

## Mr. Voice

FROM *Tim House*

MOTHER WAS A STUNNER.

She was so beautiful, men would stop midstep on the street to watch her walk by. When I was little, I'd see them out of the corner of my eye and turn, my hand still in hers. Sometimes I'd wonder if the ogling man was my father. But I don't think the men ever saw me. And my mother didn't notice them, or pretended not to notice, or had stopped noticing. She'd simply pull my hand toward the Crescent, or the Bon Marché, or the fountain at Newberry's, wherever we were going then. "Come on, Tanya, no dawdling."

This could have been my mother's motto in 1974: no dawdling. I was nine then, and Mother thirty-one. She had four or five boyfriends at any given time—she eliminated them like murder suspects. We lived in a small apartment above a jewelry store where Mother worked as a "greeter." I think the owner's theory was that men wouldn't dicker over carats with my tall, striking, miniskirted mother looking over their shoulders. She seemed to have a date whenever she wanted one, at least three or four a week. I knew them by profession: "I'm seeing the pilot tonight," she would say amid a cloud of hair spray, or, with a dismissive roll of her eyes, "The lawyer's taking me to Sea Galley." Mother left me alone in the apartment when she went on these dates and I fed myself and put myself to bed. But she was always there when I woke in the morning, sometimes hurrying the pilot or the lawyer out the door. After one of the men spent the night, I'd wonder if he might stick around for a while, but the next night he was gone and in his place came a fireman or an accountant.

Then, one day, Mother stopped dating entirely. She announced that she was marrying one of the men—a guy she'd been out with only three times by my count—"Mr. Voice." He was a short, intense man with buggy eyes and graying hair that he wore long and mod, framed by two bushy gray sideburns and a thinning swoop across his big forehead.

"You're marrying *him*?" I was confused. Mother always said that one day my father would return, that what they had was "different than other people," that these other boyfriends were just "placeholders" until he came back. I didn't remember my father, and she didn't talk about him much—where he lived or who he was—but she'd get this faraway look and say things about him like "We'll always be together" and "He'll come back." Until then, she was just biding her time—or so I thought—until Mr. Voice came along.

"What about my father?" I asked. We were packing up the apartment into grocery-store boxes.

"Your father?" She smiled gently. "Your father's got nothing to do with it. This is about making a house, and a family for us." Wait. She was doing this for me? I didn't want her to make a family for us; I wanted to wait for my father.

She set down the dishes she was packing and pushed the hair out of my eyes, bent down close. "Listen to me, Tanya. You're a very pretty girl. You're going to be a beautiful woman. This is something you won't understand for a while, but your looks are like a bank account. You can save up your whole life for something, but at some point, you'll have to spend the money. Do you understand?"

It was the only time I ever heard Mother talk about her looks this way. Something about it made me sick. I said I understood. But I didn't.

Or maybe I did.

Mr. Voice was fifty then, almost twenty years older than my mother. Although his name was Claude Almond, everyone knew him—and I mean, *everyone knew him*—as Mr. Voice. This was the name on his business cards, the name in the phone book, the name on the big sign outside the studio he owned, the name people greeted him with on the street, mimicking his basso profundo: *Hey, Mr. Voice*. By the summer of '74, when my mother married him, Claude was on every radio station on the dial, on TV com-

mercials, at civic events, hosting variety shows. Mr. Voice narrated our daily life in Spokane, Washington.

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That was Mr. Voice.

I remember their wedding more clearly than I remember either of my own: Mother wore a light-purple minidress, and she put me in a dress that matched it—in hindsight, perhaps not something a nine-year-old should wear. "I think people can see my underwear," I said.

"At least you're wearing some," she said, tugging at her own skirt. Our long brown hair was fixed the same too, smooth as liquid behind headbands high on our heads, bangs shiny and combed straight. I got to wear lipstick for the first time: a shiny lacquered coat of pink that made my lips look like two candles. I was Mother's only bridesmaid. Claude had four children from his first marriage, but only his youngest son, Brian, who was seventeen, stood with him, in a brown tux that matched his father's. He had these sleepy brown eyes behind big black-framed glasses and a shock of bushy hair that looked like a wave about to crash.

They were married at the end of the 1974 world's fair in Spokane—such was Claude's celebrity that the TV stations covered it and there was a picture in *The Spokesman-Review*: "Local Radio Host Married at Expo." The wedding was in a little outdoor theater-in-the-round on Canada Island, and a judge friend of Claude's performed the ceremony.

While we waited for the bride to emerge, Claude stood smoking a pipe in his brown tux and ruffled white shirt. He was talking to a couple of businessmen in gray suits when he saw me, walked over, and looked down at me with those buggy eyes of his—"Listen, Tanya, I know this came fast for you. I just want you to know, I'm not trying to replace anyone. You don't have to call me Dad. You can call me Claude if you want. Or Mr. Voice."

This was the first real conversation we'd ever had and it was

confusing—that omnipresent radio voice telling me I didn't have to call him Dad. Then Claude kissed the top of my head and returned to the men in suits.

Behind me, someone spoke, mimicking Claude's thundering rumble. "Listen, whatever your name is." I turned. It was Claude's son, Brian, doing what must have been a practiced impersonation of his father. "You can call me Dipshit if you want. Or Dickhead Douchebag." Then he rolled his eyes.

Mom and Claude had written their own vows, New Age gibberish about being "mate and muse" to each other and "sharing soul and sinew," not until death do them part, but "as long as we grow and glow."

The judge pronounced them man and wife; they shared an uncomfortably long kiss and then walked down the aisle, to applause. I tugged at my skirt and followed with my new stepbrother, who gracefully offered his arm. I took it. Brian pursed his lips and covered his mouth. "Don't mind me," he said. "I always puke at weddings."

Claude had a big, sprawling new rancher on the back end of Spokane's old-money South Hill, with an open floor plan and a built-in hi-fi system tied to intercoms in every room. He loved that intercom system. You could hear every word spoken in that thin-walled house, but Claude still insisted on using the intercoms. I'd be reading, or playing dolls, and there would be a hiss of static, and then: "Tanya, have you finished your language arts? . . . Tanya, *Wild Kingdom* is on . . . Tanya, dinner's ready, London broil." We ate in a mauve kitchen overlooking a shag-carpeted sunken living room. On the other end was a hallway with three bedrooms lining it: Mom and Claude's, mine, and, every other weekend, Brian's.

In the A-frame center of the house, the walls didn't go all the way to the ceiling—contributing to the open feel of the house, and to some of the worst memories of my childhood. Such was the combination of Claude's vocal power and 1970s home construction that I could hear every sordid thing that happened in the master bedroom the first year of their marriage. Claude's voice must have been key to their foreplay, because he narrated their sex life the way he did weekend stock-car races.

"Dance those ripe tomatoes over here . . . Ooh, let's get it on, baby . . . Mm, yeah, Mr. Voice digs his little hippie girl . . ."

Claude apparently liked to role-play too, because sometimes I'd hear bits and pieces of various bedroom dramas. Like pirate-and-wench: "Prepare to be boarded, m'lady." Or stern British headmaster: "Someone has *bean* a bloody bad girl." He'd play Tom Jones or Robert Goulet records—miming them, I think—and then pretend Mother was a groupie: "Hello, pretty lady. How'd you like the concert tonight?"

I never heard my mother's voice during these sex games, and based on how quickly Claude emerged from their bedroom in his too-short silk robe afterward, the sex itself was less involved than Claude's narration leading up to it. Sometimes I hid under a pillow to block the actual words, but there was no hiding from the rumble of his voice in that house.

Mr. Voice was everywhere then; in my tenth year I couldn't escape him telling me there was "strawberry shortcake for whoever cleans their plate," or that I should "git on down to Appliance Round Up for the rodeo of savings," or that my mother "put the head in 'head cheerleader.'"

One night they were playing some kind of Egyptian pharaoh game—"Take it all off, slave girl"—when my door flew open. This was Claude's custodial weekend and in the doorway was my stepbrother Brian, looking crazed.

Without a word, he took me by the hand, pulled me into his bedroom, and sat me on the floor in front of his stereo. "Listen," he said, "any time I'm not here and that shit starts up, just come in my room, OK?" Then he put his black stereo headphones on my ears and cranked the music: "Wooden Ships" by Crosby, Stills & Nash.

I closed my eyes and played with the springy cord while I listened. Halfway through the song, two things happened: "Wooden Ships" became, in my mind, the story of Brian and me—*Go, take your sister then, by the hand*—and I fell in love with my stepbrother.

I opened my eyes. Brian was sitting on his bed, cross-legged, filling some kind of little pipe with brownish-green mulch that I intuited must be marijuana. I took the headphones off. Immediately, I could hear Claude's voice, more distant than it had been in my room, but still sonorous and rich. "Pluck a grape from my mouth, slave girl!"

"Honestly, it's not the sex," Brian said, still working on his pipe. "It's the acting that offends me."

Then he looked up at me and cocked his head, smiled a bit. "You really *do* look like her," he said.

Back then, I would sometimes stare at my face in the mirror and think of Mother—did I really look like her? Would my father recognize me if he saw me? Would I have fifty boyfriends and then cash out my looks like a bank account? What made someone beautiful, anyway? Mother and I had two eyes, eyebrows, a nose, a mouth—just like anyone. Beautiful? I felt chubby and had a spray of freckles across my nose. Would I get tall like her? Would the spots on my face go away? Would her face become mine? And what did it even mean, *beautiful*?

But that day, I was never so happy to be told that I looked like her. I put the headphones back on, smiled, and closed my eyes to listen to the song—*And it's a fair wind blowin' warm*—I smelled pot smoke for the first time that afternoon, as Claude finished with his slave girl.

Not long after it started, no more than a year, the sex part seemed to end for Mother and Claude, or at least the overacting before the sex ended. I wondered if my mother had just had enough. Or maybe Brian had said something to them about the thin walls.

Having been married twice myself in the forty years since that time, I now know that a marriage can just settle into a domestic swamp too, and maybe that's what happened with Mother and Mr. Voice. Still, I can't recall a happier, more peaceful time than the second year of my mother's marriage to Claude. Unlike our old routine in the apartment downtown, she was around every day when I got home from school and every night when I went to bed. She quit her jewelry store job and embraced the domestic life, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry; she even dressed like a mother, her skirts moving down her thighs almost to her knees. One day I got dressed for school and asked what had happened to the jumper I was wearing. It was strangely stiff. "Oh, I ironed it," Mother said.

Ironing. Who knew?

Claude seemed happy too, or at least busy. He had just started a brand-new business—"Mr. Voice is going national!"—in which he read and recorded books: Bible stories and thrillers, mostly for long-haul truck drivers. "Every new semi truck has a cassette tape player," he said. "And they all want stories."

Claude worked with a partner named Lowell, a lawyer whose job it was to secure the rights to the books. I loved Claude's new job because it meant I no longer heard him on the radio or TV all the time. He was not Mr. Voice anymore, but my stepfather, helping with my homework and pulling the last of my loose teeth. I don't know if it was the new business, but Claude seemed to age ten years in the year he developed Mr. Voice's Stories on Cassette—his swoop of hair disappeared completely; what was left was long and gray on the sides and in back. With the round glasses he'd begun wearing, Claude looked like a sick Benjamin Franklin. He and my mother began to look more like father and daughter than husband and wife.

That year, Brian spent more time at the house too, which I liked a great deal. He'd started out being pretty cool to Mother, but she was nothing if not persistent and nothing if not charming and she instituted a campaign to get him to like her, complimenting his clothes and his hair and making his favorite food, tacos, at least once a week. She called him "Bri-guy," and ruffled his hair at the dinner table. Brian played guitar in a little two-man band with a high school buddy, a drummer named Clay, and Mother encouraged them to set up a practice space in the garage. Clay was tall and dark-haired, with an intense stare, and something about the attention that Mother showed him made me a little uncomfortable. "Well, if it isn't Clay," she'd gush, or "You get handsomer every time I see you, Clay."

That spring Mother set up guitar lessons for Brian with a guy she knew named Allen, who was the guitarist in a big local band called Treason. I remembered Allen as one of the men she'd dated during her "No dawdling" phase—one of the murder suspects, as I used to think of them—a greasy guy with long blond hair who would come pick up Mother on a motorcycle and take her to some downtown club called Washboard Willie's.

But he must've been a great guitar teacher because Brian really improved. I loved it when Brian got more serious about the guitar. I'd sit on the floor of his bedroom while he played the beginning of "Stairway to Heaven" or the intro to "Layla." Brian's voice was, ironically, thin and reedy, but I still held my breath when he sang, and sometimes he'd sneak my name in there, in the chorus to the Allman Brothers' "Melissa." *But back home he'll always run / To sweet Tanya . . .*

One day, I was in my room doing homework when I heard Mother and Brian come in the door from guitar lessons. I hopped off my bed and ran toward the hall just as the door slammed. Brian stomped past me and threw his guitar in his bedroom closet. Mother went into the kitchen and lit a cigarette. I lingered outside Brian's door, waiting to hear him play whatever song he'd worked on that day with Allen but he just sat on his bed and opened a book. He said he was done with the guitar.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because guitar is for assholes," he said, looking up from his book and glancing past me, toward the kitchen.

"What about Clay?" I asked. "What about the band?"

"There is no band!" he snapped. I backed out of his room.

That night at dinner Brian wouldn't acknowledge Mother and she seemed nervous around him. They both stared at their plates while Claude rambled on about the story he'd taped that day—some Western novel about a sheriff who shoots an outlaw and ends up caring for the dead man's horse. Claude was clueless about whatever was going on in the house that night. Meanwhile, I was furious with Mother. Something had clearly happened, and I sensed it had something to do with her. If she drove Brian away, I would never forgive her.

The next afternoon, while I was at school, Mother searched Brian's room, found his marijuana pipe, and confronted Claude with it when he got home from work. From my room, I could hear them arguing. "I won't have this in my house," she said. "What if he's smoking it around Tanya?"

"I'll talk to him," Claude said. "It's a confusing time for young people."

"Confusing?" Mother scoffed. "Your son is a druggie and all you can say is that it's confusing? I don't want him around Tanya. That's final."

"Linda, be reasonable."

They went back and forth like this. I walked down to Brian's room, ran my hand over his guitar, put on "Wooden Ships," and settled under his headphones.

Sometimes your life changes in big, dramatic ways, as though you've been cast in a play you don't remember auditioning for. Moments have the power of important scenes: being paraded in

a tiny purple dress at a wedding, someone putting headphones on you and playing a rock song. But other scenes seem to occur offstage; it's as if you just awake one morning and understand that a certain thing is now something else.

That was how it happened, in the summer of 1976, just before my twelfth birthday, when Mother ran off with Brian's guitar teacher, Allen. I don't recall anyone telling me that it happened, or any great argument or fight between her and Claude. I just recall suddenly understanding why Brian had quit the guitar and knowing that Treason was going on the road to open for a larger band and knowing that Mother was going with the band.

I was furious with her, much angrier—it seems to me now—than Claude was. But there's a foginess I feel from that period too, a disorientation that makes it hard to remember exactly how things played out. Maybe it was the shock of what ended up happening, or maybe it's just the fog of adolescence. Since that time, I have seen this period in my own daughters—that intense dawning of self-awareness that causes teenagers to tune out the rest of the world. A child's powers of observation must be strongest, I think, between eight and eleven; by thirteen we can't quite see past ourselves.

Whatever the cause, I just remember smoothly going from living with my mother and Claude to living alone with Claude. We developed a quiet, easy relationship. We ate dinner and watched TV together. On Tuesday nights, after I finished my homework, Claude would make popcorn and we'd watch *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*. When Marshall Harper asked me to "go with him" at school, Claude explained what that meant and gave me the words to tell him no, thank you. When my period arrived, Claude took me to the store for tampons and explained the basics of female reproduction and human sexuality to me, something Mother had failed to do. Thankfully, in his sex talk, he didn't say anything about pirates or slaves or Robert Goulet.

Brian came over a lot that year. He was taking classes at Spokane Falls Community College, and we all had dinner together at least twice a week. I was in middle school and could feel myself coming into my looks. My legs and breasts seemed to grow independently of the rest of me, my shirts becoming too tight, cuffs of my pants rising off the floor. My breasts, especially, were a great mystery and

concern to me. I would lock my bedroom door and stand naked in front of the mirror, wondering: Were they too high? Weren't they supposed to hang more? Were the nipples supposed to point out like that? Oh my God, my breasts were deformed, my nipples horribly cockeyed! It was around that time that I also became aware of boys and men watching me more attentively. I felt their heavy gazes first with surprise and with discomfort and then with a kind of familiarity. Right. This was how it felt to be her, to always be on a kind of stage, the eyes in the room drawn your way. I recalled her small mannerisms, the way she managed all that attention, the way she'd feign indifference . . . or shoot a glance at someone . . . this tilt of the head . . . that toss of the hair. In a way, it was all so natural, so easy.

While boys began to notice me, the one boy I most wanted to notice, Brian, seemed to see me only as a little kid. I thought of him as I dressed in the morning—would Brian like this skirt, this blouse, these tight jeans? I started wearing makeup to look older. Tall, intense Clay had started hanging around again too, and if Brian didn't notice me, Clay certainly did. "Man, someone's growing up," he'd say, and Brian would look at me as if noticing for the first time. Then he'd grunt with some unknown meaning: *Yeah, I guess so. Or Yuck.*

And that's how I started flirting with Clay, I guess. It was another thing I'd seen mother do—work toward the man she wanted through his friend. I'd hear them setting up Clay's drum kit in the garage and I'd put on a pair of short shorts and go out to the garage, get on my bicycle, and pedal slowly away. "Bye, Brian. Bye, Clay."

Clay would watch me ride away, smiling with just half of his mouth, while Brian tuned his guitar. I could sense the eyes moving, Clay's to me, Brian's to Clay, then Brian's to me. I can't say I was intentional in this; it was not a plan, as such. But I'm sure some part of me knew instinctually, intuitively, that the way to Brian was through jealousy, through his best friend. I also knew it was weird to be in love with your own stepbrother, and I held the secret inside, ashamed and worried that it meant something was wrong with me.

I was usually home alone for a couple of hours after school, and I'd sometimes go into Brian's room and look through his clothes

or finger through his albums, imagining him in there. Then, one day I heard the doorbell. I ran to the front door, peered through the window, and saw Clay.

"Hey, Tanya," he said when I opened the door, his eyes traveling up and down me, like he was watching someone yo-yo.

"Brian's not here," I said. "He's at his mom's." I tried to be cooler than usual, since Brian wasn't around to make jealous. But later I would wonder: Did I tilt my head too much, give the slightest shift to my hip? Was it my fault?

"Oh," Clay said. Then, "Shit." He glanced back at his blue Nova, skulking in our driveway. "So you're here alone?"

I stared at my shoes. "Um, yeah . . . But Claude will be home from work pretty soon."

He asked if he could use our phone and when I said yes, he followed me into the house, a bit too close, it seemed, and when we got to the kitchen, I took the phone off the wall, turned, and handed it to him. But he hung the phone up. "I forgot the number." Then he moved closer to me, backing me up until I was against the wall.

"Clay . . ." I put my hand on his chest, the way I remembered Mother doing—a way of touching someone that also kept a bit of distance, I thought.

But he just kept coming closer, pressing me against the wall. He kissed me, not the way boys my age had kissed me, but hungrily, with his tongue, as if he was trying to crawl inside me. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine I was kissing Brian, but it wasn't right. I didn't imagine Brian kissing like this. Clay's hands moved over me.

And I thought: Does he know I'm only thirteen? What boy would want to do *this* with someone who is only thirteen? I pushed a little harder on his chest. "Clay," I said, "I don't . . ."

But he just kissed me harder, mashed my lips against my teeth. He sucked at my neck and said into it, "Don't tell me you don't want it. The way you look?"

The structure of the sentence threw me for a second. *Don't tell? Want what? Look how? What?*

Later, of course, you torture yourself, asking, Was I allowing this? Did I do something? It was all so fast. His hands were insistent, quick, aggressive. It was like fighting a war on two fronts. I would stop his right hand from mashing my left breast and his left hand would be moving up my right inner thigh, the whole time his

tongue was stuck deep in my mouth. *Don't tell . . . don't want . . . way you look.* He pulled me to the kitchen floor, his weight on top of me. I tried to stop long enough to think, but there seemed to be no time for thoughts at all, just those hands, the battle of those hands: I stopped the right and the left undid my bra; I stopped the left and the right jammed itself down the front of my jeans. I gripped his right forearm but his fingers moved over my bare pelvis. I gasped. No one had ever touched me there. It was like being jolted with clammy electricity, his strong hand trying to move up and inside me. Thankfully my jeans were very tight, and I squeezed my legs together and that's when a clear thought formed, *I do NOT want this*, but the distance between my mind and my mouth suddenly seemed daunting and his tongue was keeping me from talking and I felt a panic go through me, that he would choke me with that thick tongue, and that's exactly when I heard the voice of God descend from heaven and rain down like fire upon the carpeted floor of that 1970s mauve kitchen.

"You little goddamn shithead creep!" In my memory, the dishes rattled and the windows shook and birds scattered at the very moment Claude came home from work, opened the door from the garage to the kitchen, and saw Clay wrestling with his stepdaughter on the floor. Clay recoiled from the thundering boom of Mr. Voice, his wrist catching on my zipper as he yanked his hand out of my pants: "Get your hands off of her! She's thirteen, for God's sake!"

There was much scrambling, one swift kick (Claude's) and a great deal of apologizing (Clay's) and a bit of crying (mine) and then Claude grabbed Clay by the neck and pushed him out the door. "Don't you ever come to this house again!"

I went to my room and curled up on the bed as the Nova rumbled to life and backed out of our driveway.

I was in there for a long moment alone; I think Claude had a stiff drink to fortify himself—I could smell it on him when he appeared in my doorway. "Are you OK?"

I nodded.

"Look, I didn't . . . I don't know if . . ." He looked pained. "I have to ask . . . is it something . . . you wanted to happen?"

"I don't know." I started crying. "I don't think so."

He nodded. "You do know . . . you don't ever have to do what you don't want to do. With a boy. They can be . . . insistent. You



just keep saying 'No,' pushing him away. He doesn't have the right to—"

But before he could finish, I started crying again. "It was confusing. He said . . . I wanted it. The way I looked." I wept into my hands.

Claude came in and sat on the bed.

"He's wrong. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded, but I couldn't stop crying.

"Do you want to know what you look like? To me?" Claude lifted my chin. He ran his index finger around the length of my head. "You look like Tanya. This is *Tanya's* face. Understand? It doesn't belong to some boy. And listen to me: it's not *her* face either."

We both knew who he meant by *her*.

"This is Tanya's face."

I stared up into his bulging eyes, veins running up his balding forehead, gray hair wiring off in all directions. "Claude?"

"Yes?"

"Do we have to tell Brian?" I asked quietly.

"Brian? What's—" He cocked his head, looked at me, and, not for the first time, I could see that Mr. Voice knew a lot more than he ever let on. "Oh," he said. "Oh. Brian."

"I don't want him to think I did something wrong."

He smiled, and if he thought I was a creep for having a crush on my stepbrother, Claude certainly didn't show it. "You didn't do anything wrong. And don't worry about Brian."

Of course, it wasn't long after that day that I came to realize something else, again without much fanfare: Brian was gay. Claude must've already known. He was much more open-minded than many of the men of his age: he accepted this fact as easily as he had once accepted that Brian would like girls. And so, when Brian started bringing boyfriends around the house, Claude welcomed them without so much as a hitch in that deep voice. "More London broil, Kevin?"

We talked about this quality the other day, Brian and I, at Claude's funeral, how Mr. Voice was constantly surprising you, how his goofy looks and odd manner could cause you to miss what a good man he was. There was an obituary in the newspaper about his death, not as big as the story of his wedding, but still nice, talking about the period when he was known as the voice of Spokane. Claude's books-on-tape business turned out to be a big fail-

ure, mostly because his lawyer partner hadn't actually secured the rights to the books that he read. Claude settled the lawsuits and spent the next twenty-five years doing voice work, but his heyday was clearly behind him. He got remarried late in life, long after I was gone (college, Denver, two marriages, a career) to a nice woman named Karen, who always talked in a whisper, but who sobbed loudly throughout the funeral.

There was a reception after the service for Claude, and I sat with Brian and his husband, a tall, quiet man named Joey, and their two adopted kids. My second husband, Everett, couldn't make it to the funeral and my older daughter, Brittany, was away at college so I brought Meaghan, who was seventeen, and who did me the favor of taking out her various facial piercings and wearing a dress that covered most of her tattoos.

"What a beautiful girl you are," Joey said to Meaghan. "Like your mother."

I looked at Brian and we smiled at each other. I was filled with nostalgia and warmth for Brian, my first love. I thought too of how many times I'd heard that myself growing up—*you look like your mother*—and how it suddenly stopped.

It's another of those things that I barely recall. I was fourteen and it was not long after the incident with Clay. I remember Claude picking me up from school and taking me home in his Lincoln Continental, but a teacher or my principal must've already broken the news to me because I seemed to know when I got in the car; all I remember is him telling me *how* it happened. She'd been gone two years by then. We'd talked on the phone a few times, and there was some discussion of my going to Los Angeles for the summers, but Treason was doing well in Southern California and it was clear that Mother wasn't coming back to Spokane anytime soon, and the road was no place for a girl.

Allen wasn't driving. Claude thought maybe it was the drummer who fell asleep at the wheel. Whoever was at fault, the Treason tour van crossed the center line and hit another car on the highway outside some town called Victorville. I used to say the town's name in my head, like an incantation: Victorville. Three people died, the driver of the other car, the bass player, and my mother. "She was killed instantly," Claude said, which, I could tell by the way he said it, was supposed to be good news.

She was cremated. We had a small service in Spokane. Moth-

er's two cruel sisters came up from Oregon. I'd met them only a few times; they hadn't bothered to come for the wedding. They clucked and disapproved and said, "Linda never had her shit together." They stared at me and said, "It's crazy how much you look like her," and "You're the spittin' image," as if this meant I was destined for trouble too. They offered to let me come live with them. I asked Claude if I had to.

"Of course not," he said. "Tell them you have a home."

There's not much else, at least not to Mother's story. My own story isn't hers, just like my daughters' stories aren't mine, just like—as Claude said all those years ago—my face isn't hers, and their faces aren't mine. You make a life for yourself and mine has been a good one—I became a special-ed teacher, then assistant principal, and now am principal of a middle school. I had one good husband, one not so good, lots of friends, good health—what can you say about a decent life? Mother's loss affected me less and less as the years went on and I probably thought of her most when my own daughters got older and came into the family looks—that same thick brown hair, same sharp cheeks, same arched brows, same stares from men. I vowed never to say anything like what Mother had said to me, about their looks being a bank account, especially not to Meaghan, who has the other thing Mother had, a danger, a smokiness, a quality that causes men to stop in their tracks.

When Meaghan got the tattoos and piercings, I was angry at first—I had to be, it's a mother's job—but I can't say that I blamed her. I always wanted my girls to be their own people, not to think their fate was tied to bone structure, or to looking like their mother, or to waiting for some man. Nobody gets to tell you what you look like, or who you are.

But back then, back when I was fourteen, I still wasn't sure. I saw her face in my sleep at night. And then, a few weeks after she died, Allen brought Mother's things over to Claude's house—some clothes, jewelry, a purse, some pictures, a makeup bag. It wasn't much. Allen was wearing a cast with pins through his arm and shoulder, jeans, and a denim vest. One of his eyes was messed up from the wreck, all red and bleary. He kept pushing his shaggy, dirty blond hair out of his eyes and staring at me. "Goddamn, you look like her," he said. "Freaks me out how much. There's maybe a little bit a me in there, but not as much as she always said."

And that was it. Somehow, it didn't really matter, finding out. Two years earlier, it would have changed my life. But on that day, I suppose the only thing I felt was some small measure of contentment for her: that he had, indeed, come back for her, just like she always said he would. They were *different* after all, destined to be together. I thanked Allen for bringing her things, watched him ride away on his motorcycle, and went inside to have dinner with my father.