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Also by ELIZABETH SCOTT

BloomPerfect YouSomething, Maybe

living dead girl

ELIZABETH SCOTT

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1

THIS IS HOW THINGS LOOK:

Shady Pines Apartments, four shabby buildings tucked off the road near the highway. Across from a strip mall with nail places and a cash-loan store that advertises on TV all the time. There's also a drugstore and tiny restaurants, every one opening and closing within months.

Shady Pines is nice enough, if it's all you can afford. The stairs are chipped but solid, the washing machines always work, and management picks up the trash once a week.

A few mothers sit outside their buildings, resting in fraying lawn chairs and talking over each other while their children run around, playing. One dog lies sleeping in the sun, twitching its tail when a child comes over and pats the top of its head before running away, giggling.

That man in the far building, the car guy, is outside, a pile of parts scattered on the black ooze of the parking lot around him. Car guy has been here since you moved in, but you never see him except for sunny weekends, when he works on his car.

Not that he ever drives it.

He's a strange one, that's for sure, living alone, always with that car, not really ever talking to anyone, but every place has one weirdo, and at least car guy cleans up after himself. He's almost obsessive about it.

Still, see how he sighs when that man, the one whose daughter is quiet and, sadly, a little slow, pulls into the space next to his? See how he watches the girl get out of the car? She's a skinny little thing, always hunching over a bit, like she's taller than she thinks she is. Homeschooled, of course, because of how she is, or so someone once told you when you were getting the mail, and there are no secrets around here, not with everyone living so close together.

She walks slowly across the lot, trailing behind her father, who waits patiently for her to get to the building door, holding it open even though he's carrying all the bags. She doesn't even say thank you, but what can you expect? Kids never know how good they have it.

2

THIS IS HOW THINGS ARE:

Cold, from the grocery store, from the dairy aisle you walked down to pick up the yogurt, from the frozen-food aisle, its cases filled deep with frozen pizzas and ice cream in large round containers.

Cold, getting out of the truck, foot clinking over something metallic, piece of a car lying on the ground.

Don't stop to look.

Walk up the stairs, Ray's footsteps behind you. Listen to him pause, smiling at the one open apartment door, the Indian family on the second floor, always children running in and out, sometimes their TV turned up so loud at night Ray has to go down there and knock on the door, say please turn it down? Thank you so much.

"Was that guy in the parking lot looking at you?" Ray says when you walk into the apartment, as soon as the door thunks closed and he's turned the locks, one, two, three. Better safe than sorry, he always says.

Shake your head no, no. Even if he did look, it would never be at you.

No one ever really looks at you.

Ray puts the groceries away, yogurt in the fridge, his oatmeal in its individual packets in the cabinet above the sink. Five apples, one for each day when he comes home from work. Five TV dinners you'll heat up at night for him to eat unless he brings something home.

He comes over to the sofa. Holds out a glass of water so cold the sides are frosty, ice cubes clinking inside. You've pulled your skirt up to your waist, arms resting by your sides, palms up and open. Waiting.

"Good," he says, and lies on top of you. Heavy and pushing, always pushing. "Good girl, Alice."

Afterward, he will give you the water and a container of yogurt. He will sit with one hand curled around your knee. You will watch TV together. He will tell you how lucky you are.

"Yes," you will say. "I know I am."

3

ONCE UPON A TIME, I DID NOT LIVE in Shady Pines.

Once upon a time, my name was not Alice. Once upon a time, I didn't know how lucky I was.

4

I EAT FOURTEEN CHOCOLATE-HAZELNUT candies, round and wrapped in silver foil that crackles when I snap it open.

I also eat six cookies, long brittle tubes filled with chocolate; one puffy cheesy thing that tastes old, all grease

and bitterness; and two mints before a woman in a sky blue shirt comes out and calls my name.

The women I'm sitting with, all older, all reading magazines that promise quick dinners and happier children, look relieved.

They've noticed the pile of wrappers around me, noticed how I sat and ate while they sipped diet sodas or water and gave each other cautious looks if they reached near the candy when grabbing another magazine.

They know I do not belong here, that there is something not quite right about me.

But they will do nothing about it. They will say nothing, ask no questions. No one does. No one has.

No one ever will.

"Alice?" the woman in the sky blue shirt asks again, and I stand up, swallowing a last bit of cookie. Flour and sugar, brittle sweet.

There is a plastic decoration on the wall across from me; clear rippled plastic resting against a blue wall. A reverse ocean, with no water for anyone to drown in.

I can see myself in the plastic and it waves me into a strange, distorted creature, the shadow of something or someone.

I look wrong.

I look dead.

I'm not, though. I'm only partway there, a living dead girl.

I have been for five years.

5

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A little girl. She lived in a town four hours away from here, in a house on a street named Daisy Lane. She had a mother and a father and her own room and a TV and sometimes could stay up late to watch movies on the weekend if she ate all her dinner.

She had a cat and three best friends and wanted to work with dolphins. She had posters of them on her walls, and her computer screen saver was one, a dolphin with warm eyes and a sweet grin gleaming out at you. All her stuffed animals, except for the stupid ones her grandparents gave her, were dolphins.

One day she went to the aquarium. She wore blue jeans, a white shirt (no logos, no designs), and sneakers (white, with white socks). She went with her fifth-grade class, and since it was three days before her tenth birthday, she thought her friends would let her sit by the window on the bus.

They didn't, and when they got to the aquarium there weren't any dolphins and her friends got mad because she wouldn't loan them her lip gloss—it was new, it tasted like cream soda, and she didn't want to share.

She was a selfish little girl.

She paid for it.

6

“DAY OFF FROM SCHOOL?” SOMEONE asks, and I realize the woman with the sky blue shirt is gone and I’ve been guided into a room where another woman stands, smiling and ready.

“Skipping,” I say, stripping off my clothes, down to one of Ray’s old T-shirts. Smell of him all around me, always.

“I used to do that,” the woman says, smiling more, like we share a secret. She has a mole on her face with two hairs growing out of it. You’d think she’d notice a thing like that.

“Ready,” I say, lying down, and the woman motions for me to spread my legs.

“You want it all gone?”

I nod.

She is supposed to ask how old I am, and maybe other things. Something. There is a sign out front that says minors must have a parent or guardian present to sign off on all services, and this isn’t a desperate, dying store that needs customers. This is a busy, bright place, where women wait and there is a girl whose only job is to ask you if you want anything to drink. (Coffee? Water? Diet soda?)

It doesn’t matter, though. The woman standing over me won’t ask any questions. She never does. Never has.

Never will.

She starts to wax. My eyes burn and then water as she rips hair away, stripping my flesh.

It is good for women to look like little girls now, to have no hair between their legs. The women out in the waiting room, the ones who will not look at me, are here for that too, to be made into smooth, hairless creatures.

They will have their skin polished, smoothed, so everyone can pretend they are young again.

Everyone wants the young.

7

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A girl in an aquarium.

She wouldn’t share her lip gloss and so her friends said she couldn’t walk with them.

She got mad and went off to look at the penguins, which weren’t dolphins but looked pretty, like in the movies she’d seen with her mother and father. Her lips tasted like cream soda, but she actually didn’t like it all that much (it was the only flavor left and her mother had agreed to buy her lip gloss once, just this once, and she knew she had to take what she could get) and she missed her friends.

Plus the penguins got boring fast. They just stood around looking like they knew they weren't in a real home. Looking like they knew their lives were just a lie.

A man tapped her shoulder and told her she needed to go find her class, that they were watching a movie.

"It's already started," he said. "You better hurry up."

"Oh," the girl said. "Where?"

"The movie theater."

The girl looked at him blankly. She didn't know where that was. They'd been given maps when they came in, but she and her friends hadn't looked at them. They were bright red with stupid baby-looking arrows drawn on them to show where you were when you got the map. Dumb. Like they didn't know where they were?

They balled them up and threw them away. Then she wouldn't loan them her lip gloss.

Then she was alone.

The man sighed. "Fine, I'll show you. Come with me."

The girl knew she wasn't supposed to go anywhere with strangers, but the man had on a blue shirt like everyone who worked at the aquarium, and he was crabby like the lady who'd told them welcome and to be quiet in the same sentence. He was just an annoying, boring grown-up, not like the strangers she was warned about, who spoke sweetly creepy, things like oh little girl, come sit on my lap, or offered rides or candy or secrets.

The man took her outside, because her class was in the other building, the new one. She'd seen it as she came in, and had wondered why they'd put in a movie theater but not dolphins.

Before they went outside, before they even left the penguins (who were still just standing there, doing nothing, like they were watching them), he gave her a baseball cap.

"Everyone got one," he said. "Yours is the only one left, though, so it's too big. Better tuck your hair up under it. Maybe that way it'll stay on."

So the girl mashed her hair up under the hat so the hat wouldn't fall off and went outside. When she did, the man stayed behind to say something to the woman at the door. Grown-ups and all their boring talk.

8

"ALL RIGHT, ALICE," THE WOMAN RIPPING off my flesh says. "You can get up now. We're done."

9

THE GIRL WENT OUTSIDE AND THE man caught up to her in three easy steps. She heard him coming—one step, two step, three—and sighed, eager to get back to her friends.

“This way,” he said, and she followed.

“Sorry I had to stop for a second there,” he said as they walked. “I had to ask the lady by the door where the gift shop was. She thought you were my little boy. Isn’t that funny? You don’t look like a boy at all.”

10

ONCE UPON A TIME, THAT MOMENT was when a little girl’s world ended.

11

“HAVE A GREAT DAY, ALICE,” THE woman tells me as I am leaving, waving without looking at me. It is only three steps to leave her behind, the door to her little room with its light and wax and hot pain.

Ray says it’s sad how women try so hard to be young, to pretend they are something they have forgotten.

“You can never remember the best part of yourself when you grow up, Alice,” he tells me. “My mother told me that, and it’s true. So what do you do?”

12

NEVER GROW UP.

Like something out of a story, maybe.

Try saying it while a hot, heavy hand pinches, testing to make sure you’re still child enough.

Try saying it when you can’t grow, when you’re forever trapped where someone else wants you to be.

13

GET UP.

Those were the first words I ever heard.

Open my eyes, see a girl, black and blue all over, dried blood along her thighs. Red brown stains smeared across the hairless juncture between.

“Get up and take a bath, Alice,” the man in the blue shirt said, and Alice did.

I did.

That’s how I was born. Naked, hairless, covered in blood like all babies.

Named, bathed, and then taken out into the world.

14

I PAY FOR MY WAXING AND WAIT FOR my receipt. The woman who prints it out asks if I want to leave a tip.

“I gave her five dollars already,” I say. “Can you put that on the bill?”

The woman frowns but types something into her computer and then prints out another receipt.

I leave and walk to the bus stop.

Along the way, I stop at a convenience store and buy five dollars’ worth of hot dogs and candy. Two hot dogs, with cheese, and three candy bars, on sale. Bright orange stickers below the candy saying SPECIAL! VALUE! I eat everything before the bus comes, even the candy bars, their chocolate gone old, spiderwebbed with gray, and throw all the wrappers away.

Here’s a tip: leave no evidence behind.

15

ONCE UPON A TIME, A LITTLE GIRL who lived at 623 Daisy Lane disappeared. The police questioned everyone, even a woman who remembered talking to a man whose little boy had already gone out into the parking lot. She remembered because he asked where the gift shop was and said thank you after she told him.

“No one says thank you anymore,” she told the police. “No one’s ever grateful for anything.”

Ray let me watch her say that on TV, and then turned it off and smiled at me.

16

I GET HOME AT FIVE, WHICH IS AFTER Ray gets home. He works 7–4 every day, with an hour for lunch, loading trucks at a warehouse that ships boxes of ready-to-assemble furniture, the kind that comes with picture instructions and lots of little screws. All our furniture is from there, and all of it leans to one side, manufacturer seconds.

Errors.

My hands are shaking as I close the door behind me.

“What happened?” Ray says. He’s still eating his apple. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

“Bus broke down. We had to wait.” I sit down at the kitchen table to be judged.

“What bus?”

“75.”

He calls the bus company. I watch him throw his apple away. There is still some flesh left, white around the

tiny core. I am too nervous to imagine eating it. Also, for once, I am not hungry.

I have not brushed my teeth. I will smell like food.

And Ray will smell it on me.

I look at the knife on the kitchen counter and picture it in my chest. I don't think it would take long for my heart to stop beating.

"All right, thank you," Ray says, and hangs up the phone. He looks at me. "I'm glad you didn't lie to me about the bus, Alice."

I nod. Look right at him.

Does he know about the food?

"Do you have a receipt?"

I fish it out of my pocket and hand it to him. He looks at it, and then throws it in the trash. "Hungry?"

I nod.

Does he know about the food?

He opens the refrigerator. It is the loudest thing in our apartment, makes odd wheezing noises, like it is struggling to stay cold. "You know what will happen if you ever do lie to me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good," he says, and slides me a fun-sized container of yogurt. The top promises it's the perfect lunch for children. "Because I would hate to take time off work to drive all the way to 623 Daisy Lane and wait for everyone to come home and ... take care of things. Helen and Glenn both have new jobs. Did you know that? Do you want to know where they work?"

I shake my head. I open my yogurt. Ray doesn't give me a spoon so I scoop some out with my fingers. My breath will smell okay now.

"I'd hate for them to come home and find me there, waiting for them," he says. "I'd hate for your parents to die because of you."

"I didn't lie to you about the bus," I say.

"I know, silly girl. My girl," he says, and stands up, unbuckles his belt. Opens his pants. "Come over here. Give me a kiss hello."

I get up and walk over to him. He frowns and I hunch over so I barely come up to his shoulder.

"Alice, my baby," he says, kissing my cheek.

Then he shoves me to my knees.

When he's finished, he throws the rest of my yogurt away.

“It spoils so easily,” he says. “I wouldn’t want you to get sick. Let’s go watch TV.”

We do. He drinks beer and orders a pizza and puts me on his lap during the sitcom he hates. I am hungry again now, think of food; hot dogs, candy bars, the pizza crusts inside the box on the floor.

Ray likes how smooth I am, how raw my skin is. It burns by the time he’s done touching it.

“No breakfast tomorrow,” he says afterward. “I think you might be over 100 pounds. That’s not acceptable.”

At bedtime, he rumples his sheets—we have a two-bedroom apartment, because we are father and daughter and he wants to take care of me, wants me to have my own room like other little girls—and then crawls into my tiny bed with me. My sheets have pictures of cartoon princesses on them, with pink trim and a matching pink comforter.

“Love you,” he says before he falls asleep. I am so hungry my head hurts with it, making me slow, and he pinches my thigh, hard.

“Love you too,” I say, but it is too late and he holds me down, breathing hard and fast.

“Show me,” he says. “Show me.”

So I do.

17

RAY GETS UP AT 6, SHOWERS AND dresses. He whistles while he shaves, and I listen for the clanking hum of the refrigerator, count out its wheezing rhythm. 1, 2, 3 4. 1, 2, 3 4.

Ray tried to teach me how to whistle once, in one of his better moods, but I could never pick it up. He said he still loved me anyway.

Lucky me.

“No breakfast, remember?” he says, sitting down next to me on the bed, one paternal hand on my forehead while the other gropes below. He keeps it up until he starts to sweat, little beads of moisture gathering at his temples, and then gets up.

Every Sunday we go to Freedom Church. Ray believes in God, and in looking at all the little girls in their Sunday best, ribbons and bows and tiny socks with lace on them.

The day I got too tall to wear the white dress with short, puffy sleeves and little tucks along the chest, he filled the kitchen sink with water and shoved my head into it.

I was thirteen then, and when I tried to stay down after he’d held me there, lungs burning, inside of my head going dark, he hauled me out and slapped me so hard the right side of my face grew a hand-shaped bruise, jaw to forehead. I couldn’t go outside for a week.

No one missed me.

Two days later, when my face was still swollen hot, he came home with a lock of my mother’s hair. He

wouldn't tell me how he got it, even when I cried and crawled onto his lap to beg the way he likes best.

He just said, "I decide everything. Remember that."

God and monster all in one, and mine to worship.

I tell him to have a good day before he leaves my room, and he turns back to grin, proud.

"I look good today, don't I?"

I nod. He looks like Ray. There are no words for what he looks like to me.

He whistles again as he leaves.

I close my eyes.

There are several women at Freedom Church who think Ray is attractive, with his full head of hair and carefully pressed clothes. They like that he is so strict with me, they say when they talk to him, his hand resting on my shoulder (remember what I will do if you ever try to leave me, remember who you belong to). Their eyes gleam with hope. They want to be taken care of, and they think Ray could do that for them.

He laughs at them on the way home, laughs at how old and sad they are. "Not like me," he says, and then rests one hand on my knee. "Not like you."

18

EVENTUALLY I GET OUT OF BED AND walk to the bathroom. We don't have a tub, just a shower, but I ignore it and brush my teeth, swallowing the toothpaste instead of spitting it out. I hear it can be poisonous, but I guess it's only if you're really young.

I am 15 now, and I keep waiting for Ray to tire of me. I am no longer short with dimpled knees and frightened eyes. I am almost as tall as he is, and his license says he is 5'7". He likes the picture. He says no one ever takes a good driver's license picture except him.

I am 15 and stretched out, no more than 100 pounds. I can never weigh more than that. It keeps my breasts tiny, my hips narrow, my thighs the size Ray likes.

I am 15 and worn out, tired of everything.

I am 15, and I figure soon he will let me go.

19

THERE WAS ANOTHER ALICE BEFORE me. Ray let her go when she turned 15.

He drove her all the way back to where she used to live, to where she was when she was another girl, back to her before.

Her body was found in a river, floating downstream just a mile from the house she grew up in.

Ray used to tell me this story a lot, pulling me close and saying, “But I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen to you. I’ll keep you safe. All you have to do is be good. Be my little girl forever. You can do that, can’t you?”

I am 15, and I figure soon Ray will kill me.

I could run, but he would find me. He would take me back to 623 Daisy Lane and make everyone who lives there pay.

He would make everyone there pay even if he didn’t find me. I belong to him. I’m his little girl.

All I have to do is be good.

20

THIS IS MY DAY:

After I chew on some toothpaste, I go into the living room and turn on the television. Morning television is boring, all bad news and infomercials, but at nine the talk shows start. I lie on the sofa and look at the ceiling.

Sometimes, in the afternoon, if the soaps aren’t any good, I’ll watch movies about angry, scared women who fight back or teenage girls who suffer but then overcome. There are always shower scenes in them, shots of the women scrubbing their abuse or grief away.

I don’t understand this. You can’t make yourself clean like that, and fresh-scrubbed skin only invites attention. Ray makes me shower once a week, and I hate coming out of the bathroom. I hate knowing he’s waiting for me, that he will rub his hands and himself all over me and whisper things. His hands used to make me cry, but now I’m used to them.

The thing is, you can get used to anything. You think you can’t, you want to die, but you don’t. You won’t. You just are.

Today I smell like Ray, which is normal, and a little like yesterday’s wax. My head itches, and I scratch it until the undersides of my fingernails are bright red. I flick the blood and dead bits of my head onto the floor, and get up to take my pills.

Ray doesn’t want me getting pimples or my period, and so he makes me take a pill for both every day. The one for pimples dries out my skin, and makes the sun blotch me angry red. The one to prevent my period does just that, and although the ads on TV say it just makes your period less painful, I never get mine.

I don’t ask Ray why.

I only got my period once, late last year, and Ray got so angry he took out a knife and made me sit on a chair in the corner of the living room. He looked at me for a long, long time, and then tied me to the chair and left me there until the bleeding stopped. He wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t look at me. Food and water once a day, a trip to the bathroom each morning and night. One time, I stood up and blood dripped down my leg and onto the carpet and he threw up.

And then he rubbed my face in it.

When the bleeding stopped he made me scrub myself, the chair, the carpet all around it, and then he threw the chair out and gave me the pills.

“We can work this out,” he’d said, and cradled me in his arms, my legs cramping from being curled up so I’d fit on his lap. “You’re my Alice. You’re my little girl. You’re all I’ll ever want.”

21

RAY MET THE ALICE BEFORE ME WHEN he was nineteen and she was eight. He keeps the newspaper clippings from when the police found her body, from the funeral and afterward. Sometimes when he reads them he touches the picture of her in the article, black and white photo of a little lost girl, and cries.

He cries and says he’s sorry, so sorry, and do I forgive him? Head on my lap, breath hot on my thighs.

I say yes for her. I say yes and used to figure out how many days until I was fifteen while he hunched over me.

Now it’s here, all those days have passed, and I can’t help but wonder what he’s waiting for.

22

TODAY IS A GOOD DAY ON THE TALK shows, and I sit and watch people cry and fight over who fathered their baby and why they love their cousin and how their moms dress like whores. The audience is always so excited, so happy with all the misery.

Sometimes the shows will have on older women with lost eyes and round faces who cry about being abused when they were younger. They call their Rays names and scream, and the host pats their shoulders or gives them a fast one-armed hug and says things like, “But you survived. You’re strong.” Then they will ask why they didn’t say anything.

Why didn’t you tell someone?

Why didn’t you ask for help?

Why didn’t you leave him?

Why didn’t you respect yourself enough to get away?

The women usually crumple, shed their flesh shells, and become quivering living dead girls, trapped. A few will say that no one listens, that people don’t want to see, and that if you try something, anything, you won’t suffer but others will.

The audience always boos and says You Should Have Done Something. You should have fought back. You should have known no one has that kind of power. You should have been strong.

You shouldn’t have been so stupid.

The women nod and sniffle. They are still broken. They still agree with everything anyone wants. Even the ones who try to explain end up with their heads down, their hands in their laps. Little girl ready to say she’s sorry.

All our fault, always.

23

THE THING IS, YOU CAN HAVE THAT kind of power, and everyone in those audiences knows it. That's why they yell. That's why they say You Should Have Done Something.

They have power too.

I'd like to see them with it taken away. I'd like to see What They'd Do then.

24

THE MORE BORING TALK SHOWS, THE ones with celebrities with shiny teeth and musicians who swear their songs are from the heart, are on next. I look out the window at the empty parking lot. Everyone who lives in Shady Pines Apartments works. Everyone has a busy job, long days, and comes home tired. In the five years I've been here, three people have learned my name, and two of them were younger, softer versions of Ray, eggs that hadn't yet rotted. They both told me I could come over "to visit" anytime I wanted.

The third was a woman. She was old, bent and wrinkly, and walked with a cane. She said I should be in school and asked what I was studying when I said my father taught me at home. She sometimes pooped herself and had a daughter, worried-looking and angry, come and take her away three months after she moved in.

The old woman told Ray he was an abomination as she left, but then she also said that to the mailman and the three little boys playing on the sidewalk. Her apartment was rented by the Indian family, a man, a woman, and four little girls. I thought Ray might like the girls but he said they were ugly dark and had bad teeth.

I see them in the hall sometimes, and they never look at me. I am smelly and strange, a dirty-haired girl who doesn't go to school and steals food people leave half-eaten on the washing machines in the basement.

They know I am wrong, and stay away.

I am allowed to eat lunch and I eat yogurt during a soap opera, licking the spoon slowly and carefully, tiny mouthfuls as Storm worries she's in love and Dessen breaks glasses because Emily broke his heart and ran off with his brother and wise Aunt Marge pats worried Henna's hands and tells her that Craig will see that he loves her, that he just needs time. Craig was with Emily before, but now he loves Henna and I think next he will love Susan. She's only a little girl now, but in six months she will be twenty and a doctor or a lawyer and will swear she hates him right before she kisses him.

I love soap operas. If I lived in a town like Ridgefield, Aunt Marge would see me and invite me in and then call her daughter or son, who would be a cop or a lawyer, and they would come and rescue me and I'd live with them, and their children wouldn't like me but would come to love me after I saved them from almost drowning or burning to death. I would never have to eat or even be hungry.

I would always be listened to.

25

WHEN RAY COMES HOME AT 4:30, I pour him a glass of milk. He doesn't believe in drinking alcohol;

his mother told him it was a sin. I rub his back and feet while he watches the judge shows that come on before the news.

He likes Judge Hammer, who was a military judge and who yells, “Justice hurts!” when people cry during his verdicts. Today’s case is about a man who says his ex-girlfriend owes him money and took his car. Hammer tells the ex-girlfriend, who is chewing gum and leaning forward so the camera can see down her shirt, to pay up, and Ray says, “What a crock. Anyone can tell that guy is lying.”

I nod—Ray thinks children should be seen and not heard, just like his mother taught him—and he sighs, scratches his stomach, and continues. “Did you see how he kept blinking? Classic sign. You know, I went to Alice’s funeral and talked to her parents and said I wished I knew why she’d run away all those years ago, and they had no idea she was with me because I knew not to blink like that. They had no idea how much she loved me.” He sighs. “How much I loved her.”

He strokes my hair. “She was never as good as you.”

I press my hands to Ray’s feet, stare at the yellow undersides of his socks. I’ve seen enough television to know Ray is missing something other than his soul. It’s like you see him, and he’s a person, but if you look close enough, you can tell that he’s not. Like underneath his skin, he’s not hollow. He’s rotted out.

“You’re too tall, though,” he says, frowning, and pushes my hands off his feet, dragging me up toward him. Hands on my throat. “Too tall and you want to leave me, don’t you? You’d run away in a second if I let you. You wouldn’t care if everyone at 623 Daisy Lane had to die for you. So selfish.”

“I don’t want to leave,” I tell him, cracking out the words as the world goes fuzzy around the edges. “I want to stay with you.”

“Liar.” He squeezes harder. “You always say that, and then one day I’ll come home and have to track you down, find you talking to people, maybe telling them stories.” He frowns. “My mother hated storytelling. You know what she used to do to me when I did it?”

I can’t breathe, but that’s not why he lets the pressure up. He lets go a little so I can nod. Because he knows I will. I am not strong; I cannot stop him or even slow him down. I can only wait until he gets so tired of me that he lets me die and moves on.

“She would punish me,” he says. “Hold me down and show me how all we think of is sin. How we are all sin.” He spits the last word out, like he can taste it, and then touches my hair, slides his fists under my shirt and twists the sullen rise of my right breast, the little lump that’s there. “Would you be that kind of mother?”

“No.”

Ray has never come out and said it, but I know from years of listening to him dream that his mother did to him what he does to me. Held him down, rubbed him raw, broke him open. In them, he cries and begs her not to touch him, that he doesn’t want to go inside her, that he is a good boy, he really is.

I let Ray have his nightmares, watch him thrash and listen to his voice squeak with fear. I lie there and watch him and wish he was trapped back there, with her, and had never broken free.

But his mother died when he was eighteen, burned to death because she fell asleep smoking a cigarette. Ray got an insurance check from the church school where she worked as a secretary and moved away.

He met the first Alice a year later.

His mother never smoked. But she was such a private woman, he's told me, that people just assumed she'd kept it a secret. She seemed the type to do that.

"You aren't listening," Ray says, and his hands tighten again. "You know you're supposed to listen when I talk." He shoves me to the floor and pulls off my pants.

I stare at the ceiling while he sweats and thrusts, air aching down my throat and into my lungs until he grabs my hair and says, "I know what I'm going to do. What's going to change."

He pushes faster then, harder, and slams my head into the floor over and over until my vision is bright and fuzzy and there are strands of my hair caught in his hand.

I think of the knife in the kitchen, of the bridges I've seen from the bus or on the way to church or the supermarket (Ray and I go every Saturday morning. Ray stares at little girls and I stare at the food), and feel my heart cramp.

It will be over soon, finally, but the thing about hearts is that they always want to keep beating.

They want to keep beating, and when Ray's finished he says, "I like that. A family. You'd be a good mother, wouldn't you? Let me watch out for a little girl of our own? Let me take care of her? Help me teach her everything she needs to know?"

"A little girl?" In all the dreams I have had, and they are small dreams, bloody ones that end with me floating free, I never dreamed this.

He shivers into me, grinning sharper. "She'll be so bad at first, crying and whining and maybe even screaming." He fingers my hair. "You cried, remember? You screamed. And now look at you. Happy as can be."

I nod, mind as numb as the rest of me. He is not letting me go. He wants me to stay. He wants me to find a girl for him.

For us.

He can't mean it. I will find him one, a beautiful little stupid girl, as dumb as the one at 623 Daisy Lane used to be, and show her to him. He will want her, with her little limbs and happy face and solid, live flesh.

She will become the new Alice, and he will want her so much he will forget all about me. Kill me to teach her a lesson, probably, and then move on. Yes, that is what will happen.

What must happen.

"I'll help you," I tell him. "I'll find what you need."

He kisses my cheek and then rolls off me, motioning for me to get up. "That's my girl."

Not for much longer, I think, and bend over, touch my fingers to my curled up mouth.

"I see that," Ray says, and yanks my jaw up, looks at me. "I see that smile. You want to help me, don't you? You want to teach our girl everything I like."

I nod, and he shoves me down again, forgetting dinner in his visions of this girl to come, this new child. This

new me.

26

I AM ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE HOUSE the next afternoon.

Ray has given me bus fare and told me the name of a park he wants me to go see. It is close to the apartment but not too close, a short ride in his truck but a long ride on the bus, and he tells me to remember everything I see.

I get to the park after sitting on two buses, and blink at all the people there. So many of them, and all so young. I will never remember everything but find a bench that has bags and backpacks tossed in a stack near it anyway, watch kids run over and pull out snacks and drinks, trailing crumbs everywhere.

I try to focus, but the world is dizzy, spinning as I think of what I will find here. Ray's prize. The new me.

She has to be just right. She has to make him forget everything.

Or at least me.

I take a breath, to slow the world down, and look.

I look and see a girl there. And there. And over there. I grab a notebook, pick up a pencil.

The first girl is blond and a little chubby, a thumb sucker. Ray would like teaching her not to do that. I carefully write down blonde and thumb.

She has a babysitter or mother, though, a woman who brings her a foil-wrapped package that the girl bats away, annoyed. Ray won't like the mother/babysitter hovering around. But still. People can be distracted, and Ray really doesn't like wasting food.

The other girls I see are both dark-haired like me, and both are alone, maybe dropped off by an older brother or sister who has to "watch" them, or maybe they've sworn to go straight home after school but come here instead. They don't play so much as stand, sullen, watching the others. They would scream and kick, I can tell. Ray would like that too. I write scream and kick, 2, and then sit with my face turned toward the sun. I don't bother to close my eyes.

"Have you seen my notebook?"

I blink, light burning away, and see a girl standing in front of me. Six? Seven? Eight? Doesn't matter. She's young.

She's young, brownish-blond hair, and is ferociously clean and shiny, not a speck of dirt on her little white shirt or pink skirt with a smiling flower on the hem.

"Notebook?"

"It's green and has a frog on it," she says. "I went on the swings and now it's not here."

"It's not," I say, and stroke my fingers over the cover of the notebook I am holding closed against my chest.

Tracing over the big frog sticker. “Someone must have taken it.”

“And my pencil.”

“And your pencil.”

She sighs and sits down. “It’s my favorite. My dad gave it to me for my birthday.”

“Oh,” I say, and snap the pencil in half, grinning as its pieces fall to the ground under the bench we are sitting on.

“I don’t like you,” she says abruptly. “You’re not nice.”

She gets up and goes over to the swings. I lean over and pick up half the pencil from under the bench. I write ALICE in large letters on the page, then tear it out and leave the notebook on the bench, half the broken pencil beside it.

I have found Ray’s new girl. I have found the new me. I think about her all the way home, how she will cry and scream and plead just like I did.

It makes me smile.

Everyone on the bus who sees me smile looks away. They see that I am all wrong, that my smile means someone else’s pain.

But no one says anything.

27

THREE LIFE LESSONS:

1. No one will see you.
2. No one will say anything.
3. No one will save you.

I know what the once upon a time stories say, but they lie.

That’s what stories are, you know. Lies.

Look at that, four life lessons. Now you owe me.

28

AT HOME, RAY IS TIRED AND CRANKY and makes me step on the scale three times before I’m allowed dinner. I give him what I wrote, the page marked ALICE, before he gives me my yogurt, and for a moment I think he’s going to take it away but he doesn’t.

“You can’t write worth shit,” is all he says. “Good thing you got me around to take care of you.”

I swallow a spoonful of yogurt and ask to get a glass of water. Ray won’t let me get it, but instead brings it to me, motioning for me to get up so he can sit in my chair.

“Tell me about them,” he says, throwing the paper away and patting his lap for me to sit back down, to curl into him, and I do.

His hands are gripping my arms hard before I’ve even finished describing the first one, and I don’t get to finish my yogurt. Later, he lets me eat the burned bit of his TV dinner meatloaf while he watches two doctors argue over how to treat a dying boy.

“Tell me about them again,” he says when all the lights are out except for the fairy princess night light he’s plugged into my bedroom wall, waving her magic wand to spread pink light into the room.

I imagine her melting, real light coming out of her, flame bright. Ray lying snoring as she burns, waking up when it’s far too late. That would be a real fairy godmother thing to do.

“Pretty,” I tell Ray. “They were pretty.”

“What were they wearing?”

I make up outfits, frilly little dresses with sashes and tiny white socks folded into delicate shoes. That was how he dressed me for years, until the dresses strained open across my hips and chest, until my arms came out strangled red from the binding sleeves.

“I wish we could have them all,” he says. “But we can’t be greedy. Being greedy is bad. Like you tonight, eating that meat. Did you think I wouldn’t see you?”

“I—” I say and then stop, still, made stupid by telling stories about those girls, forgetting that none of them are here, that there’s still only one he can wrap his claws around.

“You can make it up to me,” he whispers, a ghost that is all too real in my ear. Hot hands squeezing me too tight, but only where people won’t see.

And even if he decorated my neck with a ring of fingerprints and left me lying in the street, no one would notice. Not in Shady Pines, where everyone is busy working to keep their kids fed, their bills barely paid. Not anywhere, because I am nothing, unseen.

I learned that the hard way.

29

I DON’T REMEMBER MY FIRST WEEK WITH Ray, those days when I was being made into Alice, except for one thing. One thing that showed me everything he said was true, that no one wanted me back, that I had to stay with him, that if I didn’t listen bad things would happen.

I woke up at some point, broken and bruised, Ray asleep snoring on top of me. I wiggled like a fish and slipped out from under him, throwing on a neat pile of clothes lying on a table. Little-girl-who-had-cream-soda-lip-gloss clothes. Little-girl-who-knew-she-couldn’t-go-outside-undressed clothes.

Normal little girl clothes.

There was one door in the room and I opened it, stepped out into a parking lot lit by a flickering, dying streetlight, a small faded sign by the road reading ROUTE 40 MOTEL—WEEKLY RATES AVAILABLE.