

Crossroads

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At night we slept, my brother upstairs with the ghost in the vast quiet range under the roof, the women and Dennis and girls below in large rooms off the long hallway, door after closed door, the moon shining brightly through the windows opposite, cross-hatching the rough old walls and worn, polished floor. We didn't even know her name yet, but she was among us, no matter what we said to each other. Seth was the only boy in the house that summer my mother took us to visit our old friends, the only boy except for Dennis, of course, so when Libby's mother said Seth would sleep in the old ballroom, I was happy he would be free of the girls and women below, free of our restless investigations and winnowings and the ways in which we circled and questioned all that he was trying to take for granted. I was thirteen. Austen and the Brontës had helped me imagine this old house long before that summer made it real, before I understood the secrets every house can hold without its walls showing even a crack.

It was a romantic place, the third floor, the open curving stairs an ascension to a world apart, airy and bright with windows end to end and the small cot and wardrobe and dresser tucked at one end with a view down the vaulted hall. The grandfather clock stood like a sentry at the other end of the ballroom, ticking on and on, its moon waxing and waning in tight little arcs month after month, for one hundred years or more since our ghost—this was still before I knew her name—drowned herself in the shallow river winding through the town. The mystery in the house was this: no one had wound the clock for as long as anyone could remember. The women in the house, every family

in every decade, stroked like tender sisters the dark mirror of wood as they dusted and waxed, speaking to the old clock as if it were she, *Still here, sad girl, without rest? Why don't you just forget and forgive, at last, and leave your endless task to us?* The clock ticked on, its pendulum swinging neatly back and forth, with no forgiveness or forgetting.

Some days our ghost ran down the sunny hallway slamming each wide-open door shut, boom boom boom boom down the big hall with no wind at all to excuse her rage. Libby and I followed behind her opening each one again, taunting Mary—Mary Sheldon was her name, not much more than a child herself when she lay down in the River Windrush to find release from the pain of love betrayed—taunting her to slip past us and try again to disrupt the calm, lovely boredom of our summer days. Some nights, Mary Sheldon turned the water on in all the bathtubs, all at once, the steam rising and roiling into the dark chill. And sometimes, she seemed to get into the bath, or maybe it was just a memory of her last lonely plunge into the river, and left her small wet prints up the stairs and into my brother's room at the top of the house. He laughed nervously, fifteen and too old to believe any of this.

The mystery to me was this: I was not frightened of her endless complaint. I was still a child. I loved the way the rap of a carpenter's hammering came to me across the field a moment late, and the soft private shush of pages turning, and the secret dusty shade under the rhubarb leaves. Water making its way across the land inch by inch on its way home in the sea. The ghost could not have believed in the world as I did or she would not disorder things this way, would not agitate with her unending disappointment and accusation.

In the evening, Libby and I lay in our long beds in opposite corners of her big white room, waiting for the bright sleep of summer while my mother and her mother and stepfather laughed and drank clinking cocktails on the terrace below. My brother was awake, too, I could feel it, alone in the upper room listening, and my sister in her own large, quiet room, listening, children like me with no

father, listening to the familiar promises rising. In the dark of the night, Mary moved like a shadow in our room, waking me sometimes as if in a dream, the quiet rustle like a whisper, the door closing softly behind her as she left.

I was in a foreign country which was exactly like my dreams. Something important was going to happen here that would change me. When I returned home in August, leaving Libby here with her mother and Dennis in the magical house, I would be different, no longer a child. I was waiting.

White and pink roses and drooping, tangled vines and espaliered pear and peach trees heavy with hard young fruit draped the great stone garden wall all the way to the dark back corners. This was a dreaming place, where I first met hints of secrets just beyond my reach. Linden trees and honeysuckle vines humming with bees hung over the walls from the neighbors' gardens, which I longed to see. Libby proved to me, as we rode our bicycles on the twisting lanes behind her house, that there really was no way in, that whatever lay behind those walls would stay a mystery. But it comforted me to see that our garden was itself a mystery, that whatever happened here could not be seen or heard by anyone beyond this big old house.

Bow House on Bow Street in Bourton-on-the-Water. The ancient house curved along the lane, its high back wall rising over the cars and bicycles on their way to town, the little town where Mary had lain down in the River Windrush. Its high wall circled the garden and returned to the lane, enclosing a kingdom. We were safe here, and free to dream. I wrote the date the house was built in my diary; for 264 years men and women and girls and boys had lived in this house. For all those years, girls had gone out in the mornings to cut basil and thyme and cabbages round like doll heads into their baskets, to dig with their fingers through the sweet black dirt for baby potatoes, to gather a surprise for their mothers, yellow snapdragons and pink sweet william which they placed in the short blue vase filled with cool clear water from the well outside the back door. Libby and I carried the

cabbages and the potatoes we dug to the walk-in larder, antiquated but useful, where butter sat over a bowl of ice. We put the clove pinks and mallow we picked in a blue vase filled with cool water from the sink and carried it to the table in the long dining hall. A mirror over the mantle reflected the blue sky outside, the green summons of the garden, us. We were two girls, friends, together again for a summer.

I did not like cabbage. I knew my mother would expect me to eat it that night with no arguing. Libby's mother, Allison, cooked it with butter and salt and pepper. My sister found a fat green worm in hers and we all laughed and I ate the buttery, salty young cabbage and I liked it. My mother said, You are growing up and everyone laughed again, proud of me for this step, an inevitable step out of childhood. Allison thanked us for the pretty flowers, which we replaced every morning while the adults slept, before we took the bikes with the woven baskets on the handlebars and thumb bells to announce we were coming around a corner and we rode the lanes in the dark shadow of the high walls and through the early morning village and far out through the green fields neatly diagrammed by stone walls and hedgerows of willows and oaks. Everything was in order.

In New Hampshire, my mother drank and laughed with Allison and Dennis, neighbors for four years until Dennis was transferred to England. They had lived in New York City before moving to our little town. My mother wanted to be like beautiful, graceful Allison. She wanted to have a husband still, a husband who loved her the way Dennis loved Allison, attentively, accommodatingly, loyally. My mother changed the color of her hair, and, slightly embarrassed, smoked her cigarettes like Allison through a long ebony holder. She still worked every day as a secretary in a small insurance office uptown, and still waxed the floors in our plain little house and sent us to school with our lunch boxes full, but every night she sat with Allison and Dennis in our living room or

theirs and laughed and recrossed her thin legs, her Manhattan never spilling. At first, just Libby and I had been friends, walking the quarter-mile between houses to play quietly in the fields or the bare gray cellar or under the dining room table. After my mother and her mother and stepfather became friends, things felt blurred. I didn't like the sound of ice cubes clinking glass, of my mother's new laugh. After Libby and I went to bed the adults stayed late, the coals in the fireplace snapping and popping as Dennis laid another log on the fire.

Libby was a doll child from New York. I loved her the minute I saw her. She wore tight little dresses with flaring skirts that barely covered her underpants, with little white anklets at the ends of her long bare legs. Her shoes were patent leather with no straps. Her raincoat was bright, shiny blue and she carried a big yellow umbrella to school. She had no toys except the elegant doll Allison named Tootsie Marlene. Her house was small and smooth like an apartment, with a stereo Dennis wired into every room himself. If Libby was not with me she was with her mother and Dennis every minute—eating at expensive restaurants or going to lounges to listen to jazz and drink Shirley Temples until after midnight, or driving in their little convertible sports car up the coast on a cool fall day, Libby squeezed in behind the seats with a kerchief over her hair just like Allison.

Libby had a poodle, Brandy, a little black city dog in a small town in New Hampshire, a smart little dog who skipped when he ran and didn't mind wearing the red sweater Allison put on him when it was cold. I wanted a poodle. I wanted tight little dresses with too-short skirts, and bright white anklets and a mother who rode in the sports car with a kerchief flying in the wind and a lanky, handsome stepfather who made drinks for the women and teased the children who called him Dussy. I wanted white carpet in every room. My mother cooked a good dinner each night and taught me how to make tight hospital corners on the beds and to sew my own nightgowns and dresses and skirts. She made me practice at the piano and sent my brother and sister and me out into the rain and the sun and the snow to play outside. I was a child and I knew that Libby somehow was

not. But she knew how to be just like her beautiful mother, and I wanted to be her. I wanted to become her, doll cute and knowing how to blend with the grownups into the night. Libby was my closest friend. But, smiling, she was always just beyond my reach, a child-woman whose closest friends were her mother and Dussy.

We developed a secret language: *jishinapoo yuckamush* warned, This is a big secret. Hush. Do not whisper this out loud. They were innocent secrets, about our little lies and sneaking deceits, and sometimes about no secret at all, just a way to bind us together, delineate us from the sparkling adults.

Sandy hadn't wanted to come to England for the summer. My sister was seventeen. She loved horses and her friend Trinket and the sheep they raised for 4-H. I hate Allison and Dennis, she told my mother. I hate you when you are with Allison and Dennis. My mother took out a loan at the bank, co-signed by her boss because she had no husband, and said it was time for an adventure. Sandy screamed and pounded around the house the way she always did, believing she could make enough noise to change my mother's mind. She sulked for the first two weeks of the summer in her room in the long line of rooms on the second floor. I don't remember ever talking with her that summer. Dennis was showing Seth how to build shelves and fix car engines and flat bike tires and how to smile like a gentleman and be good natured and how to like the company of women. Libby and I lived apart, dreamy girls outside the precision of each day. Sandy was left to herself. She didn't like sleeping in a strange bed in a haunted house or imagining she was a girl here two hundred years ago or riding her bike to the village and spending strange coins on ice cream.

Allison and Dennis and my mother went off in the car for two days. They gave us money to eat dinner in the village at the inn on the little river. We were told to dress up, so we did, four good children, although I felt very grownup, and we walked on the tiny roads winding below the old walls

into Bourton. The Cotswald houses crowded around the green, the cobbled streets winding along the neatly channelled river and out into the wide green hills. We were nervous so we started too early and went to the old square inn while it was still afternoon.

Inside the courtyard was a sprawling model of Bourton, as big as my entire yard at home, a famous site. We wandered inside the model. Every house, every garden wall, every little path and lane and pasture fence I had come to know was here. Here was Bow House bending along the street. Here I could see over the garden walls! Here was another garden, and another, and another, surrounding our own familiar garden, each with its own big house looking just like ours. The village was stitched together with high walls like a quilt. And here was the river where Mary lay down to die, the long arched foot bridge she stepped from into the sparkling water, the stream laid out in crinkled blue cellophane against the stone, with real grass, green as jade, growing along the shallow banks. And here was the inn! Here was the model inside the courtyard of the inn! And inside that courtyard was another model, and inside that courtyard another model, an infinite regression until the stones were tiny pebbles and the stream where Mary died over the treachery of love just a fragile blue line of ink squiggling through the town I could have held in my hand. I pictured myself in this retreating little world, smaller and smaller, the entirety of me persistent, resilient, my sister and my brother and my friend Libby wandering with me in every tiny Bourton-on-the-Water, like children searching for the magic door back to a world that was steady and known. We ate our dinner shyly and walked home in the bright late-afternoon sun.

Sandy found a tall leggy horse the color of polished shoes in a pasture in the hills a long way from the house. We named him Ulysses and every day we rode our bikes there with an apple or carrots stolen from the garden. Sandy whispered to him in a low begging voice and he pushed his head against her chest. Seth and Libby and I patted his neck carefully, studying his black hooves and mane and the whiskers on his soft muscley chin. Sandy climbed over the fence talking to him,

stroking her hand down his shoulder and legs, telling him he was a pretty boy, her hand along his high strong back, his hips and belly, that soft voice she had for him, and she reached her fingers in through his mane and spoke to him in a whispered song and stepped in beside him and lifted herself onto his back. He shivered a minute and then stepped away from the fence. He didn't bolt. My sister was happy, smiling not at us but to the horse, and she clucked her tongue and leaned and Ulysses turned away from us and walked out into the hills. Every day Sandy left us at the fence, and we turned for home. When Sandy came into the house late in the afternoons, she smelled of horse, and her thighs were chafed red from the heaving sides of the bare-backed horse.

(break)

You are a beautiful girl, Dennis told my sister, and more beautiful because you don't know it yet. My sister snorted as he left the room and hissed at my mother, I hate him. Hush, said my mother. We all went to London for three days. Sandy refused to come but in the end had to pack and get in the car. In the afternoon, my mother and Allison and Dennis went off somewhere and told us we could walk to Buckingham Palace alone for the changing of the guard. My sister put on a new sundress my mother had bought for her, white with deep blue vines, cut low with thin straps. I look stupid, she roared. I hate dresses! She had to wear a strapless bra, which was very interesting to me. I had new breasts, hard and sore, and Allison told my mother I needed to start wearing a bra. I resisted, clinging to my undershirts and petticoats. But my sister today felt beautiful, I could sense that, in her new bra and stockings and white lace garter belt. She put on the high heels my mother had bought, and brushed her shiny blond hair into a big ponytail. I felt babyish and graceless. Even Libby looked unappealing to me that day, a slightly pudgy babydoll with a blank face. My sister was exciting, alive, an antenna.

In the great avenue in front of Buckingham Palace we watched the guards in their high fur hats and stiff red coats march and slap their rifles, march and stand and shout and turn. Then they

were settled again for the next few hours, unmoving as statues, men at duty. Watch this, my sister said to us. She smiled at a handsome young man by the little hut at the great gate. My sister walked up to him in her strapless bra and high heels and grinned at him. He glanced at her and caught himself, steadying his eyes again straight ahead. She whispered to him, tossing her head close to his chest. He did not look at her. She circled him in her bright white dress, her long strong legs striding back and forth, and she spoke in her low song, and he glanced and looked away and she smiled and whispered in the singing voice and for a second he flashed a grin at her and winked and she laughed out loud and walked back to us in the crowd, satisfied. I watched this mystery that I sensed was coming to me, too. I was caught between something old and safe and something very new that called to me. When we got back to our hotel room, the adults were still out. Sandy let me unhook her bra and put her shoes back in their box. I hung the sundress on a wide hanger in the wardrobe. We both changed into shorts, and then Sandy said she wanted to be alone and made me leave our room. Libby and Seth and I played cards in the lobby, waiting for our parents to come back for dinner. I thought of my sister upstairs, potent, awake.

Libby was a dull and compliant girl. When we were younger in New Hampshire, I hadn't noticed this. I had always felt shadowy in the brightness of her late nights and crystal glasses of grenadine and ginger ale and her return from her grandmother's in New York with pictures of her sitting with Dennis in the crook of a tree in Central Park. Allison dressed her in bright little shorts with matching tops and white canvas shoes, but now I could see that she smiled and laughed in a flat way, and was an awkward and silent and paste-faced smiling doll. She had grown tall like me, but her arms and legs and hands seemed boneless, soft and smooth as a small child's, and the front of her dresses and summer blouses laid flat against her chest. I curled my shoulders around my new breasts

but I was aware every minute of the lengthening and hardening and rounding of my body. Libby was a reminder, like a relic of something that I was starting to understand was going forever.

Libby was sneaky. *Jisbinapoo yuckamush* she said each day as we rode our bicycles beyond our set limits. I was a good girl, and did not dare to break my mother's rules. But that summer, I learned that my mother was not paying close attention, and Libby and I drifted farther and farther from Bow House each day. She was not exhilarated or scared, just a girl peddling her pretty silver bike with the basket up and down the hills on the quiet little lanes. We aren't supposed to come out here, I said nervously. Just come, she said. They'll never know. When two boys cut us off with their rattling bikes at a crossroads far from home, Libby stood straddling her bicycle and smiled indifferently as if she were not surprised. Her teeth were too large, as if they were the only part of her that was growing up.

Hello, Thomas said with no *h* and instantly moved to her side, his claim, and the red-haired boy, tall and square-faced, said, I'm Michael, and came up alongside me. I could not speak but Libby was astonishing. Just riding, she said laughing, Isn't that okay? And the boys laughed with her and Libby felt again to me like her glittering mother and her graceful stepfather Dussy, easy with something I had never practiced before, although I looked like the young girl and she like the child. Thomas and Libby rode their bikes off to the right under the old beech trees and Michael nudged me saying, Don't you like me? What's the matter? Don't you like me? The next day Libby and I rode all the way out to the long brick rows of the Projects in Upper Slaughter trying to find them but everyone stared at us and we turned our bikes and rode home slowly, hoping the boys would waylay us again.

On the third day they did, whooping from far off when they saw us. Michael's shirt was faded and too tight. He had pale red hair in soft curls all down his legs. How old are you? I asked and he laughed and said, Older than you are! Ring that bell! he said, or, I could beat you racing to

the top of the hill! Thomas and Libby stood apart from us and I watched Libby smile and laugh. I stood beside my bike at first, but finally laid it down in the grass and sat on the stone wall beside Michael. My father is gone, he suddenly told me. Mine too, I said, two years ago. Yes, two years here, too. I couldn't understand some of his words. Libby said on our way home, My mother would kill me if she knew we were hanging out with boys from the Projects, but I was not sure just what the Projects were and the boys seemed nice.

Michael had big hands and a wide smile and a down of golden hair on his cheeks. That night, with Libby across the room, I lay in my bed trying to bring into my sight every detail of my handsome boy. I wanted to ask Libby if she had noticed his bright blue eyes or the small curls that gathered behind his ears. This seemed to be a new kind of secret and I didn't dare ask her what she was dreaming. We rode out to the high crossroads the next day, and the next, and the next, and although Thomas and Michael had said, So see you tomorrow, right? they didn't come.

The next afternoon when it might be the right time we rode out again to the four corners far from town and waited a long time and the boys came whizzing at us laughing. I didn't dare ask Michael why he said he would come and then didn't. That day we walked side by side along the road and climbed over the fence into a high shimmering hayfield. We sat near each other, the thick green grass crushed sweet and wet beneath our legs and Michael touched my fingers and looked steadily at me. I'm not going back to school in September he said. I'm done with that bloody show. I knew bloody was just a damned but when Michael said it I felt the shock of all the things gone wrong for a Projects boy and wanted to fix it all, felt myself brimming with tenderness and concern. Don't do that, I said. You will regret it. You need to go to college. College? he laughed. College. Well, you are an American girl. A rich American girl. It isn't like that here. Then he leaned toward me and took my chin in his big hand and kissed me softly. His lips were warmer than mine. The sun glistened colors in the downy hair on his cheeks and my eyelashes. Will you come tomorrow? he asked. He

didn't laugh this time as he got back on his bike and called to Thomas. I didn't want to say a word the entire ride home. My first kiss was like a cloud I had climbed inside. That night the dark bedroom held my secret. All night I sought him.

The next day I tried to think of a way to ride out to the crossroads without Libby. She had not said a word about Thomas, although I was sure they had kissed on the first day they met. *Jishinapoo yuckamush* I tried, but she smiled blandly at me, waiting for my secret, and I said instead, I stole some money from my mother's purse so we can get some candy on the way home. Michael wasn't there. I made Libby wait an extra hour but finally she got on her bike and rode off and I followed. He cannot come sometimes, I said to myself, that's all. That night after dinner I wanted to tell my brother that Michael kissed me but I didn't know how to start saying such a thing. I lay awake in the night remembering his lips on mine, his hand under my chin drawing me to him as if I belonged to him, his long legs folded under him, the sun in his hair. I could not remember what his voice sounded like, and when I used my own to say his words, Will you come tomorrow? it sounded silly and girlish. The next day was silent and slow until we left for the crossroads.

Each day the sun came up warm and clean. Libby and I rode out together. If she felt as if the world had gone empty she did not show it. Every day we sat beside the little road and waited. After eight days I understood.

That night I cried in my bed. Downstairs, I heard the adults again for the first time in days, as if it had been they who were absent and not me. Allison laughed flirtatiously, Oh Dennis! You know that's not true about me! Dennis said in his soft stroking voice, teasing her, Ali, it *is* true. My mother laughed her new hopeful laugh, as if she were growing into someone bigger, someone my father would never have left. My crying moved from Michael to my father, who had a new wife and daughter. I fought the shift. I tried to remember Michael's voice, our kiss. I tried to remember my father's voice. Upstairs, my brother slept in the huge open space with no one to listen with him for

Mary as she roused for her night of reproach and lament. I touched my small hard breasts and the soft curls coming between my legs, ashamed, wishing I could go back. I wanted to be held. I wanted not to have any secrets. Libby seemed to be asleep. I wanted to be her, safe and inattentive.

My mother came back from her day out with Brian, a man Allison and Dennis introduced her to, happy and excited. I didn't like him but was polite when he came to the door that morning. Sandy was rude to him, refusing to say hello and snorting like a horse when he tried to make a small bow to her. Seth stood beside his mother, serious and earnest, and shook Brian's hand carefully. My mother looked like Allison with a big white kerchief and deep red lipstick and straw huaraches. Brian held the door to his little sports car and waved cheerfully as they cleared the big gate through the wall. We hung around all day, uncertain of when our mother meant to come back to us. Libby was impatient, wanting to play board games on Seth's bed in the cool open ballroom or watch Sandy ride Ulysses. What's the big deal, she asked? Your mother is going antiquing with a friend. Are you all going to hang around the door all day waiting for her to come back? We needed our mother, and I was coming to see that she didn't really need hers. There was a certain erasure with Libby, a refusal to feel much of anything. There was never any sign of sadness or fear or dread, but there was also not much happiness or playfulness or anticipation. I wanted her to understand what we were waiting for, but I could see that she would not.

Sandy was irritable the entire day, shoving me out of her way in the kitchen and slamming her door when I opened it to ask her something. Seth worked in the garden building a new potting bench with Dennis. Libby and I rode our bikes to the river where it broke free of its stone containments, flowing swiftly here between wild bankings, and picked raspberries for dessert. Finally, the day had muffled on and my mother was getting out of Brian's car, smiling and pulling her kerchief off her curly hair and finishing her sentence while we gathered. Children! she cried.

Look what I found! and she pulled from the open trunk an enormous sepia print of horses working, muscled, prancing with their tails tied into tight knots at the base of their spines and men with their sleeves rolled to the elbow holding the leads as the horses reared and backed and shied, and one man was on his horse bareback as she pranced sideways in the confusion. Isn't it wonderful? my mother cried happily. I have no idea how I am getting this home but I just had to have it! I struggled to bring to mind our little house with its old photographs of my grandmother and grandfather and the little dog named Teddy my mother had when she was a child, the calm little house with my father's watercolors still on the walls. Brian hugged her good-bye, his face tucked into her ear, something private they had built through the day while we waited at home.

Well? Allison teased that night at dinner. Well, what? my mother answered laughing, the ice in their glasses chinking. The smoke from their cigarettes rose in the candle light as we children ate the berries we had picked with cool thick cream.

My mother and Brian brought used books to me, with fine tissue protecting the etchings and illustrations, the type small and exact. I started to read for many hours every day, frustrating Libby who had no interest in books or the stories I made up which put me at the heart of each book's life: Dickens, Tolstoy, Wharton, where girls came in their innocence up against adults and were changed. They were always heroic, but there was a terrible price paid for their accommodation. I tried to tell Libby about Anna Karenina and Tess but she said, I don't *care* about them! They are just made up. Why can't we jump rope? She felt some days like a forgotten friend, part of something I had left behind without realizing it over this tender and unquiet summer. Her little dresses and matching shorts sets and red plastic purse with the white stars on it embarrassed me. I wanted to lie on my bed in the silent room, wanted Libby to wander off to play alone, wanted to read a book a

day, as if the questions I could not yet imagine were waiting for me. Each morning I woke up to more mystery.

One day Libby and I spent the morning playing jacks in the back corner of the garden. Allison and Dennis and my mother had driven to Moreton-in-Marsh to ship the horse print Dennis had packed in a crate. When they drove out of the yard, yelling and laughing as they held onto the crate tied on the roof of the little car, every act a big adventure, they called to us not to ride our bikes beyond the edge of the village while they were gone. Bye! we called back, We won't! After lunch Seth and Libby and I rode our bikes all the way to the crossroads. Seth was surprised we knew where we were. We come out here all the time, I said. But we hadn't been here since the day I stopped waiting for Michael to come. We lay down in the field beyond the stone wall, tickling each other on the arms and necks and cheeks with long wands of timothy. The hay had turned golden, its seedheads and daisies and Queen Anne's lace swaying in the warm breeze in great gentle waves. Our laughter rose up out of the whispering grass with the hum of bees and the far off trill of birds. I listened for the voices of two boys finally coming along the road to meet us. I did not know if Libby listened, too. My brother teased us, grabbing our ankles and wrists, twisting until we squealed, and the afternoon drifted on softly, slowly, reassuringly.

On the steep hill going home my bike slipped out from under me and I fell on my back into a patch of nettles beside the road. You're in trouble now, Libby said angrily. There isn't any nettle in town. Don't tell anyone. They'll kill us if they know we came out here. We rode silently all the way back to the house. A new sense of injustice was rising in me. The three adults seemed to live by their own rules. A bike ride should not make me feel so dark and alone.

By dinner, my back had risen in enormous and flaming welts. I have to tell my mother, I hissed at Libby. I'm going crazy. No! she said. We'll get in trouble. I don't want them knowing we broke the rules. The tale of the big crate was the story of the night, the cause of its laughter, the

reason for a toast. I sat silently, trying to hold my back from the chair, filling with resentment at my mother, and at Allison and Dennis who were beautiful and full of happiness, and at Libby who was remote and artful.

We sat on my brother's bed. I lifted my shirt to show him my back, careful not to let him see my new bra. Oh, my god, he said. You need to show Mum. I wanted to go to my mother. To say to her, I feel so sad and cannot tell you why. To say, Won't you tell me why I feel this terrible dread? No, I can't, I said to my brother. The evening breeze coming through the high windows soothed my skin.

I took a deep cool bath and put on my pajamas. Libby was asleep when I went to bed. The whole house was quiet, the deep garden was quiet, the little road along the curving wall of the house was quiet. In the dark, the door opened and Dussy was there sitting on the edge of my bed, ice in his glass tinkling in the stillness. I could not breathe, could not swallow, could not call out to my mother and my brother and my sister to protect me. The fierce sadness leaped up in me. Dussy's hand slid up under my pajama top, heavy and dry and hot, up over my belly and then my breasts. I rolled onto my stomach, trying to seem asleep, the large room beyond us black with the night. His hand reached up along my back, my shoulders, my ribs. The burning welts on my back must be hideous, I thought, and I wanted to explain them, explain the four corners and a sweet boy who would not return to school and my brother who had no father any more and my sister who had come to know she was beautiful. My mother whose laughter sounded like crying. A father I could barely remember. Dussy whispered to me in a kind and pleading voice, It's all right, don't be scared, I would never hurt you. Libby was not asleep, could never sleep, I knew that now. Dussy stood up and his glass tinkled quietly. In the dark of the night, Mary moved like a shadow in our room as she always did, holding us awake as if in a dream, the quiet rustle like a whisper, the door closing softly

behind her as she left to wander the halls with her accusations. The high walls enclosed the sleeping house.

My mother and Allison and Dennis drove off the next day, leaving us alone. Libby and Seth and Sandy and I rode our bikes to Ulysses' pasture and fed him carrots and apples. We dawdled at the edge of the little road while Sandy disappeared over the hill on the galloping horse. When she came back, flushed and sweating, we peddled back into town and rested, dangling our legs over the edge of Mary's bridge. *Jishinapoo yuckamusb.* Hush. We are changing.

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