

The Vanity

When I first met Hazel, 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; the one who left the summer before my tenth birthday.

"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.

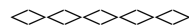
"It's nice to meet you." I found it hard to look straight at her. Her eyes were like the water of the sound, capped with white, and I feared something recognizable might surface at any moment; something too much my mother to deny the resemblance.

Hazel was an aspiring model and her husband, a wealthy businessman, who had hired me to do some photography in the past, had asked me to take some photos of Hazel as a personal favor to him. As uncomfortable as I was, I needed the money. I had never been at ease with people as my subject matter. I preferred still-life's or landscapes. I preferred conifers and ocean waves to misplaced strands of hair and fake smiles. People were too unpredictable for me. I gravitated towards certainty in spite of my creative tendencies. I enjoyed having the only perspective on my work be my own. After all, a snowcapped mountain range was much less likely to complain about the way light fell over its face than a high school senior was. So, that afternoon, as I began snapping shots of Hazel, I found myself holding my breath, preparing myself for the worst.

We spent that afternoon teetering on boulders and slick logs. I did my best to look for her best angles. I tried to view her as I would any other subject and find her strengths. Hazel smiled easily and 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, knees folded like an Indian chief, the gap between her front teeth and the way her sandy hair blew between her lips left me 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 and I chided myself for being so open, for making the first move of friendship. The five seconds before her reply seemed to stretch themselves long and thin like overworked silly putty. Yet after she said, "Yes, I'd like that," I felt such a wonderful comfort that I couldn't help but smile back.

When I looked at the photos that night, I cursed my lack of ingenuity. 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. I realized with frustration that I had been envisioning someone else all afternoon. I hadn't had her pose like a modern young model, but rather like the distant mother who looked so innocently happy in the photograph taped to the mirror of my vanity, the one photograph I'd had the strength to keep. Emotion had clouded my sight and made me see the face of another when looking at Hazel's.



I sit at my dark wood dressing table. Or *vanity*, as my mother would've called it. I found it at a flea market last Sunday and managed to get it up the back stairs into my new apartment. 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 green 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 for that matter, almost always breeds 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 that 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 one of the tulip trees, 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

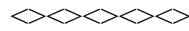
prettier than the other; noticeably so. In the photo, there is something in my Aunt Kathryn's stance that conveys she is questioning her presence; looking for a way out. Despite her pudginess (or perhaps *in spite* of it), she holds herself as though trying not to take up space. I stand between them, my hair and dress and smile all belonging to my mother; my face belonging to Aunt Kathryn. I try to remember who had taken the photo. It must've been Uncle Charlie. I notice the color of our dresses. It must've been the 4th of July.

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. Aunt Kathryn told me it had been that way for generations: two sisters born many years apart, the mother leaving as soon as the eldest daughter was old enough to manage on her own. Kathryn used this personal history to try and convince me that my mother's abandonment shouldn't bother me. She told me, "It's to be expected." When grandmother had left, Aunt Kathryn was old enough to take on the roll of mother. Yet she was too young to realize responsibility's addictive qualities; too young to see it was a disease that would eat slowly away at her for the rest of her life, leaving nothing but bitterness behind.

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. I feel I don't

know how to be someone modern, someone who is just me. I feel trapped in the old-fashioned poses of the photo taped to my mirror. It serves as a reminder of the woman I lost and the woman I seem destined to become.



Despite the pounding of rain, when the phone rang late in the afternoon, I jumped.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Amy?” It was a woman.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Kathryn. Kathryn Shale.”

To say my stomach sank within me would be putting it mildly. I felt like a child caught in the act of stealing a cookie. Only, the cookie was disappearing for the past ten years and the child was a twenty-nine year old me being caught by my aging Aunt Kathryn.

“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: “Has something happened?” I could only imagine some catastrophe had occurred to suddenly spurn her into finding me. I had changed my name and not reached out for nearly an entire decade. She must have gone to some trouble to

find me. And the only way she would do that is if something bad had happened. Or was about to. I could feel something knotting inside me.

“It’s your mother.”

“What about her?”

“She’s dead, Amy.”

I swallowed. Three times. I waited for tears to come, but nothing happened. I felt strangely robotic and detached. “When did she pass?”

“About a week ago, I think. Maybe a little longer. It took several days for them to contact me.”

I felt my teeth begin to chatter. I imagined Kathryn’s thick fingers matting 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 and I-told-you-so’s.

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

“Thank you. For finding me. To tell me.”

“I didn’t do this for you, you know. Ten years is a long time, Amy. I did this out of *respect*. Out of *love* for your mother.” *There* it was. I was surprised it had taken almost a full six minutes of talking for Aunt Kathryn’s indignation to make an appearance.

I fought the urge to reply. I pressed my lips together and tried to imagine Kathryn’s face instead. 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?

I remembered the voices, women from my childhood, meaning well as they cooed at me and Kathryn,

She looks just like you.

You have your mother's eyes.

Sentencing prophecies disguised as compliments seemed in endless supply after my true mother, Carol, left. Suddenly, I was Kathryn's daughter and she would never correct false assumptions. It wasn't polite; unless of course the assumption was insulting. Then, by all means, shove it in their faces. One morning after 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 for her mistake, but Aunt Kathryn never greeted her after Sunday morning services again. Forgiveness wasn't her way. Not ever.

I forced my eyes open and gripped the edge of my small red couch. I forced myself to take several deep breaths. "What happened to her, Kathryn?"

Kathryn sighed dramatically. "Carol was living in an apartment building. Somewhere in California. It was something with her heart."

"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 cord 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. It made me feel less vulnerable. It made me think I could never be found, though apparently that assumption was incorrect.

“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. “How could she have started another family? Had another daughter?” I fought to keep my rising panic in check.

“Your mother was a complicated woman, Amy. I can’t pretend to understand it. She was always one for making a mess of things. Never was very good at thinking of the consequences of her actions.” I sensed there was more that Kathryn wasn’t saying, but I felt suddenly exhausted.

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, Aunt Kathryn. Thank you again.” I hung up. 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

inside my head. I pulled the throw blanket over me and didn't move until the next morning.

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 out much. Ever since Kathryn's call, I'd been ignoring messages from Hazel. I couldn't even think of how I'd begin to convey this story to her. She knew little of my past. I kept it all vagueness and shadows whenever she asked. What would she think if she found out my family was so horrible that I had gone so far as to change my name? She'd think I was a nut job, that's what. Or overly dramatic. I mean it's not like Aunt Kathryn and Uncle Charlie were the mafia or anything. How could I expect her to understand all the secrecy of my past ten years? So I selfishly continued to ignore her calls. I woke in the morning, made some tea, ate an English muffin with honey and peanut butter, and went to work. I decided to pretend there wasn't someone out there who might want to know why I had gone suddenly dead-silent.

I took a break a few hours into the day and wandered back to my bedroom. 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 moved.

The voicemail beeped:

"Hey Amy. It's Hazel. I was just calling to say hi and see how you're doing. I hope everything is okay... *Please* call me back. I'm getting kinda worried about you. I

know you're probably just immersing yourself in editing or whatever for the exhibit, but just let me know you're okay somehow. Really starting to hate your aversion to technology right about now.

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.

"Just take a 30 minute break so we can grab coffee and I can hear how the exhibit's coming. Okay? Okay. Bye!" Her voice went up at the end, straining to put a happy spin on my lack of communication and her obvious concern.

I continued staring into the mirror. I resisted the urge to give myself a mental lecture on my lack of social graces. Without thinking, I walked down the hall, through the studio and kitchen and made sure the apartment door was bolted shut. Then I picked up the phone and dialed the number I was surprised I even remembered, hoping Aunt Kathryn hadn't decided to change numbers in the past decade.

Kathryn sounded tired when she answered. I asked her for the number that the husband of my mother's supposed daughter Susan had called from. Kathryn pandered, fumbling around with papers, mumbling about random things.

"Kathryn. Just give me the number, please. I know you have it." I felt exhausted from three days of trying to pretend I didn't have a new list of infuriating questions that I would never get to ask my mother, the woman who up and disappeared the summer before my tenth birthday.

Kathryn shuffled some more papers. There was nothing she loved more than holding the position of power; having something that another wanted but could not have without her consent. "There's nothing there you won't regret learning after the fact," she

warned. “Some things are better left alone.” I thought for a moment I could detect a sliver of genuine concern for my current emotional state. “Carol always had her secrets, Amy. She pulled people into her sticky little web and—”

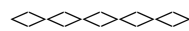
“Stop. Please.” I breathed in deeply through my nose. “Please, Kathryn. I don’t want to fight. I just... I need to know who she was. Who she became. Without me.” I twisted my fingers in the phone cord, trying to will myself closer to the mother I’d barely known, the plastic covered wires an umbilical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

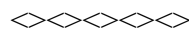
“No. Not *us*, Kathryn. *You*. She left *you*. I *know* who she was to you: the *pretty* one. The one who got all the attention. But wasn’t it enough to have Uncle Charlie? To have the pretty house and the tulip trees and the garden out back? Why did you have to take me too? Why’d you have to run her off?” I sucked in and shut my mouth. I’d done so well. But it felt as though it was all suddenly too much. And I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Silence followed my outburst. My molars pressed into each other, making deeper impressions in the mirroring enamel. I fought the growing urge to feel guilty for blowing up on her.

“213-755-8178.” Kathryn’s voice was full of a meaning I couldn’t interpret. She sounded sad and hurt and angry all at once, but I didn’t care.

“Thank you,” I said and before she could say anymore, I hung up the phone, my fingers bloodless and shaking.



It's my best friend Trina's 11th 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 Kathryn won't let me go because I didn't finish vacuuming the upstairs bedrooms, so I throw myself on the yellow linoleum floor and scream and kick and cry and say, "I hate you!" And Aunt Kathryn 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, step in and tell me I can go. 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 Kathryn 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.



I punched in the number hesitantly and held my breath. 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 saying it didn’t come naturally.

“Oh god. Oh my 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 muffled through the line. Then she was back: “I’m sorry, Amy?”

“It’s ok.” I tried to think of something to say. That wouldn’t sound stupid or contrived or nosey or rude. So I told her I was sorry for her loss. I asked her how it happened and if Carol’s passing had been slow or quick and painless. As we spoke, things Susan would say, the way she’d give her answers using the inflection of a question, made me think of mom; made me picture a younger her sitting somewhere in California on a barstool in a white kitchen wearing a red dress talking on the phone to me like not a day had passed. Try as I might, 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 Susan’s face, to know her age. And so, awkward as it was, I asked how old she was.

“I’m twenty,” she said. “Twenty-one in September.”

I remembered the weeks before she disappeared, mom flopping onto the bed, sucking in to button her jeans.

Stupid dryer must’ve shrunk ‘em.

“It can’t be,” I said, not wanting to believe it.

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 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 the year she left.”

“Yes... I—I know. I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry, Amy.” Her voice was kind, concerned. It irritated me. I wanted to see her as the imposter who ruined my life, not as my sister who wanted to lessen my pain. Life doesn’t prepare you for such encounters. I don’t think anything can. When was I supposed to have learned how to talk to a sister I didn’t even know existed when my only example of sibling affection 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 but a bitter and lonely aunt to answer my questions. Was I just a segment of my mother’s life that she’d wanted to rush quickly through? Run away from and forget?

“I did,” Susan said. “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 painting pictures of birds and fairies.”

We were both quiet for several moments. My throat constricted. A rush of warmth, a swell of forgotten love, seeped into numbed 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. “It took me several years to realize that Amy wasn’t just a character from a storybook. 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 if that upset you.” Susan’s voice pulled me back.

“No, it’s alright.” I swallowed. “Thank you. For telling me.”

“Of course.”

I wanted to say, “You should come visit Seattle sometime,” in an attempt to be sisterly. Or friendly at least. I wanted to say, “You could stay with me. I’ve got a

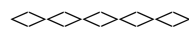
pullout couch. We are sisters, after all.” But I didn’t. Instead I posed a question I’d been hesitant to ask: “Did you know your father?” I had never known mine. I felt that if she knew hers it’d be just one more thing she had that I hadn’t. I worried I’d feel jealous or bitter, two emotions I longed to avoid.

“Yes... I didn’t really grow *up* with him though. 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 though. I guess he and mom decided against having much of a relationship. I never called him dad. He was around though. Came to my high school graduation. Mom said they were old friends. Had 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.

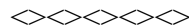
“Susan, I’m so sorry, but I have to go. Umm... I’ll call you later though, okay? Let me know if there are any arrangements I can help with. Thank you for everything.”

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 on nights when he’s away on business in LA. It’s a dreary 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 Kathryn 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 need?”

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 figured it out.” Her tone was harsh.

“Figured what out?” I told myself I had to be wrong.

“Charlie and I separated about seven years ago,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Oh... I’m sorry—I didn’t know...”

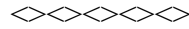
“Now, stop that. What’s done is done. I’ll have none of your pity,” Kathryn snipped.

“I don’t *pity* you. I just wanted to know how he’s been.”

“Well now you know.”

“Well I mean where is he living?”

“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 before my 10th birthday 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 Kathryn 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 Kathryn’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!" I stomp 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! My little detective. Where did you find this? I've looked everywhere."

"It was in Uncle Charlie's closet. In a box." I realize that I've given away my favorite hiding spot and pout. "Now I have to find a new spot."

"Well, if you promise not to tell Uncle Charlie that I lost the Christmas present you both got me, 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 me put this away and then how about one more round before Aunt Kathryn gets home. Okay?"

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



Monday morning I made the decision to call Hazel back. I had begun 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. I showered and 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 some Oregon Walmart when I was making my way up the coast back in '98. When my hair was sufficiently dry I pulled on leggings, a flannel shirt, and a pair of black rubber boots. I headed to Discovery Park, the place where Hazel and I first met. I had asked her to meet me there. It was time to tell what had been going on. I was early and so 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 as I waited for Hazel to arrive. I felt an unexpected peace with my decision to finally share my story; to open up and let someone inside.

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. I thought you were someone else. My fiancé. Sorry about that!" He scrambled off, making as graceful an exit as one can walking on 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.