

Actresses Auditioning

Nine days after her mom died, Alicia is running away. She has a duffel bag hidden beneath the stairs in the hallway of the apartment complex.

“Where did you say you’re going tonight?” Justin, her dad, sits on the couch in his security uniform for the night shift at Fruitvale Mall. She’s never lived with him before now, and he sleeps on the couch during the day. He tells Alicia to sleep in her mom’s room because, he says, a fifteen-year-old girl needs privacy, but she uses the couch when he’s at work. He doesn’t know that the couch has always been hers, and that whenever her mom stayed out late Alicia would listen for the heels in the hall to turn off the TV. Her mom would keep the lights off and sit on the arm of the couch to play with Alicia’s hair, both of them pretending she was asleep.

“To a friend’s,” Alicia says. “To study for bio.”

“What’s her name?”

“Katy.” She pulls her Chihuahua, Beverly, up on her lap.

Actually, she’s going to Stella’s, but Katy’s driving. Stella is the richest girl at school, and is having another model party, a thing she does when her cousin, a photographer in L.A., comes to visit. The cousin takes pictures of girls who want to get into modeling or acting then gets paid by companies if they pick the girls for ads. Last year, Tanya Nelson’s picture got picked and she ended up in a giant color photo for North Furniture. The whole school passed around the spread from *L.A. Weekly*: Tanya sitting around a dinner table with four strangers, aiming her fork at a plastic pork chop. She got a hundred bucks and might be famous soon, but no one knows yet because she transferred schools.

"Have you been to her house before?" Justin mutes the TV and stares at her. He's been staring at her all week, like he's trying to find something in her face.

"Yes."

She has never been to Katy or Stella's house. Last year, she asked her mom if she could go to a model party and her mom said not until she was sixteen, because that's how old she was when she got her first ad. Alicia is fifteen but her mom is dead. She watches the screen, where a cop car's lights flicker. The clock on the DVD player says 7:20. Justin will go to the bathroom soon, and that is when she will leave to meet Katy at Low-Inn Park at 7:30. Alicia never tells other kids where she lives.

Beverly jumps to the floor and trots over to Justin's ankles, sniffs. Alicia will have to leave her here. Justin picks the dog up like she's a remote control.

"You gonna put some pants on before you go?"

"They're shorts."

Justin shakes his head and taps a pack of cigarettes on his knee.

"It looks like you've got nothing on."

"Everyone wears them like this."

"Your mom let you?"

"Yes."

Beverly jumps to the ground.

"Did you get something to eat?" He lights a cigarette. He never goes on the porch to smoke like he's supposed to, and he puts the silverware in the drawer instead of the jars Alicia and her mom decorated. Alicia doesn't know how to make him follow the rules.

“Yes,” she lies. He doesn’t know anything about girls. He doesn’t know that girls don’t like beef stew from a can and he doesn’t know that girls need pads. Two days ago she got her period and asked him for money but he said he was broke so she said it was for food, and he said they had stuff in the cupboard. All that’s in there now are cans he brought with him from the trailer where he was living with two guys he met in training for the National Guard before Alicia was even born. She’s been stuffing socks with toilet paper for pads and taping it to her underwear. What will he say when she says she needs money for socks?

“Maybe this weekend we can make your mom’s chili,” Justin says. He says they have until the end of the month to stay in this apartment, and that then he’ll find something with two bedrooms.

"Don't know how," Alicia says. She does know how. Her mom even taught her to make kimchi in large batches, one of the only things her mom did that was Korean.

“Maybe we can try.” He stands and scratches under his light brown hair, grown longer than Alicia has ever seen it which somehow makes his muscles look even bigger. When she was little she would wrap her hands around his arm and beg him to flex.

He goes to the bathroom and shuts the door. She hates the bathroom ever since he moved in. It is all the things they joke about on TV, like the toilet seat being up and whiskers from shaving in the sink, but also new bottles and deodorants that are grayer and larger and smell sharper than her mom’s pink and green jars.

When the water runs she says, “Katy’s here, see you later.”

“What?”

“Bye.”

Beverly barks when she rushes to the door, barks and barks until Alicia swoops her into a canvas bag they keep for her by the shoes. She runs down the stairs, gets the duffel, and jogs toward Low-Inn Park. Halfway there she has to walk with Beverly squirming in the bag. It is as cold as Bakersfield gets and the sidewalk feels different under her moccasins, which her mom called indoor shoes. They had matching pairs from when her mom worked at Ross; when she brought them home to Alicia she warned that in Korea it is a curse to wear your indoor shoes outside.

Alicia sits on the plastic steps of the park's play structure, which hasn't changed since she and her mom moved from L.A. to Bakersfield seven years ago. At first, Justin came over on Sunday nights even though he still lived in L.A. and drove trucks for a week at a time. When he visited he said it was hard to live so far from his girls and her mom would say, I haven't been your girl for years, and they'd whisper-yell in the kitchen while Alicia watched *Young Stars*, the show that turned kids like her into celebrities. If they still fought when the show ended she'd come to this park to play. She used to imagine the tube slide would portal her to another world if she said the right words at the top.

She lets Beverly out of the bag. The Chihuahua sniffs the structure until circling back to Alicia's feet, then sits. "Good girl." Beverly might mess up finding a place to stay but she couldn't leave her alone. Justin doesn't know about walking and feeding, or about her stuffed dollar sign toy you have to hide on top of the fridge.

Alicia takes off the duffel, one of Justin's from the National Guard, like removing a seatbelt. All it carries is another pair of shorts, two shirts, some underwear, almost one hundred and fifty dollars -- her savings plus what she could get off Justin without him noticing -- one of her mom's dresses for the party, a medium-sized makeup purse, and her mom's high high heels. Maybe she

should have brought the red dress. She picked the green one with the gold triangles but maybe the red one would make her stand out more. She's been trying on her mom's dresses at night, standing on a chair to see butt-down in the dresser mirror. Her boobs are too small to make the fabric tight like it should be, but they still make her look eighteen instead of fifteen. She thought her mom had at least twenty dresses, but after trying them all on there are only eight. She hung each of them on the closet door and stood back to decide which one would be best for tonight, like they were actresses auditioning.

Something crashes from the other side of the park. A lumpy shadow falls from the garbage bin to the ground. A raccoon waddles away and Beverly yips after it but doesn't chase. Whenever Alicia's in a place she's been lots of times, like this park, she remembers what she was like a long time ago. Last year, when she was fourteen, she used that retarded Hello Kitty backpack. She sees herself with the fat pink and white kitty head on her back: that looks stupid, she says. She sees herself when she was ten with her hair in a side ponytail that her mom made her wear, balancing on the beam in the gravel on the way home from school earlier than usual because of teachers' meetings that her mom forgot about: Don't go home yet, she says. When Alicia got home early that day, something was happening in the bedroom so she stood on the inside shoe mat with her backpack on. The door opened and a man came out. He looked different than any man Alicia had seen up close, with a thick black beard and tattoos on his chest. He touched his open pants on the way to the bathroom and it flopped out like a slug. When he saw her he yelled into her mom's room, Lindy? and looked scared and sweaty so Alicia started to cry. Then there was a gasp, the kind her mom gave when someone kissed someone they weren't supposed to on *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

“Ali!” Her mom's black hair puffed out and eye shadow went outside of the lines. She held a red blanket over her body, the one they sat under to watch TV. The man went to the bathroom holding his pants up with one hand and rubbing his shaved head with the other, like erasing the last word on a blackboard. Her mom knelt down and the blanket fell open to one side of her butt, her stomach, her breast, the same wedge of body Alicia saw every morning five years later through hospital gowns that twisted overnight. Beverly was a puppy then, a gift from Justin, and chewed on the red blanket. “There’s nothing to be scared of,” her mom said. “But you have to promise not to tell Justin. Promise.”

That happened other times, too, with other men, but by then Alicia knew to leave and come back later. She could tell by the shoes on the mat.

In the park, Beverly chews on Alicia's moccasin. "No." Alicia taps the dog's nose, which then rests on her paws. The dog's been sitting on Justin's lap all week even though he never fed her, just to get back at Alicia for forgetting about her when her mom was sick. That was one of the things the nurse called Cynthia would do when she came to the apartment, she'd say, Hungry little thing! and go to the top shelf in the pantry where they kept the dog food. Cynthia was fat and always told Alicia to eat, and at first Alicia hated her because she wouldn't let her put makeup on her mom, or Beverly into the bedroom, or the TV up as loud as she and her mom liked it. But then Cynthia got better because she'd look at her mom's portfolio with Alicia on the couch while her mom slept. There was the picture with her arms draped over a chair, the one with her leg up in the same high high heels Alicia has in her bag, and the close-ups of her face next to a lily, her mom's lucky flower and Alicia's, too. Alicia's favorite was a shot of her on the stairs with Scott Baio from when she was the foreign exchange student for two episodes of *Charles in Charge*. Her line was, We go shopping now?

After the machines and tubes were packed into a van to move her mom to the hospital, Cynthia gave Alicia a bag of cashews and a *Glamour*. Alicia finished the magazine the night after the funeral, and someone else ate the nuts.

It is seven forty-five. Maybe Katy's not coming. Alicia bumps her heels on the step and leans against the plastic balls that spin to O or X. The park is silent except for Beverly's scratching on the ground and a buzzing from the lamp by the restrooms, which she knows are locked. If this were a movie, her mom would say, How far does this chick really think she's gonna get?

The tape around the sock in her underwear sticks to her thigh. She puts her hand up her shorts and tries to fix it and of course right then headlights sting her eyes, Murphy's Law, one of the sayings Alicia had to explain to her mom. She stands and feels something on her thigh, tries to check but the car is in front of her, parked as close as possible. "Treasure" by Bruno Mars plays as the passenger window rolls down and a hand with a lacey tattoo around the wrist dances out the window. Alicia watched Katy draw the tattoo in Bio with a Sharpie.

Alicia picks up Beverly and gets in the back.

"Evening," the driver says. She has long blond hair and looks older than a highschooler. She and Katy wear short dresses: Katy's is red and the blonde's is striped with tiny lines of black and white.

"This is Bree," Katy says.

"Hi," Alicia says.

Bree looks at Alicia's hoody then her moccasins then the duffel. "You changing for the party?"

Alicia looks down at the moccasins. Some beads are missing on the left one. "Yeah. Can we go somewhere to change?"

"Oh my god is this your dog?" Katy holds out her hand to Beverly and makes kissy noises.

"Can't you just change in the car?" Bree says, lighting a cigarette.

"I'm worried I'll ruin the dress," Alicia says. She needs somewhere with a bathroom to fix the sock. "It was my mom's. The dress."

"We can go back to Bree's," Katy says quickly. She pokes Bree on the arm and looks at Alicia the way everyone at school looks at her, like she kind of died, too.

Bree's phone buzzes and she checks it. She rolls her eyes. "That thing's not gonna pee all over my apartment, is it?"

"No."

"Let's go, then." Bree finishes her cigarette and flicks it out the window. "You can't use my makeup though."

They drive to a neighborhood that looks like Low-Inn but the buildings aren't as high. Bree parks on the street. Following the girls in with the duffel feels more like running away than sitting in Low-Inn Park did. Alicia wonders if she should leave the bag in Bree's apartment so they'd have to come back for it and she could crash on the floor, or if she should take it to the party in case she finds a ride to L.A.

Bree's apartment is one room plus a bathroom. To the left there is a mini-fridge, a sink with one cupboard and counter, and a toaster. No freezer. Alicia thinks about her mom's sweetbread that has been in the freezer forever, and how if anyone tries to thaw it without putting a damp cloth over it the way you have to, it will taste stale.

Bree goes to the fridge and bends down to open it. Beverly sniffs her wrists. "Get out of here." She gives Beverly a swat.

Katy flips through Bree's clothes on a garment rack next to the bathroom. "Should I change my dress?" The hangers screech against metal.

"Just let me see before you put anything on, some of it's dry clean and I'm not doing that shit." Bree opens a can of beer or pop, Alicia can't tell.

"Can I use the bathroom?" Alicia says.

"There." Bree points. "Be quick, China girl. It's after eight, let's get there."

At eight o'clock, Justin has already left for work.

Katy and Bree are sitting close on the bed, the stripes on one dress reaching into the red of the other. Katy plays with Beverly on her lap. The way they look reminds Alicia of her mom and Justin, the times when he loved her. Sometimes he loved her like in the movies. Sometimes they didn't fight at all and all three of them watched TV, and Justin's hand would rub up and down her mom's neck, sliding under her hair so that her ponytail pumped up and down like a heart.

Alicia squeezes into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She pulls down her shorts, bracing for deep red: there is one spot of blood on the sock. She turns on the water and opens the cupboard below the sink. There is a box of tampons, but Alicia has never used those. Her mom told her there was no rush. She rearranges the sock and pulls her underwear back up. She opens the duffel and stares into it. She has brought all the wrong things but doesn't know what she would trade.

The bathroom is hot, with no fan and blond hairs in the sink like rusted cracks. She takes off the hoody and the tank-top. The green dress is baggy around her chest, worse than she remembered. She puts on the heels and looks at herself, higher. She mouths, *We go shopping now?* to the mirror. Outside the bathroom they are talking about Twisters, the club with 16-and-up night on Sundays that she has heard about but never been to. She looks at the mirror longer. *I live with Justin. He's my*

dad. These are words she's had to say to teachers and to counselors all week. She never knew what she looked like saying them.

Alicia closes the door and the car drives off while her hand still touches the metal. She stands on the sidewalk in her mom's heels and the green and gold dress, flowering out from under the hoody. Beverly is already at the door of the apartment building. Alicia walks slowly, listening to every click, click, up the dirty tiles on the stairs. At the door, she has no key. Beverly scratches. Alicia tries the door, and it opens.

She leaves the duffel on the shoe mat and clicks, clicks over to the couch. There is a note on the coffee table, under her key with the metal lilies key chain. *Forget something?* it says. *I'll get groceries after work. Want to rent this place?* There is a picture of a mansion ripped out of a magazine.

Alicia changes out of the dress and puts it in the closet with the others. She moves the forks in the kitchen from the drawer to the jar and takes out the sweetbread from the freezer. Later she will bring the neighbors cigarettes to thank them for never telling about Beverly.