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lucyretia and

the kroons



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Slapboxing with Jesus

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The Devil in Silver

Lucretia and the Kroons

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Excerpt from The Devil in Silver

“I wrote these words for everyone
who struggles in their youth.”

—Lauryn Hill, “Everything Is Everything”

Most twelve-year-olds don't know much about death, and that's the way it should be. But a handful get the knowledge too soon. You can see it in their eyes, a sliver of sorrow floating in the iris, visible even at the happiest of times. Those kids have encountered that enemy, too soon and will always bear its scars.

For instance, take Lucretia Gardner, now turning twelve years old and having a party to celebrate. The party is to be held in the two-bedroom apartment she shares with her mother in Flushing, Queens. Three of her four good friends are invited. The fourth, Sunny, her *best* friend, couldn't come because she's at St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis getting yet another treatment for her cancer. Sunny has sent a card, delivered by her despairing grandmother. The note inside reads, *I wish I was with you*. Lucretia knows Sunny probably dictated the words and her grandmother wrote them. Sometimes Sunny's hands are so weak she can't even hold a pen. Sunny's sickness casts a long shadow that Loochie can't escape.

The three girls arrived together, right on time. Noon on a chilly Saturday in November. Because the birthday girl wanted to make an entrance, her mother answered the door. Mom walked Lucretia's guests into the living/dining room, where the curtains were drawn open and all the lights were on. Bright balloons had been tied to the backs of the chairs around the dining table. The words "Happy Birthday" were spelled out in yellow cutout letters taped to the wall above the couch. The treats had already been set out on the table and the three girls, without any prodding, picked at a bowl of mini candy bars, ignoring the bowl of fruit.

"Loochie's just putting on her dress," Mom told the girls. She asked after their mothers and fathers, and about school. She spoke to each girl—Priya, Monique, and Susan—in turn. The girls answered back distractedly. Fine, everyone and everything was fine.

Priya asked politely for a sheet of paper just as the birthday girl called out from the back.

“Everybody’s here?”

“Yes! Yes!” her mother shouted as she produced a sheet of paper from a drawer.

Priya, whose full name was Priyansha, gave a very faint bob of her head as she accepted the sheet and whispered, “Thank you.”

Then the girl began folding that paper at all kinds of wonky angles. The two other girls watched as if Priya were performing surgery. They turned their backs to Loochie’s mother, the woman already forgotten.

“Hit play,” Lucretia called.

Lucretia had put together a playlist on the computer the night before so her mother found it on the screen, clicked play, and turned up the volume on the monitor’s speakers. As she went to check on her daughter the first song played. It seemed like the obvious pick.

I’mmm coming up so you better get this party started.

Even the three girls, still mesmerized by Priya and the paper, couldn’t help but hum along and sway slightly.

*

Lucretia stood at the large mirror attached to her mother’s dresser, on which were three foam mannequin heads. Two had wigs on them. The third head was bald because Loochie’s mother was wearing that one, her weekend wig. Her mother had never liked straightening her hair. She kept it in cornrows beneath the wigs because life was just easier that way. There was one wig for work, one for the weekends, and one her mother wore out on some evenings when she dressed up and looked attractive. Loochie always thought her mother looked pretty, even without the store-bought hair, but on those evenings her mother turned the volume higher. She never told Loochie where she was going, or who she was going to see. Loochie understood the woman was going on dates but since

they never talked about them she could never really picture what that meant. Apparently it required a special wig.

Mom entered the bedroom, sat on the bed, and watched her daughter get ready.

Lucretia Gardner had actually turned twelve on Thursday. She would've been happy to have this birthday party with Sunny alone, the two girls giggling over whatever was on the TV while Loochie fed a few spoonfuls of ice-cream cake to her best friend. Because of Sunny's cancer there wasn't much chance the girls would be running through Flushing Meadows Park like they used to do. Settling down in their favorite spot below the humongous steel Unisphere.

"I wish Sunny was here," Loochie said quietly.

Her mother leaned forward and smiled tightly. Loochie could see the woman's reflection in the mirror. "It's good for you to spend time with your other friends, too, especially now."

"She'll get better," Loochie said.

Her mother nodded but her smile dropped. "Well, when she's back from Tennessee you can have another party. Okay? For now, you're being rude to Priya, Susan, and Monique. Don't keep them waiting."

Loochie remained still in front of the mirror.

"Aren't you glad I invited your other friends?" Loochie's mother asked, a little too eager.

"Yes," Loochie said, but that was a lie, one she told only to make her mother happy.

"They're all asking after you," Loochie's mother said, though Loochie guessed that was a lie, too. Mom reached for her daughter's hand, the one that wouldn't stop patting at stray strands of hair. She pulled Loochie close, into her lap.

"You're nervous?" her mother asked.

"No." Loochie lied again.

The truth was that Loochie knew something about each of those three girls in the living room, facts that she'd heard in school and discussed privately with Sunny more than once. Monique had breasts. Loochie didn't have to hear about that. She could see them plainly. Everyone could. But she'd also heard that Susan had had

pubic hair since she was ten. And Priya, maybe most shocking of all, was the first girl in Queens (or at least their class) to have her period. Meanwhile Loochie was developing at a glacial pace. Compared to Priya, Susan, and Monique she was still a child. The only person maturing more slowly was Sunny and at least Sunny could blame it on her sickness. Loochie had no good excuse. Those three girls waiting in the living room were blooming but Loochie still felt like a seed in the mud.

Mother and daughter looked at each other's reflection in the dresser mirror. Was her mother thinking the same thing as she was? That they should cancel this party right now? Probably not. The three foam wig-heads watched them both.

"Did they ask about me?" Loochie asked.

"Of course they did," Loochie's mother said. "They can't wait to see you. And you look beautiful, like an emerald princess." She rubbed Loochie's shoulders lightly. "I better get the cake."

Loochie stood up. She smoothed the front of her dress. It was green with ruffles on the top and shoulders. When she'd slipped it on this morning the taffeta felt stiff on her skin and her chest was itchy and tender. She felt a little better in the gown now. She even liked herself in it.

From the living room Loochie and her mother heard the next song start.

Lucky you were born that far away so we could both make fun of the distance.

Loochie's mother did a little hip swivel, poorly, in honor of the Shakira song and Loochie, mortified, grabbed her mother's elbow. "Please don't dance in front of my friends."

Her mother put up her hands and said, "I won't, I won't."

Then her mother opened the bedroom door and led the way out. Loochie followed.

Their apartment was shaped like a capital letter H. Loochie's mother's bedroom sat at the top of the left side and it fed directly into the kitchen. Step out of the kitchen and you found their bathroom just to the right. And, at the bottom of this side, Loochie's bedroom. Her door was shut now. It had an orange and blue Mets

pennant taped to it, a gift from her older brother, Louis, to commemorate the team's 2000 National League championship. It was starting to show its age, but Loochie kept it up. Louis had taken her to one of the games. He was grown-up and didn't live with them anymore. She reached out and touched the pennant lightly, trying to calm herself. She could feel her heart banging against her ribs.

A small walkway, hardly a hallway, connected this half of the apartment to the other half, the right side of that H. The right side of the apartment was just one room, a living room and dining room combined. The space had seemed humungous to Loochie when she was a toddler, like a long runway for her stubby legs, but by now it felt tiny. There was a dining table in the middle of the room and farther up a sofa and television. At the far end of the room, the top of the H, were three windows that faced the street. The three girls sat in a tight circle on the floor between the dining table and the sofa. Loochie felt embarrassed that there was so little space in here for them. All three girls lived in bigger apartments.

Monique and Susan watched Priya, who held a sheet of paper that she'd folded into a flower shape. Little numbers had been written on different flaps of the paper. Priya flicked the paper so it looked like the flower's petals were opening and closing. All three girls counted out loud as the petals moved.

"... five, six, seven, eight." They didn't even look up when Loochie's mother walked in the room.

"Ladies," her mom said, wearing an exaggerated smile, "may I present the birthday girl, Lucretia Gardner!"

Mom clapped and the three girls at least had the good manners to look up from their game. But they all seemed aggravated, as if Loochie and her mother had interrupted them in *their* homes.

Loochie's mother stepped aside, still clapping (a bit too enthusiastically at this point), and Loochie inched forward in her role as birthday girl and emerald princess. She told herself not to throw her arms out, that it was too theatrical and embarrassing a gesture, but then she couldn't help herself. She did feel good in the dress, after all. And it was her birthday. She raised her hands and flung open her arms and because the Shakira song was still playing

she even twisted her hips much like her mom had done in the bedroom.

The star had arrived.

But the audience didn't respond to her shine. All three girls watched Loochie for a moment and then, almost as one, they scanned her green dress from the ruffled front down to the hem. Then Priya offered a tight grin and said, "Happy birthday, Loochie."

Monique and Susan followed the leader. Same tight grins, same bland birthday wish.

And that was it.

Loochie dropped her hands as her mother left the living room. "I'm going to get the cake," her mother called with great enthusiasm. "It's a Cookie Puss!"

As soon as her mother was gone the girls looked at each other again and hunched forward over Priya's folded paper game, as if Loochie weren't standing right there.

Monique whispered, "That's a dress for a six-year-old."

Susan actually looked up at Loochie again, scanned the dress one more time, and nodded her agreement with Monique.

Priya threw out one hand, mocking Loochie's gesture. "Look, everyone," she said. "It's Princess Broccoli."

Lucretia Gardner's stomach dropped. Her cheeks felt hot and her hands trembled. For a moment the living room was silent. Then the silence was broken.

"You *whores* can get out of my house!" Loochie yelled.

Loochie's mother walked into the living room with the Carvel ice-cream cake, a candle in the shape of the number twelve on top, and before she could sing the happy-birthday song she witnessed her daughter menacing the girls, hands on her hips, *screaming*.

"Get up! And get out!" Loochie commanded.

Loochie's mother almost dropped the cake.

The three girls rose together. They'd lost their cool demeanors. Even Priya, usually composed and masterful, dropped the toy she'd made. The plucked paper flower fell to the floor. Susan took one step toward the door and inadvertently crushed it. Loochie didn't move aside. The girls had to go around her to reach the front door.

Her mother was so confused that she didn't know what to do so she just stood there, balancing the cake in her hands.

Loochie couldn't see her mom. Her vision had tunneled. "Walk out the door, *whores!*"

"Loochie!" her mother finally managed. "What happened? Girls, wait."

Loochie's mother tried to step in front of Priya, but Priya frantically stumbled around her and toward the door. The other two girls did the same. Now Loochie stood alone in the living room. Sunlight streamed in from the windows behind her, and to her mother, this made it look as if she was actually on fire, burning with rage.

"You *whores* can use the front door or I can throw you *whores* off the fire escape!"

"Where did you learn that word?!" Loochie's mother shouted. "What happened? I was just gone for a minute!"

All three girls reached the apartment door. Loochie's mother still hadn't put the cake down and poor Cookie Puss was already melting. A few drops of vanilla ice cream fell from the serving tray and landed on the living room carpet behind her like a trail of little white tears.

Priya couldn't get the apartment door open fast enough. She unlocked it and leapt into the hall. The others ran after her. Despite their terror, or maybe because of it, they laughed so loud that people must've heard them out on the sidewalk. Loochie's mother kicked the apartment door closed with her foot and it slammed.

Loochie was already unzipping her dress and kicking it off. She stood there in the living room in a matching pair of green underwear. The dress pooled around her feet, hiding her black patent leather Mary Janes. Someday very soon Loochie wouldn't be so willing to stand nearly naked in front of her mother. But for now she stood there, in her underwear, shivering with anger.

She finally pointed at the ice-cream cake in her mother's hands.

"Put it in the freezer. I'm saving it for Sunny."

It took two months before Sunny was back from her treatment and ready to mingle. The whole time Loochie suffered through school, banished from the clique of Priya, Monique, and Susan. And to her own surprise, Loochie found herself yearning for a second chance with those three. Sure they'd been terrible to her, but when she spied them in the school cafeteria, hunched together and gleeful, she couldn't help but feel a tug in her gut. She'd see them out in the schoolyard, clumped together like socks that had just come out of the dryer, and she'd want to go talk with them again. Most of the time she found herself sitting alone at the other end of yard, too close to the boys who were busy acting like wild beasts, screaming and wrestling and bashing at one another. At least they had each other. Loochie had no one.

Loochie's life went on like this for a month and a half. At school and at home, alone on the weekends. Her mother did all she could to help, offering to take her out to movies or even to go outside and play in the winter snow but those offers only made Loochie feel more pathetic. It was starting to look like her best friend was her mother. It was so embarrassing.

At the end of two months, Sunny had returned to her apartment, but was still being kept from Loochie. Loochie couldn't understand why.

"I want Sunny to come over," Loochie complained one evening in late December as she and her mother ate dinner. "You promised I could have a party with her."

"She's still too sick."

"You promised! She's back and I want to see her. *Please*, Mom."

For dessert they ate some more of the birthday cake. Her mother had pointed out that two girls couldn't eat the whole thing alone. Why let the rest go to waste? Since the failed party Loochie and her mother had been slowly trimming it down. As they debated the

issue Loochie's mother cut herself a slice. Loochie had a little, too. There wasn't much left.

"I'll ask her grandmother," Mom said. They ate at the kitchen table.

"And I don't want you there," Loochie added. "Just me and Sunny."

"That's impossible," Mom said between bites.

"We're twelve. That's old enough. Do you know what other girls are doing at twelve?"

Loochie's mother shut her eyes, shook her head. "Don't tell me."

But Loochie pressed her case. "I'm not a baby. I walk to school alone. I do my own dishes and my laundry. I can take care of myself."

"And Sunny?"

"If something bad happens I'll call your cell phone," Loochie pleaded.

Really she was embarrassed by her mother. But she couldn't say that out loud. It would hurt her feelings.

"Just let us have the apartment for a little," Loochie said. "I want to show her my Christmas presents."

Mom finished her piece of ice-cream cake and wiped her face with a paper napkin. Then she reached over and wiped Loochie's face, too. Loochie didn't resist the touch.

"How long?" Mom finally asked.

"Four hours," Loochie said.

"Two hours."

Loochie could tell there'd be no further negotiation and she'd gotten so much already. "Two hours," she agreed. And she felt confident about what she'd said. What bad things could really happen in so little time?

*

Sunny and Loochie's playdate was made through go-betweens. Loochie's mother and Sunny's grandmother. Sunny would come down to Loochie's second try at a twelfth birthday party on a

Saturday, the last in December. Loochie had done a little better than normal with gifts that year because her mother felt so bad that Loochie had spent so much time alone, waiting on her sick friend. Loochie even got a new bike. No training wheels and emerald green, just like her dress had been. It was her favorite color. Loochie knew that Sunny's grandmother would likely tackle the pair before she let her sick granddaughter ride around on the sidewalk. But Loochie and Sunny could pedal the bike back and forth in the living room. The night before she and her mother had rearranged the furniture in the living room. They'd pushed the dining table against one wall. Moved the coffee table from in front of the sofa. This turned the living room into one twenty-foot-long, carpeted track. Loochie couldn't wait to see Sunny holding the handlebars. And best of all, she and Sunny were going to be in the apartment alone! For two hours. A fact that hadn't been shared with Sunny's grandmother. If it had, Sunny grandmother would've been perched right there on the living room couch all afternoon, scowling while she watched everything, and what the hell kind of fun would that be?

Loochie's mother was in the bathroom, getting prepared to go out with Louis. Loochie found her in front of the bathroom sink and watched her, perched at the threshold.

"Louis is late," Loochie said.

"Your brother always is," her mother said absently.

She and Loochie were the primary team these days. And Louis was like an alternate member. He was ten years older than Loochie and had moved out of the apartment to Brooklyn when she was seven. She loved him but didn't really know him anymore. Loochie's mother, of course, had a different relationship with Louis. She had wrestled and cajoled him into seeing her that day. He didn't want to come to Queens, but their mother could be persistent. She'd been pestering him to come home for months now.

"Now you don't tell Louis where I'm taking him, right?" Her mother stopped applying her foundation and looked at Loochie directly.

"Debt counseling," Loochie said, though she didn't know what it meant.

“I’m taking him to *lunch*,” Loochie’s mother instructed. “Because I miss him.”

Loochie and her mother nodded conspiratorially. Then Mom brushed Loochie back, out of the doorway. She grabbed the door handle and pushed the door. “Mom needs to be alone in here for a few minutes.”

Loochie stepped farther back and the door shut and she heard the sound of her mother settling down onto the toilet. Loochie walked away from the bathroom and back into the living room. She went to the front door. She was too short to see through the peephole yet. They kept a footstool right by the door for this reason. Loochie pulled it over and stepped up and peeked out into the hall. Louis was late, but so was Sunny.

Loochie wore a pair of jeans and a thin green sweater. Her kicks were bright white Keds. Her mother had done her hair that morning, tight little box braids. It was her sporty look. Even though Loochie knew Sunny would never make fun of her she was too embarrassed to try showing off the green gown again.

Loochie checked on the bike, parked at the far end of the living room. She rifled through the small stack of board games her mother had set out on the dining table. Life, Sorry, and Risk. (The last one was left over from her brother’s days in the apartment.) She set out a pillow and blanket on the couch in case Sunny would need to lie down at some point.

She left the living room and went to the kitchen. She opened the freezer and found what was left of her birthday cake. Over the last two months, bit by bit, she and her mother had really chopped that cake down. Cookie Puss wasn’t looking so good. She and her mother had eaten its sugar-cone nose, its ice-cream chin and cheeks. All that was left was one of its big eyes. The “eye” was really just a Flying Saucer ice-cream sandwich. Loochie had guarded this last piece fiercely for the past week. It was for Sunny and no one else. Now she took it out of the freezer and out of the box. She set it on a plate and put the plate on the kitchen counter. She wanted the ice cream to soften enough that even Sunny could get it down. Sometimes she had trouble with solid foods.

As she set the plate on the kitchen table she heard a clunking sound outside the kitchen window. Something small falling down the fire escape. She knew what that sound meant. She heard it again. She watched the window and saw a penny careening down. It pinged against her fire escape and slipped through the grating and fell to the third floor below. She didn't need to wait for a third penny to drop.

Loochie smiled and ran to the kitchen window, pulled open the security gate, lifted the sash, and peeked her head out. She saw a small hand dangling out of the window right above her own. Sunny! The hand went back inside the apartment slowly. Loochie looked over her shoulder for her mother, but her mother was still in the bathroom. When she looked out the window a second time the small hand was shaking slightly and holding another penny. The slim fingers parted and the penny fell. Loochie reached out to try to catch it but the penny hit the floor of her fire escape landing and shot off wildly, then fell four stories down to the ground. If it had been anything much heavier than a penny, like an egg, or a little girl, it would've cracked in two.

Loochie spoke in a tense whisper. "I'm coming!"

Then Loochie climbed out the window.

Children who grow up in the suburbs learn to climb trees. Kids from Queens learn to climb fire escapes. In the summer Loochie's fire escape was like a rusty balcony. If the apartment felt too warm she'd sneak out onto the fire escape to cool down. Some nights she even slept out there, calling it a Queens camping trip. Even now, in late December, with a dusting of snow on each step, she gripped the handrails and climbed fast. The hardest thing to take was the cold. By the time she'd made it to the fifth floor, only one flight up, she was shivering. But when she reached the landing of the floor above hers she forgot about the chill and being so high. There, in the window, framed like a photo, sat Zhao Hun Soong.

"Sunny," Loochie whispered.

Her best friend looked so tiny. Or had Loochie just grown bigger?

Sunny Soong had always been small for her age. If she and Loochie hadn't lived only one floor apart Loochie likely would never

have noticed the kid. Would've assumed Sunny was two grades behind her and therefore not friendship material. But when Loochie and her mother would head downstairs in the elevator each morning—first grade, second grade, third grade—Sunny and her uncommunicative grandmother would be in the elevator, too. They would walk the same route all the way to P.S. 120 and at a certain point the two girls began to talk with each other, even if the adults didn't. If they'd lived in two different buildings, or even on two different sides of this building, they probably wouldn't even have met. Sometimes Loochie just couldn't believe the good luck of it.

But Loochie had a hard time thinking of good luck just now. Sunny sat in a chair in the kitchen, her hands resting on the windowsill, and her skin seemed translucent. Veins were visible, tracing their way across the backs of her hands, all the way to her knuckles. The veins weren't even blue, but a deep, dark gray, the color of wet cement. Sunny's face had become so fat and pale that her small nose, her tiny mouth, seemed to be floating in a bowl of custard. Her eyelids were red and puffy.

The one touch of liveliness was a blue knit cap that she wore pulled down to her eyebrows. It was the blue of a bright sky. And attached to the top, by two short strings, were a pair of pompoms. They sat on her head like mouse's ears. They were the kind of gift someone might give to make a sick child feel whimsical, to graft youth back onto a decaying body.

"You look great," Loochie lied.

Sunny didn't speak, just stared. Loochie could hear Sunny's breathing, raspy and weak. Sunny inhaled deeply three times before she could gather the strength to respond.

"*This* is what I look like," Sunny said as she grabbed the top of the cap with an almost angry determination and yanked it off her head.

Sunny's hair had become so thin that Loochie could see her scalp, almost pale green like a honeydew melon. It was like she was fading right before Loochie's eyes. Even at twelve years old, Loochie knew not to betray her sadness. She held her face still as best she could. She smiled weakly. "Your pajamas are cute," she offered.

The long-sleeved top of Sunny's outfit was purple with a lime collar and cuffs. There was a giant green electric guitar and next to that four big pink letters: R-O-C-K. The pajama bottoms were pink with that same image printed all over them in a much smaller size. The green electric guitar and the word *ROCK* running up and down her legs. The ankles had lime cuffs, too. The pajamas were *not* cute and they both knew it. Under different circumstances they would've laughed about them, but not right then.

"Welcome back," Loochie said, just to change the subject, and though she didn't want to do it she looked away from her friend because she was afraid she might cry.

When Loochie looked back Sunny had put the blue cap back on. She'd pulled her hands back inside the window and they were in her lap. She was looking down at those hands and her face wore a look of serious concentration. One of her hands was closed in a fist. Sunny tried to lift it but each time she did the hand trembled and, a moment later, fell back into her lap. Loochie watched this happen twice. Sunny's shoulders heaved now. She was wearing herself out just trying to do this simple thing, just trying to lift her hand. She was supposed to be getting better!

But who had actually told Loochie that?

Before Sunny got so sick she'd had this way of looking at people. She'd set her lips tight and squint her eyes and sort of lean forward, like she was about to jump right on their heads and stomp them. It made her look like the tiniest gangster ever. It intimidated everyone except her grandmother.

One time, maybe four years back, the two of them had been at Flushing Meadows Park and wandered into one of the meadows so they could kick off their shoes and walk in the summer grass. They were having a pretty good time when suddenly this *beast* came galloping right at them. It was just a dog, a Doberman pinscher, but to those girls it might as well have been a horse. And it shot straight toward them. The owner was nowhere to be seen. The thing was coming for them and it started barking and Loochie cried right there. She thought it was going to tear off their heads. As the dog got closer, its face, with those high, pointy ears and the long,

narrow snout, looked downright demonic. Even worse when it bared its teeth. Loochie was busy looking for her mother, or Sunny's grandmother—where had they wandered off to? But then Sunny bore down in her gangster pose and, no lie, the girl growled at the dog. And do you know that dog actually changed direction? It bounded away from them. Sunny had scared it off. The whole time she didn't even shiver. As far as Loochie was concerned, Sunny saved her life that day.

So how could that hero in the park be the invalid here now? The one who couldn't even lift her hand out of her lap?

Finally Loochie leaned into the window and held Sunny's hand and lifted it for her.

Relieved, Sunny opened her fingers. "I've got something for us," she said.

Three brittle-looking little twists of paper sat in Sunny's palm.

"I took these from my grandmother," Sunny said. "Take them."

Loochie snatched them with her free hand, then let Sunny's hand go. It immediately dropped, as if it weighed a thousand pounds, and landed in her lap again.

Sunny reached to a cup of water sitting on the kitchen table inside her apartment. She grabbed the plastic cup and inhaled deeply and lifted it to her lips. She sipped twice. The skin on Sunny's neck was so thin. It was as if Loochie could actually see the water sliding down the inside of her best friend's throat. Loochie turned away fast. She looked at her own palm. All three little white sticks. They weren't much bigger than toothpicks.

"Chinese cigarettes," Sunny said, after she'd set the cup back down, almost out of breath from the action. "Hand rolled." Another breath. "Strong stuff."

Cigarettes? It took a moment before Loochie could speak. "I thought we could ride my bike inside the apartment," she said, and her voice sounded as small as her planned rebellion.

Somewhere inside the apartment a woman's voice called out in Cantonese. Sunny's grandmother. Sunny looked over her shoulder, then back at Loochie. That move tired Sunny out, too. She winced

and breathed heavily and Loochie just couldn't believe that this was Sunny.

"I'm going to sneak a lighter with me," Sunny said. "But my grandmother would find these cigarettes if I tried to take them down. She'd probably smell them or something. You hold on to them. I'll be down in a couple of minutes."

Loochie closed her hand around the cigarettes. A cold wind rocked her as it passed and she squatted on the fire escape. They were at eye level. "I don't want to do this," Loochie whispered, shaking her hand. "I saved you some *cake*."

Sunny's mouth squeezed tight and her eyes closed. She kept them closed when she spoke again. "I just want to do something fun with you, one more time." She opened her eyes and looked at Loochie directly. "Just in case."

Loochie almost jumped through the window, almost tackled her sick friend. "In case what?" she barked. She felt angry suddenly and didn't quite know why. "In case what?"

Sunny's eyes flared open. "My grandmother is going to hear you," she wheezed.

"You're coming over for my birthday party," Loochie said, sounding like she was giving orders. "That's why you're coming over."

"Okay," Sunny said quietly. She watched Loochie a moment, opened her mouth to say one more thing, but Loochie raised the fist that held the cigarettes like she'd rather punch this sick kid than hear what more Sunny had to say. So Sunny didn't say anything.

Sunny reached up and pulled at the kitchen window to shut it but she couldn't do it. She didn't have the strength left. She'd tired herself out opening the window minutes ago. Loochie stuffed the three Chinese cigarettes into her pocket, then grabbed the bottom of the window and pulled it down. Sunny waved at Loochie through the window pane. Just then Sunny looked like a specimen slide under a microscope. Then she managed to slide the security gate shut and Loochie couldn't see her at all anymore. Loochie crossed her arms and shivered from the cold.

She stood at her full height again on the fire escape. Five floors below a few kids and adults walked along the sidewalk but none of them looked up. She watched them. Then she looked above her. The building had six floors. Loochie lived in 4D, and Sunny lived in 5D, but no one had lived in 6D for as long as Loochie had been alive. Sometimes boys in the building went on to the roof in groups and she didn't have any idea what they did up there but even the boys—reckless and fearless and stupid sometimes—even the boys never messed with apartment 6D.

Loochie crept down the fire escape stairs and slipped back into her apartment. She shut the window and closed and locked the security gate, just as she heard the toilet flush in the bathroom. Right after that her mother walked into the kitchen.

“Don't go in there for a little while,” her mother said, smiling bashfully. Then she crossed her arms. “Why is it so cold in here?”

But Loochie wouldn't have to explain because the front door clicked, keys in the lock.

Her brother had arrived.

“Tell Louis I need ten more minutes to get ready!” Mom called and ran into her bedroom.

Louis was only twenty-two but already going bald. He kept his hair cut very low to try to disguise the fact, a style that emphasized the perfect roundness of his skull. That round head was one of Loochie's favorite things about him. When she was younger, like three or four, he would walk her around on his shoulders and she slapped the top of that big old head and he didn't mind at all. Even now, at twelve, when she saw her brother she still had the urge to give him a smack or two right on the noggin but she wouldn't dare to do it because they didn't know each other like they used to. Sometimes she really missed him. One of the reasons she'd taped the Mets pennant to her bedroom door was so that Louis would know, if he passed it, that it was important to her. That he was still important to her. So she felt quietly pleased that Louis wanted to sit and talk a little while he waited for their mother. Before they sat down Loochie rolled up the blanket and pillow she'd laid out for Sunny.

"You know who put that bike together?" he said, pointing at it where it stood, kickstand out, right under the living room windows.

"You did," she said, rolling her eyes. She knew this because he'd told her on Christmas Eve, when her mother had wheeled it out. Then he told her again on Christmas Day, in case she'd somehow forgotten overnight.

"That's right," Louis said. He scratched behind one ear, then looked over his shoulder. "So why don't you tell me where Mom is taking me today."

Loochie grinned, giving nothing away. "To lunch," she said.

Louis scratched his chin. "I don't believe it." He looked at her directly. He had small, intelligent eyes. When they were younger he could basically stare at her until she admitted to a lie. He tried to do it now but his power over her had diminished now that she was twelve.

"Lunch," she said again, and nothing more.

Louis nodded once, as if he understood this plan was fruitless. But then Loochie saw a new quality in his eyes. They flashed brightly. "Mom says you and Sunny are going to be here alone for the afternoon."

Loochie crossed her arms. Where was Sunny anyway? It seemed like it had been more than a couple of minutes already.

"We're old enough," Loochie said quickly, just in case Louis wanted to cause trouble by convincing their mother the two girls shouldn't be left by themselves. What better way to get out of his suspicious lunch date than to convince their mom that Loochie and Sunny needed a chaperone?

Louis put up one open hand. "Relax," he said. "I'm not trying to spoil your party."

She almost believed him. She waited to see what he'd say next.

He looked past her now, out the window. "I'm just impressed that you guys aren't worried."

"About what?" Loochie asked a bit defensively. She'd been allowed to stay in the apartment alone since she was seven. Since Louis moved out and Mom didn't get home from work until six o'clock, Loochie was in the apartment by herself all the time and she'd yet to get herself killed.

"The Kroons," Louis said quietly. "I'm impressed you're not worried about *them*."

"What is a Kroons?" she asked.

Louis grinned and immediately Loochie regretted asking. The glee on her brother's face suggested that Louis was about to enjoy himself at her expense.

"You're too young to remember what the eighties were like," Louis began.

This was true, considering that Loochie hadn't been born until 1992.

"They called it the Crack Era. You know what crack is?"

"A drug?" she said, and wished she hadn't posed it as a question.

Louis shook his big round head. "Weed is a drug," he said. "Tobacco is a drug."

Loochie's eyes went wide and she looked down at her pocket. "It is?"

But Louis wasn't listening. "Crack was a *plague*," he said. "The whole country got hit by it in the eighties. Queens was no exception." Louis looked at the ceiling as if he were watching images of the era scroll by up there.

"The people who smoked crack, the addicts, they were called *crackheads*. Man were they rough. Crackheads didn't care about eating or sleeping, they didn't wash, and they didn't change their clothes. Hell, they barely had any clothes because they were too busy selling everything they had just to buy more crack."

"So they were naked?" Loochie asked. She imagined the sidewalk below, the streets of Flushing, overrun by naked, unwashed men and women. In her imagination they tackled any normal person who walked by and tore away everything, purses, jewelry, cell phones. Did they have cell phones back then? Loochie didn't know enough ancient history to be sure.

"They were monsters," Louis said with some satisfaction. He spoke like a veteran recalling war. "We had a family of crackheads in this building," he said, trying to sound nonchalant because he seemed to know that would only scare her more.

"In our building?" Loochie asked.

"Not just in our building," he said. "Right above us."

Loochie reeled back with open horror. "In Sunny's place?"

Louis chuckled, satisfied with the reaction. "On the sixth floor: 6D. Why do you think everyone is so afraid of that place? The Kroons. That was the family name. Mother, father, five sons, and a daughter. Every single one was a crackhead. I never took the elevator when I was young because one or two of those Kroons would ride the elevator, day and night, just looking for a kid to get on the elevator alone. They'd rob him for whatever he had. Sometimes they did worse."

Now Louis looked at Loochie directly. Loochie looked over his shoulder, for her mother. She wished her mother would appear and make Louis shut up, but she wouldn't let herself call out for the help. She'd feel too much like a baby if she did. So she sat quietly.

Louis looked across the living room, at the television, which was off. He was reflected in the dark screen but the image was warped. His head was even bigger and lopsided and grotesque. Loochie could almost imagine that he was a Kroon now, a creature that had snuck into their living room.

“A whole family. Can you believe that? Every single one of them was smoked out. It was crazy. I’d see them in the hallways or the lobby and they had sores on their bodies, on their faces, because the crack made them so sick. They didn’t eat or drink. They smoked so much crack it was like their bodies started *rotting*. I remember one brother, the oldest brother, he had a dent in his head. Like a basketball without enough air in it. And that dent kept getting deeper, year after year. One time I saw him, I was going up the stairs and he was coming down, and half his skull was just *gone*. It was like a pit with some skin over it. I didn’t know how he could even be alive. He tried to grab me.”

Loochie leaned forward. “What did you do?”

“I was on the second-floor landing of the stairs. I opened the stairwell door and ran out and went over to my friend Todd’s place, 2B. I still remember. I stayed there until mom got home from work. I wouldn’t even leave Todd’s place. Mom had to come get me. I was just a little younger than you. The early eighties was a weird time. I remember kids started disappearing, all over the country. The news and parents said kids were getting snatched by guys in vans, but that wasn’t it. Not in this neighborhood. It was the Kroons. Stealing children up to their apartment. And once they get you in there, that’s it. Nobody leaves 6D.”

“Why?” Loochie whispered.

“They just ... Well, I don’t know what they did to kids up there, but the smells were so bad. They must’ve been burning the bodies.”

“Why?” Loochie asked. “For what?”

“I don’t know why things like that have to happen to children,” Louis said quietly. “But being young doesn’t protect you. Horrors come for kids, too.”

At that moment Louis stared into the distance and seemed truly sad for having to reveal a truth like that to his little sister.

“But they’re gone now,” Loochie said softly. “I’ve never seen them.”

Louis lost the sad look and returned to something more gleeful. He shook his head. “The parents died, I remember that. But the others didn’t. The super locked that apartment up tight one day. But the brothers, and the sister, are still in there. Why do you think nobody’s ever moved into 6D? They can’t. That place still belongs to those *things*. The super was hoping to just starve them out but it hasn’t worked. The Kroons won’t die.”

“But if they’re just stuck in there it doesn’t matter, right? They’re stuck.”

“The super closed off the door. But they can still get out.”

“How?”

“Same as I used to do. Same as you probably still do.” Louis watched her to see if she’d figure it out.

“The window?” Loochie asked.

“The window,” Louis confirmed.

Just then their mom walked into the living room and Louis got up from the couch. Loochie’s mother said, “We have to go or we’ll miss our appointment.”

“Appointment?” Louis asked.

“Reservation,” their mother quickly corrected.

This whole time Loochie was stiff on the couch, her body locked with fear.

“Tell Sunny I said hello,” her mother said. “I hoped I’d get to see her before we left.”

“Sunny’s missing?” Louis said, but the way he grinned showed that he was being theatrical.

Their mother looked closely at Louis, then at Loochie, who hadn’t moved from her spot on the couch. “What have you been saying to her?”

Louis shrugged. “We’ve just been talking about the good old days.”

Their mother looked at her watch. “Loochie,” she said, but got no response. “Lucretia.”

Finally Loochie turned her head.

“We’re leaving,” she said. “You’re on your own.”

The story of the Kroons seemed to float in the living room like a great gray cloud. So Loochie left the living room. She walked into her mother's bedroom and stopped before the two wig-wearing mannequins. She had another idea, along with the bike ride, of what to do with Sunny when she arrived. Two wigs for two girls who might enjoy a little dress-up. Loochie would save the nicer one, the date wig, for Sunny. She slipped the work wig off its foam head and placed it gently on her scalp. She knew she should've waited for Sunny to do all this, and normally she would have, but Louis's story had her feeling jumpy. She needed to do something just so she wouldn't be sitting around having nightmares about apartment 6D.

She tucked one braid under the wig, as best she could, then the other. Did she look older now? Loochie turned to her right profile and her left. She dipped one shoulder and looked into the mirror with her most mature expression. The wig looked nice. And wouldn't it be even better with a little lipstick?

Loochie found the small bag in the top dresser drawer where her mother kept her cosmetics. Unopened lipsticks, eyeliner, foundation, a jar of cold cream. Loochie decided to be bold and she uncapped one lipstick, a red that wasn't too red, and she applied it lightly like she'd often seen her mother do. Now she looked at herself in the mirror again, delighted at the sight. Forget the fact that she was twelve years old: She practically looked fifteen. Maybe even sixteen. She stepped backward from the dresser mirror and the farther she moved the older she seemed to get. She found a pair of her mother's socks on the floor, rolled each into a ball, and tucked them into her sweater. Now she even had boobs!

Her hand moved toward her pants pocket without her even willing it to do so. She had one of Sunny's cigarettes pinched between two fingers and almost didn't realize how it had gotten there. She was becoming someone else. Not Loochie but Lucretia.

Lucretia put the cigarette between her lips and made a loud sucking sound, treating the cigarette more like a straw. The sound was embarrassing but in the mirror across the room the moves looked so *elegant* to her.

Lucretia swiveled, her hips turning before her feet did. Lucretia sashayed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Lucretia spun the dial on the front burner of the oven and the flames whooshed when they rose. Lucretia batted her head from side to side as if a breeze were playing through her hair. Lucretia bent forward delicately and brought the tip of the cigarette to the flame. When it lit Lucretia pulled on the other end more gently this time and the rolling paper flared. Suddenly Lucretia thought she heard the front door unlock. Her mother was back! She turned off the burner and listened.

“Mom?”

Loochie waited. She held the lit cigarette behind her back.

“Louis?”

If it had been Sunny and her grandmother they would’ve rung the bell.

Still nothing. She shut her eyes and held her breath. No sounds. They weren’t back. Maybe just the door of another apartment nearby being opened. She walked back into the bedroom. Where was Sunny though?

Lucretia stood in the same place, a few feet from the dresser mirror, and watched herself take a pull so deep, so expert. The smoke filled her mouth and her cheeks expanded. Then some of the smoke snuck down her throat and boy did it burn. Her eyes watered quickly, suddenly, and her mouth fell open and she hacked inelegantly once, twice, three times.

The cigarette fell out of Loochie’s fingers and landed in the bedroom carpet but she hardly noticed. She stooped forward and coughed violently. She was crying now and her mouth filled with spit that tasted vile. She opened her mouth and choked out all the spit right into the carpet. Then she kept heaving and something came up from deeper in her stomach. She hadn’t eaten much for breakfast, too excited, so she vomited bile. Right there in her mother’s bedroom. A puddle in the carpet.

Nice.

At least the vomit doused the lit cigarette, though.

Loochie stepped back from the puddle and stood straight. When she looked at herself in the dresser mirror she no longer looked sixteen, just twelve again. Her face was flushed and the lipstick had smeared down onto her chin. Her mother's wig had slipped so far forward that it almost covered her eyes.

Loochie squatted and fished the rest of the cigarette out of the carpet. It would have to be flushed. She went to the bathroom and when she was in there she heard the wail of a siren coming down her block. It was loud. Not the police. Not a fire truck. It was an ambulance. This wasn't so strange. Ambulances came down her block from time to time. There were a bunch of old people who lived in her building and the one across the street. Sometimes the ambulance was just passing through, headed toward an emergency on another block.

But the siren only got louder. The ambulance wasn't passing by. It had stopped outside. The sound was so loud now that Loochie shut the bathroom door as if that would keep it out. But it didn't. She flushed the cigarette to drown out the siren. She tried to think of which old person in her building might've called 911. Mrs. Kirikou? Mr. Dodgson? Who else might've called for it? The siren continued to wail so loudly it was as if it had parked right in front of her window. Loochie flushed the toilet a second time, but nothing would shut that ambulance out. She stood in the bathroom wishing for something, anything, that might distract her.

It was right about then that she heard a new sound. Something rattling. Earlier she'd hoping for Sunny's knock at the front door, but this sound came from the kitchen window by the fire escape.

*

Loochie walked into the kitchen to the sound of more rattling. Sunlight filtered in through the grille of the security gate. The gate had a waffled pattern, steel bars crisscrossing so tightly that an adult would have a hard time slipping more than two fingers through any

of the spaces. This was a good design, meant to keep a burglar from getting his hand inside, but the close-set grille also made it hard to see through, to see out. So it wasn't until Loochie was standing right up to the security gate that she realized there was someone out on the fire escape. The person was much bigger than Sunny.

It was a woman. At least that was Loochie's best guess. But no one she recognized and she knew most of her neighbors in the building on sight. Loochie pressed one eye to the grille and looked through. The woman was crouched there by Loochie's window, pressing so close that Loochie could only make out the upper half her face. The woman wasn't even looking into Loochie's apartment. She crouched out there, right in front of Loochie's window, but her face was in profile. Looking away, maybe down at the ambulance still on the street. It was just then that Loochie realized the siren had stopped ringing but she could still hear the heavy chugging engine of the thing, double-parked on the street below.

Loochie closed her mouth and quieted her breathing. She kept her eye to the grille but didn't know what else to do. Who was this woman? Loochie could see one ear, one eye, the curve of her bulbous nose. The woman's hair was short and dry looking. It was pulled back into a small ponytail. Her hair was almost the same color as her skin. Both a deep gray, like the color of the cigarette ashes that had fallen to the carpet in Loochie's mother's room. The woman's ear looked tiny, misshapen. It took a moment before Loochie realized it was just that the woman's earlobe had been torn off (or fallen off?) long ago. The white of the woman's eye looked pink.

But for all this, somehow, the worst part of this was that the woman wouldn't even turn her head and look into Loochie's window. She just kept staring down at the street, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to stoop in front of a stranger's fourth-floor kitchen window. It was this, the calm of the woman, that unnerved Loochie. The fear was like an itch, running up her scalp. What to do? What to do?

"My mother's in the other room!" Loochie finally shouted through the grille.

The woman didn't move. She stood in profile, only inches from the window, and the longer she stayed there, immobile, impassive, the more Loochie wanted to reach out and push her off the fire escape. Better she fall to the ground and break her back than just keep squatting there scaring the life out of Loochie.

"And my brother is here," Loochie added, less forcefully.

Loochie had been watching the woman long enough to see the faint rise and fall of the woman's head as she breathed. Loochie went quiet again and now she could hear the woman breathing, too, even through the gate and the closed window. It was a strained sound. Like Sunny's breathing had been earlier. But there was something more to it. It was wet, like gurgling, each time the woman exhaled. When Loochie had a cold and her nose was clogged up and she had to breath through her mouth she sounded like that. So maybe the woman was just sick. Maybe she needed help. Not that Loochie was about to open the gate and start offering assistance. She was twelve but she wasn't a dummy. Still, the thought that she might just be a sick woman made Loochie feel a little less scared of her. Loochie hadn't realized she had one hand balled into a tight fist until she looked down at it. She relaxed it.

Then she heard the rattling sound again. It kept on for ten seconds. Wood moving and glass shaking. Then a little squeak. And that's when Loochie finally understood what was happening. The kitchen window was rising.

The woman was *opening* Loochie's window.

These old buildings weren't always in the best shape. After decades many of their windows were loose in their frames. Loochie had seen Louis slip back into the apartment this way more than once when she was young. His hands putting pressure on the edges of the glass, then just jiggling the window until it began to lift. It was one of the main reasons buildings like this needed security gates. But even the security gate didn't make Loochie feel very safe right now. If this woman could so blatantly climb to her window, then pull the window up, who knew what else she could do? Maybe even the security gate wouldn't be much of a hurdle. Loochie would be defenseless.

Loochie heard the window squeaking as it moved up an inch, two inches. But then it stopped. Now there was another sound. The woman out there grunted. A moment later Loochie thought she saw a mouse pop out from the bottom of the security gate. She hopped back and gasped. She almost peed herself. But it wasn't a mouse. It was worse than that. Something was wiggling right between one of the gaps in the gate.

One long pointer finger poked its way into the kitchen.

Loochie hissed at it as if it were a rat. She stood straight and stiffened. The long finger, as cadaverously gray as the woman's face, wriggled and poked as if it were clearing a clog in a drain. Loochie couldn't understand what the woman had planned. She couldn't squeeze her whole body through that hole, could she? This couldn't really be happening! But then Louis's voice played in her ears, an unwelcome bit of wisdom. *Being young doesn't protect you. Horrors come for kids, too.*

Loochie didn't waste time. She could grab a knife from the drawer by the kitchen sink. She could try to chop off this woman's finger if she kept sticking it through. If that didn't work she could lock herself in the bathroom and call her mother. Then the police. Then the army. Loochie was so busy forming a plan that she didn't pay attention to the security gate. So it took a moment before she realized the finger had disappeared, pulled back out, and now something blue was being stuffed through one of the small gaps in the gate's grillwork.

It was a blue knit cap.

Sunny's blue knit cap.

Sunny's cap, with the blue pompoms. The whole thing was crammed through the small space. Finally it fell to the kitchen floor with a faint plop. Loochie stared at it. It almost felt like she was staring at one of Sunny's organs, lying on the floor.

My friend, Loochie thought. *What did you do to my friend?*

Forget fear, Loochie couldn't control herself. She shook the gate with rage. But she lost her voice when she looked through the grillwork again. The woman had turned her head to look directly into the window. The woman locked eyes with Loochie.

Now that she had Loochie's attention the woman scooched backward on the fire escape. Loochie could see her more clearly, from shoulders up. Loochie now understood why the woman's breathing had sounded so strained, so strange. The woman's lower jaw was missing. She had a scalp and a forehead, two ears, two eyes, a nose and cheeks, an upper lip, and her top row of teeth. But the bottom of her face was *gone*. No lower jaw. No tongue. As if all that had just rotted off. Loochie felt the urge to vomit again. Her own mouth hurt suddenly. It was because Loochie was clenching her jaw tightly with disgust.

The woman stayed still on the fire escape, watching Loochie intently. Each time she exhaled her throat pulsed and a faint wave of spit spilled from the gap between her neck and the roof of her mouth. The spit splattered down onto the dingy floral white nightdress she wore. The fabric on her chest showed so many spots that had been wet and dried. It looked like this woman had been wearing those clothes for decades. Since the eighties, maybe.

"Kroons," Loochie said quietly.

Now Loochie even tasted the vomit in her mouth, her nasal passage burned, too, but she swallowed the vomit back down. Which was disgusting. The woman out there didn't shift her gaze and Loochie felt almost hypnotized. She couldn't look away. Was there a challenge or a threat in the stare?

But there was the cap on the floor. Don't forget Sunny's cap. Her friend's cap.

Her friend. Her friend. Her friend.

"Where's Sunny?" Loochie said, her face pressed up to the security gate. She wished she didn't sound so scared.

The woman raised her hand, pointing up.

Loochie knew what this meant: "6-D," she whispered.

With that the woman stood. Loochie could see even more of her. The nightdress came down to the woman's knees. It looked so old that it was a wonder it had remained intact. As ragged as a mummy's wrappings. She wore cheap, very worn flip-flops.

The woman, the *Kroon*, walked up the fire escape stairs slowly. Her slippers clapped against the bottoms of her feet as she climbed

up to the fifth-floor landing. In a few moments Loochie couldn't see her anymore. Loochie listened to the sound of the slippers as the woman kept climbing, back up to the sixth floor. Loochie didn't move, couldn't move, until the sound of the slippers was gone.

Finally she pulled the blue cap off the floor. She cradled it as if it were Sunny's head. But Loochie didn't waste much time with that. She set the cap down on the kitchen table gently. Louis said nobody ever left 6D, but she wasn't going to give up on Sunny just like that. She had to at least try to save her best friend.

Loochie unlatched the security gate and rolled it back. She opened the window and climbed out. She didn't even notice that she'd left Sunny's piece of still half-frozen cake—the Carvel Flying Saucer—sitting out on a plate. She was outside, on the fire escape again, moving so quickly that she didn't even realize she still had on her mother's wig until she was on the fifth floor and happened to see herself reflected in the kitchen window of Sunny's apartment. She saw herself and almost gasped. She looked crazy, but she didn't care. Then she realized that the security gate had been opened and she could see inside. Sunny's grandmother sat in the kitchen. In the seat Sunny had been using not even an hour before.

Sunny's grandmother had no other name that Loochie was aware of. She was, simply, "Sunny's grandmother." That's how Loochie addressed the woman whenever they met on the elevator or walking down Colden Street. And Sunny's grandmother seemed to recognize Loochie about half the time, maybe a little less. It was hard to say because the woman only ever seemed to wear one expression. The same expression whether morning or night, cloudy or sunny days. Sunny's grandmother always looked as though she was about to spit.

The old woman's mouth was always closed, lips pursed tight, a slight frown always on her lips, as if she had considered any and all things known to the world and found every single one of them wanting. She was a small woman with wide shoulders and an even wider back, though her legs were short and fantastically skinny. Was there any other way to say this? The woman looked very much, in her face and her figure, like a toad. And to Loochie she seemed as unknowable.

Loochie saw this woman now, sitting in the kitchen, in the chair right by the window—in Sunny's chair—but the old woman hadn't

noticed her. This was because Sunny's grandmother was bent forward, her small, wide hands on her knees, and she was crying.

At least she seemed to be crying. The posture was correct. Sunny's grandmother leaned so far forward that her head almost touched her thighs. Her head trembled and her shoulders shook. It was worse than crying. It was like the old woman's body was breaking down. Loochie didn't see any tears, but the old woman's whole face sagged with grief. The old woman sat alone, in a chair that was still warm, and she was coming close to shattering.

This, just as much as the evidence of the blue knit cap, was how Loochie truly came to believe that Sunny had been snatched by the Kroons. Maybe Sunny's grandmother had heard, and believed, the same rule as Louis: Nobody leaves 6D. Maybe Loochie was seeing the old woman giving up all hope. Her granddaughter was gone. Loochie wanted to tap the glass now and explain. Sunny wasn't lost. Not yet.

But such a thing would be impossible to explain. For starters, Sunny's grandmother didn't speak English and Loochie couldn't speak Cantonese. The only solution to the grandmother's grief would be to bring her granddaughter back safe. And that's exactly what Loochie Gardner planned to do. She climbed again.

As she scurried from the fifth floor to the sixth she figured her first problem would be how to get the kitchen window of 6D open from the outside. But if the Kroon could do it to her then she could return the favor. No problem. As Loochie reached the sixth floor she felt fired up. She felt sure. So she wasn't prepared to find 6D's window already open.

And one of the Kroons standing right inside.

It was a man. He grunted, almost seemed to bark like an angry dog as soon as Loochie appeared before him. She saw him in silhouette as the sunlight filtered into the apartment. He was thin and tall and his head had a funny shape. The top left side of his head seemed to be *missing*. But a second later she realized it was just caved in.

... and half his skull was just gone. It was like a pit ...

He was standing there, as if he'd been looking out at the neighborhood and she happened to stumble into his view. Her shock acted like a spray of cold water on her. She shivered and froze, but the man in the window didn't.

The man grabbed the front of her sweater.

The man pulled her inside.

Her shins scraped the windowsill, but she was too shocked to feel the pain.

She was inside and he held her up with two hands and she didn't know what to do.

His hands were under her armpits. She weighed seventy-three pounds but he held her up like she was a puppy. Before she could do anything he yanked at her sneakers. He pulled off the right one, then the left. The sneakers thumped on the floor. He held her up with one hand now and the other hand dug into her back pockets. He grabbed her belt buckle and tugged at it. Then her belt came off. He dropped it to the floor, too. What was he going to do to her?

A new fear, a deeper fear, thundered in her belly, her thighs, and she whipped her body like a feral cat. She hissed and she spat and finally the man seemed to be having trouble keeping hold of her. She bucked and swung her arms wildly and finally broke free from the man's grip. She dropped to the dirty floor just like her sneakers and belt.

She scrambled backward in the kitchen. The floor was filthy. Bits of paper—newspaper, torn envelopes, old tissue and toilet paper—and bottle caps, old soda cans, straws and candy wrappers, dirt and the husks of dead roaches, crumbly opaque roach eggs. The room smelled terrible, like the parts of Flushing Meadows Park where boys pissed when they couldn't bother to use a bathroom. A smell that made her nose sting. Her palms felt bitten when they came down against the ridges of bottle caps. Soda cans rattled as her flailing legs kicked them away. She looked up at the man who'd pulled her in.

For the first time in her life Loochie thought she might faint. The feeling was so new to her that she didn't even understand what was happening. Her head felt like it was filled with bees. Her chest, her

lungs, were getting tighter. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. To see this man, this thing, above her. It wasn't even like the one she'd seen through the security gate in the kitchen. At least then there'd been a window, a gate, between them. Now they were both in the same room. Nothing between her and him. Between her and Pit. He'd tried to get Louis in a stairwell two decades earlier and now here he was, coming for her. Nothing could deter him.

But then he stopped for a moment, as if the thought of catching Loochie had been interrupted by another, more powerful, urge. He stood still and scanned the ground, like he was looking for something he'd dropped and for a moment it was as if Loochie wasn't even there. Then the impulse seemed to pass and he looked up, focused on Loochie again. Coming for her again.

But he wasn't the only one.

Pit lumbered toward her, moving across the bombed-out kitchen, and then Loochie heard a second round of grunting and another figure rushed out of the room to her right, the one that corresponded to her mother's bedroom. It barreled out and smashed right into Pit, sending both to the floor. It was another male. The pair yelped and growled at each other, as if they'd lost the power of human speech long ago.

The Kroons snapped at each other and tussled. The new male slammed Pit's head against the floor. Pit raised his head immediately and bit into this other one's shoulder. It screeched as Pit bit a second time. Loochie gasped at the ferocity of their fighting. Both of them looked at Loochie quickly and then attacked each other again. They were fighting over her. She didn't want to still be there, on the floor, when one of them won.

The room felt like some nightmare version of her place. The layout of the kitchen was the same as hers. The oven went against the wall adjacent to the window. The fridge against the wall behind her. The same space where cabinets ran along the wall beside the fridge. Identical. But here the oven was gone. A gas hose ran out from the wall but was attached to nothing. The fridge was still here but its doors had been torn off, the racks inside gone, too. Garbage bags were piled inside. They dripped a sour yellow liquid, gave off a

smell of rotten milk or meat, the worst odor in this place yet. The kitchen cabinets were there but all the drawers had come out long ago, and the remaining cabinet doors hung at odd angles. It was like her place but not her place, a nightmare version, and she wanted to escape.

She could just go right back out the kitchen window, she thought. Climb out onto the fire escape and make her way back down to her place. Be back inside and leave the Kroons behind and never think of them again.

But what would happen to Sunny if she did?

That was the terrible part. Of course Sunny would be abandoned. Left to whatever fate the Kroons had in store for her. Maybe Louis was right and they would burn her body. Maybe she'd be alive when they did it. But her urge to flee was even stronger than her concern. *Just get away!* That's what she was screaming in her head. It was cowardly to consider—saving herself and sacrificing her best friend—but consider it Loochie did. And she might even have done it, too, if the two male Kroons weren't in a heap right before the kitchen window. They screeched and gnashed at each other. Loochie had no choice but to make a different move.

If this place really was laid out like her apartment then the room to her right would be the same as her mother's bedroom. No exits in there, only windows that offered a six-story drop.

She'd have to cut left. First thing she'd see was the bathroom but there was no point hiding in there. If these things could bash each other with such force they could surely smash through the bathroom door. Next there would be a room just like her bedroom, but that also offered no escape. She would have to go into the living room and from there she could at least *try* the front door. Maybe Louis was wrong about how it had been boarded up, or how securely. Maybe she could get it open. Or, her second choice, she could try climbing out the windows in the living room. The building's air-conditioners ran in a straight line down each floor. They came preinstalled, not sitting in the window but actually embedded in the walls. They looked like a series of pegs sticking out the front of the building. As insane as it seemed, she might sneak out the window

and make her way down from one to the next. It would be like the climbing wall in gym class. Even if she only made it down one floor she could break the window to Sunny's apartment and get in. Those were her only choices. A scary plan, but at least it was a plan.

First she had to leave this damn kitchen.

Loochie felt the dirt and garbage on the floor through her socks. She worried about stepping on broken glass. But forget about getting her sneakers again. The Kroons were fighting right beside them and she wasn't going to risk getting closer.

That girl *ran*.

She fled the kitchen and passed the bathroom. The door was shut and she didn't bother trying to open it.

Loochie slowed in front of the second bedroom. Her bedroom. The door here was dirty and hung by only the bottom hinge. The door was shut, the room was dark, but from inside Loochie heard the flapping of wings. Dozens of small wings. Or could it be hundreds? As if all the pigeons in Queens had come to this apartment, to that decrepit room, to roost. At least she *hoped* they were pigeons in there. She couldn't see. But if she'd had any thoughts of hiding out in that room she let them go.

She ran down the little walkway and entered the living room. She heard a cracking sound. It was wood splintering. The living room wall was coming apart. Small pieces of it splintered, something bashing at it from the other side. A grunting sound came through the wall and a terrible crash. A piece of the living room wall shattered. A hole appeared. She could see into the kitchen. Pit was on the other side. He peered through the hole, which was the size of a pizza pie. He scanned for Loochie. When he saw her he jerked his head backward and his face disappeared from the hole. He was coming around, coming after her.

Loochie sprinted through the living room. She was looking for the front door. But the faster she ran the more distance she needed to cover. She was in her stocking feet but the floor felt cool and wet. Loochie looked down. She was standing in grass.

She looked around, trying to get her bearings. She was in a park. She looked back confused. She was standing in a field of patchy

grass. She saw trees in the distance. She looked up and instead of the ceiling she saw an overcast, gray sky. Behind the cloud cover there was a hazy sun the color of phlegm.

She was in a *park*.

But, to make it even more confusing, she could still see the living room wall that Pit had smashed through. And through that hole she could still see the horrible kitchen. She was in a park *inside* 6D. Her hands trembled and her chest clutched up again. She didn't understand. How could this be? It couldn't.

From where she stood she could see the walkway she'd just run through. Pit came rushing out a second later. He shot straight toward her. He, too, was running through the grass. Seeing him in the half-dead grass made her believe what she was seeing more. If he was in it then she really was too. He came straight at her. He picked up speed. If he reached her he would tear the skin right off her bones just like he'd snatched the sneakers off her feet. She had to move, but to where? The only choice seemed to be to go deeper into this impossible place.

A line of trees was visible to the north. There was nowhere else she might hope to hide. She took off in that direction. Loochie was fast. The fear helped speed her up. As she moved toward the trees she was filled with a sense of familiarity. Just as she'd recognized the layout of the kitchen, she felt she knew this park intimately, too. But how, exactly, she couldn't say.

Pit tore across the field in a frenzy. So rabid that when he hit a little dip in the ground he tumbled over and sprawled out in the grass. Loochie heard him making some new call, a high-pitched squeal that sounded like a toddler having a tantrum. Pit fell into the grass and Loochie kept moving. She reached the trees and disappeared among them.

The trees ran in two perpendicular lines for two hundred feet, cutting the meadow in half. As soon as Loochie entered the cover of the trees she made a sharp left rather than coming out the other side of the rows. She ran between them. She had the idea that she could trick Pit, lose him, if she did this. She doubted a man, a thing, with only half a skull had more than half a brain. Once he was up again he might keep running straight through the trees and go out to the next meadow on the other side. Meanwhile she would be doubling back toward the open kitchen window.

She couldn't run so well. The roots of the trees were overgrown and thick and they threatened to trip her up. And there were little stones everywhere, cutting into her soles. Her socks weren't much protection. Her feet hurt but she didn't slow down. She tried not to breathe too loudly even though her chest burned from the effort.

Finally she had to stop. She had to catch her breath. She lay down on her back, heaving, with a hand over her nose and mouth to mute the sound. In her own ears her every breath was as loud as a broken muffler. Out there, in the meadow, she heard the Kroon's high-pitched squealing. Then it seemed to echo. Playing once then again and again. As her breath returned to normal she realized these weren't echoes. They were replies.

Loochie sat up to check her aching feet. They throbbed like she'd been cut, but they seemed okay. She watched all the yellowed blades of grass in the meadow. Every few seconds they swayed. There was a breeze. Coming from where?

The high-pitched squeals came again. Loochie wanted to get up but found herself paralyzed. Her knees and elbows had locked up from fright. Hadn't she been trying on wigs in her mother's bedroom an hour ago? That already seemed a lifetime ago. She must be dreaming. None of this made a lick of sense. Yet somehow she knew she wasn't. The rough ground beneath her, the squeals of the

Kroons, the pain in her feet, all of it too real for a dream. She was awake. And that meant all of this was truly happening. If she was to survive it, she couldn't stay still hoping to wake up.

She straightened her mother's wig to steady herself. Loochie got to her feet. She needed to get a better idea of what was happening out there. A strategic view. She would have to climb one of these trees.

She was trembling again. She was used to climbing fire escapes, but hadn't ever scaled a tree. It didn't help that this was an insane tree in an insane woods in an insane park that had appeared—insanely—in this apartment.

These trees weren't at all like the ones she'd seen on trips to the Queens Botanical Garden or Flushing Meadows Park. These trees were like their demented cousins. They were so tall they seemed to run as high as her entire apartment building. Sixty feet straight up, that big. Their trunks were misshapen, bubbling out here and there in thick knots, and their outer bark was gray and ashen, as if burned. In places the bark showed great tears and the inner bark was a sickly white, the color of bones. She didn't want to climb this tree. She didn't even want to touch it. But then she heard the calls out in the meadow once again and she had no choice. She reached for the lowest branch of the nearest tree and climbed.

It's amazing what a person can do when her life depends on it. Loochie scaled that tree from one limb to the next, fearful but quick. Running had been bad without sneakers, but climbing was easier in socks. She was twenty feet up before she looked down. The sight made her dizzy but she shut her eyes and soon she was calm. Then she scooted forward on a limb, going farther and farther, until she was able to peak at the meadow through the tree's dense leaves.

There were five Kroons out there now. Seventy-five feet away. Pit and Lefty and three more. Two of the new ones looked exactly alike. Twins. And the last of the new ones was low to the ground, as if he was lying on his stomach in the grass. Loochie watched that one. He was pulling himself through the grass. He reached forward and dug his fingers into the dirt and moved ahead a couple of inches. Then, with the other hand, he pulled himself ahead again. Back and forth

like this, slow but unceasing. He was missing both his legs but his ratty jeans were full length. The empty denim trailed behind his upper body as if he had two tails.

Pit pointed toward the trees. He barked at the others loudly and they barked back in quieter tones. They were communicating. Coordinating. They spread out and formed a line, fifty feet between each of them. Together they moved toward the woods. The formation would act like a net, one of them sure to catch sight or sound or smell of her. *Did Sunny come through here, too?* Loochie wondered. How had she have avoided these things? She couldn't imagine Sunny sprinting away, let alone climbing a tree, not as sick as she was. Maybe Loochie was too late. Maybe the Kroons had already taken up her tiny body and ... what? Burned it. Cooked it? Her best friend going up in a cloud of smoke. The thought seemed to tickle the back of her ear, like a fly or some other pest. *You're too late. Sunny's gone.* But she brushed the words away. She didn't want to hear them.

As she surveyed the park Loochie's sense of familiarity returned. From her perch up in the tree, she could see more of the grounds. In the distance, far behind the Kroons, she made out a body of water. It looked like a huge lake. But something was off. From here she could see the surface flickering. The lake was on fire. Or maybe it was a lake of fire. And yet the shape of it, the distance from this stand of trees, were recognizable. Meadow Lake. Flushing Meadows Park. She was in Flushing Meadows Park. Where she and Sunny used to skate around the Unisphere.

The Kroons were creeping nearer. Then all five of them stopped looking toward the trees and snapped their attentions at the ground. They looked at the half-dead grass as if they'd all dropped something important. Just like Pit had done in the kitchen earlier. They scanned the ground desperately. She wondered what it was each of them could've been searching for, yearning for, so badly. What had Louis called them? Crackheads. Maybe that meant they walked around searching for cracks in the ground?

Loochie entertained a thought. Maybe she could just climb down and talk with them. Explain that she wasn't meant to be here. She

was looking for her friend and they only wanted to go home. But that would have been as futile as trying to convince Priya, Susan, and Monique that they should let her back into their circle. It would never happen.

The Kroon in the grass had stopped altogether. His arms were straight and his spine curled back and his head lifted. He was no longer scanning the ground for cracks. He'd spotted her. He was looking directly at her. He watched her for a moment, his eyes like embers. She shook her head faintly, as if begging him not to tell the others. His eyes narrowed and he grinned. The Kroon opened his mouth and barked. The other four, his brothers, changed direction. They swelled toward her.

Loochie scrambled backward along the tree limb, toward the trunk. The leaves hid her, but it didn't matter. They'd seen where she was. She climbed down, practically jumping from one limb to the next.

If this place did, somehow, have the same layout as Flushing Meadows Park then she knew exactly where she might find Sunny. *If Sunny is still alive.* She had the thought and sent it away just as fast. If this place had the same layout then she might find Sunny at their favorite place. The giant replica of the planet, built for the 1964 World's Fair. Probably the most famous landmark in Queens: the Unisphere.

Loochie lost her footing ten feet from the ground and fell. The drop seemed to take days but eventually she slammed into the earth. She landed on her side, banging her hip and shoulder. She couldn't keep her eyes focused but still she scrambled to her feet because she could hear the Kroons rushing through the grass. The brittle blades crackled. It sounded like the meadow was on fire.

Loochie ran from them, through the second row of trees. She didn't think about her feet, shoulder, or hip. Her only thought was to find the Unisphere. She entered a second meadow of half-dead grass. Without meaning to, she let out a sharp laugh.

In the distance she saw a giant silver globe.

Z

Flushing Meadows Park, the real one, was enormous, one and a half times the size of Manhattan's Central Park, and the one here—*inside* 6D!—seemed even larger. Loochie crossed the second meadow with a quickness that surprised even her. Her socks were soaked from the light dew in the grass. When the Kroons broke through the tree line behind her they looked like specks in the distance. She was that far from them already. But there was more ground to cover before she reached the Unisphere.

After the meadow she reached a concrete path with benches. The concrete was cracked and uneven. The benches were broken apart, splintered pieces of wood jutting out in all directions, as if the Incredible Hulk had come through and smashed each one. Loochie didn't hesitate. She just kept sprinting.

As she closed the distance between her and the stainless steel Unisphere, she saw the one here wasn't exactly the same as the globe in Flushing Meadows. In that park the Unisphere sat upright, in the same position as the world, tilted on its real axis. But here in 6D she could see the silver globe hung at a precarious angle. Instead of being perched up on its stand, tilting slightly but secure, this one teetered so far over it looked like one good shove would send it rolling away.

Then the terrible grunting and barking seemed close again. Loochie looked back, her pace slowing so she wouldn't trip on the uneven ground. The Kroons had reached the concrete. All of them were there. Pit, Lefty, the Twins. They were at the line between the meadow and the concrete path but they'd stopped. All four of them had the same narrow, long builds. She would've guessed they were brothers even if Louis hadn't told her earlier. They looked like four demons. Their decaying jeans and T-shirts sagged on their thin bodies. From a distance this made it look like they were shedding their skins. Again Loochie thought of Sunny. How had she survived

them? How had she escaped? *Maybe she didn't.* Again, Loochie brushed the thought away. The four males stood still and watched her patiently. What were they waiting for? She kept running. She wasn't going to wait around to find out. Straight ahead to the Unisphere, hoping and praying to find her friend there.

The Kroons barked again, all together now, and Loochie looked over her shoulder. The last of the Kroons, the one without legs, had finally reached his brothers. The Twins reached down to lift him. What happened next, she almost couldn't believe. The Twins heaved him backward and then chucked him into the air. They *threw* him at her. And as he tumbled through the air—could it be possible?—was the legless Kroon *smiling*? Yes. He was. He was. Hunting her. Hurting her. To them this was just a game. Having fun. Right then they seemed like boys at play.

At least until the legless one, Chuck, landed hard on the concrete. He slammed into the ground and the momentum turned him over twice. As he rolled he made a weird choking noise. It took a second for Loochie to realize he was laughing. And when he stopped Loochie had to stop, too. They'd thrown him so hard, so far, that he'd landed ahead of her on the path. Blocking her straight run to the Unisphere. Chuck was on his belly. He planted his two arms and raised his head and snarled at her like a guard dog. And now the other Kroons came screaming up the path behind her. They had her at both ends.

Luckily, Loochie knew this park. Knew what she would find just west of here, if it was indeed a twisted version of Flushing Meadows. The Playground for All Children. It had swings and slides and little tunnels and bridges for kids to walk across. Plenty of spaces for a girl like her to sneak through, hide under, disappear. Louis used to push her in the swings back when she was small. Loochie broke left, going off the path, headed toward the playground. She hoped it would be there.

The Playground for All Children was straight ahead. She even felt grateful to see the black fencing that surrounded the grounds. The

tops of the fence were sharp, pointed. She made it to the front gates. They were open but when she tried to pull them shut behind her she couldn't manage it. Each gate hung at awkward angles and she saw that they were broken, their hinges warped. Shutting the gates wasn't going to happen. She just had to keep going. Disappear among the tunnels and slides. As she entered the playground she passed the green plaque that hung on the side of every New York City park. A familiar site, the name of each park engraved in clear lettering. She barely looked at the words, ran three steps past it before she caught herself. Something was wrong. Something was off about the sign. Despite the fear she felt, the knowledge that the Kroons were closing in, she still turned back to read it. She read the four words, out loud.

“Playground of *Lost* Children,” she whispered.

She didn't want to go in, but what choice did she have?

After five steps it was as if the rest of the park, the rest of the world, had been shut out. No sounds carried over. She looked around. Even the Kroons, their barking, was gone. She couldn't see them, either. They hadn't been that far behind her. So where were they? Nowhere. The faint breeze she'd seen brushing the tops of the grass, had felt against her skin, had disappeared. The air here was completely still. Even the sky seemed to be shut off from her now. She could still see the overcast grayness, saw a spark of lightning over the meadow, but she never heard the crack of thunder that should've followed. A moment after that she saw rain, faint droplets, falling in the distance, a rain shower throughout the park. But not here. Everywhere but here. Not a drop fell on the playground.

It was so quiet, in fact, that she heard her own footsteps on the concrete. And when she reached the padded play area she could hear the plastic wheeze beneath her. There wasn't anything but some fencing separating this area from the rest of the park, but it was as if the playground's fences were locking the world out, but maybe also locking Loochie in.

Loochie walked through the padded playground and just before she reached a row of swings she came across a child's bike. It was upright. Made for a kid younger than her. Red, with rainbow tassels coming out of each end of the handlebars. It had one training wheel attached, on the left side. The right one was missing.

She stepped around the bike and toward the baby swings. There were four of them, in a row—black plastic. They were closed off inside a low set of black gates. From here she could see there was something sitting inside one of the swings. She opened the gate and the metal whined, making Loochie stiffen with fear that the Kroons would hear the noise. She stood there, the top of the gate in her right hand, and it took almost a minute before she could breathe normally again. Before she could walk.

She walked to the third swing in the row. There, tilted at an angle in the swing seat, was a toy school bus. She picked it up and when she did the bus's little lights flashed and the toy rumbled out the sounds of an engine chugging. She balanced it on her open palm.

Loochie walked away from the swings still carrying the bus. As she moved to the next part of the playground, a big blue jungle gym with two yellow slides, she found more children's toys, lying here and there. She stepped over two baseball bats and three small gloves. She found a length of jump rope in a heap. There were Frisbees and bright rubber balls, soccer balls and even tennis rackets. But no kids.

She passed under a silver awning, like a metallic tent top, that threw shade down on a portion of the playground. She found a Razor scooter there, still standing. She didn't want to even touch it. Where had all these kids gone? As she passed the scooter she dropped the yellow bus. She hadn't even realized she was still holding it. It fell on its side and its headlights flashed. The engine chugged, but Loochie wasn't listening.

She stepped out from the awning. She just wanted to sit down. Where were all these kids? Were they dead? All of them? She felt—what?—weighed down by the thought, by the reality. *Maybe children just die.* They do. Sometimes. Loochie sat cross-legged and felt like she was going to melt. She covered her face with two hands. Her eyes burned as she began to cry.

She imagined Sunny, but not just Sunny, maybe all the kids who'd owned these toys, burned alive by the Kroons of apartment 6D. A place that was no apartment at all, but something else. Was it hell? Nobody had ever explained to her where hell was. People said it was underground, but how far down? She'd been riding the subways her whole life and she'd never seen a pit of fire filled with burning souls anywhere on the 7 line. So why couldn't hell be located in a sixth-floor apartment in Flushing, Queens? What if she'd gone looking to rescue her best friend and got herself trapped in hell instead? And what if she never escaped? Who would take care of her mother? Would Loochie just die here? Starve to death? She

didn't even have a toy to leave behind. Eventually her body would wither away and there'd only be her bones.

But there weren't any other bones here.

Plenty of toys, but no bones.

It was this realization that reenergized Loochie. If these kids had just died here there'd be bodies all over the place. There'd be something. She'd seen ashes fall from the tip of that first Chinese cigarette she smoked. Wouldn't bodies at least leave ashes, too? But there were none. Now Loochie imagined that all these kids, one for each toy, dozens of them, were huddled away somewhere. Together. And that sounded a lot better than being alone.

Loochie stood again. She located the Unisphere on the landscape. It loomed larger than it had before. Maybe a hundred yards away now. She walked to the edge of the playground and strolled along the fence line. She didn't want to go back out the gates she'd walked through. Maybe the Kroons couldn't come into the playground any more than the wind or the rain, but they could be waiting right on the other side of those gates. In the real world this playground had two entrances. Maybe this one did, too. She'd walk along the fence line until she found the other one and hope none of the Kroons was waiting there. She put out one hand and ran it along the fence as she walked. The tips of her fingers felt slightly numb, in a good way, as she made sure to brush every pole she walked past for good luck.

Because she was concentrating so hard on finding the other exit she didn't immediately notice the sound of thunder rolling toward the playground. But as the sound got louder, Loochie looked up. The rain had already stopped throughout the rest of the park though the skies remained as gray as before. Loochie tried to track the clouds. She missed one fence post then another as she moved. Loochie saw only one cloud in the distance. It was enormous. That deep gray that signals a serious downpour is coming. The cloud glided across the closer meadow but it looked like the wind would carry it elsewhere.

But then the cloud shifted. She watched it happen and couldn't quite understand what she was seeing. It wasn't like when wind directions change and a cloud moving east begins to slowly move northeast. No. As Loochie watched the great dark cloud seemed to

bend. There was no way of mistaking the movement. The cloud turned.

It steered toward the playground.

Toward her.

And once it changed direction it seemed to increase speed. Moving so quickly that Loochie barely stumbled back five or six steps before she could understand what that noise in the sky really was. Not a thunderclap but the beating of wings. Like she'd heard when she passed that lopsided door in the hallway of 6D. Hundreds of wings. Maybe thousands. She'd passed the room and felt lucky she didn't have to know what was causing the sound. But now she could see.

A cloud of rats. No, that's not quite right. A flock of rats. The worst of the New York City varieties. The kind that plague subway tunnels and platforms. The kind that live in building basements, in the deepest cracks, and come out late at night to gnash through heavy-duty plastic bags of trash left on the streets for pickup. These were the big, bulky rats. Their fur was as gray as ashes, and their long thin tails as pink as torn flesh. She could already see their small, black, expressionless eyes. How many pairs? Too many to count. In every way they were familiar to her, every way except one: These things had wings.

Pigeon's wings. Loochie had always found New York City pigeons' wings to be quite pretty. The blend of dark gray feathers with nearly white ones, the iridescent rainbow flashes, made patterns that she marveled at. So it only horrified her more to see the rats bobbing on such beautiful wings. Each time the wings flapped the rat's claws scrambled in the air, as if they were galloping through the air.

Loochie hurried along the fence line again but she couldn't find the second set of gates. Instead she found herself slowing down. She kept looking over her shoulder as the cloud of rats drew nearer. As she ran she ducked down and threw her hands up over her head.

The rats were almost directly overhead now. Under the flapping of their impossible wings, she heard them squeaking, high-pitched shrieks volleying back and forth. A sound that burrowed under Loochie's skin and made the sides of her face itch. New York City

rats could chew through sewer pipes and industrial wiring in record time, so how hard would it be for a flock of them to tear through a twelve-year-old girl? To chomp through her clothes and even her skin until they were left to gnaw on her bones.

Loochie lost a sense of what she was looking for and ran around the perimeter of the playground wildly, trying to get away. She ran toward the jungle gym, thinking she might climb into one of its tunnels, but then thought better of it (the two sides of the tunnels were completely open) and broke for the metal awning instead. But this wasn't any better. The rats could certainly fly right underneath.

The rats flew in circles above the playground. They squeaked in high-pitched choruses as their wings flapped. She headed back to the gates she'd first come through. Maybe the Kroons really would be there waiting for her, but she didn't know what else to do.

She didn't even make it halfway to the open gates before the rats attacked. She felt them approaching. Their wings sent gusts of air downward. The winds shook her mother's wig and almost knocked it right off her head.

The cloud of rats descended. They slammed into Loochie's back and sent her facedown on the playground's plastic mats. The cloud passed over her prone body. She felt claws scrambling across her back. Her sweater and T-shirt were no protection. She screamed but couldn't hear herself over the beating of those wings.

She was too dazed to do anything but watch them come for her. The flock of rats spread their wings as one, which made the cloud seem to expand to twice its size. Each rat slowed, gliding down.

Some of the rats landed on top of her head, on her mother's wig. They landed on her shoulders. They grasped on to her arms, digging their claws into her sweater, through the cotton, cutting into her skin. Ten rats settled on her back. It was like being trampled on by a panicked crowd. They wriggled and clawed at her. And before she could even register her disgust all those rats started flapping their wings again, furiously.

If she shut her eyes she might've thought she was standing up, by her own power. But she didn't shut them so she saw what was happening. The rats had pulled her up. The rats on her head

snatched off the wig. They looked down and squealed when they realized they hadn't caught her scalp. They dropped the wig and it fell to the ground, then they dug into her real hair. They pulled and Loochie cried out. The rest of the flock had gone to the air a second time and came back at her again.

Now that Loochie was upright another dozen rats clamped on to each of her legs. They crawled on her thighs, her shins, her butt. They dug their claws into her jeans and she felt their weight tugging at her. She watched their wings expand.

They lifted her into the air.

She was flying.

Floating, really, and only a few inches, but the rats kept beating their wings and her body rose. She was three feet high and rising. They were taking her somewhere. Whatever they were going to do to her, they weren't going to do it here. Maybe they'd drag her back to that darkened bedroom, with the door hanging off its hinges. Maybe that was where they'd taken the all children who'd once played with the abandoned toys in the playground. It wasn't the Kroons that got them, but the flying rats. Loochie imagined a room the size of her bedroom empty except for mounds of children's clothes, torn through and bloody. In one corner lay all the bones.

Loochie didn't have any fight left in her. She'd finally accepted it. Horrors come for kids. Louis had said so. Well, now it had come for her. And she couldn't fight it alone anymore. In fact, Loochie was so busy giving up that she didn't see a small girl charging toward her.

"You get the *fuck* off Loochie!"

Loochie was so startled by the voice that she didn't know which direction she should turn. She looked up before she looked down.

Someone had a torch, bright fire, and was swatting it at the rats. One of the rats, down near her ankle, burst into flames. Its fur flared and it screeched and let go of Loochie's pants and flew off. The girl swung again and again. One by one the rats were singed and they screeched and they flapped off to safety. After three or four let go of Loochie, she was no longer rising. Her body descended. The ground came closer. The remaining rats struggled to hold her up. The ones

on her head were pulling out strands of her hair as she fell from their grip and she screamed.

“Kick them off, you dummy!” yelled the girl holding the flaming torch.

Loochie knew that voice. Loochie *knew* that voice!

She kicked her legs and twisted her arms. On the ground the torch swatted at the rats some more. One after another tore away terrified. Loochie’s weight became too much for the rats grasping her sweater. Now Loochie wriggled and struggled. She found new strength. And the rats lost theirs. They tore away pieces of her sweater, a little more hair from her scalp, but they let the girl go.

Loochie landed on the ground, on her butt. Standing over her was her friend. Her best friend. That was no torch in her hand; it was a tennis racket set on fire.

“*Sunny!*” Loochie shouted.

But this wasn’t the time for a teary reunion. The rats circled above them. A small group of them broke off from the others and shot down at the girls, a first salvo. More followed behind in waves. Sunny swatted them back, singing their wings. But she couldn’t stand there doing that forever.

She looked at Loochie and screamed, “We have got to *run!*”

Loochie had found Sunny. Or, really, Sunny had found her. Sunny had saved *her*. Which would have been kind of funny, ironic really, if there'd been any time to sit around and chuckle about it. But the flock of rats had only been pushed back, not scared off. As Sunny and Loochie booked across the playground the rats swarmed in the air, a cloud of fury.

"This way," Sunny said. Her voice was raspy; she sounded nearly breathless. She was so small beside Loochie. Her bald head bobbed up and down as she ran. She held the racket up, its head still burning but starting to die down. Some of the racket strings had already melted. Loochie surprised herself by scurrying over and picking up her mother's wig. Somehow, even in the midst of all this, she didn't want to get in trouble for losing it. After she picked it up Sunny led Loochie toward the jungle gym.

"We can't hide in there!" Loochie shouted. She pulled the wig back on her head just to have her hands free.

But Sunny wasn't listening, only leading. For a sick girl she moved pretty fast. Fear had charged her engines. Loochie had to rush to keep up. The girls reached the jungle gym as the column of rats bombed down at them again. Sunny ducked under a little wooden bridge and Loochie followed after. Under here Loochie could see a hole in the fence. A tear. Three of the thick black iron bars had been pulled up like the top of a sardine can. Sunny scrambled through the hole in the fence and Loochie dove after her just as the horde of rats smashed into the jungle gym. Loochie heard the little bridge shatter. The jungle gym exploded into pieces—the slides and the stairs and the walkways and the tunnels, all of it came apart. The rats clawed their way through the rubble but Sunny and Loochie had escaped.

On the other side of the fence Loochie continued to crawl off but Sunny stood at the hole in the fence and peeked inside at the rats.

"Sunny!" Loochie hissed. "Why are you stopping?"

Sunny raised the tennis racket—the edges of the head all charred—and waved Loochie back to her side. “It’s okay,” Sunny said. “They can’t come through.”

Loochie stopped moving but stayed on her hands and knees. She looked back. It seemed to be true. Loochie could see the rats through the hole in the fence. They clawed through the debris but they didn’t crawl through the hole. The rats didn’t even seem to notice it or Sunny even though the girl was standing not twelve inches from them.

Sunny raised one very small, thin hand. She pointed at the playground. “If you’re in there they can get you. And if they get you you’re dead. But out here they have no power. The rats rule the playground. The Kroons rule the park.”

“Why?” Loochie asked, finally getting to her feet. Slowly, very slowly, taking steps toward Sunny and the hole in the fence.

Sunny shrugged. “That’s just how it is.” She dropped the racket and it clattered on the concrete but the rats, now sniffing right in front of the hole, didn’t look over. They didn’t even seem to hear it.

“So we’re safe?” Loochie asked.

“I didn’t say that.”

Now Loochie stood by Sunny’s side. She touched Sunny’s shoulder. Sunny was there with Loochie. Sunny was there.

“I almost started to believe you were ...” Loochie couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Sunny turned from the fence and looked up at her best friend, but didn’t seem to hear what Loochie had been trying to say. Didn’t even register the grief on Loochie’s face. Instead, Sunny pointed at the top of Loochie’s head.

“Why are you wearing your mom’s wig?”

Loochie pressed one hand on her head. “I was playing dress-up,” she said. “While I waited for you to come down.”

Sunny nodded and looked at her feet. She put her arms out and Loochie held her and they hugged. Sunny felt so frail that Loochie didn’t want to grab her too hard. Sunny wore the same pajamas Loochie had seen her in that morning. ROCK, ROCK, ROCK. But

they looked dirtier now. Stained and worn. Like she'd been wearing them for weeks or months, not hours.

"I wanted to come down," Sunny said.

Loochie felt her face getting hot. Was she feeling angry or sad? Hurt? How about all three. "So why didn't you?" she asked.

"You really don't know?" Sunny asked quietly.

Sunny wore a pair of purple rain boots with white polka dots, which only looked more crazy when paired with those pajamas. Though they still seemed a hell of a lot better than Loochie's stocking feet. Sunny smiled and pointed at the rain boots.

"It all happened so fast," Sunny said. "I had to leave in a hurry. These were the shoes I grabbed."

"What happened fast?" Loochie asked. "Did the Kroons get you?"

Sunny looked away from Loochie and didn't answer her.

Loochie was still confused, but she was just so happy to have found her friend. She almost couldn't believe the luck of it, in a park as big as this. But then it was like the way they'd become friends in the first place: They found each other.

"We have to get back," Loochie said. "I saw your grandmother crying. She's going to be so happy to see you again. Maybe I'll actually see her smile for once!" Loochie laughed.

Sunny backed away from Loochie and almost tripped over the tennis racket on the ground. She wasn't offended by what Loochie had said about her grandmother. She was looking over Loochie's shoulder. Her attention held. Her gaze rose higher, until she was staring right above Loochie's head.

But before Loochie could turn around, she saw something moving a little ways behind *Sunny*. First a head, bobbing, coming into view slowly, as if the person—the thing—was trudging up a hill. And as more of it appeared she felt a terrible grip in her stomach. It was a man, skinny and severe, his clothes sagging on his body, his left arm dangling useless at his side. He was a hundred feet behind Sunny but would soon be closer. He was running toward them. They were outside of the playground, where the Kroons ruled once again. Lefty's brothers wouldn't be far behind.

Loochie grabbed the tennis racket from the ground. “Behind you,” she said.

But Sunny hadn’t stopped staring at a point just behind Loochie yet. Maybe Lefty was coming from one direction and Pit, or the Twins, or Chuck from the other. Loochie had a terrible feeling—dread rumbling in the stomach.

When she turned, though, it wasn’t any of the males. It was the female. The one who’d come to Loochie’s window. The one without a lower jaw. She loomed over Loochie and Sunny. Before Loochie could swing the racket the Kroon grabbed them both.

Loochie couldn't escape the smell. The female Kroon had snatched her and Sunny. She clutched them close and ran with them. Loochie was so confused, overwhelmed, that she couldn't be sure which direction they were headed. She was trying to squirm free but the Kroon's grip was impossibly strong.

But that smell. It was the smell of burning plastic. Strong and toxic and it irritated Loochie's eyes. But behind that smell, along with it, was something sweet. Once Loochie and her mother had tried to make sugar candy at home and it had gone badly. The whole apartment had smelled like this for a day. Loochie tried to pull her head back from the Kroon but each time she did the thing only squeezed tighter and Loochie lost her breath and fell into the stink again.

Loochie found herself imagining what would come next. One Kroon grabbing Loochie's feet and the other holding Loochie's head, then each side pulling until head and feet popped right off her body. But when they finally stopped moving Loochie was dropped to the ground, landing on a new patch of concrete. She was on her back, looking up at the endless gray sky.

And she was under the Unisphere.

It was right here. Only ten feet away. Because of its precarious angle it looked as though the great stainless steel globe was about to roll off its stand and crush her.

"Sunny?" Loochie called out.

But the face that appeared above her wasn't Sunny's. It was the Kroon. It was breathing hard from the run. From this angle Loochie could see the roof of the Kroon's mouth, which wasn't pink, like a normal person's, but yellowed and tough. The Kroon coughed and Loochie felt a scattershot of spit hit her forehead and cheeks.

She hopped right up after that. And it turned out she'd held on to the old wooden tennis racket. The one Sunny had set on fire. Once

she realized she had a weapon Loochie didn't hesitate. She cocked back and brought the tennis racket down hard, right on the crown of the Kroon's head.

Loochie screamed as she connected with the creature. And did the same when she hit the thing a second time. She must've sounded as frightening as Pit and his brothers ever did. The third time she swung the racket she only grunted, like Serena Williams during a tennis match. The racket's head—already brittle from the fire—cracked into little pieces, leaving Loochie holding only the handle and a portion of the shaft. It had snapped off into a jagged sharp point. Loochie was basically holding a dagger now.

The Kroon had taken all three hits and seemed dazed by the attack, by Loochie's ferocity. It was on one knee, one hand flat on the concrete for balance. It still hadn't caught its breath from running with Sunny and Loochie in its arms. Its head dipped down so the back of the neck was exposed. Loochie could see the top of the spine, that little ball under the skin. She raised the sharp stick so she could drive it through.

"Stop! Loochie, stop!"

Sunny threw herself at Loochie, sending her best friend tumbling over. Loochie and Sunny fell into a heap. The racket handle dropped from Loochie's hands.

"What are you doing!" Loochie shouted.

Loochie tried to shake free, but Sunny gripped her close. She held Loochie's wrists and looked down into Loochie's eyes.

"She's my friend," Sunny said.

Loochie struggled some more.

"She's my friend," Sunny repeated.

Finally Sunny released Loochie's wrists. She slid away from Loochie and Loochie sat up. Nothing that had happened in 6D had stunned Loochie more than those three words. Loochie watched Sunny, dumbstruck.

"*I'm* your friend," Loochie finally said.

Before Sunny might react both girls heard heavy breathing behind them.

Sunny moved toward the sound, toward the female Kroon. When Sunny stood right next to it (her?) they looked like a jockey and a horse. One big enough to stamp the other into dust. The sight made Loochie want to pull Sunny away. Loochie scanned the ground for that tennis racket dagger, which she could still plunge into the monster, like stabbing a vampire with a wooden stake. But it had landed behind the Kroon.

Sunny pressed her body against the Kroon, hugging its big arm and resting her head against its shoulder. How could she stand the smell? That's what Loochie wondered.

"Are you okay?" Sunny asked quietly.

The Kroon sniffled but nodded.

"Can you stand up?"

Sunny stepped back and the Kroon rose to her full height. To Loochie the thing seemed to be seven feet tall. She looked into that face again—that missing jaw, the dribbles of spit rolling down its neck—and wanted to turn away. But now there were also two small gashes in its forehead, and a bump already starting to rise on its scalp. Hard for Loochie to believe she could've done such damage to something so powerful.

Sunny pinched her lips tight. "I want you to say sorry to Alice."

Loochie didn't mean to, but she laughed a little. "Her name is *Alice*?"

The Kroon dropped her head. It almost seemed embarrassed.

Sunny crossed her arms. "Loochie's better?"

That stung a little bit. "My name is *Lucretia*," she corrected.

Sunny pointed at the female Kroon. "And hers is Alice."

Sunny set her lips tight and squinted her eyes and leaned forward. It was her gangster pose. The one that had scared the Doberman pinscher away years before. Well now Loochie understood why that dog had panicked. Despite Sunny's nearly bald head and her body worn down by cancer treatments, even with a monster standing right there, that girl looked like the fiercest thing in the world.

"Fine," Loochie finally muttered. "I'm sorry."

But that didn't seem to be enough. Sunny said, "I couldn't have saved you without Alice's help, do you understand that? Who do

you think pulled those bars on the fence apart? Me?”

Now Loochie looked up at Alice, but Alice looked away.

“You did that?” Loochie asked. “Why?”

“She used to be as bad as the others,” Sunny said. “But she doesn’t want to act like a monster anymore. Now she wants to be friends.”

Alice opened her hands and extended them so Loochie could see the scrapes on the palms and fingers. Proof that tearing open that hole in the fence hadn’t been easy. That Alice had done something kind for her friend Sunny. And for Loochie, too. Wasn’t that all she’d been hoping to do for Sunny in her apartment that afternoon? To be a good friend?

Alice left her hands out and Loochie walked closer.

“It’s going to be okay,” Sunny said calmly. She uncrossed her arms, relaxed her face. She was cooing at Loochie, the way you might call a skittish cat.

Loochie inched closer. Alice’s big hands remained outstretched and open.

“I promise it’ll be okay,” Sunny said, and the words were so quiet it almost seemed like Sunny was speaking right inside Loochie’s head.

Loochie raised her two hands and set them flat on Alice’s. Loochie’s hands were so small, by comparison. Then Sunny set her hands, even smaller and frailer than Loochie’s, on top of theirs.

“Friends,” Sunny said.

They stood this way, and remained quiet, for a little time.

“Let’s go home,” Loochie finally said with a smile.

But in a moment they heard the great, echoing yelps of the male Kroons again.

“They’re back,” Sunny said, looking at Alice. Strangely, Sunny didn’t sound scared. She sounded tired.

Alice stood straight. Alice pointed behind them, toward the Unisphere.

“We’ll have to hide,” Sunny said. “Let them pass by.”

Loochie looked up at the stainless steel sphere. She’d always been amazed by the size of it in Flushing Meadows Park, and it was just as impressive here. Twelve stories tall, twice as high as Loochie’s

building. You could actually see through much of the sphere, which was just a series of crossing lines, like longitude and latitude lines, welded together into the shape of a globe. Only the continents were solid steel, sitting just inside the lines, matching their real positions on the earth. It was a beautiful construction, a work of art, and even here, at its cockeyed angle, the Unisphere made Loochie feel secure.

Alice picked Sunny up in one arm then she extended the other arm to Loochie. Loochie almost couldn't do it, let herself get grabbed again, but then the squeals of the males came louder. Getting nearer. Loochie climbed into Alice's embrace.

Then Alice ran toward the Unisphere. She hopped over a concrete barrier that surrounded the base of the sphere, landing in a pool of mucky, murky water. As Alice ran the pool got deeper, the water coming up to her ankles at first, but then her knees, even the middle of her thighs. Loochie gazed down into the water, which looked like sewer sludge. The smell was just as hideous. She pressed her face into Alice's shoulder, preferring the scent of burning plastic to whatever might waft up from the pool. As Alice ran the sound of splashing water drowned out the other Kroons.

They reached the base of the Unisphere, a concrete pedestal. Alice stepped up onto it. She moved around the base until they were right below the continent of Australia. Sunny pulled at it. Australia swung open like a door. They scrambled inside the Unisphere.

Sunny was inside now, walking along a latitude line, one foot in front of the other, with confidence. Her arms hung out slightly for balance. She made it ten steps before she turned to find Loochie stuck right at the start.

"I was scared the first time, too," Sunny said and she smiled as warmly as she had since they'd met in 6D. "You can do it."

Loochie looked at the latitude line again. She had to be calm. She breathed quietly. But the barks of the males were so loud it seemed as if they were shouting right into Loochie's ear and the tremors in her legs got stronger.

Sunny had made it all the way across, to the next continent. Africa. She called out. "I don't want to rush you, Loochie, but Alice needs to get in, too."

Loochie looked back. Alice stood outside the sphere, on the concrete pedestal base, her body still, but her forehead had gone reddish and sweaty. Alice seemed to be as scared of the other Kroons as she was.

Loochie decided she would walk across the line like Sunny had done. Follow Sunny's example. Simple. No fuss. No hesitation. Sunny hadn't even seemed to look down at her feet as she crossed. Loochie would do the same. That sewage water in the pool sloshed a foot below her. If she fell in there she'd probably drown or die of disgust, but she wouldn't pay that any mind.

Just walk. Just walk. Just walk.

She made it three steps before she slipped.

She was falling before she could even scream. Sunny had to scream for her.

"Loochie!"

Loochie threw out her hands to try to regain balance but that only made things worse. She flailed. She could see the water underneath the Unisphere. It was so dark it looked green. She saw the gaps between the longitude and latitude lines, like the gaps in the grillwork of her security gate but magnified a million times, and she hurtled toward them. And now the smell from the water, pure muck, did reach her. A sharp ammonia scent and something worse along with it. It felt like she'd been punched. She was going to dive right into it.

But she stopped falling. Alice had grabbed her by the waist of her jeans.

Alice pulled her back in.

Alice walked across the latitude line with Loochie in one hand. Alice grunted with the exertion but she made it. All the way across. Where Sunny crouched. Alice reached Africa and set Loochie down. Sunny put her arms around Loochie and Loochie fell into the embrace. Sunny held Loochie tight.

"You're with me," Sunny told her. "I'm not leaving you."

Those words made Loochie cry even harder than when she'd been alone in the Playground for Lost Children. But this time Loochie wept with relief and happiness. She was with Sunny. Sunny wasn't

leaving her. Loochie and Sunny and Alice sat inside the Unisphere.
They rocked in the cradle of Africa and they were safe.

A pack of feral dogs would've sounded more civilized. The Twins circled the structure. Loochie thought she and her friends were about to get caught for sure. But the Twins were distracted. They were looking around for Loochie and Sunny, but they also scanned the pathway around the Unisphere. Looking up for the girls and down at the ground, back and forth. Loochie couldn't understand what they expected to find at their feet. It wasn't like the girls had shrunk down to the size of small rocks. But then one of the Twins almost seemed to sing, a high-pitched coo, the sweetest sound she'd ever heard one of them make.

He leapt to the ground and snatched something up. The other Twin crowded close, cooing too. In a moment the other Kroons—Pit, Lefty, and Chuck—were scrambling closer to the Twins. But the first Twin ignored them, seemed to have forgotten about anything, everything. All except what was in his hand. He stayed on his knees and hunched over, his back to Loochie. She couldn't see exactly what he was doing. But in a moment his hands glowed an orange color, as if they were on fire, as if a flame had leapt up out of his palm. The Twin brought his face down to his palm and inhaled deeply, loudly, and his shoulders rose and fell.

The other Twin pushed his face closer to the fiery hands. The other males sprinted closer. Even Alice sat up straighter there inside the globe. But in a second the orange glow died out and both Twins fell backward on their butts, in a stupor. They tilted their heads back and gray smoke wafted from their nostrils. They smiled absently and shivered. Their whole bodies seemed to deflate. They seemed like they were about to fall over. At least until the other three Kroons got close.

Pit choked with rage. He looked like he'd chop the heads off both Twins if he got hold of them now. The Twins scrambled to their feet and ran, slightly wobbly, away from the Unisphere and the other

Kroons chased them. The girls watched them all go. Finally Loochie lay on her back and looked up through the top of the globe.

"That was weird," Loochie said.

Sunny said, "I've seen them do that before."

Both girls looked to Alice, as if she might offer an explanation, but Alice only stared at the spot on the ground where the Twins had found their treasure and stayed quiet.

"Well, can we at least start heading back home now?" Loochie asked.

Sunny didn't answer. Loochie sat up but Sunny stayed on her back.

"I still have my lighter," Sunny said. She raised her left foot and wiggled the rain boot until the lighter, a cheap little Bic, slipped out. She held it between two fingers and wiggled it. She looked at Loochie.

Loochie sighed. "Why are you acting like this? You really think I care about that right now?"

Sunny shivered for a moment, it looked involuntary, and her eyes rolled up slightly like she was about to faint. Then she coughed and cleared her head with a shake. She looked at Loochie and her eyes were clear, focused. "We said we were going to smoke a cigarette together. Just in case. You remember I said that? So I want to smoke a cigarette together. Now."

"I'll smoke ten packs of cigarettes with you," Loochie begged. "But let's do it after we get back to my apartment!"

Sunny's expression changed. A wash of anger doused her face. "I'm not going back that way! Don't you get that? Stop acting so *stupid* and try to understand!"

Loochie grabbed Sunny's arm and squeezed tightly, with malice. "Don't talk like this on my birthday, Sunny."

Sunny looked down at Loochie's hand. "Your birthday was in November," Sunny said.

"Fine," Loochie said, letting go. She contorted herself until she could reach into her pocket. She pulled out the two remaining cigarettes.

"Where's the other one?" Sunny asked, sitting up.

“I smoked it already,” Loochie said. “It was nasty.”

Sunny waggled her head from side to side. “You just didn’t know how to do it right.”

Sunny snatched one of the cigarettes from Loochie’s palm. “Hold on to that one for me,” Sunny commanded, and Loochie slipped it back into her pocket.

Alice sat up too now. It took a little work but when all three crossed their legs they were able to sit in a circle. “The first thing I want you to do,” Sunny began, “is breathe like this.”

Sunny sat erect and breathed in through her lips but then she held on to the breath and pushed her bony chest out. She let it expand and held the air inside. Finally she deflated and the air rushed out of her nose, a faint, shushing sound.

“Now you two do it.”

Loochie gave it half a dozen tries. Alice clearly knew how to inhale, but Loochie was lousy. She might get the breath down into her chest but just as quickly she’d fall apart, coughing and snorting. And this was before she’d even inhaled any smoke.

Sunny watched Loochie with disappointment and even aggravation.

“Well where did you learn to do it?” Loochie finally spat.

“I watched my grandmother? Duh?”

When Sunny put it that way Loochie only wanted to prove herself better at it than Sunny could ever be. So all three sat there, for about ten minutes, just practicing their breathing. They looked like a yoga class.

Finally Sunny’s patience ran out. She tapped the bottom of the lighter against the stainless steel plate beneath them. “We’re just going to have a try now,” Sunny said.

“This made me sick the last time,” Loochie admitted. She looked away from Sunny when she said it, feeling stupid and inexperienced.

The practice had helped, though. While Loochie still coughed badly at first, she was able to get it right after a few pulls. Sunny, meanwhile, puffed expertly. And what about Alice? What did she do? Obviously she couldn’t smoke a cigarette without a bottom lip.

Instead, Loochie and Sunny took turns inhaling the smoke and leaning across to Alice and blowing it down her throat. Alice inhaled expertly, considering the realities.

Each time the girls exhaled they watched the smoke trail up, gray ribbons and clouds, floating toward the sky. Soon enough the whole cigarette was smoked down. After it was done they lay on their backs again, looking up at the unchanging, overcast day.

“How do you feel?” Sunny asked.

Neither Loochie or Alice responded.

“Should we smoke the last one?” Sunny asked, but she sounded less assured than the first time.

Loochie lay there feeling buzzed up and dizzy. Her hands were warm, her face tingled in a good way, but each time she lifted her head to answer Sunny her stomach lurched and she thought she would vomit.

“Not yet,” Loochie groaned.

And Alice, also on her back, waved her arms in front of her, another “no” vote.

“Chickens,” Sunny said, pretending to be disappointed, but Loochie could tell she was relieved. That last cigarette would stay in Loochie’s pocket for now.

They stared at the top of the globe, the far end of the world.

“What did you mean when you said you weren’t going back that way?” Loochie asked. “Which way are you going then?”

Up through the frame of the Unisphere the gray sky seemed endless.

Sunny sat up. She looked down at Loochie.

“You’ve got boobs,” Sunny said. She said this with no affect in her voice, but the words were clipped, like Sunny was holding back a rush of true emotion.

Loochie didn’t even understand the sentence for a second. Hadn’t she just asked about something else entirely? Something that seemed far more important? Finally she raised her head slightly, fought back the moment of dizziness, and saw her two nipples poking up through the fabric of her T-shirt.

“These?” she asked, as if Sunny had just cracked a ridiculous joke. “You should see Monique!”

Sunny crossed her arms. “I don’t want to see Monique,” she whispered.

Alice stood up slowly, carefully. With all three of them on the single steel panel there wasn’t too much room for the Kroon to maneuver. She had to be very careful with her long body for fear of knocking one of the girls off the side. Alice tucked her nightdress between her knees and closed her legs tight. She extended her hands over her head. Her arms were so long she could grab at a pair of the latitude lines running above.

“You wouldn’t ask me to go back,” Sunny said in a soft voice, ignoring Alice’s movements. “If it was you getting the treatments all these years.”

“I want you to come back because I love you, Sunny. You’re my best friend. Don’t you love me, too?”

Alice, holding the latitude lines tight, pulled herself up and then flipped over, so her legs were in the air. Alice hooked both legs over the latitude bars, then let go with her hands, and her upper body swung down. She looked like a child playing on a set of monkey bars.

Loochie wanted an answer from Sunny, but she couldn’t ignore Alice any longer. She had no idea what was about to happen, but Sunny seemed to know. Alice grabbed Sunny’s hands, then curled her body upward, pulling Sunny up as well. She plucked Sunny up and Loochie watched, almost fainting, as Sunny scrambled through a crack between Africa and Europe and climbed *out to the other side* of the Unisphere! Sunny was standing on top of the world. Loochie heard Sunny’s rain boots squeaking as she walked across Europe. Then Alice swung down again, hands out, and gestured for Loochie.

And here’s the crazy part: Loochie didn’t hesitate. She grasped Alice’s wrists and felt her feet lift away from the security of the steel plate below her. She crawled through the gap and lay flat when she climbed out the other side. The wind had picked up and she shivered with a slight chill that felt like fear. She saw Sunny ahead of her. Sunny had walked all the way to the northern edge of Russia,

the very top of the world on this tilted Unisphere. Loochie moved toward her friend on hands and knees, keeping low so she wouldn't be blown off the side.

Loochie reached Sunny. Sunny put out her hand. Loochie took it and rose to a crouch beside her friend. Loochie couldn't look away from Sunny's face. Loochie's mother's wig, still on her head, rose slightly as the wind snuck underneath it but it stayed on.

They were facing the western end of the park. Another long, jagged run of concrete scrolled out before them. It was a parking lot as long as a football field. At the end of it was an enormous stadium. Citi Field, where the Mets played baseball. Where Louis had taken her. Though, of course, this wasn't *that* Citi Field. It looked different, older. This stadium's walls were blue and white while Citi Field's were reddish brown.

"That's where I'm going," Sunny said, pointing.

"Why do you want to go there?" Loochie asked. It sure didn't look nicer than Sunny's apartment.

"I know how it looks on the outside," Sunny said. "But inside the stadium, it's a very happy place. Alice will take me up to Gate C, the home plate entrance, and I'll walk through. Everyone who makes it inside is at peace. It's bright and warm all day. You can take a seat in the stands or run around with other kids down on the field. There's no pain in there. No need for hospital visits. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Sunny didn't look at Loochie as she spoke, and her voice seemed to float.

Loochie looked down at her feet. "You make it sound like Heaven," she said.

"That's how Alice described it," Sunny said. "But she calls it Shea."

"What is Shea?" Loochie asked.

Sunny shrugged. "Once Priya told me that in her family they say 'Moksha' instead of Heaven. And Shaz? From 3A? They're Persian. She said they call it Paradise."

Loochie worked hard to choke down her feelings of jealousy at the idea that Sunny had been having conversations like that with

Shaz or, worst of all, with Priya, when Loochie wasn't around. When had that been? Where was Loochie when this was going on? Why hadn't she been invited? But she didn't ask any of those questions. Instead she got snappy about the conversation at hand. "That still doesn't explain what the hell 'Shea' means."

"Maybe 'Shea' is how you say 'Heaven' in Queens," Sunny offered.

Alice had climbed out there as well, and sat cross-legged behind the girls. She looked out over their heads at the stadium, at Shea.

Loochie leaned closer to Sunny. "How come you can understand those sounds she makes and I can't?"

Sunny's eyebrows squeezed tight. "What do you mean? She's talking. That's how I understand her."

"She's *not* talking," Loochie said. "She's always just grunting and stuff."

Sunny swayed, like she'd been pushed. She looked back at Alice. Then Sunny looked at Loochie again. "If I understand her and she understands me then maybe you're the only one who's in the wrong place."

"I'm with you," Loochie said quietly. "That's where I want to be." Loochie's vision became blurry with tears. Her nose turned stuffy and she heard herself sniffing but couldn't stop.

"I want to tell you what happened to me," Sunny began. "So you can understand." Sunny grabbed Loochie's hand, and held it gently.

"Right after I gave you those cigarettes I leaned out and watched you go into your apartment. You were moving so fast! Then my grandmother came and got me. I wasn't feeling too good when I leaned back in, like I couldn't really breathe, so *gon-gon* took me to my bedroom. She put me down in bed and went to call the ambulance.

"I was on the bed and my chest started hurting, a lot. I knew you were waiting for downstairs so I tried to get up anyway but I all I did was roll off the bed. I fell right on my face, kind of hard, and I was there on the floor.

"I still couldn't really breathe and my eyes just seemed like they slammed shut. And when I woke up I was here, in the park. I've been here ever since. It feels like I've been here a couple months,

but I'm not sure. I knew you were going to come. I felt it. And I felt like I had to see you before I could go. It was almost like I *had* to wait for you, or else I couldn't go to Shea."

Loochie squeezed Sunny's hand back, hard. "But I just saw you today! All that stuff on the fire escape was like two hours ago."

Sunny almost choked with shock. "Two *hours*?"

She pulled her hand out of Loochie's. She held her neck delicately. "It's only been two hours," she muttered to herself. Now it was Sunny's turn to cry but she didn't sound sad really, just exhausted. Loochie brushed Sunny's face, wiping at her tears. She shivered when she felt the skin, which was already quite cold. "I'm not ready to let you go," Loochie told her.

Alice made a low, thoughtful sound, almost like a cow mooing. Sunny's mouth dropped open slightly, then she smiled. "You think so?" Sunny asked.

Alice repeated the sound.

"What is it?" Loochie asked, looking at Alice and back to Sunny.

Sunny hugged Loochie so tight. "Alice says you don't have to let me go. You can come with me. You can go to Shea, too!"

Loochie looked toward the end of the park quickly, at the blue and white stadium walls, and her heart sped up. She even smiled, just like Sunny was doing. But she wasn't sure why.

From the moment Alice's offer was made Sunny couldn't stop talking. What was she talking about? Loochie couldn't really say. It seemed like she was making plans. For what she and Loochie would do once they reached the stadium, once Alice got them to Gate C, once they entered Shea. Sunny guessed at what they would find in that Paradise. What they would do there. Together forever. Forever. At least that's what Loochie *thought* Sunny was talking about. She couldn't be sure because she couldn't make herself focus, make herself really listen. She had this ringing sound playing right behind both ears and with each moment the ringing got louder.

You can come with me.

Alice crept over to the edge of Europe with her back to Sunny and Loochie, who followed behind. When they reached the end Alice looked over her shoulder and grunted at Sunny. Sunny came closer and climbed up on Alice's back, wrapped her arms around Alice's neck, then looked back at Loochie.

"Climb on."

Loochie heard that, at least. She walked over and did exactly as Sunny had done. The two of them fit on Alice's back perfectly. They both wrapped their arms around Alice's throat. At this point Loochie didn't even pay attention to the missing jaw, the moist skin of Alice's neck. She was used to them by now. Compared to going through Gate C, it didn't even seem that scary. And there was the truth of it—the thing Loochie couldn't hide from herself—she didn't want to go to Shea, at least not yet. Loochie didn't want to die.

Now Alice turned around so that her back faced the open air. Alice grabbed on to a pair of steel beams, two latitude lines, and braced her feet between the same bars lower down. Then she climbed down the outside of the Unisphere, with both girls on her back. Loochie and Sunny were basically dangling in midair, twelve

stories up. A fall that wouldn't just kill them; it would spread their insides across the concrete like strawberry jam.

And yet Sunny continued to chatter happily. She'd seemed pretty practiced when she walked across the latitude line earlier, so maybe this wasn't the first time Alice had climbed down the side of the Unisphere with Sunny on her back. But it sure as hell was a first for Loochie! The ringing in her ears, the thumping of her heart, the sweat moistening her locked fingers, they were all aspects of her terror. She had to shut her eyes. Every second seemed like a century. And when she opened them again she whimpered because the descent was far from finished yet. They were still ten stories up. Still so much farther to go.

"I bet I'll get my hair back again too," Sunny continued. "Don't you think so? I mean I can't be bald there, right? It'll grow back and you'll brush it for me. And I'll comb yours and put it in braids. I want to let mine grow down to ..."

Still seven stories up. Much higher than Loochie's apartment. Loochie looked out across the park just to keep from looking down.

"They're ...!" Loochie suddenly shouted, cutting Sunny off.

But Sunny wouldn't be stopped. "... let mine grow down to like my ass."

"Alice," Loochie said. "They're coming back!"

The males.

Having made the circuit of the park, having gone as far as the stadium gates and finding no one, they had finally given up. They were backtracking, looking for the girls but also distractedly scanning the ground. The Kroons walked slowly, and close together this time. If the Twins found something on the ground this time they wouldn't have a chance to smoke it alone. The Kroons weren't barking or squealing but silent. They almost looked tired, worn-out. Maybe they were returning home to take their naps. They hadn't seen the girls yet.

Alice tried to move more quickly. This meant the ride down was even bumpier for Loochie and Sunny. The girls did their best to keep from hollering when their grips loosened but the situation felt impossible. It was doubtful all three of them could just dangle there

and let the males pass. Alice looked toward Sunny and huffed out one long groan. A communication that meant nothing to Loochie but Sunny said, "Hold on tight."

They were still twenty feet up.

A moment later all three of them fell through the sky. Loochie and Sunny cried out.

The males heard them but were so shocked that they were caught stiff, standing frozen, on the other side of the sphere. All five gawked at their sister, Alice, through the grillwork of the globe.

The only one who didn't hesitate was Alice. She landed and the girls fell off but she didn't even look back to check on them. There wasn't any time. She sped forward, stepping onto the concrete barrier and leaping across the pond of muck. She landed on the base of the Unisphere and braced herself against its bottom. She slammed her right shoulder forward and strained against the steel sculpture. A long, high cry played from Alice's throat. Loochie clutched at her own neck when she heard the sound. Then there was a terrific cracking, an echoing snap, and the Unisphere rose, just slightly, into the air. It came off its cocked axis. On the other side the male Kroons looked up in quiet fascination. Alice had hurled the world at them.

The Unisphere plowed through the Kroons. The 700,000-pound steel globe hit the Twins and Chuck directly. It crushed them. Loochie heard their bones crack even from where she still lay. All three bodies were pulverized; what was left was liquid. The earth kept moving. The globe now caught one of Lefty's legs and his pelvis. The Unisphere rolled over it, turning both to powder. Lefty lay there howling, almost blind with pain. His right leg was gone. He flailed on the ground. He spat. He bled out. Loochie had raised herself to a seated position and watched it all, horrified and dimly elated. Confused. Was it okay to cheer when a devil dies?

The only male left was Pit, who hadn't been hit directly. He was knocked on his back, dazed, but that was all. Already he sat up. He watched with amazement as the Unisphere kept rolling, clanging loudly as concrete crunched beneath it. That sphere didn't stop until

it reached the closer meadow, where it settled into the dirt and grass. It stopped after a moment.

“Holy shit!” Sunny shouted, pointing at Alice, who was already climbing back over the concrete barrier to get the girls.

“Holy shit,” she repeated.

Sunny couldn’t stop marveling over Alice’s triumph, but Loochie couldn’t stop staring at her friend, possibly the best friend she would ever know. Loochie stared as if she were focusing for a snapshot of Sunny. Something to remember the girl by. Loochie hadn’t realized she’d made a choice, a decision, about what to do next, until right then.

Loochie took off her mother’s wig. She walked to Sunny. Loochie set the wig, delicately, on Sunny’s small head. Sunny looked up at it, surprised.

“My mom will get worried if I don’t come back,” Loochie said.

Sunny nodded and it made the wig slip forward, almost over her eyes. Loochie was about to adjust it when Alice’s big hand pulled it back into place. Loochie looked up and smiled at Alice. Then she felt a throb of regret. She’d given Sunny her mother’s wig, but what had she given Alice? Alice who’d saved her half a dozen times in here. Alice who looked like a monster. Alice, who wasn’t a monster anymore. Loochie had nothing else to offer. So she waved for Alice to crouch. Alice did so a little warily. The last time she’d crouched in front of Loochie like this Loochie had bashed her with a tennis racket. Loochie brought her face right alongside Alice’s. From here she could smell Alice’s burnt plastic body and she couldn’t avoid the gaping emptiness below her upper jaw, but Loochie didn’t hesitate. She brought her lips to Alice’s upper cheek. Loochie gave Alice the only thing she could. She kissed her gently.

“Friends,” Loochie whispered, and Alice cooed in her ear.

In a flash, Alice lifted both girls, as easy as always. She turned to run, toward the stadium, but before Loochie could resist Sunny said, “She’s not going.”

Alice barked out a handful of desperate-sounding notes. She looked across the barrier, at Pit, who was doing worse than he first

seemed. He struggled to rise, a feeble growl lost in his throat, then he stumbled backward again, flat on his back, still stunned.

“She says you have to find someplace to hide,” Sunny told her. “We’ll get Pit to chase us. We’ll draw him away.”

Alice set Loochie down. Loochie looked up at Sunny. Already, even from this close, it seemed harder to focus on her friend. To really see Sunny’s face. As if it were already being erased, little by little, from her memory if not her heart.

“Hide.” Sunny pointed to the barrier. “Lie flat.”

Loochie followed the order. On her back like that she was hidden. Alice howled at the top of her voice. It was like a taunt, a challenge.

Pit sat up again. Looking more like himself. Menacing and manically focused. He found his sister’s face. She stared at him and he glared at her. He scrambled to his feet. Just before Alice ran, Sunny kicked her feet wildly and her rain boots flopped off. They smacked the ground. Loochie had given her the wig. Sunny gave the boots in return.

Sunny shouted, “I love you, Loochie!”

Loochie couldn’t respond for fear of letting Pit know she was still there. But inside her head she could hear her own voice, loud as a siren: *I love you, too, Sunny! I loved you!*

Loochie lay flat and watched them go. Alice took off, carrying Sunny, horse and rider exploding down a track. And Pit chased after. Soon enough they were all just figures in the distance. Now there was no denying it. Loochie’s best friend, Zhao Hun Soong, was gone.

Loochie finally got the courage to sit up and look around. Even though she'd seen Pit trailing after Alice and Sunny, she hadn't entirely believed it was true. After all, this place was a kind of nightmare and in nightmares the worst can always happen. She half-expected to find Pit standing on the other side of the murky pond when she sat up, an evil smile below his dented skull.

But he wasn't there. The place was quiet enough that she could hear herself breathing and she listened to that. If she was breathing then she must still be alive. If she was alive she could move.

She stood. The concrete dug into her soles. Her socks were pretty much shredded. But she had a pair of rain boots. Loochie grabbed them and slid the first boot on. It felt so *wonderful* to have them between her feet and the concrete. Loochie stretched her foot and listened to the rubber stretch. The boots were purple with white polka dots and, right then, Loochie had never seen anything prettier in her whole life. She slid the other boot on but felt something against her heel. She took the boot off, turned it upside down, and out fell Sunny's lighter.

Loochie weighed it in her open palm. Its body was made of red opaque plastic. She held it to her ear, shook it, and heard the faint swish of the remaining lighter fluid. The last cigarette was in one pocket so Loochie put the lighter in the other. She popped on the other rain boot.

Go home, she told herself. Get home.

But she didn't move. She did not go home. It was as if her body wouldn't follow orders.

After a time it seemed as though she was going to collapse. Loochie's body began to melt. Her knees buckled. It seemed as though the faint was coming on again, but do you know what made her do otherwise? What made her turn instead and start to run? The ice-cream cake. It was sitting out on a plate in the middle of the

kitchen. She imagined that by now all of it, except the wafer cookies, had turned into a soupy mix. That it had spilled over the plate and across the table and even run down to the kitchen floor. One hell of a mess. Her mother would be so angry! And, strangely, she wanted to hear her mother's voice so much right then that even a month of yelling at Loochie was preferable to the silence, the isolation, surrounding her now. So she turned and made the long walk.

Following the concrete pathway until she reached the Playground for Lost Children, she saw no rats but still kept a good distance from the gates. She reached the first meadow and here she found the upside-down Unisphere. It looked like an enormous Christmas ornament that had fallen off its tree. Seeing it reminded her of Sunny, the two of them crouched on top and looking out across the park. How long ago had that been? Minutes? Why did it already feel, in her bones, like it had been weeks? Loochie walked the meadow, but she moved slowly. She wasn't tired exactly, but sore. Deep down. Heartsore. It took great effort to lift her legs and her shoulders felt heavy. By the time she reached the double row of trees she could hardly stand. She had to sit beneath one of the great trees, on its gnarled roots. She could see the next meadow. She knew the kitchen, the open window, the fire escape weren't far ahead, but she couldn't get herself to stand. The overcast sky thundered and soon rain fell across the meadow. It fell on the tops of the trees and trickled down from limb to limb until the drops reached the dirt. The rain fell on Loochie. She had leaned forward because she was so tired, elbows on her knees. Her head and back were soon wet. Her T-shirt stuck to her skin. A quick run across the next meadow and she'd be away from all this. *Just get up*, she told herself. *Just get up*. But she couldn't.

The rainstorm grew stronger. Quickly the meadow was drenched. Above Loochie the tree limbs sagged with the weight of the water. Loochie looked up and the rain doused her face. Had Sunny made it all the way to Gate C by now? Had she reached Shea? Maybe Loochie should have gone with her. Had she really been thinking of

her mother's worry when she decided not to go with Sunny, or was she just saving herself?

The storm became a torrent. Loochie couldn't even see beyond the tree line anymore. The rain became like a great, gray wall. It came down with such force that the ground seemed to shake. Loochie had abandoned Sunny. Why didn't Loochie fight harder to bring her back? The trees were no protection against the rain anymore. It came down so hard that it scoured Loochie's skin. What kind of best friend was she?

Then Loochie heard an incredibly loud groan. Not a living thing. Loochie squinted back to the meadow she'd come from. The groan came again. Her curiosity was what finally made her stand. She walked to the edge of the tree line and what she saw she couldn't quite understand.

The Unisphere was disappearing.

She could only see about half of it out in the field now.

Once more she heard the groaning, the steel beams being battered and, while she watched, the Unisphere disappeared even more. That's when she finally understood.

"It's sinking," Loochie whispered.

The whole meadow had turned to mud under the tremendous rainstorm. The steel globe rose and fell now, bobbing as if it were a plastic ball in a pool. There was one more groan of metal and, just like that, the entire Unisphere, twelve stories tall, was gone. Sucked down into a sea of mud and lost.

Loochie tried to turn around but found that she couldn't move. But this time it wasn't because she was too tired or too scared. Her rain boots had sunk into the dirt. They were in the mud, all the way to her shins. The rain continued to fall. A deluge. Loochie strained and pulled one boot out of the soft earth. She stepped backward and barely got the second boot out.

She'd taken a step back but now the ground beneath her feet was already softening, too. Her boot soles sank into the dirt. If she stayed in place she'd be up to her shins in minutes. She had to run, out beyond the trees, into the next meadow. *Get away.*

She ran out into the open. Without the shelter of the trees the rain hit her as hard as a punch. She ran three steps and was knocked down, face-first to the ground. When she put her arms out to push herself up her hands sank down to her wrists.

Loochie scrambled to her feet. The rain fell and she could barely see a few inches ahead of her. Her face was slick. Her hair already soaked and heavy. Three more steps and she sank again, her legs lost below the knee. The mud surged around her. The meadow had become a swamp. Two more steps and she'd hardly moved forward, but she was sunk down to her waist.

Her breathing sped up. She paddled forward. But in a second the mud was up to her chest. How much farther did she have to go? She couldn't tell, she couldn't see.

When the mud was at Loochie's chin she simply couldn't keep going. She was stuck and the rain continued. Loochie had abandoned Sunny to save herself and now look what happened.

"I should've stayed with you, Sunny," Loochie said, as if she was issuing an apology.

With her mouth open the mud flowed in. She spat it out and tried to move, but which way was forward anymore? The rain obscured the world. It overwhelmed her like grief. The worst thing in life was to be left all alone. That's what Loochie felt. And yet that was how she found herself. Loochie desperately gulped in one deep breath.

Then she sank into the mud, all gone, nothing left, and she had no one there to save her.

Loochie floated in darkness. Using the technique Sunny had shown her while trying to smoke, she'd filled her lungs before going under. Now she held her breath. She couldn't see anything. Not enough to tell east from west, north from south. She'd sunk down below the mud and found another layer. She kicked her feet and paddled her arms but couldn't be sure if she was moving back up toward the surface or just swimming deeper down. It was darker than a starless night down here. This was the longest darkness, the shadow without end. This was death. She floated in death and didn't know how she could ever find her way out. Her cheeks burned, her throat tightened, her lungs were already straining to hold on to the oxygen inside them. But how long could that last? In a minute or two, maybe a few more if she was lucky, she was going to have open her mouth. When she did she'd swallow all that death around her. She would drown in it. And that would be the end.

But Loochie Gardner wasn't ready for her end just yet, thank you.

She kicked harder, swam upward—at least she hoped she was swimming upward—but she couldn't tell and became confused. She changed direction, but that wasn't any better. She might've just sent herself back where she'd been a moment ago. Loochie needed help seeing. She needed light. As her lips strained to open, as her lungs demanded air, she reached into her pocket and pulled out Sunny's lighter.

It might sound strange, though in 6D this wouldn't be the first time, but Loochie *knew* the lighter would work. Even though she was utterly engulfed by this void, though she swam in this death, she knew the lighter would still work. It had to. She flicked the little plunger though she couldn't even see the lighter in her hand. She only felt it. She flicked again.

When the flame lit she nearly opened her mouth and cried out with joy.

She stopped kicking her feet and floated. She held the lighter in one hand and held its flame out. But what did it really help her see? Only more and more of the same nothing. It was like being trapped at the bottom of the ocean. What would you see with a light but more of the same? The darkness surrounding her went on too far, too long, for the lighter alone to show her some path to safety, to life. She needed a trail to follow, like a lifeline, back to the surface, but she hadn't been sprinkling any crumbs on the way down. What to do? What could she follow? Her lips trembled and her throat burned. That feeling reminded her of smoking.

Loochie pulled the last cigarette out of her other pocket. She held it up to her clenched lips. When she and Sunny had been puffing away, hadn't they watched the smoke curl up from the tip of the cigarette and go floating toward the sky? A gray ribbon you could follow with your eyes.

Loochie had been holding her thumb down on the plunger of the lighter this whole time. The flame flickered, the lighter fluid burning away. Quickly she brought it to her lips and, with what was left of her life, she inhaled until the tip of the paper glowed.

A trail of smoke appeared. It was wispy and thin but it was there.

Loochie's vision began to blur, but she concentrated. She just needed to see which way the smoke would move, up or down. That's all she needed to see so she could follow it. She strained to stay conscious, watching until she saw ...

The smoke floated *sideways*.

She was disoriented that she'd been swimming east to west, not north or south. She held the cigarette between her lips and it remained lit in the darkness and the smoke trail that floated up from her mouth looked like the arm of a snorkel.

Loochie swam furiously. When the lighter died she let it go. By then she already knew the right direction so she just kept going, cigarette still between her lips. When she left the void her ears popped, a change in atmosphere. The void fell away and she was in the mud again and her heart strained so hard that it promised to burst. She kicked and kicked. Her arms felt like they'd break from

all their paddling. She lost the last of her strength and her mouth opened wide.

Loochie broke the surface of the muddy water and saw the gray sky. The rain had stopped. She gasped. She inhaled. She breathed.

Thank God for cigarettes! she thought. That last one had saved her life. She laughed so loudly at this thought that Sunny probably heard all the way at Shea.

Without the rainfall the mud already felt more solid below her. She trudged forward through the mud. With each step the ground was drying rapidly, becoming firmer, solid under her feet.

Loochie spat out the last of the cigarette.

Loochie climbed out of the earth.

Loochie moved across the last of the meadow quickly. She found the living room wall and slapped at it like it was the side of a favorite dog. She reached the hole, the one Pit had bashed open when he first chased her. Loochie wanted to climb right through, but she was too big. Loochie tapped at the living room wall, making her way back toward the walkway that would lead around to the kitchen.

A great screech rang out behind her. Loochie whipped her head back. In the far distance she saw the grounds had returned to the way they'd been before the rain. The meadows of half-dead grass, the row of trees. From Loochie's position the trees appeared small. And even smaller was the figure lumbering out from between them. It was so thin. It screeched again. The figure staggered forward, trying to run but clearly weak, maybe injured. It fell and pushed itself up. Loochie squinted. Was it Alice? She couldn't tell. It could be Pit. It barked now. It ran toward her.

Loochie booked it down the walkway. She passed the door that was half off its hinges. From inside she heard, once again, the flapping of a thousand little wings. The flying rats in their lair.

Loochie entered the kitchen. She ran to the window. She felt a chilled winter breeze, fresh air, on her face. She heard heavy footsteps beating down the hallway floor. Alice, or Pit, was close behind.

Loochie didn't climb out the window. She practically flew.

She was on the fire escape in a T-shirt and jeans in December and didn't feel the cold. She was too zapped with terror. She was hardly able to climb down the fire escape steps. She slid. In the periphery of her vision she saw a figure fill the window but she didn't look back. Loochie was gone!

Loochie reached her apartment. She climbed through the window. She slammed and locked it. She rolled the security gate shut. "Mom?" she called out. "Mom!"

No response.

Loochie walked into her mother's bedroom, then back to the kitchen. She peeked inside the bathroom. Empty. When she entered the living room she held her breath, expecting to find herself back in the meadow, staring down at the promenade of trees. Lost inside 6D yet again.

Instead, she saw only the dining room table, the sofa pushed back against one wall, the television sitting in the big entertainment unit. And her green bike, still upright. Everything exactly as she'd left it. The apartment quiet and empty. She clapped once, with relief, and the sound seemed so loud.

Loochie returned to the kitchen. She saw small brown footprints on the floor. They were hers. She'd tracked mud inside. That would have to be cleaned up, but not just yet. The last bit of her birthday cake was still sitting out on the plate. She'd expected it to be nothing more than a puddle of sludge by now. Instead it was only partway melted, as if she hadn't been gone long at all. Sunny's blue cap sat on the table, too, right where she'd left it. She picked it up and held it to her forehead. Loochie wept.

Loochie's mother came home an hour later. Loochie was in her mother's bedroom, down on her hands and knees. She had a sponge and a dish towel and she'd just finished scrubbing away the cigarette ashes she'd vomited earlier.

By the time Loochie's mother hung up her coat and pulled off her shoes Loochie was in the kitchen squeezing the sponge dry, then running it under water and squeezing it dry again. She didn't want there to be any ashes left. She'd already wiped up all the mud she tracked into the apartment. Had already washed the mud off her jeans and T-shirt in the bathtub. They were in the hamper.

Then her mother was there in the kitchen. Loochie couldn't believe how happy she was to see her mother. Suddenly she felt weightless. Loochie hugged her around the stomach and didn't let go. Her mother leaned into the hug, patting her daughter on the neck.

"You changed your clothes?" her mom asked.

"They got a little dirty," Loochie said.

The rain boots, also washed off, were under Loochie's bed. The knit cap lay under Loochie's pillow.

"You two must've had some fun." Loochie's mother laughed. "Is Sunny still here?"

Loochie pulled away from her mother, looked into the woman's face.

"Sunny's gone," Loochie explained. Her mom nodded but clearly didn't understand what Loochie was trying to tell her.

Loochie's mother took out some diet soda, and grabbed a tray of ice cubes from the freezer. She saw the last bit of birthday cake on the table, still on the plate.

"You and Sunny didn't want to eat it?" her mom asked.

"We were too busy," Loochie said. "You can have it."

Her mom cracked the tray, scooping out two ice cubes for her soda. "I ate too much already today. But it seems like a shame to waste. I wish you'd share it with someone."

Loochie looked over her shoulder. "Louis came back?"

"Hah! He was so mad at me. He wouldn't even stay at the lawyer's. I met with the man by myself."

Loochie picked up the ice tray and put it back in the freezer.

"Oh but the lawyer was a bastard," Loochie's mother said absently. She wasn't really talking to Loochie, just out loud. She gulped the soda. "And his secretary. Rude and she dressed badly. Like a whore or something."

Her mother left the glass on the table and walked into her bedroom. Loochie picked up the plate with the last of her birthday cake. Her mother's suggestion was a good one. She should share it with someone.

She pulled back the security gate. She lifted the window as quietly as she could. Loochie crept out onto the fire escape. She climbed toward the sixth floor. She held on to the fire escape railing with one hand. Loochie peeked at the sixth-floor window. It was open. The kitchen stayed dark. Loochie listened for life inside but all she heard was the traffic of passing cars down on the street, the voices of kids calling to each other. And, soon, her own name.

"Loochie!"

It was her mother, and she sounded *pissed*.

Loochie set the plate of cake down on the fire escape landing, right outside the open window of 6D. Her neck prickled with the heat of fear and her heart bumped violently when she got close. As soon as she let go of the plate she snatched her hand back.

"Lucretia!"

No time to linger. Loochie hurried back down to her place. She was through the kitchen window just as her mother stepped out of the bedroom. Her mother carried one of the bare foam heads.

"What did you two do with my wig!" she shouted.

Loochie stood there, looking almost bashful. "I gave it to Sunny," Loochie said.

Her mother watched Loochie quietly. Her lips were clamped tight, holding in a rage.

"I went upstairs," Loochie said. "Sunny didn't come down so I went looking for her."

Mom squeezed the foam head's neck tightly. "What does that have to do with my wig?"

"I was wearing it," Loochie said. She grabbed the back of a chair for balance. Then she told her mother everything. Climbing up to 6D. Being yanked inside. Finding the park inside the living room. Running for her life as the Kroons pursued her. The Playground of Lost Children. The flying rats. Sunny's rescue. Alice. The muddy meadow. Swimming in the void. Absolutely all of it. Well, almost all of it. Loochie left out the cigarettes.

When Loochie was done both she and her mother were sitting at the kitchen table. Her mother cradled the foam head in her lap the whole time. When Loochie was finished she felt relieved, even happy. Certainly her mother could understand, after all that, why giving the wig to Sunny had been so important.

"I don't know what to say," her mother told her.

"Say you're not mad at me about the wig," Loochie offered.

Her mother looked down at the foam head. Her movements were slow, stunned. "I'm not mad about the wig."

Loochie nodded happily, relaxed in her seat.

"But you don't really think ...," her mother began. "I mean, Loochie, please tell me you're joking. You don't really believe any of that happened, right?"

"You think I made it up?" Loochie asked. She felt as if she'd been stung all over her face.

Her mother looked up from her lap. Her eyes were moist. Her jaw hung slack and her lips were open.

Loochie didn't try to argue. Instead she hopped out of her chair and marched to her bedroom. When Loochie returned she held Sunny's blue knit cap in one hand.

"Well then how did I get this?" She shook the knit cap, its pompoms dancing.

Her mother looked at her daughter's evidence. "It's just a cap," she said quietly.

"But you should've seen my clothes when I came in!" Loochie said. "They were covered in the mud."

"Bring them to me," her mom said. Loochie went and yanked them from the hamper. The clothes looked worn down and wrinkled and wet, but they were clean.

"That's just 'cause I scrubbed them!" Loochie shouted.

Loochie's mother touched her daughter's forehead with the back of her hand. She dropped her hand and watched Loochie with a grave seriousness.

"Go to your room," her mother said, her voice lacking any emotion.

Loochie didn't know what to do just then so she just got up. Her mother didn't believe her.

Slowly, Loochie's mother shuffled back into the bedroom. As she did she looked over her shoulder at Loochie one more time. A look of confusion, pure bafflement, was there.

Loochie turned to the kitchen window. She was about to close it, but before she did she leaned her head out. Her mother's doubt seemed to infect her. Could she really have made it all up? She looked to the sixth floor, just in time to see a long, narrow hand reach out from the apartment. Loochie knew that hand. It was Alice's.

"I hope you like it," Loochie whispered.

In another year, at the age of thirteen, Lucretia Gardner would be diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Over the rest of her adolescence she would see many different doctors and be admitted to a number of different mental hospitals in Queens. In the first year of her illness Loochie's mother would tell the admitting staff about the time Loochie claimed to have battled monsters inside a park inside apartment 6D. To her mother, and the doctors, this counted as a clear manifestation of mental illness, an amped-up delusion, the trick of a troubled mind. Loochie learned to stop arguing otherwise. Folks like that could never be convinced. Sunny's death was no delusion, though. Neither was Loochie's grief, which lasted a year.

The doctors and her mother, and later even her brother, dismissed Loochie's story, but she never doubted that it was true. Louis had turned out to be right about one thing, however: Being young didn't protect anyone. Horrors came for kids, too. She understood that now. But that didn't have to be the end of the story. Because of Sunny, so much joy had come for her as well.

After Loochie saw Alice take the cake, she closed her kitchen window. She shut the security gate. She went to her room just as her mother had told her to do. She lay down in bed. Sunny's blue cap was tucked under her pillow. Keeping it close comforted Loochie. That night she slept the good sleep. In her dreams there were no monsters, only friends.

Read on for an excerpt from Victor LaValle's

The Devil in Silver

BOOK GROUP ENDED with a silent march. The patients left the conference room quietly. Sam and Sammy went together. The others, one by one. Only Pepper remained at the table. Dr. Barger and Josephine waited for him to leave so they could lock the door behind him.

What had Pepper been expecting? To declare he'd been trapped here through deceit and have the others, who'd been trapped even longer, gnash their teeth and weep for him? To confess he'd seen a monster and have everyone melt and hold him close? Maybe so. But that's not what he'd gotten. He'd admitted to being frightened. The reaction of his peers? They wanted lunch.

Pepper finally left the room.

Josephine moved behind him, keeping the Bookmobile between them.

Dr. Barger locked the door.

Lunchtime.

When Pepper reached the nurses' station, he found half the patients in an orderly line. Scotch Tape stood inside the station, holding a clipboard. He caught Pepper's eye.

"No more room service for you, my man. Before every meal, you come here first to get your meds, like everyone else."

Pepper didn't see any point in refusing. He went to the back of the line. Where Loochie and Coffee and Dorry and Sammy and Sam were. They didn't speak to him. They didn't even look at him. Had he said something wrong in there?

Miss Chris was beside Scotch Tape, holding a tray of small white cups. As each patient stepped up to the desktop, Scotch Tape read off a series of medicines: Risperdal. Topomax. Depakote. Celexa. Luvox. Nardil. Dalmane. Haldol. Lithium. (Just to name about a third of Scotch Tape's list.) Miss Chris checked the cup to be sure the right pills were in each. Then she handed the cup to the patient and both staff members carefully watched each one swallow.

That was the system. Meds at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Pepper swallowed his Haldol and lithium. He was strangely grateful for the pills. They shaved down the sharp edges of his emotions. Until he felt smooth and round. Easier to roll along, no matter the bumps and curves. He walked down Northwest 5, toward the television lounge, alone. No doubt he'd lost his job with Farooz Brothers by now. Those guys would fire someone if he missed more than two days. Forget about four weeks. But Pepper just kept rolling.

His rent was paid automatically from his checking account. A system that his landlord (an agency rather than a person) had demanded of all tenants back in 2009 when layoffs first began in big numbers. Electricity, gas, even the cable was probably still working. His life had been disrupted, but not his billing cycles. His cell phone was paid automatically, too. Which meant he might still have service. Where had they put his phone? In a baggie with his boot laces and belt. (That baggie then went into a cubby, like in kindergarten, kept with all the others in a locked room on Northwest 1.) How long could he keep current on his bills? How long would his life outside wait for him? He had about four thousand dollars in his checking account. Which would last longer—his savings or his captivity? Keep rolling.

He reached the television lounge and the orderly handed him a lunch tray. The gray tray, with its little segmented sections, reminded Pepper of the ones they used to hand out in grade school.

Pepper moved to an empty table, as far away from the television as possible. The flat screen showed the local news. There was a remote control for the TV, an old man held it like a scepter. He lifted it high and increased the volume so he could hear over the chatter of the growing lunch crowd.

The orderly said, "Not too loud, Mr. Mack."

The old man turned and glowered at the orderly, a kid. "It's my half hour to control the remote," he said. "That *includes* the volume."

Mr. Mack looked to his best friend, who sat beside him. "Is this youngblood giving *me* orders?"

His friend shrugged noncommittally.

Both men wore threadbare sport coats. Under these were their patient-issue blue pajamas; theirs were bright and stain-free. Both had on worn-down loafers, too. They looked sharp, especially in here. Compared with everyone else, they looked like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

The orderly raised his voice now. "You've got to think of everyone in the room."

"Fuck everyone in the room," Mr. Mack muttered.

"Language!"

Mr. Mack put up a hand in a gesture of peace. "I *mean* I'm trying to help these people learn about current events." Mr. Mack looked back at the orderly. "And Frank Waverly doesn't think I need to listen to you anyway."

The orderly said, "Frank Waverly is no fool. It's you who's being defiant."

Mr. Mack grinned at this as if he'd just been complimented. He raised the remote again and lowered the volume. But just one bar.

Pepper, meanwhile, had settled himself at his table, ignoring the skirmish. Instead of the staff and patient, he watched the sunlight as it lit up the half-court outside the lounge.

He didn't notice he had company until they sat.

Loochie, Coffee, and Dorry.

At the other end of the lounge, Mr. Mack's hand rose again, the remote aimed at the screen, and the little green volume bars appeared again. The sound went up.

"Mr. Mack!" the orderly shouted.

Dorry reached over and put her hand on top of Pepper's.

"So," she said, when he looked at her.

She leaned toward him without smiling. She squinted, as if trying to see deeper inside. Loochie spoke next, though.

"It's been around *long* before any of us. I mean any human beings. They found it living here and built Northwest just to hold it. You understand? Northwest is a cage."

Coffee leaned forward to add, "But every living thing needs to eat, Pepper. You can keep something in a cage, but then you have to feed it. Now look at us here. The food makes us fat. The drugs make

us slow. We're cattle. Food. For it. And best of all, for New Hyde, no one notices when people like us end up dead."

Behind the group, a new skirmish unfolded. Mr. Mack's half hour of television privileges had passed. This was as much of a rule on the unit as the medication schedule. The only way to keep so many different patients occupied. It was Sammy's turn to hold the remote. But Mr. Mack wouldn't let it go. He and Sammy were now tugging at either end of it like it was the key to New Hyde's front door.

The orderly intervened. "Your time is *up*, Mr. Mack."

"I got one minute left! I got one minute!"

"You got milk breath!" Sammy yelled back at him. "And your teeth are yellow!"

Behind Sammy, Sam added, "And those are his good qualities!"

Frank Waverly, Mr. Mack's friend, nodded at this. Even though Mr. Mack was his best friend, he couldn't disagree with Sam's point.

Now the orderly clomped over to the tables to break up their nonsense.

Dorry, Loochie, and Coffee paid this chaos no mind. They were on another plane. Dorry leaned in to speak, snatching that wretched cookie off Pepper's tray and dropping it into her lap before opening her mouth. "I'm going to tell you the *truth* about what you saw last night." She glared at the others. "Not stories."

She stole the cookies off Coffee's tray, then Loochie's with surprising quickness and dropped them into her lap.

"I've been here longer than Coffee and Loochie combined. I have the distinction of being the second patient ever committed to Northwest. And that thing you saw the other night? He was the first. Let me tell you this, with no ambiguity. He's a man. Deformed. Very troubled. Very angry. But just a man."

Pepper could feel that breath burning his ear again. Could see those white eyes, missing their pupils. Felt the fur. "I've never seen a man like that," he argued.

Loochie and Coffee nodded solemnly.

Dorry shook her head. "I'm telling you what I *know*."

The orderly stood over Mr. Mack now and put his hand out in a gesture common to any parent. Exasperated authority. Mr. Mack

looked at his wristwatch and counted out loud. “Nine ... eight ... seven ... six ...”

When he reached zero, he opened his hand and held the remote out to Sammy, but the orderly snatched it first to turn the volume down. When Sammy got her turn, she chose an episode of *American Chopper*.

She and Sam pulled their chairs right up under the screen. Even the patients who didn’t like the show remained in their seats and watched to pass some time. On the screen a burly guy with a graying mustache slapped the side of a silver motorcycle, grinned at the camera, and said, “This beast looks like it was forged in hell!”

Coffee rose from his chair. “Why don’t we just show him?”

Dorry shook her head. “Not yet.”

Pepper said, “Show me what?”

Loochie picked the green apple off her tray. She bit into it and chewed.

“Show you where it lives,” she said.

The four of them walked down Northwest 5 as a pack. Loochie and Coffee in the lead, Dorry and Pepper behind.

Dorry said, “What’s on Northwest One?”

Pepper said, “The exit.”

Loochie said, “That’s no exit.”

Coffee said, “It’s just an entrance, for us.”

Dorry asked, “What’s on Northwest Two?”

Pepper said, “Male patients.”

Dorry asked, “What’s on Northwest Three?”

Pepper said, “Female patients.”

As they entered the room at the hub of the unit, Dorry said, “And what’s on Northwest Five?”

Pepper said, “Television lounge.”

Loochie turned back to him and the pom-poms on her knit cap bounced. “We would’ve accepted smoker’s area, too.”

They ignored the staff members sitting inside the nurses’ station just as the staff members ignored them. They were in two

overlapping realities.

Dorry touched Pepper's shoulder to stop him. "So what's left?"

"Northwest Four," Pepper said. "You told me not to go anywhere near it."

Loochie and Coffee and Dorry and Pepper gathered at the threshold of that hallway. Northwest 4 looked like all the others. Eggshell-white walls, beige tiled floors, fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. There were doors running down either side, but here was the first difference: None of the doors had knobs. Even from the lip of Northwest 4, Pepper could see door after door with the handle removed and the lock sealed. A whole hallway of rooms that were never used.

At the far end of Northwest 4 sat a large stainless-steel door.

It looked like the little cousin of the secure door in Northwest 1. Stainless steel instead of cast iron, sleek where that other one was rough. But it, too, had a shatterproof window. The lights of the room behind that door were out. Totally dark.

"There," Dorry said quietly.

Loochie lifted one foot. "Watch this."

Her baby-blue Nike crossed the threshold of the hallway, and instantly Miss Chris called out from the nurses' station.

"Off-limits."

Loochie winked at Pepper and planted her foot over the line. She lifted her back foot and brought that one over, too. There she stood, just barely, in Northwest 4.

Scotch Tape stood up and leaned his elbows on the desktop of the nurses' station.

"Loochie," he growled. "You heard what Miss Chris said?"

Loochie stepped back.

"They protect it," Coffee whispered.

Pepper couldn't look away from the stainless-steel door one hundred feet down Northwest 4. It bent the light cast down from the ceiling so that something seemed to move behind the plastic window. A figure on the other side, or just a reflection of something on this side? Pepper stared at the small window. His legs stiffened. His face turned warm.

He felt watched.

Then he heard his own voice in his head. It was saying, *No, no, no, no, no*. Not disbelief but refusal.

"I don't belong here," he told the other three. "This isn't my fight."

His spoken voice sounded so small. He watched Dorry and Loochie and Coffee deflate with disappointment. A story came to him, an explanation.

"In 1969," he told them, "the Doors performed at the Dinner Key Auditorium in Miami. About twelve thousand fans showed up to hear them play. Jim Morrison was drunk."

"You were there?" Loochie asked. "You been to Miami?" She sounded jealous.

"No," Pepper admitted. "I was *born* in '69. I read about this. In an interview with Ray Manzarek, their keyboardist."

Pepper looked to Coffee and Dorry and Loochie, but none of them seemed to recognize the name. Pepper decided not to be disappointed in them for this.

"Morrison performed, but he didn't sing much. Mostly he yelled at the crowd. And at a certain point he told the crowd he knew why they'd really come to the show that night. 'You want to see my cock, don't you?!' "

Dorry snorted, a little laugh.

"That's what he said," Pepper continued. "Then Morrison waved his shirt in front of his crotch and pulled it away and said, 'See it? Did you see it?' "

Coffee looked confused.

Loochie said, "This doesn't sound like a very good band."

"Listen to me. Four days later, the city of Miami issued a warrant for Morrison's arrest. After a trial, Morrison was convicted of two misdemeanors. Open profanity, I think. And indecent exposure. And yet, Ray Manzarek swears Morrison never exposed himself. No pictures were ever developed, from a crowd of twelve thousand. And no one ever showed real evidence that the ... exposure ever happened. Manzarek called it a mass delusion."

Pepper stopped for a moment, to let the phrase sink in.

“But even years later, there were hundreds, thousands, who swore they’d seen Morrison’s penis. It didn’t happen, but to them it was still real.”

Loochie and Coffee and Dorry backed away from Pepper. Pepper looked at his feet.

“You understand what I’m saying?”

Dorry nodded and shrugged.

“You’re not one of us,” she said. “Sure. We understand.”

Loochie said, “If I had paid to see that concert, I would’ve got my money back.”

Just that fast, they departed. Coffee slipped into the phone alcove. Dorry returned to her room on Northwest 3, where she slipped those cookies into a plastic bag, a kind of care package she was putting together for another patient, one of the many she took care of at New Hyde. And Loochie wandered back down Northwest 5. Her half hour of TV control would be coming soon and she wanted to watch something stupid and fun, music videos maybe; something to make her forget the story about Jim Morrison’s penis. And how Pepper meant it to say she was seeing something that wasn’t really there. *Fuck you, Frankenstein.* That’s what Loochie wanted to tell him.

And Pepper? He returned to his room alone.