

The Vanity

I met Hazel the summer of 2007. When I first saw her, down by the water in Discovery Park, I felt a familiarity. Like seeing someone you've forgotten. The way she walked towards me made me think of another woman I hadn't seen in years.

"You must be Amy." Hazel's handshake was firm and her skin was milky in the overcast light of Thursday's late afternoon. She smiled warmly.

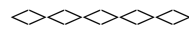
"It's nice to meet you." I found it hard to look straight at her. Her eyes were like the water of the sound, capped with white, and I feared something recognizable might surface at any moment; something too much my mother to deny the resemblance.

Hazel's husband, an avid collector of my work, had commissioned me to do a painting of her for his study. He wanted a painting of her on the rocks down by the water in Discovery Park, the place where he'd met her, five years earlier, walking her greyhound, Ferra.

I spent the afternoon asking Hazel to teeter on boulders while I sketched the way her arms hung from her shoulders and snapped photos of the sky's lilac haze and the water's weimaraner-like hues. I found myself telling stories about eccentric clients and detailing the way I like my tea: black with a drizzle of agave, a squeeze of orange. She listened and laughed at all the right places and when she sat facing me, the gap between her front teeth and the way her sandy hair blew between her lips left me feeling a longing for something. It wasn't sexual. Of that I was sure. Yet there was something within her that made me feel desperation. So I asked if she'd ever like to grab coffee or catch a movie sometime. Hazel's mannerisms disintegrated my usual reserve. It made me nervous even asking her to consider the thought of a friendship. I chided myself for

being so open, for making the first move of friendship. The five seconds before her affirmative reply seemed to stretch themselves long and thin like overworked silly putty.

When I looked at my sketches that night, I cursed their deranged proportions. The only thing about Hazel that I'd managed to capture with any kind of accuracy was her eyes, the straightness of her brows, hooding her curved lashes. Yet strangely when we met each other at Tulley's the following week, I realized that it wasn't *her* eyes that I had sketched, but rather those of my distant mother who, on the surface, appeared very similar. Emotion had clouded my sight and made me see the face of another when looking at Hazel's.



It's 2010 and I sit at my dark wood dressing table. Or *vanity*, as my mother would've called it. It's angled in the corner of my bedroom so that the light from the large paned window reflects in its mirror's surface. My walls are somewhere between apple and jade and always give my skin a yellow pallor. I knew this would be the case even as I flipped through swatches at Home Depot. But I wanted something that would cause initial cringing. My hope was that curiosity at the effect of the color would follow the initial distaste and, that eventually, endearment would develop. I've come to believe that instant satisfaction with something (or someone) almost always means eventual dislike.

I am twenty-nine years old. A year older than my mother was the last time I saw her. I've taped a picture of her to the mirror. It was taken three months before she left.

I am vain in my determination to remain unbothered with my appearance. I wear linen pants with drawstring waists and shape-masking shirts in muddy hues such as taupe

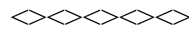
and sand. I air-dry my hair and the most makeup I can be imposed upon to wear is a swath of plum lipstick and maybe a hurried brush of mascara on special occasions. I sit at the vanity and press my fingers into my cheeks, distorting my face momentarily into something, someone, I don't recognize. This calms me. I pull at the skin around my eyes trying to smooth out the little pile of crows feet that's accumulated frighteningly fast. For many women my age, being told they look young is the highest form of flattery. For me, all I want is to not resemble the woman standing behind my mother in the photo taped to the mirror in front of me.

I look at the picture with a critically assessing eye: Carol. My mother, with sandy brown hair, shapely cheekbones, full lips and a gap-toothed smile. Her arms hang like pendulums from her narrow shoulders. Collarbones, like bridges, lead to nowhere. My mother stands beneath an oak tree, her older sister, Kathryn, just behind her. They both smile, but my aunt eyes the camera uncomfortably, her shoulders rounded but ridged, angled away from my mother. She can tell what the camera sees: sisters, one prettier than the other; noticeably so. In the photo, there is something in my Aunt Kathryn's stance that conveys she is questioning her presence; looking for a way out. Despite her pudginess (or perhaps *in* spite of it), she holds herself as though trying not to take up space.

My mother, Carol, is frozen at twenty-eight. In the photo as well as my memories of her. In the photo, Aunt Kathryn is forty-one. But when I think of her, she's fifty, face etched and grooved, screaming something as I throw my bags into the backseat of a dirty cab and let myself be driven far away. Kathryn was thirteen when my grandmother left

them. Kathryn was old enough to take on the roll of mother; too young yet to realize responsibility's addictive qualities.

I bite the thinness of my lips to bring a flush of pink to their surface. Creases at the edges of my mouth spread like paint in water and I find myself feeling more forty-one than twenty-nine. I have no sister to be older or younger than. There was simply me and, alone, finding definition proves difficult. Perspective remains skewed. There are no clean-cut lines, just smudgy pencil strokes streaked across the page of my family's tree.



Despite the pounding of rain, when the phone rang late in the afternoon on October 3rd, 2009, I jumped. "Hello?"

"Hello. Amy?" said a woman, older than me; familiar somehow.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Kathryn. Kathryn Shale."

"You found me." It was a lamely obvious thing to say; I felt cold and unprepared.

"It took some time. My investigator couldn't find anyone named Amy Janis."

"I changed my last name."

"Yes. I gathered that." Emotionless, she remained.

"It's been like nine years."

"Ten, actually. I gather you're in Washington somewhere? I looked up your area code on the internet."

With that reference, she sounded old; so much older than I remembered. I found myself wondering what she looked like. The thinness of her voice made me think of the clothesline she used to stretch out in the backyard before making me drag out basketfuls

of wet underwear and hang them. My fingers were always sore afterwards from pinching the clothespins. *Four finger-widths apart, Amy Maxine. You hear me?*

My hands felt clammy, like toes that have been crammed into wet socks on a hot day. I cleared my throat: “What happened? There must be some reason you’re contacting me.” I could feel something knotting inside me.

“Your mother.”

“What about her?”

“Your mother. She’s dead.”

“No. That can’t be.” Emotionless. That’s how I felt.

“Well, it is. I just thought you should know.”

I felt my teeth begin to chatter. I could feel Kathryn’s bony fingers stroking my hair in a half-hearted attempt to comfort me. Like she’d done ten years ago. When she was left with me and all I’d had for companionship was her bitterness.

Just like Carol to leave you to me. To pick up her broken pieces.

“You haven’t changed a bit. Still frigid as ever,” I said.

“Amy Maxine Janis. I didn’t call to be *insulted*. I did this as a *favor* to you. I did this out of *respect*. Out of *love* for your mother.” Aunt Kathy had always worn indignation well.

My mind reeled and I felt my mouth spinning quickly after it: “Chasing her off was just never enough for you, was it? Weeding out those who didn’t want to follow your *meaningless* plans. We *both* hated it. Me and mom. Living with you and Uncle Charlie. You know, my mother was not you’re *child*. And of course when you couldn’t keep her, you just *had* to claim me. I don’t blame her for leaving. I blame *you* for all of it. I don’t

know how Uncle Charlie stands it. Honestly. It's appalling a man, even as spineless as him, could stay with you for so long."

I closed my mouth and tried to imagine Kathryn's face. Did she still have eyes reminiscent of a bird? Small and dark and hard? Had she swelled and developed jowls? Or had she thinned and creased with age instead? I could hear the voices, women from the past, meaning well as they cooed,

She looks just like you.

You have your mother's eyes.

Sentencing prophesies disguised as compliments seemed in endless supply after my mother left. Suddenly, I was Kathryn's daughter. And she never corrected false assumptions. It wasn't polite (unless of course the assumption was incriminating. Then, by all means, shove it in their faces). One morning at church a kind older woman approached Aunt Kathryn and congratulated her on her pregnancy. I'd never seen such a withering glare. The older woman apologized profusely, but Aunt Kathryn would never greet her after Sunday morning services anymore. Forgiveness wasn't her way. Not ever.

I forced my eyes open and gripped the edge of my small red couch. "My mother's only short coming was having *you* for a sister." My voice was low, a growl.

"Well, it seems some things just never change. You're still as *ungrateful* as you ever were."

I forced myself to take several deep breaths.

"What happened to her, Kathryn?" I articulated each word exactly, punctuating the ending letters.

Kathryn sighed dramatically. “Carol was living in an apartment building. Somewhere in California.”

“Who found her? I mean, how did you find out about her?”

“Some man called me. He said he was family.”

“Family? What family?” The phone chord had tangled itself around my ankles and I kicked it off. I despised technology and in revolt insisted on using only my apartment’s landline.

“How would I know that?” Kathryn was terrible at lying. She knew something she didn’t want to say.

“Because you *asked*?”

“I forgot to. Happens to old people, you know.”

“Tell me what he said.”

She sighed dramatically. “He said he was the husband of Carol’s daughter, Susan. That Susan was too worked up about Carol’s passing to come to the phone. That they just thought we should know about her... you know.”

“No. That can’t be. It must’ve been someone else. Not mom. Another Carol Janis. They must’ve gotten the wrong number.” My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. My hands felt slick against the plastic of the telephone. “That’s just not possible. That she started another family. Had another daughter?”

“Amy, *dear*, it was *her*. I *swear* it. This husband? He knew all of Carol’s stories. They found some old photos, her birth certificate, a slip of paper with my name and address...”

I pulled my knees to my chest and buried my face in my lap.

“Amy? Are you there?”

My mouth felt as though I’d just eaten a spoonful of cinnamon, dry as the Sahara. “I’ll call you later.” The fibers of the couch made my skin itch, but I pushed myself as far in between the cushions as I could go, trying to disappear and feel anything other than the ice-cold realizations splintering open.

It was three days after Kathryn’s call that the phone rang again. I didn’t answer, fearing it was Kathryn looking for more confrontation involving information I wasn’t prepared to learn. I was working on a collection for a big exhibit at the time and hadn’t been seeing people very much. I’d been ignoring messages from Hazel for weeks. First it was a couple days and two messages but then the number of days accumulated to weeks along with numerous recordings, each sounding slightly less patient and pleasant than the last. So I woke in the morning, made some tea, ate an English muffin with honey and peanut butter, and went to work. And decided to just pretend there wasn’t someone out there who might want to know why I had gone suddenly dead silent. I hated prying questions. I couldn’t remember the last time I had washed my hair and was staring dejectedly at my reflection in the vanity mirror when the phone rang for a second time that morning. I stood very still as though whoever it was might be able to hear me if I made a sound.

The voicemail beeped:

“Hey Amy. It’s Hazel. I was just calling to say hi and see how you’re doing...”

There was a long pause. I knew what was coming next and held my breath.

“I—I don’t know what’s going on, Amy. *Please*. I’ve been wracking my brain trying to figure out if something happened? I’m worried about you. And I mean, it’s kind of frustrating you know. I mean I have things going on with me too. And I mean, maybe you’d like to call and see how I am? Whatever.”

There was another long pause and I knew she was rubbing the space between her eyebrows, trying to smooth out the furrow that always forms when she’s thinking.

“Look, just... call me back, okay? I’d love to grab coffee or something and hear how the exhibit’s coming. Okay... Bye!” Her voice went up at the end, straining to put a happy spin on my lack of communication and her obviously hurt feelings.

I continued staring at myself. I looked for something, a flicker of explanation in my eyes or a telling twitch of my lips, to give me an answer to her question. But I found nothing. In all honesty, I didn’t know why I hadn’t called her back. All I knew was that the fact that I knew when she was rubbing her forehead crease freaked me out and made me feel hot and irritable.

Without thinking, I walked down the hall, through the studio and kitchen and made sure the apartment door was locked; bolted. Then I picked up the phone and dialed the number I was surprised I even remembered.

“What’s the number that this daughter’s husband called from?” I didn’t even bother saying hello.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Kathryn. Just give me the number.” I felt exhausted from three days of trying to pretend I didn’t have a new list of infuriating questions that, now, I would never get to

ask my mother, that woman who up and disappeared the summer before my tenth birthday.

Kathryn was silent on the other end. There was nothing she loved more than holding the position of power in an argument.

“I need it. I need to *know*.” I strayed dangerously close to begging.

“There’s nothing there you won’t regret learning after the fact. Some things are better left alone.” I thought for a moment I could detect a softening of Kathryn’s tone.

“Carol always had her *secrets*. She pulled people into her sticky little web and—”

“Stop! Please.” I breathed in deeply through my nose. “Please, Kathryn. I don’t want to fight. I just... I need to know who she was. Who she became. Without me.” I twisted my fingers in the phone chord trying to will myself closer to the mother I’d barely known, the plastic covered wires an umbilical chord to the information I needed.

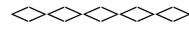
“She didn’t care about us, Amy.” Kathryn blew her nose noisily. She sounded like a grumpy child who’s had their feelings hurt.

“No. Not *us*. *You*. She didn’t care about *you*. I knew her *without* you. I *loved* her without you. You were *poison* to her. To *us*. Her and me. The day we moved in with you and Charlie was the day I started watching her die a little. Every day.” I felt tension in my throat as I fought to keep my voice calm. “I *know* who she was to you, Kathryn. The *pretty* one. The one who got everything you *couldn’t*. But I know it killed you when she left. Killed you to know that even the sister that you’d raised couldn’t stand to be near you for a second longer.”

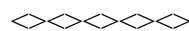
Silence followed. My molars pressed into each other, making deeper impressions in the mirroring enamel.

“213-755-8178.” Kathryn’s voice was full of a meaning I couldn’t interpret.

Before she could say anymore, I hung up the phone, my fingers bloodless and shaking.



It’s 1991 and it’s my best friend Trina’s birthday party. We’ve been planning it for weeks and I got to help pick out the favors and put together the little gift bags and everything. It’s a Tinkerbelle party and Trina’s mom bought me and Trina matching Tinkerbelle t-shirts. But Aunt Kathy won’t let me go, so I throw myself on the yellow linoleum floor and scream and kick and cry and say, “I hate you!” (even though I don’t really mean it). And Aunt Kathy puts her hands on her hips and leans over me and says, “If I could raise your mother, then I can sure as hell raise you.” And I say, “But I don’t want you! I want mom!” And she says, “Well, *our* mom didn’t want us *either*. Carol learned from the best.” And the way she says “either” and looks at me all serious makes me think that she’s really saying, “Your mom left because she doesn’t love you anymore.” And I see Uncle Charlie’s shadow in the hallway coming from his study and I think maybe he’ll say something and I stop crying for a minute and sit up and rub my eyes, but he steps back and closes the door again and I drop back down to the floor and cry. For real this time, because I feel like every time I make a friend, Aunt Kathy just tries to make it so I can’t see them ever. And... I cry for real because, after almost a year, I’m starting to wonder if maybe mom actually *doesn’t* want me. And that I was silly for thinking she did. That I was silly for thinking she’d come back.



The phone rang seven times before someone picked up:

“Hello, this is Susan. How may I help you?”

I was taken aback by the calm, automated nature of her voice. “Hi... Susan?”

“Yes?”

“My name is Amy. Jones. I mean, Janis. Amy Janis.” It’d been years since I’d used my real name and it felt strange on my tongue.

“Oh god. Oh god, oh god,” she said sounding suddenly human and panicked and very young. There was a scraping sound as something was placed over the mouthpiece. “Joel, it’s *her*... What... I don’t know... Umm Amy. Yes... Shit,” trickled through the line. Then she was back: “I’m sorry. Amy.”

“It’s ok. Umm, I know this is a weird question to lead off with but, how old are you?” I was desperate to know when this other life had come into my mother’s and sent mine careening off course. I ached to see her. Was she big boned like me and Kathryn? Did she have my mother’s petite frame? Was she dark like me? Or maybe sandy haired...

“That’s ok. Uh, I’m twenty. Twenty-one in September. Why?”

I remembered mom flopping onto the bed, sucking in to button her jeans.

Stupid dryer must’ve shrunk ‘em.

“That’s impossible.”

I stand by the bathroom door, listening to my mom retch into the toilet. The stomach flu, she said her eyes looking worried.

“No, I swear. 1990. That’s when I was born. I have my birth certificate here somewhere... Been sorting through all of mom’s things... Yep, here it is: November 16th, 1990.”

I remembered Kathryn’s snide remarks.

Carol, your face is looking a bit pudgy. Maybe you should renew that gym membership, huh?

“1990.” My voice cracked and I swallowed. “1990 is when she left.”

“I—I know. I’m—I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry, Amy.” Her voice was kind, concerned. It irritated me. All I wanted to think of her was “imposter”.

Life doesn’t prepare you for such encounters. I don’t think anything can. I’d endured vicious nicknames. I’d listened to people degrade my art, sneering as they passed quickly by my display in Pike’s Market. I’d made friends and lost them due to my underdeveloped communication skills. But when was I supposed to have learned how to talk to a sister I didn’t even know existed when my only example was yelling matches between my mother and Kathryn? When was I supposed to have learned how to have a family when I felt like I didn’t even know the meaning of the word?

“Did you know about me?” I felt twelve again, stumbling through puberty without anyone to answer my questions. Was I just a segment of my mother’s life that she’d wanted to forget? Rush quickly through?

“I did. She’d talk about you sometimes. Usually after she’d had a couple drinks. Or when it was late and she couldn’t sleep.” I could hear Susan smile. “She’d come into my room and wake me up and ask if I wanted to know a secret. And she’d tell stories

about a girl named Amy who loved climbing trees and painted pictures of birds and people that were so good they looked real.”

We were both quiet for several moments. My throat constricted. A rush of warmth, a swell of forgotten love, seeped into unexplored corners of my being. Then the ache of missing her encompassed me like a damp wind and the warmth was gone. I shivered.

“I always envied this ‘Amy’. Her abilities. Her freedom.” Susan said this quietly.

“Ha. Trust me, there was nothing to envy.” I laughed at her childish fantasies. But Susan ignored me.

“It took me several years to realize that Amy wasn’t just a character from a storybook,” she continued. “Mom was out with some friends one night. I must’ve been thirteen or so at the time. I wanted to paint my nails or something. And I found a box hidden under the bathroom sink behind a Ziploc of tampons and her make-up case. There were all these letters. Never sent. Addressed to you. And there was a picture...”

I knew which one it was. Mom always kept it in the side pocket of her red pleather purse. I’m six or so, sitting on the front steps of Kathryn and Uncle Charlie’s house, my hair in braids, wearing a pink and yellow dress with white bobby socks and Keds. Mom took the picture. I remember she looked so beautiful that day. It was Easter, I think. Everyone was all dressed up. I remember thinking that mom looked exactly the way I pictured Cinderella looking if she were real. If you look carefully at the photo, you can see Kathryn and Uncle Charlie in the background, under the shade of the covered porch behind me. Uncle Charlie is staring straight at the camera, a smile on his face.

Kathryn is tucked under his arm, wrists pinned to her sides, like a propped up doll, her eyes focused on Charlie's face.

"Amy? I'm sorry... I didn't mean to upset you." Susan's voice pulled me back.

"No, it's alright." I swallowed. "Thank you. For telling me."

"Of course." There was a momentary pause, then Susan's voice changed. "I googled you. Silly, I know, but Joel, that's my husband, had said he thought your name sounded familiar when Kathryn mentioned that you were an artist. Your art is... amazing. That one... Umm it was called Chestnut or something? On a beach?"

"Hazel?"

"Yeah! Hazel. That one is *stunning*. Is it supposed to be mom? It looks so much like her... Especially the eyes."

"Yeah... I guess it kind of does look like her. But no. It's not mom. I was commissioned to do that woman's portrait."

"Well, either way, it's beautiful. I'd love to see it in person sometime."

I wanted to say, "Yeah, that'd be great," in an attempt to be sisterly. Or friendly at least. I wanted to say, "Come to Seattle and visit anytime. We should meet. After all, we are sisters." But I didn't. Instead I said, "Did you know your father?" and held my breath. Because I had never known mine. I was always missing something.

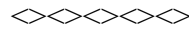
"Yeah, actually. I mean, I didn't really grow *up* with him, per say. He'd visit every now and then. Come down to LA for business and stay for a long weekend sometimes. He actually moved to Santa Barbara about... seven years ago I guess it's been now. We never really saw him much. I never called him dad, but he was around.

Came to my high school graduation. Mom said they'd been old friends. Known each other a long time."

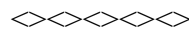
My head felt like cotton, as though too much information had been stuffed inside and was beginning to push out through my ears and nose and mouth.

"Susan, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. Umm... I'll call you later, okay? Thank you for everything."

I hung up and sat staring at the phone until it was dark, trying to convince my subconscious that it had an overactive imagination.



It's August 1998, three days before I make the final decision to pack my bags and leave Aunt Kathy's for good. Uncle Charlie has been travelling more and more with his job and it's becoming next to impossible to stand the awkward silences that encompass the dinner table at night. It is a rainy Saturday, late afternoon, and I've confined myself to my upstairs bedroom claiming a headache in order to read *Bridget Jones's Diary* for the second time that summer. I hear the front door open and slam and see that the rain has stopped. I get up to look out the window, hoping to see Aunt Kathy leaving so I can have the house to myself for a while. But instead I find her crouched on the front walk of the house, picking up earth worms from the quickly drying cement and placing them back in the rich black of the flower beds. Something inside me twinges at the sight and I turn away, hating the way her display of humanity makes me feel.



I worried it was too late, but called anyway.

Kathryn answered on the first ring. “Hello?” She sounded like she’d been sleeping.

“It’s Amy. Did I wake you?”

“Just dosed off for a minute watching TV. What do you want? Lose the number I gave you or something?”

“No, I didn’t. This—this is about something else.” I waited for a moment, trying to find the words. “I forgot to ask the other day: how’s Uncle Charlie doing? You didn’t mention him at all.” Kathryn was quiet. I held my breath waiting for her reply.

“So, you know, huh? Figured it out?” Her tone was loud and harsh. I held the receiver a few inches from my ear.

“Figured what out?” It couldn’t be. I had to be wrong.

“Charlie and I separated about seven years ago.” She said it dryly, as though she were telling me about a produce sale at Wholefoods.

“Oh... I see. I’m sorry—I didn’t know...”

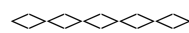
“Now, stop that. I’ll have none of that. What’s done is done. I’ll have none of your pity,” Kathryn snipped.

“I don’t *pity* you. I just wanted to know the truth.” I tried to stay calm; not respond to her baiting.

“Well now you have it.”

“No... You still haven’t told me why.”

“You’re a smart girl, Amy. Figure it out. Now, I’m quite tired and need to get some sleep. Goodnight.” And she was gone.



“...49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59... READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!” Mom’s voice rings out.

It’s the summer of 1989 and I nearly squeal in excitement as I hurry to find a place to hide. In a panic, I squeeze through the crack in Aunt Kathy and Uncle Charlie’s bedroom door and slide between the doors of Uncle Charlie’s closet. His closet is already messy and I know he won’t notice I was there. The last time I hid in Aunt Kathy’s, she put me in timeout for an hour just for messing up her shoe rack. I snake myself down behind a couple of boxes, the legs of Uncle Charlie’s dress pants and the cuffs of his shirts covering my face. I hear mom rattling around in the other rooms. She keeps yelling out, “AH-HA!” before giggling and saying, “Don’t you worry. I’m gonna find you!” My hands taste salty as I press them over my mouth to keep from laughing.

Just then the doorbell rings. “I’ll be right back, sweetie. Better keep hiding!”

I sit there for a few more minutes, careful to breathe quietly in case mom sneaks back up the stairs without me hearing. But after ten minutes or so, I hear voices on the front porch and decide to stretch out. The carpet is itchy and I reach inside one of the boxes to find something soft to make a pillow with and pull out something silky. In the dark of the closet I can’t see it, but I feel lace and ribbon. Quietly I slide the closet door open to let in a little bit of light.

I’m holding mom’s blue nightgown that I picked out for her last Christmas with Uncle Charlie’s help. Mom said she lost it. I forget about hiding in my excitement to show her what I’ve found. I push the doors open and climb over the boxes.

“Mom! Look what I found!” My little legs stomp through the carpeted hall and down the wooden steps.

Mom stands in the entryway, closing the door. “Sorry sweetie! Some vacuum salesman.” She turns and sees me.

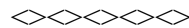
“Look! Your nightgown.” I smile as I hold it up triumphantly.

She smiles but her eyes look wide, afraid. “Well look at you!” She laughs. “My little detective. Where did you find this? I’ve looked everywhere.”

“It was in Uncle Charlie’s closet. In a box.” I realize what I’ve just said and pout. “Shoot. Now I gotta find a new hiding spot.”

“Well, if you promise not to tell Aunt Kathy that I lost her Christmas present, I promise to forget where your hiding place is. Deal?” Mom pats my head quickly as she hurries up to the bedroom we share, calling over her shoulder, “Let’s put this away and then how about one more round before Aunt Kathy gets home. Okay?”

“Okay!” I shout. “Better start counting!” But upstairs all I can hear is mom crying.



Monday and Tuesday passed at a torturously slow pace. I began hating the sight of my face in the vanity mirror, tinged yellow-green by the walls. I felt like the Wicked Witch of the West and vowed to pick a more complimentary shade next time I mustered the energy to paint.

Wednesday morning I woke up early and showered. I scrubbed my hair until my scalp felt raw and my fingers were rosy prunes. The forecast said it was 39 degrees out and so I got down on all fours in my towel and rummaged under my sink until I found the only blow dryer I own: a pink travel sized one I stole from the Tri Cities Walmart when I was making my way to Seattle back in '98. When my hair was sufficiently dry I pulled

on sweats, a flannel shirt, and a pair of black rubber boots. Before I realized where I was headed, I found myself crawling around on the boulders down by the water in Discovery Park. Listening to all of Hazel's old voicemails had made me miss it there. I made my way around the point, by the lighthouse, and settled onto a wide, dark rock. The damp, saltiness of the air cleared my head and made me thirsty. I closed my eyes, wishing I'd thought to bring a water bottle, and listened to the waves slap against the water-smoothed edges of shoreline.

A few minutes later I heard something behind me, the squeak of rubber on wet rock. "Annie! Hey!"

I turned around to see a man in his thirties slipping his way towards me. "Do I know you?" I called to be heard above the waves. I was feeling unusually light. Despite the chilly air, the sun was fueling me with a kind of happiness.

As he reached me his expression changed from recognition to embarrassment. "Oh god. Ha, sorry. I thought you were someone else. Annie, my fiancé. Sorry about that!" He scrambled off, making as graceful an exit as one can walking on large mounds of wet rock.

I watched him leave, smiling to myself.

Somewhere, there was a woman named Annie who looked like *me*.

I touched my cheek and, for a moment, my face felt like my own.