



2011

Sugar sandwiches

K. Toole

Western Washington University

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Sugar Sandwiches

By

K. Toole

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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K. S. Toole

February 2011

Sugar Sandwiches

A Thesis

Presented to

The faculty of

Western Washington University

In partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

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ABSTRACT

Sugar Sandwiches is an excerpt from a larger body of work about the life story of a young girl named Katie. This portion covers three key days of both loss and gain. This story interrogates the mother/daughter, sibling relationship as it functions in the unorthodox situation of the drifter family of the 1970's. It is about the bonds that enable Katie to survive this world. Set in small town Kansas, on a local carnival midway we see what choices mothers, daughters and sisters will make in life and in this piece specifically - when the family is not only observed by but also challenged by outsiders. This is not a family that thinks about doing, but because they must, they do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm very grateful for all the support and guidance I received from my remarkable creative writing thesis committee. This piece wouldn't be as courageous as it is without the tireless support, patience, inspiration and encouragement of Kelly Magee, my committee chair. You are amazing. To Oliver de la Paz who was more than just a rocking boss but who also stepped in during the crunch to save the day. Brenda Miller who supports not just great stories but also the strong woman's voice.

This journey would not exist without my big sister Amy Ruth, my Grandma Alice and without the light of my life, my daughter. My thanks to my amazing friends along the road, from the mountain, to the spirits of the woods and for my tribe whose tireless faith brings me through the day.

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Part I – Day One

8:00 am, Garden City, Red Rose Motel. Room 4. June 1977.

He is outside.

8:15 am - Beverly

I can't tell you what it's like to love a man like Robert. I can't tell you that his laugh, so rarely heard, makes me want to sing because it doesn't. There's nothing special about his smile, the cut of his blond hair or the wrinkles on his young face or even the way he fucks me. His eyes are pale blue and his body is tall and bony, even wiry. Even after long hours in the sun, he doesn't tan. His hair is short, cut in a sharp angle and he shaves every day, no matter where we are. It is one of his rules. I love his hands.

I'm not that interesting either. I'm like those women Gertrude Stein wrote about in *Three Lives*. That's me. I work for a living. Anna was my mother's name. The girls don't understand. We all dream at night. I used to have real dreams, dreams about a life someplace. I wanted a house. I wanted to see the world. I don't have them anymore. My hands are broken.

"Wait for it girls." I watch Katie press her nose into the carpet. It's been a few years since I've seen this movie altogether. "I'm in all three of the crowd scenes."

"I'm watching, Mom," Susan says. "What's the name of it?"

"*Gunsmoke*."

"Were you famous, Mom?"

“No.” Watching the cowboy gallop across the desert makes me thirsty. Thank God for the invention of early morning motel movie channels. “But I could have been.” I run my fingers down the long silver chain around my neck to the wrought silver spider on the end. My mother gave it to me - she discovered I had it when Katie was a year old. She sent a letter wanting to know how much I got for it. I think about the empty bottle in the car, our last one.

“I want to be famous someday,” Susan says.

“Your girls’ Daddy is famous, did you know that?”

“Really?” Susan asks. “Do I look like him?”

Kat rolls her good eye towards the ceiling. Katie’s eyes were crooked when she was born. The girls get that from their father - that and their mouths have too many teeth like his does. We had to pull out two of their baby teeth, each girl, so their mouths wouldn’t hurt. Straightening Susan’s hair with my fingers, I start to weave the lengths of hair together into a braid from her seat on the floor in between my knees. The television is a fifteen-incher, bolted onto the wide, short two-drawer dresser. I’m fairly certain the chest-of-drawers is also chained to the wall.

“Yes really. He was the first guy to get shot off of a horse in the movie the Wild Bunch. He’s written some books too.” The Red Rose Inn in Garden City has pink carpet that was new when John Dillinger was passing through here.

“Wait for it girls, I think this is it.” Peering over Susan’s head at the snowy screen of television without glasses is becoming a problem. Someday.

I twist my head to look behind me and watch Kat pick up the receiver on the green telephone, the O shape of her mouth moves as she talks silently to the imaginary

person on the other end. She puts her fingers in the holes of the rotary dial and spins it. The cord that runs from the phone into the wall is gone. Robert needed it to tie something down in the engine of the car or the trunk or something. “Why don’t you come and see this?” We spent twelve dollars on this room, which is more than we’re allowed, but that cop was circling our car so closely we had to get inside. We had a bus before this, usually a campground or a place in the woods will do. When you have kids in a car, people notice. Adults alone and no one cares.

Kat nods with a tilt of her head to one side and smiles at me while she continues to speak into the receiver, twisting the spiraled cord around her fingers.

“You could bring that phone over here,” I say. “It’s a good movie. They turned it into a television series, though I’ve only seen a few episodes.”

“Ouch,” Susan grunts as I bend into get a closer look at the screen, accidentally giving her hair a yank.

“Wait for it...”

“Were you in a lot of movies?” Susan asks.

“No. Not really.”

“She was in a lot of movies,” Kat pipes in, having snuck up to my elbow to put her hand on my shoulder.

I jump away and drop Susan’s braid. “Jesus, Katie why do you always have to sneak up on people?”

“I do not sneak up on anyone.”

“Just make some noise when you’re coming up on someone.”

“I make plenty of noise.”

“Are you seriously arguing with me?”

“No, Mom. I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Susan twists her body to make a face at Kat.

“Shut up, Suz.” She sticks out her tongue.

“You shut up.” I watch Susan do some kind of gesture with her fingers. They’ve started playing this game where they communicate with each other with their hands.

“Will both of you shut up?” I pull Susan’s head to look at the TV. “Turn it up, Kat.” Sometimes I can’t believe that these are my children, that they only follow us around waiting for crackers and milk. I don’t remember giving birth. Susan came first and is blond with a round face. Katie is small for her age, thin and a brunette. Eleven and nine years old, respectively; I am only forty-three. I remember the places we used to be more like scenes in a film - so long ago that they feel like another universe.

“Yes’m,” Kat says. “In a minute. You never answered her question.”

“What question?”

“Does she look like him?” Kat asks.

“Who?”

“Our Dad?”

“Not really. But you definitely look like him.”

“So, I’ll be the one who ends up famous?”

“No, you won’t.” Susan sticks her thumb on her nose and wiggles all five fingers.

I know what that one means but let it slide.

Kat steps forward to turn up the volume just a little bit on the television.

“Who needs a remote control TV girls, I have you two babies.”

“What kind of movies were you in? Where they all Westerns?” Susan always manages to shift the lower half of her body without moving her head when I’m working on her hair.

“The kind we aren’t old enough to see,” Kat says. I shift the braid into my left hand and give Katie a resounding smack on the face and watch her head wobble only slightly. She doesn’t make eye contact. She used to cry. At least Kat is still shorter than me. I have a feeling she’ll outgrow me.

“Don’t get sassy, girl.”

“Do you love us, Mom?” Kat asks.

“Of course I love you girls.” I reach into my pocket to pull out a rubber band to wrap around the tail of Susan’s hair. “What kind of question is that to ask your mom?”

“We love you, Mom,” Susan says laying her hand on my foot and I pat her on the head. I check the face of the clock on the wall. Rob is out front trying to get the carburetor right. The thermostat should be in at the garage in the morning. We ordered it priority from Topeka. We’re getting a ride into the fairground with Grace for work in about an hour.

“Look, look girls,” I say, bending towards the screen. “Wait for it, wait for it. This is it! It’s right up... here.” More hand signals as Susan moves away from me. Kat nods, points her thumb at something and moves, too. I never understand them.

“That’s the back of my head, right there.” I press my finger onto the screen drawing a line in the heavy dust.

“So like, Mom,” Kat begins leaning into the screen. “Where are you going?”

“I’m not going anywhere. It’s just a movie.”

“But what was your motivation?”

“I never thought about it.” I slide back onto the mattress to sit on my hands. They suggested that to me back in Fort Worth at the support group. I watch the figures cross the screen and the soundtrack rises as the horses gallop through the crowd. “Where did you learn about a thing like motivation, Kat?”

“I figured it out on my own.”

“Motivation is a big word for you to just pop up out of nowhere.”

“It was on the vocabulary list.”

“Where?”

“The one you gave us in the last town.”

“Show me.”

“What is my motivation for telling you where the list is?” A wrinkle appears between her eyes.

I am too tired to even raise my hand. I don't have time for this shit. “I don't care anymore Kat.” She must've had sugar this morning. I have a strict rule of no sugar in my house. I read a book about how dangerous sugar is to the long term health of the body, to the teeth and not to mention what it does to Kat's attitude. I won't have that kind of junk in my house.

“You have to be going somewhere, motivation is your reason for getting to that place,” Kat jumps in again.

“Why do I have to be going somewhere?”

“So you know when you get there,” Kat says.

“Some place.” I need a cigarette. “Are you girl’s hungry?” They never hear me. I watch their language but I can’t seem to get it. I even made some notes about it in my book a few months ago but, well, we have to work and I just couldn’t keep up with it.

“There’s always a place,” Kat says.

“What do you mean?”

“Like when do you know you’ve gotten somewhere,” she continues, careful to stay closer to the television than the foot of the bed. “So you can stop. It’s a destination.”

“A destination. A place,” Susan adds.

“You girls are my place.”

“How can people be a place?” Kat asks, putting her hand on her hip. Susan takes her right hand, places her thumb on the ring finger and taps her nose. Kat returns the gesture without the tap. That one means something sweet.

“They just are.”

“But...” Kat starts again. The attitude on this kid is something else. I think she’s going to spend her life pissing people off. “But, Mrs. Albert in the school in Mobile had a whole corner of her room set up like a special place. It had walls and couches and a play kitchen like Gram’s, only with rubber eggs and everything. It was a kiddie space but you know - it’s a home. That’s what a place is. It is a house.”

“Robert is our place. You are my place. You are home.”

“Home. When will we have a house again?” I watch Susan wiggle all five fingers as fast as possible over her head.

“Last I checked there’s a roof over your head right now.”

“So, Grammy is a place?” Kat asks.

“No, Grammy is not a place. This is our home.”

“This?” she asks and I watch her roll her eye.

“Goddamn it Kat, what is this new obsession with place? This is our place. We are us and that’s enough.”

“I’m hungry,” Susan says, standing in front of the TV.

Kat pulls on her ear saying, “Places are important.”

“Shut up, Kat.” I run my fingers through my hair. “There are some crackers in my pur-” Susan lays her hand on my knee at the sound of the footsteps outside of the door.

The door opens silently and the sunlight pours in around his towering frame and I take him in like a long deep drink.

“What’re you useless women doing this morning?” His finger scratches the side of his nose.

“Just getting ready for work,” I tilt further back and slide my right knee just to the side so he can see the crotch of my black trousers. Mother and her country club set would be appalled. I smile briefly. *On the left of the plate are placed the table fork, the fish fork, and the oyster or melon fork, if required. Dessert cutlery – spoon and fork – are placed between the plate and the glasses, with the handle of the spoon towards the right and the handle of the fork to the left.*

“You girls are so fucking lazy,” he says. “We gotta be ready to leave at 9 and its 8:30 now.” His voice is too deep for his young body. He taught himself to talk like that when he was over there, you know, over *there*.

“Maybe we could hit the diner on the corner for some cold cereal?” I smile watching him pull out and pack the red Marlboro hard case. Kat - two fingers tapping the forehead and a big grin. If I had time, I’d make her quit smoking. When school starts up again in the fall, I’ll put a stop to it altogether. Shouldn’t start that shit until you’re in your teens at least.

The large table knife, the fish knife, and the soup-spoon are placed to the right of the plate.

“Mom,” Kat asks with a quick scratch to her neck. “What’s for breakfast?”

“You girls can get breakfast at work.” Robert says as he kicks his black work boots across the room with a thump on the hollow wall.

“I’m hungry now,” she says.

“Shut up, Katie,” Susan says, softly.

“Fuck you,” Kat says equally softly. With a groan I stand up, give Kat a solid smack on the back of her head, pushing her towards the open doorway.

“You girls go outside to play.”

“But.”

“Get outside, little girl.” Robert says, laying his long fingers on Susan’s arm and shoving her in the general direction of the door. I love the way his belt sounds when it’s coming undone.

“Why should I bother to do laundry, Robert? You just get grease and dirt all over everything. You’re a pig.”

In general use, both spoon and fork are held horizontally by balancing them between the first knuckle of the middle finger and the tip of the index finger while the thumb steadies the handle. Kat always knows where to find food. They'll be fine.

I go on picking at him. I know I shouldn't but it's compulsive. "What's the matter, can't figure out what's wrong with the car," I adjust the collar of my button down shirt so that it is crooked, "...baby?"

"I know what's wrong with the car."

"Grease, nothing washes out grease from that shade of blue. You shouldn't have worn your nice shirt out there."

"Don't start with me. We just need to tweak the engine a bit. Get that thermostat in at the hardware store and we'll be on our way."

"Are we going west?" Katie asks leaning against the doorjamb.

"Get out."

"It's hotter in the east so," she shifts from one bare foot to the other. "We should go west."

"Go outside, baby girl," he says.

"I am not your baby."

"That's right, Robert. She isn't your baby, is she?"

"Don't start with me, woman." I love that tone of voice, sometimes. Sometimes it goes too far. But if I can control it – then it's goddamn brilliant.

"Mom?"

"I'm done asking you, Kat. Get out!"

8:40 am - Katie

Stepping onto the cracked sidewalk outside is like being dropped out onto a frying pan. Tumbling, essentially, from pitch darkness into the overblown world of asphalt and morning sun is a rude wake up. Except this motel doesn't have asphalt, it's just cheap gravel and a load of weird silty dirt. It isn't sugar and it isn't sand, it's not even brown, just silty like they got it from a quarry on a blue-light-special. I check these things. And it's too damn hot. Hotels have ice machines. Motels do not.

Firm elbow thump to Susan's right arm. Two more steps and I'm off the walkway. One, two with a short hop and I am up on the aluminum pipe rails that function as the only kind of fence here. My toes curl around the wide metal. I am going on ten. That's important too.

“Why do you always pick fights with her, Kat?”

I can orient myself when I find the sun, but otherwise I get lost. If I know where the sun comes up then I know where east is and from there I know where west is. That's important because Grammy is always west. Colorado and then south into New Mexico. The cement from the narrow sidewalk was hot under my bare toes. Baby blue sky sits on top of a long flat stretch of decaying grass as far as the eye can see. Everything is quiet.

“You suck rotten eggs.” Suzie thumps me hard in the back of my head with her finger. Picturing the way her middle finger flips off of her thumb makes me smile. Susan is a way better flicker than I am.

“Fuck you.”

In front of our motel room - the walkway to be specific - the hood of our 1966 four-door Town Sedan Ford Fairlane is propped up with half of a broomstick and the 272

cubic inch, V-8 Engine is putting off heat. I know things about cars. Robert talks about them all the time. This car will start up fine but overheats really fast. He can fix it, he just doesn't want to do the work.

"Why do you always pick fights with her?" she ducks between the rails walking toward the slender fins of the car. Vocabulary word: slender.

"I don't," I say.

"Motivation? C'mon, who asks a question like that?"

"I do." I know I shouldn't ask but I like knowing stuff.

"You hungry?" she asks.

"Is that all you think about Suz, food?"

"Pretty much." With a quick glance up and down the space I see only doors and a small office with a hand painted sign propped up outside.

Vacancy, Cash Only.

Hourly Rates Available

Above that there's a large plywood cut out of a rose with faded paint and a neon vacancy sign. Why there are two vacancy signs eludes me, except that the neon one is probably broken.

There are no other cars, here or anywhere. No farms, no farmers, no dogs and no trees. No trees means no birds. Two blocks to the right there's a small grocery store and about half a mile to the left there is all night diner. No wind. No smells. No cars in either direction.

"What do you want me to do about it?" I swing my leg over the rail, "you left the crackers inside."

“I think there’s something in the back seat I think.”

“So?” I roll the other over so that I’m perched like a robin balancing on my rear on the bar. The metal is warm but not hot. I like it. If it were higher I could try to do a cherry drop but that’s as daring as I get.

“Well?” she asks.

“It’s not my job to get it.” Turning my body into a large T at my perch, I put one finger on my nose like in a sobriety check. Sobriety is not a word from a vocabulary list.

Her right hand swings through the air with a wide flourish of her arm, doing a weird bend with her index finger and she says: “You’re the climber.” Like a pointy, only not.

“What was that?”

“What?” she asks.

“The thing with your finger?” A crooked grin crosses her face as I touch my right hand to my nose before moving to mimic her special bend with my index finger. Like an L. I like letters. Or is it more like a hook? South and then west would make a hook. Southwest into New Mexico from here.

“But you’re hungry.”

“I am not hungry anymore.” Standing in front of me one foot firmly and then the other, she levels me with a stern frown.

“You’re thinking. I can tell.”

“How?”

“Your bad eye wanders. Are you practicing numbers or your states?”

“What day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

“Spelling.” Monkey feet are important when you have to climb stuff. Something clunks against the window from inside of the room, behind me.

When Suzie climbs she gets way up high. I don’t like to go too high but I climb faster. “Are we going to be in Texas soon?” I ask.

“What’s in Texas?”

“Nothing. It’s just south.”

“Everything with you is geography,” she says.

“Fuck you.”

Suzie frowns crookedly, “Fuck you back.” The bell on the telephone dinks a little bit as it flies into the door. That’s going to leave a mark.

“I want to go home, Suzie.”

“Your brain spins when you’re hungry. Go climb in the car and get something to eat.” The lines form at the edge of her mouth like a puppet.

“Get your own grub.”

She climbs into the car, pulling herself up onto the cream - - or once cream colored - - door panel and pushing herself through the open window. I watch her bum pop up like a soccer ball float in water as she slides down into the car.

Hopping down with a leap, I follow her and lean up against the metal of the door. My big toe leaves a dent in the dirt. I listen to her root around. Listen to mom cry out and start to sob.

Suzie is a loud eater even when the food is quiet. The brown paper sack is full of croutons: plain, un-herbed, crunchy, croutons.

“*Craoutons*,” I whisper opening my mouth wide. *Crootons maybe?*

We found them wedged underneath the driver’s seat. I’m careful to not touch the edges of the bag when I reach into the sack. It’s noisy and the morning is quiet. There hasn’t been another car by since we got out.

“Where’d they come from?” I ask.

“What?”

“The croo-tons.” I’ve decided pronouncing it like sauerkraut just sounds dumb, *ooo* is the right sound.

“The car, stupid,” she says.

“I know they came from the car.” I reach into the sack for another one. “Where did they come from before that?”

“I think Mom swiped them.”

“No. They’re like day-olds.” Old is an easy word to pronounce.

“Day-olds?” she giggles. “How can you tell?”

I’m working a crust out from beneath my lower front teeth when I say, “What we get to eat is cheap, and so of course they’re old and stale.” I open my mouth awkwardly and produce a large crust of bread, “I think I broke a tooth on that last one.”

“Hey, Kat.”

“What?” I could swallow the bread chunk whole but suck on it instead.

“He left the keys in the ignition. We could go,” she says.

“Nah. The car will overheat before we get to the state line.”

Mid-afternoon. County Fair.

I have never found anything that doesn't have some kind of smell, except maybe rocks. There's one of those creeping down my butt crack right now.

"Three shots for a quarter," the old carnie broad barks over the endless sounds of bells, accordion music and whistles. I wipe the sweat out of my eyes and peer out at the rush of townie revelers through the small gap in the heavy-gauge, rainbow canvas.

"Pop a blue one and win a lovely teddy. Yellow'll get ya a shiny trinket for the lady," she goes on, her deep voice heavy with years and hooch. We can't dust the yellows because the powder is too easily spotted so they aren't worth much more than a blue beanbag or a couple of palm tree coasters. They get cheap plastic shit on whites and then they try for more. Bait. I can't dust the dark ones either. I'd give anything for a giant plate of pork chops and sauce right now, with a cold glass of milk. Stop. Stop thinking about it.

I used to love red balloons. I shift from one butt cheek to the other and in the small space I try to reach behind myself to find the rock. I'm wedged in sitting cross-legged under the corner of the counter top. Right underneath the square that is one end of the counter. Canvas to my right and left, at right angles with a gap to my left, back to the midway; like being put in the corner of Mrs. Albert's second grade classroom last year but under a board and with canvas for walls. I'm surrounded by plastic whistles, tin jewelry and pink teddy bears. I can't twist my torso very well in this space so I just can't get to the problem rock. How the fuck did it get in there?

Taking a deep breath, I inflate the balloon in my hand, pull the heavy rubber taut, and push the end through the tight elastic. The blue ones are easier to dust with ladies

neutral tone face powder so the darts slide off. I tuck a red one onto the last slot on the pegged board loaded with balloons as another rack is lowered under the counter and I set to work.

I hate this gig. I've been blowing balloons up all day. I don't know this lady from Adam. She showed up with her rig, asked around for a kid to hire, and my mom offered me. She wanted to know who names their daughter Kat - like I'm named after an animal or something. I like my name. Ten dollars for twelve hours and dinner, that's my going rate. If I get lucky the sweat trickling down my back will wash the rock away. Mom is working the Ferris wheel line. It's just a little wheel, only eight cars and thirty feet up but I won't go on it. Nobody knows I'm scared of heights 'cept for Suz.

"I'm serious," I call from my spot underneath the heavy plywood countertop. The smell of the chain-smoking old broad that hired me for the evening is sickening. Spell broad. Cheap ass clove cigarettes reek. Now Menthol Marlboro, they are the shit. Just impossible to find here - gotta be east in Louisiana or out west like Wyoming or Colorado for those. People here smoke straight tobacco, cheaper the better. Lucky-Strike or store brand.

"There's a rock up my butt-crack," I call out to the old woman. No answer. I know it. I squish my face into a pucker and take a deep breath and blow up the green balloon. Townies love balloons. They love the glittering lights and the carnies barking at them. They like the idea that for a dollar's worth of darts they can win a teddy bear the size of a medium dog. Likely infested with insects, but that's not my problem. Forcing my index finger through the loop is getting harder as my skin gets more raw. Each balloon takes me closer to the end of the day.

“It’s a big rock!” I try again.

At least I’m not working with Jimmy today. Last week Jimmy told me that all Ferris wheels are haunted by the guy who invented them; that he hung himself from one of the contraptions after he split with his old lady. The workers will always fill up all but one of the cars with these townie kids and teenagers who want to go up high and swap spit. According to the legend, if they fill up the last one, Mr. Ferris curses the whole rig and something horrible happens. Jimmy is not a smell you want to imagine and he’s way worse than a rock up your butt crack.

If I twist just right I can peer through a gap in the canvas and watch the people walk by. All I can see are shoes. I love shoes. You can learn anything you want about people from their shoes. There’s a Green Stamp Store in town that mom says she might take me to during a slow hour. Some shoes smell bad but I make sure that mine never do. I only wear them when I’m at work. I want a pair of red shoes. I know I’ll never get them. I get black or navy blue because they’re the cheapest and hide the dirt the best. Someday I’ll have a closet full of new white shoes too.

It’s only when the sole of a black Converse sneaker kicks me between the shoulder blades that I remember what I’m supposed to be doing. Most shoes are just shoes but Converse, they have slick bottoms. I know these shoes are Converse because of the way the sole hits me. Flat, slick and they leave no marks in the ground for tracking. Converse. I’ll have to look that one up in mom’s pocket dictionary and see if it means anything. I know that on every shoe it says “All Star”. I like them but they’re a size bigger than me.

“Shit!” the young male voice groans. “Goddamn it.” The voice cracks on the *I*. Anyway, a voice cracking means, like, thirteen and in townie years that makes him still a chump cutting his teeth on frozen green beans.

Emmm, I, Crooked letter, crookedletter crookedletter I hunchback hunchback... begins to roll around in the back of my head. Mississippi. We’re homeschooled. There’s a song for every state in the country. What kind of song would you have for a name like Kansas?

“Don’t cuss, Charlie,” a mother’s stern voice cuts in. I hope it’s his mother. The voice is round and deep like a country well. She sounds like moms are supposed to sound like.

I dig into the plastic bucket full of flat balloons and sort through for a blue one. It’s about that time. Blues are worth the most points and are the least inflated. Depending on the shade of blue they’re also the hardest to dust with powder. When dusted the darts slide off and we give fewer prizes. They’re usually ordered a half a size bigger than the lighter colors (so are green and red) so that they can be under-inflated but still look the same size as the rest. They’re also ordered from a different company so that the colors look paler and hence, fully inflated and at fifteen cents for a box of a hundred, we’re always clearing a profit - - or at least the Broad is always making money. I pay her ten cents for every one I accidentally pop. I wonder what I should charge her for the rock that is probably turning into a diamond in my underpants right now.

The Converse nails me again. “Jeez Ma, I stepped in shit.” If he tries to wipe off the bottom of his shoe on my back again I’m going to come out and kick his ass. Peering up through the gap in the canvas I see long legs that reach too far. That and upon

inspection his feet are ginormous so, I might not quite kick his ass, but I'll think of something.

“Quit wiping your shoe on the nice lady's tent.” I grin, thinking of the fifth tucked into the *nice lady's* grey tube sock above her grocery store brand black lace up sneakers. She has a cheap plastic flask with a big scratch on one side. I want a silver one someday. Real silver with my name engraved on it.

“She don't care,” he says and I listen to him snort some kind of horky dude lugey up his oversized nose.

“Well, I do. I don't want people thinking I raised my son in a barn.” Peeking through the gap gives me a shot of part of her pants. Bright green, plaid polyester slacks. I am transfixed.

“Nah,” he says coughing briefly, “you just work in one.”

“The Blue Barn Grille is a perfectly respectable place.”

“Why'd you have to get a job?” he asks.

Whose mom doesn't have a job?

“You needed new shoes. We got them,” she says.

“I never asked you for them.”

“Why are you sassing me?” she asks and I can feel her shifting her considerably enormous green pants for a fight.

“I'm not.”

“Well, I didn't raise a barbarian.” She pauses to rummage in what I am certain is a giant poly-ethyl mock leather purse. “Be respectful of this lady's property.” I listen as she

unwraps a butterscotch candy and pops it into her mouth. I know its butterscotch because of the way the wrapper sounds. Butterscotch candies are a spiritual experience.

“You two want to play or what?” the Broad asks.

“It’s just a carnie tent, Ma. It is not a real business.”

“It is where the lady works. Feminism in action. So, it is a real business,” Mother says. Feminism.

“No it isn’t.”

“Fifty cents will get you three shots.” She breaks into a heavy smokers cough. I watch her bend and look into the bright white hair on her scalp as she reaches for the flask before pausing, thinking, and straightening the leg of her too short jeans instead. “A dollar will get you ten.”

“It’s just shit, Ma. Who cares what they think?”

“Come on, sonny – win your momma a bit of gold.” Sure, he’ll get the good darts, the super dull ones. I grin and tilt sideways against the cardboard and close my eyes.

The shoe kicks me again. This time I throw my weight back against it giving it a shove right back. I nearly topple over backwards but catch myself on the box. The canvas is not properly secured on the bottom of the frame. That’s a detail worth knowing.

“What the...” thwack, I can hear a thump. I hope it wasn’t on the head. Those suck.

“You know you want to give your pretty momma a gift.” She tries again. “Or maybe you have a girlfriend?” I can feel the old lady smile. Well, actually, I can smell it. When you’re missing that many teeth there’s a special fragrance to it.

“We don’t want to play,” Mother says shifting from one sensible brown shoe to another. I can hear the rubber soles squeak in the way that only heavily soled women’s shoes squeak – particularly underneath bright green pants. They are the kind of pants that you can imagine haunting your nightmares twenty years in the future. You’d have to see them to believe it. I know her pocketbook is empty.

“Hey, Ma. I actually think there’s someone down there.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, who’d fit down there?”

“Seriously,” I can feel his body bend as he begins to crouch. Damn townies. I get busted and things will really go to hell.

“You folks here for the bluegrass concert?”

“Yes,” Mother says. I hunker all the way forward and hold my breath. When we got caught in Montana it was six weeks of sleeping in the Baptist Ministers basement, two visits with a judge, three supervised visitations and one unsupervised before we were able to make a run for it. Supervised isn’t as much fun to say as you would think even if it is easier to spell than motivation.

“Ma, I’m not kidding.”

“That show’s about to start,” the Broad says.

I listen to the coins begin to jingle in his pocket. “Maybe we will play a round.”

“You don’t want to play,” the Broad says.

“Let’s go,” Mother says.

“I’m not kidding, Ma.”

I’ve stopped breathing. The broad reaches down to rattle the balloon rack, as if I didn’t already know I am a secret. “There’s something alive down there,” he says.

“There’s nothing alive down there,” the Broad says.

“Don’t be stupid, Charlie.”

“Ma.”

“Better catch that show,” she coughs again.

“There’s a person Ma! Who’d work in a hole like that?”

“We’re leaving,” Mother repeats, and I listen to another thud. Poor kid. She shouldn’t hit her son. It occurs to me to wonder if he has a brother. Nobody notices anything.

I listen to the Converse sneakers shuffle away in the packed dirt of the midway track along with the squeaking sensible brown shoes. Amid all of the noise I am tracking them. It’s only when I know that they’re gone that I begin to breathe. That moment was enough to turn a rock into a gemstone if anything ever was. I get back to work on the blue one.

The pegged balloon board is yanked out as I’m about ready to slide it into the slot. “Get out, little girl.” The balloon falls out of my hand and I see her tar-stained hand reach for the plastic flask. “You’re fired.”

I’m beginning to slide forward onto my knees, and ah, the rock moves. Oh shit, not in a good way. Damn. Damn. Damn. “You owe me money.”

“I don’t owe you shit.” The Broad swallows hard as she works the cap on the flask loose. The cheap booze sloshes in the container as she hoists it to her lips.

“You owe me. I’ve been here since ten this morning.”

“You’re lucky I don’t take that lost money out of your hide.”

“For fifty lousy cents? My mom’d kill you.”

“She’d pay me to teach you a lesson. How long you been at this shit, girly? You know better than to be obvious.”

“Five dollars,” I am not going to stand up. She’ll be stuck with me until she pays up. Settle in and ignore the rock. My body rocks to the side with the first kick to my shoulder. Duck head and slouch. Discount grocery store shoes or no, they hurt. Right myself. Hang on. One more, this time to a rib. Maybe not a slouch because my arms are too far forward. By the third kick I’ve got my arm settled in securely to shield the belly. It’s when she’s reaching down to pull me out and really whale on me that I know I need to roll out through the gap in the canvas and into the crowd. Damn townies don’t notice shit. No five bucks either.

Mom doesn’t make her pay me.

Part II – Day Two

Mid-morning, County Fair

I've decided to hit the guy in the black Levi's. I mean who in their right mind wears baggy jeans? His short, thin frame is walking slowly in overpriced, new Acme boots. It's easy to tell that his shoes are new because he takes shorter strides that hit the ground fast like they hurt. That and the idiot didn't take the price sticker off of the insole where it was stuck when he bought them at Kmart. He's following the heavysset blond girl in the blue cotton skirt. She doesn't interest me at all. Normally, I wouldn't hit a schmuck who shops at Kmart either but I've seen the wad of cash he keeps flashing hoping the girl will see. I mean dude, he deserves it.

The sun is setting in Garden City and the lights are picking up speed, or at least that's what it feels like. Midway lights, they scream at you, if you're paying attention that is. The bright white, yellows and reds flash in a way that burns your eyeballs. This isn't like a big State Fair either. Just a small rodeo grounds outfit county fair with like five acres of nothing interesting. I'm wearing my new lace up sneakers and nice jeans. Townies look for dirty rug rats to steal, never a kid who looks like she knows what soap is.

"Hey Jimmy," I say, sliding up to his counter while keeping my eye on New Boots over at the water-gun racetrack. Jimmy is running the bag toss rig. He takes what work he can get and this is the outfit that showed up looking for a hire. Jimmy's shoes are

wide and black but I don't think they started out that way. His are loafers - no laces - too funny.

"Hey-ya super sport," he says and I dodge the spittle with every "s" he utters. "What're ya doing here?" *Esssss*, I think to myself. *Esss teeee youuuuu veeeeee*. Feeling my mouth make the shapes of the letters, I smile a little. *Dubbbbaayouuu*.

"You hungry?" I ask more out of habit than intention. It's too busy for a food run.

"Nope," he says with an audible slurp. I don't look at him. Once you've seen the over-ripe tongue trace the line of his front teeth atop the cracked dry lips you know enough to look away when he speaks - just never completely away. Always know where Jimmy's hands are, that's one of the rules. Maintain a good distance. Like, 'ten-miles-plus-a-garden-hose and the ability to maintain a high-speed run if you have to' kind of distance.

Lights like these, midway glitterers, make guys like New Boots kind of stoned. Their day shift eyeballs can't adjust to the flashing and when you blend it with the howling of the wolves (I read that in a Jack London book, *White Fang*) also known as the carnie barkers well, he's as good as gone. Or at least, his money is. I followed him from the entrance. I like to wait there for the easiest marks. Sometimes I wait for hours, just watching. You have no idea how easy it is to set one up or that the target has almost always been set from the moment he bought his ticket at the gate.

"You trackin', Kat?" Jimmy asks, noticing my distraction.

"Gotta roll the minute this guy moves on, ok."

"I can't believe we're in Kansas," he says with a long slide over the name of the state, "Kansssaaaasssss," he says stretching it out a second time. "We were supposed to

stay in Texas this summer.” *This episode is brought to you by the letter S.* If I twist my tongue just right it makes an O. I just thought of a song for the state of Kansas.

“Huh?”

“Just gotta stay out of Topeka,” he mutters. His hands fidget with the yellow lanyard the locals make the workers wear this week. The round fingers twist the silver clasp over the tag. It reads “Staff” in large navy blue letters. Topeka. Is that with a C or with a K?

“Think it’ll rain tonight?”

“Gotta stay clear of Topeka,” he mumbles.

I set my fingers onto the plywood deck and hoist myself up for a better view over the developing crowd. I wish I had the money for a pop. I love bubbles.

“It’s a shame you ain’t working for me, girl.”

“Huh?” The racetrack music has started across the way.

“I said it’s a shame you ain’t working for me.”

New Boots is not winning.

Jimmy is saving for his own outfit. For now he just slides into the back of the truck that hauls the hot dog stand and rides along from town to town. He’s a runner, too. New Boots isn’t one. Or at least I don’t think he’ll be much of one - though a good run would be nice today. I have new baby blue shoes to go with my new jeans and I like running almost as much as I like climbing. Mine are new shoes that don’t have a price sticker on them (they came brand new in a plastic bag from the S & H Green Stamp Store). I did not get to go with mom to pick them out.

“Do you think it’ll rain?” I ask squinting up at the strange blue sky and the sooty clouds rolling in from the west.

“No.” He scratches behind his ear. “Don’t rain in Kansas in June.”

New boots pulls out his wad of bills, this time it’s for a short brunette with white lipstick on. At least now he’s swimming in his own league. He’s sliding a single from the center of the roll of money. I watch the twenties from my perch, at least three in a wad of smaller bills - it’s hard to tell from here. The crowd is thin or thin for a Saturday afternoon in a hick town, so he’s not too hard to follow. Three twenties would be a great haul.

“You’re so full of shit, Jimmy.”

“What?”

“Mom filled up the whole Ferris wheel last night and nothing happened.” I pause, suddenly realizing that there’s a wad of gum on the far end of Jimmy’s counter. Learning to look for danger everywhere was a fast lesson from a long time ago.

“Something will.” He wipes the dribble off of his chin with his blue pull over sweatshirt.

“Like hell it will.”

“Why’d she go and do a thing like that?” he asks.

“It was the last set with, like, the last two people in line.”

“That was not a good thing, girl. Super stupid.” I will spend the rest of my life afraid of the letter S - I swear - I can tell.

“Well, the sss-un is still out and I’m about to sss-core big.” I grin, slurp a little at him and cross my eyes in spite of the fact that it hurts when I do. Fucktard Jimmy. “Have you seen ssss-Suzie?”

“Something bad is going to happen, Katie. Something always does.”

He doesn’t even notice me. “Fuck you,” I snap.

“Just the same, lay low, Katie.” I watch him pick at some piece of food behind his front tooth with his fingernail. “I wouldn’t want to see you get in trouble.”

“Suzie?” I try again. She’s a runner tonight. She runs food, money, change and drugs from one place to another. A gopher. Go-fer. Spell that one if you can. Making an F sound with a P just doesn’t make any sense to me.

Nobody ever plays at Jimmy’s rig. The only thing winning over here is the smell, and that’s enough to keep most of the players at bay. It’s when I stretch my arms up over my head and out in a wide ark that I feel the raindrop - it isn’t raining anywhere else. Goddamn Jimmy. The quick scan on the horizon tells me something else. Shit, I’m down and off the counter at a run towards the opposite side of the midway, having lost sight of Boots. What distracted me? I don’t know. Gotta run.

“Don’t forget your friends, Miss Katie,” he hollers. Jimmy is with us everywhere. He’s one of us. Just another fucking carnie.

Weaving my way through the crowd, I find my way to the last place I saw Boots. He was losing at the track. The crowd has grown in the ten minutes I spent at Jimmy’s. I see a lot of buckles from where I walk. I’m not very tall and kind of spindly. Well, anyways, that makes it easier to wade through these people. I scan the ground for debris, the shiny kind,

along with an eye for new shoes. Shoes. You wouldn't believe the number of people who wear brand new shoes to the fair. Dumbfucks.

The noises on the midway are special, too. There are big bells and little bells, whistles, music and people yelling, singing, laughing and the occasionally bawling brat. Even grease pits make noise if you're listening. Bad Country music always seems to float up from the asphalt like steam out of manure from the livestock building on a cool morning.

Catching sight of a woman with a large denim bag sets my new course for now. It's one of those purses made out of a pair of old blue jeans. Like a butt swung over the shoulder, hanging at the waist, no zipper, open at the top and all the way to the bottom, literally. Townies are easy marks. Women keep their wallets in the same places. Two seconds and I'm out with a blue rubber change purse and a roll of mints. Two shakes and I know there's paper money inside. "Essss" I repeat with a smile under the flashing lights, bells and whistles.

If you live out here long enough you don't hear all the sounds. I only see shoes and money. I see worn out shoes, new shoes and ridiculous shoes with four-inch heels. There's a dude wobbling from foot to foot in these bright blue platform shoes and wading through a murky pot-hole puddle and I laugh. Seriously, a dude!

Ah, I spot the white sandals that match the blue skirt heading into the beer hut and take the chance that Boots is following. I am not disappointed.

"Get over here, Katie!" I can hear my mother call over the crowd.

"I'm working," I shout back.

“Katie!” she goes again. I’m gonna pay for it, but I keep tracking for now. I know that by this time of day, she needs a fix. That and the weird grin along with a new limp.

I spot the girl in the blue skirt on the far end away from the canvassed entrance of the beer-shack. It takes me a few minutes to work my way through the crowded midway to the makeshift sidewalk to the entrance. I can feel the grains of the plywood floors and can almost hear them creak above the crowd and the bad country music in the distance. There’s a country cover band in the pit at the end of the way and man, do they suck. The girl is pulling first one foot and then the other out of her over-woven platform shoes.

“What’d’ya want, girl?” the man at the entrance asks. I look up to see the worn face of a middle-aged redneck, right down to the blue bandana and Caterpillar farm equipment baseball cap. Damn.

“I’m working,” I say, scanning the crowd for Boots. I still can’t believe that I lost him.

“Who are you?” his voice startles me.

“Nobody.” Good grief. I tilt sideways trying to get another look through the doorway. Only in Kansas would they have a bouncer on the fairgrounds in the morning. Damn prudes.

“We don’t allow kids in a place like this.”

“Are you kidding?” I finally lock on his frown with a glare of my own. He needs to eat less of those Kansas pork chops.

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“I’m just looking for my mom, she came in here.”

“The answer is no.”

“Lemme find my mom.”

“What’s her name?” he asks, while adjusting the keys in the front pocket of his black jeans. I hope its keys.

“Oh come on, it’s just a beer shack, you small town schmuck!” I watch his face contort in response. Oh fuck, I said it out loud. I think something dumb and then it comes out of my mouth.

“I’ll call her,” he says with a frown. The corners of his mouth are tight. “What’s her name?”

“Forget it,” I say.

“Your momma know you talk like that?” he asks.

“I’ve gotta roll.” I duck out from under his heavy hand as it reaches for me. He’s a guy who works for a living. I can tell by his calluses.

“Hey, where’re you going?” he shouts after me but I’m already gone. Boots isn’t worth a bust. They’d kick my family off the job and we need it.

11:45 am

Sliding in through the side flap is easy. Mom's working the ring toss as usual. Everything is a toss game on every midway, even the guns. The pop bottles are spinning crookedly on a turntable. When I help her in the mornings the bottles are set up in a perfect spiral pattern with just thin bits of wood wedged under their bases to make them crooked and some baby oil on the rims of the center glasses.

"Hey there, Kit-Kat." She scratches me on top of the head.

"Hiya, Mom." She climbs onto the secondhand barstool. One, two with a short hop, like me, she uses the bottom rung to sling her thin frame onto the vinyl seat. Another year and I think I'll be taller than her. I wasn't here to help her set up this morning. She's tired. "You are," coughing for emphasis, I put my hand on my hip and smile, "slender, Mom."

"Did you girls get breakfast?" Nothing.

"We were motivated to succeed." I smile my very brightest and tilt my head to one side and bend forward to try to catch her eye. The two c's in the middle (success) don't make sense but I'm learning.

She leans into her cigarette. "Were you followed?" She's picking at a piece of food in between her teeth using her overgrown, yellowing thumbnail.

"Followed?"

"No cops right. I thought I saw a blue shirt out there." Whatever it is that she lost behind that molar is in trouble.

"No. I'm always careful, no one followed me."

“You know how it is in these small towns. Cops follow kids, ya know. Be careful.”

“It’s a good thing Robert got the car running then isn’t it, Mom.”

“Only runs a few miles at a time Kit-Kat. We need that part,” she says.

I watch her run her fingers through her salt and pepper hair. It isn’t black but dark brown like mine. When I grow up I will not have a spider on a chain. I will have a fish.

“I got something.”

“Got what?”

“Something to eat.”

“Good girl,” she scratches her nose and quickly scans the crowd. “And your sister?”

“I think so.”

Her long fingers reach out to pull the long bit of brown hair from my face and she smiles. “Did you know I almost named you Anne?”

“No.”

“That’s a pretty name isn’t it? Raggedy-Anne you would’a been.”

“Yeah Mom, it is pretty.”

“We’ll eat out tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Be a good girl today. Get money.”

Leaning forward I get a good whiff of the menthol. I watch her long slim fingers work their way up and down the white paper, stroking it. When Robert smokes the paper

cigarette dangles from his lip like in a movie but my mom always holds hers in her left hand. She's right handed but she can use both hands. Ambi... ambi something or other.

“Out?”

“See if you can score something good out there tonight.”

“I will.”

“Get some stuff from Grace would you.”

“The usual?”

“Yes,” she says. “And something for pain.”

“The usual.”

Noon

Grace laughs in staccato, like a woodpecker on too much coffee. I can hear her from a block away. I am not currently a block away but I can hear her even over this crowd. The high pitched-notes hit at the empty places where you know that things are supposed to be funny but really aren't. Making my way through the heavy crowd, I squeeze through the tent flap to go into the back door of her food service trailer.

"I'd walk a mile for a Camel," pops through the old transistor radio.

"Two coffees, Grace," I say. The opening chords of the keyboard kick in for Iron Butterfly. "In-a-gadda-da-vita" slides quietly out the narrow doorway. Rock-n-roll music could get a person shot in this part of the world. I lean in and watch as she lays out a flour tortilla before using a spatula to spread out a layer of refried beans in the tortilla on top of the laminate surface before taking the day old (maybe two day old) ground beef and plopping it into the center.

"Two coffee," I repeat, more loudly.

"Are these for you, baby?" she asks heading for the door where I'm standing, stopping at the small silver mirror to check her make-up. I am not a baby.

"No," I say with a tug on my right ear (I do that when I'm thinking). "Well, one of them is for me."

"Who's the other one for?"

"Mom."

"Ah," she says, preening in the mirror to check the heavy pink goo on her lips. "I suppose you want a freebie?"

"Well, it is late enough for one."

“What time is it?”

“I dunno. It’s afternoon.”

“Look at the clock.” I hate clocks. “The big hand is pointing where?” No coffee is worth this. “You need to learn to tell the time, sugar.”

“I do not,” I shift from one foot to the other in my new shoes, feeling my toes wiggling in the canvas. I’ll grow into them.

“What’re you going to do when you start school in the fall?”

“I’m not going.”

“You guys are wintering with us in Florida, I think.” She shifts to the top of her toes to grab the tin box from the top shelf where she keeps everything. “The little hand points where?”

“Nowhere.”

“It starts with an M.”

“What does?”

“Where the little hand points. M. then and I and then and N.”

I know how to spell minutes. I learned that word ages ago.

“Tell me and I’ll give you your coffee for free.” A large brown bottle full of little white pills emerges from the tin.

“Yeah, sure you will.”

“I will.” She smiles, and I watch the mascara on her lashes flake off onto her pale cheeks. Mom is right. Grace puts it on with a spackle knife. “You need to know.”

“I can read just fine.”

“Reading isn’t everything.”

“Yes, it is.”

“How will you know what time to get up, or when to be home?” Grace is only a summer carnie. Grace’s husband Sam works in construction during the winters. This is what they do for fun. Ha.

“I need two coffee.” I watch the make-up gather in the crease over the scar on her lip as she frowns, leaning into in the mirror. The make-up doesn’t cover it.

“How much do you have?”

“I can give you two bits.” I remember the coin purse I snatched from the butt bag. I hope there are two quarters in it. I keep my loose change in my front pocket. Pulling it out I give it a quick squeeze and three quarters fall out. Nice. Reaching in, I find a five dollar bill wedged inside and folded up three times.

“Can I have a burrito too?”

“No. You don’t want one of those things,” she says. “I have some cheese sandwiches here for you.” Grace has a soft voice. She doesn’t smoke.

“No burrito?” I ask tilting my head again, knowing that I’m giving her my cutest angle. Vocabulary word: Skills.

“You don’t want one of these, girl. Your momma would kill me if you got sick.”

“She wouldn’t kill you.”

“No, honey. She wouldn’t kill me but I remember last time.”

So do I. Grace nods with her pity face, a tilt and a nod and a bad smile. The pity face pisses me off. “Nice dye job,” I say pointing to the emerging pitch-black roots underneath the now nearly orange hair. It was blonde a month ago, when she tried for red and then back to blonde. Now it’s orange. Not the good kind of orange either.

1:00 pm

I'm sitting underneath the wheels of the big semi that hauls the haunted house, chewing a day old sausage on a stick that Grace finally gave me for the spare quarter. I've downed my coffee and the other is sitting propped up on the inside of the big truck wheel. I'm not a big fan of Grace's cheese sandwiches because she uses the generic plastic-wrapped cheese. Mom will only make them with good cheddar and she grills them with real butter, not sausage on a stick. I've tucked my feet in under my legs- - Indian style the lady called it at the school in Texas. I've taken my new sneakers off and set them to the side. I like to keep them looking as new as possible because it makes my job easier. A thief in new shoes is a less threatening thief.

"Hey, Kat," Suzie says, crawling up behind me. God, in a small town like this there's no place to hide from anyone. "Saving your brand new shoes?" she smiles crookedly, gesturing towards the baby blue sneakers. Mom went to the store and got them for me. They're too big and the wrong color.

"Snark," I chirp at her. "What do you want?" It's a code word. Snark, that is, it means go away. I remember hearing that it was some kind of monster in a story too. *The Hunting of the Snark*. Lewis Carroll. Mom read it to us over this past winter in Texas.

"You should be out there working."

"People are allowed to eat." I stick my tongue out at her with a wad of chewed up grey sausage on it. Pop it back in and keep chewing. This is not fresh meat.

"Did you get lucky?"

"Nah, I was tracking this dude but I lost him."

“Then how are you eating? That’s not one of your trash can scavenges is it?” She makes a face.

“Not a scavenge,” I pause to swallow, making a drama of it thinking about my Adam’s apple sliding up and then down as it goes. I’m a girl so I don’t have much of an Adam’s apple but if I do it right it grosses her out just the same. “Ah!” I grin over my missing front tooth. “Grace cooked it.” Suzie’s two front teeth already fell out and grew back in.

“But when did she cook it?”

I shrug. “I dunno.”

“If you get sick I’m going to laugh.”

“I won’t get sick.”

“How do you know that?” Suzie says tucking her thumbs into the loops of her jeans.

“Grace promised me I wouldn’t.”

“Ya, sure. As if I’d believe anything that woman says.”

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No,” she says.

“You do.”

“I do not.”

I make a face and scrunch up my nose. “I can smell it on you.”

“It was my last one,” she says.

I angle in to look closely at her face and scrutinize the squinty grey eyes. She blows a raspberry.

“Ew,” I push away hitting some low laying engine part with the back of my head.

“I hate Kansas,” she says.

“What sucks about Kansas?”

I watch her root around in the too deep pockets of her new blue jeans. “I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling about it,” she says. We haven’t had a chance to wash them yet so they leave a dark blue ink on her skin.

“Ooh, I have a ba-a-ad feeling about it,” I say.

“What is your problem today? How much of that sausage have you had?”

“It’s not the food.” I’m ignoring her. Suzie is always so full of shit. My stomach is starting to hurt though. It isn’t the sausage. “Do you ever think about it?”

“About what?”

“About leaving?” Mom says my earlobe will reach my elbow before I’m twelve if I keep at it.

“Where would we go?”

“Would it matter?”

“You sure you don’t have a cigarette?”

“Your shoes are cute,” she smiles. “I’d give up my front teeth again for a plate of potatoes right this very minute. No shit.”

I slouch forward and touch my nose onto the ground. Not dusty. Black, over-smooth asphalt. I’m bendy like that. That and spindly. “I hate baby blue.”

“I know,” she says.

“I am so tired of thinking about this shit all the time.”

“What shit?”

“This life.” Suzie doesn’t say anything. She just sighs loud and slow and waits. “Food, rain, clothes, blankets and... and... food and everything.” My nose touches the ground again. Bendy.

Suz just picks a rock from the groove of the tire and we listen as this group makes it through the screaming room. I’ve been in a haunted house before. They stash someone about three quarters of the way through the maze to jump out and scream at townies. Gets me every time – townies are pussies.

“You got new jeans.”

“You’ll get the old ones,” she says. I have to pee. When I get nervous I have to pee. “I wish I could’ve gotten the new shoes instead,” she says. Seriously, my earlobes will reach my elbows someday. We carnies take care of our own.

“Shut up, Suz.”

“Screw you, Kat.”

“Want a mint?” I ask pulling the roll out of my pocket.

11:45 pm

The yellow leather is smooth under my fingertips and our car smells like straw. Our stuff, clothes, pictures, pots/pans and crap that we didn't unload into the motel room closet is shoved onto the floorboards of the car. I'm sitting on my knees behind my mom. She's driving. I usually like to sit cross-legged but this way I can see where she's going. The lights reach far ahead onto the empty road. Once we're away from the fairgrounds and turned onto the main drag towards our motel all the cars disappear. The only sound is the thrumming of the wheels on the road. It's taking forever to get anywhere.

"Ha ha ha," he laughs. Not 'hu hu hu' in his normally deep voice but a high hysterical laugh from his slouched position against the passenger door. I have to pee. There's a click as mom punches in the automatic lighter. Even slouching he's too tall and his head brushes the roof of the car. Our old car didn't have a built in lighter.

The cinderblock buildings, wood siding, stick built and shingled houses are all dark and empty and not as cute as they were when we first pulled in two days ago. There are only about three blocks of downtown but so far it feels like we're the only people alive anywhere. There's a streetlight on every corner that briefly illuminates the shadowy structures along with stop signs that my mom ignores.

"Cheese baby," he says too loudly. "We have to get cheese for the girls' fries." Robert always smells weird. He doesn't smell like soap or like the cologne that townies like New Boots wear to the fair. He doesn't even smell like sweat. It's like the pills he takes every day just ooze out through his pores and he smells sickly sweet, like baby oil plus dried apple juice plus salt.

Hitting the speed bumps as we drive by the local church is physically painful.

Click. She slides the cigarette out of the pack with her tongue and directly onto her lips, lays the pack down next to her, pulls the lighter from the dash, presses it to the end, and the tip glows as she inhales.

“Are you girls hungry?” he asks.

Suzie lays her hand on my back. *Shut up Katie*. I don't need to hear it out loud.

Four more street lights. “Hahaha,” he goes again. One last working light, three broken ones and no more lights. “I asked you girls a question. Are you hungry?”

Suzie coughs loudly and grunts. Most of the time it works.

The leather seat shifts under his weight. “That's not an answer,” he says.

“Yes sir,” I whisper.

“Yes sir, what?”

“Yes sir we're a little hungry,” I say softly sliding back into a cross-legged position.

“What do you girls want to eat?” Suzie is scowling at the back of his head. I don't need to be able to see it, I know from the way she's sitting. Her little body is pressed into the door, hard.

He says, “Imagine with me girls.”

“I want a tuna melt,” I say.

“No, you don't,” he says.

“I don't?”

“I want chicken fried steak,” Suzie offers.

“You girls don't want any of that.”

I'm wiggling my toes in my too big shoes. “We don't?”

His voice cracks as he crows, “you girls want French fries!”

There’s a long stretch of nothing before we pass the shuttered doors of the grocery store with one car parked in front. A station-wagon. He laughs again only louder this time and points at it. Then the neon vacancy sign with the silhouette of the tacky plywood rose above it. The turn into the parking lot for the twenty-four hour diner and mom’s missing the curb with a clunk nearly kills me.

Mom turns off the ignition with a loud click and the motor dies. He has to push himself away from the passenger door and take a deep breath, and then he coughs. “Let’s go ladies.” He reaches for the handle.

“I need to finish my smoke,” she says.

“Ok,” he says.

“Kat,” she says.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Keep your hands palm down on the table or under the table.” The balloon lady left a mark on the inside of my right arm that will scar - directly below the wrist.

“That’s it? You’re just going to finish your smoke, baby?” he asks. Pulling a fifth of Jamison from the glove box he takes a swig.

“Yep.”

“Bev baby, about this morning...”

“Fuck you, Robert.”

I listen to him shift his heavy weight in the small space. “I’m sorry.” Our next car will have to be bigger. He wiggles a lot at night, way worse than me.

“Ok,” she says.

She won the fight. I don't know why.

"You girls mind your manners in there."

"Yes'm," Suzie whispers.

Part III – Day Three

12:10 am

I love the way the bell rings when you walk through the door of places like this and all the people look at you like you're important. I'm dancing from one foot to the other in my new shoes. The room is small and square with an eat-at-bar along the wall to our right and six booths along the left wall, kitchen in the back. There are two truckers at the bar, a weird old man in the back booth at the back of the room, and one heavysset waitress.

Robert is holding the door open for all of us. Suz and I walk in first followed by Mom. *Please Wait to be seated*, the sign says. A tap on top of my head from my mom says I don't have to wait and I dash towards the restroom sign near the kitchen entrance in the back. Mom knows everything.

I'm wiping the cold water from the sink from my fingers onto my blue jeans as I walk past the truckers at the countertop. Only one is packing and it's just a small switchblade in the sock of his left foot. I see everything. Knives are especially bad for us. Both truckers are wearing work jeans. One has on a plaid shirt, the other a cotton cowboy shirt with blue stitching over the white material. The old guy is counting money in the back booth. He tries to make eye contact and smile at me as I slide in next to Suz on the red leather seat of the booth that's directly by the front window. The space is small and I imagine he can smell Robert the way I can. I smell grease, coffee, sweat and Robert. I do not smell bad, I checked. Suz and I have our backs to the window and the heavy ivy of a plastic plant is hanging down from a basket that hangs over our table. Mom and Robert

are directly across from us. Mom is by the wall. Robert is across from me. They sit where they can see the car through the wide window that runs the width of the restaurant. That and they can always see the front door. Know where the exits are. That's a rule.

"There you are, stranger!" Robert booms. "I wondered where you'd gone!"

"Did you wash up?" Mom asks. I nod yes. "Good girl." I love soap. You have no idea how hard it is to find soap out here on the road.

He smiles wide beneath his thin lips, "So how are my girls today?" Suzie has put on her smile like a pair of dime store novelty wax lips, unmoving and too pink. Novelty. So has Mom. "Are you girls excited? Dinner out and it isn't a sausage on a stick!" I grin back at him and watch as the waitress steps out from behind the stretch countertop carrying menus and walks slowly towards us. Be happy. Be happy. Be happy. Keep my elbows off of the table. Palms down.

"What can I get for you folks tonight?" The waitress asks.

"I'm buying my girls dinner!" he says loudly as he reaches over Mom to give her a sideways hug. Palms down.

The waitress pulls a pencil from the overblown brown hair that's piled on top of her plump face and she shifts on her feet to stick out her right hip. It's a big hip. She says, "The special is herb roasted chicken and wild rice pilaf with a choice of soup, salad or steamed veggies on the side." She rolls her tongue in her mouth when she's thinking; you can tell because it pokes at her cheek like she's searching for a scrap of potato chip. I watch her scan the table quickly. She sees things too. "I'll leave these with you," she tries to hand Mom one of the tall vinyl menus. Menu was an easy word to learn. The waitress doesn't wear make-up and she has on a nametag that reads "Kimmy" in big white letters.

Not an imaginative name. Not like Kat. Kit-Kat is better. At least it isn't one of those stickers you get at church where you write on it with a marker, but like they ordered it special for her. I love diners.

“We don't need any of those,” he says through his teeth. His smile is getting wider. “Do you girls want French fries?” he asks.

“Yes!”

“And sodas?”

In rare stereo we recite: “Yes!” He likes it when we talk like this.

“We'll have one cold ham and cheese sandwich, two plates and...” he points at us.

“French fries!” We three crow in unison, except for Mom. She's reaching into her purse for her pack of smokes.

“With cheese,” he says watching Suzie scrunch up her nose. “I love my girls!”

Mom slides her green Bic lighter from the hard case of the Marlboro cigarette case.

“Bbbrgrrr.” My stomach talks out loud. I run my fingers along the silver ridge of the tabletop and refuse to make eye contact with anyone. At least it isn't a fart noise. I thought about that when I was in the bathroom stall and made sure. Sausage gives me gas.

“Do you want cheese on yours, honey?” the waitress asks running her fingers along her jawline and smiling. Ok. Cherry Chapstick isn't make-up but I can smell it when she smiles.

Watching me pick up a spoon Suz answers “yes.” She doesn’t make eye contact with him either. When I scrunch up my hands the knuckles and joints glow white through my skin. I’ve always thought that was neat and it’s getting to be a brighter white. Palms down. The cut on the right one feels prickly when I move it.

The waitress slides the menus back under her arm. “This is the non-smoking section.” The smile turns upside down when she looks at my mom.

“Do you need to write that down?” Robert asks her. “French fries and ham and cheese.”

“So, that’s two ham and cheese sandwiches with fries? Two plates?” she asks.

“No. That’s one ham and cheese sandwich and one order of fries, two plates here,” he gestures to himself and mom, “and two plates there,” and he points at Suz.

There are three short lines that run in between her plucked eyebrows; they go straight up like arrows aiming the inflated hair on her head. “Nonsmoking,” she says pointing at the little sign on the table-top with her pudgy finger. “You can move into the back if you want to smoke.” Mom gives her the look. *The Look* is something we all know and it’s this thing, man. You stop breathing. You know our mom stops breathing, too. Suz slides several small white sugar packets under the palm of my hand, taps two fingers on the back. It’s a good thing Robert can’t see Mom’s face right now.

“There’s nobody else here.” Mom says looking over her shoulder back over the room. Robert is running his fingers along the collar of his crew neck t-shirt. The color black hides dirt.

“We have a kids menu. The grilled cheese sandwiches with a side of slaw or fries are only a dollar fifty each. I’ll give you a midnight special since the bread is day-old.

Two for one.” Suz and I put on our best smile. Mom doesn’t see.

“I need a cigarette,” Mom says. “And no on the charity, thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, thank you,” Mom says.

“I have five…” I start before Suz thumps me in the arm… “dollars.”

“The girls will have fries.” Watching moms lips form a thin line. “We’ll split a sandwich.”

Kimmy begins, “Are you sure?”

Robert interrupts, “Yes. She is sure.”

“Fine. I’ll bring you an ashtray though. And don’t leave ashes on the table.

Anything to drink?”

Robert is straightening his t-shirt. It’s just a black t-shirt. Robert doesn’t like anything to be crooked, even a t-shirt. “Root beer,” he adds.

“Just one?” She scratches the top of her pinky fingernail using her thumb. Weird.

“And what does Dad want to drink?”

“He ain’t their daddy,” Mom says.

“But they’re all mine don’t you doubt it.” He throws his arm around mom’s neck tilting in to kiss her on the neck. “They are mine.”

Even without lip gloss I can see the wrinkles that frame her mouth as she glowers at our mom.

“Humph,” Kimmy says.

I can feel her shoes squeak as she turns toward the old man counting money hoisting one eyebrow higher than the other. That's a neat trick. I will have to learn it.

“Put it into two smaller glasses,” Robert calls after her.

Herbed chicken smells wonderful. I've never had it, but my stomach knows it would be wonderful. I like my chicken with the bones in. She brought us two glasses of root beer. Water glass size and she smiled at us when she brought them. When she looked directly at us we could see the missing lower tooth. I have three molars missing. We tried the string, but it didn't work. Robert is good with tools. I probably couldn't eat chicken anyway.

“Hey, what's taking so long back there?” Robert bellows. His stomach caught a whiff of the chicken, too. I can hear it rumble.

The waitress is walking up the only aisle in the place, loaded down with three plates. One ham and cheese, fries and chicken. Real herbed chicken. I learned to spell herb last winter in Lochloosa, Florida.

She sets down the sandwich in front of Robert, lifting it up to reveal the empty plate below. The sandwich is at his lips before Kimmy can shift to her other foot and poke at the inside of her cheek with her tongue.

“Hope y'all don't mind. Our Steven is the world's worst short order cook. He got the order wrong.” The plate of fries goes in front of me. She says, “Thought I'd bring y'all a plate rather than toss it.”

It's only when she sets down the plate of chicken directly in front of Suz that my brain goes away. I can smell the food. She sets it down fast trying to avoid an argument. The juice is running over the plate and she brought rice. Not plain white rice but rice with almonds in it; with large pieces of celery and green onions.

Mom's overgrown thumb nail is tapping on the table top. Mom eats her fingernails. I think it's the grossest thing on the planet. She is constantly chewing on her fingernails, all but the pinky and the thumb on her right hand. The pinky nail is long and yellow and is starting to curve.

"What do you think we are? Stupid?" Mom asks. I can taste it. The limp crinkle cut fries, frozen and fast fried in bad oil. I can smell that, too. Bad oil is a regular carnie smell. It means end of the week, or just the shift. But chicken, real, fresh, roasted chicken that's something we don't get to eat. Warm food is rare.

"Seriously. It was a mistake in the kitchen."

Suzie shoves her fingers into her shallow jeans along with her wads of packets of sugar and creamer. "Bullshit." There's butter on the overcooked broccoli.

I pick up glass of root beer, raise it to my lips and swallow hard and try to imagine how this chicken would taste. I'm a righty. Oh shit. The waitress sees.

Mom lays her lighter on the table with a loud click. "We don't accept charity."

"If it's a big deal I can take it away. I just thought it'd be a nice treat for your girls."

Mom shifts her small frame for a fight. I think it hurts her when she does. "They don't need a treat." Swallow hard and think about how my girly Adams apple bobs.

Kimmy chews on her lip and steps forward, “I can take it if it’s that big of a deal,” and moves as if to pick up the offending plate of food. Her eyes lock with Suz.

Mom gives Robert a shove and says, “We have bread and butter back at the room girls.”

He spits through a mouthful of ham, “What?”

She frowns in a peculiar way, frowns and leans into Robert’s body. “We’re leaving.” Yesterday was bad for her.

My left hand closes around the sugar packets Suzie gave me.

“You owe us two dollars for the ham sandwich and fries,” Kimmy says.

“Fuck you lady,” Mom says. “Get up girls.” Robert crams the last bits of ham sandwich in his mouth. His cheeks are bulging with food. I pull the wadded up five dollars from the bottom of my front pocket. Most people don’t think about what a person looks like when they’re swallowing food, but I do. Robert knows how to keep his cheeks full of food but still manage to swallow small bits of ham at a time. Motherfucker.

Kimmy squarely sets her considerable feet. “We’re calling the cops, lady.”

Mom levels her with the *look*. “Move.”

That’s all she says, watching Robert stand up, despite cheeks full of food.

Listening to the bell ring as Robert holds the door open makes me sad. I swallow hard. “Bullshit,” I whisper. Dropping my five dollars on the table is hard, but I do it. We don’t pay, cops come. Montana was bad. The thermostat came in the mail today but isn’t installed yet so the car won’t get far.

White bread, margarine and sugar sandwiches for dinner. Bullshit.

2:15 am

I'm supposed to be asleep so I'm lying frozen on the seat of the car. I'm pitching my new shoe over the seat from my crouched position. "Wake up," I whisper. The first shoe was a miss with a quiet clunk onto nothing. The back seat is wide and Suzie is not. I arc the second at a more vertical angle with some roof rebound. Thunk.

"Go away."

"Wake up, Suz." I squeak when I'm upset. "Mom snuck out of the motel."

"What?"

"She snuck out," Suzie only groans. "She left. I just watched her go. I heard the door creak open and she left. She walked down the road in the dark and she left us." I'm whispering. I hate whispering.

"She wouldn't just leave," she says.

"Oh yes, she would."

I listen to Suz stop breathing, exhale and say, "No."

"Yes." I roll over and push myself up so that I'm sitting against the passenger door. "What do we do?" I swallow hard and think about swallowing.

"Nothing. Are you kidding me?"

"But."

"Fuck you, Katie."

"Is that all you ever say? Fuck you."

"Go back to sleep, Kat. You'll wake up and everything will be fine."

"I can't sleep."

"Then pretend to."

3:00 am - Beverly

Charlie's Grocery Market Parking lot on 9th Street and Maple

Hauling her out from the bed of her Nomad station wagon is the easy part. The door swings open wide and with little to no squeak, I'm lucky, it's unlocked. The balloon broad, the bitch, is asleep wrapped in an old blanket and with a good yank she is out with a thump on the dirt lot.

"Hello Bitch," I growl. Three solid kicks to her ribcage with Robert's work boots get through before she rolls and covers, scrambling for something to hold on to.

"Wha...!" She croaks as her head whips around in a circle, her body now on all fours as she locks on my face in the dim light. "Who are you?"

The moon is only a sliver and lying low on the flatlands of the Kansas prairie. The grocery store lot wasn't far, only a half a mile from our motel. There's nowhere to hide in a small town like this, although half a mile walk after a twelve hour shift, dinner out at that place, a thirty-minute fuck (thank God and American pharmaceuticals - and the Seconal tranquilizer I gave him), another hour for Rob to fall asleep and here we are. Kat is crashed in the front seat of the car. Susan sleeps through anything. A twenty-seven minute trek down a ten minute stretch of road on foot was good for me. The Broad is all mine.

She's wearing a tank top and the same crappy jeans she had on when she hired Kit-Kat, but is barefoot. The white straps of her bra glow in the moonlight. The bulb from the inside of her car, the dome light, is broken.

I like the feel of her skin, her flesh under my hands and it does something to me.

Nights like these I feel as if my soul will come apart in sixteen different pieces if I don't hit something, anything. So I find ways to go out, to howl at the moon and paw at the ground and run. Tonight's task is a first but just as fun. I love to just run to run with abandon, the way we carnies do. I know the wildness is just a part of me. Like Kat smells the carpet, I look for trouble.

This lady doesn't run from me. The white roots of her hair catch in the light. She just lies on the ground trying to breathe. Bending over her is easy. It's only when my fist connects with her face that I feel old. The sensation of age is something new.

"Don't go paying my kid, 'eh?" It took me two hours to track this lady down. Her balloon rig was out on the midway. The flat-bed she hauls the gear on is parked in the fairgrounds public parking lot, the one the townies use. She parked her wagon this far from the fairgrounds to be safer.

She doesn't make a sound as I hit her. She flinches and knows enough to cover her neck. I go to give her a good belly kick colliding only with her shoulder. She ducks and rolls but doesn't make a sound. On her knees and pushing herself up from the bumper of her station wagon, the door clunks her on the back of the head when I give it a light tap. Thing must weigh a hundred pounds. She slides onto the ground.

I had only to ask Grace's old man where she was. Sam makes a point to track the outsiders. The muscles in my hands are strong, but my bones hurt when I make contact with her. One - two. One - two and her thin skin tears like paper. Mine doesn't.

"What the...!" she reaches for the bumper.

"Don't nobody hit my kid." I wait for her to find her footing. I want a new angle on her now.

“I’m an old lady!” she cries out pulling herself to her feet.

Thump to the side of her head. “See if I care.” Whack. “My kid is only nine years old! You didn’t mind beating the shit out of her?” My nose runs a little and I wipe it with my sleeve. “Hit my kid, this is what you get!”

She’s breathing heavy and moving to cover her face. It’s the face I want. “What,” she coughs heavily, “girl?” she makes a lunge for my chest. She’s fighting back at last. *Yessss* as Kat would say.

“Yesterday!” I’m shouting.

Another arm reaches for my chest, which is a waste of time. It gives me easy access to her face and a good knock to the bottom of her chin draws a nice flow of blood from her mouth. She falls forward. This time, however, she catches on my long silver chain, breaking it and the spider goes straight down between my feet. Two steps and I’ve hauled her further from the back of her station wagon.

“Please stop,” she says - too quietly.

“Shout at me!” thump. “Fight back!” The smokers cough is not a myth.

“I’m just an old lady.” She tries again this time falling to her knees.

I stop to catch my breath, spit, and watch as she crawls over to push her back onto the wheel of her car and sit looking up at me.

“What do you want?” she gasps. “I don’t have anything worth stealing.”

A quick swoop puts the spider and the chain back in my hand. “I’m not here to rob you.” I have another twist tie in my bag to fix it, again.

“Then what do you want?” she coughs, the blood spatters, her lower dentures pop out.

Her blood looks brighter on my pale skin in this shadowy moonlight. “You didn’t pay my kid yesterday. She put in a day’s work and you didn’t pay her.”

“How much do I owe her?” she asks.

I tilt my head to one side, Kat inherited that from me, and glare at her. “What?” She pulls a wad of rolled up cash from the cleavage of her bra. “I don’t want your money.” Catch sight of a glint of silver in the light.

She asks, “Five dollars, right? Or was it ten for the day?”

I give her a quick kick to her shoulder and the money rolls away.

“You broke my mother’s chain.”

“Fuck you,” she mumbles.

A quick kick and the blister in my shoe pops. I like the feeling. I put the chain and spider into my pocket. “I want that silver ring on your hand.”

“You can’t have that.”

Thump.

“Look,” She reaches forward but can’t reach her roll of bills. “You can have my cash but you can’t have the ring.”

“Give me the ring.”

I watch as her body shakes when she coughs. “I’ll fight you for that,” she says.

“Pay the kids who work for you.”

“Goats have kids, people have children, lady.” She lisps on the sounds her loose dentures miss.

“Give me the ring.”

“You don’t want it. It’s just a piece of tin,” she coughs again. “If you don’t want my money, then what do you want?”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“We’re just two old ladies fighting in the middle of the night for nothing then?” she asks.

“I,” kick, “am not an old lady.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“You’re nothing but a bitch cowering in the back of a clunker.”

“You’re a piece of shit, lady,” she says.

“I am not.”

“You sold me your child, woman.” She tries to stand up. “Ten dollars for a day!” I watch her roll to one side to get her knees underneath herself, trying to use the side of the car to pull herself up. “That makes you shit.”

Five minutes later and I’m heading down the road. There’s a chill out tonight.

The girls are pretending to be asleep.

I love smoking cigarettes. I always start out holding the cigarette from the tip and slide my fingers down towards the filter before lighting it. The feeling of lifting it to my lips makes me feel horny. I understand every cigarette.

The moon is moving fast across the horizon and starting to set. The cool metal from the rail that runs across the front of the motel walkway is nice against my tired back as I rest against it. The tip of my cigarette glows in the night. I’ve checked on the girls, they’re fine. Kat is crashed in the front seat. Susan in the back. They have their own

hierarchy. Susan is taller and doesn't like to be wedged in underneath the steering wheel at night. Kat sleeps light but doesn't mind being in the front seat when she has to be.

The entire parking lot is empty. It's eerie. With a county fair there should be more people but I imagine that was Rob's logic in picking this spot. Less people mean less carnies, except for the moron. She thought she was so smart parking so far from the fairgrounds. That she would be safe. She had no idea we parked at this end of town. An old lady shouldn't travel alone. The sun will rise soon. I'd better get inside. Today will be long but Grace gets me through.

The cigarette is an interesting thing. They grow a plant, not for nutritional value. Not because it makes any valuable contribution to your nourishment or health but in order to harvest it, dry it and then set fire to it. Not for warmth, however, but to inhale the poisonous soot that flows through the burning bits and leave a black tar on the lining of your delicate lung tissues. Wrapped in cheap paper the tobacco stains your teeth and leaves an awful smell on your clothes.

There was hardly any light from the moon for my walk back from the market parking lot. Roughly four blocks in the dark was good for me. I will have a new scar on my left hand, right below my cigarette. I have three new scars this year on my left hand and a new cut that is healing. The ring finger on my right hand will never be straight again. This scar is the first one that is actually mine. All my own flesh and blood. A quick drag and a flick and the cigarette lies in the dirt.

9:00 pm - Katie

Midway

“Anybody seen Jimmy?” I holler again. It’s been a long day.

Grace shouts, “No!”

Jimmy took off for lunch and didn’t come back. Robert took over working his rig when he finished putting the thermostat in the car, the hose-bag got to sleep in. I’m running a plate of sandwiches up the midway before starting to gopher seriously. Friday nights mean no breaks and extra stops at Grace’s for supplies. The cops are also prowling the midway extra close and asking questions about some townie kid got beat up and had his sneakers stolen this morning a block away.

With a flick on my head I know Suz has come up behind me on the midway. She’s full-on picking pockets tonight. She’s just better at it than I am, probably always will be. A purse or a guy in baggy jeans isn’t a challenge for me, but Suz can hit up the police officers wife and their family won’t make their rent that week. “Any word on Jimmy?” she asks.

I watch the cop on the corner. “It’s not like he’s a big loss.” I have to yell in the noise. People don’t realize that cops have their own kind of smell too. It’s like they all go to the locker room and share their Old Spice and Ivory soap - - makes me want to retch. Mix that with the leather and the smell of the starch they use to press their uniforms and I know where one is from a mile off.

“People don’t just disappear, Kat.”

I'm scrunching up my face trying to work the tickle in my nose back down and I wiggle my toes in my shoes. I'd give up a tooth for a pair of socks today. "People don't disappear - but carnies do. Hell, he's just drunk out there somewhere."

"Not one of our pack. Not without some kind of word," she says. "What's the matter with your face?"

"Nothings the matter with my face."

"You've got it all scrunched up," she laughs. "You didn't get hit that hard."

"I'm not sore, I'm just allergic to something out here."

"You are never allergic to anything."

"I can smell something bad."

"Bad. What a word."

"Seriously, Suz." I hate the sneezes that never come out. They just wait there, lurking, even prowling and moving from nostril to nostril but never emerging. "Got anything to smoke?" Cigarettes cover the smell of everything.

"Just this," I watch as she pulls a half smoked Camel menthol from her back pocket along with a lighter.

"Hey, watch yourself, sis. We've got a cop on our ass."

"How do you know?"

"I can smell him - - that and bad fruit?" Sliding my foot in and out of these giant sneakers every time I'm stationary is becoming a habit. "You sure you don't have anything better to smoke than this?"

"Do you want it or not?"

"Yeah."

“We’ll share it,” and I smile telling her, “Go around that way, duck through the craft shack and meet me under the haunted house again.”

“Shit, Kat, you’re as paranoid as mom now.”

“I’m not paranoid. I just hate cops.” Montana and a month in a Baptist minister’s basement will make anyone paranoid.

It’s just as the townies pass through the screaming room that Suz finally crawls up next to me giving me a shove. I can tell it hurts when she smiles - she has a new scratch on her jaw today.

“About time.”

“Come on. Light it already.”

“You’re getting the ol’ lady’s twitch, too. You’re not chewing on your nails now are you?” she asks.

There’s a scab forming on my elbow from a tumble this morning. I smile. I can’t help poking at scabs, it’s a nervous tick. “Fuck you.”

“That’s all you seem to say, Kat.”

“It’s the only thing that works.” I slide my new shoes off and tuck my feet underneath myself. “That’s all you say too.” There, I’ve got the edge worked off. It’ll scar. Smile right side up, like eggs in the morning. “What took you so long?”

“You were right,” she says.

I pull an imaginary pencil from my equally invisible bouffant hair-do and make a note. “Wait, wait... let me mark that in my book.”

“Shut up.”

“No, wait. ‘Katie was right’.” There’s a flash as the lighter goes on. “Sign here for the record. We’ll get it notarized.” Vocabulary lists are good sometimes.

The smoke comes out of her nose as she talks. “Don’t you want to know what you were right about?”

“I’m just glad that you now know I’m smarter than you.”

Extending her cigarette arm just the opposite direction of my seat to her right is just mean. “Just for that I’m keeping the cigarette all to myself,” she says.

“You were right about one thing. I will always be smarter than you.” I rock from one butt cheek to the other. “So,” and try again. Suz’s black shoes don’t show dirt so she gets to keep them on. I run faster barefoot anyway. Another group passes through the screaming room and I finally get the cigarette so I can take a drag. “What was I right about?”

“Word is that the balloon lady is missing, too,” she says.

“That is not what I asked.”

Screams again. Friday crowds move faster. “Didn’t you notice her tent was closed up?”

“It’s not like she’s one of us. Just a hobby-carnie. A nobody.” I think about the wallets outside. “What was I right about?”

“Well,” she takes a long drag before finally handing me the cigarette. “They found Jimmy, alright.”

“Where?”

“I guess he passed out in the rigging to the Ferris wheel. He crawled under the canvas down by the crates and boxes and just passed out drunk or overdosed or something.”

“Damn, what’s he been doing all afternoon? How can anyone sleep through all this racket? Why didn’t he just wake up?”

“He died,” she says. The screaming kicks in again.

“What the hell?”

“Yeah, he started to smell I guess,” she says. “So they sent Sam in and he found him just lying there.”

“He stank more than enough when he was alive.” I think an ant just started to make its way down my pants.

Suzie gives her leg a scratch. “Yeah, I guess he shit on himself when he died.” She scratches her nose when she’s thinking.

I roll forward, reach down and dig for the bug. “You’re kidding?”

“What the fuck are you doing, Kat.”

“Did they call the cops and all?”

“Nah. Just brought a bus for him about an hour ago and took him out the back way,” she says. “I think that’s why the cops are prowling tonight.” I just squish it with my fingers. Yessss. “What are you smiling for?” she asks.

“Nothing.”

“It’s not funny, Kat.”

“They’re here for shoes, sis.” I cough and watch her scratch away at her leg. Maybe not such a good idea after all. “So, Jimmy’s really dead then?”

“Yeah, and it’s not funny.”

With a smile I hold out my index finger and show her the guts. “I squished a bug just now.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.”

She frowns in her lopsided way, “down in your butt crack?”

“Yep.”

“Ugh.”

“Ugh what, that’s where the ant was and that’s fucking funny. Can you imagine Suz, death by shit?”

She finally hands me the cigarette. “He didn’t die of shit, he just pooped himself when he died. A body lets go of itself like that when it dies.”

“Either way, he was ripe enough without the smell of crap.”

I take a drag before she asks, “What do you think he looked like, Kat?”

“Looked like?”

“Like, did he smile or something?”

“No. Jimmy didn’t smile.”

“Yeah, he did. He liked you, Kat.”

Scrunching up my face in the dim light I feel a chill down my spine. “Don’t be gross.”

“Jimmy only laughed at your jokes, never at mine.”

I give my earlobe a tug and frown. “Shit, man.” Another tug and the new scab on my elbow cracks. Nice. “Do the shoes fit?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” I cough again. “It’s my job to be funny.”

“Jimmy always knew you skimmed from him when you brought back his change too and he never told mom.”

“What an asshole.” People are screaming again. Jeez, these people have no respect for the dead.

“Yeah,” she says. “He was one of us.”

“Not one of us.”

“One of us, Kat. He was family.”

“Who’s going to call his people?”

“Nobody, man. They took him and he had all his stuff in his pockets. The cops will call them.”

It takes us a while to figure out that the screaming isn’t just coming from inside of the haunted house and that people are all running in the direction of the north end of the midway, toward the Ferris wheel.

I elbow her in the arm, “So, sis,” she gives me a shove back and I ask, “Should we go figure out what’s going on out there?”

“I guess so.”

I get two more drags. “I’ll let you have the last one.”

We’re both short enough to not really need to scuttle out from our hiding place under the haunted house. The All Star insignia catches in the glow from a black light from a gap somewhere. “Nice Chucks, Suz.”

“They are nice, Kat. You guessed the size right.” Family first, dude. We take care of our own. We don’t let go.

“Seriously Suz, he died of shit?”

“Not shit, Kat. He just died.”

“Damn.”

It’s a sea of screaming townies and we’re pressed up against the walls of the craft shack. There’s the narrow road of the midway track, wide enough for one good size truck and the rails, then the lights of the frozen machinery of the Ferris wheel. There are thirty voices in a small space and no one has any idea what the fuck is happening.

“Somebody jumped!” a man yells.

A soft old woman’s voice, ‘What happened?’ She sounds like PBS on Sundays only with a tremble.

“Who knows what happened?” Another voice goes out above the din.

“Nothing happened, dear.” Definitely from the old man that matches PBS.

“Really man, something happened,” a teenage boy says. A woman cackles.

Seriously, she cackles when she laughs. I’m not sure who’s saying what in the crowd but I wish they’d all shut up.

“Please move towards the nearest exit,” the voice booms over the loudspeaker.

“Slowly.”

“Somebody is going to jump.” A man’s voice cracks. We’re pressed in along with the heavy crowd against the wall. People are behind us but we’re small so can push to the front but that doesn’t help. We can’t see.

“What happened?” Suzie asks an old woman in a brown twill polyester jumpsuit. I’m thinking forty and that’s ancient - forty is too old for a pantsuit. How do you pee in one of those things? The zipper goes all the way up to her neck and she’d have to take it all the way off to take a leak. In a port-a-john that’d be a nightmare. I think about everything too much. Even I know that.

“There’s a guy who wants to jump from the top.”

“He wants to jump or is hanging from the thing?” the lady in the pantsuit asks.

“Yeah, people have been stuck up there for ten minutes waiting for the firemen and the cherry-picker to get here.”

“So,” I say into Suzie’s ear, “there’s a guy up there who wants to jump off?”

“I have no idea,” she answers.

I shift from foot to foot in my sneakers. “I would never jump from a Ferris wheel.”

“You’d never go up on a Ferris wheel.”

“I would go up there.”

She begins to flap her arms. “You’re chicken.”

“Shoos,” Pantsuit says.

“Cluck cluck,” I grin.

“Scared of heights, Kat. I’m ashamed to be seen with you.”

“Fuck you, Suz.”

Pantsuit flips her head too look directly at us. “This,” she says with a strangely overwide mouth, “is an emergency!” Her maroon lipstick is far too dark against her ultra-white skin in the flashing lights. “Don’t you girls have any respect or manners?” Black-lights catch on the patterns of her face, her teeth and the flickering lights behind her make me want to hurl.

“No,” we say in stereo and watch her eyes grow wide in the light before she turns to look away. People start to scream again.

“Hey sis,” I begin. The whole crowd screams as we look up to see something fall. It’s just a shoe. “Hey sis,” I flick her this time, but not as good as she flicks me. She’s taller so I tend to end up hitting her on the soft spot right below her skull.

I give my chin a tap with two fingers and roll my eye’s toward The Pantsuit’s wallet.

“What?”

“Look,” I point at The Pantsuit’s purse. She just put it down between her feet and is watching the chaos above.

“Wanna?” I ask with a grin.

“Just enough for dinner. We don’t hit anyone we don’t have to and she doesn’t look like she can afford it.”

“Fine. Can we just go get a cup of coffee?”

“Shh... shuu... sure,” she says as I duck, mimicking avoiding spit, and wipe the dirt out of my eye. Dirt. Yes, only dirt in my eye. Weird silty dirt.