

Before the End

Before the end, confetti burns in a sky of periwinkle blue and soon thereafter, a coat of gray flannel is tossed over the city. It settles around the foundations of skyscrapers and street shops alike, blanketing the avenues lined with ruins. Zombies roam the landscape. On wooden legs they stumble through the knee-deep muck of fallen debris, arms outstretched before them. Cloaked in silt and clinging to a lamppost, a marbleized businessman oozes wine-red blood from a wound chiseled above his cheekbone. I feel a rush of homesickness, for the trickle is the shade of my father's Chianti. A crying woman, wearing no shoes, balances an orange open-toed pump in one hand; the color blazes upon her palm like licks of fire. Before the end, I am caught in the brown crossfire of a war that only minutes ago I had no idea was being waged. From across a span of eternity, I find what I'm looking for — my mother's eyes; they are two green smudges in an alabaster face. Our eyes lock, while a veil of buckshot black powder separates us, swallowing in its path anything that has not already been devoured.

These are the pigments being mixed upon the palette of a madman. The artist is weak and cowardly, applying color, like a paint-by-number, onto a canvas of death. Yet, it is against this backdrop that the color becomes the only part of life that seems alive. Time is meaningless. Sound, as I have known it to be, no longer exists; it has been sucked into a gaping hole, leaving silence to sing its discordant lullaby.

God, please don't let me die.

I'm not sure if these words are spoken or merely imagined, but by some force short of a miracle, I land in this littered alleyway. It is the color of nothingness; it has been whitewashed in talc.

My name is Rosie. Rosalia Prima Montesano. I am sixteen years old and, to my surprise, I'm still wearing this morning's pair of blue jeans with the same hole in the left knee and my favorite sweater — one that's two sizes too big for me in a shade of tangerine. And I'm still alive. Still.

- 1 -

Summer is a Child's Game

One Year Earlier

Rosie awoke to the sound of buzzing bees and the feeling that she was slowly being suffocated. Two weeks earlier, August had boldly announced itself, ushering in temperatures well into the triple digits, and with that, sticky stinking humidity, and lethargy. It was prime weather, though, if she had been born into the *Ictaluridae* family, or — Latin aside — if she was a member of the catfish clan native to North America, and called Clark Pond in the center of Mindowaskin Park, her home. Or if she was one of the Geribaldi twins whose parents boasted a membership at the country club, with access to three swimming pools, one being Olympic-sized. Or if she lived in the Sellinger household where Sharon, Stephanie and Sabrina attended public school, and not the all-girls Catholic school her parents had sacrificed to see her through — one, whose board members enjoyed torturing God-fearing pupils by ending summer vacation during the swelter of August.

It was already one week into the new school year — one more to add to the 356 weeks of schooling she had, up until now, accumulated, and yet with each passing summer her life seemed to accelerate, gathering speed like a runaway train barreling into a crowded depot. You wonder — what could she possibly know about the stresses of growing old? A ninth grader already sounding like a craggy cranky old lady. She did have an excuse, though; it was the thought of her up-and-coming contribution to Social Security. With the end of this summer, came the end of what she considered to be the true meaning of adolescence. *Ah*, summertime as a kid — those seasons would go down in history as the sweetest moments of her life. The following summer, however, would be the beginning of her lost innocence. It would be the beginning of her life as either a grocery bagger, a shoe stocker or a checkout clerk. During the summer of 2000, that was the worst thing about to happen to her. Or so it seemed.

But, on that white hot August morning, Rosie lingered in bed a moment longer and her brain circled around the mystery that she called *mother*. She was never one to dwell on the past, but the day before, while making her way to the fridge for a can of Coke and a Twinkie, she had stolen a glimpse of her mother through the kitchen window. She was sitting in the garden under the gazebo; the radio was turned up loud enough for Rosie to hear the crooning of Luther Vandross and the lyrics of his song, *A House is Not a Home*. She was crying. It was true that she was an emotional woman, prone to tears in a moment's flash. The running joke in the Montesano household was that her mother would live to see one hundred and ten with all the tears that she has shed.

Rosie snuck through the kitchen, hoping her mother would not see her. She ducked her head as she swept past the window that overlooked the garden, while the words to that song all but buried themselves into her brain. *That damned song*. But the song had it right. A chair was still a chair. But a house, for it to be a home, required much more than timber and nails.

Home, for the Montesanos, was called the carriage house. It had been a true carriage house before a series of additions transformed it into something much more than the four-room horse stable it had started its life as eighty years before. Situated on one the oldest, wealthiest streets in one of the most affluent towns in New Jersey, the dwelling itself was deeply set on an oversized plot; old brick, stone and clapboard was sheltered by graceful willows, ash and maple trees, and a dotting of dogwoods for color in the spring. The strikingly pitched and multi-gabled roofline flaunted colorful slate held in place by *hens and chickens*. The massive stone chimney was partially hidden by spreading ivy.

Almost two years before, Rosie and her mother had been chauffeured and tour-guided by a chatty real estate agent from the Burgdorff Realtors of Westfield. Before pulling into the driveway of the carriage house, they had already endured four pages from the multiple-listings. But as the structure emerged from behind the willows, she heard her mother gasp. There, before them, stood a gingerbread house. It was as enchanting, Rosie thought, as a storybook castle. Upon entering, irregularly shaped rooms displayed exposed beams and second story dormers, and wood craftsmanship that rivaled no

other they had seen thus far on their house-hunting expedition. The real estate agent had offered little tidbits about the history of the home, calling it a Cotswold Cottage, constructed in the early 1920s and having roots in the pastoral Cotswold region of southwestern England.

In the parlor, a vaulted peak rose to a lofty pinnacle, heavily sand painted and strewn with glitter that flickered and winked as Rosie moved about the room. The realtor had called it a California ceiling. Three slices of glass were carved into the highest point of the ceiling. A cabana fan lazily twirled. The river rock floor to crown fireplace sat poised on a wall-size granite hearth. It had been easy to imagine the smell of burning wood; she listened for the crackle of a roaring fire. Through the kitchen window, a glimpse of the backyard was just visible. It was a formal English garden.

“This will not do,” her mother had said upon first sight of the garden. “Flowers need to roam and scatter. After all, seeds are no different than we are.” She then turned to the real estate agent and announced: “We’ll take it!” She was so pleased — and the previous moment was forgotten.

But, those words had frightened Rosie. Her mother, as it had come to be played out, was the seed in this metaphor. It just goes to show, you can live with a person but never really know them.

So, as time ran its course, over that first spring and summer, a carefree meadow garden had gradually replaced the prim, maze-like plantings not quite fitting of such a fairytale house. After the garden’s evolution, Rosie stood on the flagstone path and a feeling of security hovered over her like a plump cumulus cloud. Who could leave such a beautiful garden? What evil could possibly confront them now?

As the memory slowly ebbed from Rosie’s mind, she rolled her eyes to the clock on the nightstand. It read 7:35am. She jumped out of bed. It would be almost impossible now to make the bus. After throwing on the previous day’s clothing, a skirt and blouse that lay scattered on the bedroom floor, she entered the kitchen — a whirlwind of knobby knees and elbows, wisps of flyaway hair — her backpack hurled onto narrow shoulders, and her violin case in hand, bulging at the seams. Her mother stood at the kitchen sink, looking out over the garden through the window. The big *Betty Crocker’s*

Picture Cookbook, cracked on the spine and tinged with age, lay open on the counter. She stood there with her coffee cup in hand, tilted at a haphazard angle; the coffee was sure to spill on the floor. With her other hand, she turned the pages of the cookbook from one recipe to the next without so much as glancing down to make her choice.

Rosie cleared her throat as not to startle her mother. "Bye, Mama," she said.

Her mother swung around, spilling the coffee over her hand and into the sink. "Rosie, I didn't hear you come in. What time is it?"

"Mama, your hand."

"What?"

"You spilled coffee on your hand."

She looked down and her forehead furrowed in confusion, as if expecting to see a foot instead.

"Oh, it's turned cold," she said with a shrug. "I was just looking at the garden. Isn't it lovely . . ."

"Mama, I'm gonna be late. I gotta go." She had no time to consider her mother's mood swings.

Rosie turned her back on her mother to collect her lunch from the fridge, but the sound of breaking glass spun her in her tracks. The cup had been dropped into the sink; it rattled at the bottom, stoneware against stainless steel. At once, her mother took several long strides toward her, and then grabbed both her arms, commanding Rosie's attention. Her grip was like a vice.

"You know I love you, Rosie," she said. There was an immediacy to her tone.

"Yes . . . Mama . . ."

"I need for you to believe that," she continued. "Your brother, Joseph . . . your father . . . you're everything to me." Her eyes pierced through Rosie's like green daggers. She pulled her daughter close; the strength of her bear hug was over the top.

"Mama, are you okay?"

She bobbed her head against one of Rosie's pigtails. "I'd say . . . it's an attack of the PMS monster." She grunted the last words and tickled Rosie in the ribs — and then she laughed — but it was

a forced laugh and it sounded tinny to the girl's ears. Then she pulled Rosie back against her, crushing her daughter's cheek into the high bony part of her shoulder.

Something *was* terribly wrong. And it wasn't the canned laughter, nor was it Rosie's bruised cheek that told her so. She stumbled upon this knowledge not by the meaning of her mother's words, but rather, by that one small act of her mother tickling her ribcage. They both knew that Rosie was at least five years beyond that stage.

Rosie cleared her throat, then looked at her watch in that restless manner in which people of importance often do. "Mama, I really have to leave. The bus . . ." And a sigh escaped her lips before she could trap it. "Will you be okay?" she asked, doing a poor job of hiding her impatience. But her mother was already past her grasp; she was floating away like a helium balloon released into the atmosphere.

"I'll be fine," her mother finally said.

Rosie reached up on tiptoes and with a quick peck on her mother's cheek she was out the door. Halfway down the driveway, she realized she had forgotten her lunch. Running into the house through the laundry room, her mother's back was to the doorway but she could tell by the trembling shoulders that her mother was crying; her hands were plunged under steaming water, rinsing the morning's cereal bowls under the running faucet. As silent as a crouching cat, Rosie retraced her steps, checking her pockets for loose change and trying to remember what was on the day's lunch menu. Halfway down the drive, she dared to sneak a peak behind her and thinking she saw the flutter of drapery, wondered what it could be that made her mother cry. She wondered how her mother, after rinsing the cereal bowls, would fill her day alone in the carriage house. She wondered how two people could share the same blood, the same name, the same home — yet be virtual strangers. But these questions, along with so many others the girl had often asked herself about Lucianna Prima Montesano, would go unanswered. Rosie would simply have to continue to view her mother like she was some kind of strange, extraordinary bug under a microscope — larger than what she would normally want to experience firsthand, yet extraordinary.

- 2 -

The Beating of the War Drums

The bleat of a car horn in the driveway startled Lucianna Prima Montesano from her thoughts and transported her back to the task at hand. Farewell. Goodbye? She could not decide. How was it that one word could so effortlessly take her back to a place where life was . . . what — simple, understandable, unadorned? Time was falling away and here she was, concerned about whether to end the letter with a promise or a question. Slipping the filmy sheet of Japanese rice paper into its matching envelope, she tucked the flap inside and rested the sheath against a vase of late summer blooms centerpieced on the kitchen table. It was an oversized kitchen table marred with the memories of family gatherings that had taken place over the years. Days from now, there would be yet another event, one in which a thickly-iced cake would be set upon its glossy veneers while the sounds of happy birthday — sung in a key somewhere between off and way off — resonated throughout the rooms of the carriage house. The usual assembly of guests, minus one, would be gathered. And then Rosalia, her Rosie, would blow out the candles, fifteen in all and one more for good luck, then cast her wish out into the world. What would be the wish of her youngest child, her only daughter?

She opened the side door and leaned out.

“I’ll be just a minute. I need to get my bags,” she yelled to the cab driver who already had the trunk of the taxi opened.

She closed the door and sagged against it with the full weight of her body.

“I’m going crazy. How can I do this?” The sound of her voice caused her to flinch. “How will they ever forgive me?”

It wasn’t that she was trying to persuade herself from fulfilling what she, in her heart, knew to be the right decision, the only decision — no; in fact the opposite was closer to the truth. She had to leave. Freedom was food and she would surely die of starvation if she stayed. Some months before, she had

read an article in a magazine that one of her daughter's friends had left behind — *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour* — she could not recall, but it was not the kind of magazine her daughter would have picked up on her own. The story read like a chapter taken from her own life. The first line, bold and to the point, had caught in her throat and stuck there, lodged, like a chicken bone.

It had stated that there was a pivotal point in every mother's life when she thought about quitting. For many, the impression was fleeting. For others, though — others, like herself — the awareness was all too real, manifested deep within the recesses of gray matter. And, for a time, it had lay dormant, hardly brewing below the surface. That is, until recently when it had finally emerged as a pounding at the temples. She took aspirin, but it was not a headache she suffered from. It was more like the beating of a war drum beckoning a platoon into battle. The author called it abandonment. But if this author had bothered to ask someone who actually heard the war drums — the sound of them beating without end — she would have learned that it was a matter of survival more than anything.

Another blare of the car horn, this time several seconds longer.

"Okay, okay," she said under her breath. "Another impatient man. I'm on the clock . . ." She said the second line louder secretly hoping he would hear her. She felt brazen, reckless.

Hurrying through the kitchen and down the hallway to the master bedroom, her eyes rested on two suitcases sitting squat and bulging near the doorway. With a mist of White Linen and a snap of the clasp on her wristwatch, she donned her antique Jackie-O sunglasses and heaved the satchels from their perch. Without a backwards glance, she retraced her steps to the kitchen, switched off the light and closed the side door behind her, letting the screen smack against the frame, pistons forcing it shut with an angry shriek.

"To the Westfield train station, please," she said with an air of authority that bordered on rudeness.

At weak moments during the past year, she often thought of what would become of her son and daughter. What happened to the children of a mother who no longer desired to be a mother? Would they

end up, many years down the road, described in newspaper articles as convicted felons, sociopaths, psychologically deranged residue unfit to live in a proper society? Would she be creating the next Ted Bundy or Dorothea Puente, who, underneath a facade of charm, were quite evil? Or would her children quietly slip away into obscurity with the hopes of leading normal lives, all the while, missing a part of themselves that could never be recovered?

The taxi backed down the driveway. Lucianna scrunched down into the air-conditioned vinyl, trying to make herself small enough as to not catch the roving eye of a stray neighbor out for a walk or pruning the garden. At the end of the block, the taxi turned the corner. With a shiver and a sigh, the woman in the back seat disappeared into the early morning traffic.

- 3 -

The Life of a Catholic Schoolgirl

For the second time that day, Rosie glanced at her watch impatiently. The hand swept faster and faster — round and round it traveled the purple face of the glow-in-the-dark timepiece. She pressed her right foot to the floor, pretending to have control of that ever-important gas pedal, willing the bus to go faster.

Normally, the bus rides back and forth through the tree-lined streets of Westfield were enjoyable. These periods of time were the only moments of peace she savored during an overextended schedule of honors classes, *The Junior Philharmonic of Westfield*, *Biology for Life Club* and a volunteer position with *The Timber Trails Museum and Science Center*. Her seat was established toward the front of the bus, assigned by the bus driver, according to grade and then alphabetized within each grade. She didn't mind this arrangement, though; she was always seated next to her best friend, Hilary Morning, who, as a matter of course, occupied a seat next to her in every classroom they inhabited together, which was most, with the exception of biology. Rosie was in the advanced class. Her dream was to someday become a pediatrician.

“Cut it out,” said the flame-headed girl monopolizing Hilary's place. “You're stepping on my backpack.”

“Sorry.” Rosie looked at her and rolled her eyes.

Hilary would not be riding the bus that afternoon. She had become ill during sixth period, right after lunch. The timing of her illness was punctual, not because it occurred during sixth period which was physical education, a class that Hilary enjoyed and excelled in, nor because it transpired after lunch, another class she enjoyed and excelled in, but because every year during the first week of school, her falling victim to one bug or another became a regular event. Rosie often pondered her friend's incidental maladies. In the end, she had decided that Hilary was either psychosomatic about the start of a new

school year or her stomach just could not agree with the cafeteria food dished up in greasy globs by grinning latex-gloved lunch aids.

Rosie turned her attention to the moving landscape beyond her window. Rolling down North Chestnut Street, the bus stopped at the corner, discharged two passengers and turned onto Oak Avenue, justly named for the two neat rows of mature white oaks that densely lined either side of the road. In the summer, they fashioned a canopy of green leaves as cooling as a dip in the deepest pool, even on the hottest day; yellow leaves falling free from their seasonal home would ring in the autumn; and glistening ice-coated branches twinkled to the sounds of jingle bells for a winter wonderland display.

The bus pulled up to a noisy stop. This was Rosie's stop. Descending from the bus, she was particularly careful not to tread on the backpack of the freckle-faced girl. The day was waning — one of those late summer days that ended with a chill in the air, but in between dusk and dawn ignited, causing the backs of a Catholic schoolgirl's legs to stick as if crazy-glued to those desk seats they were required to spend most of their waking hours in. And as if that wasn't bad enough, a movement as simple as a skirt adjustment could bring on a serious case of the farts, what Catholic schoolgirls called those high-pitched squealing noises produced when warm skin plus plastic equaled friction. Just as embarrassing though, were the droplets of sweat that gathered between not-so-formed breasts and slid down the fronts of white regulation school blouses; how that little rivulet of sweat could make a Catholic schoolgirl dance in her seat trying to get at that itch and doing everything in her power to keep from putting a well-behaved hand down her blouse and scratching away.

On several occasions, Rosie had slipped an anonymous note into the suggestion box proposing, one — the placement of fans in strategic areas within the building, and two — delaying the start of the school year until after Labor Day (like every other school in the tri-state metropolitan area) instead of forcing the student population to cook like rotisserie chickens during the dog days of August. These anonymous notes, she had realized due to a lack of response, were of no importance to the Sisters of Charity and those who sat on the Board of Education.

The shadows deepened as the sun dwindled in the west. Rosie pulled her uniform jacket close and hurried down the professionally landscaped street, finally glimpsing the carriage house. She fished through her jacket pocket for the side door key. As she neared the house, she silently cursed the bus driver for taking her sweet time today, of all days. Her mother, who lately seemed too busy, preoccupied with the day-to-day bustle, had promised to help her with an art assignment. It was a widely known fact that Rosie did not bear any inclination toward drawing or painting. And although the subject had never been brought up, she knew her mother was an artist. Being well versed in the knowledge of recessive and dominant traits, though, she accepted this anomaly as the recessive gene theory in full swing.

It was upon first moving into the cottage, while rummaging through the loft attic, Rosie had found a trunk filled with yellowed pencil drawings, curly-edged watercolor paintings, a box of well-used pastel chalks, tubes of dried up acrylics, pads of sketching paper and paintbrushes in every shape and size. There was a sallow-colored newspaper clipping from *The Elizabeth Daily Journal* announcing the one-woman show of a local girl, Lucianna Prima, daughter of Carmen and Maria Prima. There were pattern sketches of a Grecian goddess wrap style disco dress in silky nylon, a ribbed knit sweater dress with matching cardigan, a figure-flattering A-line skirt and even a pattern for a fluffy, hooded bathrobe with pockets and comfy slippers to match. Employed as an artist for the Butterick Pattern Company in the mid-1970s, Rosie's mother was responsible for dreaming up patterns that housewives and their daughters in home economics class would anxiously follow in the hopes of creating something even as simple as a decorative bedroom pillow. That trunk was a Pandora's box to her mother's previous life, the life she lived before she had her family. It appeared that after saying 'I do,' she had never since garnished another paycheck.

Skipping up the driveway, Rosie was close enough now to realize that the house at 1225 Woodland Avenue appeared vacant. The etched-glass windows, normally golden in the afternoon light, instead, gaped at her like missing teeth in a prize boxer's grimace. The mail peeked out of the mailbox and a FedEx envelope, its familiar orange and purple logo visible from the street, leaned against the

front door. She gathered up the mail and the envelope addressed to Ms. Lucy Prima, and ran around to the side door. Her father's black Cadillac was parked in its usual spot in front of the garage. Thinking it odd that he would be home so early from work, she let herself into the laundry room.

Nothing was familiar.

There was neither the sound of the spin cycle nor the clean scent of freshly laundered clothing to greet her. The fragrance of her mother's slow-cooking tomato sauce did not permeate the air. Absent, were the smoky tones of her voice complementing the oldies station. Where were the traditional fluttery kisses, one for each cheek that would be bestowed as Rosie passed into her mother's warm perimeter? The house had a feeling of stale neglectfulness, like someone had forgotten to open the windows on a warm spring day. Dust particles danced through a sliver of light peeling from one of those latched windows. Rosie stashed the unused key into her pocket and with a hesitant step, called out.

- 4 -

The Key to Her New Life

The key lay polished and new upon her grimy palm, slick with perspiration. The contrast forced Lucianna to stare at it while the superintendent of the walk-up apartment building waited for her signature. This would not be the first key claimed as her very own, but that other time was so long ago. She lived in the present now, her past behind her. She clasped her hand around the metal, admiring its smoothness. She wouldn't have to share this key; not another soul possessed one like it; it was not a duplicate (unless she counted the one in the super's possession) and it would not jingle jangle on the end of a key fob with many others that, for the most part, did not belong to her. It would be hers and hers alone.

She felt an air of impatience about the landlord, the way he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. The mannerism was subtle, but she was in tune to it, reminding her of another place, another time, another man. She grasped the pen and in elaborate swirls, dots and lines, signed her name to the rental agreement. He looked at the signature, and then shut the file.

“Third floor, second door from the stairs.”

She smiled a timid smile, lowering her eyes to the two overstuffed suitcases at her feet.

“You need help with those,” he asked.

“No, thank you. I can manage.”

“D’ya mind me askin’?” And she knew exactly what he would ask. “What’s a pretty girl like you doin’ in a dump like this?” He motioned to the bleak surroundings.

She only smiled. He would never understand that she didn't notice the peeling gray paint spotted with soot and mildew. The thinly worn indoor-outdoor carpeting, unraveling in high-traffic areas resembled a richly ornate red carpet rolled out to welcome her. The looks of disdain from young girls with bulging bellies did not bother her. They were her new neighbors. She smiled at them as they eyed

her suspiciously while dragging behind them one or two whimpering, snot-nosed toddlers, dressed only in diapers, thumbs plugging their button mouths.

The elevator did not work. Closed for repairs, the sign stated. The landlord mentioned three flights of stairs. The corridor was dim, more bulbs broken than not. Glass chips scattered on the carpet, crunched under the rubber soles of her sneakers. A pay phone hung on the far wall. Its receiver was attached to the ear of a girl no older than her own daughter. Why was this girl not in school?

Loud talking, demanding tones escalated as she entered the stairwell and started on the first flight of stairs. Spanish seemed to be the language of choice. Babies screamed, men bellowed, women shrieked.

She stood before the door to Apartment 3C. Relief spread warmth through her body as she inserted the key into the keyhole and turned it, allowing safe passage into her new home.

- 5 -

The Dutiful Daughter

“Mama, I’m home.” Rosie’s voice echoed through the empty house. “Mama . . .”

She walked into the kitchen, flipped on the light switch and dropped her backpack onto the granite counter, tinged in sepia tones. She loved this room, with its golden cabinets glossy from many layers of varnish, the comfortable hum of the overloaded refrigerator and the carefully chosen, multi-colored Tiffany lamp hanging above the antique kitchen table. Many days, she would be welcomed home with the smell of freshly baked bread or teased with the sweet aroma of oatmeal raisin cookies right out of the oven. While thumbing through the mail, she walked into the parlor. Late day shadows filled the room. She turned on the lamp and was startled to find her father sitting in the darkness on the forbidden sofa.

“Papa, you’re home,” Rosie said, dropping the mail onto the nearest end table. “Where’s Mama?”

Emmanuel Montesano lifted his dark eyes until they rested on his daughter’s face. He sat in that position for some time before Rosie, like a broken animal, looked away.

“Papa, why are you home so early?” she asked. She could tell his mood and realized that even small talk would be difficult to approach him with at that moment. She braved a glance in his direction and to her surprise, there were tears pooled in his eyes, bright like two wet pebbles in his sockets. “Papa, what happened?”

“Rosalia,” and he paused as if searching for the perfect combination of words that would make what he had to say somehow unimportant or trivial. “Your mother . . . she . . . she will not be home tonight.” He stammered through the statement, the slightest hint of an imaginary Italian accent clung to his words. The accent was something he tried on when the need for attention became necessary, and he wore it in a show of pride. He was fully Americanized, migrating from the *old country*, as he put it,

when he was but a boy. However, getting back to the dilemma at hand, two things had caught Rosie's attention: number one, he was sitting on the forbidden couch, and number two, the pride of the accent had conceded to some other emotion that she found difficult to detect. Was it sadness? Disbelief? In his hand was clutched a wrinkled sheet of parchment that she recognized as her mother's stationery. A clue.

She sat down next to him and reached out to touch the Japanese rice paper her mother was so fond of. He drew the letter close to his heart.

"Is it from Mama?"

Emmanuel didn't answer. Instead, he turned his face away from scrutiny.

"Is it a letter from Mama?" Rosie asked again.

Her father shook his head. "She left this on the table for one of us to find."

"Can I read it? Did something happen to her?"

"You ask me like I know, like I had something to do with this."

"Papa, I just want to know what's going on. Why won't she be home tonight?"

"She's found a better life."

"A better life? What does that mean?"

"You wanted to know what was in the letter. This is what she says."

"Should we call the police?"

"Why should we bring the police into this?" Emmanuel looked up at his daughter and his eyes were wild with fright or grief, she couldn't tell. "Your mother is not coming home," was all he could muster.

"Please," Rosie begged. "Why won't you let me read the note?"

Again, he did not respond.

"Let me call the police."

"There's been no foul play," he replied. "Your mother . . . she . . ." He put his head in his hands, unable to finish his thought.

“Papa, I don’t understand. What happened? What happened to Mama?”

“I don’t know, Rosalia.” He folded his arms over his chest, hugging himself. “I just don’t know.”

Father and daughter sat like that, on the forbidden sofa — father hugging himself while his daughter watched. There were no words to console her father, to bring him out of his trance. She reached for her mother’s stationery.

“Papa, one sentence.”

“No more words.”

“But . . .”

“STOP.” He pounded his fist onto the coffee table. Trinkets for show danced on the marble top.

Rosie started to cry yet her father offered no comfort. He turned his face from her again. She rose from the sofa and jogged down the hallway calling out her mother’s name. She checked her parents’ bedroom, the bathroom, and the den at the end of the hall before retracing her steps back to the living room.

“Don’t you believe me when I say she’s gone?”

“I don’t, Papa. I can’t.”

He exhaled and it was a ragged sound like the fabric being torn from a hem. “Come,” he said.

“Come here, child.”

Rosie approached her father from across the room. She feared him. She had no reason to fear him, for although he was a strict father, an overbearing man, he was not a cruel man. At least, she believed, not intentionally.

“She’ll be back. There’s no need for the police.”

“How do you know she wasn’t kidnapped? Or forced to write that letter? You don’t know.”

“Rosalia, please. Don’t make this harder than it has to be. You will do as I say. No police. Now go. Surely, you have some homework to do.”

“How can I do homework? Like nothing ever happened? I don't believe this. I don't understand. You can't expect me to just forget about her, Papa.”

“She'll be back.” And with that, he rose from the couch and glanced at his watch. “It's almost dinnertime. We should have something to eat.” The pride of the Italian accent was returning to his voice.

“I don't know how to cook.”

Emmanuel's eyes flashed in his daughter's direction. Never before had she been so daring, so outspoken. She argued back in an angry voice — much as an adult would — but in the same breath, wept like a child. To her father, though, her tears only represented weakness, a child's weakness, a girl child's weakness; they were nothing to him.

“Do not disobey me,” he continued in a low voice, one that suggested he meant business. “Not tonight.”

Rosie did not fight with her father. Being the dutiful daughter, she returned to the kitchen and scanned the cupboards for the makings of a quick dinner. From the cabinet, she took down two cans of chickpeas for a salad. It would not be her mother's cooking, not even close. She leaned on the cabinet, resting her forehead against the smooth, cool surface.

The letter. She had to get her hands on the letter. The distinct click of the lamp being turned off in the parlor set off a series of actions that in a sane state of mind she never would have considered acting upon. Taking a cue from the sound of running water in the bathroom, she tiptoed down the hallway and glanced into the bedroom that her parents shared. The light on the nightstand was blazing and on the bureau laid the crumbled piece of paper. Rosie swept her eyes to the closed bathroom door, knowing full well that if caught, she would be punished.

She didn't care. The need to know had extinguished any rational judgment. She grabbed the note and scanned the neat handwriting as quickly as her eyes would allow, eating each word as if she were starving. She read as far as the second sentence when from behind she felt a presence and out of the corner of her peripheral vision she saw her father.

Emmanuel raised his hand to slap her.

She raised her own, in defense, but the slap did not come. Only the sound of sobbing as he crumpled to the floor. Rosie went to him and yelled, "Papa." The note was crushed within her clenched fist. But instead of coming to his aid, she looked down at him in disbelief. Who was this old melted man puddled at her feet? Certainly, not her father. She placed her hands on his shoulders, releasing the letter; it floated away. He trembled under the strength of her grasp. He seemed to diminish right before her eyes.

"Papa, I'm sorry, but you can't keep her from me." Dropping to the floor beside him, she looked into her father's eyes shining with the tears that his pride refused to shed. She didn't hear the footsteps in the hallway.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Rosie looked up at the sound of her brother's voice. Joseph stood in the doorway, tall and lean, a look of surprise on his reddening face. He had his father's dark good looks, but his mother's vibrant green eyes. The combination elicited a most favorable response from most of the females in his senior class as well as from many of the underclasses. His hair tumbled casually over his forehead, tousled, no less, by the wind whipping through his topless, prized 1963 Ford Galaxy convertible, a gift from the father and painstakingly restored by the father and son team to its original splendor.

"Rosie, have you gone mad?" In two long strides, he was over to the bruised figure on the floor. Hard muscle mass strained against oxford cloth as he assisted Emmanuel to the edge of the bed. "Will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"Joseph, you will not use that language in this house." The voice quivered; it was not the type of voice worth submitting to. Rosie looked at her brother as he held the shrinking man in his arms, a skeleton of what he was only that morning — strong, powerful, striking in his three-piece suit. With quick darting eyes, there was the hint of a fast smile if he felt you deserved it. This morning, like every morning before it, Emmanuel Modesto would have glided out the door with a cup of steaming dark

roasted coffee in hand, his pomade-styled hair glistening in the early morning sunlight. He looked like a banker from the 1950s, pocketwatch in hand, gauging his time — instead of a sales manager for a local insurance company, counting the hours until the day's end. He refused to conform to the present, in which casual business attire was quickly replacing the suits and wingtips of days gone by.

And now, he had aged years before his time. The sharp lines of his meticulously pressed suit lay rumpled, the worsted wool twisted on his frame, dust-laden from forgotten bunnies underneath the bed. His face, normally smooth, even at the age of fifty-two, was now etched with deep lines around his mouth; furrows creased his forehead.

“Mama ran away,” Rosie whispered to her brother. It sounded juvenile coming from her lips, those words, when the person they were referring to was a grown woman. “She left a note.”

“What? What are you talking about? Papa, what note?” Kneeling on the floor, Joseph steadied his father with an immovable arm, but who would steady Joseph, Rosie thought, when their father confirmed what she had just so clumsily tried to say.

“Papa, what happened today? Where is she?”

“She left us,” Emmanuel replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Rosie grabbed at the note that had slid under the dresser and in a gesture of peace, offered it to her brother. He looked at the slip of paper, reached for it, touched it. He raised it to his face, as she had done earlier, for the stationery was still lightly fragranced with their mother's unique scent — a mixture of White Linen, Aquanet hairspray and Wrigley's spearmint gum.

“Read it,” Rosie said. “Read it out loud.” She stared at her brother, the greedy heir awaiting the interpretation of the last will and testament of a wealthy but selfish uncle known for his inability to part with accumulations. Joseph cleared his throat.

“My Dearest Family:

What I have to say will not be easy for you to understand. So, I will not try to explain myself. I must leave for a while. Please do not worry about me. I have found an apartment and a job. Rest assured, it is a good job, one that can provide enough money for shelter and food.

When I return, and I cannot say when, I will be a whole person, a better wife for you, my Emmanuel, and a more attentive mother to you, Joseph and Rosalia. I need this time for myself. Understand that you will all benefit from my taking it. Please do not try to locate me. I do not wish to be found. You must search within your hearts and respect this one request.

Your lives will be different without me and I apologize for putting you through hardships that you normally would not have to endure. Just know that I love you all.”

Joseph leaned against the heavy bureau, toppling several arranged perfume bottles; the splashing amber glistened through cut crystal. His eyes scanned the note again. For some time he did not speak. The bedroom became a tomb.

“I don’t get it,” he finally said. His voice was hushed. “What does this mean?”

No one ventured a guess. No one offered an explanation. His eyes traveled over the words once again and then they lifted, as if a dawning had occurred in between one reading to the next. Those same eyes bounced about the room, at last settling on the dresser top.

“But, she didn’t take her perfume.” He sounded like a small boy on the verge of a temper tantrum.

The note slipped from his fingertips and drifted like a feather in swoops and arcs. He looked around the room searching for other discrepancies. Muttering under his breath, he moved over to the wall-length bank of closets. He opened the louvered doors just a crack at first, as if afraid of what might lay behind them, and then forced his entry. It was what had been removed that frightened Rosie the most. An entire section of clothing was missing. Only remaining were the bent wire hangers. It was as if

the taking of her mother's wardrobe was a violent affair. Joseph flung open the next set of doors. It had the same sad absent look as the first.

"Joseph, that's enough. Please. Stop." Rosie could not endure his theatrics any longer.

"Why Rosie? What else did she take? Don't you want to know?"

"Shut up, shut up!" She screamed, throwing her hands over her ears.

Joseph then walked with purpose over to the chest of drawers, pulled out the top drawer, and then the second and then the third, until all lay open tipping from their tracks, their meager contents spilling onto the floor.

"Joseph, stop." Rosie grabbed his arm. "Can't you see you're upsetting Papa?"

He brushed her away as a hulking Doberman Pinscher would a tiresome flea nibbling on a tender spot. She seized his wrist and they eyed each other over the empty drawers that once held their mother's panties, bras and stockings. Rosie thought back to the early hours of the morning and to the strange conversation with her mother.

"Joseph," she whispered. "She took her clothing. She took her shoes. She took her underwear. She's gone. She had to take her things."

"But what about her perfume?" He glared at his sister making sure she grasped the fact that much more than one or two bottles of cologne were left behind. His eyes flickered once again about the room. "Look . . ." he said, pointing to a novel on the end table of Lucianna's side of the queen-size bed. ". . . she didn't take her book." He released himself from his sister's grasp and picked up the novel. "Page two hundred and ninety-seven. Who would leave a story hanging, with only . . ." He paused to leaf to the end. ". . . twenty-nine pages left? Doesn't she care to know how it ends?"

"If you knew anything about Mama, you'd know that she always reads the last chapter first. She wants a happy ending."

Emmanuel lifted his head from the shelter of his palms and looked to his daughter with a quizzical expression as if this was breaking news to him as well. Rosie took full advantage of their attention.

“We should call the police,” she demanded, lifting herself up to the fullest height of her five foot two inch frame.

“Rosie, are you deaf? Didn't you hear me recite from your mother's letter, one she wrote in her own hand, that she doesn't want to come home?”

“Every word, dear brother . . .”

The bed springs groaned and Rosie turned, almost forgetting that her father was still in the same room. It appeared that his strength had miraculously been restored.

“She will be back,” he shouted and the room was filled with the timber of his voice. Rosie was thankful for the latched windows. She backed away from her father's rage, the way he pummeled the mattress with his fist at every other word. Her father — quiet, respectable, diplomatic — had turned into a crazy man. He rose from the bed and kicked at whatever lay in his path, strewing old bras and underwear across the room.

“She will come home,” he said, this time more to himself than to anyone else.

He was crying now and the tears streaked his face.

“Papa. Don't worry,” Rosie said, moving toward her father. “She'll come home. Don't be upset.”

He turned to his daughter, swatting at his glistening cheeks. “So then, what do we do?”

“What do you mean, Papa?”

“What do we do until she comes home?”

“I don't know.”

“And when your mother decides to come home. What do we do then? Take her back? Rejoice? Throw a party?”

“Papa, why are saying this?” Rosie leapt at her father with her fists. “I hate you.”

And then he grabbed her arm and that dark gleam had returned to his eyes.

“You hate me? Why, because of that?” And he pointed to the letter on the floor. “Because I don’t want you to become like that?”

“What is *that*, Papa?”

“Cowardice. The words of a coward,” he said. “You’re a child . . .”

“Papa, I’m not a child . . .”

The anger in his eyes silenced her.

“You are, Rosalia.” Emmanuel released his daughter’s arm. “There’s so much you need to learn about our traditions. There’s so much you haven’t been taught. Instead of words in a letter, your mother should be teaching you how a young woman acts in our family. She should be teaching you respect. It’s obvious to me she’s had other priorities.”

Rosie looked to Joseph for help — for advice — *say something*, she urged him with her mind. Her father was going through the dictionary of emotions and she could not possibly guess which concern would be next. But instead, Emmanuel turned to leave the room.

“I’ve listened to the ranting of my children long enough,” he said. “Now, I have to take matters into my own hands. What your mother’s done is a disgrace, but we will abide by her wishes. If she doesn’t want to live in this house, so be it.”

“But, Papa.” Rosie screamed. “I want her here.” Tears spilled onto her cheeks. “Let me call the police. They will find her. Please, Papa.” Clutching his hand, she crouched before him. “I know it’s my fault. I wasn’t a good daughter. But I could be a better daughter to her,” she cried out. “I promise. I know I can.” Her pride was no longer an issue. If she had glanced into the mirror above the dresser she would have been shocked at the sight of this pleading girl — a face so pale that the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose emerged like marching red ants on a crag of shiny limestone.

“Jesus, Christ . . . do you hear yourself?” Joseph asked. “Wake up, will you. Can’t you see that she’s been planning this move? I mean, you just don’t wake up one morning and say to yourself, ‘Gee, I

think I'll abandon my family today.' My God, open your eyes, Rosie. Look at what went into this. She had to find a job. She had to rent an apartment. She had to save money. She had to buy clothing." Counting on his fingers, Joseph pointed out the reasons for his mounting anger. Shaking his head, he turned and marched towards the doorway.

"Why are you leaving? Why is everyone leaving?" Rosie jumped up and took hold of the shirttail hanging out of his jeans. "We need to do something."

"Your mother will tire of her little charade. She'll come home. How long do you think she will last out there?" Emmanuel spoke with his hands.

"I wouldn't take her back," Joseph said almost in a whisper as he turned away from his father.

At once, Emmanuel charged across the room and grabbed Joseph by the collar. "I have ears, don't think I don't hear what you mumble under your voice. I will handle your mother in my own way." His dark eyes glittered fiercely as the words spewed from his lips. "Do you understand me, Joseph?" His voice thundered into Joseph's face, mere inches from his own.

"Yes. Papa." Joseph pulled away and stormed from the room, cursing under his breath.

The side door slammed and the revving of a car with a mighty engine echoed in Rosie's ears.

"Joseph, wait." She ran through the hallway and into the laundry room in time to see a flash of pearly white, as the car peeled down the driveway and disappeared under the graceful motions of the weeping willows. Her eyesight blurred. She asked the empty room, "*How could this be happening?*" She pounded her fists into the side door. "*Why would you leave us — leave me?*" Did her mother think that they would go on and move forward as if she were not an integral spoke in this wheel of a family? Did she think they would go on as if she had never existed? What could possibly have been going through her mind when she walked out that door with her bags in hand and not even a look backward?

- 6 -

Tiny Dancer

Lucianna crossed the threshold, ushered in by two bulky suitcases and the knowledge that her life would be changed from this point forward. She surveyed her surroundings. A bedroom, a small eat-in kitchen and a bathroom branched off the main living area. The apartment, she thought, could use a woman's touch. The furniture was 1980s Scandinavian pine — simple lines, functional, easy-to-wear-down if purchased for a furnished apartment, which the apartment had all the trappings of — scratched tabletops; rickety, unmatched kitchen chairs; a thread-bare sofa, worn from years of overuse; vinyl LazyBoy recliner with a duct tape seat and matching foot rest; the sagging, thin mattress. Heavy curtains, stained and sun-bleached, obliterated the sights and sounds of the street below. She dropped her bags and threw open the drapes, cobwebs and dustmites danced through the stale air.

The buzzer to announce guests sounded at the door.

“Yes.” Hesitantly she answered.

“D’Agostinos, ma’am.”

“That was fast. Come on up.”

There was a knock at the door. A boy from the food market down the street stood on the other side of the threshold. She paid him in cash and tipped him a ten-dollar bill. From the brown shopping bag, she produced a bottle of ammonia, lemon-fresh Pledge, a package of disposable dust clothes, a jumbo roll of paper towels, a small bottle of Clorox bleach, a scrub brush, a spray bottle of Windex and Scrubbing Bubbles bathroom tub and tile cleaner.

From the suitcase, she felt for the Sony Walkman and the few CDs she hoped would not be missed. Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Vivaldi, Elton John, Carol King. She reached for Sinatra's *New York, New York*, but instead, inserted the disk from the faux-embroidered jewel case, an abridged version of the original album cover, one that lay at the bottom of a trunk in an attic, mangled and worn

from too many spins on the old turntable. “. . . *Count the headlights on the highway . . . lay me down in sheets of linen . . . you had a busy day today.*” She hummed along with the bespectacled music man.

Scrubbing and cleaning and polishing for two hours prompted growling stomach rumbles and reminded her that she hadn't eaten since the day before. She would take a walk — visit old haunts. Was that barbecue joint still on Trinity Place?

On her travels, she passed the Century 21 department store. She could have been eighteen again — the memories were foremost in her mind. Once inside, she purchased a carpet sweep; toaster oven; two small throw rugs — one braided for the kitchen in a green/rose color swirl and one rubber-soled for the bathroom; towels, washcloths; a Mr. Coffee four-cup coffee maker; drapes for the living room from the discount bin; lacy cafe curtains in a bright plaid for the one-windowed kitchen; a shower curtain and plastic liner; alarm clock; three gold-metal picture frames; a cotton sofa upholstery cover in a subtle beige jacquard with a matching country stripe coverlet for the recliner; two throw pillows with piped edging; a squat ceramic night table lamp with pleated shade; a small framed print for her bedroom — Van Gogh's Sunflowers; a full-size Bed-in-a-Bag complete with sheets and shams in a pretty rose pattern; travel iron and mini ironing board; and as a special treat — two plumped up feather pillows. A potted African violet caught her eye and she had to have it. She thought of planning a trip to the flower district, She would choose for her new apartment, bushels upon bushels of Queen Victoria Lobelia, her favorite. Not until then would she feel at home.

“Is there anyone to help you,” asked the tired-looking young woman with a stud through her nostril. The last item was rung and cash was swapped for goods.

“No, I can manage with several trips.”

“You want your stuff delivered?”

“No, thank you. I can manage.” She smiled. ‘Your stuff’ sounded pleasing to her ears.

Swinging twin pouches down Church Street, and after jaywalking across the thoroughfare to browse the windows of the Borders Bookstore, she paused at the huge 15-foot-diameter, 45,000-pound,

steel and bronze sculpture entitled *Kugelkaryatide*, widely known as *The Sphere*, an abstract work by sculptor Fritz Koenig. According to the brass plaque, *The Sphere* was created in 1971 as a monument to fostering peace through world trade. It sat atop a granite fountain in the center of the five-acre World Trade Center Tobin Plaza. She leaned her head back releasing a cascade of brown waves that shone like silk in the gauzy sunlight. The Twin Towers. She could barely see their tops, scaling the hazy sky, slicing through stratus clouds and surging towards the heavens.

- 7 -

A Half Eaten Salad and a Broken Heart

Rosie was alone in the world.

The sound of the shower and her father's voice humming a tune she was not familiar with only reminded her that dinner was still far from being served. She returned to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator. A head of romaine lettuce, a Kirby cucumber, two plum tomatoes, a zipper-lock baggie of baby spinach leaves and a container of pitted black Italian olives — became the fixings for a meal. She chopped and sliced and tore, pouring the mixture into a large glass bowl. She opened the cans of chickpeas still perched on the counter where they had been left so long ago, and drained the liquid, sprinkling the rubbery lentils onto the salad. She tossed the vegetables with extra virgin olive oil and red wine vinegar; a dusting of Parmesan cheese she grated over top. From the antique breadbox that belonged to her mother's mother, a loaf of Italian bread lay in waiting. She warmed it in the oven then sliced it into thick chunks. She looked down at the bowl of colorful fresh vegetables. Not good enough. A salad was a mere side dish, not a meal.

Searching the refrigerator for something that could be heated quickly, Rosie discovered leftover escarole soup in a Tupperware container. Quickly she poured it into a pot and boiled it over a high flame. The table was set for three, although, her heart told her that Joseph would not be back any time soon.

"Papa, time for dinner," she said, pouring his customary glass of Chianti.

"Smells delicious, Rosalia." Emmanuel surprised his daughter from behind and she jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Why so jumpy, my child?" He took his rightful place at the head of the table and lifted the glass of pungent wine to his lips. "Come, sit down and eat."

She sat down at his left and ladled soup into his bowl first and then into her own. She broke a piece of bread, breathing in its yeasty fragrance, but the thought of the soft squishy center on her tongue caused her mouth to fill with bile. Her father, on the other hand, ate with gusto. Breaking bread, he dipped the crusty end into the steaming soup, sopping up every last bit of broth. The sounds of teeth pulverizing crunchy lettuce leaves were replaced by the sounds of slurping and the clatter of stainless steel utensils against the everyday stoneware.

“Rosalia, eat.” He beckoned with his fork.

“Papa, I’m not hungry.” She placed her napkin on the table. “May I be excused?”

“You must eat something,” he said, pushing back the heavy captain’s chair from the table. “I left the office early when your mother had not returned any of my calls this morning. I’ll be there for . . . a while.” He wiped at his mouth with his napkin and then stood.

Rosie looked at her father perplexed. “Does Mama always return your phone calls? Wonder if she goes shopping.”

“I was worried. I had a feeling . . .”

He looked at his daughter as if wanting to say something protective, fatherly, but in the end, opted for safe. “You look tired, Rosalia. Get some sleep.”

“Papa, why can’t we call the police?”

“Your mother is not a missing person. No police, Rosalia.” He picked up his suit jacket draped over the arm of the chair usually reserved for Joseph. Before dinner, he had swapped the disheveled black three-piece suit for the neatly pressed blue pinstripe he was now sporting. “Goodnight, my child.”

And then he was gone, leaving behind a hint of Old Spice and a half eaten salad. Rosie saved a dinner portion for Joseph and scraped the rest into the garbage. After loading the dishwasher, wiping down the table and counters with a soapy cloth and sweeping the tile floor — motions she had seen her mother perform a million times over — she placed the vase of freshly cut asters and chrysanthemums in

the center of the table; the morning dew still clung to the lower petals. The recessed light over the sink she kept burning for her brother with a note that dinner was warming in the oven.

Down the hallway and into her parent's bedroom, Rosie retrieved her father's dry-cleaning and was not surprised to find the remnants of Joseph's outburst still strewn about the room. Mumbling under her breath, she separated clean from not so clean, hung up suits and shirts and piled dirty undershirts and used handkerchiefs.

One of her mother's perfume bottles had been knocked to the floor leaving a darkened puddle, which spread quickly on the cream-colored carpeting. Replacing the bottle on the mirrored tray in the center of the bureau, Rosie grieved for the lost liquid. It was as if another part of her mother had dispersed and left her behind. Sponging up most of the wetness with a cloth, she scrubbed the stain with cleaner, but could not return the carpet to its spotless condition.

Rosie straightened the bedspread and placed her father's discarded ties on the tie rack in the closet. She found his tie tack and one of his cufflinks on the floor wedged between the wall and the bed and when she felt under the bed for the other, came up, instead, with the note from her mother. Sitting on the floor, with her back against the bed, she read the message once and then a second time, three times, five times — tracing the letter forms with her fingertips. The raised swirls of ink, now, were her only connection to her mother. She would come to memorize the handful of sweetly scented words — words that had destroyed a family. Rosie closed her eyes and breathed in the bouquet of her mother's departing missive. She bowed her head and silently cried.

When she opened her eyes the hands of the pendulum clock on the night stand stood at 9:30pm and the sky that filtered through the curtains was streaked in shades of ebony. The house was quiet. Tucking her mother's note into the pocket of her uniform skirt, Rosie gathered the dirty clothing and turned off the light. Trudging down the hallway, she felt so tired, too tired to do anything but go to bed. But there was laundry to do and homework to finish and a biology test to study for. She would not even

dare to attempt the art project. Rather, what she really wanted to do was sleep — to crawl into bed and sleep and forget.

Flicking off lights from room to room, Rosie picked up the backpack that still lay on the kitchen counter. Its heaviness prompted her to question whether she had been toting a wall of bricks, instead of a few books. She passed through the parlor on her way to the stairs that led to her bedroom on the second floor. The FedEx envelope peaked out from under the end table from where it must have fallen. She picked it up and clamped it under her armpit. Her legs refused to coordinate with her brain's command to lift and walk, walk and step, lift and walk. By the time Rosie entered her room at the farthest limits of the hallway, she felt as if she had climbed the highest peak of the tallest mountain. The backpack slipped from her shoulders and fell to the wide-planked hardwood floor with a loud smack. She threw herself face down onto the bed. When she could no longer breathe, she flopped over onto her back and stared out of the glass and sash triptych that her mother had once defined as shed windows, common to the architecture of the house. The moon had come up full and round and was suspended directly over the backyard. A cool breeze whispered through the screens of the open windows, fluttering the sheer lace panels.

Rosie's bedroom overlooked the sweeping scope of the yard. Each morning she would wake up to a new and varied exhibition — the changing shades and shapes of the garden's greenery and the vast palette of perennials that grew during the spring, summer and into the autumn. And while she took to appreciating the oasis by day, her mother enjoyed the garden's delights by night. Tonight would have been a perfect night for a nocturnal walk in her personal Eden.

There had been countless times that Rosie had been an eyewitness to her mother's wanderings along the flagstone path blazed through the shadowy figures of stately delphinium, yellow rudbeckia, feathery plumed astilbe, sweet-scented phlox, and the gentle rolling ground cover of silver brocade artemisia. After her meandering, Lucianna would come to rest under the rose-trestled gazebo while fireflies danced about the skies and entertained her with their quiet light show.

This place was her mother's peace, her solace. She once asked her mother what it was that drew her to the garden. Her response was one that tickled all senses of the human experience. The feel of dirt under her fingernails; the peppermint bouquet of a bearded iris; the smooth, silky texture of a rose petal pressed between her fingertips; the sound of the wind as it swept across the dancing foliage. She reveled in the sight of a butterfly touching down on clumps of red monarda or the sound of bees buzzing about their business, collecting nectar from the innards of wild columbine. She was happy to give it sustenance: water, mulch, bonemeal, attention — for what it gave back in return was two-fold. It did not ask much from her, only a little weeding, some pruning.

But tonight, the garden looked lonely without her mother. The outside floodlight beamed a globe of watery brightness onto a clump of early fall Japanese anemone; their usual bouncing faces were now pointed to the ground. Rosie closed the two windows nearest to the bed and drew the shades and then happened to notice the light on the answering machine blinking twice. Reaching over the bed, she swatted the replay button.

“Hey, Mo . . . it's me. Call me when you get in.”

The sound of Hilary's voice brought a much-needed smile to Rosie's face. The machine beeped and went on to the next message.

“Hey, it's me again. Where are you? Call me, but not too late or *Mother* will have a fit. Bye.”

The recorder belched again and then grew silent. It was 10:30pm, too late to call but Rosie picked up the receiver and dialed from memory.

“Hel-*looo*.” The voice, belonging to Hilary's mother, was much too sing-songy for such a late hour. Rosie stammered a half-greeting while twirling a strand of hair around her fingers.

“Rosie, dear, do you realize the time? Hilary's asleep,” Patricia Morning said, blowing and coughing into the phone. It was a phlegmy, smoker's cough, one in which Rosie had no problem visualizing the route the plug of yellow mucous traveled — starting in the lung, rising to the top of the

esophagus and falling back down the woman's throat into her belly of hot stomach juices. The sound would be like a slab of meat slapping down on a sizzling griddle.

"Put your mother on, dear, would you? Did she make it to bridge tonight?"

"Um . . . she's sleeping. She wasn't feeling up to it . . . Something must be going around.

Goodnight, Mrs. Morning."

Quietly, Rosie slipped the receiver into its cradle.

- - -

It sounded like rain, but it was only late night insects colliding with the window screen, attracted to the glow within her bedroom. Rosie watched them smash their segmented bodies, with a running jump, into the tiny squares of meshing. What would it be like for these creatures, she wondered, to feel the change of seasons and, on some level, understand that soon the trees would be devoid of the nurturing leaves they relied upon for shelter, warmth and food. She wrestled with the answer, had none to offer, and came to the conclusion that for now, if they expected to be let inside into the light, they were sadly mistaken.

More bumps in the night. Rosie had just settled under the comforter — sleep coming in difficult spurts — when she heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. The sixth riser was always the tattletale. This was not a house where one could sneak around, although just this morning someone had managed to do so very efficiently. The door to the bathroom next to her room closed, the lock snapped in place. Sounds of running water. A toothbrush cleaning the residue of a meal. Spitting. More running water. Pissing. The ca-clunk of the toilet flushing. More running water.

The door opened and she heard her brother, most likely with his fly still down, shuffle his way back through the hall and with a solid slam, shut his door to the uncertainty that had become home. Rosie closed the remaining open window, shutting out the bugs from the precious glare of sixty-watt soft whites. She lay back on the bed studying the ceiling. The room grew stuffy, but she wanted to suffer.

Suffer the little children.

Nine years of catechism and fourteen years of being her father's daughter taught her that. She looked down at the loaded backpack sitting complacently on the floor, but didn't feel like studying. She would have to fail.

Suffer the little children.

She had a choice — attempt and fail or ignore and fail. She chose to ignore.

Pulling the sheets around her, Rosie examined the pockmarked sand painted ceiling. And she thought of her mother. What was she doing now? Where was she? Who was she with? Her eyes scanned the dimly lit room and fell upon the *Dirty Dancing* poster. It was a movie she and her mother had watched together quite often. Now, instead of Jennifer Grey poised before Patrick Swayze, it was her mother who stood in the beautiful white dress with the big swirling skirt and tiny spaghetti straps — her lithe arms balanced in the air waiting for this handsome man to sweep her off her feet. There was the look in his smoldering eyes; his pouty lips were slightly parted. A lock of hair, out of place and unrestrained, had fallen over one eye. Was this what she believed? That her mother was having the time of her life?

Rosie tossed and turned, unable to find comfort. She grew warm under the sheets and got up to peel the sweat-soaked pajamas from her skin. She slipped an oversized tee shirt over her bare, non-existent chest; it fell past her hips and thighs, coming to a rest just above her bony knees. Standing tall at five foot two, her father's old shirts were more like dressing gowns on her frame. She was often mistaken for a helpless little girl, younger in looks than her almost fifteen years gave away.

She remembered her mother's note stuffed into the pocket of her uniform skirt. She did not want to read it. She couldn't. Not again. Instead, Rosie wanted to inhale the essence of a misplaced mother one more time before surrendering to sleep. Her mind was a jumble of questions. She wondered, how long did it take to forget what an absent parent looked like? Or the sound of her voice to diminish? Would this, she asked herself out loud, become her reality?

Rosie tried to will herself to sleep, but sleep was most elusive during the wee hours of the morning when the quality of light shifted from deep gray to raw umber. A sliver of sun was edging closer to the horizon. At some point while she dozed, her father had slipped into her bedroom. She was aware of his presence. She could tell that he was watching her, believing that she was unconscious. Slumped over in the director's chair hidden in the corner shadows across the room, he was convinced that he was invisible to her. He had crept in, careful of the third floorboard from the doorway. Watchful of the antique dolls his daughter collected and displayed throughout the room. He crept in with the stillness of the house a close companion, pre-dawn, a heavy fog looming outside the shed windows.

Rosie was aware of the whiskey vapors that emanated from his lungs, his mouth, his pores. She breathed them into her own lungs and felt drunk with sadness.

"Rosalia, you wanted to be a better daughter," he said. A quiet slur coated his words. He threw punches into the air as if striking the ghosts that shimmied around his head and clutched at the tender lobes that held memories of his wife of twenty years. He cupped his hands to his ears as if willing the voices in his head to end their raving. "You're now an optional daughter."

Rosie lay still under the sheets. She was scared. She pretended to sleep, concentrating on keeping a consistent rhythm with the sounds of her breathing. Inhaling. Exhaling. She murmured in her fake sleep. Emmanuel blabbered to his ghosts. He spoke of his daughter's nightmares as a child. How his wife had chased away the demons, knowing by instinct the steps it took to calm the little girl. Steps, as a father, he had no clue of; he simply did not possess that fine machinery that made a mother, a mother.

Inhaling. Exhaling.

Her father moved swiftly from one topic to the next until he came to what she considered his favorite subject. Tradition.

"I've lived a life of tradition." He hammered the arm of the director's chair. "I've lived my father's way of life. It was passed on to me and I, in turn, will see that my own son inherits. The husband went to work, earned the money, earned the keep and the wife stayed at home, nurtured the family,

tended the nest. My mother obeyed. She did not complain. Why is it that my wife, *my own wife*, cannot comply with what is expected of her? She was brought up in a traditional Italian household. Why must she fight every step of the way?"

Rosie felt like an intruder. His innermost thoughts lay scattered on her throw rug; his tortured emotions littered the floor. But it was a lecture she had suffered through on countless occasions before. She kicked at the heavy bed coverings. After all, she was her mother's daughter.

"Oh, Rosalia. You too, will fight. With your lofty ideas of becoming a doctor. A doctor — *ha!* I know of women doctors. Could never be treated by one. Women are emotional, men are reasonable."

Inhaling. Exhaling.

"I have to think of a story. Our friends, our family, they will soon inquire after Lucianna. I will be a laughing stock. A husband who could not keep his wife home." Emmanuel slipped from his daughter's bedroom, forgetting about the squeaky floorboard. It groaned from discomfort under his weight, which had increased twofold since that morning. He now carried on his shoulders the burden of a downtrodden man.

- 8 -

Espresso Beans

When sleep finally embraced her, it refused to let go. Rosie could hear the muffled tones of her father's anxious voice calling her name over and over. That voice penetrated floors and doors and the haziness that enveloped her head like a rain cloud. She had forgotten to set the alarm, and yet, there he was wide-awake, prancing about like a proud peacock, as if the moments of yesterday had never occurred.

"Rosalia," Emmanuel called up from the foot of the stairs. "My espresso?"

"Make it yourself," she whispered under her breath, just loud enough for her two goldfish, Mr. Blonde and Goldie to hear, if only they had ears. "Now, he'll probably demand today's paper, too," she giggled, sprinkling fish food from a canister into the fish bowl. She watched her scaly friends swoop up to the surface and inhale each granule. She and Hilary had raided the Morning's video collection one rainy Saturday afternoon and watched *Reservoir Dogs*, a Quentin Tarantino movie, filled with violence and gore. Rosie loved it to the point of adopting the name of one of the movie's most fiendish gangsters for her pet.

"Rosalia, my newspaper, where is it?"

"Just a minute, Papa," she yelled, running into the bathroom, hoping to smash the *Guinness Book World Record* for the fastest shower.

"Rosalia, now."

Rosie sniffed under her armpits. She would have to forgo her goal of breaking into publishing and, as Hilary would tease, have herself an Italian shower — a dusting of powder and a spray or two of deodorant. She stepped into yesterday's pleated skirt; the blue plaid was creased in areas that should not have been creased and was flattened in areas where the fabric should have held a pleat. She buttoned up a fresh white blouse and slid blue socks to her knees. She washed her face, ran a comb through, then

pig-tailed her on-the-verge-of-being-greasy hair, brushed her teeth, guzzled some mouthwash, swung the backpack loaded down with untouched homework over her shoulder, then grabbed her uniform jacket and raced down the stairs, taking note that Joseph was still sleeping soundly.

“Good morning, Papa.” Rosie dropped her armload onto the counter and fetched the espresso maker from the cabinet. With an old-fashioned coffee grinder, she milled enough of the dark beans for several miniature cups. “You found your newspaper,” she said over her shoulder, covering the nutty-colored grains with water, and then plugging in the coffee pot.

“Yes, Rosalia. I had to walk to the curb to get it. Your mother has this and my coffee ready for me every morning.” He snapped the newspaper, making a point.

“I’m sorry, Papa. What about Joseph?”

“He needs his rest, Rosalia. This is an important year for him. He decides what to do with his life.”

What about me? Don’t I get to rest? Don’t I get to decide?

The questions dangled at the tip of her tongue, almost spilling out of her mouth. But she stopped the words from coming, remembering the first commandment of the Montesano household: thou shalt not disrespect thy elders.

Instead, she responded, “I’d like to go to medical school, Papa.”

“Medical school,” Emmanuel spat from behind the paper. “Such big dreams. Do you realize how much time is spent in the making of a doctor? You should concentrate on finding a good man . . .”

Rosie sighed, shutting out the rest of her father’s lecture. They had been down that road before.

“A good man would be nice . . . someday,” she replied. “But what I really want is to be a pediatrician. Papa, I would make a good doctor.”

“Yes, well . . .” He neatly folded his paper, placed it into his briefcase, drained the diminutive cup of coffee and with a quick peck on her forehead, was out the door.

Not a word was mentioned about the missing mother. Rosie was overcome by sadness, choked by it, but there were no more tears to shed. She felt shriveled, prunelike in her polyester uniform. She caught the back end of the Cadillac's trunk as it moved down the driveway. It stopped, brake lights tapped twice and then the car turned, passing in front of the living room window.

"What about Mama?" Rosie asked the empty room. She'd grown used to having conversations with the walls. Her eyes were fixed on the empty spot at the edge of the driveway, where the Cadillac had been moments ago, where her father had tapped the brakes twice, where he most likely had adjusted his rearview mirror, where he might have even caught a glimpse of his daughter watching him. "Papa," Rosie called out. "What are we going to do without her?"