

AND YET THE BOTTLE TREE'S SONG IS SADDER THAN MINE

Ashley Atkins

The tabletop is scarred with pairs of initials and a couple of half-assed hearts, carved deep through the lacquer and dark finish into the light-colored wood below. The dim yellow light of the place makes it hard to see as I trace my fingers along “C.M. + P.T.” and “Josh Loves Katie.” I hear the crack of balls and the sharp snap of cue sticks from the pool table in the back. It’s early afternoon, and there isn’t much of a crowd. People are smoking. I’m not used to there being cigarette smoke indoors, and it irritates my throat, but I like the way it smells. I like the way it hangs in the air, so that when he approaches it is as if he emerges from a blue haze, squinting like Bruce Willis on a big-budget movie set.

He slides into the seat opposite me, but he keeps his left foot firmly planted in the narrow passageway between our booth and the next table, like he intends to trip the waitress when she comes to take our order. He rests his forearms on the table, covering a jagged heart with “Alex” scratched in the middle of it. I wonder if Alex is a boy or a girl. I wonder if anyone will ever carve my name into a table. He hunches his shoulders a bit and leans in towards me in a posture of earnestness, but all I can do is look over at his left foot. He’s wearing ridiculous leather shoes. Wingtips, I think they’re called. And the way his leg is stretched out, cuffed pantsleg pulled up, I can see a thin greenish, grayish sock that might be silk and reveals the boniness of his surprisingly thin ankle. I wonder what kind of ankles Bruce Willis has. He looks like he may just make a break for it.

The waitress nervously steps around his stupid wingtip. “How y’all doin’ today?” she says with forced brightness and a couple of extra syllables. “What can I get for you?”

“Yuengling,” he says, almost defensively. “Do you want a Diet Coke or something,” he asks me.

And that does it. Jesus. Really. A Diet Coke? What’s up with that? Is it because he thinks I’m fat? Or stupid? I am not one of those tittering diet soda guzzling empty-headed bimbos, you know. I’ve been to hell and back. I should probably have been dead a couple of times over, but I lived to tell the story. And all he can think to do is buy me a zero calorie soda. “I’ll have a Heineken,” I tell her loudly, much to my surprise, and she heads back toward the bar. I look at him and curl my lip in distaste. He tenses a bit and finally pulls his leg in under the table. I sigh and look away. Good. Maybe he’ll pay attention to me now.

He drums his fingers on the table, tapping out an erratic rhythm across “DJ ‘n’ Max.” He stops abruptly and leans in toward me further. His eyes are huge. “You can’t order a beer,” he hisses. “You’re only fifteen.” I shrug and still don’t look at him. “Well?” he says.

“I’m sixteen now, Dad. Guess you missed my birthday. And what? You asked me here.”

“I saw you on TV. You were even on CNN.com. Cindy thought – I thought – I thought I should see you for myself. Find out what really happened.”

I decide to talk. “Wow, Dad. Cindy’s concern – I mean, your concern. Your concern for me is touching, especially since you clearly didn’t give a shit about me when you abandoned me and moved to – God, I don’t even know where you live now.”

The waitress sets the beers down in the middle of the table, on top of the curious word, Puddin’. “My name’s Suzanne,” she says. “Y’all need anything, you just holler,” but she is already moving quickly away, back through the smoke that just hangs there like a curtain. *You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet* is playing over the iffy speakers. I can only assume that the glass closest to me is the Heineken. I pick it up and take a tentative sip and it tastes like beer. If my dad were anyone else I would ask to trade tastes so I could learn about these things. I drink some more. I figure he will tell me if I have his Yuengling by mistake. It’s not even a glass. It’s one of those tall crappy plastic cups with the fine pebbly surface like they serve tea in at Pizza Hut, full of those little pellets of ice. Sometimes you get a red one, but these are just cloudy and colorless.

“You can’t drink beer. I told you that. Christ, Lulu. What do you think you’re doing?”

I take a long sip and make a production of wiping foam from my upper lip, even though there’s only the tiniest trace of foam clinging to the side of the cup. “I’m touched that you are so interested in me now. It’s really quite a development.” He’s just sitting there looking at me like a dumbass. I’m not going to make this easy for him. At this point, I really don’t care what he thinks.

“I, uh, think maybe you shouldn’t wear so much eye makeup. I mean, it’s really dark and it doesn’t look natural.”

“Oh. My. God. Did you really come all the way from – where? You’re honestly not going to tell me where you live now?”

“California.”

“California? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” He winces like I swung a bat at his head. “You ditched me and went three thousand miles away without leaving a forwarding address? So you think it’s OK to leave me to fend for myself in the world alone and then just show up one day to tell me you don’t like my eyeliner and to bitch at me for drinking?”

“I told you. I want to hear your story.”

“Well, I think the least you can do is buy me a beer, then.” He sighs and I know I’ve won. I think about where to start, what to say. Everything has changed now, and if I’d had his undivided attention a year ago I probably would have blathered about how my friend Ariel drank half a fifth of Bacardi before the winter formal and had to have her stomach pumped and who I liked on *America’s Next Top Model* and the plot of *Desperate Housewives* and how much I hated my stupid horrible Biology teacher and how much I loved Hawaiian pizza with extra cheese. But I feel strangely detached and unprepared. All the tearful threats and harsh accusations and desperate pleas I had rehearsed during the past four months just die in my throat.

I decide to do what he says. I swallow a mouthful of Heineken, and it makes me burp. I drink some more, and it makes me feel warm. I will tell him my story.

###

On Christmas Eve, Mom and Joe had some friends over to visit. They made eggnog. Well, Joe actually started making it a few days before because he said it had to sit in the refrigerator a while before drinking. I'd only had eggnog from a carton in the grocery store, and that was pretty good, but he cooked the egg yolks into a sort of custard and then whipped the egg whites until they were kind of stiff and folded them in and I never knew there was so much to it. He put rum in it and gave me a small cupful and grated some nutmeg on top.

You know, I've never seen Joe cook anything except for these cheese enchiladas that he makes about once a month or so that really aren't anything like the ones you get at Tijuana Fats'. The ones there are rolls of tortillas and filling and sauce and cheese that all kind of blend together in your mouth, but his are just these stacks of flat corn tortillas with enchilada sauce and thick shreds of cheddar cheese and chopped onion between the layers. All the parts feel separated, and the onion pieces are so big that they are still raw after he bakes it. I'm not trying to be negative. I like his cheese enchiladas. They taste pretty good. I just think maybe he should call them something else.

So you can imagine how surprised I was that he made homemade eggnog. Like I said, it's not a simple process. But Joe was wearing a red and white striped apron and whistling "Little Drummer Boy" and even breaking out on the rumm-pa-pum-pumms and shaking his butt a little while he beat the whites. It was funny and he made me laugh. I was still surprised that he gave me the rum – he'd never offered me so much as a sip of wine before – but he said the flavor wouldn't be right without it. And then he started getting out the ingredients to make hot chocolate. Homemade hot chocolate! With milk

and cocoa powder and sugar and vanilla extract. I asked him if he was going to put any of those little marshmallows in it and he said, no, but their friends were bringing peppermint Schnapps to add to it, and he was going to make homemade whipped cream to go on top. I teased him about making all those fancy, festive drinks, and he showed me a bottle of bubbly in the fridge and joked about how he and Mom were going all out on the holiday beverages. Mom had even gone to Lenoir the day before to have her hair braided. She didn't like to get it done anywhere else, but it was an hour away so she usually just wore her hair natural.

After a while Steve and Erica – their friends – showed up. They were wearing these hideous Christmas sweaters and at first I didn't realize that it was a joke. I mean, old people, you know. Steve's sweater was royal blue with a Santa on it, and there was a big white pompom at the tip of his hat. Santa's suit was this red fleecy material and his boots were made of black sequins. Erica's sweater was the best: bright lime green with Rudolph's face on the front. His antlers were three-dimensional and made of brown felt. They flopped against her boobs when she walked. Rudolph's nose was an actual flashing red light, sewn onto the sweater. Once I realized it was a joke, it was great. But at first I was pretty horrified. And I was really glad I would not have to be seen in public with those people.

Evidently, they had big plans for the evening. Steve was waving a copy of A Christmas Story on DVD. Erica was carrying the Schnapps. Mom came running in and put on Bruce Springsteen's "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town." She asked Joe to start a fire. Joe said for her to do it – he had to whip the cream. She said, "What's wrong with

this picture?" Everyone started laughing and then they were scraping chairs and barstools across the floor so they could all gather in the spot where the kitchen and living room come together. Mom noticed the sweaters. Steve started to bounce a little to make Santa's hat flop around, and then Erica began to shimmy so everyone could admire the way Rudolph's antlers looked so, so real! Boots were shining! Nose was flashing! I decided it was time for me to go. I ran to get my coat – you know we had snow on Christmas Eve, all day long, and the wind was blowing pretty hard – and I called Hannah on my way up the stairs to see if she wanted to do something. We thought the Chinese buffet would probably be open, since Chinese people don't celebrate Christmas, so we decided to go get our lo mein on.

Joe was serving up cups of eggnog. He was using these pretty goblets made of red glass that I didn't remember seeing before. Everyone looked so happy and they were all drinking and talking at once about how it was the best eggnog they'd ever had and why had no one told them and Joe was hiding major secret culinary gifts and no one even once mentioned his enchiladas.

I've heard lots of gross things about Chinese buffets and in particular about High Country Dragon, like the time Edwin Moss – who washed dishes there at night last year when he was in ninth grade – saw the Chinese dude with the braided goatee and pierced eyebrow cut into a raw chicken that was sitting on the floor and bugs came pouring out of it. I was eating sesame chicken and Edwin said, "You just know ol' Chang Chow chopped that sucker up and rolled it in flour, deep fried it, tossed it in sauce, and mmm! oh, honey you know dat's so good with dem little roach legs and all." I kicked him in the

shin with my Ugg boot, so I know it didn't hurt too bad, and I didn't stop eating High Country Dragon, but it's never been the same for me because every now and then I imagine limp pale chicken carcasses full of skittering golden cockroaches.

So Hannah and I ate the Chinese buffet. Fried wontons with duck sauce. Steamed dumplings with hoisin sauce. General Tso's chicken and pork fried rice and beef and broccoli. Shrimp lo mein with soy sauce. Spring rolls with more duck sauce. And we drank so much Coke. They have the best Coke there. I don't know what it is. It's just one of those machines like they have at Hardee's or anywhere, but it makes the best Coke ever. Paul and Abby and Denzel and Mary and Josie and Cort and Kendra were all there too. Of course we had dessert. It's never as yummy as I think it will be, but it comes with the cost of dinner so how could we not eat it? Soft serve ice cream product – I always get the chocolate and put M&Ms on top. Hannah got vanilla and put those syrupy strawberries on top with some little mini chocolate chips. She was surprised that her parents didn't make her stay home on Christmas Eve. She's a junior – she turned seventeen on New Year's Day – but her little brother is only six – yeah, that was a surprise – so her parents still do the whole Santa Claus thing and that usually means she has to be there and be a part of everything. I gave her hell because I knew she would have to get up at the break of dawn and be all, like, “Santa came! What did Santa bring?” And I was just going to sleep in as late as I wanted, or until Mom woke me up to say she was making waffles, and I hoped there would be some homemade hot chocolate. I knew there would be bacon. And fried cinnamon apples, because they're my favorite.

When I got home the house was so quiet. After all the laughing and eggnog and Bruce Springsteen and Christmas sweaters, it was kind of eerie watching Hannah's headlights get farther and farther away. Everything was just snowy and silent. I opened the front door, and the living room was so smoky I couldn't see our tree. And the smell. It was not wood smoke. I remember reading the word "acrid" in a book once and not really understanding what it meant, but when I breathed in the air of our house the only word that came to my mind was acrid. I didn't know what that smell was. It wasn't like fire or gas or anything familiar. It was plasticky and chemically and I think its strangeness scared me even more than if I had walked into a flame-engulfed foyer. I tried to walk further inside, but it was just too much. I panicked and yelled for Mom and for Joe. I listened for them to yell back, but I couldn't hear a thing. It was so quiet.

I left the front door open and stood out on the porch. I used my phone to call them, and I could hear the phone ringing in the kitchen. I knew it was also ringing in their room. They never turned the ringer off. Mom was kind of obsessed that way, but you probably know that. I remember one time a couple of years ago when the phone rang at three in the morning, and she jumped out of bed because she was sure someone was dead or in the emergency room and she ran into the corner of the dresser and broke two toes trying to get to the phone and it was just a wrong number, someone speaking Spanish and asking for Julio. We teased her about it, but it really wasn't funny. She limped around so much that she threw her back out and then had to be on pain meds and stay in bed for three weeks. We didn't eat very well during those three weeks.

I finally came to my senses and called 911. And the operator was all confused because I was calling from a cell phone and our address didn't show up in their system and I was freezing and sort of half waiting for someone to come yell at me for leaving the front door wide open and the sky had cleared up so there were all these stars and everything seemed to be happening so slowly. I wished Hannah would pull back up in the driveway and we could start all over again because I was just so confused but I knew it wasn't good. Finally a fire truck arrived with its lights flashing and reflecting off the snow and it made me think of Erica's sweater with Rudolph's blinking red nose and I looked around to the side of the house to make sure their car was gone. It was, but Joe's pickup and mom's Honda were still there. For a moment I felt all this lightness and relief, like of course! They went out somewhere in Steve and Erica's car and lost track of time is all. Except that it was eleven o'clock at night and they usually go to bed by nine-thirty, even on the weekends, and they never really go out at all.

I'm still not exactly sure about what happened. You know it was the hot water heater. They had cleaned up the kitchen and turned off the TV and stereo, left a light on for me and went to bed. The dry ingredients for waffles were sitting out on the counter, and the coffee was ground and set to brew in the morning. The hot water heater wasn't even that old. I think they said a valve leaked, and then it all shorted out and filled the house with smoke and fumes, and they just died in their sleep. And you can blame them if you want but everyone says that it was pretty unavoidable. If it had happened earlier they could have gotten out. If it had happened later I'd probably be dead too. If you blame anyone, blame me. If I'd stayed home on Christmas Eve, I'd have still been awake

and I would have smelled it and been able to wake them up. Blame me for eating crappy Chinese food and wanting to be with my friends instead of at home with my parents.

I mean my mom and my stepdad. No offense.

You know how sometimes something can be happening to you, but it is so far removed from what you thought would happen that it doesn't seem real. I was supposed to be sitting up in bed and I.M.-ing with my friends, bragging on everything we just knew we were going to get for Christmas. Like, oh, you're getting a new iPhone? well I'm getting a Juicy watch. oh yeah, I'm getting Black Eyed Peas tickets. so? I'm getting a new laptop. that's nothing, I'm getting a Bug. well, I'm getting a Cube. haha, well I'm getting John Mayer, bee-yatch!

But instead there were all these men. Police officers in blue uniforms. Firefighters in brown and yellow. EMS in white. There was one lady cop who came over and wrapped a blue blanket around my shoulders. It was just like the blankets they have on airplanes, and it made me think about those lumpy paper-covered pillows and wish I had one to put my head on. I think her name was Loretta. She sat with me until Aunt Tamara got there.

I don't know why I was so surprised to see Aunt Tamara. She was pregnant, you know. Really huge. Looking at her then made me decide never to get knocked up, but I later figured that her swollen puffy face was more the result of crying about Mom. I guess she had the baby by now. That's weird. I'd been so excited about my new cousin coming, but I completely forgot about her. I guess being kidnapped by a deranged killer

will do that to a girl, huh. Do you know? Have you talked to Aunt Tamara or Uncle Marcus? Was she born? Is she OK? Did they name her Delilah like I suggested?

Obviously someone called you. It's kind of funny, though, isn't it, that I didn't think of it first. I just spent Christmas Day on the couch at Tamara and Marcus's, covered in that pea green and burnt orange afghan that Grandma Louise made forever ago. It's so ugly but really soft and the only thing I wanted right then. I never got my presents. There were presents for me under the tree. And the gifts I got for Mom and Joe. The earrings I made for her at the bead store and the Jack Johnson CD I bought for him. No one bothered me and I ate a lot of Starbucks ice cream and watched SpongeBob and Jersey Shore. I was so surprised when you showed up. How long had it been since I'd seen you? At least a year. I guess when you married Cindy you decided you were pretty much done with me.

Do you ever think about how weird it is that your new wife has the same name as your mother? The same name as me, for that matter. I mean I know Mimi always went by Lucy, but still. Cindy. Is she a Cynthia or a Lucinda?

So you came and got me and took me to Boston and I guess you wondered what the hell you were supposed to do with me then.

###

The waitress sets down a basket of peanuts in their shells. When I was a kid and my mom and dad were still married, we went to a steakhouse place that gave you peanuts like that. You were supposed to just throw the shells on the floor, and I thought it was the

coolest thing. Ever. My dad orders another Yuengling. I break a shell open, toss the nuts in my mouth and drop the casing on the floor. He jerks up straight in his seat.

“I don't think you're supposed to do that here.”

“Do what?”

“Throw the shells on the floor.”

I look around. He's right. The floor looks pretty clean. I shrug. “So leave a good tip,” I say. He sighs and checks his watch. “Am I boring you?” I ask. “Because we can leave. Please don't stay on my account.”

“I just want to hear the parts I don't already know,” he tells me.

“Well, it's good that you ordered another beer,” I say. “We're going to be here a while, because you don't know shit.”

###

We got to Logan Airport, and Cindy was jumping up and down when she saw us coming, waving and grinning and acting like she couldn't wait sixty more seconds and might have to just run past security. I was glad she was happy to see me, but it was still a strange reception after the somberness of the funerals. Of course as soon as we got to her I understood that the excitement wasn't for me, it was for you. She really didn't pay much attention to me at all, except to pat my hand all distractedly and say, “So sorry for your loss, hon.”

So OK. That was December 29. My head was spinning. I hadn't even been home since Christmas Eve. Everyone seemed to agree that it was better for me not to go back there. Someone collected a few of my things: blue jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, socks, bras,

underwear, mascara, cell phone charger. I overheard snatches of conversation to the effect that the rest of my stuff would be shipped in the next couple of weeks. Everything was still so fresh that I wasn't feeling the loss of Mom and Joe so much as I was feeling the thrill of being with my dad.

It was like before you moved to Boston and married Cindy, when I would spend half of my Christmas vacation with you in Charlotte. Except this time we went straight from the airport to the top of some hotel overlooking the water to "celebrate" with a drink. And Cindy ordered a Shirley Temple for me and a green melon-flavored drink for herself. She made me taste it. It was so sweet. You got a vodka martini and drank it in what seemed like one swallow, then sat chewing on the olives. And she couldn't stop touching my hair and my arm and telling me how beautiful I am and how thrilled she was to have me there and we were going to walk the Freedom Trail and go to Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market and attend the theater and, oh, she just couldn't wait to spend time with me. We were going to shop and buy me all new clothes for the city and fabulous shoes and real jewelry and a few purses because a girl can never have too many purses and maybe even a fur coat but a short one and only if we could find it at Filene's Basement prices but we were going to do our best.

And then by New Year's Eve she seemed to be bored with me and pouted when you said y'all should spend the evening with me instead of going to the Beacon Hill party you had RSVP'd for back before Christmas. She was sure I'd be super happy at your place eating takeout paad thai and watching a movie on demand and you said it sounded like a great plan. For all three of us. And she sniffed and her voice broke as she said she

was getting a cold and asked you to make her an english muffin and a cup of chai, which she took upstairs, and you would not believe the look she gave me while you were boiling her water, like she would happily drown me in that pond with the swan boats, and you and I ate tom ka gai and beef larb and basil spring rolls and pork nam sod and red curry chicken until I thought I would burst. We watched *Blazing Saddles* and then you piled the dishes and containers in the sink, grabbed a bottle of Champagne and a couple of glasses, kissed me goodnight and hurried up to your room. I had to watch Ryan Seacrest and Justin Bieber and Fergie all by myself. I decided not to wait for the ball to drop.

The next morning, New Year's Day, Cindy came and sat on the edge of my bed. It didn't take long for me to come fully awake with her watching me like that. I sat up straight as she handed me a bright yellow mug of coffee. It had sugar in it and, I think, skim milk. It didn't have that creamy taste I like for my coffee. I wasn't sure what was going on, so I took it and said thanks, took a sip and waited for her to speak. She gritted her teeth in a sort of a smile and spoke in a clipped way but ever so sweetly.

"When I heard your mother was dead," she said, "of course I couldn't roll out the red carpet welcome mat for you fast enough. Poor orphaned girl. 'Chris,' I said, 'hurry down there to North Carolina and bring that child here.' I made up this room for you with clean sheets and fresh flowers and a bar of my honey almond soap and the latest *Cosmo Girl* and *Seventeen* magazines. I even bought you lip gloss at Sephora. And I started researching schools right away because of course you have to finish your education and you are our responsibility now but coming from hillbilly country who knows how far

behind you will be. My friends are all sure you'll have to repeat the tenth grade or at least take some remedial classes.

“Then you get here and all of a sudden it's all about you. Lulu this. Lulu that. What will Lulu eat? What will Lulu watch? Where will Lulu be? I know it's only been a few days, but I can already see the direction this is going. Chris is downstairs right now cleaning up your dinner dishes that you were too lazy to wash and he's asked me to find out what you want so I can make a special trip to the market even though I just went on Monday but apparently you don't like Fage and feta and Kashi and kombucha and beets and baby lettuces. So I'm supposed to buy what now? Froot Loops and corn dogs and Bagel Bites? I don't think so.

“If you want to be a spoiled selfish brat, Lucinda Louise Maxwell, then you'll have to do it on someone else's time. I'm not going to worry myself wrinkled and gray or work myself raw and chapped on your account. I have had quite enough, and you can stay until school starts, but only if you earn your keep.”

I was trapped, under the covers, with a full cup of coffee in my hands. Lukewarm coffee by that time. I did not know what to say. She was just sitting there. Orphan? Hillbilly? Froot Loops? Cindy just looked hard at my face. She had already put on mascara and lipstick. I could tell that she had her hair done somewhere expensive, because the color was rich with highlights and lowlights and it was so smooth without any of those sticky-up ends that most girls and women seem to have. I looked down into the cup and my elbows were starting to ache from holding it and my vision was blurring

because I didn't know where to focus my eyes. And then finally she stood up and walked out and didn't pull my door shut behind her.

I put my coffee on the bedside table, closed and locked the door, turned on Ke\$ha and got back in bed, pulling the covers over my head. I wanted to go back to the old year.

I waited until I thought she was gone before I came down the stairs. No such luck. She was waiting for me! I still can't believe you let her do it. What kind of father does that to his kid? I'm pretty sure you know what she told me, but maybe not since you didn't have the balls to be there when it happened. She'd already said I could stay "until school started." What the hell did that mean? My old school was starting back up on Monday, but I knew I couldn't be going back there. Cindy was staring me down with her arms crossed over her chest and I started to pull out a chair to sit down at the table and she – the bitch karate-chopped the back of my hand. It hurt like hell. "I've had it with you doing nothing but sit around, lie around, make a mess, and expect someone to clean up after you. Stand up straight and listen to me."

My eyes were so full of tears she looked swirly like that guy in *The Scream*, and I kind of liked seeing her like that. So I stood there, but I didn't really listen. "Ungrateful... blah, blah, blah... father works so hard... yadda yadda... selfish... burden... early grave... life, too, you know... only do so much... blah, blah, boarding school."

"What did you say?"

"Your father and I agree that the best thing for you right now will be to go to boarding school. It's an excellent school, all girls, and I hope you will prove yourself

worthy. My college roommate, Trilby, went there, and she is beautiful and smart and successful. Married to an anesthesiologist.”

“All girls? Are you kidding me? Where is it?” I was imagining something close by, of course, where I could easily come home on the weekends and school vacations. God, how stupid was I? How presumptuous. Assuming that just because you're my dad that your house was my new home. God. What an idiot.

“Winston-Salem.”

“North Carolina?”

“That's your home.”

“I've never even been to Winston-Salem except to drive through. It's scary.”

“Oh, please. You're such a baby. Little mountain girl. Not everything is as it seems from the interstate. I feel confident it's where you belong, and your father agrees.”

“Well, you can just convince him of anything, can't you?”

“Classes resume on Wednesday. You fly down Tuesday morning to get settled. We've already arranged for your personal belongings to be redirected to the dorm. Oh, and I made a list of chores for you to do today. You can eat some cereal first if you want – sorry I don't have any Lucky Charms – but I expect you to get started by nine.”

The flight attendants were so sweet and checked up on me so many times it made me cry. In one week I'd forgotten what it felt like to be taken care of. They brought me extra Coke and cookies and chips and asked me where I was headed. I thought about

telling them how my mom and Joe had died on Christmas and I went to Boston to live with my dad but he let my stepmonster harass me and kick me out of the house, but they acted so genuinely interested in me as an actual person that I didn't want to seem like a whiner, so I just said, "I'm going to boarding school."

"Oh, that's great, honey," the younger one said. "You work hard in school and you can go anywhere, do anything. Just look at us." I did look at her. Her eyebrows were way over-tweezed.

"Are you from Boston?" the older one asked. She could have used Cindy's hairdresser. Her hair was completely fried. But she did have great legs.

"No, I was just visiting. I'm from Stone Spur, in the mountains."

"Aren't you a lucky girl," Legs said. "Out to see the world."

Eyebrows insisted I wait and let her help me with my connecting flight in Charlotte, and when I arrived in Greensboro I followed everyone else to baggage claim even though I had absolutely nothing except the backpack I was carrying. I looked for a man with my name on a card and actually started to feel a little bit excited about getting my own things, meeting my roommate, and falling into a real routine. I've never really wanted to admit it to my friends back home, but I like school. I like to learn. And I really like when I have a good teacher. I'd googled Grace Academy and it did seem like a great opportunity, one of the oldest girls' schools in the country and pretty prestigious. Maybe Cindy really was looking out for me in her own charmless way. There were a couple of uniformed drivers talking about a woman in Toledo who'd smashed a McDonald's drive-thru window because they weren't serving Chicken McNuggets. They were holding

signs that said “Lawrence Reynolds” and “Mira Hackney.” Another guy closer to the door was holding a Marriott placard. There were all these people around me who seemed to know exactly where they were going and I was feeling a bit panicky like maybe I was in the wrong place but of course I was in the right place. And it occurred to me that he could have gone to wait for the wrong flight so I walked around the different baggage carousels looking for signs. When I was back where I’d started, I got a glimpse of a hand-lettered scrap of cardboard, like one of those that say “Homeless Please Help” or “Will Work For Food,” but this one said “Loo Loo Max” by a small bank of chairs near the men’s room. There was a big orange Croc with the strap missing pinning the sign to the floor.

The guy was eating Bojangles’ fried chicken, with the box sitting on his stomach, sucking the bones, breadding scattered across his shirt, grease soaking in and leaving patterns of dark spots, shoveling slaw with a spork and dropping half of it so it clung to his forearm and slowly crept towards his elbow. He looked just like that minister from Harvey Gap Methodist Church who was caught with his hand in a little girl’s underpants during Vacation Bible School a couple of years ago. I mean, shit. Seriously? Did you just post an ad on Craigslist or something? If I’d had more money I would have just walked away and taken a cab. But I only had 200 bucks for “incidentals,” to last me the whole semester, until I came back to Boston for the summer. I’d made it that far and I only had a little bit further to go. “Are you Lee Ray?” I asked.

He kind of snorted and snuffled. This guy had some major sinus issues. “Yeah,” he said, and it sounded like he had a throatful of cabbage. “You Lulu?”

“Duh.”

“Gimme just a minute.” He was picking up the bones and dropping them back in the box, checking for more meat. It looked like he'd had the three-piece dinner. He found a crust of biscuit and pushed it into his mouth, then wiped his lips with the back of his wrist and held out his hand.

“That's OK,” I said. “Jesus. Let's go.”

Lee Ray heaved himself up, nearly slipping on the sign under his foot. He set the Bojangles' box down on a chair and grabbed the hem of his shirt and shook it hard, sending fried breaded bits flying and giving me a nauseating view of his stomach. I could not believe I had to follow this guy out of the airport and through the parking lot and I was grateful that I didn't know a soul. The Marriott guy was counting people as they came over from collecting their luggage. I wanted to go with him. He looked like Trey Songz.

Lee Ray had one of those asses that is wide and flat and just sort of sucks khaki pants up into the crack so the cuffs hang at an angle, longer towards the outside of the leg and way short on the inside. His socks were gray with dirt and there was a hole on the left heel and neither one of his Crocs, it turned out, had a strap. I moved around to the right a bit so I was not exactly following him, but not exactly walking beside him either. His car was some kind of old Mazda two-door that might have been sporty in, oh, I don't know, 1987? And he had to pick up crumpled fast food bags stuffed with trash and throw them in the back so I could sit down. Lee Ray completely overflowed his bucket seat. The passenger seat was split down the side and the foam innards were yellow and hard where

they were exposed. He did have a badass stereo, though, and it was supposedly only a 30-minute drive, so I tried to relax. “You got any Rihanna?” I asked. “Black Eyed Peas? Lady Gaga?”

He started the car and turned up the radio, which was playing classical music like violins or something, and people were singing but it didn't sound like there were any words, not even foreign words. Lee Ray listened a few seconds, pointed at the radio without looking at me, said, “Debussy,” and backed out of the space. I hate classical music. We drove for a little while and got on the highway and there was an exit coming up with McDonald's and Wendy's and Lee Ray pointed and said, “You hungry?”

“No,” I said and thought for a moment that I'd been rude, so I kept talking. “Well, I am hungry, but I don't want to stop. Thanks for asking. It's just that I'm supposed to eat lunch when I get to school. I think it's a sort of welcome luncheon thingy for everyone coming back for spring semester.”

He'd stopped listening after “No” and was breathing through his mouth and for a second I thought Lee Ray'd fallen asleep but he was concentrating on the radio announcer with an English accent announcing a “classical conundrum.”

“There is a story, rather famously told, of a composer who penned his first truly great work at just 17 years of age and then left the full score in a London taxicab. The piece disappeared, but he was able to rewrite it from memory, almost perfectly, note for note. Who was the composer, and what was the name of the piece?”

“Mendelssohn,” Lee Ray said. “*A Midsummer Night's Dream* overture.” He slapped his meaty palm against the steering wheel in what may have been a triumphant

gesture. All of a sudden I felt very sleepy. I leaned my head against the dirty window and closed my eyes.

“Hey.” I had fallen asleep leaning forward using the backpack in my lap as a pillow. “Hey, you.” I could feel the zipper pressing into my ear and the gumminess of drool on my cheek. Gross. I wondered if I had tracks across the side of my face from the stitches. They would take forever to go away. “Lulu.” Great. I probably looked like a homeless person. “This where you get off?” he asked.

We were at the base of the main drive leading into the school. I looked up at the campus, with its white-trimmed brick buildings, and knew the grounds would be crazy beautiful in the spring. “Um, you can drop me right here,” I said. I really did not want to be seen with him. It seemed right to tip a driver, even this guy, but I really didn't have any money to spare. It was pointless to even wonder, but I had to ask. “My dad paid you, right?”

“Paypal.”

“OK, then. I gotta take off. Thanks again for the ride.” I thought I slammed the door, but it didn't shut all the way. I went to open it, but Lee Ray was already leaning across, pushing it out and pulling it back hard, just like he must have done a thousand times before.