

THE ADULT STORE

Amy Gaige

Outside the Softee you can sit in the cheap white sun. There are always bees in the trashcans nearby, nursing on the bright orange globes of soda left in wax cups. If you shut your eyes, you can hear their gentle business. Across the highway, and under the same sun, stands the Adult Store. Traffic draws and redraws the line between the two places.

The boys like to pretend they've seen it all. They're not allowed in the Adult Store yet, but they are allowed in the Softee. They stand looking into the hotboxes where the tortured hotdogs roll incessantly; every once in a while they buy one. They also buy towering ice cream cones covered in krunch kote, and they give out licks to girls they like. The girls buy diet soda. They slouch in the corners holding the cans in their fists like maces. They seem to believe they are only as visible as they feel.

Some girls sit in the middle. These girls have mighty laughter. They laugh and make crude gestures with the condiment bottles, and sometimes they are surrounded by boys – but they like it, a lot. It's as close as they'll ever get to being in the Adult Store.

As it so happens, I am a girl. People mostly call me Joanie. I am large-boned and I have a small, straightforward sort of face. My favorite sweater is old and blue, and a run threatens to detach the sleeve. All the girls have favorite sweaters, and we are faithful to them. They were our fathers' old sweaters. Our fathers wore these sweaters when they were our age; they wore them on a thousand autumn days, and the wool still smells of old bonfires and *bonhomie*. All the nights we go on dates, and take tables beside the grill at the Softee, where bacon shrivels in its own sweat, do not smother Daddy's smell. He is date number one.

Angela still comes with me to the Softee. She has been a friend of mine for a very long time and I am under the impression that the only thing that she's ever changed is her hair, which these days she flattens with an iron, so that it is

harsh and shiny as carbon. We've graduated high school, and this hairstyle is supposed to say so, it is supposed to say *I've got no more innocence*. Although it's funny how every time I think I've gotten rid of all my innocence, I discover that I'm innocent all over again.

Tonight Angela comes over to me on the bench outside the Softee, where I am watching bats storm the mini-golf course behind the generators. Out on the course, tall plastic animals keel to and fro with their fixed and shocked expressions. Inside the Softee, one limp pretzel floats round and round in a red glass case.

"Heya Joanie," Angela says. "Who you looking for?"

Angela eats all the time, but she's very thin, and her wrists seem like narrow hinges. Now she shovels a butterscotch sundae into her mouth. The sundae is in a small baseball helmet, which she cradles in one hand. With the other, she pets the slick surface of her iron hair. She smells of Aqua Net.

"You buy that?" I ask.

"What do you think?" she says. "I don't need to buy anything. Carl does it for me."

"Carl is in for it."

"You bet," she says. "So long as I'm hungry."

We can see Carl through the plate glass window of the Softee. He is still in high school, and I can't help but think that being associated with him is a kind of demotion. Angela pretends she does not really love him, when it's clear that she loves him entirely. She even loves the twin caverns in his smile where his incisors used to be. Right now, he is whacking Darnell on the head with his own baseball cap. Every time Carl lifts his arms, we can see the crack of his ass. Out here, we think the joke is on Carl. But in there, maybe we're the joke.

Across the highway, a man walks into the Adult Store. Dicky. Dicky McNichols. He's a long-legged, likeable guy, although nobody could claim to really know him or really love him, not *really*, since he spends so much of his time in that little shack across the highway. It's dark in front of the Adult Store and to Angela, Dicky is just part of the traffic, but I know everyone by the particular quality of their shame. Everyone is ashamed; you've only got to look long and hard.

People keep asking me why I'm still hanging around even though I graduated in June. They say I could go to whatever college I want. But the truth is, I am needed here. I am the sentinel of the Softee, and I know every man who goes in and out of the Adult Store. From the All-American tight end returned from the frosted arches of Princeton, to the man who makes wigs from the clippings of salon floors – I know them. But no one goes in as much as poor old Dicky McNichols, who shoves quarters through the metal lips of a projection machine in the back until his back is sore and he is rid of his own wishes.

Dicky has a wife. Her name is Mags, which is a hard name, and Mags is a hard nugget of a woman with a slavish sense of work. She doesn't get along with other women, and neither does she get along with men, first and foremost Dicky. I have watched her come to fetch Dicky at the Adult Store several times

and I think, by God, I wouldn't wish that wife on anybody. Once, he tried to sneak out the back when Mags burst through the front door, and they ended up chasing each other around the parking lot. Sometimes, she picks Dicky up from the airport where he works; or if he has driven himself, she follows behind him in her car at a close distance. No one knows why. Maybe he is having an affair. Maybe she distrusts him preemptively.

And so I can only imagine, while straddling the rotting picnic benches outside the Softee, that there are many Adults in the Adult Store. When the dark glass door opens, I can make out the shapes of Adults – their wallet-heavy hips, their halfhearted heads of hair. What sort of Adults does the Adult Store sell? You can imagine the sort of Adults you would buy if you could – ones that live on Fritos and pizza pockets. Open-handed, good-looking people who will become active seniors. Happy, happy, well-married types of Adults, like the stay is to the sail – flirts, sweethearts, people with that well-preserved touch of irresponsibility that keeps us all clear in the eyes.

The owner of the store is called Lars. At the end of the day, Lars will usher out the lingering Adults, asking after their families. He is as routinized as a priest or a madam, and he knows that somebody has to do it, somebody has to be the Lars. For now, he accepts his regulars and irregulars with the same quiet understanding, and the door shuts, and I am faced once again with the tight-lipped aluminum facade of the Adult Store.

“Are you waiting for someone?” Angela asks. She is scraping at the bottom of the plastic helmet. As time passes, she forgets the question. She is so absorbed in our particular youth that I don't think she even cares that there's a porno shop across the road. She tosses the plastic spoon into the grass and digs at the helmet with her fingers. Her lipstick is gone, and her thin, white lips make her look not a day above thirteen. She is the kind of girl it's easy to feel impatient with, for her peculiar blend of slowness and impressionability, and mostly she irritates me, excepting the times she moves me, quietly.

I roll a tube of Satin Sunrise across the picnic table.

“Wha?” she asks.

“Put on some lipstick.”

Angela's small hands go quickly to her lips and she looks hangdog. Without me, she'd be lonelier but happier. Without Carl, without the ill glow of the Softee on her face, she might have just sat there whistling, being Angela, trapping fireflies in her fist and shaking them so that they fly away dizzy.

When Carl plods over to the table, she brightens again. He has brought her a soft pretzel, and a whole tube of mustard.

“Stole that for you,” he says, and nods at me. “Hey, Joanie. Thought I might find you out here.”

They start to make out, mashing their faces together. I pull my arms out of my favorite sweater and wrap the loose ends around me.

Then a squad car slides up to the Softee. Carl and Angela stop making out, and we all feel suddenly cold.

"Up and Adam," says Carl, something I'm sure he picked up from his father. Carl probably wouldn't say this if I weren't around. He acts stiffly towards me, somewhat sportingly, but it comes off stupid.

"Nah," I say, wanting less and less to be around them.

The car grinds to a halt and puts its spotlights on the picnic area. I see Angela's caught face. Her lipstick is gone again from all the kissing.

"Come on," she says.

They stumble into the Softee. It's past curfew, and we've all known its consequences. Once Darnell spent eight hours downtown in jail for loitering after curfew, before his mother even noticed he was missing. Pretty soon we'll all be eighteen, and we'll be allowed out all night, and we'll be allowed in the Adult Store. Maybe I am hanging around for this event. Maybe I am hanging around for the moment in which I will be made an adult. But sometimes I wonder, how is it that you can be *made* an adult? There is no committee. There is no quality control. Who will assure me?

Forming between the lights is a man's shape. Languorously, it walks forward, in fitted slacks that allow the light to shine through the thighs. A shirt is pulled across the chest tight as a full sail. I can hear the crunch of his steps and only that. We are face-to-face before I see it is Officer Baucher. The light catches in the deep laps of his cheekbones.

"Why you out here alone, Joan?" You see, he calls me Joan.

"I wasn't alone before you came," I say. Although he knows both my mother and my father, it's the first thing I've ever been bold enough to say to him besides *sorry*.

He doesn't smile. I was hoping he'd find that funny. I was hoping he'd grin and pat me on the cheek. I had always hoped, since I was a girl at the baseball diamond, that he'd salute me, as he did our mothers, passing by on his beat. The spotlight now is as bright as game nights. I'm older.

"Get inside," he says. "Chop chop."

"I have to put my arms back in the armholes," I tell him.

He waits while I struggle with my favorite sweater. Its autumn smell comes up at me through the night air, and at once I see shapes tussling in piles of raked leaves. I see the slow ascent of a football in the sky.

"Sure are taking your time," he says. His eyes are a thin gray, the color of haze.

I am a loiterer. But I am also a girl. And the jail is filled with boys, boys exhilarated by their first violence and its sense of enlistment, boys languishing in dark cells from which they can see out but not be seen, and the sunrise will see them changed, stronger. Officer Baucher will never take me *downtown*. I will spend the rest of my youth tweezing splinters from my thighs, straddling the rotting benches outside the Softee, where morning dawns again and again over the same dull scene.

Emboldened by this miserable vision, I look Officer Baucher in the eye.

"You want real trouble," I say, "why don't you just go across the highway? Do you know what sort of – what sort of *filth* they sell in there? And right

across from an ice cream parlor, of all things.”

But Officer Baucher only says, “go inside, Joanie.”

He turns without emotion, and walks back through the spotlight.

At the window of the Softee, I see the bright faces of a dozen kids, and a dozen foggy patches on the Plexiglas – one for each mouth. They are half-hoping something bad and exciting will happen to me. Officer Baucher calls out to me.

“What?” I say. Cars race past on the highway. Inside them, teenagers are suckling beer bottles like teats.

“I said say hello to Darnell for me!” Officer Baucher shouts, and I can hear that he is smiling. When the spotlight goes off, I stagger around like a flagellum, and my heart is beating like crazy.

A little loosely and with a special oozy feeling, I open the door to Softee, which is hot with gamy breath and fried onions. Several kids move out of my way, looking impressed.

“Is *that* who you were waiting for?” asks Angela.

That night, back at home, I shut the door quietly. My mother jerks in her sleep on the sofa. She is wearing sweatpants and studded boots, and crumbs are collected in her cleavage. One rivet drops from her relaxing hand, but she does not wake up. I sit on the arm of the sofa, and watch the twitches of her face. She tastes her mouth, apparently disagreeable, and her cheeks go slack. Times such as these I love her deeply; the rest of the time I do not love her at all.

Upstairs, my father’s light is on. He has come home early tonight. I feel a simple sense of rightness to have both of them in the house at once, as if the stars are in order or some cosmic scale is even. I hear snoring. I go upstairs and look through the crack in his bedroom door. I see his thick arm reaching out from under the comforter, his fingers tickling the air.

I am tucking them in. As in their dreams, I am sure they do to me.

My bedroom looks like the bedroom of a girl named Joanie. In some ways it’s like the den of a fetishist, plastered with cut-outs of models with the beaten and wall-eyed look that is the fashion, and photos of summer friends whose names I don’t recall but whose sexual secrets I have memorized. The drawers have been ravaged, and panty hose lie used on the carpet. I sit and look at my face in the vanity mirror. It is still small and simple. Ordered. Unmysterious. I want to ask myself if I’m pretty, but I don’t have the nerve.

I wonder what Dicky McNichols says when he can’t help himself. I wonder if he struggles with his own body as he drives past the Adult Store. He was only supposed to run out for milk. His kid is sitting in front of dry cereal. Does he slow down at the store, gripping the wheel, and pass by? Does he laugh menacingly and go back? Or does he plan it all the time, as I do, when I reach under the vanity seat for the tattered magazine?

There's a woman on the cover I have named Bonita. I call her Bonita because the word means 'lovely,' and the way her breasts rise up like meringue is lovely. Her smile looks less lurid than open-minded. The blurb about her gives her another name, but I know they are all aliases anyway. It says she likes rock climbing and snorkeling, but most of all she likes dates with you, the reader, and you think about it – would you like to go to the Softee with Bonita? She looks like a joiner – a fun girl, the kind who is comfortable without a plan. Like Dicky McNichols, you can't help it; you picture her in the passenger seat of your car, begging for the music at higher decibels.

The other girls I don't like so much. I mean, there's a reason *they're* not on the cover. They cavort glumly in bales of hay, in steam baths, sliding sharp tongues along each other's thighs. There's a redhead in front of a fire, wrapped in a bear rug, sucking on a poker. A pair of twins wrestling in nothing but saddle shoes. I don't like their spittled lips and vulvas. I don't believe their whorishness. In fact, too much do I see their ordinary lives, their dim ideas, and their sullen boyfriends, with whom, most likely, they have infrequent, workaday sex. I miss Bonita. But when I smooth open her centerfold, she hasn't changed. My eyes slide thoughtlessly down her body like a drop of water, from her weightless fingertips, to the sockets of her armpits and the rise of her breasts to her soft triangle, she looks as if she is chiseled from a cloud. Her sleepy eyes are alive with what she has seen while snorkeling: wavering schools of tiger fish, wriggling anemone, seahorses rocking back and forth through the water – and whales, maybe.

Hopefully, tonight, I will dream through her eyes.

The next morning I hear my father wrestling with pots in the kitchen. He must have done something bad if he's cooking. He only cooks for penance, and when he cooks, he makes things in great quantities, so that he won't have to cook again soon. We have large pieces of Tupperware filled with *huevos rancheros*. I watch his back from the doorway.

Then, I go out to the garage, where mother is staining a crib.

"Hello, honey," she says, without turning around. I fish around in a bag of old, flexible potato chips.

"Potato chips for breakfast?" she asks, and stops herself. She comes up to me and gives me a tense smile. She moves my hair from my eyes and tries to hold my face dearly. She holds it like a jewel cutter. I don't like the smell on her hands. I pull away. Her eyes darken. Her skin is the color of caulk.

"The Swoyers are coming over tonight," she says, "to show your father and me the new baby."

"The Swoyers are a baby-machine," I say.

"Thought I'd give them your old crib. Is that OK?"

"Well I don't need it anymore."

"Does it have any sentimental value or anything?"

I want to remind her that I'm a *teen* – nothing has sentimental value yet. I remember nothing about being in that crib, except maybe the sense of incar-

ceration. It was she who spent nights watching me writhe inside it, a dumb bug stuck on its back. Had she wanted to use it again?

"Really," I say. "Give it to the poor old Swoyers."

Am I pretty? Outside the Softee, Darnell thinks so. His heavy body inclines towards me, surrounded by salami-scented warmth. This is the closest I let any boy get. If you're a girl, you either give it out like leaflets, or you guard it like the Grail. There is a lot of confusion about sex, but no ambivalence.

"You got nice lipstick," he says. "That's a real nice color. I like it. It's a nice color."

The cars march down the highway. I am so bored out of my head it seems to me that I recognize each one.

"Does it have a name, that color?" Darnell asks. The color of his skin is rich and elusive, and I wonder what Maybelline would call it. His mother is black and his father, an Italian who everyone calls "The Sire." Darnell's own half-sister Gina is sitting inside the Softee picking lint off her mountainous chest. She's the closest you get to Bonita in real life. She gives me an ambiguous look through the window. Like everyone else, I think she's devastating.

"I've seen roses that color," Darnell continues. "Not ordinary roses. Not ordinary red. Special roses that you order – from Italy."

"How do they get *roses* here from Italy before they die?" I ask.

Darnell considers, his eyes focused out at the moon. To this he has no answer.

Gina emerges from the Softee, punches Darnell on the arm, and simpers. She's the kind of girl who doesn't have to say much. She gets into her car. Across the highway, I see Dicky McNichols get out of his. He looks over his shoulder at the Softee – something he never does – and I have to turn away quickly.

"Darnell," I say, tugging on his jacket. "Let's go to Kipson Field."

"All right!" he cheers, and runs across the parking lot. He makes sure to bump as many cars as he can, so that there is a whole chorus of car alarms going off by the time we tumble laughing in to his car, and tear our way out of the lot.

The wind is violent, tugging at the end of summer's short tether, towards winter. Ice T. hollers over the airwaves, telling the city it's his tonight. It sure isn't mine and Darnell's, but as we roll past the valley, we see the lights strung in its gaunt belly, and city hall fragile in the orange sky, and it sure feels like it's ours.

"So you never told me what color that is," Darnell says as we sit in the gazebo at the field. He touches one finger to my mouth. "Joe-knee."

"It's got a stupid name."

"What? What, Midnight Desire?"

It's a pretty good goddamned guess. "Satin Sunrise."

He laughs riotously, leaning forward into my lap. He rubs his face into my thigh, and I lean away, feeling chilly, pulling my favorite sweater up over my

nose. Under its cover, I hear distant fight songs, sung years ago.

We leave the gazebo and start to walk. In the daytime, little boys come to Kipson to play wiffleball on the diamond. But at night, the field is one big sexual proposition. It's a wide place, ringed with rocking cars, and in the grassy lap there are lots of nooks open only to the stars. If you don't watch where you walk, you can walk right into somebody else's sex. So we stay around the edges. Darnell jumps up to snatch leaves off branches, making it rain on my head, making me laugh, reluctantly.

Around the bend, my heart punches me from the inside. About fifty feet away, we see the rear end of a squad car parked behind some bushes. Darnell sees it too and does an about-face.

"No," I say. "Come on. It's only nine o'clock. And we're not doing anything wrong."

Darnell checks his watch, and pets a leaf quietly.

"Not yet, I guess," he laughs, and yanks his baseball cap low over his eyes.

"Come on," I say, pulling him onward.

"Woah, Joanie," he laughs, pulling back.

The car is revealed as we walk around the bushes, it's slim black rear, its white belly, and indeed, it's Officer Baucher's car. He leans against the hood, arms crossed, gazing up at the stuffy night sky. He looks as solitary as a king, his eyes affixed to the moon as if it were his lone conspirator. My heart heaves.

I pat my hair, fix my lipstick, and just then Darnell says, "That's my fucking sister."

"What?"

"That pig is with my *sister*."

"No," I say. "No he's not."

As I step closer to Darnell, I see Gina, standing a few feet away from Officer Baucher. She has one hand in her back pocket, and gestures casually with the bright cherry of her cigarette.

"Fuck this, Joanie," says Darnell, walking back towards the gazebo and the batting cage. "Ridiculous, man."

"Wait," I hiss. "Just you wait." I feel hot, smothered between the sulfurous sky and the pavement. I charge after Darnell and pull his jacket. He shirks me off.

"That's your sister," I say. "What do think a cop wants with *her*? Think about it."

Jealousy makes you aware of whole new parts of your body. I feel jealous behind my eyes, between my hips; I feel the hot charge of jealousy down into my sneakers, where it forks into my feet and shoots back up my shin. I am a closed circuit. I will have to run to get rid of this.

I pick up a rock, not understanding why yet. I just understand what I've always understood; I don't like to be completely forgotten about. I kneel on the breast of a small hill, and by the time I've decided that Darnell has finked-out, he kneels down next to me with rocks of his own. Mud seeps through my jeans. My skin is cold but my heart is the most opposite. I look over at Darnell, but to

him, this isn't something we're doing together.

It's he who throws the first rock. It strikes the top of the squad car and stays put.

Officer Baucher jumps and looks at the sky. I find that tender and silly. I can't see Gina. I throw blindly. But I miss her.

Darnell throws another rock, and now he's swearing. It smacks the pane of the rear window. Officer Baucher is walking briskly and furiously towards the field. I throw, too, and my rock hits him in the shoulder.

"Damnit Joanie!" hisses Darnell. Then he throws a whole handful himself, and the rocks fall around the policeman, who is bent over under the street light. Officer Baucher doesn't curse or shout. As I peek over the lip, he looks right at me, his eyes full of hot disappointment.

"Fucking pig," I scream, and take off towards the baseball field. Darnell runs off in the opposite direction, and now Baucher has to choose, knowing both, which one he'd rather punish. Under the street light, joined by the sandglass form of Gina, I see he has chosen neither of us. But he is watching me. For show, I jump on third base several times, crushing it, and then run away through the slippery grass into the complex paths of the empty university.

At a distance from my house, I look for the Swoyer's car in the driveway, but it's not there. Wheezing, edging closer, I look for their indistinct shapes through the curtains, but there is no movement. I softly open the door, step inside, and sigh.

Mother seizes me by the wrist. She is so small, and so mighty.

"Where's your father?" she demands. Her jaw is webbed with mad blue veins. She does not drink or smoke, but on nights like these, I wish she would.

"I don't know, Mom. We don't hang out much," I say, panting, trying to smile.

"Sit in the kitchen." She throws a dishrag into the sink. "Why are you panting like that? Were you running? What were you running from?"

"Just running," I say.

"Just running," she says, disgusted. "The Swoyers –" she begins, and then puts both hands to her temples. I imagine the humiliated silence between my mother and her rare guests, the baby gimping around on the carpet, straining uselessly, blindly forward like a penitent.

"Once in a blue moon I ask him for a little thing. The Swoyers –" Again, she can't go on.

"He must have forgotten," I say.

Then she says, out of nowhere, "I don't know why he does this to you."

I am flattered by the idea that my father might be doing this to *me*. If it's all for me, well then, at least I'm involved. Perhaps his hiding from me is like a game. Any old game, like Kick-the-Can or Popsey. But I fear she's wrong; I know that he skipped out on the Swoyers for reasons having nothing to do with me at all.

My mother pretends to fiddle with the refrigerator. She has pulled it from

the wall, and taken out its guts. Sweat condenses on her forehead.

"Did you see him?" she asks me.

"Where?"

"You know where."

"No, where?"

I can't do this tonight. I still believe I am about to be arrested. I am still thinking of Officer Baucher standing under the street lamp with his hair in his eyes, his pulse beating *Joan, Joan, Joan*. He could be here any minute.

Mother stands. Her eyes have iced-over. "Don't you care, Joanie? Don't you two even *care* about each other?"

I look up at her. It is so strange, the way she lives sideways, like a sandcrab. She speaks sideways, feels sideways. And maybe I was born sideways, and that's part of the problem, that's why I feel off, that's why I can't just say What about *you*, Mom? How does it hurt *you*? She pushes past me to the door, snatching her keys. Outside, I hear her car start. She's gone to get him.

When he gets here, the first thing I will say is *At last*. Then, I will apologize for hitting him with a rock. I will lead him to the battered couch. I will clean his small wound. I will wait until he's done weeping. Then I will reach down his thighs, and squeeze reassuringly his tidy pouch, searching for that forked and friendless part of him. I'll free his chest from its uniform. Shaken from sadness, he'll respond in kind. He will lift up my favorite sweater. I'll feel the coldness of his hands in the backs of my eyes, I will feel his words inside of me, and then I'll know the marked strangeness of penetration, and the racket of the city will die away.

But he does not come.

After I wait for an hour or so, I go upstairs to my bedroom and take Bonita out of the mattress. Under the blankets, my hands search for their little nub. The Milky Way slides across my eyelids. I pet myself to sleep.

The next night, the Softee feels cramped and tense. I pant against a booth, trying to fit into a corner, like all the other girls. Across from me, Angela's ironed hair looks frayed like old rickrack. She eats a plate of cheesefries, talking with her mouth full. She is nervous because she finally spent the night alone with Carl, and I know she wants reassurance, but I'm not sure there is such a thing. Carl is conspicuously absent. I want him to come for Angela, but I also want him to come for me, to save us all from who-knows-what.

"Have you seen Darnell?" I say.

Angela says no. She begins to tell me about something she learned last year in Mrs. Ciatto's class about the difference between *may I* and *can I*.

"Do you know the difference?" she asks me. "Do you understand the subtlety?"

I shrug, playing with the packets of sugar. I see her blouse is buttoned wrong, exposing one half of her fleecy neck, but I don't mention it.

"Does it matter?"

"Exactly. No," she says. "Not to me, at least. But it mattered to Mrs. Ciatto, the old Gorgon."

Angela looks towards the door, clearly looking for Carl, the turncoat.

"Once she asked me to put the two words into context, in front of the whole class. And I couldn't do it." She licks her lips, anxiously.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Gina staring at me. She's with a group of older girls, sucking on cigarettes, in the dark table under the TV. It takes all my will not to catch her eye. I know all the signs of contention, and that's how I've always avoided it. What death wish has brought me here tonight I don't know. We don't have anywhere else to go.

I take more interest in Angela than I ever have. "What did Mrs. Ciatto do?"

"First," says Angela, thrilled now by her story, "she tells me to come after school and she'll explain it to me – the subtlety. After school, she shuts the classroom door and I'm thinking, oh my god, she's going to *molest* me, she's going to try to lick my *navel* or something. But guess what?"

She waits until I ask what.

"She takes out a pack of cigarettes and lights up. Right there on school grounds. Tells me all about *may I* and *can I*, plus a lot more. She's not such a Gorgon after all."

She reels back, her mouth parted. I see her vividly as a child, the first time she was allowed to place the needle down on the spinning record, the first moment it produced a chord.

"Turns out, people make a thousand tiny mistakes in their speech every day," Angela says, like it's God's word. "It's a wonder we understand each other."

I hear Gina laugh nearby, and I feel deep in trouble.

"I got to get some air," I say.

We start to make for the door, but we have to pass by Gina's table on the way. I watch Angela's pleased shuffle, her small back moving through the air. I try to focus on the haphazard stitching of her own favorite sweater. Whose is it?

I feel the eyes of the older girls on me. I see the ridges of their multi-colored hair. Their shoes tap on the linoleum.

"Hey," calls Gina. I flinch, but don't stop.

"Hey!" she shouts, as I push through the door.

The night doesn't afford any more space than the Softee. Again, the sky snuffs out the stars, its black-hearted stillness is full of exhaust. Winter boils inside it. Dark shapes rise before me and behind me like waves at night. I feel the omnipresence of enemies.

Angela is trembling. She looks at me. "Was she talking to *you*?"

"Yes," I say.

"Oh my god."

I am trying to think of the girls from the magazine. I am trying to picture them on a picnic, eating cherries and lifting their faces to the sun. Dicky's car

is parked at the Adult Store. I gently smooth the image. I turn the page.

Gina has followed me outside, and she's come up behind me. Her smell is nothing like I would have thought; it is like hail, like peat moss, the smell of soldering. She blows a plume of smoke into my hair.

"I said hey," she murmurs, "bitch."

Another girl who has come with her laughs shortly. "Tell her what you said inside. Tell her she has a good arm."

Gina sighs, weary as a queen. "Well you just *told* her, Marjorie." Then she whispers, into my ear, "I saw you last night, you know," she says. "What were you trying to do? What sort of idiotical idea was that? Why don't you tell me about it?"

I am about to fall over myself apologizing when we all hear a car skidding down the highway. It's my mother's car. It screams to a halt in front of the Softee. My own mother looks right at me, like a dart.

She thinks I am hanging out with my friends, carefree and jolly.

She steps on the gas, and leaves me.

Distantly, I hear Angela snuffle.

Gina tugs at the back of my sweater, hooking my body to her chest. Her breasts are hard and cold.

"I don't like you," she says, "and I don't like your influence on my brother."

The tip of her cigarette is at my ear. I can hear the paper crackle and give.

But Mother is not gone. She's made a U-turn just up the road and is now driving at great speed towards the aluminum façade of the Adult Store.

"Oh no," I say aloud, "not now."

"Jesus," I hear the other girl say. "Is that her mother?"

It is difficult to tell whether or not she intended to stop. The wheels skid but the car jumps a small curb and its nose crashes into the front of the Adult Store. The aluminum siding whines and gives and the hood crumples and pops open. Gina releases me. When I turn to her, she is looking past me with her big, starlit eyes. Having heard the noise, kids come pouring out of the Softee. Finally, something bad and exciting has happened, and that thing is my mother. She steps from the hissing car as if it were just a wrecked idea. Lars emerges from the Adult Store. A couple men hurry out, pulling up their lapels.

"Get out here!" my mother is yelling. "Get out here, coward! Degenerate! This is the last time!"

I look at Gina again. Hit me. Why won't she just knock me cold?

Across the highway, Lars is at a loss for words. His old sloppy arms are wagging. He begs and negotiates with my mother. Traffic muffles the words. Mother is no calmer. As I take a step towards the Adult Store, Dicky McNichols takes a step out.

As I see him, I experience a strange moment of nostalgia; I am so familiar with him at this distance. I see his spindly, funny legs and his featherbed hair, his shirts the color of bygones – Fleshtone, Sunset.

"There you are!" my mother says, and there is a terrible break in the traffic, so that we can all hear her. "*Satisfied!* You look so satisfied!"

Dicky's head is down. He gives a strange wave in my direction. Only when he gestures to me, do I remember myself. When I remember myself, I see the crowd that has gathered behind me, staring. Angela is crying. Grease comes out for tears.

Lars runs inside the Adult Store.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself? Say something!" my mother screams.

"Say what, Mags?" Dicky asks plaintively. He says something else that I cannot hear, but whatever it was throws Mags into a rage. She seethes and squirms like a twister, with the wreckage of houses whorling inside. She slams her fist into the hood of the car.

Then my mother shouts, "Look at her!" She turns to me with eyes like burning oil. "She spends every night waiting for you. She's spent all summer just waiting for *you*. Say something to her, for Christ's sake. Tell her *something*."

"Margaret," I hear him say.

"Tell her... go tell her something... tell her hello. Tell her she's nice or she's pretty," I can hear her crying now. "*Notice* her, Richard."

Dicky wants this to be a joke. *Look at me*, his practiced eyes say, *I am sorry. Again*. He offers his open hands, as if to show he's unarmed. Then, he moves towards her, to take her home, where they may do the things they used to do before I came along – giggle, kiss, and conspire.

But at his touch, she stops weeping and begins to yell, a strange flow of words that don't add up: *waiting, accident, Swoyers, nothing*. Each word is said in a different timbre, high and angry or low and sad. She sounds like a whole chorus of voices.

"I'll go Mags. Look Mags, I'm going to go say hello," Dicky McNichols says gently.

Without looking, I know I am standing alone. Under the lights I am chosen. I turn towards the group, where I see again the multitude of gaping mouths. I see my story forming in their heads.

In a moment, I will feel my father's touch. Already I feel myself recoil at the strangeness of it. He crosses the highway.

"Joanie?" he says. I turn to him. His eyes are more severe than I have ever seen, fearful and ashamed. The highway is quiet.

"Say something!" screams my mother, across the highway. "Say *something*!"

He grips my shoulder.

"You," he begins, and I want to argue, this is not how I want it to go, "you —"

"What did he say Joanie? Make him say something nice!"

"You —"

His face is wet, and in his tears I see tiny faces that are mine, many faces, falling from his chin. A tear for each time he has watched me, from the crow's nest

of his fatherhood, for each recognition that the world is a world of girls who don't love him either. It makes me incredibly sad. So sad I wish I had never been born to see it.

So instead I pretend I am seeing through Bonita's eyes. I pretend that I can see, with perfect clarity, the whole, forgivable world. I pretend that my sight confers grace upon every thing I see: the aluminum shack, the wet, endless highway, and the man standing before me who is crying.

And even after the police come – after Officer Baucher, who guards us all, I guess – comes and takes my parents back home, I keep pretending. Even after the crowd behind me disperses and the air gets palpably colder and I realize that I am standing in winter, I keep standing. Winter has won this city decisively. Soon, the lakes will harden with shields of ice. The kids at the Softee will surge back into school, and geese will lurch away in search of warmth. But Bonita will be wherever the sun shines all winter. She will dive into the waves, swimming ever deeper, to where the angelfish dart in concert, and ancient whales wave at her with their tremendous flukes. It must be that only the impossible warmth of her body keeps the whole sea from freezing.