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Butterflies Fall in Multiples of Two

By

Joy Lynn Torrenga

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1994

Advisor: Professor Anita Skeen

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ABSTRACT

BUTTERFLIES FALL IN MULTIPLES OF TWO

By

Joy Torrenga

This manuscript is a fictionalized autobiographical account of a segment of a woman's childhood from age eight to sixteen. It comprises the framework for a series of short stories describing growing up disabled in an unstable family. Through narration, the collection describes the loneliness and isolation the main character feels not only during the parental battles and subsequent separation, but also her own fears and doubts about her declining strength and her distorted personal image.

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Introduction

I don't remember what it feels like to walk anymore. But I remember what it looks like. When I was about six, I watched myself waddle before the full length mirror at the end of the hallway in our house. Each time I took a step my stomach rolled like a water balloon with an inny, rather than an outy, for a stem. I owned the body that filled the mirror with my six-year-old legs, my stomach, shoulders, and head. I'm glad I looked at my image that day. Now I have a visual memory of loving myself.

Time passed. My body lost its ability to propel itself. I resorted to hand-held mirrors, preferring to peer in only on bits and pieces at a time. I was bitter and ashamed of the body that had let me down. Most of the other bodies around me seemed so perfect. The ones that weren't, weren't talking.

We never read stories in my special education school about other disabled children. The kids in our stories filled full length mirrors. It seemed like nothing was wrong with children in other schools. We were the only invisible mistakes.

My introduction to disability reading materials didn't come until my mid-twenties when I read two journals: the politically radical Disability Rag, and Accent on Living, which promoted the continuing invisibility of disabled individuals. The first left me aghast. The second left me

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confused and disempowered. I was not ready to shout in the streets of Washington, D.C., nor was I ready to continue towing the same old sorry, worn out line. There had to be materials that pointed toward a path of self-awareness.

In an absolute state of confusion, Winter, 1990, I found myself in the library. I spent the season introducing myself to the power behind story telling by reading novels, short stories, autobiographies, poetry and essays written by disabled people. One particular collection of articles, Women and Disability, edited by Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, was of particular interest to me. Holding a collection of materials which created a conscious awareness of the genesis behind my self-denigrating beliefs was powerful. My education continued with authors such as Ellen Hunnicutt, Mary Jane Owen, Amber Coverdale Sumrall, Isabelle Maynard, and Kathy Austin. The genuine quality of their work gave credence to my life. The reader experienced the shit and the shame, the sense of loss, and the developing self-love. The materials introduced a new concept to me: community. Though I had shared classrooms and living rooms with other disabled individuals, we never shared experiences, never created a feeling of oneness with each other. Apparently, we learned well one must keep shame hidden. Reading disability-centered materials gave me that sense of community for the first time.

Of equal importance is the realization that we, I, have been running on what writer Andre Dubus calls "biped time. (p.

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8)" Though I have not been a biped for the majority of my life, I have judged myself and my abilities on a biped scale, thereby becoming a loser nearly every time. In Broken Vessels, Dubus, whose left leg was amputated and his right leg scarred by severe muscle and nerve damage after he was hit by a car on the highway, describes getting ready for his daughters' weekend visit. He gave himself forty-five minutes to prepare dinner and shower, the amount of time he had needed before his accident to accomplish the same tasks. However, dinner appeared three-and-a-half hours later. His account was amusing and painful, yet after reading the essay with its many similarities to my life, I found myself able to sit a little straighter. I have spent a lifetime in anger and frustration comparing myself to bipeds. Unable to accept what I couldn't change, I have berated myself for my inability to walk, plant gardens, have babies, pitch tents, retrieve fallen books, even flip hamburgers at McDonald's. In addition, none of these feats accomplished through alternative methods would have been regarded as significant. Thank goodness for writing. It is one ability which, for me, doesn't take biped time into consideration.

I hope to continue what other disabled writers have already begun by adding to the shared experience and strength of community through writing as genuinely, and sometimes as painfully, as I am able. I want to describe through fiction what it feels like growing up disabled, the powerlessness

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which derives from disability and the even greater disability of prejudice which is created within the general community. Many of my reasons for writing stories about disability are self-centered. The cathartic release of negative emotions clears my mind, allowing me to exhale. At the same time, writing exposes the irrationality of my thoughts. Just as Dubus' "biped time" reminded me that it was senseless to judge myself by the standards of others, putting my thoughts on paper allows me to eliminate personal, long-held beliefs that cripple my judgment. Also selfish is my need to scream to the world, "Look at me. I'm human. There's nothing mystical here. I may be disabled, but I'm like you." I am creating my own conscious realization of humanness while displaying it for others to compare their own lives to, and hoping to dispel disability myths along the way.

I have a large mirror in my home now. Much better than the ordinary full-length variety, it reflects not only my body, but a great deal of my surroundings. I still use my hand-held mirror. But every so often, I take a look in my big mirror. It keeps everything in proportion.

Disability saturates my days and nights. I get in and out of bed to someone else's schedule, whether I am ready or not, or have been ready for quite some time. I am a mechanical junky, dependent on the whims of electrical

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wheelchairs, lifts, vans, and a plethora of devices, many of which are common to others, but essential for my living. Fears for my physical safety reach irrational heights as I sniff the air through the dark hours as I lay in bed certain that if fire comes I will burn alive. To arrive at appointments successfully takes great amounts of thought and energy. I must coordinate my transportation to conform to given weather conditions and my ability to manage within them. My fragile body strength must be considered, for loss of sleep or a missed meal causes immobility. I must ensure building accessibility once I arrive, and confirm personal care attendants will come at the necessary time in the morning to care for my physical needs before the day can begin. Many labels could be attached to me, but nothing affects my daily living like disability. It slants my thoughts, forcing me to observe myself and my surroundings in a new light. In essence, disability enriches my life. Therefore, it makes sense that it would be the topic which permeates my writing. Kaleidoscope published James Harris' article, "Seeing the Art of Arlene Innmon," in its Winter/Spring 1988 issue. Innmon, a painter born with congenital glaucoma, realized how tenuous her eyesight was. "I began to appreciate what I could see, looking at everything around as if it were beautiful," Harris quoted the artist. "Looking at the angles, design, shadings, and colors. I wanted to draw everything I saw. (p. 34)" Writing is for me what painting is for Innmon.

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I chose writing rather than any other artistic pursuit because of my respect for books and story telling. Stories were an escape for me as a child, a way of travelling without physically moving. I did not acquire my first electric wheelchair, hence my first taste of physical freedom, until I was fifteen. By then, reading had become an integral part of my life. In addition, I was encouraged to write diaries, journals, and letters by my family, and given praise for my ability as a writer. My journals became the instrument through which I could release the tension threatening to bubble over when I was a child. They were the one place where I could disclose my feelings without fear of reprisal or indifference from others. My ideas became tangible when placed on paper.

Until recently, disability was rarely the topic of my short stories. If I didn't mention that I was disabled, maybe nobody would notice, I thought. The few times I attempted writing about disability, I was encouraged to continue. But I feared, wrongly, that the encouragement stemmed from others hoping to pigeonhole my writing, as if they were unaware that I was more than a physical characteristic. My self-education into the subject of disability helped dispel my fears, and contributed toward a healthier view of disability issues in general. Now that I am writing about this subject, I hope to integrate it with the many facets which create the whole being.

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The nature of my topic is highly personal to me, and my hope is to convey that personal nature to the reader partly through the use of first person. This point of view lends a conversational dialogue with the reader, allowing me to feel that I speak directly to her. Though the topic is disability, the plot permits non-disabled readers to become emotionally involved which I hope will lead to understanding, the main goal in writing my thesis. The struggle of my protagonist for acceptance are not unlike those which women and other minorities experience, allowing others to have empathy.

In the essay, "Growing Up 'Special'," published in the Winter/Spring 1989 issue of Kaleidoscope, author Gail Willmott stated that authorities expected her, as a disabled individual, to live down to the lowered educational standard they had set for her. She quoted a psychological evaluation which was read aloud at a pre-admission interview she attended before beginning studies at the University of Illinois: "Severely disabled 18-year-old female with typical adjustment problems. As regards college level studies, she can be expected to perform with average ability -- perhaps maintaining a 'C' average. (p. 25)" She did just that for one year before she was able to break through the limits of the evaluation, maintaining an "A" average for the remainder of her degree.

In each of my stories, though Lisa is faced with many experiences which she finds humiliating, I consider it

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essential to also provide her with backbone sufficient enough to carry her through the assaults. Her understanding of the situation must allow her to realize her self-worth. Though Lisa's perception is clouded at times, she has hope. The butterfly scene in "Butterflies Fall in Multiples of Two" exemplifies her resolve when she chooses not to color the butterflies. In addition, the conclusion to "Archipelago" illustrates the main character's ability to remain strong. In this first story, Lisa feels confined and scared about her decreasing physical strength, and how her weakened condition will affect her family. She is also distressed by the explosive relationships between the family members. Yet, in the conclusion, she finds a correlation between herself and a tree. "A lone tree with only a few branches sticking out held onto the piece of land, its root system the only thing keeping its world from washing away." It is that strength which allows Lisa to face her challenges.

As a disabled female, Lisa must also manage body image issues in a society with exacting ideas concerning female beauty. Susan Hannaford stated in her essay, "Women, Disability and Society" that "[w]oman is still, by and large, identified by her sexuality; with man it is merely a part.... While as a woman, sexuality is defined for her and seen as of great importance, having a disability is seen also as denying her this sexuality. She becomes...neutered. (p. 17)" My third story, "Hard Work, Flying", addresses this issue.

Her conception of the perfect woman is molded by characters on the television and the covers of her father's girly magazines, and by the image her mother projects. Her body type is very much different from those likenesses because of her scoliosis and decreased musculature. In this story, Lisa's self-image is influenced by cues taken from her family. Her father makes her the brunt of a joke, calling her "Buddha" in reference to her protruding stomach. His remark causes her pain, an attack upon her inability to achieve the necessary female body image, and her resulting lack of worth in his eyes. She denies her pain to ensure a modicum of security within her diminished position in the troubled family.

Future stories will expand the characters in my thesis. Among the ideas which I am fostering is the issue of body image which appeared in "Hard Work, Flying." Lisa will become conscious of the fact that she must somehow bridge the gap between societal pressure to be a specific type of woman in order to have self-worth and her inability to achieve that body type. Also, I want to explore the main character's imagined role in the abuse of the brother conceived after the conversation with her mother in the conclusion of "Fusion." She vehemently denies culpability, yet in a future story she will need to address the issue. If she does not hold herself accountable, then she must learn the reason behind the accusations dealt by her mother. I am hoping that a blend of the existing stories with those yet to be written will

complete a book for publication. As my understanding of myself and of disability issues grow, I want to join those whose stories have marked my experience, helping me to shape and expand my views, enriching my life.

Archipelago

I sat with my legs folded Indian style in the bunk bed made from logs, pulling my shirt over my head and trying hard to push my arms through the sleeves. I watched my brother play Matchbox cars on the floor. "Zoom, zoom. Watch out, you're gonna crash," he said, talking for the invisible people inside the tiny bucket seats, racing them under and around the bed. Mom pulled up outside the log cabin. I heard the car door slam. The grocery bags crunched in her arms as she walked around the side of the cabin. Eric stopped playing and ran to open the screen door.

"Did you buy any cookies?" he asked. Mom handed him a crackling clear package of chocolate cookies. She put the bags on the gray formica-topped kitchen table with the wide strip of metal around the edge.

"Only one cookie, Eric. Remember we're going to have our picnic breakfast now."

"I need my walker, Mom," I said, scooting my hips back and forth to the edge of the mattress, trying my best to hurry. Mom took us on our first breakfast picnic in the Spring to a park a few miles from our home. Dew covered the green picnic tables, and sparkled across the grass tips. The tennis courts where my brother would one day take lessons were empty. We had the whole park to ourselves.

"Here you go," Mom said. She snapped my new walker open

and put it next to me. "It's a beautiful day." I squeezed the grips a few times to make sure I had just the right hold, then counted " 1-2-3," and jerked my body up. My legs shook. I was afraid they would collapse.

"Put your sweatshirt on, Eric. It's still pretty chilly out," Mom said.

"This one?" he asked pulling out his gray one. It was his favorite because Aunt Georgie gave it to him. She bought Eric and me sweatshirts with the Central Michigan University emblem on them when she went away to school. She took me to her college once for little siblings' weekend and her boyfriend carried me around on his shoulders. But that was a long time ago, at least two years, when I was in kindergarten. Eric's sweatshirt was too little for him now.

"Sure, that's fine," Mom said.

I looked across the wooden floor, concave by the door from people's shoes grinding on the sand. I swung the walker a step forward. "This might be the last time I walk," I whispered. I kept it to myself. It might upset Mom if she knew.

Remember everything, I thought, noting every detail around me. It'll be important when I'm old. Eric shoved his arm through the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and got stuck in a hole in the elbow because he tried to hold on to his gold Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang car with movable wings. The cabin walls looked like Mom's hand-me-down Lincoln Logs, but more

twisted and knotty. In the corner near the door, Mom wrestled a package of hot dogs down between an egg carton and a bag of carrots in the overstuffed ice chest. Then she poured a bag of ice cubes over the food. Out the front door, I saw a wedge of combed beach and the lake which stretched unbroken to the horizon.

I dragged each foot forward a few inches, feeling the grit of the scratchy sand, then swung the walker out a little farther as I made my way across the cabin where we had vacationed for the last three summers. Dad didn't come with us this year. He wasn't Daddy any more. I changed his name the day he moved out. I called him "Dad" the first time he came back to visit Mom at our house, then waited to see if he would hit me, or say, "Are you trying to belittle me?" which I had heard a million times. But nothing happened. He didn't notice.

I'd been calling Dad "Dad" for a long time. Mom separated from him the day after New Year's. It seemed so easy. Moms signed a paper in one of the big gray buildings downtown and they got rid of the dads. I wondered why she didn't do it earlier.

Mom pulled the carton of milk out of the ice chest and let the lid slam shut. She gathered the milk, cereal, bowls and spoons into a basket to take outside for our picnic breakfast, then put a covered styrofoam cup of coffee from her trip to the store inside.

"Can we have the blackberries, too?" I asked, standing still for a moment to rest.

"Oh, how could I forget the most important thing?" She pulled them out of the ice chest.

Eric found the blackberries growing in the woods around the cabins the day before. "Blueberries," he yelled, pointing to where they grew. I sat on the edge of the woods in Mom's old red wagon that she painted blue, watching them flick through the trees.

"These are blackberries," Mom answered, her voice muffled by the trees.

"Here's a bush with a whole lot. Mommy!" Eric screamed. His voice was tiny as if all the plants and trees absorbed his sound. "Great, where's the cup?" Mom said. She ran out of the woods with the little coffee cup filled with berries and a few leaves, then dumped them into the red plastic beach bucket sitting next to me in the wagon. "Look at these. They're so good," she said, eating one. "Mmmm. Try one." She sprinted back into the woods to gather more, then ran back to dump the little cup of berries into the bucket next to me.

I listened to their voices, imagined their movements; my brother spinning one way, then another, picking ripe berries from the bush, sometimes picking ones that weren't ripe yet because he was so young, little thorns sticking his finger as he raced Mom to get more berries. Probably they ate some. I

knew from the crackles and snaps that dried twigs were scattered on the ground. I imagined the uneven ground with old dead leaves decaying under their feet felt soft or maybe slippery.

"Mom," I yelled, as my legs gave out. I gritted my teeth, holding my elbows locked to keep from falling. She grabbed me around the waist from behind. The walker tumbled as Mom swung me against her stomach, then pushed the screen door open with her hip. Bending backwards to counter-balance, she carried me down the cracked cement steps and plunked me into the wagon.

"I'm going to get the cereal," she said, breathing hard. "Be right back." She smiled, though her eyes were swollen. I thought that was strange. The night before, I woke up when I heard her crying next to me. "Mom," I whispered. She fell silent. "Go to sleep," she ordered. But I couldn't. Suddenly, the pitch blackness was scary. Bad people and monsters, like Dracula or the Mummy from the Saturday afternoon movies, could get in through the flimsy door. Mom couldn't stop them. I lay awake with my head underneath the covers, as still and flat as possible so the monsters wouldn't see me, listening to all the noises until I saw purple light through the windows. Night monsters couldn't be trusted not to pop out of thin air. Day monsters were more predictable.

I dug my toes into the cool, shaded sand, catching tufts of grass in between. I tried to pull them out, but they were rooted deep. It was really more dirt than sand near the cabin, and dirty dirt at that. People dumped ashes from charcoal fires everywhere so that soot clung to Mom and Eric's feet, even mine when I touched the ground. The wind whipped the leaves. I looked up to see them dance spirited overhead.

Close by, Lake Huron crashed onto the beach which old man Morrison raked every morning before we woke. He was a fat man with a big belly and a cigar hanging from the corner of his mouth. He had a gray crew cut, too. He had a wife, but I never saw her. She stayed inside their white house that needed paint at the end of the row of three cabins they seldom rented, hidden in the dark behind the sunny yellow curtains that framed the window. I imagined she wore tight fitting bright flowered dresses, and had purple splotched arms with skin hanging elephant-like from her elbows.

Eric swung the screen door open and jumped over the broken steps. He landed near me. I felt the percussion when his feet smacked the ground. His sweatshirt was not only on backwards, but inside out. On his back, I could just make out the outline of the University emblem. Eric ran, kicking up dirty sand, to the beach. He looked around him in all directions, then raised his arms to either side as if he had lost something.

"Where did it go?" he yelled. "Where's my castle?" He

hit the air with his fist, the sand with his heels as he clumped his way back to the cabin.

"Mommy, my castle's gone," he complained, as Mom stepped out the door carrying the breakfast basket. He whined as if he would cry, but wasn't quite sure that it was worth it. She put the basket down beside me in the wagon and pulled me to the beach where the old rickety picnic table, held together by rusted nails, leaned.

"You can make another one after breakfast as big as you want." Eric plunked himself down in the front of the wagon, straddling the handle. His bottom lip protruded.

"But I want the castle I made yesterday. I was going to make it bigger," he whined.

Mom pulled the wagon, but the wheels dug deep into the sand down to the hubcaps. "Come on and help me pull, Eric," she said to get him out of the wagon.

He whined a prolonged version of the word "Mommy," as he pushed himself up, hands on knees. He grabbed a corner of the grip to help. Sand got into the wheels around the axles and made grinding noises as they yanked the wagon unevenly across the sand. Mom put the basket onto the picnic table as Eric jumped onto the seat which creaked and sunk an inch. Mom wrapped her arms around my body from behind and lifted me to my feet. She stepped down the small bump to the sand and walked me to the table. Then as she held my body up against her belly, I swung my legs up, over the seat, and she sat me

down. She set the bowls out, filling them with cereal.

Eric sloshed milk into his bowl. He grabbed at the berries, popping a couple in the process and making his hands turn blood red. He stared at the stain, turning his hand around.

"Mommy, look," he yelled as if we were far away. He laughed as he shoveled a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

"Boy, what a mess," Mom said. "Good thing we have that big bathtub to throw you into when you're done. Should I do that?"

"Okay, if you go in, too," he said. Mom swallowed, nodding her head, yes.

Seagulls flew close by, some landing on the beach hoping for a handout. "I'll give them some cereal," Eric said. Mom said that was too expensive, she would get the "seagulls' crackers", the crackers that had gone stale. I didn't like watching the seagulls beg for food, their black eyes zeroed in on our movements. But they were beautiful in the sky, circling, catching a wind current, soaring great distances with long, outstretched wings they never seemed to flap.

"How long can we stay here?" I asked Mom.

"Four days. Why?"

"Why can't we stay longer?" I complained. I tried to pick little sections off a berry and ate them one by one, but the thin membrane always ripped and bled.

"We can't afford it." Eric and I whined. "It's better

than nothing," she warned. "I'm doing the best I can."

Eric threw a twig at the seagulls. Two of them raced toward the stick as it hit the ground, fighting a moment until they noticed it was worthless. I looked down into the puddle of milk at the bottom of my bowl. Eric climbed back onto the bench and slurped a spoonful of cereal, making as much noise as he could.

"You know, I was thinking about your father just now," Mom began. She pried the top off from her coffee and steam rolled upward. "You haven't seen him in a while. Do you miss him?" Mom's voice lowered when she asked.

"No," I said immediately. I lowered my voice, too, as deep as I could so she would know I meant it.

Eric stopped playing and chewed his food slowly, sitting on his knees to reach the table. "Is he coming here?" he asked. His eyes moved up to watch Mom's face.

"No. This is our vacation."

I believed her. I picked at a splinter on the table top, pulling it slowly to see how long it would grow before breaking. But the rotting gray wood easily broke away.

"Daddy wants you to be married to him," Eric said, a little milk dribbling down his chin. "He bought new clothes so you can like him."

"And stopped greasing his hair," I said, rolling my eyes and shaking my head like I saw Mom do when she was talking to her best friend about Dad.

"That's one good thing he did," she laughed.

"Greasy, greasy," Eric said to himself as he lunged for a little fly which dive-bombed into his cereal. He clutched it between his thumb and index finger, then wiped its guts across the picnic table.

"You're sick," I criticized.

Dad changed a lot that summer. He stopped rolling his Lucky Strikes in his tee-shirt sleeve, and stopped greasing his hair until it looked black and dirty. He even started smoking cigarettes with filters, and made his first trip to the dentist in ten years to get his brown, decayed teeth capped. He came to our house to show Mom how much he had changed for her. I was in the backyard floating in the pool, watching him stand at the screened door, all shadowed, except for his new white teeth. On t.v., reporters on the evening news showed Robert Kennedy getting shot over and over, one frame at a time. They said 1968 was a year to be remembered. I knew it was true. But the pictures were grainy. It was hard to tell one man from another.

"Well, Daddy knew I wanted him to change, but he didn't understand what."

"You told him, but he didn't listen." I popped a blackberry into my mouth and crushed it with my tongue.

"What do you want out of me?" Dad screamed at Mom one night when he thought Eric and I were asleep. She told him the hitting and screaming had to stop. I heard him say, "What

do you mean? I never hit you."

"Maybe he is starting to understand," she said, her voice quiet.

"He won't stop, ever," I yelled at Mom. I shoved the big bowl of blackberries away. Mom sighed, but she didn't say any more.

"Mommy, I'm hot," Eric whined. "Can I take my sweatshirt off?"

"First go wash your hands in the lake. Try to get that red off," she warned. She gathered the dirty dishes, placing them into the basket. "I'll get the seagulls' crackers."

I cupped my hands over one knee, pulled my foot up on to the bench, then swung it over to the other side. I did the same with the other leg, careful not to rub my skin on the wood. Eric pulled at his sweatshirt, getting it stuck on his head and arms at the same time, then separating himself from it. He threw the sweatshirt down next to me on the bench, then ran to Mom. He grabbed the box of crackers. I lay his sweatshirt out flat on the bench, then rolled over onto it, scooting to the ground. I crawled closer to Eric's castle and began building my own using his cups and shovels. He was preoccupied with trying to run closer to the seagulls with his hands full of crumbs, but he only chased the birds away.

"I'm ready," I yelled, holding a piece of toilet paper over my face to block the outhouse smell. The heat and

humidity of the afternoon made the stench even worse. Mom came in and stood me up, holding me with one arm while she pulled my wet bathing suit up with the other. Then she bear-hugged me and walked out of the little stall which had two nailed-down toilet seats. "Why are there two?"

"I don't know," she strained to say. Mom sat me in the wagon, then knelt on her knee to wipe the perspiration from her face. I stared at Mom's red face, listening to her breathing.

"Mom," I whispered when she was rested. "I'm scared." I looked away from her, fixing my eyes on the crescent moon on the weathered gray door above me until I was sure I wouldn't cry. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You're going to grow up to be a beautiful girl, and you're going to go to college, and be a great scientist or a teacher, or whatever you want to be." The words tumbled together like an over-practiced speech.

"No, you know what I mean," I complained and shook my head. "What's going to happen if I can't walk anymore?" I looked at Mom, waiting. She put her head on my lap and hugged her arms close around me.

"I'll always love you no matter what happens." She lifted her head, and I saw her eyes were red. I wondered if that meant nobody else would love me. "I'll make sure you can do all the things the other kids do. Okay?"

I hesitated, then nodded, yes. But I said nothing.

She pulled the wagon across the hard-packed ground near the outhouse. "We better hurry, we left your brother by himself." Mom bumped my blue wagon down the gravel drive, one wheel in the gravel rut, one wheel on the grassy island in the middle. I bent forward with my body centered over my knees in order to keep balanced. We came to our cabin and Mom turned onto the soft ground where the wheels began to mire into the sand.

"Can we go swimming again?" I asked.

"After I take a nap. I'm tired."

"Mommy, come look at my castle," Eric yelled from the water's edge. He patted one of the towers he made by dumping a large cup full of wet sand up-side-down, making sure it was strong, then looked up at her. "Mommy do you see it?" he demanded.

Mom pulled the wagon through the long sea grass which anchored the sand well making a more solid surface for the wheels. She turned her head to look at Eric's castle as we came to the beach. "Oh wow, look at that," she yelled. Her voice trailed off at the end of her sentence. She stopped at the edge of the bump down to the sand, looked at the wagon wheels, then back at the bump. Lifting the wagon handle upward, Mom pulled the wagon forward, and lowered the front wheels down the decline.

"But come here and look at it," Eric complained.

The back wheels went down the hill unevenly, only one

wheel touching the sand. The wagon began to tip. Mom dropped the handle, and grabbed the wagon to steady it, but it was too late. It turned and deposited me in the soft, warm sand.

She stumbled forward and sat down near me. "I can't do this all by myself," she whispered. "It's too much." She brushed hair off her cheek. Sand stuck to her tears like sparkles to glue.

I lay curled up on my side in the sand, with my cheek against the warmth, looking up into my mother's face, watching her lip quiver as she leaned on the palm of her hand. She was beautiful. Her frosted sassoon-styled hair framed her face. Her blue eyes were still circled in black eye-liner, from her trip to the store in the morning, making them seem even bluer.

"You've been sad all vacation," I said.

"It's been so hard." She paused a moment and stared into the sand. "This vacation was a test to see if I could handle living without your father. But I just can't do it. He was right." Her voice was shrill as she tried to talk through tears. "You need more and more help. It's so hard for me to lift you. It wasn't like this last summer."

"It's not my fault," I said. "You make it sound like you'll go back to Dad because of me." I concentrated on a pile of discarded shells Eric collected, noticing their curves, furrows and soft tones of pearl, brown and peach.

"No, it isn't you're fault." Her head sunk forward.

Tears fell to the sand, the granules nearest to the drop jumped on impact. Her hair scooped forward so that I could only see a slit of her face. "So much has to be done, so many decisions.... Maybe I'm not a very strong person."

I listened to the waves, mesmerized by the rush. The sound built, then faded away, over and over again. Nothing could be done to stop them from crashing onto the shore. I drew in a deep breath pretending the waves filled my lungs. I felt calm.

"You can do it," I said. "He's been gone a long time. Everything will be okay. It's just harder here than at home."

"What are you doing?" Eric asked running toward us. He kicked up sand that tickled my legs as it fell. He plopped down to his knees looking at the sand between Mom and me as if we found something neat buried there.

"Look what I found," he said, his eyes riveted on the sand. Between us lay a snail's shell, so tiny and pale that it was camouflaged by the granules of sand in which it was half buried.

"Huh-huh," Mom replied as if she were deep in thought. "Kids, I have something to tell you." She sighed. "I talked to Daddy this morning."

"How?" Eric asked. "Where's the phone?" He shook his head and smiled as if she were making a joke.

"I spoke to him on the pay phone when I went to the store

this morning," she said to the sand. Mom pulled her dark glasses from the resting spot on her head and covered her eyes. Her lips formed a hard, thin line. She became a glamorous actress resting on the beach in a blue and white checked bikini and black sun glasses.

"You're going to let him come back, aren't you?" I asked. "I knew you would." I stared down at a tiny cinder from a campfire inches from my nose, knowing I would remember it every time I thought of that day.

Mom got up, pushing hard against her knee. She pulled the edge of the wagon until all four wheels were square on the ground. Then Mom bent over and pulled my arms to sit me up before grabbing me under the arms. She hoisted me back into my seat. I brushed sand from my arm and leg while I watched Eric squeeze the little snail's shell. He broke a shard from its outer rim before he threw it as hard as he could across the beach. It weighed so little that it fell only a few feet away.

"Daddy said he wouldn't hurt us anymore," Mom said as she picked up a wet towel blown from the picnic table and snapped it in the air to remove the sand. She threw it back on the picnic table bench, then snatched up some dirty cups from the table and walked toward the cabin.

"You mean Dad," I added bluntly, as I bent to pick up the tiny cinder.

"We'll have dinner in a little while," she said as if I

said nothing. "I'm just going to read for awhile. I bought hot dogs and corn-on-the-cob this morning. We'll cook them over a fire. That'll be fun." She smiled over her shoulder at us.

Mom came out of the cabin with a blanket and her book, I'm OK, You're OK which she had been reading all summer. She unfolded her blanket and lay down to read the creased and torn book. Within minutes she was asleep. Eric wandered around looking for the perfect spot in between Mom and me, and began digging a deep hole. I knew he was digging a hole to China because that's what we did in the sandbox at home. I flipped onto my belly, fell to my knees on the sand, which was almost too hot to touch, and started crawling toward the water's edge. The waves hit my arms and legs. I almost fell over. I sat down and the water lapped against my legs. I scooped up handfuls of wet sand and caked my legs, completely covering them, trying to make them blend into the beach. But the water kept washing the mud away. Far out, a ship inched by. I watched it disappear in the haze.

A familiar car rumbled behind the cabin where Mom's car was parked. I didn't notice it coming down the long dirt road through the trees. It stayed hidden. Then the noise stopped. A door slammed, and for a few moments the only sounds were the waves and the trees. Mom raised her head from the book, propping herself on her elbows. Eric turned away from his

pit, as I scooted around to look over my shoulder toward the corner of the log cabin where the logs came together in crisscrosses.

Dad appeared with his short-sleeved white shirt untucked and unbuttoned exposing his lean, muscular, nearly hairless chest. He was already tanned, and his light brown thinning hair had a trace of blond from the sun. His vacation mustache that he grew every summer, and wore to work for a few weeks until his boss threatened to fire him, was just starting to grow. He stared at Mom. She balanced stiffly on her elbows on the beach blanket as if paralyzed. Dad lit a cigarette, cupping his hand over the match, then flicking it through the air. He placed one hand on his waist and rested most of his weight on one leg like a Jimmy Dean look-alike, minus the slicked-back hair.

Mom stood, then walked toward the cabin as Dad took a long drag on his cigarette, holding it firmly between his thumb and forefinger. He walked a few steps forward to meet her. Dad didn't see us, he didn't look. They talked, too far away for me to hear. He grinned, then slid an arm around Mom's waist and lead her around the corner of the cabin.

Eric walked up to his castle and slammed his foot sideways across one section, wiping it out. He came over, sitting a few feet away in the wet sand and let the waves roll up over his legs.

"Is he going to live with us again?" He looked up into my

face, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know," I said. "Mommy said he wasn't coming."

We sat next to each other without talking, four legs washed in the bubbling waves, minnows swimming at our feet.

Dad poured lighter fluid over the coffee can full of charcoal in the big pit, then threw a burning match on them. The screen door crashed closed behind Mom as she brought the foil-wrapped potatoes out for the fire. She put the potatoes down by Dad, then kissed him. He patted her rear end, grinning. I sat in a lawn chair, my walker next to me, watching the flames shoot skyward toward the leaves. A thin line of smoke rose from the hot dancing air above.

Dad stood near the fire with a cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth. His hand rested on his thin waist. Mom tapped him on the belly before walking back to the cabin. "Haven't gained an inch since I left the Marines," he said. It seemed like it was about the only thing in his life that he was proud of. Mom smiled over her shoulder the way she always did when he mentioned his weight, or the Marines. The door slammed again.

The fire died too quickly for Dad, so he picked up the lighter fluid and began squirting the live coals until they burst into flames. My stomach tightened waiting for the flames to leap up the stream and explode in his face. The

open can held loosely at his side, Dad stared out toward the beach where Eric threw a frisbee up into the air and tried to catch it before it fell to the sand. But Eric's six-year-old legs weren't fast enough.

"Eric," Dad yelled, "you're doing that wrong. Bring it here, I'll show you." Eric grinned, ran to Dad, his eyes wide.

Dad took the frisbee, held it at a ninety-degree angle, and flipped his wrist as if he would throw it. "Okay?" he asked. Then he tossed it straight up into the air. Eric chased it. The frisbee came down, hit his hand and bounced to the ground. "Jeez," Dad said, shaking his head. "Where'd you learn to catch like a sissy?" Eric held the toy to his chest like armor, his eyes round, his bottom lip trembling. "You might as well go put on one of your sister's dresses if that's the best you can do." Eric dropped the frisbee and walked back to the beach, dragging his feet.

"Hey, why don't you bring me another beer?" Dad yelled in a happier tone toward the cabin as he collapsed into a lawn chair.

"Just a sec," Mom said from behind the screened door. She came out with the package of hotdogs and Dad's beer. "What's wrong with Eric?" she said looking at him on the beach hanging his head.

"He can't even hang onto a damned toy. Now I suppose you're going to go running after him." Dad guzzled his beer.

"It's your damned fault he's such a damned sissy." Dad bent over and knocked the coffee can off from the coals with the metal spatula. Coals tumbled red hot across the pit.

Mom walked one step toward the beach, then stopped, her face raised as if she would talk. "Eric, look around in the sand and find all of your Matchbox cars," Mom yelled as she walked back to the cabin. "I want you to bring them in just in case it gets dark before we're done with dinner."

My chest tightened, realizing what she was up to again. "Nothing's changed," I whispered, so Dad wouldn't hear me. I wanted to go into the woods and never come back. I pulled my walker in front of me, placed my hands on the grips, squeezed. I jerked my body to stand, but my legs felt tired. I tried again, but I couldn't move.

"Do you need something?" Dad asked, staring down at me. It sounded like a challenge, or his defensiveness.

"No," I answered, looking at the tree behind him. I tightened my lips. I won't give you anything, I thought to myself.

"You trying to belittle me?" he bullied.

"No." My voice was flat so that he wouldn't think I was acting happy like Mom, or being sarcastic, which would make things worse.

Eric circled around us, his shirt pulled up to hold his cars, he entered the cabin. I stared at the coals, now turning gray, blanking out everything else.

I dozed next to Eric in the top bunk of the log bed, looking at his drooling face smashed into the pillow. The sun was weak, so I thought it must be early. I pretended to be asleep. Mom and Dad carried our stuff out to the cars. Their shoes scraped across the sandy wooden floor. The boards sounded hollow, like there was nothing below them.

Dad's cigarette smoke wafted up to the ceiling, spread out, reaching the bed. I put my nose under the sheet, but I couldn't escape the stink.

"No, don't take that one," he ordered Mom. "That one's next. No, that," he persisted.

Mom's steps changed direction a few times. I heard her say, "Oh," as she tried to figure out his orders.

"Instead, why don't you just get them up and ready for when I get back?" Dad said.

"You're going somewhere?"

"I'm going to get some cigarettes and gas up so we can get on the road from here." The door slammed. A moment later Dad's car engine roared and faded away. I stuck my head out from under the sheets. Mom poured our cereal into bowls and pulled out what was left of the blackberries.

"I'm awake, Mom," I said, lifting my head and balancing it on my hand.

"Good morning." Mom was lighthearted, and I wondered if she was happy like me when he wasn't around. "I'll get you up

in a minute after I take the ice chest out."

The wind whipped as she opened the door, blowing through the thin summer blanket. I looked out the window at the angry leaves thrashing around, but getting nowhere. Mom stomped her feet on the cement step outside before coming in. She lifted me from the bed to a kitchen chair, then took my pajamas off. Goose pimples dotted my body. "Hurry, I'm freezing."

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying." She pulled a sweatshirt over my head. When she finished dressing me, we made the trip to the outhouse. Mom lifted me into the cabin and sat me on in front of the table. She poured milk over my cereal. "Get started while I get your brother up."

"Hey, sleepy-head," she sang. She pulled the covers off from Eric. He groaned, stretched, then lay inert again. Mom gathered him up, his head on her shoulder. She took advantage of Dad being gone and held him close. "My baby," she whispered to him, burying her face into his hair. He stirred, opened his eyes, stared as if he had awakened in a different world from the one in which he fell asleep. She put him on his feet and pulled his pants up, then put his sweatshirt over his head. He began to dance in place. "Run out to the outhouse, then come right back for breakfast." Mom packed up the odds and ends left in the cabin and took them out to the car.

"Can I go out to the water?" Eric asked, following Mom back into the cabin.

"Eat first." She poured his milk. "Don't forget your blackberries. You can finish them."

Eric shovelled his cereal into his mouth, drinking the milk in one long gulp. Mom loaded the dirty bowls into the last box. She looked around to make sure everything was out.

"Well, let's say good-bye to the beach," Mom said. She lifted me out to the wagon. Eric jumped off the steps behind us. The sky was a thick heavy gray. The wind made each white-capped wave crash hard on to the beach. I wondered why the world seemed so angry. A peculiar stench hung in the air, becoming stronger the closer we came to the beach. Eric ran ahead of us, then stopped before he got to the water.

"Mommy," he screamed, racing back to us. "The fishes, they're dead. They stink." He pointed toward the water's edge, his eyes opened wide.

Mom pulled the wagon to the bump. She walked across the sand looking at the fish that were scattered on the wet sand near the water like a cloudy gray decaying blanket.

"Why are they dead?" I yelled, holding my jacket sleeve over my nose.

"Alewife," she said after inspecting them closer.

"What?" All I heard was "wife", so I figured they were girl fish.

"Alewife is the name of the fish," she explained as she walked closer. "They die after mating, after they have babies."

"How did you know that?"

"I saw them once before when I was little, when I went on vacation to Lake Huron with Grandpa," she said as she walked back. Mom sat down by me on the bump.

"I wouldn't have babies if I had to die afterwards," I said. "Do they know that's going to happen?"

"No, I'm sure they don't or they wouldn't do it," Mom said. "Or maybe they would. Who knows." I heard Dad's loud engine coming down the road. "Maybe it's worth it to them."

"It wouldn't be worth it to me," I said. The car door slammed.

"Eric," Mom yelled. "Look, don't touch." He bent over for a closer look into the clouded eye of an alewife. He ran to Mom, and sat next to her, hugging her waist.

"Mommy, I want to go now," he said. His voice was almost drowned out by the whistling wind. I heard the sudden hiss of Dad's beer can opening just before the grass was crushed under his step next to me. I felt it bruise.

"What, do we have some dead fish?" Dad said cheerfully.

"A few," Mom answered.

Eric scooted away from Mom, as Dad sauntered down to the water's edge and placed his Marine weight on one leg, hand on hip. Sky and water mirrored each other in gray. Both held Dad's shadowed form in relief for the three of us sitting on the bump between grass and sand. He was good looking in his jeans and tee-shirt. His hair blew back from his face like he

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was standing in wind created especially for him by Hollywood. He had his jaunty James Dean look down pat.

I looked away from him, down the beach to a small peninsula jutting out into the stormy water. A lone tree with only a few branches sticking out held on to the piece of land, its root system the only thing keeping its world from washing away.

Butterflies Fall in Multiples of Two

"Stop fooling around, and finish breakfast," Mom yelled at Eric and me. She flipped the sandwich bag over and tucked the flap down around the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then shoved it into my Monkeys lunchbox. On the radio, Nancy Sinatra was blaring, "One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you." I felt militant. Eric and I hid behind the fortress made from Life, Cheerios, and Lucky Charms boxes trying to catch each other off guard. Our cereal got soggy.

"Eric, go brush your teeth. You can't be late for the bus. I don't have time to drive you to school today." Mom ironed her skirt, then held it up for inspection. "A lick and a promise," she said, as she ran into her bedroom to change. She worked three days a week as a child advocate for the Handicapped Child Advocacy. Dad wasn't happy that she worked, but he put up with it because it seemed like mother's work. Mom talked with parents about their handicapped children, helping them acquire equipment, like wheelchairs, that they needed to care for them. She also talked on morning radio shows about the advocacy group. I knew lots of the kids she worked with, but her work still seemed disconnected from my life. It existed in some office downtown, or in clinics and hospitals. Even though I heard stories about my classmates, like Terri and Duane, they weren't the kids I knew, just their doubles.

"I have to go to the bathroom again," I told Mom.

"You just went ten minutes ago," she said, dancing across the kitchen floor while she put the ironing board away. "Start walkin'," Sinatra said. Mom stomped across the floor, grinding her heels down on the linoleum. I pretended Dad was under her feet.

"But I have to." Mom sighed and pushed me to the hall. I didn't let on that it was my last chance until I came home from school in the afternoon.

"Eric, finish brushing your teeth in the kitchen sink." Mom carried me from the hallway because the bathroom door wasn't wide enough for my chair. She pulled my pants down with one arm while holding me with the other, then sat me on the toilet. She danced back to her bedroom. "Eric, are all your pets fed?" Mom screamed from her bedroom.

"I fed Pete and Rose last night. And Hank, too," he yelled back. Pete and Rose were his white mice. Eric found Hank, a garter snake, in the woods after Hitler and some of the other neighborhood boys tortured it by swinging it against a tree. Eric kept it in an old cracked aquarium in the garage with a warming light nearby.

Mom came back into the bathroom, her heels clapping across the floor. She sat down on the wicker stool in front of me, swung my arms around her neck, then grabbed me around the waist, hoisting me up. With my knees against the wicker stool so they wouldn't buckle, I could stand by myself so she could pull my pants up. Then, Mom carried me back to my chair

and pushed me into the living room.

The Special Education bus honked. "It's here," I yelled, turning to see it parked in the street at the end of the driveway.

"Let's go," Mom said, handing me my lunch box. She pushed the wheelchair down the ramp. The driver maneuvered her large body out of the bus, then opened the doors and lowered the lift.

"I'm going, Mom," Eric yelled as he ran toward the other kids gathered on the corner. All the kids from our neighborhood waited there for the bus, except for me.

"Got your lunch?" she asked. Eric held it up for her to see. "Okay, I'll see you this afternoon. Remember I'll be a few minutes late, so be good 'til I get home."

I watched him join the other elementary kids by the yield sign on which Jimmy Hancock dared Adolph "Hitler" Jones to stick his tongue the previous February. Hitler did it. Once he was free, he beat up Jimmy. Eric told Mom and me about it that night. I listened feeling like an outsider in my own neighborhood.

Mom pushed my wheelchair onto the lift. The bus driver locked my brakes. "Just a precaution," she always said. "Do you have your seatbelt on?"

"My brother doesn't have to wear a seatbelt on his bus," I argued.

"We wouldn't want you falling out of your wheelchair and

bouncing across the floor, now would we?" she answered. I knew I would never win. I sighed so she would know I was putting it on in protest, then snapped the ends together.

"I'll see you this afternoon," Mom yelled. I watched her bounce to the house. I knew she was happy because she was going to work. Jeannetta Hancock, Jimmy's Mom, stood next door on her porch waving to Jimmy as he ran to the bus stop, one hand perched on an ample hip. Black prickly curlers helmeted her head. She was already prepared for her idea of middle age, her paunched gut packed into black sausage pants. I wondered if she was as happy as Mom.

"Remember I'm picking you up from school today," Mom yelled before the front door slammed shut. She picked me up after school on the days when she was working in town so I wouldn't have to spend an hour riding home on the bus.

The bus driver wheezed as she bent over between Travis and me to hook my chair to the wall. Everyone said he was really a teenager even though his stiff body was smaller than my brother's. But I would never really know for sure since Travis didn't talk. He only laughed hysterically in his deep voice every time something he thought was funny happened. He thought everything was funny.

I closed my eyes to daydream while the bus went all over town picking up kids who went to the special ed school. My daydream was always the same. Mom would divorce my real Dad, then marry a new man with six sons. They would all have dark

hair like the Brady Bunch boys, and be strong enough to beat up anyone who tried to hurt me. Eric was never in the dream. I'm not sure where he went. But, we lived in an old mansion with a bell rope that hung down in the hall to call everybody in to eat. And the family room was converted into a play room with pinball machines. I had a four-poster bed in my room upstairs, which wasn't a problem since I could walk.

"Hello Sara, hello Susan," the bus driver said to the identical deaf twins with dark brown hair. They were both overweight, with puffy cheeks like older versions of the Campbell Soup kids. They lived in a rich neighborhood with English tudor homes and manicured lawns. Susan and Sara waved, but didn't say anything out loud. They wore hearing packs strapped to their chests, connected to their ears through wires. Their friends, Jerry and Karen, came on later in the ride. All four sat in the back, talked in sign language and giggled. They peeked at Jerry's genitalia which he loved to show off. If I looked toward the back of the bus when he was playing show and tell, all of them would look at me angrily and tell me to mind my own business in voices that sounded like their mouths were full of cotton balls. They were pretty kids, ones that looked normal. Nothing about them looked twisted or stiff, and they refused to be friends with the rest of us.

We travelled across town to the houses that clung to the top of a scarred hill along the edge of a freeway to pick up

a boy with cerebral palsy. "Tommy, how are we today?" the bus driver simpered. Her voice was sad and quiet like in an old movie when someone's died. Tommy's brother carried him over his shoulder to the bus. They both had shaved heads like they belonged in a prison. The brother put Tommy in the front seat, then left without saying good-bye.

At school, Mrs. Tyson, the teacher's aide helped the driver get us off the bus. She walked with us to our classrooms. I wheeled past the gym where Mr. Wilcox stood holding a boy on top of a gigantic ball that he rolled back and forth. "Hang on, hang on," he encouraged the boy. The smell of chlorine from the heated pool across from the gym sometimes competed with the smell of urine in the hall. My class swam every Tuesday and Thursday. The water was so hot that I felt like I was sweating in the water.

The occupational therapy room was on the right. Mrs. Andersen taught the girls how to sew quilts for our dolls, and how to make candy that we didn't have to bake by packing sugary paste into rose molds. I didn't know what the boys got to do, but I was sure it was a lot more fun.

We passed the girl's hallway bathroom. Maria and I used to go in there at lunchtime. She scared me once when I looked up and saw her peering over the wall, giggling. But the stalls were too small for my wheelchair to fit into, the door too heavy to push open. I couldn't go in anymore.

Mrs. Thymes' physical therapy room, with the pulleys and

mats, was next to our classroom. She stretched our heel cords until we cried. One time, I peeked into her room and saw the bottom half of a body standing by itself next to the walking rails. It was a boy's body because it had on boy's brown pants and black shoes. It even had on a black belt. My face felt prickly as I pushed hard on my wheels to get away. But then, I saw Billy speed down the hall in a wheelchair without his legs on. When I saw how fast he could go, I wondered why Mrs. Thymes made him wear his legs. They were just two sticks with a bucket on top for him to sit in. The hips and knees didn't move. When Billy walked in his legs he used crutches to keep his balance. It took him a long time to get anywhere.

The aide left me in Mrs. McCarthy's fourth grade classroom. I waved to my friend, Terri, who just came back to school. She sat at her table in her wheelchair that was much too big for her. It was the same kind that sits folded by emergency doors at hospitals, the kind nobody uses in real life. Terri's thin body took up only a narrow part of the wide light green plastic seat, her arms sticking out like chicken wings in order to reach the arm rests. Terri's back slumped forward, her swollen knees stuck out. Her Mom always dressed her in bright dresses, but she had to wear dark brown leather orthopedic shoes that laced up the ankles. Mrs. McCarthy told Mom not to tell anybody, but Terri had both muscular dystrophy and sickle cell anemia. Nobody was supposed to know about the sickle cell because her family was

ashamed of it. I didn't understand why. Everybody knew what everybody had around here.

I threw my lunch box on the floor of my wooden locker, and pushed my chair over to the table next to Terri.

"Hi," she whispered. Her thick hair was a long, straightened black mass that covered up most of her face and hung heavy on her shoulders.

"Hi," I said. "You were gone a long time. Did you have the flu?"

"No," she whispered. Her eyes turned away and something told me I shouldn't ask more.

"What's black and white and red all over?" I asked to change the subject. It was the only joke I could ever remember.

"Lisa, everybody knows that joke," she teased. "I know another one. "What goes thump, thump, thump, click when it walks?"

"What?"

"An elephant with a wooden leg." She watched my face. I pictured an elephant with one of Billy's legs, and laughed. Mrs. McCarthy, our fourth grade teacher, stared at me. I stopped laughing, my eyes shifting to the floor, instead.

Maria hopped in. One side of her body didn't work very well, so she bounced everywhere on her good leg. Her left arm was shrivelled against her body, hidden inside her coat sleeve. Maria had glossy brown hair that her mother pulled

back in barrettes on either side of her wide forehead.

"Maria," Terri whispered. She told Maria the joke.

Duane, Chuck, and Tim whispered on the other side of the room, where they chose seats as far from the girls as possible. They pointed toward us, holding their bellies and faking laughter. "They laugh like they see us on the toilet," I said, realizing I had to go. Maria and Terri covered their mouths and snickered.

"Keep your voices down." Mrs. McCarthy looked over the rim of her glasses at the boys, then the girls, her thin lips making her even more frightening.

It seemed to work on everyone, but Duane. Duane's drunk mother, I overheard Mom tell Dad, kept him in the basement the summer before. He didn't scare easily. He sneered back, matching her gaze with his own grin, dropping the corner on the left to form a hook. Duane was the thinnest, smallest boy in the class, but he was strong when he fought teachers. He kicked, spat, and screamed "bitch" at Mrs. McCarthy, but it never seemed to shock her. She just screamed right back.

Mrs. McCarthy dragged Duane into the bathroom the week before, and stuck the bar of soap in his mouth when he shouted "you horse's ass!" at her, his long blond greasy hair whipping around his face, eyes closed to slits. "What are you going to do about that?" he said, smiling. She always knew what to do. It was either the ugly bright yellow cracked soap that looked

like it was never used for its intended purpose, or the principal's office. Mrs. McCarthy went next door to get the fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Beck. The two of them dragged Duane by the arms to the principal's office to be paddled. I watched the teachers struggle against his bony body that was covered in a dirty shirt as he kicked and screamed. I sat clutching my thighs as he was dragged out, squeezing back my sudden need to go to the bathroom, whispering, "Don't let them get you, don't let them get you."

Mrs. McCarthy walked slowly, deliberately, back into the room. Her hair, dyed the color of an Irish Setter, never changed. But her face seemed more creased, her scowl all the more hideous. We all sat quietly after she slid the door shut, and walked back to her desk, which sat squarely in front of the mismatched tables and desks. She opened a side drawer and pulled out some papers, then walked to the first row. Mrs. McCarthy counted out enough sheets to supply students in each row. "Take one and pass the rest back," she said. She pronounced each word separately. It was the mimeographed sheets with one-hundred identical boxes to be filled out with the numbers one to one-hundred that we had seen too many times to count in first and second grades. Only when we filled out our numbers could we color the two butterfly outlines that flew incessantly on top of the sheet smudged in the blue of the mimeograph machine. By second grade, to make the butterfly sheet more fun, I tried to fill out all the even

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numbers first, sometimes the multiples of five. But in my daydreaming I would mess up, skip a number, fill in the wrong box. Then, when I handed in my sheet with colored butterflies on top, the numbered section was rubbed off in places and smeared in others from being erased over and over. The teacher would look grim as she perused my sloppy work. She never asked what the problem was. She probably wondered if I would ever learn.

I entered "100" in the last box. Duane wouldn't do this if he were in the room, I thought. I entered "99", then "98", feeling the skin on my cheeks burn. He would scream, "Go to hell," at Mrs. McCarthy, his nose crinkled in anger. My stomach tightened, thrilled by the thought of Duane saying what I would never have the guts to say. Duane would have balled the sheet with the butterflies up and lobbed the ball at her face. She would drag him to the bathroom, leaving the door wide as she always did, then stick the soap in his mouth. I thought of the soap grating on his teeth as I filled out "78", then "77", wondering if the soap curled on the back of his teeth like rippling ribbons on a birthday present, or if it clumped in big hard globs that he had to dig off with his finger. "43, 42, 41." I filled out each box, keeping my numbers uniform, properly curved and squared in all the right places. I wouldn't get caught making mistakes now. "4, 3, 2, 1." I finished. But I didn't color the butterflies.

The lunch bell rang and we waited for Mrs. McCarthy to

release us. "Pass your worksheets to the front," she announced, slowly moving to the front of the first row. She waited, her hands clasped at her waist, then collected the pile from each row. She walked to the side of her desk, turned, held the worksheets over the metal wastebasket, and released them. The colored butterflies on many sheets caught my eye. I almost expected them to flutter lightly down, but they didn't. They fell in one hard clump as if each paper were bound unalterably to every other. They clunked in the bottom of the empty can before Mrs. McCarthy raised her hand. "Line up at the door, boys on one side, girls on the other."

Nattie was first in line. She was a fat girl whose chin seemed to blend into her neck. A bag of dark yellow urine sloshed against one of her tiny pink-bootied, malformed feet which just peeked over the edge of her wheelchair seat. Maria hopped, forever caught in the midst of a skipping game. Terri and I raced to see who would make it to the door first. She always held back, her eyes turned down, making me the winner. I got angry, rammed her chair. Chuck and Tim both moved with stiff legs held by braces that connected to their shoes and reached to their hips. They swung their legs out, then forward to walk. I stared at them. They were taller than the rest of us, with strong muscles, flat top crew cuts, Chuck's brown and Tim's blond. Their long legs were so strong, I was positive that they could walk without the

braces. They stuck close together. I wondered if they felt like their parents had made a big mistake sending them to this school.

It took a few minutes for our class of eleven to assemble in two lines by the door. "What has four eyes," Chuck said, mocking the girls while we waited for the next bell that moved us down the hall. "Besides you," he added, looking at me. We didn't know the answer. He sneered at us like he knew we would never get it. "Mississippi."

"But I bet'cha can't spell Mississippi," Maria challenged the boys.

"Bet'cha I can," taunted Chuck. He spelled it in a sing-songy voice, stressing the i's the way we always did. I was mesmerized by the poetic beat. Everyone joined Chuck trying to spell it faster. We became louder.

"Silence!" Mrs. McCarthy's voice felt like a cold slap of metal on my spine. Once more I tightened my legs, resisting the need to physically force them together with my hands because the other kids might see that I had to go to the bathroom. I didn't know when I stopped being able to help myself in the bathroom, to lift myself to the toilet. I didn't tell anyone. By the time 3:00 came every day and we went home, I was miserable.

The bell rang which indicated that it was time to begin school. "Everybody get out a sheet of paper," Mrs. McCarthy

said.

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said. "I hope you studied like I told you to because it is time for your spelling quiz."

My stomach tightened. "You're going to fail," a silent voice repeated in my head. "You'll get it wrong, wrong, wrong." I never studied for tests or quizzes. I didn't know how. So I read the material once, then hoped for the best.

"Insect," Mrs McCarthy said, looking over our heads, watching us to make sure we didn't cheat. "Insect," she repeated.

"Broccoli." She said it slowly, then repeated. I heard Terri's eraser rubbing paper next to me. I felt badly for her knowing how Mrs. McCarthy made me take tests when I came back to school after being out for a week with bronchitis and I didn't understand the questions.

"Forest."

One "r" or two, I thought. My hesitation increased. My heart beat hard enough for me to feel through my chest. My hand shook.

We had twenty spelling words. When we finished, we traded and corrected each other's work. Terri got nine wrong. I got one. "Broccoli." She avoided my look when we traded papers. I thought it wasn't fair that she always did so poorly. I was angry at myself, too, for missing any.

We made it through the rest of the morning without any more tests or quizzes, and went off to the lunch room. I tried not to drink my milk so that having to go to the

bathroom wouldn't be so painful before I went home. But one of the aides checked our cartons before she threw them away, found mine full, made me drink it. I rubbed my hand across my stomach, careful not to push too hard. I wish Mom were here, I thought. She would help me.

It was movie day. After we ate, we saw a movie about a doll that got lost and all sorts of other toys helped her find her way home. Then, we got to see it backwards, with the sound off so the teachers' aides wouldn't be driven nuts. We laughed and cheered as the doll got unfound, relost, and in the end, found herself in the arms of some little girl walking backwards through a park.

Our class had swimming after the movie. Mrs. Tyson helped us dress. She and the swimming teacher lifted us into the water. We could do anything we wanted in the water most days, and I liked sitting on the bottom of the pool in the corner, forcing myself down by pushing up on the bars that circled the pool. It was quiet at the bottom, away from everyone else. But I was miserable in the warm water with a full bladder. I sat at the bottom wondering if anyone could tell if I went in the pool. Only babies do that, I thought. Besides, if the teacher saw, she would say something, then everyone would know. So, I held it.

"Class," Mrs. McCarthy said. "I am going to write your math assignment on the board. Please copy the problems onto

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a sheet of paper, and complete them."

I copied the first division problem off from the blackboard. It was 2450 divided by 5. Five goes into 20 four times, I thought. Four left over, bring down the five. I squeezed my thighs together. Don't think about it, I thought. If you don't think, it will go away. How many times have I tried to forget about it? I wondered. Five goes into 45 how many times? I couldn't picture that number 45. What does it mean? When did I stop going to the bathroom by myself? I thought about the time I had diarrhea when Mom and Dad left Eric and me alone one evening. He dragged me across the bathroom floor, his face red. He breathed hard, trying to lift me to the toilet by himself. "I can't do it," he said. "You have to," I said. "I have to go." His arms shook as he lifted me from the floor to the stool.

I couldn't wait any longer. I have to go so bad, it hurts, I thought. I raised my hand, waiting for Mrs. McCarthy to see me. She was writing at her desk, not looking up. I didn't call her name. Everyone would hear me. What would I do anyway? Do I ask permission to go to the bathroom? What for? I can't do it, I thought.

I waved my hand. The motion caught her attention. "Lisa, what it is?" she asked.

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

The boys snickered. "Shush," she growled. She looked toward me and waved her hand absent-mindedly toward the

bathroom.

I wheeled to the bathroom door, pulling it shut behind me. The peach-tiled bathroom was big enough to fit six kids in wheelchairs in at one time if they wanted. I looked toward the white toilet in the far corner of the room, knowing I could not pull myself onto it no matter how hard I tried. "Try, just try," I thought, stopping to concentrate so I wouldn't go that minute right in my seat. Moving as close as possible to the toilet seat until my wheel hit, I set my brakes before scooting myself forward. I leaned, one hand on the toilet seat, the other braced on the arm of my chair, and tried to pick my body up. But I couldn't budge. Just being in the bathroom made the feeling grow, the pressure build inside. My body screamed. "Please help me," I whispered to the room, closing my eyes, tears coming down. My thoughts turned in corkscrews, looking for a solution. I tried again. I strained hard, holding my breath. I stopped to rest. My muscles were so tired. It hurt so much, my bladder released. I squeezed to stop it, closing my eyes hard, my fists gripped hard on the edges of my chair. But it would not stop. Just go, I thought.

The warmth spread underneath me. I thought about Nattie's leg bag and how it hung out for everyone to see. She didn't even bother to close the bathroom door when she emptied it. "I'm not like that," I whispered to myself. Urine trickled down my leg. A puddle formed on the floor around my chair.

I sighed, letting myself feel the relief.

What are they going to think of me? I wondered. Get rid of it so they can't see. I wheeled over to the paper toweling dispenser and cranked out long reams of the brown rough paper. I threw it into the puddle, until it was soaked. I gathered it, threw it in the metal basket, then cranked out more paper. I wiped the floor until it was dry and the basket was full of soaked toweling.

I washed my hands, then stopped to take inventory. Everything looked the same. The bathroom looked clean and dry, and my pants seemed only a little damp to me. "Nobody will notice," I murmured. I opened the bathroom door almost shocked to find the classroom with everyone still in it. Terri's wide smile caught my attention. Her big round eyes seemed mostly white as she stared at me. Maria also looked up. She covered her mouth to conceal a giggle.

Did they know? I wondered. I looked away as if nothing were strange, and if it was, it didn't matter to me. But I wanted to run out of the room, never come back to school. I pushed myself back to my desk, and looked at the clock. 2:30. Mom will get me in half an hour, I thought.

The division problems were erased from the board. Chuck was taking his turn reading a paragraph from "The Secret Tree House." It was a story about a lonely girl, named Sara, who found a hidden tree house in an ancient oak tree in the middle of a field. The tree house, made from weathered gray wood,

looked rickety and worn from the outside. But inside, Sara found navy, velvet sofas and rich red tapestries covering the floor. A gold music box sat on the mantle over the fireplace. Above the mantle hung the painting of a girl who looked just like Sara, except the girl in the painting was happy. Whenever Sara felt sad, she ran away to the secret tree house and danced to the music of the music box, or sometimes just sat and looked out the window at the field flowers below.

I looked at Terri's book to see what page she was on. The boys thought it was a sissy book. They put up a fuss every time it was their turn to read. But I loved the book. I imagined Sara looked just like me. The painting above the mantle was really the photograph my mother had taken of me when I was four. In it I am smiling, and wearing a blue dress with a white collar, white socks, and black shiny shoes. My hair flipped up on the ends, and a bouquet of flowers rested in my hands.

"Duane, begin reading," Mrs. McCarthy said.

"I'm not reading this," Duane said. "It stinks."

"Then you will sit in the corner."

"Fine, I don't care," he said, struggling to stand, pushing his hands against his knees. He walked to the back of the room with his narrow back bowed to give him balance, and sat down facing the wall without causing a disturbance. Duane spent most of reading time in the corner. He never made an issue about it, and maybe that's why Mrs. McCarthy didn't care

that he didn't read out loud, or even read along.

"Lisa," Mrs. McCarthy said. "Now that you've chosen to join us again, possibly you could read."

My cheeks burned like she had dragged a red hot coal across my skin. The kids giggled, all knowingly, as if they understood my secret, Terri looking downward miserably. I read, not hearing or comprehending a word of it. Just reading mechanically. I finished the paragraph, heard Mrs. McCarthy's voice murmur something before someone else began reading the next. When the next kid started to read, I began to listen. Sara climbed the rope ladder to her secret hideaway just as a big storm began to rumble across the sky. She hurried to shut the windows and doors, then snuggled under a big satin comforter, knowing she would never be unhappy again.

The bell rang. "You may leave," Mrs. McCarthy said, a hint of relief in her voice. I put my book away. I found the spelling quiz, which I folded and stuck in the side of my wheelchair. Mrs. McCarthy opened the classroom door. My mother stood waiting in the hall. Mrs. McCarthy's face cracked into a smile when she saw her. I thought little chips of stone would break away around the edges of her lips. They stood in the hall and talked as usual while Mom waited for me to come out.

"Bye," I said to Terri and Maria, not meeting their eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Terri said, looking at me with her big toothy smile that I couldn't interpret. Maria hopped

toward the door waving good-bye, as I wheeled to the locker and reached for my Monkeys lunchbox.

"Ready to go?" Mom asked. I nodded without answering, and she pushed me down the hall and out the door. It was gray and rainy. Yellow buses lined up like a long train, each car waiting to be filled with the kids, wheelchairs, and crutches that poured out the doors. The sky grumbled out a complaint as Mom lifted me into the front seat. She folded the wheelchair, pulling the damp spelling quiz from the side of the seat, then putting the chair in the trunk. The radio came on when Mom started the engine. She turned it down lower than usual. We drove down the steep driveway that went out to the road.

I have to tell her, I thought. She'll make it better. I stared out the window at the rain hitting the asphalt, hoping that was really true.

"Something bad happened today," I said quietly.

"Oh, what was that?" she asked. The windshield wipers flipped back and forth, squeaking. She waited.

"I had an accident," I whispered. "I cleaned it all up, though."

"Did you have trouble getting into the bathroom?"

"I can't do it anymore. I had to go so bad, it hurt. I tried really hard." Sobbing, I waited.

"Don't worry," she said, straining to see through the wash of water. "We'll clean you up when we get home. Just

like new." "I'll take care of everything." I watched the wipers trying to clean away the water, but more flooded the glass. It seemed so sad, I cried even more. "It makes me feel so bad when you cry," she said, pulling up to a red light. "I'll take care of you." Mom looked at me. "I always do, don't I? I'll come to school every day if I have to." The light turned green.

"But I can't take care of myself anymore." I wiped my face with the palm of my hand.

"Honey, remember, I'll make all the bad things right. Always."

If she can do everything, why do I still feel so bad? I thought. I watched the windshield wipers wondering how many times they would swing back before we got home. I began counting to myself, "100, 99, 98,...."

Hard Work, Flying

"There were these two girls wearing tiight blaack leaather skirts way up to heere...huh-huh?...just covering their you-know-what's...yeah?...and they walk into this Catholic church and the priest comes over to them...", Mr. Lewenski's joke began. I think Mr. Lewenski liked telling Catholic jokes because his wife was Catholic. He stressed every important word, drawing out the vowels and lowering his voice down an octave. It was hard to hear all of the joke because he whispered some of it, especially just before the grown-ups screeched with laughter.

When we first arrived, Bing Crosby's "Silver Bells" played on the stereo. Then, jingle bells and violins accompanied a chorus of voices singing what lovely weather it was for a sleigh ride, and I pictured myself in that sleigh full of laughing people. Mrs. Lewenski passed out drinks to everybody as soon as we arrived. Green drinks with salt around the edge for my parents and eggnog for my brother and me and her two boys.

"You wouldn't believe that ice out there," Dad said as we stood around the kitchen munching Christmas cookies of Santa with green and red icing. Some had obscured identities under heaps of colored sugar, the little dents made for eyes and mouth filled in so they looked flat and faceless. "The kids decorated them," Mrs. Lewenski whispered to Mom.

"I hit one spot and I thought that was it," Dad continued. "You can't even see that shit when snow's blowing over it." Dad got his sly boy look then. "Actually, I dropped the damn bottle opener and I bent over to get it, and hey," Dad laughed. "When I hit, the car spun around in a donut until I was way over on the other side of the road."

"Drinking and driving...drinking and driving," Mr. Lewenski added wagging his finger at his naughty friend.

"Mommy, Mommy... Mommy? Can I have just one more cookie?" Brad pleaded with Mrs. Lewenski.

"No, you've had enough," she whispered to her son. "You boys go upstairs and play."

"Get upstairs and stop interrupting or I'll beat your butt," Mr. Lewenski yelled. "Did you hit the bank?" he asked Dad as he slowly moved to the dining room, pulling the party after him.

"Missed by this much," Dad said as he settled into a chair.

Mr. Lewenski grabbed the deck of cards in the center of the table and flipped them into four separate piles.

"Do you want to go out into the family room and watch television?" Mrs. Lewenski asked me.

"Ok," I replied. I really wanted to stay with the grown-ups the way I usually did when Mom took me places with her, but I knew they wouldn't let me because the dads were there.

Mom pushed my wheelchair across the rust and brown shag

carpet in which my tires sunk so low it was nearly impossible for me to move alone. The family room was an extension of the dining room filled with a clutter of dark oak wood and autumn colored plaid cushions.

"Can I sit in the rocker?" I asked. I loved rockers, even hard ones with uncomfortable spindle backs like the one the Lewenskis had. The swaying made me feel like I could float away.

Mom threw my arms around her neck, then grabbed me low around the waist in a bear hug. She straddled my legs with hers, and pivoted me around to the rocking chair. It was hard to move my accordion body. My curved back scrunched downward when I was sitting. But when I was picked up my spine stretched out nearly straight so that I was almost as tall as she was.

"I'll get your rug hooking," Mom said. Her voice was strained and I knew she didn't feel comfortable. She went out to the kitchen to get the bag with all the supplies I needed for my art class project, a rug of Jonathon Livingston Seagull. Mrs. Lewenski held up the rug to take a better look. The rug said I AM in forest green in the lower left corner, while Jonathon flew into the sun in the upper right.

"You're really doing a wonderful job on this," Mrs. Lewenski said. "You're very creative."

"I wish I could start over," I said. "He doesn't stand out enough."

I feared that Jonathon's white bird body blended almost imperceptibly with the pale yellow sky. The only part of him easily seen was his beak which had already reached the bright yellow sun.

"He looks just fine," Mom said. "It'll look great once it's finished." But I thought she said that only because it couldn't be fixed.

"Come on, ladies," Mr. Lewenski yelled. "Let's go. Time for some serious playing around." Mr. Lewenski moved his eyebrows up and down. "The game is pinochle."

"Get ready to lose," Dad said. He drew a long drink of Blue Ribbon from one of the six-packs he brought along. He was happy now. Pinochle was his favorite game. As long as he was winning I knew the night would be okay.

I was filling in more of the pale yellow sky and watching beautiful people oscillate across the t.v. screen. Skinny women dressed in long clinging gowns cut low in the front danced, jutting their hips and partially closing their eyes every time the camera flashed in their direction. It looked exciting, and I wished I could be one of those women.

Upstairs Eric played guns with the Lewenski boys. Pop, pop, pop. My brother brought his metal pistols with the red coiled paper with gunpowder spots. When the gunpowder exploded, he shouted from the staircase: "Ok, you're dead. You have to fall down."

"You didn't get me," one of the boys said.

"Yes I did," Eric screamed, indignant that someone would call him a liar.

"Boys, go back into the bedroom and play," Mrs. Lewenski yelled toward the staircase. Her voice sounded more relaxed than it did when we arrived. "Would you like another drink," she said, turning to my mother.

"Gin and tonic sounds good."

"It does," Mrs. Lewenski said. "I'll be back."

I watched Mom and Mrs. Lewenski. Their movements were fluid now, becoming more like the women on the t.v. party, more like the women posing on the covers of the magazines which were fanned out before me on the coffee table. They changed themselves. The person Mom became when she drank was scary. She didn't seem real anymore. With my head bowed down to my rug hooking, I glanced at the pictures. The woman on the top cover, wearing a Santa Claus hat, looked up at me with her perfect red lips and blue eye-shadow eyes. She glanced back over her shoulder with long blond hair covering her exposed breasts. A big red bow, hung slanting from her hip, was the extent of her wrappings.

My Dad read the same kind of magazines as Mr. Lewenski. When we were at home I watched him looking at the pictures as he sat in his place on the couch with his feet tucked underneath him. His magazine in one hand, and a beer can in the other. Dad's sad wet eyes never changed expression, and his mouth, partially concealed under his Burt Reynolds

moustache, never flinched. He seemed cold. I pressed my hand against my stomach trying to make the knotted feeling go away.

"Should you read those magazines in front of the kids?" Mom was dressed in the short purple dress he bought for her. It was held on by a piece of elastic, which encompassed her body just below her shoulders. If Mom raised her arms her dress would have popped up around her neck. She wore matching underwear because it was so short. Her voice was sing-songy. I learned from watching them that she talked that way whenever she had something to say and she didn't want him to start yelling. She slid down into the couch beside him, rubbing her body against his, her eyes half closed. She snuggled her face against his neck.

"It's nobody's business what I read," he said, never taking his eyes from the photographs. "This is my damn house. Nobody tells me what the hell to do."

"How about keeping them in our bedroom when you're done with them?" she asked in her simpering voice which sounded like she thought it was cute how naughty he was. She cuddled his stiff neck. "We wouldn't want your son getting an early education, would we."

Sex is such a dirty thing, I thought.

"You're growing up now," Mom announced on my first day of seventh grade. "It's time to learn how to put on make-up."

She laid all of her tubes and bottles on the kitchen table, then set a standing mirror in front of me. Quickly, I smeared foundation across my face, painted cold, wet lines of black around my eyes, brushed red on my cheek bones and blue on my eye-lids. I finished with a ribbon of pink around my mouth. I brushed my hair getting every tangle out before tossing it behind me. It was so long that it hung down below the upholstery of my wheelchair, almost wrapping around the wheel axles.

I pushed my wheelchair through the hallway to Mom's bedroom and looked into her mirror. But, before I could see my face, my gaze was drawn to my body. My curved spine lowered my ribs until they brushed my pelvic bone, pushing my stomach out so I looked fat and ugly. I didn't look like my Mom, or the women in the magazines. I pulled my hair forward again and covered my face.

Dad threw his hand down, grinning.

"Ohhhh," everyone yelled. A fraction of my tension dispelled when I heard Dad's muffled short bursts of laughter.

The boys ran down the stairs with sweaty hair stuck to their foreheads. They bumped into each other, excited, out of breath, running into the kitchen. I heard the cookie jar rattle and knew they were eating Christmas cookies.

"You know when Keith jumped up from the side of my bed with the Frankenstein mask on?" I heard Brad ask my brother.

"You were really scared."

"I was not," Eric said. "He screamed in my ear and almost broke my eardrum."

"Yeah, I went like this....," Keith said. Then I heard monster growling and the other two boys laughed with their high-pitched voices.

My father looked up through red, wet eyes and noticed the boys. The happy look on his face disappeared.

"It's way past your bedtime," he announced. "Go up and put your pajamas on right now."

Mom came into the family room to put me back into the wheelchair and get me ready for bed. She looked at me with her bleary eyes and hesitated. "I'm going to have your Dad lift you."

"Hon," she called to my Dad. "Would you lift her?" He walked into the family room and picked me up out of the rocking chair, carrying me to the first-floor bathroom. He sat me on the stool, and walked out. I grabbed the sink so I wouldn't fall.

Mom put my arms on her shoulders and pulled my sweater over my head. I looked up into her glassed eyes. They looked like that even when she didn't drink now that Dad wouldn't let her work. Mom asked for a leave from her job to take care of the family when Dad got his promotion to supervision. He was on second shift for a year. Since he didn't leave the house until three o'clock, neither could Mom. She put my nightgown

over my arms and once again lifted my arms up, placed my hands on her shoulders, and slipped the nightgown over my head. Mom pushed my pants down from my hips, then tugged from side to side until they were around my ankles. I knew better than to ask her to leave the bathroom. She would only say, "I won't look."

"Where am I going to sleep tonight?" I asked.

"There's a fold out couch in the den." Mom stood at the mirror digging lipstick out of her make-up bag, plastic tubes, bottles and compacts banging against each other, then applying pink on her O-shaped lips. She ratted her hair with a comb to give it more height.

"Are you going to sleep upstairs?" I said, watching her tuck her blouse in which was loose in back.

"I think we'll sleep in the guest room," she said as she opened the bathroom door. "Hon," she screamed to my father. She opened the door wide and waited for him to finish his conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Lewenski. I was afraid they might come down the hall and see me sitting with my nightgown bunched around my waist.

"No, the line shut down because Sanderson fucked up and didn't order enough quarter panels," Dad yelled over his shoulder, talking to Mr. Lewenski about something that happened at the factory as he walked down the hall to the bathroom.

"I didn't even know he was over there," Mr. Lewenski

talked loudly. "When did he get transferred?"

"Last fall. They're trying to find some place where he won't make the company go bankrupt." Dad snorted.

He stopped talking when he came in and took a long breath, letting it out slow through his mouth. Dad stared down at me as if he was trying to figure out what to do next. Mom stood next to him, waiting. I looked up at them, noticing how tall they were, how strong they looked.

Dad grinned. It grew under his red stare until I saw a glimpse of his straight white teeth between his parted lips.

"What?" Mom asked, watching his face, smiling in anticipation. "Tell me," she prodded, nudging his arm gently. Dad hesitated a moment in consideration.

"Buddha," he replied, looking at my belly beneath the thin nylon nightgown which hung close to me.

Mom looked at my stomach. She hesitated, trying to figure out what he was talking about. She mouthed the word, "Buddha."

The corners of her mouth fell as she looked into my face, then looked at my stomach. I watched, wondering what I should feel. A moment of hesitation, and her lips curved upwards again. She covered her mouth as she smiled.

Dad chuckled. His lips, never stretching too far from his stone expression, caught my attention. I couldn't help but smile as I looked up into their faces. It hurt, but their giggles said that it was supposed to be funny. So it must be,

I thought.

Dad picked me up again, a little more steady this time. He carried me into the den.

"Hey, what's the status on that tryst between Larry Higgins and Bullah Boobs over in Production?" Mr. Lewenski yelled in our direction.

"Bullah Boobs?" Mrs. Lewenski laughed.

Dad sat me on the edge of the fold-out bed.

"Caught in the act," Dad yelled as he turned and left the room.

Mom hurried to lay me down and cover me. The dads' voices murmured quietly, then they laughed, Mr. Lewenski in his tell-tale shriek that sounded so dirty to me, and Dad's shorter muffled noises. I shivered.

"I don't want to be by myself," I said to Mom. "It's scary here."

"Don't worry," she said. "Nothing's going to happen." She turned off the lamp on the desk.

"Okay?"

"Yes," I whispered. It didn't feel like nothing would happen. And if it did, she wouldn't know. She closed the door, leaving me alone. I lay still on the cold mattress, listening to every noise.

A loud thud woke me. It sounded like it came from all

directions. I listened, trying to figure out what it was, if it could hurt me. Even if it could, what was I going to do about it? I wondered. All I heard was the boys talking upstairs, then nothing. One of them probably dropped something on the floor upstairs, I thought. I calmed down, holding on to what was left of the early morning everything is fine feeling I have before the day hits.

"Marie, where the hell is that snow shovel?" I heard Mr. Lewenski say far away. How sinister, I thought, in my half asleep mind. No, maybe I mean sexual.

"Mom," I called, hoping she was nearby. I waited. I heard adult voices talking low. Then the kitchen door which lead into the garage slammed shut taking the low mutterings with it.

"Mom," I yelled a little louder. But the house was still. Slits of dim gray sky showed through the closed wood shutters which covered the lower half of the den window. The den was wallpapered in green and brown plaid on the upper half, brown paneling along the bottom. Antlers hung on the wall above me, probably deer because they were flanked with pictures of men standing in the woods with guns and a dead deer which looked like it was hanging from a tree. I shivered, pulling the blankets over my shoulders.

The kitchen door squeaked open, then banged shut again. I waited. Then I heard footsteps across the kitchen linoleum. I listened, like I did most mornings, trying to decipher

whether the footsteps were my Mom's or Dad's, to better judge my odds before calling out. It was the footstep of someone moving within a confined area. Two steps one way. A few in another.

"Mom," I screamed my loudest, then waited. The steps gained direction as they became louder, moving toward the den door. A knock at the door, and I knew that it wasn't my mother or father.

"Good morning, Lisa," I heard Mrs. Lewenski say. She spoke through the door.

"Morning," I answered, feeling scared. "Is my mother there?" I was afraid Mrs. Lewenski would say no, your mother's gone.

"She's outside with your father getting the snowsuits and boots out of the car." She paused. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Will you tell her I need her?"

"Sure. She'll be just a few minutes." I heard her open the kitchen door, then shut it.

Holding still so I wouldn't touch the mattress that was cold everywhere I wasn't, I closed my eyes to block out the lonely gray slats of light on the wall. The door banged shut again and I heard my mother's laugh coming nearer. I sighed.

"We haven't gone sledding there in a couple of years. You know what happened last time." Her voice was shrill as

she yelled from the hall to Mrs. Lewenski. "He flew out over the pond and cracked through the ice." She shrieked.

She didn't tell Mrs Lewenski what happened next. Dad fell through the ice. I hoped he would go under and never come back up. I imagined his eyes wide open staring up through the ice. But Dad didn't go under. He barely got wet. Eric was on the sled when Dad went down the hill, but he fell off halfway down when they hit a bump.

Dad jumped quickly to avoid getting wet. Angry, he bolted toward my brother up the hill.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he badgered my brother, pulling him hard by his coat sleeve. "You fell off like some damn sissy. Get away from me, you faggot," he yelled. Kids stopped to watch the show, but some parents pulled them away. The whites of Eric's eyes showed, his lips pulling back from his teeth. "If you didn't screw around all the time, things like this wouldn't happen."

Even though it was impossible, Dad's words were convincing. His magic voice wove fact and fiction in a way that made complete sense. It was only later when I tried to recall his creation that it felt like my head would explode.

His voice fired through the house the rest of the day and night. He blamed not only my brother for what happened, but Mom, my grandparents, and a neighbor down the road selling tickets to the church carnival who happened by at just the precise wrong moment. That's when the subject changed to

Mom's infidelities, which was probably good for Dad because he must have been running out of material. It was much too complicated for me to understand.

I sat alone in the living room, watching Sonny and Cher sing "I've Got You Babe." Their movements were exaggerated, their heads jugged forward as their mouths opened to throw up words. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't. My brother ran into the living room, and held onto the arm of my wheelchair with both hands.

"Tell me Grandma's phone number," he screamed, the cords standing out in his neck. His face was blotched with red. "She'll make him stop." He knew Grandma's phone number. Why was he asking me?

"Just shut up," I said. I hated him. Grandma wasn't supposed to know. Something crashed in the bedroom. Eric's eyes were wide, and he began to cry as Cher flicked her hair over her shoulder and ran her tongue along her upper lip.

Mom swung open the den door, still wearing her coat and hat. "Want up now?" she asked, out of breath.

"Yeah," I said, wondering how she always managed to forget the bad half of stories.

She whipped the covers back and with one arm under my knees and the other behind my neck, swung me into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Mom had that wonderful outdoorsy smell that I associated only with her, and I felt

safe. Eric always smelled like dirt when he came from outside, like his bedroom. Mom said boys bedrooms always smelled like that.

Mom swung my arms around her neck and grabbed me in a bear hug around my waist. She lifted me into my chair, yanking me about until I was sitting straight.

"What kind of eggs does everyone like," Mrs. Lewenski asked from the kitchen.

"Oh, hang on with that, I'll help you," Mom screamed.

"Ouch," I complained, putting my hand over my ear. She tugged my robe around me, pulling back and forth as if it were too small to fit around my body.

"I'm sorry." Mom's face looked angry.

"You always say that," I said.

"I'm doing my best," she complained.

"I know." I squelched the tears. "It feels like you just say sorry to shut me up."

She continued putting my slippers on without saying anything. Her lips pouted slightly as if I had wounded her.

"Do you hate taking care of me?" I asked.

"Of course not," she said swinging her face up toward mine. "I told you I do the best I can. Now we're not going to ruin this day."

She pushed me into the dining room and left me in front of the sliding glass door where I could see deep snow piled a

foot high on the redwood picnic table on the patio. I wiped the tears away from my cheeks and stared out the window trying hard to stop crying before someone saw.

After breakfast, we all went to the sledding hill at the golf course. Lots of kids flew down the hill on metal saucers and plastic sleds. Some were skating on the pond at the foot of the hill. Dad and Mr. Lewenski parked side-by-side as close to the top as possible so I could see from the car.

The boys ran to the trunk and grabbed the saucers. Eric began to run toward the hill with the Lewenski boys, but my Dad grabbed his shoulder.

"Walk, just walk."

Eric looked at Dad's face, then nodded, okay. He walked in the direction of the other boys. They were screaming, already sliding halfway down the hill. Eric sat on his saucer and sunk his heels into the snow to push off. Down the hill he flew, screaming, gripping the edges with both hands. He bumped and flew off at the bottom, picked up his saucer and ran to the other boys who were already trudging back up the slope. Snow caked the creases of their suits. It must be hard to walk on the snow, I thought.

Mr. Lewenski unstrapped the tobaggan from the top of his station wagon. "C'mon," he yelled to my parents. All four headed toward the hill. They climbed on. Dad was first, then my Mom. Mr. Lewenski sat down behind Mom with his legs on

either side of hers, and it made me feel nervous.

"Don't get mad, Dad," I whispered to myself in the front seat of the car.

Once Mrs. Lewenski was on, they started shoving with their feet to get the tobaggon moving. Mom whooped as they picked up speed. Their heads bobbed in unison on every bump. Kids moved out of their path. They sailed out of control toward the bottom, trying to change direction by bending their weight left and right. Mr. Lewenski pointed his long stiff legs skyward as they hit bottom, then rolled off just as they stopped.

Dad got off and began to walk fast up the hill. He lost his footing and caught himself with his hand on the ground twice before Mom caught up with him. He turned and jutted his face toward hers as he talked. He pointed his gloved finger at her, then turned and continued up the hill. They trudged upwards, sliding on the slippery spots. My parents came over to the car, while the Lewenskis got back on the tobaggon and pushed off.

"It's perfect for sledding," Mom yelled as she opened the car door to get a tissue to blow her nose. She was smiling too much. "You've got to try it." Mom breathed hard after walking up the hill.

"I don't want to," I said. "I just want to watch." I kept my voice low so I wouldn't provoke Dad in case he was still mad. I wanted to go with the other kids down the hill,

to know what it felt like to fly. But something bad would happen, I thought.

"Just go once so you can see what it's like." She turned around. "When they come back, let's take Lisa down once," Mom said to Dad.

"All right." He stood with one hand on his waist, staring out over the hill.

"Why don't you two go down again? We need to rest," Mrs. Lewenski said, breathless after coming up the hill.

"We're going to take Lisa so she can see what it's like," Mom said to her. "Okay, let's go," she said, making her voice sing with each word.

They pulled the tobaggon close to the car. Dad put me on. He took the rope and pulled toward the top of the hill. The tobaggon jerked, and I fell over, my cheek hard against the snow.

"Shit," Dad swore.

I felt so awkward and ugly sprawled out in the snow. I must look like a blubbery walrus, I thought. I wanted to cry, but I knew if I did, everything would get worse. Mom grabbed under my arms and Dad grabbed my knees. They pulled me back on to the tobaggon. Mom held me and walked bent over as Dad pulled me along to the edge of the hill. Kids stared at me. I wanted to disappear.

Just let this end. Hide me in the car again, I thought.

"You get in the front," he instructed Mom. "I'll hold

her up." He climbed on behind and kept his legs bent at the knee on either side of me so that I could not fall sideways.

I saw the boys on their saucers on the far end of the hill. They were doing belly smackers, boots up in the air, as they flew down the hill. Mom and Dad started the tobaggan moving. We were silent. We hit bumps, our bodies jarred from side to side. I strained to keep sitting up, digging my fingers into the back of Mom's coat, waiting for the ride to end. I forgot to think about how it felt to fly. We came to a sudden stop at the bottom of the hill. Dad stood up. Hand on hip, he stood over me surveying the situation.

"We'll pull her over as close as possible to the road and I'll drive the car down."

"Okay." Mom took her position behind me and Dad started pulling the tobaggan toward the edge of the sledding area until we came to a hill of snow made by a snowplow.

Mom held me up, while Dad walked away. Families went by, looking.

"Do you need some help," a man asked Mom.

"We're okay. My husband's coming. It's okay." He walked away.

Dad drove the car as close as he could. He climbed over the hill of snow.

"Hold it steady," he told Mom. "Steady. Do you understand the word steady?"

"Yes."

He put an arm under my knees and another behind my back, then pulled me to his chest. Balancing on one knee, he stood up, steadying himself. He walked a few steps closer to the pile of snow, then threw me over one shoulder with my rear end in the air. I closed my eyes as pressure filled my head. My cheeks felt pulled toward my forehead, and with every step Dad took my body bumped against his back, forcing me to take short breaths. I prayed let this end, let this never happen again.

I don't ever want to leave the house again, I thought. I squeezed my eyes, afraid to cry.

Dad stumbled a step when he reached the top of the bank.

"Hey, you need some help," Mr. Lewenski screamed as he jogged toward us. Mrs. Lewenski followed behind with the boys.

"I don't need any fucking help," Dad roared. He was breathing hard, and climbing one step at a time down the hill to the road.

I looked sideways and caught a glimpse of Mr. Lewenski's face. He looked confused as he stood still a few feet away.

"Grab her legs. Both legs, damnit," Dad yelled at Mom as she scrambled to comply.

She held on to my knees as Dad pulled my body back in

front of him. She struggled into the car, pulling my legs after her. Dad shoved my body into the seat. He backed up and slammed the car door shut on us.

"Okay?" Mom said. She smiled and pretended everything was going well, as if that would make it so.

"Uh-huh," I grunted, relieved to have it over, even willing to accept her imaginary happiness.

Mom hurried out of the driver's side and motioned to Eric to get in the back seat. I watched Dad open the trunk and put the saucer in. She walked toward Mrs. Lewenski.

"Thanks for having us over," Mom said, smiling. Yet, her lip quivered as she looked at her friend.

"We'll have to do it again sometime," Mrs. Lewenski said, bending toward Mom to hug her good-bye. Mom stepped back quickly, and waved. "Happy New Year's." She climbed into the back seat and pulled a tissue from her coat pocket and blew her nose.

"Boy, it's cold," she said, smiling. But her eyes shimmered too much for it to be from the chilly weather. She wiped the corners of her eyes.

"Mom did you see me when I flew across the ice on my saucer?" Eric asked. "I spun around a lot, until I was pretty dizzy. I pretended I lived in the sky."

She hugged him quickly before Dad got in. Dad slammed the car door shut, and started the engine. We drove fast down the drive, hitting every bump, each of us flying into the air.

We were all trying to be happy, and that was hard work.

Fusion

We sat in the last row of biology lab with the formaldehyde-soaked fetal pig feet up in front of us in the dissecting pan. Its eyes shut tight, legs curled. The pig looked like it had been caught mid-dream. I expected it to jump up and squeal.

"This looks like a roasting pan," Amy said. Amy, Stu, John and I shared a pig, and we elected Amy to make the first cut.

"Maybe we should stick an apple in its mouth," Stu said, pretending to opening the pig's snout and toss in an apple.

Now that I was in tenth grade, I made sure to sit in the back where the cool people were. The previous year was my first at the neighborhood high school which Mom fought to get me into. In ninth grade, the biology teacher told me to sit next to her because my wheelchair didn't fit between the bolted down tables. I wouldn't make that mistake twice.

"Once you have the longitudinal incision made, use your scissors to open up the right pleural cavity," Mrs. Gillespie yelled over the students' voices as she walked around the room inspecting each group's work.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Amy said looking at me, rolling her eyes. The scalpel was steady in her hand, resting in the tanned curve between her thumb and forefinger. She sliced a straight line through the rubbery skin as she sat on the edge of her seat with her legs crossed at the knee.

"Don't mangle him," John snickered.

"How do you know it's a him, John," Stu asked in his easy-going drawl. Maybe it's a her." Stu, sitting sprawled in his seat with his legs hanging apart, pushed one of the pig's back legs to the side with one finger, peering sideways as if he were peeking.

"Stop that," Amy laughed, talking to them like brothers. "How am I supposed to get this right if you keep moving it." I laughed little more than a giggle even though I felt an irresistible urge to howl. But they would think I was crazy, so I just leaned forward on my elbows, pretending to care which glop of guts was the heart, and which the lung.

"Hey, you remember that kid in the third grade that had that Swiss army knife?" John asked. I pulled my arms across my chest, and looked around the lab at the other groups huddled over their pigs.

"What was his name?" Stu asked.

"I don't know, Hughie or something like that," John said. "Anyway, he always went around carving up frogs and things? Remember we said he was going to be either a doctor or a mass murderer?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," Amy answered, pointing the scalpel at the guys like a long silver fingernail. "I haven't thought about him in years. Whatever happened to him?"

"Who knows," John said. "Probably medical school or juvenile detention." They laughed, shaking their heads. I

just smiled, wishing I could do more than pretend to be their friend. But I didn't know Hughie, or whatever his name was.

I didn't really know Amy, Stu, or John, either. I didn't know their last names or what street they lived on. We never talked on the phone. We just shared a pig.

I snuck a look at my body, my stomach hanging over my legs, my right elbow balanced on my hip because of my crooked spine. Amy looked like a Glamour magazine cover with her tiny waist and long legs. She wore guys' Levi cords like most of the interesting girls in the high school. When she laughed, her face tipped up, her back arched like a dancer. John and Stu's eyes flickered every time she touched her blond feathered hair or twirled her necklace. My hair was long. It lay on the battery case of my electric wheelchair. I combed my fingers through the strands, felt the softness. Though my hair made my face look fat, it was my only asset. I wouldn't dare cut it off.

"This little piggy went to market," Stu said.

"This little piggy had roast beef," John said. "Mmmm yum-yum." He cut through a membrane around the lung.

"Wait, you guys forgot a piggy," Amy said.

"Oh no, who?" Stu said, hand over his mouth.

I put my hand over my belly wondering if I would look more like Amy after my back surgery. The doctors wanted to straighten my spine as much as possible, then fuse most of it together like one big bone. Certainly, I wouldn't be able to

move my back the way she does, I thought. I tried not to think about it very much. My partners didn't know anything about the spinal fusion, or that I wouldn't be in school for the rest of the year. It seemed crazy to share something like that when they didn't know anything else about me.

Why couldn't this happen last year when I had to sit next to the teacher? I wondered.

"Start cleaning up, put your pigs back where you got them," Mrs. Gillespie yelled.

My wheelchair didn't fit in the back room where the pig and the instruments went. So the others took them while I waited. As they walked back toward me, Amy bumped hips with Stu, showing him a dance move. Her movements seemed fluid, where his were always half a beat behind. I wondered if he did that on purpose, creating his dumb act, to make Amy laugh.

"You don't have to dance just because you go to Homecoming," Amy said to Stu. "Just go to have fun."

"I'll think about it," Stu stuttered, acting like he was biting his fingernails in fright. "But I might have to work that Saturday."

"Where you working?" John asked, shoving his notes into the lab manual.

"Kentucky Fried Chicken, yes sir'ee," he twanged.

"Home of the deep fried, finger lickin' good rats," John added.

"Now that's was just a malicious story going around about

my place of employment."

"Huh-huh, and you probably started it, my boy," John said, slapping Stu on the back. Stu folded his hands in prayer, looking toward the ceiling tiles. "How much they paying you to goof off?"

"Not enough for my multiple talents."

"Well if you don't have to work, I hope you go with all of us to Homecoming," Amy said.

I knew Amy didn't consider me one of the "us" that would be going. "I'll be in the hospital anyway," I reminded myself. "So being asked to join them is irrelevant." The bell rang to release us from class. I pretended to reorganize my notes.

"See you tomorrow, Lisa," Amy said, waving her hand in my direction. The three moved together, joining the stream of kids headed for the door.

"Lisa," Mrs. Gillespie called. She sat down on the lab table next to me. "I understand you will be gone for the rest of the year?"

"I hope I won't be gone that long," I answered.

"I'm going to miss you," she said. "You're a good student. I'll make sure the homebound teacher gets all the assignments so you can keep up with the class. Then if you do join us later in the year, you'll be ready."

"Okay, bye," I said, stumbling on the words, staring at my notebook.

I left lab, joining the flow of kids in the hall. The hall reeked from a combination of sweat, body odor, and smoke, only some of it from cigarettes, which seeped out from the bathrooms. Two boys were having a howling contest until Mr. Jentsen, the econ teacher, told them to knock it off. The long-haired rednecks sauntered down the hall together, bull-legged, chins tipped up, their eyes scanning back and forth like they were looking for trouble. Cigarettes bulged from their back pockets. Jocks in their letter jackets grouped in packs moving their eyes up, then down, then back up the bodies of the best looking girls in the school. The girls said: "What do you think you're looking at?" or, "Did you get an eye full yet?" Their own eyes were half cocked, flickering mascara-coated eyelashes. The loud hum of my electric wheelchair was muted by the roar of their voices, giving me the eery feeling that I floated unconnected.

Kids bumped into my chair, my shoulders. They tripped over my footrests, then turned away with their eyes seeking the floor. It was impossible to get around them. So I went the prescribed speed, waiting until we flowed out the door, dispersed on the sidewalk. I rolled down the long driveway to the main road. A group of girls with frosted, permed hair caught up with me. They were all thin, even underweight. Their hips swished when they walked. They passed me. For a few moments, it seemed like I was walking with them. I smiled, looking toward the field flowers growing along the

ditch so they wouldn't think I was trying to horn in on their group, but hoping to create the appearance that I was just a happy kid with her friends walking home from school. Just in case anyone was looking. They giggled, pretending to hit each other in the back of the head after they passed. I wondered if they were kidding each other about being my friend.

I crossed the main road, entering the subdivisions. The kids' voices died away. Fall's first leaves skittered across the road. A door blew shut, wind whistled in my ears. I was alone. No eyes watched me watch myself.

Elementary kids played baseball in the street up ahead. They stared. "Look, look," one of the boys yelled, pointing his finger at me.

"This is my neighborhood, too. Haven't you seen me before?" I wanted to scream as if what a ten year old thought about me really mattered. You'd think they never saw a wheelchair before, I thought.

I watched their baseball roll to a stop in the gutter, and thought of the poing, poing, poing of the red rubber ball that Maria taught me how to bounce in third grade. She, Terri, and I played catch together on the sidewalk at recess every day, except when it snowed or rained. Terri died a long time ago. Her parent's buried her in a bright yellow party dress. Maria disappeared into her world on the other side of town that I wasn't familiar with. I pretended that the red ball bounced along the asphalt with me as I walked home, just

behind my wheels where I couldn't see.

I looked at the straight row of ranch houses stretching unbroken to the next corner. Even though each house had different colored shutters, some with a brick facade, every one had a picture window, a front door, then two smaller bedroom windows. Like cars off a factory line, I thought. I passed Renee's house where we played seven-up with a tennis ball against the brick when we were eight. When I went into the wheelchair, Renee thought of new rules for us to play by since I couldn't twirl around in a circle, bouncing a ball at the time.

Renee was my best neighborhood friend until the beginning of seventh grade when she stopped speaking to me. We hadn't talked for two years when she called the first day of high school. She asked me to walk to school with her. "Sure," I stammered, my hands shaking. I didn't want to walk alone on the first day.

Renee came to the door. "Hi," she said, hanging her head. "Let's go." We walked together until we got to end of the street.

Then she sped up. "I can't go that fast," I said.

She stopped, leaning her weight on one leg with her hands on her hips. She tapped one foot on the pavement, waiting for me to catch up. Her mother made her do this, I thought. The same mother who gave her the choice of going to confession or getting an egg beater across the back of the thighs to confess

her sins.

"Just get out of here," I yelled. "Leave me alone."

"Fine," she said, throwing up her hands. "You can't say I didn't try."

My eyes teared, but I concentrated until they evaporated so black mascara streaks wouldn't mark my cheeks on the first day of school. I looked down at my size 12 pants that I wore because my stomach protruded so far. It was evident why Renee didn't want to be caught dead with me. She would be ostracized on the first day of classes, too. "I just want to forget this whole damned thing," I muttered to myself. "Don't cry. Don't cry."

I didn't look at Renee's house as I passed. I didn't look at my stomach either.

Things were going to be different real soon, I thought. "Probably worse," I whispered. If kids wouldn't talk to me now, what were they going to do when I looked like I had a board shoved down the back of my shirt. Maybe I would be too long when they straightened me out. Long body, short legs, like Nattie, the Thalidomide kid in elementary school.

I looked at the fissures in the asphalt as I wheeled home. What happens when they cut me open, slice my guts? My spine will have a red welt with dots running along each side like Frankenstein. My stomach bunched just thinking about it. Even if my belly wasn't so fat anymore, would Stu or John look at me when I'm stiff and scarred like they look at Amy? I

wondered. My face burned to the tips of my ears thinking of the possibility.

Mom had explained the surgery to me as we drove home from the hospital a few weeks earlier. She went over and over the details like saying it would make it seem real. "They'll take bone chips out of your hip and stick them around your vertebrae so that they fuse together," she said. "They put the metal rods in just to hold everything together until it heals."

I'll never be a gymnasts like Cathy Rigby if I can't bend, I thought as Mom continued talking. Don't be so stupid, I told myself. You never will anyway.

"What happens if I'm ugly?" I asked Mom, hoping she would convince me that wouldn't happen.

"You won't be," she said. I rolled my eyes. "You don't have any choice. You have to do this to live."

"Oh, Mom," I whined. "Why do you always say things like that?"

"It's the truth." She stared at me with sad eyes. "You're back will only get worse, until it starts hurting to sit up. I want you to have every opportunity. You can't do things lying in bed."

Later that night as Mom lifted me into bed, she wiped her eyes, smiling at the same time. "Honey, you're going to be so straight and proud."

I sighed, looking toward the corner of the room. When I was little, I dreamt of being an Indian girl sitting, knees under my chin, in that corner with rope wound around my body. Mom swung her arm around my back, the other under my knees, then turned me around onto my back. Eric played music in his room on an old transistor radio. Dad was in front of the t.v. I heard his beer can clink on the end table that would have rings on it in the morning.

"The only thing that will be unpleasant is wearing the body cast for ten months," she said, covering me.

"I don't care about that," I said. "It'll come off like everything else. The surgery won't." I looked toward the blurred ceiling.

"Why do I have to have this thing?" I asked Mom, gesturing down the whole length of my body. My words squeaked out, irritating. "Everybody else gets a pretty body, and they don't have to think about anything. I get this." I sobbed, my lips pulling downward, making it difficult to speak. "They stuck special pillows in my sides, and under me, so my back would be straight. Then they put me in an ugly plastic shell that made sores under my arms, and made me look like a freak. I could've told them it wouldn't do any good. It just made everybody hate me more. Now they want to rip up my body so I'll be even uglier."

Mom's lips pursed. "Get some sleep. Everything will look better in the morning." She turned off the light, closed

the door.

"You just don't understand," I whispered, feeling the tears tickle down my temples before they soaked into the pillow.

I turned the corner onto my street. "This isn't my body, this isn't my body," I whispered, staring at the dark gray road.

Neighborhood high school ran in shifts. Ninth and tenth graders didn't start until late morning. So, I was the last home every day. Mom tried to be the first in so she could start dinner and do some housework. On teachers' conference days, when there was no school, I saw Mom fly into the house, smiling and winded. Her eyes seemed so open. One time she yelled, "Wonder Woman," spun around, then leapt into her room to change clothes. She seemed like two women in one.

Dad knew she worked at the Handicapped Child Advocacy, but it was best not to provoke him, she said. "It scares him to see me happy." Dad didn't know about the public relations class Mom was taking at the college. That was a secret. HCA grew so much, Mom worked five days a week. She took the class to learn how to write press releases, give interviews on t.v., and take care of her other responsibilities she now had at work.

I saw the shadow figures of Dad and Eric in the back of the garage as I came up to the house. The new van was parked

in the driveway, just washed. Water and suds puddled in the street. Mom talked Dad into getting the van since my new electric wheelchair wouldn't fold up to fit in the trunk. They had done a lot of buying lately. And repairing. "I'm making sure this house is in order. I don't need any hidden expenses popping up," Mom said to me the day she talked Dad into wanting to have a repairman fix the sump pump. It broke down all the time, then the basement flooded. Mom spent days trying to clean up and dry everything out. "You work too hard to have to fool around with this thing all the time," she said to him as if he were the one that tried to fix it every time it broke. But it worked. Dad agreed.

The maples in the yard were turning orange. Warm Indian summers made me nervous, though. The warm weather could change in an instant. I drove through the sudsy puddle, into the driveway.

I felt the percussion of two blasts before I realized I must have heard it, too. Two bursts of light flicked in front of Dad as if his cigarette lighter sparked twice. Eric yelled, out of control, no words just sounds that broke with his changing voice. He swept his arm outward, catching oil cans, tire pumps, glass jars, and boxes of old junk along the back wall.

My body raced, everything blocked from my thoughts but the garage, my brother, the shattering glass. Mom ran from the kitchen door into the garage, a muffled noise from deep in

her throat cut short. All three froze in their spots. Only my wheelchair continued to move, humming closer.

"Why did you kill her?" Eric's voice cracked. "Why?"

Air escaped from Mom's lungs, her shoulders collapsed forward. Dad clicked open the barrel of the gun held in his right hand, peered into it as if to make sure he used all the bullets, then clicked it shut before picking up his beer can from the workbench. My eyes adjusted to the dim garage. Dad and Eric stood separated by the aluminum garbage can with two small holes in the side. Gunpowder smoke stung my throat.

"I don't answer to you, buddy," Dad said, pointing at my brother with his index finger, while holding his beer can in the same hand. "I'm damn sick and tired of having these fucking stinking animals around," he said, banging his fist against the mice aquarium on the table where many of Eric's animal cages were. "You didn't need a damn rat, too. How do you know he didn't have rabies, huh?"

Eric's nostrils flared. He breathed short gulps of air through his mouth, standing with his arms half-cocked, fists tight. Every muscle stood out in his over-sized fourteen-year-old body, almost as big as Dad's. He looked at Dad the way he looked at his punching bag which hung from the rafters in the basement just before he sent it sailing against the wall.

Dad stared back, his beer can balanced on his hip. "Try me," he said. "We'll see who wins." They stood, face to

face. Eric quivered, his eyes fell to the can. It seemed as if his muscles had been made of nothing more than air. His shoulders sagged as he stuffed his hands into his back pockets and slumped into the house. Dad smirked and shook his head, then swigged down the last of his beer. He tossed the can into a grocery bag full of empties by the back door on his way in.

I wheeled over to the side of the aluminum can, avoiding the broken glass. Inside lay the thin gray-furred body of a rat on its side with a pulpy mass ending where the head should have been. Tissue and blood were scattered on the sides of the can and on the empty maple syrup bottle, the smell of which must have enticed him to jump in. Eric probably wanted to add it to his animal collection, most of which were crippled or homeless. Mom and I were still. There was nothing we hadn't said before.

She turned to stare out the garage window toward the rose garden. Her lips moved, though she was silent. Nodding her head once, she turned, and went back into the house.

I woke in a room with many beds. Three nurses stood across the room from me. One of them turned and saw me.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I'm thirsty." I closed my eyes, my body screaming for water.

"I'm sorry, but you can't have anything to drink so soon after surgery."

"I'm thirsty," I repeated.

"I'll ask the doctor if you can have something." She walked away, then came back a moment later with a cup of small ice cubes and a white plastic spoon. She slipped an ice cube into my my mouth. I sucked on it, wondering why I was face up when I just had surgery on my back. When the cube was gone, I turned my head to find the cup sitting on the stand next to my head. I reached for it, but my arm was not long enough. I dug my elbows into the mattress, trying to scoot my body up. The nurse ran to my side, put my arms down, then spooned another cube into my mouth. I closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

"Lisa, can you hear me?" the nurse said. She was talking close to my head. "Lisa, it's time to flip. Are you ready?"

"Flip where?" I asked without opening my eyes.

"You're on a circle bed and it's time to turn you on your stomach. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Place this over her," the nurse said. A frame was placed on top of me, then bolted into place so that I was sandwiched in between. Metal clicked, the bed began to move.

"Ahhh, I'll fall," I yelled. They turned the whole bed over like a grilled cheese sandwich in a skillet until I

landed on my belly.

"It's okay," the nurse said. "You're all right. You can't fall." The frame jolted to a stop as if it hit a lock point.

My face stuck through a hole in the frame. I stared at the linoleum, wheels of the bed frame, white shoes. Hands moved around me, jiggled the bed, removed the frame on which I had been lying. "Throw that blanket over her."

"How's that, are you warm enough?" the voice said.

"It hurts," I said. I closed my eyes. "It hurts."

"We can't give you more morphine for another half hour, okay? I know it hurts, but we have to wait."

I didn't answer. I can't take this, I thought. Go to sleep, just go to sleep.

Screaming from across the room woke me. I looked up and saw Mom on the day bed, her books and notes strewn around her. Empty styrofoam coffee cups and a soup bowl were piled up in the corner of her bed.

"Mom?" I asked.

She came close to me and whispered. "That girl had boiling water thrown on her and the nurses are trying to change her dressings."

I was on my back, so I turned my head to look. All I could see were several white shoes moving around behind the girl's privacy curtain. The screams wrenched my stomach. I

wanted her to shut up so I could sleep.

There were four of us in the room, Mom whispered. One had psoriasis all over her body and had to wear a space suit that covered her up to the neck. Underneath, her skin was smeared with tar. I saw her once when I woke pacing the floor, eating a candy bar, the wrapper crinkling. Nobody visited her. She sneaked guys from Six East, the boys side, into her bed when she wasn't wearing her space suit. Sometimes they got caught.

The girl next to me had leukemia. She and her husband were sixteen. I watched him sit in a chair next to her, balancing his elbow on the bed, chin in hand. Her dark eyelids were closed most of the time, tubes ran through her nose and into her arms. A few thin strands of dark hair straggled across her pillow. She would die soon, I could see. Her body had become useless. She would leave it behind just a few feet away. That scared me.

My nosed itched.

I tried to bend my arm up, but it wouldn't budge. The itch grew worse. I tried to inch my fingers to my hip, then across my stomach, ribs, up to my nose. But I couldn't move my hand from the blanket.

"My nose itches, I can't move," I panicked.

Mom came to the side of the bed. She picked up my arm, held my hand next to my nose.

"You'll get your strength back," she said. "Give it time."

I opened my eyes, feeling someone breathe nearby. The girl with psoriasis bent over me, smiling.

"If you're not good to me, I'll rape you," she said. I looked at her yellowed teeth, wondering if she meant it, and if a girl could do that. How should I be good? The girl with burns laughed. This must be a joke, I thought, smiling. The girl teasing me sauntered back to her quarter of the room, flopped on her stomach across the bed to read a magazine and eat another candy bar.

I ignored her, turning instead to look at the cards Mom taped on the walls. Most of them were childish pictures of teddy bears or balloons. Some were demure little girls in pinafores holding cats or flowers. I don't know what girl they were sending those to, but that's not me, I thought. An orange and yellow stuffed snake from Eric coiled around my legs at the end of the bed.

The day bed was empty. Mom was taking her final in public relations class. The housekeeper came in to put clean sheets on the bed where the girl with leukemia had been. My eyes grew heavy. The last thing I saw before falling asleep was Ted Nugent staring at me from the wall above Psoriasis Girl's bed.

"I'll be removing the stitches so they can put your cast on tomorrow," the resident doctor said. He pulled the blanket down.

I imagined thick black twine laced down my spine. "Really, you can leave it if you want," I joked. "I don't mind."

Mom sat next to me watching the doctor prepare. "It really healed fast," she said.

"Doesn't take long," he said. He turned the bright fluorescent light on over the bed. "I'm going to start now."

"I don't want to do this," I groaned.

"Don't worry," he laughed, "you'll hardly feel anything."

I heard the scissors snip the stitch, felt the vibration of the cutting. Then, the tug of thread being pulled through skin. Renee and I used to sew our fingers together when we were little. Sitting on the floor of my mother's bedroom, we passed a needle and thread through the outermost layer of skin on the ends of each finger. We pulled the thread slowly so it wouldn't rip the skin. We sat on the wooden floor, unable to move, our hands held like clubs.

The doctor snipped and tugged all the way to the base of my spine. I wanted to ask, "How ugly am I, really?" Just as a joke, make him laugh. But, what if he didn't laugh?

"Okay, we're going to move you now," a woman in the casting room said. They transferred me to a frame which felt

like a thin strip of metal running along my back, then pulled my smock off. I lay still, exposed, the catheter tube taped to my leg, afraid of falling. A body stocking was pulled over my torso, then I was wrapped tightly with cotton batting. Wet plaster-of-paris-soaked strips were wound around me up to my neck.

"How does it feel," the woman asked who pressed with the palms of her hands around my waist and over my ribs so the cast would fit snug.

My own portable prison, I thought. It was a kindly prison, padded for comfort. But just try to breath deep. The hard walls will remind you where you are. Do people buried alive feel like this? I wondered.

"If you throw me in a river, I'll sink," I said.

"It's too cold for swimming today," she said.

They transferred me to a gurney and the orderly pushed me head first down the hall to the elevators. He whistled through his front teeth, looking down the hall, over the length of my body.

"What's that?" I screamed, as I lay sleeping on my side.

"It's a suppository," the nurse said in her raspy voice, walking out of the room.

"Don't do that to me," I wanted to yell. But she was gone.

"Do you want to get up?" Mom asked. "The doctor said you can."

"Yeah," I said. "Put me in my chair and we'll leave right now." Mom brought my wheelchair up the day before. I listened to the battery charger humming all night.

I was wearing underwear again. No more catheter bag. The nightgown was mine, too, though it seemed a little unnecessary over the cast, like shoes on a prosthesis. Mom cradled the back of my neck with one arm, the cast with the other, raising me an inch at a time until I was sitting. It was the first time I sat up in a month. My head floated.

"How do you feel?" she asked, watching my face. I listened to her breath.

"Okay," I answered. "This weighs so much."

"Do you want to wait?"

"No, let's go," I said. She moved my legs over the side of the bed, still holding on to the front edge of my cast to keep me upright. Then she bear-hugged me around the cast, lifting until I cleared the bed. It felt strange to be lifted, but not feel the other person.

"Okay?" she asked.

I nodded, and she lifted me until I was standing. My body slipped through the cast, the upper ridge gouging into my throat. I couldn't breathe. I looked into my mother's eyes, thinking, can you read my mind?

She put me back on the bed, then lay me down. "Can you

breath?" she asked, panting.

I nodded, yes.

"You take her legs and I'll take her shoulders," Mom said to the orderly as she crawled into the back of the van. I lay on the gurney, snow tickling my face. The ride home was too long for me to sit up. So Mom threw a mattress on the floor.

They lifted me into the van, Mom pulling me in until I was lying flat.

"Thanks for your help," she said to the orderly. He only nodded and slammed the doors shut.

"We did it," Mom said, out of breath.

I looked up through the windows, but all I could see was gray sky. "Great," I teased. "I finally get out and I can't see a thing."

Mom sat on her knees, grinning, rocking back and forth. "We did it."

"You sound like we just broke out of prison."

"We did," she said, then paused. "I did something last week, but I wanted to wait until you were free, too, before I told you." She adjusted her legs so she was sitting cross-legged. Her lips twitched, holding something back. "I filed."

I knew what she was talking about, but I didn't know what to say.

"For divorce," she added. Mom smiled, looking at me. "On

Halloween."

I imagined her riding a broomstick to the big gray building downtown, pointed black hat and all. I laughed. "Did Dad say anything about it being Halloween? Did he call you a 'you know what'?"

"He just cried," Her forehead wrinkled. "He knows it's for real this time."

"Does Eric know?"

She nodded. "Yeah, he put his fist through the wall. I don't understand what is going on in his head." She sighed, looking toward the window. "I thought it would make him happy to be away from Dad. But, maybe after everything that's happened, that was too much to expect. He was the sacrificial lamb, afterall."

"What?" I asked.

Mom's jaw quivered as she looked away to the corner of the van. "I couldn't take care of you by myself. I needed your father. I knew it would be hell for Eric, but it was a choice that had to be made. I sacrificed one child for the other. Now Eric is going to pay for the rest of his life." She shook her head, wiping a tear from her cheek. "There was no choice."

"It isn't my fault," I yelled, looking up at her. "You didn't have to stay with Dad. I wanted you to leave him eight years ago." Tears burned down my temples. "You just didn't want to," I added, my voice trembling with anger.

"It's not your fault," she said, looking at me with sad, round eyes that I wanted to believe. "I'm not blaming you."

"You are, too," I whispered, looking away from her to the wall. "You're saying Eric got hurt because of me. I didn't want anybody hurt."

Mom shook her head. "You're tired," Mom said, getting up to walk to the driver's seat. "We'd better get you home. This is too much all in one day." The engine roared. She flipped the heater on.

Mom backed the van up, then pulled out of the parking lot. I looked up toward the windows, but from my viewpoint, everything was gray. It was a bumpy ride. I was pulled one way, rolled another, depending on which direction Mom turned. Pushing my palms into the mattress, I held on the best I could.

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