

## **THE MORTICIAN'S CHILD**

The casket in our living room  
the hearse outside the Dairy Queen  
and the rest of my life six feet above

Kathleen L. Hawkins

Windsor Westcott  
Publishing

# **The Mortician's Child**

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Some of the names in this book have been  
changed to protect people's privacy.

## **Author's notes**

The events in some of the chapters aren't necessarily in chronological order. I might start out as a child in one chapter, and then, in the same chapter, become a teenager or an adult thinking back on the events. In the next chapter, I might be a child again. In each case, I specify how old I was at the time—or at what point it was in my life—so readers can travel with me easily through time.

## **Disclaimer**

The name Dairy Queen is trademarked. The name as it's used in this book is for identification purposes only; it's a place where the author and her father stopped for ice cream. Neither the publisher, author, nor this book are in any way affiliated with Dairy Queen. This book is not licensed, endorsed, or sponsored by Dairy Queen, nor does it necessarily represent their opinions or views.

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1. Memoir
  2. Psychology
  3. Death
  4. Mortician
  5. Family
  6. Kathleen L. Hawkins
- I. Title

## **Praise for *The Mortician's Child***

Winner of the Mayborn Nonfiction Prize  
for Literary Excellence (original title *Six Feet Above*)

*The Mortician's Child* surprises, horrifies, appeals to voyeuristic tendencies and, at the same time, tugs at our heartstrings. — Cindy Groom-Harry, CEO, CMC

Wow. Mesmerizing and fabulous. I enjoyed every minute of it. Kathleen has shared her life so beautifully. Humbly and lovingly, too. This is the kind of book the world needs, it is so real. — Cassandra Miosic, legal assistant

*The Mortician's Child* is wildly different from anything I've ever read. The writing is far more imaginative and goes way beyond a traditional memoir. I love it! — Dr. Lynne Kelly, author, *The Memory Code*

Fascinating. Kathleen is remarkably resilient and damn healthy given her situation. Any one of the events she experienced would screw up most people; she had one traumatic experience after another. And she doesn't drink or do drugs. It's a miracle.  
— J. Johnson, teacher

Kathleen is incredible: far deeper, more intuitive, and more genuine than most people ever allow themselves to be. Thank you, Kathleen, for speaking about your soul, and in doing so, speaking to mine.  
— R.G., Ph.D., Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

## **Dedication**

For Lissa, my first and forever friend

And for the young girl I was who wrote in her diary every day.  
You were a reporter, my memory. I hope to be your wisdom.

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you  
plan to do with your one wild and precious life? — Mary Oliver

There are years that ask questions and  
years that answer. — Zora Neale Hurston

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Mom and Dad, ages 23 and 24



The mortician's child



Two of the three funeral homes where I lived before I was six years old



Our home in Berkley, Michigan, a Detroit suburb



## YEARS THAT ASKED QUESTIONS

### Fugue

“Dissociative fugue” is one of a group of conditions called “dissociative disorders” ... People with fugue temporarily lose their sense of personal identity ... Outwardly [they] show no signs of illness, such as odd behavior ...

Dissociative fugue has been linked to severe stress, which might be the result of traumatic events that the person experienced or witnessed ... Most fugues are brief, lasting from less than a day to several months. Often, the disorder goes away on its own.

— Webmd.com/mental-health

Our sense of worth, of well-being, even our sanity depends upon our remembering. But, alas, our sense of worth, our well-being, our sanity also depends upon our forgetting.

— Joyce Appleby

Amnesia is like opening a suitcase and discovering that I picked up the wrong luggage at the baggage claim after a flight. I see a sweater, slacks, and toiletries, but nothing familiar. These items must belong to someone else.

I’ve sprung fully-grown—blinking and bewildered—into a strange, bright afternoon, steering a teal-blue Camaro through traffic. In the rearview mirror I see serious, blue-gray eyes with perfectly arched brows. I run fingers through long hair, pull it forward: dark strawberry blonde, almost auburn, straight, and silky. On the seat next to me, two books: *The Future of Time* and *The Haunted Mind*.



I'm wearing a beige skirt, a cream-colored silk blouse, and sturdy, brown high heels.

Rumbling past me are muddy 18-wheelers hauling shiny new cars, and on both sides of the freeway, there are gently sloping brown hills, and fields laced with side roads and dotted with maple trees and puddles where the land is low.

Amnesia isn't empty. It's shallow like rainwater in those puddles spiked with weeds, reflecting only the present: birds that sweep across an expansive blue sky, and a stranger who walks along the side of the road going for gas or help.

I want to exit and take a side road, but which one leads to my life? If there's no beginning here, is there no end? Am I suspended in the forever present, driving the pavement of a beautiful day?

Is someone waiting for me to return from a coffee break? Did a friend, lover, or a relative stop thinking about me for a second and I ceased to exist? Even my breathing is shallow. I inhale deliberately and deeply and then exhale slowly to try to steady myself. It's terrifying in this vacuum. I continue to drive, not a threat to anyone's safety. I know what traffic signs and signals mean and I obey.

The coffee shop has no name—like me—but a sign brags FINE FOOD. I exit onto Middlebelt Road. “Middlebelt, Middlebelt, Middlebelt,” I repeat like a mantra or a password to commit the name to a new reserve of memories or conjure up the old.

Middlebelt must be the center of a town or city, a division between two sections—the median between memory and mystery? I'm driving the narrow line.

The cars in the FINE FOOD parking lot have Michigan license plates. I park, go in, and sit down. The server hands me a laminated menu that tells me I'm in “Dearborn Heights.” A calendar on the wall says “April 1967,” and a clock says “4:00.” But calendars and

clocks are meaningless. Progression of time is truly measured by feelings and collections; I have neither.

Customers sip coffee and read newspapers. Will any of them claim me as family, a friend, or maybe arrest me for a crime I don't remember committing?

"What?" I ask the server.

"Are you ready to order?" she repeats, apparently taken aback by my intensity.

"Coffee."

"Cream?" she asks suspiciously, as if sensing something's amiss.

"Yes."

I swirl it into the dark coffee and marvel at the rich compromise of colors. I pass up the sugar—a taste preference from my past? Does this body have memories it won't share with me?

The server looks up from polishing a pie case and smiles. I return her smile uneasily.

A poster on the wall tells restaurant personnel what to do if someone chokes, and under it, a mirror in which I confront myself: tall and slender with the same serious eyes I saw in the rearview mirror. Embarrassed to be an interloper in an unfamiliar body, a voyeur watching myself from a distance, I glance away.

I move cautiously as though memory is linked to a sense of balance and raise my cup for a refill. What an unpredictable place, a world in which one has no memories. Beware of ambush by people who know who they are, who have names, and who are certain of themselves.

I try to summon up a sense of the situation but realize with dread that intuition—as well as identity and balance—roots itself in memory. Oh God, give me an arsenal of memories—lurid or ecstatic, boring and insignificant, manic or depressive—and they'll

give me an identity and a place in the world, give me whatever is truly mine and I'll be strong again.

I shiver. Am I safe here? Could I think my way out of a dangerous situation? Am I smart, or does intelligence also depend on memory? I can't let anyone know that I'm this lost. I'd be too vulnerable, a target. If I had a name, I'd have a chance.

"Cream of mushroom soup with whole wheat bread," I tell the server, and then think proudly, I made a decision, and the soup will be warm and friendly.

The sound of the bowl being set on the counter and the fragrant mushrooms and spices unlock something inside me, and to my great relief, memory returns, feeling not guilty for having strayed. It comes without direction or apology and fills me everywhere at once with its objects, a whole life with a history: baby books with bold colors, cider mills in the autumn, a bicycle, college, awards, writing scholarships, degrees, and, yes, a family, profession, and lovers. I'm 21 years old. I have an identity and a life—dark with secrets and silences, full of passion—with skeletons in its closet.

I wanted to get away from it, but I've been thrown back into the briar patch. And now, only after remembering, I realize there were a few things that I needed to forget.

## SWITCHED AT BIRTH

### 1. Into the Abyss

When you gaze long into the Abyss, the Abyss  
also gazes into you. — Friedrich Nietzsche

Stephen King and I were switched at birth. How do I know? Because I saw an interview with him on TV and the interviewer asked what kind of childhood he had, and he shrugged and said it was fairly normal. It was then I knew that Steven King got the childhood I should have had, and I got the childhood of a horror writer. I was the daughter of a freelance mortician who worked for 22 funeral homes throughout the Detroit area and suburbs.

Rather than keep a full-time embalmer on staff, funeral directors hired Dad when they had a “call.” That way they saved money and Dad worked as much as he wanted, which was most of the time. Dad insisted that they call him whenever a body came in, even in the middle of the night—he didn’t want his work to pile up—so our phone rang day and night. Dad taught me to answer the phone when I was a little kid, “He’s not here right now; may I take a message?” Then I took a name, wrote it clearly in my best handwriting so Dad could read it later—Lynch and Sons, Kingsley, Sawyer, Cole, Spaulding, Sullivan, Fisher, Calhoun—and I repeated the phone number they gave me to be sure I heard it right.

We lived in apartments above the chapels in three funeral homes before I was six years old and I had to be quiet because people were grieving downstairs.

The “be quiet” rule was still in effect when I was five-and-a-half years old and we moved out of the last funeral home into a new house in Berkley, Michigan. I guess Dad just didn’t like me talking no matter where we lived.

~~~~~

“Piggy-back!” he crouches down for me to climb on, I’m six years old, I shake my head knowing that he’s headed into the lake over my head, no, you’ll go under, no I won’t, yes you will, no I won’t I won’t don’t be such a baby, you’ll go under, no, no, no, do you promise you won’t go under, I promise, you really, *really* promise, I promise, so I climb onto his back and he carries me piggy-back into the lake riding on a promise that he won’t go under, but he does—before I’m ready and can take a deep breath.

The weight of the water closes over my head—swallows me whole—the lake gulps me down, blue-green transparent—sunlight reaches faintly through the deep, silent water to touch me—and Dad keeps me under. I cling to his back, terrified to let go, I can’t swim, and the shore is so far away; my lungs burn, his lungs are bigger than mine, he’s a grownup, he can hold his breath longer than I can. I don’t know how far away the surface is, how distant the shore, so I hold on. I hate that I need someone who betrayed me. I’m stunned, furious, broken. If I can’t trust my own father, who can I trust?

~~~~~

Some years later, he tells me, “You’re going to die not being able to breathe—”

I remember the lake (he resurfaced when it suited him); I can’t imagine a worse death than being deprived of air.

“—because of your allergies,” he specifies, “and I’m going to die of a heart attack. One day I’ll go just like that.” He snaps his fingers.

“How are Mom and the boys going to die?”

He thinks about it. “I don’t know. And I don’t know who’s going to embalm you.”

The thought of being embalmed horrifies me. I saw an embalming machine once—Dad had it in the car—and I smelled the sickening odor that wafted up from it.

It had a plastic container to hold the embalming fluid and a base with a motor, pump, and a hose. Incisions are made in an artery and embalming fluid is pumped in, which forces the blood out into a drain.



“I don’t think I could embalm you,” Dad says, “but I wouldn’t want anyone else to do it. Oh well,” he shrugs, “I’ll probably die before you and I won’t have to worry about it.”

I’m immensely relieved. Yes, Dad, please die before me, please, I couldn’t stand having you do that to me with all those hoses and nozzles and smelly liquids and sharp-pointed instruments.



Dad and I are getting ready to run errands, this time in the car instead of the hearse, which he saves for official business: picking up and delivering bodies and going on funerals.

I take a small cardboard box off the front seat as I slide in. It doesn’t have any writing or markings on it. “What’s this?”

He starts the car and we’re off. “Do you know what ‘cremains’ are?”

Startled, I say, “Yes.” Someone’s ashes. There’s a person in here, or there *was* a person, but the box is so small. It’s a child. I place it carefully behind me on the backseat.

An ambulance siren breaks into my thoughts, Dad tracks it to a car accident. We sit at the side of the road and look at the pain and suffering. Dad slumps in his seat, lost in thought, studying the scene before us. A young man in black dress slacks and a white shirt stands by a wrecked car and looks shaken, a trickle of blood on his full, lower lip. He's handsome; my mind snaps a picture, snap, and one more for the memory "photo album," snap.



Dad finishes eating dinner before Mom, my brothers, and I do, and he pulls out the newspaper and reads the obituaries to us with commentary. "This little boy got himself killed because he ran out between parked cars; that's so stupid." Dad has a long, narrow face with a high hairline and a slight underbite that's more pronounced when he glares at me, "You better not do anything so stupid."

I try to ignore him and frown at the stewed tomatoes sitting in a bowl of watery, pink juice in front of me, and I wonder how many mouthfuls it'll take to finish before I can have the apple pie Mom made for dessert. We don't have dessert usually, but we have it—like a bribe or an apology—on the nights we have something I hate, like liver and onions, and stewed tomatoes; the worst dinner ever.

"I took care of him," Dad says and jabs the newspaper with his finger. "He died of tuberculosis like you're going to if you don't get outside and get some fresh air!"

I taught myself to type when I was nine. I prefer to stay inside to write my stories. The last time Dad told me I'd get TB if I didn't get some fresh air, I dragged a chair and card table outdoors and put the typewriter on it. He stood inside the house looking out at me; he seemed angry, as though he thought I was being a smart aleck. I was just trying to get him off my case and get some fresh air, so I wouldn't die not being able to breathe.

I'm not sure that Mom likes some of my stories. I showed her one, "The Case of the Sunburned Model," about a woman who's murdered by being drugged and left in the sun on a lawn chair, so she dies of dehydration and severe sunburn. The murderer wants it to look like she just fell asleep in the sun and it sucked the life out of her. It's a clever story and I'm proud of it.

Mom said, "Write about things you know. I like your animal stories and fairy stories." Yeah, like fairies are real. I wrote a 12-page story in the first grade (my handwriting was large, so the story wasn't "single-spaced," like typewritten) and the teacher had me read it to the class. When the prince swung down on a vine to rescue the princess, the kids laughed. It was a dramatic scene, and they laughed. It was humiliating. I haven't read anything in front of anyone since. Maybe they liked the story, but laughter wasn't the reaction I wanted.

Dad shakes out the newspaper and turns to the second page of obituaries. "This woman here was at Sawyer Funeral Home. She died because she was stupid and went to a doctor who made a stupid mistake and killed her." He fumes, "And this one, someone else did the work."

"The work" being the embalming. That was the "call" that got away. He works day and night. How much more can he handle? Maybe it was good that someone else got that job.

My brother, Bill, who's seven—three years younger than I am—jiggles his legs. Mom has him on yeast tablets for the Vitamin B to try to settle his nerves. My youngest brother, Matt, is still in a highchair and probably clueless at this point.

As Dad continues to read the obituaries out loud and comment on them, Mom quietly clears the plates and puts out the apple pie.





I swallowed more than dinner in those days. I ate fear and anger, and like food they became part of me, fueled my dreams, my creativity, and my anxiety. I swallowed what I wanted to tell Dad: stop, just stop with the obituaries and let me eat in peace or let me tell you what happened at school today and how I got a good report card; but all he wants is silence.

There were a lot of silences when I was growing up, and I did a lot of listening. It's amazing what I hear when I listen to silence. I hear the inner workings of things: the earth in its orbit, the slow rhythm of tides, and the crawl of the sea. I hear stars twinkling, the sun trailing the moon behind it, and the Breath behind my breath.

Sometimes it seems that I can hear people from the insides of their heads, the twisted tangle of their thoughts, their anguish, so loud that I think they spoke to me and I answer, and they say, "I didn't say anything, how'd you know what I was thinking?" And the color drains from their faces; I change the subject, flustered and embarrassed, and I'm even more afraid to speak the next time.

A college roommate tells me that she can see in the dark like a cat and feels like a freak because of it. With me it's hearing. I hear a faucet dripping a room away, the contraction of water pipes deep in the remote walls of the house, a clock ticking in another room, and once I tracked a tiny sound to the floor in a corner of my home office. A slug had crawled in under the door from outside, made its way down the hall, and was on one of my manuscripts nibbling the letters off a page of print.

I hear various parts of me whispering—the lost little girl crying for comfort, physicians conferring with each other and going about their healing, creativity asking for an invitation or an audience—the zip and zing of electricity in my brain.

A boyfriend in college says, “If you listen, you can hear your scars. Press a scar with a matchstick,” he demonstrates on the scar on his forearm, “and you’ll hear a change in the sound of silence.”

The only scar I have is from when I was a baby walking on the couch; I fell against the windowsill and chomped down on my tongue; I don’t want to probe that scar, so I take his word for it.



The places I’ve lived in the presence of death make me crave silence like a nutrient. And deep within that silence Something moves, a spirit, I feel it. I want to interpret that Spirit, explore the meaning and mystery of it, and live from within it. I hate anything loud that interrupts the silence: fireworks, blaring music, or piercing laughter. I carry earplugs everywhere I go, just in case, and slip them in when no one’s looking.

Today I live in the country. My house is silent and solid as it sits on a ridge overlooking the lake. I stand in the entryway, look out at the water. I go into the living room with its dark paneling and high ceiling. The sun streams across hardwood floors. It’s so quiet in here. Sometimes I spend days alone in the silent house, preferring it.

## 2. The Hour of Lead

This is the hour of lead, remembered, if outlived,  
as freezing persons recollect the snow.  
First—chill—then stupor—then the letting go.  
— Emily Dickinson

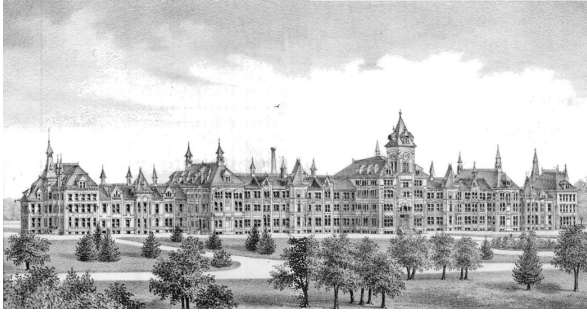
I'm the only kid who goes out for bodies and ice cream. I like to go with Dad on pickups and deliveries because he doesn't call me an imbecile in public if I ask a question—like he does at home—and then we go out for ice cream. A hearse outside the Dairy Queen creates quite a stir. Add to the creepy effect the fact that Dad is big—230 pounds, 6-feet-6-inches tall—and has the somber look of a man who knows death up close and personally.

We haul death to and from hospitals, funeral homes, and airports, and I pretend it doesn't bother me, but I don't like the way people gawk at us when we drive by and some of them laugh when they see me. I'd rather Dad have another job. Lissa's dad is a barber. Lissa is my best friend. Diane is another good friend. Her dad sells Kenmore refrigerators and other large household appliances. Nicky and Jimmy's dad next door is a milkman. Then there are the kids who live in the big, brick houses in Huntington Woods. Their dads are said to be doctors and lawyers.

Today we're taking the hearse to pick up a body from Eastern Michigan Asylum for the Insane (also called Pontiac State Hospital). It's a self-contained town, an entire city unto itself with a church, a greenhouse, shops, a bakery, offices, cottages, wards, sleeping rooms for 3,100 patients, an infirmary, a dairy, and its own herd of cattle.

It's a short drive—about 10 miles—from our small home in the quiet suburbs, a nice ride into the country. And all too soon, there it is on the horizon, a huge complex of imposing gothic, brick buildings—like haunted mansions in the movies with endless rooms

and Victorian spires and slate roofs, towers and turrets—growing larger and larger as we approach.



Eastern Michigan Asylum for the Insane, Pontiac, Michigan, c. 1876  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EasternMichiganAsylum.jpg>

Dad pulls up to the front door of the main building and parks. You think we'd go to a side door or a back door, but no, we pull up right in front of the place in a hearse. That must really depress the inmates—or are they called residents or patients?

Dad says, “This place caught fire in the 1800s, the women’s ward, before electricity when they used candlelight.”

Imagine this vast, eerie place after dark, lit by candlelight: halls and rooms, narrow corridors, flickering shadows and attics, lock down. I just know it’s haunted.

He adds, “Five-hundred women got loose. Some had to be kept from running back into the burning building.”

I stare at the place and try to imagine fire peeling back the walls of their confinement—or their security—and they run wild and unpredictable across the dark lawns and empty acres that surround the place, they run against a background of flames.

Dad shakes his head, “They tried to run back in. That was so stupid.”

No, Dad, not stupid, insane. I think there’s a difference.

“There are children in there,” he says. “They have their own ward.”

I'm startled. Insanity is way too big for a child to contain. Madness should be an adult thing. How is it that children go insane enough to be put in a place like this? Could it happen to me? Do they have someone to tuck them in at night, read stories to them, love them, or are they alone and terrified like I feel on the outside?

Dad, wearing his customary dark suit, white shirt, tie, and black shoes, goes into the building and leaves me alone in the hearse.

It must be awful to die in there, to have an insane asylum be the last place you see. Do they give people shock treatments? It's terrifying to think that someone shoots electricity through your brain until you have seizures and forget for a moment—or forever—what was bothering you. I'm going to keep my thoughts and feelings to myself, bottled up inside and guarded, or someone might tell me that I'm crazy.

What if the insane people smell me out here—sense my shaky hold on reality—and, like zombies, lumber up to the hearse to study me? What if they surround me, their palms pressed against the windows, trying to get at me, their eyes vacant, yet trained on me, their pale, blue lips gently brushing the window as if to taste it, but leaving no warm, moist breath behind on the glass?

I'm so cold. If I were to go insane and lose control would someone warehouse me in a place like this until death released me? My eyes travel along the red brick walls of the first floor, move up to the second floor, third, and up there, on the top floor, a young man is hitting his forehead slowly against the bars of a narrow window. Does the hearse scare him, make sense to him, to look outside and see a young girl looking up at him, her face framed by the window of a funeral coach? Does he know who died, why we're here, or is he just trying to rock away his despair?

Kathleen L. Hawkins

Who is Dad bringing out? Who found death the only escape, man, woman, or child? I'm afraid to ask, "Who is it?" too fragile to hear the answer.

### 3. Red Rover, Red Rover

A friend is a second self. — Author Unknown

I was seven years old, in second grade, and Lissa was five when her family moved into the neighborhood. Her mom asked my mom if I'd walk her to school. She had blue eyes and long, blonde hair and was wearing a pretty blouse and skirt and carrying a pencil box. She looked brave for her first day of kindergarten. Maybe she felt safe because she was with an older girl who'd protect her on the walk to Pattengill Elementary School, seven blocks away—half a mile.

I had two responsibilities: to feed Penny, my cocker spaniel, and Tico, my parakeet, and now, walk Lissa to school. If I didn't protect her, something bad might happen to her.

Dad warned me, "If you're not careful, if you're stupid, someone will hit you on the head and drag you into the bushes." He didn't say what would happen in there, but I was sure it'd be awful. I won't let anything like that happen to Lissa. I watch the bushes and shadows between the houses in case anyone jumps out to grab her. If that happens, I'll bite and scratch and tear him to pieces! And scream so people in the houses come to help.

We sleep over at each other's houses, suntan in our swimming suits in the backyard, and dress like gypsies on Halloween. We go to the lake and the zoo with our families and make sandwiches and eat them in the field across the street, Greenfield Road. Sometimes I pull a delicate, blue flower off a stem and lick the pollen out of the middle, and then Lissa does it, too—because I did.



I'm 11 now; Lissa's nine and we're playing in the vacant lot. I call, "Statues!" and kids come running from the nearby backyards: Lissa's sister Sandy, my brother Bill, and neighbors Dougie, Linda, Jimmy, and Mike. Four-year-old Pookie clumps over in his mom's high heels and sits on the sidelines on a large flat rock. He's wearing

a t-shirt, shorts, a pearl necklace, and white gloves and has a large purse slung over his shoulder.

I'm older than the other kids and like being in charge, unlike at home where I can't control much of anything. In "Statues" I spin each kid around and around and let go. They fly away from me and land in all sorts of silly positions. I ask them what they are—horses, dogs, dancers, etc.—and then they have to chase me in those positions. They look so funny trying to catch me, especially Jimmy who fell on his side and can't move very well, but then they all circle me at same time and block my escape. Lissa tackles me, and then she gets to be "It."

She spins us around, lets us go, and asks me, "What are you?"

"An airplane," I say from my seated position on the ground.

Dougie is a house painter, Sandy an eagle, Linda a racecar, Mike a football player, and Jimmy a wrestler.

"Go!" Lissa shouts and we chase her. I leap off the ground and swoop at her so fast she doesn't have time to think, and I tag her.

"Hey, that's cheating," Dougie protests, "You have to stay in the same position."

"*Nuh-uh*, I'm an airplane and airplanes fly. I was sitting on the runway, and then I took off. I'm still an airplane whether I'm on the runway or in the air."

The game disintegrates. Sandy and Jimmy debate whether I cheated and, excited by the chaos, Dougie shoves Linda. Sitting on the sidelines, Pookie adjusts his pearl necklace and seems to disapprove of all of us.

"You cheated," Dougie pouts.

Indignant, "I did not. I was being creative."

Weepy now, "You cheated."

"Do over," Jimmy calls out cheerfully. I sigh, aggravated. He wants to start the game over from just before the disputed play, so



we can keep playing rather than have people go away angry. A do-over would make them feel better but would cancel my win. I won by being smart and I won't let anyone undo my win.

"Nope, no do-over," I say emphatically. "Let's play something else. Red Rover."

They're still pouting and complaining as we form two lines facing each other some distance apart. I'm in line with Sandy, Bill, and Mike opposite Lissa, Dougie, Linda, and Jimmy.

I whisper to Sandy and Bill on each side of me, "Hold wrists instead of hands; it makes the line stronger." I narrow my eyes, scrutinize the other team: Jimmy is little and won't be able to break our chain, so we'll get to keep him and make our line longer. "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Jimmy over."

He comes running as fast as he can and leaps, folding himself in half over our gripped wrists. He can't break through and joins our line.

Next, Linda calls me over. I charge toward her and Dougie to make it look like I'm running straight toward their link, then veer off course suddenly and hurl myself against Linda and Lissa's hands because they let their guard down—and I break them apart. They rub their hands, "Owww!"

Dougie's eyes widen, "You cheated again. You tricked us."

"I did not. I was just being clever. You're not any fun to play with," I scold, furious at being called a cheater again.

Pookie left. He watches us play until he gets bored—or scared if we argue—and then drifts away to go do whatever he thinks is more important. He always seems to be on his way to somewhere else.

"Oh, I give up," I say, incensed at being wrongfully accused of cheating. "I'm going home to write." In my stories, I'm totally in control. People do whatever I tell them. I can make them win or lose—heck, I don't even have to make them human.



Lissa and I tromp down the sidewalk, arm in arm, making sure that we each start with the same foot, so we'll be in step all the way to wherever we're going: right foot, left foot, right, left, right.

"Let's go to the store and see if the guys are there," I say. They're stock boys who work at National Grocery store across the street and are probably in high school. I go to Anderson Junior High; Lissa still goes to Pattengill Elementary.

Halfway there we cross paths with some boys on the sidewalk, she pushes me between them and her, and then pinches my arm real hard. I hiss, "*Owww*, stop it. Quit pinching me. You're just drawing attention to yourself."

She gives my arm another pinch for good measure. "I want attention, except boys are our worst enemies. The ones I see coming out of Anderson Junior High are creeps. I bet they all are."

*Hmmm*, there's something more to boys than she realizes. There's just something about them.

The Ouija Board says that the stock boys' names are Jerry and Gary. Ouija says that Jerry likes Lissa and Gary likes me, and it says that I'm going to marry someone named Chuck and have five kids; Lissa's going to get married, too, and have three. I hope our families visit each other when we're grown up. It gives me a funny feeling to think of having a husband.



Lissa and I kept in touch occasionally when I went away to college. I made new friends and had my first boyfriend. Lissa made new friends, too, and was "discovered" walking down the street by the director of a modeling agency, and it wasn't a scam. She was slim, tall, and beautiful with blonde hair. They sent her on assignments, but some were in Detroit and she got nervous going there by herself. She had anxiety attacks and stopped accepting jobs.

Being two years older than Lissa, I figured I'd do everything before she did: wear a bra, get my period, go to college, get married, have kids (five according to the Ouija board). Turns out I went to college and she didn't. She got married, had a son, and got divorced and married again. I chose not to marry or have kids, so maybe Lissa caught up with me and, in some ways, passed me.



I drive up to a large, elegant home on a lake in an exclusive neighborhood. Lissa opens the door, throws her arms around me, and draws me into her home. She's crying, so happy to see me. I hug her tightly. We're the same height now. Her home is beautiful. She's quite artistic and has a wonderful sense of color and style. We visit as though we saw each other just yesterday and we talk for hours.

She bakes chicken and vegetables for dinner, and her husband, Ray, joins us. I like him. He's attentive, friendly, and smart. At dinner, the three of us share our most embarrassing experiences and I laugh so hard that my nose starts to run; an allergy attack.

Ray leaves after dinner. Lissa and I continue to visit and make up for all the years we missed. I remind her of playing in the vacant lot.

"I ate Morning Glories because you did," she stated.

"Those weren't Morning Glories," I say, horrified. "Morning Glories are poisonous. They were Chicory. And we didn't eat them. We just licked the pollen out of the middle."

"But they might have been poisonous," she says uneasily.

"But they weren't. Chicory is safe to eat. They use it in coffee in New Orleans to bring people good luck and remove curses. I think my family was cursed; they were weird. Dad and I went to the asylum in Pontiac to pick up a body; it was very traumatic."

"I know. I was with you."

Her words jolt me. I frown, "No, I was alone."

“There was a man hitting his forehead on the bars of a window on the top floor.”

She saw him, too. A cold, sinking feeling tells me it’s true. She was with me. How could I not remember something so important?

She says, “I was afraid of going crazy after that. That was one of the things that contributed to my anxiety.”

The trip with my dad in the hearse was part of the reason she developed an anxiety disorder and suffered panic attacks that plagued her much of her life and ended her modeling career. My head feels cottony inside. The world is far away. I was supposed to protect her. It was my responsibility.

“We might have gone there more than once,” she adds.

I shake my head. I only remember once. Was I repressing the other times? Something inside me feels frantic like a bird trying to escape, flapping its wings against the bars of a cage.

“Those rides to Pontiac State Hospital were quite unsettling for me as a youngster,” she says, and then, “I’m sure your dad didn’t realize how they would affect us.”

Yes, how could he have known?

You were entrusted to me at an early age; I should have protected you, but how? I thought I was alone in the hearse, when in fact, you were with me; I was with my best friend.



Lissa and I say good night. I make myself comfortable in her cozy guestroom. I spared her the grisly details—which I learned years later—about Pontiac State Hospital. What started out in 1878, as a humanitarian project to house the homeless and mentally ill, devolved into a place where a doctor, in 1913, conducted inhumane experiments on “mentally defective” patients. He was a dermatologist and “syphilologist,” not a surgeon. He used a dental drill on the skulls of living patients to extract syphilitic brain tissue

to study. With 3,100 patients, they had an abundance of research subjects to use for whatever.

In the 1920s, “eugenics” was an accepted practice. Eugenics was the science of “improving” the human race by controlling reproduction in order to increase desirable, heritable characteristics. It was common for surgeons to sterilize people whom they deemed to be “feeble-minded imbeciles.”

Michigan was one of the states that aggressively sterilized people considered “inferior” due to low intelligence, anti-social behavior, and “insanity.”

That place was more than spooky. I must have sensed the agony that emanated from it. And the man hitting his forehead on the bars, what had he seen, what had he endured?

I shiver off the terrifying thoughts. The property was sold to developers eventually, the buildings demolished in stages and all gone by the year 2000. If only it were that easy to dismantle a nightmare.

The grounds returned to open fields for a while, like my vacant lot only much larger, where children—brothers, sisters, and neighbors—must have played until developers built houses.

I played strategically when I was young, and still do. I was smart and fast. I had to win, and I had to be right. Dad told me that stupid people die and sometimes children end up in insane asylums.

I close my eyes. Breathe in deeply and out slowly. Travel back in time to revisit a memory.

It's quiet, early evening. Mothers cook dinners, fathers come home from work, and the traffic thins out along Greenfield Road. I'm young again, and children move—shadows and silhouettes—playing in the vacant lot where I resisted the rules of the game or changed games entirely on a whim to control the play.

The fragrant breeze is gentle, whispery, and easy with us. Chicory grows along the fence. There's a bright new moon in the sky and fireflies in the bushes.

I change the memory a little. I tell Bill and Sandy, standing on each side of me in line, "Just hold hands this time, not wrists," and they protest, "But you told us that holding wrists makes the line stronger!"

"Just the same, let's hold hands," and then I call out, "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Lissa over."

She comes running toward me in the twilight, her blonde hair unfurling behind her, my best friend whom I tried to protect but couldn't save from a ride in a hearse to an insane asylum. Oh, my first and forever friend, I'm sorry.

Her feet gain traction in the grass, she barrels toward our line, throws her full weight against our clasped hands, and I loosen my grip so she can break my hold.

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End of Excerpt