

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Stephanie E. Wisniewski for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Marjorie Sandor

Ms. Miles is Missing—the beginning of a novel—is the story of a woman who, in her early thirties comes to realize that the life she is living is not the life she wants. She yearns for her lost childhood, and tries to come to terms with her mother's death. Martha ever attempts to find meaning—spiritual or otherwise—in the midst of a fairly deadened suburban world.

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Ms. Miles is Missing
by
Stephanie E. Wisniewski

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Stephanie E. Wisniewski, Author

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Dusk, the day after her mother's funeral. Martha drove up to their old row house, and idled out front. Through icy air like tarnished silver, she saw a child's plastic kitchen with a frying pan on the stove, and dishes piled in the sink. At the edge of the patio, a blue racecar with wide square headlights stared right at her. From her old living room window, light shone warm through heavy black bars. The stick shift dug hard into her hip, and she eased back into the driver's seat. Above her the streetlights flickered on, faint and yellow. Martha shivered, and turned the heat on high. Hot air stung her eyes. She hadn't been back here since she'd moved her mother to Fair Acres, over three years ago.

Driving away, she peered down the alleyway where she'd taught herself to ride a bike: it was dark and empty like those tunnels she sometimes dreamed about that echoed wails of children but led to nowhere. And she remembered that day, just a few weeks after the stroke, when her mother had brought her here and pointed at two needles she'd found. "*Patrzę na,*" her mother had said, like all the Polish ladies on Wanamaker Street used to say. Look at this. She shook her head, leaned over, and squeezed Martha's fingers tight. "Don't you remember how it used to be?" she'd pleaded feebly. It was then that Martha met her mother's gaze, and noticed, with a silent jolt, that her clear blue eyes weren't as glassy as they'd been the day before. But Martha had already decided on Fair Acres, and Christopher had wholly agreed. Martha and her mother linked arms, and inch-by-inch, they wobbled away. Even at the time, it had felt like the beginning of goodbye.

She'd looked so small laid out flat in the casket in her green velvet zip-up robe surrounded by bold red Poinsettias. Her hair was fine and white as a cloud, face pale and powdery with eyes that had been shut. But how could Martha have been so fearful, such a horridly weak, wickedly weak person, as to not even kiss her mother's forehead goodbye? Who the hell did she think she was? She hadn't visited her mother in over a month; the final stroke had come without warning. Her last trip to Fair Acres hadn't been any different than the many that had come before, at least not that she could remember. In silence she'd watched her mother stare blankly at the ceiling, her wrinkled mouth caving in, pointy chin poking out like an arrow. Her mother clenched the shiny metal bars of the hospital bed, hands red, swollen, shiny—ready to burst. Talk to her, the nurses had advised. She can still hear you. But Martha had always ended up turning the television to *The Price Is Right*, and trying to think, endlessly, of what she could say.

Her mother's old church—St. Mary of Czestochowa—came into view. By now, darkness fell heavy upon the grey stone building, and it loomed like a fortress. On the tall pointy steeple, a tiny stained-glass star seemed to flicker. Back when her mother could still speak, she'd told Martha, “When I die, bring me back to St. Mary's.” But the parish had shut down over a year ago, and in the end she'd had her mother's viewing at a private funeral parlor a few blocks down from Fair Acres, between two strip malls. A car beeped loud, long, and angry at her. She had no choice but to speed up, and drive on out of Philadelphia.

Martha stopped in the middle of their neat and tidy living room. Light from the hallway seeped down the steps, dusting the living room dim; the house felt empty. Christopher must be grocery shopping or at the library. The tan wall-to-wall carpet had the clean lines of a newly vacuumed rug, while the glass coffee table was streak-free. The couches remained spotless white because she and Christopher never found reason to sit there. When they'd moved in four years ago as newlyweds, he'd convinced her to keep the house sparse and white until they naturally accumulated things, and found just the right colors. At the time Christopher's desire for simplicity had seemed clear-headed and refreshing. But in the last six months, she'd started bringing home some of the artwork her third graders gave her as gifts. Without first consulting him, she displayed these pieces around the house, and they usually lifted her spirits. Above the mantle there was the gaunt, lopsided heart that Lucinda Walters had pieced together with shiny red squares. She knew Christopher didn't like it; once she'd caught him glaring at it as he passed. But she loved that heart. It beat slowly, like an animal had taken a bite from it moments ago.

Upstairs, Martha flicked on the light in Christopher's office and lingered in the doorway a moment. The room was lined with pale pink and brown teddy bear picnic wallpaper. This had been a baby's room before they moved in, and they'd never gotten around to stripping it. By now grey fingerprints smudged the wall around the light switch, making the picnic seem stormy, with yellow paper edges curling in. She switched on the computer monitor, though all she ever got was junk mail, and those jokes some of the teachers at Madison Elementary forwarded to everyone. The black

screen brightened to blue. At the bottom, she noticed a minimized box: *LittleRedRH Conver...* Christopher never left windows open, not even work documents. Martha moved the mouse down there, and kept her finger on the clicker. *LittleRedRH* had to be a woman. But Christopher didn't have any female friends, not that she knew of. She shook her head quickly; why should she even care? Of course they were married, but these days that barely meant a thing. They gave each other cordial smiles over the newspaper at the breakfast table. They ran errands when the other was in. At night when she slipped under the covers, without fail, he'd grab his yoga mat from beneath the bed and say, "Just need to stretch my calves a little. Be right back." Not that it bothered her much; a distance had grown between them, or maybe it had always been there, she never could tell. What he did with his time was his business. And if he *were* talking with a woman, it would hardly be a surprise; last month all the online doctors she'd sought out had warned that cheating might ensue. The man may grow distant, search for compensation elsewhere. Staring blankly at the screen, she tried to imagine what Christopher might write to a woman, but couldn't. He'd never written her a note, or even given her a card—*Cards force us to be fake*—he'd always said. It's out of curiosity, nothing more, she told herself as she clicked the mouse with a light tap of the finger.

LittleRedRH: I've been abducted by men in black trench coats and hoods. They tied me to a tree behind the cornfield. Will u rescue me?

YogaDaddy: Did they rape u?

LittleRedRH: Not yet.

YogaDaddy: What should I do when I get there? Kill them or save u?

LittleRedRH: Untie me, of course.

YogaDaddy: Before I untie u...

LittleRedRH: ??? ;)

YogaDaddy: I'll fuck u on the tree.

Her stomach knotted to a fist. *I'll fuck you on the tree* throbbed at her. She blurred her eyes, but they refocused instantly.

LittleRedRH: As long as I don't untie myself first.

YogaDaddy: What are u wearing?

LittleRedRH: Red lace crotchless panties...

YogaDaddy: I can't take it anymore. Meet me at the Wal-Mart in our usual spot.

LittleRedRH: Be there in 20 u sexy dick ;o

Martha hunched now in the chair, the muted white screen reflecting her pale, twisted face. Everything seemed distorted. Her body felt big as a balloon, and then the next moment, small and withered. She noticed a metallic taste along the edges of her tongue. Her toes had clenched, and cramps shot up her arches. She swept her arm across the desk, and Christopher's telemarketing papers slid weakly along the floor. "Cheated on by your husband," she whispered to herself. "Get angry." But she wasn't. Not even the slightest bit. She imagined a normal woman might run around the house screaming and crying and ripping at her hair; Martha felt too tired to move,

and knew an outburst would feel like acting. What scared her most, though, was that this blank feeling was too dissipated to even be sadness.

“I don’t trust him,” her mother had warned that first night she’d had them over for dinner. Christopher had gone to the bathroom. Her mother leaned over the table of golabki and pierogies, and whispered a little too loudly, “He gives me a bad feeling, makes me all nervous with those shifty eyes.” No matter how much Martha chewed that small piece of cabbage, she couldn’t force it down her throat. “I’d never noticed his eyes,” Martha had said. “He’s just hard to get to know, that’s all.” Her mother folded her hands firmly on the table, and her face relaxed into conclusion. “And so are you,” she’d said. “The two of you won’t ever get anywhere.” Martha stood up and took her plate to the sink. “Let me ask you this,” her mother said to her back. “How will he ever love you when he doesn’t even know himself yet? Now sit down and finish up.” Martha rubbed the soapy sponge in circles on her dish. “You know I have this sense for people,” her mother said. “Haven’t ever been wrong, have I?” Martha stayed at the sink. It was true that her mother had keen intuition, but she was sick of being told what to do. She was nearly thirty, and needed to get on with her life. She added more soap, and kept scrubbing. Even if Christopher wasn’t perfect, he was something. And what if no one else ever liked her again? “You’re better off alone,” her mother had then said, as if reading her mind.

Across the room now, Martha slumped in the rocker. Wooden bars dug into her back. Christopher had surprised her with the chair about a year ago, rushing her upstairs by the hand to tell her, “The time is right. I can feel it. And the wallpaper’s

already here for us.” Martha hadn’t believed him: all he ever talked about was order, and “spiritual balance”—she didn’t even know what that meant. Nonetheless, she’d hugged him tight, telling him, “You’re right, you’re right! I love you, my love,” trying to remind herself that this mysterious spontaneity was what she’d been missing most about him. So for a while their sex became tender and purposeful, but after six months, his caresses turned desperate. Martha tried to ignore his impatience, but more and more, she felt herself disappearing beneath him.

Then last month, she’d opened an envelope thinking it was a doctor’s bill. Instead, she’d read, “As a result of the semen analysis evaluation, a case of Immunological infertility has been detected.” Floating there by the counter, she found she felt no real loss, just dread. She’d resealed the envelope the best she could with a glue stick from her briefcase, and kept quiet. She hadn’t even considered bringing it up, or even assuring him he had no need to be ashamed. Martha was rocking now, stiff and creaky. It was that same dread inside of her now, but it had widened, and her insides were rowdy and nervous, twitchy all over. She stopped rocking, had to do something. On the floor, she reshuffled the papers—“you’re in control,” she told herself—and stacked them on his desk in a neater pile than before. The cheating wasn’t just Christopher’s fault, she knew that; she was guilty too, both of them so cold and distant. She stalked to the bathroom, and pulled on yellow rubber gloves. Of course she didn’t have any real friends, they could all just see it in her, how callous and closed she was. Bleach and sponge in hand, she squatted beside the toilet and lifted the seat to find faint yellow stains with scattered brown hairs crusted in. She

gagged, but nothing came up. Cleaning up after Christopher at a time like this—what a spineless fool she was! She poured bleach onto the sponge, and started scrubbing. She forced herself to imagine Christopher leading LittleRedRH, or whoever she was, into a dressing room at the mall, both of them giggling hysterically like naughty children. She couldn't tell if she was jealous or just disgusted. The toilet bowl smelled sweet and rancid and she gagged again, something like acid burning as it slipped up her throat. She kept the liquid on the back of her tongue for a few moments, and then swallowed it back down. She peeled off the yellow gloves, and went to the medicine cabinet. In the mirror, her dark eyes seemed sunk deep into their sockets, and the rest of her face was grey and flat. She opened the cabinet and saw a pair of tweezers, an old bottle of aspirin, a tan ace bandage, three orangebrown bottles of Christopher's anti-depressants, hair scissors, Neosporin, stale cotton balls. She shut it. The hallway to their bedroom was long and so narrow that pushing hard on either wall, Martha's elbows remained mostly bent. Christopher had hung one picture in the whole entire house. It was from their wedding, and she got up close to it now. In front of her mother's church, they stood beside each other, his hands on hers, her hands on the neat bouquet of peach roses. They both smiled pleasantly, but into the distance. Her mother had sewn her slip, and hemmed it with off-white lace. She'd crocheted the dress, woven ribbons around the waist and wrists, and tacked on the crystals and pearls. Right after that picture had been taken, Christopher had whispered she was the most beautiful thing in the world. But later at the reception, her mother let her know, fussing with her veil, and the fake, done-up curls around her face, that

Christopher had never complimented her on her artistry. “Don’t want to rock the boat so soon,” she’d said. “But you should know these things now you’re married.”

In their bedroom, Martha perched on the neatly tucked bed. She reached deep into her nightstand drawer, and grabbed the notebook she’d bought for herself when she’d first married. It was still empty. On the first page, in a frenzy, she wrote, *Come back to bed and wake me up...* Her words looked crooked and sinister, but how easy it was to be provocative. She imagined herself surprising Christopher with black lace lingerie under the covers, and teasing him until he begged, on his hands and knees, for her. He would do it, too; once right after she’d showered, he’d spontaneously knelt on the tile floor before her, and delicately kissed each of her ten toes. She ripped the note out, and stuck it in the bathroom mirror, looking down into the porcelain sink rather than at herself. Even if Christopher had somehow wanted to get caught, he wouldn’t have expected this reaction from her at all. She scrawled, *I’m throbbing...* and knew just where to put this one. In the back corner of their carpeted walk-in closet, she placed it on top of his small box of porno magazines. All these years she’d let him think they were a secret. Finally, she rolled *Waiting for you in the laundry room...* into his blue yoga mat. Out of breath, back on the edge of the bed, she shoved the notebook in the drawer, and slammed it shut. She crawled to the middle of the king-sized bed, crossed her legs, and tried to breathe deep. She was safe there for the moment, but also lost: the bed a boat at sea.

Outside, a car door slammed, and panic jittered her. She couldn’t face him just yet. What if he found one of the notes—or tried to confess to cheating—or smelled

sweaty or like LittleRedRH's cheap perfume? She didn't know what she'd say. She slipped on her snowflake nightgown, switched off the lamp, and got in bed. The sheets were cold on her legs, and she curled up small. Yesterday, the stuffy funeral parlor had been dizzying, and smelled like baby powder, church incense, and burning plastic you could taste in your mouth. There hadn't been more than twenty people. Santi, their old next door neighbor, shriveled all over, handed Martha a homemade cheese babka. Leaning on her cane, she told Martha she remembered when "Jeannie first brought you home from the hospital. A sunny day in May, and we sat on my porch all afternoon long. You were all wrapped up in a purple shawl not looking so young at all, and didn't cry once that day." Santi grabbed Martha's arm hard, and marveled at what a beautiful young lady she'd become. Her mother's main nurse from the home, a plump but firm woman, told Martha, "Jeannie was such a sweetheart, and I miss her already, mostly on my morning rounds." As she said goodbye, she passed Martha her mother's beige satchel. "You must know," she'd said, "that these are her special things." As soon as she'd gotten home from the funeral, without looking inside, she'd tossed that worn satchel into the crawlspace at the very back of their basement. Martha stared into the dull bedroom air.

Christopher was as scared of death as she was, not that they'd ever discussed it. She could just tell. Maybe that was part of the problem—they were both nothing more than cowards. Yesterday he had been stiff at the funeral, careful with her, respectful, even, not touching her once, always lurking just a few feet behind. When it became too much for her to visit her mother downtown two times a day, she hadn't

even suggested to Christopher that she move into their extra room. She knew he'd think of it as a hassle; he'd have to give up his office. On lucid days, her mother had fought to the end not to leave Wanamaker Street. She was the last of the old women left on the block, and still stubborn to stay. But once she started losing her way to the kitchen or the bathroom, and staring blankly out windows for hours, Martha decided something had to be done. She'd never even thought about hiring a nurse. It had been a mistake to put her in the home so early, there was no denying it; those aqua walls had sucked up any remaining vigor immediately. But Martha realized how selfishly convenient it was to begin regretting the decision now when there was finally nothing she could do—no more visits to be made, no more words to try to conjure. It was unfair to blame Christopher, and there was no sense in lying to herself anymore. It was the fear, mostly, that haunted her now, how scared she'd been of her sickly mother, ever-anticipating the next stroke, the last big fall. How morbid she was. She'd always been like this. As a child lying in bed at night she used to picture death as being trapped inside her body, unable to move, forced to face endless nothing that was darker even than her pitch black room. When Christopher came home at 2 am, Martha kept her eyes shut, and her body still. She worried he'd sense she was awake. He settled in flat on his back, as always, and then sighed. His breath smelled exactly the same, but tonight it brought to mind their stale medicine cabinet. She was strangely disappointed that she couldn't detect another woman's odor on him, but she wasn't exactly sure why. She groaned a bit, rolled over close to her edge of the bed,

and tightened all her muscles so she wouldn't fall off. In that way, she forced herself into a light, fitful sleep.

Martha startled awake before dawn, and tiptoed around the room. What was that dream she'd just been having?—a humid summer night on Wannamaker Street when she was young enough to be in diapers. Christopher was still asleep, his eyelids fluttering erratically, like a dying fly's wings. There had been lightening bugs in the dream, too, and mist.

With her robe wrapped tightly around her, she poked about the kitchen making coffee. She stirred oatmeal on the stove until it became thick and gooey. In her dream she'd been patting water from a bright red pail onto the rough, warm pavement. At one point, her mother had been running toward her. The feeling of her diaper hanging heavy and dripping from her bottom was still so palpable that she wondered whether it had been a dream or a memory she'd been having. Martha watched the orange winter sunrise through the small window above their kitchen table. She picked up two bottles of Christopher's all-natural vitamins from the table, and one in each hand, shook them. Pills rattled plastic. Sometimes she couldn't help but despising him. She sipped her coffee, trying to feel warm inside.

In the dingy laundry room, Martha watched the water stream into the washing machine as she tossed in the whites: socks, underwear, sheets. She heard footsteps on the stairs, lost her breath, and stiffened. She remembered the notes.

“Martha?”

“You startled me,” she said.

Christopher stood on the last step in nothing but his tiny red Yoga shorts, and the notes in his hand; he smirked, his dark eyebrows raised. Her face went hot. He walked to her, waving the ripped papers. “Why haven’t you ever done—this is just crazy.” Was this the reaction she’d wanted? She couldn’t quite remember. She watched him slip off his shorts, toss them in the washer, and shut the lid. Then he pulled her nightgown up over her head, dropped it to the ground, and grabbed her waist with clammy hands. When he picked her up and placed her on the washing machine, still in her white cotton underwear, she was surprised to feel so light. He stepped back, and his eyes filled with gratitude. “Look at you,” he said, as if remembering something from long ago. His erect penis, pink, and shooting straight out and proud like a statue, looked grotesque.

Calmly, she said, “I know you’re infertile and I know you’ve been cheating on me.”

Silence. She hadn’t had anything else to say, and needed to stop him immediately. Christopher wrapped his arms around his bare chest. “Martha, I don’t know what—” He got her nightgown from the floor, and pulled it back over her head, barely touching the curves of her waist as it slid down. He paced slowly in front of her, back and forth. “I feel so sad right now,” he said without looking up. He’d gone limp. “It’s like I don’t have control of anything in my life, anything that I do. I’m in this, this maze, and don’t know how to get out.” He grabbed a peach towel from the basket and wrapped it around his jutting hips.

Beneath her, the washing machine hummed and shook; her legs dangled over the side, tingly and almost numb. What had he just said? “I have some things to do before school today. So I better—”

“Don’t go in,” he pleaded. “I’ve been riding the el in and out of town lately when I can’t think. Let me call you in sick, and we can just ride until we feel like getting off. Like we used to.” He paused in front of her. “We don’t have to talk. But I’ll sit beside you. And we’ll be okay.”

“It’s too late to find a sub. Besides, we both have cars now,” she said. She slid down off the washer and went to the steps. He followed her, and she stopped. His breath was warm on her neck.

“Martha, please say you’re still with me, that you haven’t given up on me yet. Can I touch you? Can I hug you? I don’t know what to do.”

“Me either,” she said, starting up the steps. He followed a few steps behind her. “I guess I’ll take a shower, then,” he said.

While he showered, Martha dressed for school, trying to compose herself. Once she was dressed, she stood in front of the mirror. What she saw was a cheap, shapeless purple blouse with green polka dots and fake pearl buttons—the garb of an out-of-touch teacher no longer taken seriously by her students, let alone by herself. And her woolen skirt, the kind that gets people wondering if there is a spider web in the musty crotch beneath, hung heavy from her hips in a rigid triangle. As soon as Christopher shut off the shower, she hurried out the door, wondering how anyone could possibly go on like this.

On the playground, Martha tightened her scarf against a gust of cold, dry air. Brown leaves crackled along the asphalt, then climbed with the howling wind, and a herd of boys raced across the field

A slap on her back, and there was Connie, the kindergarten teacher, in her puffy pink coat. “Martha, hun, I don’t want to be nosy or nothing, but I noticed someone hasn’t bought her *Winter Wonderland* tickets yet.” She clicked her long red and green fingernails off each other. There were even mini Santa decals on each tip. “It’s Friday night, you know.”

“It must’ve slipped my mind.”

“Hi Miss Miles!” Maya called as she bounced by, holding Beverly’s hand. These two sat beside each other in the back of her classroom, their desks a little closer together than anyone else’s, always giggling, whispering, and passing notes.

“Sit-down dinner at the Radison ballroom this year,” said Connie. “It’ll be top notch, the best ever, like a prom for the teachers. It’s black tie so all us girls can squeeze into new evening gowns and see if our hubbies still look sexy in tuxes.”

“I forgot you’re in charge this year,” Martha said, remembering Christopher in his black suit at the funeral. It had been too small in the arms and legs, and he’d looked like a little boy having a growth spurt. She noticed Maya and Beverly were already at the far corner of the playground, where the trees grew tall. They huddled to the ground with rounded backs. They both wore white coats, and appeared to be protecting something.

“Last year Principal Evans was singing *Little Drummer Boy* on Karaoke and he was so drunk on egg nog he started stripping!” Connie let out a squeal. “I’ll never forget it!”

“Oh?” Martha squinted and saw that now the girls were digging with cupped hands, scooping in quick rhythm like wind-up dolls.

“We’ve all gotta celebrate the start of winter break together. It’s the one time all year that the teachers can get down and boogie.” Connie swiveled her hips as if trying to edge out of a glass jar. “Shoot, there she is again!” Connie shook her head and waved her hand to the chain-linked fence.

A hunched figure in a long brown coat lurked on the other side.

“The kids are callin’ her ‘The Jesus lady’,” Connie said.

“The what?” A group of fifth grade boys crept along the fence toward her.

“She’s always sayin’ ‘Jesus loves you’ and staring at them with crazy eyes. She’s insane and needs to be put back away for good.”

The boys crowded around the old woman, then darted away, hooting and laughing.

“I’m chasing her off,” Connie huffed with feigned exasperation. “She’s a danger to our children. I’m bringing this up at the next PTA meeting for sure!” she declared valiantly, and headed to the fence.

Maya and Beverly were no longer by the trees, and there was no trace of their hole; it was as if they’d never been there. But when Martha looked back to the fence, she found them huddled with the old lady. Any second they would sprint away in

fear, she was sure. A minute passed, and they didn't budge. Connie was only halfway there; though her steps were quick, they were short, and she just inched along. With animated precision, the girls gestured toward the hole, and the strange lady nodded at them. Were they letting *her* in on their secret? Connie arrived at the fence, and shooed them all off; Martha was relieved, for some reason. Maya and Beverly walked away from the fence with their arms around each other's shoulders like interlocking puzzle pieces. Martha's throat ached, and she folded her arms tightly across her chest. Watching Maya and Beverly walk toward her like this, she couldn't help but remember exactly what it had been like to run around the playground with a best friend, to lose yourselves so much in each other that you almost feel invisible. She'd had many best friends as a child, but wasn't that true for everybody? The goose bumps on her legs chafed against her thick tights. Maya and Beverly whispered, pointed over at her, then giggled, hands over mouths. She thought for brief a moment that they were laughing at her because Christopher was cheating, but knew that was ridiculous—how could they have found out about that? But still, they had to have been laughing at *something* about her. Her outfit? Her long skinny legs? Her too-serious face?

“Miss Miles, can we ask you something?” Maya stood before her, looking up, and holding Beverly's hand in a straight “V” with a mittened grip. Maya's white fur-lined hood framed her delicate face, and Beverly was sturdily wrapped in a hat and scarf.

“Of course.” Martha squared her shoulders.

“Promise not to tell?” Maya said, licking her pink lips.

“It’s very important,” Beverly urged.

“You know you don’t have to be shy with me,” Martha said. But her voice sounded too eager in her ears.

“We buried something very important,” Beverly said. “And do you think anyone saw where we hid it?” She kept unwavering eye contact. Maya’s brown eyes glimmered, and she nodded.

“I doubt it. Everyone is busy or pre-occupied around here. I’m sure your secret’s safe.” Looking down at them like this, with such need, feeling so tall, she imagined her own eyes looked yellow and beady.

“Are you sure?” Maya said, and looked to Beverly.

“I’m perfectly sure. But you know what Principal Evans says about digging in the playground.”

“We’re not suppose to dig because we’ll fall in the holes and get hurt,” Beverly answered with confidence.

“Are we in trouble?” Maya looked at the ground.

Martha fiddled with a button on her coat. What could she say? “Just be careful next time. You wouldn’t want someone else to catch you.”

“Oh, we will,” Maya said with relief as she pulled on Beverly’s arm, and in a flash of crinkly whiteness, they were gone. Now they leaned against the red brick wall of the school, and Beverly whispered to Maya. They both let out big laughs, like volcanoes exploding, and Maya bent over herself. Surely they weren’t laughing at her

again. A minute later, Maya was still laughing, losing her breath and gasping for air. Martha couldn't bear it anymore, and though it was five minutes early, she blew her whistle three times. There'd been Nicole in third grade to whom she'd passed notes in pen caps, and then in fourth grade, she and Lucy came up with a secret language while they ran laps around the playground all recess long. And Melinda and Lori in fifth grade. She'd even had a best friend in high school, just when she'd started to feel like she was too old for all that silliness. The students began to line up at the door to go in. Maya and Beverly passed by without even looking at her, holding tight smirks on their faces.

Martha walked into the teacher's lounge. It was stuffy in there, as always, the walls a creamy peach.

"Here to get those tickets?" Connie said, and grabbed the flyer from Martha's hand. Susan, the other kindergarten teacher, slouched on the sofa paging through *People*.

"What's this now?" Connie scrunched her pointy little nose at the paper. "Suze, listen to this."

Susan looked up but kept flipping through her magazine, as if still reading. Her frizzy yellow hair floated, lighter than air, around a pale egg of a head.

"Another one of these flyers," Connie said. "Don't mean to be rude, Martha, but we do get a kick outta you sometimes." Martha forced a laugh though she didn't know what Connie really meant. Connie cleared her throat, and read in a mock-intellectual manner, "Fruitfulness and Poverty: The Age Old Struggle."

"What's that even mean?" Susan asked, mouth half-open, dully annoyed.

"Please join Ms. Miles' third grade class in their exploration of the causes and effects of the economic inequality in our nation. Friday, December 19th from 12-3."

Martha looked from Connie's fleshy feet squeezed into gold high heels, to her own chunky black shoes, and almost made out her severe face in the shiny, rounded toe.

"Martha, no offense, but don't you think this is a little mature for your students?"

Susan chuckled, but her hair stayed put. “Yeah and what was that other one you did? Something about that old stream at Naylor’s Run where all the bums hang out?”

“I think you’re underestimating—” But Martha stopped. Her head was light, and her fingers tingled. She realized she hadn’t eaten anything today.

“Will there be snacks and refreshments?” Susan licked her puffy lips.

“No,” Martha said. “I hadn’t planned on it.” As politely as she could, she tugged the flyer from Connie’s grip, smoothed it on the bulletin board, and pinned it up.

“Martha dear, look what I’ve got for you.” Connie waved two black, silver-embossed tickets in front of her face. “One for you and one for that Christopher of yours.”

Christopher. Suddenly she remembered how light she’d felt when he’d put her on the washer this morning, and imagined she’d looked slumped like a rag doll. She closed her eyes, and shook the image from her head. “I actually think we already have plans,” she said. “You know, with the holiday season and—”

“Like what? A date with the *Jesus lady*?” Connie said, elbowing Martha in the ribs. “I knew it, I knew it,” she teased. “That’s your secret, isn’t it?”

Susan’s eyes shone, and she shut her magazine. “No. Do not tell me you’re friends with the freak! Are you for real?”

Connie whispered now, “You know she was a teacher here in the late 80s? Could have been one of our co-workers.”

“Stop! You’re giving me the goose bumps!” Susan twisted and squealed.

Martha had never seen her look so young.

“But then she went cuckoo, and had to be put away.”

“Why?” Martha lingered by the door, one hand on the frame.

“She was just crazy, like she thought she was this witch, and started filling her classroom with brooms, and capes, and one of those big black pots.”

“And tell her about those spells,” Susan said, bouncing steadily on the couch.

“She once put a spell on one of her students, and he wouldn’t stop running around the school naked peeing on all the walls. Have you ever heard of anything so disgusting?”

“That’s freaking gross,” Susan said.

Yellow stars blotted the room, and everything started to darken. Martha grabbed a chair and sat down, resting her forehead on the table.

“You okay hun?” Connie was right there, rubbing her back in firm circles, around and around. “Martha?”

“I’m fine,” she said, sitting up slowly. Her eyes refocused on the boxy white microwave. “Just a little dizzy.”

Connie slid the tickets right up to her. “Come on now, it’ll be fun. Everyone’s going to be there.”

“But how do you know so much about her? It has to be rumors,” Martha said, rubbing her eyes. She reached into her briefcase, and pulled out her checkbook.

“Oh no, Martha, this is the truth. You can tell just by looking at her.” Connie dropped a butterscotch TastyKake on the table. “Looks like you should eat something, hun.”

Martha scratched her signature. The ‘M’s’ were too tall and slanted.

“From what I remember about Christopher, he needs to get out just as much as you do.” Connie took the check. “Maybe you two will get drunk and make out on the dance floor.” She tilted her head back, and chortled at the thought. “God, it’ll be a blast.”

“I’ll be going now,” Martha said, getting up. “You two take care.”

“Martha,” called Susan, “Why don’t you come out to happy hour tonight? It lightens us all up a little.”

“I’ll try to be there,” Martha said. She backed her way out the door, and found herself alone in the shadowed hallway. White string lights on either wall reflected blurry and muted in the shiny floor. She walked down the hall slowly, thinking about how Christopher might be riding the subway by now. She imagined him sitting in the very back of an empty blue and beige car, looking small, staring out the window. She and Christopher had first met at the 69th street subway station, and at the time she’d actually enjoyed telling people the details of their uncommon romance. She’d tell near strangers, like the hairdresser, about how he never told her where he was going, even when she asked. “I’m not sure,” he’d always say. “I like to leave things like this open.” She’d never really met anyone like him before. One day, after he’d been sitting next to her for about a week,

out of the blue, he placed his hand on top of hers, and though his fingertips were cold, she'd felt a faint warmth between her tightly crossed legs. "You ride the subway for entertainment?" she'd asked him, giddy, suddenly wanting to know more. "I ride for the same reasons you do," he'd responded, ever elusive. But Martha had reveled in their unspoken connection. She liked riding the subway because of the insulation of the dark, narrow tunnel, and the faint rocking of the car on the tracks; maybe Christopher was thinking of all these things, too. She'd never told her mother about Christopher's long rides on the subway; she wouldn't have approved of such *pointless acts*. But back then maybe they had really been in love. She'd called it that in her head, at least. He'd always surprised her with his unexpected insights, and she'd liked to think that he got her, that he always knew exactly how she felt, even if she never said a thing. This was comforting, and there was no denying that back then, he'd made her feel at least a little less alone especially at night in bed, or when he was there at the table on what would have otherwise been an empty Sunday morning.

5

In her classroom a few hours later, Martha snaked through clusters of her students preparing for Friday's open house. Thank goodness Connie and Susan only teach kindergarten, she thought, or else these kids would be eating baby food till fifth grade. Had they all forgotten she'd been 'Teacher of the Year' twice in a row?—no small feat at all. Furthermore, going to Happy Hour with Connie and Susan and their whole shallow gang would most certainly not lighten her up. She understood children, she did, even if no one else seemed to realize that. Look at Brendan, Katie and Fiona cutting out mittens and scarves and pieces of fruit to paste on the donation box, gently conversing all the while.

Just then, two light tugs at her skirt.

It was Beverly—no Maya in sight. "Bend down," Beverly said, chewing the collar of her purple sweatshirt, "so I can reach your ear better."

Martha did as she was told.

"Could you please, Ms. Miles, meet me and Maya in the cubby corner in five minutes?" She stopped for a big breath, and Martha smelled graham crackers and apple juice. "Maya will go back in one minute. I'll go in three minutes, and you go in five."

"It's that important?" Martha whispered back.

“You’re right. It’s very important.” Beverly shook her head up and down, pursing her pink lips. “We need your help *so* bad.”

So, in exactly one minute, Maya disappeared into the back, long-legged, and stealthy as a lynx; the plan was in motion. Martha suppressed a smile. Despite herself, she wondered if they’d tell her what they’d hidden in the hole. That had to be it. She closed her eyes, and imagined underground. But all she saw was a pink, pulsing, throbbing breath—nothing solid, nothing real, so quickly, she opened them back up again.

Beverly now sat alone with Lucinda, the quiet, freckled redhead who was always looking up and around at the air like a kitten detecting ghosts. Recently Maya and Beverly had taken Lucinda under their wing. She sat with them at lunch, they all held hands in the halls, and for bathroom breaks, it was the three of them at once. Lucinda sometimes ran errands for them across the playground, and Martha couldn’t tell if they were just using her for a messenger. Now Lucinda slid Beverly a note across the desk, eyes on the floor.

Then it was Beverly who slunk away. Martha eyed the clock to make sure she wouldn’t miss her cue. Fifty more seconds. She probably shouldn’t leave her class out of sight, but they’d be just fine for a few minutes. Finally, as the second hand slid past twelve, Martha headed back, trying not to walk too fast. To be so excited about a third grade secret was pathetic, and maybe even unprofessional, but at least she wasn’t thinking about Christopher. Then she started to. She pictured how small and round his butt had looked in those red yoga shorts this morning. Like two crunchy apples.

For a moment the image seemed so foreign that it was hard to believe she'd ever touched his body.

“Um, ‘scuse me Ms. Miles,” Lucinda squeaked as she passed. “I have a present for you, from art class.”

Martha squatted beside Lucinda carefully. “Another present? Lucinda, you didn’t have to do this. Remember the heart you gave me? I have it hanging above my mantel at home.”

Lucinda’s fingers shook as she handed Martha the folded paper. “Open it now if you want.”

Martha unfolded the sheet and smoothed the creases down on the desk.

“It’s of me and my mommy. We’re flying up in the air, like birds, see?”

Lucinda pointed hard with a dirty nail to two crayoned figures that appeared weirdly half-human, half-bird. One was black, the other magenta. “And look,” she pointed at a beaklike smile. “Wanna know why we’re laughing? Cause we’re never coming back. That’s what she says.”

“Lucinda, what a beautiful picture! But you know who might love it even more than me?”

Lucinda furrowed her brow and picked at her nail.

“I just know it would make your mom so happy to have this picture.” Long silver clouds pointed at the ends like icicles, and the bare tree branches were bony arms reaching to the sky.

“But I made it for you. I want you to have it. It’s not nice to say no to a present.”

This forcefulness was not Lucinda at all. Martha moved in a little closer, and lowered her voice. “Did Maya and Beverly make you do this? You can tell me the truth.”

Lucinda concentrated hard on folding the paper. “We’re all best friends. We got best friend charms at the mall,” she said, and reached beneath her thick red cardigan, showing Martha a chain with a small gold piece of a heart.

“Just let me know if they try to make you do anything you don’t want to.”

“They’re waiting for you,” Lucinda said as she handed the wad of paper back to Martha. “It’s for you. I made it just for you.”

A wall of cubbies separated the coat nook from the rest of the room, and Maya and Beverly waited for her at the far end against the wall, shoulder to shoulder. The cubbies were bright blue, and cast a deep-sea glow on the girls’ earnest faces. “We thought you weren’t coming,” Maya said. “We have to ask you something very very important.” Her long fingers twisted together.

“Don’t be nervous.” Martha squatted and smoothed her woolen skirt over her legs. “You know you can ask me anything.” Elbow on knee, and chin in hand, Martha shot them a look of concern. But she imagined they realized how fake it was.

“That’s why we like you best,” Maya said. “We can tell you stuff like this and you always help us.” Maya turned to Beverly, and tucked her fine hair behind her ears

delicately, like a mother. She quietly urged, “Go ahead. You say it just like we practiced in the bathroom.”

Beverly looked from Maya to Martha, stood up straight, and said, “You know how sometimes on special days our parents are allowed to come to class so that they can see all we’ve done?” Beverly took a breath, and continued, “Friday’s a special day too.”

This was all they wanted? “Your parents want to come on Friday, Beverly?”

“No, my parents both go to work on school days. But someone else’s does,” Beverly said. “Just one mom.” She paused, and then whispered, “Lucinda’s mommy.”

“Of course Lucinda’s mom can come. Was she too scared to ask me herself?”

Maya stepped forward and whispered through cupped hands, “Her real mommy, not the one that adopted her but the one that no one lets her see.”

“Oh.” Martha’s stomach dropped. She stood up and stepped back. “If Lucinda isn’t allowed to see her real mom outside of school, she can’t see her in here either. It’s against the law.”

“Pleeease,” Maya urged, grabbing Martha’s wrist with her warm hand. “We can sneak her in, and no one will know. We promise not to tell.” She squeezed Martha’s fingers tight.

“She misses her mommy a lot,” Beverly said. “She told us that she cries every night ‘cause she’s so sad.”

“I’m sorry,” Martha said. She had forgotten that Lucinda had been adopted. “Sometimes grown ups have so much else on their minds that it’s hard for them to know when—”

Maya slipped her limp hand from Martha’s and took Beverly’s. “It’s not fair,” Maya said, with a quivering chin. “We promised her. It was going to be our Christmas present to her.”

“Member how on Monday you said it’s not nice to be mean to poor people just because they’re poor?” Beverly said.

“Yes—?” Martha put her hands deep in her skirt pockets, and her fists clenched.

“The only reason they took her away is because her mommy didn’t have enough money. That’s what she says. But she was a good mommy. Lucinda says that they wrote books together and got dressed up and her mom always played with her whenever she wanted. You know that picture she just gave to you? That’s her and her *real* mommy playing together.”

“Can we pleeeeaase,” Maya begged, jumping up and down.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” Martha said. “This is a rule that we can’t break.”

“Fine,” Maya said, biting her lip. “You’re not our friend anymore.”

“We thought you were a nice teacher. You were our favorite.” Hand-in-hand, they walked away.

Loud enough for Martha to hear, Beverly said, “Now we know she’s just mean and a big mean liar.”

“Yeah and, and, now we know why she doesn’t have any friends, and no one likes her,” Maya said. And then they were gone.

They were right about her, she thought as she looked to the cubbies, all stuffed with bright puffy coats, vinyl mittens, and scarves and hats. Of course Maya and Beverly were trying to manipulate her, but they were still right. Connie and Susan even felt comfortable laughing in her face. She placed her finger on a hologram mitten, and the purple robot head changed to red before her eyes. Soon her students would gather back here to pull hats with pom-poms over their eyes. They’d return home once again where the trees and hugs would sparkle with merriment. Her own heavy black cloak hung on its own hook on its own wall, like a cape. She shivered. She was the teacher, and maybe it was natural to feel a little excluded from the students, but she wasn’t even sure anymore. The problem was that she remembered how good it felt to be on the other side—the secrets, the intrigue, and the never-ending possibility. All the way back in high school, she could still remember Mrs. Ciminera’s hungry, sallow face when, outside during a fire drill, she’d falsely chastised Martha and that best friend of hers. Amelia was her name. In the middle of all of their classmates, she and Amelia had held each other’s cold-tipped fingers and talked close. It had just started flurrying, and they were giddier than usual. Amelia’s cheeks were pink, and her eyes were shining, Martha remembered the moment vividly, as if looking at a photograph. *I knew the instant we met that we’d be friends*, Amelia told her. *How? How did you know?* Martha asked her. *I knew you were lying when*

you told me you had a twin sister, but now she's dead, Amelia said. But you started stalking me first, Martha insisted.

It was then that Mrs. Ciminera, thick-banged and gawky, interrupted them, and took them aside. *Talk about me all you want, she said, just try not to be so obvious about it.* When she walked away, they laughed for only a second at how awkward and paranoid she was, and then Amelia continued, *No, you were the one stalking me, following me to the bathroom, leaving me notes, touching my hair and twirling it in your fingers.* Amelia's breath smelled like snow when she got close and told Martha, *I could talk to you forever. I get sick of people, but no, not you. Never you. There's always more to say.* Only a few months later, Amelia had moved, and Martha couldn't quite remember why it was that she'd had to leave in the middle of the school year.

"Mrs. Miles," Ryan called out to her. "I need more paste. I'm all run out."

"Be right there," Martha said. She grabbed a tub of paste from the closet, and headed back to the main part of the classroom, trying for a calm smile. Luckily, things were going on as they had been before, even Maya and Beverly were busy coloring a poster for the 'Needs and Wants' booth, so she gave the paste to Ryan, went straight to her desk, and sat down. At her own small desk, Lucinda rested her chin on crossed arms, peering out the window. Lucinda would be mad at her now, too. Martha wondered if the whole story was really true, but immediately suspected that it was. Lucinda looked so small hunched over the desk like that. Her legs swung below her, barely brushing ground. Lucinda wanted her real mother. That was all.

Gerry, a skinny little boy with black hair plastered to his head, already a loner, approached her desk. The way he drooped his head as he walked reminded her of Christopher's timid posture. Gerry wielded a great big posterboard before him. Martha helped slide it onto her desk, then called him over to her side so they could look at it together. He stood so close to her that his bony arm brushed her elbow. Gerry had filled the entire poster with one bold, black-crayoned spiral, like a snarling tornado ready to bite. Martha had put Gerry in charge of the 'Welcome sign' for Friday. In silence, they both looked at it. She should have known he'd come up with something like this.

"You want to tell me about your picture?" she said quietly.

Gerry shook his head, no.

"Good," Martha said. "Because you're not supposed to talk about masterpieces."

Gerry wrinkled his forehead, took a step away. Martha opened her drawer, and pulled out masking tape and a piece of chocolate. "Shhhhh, don't tell anyone about it," she said as she handed the candy to him. He almost smiled as he slid it into his pocket.

Side by side, they walked to the door, and in preparation for Friday, taped his drawing up. It looked good there, monstrous and bold, right in the middle. A strange welcome of sorts, she couldn't help but think.

6

Martha's knees felt knobby on the hard ground. Maya and Beverly had patted down the dirt with care, and their handprints were pointy and spread, like baby starfish. She shouldn't be here, deceiving her students like this (especially these two), acting so crazy, she really shouldn't. But here she was, pawing at the half-frozen earth weakly, with the drunken futility of trying to recall one of her faint, fleeting dreams. Maybe they hadn't even buried anything—could she have made the whole thing up? She still hadn't eaten anything, and by now her head felt swollen and light. And who was she kidding anyway? —not herself, certainly not herself—real answers aren't simple enough to keep themselves neat and tidy in shallow playground holes. She knew that much. But still. She'd never claimed to have self-control, but she wished she could muster up at least a little dignity once in a while. Alas, she kept digging.

Between the skinny, slanted, looming trees, lamps glowed warm through square windows. White lights frolicked about a Christmas tree that shot up high. A star gleamed down from above. Hours ago, all the others, the teachers and the secretaries, students and janitors, had returned home to festive houses like these. She and Christopher didn't have a tree (he'd given up holidays when he'd started Yoga), so her mother's ornaments grew moldy boxed up in the basement, and surely their windows would be the darkest on the block. But no, it couldn't be true that all this light pouring from strangers' houses meant that those inside were happy. Everyone

had problems— happiness, whatever that really meant, might not even exist. Still, she had the urge to press her fingers, skeletal things (they trembled now—long, white, and bony), against these windows to warm them as if over a fire. Anything that wasn't hers, that's what she wanted.

She dug faster now, and felt blood pulsing at her fingertips. At last she snagged her nail on something rough and pointy. This had to be their secret. With one hand, she kept digging, and with the other, she rocked the object back and forth, easing it from the ground little by little. And then, in her numbing hand, she held a stick. A plain old stick with no branches or knobs to decode. No smeared blood from pricked fingers (we're blood sisters now!). Not even an *M+B* carved in. It was a flimsy thing, too—she bowed it, and could have split it in half. She sank into her legs, still running her hand up and down the smooth grain. Maybe this wasn't the right hole. Oh, but it had to be. But why would their secret be a stick?

“Behold Janice: keeper of the hole!” The voice swept shrill like a wild wind; Martha's teeth chattered as she looked up.

She remembered how Susan had called this woman a “freak,” and how utterly sharp and dangerous the insult had sounded. But from up close, it seemed to be an entirely different story. This woman's eyes were almond-shaped, and so dark blue they were nearly purple. Mesmerizing, she couldn't deny. Her cheekbones were prominent, their angle somehow catlike. Her skin looked smooth, milky, even; she seemed much younger than Martha had expected. She couldn't be more than forty. A hot pink headscarf was knotted tightly under her chin. She wore dirty white Keds, and

a pointy yellow nail scratched through a thready hole in the toe. Martha tried to fathom what kind of body lurked beneath that heavy mousy coat. Homeless, Martha thought immediately, the shoes, the scarf, the ratty red hair poking out like a bird's nest. No wonder they were all so scared of her. The people around here treated the homeless like they were committing a horrible crime, and *always ALWAYS* dangerous. Martha tried not to think about it that way; she wasn't really that scared right now, just shocked. But true, if she was alone on a dark street at night, and a man was warming himself over one of those heat vents, in fear of him grabbing one of her legs, she might step off the curb into the street.

“Beware, my wand!” The woman thrust her stubby black umbrella against the fence again and again. Then, suddenly, she stopped; the metal shivered, tinny and hollow. Boldly she admonished: “Godalmighty aren't you ashamed of your little self!” Then, she said drearily, “Wait'll I tell Maya and Beverly.”

“No, please don't,” Martha said, trying not to plead. “I'm their teacher.” She stuck the stick back in the hole, tossed the loose dirt on top, and patted it down fast and hard. “I'm just trying to protect—”

“Have you seen my husband?” The woman pulled a child's viewfinder toy from her pocket, and put it to her eyes, jerking her head about.

“He's lost?” Martha raised herself from the ground, and took a small step to the fence. Then another.

“I've been meaning to meet you,” the woman said ominously, taking the viewfinder from her face, and dropping it in her pocket. There were deep red creases

around her eyes, and Martha noticed golden sparks and speckles in her nearly purple irises. They were beautiful, like nothing she'd ever seen on a human before. Martha thought of woods, of old women hidden in cabins. She couldn't tell if this woman was drunk or on drugs, or just a little off. Martha wanted to run, but couldn't look away from those eyes, wild one instant, then lucid and penetrating the next. "Why did you want to meet me?" She linked her fingers through the fence.

"I've been watching you," the woman said, and trailed off into a smile, both crooked and coy.

"You have?"

"I know you."

"You do?" Martha said, more surprised than frightened.

"You're not like the other teachers."

"How do you know?" Martha rested her forehead on the metal.

"You stand there, watching." The woman paused, looked around. Then she whispered, "In all of our sadness, we live close to the soul of the world." Her lips, beneath the smeared red paint, were full and luscious; could any of this be true?

"What do you mean by that?" Martha said.

"You'll help me," the woman said, meeting Martha's eyes.

"I can try," she said

"Please say you trust me."

"I hardly even know you."

"But you trust me already, don't you?"

“I think I do, but it’s such an odd—” She was speaking without really realizing it.

The woman broke in: “My Lucinda, my one and only, is in your class. And I know she must be a good student, she’s so insightful and mature and—”

“Lucinda Walters?” Martha said, but was instantly sorry. You don’t give away information about your students. Ever. But then, Martha found herself gasping for air. “You’re her mother. I can’t believe it.” She weakened into a shudder.

The woman’s voice rose and fell as she spoke: “Want to know why those bureaucratic fucking devils took her away from me?” She opened and closed her umbrella frantically, then dropped it to the ground. “I was telling her the truth. Because I was telling the goddamned truth to my daughter, that’s why they came and snatched her away.” Now both her arms shot out before her, shaking. Her voice reached shrill and pointy heights, like a bird’s broken bone: “And she was screaming and I was screaming and they didn’t give a fuck and took my baby away! I tried to sing to her, I tried, but I couldn’t and she was crying—And she won’t leave my dreams, every night she won’t leave me alone in my dreams. She needs me—” Her words trailed off, and, suddenly, she looked tired enough to fall asleep right there.

Lucinda’s other mother packed her chicken salad sandwiches on wheat bread. Sometimes when Martha passed Lucinda’s table in the cafeteria, Lucinda would call her over, peel off the bread, and softly but with pride, point out to Martha that, “Look, my mom puts grapes in my chicken salad because that’s how I like it best.”

Regaining strength, Janice urged, “Help me, and I promise I’ll help you. I have to see her and hug her, just once. I have to talk to her. And the playground’s no good. The police would come again and arrest me, they’re watching me, they never stop watching me. You’re my last chance.”

Martha stepped back. She thought she smelled sweet-stale alcohol. “I wish I could help you, but I can’t.” Martha wondered if this woman was capable of hitting Lucinda, and for a brief moment imagined her face all red and twisted in rage.

“Do you know what it’s like to have your baby taken away? Do you? You obviously don’t fucking know that I walk through this world alone because everyone thinks there’s something wrong with me and the only one that could be made to understand is in somebody else’s house being fed sugar and TV and poison and the only thing that’s real is me and where the hell is my goddamn husband?” She gasped for air now, barely wheezing. Yellowy mucous ran from her nose to her mouth. “Or Sally?” Out of breath, she stopped; her eyes went blank. “Who else,” she said to no one.

It seemed the woman had forgotten Martha was even there, and her blank expression reminded Martha of her mother’s first stroke. How helpless she’d been when she’d found her mother frozen like a statue, leaning on the bathroom sink. How tightly she’d clenched the porcelain edge. “No,” Martha said a little too loudly, shaking her head fast. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“Nobody would have to know,” said the woman, snapping back. “You even said that you trust me. Everyone trusts me, everyone says that at first, but when it comes down to it, no one seems to ever want to help. Are you just another hypocrite?”

“I wish I could do something, I do.” She wanted to tell this woman that, no, she wasn’t like the rest, and that, in fact, she was teaching her students about the homeless.

“Help me and I’ll help you, and you know you need me. Please let me see her. I’ll do anything. And then we’ll make a potion for you right away, and conduct a *Passage Ceremony*. All you need is yourself, and a few other ingredients. A feather, one of your grandmother’s earrings, a lock of a newborn’s hair—you know any babies?—a dog’s collar, a bloody—”

“No thanks,” Martha interrupted. A lock of newborn’s hair? Her armpits and fingertips went cold. Was this what Connie and Susan had been talking about? “I don’t think I need—” Martha backed up, then turned to the wide open field. Across the playground, the bright red monkey bars glowed in the dimness, and looked too tall for kids, too wet and slippery. It had turned into a clear night, and Martha could make out hints of stars. She was acting cowardly, like all the rest, turning away like this.

“There’s no reason to be scared of me,” the woman said, her delivery even and reassuring. Martha turned back to the fence, and said, “Maybe I’ll see you again sometime.”

“You won’t be able to stay away,” the strange woman said, almost as if teasing.

Martha laughed nervously. “You said your name is Janice?”

She smirked and nodded. “Good to finally meet you, Martha,” she said, and headed down the street. “You haven’t been a disappointment,” she called over her shoulder.

Martha walked home briskly with her eyes on the ground; the houselights on either side of her were soft blurs. Once she slowed down to peer into a dimly lit phone booth, but then she started to imagine movements on either side of her. Of course she was just paranoid. What if she ran into Janice again out here on the street with no fence between them?

When Martha arrived home, it felt a little warmer than usual, and she recognized the smell of Christopher's spicy tomato sauce. He stood at the stove, stirring with one hand, and yanking at his short dark hair with the other. "Martha," he said, looking over his shoulder, and smiling at her. "It's so good to see you." He wore his blue "I'm not cooking, I'm meditating" apron.

"Is it?" she said, a little confused. She emptied her pockets onto the counter, as usual—the *Winter Wonderland* tickets, some change from lunch, and a balled up tissue. She sat on the steps to untie her boots.

"Let me get you some wine," he said, and quite gracefully he dashed to the cabinet for a glass, like a regular host—or a lonely bachelor desperate to impress. "I must admit I've had a few glasses already this evening," he said as he poured the wine. "I know I gave up drinking when I started Yoga, but I like to think there are bound to be exceptions, and I shouldn't really put myself down for slipping up here and there, right?" He handed her a big, round glass of red wine. "Cheers," he said, and clinked his glass on hers. "To nights like these."

"Cheers," she said. They had never done this before, she was sure of that. Only at their wedding when they'd had to.

"And to learning to accept the natural balance of good and bad in life. This is all there is," he said, and swirled his wine.

She hid her face in her glass, and gulped it down. He did seem a little drunk, the way his cheeks were patchy and flushed, and how there was a sleepy-but-kind gleam to his eyes. “Cheers,” Martha repeated, meeting his eyes. They used to get drunk together, in the very beginning, at least. She would get all warm and giddy on wine, and he’d end up contemplative on whiskey, telling her such nice things, like that she reminded him of a doe, or simply that he was thankful that he’d found her, so thankful, she couldn’t even imagine.

“Martha, I rode the subway today even though you weren’t with me.”

“I should have taken off today, I know,” she said. “I would have gone with you.” She didn’t think that was true, but then why was she saying it?

“I wish you had,” he said, bringing two plates to the long dining room table. They’d never really used the dining room, even in the beginning. He’d spread her mother’s red and green paisley tablecloth. She’d thought for sure it had been boxed up in the basement. “But alone I got a lot of thinking done,” he continued. “And now I have so much to tell you. Over dinner, I hope,” he said, folding the cloth napkins in triangles, and smoothing them out with care. “I picked up our favorite raviolis while I was downtown.” He’d even placed the brass candlesticks on little snowflake doilies.

“I think I’ll shower while you finish up. Unless you need my help,” she said heading up the stairs. Would he force her to listen about the cheating? Or his infertility? She didn’t think she could bear it.

“Go ahead,” he said. “This is my dinner for you. You don’t have to do anything at all.”

In the shower, as the hot water streamed over her scalp, and soap foamed down her stomach to her legs, she took her breasts into her hands softly, as if they were someone else's. She touched the delicately shriveling skin, trying her hardest to show her body care. She remembered those few times before the Fair Acres move, when she'd had to bathe her mother. She was no longer flexible enough to sit down into the bathtub, so Martha held onto her mother's arm tight so she wouldn't slip. "I know you could do this yourself," Martha would say, "but I want to make sure you're alright." "Of course, dear," her mother would say, dreamily. How heavy and cold to the touch her drooping skin had been, and all those creases and crevices behind her knees, beneath her breasts, on her stomach, that she had ignored—afraid to even brush over them with the washrag.

Martha went to Christopher's dinner that night in her blue terrycloth robe, slow from the shower, with steamy soft skin.

"What splendid dinner attire," he said as he slid the chair out, then inched her right up to another full glass of red wine. He sat down across from her. He'd dimmed the lights, and the two tall, red candles gleamed and flickered.

"Nice atmosphere," she said.

"You don't think it's too dark?" he said.

"It's perfect," she said, holding her glass to her mouth.

He served her pasta, grated cheese on top, and even added a sprig of curly parsley for presentation.

“I noticed those tickets on the counter, Martha,” he said, tracing his pointer finger along the paisley design. “We haven’t gone to *Winter Wonderland* in years,” he said, almost wistfully.

“We never really had fun.”

“If we set out to have fun, we will. I was just remembering that night we danced in the coatroom.”

Martha coughed a little. “Oh, no this one's black tie, and you know that annoying teacher at school, Connie, well she's in charge, and—”

“I could rent a tux,” he interrupted. “You could pick out the cummerbund color, you know, depending on what color dress you wanted to wear. I mean, if you even wanted to match. Is it cool to match or not match? I don't even know anymore.” He sounded sincere and looked small with his hands folded in his lap under the table like that. “Maybe if you were wearing a black dress, I could maybe get a red cummerbund?”

“I’m not sure I want to go yet,” she said.

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Maybe you’ll think about it.”

They ate for a few minutes in silence. At first it was hard for Martha to even swallow, but the second glass of wine warmed her up. She took small bites, and concentrated on chewing persistently.

“It’s peaceful to eat in silence, isn’t it?” Christopher said. “It’s how the Tibetan monks eat.” He paused. “I mean, that’s what I read, anyway.”

She sipped more wine; by now it was smooth and soft in her stomach like velvet.

“Can I tell you, Martha, that today on the subway there was this baby across from me and I got to thinking about babies again, and I couldn’t stop. Don’t you think we still have a lot to talk about?” His eyes were wide, his lips pursed—he looked almost like an owl.

“You think you might be obsessed with having a baby?”

“What?” His eyes narrowed.

“I’m not trying to offend you, I was just wondering.”

“Martha,” Christopher said. “Imagine if we had a little girl.” He pressed his finger into the blade of his butter knife. “I’m not too proud to look into artificial insemination. I promise. I’ve been doing some reading on the Internet, and it doesn’t seem so strange anymore.”

Martha ran both hands through her damp hair. “Why are you so desperate for a baby?” She took another sip of wine. She thought of her mother in the shower, alone, frozen—clutching a frosted metal bar for support. “I don’t know if I even want one. I can’t tell.”

His mouth shriveled tight. “I’m not *desperate*.”

“You think it’ll make us happy?”

“You think we’re unhappy?”

“I don’t know what to call it,” she said.

“Didn’t you say you wanted a baby before? Wasn’t that what you said?”

“Things are different now,” she said, and shook her head. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d gone on like a little boy, *I promise I’ll do everything. I’ll change all the diapers, and put it to bed, and watch it all the time...*

“That lady, you know, I don’t care about her like—I just met her because I felt normal around her or—. She made me feel sexy.”

Martha cringed and pressed her palms into her eyes. “Please don’t tell me about it.”

“Okay,” he said, leaning over the table. He hesitated, then kissed her cheek, leaving a small wet spot near her eye. “I’ve always wished I could have seen you when you were a baby, watched you grow up.”

“Do you?” This was the type of thing he used to say on the subway, the type of thing she would have shared with some of the other teachers at school. *Isn’t he strange*, she might have said, trying to keep her smile under control.

“I wonder about it a lot, I’m not sure why.”

She’d had jaundice as a baby, colic, too. She’d taught herself to tie her shoes at three, under the table at her father’s wake. But she didn’t feel like telling him any of this.

“You must miss your mother.”

A lump grew and hardened in her throat. “Christopher, not right now.”

“Okay, whenever you’re ready. He paused, then said, “What do you think of ‘Iris’?”

“What?” Had she forgotten what they’d been talking about?

“Iris. For a baby. Or Molly?” he ventured.

He’d give anything for a chance to start his whole life over, she realized.

“Christopher, I’d make a horrible mother.”

“Don’t say that. I’ve seen you, how good you are with your students at school. You’d be patient, and caring and kind and insightful.”

“That’s not true.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but I’ve had this fantasy for a while now about you.”

“Oh?” She imagined her face looked like she’d just tasted spoiled milk.

“Can I tell you about it?”

“Okay.”

“I fantasize about how beautiful and sexy you’ll look when you’re pregnant.” He came over to her, stood behind her, and kissed her hair. “Your cheeks would glow, your neck would be long and graceful, and your breasts would swell so round, and soft.”

She tried to imagine herself as beautiful, full, and expectant. “That’s nice of you to say,” she said. For a moment she was in the rocker, with a small, warm bundle in her arms. Responsible, competent, content, and with purpose.

“Come on,” he said. He took her arm, and led her from the chair. “I’ve been thinking about those notes all day.” They left the table as it was, meals half-eaten, candles burning down low. They lay down on the white couch together. Maybe it would be tender between them. Maybe it would even make *her* feel sexy again. They

kissed, and she closed her eyes, trying to surrender to the moment, trying to feel the sensation all over her body, trying to imagine she wore black lace lingerie. He undid the tie on her robe, but she left it on. Piece by piece, he took off his own clothes. His breathing was shallow. His fingertips felt icy under her robe as he traced her neck to her shoulder, her hip to her thigh. On top of her, he eased in, and thrust his hips carefully, over and over. He asked if she was okay. She nodded, looking at the ceiling, her hands moving slowly along the bumps of his spine. He told her that he wanted to make things right, and he'd do anything, anything, he promised, between light groans and whimpers. This wasn't right. Tears came, but Christopher didn't notice. Afterwards, she massaged his head so he wouldn't start talking again. *Molly*, she heard him say. *Or Iris*. He fell asleep fast, his breath deep and slow. His newfound sincerity made her feel even colder than usual. Her mind found her mother's beige satchel in the basement, heaped atop those boxes, limp and lumpy as a dead possum. She turned her head from the white ceiling to Lucinda's heart. She stared blankly, then blurred her eyes, then stared blankly again, mimicking the slow beat in her chest.

8

During recess it began to snow. The air was wet, the flakes so light that they swirled and dissolved before even touching ground. This was the first snow of the season, and around Martha, the playground surged with excitement. Bundled-up kindergarteners wove around each other, lunging to catch flakes between their tiny mittens. Fifth grade girls shrieked as they ran from the boys—perhaps with kisses on the mind. She was thankful Connie had a doctor’s appointment; it felt right to be alone out here, where everything was somehow in motion. Fiona, Brendan, Katie, one after another, slid down the sleek silver slide. Arms spread like airplane wings, Gerry spun around the field in long crooked circles, then collapsed dizzily to the ground. Martha looked to the thick grey sky: the flakes fell heavier and faster. She thought of snow dusting the rounded top of her mother’s grey stone. “Eugenia Lipski,” it said. “1936-1998.” And that was all. She’d placed Poinsettias beside the grave, and now she imagined the thick red leaves dotted with delicate frozen stars. *My mother was a strong-willed seamstress*, she might have said at the funeral if she’d been brave enough. *Always busy with the hands, certain that she knew best*. But would those words have sounded the slightest bit resentful coming from her, the flimsy daughter? The flakes seemed endless in their falling, down, down, and Martha stumbled forward. She regained balance just in time to see Maya and Beverly duck into the red igloo by

the fence. On the sidewalk, an old lady in a clear plastic rain scarf pushed a shopping cart slowly down the street. A thin layer of white coated the blacktop by now. In the middle of the field, Lucinda searched for flakes with her long pink tongue. She'd gazed out the window all morning, looking for her mother. Martha felt for the ridiculous flyer in her skirt pocket. There had been one neon yellow paper in every teacher's mailbox this morning. The first line was: *Jesus Lady: Threat to Community*. It went on to read: *Talk to your class about strangers, but don't scare them. DO NOT mention the Jesus Lady. Suggested reading: The Berenstein Bears: Don't talk to Strangers*. Connie and Principal Evans had both signed the bottom. Martha and her students had spent all morning setting up for tomorrow's open house, and even if she'd had time, she certainly wouldn't have given the lesson. Ever since she woke up, she'd felt strange about last night, and it wasn't so much Christopher (they'd been cordial as usual this morning), as her encounter with Janice that troubled her. Small details kept sneaking back—Janice's pointy yellow toenail that almost curled, or her unnaturally purple eyes with pupils dilated big as cat's. Janice had noticed her over all the other teachers—maybe she *was* different somehow. But how juvenile of her to relive the encounter, as if a dreamy high school girl. She suspected she'd been too gullible, and now was part of some trick she didn't yet know about. They could be plotting to embarrass her on the playground, or get her in trouble with Evans, or—could it be possible that they were actually planning a kidnapping? And she would assist them somehow, without even knowing it. No, no—she wouldn't believe it. Martha crumpled the flyer in her fist, and headed to Lucinda, wondering if the child

was angry with her. She wanted to tell her she'd met her mother, and that she liked her very much, she really did, but then thought better of it. "Lucinda, hi." Martha tugged her hat over her ears.

Lucinda shut her mouth, and looked past Martha with wide green eyes. Martha tried to believe there was no resemblance between mother and daughter, but the yellow starbursts around her pupils were unmistakable.

"I know how much you must be missing your mom," Martha said. Wasn't this what Christopher had said to her just last night? She could come up with nothing better?

Lucinda chewed on her mitten, and kicked her leg front and back.

"It makes you feel sad, doesn't it? You know, I recently lost my—" But she stopped—it wasn't the same, and it was important to maintain boundaries.

Lucinda looked from one fence to the other. Then she met Martha's gaze, and her eyes brightened: the speckles went golden. "Member how I told you yesterday, it's a secret, but we're going on a trip, just me and my mom."

"Is that what your mom says?" She felt a pulse in her neck.

"I'm getting a suitcase for Christmas, and Beverly said for me to put my favorite jammies in there." She took a breath, and licked a wet circle around her lips.

"And *Harriet the Spy*, and some socks and my *Spongebob* sleeping bag and my Princess play set."

"Oh?" Martha crouched down beside Lucinda.

“Maya and Beverly told my mommy to get a car, and we’ll paint it purple, and paint cats and birds and seashells and pizza slices on it. It’ll be our house and our car all together. We can go anywhere whenever we want.”

“Is this trip Maya and Beverly’s idea, or your mom’s?”

“There she is!” Lucinda pointed to the fence with her soggy mitten, and grabbed Martha’s hand. “But I can’t go over, no, I can’t, even though I really *really* want to because then we’ll get in trouble. We have to be very careful because some people don’t like my mommy.”

Janice, all in black, paced along the fence quick and hunched like a vulture. Number three on the flyer, bolder than all the rest, said: *If you see her lurking near the playground, immediately alert the other teacher on recess duty, and promptly call the police.* She’d been startled to see that the school was ready to get the police involved. She wondered if anyone had seen her with Janice last night. But she hadn’t done anything wrong, only talked with her. Martha surveyed the playground: she was still alone, and Janice hadn’t moved. Nothing on the flyer spoke to this one-teacher-on-the-playground-predicament, so she couldn’t be blamed. But then she realized, with a quick shiver, that she was already defending herself.

Suddenly, Maya and Beverly, all in white, emerged from their igloo. Wind gusted snow into their backs, and hand-in-hand, they ran to Janice. Their footsteps made a straight line in the snow. *Above all, do not let our students talk to the Jesus Lady. Psychological damage could result from even the briefest of encounters.*

Martha squeezed Lucinda's thin little fingers through the puffy mitten. The flyer hadn't mentioned anything about Janice being a criminal, and they probably would have broadcast that information had it been true—right?

“They're making the plan now,” Lucinda said. Maya, Beverly, and Janice were in a tight huddle at the fence.

Martha looked around the playground again, and then to Lucinda. “Are you ever scared of her?” she said, surprising herself.

“She's the smartest in the world. Like, um, when I was four, my cat Sinka ran away, and I was so sad, and my mommy made him come back with magic. He's a tabby. He's coming with us too but he has to sit in the back seat where his litter box is. I'm gettin' him a seatbelt.”

“What are they planning?”

“Maya and Beverly say that my mommy said you're smart just like her. Are you magic too?”

“She doesn't even know me,” Martha said.

“I want my mommy,” Lucinda whined, suddenly frustrated and sad. “I just want her. I need her.” Tears dripped from her cheeks, and slid down the front of her blue coat like rain.

“I know you do,” Martha said, and right then, she heard Connie hollering. She couldn't make out the words. She stood up, and kept hold of Lucinda's mitten. Connie ran toward them, but not that fast, Martha couldn't help but notice, because those three-inch heels made her awfully wobbly.

Lucinda looked up at Martha, then slipped her hand away. She ran to the swings, her big blue hood bouncing behind her as she went.

When Connie arrived, she was panting. She grabbed Martha's arm for support. "Didn't you get the flyer this morning?" Even outside she smelled like a French vanilla candle.

"I did, Connie," Martha said. "It was really, um, informative."

"Well?"

"I just noticed her. I was talking with Lucinda. I think she just got here."

"Okay, we better act fast. You shoo the girls off, and I'll call the cops."

"The cops?" Martha heard herself exclaim. "Couldn't we just ask her nicely not to come back anymore? She's probably harmless."

Connie shook her head at Martha, and her bell earrings jingled. "We don't know anything about this woman. We can't take any chances with these kids. That's the first rule in the book."

"I know that," Martha said. "I know."

"So then go stall the lady so we can get her." Connie rushed off.

"Of course," Martha said, and forced herself to start running. Her strides were short and quick, and her breath went shallow. "Look at her go," a fourth grader said to his friend. They chuckled, and Martha couldn't tell if they were impressed or making fun. Lucinda drooped over a swing; she'd twisted the chain to face the fence.

As Martha approached the threesome, she heard Maya: “Tomorrow night we’ll be dancing, and Sally’s coming over, and my mom’s making sugar cookies and lamb chops.”

“Shhh.” Beverly quieted her. “Ms. Miles is coming.”

They all went silent. Martha stopped short, and tried to steady her breath. Maya and Beverly turned their backs to the fence, and glared up at her. Behind them, Janice stared too. Snowflakes clung to her red eyebrows and lashes, and her mouth hung slightly open. One of her front teeth was missing, and her top lip had split and puffed. Something had happened to her last night—a fall or a fight, maybe—and all the possibilities seemed dangerous. But then Janice waved and smiled at her. “It’s good to see you again,” she said, her voice scratchy and slow.

Martha couldn’t help it: she softened. “You too,” she said, smiling back. Across the street, blue lights blurred along the perimeter of a house, icy through the snow.

“This is a private meeting,” said Beverly.

“Yeah,” Maya said.

“Why so mean?” Janice admonished.

“We told you what she said that other day, that she wouldn’t help us out,” Maya said.

“We talked last night,” Janice said, meeting Martha’s eyes, then winking at her. “And she’s on our side.”

“Really?” Maya said, disbelieving.

She'd never agreed to anything, at least she didn't think she had. Connie would be back in only a few minutes, and maybe the police would even come.

"Janice," said Martha. "Can we talk alone?"

Below them, Maya and Beverly whispered and giggled.

"Little witches," Janice teased. The girls looked to her immediately. "Why don't you go check on the stones in the fort?"

"She's right," Beverly said, biting the collar of her coat. "It must be time to rotate them by now."

"Okay, bye Janice," Maya said, pulling Beverly away. "And bye Ms. Miles," she said as they turned and ran. "Thanks for helping us."

"Alone again," Janice said. "Here we find ourselves." Her purple eyes seemed to darken to a deep velvet.

"I was thinking about you earlier today," Martha said. "I mean, not *that* much." A mailman in bright green earmuffs walked by. As he passed, he gave them a little salute. Maybe they didn't look that suspicious.

"I'm liking you a lot," Janice said. "You're just how I thought you'd be." She reached her hands above her head and grabbed at falling snow.

"What is this trip they keep talking about?" Martha looked around again, and wondered how much more time she had. "You're not planning to—?"

"You really think I'd take off with Lucinda?" Janice said.

"What else am I supposed to think?" she said, almost apologetically.

"I just want to talk to her."

Martha's eyes kept going back to the oozy split lip, the bloody gum where her tooth should've been. "Then why do they think you and Lucinda are going on a trip?"

"They know what make-believe means," said Janice calmly. "And there's nothing wrong with getting carried away. It's all we have, and you know that."

"It's just hard for me to know what to believe. There are rumors, you know."

Janice dug deep in her coat pocket. "Here they are," she said, and in the palm of her hand, revealed three cat's eye marbles. One was swirled blue with clear bubbles all around, and the other two had smooth waves green as Lucinda's eyes.

"For you," she said. "Because you trust me."

Martha cupped her hand, and one by one, Janice passed the marbles through the metal fence. Then she scraped her pointy nail lightly across Martha's palm. The trail she left felt hot, and the heat spread to her fingertips. "You better get out of here," Martha whispered. "The police might be here soon."

"The police? I haven't even done anything, haven't gotten near her." She stepped back, widening her stance as she glanced around. "I'm just trying to see my daughter. I want her to hear a few things straight from me. The important things."

"No, I understand."

"You don't have children, do you?"

"Why do you ask?" she said quickly.

"One last thing," Janice said. She reached back in her pocket, and tossed the viewfinder high over the fence. The plastic toy bounced hard on the blacktop, but didn't break. "Keep these things safe for me," she said.

“Why? Where are you going?” Once she’d heard on *Oprah* that people give things away when they’re planning to commit suicide. But Janice seemed too desperate to see Lucinda to be suicidal.

“Just keep them, please,” Janice said, and took off down the street. Martha heard a clicking sound on the pavement, and through the blur of steady snow, she thought she saw new shiny black loafers on Janice’s feet. Her black coat flapped stiffly out from her back.

Martha’s scalp tingled, and she couldn’t stay still. She picked up the viewfinder, and held it to her eyes. The image looked small and distant, but Martha recognized Janice and Lucinda right away. Lucinda was a toddler, unbalanced, chubby leg up, going for her first steps. From behind, Janice held Lucinda’s hands above her head, just as a mother is supposed to. Her red hair fell long and thick around her placid face. It was the kind of picture, just old and yellow enough, that makes you want to have been there. She imagined Lucinda’s father, bearded and rosy cheeked, letting out a hearty laugh as the camera flashed. Martha clicked the advance lever, and what came into view, she almost couldn’t believe. Janice must have taken it just weeks ago because the trees were bare. It was a simple picture: she—Martha, herself—stood alone in her long black cloak. The weird thing was, the image was distorted, somehow. Her head looked too big for her feet, and she knew she wasn’t that tall and skinny. Janice was right, though, she didn’t look like a mother—not at all.

“Where is she?” Connie rushed up to her. Martha shoved the viewfinder into her pocket, and stepped from the fence. Principal Evans, in his tan trench coat and green Eagle’s caps, stalked beside Connie.

“You happen to see anything suspicious?” He looked up and down the street.

“Like what?”

“Just anything that looked suspicious.” A police car without a siren sped up to the school.

“Like was she carrying a big handbag filled with lots of stuff?” Connie said.

“Did you see anything like that?”

“No, nothing.”

“Did you speak with her?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “She was gone before I got here.”

“Well, which way did she go?” Evans straightened his tie, and glanced to the police nervously. They were out of their car now, and students flocked toward them.

Martha fingered the marbles in her pocket. They made a soft clicking noise against each other. “They’ll arrest her?”

“They’ll do something with her,” he said. “They *will* do something, I can tell you that.”

“Maybe you’ll have to be a witness, Martha.” Connie perked up. “And *testify*.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here. Where did she run?”

“That way,” and with no hesitation, Martha pointed up the street, rather than down. It hardly felt like lying. “Definitely that way,” she added, and pointed again.

“That’s a real big help,” Evans said disingenuously. “We’ll get the details for the incident report later.” He started to back away. “Okay, we’ll be seeing you around, Martha.” He turned, and headed to the cops. Connie went with him. “Hitting the eggnog this year, Evans?” Martha heard her say.

“Only if you do,” he said, and huffed out a rigid laugh.

Both of the policemen were tall and skinny, and looked awkward stuck in the middle of all the students. The skin around Martha’s eye twitched. Okay, it was just a little thing she’d done, pointing them in the wrong direction, but for some reason, she couldn’t get over it, and like her encounter with Janice, it kept running through her head—the moment when she shot her arm out and pointed in the wrong direction, confident even though she’d been lying. She had taken a bit of a stand, it was true. And they had no idea how much she and Janice had communicated, or even that Janice was Lucinda’s mother. It was a little like she’d felt years ago on the curb of her own street with Amelia. It had been a lazy summer afternoon, and they sat there watching the cars and people pass by. It was Martha who’d gotten the idea to put on a ‘certain kind of show’ for the passers-by. *What kind of show?* Amelia had asked, eyes wide and willing. *A show no one will be able to turn away from,* Martha had said. She ran down the block, bare feet slapping on the hot pavement, up the steps to her house, and took the pitcher of fruit punch from the fridge. So Martha and Amelia stood there side by side, drooling fruit punch each time a car passed by. It dripped

out, red over their smooth lips, to their chins. Sticky sweet blood down their necks to their chests. Mostly they couldn't breathe for laughing so much. And then, for the benefit of a somber businessman—in broad daylight—Martha licked some fruit punch from Amelia's long neck. Amelia had giggled, grabbed Martha's hand, and licked her neck too. And just as Martha had anticipated, the man in the car scowled, and shouted, "Grow up!" as he sped home to dinner and TV. *He's just jealous*, she'd told Amelia. *They all are*, and as she said it, she'd squeezed Amelia's long, pale fingers tight. Who wouldn't be jealous of two girls carrying on like that, like they could get away with anything at all.

The police car sped down the street in the wrong direction. Martha's armpits were wet and cold, and she had to pee. She looked down the street to make sure Janice was really gone. A squirrel with a chestnut in its mouth scurried across the street, and up a maple. A plastic Santa flashed on, his sled pulled by sickly reindeer whose brown paint had peeled off in spots. Their eyes were big and round, and the white gleam meant to signify trust looked like tears about to fall.

Connie and Evans headed to the big gymnasium doors, and Martha reminded herself that she was in charge of all the students on the playground—but how easy it was to lose track of herself these days. By the fence, the crowd of students dispersed. Martha pulled out the viewfinder, clicked it again, and brought it slowly back to her eyes. In brilliant colors—red, orange, green, magenta—was the most elaborate gingerbread house she'd ever seen. Rows of gumdrops glittered, and the frosting along the edges had an icy blue sheen, like freshly fallen snow in twilight. There were

three or four levels, but she couldn't tell how big it really was. It brought to mind that drawing of the gingerbread house in her own yellowed copy of *Hansel and Gretel*. The trees around the house always looked too crooked and dark, and through the bushes, the chipmunks' eyes glowed yellow. She clicked the toy again, but now the screen was blank. She heard footsteps, and there was Brendan tugging on the back of her coat. "Miss Miles, Miss Miles," he said. "She just cast a spell on all the kids on the playground!"

"Is she a real witch?" Katie ran up beside him.

"Is she?" Brendan asked.

"She's harmless," Martha said. "They're just rumors."

"But Principal Evans said she's *dangerous*," Brendan insisted. "And not to look her in the eyes."

"I heard that you're her best friend," Katie said. "Is she weird?"

"I hardly know her. We'll talk later," Martha said, and walked ahead. Lucinda ran out from behind the red igloo. There were still some students too caught up in their games to even have noticed the drama. A big red ball bounced in front of her, and two second graders chased it. Gerry twirled once again in continuous circles. First graders played hopscotch and sang "Joy to the World" and "Jingle Bells" all at once.

Lucinda appeared beside her, looking up searchingly. "What did she say?"

You know it's make-believe, don't you, she almost said, but didn't. Of course Lucinda thought the trip was real; Janice was being extremely careless with her

daughter's feelings. "She said she loves you, and that you're a very, very," Martha strained to swallow a lump in her throat, "good girl."

"She did? She was talking about me?"

"Of course." Martha stopped walking, reached into her pocket, and found the marbles. "Give me your hands," she said.

Lucinda cupped her little hands, and Martha placed the green marbles there. She kept the blue one for herself, and rolled it between her finger and thumb. It was cool and smooth.

Lucinda brought the marbles close to her eyes. "Wow," she breathed. "I remember these. They're the magic ones. They give wishes." Martha rested her hand on Lucinda's shoulder. "I know what I'm wishin' for. Do you?"

"I'm still thinking about it," Martha said. "Lucinda, did you and your mom ever make gingerbread houses?"

"She told you? They were the best and the biggest ones in the whole world."

"I bet they were."

"Ms. Miles, I bet Santa's gonna bring you lots of presents this year. Because you're so nice."

"You think so?" She squeezed Lucinda's shoulder, and they began walking again. "That's nice of you to say." Presents—no, she didn't think so. Christopher had also renounced gift giving when he'd taken up Yoga. An inch of snow coated the ground, and Martha stopped and glanced at the playground behind her. She could make out her footprints easily—they were the biggest, and heaviest, somehow.

That evening as Martha meandered home from school, she found herself walking right into that old phone booth on the corner of Cooper and 5th. She sat down on the thin wooden bench, and noticed a light bulb hanging from just a few wires above her head. The plastic walls close around her were cloudy with dirt and jumbled with etchings. *Fuck your brains out! I LOVE FREDDY THE FAIRY!!! Kelly +Denise Friends 4-ever.* The wind gusted hard through cracks in the corners, all the way to her middle. She brought the receiver to her ear, and heard the dial tone, dull and flat. She replaced it. She swung the weathered phonebook back and forth a few times on its metal chain, then she set it on her lap. She flipped through the crumpled, ripped pages. She was just curious to see if Janice was listed—it would be interesting to know where she lived, if she even had a home. She found the row of *Walters*'—and found *James* and *Jamie*—but no Janice. Maybe *Walters* wasn't even her real last name. She wouldn't have called, anyway, even if she'd found her listing—what would she have even said? And it might've made Janice think she was stalking her. But now, since she was already looking through the book, she turned to the *L*'s. She thought she remembered Amelia's dad had moved to Upper Darby when Amelia moved to New Jersey with her mother. She couldn't recall his first name, exactly, but might recognize it if she saw it. *Latimer, Allen*, she read. *Latimer, Allison*. But then, she saw Amelia's name: *Latimer, Amelia*. Her throat seemed to lurch open. Was it really this easy to find people you'd lost track of? What if it really was her? But what do people say, anyway, to someone they knew for only one year, over fifteen long years ago? Most likely Amelia hardly remembered her, anyway. But people did

contact old friends—it wasn't so strange—people even hired professionals to assist in the process. Businesses ran on this desire. And there were many reasons for contacting old friends, like, for example, someone died, or you just wanted to know how their life turned out, or you were in the mood to reminisce—by no means would you contact an old friend to tell her that you've developed what you think is an obsession with these memories from high school, and you think it's because that's the last time you could remember that you felt good and alive. Martha wrote down Amelia's number on her hand with a red cherry scented marker from her briefcase. And before she left, she dialed those numbers, telling herself she could hang up anytime, maintain complete anonymity. The phone rang and rang, and she stayed on the line. Just to see. Just to see. Then there was a beep, like at the end of an answering machine, but there hadn't been a voice recording. "Amelia," she spoke. She should have planned out exactly what she'd say. "This is Martha, from high school. It's a long story, and I'm just wondering if this is your number, and if maybe you'd want to talk sometime. Okay, I bet my time's running out. My number's 610-284-1285. Call me if you want, if you're not too freaked—"

The phone clicked. "No Amelia here." It was a gruff voice. "Wrong number." The man hung up. She faltered the phone back onto its hook.

Of course, she thought, standing right up, oddly embarrassed, as if someone had walked in on her using the bathroom. She was just building false hope for herself. She needed to take this mistake as a sign telling her to move on. It was about time she finally learned the past was impossible to recapture. She left the phone booth, not sure

how much time she'd passed in there. Whenever she'd noticed someone sitting in a phone booth downtown, not tending to any real business, she'd always assumed they didn't have anywhere else to go.

9

A puppy with a big red bow around its neck scampered up to Martha as she walked in her front door. A puppy, no more than 8 weeks old, in their house. Huge paws, floppy ears, white freckles scattered along its little brown snout. "A puppy," she said. It panted, and looked to be almost smiling.

"Merry Christmas," Christopher said, walking in from the kitchen. "I know it's early, but I just couldn't wait." He held a glass of wine, and his cheeks were rosy. He even wore what looked like a woman's holiday sweater with a fake white collar, and a big Santa Claus face.

"A present?" For some reason her mind went to Lucinda's adoptive parents piling stacks of presents high at midnight on Christmas Eve, almost invisible in the dim light of the tree.

"His name's Jack." Christopher smiled wide.

"Jack," Martha said. Jack sniffed her boots with his tiny pink nose.

"That's what they called him at the shelter, so I couldn't change it." He scooped Jack up, and perched him on his shoulder. "It matches him, don't you think?"

"I didn't even know you liked dogs."

“I was at the shelter today, just walking around, and I couldn’t refuse him. Love at fist sight, I guess,” he said. “And it feels good.”

“Does this mean we don’t have to have a baby?” She wasn’t thinking. She couldn’t help herself. A smiled budded at the ends of her lips.

“Martha, you know this has nothing to do with that.” As he leaned over and set Jack down, he spilled a few drops of wine on the rug. Jack sniffed the stain, wagging his thin tail fast. “Uh oh,” Christopher said. “Guess I’ve had a few glasses already.”

“Well, you had to celebrate.”

“You’re right,” he said, raising his glass to the air. “To Jack, our newest addition.” He paused. “A call for drinks all around!”

Just a few minutes later, they both followed Jack as he struggled up the steps. It was strange to have a third party in the house, even if it was just a puppy. Martha leaned over to help Jack to the next step—his fur soft as a bunny’s—and Christopher slapped her butt lightly. “Christopher!” she said, shocked. “Sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t help myself. It’s just so—so, touchable.” She rushed up the stairs, but on the landing, he caught her, and wrapped his arms around her middle. “I’ve been feeling good these past few days,” he said. “Like, really hopeful.”

“That’s good,” she said.

“What about you? How have you been feeling?”

“Where did Jack go?”

“Uh oh,” Christopher said, and squeezed her once before he let go.

In the bedroom, Jack was nowhere to be found. They checked under the bed, in the closet, beneath the clothes in the hamper. Martha was paranoid the whole time, though, that Christopher would slap her butt again; she kept her eye on him. Then they heard light scratching under the bed. Side by side, they both got down on their hands and knees. Martha pulled her moss green suitcase out of the way so they could see better. “Where did that little bugger go?” Christopher kept saying. Then a paw—golden like brown sugar—poked out from the suitcase. They both laughed, as you must, Martha thought, when you come across a hiding puppy.

The phone startled her. They hardly ever got calls at night. “I’ll get it,” she said to Christopher, who was blowing on Jack’s round, pink stomach, making him squirm like jelly. “Hello?”

“Hi. Is this Martha?”

“But I thought—” She froze. It couldn’t be.

“My dad’s been senile for a while now, but I caught your number on the tape.” Amelia’s voice was still grainy like sand through fingers, and Martha melted a little. “I was like, completely blown away. I mean, talk about a blast from the past!”

“I know what you mean.”

On the floor, Christopher lay on his back, and Jack licked his ear and bit at his hair as if eating corn on the cob. Martha tried to make excuses for contacting Amelia: “I was looking at an old yearbook,” and, “I thought I saw you in the grocery store the other day.” But to her surprise, Amelia didn’t seem to really care. She was talkative, and quite friendly, as if something of this sort happened to her everyday. She told

Martha that she was a hairdresser, and that she lived right here in Upper Darby in the apartment below her father's house. He needed her help, and she was saving money. The set-up was okay for the time being, anyway. Martha mentioned that she'd become a teacher, and that she was married. All the daydreams Martha had been having about Amelia flooded back—licking the fruit punch, and their absolute giddiness—and she was overcome with embarrassment because Amelia had no idea how obsessed she was. After only a few minutes, Amelia suggested they meet up. "Sure," Martha said, thinking they'd have lunch sometime that weekend. Lunch would be doable, an hour-and-a-half at the most. But Amelia suggested a bar—she'd pick Martha up 4:30 tomorrow afternoon so they could catch Happy Hour at *Casey's*.

"Who was that?" Jack was back in the suitcase, and Christopher opened and closed the top flap in a game of peek-a-boo.

"It's so funny," she said. "My old friend from high school. We're meeting for Happy Hour tomorrow night." It thrilled her, and also vaguely frightened her, that this was the type of thing Connie and Susan might say.

"Oh—" he said. He looked at the white dry cleaning bag folded over their bedroom door. "I got my wedding tux cleaned for tomorrow night. I thought I'd surprise you."

"I didn't think we'd decided to go yet." She noticed that her fingers still clenched the receiver.

"I know, I just thought I'd be able to get you in the mood for it."

"I'll call her in the morning—I'm sure she can meet Saturday night instead."

“Oh good. It’ll be a real date.” He started at peek-a-boo again.

“I’m jealous of your Yoga,” she said, not necessarily because she thought it was true, but because right now she felt sad for him.

“It doesn’t really work,” he said.

“At least you try,” she said. She finally let go of the phone with a light plastic drop. She sat down on the floor next to him, and tried to join in the game. But Christopher kept picking Jack up, and hugging him to his neck. Showing off his fatherly instincts? Eventually Martha stopped trying to be involved. She sat back on her heels and stared at the fuzzy dust at the bottom of her suitcase, coming to realize how long it had been since she’d taken a trip.

10

Gerry shuffled to the front of the classroom with a plaid bowtie in his hand. "Ms. Miles," he said, his soft voice wavering, "it fell off." His fine black hair was parted at the side, and slicked down with gel.

Martha squatted in front of him, redid the top button of his stiff blue shirt, and took the bowtie. His palm was streaked with purple marker. "You're looking so handsome today," she said. He smirked, and looked down. "My mom let me pick it out myself," he said. She clipped the bowtie back on, and straightened it out. He looked like a perfect little gentleman. "Well, you have wonderful taste," she said.

The intercom above their heads clicked on, static fuzzed, and they heard: "Ms. Miles, please report to the office. Ms. Miles, please report to the office." It was Dana, Principal Evans' newest Secretary.

Gerry's brown eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. "Are we in trouble?"

"Why would we be in trouble?" Martha stood up.

"I don't know." He surveyed the room slowly.

It must be Evans anxious about Janice and the incident report. What horrible timing, though: the open house was to start in fifteen minutes. Maya scurried past hugging a pair of big brown boots to her chest. Jenny, Trisha, and Brendan dragged the donation box across the room. Beverly stood in the middle of it all clicking her Fisher Price camera left and right. "Smile Miss Miles! Say cheese," she said, flashing the camera at Martha.

"I wasn't even smiling," Martha said, blinking her eyes.

"No, that was a good one! It's more like real life this way."

"Why don't you help them with that box," Martha said, turning to Gerry.

"Okay." He approached his classmates meekly.

She'd tell Evans it was a bad time, but it was no real surprise that he'd forgotten all about her class' open house. Shelly walked in. "Look at it in here," she exclaimed. She had red curly hair, ever-pink cheeks, and a gentle, sincere voice. "What hard workers you have,

Ms. Miles." Maya ran up to her, and hugged her waist. "You'll have to show me around, Maya." Shelly cocked her head to Martha and said, "Someone's here to see you." Maya pulled on Shelly's arm. "I want to show you something," she pleaded. "Go ahead down," Shelly told Martha. "We'll be just fine in here."

On her way out of the classroom, she passed Mr. and Mrs. Brown walking in. They said some nice hellos, but Martha was overwhelmed because she had almost entirely forgotten she'd invited parents to visit this afternoon. The dim hallway flickered with fluorescent light. So someone else was here to see her—it wasn't just Evans she'd be speaking to. A cop? Lying to a cop would be no different than lying to Evans—as long as she stayed calm, and believed what she was saying was true. And her words would be true—at least in spirit, in the sense that protecting Janice was the right thing to do. Of course it was. She heard cheers, and a few high-pitched shrieks from Connie's classroom. The last day before break was always the same; it was hard enough just to keep the students from bursting through the seams of the school. Right beside the office, she paused and ran her fingers over a big glossy *Winter Wonderland* poster. "Feel the

Magic! Dance the night away!" The silver cursive looped gracefully this way and that. "Tonight! Tonight!"

Elegant, she imagined Connie had thought when designing it, *I want something elegant*. The fried egg she'd choked down this morning sat heavy in her stomach. Oh, who was she to judge Connie, anyway? As if she knew how to have a good time. She used to know how—it seemed she and Amelia hadn't ever been able to stop laughing, not even at those assemblies—but at the thought of Amelia, the gap in her stomach widened. The fact that she'd even made that call felt like the half-drunken sex with Christopher she'd woken up sadly regretting. This morning she'd run her fingers over the white dry cleaner's bag draped over their bedroom door. She hadn't bothered to look inside even though she hadn't seen the suit since their wedding day. Christopher was trying so hard. But it was becoming difficult for her to think of Christopher and the puppy as separate bodies. All she could see were those floppy golden brown ears smushed up against Christopher's rough stubble—two sets of dark, shiny puppy dog eyes ever-asking for something she would never be able to give. She would call Amelia right after school to reschedule—she'd have to endure *Winter Wonderland*, it

was only right what with the suit and all—and maybe if she got Amelia’s machine again, she could just leave a message and cancel the whole thing. Honestly, she had no idea what Amelia would be like after so long. Maybe because she couldn’t imagine how she would act, what she would say, or even what she wanted out of such a reunion. Momentarily, a full-body chill overtook her. It hit her for the first time that Christopher was trying to turn her into his mother without even knowing it. Or maybe she was just being paranoid. Across the hallway, the second graders had taped up all different-sized presents with bows that drooped away from the wall, and paste that squeezed out at the edges. Martha imagined each present held a student’s secret—some were big, some small as boxes of dental floss. What was wrong with her? She was never this skeptical about the students. Maybe it was just that teaching wasn’t for her. Was this heartbeat-in-the-neck what a panic attack felt like? She needed to get a hold of herself. Or just finally grow up?—she was nearly thirty-three, or thirty-four, for heaven’s sake, she couldn’t even remember her own age.

She walked into the main office and stopped in front of Dana’s long, wide desk. “Happy Holidays!” she greeted Martha, and continued to tape candy canes to cards. She wore brown reindeer ears. A floor vent shot warm, dry air all the way to Martha’s face. No policemen that she could see, but Evans’ door was shut, so she couldn’t be sure quite yet. Crimson strands of garland swooped from the ceiling, and lights twinkled quickly around each door. “Isn’t it exciting,” Dana said, and shivered

her narrow shoulders. “Here Comes Santa Claus” bounced soft as cotton from speakers hidden somewhere.

“Help yourself to some goodies,” Dana said. “We’ve got to spread the fat around, know what I mean?” Three tables overflowing with food lined the wall. It was the main office’s annual “Holiday Potluck.” Pies, cakes, brownies, cheese, crackers, vegetables, potato salad, macaroni salad, jello. “There’s a lady in there wants to visit your class,” Dana said, pointing to the teacher’s bathroom with a mini candy cane. “Evans is out to lunch, but I’m sure we can handle this ourselves.”

“In there?” Her eyes fixed on the smooth, wood-paneled door.

“Uh huh,” Dana said, taking a small bite from a frosted brownie. “Says she’s down from Connecticut, or something.” She dabbed the corners of her mouth with a stiff gold napkin.

Martha heard the faucet running, then water sloshing around and splashing out as if a student was playing in the sink. It was no cop. She reached back, dug her nails into the edge of Dana’s desk, and murmured, “Who is she?” Hearing her own weak whisper, heat crept stealthily into her fingertips and toes, just like when Janice had touched her hand yesterday. No, maybe she was just hungry and tired, and getting delirious and hallucinating these connections. She turned to the food, and caught a whiff of sour-sweet mayonnaise. She clamped her hand to her mouth, and forced herself to swallow. Somehow Janice had made it into the school. This must have been the plan all along. But to come in through the office like this—what was she thinking?—who did she think she was? The sleek metal lever turned down. The door

opened slowly, and like a dream in which she already knew what would happen, there was Janice. “Oh my god,” Martha said. Janice hardly looked like herself. She had dyed her red hair chestnut brown, and twisted a neat bun at the nape of her neck.

“See, I’m not certain what the policy is,” Dana said, standing up. “Evans or Shelly usually deals with visitors.”

“Oh,” Martha said, and took a few steps closer to Janice. She wore a fitted black skirt suit, sheer pantyhose, and those brand new loafers with a shiny penny tucked in each shoe. Her cheeks glowed pink and clean. Martha’s scalp was tingling. Janice’s eyes were sage green today, exactly like her daughter’s.

“Lucinda invited me,” Janice said, looking from Martha to Dana. “I’m Lucinda’s Aunt Michelle.” She’d even pinned a shiny green wreath onto her lapel; it was nearly all too much.

“The passes might be in Evans’ office. Give me just a minute,” Dana said, and headed back there.

Martha found herself reaching for one of Janice’s teardrop pearl earrings, but then stopped midair, and dropped her arm to her side. Janice’s split lip had almost completely healed, although Martha noticed a slight puffiness beneath the smooth plum lipstick. “I can’t believe you,” she whispered.

“What is it?” Janice cast her eyes to the floor, almost demurely.

“No one would ever know it was you.”

“I look good, don’t I?” Janice bent over, and tugged up her pantyhose. “I clean up nice.”

“Where’d you get all this?” Martha glanced back at Evans’ office. Dana had disappeared behind the desk. Martha heard one drawer shut, and another slide open.

Janice grabbed both lapels, straightened her shoulders, and stuck out her chest. “You’d hire me like this, wouldn’t you? You’d hire me right away.”

From the hall, Martha heard sharp high-heeled footsteps. “What are you doing here?” she almost snapped at Janice. Then she cleared her throat.

“You know why I’m here,” Janice said, vaguely smirking.

“You can’t come into my classroom.”

“Food sounds really good just now,” said Janice, heading to the tables.

Martha followed close behind, and felt herself speeding up. “We never talked about this, you coming right into the office like this. This wasn’t the plan.”

“How do you know?” Janice served herself a fat triangle of chocolate pie, and dropped a handful of potato chips on top. A few thin chips dropped to the floor.

“How do I know? I can’t believe this. I don’t even know what we’re talking about.”

“You believe what you want to believe.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Martha’s voice wavered now. “You have to leave.” She swallowed hard. “Evans will be back any minute.”

“Why don’t you take some food, Martha?”

“What?” Martha was shaking her head by now, flabbergasted.

“Your cheeks are much too sallow this afternoon.”

“I couldn’t find those visitor passes,” Dana said, walking back to her desk. “I swear I saw them somewhere earlier today.”

Janice set her paper plate on the table, and suddenly, wrapped her arms around Martha. Martha stepped back but Janice dug her fingertips hard, insistently, between her ribs. “Let go,” Martha whispered. “What are you doing?” Martha felt what it might be like at the very beginning of being strangled by a snake.

“You two know each other?” Dana exclaimed, scrunching one eye up in confusion.

“Help me, please,” Janice whispered, her lips barely brushing Martha’s ear.

Martha craned her neck to Dana. “I don’t even know who she is,” she said. “We’ve never met.” Her heart was beating too fast. “Maybe you should call the police,” she ventured, but her voice was sounding shrill and weak in her own ears.

“The police?” Dana said. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s kidding,” Janice said. “We’re old friends, so I know how strange she can get sometimes.”

Dana laughed. “I guess you *are* old friends,” she said, returning to her candy cane cards, almost merrily.

Janice squeezed even tighter, and Martha remembered how Christopher had squeezed her on the landing last night, and she wondered if the same things would keep happening to her over and over again. “Please let go,” she pleaded softly. “I really need some space to breathe.”

“Listen to me,” Janice whispered, and then paused. “Wouldn’t you like to keep your strange *relations* with your students a secret?”

“What are you talking about?” Martha noticed that Janice’s hair smelled subtly sweet like the rosewater her mother used to dab behind her ears and on the insides of her thin wrists before going out with friends on a Friday night. Martha had been in grade school then, and how she’d watched her mother, unblinkingly, dab rouge onto her cheeks, and clip those flowery crystal earrings onto her fleshy lobes.

“Or are you both like the same religion or something where you have to greet each other with a hug? I remember seeing something about that on 20/20.”

“I saw that too,” Janice said. “They were weirdoes, right?”

It was all too much. Martha had to hold back a laugh. Finally, Janice let go. For some reason, Martha was remembering playing peek-a-boo with Christopher and Jack last night, and how every time Christopher found Jack in the suitcase, he held him high above his head, and giggled like a man gone a little crazy. And at the same time, Janice’s smirk was giving Martha faint *deja vu*. And then she found herself actually laughing, a giggle really, and then a laugh. She wasn’t laughing at any one thing, specifically—none of this was funny—especially Janice’s threat—but when she tried to stop, her face went red, and when she tried to stop again, tears welled in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, wiping the tears. “I was just thinking of something.”

“Whatever,” Dana said, shaking her head. “Spending too much time with your third graders?”

“I know,” Janice said, clicking her tongue, and shaking her head. “A grown woman who can’t keep a hold of herself. What’ll we do with her?”

Dana laughed again. “How long did you say you’re down from Connecticut for?”

“Just the weekend, unfortunately. I do love Philadelphia.” Janice wrapped her arm around Martha’s shoulders. “Especially now since we’ve reunited. Tell her all about us,” she said, squeezing tight again.

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” Martha said, trying to smile. “I think she’s trying to sneak into my classroom.”

“What,” Dana said, and gave Martha that you’re-crazy-in-a-weird-way look.

“Let me ask you something, dear,” Janice ventured, leaning gracefully onto Dana’s desk, like a sexy secretary might in a horribly bland movie.

“Of course,” Dana said, perking up, even.

On her feet, Martha swayed, trying to stay straight.

“What would happen to a teacher who gets too close to her students?” Janice spoke slow and ponderingly.

“You don’t mean—“ Dana’s face went blank with near-horror. “Do you know something about a teacher—“ she paused, and looked slowly up at Martha, “—*touching* our students?”

“Too bad it’s Christmas and not April Fools,” Martha broke in. “I think we really tricked you.”

“Huh?” Dana’s pouty lip stuck out.

“We’re old friends from college,” Janice said.

“I was just shocked before because it’s been so long,” Martha said. “And she’s, um, lost so much weight.” Janice’s claim was a complete lie, of course it was, but Martha recognized that sick sinking feeling as the worst of omens.

“We were roommates freshman year,” Janice said. “At *Harvard*,” she added, raising her penciled-in eyebrows suggestively. She grabbed Martha’s arm.

“She’s kidding,” Martha said. It had to be on file that she’d gone to *Temple*. But maybe it didn’t matter, maybe Dana wouldn’t remember such a thing.

“We had a spiritual connection, really, like two different versions of the same person,” Janice said.

“You’re losing me,” Dana said, taking a big bite from a Twizzler, her eyes blank and glazed.

“But we did used to have a lot of fun, didn’t we, Martha?”

“Like that one time we drooled fruit punch for those cars,” Martha said, not really knowing why.

“That wasn’t me, silly,” Janice said. “You must be getting old.”

“I need to be getting back to my class,” Martha said suddenly, looking behind her. “There are parents visiting this afternoon. This is a potentially stressful situation.”

“And I’ve visited her classroom before,” Janice assured Dana.

“Go right ahead down,” Dana said, waving them off. Martha and Janice turned from the desk at the same time, and Janice linked arms with her.

“Help yourselves to some sweets on your way out,” Dana said.

“I’ll take you up on that,” Janice said, heading back over to the food.

“Nice to meet you,” Dana said to Janice chummily, as if they’d become fast friends.

“No thanks,” Martha said, and realizing that Evans could be back any minute, that he might even be walking down the hall right then, she almost yanked Janice from the table, and out the door. Luckily, the hall was empty, and they paused together outside the office for a moment. Martha tried to control her breath. “How did you know that about me and Amelia?”

“Where’s your room?” Janice asked, looking around. A classroom door slammed shut, and Janice grabbed Martha’s hand. Then Martha thought she heard the unmistakable squeak of the heavy main school doors. She started running, and pulled Janice along with her. As they ran past the entrance, Martha saw Principal Evans’ green Eagle’s cap, and his long, pale face through the thin rectangular window. “I can hardly wait,” Janice said, beaming.

“You can’t stay,” Martha said through shallow pants. “We’ll have to think of something once we get in there. Go right to the back of the classroom.” Together, they blurred past cotton ball snow scenes, glittery construction paper stockings, and tall thin toy soldiers.

As they neared the room, Martha saw Maya and Lucinda peeking out the doorway. Then they stepped into the hall and just stood there, side-by-side, dangling mint green bathroom passes from their hands. Martha held onto Janice’s hand, even

tightened her grip for some reason. She felt over-sized—like this body wasn't really supposed to be hers, or that she was just lost deep down inside somewhere. She and Janice were running down the hall like little girls.

“Mommy!” Lucinda exclaimed. Janice squatted down, and her face went peaceful as if she were praying.

“*Aunt Michelle,*” Martha corrected her.

Lucinda darted into her mother's arms, and wrapped her long legs around her waist. Janice picked her up and hugged her tight. “My baby,” she said. “My baby.”

Maya ran up to Martha, and grabbed her hand. “Look how happy they are! This really is a Christmas miracle!”

“I dream of you every night,” Janice cooed into Lucinda's hair. Fast straight tears streaked clean through her powdery make-up.

“Don't ever leave again, Mommy,” Lucinda pleaded. “I'm going with you.” Lucinda nuzzled into Janice's neck, and her legs swung out to the sides now, relaxed, as if she were sleeping.

No, those twinges in her chest did not mean she was jealous of them. That was completely ridiculous. “Let's get back in the classroom,” Martha said, ushering them all toward the door.

“Miss Miles,” Maya tugged on her arm. “The kindergartners are already here!”

“Is that right? Well, you must be excited.”

“It's all ready and perfect.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Martha said, and they all walked through the door.

Parents were circulating around the room, some uncomfortably and on the edges, others swarmed overzealously through the middle. She’d never thought of parents as the enemy before, and now she felt guilty or incompetent, she couldn’t tell which, in their eyes. Maya, poised-as-could-be, let her mother, an elegant woman, on a tour of the room. Everything seemed calm and professional, so this was okay, everything could still be fine. Janice and Lucinda, now walking side by side, but not touching, thank god, headed to the back of the room. And honestly, Janice, in her neat business suit, blended in with the rest of the parents. But then she saw Connie perched on the edge of her desk, surveying the room with her peculiar discerning glare. As Martha headed over, she tried to remember if Connie had seen Janice from up close or not. All of her third graders held their positions behind the various stations, or as tour guides. Beverly clicked away on her camera. Lucinda and Janice sat down on the pillows in the story corner.

“I hope none a’ this to-do about poverty scares my kids,” Connie said when Martha got there.

Say something funny, Martha told herself, like a joke. Or some other normal, chatty thing. “Hope not,” she said, trying to smile.

“The ballroom is being waxed as we speak,” Connie said, clicking her thick nails together.

“It won’t be too slippery?” A few of Connie’s kindergarteners had joined Lucinda and Janice on the pillows. Martha couldn’t tell if that was a good or bad sign.

“Planning to kick back a few tonight, Martha? I’m sure you can get to be a wild one.”

“Oh, maybe.” By the way Janice traced lines into the air above her head, it seemed she had begun telling a story. A few more students had gathered around, and now they all leaned in close.

“Who’s that lady back there? She’s not a parent, is she?”

“Well,” Martha said, leaning back on her desk, trying to steady her voice. “She volunteers at the homeless shelter down at 69th street.”

“So then why is she *here*?”

“She’s really good with the kids. I think she’s a professional storyteller.” It went quiet back there, the students leaned in close, and Janice whispered something to them. It was as if Janice were some sort of human magnet.

“Sometimes those storytelling types are weird.” Connie tapped her pearly watch. “Gotta get to my hair appointment by 3:45.”

“Suddenly the sky was dark,” Janice’s voice went bold and loud. “Even though it was daytime.” She stood up.

“How do you think I should fix mine?” Martha asked, gathering her short dark hair into a low, stubby ponytail. But Connie was no longer listening; her eyes were on Janice now.

“And then the cat ate her own tail. Chomp, chomp,” Janice said, pretending her hands were teeth. “And transformed back into a little girl on the playground!”

Martha heard a few *Ah*'s and *Wow*'s. "Do you really think Evans will strip again this year?"

"That lady's giving me the creeps." Connie scrunched her nose. "Just how she's talking."

"I think she's trying to make them feel like they're there, you know, like she's acting."

"And then," Janice said. "She dropped the final ingredient into the pot! Who knows what the magic ingredient is?"

"Puppy fur!" Lucinda shouted, jumping up, and hugging her mother.

"That lady," Connie said, getting off the desk. She backed away from Martha a little, her waxy pink lips twisted in disgust.

"She's a volunteer, Connie, from the shelter. She's a very nice woman."

"And when she dropped the eyelashes into the pot—" Janice pulled a sparkly wand out from her sleeve, and waved it above the students' heads.

"I'm getting Evans," Connie said, backing out the door. "This is just too weird."

"Wait, we don't have to do that, I'll go talk—" Martha started to say, but Connie had already gone.

"She was never scared again!" The students clapped and cheered as Janice bowed dramatically.

Martha headed back there, trying to piece together the events and her mistakes on the playground and with Christopher and her mother, and in the office—it all had

to relate somehow, but all the connections dissolved before she could even detect them. And it was still early—Lucinda’s adoptive parents might show up. They almost always attended such events. “Okay, that’s enough,” she heard her firm teacher’s voice. “Back to the booths, everybody.”

“But there’s more stories,” Lucinda said, hooking her arms around her mother’s neck.

“Janice, it’s urgent.”

Janice got right up. Some students scattered and some lingered shyly at a distance. All the other parents seemed occupied at the booths. Lucinda tightened her legs around her mother’s waist.

“I think Connie knows who you are,” Martha said when they got to the cubby corner. “You need to leave.” She cranked open the window, and stuck her head out. The ground was only about five feet down, eight at the most. “You can fit through easily, I think.” If Janice slipped out quickly, she could be free, and Martha would immediately cut all ties with her, not matter what. But what about Dana and all those lies in the office—had she revealed anything that would get her in trouble? She could just blame it all on Janice’s insanity, because she probably had a chemical imbalance or something, and it made her highly manipulative. She could say that she tried to stall the strange woman, but to no avail. And then Martha would exclaim, in shock and horror—she could do it, all she had to do was act—that she couldn’t believe a criminal had snuck into her classroom like that without her even knowing it.

“Mommy, don’t go,” Lucinda pleaded and cried. Her face had gone red, and she kicked her legs against the radiator. “I’m not letting go!”

“Janice, there’s no time,” Martha pleaded.

“Right, you’re right,” Janice said, with a smile, and those half-wild eyes again. Then she stepped onto the radiator, Lucinda still attached to her. “It’s time. I had a strange feeling it would end something like this.”

“What do you mean? What are you doing? Are you kidding me?”

“You knew this was coming,” Janice said. “Don’t lie to yourself. It’s a waste of energy.” She squatted down beside the window, and stuck one foot out. There she paused, and met Martha’s eyes. “I gave up everything for this—sold all my things, moved out of the shelter. She’s all I want.” Janice somehow hunched her back through the window.

Martha became acutely aware of the circle of silent, intent students. She noticed Maya’s mother walking toward them, Maya trailing behind pulling on one of the flaps of her blazer. “Mom, please don’t go back there. Mom, please no. I want to show you something.” But she kept coming, faster now, it seemed.

“Come on, baby,” Janice said, pulling Lucinda toward the window. “I’ve got you. Just stick your legs right here, and we’ll jump out together.”

“I’m not scared, mommy.” Lucinda’s full cheeks were ruddy, and her eyes gleamed.

Martha grabbed Lucinda under the arms, and tugged her hard away from her mother. Lucinda stiffened, and shrieked, "Get off me!" She kicked Martha sharply in the stomach.

"Lucinda, you can't go with your mommy right now." Martha pulled harder, but her grip kept slipping. "You're hurting me! My arms! My arms!" More students had gathered around. Lucinda's shrieks were shrill and sounded much too old and deep to ignore or bear. They jabbed at her stomach where she'd been kicked. And the veins on Janice's neck bulged tender and rosy, shiny somehow, beneath a thin coating of sweat. Her teeth clenched, and her green eyes were distant with determination.

"Now what's going on back here?" It was Maya's mother, right next to her. Almost immediately, Dana, Evans, and Connie arrived. It was all happening at once.

"She said they were old friends," Dana was saying. "I couldn't say no," she explained to Evans.

Janice hung halfway out the window by now. It looked like she could fall or jump any second. Lucinda was almost lying on her mother's body now, trying to get her legs through, too.

"What is this?" Evans said. "Who is this lady?"

Martha climbed up on the radiator now, as if to block Evans from interfering physically. But he wasn't even trying. It was so strange. She was panicked and so many people were gathered around, everyone knew something wrong was happening, they had to, but nobody was doing anything, not even Evans. How could they even begin to imagine what was going on? Should she try to explain? No, she couldn't.

Where would she start? She felt almost alone. Martha grabbed Lucinda's hips, it was all she could reach at this point, and started tugging again. Maya's mother grabbed onto Lucinda's legs, and started pulling, too. "Should we keep this woman here or push her out," she asked. Evans tried to balance himself on top of the corner of the radiator. He went for Janice's shoulders. More students were crying. Gerry stood there, a little closer than all the rest, calmly watching. Martha noticed, out of the corner of her eye, Beverly frantically reloading the film in her camera.

"Mommy," Lucinda cried.

"Someone call the police," Evans said. Mr. Brown rushed off. "Where's the nearest phone? Is this a phone? Can I use this?"

Janice looked right at Martha and said, much too calmly, "Let go of her."

Martha held on so tight that her fingers felt much too close to Lucinda's hipbones. "I'm bleeding," Lucinda cried. "You're making me bleed!" Between sobs, she gasped for air.

"That's not her mommy," Gerry said, shaking his head in a brief moment of silence. A few students sniffled.

"I have important information for you about Martha Miles," Janice said to Evans, who now had a firm hold on her shoulders.

"She's a liar," Martha said. "She's going to accuse me of molesting the students, and it's not true." Lucinda kicked her hard right in her neck. Martha lost her breath, but held on.

“What?” Evans said. “What’s this?” He released Janice’s shoulders. “Here,” he said, reaching for her hands. “Let me help you in. You need to tell me everything you know.” He took a long, low look at Martha.

“I’ve been talking to some of the students,” Janice said. “They were afraid to tell anybody else.” But just then, she grabbed the windowsill, and slipped herself out. She tried to pull Lucinda with her, but Martha had held on tight. Now Lucinda was biting the top of Martha’s arm.

Janice stood just a few feet down, with open arms. “Lucinda and Maya and Beverly told me that Martha took them into the girls’ bathroom and—“

“None of it is true,” Martha said, turning to Evans. But Lucinda was biting harder now, and she was squirming her body out the window, and Martha’s grip loosened again momentarily. “Someone please grab her—” But just then, Lucinda fell straight out of her hands.

Martha shoved her head out the window, scraping her forehead hard on the metal ledge, and saw Lucinda land right in her mother’s arms as if they were performing an ice skating routine.

“It was an accident,” Martha said, without looking at anybody. “I tried to hold on, but I couldn’t. She slipped out. But I didn’t mean to let go.”

“Martha,” Janice called up to her. “It was the right thing to do.” Then she took off across the field, Lucinda attached to her back like a permanent fixture. They dashed under the tall red monkey bars, past the shiny slide, and Martha lost them at the red fort.

“What just happened?” Evans was too close to her face now.

“Was that her mom?” Maya’s mother paced back and forth. “Should we be chasing after them? We *should* be chasing after them.” She looked out the window again.

“They were both lying to me,” Dana said. “I didn’t know what to believe.” Her reindeer ears were slipping slowly down her forehead.

“Lucinda wanted to be with her mommy,” Maya said, trying to crawl onto the radiator. Her mother gently eased her off. Maya whined a little, and then she was crying. “Are we all in trouble?” Her mother picked her up, and rubbed her back. “Everything will be okay,” she spoke quietly in her ear.

Then the police were there—the tall ones from yesterday, but now they were so close. They had big black guns, and thick black sticks, and wide, stern faces, and there was the strong musky stench of cologne, and Martha had to get out of there. She backed away from the window, and started for the door. “I need to be alone,” she said. “I just need some time alone, or I might, um, have an anxiety attack.” Now it seemed everyone was still, watching her. She looked from students to parents, not really seeing them.

“Hold on,” Evans said, coming toward her. “We need to talk to you right away.” Martha grabbed the black sweater from the back of her chair, there was no time for her coat, and started to the door. “Miss Miles,” Beverly said, appearing in front of her, camera to her eye. “I need to interview you. This is breaking news.” “I need to use the washroom,” Martha said, squeezing between Beverly and the

doorframe. “I’ll be right back,” she said, wrapping the arms of the sweater around her neck. Again, Martha found herself running down the hallway, and as if in a dream where time doesn’t exist, she slid right out the front doors of the school.

But on the steps, Mr. and Mrs. Banks—Lucinda’s adoptive parents—lurched her to a stop. “Are we late?” Mr. Banks said, checking his watch.

“Is anything wrong,” Mrs. Banks wanted to know. She held a big pan with two layers of decorated cupcakes.

“Of course not,” Martha said, descending the steps, one at a time, backwards.

“We’ve been looking forward to coming in all week,” Mrs. Banks said.

“I just have to get something from my car,” Martha said. “Go ahead in.”

Running across the field, Martha thought she heard the sharp sounds of rocks banging together from the fort. If they were in there, could she blockade them in somehow? No, they would hear her making a racket. She could run back into the school, and get the police out here. But she was losing track of each moment before it even passed, and she found herself sneaking up to the fort alone, not even able to stop and think. She peeked in there. It was empty, but for one of Lucinda’s puffy purple mittens set in the middle of a circle of smooth small rocks. Her mind went back to the classroom she’d just left, and she saw perfectly how Mr. and Mrs. Banks, shocked to weakness by the disappearance of their daughter, would collapse to the floor together in tears.

Martha backed away from the fort, and went for the gate. She thought she heard someone yelling at her from the window, Gerry, maybe, or one of the cops, but couldn’t be sure, and didn’t look back to see who it might be. The wind was blowing

hard and through her middle, naked but for a thin silky blouse. She felt her long black cardigan blow open, and flap, almost weightlessly, behind her.