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Mary McCue took long walks to unwind from the rumor mill. She chose the path where the sun cut through the golden crowns of maple trees. Leaves swirled down, and she caught the colorful ones and placed them into the wicker basket at her elbow.

She rested at a weeping willow, where a pond mirrored the world. If she looked deep enough, images of her brother's fateful night bubbled to the surface, vivid and maudlin, courtesy of the rumor-mill. His reflection rippled towards hers. She skipped a rock to cause disruption, and set out for home.

She stepped into the neighborhood thrift store; the sign just flipped to 'Open'. She browsed through a teen magazine of yesteryear. Fashion models, with brown eyes and beehive hairdos, posed with amber jewels. The featured article spoke of amber's ageless beauty, though ninety million years old. In its original form it oozed as tree resin, repairing abrasions in prehistoric trees of preposterous sizes. Amber hardened in texture over time; maybe even in spirit, when men corrupted God's earth, but its medicinal qualities were encapsulated.

She rummaged through custom jewelry, unearthed an amber gem, and the shop owner smiled. "There are no coincidences." With small pouch in hand, Mary exited to hanging bells jingling, and the whistle of an incoming train.

A stone -throw away, white-collared dads gathered at the train station. They dropped coins in the newspaper vending machine; tucked the Chicago Tribune under armpit, and rushed to board the 8:37. It rumbled toward the Chicago Loop, routine, and the men unfolded the sports section for the headline on Mike Ditka's latest temper tantrum.

At the periphery, in charming Tudors, little ones secured Gremlin lunch boxes. They recoiled at kisses, "Mom! Your lipstick," and teen-agers wrestled for popped-up Eggos, and it was a crap- shoot as to which kid would screw up someday-in colossal fashion-derailing what their parents had planned for them.

Neighbors, with bristled hair curlers spun tight, belonged to ‘The Chatty Cathy Club’ of their own making. With telephone receiver as appendage, they flipped up slats of window blinds and watched Mary tie the red hood in a bow at her chin. They analogized the rumor mill to the wolf, named her ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, and proceeded to the newly revealed affair on Pratt Street.

Mary returned to the porch stairs of the family bungalow. She preserved the leaves in her Bible, hand-picking pages that mentioned heaven: Revelations 21:4-she especially liked that one. *He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more.*

She tucked the amber gem under her pillow, because nights were hard.

On a humid summer day-when Mary was nine years old, and her brother Paul a year older-he took a leaf, and held it toward the sun. The web of veins illuminated, and it was just like a hand. He said God created leaves without life-lines, so, at every frost, they’d crystalize and rot into the earth. “Can’t wait until frost,” Mary had said, and Paul countered. “Be careful what you wish for.”

In the spring of 1983, months prior to Paul’s fateful night, white-collar dads took turns planning and executing weekend getaways to open their summer cottages:

Mr. Moore packed up the station wagon. Young-uns were relegated to the backseat, and they pointed to the side-walk where older siblings tossed a Nerf ball. “Why do they get to stay?”

Mrs. Moore stumbled into the front seat; a ridiculous amount of shopping bags flailing like octopus’ arms. “I thought you kids loved Wisconsin?”

Whining ensued. “We don’t want to flip the mattresses there.” “Sometimes there’s cockroaches on them.” “The septic tank is stinky like poo!”

Mr. Moore angled in fishing poles through the back, and slammed the tailgate shut. “God-damn kids! You know when I was a young buck, I trudged ten miles to school in snow up to my eyeballs wearing a wind breaker with a broken zipper. Do you think I had a summer home?”

Children covered their ears. "Please! Not again."

"You want a fresh slap?"

The Nerf ball bounced off the windshield, and Mrs. Moore rolled down her window. "Kids! Grandma's number is under the Blackhawk's magnet on the fridge. And no more than two friends in the house at a time. If you make frozen pizzas, don't put them in the oven with the cardboard."

Mr. Moore started the car engine. "Doll, you're beating a dead horse." He elbowed clutter to his right. "And toss those God-damn bags into the back, they're encroaching."

"They're necessities: Big League Chew and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and handheld games and\_\_"

"Mark my words: these son-of-a-bitchin' Donkey Kong electronics will beget mental problems. Fishing, now that's a healthy hobby to pass along."

Whining recurred. "We'll get sunburn. It's so boring."

Mrs. Moore reached back with awkward air slaps, until she landed a fresh one. "Would you rather go psycho?"

Mr. Moore talked into the rear-view mirror. "Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about."

Eyes were rubbed with small fists. "Can we be-get our games now?"

"That's not what it means!" He saluted the troops aligned at the fireplug. "At ease."

The elders relaxed. "We'll hold down the fort, sir."

"Don't burn the house down." Mrs. Moore secured the kerchief over her fresh hairdo, and opened Jennifer Blake in paper back.

The relegated climbed to the backseat facing the tailgate, absent the girl that hopped on her mother's lap, My Little Pony in a choke hold. The boys flashed obscene gestures out the back window, and the elders bowed. "We've taught you flunkies well."

After the designated time had expired on the odds of grandma jumping the curb in her Lincoln demanding Pinochle, the kitchen phone was dialed with the announcement 'all clear'.

Buddies in rugby shirts rolled a keg up the back stairs, chaperoned by uncles revered for college hoodies and valid I'D's. "Quit bouncing it, you dufus! Do you want foam?"

"Eat me."

"We'll return it, I swear!"

"Why is there always a threat involved?"

*The Outsiders* movie was the craze. Paul-with square jaw, broad shoulders, and aforementioned old soul-was likened to Patrick Swayze. "Aw-shucks," he said, flexing his muscles under rugby stripes.

Mary tipped her red solo cup under the keg spout. She declared the novel superior to the movie, after all, the other hunks eclipsed poor Pony Boy. Paul snapped his fingers. "See? Another reason not to read fiction. Why second guess a Hollywood blockbuster?"

The Moore boys beckoned Mary and friends to the coffee table. In quarter game readiness, they sat cross legged: crimped hair high in scrunchies, and long slender legs touting leg-warmers.

"*Do it for Johnny!*" Paul exclaimed. *Kerplunk*. "Drink, my Cherry girls," to which Mary replied, "Oh! What I would do to look like Diane Lane."

Paul lit a Kool, and his eyes narrowed. "You kind of have her cheekbones."

The Moore boys concurred. "Legit!" "Yah Betty."

Her mood ring changed to indigo, and she touched her face.

After midnight, Paul and Mary meandered through back alleys, a short cut to home. Mary tumbled into the neighbor's garbage cans, and dogs barked sequentially. "I'm going to barf in the evergreens."

Paul nodded. "It's good fertilizer."

"No, dung is."

"Levity." He regarded the moon, a teeny crescent in the black sky.

She walked away from the mess. "I told you, I'm no Diane Lane."

“I bet she hurls all the time, with all those after parties.”

He opened the latch to the back gate, and stepping stones looped to the front porch. Mary paused to drink from the water hose, and it sputtered and hissed. “Shut up! You’ll wake up the dead.” She hopped over the row of her mother’s closed tulips, warm in pink hues, and Paul impersonated Tiny Tim.

“Paul, that’s creepily precise.”

He jutted out his elbow. “Shall we hook?” Arms interlocked, and they laughed like hyenas, skipping from one stepping stone to another. *Tip toe through the tulips...*

Their father, Michael McCue, was the neighborhood chiropractor. He swore to uphold the Hippocratic Oath, and coveted it as much as his God. Insurance, and all its exploitations, repulsed him. He practiced for nominal fees, and encouraged the barter system, foregoing a summer cottage.

He sat in his Lazy Boy, an Old Style can in hand—the newspaper read from front to back, the crossword puzzle penciled in—everything solved. He glanced up from *Police Woman* to late-night pitter patter on the porch. He reached for his asthma inhaler at the TV tray, and breathed in.

The front door shut, and the chimes in the grandfather clock reverberated. Paul plopped a bag of White Castles next to the inhaler. “Courtesy of the Moore’s.”

“Nice.” Dr. McCue pointed to the television. “Pepper Anderson can frisk me any day.”

“She’s old!”

“You don’t know a real woman when you see one.”

“Gross,” Mary mumbled, and made a b-line to her bedroom.

Dr. McCue bit into a Whitey-one-bite, washing it down with the Old Style.

“Paul, Mr. Davie gave me tickets to the White Sox game Sunday. His sciatica’s improving.”

Paul clapped. “The Tigers! Great series.”

“Yes, but Tom Skilling calling for cold winds off the lake.”

“We’ll dress in layers. I’ll wear my Carlton Fisk jersey over my coat.”

Dr. McCue reached for crinkly French fries. “Mary looked peaked.”

Paul shrugged. “She always regrets the White Castles.” He stole a burger, and handed off the pickles. “Did you use heat therapy for Mr. Davie?”

Dr. McCue chewed on pickles. “And table adjustments.”

Paul devoured the burger. “On the road to recovery?”

“No. He doesn’t do his exercises.”

“Self-sabotage.”

“It’s very frustrating, another reason not to follow in my footsteps.”

Paul took a napkin. “That’s for another day, dad.”

“Put a bucket, two aspirin, and a glass of water on Mary’s bed-stand. Keg beer’s a bitch.”

Paul grinned. “Some would say the same about Old Style.”

In early October, Paul became the topic of the rumor mill, drowning in a college hazing on Mary’s nineteenth birthday.

Their mother, Mrs. Therese McCue, sat at the kitchen stool parked under the wall phone, white knuckling the receiver.

The officer repeated the incomprehensible.

“Well, is he okay?”

Silence.

“Mrs. McCue, your son drowned. He’s not okay.”

Her ears rang, and she clutched the counter. “Ponyboy drowned in the fountain at the park. He lived to write all about it, so\_\_”

“I wish it were fiction.”

Heavy static consumed the line, and a faraway voice said *mama*.

“Paul, is that you?”

The officer coughed. “Ma’am, sometimes wires get crossed out there.”

A current rushed through her, electric. “Exactly! Don’t you believe in God?”

“Mrs. McCue, we regretfully ask you and your husband come down to identify\_\_”

“I\_\_ I made homemade buttercream frosting. It’s their favorite. He was due home after intramural softball today.”

The cuckoo bird emerged from the wall clock; its coo flat and sluggish, and it wasn’t on the hour, but 3:42 a.m., the time of Mary’s birth. She pitter-pattered in, and fell at the knees of her mother, screaming like a newborn thrust into the world.

The birthday cake went stale for days at the stovetop, and Mrs. McCue told Mary the long-kept secret of the gypsy:

In the hippy days, at a flea market of junk, a gypsy abandoned her crystal ball to lean into the buggy where Paul sucked his thumb. She pulled his hand to read his palm, and he cooed, for he was a congenial baby.

Her eyes widened, and she wrapped her musty poncho around her. Mrs. McCue denounced such theatrics, and pushed the buggy toward a stand of fake turquoise.

The gypsy was relentless at her heels. “Your baby has no lifeline.”

Mrs. McCue, big with child, set the break of the buggy. “And you have no soul!”

“I am a child of Jesus.”

Mrs. McCue slapped her across the face. “All blasphemy!”

The gypsy flailed her fists. “You’re lucky you’re pregnant! For more reasons than one.”

“You’re a junkie. I see it in your eyes” Mrs. McCue’s blouse puffed up, a fetal kick within, and the gypsy, red-faced, opened her hands to God.

In lieu of Paul’s death, and then the aftermath- in the autopsy and the investigation and the funeral arrangements-the doctor suggested tranquilizers for Mary and Mrs. McCue.

Mrs. McCue objected. “Doctor Patel, I don’t aspire to be a pill-popper. Need I remind you I’m a woman of prayer?”

“Therese, now is not the time to champion hyperbole, nor smugness.”

Mary held out her hand. “How many can I take at once, Doc?”

He looked up from the clipboard. “Are you giving us an astute example of hyperbole?”  
“You’re the doctor. What do you think?”

When she slept deep, her father kept vigil over her, and he wiped her mouth of drool, and frowned when she jerked sporadically. His pipe exhaled smoke the scent of cedar wood, and Mary watched Paul climb a Giant Sequoias that reached beyond the sky, and the bark oozed with liquid so she slipped and fell to the ground and tried again.

Dr. McCue strained his ears to hear the sport’s update from the Zenith sharing the wall: The Baltimore Orioles eliminated the Chicago White Sox to advance to the World Series, Carlton Fisk hitting a dismal .176 postseason; but he’d go on to win the Cy young, because in baseball, there’s always another day.

Dr. McCue considered the pill bottle, even toyed with the lid. He puffed on the inhaler in search of breath, and if he didn’t find it, well, that was okay too, but he reached for Mary’s wrist, and took her pulse.

At the conclusion of Paul’s graveside ceremony, the crowd hung their heads as if dejected, and this prompted a heartfelt invitation to the luncheon at the bungalow.

Dr. McCue created distance from the cemetery workers utilizing a loud contraption to lower the coffin. He’d lingered. Jason Crow, the funeral director, offered to give the family a lift.

Dr. McCue tipped his tweed cap at Jason. “That’s very kind, my fine young sir.” He watched Jason walk toward the limo, and he heard the rhythm of Mary’s footsteps behind him. She reached for his arm.

“And why am I earned this pleasure?”

“My toes are numb from these stupid heels.”

He juttied his elbow. “Shall we hook?”

Chills consumed her, and a strong wind blew her long hair asunder. Birds flew from trees, but a cardinal stood steadfast on the lowest branch of a Cypress tree. “The cardinal, dad. What a



cliché’.”

“Maybe not.”

Mary glanced at the gravesite. “That monstrosity is like a pulley, lowering a bucket into a well.”

“Don’t look back.”

“Jack and Jill went up the hill. No more Jack, dad.”

“That doesn’t mean you tumble after him.”

“Is that a pact?”

Mrs. McCue motioned from the opened limo door, and Jason Crow held for her a Tupperware of homemade scones. “Stop dilly-dallying. We, we have to go home without him.” And the cardinal took flight.

Jason turned the ignition key of the limousine. His hair was an iridescent black and layered like crow feathers. He adjusted the rear-view mirror and glanced through it at Mary, glossing pouty lips, dry, like a crumbled leaf, and he longed for them to remind him of life, but instead he compared her to the deceased: the square jaw, and the eyes which he closed with his own fingertips seemed open now, resenting every minute, for they had a glimpse of after.

Jason abhorred the family business. He had concocted an elaborate plan to study abroad, avoided the matter, but his dad, diagnosed with an aggressive disease, launched a crash course in embalming and a fury of lawyers to draw up papers that stipulated his favorite son-yes, the empathic one-would be sole benefactor of Crow’s Funeral Home.

Mrs. McCue whispered The Lord’s Prayer, the rosary at her fingertips, and Mary and she sat hip to hip. They faced Dr. McCue like a train ride, and the Chicago street, riddled with pot holes, made it seem so. “For Christ’s sake, where do our taxes go?” He reached down for the Camel that had bounced from his lips. “Corrupt politicians, that’s where they go.”

Mary unbuttoned her coat, buttons shaped like acorns. “Dad, why did you give the green light for strangers to invade our house? This is all so\_\_ drawn out. The burial should’ve been private.”

“What about your mutual friends?”

“They’re long gone.”

“Or are you?”

They listened to Mrs. McCue whisper the rosary.

He picked at loose tobacco on his tongue. “And, I’m sure Paul knew all the others. We must be hospitable.”

“Why?”

“Common decency.”

She leaned her head on the seat of purple velvet. “Aren’t you tired?”

“That’s beside the point.”

She wiped sweat from her bangs. “And, by the way, I knew everyone he did. At least the ones that mattered.”

Dr. McCue poured bourbon from the decanter into a glass, there for the taking.

“Obviously not, or maybe he’d still be alive. You two always babysat each other.”

She straightened. “You’re the one that preached medical school. Pompous asshole frat boys were a whole new beast.”

“Pigeonholing is a sign of ignorance.”

“Not in this fucked- up scenario.”

Mrs. McCue tsk-ed Mary, and jiggled the rosary.

Dr. McCue tossed a cigarette ash into the silver ashtray in the armrest. “Please don’t curse, Mary. It’s unladylike.”

“Do as I say, not as I do.”

“I’m not a lady.”

She pointed at the decanter. “Can I?”

“No.” He fiddled with his wedding ring. He wasn’t the jewelry type, and the bloat from booze made it unbearable. “Paul exceeded me.”

“He wanted to be just like you.”

“Medical doctors are esteemed. Chiropractors are discredited.”

“You’re admired by everyone who knows you.”

“He was smarter, Mary.”

“You were the Salutatorian!”

“It was easier than.”

“No, it wasn’t”

“The sky was the limit.”

“And now you’re left with me, the disappointment.”

“You don’t apply yourself.”

Mary yawned. “This is all a blur. Gotta love tranqs.”

“Brace yourself. Only one left.”

“How do you know?”

Mrs. McCue, crossed herself with the rosary. “It’s a blur no matter what. I never touched those crazy pills. They change your brain, Mary.”

“Where are they?” Father and daughter asked in sync, and Mary, in a recent life, would’ve laughed and said ‘make a wish’, but the wish was futile.

Mrs. McCue unsnapped her purse for a Kleenex. “Michael, you’re holistic.” Her lips quivered, so Mary turned to the window.

“I was.” He slugged down more bourbon and coughed at the sting and phlegm, and his wife dabbed her tears with the Kleenex. “Please Michael, just stick to your vitamins. And you need to sleep, you never sleep. I don’t even hear you snoring anymore, and then I can’t sleep.”

“Every time I try, I dream I can’t find my inhaler.” He coughed. “If I fall asleep, I stop breathing.”

“That’s your imagination getting the best of you.”

“The best of me is gone.”

Mary hmped. “What am I, chopped liver?”

Mrs. McCue opened a small tube of hand lotion. She reached for her husband’s hand, and with a dollop the wedding ring made its way off his finger. He sighed, and they rested their

eyes.

Mary rolled her fingertips over her mother's rosary beads, *'for where there are two or three gathered together unto My name...'*

She caught Jason's gaze in the rear-view mirror. "Taking it all in, Grim Reaper?"

"You're not the only one who'd rather be elsewhere."

"Did you know Paul died on my birthday? How about that for a big 'fuck you'?"

"It's biblical."

"Bull shit."

At the bungalow, women ate finger food and chain-smoked Virginia Slims, speculating how long the McCue's would need casseroles.

Ray Goodman of Pratt Street, his wife conspicuously absent, winked at his new neighbor, her tongue exploiting an olive on a toothpick. The Chatty Cathies played with their collars: *that one would not* be the recipient of the welcome wagon. "A plunging neckline at a funeral."

"A trollop."

"Goodman, entrapped in her web."

"Men are weak. They're enchanted by silk."

"Rumor has it, Margie Goodman is frigid."

Silence.

"Well, she is menopausal. It just ruins so many pleasures."

"That's when the bastards get young ones."

"I can't wear silk. It makes me sweat."

"The trollop's a divorcee, you know."

"Already?"

The men feigned no appetite, for there were slim pickings, but they drank liberal rounds of stiff drinks, goading chatter, distancing themselves from Paul's kin:

"He was in shallow water, drowned at the shoreline of the Marshall Park lagoon, you

know, where it slopes.”

“Just had to lift up his head.”

“He passed out in the cat-tails.”

“Poor kid.”

“You know, you can catch largemouth bass there.”

“We played ice hockey on it, when we were little tikes.”

“They ban skating now.”

“Neighborhood’s changed too.”

“Frat boys probably thought isolated spot.”

“Surprised they didn’t get jumped.”

Heads nodded.

“I heard a frater ordered Paul to do his age in whisky shots.”

“Twenty in five minutes.”

“Had to wear a diaper, and suck a pacifier too.”

“I heard a baby bottle.”

“Nope, a sorority pledge’s titty.”

“Oh, those college days.”

“If I had a time machine.”

“Breasts so firm.”

“The autopsy report noted cocaine, and the *alcohol* content...” the bald man whistled, and this turned heads so he whispered. “My neighbor’s a cop, inside skivvy.”

“I see.”

“Whatever happened to ‘Just Say No’?”

“Yah, my kids know all about Nancy Reagan!” The bald man waved at said kids who smiled, silly-faced, sipping Sprite and vodka.

Mr. Goodman refilled his glass with gin. “Paul was pledging, was at their beck and call.”

“Follower.”

“Are you really throwing the first stone?”

“Who would stand for that humiliation?”

“Many. The alumni have connections.”

As if all working parts of a machine, the huddle turned to the frat boys in ear-shot, tight-lipped in the sacred oath of silence.

The bald man talked out the side of his mouth. “They sang like canaries.”

The frat boys, of high intelligence, stood perplexed at the window seat, where various angiosperms had blooms, impossible in fall.

Mary hid in her bedroom, reading *Go Ask Alice*, and her maternal aunt barged in.

“Oh, come on in, Aunt Bridget!” Mary barked.

“Look at you, sprawled on that bed, like it’s just another one of your lazy Saturdays.”

“Formal attire hinders laziness.”

“Initiate small talk out there, so your parents don’t have to.”

“I’d rather read.”

“Read a story about a spoiled brat who *also* tortures her parents?”

“I’m torturing my parents?”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, you’ll never comprehend what they’re going through.”

“No, of course not, I barely knew him.”

“The sarcasm will impede you moving forward.”

Mary sat up. “I’ll never move forward.”

“We have to.”

“We?”

“I suffer too.”

Mary laughed. “What all you ever did was bitch about us.”

Aunt Bridget pointed. “About you; always a snip. Paul just went along, and in that his demise.”

“What a shitty thing to say.”

“And you, always the potty mouth.”

“Well, watch out! Now I’m of orphan quality, seething with bitterness.”

Aunt Bridget hunched at the dresser mirror, freshening her lipstick. “Your buffer is gone. Grow up.”

Mary wiggled into her spiked heels. “I can’t believe you started packing Paul’s things.”

“Your mother doesn’t need reminders everywhere.”

“She will want some, and you have no idea which ones. Like his sketch book. You put it in the garbage pile!”

“Chicken scratch!”

“Then you didn’t open it.”

Aunt Bridget put her hands on her hips. “What do you possibly think you know at your age?”

“I know you have lipstick on your teeth.”

She returned to her reflection. “Why don’t you freshen up, and seduce a Mensa boy? You’ll need someone else tend to you now.”

“A murderer?”

“When all is said and done, we have free will.” She jumped at the slam of the bedroom door.

Mary wandered with her head in the novel, and friends waved and whispered and she misinterpreted everything. She bumped into a frat boy, and red wine splashed onto his white dress shirt. “Shit! Watch where you’re going.”

She looked up. “Did you watch where Paul was going?”

He held out his hand, she shook it weakly. “Tom Long. As President, I’d like to offer our sincere condolences\_\_”

“Oh, the grand poo-bah. Did you give him the booze that killed him?”

“He drank it.”

She looked at the others, and they looked at their Ferragamo shoes.

“Fucking losers.”

Tom smiled. "That's a new one!"

Mary tapped Tom on the shoulder with the novel. "You're just fancy drug addicts, like Alice."

"You could use some blow, Miss McCue, it helps with grief."

"I recognize you from a picture Paul showed me. He said you mistreated a girl at a frat party."

He tilted his head. "Girls love mistreatment, and your brother obviously disobeyed the most basic rule."

She pushed him, and he stumbled into a flowering plant. "But you can fucking kill people?"

He quickly composed himself. "The survival of the fittest." And the frat-boys shifted uncomfortably, and one boy looked up. "He doesn't mean that."

A Chatty Cathy arrived, and she worked at the red stain in Tom's shirt. "Mary's not in her right mind. My sixteen-year old grandson applied for the Smithsonian Summer Internship. William! Someone wants to meet you!"

Mary locked eyes with her dad across the room, where his Irish kin gathered by the grandfather clock, and they divulged flasks from inner pockets of suit jackets. He blew cigarette smoke through his nose, but it was his eyes that were ablaze.

Mary ran toward her mother, propped at the piano, segueing to *Moon River* and Aunt Bridget sang the lyrics, searching for compliments.

"Mama! I hate that song now."

"But, Mary, it's your favorite."

Mary unlocked the attic door with the skeleton key. She stomped up the creaky stairs into Paul's bedroom, stumbling over cardboard boxes. She ducked where the eaves angled and met the wooden floor planks. She opened the bottom drawer of Paul's dresser, digging under tube socks to find the pack of Kool's, and Chap Stick rolled off the top of the dresser.

The front window was at half mast, maybe to clear the air of shame. Maybe to set



stale air free, long stuck in wall-shelves filled with Shakespearian books, now shriveled, quoted poetically from Michael to Therese in the early years, and Mary loved the scent of it all because it was their history-and Paul did too.

He'd finally got the nod to move upstairs for his senior year of high school.

"You'll last a week with that asthma," Dr. McCue had said.

"I'll keep it clean. I promise."

"You can't clean dankness."

Mary set the novel on the windowpane. She blew cigarette smoke through the screen, wires torn and pointy, and the head rush was staggering.

Across the street, in the parking lot of St. Jude's elementary school, girls in plaid skirts raced toward four-square, and boys in navy vests played Horse. The bell tower housed a cross that fused into heaven, where storm clouds formed like rapid fire.

At that age, Mary sat alone at the sandbox with Nancy Drew books, and Paul always stomped over. "Did Nancy find the hidden staircase yet?"

"She's on the roof at a secret door."

"Did she see the ghosts?"

"Why don't you read it to find out?"

"I can't read."

"Very funny."

"You tell it better."

"Don't insult the ghostwriters, Paul."

"I'll stick to math where everything adds up, not like stories and girls."

"What girls?"

"No one pacific, Mary."

The Amber and the Leaf

“It’s specific.”

Paul sipped from the water fountain, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I have H O in Horse. Fill me in later.”

“Only if you tell me which girl\_\_”

But he had gone.

She touched the amber gem in the pocket of her cowl-neck dress. The dress was flattering to her curves, never worn again-so it would hang aside Paul’s softball jersey, and they grew old in the attic wardrobe.

The nuns assembled students into a single file line. Her favorite teacher, Sister Gemma, was still at the helm. Her headdress framed her face, forever young, like a saint incorrupt, and she looked up, and lightning struck. If Mary had a metal rod, she’d welcome fire, and in back of her the poster of Farrah Fawcett sagged from the wall.

Sister Gemma turned toward the bungalow and waved. Mary ducked. She doused the cigarette in the ashtray where a butt of Paul’s remained, proprietor of the ghost print of his mouth curved in that shit-eating grin.

Sister Gemma led the children into the gym doors. and a red leaf floated down from the gutter of the bungalow. It clung at the window screen, as if a frantic hand. Mary reached for it and pricked her finger on the pointy wire, drawing blood, and it pulsated like heartbeats.

Sister Gemma reappeared and sat at the sandbox, an umbrella overhead, a Bible in hand. A cardinal flew into the tower, and the bell tolled.

Mary sought shelter with Sister Gemma under the umbrella, and the air was crisp. “Everyone is gossiping, Sister.”

## The Amber and the Leaf

“People are afraid.”

“They’re judging.”

“They’re deflecting.”

The amber gem fell from Mary’s dress pocket, and Sister Gemma plucked it from the sand. “Did you know that electron is the Greek word for amber?”

Sister Gemma handed Mary the gem, and lightning flashed, and Mary’s hair stood up on the back of her neck. “Paul’s here.”

“Compare amber to a soul. Our bodies hold the soul for a short time, and then it is energy, and love evolves forever.”

The sun illuminated the veins of tree leaves, and the red leaf rested into soil. Sister Gemma took Mary’s hand. “Let the healing begin.” She opened the Bible to Revelations, and the story has no end.

