

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Katharine L. McIntyre for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
presented on April 26, 2006.

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*Redacted for Privacy*

Abstract approved:

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Keith T. Scribner

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This thesis is the first third of a novel in progress called Rose, Thou Art Sick. In the selection, Rose loses her mother in a freak accident in Boston, is threatened by her evil uncle Charlie, and packs up and moves to Kansas to live with her father, whom she has never met. The novel tracks Rose's search for connection in her life, her struggle to triumph over the absurdity that surrounds her.

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Rose, Thou Art Sick  
by  
Katharine L. McIntyre

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APPROVED: *Redacted for Privacy*

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Katharine L. McIntyre, Author

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To my mother and father for their unflagging love and support

## Rose, Thou Art Sick

### Chapter 1

Rose was born fifty feet underground on a packed Red Line train hurtling from Park Street to Charles MGH. It was a cold day in January of 1983, three months before the first environmental impact studies on the Central Artery and Tunnel Project in downtown Boston began, and nearly ten years before crews began tearing up the center of the city. She slipped from her mother Patsy Ann's loins, landed on the gritty, newspaper-swaddled floor and skittled around on slick blood and bodily fluids before settling near the middle of the car. In the flickering fluorescent lights, the blood looked black, and the rumbling of the steel wheels on the tracks as the train thrust jerkily forward drowned out Rose's first cries. Horrified faces of strangers and feet rapidly scrunching up onto seats welcomed her into the world. Squashed by a construction worker's steel toed boot, or pierced by a businesswoman's stiletto, her life could have ended concurrently with its beginning.

A sharp curve in the tracks threw the morning commuters to their left. Screaming Rose slid headfirst toward a steel support pole. The back of her head hit it with a dull ping. Rose's mother, Patsy Ann scooped Rose up (using the umbilical cord to reel her in) and tucked her against her breast, swallowing her up in the billowing sleeves of her maternity dress, as if to undo the birthing process, so that Rose (whom she called Rose from the beginning—Patsy Ann, while not



one for the births in hospitals, was one for the preparatory sonograms) could pop back out into the light at a more seemly time.

As the train emerged from the tunnel and filled with sunlight, Rose's mother shuddered; she was passing the afterbirth. It plopped on the ground beside a Star Market bag which was whisked onto the lap of its owner, barely saving the eggs and oranges and lettuce. A single organic plum rolled out of the bag and settled beside the bloody mass. The young woman in the lavender sweat suit looked away, disowning it.

Illuminated by the sun, the blood-smeared floor was redder than red—the reddest red imaginable, redder than Valentine hearts, than maraschino cherries, than a whore's lips. The blood pooled where decades of feet had carved out indentations. It ran in thin lines as the train chugged around a corner, then pooled again, creating savage shapes, rough-edged circles, crimson whirlpools and eddies.

No one could figure out the appropriate thing to say; everyone turned phrases over in their minds, dismissing this one as tawdry, that one as too prim. Finally, a punk with a tattoo of the grim reaper on his neck, with eyes burrowed deep in saggy purple sockets indicating that his night was ending, rather than his morning beginning, smirked, "Aren't you going to get your plum?" The young woman who lost it, a mother herself perhaps, shook her head vigorously.

Patsy Ann kneeled at the front of the car holding her baby close to her. She held her fingers in front of her daughter's red, crinkled face and wiggled them. Rose blinked tiny reptilian eyelids and followed Patsy Ann's hand with her eyes. An older woman, forty, maybe, came over to Patsy Ann, smiled at her baby, and asked if she was all right. Patsy Ann nodded. The woman rode along beside Patsy Ann, their bodies and little Rose's shaking from the vibration of the train.

A raspy Boston accent piped through the intercom, "Chawrles/MGH, doors open on your right." Patsy Ann, flushed yet dignified, shifted Rose to her arm, plucked the afterbirth up and tossed it into her old brown handbag (she still carried that bag many years later, though she switched out the lining), and slipped out the doors of the train as soon as they opened, leaving in her wake paralyzed commuters plunged into the tragicomedy of humanity even before their second cups of coffee.

At the hospital, after vital signs were checked and the mother and baby were monitored for a day, the doctors allowed Patsy Ann to rise from bed and wash her newborn. Patsy Ann delicately sponged Rose clean using a corner of a soft washcloth. She gasped when she saw the cut from the subway pole on the back of Rose's head. It was hexagonal, no bigger than a dime. A thin line of blood outlined it. Patsy Ann cleansed the wound with gentle soap and patted it dry. She kissed Rose's head above the wound and held her baby close.

## Chapter 2

Patsy Ann was a registered nurse so she took childbirth lightly. She'd seen it often. She eschewed more standard birthing methods involving a stationary room in a hospital, with a doctor and sterile conditions. Patsy Ann had tended new babies who emerged from taxicabs, from mini-vans, and in one desperate case, from a dune buggy. They had been born mid-fare, or in the family bathtub, or in amongst the sand on the coast, arriving at the hospital covered in grease, or graham cracker crumbs, or a gritty coating of sand, along with those who had tidily popped out straight from the mother's womb into the doctor's sterilized arms. And in her opinion, it didn't make any difference one way or another. In fact, she'd go further. She believed (she had no evidence for this) that these babies who entered the world roughly turned out better. Patsy Ann did not think, however, that the world was a hard place and that the sooner a person learned that, the better. She considered subscribers to this notion the worst sort of sadists. But she did believe that it didn't pay to protect babies, or the children they would metamorphose into. If they didn't get into a little trouble on their own, they'd never learn.

She frowned on those mothers with the antibacterial wipes and sprays who aggressively spritzed and swabbed stuffed animals and cribs, any place tiny lips or hands might touch, whose babies had absorbed so much second-hand disinfectant spray that by their second birthdays their pores oozed Sunny Lemon

fragrance. If a big, bad germ ever did sneak through all those defenses, that baby, who'd never had to fight anything before, was doomed. True, she would have preferred sanitary birthing conditions, but the main point was that her baby was in no way endangered or damaged, as some of the more scurrilous news outlets claimed.

Patsy Ann had, too late, made a good faith effort to head over to the hospital. When the contractions had started, she rearranged herself on her lavender couch, with her feet up on one armrest and her head on the other. This movement disturbed Elroy, and he hopped off the couch where he had been nestling beside her, giving her a disgusted look and savagely licking his orange fur where she'd touched him. She gave him a mean look back, and he ambled into the kitchen where she could hear him crunching cat food.

The contractions hurt, and when they struck, she dug her head down on the armrest and flexed her legs. They smarted, certainly, but she wanted to wait until things got good and started before she went in. This was her first baby, and she was looking at eight to ten hours of labor. No need to rush things. She had spent so much time in the hospital, nursing other folks, that it didn't feel entirely right to give birth to Rose there, to sit back and be nursed. Some instinct about separating work from her personal life? She wasn't sure, but that made no sense because she'd hooked Rose's father while on the clock. And she loved the people

in neo-natal. Rosy-faced and ample, women mostly, who had borne ten or twenty children each, surely, so strong was their maternal aura.

Her Dr. Eloise Lynch, one of these women, harangued her every pre-natal visit about her diet and her stress level, whether she was drinking enough water, getting enough exercise. Patsy Ann enjoyed the fuss, how Dr. Eloise called her baby Baby, as in “Now you’ve got to do something for me, Patsy Ann. Make sure that you’re getting enough folic acid. Baby needs at least 100 milligrams a day.”

Now, though, when she should have been paging the good doctor, arranging transportation, getting her bulk loaded up and hospital-bound, she couldn’t get started. Part of her reluctance, yes, she was woman enough to admit it, stemmed from *The Peggy and Tammy Gessner Story*, which only had forty-five minutes remaining. It was the touching based-on-true-events account of two little girls born with their necks grown together, literally inseparable. Tammy dreamed of being a country music singer, and at the climax of the movie (still a half-hour away, Patsy Ann knew, because she’d seen it twice already), she gave a performance in Nashville, wearing a fancy little cowgirl skirt and top combo with blue rhinestones. Peggy was beside her on stage, wearing black so that she didn’t distract anyone, and moving her lips silently along with all of the words. Such a touching moment, Peggy doing everything she could not to draw the audience’s eyes toward her, then capturing hearts all the more because she couldn’t help

singing along. Patsy Ann always wept at that part. She thought of her own brother Charlie in the federal pen in upstate New York, how he might react if she ever performed country music songs. He'd laugh and make loud jokes about the poor fit of her costume. He'd bring some moldy fruit to throw at her. Then, after the show, he'd try to borrow some money. Familial warm-heartedness had perished five years ago, along with her father.

When Patsy Ann turned the television off, still minutes shy of the climax, the contractions were coming much faster. Alarming. Maybe she wouldn't make it to the hospital in time. She swung her legs down to the floor and pushed herself up to half-sitting, half lying down. As she heaved herself up to standing, another contraction clamped down on her insides, and she fell back down. She panted, waited for it to pass, then acted swiftly, again hauling all that extra weight up. She grabbed her purse and put on her heavy coat, the two middle buttons of which now could not be fastened. She reached inside the purse for her keys, feeling better because she was moving with speed and efficiency. Her keys weren't there. "Shit!" she yelled. After a curse-laced search, she found the fuckers lying in the soil of her potted asparagus fern by the door and steamed out to catch a taxi. She walked to Beacon Street and waited, perhaps five minutes, which felt painfully longer. The sky looked pregnant, too, gray and full of snow. Every cab that passed was full of people who were not cold and pregnant to the point of bursting. She hated them. A cab stopped and rolled down a window. "Mass

General. I'm having a baby," she told the driver, whose belly rivaled her own.

The steering wheel cut into it. Later, she wondered how he got in and out.

"Sorry, lady. Last one of those I had, I'm still scrubbing up the blood from the cracks in the seats. Besides, traffic's all fucked up that way. You'll get there quicker on the T." With that, the window rolled up smoothly, and he pulled back into traffic.

"Fuck you, motherfucker! You're going to hell for that!" Patsy Ann's vocal chords burned as she yelled, and he never even heard her. "I'm taking the goddamned T," she said, softer.

Patsy Ann's apartment was closest to the South Station stop. She waddled down the stairs of the station and boarded a train. She knew this trip now. Thirty minutes or less, and she'd be shuffling into the hospital. She'd make it. Except. Except for, between Downtown Crossing and Park Street, the lights on the train flickered, and it ground to a squealing stop. Much later, she found out that a careless workman with an earthmover had punctured a water line, and a team was down the tunnel to inspect the leak. The passengers all groaned as the train lost velocity, and Patsy Ann joined in, a bit more loudly and more urgently than the rest. When the train again jerked forward, Patsy Ann knew she wouldn't make it to the hospital.

Her baby was not born in a sterile heartless room in the hospital, but onto the floor of the T, the whole city's taxicab, where for only two quarters,

Bostonians could ride anywhere they liked and leave behind bits of themselves, soiled gloves and crumpled tissues, bitten off and spit hangnails, and black grease from the bottom of their shoes. Rose landed in it all.

Rose was Patsy Ann's first and only child, and Patsy Ann had decided nine months ago, when she first peed on the little E.P.T. strip and it had registered a plus sign, that she would make it a point of honor not to scream and carry on like all the mothers-to-be she'd tended. She thought her calmness about the whole process would make a funny story to recount to her friends, if she'd had any who weren't there at the hospital, already intimately familiar with the circumstances: "So then I figured, 'I know how long this takes. I've seen it often enough. I've got plenty of time to finish my movie!' Old Rose proved me wrong, though. Sneaky, sneaky baby!" At this point, Patsy Ann would shake her finger at Rose, scolding her, and pause for laughs. She had tried this a couple times with her coworkers when they came to visit the new baby, but they knew the story already. They were more interested in seeing glamour shots of Rose, with her pink puffy cheeks, pursed mouth, and questioning eyes, in taking Rose up in their arms and stroking the downy fluff on top of her head. Patsy Ann provided these photos, let them pet her baby, but couldn't help but feel cheated. Rose wasn't the only one who suffered.

Patsy Ann acquired a following after the birth of Rose. News of the birth spread from mouth to mouth at the hospital, and, as with anything that people



cannot imagine anyone admiring anyone else for, there were folks who did admire Patsy Ann for what she did, including one of the janitors, a morning receptionist, and a morgue technician who wore a big silver skull ring on his pinky and who, inspired by Patsy Ann, had decided that all major life transitions should happen on public transportation. When his time came, he'd be sure to die on a public bus or ferry or something. Not the subway, though. Patsy Ann owned that one.

When Patsy Ann came back to work after her maternity leave, people sought her out, in the backs of elevators, in supply closets, at the ends of long hallways. Patsy Ann's admirers all liked her matter-of-fact descriptions of the birth. She alienated her new friends eventually, though, by telling her story over and over a few too many times. She figured that if it were endlessly entertaining to her, everybody else must feel the same way. They drifted away from her one by one. The mortician stuck around longest, but finally, when he had the entire story memorized word-for-word, even he deserted her.

The less respectable Boston newspapers ate the story up. For the first week after they had figured out who Patsy Ann was, she got call after call wanting details about her story. What was she thinking when the birth happened? "Wow, that was quick!" Had she thought about taking a cab? "Yes, and that driver who wouldn't pick me up, wherever he is, should go somewhere and die and rot. Whatever, though. I take the subway in to the hospital for work. I know the way." Who was the father? "None of your damn business!" How do you spell

“Gessner?” “Are you really going to put that part in? Yes, I suppose it does add something.” Patsy Ann’s story combined a public interest angle with blood and gore—the heady mix of the saccharine and the grotesque was sure to appeal to all parts of the newspapers’ reading public. A couple papers stopped by the apartment and took pictures of Patsy Ann holding Rose in her arms, making sure that the stacks of old magazines and newspapers and Elroy’s claw marks on the couch made it into the frame.

Patsy Ann collected the articles as they came out and pasted them into a pink and white lace-encrusted album that read “My Baby Girl” on the front in puffy letters. Pasted on the first page was a grainy black and white picture of the floor of the subway train post-partum, blood-smearred like the scene of a triple-homicide. The clippings’ headlines: “Crazy Train,” “Red Line Maternity Ward,” “Special Delivery on Track 5.” For years, she kept the volume on the top right corner of her bookshelf, supported by her dog-eared Jackie Collins paperback collection. She’d pull it out at a moment’s notice. Meter-readers, pizza deliverers, and children selling candy door to door for band class were all roped in by Patsy Ann’s insistent charm. Soon the visitors would be settled into the violet wingback chair, the one comfy chair in the apartment, with a steaming cup of cocoa at their elbow. Patsy Ann would turn pages and narrate for them. After school, teenage Rose would walk in as her mother was saying, “My contractions were only about two minutes apart by South Station. I figure I was nearly fully

dilated by Park Street,” or “The train stopped just beyond Park Street. Let me tell you I kept my legs tight together during that little period.” Rose glared at her mother, who anticipated the look and kept her eyes on the album and guest.

Once, when Rose was sixteen—bold enough to confront her mother, yet naïve enough to think that her mother could change, she asked her to stop telling the story. Rose saw the vivacity dribble out of her mother’s pale eyes and the smile fall off her mouth and knew that she’d made a mistake. Patsy Ann told her daughter flatly, “It’s my story. I’m sorry it embarrasses you, but I’m going to keep telling it.”

Rose was touched, though, when she got home from school one day to find a girl scout in the living room. Patsy Ann stood with her left foot on the violet chair, one leg of her elastic-waisted nurse’s pants hiked up to show the girl scout the big scars on her raised knee. “I used to play softball, you see, catcher, and that tears up your knees really bad. I had to get the arthroscopic surgery on this knee here. You can tell by the two little scars on either side of my kneecap. That’s where the scope went in.” The girl scout nodded vigorously, her hands in her lap clenched on her cookie ordering form. Rose leaned over and kissed her mother’s cheek before dumping her backpack off in her room.

But the grotesque subway story soon pulled Patsy Ann back into its orbit. She couldn’t resist the power she held over audiences when she told that tale. Patsy Ann would smile and her cheeks would flush as she uttered the familiar first

words: “You might not think that a subway is a good place to give birth to a baby.” She would continue on from there, tweaking minor sections and embellishing others, always watching her audience’s faces closely, and adjusting the length and narrative commentary to accommodate her listeners’ tastes.

Rose wasn’t embarrassed by the story so much as disgusted. As Rose got older, when she rode the subway she would pull her long-sleeved shirt over her hand before she grasped a pole, or meticulously examine the seats for bodily fluids or still-wet graffiti before she lowered herself down onto them. The subway was a dirty, dirty place. She had seen some gross things on the subway during the twenty years she’d been riding it, including the man who clipped his fingernails, one of which, (a thumbnail, Rose believed), had shot off and landed on the gray wool pants of the oblivious lady sitting beside him, and the man who wore short shorts, no underwear, and sunglasses. His thing was hanging out one of the legs of the shorts, and his face was pointed straight at Rose’s though she could not tell if his eyes were on her. She moved to a different car at the next stop. Then there was the man who stood clutching a rat at the top of the escalator at the Harvard stop (there was an art supply store there Rose liked). When Rose had gotten halfway up the escalator and finally noticed him, he drew the hand holding the rat back and thrust it forward, winding up to toss it at Rose. She shrieked and beat a hasty retreat back down the escalator, which was difficult because the escalator continued to move upward and she wore her highest heels.

She made it, though, and stood glaring up at the Rat Man. His round face turned oval as he smiled and said, "Come on up, I won't throw it!" Rose delicately stepped up the stairs instead. Mr. Ratty offered her a ratty handshake of peace, but Rose gave him a wide berth.

The subway made her sad: every time she rode, she looked at the floor, imagining the impropriety of her naked body with its soft, permeable baby skin slipping around on it. And, if she were on the Red Line, she'd always wonder about the age of the train, if it might not have been in service back when she was born, if Patsy Ann might not have huddled with her at the front of that very car, turning her baby's eyes away from the carnage behind them.

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On Rose's 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in January 2003, Rose and Patsy Ann sat together at the kitchen table, a long slab of plywood Patsy Ann had decoupled with pictures of cute kittens then varnished. The radiator clanked and burbled wheezed behind them.

"Ready for your present?" Patsy Ann asked. She got up and opened the door of the hall closet. She retrieved a cardboard Michelob Light box from the top shelf. Inside, Rose knew, were a pair of Rose's baby shoes, a lock of fine blonde hair, a first birthday invitation with an elephant on it, and Rose's birth certificate.

Patsy Ann pulled out a thin rectangle wrapped in pink paper and brought it back to the table. Rose tore away the wrapping paper, and there it was, reborn like the impaled and decapitated villain in the last scene of a horror movie. Just when you thought it was dead, Rose thought. By now, the lace on the cover had faded to a splotchy gray, and the clippings had yellowed and crinkled. Her mother had not shown the book off for nearly a year, and Rose was hoping she'd forgotten about it or lost it. In fact, when Rose was fifteen and meaner, she'd considered hiding the book herself or throwing it away. But it gave her mother such joy. And Rose did feel grateful to her mother for...for what? For caring enough to keep that book for her? No. Not that specifically. What a sweet gesture, and what an ill-conceived one. Patsy Ann couldn't understand it, what seeing that book did to Rose. It filled her with the weight of her hideous birth, it dragged her by the scruff of her neck back to a time when she could not control how she presented herself, but instead crawled and slid like a small weak animal. She did not understand nicety, elegance, by instinct then, like she did now. Patsy Ann never grasped it. Rose was grateful to her mother for not being embarrassed about how her daughter was born.

Rose felt a warm, hard palm on top of her hand. "I thought you'd like to have it. So that you can remember your roots."

“Oh, thanks.” Rose would never tell her mother that she had not done right by giving her the book. Patsy Ann wouldn’t understand. Part of the grace in their relationship came from many small lies about their feelings.

Rose had to be very careful about her mother’s feelings. Patsy Ann had switched from full to half time at the hospital a few months earlier, step one toward retirement. She could not seem to adjust to having nobody depending on her. She would go through the apartment looking for things to clean, or fluff up, or pick at. The years fell off the apartment as Patsy Ann scrubbed the floors and walls, cleaned the foot-high stack of junk mail off the stove, organized her shelf of medical books alphabetically, and rubbed orange oil into the old butcher block she’d inherited from her father, a real butcher. She would say to Rose, as she was scrubbing, as her crown of brown and gray hair bobbed up and down: “My father killed things, I saved lives, and you capture things so they live forever in your paintings. We covered a lot of ground in three generations!”

Rose took the album up to her room and put it in her top dresser drawer, under her bras and panties, a place that conveyed its significance, so if Patsy Ann spotted it there, her feelings would not be hurt, yet also a place where Rose, as long as she kept up with her laundry, would never have to see it.

Rose shut the drawer and sat down on her bed. She reached back to the place where the base of her skull met her neck. There, beneath her probing fingers, was a hex-shaped divot that neatly corresponded to one of the steel bolts

holding down the vertical pole of a subway train that was, at that very moment, thundering along deep within the belly of the city like a smooth metal tapeworm, sending subterranean rodents scrambling with the sound of its screeching brakes.

Soon the rodents would run even faster. Six million rats who had made their homes in the subways would be evicted because of the Big Dig, known more formally as the Central Artery and Tunnel Project. At least that was the rumor at her internship at Bechtel/Thomas. She'd worked there for two weeks now. The firm made aesthetic choices about the T stops that were to be refurbished using some of the eight billion dollars for the project. A lot of people were upset about the Big Dig. The central traffic artery pumping cars through Boston was to be widened and sunk underground, below the subway, phone, gas, and water lines. Redoing some subway stops, including Aquarium, which Rose worked on, had been a sop to the folks who were worried car traffic would just be increased, that the rush hours would only get longer. They figured that the ten-hour rush hours on the central artery currently scared the more impatient drivers away, and that wider lanes and easier access would only mean more cars glutting the new road, reestablishing the clog and worse, for more cars on the road meant more pollution.

All that digging would disturb the rats in their underground nests, sending them scurrying up through sewer grates into the streets, where they would nip at ankles, eat pigeons, and steal babies. Or so the crazies who called in to



Bechtel/Thomas liked to claim. When Rose went to see the progress at the Aquarium station, she'd imagine rats dripping off the walls, thousands of clawed feet clinking against the rails as they came for her, derailling subway cars that got in their way.

She came to think of any subway car she climbed aboard as her father, an angry, vengeful beast who tore through the night, dispassionately righting all wrongs dealt to her. He would jump off his tracks and go after anything or anyone who tried to hurt her. Separated from the power supply of the third rail, he'd run on straight piss and vinegar.

### Chapter 3

Back when he impregnated Patsy Ann, Earl was a scrawny man who spoke in a soft high-pitched whisper but sang bass in his church choir back in Kansas. He was visiting his brother Jim in western Mass. Jim had ended up on the east coast because the only place that recruited him to continue his spotty high school football career was a tiny Division III school in New Hampshire. The football coach of said school had been visiting relatives in Goodland, Kansas, and saw Jim play the best game of his life. After the game, coach #1 spoke to coach #2 and found that Jim was "tenacious, a scrapper" and a "real class guy." What more could anyone ask for? Much more, apparently. Jim ended his college career having accrued thirty-seven net rushing yards and five fumbles.

While Jim wasn't bringing mediocrity to the playing field, he wooed a sweet round girl named Belinda. Belinda's family ran a successful car wash empire called Sir Suds-A-Lot, and Jim, inducted into the business, managed a chain of five Sir Suds-A-Lots in the Boston area. Jim refused to let his old lifestyle get eaten up by the city. He maintained his country tastes and prejudices, which his more delicate brother never had shared.

On a fishing trip on a lake in western Mass with brother Jim, Earl'd sunk a hook into the fleshy strip of his nose right between the eyes. Because Jim drove a pickup and coached junior high football, Earl felt obligated to shrug off the pain and allow his brother to try to extricate the hook using a tool that had a can-opener, a thin knife blade, a toothpick, needle-nose pliers, and a measuring stick attached. His brother referred to the tool as "my Handyman."

"Look here, now, you just hold still a second. Me and my Handyman can take care of that." His brother came after him with the corkscrew attachment. Earl's eyes crossed as he tried to focus on what his brother's fingers were doing. After maneuvering the tool around for several minutes and using three of the Handyman's different accessories, Jim said, "Got it!" He dropped the Handyman back in his tackle box and gave the hook a sharp tug.

But the hook was still firmly embedded. Earl let out a deep guttural groan and pulled away from his brother's fingers. He sneezed three times in quick succession, bending far over at the waist. Tears formed in the near corners of his

eyes, which he didn't want his brother to see. When they were little, his brother used to beat him up, not out of resentment or anger, but for the sheer pleasure of seeing Earl cry.

“Thought the Handyman had it loose there. Here, hold this beer on there for a while. Take care of that swelling. You don't mind if I get in a few more casts, eh?”

Earl sat with the cold Pabst against the bridge of his nose for an hour while his brother finished up, then for another 2 hours in the shiny pickup during the ride back to Boston. “No brother of mine's going to a lousy western Mass hospital. They're not sanitary,” Jim told him. Earl ignored his brother and watched the billboards fly past.

His brother finally dropped him at Mass General and told him, “I'll come and get you in an hour or two. I'll get the grill all fired up. Have a nice steak dinner when you get back.”

Earl jumped out of the truck, and after thinking a second, tossed the Pabst back into the truck bed.

Inside, Patsy Ann warned Earl, “This may make your eyelids droop,” as she injected a numbing agent into the bridge of his nose. She waited a few minutes then pressed on the inflamed tissue around the hook, asking if he could feel it.

“Naw,” he told her, ducking his head down.

She bent close to his face, “Yeah, look at that. Look at those bedroom eyes.” Patsy Ann left the room, adding a special swish of her hips because she liked his gentle mouth. Also, he’d told her he was heading back to Kansas in two days, and there was no band on his left ring finger.

She slipped him her number and a smile after the doctor had finished up with him. He called her after the barbecue, during which his brother forced on him a steak cooked much rarer than he liked it. As he sawed at the tough, lukewarm meat, he bitterly thought that for the way his brother had hurried off to tend to his grill, he might at least have laid the steaks on there a minute or two before serving them.

Earl and Patsy Ann met up that evening at a coffee shop near the hospital, and then Patsy Ann took him back to her place, where he spent the night. He needed Patsy Ann after all the time with his brother. After his brother so thoroughly reminded him of how things were when he was younger—his brother inflicting physical harm on him, accidentally or not, and he never complaining because it might mean that his brother wouldn’t hang out with him any more. He, a small, small child with freckles, a little brother, who always looked sickly, who had scars on his back from when his brother had told him he’d hold up a barbed wire fence so that he could skinny under, after he himself had so painstakingly held it for his brother, grasping the wire so hard that it made red indentations in his fingers. He needed to stand up to his brother, to show him how much he’d

changed. How manly he was now, able to lure in women with his flypaper-like testosterone, even while wounded right between the eyes. His visage was, if anything, improved by the cruel black stitches. Made him look tougher.

Patsy Ann needed him because, after all, women had needs, and she was an active woman, much too busy to sleep with someone who lived in town. A man in town meant such things as home-cooked dinners together, talking on the phone about the course of her day, and losing valuable sleeping real estate in her bed.

She actually gasped in bed, while Earl worked and pushed on top of her, “I need you, baby!” which bothered her for a week afterward, long after Earl had cleared out of town.

They separated the next day, and he went back to his used car lot in Kansas, expecting to never hear from her again. He didn't, except for once, only nine and a half months after they met. She tracked down his number to let him know he had a daughter, and that she didn't expect him to be involved in her life, and didn't really want him to be, considering how she didn't know him. As she gripped the phone in her hands, saying those words, she wondered if she meant them. Her palm sweated and she paced the apartment, as if her agitation might speed up his reply.

“Okay,” he told her, his voice tinny, unreadable, “What's her name?”

“Rose. She was born on the subway,” Patsy Ann told him as she hung up. If she got started talking to him, she wouldn’t be able to stop, and pretty soon, he’d be driving a U-Haul trailer cross-country so that he could move into Patsy Ann’s tiny little apartment ready and rarin’ to fill it up with man smells and make an honest woman out of her. That was the last thing she needed.

#### Chapter 4

When Rose was eight, in the summer of '91, bulldozers broke ground on the Big Dig project. Rose’s third grade teacher told the class all about the project, how the biggest, widest road in Boston was to be buried underground. First, though, they’d build a tunnel under the water of the bay. Rose imagined a bunch of divers in wet suits and hard hats speaking garbled directions to each other through walky-talkies. Fish would swim past periodically, surly snaggle-toothed city fish. The men would bat them away with their gloved hands. But how would they pour the concrete underwater? It would float and get in the men’s eyes. The fish would suck the gravel up in the hard mouths. Rose wanted to ask her teacher to explain, but the class had already moved on to fractions.

One day, Rose and her best friend Lucia were sitting on the floor of the apartment with a pair of safety scissors each cutting out pictures of flowers from seed catalogs. Patsy Ann signed up for the catalogs even though they had no fallow ground to plant around their apartment. Both she and Rose would flip

through them admiring the pictures, the color so saturated and garish, so pretty. Rose was more precise than her friend, patiently tracing around every petal of purple coneflower, each individual spike of gladiolus, and separating the flowers and scraps into two tidy piles. Elroy kept plopping down in the center of the project and Rose would pick him up and give him kisses until he squirmed away. He'd wait a while in the kitchen then sneak back in and arrange himself back in the middle. Patsy Ann came in carrying a plate of cookies and her album.

She knelt down on the floor beside the girls. She wore her nurse's scrubs, though she was off work that day. Most days, she wore them. Rose had asked her why, and Patsy Ann replied, "Comfort and maneuverability." Rose knew comfort, but she looked up maneuverability in a splotch-edged dictionary at school. She already knew that these fell outside her own personal list of virtues in clothing, which included jewel-tone colors, attached flowers, and pouffy skirts.

"So, Lucia, I thought you might be interested in where Rose came from," Patsy Ann said. Lucia looked up at her and nodded. She shifted nervously. Rose had been waiting for her mother to drag out the album. It made her shyly proud when her mother did this, that there was something so unique about her that her mother couldn't stop talking about it.

"Lucia, Rose wasn't born in a hospital like you were, or like the rest of your friends. You know the Red Line?"

Lucia nodded slowly.

“Well, Rose was born there eight years ago.” Lucia looked confused.

Patsy Ann clarified, “On the subway.”

Lucia grasped it at last. “That’s gross!” She started laughing hard, in the same way she’d laughed when Mrs. Hayes’s fly was open at the beginning of class one day. Not a nice way. Rose had crept up to Mrs. Hayes’s desk at the first opportunity and handed her a note that read, “Dear Mrs. Hayes, Please note, your fly is down. I thought you’d want to know.” So young, so empathetic, and so sensitive to open flies, that Rose.

Lucia’s laughter started out in high chirpy bursts, then grew, to gasping “Huh, huh, huhs” from deep in her small belly.

Patsy Ann frowned and tucked her book up against her chest, and Rose started to cry. She’d never known before that being born on the Red Line was shameful, nothing she should be proud of. Neither of them asked Lucia why she laughed. They didn’t want to know.

“Well, all right girls, I think it’s about time for Lucia to go home,” said Patsy Ann.

“Oh, not yet mommy,” Rose protested weakly, using a mock-upset tone that always conveyed to Patsy Ann her true desires. Lucia didn’t say anything because she couldn’t. She was still laughing.

They all put on their heavy coats and gloves and hats and trooped to that very subway that’d birthed Rose. On the train, Lucia asked, pointing a chubby,



crooked finger, “So was she born here? Or over there Mrs. Abernathy?” Rose sat with a fixed smile on her face. Patsy Ann glared.

In school the next day, Rose had forgotten all about the subway. She hung her pink backpack on a peg, sat in her desk, and got out her mini-notebook with the purple butterflies and sparkles on it. And then the laughter started. It was subtle at first, but then built up as Rose looked around her, trying to figure out what everyone was laughing at. She saw faces contorted in laughter. Devin Arnold was doubled over shaking. Priscilla Smith pointed at her as she laughed. And high over all the other laughs she heard Lucia’s bell-like, dulcet tones.

“What are you all laughing at?” Mrs. Hayes asked. No one answered her, but, quick-eyed, she spotted a piece of notebook paper being passed from Colt Balthazar to Rose.

Rose had just enough time to unfold it and take a look before Mrs. Hayes intercepted it. The picture was horrifying. It showed a subway train with legs, which were spread open. Savagely scribbled lines shot down from the subway’s crotch, and there, below them, was a cross-eyed baby labeled “Rose” on its forehead. Rose knew the artist. She recognized the roses made of spirals and a couple diagonal lines that framed the train. They were Lucia’s. Rose’s face burned with shame. The anger did not take hold until much later.

At recess that day, Rose tried to talk to Lucia, but Lucia turned her back on her and continued to talk to the popular girls, which had included Rose until

that morning. Rose had no choice but to seek out the other group of girls, in whose company she languished until junior high. These girls liked to pretend that they were bunny rabbits, hopping around the playground and pretending to gnaw on the grass.

For years afterward, Rose was called Subway Sally, and Third Rail, and dirty trash. She crossed Lucia off her list of friends, which was an actual list on heavy cardstock, taped to the wall beside her bed and written in purple marker. Later, in high school, Lucia fell in with the juvenile delinquents who smoked and did whippets out behind the tech ed building. The high school was big enough that Rose got lost in the crowd. She hung out with the drama kids and was regularly cast as a mother in various school productions. She imagined it was because of her ability to sit still and enunciate clearly.

Nine years later, during Rose's senior year of high school, Patsy Ann woke Rose up an hour earlier than her alarm and pushed a copy of the *Globe* onto Rose's stomach. Rose strained her eyes to read the article Patsy Ann's finger stabbed, at the bottom of the page, below the fold. The headline: "Teen Dies in Subway Accident." Lucia Davenport, drunk and on Quaaludes, at 11:15 on a school night, had left her friends, young punks with savage hair and gray skin, who gathered in a depressed area outside the station called The Pit, had entered the Harvard Square station, hopped down from the platform, skirted the electrified third rail, and took off running down the dark tunnel toward Porter Square. An

in-bound train struck her and dragged her underneath it for a hundred yards, until the emergency brakes brought it to a halt.

“Oh my God!” Rose said. “How terrible!”

“I suppose so,” Patsy Ann said dully. Was that a smile creeping along the corners of Patsy Ann’s mouth, a tightening in preparation for a raising of the corners? Surely not. No one could nurture a grudge against an eight-year-old for ten years, nurse or not.

While Rose sat in her English class that day, she thought about life and death. And about the subway. Was it sentient? She thought it was. Did it have as many ears as trains, spreading out in a web under the city? Rose believed in the hideous power of the Red Line, and she wouldn’t put it past the subway to have lured Lucia down that murky tunnel, so that the train, a sort of avenging father figure, could sneak up on her and wallop her. But that could not be. As much as Rose appreciated the idea of an retaliating force looking out for her, punishing transgressors, she refused to believe that her protector would be so gruesome, so brutish.

## Chapter 5

Rose at 20, in her college art classes, was a young woman fully integrated with her surroundings. When she entered the art building on campus, a modern, blocky structure so at odds with the other dour brick façades, she walked with

purpose. During her time in the studio, she never wasted a single motion. She moved deliberately to her easel, got her canvas situated, prepared her palette intuitively, got her brushes unrolled from their case and on a chair beside her, selected one, dragged it through the paint on her palette, and laid it onto the canvas in thick, sure strokes. The students around her would spend ten minutes looking at their canvasses before tapping down a thin line of blue along the top edge—nascent sky. Every few minutes they would look up from their canvasses to spy out what their classmates were doing. They all postured big—acting like the art luminaries they occasionally believed they would become. But the sharp sting of failure kept creeping into their nostrils. And as they scanned the room, no one irked them more than Rose. She never looked away from her canvas and palette. The only times she stepped away were once every ten minutes or so to get an idea of how the component parts of the painting meshed from afar.

She didn't mean to offend her classmates so. But from the beginning, they couldn't stand her. She spoke not with the consonant-murdering twang of mean Boston, but with a modulated lilt, and softly, so that you had to strain to hear. Her fashion always clicked—there was never an out of place earring, a poorly conceived color scheme, shoes that were tomato red to a blouse's deep red. Her classmates walked around looking war-worn, in unevenly stenciled T-shirts and jeans with seams all off-kilter. Paint smeared their arms, their pants, their eyebrows. And they painted ugly things. One young lady specialized in paintings

of taxidermy. She particularly liked the ones with the soft pelt in the background and the bloody fleshy carcass leering at viewers from the foreground. When the class gathered around the gore-loving girl's painting for a critique, Rose positioned herself toward the back of the group and looked at her shoes until they'd moved on to the next canvas. The other students oohed and ahed over the "unflinching realism" but it just made Rose nauseous. She believed that art should not be a freak show, entertaining only through its power to shock and disgust.

Rose kept the secret shame of her subway birth to herself. She had considered telling her classmates about it because she knew that they would appreciate the sordidness, might embrace this showing of her soft underbelly. "See!" she'd cry, "I'm filthy just like the rest of you." But she never did. Friendship with those crude fellows and ladies came at too dear a price.

And Rose did have other friends. All male. All musicians. The guys in the band. They shared with her an understanding of what it meant to want to please people with their art. However, they could see that reflected in front of them immediately, as enraptured girls squealed and bared their chests for them from the first row, while Rose could not. People bought her art, so they must like it, correct? Or perhaps, they worked at a dentist's office, and came to the show or the gallery with the express purpose of tricking out the waiting room in something that exuded pale class, a real upturned nose of a painting. Perhaps, Rose worried,

it was not a spiritual level on which she connected with her patrons, but an aesthetically expedient one. It didn't pay to have her art too easily appreciated. Well, it paid, but not in prestige. Dollars and cents.

How Rose envied her friends in the band. They would play shows (at which she always had a peachy place backstage,) and she would watch the reactions of the audience. They wrote shameless bubblegum pop, well-crafted, of course, the height of technical proficiency, though their audience never knew it. Of course, too, they were selling all of themselves, as they should up on that stage—they performed, embodied their art in a way that Rose was never called upon to do, though she would have willingly.

Rose did not live in the dorms during her time at school. She said that she wouldn't mind moving out, but her mother told her to stay. Rose had a feeling that not everyone lived the way she and her mother did, not eating formal meals but indulging in stand-up "feedings" as Patsy Ann called them, every couple hours, or sitting around as the sky grew dark trimming out the faces of the cutest kittens from *Cat Fancier* magazine to cover a large dresser. They did not have any cats themselves anymore. Rose grew up with an orange tiger-striped one named Elroy, and his death at age seventeen had sent Rose and her mother into three-weeks' mourning. Patsy Ann sewed them both armbands from the bottoms of a faded black pair of her nurse's scrubs. Then they had snuck into a cemetery at night to bury him beside Septimus Abernethy, another relative. Patsy

Ann carried Elroy in a cake box kept closed by a length of knotted twine. Luckily, Elroy's small body required no bigger a hole than could be dug with a couple of gardening trowels, which Rose and her mother stashed in their purses for the T ride. Patsy Ann set the box down gently in the hole. Neither of them was religious, and it was a school night for Rose, who had just entered the tenth grade, so they said no prayer over his furry body once it was interred. They walked the couple miles home. The T stopped running at midnight.

## Chapter 6

During the last few months of college, when Rose wasn't in class, or messing around the studio at school, or reveling with her friends in the band, or shopping, or sleeping, she was at work. She had an unpaid internship with the city of Boston. At the beginning of the school year, a heavily-accented man with a long mustache he chewed between sentences, a P.R. person for Bechtel/Thomas, spoke to her Advanced Sculpture—Found Objects class.

“You folks,” he told them, “can contribute to the future. The Big Dig is that future. We've got engineers to figure out things like how many steel rebar supports we need per square foot of poured concrete tunnel, but we need young people like you all with creative vision to help us decorate the façades. Glass, tile, cement. Did you know that they make powdered dyes now that can be added to concrete to change it colors? Concrete can be stamped and extruded, formed

and cured. We're only now fully exploring its possibilities. We want you all to join our team. These tunnels are going to be around forever, and you can have a part in designing them."

"How much might we be paid for our efforts?" Lars asked. He was the kid who made his sculptures out of condoms he picked out of gutters across the city. He'd walk around wearing latex gloves and looking down, using his feet to plow through leaves and rubbish. "I found three ultra-thins, a glow-in-the-dark and a strawberry scented in the grass off that jogging path that runs along the Charles. Not such a good spot for a picnic after all," he'd told the other students.

Rose cheated with her found objects. She liked small shiny building materials—the washers, the nuts and bolts and nails, and she tried once to visit a site close to her apartment at night, after the workers had gone home. She had a flashlight, which she aimed at the ground at an angle, watching for metallic glints. As she found things, she threw them into the bottom of her purse. Thinking of Lars's success, she kicked through a big pile of sawdust, which was a poor choice, for in the pile was a buried chunk of two-by-four with nails sticking out of it. One of the nails pierced her big toe, which stuck out vulnerably from her peep-toe pumps. She yelped and raised her foot out of the pile. The two-by-four dangled from her toe for a second, a grotesque earring, then landed softly back on the pile.



From then on, after her tetanus shots were up to date, she found her objects at the hardware store. She always felt guilty about cheating when she was in there, so she would wrap a silk scarf around her head like a vacationing movie star. She worried about the sculptures she made from the nuts and bolts, though. In the early nineties, Patsy Ann had a little desk sculpture with a black magnetized base and hundreds of tiny diamond-shaped pieces of silver metal on top. Patsy Ann raked her fingers through the diamonds to form a tower. Instant art. Rose's work, horrifyingly, seemed to owe a debt to her mother's earlier efforts.

She had been in class staring in disgust at her latest effort, thumbing loose washers like poker chips, before the transportation man had come in. Trying to make art made her so frustrated. And it wasn't as though she enjoyed the process. She liked everything up to the creating part—the laying out and preparing of supplies, the arranging of her palette, the firing up of her little welder. But after that each second was agonizing. She wanted to translate things perfectly from their nascent state in her head, but also, she hoped for an alchemical process during this translation, so that the act of creation would improve, clarify her vision. Very rarely did the lead become gold, though. Mostly the lead turned into dirtier, blacker lead. She wanted to slam her head into a table or the wall. Perhaps that would shake things up enough to dislodge something brilliant.

Rose focused on breathing slowly through her nose. She had nearly decided that she'd need to bring in other things like plywood and drywall, just so the thing could be bigger, for eventually, screws got expensive, but then the man came and started talking about building materials. Her problem cleared up. The homogeneity of her supplies did not hurt so much as the small scale. If she could find nuts as big as her palm, for instance, she could produce the same sculpture without the fiddly, bite-size effect, early 90s desk art effect. But the hardware store didn't sell anything that big.

The man spoke of the construction of massive underwater tunnels, through the bay and the Fort Point Channel, of underground tunnels snaking through the heart of the city, surely necessitating many large metal connectors and strengtheners. Perhaps the city of Boston had enough building supplies to share, or not to miss if she borrowed some things on the job. Also, the internship seemed like something she would absolutely hate doing—sure to get her dirty, and she felt like punishing herself with the least appealing job she could find. If she was really that bad at creating found object sculptures, she didn't deserve a better job.

Rose approached the man after his presentation, and a week later, he hired her as an "aesthetic consultant" (read: unpaid intern). She worked both in an office downtown, where she had her own little cubicle with her own paper clips and file folders, and onsite at construction projects throughout Boston.

On her first trip into the bowels of the city, a group of three men in business suits and hardhats, and she in a little yellow sundress and matching hardhat rode a very small, rickety elevator down into the ground beside the Fort Point Channel. The concrete tunnels that crossed the Channel had been formed in the casting basin adjacent to the Channel. The casting basin, big enough to fit three Titanics, was dug so that the Channel tunnels could be constructed onsite, an engineer at the office had explained to Rose. The bridges across the Channel were too low for the tunnels to be floated in sections up from the sea, like what had been done for the Ted Williams Tunnel to the airport. But the casting basin wasn't big enough to make all of the tunnel sections at once, so engineers had to figure out how to build some of the sections, slide them out into the Channel, then build some more. It reminded Rose of a plastic game she'd received at a birthday party years ago, in which square sliding tiles numbered one through eight had to be maneuvered into the correct order using the one gap where the number nine would have been. All of these practical concerns felt like a relief to Rose. After all of the time treading water in the sea of Big Art Ideas, tunnel construction made sense. Either the tunnels were balanced correctly, and they'd float when the casting basin was flooded, or they'd sink. The result wasn't random, either. The construction teams weighed and recorded every single nut and bolt used in the building of the tunnels to make sure that the sides of each section weighed the same amount. Rose admired that precision, and when the engineer told her about

it, she knew she couldn't bring herself to steal anything. What if she contributed to a Titanic-like sinking of one of the tunnels?

As they descended, the temperature dropped, and goose bumps popped out on Rose's arms. Above-ground, Boston unleashed one of the first hot days of the year, and sweat beaded up and collected in the crooks of her knees and elbows. But below ground, the air was cool and dry, as Rose imagined a tomb might feel. The elevator heaved to a stop, and Rose entered the tunnel for the first time. The nearly intolerable sound of metal clanging against metal filled the space, reverberating up and down off the walls. Lanterns strung on a yellow cord ran down the length of the tunnel, only barely illuminating faces. Workers wearing heavy boots, blue jeans, and long-sleeved shirts, with lights on their hardhats, like coal miners, scrambled purposefully past them. They walked all the way down to where the workers were cutting off the caps on the joined tunnel sections. There were a couple men up on ladders wearing tinted hoods. Blue sparks shot up around their arms. Some more waited below to spell them. "Those plasma cutters get really heavy after a few minutes," one of the engineers shouted in her ear. "No one man could use one all day. Besides, they're pretty powerful, and we don't want any accidents when someone gets tired." Rose imagined an arm flying out of the sparks and hitting the man beside her in the nose. The man who severed his own arm would turn around, shocked, the "on" switch of the plasma cutter still clamped down in his remaining fingers, swinging the cutter with him at

neck-height, severing the heads of everyone nearby. A couple of the men in suits wandered closer and struck up a conversation with a man waiting for his chance on the cutter. Rose prepared to duck.

“So, Rose,” the man said (she had only met them that morning, and had forgotten who was an assistant project coordinator, an associate façade consultant, or an underground systems technician), “Here’s our tile choices. What do you like?”

Rose panicked. There were twenty choices, and they were all represented by tiny two-inch square samples. She couldn’t see them that well in the half-dark. The engineer was watching her closely, so she just pointed at a mossy green one and held her breath.

“Well, that’s definitely an option,” the engineer said diplomatically. He hadn’t liked her choice, and now that Rose thought about it for a second, she didn’t either. People wouldn’t enjoy driving through a tunnel that looked like a mossy woodland. “We were thinking this buff, with a blue stripe at about window-level. Calming, you know, but the buff will keep things bright.”

Rose considered that for a couple seconds. “Well, yes, that blue’s really pretty. But we don’t really want to remind them that they’re underwater, do we?”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Rose took the display of sample tiles from him and looked close. “It’s hard to see them in this light. What if we were to do a sort of Art-Deco-y thing in black and white? Really sharp and clean-looking.”

“So stark, though. Not very inviting, and though we’re really confident in the ventilation system (the air down here really is going to be cleaner than the air above-ground), we don’t want dirt to show.”

“All right, so we take this buff color and pair it with red. I heard that we’re crossing under the Red Line around South Station with this tunnel. It’s a nice tie-in. And it’ll make people think of the Red Sox.” Rose was surprised at how good at this she was.

It was not until later, as she ascended on the elevator and daylight struck her dilated eyes, did it occur to her that she was extending the thrall of the Red Line. Just through the color palette, sure. But still.

## Chapter 7

After Rose graduated, the shine started to smudge off Patsy Ann and Rose’s relationship. Rose knew what her mother would say before she said it, and if her mother didn’t know what Rose was going to say, it could only be because of her willful obliviousness. This wore on Rose, but she stuck around because she didn’t have the money for a place of her own, and she had lived in the apartment her whole life. It was hard to think about moving.

Rose had nightmare visions of her mother's apartment if she moved out and left Patsy Ann to decorate alone. There would be no one to dissuade Patsy Ann from picking up three-legged chairs and floral print sofas covered in brown, cancerous stains from the side of the road. From starting another "collection" to adding to her preexisting ones, her mother would be a menace, the scourge of every dumpster from Cambridge to Watertown. She was not hoarding, oh, no, but starting a new hobby. Rose always told her that she should have interests outside the cold hard world of nursing, though Patsy Ann already had interests. Interests that allowed her to touch soft surfaces, pampering her skin, feasting her eyes on pretty-colored things.

Despite Rose's promises about finding part-time work in this post-graduation interim period, something besides her internship, while she went about the essential business of figuring out what to do with her life, she remained unemployed. Rose hated asking strangers for things, from the time of day right on up to part-time jobs.

In her defense, she had tried. Just hard enough to get Patsy Ann off her back. She had stepped into an ice cream parlor two weeks earlier and requested an application from the pudgy counter boy with a mohawk and a slashed T-shirt. While he went to the glassed-in office behind him to dig for one, Rose pictured herself there, smiling prettily to the customers, giving everyone a little extra with their scoops, never getting exasperated when they asked to try flavor after flavor,

making the best tips in the history of the store so that the management would need to purchase an employee of the month plaque simply to honor her excellence. Her name and picture would never move from it, but the other employees wouldn't get jealous. They'd be proud of her. They'd say things like, "Oh, that Rose. What a go-getter!" and "Employee of the month again? More like employee of the decade!"

The boy returned from the back empty-handed. "Uh, we're all out. Try coming back tomorrow or something."

"Oh, okay," Rose said. She lingered for a few seconds longer because this was not how the plan was supposed to have gone. She had this feeling that maybe if she just stuck around a little bit, the boy would get back to the proper place in the script, hand her an application, contact the manager immediately, and get her a badge with her name on it posthaste.

"You want some ice cream or something," he asked her, his eyes trained on his cold steel scoop.

"No thanks," Rose left. The bells on the door tinkled merrily behind her as the heat smacked her in the face. Walking home to Patsy Ann's apartment, her sweat mixed with her mascara and pooled at the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and under them. In the apartment, she flipped the light on in the bathroom and stared at her unsmiling reflection. Her hair lay lank and damp on her shoulders. Her exertion-blotched complexion reddened at her cheekbones. Her



lipstick had worn off on the walk, probably before she'd even entered the ice cream shop.

"This is how I will look when I get old," Rose told herself. Then her eyes filled with tears. She had herself so put together that day. Makeup, hair, shoes, everything. And all for nothing. She had no job, no plan for the next sixty-odd years, and her mother would be angry when she got home from work. Her mother went to work every day and seemed content enough, but Rose had no patience for the idea of a normal schedule, of the majority of her waking hours spent working. Her laziness terrified her. She didn't feel like doing anything except plotting in her sketchbook and getting her fingers all black and grimy from the charcoal she wielded with a heavy, authoritative hand, slashing with it across the paper. She wet a tissue and wiped the clotted, gummy mascara from the corners of her eyes.

Rose never did go back to the ice cream joint. It was clear to her after that that her destiny did not lie in expertly dispensing sweet cold treats to the sweaty masses. But that was no problem. Her first time out, she couldn't expect to stumble onto her true life calling. Besides, her true life's calling was painting and drawing, she was pretty sure. Almost positive, really.

Her mother did not understand artistic struggle. To her way of thinking, you worked, and earned money, and supported yourself. Any leftover time could be filled with this loopy thinking about sense of purpose and artistic integrity.

One hot evening in July, the two of them had a discussion about Rose's future. Rose's mother locked her eyes on her daughter's and both women felt those undercurrents of distrust, of doubting. Patsy Ann's eyes were the only part that she shared with Rose. They both had the widest blue eyes, which, quite unexpectedly, seemed untrustworthy to the Boston folk. It was as though such guilelessness, such a blank, clear surface with no room for hidden brooding purpose could not be believed. They often communicated through glances and small gestures. Between them, a grazed arm, a creased-up nose, could signify as much as a broadhand swipe or a full-on mouth kiss in others.

"I love you, honey, I do, but what about graphic design or something? You could paint billboards, or make up new font styles. Or that internship. You like picking out those new trash cans for the T station, right? To keep you still doing art, but you'd have enough money to live. That's what I had to do, go to nursing school. There wasn't enough money for medical school. And that's not to say that you will never be an artist. Maybe, by the time you're in your forties and have some savings, you can do art full-time," her mother said.

Her mother couldn't wrap her mind around Rose's idea—that she might be able to make her livelihood by doing as she pleased—but Rose's paintings did sell, sometimes. A self-portrait entitled "Venus in Pin-Curls" had fetched \$400 at her school's auction. True, there'd been a bidding war between Patsy Ann and a man in a Western shirt and bolo tie with a gray moustache, waxed at the tips.

Rose's secret plan was to continue living with her mother, painting and selling them and painting and selling them, 'til she had a wee nest egg—something to keep her warm at night, to keep her fed, to keep her in fresh nylons. After that, Rose did not know what she would do, though she had hazy visions of herself living in a modern, pyramidal apartment along the Charles, with a balcony where she could take her supplies and canvas out, of a foggy morn. Rose had a soft spot for balconies. Outside her mother's apartment, they had nothing but a rusty fire escape, covered in black city grease.

Rose felt the full weight of their years together, the pull deep in her as though the space to the right of her heart was a scrap of paper, twirled tighter and tighter into a ball. A woman who knew Rose so well also knew her flaws, her inabilities. Rose's mother mentioned them in passing, as established fact, stone-set and inescapable, while they ate dinner, or during a whirlwind cleaning spree, in which the two of them cleared out months of old newspapers, reading through them a last time to extract tasty-sounding recipes and stories about the limits of human experience—the Jamaica Plain woman with the seventeen-inch waist, the Roxbury man who survived a week in a dumpster when the owners of the trash receptacle installed a lock to keep out dumpster divers without first checking that there were no divers hiding from them in the dumpster. Because Patsy Ann had such an experience herself, she felt an affinity with these survivors, their triumph over absurdity.

“I could stay here for a little while, you know. Do some painting, sell a few things,” Rose floated her plan out to her mother like a piece of bread in a duck-filled pond and waited for the inevitable nibble.

“Well, Rose, I don’t think so. You know you’ve never been able to finish things. Remember that needlepoint of the two kittens in the blue basket?”

“You got that for me for my sixth birthday.”

“And look, still unfinished.”

“God, mother.”

“What I’m concerned about is your ability to fend for yourself. It’s important.”

“What’s important to me is making my art. I’ll survive just fine, as long as I’m doing what I love.”

“Do you love it? Whenever you paint for a while, you’re grumpy for the rest of the day.”

The problem was that Patsy Ann knew her Rose. She honed in on her daughter’s vulnerability through an innate knack, not from malice, but with motherly intuition about her daughter’s weakness. Rose did worry about how bad painting made her feel. Sometimes, very rarely, it was cathartic, but mostly she just felt haunted by her lack of skill, her inadequacies. She knew that the way to feel better was to soldier on through the emotional quagmire, but at some point,

didn't smart soldiers decide that it was prudent to turn back around, that if they went any further into the muck, they'd end up stuck forever?

Rose had a whole stack of paintings, twenty at the inside, deep in a big drawer at her workspace at the art school. She trained herself to never think of them. They were perfect, but not completed. Some of them missed only details—an ear on a capering sylph, a tree's toenails. If Rose ever felt that she hit perfection, she quit. She couldn't go on, because inevitably, the next stroke of her brush would desecrate rather than decorate. In fact, the only paintings that she did manage to finish were those that never hit that point of perfection. She'd approach them with an eye toward making them less bad, and she would always succeed. The perfect ones, though. She tried to work on one once, a portrait, and it ended up an ugly, filthy thing. It infuriated her. She tried to get it back to its unsullied, incomplete state and failed. She decided to sit on the rest of them, until her skill caught up with her high standards. She told no one about her not false, but true starts. The false starts she finished and sold as quickly as she could. All of the praise she reaped, for her singular vision—her bravery upon the canvas (just like a pro-wrestler), her mastery of color, fell to paintings whose flaws Rose could enumerate one through ten (occasionally through 35) on her fingers. If this, the worst she could do, attracted such acclaim, how would the best be received?

Patsy Ann had dreams of her own when she was young. She would be a doctor! But no. Daughters of butchers did not make that jump from pig bones to

human, from rump roast to ruptured aortas, her father had told her sadly. So nursing it was. Rose was skeptical when her mother told her about her old dream. Rose could not believe that anyone could want to be a doctor just for the joy of the practice of medicine. For the satisfaction in a job well done, in saving people who needed her, for the sense of power that comes from performing small miracles on a daily basis, yes. But the human body was a disgusting, unclean thing, that, when sick, exuded and excreted and oozed puss in a most unappetizing manner. No one could love, could embrace such messiness, such viscera. Even Patsy Ann, Rose suspected, she of the romance novels filled with just such secretions, the man juice, that sticky love potion, the slick vaginal wetness.

The July afternoon after their discussion about Rose's future, and after Patsy Ann finished up at work, stocking the cabinets with gauze, filling up the reservoir of new ear examination tips and pitching out the used ones, Rose and her mother walked along the outskirts of Boston Common. It was a ferociously hot Boston day, the sky hazy and the pavement catching all the sun and reflecting it back in their faces. Cool, dank air that smelled of rats' droppings rose from underground through the sidewalk vents and grates. Weather like this made Rose and her mother grumpy.

They took a left onto Tremont, threading along the edge of the Common. They paused at the subway stop to buy flowers from the vendor there. Rose wanted the Japanese irises. Patsy Ann opted for sunflowers. "They look good for

longer," she said. "And I'm the one with the money." The two of them had this fight weekly. They'd get off the subway at Park Street then walk to Boyleston, buy the flowers, and enter the iron gates of the common. Along Boyleston Street, across from a piano shop, a nightclub, a fancy hotel, was the cemetery. It dated from the very beginning of Boston, from the habitation of the country itself, for that matter. The skyscrapers around it blotted the sun, throwing it into perpetual darkness. Angels with faces eaten away by acid rain pointed broken trumpets skyward, and standing tall beside them in wide shoes and breeches were statues representing famous Bostonians whose bones reclined in rotted coffins down in the earth six feet below them. Some graves had several statues of the same luminary on top showing him (it was always a him) in various states of repose and action—poised on a throne, raising an arm in the air as granite horses bucked beneath him. Vandals had long ago broken off all of the protruding extremities, so the statues' smiles looked foolish in the face of missing fingers, ears, and, in one unfortunate case, a nose.

Patsy Ann's father had found the gravestone as he cut through the cemetery on his way to his butcher shop one morning when Patsy Ann was twelve. He liked the route, the way the lush grass muted the noises of the passing cars. The gravestone pitched to one side, and its weight over the years had sunken it further down into the earth. Its thinness, that of a volume of poetry, made it look vulnerable, as if a sharp gust of wind propelled through skyscrapers

would knock it on its haunches. The date: 1673. The name: Septimus Abernethy. Patsy Ann's father had remembered the spot, and brought Patsy Ann and her brother Charlie, ten at the time, there that following weekend. Charlie, the destructor, kicked his heel along the daisies growing up along the side of the grave, where the mowers could not reach them. The blossoms fell, buried in the grass, their petals lacerated and oozing. Patsy Ann, who already hated and feared her brother, lifted up a few of the flowers and laid them on top of the headstone.

Their father took them by the shoulders, a child plastered to each of his beefy sides, and whispered, "This is your great-great-great granddaddy. Look where they buried him." Patsy Ann and her brother raised their eyes to the towering gray buildings around them, the reflections bouncing off the windows and stabbing their squinting, uncreased eyes. Their father nodded his approval.

As they left the cemetery, Charlie flicked his wrist over the wild daisies on the headstone so that they fell back down with the others on the ground. Patsy Ann had skipped on ahead and didn't notice.

Now, Patsy Ann set the sunflowers on top of the grave, plucked one from the bunch and laid it on the ground over Elroy's final resting place. Charlie, the last Rose had heard of him, was serving ten to fifteen years for attempted vehicular manslaughter in a federal pen in upstate New York. Rose knelt down, spreading her skirt out around her, and pulled out a few pernicious weeds from



the base of the headstone. They both touched the cool, rough stone, a good luck gesture for Rose, and a soothing one for Patsy Ann.

On the way to the exit, they paused and sat on a bench. Patsy Ann started in on Rose again, “Well, regardless, you’re going to need to find somewhere else to live soon. Your own place. I want you to move out.”

“Of the apartment?”

“Yes, find your own place. We’ve been living together so long. You need to try something different.”

Rose felt betrayed. She couldn’t understand how her mother could evict her. She thought of her bedroom, filling up with soft blue-gold light in the coming city twilight. They were in the magical time photographers loved because of the light’s solidness, its shaping and smoothing powers. The flowered duvet on Rose’s bed would appear dappled like a forest floor. Her lined up collections of camel hair brushes, the paints on her dresser, were struck so vulnerable, so sad. She bet they never even knew that they were subject to eviction. This thought coaxed the tears out of Rose’s eyes. She’d had her head tipped back slightly to maintain the surface tension as her eyes filled, but now, the dammed up tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks. Patsy Ann clasped her fingers around Rose’s forearm, but Rose pulled away.

“So what, are you going to give me an eviction date?” Rose’s voice rose in pitch and volume. She tightened her diaphragm to prevent any errant escaping sobs.

“Well, Rosie, I was thinking you could find a place in a month or so.” Patsy Ann wouldn’t meet Rose’s eyes. It hurt her to tell her daughter that, but what else could she do? Rose had to get a job, support herself. She needed to start on a career now rather than later. Also, Charlie’s time in the pen was up in a couple weeks. Patsy Ann didn’t want him anywhere near her daughter.

“If you find a really good job now, Rose, you could retire by the time you’re forty-four. That would give you plenty of time to paint.”

She was serious! Rose had made the comment out of self-pity, so that her mother would back down, recognize her unreasonableness. Had Rose not wanted to move when she first started school, and Patsy Ann insisted she stay?

“Fine then, mother,” Rose spoke in clipped syllables, and she stood up from the bench quickly, so that her mother would not see more tears. One of her heels got stuck in the cracks between cobblestones, so she had to take her foot out of it, rip it free from the crevice that held it, and jam her foot back into it before she could stomp off. She knew she looked ridiculous fumbling around on the ground, and this stirred her ire. Patsy Ann sat quietly on the bench looking off and up into the distance, like some lone American Indian in a crappy oil

painting. Rose could not tell if her eyes focused on the cornices of the buildings in the distance or on the yellow air in the foreground.

“Glad she can look so calm, so meditative,” Rose growled, then started walking. She wished she could run, but her heels prevented her from accomplishing more than a crab-like semi-jog. Rose listened for signs of her mother following, but the sounds of the city, the groans and grunts of buses, the whine of stressed engines and Bostonians swallowed up any footfalls of Patsy Ann’s stolid rubber-soled shoes.

Wait ‘til she sees how I’ll suffer, Rose thought. I’ll live on the street but not just any street. Our street. The neighbors will be dismayed as my arms and legs get more and more skeletal. My head will look out of proportion from the rest of my body—a lollipop on a long, frail stick. Covered in tatters. I’ll wear this outfit I have on, and it will get rattier and rattier in the most delightful, Dickensian way. All artists should suffer, dear mother, and this will be my turn, my chance to taste the sweet metallic residue of starvation upon my bloated tongue. And my new home on the street is far from a secure one, rending me infinitely ravishable by any loud-mouthed beer-breathed ruffian who should stumble past. Good. Remember the care, mother, with which you locked up our little apartment every night, the concern for the latches on the windows. Now imagine me sitting on street grit. It’ll burrow into my palms and the backs of my thighs. And I’ll be cold, so cold. You’ll see me of a morning, knees stiff from

the chill wet night, lying on my stomach in a puddle, or gazing up hollow-eyed, my senses too feeble to recognize you.”

The backs of Rose’s calves throbbed hot from her pace in the pumps. Rose pushed on even faster as each foot’s impact sent tingles up her spine, where they radiated out to her fingertips. “Let the suffering begin,” Rose thought.

What Patsy Ann did not know and what Rose ignored for the moment was that Rose kept the proceeds from selling her work secret. At first, she told herself that she wanted to surprise her mother by telling her all at once: “I’ve made \$2,385.61 painting, mother. Aren’t you proud of me?” But then, as her total grew and grew, her old reasons fell away. She wanted to impress her mother, to not only surprise her, to stun Patsy Ann into recognizing her as an artist.

“Hey,” Rose felt her mother tug on her turquoise-beaded cropped jacket. She kept walking, petulantly, she knew, but her feelings were so badly hurt. She continued for half a block, Patsy Ann keeping pace, and then she turned toward her mother. Their eyes met, which set Rose to sobbing anew, and they continued on at Rose’s aggressive pace, side by side.

And then her mother was no longer beside her, and Rose heard a thump below her, as though a pile of wet clothes had been tossed down a laundry chute. Rose turned around toward where her mother had been when she last saw her, and Rose’s leg got sucked down into the ground. It throbbed painfully,

especially around her knee and hip. Rose swished her head back and forth, trying to orient herself. She half-straddled (only half because one whole leg was submerged) a round opening in the sidewalk. Beside her she saw a rusty circle of iron. Oh, God, a manhole. A man grabbed Rose's torso under the armpits and lifted her from the hole. But her mother, her mother was still down there below her. Rose edged back toward the opening and looked down. "Don't look down there, honey," the man said, and pulled her back. But Rose had already seen it all. Patsy Ann, unrecognizable twenty feet below, her body piled up like a homeless person's nest of blankets, wildly disarrayed, unnatural in its splay-legged, bent armed recline.

"My mother!" Rose said. Someone had to know, so that Patsy Ann could be rescued. She had to tell these people (for now a crowd gathered). "Down there, down there," she pointed.

The man who had helped her up said, "We know. It's okay." And a woman who smelled of gingerbread, or perhaps clove cigarettes, enveloped Rose in her arms and led her away from the hole, backward, because Rose refused to take her eyes off the spot where her mother had descended.

Sirens approached, then stopped. The flashing lights in the twilight coated Rose's face in red and blue. She squinted her eyes toward the hole, thirty feet away from her now. A small crane unit spanned the hole now, and a cable ran from a spool attached to a fire truck, onto the crane, and down. It bobbed and

swung every few minutes; each time this happened, Rose felt a thrill of hope rise up and subside, when her mother did not rise from the hole.

It made no sense. Patsy Ann was so tough. Rose had watched when she was ten her mother get hit in the nose by a fast-pitched softball. The nose broke, and blood dripped down in a heavy stream onto her blue team T-shirt. Rose ran onto the field, stricken, but Patsy Ann calmly picked up the bottom edge of her t-shirt and clamped it on her nose to staunch the bleeding. "It's okay, darling," Patsy Ann said, her mouth and nose covered like a woman in a harem. On the way to Mass General in the back of a teammate's car, a stuffy-voiced Patsy Ann told her daughter the story of how she and Rose's father met, over a similar injury. "Maybe we'll meet someone really interesting in the E.R. this afternoon, Rose." They didn't. All of the other patients sat with their eyes glazed clutching their bellies or applying pressure to sliced fingers, unapproachable.

Her mother never cried because of physical pain. Rose had never seen it, though Patsy Ann had cried plenty of times for other reasons. Stories of suffering, particularly of animals suffering, especially got to her. Rose thought this was an admirable trait, crying only on behalf of others.

If Patsy Ann had a neck injury, which surely she did, after such a fall, then they probably were being especially careful down in the hole, stabilizing her neck so that there was no further damage, carefully getting her hooked up to the cable, maybe telling jokes to her to ease process: "So nice of you to drop in,

ma'am." "If we'd known you were coming, we would have made up a bed for you, or at least some padding." Patsy Ann loved gallows humor. She'd be eating it up. The firemen or paramedics or whomever would have to warn her against talking.

Finally, two firemen wound the heavy cable back onto the reel, and up, slowly, majestically, came Patsy Ann, strapped to a stiff stretcher. In order to get the long stretcher out from the narrow manhole, it had to be tipped nearly vertically, and Rose saw a long form covered in a white sheet. The sheet was wrapped tightly, and Patsy Ann's nose and breasts pushed out against it, forming three raised bumps. No amount of hoping, of rationalizing and explaining, could help now. Patsy Ann was dead.

## Chapter 8

Rose had trouble remembering that her mother was dead when she came back to the apartment after a night out, or a trip to the grocery store, or when she walked through the kitchen, living room and the two bedrooms of the apartment looking for Patsy Ann. She'd cry when she remembered. Rose had never felt loneliness before—that longing for someone to touch, for a smile from the token mistress at the subway gates or an extra dollop of mustard on her giant pretzel. Just some sign of fondness, a caress, even in condiment form, would mean so much.

Rose's friends, the boys in the band, would take her out and get her drunk, and she'd whoop and holler with them, but then, when Rose came home at night, sliding her key in the door (a key she'd had since the third grade, when Patsy Ann announced that she trusted her to find her own way back from school, the metal dull now), she'd be semi-quiet. Not totally quiet, because part of her wanted to wake Patsy Ann up in her bed, to hear her say "Rosie," in that hoarse, tired way, so that she could go and snuggle up in her mother's bed with her, the sins of the evening—the nicotine, the gin, wafting around the two of them. They'd talk then, about Rose. About how her night was, but then, too, what she thought of the ideas of nature versus nurture as it applied to child-rearing, or maybe one of them had just read something about how memory works, how each time we remember something, we create the memory afresh, fashion it slightly differently from the last time we thought about it, and isn't that sad? Or exhilarating. And when Rose came home now, it did not matter how hard she walked on the wooden floors, or if she took her heels off before she crossed them. Fuck the neighbors downstairs. And wasn't that loneliness, right there, having no one to see you, to listen to you? No one to disturb, or by whom to be disturbed?

The relationship with these gentlemen in the band could never muster even the most basic levels of penetration of smooth surfaces. They all got together to have good times, to make the same jokes throughout the evening,



louder on each subsequent retelling, Rose with her own small store of stories to share. She'd stockpile them while she was painting, think about how to present them best. But she hadn't been painting. Her reservoir ran dry, and she sat silently now in banquettes, at the clubs where they'd watch other bands, making snide comments behind open palms, 'til the break in the sets, during which time they would gather around the stage with the performers, talking animatedly about guitar pedals. Rose used to exploit these gatherings near the stage, getting introduced there to the cutest band members. She could have any one she wanted, like picking from an assortment of her favorite candies, all gathered in a small bowl. But Rose's sense of purpose, of the thrill of the hunt, had been extinguished by the death of her mother. A paradox had her pinned: she could take the extreme loneliness she felt now or try to upgrade, give her affection to one of these flat-chested boys who would desert her just as Patsy Ann did. And as Rose's father did. And indecision produced loneliness, for the fellas in the band lost interest in her. Their original idea was that Rose would introduce them to funky artist chicks with loose morals, and they would introduce her to band boys of similar moral fiber. A good-times deal like that worked only infrequently, for the very young, and Rose quite abruptly didn't feel so young.

She went out with them once two weeks after Patsy Ann died, and nothing felt the same. A band called The Candy Butchers was playing at the Abbey, a cramped venue with a bar in one small room and the stage in the other. The

band's sound was billed as glam-Goth mope rock, which seemed to comprise at least two too many genres. They sounded like shit. The lead singer's voice cut like a hack saw above the squealing power-cord heavy lead guitar, and the drummer had a heavy hand with the cymbals. This music—it was ugly. Her connoisseurship had prevented her from noticing before (she'd seen them play in December and loved them), but now she couldn't stand the pain emanating from the instruments, the lead singer's voice. It was fake. Real pain didn't have that sort of outward thrust, the desire to lift someone up by the collar and slather the misery onto his helpless body with a trowel, which was not a very delicate nor a very precise instrument.

So she got another drink, then another. She cozied up to her friend Ben, a drummer, because he had a stack of free drink tickets. He kept peeling them off and handing them to her, and she kept asking the bartender for whiskies on the rocks. She'd bring them back to where Ben was standing, against the back wall of the room with the stage, and they'd drink them down together. After the third, and the fourth, the grimness subsided. By the fifth, they were laughing about The Candy Butchers's prospects, which, they were certain, included a poorly-received album released on a crappy independent label, which would drop them, and then they would either dive in to the nebulous world of self-releasing records of similar quality to the first one, or they would break up and reform in new configurations with other bands whose first LP also bombed, "Wash, rinse, and

repeat," Rose slurred in Ben's ear. They both broke down laughing, Rose leaning on Ben for support.

By the sixth whisky, they were kissing each other greedily, all over each other's faces. This was something Rose had a rule against. She could never, ever make out with one of her friends in the band. Once this happened, things could only get weird. Their relationship worked because it operated on only one level. Now for Rose's next trick, she would, already teetery in her heels, attempt to navigate her way through the minefield of friendship complicated by sex. She leaned on Ben a bit too hard, toppling both of them over onto the sticky floor, coated with cigarette butts and sour mix and worse. They kissed and groped until the bouncer grabbed them by the scruffs of their necks and pushed them out the door. Ben's place was a ten-minute walk, and along the way, Ben pushed Rose over onto a recently watered and mown lawn, where they rolled around some more.

By the time they reached Ben's building in Porter Square and climbed the four stories to his apartment, the whisky had sedated them. They collapsed together on Ben's bed, which was not a bed, but a futon.

The next morning, Rose stirred first. Her head hurt, and when she ran her fingers through her hair, they came back holding a cigarette butt. She shoved Ben's leg off of her own, stood up, leaned over, and rubbed her hair vigorously. Grass clippings fluttered out. Jesus, she was drunk last night. Then, she looked

over at Ben, who had drawn his leg up toward his stomach. He lay on his side, with his face pointed down into his pillow. His breathing sounded labored, so Rose reached down and turned his head so it pointed to the side.

Rose found a pen under the futon and an old grocery store receipt for beef jerky, a frozen pizza and beer in the kitchen. She wrote, "Thanks for letting me crash here. What a night. Let's talk soon, k?" and laid the note beside Ben where he couldn't miss it.

Then she trudged to the Red Line. As she rode toward home, she picked more dried grass clumps from her hair and clothes. She dropped them on the floor and looked around her, daring someone to show signs of disgust. She was dirty, damn it. One of those dirty people she loathed. Just let a couple of whiskies coated her throat and stomach and see what happened. When she got back to the apartment, she showered, put on some pajamas, and went back to sleep.

Ben called her that afternoon. He asked her to get coffee. When she met him, Rose realized that she had never seen any of the band members in natural light. She noticed that his eyeliner wasn't applied perfectly straight, and it collected in the corners of his eyes. Neither of them mentioned the previous evening.

"So I'm really sorry to hear about your mother, Rose," Ben told her.

That little bit of sympathy was all Rose needed to explode into a real crying fit. Her body shook, and she gasped and gasped, unable to catch her breath. Her eyes had never recovered from the first days of her mourning and each tear gathered painfully in her swollen tear ducts before it could be released. The crying felt good, though, or if not good, then at least right, that some of her pain could be rendered up physically.

Ben hugged Rose, and this made her cry harder. She wanted to tell him about her crippling guilt, about how the two of them were walking too quickly because she, Rose was angry, and her mother was focused on soothing her rather than watching her step. And for what? Rose was twenty years old after all, it made sense that Patsy Ann wanted some space to herself. And Rose's first thought, after she learned that Patsy Ann, her mother, was dead? She thought, "Well, I won't have to move." The callousness of such a thought, the minute shred of relief she felt at this knowledge. Hideous. Unthinkable. She wanted to tell Ben this, but she couldn't through her sobbing. That she once, while Patsy Ann was still with her, looked around the apartment with an eye toward resale value of various items, so that, because, you know, Patsy Ann was Rose's only real kin, besides Charlie, who had never counted, because Rose wondered how much she might inherit. Not much. Similar items to the ones in their apartment could be found, by a discerning buyer, at thrift stores across the greater Boston area. This made sense, considering the furniture's provenance. "The Goodwill

store giveth, the Goodwill store hauleth away in a big grey truck.” And they rented, didn’t even own their little apartment.

She didn’t want to expose Ben to this tragedy, the sordid details of it, of her lawsuit against the city of Boston, wrongful death, three million, plus the right to bury Patsy Ann in the Common beside Septimus and Elroy. The back cover of the phone book lawyer, with his extremely side parted hair and suits shiny in the elbows, whom she’d met in his office which smelled of wet socks and old Indian take-out. She didn’t want Ben to know how this could happen in someone’s life. They sat together a while longer, he being so good to her, she taking measured breaths to bring the intensity of her sobs down to levels that allowed her to breath normally. Then they left, she assuring him that she didn’t need to be walked home, he insisting that he would call, which he did, several times

The lawsuit was not settled quickly, and Rose realized the foolishness of fighting about where to bury her mother, while her mother lay in cold storage, to rot inevitably, like lunchmeat. Rose received Patsy Ann’s ashes in a plain urn and scattered them, all but a little bit at the bottom of the urn which she couldn’t bring herself to part with, over Septimus and Elroy.

## Chapter 9

Rose's friends in the band departed on their tour for New York, Philadelphia, and all parts west, hanging out the windows of their rented mini-van and u-haul-it van that contained all their instruments, war-whooping, and waving fifths of vodka in their pale, thin fists. Rose saw them off, wishing she had a handkerchief to wave. Then she walked back to the apartment. Ben had asked her to accompany them, as a sort of "court painter." The idea pleased her. She'd ride across the country in cramped quarters, hung over, with four sweaty men, looking up from her sketch pad at the landscape whizzing by to stave off carsickness. Every night, a different cheap motel. She could pick up shaggy-haired boys at the shows and bring them back to her room, as the boys in the band would with shaggy-haired girls. She'd snuggle up to a strange man in bed, wrap her thigh around him to show ownership, the warmth of his body making her feel as though she would never die. Then, in the morning, no time for reflection, just movement. Pack up that bass drum. Where's my pedal? Joey, I'm not moving your goddamned amp into the truck again. You do it. And Rose, her frail forearms giving her a free pass from packing, she'd draw her friends, their eelish biceps tightening, the hair no longer artfully mussed, but disarranged, the aviator sunglasses falling on the concrete, the cussing, their retrieval. Musicians at work.

It was nearly perfect. But, as Ben explained to Rose on the phone, "Some of the guys were wanting more of like a male bonding experience." Rose felt the

tightening of her throat. A limited amount of time remained before her voice turned quavery.

“Oh, that’s fine. I should stay here and get all organized. My painting’s going really well lately.” On that last syllable, her voice broke. She coughed to buy time.

“Have a good tour! Don’t drink too much! Only make out with clean girls,” she said, now too exuberant. Such a quick-draw with the platitudes.

“Yep.”

The conversation left her strangely invigorated. She had been failing in the womanly arts. The apartment smelled different from when her mother lived there. Now, rude food smells from crusted dishes on the counter pushed away auras of furniture polish, old, clean wood, and clean cotton. Rose’s clothes smelled different, too. Musty, under her care, as if the sweat, the soil of her body never quite got removed. She needed to do something. She walked to the grocery store.

She sniffed every detergent box, squeezing them to release the fragrance. When she got home, she opened the detergent, smelled it again, and sat down heavily on the floor, her legs splayed long. The wrong one. She’d reached behind a dented box of the right one to select this box, which she’d assumed was also Apricot Meadows. But it wasn’t. It was Mountain Frost. She kicked a leg in the air; it fell hard. Thump. A thin ribbon of pain unfurled down to her big toe



and up to mid-shin. Again. Like a test-your-strength tower at a fair, her leg, and the pain, the little metal ball that slid up the clear tube to ring the bell, if you were strong enough. Repeat, with both feet. Twice the sensation. Faster. 'Til her whole legs ached long after she'd stopped. She laid back and stretched herself out on the floor.

The phone rang. Rose retrieved it from under a pile of dirty clothes beside her.

"Hello, this is Jill Bray from the Boston Metro. Is this Rose Abernathy?"

"Yes."

"Ah, excellent. I'm glad to reach you. I've been leaving messages. We here at the Metro are so sorry to hear about your loss. We'd like to do a two-page spread on you and your mother. Kind of a twentieth anniversary of the birth of the subway baby thing. What you're doing now, with a nice write-up of Patty Ann. About her life, how special she was and how much she'll be missed."

"What?" Rose's anger mounted, forcing down the inside tips of her eyebrows and stiffening her limbs.

"An article about you two. Like we did twenty years ago."

"I'm about done with this conversation." Rose paced fast while she talked, down the hallway to the bathroom and back, around the living room, through her bedroom, her mother's, and back into the kitchen, where she set her elbows on the counter and leaned forward.

“What we need now are some pictures of you and your mother to accompany the article, and an interview from you, of course, so that you can tell your story.”

Rose focused on speaking civilly and calmly. If she were not careful, she knew, her voice would slingshot out of her, high-pitched and screechy. “I prefer to forget about the story, thank you, and I’d like for you to do the same.”

“No can do. Two pages it’ll be, and we’d love to have your help. I’ve heard the Herald’s doing one, too, and I can tell you for a fact they might not show the same discretion.”

Rose lifted the phone from her ear and hit the off button. “Fuck!” she said and kicked the wall. A Christmas plate with the date 1982 in gold script was dislodged from the wall and shattered on the floor. She kicked the broken pieces into a corner.

Hounded, recognized, pointed at. It would be grade school all over again without the assurance that she’d grow and look so different that in a year or two nobody’d make the connection. Now, years and years of curious glances, of stares of half-recognition awaited. And Patsy Ann, the only one who’d actually enjoy the attention, was gone. Her friends were gone, too. She had nobody.

There was her father, whom she’d never seen, and her Uncle Charlie, whom she’d met when she was six, before they put him back in lock-up for attempted vehicular manslaughter. She hadn’t liked him when she met him.

Patsy Ann hated him. She'd called him "no-account" on numerous occasions. He'd stopped by years ago, to try to get some money from Patsy Ann. He showed up wearing a faded navy jacket with his name stitched in gold cursive lettering on the left breast. His hair, you could tell, was blondish, but the grease in it (artificial or Charlie-made, Rose couldn't determine) turned it lustrous brown. He wore a smirky grin with one mouth corner tilted up, like a stroke victim. There must have been a first-rate weight room in the pen, for, when he took the jacket off and summarily tossed it on the violet wingback chair, the muscles in his biceps stood out like two small mammals nuzzling each other.

"Where you been, Charlie?" Patsy Ann asked. Rose had never seen her mother's neck cantilever itself to such an uncomfortable angle to look down her nose.

"Up the river." He stared her straight in the eye.

"Are you back in town for good?"

"Maybe. Got a job working on the Dig. Grunt work bending rebar."

As they talked more, Rose circled around the two of them, staring at her uncle. He didn't look down at her, kept just looking at Patsy Ann with that peculiar look on his face.

When Patsy Ann said no, she wouldn't give him any money, he pushed her up against a kitchen cabinet, the one right above Rose now as she leaned on the counter, in fact, and Rose had crawled under the butcher block table and

screamed until Mrs. Jones, their downstairs neighbor, knocked on the door. Charlie, the coward, grabbed his filthy bandana and satchel off the wingback chair and pushed past Mrs. Jones. He evaporated down the stairs, leaving behind his faded navy jacket with his name stitched in gold cursive lettering on the left breast. Patsy Ann shook her head a few times, as if to clear him out of it, and said, "Bastard."

"He's had this since high school," Patsy Ann said, to no one in particular, as she folded the jacket up as tightly as possible, pulled back the bench seat of their breakfast table, and put it down there with crumpled Halloween decorations and old candles that had lost their scent.

Mrs. Jones stepped into the apartment. She found Rose still cowering under the table and Patsy Ann on her knees, trying to talk her out.

"Rose," Patsy Ann said, "He's gone. And he's not coming back. I'll call right now and get new super-security locks installed, okay?" Patsy Ann mimed as if going for the phone, which, back then, was not a sleek cordless but a model with a springy cord and molded receiver hanging on the skinny wall that narrowed the width of the passage from the living room to the kitchen. Then she came back and peeked under the table again. Rose hadn't moved, had only balled up her legs to her chest and pressed her chin into her knees even harder. Her mother had let that dangerous man into their apartment. And some mornings, Patsy Ann forgot that Rose needed a lunch for school. She hot-glued the hem of

Rose's favorite dress, the one with the cherries on it, rather than buying a needle and thread. Rose would have done the job herself, but she had no one to teach her how to sew. Patsy Ann was a terrible, terrible mother.

## Chapter 10

The morning after the distressing phone call from the newspaper, while Rose sorted through her mother's desk, barnacled with stacks of important papers, she couldn't stop thinking about her family. She had a strong desire to seek out her father, wherever he was. Someone to protect her from all the uncertainty that seemed to be springing up in her life like toxic toadstools. She could go and visit, maybe, if he had a nice phone voice, and lay low for a while, until all commemorative editions of the newspapers were burnt in fireplaces or blown into the Charles or sent conscientiously to local recycling centers.

Rose knew her father's name was Earl, which troubled her, for it was such a country name, and that he lived somewhere in the Midwest, but there had to be hundreds of men out there with that name. Thousands, even. If she were ever to want to, say, track him down, she knew of only one way, and that was through Uncle Charlie. But even that was uncertain. Patsy Ann would have had to confide in Charlie. Rose knew that, the past year, they'd been trying to make peace because Patsy Ann wrote letters to him and Rose saw his replies sitting on the kitchen table sometimes, the ink black and heavy, the writing large and wide.

And she knew right where to find Charlie's phone number. It was in the recipe tin with the turkey on it, not ten feet away in the kitchen. Rose had spotted it stuffed in at the back when she was looking for a soup recipe. Not ten feet away. Rose went to the kitchen and took out the scrap with the number. Perhaps he'd mellowed, the years had smoothed out his rough edges, his tendency toward physical abuse. And if she just called, she wouldn't have to come close to him in person. Also, she'd have to tell him sometime what happened to his sister. He deserved to know. After a whole morning of looking at old gas bills (how was she supposed to know if she needed to keep them?), she felt the need for some decisive action. She called him up.

"Yeah," he answered on the first ring.

Rose wasn't expecting such a quick answer, and she hadn't talked all day, so her voice came out scratchy, unsure, "Oh, hello. This is Rose. Your, well, I guess your niece."

"Rose! Well, hello. How are you doing?"

"Terribly," she told him. She heard sympathy in that voice, and that was all it took to tip off another crying jag. She sniffled and tried to hold the tears in. And she failed.

"What's going on?"

"My mother's dead. I don't know what to do. I don't have much money."

"That's terrible! Patsy Ann? How did it happen?"

“She fell down a manhole. I was walking right beside her, and she was just gone.”

“Oh, God. You saw it?”

“Not really. My leg got caught in the hole, then someone pulled me out and took me away.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about that. What a loss.” Here was a good, decent man talking. Perhaps the federal corrections system did some good, some actual correcting.

“Yeah, I look for her around the apartment and I don’t see her anymore. It was just the two of us, but she was always there, you know. The apartment feels so big now.”

“So someone left that manhole uncovered?”

“Yep, some workman. He was checking out the wiring on the electricity and phone lines. They’re redoing it all for the Big Dig. No one really knows where any of those lines are running right now. He felt terrible, according to the newspapers.”

“Well, good. He should feel worse than terrible. I should track him down.”

“I filed a lawsuit against the Big Dig. You can sue a construction project, apparently. That’s what you do rather than suing the city. I’ve got a lawyer. He seems adequate.”

“That’s good. Better than kicking that guy’s ass, I suppose.” He laughed.

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“The lawsuit. How much?”

“Three million. That’s how much my mom’s life is worth.” No one liked maudlin talk. Rose had to cut it out, or even her kin wouldn’t want to talk to her.

“And worth every penny.”

“Anyway,” she said, “I was calling because I’m trying to get in touch with my father. Do you know how I could reach him, or even his last name? My mom never told me.”

“She didn’t? That seems sort of strange. You know what, I think I’ve got that address around here somewhere. Your mom gave it to me when I went into the joint. She told me she wanted me to have it. She said I should get to know a good man. My father was a good man, she’s forgetting. Forgot. It might take some digging, but what if I took it over to you at the apartment when I find it? It sure would be nice to see you again.”

“That sounds great, thank you. It’s so good of you.”

“Not a problem. Anything for my Rosie. You still live in the same place?”

“Yep. You know, you really scared me the last time you were here.”

“I was pretty messed up then,” he said, laughing, as he hung up.



Rose grabbed another trash bag and went back to her sorting. She took out the recipe tin and pawed through it. She fanned through pages of Patsy Ann's trash novels and put them all in a box. She'd looked at the spines of those books on the shelf for years. It made her sad to think about never seeing them again. But this was what people did when other people died. Some of their stuff, not labeled "keepsake" or "heirloom," inevitably died with them. Rose sorted through rarely-used pots and pans, putting all the really old ones in a pile by the door. Suddenly inspired, she took everything down from the high shelf of the hall closet and spread it on the floor, shifting it around with her feet, then collapsing to her knees and digging. She found the little box where Patsy Ann kept her subway baby album. She ripped the lid off and fished around. And there, right there, was her birth certificate, with the father's name filled in clearly, in ink: Earl Trout. Jesus, she was a Trout.

That very minute that she made her discovery, the bell on the street rang. She buzzed him up and yanked open the door a few inches, then ducked into the bathroom to make sure she looked presentable. The soft tissue around her eyes was inflamed so badly that she couldn't open them all the way. Other than that, though, excellent.

"Hello? Uncle Charlie," he called into the apartment.

"Hey," Rose came out ready to give him a hug. However, he didn't look so huggable. His hair hung down in long greasy strands. He wore a blue

coverall, not recently laundered, and stale tobacco smoke emanated off him. It took Rose's eyes a minute to work their way down to his chest, where, in his right hand, pointed straight at her, was a small snub-nosed pistol.

"Oh, fuck," Rose said, involuntarily, when she spotted it. She clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Don't scream. You really shouldn't have let me in," he told her, using the gun like a pointer finger, showing her where to sit on the violet chair. She obeyed, moving sideways so that she could keep her eyes on him. His body was not just skinny, but wasted away. The flesh on his arms hung down limply, and she could see the outline of his bony thighs through his jeans. His eyes, the same light blue as hers, looked electrified against his pasty flesh. He strode around the apartment, glancing into all of the rooms, then came back to train the gun on Rose. As the seconds passed and he did not shoot her, Rose let her mind wander. She wondered if she might be able to achieve that effect of ultra-bright eyes using her eye shadow palette. She leaned back in her chair as Charlie paced back and back, then, coming to a decision, turned to her.

He said, "Now, I don't have your father's address for you, but you do have something for me. The money from that lawsuit. Yes, I know it isn't settled yet. When it is though, I'm going to be getting a nice piece, and you aren't going to tell anyone, because you're scared, right?" As he said this he slowly brought the gun closer and closer to her forehead.

Rose nodded hard.

Uncle Charlie walked out carrying the television, the gun tucked into the back waistband of his jeans where his ass should have been.

## Chapter 11

As soon as Charlie left and Rose had triple-bolted the door behind him, before, even, the self-doubt and loathing arose at her poor decision-making, she remembered that she was a Trout. The sound of the name was not displeasing. There was a gentleness to that middle vowel pairing. But the association with dead, edible freshwater fish. Yuck. Even Bass sounded nicer. With Salmon, you'd think of the color. Halibut sounded a lot like Abernathy. But Trout. No matter, so long as she could be a living trout, rather than a flopping dead one on a dock somewhere with a bullet between its cloudy eyes. She walked fast into her bedroom.

With one hand, she tossed clothing into a gaping suitcase she dragged from underneath her bed, and with the other, she typed Earl's full name into an Internet search engine. Luckily, Charlie hadn't poked around long enough to find her laptop. A page popped up, garish with flashing borders, which framed a picture of dear old dad, wearing a black cowboy hat and bolo tie, with a sunflower tucked into his lapel. And oh, God, he gestured toward a Buick. In a used car lot. The caption underneath the picture read "Earl Trout, salesman of the month." She

had abandoned the packing now to stare at the man. Nice smooth skin, tanned. Thin physique. Real thin. Not diseased like Charlie. His eyes looked kind, though Rose was no great judge of kindness, for she thought she'd heard it in Charlie's phone voice.

And the location of this establishment, this "Conklin Cars?" Clay Center, Kansas. Wherever the hell that was. She imagined a place where all she could see was grass. The prairie. All grass except for a small paved area with shiny, diagonally parked late-model American-made sedans. There was a phone number at the bottom of the page which she copied onto her palm. She half-zipped the suitcase, took it with her to the bathroom, and shoveled in toothpaste, a toothbrush, and all her cosmetics. Those were very important because who knew what they had in Clay Center.

She grabbed her purse on the way out, shut the door and locked it, got halfway down the hallway, then ran back in. She unplugged the coffee maker and toaster, grabbed up Patsy Ann's subway album and headed down to catch a cab to the airport. She snagged one quickly. The street was much busier now than twenty years ago, when Patsy Ann tried to catch a cab in similar desperation.

Ideally, she knew, it would be best to give a courtesy call to the parent you'd never met when you planned on crashing at their place for an unidentified period of time. She'd just explain to him, while imagining those kind eyes, that she needed a place to stay. And also a car. She'd ask him for a car. She punched

the number into her cell phone and pressed "send." As she dialed, it occurred to her that she'd forgotten her phone charger.

"Hello," said a man's voice. It sounded funny, more of a "Yellow," varying in pitch from high to low. Did this mean that he was in a good mood, a mood that might make him amenable to the revelation that he had a twenty-year-old daughter?

"Hello, is this Mr. Trout?" Rose asked. She was still all pumped up from the gun at her temple and the quick packing. Each breath of air felt as though her insides were filling with warm cotton. Exhalation was difficult. The cab driver saw an open lane and went for it, gunning the motor as they ripped along the Central Artery, which already had cranes clustered around it for the big demolition. Rose never again saw the Central Artery.

## Chapter 12

A twitchy boy named Trevor picked Rose up at the airport, a three-hour drive from Clay Center. He had long limbs that were not quite under his control. He reminded Rose of a newborn horse she'd seen on the science channel. The filly or foal or whatever staggered on unsteady feet, collapsing every couple steps. However, the program showed, the horse gained mastery of his/her extremities within half an hour. Trevor still waited. "I work for Conklin Cars. I'm gonna

take you straight to see Earl at the lot. Then he can drive you back to his place and get you settled. So you've never met him?"

"Nope. What's he like?"

"He's a good man."

"What do you mean?" The words burst out of her mouth, and Trevor visibly jumped. Rose hadn't meant this to sound so demanding. Trevor talked in a slow, loping way, and he'd jumped, startled, when she spoke.

"I don't know. Good. You'll see when you meet him."

Rose tried to picture a good man while Trevor sang along to songs on the country station. A good man wore jeans and a plaid shirt and wiped his hands on the jeans when he got them dirty. He was quick to smile, to make a gentle joke, but slow to rage, to physical violence. In his free time, he'd coach a team of children in some sport, t-ball, say, which would require a lot of patience, something the good man had unlimited reserves of. This good man, upon finding out about the birth of his daughter, would fly to the scene, showing up at Patsy Ann's door with a head-high pile of cloth diapers, bottles, and nappy wipes. He'd remember his daughter's birthday and send her a card or letter with a fifty-dollar bill tucked inside. He'd wonder how her life was going and what he could do to help. He'd provide a strong foundation for a growing girl. Teach her good American values, about hard work and tenacity. He'd ask her to come visit in the summertime, and he'd take her horseback riding and teach her how to fish. She'd

complain about how dirty fishing made her, and he'd give her this look that said, "Oh, Rose. I know you hate the dirt. But sometimes you've just got to get out here in it. Otherwise, you miss out on things."

The used car lot had changed since the picture Rose had seen on the website was taken. The cars looked exactly the same, ugly American models, bulky and bloated. The parking lot, though, had weeds growing in all the cracks in the pavement, some to knee-high. And the office building in the photograph was cool and mod with a red and white paint job. Now it was blue and mauve, and someone had installed shutters with heart cutouts around all the windows.

Trevor pulled the car up in front of the office. Before Rose could even get out of the car, a couple of men ran out from the office. One of them pulled the door open and leaned his head in. His breath smelled of smoke and cloves. His eyebrows raised and his mouth pursed in anticipation as he asked, over-enunciating each syllable, "Are you Rose?"

"Yes," she told him. He looked like a good man, so excited to see his daughter.

Then, he stepped back and turned to the skinny man leaning against the wall of the office. "Earl, it's her," he said.

Rose peered through the windshield at this other man, her father. He pushed off the wall using his foot and ambled over. "Of course it's her, Gil. She came with Trevor, didn't she?"

He held out his hand to Rose, she grasped it, and he pulled her out of the car. His hand felt dry and rough, and huge. The knuckles on a couple fingers were swollen and purple. Earl saw her looking at them. "Got those caught in the door of a '94 Skylark," he muttered. Rose resisted the urge to wipe her hand on her skirt.

"I'm gonna knock off for the day," Earl announced. "Show the girl around town."

"All right. Nice to meet you, Rose. I've got a daughter about your age. Named Melinda. Maybe you two could get together and, you know, talk, sometime."

Rose smiled at him and waved goodbye to Trevor. He nodded and shuffled his feet.

As they walked through the lot, Earl carrying her big duffle bag, and Rose dragging her wheeled suitcase across the uneven pavement, he said, "We're not gonna take my car home tonight. You needed a car, you said. I picked out one." Earl pointed and let Rose walk ahead toward it. It was a small blue sedan

"Thank you so much!" Rose told her father. Earl's face didn't move. Rose's smile subsided, and she climbed into the front seat puzzled. Did her father not like her? She hadn't done anything to offend, she was pretty sure. Maybe it was Midwestern taciturnity, like she'd seen in old cowboy movies Patsy Ann sometimes made her watch.



A smile crept around the edges of Earl's mouth as he lifted his daughter's luggage into the trunk. It was gone by the time he climbed into the driver's seat.

### Chapter 13

The next morning, Rose's new car skidded and bumped down a one-lane highway ten miles outside of Clay Center, Kansas. Every time a car approached it the other direction, it slowed and pulled off to let the other one pass. Earl drove, and Rose rode shotgun. Soon their roles would be reversed, and Rose could not wait to nose the car along an empty road, then, maybe soon, through traffic.

For most of the trip thus far, Rose had been sneaking glances at her father, noting his neck, red and splotched, with white lines where the skin creased. He had hair on the backs of his hands, but the hair was light, and ran only in a thin line from his wrist to his pinky finger. Rose's own hands had an even fainter, fuzzy and white line of hair. The tendons stood out under his grip on the wheel. Rose flexed her hands in her lap and observed them. No visible tendons. Had her mother's tendons shown? Maybe everyone's did, as they got older. Earl glanced over toward Rose, smiling uncertainly, and Rose, spooked, jerked her head around and looked out the window. She'd be driving soon, through this landscape. She worried that she might have no knack for driving, that Earl might be an impatient teacher, or, even worse, a patient one with a dunce for a pupil.

The sun-scorched prairie stretched out around her, a drab carpet. It looked like Boston might if a natural or man-made disaster had struck, leveling universities, lamp poles, statues, town homes, and cobblestones. But that last statement was untrue. Rose tried to think of Kansas in terms she could understand, but she had never encountered a landscape so flat. This place was flatter than Boston could ever be. The land made her feel unstable, as if she skated on an icy lake, as if with one small miscalculation, she'd spin off to the edges of the world at tremendous speed. She scanned the horizon and counted three trees. They looked like a half-hearted decorating concept comparable to her friends' attempts with their first apartments, accessorizing a drab living room with votive candles, when what they needed was framed prints and end tables. The slim effort made things even sadder, more hangdog. There was a certain dignity in minimalism, but not when it was unintentional, Rose thought.

And below all this infertile soil lay nothing but more soil. Mysterious, unknowable dirt all the way down to the Earth's molten core. In Boston you knew what you were walking on. People and subway stops and gas lines and plumbing and storm sewers. Dead bodies of mice and rats and larger mammals. And Charlie slithering around somewhere, too, spitting and bending rebar with his teeth. Soon, under all that, paved concrete tunnels painted with double yellow lines, then, later, once the ventilation had been checked, hundreds of cars. Then,

they could drive both above and below where her mother had landed. Would Boston ever feel like her home again?

Her father seemed so content sitting there beside her, giving a friendly flick of the fingers from the top of the steering wheel to the farmer who rumbled past them in his tractor, the wheels taller than Rose, then pulling the car back onto the road, fingering the gearshift and humming along to himself. So easy, so in touch with the motor. What was he thinking as he stroked that gearshift, so intimately, so sweetly, so close to Rose's left thigh? She smoothed her skirt down hard, with both hands.

She snuck another glance at her father, who sniffed a couple times as he hunched over the steering wheel, his hands gripping it in a way that troubled her. That thin strip of vinyl-covered metal almost the diameter of her thumb. There were no other cars on the road now, and it was hot in the car, dusty. The model he'd bestowed upon her was without air conditioning. "Probably doesn't even have power steering," she would have muttered, if she had been familiar with the term at the time. But that was unfair. He owed her nothing, and he'd given her a car and a place to stay, and now he was going to teach her how to drive the car. She'd flung herself across the country toward him, and he'd caught her rather than dropped her.

It was as though her father had waited for her so many years in this netherworld, alone, practicing his driving skills, selling cars (to whom she could

not fathom: she'd seen five people since she'd arrived in town), so that he would be ready to take her and help her. To assume the responsibilities of a quarter of a lifetime, to make up for all of the untended bloodied knees, unlearned softball swings, ungrunted-about and glared at young suitors, with this certain help, in this certain place, at a certain time that would benefit her the most. This thought filled Rose with fear. She didn't know this man beside her. She didn't want to let herself think about how badly she needed him.

Earl, for his part, felt like his heart was full, calmer than he'd been in years. He thought he'd be nervous meeting this girl. But no. First of all, anyway, he supposed he was proud of her. She sat so ladylike in the seat beside him, wearing some sort of housedress with a flared skirt like his mother up in Nebraska might have worn as he was growing up, if she had been fashionable, conscious of fit. Even then, though, the hard, keg-like middle of his mother would make it hang poorly, pooching around her stomach and sagging around the bust and hips. Women, he couldn't help but think, should have about them some air of the feminine, the ladylike, the cowering, sweet and civilized—all qualities his daughter possessed. You could tell just by looking at her there, fanning herself with an Obay's Tires circular she'd found stuffed in the door flap. Precious cargo. Twenty-three years had passed since his accident with the fishing lure, since he'd had sex with her mother, and he couldn't remember too well what

Patsy Ann looked like. Not as pretty as his daughter, most definitely. His daughter. Sitting there beside him, the gold hair on her arms shining in the sun.

He hadn't had many opportunities to produce daughters. Between the time he met Patsy Ann and the time he met Rose, only four other women had agreed to have sexual relations with him. It had been five years since the last one, a waitress named Sandy at The Three Bears Café where he'd stretch out in a booth with the boys from the pro shop a morning or two a week. The two of them flirted back and forth, he telling her he liked the way she handled a loaded serving tray, and she giggling and shifting her weight on her feet, blowing her hair out of her eyes.

Then he stopped in one day when he knew his friends wouldn't be there. Car sales at the lot were poor, and he went to bed every night wishing he had someone to talk to, the outline of someone's naked hipbone to trace with his index finger while he talked. When Sandy asked him what he wanted to eat, he said boldly, "Well, I think you look good enough to eat." He blushed and looked down at the wood grain plastic tabletop. It was not something that he would ever say normally, but he felt so lonely. She told him to come pick her up after she got off work. He said okay and was so flustered by his daring and shocked by her positive response, he got up and walked out of the restaurant.

They had spent three nights together when Sandy's ex-boyfriend showed up at Earl's place one morning palming a two-and-a-half foot length of heavy

chain. He banged on the front door, first with his fists, and then thwoning it with the chain, which made a hollow sound that echoed all the way through the small house. Sandy, nestled in the crook of Earl's arm, jerked her head up.

"That's Jack coming for me," she told Earl, shaking him awake. "I knew he would."

"Do you have to go?" Earl asked. He knew that another response would keep her beside him, that he was just acting a part here. He stuck to the script of least resistance.

Sandy was already pulling on her panties, picking up her bra from under the nightstand. She turned to him with a beatific, gummy smile and told him, "I do, Earl. I do. Jack's the man I love, and I've got to follow that, that love."

"All right then," Earl told her. "Well, at least we had this time together."

"You angel," Sandy said.

Earl was no angel. If Jack had not shown up when he did, Earl would have unconsciously set about driving Sandy away himself, through a lack of attention, not making the right remark when he should, not being reassuring enough. Earl believed that his natural state was solitary—a lone wolf, just like other people belonged in mated pairs. It was like the force of gravity, or inertia maybe, at work. Things would work out as they would. He had a fish tank in his living room, and it had inspired a private analogy. When you feed the fish, some of the little flakes of food get eaten by fish right away. These are people who get

married really young. Sometimes one fish goes for a flake, nibbles a while, decides it's not for him, and lets it go. Another fish, below him, snatches up the food and swallows. Divorce and remarriage. (Somewhat counterintuitively, the top of the tank represented birth, or the birth of one's interest in sex, and the farther down one went, the more years had elapsed. Though maybe going down was appropriate. The inevitable decline. It was a very complicated theory.) But he, Earl, was the flake that floated (sunk, really) all the way down to the very bottom of the tank, burying itself in the gravel so that not even the catfish could reach it. Maybe a fish or two nibbled it along the way, but no one really dug in. Earl knew this about himself. Once, he reached down with a little net and stirred the gravel. Old food and fish poop floated up, but the fish ignored it all, swam past it, haughtily, in his estimation. He suspected that this agitation of the gravel had killed his angelfish.

That was not to say that he didn't relish the time with women. Earl had gotten progressively more grateful with each woman's attention, which probably explained why the women came to him slower and slower. He knew that but couldn't help it. Ask any woman—ask Rose, for instance! Women thrived on a challenge. Earl's gratefulness embarrassed the women, made them feel as though they were lowering themselves to sleep with him. No one wanted to feel that way.

What did attract the few women who seduced him were his looks. He had a thin, finely muscled build which not even a Midwestern diet of meat, grease, and breading could inflate. His brown hair fell in wisps onto his forehead, a sign of aging, though the women who seduced him often interpreted it as a leftover from little boyhood and babied him accordingly. Sadness clung to him like a staticky shroud, and women wanted to brush it away from him, to show him how beautiful life could be, especially between their thighs. Since Rose arrived, though, just in these few hours, he changed. He could remember how sad he'd been, but he couldn't remember why.

They pulled off the one-lane road and onto another, wider strip of concrete that ran parallel to it. This one did not even have the reflective yellow line markers, just bleached pavement with scrubby weeds growing in the cracks.

"This is the old runway," said Earl. "It used to be Schilling Air Force base. They left in the sixties, consolidated with Fort Riley up north. Town's been dying ever since. You'll see men out here with their model airplanes, or their cars now. They set up cones and drive around them."

"What do the women in town do?"

"What?"

"For fun. Do they fly the airplanes, too?"

Earl thought a moment. He didn't know what women did for fun. "I've never seen it," he said. "See them woods over there?" he pointed out a sparse



stand of cottonwoods a half mile away. "There's wild turkeys there in the spring. You can walk right out and hunt them if you're wise enough. They get scared easily though..." Earl trailed off at the end, his mind catching up with him, telling him that his daughter couldn't possibly be interested.

"What do you hunt them with?"

"Oh, well. I don't. You could, though. My friend Ed down at work does. Uses a .22. A shotgun."

The two of them rode in silence across the washed out pavement. Then, Earl broke out whistling a high-pitched and meandering tune. Patsy Ann detested whistlers. She felt it was an acoustic invasion of her space, and she'd always give them dirty looks to try to discourage them. Rose didn't mind Earl's whistling. It felt fatherly. Rose had assumed that her father would be not so much a copy of her or Patsy Ann, but linked to the two of them in some readily apparent way. He would possess all of the strange characteristics of Rose's that her mother did not pass on down. A stranded third of the three of them. But possibly not stranded so much as escaped. No one else living knew why she'd never met him. Rose needed to study this man.

Rose tapped her feet and clicked her ring against the silver metal door handle in time to the whistling as the car slowed and finally stopped right in the middle of the paved area, near a little shed where the roof shingles didn't stop when the roof met the walls, but crept on toward the ground.

“What’s up?” she asked Earl.

Abruptly, he left off whistling, popped the gearshift into neutral, pulled the parking brake, and climbed out of the car. Rose watched him as he walked around the back of the sedan, kicking each tire on the way.

As he approached the passenger side door, an uninvited thought reared up in Rose’s mind. This was exactly the sort of place young women were raped and chopped to bits and buried under one of the three trees. Maybe Earl’s strange silence was not the usual taciturnity of country folk in sparsely populated areas, but the quiet calculation of a sociopath. Maybe the trees were there so that when Earl confessed (and confess he would, she had a feeling, for he did seem to be an honorable man, not one to hide from his fate), he could lead the police to exactly where he had buried her arms and torso, sprinkled with quicklime (to speed decomposition), like sugar on a halved grapefruit. Her head he would keep with him as a souvenir, after pickling it in lye. “Welp, yes, right under that skimpy lil’ cottonwood there you’ll find her. Sure, she was my daughter, but I always told Patsy Ann, I didn’t want her when she was born, I sure as hell don’t want her when she shows up on my doorstep.”

Rose jumped as Earl jerked the passenger side door open and bent stiffly at his waist. “Okay, little lady. Out you go.”

Rose swung her legs out of the car with her knees tightly clasped together. She rose to her full height and stood eye to chin with her father and saw the loose

flesh on him, between the mid-neck and lower face. A bit of paper from a napkin stuck to his lip where he'd wiped it after lunch. She brushed it away, which gave her a little thrill as the fragment fluttered down onto the coarse asphalt. But he didn't react. Just stood there. Spooky.

She circled around to the driver's seat, where she lowered herself gingerly, like a man in a hardhat descending into a manhole. She hated herself for thinking of that image. Earl settled down into the passenger's seat, lowering himself as far as his legs would allow, then plopping the rest of the way. Curled up beside her, her daddy was not an intimidating physical presence anymore, nothing but a concave-chested little old man.

Earl noticed his daughter's intent eyes on him as he had opened the door for her, but he'd mistaken the terror for curiosity. When Earl sat down, it sent up into the air a whiff of the dealership's unique pineapple car fragrance. Earl told Rose about how the dealership paid Trevor to walk around the lot with a reservoir strapped to his back and a plastic nozzle in his hands to squirt each car in several key places: the driver's side floor. In the vents. That was a big one. Rose laughed as he told her this, but she still looked awfully tense, especially around the shoulders. She sat as though someone pressed a sharp finger into her back between her shoulder blades.

Many used cars smelled as though a small mammal had crawled up into the works of the car and died staring through the vents—its prison bars. Earl

hoped that he hadn't given his daughter a stinky car. He had not picked out the automobile carefully because he had no idea how much he'd like the girl. She had asked him for it over the phone, told him he could do this one thing for her now, a ballsy move, he thought. Now, he wished he'd picked something grander, with leather seats and a shiny finish that matched her hair or eyes. Oh, how that warm fatherly feeling would leech into his chest cavity every time he looked over at her. He wished that she would relax.

Rose, heavy with the responsibility of driving, stared straight ahead now. The driver's seat disoriented her. She'd never before sat at the control hub of such a monster. As her father went through the basics with her—pedals, blinkers, odometer, speedometer, it all felt too close, like the gears and gauges pointed menacingly at her, waiting to stab her in the eye. She had dreamed of the power she would feel behind the wheel, but all that confidence had drained away on the ride out to the airstrip.

Now she hoped that something would happen to prevent her from trying to drive—like perhaps she could faint, or a necessary part could fall off the automobile. And she was wearing high heels. Surely these were dangerous to drive in, these dual hound's-tooth plaid pointy-toed death traps. She should have worn her sneakers. And now it was too late, and she wasn't paying attention. He'd said something, probably essential for ensuring that the car did not explode while in operation, and she'd missed it.

“Can you repeat that?” she asked.

“Oh, the wipers have a couple different speeds. Pull this thing down for high, tug it up for low.”

“Okay.”

“You’ve rode in cars before, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Taxis. My friends’ cars.” A police car that followed the ambulance carrying Patsy Ann’s body to the hospital. The flashers on top of the car coated streets, sides of buildings, people. It felt as though the blue and white and red light was emanating from them, rather than from the top of the car. One cop had tried to make conversation asking, “You okay back there?” Rose had just nodded at him and watched the parti-colored people go by. The closer to the car they came, the more brightly lit they were. Rose wished they came in other colors.

“Good. So you know the basics. Now, then, I’d suggest you never yell at someone or drive fast because another car is bothering you, but you should get really good with your finger. If you do it just right,” he put his hands on the dashboard to demonstrate and flicked his middle finger in the air, keeping the others clamped down, “they can’t tell if you’re flipping them off or waving, but you’ll feel better.”

Rose nodded. She couldn’t bring herself to loosen her grip on the steering wheel enough to try it.

“Okay, now, ease up on that brake,” Earl told her. The small car crept forward. The car pattered along, all tiny V-4 motor and touchy transmission, and Rose felt as though she had been transformed into a dinosaur, a terrible, strong beast, slow-moving and dim-witted. For her father would call out a direction to her: “Turn right. Slow down. Speed up. Watch out for that pole,” and it would take her a good five seconds to respond. She knew now what it meant to be a lumbering carnivore—a girthy brown fish hugging the lake bottom, staring up at the shiny silver minnows and waiting to strike. Vehicular homicide made sense. The car was her protection, her weapon. She could harm anything she wanted now, as long as it was smaller and softer than her rusty steel two-doored frame. Oh, the power burned through her as she navigated the unwieldy hulk along the thin strip of pavement, which had seemed so ample before, when the beast was under her father’s control. Her father laughed, sensing her glee, but she resisted the impulse to join him. Somehow that would rob the undertaking of its gravity.

“Give ‘er a little more gas,” her father said, still laughing, nudging her shoulder.

“Yes sir.” Rose depressed the pedal with the toe of her high heel. It was difficult to get it pushed down well because the heel provided poor traction on the carpeted floor. Also, the seat was too far back. She had to fully extend her leg to get the brake depressed. Rose understood now the benefits of those nubby-heeled, fine leather driving shoes she had always scorned for aesthetic reasons.

She tried keeping her heel in the air and using the muscle in her calf to keep the pedal depressed, but her leg soon tired. It sunk back onto the floor and she ground her heel into the gray carpet. The heel stuck and gained purchase, and she pressed the accelerator with the ball of her foot. Rose watched the speedometer needle creep higher and higher, from 30 to 40, to 45, 48...

“Whoa there. Stop. Stop!” Rose’s father said. Rose looked up. There in front of her, at fifty feet and coming on fast, smack in the middle of the airstrip, she saw a fat man in a yellow t-shirt waving his arms in the air. Rose tried to switch her foot from the gas to the brake pedal, but her heel was wedged in. She couldn’t free it from its place snagged on the carpet.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Rose cried. She took her hands from the steering wheel and raised them to her face.

“No, no! Hands on the wheel! Brake! Brake!” She jabbed for the brake with her left foot and finally found it. She tried to rip her foot off the accelerator one more time, but it held fast. Instead, she applied the brake with her left foot and turned the wheel hard. The car spun around and made a terrible complaining sound, whining and grumbling and screeching all at once, and Rose squeezed her eyes tight. Perhaps the spinning would make her miss him, send the little car hurtling off to a clear, wide part of the runway.

But no. The impact came. Hitting a man did not sound as she expected. A dull thud, she imagined. But instead it sounded like a splintering, a crack, as though the man's bones were on the outside rather than the inside.

A surge of adrenaline allowed Rose to rip her foot out of her pump. She kept her other foot on the brake, and the car stopped. The silence after all of the noise made Rose want to yell, to act firmly and decisively, but she didn't. She searched the rear view mirror for the body. Surely the man could not have survived; his frame would lie crumpled and still behind her. Or perhaps, more horribly, his appendages would twitch like a cockroach's in death pangs. And the police cars would come soon, and then the ambulances, but they wouldn't be sympathetic to her this time, wouldn't wrap a blanket around the shoulders of, wouldn't wedge a hot beverage into the hand of—a manslaughterer.

What was that stupid man doing there rooted in place like some damn scarecrow and shaking his arms rather than running for his life? Perhaps he had sticky feet like Rose did. And yes, this pattern was familiar, too. First the shock, the disbelief, then the gallows humor. Next came the wild wailing, the animal grunts of pain.

Rose folded her arms over the steering wheel and laid her head down upon them. Sweat pooled in the creases of her elbows. Her father slapped his hand onto her back, too hard, but, Rose hoped, with loving intent. She expected him to stroke her back, to lean close and whisper soothing words into her ear, his



whiskers abrading it, and his hot, tobaccoey breath rushing past her nose. Instead, he withdrew his hand. Rose heard the passenger side door swing open and slam shut. Her father had so confidently told her to speed up. He didn't help matters either, damn him. Rose peeked in the rearview mirror.

Earl had walked back behind the car and kicked at something. It seemed a callous way to test a body for signs of life. Rose opened the heavy car door and set her feet on the pavement. Her legs felt elastic, not quite her own.

Her father laughed. Softly at first, but then he picked up speed and volume. His whole body shook. "You really smeared the shit out of that guy's plane! My daughter's a terrorist. Wreakin' havoc!" An airplane. She had hit a model airplane. Her whole life stretched out in front of her, a vista of possibility rather than a long cold prison. Earl came back and climbed into the passenger seat. She reached over and hugged her father for the second time since her arrival in Clay Center.

Then, she heard an angry voice yelling. Into the age-clouded side mirror, where objects were closer than they appeared, stepped the model plane enthusiast, reborn, a phoenix in a yellow t-shirt that strained against his belly. Rose shut the door, and her father reached across her to jam the lock down a second before the man went for the handle. Yellow shirt pounded on Rose's window with both fists, yelling.

"What should I do?"

“Uh, I dunno,” Earl told her. Rose could tell her father was scared by the way he gripped the console with both hands and looked straight ahead. When Rose was driving, her own fingernails denting the vinyl of the steering wheel, even when her feet depressed both the accelerator and brake pedals simultaneously, making the little two-door hop and hiccup in distress, he hadn’t been so nervous.

The man pressed his face to the glass, an eye rolling about in its socket, pinning first on Rose, then on her father, like a hungry bear shaking down national park tourists for handouts or, perhaps, even fresher meat. His arms hugged the car as if to keep it from getting away.

“Shit, what do I do?” Rose asked again.

Yellow shirt yelled, “Hell, you stupid bitch! My airplane’s fucking destroyed!”

“That’s not right he called you that,” her father said. Now the action would come, she thought. Her father’s brain worked slower than hers; he’d allow seconds to pass before replying, reacting. But now he was provoked. And when provoked, good country boys like her father had short tempers and acted fast with their fists. She’d heard about this in songs featuring pinched, nasal singing voices and the banjo. He would hop out of the car and defend his daughter’s honor: plaster the crude gentleman’s face against the hood, then peel him off, throw him on the ground, spit on him, and mount a foot on the ample belly. Astride the man,

he'd condescend to reach into his own back pocket—not the left one that contained the chew, but the right, which bore the faded outline of his wallet, draw it out, and drop a few crumpled bills onto the man's chest. Then he'd hop into the car (a shame it was no convertible, so that he might slide in over the top of the door, though with this model, he'd be able to give the door a hard slam of finality.)

The man picked up a wide piece of the fractured plane and beat Rose's window with it.

"We should probably do something," Rose told her father, and as usual with such a statement, the pronoun "we" meant a very different, singular pronoun.

"That man's crazy. Drive, Rose, drive," her father told her.

"It's just balsa wood," she said, and settled down to explain balsa's qualities to her father, its porousness, its light weight which made it ideal for fashioning architectural models, its unsuitableness as a weapon, when the fat man raised a heavy leg and began pounding his foot into the glass. His belly overhung so much that he could not keep his foot raised in the air in battering ram position without holding it up around the calf with his arms.

Before he could get the balance worked out for another strike, Rose smashed her feet to the gas and brake, the engine howled, her father said "Right down, left up." She took her foot off the left pedal, and they roared away. Rose drove straight and fast back down that one-lane road. This time, they met no

other cars, which was providential, because Rose would have driven over them, too, just like the airplane. Shit, Rose thought. He's a coward. A big worthless coward and Charlie's after me. He'd probably step aside, the well-mannered soul, to allow Charlie easier pistol-whipping access.

They switched places again at a gas station, then didn't stop again until the car rumbled under the carport beside Earl's home. Rose's neck ached and her fingers felt stiff and brittle from the strain of claspng the steering wheel. She was profoundly disappointed in her father. Earl sensed the turn in Rose's mood.

"We'll try again tomorrow, Rose. You'll be driving like a pro in no time."

"Yep. Like a pro. A real racecar driver."

"A speed demon."

"Exactly."

Later, once the sun crept below the horizon and the last bits of pink light died, they sat in silence at her father's little dining table waiting for their frozen pizza to cook through.

Rose asked, "Have you ever been in a fight?"

"Uh, well, back in grade school." Her father turned toward her. "You aren't thinking of getting in a fight, are you? I wouldn't recommend it."

"Oh, no," Rose laughed. "I'm miles away from anyone I'd want to fight with." She thought so, anyway. But where was Charlie right now? How could she be sure he wasn't looking in on them right now through her father's

curtainless windows, his hot breath fogging up the glass? “What about a gun?

Do you know how to fire a gun?”

“Well, yes,”

“Do you have one, like for protection?”

“Yes. What are all these questions?”

“It’s just interesting to me. I’ve only known one other person who owned a gun.”