



PROLOGUE

I'M PACING CIRCLES IN THE FAMILY THERAPIST'S waiting room, trying to discern what my daughter is saying on the other side of that door. Hannah hasn't spoken to me in days, but she seems to have plenty to say to a stranger: I can hear the muffled inflection of her voice, rising and falling with some thick emotion, her footsteps beating the length of the wood floor. I time my own gait to match hers—step for step across the narrow, windowless room. Though I've never been taught to believe in purgatory, it must be a place like this, where we hold our breath while the stories converge. A land where we linger, mourning our nature like obstinate children whose parents warned them about the crack in the sidewalk, the fissure in the glass, the lethal fork in the trail.

The night my father died, a Santa Ana wind sent tumbleweeds as big as these waiting-room chairs across our yard. Lying on my bedroom floor, I heard the dry clapping of palm fronds, people's trash barrels bumping down the street.

Around midnight, the electricity sputtered out. They say we often know the exact moment of a loved one's passing: I remember sirens, and in the blackness felt my body expand as though it would fill the house. The weight of my guilt pressed down like water—massive, immovable.

I got up then, stood on tiptoe to reach the secret boxes in the upper corner of my closet and brought them, bulging with contraband, into the night. It was almost impossible to light the fire pit in that swirling wind, but I kept at it, lighting match after match, holding each illicit letter firm until it caught, curled and blackened in the flame, until the boxes were finally empty and bits of ash scattered and danced across our patio. Then I hopped the fence, joined with the wind. I walked until an orange dawn bled over the San Gabriel Mountains, until I could no longer feel my feet, until my mother finally drove up beside me and told me to get in.

Until two days ago, I hadn't spoken to anyone of that night.

Thirty years and three thousand miles from that history, I can't believe it's come to this—pacing past the stacks of *Parenting* and *Family Circle* while my thirteen-year-old, on the other side of that door, makes her case against me. Don't we all assume we'll do it differently, not repeat the past? We believe with all our hearts that we can rise above the things they couldn't. Sometimes, our beliefs blind us.

1968

WE'D BEEN RIDING WEST IN THE GREEN-PANELED station wagon for the better part of three days when our cargo trailer came unhinged. We saw it overtaking us in the right-hand lane.

"Look, that car's passing on the wrong side of the road," announced my big sister, Alison, who at eight was old enough to know. "And look—no one's driving, and it's going all wild!" We gawked, openmouthed, at the trailer shimmying beside us, swaying like a drunk. Fiery sparks kicked up where the metal hinge scraped hard over asphalt.

"Holy cow—our *things!*" my mother gasped. "Our whole life, Don. It's getting away!" Her hands fluttered to the half-open window, as if she might be able to reach out and stop the runaway trailer with her bare fingers.

We were driving on Interstate 80, well into Nebraska. A few miles back, my father had swerved left, to avoid three enormous hay bales bouncing off a truck. Apparently our trailer had come loose from the jolt, passed us on a decline.

Now it was a good bit ahead of us, threatening to rear-end a blue VW bus. My father veered into the right-hand lane behind the trailer and blared his horn until the bus jerked out of the way—just in time, before the trailer would have smashed into it. After that, there was nothing to do but tail it and wait for the worst.

“Keep your distance, Don.” My mother’s voice was as taut as a telephone wire. “The darn thing’s going to crash. It’s going straight into that cornfield!”

“Cut the hysteria,” muttered Dad. Mom fell silent then, clenching her eyes and knitting her fingers together while Ali and I, perched on the edge of the backseat, vied for the best view between our parents’ headrests. We hadn’t had this much fun since we’d left our apartment in Chicago. I slid my hot pink Calamity Jane hat back on my forehead and held tight to my sister’s knee.

We jostled onto the shoulder of the road, about twenty feet behind the trailer. Dust swirled around us, obscuring our view, and our father suddenly threw back his head and let out a high-pitched cowboy *whoop*, so unlike him that Ali and I burst into giggles.

As we watched the highway bend ever so slightly to the left, the trailer broke free from the asphalt and bounded over the shoulder of the road. It smashed clean through the corner of an old wooden shed before careening into a cornfield, disappearing from sight.

“My new bike’s in there,” Ali wailed.

“The wedding china,” whispered Mom, placing her hand on Dad’s thigh.

“Yep—everything.” He slowed to a stop, the cloud of dust rising around us and filtering through the windows. Some of it landed on the skin of my bare arm, coating the thin blond hairs. Midday sun glared through the windows

and we were quiet, each of us staring at the gap in the cornfield that had just swallowed our possessions. There wasn't much: my wagon with the peeling red paint, our bulky winter clothes and photo albums, some treasures from Mom's wealthy parents, Dad's fishing gear and medical books. We'd left all the ratty, secondhand furniture behind, since it had come with the apartment. The idea was we'd buy all new stuff when we got West. We were starting over with a better house, better furniture, better climate, better schools. We were going back to California, where we came from—like the song said—in search of the good life, just as the pioneers and our grandparents before us had done. At least that's what Dad kept saying. But this didn't seem to comfort Alison any; she burst into tears at the thought of losing her new bike.

"It's all right." Dad draped his arms over the steering wheel, the wild cowboy spooked out of him. "If we're going to be pioneers, then we gotta be tough, right?"

I loved the idea of being a pioneer, or better yet, a cow-girl. I could imagine ditching the old trailer *and* the station wagon, donning a pair of chaps and riding a wild palomino filly across every wide-open acre between here and Los Angeles. I didn't remember much about California, being only two when we left, but I knew plenty about Annie Oakley and Dale Evans, and I figured a girl should be able to get her start in one of the westernmost states of the country.

"Well, we'd best get out and see what damage there is," said my father, opening the car door. And then we heard the sirens.

Half an hour later, Ali and I sat on the bumper of the Ford watching as the tow truck hauled our trailer from the cornfield, as the police lights flashed and spun, as the brick-

faced farmer, flanked by officers, barked words I couldn't understand. He wanted *collateral*. There'd better be *reparation*. And why in hell hadn't the chain been fastened on the goddamn hitch? His hands dove like angry crows around my parents' faces until one of the policemen placed a restraining paw on his forearm. I couldn't quite fathom all this fuss over a rickety old shed, a few dozen rows of corn. But clearly we were in trouble.

Dad gripped Mom's bare shoulder. He stood weirdly erect in his blue plaid shirt; even so, he was scarcely two inches taller than her. We were fully insured, he insisted, squinting into the glare. He was terribly sorry. In their hurry to get on the road, he must have overlooked the chain. The tall officer wrote things down while the other just stared at Mom, his gaze sliding over her green sleeveless sweater, down the slim length of her khaki pedal pushers. I could have sworn he even winked, after which Dad tightened his hold on her, the dark circles expanding beneath his armpits. I was pretty sure I'd never heard my father apologize before, and I elbowed Ali in the ribs, wanting her to take notice.

"At least they're not arguing anymore," she noted then sighed, nudging me back. "Move over, Sylvie—you're hogging the whole car." She was in a better mood now, having discovered that her new bike was still intact, little pink basket and all. Our things had been spared, in fact, except for a few glasses and the wedding china. When Mom picked up one of the boxes, heard the faint tinkling inside, she'd bit her lip, eyelids fluttering, while Dad patted her wrist bone.

Now Ali hoisted herself onto the hood for a better view, and I wondered if she was right—if the accident had put an end to our parents' bickering. Perhaps this was why God allowed it. I was six, and still believed God was in charge, directing the show like some capricious old

ringmaster—allowing this disaster but not that one. This was God’s Plan, I decided while Dad explained to the officers, pointedly massaging the back of Mom’s neck.

“It won’t happen again,” he was telling them. “I assure you.”

Still, it didn’t take long for the bickering to resume once we were finally back on the highway, our dented trailer secured behind us. My mother argued, in her clipped, quiet way, that we needed a break, that we girls had been traumatized. The accident was a reminder to slow things down, she said, rethink our priorities. We ought to stop for some lunch, maybe end the day early and find a Travel Lodge with a little pool.

“It’s hot, honey. You’re expecting too much of them,” she continued.

“We’ll stop at supper time,” Dad said, reminding her the accident had just cost money we didn’t have, that we were now two hours off schedule, our budget blown to hell.

“There’s no need for *language*. The girls will pick it up.”

“And what are they picking up from you? That there’s money to burn? You know we can’t afford fancy motels—not yet.”

“What about the park? You did promise.” She was whispering, as if she actually believed we couldn’t hear. Ali and I had started our own silent war in the back, over where the imaginary line between us was supposed to be. We’d moved on from gentle shoving and were grinding our knuckles, hard, into each other’s bare thighs. In the course of our short stint as “pioneers,” we’d learned how to practically kill each other without making a sound—stomping each other’s defenseless toes, suffocating one another with our blue bears. We knew if we got wild, made too much noise, we were

asking for it. Usually, it was me who got it. Maybe because I was easier to yank out of the back, throw against the hot metal side of the car. Two days back, in Iowa, I'd gotten a mouthful of roadside dirt for calling Ali a farty old pig's ass. So now I relented, slipping out of the game as it got too rowdy. But Mom wouldn't relent.

"It was all this rushing that got us into a fix." Her shoulders were creeping up around her ears. "Besides, you promised them."

"That was before we had to buy a damn *shed*."

"For heaven's sake, don't curse."

"Why didn't you use some of that feminine charm to get us out of a ticket?"

"I haven't a clue what you're referring to."

"I mean, if you're gonna flirt, may as well make it useful."

They ended by falling into a bulky silence, Dad drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, Mom heaving exhausted little sighs and turning her face to the window. After a while, she doled out stale peanut butter sandwiches and dill pickles without saying a word.

For the past four years we'd been living in the damp three rooms of an apartment in one of Chicago's shabbier suburbs. We'd been sleeping on someone else's mattresses, eating at someone else's green Formica table, watching someone else's black-and-white TV on their ratty polyester sofa with the stuffing spilling out one seam. Mostly, my mother and sister and I had been doing these things while Dad worked, completing his medical internship, taking most of his meals at the hospital, because he could. Sometimes, he didn't come home for three nights running. When he finally appeared, Ali and I were usually in bed. I'd hear bits of his talk as my

mother poured him a drink, asked about his day as if she were entertaining an important stranger. I knew I wasn't allowed to go to them, no matter how many dark blue bats startled through my nightmares. I feared and longed for that prohibited after-bedtime world, ice clinking in his drink, his voice—as strange and ubiquitous as the moon.

I often wonder if her restlessness took root there, shut into three rooms during those Midwestern winters, caring for us by day, typing medical reports by night. She was new to the city and didn't have a car. She loved Dad, but how lonely it must have been in that apartment when we were tiny and whiny and underfoot, clinging to her knees. How relentless it must have seemed, one baby crying on her hip, the other running wild, tossing Tupperware into the toilet and trying to cut her bangs with the nail scissors, no husband in sight.

What else to lean into but the secret, infrequent lunches with her “special friend”?

A few days before we left Chicago, we had the last of those lunches, my mother, Mr. Robert and I, at a Big Bob's on University Ave. I wasn't supposed to mention Mr. Robert, with his gap-toothed smile, his Broadway songs and wavy, silver-streaked hair. During that last lunch, he bought us ice cream sodas, as usual, and we ate them with the heavy, long-handled spoons I loved. Then I colored on the place mat while they talked in somber tones.

“So you're really going next Sunday?” Mr. Robert asked.

“Sunday, that's right.” My mother stared into her lap.

“Well, I have to admit, I won't be sorry not to make this trip every few months.”

“I thought these trips were all about *business*, Robert.”

“Now let's just quit being silly, Lainie. Just tell me the town, for God's sake.”

“You *know* I’m not telling you this time. I’m just not.” They were quiet for a while. My mother’s breathing reminded me of the ocean at Goat Rock, when we’d last visited Gram and Poppy. Finally looking up, I was startled to see a single tear glittering along the side of her nose. She glanced at the people in the next booth, the bluish office buildings outside, traffic lurching past in the summer afternoon—she was looking everywhere but at Mr. Robert, who suddenly reached out and wrapped his meaty fingers around her wrist, as if to take her pulse.

“Is this your friend Sammy’s silly advice? Why don’t you just quit this game?”

“We need to let it go. Don’t you *see*? This is a chance to—” She faltered, hugging herself as if she were cold, though the afternoon was humid as a gym sock.

“What? A chance to be foolish? Miserable?” Mr. Robert’s voice seemed thin and stretched now, a balloon ready to burst. I wondered why Mom was being so difficult. I wondered why she didn’t want Mr. Robert to find us, when he was so nice, and bought us ice cream sodas, and made her laugh like a man—mouth wide, head tossed back. I’d never seen her laugh that way for anyone else.

“You know I’ll find you,” he whispered.

“We need to let it go,” she repeated after the waitress brought our check on the little red tray. Mom extracted her dark glasses from her handbag, slipped them on. I loved her in those glasses, which were huge and round, and made her look like Jackie Kennedy.

“I will *never* let it go,” Mr. Robert said in a thick, radio-announcer’s voice, as if he wanted the whole restaurant to hear. Into the startled silence that followed, he hummed a tune, his fingers beating out a cheerful rhythm on the lino-

leum tabletop. “Lainie, Lainie, ‘give me your answer, do. I’m half crazy all for the love of you,’” he sang. Then he winked at me, as if somehow, we were in this together.

1974

THE NEXT TIME I SAW MY MOTHER'S SECRET FRIEND, I was nearly twelve, and had just learned that Jesus would come on a cloud shaped like a man's fist. I learned this from the Sabbath School teacher at our Seventh-day Adventist Church, Mrs. Sullivan, who kept her black hair wrapped around her head helmet-style. My sister and I called her *Iguana Woman*—she seemed that scaly and cool, skin pale as plaster behind her bright makeup. Her voice was reptilian, too, as she whispered about the Last Days, about fire and falling boulders as if these things were secrets she wasn't supposed to tell. In the car on the way home, Ali and I would sometimes roll our eyes and snicker at Mrs. Sullivan's grim predictions. But I never forgot the image of that cloud, its silent, impossible fury, the way endings could surprise you like that—with a crack and a flash when you least expected it.

I learned about the cloud on a dry June morning in 1974. Fires burned in the Santa Ana foothills, turning the air

milky-brown and bringing the occasional distant wail of a siren. My mother woke us with her morning song, her high heels clicking against the Mexican tiles as she sang, “Good morning, merry sunshine, how did you wake so soon, you scared the little stars away and shone away the moon.” Her voice was clear and intrusive as a shard of glass, and it worked. By the third or fourth time she clicked by my door I was awake, anticipating the Sabbath morning hustle. My father would be sitting at the dining room table in his dress shirt and slacks, sipping his coffee, finishing the *Los Angeles Times*. Already, at 7:00 a.m., he’d have committed several sins against the church: the coffee, the newspaper on a Sabbath, the fact that he was not attending church with the rest of us but heading off to work. My mother never verbally chided him for his transgressions, but each time she swished by him in her buttery-yellow church dress, she heaved a small sigh, pressing her lips into a crease. He took no notice.

It was a Saturday like any other, except for the pungent smell of ash as we emerged from the church sanctuary, made our way across the blistering pavement. Today was potluck day, and Mom had decided, against our will, to participate. As she rummaged in the car for paper plates and cups, Ali and I stood staring at the sky, the brown columns of smoke rising on the horizon.

“Maybe it really *is* the end of the world,” I said, elbowing Ali in the side. “Maybe Mrs. Sullivan was right.”

“I bet our whole neighborhood is on fire,” Ali murmured in the direction of our mother’s bent back. “And our mother thinks this is a good time for a picnic.”

“All right, girls, all right.” Mom emerged from the back-seat with her paper grocery bags, her red handbag dangling from one elbow. “Do you think you can *manage* being

pleasant this afternoon?” She thrust the bags at us, smoothed her sleeveless dress over her hips.

“It’s a hundred million degrees,” Ali whined. “And the food here—”

“Now listen.” Mom looked hard at us. “There’s some-one meeting us today. A dear old friend, okay?” And before we could ask, she was strutting toward the meeting room, hoisting her pocketbook up her shoulder. She was the only person who didn’t cower in the heat, didn’t glance toward the blazing hills. There was nothing we could do but follow.

Mom’s friend didn’t appear until the end of the potluck, as people were gathering their empty casserole dishes, mopping damp necks and noses. Ali and I were lobbing pieces of veggie dog from the baked beans at each other when suddenly he was standing close beside us, crooning our names.

Though he’d lost most of his gray curls, he still had the same mischievous eyes and gap-toothed smile. He spread his fingers over Mom’s bare shoulder, just as he used to. He wore plaid knickers—he’d been golfing, he explained—and she introduced him as her dear old friend, *Mr. Robert*. I started to say I remembered him, that we’d met before, but she narrowed her eyes and shook her head slightly. I took my cue and fell silent.

“So these are the infamous Sandon girls I’ve heard so much about,” Mr. Robert said in his thrumming voice, dimples flexing. Ali gnawed on a thumbnail.

“What have you heard?” I pushed the sticky beans across my plate.

“Oh, secrets.” He sat beside me, his cotton-clad thigh pressed slightly against my own. “Only your darkest, most dreadful secrets. But don’t worry,” he added, winking at Mom, “my lips are sealed. Isn’t that right, Elaine?”

“Don’t chew your fingernails, honey.” Mom reached to tap Alison’s wrist. Then she took my sister’s hand and examined the well-chewed fingertips, tsk-tsking, as if to demonstrate what a conscientious mother she was. Ali whipped her hand away. Had she noticed the way our mother’s name slid off Mr. Robert’s tongue like heated syrup? Or the way Mrs. Dixon and Mrs. Alexander were gawking from the next table over? Mom loaded up a plate for her tall stranger, as if she expected him to stay for a good, long time.

“You don’t come to this church,” Alison announced just as Mr. Robert stuffed a forkful of casserole into his mouth.

“Why, no,” he garbled, wiping his big lips. He used his own monogrammed handkerchief rather than the paper napkin Mom handed him. “I really only come for the bean casserole, which is, uh—exquisite.” He elevated his fork and let a pasty mound plop to his plate. “I’m afraid they won’t win many converts through the *cuisine*.”

“Oh, Robert.” Mom waved her hand round Mr. Robert’s face as if to scare off a troublesome fly.

“You’re not even Adventist, are you?” Ali pursed her lips, and I pressed her foot with my own. I felt sudden sympathy for our old friend, who had done nothing, as far as I knew, to deserve Ali’s grilling.

“As a matter of fact, I’m not, my dear. But I grew up surrounded by them.” He lapsed into a story about growing up in Walla Walla, Washington, where everyone was Seventh-day Adventist, except him and his nutty old mother. “It took me a while to figure out that the whole world wasn’t filled with bean eaters—that’s what we called them back then. But you girls don’t look like bean eaters to me,” he added quickly. “You girls look more like, let’s see, butter-and-Karo-syrup sandwich eaters, maybe? Chocolate-chip cookie dough straight from the bowl? Or do you still prefer

ice cream sodas?” He raised his bristly eyebrows as Alison rose from her seat and stalked off to join her friend Veronica at the next table.

Mr. Robert shrugged. “I have a teenage daughter of my own, you see, Sylvia,” he said. “So I’m used to being snubbed.”

“What grade’s your daughter in?” I was hoping to atone for my sister’s rudeness. But Mr. Robert didn’t seem to hear; he was now watching fiercely as Mom gathered up paper plates and bowls, frosted hair sweeping the tops of her freckled shoulders. I would have thought him angry, but for the sly smile tugging his cheeks. My insides lurched. *Why did he come back? What did he want with us?* I suddenly remembered what he’d said the last time I’d seen him, about tracking us down, whether or not she wanted him to.

Since then, we’d had four different addresses, traversing the boundaries of the Greater Los Angeles Basin as my father completed his residency, went to work as a surgeon and began his own practice. During those six years, we’d gone from renting a two-bedroom, roach-infested duplex beside the Riverside Freeway to creating our own five-bedroom, Mexican-style dream house near the Santa Ana foothills, complete with inground pool and Jacuzzi.

“We’re coming into our own, girls,” Mom had declared during the weeks after our move, and I knew she meant more than those wallpaper samples she’d been itching to get her hands on. She meant quitting her job as a medical transcriber after tiresome years of night work. She meant the end of my father’s residencies. Maybe now he’d tell stories again, chase us across the lawn and dig in the vegetable garden. Maybe we’d even go for drives up to the mountains, or down to Tijuana—just the four of us. And we’d never again

have to load our things into boxes and shove them into a U-Haul.

As always, my mother's faith worked inside me and grew there like a sweet disease. And for a while, it *was* sweet.

"We actually should be getting home soon," Mom said now as she crammed her potluck things into paper bags.

"Your hair looks great long, Lainie," Mr. Robert observed. "It's the only thing different, you know."

At this she paused, biting the inside of her cheek. She had a canker sore just there—she'd been worrying it with her tongue all morning. "And *your* hair—"

"I know, I know." He ran his fingers over his sparse waves, the perfect pink oval of skin at the back. "Time hasn't been quite so kind to me, I dare say. But I'm hoping—"

"We really do need to get going." She resumed her gathering and packing.

Mr. Robert placed his boxy hand over my mother's. He wore a thick gold band on his ring finger, adorned with a single ruby. "I've only just gotten here."

"But it's late, Robert. And the fires. I know they're saying everything's under control, but the whole thing makes me nervous."

"All the more reason to go somewhere else. Let the firemen do their jobs." He stood, snatching the bags from her. "I know—I'll take you all to Disneyland. How 'bout it? I haven't been there myself since I moved north."

"Disneyland on a *Sabbath*?" I asked, my eyes popping.

"It's not what we do on Saturdays," my mother explained. "You *know* that."

"Ah yes, the Sabbath ritual. Let's see if I can remember... Sabbath School, then potluck or lunch at the club, then, let's see, home for the weekly call to Gram and Poppy, a few hymns around the piano... 'We gather together to whatsa-

majigger?” He boomed out a tremulous tenor, winking at me. “Am I missing anything?”

“You make it all sound so tedious.” She slapped his arm.

“It does sound a bit dull, doesn’t it? In any case, this isn’t a *usual* Saturday. How often do I get to come to town for the weekend?”

My mother, sighing, pressed her hand to her forehead, as if to take her temperature. I held my breath. My father would soon finish his rounds at the hospital. He’d probably go to the club to practice his shooting and arrive home by early evening. He hadn’t been to church with us in years—I wasn’t sure if this was a question of faith or just scheduling—but he always made it home for the end-of-Sabbath hymns sung around my mother’s Steinway. Saturday night was *family* night (after sundown hymns, we watched *All in the Family* and *The Carol Burnett Show*, sprawled on the orange sofa, eating take-out Chinese straight from the cartons) and I was certain he’d miss us if we were absent when he arrived. At the same time, I must have harbored a small, secret wish for revenge. *Let him be the one, for once, who waits and wonders*, I must have thought, for I felt an awful, deep thrill when my mother said yes to Mr. Robert, then broke into a girlish grin. “I guess it wouldn’t be so very terrible, just this once,” she said.

Mr. Robert beamed. Surely the good Lord couldn’t disapprove of a little harmless fun on a Saturday afternoon. He even invited us to bring some of our friends. I didn’t have any friends at the potluck that day, but Ali invited Veronica, and the two of them whispered and giggled all the way to Anaheim in the back of Mr. Robert’s cavernous rented Buick. I sat on the front bench seat, sandwiched between the two adults, listening for clues; they spoke of Southern California golf courses, the impeachment hearings, the SLA and

Patty Hearst—things any two old acquaintances might discuss. My mind sprang to what I'd learned in Sabbath School that day: Jesus would come on a cloud in the eastern sky when we all least expected it. We had to be vigilant every minute of every day. *He might even come today*, I thought, glancing at the mirrored buildings along the highway, the blurred brown horizon. What would He do with us if He found us like this, going to Disneyland on a Sabbath with a mysterious friend of Mom's—an old friend who had now draped his arm across the seat behind me and was brushing his fingertips against the nape of her neck?

That my mother might have a *boyfriend* seemed as plausible as the sun turning to blood. She was the kind of mother who took Ali and me to the fabric store every Tuesday, wallpapered the insides of her silverware drawers, ironed our father's dress shirts and had the house scoured on Fridays, in preparation for the Sabbath. She was the kind of wife who kept my father's dinner warm on the stove all the nights he stayed late at the hospital, who endured his absences and outbursts with a sigh.

Alison and I always teased her about being so perfect. The most heinous crime she could remember committing as a girl was cutting through Mr. Snyder's forbidden peach orchard on her way home from school one rainy afternoon. The one time we'd heard her swear—when she locked herself out of the house on a Sabbath before church, then stomped around the courtyard breathing, "Damn, damn, damn"—we could hardly contain our delighted shock. Even our father, whose piousness had turned to worldliness over the years, teased Mom by pouring her a drink now and then, insisting it would do her good. She always refused.

It wasn't that she didn't want things. I knew she'd once

dreamed of being a professional singer, and had the voice to prove it. Each year, she was chosen as the lead soprano in the Christmas and Easter cantatas at church. For weeks leading up to these events, Mom's piercing, bright melodies floated from the shower and the laundry room, even the produce aisle at the grocery store. I could have recognized that voice anywhere. I knew it as intimately as I knew the lemony smell behind her ears, the five moles hovering on her left shoulder like a tiny constellation, her clean, bony fingers and the four rings that adorned them—one for every five years she and Dad had been together. I'd thought I knew everything about her by heart, even the contents of her cosmetics cases, her girlhood photos and retired longings.

But watching her at Disneyland that afternoon—she was sucking sticky sheets of cotton candy from her fingers, trying on every hat in the Mad Hatter's shop, laughing openmouthed as we rounded the Matterhorn—I had the sickening feeling that my mother was a stranger, that if I were to walk up behind her and press my nose into her back, as I was longing to do, she'd turn with a start as if I were some other woman's child, mistaking her for my own.

As we were standing in line for the Haunted Mansion, Mr. Robert sidled up beside me, looping his heavy arm through mine. "Hey, twerp, bet you haven't had this much fun on a Sabbath before?"

I flinched, resisting the desire to yank myself away. It wasn't exactly that I didn't like him. I just didn't like how hard it was to *dislike* him. He was silly and buoyant, two things I could never have accused my father of. Despite my edginess and my sister's complete rudeness—rolling her eyes at his jokes, whispering behind her hand to Veronica—

Mr. Robert was trying. He asked about our favorite radio stations. He bought us souvenirs, candy and Cokes, which Mom never let us have. And he didn't mind making a fool of himself—donning a French-fry mustache, performing a jig to Tinkerbell's ballet or impersonating W.C. Fields—just to make her laugh. I'd never seen my mother so giggly and flushed.

"Your mother tells me you still love horses." Mr. Robert's arm tightened around mine as he leaned down to whisper in my ear. I caught a whiff of spicy mustard on his breath, and my stomach curled into a hard ball, like a pill bug. "I'm an old cowboy myself," he said. "I'll take you riding sometime—how 'bout it?"

"Sounds great." I loved riding above all else, and was obsessed with the wish to own a horse, which my parents had failed to grant. Too dangerous, said my mother. Too costly and time-consuming, said my father, and besides, they were sure it was a passing whim—a typical little-girl fancy I would tire of soon enough. It felt eerie and enticing to have my dream acknowledged now, by this familiar stranger. I dropped my bag of fudge so that I could extricate myself from his meaty grip. He seemed to get the message and took a step sideways, but during the ride, I occasionally felt his hand resting on my shoulder, or on the small of my back, in a gesture that was comforting, and too intimate.

My own father, whose hands were small, precise and knuckly, rarely touched me this way. My own father needled and tickled, or slapped and spanked, depending on the occasion. Just that morning, I'd been blowing bubbles in my milk after he'd told me not to, and I felt the customary, sudden sting of his backhand, his ring scraping my cheekbone as the glass toppled, drenching my dress. After I'd sopped up the mess, Dad placed his hand on top of my

head, ruffled my hair—his way to say *sorry*—but never this strange, open-handed caress in the center of my back, as if he wanted to calm me, or claim me as his own.

By the time Mr. Robert left us at the church parking lot, the sun was going down, smoldering red through layers of haze from the nearby fires. Helicopters circled the pillars of smoke, their percussive beat filling the sky. Ali and Veronica had stopped talking about ninth-grade boys and were oddly silent as we rode home in Mom’s Jaguar. In Veronica’s driveway, Ali begged Mom to let her friend spend the night. She clung to Veronica’s arm until our mother said, “Not tonight, Alison! For the hundredth time, *no!*”

I couldn’t have named my own dread about returning home until Mom stopped the car at the top of our street and peered at us in the back, a fierce, unfamiliar thrust to her jaw. Backlit by the setting sun, evening shadows sharpening her cheekbones, she reminded me of Pocahontas in my fifth-grade history reader.

“Please, girls, do not mention Mr. Robert, or Disneyland, to your father.”

“What? You want us to lie?” Ali’s eyes gleamed in the dusky orange light.

“No. I don’t want you to lie, exactly. I just— Dad wouldn’t understand, that’s all. It might upset him to know that Mr. Robert and I are still friends.”

Ali and I cast each other a glance.

“So, what have we been, like, *doing* all day, Mom?” my sister demanded, hooking her golden hair behind her ears, licking her lips. My own lips felt as dry and rubbery as erasers.

“Well,” our mother offered after a pause, “we can say that the potluck went late, which is true. Maybe I had choir

practice and you girls played with your friends in the meeting room.” Her gaze darted to the side windows, like a fly feeling for an opening, battering itself on the glass. “Or we could say we had some errands to run.”

I glanced at the souvenirs on the seat beside me—a Minnie Mouse hat, Ali’s glass Cinderella figurine, a box of fudge with the Matterhorn on the front.

“We don’t run errands on Sabbath,” I said.

“Sometimes we do,” my mother insisted.

“Like, when?” asked Alison.

“And besides, your *father* certainly does. He’s always running errands on Sabbath these days. Actually, I really don’t think he’ll be home.” Here she nodded. “We’ll order Chinese, or a pizza. How does that sound? Hmm? Maybe we can catch an old movie on channel 7.”

Neither of us answered. She turned toward the road again, hands braced evenly on the wheel, as if this last thought had given her the necessary courage to drive down our long street, pull into the driveway. She even hummed a few lines from one of the hymns we’d sung at church, as if this were an ordinary Sabbath afternoon, as if we weren’t six hours late and the world wasn’t on fire.