

came to get Lisa, she protested by locking herself in the closet and refusing to leave. Ma had to pry Lisa out of the house and drag her back to University Avenue, both of them in tears—which, it seemed, Lisa never got over. From then on, Ma said Lisa was tough to please. It appeared she had developed a sharp sense of what was owed to her, and she was quick to put her foot down whenever she was presented with less—which was nearly all the time.

Lisa screamed a final “I hate you” from the table, folding her arms over her chest, staring back at the TV. “And, I’m not poor—my daddy’s Donald Trump!” she shouted.

“Well then, go ask Daddy Trump for some chicken, why don’t you?” Daddy said. Ma buried her laughter as Daddy howled at his own joke openly, clapping his palm over his knee.

Abruptly, Lisa clanked her plate into mine, which tipped, scooting my eggs into a pile. She stomped off and slammed her door, hard. The noise faded into the blare of pop music from her distorted speakers. Ma and Daddy had taken over the living room, two tired bodies sprawled over the cushions, limp as cooked noodles.

“I ate *all* my eggs,” I said, but no one was listening.

## ★ START HERE ★

Grandma, my mother’s mother, lived in Riverdale, across the street from Van Cortlandt Park, in a sixties-style old-age home where she smoked, prayed, and made pay-phone calls to our apartment daily. Apart from us four, she was the only family we really connected with. Daddy’s mom sometimes sent gifts from Long Island, but by falling into drugs, he’d become the black sheep of his middle-class family. My whole life, they never once visited; they never came to see how we lived in the Bronx. Although Ma had run away from home at the age of thirteen, she and her mother reconciled later in life. By the time Lisa and I were born, Grandma would visit once a week, on Saturdays, when she boarded the number 9 bus using her senior citizens’ half-fare card to travel to University Avenue.

Before her visits, Ma sped across the apartment tucking sheets into the corners of beds and gathering plates into the sink and running hot water over them. She swept dust into a pile under the couch and sprayed air freshener over our heads minutes before Grandma was due to arrive.

From the couch, Lisa shooed Ma away each time the vacuuming blocked her view of *Video Music Box*, a show that appeared in snowy grains on our TV only if Lisa turned the UHF dial around and around.

On one hot summer afternoon, Grandma was expected to arrive at twelve sharp, but Ma—as always—waited until the last minute to do anything. The mist from the aerosol spray was settling over me in cold drizzles when Grandma arrived, dressed too warmly for the weather. She was wheezing heavily from her brief walk up the two flights of stairs, and the strong reek of cigarettes kicked up from her sweater when we hugged. Her hair was a tight bun of gray and silver. Her eyes were crisp and green, and her skin was wrinkled and tough-looking, with faded brown blotches of age. Lisa didn’t look up from the TV. For her, Grandma had to lean in to get a hug. I threw my arms around Grandma’s waist and asked how her bus ride—a pivotal part of her week—had gone. Her answers were always brief and delivered with a complacent smile.

“Everything was simply wonderful, dear. I’m just glad to have been given another day from our Lord to come see my beautiful girls.”

Grandma was deeply religious. In her tan pleather purse—which she held in the crook of her right arm wherever she went, even to the bathroom (a habit she attributed to “those filthy crooks at the home”)—Grandma carried a Bible—the King James edition—hair clips, Lipton tea bags, and two packs of Pall Mall cigarettes, her “smokes.”

Usually, no one cared to have a conversation with Grandma but me. Ma said she was so lonely living in the home that she would talk anyone’s ear off who’d listen, her sole focus being religious education. Ma also insisted that I would eventually lose interest, just like everyone else had, when I realized Grandma “wasn’t all there.”

“She’s not working with a full deck,” Ma would say. “I figure she couldn’t help the things she put me through. You’ll understand what I mean one day, Lizzy.”

But I couldn’t imagine. Grandma was unlike other adults. She would indulge my every question, no matter how many I asked. My curiosities ranged from how rainbows were made to who looked more like Ma when she was little, Lisa or me. And Grandma came ready to offer answers to absolutely everything, drawing all reasoning from her pious know-how, assuring me that all



mysteries of the world were God's doing. From the doorway, Ma watched, commenting that we were a match made in heaven.

Grandma set up station in our kitchen, offering tea and scripture to any takers. I liked the sweet taste of the tea after Grandma stirred in two sugars and some milk, which ribboned through the smoke curling from one of Ma's cigarettes. I sat, my knees drawn to my chest, nightgown pulled over my legs, sipping the warm drink, and listened to her describe how sins kept the wicked from heaven.

"Don't curse, Lizzy. God doesn't favor a foul mouth. Clean the house for your poor mother once in a while. God sees and hears all, and He never forgets. He knows when you don't do right by others. Trust me, missy, there will be plenty of sinners who never enter the pearly gates of heaven into God's love. Be careful, God is our Lord, and He is all-powerful."

The only other thing Grandma made conversation about, unrelated to religion, was what I wanted to be when I grew up.

"A comedian. I want to tell jokes onstage," I declared, recalling the nights I'd watched men on TV, wearing suit jackets, delivering nervous anecdotes to invisible audiences, their confidence mounting with each explosion of laughter. I figured Grandma would be as impressed as I was at the idea. Instead, she looked at me with concern and set her glass down to raise her finger to the sky.

"Oh dear God, no, don't do that. Don't do that. Lizzy, no one will laugh. Sweetie, be a live-in maid. I became a live-in maid when I was sixteen years old. You'll love it. You go to stay with a nice family and if you take good care of their kids, you can eat for free and make a good, honest living that God would be proud of. Doesn't that sound nice? Be a live-in maid, Lizzy. Besides, it's good practice for when you have a husband, you'll see."

At my age, it was hard to understand what Grandma meant. I envisioned a wife and husband seated at a square table, in a large, square, white house. Their toddler, chubby and wailing, was waiting for me to serve him, along with the couple, whose faces were blank blurs. Grandma smiled reassuringly. I smiled back. Her vision of my future disheartened me so much that I decided that while I would outwardly agree to anything she said, secretly, I'd keep my true wishes private. I nodded and smiled, pretending to be as pleased with her

advice as she was. Then I gave her an excuse about needing something from the living room and joined Lisa on the couch.

But Grandma didn't need me—or anyone, for that matter—to keep up a good conversation. If she was left alone in the kitchen for too long, she was just as happy to kneel on the floor and carry on a private dialogue with God Himself. Lisa lowered the volume on the television so we could eavesdrop from the next room on Grandma's passionate repetitions of "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." She went on, over and over, clicking her rosary and murmuring until her speech was more rhythm than words. This meant that she'd made direct contact.

Lisa snapped the TV off completely when Grandma's praying got louder, her voice raised and deepened in a way I found frightening as she called out for guidance from above—her own sort of CB radio calling to the Lord. Grandma could lose hours in this trance, never moving, never opening her eyes while the sun set and darkened the room around her, the tea cooling in glass mugs on the table. The kitchen remained off-limits to the rest of us when Grandma was speaking to God.

"Lisa, shhh, I wanna hear." I believed she might truly be reaching heaven and strained to listen, through Grandma's responses, to what God's direct advice might sound like. Lisa twisted her lips into a smirk.

"You're so dumb," she chided. "Grandma's just crazy. Ma says she hears voices. She's not talking to God—she's nuts."

Many times, while Ma was busily cleaning in preparation for Grandma's arrival, she told us stories about how her childhood was ruined by her mother's mental illness. As a girl, Ma was forced to return home every day only minutes after school let out, many long blocks away from home. Grandma would synchronize Ma's watch to their living room clock, and if Ma was late, even by minutes, she received a fierce beating. Grandma used anything from extension cords to spiked heels; all blows were delivered to Ma's tender inner thighs until black-and-blue bruises colored her flesh from crotch to knee. In the middle of the night, Ma, her sister, Lori, and her brother Johnny were often shaken out of bed, pots and spoons thrust into their hands. They were instructed to bang hard, to make as much noise as possible, and to scream a phrase of Grandma's devising: "Its-a-bits-of-para-kius, Its-a-bits-of-para-kius" over and over, until the voices that tormented Grandma were drowned out by the clatter.



This is partly why, Ma said, she'd left home to live on the streets when she was very young and why she cried, listening to sad records in her darkened bedroom, remembering all the trouble she'd run into since.

"A childhood like that can really mess with you," Ma would say. "What'd she expect me to be after all that, Miss America?"

A firm regimen of medication and talking to God kept Grandma tame later in life. Without that, Ma swore, the devil in her was easily provoked.

"But you should know, it's not her fault," Ma once explained in a gentle voice that told me she loved Grandma. "It's hereditary. Her mother had it, and her mother's mother had it. And once in a while, pumpkin, I got a spell of it, but I was nothing like Grandma. With treatment, mine went away, one hundred percent. She's always half in la-la land. She can't help it."

The "treatment" Ma spoke about was two- or three-month stints in the psychiatric ward of North Central Bronx Hospital, after Daddy found her hallucinating and hearing voices. Before I was born, they tried a few types of medication before Ma was given Prolixin and Cogentin to keep her balanced. Daddy explained that more attacks were unlikely because this had happened years ago, and Ma had been all right since. Either way, I was convinced that Ma could never be anything less than one hundred percent herself, partly because the very thought of her being any different frightened me.

Inside the kitchen, Grandma laughed knowingly to herself, in some private joke.

"There she goes," Lisa said, rolling her eyes at me and spinning her finger in small circles beside her head. Until Lisa and Ma pointed it out, I'd never once connected Grandma's solo conversations with her insanity. I blushed at my gullibility.

"I know she isn't talking to God. What do you think, I'm retarded?" I snapped back.



In the summertime, Ma bridged some of the gaps in our income by feeding us through other government programs, like the free lunch offered throughout local public schools. Lisa and I often had to coax her out of bed to dress us and ready herself, so we were almost never on time. Having waited until the last

minute, Ma would rush around the apartment frantically, feverishly scrambling to make the cut-off time.

"Just—sit—still! If you move around, it'll only be worse."

My head jerked and swayed with the tug of Ma's fine-toothed comb, which ripped fire like nails along my skull. "Owww, Ma!"

"We have only fifteen minutes, Lizzy. We need to go. I'm being as gentle as I can. If you sit still, it won't hurt," she insisted, tugging my hair to prove her point. I knew from experience that this was a complete lie. From the doorway, Lisa poked her tongue out at me; her hair was manageable. My cheeks burned with anger. As I went to return the gesture, the teeth of the comb snagged an enormous knot. Without hesitation, Ma dug furiously, snapping the stubborn pieces like dry grass. I winced my eyes shut and grabbed the corner of the mattress beneath me to wrestle with the pain.

"See. If you sit still, it's not so bad."

I would rub my throbbing scalp for the rest of the morning.

We were in danger of being given cold servings for the third time that week—or worse, there might be no food left at all. This was especially difficult when we were between SSI checks, and the free lunch was often our only full meal of the day.

July's intense sun broke the Bronx open, split it down the center, and exposed its contents. High temperatures drove our neighborhood's occupants out from their muggy, un-air-conditioned apartments to crowd the cracked sidewalks.

I waved hello to the old ladies who spent all day sharing gossip on lawn chairs, each claiming one full square of cement for themselves and their battery-operated radios.

"Hi, Mary." I smiled at the woman who gave me nickels to buy peanut chews whenever I saw her downstairs.

"Good morning, girls. Good morning, Jeanie." She waved back.

Old Puerto Rican men played dominoes in front of the corner store on planks of rotted wood suspended over cinder blocks. Ma always called them *dirty old men* and said that I should stay far away, because they think *dirty thoughts* and would do *dirty things* to little girls if given the chance. As we approached the men, I tried to keep my eyes on my shoes to show Ma that I was obedient. They called things out to her that I never understood. "Mami,



*venga aquí, blanquita.*” And they made whistling and sucking noises with their wet, beer-shiny lips.

We passed a few of Ma’s friends sitting nearby, perched on stoops, eyes trained on their children, clutching overloaded keychains decorated with plastic Puerto Rican flags and smiling *coqui* frogs in straw hats. The plastic jumble of trinkets clinked with each disciplinary raise of the mothers’ hands. Children circled sprinklers and teenagers claimed street corners.

The block thumped salsa as we crossed University onto 188th, Lisa and I tugging on Ma’s arms, helping guide her through traffic while she squinted.

“Four more blocks, Ma, all right?”

Ma smiled absentmindedly. “Yep, okay pumpkin.”



The cafeteria was filled with the distinct smell of fish. I sucked up disappointment, grabbed a yellow Styrofoam tray partitioned into four sections, and got in line. I hesitated over the pyramid of fish cakes glistening with grease.

“You got something better to eat at home?” the milk lady asked over the cafeteria chatter.

“No,” I answered, hanging my head as I accepted the limp fish.

“Then come on, keep it movin’.” I grabbed a pint of milk, the container slippery between my fingers, and tried not to let my Tater Tots roll off the tray as I went to sit on a bench connected to a long, crowded table.

Lisa stabbed holes into her fish cake, drawing the bright yellow cheese filling from its center. I was staring at a faded poster of children raising their sporks—a cheap plastic spoon combined with a fork—to demonstrate the importance of proper nutrition, when a lady with a clipboard began talking to Ma.

“So, how old are *your* children, ma’am?” she asked.

“Seven, and the smaller one is almost five.” Ma squinted and smiled vaguely, but I could tell that the woman’s face was too distant for Ma’s bad eyes to see clearly. The woman wrote something down, humming a quick, “Mmm-hmm, really,” as though Ma had said something interesting.

They talked for a while, the woman asking Ma a lot of personal questions about our family income from welfare, Ma’s level of education, and whether or not she lived with our father. “Where is he? Does he work?” and so on. I pushed the Tater Tots around in my mouth, breaking them into bits with my

one front tooth. Still cold in the center, they tasted like cardboard moistened by freezer ice.

“I see. So when do you plan on starting this one in school?” She pointed her finger at me. I slid closer to Ma. The clipboard woman spoke to her with the same voice adults used when they leaned down to tell me how big I was getting.

“This fall, down the block at P.S. 261,” Ma replied.

“Mmm-hmm, really? Thank you, ma’am. Enjoy your lunch, children,” she instructed us as she went on to the next parent.

“My baby’s growing up,” Ma said, ignoring the woman’s intrusion and briefly hugging me to her side. “You start school in just two months.”

I thought of the words *growing up*—grown up, I mouthed to myself. I looked at the adults in the cafeteria, searching for what *grown up* looked like, hoping to find some signs of what to expect for myself.

I watched the way the clipboard woman interviewed the new lady, making her nervous as she leaned in to take her information. I didn’t like it when Ma smiled for her questions, just like when she was nice to the cold women who sat like royalty behind big wooden desks at welfare—the way Ma sounded like she was begging. I didn’t like being afraid of Ma’s caseworker and racing around the apartment to help clean for the in-home checkups, or having to be overly grateful to the moody cafeteria workers. It scared me that strangers had the power to give or take so much of what we depended on.

The cafeteria rules stated that food was for kids only, but at Ma’s request, Lisa snuck her a piece of fish. Careful not to let the lunch ladies see, Ma stuffed it into her mouth and had me scan the room to ensure that she had not been seen. Watching her and Lisa, I thought of Ma’s words, about the fact that I was growing up.

I stared over at doorways leading up to stairwells that held so much misery for me in the summers I’d attended P.S. 33’s free lunch program. I cherished the last few years when Lisa always went off to school in the morning, while I got to spend time alone with Ma. We’d wake up when we felt like it, and Ma would sit me down on the couch and if we had enough food, I’d get the rare treat of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. We would watch the morning game shows; Ma would light up for Bob Barker and *The Price Is Right*. Ma said he was “one of the last real gentlemen around,” and she always sat extra



close to the TV, squinting when his face filled our screen, his white hair perfectly neat, his suit freshly pressed. Together, we would bet on the “showcase showdown,” taking turns pretending to be contestants, winning boats, new living room sets, and glamorous trips around the world. I’d stand and clap extra loud for the contestants who won big. Ma sometimes vacuumed, humming smoothly while I was parked in front of the TV for hours, our apartment bright with the morning sun. It was a brief time when I felt that Ma belonged only to me.

And then some days Daddy brought me to the library, where he helped me pick out books that were mostly pictures. For himself, he’d choose thick ones with photographs of contemplative men in suit jackets on the back, which he stacked around the house and never returned. He was always applying for a library card in a new name. Some nights, I liked to take one of his books and bring it to my room, where I would try to read it the same way Daddy did—held directly under the light of my bedside lamp, searching for any words that might be familiar to me from nights when Ma read to me at my bedside. But the words were too big and they made me tired. So I’d just fall asleep beside the book, smelling the yellowed pages, relaxed by the feeling that I shared something special with my father.

It worried me to think that I would be away in the mornings now, missing out on this. I got the feeling that something was slipping through my fingers, and that I was the only one who saw the loss of our special time as a bad thing. I wondered what starting school would be like, and how it was supposed to help me become grown up. I wondered what *grown up* could mean, when there were different types of adults all around me. Though I wanted to, I didn’t dare ask Ma to help me figure things out, because I knew it would only make her feel bad about herself and the scrounging we had to do to get by. Some things I was just going to have to figure out on my own.

Later that week, the evening newscaster—a white man in a suit who wore a triangle hat with colorful streamers dangling from the top—called the day, July Fourth, *a time to celebrate our independence*. Then he and the poofy-haired woman beside him waved good-bye under the rolling credits and blew simultaneously into kazoos. The noise honked in our living room, becoming the second-loudest thing next to our window fan whirring behind me. I sat alone

on the couch, motionless. Ma had promised me earlier, when it was still light outside, that she would take us downtown by the water so we could watch fireworks along with everyone else. I had run to get dressed and chosen my blue shorts and tie-dyed shirt to match the festivities. But I had stayed in my room too long. By the time I came out, Ma had left for the Aqueeduct Bar without telling anyone—a new place she’d recently discovered and been running off to more and more lately.

Her trips there started on St. Patrick’s Day, that past March. Ma and Daddy had taken us down to the parade spontaneously, after we’d seen it announced on TV.

Under a light sheet of rain, we watched from Eighty-sixth Street, just off the park, as men in kilts played eerie notes on bagpipes and beat drums so powerful I could feel them in my chest and legs. Lisa and I had our cheeks painted with four-leaf clovers, for luck, and Daddy let me fall asleep on his lap for the whole train ride home.

Ma didn’t make it back to the apartment with us. Just as we were about to come off Fordham Road, she ran into an old friend who was headed into a bar, and she decided to catch up with us later. After all, what was St. Patty’s Day without a drink, he’d insisted. Without bothering to wash the paint off my face, I’d set my blanket down on my windowsill to watch for Ma’s return. I waited for hours, dozing off against the window, until she finally came home around three in the morning, smelling of liquor and walking in zigzags. Ma slept then like she did after her longer coke binges, without waking up once for the entire next day. After that, the bar became a regular thing. We could be in mid-conversation, or sitting down to dinner, it didn’t matter; she would leave at any time.

Hours later that night of the fourth, still dressed in my tie-dyed shirt and blue shorts, I sat on the couch, turning the TV dial, flipping through the different televised celebrations. I decided then and there that Ma had snuck away because of me. It was because I’d developed this habit of asking her over and over if she *really* had to go to the Aqueeduct, and what time *exactly* I could expect her back. Sometimes it was hard to help myself, and I even followed Ma to the door, holding her hand for as long as I possibly could. I made it so that our fingers touched down to the very tip before she exited. “See you soon, Ma, come back soon, okay? Okay?” I called down repeatedly, until I heard the hallway door click shut. I supposed that this had become too much for her to deal with. That



must be why she'd felt a need to slip out secretly tonight. If only I'd been less difficult.

A couple more hours passed and the replay of the news ended. I stood up, readying myself for bed, walking out of the living room. Just as I did, Ma came through the door.

"Guess who's here," she sang. I heard two sparks from a lighter and thought she was lighting a cigarette. Then I heard a fluttering noise, like a small swarm of bees.

"Ma!"

"Look what I brought you, pumpkin. Go get your sister."

Ma stared at a sparkler that she held like a magic wand. The brightest light in the living room, it shot glowing, silvery threads all over her pinched fingers, around her bare arm. Flecks of light danced in her eyes.

"Ta-da!" she sang, raising the sparkler. Just then, I noticed the large plastic bag filled with fireworks hanging from her other arm.

We never made it downtown by the water that night, but we did sit on the stoop out front, surrounded by people from our building. We set off every last firework Ma had brought home. With the neighborhood kids, we made Jumping Jacks dance and spin. Firecrackers popped, ringing in our ears. Daddy was the safety supervisor for Lisa and me. With a glass bottle from the trash, which he cleaned off with newspaper, Daddy taught me how to send a bottle rocket soaring into space without hurting my fingers. Ma sat on the stoop and talked to Louisa from apartment 1A, whose daughters played with their own fireworks beside us.

"Here, Lizzy," Daddy said to me, his deep voice reassuring. "You've got to prop the stick into the bottle first. You don't want to get burned."

I crouched into a ball down by the cement to help Daddy light the fuse. Daddy wrapped himself over me, engulfing my small body, protecting me. I smelled his scent, the musk and sweat mixed with our freshly struck matches. His hands were enormous, cupping mine as he showed me how to position the small explosive. Together we backed off to watch it fly, screaming through the air, flashing radiant pink beams in the black night sky. With Lisa and I taking turns shooting bottle rockets, we finished the whole bag in under a half hour. I sent each one flashing into the dark with a round of applause, looking over

my shoulder at Ma, who hooked her arm through Daddy's and was leaning on his shoulder, smiling.

That was the summer of 1985, just before school, and the last time I can remember the four of us being close, and happy. Before then, whatever went on in our household, I simply had nothing to compare to. I had no idea how different we could be from other people. All I knew was Ma was a real mother then, and my parents, together, tended to our needs. Or whatever they didn't tend to didn't matter because I had no clue that I needed anything more.

The fade of that summer withdrew not just its own warmth, but with it, the only family unity I'd ever known, and as a result my very last clear memory of stability, too. I guess you could say we'd lived in some kind of bubble before that, a little world made up of just the four of us. But in my eyes, we were just one of the many families living and struggling to make it on University Avenue. Things were sometimes tough, but we had each other, and in having that, we had it all.



That August, I made a habit of standing on one of the kitchen chairs to count the passing days off the free Met Food supermarket calendar tacked high up next to the fridge—something I'd learned watching my big sister. For two Augusts, I'd seen Lisa repeatedly squint at the dates framed neatly beside coupons for bargain poultry and ninety-nine-cent frozen burritos while she muttered complaints and groaned extravagantly over the start of school. Tomorrow would be my first day to join her.

"You're in for it now," she said, digging through her extra school supplies to split with me. "No more bumming around here, that's for sure. You're going to have to work now, just like the rest of us."

I thought of all the times Lisa returned home and headed straight for her room to labor over homework, emerging hours later, droopy-eyed and exhausted, only to find that I'd been sitting on Ma's lap, watching TV most of the evening. Routinely, she'd strike up some petty fight with me shortly thereafter, demanding control over the TV or the couch, since she'd been working hard and I'd just been sitting around on my butt. Her helping me prepare for school felt, to me, like some form of revenge.



Lisa peeled open a pack of very old lined paper that she'd dug up from her closet and divided it in half.

"You'll need this," she said, passing one stack to me. "Don't put it in upside down or people will make fun of you. Kids tease about a lot of things, you'll see." My small hands worked to hook the whole stack at once into my three-ring binder, just the way I had seen Lisa do many times before. Ma circled the room frantically.

"Tomorrow, Lizzy. I can't believe it. It wasn't too long ago that you were in diapers!" Ma's voice was panicked. I couldn't tell whether she realized that she was shouting.

Ma had just spent time in the kitchen with Daddy, getting high. Now, with her jaw tight, her lips pursed, and her eyes wild, I knew she would go on like this for a while, circling and ranting. I'd been pressing Ma the whole week to get me ready for school, but she wouldn't get out of bed. Luckily, check day had just come. And now that she'd shot up, Ma absolutely came to life. Whatever the reason, I was thrilled with her attention.

"Now look at you, starting school. I can't believe it, pumpkin." She lit a cigarette and sucked so hard that the tip glowed bright.

"You're going to love it, Lizzy. You'll do so well."

Her excitement became my excitement. I *would* love it.

"Wait, do you have a notebook?" she asked with sudden, manic concern.

It was eleven thirty at night. I'd found the used binder under Lisa's bed a few hours before. The paper she'd provided, which we'd rescued from the trash room downstairs last spring, was yellow with age.

"Yeah, Ma. It's right here." With great effort I held the thick notebook high for her to see, but she didn't look.

"Good, but did I give you a haircut?"

"A haircut? No. Do I need one?"

"Yes, pumpkin, the day before school everyone gets new things, they get their hair cut, they brush their teeth. Go sit on the floor by the coffee table, I'll get some scissors and take care of you right now. You probably don't need your whole head, just your bangs. That's all people really look at anyway."

She went to search the junk drawer. Her movements were impatient, unfinished, like her sentences, which usually stopped before any point was made.

"Lizzy, you just . . . It'll be good. Wait until you see . . ." Her energy felt frantic.

I could hear the contents of the junk drawer clanking from the kitchen as she stirred through them. Lisa had gone to bed, saying she needed sleep to get up early and warning that if I knew what was good for me, I would do the same.

Something about the way Ma moved made me nervous. Did she even know how to cut hair? And what about her eyesight? I didn't want my hair to look anything like hers, which was long and wavy, but also kinky and unkempt. The thought filled me with worry.

"Here we go!" she yelled, holding up a pair of rusted scissors. Daddy was still in the kitchen; I could hear him fidgeting and making small mumbling noises. There was nothing to do but go with it, so I did.

I had to stay perfectly still, with my chin held in place by Ma's fingertips while she made each cut, or I would interfere with her concentration. Ma made me close my eyes to avoid getting any hair in them. I held a piece of loose-leaf paper below my chin to catch what fell. I'd never had bangs before, but Ma didn't seem to realize this. She just took clumps of my longer hair and made the necessary cuts. The real panic didn't set in until I could feel the cool metal of the scissors slide along my forehead, over an inch above my eyebrows.

"Ma, are you sure that's not too short?" I asked.

"Pumpkin, it's okay, I just need to make it even. I almost had it before; I just need to try again. We're almost there. Just . . . sit . . . still."

On the ground beside me, my hair had fallen in scattered chunks. Ma tapped her foot impatiently. Every so often she'd hiss a curse.

"Shit!"

My heart raced and I tried not to ruin her concentration by flinching.

In small bits, Ma chopped away my bangs, until they were so short, only a cropped border remained, so stubbly that pieces of it stuck straight out from my head. When she rested the scissors on the coffee table, I touched my forehead, rubbing it frantically in search of hair, pinching the short stubble in disbelief. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Ma-aa," I whimpered. "You made it really short, Ma. Isn't this too short?"

She was already putting on her shoes to head out to the bar. From the way her face had dropped, I could tell her high had worn off. The alcohol was what she needed now, to calm her. She was out of my reach again.



"I know honey, it'll grow back. I just had to make it even. Those damn scissors are no good for cutting hair. I had to keep going back to fix it."

Lisa said that kids teased about a lot of things. Imagining what the kids in school would think when they saw me, I began to cry softly. Ma took me by the hand and walked me down the hall to the bathroom, which was just beside the front door. She stood behind me, both of us facing the mirror together. Her jacket was already on. Suddenly, her chin was down on my shoulder, her fingers stroked my forehead.

"It's just hair, pumpkin, it'll grow back. When I was little, my sister, Lori, cut my favorite doll's hair off. I was so angry. She told me it would grow back and I *believed* her. Can you imagine?"

I wiped tears from my cheeks and studied us together in the mirror. Ma's eyes couldn't stay in one place, and her hands on my shoulders had blood spots on them. Tiny pieces of hair were stuck to her fingers.

"At least yours grows back, Lizzy. It's really fine. School will be so much fun, you'll see."

With that, I watched her reflection plant a single kiss on my head, and she slipped out the front door. I could hear her stomping quickly down the battered marble steps. Then she was gone.

## Middle of Everything

"THEY DON'T LIKE RED. I'M TELLING YOU, IF YOU PUT RED IN YOUR hair, they'll leave. I swear, Lizzy, it's how I got rid of mine."

"Yeah right. . . . *Liar!*"

For apparently nothing more than to relieve her own boredom, Lisa would torment me in our parents' absence. When Ma and Daddy disappeared for a full day or when they'd stream in and out of the house, preoccupied with coping drugs, leaving us to ourselves for whole nights, she would dream up new and terrible things to do to me.

"Look, first, I'm going to have to braid your hair, Liz. But, not just any braids—stiff ones that point out in all directions."

"But why! I *know* you're lying. Why would it matter if my hair was braided?" While I believed almost everything Lisa told me, I had, by the time I reached the first grade, been fooled by more than one of her practical jokes, so my instincts were slowly growing sharper. This claim seemed too outrageous, I thought; surely she was up to something.

"All right, Lizzy," she said, turning to walk away from me. "I'm only trying to help you out here. Isn't that what you wanted? Well, I know what it takes, but if you don't want to get rid of your lice, I guess there's nothing I can do about it."

But I did want to get rid of my lice. They'd been crawling on my head for weeks. Chasing them with my fingernails, I'd dug burning furrows into my scalp, painful and sensitive to the touch. At night, I could feel them moving around, weaving their way through my hair, biting until I scratched deep to disperse the sensation. I awoke frequently to dreams of angry bugs eating at my scalp, laying eggs in my skin.

At first, it wasn't this bad. I'd barely noticed them at all. It took the building superintendent's daughter, Debbie, to come knocking on our door, telling