

Sonata

The vanity is a cherry veneer monstrosity, the kind of antique dealers laugh at. Attached to the back are three oval mirrors; the middle one, the longest, is crowned with a carved bouquet of rosebuds that, when the light is right, blinks with gargoyle eyes in the sun. The blind is up and the sun pours in steadily, but the woman sees only herself in the glass. Her freshly scrubbed mouth has been painted a dusky rose color; her hair is twisted atop her head without pins or clips in a way only she knows. Scattered before her are jars of creams, bottles of nail polish, lots of tissues smudged with shadow. The sun makes a dazzle of a gold mascara wand.

A child, just past eight, stands at the door, watching. Her face is flushed; she has been running through the tangle of pear trees in the side yard. The girl's attention is divided between the woman and the window, where she can see a dilapidated weather vane atop a detached garage. The husky, humming sounds from the woman's throat seem to turn it. The vane's arrow swings north, then south, then in the direction of Glorious Life Pentecostal, where they are having a big revival.

The woman leans forward until her nose presses against the middle mirror, then jerks back, causing her hair to fall. It's light brown and falls in waves to her shoulders. The woman rises from the bench before the mirror. She is wearing an aqua housecoat and her breasts point out. She sighs and picks up the silver bottle. At the sight of it, the girl squats on the hardwood floor, her toes edging an oval braided rug. The woman unbuttons her housecoat, stumbles, straightens, then shrugs off the coat altogether and stands naked. She sprinkles talcum onto her body like salt from a shaker. She rubs in circles, smoothing it deep into her skin. She raises an arm, weaves sideways, straightens again, and proceeds to put lots of talcum under each arm. The child squeezes her legs together as if she might like to go to the bathroom, but it isn't that kind of pressure. It's that panicky feeling she gets way down deep when she knows she's being left behind.

Silver Bottle

The woman in my mind just now? That was my mother. Resurrection driven, gliding in and out of my mind as easily as a paschal moon, hungry for a feast.

We don't celebrate Easter at my house. No church, no new patent leathers, no three-piece suit for the boy. Just two dozen eggs I'll color and leave in the backyard while Royce drives to the mall and gets three huge pre-stocked Easter baskets from a party store. I always remind him to get pink, yellow and blue because those were the colors of cellophane I used when I made them.

I made them until the nightmare.

I was stuffing Easter baskets late on a Saturday night when I fell asleep on the ear of a plush bunny. The sleep was light. I knew I was drifting, but I could rouse myself. I had stuff to do. Then exhaustion overcame me, and I plunged. I don't know how long I slept before I met Mother, more real than she had a right to be, and wearing the same soiled nightgown that

smelled to high heaven. She was holding the silver bottle. "Take it, Lorraine," she said. "I'll stay if you do."

I woke, cursing, for this time I knew what I was being offered. A silver Judas. A slurred promise. A betrayal of trust. Sure, she left it behind on the day she left us but that was because she was drunk and just forgot. Somewhere amongst another set of pear trees, I buried that silver bottle, and I know that somewhere my mother bought another just like it.

The front door slams and Nathan, my youngest, runs into the kitchen. His face is white beneath his tan, and he's shaking like a hound hosed with cold water. His shoulders are hunched, the blades sticking out so prominently that I suddenly wonder if he's eating enough. My girls are sturdy with matching dispositions. They would fight buzz saws.

"Mom," he says, "I ran from the bad bus."

"Nathan, today is Tuesday." My voice is kind, even, but I step back and start putting things in the kitchen cabinets that don't belong there; the salt and pepper shakers, the wind-up timer shaped like an apple, the cobalt blue napkin rings that belong in the napkin drawer. I'm remembering another small boy, my brother Jarrell. He was born a clinger, but after Mother left, he became a leech. I don't think it would have happened if people, especially women, hadn't kept reaching for him. He's over the worst of it now, but for years Jarrell had a problem with the bottle, trying not to grasp again.

Now, I look at my son, proud of his skill but defeated by circumstance. Doubtless, he's run from a UPS truck.

"The bad bus doesn't come until Sunday," I tell him.

"Mom, I ran *fast*."

"I know you did."

The girls aren't afraid of buses, but Nathan's just turned five and still gets confused. I hammered bus facts into my children's heads before they could walk. There are three buses that go through Harshbarger Mills: the yellow school bus, which you will never ride because you live in town; the Greyhound that stops twice a day on West Main; and the blue bus that says Glorious Life Pentecostal in letters about two feet high painted state road yellow. Avoid the blue one, and if the driver gets out and tries to give you a pamphlet, run straight indoors. *Run for your lives! Run as if the very devil were on your heels!* The girls laughed, delighted by my exaggeration, but Nathan took it to heart. I have to watch what I say around him.

My husband isn't a Christian, but he used to be alarmed by the way I treated religion.

"Why does it matter to you so much if they don't believe?" Royce said to me on night. 'It's a good, clean way to live. Let them go to Sunday School with the rest of the kids. Nothing will happen."

I propped myself up on my elbows and told him it wasn't a matter of not believing. I hadn't been inside Glorious Life Pentecostal since we were married and there wasn't one of those hypocrites who was a better Christian than I could have been. The point is, I continued, you can't just *be around* Pentecostals. You can fight them, you can hate them, but once inside those double doors, you'll start acting like them. The kids won't know a day's peace until they're baptized and after that it's all about abstaining from alcohol and sniffing out sin.

"But if that's what you want," I told him, "I'll put them on the bus come Sunday. I'll take them to the corner and show them where to stand. But let me warn you," I straightened, taking

the pressure off my elbows, “you’ll get more than you bargained for. Religion isn’t like cleaning a chicken; you can’t take the messy parts out.”

‘You’ve been thinking about your mother,’ Royce said flatly.

“Of course. She left at Easter, remember?”

“I didn’t know you then,” he muttered, face down in the pillow.

‘You knew about it, and don’t tell me different. Vera, Roseanne, and that uppity Jane Lee Veach? All pure as driven snow on the outside and rotten to the core underneath. They never let me forget for one minute what my mother did, and don’t tell me you didn’t listen to gossip. Everyone did. *Nothing will happen?* Listen, I had to go to that place after Mother left. No one would sit with me at the Sunday School table, and during the main service, Pastor Burgess always thundered about Whores of Babylon or Jezebels. Then, when we read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school in tenth grade, the whole thing started up again. Those kinds of scars don’t go away. I’d sooner let the kids join a street gang than that stupid Determined Disciples group. Are you listening? “

Of course, he wasn’t. Royce, having turned on his side, let out a rip of a snore. I thought about waking him, and let it go. My moaning, bitching, and venting about Pentecostals has become his bedtime story. The same words in different order, but all told before.

My mother used to play the piano at Glorious Life Pentecostal. She’d sit at the bench, back straight, her wavy hair pinned up. In the spring, she wore corsages. Everyone liked her, and I once repeated a compliment that I’d heard someone say after a service that made her shake with laughter: *Carmen’s the greatest thing since sliced bread.*

I’ve given a lot of thought to her memory. At one point in my life, especially when Jenna and Carlee were small, I guess you could say she was all I thought about. I tried to imagine how she could leave us, especially when I was bathing my children. The sight of my girls lifting their arms to be helped out of the water made me think of my mother, and the thought twisted like a knife.

Sometimes, I’d see things her way. Especially during those long summer months when Royce worked overtime. My husband works at Berry Construction; he’s their head dry wall man. When the girls were small, Cliff Berry was building a subdivision out Yate’s Crossing called *Love-the-Maples*. Royce worked day and night finishing the dry wall so the painters could come in. He’d leave for work at five and sometimes not get home until past midnight. Then I could feel the pressure. Jenna was teething and Carlee always seemed to have colic and I’d walk the floor for hours, with a kid hanging on one leg and another squalling in my arms. Then, it no longer seemed fantastic that a mother of three, saved when she was twelve, a virgin when she was married, could walk out on her family – just that she lasted as long as she did. She must have been like a motor idling.

My mother was a good woman; I’ll give her that. Her mother, Grandma Lizzie, was always at our house, teaching her how to cook and clean, and when we were sick, she didn’t waste time getting us to the doctor. Speaking of Grandma Lizzie, there was none finer. Without Grandma Lizzie, Lord knows how I would have turned out. When Mother left, she took us in until she had a stroke, then West Virginia Child Placement Services interfered. But Grandma made sure I was remembered. She sent cards, addressed by an aide who went to Glorious Life Pentecostal and I received dozens, each covered with flowers and a dollar or two tucked inside

– even after I was fostered by the two schoolteachers and didn't need one red cent. And the Thompsons in Davis County who took the twins, Rush and Jarrell? Before she would even consider such an arrangement, she made sure Mr. Thompson didn't drink. But that was after Mother was already gone, and I'm jumping ahead.

Like I said, I've thought a lot about my mother. I've even thought about her life before I was born. She was a change of life baby. Grandma Lizzie told me she didn't suspect she was pregnant until she was almost four months gone and the shock spun her catawampus. *I don't know what got into me, Lorraine. I must have been crazy. There I was, with what I thought was a pot belly, calling all my friends, yet not allowing anyone to see me, not even Catherine, unless I was covered up in bed. I did the wash in the evenings, hung the clothes on the line in the dark, and brought them in around six, damp with dew. After she was born, I had the prettiest baby in the clinic. She had a headful of curls. I knew Carmen was going to be someone special. As soon as Dr. Burdette released us, I showed her all over town.*

No, she wasn't crazy, just temporarily out of her sphere. For instance, where did the name Carmen Amber come from? My mother should have been named something serious, like Ruth, Leah, or even Mary. But Grandpa Hugh, the head usher, let it pass.

That was only the beginning. Grandma Lizzie learned to drive and not just around Harshbarger Mills. That might not sound like a big deal, but it was then, because our part of the state is known for its terrible roads and circuitous routes. The only way to get to Clovington at the time was Route 40, a winding two-lane which was just as dangerous as any country road because the state never bothered to trim the growth along the berms. At a time when having a woman song leader in the church was a big stink, my grandmother drove to Clovington because her baby was going to have piano lessons from someone who knew music, and she was going to take tap, ballet, cotillion, and something no one teaches anymore --- elocution.

There was always a lot of gossip. First, it concentrated around Grandma Lizzie: she told me so herself. Most of it came from Pearl Ellis, mother of crazy Lena and grandmother of Jane Lee Veach, who would torment me mercilessly at school after Mother left. Pearl actually stood up during a Wednesday night service and tried to prophesy. It didn't work because everyone knew Pearl was incapable of seeing beyond her nose (which was very long and had a bump in the middle), but the words which flew out of her mouth stuck in my grandmother's brain. Pearl prophesied that the devil now had a stronghold in Lizzie McComas, and because of her pride, Carmen Amber would desert the Savior and follow the world.

Grandma Lizzie repeated the accusation so often that I have to believe it bothered her more than she'd admit. But as often as she told the story, she told the ending twice --- how the gossip turned prophetess enrolled her older daughter, Andrea, in piano and dance, but the girl proved so hopeless at ballet, she had to quit. As for her piano, she lacked Carmen's light touch.

Every time my mother did something extraordinary, like appearing on Talent Hunt or making head majorette, the gossip would start again. It was all based on jealousy. Grandma Lizzie told me, but I'd believe it for myself. You see, I've got the pictures, her yearbook, and dozens of photographs taken out in the back yard. My favorite is Mother in her full-dress uniform. It's one of the few color shots. She's turned sideways in an effortless pose, one leg straight and the other bent, knee directed toward her chin. Atop her head is a huge majorette hat with a plume dyed dark blue, while the baton is tilted downward, held by a white-gloved

hand. Yes, there is sex, but it is clean, clean sex spilling out. She looks so young it's hard to believe that in a few years she'll be my mother.

My father's name was Garry, spelled with two r's. He was such a handsome man, but the only picture of him was taken on the front porch steps. Because he is posing (what today would be called a J. Crew look), I know Mother must be taking the picture. That and the fact that on the back, written in her rounded handwriting, is the word "Dreamboat." And that's it, none taken together. It's almost as if my mother went straight from her majorette uniform into a wedding dress. I asked Grandma about this. She snorted and her cheeks turned red. She said she knew Garry was crazy about Carmen, but she had no idea they'd end up married so she never bothered to get the camera out. I have wondered if Grandma Lizzie wasn't trying to hold back time. Surely it wasn't deliberate, just that the time was nearing when all girls slip away from their mothers, and she wasn't ready to let go.

I was born two years after their marriage. Around the age of four, my own memories begin. We rented a two-story white frame on the corner of Holt and Buttermilk. Our landlady was Mrs. Sanders, an elderly woman, who lived next door. Across the street, in a long cinderblock building with a permastone front, was a print shop that published *The Mill Record*, the county's only weekly paper.

The press started up early; each weekday, I awoke to the sounds of constant clicking. Perhaps it's for this reason that images of my childhood are triggered by sounds. Besides the press, there was the sound of wind in the hollowed-out gourds Mother hung on the porch. Martins were supposed to nest there, but they didn't because Grandma was always banging in and out. Next came the sound of Chum, the neighborhood bulldog, panting and grunting, as he followed the mailman. Then, a tremendous wheeze when Chum flopped down, usually in front of our house. Finally, there was the sound of bubbles. Let me tell you about them.

Every morning Mother would make a batch of bubbles. She filled a pan with warm water, squeezed in a bit of glycerin followed by a glob of Ivory Snow. The bottom of the pan was dented; it rocked gently on the linoleum floor. Mother always set it down with a sigh. I always held my breath. You see, the placing of the pan was invested with secret meaning. If the water spilled out, it meant the bubbles would be lazy, heavy, too oily to rise. If the waves sloshed just to the rim, it would be a good batch.

Imagine a hot summer morning. Imagine the motions of a small mountain town. The pan has been set on the floor, and the water has sloshed safely. In the kitchen is the drip from the faucet and the hum of the second-hand Frigidaire. I'm sitting on the floor with my legs splayed in a V, waiting. Mother is moving about in the next room, then I hear her shut the door to the bath. More sounds of water running. The mixture waits in a spiraled glob in the bottom of the pan. At last, the sound of her body in the tub. I stick my finger in the pan and begin to swirl slowly, but when the bubbles come, it's just too much. I make bubble lips and bubble moustaches, mountains of bubbles pile up on the kitchen floor. I watch iridescent bubbles roll on the air until I can stand it no longer and jump up, clapping my hands to make them pop. I should remember the smell, but I don't, only the sounds of the light, pinprick popping. On some days, so many and fast it sounded like rain. Sounds only. Sound of my mother singing, sound of my bubble kisses, sound of her hips as the wet skin shifted against the enamel of the claw-foot tub.

Grandma Lizzie and Mother were close, but there was a bond outside of blood that made them closer. Both were widows. I never knew my grandfather because he died in my mother's junior year. His death was undramatic. Grandpa Hugh simply closed his side street market at noon, as he'd done for thirty years, walked home for lunch, and died while sitting on the front porch in a wicker chair.

My father's death was a different matter. His death was dramatic, gruesome, and written about not only in *The Mill Record*, but in *The Clovis Dispatch* and *The Burlington Gazette*. LOCAL MAN CRUSHED BETWEEN TRUCK AND TRAIN. C&O TO INVESTIGATE FATAL COLLOSION ON 16TH AND HUMMEL. HARSHBARGER MILLS NATIVE NEVER REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS.

My father was a truck driver, who'd just returned from a run to Clovington. He'd begun to cross the railroad track, even though he probably knew a train was coming, but it must have still seemed safe because an eyewitness said the warning arms were slow in coming down. *When the cab was smack in the middle of the track, the engine stalled. The driver tried to start it. It went a few feet and stalled again. The guy looked up, saw the train, but started fiddling with the engine again. He tried one more time before he jumped out, tripped on the tracks and fell again. I saw the whole thing, but I wish I hadn't.*

My dad lived a few hours afterwards, but the doctors told my mother there was no hope because his liver was crushed. Looking back, I don't know which was the hotter topic: the way my dad died or the structured settlements we received – one from Tri-State Trucking and the other from C&O Railroad. Garry with two r's. I should remember him more than I do. I don't remember the eulogy at his funeral, just the expressions of his sons, Rush and Jarrell, born five minutes apart yet so different in temperament. At my father's funeral for the first time I saw my brothers as twins. They wore the same expression - confused.

We got a lot of sympathy from the town and so much food that Mother bought a freezer, which she told Sears to deliver to Grandma's because the wiring in our house was old and a freezer would blow a fuse. We had enough freezable casseroles to last for a year, but occasionally Mother would fix macaroni and cheese for Jarrell or make a meal from Chef-Boyardee. She quit going to church, which Grandma said was only temporary, but sent us every Sunday, then went back to bed. During the week, she volunteered to teach the high school majorettes new routines and joined the Junior Women's Club, planting flowers and shrubs in front of the library, the town hall and the covered bridge, which had been condemned for traffic but was being preserved as an historic monument. Grandma Lizzie kept us while Mother was out, plus, she came over twice a day, morning and evening. For a while, Mother had trouble getting out of bed.

Months passed and soon my dad had been dead a year. Mother still grieved, but she'd stopped crying at night. The boys didn't remember Dad, and as for me, I was forgetting him, too, especially as his picture wasn't being plastered on the front page of newspapers anymore. But something was wrong with Mother. She'd never been the talker Grandma was, but now she scarcely spoke. There were other things. One day she was sluggish and swollen eyed, the next day she was quick and nervous, jumping at every sound. A new wind had swept through our screen door, causing Mother to spill out the words, "I'm bored."

I couldn't understand that statement. She had us, she had Grandma, she had plenty to do.

My understanding came due to a bad habit. I hadn't given up my bottle of Ovaltine yet. Mother had once told me that I hadn't been breast fed, that when I was born everyone had gone Gerber bottle crazy, and I still had one glass bottle left that hadn't been shattered from a set of four. I used to get up at dawn and mix Ovaltine and milk in it, suck it, rinse it, and then go back to bed. Quite a shameful habit as I was going on ten. One morning, however, I overslept, and Grandma Lizzie was over extra early. I was heading to the kitchen, knowledgeable of every creak in every board of the hallway, when I stopped, hearing the sounds of an argument. They were keeping their voices low, but there was no disguising the anger. I froze, slid down beside the phone table, and listened.

'You've been up and down for months, Carmen,' my grandmother was saying. 'I'm your mother. I know you and ---'

"You know *me*?" That simple statement let loose a rage I'd never heard before and Grandma chose to ignore.

"Of course, I know you. Mothers know their daughters inside and out."

This time there was no response.

"All of this isn't because of Garry. What's wrong?"

"Nothing you'd understand."

I heard the slap of a hand on the table. Mother had made Grandma Lizzie mad.

"I understand more than you think. I know about those trips to Clovington and to the 3rd Avenue ABC store. I know where you keep your liquor." I peered around the table and saw my grandmother motion toward the top cabinet. "Right up there."

I sat back in place, nearly banging my head against the wall. Liquor! The devil's drink in our house. And worst of all, if Grandma had found Mother's liquor, she'd found my bottle as well. Her liquor! My Ovaltine! My head was buzzing. I was undone, but Mother wasn't.

"I know you've found the liquor. You probably found it months ago. You run through everything here, my drawers, my kitchen cabinets, you open the mail. You always have. Garry couldn't even sit in his boxer shorts without you barging in." Besides pinching her upper arms, Mother had developed other odd habits. She chewed gum, practically all the time; she'd even wake up with gum embedded in her hair. She drummed her fingers on the tabletops, the kitchen counters, the arm rail of the swing. She'd also begun laughing oddly --- or rather at odd things. She let out a whoop now. "There must be half a dozen liquor stores in Clovington. How did you find the exact one?"

"Catherine Valentine told me. Her husband saw you there."

It was Mother's turn to slap the table.

"Oh, Lordy, Fred. Of course, I talk to him." She was laughing so hard both sides of her housecoat fell open, then she sloughed it off altogether and let it pool around the legs of her chair. "We've both decided it will be a great day for West Virginia when it gets out of the booze business and hands it over to private control. There'll be liquor and beer everywhere. Fred and I won't have to drive so far."

I peeked around the kitchen table and saw an expression on my grandmother's face that I'd never seen before and would never see again. She'd lost her nerve.

"You didn't say that," Grandma Lizzie said, finally, firmly.

"Sure I did," Mom flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I'm glad Catherine finally admitted Fred drinks. She should be crying on your shoulder instead of spreading tales. You think I've got a problem? Fred's had one for years."

"Everybody already knew Fred drank," she snapped. "Now I have to worry about how many people know you do."

"I'm not worried about it. I don't care."

There was a silence that lasted for so long I shifted position because my right leg had gone numb. I stretched it out, then pulled it back when they started to talk again.

"Carmen," Grandma said, "tell me what's wrong. Tell me now."

There'd always been tension between them, mostly over the three of us. Grandma said she was too easy; Mother said kids should be kids. Now, I realized the strife was deep between them, though I couldn't imagine the cause. Whatever it was, it was bad because Grandma had those red spots on her cheeks and Mother sagged like the hollowed gourd Rush had pulled down and left out in the rain.

Mother broke first. She threw her arms on the table, palms up, and spilled out her thoughts. "I'm bored. I stay busy all the time, but I don't do anything. I've got money now, and I was thinking - no, I'm not leaving Harshbarger Mills." This was said rapidly, doubtless in response to a look of alarm on Grandma's face. Then, she took a deep breath. "I want to go to Burnell University and get a degree like Andrea Veach."

"Andrea Ellis," my grandmother said.

"It's Veach, Mom. She got married around the same time I did, and widowed."

Grandma Lizzie dismissed this statement and now her voice held equal parts disgust and disbelief. "You don't need a degree to be better than that girl. You've got more talent in your little finger than she has in both hands."

"It's not about talent. It's about—"

"Carmen Amber, listen to me. If you're worried about being replaced as the church pianist, don't give it a second thought. No one is going to allow Andrea to horn in on your position because there's a crazy streak in all those Ellises, especially Lena, and the church is no place for confusion. And that little girl of Andrea's already acts strange, even if she is half-Veach."

"You're missing my point."

"I don't think I did."

"Mom, when I used to take lessons from Mrs. Jones, she told me I had perfect pitch."

I'd found an opening between the table top and the phone book on the shelf beneath, and now I could see clearly without moving. I watched as my grandmother rubbed at her cheeks.

"Perfect pitch, eh?"

"It means I have a natural gift and—"

"I know what it means."

"Okay, then you should know that I didn't benefit as much as I should have from those lessons. I cheated."

"You did what?"

"Cheated." My mother was drumming her fingers, a slight smile on her face. "Yes, I did. Mrs. Jones would play the songs for my next lesson, and all I had to do was listen. Then, I'd

come home and play the piece without using the music. She stopped playing for me when she caught on." Briefly, Mother stopped drumming her fingers. "Oh, don't look so horrified. I can read music, but I could have learned more back then."

"You don't need to learn more now. You play beautifully as it is. You've just lost your confidence because you haven't been back to church in . . ." The red spots on Grandma's cheeks had receded, now they flared again. "well, I can't remember when. In fact, as soon as you give up this liquor habit, you won't be bored. Liquor dulls the brain, and once you've quit drinking, you'll find plenty of things to do in this world. You don't need more education. You need a new house. Why don't you buy in Harshbarger Heights where the Valentines and Veaches live? You've got the money. The kids are going to need more room."

"I'm not ready to move. I'll buy when I'm ready. I want to go to school."

There was a silence, and for one glorious moment, I thought my mother had won. I wanted her to, although I'd never taken sides between my grandmother and mother. But Grandma Lizzie was shrewd. The same woman who'd learned to drive a stick shift might have changed in appearance, but her mind still worked the same. She had a trump card.

"Who's going to watch your kids?"

"You."

"No, I would not."

"You're here all the time, anyway."

"Not for hours and hours."

"Yes, you are."

Grandma ignored this. "Lorraine is no trouble, but those boys wear me out. I'm not as young as I used to be, and you're fine just the way you are. Except," she added, "for the liquor and the house."

Mother had stopped drumming the table and was now pinching her upper arms.

"Carmen, stop that."

"Make me," Mother said, continuing to pinch herself, hard. After one pinch that reddened every bit of extra skin on both of her upper arms, she said, "I'll get a baby sitter."

"A baby sitter!" Grandma Lizzie raised her voice so loudly that she disturbed Jarrell, who let out a whine from upstairs. "A baby sitter," she hissed. "You never had a baby sitter. Neither have your kids."

"Maybe it's time they did."

"Maybe it's time you quit trying to get above your raising." Her cheeks were on fire now. "You've got money, but you're not thinking straight. You have all the education you need. You'll never be replaced at the church, no matter if Sandra Ellis gets degrees out her ears. Forget what that teacher in Clovington said."

"You know good and well her name was Mrs. Jones. At one time, you thought Clovington was the place to be."

"I only took you to get decent lessons. Your lessons are over. Now, raise your kids."

That was the end of the conversation. Whatever my mother's thoughts were, I'll never know, because she didn't answer, not even to say goodbye when Grandma Lizzie let herself out the side door. She sat at the table, drumming her fingers for so long that I gave up and went back to bed. Lying there, deprived of my Ovaltine, I realized how much my mother and I were

alike, both wanting things we couldn't have. *Raise your kids*. Was that when she started resenting us? Was that when she started looking for ways to leave?

I receive a letter from Mills Elementary. I'm surprised when I see the school's name and address printed on the envelope. After all the confrontations I've had concerning my two girls, I'm surprised any teacher has the nerve to confront me. Right now Jenna's in the middle of a fashion war, and I'm right there with her. Why can't she wear skinny jeans? They sell them. As for Carlee, well, wasting materials is not a crime. She likes to draw and she likes to draw right. I pay for that paper with my tax dollars and I haven't been shy about telling the principal. But this concerns Nathan. What I can pull out of the loopy, distracting handwriting of Miss Lewis, first year teacher, is this: my son isn't doing well. *I'd like to schedule a conference at your earliest convenience*. Then it concludes with a flourish, *An extremely bright but nervous child*. I put the letter back in in the envelope and fold the envelope in half, sliding it into the side pocket of my purse. I'll tell Royce after the conference. I want to find out what's really going on.

After that conversation with Grandma Lizzie, I think Mother entered another world. She was already too quiet, but now it was impossible to get the slightest response. I finally gave up, after I'd repeated myself inches from her face and realized her eyes weren't focused on me but at something on the wall. Her breath smelled funny, too. She went through gum like Catherine Valentine smoked cigarettes. I started directing my questions to Grandma, and she told me what to do – how to watch the boys and what went where.

Grandma and I were keeping house because Mother was always in her room with her door locked. She came out when she knew Grandma was gone, but then it was mostly to lie on the couch and watch T.V. with the sound turned down. She'd quit getting dressed and always wore a nightgown. I tried to brush her hair once, but that made her cry because she said I was hurting her head. I was picking up on more things now. I knew the trouble between my mother and grandmother wasn't just about college. I slunk around. The boys didn't. After school, they stayed in the back yard and tried to put up a pup tent, which kept falling down. Mother had the telephone man put an extension in her bedroom because the phone rang a lot and she didn't want us disturbed at night. We were disturbed, anyhow. The calls stopped eventually, but when the phone rang night after night, I'd think: *I never knew my mom had so many friends*. I was losing the friends I had. I didn't know why, but the girls, especially Jane Lee Veach, were laughing behind my back. They didn't bother to stop when I turned around.

I was glad when the last bell rang, though the arguments had worsened at home. Bad words, some I'd never heard, were being used. I might not have known all the meanings, but I knew exactly what was going on. Mother and Grandma were in a full-scale war, though neither had told me the cause. The arguments stopped for a time, though, after Harshbarger Mills was rocked with news. Another death and more money. Harold Brickman, long standing member of Glorious Life Pentecostal and the town's leading insurance man, had died of natural causes and willed everything he owned to the church to be used for "The Glory of God." I don't know how God felt about all the renovation and decoration, but the parishioners, tired of housing their piety in the plainest building in town, decided to throw out their feet. New bathrooms, stained glass windows, and an educational unit were begun. The decoration was left to the Etta

Campbell Circle, a choice that infuriated Grandma because Pearl Ellis was the president and overrode any objection to her taste, which, according to Grandma, resided only in her mouth.

Pearl chose a carpet pattern called "Busy Autumn." It was brown with ecru diamonds and inside the diamonds were more brown flowerpots with yellow balls of color that slightly resembled blooms. I thought the pots looked like lumps of chocolate and the balls like half-hearted suns. Grandma said it was nothing but a field of stubble dotted with cow pies and dandelions ready to be blown.

The fern stands on either side of the pulpit came from the window of a florist's shop. They were huge columns, sprayed bright gold, which conflicted with the wood in the sanctuary. The women's bathroom was finished first, and for that Pearl had chosen pink tiling and wallpaper in a sea shell design, complimented by ceramic towel racks and soap dishes with raised conch shells. I'd already seen my grandmother lose her temper with my mother in the kitchen, but this time she went berserk. *What a joke*, she said, *when no one in the congregation has seen the ocean. Of course, Catherine has, but she said it was just a lot of water.*

Grandma gathered a group of disgruntled women behind her and was ready to face down the head deacon when a bone was thrown her way. The bone was an organ; the Board of Elders had decided to buy one. Evidently, they'd gotten wind of Grandma's ire and had even allotted money for chimes. An employee from Kinzey Music came to the church and surveyed the sanctuary for the acoustics, and then one of the elders, Grandma and the employee had long talks about which organ to buy. Finally, they decided on a Wurlitzer, which was to be shipped in from Columbus, Ohio. At some point, Mother, who'd been like a piece of flotsam all these months, got involved. She agreed to play the organ. I think a deacon called. Anyway, after the organ was installed, Mother was to receive a series of free organ lessons. She was a whiz at the piano, but she'd never played an organ and would need help with the pedals, stops and chimes.

Mother didn't come back to church until the organ was installed. She tried once but had to leave after the announcements because she was feeling lightheaded. Pearl couldn't say anything about her "weakness" because the same Sunday Mother slipped out, Jane Lee had an accident in the pew. She had a bladder infection, Pearl told everyone, caused by too many bubble baths and some blue colored toilet paper that Andrea had bought to match her bathroom. Until it cleared up, Jane Lee had to take big, red pills. Her granddaughter would be fine, Pearl insisted, but she didn't know when she'd be able to sit through an entire service.

For months, there was disruption and excitement at Glorious Life Pentecostal. The carpet was installed and clashed horribly with the seashell bathroom, but Grandma held her tongue because she was put in charge of the hymnbook committee as well. This time, my mother worked with her, afternoons only, and at our kitchen table. Grandma lugged sample hymnbooks to our house, and I was told to keep a list of the best ones. I asked Mother why she wouldn't work at the church; she said she didn't want to be around Pastor Burgess. That's all she said, and I knew not to pry.

The construction began, and I thought it would never end. It lasted until the end of April, and the organ came in the middle of May. Jane Lee Veach had been nice, but now she was snotty again. I think it was because she'd peed in the pew and her mother was going back to the Presbyterians. My mother still hadn't come out of her shell, but word was out that once the organ came, she'd be back on the bench. Yes, building and more building, torn out walls

with huge sheets of plastic covering them, paint spatters, Sunday services held in the church basement where it was cold, even though it was spring, and where we sat on aluminum chairs whose seats were even colder. Finally, it was over. A hideous combination of solemnity and bad taste, but there it was. Now, what to do? New pews had been purchased, but no one was filling them. The exterior had changed, but the church hadn't grown.

The pastor and deacons decided to host a revival. Not just an ordinary revival, where Pastor Burgess stood up every night and preached in his second-best suit, but one full of fire. An evangelist should be hired, the best that money could buy. The Reverend Stephen Fisher was contacted, a celebrated Pentecostal who'd written three books, two on tongues and one of victory in prayer, and who had a huge congregation at *Holiness in Christ Pentecostal* in Athens, Ohio. He also had air time and had a popular series on seed faith.

No one thought he'd agree to come to Harshbarger Mills, but he did. Once the deal was struck, Pastor Burgess asked and was granted the whole summer off; his only pay came from his two-week vacation time. In the interim, various deacons would preach. With the Rev. Stephen Fisher coming in August, more flurry began.

Mother had agreed to be the organist, but she was far from an expert. The man from Kinzey Music had given her the twelve easy lessons and left, assuring her that, though she was still a little heavy on the pedals, she'd catch on. It would be better if she played barefoot, with not even nylons on. She'd have more control of the pedals because her feet wouldn't slip. Mother was out of the house, but it was only to practice.

Every day after school, I'd traipse behind my mother as she went to Glorious Life Pentecostal. At first it was a trial, then the organ became a fascination. I sat in the choir loft and watched her face. Sometimes, I imagined she went at it with the same intensity that Grandma Lizzie had when she learned to drive a car. Grandma would watch the boys, and there was a tacit agreement between us that I'd watch Mother.

Then, it was June and I was out of school. Grandma Lizzie took the boys earlier, and Mother and I were normally at the church right after breakfast. I know this because I remember eating two bowls of Fruit Loops while Grandma fussed about Mother's lack of appetite. Yes, Mother was still at home, back at the bench, *raising her kids*, but though the arguments had stopped between them (or at least stopped when I was in the house), Mother had developed a sullen, independent streak. When Grandma Lizzie fussed at her to eat, she'd dump her food into the scrap dish we saved for Chum. The only thing I saw her "eat" that summer was black coffee.

Once Mother was at the organ, she forgot about everything, and that freed me. I grew bored with sitting in the choir loft, so I moved down to the pews, taking along an Etch-a-Sketch to keep myself amused. I grew bored with it, too. I made up games of my own. Usually, I slid up and down the pews. One of my favorite games was to see how far I could go with just one shove.

In front of the pulpit was a huge communion table made of solid oak, and across the front in large letters were carved the words: THIS DOETH IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME. I'd position myself in front of the first M, hook back with my right foot, and give myself a shove (it was cheating to use my hands). The wood was so smoothly polished that Mother never suspected what I was engaged in. Now, I realize she wouldn't have cared. When I got tired of sliding, I'd search the hymnbooks for notes left by the older girls, or faintly pencil in a mustache on the

Sunbeam girl on the paper fan, donated by the Sunbeam Bread Company and the Veach Funeral Home.

My grandmother hated those fans. Even when the church was stifling and those cheeks were blooming roses, she wouldn't fan herself, although the other women waved them back and forth as if they were racing for air. I asked her why, and all she would say was, "I think they're tacky."

It must have been the Veach name on the back, because the Sunbeam girl was harmless. She was a child of perhaps five, blonde hair piled on top of her head, each tumbled ringlet meticulously etched. Her skin glowed pink with health and innocence; her head was bowed in prayer. The background was blue, a sky washed fresh by rain with a couple of fluffy clouds thrown in, which, if I squinted hard enough, reminded me of cows. Her eyelashes were long and curled upwards, her mouth pursed in a pink bow. The lettering on the back of the fan said: COMPLIMENTS OF THE SUNBEAM BREAD COMPANY AND VEACH FUNERAL HOME. ALWAYS READY TO SERVE YOU.

Sometimes, I slept.

My naps came to an abrupt halt one day when I awoke to the sound of awful music. Not awful in the sense that Mother was playing badly, but that she was singing in a voice I had never heard. Her head was thrown back so far that I could see the tip of her nose. There was a wildness in her voice, a vibrato that overrode the rest. The words to the hymn went like this:

*Lord Jesus, I want to be perfectly whole
I want thee forever to live in my soul.
Cast out every idol, break down every foe,
Now wash me and I will be whiter than snow.*

I'd heard that hymn before, had even sung it. Simple words, a repetitive chorus, nothing to be afraid of, except that Mother was making the familiar terrible and new. Coming out of sleep, I struggled to recognize the wild woman on the organ bench.

*Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow,
Now wash me and I will be whiter than snow.*

By the time she was ready to go to the second verse, I was screaming loud enough to wake the dead. I put my hands over my ears and screamed until I became aware that Mother was shaking me, hard.

We stared at each other.

"What the matter with you? Are you sick?" She picked me up, felt me all over. "Do you hurt somewhere?"

"It's the music." Her kindness only made me want to cry more. "I'm afraid of the music."

Mother was stunned. Her face assumed the same expression as Grandma's when she talked about Mother and Fred Valentine at the ABC store.

“Afraid of the music?” A question, one she was asking herself. “But it’s not bad music, Lorraine. That’s a hymn.”

“It’s not the music.” It was harder to explain than to hold back my tears. “You’re the one making it bad.”

Mother let go of me as if she’d been slapped. I watched her through eyes filled with tears, watched as tears gathered in her own, watched as she blinked them back and a closed look settled on her face. Was she thinking she’d birthed a nutcase like Lena Ellis? Was she thinking she’d better make a fast getaway? Finally, she took me in her arms and held me tightly, my flat chest flattening her breasts, waiting until the rhythm of my heart matched her own.

“Should we call Grandma?” I asked. Another thing Harold Brickman’s money had bought was the installation of a new hall phone.

“No,” Mother gave me one last squeeze before she let me go. “Your grandmother doesn’t need to know.”

I sniffed and nodded.

“You’ve been asleep,” she said, her voice gathering force. “You’ve been asleep and have had a bad dream. Now, do you need to go to the bathroom?”

I nodded, following her to the beach bathroom, which was beyond clean and seemed bigger than the first floor of our house. It was so clean that, despite the fact that I had to go, I couldn’t.

Mother waited outside the stall so long that she began to tap her foot. Soon, it took on the rhythm of the routine she was teaching the majorettes. Though it felt like my bladder would burst, nothing was happening. She rapped on the door.

“Lorraine, hurry up. I want to get back to the boys, and I don’t want you wetting yourself on the way home.”

Again, the note I’d heard the morning I’d eavesdropped in the kitchen. She was angry, and my mother was not an angry woman. In fact, if one of the Sunbeam girls had come to life, they’d have grown up to look just like her. Finally, my bladder, cooperating with fear and nature, let forth a stream, staining the water.