

Sheath

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M

y right hand is a shark, the spiny metallic jacks are starfish I scoop and spit out, scoop and spit out. Three at a time, four at a time, five, six, seven, all eight. The pink rubber ball smudges the air going up and wipes its own trace away going down.

Recess will be over and I will be scrubbing my hands in the bathroom sink before I notice the sting of scrapes from the rough sidewalk. I have become so fast at this game that Candice has started to act like it's okay for the other girls to know that we're friends. She talks to me out loud now in the classroom, instead of only in secret notes, and she's given me a woven bracelet of silky green and orange thread. Even Mean Mirella Nolan holds her tongue now. She has stopped calling me Brownie or Dothead, although she still never talks directly to me and never uses my name. But when I'm winning this game everyone forgets that I was the only fifth-grader not to receive a Presidential Fitness Certificate because I couldn't do a single chin-up and it took me fifteen minutes to run four times around the track. And the best thing is that I don't have to look at any of them, the strong popular girls who can run a mile in six minutes and do fifty sit-ups in a row. I only look down at the blue and green and red jacks, which are metal but light as feathers, and don't make me nervous like softballs or Frisbees.

For once the girls are watching me instead of me always watching them.

Far off I can hear them shushing each other so they don't break my concentration.

Maybe they are even a little frightened of me.

At reading period, Miss Gagliano crooks a finger and summons me to her desk, where she is sitting squeezed into the chair that's too small for her. I stand at the front edge, but she pulls me over next to her to undo and retie the sash of my uniform. I like it loose and low but she always makes me wear it tight and high, so that the skirt balloons out and exposes my knees and I feel like a little baby. After that I start to walk away, but she pulls me back. She holds my arm and leans into my face to whisper. I can see where baby powder and sweat are mixing into a paste in the folds of her chins.

"It would be just fabulous if Mom came in to answer questions next week after our sex-ed film, don't you think?" Miss Gagliano always calls our parents Mom and Dad instead of your mother and father, like we're all in one big, happy family. "She's a gyn-o-cologist, isn't she?"

I'm not sure if she's mispronounced it because she doesn't know better or because she's playing cutesy. But I am sure it's a bad idea, the worst idea I've ever heard. My mother never talks to me—what would she possibly have to say in front of a bunch of strangers? Miss Gagliano presses a note into my hand, a little square of tan paper with big blue ink loops on it. I promise to deliver it.

That night I sneak a look at my mother before entering her tiny home office behind the TV room. I peek through the slatted double-doors, trying to figure out if it's a good time or bad time. There she is, doubled over the low desktop, her waist-length black hair knotted in a bun so tight that I can see where some follicles have snapped and are sticking out in a fuzzy halo around her temples.

My father has told me the only three things I know about my mother: that she grew up very poor and unhappy in India; that she married my father to escape; and that, even though she's smart and a great surgeon, the Jewish men doctors at the hospital give her a hard time for being dark-skinned and a woman. These things are not easy for me to understand. It is hard to connect my father's words—words that make my mom sound like a story-book princess who does battle daily with ogres—to the near-silent woman I see through the wooden slats. How could I know about the "very poor" part? Because she's not anymore, and I have never been. The "escape" is okay: I can imagine my mother coming out of a window and climbing down a rope ladder

into my father's arms, even though I have seen pictures of the wedding, and I know it wasn't really that way. But as for the "hard time," well, when I look at my mother's hands, her surgeon's hands whirring, her right hand slicing the air with the silvery mechanical pencil, I can't imagine that anyone would dare cross her.

It is eight-thirty and I will be expected to put myself to bed soon, but there is my mother, working through a pile of patient charts, slashing away at the insides of each manila folder with her pencil. I once poked around in those files to see what it is she writes, but it wasn't even English, it was words like *fibroid* or *menses* and little mysterious codes like *D&C* all smashed together with slashes and commas and plus signs.

I lean against the door and it clicks softly in the frame. My mother's head snaps up immediately. "What, dear?" Her voice is not cold, but still I feel guilty for interrupting her. I walk in and drop the note on top of the pile of folders.

In anger, my mother's features are all movement: her cheeks go red then white then red, her eyes roll in all directions demon-like, and she doesn't hesitate to bear her full mouth of crooked, yellowed, poor-girl's teeth. Only in anger does my mother become a living person. It is her controlled stone face that scares me.

She makes a meaningless sound—"Hanh"—and looks over the note, her mouth a dead thing, her eyes fixed in the shadow behind her thick glasses. "Alright," she says, and hands me back the note. "Go to bed now."

The week passes slowly. Stupid me, I picked a fight with Candice and now my only friend is not talking to me. It's very odd how she used to love me but then somehow, in just one week, it turns out that really she hates me. It happened on the day we had P.E. inside, not because of the rain but because of the lightning. If it was only rain Mr. Daibeck would make us go out and play field hockey in the slick mud anyway.

Just like the chin-up bar, the horse is another of those things I can't do. Five tries in P.E. and I have still never made it all the way over. I run, I hear Mr. Daibeck's voice yelling at me to jump, I spring off the

springboard and leap, my hands grip the metal rings, but at the last second I can feel my whole self giving up, my legs go wooden, I forget to lift my knees and pull them through, they slam against the horse like a window coming down on fingers, and then I am stuck there, pasted to the side of the horse, my arms locked straight, and I can't even bend at the elbows to put myself down gently, I just let go and fall. Far off there is laughter, but I don't really hear it, although it makes my skin feel like a burning-hot shirt just out from the clothes dryer.

Mr. Daibeck's hand lifts me off the ground. "That's okay, next time," he murmurs, but he can't look me in the eye.

I know I have control over myself, know that if I could make myself not afraid, if I could only believe in the solid, steady floor on the other side of that horse, I would fly over the top. But I can't even see it in my mind, can't see the floor behind the horse, not the way I can see the bare black ground underneath the sparkling jacks, the way I can look right through the jacks as if they are already gone, already all swooped up by my hungry right hand.

After my turn I go sit next to Candice and Mirella on the bleachers. Mirella says to Candice, loud enough for me to hear, "Why don't you come to my house on Saturday? My Mom's going to show me how to hook a rug. Then we can all go to lunch downtown." This is the first time Mirella has ever invited Candice anywhere, I know. Now Candice turns her back to me and talks only to Mirella. They pretend I'm not even there. I am shrinking into a little ball of nothing inside my skin. Finally I can feel my mouth being forced open by words that want to be said.

"Candice, why is that you call Mirella a bitch behind her back but now you're all nicey nice in front of her?"

Candice whips around so fast that her braid slaps me across the cheek. "You're stupid, the teachers all think you're smart because you're Indian, but I know you're stupid."

Mirella and Candice are hand-in-hand as they walk away from me, laughing. My left eye waters near where Candice's thick rope of auburn hair has whipped me.

Then comes the big day. Home Ec is cancelled that afternoon for the program, so after lunch all the fourth- and fifth-grade girls mill

around outside the auditorium. I want to start up a game of jacks but now that Candice and Mirella ignore me, so do all the other girls, except for Jane Kaplan, who has stringy black hair and bad skin and who nobody likes. Jane says, "I'll play," but I pretend not to hear her. Right on time, my mother drives up in the green Chevy and emerges. I wave to her from near the school doors; she nods once but doesn't wave back. She is wearing her purple rayon pantsuit with big gold buttons, the same old thing she always wears, and a current of red heat shoots up from my belly. From all the way across the parking lot, I can see her orangy lipstick and green eye shadow. She is trying to look right but looks all wrong to me.

I want to look through my mother to see my mother, look beyond the purple rayon and green powder to see my mother who is my one and only mother who I love, but I can't. I have met the mothers of the other girls, the mothers who look right, who wear plaid pants and paint watercolors to hang in their kitchens, the mothers who stay home or write magazine articles or teach part-time in nursery schools. You don't have to look very hard to see that these mothers are made to be loved, it's so easy, they are dressed for the part, and they make it easy by talking about it all the time, *I LUHV you! I LUHV you!* is what I am always hearing my friends' mothers saying to my friends, and kissing their cheeks, and asking them about which boys they like, and all sorts of stuff that seems so easy to them.

Am I your best friend? I once asked Candice. She said *No, silly, my mother is*, and this made me dizzy to think about. A mother a best friend? What could that possibly mean?

"Hello," my mother says, but doesn't kiss me, doesn't even quite look at me. I knew this was not going to be good. I don't think she likes to be around people. One look at my mother's dark face all screwed up with seriousness and I feel like I will never again be friends with anyone, not Candice, not anyone, not even ugly Jane Kaplan.

They show us a cartoon movie. On the screen there's a cartoon boy and cartoon girl, both blond, standing by a row of lockers, facing each other and smiling. They must be in high school because they have lockers, the floor-to-ceiling kind made of green metal, instead of cubbyholes. And they must be in public school, they're not wearing

uniforms like our forest-green wool jumpers. The boy is wearing tan corduroy pants, but suddenly, he's not wearing them anymore, although he is still smiling at the girl, and his thing like a yellow teapot handle is sticking up at an angle, pointing directly at the girl's red plaid skirt. But the plaid skirt never disappears the way the boy's pants do. I am sitting next to my mother and wincing in the dark. The boy is suddenly reclothed. Boy and girl still smiling at each other, their faces don't ever move. The narrator's voice says something about how the boy will "place" his thing inside the girl's thing. We do not actually see a cartoon picture of the mystery thing, the girl's thing. Only the fire-engine red plaid skirt. My mother is next to me, I can't look at her. Other girls are giggling. I hear Mirella shout "This is gross!" Miss Gagliano shushes her.

Then there's a cartoon egg surrounded by hundreds of cartoon sperm-fishes. The egg is a round yellow smiley-face, with long lashes and red circles for cheeks and big watery blue eyes like Miss Gagliano's. The fishes strike and strike. Then there's the egg lady stuck on a wavy red wall, getting bigger and bigger. Then there's a blacked-out screen, the sound of a baby crying, and finally a cartoon baby girl smiling out at us. You're supposed to know it's a girl because of the big pink ribbon on its head.

The lights go up and Miss Gagliano hoists herself out of the chair and asks my mother to stand also. I look up and see her rise, her arms folded across her chest tightly, her eyes shrunken and almost invisible behind the big glasses.

"Any questions from the girls?" My teacher's voice is all chirpy, all birdy-sounding, and her face shines with sweat.

I have lots of questions that will not come out of my mouth.

Why do they hide it but paint it red.

Why do they hide it but paint it the same color that makes a big bull come at you.

Why yellow teapot, why red plaid.

My throat burns but I can't say anything.

There is only one question, from Mirella of course, who can never, will never, be *shushed*.

"Doesn't that, like, *kill*, to have something stuck up in there?"

The whole room bulges with laughter and yelping and whooping, and the sound of Miss Gagliano trying to get it quiet by saying *Ladies...*

please... ladies... LADIES... GIRLS, THAT'S ENOUGH!

Up there a hundred miles away is my mother. My mother the gynecologist. Who spends all her mysterious days doing mysterious things in some woman's mystery-parts. Who has nothing to say for herself. Who I only know things about because my father tells me stories. Say something. Say *something*. Tell Mirella, tell me, something, *anything*. But she doesn't.

My aloneness is complete. It is real. In this very moment it has become a real thing. Years will pass and I will grow up and forget everything else, the jacks, the pommel-horse, Candice, Mirella, ugly Jane, even the red plaid sheath and yellow teapot I will forget completely—but I will always remember being there, small in my seat, looking up and knowing that it has become a real, solid thing: myself alone, and the many miles of unswimmable dead calm blue that separates me from her and us from them.

Her eyes are narrow like the slits in her slatted office door. I can barely see in. Her mouth opens and closes a few times like a fish-mouth. Then she sits back down without a word.

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