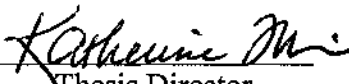


Leading Girls

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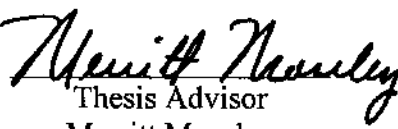

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Damselfly

The white plastic helmet stinks and it makes my head itch, but I'm way too old to act like a baby. I don't want to spoil me and dad's last day together, so I pull the life jacket around my shoulders and push my arms through the armholes. I stare at my pink and yellow river shoes while dad grabs my life jacket and pulls me forward to buckle it up.

He says, "Good girl. Look, you're brave like the other kids."

The parking lot is crowded with families buckling up their life jackets. A mom puts sunscreen on a girl my size, and then they stand in front of a blue school bus that's loaded with whitewater rafts and ask the bus driver to take their picture. The girl jumps around, asking lots of questions. She's too busy hogging everybody's attention to be scared.

Two fat blonde brothers are close to us, all suited up and throwing gravel as hard as they can at each other's helmets. They think it's fun. I don't think I'm very much like them either, but I don't say so. I have to be brave today because dad carries me in his heart while he fights in the desert, which is what he's going to do tomorrow.

Dad doesn't know I have the same dream of water all the time, a dream of black water that looks exactly like a big old sad sleeping dog that will get happy if I pet it. In my dream I creep up to it even though I'm scared, but right when I get close to it, it lifts up its nose and it keeps lifting until the whole thing is in the air and it doesn't look like a dog anymore, but like a big black sheet right out of the dryer that someone's putting on the bed. It whips up and goes way above my head, blocking out the light, and I run, but I can't run fast enough because it gets bigger and bigger like a parachute that's as big as the world. It floats down and when it's almost touching my head it whips back up. It keeps whipping up and floating down, like somebody's

trying to get it on the bed just right, and the last time it comes down, it breaks into black blobs that swirl around me and I run slower and slower because the blobs stick to my feet and wrap around my legs and arms until I can't move at all and I'm all alone and the blobs drift down and make a thick gooey puddle around me and they fly into my nose and mouth and eyes and I scream as loud as I can but nobody can hear me, and that's when I wake up. Even though I don't want to, every time I get around water, I imagine it's playing 'possum like the black dog in my dream.

I don't tell my dad about the lake-'possum-dog because he'll say, "That's just a dream," which I already know.

When dad came to pick me up today, mom looked at him and frowned. She said, "Are you sure this is the best thing to do on your last day together? How about just pizza and a movie, Paul?"

Dad said, "We're making a memory to last until next time, Maureen. Relax."

Mom said, "But she's just seven, Paul, and she can't swim."

He said, "Well, maybe today's the day to learn something new and not be limited by what we don't know, Maureen."

When they say each other's names so much it means they're about to have an argument about me, like whose turn it is to buy me new shoes for school, or whether or not I can drink orange soda with dinner, or whose fault it is that I still wet the bed sometimes. So even though I didn't want to go rafting, I was kind of glad when my dad grabbed my hand and said, "Come on, Superstar, let's go get 'em."

And then me and dad were in the car on a long curvy drive to the rafting place. The whole way here, I tried to remember everything we talked about and exactly how he looks, so it lasts until next time I see him, which won't be until after I'm eight. I try to believe him and mom when they say he won't get hurt fighting in the war, but most nights I lie awake thinking about him burning up hot in the desert, getting sand in his eyes and boots, and mean people with guns and bombs all around him, and trucks exploding, and legs and arms getting chopped off, and I think I'll never see him again and I don't understand why he keeps going back. I wish he'd stay here where he can just carry me in his arms instead of his heart. So on the drive to the rafting place, I tried as hard as I could not to think about the desert or the water, just about making a good memory.

Maybe today will be so much fun that I'll quit being scared of water. And maybe it will be so much fun dad will decide to stay here and not go back to the army. And maybe the dream will go away. And maybe me and mom and dad will all go to the beach and laugh a lot like my friend Miranda's family does.

A big brown lady with silver in her hair and sparkly blue eyes stands up on a bench and blows a whistle. Everybody crowds around her as she reads names from a clipboard and marks their names off. A bunch of scruffy guys that my Nanny would call "Ne'er-Do-Wells" raise their hands and wave as she introduces them as our river guides. I hope I don't have to ride in a boat with any of them. I saw them earlier, throwing gravel in the parking lot like the fat blonde brothers. I stare at the big lady and think as hard as I can, *Please be our guide, Please be our guide*. She says it's a great day for rafting, and then tells us to hop on the bus, Gus.

She stands by the bus, checking everybody's life jackets and helmets as they climb on, and when it's my turn she winks at me and I get the feeling she heard me thinking *Please be our guide*. Me and dad sit close to the front, and the bus pulls onto the highway. I press the side of my thigh tight against my dad's and the bottom of my legs stick to the ripped seat. The big lady stands at the front of the bus and says her name's Courtney and that she's our trip leader today. She starts talking about what to do if you fall out of the boat. I try to make everything she says stick in my head. It's important that I stay safe because if I get hurt, mom will be mad at dad, even if it's my fault, and they'll have a big fight and my stomach will start getting that empty feeling and that won't be a fun way to end our last day together. It won't be a good memory for anybody.

Courtney says, "Keep your feet off the bottom of the river, because if you don't, they can get stuck under a rock and then I'll have to swim down there and gnaw your leg off to get you out!"

My dad chuckles and the jumpy girl that had her picture taken by the bus scrunches up her face and says "Eww!"

Courtney says, "And I get really grumpy when I have to do that because I'm a vegetarian!"

Everybody laughs except me. Even though I try as hard as I can to hold it in, I can't stop it. I tuck my chin against my lifejacket and start crying. I can see myself underwater stretching as hard as I can toward the light but I can't get my foot unstuck and fish chomp on my ears and my hair's in my eyes and that lady comes down looking grumpy with her cheeks puffed out and bites my ankles and there's blood in the water and I can't breathe.

Courtney tells everybody to look out the window at the river, but I don't want anybody to see me crying and I don't want to look anyway. The bus stops, and she says that the moment of truth has arrived, and dad nudges me up and into the aisle. I can hear the river, but I keep my face down and push my hair around my face that's a sticky mess from crying so much. Before I know it, me and dad are off the bus and I'm leaning against him under a tree. The guides look like worker ants, carrying the big red rafts over their heads.

Dad leans down and says, "Look Flavia, it's not scary. We're going to have so much fun!"

I take a peek at the river and it is so big I can barely see the other side. I think about the black blobs. I rub my tongue over the ridges of my finger that's pruned up by now. Black starts creeping around the edges of everything, and the world starts to spin. I bury my face in my dad's stomach, but he puts his hands on both sides of my face and turns it around.

He squats down and gives me a backwards hug. He says, "The most important moments in our lives sometimes feel the scariest right before they happen. You're a big girl, and I wouldn't be doing you any favors to give in to your fear right now."

He's trying to help me grow up to be brave like him, but it's not working. The black blobby parachute is still in my head and I want to run away and scream, but then I remember that my dad's going to say goodbye tonight and I might not ever see him again, and even if I do, it won't be until I'm so much older. I don't want him to just remember me crying for that whole time. I wish I was watching him eat pepperoni pizza and listening to his big laugh mix with mine at the funny parts of Shrek. I feel him holding me and I think about how sad he is too, that he's got to leave me and go be all alone without me in the desert. I turn around and he lets me drop my head onto his shoulder and he rubs both of his hands on my arms.

He says, "I'm so proud of you. I know this is hard, but you're going to be so glad you did it."

I try to smile at him, but my lips feel lopsided.

He pats me hard on the helmet and says, "Me and you, Superstar. This is our adventure." I laugh a little with my lopsided lips so my dad knows I appreciate him cheering me up, and I remind myself that dreams are just dreams. Dogs can't turn into water blobs and water doesn't fly around like a sheet or a parachute. And dad's going to come back from the desert.

While I'm reminding myself of this, Courtney walks towards us with a big smile on her face.

She says, "Hey guys, I need a crew. Looks like it's just the three of us in the raft today. You guys ready to paddle?"

Dad says, "I'm Paul, and this is my daughter, Flavia. She's a little scared."

Courtney doesn't look at him, which is strange because everybody stands up straight and pays attention when my dad talks to them. Instead, she bends down and puts her hands on her wide brown knees.

She looks me right in the eye and whispers, "I just said all that scary stuff on the bus to make the grown-ups pay attention. I promise you'll be safe."

Her eyes are as blue as the big jewel in my Nanny's ring and she smells like coconut and the good kind of sweat. Dad's holding my face again, so my cheeks are pushed up and if I say anything I'll look like I'm saying "Chubby bunny," so I just stare at the silver whistle that dangles from her lifejacket. Dad squeezes my cheeks against my teeth. That means, *quit being rude*.

The families are all gathering around the rafts, listening to the Ne'er-Do-Wells, but Courtney's still looking at me. She takes one hand off her knee and holds it out.

"It's smart to be scared," she says, "I get scared too. Water is dangerous."

Dad lets go of my face and waves away some bugs that are buzzing around us. I stick my finger back in my mouth and stare at this big brown smiling lady who looks at me instead of my dad and says she's scared of water. I look at my dad. He's not scared of anything. He's brave.

My hands are messy wet, but I reach for hers. Her hand feels warm and rough like a sidewalk, and she doesn't act like mine feels gross, so I shift my weight from my dad to my own pink and yellow feet and follow her to the raft.

Dad's behind us, so he doesn't hear her whisper, "You know, you're the bravest one here."

I look at the jumpy girl who's asking about piranhas and alligators now, and at the brothers who are sword fighting with their paddles. I look back at my dad and I'm pretty sure Courtney's mixed up.

She says, "Being brave is being scared and doing it anyway."

I think hard about this and suck the soggy humps on my finger. She tells me I can sit in the back of the boat with her. I can even sit on the floor where there's no way I'm falling out and I don't have to look at the water if I don't want to.

Dad says, "She'll sit up on the side of the raft like everybody else."

She ignores that and says she needs him to sit up front.

He says, "I paid good money to spend time with my daughter and I'll sit wherever I want."

This time she stands up straight to talk to him. She's not mad, but she sounds like she means business when she answers him. She uses a lot of big words like "chain of command," that mean, "I'm the boss of this boat." He gets red in the face and sits down in the front of the raft. A big giggle starts crawling up my chest, but I know better than to let it out. Instead I just turn my lips down hard and shoo away some bugs.

When Courtney tells me to, I crawl in the raft and sit cross-legged in the bottom with my forehead pressed against the rubber, looking at the red spots that keep moving around inside my eyelids. My legs are cool from the water and that makes me dizzy and scared. I remember that feeling scared means I have a chance to be brave, so I take a peek at Courtney's toenails that are painted all different colors.

The raft moves forward and she tells us all about damselflies. She says most people get them mixed up with dragonflies, but the colorful, delicate-looking ones are damselflies and the big, helicopter-looking ones are dragonflies. Damselflies spend most of their lives underwater as nymphs, sometimes even years, and they are the tiniest, bravest creatures under the water. They keep on swimming through dangerous water until they grow little fins and the little fins turn into wings that look like silver spider webs with jewels stuck in them. She says that some of them only live a day or two as damselflies after all that time underwater, but for those days they hunt and love fiercely, eating mosquitoes and laying lots of eggs that will hatch into nymphs that will go through the whole thing again. She says that in her opinion, they are the most beautiful creatures on the river.

I think about this and stare at her toes.

She says, "Hang on everybody; we've got our first rapid coming up!"

I wrap my arms around Courtney's leg and close my eyes. I'm glad I'm down here in the bottom of the boat where I can't fall out and I don't have to look, but my stomach's still flopping around inside my body. The boat moves faster and the black starts creeping around the edges of everything again. The boat rocks back and forth and an icy wave spills over the side of the raft and splashes all over my legs. I hear myself screaming and I feel Courtney's strong scratchy calf tight on my cheek.

Right when I think I might be dead, I notice that the boat's not rocking anymore. I pull my face out from between Courtney's legs and look up at her, but I can't see her face. The sun's bright and it makes her look like a shadow, but her silver whistle flashes. She asks if I want to look at the rapid we just went through and I sit up on my knees and peek over the edge of the raft with an arm still wrapped around her leg. I grin when I see how big it is. I know I'm brave like a damselfly, and I feel sparkly like Courtney and the edges of water that fall off rocks.

Courtney says, "Look at your arm, little lady."

I look and there's a bright blue damselfly there, twitching its cobweb wings. I think how much we're alike, me and Courtney and the damselfly and the river, and I wish my mom was here to see me like this, because she'd love to see me so sparkly. It might even make her laugh like she did when she was playing with Miranda's new puppy. But she's at home, worrying about me, and my dad's looking over the front of the boat. I'm brave enough now to sit up on the side of the raft like everyone else and that will make my dad very happy. He'll tell my mom how sparkly I looked out here on the river, and how I was brave just like all the other kids, and maybe we'll all be happy now. Maybe he'll stay here longer so we can do this again.

The damselfly twitches a few more times, takes off and flies downstream. Maybe next time I'm at the ocean I'll just jump right into the big waves and laugh like other kids do. Mom and dad will be so happy, sitting on their beach chairs watching me play in the water.

Courtney starts talking again, but all I'm thinking about is that I want my dad to see me right now, so I don't listen. I get up real quick and climb over the rubber tubes in the middle of the raft that Courtney calls "thwarts." Right when I'm in the middle of the boat, on top of the thwart, Courtney shouts, "Flavia!"

My dad whips his head around and he looks really scared, so I whip my head around to look at Courtney.

Her eyes are big and her voice sounds sharp when she hollers, "Watch the bump!"

Her big brown hand reaches for my life jacket, but it moves way too slow. The bump happens first and I feel a big jerk.

Now I can hear what Courtney was saying that I wasn't listening to, like I'm listening backwards, or like I hit play and rewind on the VCR at the same time. She was talking about a bigger rapid and bracing into the raft. This time when I'm scared it feels different. It feels like a freezing cold metal rod sticking straight through my body. Like the only thing I can move in my body is my eyeballs. I look down at the water from the thwart I'm kneeling on. It's all white and foamy now and for a second I know it's about to happen. And then it happens.

I fly into the air and into the water at the same time. I'm underneath the river or upside down in the middle of it and it keeps turning me like a blender and I think I'm moving up but my head slams into something hard and slimy. I try to breathe but it hurts, and I scream, but nobody can hear me because I can't hear myself.

I stretch as hard as I can and kick my legs and arms, but I don't get any closer to the light and nobody chews on my ankles and there's no blood or fishes or nymphs. It's just me down here, and I quit trying to be brave because all of the sudden I know that it doesn't matter if I'm scared or brave or what the difference is.

My head fills up with a loud, slow whisper from the river that says, "I promise you'll be safe," and I know it's true. Everything slows down. I quit kicking and stretching and I just float in a soft kind of quiet with my hair waving in front of my face.

Then a big gush pushes me up and all of a sudden it's way too bright and my mouth is open and water is coming in and out of my mouth and I cough water out of my nose and suck it in at the same time. My chest hurts worse than anything ever hurt before. I'm going to explode like a water balloon and float down the river in floppy little pink and yellow pieces. The river pulls me down again and back up real quick, with the water just pouring in my nose and when I'm up, I see the red raft and it looks tiny like a toy. For a second I hear my dad screaming and I see Courtney jump in the water on the wrong side of the boat. They don't see me or hear me, even though I think I'm screaming.

It's all so loud and crazy and scary up here that I'm kind of glad when another gush pulls me back down to the big safe whisper, even though it hurts. This time I go straight down like a bowling ball somebody dropped in a swimming pool, and I don't kick or reach at all, I just relax my arms and legs and think about nymphs, and that makes me think about sea anemones, and that makes me think about the ocean and my mom and dad saying each other's names too much and how happy they'll be sitting on the beach together, watching the other kids if I'm not there to make them argue. I smile at their shiny, happy, suntanned faces, but I can't see their eyes

because the sun reflects off their silver sunglasses. Then they both wave and smile real big and I know they see me.

I watch my fingers and arms move around slow and lazy like a sea anemone. Everything gets dark, like I pulled a comforter over my head, and the water feels silky on my skin like my mom's sheets. I tilt my face up to kiss my mom and dad and that's when I see the last thing, silver flashes. I take off swimming through rough water, and my skinny little arms change into little wings that look like cobwebs with jewels the color of Courtney's eyes stuck in them, and I keep swimming fast as nymphs, chasing streaks of light that disappear.

A Better Place

Truthfully, the bite marks and bruises all over Marjorie's mom terrified Katie, but she knew she could change things. Marjorie just needed consistency, positive reinforcement, and more than anything, someone to really connect with her and pull her out of her autistic shell. She needed the means to communicate with the outside world. Sitting in the dark, dirty apartment that was home to Marjorie and her mom, Katie felt strong, excited to turn things around for this family.

But that was just the interview.

Today Katie's brand new Connections Mental Health Inc. employee I.D. swings from a lanyard around her neck. She is all alone, solely responsible for Marjorie for the next three hours and twenty-five minutes. Up until now, the day has gone surprisingly well. They walked around the Nature Center and Katie introduced Marjorie to the ASL signs for some of the animals, which Marjorie completely ignored. But Katie knew it wasn't all going to happen in a day. So far no aggression, no self-injurious behavior. *Doing good, Katie, doing good.*

But now they're at a playground and it's got to be ninety-eight degrees and a hundred percent humidity. Marjorie sits, legs splayed, smack in the middle of the sandbox, and her blonde pony tail brushes the top of her Hannah Montana t-shirt when she rocks back and sings, "Huummee!" It's a happy song, and she's cute while she sings it, except for the fact that she's compulsively shoving sand up her nose.

But Katie's cool. She didn't double major in social work and child psychology for nothing. She's read every book on autism she can get her hands on. She stands at a nearby picnic table rifling through Marjorie's backpack, apparently oblivious to the repetitive insertion of sand into Marjorie's nostril, but she isn't. She's following Dr. King's behavior plan, written

especially for Marjorie. Step number one—extinction. Ignore the behavior; don't let it escalate into a power struggle.

Of course Katie would rather not be tested, but she knows it's inevitable. Joy, her bulldog-looking supervisor, told her that Marjorie was notorious for running off her workers in the first couple of days, but that in general, Marjorie's mother was the primary target of aggressive behavior. And that was only because she wouldn't follow the behavior plan. Her teachers loved her and she was really a sweet, teachable child. If Katie could just make it past the initial testing period, things would smooth out.

And Katie has never failed a test. She's ready— Marjorie's behavior plan is memorized, she'd dedicated and determined, and more than that, much deeper than all that, she's got her strong belief in the goodness of human nature. Not that she's idealistic; she knows life is miserable and unfair for most people, but if there was more value placed on communication, if there was significantly more genuine connection between and among people, the world would be a better place.

Standing at the picnic table with sweat dripping down her back, poised to handle her first behavioral problem, Katie knows that she'll always remember Marjorie. This is what she bucked her parents for. Although they weren't as strongly opposed to this line of work as they had been her junior year when she went home and announced her plans to join the Peace Corps. Momma cried and daddy said it was absurd, out of the question, no daughter of his was going to be gallivanting with half-naked heathens halfway across the world. And then he threatened to take away all financial support forever if she went.

She ended up not going to Zimbabwe. Not because of daddy's threats of course; she wasn't afraid to stand up to him or to be out on her own financially. She knows there's more to

life than SUVs and swimming pools. And she already feels like an outsider when she goes home. No one understands her desire to rub shoulders with the poor, the dirty, the ill. They all think it's a whim, they think she will soon tire of it, marry a Senator and play hostess at charity fundraisers. Even her new, more socially aware friends think she's too spoiled, too soft, too pink for social work.

But they're all wrong. She's not afraid to get dirty. The only reason she didn't join the Peace Corps is that her doctor advised against it, due to her weak immune system and her migraines. If her health had allowed it, you can bet Katie would have told her parents and everyone else exactly where to get off. Maybe she can't travel to third world countries, but she can and will do what she can here in the U.S. And the first task is to stop Marjorie from shoving the rest of the sandbox in her nose.

Marjorie's happy "huummee's" have changed to crying sounds. Katie looks up from the backpack, careful to look away from Marjorie. *Extinction means absolutely zero attention for inappropriate behavior.* A few yards away, under the shade of a big Oak tree, a young mother pushes a Gerber baby in a swing. It looks ten degrees cooler over there. Marjorie lets out a wail. The mother gives Katie a dirty look and Katie replies with a generous smile. That woman with a perfectly healthy baby has no way of knowing that beautiful nine-year old Marjorie is profoundly autistic. She has no way of knowing that extinction is not neglect.

Marjorie's cry escalates to a painful scream, and she shoves the sand up her nose more urgently now. *Once the child becomes a danger to herself or others, move on to step two—redirection. Act like the child is not shoving a pound of sand in her nose and suggest another activity. Allow the child to empower herself by making good choices.*

Katie zips up the backpack and straightens her shoulders as she walks past a dad who's been watching her behind his Ray Bans since they got there. He's cute—in a single-dad-scoping-out-hot-maternal-types-at-the-playground kind of way. One of his boys directs the smaller one to the plastic climbing wall via a Fisher Price Walkie Talkie. Katie smiles at them, steps into the sandbox and says, “Marjorie, let's go swing!”

Marjorie looks at her, emits a sound that resembles a laugh and sticks her finger in the sand. She lifts it to her face and Katie resists the urge to grab her arm. *When Marjorie is escalating into a tantrum **do not** make physical contact unless it is **absolutely necessary** to her safety. Doing so triggers aggressive behavior.*

Marjorie shoves the fingerful of sand into her nose, opens her mouth and howls. *That's got to hurt! Does a pound of sand eventually make it into the sinuses and come out the eyes?* Mr. Ray Ban Dad folds his hands behind his head and smirks. A trickle of sweat rolls down Katie's back. She thinks about calling the crisis line for support. No, she has to handle this herself if she's ever going to gain Marjorie's trust.

But she's not getting anywhere. She may as well be redirecting the sandbox itself, expecting it to become a swing set because she made it a better offer. For a second, Katie thinks about abandoning the behavior plan, her over-priced education, her principles, her perfectly expressed, Times New Roman, two-inch margin ideals. Now that she's out here sweating her ass off in a playground with a self-injurious child, it all sounds so...pat.

She remembers having the distinct feeling that Joy was laughing at her when she walked in to apply for the job and handed her her application, her resume and her thesis. At the time, she thought Joy was just amused at the fact that she was over-dressed, which *was* embarrassing.

She walked in the non-profit office in an Ann Taylor dress and heels to find that even the Director wore jeans and Crocs.

But now Katie thinks maybe Joy was laughing at her thesis. She can see Joy behind her desk in her cluttered office, coloring book pages scribbled with bold colors pinned up all around her. Joy leafed through the stack of papers Katie handed her and lifted an eyebrow.

Katie said, "That's my thesis." Joy raised her eyebrow further.

Katie said, "All children want to communicate in order to live in harmony. It is up to the adults to decipher their behavior and enable the children to do so."

It does sound a little simplistic now. *But it's true, it's got to be true.* But it would be so easy to just offer Marjorie a bag of Skittles. The little cutie would probably hop right up and lope to the picnic table, empty the bag, meticulously arrange the candy in lines according to color, eat only the red ones, and sing "huumee!" the whole time. *NO! The Skittles are a reward for following directions all day long. Don't use them as a bribe. Reward, bribe. Semantics. No, there's a big difference, a huge difference, between a reward and a bribe.* That was an essay question on an exam she aced.

Marjorie's left hand joins the action. She draws two lines with her index fingers and goes for both openings in her nose. *All behavior is communication. What's she communicating? Stick with the plan. Redirect.* Katie puts two fingers from her right hand on top of two fingers from her left hand and rocks them back and forth. She signs, "swing," and repeats cheerfully, "Marjorie, let's swing!" Marjorie looks Katie in the eye and drags her fingers through the sand. Wisps of blonde curls that have escaped the pony tail stick to her neck and face. Katie winces as Marjorie pushes the tip of her index fingers into her nostrils again. Both fingers disappear up to

the knuckle. The wail she releases is the right pitch and volume to give everyone in a ten mile radius a headache. Tears, sand, sweat, snot, drool streak her pretty little face.

Katie feels male gaze from the bench behind her. Baby Perfect's mother flips open a pearl pink razor phone and pushes a finger into her free ear. Katie wonders if the bitch is calling D.S.S. She wants to scream. She's too hot, her pulse is too quick, her stomach hurts, she feels a migraine coming on. She might be getting a bug. She takes a deep breath and grounds herself in the behavior plan. *Stay calm and move to step three.*

Katie doesn't believe in step three. "Consequences," in her opinion, is just a PC word for "threats," and "Removing a reward," is just a fancy phrase for "punishment." But she's a rule follower, and God knows she doesn't intend to look like Marjorie's mom. Marjorie bends her face down to the sand and loads her nose up again. Katie takes another deep breath. Come flu or migraine, she can't let this helpless girl rip up her sinuses. Katie's in charge, which translates, *Katie's responsible*. Oh, but she doesn't want to make a threat. And what if she can't follow through? Seriously, how do these behavior-plan makers expect her to get the kid out of the sandbox and into the car as a consequence of not following directions? It requires direction-following to get to the car! *The kid is not responding to anything! Stick with the plan and hope like hell it works. It's your only option.*

In a very calm, matter-of-fact tone, Katie says, "Marjorie, if you don't stop, we're leaving right now and you don't get your Skittles tonight." *Did she hear the quiver in my voice? Can dad-on-the-bench see my cellulite? I wish they'd all quit staring.*

In response to Katie's execution of step three, Marjorie lifts her freckled nose and screams at an impossibly higher pitch. Teeth too big for her face frame the cavern from which the shriek emerges. They look like white tiles cut with pinking sheers. Mom snaps her phone

shut, lifts Gerber from the swing, slings her Paddington Bear diaper bag over her shoulder and prances toward the sandbox. Katie's head pounds. *I know that bitch isn't coming over here!* Oh, but she is, straight toward them. The woman holds her baby against her chest, covering its exposed ear with one hand, extending a business card with the other. Katie is bent down in the sandbox and can't hear what the woman is saying over Marjorie's screams. The woman shakes the card at her.

Katie straightens. "Yes?"

The woman yells, "My church has a parenting class for young parents with problem children. It meets on Tuesdays. You're welcome, even if you're not a member."

Katie stares at her. *Unbelievable. Unfucking believable.*

She grabs the card and shakes her head. Marjorie is now doing the one-two on herself—one finger in the nose, one hand punching herself in the head. Katie bends back down to Marjorie, resisting the urge to grab the arm that pounds into her little blonde head. The woman walks off, apparently offended at the lack of gratitude. Marjorie keeps screaming and Katie's at a loss.

She yells at the woman's retreating backside, "Hey lady!"

The woman turns around hopefully. Everyone wants to help those less fortunate.

"Take care of the camel in your own eye before you worry about the log in mine!"

The woman stands still, staring at Katie.

"That's Jesus' way of saying 'mind your own fucking business!'"

The woman shakes her head and stomps to her car. Katie laughs. She's never said "fucking" to a stranger. *You're losing it Katie. What kind of white trash yells 'fucking' in a*

playground? A migraine is definitely on its way. It looks bad calling in on your second day, but a migraine's a migraine.

But you're here now. Get your head back in the game. Katie waves her hands to scare off the gnats that swarm around her sweaty body. *Now what? Autistic kids respond to visuals.* Katie runs back to the picnic table and digs a pen and paper out of the backpack. She draws a round face, a finger in a nose and a big "X" over the whole thing. She puts it down by Marjorie who is pulling another blob of sand from the sandbox. Ray Ban's two boys stare from the top of the climbing wall with their Walkie Talkies silent in their fists. Katie doesn't smile at them.

Summer sun reflects off the loose leaf paper. Marjorie looks at it. She stops screaming for a delicious moment. She bends down and looks at it again. Katie holds her breath. Marjorie leans back and starts rocking, slow and steady, bending at the waist, eyes closed. Katie lets out a long slow breath. Marjorie stops rocking and bends over the piece of paper. She touches it and smiles. She leans back and locks eyes with Katie. She clenches her jaw and digs a line through the sand. With her eyes still fixed on Katie's, she curls her lips into the hint of a smile before she shoves sand up her nose and screams.

Katie bends down to jerk the paper out of the sandbox and her tank top strap slides off her shoulder. *What a hot freaking day! Couldn't we be doing all of this in the shade?* Just as she lifts the paper, she feels small fingernails on her arm— small fingers grabbing the strap, jerking it down, exposing Katie's heat-blotched white breast to the playground. *Nice. Thanks Marjorie. Just what I needed. My titty flapping around the playground.*

Mr. Ray Ban's smirk burns through her skin. Her face glistens crimson. Katie grabs for the strap, but instead of cotton, she feels Marjorie's little hand under hers. She jerks away, too late. She's made physical contact. The next thing she knows is sharp physical pain, quite unlike

her migraines, or any pain she's ever felt. It feels exactly like pinkie sheared teeth deeply embedded in the flesh above her nipple. Marjorie is clamped to her breast.

"Goddamn it!" Katie screams. She pushes Marjorie's head back and feels teeth rip her flesh. With one hand, she holds Marjorie's forehead at arm's length. Marjorie pushes against it like a bull, trying to get close enough to bite again. Pictures from the Physical Intervention Training manual flash through Katie's mind and she knows she's doing it all wrong. She should have pushed into the bite, not away from it. *But it happened so fast!* That bite was nothing like the slow motion scenarios she practiced in the training class.

She lets go, backs away, pulls up her shirt, hopes she didn't hurt Marjorie's neck. *Way to scream Goddamn in a playground! Fucking, naked boobies, Goddamn.* Very professional, Katie, very professional. *Now those little boys are going to need social workers. Thank God she's nonverbal.* "I'm sorry, Marjorie," she says. "I didn't mean to say that."

But her breast still feels like it's on fire and Marjorie's snorting sand again. Katie steps away from the little cannibal and kicks the sandbox wall. Her foot throbs; her rage flares, replaces shame. She kicks the wall again. *Inability to communicate leads to frustration, leads to rage, leads to aggression toward one's self or others, leads to further isolation, inability to communicate, frustration, rage, aggression. On and on.*

Rocking silently, rhythmically, Marjorie breathes loudly through her open mouth. At the low point of every rock, she slows to study the visual cue. A drop of sweat slides from the back of Katie's head where her once tidy French braid has fallen apart. It rolls around to the wound. She whimpers at the sting, pulls back her shirt and looks at the already purple oval. She slaps too hard at a gnat on her arm and thinks about hydrogen peroxide and the sandbox in Marjorie's nose. She thinks about an ice cold bottle of water. Better yet, a margarita and a swimming pool.

She thinks about how far away the parking lot is. She tries to imagine extracting the sand. She counts two hours and fifty-seven minutes until it's time to drop Marjorie off at home. She sits down on a corner of the sandbox wall, way out of mouth's reach, covers her face with her hands and sobs.

Marjorie cocks her head and looks at Katie sideways, then she picks up the paper and flaps it in front of her. She smiles and sings, "Huuumeeee! Huuumeeee!" She giggles. She looks up at Katie, but this time she looks her dead in the eyes and laughs a laugh Katie hasn't yet heard from her. It sounds so *normal*. Katie corrects her thought, *Typical, not normal*. *She's laughing like a typical nine-year-old girl*. Marjorie tosses her head back and pulls her finger through the sand. Her cry holds echoes of a laugh when she shoves another pile of sand into her nostril. *She's trying to break me down! I just want to understand her weird little world, to communicate, to make her life easier! Why won't she let me help her? I could just slap the little bitch!*

Sand slides up the hem of Katie's shorts and bites into her sweaty thighs. She locks her jaw and bends down low enough to make eye contact across the sandbox. She says, "Humme, Humme, Marjorie!" Her tone is nasty, frightening. Marjorie freezes. She stares at Katie for a long moment. Then she screams.

Katie screams back. Marjorie slams her fist into her own head. Katie screams again and slams her fist into *her* own head. The reverb surprises her, the amount of pain inflicted with so little effort. A *wah-wah* sound bounces around the insides of her skull. Who knew a head injury sounded like something? The echo and the sharp pain in her knuckles distracts from the duller pain in her head that somehow feels warm, almost comforting. She thinks of a bath, rocks back and forth, crying loudly. Her tank top strap falls off her shoulder. Ray Ban and his boys stare.

Katie grabs a handful of sand, smashes it against her face and rubs it in. Tears erode the sand on her cheeks, drawing gorges of flesh. She holds her palms open and stares at the patterns of sand stuck there. *Damn it! It was a speck and a log in the eye, the camel was going through the eye of a needle!* Katie moans and drops her whole face into her strange sandy hands. *Come on, bite me again, Marjorie! Want my tits now, dick-head? Tell me again about that parenting class, Log-Jam!* Katie slides into the sandbox, rests her elbow on the edge, and laughs hysterically.

But Log-Jam's long gone and Ray's standing, calling his boys, walking toward the parking lot. Marjorie sits up, tosses her head back and squints, probably watching the sunlight make patterns through her eyelashes. She sings her sweet wordless songs and rocks with the rhythm of the heaving leaves above her. She lifts a handful of sand and lets it trickle through the fingers of her other hand. She giggles at a bird's twitter and asks, "Huume?"

Sierra Madre Playground

I snuck out of the house while Trevor was the bull's eye. He left the toilet seat up again. He's always so jumpy and he does things without thinking them through and now he's in Mom and Dad's room having a little talk with Dad and I can hear the belt. Mom's getting all worked up in the kitchen because Big Fat Baby Brian threw his spaghetti all over the place, so I'm getting while the getting's good. I'm sure I did something wrong that will come to light if I stay in here. Either that or I'll start getting jumpy and not think things through. I'll cheer Trevor up later. And I'll figure out a way to help him remember the dumb toilet seat. *Pee* sounds like *seat*. If he can just start thinking "I've got to *seat*" instead of "I've got to *pee*," maybe he can keep it in his head.

I run out of the cold dark house with its concrete floors and the belt-sound. The sun's so bright I can hardly see and the ground's still soggy from last night's rain. It stays soggy half the year and dry the other half. It was like that in Oaxaca City too, but it seems different out here in the village. The sky seems brighter blue and the rains seem harder. Or maybe since I'm nine now, I just pay more attention.

I cross the field to the creek in my favorite shirt with hand-embroidered flowers across the neck. I wish my jean skirt was calico and that it went to my ankles instead of just to my knobby knees, but I'm still like Laura Ingles Wilder. I want somebody to call me *Half-Pint*, but Dad just calls me *Pud*, short for *Pudding*, and I hate it. My rainbow flip-flops squish dirty water up from under the grass when I run and my toes slip over the edge, but I don't care if the toe-thingy hurts. You get tough feet by making them tough.

I walk on gravel and hard things all the time so I'll be able to walk barefooted all over this sierra like the little *Inditas* do. I also want to be able to walk soundlessly in the woods like

the American Indians in the *Skunky Wundy Tales* Dad reads us every night before devotions. My great great great grandmother on his side was an Indian and I think maybe that's why I love being in the wilderness. Sometimes me and Dad take walks in the woods and we go way past where I'm allowed to go by myself. He shows me things like what the difference between coyote and jackrabbit scat is and we practice walking heel to toe, just the two of us. He's really good at it, but I still snap twigs and crunch leaves sometimes.

John Andrew's kneeling on the cement slab by the hut where the well and generator are in his red and white checkered cowboy shirt. His pants are falling off his bottom like always and he's lost in his own little world, aiming his bb gun at a lizard or something. He sits there aiming for hours before he shoots. He's such a slow-poke I could wring his neck, and I can tell Dad thinks so too, but Mom was watching him out the window the other day, laughing, which made me pay attention because she hardly ever laughs. She said, "He's just like PaPa. I've never seen a kid so patient. Catching dragonflies with his bare hands!"

I run across the field and John Andrew doesn't notice and that's just fine with me. I look up at the Spanish Moss swinging in the giant Cypress tree. I run my hands across the bark and tell it hello before I go down the slope. Halfway down, I stop to check my garden that grows in the half-circle of the Cypress' root. I grow the most beautiful moss, bright green with little sprouts that come up lighter green. And teeny white flowers that you can't see if you don't pay attention. I named it *My Secret Garden* after I read *The Secret Garden*. But mine is so secret you can look right at it and not know it's anything but a chunk of moss. It was already growing here in the cool arm of the tree when we moved here and I know she's its real mother, but I bring up handfuls of water from the creek to make sure it stays pretty and happy.

I press my finger into the spongy moss and muddy water crawls up over my fingernail. It doesn't need creek water today. I look around to make sure sneaky John Andrew isn't spying on me, and then I reach around under the root and pull My Fishing Stick from a big hole. Careful not to get my skirt muddy, I slide on my heels down the steep part of the bank. My palms are covered in dark clumps of dirt by the time I get to the flat part where I kick off my flip-flops.

I hobble gracefully across the sharp stones thinking of how tough my feet are getting. At the edge of the water, I hold my flip-flops by the grimy toe thing, lean over as far as I can and swirl them around in the water, watching the silt rise. Then I stick just my palms in to rinse them and test the water. The creek's so icy it burns. I put my clean flip-flops on a boulder in the sun and balance my way into the water. The rocks on the bottom are slippery, so I have to adjust to the cold the slow way.

My Fishing Stick is mostly to help me balance in the creek and to reach things. It doesn't have a hook or a string, but sometimes I do pretend I'm fishing minnows, which is how it got its name. Dad takes the boys real fishing, but I don't go because I'm a girl and I'm nicer. Besides, fishing's gross.

I move slow so I don't slip or make the creek muddy. I keep looking down at the stones, looking for minnows and salamanders and pokey things in the bottom. Once I sliced my foot pretty good on a ripped tin can and Mom got all upset about us gallivanting around. While she was putting peroxide and Neosporin on it she said to my Dad, "See Jack, what if this was serious? What would we do out here in the boonies?"

Dad said I'd had my tetanus shot and it was a good lesson; if we're not responsible enough to play outside without doing something bone-headed, then we can stay in the house. He said the Devil's always trying to stop The Good Work one way or another. Then he laid hands

on my foot and prayed and I prayed with him and thanked the Lord in advance as a sign of my faith that By His Stripes We Are Healed. My foot healed right up, and I thanked the Lord afterwards too and I pray all the time for Him to help me pay more attention so nothing bad happens so me and the boys can keep gallivanting and the Devil doesn't use me to stop The Good Work.

I pull my skirt up to right under my panties, hold it in the hand with My Fishing Stick and pull all my hair to one side of my neck so it doesn't get wet when I bend down in the pool under my Cypress where some tadpoles are growing. Maybe if they're growing feet or something it'll cheer Trevor up. But the pool is really deep and it's just plain not thinking to wade close to it without watching your step. If you're not careful, you'll slip in over your head and it will take your breath away. It's scary and dark and then you're a big freezing mess.

The circle of cold is over my knees now. I'm almost to where the tadpoles are wedged up behind the Cypress' Deep Trunk, which is what I named the trunk below the trunk up on the field. From up there it looks like the tree ends in the grass, but from down here, it seems like it might grow down and down forever.

When I'm close to the tree and the water's almost touching my skirt, I reach down into the cold and feel the tadpole goo and pull some of it up. I love the way the clear jello strings feel in my hand, the way they slide into the cracks between my fingers. I hold them up to the light and I see that they're bigger black dots now; one of them has sprouted a tail. I pull the strings up some more to make sure it's not just one that's older than the rest, and sure enough, the string's just lined up with little black spots with tails and I wonder how much longer till they're tadpoles we can catch. Right as I'm smiling thinking about bringing Trev down here, I hear Dad shout my name and I know I better book it.

I drop the babies, My Fishing Stick and my skirt, and I wade out as quick as I can. It's better to get my skirt wet than be slow about getting back up there. I don't slip even though I'm not looking and I remember to grab my flip-flops, but I don't stop to put them on. I climb up the bank, getting my hands all dirty again and a big dirt spot on my wet skirt, but I get up there, and Dad's shouting, "Get up here!" I must have done something really wrong without realizing it. If I was thoughtless I definitely need to be disciplined.

Dad's standing in the bright sun in his jeans and tennis shoes with no shirt or belt on. He hollers, "Where's John Andrew?" I say, "Over there," and he runs across the field like a madman to get him. I bet you John Andrew was the one that left the toilet seat up and I'm glad Dad wasn't looking for me, but after John Andrew's been dealt with it'll come to light that I'm a big mess. My skirt's all heavy and dripping down my legs and I'm shaky and scared and waiting to see what's going to happen next.

Mom comes out of the house in her stained red apron, shading her eyes and Big Fat Baby Brian's on her hip eating a piece of tangerine and he's got it all over his face and spaghetti too and Trevor's behind her, looking snaggle-toothed and scared. I send him a message that everything's going to be OK by thinking it. I'm pretty sure he gets it.

Dad comes running back across the field, carrying John Andrew and I think how strong and fast he is. He could carry all four of us at once and Mom too, if she wasn't so fat. Mom couldn't carry John Andrew to save her life. Dad tells us all to come up to the bank. We gather around him and wait quietly. He just kneels down and pulls Trev on his knee and says, "Listen."

So we listen. At first there's nothing to hear and then there's a sound from the mountain. He cocks his head and looks at us. It means "listen" again, and I wonder if Jesus is coming back right now and I start praying in my head. The sound gets louder and louder like a train and I'm

getting really scared, thinking about Uncle Johnny and Sibbie who won't get saved even though we pray for them every night. I wonder if it's because I didn't pray earnestly enough and I start praying as fast and hard as I can for their hard hearts to soften up quick.

Dad points up the creek, but all I can see is where it curves at the burnt-out tree trunk we're not supposed to go past. Dad's still kneeling and I lean on him and he puts his arm around me. He's talking right beside my ear, but the sound from the mountain is close now and it's so loud that I can't even hear what he's saying. I want to bury my face in his chest, but I know I need to keep looking and listening and I know I'm safe close to Dad.

All of a sudden the big roar comes around the bend headed right towards us. It's a huge brown wall, straight up and down, so tall that it comes all the way up from the rocks in the bottom of the creek to the top of the bank. The burnt-out tree trunk disappears underneath it and you wouldn't even know it was there. I wonder if everything's about to disappear. I can't believe my eyes and I don't know what's going on and then I realize the brown wall and the noise are water. I think about when God saw how great man's wickedness was on earth and sent a flood, but we don't have an ark and I'm probably one of the wicked ones anyway. I want to cry and I pray for God to forgive me for running out of the house and for sneaking past John Andrew and for being selfish with My Fishing Stick and for keeping My Secret Garden a secret and for every other thoughtless thing I've done and every sin I forgot to ask forgiveness for.

The sound's louder than jet engines in my ear and all of a sudden right at our feet is the creek that used to be way down there and the brown wall rushes past the other curve. If Jesus was here He could walk straight across from one side of the creek to the other without even climbing down our side and back up the side we're not supposed to go up. I stare down at the old tadpole's home and the old My Secret Garden and My Fishing Stick's probably in the States

by now and I don't know what to think about any of it. The muddy water seeps up into the field and I look at my Dad.

He tells us all to back up and we do. He's excited and telling us that this is what he told us about, the flash floods, and we need to learn to listen for them all the time and not just be lost in our own little worlds. He looks at me and John Andrew when he says that. He says we need to be able to hear them before they're loud or we'll drown. Think about how quick that water came and how quick it would take our little bodies and smash them. That's why it's important to always, always stay within the boundaries, to drop everything and come as soon as he calls, and that's why he disciplines us. He looks at Trevor the most when he says that's why Our Heavenly Father gave children earthly fathers. If Dad hadn't taught us to be so obedient *somebody* would have been carried away in that flood and died.

His eyes water up and he takes Brian from Mom and puts his arms around the rest of us kids. He says he's proud of us and he loves us so much. I'm pretty sure I'm not in trouble for my wet muddy skirt.

We lean on him and bow our heads to pray right there in the soggy field with the muddy creek roaring beside us. When we're done praying I've got tears too and Dad hugs me tight for a long time. He says I did a good job getting a move on and obeying instantly without stopping to think about it. When he quits hugging me, he keeps his hands on my shoulders and kneels down so he can look me in the eye. He says, "You're the big sister. You're responsible for the little ones. Always, always pay attention." I nod. I sure will.

The Eyelash Barber

After Minerva moved to Monterrey to work near her daughter and new son-in-law, things started going berserk around our house. It's a total wreck. Our *comida* is usually late, and then dinner's a disaster from trying to cook it and eat it with the lunch mess. The laundry's piling up and Mom's stressed out like crazy. Dad gets upset about it being a mess and lunch not being very good or on time and Mom starts up with her whining like she always does.

It's not like she can just go to the grocery store and pick up something to eat; it's not like she can just throw the clothes in the washer and dryer. There's four good for nothing kids to feed and keep up with and she's got to go to the market and while she's at the market, she misses the water truck and every single dish she has to make for *comida* has a million tiny ingredients that have to be roasted and diced and marinated and peeled and blended and he has no idea what it's like. He says something about his mom and grandma, how they both did it without supermarkets and microwaves, and they did it looking pretty too. And that really sets Mom off.

Not right then, not in front of him, but later it's when just us kids and she's trying to get lunch cooked before he gets home. I spend hours helping her, taking care of the boys, roasting chilies, de-boning chicken, peeling *tomatillos*, blending *adobos*, scrubbing laundry, just basically finding what needs to be done and doing it cheerfully (and I try to look pretty while I'm at it, because I do think I'm more like the women on my dad's side). But it doesn't help. Mom's still a nervous wreck. I can't wait till we find another *muchacha*.

Now the thing about *muchachas* is you just can't get any old girl off the street. She's got to be trustworthy. She lives right there in the house with you— well not exactly in the house, but in a little cubicle right off the patio, within earshot of the kitchen. She's got to have access to your money so she can pay the water guys and the Coca-Cola guys and go to the market. She's

got to have some common sense and be able to cook and see what needs to be done and do it. She's got to be able to blend with your family without being a part of it. She's got to be able to take care of the kids without forgetting her place. And it's very important that she not be gossipy with the other *muchachas* so all the neighbors don't know your business.

People tell horror stories about *muchachas* cleaning them out in the middle of the night or hurting the babies when no one is home. And lots of other things. Really the only way to hire one is by references. You know, so and so's muchacha who's been with them for ten years has a sister, and that's exactly how we're getting Letty. She's Sergio and Christy's muchacha, Sylvia's younger sister, and she really needs a job. Mom and Dad are worried that she's a little young, and you always have to worry about the young ones because they'll up and fall in love and run off on you, but we're hard up so we're giving it a try.

My Dad's driving me and my little brothers, John Andrew, Trevor and Brian, home from school for our first hopefully decent meal in ages because Letty was supposed to start this morning. I wonder what she looks like and if she'll be cool like Minerva.

Minerva was an old *Indita* woman. She was shorter than me, and dark, with a long grey braid hanging in a thick strand down her back. She never moved fast, but she never stopped moving either. She didn't talk much, but when she looked at us, we behaved. She didn't even try to boss me around and most of the time she knew that I was the one that kept the boys in line. She would let me go sit on her cot and she taught me how to do embroidery and helped me do a whole set of placemats for Mom for Christmas.

She helped Trevor make a little shirt with an embroidered peacock covering the whole thing and he did such a good job I couldn't believe it. He was so cute because he loved it so much. He wanted to wear it every day and sleep in it at night and he was always looking down

at the peacock when he wore it. When Mom and Dad were gone and it was just us there with Minerva, we were pretty much always calm.

Not always, because there was that Wednesday night when we started sliding down the stairs on the couch cushions while Minerva was out in her room and Trevor slipped and fell all the way from upstairs, sliced his ear in half on the aquarium and landed in the foyer. Minerva put lemon juice on his sliced ear and I laid hands on him and prayed while he screamed and all of a sudden Mom and Dad walked in, because during praise and worship, the Spirit told Dad that he'd better come home. And it's a good thing he did, because who knows what would have happened if he hadn't been listening and been obedient.

Dad didn't have time to deal with us then because he had to get back to church to preach, but we should all think about the little talk we would have with him tomorrow. Especially me. He expects the boys to do bone-headed things sometimes, but I really ought to know better. So that night we weren't too calm with Minerva, but most of the time we were, and I liked to help her work because she always taught me things, like garlic makes your fingernails stronger and lemon and salt clean up the bottoms of copper pots really good.

So dad and the boys and I drive into our *colonia*, which is called *San Jose Vista Hermosa*, and turn onto our street and Dad honks at the gate, and sure enough, we don't wait long and the big brown metal doors swing open. Yeah! We've finally gotten our *muchacha* again and I don't have to get out and open the gate. It's dark in the carport, so I can't see her good, but she's backed up against the wall and motioning us forward and when to stop. Then she goes back to the street and pulls each side of the metal door shut and the latches squeak when she pushes them back in place. We all hop out, and as soon as I get a good look at her, I hate her guts.

She looks sloppy. And she's not much older than me and I tell you what, if she thinks she's going to be the boss of me, she's wrong wrong wrong. Dad says hi and introduces us all and the boys are all nice and excited which makes me mad. She just kind of giggles and puts her eyes down and I hate the way she stands, with her belly fat all pushed up in the front and her hands on her boobs. She doesn't hardly look at me, just at my Dad and the whole time she kind of swivels around on her hips with her hands on her boobs and all I can think is how am I going to get rid of her. I'd rather the whole house be berserk than have to look at her swivel her gross hips around.

But when I see how Letty sets up her room I laugh because I know I'm not going to have to do a thing to get rid of her. All I have to do is keep my mouth shut and she'll hang her own ugly-faced self. When Minerva lived in that room, there were just a few neat things on the shelf, like a stack of clothes and a Bible and her sewing stuff, but Letty slops that place up good.

She's got Luis Miguel posters on the walls and stacks of soap opera magazines and piles of trashy clothes. She likes to wear white see-through shirts with black bras underneath and really tight jeans that show her gross flat bottom with panty lines and high heels. She's got a radio that she plays *ranchero* music on. And the little bathroom in there's all piled up with ugly makeup that she uses to draw moles on herself and she spends hours laying on the cot with her feet up looking at her stupid magazines. When Minerva took a break from working, she just sewed or read the Bible or something nice and quiet like that. Dad's not going to like Letty's worldliness and Mom's not going to like the way she prances around.

I know Mom and Dad are not happy with her. She's not a good cook. She just cleans around things instead of cleaning underneath and inside things, like the counter looks okay unless you pick up the toaster. Sometimes she rearranges the furniture. It flies all over Mom to

walk in and see the back of the couch right in front of the front door and big nail holes in the walls from where Letty moved the pictures around. So I just wait for her to be fired.

I used to work on the house a lot with Minerva, because I *do* want to grow up to be a woman of noble character and an excellent helpmate for my husband and it was fun to work beside her. It always felt like we were talking when we weren't. But now that we've got this lazy Letty here, Dad says I *have* to do housework because we all were spoiled with Minerva doing everything for us. He says this will be good for us, especially me, because one day I'll be some man of God's wife. Like I don't already know that.

I don't like *having* to do anything, and I want us to find a *muchacha* who doesn't make me want to throw up in my mouth when I look at her, so I tell Dad about Letty playing the *ranchero* music. He frowns and goes to have a talk to her. He explains that it is important that our home be pure and that you never know how the Devil will try to sneak in. He explains the important work that the Lord is doing through our family and how important it is to protect us all from any evil influence, like *ranchero* music.

So she quits playing it when Mom and Dad are around and she gives the boys some candy to not tell on her for playing it when it's just us kids there. I don't care about candy, but I'm pretty sure I can make this work for me. I'm grounded from the phone because stupid Roger Reek told on me for sitting by Carlos Gonzalez in youth group, and I really have to talk to Heidi Tuggy a lot lately because her brother Chris has a crush on me and I might kiss him. So me and Letty strike up a deal. I don't tell, you don't tell. This works for awhile, until the loud mouth boys start saying they're going to tell. Now I have to start sneaking in to Mom and Dad's room to steal three 100 *peso* coins, give them each one, and tell them to go buy as much candy as they can so that I can talk on the phone when they're gone.

I take more and more money from Mom and Dad's dresser and wherever else I can find it, and I get to talk on the phone as much as I want. The boys act crazier all the time because I'm busy making plans and Letty doesn't care if we beat each other up all day long.

Then one day I hear Mom saying that she thinks some money might be walking out of the house and we'd better keep an eye, so I quit taking the money for a few days. I still hate Letty's guts, but this is working pretty good for me and I don't want her to get fired for stealing.

The kiss is going to happen as soon as I can figure out how to get to the empty lot at the end of the *colonia* to meet Heidi and Chris and his best friend Chaz. This is a big problem because even though my brothers get to run around all over the place and ride bikes and shoot marbles and do whatever they want, I can't be out by myself because I'm a girl and I'm a *gringa*. I've got to have an adult with me to go farther than right outside our gate. Letty's my only option and I'm going to need something bigger than not telling about her *ranchero* music to pull that off.

Right when I'm laying awake in my bed, imagining how the kiss will go and if I should try to stick my tongue out like Chaz told me the girls in the States do, I hear the gate squeak. I go look out, and lo and behold there's Letty on the corner, leaning back in some guy's arms, swiveling her belly fat up on him.

The Lord provides. The next day, when she's laying on her cot looking at a dumb magazine, I go in there and close the door. I tell her I'm going to tell and my Dad will fire her. She says that we don't own her and I say, "No we don't, but I know that my Dad is very concerned about me around boys right now and he's not for a second going to let me be influenced by a loose woman like you." She asks me what I want and I tell her the plan. She agrees to walk up to the end of the *colonia* with me and I go get three coins for the boys and send

them to the store and call Heidi. We decide to meet tomorrow at one and I guess I'll be up all night again, practicing how to kiss.

But that night, when Mom and Dad are at a prayer meeting and the boys are all watching a Masterpiece Theatre video, Letty comes in my room and tells me she wants me to do one more thing for her before she will walk me down there. I say, "I'm busy. What do you want?" She says, "I need you to cut my eyelashes."

I ask, "Why do you want to do a stupid thing like that?"

She says, "If you trim your eyelashes, they grow back longer, darker and curlier." I tell her that's the stupidest thing I ever heard. She says that I wouldn't know a thing about being a woman, that I'm just a little girl and I'm so skinny I'm never going to grow boobs. This makes me mad as fire because there's nothing I want in the world more than boobs and I'm scared she's right. But if I kiss Chris, maybe I'll start growing some. All I care about is my plan and I sure don't care if she looks stupider than she already does, so I go find some scissors. Letty goes to the living room and lies down flat on the floor with her hands on her boobs and tells me to go ahead.

I kneel down with Mom's big sewing scissors in my hand and try to cut them, but eyelashes are pretty wiggly. She yells and says I poked her in the forehead. I tell her to shut up and hold her stupid eye still or I can't do it. She takes her hands off her boobs and puts one on her eyebrow and one under her eye to try to hold it still, but every time I get near, she jerks her fat eyelids. It takes a long time and we're both mad as fire when I finally get one of them done.

She looks so stupid I can't even believe it. I start pointing at her and laughing and saying that no guy's ever going to kiss her again and her eyelashes aren't going to grow back and I'm not going to cut the other one. She tells me I'm a stupid little girl and I'm a *cochina*, a pig.

She says my whole family looks good on the outside and we're *gringos* and Christians and we've got a lot of people fooled, but she knows we're all just a bunch of white filthy pigs with no manners and a bunch of liars too. That's when I attack.

I throw the scissors at her. I kick. I scream. I bite. I punch. I slap. I pull out every dirty trick in the book and then she starts shoving me back and telling me to go to my room and I tell her she's not the boss of me and I won't do anything she says. She says she's going to call my parents and they'll beat me like I deserve. I say I don't care because they think she's been stealing anyway, and who's going to believe a lazy *muchacha* like her over me anyway? I'm the one that's a Christian, remember?

She pushes me into my room and calls my parents and when they come home I'm calm and sweet and very upset because I don't know what's wrong with Letty, but she's been listening to a lot of *ranchero* music and seeing boys and I feel so guilty because I didn't tell about it sooner, but I think the Devil's got a hold on her and I'm scared he'll get to me too.

And now we need another *muchacha*.
