

Three Stories:

An Exploration of Voice and Perspective in the Fiction Narrative

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Introduction

Truly at the heart of any good story are the characters, for without them, no story could even exist. Through the unique experiences of the characters, an author can craft a human connection with the readers, often via the use of the narrator. And it is through the narrator's own personal voice and the way that the narrator tells the story that engages readers and builds the bridge between them and the characters.

British novelist E.M. Forster wrote about the importance of voice in his book of lectures, *Aspects of the Novel*, in saying that the story "adds something because of its connection with a voice" (40). According to him, a strong voice in telling a story "appeals not to the eye, like most prose, but to the ear," as voice has its roots in the oratory tradition of story-telling (39). A strong voice in a story transforms "readers into listeners," including them more in the circle from which people tell their stories (40). The strength, consistency, and unique quality of a voice not only make readers listen, but should keep them listening in order to hear and connect with the stories of the characters.

I particularly wanted to focus on narrative voice in my thesis project because, as an element of fiction story telling, it is one of the more crucial in making a story engaging for readers. I also wanted to stretch my creativity in producing voices that sound much less like my own. But primarily my goal was to portray three unique and diverse women who have found themselves in similar situations in which their own voices within their stories have been stifled or silenced. I chose to give voice to female characters and narrators in particular because historically women have not had their voices heard as a more marginalized group. It was also important to me to make each individual voice of my characters (Paloma, Veronika, and Nancy) sound their own in order to highlight their varied reactions to somewhat shared experiences, and

I chose to use multiple narrators to show that even when women are placed in similar situations, they are unique enough to react differently from others. Additionally, I tasked myself with the challenge of using a narrator of a different race from my own in the character of Paloma. Not only does race add another layer to the unique experiences of a character, but it can also be a factor that influences the character's own voice and how they tell their story.

The Various Voices of Short Fiction

Perspective, as a tool in the craft of constructing a story, can influence that story's voice. As writer Christopher Castellani says, "If perspective is a way of seeing, and narration is perspective in action, then a narrative strategy is the how and the why of that seeing" (16). Short fiction often experiments with various narrative strategies through the use of perspective, which in turn lends itself to the narrative voice of that story.

In particular, first person point of view offers a closeness to the readers, as a character who is usually part of the story tells the story to the audience, rather than a third person narrator outside of the action relaying the events. The first person narrative offers an intimacy with the readers that gives the narrator a vulnerability that can either "win the reader's engagement" or their rejection (Castellani 84). Furthermore, readers require a lot more from these narrators, including "more from their voices: more humor, more style, more insight" (85).

For my three stories, I used first person narrators because I wanted that intimacy between reader and character. Given that all of my protagonists are in complicated and unconventional situations, gaining the reader's empathy becomes extremely important in making the characters, if not relatable, understood. The stories that my narrators tell then become like secrets between them and the reader, secrets that could be spoiled by an intervening third person narrator.

An example of a story that uses a first person narrator with a strong, distinct voice is Elizabeth McCracken's "Some Terpsichore," from her collection *Thunderstruck*. Marya is the narrator who tells her story of meeting and falling in love with a man named Gabe, a saw-playing musician who wants to show off Marya's singing voice, which also sounds like a saw. But as their relationship progresses, Gabe reveals himself to be possessive, abusive, and manipulative toward Marya, eventually prompting her to leave so he doesn't hurt her or himself.

Marya, as the narrator, tells her story retrospectively, stating that it happened "forty years ago" (McCracken 44). Already that presents Marya as someone who has had the opportunity to think back on her relationship with Gabe and assess her thoughts and feelings from that time. As Marya looks back on her past, her voice contains hints of sentimentality or nostalgia for the happier times she spent with Gabe. She wonders, "Maybe I loved Gabe already," then, "At least, I believed for the first time that I was capable of being loved" (49). Telling this story in first person really allows the reader to enter into the consciousness of Marya and see, from her perspective, why she would love a man like Gabe. Otherwise, from a third person point of view, readers might feel enough distance from her to judge Marya's decision. Also, Marya being able to tell her own story lets her have the chance to defend herself and her previous actions. She even directly addresses the reader in doing this: "Listen: don't tell me otherwise. It was not nice love, it was not good love, but you cannot tell me that it wasn't love" (54). This creates even more of an intimacy with the reader, as her conversational, almost commanding, tone of voice sounds as if she is telling a secret, releasing it through her story after many years of keeping quiet about it. In fact, Marya sums it up in telling the reader, "Here is what I want to tell you: I knew something was ending, and I was grateful, and I missed it" (56).

One of my characters, Nancy, who narrates “A Confession to Who I Was,” is similar to Marya not only in that she too finds herself in an abusive relationship with a man, but even her tone of voice shares conventions with Marya’s. Nancy often has a defensiveness about her, speaking in short, sometimes gruff sentences, and she tells her story in a kind of confessional tone that anticipates the reader’s responses to what she reveals and also explains her reasoning behind her actions. She has an awareness of her audience, her audience being her younger self. Since Nancy is telling her story to her past self, she also tells it in retrospection, like Marya.

Another character in my story, Paloma, tells her story in “Little Prisons Where I Go” retrospectively. All of the events in the story have already happened to her years prior, so she is looking back on them and assessing her experiences during that time in her life, often questioning herself and the actions of the other characters as if trying to find the reasons behind them. Her voice then is more mature and eloquent than the age that she actually is within the story, fifteen, would suggest, while still retaining an innocent confusion in puzzling over the past.

Conversely, the voice of Veronika, the narrator of “Taking Back the Names,” sounds younger than what her actual age of twenty-five would suggest, due to her sheltered and abusive life, which resulted in a prolonged adolescence. She is very inexperienced in many things, especially social interactions, so she does not know how to read people or appropriately respond to certain things, unless conditioned to do so. Veronika is quite impressionable, and her thoughts, often times influenced by others, are sometimes repetitive as if to give her reassurance and tell herself what she should do.

All of these qualities in the narration of my stories might be lost if they were instead told in a perspective other than first person point of view. Perhaps through a third person narrator

some of these quirks and characteristics found in the characters' voices could find a way to show themselves, such as through the use of free indirect discourse, but not to the same extent that first person narrators could. As Castellani defines it, free indirect discourse is "that mode in which the narrator continually fuses with various characters one at a time, inhabiting their consciousnesses, and, in showing us the world through their eyes, disappears into them" (21). Essentially, the third person narrator's voice becomes like the voice of a character in the story. Castellani goes on to explain that free indirect discourse "has the effect of eclipsing the psychic distance between reader and character, and between reader and narrator, because it borrows the 'voicey' and 'organic' qualities of first person and integrates them into third" (32).

But even as an effective mediator, a third person narrator could not generate quite the same amount of intimacy between reader and character needed in order to establish that close relationship, because there is still that figure in between. Perspective and its many different modes can be an interesting tool in utilizing voice in works of fiction, and the voice of the narrators or of the characters strengthens the relationship not only between the narrators and the story but also between the readers and the characters. Therefore, choosing to have my characters as first person narrators telling their stories was the best option for me since I wanted to illicit more empathy and understanding between the reader and the characters.

Multiple Narrators and Perspectives

Besides having a single voice in a fictional narrative, the inclusion of multiple voices really showcases the variety of those individual voices and perspectives. They can also reveal certain details of which the other perspectives might not be aware. E.M. Forster praised this use of shifting viewpoints among multiple narrators in saying, "this power to expand and contract perception...this right to intermittent knowledge: —I find it one of the great advantages of the

novel-form, and it has a parallel in our perceptions of life” (81). Of course, like people in real life, individual characters cannot know everything to their stories, but the perspectives of other characters can fill in those gaps and offer explanations that only they can know.

The use of multiple perspectives provides various thoughts and observations that can sometimes work together to reveal a fuller picture of the story, but often the differing perceptions can divide characters and create conflict because their respective thoughts and feelings are too misaligned. Castellani writes that, concerning narratives with multiple characters’ points of view, “The friction among the characters produces much of the meaning, which must be inferred or interpreted by the reader rather than provided by the omniscient narrator” (67-68). But even with that friction or division among characters’ perspectives, each contribution made by a specific point of view is important to the whole of the story. Castellani calls this effect “prismatic,” in that each character’s perspective still remains unique and distinct, but all of the perspectives form together for the story as a whole (68).

An example of a fictional work that utilizes multiple narrators in order to tell the story is William Faulkner’s novel, *As I Lay Dying*. Over the course of the novel, fifteen different narrators contribute their own perspectives to the story as they deal with the death and eventual burial of Addie Bundren and the consequences that follow. Each narrator has his or her own distinguishable voice that goes along with his or her personal perspectives. For example, Vardaman, the youngest narrator, a child of around eight years old, uses repetitive language, usually simple sentences, such as the phrase, “Darl is my brother,” like he has to remind himself of that fact because he is at the age when a child distinguishes who is family and who is not (Faulkner 101). Other concepts are too new for the young mind of Vardaman to properly comprehend, such as death; therefore, equating his dead mother with a dead fish, Vardaman

keeps proclaiming, “My mother is a fish” (84). The childlike innocence exemplified in his character reveals itself in his simplistic, yet insightful, voice, and having the perspective of so young a child adds a new response to death and how different people deal with the loss of someone.

The many narrators in Faulkner’s novel function in another way besides showing how different people of different backgrounds and ages react to the death of someone. By having more than one narrative perspective, the novel is able to reveal details that some of the other characters would not know. Nowhere is a reveal of this kind more profound than in the single chapter narrated by the dead woman, Addie Bundren. In her bitter and resigned tone of voice, Addie reveals that she is not the great, loving mother figure that so many other characters in the novel portray her to be. Instead, she tells of how she does not love her husband Anse or her children, and that sometimes she has to go alone to a quiet place in order to hate them (169). But the biggest revelation in her chapter that no other narrator in the book seems to address is that one of her sons, Jewel, is illegitimate, not the son of Anse. And because Addie feels that, despite her dislike of motherhood, it is her duty to remedy the sin of her affair, she gives more of herself up in having more children: “I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine” (176). Without Addie’s perspective, the novel would lose a very important facet of her character, as many of the other narrators portray the dead woman as an almost mythic mother figure whose request to be buried in a certain place must be obeyed. But Faulkner gives voice to a woman who is dead, which makes her a more complex character, as well as reveal thoughts and facts to which the other narrators in the novel do not have access.

I wanted to divide my over-arching story into three, told by three separate female narrators, because I wanted to achieve something similar to what Faulkner did in *As I Lay Dying*. I also took inspiration from the novel *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, a book told from the perspectives of three different women connected by similar themes and ideas. Only I wanted my narrators to be more closely related to one another and interact more with each other, rather than the women in Cunningham's book who are separated by years and distance that prevents a few of them from ever meeting. Again, I wanted my characters to be in similar enough situations within the same setting because I wanted to explore how each individual woman responds differently to their experiences and how they also perceive and characterize each other.

In addition, like Faulkner, I wanted certain information to be revealed through one character's perspective, information not available through the other characters. Specifically, the moment that Nancy reveals that Veronika is not truly her biological daughter is something that only Nancy, of the three narrators, can know and tell, and it is a revelation that contradicts what Veronika, and in turn the reader, thinks in "Taking Back the Names." It complicates the kind of mother-daughter relationship that the other stories seem to establish between the two characters, while also giving fuller detail to the reader of what is true, or at least what each character believes to be true. In that way, I hope that my stories and their three narrators achieve the "prismatic" effect that details each perspective as contributing to the whole of the story.

Voice in Relation to Race

Characters' voices, like with the voices of people in real life, are heavily influenced by their backgrounds. A character's background can include past experiences or the influences of those around them, and it can also include race. Because certain experiences are unique to a particular race or culture, they can impact an individual's perspective of the rest of the world as

well as their personal voice. And even within the same race, people can have vastly different experiences than can further distinguish their voice from others.

It's important to read from these varied perspectives and let the voices of those who are sometimes not as noticed in our culture and society be heard. But there exists a dilemma in how to write these characters and voices of different races appropriately and non-stereotypically, especially if a writer is not of the same racial background as the characters. Castellani addresses this issue by noting that an author's crafting decisions can become "social and political when she gives over the narrative reins to someone on the margins, or who might otherwise be despised, or who has been invisible" (107). He wonders how far an author can go outside of his or her own experience, questioning the supposed restriction on writers to write what they know.

Additionally, he quotes the writer Grace Paley, who said, "The whole point of [being a writer] is to put yourself into other lives, other heads" (108). After all, many writers have written from the perspective of a different gender or from a character who has had vastly different experiences from those of the author.

But while Paley makes the point that writers can exercise their imagination in writing characters who are outside of themselves, writing about race can be a tricky topic to handle. Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine write that the imagination is not so free that race is no longer a factor in it. They explain that "imagination is creatures as limited as we ourselves are," and that writers cannot always transcend those limitations (16). In *The Racial Imaginary*, their book of compiled essays from a multitude of writers, they do not necessarily seek to answer the question of whether or not writers are allowed to write about characters of a different race from their own; rather, they wish to explore the question of why writers want to write from those different perspectives and the ethics surrounding some of those answers. Additionally, they point

out that just because an author writes a character who is of the same race does not mean that it is any easier to write.

But there are instances in which writers do write about racial experiences and do it well. For instance, Dominican American writer Junot Díaz has developed a very strong and distinct voice in Yúnior, the narrator of Díaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Yúnior, also Dominican American, has a voice that incorporates some words and phrases from the Spanish language as well as more Americanized slang and profanity. His voice also utilizes code-switching, in which he goes back and forth between using his more Dominican-influenced vernacular to writing in a more formal-sounding, eloquent prose style. This duality in his voice also exemplifies Yúnior's own identity as a man raised both as Dominican and American who also identifies as a writer. In that way, Yúnior's voice is both the result of his racial background as well as a commentary on race in relation to writing and diaspora in America.

I chose to include a Latina narrator in the character of Paloma because I wanted to highlight the diversity of women's experiences when they are put in a similar position, and it did not feel appropriate to limit that to just white women. But more than that, it was important to me to address how Latina girls are some of the more vulnerable to sex trafficking and to being fetishized by older, white men. Paloma's story is not really a story about sex trafficking or human trafficking, but initially I was inspired by what girls have to endure in that type of situation. I downgraded it to a kidnapping story because the issue of trafficking seemed too broad and global to cover in a short fiction form. Additionally, but to a lesser extent, the story briefly addresses the immigrant experience from Mexico to the United States.

I must admit that finding the voice for Paloma was difficult. I felt that I had to treat it sensitively and never delve into the territory of a stereotype. But because I still felt unsure about how to appropriately capture her voice, I relied too heavily on incorporating Spanish words into the prose in the initial draft. I did keep some of the Spanish because it felt appropriate at certain moments, but many of the words I included were unnecessary. On the whole, I was afraid to portray Paloma in any negative light, as if that could somehow reflect on the race as a whole. But through the revision process, I found that Paloma is actually brattier and angrier than I portrayed her in the original draft, and I think that I translated that more stubborn quality into her voice. I had to remember that Paloma is only a part of the Hispanic ethnicity, not a representative of the entire group. And her being her own character meant that I had to treat her like I would the other characters, showing both her positive characteristics and her flaws.

Though the issue still exists of writers, particularly white writers, writing characters of a different race, it does not seem like a question that someone, especially me, can effectively answer. But what I've learned is to be attentive in how to write the voice of a character who exists outside of my own experiences and to steer clear of stereotyping. Stories originate with the characters, so as long as the characters telling them are appropriately portrayed in all of the complexities of their backgrounds, readers will be more willing to listen to them.

Through my project, I have learned so much about crafting my characters and, in particular, finding their voices. With each new draft and with each new revision, I find my writing improving a little at a time along with the voices of my characters growing stronger. And as both my writing and my characters strengthen, I hope that the connection made between the characters and the readers strengthens too.

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Little Prisons Where I Go

Growing up, I used to think of America as the biggest of places, a large expanse of tapestry being infinitely woven by the rest of the world. I admired it, impressed by its mix of colors, all the handiwork by the myriads of people who helped create it. I thought it was beautiful.

Papá lived there now, another set of weaving hands. He'd gone to America years and years ago to work. The last time I saw him was when I was just a five year old girl. He sent back money from his working in mining and construction jobs in North Carolina, so in a way, he was still around. But often I thought of him being so far away that it was almost as if he was dead.

Mami missed him most. So she kept a bird, hung its cage from the ceiling like a lighting fixture. Mami liked having the music around; it reminded her of Papá's singing. But I thought it was a stupid thing to keep.

I was so angry when she got it. We were poor enough as it was, but still she bought a new bird and a nice cage, wasting money that we could have used, that Papá would have to send to make up for. It reminded me of how trapped I felt in our near-poverty, that, like the bird, I would be caged in México forever.

I thought of this as I sat in my new home, a small, windowless room with a single locked door, a space where I could touch all the walls. I thought then that the birdcage would have been preferable.

I couldn't exactly say how long I had been in that room. I never started counting the days; I never thought that I would be there for so long, that I would ever lose track. At some point, I tried to count the months when my blood would come, but as time went on, even those monthly

occurrences became less frequent, spaced out further and further apart until they, like time, disappeared. My guess was seven months, but I might have been wrong.

Time was tricky in that way. Seven months sometimes felt like a few weeks, yet the day when I first came here felt like it happened years ago. Like the elusive memory of one's own birth, the memory of that day felt almost intangible, only captured in a slideshow of moments.

Lost in an American airport, somewhere in North Carolina, tired from being too excited to sleep on the plane. The faces around me looked away or offered suspicious glares. None of the faces matched my Papá's. I wondered if I could even remember his face, if I could even recognize him. I stood and waited, hoping he would at least recognize me.

Then two people, a large man and a short woman, standing near the wall, talking, looking at me. The lady pointed in my direction. The man walked up to me, spoke to me in the language that I didn't yet have a grasp on, the words slipping through my fingers like water, though I tried to catch them, cup them in my hands. I said Papá's name. I thought the man might know him. The man smiled, nodded; he seemed kind. He seemed like he wanted to help me find Papá. He offered me a drink, a bottle of soda. And I was thirsty, so I drank.

I should have realized the taste was off; I was feeling even sleepier than I had before.

Numbness spread. I could only dully feel the man's hand clutching mine, the woman's hand on my shoulder, my feet walking across the airport's tile like they were no longer mine.

Sometimes I like to think that I heard my name being called, echoing, fading through the terminal, my Papá's voice breathing, "Paloma." But in truth, I didn't hear that. All sounds were fading, becoming muffled, as I retreated inside my body further and further. Somewhere from beyond my interior, I heard the vague sound of a car door slam and felt the swaying feeling of driving. Then I fell into a dark hole.

When I finally climbed out from that hole, I found myself in a little locked room with the man standing over me.

“I’m Randall, by the way,” he said. He came toward me, and I wished that I could have crawled back inside that hole once more.

It was worse because I was alone, but never truly alone. Maybe I could have been able to handle it if that door remained shut, if I never once thought there was hope. If I saw no one, if I knew it was just me in a tiny eight-by-six foot room, I could pretend that I was anywhere, that this wasn’t America. That somehow I had just gotten lost along the way.

Back home, I used to always dream of being alone. I had to share a bedroom with my siblings, Isabel and Luis, and privacy was nearly nonexistent. When my siblings were too loud or when Mami’s voice became unbearable to listen to, I tried to escape outside and find a tree to sit under. But it was never quiet enough; the sounds from our small home leaked out and echoed against the surrounding hills.

Now I could finally be alone, but it wasn’t the peaceful solitude I thought I would get, when I could do anything that I wanted to do without being pestered by my brother and sister. My options were fewer than I had expected.

During the hours that I was alone, which were many, there was nothing to do but look around my room. After all, it was mine. I had to claim something as my own, even if it was just a little prison.

The space I occupied was a room with no windows. It was a decent-sized bathroom, with a toilet, shower, and sink. No mirror, just spots of dried glue where it used to be. I guessed that there used to be a wall that separated the bathroom from an adjoining closet, because there was a

small patch of carpet where everywhere else was tile. It made the room just a bit bigger. Wood panels lined the walls and the ceiling, a color orange so bright, glossy, and unnatural. In the middle of the room was my bed: a small mattress with faded stains and torn edges, a blue blanket made of thin enough fabric that I could see through it. I no longer had to share a bed with my sister, but that didn't mean I enjoyed lying on that mattress. That bed was no throne of solace, no refuge for relaxation; it was a sacrificial slab.

But for a time, I was alone. The walls were thick. I could hear no sound beyond the locked door, not until the heavy turn of the doorknob signaled the uninvited visitor. The silence was claustrophobic; it made it hard to breathe. But I could at least be alone in suffocating.

Yet everyday that door would make its dreadful click and open. And everyday I would cower in the corner, no matter who it was who came in. It became a routine for me.

So was the routine of Nancy, the woman who brought me my meals. At least there was that. They could have just starved me instead. I wondered if that would have been the more preferable option.

She would come in, carrying something meager for me to eat, and usually throw it at me, along with her curses and her sneers. The food was bland, the portions small. When I first came, I refused to eat my meals, though hunger was stronger than ever. But Nancy caught on.

"No, chica, you are not about to starve yourself," she had said. "You're gonna eat this food, do you hear? I'm not going through all this trouble just to bury a body."

She forced me to eat in front of her, or else she would slap me across the face and stay in the room, even for hours, until I finally took a single bite. Then she would leave.

Often, I saw an older girl following close behind Nancy. I heard her called Veronika, and I assumed she was Randall and Nancy's daughter. She looked up to her Nancy, even though she

was taller than her mother, and adopted her cruelty. From behind Nancy's shoulder, Veronika would smile devilishly at me, laugh when her mother struck me. She made teasing faces at me, reminding me of my little sister Isabel, but not so kind or so young. For all her meanness, she never said a word. She only followed her mother out the door, sometimes helping to lock it shut.

I could handle the days, even with the intermittent cruelty and the long hours of boredom. But it was at night when Randall came, the room turning dark, the hole reopening. I could not see him, but I could feel him. He held me down and made my own body into a prison. He would leave, but with the light still off, it always felt like he was still there somewhere in the darkness.

Of course I tried to fight back. I screamed, I kicked, I spat, but Randall was too strong. It was like punching a rock; all you got was a bruised fist. He told me he would kill me if I ever yelled out again. And with his weight on top of me, I took him as serious.

This routine happened nearly every day. Earlier on, I still had some kind of hope for escape. But weeks went by, and I realized that my situation was edging into permanence.

There were times I tried to end it myself. I once filled the sink with cold water and forced my head to stay under. It was torture, it was painful, but it was also an escape. Until Randall burst in, yanked my head out of the water by my hair, and banged it against the metal faucet. After that, he shut the water off to that sink. All I had left was the shower, but then he decided to supervise me whenever I bathed. There was really no way out.

So I spent months in that room, not knowing what was happening outside of this place. I had no idea that Papá was late to the airport that day, that he had tried to file a police report for my disappearance, but then it fell through because, "Hispanic kids go missing all the time." I did not hear about Hurricane Diana and how she flooded México. I never knew how Mami reacted when she discovered I was gone. I didn't know whether or not my family was gone either.

I knew nothing outside of myself. I only knew that I missed my homeland, and I missed my family, guilty that I ever thought life would be somehow better away from them. I missed my Mami, her food, the smell of her cooking. Mami busy in the kitchen, sweating until the spices soaked into her pores. She'd smell like cumin for days. I never even knew I liked the smell until the only odor I had was the musk of an overused mattress.

I would be overcome with longing for the México I lost. I missed the sun. The sun is everywhere, but never did it shine so glorious as in México. And though I wanted to feel angry toward Mami for the poor life I had thought was unlivable at home, I didn't. I missed her, too, and more than just her smell. Her long hair. Her rough hands. I realized my love for México was more than assumed patriotism. It was a love like that between a mother and her child.

I didn't always love México, and I didn't always love Mami. That's why I felt I had to get away from them.

I remembered that I had it in my head that Mami was trying to ruin my quinceañera. Why else was she trying to dress me in my cousin's old gown from a decade ago? It was a gross faded pink that looked like a stain, a mistake. There were large, crumpled, puffy sleeves at the shoulders that were too big, deflating on my arms. Mami was sewing ruffles of a mismatched shade of pink to the bottom of the dress, as if they could somehow improve it. They didn't.

"Why couldn't we have gotten my own dress? All of my friends got to pick out theirs when they had their quinceañeras."

"These dresses are very expensive, Paloma. This is all we can afford. You're lucky you're having a quinceañera at all," Mami said. She cut the thread that she was using to sew with her teeth and tried to fluff up the ruffles. They still fell flat. "There. Don't you look beautiful?"

I did not feel beautiful. I felt poor and bitter. “It’s so ugly,” I told her.

She sighed, putting her hands on her knees as she knelt beside me on the floor. “If you’re going to complain this much about it, hija, maybe this is the dress you deserve.”

I was led to believe all my life that my fifteenth birthday was supposed to be *my* day, the most important day of my life, besides my wedding. But already, I could feel it go wrong, like I was being sabotaged.

But I still wore the dress. Mami was right. There really were no other options for me, though I still dreamt of the gorgeous dresses I had seen in American magazines. In another world, maybe a dress like that would be available for me. But I did not live in that world.

My quinceañera was not the disaster I thought it would be after all. My friends and family were there; they told me I looked beautiful. My friends, who had the newest and biggest ball gowns for their parties, did not make fun of me for my dress, though I wondered if when they turned their heads they giggled to themselves about how ridiculous I looked. I felt incomplete, that despite the support I seemed to get from everyone, I was falling.

A quinceañera is supposed to have a dance between a father and a daughter. But my father wasn’t there. Instead, I danced with my older brother Luis, but I could tell in the faces of my friends and family that they felt a little sorry for me. They still smiled and clapped along to the music, but even they knew that my father should have been there.

After the dance with my brother, I felt tired and unhappy, and even though the next song that played was my favorite Selena song, I had to take a break and sit down. It was expected of me that I keep dancing, but I didn’t care. I was going to be the girl to pout at her own party.

Mami saw me seated alone at the table. She came and sat beside me.

“Palomita, what’s the matter?”

“Papá should be here today.”

“I know. I miss him, too. But I bet he’s doing so well now.”

“Haven’t you heard from him?”

She hesitated. “His letters don’t come as often. But I figure the less I hear from him, the harder he’s working.”

“Sure, Mami,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Hey,” she said. She casually slapped my arm. “Don’t be mean. He’s done a lot for us.”

“Yeah, *he* has.” I stood and walked over to my girlfriends, joining their dance and leaving my mother seated at one of the empty tables.

What Mami didn’t know was my secret, that Papá was actually going to give me the greatest birthday gift of all. A way out.

For a few months before, I had stolen the letters that Papá wrote to Mami, remnants of him that Mami usually tucked away at the bottom of her dresser drawer. Pressing them to my nose, I hated that they smelled more like her than him. But I read them and learned that Papá had officially become a U.S. citizen. He had also saved up a good amount of money, money that he planned to use to help our family, eventually sending us to live with him. All I did was speed up the process and put my name first in line.

I wrote to him, pretending to be Mami, telling him that his daughter Paloma missed him so much and wished that she could live with him. I had a way with words. Papá fell for it, and in the letters that followed, that I continued to commandeer, he arranged for my green card and arrival to America.

I was obsessed with the idea of America. But all I had seen were the too-perfect pictures in my magazines, edited images behind the fuzz and static of an occasional, old television. I tried

to picture Papá there among the bright colors and the tall buildings that blocked out the sun. But I could not. I tried picturing myself there. The image was as blurry as the television screen.

But the idea of living with Papá, who I imagined lived in a house of his own, bigger than ours here in México, who worked hard every day to make money, who loved me enough, the daughter he still pictured as a child, to want me there with him, in that rich country, that land so often associated with freedom, prosperity, second chances. I felt as if I was too good for the poor lifestyle of my family, that it was somehow my right to move above that. I knew that I loved México, but only as a bird loves its cage, without knowing the great beyond behind the bars.

Months after my quinceañera, I got up early, grabbed the bag I had already packed from under the bed, and caught a bus to the airport. The thrill of independence, secrecy, and rebellion filled me whole, and I dared anyone to try to take that away from me.

My poor home in México used to be a prison for me. I thought I was finally getting away from it. But I didn't consider in that great beyond I would find little prisons wherever I went, even in the land of the free.

Months passed in my little room, and I became used to the routine, the abuses, the violation. I didn't want to become apathetic, but the more time that passed, the more hope went down the drain, dripping like the shower faucet. I wasn't content. I never truly accepted my situation, but I had to think now that this was my life, and somehow I could survive it. I made friends with the spiders who weaved webs in the corners of the room. They were just as trapped as I was, and I pretended to myself that this meant I wasn't so alone.

I used to bang on the door until Randall screamed for me to shut up. I used to pull on the door knob, twisting and turning it though I knew I wasn't strong enough to break it off. I used to

scratch at the splintered parts of the wooden walls, thinking that if I could just get a sliver, I could use it as a weapon or a way to pick the lock. Or even a way to end it all. But all I got were bloody, wood-pricked fingers. The pain in my hands eventually dulled, as did my passion to get out. If someone had ever forgotten to lock the door, if I didn't hear the click of the latch, I'm not sure that I would have cared then to even open the door.

I tried to reason that it could have been worse. They still fed me. I was still alive in some form. Nancy's words, Randall's violent body, they were expected now. Fear and dread still came with each unlocking of the door, but I knew now that I could handle whatever came. This room was my America now, land of the trapped, home of the scared. Hope no longer fit in.

Until once when Nancy delivered my lunch for the day. She came into the room, carrying a bowl of some cereal in one hand, a loose rag in the other. Veronika, like a scared, curious child, followed behind her mother, trying to hide. Her eyes met mine. She did not glare at me like she used to, like I had stolen something from her. Her eyebrows raised, her mouth parted; she looked as if she wanted to say something but the words were stuck behind a gate that would not open.

"Here's your lunch, chica," Nancy said. She leaned over and plopped the bowl on the floor. The milk spilled and little flakes of cereal floated as islands in the puddle. It looked stale, tasteless. But I was hungry, an almost permanent state of being for me now, like breathing or my heart beating. My lungs always drew in air, my heart always pumped blood, and my stomach always called out for more.

I crawled over to the bowl, ashamed that I was acting like the animal she believed me to be, and picked up the spoon with a shaky hand. Nancy looked down on me, her thin lips pressed together so tightly, so disgustingly. She wrung up the rag in her hand and flung it on my face.

The strike stung my cheek as my startled hand let go of the spoon. Cold, soggy cereal splashed onto my lap and on my shirt.

“This mess better be cleaned up by the time I’m back,” Nancy grumbled. “Comprendo?” She turned around, nearly running over Veronika in the process, and shuffled to the door.

But then she paused and looked back. The daughter, who I had witnessed as being as loyal as a puppy to Nancy, did not follow her mother. Instead Veronika, face round as the moon, crouched and came to meet my eyes. She had never come so close to me before. I saw now how much older she truly was. She was not like the young girl she behaved like, or even a girl my own age. She had circles under her eyes, scars on her cheeks, faint lines on her forehead. She was no girl but a woman, someone maybe ten years older than I was.

Looking at that face, I wondered. What was in there? Who was this woman who still behaved like a child? What could there be alike between her and me? And why did she take the rag, her arms as white as the milk of the floor, and sop up the spill herself?

“Nika!” Nancy called from the doorway. “What’re you doing? Don’t dirty yourself over a pig. Let her do it. Come on, let’s leave.”

Veronika cast her eyes down and stood, leaving the dirty rag on the floor to soak up the rest of the milk. At the door, she met Nancy, who grabbed the girl’s shoulder and pushed her into the hallway with a gentle but firm force.

Nancy shut the door, I heard the heavy lock, and once more it was quiet, except for the hum of the single bulb above me and the dripping of the shower faucet. I took a few spoonfuls of the cereal, but the blandness did not satisfy. I washed out the bowl in the sink, apologizing to my stomach.

I was distracted by thoughts of Veronika, this strange childlike woman who could laugh and tease me in mimic cruelty of her mother, who was now somehow trying to help me. Hope, for a moment, entered my heart, hope that maybe someone could show me kindness, compassion; maybe she could help me escape.

I ignored that hope like I ignored my hunger, smothering it with the full weight of realism, insisting to myself that Veronika's act was just one instance, and that it wasn't likely to happen again.

But weeks later, it did.

I assumed that it was winter now, a much colder winter in North Carolina than in México, for my little blue blanket felt even more paper-thin around my body in the nighttime. I tried to tell Nancy once when she came in with another meal.

"Frío," I said quietly, not knowing if she would understand. Or care. "Tengo frío."

She made a face at the sound of my voice. "Frío, huh? Is that like freezing, or what? Well, hell, I'm cold too. You don't see me complaining about it, so suck it up, chica."

She left, but a while later I heard the door unlock again. It was too early for it to be Randall, and Nancy wouldn't come back so soon. Instead it was Veronika. She snuck in and was only in the room for a few seconds, but in that short length of time she draped a white, heavy blanket around my shoulders like a blessing, then padded out the door, shutting and locking it slowly.

What was this kindness, and where did it come from? Now so suddenly Veronika had turned serious? Had a change of heart? I did not understand it. I appreciated the kindness, but I could not understand how it could come from the same woman who before treated me more like a forgotten, caged pet.

Again, hope tickled me like a whisper, teasing me with its promise of escape, of freedom. Of good people in this place. Could Veronika be a way out? This girl-woman, could she help me? Could I trust her?

The idea was tempting, but I couldn't count on it. Veronika might be more innocent than her parents, more naïve, but she was still their child. She was near the bottom on the spectrum of control, above only me, but not enough in control to lift me up higher.

Yet Veronika had helped lift my head up above the surface of the pool of complacency that for months I had been drowning under. With her kindness I could breathe, and though I was afraid of the air poisoning my mind, I still let the hope fill my lungs. Even without her help, I figured there was possibility of freedom. Or at least friendship, companionship. If Veronika couldn't help me escape this room, maybe she could at least help me escape the solitude of my own mind.

With the growth of hope came a little bit of defiance. Veronika, in her compassion, had given me her attention. And Mami always used to say that I was a brat for attention. So I started breaking through the silence of my little room. I shouted, I sang. I banged on the walls again, and Nancy and Randall probably thought I was going insane. But I didn't care. I was going to make them notice me, so that they never would forget that I was here and it was because of them. And I actually started feeling a little bit happy, being loud again. I was the only one happy with it.

"Oh my God, why don't you shut the hell up?" Nancy yelled at me, swinging the door open when she finally had enough. She came over to me and tried to slap me, but those things didn't hurt me anymore. Instead of crying out in pain, I laughed in her face.

"You little bitch," she said. "Just wait until I get Randall on you."

As she turned to leave, I said under my breath, “Perra.” She didn’t hear me, but I was satisfied with finally saying the word.

When Randall did come, he tried to shut me up. But I bellowed and insulted him, even though I knew he would never understand what I said.

“Goddammit!” he said. “Hush.”

I wasn’t silent until Randall had his hands around my neck, trying to squeeze out my voice. Then I finally quieted down again.

Time kept passing, and Veronika started coming into my room without Nancy’s supervision. She’d only be there for a few moments, standing near the wall close to the door, staring at me, assessing me like a wild animal about to attack. Then she would quietly leave, never saying a word. She’d do this a few times a week, in between the times that Nancy or Randall would come. She always came alone.

I wasn’t sure what to think of my new visitor. Part of me was annoyed by her, how her intrusions cut into the time when I could be alone and not have to worry about Randall or Nancy and their terror. Even though Veronika never did anything to me, it was an inconvenient bother to have to anticipate the daily visits of now three unwelcome people.

Yet at the same time, I did welcome Veronika. Though it was no choice of my own, she did become company for me. For maybe fifteen minutes out of the day, I was at the same time not alone and also not filled with dread. That combination hadn’t happened in months. All we did was stare at each other, me curled up in my corner, her rigidly posted by the door. I didn’t make noise around her. I still didn’t know how to read her or how she would respond to me. And the memory of Randall’s hands left their imprint on my throat. Besides, Veronika didn’t speak either. Sometimes she would walk around the room, looking as if she’d never really seen it

before. She seemed giant-height in that room, her head nearly grazing the light bulb that hung from the ceiling.

Apparently this was our secret that we now shared. Nancy didn't seem to know about her daughter's visits to me; she never mentioned them. Neither did Randall. Veronika came to me by choice, for once independent from her parents, it would seem. But that didn't mean they didn't still carry their influence. I witnessed Veronika multiple times jump at a sound she heard or hurry out the door like she was afraid of being caught. That was another thing we had in common: we both seemed to live in fear.

After a few weeks of Veronika coming into my room and watching me, she finally said something. The whole time she stood there, she bit her lip, her face scrunched in concentration. I sat quietly in my corner, for the most part ignoring her, until a hoarse whisper invaded the silence.

"I'm Veronika," she said. She pointed to her chest. "Veronika," she said again, slightly louder.

I already knew her name from hearing Nancy speak to her, so at first I didn't understand this sudden introduction. But then she pointed at me. She raised her eyebrows, willing me to understand her. She wanted to know my name.

I mimicked her movement, putting a finger against my chest. "Paloma," I croaked.. I cleared my throat. "Soy Paloma."

"Paloma," Veronika said. My name sounded odd on her tongue, each consonant so short and heavy falling from her slow-moving lips.

Then she walked up to me. She squatted in front of me, our faces so close together I could feel her breath. She actually smiled, her eyes turning kind, a look of sisterly affection. She reached over and touched my wrist, holding it there as the look in her eyes then turned urgent.

“I’m going to help you, Paloma,” Veronika said. “Okay?”

I recognized the word *help* and knew then what Veronika was trying to say. I nodded my head, and she looked glad to see it.

Then she got up, went toward the door, and, as usual, quietly left, the only sound the tiniest of clicks with the locking of the door. Then all was silent again. I could feel my heart through the finger still pressed to my chest beating like a bouncing ball, faster as I thought about what Veronika promised, faster as hope swelled to a near-toxic high.

That hope transformed me. Thinking that I would soon be free of this place, I became a torment. When Nancy came in and threw a bowl or plate of food at me, I threw it right back to her. She smacked me, yelled at me. I had some cuts and scrapes, but I knew those would heal. In fact, I made a bet to myself that I would be gone from here by the time the scars faded.

I couldn’t exactly behave the same with Randall. He would come, but I wouldn’t yell or scream or kick at him. I knew from experience that that didn’t do anything to help me. Instead, I laughed at him. Not the mean, insulting kind that I tried before, but small giggles, like I knew a secret about him. A humiliating schoolgirl’s taunt.

“What are you doing?” he said. “Stop that.”

But I giggled some more. He stopped what he was doing and stood up. His shadow loomed over me.

“I can’t take this right now. You’re acting crazy.”

And he left. I claimed a little victory.

A few weeks went by until I saw Veronika again, and somehow within those weeks my hope did not disappear. In a place where trust was not easy to give, I threw it all on the one person who showed me any sort of kindness and reliability. I did not forget about her or what she had said to me. And she did not forget about me.

It was around the time that I would typically expect Randall to come in, but he hadn't shown up yet. I hadn't yet decided if I wanted that door to open or not. It could be Veronika to potentially save me, to help me get out of this room, this place. Or it could be Randall, who would shut off the single light and envelop me in my own fear, sweat, and darkness. I couldn't scare him away forever. Either way, I waited in the corner.

Eventually there was a sound at the door, and I held my breath. The movements were too slow, the unlocking of the door took too long, so I knew that it couldn't have been Randall. My heart increased its pace, and finally the door opened.

Veronika peeked her head in and glanced around the room until she spotted me in the corner. Her eyes were still urgent, but they also had excitement in them. I felt that same emotion. She was just as nervous as I was.

She grasped my hand; hers was slick with sweat. "Daddy's sick. He's not coming tonight. I'm gonna help you escape, okay?" Her voice was small and high.

I recognized the word *escape*, so I nodded like my head wanted to be rid of my body.

She took a step out into the hallway, and I followed. And in just a few steps I was farther than I had ever been in months, my legs unused to the walking. Veronika led me down the hallway, and I realized how grand the house really was. We passed a set of stairs that led to rooms that I couldn't even imagine. My home in México never had stairs. The kitchen in

Randall's home was at least twice the size of Mami's. It was amazing to me that my little prison could be surrounded by so large a house without me ever knowing at all.

It was dark outside the windows, so I could not see if there were trees, mountains, roads, or other homes. But what I could see was a door in front of Veronika. I used to be so afraid of the opening of a door, but this time I couldn't wait to hear the sound of a latch unlocked.

Veronika looked back at me, smiled, and pressed a finger against her lips. I understood. She turned back, and in her usual slow motions, she carefully turned the lock until it clicked. I think we both held our breath when her hand wrapped around the knob and twisted it. The door edged open, and through the crack the cold air came in and it felt like paradise to my skin. But along with the cool air came a piercing alarm.

I was struck still, hands covering my ears, wanting to scream. And maybe I did scream, but the alarm drowned out everything. Veronika yelped at the sound and immediately dashed down the hallway. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to follow her or not. But I wasn't able to, for a heavy hand fell on my shoulder. Randall spun me around. His eyes were red, his face fevered.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screamed above the alarm. He latched onto my bicep and pulled me back down the hallway. The alarm stopped; the silence was painful. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Nancy emerge in her pajamas, a concerned look on her face until she saw me. Then her lips reverted to that same tight line of hate and disapproval.

"I saw you too, Roni, so you better come out from wherever the hell you went," he called out. His words echoed throughout the house.

I was so close. Just inches away, but all for nothing. The door to the outside was still in my sight, so I fought. It was futile, but I struggled against Randall, I tried to pull away even though I knew I wouldn't go anywhere. But I had to try.

It didn't take long for me to be back in my little room with the door shut yet again. It seemed even more suffocatingly small now. Randall threw me down on the mattress; my head bounced against the tile floor.

"You ungrateful bitch!" he yelled, his voice rough. "Haven't I given you a good enough life? Hell, I practically saved it! You could've been starving on the damn streets with all those other Hispanics if it weren't for me, understand?"

He turned his head away, coughed and sneezed. I had never seen him so weak before. I didn't mean to, but out of nerves and out of spite for him, I giggled through my tears.

He looked at me, fury running from his nose. "Shut up. Nancy and I didn't have to open our home to you, you know? I didn't have to feed you, shelter you. A fucking dog would be more loyal than you. You hear that? You're nothing but a dog. And dogs need to be tied up."

I expected Randall to put his hands on me then, but instead he just left. Again, I was alone, in my cage of a room, sobbing at the sound of a locked door.

I almost dropped back into that well of complacency, almost gave up fighting altogether. This was it, I figured; this was my life from now on, and I would just have to deal with it. I considered that I had already had to endure months and months of living here. What difference would more months make, years even? I had heard freedom called sweet, but could this bland-tasting life be enough to satiate me?

That locked door might never open for me again. I might never see the America I had always dreamt about. But didn't I end up getting what I wanted here? I had wanted to get away from my family and México and a life of poverty that was destined to me. And here, in my tiny room that I had all to myself, I had that solitude, quiet, security, all I had ever wanted. And

though I had to face the abuse of Randall and his family, it was what I deserved, I imagined Mami telling me. I had no one else to blame for ending up here than myself.

I thought about Mami's bird in its little cage. I told her once how much I hated it, how we should set it free. Surely it didn't really want to be locked up in there.

"If the bird is happy, it sings," she said. "Don't you hear its music? The bird is perfectly happy here. And sometimes it's better to be happy than free."

I tried to reason with her words. Could freedom become obsolete if I found happiness? Is that all I needed to make this prison bearable? And could I find that happiness here, hidden in the dusty corner of this box of a room?

Ever since I first dreamt of coming to America, I thought I would find that happiness here, where I could finally be separate from my family, where I could be on my own. And didn't having happiness mean having what I wanted? I had thought so. Wasn't this what I wanted?

No, I told myself, of course not. I was not happy here; I could never be happy here. I missed my family. I hated Randall. It was true, I could live here for years and learn to survive in my little prison, but at what cost? Randall's abuses didn't make me happy. The stench on my mattress didn't bring me joy. The terrible silence did not excite me. I wasn't going to sit content as a bird and sing a melody to pass the time. That wasn't going to work for me.

Mami was right that happiness was important for a creature to have. But I knew my happiness was only going to come through my freedom from here and finding my family. Being with them was what I wanted now; that was what I knew would finally make me happy, being with people I loved and who loved me. I wanted to be happy *and* free.

And so I plotted. I knew that there had to be some way to get out. Randall and Nancy didn't strike me as the most intelligent of people, so I figured that not every little part of the

house could be so secure. There must be some way to leave. And I was going to do it by myself. I didn't need Veronika this time. I didn't want the outside help.

But Veronika did help me with one thing. Because of our failed escape plan, I now had a better idea of the layout of the house, where the exits were, in what direction I should run. That mental map became essential, and I dreamt continuously of those halls and the windows and that all-important door. That was my goal.

I lay on my back on my mattress and stared at the ceiling, thinking through the plan forming in my head. That single bulb still dangled above me. My only light source. Without it, the tiny room became blindingly black, a mass of shadow in which Randall committed his crimes. I was afraid of the dark, of that light leaving. The dark meant Randall was here; it meant that I was trapped underneath him, suffocating under the weight of his body, of the darkness.

But then I thought, the dark could save me. I couldn't see Randall in it, but he also couldn't see me. Was it possible that I could somehow sneak around his figure in the dark and find my way out the door? I could only find out by taking away the light.

The bulb hung a couple of feet above me. It was not enough for me to jump to reach it. I needed something heavy to swing at it, to bring it down. I gathered up the white blanket that Veronika had given me. I swung the heavy fabric around and threw the blanket on the light, again and again until finally I let go of the entire weight of the cover. I heard the glass bulb crack. Then all was darkness.

I felt my way through it, grazing each wooden wall until I found where the door was. I pressed my back against the wall right next to it, where Veronika used to stand, and there I waited. I stood there for what felt like hours, never growing tired. These could be my last

moments here, I thought. I might finally get out. I didn't know why I felt so confident, but somehow I knew. Somehow I trusted my ability to free myself.

There was that all-too-familiar sound at the door. At the same time the door unlocked and opened, I held my breath, no longer feeling the need to breathe; I felt more than human.

"Huh? Why's the light out?" I heard Randall fumble with the light switch on the wall beside me. Click, click. His hand was so close to me.

"Damn bulb must've blown out. Well, I'll fix that later." I heard him take a heavy footstep inside. "Hey, chica, where are you?"

I kept so silent. He took another step. And another. He made a loud noise, tripping over something in the dark. He cursed. It was then that I could sense that he was past me. I moved for the first time in hours, taking a couple of stiff steps to the side, always on my toes. I felt the wall against my back until suddenly there was nothing. I was in the hall.

I leaned in and found the door, pulling it slowly and gently like it was made of glass that might shatter. I heard it click shut. My shaky hands soon found the lock and turned it until it made its satisfying sound. I could almost hear Randall bang against the door. But by then, I was already running.

I raced down the hallway and saw the darkness outside the windows, where I could make out the shapes of trees against the night sky. There were stars. There was my light.

The door to the outside, waited there for me. My fingers slipped at the lock, my sweaty palms had trouble grasping the knob, but still the door opened. And cold air welcomed me.

Hours later, I found myself in a new prison, this one made of metal with bars on the door. The police found me running through whatever town I was in, and, scared and confused, I kept

running. But they caught up with me and took me in, placing me in a tiny car that took me to a tiny cell. They couldn't understand me when I tried to tell them why I was running, not until they got a person who spoke Spanish to translate. And then I saw them nod their heads, and they let me go, imprisoned no more.

Once they understood me, it didn't take long for them to find where Randall and Nancy lived and to find the room where they kept me. They found Veronika too, but I told them that she had been just as trapped as I was, that she was innocent. In turn, Veronika told them what happened, confirming my story. Even to the end, she helped me.

Randall got a little prison of his own. Nancy too, but the image of Randall locked up in a tiny cell all by himself satisfied me the most. Veronika lost her parents, lost all she had ever known. The police told me that they would do what they could to help her, and I hoped that was true. I hope now she has found her freedom.

I found mine. And then soon after, I found my Papá. He was unrecognizable, older than I had pictured him. He said he aged more during the months I was missing than he had in the previous years he had been in the United States. He was angry when he learned that I had forged Mami's letters and that she never even knew about my running away. He said he had a mind to lock me up in his home so I wouldn't do it again. I knew he was only joking, and despite his anger, I knew he loved me. And I loved him. I was no longer alone. I was well on my way on my journey of finding happiness.

Finding my family in México took longer. For months, we didn't even know if they survived the hurricane that hit the country. I cursed myself that I was ever mean to Mami, now that there was a chance that she was dead and would never know how very sorry I was to leave her with no warning. But after calls and letters and lots of time and waiting, we found them too.

Mami, my siblings, they were safe. I wished I could hug them from hundreds of miles away, but just to know that we were now all safe, that thought was the greatest comfort.

The last thing that I found was a life, a new life in this country called America. I've learned English, read many books, and now I share my story to those who will listen. Years have passed, and Papi and I are no longer alone. First my sister Isabel, and then my brother Luis got to come over from México as well. He's been helping Papi work and save even more money. They tell me that soon they will have enough for Mami's green card. And then she will come, and we will be together again, like she promised.

As for freedom, I don't really worry about being free from my family again. As long as they're around, I know I won't be able to get away from them. But I am fine with that now. Some chains we're meant to break free from and escape, but the chain of a family is much too strong to cut. And I've learned to like my chain.

I can't wait to see Mami, to hug her, to smell her, to tell her how sorry I am for everything. I wonder what she'll do with her bird, if she still has it. She might try to take it with her; I could picture her boarding the plane with the cage in hand. But I imagine she'll do what I wanted her to do those many years ago; she'll set it free and watch the bird fly out of the window into new freedom, giving it the chance to find a safe place to land, somewhere to call home.

Taking Back the Names

Momma sat me down in her chair in front of the mirror in her and Daddy's bathroom. The chair had no back, so I slumped, back curved forward until Momma reminded me about posture. She pulled me back so that I leaned against her, my shoulder blades nestled against her stomach. Her hands worked through my mass of hair, getting out all the tangles. Her long fingernails chewed at my scalp.

"My pretty girl," she said. She took up her hairbrush, the one with the broken handle that she used more on me than on her own short, gray-brown hairdo. The bristles were choked with the long strands of my light, butter-colored hair. Momma would dig and pull that hair out from time to time and store it in a plastic bag she kept in the cabinet under the sink. I didn't know why she did it. I had asked her once. She said it was so there would always be a part of me with her.

Sometimes when I woke up with clumps of my hair in my hands, I gave them to Momma to put in her bag. She always looked sad to take them.

While she brushed my hair, combing it down the length of my back to my waist, I stared at our reflections behind the toothpaste splatter of the mirror. Momma and I were opposites. My hair was long and light like sunrays poking through the clouds, while Momma's hair was short and wavy and dark like the clouds of a storm. My face and lips were round, hers long and thin. I wondered why we looked so different; Momma said looks could skip a generation.

We did share one thing; neither of us had smooth skin. Momma's was scrunched up with wrinkles around her mouth. Mine was dotted with erupting pimples and acne scars that Momma scratched and tore at, even when it hurt me and filled my eyes with tears. She insisted that it was to make my skin better, to keep me pretty. She had her reasons. Still, when my skin became raw

and red and scabbed over with dried blood, Momma said she loved me. Momma thought I was pretty.

I didn't think Daddy did. He said I was getting chubby. He said my face was getting hard to look at. He didn't come to visit me at night as much as he used to, before the girl came. The Mexican girl, the girl locked in our bathroom, the girl with no name, who took Daddy's attention away from me. I thought that I was special to him; I thought when he'd see me at night, it meant he loved me. That's what he called it: loving me. Now he was seeing the girl more and more. I was afraid he loved her now.

But still, I reminded myself, Daddy loved me too.

Momma looked at the clock on the wall, and I knew she was waiting for Daddy to come back from checking in on the tourists at the cabins he rented out. Momma liked spending time alone with just me. Daddy didn't like it though; he said I was too attached to her at my age.

Momma began pulling my hair and bunching it in a ponytail, then wrapping it around in a bun so that it wouldn't catch and tangle.

"Nika, you know your birthday's coming up soon. You know what you want yet?"

I had decided that twenty-five felt the same as twenty felt the same as fifteen and so on. I knew the routine of it all. Momma would get me a new book or game or piece of clothing that I needed, as long as Daddy approved it, of course. She'd bake me a coconut cake that I would be able to eat all by myself for the rest of the week because Daddy didn't like coconut. Daddy wouldn't visit me at night on my birthday, which I used to think meant that he rejected me, than he didn't love me any more. But Momma said the opposite; she said it was his gift to me.

But my birthdays came and went with no real change, and once I blinked and another year had gone by. I didn't think anything could change that. I'd spent my life in the cabin, happy

with the routine: a new year, a new age, a new book, and coconut cake. It was the best day of each year; I couldn't think that it could be any different or be any better.

Months before, Daddy brought home the girl with no name, which changed things. She was from the outside. She was not a part of the life I was so used to. Momma told me to not worry about the girl, that Daddy was just taking care of her, saving her from the outside world, the place he always told me was unsafe. But I couldn't help it. I wondered about where the girl came from, why she was here, how she could be here when Daddy used to say the cabin was just for him, Momma, and me.

But it was also easy to forget about the girl with no name. It was easy to think of her as a caged animal, like a dog, a thing we had to take care of, yet we had to keep our distance to not catch her fleas. Momma said she was dirty and stupid. Daddy said that the outside world made her that way. I believed them, and I wondered if that was why I wasn't allowed to leave the cabin.

I used to want to explore when I was younger. When Momma and Daddy couldn't see me, I would sneak out of the cabin, roam around the land, never straying farther than the edge of the driveway. The open air tasted cool in my lungs and on my skin. I felt a release like an unclenched fist. It was quiet, but there was so much sound. I delighted in the noises of the birds and the leaves until I heard Momma or Daddy screaming my name: "Veronika! Where are you?" I always came back to them, but then I wasn't able to breathe the outside air for months.

But ever since the arrival of the girl from Mexico, the outsider, the more I felt too much like an insider, stuck inside the cabin. The extra body in our house made it harder to be happy. Curiosity tempted me with the outside, the rest of the world, where girls like the one in our

bathroom came from. I knew what my parents had said, but I wanted to go there, to see it. I'd never been so close to something, or someone, from outside.

I knew what I wanted this year for my birthday; at least, I thought I knew. It was hard to know how I should tell Momma, who was waiting for my answer as she finished pinning up my hair. It was even harder to imagine that Daddy would approve it.

"I think I'd like to have another book." The words came out slowly, one at a time, like I was counting them. "One like the dog book you got me."

"*Where the Red Fern Grows?* That's one of my favorites, too." She smiled and looked at my reflection in the mirror, hands grasping my shoulders. "I'll try to find a good one this year."

"Actually," I began, feeling every single pin that Momma stuck in my head, "I was wondering if I could pick out a book myself?"

Momma pursed her lips and crinkled her eyebrows, and her whole face scrunched up like tissue paper. Then she puffed out again, letting out a long, breathy sigh.

"You mean go into town. By yourself," she finally said. She didn't seem angry, but she wasn't super-pleased either. She put a hand against her lips, and her expression looked far away. "I knew one day you'd ask."

"Of course I don't have to go," I rushed out. I squeezed my hands shut, anticipating Momma to say no. "It was just an idea, a dumb idea. You can go get the book yourself like normal. I don't mind."

"No, no, Nika, I understand," Momma said. "A girl your age doesn't need to be cooped up in here all the time. I'll see—"

A door slammed at the front of our cabin. Momma glanced at the clock. Daddy was back. She sighed again. "I'll see what I can do. Come on now."

I stood and followed Momma out of the bathroom. I could hear Daddy's gruff voice get closer and louder. Momma met him in the kitchen.

"Nancy, the goddamn lodgers in Cabin 3 think we're overcharging. Can you believe that?" he said. "They get a great view, a top-notch location near town, but they think it's worth peanuts. Bunch of cheap tourists."

"You'll make them pay," Momma told him.

"Oh, you bet I will." Then Daddy saw me standing behind Momma. "Jesus, Roni, what do I keep telling you? Stop picking at your face. You look like the moon, craters and all."

"That's what I keep telling her," said Momma.

I wanted to object, to tell him that I wasn't the one who picked my face, that it was Momma, but one look at Momma shaking her head told me that it was best not to say so. I kept my closed fists, like my thoughts, hidden behind my back.

"Sorry, Randall," was all I said. He didn't like it when I called him Daddy. He didn't like that my face was splotchy. But he loved me, I believed. Daddy loved me.

"Yeah, whatever." He turned to Momma. "Have you fed the girl lunch yet?"

Momma went pale. "Oh, no, not yet."

"Well, what the hell have you been doing all this time while I was gone?" Daddy knocked Momma's forehead with the back of his hand. "Go, do it now. I thought I could rely on you, Nance."

Daddy stomped into his bedroom. Momma took out a paper plate and some bread and made a quick sandwich with some bologna in the middle. She carried it down the hallway.

"Come on, Nika," she said. So I followed.

Even though the girl lived here, even though she sparked a curiosity in me about the world, I didn't like her. She was boring, she only spoke Spanish if she ever talked at all, and Momma said that she was a necessary evil. I didn't understand what that meant or why it was necessary. I only knew that Daddy had saved the girl by keeping her here, that she might be dead without his generosity. But he gave her more than that; he gave his attention. Every night when Daddy didn't come to see me and tell me goodnight, I knew he was with the girl with no name.

Momma unlocked the door to the girl's room, which used to be the hallway bathroom. Daddy had knocked out the wall to the linen closet and made the room a bit bigger for the girl. I wondered why he went through all the trouble for her. She could have survived when the bathroom was its original size, I figured.

The girl crouched in the corner of the room, wearing one of my old shirts, an oversized pink sweater. Her black hair was straggly, but long, almost as long as mine now. She might have been pretty for a Mexican, for a teenage girl. But her eyes were wide-set; her nose was flat. She was too skinny, too bony. I couldn't see how Daddy could love her. Daddy loved me.

Momma tossed the sandwich and the paper plate at the girl. She flinched as the paper plate rolled across the floor and the sandwich fell open-faced on the tile. "Lunchtime. Go on, eat."

At least I knew Momma didn't like her. At least I knew that the girl with no name was never going to totally replace me. I knew Momma loved me.

I watched as the girl inched her way to where her meal lay on the floor. She picked up both slices of bread and put the sandwich back together. She took a bite, and I let out a laugh at the sight of her eating off the floor. I felt bad for laughing, but Momma pat me on the back.

"That's right, Veronika," Momma jeered. "It's pathetic."

She turned away, leaving the room, and I followed behind, but not before I looked back at the girl and glared at her, sticking out my tongue for good measure. Momma locked the door, and at the sound of the latch, the girl in the room faded away from my thoughts.

“Into town? Are you fucking crazy?” Daddy yelled when Momma finally talked to him about my birthday wish.

They were in their bedroom. I was outside of their door, listening in.

“It would only be for a couple of hours, Randall,” Momma said calmly. “She’ll go down and be back in no time. You know she’ll come back.”

I heard the sound of a slap, short and sharp. Momma gasped, but I knew it was from surprise, not pain. She was used to Daddy’s little punishments for her speaking out. And I was used to hearing the hits, though Momma tried to not let me see them. Still, I felt my hands form into involuntary little fists, like I had the urge to hit something too. Daddy didn’t hit me, but sometimes when he hurt Momma, I could feel her pain in my chest. He said it was for her own good, but it almost made me love Daddy less.

When I was too young to know any better, I used to hit Momma too. Daddy said he wanted me to, that Momma deserved it. It wasn’t until Momma started crying that I realized I was hurting her.

“But you never cry when Daddy hits you,” I had said.

“It’s a different kind of hurt, Nika.”

I never hit her again. But sometimes I noticed that violence wanting to return, even when I didn’t think I felt angry. My hands would become fists, sometimes my face would get red. Sometimes I imagined hitting Daddy.

Then I had to remind myself, I could never do that. I was supposed to love Daddy. And he was supposed to love me.

“A couple of hours? You *know* what can happen in a couple of hours. Hell, minutes,” I heard Daddy say behind the closed door.

“I can take her myself.”

“No, you won’t! She can’t be with you. How would you explain that?”

I heard Daddy opening the door now. He flung it open, and I had to jump back before it slammed into my face. Daddy stared at me, smirked.

“There’s the troublemaker. Eavesdropping, huh? You shouldn’t do that, you know. But you might as well hear how stupid your plan is.”

“We can trust her, Randall,” Momma said. I could see the new pink mark on her face. “She’s a full-blown adult now. Has been for a while. She won’t blab.”

“Ha, an adult, huh?” Daddy laughed, but his face was mean. “Roni might be able to play grown-up like it’s a little dress-up game, but she ain’t one. You know it. Plus it’s not just her I’m worried about. Say someone takes her. She won’t have a clue what’s happening. She don’t know who to trust, who not to trust. How do you think she’ll get along?”

Momma ignored him, and walked past Daddy to stand by me. “Nika, honey,” she said, “do you promise, *if* you go to town, to not speak to anyone? Not unless it’s really, really important? Just go to the store, pick up a book, and come back. Do you understand?”

“I promise, Momma,” I said. I would glue my on lips together if I had to, I thought.

Momma smiled, then pointed her eyes back at Daddy. After all, it wasn’t her permission that I needed. “I promise, Daddy.”

He screwed up his face at the word. Not disgust; maybe just discomfort. Before I could correct myself, he reached over and grasped my arm, a little too tightly.

“You’re gonna come back directly, you here? Now, I don’t like this, you going off by yourself. Not a bit. But you’re getting too old, I figure. And I can’t go with you. But remember this is a one-time thing, all right? Just for your birthday. Don’t you dare talk to a soul.”

He let go of my arm, his sweaty handprint leaving a mark that I didn’t bother to wipe away. I couldn’t believe it, that Daddy had actually said yes. Of course that’s not the word he used, but it meant the same to me. I was going to get to go to town. I was excited and afraid and confused and thankful. For a second, I almost wanted to tell Daddy to forget about it, that just knowing that he would’ve said yes was the best present he could ever get me. But I held my tongue. I had to remind myself, I got what I wanted. I asked and I received.

Daddy huffed and turned around, shuffling back to his room. I realized that I had not responded to what he said, that I had been struck silent.

As he moved to close the bedroom door, I called out, “Thank you, Randall!”

Ignoring me, he muttered something about damn women overpowering him. He shut the door, while Momma and I sat down at the kitchen table.

“I love you, Daddy,” I said. I knew he couldn’t hear me, and I knew that he wouldn’t reply. But that didn’t matter. He told it all to me when he didn’t say no. Daddy loved me.

On the morning of my birthday, I followed Momma down the hall to take breakfast to the girl with no name. While Momma tossed a couple of stale pieces of bread in the room, I smirked at the girl and her little meal, prideful that it was my birthday and not hers. This day was mine, only mine, and I would have my coconut cake and eat it too, get a new book, and, most

importantly, see town for the first time, the unknown world that it was to me. All the while, the girl with no name would stay here in her room, like always. Even though Daddy was so kind to take her in and save her, I knew that he would never be so generous to let her leave like me. Daddy loved me. Daddy did not love the girl that way.

“Now here are some directions I wrote down that tell you how to get to the store,” Momma told me later, handing me a folded piece of paper. She had already told me a dozen times the way to get to town, and she told me once more. “Use the directions if you can’t remember, all right?”

I nodded and stuffed the paper in my jacket pocket.

“Here’s some money for the book. Should be enough for just one. Remember, only one. And bring back the change. You know, four quarters to a dollar. Use that math I taught you.”

She forced some crumpled bills into my hands, ten dollars worth, and I had never felt so rich. The money joined the directions in my pocket. Momma had nothing else to give me, her hands outstretched, empty, lost with nothing to hold now. So she pulled me into her arms and held me in her hug. Momma loved me.

“Happy birthday, honey,” she whispered. “My little Nika. Oh, this is so scary. But I’m glad for you, I am. This is what you want.”

We broke apart as Daddy entered. I wanted to hug him for giving me this gift, but he only ever touched me when he wanted to. I only ever touched him or hugged him when he told me to. So I didn’t go up to embrace him, but I did smile.

He regarded my smile with a single raised eyebrow, which was close enough to any smile he could give me. He approached me, and for a second I thought he might hug me or pat my shoulder or wish me a happy birthday. But he lifted a finger, pointed at me, and said:

“I’m giving you two hours. The bike ride there and back will take a good chunk of that. Like I said before, don’t talk to anyone. Don’t mention my name. And come back, Roni, you better come back here.” He grabbed my arm then, squeezing. “I don’t care if it is your birthday, you do what I say or you’ll never leave this house again.”

His voice was hard and gruff, but I felt the hand on my arm loosen, soften. It turned into what seemed like a gentle touch, the smallest of caresses that such rough hands could give. I saw it as a sign of what I believed to be true: that Daddy trusted me. That he loved me.

I knew he said these things because he wanted to keep me safe. Daddy was protective like that. He wanted to keep everyone safe inside the cabin, including the girl with no name and no home who would have probably died in the streets, according to Daddy, if it weren’t for him.

He had to leave to clean and take care of the other cabins, so it was Momma who saw me go. I used her old bike, rusty and blue, though we had to put on some training wheels. I never quite found my balance; It had been years since I last sat on a bike. But soon I was off. Momma stood in the doorway, and she might’ve cried, might’ve said a prayer.

The road wound down the hill we lived on in curves and loops like a dropped ribbon. I didn’t even bother to pedal as I raced toward town, feeling the early autumn air slap my cheeks and water my eyes. My hair fell free from its bun, all of its length flying behind me like wind-swept tree branches, and I didn’t even care if it tangled or frizzed or left my head altogether. I kicked out my legs as the bike gained speed and kept my eyes open to take in the yellowing leaves and gray-blue sky. I let myself breathe again.

As I stopped near the bottom of the hill, trying to recall Momma’s directions, I could hear the rumbles of an engine behind me. I nearly escaped into the trees, afraid that it was Daddy

following me, afraid that it could be anything. But curiosity of this new world got the best of me, so I turned around.

A shiny, red truck sped along until its headlights found me. It slowed as it got closer. I didn't know whether I should pedal away or hide or turn around. But it didn't matter, because the car stopped, the engine died, and a door popped open. Trying to ignore the sounds, I repeated Momma's directions in my head.

"Hey, lady, are you okay?" a voice behind me called. A man's voice. It wasn't like Daddy's voice; it was smoother and higher, a bell sound. A voice I'd never heard.

I stopped and chanced turning around to see the man who owned the voice, a man who was not my father. He stood leaning against his truck, hands bunched in the pockets of his brown jacket. He looked much younger than Daddy looked, but I couldn't pick out an age. His hair came down to his ears. He wore large glasses, and his eyes looked green behind the glare of the lenses. His teeth stuck out when he talked.

"This isn't really the kind of road to bike on. The cars around here drive too fast down the hill. They could hit you." I looked at his truck, wondering about how easily it could have run me over. "Besides, you're still miles away from town, if that's where you're going. It'll take you forever to get there. I can give you a ride if you want. It's really no problem."

I knew what Daddy said: *Don't talk to anyone*. But I knew what Momma said, that I could if it was really, *really* important. If what the man said was true, I might not make it home in time if it took too long to ride the bike. That seemed important to me. And what did Daddy say to me over and over since I was a child? *Speak only when spoken to*. This man had spoken to me.

But it wasn't just that, I knew. Being outside made me feel bolder and stronger. I knew I was only going to be out there for only a couple of hours. And I was going to try to make the most of it and not let this chance pass by, even though I was still afraid.

I hesitated too long to speak. The man said, "Sorry, I'm an idiot. You don't know me. I shouldn't expect you to want to ride with a stranger. I could be a murderer for all you know!"

He laughed. I didn't.

"I'm not, of course," he rushed, taking his hands out of his pockets as if to show he had no weapons. "Just a joke. I'm only a student, not a murderer. Let me start over. My name's Samuel. I'd like to help you out, if you want me to. I'm heading to town. Are you going that way too?"

"Yes!" I said, too loud and too fast that Samuel took a step back in surprise. Carefully, I pulled out the next words and placed each of them down in a row. "I am going to town."

"All right! So you want a ride?"

"Yes, please."

He lifted my bike, eyeing the training wheels with confusion, but he didn't say anything. He laid it down gently in the back of his truck. He walked to the other side and opened the door, extending his other hand toward me.

"Hop in," Samuel said.

I took his hand, it was soft, and I climbed into the truck. He closed the door when I got it, and walked over to his side and got behind the wheel. He started the truck, and the feeling of the vibrating engine beneath me matched my nerves. He pushed a button and music began to play, songs I've never heard.

“So what are you going to town for?” Samuel asked. We drove on down the road, and he turned left, where there was a sign pointing to the town of Boone, North Carolina.

“It’s my birthday.”

“No way! Happy birthday to you,” he sang. “How old? If you don’t mind.”

“Twenty-five.”

“Really? I would’ve never guessed. You have such a young, childlike face. I’m twenty-two myself.”

I realized the rules I was breaking, or, as I saw it, bending. I didn’t want to think about what Momma or Daddy would think if they knew I was not only talking to a stranger but also riding in his truck. But he wasn’t a stranger anymore, I thought. His name was Samuel and he was a student. He was twenty-two.

Besides, I didn’t feel afraid then. I was afraid of how Daddy would react, of course, but I wasn’t afraid of Samuel. He was kind. He helped me. And I was actually saving time by riding with him. I was still going into town, like I wanted. I was feeling close to happy. Free, in a way. And I felt that couldn’t be a bad thing to feel.

“Sorry, I’m stupid,” Samuel blurted. “I totally forgot to ask you your name.”

Daddy called me Roni sometimes. Momma almost always called me Nika. But they hardly ever said my name, said it in full with every last syllable. They broke it up, split it in the parts that they liked best, and so I answered to both sides.

But here was a chance, in my new, but brief, moment of independence, to take back my name. To take the part that Daddy took, take the part Momma held close to her, take the rest, and stitch them back together again, full and complete, every letter spelling out who I was.

So I answered: “My name is Veronika.”

*

Samuel said he was going to meet with friends at a place called a bar. He asked if I wanted to come to celebrate my birthday. I should've said no, I should've told him then to drop me off at the store to get my book. But I couldn't lie; I did want to go with him and see more of this town and more of its people. I made that decision, so I said yes. And he turned on the street, in the opposite direction of the store and the books.

The bar, which was small and dim with brick walls covered in pictures, was nearly empty. There were only three or four other people inside when we walked in. But it was still the most people I'd seen in one place all at once.

I followed Samuel to a table in the back corner. He waved to the two people who sat there. One was another man; he was round everywhere and had a thin beard and wore a cap on his head. The other was a girl, and she was the strangest but most interesting person I'd ever seen. Her skin was dark, shades darker from the tanned skin of the girl at our cabin. Her black hair was in multiple, tight braids, like thick noodles of rope. She smiled, white teeth like milk.

"Hey, guys. Sorry I'm a little late," Samuel said. He sat down across from them at the table. I still stood, but he looked up at me like I should sit down too. "This is Veronika. She was having some bike trouble, so I gave her a ride. Veronika, these are my friends, Patrick and Tara."

"Hi there," said Patrick.

"What's up?" said Tara.

"And guess what?" Samuel said. "It just so happens to be her birthday today."

"Wow, that's cool!" Tara sat up in her seat, her braids bouncing against her back.

"Yeah, birthday drinks on me," Patrick proclaimed. He handed me a glass bottle filled with a honey-colored liquid while he held up his own. "To Veronika!"

“To Veronika!”

The drink was sharp, stung like my skin when Momma picked at it. It reminded me of the sleepy-medicine that Daddy would give me when I was younger. Soon I got the familiar warm feeling in the front of my forehead.

“So, Veronika,” said Tara. She took a sip of her drink. “Where’d you go to school? We all go to Appalachian State.”

I’d never been to a school, so I didn’t know what it was like. I blurted out, “Momma taught me.”

“Oh, so you were homeschooled?” Patrick said. “That’s nice. Always wondered what that would be like.”

“Yeah, where is *home* exactly?” Samuel said. “If you don’t mind me asking. You were biking down the hill. You live up there? In one of those cabins?”

Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t mention my name. Daddy’s voice was louder in my head as the heat from the drink spread. I imagined he wouldn’t want me to say where I lived. So I said something that was not really a lie, but it sounded wrong to say.

“I’m just visiting.”

They nodded their heads like they understood, taking my statement as a good enough excuse of why they’d never seen me before and why I looked so lost the whole time, gazing at everything in the town, in the bar, in these people’s faces like they were strange. I wanted to tell them, *I’m not just visiting. I’ve been here my entire life! I’ve always been here, but I’ve never been here.*

In the corner of the bar there was a boxy television. Momma said she used to have one, a tiny one in the kitchen until Daddy got rid of it. He said it was going to rot my brains. All we had at home was a radio that we sometimes listened to; but mostly Daddy kept it to himself.

“Breaking News,” the television suddenly blared with flashing red letters. “A Raleigh man has been arrested for kidnapping, raping, and murdering a female high school student from Union County.”

“Ugh, can you believe that?”

“So disgusting.”

“How can somebody do that to someone else?”

I sat quietly, trying to make sense of what the woman on the television said and why the others were reacting the way they did. There were words that I had never heard said before: kidnapping and raping. They didn’t sound like good words.

“Can you imagine,” Tara said, “what that poor girl had to go through? Taken and locked up by some old, nasty man, treated like a sex object. She couldn’t even ever leave. It’s horrifying.”

I thought of the girl locked up in a small room in our cabin, the girl with no name. I did not think about her often, but when I did, it was like she was just an object, a forgotten ball rolled under a bed, gathering dust. Daddy was just keeping her safe, he said. I thought it was true.

“Maybe the man was trying to help the girl,” I said, more to myself than anyone else.

The group of friends stared at me, mouths open wide. Patrick looked angry, Tara shook her head, and Samuel gnawed on his lip.

“Oh, honey,” Tara finally said, “I don’t think you understand what you’re saying. You must not get out much.”

My cheeks burned, and I had to look down from the friends and from the television. I stared at my clenching fists, wishing I could tell them that it wasn't my fault that I had never been able to go anywhere. But I only nodded my head in response.

They were silent for a while. They gulped their drinks and tapped their fingers against the wooden table. I wondered what they would think of Daddy, if they would think what he was doing with the girl at the cabin was wrong. Or what he was doing with me. He'd never let me leave the cabin until now. Was that bad too? It was starting to feel like it.

I thought I had wasted enough time and that they didn't want me around anymore, so I almost got up to leave. But Samuel touched my wrist, as if to say that it was okay.

Patrick cleared his throat. "So what are you doing in town?" he asked.

"Getting a book."

Tara perked up. "So you like to read? Me too," She said. She tucked a beaded braid behind her ear. "Hey, I'll go with you to pick out some books. I'll pay. My birthday gift to you. Plus now I have tons of books to recommend to you."

Only one book, I heard my Momma say. *Just one*. I ended up with three.

I was late by only half an hour somehow. But it might as well have been two.

Samuel drove me back up the hill until we were about halfway to the cabin. I told him to stop and let me out, even though I still had a half-mile climb more.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes. Please, I have to go."

He lifted my bike from the back and rolled it to me. I took the handlebars and almost raced up the hill just then, but Samuel stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Veronika,” he said. “It was really nice to meet you. Really. I hope that I’ll see you around again. And happy birthday.”

He hugged me. No other man had ever touched me like that, not even Daddy, who grabbed rather than held, gripped rather than caressed. I didn’t know what to do, but my hands reacted in pushing him away. Samuel let go of me, taking a few steps back, almost tripping on his feet. His face was a mixture of fear and confusion.

“I’m sorry, Veronika,” he said. “I guess I should’ve asked.”

He scratched his neck and looked away. I didn’t know why I pushed him. I wondered if Daddy’s violence was coming out in me. I didn’t want to hurt people the way he did. I tried to take a step toward Samuel and let him know I didn’t mean to shove him, but he saw me and backed away even more. I looked down and noticed my fists were clenched again.

I tried to relax and open them. I looked toward Samuel and called out, “I’m so sorry.”

I got on my bike then and pedaled away, waiting until I reached a curve in the road so Samuel couldn’t see me anymore. I hid in the trees and waited until I heard his truck start and drive away. Then I let the violent urge take over. I found a large rock and started bashing it against the bike, over and over again until the chain broke off.

I was so angry at myself for pushing someone who was kind to me away. I was angry that the world was so big and yet I never really got to see it. I was angry at Daddy for keeping me from it for so long.

As expected, he was furious when I came home. He took me by the arms and shook me. I prayed that the books pressed against my chest under my puffy jacket wouldn’t fall out.

“Where the hell have you been? I said two hours. Didn’t I tell her two hours, Nancy? That was plenty of time. What did you do, Roni?”

He squeezed me so hard. All that I could utter was, “The bike.”

Daddy looked behind me at the bike and its broken chain. Momma noticed too and crouched beside the bike, inspecting it.

“Oh, Randall,” Momma said. “You know there’s no way she could’ve made it back in two hours if she couldn’t ride the bike all busted up like this. I’m surprised she’s home so soon. You know, I told you that old bike wasn’t in any condition to ride.”

“Nance, don’t argue with me.” He kicked her while she knelt beside the bike, so hard she fell back on her bottom. I winced, wishing I could help Momma, wanting deep down to tell Daddy to stop it. My fingernails dug into my palms. He looked at me next. “You’re lucky all you did was break the bike. It was cheap, anyway. But I swear, if you did anything else besides get a damn book.” He took a deep breath. “Let me see the book.”

I handed him the one I had clutched in my hands. The one I wanted. *The Call of the Wild*. The other two under my jacket were making me sweat.

“Hm. Another dog book. I think I’ve heard of it before. Looks safe enough,” he said. He handed it back to me. “Now where’s the change?”

I had tried to tell Tara that I needed to buy the book on my own, but she insisted she’d pay. I counted out some of the bills in my pocket, what I thought would be leftover from what my book cost. I handed the money to Daddy. The rest weighed heavy like rocks in my pocket.

“That’s it? Damn books are getting expensive these days.”

He left the room, obviously cooled down, and went to his bedroom, slamming the door. Momma got up from the floor and embraced me tightly.

“Thank God you’re all right,” she said. “Thank God.”

But everything felt all wrong now.

*

Sitting alone in my bedroom, I questioned everything that I knew, everything that had built my life.

Daddy had always warned me about the world outside, how people were even meaner than him, that they were unfair, and they didn't care a bit for other people. But what I saw on my birthday was none of those things. The people, like Samuel and his friends, were kind to me. And they didn't have to be; they didn't even know me. But they did care for me and help me, yet Daddy would never have wanted me to meet them. Thinking about every single person I've ever known, counting them out on the fingers of my hands, Daddy was the meanest, the most unfair. I wasn't so sure that Daddy ever did love me.

I thought about Momma. Daddy would hit her sometimes and call her names, but she never seemed upset by it. Did that mean it was okay? But then again, Momma would sometimes do that to the girl with no name, yell at her, throw her food. Was Momma as mean as Daddy? I thought about how she picked at my face, how Daddy would say I looked ugly and then he wouldn't visit my room at night. Momma said she was helping me when she did that. Was she saving me from something? From Daddy?

I had to distract myself from all the questions that night, so I treated myself to my birthday cake. I stuffed my face with the delicious, creamy coconut frosting, feeling hungrier than ever before. Daddy looked at me, grimacing.

"Slow down there, Roni," he said. "If you keep eating like that, you're gonna end up getting real fat."

Normally when he'd make comments like that, I would stop what I was doing, put my fork down, and hang my head in shame. But this time, I surprised even myself by cutting another

piece of cake for me to eat. I didn't even know why I did it, other than that I wanted a second piece, so I was going to eat a second piece.

"God, didn't you hear me?" Daddy said. "I said stop stuffing your face, Roni."

This time I did stop eating. I let go of the fork that I was squeezing in my hand, letting it clatter onto the table. Momma jumped at the sound.

Letting go of any control that was over me before, I took the piece of cake in my hands and smacked Daddy with it. I stuffed his face instead.

I couldn't see how red he was behind the white frosting, but the look in his eyes was enough to show his fury. Momma's eyes were wide, and she had her hand over her mouth in what I thought was a look of shock until I heard her giggle.

Daddy stood, and the frosting melted off his face and dripped onto the floor. "I think you've had enough," he said in a voice so quiet, it scared me. "Birthday's over now. Go to your room."

He didn't have to tell me again before I raced up the stairs and shut my bedroom door. I was afraid of what Daddy might do to me now, but I couldn't help but feel satisfied with myself. My hands could finally uncurl. I felt a new sense of control, my own this time, one that I thought could maybe help me leave the cabin again.

But then Daddy installed a new security alarm in the house that beeped any time the front door opened. I took that as his message to me. I was never going to leave that cabin again.

The books that Tara got me were different from any of the other books that I had read before, which were usually about animals and sometimes had pictures. But Tara's books didn't tell a story; at least not in a way that I was used to. I didn't really understand them; it would take

a long time to really read and understand them. What left an impact on me was what Tara had said to me when she bought the books.

“I think these should be really helpful and insightful, Veronika.” She placed the books into my hands. They were heavier than I expected. “I just think it’s important for women to help other women, girls to help girls. That’s basically what these books are about.”

That was an idea that was easy for me to understand. It made sense, while the other stuff that I read took longer to make sense.

After weeks of reading, I accepted something that I knew but usually dismissed as a stupid and silly idea. My life was not normal. What Daddy did was not normal. What he did to me, coming into my room, touching me, was not normal. What he did with the girl with no name, keeping her locked up in a room, was not normal. It was hard to grasp this. The books made me believe that these parts of my life weren’t normal, but they were all I had ever known. They were normal to me. So what “normal” was right or wrong?

Who I had always believed to be my Daddy was not who he really was. He had never really changed. But now I couldn’t look at him and think of him as Daddy. I looked at him and could only remember the red marks on Momma’s cheeks or the sad face of the girl with no name. I remembered clenched fists and closed doors. I had always thought I loved Daddy. But he wasn’t Daddy to me anymore. His name was Randall. He did not really love me. And I didn’t think that I loved him.

I kept thinking about what Tara said. After the kindness she had shown me, I agreed with her; women should help women. But I at first didn’t know who I could help. Then I remembered the one person in the cabin who needed the most help, the girl with no name. She needed help.

She needed kindness. And maybe I could be the one to give that to her, like how Samuel and his friends were kind to me.

I tried. I no longer laughed at her; her situation was no longer funny to me. I brought her a heavy blanket when winter came. They were small things that maybe helped, but they didn't seem enough.

Then I started to hear her, a far away voice that sang and shouted from some lost part of the cabin. Faint, but I could still hear it, and I took it as her calling out to me. Sometimes I wondered if hearing her voice was just a dream, something I made up. But I knew that it wasn't once I stopped hearing it altogether.

I started visiting her. Just for a few minutes every other day so that I could build up the courage to do something more. And maybe then I would hear her say something again. Momma didn't know. I didn't think it would be a good idea to tell her. I would just say that I had to go to the bathroom, which wasn't exactly a lie. I would go to the old bathroom where the girl was. I would open the door, quietly shut it, and stand in the room. With the door closed, it looked even smaller. I couldn't believe this was all the girl had. How could she stand it? I had to help her get out of there.

She was young; she could still be saved. She'd been here for just months, surely not long enough for this life to be normal for her now. There had to still be a want in her to be free, to get out. I could tell in the way she still crouched in the corner of the room, as if ready to pounce. She just needed a push to make that leap.

But I hated that I didn't know her name. I took back my own name, I took away Daddy's, and I had to find a way to give the girl back her name.

I wondered how I could find out and ask her. After all, we didn't even speak the same language. But one day, I tried something. I looked at the girl, making sure I had her attention. Then I pointed to myself and said my name. I hoped she would understand.

"I'm Veronika," I said.

She was silent for a little while. I worried that we'd never be able to communicate. But then I saw her hand lift, ever so slowly, until it rested on her chest.

"Paloma," she muttered. "Soy Paloma."

Paloma. I said her name, rolling it in my mouth. She was no longer the girl with no name. She had one. And it was Paloma.

Now that I knew her name, Paloma became more real to me, more human. I felt compassion for her, and I knew then that I didn't just want to her help, I had to.

I walked close to Paloma and knelt in front of her, looking straight into her dark, blackish eyes. I gave her a reassuring touch.

"I'm going to help you, Paloma," I said.

I wasn't sure if she would understand what I was saying, but I think she did. She nodded, and as our eyes stayed glued to each other's, I felt the link of the promise between us rattle like the chains that now bonded us together, that kept us tied to this house, because even if I didn't understand it all yet, we had that in common: we were both prisoners here.

A Confession to Who I Was

Marriage was supposed to save me. That's what my mother always told me. She warned me about becoming an old maid, saying if I didn't get married soon, no man would want me. And then I'd be lonely. But, as I soon learned, to be married is to be lonely.

And lonely is when your husband calls you names, insults you, makes you feel worthless. Lonely is when he hurts you if you speak up, and you have no one, not even yourself, to defend you. Lonely is desperately wanting a child, a friend, but no matter what you do, you try and try and nothing happens. You feel like there's something wrong with you. Lonely is telling yourself that you love him but can't say why.

Leaving your husband is not as easy as you think. Take it from me; I knew at that point that Randall was not a good man. He hit me sometimes. He wasn't always the nicest. He lied. But he was my man. I married him because at nearly thirty in the sixties, that's what my family expected. I married him because I wanted out of my mother's home, where I would've sat in spinsterhood if Randall hadn't come around. So I let him sweep me away like a fairytale to his cabin-home in the mountainous woods of North Carolina, with his promise of wealth in his cabin-renting business,

But he wasn't a perfect husband. And believe me, I strongly considered leaving many times. It was an option, a last resort if I had to. I could return to my family. They would've taken me in again. I'd be embarrassed to go back, but I could survive the shame. I wasn't sure if I could survive my marriage and the loneliness.

So I almost left once. But then Randall brought Katya home.

It was late one night. I was alone, contemplating leaving my husband, staring at all of my few belongings I had stacked up on the bed, wondering what was worth taking. Randall had been

gone for a few days, doing whatever the hell it was he did. I wasn't an idiot. He said he had to go for work, but I knew it was a lie. I figured he slept around, find some hooker for a night or two, come home smelling like cheap, sour perfume. I didn't fight it though. I had learned by now that Randall did what he wanted.

But I never expected him to bring his past times home with him. As I was grabbing a bag from the closet, I heard the front door open. He was back. I cursed under my breath and stuffed everything back into the closet. I met him in the entryway and saw that he was not alone. There was a girl, tall and blonde and beautiful, of course the kind of chick you'd expect your husband to fuck when you're none of those things. She was obviously drunk. Eyes half closed, she teetered in her heels. Randall held her by the waist to help her stand. I'd already accepted the idea that he saw other women. But to stand there and see with my own eyes his hands on another girl—surely you can imagine what I felt.

“Who's this?” I asked.

“Nance! Bet you didn't expect me to be back so late. I brought someone for you to meet. This is Katya. She's from Russia or something—”

“Ukraine,” Katya slurred in accented English.

“Ukraine. Right. Anyway, she's a little tipsy and doesn't really have a home right now, so I figured she could stay here for a couple of days. We have that spare room. Might as well make use of it.”

Before I could even respond, Randall led Katya up the stairs. He was only up there for a few minutes, thank goodness. I had time enough to think of what to say, but not too long for my fury to cool. I'd taken notes from him on how to maintain a rage. I couldn't allow too much time to pass. He soon came back down. His footsteps echoed throughout the cabin.

“What’s got you so pissed?” he remarked when he saw me.

“What the hell is this, Randall? Who even is this girl? Some hooker you picked up tonight? You feel sorry for her? Wanna try to help her? Or did you enjoy the meal so much you had to take a doggy bag home?”

“Oh my God, Nancy,” Randall groaned. He rolled his bloodshot eyes at me. “It’s just this one time. Is it really that big of a deal?”

“Is it? I don’t know if you forgot or something, but I am your wife. You *asked* me, remember? I’m sorry, but I’m not going to let you keep a whore like some sort of concubine in this house.”

I talked wild and fast, spewing the words before Randall even had the chance to shut me up. He came toward me and raised his hand. But this time, I slapped him first. I hadn’t even planned on it. It was like an instinct, a defensive reaction. My small hand had little force behind it. He hardly even winced. But Randall saw the little rebellion brewing in me. His face turned almost purple.

“You’re so selfish,” he spat. “You know why I married you? I thought you’d be loyal. You seemed like the type of person who I could expect to stand by me, no matter what. You don’t have anyone else. You left your family. You just have me. Why isn’t that enough for you?”

“Am I enough for you?” I dared to say. “You bring some lady from the streets home and I’m supposed to believe that I’m somehow important to you?”

“Dammit, Nancy! You bitch about being lonely and having no one else but me. But I brought that girl upstairs back for you. You wanted a friend. Well, look, now she’s here. I didn’t have to do it.”

He walked past me, brushing our shoulders roughly, and then slammed our bedroom door. I thought surely he was full of shit. Randall was lying, that's what he did. That Katya girl wasn't for me; she was his. His new little plaything. Someone he could turn to for pleasure without having to leave his own home. A convenience.

Again, I thought about leaving. I thought of all of the reasons to: the hitting, the name-calling, the loneliness, the shame, and now this girl. Part of me knew that I had to leave, that I shouldn't stand for this kind of marriage. That part of me saw things clearly. It could tell that things were not good. You probably side with this part of me. The rational side.

Then the other part of me decided that I was being difficult, unfair. That part scolded me for being such a poor wife, for thinking for a second that I could live without Randall. Didn't other women have it worse? Look at Katya, didn't she have it worse? What made me think I had such a bad life?

It was that latter part of me that won. It was that part of me that made me stay. I stayed, and I proved Randall right. I became friends with Katya.

Don't judge me for staying. I had to be there, I had to. You'll understand why. Just know that after I met Katya, truly met her, I couldn't leave. I had a responsibility to stay.

Initially, I didn't want to have anything to do with her. I was still fuming that Randall brought her here in the first place. What did I have to do with my husband's live-in mistress? Or whatever she was supposed to be.

Randall had to be gone again. Legitimately, this time. He was giving tours of the extra cabins to potential lodgers. So he was gone, but for once I was not alone.

Katya had already made herself comfortable here. I kept expecting that she would leave, that at least Randall would kick her out at some point. But he didn't. He liked her here. She'd been with us already for four days.

She was spread out on the couch when I came into the living room, her bare feet propped up on the leather, like she'd been living here for years. I imagined myself pushing her legs off, showing her that she didn't belong here. But I didn't have that boldness or cruelty just yet. That hardness hadn't come. So I sat beside her on the couch. Her long, red-chipped toenails rested on the cushion next to me.

"So, you're from Ukraine, huh?" I never was good at small talk.

"Oh, yes," Katya perked up, as if I had woken her from a nap.

"So what are you doing here? In the States?" *And in my home.*

Katya stretched and sighed. Her damn foot nearly kicked my face. "Oh, escaping, chasing what your people call 'the American dream.' I miss Ukraine, but it was not the place for me."

Her accent and her rounded features were the only things seemingly foreign about her. She didn't have that unsure look about her of an immigrant or refugee. Her attitude toward me, toward her being here was blasé, nonchalant. As she spoke in her low, sultry voice, I could imagine her holding a cigarette between her fingers, blowing smoke like kisses. No wonder Randall liked her. She played the sophisticated foreigner well. But it was just an act. Her youth showed in the way her lip almost pouted, how her eyebrows scrunched over her hooded eyelids. She had to have been only in her early twenties.

"So why are you here?" I asked. I didn't care if I was rude or intrusive. She was the intruder here, not me. "Why do you—pardon me—sell yourself?"

“It’s all I can do,” she snapped. If she had that imaginary cigarette, she probably would’ve stubbed it out, crushing it to ashes. Instead, she crossed her arms and looked away.

“Sorry,” I said.

We sat in silence for a few moments. She brought her knees to her chest, hugged them, looking much younger. I thought about getting up and leaving the room. Making friends with this girl seemed pointless. But as I made a move to stand, Katya uttered, “Your husband says he’s given me a home. Randall is so kind to take me in.”

“He’s...he’s all right,” I responded. Katya really believed that Randall was helping her. Did that make it true?

“But I am glad that you are here, too, Nancy” she said. “I don’t feel so lonely now.”

She smiled up at me with crooked teeth. And despite my confused feelings toward the girl and the reasons why Randall brought her, I had to be honest. I was feeling less lonely too. I guess that’s what happens when you put two lonely, pitiable creatures in a room together. It sounds like the start of a bad joke.

Don’t get me wrong. We were not sudden best friends. It took time, and many awkward conversations. But there was always plenty of time. Initially Randall said Katya would only be staying for a few days. As you can expect, days became weeks, and it was evident that Katya was becoming a permanent houseguest at that point. She didn’t seem to mind, though. She always did admit she had nowhere else to go.

I found out more about her. I went upstairs to the room that Randall gave her, and we talked, like girls at a slumber party. We shared our fears, told secrets. I asked her again why she was in the States. What was she escaping from? Eventually she told me that a man in Ukraine

had wanted to marry her. She didn't love him, she said. She wasn't ready to get married so young. So she found a way out and then found herself here.

"Sometimes I have regret, though," Katya said. "If I married, then I would have someone to take care of me. Maybe I wouldn't have to work like I did. 'Sell myself,' as you said."

"Don't say that," I said, hugging her shoulder. "If you weren't ready to get married, you weren't ready, okay? I didn't get married for a while too. Then at some point, I was just sick of being alone, and I was ready to marry. So I did."

"And you married Randall because you loved him?"

At the time, yes. At the time, he paid me a compliment, which was love enough to me. But looking back, he just saw me as a lonely woman, a target, someone he knew he could control. Was that love to him?

"It would seem so," I answered to Katya's question.

She'd been there for a couple months, and I knew that Randall was sleeping with her. It was something I expected would happen. He brought another woman home to stay with us; of course he was going to sleep with her.

I never knew if it was rape. Maybe yes, maybe not. Maybe she was just used to it. Maybe she was willing, like somehow her body was payment for her staying at our cabin, like overdue rent. I wouldn't know though; we never talked about it.

That is, until it was obvious that she was pregnant. She hid it for a good month or two. When she started vomiting, she blamed our American food. But obviously she couldn't hide it forever. At some point Randall realized that the new bulge in her tummy wasn't just from her new fatty diet. As soon as he found out, he pulled me into our room and shut the door. His face didn't show his usual anger. This time, he looked scared.

“I swear, Nancy, did you know that she was pregnant and not tell me?”

“Trust me, I had no idea,” I lied.

“My God, what are we gonna do?” He starting pacing, clenching and unclenching his fists like he couldn’t find a target to hit. “I mean, obviously she can’t have it, no way. We’ve got to get rid of it somehow, right? She can’t have it.”

“Randall!” I said, horrified. “You can’t possibly mean that. Get rid of it? That’s what you’re saying? That’s just cruel, even for you.”

“Nancy, are you seriously trying to argue with me right now? What other options do we have? Don’t you dare try to tell me you want Katya to have the baby and give me another thing to worry about. This is my problem, not yours.”

“Just listen to me, for once,” I yelled. He stopped his fidgeting and looked at me. He waited. I didn’t expect him to actually let me speak. “This is our chance to have a baby, our only opportunity if we ever want one. Don’t you want a baby boy, your ‘little man’? This baby can be ours, don’t you see?”

Randall considered this for a moment. “I have to admit, that’s pretty clever,” he finally said. “Surprised you came up with it on your own.”

I winced but took it as a compliment anyway.

“So she has the baby, but then we keep the child.” His eyes lit up. They dulled when he looked at me next. “That’s what you want, right?”

I nodded. I didn’t realize my hands were so tightly clasped, like a pleading beggar.

“So then what do we do with Katya?” Randall asked. “Kick her out? Dump her? We can’t afford to take care of them both.”

“We’ll just have to see,” I said.

I know what you're thinking. How selfish of me. How dare I used Katya's pregnancy as a means of getting what I wanted. But you have to understand. I was never going to get pregnant and have a child of my own. Never. I just wanted to be a mother. I wanted to have something to take care of. Sure, I took care of Katya, but she was an adult. She didn't need me all the time, and I needed to feel needed. And if you still don't understand, consider this: Katya was my friend. It wasn't really my baby I was saving. It was hers.

Since Randall consented to let Katya have her child after all, I flew into a frenzy of baby preparations. I became part ecstatic midwife, part expectant mother. You'd think I was the pregnant one by the way I was acting. For those months I was the most excited, the happiest I'd been in a while. I never knew someone else's pregnancy could give such a high.

Even Randall changed, if only slightly. He'd gone back to sleeping with me in my bed, since Katya's situation now disgusted him. I began to almost feel a kind of domestic tranquility. I had an influence over my husband I never before expected. He took pride in being the king of his castle, our cabin. He sometimes treated me as more chambermaid than queen. But I never considered myself the footstool to his throne. Believe me, I was his crown. He had listened to me; I had changed his mind. And now he made love to me, and we were going to have a baby. It seemed like our little family was becoming less atomic, more nuclear.

Katya was surprisingly calm as the months went by. She was a content pregnant woman, but she wasn't as anxious or excited as I was. It was like she had found a way to transplant all of her hormones into me. She did seem happy, but behind her warm, glowing, smiling face, I thought I saw something dim, like she knew something that no one else knew.

Katya could tell that I was excited for her and the baby. Of course I never told her of any selfish motives I might've had, but she could've guessed. I gently put my head against her bump,

listening in for a heartbeat or any kind of movement. Sometimes I felt a kick. I had begged Randall to at least take Katya to a doctor once, but he refused. No one could know that we'd been keeping a girl in our home for nearly a year.

"Do you know what you're going to name him?" I asked her as I rubbed her stomach. We all just assumed that the baby would be a boy.

"Miron. My father's name," Katya said, smiling.

I dared to ask, "What if it's a girl?"

She thought for a second. "Veronika. Or just Nika. I think the name is pretty."

I nodded but prayed that the baby would be Miron. For Randall's sake. He wanted a boy.

I lifted my head and looked at Katya. "Aren't you scared at all?"

She scrunched up her eyebrows but shook her head. "No. Whatever happens is not in my control. My purpose is to give birth to this baby. That is all that I care about."

"You say that as if that's it. Katya, you're having a baby! You're going to be a mother. Doesn't that matter to you?"

She didn't answer my question. Instead, she asked, "Nancy, promise me something?"

"Yeah, of course."

"You will take care of my baby? If something happens?"

I wondered what she knew. Had she heard Randall say he didn't want to take care of both Katya and her baby?

"You know I will," I said. "I promise you that."

Just a few weeks later, I had to act on that promise.

In the middle of the night, Randall and I woke to the sounds of screaming coming from above. We raced upstairs to Katya's room, the howls and cries growing louder and louder. We

found her sprawled on her the floor in a puddle of wetness, squirming like an overturned bug trying to right itself. She swore in Ukrainian, the foreign words sharp arrows lodged in our ears.

I begged Randall to take her to the hospital, to get her help. But of course he didn't. Did I want us to get in trouble, he said. So I did everything that I could to help Katya. God knows I did. Meanwhile Randall stood by the door, watching in fear. I heard him vomit in the hallway.

I thought she was healthy. I thought she would be all right. But I could see it in her half-open eyes and feel it in the way she gripped my arm that she somehow expected this to happen. I don't know how, but she seemed to know she wouldn't make it.

There was blood. God, there was a lot of blood. At some point Katya fainted. I called out her name, but she never opened her eyes again. I wanted to save her. I really wish I could have just watched her face and see it open up again, and she would smile and be all right. But none of that happened. She was past the point of saving. I had to save her baby.

I found the head and pulled. A little gray body fell out into my arms. I was so afraid that the baby wasn't breathing, that it would reach the same fate as its mother. But there was a gurgle, a cry, and the baby seemed to be okay. Randall finally came back into the room once he heard the baby wail. He exclaimed at the sight: the red-stained floor, the unmoving mother, and the shriveled, naked newborn in my own blood-encrusted arms.

"My God," he uttered. "Is...is she dead?"

What a stupid question to ask. I didn't bother to answer him. Katya was gone. I couldn't focus on her. I had new life in my hands.

"Randall, could you please get some towels?" My voice was surprisingly calm. I did my best to control the quivering. I didn't want to scare the baby more than it already was.

Randall, to his credit, did get the towels for me. When he came back, he avoided Katya's body, didn't even look her way. Instead, he stared down at the baby in my arms as I cleaned it, wiping its body to reveal new pink skin.

"Wait," Randall said, "is it a girl? Dammit, all of this and it just had to be a girl."

Yes, Katya's baby did turn out to be a little girl. Veronika. I'm not exaggerating when I say that she was beautiful and that I immediately loved her. But I was also scared for her. My little Nika had no idea of what life she was just brought into. Already her mother was dead, her father disappointed in her. As Randall grumbled to himself about what we were going to do and how he was always outnumbered by women, I said a quiet prayer to myself and to the baby. I hoped that despite it all, I could save her, that somehow I could keep my promise to Katya.

We buried Katya in the woods a mile or more away from our cabin. I picked wildflowers for her. They were essentially weeds, which Randall said were fitting. But she deserved better.

I raised the child as my own. I had to. The poor girl had no one else who cared for her. I know, you must think I was so selfish for what I did. But I could never tell Nika the truth about her mother. For all she knew, I was her mother. And I liked it that way. Trust me, I never wanted to forget about Katya. How could I? Her daughter looked just like her. But I wanted Nika to believe she was mine. I wanted her to love me, only me. And sure, maybe I was selfish; I didn't want to be alone anymore. And with Nika, I never was alone. But you can't say that I didn't love her too. I did. I loved her like she was my own child, because she was.

Randall was still bitter that he didn't get the son he wanted. Early on, I'd hear him mutter things like, "First my mom, then my sisters, and now a goddamn daughter! I swear to God I can never escape these women."

Eventually he got over it, but he would never call Veronika by her full name. He called her Roni, as if by giving her that kind of masculine nickname, he could somehow pretend that she was a boy. I wished he wouldn't do that, but at this point, you should know by now. Randall did what he wanted.

Nika's first word was "Momma." You bet I was proud of that. She pulled at my hair, uttered the word, and I swear I almost cried. "Randall" was her fifth word. She didn't learn the word for "Daddy" until much later.

I thought I was a good mom. Under the circumstances we were in, of course. I kept her alive, didn't I? Every day, I told Nika that I loved her. And that she was beautiful. I hugged her. I kissed her. I tried to make her happy, because that's all I ever really wanted her to be. Basically I treated her with a love that showed her that I would do everything I could for her. Of course I couldn't actually do everything for her. It was one of many lies that I had to tell her.

"Momma, what's it like outside the cabin?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. You're not missing much. It's tons more fun in here!"

"Okay. But why does Daddy leave the cabin so much?"

"He has to do work outside of our home. Why? Do you miss him sometimes?"

"Yeah. Hey, Momma. Does Daddy love me?"

"Why, of course, sweetheart!"

Besides the lies, I had to tell Nika no a lot. If I could have given her the world, I would have. But it was impossible. I couldn't let her just be a kid. She was sheltered, stuck inside our cabin day after day. She couldn't go into town; Randall wouldn't allow her to be seen.

“How do you think that would go over?” he would say. “There’d be questions. There’d be talk. And then what? People might find out what really happened. They might take Roni away. You don’t want that, do you?”

So Nika couldn’t go anywhere. She could never go to school or make friends her own age. I tried to teach her as much as I could over the years, but it never seemed enough. My little girl would always have the mind of a child. It seemed her future was to be stuck with us in that cabin all her life. Shut off from the rest of the world. Is that what Katya would have wanted?

“Randall,” I told him once, after putting Nika to bed, “don’t you think it’s a bit harmful to lock our daughter away? Doesn’t seem right to me.”

He scoffed. “*Our* daughter?” he said. “She ain’t your daughter, Nancy. Remember? She’s mine. I’m her natural father, so I get more say in how we raise her. Understand?”

In a way, I believed he was right. He had the biological right to call himself her father. I was just a lonely woman pretending to be a mother. An imitation. Randall had made his claim, so I had to let him have that control. I didn’t want to fight with him. I couldn’t.

When Nika was really young, like six or seven, she started hitting me. Or really, I should say, Randall told her to hit me. She never hurt me. Not physically. Her little bunched up fists felt like dull thuds to my body. But at the same time, they were more painful than any punch Randall could throw. I felt helpless. Randall was trying to turn our child on me. He was trying to turn her into a mini-Randall. But Nika had no idea what she was doing. She’d go through her attack of slapping me and beating me up, only to stop when she saw me crying and ask, as if nothing happened, “What’s wrong, Momma?”

There was something that told me I deserved it. After all I had done, I deserved to be betrayed by the one thing I loved. Hit after hit was just overdue punishment. Maybe Katya's ghost possessed my Nika. Like this was her way of telling me that I screwed up.

She eventually stopped hitting when she realized that it was wrong. Randall was disappointed. Nika had quit his little game.

I wonder sometimes why I didn't take Nika and run away first thing after she popped out of the womb. Believe me, I wanted to. But there was that fear. Randall was her parent, but I was not. And part of me still hoped that having a baby would change things between us, for the better.

Well, obviously it did not.

Time just runs through your fingers sometimes, I guess. Suddenly I looked up and Nika was years older, a preteen beauty, almost taller than me now. It was overwhelming enough to think that she grew up so fast. But that wasn't what bothered me. What bothered me was the way that Randall was starting to look at her.

You see, after Katya died, Randall went back to his old ways. Leaving home for days, sleeping with God knows who. Any time he'd stay at home and we'd have sex, it was routine, businesslike, ordinary. He did it like he was swallowing a pill or taking a midnight piss. He did it because he had to, because it was necessary. It was an addiction for him.

So I guess he saw Nika as a new drug. She had an obvious budding womanhood rounding out in her face and body. Her late mother's beauty was showing hints of peeking through. Maybe it was Katya's light casting a reflection on Nika that tempted Randall, a nostalgic tease of what

he once briefly had. But don't get me wrong, there's no justifying what he did. She was still only a child. His child.

It absolutely broke my heart when one morning I went to wake Nika up and I found her bleeding in her bed. I begged her to tell me what happened.

"It's okay, Momma," she said, though I could tell she was in some pain. She still smiled up at me. To her, nothing was wrong. "Daddy just came in to tell me goodnight last night. He said he loved me and that he would show me how much. That was nice of him, right?"

I know, I know. You don't have to tell me. If there was ever a time for me to leave, it would've been then. And, honest to God, leaving Randall, taking Nika with me, saving her, all those things did cross my mind. It was cruel to let my husband molest my daughter, *his* daughter. I swear I felt just as guilty for letting it happen. I wanted to stop it, I really did, but I knew what Randall would say: that she was his daughter, his alone. He could do what he wanted with her.

He was right, wasn't he? I kept telling myself that, but still there was an itch to leave. But I never did. Something wouldn't let me. Something kept me shackled to the wooden bedpost, to my husband's arm. Fear. Of course I was afraid. You'd be too. And it wasn't just that I was afraid of Randall. That was a big part of it, sure. He always was possessive of his things. Who's to say he wouldn't go after the things stolen from him? He might follow me, find me, hurt me. Hurt Nika. I didn't think I could risk that. But I was also afraid of the world. Remember, I'd been living in the same cabin for over a decade now, stuck between those wooden walls, only allowed to go to the same small town every once and a while. I'd been almost just as sheltered as Nika. How would I function out there?

All I could do was keep her happy. All I could do was to distract her from whatever Randall did and hope that she wouldn't understand what it was. I pretended like it didn't happen

or that it was a normal thing. I'd clean the bloody sheets. I'd pick out the clumps of Nika's hair that I found in her hands as she slept, store them away as lost parts of her. All like it was nothing unusual. But I hated myself every time I said nothing, every time I saw Randall go up to my little girl's room and I did nothing to stop it. So hate me all you want. Lord knows I did.

There's always a breaking point, isn't there? A point when you just can't take it anymore, when you've watched the fire for so long that you'd rather have it burn you than to see it spread.

That point came when I realized that Nika was twenty-four, as old as Katya had been when she was here. It was striking, really. It was just like one day I looked up at Nika and only saw her mother: the same long, blonde hair, the tall legs, the round face that only got rounder when she smiled. It was almost as if I had my beautiful friend back. I wondered what she'd think of me now. Did I keep her promise well enough?

"Momma," Nika said as when she walked into the kitchen one day, "why are you looking at me that way?"

"No reason," I said, turning back to the dishes I was washing. "You've just grown up to be such a beautiful young lady."

But I was thinking of something else. Nika was the same age as Katya when she became pregnant. I couldn't help but picture our daughter, the spitting image of my friend, with the same rounded belly, the same navel poking through the same shirts. Along with that image came the picture of Nika's face, tired, pained, resigned, until finally it went dead. I didn't think I could handle that possibility, that repetitious cycle of loss and birth. I couldn't let that happen to Nika.

I first tried to incite a quiet rebellion in ways my daughter did not understand. I decided to try to make her ugly. I dragged her into my bathroom, told her I was going to pretty her up. I noticed the pimples that dotted her skin, so I scratched and clawed at them until her face bled.

“Momma, what are you doing?”

“Trust me. I’m just trying to help, Nika.”

It killed me to see her cry, but she just couldn’t understand. I figured Randall might stop if she looked a little less beautiful, a little less like Katya. This was my way of helping. But I know, it was cruel. I was no better than Randall, hurting her and then telling her lies to make up for it. It didn’t really change anything anyway.

I had to talk to him. I thought actions would speak louder than words, but my rebellion had been much too quiet. The only way I could make Randall react was to raise my voice.

“Randall,” I said one night when we were in bed. I tried to keep my voice firm. “I don’t like what you’re doing with Nika. I never did, but this is getting ridiculous. It’s gone on long enough.”

He made a noise in between a sigh and a groan. “I’ve told you this. You can’t control a man’s urges. What do you expect me to do?”

“I’m just asking that you, I don’t know, find some other outlet for these ‘urges.’ But leave Nika out of it.”

“Why are you trying to argue with me? What I say goes, remember? Roni never complains, so what’re you worried for? She’s not even your daughter.”

“Stop saying that!” I would’ve yelled if I thought Nika couldn’t hear from upstairs.

Randall looked amused, as if he found my little outbursts funny, like they were only as serious as a toddler's temper tantrum. He didn't take me seriously. He wasn't even angry yet. After years of marriage, he'd learned that even if I did stand against him, I'd shut up eventually.

I couldn't do that this time. I had to be mean; I had to talk like him, think like him. I had to exercise the little bit of influence that I know I had over him, that same influence that convinced him to let Katya keep her baby. I had to control him like he would control me.

"I'm more her mother than you could ever be her father, you got that? So I think I have a right to say this, okay?"

"Excuse me?" he said, wide-eyed that my mouth was still open. "What are you—"

"Look, I don't care if you cheat on me and sleep around. I don't care about what you do with your body. You can go and find another girl to screw around with. I don't care. But it's not going to be my daughter."

"Oh yeah?" He sneered. "How's that gonna happen?"

I felt like I had to crouch on the floor in order to reach Randall's level of low moral standards as I tried to think like him, devising a plan to get what I wanted. And what I thought of was, admittedly, despicable. But it was a way to save my Nika and keep my promise to Katya.

"There are plenty of girls out there, you know," I said persuasively. "Yours for the taking."

"What are you getting at?"

"I know you liked it when Katya was here. Well, why don't you pick out a fresh, new girl for yourself? She can live here, so you wouldn't have to leave the house for your 'urges.'"

I knew it sounded bad. Everything about it was so wrong. It sounded like I was trying to sell a car.

Randall looked confused, yet intrigued. “You mean keep a girl here? All for me? You’re okay with that?”

I nodded. I knew I was talking about kidnapping. I knew it was wrong. But I was saving Nika. And that had to be right. “Just as long as you stay away from Veronika.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Randall yawned. He rolled over in bed, taking the covers with him. “Hell, if that’s what you’re willing to do.”

I was satisfied. I knew I had an influence over my husband. And I know, I shouldn’t have been happy about it. You don’t have to tell me. What I did was cruel. It changed everything about life in the cabin. But for once, I got what I wanted. I saved Nika. I kept Katya’s promise.

It wasn’t long after that Randall and I went to the airport. I felt a thrill being there. I stared at the board showing the arrivals and departures, looked out the windows at the planes taking off, and imagined the possibility of flying away from here. But that wasn’t what we were there for. Randall figured the airport would be the place to find a girl, one lost enough amid the bustling crowd of travelers. The needle in the haystack.

“Look out for one who’s alone,” Randall advised me.

So we stood together in the middle of the airport, nonchalantly, waiting to pick up the new member of our family. Randall held the back of my neck in what might have looked like an affectionate touch between husband and wife, but I felt like a hunting dog held at bay by its scruff, sniffing out possible prey for the hunter. What a pair we made, the two of us.

I saw a teenage girl, a small, Hispanic one who stood in the middle of the terminal, gazing around. Lost and alone. She was perfect. I pointed her out to Randall like a piece of jewelry I wanted. And he bargained, sweet-talked, wrapped her up to take home.

I figured now Nika was safe. Katya's memory was safe.

But I know now you wonder about the girl. What about her? At that point, I honestly didn't care. Shoot me for that, but this new girl was not my problem. She was just a pet, a thing to feed and clean up after but forget about when you lock it up at night. She was nothing to me, nothing but an attempt to save my Nika.

You might say I truly was cruel now. Go ahead, you can say it. I might've been. It didn't bother me anymore. I lived with Randall long enough that it was possible that it rubbed off on me. I learned to be cruel, to use words to my advantage. I had to.

So you can say I was cruel. You can even say that I was stupid, that from the start I should never have married Randall. But I dare you to say that I wasn't a good mother, that I didn't do what I could for my daughter. You may still not understand it, but wait and see when it happens to you. Then you might get it. And you'll learn to be like me.