.

"Cassie!"

Cassie studied her bare feet, the way one foot sank into soft gray dust and the other into soft black mud. The mud oozed between her toes, curling over and touching like wide, matching rings. She leaned against the tree's wide

trunk.

"Cassie, come here, little *darlin'*." Ben's boots raked the scatter of loose rocks at the bottom of the steps.

Cassie peeked around the tree in time to see Ben stride across the yard to the Chevy. He stepped into the mass of berry vines and checked behind the car. "Cassie?" He walked back around to the half-open door and stuck his head inside the car. "Cassie!" Then he turned around and scanned the yard with his pale blue eyes. He kicked rocks toward the bay. Cassie ducked behind the tree again.

"Dammit, brat. Where'd you go?" Ben kicked more rocks, and one of them ricocheted off a tree root. The rock arced high and landed in the mire, splattering thick black mud on Cassie's legs.

"Okay, fine!" Ben flung a leg across the seat of his motorcycle. "See if I care." A moment later the bike growled alive, and he roared out of the yard and down the driveway.

Cassie rounded the tree, keeping the trunk between her and Ben. When he reached the blacktop at the end of the bay and turned left, she ran for the house.

It was dark inside. It took a half minute before her eyes adjusted to the shadows.

"That you, Cassie?" Her mother's voice was high and quivery. She always sounded that way after a late Friday night waitressing at the tavern.

"Yes, Mama."

"Darlin', bring me a glass of water, please."

The sink was piled with dirty dishes from the past three days. Big green flies circled the room and crawled across the plates and bowls. The cupboard held one clean glass. Cassie used a chair to reach it, turned on the cold water, and let it run. Then she filled the glass and carried it to her mother.

Her mother was in a nearly upright position. She took the glass with two, shaking hands. "That's my girl," she said. "Did Ben leave?"

"Uh-huh."

"Ohh. I asked him to give you a ride into town. We need a few things from the store."

"That's okay. I can walk."

"The money's there in my purse. Take the twenty."

"What do you want me to get?"

"I'm about to die for some orange juice, baby. And you'd better get a loaf of bread ... and here, I'll write a note for you so Mr. Cox can sell you a pint of Jim Beam."

"He won't do that anymore, Mama, remember? He said not to ask again."

Her mother sighed. "Okay. Just the juice and the bread then. Take the ten instead of the twenty, and make sure Mr. Cox gives you a receipt. I'm pretty sure he overcharged you last time, but I couldn't argue without the receipt."

"Okay, Mama."

"Thanks darlin'." Cassie's mother slipped back down into her bed and pulled the sheet over her shoulder. Her ash-blond head sank into the pillow.

Cassie paused in the doorway. Her mother was already asleep, snoring lightly, a similar rhythm to the circular droning of the flies in the next room. Cassie stuffed the ten dollar bill into her shorts pocket, found her faded red Keds near her bedroom door, jammed them on her feet, and ran outside.

It was a quarter mile from the house to where the dirt driveway merged with Bay Road. It was all blacktop from there into Bristleton. Cassie hurried along the edge of the blacktop, keeping close to the cattails and the cottonwood trees on the other side of a narrow ditch. If she heard Ben's motorcycle she knew of several places to duck and hide.

Across the road to Cassie's right were the mudflats of Bristleton Bay, a saltwater inlet too shallow for boats with deep hulls. At low tide only a narrow strip of water remained in the center, sloshing back and forth in a rocky trough. The bay's salty, iodine smell and the smells of dead, sun baked fish and warm seaweed were a pungent mix, something that made visitors to the area pinch their noses and hurry back to their cars. But Cassie found the smells comforting. She had come to like the smells.

Oftentimes her mother would reach out, ruffle Cassie's fine blonde hair, and ask, "What does the bay tell you today, baby? What kind of day will it be?" And Cassie would turn to gaze at the water. She'd study the way the sunlight glanced off the surface, she'd inhale through nose and mouth together and close her eyes and let the smell leave a taste in the back of her throat. The bay had a way of warning her of trouble. "Nothing bad today, Mama. The breeze smells sweet."

"Sweet? If you say so, darlin'." Mama would shake her head and get that

half-smiling look on her face, as if she thought reading the bay's mood was a strange thing to do. But she'd smile. "Maybe at high tide this evening, after the water has flooded back in over all that steaming mud and over those baked rocks, we can go for a swim."

"Okay, Mama."

On her journey to the grocery store, Cassie approached an abandoned gas station that slouched on the outskirts of town. Its corroded gas pumps leaned away from the sinking building; its doors and windows were mostly boarded over. What remained of the original yellow paint hung bleached, blistered, and flaking away. More blackberry vines claimed the building as a trellis, pressing against the few visible windowpanes from inside like long ghost fingers. The wide garage doors were a collage of public notices, of upcoming events, bond issues, politicians' faded photographs atop their faded promises, and hand-printed missing dog and cat posters. Cassie glanced at the hodgepodge of flyers, saw nothing new, and kept walking. But she halted at the next utility pole. A new flyer had been nailed to the post. REWARD, it began, FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF LUCY ANN HARSTEAD, AGE 16—MISSING SINCE JUNE 10—LAST SEEN WEARING BLUE SUNDRESS & WHITE SANDALS. ALL INFORMATION KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

A black and white photograph took up the bottom half of the poster, and Cassie studied the photo. Lucy Ann Harstead looked familiar. Cassie decided she'd probably seen the missing girl in town, loitering around the drugstore or the grocery story with the other high school girls, reading celebrity magazines, drinking cans of soda pop, and comparing shades of fingernail polish. She could ask Ben if he knew her. He was seventeen, closer to Lucy Ann's age. Naw. Cassie didn't want to ask Ben anything. He'd either tell a whopping big lie or refuse to talk at all.

A couple of years ago, Ben had told her he knew where there was a nest of baby ducks. "Cute little yellow ducks and they'll eat right out of your hand," he told her. Cassie had followed him along the shore until they were

nearly a mile from home. Then he had pulled a length of nylon cord from his jacket pocket and tied her to an alder tree.

"That should give you something to do for awhile." Ben grinned, turned, and jogged away on the trail.

At first Cassie yelled, and then she wrestled with the rope, twisting and pulling and gasping, but soon she grew dizzy. For a few seconds she couldn't see—everything went white. She felt as if she were floating, as if only the cord kept her from floating away. And then finally she focused, saw the grass at her feet and the sunlight sparkling on the bay. She felt her equilibrium return. Her eyes stung and then blurred. She was glad Ben wasn't there to see he'd made her cry.

Hours later when she had nearly worked herself free and her wrists were raw and she'd wet her pants twice, suddenly Ben was there again.

"I thought you'd get loose by now, brat." He untied the rope. "Guess that last knot was pretty tight."

During the day the tide had come in. Cassie had waded out far enough to rinse the urine from her feet and legs and to cool the stinging rope burns. Then she had splashed water on her face to wash away any dried tears. She would never believe Ben again.

Cassie continued past the reward flyer for Lucy Ann Harstead. A few minutes later she pushed open the front door to Cox's Grocery and stepped inside. Mr. Cox stood behind the front counter. His pink scalp reflected the overhead lights through his thin, straight, graying-blond hair. He looked up, nodded at Cassie, and then returned his attention to a customer. The customer was stoop-shouldered and elderly and wore a straw hat. He turned at the sound of the bell above the door and squinted through thick lenses at Cassie as she picked up a shopping basket from the end of the counter. Then he continued talking.

"In my day we handled things differently, yessir. We'd have found the sick so-and-so by now and given him a taste of his own medicine, *guaranteed*."

Mr. Cox leaned across the counter. Cassie heard the sound of whispering, and then the customer turned and eyed her again as she passed by.

"Hmmm," the man said.

"Well, at least they found her," Mr. Cox shook his head in a sad way. "Not knowing ... and waiting and hoping ... that's got to be the worst part."

"I guess so. Say, how's your garden doing this year?"

"My back quarter-acre is all in bloom. Come and see it sometime," Mr. Cox said.

"I'd like to." The old man jerked his head toward the door. "The missus is waiting for these groceries. She's making pies today."

"Take care now," Mr. Cox said.

The bell over the door jangled and then, "Can I help you find something, Cassie?" Mr. Cox stood at the end of the aisle rubbing his bony white hands together. Cassie's mother had explained it was just a nervous habit he had.

"No, thanks. I know where everything is." Cassie picked up a can of frozen orange juice concentrate and dropped it in the basket.

"Did you hear about the Harstead girl?"

"I saw her picture on the telephone pole down the rode." Cassie rounded the end of one aisle and headed up the next.

"Neighbors said they heard a motorcycle the afternoon she disappeared," Mr. Cox said, continuing to rub his dry palms together.

Cassie shifted the basket to her other arm and lifted a loaf of whole wheat bread from the display. Mama and Ben both liked whole wheat bread.

Mr. Cox nodded, his eyes not really focused on her, more like he was thinking aloud. "Neighbors said they heard a motorcycle go up and down the road several times that afternoon."

Cassie slid the basket onto the counter. Mr. Cox circled to the other side and picked up the orange juice. He punched the price into the old cash register.

"Mama wants the receipt this time," Cassie said.

"Sure thing, little lady. What's your brother up to these days? Ben graduated from high school this month, didn't he?"

Cassie nodded.

She remembered the day Ben came home from school, grabbing one of Mama's beers out of the refrigerator and saying how he felt like celebrating now that he had graduated. Mama shrugged and said, "If you can call a D

average 'graduating'."

"What do you know?" Ben fired back. "You're nothing but a drunk."

"Well, it takes one to know one. I do believe that's the third beer you've taken without asking."

"Here. You can have it back." Ben threw the can on the floor. Amber beer and foam gushed across the dull wood. Then he shoved past his mother and out the door.

"They found that poor Harstead girl, you know," Mr. Cox said. He placed the orange juice concentrate in the bottom of a medium-sized sack and the loaf of bread on top. He waved the receipt in the air above the sack, making a show of integrity before he dropped it in and folded the top of the sack.

"Is she okay?" Cassie asked.

"Okay? No, Cassie. She's dead. A search team found her over on Hicklebickle Rock, laid out like some kind of gift or decoration."

"Huh?"

"Whoever killed her laid her out sort of nice-like, over a hundred lilies spread all around her, and both hands folded over her chest like this—" Mr. Cox demonstrated, "—holding a bouquet. She was fully dressed. Nothing wrong there. She hadn't been—you know—molested."

"What's 'molested'?"

Mr. Cox's eyes focused on Cassie as if only then realizing to whom he spoke. "Well, that wouldn't matter none to you." He handed the sack to Cassie. "There you go. I hope you and your friends don't ever play around Hicklebickle Rock. It might be dangerous."

"That's clear across the bay from our house. I can't swim that far."

Mr. Cox turned his gaze out the window, and Cassie's gaze followed his. From his store they had a clear view of Bristleton Bay. Cassie's house was a small beige square to the far right side, and straight across the bay on the left side was Hicklebickle Rock. The rock jutted up and out over the water like a giant's thumb. There was an unusual rock formation at its tip that looked like a kneeling Native American woman with a blanket over her shoulders. From this far away the kneeling woman was just a small bump.

"Right," Mr. Cox said. "Even at low tide you couldn't wade clear across—

not that you'd want to."

"No. Besides, Mama told me that Hicklebickle Rock is haunted."

Mr. Cox smiled. "There is a legend about some lost civilization—a displaced tribe of Aztecs, I think. Some people believe the rock is a place of mysterious power. Last summer a visiting archaeologist from the state university said he was certain Hicklebickle Rock was once a place for human sacrifice—to some old Aztec god called Quetzalcoatl."

Cassie wrinkled her nose.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that. Your mama might not want you knowing things like that—scary things to keep you awake nights. Guess I talk too much."

"It's okay. I won't tell her you told me."

"How old are you, Cassie?"

"I'll be nine when school starts."

"You're small for your age, but you're older than nine up here." Mr. Cox tapped his temple. "You're growing up fast. Hope you're careful."

Cassie wasn't sure what Mr. Cox meant, but she nodded.

He came around the counter and opened the door for her. "Tell your mama I said hello."

Cassie headed for home but paused when she reached the driveway. She set the grocery sack down in the shade of a maple tree. It was already hot and not even noon. She blotted her upper lip with her wrist and checked the bay's mood.

The tide was out. The water in the center trough was flat and calm, the sun glinting off its surface the same way it reflected off Ben's knife. Cassie sniffed. The air smelled bloated and heavy, the same way it had smelled the day after a killer whale carcass had washed in. *Danger*, the bay whispered.

When she got home, her mother was in the kitchen. Cassie was surprised to hear her whistling and to see her elbow-deep in steaming water and detergent bubbles. Most of the dishes were washed.

"Hey, baby," her mother said.

Cassie placed the can of frozen orange juice on the counter and the loaf of bread beside it. She dumped the change and the receipt on the table.

"The bay is worried, Mama."

"Worried?"

"It knows who killed somebody."

"Oh." Her mother twisted her face around over her shoulder. "You mean the Harstead girl? I heard about that at work."

Cassie nodded and then told her what Mr. Cox had said about how the searchers found the body on Hicklebickle Rock with lilies all around

Mama shook her head. "It's a shame. Could be someone we know did that. This is a small town."

Cassie folded the sack as she gazed through the front room and out the door, straight across the mudflats and the shallow green water to Hicklebickle Rock. From this angle it was an ordinary, round-topped boulder, the kneeling Native American woman only a shadow.

"If I get that job in Rutherford, we're moving away from here," Mama said. "I've never liked it here—never felt good about this place."

"When will you know about the job, Mama?"

"This afternoon. They asked me to come back for a second interview." Her mother dried her hands on a dishtowel. "Will you be all right? I don't like leaving you alone, but I can't count on Ben. I never know where he is until I hear that damn motorcycle outside."

"I'll be okay, Mama."

"I'd call someone to sit with you, but I don't get paid for another week and all we have is that twenty in my purse and," she eyed the money on the table, "looks like six dollars and some change." She sighed. "And the car is on empty."

"It's okay, Mama. I can take care of myself."

"Good girl. Just stay here at home."

Her mother showered, dressed, and combed her hair.

"Mama, how did Hicklebickle Rock get its name?" Cassie leaned against the bathroom doorway watching her mother apply rosy-colored lipstick.

"I always thought it sounded like a witch's chant ... you know, like *double bubble, toil and trouble*? But my friend, Gretchen Boyd, told me that 'hicklebickle' means out-of-place, or misplaced, or not belonging where you are, or something like that. Maybe it just means lost."

A few minutes later Cassie's mother backed their '67 Chevy Nova out of the carport and down the driveway. Cassie waved goodbye and then returned to the kitchen and made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

She spotted Ben's binoculars on the windowsill, looped their strap around her neck, and then, carrying the sandwich, ran down to sit beneath the big alder tree by the mudflats. She sniffed the air again.

"Will Mama get that new job?" Cassie asked. She took a big bite from the sandwich and squinted at the strip of water out in the center of the bay. A breeze ruffled the leaves above her head, and the *chug-chug-chug* of an inboard motor from a boat she couldn't see came across the water from out in the straits. She chewed slowly, swallowed, and took another bite. A bright green leaf landed on her head and slid to her lap. "Good. Will we all move to Rutherford and be happy there?" A few seconds later a small brown frog hopped along the dry bank and then leaped behind a log. Cassie smiled.

She finished her sandwich, licked her fingers, and was about to go inside when she spotted a bird high in the sky above the bay. It circled, wings spread out wide. Cassie lifted the binoculars and adjusted the focus. The bird's head was snowy white.

"Oooh, a bald eagle."

The eagle circled for another few minutes and then glided over the treetops across the bay. Cassie's gaze dropped to the water's edge, down to Hicklebickle Rock. The stone Indian woman knelt as always on the outer edge of the boulder, her sad stone face and eyes gazing out over the water. Cassie was convinced that the woman heard her when she talked to the bay, even if she whispered. She believed the woman knew everything that happened around Bristleton.

Cassie's mother had told her once, 'There's an old superstition about the rock woman, about how she was once a real Indian princess. The cruel priest of her tribe demanded that all the children in their village be sacrificed, but the princess intervened and saved the children and then the priest was so angry he turned her to stone." Cassie thought that was a very sad story.

"Hey, what are you doing with my binoculars?" Ben leaned against the trunk of the big alder. "You didn't ask me first."

Startled, Cassie jumped. "You weren't here to ask."

"Take them inside, right now." Ben shoved away from the tree and strode across the yard toward the house.

Cassie followed from a distance. "I didn't do anything to them. I was careful."

"Where's Mom?"

"Gone to her job interview."

Ben snorted. "Nobody's going to hire her. She can't do anything except work at a tavern."

"She said she had a real good job once—when you were little and she had to leave you at a day care and that's why you're ..."

"And that's why I'm *what*?" Ben prompted.

"That's why you're so mad all the time ... and mean. She said she should have stayed home with you more."

"She said I'm mean?"

"No, she said you're the 'way you are' or something like that."

Ben snorted again. "What a joke. If I really wanted to be mean ... well, she doesn't know the half of it."

Cassie followed Ben into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, leaned on the open door for a full minute, and then slammed it shut. "There's nothing to eat in this place. There's never anything to eat."

"There's peanut butter and jelly."

Ben's gaze shifted toward the loaf of bread on the counter, frowning as though considering it.

"I'll make it for you," Cassie offered.

Ben shrugged, nodded, and headed toward the front room.

When Cassie took the sandwich to Ben, he was sprawled on the front steps with the binoculars jammed against his eyes. Ben took the sandwich and bit into it.

"You're welcome. What are you looking at through the binoculars?"

"Nothin'."

"I saw a bald eagle."

"Big deal."

"Ben?"

"*What*?"

"Did you know the Harstead girl? Mr. Cox said that neighbors heard a motorcycle go up and down the road the afternoon she disappeared."

Ben lowered the binoculars but continued to stare out across the bay.

"Did you hear me?" Cassie asked.

"I heard you."

"What if the police come here, asking about that day and about your motorcycle?"

Ben turned. "Don't care if they do. I ain't done nothin'."

Cassie leaned against the door frame. After a moment Ben continued. He sounded angry.

"I suppose you and Mom have it all figured out. Ben is mean. Ben is no good—he probably killed that girl and someday he'll start killing people left and right. Is that it? You and Mom think I'm some kind of psycho nut?"

"I didn't say that. I was just wondering."

"Wondering if I *would* do something like that?"

"Well, you are *mean* all the time."

"Get away from me, you little idiot. You don't know anything. You don't know what I know! I'm not half as mean as Dad was. He used to hit Mom and sometimes he'd kick me ... but he ran off when you were born and ..." Ben grabbed Cassie by the arm. He pulled her through the door and gave her a shove. She stumbled down the steps and fell to her knees in the dust. She heard the door slam and the lock click.

"Ben!" Cassie climbed the steps and pounded on the door. "I didn't really think you would hurt anybody."

A song from his Metallica album blared, drowning out her voice. Her fists felt bruised. She stopped hitting the door, turned, and squinted at the bay. *Danger!*

It was very hot on the front stoop. Heat waves rose from the front yard and along the driveway. There was no breeze now from off the bay, no leaves rustling to suggest coolness near the water. There was only the monotonous clicking of grasshoppers from deep within the blackberry vines. The sound only made Cassie feel hotter.

She headed for town. At least Cox's Grocery was air-conditioned. Halfway down the driveway she looked back at the house. She was certain she saw Ben at the front window, elbows against the glass as if he watched her through his binoculars. She stuck her tongue out, just in case he was.

Cassie reached the old abandoned gas station and sat down in its shade. She leaned against the crusty front doors, too hot and tired to walk any further. After a while she stretched out in the yellow grass and fell asleep, and

when she woke, the building's shadow was even wider, stretching clear across the road. But it was still hot. She got to her feet and continued into town.

"Back again, Cassie?" Mr. Cox looked surprised. He smiled.

Cassie closed the door and took a deep breath of the cool store air. "I don't have any money. I just need to cool off," she said.

"It's a hot one, all right. You walked all the way over here just to cool off?"

"I accidentally locked myself out," Cassie said. She wouldn't tell Mr. Cox about Ben shoving her outside and locking the door. Mama said the people in this town were gossips and to never tell them anything they could "spread around." It was none of their business.

"Isn't your mother there to let you in?"

"She's at a job interview." It was okay to tell him that, Cassie decided. That was something good. Nobody could "gossip bad" about a job interview.

"Oh, that's nice. A job here in Bristleton?"

"Nope. Over in Rutherford."

"Oh ... well, that's an hour's drive from here. She won't be back until after dark. Where's your brother?"

"I don't know. Riding his motorcycle somewhere."

"Poor kid. All alone, huh? How about a Popsicle? A free one on me."

"Really?"

"I have a few extra grape ones—need to get rid of them before they start tasting like the frost in the freezer."

He lifted the lid on the ice cream bin and held out a grape Popsicle. The paper wrapper was frosted and dotted with tiny ice crystals. Cassie pulled off the wrapper and stuck the tip of the sweet purple ice in her mouth. For a few seconds it stuck to her tongue, but then it melted and she bit the tip and smashed it against the roof of her mouth.

"Thanks."

"Taste good?"

Cassie nodded.

"Nothing too good for my best customer," Mr. Cox said.

Cassie nodded again. The Popsicle tasted odd. Stale, or kind of like the cough syrup Mama gave her when she had a cold. The inside of her mouth felt numb, and there was a sick-sweet taste in the back of her throat after she swallowed.

"Why don't you sit down over there by the window and read some comic books? I'm about ready to tally the receipts and close up, but you can rest here where it's nice and cool for another half hour. Okay?" Mr. Cox walked to the front door and turned the little sign so the CLOSED side faced the street.

Cassie sat down on the bench beneath the window. It didn't feel cool inside the store anymore. It didn't feel cool, didn't feel warm, sort of in between. It only felt cool when you first stepped inside.

The Popsicle was a third gone. Cassie didn't want the remaining two-thirds. She was certain that if she ate any more she'd be sick. She searched for a place to dispose of it. The garbage can was up near the cash register. She didn't want to throw it away right in front of Mr. Cox, not after he had been so nice in giving it to her free. She smoothed out the paper wrapper and slid the Popsicle back in. Then she lifted the lid on the frozen food bin and dropped it inside.

She eyed the comic books along the bottom row of the magazine display, but none of them tempted her to leave the bench. The bench had a thin, soft pad. The pad was covered with a striped fabric that reminded Cassie of her own pillow at home, her pillow with a sturdy striped fabric that held the feathers inside. She wished she were home now, resting on her own bed with her own pillow. Darn Ben anyway. She lay down on the padded bench and closed her eyes.

Cassie woke to a gentle rocking motion. It felt as though her bed was swaying. Her room was darker than usual. At first she thought Ben was pulling her mattress out from under her, inch by inch, and she wanted to say *Stop it, Ben*, but her tongue was numb. It refused to form a word.

Then she heard water sloshing and the *thump-grind-thump* of oars. She was in a boat. Wrapped in a tarp. The air inside the tarp was hot, humid, and heavy with a flowery, sweet smell. The smell reminded her of the grape Popsicle.

Cassie swallowed, feeling a little sick. She licked her lips with her slow, stiff tongue.

The sound of oars died and a few seconds later the boat ground to a halt in coarse sand. The tarp slipped open far enough for Cassie to see moonlight almost as bright as day; then she heard footsteps in the sand. The boat was dragged ashore.

Her heart pounded harder and harder. Her eyes strained to see something, anything, through the gap in the tarp. Her ears strained. More footsteps in the sand. *Sand!* The only spot in the whole bay where there was sand was Hicklebickle Rock—the place for human sacrifice. Like the Harstead girl. Cassie straightened her legs, felt the curve of the boat's bulkhead against the bottoms of her Keds. The other bulkhead pressed against the top of her head. It was a small boat, and she was stuffed beneath its bow.

Someone pulled on the tarp, and Cassie closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She felt herself lifted and carried ashore, still wrapped in the tarp. The kidnapper gasped for breath as he climbed the sandy bank; a moment later he laid Cassie down and peeled away the tarp. Cool air caressed her face. She smelled the salty, iodine smell of Bristleton Bay, but she kept her eyes closed. Heavy fingers brushed stray hairs from her eyes. He arranged her hair around her face. Her shirt was twisted but her captor pulled it straight, and then he overlapped her hands across her chest and straightened her legs, placing the rubber heels of her Keds together.

"Pretty baby," he whispered.

Cassie opened her eyes a crack, enough to see down over her cheeks toward her feet. Mr. Cox knelt by her knees, his bony white hands wavering above her as if he were afraid of his own actions and uncertain of what to do next.

"You're perfect," he continued. "A virgin—a pure sacrifice."

He twisted around as though remembering something. "The flowers!" He scrambled to his feet. A shoe grated beside Cassie's ear, and then his footsteps continued on by. A moment later she heard him climbing back into the boat. She lifted her head. Mr. Cox was gathering something from the stern. When he straightened, his arms were filled with lilies. He climbed from the boat and plodded up the sandy beach.

Cassie looked around. She *was* on Hicklebickle Rock. Dizzy, she pushed

herself to her feet and stumbled back along the top of the rock, but Mr. Cox dropped the lilies on the beach and ran toward her, blocking the only exit.

"Cassie! You're awake? Don't be afraid. I won't ... it won't hurt much, I promise."

She backed away, along the top of the rock toward the water, toward that white, shimmering moonpath that cut straight across the bay toward home. Toward Mama and Ben. She wished she were home right now. She wished it were noon instead of night, and she wished she were down by the water picking lemon yellow buttercups in the sun instead of out here on this rock with nowhere to run. The water below the rock was black. It looked deep.

Cassie screamed, and a few seconds later it sounded as though another girl on the opposite shore screamed exactly the same way.

"No, no! Shhhh." Mr. Cox waved his hands back and forth. "Cassie, don't be afraid. You know me. I've always been nice to you."

Cassie screamed again. She staggered toward the tip of the giant's thumb, toward the stone woman with a blanket around her shoulders.

"Help!" Cassie fell beside the stone woman and reached out to touch the corner of the cold, stone blanket. "Please help me!"

Bright moonlight reflected on the woman's face, on her forehead, nose, and cheeks, and on her hands clasped beneath her chin in a prayerful pose—so perfect in the moonlight, as perfect as if carved by human hands instead of by nature. But she was only a rock.

"Cassie, Cassie," Mr. Cox crooned. "Let me help you join all the virgins sacrificed here throughout the centuries. You'll be a goddess, and Quetzalcoatl will grant me power because I gave you to him at this sacred place." His eyes were as wild and round as the moon.

"No! Help!"

Mr. Cox picked her up, his arms around her middle. She kicked and scratched, but he shoved her down on the rock again and wrapped his hands around her throat. His fingers were tight and squeezing. Soon her ears rang and her tongue felt too big for her mouth. She wanted to gag, to vomit, but his hands wouldn't let her. He squeezed tighter, and then everything turned white, like when Ben had tied her to the alder tree and left her and she had fought the rope until she almost fainted. Cassie kicked, felt her foot strike Mr.

Cox's shoulder, but it wasn't enough. She felt herself floating, inches off the rock, felt as if she could float away, but she kicked again, as hard as she could, one last desperate kick. Mr. Cox grunted. His grip loosened on her throat. And over his shoulder Cassie saw the stone woman rise to her feet. The woman was much taller than Cassie had imagined, a giant woman towering ten feet tall with shining eyes as black, deep, and wet as the bay. Mr. Cox must have heard something—some soft stepping sound the woman made, because he turned and looked back ... and let Cassie go.

Cassie heard voices, but she couldn't see anything or anyone. It was very dark all around her as if she were at the bottom of a well. She was floating upward toward a tiny, distant light. A man spoke. He was nearby, his deep voice cutting through her dizziness.

"Looks to me like he slipped and fell, doesn't it? Like the outer edge of the rock gave way beneath him."

"Yes sir, sheriff," another man said from farther away. "There's been some recent erosion on the rock edge up there. It's quite a drop to the beach from the spot. His neck snapped like a twig."

"It's just as well. Saves the taxpayers from trying the s.o.b."

"The girl's family is arriving in the police launch, sir."

Cassie heard a motorboat, and then the motor died and she heard footsteps in the coarse sand.

"Cassie! Baby!" Mama's voice.

I'm here, Mama. I'm here, Cassie wanted to say, but she couldn't. She floated faster toward the light. The light was now a small moon.

"You're the mother? I'm Sheriff Larken. The Paramedics told us she'll be okay. Her throat is bruised."

"Where is she?" Ben's voice.

"Over there. Wrapped in a blanket. She's still pretty groggy. She was half conscious when we found her, mumbling something about Mr. Cox choking her—and then something about the stone woman saving her. Hallucination, I guess.

"I can't believe this happened," Mama said. Her voice shook. "How did you find out that Mr. Cox was the killer?"

"He recently placed a large order for bulbs through a wholesale nursery—all lilies. When the dispatch relayed your call about your daughter being missing, we were already headed over to his store to question him. He was gone, and so was his boat."

Cassie's eyes finally focused. The small moon she'd seen was a spotlight atop the police van. She felt the blanket around her, felt the solid ground through the blanket, felt her mind and body waken. She took a deep breath and looked toward the voices. Mama and Ben stood nearby. A big man in a uniform leaned close to Mama.

"You okay?" he said. "You look sort of pale. Maybe you should sit down."

Mama sank to the sand.

"I need to see Cassie," Ben said.

"I guess that's okay, but don't make her talk, son."

Ben strode toward Cassie and dropped to his knees beside her. "Jeez, brat," he whispered. "I shouldn't have locked you out." He swallowed and looked away. His whisper grew so soft she couldn't hear him, but she read his lips. "I'm sorry."

Cassie nodded. She had never seen tears in Ben's eyes before.

He sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve. His lips quivered into a painful-looking smile.

"Kicked him," Cassie managed. Her voice sounded scratchy and low. Her throat hurt.

"You must have kicked him really good! He landed down there on the beach. See? Quick, take a look before they cover him up."

Cassie shoved the blanket down and sat up. Mr. Cox lay amidst broken rocks and sand with the lilies scattered all around him. Cassie looked out across the top of Hicklebickle Rock, surprised to see the stone woman kneeling again, her back toward the beach and her face, as usual, aimed out across the bay.

"She saved me," Cassie croaked.

"She's just a rock, brat. She isn't real."

"No." Cassie shook her head, glanced at Ben and then back at the woman. Mama and Ben and the police weren't going to ever believe her. They thought Mr. Cox had fallen off the rock, that she had kicked him and made him lose

his balance. They thought the stone woman was just stone. But Cassie would never forget the woman's eyes—eyes as black and deep and wet as the bay.

The Clan

It was about this same time last year that Mrs. Flint moved into the house across the street. Mrs. Flint wasn't a person to encourage conversation, and based on her appearance, some of the neighbors jokingly suggested she was a witch. I knew right away she was a vampire but kept it to myself, out of professional courtesy.

Nobody really believes in witches anymore, which benefits me, naturally. Later this evening children dressed up as witches will knock on my door, hold out a decorated sack or a plastic pumpkin, and shout, "Trick-or-treat." I'll smile, compliment their costumes, and drop in Snickers or Hershey bars—plain store-bought treats, nothing *home-brewed.* Then I'll remind them to be careful crossing the street. My name is Amarantha Endless, by the way. I'm second in line as Matriarch of our Clan—such as the Clan is these days.

The day after Mrs. Flint moved in, we had a thunderstorm. It didn't feel normal, that storm. It felt like the beginning of something bad, as if the sky were alive but sick. Litter whirled up and down the street, and not far away huge green-black clouds with fearsome yellow edges rolled closer. The clouds resembled boiling mud, a pestilence or an approaching plague. I felt the thunder's concussion in my chest as if my heart had stopped for a second—an odd, mortal feeling.

By two A.M. the storm had passed. I rolled over and went back to sleep with Phoebe curled up against the backs of my knees. Even though I've cut back on her food, Phoebe is still quite a tank of a cat at fourteen pounds.

The next morning, as I worked my way around to the front of the house dragging a trash bag and picking up storm litter, I heard the sound of a squawking, exotic bird from across the street. I recognized the sound as that of a cockatoo. It said, "Give me a taste," and "I'm so hungry," and "C'mere, sweet thing."

I prefer cats. Phoebe seems to enjoy following me around outside but seldom chases other critters, like mice or birds. Usually she's content to lie in the shade of the clematis, mashing down my hosta plants and blinking at the sunlight. It takes something phenomenal for her to exert herself physically, like an escaped cockatoo within easy reach.

Right behind me I heard a sudden squawk and then a growl. There was

Phoebe with her fluffy tank's butt in the air, her tail straight up.

"Phoebe?" I said. "What are you doing?" She shook her head back and forth and then ran behind the garage carrying something in her mouth and scattering white feathers.

I gathered up the feathers and put them in my pocket. The next morning there were handwritten flyers on utility poles and fences:

LOST
WHITE COCKATOO – "GEORGE"
REWARD
CALL 555-1313

At first I planned to keep mum, but then I pictured how I'd feel if Phoebe were missing. I'd rather know she was dead than keep hoping she'd come back. So I crossed the street just after sunset and knocked on Mrs. Flint's front door for the very first time.

From inside the house came the sound of hard-soled shoes on a hardwood floor, as if Mrs. Flint were climbing stairs. She must have been in the basement. I straightened up, took a deep breath, and prepared myself for delivering bad news.

The door opened the length of a safety chain. Half a gaunt face with one shadowed eye appeared in the glow of a twenty-five watt porch light. An ancient yet familiar smell rolled from the open door, the odor of dust and dirt and mold and damp ... and something else, something vile and truly rotten, something I hadn't smelled in a dozen decades. I'd forgotten how bad vampires smell.

"Mrs. Flint," I said. "I'm your neighbor from across the street." I turned around far enough to point to my own house.

Her voice held a note of impatience. "Yes?"

"I saw your notice ... about George?"

The chain rattled and the door swung open wide. I took a step back, realizing that when she had first opened the door Mrs. Flint must have been crouching down. She stood straight now and was over six feet tall. I guessed her age to be anywhere from forty to sixty—she had that mature, drawn look around the eyes and mouth, and yet there were no wrinkles. Her skin was the color and texture of mozzarella cheese, her hair that of dull steel wool. I suspected it was a cheap wig pulled into a frizzy wad at her neck. Not a good

color for her with that morbid complexion. She wore a black dress that draped like an old musty curtain on her gaunt frame. The dress hung clear to her lower calves, and below that she wore heavy black stockings and those horrible black oxfords; you know, the orthopedic kind that little old ladies wear for support.

"Where is George?" Mrs. Flint gripped the edge of the door. Her hand looked powerful. She had broad, short nails, neatly manicured.

"I'm so sorry. George flew into my back yard, and Phoebe, my cat, caught him. She killed him before I could stop her. I thought you'd want to know."

"I see," Mrs. Flint said. "And what did you do with George's body?"

Her coolness surprised me and my mouth almost fell open, but I caught it. "Body? There was no body. By the time I caught up with Phoebe there was nothing left but feathers."

"I see," she repeated. "May I have his feathers?" She eyed my pocket as if she knew I was fingering the feathers at that very second, which I was. Her expression revealed no recognition of *my* station in life. Vampires are so self-important and arrogant, they rarely acknowledge me, even if they do notice.

Gathering most of the feathers, I handed them over, touching her open palm for only an instant yet long enough to feel her cold flesh, as cold as if she'd been handling ice. Repulsed, I yanked my hand away.

She caught my reaction, and for a half second she smiled—a mere twitch at the corner of her colorless mouth. She stroked the feathers with her thumb, back and forth in her palm, and then her cold gaze fastened on me again.

"So, you have a *cat,*" she said. An accusation.

I nodded. "Phoebe. A plump, six-year-old calico."

"Well, cats will be cats, won't they?" She stepped back, and the door seemed to ease forward on its own.

"I'm really sorry," I said, leaning to the left to keep eye contact. "Phoebe has never done anything like this before."

"It's natural for predators to hunt," Mrs. Flint said, and then the door closed with a resounding *clank*. The chain rattled and her footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor.

Later, Phoebe and I ventured into the front yard again. I snipped a few late-blooming foxgloves, snapdragons, and calendulas and then stood wip-

ing stains from my shears with the thumb of my glove.

"That should do nicely," I said. "What do you think, Phoebe?" I expected to see her rolling on the brick path where she'd been a moment before, but she was gone. I glanced around. "Phoebe?" I leaned over the front gate and checked up and down the street and then hurried into the back yard. My fence is six feet tall, too high for a waddling fat cat like Phoebe to scale. She had simply vanished.

I put on my jacket and went looking and calling, canvassing the neighborhood for three blocks in every direction, peeking into open garages and sheds and beneath porches. It was pitch dark when I returned home.

Phoebe has been my loyal companion ever since my last husband, Frank, passed away, so I went to bed feeling very alone. I tossed and turned all night.

At dawn I threw on my robe and slippers, ran downstairs, and opened the back door, hoping Phoebe would be waiting to be let inside. She lay on the porch, her mouth wide open. Her ribs heaved and shuddered, more of a spasm than breathing.

"Oh, Phoebe." I knelt beside her. On the porch nearby were a white feather and a slimy pile of what appeared to be bloody, regurgitated meat. I picked her up, took her inside, and wrapped her in a big towel. Then I laid her on the heater vent in the kitchen and, rather than taking chances with conjuring or trying to doctor her myself, I called the twenty-four-hour vet.

I met Dr. Robins at his clinic and produced a zippered plastic bag containing the regurgitated meat from the back porch. Late that afternoon Dr. Robins called me at home.

"At first I suspected slug bait," he said. "But it turned out to be Tylenol tablets ground up and mixed with raw liver."

"I can't imagine ..."

"Somebody obviously fed it to her on purpose, but we caught it in time. You can come get her now."

On the way to the clinic I experienced immense relief, then suspicion, and finally anger. When Phoebe was home again, I marched across the street.

The setting sun threw my shadow ahead of me as I shoved open Mrs. Flint's gate and climbed her steps. I banged on her door. A violet-blue dusk fell as I raised my fist and banged again, and then came the familiar footsteps. The door groaned open. Mrs. Flint wore the same black musty clothes; her

face wore the same lifeless, mozzarella cheese expression. The same sour, musty odor of decay wafted out the door.

I cleared my throat. "Mrs. Flint? Phoebe was poisoned and—"

"Your cat ... the fat, six-year-old calico?"

"Yes, well, she's *plump*."

"We can't keep our pets forever, you know—look what happened to George." Mrs. Flint stepped back, and the door clanged shut in my face.

I waited for the sound of her shoes on the hardwood floor, but there was only silence. Gooseflesh crawled over me as I pictured her ecru-colored ear pressed against the door on the inside, pictured her listening for the sound of *my* footsteps, pictured her smiling—*felt* her smiling—and by the time I reached home my anger had turned to rage.

I pride myself for not getting embroiled in silly feuds. There are childish, petty feuds going on amongst Clan members, too, and I have no desire to get involved so I seldom contact any of them. Another reason to avoid them is that some Clan members seem to go out of their way to be embarrassingly odd. For instance, Rudy and Raphael insist on dressing as mimes—downright freakish, but that's just my opinion.

Mrs. Flint foolishly encouraged the rumor that she was a witch when the whole point is to blend in, to look as every bit human as your neighbor. I've lived all over the world—sometimes in places that no longer exist, such as Mesopotamia, Atlantis, and Pompeii. No one suspected I was a witch. Even now I appear to be an ordinary, middle-aged widow, five foot four with permed graying hair and silver, wire-rimmed glasses. None of my nineteen husbands ever suspected, although a few of them mentioned that I never seemed to age, which is nearly true.

I've *been* a femme fatale—spent my second and third centuries that way—but it isn't worth the effort. Plus, it draws attention, and that's ill-advised. After all, the Clan isn't immortal—we simply tend to live a very long time. You'd think Mrs. Flint would have learned caution by now, too.

On Halloween morning I journeyed out before it was truly daylight and strolled half a block to the alley entrance behind Mrs. Flint's. Litter from the storm remained wedged in cracks and crevices and stuck in tall dead grass. I followed a dog trail that looped through her yard to the porch.

So close to dawn, Mrs. Flint was most likely in the basement. They tend

to favor cellars and crawl spaces, you know. Her cellar had one small ground-level window with a heavy black cloth across it, blocking out daylight.

Brazenly, I tried her doors, first the back and then the front. Locked tight. At that early hour the neighbors are getting ready for work and trying to get their kids dressed and off to school, so even if they spot you snooping they're too busy to care. From my pocket I withdrew one of George's feathers and a bottle containing a mixture of black ink, garlic oil, powdered monkshood, a dove's tear, and one secret ingredient—I never reveal my potions entirely, you understand.

After shaking the mixture well, I dipped the feather into the bottle and drew a black cross on her back door, another on her porch, and a third on the bottom step. With the remaining mixture I circled her house, depositing a single drop every foot or so around the entire foundation. After smashing the bottle on her front walk, I kicked the shards of glass into her lawn, smiling at the inevitable results of the potion. Vampires *hate* garlic, monkshood, and dove's tear, but they're *allergic* to the secret ingredient. They break out in a rash.

The rest of that day I spent cleaning house with Phoebe sniffing and inspecting my every effort. It turned out to be a beautiful day, actually warm for the end of October. My kitchen is on the sunny west side, so I propped the back door open but left the screen door locked.

Every Halloween I decorate my front porch with cornstalks, pumpkins, and 'spider webs' woven of silver-flecked yarn. Busy with this project, I forgot to keep an eye on Mrs. Flint's house for *signs of life*, which is sort of a joke.

The sun had gone down by the time I finished decorating. The trick-or-treaters show up soon after dark, so I hurried to fill my punch bowl with candy to be placed by the front door. As soon as I entered the kitchen I smelled something bad, something rotten. And then I saw Phoebe sitting outside the screen door, blinking at me as calmly as you please.

"Phoebe, how did you get out?" I opened the screen door and with one hand nudged her fluffy butt across the threshold. "Come inside." Then she bit me—not a deep bite that drew blood, I was too quick for that, but her fangs did leave red tracks across my wrist.

"Phoebe!"

She was back out the door and over the fence in two seconds. The screen

door thumped shut. Then, I saw the real Phoebe licking her empty dish and I realized that the first cat, the biting cat, had been an imposter. I spent the next five minutes conjuring and hexing to ensure that my wrist healed without the usual vexing complications of a vampire bite.

Obviously, Mrs. Flint hadn't yet figured out exactly with whom she was dealing. The dove's tear concoction had been fair warning, but apparently she had taken it for a challenge. *So be it,* I decided.

Vampires aren't limited to transforming themselves into bats, wolves, or smoke the way they're portrayed in films. It is true, however that vampires may not enter your home without first being invited—so I'll admit my mistake there. She took me by surprise. "Touché," I whispered.

Halloween night was clear, with a scatter of stars and one gauzy cloud that trailed a hunter's moon across the black sky. At nine P.M. I turned off all my lights. By then the cute little kids have stopped trick-or-treating and it's all the big, pimply-faced high school kids, mostly boys with their big clumsy feet that for some reason cannot seem to stay on the path. Besides that, they don't even bother with costumes, and sometimes they say rude things about the size of the treats I hand out. If they only knew what I *could* give them!

For the first time in over two hundred years I felt elation, an exhilaration, an evil enthusiasm, if you will. Vampires are dangerous creatures, but the Clan has been around since God created Earth; at least Granny was. Granny grew weary about seventy years ago and shut herself down, and Mother has been the Matriarch ever since. I guess Mother does an okay job—far be it for *me* to say things should be run differently.

The next morning Mrs. Flint's yard was gone—an entire foot of topsoil, grass, weeds, and old rose bushes. A raw crater surrounded her house, and I chuckled, picturing how she'd spent her evening at the tiresome end of a shovel, digging-itching-scratching-digging, probably during her prime hunting time, all because of my secret formula. That enticed me to dig even deeper into my long-neglected cache of potions.

Three blocks away on a street lined with maples trees is a Protestant church. It's six blocks to the Catholic Church, and the little wafers the Protestants use for communion are every bit as powerful as holy water, so why walk the extra three blocks? It was time, anyway. I try to attend church at least once a century.

When the communion tray was passed around, I 'accidentally' spilled it on the floor. Whispering apologies left and right, I got down on my hands and knees, scooped up the wafers, and dumped them into my purse. Deacons came running. They tried to help me back into the pew, insisting that I not worry about the spill. Feigning dizziness, I headed for the ladies room. Shortly after that I departed with the stolen wafers. It was a shameful deed, yes. But necessary.

It's common knowledge that the hour right after sundown is the best time to launch an assault on a vampire. Upon rising, vampires go straight out to hunt, having a driving hunger for human blood. And that old myth about their needing to rest on their native soil in their own coffin is just plain silly. They don't require anything special. Vampires don't really sleep, either—they're just hiding because they're more vulnerable during daylight hours.

I returned to a cracked window near the back of Mrs. Flint's house. I pried up the screen, knocked out a loose wedge of glass, eased a hand through, unlocked the window, and climbed in. Her dining room was empty. The wallpaper was that old flocked stuff, aged to an unhealthy urine color with rusty stains below the window and on the ceiling around a tarnished chandelier. The place smelled worse than any outhouse I've ever interviewed, and please remember, I've been around a long time.

There was a small lamp glowing against the front window shade—a pitiful attempt to civilize the appearance of her house from the street. At the rear of that room was a door, slightly ajar.

I pulled it open and stood at the top of skeletal stairs that dropped into a black cellar. The light switch clicked up and down uselessly, so I adjusted my eyes for night vision and descended.

The smell almost took my breath away. The only worse smell in my memory was after a flood had ravaged a graveyard filled with recent plague victims, dispersing hundreds of bloated corpses over field and town and eventually into sewers. After the flood receded and the sun baked those contaminated streets, the smell of mortal decay was so foul it drove vultures away. Nevertheless, I continued down into that rancid cellar.

In my night vision everything glows green. Shadows are emerald-black. Anything alive or warm-blooded has a faint, orange aura. Down there that night, everything was green or black. Mrs. Flint's resting place was a filthy

mattress in the northeast corner, in a paved crawlspace, gloomy, cold, and moldy. The outline of the mattress shimmered with a putrid chartreuse.

Crouching, I pulled the plastic bag of sacramental wafers from my pocket and inched forward until my toes touched the side of the mattress. I crumbled the wafers and sprinkled them across the foul bed. Then I continued to sprinkle the wafers along the crawlspace and on the cellar floor while backing out.

It was then I saw human bodies heaped in the farthest corner. They were decaying and bluish-green. None had yet deteriorated to bone. They explained the horrendous smell.

Back upstairs I left the cellar door ajar, climbed back out through the same window, and hurried home.

Knowing that Mrs. Flint had already gained admittance to my house disguised as Phoebe, I kept checking Phoebe's aura. A vampire emits a dull green glow even when masquerading as a cat. Thankfully, Phoebe glowed like a lighted pumpkin.

I reinforced my house against vampire invasion, stringing garlic around each window, placing dried monkshood beside both front and back doors, and hanging a gilded cross on my entry wall.

Most vampires probably wouldn't enter a church, but a Master Vampire will walk down the corridors of the Vatican and gaze brazenly at the icons. He might even glare upward at the cross—with some visceral discomfort, of course. Vampires find the image of the cross offensive because it reminds them of their depravity and the impossibility of their salvation ... well, nearly impossible, but I won't go into that. The point is, a vampire must *touch* the cross to be injured by it. Simply looking at the cross only causes them stomach pains.

Why does trouble arrive in duplicate? It was nearly midnight. I had bathed, put on a clean nightgown, and had one foot lifted to climb into bed when the doorbell rang. Naturally, the first person I thought of was Mrs. Flint. I shoved my feet into slippers, grabbed my robe from the foot of the bed, and ran downstairs to open the front door.

"Hello, dear." Mother picked up her suitcase and hustled her way inside. "What's with all the garlic and monkshood? I smelled it from the taxi."

"Just a disagreement with the vampire across the street."

"Oh," she huffed. "I come all this way hoping for some peace and quiet

and find myself in the middle of a war."

"Well, she started it."

"They always do, dear. It's their nature. Just ignore her."

"I tried that." I gave Mother the obligatory hug. "Good to see you. It's been a while."

"Not that long. Seventy years maybe."

Mother set her suitcases at the bottom of the stairs and slipped out of her coat and gloves. I checked her aura. It was weak and flickering from weariness, more peach-colored than true orange, but she passed the test. I hung her coat in the hall closet. "I could sure use of cup of herb tea," she said with a sigh. "I'm pooped."

Not too pooped to talk until two A.M. though. Finally, she installed herself in the guest room and I staggered upstairs and fell into bed. At eight I was awakened by Phoebe squatting on my chest, sniffing my breath as if checking for signs of life.

Mother was already up and in the living room with a fresh cup of herb tea. She pointed out the window toward Mrs. Flint's house. "That's the place?"

I nodded.

"I couldn't help noticing her yard. Dove's tears and garlic?"

I nodded again.

"Why waste time with those old concoctions? Go for the jugular; *she* would."

"I thought I should give her time to back off first," I said.

"Courtesy doesn't pay. Not with vampires. They're ungrateful. If you died today she'd spit on your grave tonight," Mother said.

Mother proceeded to interrogate me about the feud and how it had evolved into such an irksome situation. I felt like an apprentice again, taking a witchcraft test and being graded on procedure. After describing the situation from the beginning I finished by adding, "Don't tell me you wouldn't have done something too."

"Naturally, but if I had, her ashes would be scattered in hell by now. I see no point in procrastinating. Which reminds me, I need to do some clothes shopping while I'm here."

So Mother went shopping while I scurried to the health food store. Mother is so very fussy about what she eats, and The Nutritious Pantry is the only

place that carries some of that archaic stuff—rare, delicate herbs and things.

"Oh please, Amarantha," she said later. "Allow me to cook dinner. It's the least I can do."

Eating Mother's cooking for the first time in seventy years was a shock to my system. I ended up with indigestion, but thanks to a brew that only Mother can make correctly, I felt better by bedtime. It's sort of like being bitten by a cobra who then turns around and injects you with its own antivenin.

Thoughts of Mrs. Flint had faded and I was prepared to let bygones be bygones when Mother woke me up at six the next morning, blathering something about "bodies on the front porch." Sure enough Mrs. Flint's basement victims were piled outside my front door in all their gruesome, decaying glory. I stepped outside at the same moment a police car pulled up to the curb.

Oh, I know what you're thinking, but the victims will *not* turn into vampires. That's just another part of the myth. There is quite a long and disgusting ceremony involved in a Master Vampire creating a new creature. I won't go into details since it's a repulsive transaction involving lots of screaming and thrashing and of course plenty of blood, so it seldom happens in populated areas.

A big, robust, blond guy, probably in his late thirties or early forties, exited the car and walked up to me. "I'm Detective Zimmer from Homicide." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "This is my partner, Officer Snow." Following him up my steps was a young policewoman. She was about twenty-five, brunette, and with a butt the size of an apple. "What can you tell me about this?" Detective Zimmer pointed toward the pile of bodies.

I covered my heart with one hand. "We just discovered them ourselves."

"We?"

I opened my mouth to explain how Mother had found them, but then I saw that Mother had changed her appearance as she often does when she finds herself beside an attractive man. I assume she found Detective Zimmer attractive because now I had *two* apple butts on my front porch.

"Uh, my guest discovered them only moments ago and came to wake me," I explained.

Detective Zimmer frowned toward his partner. "Call for the meat truck

and then get a tarp and cover the bodies." Officer Snow jogged back toward the patrol car.

"Who notified you?" I asked.

"An anonymous caller."

"Hmm." My eyes shifted toward Mrs. Flint's house.

Zimmer stepped inside, sniffing and frowning at the strings of garlic and dried monkshood. I decided he frowned far too much to be attractive.

"Excuse the mess. We haven't finished putting away all the Halloween decorations," Mother said. She put her hand on his arm. "Would you care for some herb tea, Detective Zimmer?" she asked. "An almond croissant?"

"No, thank you, Miss ..."

"Terry Endless," Mother said. "And this is my aunt, Amarantha Endless."

I felt the familiar burn of indigestion as we returned to the living room, Mother positioning Zimmer beside her on the sofa.

"How terrible," Mother said in her most helpless voice. "To think someone came right up on our porch with those poor dead people."

Zimmer explained that our porch had probably been chosen at random for the dumping of murder victims. Then he described how several such 'dumpings' had occurred in the past month.

"How awful," Mother gasped.

Zimmer flipped his notebook shut and stood up. Mother made sure he had our phone number in case there were "any more questions" and accompanied him to the door. When she returned she was again her regular self—sixtyish, coiffed, manicured, all *crispy-looking*.

"What a sour expression you're wearing, Amarantha," she said. "Not attractive."

"I'm losing my patience, Mother."

"With me?" She looked shocked.

"No, with Mrs. Flint."

"Oh, well yes ... of course!"

That night Mother accompanied me across the street. Surprisingly, Mrs. Flint had upgraded her resting place to a second story bedroom and had acquired a genuine bed—a baroque, black-enameled gargoyle-carved monstrosity with a black velvet canopy, black velvet coverlet, and black velvet curtains over the windows. A deep burgundy Persian carpet with an amber

fringe covered most of the floor.

We poured a mixture of olive oil, snips of virgin lamb's wool, powdered snail slime, and one secret ingredient all over the bed, the carpet, and the drapes. Mother knelt at the threshold of the room and held a white candle's wick to the edge of the carpet. A low blue flame raced forward and trailed off in every direction. Moments later it died down to a smolder and we left, knowing that by midnight the contents of the room would be ashes without spreading to the house's structure or even emitting enough smoke to be noticed by neighbors.

We also knew our actions would provoke a response, so we hurried home to prepare. I took a disgruntled Phoebe to the garage and locked her in my car with a blanket, a dish of water, and her litter box. Mother helped store the garlic and the bouquets of dried monkshood in the attic—they were dropping seeds all over the foyer anyway.

It was late when our guest arrived, about three A.M. I was struggling to stay awake when smoke seeped into the foyer under the front door. I glanced toward Mother, relieved to see her alert. She had assumed the form of a mantel gargoyle while I had transformed myself into a growling duplicate of Phoebe.

The invading smoke gathered into a swirling cloud at the foot of the stairs, finally taking on the shape of a tall, gaunt figure with a tidy, auburn ponytail and dark eyes with glowing red pupils. I thought the addition of the gold hoop earring an exotic touch.

"Mrs." Flint was actually an impressive, six-foot-four *male* vampire wearing an impeccable charcoal pinstriped suit and full silk cape. His emerald aura indicated he was *beyond* common—we were dealing with a Master Vampire.

Flint narrowed his eyes and growled at me, "Thought you were dead, you mangy recreant mooncalf."

Recreant mooncalf? Do people still talk like that? I hissed at him and loped upstairs.

The basement door was open with the light burning as a decoy. His footsteps were soft through the entry, and with long, sweeping strides he glided down the hall. The kitchen's tile floor clicked under his polished heels, the basement door squeaked, and the third step down gave its dependable, telltale groan. I wondered how he had survived the centuries. He made this

embarrassingly easy.

Mother and I assumed human form again and followed him, each of us armed with a wooden stake and wearing large gold crosses on chains around our necks. After all, why not?

I reached the bottom step first, expecting to find him hovering over the two sleeping forms we had constructed on cots in the farthest corner, but he was nowhere in sight. Then the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut and locked, and voices surrounded us—vile whispers and loathsome mutterings. The basement filled with flickering shadows. The shadows came through the concrete walls, and we were soon surrounded by creatures with red glowing eyes in otherwise featureless faces.

"Oh my," Mother whispered under her breath. "Oh my, oh my, oh my."

"Mr. Flint," I began. My voice sounded unusually high.

"The name is Morgan Flint." He slid from a corner and stood a few feet away, bowing formally. "And you are both of the Endless Clan I've recently learned."

"None of this is necessary, Mr. Flint," I said. "All of this fuss over a silly cockatoo?"

There was an angry edge to his voice. "George was my brother. And I might ask you the same question; all this fuss over a stupid cat? After all, the escalation of this situation has been your doing. You invaded my privacy and destroyed my property." Morgan Flint strolled behind us, cape rustling. He paused there. "Why did you bring these?" With the toe of one shoe he nudged the tip of the stake in my hand. I'd been trying to conceal the stake in the folds of my skirt.

Without waiting for an answer he circled us again, waving a manicured hand in the air. "I brought something for you too." He produced a thick black candle from inside his cape and held it only inches from the tip of my nose, forcing me to look cross-eyed in order to see it. On its smooth, rounded side, halfway between top and bottom, was an eye. The eye opened, revealing an algae green iris and red pupil. Its lid was covered with serpent's scales. The eye blinked, narrowed, and focused on me.

"It's a gift," Flint said. "Take it."

I shook my head.

"Oh my." Mother closed her eyes and hummed under her breath.

Once, in a cave on a Mediterranean island, when I was barely a girl, I'd seen just such a candle. I recall how my teacher took my hand in hers, how she shook her head. "If offered, do not accept it," she said. "You will lose your powers and become its slave."

"Here. Take it," Flint insisted, but again I refused. He circled us a third time, even slower, making my skin crawl. Then he halted in front of us again, his ruinous smile sharp and deadly, his gums dark red.

Obviously I had underestimated him. If something happened to Mother, the Clan would blame me—if I survived—which seemed doubtful.

Oh my, I felt myself thinking, as if Mother's thoughts were contagious. *Oh my oh my oh my.*

Mother hummed louder, and Flint's shadow kinfolk suddenly scurried about the basement, darting first one way and then the other as if in panic.

My toes and fingertips tingled, and I realized it was due to Mother's humming.

Upstairs, footsteps pounded through the house. The door at the top of the stairs was ripped from its hinges, and shadows with orange auras rushed down into my basement.

Morgan Flint's white hand trembled. He drew the candle close and pressed it against his sternum as if trying to hide behind it. He narrowed his red eyes, bared his fangs, and hissed.

The first to reach the basement were Rudy and Raphael, in full mime—whiteface, striped satin coveralls, black shoes, white gloves, and idiotic pink bowler hats. Judging by the sound and the commotion, the entire Clan had arrived. They filled the stairway.

Mother scolded, "Well, you took your sweet time!"

Morgan Flint fell back against the wall, and his shadow-kin crawled around his feet squealing like rats trapped in a burning barn. I lunged and drove the sharpened point of my stake into the glaring eye of the candle. Black liquid spurted out and ran down Morgan Flint's sleeve, smoking and bubbling like acid. I shoved harder and the candle broke in half. The stake pierced the lapel of his pinstriped suit, his fine white Egyptian cotton shirt, and finally his dead black heart. With eyes full of surprise, he slid down the wall to the floor. His flesh crumbled to dust, his suit and cape smoldered. Then he and his kindred burst into flames and vanished in a swirl of smoke, leaving nothing but a

smear of soot on the concrete floor.

"Mother, I've never heard that melody you were humming."

"It's a special spell, reserved for the Matriarch alone."

"Hmm." I felt a touch of indigestion.

The Clan hung around for nearly a week, and we had a long-overdue family reunion. Apparently most of the feuds were settled decades ago. We all got along great—well, mostly—but I won't go into that. As a result of all the attention and festivities, Phoebe actually dropped a pound or two.

I've decided to 'pop in' on Mother occasionally—about every decade or so—because I suspect she's keeping secrets. I've also dug out all my old potions, remedies, and even my old notes from the chests in the attic. It's time to catch up on the ancient arts. Some of them are quite intriguing, you know, especially those love spells. It's been a long time.

Heat Waves

Mama was frowning, warning Rachel with her eyes, thinking thoughts so loud they hurt inside Rachel's ears: *Now don't you go doing anything, Rachel. Don't you embarrass us!*

Rachel wanted to answer, but Mama couldn't hear. You had to talk out loud for Mama to hear.

On Sundays it was always the same, and in the summertime it was the worst, standing there in the heat and the sun. Rachel leaned against Mama on the walkway leading from the front doors of the church to the front gate and the street. Rachel's head hurt from the sun's white glare. Her neck and chest felt squeezed by the heat. Her head felt heavy, and her lungs felt empty no matter how much hot air she breathed in — and her bladder ached. She wouldn't use the church restroom, not since she saw Pastor Stern come out of the ladies room at Christmas with a plunger, mop, and bucket. She was afraid he'd come in while she was in there, even though Mama said he always knocked first, and that a church this small didn't have a janitor, and that Pastor Stern did most of the maintenance himself. But Rachel would rather hold it until pee leaked down her legs than take a chance on being seen with her underpants down.

Mama and Daddy always talked to Pastor Stern after church. Always. Their voices droned on and on in the background like the nonstop chorus of bees in the flower beds.

"Wonderful sermon," Daddy always said.

"The Good Lord makes every sermon an easy task," Pastor Stern always answered. His bald head gleamed, and his gold-rimmed glasses caught and reflected the hazy, glaring sunlight like mean little mirrors. Rachel lowered her gaze to the toes of her shoes, but the sunlight bounced off the shiny patent leather and up into her eyes. She felt wobbly in the knees.

"Please tell Mrs. Stern that her flower arrangements today were lovely," Mama said, "and I hope she's feeling better soon."

"Bless your heart, Lydia. I'm certain that hearing your kind words will make my wife feel better."

It was always the same on Sundays, with her parents saying things like, "wonderful" and "lovely" and Pastor Stern using words like, "inspiration"

and "blessed."

Rachel crossed her legs and squeezed.

"Rachel," Mama said. "You're eight years old now, so stand still and act like a lady."

Turning eight yesterday didn't make holding her bladder any easier. Rachel squinted through the thick, wiggling heat that blurred Mama's face and made her look fuzzy. Even Mama's soothing touch couldn't make Rachel's bladder stop aching.

Can't we just go home? Rachel thought.

Be patient, Daddy answered. Daddy heard 'think-talk' too, but not at the same time as regular talk — not like Rachel could. Sometimes Rachel had to shout inside her head before Daddy heard, and sometimes when he tried to think-talk back, he had to strain. Rachel heard Daddy and the Pastor the same time she heard Mama, and she also heard two ladies in the parking lot, gossiping: *"She claims she had her colors done professionally, but mercy, that fuchsia dress she wears!"* Rachel didn't like those ladies. They were what Mama called mean-spirited people.

Rachel liked Pastor Stern, though. Mama said Daddy and the Pastor had been friends since they were little boys. The Pastor had a glowing face. Mama called it an *aura*. To Rachel, it looked like happiness.

"... baseball league. We'll beat the Methodists again this year ..."

"... haven't beaten that Baptist team in five straight seasons, though ..."

Rachel slipped her hand into Mama's cool dry palm and tugged, hoping for at least a little comfort. *Oh please*, she thought as loud as she could, *I got to pee so bad! Can't we go home?*

And then, as if a transparent door had opened in the air to Rachel's left, shadows came, circling and whispering. Gray, wavy shadows swirled through the door, blurry like water, dry like heat. She had seen them before a few times, but only briefly, only for a moment. They knew her name.

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. Several shadows whispered all at once, speaking at the same time and yet slightly apart, so that their words had a wavy, echo sound.

Go away, Rachel thought. *I can't think-talk with you. My parents are here, and they said not to think-talk to anyone except Daddy, because it's our secret.*

Come to the gate, Rachel. Come to the gate. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

Mama was laughing at one of Daddy's jokes. Pastor Stern laughed too and shook his head, the sunlight bouncing off his shiny, tanned dome. He smiled a lot, like someone who didn't mind hearing old jokes or unclogging toilets at Christmas.

Rachel slipped her hand from Mama's and took one step toward the gate, then a second step.

Daddy talked loud when it was about baseball. "Presbyterian team has a strong third baseman and a talented short stop ..."

And Pastor Stern said, "I'll be lucky to get even one home run this year with my arthritic knees."

The church gate was always open. Rusted open. Painted open. Rachel had never seen it shut. *Why have gates and hinges if you never use them? Why have anything if you never use it?* she thought.

Daddy turned and glanced in Rachel's direction. *Who are you talking to, Rachel?*

Rachel shrugged. *No one, Daddy. Just thinking.*

"Just once, I'd like to blast one over the billboard, right over it." Pastor Stern's eyes were shining toward heaven.

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. Come through the gate, out to the sidewalk. Come see. Come see. The wavy, whispering shadows only came shimmering around when she was hungry, tired, too hot, or had to pee.

Rachel placed her hand on a white gatepost, felt the warm, painted splinters, rough and smooth at the same time. Heat rose from the sidewalk. Shadows flickered in and out of her peripheral sight. Heat wave people — that's how she thought of them. They only came around in hot weather, and before only when she was alone. Why wouldn't they go away? What did they want?

Come to the sidewalk, Rachel. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

It was noon now. Except for five or six others milling around outside the church, there were very few people in sight. A block away down Main Street, a gray pickup truck with primer-orange doors eased around the corner and pulled up against the curb. A man wearing blue shorts and a white T-shirt got out and ran into the grocery store. He left the truck engine running and the truck door open. *Probably needs the Sunday paper or a quart of milk. He'll be back in a few seconds.* The man was too far away for her to hear his thoughts. She

knew she didn't like him though. She knew he had a mean *aura*, and that he lived alone in an old trailer in the woods and that he shot birds and squirrels from his window just for fun. She didn't know how she knew these things. Knowing them was something as new as being eight years old.

A boy in tan shorts and a red tank top peddled a blue bicycle down the street and was gone again in seconds, still tasting the pancakes and maple syrup he had for breakfast. He was on his way to meet a friend and they were going fishing.

All the buildings up and down both sides of the street looked bleached and faded. Heat rose up in zig-zaggy waves and made everything hazy and soft, as if seen through a gauze curtain.

Rachel leaned on the gate post and felt the heat wave people hover closer. They were listening. She allowed her thoughts to float out and around her. *Daddy helped paint this fence last summer, along with some other men on the baseball team, kneeling in the dust alongside Pastor Stern. The pastor's knees keep him from doing it all by himself, but he plays baseball and joins in the picnics. The ladies spread pot luck dishes out on picnic tables with big checkered or flowered tablecloths and stacks of paper napkins and the best Tupperware, all yummy stuff, all made by mothers and wives and grandmas and aunts and even some single ladies — 'old maids' those mean ladies call them.*

Rachel wasn't sure the heat wave people were interested, but she heard them giggling behind her, so she continued. *Daddy says we're special because the two of us can think-talk. Mama knows that we can, but she says that other people wouldn't understand, and so we've got to be careful and —"*

What are you doing, Rachel?

Nothin' Daddy. Just waiting. Are we leaving now?

Pretty soon.

"... and I decided to go for the bunt and took em' by surprise, yes sir ..." Pastor Stern continued.

"Seems like you make it across home plate at least once every game, Pastor," Mama said, and Pastor Stern's aura glowed even brighter.

Baseball! Some people want to win so bad they get hurt trying. Some people go home angry and disappointed. Why even play baseball then? Rachel kicked the gate post with the toe of her shoe. THUMP.

Rachel. Daddy tossed a glance over his shoulder. *Just a minute longer and then we'll head for home. Go use the ladies restroom.*

Rachel shook her head no.

"I have a new catcher's mitt," Pastor Stern said. "But it's still stiff as stick."

Rachel smiled. Pastor Stern said funny things.

Down Main Street a little boy came out of the grocery store. Rachel squinted through the heat rising off the concrete. It was George Thronsen's little brother. George would be in second grade with her in September. His little brother wasn't even in kindergarten yet. What was he doing out all by himself? Rachel couldn't think of his name. She squinted more, until her eyes were nearly shut and the sunlight made little stars twinkle through her eyelashes.

Henry, Henry, Henry, murmured the heat wave people. *See Henry? See him?*

"That's right, his name is Henry," Rachel whispered. She was curious about the heat wave people because only she could see or hear them — but the heat wave people seemed to know everyone's names and where they lived.

Henry's hair was strawberry blond; copper like Mama's best pots. He walked toward Rachel up the other side of the street, carrying a brown sack, its top twisted into a gooseneck. He swung the sack back and forth, pausing to kick a rock into the street and to pick up some small treasure from the sidewalk; a piece of bright blue glass.

Daddy's voice drew Rachel's attention for a second, "... my toe stuck out behind me, safe, touching third base but ready to steal home ..."

Across the street, Henry paused at the curb and looked left and right. Rachel checked up and down Main Street, too. No traffic. Red light at the intersection. It was safe for him to cross.

Henry headed out across the wide, cracked concrete, his feet looking as if they never touched the pavement, as if there were gaps between the bottoms of his faded red Keds and the street, as if heat *held him off the ground.*

Rachel! Rachel! Rachel! called the shadows. *Hurry! See Henry? See him?*

The man in the blue shorts came out of the grocery store, running, carrying something pointed in one hand and a sack in the other. Rachel felt a chill start at her heels and race up her legs, up her spine to her scalp. The man ran around to the open door of the truck. He leaped inside. A second later the truck's tires squealed on the pavement. Henry squatted in the middle of the street, prying something from the crack, digging with his stubby fingers.

"Henry, come over here," Rachel said aloud and stepped toward him.

Henry lifted his gaze and frowned at Rachel as if surprised she had spoken to him, yet uncertain he'd really heard anything. He wrinkled his nose and squinted at her.

Dumb girl knows my name.

"Henry, come over here. Hurry." Rachel took another step toward him.

Rachel, what are you doing? Daddy was straining for her to hear.

Daddy ... little Henry Thronsen ...

Rachel, stay out of the street.

A half block away the truck's rear tires slid around at a crazy angle, spinning and smoking. Exhaust stained the hot shimmering air a blue-gray.

Rachel ran into the street as Henry twisted his head toward the truck, eyes wide, open-mouthed, his actions jerky. *Stiff as sticks*, Rachel thought.

From inside the careening truck the man's pale face and wild eyes glared through the windshield. *Damn kids*, he thought. *Damn kids!*

Rachel reached for Henry. His eyes were full of disbelief. He stumbled, wrapping his arms around Rachel's waist. His rubber-toed sneakers raked the concrete as they fell together. She pulled Henry's neck against her, felt his sugary sweet warmth, and then she heard a chorus of heat wave voices all around her, shouting.

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. Come dance. Come dance. Come dance.

The truck was so close now. No time. Rachel held one hand out toward the truck and squeezed her eyes closed, too afraid to look, picturing the truck swerving, picturing the driver's hands turning the wheel at the last second, and she heard the heat wave people laughing and singing her name, *Rachel, Rachel, Rachel.*

Rachel opened her eyes and saw the driver through the windshield. She looked straight into his wide, glaring eyes and thought desperately, *NO.*

His knuckles turned white on the steering wheel as it turned. The truck lurched as if it had reached the end of an invisible cable. It flipped over Rachel and Henry, crashing and grinding to a noisy, screeching stop against parked cars, steam boiling from under its hood.

People rushed from doorways all up and down Main Street, shouting, "Are those kids all right?" "That little girl saved that boy's life!" "Did you see that truck flip?" "Who's in the truck? Is he alive?"

From somewhere across town a siren wailed, and across the street the truck finally stopped rocking back and forth. Its windshield resembled a lace curtain — no sign of the man through that shattered glass. But Rachel heard his thoughts coming from inside the truck: *No, no, I don't want to go. Not ready ...* But his thoughts sounded weak and they faded as if evaporated by the hot, idle breeze. Rachel realized they were his final thoughts, and even though she still held Henry tightly in her arms, she felt alone for the first time. *Everyone is alone, really*, she thought.

The shadowy voices all murmured at once, blending together like wavering notes on a church organ, giggling and laughing, and Rachel saw the shadows leaping and dancing in the air overhead.

Finally, Henry stood up. He picked up his sack, opened the twisted top to peer inside. Then he wadded it shut again. He squinted at Rachel where she sat rocking and holding her arm against her ribs.

"My Gummy Worms and Spiderman comic are okay," he said.

"Go home, Henry," Rachel told him. "And don't stop to play in the street anymore. It's dangerous."

Daddy knelt beside Rachel and kissed her forehead. "You scared us, honey, scared us really bad. My knees are still shaking." He pulled his big, clean, white handkerchief from his pocket and folded it into a triangle. He slid it beneath Rachel's broken arm and tied the two corners behind her neck with trembling hands.

"Rachel, what were you trying to do?" Mama asked.

"They wanted me to stop the truck," Rachel said. "I think."

"Who did?"

"I don't know." *Didn't you hear the heat wave people, Daddy?*

Daddy shook his head.

Rachel-Rachel-Rachel. Come dance. Come dance. Come dance.

Rachel frowned at the shadows. *Go away! Go away right now!*

The shadows twisted back toward the transparent doorway, giggling, whispering, swirling like smoke up a chimney. They shimmered, twinkled, blinked, and then were gone. The doorway shrank to a dot and vanished.

"Heavens!" Pastor Stern halted behind Rachel's father. "I don't know what to think. I could swear I saw that truck flip for no reason at all."

Rachel leaned closer to her father and thought, *I wet my pants.*

"We'll be heading home now," Daddy said to Pastor Stern. "I need to call the doctor about Rachel's arm."

Mama helped Rachel to her feet, and the three of them walked to the corner with the sound of think-talk coming from every house, every open window, every yard. They entered the mottled shade of madrona trees where the sidewalk was scattered with crisp oval leaves and where long, paper-thin strips of bark fell like amber ashes. Underfoot the bark broke into a thousand pieces with a pleasant crunch.

"Rachel," Mama said as they rounded the corner. "You've got to be more careful." And then she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Just because you and your father can hear thoughts, it doesn't mean you know everything about everyone. Life is full of dangerous mysteries that you'll never solve."

One block away their two-story white house with its wrap-around porch waited in the deep shade of a giant maple. But even in the shade it was hot and her armed ached, so Rachel turned the think-talk off from inside her head. Then it was quiet with just the sound of their footsteps on the sidewalk and the little summer birds in the hedges.

"I'm sorry about what you saw today, Rachel," Daddy said. "Sorry you learned what you learned. That man in the truck ..."

"He's gone," Rachel said, finishing Daddy's sentence. Daddy nodded and looked sad.

Rachel still didn't know who the heat wave people were, but she knew now that she didn't trust them. From now on she would be very careful when they came flickering around because they seemed to know things would happen before they happened, and they knew how to make danger feel like a curious game.

Rachel would never forget how it felt to be afraid — so terribly afraid. She remembered how the driver's eyes looked just before the wheel jerked and the truck flipped. And she remembered how his thoughts had thinned out and faded away like smoke in the breeze, to some other secret, next-door place — an invisible heat wave place.

Chazzabryom

"Sometimes I forget my name, like now—for a second I forgot." He rose from his metal chair and hobbled to the dusky mirror on the wall. I suspect he knew we were being observed through that mirror, but he stood calmly with wrists and ankles shackled together, eyeing his reflection without expression. He had a milky complexion with Neanderthal features and black hair shaved so short his scalp looked blue.

"Fenmore Gregerson," I reminded him. "Prisoner number 325416."

He assessed me in the mirror with an amused gaze. The expression was all in his eyes and in the slight tilt of his head, an expression impossible to describe or capture on canvas or film, an expression so subtle that had he not been shackled I would have fled the room. It was probably the same expression his victims saw just before he grabbed them by their ears and sucked out their eyes.

I had read the police report.

"Do you imagine you're someone else?" I forced a dry swallow.

My trusty pocket recorder sat blinking on the table. In one sweaty hand I gripped a charcoal pencil, and on my knees I balanced a sketch pad. For the next few seconds the only sound was the scratch of charcoal on paper.

"Imagine?" He hobbled back to his chair, leaned over the table, and smiled at the recorder. Then he began pacing, beneath the high, barred windows to the corner, around in front of the oversized, metal door where every minute or so a guard's face loomed through a small screened window. There, he turned and hobbled past the two-way mirror, apparently no longer interested in his reflection—and behind me to start the same route over again. I held my breath when he shuffled behind me.

"I don't *imagine* anything. I just forget that name, Fenmore Gregerson."

"Then, what *is* your name?"

"Hezzabyam."

"Hezza ... "

"Hezzabyam." He paused beside the windows.

If I foolishly repeated his name three times, would something mystical happen? Like Rumplestilskin, he might vanish or the whole truth be revealed?

"Please sit down so I can get your features right," I said.

He slid into the other chair with another a clink and rattle of chains.

Flipping to a clean sheet, I continued sketching, determined to capture that prehistoric face. I sketched lightly at first, changing to heavier strokes as I perfected the contours. Wide across the forehead and narrower at the chin, slightly squared, with a deep Kirk Douglas dimple—a hero's feature on a monster's face. He had brows like an ape. I deepened shadows at the outer corners of his eyes and down into stark hollows beneath his cheekbones.

At first glance his eyes appeared gray, but the more I looked the more colors I saw. Every color imaginable was crowded into his irises.

"Interesting eyes," I said.

"Like my father's."

"Tell me about him."

"I'll tell you about him if you tell me about yours," he said.

"I don't have any family," I lied. The Warden had warned me to say nothing about myself or anyone I cared about. Fenmore Gregerson apparently had connections on the outside.

"You don't want them paying you or your family a visit," the Warden had said.

"You have pretty blue eyes," Fenmore said, closing his. "You also have a sister, a brother-in-law, and two nephews." His expression was blank, as if he were seeing something inside his head—or inside mine.

"You're mistaken," I said, pretending to sketch calmly. I recrossed my legs and rebalanced the sketch pad, hoping the movement appeared relaxed, even though my gut felt tight as a fist. I wondered what it was like to have your throat ripped out by human teeth.

"Better check your recorder," he said.

"It's just fine. You were going to tell me about your father," I reminded him. "Is he still alive?"

"Alive?"

I decided not to push the subject. "Then tell me what you miss the most, being locked up in this place."

"I have everything I need." He nodded, adding that evasive smile.

My sketch was good, one of my best. For some reason, Fenmore Gregerson refused to be photographed, but he agreed to let me sketch him during the interviews.

"When they told me a lady journalist was coming to visit, I thought she'd be wearing a skirt. You ever wear skirts?"

I shrugged, convinced he was trying to frighten me. I pretended to erase a nonexistent smudge on the sketch. A moment of silence passed.

"Sometimes I fly," he volunteered.

"Where?"

"Out through the walls and into the night sky," he said, as if my question were ludicrous.

"An out-of-body experience?" I switched to sketching black leathery wings behind his head, dragging the charcoal in rapid streaks across the smooth paper.

He shook his head no.

"Do you get a running, leaping start, like Superman, or straight up and away?"

Then he smiled his first real smile, with large, startlingly white, surprisingly nice teeth. On a corner of my sketch pad, I captured that enigmatic smile, got it down as fast as I could on the stark white paper, even caught the way the ceiling lights reflected in a diamond shape on the point of two, sharp incisors.

"Call me Fenmore."

"Is that what your friends call you?"

"I keep to myself."

"I understand you write poetry," I said, changing the subject again.

His kaleidoscope gaze traveled my face. My cheek itched and then my upper lip, as if his gaze had the power of touch.

"Would you recite one for me?" I asked.

Fenmore took a deep breath and chanted:

Candle flame spent,
hot death puddle
chokes out the glow.
Charred spinal wick,
a charcoal corpse.
My straw pen claws
parchment moon wall,
thick black blood ink

thinned with spittle
outline shadows,
gallows and noose
while I succumb
beside the flame.

"Wrote that today when they told me you were going to visit," he said. "My poetry scares most people."

"Not me," I lied. "It has a dark beauty."

He blinked. "Haven't thought of a title yet."

"That last line would make a good title."

"Beside The Flame?" Fenmore's gaze turned inward again, his face went blank. I wondered where he went when his face changed so suddenly, with twitches and flickers in the flesh of his cheeks, brows, and lips. Then he focused on me again. "That's the title, then."

"Mind if I print that poem in my article?"

"Go ahead. What magazine will it be in?"

"*New World News.*" And then I got a cramp in my stomach. I'd revealed something about myself—where I worked. There was other information about me in the files at the office. My address, phone number, next-of-kin. I glanced over at Fenmore, dreading what I'd see. But he seemed intent on my sketch.

"What's it like to fly?" I asked.

"Cold. Could use a warmer jacket than they give us here."

"But don't the guards check on you during the night?"

"Not between midnight and 2:00," he said. And then he grimaced and bent to one side, as if he'd been jabbed in his ribs with something sharp. He sucked air through his teeth before straightening.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"*Don't ask questions like that.*"

"Like what?"

"About how he ... does things."

"Who?"

"My father."

"He can hear you? Right now? Can you hear him?"

Fenmore nodded.

I leaned over my little recorder and spoke directly into the microphone.

"So, you fly between midnight and 2:00 A.M., right through the wall and into the sky like Superman."

"Not like *Superman*. I fly sitting up." He flinched again, pressing his fist against his ribs. "I've got to go now."

"May I come back and see you again, on Tuesday?" I asked.

His eyes went blank, his face slack—gone inside his head again. Could he see or hear me at times like that? I slid my tablet and charcoal onto the table and took three steps in his direction before his eyes cleared. He jumped and fell against the door.

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"Tuesday is fine." He kicked the door twice, and it was opened by a guard the size of Milwaukee. I gathered up my things and hurried into the hallway behind them.

While I waited for the first of many doors to open—doors to the outside and freedom for me—I studied Fenmore and the guard as they ambled down the ecru-colored hallway, at the big guard in his crisp uniform, robust and arrogant, and then Fenmore, short and squat and the build of a caveman. And, as if Fenmore felt my gaze on his back, he did a quick spin on one heel, pausing for a half-second to make eye contact before completing the spin and returning to his shuffling pace beside the guard. It happened so fast, the guard did a double-take. And then, apparently satisfied that nothing had occurred, the guard swaggered on, swinging his billy club.

When the door buzzed I almost swallowed my tongue.

Up until now I'd been passed over for every promising assignment at *New World News*. None of my articles had ever made the front page. This one would appear in the "What's Happening" column on page three. A popular column. On the average, one-hundred-fifty letters arrived weekly—usually from irate readers. Normally, black and white photos accompanied those stories, but since Fenmore allowed none, my sketches would add a touch of class to a tabloid that was often referred to as *crap*. Who would have ever guessed my bachelor's degree in art would come in handy?

I hurried into the late afternoon sunlight, fumbling for the keys to my ten-year-old Honda. Goose flesh raced my spine as I glanced behind me, at the

six story, gray concrete building and at the six rows of windows—as if thirty-six barred eyes watched at me. Steam billowed from five chimneys the length of the roof. Black smoke rolled from a sixth chimney.

A tattered cloud eased across the sun, casting a shadow on the prison. The shadow resembled a skeletal hand clawing that flat, gray surface. I climbed into my car, locked the doors, and headed for home.

"I expected the first draft on my desk this morning." It was Michelle-From-Hell Mangrove. My editor.

I stared at the receiver in my hand, but couldn't remember answering the phone, much less remember the *ring* that had wakened me. I blinked at the clock. 6:00 A.M. I wasn't due at the office until nine.

"It's a three-hour drive to the prison. I didn't get home until after nine."

"You said you'd have it written and on my desk today."

"I'll have it to you before noon."

She sighed—one of her, you're-trying-to-give-me-ulcers sighs. "All right. Try not to cut it too close though, okay Mitch?" I gave her credit for that. I hated the name, Mitchella, and have never forgiven my mother for creating such an asinine version of my father's name.

"Yeah." I slammed the receiver back into the cradle and made myself a mental note to phone Michelle at 4:00 A.M. on Sunday—the only day, according to her, that she ever slept in past five.

While coffee brewed I staggered to the shower and then slipped into my official writing sweats.

Digging through my briefcase, I found my little recorder and flipped open the clear plastic window. *No tape?* Through the bottom of the briefcase, through all the gum, pens, lipsticks, compact, comb, and receipts. I dumped the whole thing out on the table. No tape.

I sat down in front of my iMac, determined to write this article from memory. What difference would it make if there were some tiny errors? Whom would people believe, me or that nut-case in prison? Me or that guy that claims he *flies* at night through prison walls?

Sugar. Creamer. I dumped the horrible coffee down the sink and made tea. There was the strangest taste in my mouth.

Michelle wasn't in her office when I arrived, so I tossed the four-page article on her desk and then headed to the corner cafe for a breakfast-lunch. I helped myself to coffee at the self-serve counter and then spread the morning paper across my table The front page captured my attention the way it was meant to:

"COPY-CAT KILLER STRIKES"

And below that:

"When serial killer, Fenmore Gregerson was sentenced to eight counts of life without parole, the town of Wenatchee, WA believed it was finally safe. But, like other famous serial killers, Fenmore Gregerson has his admirers, those determined to make names for themselves by stealing his *modus operandi*—his signature methods of murder. Police give no details of this latest killing, except to say the victim was a thirty-year-old Tai Kwon Do teacher, and that the attack happened between midnight and 2:00 A.M."

"Here you go, Sweety—one poached egg on dry wheat toast and three stewed prunes in light syrup." The waitress slid the plate across the table as I folded the newspaper and set it aside.

"You know," I shoved my coffee away. "I'd rather have hot chocolate."

"Where's that poem you said he recited?" Michelle's voice sounded like coarse sandpaper on rusted iron. "You taped the interview, right?"

"When I got home the tape was gone."

"You lost it?"

"I put the recorder in my briefcase, but—"

"You lost it." Michelle resembled a gargoyle, especially in her wrinkled, beige linen suit. Her dull blond hair jutted from her scalp like ruffled straw.

"I'll get it Tuesday," I promised.

"I was hoping you'd wear a skirt this time," Fenmore said. "And where's your sketch pad?"

"I'm not going to draw this time. We'll just talk." I checked my recorder. The green light blinked. The tape spun. "Tell me about your father."

"He said you're pretty."

"That's nice. Tell me what *he's* like."

Fenmore approached the big mirror again and fixed his gaze at his own reflection. "He looks like me ... a bit. The eyes—the colors."

For a second Fenmore's expression changed from the cool, half-amused expression to one of *sadness*. Maybe not sadness—more like resignation.

"Except my father is beautiful," he said.

Somehow I couldn't imagine anyone resembling Fenmore Gregerson as beautiful. We were describing oil and vinegar. They can whirl in a blender until their molecules share space, but eventually, they separate.

"He's the most beautiful creature, ever." Fenmore frowned at his reflection. "Ugly people are laughed at. Society believes the worst, without *really* knowing. They don't care about the truth."

"You can tell *me* the truth, Fenmore."

He turned and lowered himself into his chair as if very weary. "You wouldn't believe me either."

"I might if it made sense."

He shook his head.

"Did you fly again last night?" I needed to keep him talking.

"It was in the newspapers, wasn't it?"

"You mean the copycat killer?"

"Not a copycat. Same killer."

"How can that be? You're locked up here."

"*I* never killed anyone."

"Sixteen people identified you, people who didn't know one another. They all picked you out of a line-up."

"See? You don't believe me either."

"But your fingerprints were all over the murder scene—the victim's blood all over you. The doctors and crime pathologists found the last victim's eyes and tongue ... in your stomach." Just saying it made me queasy.

"I know," he said.

"How do you explain, unless you are the killer?"

"It was my body ... but not *me*."

Fenmore jerked to one side, his primitive features twisted as if in agony.

He jammed one hand over his ribs and leaned forward, eyes squeezed shut.

"Should I call for help?"

He shook his head. Sweat beaded his eyelids and upper lip. "No," he said, gulping air. "Just a minute." He seemed to catch his breath finally, but he stayed tilted to one side. "I can prove it to you ..." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Prove what?"

"Everything I've said. That I fly." He took several more deep breaths and then straightened in his chair. "At night." More, easier, rapid breaths.

"Remember your tape from last time?"

He had my attention. I nodded.

"You couldn't find it later, could you?"

I shook my head. "And it had your poem on it," I said. "I did the best I could to write my article from memory, but I couldn't remember your poem."

After another deep breath, Fenmore leaned across the table and recited the poem again, directly into the recorder's microphone. When he finished, he raised his gaze to mine. "This tape won't make it home with you either. My father will see to that. He's jealous of anything I do on my own."

"No, this time I'm going to hang onto the tape."

"Won't make any difference." He whispered now, so quiet I leaned forward to catch his words. "But I'll prove that I fly. I'll visit you tonight."

"... uhhh ..."

"It's not one of *those* visits," Fenmore said. "My father is gone. He left a moment ago."

Fenmore and I both jumped at the reverberating, *bang-bang-bang* on the metal door, our visit interrupted by the guard.

"May I visit again? Thursday?" I rose to my feet.

He nodded.

I didn't watch Fenmore and the guard this time as they departed down the long hallway. The visitor's door was already open, and I escaped through the series of humming, clanging, sliding exits to the parking lot outside.

Once inside my car, I unzipped my trousers and stuffed the tape from the recorder inside my pantyhose, shoving the little plastic case clear to my inner thigh. No way was I going to lose the tape this time. I locked the car doors, turned on the radio, and headed west. I'd be home before seven, slam out the rough draft, touch it up in the morning, have it on Michelle-From-

Hell's cluttered desk by ten. I grimaced through five seconds of Whitney Houston before punching buttons on the radio and accelerating up the onramp to I-90, giving Sting some unsolicited back-up, straining to hit the high notes. "*Don't put on that re..e..d light.....Rox...anne!*"

Fenmore claimed to fly at night and that he was controlled by his father. According to public record, Fenmore's father was alive and well and retired from Wenatchee Waste Management—a man who, understandably, refused to discuss his son. Fenmore's mother had died fifteen years earlier. I wondered why his defense attorney hadn't jumped on an insanity plea. Or was I simply falling for Fenmore's practiced crazy act?

Every fifteen minutes or so I reached down and tapped the tape case with my index finger to make sure it remained wedged against my thigh.

That evening, I came in the front door, threw my briefcase into the armchair, and kicked off my shoes. I didn't even take the time to change into my trusty writing sweats. I flipped on my iMac, ran through the kitchen pausing long enough to uncork a dusty bottle of Merlot, and then plopped down in front of the glowing computer screen and flew through the opening fresh from memory. Fenmore was getting easy to capture, both as an art subject and in text—his Neanderthal appearance, his claims of innocence. Introductory words flowed, line after line, fast and clean—but when I needed the poem, I found a big hole in my pantyhose—as if the nylon had melted. Again, the tape was gone.

It wasn't in the car, or the carport, or the driveway. After a few choice words to the walls, I decided—well, there was always Thursday, my third and final visit with Fenmore Gregerson and my last chance to get that poem.

I've never had sleep problems, unless it's something like a neighbor cutting his lawn at seven-thirty in the morning, or a yapping dog—or Michelle-From-Hell calling me at some ungodly hour. I scribbled myself a yellow sticky-note, a reminder to phone her Sunday morning bright and early, and stuck the note to the clock on my bedside table. Revenge would be so sweet.

I'm still unconvinced the dream was only a dream—unable to find my car in a parking lot the size of Safeco Field and when I finally found it, my key didn't fit the lock. A wind came from behind me, and leaves crawled across

the blacktop, big, brown leaves with blackened points—claw-shaped, bony-looking leaves. They skittered under and over the parked cars, circled me, surrounded me. I slapped them away from my face. They smelled moldy, rotten ... that's when I woke, gasping. All the blankets were in a twisted pile on the floor. The room smelled musty, cold, and damp. I got up and checked the windows, pulled back the curtain to see if it was raining outside. It was calm, with a three-quarter moon glowing through a thin halo. No rain, no wind. Hushed.

I went to the bathroom, splashed water on my face and remade my bed. The musty smell was gone. Lying there, doubting sleep would visit again that night, I checked the clock. 2:00 A.M.

My yellow sticky-note was gone. I turned the light back on and checked around on the floor, under the bed, behind the night stand. Then I saw it—through my open bedroom door, down the hall—hanging there on the side of the refrigerator. Even from a distance, it was obvious something additional had been written—more than MICHELLE 4:00 A.M. SUNDAY. I ran to the kitchen—then slowed. Black ink instead of blue. Not my handwriting.

"The candle, spent,
its death puddle
chokes the flame—

I imagined ghouls under my bed and behind doors every night afterward. I took baths instead of showers, unable to close myself into such a vulnerable space with only a shower curtain between me and the unknown. I realized that nothing would be right again until I saw Fenmore Gregerson one last time. I crossed the days off on the calendar.

The guard escorted me into the visiting room where I busied myself with setting the tape recorder in the exact center of the table, making quarter-inch adjustments, positioning my chair *just-so*. My hands were shaking.

Then came the rattle of chains. The door swung open. Fenmore shuffled in and the guard backed out.

"The poem," I said. "How—?"

"You wanted proof that I fly."

"Describe my house."

"Not what I expected, you being so smart and all," he said. "I imagined a high-rise apartment with a view, not a little sixties rambler with a carport and a cracked driveway." He placed his hands on the back of the other chair. "You sleep hugging your pillow."

I felt my guts shaking inside and was unable to speak for a moment.

"I read your article," he said. "You didn't make fun of me the way the other journalists did. I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone before."

Fenmore leaned forward, his eyes focused somewhere over my left shoulder, and yet not apparently focused on anything in particular. "He can hear me—right now," Fenmore said. "But he's too far away to stop me. He's on his way back ... coming fast ... but it's a very long way."

"But—"

"Listen, or we won't have time. This is our last chance. I'll be gone soon."

"Gone?"

"My father's name is Chazzabryom."

"Chazza—"

"Shhhh! Don't say it aloud. It gives him power and speed." Fenmore dropped into his chair and straightened. He took a deep breath. "I've made a deal with ... my father's nemesis, you might say." Fenmore smirked at that, a sad sort of half-smile. "I have a safe place, away from my father forever."

"Where?"

"My father will be outraged. I am his link, a doorway for him to move about in human form, but he is *not* omnipotent. He has a weakness, a vulnerability, a—"

"An Achilles heel?"

"Yes, but remember, what I'm telling you is a weapon ... like a gun with only one bullet. Waste it and you'll be defenseless."

I wasn't certain if I believed him or was just humoring him. "All right."

"When he comes, and he *will* come ... shout his name *once*, and then add Yavkem, Dortov, Ukejev."

He scribbled the words down on the corner of my art pad. Then he leaned back against his chair. He seemed content.

"Did you honestly like my poem?" he asked. He seemed very human

then.

I looked up. "Yes. It will be in the next issue."

"Remember what I've told you. It's your only hope." Fenmore held his right hand out, dragging his cuffed left hand with it. We shook hands; his felt cool and dry. "I'll remember you," he said.

"And I you."

Fenmore kicked the door and then walked away with the guard, without looking back.

On the way home, I glanced down a hundred times to the corner of the art pad and to the names scribbled there. Chazzabryom, Yavkem, Dortov, Ukejev. It occurred to me that I could be the brunt of a joke. Maybe Fenmore was having a good laugh in his cell right now. But did it matter? Could I afford *not* to treat this seriously? I decided to chisel those names into my memory. Locker combinations, bank account numbers, email passwords—they all paled by comparison. Strange, how the fear of death can put things into perspective.

My third and last Gregerson article appeared on page two of *New World News* along with my sketch of Fenmore. But no poem.

I spotted Michelle scavenging paper clips from the floor under her desk. She banged her head when I slammed her door. She rubbed her scalp and frowned. "What'ya want?"

I threw the issue on her desk. "After the fuss you threw—and calling me at the crack of dawn—now the poem's *not even in there?*"

"The sketch was more important."

"The sketch ran with the *first* article."

"Yeah, but our readers have inch-long memories."

"We'll have to print the poem in the next issue."

Michelle looked amused. "There's no article about Whatsiz-name in the next issue."

"His name is Fenmore Gregerson, and I promised him."

Michelle tossed a handful of paper clips into her drawer. "No-can-do."

I got that strange feeling in my stomach again, like parts of me weren't really me. I wanted to scream, to throw something, to rake everything off

and leap on her desk waving the latest issue of *New World News* over my head. Instead, I focused on a window across the street, fourth floor, at an office full of *normal* people leading normal lives, with respectable jobs.

"If you don't run the poem, something bad will happen, Michelle." My voice sounded strange, even to me. Deeper. Gruffer.

"Such as?"

I shook my head, unable to describe what I felt.

Michelle smirked. "Sorry. Get it published somewhere else."

Sunday came and went. I didn't call Michelle at 4:00 A.M. to wake her. All I wanted to do was to sleep myself—and yet I couldn't. I couldn't eat. Nothing tasted right. My clothes were getting baggy. I looked like crap, according to Michelle—and who should know better than the Queen of Frump? Most of the time her slip showed and the back of her hair looked like a bird's nest.

I avoided mirrors, afraid of what I'd see. A Michelle-From-Hell apprentice.

The article on Fenmore Gregerson received more phone messages, letters, and email than any other "What's Happening" article ever had. Michelle said to find another "weirdo" to interview, but my heart wasn't in it.

The Warden from the prison called me. Fenmore Gregerson had died. The Warden said, "Just thought you should know."

"Did he leave a note or anything?" I asked.

"It wasn't suicide, lady. He died in his sleep."

That night, I woke up three times, and every time I fell back asleep it was to another nightmare. My car was shrinking with me trapped inside. Or I was driving alongside a calm, black lake, the road narrowing—soon my tires touched water on both sides, and when I tried to back up, the road behind me was already under water. I climbed on the roof of my car with the lake making gulping sounds.

Then, I flew straight up.

The night was cold and I shivered. Flying across the black water I saw mountains and at their feet, city lights. I flew toward the lights, crying with relief, anxious for land and human life. Before reaching shore, I woke.

The next morning, Michelle greeted me. "Do you have anorexia or something? Go see a doctor. I feel queasy just looking at you."

"Oh yeah? You must not have any mirrors at *your* place."

She glanced down at her wrinkled lap, at her pill-covered sleeves. "I was in a hurry this morning."

I picked up a draft of an article from the corner of her desk. "What's this?"

"Oh, here, I'll take that." Michelle reached for the paper. I held it away and scanned the first paragraph.

"It's about Fenmore Gregerson."

"No, about a copy-cat killer. Same kind of killings—eyeballs, throats—the usual."

I skimmed the rest of the article. "Hmmm." The article reiterated how Fenmore was dead and buried.

"Only difference is this time a witness says the killer is some weird naked woman," Michelle said. "Hey, where you going?"

"For the next two weeks, I want you to write down everything you eat or drink," Dr. Rice said. "Even water." She handed me a small pamphlet. "For your height and bone structure, you should weight 120 pounds, minimum. You're 102 and anemic. You're not vomiting, are you?"

"No. Nothing tastes right."

"Do you take any medication that I don't know about? Herbs? Over-the-counter stuff? Trouble swallowing? No? Okay then, follow this diet and call me in two weeks if you're not feeling better."

That night I flew through a rainstorm, freezing cold and shivering. When I woke, the sheets were damp. My nightgown was drenched and so was my hair. I changed into dry pajamas and blew my hair dry. At midnight I dropped exhausted to the sofa in the front room with a dry pillow and quilt.

Then I heard the sound of wind, the sounds of traffic—car horns, skidding brakes, tires through puddles, windshield wipers, distant sirens—the steady gurgle of rain in the down spout from my own roof—but it was as if I

heard it all through ears *other than mine.*

Moments later there was a *thud* on my roof and then the sound of running feet, and then it sounded like someone jumped from a high place into my hallway. The feet sounded bare and wet. They squeaked on my hardwood floor. The bathroom light threw a yellow glow against the hallway wall—a female silhouette halted there. She pushed open the bathroom door, and then headed in my direction, gliding down the hall.

I shoved away the quilt and rose to my feet. My fingers found the light switch on the wall. Bright light glared suddenly as a naked woman halted directly across the room.

She was drenched and dripping; her muddy feet were crusted with fir needles and bits of moldy leaves. She smiled with small, even, sharp teeth.

"You're the one," she said in a surprisingly deep voice. Low, growling, angry. "Because of you, my son ..."

"You mean Hezzabyam?"

We faced each other, no more than ten feet apart. Her dripping hair was dark blond. Water ran down her shoulders, arms, and breasts. Her flesh was pale and blue with cold. Her eyes were pale like a wolf's—or as if she were both blind and clearly focused. Ice-blue eyes. She was a depraved version of myself.

"Where is he?" she growled.

"Where you can never go."

Her eyes shrank deeper into her skull until only two yellow lights glowed from the black sockets. She crouched and leaped. I fell back onto the sofa, but she grabbed my arms and pulled me to my feet. She was my same height and build but with superhuman strength.

I shoved her as hard as I could. Her wet hands slipped, and I leaped on the sofa and screamed, "Chazzabryom!"

She slashed at me, claws raking the air, missing my throat by an inch.

"Yavkem, Dortov ..." I managed before she lunged again.

"I'll eat your bowels," she screamed. "Your heart, your eyes!" She grabbed my ears and jammed her mouth against mine before I could shout the last word. I kept my eyes away from her bloody-looking teeth, but then she sank those teeth into my lips and I couldn't breathe the pain was so intense. Blood or rainwater trickled down my chin and neck.

I grabbed her hair and yanked hard. An inch of space let me turn my head, and I sputtered, tasting blood and mud and rain, "Ukejev!"

There was a sudden, shrill whine and she shrank away, covering her face, driving her own claws into the flesh, into her own eyes and mouth. Yellow light flashed outward from those wounds, darting around my living room, careening at bizarre angles, ricocheting off walls. They gathered into a single, undulating knot of light near the ceiling and then grew into a transparent figure, much bigger than her original, human form. The lights became a dozen twisting, contorted faces that surfaced, sank, and surfaced again, undulating around the edges of the central form.

"We are Chazzabryom," a dozen voices squealed in disharmony. "Do not gloat with this minor victory. Thousands more such battles lay ahead." And then, as if in terrible pain, the squealing grew to a chorus of screams, and the twisting, coiling mass of demons shrank to a pinpoint of light. It vanished. Then silence. There was nothing to prove the struggle had occurred, except for puddles of rainwater on my hardwood floor.

I felt my face. No blood, no torn jaw. I crawled to the sofa and fell into a desperate, dreamless sleep.

The next morning I tossed a mediocre story on Michelle's desk. After all, what *could* compare to Fenmore Gregerson?

"You look better," Michelle said. "What did the doctor say?"

"To eat better, to get exercise and eight hours sleep. It cost me a fifteen dollar co-pay to hear what I already knew."

"Count your blessings, honey," Michelle said.

I studied her. No slip showing. Hair combed. Was that mascara? Lipstick on those wrinkled lips? *Rouge* on those dry cheeks?

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

"Maui. Three weeks."

"What's the *bad* news?"

"You're filling in while I'm gone."

I leaned against the front of her desk.

Her suspicious gaze flashed in my direction. "Stick to this list." She spun a clip board around for me to see. "Nothing else goes in *NWN*. All you have

to do is line-edit and sign off."

"I'm printing Fenmore Gregerson's poem while you're gone," I said.

"I'll fire you."

Animal feelings flooded through me like an adrenaline rush—sudden and empowering—as though I could leap into the air and fly around her office in wild circles.

I jumped on Michelle's desk, sending desk calendar flying, pens and pencils clattering. I grabbed her ears and pulled her face close to mine—our eyes separated by four inches of coffee breath. And up through my throat and out through my lips, that voice again.

"I'll eat your bowels, your heart, your eyes." My smile stretched around painfully sharp incisors.

"Okay... front page," she whispered.

Shivering, We Dance

The pavement screamed under the wheels as my car skidded from the alley between Cedar and Clay. I jammed both feet on the brakes and slid sideways out on Western, heading north, and then I pressed hard on the gas pedal, down Bay Street to the Caldera Self-Service Car Wash. The place was barren of other customers in that queer, twilight gray, early Sunday morning.

I gasped as if I had run all the way there. My knees trembled and my rubber boots clomped on the blacktop. The sleeves of my denim coveralls rasped and my rubber gloves squeaked as I dropped quarters into the slot. Hot Wash.

Crimson water swirled down a drain as I washed the stolen rental car. So much blood—had anyone seen the splatters and smears during those five blocks of high-speed driving? Had anyone seen my face in that vague gray light? Had anyone recognized me? *No,* I whispered. *No.* It had all happened too fast. It had all gone so murderously well.

Strange thoughts leak into your brain as you're cleaning up a blood-splattered car—like, where would one rent a Volvo? The letterhead rental agreement in the glove box said *Masked Transit.* The logo was a raccoon. Had I stolen a celebrity's rental car?

Before anyone else drove into the car wash, I scrubbed away the sticky red splatters from the Volvo's bumper and grill and the smeared handprint from the left rear fender. My soapy gloves slid back and forth across the car's smooth white surface, feeling for injuries—the hip-shaped dent on the hood, the knee-smashed grill, the webbed, skull-shattered windshield. Or did those damages resemble injuries to me because I knew what had caused them?

Steam rolled in the cold air, and jets of hot water built cloud upon cloud. Hot water gushed inside the rear wheel wells, and a strand of long, brassy, red-gold hair slid down and draped against a black tire. I grasped the strand and pulled it free. Livia's hair dangled from my fingers—Livia's hair with a patch of blue-white scalp. I squatted and forced the hair and skin down a drain.

An hour later I returned the Volvo to the same parking spot on the top level of the airport garage, and then I hiked across Airport Way to my own car in the Marriott parking lot. Twenty minutes later I cruised through the

Salvation Army Building donation stall where the boots, coveralls, and gloves landed in the donation bin. Then I drove home to wait for the inevitable phone call.

I replayed my busy Sunday morning backward and forward inside my head, searching for anything I might have forgotten. No, nothing to worry about. My timing had been perfect, my execution flawless. No one knew, no one would ever know except Livia and me, and she wouldn't tell because she was dead.

"Dead." Saying it aloud gave me delicious chills.

I didn't mind waiting for that call. Anticipation can be a titillating reward for patience. Sooner or later the money would descend to me along with the big house, the little Audi, the Mercedes. They should have been mine anyway.

The radiator clang-clang-clanging like a gravedigger's shovel on frozen earth woke me two mornings later. Dawn etched a dull gray line around the window curtains, and I wiped a salty film from my face and pushed myself up from the flowery bedding—roses, as if splashes of blood had dried on the snowy sheets. My fingers traced the edge of a rose, half-expecting to see it flake and smear.

A damp wind battered the window and the southwest corner of my apartment. Another gray Seattle Monday. My bare feet arched away from the jaundice-yellow linoleum as I drew back one of the heavy maroon curtains and scratched at the glass coated on the outside by gray grit. My window looked down into Post Alley, and further west Elliott Bay undulated like a pool of liquid mercury. Above the bay, black-winged gulls circled and screamed against an unforgiving, lint-colored sky.

Six stories down, through fog and drizzle, the traffic grew. Cars spewed thick white exhaust in the cold morning air, and across endless black tar rooftops, smoke and steam belched from local industry like rows of crematoriums, thickening the clouds that already blocked the sun. Directly below, a black dog stalked the sidewalk. He paused, lifted a hind leg, and pissed on the corner lamppost.

The shower nearly scalded me even with the faucet turned all the way to cold. I washed my hair and then shaved, nicking my knees. My own diluted blood swirled around my feet and down the drain with a swallowing sound.

My mid-calf skirt was of charcoal gray wool, and my blouse was black

and white checkered silk. Over the blouse I pulled a red sweater. My heart pounded when the telephone's sudden blaring ring startled me.

"Ms. Absinthe?" It was a man's voice, sympathetic. He identified himself as a police detective.

"Yes?"

"You are Livia Absinthe's niece?"

"Speaking."

"I'm sorry ... so very sorry ... but I must inform you of your aunt's death."

"Aunt Livia? Dead? But ... how ... when?" Through the receiver my voice sounded stunned, shocked—as I had practiced sounding—but not *too* practiced. Even now I barely recall what he said, except for, "You're the only living blood relative. We need you to identify the body."

"Of course. Of course." My hand actually trembled as I wrote down the address. "Thank you," I said and hung up. "Thank you," I repeated, smiling.

I raced across the room to turn up the radio and then leaped and swirled to the sounds of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," leaping higher and higher as each cannon fired. I was thrilled. I celebrated my joy. The orchestra finished; a commercial followed.

I pinned a black cameo at my throat, black pearls in my earlobes—gifts from Livia. Neutral powder, black mascara, a touch of transparent red on my lips, a sweep of gray shadow to deaden the glow of my cheeks. I stepped into black stiletto heels and wrapped myself in an ankle-length gray wool coat and then measured my appearance in the full-length mirror while pulling on black leather gloves beneath a flickering overhead light. My blond hair was parted straight and sleek down the middle and pulled into a tight chignon.

I no longer had a plain face with the build of a young boy.

Another song came on the radio: The Tennessee Waltz; Livia's favorite. I reached down and yanked the cord from the outlet, decapitating it.

Leaning close, I wiped a red lipstick smear from my teeth, and then with a final nod at my reflection I headed downstairs.

Through the center crack in the elevator doors, the shadows of five floors thumped by. My Monte Carlo's cracked and peeling landau top rattled like loose snakeskin in the garage's draft. The car whined to life and the wind-

shield wipers dragged back and forth, their screech knifing my ears and smearing raindrops into a red and green streetlight blur while the defroster dried an elliptical clear spot in the fogged windshield. I climbed to Second Avenue, down to James Street, and then uphill again, toward Harborview Medical.

Livia was dead, but *I remembered* the sound of her voice and how her words always chewed at me, pointing out my faults, my failures—laughing at my plain face and my boyish body. But *she* should have remembered: *things change.*

I remembered how she moved about the big house, silent and sudden, how no lock kept her out, how maniacal her face looked through the steamed glass shower door—and her eyes—how they burned through the glass. *I remembered* how she pulled open the shower door, sucking out the steam and the warmth, dragging in the cold air with her. "Are you clean? Let me see." Her rough hands, squeezing and poking—her fingers—and her laugh. On and on, that laugh—how I hated that sound. How I hated her.

On my eighteenth birthday I moved out of the big house while Livia was shopping. She didn't find me for over a month. Then, there she was at my door.

"What a disgusting, shabby little apartment," she said. "Come home."

I closed the door in her face. It was shabby but not disgusting, and it was mine. When I locked the door there, she couldn't come in.

Livia had many names while she was alive. Liar. Thief. Murderer. Pedophile. No one knew the truth except me. I had proof—her journal, but I burned it because of what she wrote there, about me.

She flattered and cajoled my father until she had maneuvered her way into the heart of the family, and then she systematically eliminated every person who threatened her line of succession. It took her six years to murder my family and seize control. Six short years to steal my inheritance and to rob me of my childhood innocence. What kind of cold-hearted bitch kills her brother and her nephew for money? She must have thought I was too young to know. But I knew. *I knew.*

Livia was an excellent mentor. She taught me well. What happened is her fault.

My father and older brother—a suspicious drowning, a deadly fall. She killed them, and afterwards the money was hers. She controlled all of it and

doled it out to me in a meager allowance. She was the grieving sister and aunt, and I, her orphaned niece. People praised her for taking me in as her own, and oh, how she reveled in that praise.

My father and brother were lucky. I lived with her for thirteen years, and that was far worse than dying.

Livia always underestimated me. I remember the day she revealed her plans to evict a tenant in the Denny Regrade, and her timetable for that eventful day, even pointing out the importance of getting an early start if one hoped to succeed in real estate. I'll never forget the look on her face when she recognized me behind the wheel of that Volvo at 5 o'clock in the morning. I'll treasure her look of disbelief, of terror, of panic. I'm certain the last thing she saw was that blood-streaked eviction notice blowing away down the alley.

The Monte Carlo's heater was almost useless. My hands ached from gripping the cold steering wheel, and I flexed my fingers, trying to warm them. An anemic sun slid between ash-colored clouds, and for a few seconds a golden light warmed the street. But the clouds closed in again and thickened. Day grew dark as night.

Every day on my way to work I passed the corner of Alder and Ninth, never suspecting what lay buried in the stone foundations of that gray building. It resembled a granite headstone at the crest of the hill with its glassy eyes staring outward toward the bay.

I spotted a vacant parking spot right in front and grabbed it, climbed out and locked the doors out of habit. Next door a tavern squatted low and raw, its weathered face guarded by a row of black and chrome motorcycles, like armored war horses tethered to the curb. Red, yellow, and blue neon beer logos glowed in the tavern's darkened windows, and greasy smoke coiled from its tarnished metal chimney on its tarpaper roof.

A one-legged crow hopped from the alley between the two buildings. She halted, cocked her head, the wind raising a row of feathers into a jagged black crown above her glistening eyes. I heard her clicking call as I pulled my coat collar closer around my neck and hurried inside.

The heavy doors raked closed behind me. The lobby was long, narrow, and empty—except at the far end where a dark-haired woman dressed in

black velvet sat behind a corner reception desk. Was she old? Young? I couldn't tell. With an alabaster hand she slid a visitor's permit toward me across the counter, and without looking up she pointed down the hall to my left. I squinted, saw my name on the permit, my name in black letters on white paper. I picked it up. My name. How did she know that was my name? I looked up to ask, but she was gone, already waiting for me at the end of the hall.

The temperature dropped as I followed her downstairs into the basement, passing beneath the sign: MORGUE. An arrow pointed the way between bile-green walls toward wide double doors. I held the permit for a moment, and then I shoved it deep in my pocket. My footsteps echoed; the woman's shoes were silent. Where was everyone?

The double doors were of stainless steel with frosted glass windows up high, like square, cataract eyes. It was even colder beside those doors. I saw my breath fog, and yet perspiration beaded my upper lip. Inside my pocket my fingers folded and unfolded the permit.

"May I see her alone?" I asked and was surprised when, without a word, the woman nodded and glided back up the stairs.

The double doors opened with barely a touch, and a triangle of amber light fell into the room from behind me, framing my long shadow on the ecru-colored floor. I stepped inside and walked toward the center of the room, leaving the doors wide open.

The room was larger than I had expected—a small auditorium. Far away against the wall, a sheeted gurney stood in the corner with the room's solitary overhead light reflecting along its aluminum rails.

Tavern music seeped through the concrete walls, its deep, repetitive bass like a heartbeat. A bead of salty sweat trickled into my mouth as I left behind the outer corridor and the square eyes of the open doors. My feet and legs felt numb. I stumbled forward, whisper-singing along with the music. *I was dancing ... with my darlin' ... to the Tennessee Waltz ... when an old friend I happened to see.*

Cold air crawled beneath my coat and skirt and stroked my legs with icy fingers. A long, slow chill traveled the length of my body. I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets. Such a big, empty room. Such a terrible, cold room. My breath hung in the frigid air like a trail of twisted clouds.

A round, metal drain stared upward from the center of the floor like a

dead eye—and from deep below came the sounds of dripping. The floor was a shallow funnel draining all shadow and light toward the hole—and the hole, glistening with black and green clots, sucked at my feet as I passed by.

The high ceiling cowered in darkness above the solitary light fixture. The fixture pointed straight down at the drain, while in the far corners, dense shadows crouched like huge, hunchback dogs.

I walked in time with the waltz, reached the side of the gurney, grasped the edge of the sheet, and peeled it back.

She was truly dead, the bitch, and rotting in perdition.

Livia's face was a white mask with blackened eyes sunk deep in their sockets. Dried black blood filled her nostrils and caked the corners of her mouth. The cuts on her scalp and forehead were jagged crisscrossing lines. More black blood had pooled beneath the flesh of her cheeks. Her crushed hands lay across her chest in a false, prayerful pose.

"I'm not sorry." My whisper echoed. *Not sorry—not sorry—not sorry.* I raised my gaze to the dark ceiling, to the thick shadows beyond the insufficient light, and then down again at the gurgling drain. "And no one will ever know."

"Just wait."

"Wha ... what?" I looked down. It was Livia's voice, but she was the same as before: eyes closed, white and cold, her ruined hands folded on her lifeless chest. Her voice was in my head. I backed away, turned toward those distant, yawning doors.

"Just wait." Livia's voice, and this time ... *her* words echoed. *Wait—wait—wait.*

Surrounding me from the corners, the hunchback dogs' eyes were now like glowing yellow scythes, and from behind me came the soft airy sound of *something* moving in the dead air. I strained to hear. My heart pounded ice cold inside my chest. My hands were fists in my pockets; my feet felt frozen to the concrete floor.

"Wait for me." Livia's voice again.

I struggled to lift one leaden foot from the floor. I dropped it inches ahead of the other. My gaze was fixed on the rectangle of amber light inside the door. The light! Oh let me reach the light—let me reach the doorway, the hallway, the stairs, the lobby. The sidewalk!

Behind me the gurney groaned. I heard the sheet whisper to the floor, and a sob swelled in my throat. I lifted another numb foot and dropped it inches ahead of the other. From the darkness came the sound of raw bone and fingernails clawing concrete.

"Wait for me."

Damp flesh slapped the floor behind me as I forced one foot up again. Pain, my foot was so heavy. Again I strained, inching forward.

I heard voices down the hall. Laughter. They sounded far away, and then I heard human footsteps from the living world beyond the door. Footsteps—walking away!

"No! Come back! Help!" But it wasn't my voice I heard echoing in the icy corners. It was the sound of a terrorized animal screaming.

Black and blue fingers tugged at the hem of my coat and clawed the heels of my shoes. I staggered on frozen legs toward the light, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Wait." Bloodied fingernails clawed my sleeve.

Down the hall the human footsteps grated on a distant floor, a jangle of keys, the slam of a faraway door, and then the hall light, that rectangle of safe, warm, amber light, *vanished.*

And then, as if held open by the strength of the light, the stainless steel doors hissed shut.

Livia's twisted shadow rose beside mine. She touched my shoulder, and even though I was filled with dread, I turned around.

Livia smiled. Her blackened tongue bulged from behind her blood-smeared teeth. The smells of dead flesh and thick, rancid blood engulfed me. Her dry eyes burned with a feverish light. She leaned closer, close enough to feel the dead-cold of her body and to smell her odor, like that of ripe, moldy cheese.

"It's your turn now," she said, "to dance the dance."

She stroked my cheek and neck with a cold blue finger, and then across my shoulder, down my arm to my waist. She pulled my hands from where they were fisted in my pockets and clasped them in her sticky claws.

"Hear it? Hear the music?" Livia swayed back and forth in front of me, the stench of rot and of old blood swirling between us. "When invited you must always dance with the dead." And then she laughed that familiar laugh.

The Tennessee Waltz began again.

My feet moved on their own, and together Livia and I swayed back and forth. We swirled in the eerie light, whirling around and around in enormous circles, inches from the jaws of the crouching shadowdogs, so close I felt their icy breath on my face and neck and heard their demon hearts pounding.

The music swelled louder as we waltzed in the icy vault while the silent, grinning hounds filled the corners. Their glowing, crescent-shaped eyes flickered as we whirled by—their open mouths heaving the smell of an open grave—the stench of a slaughterhouse floor.

Then, I was back in my apartment, alone in the center of my room standing fully-dressed and shivering in front of my full-length mirror, wet with sour sweat, my heart pounding, my nostrils filled with the smell of death. I stared at my reflection, into my own eyes, knowing it will never end, this dance of death.

It happens again and again. I torch the clothing in the bathtub, setting them ablaze with lighter fluid, the black smoke rolling out the bathroom window and into the alley, and then, handful by handful, I flush the foul ashes down the toilet. But I'll wear those clothes again tomorrow, or tonight, or the next day, or the next night. I'll wear them whenever Livia demands.

I wish it were a dream, but it's real. Livia pulls me back, transports me into the spirit world, *into hell,* where we sway together around and around in the icy twilight ballroom. We swirl to that never-ending waltz while Livia laughs. On and on and on, she laughs while we dance.

Shivering, we dance.

Gifts From The North Wind

Magdalena tugged on her father's sleeve. "Wait, Daddy," she said between painful hiccups.

"Maggie," her father said. "We have to bury Mouse before she goes bad."

"Please, Daddy. Wait 'til tomorrow?" She saw hesitation in her father's eyes, but then Mama pulled her away from the shallow grave under the big maple tree in their back yard.

"Maggie, let your father bury the cat. You'll understand someday."

"No!" Magdalena yelled. "Mouse!"

"Shhh!" her mother hushed. "The neighbors will hear you. They'll come out and see you crying, and they'll think, my goodness what a noisy little girl."

"Don't bury her yet, Daddy. She's ... coming back."

"Maggie!" Mama said. "Remember when the Haviston's dog got hit by a car, and how he ran home and dropped dread on their front porch? Mouse is dead, too, and she's not coming back."

It seemed sometimes to Magdalena that Mama enjoyed saying painful things.

"Please, Daddy?" And then Magdalena's throat closed up so tightly she couldn't talk anymore. She choked, and her tears blurred the sight of Mouse, wrapped in an old towel being placed into the grave. Daddy raked dirt back over the small bundle and packed it down with the back of the shovel.

Mama led Magdalena back into the house. "Would you like me to read you a story, Maggie?"

Without answering Magdalena ran to her bedroom and closed the door.

"Mouse," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut.

Later, Daddy opened her bedroom door and said, "Dinner is ready," but she shook her head without looking at him. A few seconds later he closed the door, and she heard him go back downstairs.

Magdalena tiptoed across the hall to the guest room and parted the curtains. Through the branches of the maple tree, Mouse's grave looked small and lonely. A few golden leaves had already fallen and decorated the brown dirt, but then a breeze came from the north and blew them away again.

The kitchen and dining room windows faced the back yard.

She knew she would have to wait until Mama was finished in the kitchen and Daddy and she were both in the living room.

Magdalena returned to her own room, opened her window, and pushed the curtains aside. Outside hung wind chimes that had been there for as long as she could remember. The breeze turned the pieces of glass this way and that, but not enough to make them chime.

In the distance the foothills slowly turned from green to blue as the sun inched lower. Behind the hills the mountains were hazy purple and the sky was turquoise. One small cloud hovered like a strip of cotton candy near the peak of the highest mountain. That was a good sign. Whenever she had 'the dream' that was how the sky and the mountains looked, with that small, pink cloud.

The first time Magdalena had the dream, it frightened her. In the dream she saw the Haviston's black lab, Dex. He stood at the top of the Haviston's front steps, and he seemed to be staring at her window with his soft brown eyes. She didn't know how she knew, she simply knew he was thinking: *Call me*. But she didn't call his name, and the next day Dex was hit by a car and killed, and Byran Haviston didn't come outside for a whole week. Byran was two years older than Magdalena and they had never said a word to each other, so she didn't even wave at him. But she felt sorry for him.

The dream grew more detailed every time. It always started out with a clear evening and the purple mountains, and the pink cloud and the wind chimes, but now there was Dex, staring toward her window.

Eventually she noticed other things. She looked up and down the street and saw other people standing on their porches, all of them looking toward her. They, too, were thinking: *Call me.*

Mrs. Starkberry lived next door to the Havistons. Magdalena didn't know how old she was, but Mrs. Starkberry had snow white hair and wore glasses and cardigan sweaters even in the summertime. She wore clumpy shoes and thick beige stockings, and she pushed a basket with wheels down the sidewalk to the corner store every few days.

One night when Magdalena dreamed she stood at her window listening to the wind chimes, she saw Mrs. Starkberry standing on her porch, staring the same way Dex stared. *Call me*, she was thinking, and Magdalena dreamed that she leaned out her window and yelled, *Mrs. Starkberry!* And the old woman waved and went up her steps and inside her house. Magdalena even heard the sound of Mrs. Starkberry's door closing, and the next thing she heard was Mama's voice.

"Maggie, why are you yelling?"

Magdalena opened her eyes and saw Mama in her bedroom doorway. "Mrs. Starkberry is sick," Magdalena said.

"What's wrong with Mrs. Starkberry?"

"I don't know."

"Then what are you talking about?" Mama asked.

"I dreamed—"

Mama interrupted with a shake of her head. "As soon as you're dressed, strip your bed and bring all your dirty laundry to the basement."

Mama never talked about dreams, and she didn't allow Magdalena to talk about them either.

A breeze lifted the window curtains, and Magdalena heard the slightest tinkling of glass chimes. Chills started at the base of her skull and traveled to her toes, and a second later she heard the familiar 'thump' of the kitchen dishwasher door and the sound of water running through the pipes in the walls. She hurried out of her room and then paused at the top of the stairs. She heard the television and the sound of Mama's voice. She tiptoed down the stairs and paused again. When Mama's eyes were turned away, she raced into the kitchen and then down the back stairs to the basement. Magdalena lifted the shovel from the hook and opened the basement door and ran, dragging the shovel across the grass. She hurried, because whenever she tried to do something on her own, Mama showed up to spoil it.

"No, Maggie. We already have a cat. Put that kitten back outside and let it go."

"No, Maggie. Nail polish is bad for you. Just file and buff your nails and they'll look nice enough."

"No, Maggie. Don't go outside without me. You might get lost."

No, Maggie. No, Maggie. No, Maggie.

Magdalena struggled with the long-handled shovel. She whined with frustration, threw it down, and then dropped to her knees and dug with her bare hands. Finally, she felt the towel and the soft, round cat shape. She lifted Mouse from the ground and then shoved the cold dirt back into the hole. She carried Mouse in her arms, dragging the shovel handle trapped against her ribs.

When she reached her room, she placed Mouse on her bed and unwrapped the damp towel. Clumps of dirt left smudges on the white bedspread, but she didn't care. She picked up Mouse and gently placed her on the windowsill. Above her head the wind chimes slowly turned on nylon strings.

Cling. Ting.

"Come on," Magdalena whispered. "Come on!"

And then a north wind moaned down the middle of the street, carrying leaves and litter, and it blew open the white picket gate out by the sidewalk, sending it slamming against the fence. The wind swirled across the front yard and up to her window. It blew her hair straight back from her face, and the chimes RANG. Magdalena shivered.

CLANG, BLING, BANG.

"Mouse!" Magdalena yelled. She felt her hair lifted higher by the wind.

She placed one hand on Mouse's head and one hand on her body. Her fingers tingled, and chills raced up and down her arms and down her neck, back, and legs. "Mouse," she said again, and the cat's ribcage heaved. She felt the cat's heart move beneath her palm and saw the tail twitch. "Mouse!"

The cat's eyes opened. It sneezed. Magdalena stroked the cat, leaned closer and heard the animal growl.

"What are you ... ?" Mama's eyes widened and her mouth hung open.

"I told you," Magdalena said. Mouse hissed and scrambled out the window and across the roof. "I told you Mouse would come back. I dreamed it."

Mama backed through the door and closed it.

* * *

The next morning Magdalena heard a siren, and a moment later she saw an emergency vehicle screech to a stop across the street. She saw a group of neighbors in Mrs. Starkberry's front yard and Mrs. Starkberry lying on the grass. Two men from the vehicle climbed out and ran, and a minute later she saw them put Mrs. Starkberry inside the vehicle and drive away with the lights flashing and the siren wailing.

Magdalena's father crossed the street, and when he returned he shook his head. "Poor old thing. Probably a stroke. Joe Benastosa said he thinks she's a goner."

"No," Magdalena said, and she saw Mama's jaw tighten. "Mrs. Starkberry will be okay."

"Honey." Daddy squatted beside her and took her hand in his. "Just because we were wrong about Mouse, that doesn't mean that Mrs. Starkberry will survive this. She's eighty-two years old, and she has lots of health problems."

"She's coming back," Magdelena insisted. "I dreamed it."

Daddy stood and patted her on the head. "We'll see."

Several times during the day Magdalena leaned out her window and called for Mouse, but Mouse didn't come. Late in the afternoon, she saw the cat in the upper branches of the neighbor's madrona tree, crouching and holding very still as if waiting for a bird to land nearby. Magdalena called again, but Mouse ignored her.

At dusk, Daddy opened her door and said, "Come downstairs, Maggie. Dinnertime."

Magdalena followed him downstairs, but she wasn't hungry.

"Did she eat anything for lunch today?" Daddy asked, frowning at Mama.

Mama nodded. "Soup and crackers."

Mama was lying, but Magdalena was glad because Daddy would insist she eat something, and afterwards Magdalena would throw up, just like always.

After dinner she helped Mama clear the table and load the dishwasher.

"Follow me," Mama said, wiggling her finger.

When Magdalena caught up to her mother, her lips quivered with fear.

"It's just two inches of water, Maggie. See?" Mama put her hand into the bathtub, and the water came up to her second knuckle. "And it's nice and

warm. Not cold like at the beach."

Magdalena tested the water with one foot. It reached her ankle.

"It's too deep," she said.

Mama pulled the plug and allowed water to drain for several seconds. Magdalena brought the other foot over the edge and then sat down in the tub. Her mother lathered a wash cloth with a bar of soap and bathed Magdalena in the one inch of water, and then she pulled the plug and used a small pail of clear water to rinse her. The soapy water gurgled down the drain.

"Now you smell sweet again," Mama said.

"I had that dream again last night," Magdalena said.

"Let's not talk about it."

"But my dreams 'happen'."

"Maggie, I don't want to hear about it." Mama very gently blotted the water from Magdalena's body, never rubbing hard, and then helped her into clean underwear and a nightgown. She led the way to Magdalena's room and tucked her in. Mama had laundered the bedspread, and the dirt smudges were gone. Everything smelled clean and soapy. "Don't forget to say your prayers," Mama said as she backed out the door.

Sometimes Magdalena heard Mama crying. Sometimes she saw tears in Mama's eyes, but Mama always wiped them away. Sometimes Mama prayed at the foot of the bed when Magdalena pretended to be asleep and she tried hard to hear what Mama prayed, but Mama whispered too softly or prayed inside her head, where only God could hear.

Again, Magdalena stood at the open window, gazing at the soft turquoise sky and at the purple mountains and at the hills turning from green to blue, and at the little cotton candy cloud. She looked south and saw empty sidewalks and empty porches. She looked north and saw a great funnel cloud. It spun slowly, and up and down; trapped in its great, whirling sides were people and animals and trees and cars and even houses. She saw Dex and Mouse and Mrs. Starkberry whirling around and around.

Something about the funnel cloud made Magdalena sad. One of the houses could have been their house, but she knew it was just a dream. And then she saw Dex jump down from the edge of the funnel cloud. He loped down the middle of the street, up the Haviston's front steps, and sat down. He looked tired and his head drooped.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you," Magdalena whispered. She felt the evening breeze on her face and heard the softest *ting* from the chimes. The setting sun ricocheted off the shapes of glass, off their beveled edges, sending miniature rainbows sliding across her windowsill and up against the white lace curtains and back again.

CHING, BING, CLANG.

"Dex," Magdalena said. She felt the familiar tingle in her toes. Dex rose to all fours.

"Dex," Magdalena said, louder, and he lifted his head and stared straight at her.

"Dex!" Magdalena yelled, and Dex jumped from the porch and ran through the gate and straight up the middle of the street heading north.

The next morning Magdalena heard her parents in the hall outside her room.

"Damnedest thing I've ever heard," Daddy said. "First Mouse and now Dex?"

"Shh," Mama whispered. "You'll wake Maggie."

"I think we should take Maggie to the doctor's office," Daddy said.

"She's fine. She's just sensitive."

"Fine? She won't eat, hasn't grown an inch in over a year, and she needs to go back to school. Home schooling has been okay, but she needs to interact with other children."

"I don't think she's ready," Mama said.

"She's ready." Daddy sounded angry. "I've made an appointment for her to see Dr. Prentis. School has already started, but Maggie is smart. She can catch up."

"I don't think—" Mama said, but Magdalena missed the rest because they went downstairs.

Magdalena remembered school, remembered the smell of polished floors and eraser dust, and big jars of paste and big sheets of paper and new boxes of crayons and the way new books 'cracked' when opened for the first time. Sometimes she peeked through the curtains to see other children walking by on their way to school. Sometimes she heard the school bell ring from four blocks away — but only when the north wind blew.

Mama cried, and this time she didn't stop for a long time. Magdalena heard the sounds through the wall. She crept on bare feet down the hall. She pushed the door to her parents' room open, one inch, and then she pressed one eye close to the opening. Mama knelt at the foot of their bed with both hands clinging to the bedpost as if she'd die if she let go.

"I'm sorry," Mama gasped. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and coughed. "Please ... I don't know if ... I can stop this."

Magdalena tiptoed back to her room. Mouse sat on the windowsill with a goldfinch in her teeth. Mouse shook her head violently, back and forth, and yellow feathers floated to the floor, and then Mouse dropped the bird and ran across the roof. Magdalena gathered up the lifeless bird and held it in her hands.

"Poor little bird."

There were punctures from Mouse's sharp fangs in the bird's breast and neck and smears of red on the bright yellow wings.

"Bad Mouse."

CHING, PLING, CLANG.

Magdalena placed the bird on the windowsill. "Goldfinch," she whispered. "Goldfinch, goldfinch!"

The bird trembled and let out a single, piercing chirp. One yellow wing stretched open wide, and then the other wing. Its tiny claws made a scratching noise on the painted wood, and then it flew out the window. It soared above the Haviston's roof, circled, and was gone.

While Daddy read the newspaper, Magdalena watched the evening news on television. She saw a boy carried from a lake by two men. They placed

him on the ground and breathed into his mouth. The boy sat up and people cheered.

Mama rushed across the room and flicked the television off.

"You shouldn't let Maggie watch things like that," she said.

Daddy folded the newspaper and frowned at Mama. "If anyone should see it, it's Maggie. After all, she nearly drowned at that same beach the summer before last. We should probably give her swimming lessons so it never happens again."

"The little boy is okay, Mama," Magdalena said. "He came back."

"No," Mama said. "They gave him mouth-to-mouth, and he started breathing again. He wasn't really gone."

"I don't remember almost drowning at that lake, Daddy," Magdalena said. "Were you there?"

"No," Daddy said. "But thank goodness your mother was."

"Come on, Maggie," Mama said. "It's time for bed." Mama took her hand, and together they climbed the stairs.

"Do you remember the lake, Mama?"

Mama nodded.

The next day Magdalena listened for the sound of the school bell, but the wind blew from the east. She searched the sky for the goldfinch but didn't see him. She called Mouse, but Mouse didn't come. A man came and put a FOR SALE sign up in Mrs. Starkberry's front yard. Mrs. Starkberry was living in an assisted living home for the elderly.

At bedtime Magdalena asked, "Will I go to a home for the elderly some day?" She stood in front of her door mirror and studied her reflection. "Will I have snow white hair and wear glasses and thick stockings? Will I push a basket with wheels to the store?"

Mama came and stood behind Magdalena and smiled. Her smile looked sad as she stroked Magdalena's hair. "Not my little Maggie."

Daddy came to the bedroom door. "Don't forget to give Maggie a bath in the morning. Her doctor's appointment is at nine o'clock." He winked at Magdalena and then continued down the hall, whistling.

"Just one inch of water, okay Mama?" Magdalena asked.

"Just one inch, sweety," Mama promised. "Nice and warm. Not cold like the lake."

Mama tucked Magdalena into bed and kissed her forehead three times, and then she went to the window and opened it as wide as it would go. The north wind blew the curtains inward like white lace wings as Mama reached outside and took the wind chimes down.

Ching, ting ...

And then Mama laid them on the foot of the bed and they stopped ringing.

"Why did you do that, Mama?" Magdalena felt as if she were floating, and the room looked darker than she ever remembered it being.

"Sleep, my little Maggie," Mama whispered. "I love you. Go to sleep."

Twisted Wishes, Twilight Dreams

Evie lay on the bed, naked and shivering, ears straining for the sound. She licked her lips, tasting the night air. First she'd smell him and then she'd taste him, in the back of her mouth, in her throat. Finally, she'd hear his sound—always at exactly 4:14 A.M., a rustling, slithering, scratching sound, a throaty, raspy breathing sound. Her bed would jostle at his touch, just a little, but she'd feel it—the way one feels her own heartbeat, her own sweat.

Evie shuddered. Her body raced with chills. There! The smell, like dead leaves smoldering, like fruit gone bad—and then, a slow gurgling inhale, a long raspy exhale and, what—scales scraping over the icy windowsill and down across the hardwood floor chilled by the November air? She'd never seen him, never had the nerve to look. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath. The footboard rattled, the bed shook.

"Ahhh." His sigh.

Evie felt his touch—across her right foot and inside her ankle and calf, inching between her knees. His touch burned.

"Uh!" Evie jumped awake. She pushed away the sweaty, twisted blankets and yanked her nightgown down from around her waist. She straightened the disheveled covers with trembling hands.

Evie's window shade glowed silver with moonlight. It shimmered like a motion picture screen, frosty and blank. The window was closed.

That dream again! That damn dream. So real, so terrible ... so *unfinished.* She slid out of bed and ran barefoot down the hall to her mother's room. Evie pushed the door open far enough to stick her head inside and whisper, "Mama?"

Her mother lay in her double bed, the blankets tucked tightly along the foot and sides. A wisp of chalky white hair stuck up from the hollow in the pillow. The faint sounds of ballroom music came from the radio on the bedside table. Evie backed out and eased the door shut, quiet as possible. She went into the kitchen and heated milk on the stove, drank it down, and then washed and dried the pot and the cup and put them away. She wiped the counter and hung the towel inside the cupboard door, perfectly straight and centered on the wooden rail, embroidered side out.

Then her eye caught sight of the empty slot in the knife block. One of

Mama's expensive matched set and impossible to replace. Evie frowned. The knife had been missing for over two years now—no point in searching for it anymore. She had looked everywhere, in every kitchen cupboard and drawer. It must have fallen into the garbage and was accidentally thrown out. No chance of ever finding it after all this time. Evie pictured her mother getting well, getting out of bed and coming into the kitchen, seeing one of her expensive, teak-handled knives missing, and she'd call Evie *careless*. The empty slot on the knife block gaped—an accusing, nagging daily reminder, almost as irritating as the chronic musty smell that permeated the small house. Evie emptied the garbage every evening, and yet the sour smell hung in the air. Old houses were like that. They held odors in their walls and floors the way smokers did with their skin, clothes, and hair. She hated this place. If she could just earn enough money she'd get them both out and into a condo with lots of big windows—a bright western exposure—everything white and new and clean.

Evie returned to her room, flicked on the light, and inspected every corner. She lifted the bedspread and checked under the bed. Even there the smell was strong. She brought the can of air freshener from her bathroom and sprayed the scent of lemons into the dark corners of her room. Then she crawled back into bed. The smell always seemed the strongest after that dream.

At 6:00 AM, Evie carried a breakfast tray into her mother, rattling the things on the tray to announce her arrival.

"Mama, I know you've heard me talk about the switchboard and all the telephone lines that never stop ringing at work, and about the people who are so impatient. If one person is put on hold, even for a moment, they're furious. I wish I could stay here with you, Mama, but you know how we need my paycheck."

Evie kissed her mother goodbye and caught the city bus at 7:35, riding it the twelve blocks to her telephone receptionist job downtown. The other passengers were as familiar as the graffiti scratched into the metal backs of the seats. The same people sat in the same seats, wore the same coats, carried the same shopping bags or briefcases, and held the same indifferent expressions. The same steamy windows faced gray dawn after gray dawn. Until lately. Until the dream began. That dream she now had every night.

But it was too real to be just a dream. Someone *did* come into her room

at night, scratching and sighing and touching. Sometimes after she woke up, his smoldering odor was so heavy and thick she expected to see it—a gray-green, yellow-streaked fog floating in the air above her bed, but when she turned on the light ... nothing.

Maybe, she thought, it was someone on the bus, someone who boarded before she did, someone who knew where she lived, someone she saw every day—sat near every morning and every night.

Evie studied the people around her on the bus, one by one. They were all reading or dozing, except for one elderly man who pressed his white bushy eyebrows against his darkened window and blinked at the black nothingness outside, his toothless mouth hanging open. Evie saw him every weekday morning. He used a walker to climb aboard, passing her in the second row of seats, sucking his gums and smacking his shriveled lips as he inched by. He smelled old and musty, but not like compost; not like rotting garbage.

At work, Evie sat at the switchboard behind the curved reception counter with the phone headset wrapped behind one ear. "Good morning—Treat, Barclay, and McKiever—how may I direct your call?" She repeated it over and over as the lines filled. "May I tell Mr. Barclay who is calling?" Or, "May I take a message for Mr. McKiever?" Or, "Sorry, Mr. Treat isn't in today." Or, "Can you hold please?" All the while she studied the people passing through the reception area. Her nose twitched with the cloying mix of perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, soaps, and body odors—but not *his* odor, not her night visitor. Her head throbbed from the smells and the noise, and she wanted to stand up, rip the telephone console from the counter, and throw it through the gleaming, sixth story picture window.

As usual, the day ended with the buzzing in her ears from all the calls and with the familiar headache from the pinch of the headset. Evie cleared the reception counter. She connected the switchboard to the automatic message machine, put on her coat, and descended the twelve flights of stairs to the lobby. She couldn't tolerate elevators. Elevators were too much like crowded coffins.

Evie exited the lobby to the corner bus stop. She pressed her shoulders against the cold stone building with the voices continuing to buzz inside her ears. People from her own office walked past, but none of them spoke to her. All her life it had been that way, people treating her like a piece of equip-

ment, taking her for granted, no more important than a desk or a chair.

She hated them. *Hated* them. Someday she'd surprise them all. Someday she'd leave a special surprise beneath a desk when she left for lunch—something to go BOOM. Evie smiled at the gritty sidewalk, picturing blood and chunks of bone and flesh flying through the air and landing with wet, meaty slaps on the pavement. Wouldn't they be shocked if they knew what she was thinking? She heard a giggle, but saw no one laughing.

One block from home Evie exited the bus at the little corner store. Always the same: chicken broth and soda crackers for her mother's touchy stomach; fly paper, disinfectant, and air fresheners for the house.

Evie carried the supplies home and into the kitchen. She heated the broth and divided it into two big mugs, tossing a wad of napkins on the tray along with spoons and a bowl of soda crackers. Then she tiptoed into her mother's room, rattling the tray.

"Dinner, Mama."

Evie placed the tray on the bedside table and helped her mother into a sitting position, propping her up with four big pillows. She settled herself on the edge of the bed, tucked several napkins beneath her mother's chin, and spooned broth between the dry lips.

"Oops, here, I'll get that." Evie dabbed at the escaping drool. "There's an opening in the word processing department and I'm going to apply for it, Mama. I'm a good typist and I'm sick of phones!" Evie stuffed more napkins beneath her mother's damp chin. "The pay is a lot better and maybe I could just work part-time—and spend more time here with you. I know you're lonely, Mama. Don't worry, I'll never leave you or put you in one of those convalescent homes.

"That man, Jerry? He was nice to me. He told me I was pretty. No one ever told me I was pretty before. He bought me flowers and took me to dinner and ... oh Mama ... I'll never forget my promise to you. He almost made me forget my promise. But he's gone now. He said terrible things when he left. Terrible things. Did I ever tell you what he said? He said that I was sick—that I needed help. And he blamed you! He said you'll drive away every man who tried to come into my life. What a terrible man. Such an awful man. I'm glad he's gone. I'll never leave you, Mama. Never."

After dinner Evie emptied the garbage and cleaned the kitchen, scrub-

bing cupboards, counter, and floor with the disinfectant. She hung new fly paper. She washed a load of laundry with scalding water and bleach and then polished the remaining kitchen knives until they gleamed. Before turning out the lights, Evie tiptoed down the hall. Her mother's cottony hair stuck up in wisps above the dent in the pillow, and the radio, turned down low, hummed a big band classic.

In her own room, Evie lifted the shade on her window and twisted the latch with all her strength. LOCKED. She drew the shade and slipped into bed, holding the covers up until she had untwisted her nightgown and had pulled it straight and smooth down around her ankles. She straightened the blankets and pulled them clear to her chin and folded the sheet down in a tidy cuff. Then she turned off the light. For a moment she listened to the silence of the house, the same house where she had lived all of her thirty-six years—and then she heard the familiar voices—her inner ears were scarred with the sounds of phone voices. She jammed pillows against her ears and eventually fell asleep.

"Ahhh."

Evie opened her eyes and sat up, naked and shivering. Her breath fogged in the green glow of the digital clock. There was the smell of burning leaves and that familiar scratching sound. She heard the window slide open, the shade rattle, and the sound of something slithering and dropping with a thump on the floor below.

Evie swallowed. Her mouth and throat were dry, and her voice cracked. "Who are you? What do you want?"

A black form rose up at the foot of the bed, a writhing silhouette against the frosty window shade. It pressed against the footboard, and the bed groaned from the weight. The shadow leaned closer, and Evie's flesh tingled. Chills raced up and down her body, muscles fluttering in her abdomen. She felt invisible eyes burning paths on her bare skin.

"Your body. Only once. I'll grant you one wish."

" ... grant a wish?"

"Anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"A different life? I can be anyone I want, live anywhere. Rich? Famous?"

"Anything." A shadowy tendril slid over the footboard to touch her toes, winding slick and warm around and between.

Evie shuddered. "I can be the most beautiful woman in the world?"

"Anything," he growled. The tendril slithered around her ankle and wound up her calf, behind her knee. "You can live forever—never grow old."

Evie remembered her mother in the room down the hall. "My mother ... up and out of bed, walking and talking like before she got sick?"

"Anything! Choose!" The tentacle wound upward along her inner thigh and Evie gasped. This was only a dream! She could be selfish in a dream. She could be the richest woman, the most beautiful. She could live forever, or her mother could be well again. She had only to choose.

The black silhouette loomed even taller, scales scraping the footboard. "Choose! Choose!"

"My mother! Mama!"

Evie fell back on her pillows and squeezed her eyes closed. Any second now she'd wake up and he'd be gone. She'd see the clock blinking 4:14 A.M.—*any second now.*

The bed shook, and the night visitor's enormous shadow blocked the glowing window shade. Scorching hands slid across her body, stroking her arms and legs, gliding beneath her, circling her throat. Long fingers wound through her hair, crisscrossed beneath her until she was wrapped in ropes of icy-hot fingers. Her heart pounded in her throat and ears. This felt too real to be a dream. Too real!

A tendril tickled the corner of her mouth and she pressed her lips tighter together, but it dug and twisted its way inside. Evie tried to spit, but the tendril coiled around her tongue. She gagged.

No, no, no. I can't even scream, and Mama couldn't help me anyway. She can't get out of bed without my help.

The night visitor whispered her name. "Evie." He knelt between her knees.

No! No! Evie tossed her head back and forth, tangled in dozens of fingers. *I can't do this! I promised Mama I wouldn't. Not ever! I promised! I promised!*

And then, winding, twisting, it filled her with an aching, crawling warmth and she heard a low, desperate moan. She felt a rumbling sigh roll up from her own throat, and a burning weight descended on her, pressing her into the

mattress. Then he howled and arched above her, moonlight glistening off ebony-green scales. White lights flashed inside her eyes, and Evie gasped at the heat consuming her from the inside.

His burning weight lifted. The tentacles withdrew, slithering from beneath her, unwinding from around her legs. The creature slid from the bed, up and over the footboard and across the floor, scales clicking—across the windowsill and out into the icy, moonlit night. The window closed. The green digital clock numbers blinked, 4:22 A.M.

Evie grabbed her nightgown from the floor and pulled it over her head, yanking it down over her legs to her ankles. *I didn't really break my promise. He tricked me. Besides, it was only a dream.* She drew the covers up to her chin and squeezed her eyes closed. The rest of the promise she would keep. She'd never leave Mama. Never. Never.

The alarm sounded at 6:00 A.M. Already Evie heard the chronic buzz of voices in her head—the never-ending voices and the smell of rotting compost. That moldy, dead leaf smell.

Mama stood in her bedroom doorway, rattled a breakfast tray with a wreath of black flies circling her head and buzzing in and out of her empty eye sockets.

"Sleep well, dear?" Mama came into the room, powdery gray flesh hanging in strips from gray bone, cottony hair trailing from her moldy skull, and with her came the rotten-sweet smell. Through the slashed front of her stained nightgown, shriveled lungs, liver, and stomach rattled like dried fruit inside her ribcage—and her heart dangled like a desiccated pear around the corroded blade of the missing kitchen knife.

A City in Italy

"This morning my list of goals looked like I had scribbled them in my sleep."

Venice felt as if only her head and heels touched the sofa. Her back arched away from the cushions. *Don't want to be here.* She took a deep breath and stroked the leather with her fingertips, trying to relax.

"Well, you have been under some stress." Dr. Jones's pen scratched and Venice glanced at him from the corner of her eye. What did he write about her? Words like *unstable*, or *a danger to herself and others?*

If he knew ... if she told him everything ... what would he write then?

"So, what did you add to your list? What kind of new goal have you set for yourself?" Dr. Jones asked.

"To wash my hair more often. I washed it this morning."

"It looks very nice," he said.

"It takes a long time to dry."

"I suppose short hair dries faster."

"Should I cut my hair?"

"Only if you want to. What else did you add to your list?"

"To balance my checkbook all by myself. It's embarrassing to have my neighbor always help me."

Scribble, scribble. "Mmmm. Anything else?"

"I think I should write a letter to Helen. I started one, but I'll have to rewrite it. She's so critical, you know. If I spell anything wrong or use poor grammar, she circles my mistakes with red pen. Usually, she crumples my notes up and throws them in the garbage and doesn't ever do anything I ask her to do."

"What would you ask her to do? I mean, it's your apartment, right? She's just the ... uh ... guest?"

"Yes, but she does whatever she wants while I'm gone. Last time she rearranged the furniture in the living room and the guest room. Did I mention that? Yes I did, didn't I? Don't you think she should have asked me first?"

"Will you tell Helen that in your letter?"

"Yes, and I want her to stop leaving the shower walls wet. The tile and grout get moldy if it isn't wiped down with a towel."

Scribble, scribble. "She actually showers?"

"Of course she showers. And I'll ask her to not leave the mayonnaise out. Mayonnaise has eggs in it. You can get botulism or salmonella or something from it. And I can't keep buying new jaws of mayonnaise."

"Eats. Mmm. Are you concerned Helen might poison you, Venice?"

"Of course not. I'd have to *eat* the mayonnaise left sitting on the counter, and that would be very stupid of me."

"Try to relax, Venice. You look extremely rigid right now, physically."

Venice concentrated on relaxing again, on stroking the soft leather.

"Why do you allow Helen to visit if she does things you dislike?"

"She has always done things I dislike, but she is my sister, after all."

Venice felt frustration welling up inside. Explain, explain, explain. She wearied of explaining everything to Dr. Jones. Helen was unexplainable. Why couldn't Dr. Jones just tell her what to say to Helen in the letter? He had an educated, tactful way of saying things. *Helen should be the one here, explaining everything instead of me*, Venice thought. *I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here!*

But Venice knew that if she didn't keep the appointments, she'd have to go back to the hospital.

Music floated from the speaker in the corner of the room signaling the session was over.

"Well done, Venice," Dr. Jones said. "I'm glad you finally felt like talking this time. Next time, would you share your letter to Helen with me?"

"If it's finished."

"See you Thursday, then."

On her way home Venice picked up a half gallon of skim milk, a loaf of oat bread, whole Italian coffee beans, and a six-ounce jar of mayonnaise.

The mail was neatly piled inside box number 3C. Venice approved of the new mail carrier. The old carrier had deposited the mail with the care and skill of a chimpanzee—upside down, sideways, or even folded. Sometimes the neighbor's mail had been mixed in with Venice's, and sometimes her mail had been left in the neighbor's box. Finally, the neighbor had complained to the Post Office and a new carrier had been assigned, and since then things had been better.

Venice placed the mail on the corner of her desk and then put the milk, bread, coffee, and mayonnaise into the refrigerator. She hung her coat in the

hall closet and changed clothes in her bedroom. She didn't want Helen wearing her silk suit, so she hid it in the back of the closet.

Her old sweats were stretched and faded, but she always wore them to clean house. They already had stains and frayed cuffs, so she didn't have to worry about accidentally splashing bleach on them or staining them or tearing them. And she had another pair of aging sweats waiting in the wings when these fell apart. "Sometimes," she said aloud, "things are at their most interesting when they're falling apart." One of the stains looked like a crow, she decided, the profile of a crow with its beak parted and its wings spread as if it were ready to fly away.

She ate a piece of toast, a cup of tomato soup, and a Fuji apple cut into wedges. Then she stripped the sheets from both her bed and the guest room and remade them with clean linen. She vacuumed the entire apartment, dusted the furniture, and finger-combed the fringe on the Karistan entry rug, perfectly aligning each golden tuft.

The mail consisted of two bills and two advertisements. She threw the advertisements into the waste basket. Her telephone bill was always the same since she never made any long distance calls. Whom would she call? Her cousin Alice in Phoenix? If she called and asked for Alice, the person answering would say, "Who? Oh, you mean Sister. Just a minute."

Sister? What kind of a nickname was that? Her name was Alice, for petesake!

Venice's other cousin, Anne, lived in San Diego in a 'home' and hadn't spoken one word in over seven years. Anne wouldn't talk if Venice phoned. She might not even listen. She might wander off and leave the receiver dangling.

Venice studied the neat rows of numbers her neighbor had written in her checkbook the previous week. The process seemed simple enough. Her income was automatically deposited every two weeks by the family lawyer. Twenty-two thousand, five hundred forty-five dollars remained in the account. She never spent it all, so the balance kept increasing. Tomorrow, another automatic deposit. Every week Venice phoned the auto-recording to get her balance—to make sure her money was really there. A recording never asked why she was calling. She didn't need to explain anything to a recording.

The phone bill was always twenty-six dollars and wasn't due for two more weeks, but Venice picked up a ballpoint pen and wrote the check num-

ber in the first column, and then her heart pounded so hard she felt lightheaded. Was that correct? Yes, that was check number 3489, directly below 3488. Maybe she should write in pencil? That way, if she did it wrong the neighbor could erase it and rewrite it correctly. The checks needed to be written in blue or black ink to be legal—she remembered the neighbor saying that, but her hand shook so badly Venice laid the pencil down. She felt her face burn and a prickly sweat break out between her breasts. The last time she wrote a check Helen found it and tore it into pieces. Did the act of writing checks *bring* Helen? That sounded crazy, yet Helen always seemed to know when Venice attempted doing anything on her own. Helen always arrived in time to disrupt things.

Helen had always been the one to keep a checkbook straight and had always been good at math and accounting. Venice felt herself suddenly grow cold. Chills replaced the sweat, and she wondered *where exactly is Helen, right now?*

Venice studied the name on the account. Venice Studacher. Her name, not Helen's. Helen's name would never be on the checks.

What would Dr. Jones say if he knew the whole story about the car wreck? The truth about the accident. There was probably a clinical name for her relationship with Helen.

Two hours later, after erasing and rewriting the checkbook entries several times, both the checkbook and the checks were written in blue ink, in the correct columns, on the correct lines, and the balances had been carefully calculated five times. Venice placed the checks into the envelopes, sealed them, added postage, and placed them on the corner of her desk.

To celebrate her achievement Venice carried a cup of chamomile tea doctored with a teaspoon of fireweed honey into the bathroom. She dropped her sweats and underwear into the hamper while the bathtub filled, and then she pulled on a shower cap. After bathing Venice hung her towel perfectly straight across the rack. Unlike Helen who always left her damp towel wadded on the floor.

"You still refer to your father as 'Daddy'." The way Dr. Jones said it made Venice regret mentioning it. Hearing the scratch of his pen in the note-

book made her turn her face toward the peach-colored wall.

"I can't imagine when I would have started calling him anything else. If he were alive today, I'd still call him Daddy."

"Did your father ever spank you?"

Venice turned back around at that question and with narrowed eyes studied Dr. Jones at his desk, holding his fat, maroon, Mont Blanc pen, scratch-scratch-scratching in his notebook. It seemed like the smaller the man, the bigger the desk and the fatter the pen.

"Mother wouldn't let him spank us."

"Your mother was the disciplinarian?"

"Mother picked switches from the hazelnut bush outside to whip our legs. They stung and made red welts but left no permanent marks."

"Tell me about your neighbor. The one who helps balance your checkbook."

"Mike Bremer. He lives one floor down in B2. I met him when I was moving in last year. He came out and helped me move some of the bigger items from the truck into my apartment. The sofa and armchair—stuff like that."

"What did you first notice about him?"

"Physically?"

"The first thing, whatever it was."

"His voice. He came up behind me and said, 'Need some help?'"

"What was noticeable about his voice?"

"That it came from behind. He has an ordinary voice. He's ordinary looking."

"Describe him."

"He's about five-ten and just slightly heavy. He might have been into sports or weight lifting at one time because he has that, you know, muscle-gone-soft look. He wears undershirts, not t-shirts but the other kind, the kind with straps that show through white dress shirts."

Venice paused, but Dr. Jones was waiting for more, the way he always did.

"Thick, dark blond hair. Sort of wavy. Eyes ... I can't remember. He has a five o'clock shadow by 3 PM. I remember a girl in school with the same coloring. She had an unusually dark complexion for a blond. She had a French

name but I can't remember it." Venice felt like she was rambling senselessly. What was the point in this?

When Dr. Jones said nothing at times like this, it meant he was waiting for her to continue, to slip up and say something that he could pounce on. He always out-waited her because she hated the silences. Saying *anything* was better than the silence.

"Mike has nice hands. He takes good care of his nails, and he smells like soap. No colognes or aftershaves."

"Do you find him attractive, Venice?"

Venice hesitated. "I appreciate his help with my checkbook, and I'm glad I don't have to clean up after he's been in my apartment."

"Where has he been, other than your living room?"

"My bathroom. He puts the lid down afterward. We were in my kitchen once. We made tea. He drinks it plain, no milk or sugar, so there was only the mug to wash up, no spoon even. He teaches at the Art Institute I think. That's probably the reason he has nice hands."

"How old is he?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever been in his apartment?"

"No."

"Have you ever touched?"

"Touched?" Venice thought back. "We shook hands when we introduced ourselves, and our hands might have touched when we exchanged mail, and ... he patted me on the shoulder when I almost balanced my checkbook."

"How did you feel when he touched you?"

"I was feeling pretty good about the checkbook. I don't remember feeling anything about touching. I had forgotten about it until you asked."

Dr. Jones took a deep breath and rubbed his chin. He glanced in her direction and then away, as if disappointed by a lab mouse that had failed to find its way through a maze.

Venice discovered a wet towel on the bathroom floor. In the kitchen there were bread crumbs on the cutting board, a knife with jam smears, and an open jar of peanut butter on the counter. The empty jam jar was in the

bottom of the kitchen sink, filled with soap and cold water.

Helen had arrived a day early.

There was a note on the desk, written in Helen's loose, loopy penmanship:

Need more jam.

Venice's stomach cramped. Nevertheless, she ate a slice of cantaloupe, downed a cup of tea, and then bathed, dressed, and left for the library with her lunch of vanilla yogurt, orange sections, and a bottle of spring water. She caught the city bus at the corner and entered the real world of real people doing real things. Whenever she could, she went to the back of the bus and took a corner seat, and from there she studied normal people on the bus and on the sidewalks, how they dressed, how they walked, if they smiled or scowled, if they were alone or were with someone else. If they looked wealthy or poor. When she exited, she practiced looking the way those people looked and the way they walked. Head up, arms swinging free. *Normal.*

Later in the day the return trip was the same, except then there were mothers with children or nannies pushing strollers, old couples or old singles. The sidewalk was in the shade instead of in sunlight. Venice got off the bus and walked the half block to her apartment, stopping to bring in the mail.

On the desk, another note in Helen's pen:

Tomorrow—night shift 9 PM to 6 AM.

Helen had a job? Who would hire *her*?

The last time Venice had seen her sister, Helen had been wearing trashy clothes, her stomach exposed in low-rider jeans and cropped top, see-through, white gauze blouse, blood red bra—and a diamond navel ring.

"Did you finish your letter to Helen?" Dr. Jones asked.

"No, I just left a note asking her to please start putting the mayonnaise away."

"Has she changed since the last time you saw her?"

"Don't know. All I see are her notes. When I get home she's always gone."

"Doesn't that seem strange to you, Venice?"

"There doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it."

"Have you left a note for Helen, saying you want to talk to her in person?"

"No, but I guess I could."

"Would you like for me to talk to Helen?"

Venice was surprised by that. She sat up and turned to face Dr. Jones. "Do you want to talk to Helen?" she asked.

"Yes. Would she come with you next time?"

"I'll ask her."

No one had asked to meet Helen before. Not for years and years.

The kitchen was clean when Venice arrived home, and the mail had already been brought in and left on the desk. How, she wondered, had Helen opened the mailbox without the key? Then she spotted the key beside the pile of mail. Helen must have taken it out of her purse. But when?

The mail was all junk so Venice dropped it into the waste basket and hung her coat in the closet. She knelt and finger-combed the entryway rug fringe before entering the bedroom. The light bulb in her bedroom closet had burned out, and she changed clothes in the semi-darkness. The darkness obscured her image in the full-length mirror. She lacked detail and color and looked more like a shadow than a real person.

The light in the bathroom wasn't much better. Venice strained to see the wattage. Forty. No wonder. Helen must have changed it. Venice added hundred-watt bulbs to the grocery list and then picked up the laundry hamper and carried it down three flights of stairs to the basement. One of the three washing machines was churning and sloshing away with a load of dark colors. The load looked like blue jeans, and that's what her neighbor, Mike Bremer, wore when he was home. One of the dryers was tossing what appeared to be a load of sheets and towels.

Venice hoped she could get her laundry going and get back upstairs before Mike returned. She appreciated his help with her checkbook, but she didn't want to make conversation today. She jammed quarters into the machine and punched the starter. The machine growled alive.

"Hi there."

"Oh, Mike. You startled me."

"You look hot today."

"I do? Because my hands have been cold all day."

"No, I mean ... never mind. Why didn't you call yesterday? We were supposed to balance your checkbook, remember?"

"We were?"

"Remember, we wrote it on your calendar?"

"I'll check my calendar when I get back upstairs."

"Do you want to come over to my place this time?

"I already balanced my checkbook this week. I think I've got the hang of it now. Thanks."

Venice picked up the empty hamper and headed for the stairs.

"Have I done something wrong, Venice?"

She turned around on the bottom step. "Of course not. Why?"

Mike shook his head. "Well, after yesterday, I thought we had taken our relationship way beyond ... you know, the next level."

"Yesterday?" She hadn't seen Mike yesterday. "Relationship?" She took another step up the stairs and paused again. She waited but Mike didn't answer.

He seemed to be studying his own feet and shaking his head. Then he shrugged and began pulling dry sheets and towels from the dryer. "Okay, fine," he said.

Venice hurried to her apartment and locked the door.

"You still haven't seen Helen?" Dr. Jones asked. "Still just leaving each other notes?"

"She leaves enough *messes* for me to know she's been there."

"When was the last time you touched Helen?"

Venice pondered that. At least a full minute went by before she finally said, "Can't remember the last time."

"Venice, how can you be certain that Helen is real?"

"What do you mean?"

"I simply mean, what if she isn't real?"

"Like my hand would go right through her? That's silly. Why are you always asking me about touching? You asked that about Mike Bremer, too.

His number is 555-1223. Call him. You'll hear a real person answer the phone."

"Don't get upset, Venice. I just want you to consider something. According to the things you've told me this past year, you haven't actually seen Helen, nor have you spoken directly to her, and you can't remember the last time you touched her. Did you ask her to come with you today? To meet me?"

"I forgot."

"Here," Dr. Jones said. He peeled a piece of cream white paper from a pad and uncapped his Mont Blanc pen. He scribbled on the paper and then slid it to the far side of his desk. "Give this to Helen. Leave it for her, right where you leave your other notes. All right?"

Venice picked up his note. *Helen, please join Venice for her next appointment, Tuesday, February 3, ten o'clock AM. If you cannot, please call me at 555-4890. Dr. Jones.*

"You think Helen is imaginary?" Venice asked. "But you've seen my records, including my birth certificate. It says I'm the younger of twin girls."

"Prove me wrong," he said. "If Helen exists, bring her with you next time."

As Venice reached the second landing, Mike Bremer opened his door. "What kind of game are you playing anyway?" he asked.

"Game?" Venice said. "What are you talking about?"

"This damned game you seem to be so good at. First, you were all helpless and innocent and couldn't even balance your own checkbook—flinching like a virgin if I touched your hand. Next, you're rubbing up against me in the hall, licking my neck and sticking your hand down my jeans—"

"I what?"

"And then, hell, right back to being the iceberg and acting like we never saw each other naked—"

"... naked?"

"Hey, lady ... just call me when you get horny again, okay?" He slammed his door.

Inside her apartment, Venice dropped to her knees and arranged the fringe on the rug with trembling hands, but no matter how she tried, the fringe wouldn't straighten. The tufts seemed to slide right through her fingers.

The only light in the entire apartment that functioned was the small desk lamp. The bills had all been paid, the checkbook updated and balanced, and the envelopes stamped. Helen was intruding, sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. Venice laid Dr. Jones's note on the desk and backed away.

Helen was a tramp and Mike thought it was her! Helen was the same old Helen. She would never change.

Venice changed clothes in the dark closet again. She took a quick bath in the dusky afternoon light, put on her pajamas, and crawled into bed without eating. When she awoke it was twilight—but was it almost morning or almost night? Venice had no sense of how much time had passed. She never dreamed anymore. When Dr. Jones asked about her dreams, she made one up. He used to take notes of her dreams, but not anymore. Instead, he propped his chin on his palm and observed her. She suspected he knew her dreams were lies.

Venice stood at the counter for a full minute while the cashier ignored her.

"Excuse me," she finally said. "May I pay for these light bulbs please?"

The cashier took a step back. "I didn't see you! Yes, certainly."

Venice paid for the hundred-watt light bulbs and carried them home in the plastic sack with red letters, HARDLY'S HARDWARE. Were light bulbs considered hardware? She replaced the dim, forty-watt bulb in the bathroom, the burned-out bulb in the closet, and both lamps in the living room. She stored the extra pack in the kitchen pantry and then noticed that her efforts had made little difference. She still couldn't see into the corners of the rooms. Shadows darkened everything except for small circles directly around the lamps. In her closet she remained a shadow figure in the mirror, and in the bathroom she couldn't get close enough to the mirror to see more than a pale oval with eyes set so deep they were black hollows.

Nearly everything she picked up, she first dropped and had to pick up again. Her birthstone ring slipped from her finger one day and fell through a sewer grate. She stared down through the grate at the light-reflecting circles on the surface of that water. Eventually the water calmed, reflecting her colorless silhouette on its undulating surface.

On the sidewalk it was as if other pedestrians couldn't see her until they bumped into her. One day on the bus she spoke up barely in time.

"Hey," she said. "This seat is taken."

The man halted in mid-squat, turned around, blinked, and then shook his head. "Sorry. Didn't see you."

Helen, Venice wrote. *Dr. Jones wants to see us both. Did you get his note?*

The next morning she found Helen's reply: *Who wrote this?*

I did. Venice.

Sometime later that day, Helen had scribbled, *Go away.*

It's very important. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Be there. Please!

Venice couldn't hold the pen any longer, and it rolled across the desk and fell to the floor.

Dr. Jones's receptionist ignored her the same way the cashier had at the hardware store. Finally, Venice leaned forward over the desk.

"Venice Studacher. I have a ten o'clock appointment."

Venice waited and then repeated herself, louder. The receptionist seemed to look straight through her for a second and then appeared startled.

"You're late, Miss Studacher. Dr. Jones took his ten-thirty ahead of you."

The time seemed to crawl, but finally the receptionist motioned for Venice to enter Dr. Jones's office. As always, she took off her coat and draped it over the back of a chair and placed her handbag on the chair cushion. She slipped her shoes off and stretched out on the sofa.

"Are you feeling all right, Venice?" Dr. Jones asked. "You look tired."

"I sleep a lot and yet I'm always tired. And I'm losing things—my watch, my birthstone ring. They slipped right off my wrist and finger."

"Have you seen a medical doctor?"

"No."

"You might consider it. Have you seen Helen?"

"No."

"Did you ask her to come here today?"

"Yes. I think she might come."

"Will I be able to see her, Venice?"

Venice sat up. "Of course," she said. "Just like you can see me."

"How is that possible? Your sister has been dead for fourteen years. You do realize that, don't you?"

Venice twisted her hands together in her lap and then noticed she couldn't see her feet. Her legs were haze below the knees.

"I know that when she's around she interferes. She ruins my life. I lose my job, my apartment, and any friends I might have made. I have to move and start all over again."

"You were driving the car the day that Helen died. You feel responsible."

Venice strained to see Dr. Jones. He appeared to be further away, and he seemed to be squinting, as if he couldn't see her clearly either.

"Helen is a slut and a tramp. She seduced my neighbor, Mike Bremer, but he thinks it was me."

"It was you, Venice. Helen is dead. She can't seduce anyone. You deny yourself a normal life because of the guilt."

A gray film divided the room, and Dr. Jones was a shadow behind that film. Venice tried to wipe it away, but her arms had faded to nothing past the elbows. She heard his voice as if from a distance, "Venice, admitting that Helen is dead will help you toward recovery."

Venice's handbag dropped from the chair beside her. It landed upside down on the carpet, and a pair of low-rise jeans took its place. A hand rested on the arm of the chair. The long fingernails were painted blood red, and on every finger was at least one ornate silver ring. Then Venice saw a white gauze shirt and a red bra through the gauze, and finally a woman's head and shoulders. Helen's wavy, streaked-blond hair was gathered into a ponytail with loose ringlets framing her face.

"I'm staying this time," Helen whispered. "And you're leaving, little sister."

Dr. Jones's desk lamp went out, and the tall, narrow window provided the only light. Venice concentrated on that rectangle of gray light, holding to it with every bit of self she had left. There was life in light.

"Bulb went out," Dr. Jones announced. "I'll change it. Just a moment." He opened a drawer and fumbled with a corrugated paper carton.

Helen rose and approached his desk. "Need any help?" she asked.

Dr. Jones reached for the lamp and the darkened bulb, but his hand halted in mid-air.

"Pardon?" he said. His mouth hung open. His eyes bugged. "Odd," he said, swallowing with obvious effort. "I thought you were wearing brown. I'm certain you were wearing a brown pantsuit a moment ago," he said.

"I don't own anything *brown*."

"Venice?" he said. "Venice?"

"Venice is just a city in Italy," Helen said, and she took the new light bulb from his hand and screwed it into the lamp. "Helen launched a thousand ships."

The room brightened some, but the amount of light was not nearly enough to hold Venice. She felt weightless, as if she were floating. It was warm near the ceiling, and from there she saw blue sky through the window and white clouds, and the tops of buildings and soft green trees shimmering in the breeze, and people on the sidewalks, and cars and buses on the streets. The ceiling couldn't hold her anymore, and she passed through it and into the sunlight. Once there, she thinned and spread out, clear to the curve of the earth.

It's as I always suspected, Venice thought. *Things are the most interesting when they're falling apart.*

Jessica Fishbone

I don't like storms. Storms like this bring back bad memories. I don't like storms.

It's scary to lie in bed alone at night when a storm is howling around the house. I remember as a child, standing in a doorway crying, afraid of the storm outside, then running over to crawl into bed with my sister. For some reason I felt safer in her bed. But she wouldn't stay with me. She went to sleep in another room. That was such a long time ago. Tomorrow is my seventieth birthday.

It must be around midnight, so I give up trying to sleep, put on my robe and slippers, and go downstairs. There are hot coals in the old pot-bellied stove in the kitchen. I shove a dry piece of madrona through the little door, and soon a flicker of flame caresses the log's smooth amber skin. As I fill the tea kettle and set it on the electric range, the power goes out with a *snap*. That used to terrify me as a kid, to have the lights go out all of a sudden. Now I'm grown up and gray-haired, but I still jump. I don't like the way the dark closes in around me so fast, and then there are the sounds of appliances dying. The refrigerator thumps like a dog's skull being clubbed with a bat. Down in the cellar the furnace screams like a cat having its throat cut. At least that's what it sounds like to me.

My house is old, built by my grandfather when he was a young man. From what I was told by my father, who was a boy helping build the place, they used only materials from the surrounding twelve acres. The foundation is made of stones from the stream, every one of them hauled up in a wheelbarrow. Four hundred trips, my dad used to say. All the wood, including the hand-split cedar shakes for the original roof, were from the trees that grew at the north corner of the property. Whenever I walk into those woods, I stop beside an old crumbly stump and picture my grandfather and Dad cutting, sawing, and hitching logs to a horse and wagon. The forest has grown back now and the trees are very tall.

Grandpa and Dad are both dead, as are Grandma, Mother, and my twin, Amanda—all of them buried in the family plot at the crest of the hill. Now, as during every winter when the hawthorn tree is bare, their gravestones are visible from my bedroom window. I'm alone here.

There is no dial tone, so the phone lines must be down. I have hardly ever called anyone. Last month the phone rang, but I didn't answer it. It was probably a wrong number anyway. I don't know anyone, but I like the idea that I can call someone if I ever want to.

I have a transistor radio that I found alongside the road on one of my trips into town for supplies and to pay bills. I pay all my bills six months in advance—that way creditors won't clutter up my P.O. Box with monthly statements. I don't subscribe to any magazines or newspapers. I don't correspond with anyone either, so there really isn't much reason to traipse the two miles into town more than every three months. I go very early or just after dark because I don't like the way people stare.

Occasionally I hear about some gadget on the radio and send away for it. I sent away for an apple peeler-corer. It peels and cores an apple in about six seconds with a few easy turns of the handle. One can peel and core a dozen apples in a minute and a half, which comes in handy when you're making applesauce. Every autumn I put up twenty-four quarts of applesauce from apples in my orchard, and I store them down in my cellar where it's 50° F year-round, even in the hottest summer. My grandmother taught me how to put up canned goods when I was ten years old. By then Mom wasn't around. Grandma told me that one stormy summer night Mom took a walk into the forest, ate rat poison, and died. Dad found her beside the creek. I used to ask him again and again, but he would never tell me about it. He'd say, "I don't want to think about that."

Now that I'm grown and have an idea of the pain life can bring, I defend her decision to take her own life. But I don't understand why she took my twin sister with her. Amanda and I were six years old at the time. Why Amanda? Did Amanda swallow the poison without a struggle? Why did they leave me home? Grandma said Amanda was a sweet little girl, gentle and cheerful. It's a terrible mystery, and I think Grandma always regretted telling me about Mother and the poison.

As far back as I can remember, there has always been a big mirror above the fireplace in the living room. With eight candles and a hurricane lamp on the mantel, the room is surprisingly bright. I can read by that light. There's a stack of *National Geographic* magazines on the floor beside me. Some of them date back to 1949. I found them last summer when I decided to explore the

attic. There are trunks and boxes and a couple of armoires full of clothes stored up there, antique armoires, all sturdy and free of scratches. I could probably get a good price for them if I hauled them into town, but I never will of course. Even the clothes are in good condition. The moths haven't eaten a single hole, nor have the mice done any damage, which is odd really. I have to keep mouse traps baited in the kitchen or they'll eat up everything. On occasion I'll pull a sweater or a pair of pants out of my own bedroom closet and discover that moths have chewed them to shreds. I'm down to wearing mismatched things, even some of my father's old clothes, but it doesn't matter. I don't see anyone and no one sees me.

It's about 2:00 A.M. now. I stick another log into the potbellied stove. The wind has let up a bit, but the windows rattle and it's very dark. It might be days before the power company repairs the lines this far out.

I don't remember Amanda very much, nor my mother, although I remember Mom was pretty, slim and blonde. There are old photographs in my grandparents' room, mostly of my parents. A few are of Amanda and me together; only one is of me alone. In that picture I'm sitting on the back steps, smiling, a big dead goose at my feet. Grandma used to cook a goose every Christmas. She'd pull the feathers and the down to stuff pillows and quilts, but it's obvious this photo was taken in the summer because I'm wearing a short ruffled romper. I remember the romper. I don't remember the goose.

Grandfather was harsh. He clomped instead of walked. He wore heavy work boots and refused to take them off at the door, so he tracked in dirt and mud. I remember once, when Grandma grumbled about it, he raised his fist to her. She ducked and lifted one arm as if to shield herself. Then Grandpa saw me standing there in the hallway, and he dropped his hand.

"See," Grandma whispered to him. "This could be what caused it."

Grandpa stomped out the door, letting the screen door slam and without doing whatever it was he came inside to do.

"Caused what?" I asked, but Grandma just kept sweeping up the clods of dirt with the broom without answering, all the while shaking her head.

Grandma taught me how to read and write at home. She said the school was too far away for me to walk to alone, so she taught me how to add and subtract, and she sent away for books on multiplication and long division. I can multiply and divide, but seldom need to. My checkbook always balances

to the penny.

It took me several letters and several irritating phone calls from the banks before they stopped sending me monthly statements. They said they were *legally obligated* to keep me informed each month, but they finally agreed to send just one statement a year. That was after I threatened to come into town and bash their heads in.

My checking and savings accounts earn something the banks refer to as *interest*, so the money just keeps piling up. I don't know where all that money came from originally, but by the time I opened up old bank statements and figured out how much had been left to me, I realized I'd never have to get a job or leave the house. And there's nothing for me to spend it on. I don't need much. Maybe next year I'll have to see about a new roof.

That will be the third roof for this old house. I'll pay in full so the roofing company people won't clutter up my P.O. Box with statements.

The Internal Revenue Service was my biggest problem. They kept sending me letters saying I owed them because of that bank interest. I never wrote back to them or even thought about talking to them until the day I received a phone call. The lady said they were sending a man out to my house to "discuss my back taxes." I met him on the road halfway from town. It isn't really a road anymore—more of a path it's so overgrown.

He looked lost even though someone had apparently drawn him a map that he clutched in one hand. He wore a gray suit and a striped tie and carried a flat box with a handle, like a little suitcase. His shoes were so muddy I couldn't tell what color they were. I planted myself on an embankment and waited until he was below me on the path before I yelled at him.

"You're on private property!"

He jumped about a foot and then backed up a few steps. He talked fast. "Are you Jessica Fishbone?"

I nodded.

"I'm Wilson Dibble." He extended his hand and took a step up the embankment, but he slipped and fell and dropped his little suitcase, and when he finally got to his feet he spent the next moment brushing at the mud on the front of his suit. He looked up at me the way a rabbit looks at you from a cage. Then he talked even faster.

"I've been sent to explain why you keep getting letters from the I.R.S."

"Who?"

"The Internal Revenue Service."

"I want to be left alone," I said.

"I understand, Ms. Fishbone, and I have a paper right here in my briefcase that can solve that problem for you." He shoved the dirt-smudged map under his arm and pulled a piece of paper from the outside pocket of his briefcase. "If you'll just sign this paper, giving your banker, Mr. Wright, the authority to pay your taxes for you, the I.R.S. will probably never need to bother you again, Ms. Fishbone."

"Why would Mr. Wright want to pay my taxes for me?"

He held his briefcase against his chest like a shield. "Well, actually," he said with a high, nervous sounding laugh, "with this permission statement, Mr. Wright will draw just enough money from your checking account to cover your taxes. You'll receive a yearly statement showing exactly how much money was withdrawn and exactly when the transaction occurred. You may revoke his authority if you are ever dissatisfied with his handling of your account, and this paper gives him permission to handle *only* your taxes."

I signed the paper.

"Thank you, Ms. Fishbone." Mr. Dibble squatted and placed his briefcase on the ground. The case sprang open, and he laid the paper inside. Then he slammed the briefcase shut and stood up. "Well, Ms. Fishbone I appreciate ..." He looked left and right, and he turned clear around, but by then I had taken several steps back behind a wild rhododendron and beneath the drooping, hooked branch of a cedar tree. I knew he couldn't see me. He called out, "Goodbye, Ms. Fishbone. Thank you. Have a nice day." Then he turned, flipping up mud as he ran.

A few months later I walked into town and checked my P.O. Box. There were statements from the bank and from the I.R.S. showing that the amount drawn from my account matched the amount the Internal Revenue Service said I owed. It's a good thing I met Mr. Dibble that day on the way from town, instead of him walking clear to my house. I don't let anyone come to my house. People should pay attention to my NO TRESPASSING and PRIVATE PROPERTY signs. If they leave me alone I'll leave them alone. That way no one gets hurt.

I've been asleep, I think. It's hard to tell when you never dream. The last

dream I can remember having was about Mother. She was crying and crying about her dead cat.

My back is stiff from dozing in the armchair. It must be close to 8:00 A.M. because the candles have burned out and a gray morning light is peeking through the rip in the window shade. The only clock I have is a grandfather clock upstairs at the end of the hall, but I never wind it. Can't seem to remember to do that. Anyway, it doesn't matter what time it is, but I'll need more candles for tonight. There are boxes of candles in the cellar.

Almost every morning I eat applesauce and cornbread for breakfast, with tea sweetened by clover honey. After breakfast I often pour a cupful of beans into a pan and fill it with water to soak for dinner. I sent away once for a book on natural foods and nutrition, and it says you can get your protein from beans. So every few days I cook up a small pot of beans and rice.

I don't like the taste of meat because it used to have blood in it and I don't like the idea of eating anything that once had a heartbeat. It reminds me of that dead goose in the photograph. There was blood on its feathers. Maybe I was smiling because I was too little to know the goose was dead. I could only have been about five years old, a whole year before Mother took Amanda out into that summer storm with rat poison in her pocket.

It's too quiet after a storm, as if the wind is too tired to move anymore. Right now it's overcast with a gray ceiling of clouds, although I do know where the sun is. There's a bright spot in those clouds.

My house is surrounded by trees. Used to be I could see clear down to the creek from the back porch, and from the front porch I could see all the way to a church on another hill three miles away. There's questions I'd like to ask, and I've thought about going to that church, but never have.

There used to be open fields and open pasture and outbuildings all around my house, but after Grandma died and left me alone here, I opened the gates and let the cows and chickens wander wherever they wanted to. After all, I don't eat meat and I didn't want to keep buying food for them. I always wondered what the animals would do and where they would go if they were free. Some of them wandered over to a neighbor's farm about a mile west; at least three chickens were eaten by wolves. I found their heads, legs, and feathers not far from here. After that there was nothing to keep the pastures down or the trees from sprouting, and now I'm in the middle of a forest. I

have to look up to see sky. It's like living at the bottom of a well or inside a big cooking pot. But there's nothing in the pot except me. Me and my house.

Midday. This is a good time to search through the attic again. There are trunks and boxes that I haven't even opened yet. Some of the clothes are wearable. It doesn't matter that they're from the thirties and forties. No one sees me anyway.

Back under an eave is a big steamer trunk, the kind people used to take on ocean voyages to Europe or to the Orient. Years ago we had a television and I remember watching old movies about people taking trips like that. The television is in the cellar now. When the picture went black I moved it down there and put quarts of applesauce all over it. I can smash out the picture tube and put quarts inside it, too.

The steamer trunk has a big tarnished lock on it, but no one ever locked it. It slips right off. Inside are more old clothes and more old photographs and more old books. I stack the books to one side because I might want to read them later by candlelight.

I lift the clothes out piece by piece. Do I remember this dress, this creamy beige, faded rose-flowered dress with the ruffled neckline and the dropped waist? Along with the dress floats a scent: lilac. Is it possible for something this old to hold the smell of the person who once wore it? After sixty-four years in a trunk in the attic? I press the silky material to my face and inhale. It's as if I'm rubbing my cheek against my mother. She is so pretty, but her smile is sad and she looks at me with eyes full of grief. Why does she always touch my hair and then shake her head? Why does she bite her lip and walk away?

I fold the dress and set it aside. In a bottom corner of the trunk is another book. *Journal* it says on the cover. I open it to see faded, rough black script handwriting on the yellowed first page. *To my wife, Carolyn, on the birth of our two beautiful daughters. Love Gerald.* Gerald was my father, Carolyn my mother.

I turn the page and read the first entry, about the day Amanda and I were born, how much we weighed and how *perfect* we both were. I was two ounces heavier than Amanda, but otherwise Mother wrote that she couldn't yet tell us apart. For a few weeks she depended on our hospital tags to identify which of us she was bathing or diapering. After that, she said it was easy to tell us apart, but she didn't say why it was easy.

On the following pages are lists of our favorite and least favorite foods.

I skip page after page of trivial baby care.

One entry says, *Amanda sleeps through the night now, while Jessica screams at 1:00 A.M. and again at 4:00. I'm exhausted and we've put Amanda's crib in our room so that she can sleep in peace.*

There is a long gap in the entry dates, nearly an entire year. Then a short, scribbled notation. I recognize my mother's handwriting, but it looks scrawled and I assume she was ill or desperate when she wrote it. *I don't know what to do!* And on the next page the entry is dated a full year after that. *Their fifth birthday. We had a cake with candles. They each wore the little ruffled rompers I made them. They looked so cute. Everything was going along so nicely until Jessica disappeared. We couldn't find her even though we looked everywhere in the house, and of course, I'm always so afraid of the creek.*

I turn the page and keep reading. *Down where the creek swirls around the bridge are eddies, little whirlpools. I once dreamed about Jessica holding Amanda's head under, and now I seem to always be afraid—as if the dream is an omen. Gerald says the water isn't very deep, but I can't help this awful, endless feeling of fear. Sometimes I can't stop shaking and my heart pounds so hard I must sit down. I'm having more and more of those dreams and Jessica is doing even more horrible things. We can't understand it. Why is she this way? We finally found her in the barn. Oh, that poor goose!*

I'm feeling empty now. Drained. I can't remember the last time I felt this way. I keep reading, but with a sense of dread. Mother's next entry is a full year later:

Aunt Sophie finally answered my letters—and confirmed my suspicions. It's my fault, and my mother's and her mother's—and who knows how far back this goes. No one here will discuss it, which only makes things worse. Gerald's parents have always been so good to me, although they don't seem to fully comprehend what mental illness is. They tell me not to worry. They say it's not my fault and that everything will be all right, that they love me and none of it matters. But what about Jessica? Will she be alright? Will she understand being sent away to that place? That hospital? It's the only way to protect Amanda. But Jessica is my baby too. I can't do it. There doesn't seem to be an answer. There is no way out of this.

I close the journal, remembering. Long ago, the storm, the howling wind—I was so afraid. I remember standing in Amanda's bedroom doorway, crying. Lighting flashes and thunder rattles the house and there are black shadows in every corner and then more blue-white light turns everything ghostly and distorted. I run and crawl into bed with Amanda. She is warm and she smells

like our bath water, all soapy and clean. Our nightgowns match. Mother made them. I scoot up next to her and wrap my arms around her, finally feeling safe, but she throws off the covers and stands in the middle of the room and says, "Go back to your own bed, Jessica." But I shake my head and squeeze my eyes closed. Amanda turns all blue-white and scary with the next lightning flash. Her eyes look like holes in her face. I pull the covers over my head and bury my face in her pillow. When I look again she is gone into my room to sleep. I stay in her bed because I feel safer there.

When I wake up in the morning, the storm is over and Mother and Amanda are gone.

I remember the look on Grandma's face. "It was a mistake," she says over and over again. "A horrible mistake." But no matter what I say, she never explains what the mistake was.

Many times I've been blamed for things when I've done nothing at all. After all, it wasn't me who took Amanda into the woods and poisoned her and then myself. But I was blamed for it anyway. I knew by the way Grandpa and my father looked at me. Sometimes they said things—unfinished things. When I caught their eye, they'd stop talking and look away.

When Grandpa died he hadn't spoken to me or looked me in the eye for five years. "Devil child," were his last words. Grandma cried and tried to hug me, but I pushed her away and ran to the barn. Even though it was winter I stayed there for two days, until Dad came and asked me to help bury Grandpa. We buried him beside my mother and Amanda. I don't remember feeling anything except cold. It was raining and dreary.

Two years later Grandma and I sat beside my father's bedside as he lay dying. He wasn't old, but he looked all used up.

"Take care of Jessica, Mom," he whispered. "You know what I mean." And then he slipped away without another word, and Grandma cried as if she would die of grief. She did die of grief I think, but not for five more years.

Many times I asked her to tell me why things had happened the way they did. Why did Mom poison Amanda and herself?

"Just a horrible mistake," she always answered.

"Why did Grandpa call me a 'devil child'?"

"Just the ravings of a sad, dying old man." Then Grandma sighed a very

deep and tired sigh, closed her eyes, and said, "Tomorrow, we'll go to that place where your mother and Amanda died. I'll tell you everything then."

I knew she was very tired so I kissed her goodnight. In the morning she was dead and stiff, the pillow jammed tight down over her face. I was eighteen years old and all alone in that house from then on. I sometimes wonder what she had planned for us, out there in the woods.

I turn to the last entry in the journal. My mother's handwriting is clear and steady.

How will people remember us? As monsters? Why me, and why my child? I must take responsibility. It's very late, and the storm blew in cooler weather, so I have on my coat, boots, and scarf. I have gloves in one pocket and the special packet is in the other. Jessica's little hooded coat and boots are ready, too. She's afraid of storms so I will have to carry her. I'll take her to the mossy bank by the creek where we had their sixth birthday picnic. That was such a wonderful day. The girls were both good and so pretty. I took their picture sitting together on the moss. They were smiling and laughing and holding hands, and I thought ... for a moment I actually thought that Jessica would be all right. She waved for the camera. It was the best day I can remember since they were born. I think Jessica will remember that spot by the creek and that she was happy that day. We'll eat the snack together and I'll hold her in my arms. I'll tell her I love her. It's the best I can do for her. It's best for everyone.

I'm empty now. I'm an empty shell. Mother took Amanda into the woods because she thought it was me. Maybe Amanda was too sleepy to ask why they were going into the woods in the middle of the night. Maybe Mother called her 'sweetheart' or 'baby' the way she so often did, instead of by name. If Mother had called her by *my name*, just once, maybe Amanda would have corrected *the mistake*.

I don't remember doing bad things. I suppose turning all the animals loose from the pastures and the pens to be killed by wolves was wrong, but I didn't think about that before I did it. I didn't think. Maybe I should have put a card up on the bulletin board at the Thrifty Mart, telling people to come and take the animals, but then they would have come and walked through my yard, snooping in the outbuildings, maybe even knocking on my door. No. I don't let people come to my house.

It's dark again, and the wind has picked up. I wish the power would come back on. Storms bring back bad memories. I don't like storms.

Down in the cellar it's quiet. I'll not hear the storm down there. No

windows to rattle, no roof to tremble. Down there it never gets above 50º, year-round. I'll put on my coat, boots, scarf, and gloves and go down in the cellar. I'll take lots of candles and the hurricane lamp and the stack of *National Geographic* magazines. Down in the cellar is where Mother found the rat poison. I saw some down there.

Tarissa

"Hear the wind, Megan?" Tarissa whispered. "... a bad omen." She cupped her hand behind the candle as the flame shuddered in the draft. "We cannot do the Sharing this night!"

"But I've already been paid to weave a love spell for the Festival."

"I told you not to cast any spells until the next full moon. You haven't practiced enough."

"If you'd Shared the power when I first asked, I'd be well practiced now!" Megan's hazel eyes flashed in the candlelight, and her thick chestnut hair shone like a wavy halo around her head and shoulders. Her flesh glowed like polished ivory, her cheekbones glowing with the rise of her temper.

Tarissa shook her head and caught sight of her own reflection in the dark window. Her straight black hair was pulled back and held with a tarnished silver clasp at the nape of her neck. Shadowed eyes stared back from the glass, deep and sad, for what did a lanky, unwed woman of thirty have to be happy about? She frowned at her plain features and turned to her younger sister.

"Ahhh, Megan," she said. "Tiz dangerous, this power. The villagers fear us, and our kind is hunted down because of it."

"Tarissa, we must do the Sharing this night, for I've spent the fee paid me and I cannot refund it."

"All right, but remember ..." Tarissa pointed a long finger at her sister. "Remember that you begged and pleaded for the power. Remember that."

Megan lifted the candle from the windowsill, stepped to the fireplace, and squatted on the hearth. She poured wax on the cold stone and then pressed the base of the candle into the puddle.

A cold draft gusted down the chimney and into the small cabin. The flame flickered and tossed frantic leaping streaks of light around the dark walls and ceiling, but it didn't die out.

Tarissa drew the curtains and joined Megan on the hearth. She wanted to warn Megan again, wanted to tell her how women with the power had been hanged, or drowned, or skinned alive. But it was no use.

She pulled a leather pouch from her cloak and laid it beside the candle. "I never wanted the power, y'know."

"You've told me a thousand times, Tarissa, how Mother was on her deathbed and there was no one else but you for the Sharing."

"Well, there was you, but you were a babe in the cradle. Do you have the things I said to bring?"

Megan pulled items from her skirt pocket and placed them one by one beside the candle. "Scissors, knife, a stone from Mother's grave, and a lock of my own hair."

"Good." Tarissa placed her own scissors on the hearth and alongside, her knife. "Where's your lock of hair?"

Megan held her leather pouch upside down and shook it. A small bundle of chestnut hair fell out.

Tarissa lifted a silver cup from her pouch, dropped her rock and the lock of her hair into the cup. "Drop yours in with mine."

Megan dropped her hair into the cup along with her stone.

"Now, the scissors. Trim a fingernail into the cup, and then a small piece from the corner of your cloak."

Megan did as she was told.

"Now, the knife. Cut a small square of flesh from near your eye and —"

"What? Scar myself? I won't do it."

"Then you'll have no power this night."

Megan chewed her lower lip. After a moment she picked up the knife and flinched as she sliced away a very small piece of skin from the edge of her brow. A bloody bead swelled over the cut.

Tarissa did the same, and they both flicked the bloody bits into the cup.

"Now, a drop of blood from the arch of your left foot."

Megan pulled the shoe from her left foot, held her breath, and cut the tender pale flesh of her arch. "Ouch!"

"Quiet! Do you want to feel the hangman's rope before you've cast a single spell?" Tarissa picked up her knife again. "Stick out your tongue."

"Why?"

"I cut your tongue—thirteen drops in the cup. Then you cut my tongue and another thirteen drops."

Megan squeezed her eyes shut and stuck out her tongue. Tarissa held the cup under Megan's chin, leaned closer, and dragged the sharp point of her

knife across the tip of Megan's tongue. Megan flinched as dark blood dripped into the cup.

"Chew your tongue, Megan. We need three more drops. There! Now hold this clean cloth against the cut."

Tears ran down Megan's cheeks as she jammed the cloth into her mouth.

"Now cut my tongue, and don't forget to count the drops." Tarissa leaned over the candle again, closed her eyes, and stuck out her tongue. She felt the sharp knife on the tip of her tongue and heard Megan's muffled counting.

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen ... oh." Megan spat out the cloth. "An extra fourteenth drop fell in."

"You didn't pull the cup away? The Sharing is probably ruined!"

"But I feel it, Tarissa. I feel the power, warm and tingling."

"A temporary flush." Tarissa sighed. "Well, we may as well finish, in case you've received *some* power. Spit in the cup, Megan."

Megan spat and then Tarissa. Tarissa lifted the cup over her head. "What we see, what we touch, where we go, what we say. Tiz the Sharing, tiz the Sharing." She handed the cup to Megan. "One small drink."

Megan's eyes were round with disgust, but she lifted the cup to her lips, took a small sip, and handed the cup to Tarissa. Tarissa took the cup and tasted. Then she pried a corner of the hearthstone up, dumped the remaining mixture beneath it, and pressed the stone back into place. She wiped the cup with the corner of her cloak and shoved it back into her pocket. "Go home and do not bathe for a day and a night. We'll soon know if the power was Shared."

Tarissa watched from the doorway as Megan's slender silhouette crossed the crest of the hill. Tarissa shivered as a twisting cloud followed Megan across the moon's wide, round face.

A sudden draft yanked the door from Tarissa's hands and slammed it back against the wall. Wind whirled around the tiny room, sucking up the ashes from the hearth and smothering the candle's flame. Tarissa knelt beside the fireplace, slapping the cold hearth with both hands until she found the candle. She shoved it into her pocket, and then pulling her cloak tight around her, she ran.

* * *

A winter sun crawled across the sky behind skeletal trees. Tarissa draped her laundry about her yard on bushes and along her low rail fence as she waited for the soap in her molds to cool. It was a good batch this time, creamy and heavy with the scent of lavender. She would wrap the bars in squares of calico, tie them with straw cord, and sell them at the market along with her handmade cloaks and quilts. Her soaps, ointments, and salves always sold well, usually to people who leaned closed and whispered, "Are they charmed?" And Tarissa would smile and say, "Not charmed, but good quality." Not even to those people who sought her late at night, tapping or scratching at her door, did she admit having the power. "Keep your silver," she would say. "Bring me one of your fine laying hens when you've achieved your heart's desire." Some remembered, most forgot, but Tarissa never reminded them of their debts.

Last year's Harvest time, on a day very much like this one, the Magistrate's daughter, Elsa, had arrived at sundown, pounding on Tarissa's door.

"I'll buy a curse from you," Elsa had hissed. "A high fever for the miller's wife, for she is with child."

"You want to kill the Miller Eggar's wife and unborn child?"

"He doesn't love her. He loves me!"

"Be gone! You've heard wrong about me."

Elsa had run about Tarissa's yard tearing the clean laundry from the bushes and the fence and tossing them in the dirt and stomping on them. "You'll be sorry, wait and see." Elsa had flown through the gate and toward the village, leaving Tarissa to gather up her ruined laundry.

More than a year had passed and the miller now had a fine son, but as Tarissa draped her wet things along the fence, she thought of Elsa and of how the hatred had looked on the woman's face. Tarissa pinched the waistline and cuffs of her blue dress. Dry enough. She gathered the rest of the laundry but paused by the gate. A stiff wind gusted through the trees, carrying the smell of sour smoke. Tarissa shivered and hurried inside to wipe and wrap her bars of soap.

The full moon rose above the hill as though birthed from the earth itself.

Tarissa stepped outside to get an armload of firewood. She saw a shadow

at the gate.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"I be the Miller Eggar's wife." The woman sounded out of breath. "I know what happened last year, between my husband and Elsa. I know Elsa came to see you, but you wouldn't sell her a curse. I owe you, so I came with news ... but now I be afraid to tell it."

"Tiz cold. Come inside."

Mistress Eggar stepped through the gate but halted again. "The news I have is bad," she gasped. "I don't want your wrath for the telling of it."

"No wrath for you."

"You would hear it tomorrow anyway. Elsa accused Megan of witchcraft. The Magistrate found her guilty and ..."

Tarissa dropped her armload of wood. "Megan!"

"I ran all the way, but it's over a mile!"

"Megan!" Tarissa grabbed her cloak from the hook inside the door and ran across the yard and through the gate.

Tarissa was accustomed to walking, but not to running. Her toes caught on roots, her cloak caught on thorns. She stumbled and fell, scraping her hands on sharp rocks. When she reached the village gate, a gray-black smoke trailed upward from the town square. The villagers were gathered in a circle around the source of the smoke, but when they spotted Tarissa they parted, whispering. Gasping for breath, she strode through their midst.

Straight ahead was the black mound that had once been wood and fire, and Megan. Megan was ashes now and charred bits of bone. A blackened, sooty skull lay amidst the rubble, perfect teeth wide open in a silent scream. Tarissa knelt and touched the skull.

"Witch," someone hissed. "Tarissa be a witch, too."

The skull was hot, but Tarissa picked it up. She wrapped it in her cloak and then stood and faced the crowd. "Megan was no witch."

"She was selling spells at the Festival."

"Who said so?"

"Me." Elsa stepped forward, swishing her long burgundy skirt. She dropped her black shawl from her head to her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"What spell did Megan cast for you?"

"Not just a spell, a curse!"

"You asked for a curse?"

"I knew she be a witch, just like *you* be a witch, so I asked for a curse." Elsa raised her voice. "As that's how we know a true witch. They sell curses amongst the innocent."

"What kind of *innocent* buys a curse?"

"It was only a test. This town is a fine town, and the people be honest."

"They be ignorant, for look what they've done to Megan."

A rotund, red-haired man strode to the edge of the pyre. "You be Mistress Tarissa? Sister to the witch?"

"I be Megan's sister. Who be you?"

"Magistrate Biggs. I saw the mark on your sister's hip. The witch's mark."

"Mark? She had that since birth. It was naught but a small mole."

"Satan's mark. She confessed she was the devil's whore."

"You tortured her?"

"... questioned her."

"Ohh, Megan." Tarissa's eyes burned with tears.

"Look!" a young girl shouted. "She cries! Witches don't cry."

"No! She be a witch! I know it!" Elsa screamed.

Magistrate Biggs pointed at Tarissa. "We'll test her! If she swims, she be a witch. If she has the mark, she be a witch. If she confesses, she be a witch!"

He crossed his arms above his rounded belly and then nodded at several large men in the crowd. "Bring her to the courthouse."

The men lunged, but Tarissa drew herself up straight, taller than the men. She held up one hand. "Come no further," she warned.

"She threatens like a witch!" The Magistrate waved the men on. "Bring her. Bring her to the courthouse!"

One man reached for Tarissa, but she lifted her hand again, pointing at him with her thumb and two fingers. "Shrivel, shrink, and wither." She spat in the ashes at his feet.

The man blinked, took a step back. His mouth fell open. "What have you done? What's happening?" He grabbed his crotch with both hands. "Tiz gone! I cannot feel it ... tiz gone!" His face turned ashen and his eyes grew round. "She's taken it!" He stumbled around in a circle, and then he discovered his feet and ran. The other two men backed away.

Tarissa unwrapped Megan's skull from the folds of her cape and held it

up in front of her. "Fools! If Megan were a witch, you'd not have succeeded with the burning. Are you all blind? Cannot you see a real witch when she stands before you?"

The space around Tarissa widened. The whispers and the murmurs grew. A stone struck Tarissa's shoulder and a man shouted, "Burn her!"

Tarissa crouched and turned in a full circle, spitting in six directions, and the stones the people hurled all missed their mark.

A sudden cold wind whistled into the village. It howled through alleys and over rooftops. It whirled about the square, picking up ashes from the smoldering rubble and flinging soot into the crowd.

Tarissa tucked Megan's skull inside her cloak again and then strode down the muddy street toward the gate. She shouted over her shoulder. "This town will pay full price for my sister."

As Tarissa strode through the town's gate, she passed Miller Eggar's wife, leaning against one post, gasping for breath. Tarissa slowed but didn't stop.

"Be warned. This town will hate you, because you shall fair well while they suffer."

When she reached her yard, Tarissa picked up thirteen stones and licked them. She dropped them around the edge of her yard outside the fence, repeating, "Howl, wolf," with each one. Then she went inside, closed the door, and placed Megan's skull on the mantel. She lay down on her bed and faced the wall. "And so it begins," she moaned. Then she closed her eyes and cried.

Twilight crept under Tarissa's curtain and through the crack under her door. The pure, mournful howl of a wolf pierced the air. Tarissa rolled from her bed.

She lifted her skirt and squatted over the night bucket. Then she stood, carried the bucket to the door, unlatched the door, and stepped outside. "Come, rain, to end this drought!" She tossed the steaming contents into the air. Seconds later there was the crash of thunder, and green-gray clouds rolled across the sky. The porch beneath her feet shook, and pieces of moss fell from the edge of the roof. The belly of the clouds swelled, pregnant with a growing storm. Lightning flashed, and then huge drops of amber-colored

rain fell fast and hard. As the drops hit the dusty earth, they hissed and smoked. Screams came from the forest, along with the sound of footsteps running away.

Later, when she walked about her yard, Tarissa discovered bottles of lamp oil, matches, and torches. She collected them and took them inside.

That afternoon, Miller Eggar's wife tapped on her door.

"Come in," Tarissa said. "It is not safe for you to be seen talking to me."

"I've come to warn you. The men are all gathered in the courthouse, planning something nasty for you, but they won't let women inside. Some of us listened at the door, but they chased us away."

"Do not worry about me, Mistress Eggar, but thank you for wanting to warn me."

"I sense something bad. My husband is loading the wagon. We leave this very night. You are welcome to come with us."

"I suppose I will leave also. The townspeople here have destroyed all I've ever cared about." Tarissa took Mistress Eggar's hands in hers and held them. "Ahhh. What's this? You'll have a beautiful daughter in nine months. I beg you name her Megan after my sister and Rose after my mother."

"A daughter? My prayers answered! Megan Rose? Better yet, Megan Rose Tarissa! A good name." Mistress Eggar hurried away, leaving Tarissa in the open door, shocked into silence by the three names spoken aloud as one.

At twilight, Tarissa took down Megan's skull from the mantel and tucked it inside her cloak. She gathered a few other things, stuffed them into a pouch, and tied the pouch strings to the sash around her waist. Then she picked up one of the bottles of lamp oil, smashed it on the floor, and flipped a hot coal from her hearth into the puddle of fuel. Flames leapt upward, filling the room with an oily black smoke. Tarissa left the door wide open, and by the time she reached the top of the hill, the cabin's flames leaped as high as the treetops.

In the next valley, night had already fallen. In the heart of the valley was a small clearing, and in the center of the clearing were row after row of white headstones glowing in the dark. The graveyard was old, older than the village, having seen the rise and fall of numerous towns.

Tarissa found and knelt beside her mother's grave "Mother, something wondrous has happened. The miller's wife is with child, and on this very day

she spoke *our three names* aloud as one, *Megan Rose Tarissa*. A spell has been cast for us—but I wonder—do I have the courage to fulfill my part? To complete the spell? I am not brave."

Tarissa lifted Megan's skull from her cloak. Inside the skull was a trace of Megan's ashes. She placed the upturned skull on her mother's headstone and then picked up a pinch of fine black soil from the grave. She sprinkled it inside the skull along with the ashes. Then she spat into the skull and stirred the mixture to a paste with her fingers. Tarissa scooped the ashy mud onto one finger and held it up to the cloud-covered moon. "Together, we be very strong! We be *Megan Rose Tarissa*." She shoved the finger into her mouth. The ash was sour, the soil gritty and moldy. She swallowed, stuffed the skull into her cloak again, turned, and strode toward town, fear gnawing at her.

In the town square the sooty rubble had been swept away and a new pyre built. Straight across from the pyre was Magistrate Biggs' grand house. From his third floor balcony he would have an unobstructed view of the burning witch and hear her screams.

Tarissa pulled her hood over her head and kept to the shadows, keeping her face turned from the street lanterns. She entered a steep alley, and when she reached the top she was level with Magistrate Biggs' roof. Tarissa climbed a tree, crawled out along a limb, and dropped to his slate roof. She sat down and leaned against the chimney. Above her, smoke coiled into the moonlight from the chimney's throat. The bricks were warm against her back. Her hands trembled as she patted Megan's skull through her cloak. Tarissa had never attempted this kind of magic before. Never revenge.

People were gathering in the square below. Some had brought broken tables or stools, anything of wood to add to the pyre. Some had brought long sharpened poles to torment the witch. The people talked, joked, and laughed, the way they did at Harvest Festival.

An hour passed and then a door squeaked open. Lantern light flickered at the edge of the roof. Tarissa heard a man clear his throat.

"Good people!" It was Magistrate Biggs on his balcony. "One hour ago, the witch, Tarissa, was sent for. My men should be returning with her in chains at any moment."

The townspeople cheered. Some threw their chairs and stools onto the pyre in anticipation. Some swung their flickering lanterns back and forth.

At that moment five men came running through the town gate, shouting, "The witch is gone—her house is burned. We couldn't find her!"

Tarissa rose to her feet and stepped to the edge of the roof.

"There she is!" Elsa stepped from the crowd, pointing. "Knock her down!"

A flurry of stones arched toward Tarissa; most of them fell short of the rooftop, and those that came near clattered on the slate and rolled down its slope to fall back on the crowd. The mob backed away from the edge of the roof and another flurry of stones flew toward Tarissa, but none reached her.

Tarissa pulled Megan's skull from her cloak and held it high above her head. An amber light glowed from within the skull, streaking out through the eye sockets, nose, and through the grinning teeth. The crowd gasped.

"Is it a fire you want?" Tarissa shouted. Another sudden wind whistled and howled between the buildings and along the cobblestones. Tarissa's cloak billowed full behind her like giant wings, and her hair, freed from the tarnished silver clasp, whipped about her head like black flames.

A lightning bolt zigzagged from the clouds and struck the pyre below. Chunks of wood, broken chairs, and smashed stools exploded into the air, spinning and burning, landing on rooftops and crashing through windows. Several houses caught fire.

Tarissa spun in a circle. Another lightning bolt cut the air like a jagged blade. It struck the courthouse roof, and hundreds of slate shingles flew from the rooftop, sharp and spinning and landing on the crowd. More shingles broke into slivers and flew through the air. A dozen people, including Elsa, fell wounded and bleeding on the street.

The fire spread, leaping from house to house, jumping across alleyways and through windows. People ran inside, picked up their sleeping children, and then rushed back into the square just in time to see their houses consumed by smoke and flame.

Again, Tarissa turned in circles, her cloak twisting and flapping and billowing again. She pointed at the balcony as the Magistrate began to speak.

"Her pyre is ready ..." and then his voice changed to that of a squealing pig. He clapped both hands over his mouth, backed into his house, and slammed his door.

A man shouted, "Look! There be *three* witches on the roof."

Tarissa pointed at the villagers and their voices, too, changed to that of

squealing pigs.

Tarissa lowered the skull and kissed it. "Ahhh, Megan, see what has happened. But it's finished now. I'm done."

And then a lightning bolt, the biggest and the brightest, tore from the black clouds. It struck the chimney behind Tarissa, and she, the chimney, the slate roof, and the entire third floor of the Magistrate's house exploded into dust and smoke and steam. The belly of the house glowed like a furnace, and from the midst of the flames came the screams of a pig in terrible anguish. The screaming went on for half a minute before it stopped.

The rest of the villagers ran grunting and squealing through the gates as the town crumbled and fell into smoking ruin, and high in the sky the face of the moon slid behind a black cloud and an icy rain pelted the earth.

Miles away, Miller Eggar and his wife and son rode through the night in their wagon. A sudden breeze caused Mistress Eggar to draw her cloak tighter.

"I smell smoke," she said.

"Just your imagination. No houses near."

She gasped and placed a hand over her abdomen. "I felt the babe move."

"'Tiz too early, wife."

"Naw, I did feel it," she insisted.

"And what was the name again? The name you've picked for our daughter?"

"Megan Rose Tarissa."

The miller was quiet for another moment, and then nodded.

"'Tiz a fine name," he said. "I wonder which of us she will take after."

About the Author

Sherry Decker was born in Bremerton, Washington and now lives east of Seattle in Sammamish. She started writing stories in third grade. Her first fiction sale was in 1994 to Heliocentric Net and later to Aberrations. Since then her fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Black October*, *Book of Dark Wisdom*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Black Gate*, and *Cemetery Dance*. From 1997 to 2001, she edited and published the fiction magazine, *Indigenous Fiction ~ wondrously weird & offbeat*. She won First Place in the NTPWA fiction contest, Finalist and Honorable Mention in Writers of the Future, and Finalist in the Pacific Northwest Writer's Conference. This is her first collection.