

CYNTHIA STRULOEFF

The Sugar Shell

My first job was working for a woman named Ellie Ford, the summer before my freshman year of high school. It had been one of the worst years of my life; it changed me, and I knew I could never go back to being what I was before, untouched by the ugly things in this world. I had been a child. I was not yet a woman, and I could not see the point of being in between. What I remember most from back then was wanting to hop a train and get on with my life somewhere far away from home. I thought Maine sounded nice, a place I'd never been to but thought looked fine with all those lighthouses and boats and people eating lobsters.

Nobody ate lobsters in Eagle City, and nobody wanted to, because you can't get good shellfish in Idaho, and because the Bible says you don't eat things out of the water that don't have scales and fins. Of course, the Bible also says that you don't eat pigs, but folks ate bacon without a fuss. I might have been that way too, content with the reasons people had for things, pleased enough with the mountains to not want to see the ocean, eating off what we grew for ourselves. I'd grown up with the feeling that our family was paring down like layers of onion. There had been nine of us in the beginning—seven kids, two parents—and then, one by one, I started to lose my brothers and sisters to the outside, to husbands and wives and houses all their own, until there were just six of us still home, waiting for my brother Jason to graduate and go too. I knew I'd be next. But then my mother died, when I was just fourteen, and left me the oldest girl still at home. She died in March, of a cancer that came and took her so quick that it left us all feeling like we were stuck in the same bad dream. And then there were just five.

Things were quiet for a while, just falling apart, falling down, nobody watching them. Dad had always been a tall drink of water, six-four and wiry, but strong. Now that left him. He got too thin. His hair started to fall out. I'd sweep up little drifts of it from the bathroom floor, vacuum a fine layer off the back of his armchair. He kept on like he always had, like he hadn't noticed that Mama was gone. He went to work at the nuclear plant at six in the morn-

ing, came home at six at night, sat at the kitchen table for an hour whether there was food there or not, then pulled back into the living room reading the newspaper for the few hours before he went to bed. Every week he handed me off a hundred dollar bill to buy groceries, said that I was the woman of the house now. But he didn't look me in the eyes.

The four of us kids still at home got by however we could. Jason was a senior in high school, and he went on with his routine, like Dad did, football and yearbook and dates with the homecoming queen. He worked nights at the supermarket unloading and packing and was smart enough that he didn't need too much sleep or study. Levi, then twelve years old, and Robbie, only nine, found a family down the road who had lost their only son in a hunting accident the fall before, and they ate most of their meals over there, slipping home after dark to shower and sleep. It'd suck the breath out of me to come home to our house like that, the gardens dead and dying around it, the shingles blown loose, sticking up at all angles, the windows dark. The house looked like a cold place. Our four horses stood close to the fence, their necks hanging over limp and loose, their noses almost touching the ground.

I spent a lot of time at Safeway grocery, the hundred dollars clutched in my hand, walking the aisles and thinking about dinners my mama used to make, the smells of roast beef and potatoes, asparagus she cut from the sides of canals that twisted like secret roads over the Idaho countryside, places only she knew about. She would steam the stalks to bright green and roll them in butter. The asparagus in the store never looked as good to me, dry and purple at the ends, but I bought it anyway. I followed other women around, watching the way they fingered things before they bought them, the way they held packaged meat in their hands and squeezed, the way they brought fruit to their faces and smelled it. I tried to be one of them, touching, weighing, smelling. I tried to tap into that womanly part that knows what to do, what I most wanted to get from Mama besides her brown eyes. It didn't come. I boiled the asparagus to a gray limpness. I laid heaps of blackened, unrecognizable meals on the table before my father, and he always picked at them with his brows drawn together, his eyes refusing to confirm that I was not my mother.

So I turned out to be a failure at being a woman, and after awhile I cut myself loose from the job. My father stopped paying me. But I still went to the Safeway. I stole a little, mostly sweet things. Chocolate was something I'd never had a lot of, even before she died. I'd unwrap that stolen candy and let it curl around in my mouth, thinking it might rot out my teeth since all four of us kids had missed our yearly dentist appointments. I ate so much candy I got cankers on my tongue. I had a mouth full of pain, and I thought it would only get worse with time to fester.

I got caught stealing in June, just after school was out for the summer. Seven Baby Ruths, two Snickers, five Milky Ways, slipped in my pocket at the gas station. It amounted to about fifteen dollars I owed, total, and a ride in the back of the sheriff's truck.

"Ginny," said my father, after the sheriff dropped me off, "I'm not going to baby you."

"That's fine," I said, and I felt brave because I'd been planning these next words since I'd enjoyed the sweetness of that first stolen candy bar. "But it'd be nice if you fed us once in a while."

My father folded his newspaper and laid it on the coffee table. He stood up, put his hands in his pockets and looked at me. He had the look of a farmer in a hailstorm. He looked tired, like the horses, and then he turned and walked down the dark hall, toward the bedroom that he and Mama used to share, and said as he went, "You will pay for the candy you stole, Ginny, with your own money."

He knew I didn't have my own money. I took his newspaper into my room and read the want ads, the sound of the newspaper crackling the only proof that, in our house, there was someone left alive. That's when I saw the ad for the part-time job at the Sugar Shell.

The Sugar Shell was a cake decorating shop on the edge of town. For years it was the only cake decorating shop in Eagle City, and even after some of the grocery stores started selling cakes, business there was good. Sugar Shell cakes were cheaper, tastier, and prettier than anything a supermarket could whip up, and that was a good combination for the women of Eagle City, whose husbands were wheat and potato farmers and workers for the nuclear plant out in the Arco Desert. The Sugar Shell was a small white brick building right next to the bowling alley, just across the railroad tracks where town mostly ended and country began. It wasn't much to look at,

squarish and squat like a bent old woman, the brick more gray than white, with a row of large windows that lined the east side of the building, blocked by heavy, yellowing blinds. There was no way to keep those windows clean, though God knows I washed them often enough. The trains that came by kicked up the kind of dust that stuck, a mixture of cow manure and the dirt that dried and blew off spuds, and those trains came by every single day.

The front door led into a small entryway, where people would post up papers on the sides, layers of missing dog posters and jobs for hire, signs for washing machines for sale and sun-bleached calls for babysitters. Eagle City always has a wind going, and when the front door swung open those papers fluttered and crackled like startled birds. A little farther in hung a silver bell about the size of my fist, which rang out a nice, loud dong when the main door opened.

Inside the Sugar Shell, the light came in golden and hazy, the dust floating around like it was mixed with sugar, sweet with the taste of vanilla and lemon. I went in the main door and stood looking at the hooks on white particleboard where cake decorations, miniature ballerinas and plastic pigtailed girls to tiny football players and golfers, hung in neat rows. Against one wall there were shelves stacked with cake pans, dusty silver totems of different shapes, for bundt, angel food, heart-shaped, rabbit-eared, and Christmas tree cakes. Against the other wall was a line of clean glass counters where various types and sizes of wedding cakes stood on display, all of them white and perfect.

“You look like you want something specific,” said Ellie from behind the counter when I came in. “I hope I have it.”

Ellie had always seemed like a giant to me. I knew, just from the way people talked, from the way my mother had talked, that Ellie Ford was one of the nicest women in town. She was also one of the biggest. She was probably around six feet tall and weighed near four hundred pounds. She wore huge, baggy T-shirts and sweatpants that sagged in the legs. She couldn't get aprons that would fit her comfortably all the way around, so she bought white butcher's aprons, which were usually made bigger, and embroidered the words “The Sugar Shell” in blue and yellow on the front. She towered over the counter and cash register, framed by fancy wedding cakes.

“It's hot today. Enough to wilt a person,” she said.

“I want a job,” I said.

Ellie didn't seem surprised to hear such a thing; she looked like she had been expecting it for some time, like I was late, even, to have come in there and said it. She had gray eyes that had a pinkness to them, as if she smoked or cried a lot, but her eyes were watery and kind.

"How old are you?" she said, looking right into my face.

"Fourteen."

Ellie clucked her tongue and shook her head.

"My brothers moved pipe at thirteen," I said. "Nobody cared."

She was quiet for a minute, standing with her dimpled arms crossed, leaning her enormous belly against the glass counter, and then she said, "I've got frosting to make. Come in the back and sit with me while I think it over."

I slipped around the counter after her and through a swinging door into the kitchen where there was a huge Formica-topped counter in the center of the room covered with her tools of the trade: a shallow case containing over a hundred silver frosting tips, a bowl of white couplers, rolls of waxed paper and soft, clean parchment, scissors, a box of toothpicks, and a stapler. There was also a gallon of whole milk, a large glass canister of powdered sugar, bottles of orange and vanilla flavoring, and tiny plastic containers of food coloring. Ellie picked up a silver bowl and started to whip some milk, sugar, and vanilla together with quick, strong motions, her arms suddenly flexing as tight and muscular as a boxer's. There was a set of stools against the outside edges of the counter, and I sat on the one farthest from Ellie and watched her work that frosting over.

"You ever done this before?" she asked into the bowl.

"No."

"Your mother never taught you?"

"She was too busy."

Ellie gave a little snorty chuckle. "I suppose that's true, with a kid for every day of the week. She never was in here much. Made her own cakes. Last time I saw her was when she came in to buy the bride and groom for the oldest girl's wedding cake. What was that one's name?"

"Laura," I said. "I came with her that time."

"Did you?" Ellie started to spoon the frosting into the end of a large parchment funnel. "Which one are you?"

"Ginny," I said. "Virginia."

“I used to teach night classes,” Ellie said. “I taught all the housewives around here how to decorate. I taught your mother; it must have been almost twenty years ago, now. She was just married then.” She kept slapping the frosting into the funnel until it bulged and then set the bowl down and folded the ends of the funnel in tightly. I could not take my eyes off the movement of her hands, how practiced and precise it was, like folding origami. She snatched up the pair of scissors and snipped off the end of the funnel, then picked a silver tip from a box without hardly looking at it and twisted it onto the end of the frosting tube with a white plastic coupler. “I don’t have the time to teach anymore,” she said. “I have too many orders.”

Then she put the frosting tube into my hands and molded her plump fingers around mine. Her hand was cool and moist, softer than any hand I’d ever touched. “You have to put on just the right amount of pressure,” said Ellie, squeezing my hand hard so that a little bit of frosting emerged from the tip of the tube. “From the strength of your hand, not the fingers. Too hard and the frosting will all push out the top of the packet. You want to be able to form a nice, consistent line. Try here,” she said, letting go of my hand and ripping off a small sheet of waxed paper, which she laid in front of me on the counter.

I touched the tip to the waxed paper and squeezed. Nothing came out.

“This is harder than milking a cow,” I said. “I’ve milked a cow all my life.”

Ellie smiled, still watching the tip of the frosting tube, which produced nothing.

“We sold our cow,” I said.

“The frosting might be a little too thick. Squeeze hard,” Ellie said. “From the top.”

I squeezed until a muscle at the edge of my hand cramped and a fat line of frosting came out onto the paper, getting thinner as I dragged it along, then lumping as I relaxed my hand and pushed again. “This is probably not what you meant by a nice, consistent line.”

“It’s a line,” Ellie said. “You can work on consistent tomorrow.”

I laid the tube down on the counter.

“You mean it?”

“Two o’clock,” she said. “I’ll pay you four dollars an hour, five when you get to where you can frost a decent cake, six when you get to wedding cakes.”

I felt like I’d been poked with a cattle prod, really awake, for the first time in months. “I’ll be to six in no time.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “Now clean up that line of yours and make sure that you’re on time tomorrow. Wear a white button-up shirt and slacks. No jeans.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I swiped the frosting off the waxed paper with my finger and put it in my mouth. It was a sweet, fragile sort of taste, melting away quickly on my tongue. It was better than the candy bars.

Ellie worked me hard, after that. Every day from two until five, when the shop closed, she set me to doing simple things: cleaning the windows, arranging and dusting the glass counters, tagging new items that came in, taking cake orders from bright-eyed brides-to-be, who didn’t seem so much older than me. The work kept me busy, got me talking to people again, and got them talking to me about something other than my mother. Ellie put the store into my hands; while I was there she stayed almost exclusively in the back. Once in a while, friends of hers would wander in for flimsy reasons, and she’d recognize their voices and come booming out to wait on them herself. By that I knew that she was keeping a close watch on me from the kitchen.

I had a power of my own in the Sugar Shell. I could pretend, for all its flaws, that the little shop was mine. I played the radio as loud as I liked. I breathed that sugary air in deep and rolled up my sleeves and stocked, dusted, polished, and organized until the shop gleamed with my own kind of heavenly light. When the bell over the main door rang, I smiled at those women, and got them what they needed, and talked about how hot it was that summer, enough to wilt a person, I found myself saying again and again. The clock over the cash register spun away the hours. The trains rumbled by twice during the afternoon shift. The sound of the train whistle filled the shop, and that was the only time that the spell was broken, when I remembered that I wasn’t Ellie Ford but a smaller, sadder person, and there was another place in the world where I’d rather be.

Things were different after the store closed at five. Ellie came out for a few minutes, surveyed my work. "Today you made good business," she'd say, and then she'd clap a hand down on my shoulder and lead me through the swinging door into the kitchen. "Now let's get you to making a good cake."

I was a natural with the details of the store. I was a flop with cakes. Ellie taught me ingredients first, the things you mix for the best tasting cakes. A pinch of salt, for instance, to keep the sugar from overwhelming the tastebuds. "A lot of cakes are just too sweet," Ellie'd say. "Put in some salt."

"How much?" I'd ask.

"Stick your fingers in and pinch some out," she'd say, and then, after I did what she asked, she'd say, "That's too much."

Ellie didn't care for recipes or exact measurements. She measured things with her eyes, with the feel and weight of an ingredient, with the precision of her hands. What I was missing in the grocery store days had not come into me yet. So I tried and failed and tried and failed again, first at baking, then at the simple frosting of a cake, but mostly at decorating, at forming the consistent border of thin white frosting along a cake's slippery edge. I couldn't do it no matter how hard I tried. Ellie was patient. Her instructions were always given gently, usually with my name in front of them, like, "Ginny, you might want to check to see if that cake's ready to come out of the oven," or "Ginny, you didn't screw down the coupler tight enough. If you squeeze the tube now, you'll shoot frosting all over the counter."

She didn't like to play the radio when we worked back there; she said that this time, when the bell on the front door quit ringing, was her best thinking time. She didn't talk much either, and it was uncomfortable at first, the two of us just standing there, me trying to smooth icing on the cakes with a dull knife and some milk, Ellie with the tube of frosting in her hand, her eyes never leaving the latest cake. We could hear bowling balls next door knocking into the pins and the sound of men laughing.

After awhile, I started to make it my thinking time too. I thought about my mother. I tried to remember about how brown she had been, the strong shape of her shoulders smattered with freckles and dirt under her tank tops as she yanked weeds. I tried to remember the Fourth of July parades where our family rode horses down Main

Street in cowboy hats and chaps, the way she waved like a beauty queen. I tried to remember the way her face had looked before it'd swelled up, before she'd fallen down that day and never gotten up, but I was losing it. I was losing the image of her in health, left instead with the sight of her body across the bathroom tile, her skirt still bunched at her hips, her right leg bent back unnaturally between the toilet and the wastebasket. "Oh no," my brother Jason had whispered, leaning over her. "Oh no," he said, trying to blow the life back in. I dripped plenty of tears into bowls of frosting, and Ellie saw me, but she never said a word. At nine o'clock she'd say, "Let's get this all cleaned up," and at nine-thirty she would drive me to the end of my long gravel driveway and wait until I went inside and turned on the porch light before she drove away.

I brought my failures home. There were burned cakes and cakes taken out too soon, cakes with sunken middles, cakes that had resisted coming out of the pan, cakes cracked down the centers like the edges of earth after an earthquake, layer cakes that refused to sit right, leaning heavily to one side or the other. They were at all levels of bad. On each cake I slapped a layer of thick chocolate frosting, carried it carefully up the unlit walkway into my house, and left it on the kitchen counter. The next morning I'd find the empty plate on the counter, scattered with small, dark crumbs, as if during the night the cake had been carried off by an army of hungry mice.

Then there came a night, about an hour into our work, when someone thumped on the front door so hard it made the bell in the entryway ring. Ellie and I both went out to have a look. When I first saw Martha, standing outside hugging her arms to her chest like it was cold, she was wearing one of my mother's old sundresses, which my father had taken to Deseret Thrift Store after Mama wasn't there anymore to wear it. It was one of her favorites, white with yellow daisies on it. It had glowed against my mother's bronzed skin.

Ellie unlocked the door and said, "Martha Wilkens, what can I do for you?"

"Who's that?" said Martha, looking at me with her head turned to the side. She looked familiar, more than just being in my mother's dress, and a little drunk or off kilter in some other way. She was as thin as Ellie was fat, just sticks and skin, and her mousy brown hair didn't seem to want to lie right on her head.

“This is Virginia Thorton,” said Ellie. “She’s helping me out with the cakes. You want to order a cake?” She held the door open and Martha sidled in under her arm, still looking at me like I might jump out and bite her.

“Tom’s bowling,” she said. “He bought a bowling ball, can you believe that? He’s a bowler now, he says.”

“Stranger things have happened,” said Ellie.

“Not to me. I hate bowling. It’s got to be the stupidest thing,” said Martha.

She followed Ellie and me into the kitchen and plopped herself right down on my stool.

“You got a light?” she said.

Ellie fumbled in a drawer for a match. I could only stare as Martha lit her cigarette, inhaled deep, and then blew smoke out all over the cake I’d been frosting.

“It’s too quiet in here,” she said.

Things were never too quiet after that. Martha, she had a mouth and she used it. She smoked three cigarettes that night, asking Ellie for a match each time. She liked to strike the match hard against the matchbook and put it to the cigarette in her mouth while it was still flaring. I pulled up a stool on the other side of the counter and managed to get my cake out of the reach of most of the smoke. While Ellie and I worked, Martha told us all about her life, how she had grown up in Boston, Massachusetts in a fancy house, and how she’d come out west to go to school somewhere we’d never heard of. She’d ended up in Eagle City after she married her husband Tom, when his mother here took sick, and she’d lived with him in a trailer two roads down from the Sugar Shell ever since. As she talked, I finally recognized her as one of the bus drivers for my school district, the woman my older brothers, Johnny and Jason, had teased something fierce when they’d been in high school together. I’d heard one story, the story of April Fools’ Day, maybe a hundred times.

“Mrs. Wilkens is a good driver,” Johnny had said from the back of the bus, loud and clear so Martha would be sure to hear him.

“April Fools’!” shouted Jason.

“Mrs. Wilkens sure is a pretty woman.”

“April Fools’!”

They went on and on like that, a couple of regular jerks. But I always laughed when they told it, at the way they’d mimic her facial

expressions, her rage, her scowls, the way her hands clutched the steering wheel. She'd been their own personal wicked witch. But now that she was standing in front of me, talking in that scuffed-up voice of hers, I couldn't figure her out. From what she told Ellie and me, Martha had once been a sophisticated lady, and how she went to being pretty close to a bag lady she never did tell us, for all that talking. She cussed enough to make the wallpaper peel off the walls, some words that would have had my father running for a bar of soap, some words that I'd never heard before, but sometimes a different kind of word would come out of her, one that seemed too big for her to be wearing.

"How's the cake business?" she asked Ellie.

"Steady," Ellie said. "All these summer weddings and birthdays and such."

"You can't find places like this anymore," Martha said. "It's God's honest truth. Do you know that Safeway is selling cakes now? Exorbitant prices, thirty dollars for a little birthday cake. They write the name on it while you wait."

"Folks are in a hurry, sometimes," was all Ellie said.

After Martha had been with us for a couple hours, there was another thump on the door outside, so hard it jarred the wall, and a muffled curse. Martha hopped off that stool like she'd been poked.

"That would be Tom," she said, putting out her cigarette in a hurry. Then she was gone, a whirlwind in my mother's flowered dress, before Ellie and I could even say goodbye.

"Too many cigarettes," Ellie said, after the quiet had settled back in. "Too many cigarettes and too much crying will ruin a voice like Martha Wilkens'. She used to sing in the choir, when she first came. She sang 'Amazing Grace' so that everyone in the room would be a-bawling."

"Her voice is like chopped onions," I said. Ellie smiled.

"No cigarettes for you, Ginny," she said.

"No, ma'am."

"Let's get this all cleaned up."

"I hope to God that Martha Wilkens isn't my bus driver this year," I said as I stacked up cake pans on the shelves.

Ellie, washing out couplers in the sink, looked sad for a minute.

"Martha's not doing that job anymore," she said. "I don't know what she's doing."

Martha visited us nearly every night for the rest of the month, staying a couple hours while her husband bowled. It didn't take us long to figure out that Tom Wilkens took up bowling because he'd been permanently thrown out of the only bar in town. He didn't bowl so much as drink, and didn't come inside the Sugar Shell. He'd stand outside and bang on the door and yell. Most of the time Martha would hustle out there to meet him, but sometimes, if she was wearing fresh bruises from the night before, she'd pull a compact out of her purse and try to cover them up again with powder. Maybe seeing a bruise on her face reminded Tom of what he could do to her. Tom silenced Martha. As he howled away outside, she'd close the compact slowly and lift her chin and slip out the kitchen door and through the dark shop without another word.

She wore a lot of my mother's old dresses, dresses Mama had mostly worn to church, but Martha wore them every day. They didn't hang right on her thin little body, without my mother's strength to fill them. Sometimes when I looked at Martha in those dresses, I felt lucky to have known my mother and to be reminded of how beautiful she was just by seeing how beautiful Martha was not.

Every night Martha sat on a stool and smoked, and talked non-stop. I felt sorry for her. But I didn't like her. The Sugar Shell lost its magic when it was filled with her gravelly voice. As beaten down and drug out as she was, Martha had a fire in her that burnt. She made me feel like what I was, a teenager who didn't know much about anything. I think she hated me a little, on account of my brothers. She loved to laugh at me. When Ellie tried to teach me to make roses out of frosting, Martha was right there, grinning as I cut out little pieces of waxed paper, poked a toothpick through, and tried to layer petals around it.

"That one looks just like a cabbage," she said, laughing and coughing, waving her cigarette around in the air.

"Ginny, try not to layer the petals so tightly," said Ellie.

"Ooh, that one's a pine cone," shrieked Martha, flinging ashes everywhere.

"Ginny, try that one again," said Ellie.

"Yes, try it again, Virginia," said Martha. "Make us a whole tree full of pine cones."

"You think you could do better?" I said, holding out the tube of frosting.

Martha shook her head. "I have no interest," she said, "in making anything sweet."

She wasn't interested in eating anything sweet, either. Ellie tried to get her to eat cake, but Martha refused. "Got to watch my figure," she'd say. "Don't want Tom to have trouble getting his arms around me in the night."

I wondered if it hurt Ellie's feelings when she said things like that. Ellie never gave a sign that Martha's chatter bothered her like it did me. She just kept to her cakes, nodding occasionally to what Martha said, the tube of frosting held tight in her hands.

And then one night, we remembered our fathers. Martha, through her second or third cigarette already, started it up.

"He was rich, my old man, but he was a mean one," Martha said. "And my husband's just the same, but poor."

"Why'd you marry him, then?" I said, and Ellie looked at me so startled, and so disappointed, that I decided I'd better just shut up and frost my cake.

"What business is it of yours?" said Martha, but then she said, "He's not like that all the time. He's a world better than my father. At least he's no hypocrite."

It was quiet for a minute, so quiet we could hear the bowling balls rolling down the aisles next door.

"My father was a sweet man," said Ellie then, smiling that quiet smile of hers. She was making little doves out of frosting—love-birds, she called them—to add the finishing touches to a three-tier wedding cake she'd decorated the night before. "He bought me a bicycle for my tenth birthday, and bought one for him too, and we both learned to ride at the same time."

I tried to picture Ellie on a bicycle but couldn't.

"My father bought me a bicycle once," Martha said, grinding out her cigarette on a saucer, "but he never taught me to ride it. That would have been something, if he'd done that. I took the bike out to the driveway and fell before I got to the end. Hit so hard it knocked out my front tooth."

It was quiet again. Ellie stared at Martha in such a pitying sort of way that it annoyed me. She wasn't the only one, after all, who'd had some pain in her life. I never even had a bike. I closed my eyes and tried again to remember the way my mother's face had

looked the last time I saw her. Instead, I saw my father, chewing on a piece of wheat as he came up into the house, fresh from working the horses, sweeping an arm around my mother to kiss her in the kitchen. She'd laughed, thrown her head back and laughed from the belly, her hands messy with bread dough, and then she'd whipped the strand of wheat from his mouth and stuck it in her own.

"Who needs bicycles when you've got horses?" I said, more to myself than to Ellie and Martha, remembering when my father first taught me to ride. I was five or six years old, sitting in front of him on the saddle, held snug against his chest. My feet were too short to reach the stirrups even in the highest notch. I loved the dustiness of the horse, the smell of him, the flicking of his tail. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it.

"Don't be afraid," my father said. "Horses can feel it if you're afraid."

"I'm not," I said. He'd shown me how to hold the reins, and put his hands over mine to show me how to coax the horse in a direction without hurting his mouth.

"Little kicks," he said. "All you need is soft hands and little kicks."

"Horses," snorted Martha as she lit her next cigarette. "Your father should be ashamed."

I opened my eyes. "What did you say?" I looked at Ellie, who flushed pink low in her cheeks and looked away.

"Your father is letting your horses starve to death," said Martha. "Everybody knows it."

I felt the blood rush to my face. "You don't know anything."

"I know that those four horses of yours are starving. I've never seen a horse's ribs stick out like that," she said. "He thinks because he lost his wife he can just let it happen. Way I see it, he lets his kids starve, too."

"You shut up."

"Your family's a real tragedy," said Martha. "Your Mama was something else, so pretty and so sweet, enough to make your teeth ache."

"Stop it," I said. The hand holding the knife started to shake and when I put the other hand down to steady it, my knuckles dug a deep groove into the side of the cake.

“And you, well, I think you take after your old man,” said Martha. “You’ve got none of the prettiness of your mama and none of the guts of your brothers. You spend all your time pretending you’re the little princess of this sugar-shit world, just like your father.”

“Martha, I think it’s time you be going,” said Ellie from behind me.

“You trash,” I said. With my free hand, I dug a handful out of the already-ruined cake and flung it in Martha’s face, knocking the cigarette out of her mouth. “Your poor little rich girl story. Your thrift store dresses, pretending like you’re somebody. So your father let you get a tooth knocked out. That’s nothing. If you’re missing a tooth now, it’s because your drunk of a husband knocked it out, because he couldn’t stand to listen to the way you talk like you know something. You’re just plain trash, Martha Wilkens.”

“Ginny,” said Ellie, but I didn’t pay her any mind.

Martha put her hand over her mouth. Her face was smeared with frosting. Her eyes looked like they were going to bulge out of her head. The knife felt heavy in my hand, and I thought, had it been a knife with any kind of sharp edge, that I might be close to cutting her somewhere.

“He did, didn’t he?” I said instead. “He knocked a tooth out. And with a mouth like yours, you probably deserved it.”

“Ginny,” said Ellie, real low, “that’s enough.”

I was surprised to see the tears come up in Martha’s eyes, and even more surprised to feel tears in my own. “You don’t know anything,” I said again, throwing my knife down on the table.

Martha covered her eyes and bent over on the stool and sobbed. Ellie’s hand came down on my shoulder and when she looked me in the face I saw tears in her eyes too. Outside I heard the sound of a train coming, moving up the tracks, calling out its low, deep music.

“Go out to the front,” Ellie said. “Sweep the floor or something.”

I went. I sat in the middle of the floor in the dark shop and listened to the train pass by, rattling the blinds against the windows, and I cried the bitterest tears of my life in those few minutes. I never knew there was that kind of meanness in me. Things inside me were on the move toward something that I didn’t know and couldn’t come back from.

After I had dried off some, I went back into the kitchen. What I saw first was Ellie's back, with the white butcher apron tied tight across her T-shirt, and Martha's hands, which looked small and red against Ellie's back. They were hugging. I went back to the counter and picked up my knife to start frosting again. Martha and Ellie didn't move. I couldn't see around Ellie, but suddenly I had the idea that they might be kissing, standing perfectly still as Martha leaned against Ellie, their lips touching but not moving. Then Ellie stepped back and put her hand to Martha's cheek, like she was calming a little child.

I turned right around and went back out to the front. I swept the floor again. I could hear them laughing at each other, and it wasn't Ellie's normal laugh, either, not that quiet laugh she had when I put too much frosting on a cake. It was a full-fledged belly laugh, combined with Martha's throaty choked-up one.

When I went in there again, Ellie was making a bird on Martha's palm, slowly squeezing the frosting into a recognizable shape. The body, the head and neck of the bird. Then the wings, outstretched. One at a time. Martha was smiling. One of her teeth, the fourth or fifth one from the front, was gone just like I said, although I'd never noticed it before.

"There you go," said Ellie. "Your very own lovebird."

"Thank you," murmured Martha, and her voice was the nicest I'd ever heard it. Close to the Amazing Grace voice, I guess.

Martha left before her husband came to get her. As she went out I said that I was sorry, but she shook her head.

"Don't," she said. "I've had enough for an evening."

The house was the same when I got home that night, dark, broken down, in need of painting. My father was sitting at the kitchen table with his head resting on his hand. He looked up into my face. He looked better, his cheeks filled out some, a little bit of color back, so much better that I knew he must have been getting better for a while, and I hadn't noticed.

"You look like your mother," he said, "coming in like that."

"No, I don't," I said. "But it's nice to hear a lie now and then."

And then I was crying again.

"Ginny," said my father, and made like he would stand. "Ginny, don't."

"Let's go out and feed the horses," I said.

His eyebrows lifted. "Tonight?"

"Yeah," I said. "They look like they're hungry."

Under a bright moon, my father and I hurled pitchforks of hay over the fence, finding a rhythm to it like a dance. The horses floated toward us from the back of the field, ears forward, listening to me talk into the night, telling my father how a woman makes a decent cake. They ate slowly, as if they were enjoying the flavor of the hay, because they lacked the strength to eat it fast. My father wiped sweat from the side of his face. He leaned over the fence to touch the horses. His hands moved across their necks to their sides, where he caressed the sharp bars of their ribs.

My younger brothers liked to say that they didn't get to know our father until after our mother died. I don't know about that. I don't know if we can come to know each other that way, through the loss of pieces of ourselves. That night my father and I drew together, each bearing something of the same burden, and got a good look at each other. The Ginny my father saw looked like my mother, wise and womanly. The father I saw looked like a man who had decided, after a long while, to take care of his own.

"There now," he said, his voice low as a lullaby as the horses strained to reach more hay. He looked over at me, his hair curling long over his forehead, messy, his eyes shining. "There now."

I never saw Martha Wilkens again. She left town that night without a word to anyone. Tom Wilkens came in a few days later and asked Ellie if she knew where Martha had gone, and Ellie said she honestly didn't know but hoped that he would never find her.

"I hope she'll go someplace warm," she said. "Someplace far away."

I liked to think that Martha went to Maine, about as far as a person can get from Eagle City. I liked to think that she hopped a train and set off across the country, hell bent on getting herself some good lobster.

Overnight it seemed I began to understand the nature of cakes, the careful combination of ingredients coming together, knowing its rise and settle, its smells, and then the movements of frosting and perfecting it. I learned to make my own lovebirds. I improved so quickly with the cakes that, before long, Ellie said she'd taught me most all of what she knew. In August she started paying me six

dollars an hour, and Ellie decided to start teaching classes again. I was her assistant. I showed women in our neighborhood, so many of them newlyweds, how to put a pinch of salt into a cake to keep it from being too sweet. I walked the line of women and laughed over how much their roses looked like pine cones.

We were teaching one night, a few days before I started high school, when someone thumped on the front door, loud enough to ring the bell in the entryway. Ellie and I went out to have a look. There was nobody there, no woman waiting at the door with her arms hugged to her chest. On the top of the cement steps was the ugliest cake I ever saw. It was round, that much I'll give it, but lumpy, covered in some chocolate frosting that must have come from a can. The outside edge was lined with candles, which flickered and sputtered in the wind, but none of them blew out. In badly drawn blue letters across the middle, it simply read, "Ellie."

We both stared at it for a long time. It was beautiful.

"Ginny," Ellie said to me at last. "Let's take it in."

I lifted the cake carefully and we walked it into the kitchen. I set it on the counter and Ellie slowly blew out the candles. The women taking decorating lessons didn't know who sent it, but they understood, in that way that women do, that it was a tribute of the most precious kind. Their eyes were bright over it. Then we cut that cake up, and Ellie and me and the housewives of Eagle City each had a piece, one big circle of women, eating, in the kitchen at the Sugar Shell.