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Voices

by Lehua Parker

“Kari, if you miss the damn school bus again you’re walking.”

“I won’t, Mom,” I call through the bathroom door.

“Like I haven’t heard that before.”

In the mirror, I hold a razor blade next to the new black hole the size of a freckle on my cheek. Its mosquito-pitched whine is the sound of a hurricane through a crack in a door. My hand shakes. If I don’t get this right, missing the school bus is the least of my problems. I close my eyes.

Troops, I call to the people in my head. Report.

Just do it, Big Frank says. Cut quick like we did on our thigh, a single long stroke to let the pressure out.

But it’s on our face, Bunny sighs from her burrow. And the others didn’t whistle.

Exactly, Big Frank says. We need to nip this crazy in the bud.

I open my eyes and tilt my chin. As I move, the hole shimmers, twinkling like glitter or diamonds. It’s the smallest of the four, smaller than the pea-sized hole on my thigh, the pinkie

nail hole on my toe, or the hole hidden in ink on my arm. I put the razor down and touch it. Air flows out colder than star-breath. I gasp and stick my finger in my mouth, sucking hard. Pulling it out, I see subzero blisters where my fingerprints should be. The holes in my body oozed cold before, but this ferocity is new.

I peer into the mental space where Granny Roz lives. Granny? What should I do?

Plug it, Granny Roz says.

With what? Big Frank sneers.

Bath tissue. Bum-fodder. The old t.p., Granny Roz says, scratching her cornrows. She purses her lips and spits tobacco juice into an empty Dr. Pepper can. *Cover it up with face-spackle. Ain't no one gonna see.* She shifts her tobacco wad to the other side. *Nobody ever do.*

Plugging didn't work yesterday, Bunny says.

This hole ain't but a baby, Granny Roz replies.

Cut it. Get rid of the cancer, Big Frank says.

Spoken like a true military man, snorts Granny Roz. Why fix what you can beat into submission?

It's a hole in our face, Bunny says. It's making noise. It needs to stop.

The voices in my head advise, but the final decision is mine. I tug some tissue from the roll and lean so close to the mirror that my breath fogs it and I have to pull back a little to focus. I press a tiny piece of toilet paper against the shrillness. It doesn't stick.

Wet it, Granny Roz says.

I take a drop of water from the tap and roll a needle-sized plug. I twist and jam it into the hole. Like a teakettle lifted off the heat, the whistling stops. In the silence, time speeds up.

“Kari!” Mom calls. “I’m not driving you if you’re too stupid to catch the bus.”

I dab a bit of concealer over the lump and lean back from the mirror. The area looks red and swollen, a blemish about to erupt.

Good enough, Granny Roz says. Don't forget our backpack. Put it next to you on the bus so none of Them can sit there.

Big Frank growls, but doesn't say anything, just grabs his binoculars and heads to his lookout post. Bunny runs down her burrow to make sure all the dolls are tucked into bed. Bunny hates school.

Switch it on, Granny Roz says. Let me see it.

Mentally, I reach up to my master control panel and flip the switch that reveals a soldier's thousand yard stare. Big Frank taught me that last year when I first went into battle with Them.

Now you're ready. Granny Roz settles into her rocking chair, picks up a bowl of peas, and starts shelling. We're here if'n you need us.

As I walk out the bathroom door, I tuck a tube of concealer into my pocket.

Might need a touch up later.

Not that anyone will notice.

I get to the end of the driveway in time to watch the bus pull away from the corner.

Through a window, Becca Jameson points at me and laughs. Charlotte Hanamoto, that cow, joins in. Without thought, my arm raises and my finger flips them off. They laugh harder as the bus rolls out of sight. Big Frank, I say.

What, he says. They deserve it.

I look toward Mom's car.

Big Frank shudders. *Let's avoid that crapfest.*

How?

Granny Roz shakes her head. *You got two feet, Chile. It's not but a twenty minute walk.*

I'll be late.

Better late than getting into Mom's car, says Big Frank.

Bunny? I think.

Walk, she says, *you'll still make the second bell.* She curls her ears over her face and closes her eyes. In the background the shadow troops stand silent.

Walking gives me time to think.

The first black spot—holes I call them—appeared a week ago on my littlest toe. Covering my entire nail, it looked like a Goth pedicure gone wrong or the aftermath of a hammer's kiss. The rest of my toe was warm, but the arctic draught of air coming from the place where my nail had been froze my sock to my shoe. Walking across polished cement floor of the library, I'd slipped and barely caught myself before tumbling into a spinning rack of paperbacks. Ignoring the glare from the librarian, I eased into a study carrel and pried icy laces loose.

WTF?

There was something familiar about the hole and the thin thread of bitter air leaking from it.

The swan, Granny Roz said.

That's it! It reminded me of the inner tube with the swan's head that I'd gotten for my sixth birthday. Something about its beak or eye. Maybe it was the way the swan was supposed to keep me safe that day at the Great Salt Lake, but slowly leaked until I was floundering, unable to keep my head above the wakes and splashes of the other kids.

That day the miracle of Granny Roz's voice saved me. I remember floating in the too thick water, salt sticking in my hair, not paying attention as the swan carried me away from shore

and toward a diving platform. Bobbing in the lake, I watched bigger kids cannonballing and lying in the sun, white spots of salt pooling in the hollows of backs and knees. “Watch this!” a boy’s voice called. I didn’t see the giant tsunami of a splash that knocked me sideways, only heard the girl next to me snap, “Carl! Knock it off or I’m telling!” as she brushed water off her face.

Slip. Struggle. Slip. I remember the sound of wet plastic rubbing against skin. Slip. Splash. I felt a hand grab my ankle as I slowly sank like a pocket full of rocks. Instead of buoying me up, water seven times saltier than the sea pulled me down, filling eyes and ears, gurgling in the back of my throat, burning like hellfire. My toes touched mud, feet burying themselves to the ankles in slickness. Raising my arms to the surface, I watched the deflated swan lift past arms, wrists, fingertips—buoyant only enough to save itself. Bubbles rose, trailing fish kisses against skin as the darkness closed in.

Jump, commanded a new and wonderful voice in my head.

I jumped. Only my fingertips broke the surface.

I said, jump, Chile! Jump like a frog in bucket of cream. Jump with all the might God give you!

When my feet touched mud again, I pushed harder and swung my arms, this time rising high enough to catch a quick mouthful of air before sinking back into the lake.

Good, said the voice. *Now not just up—you gotta jump toward something. Jump toward salvation, Chile. Jump like you’re playing hopscotch.*

What’s hopscotch? I thought.

Eyes screwed tight against the salt burn, I saw a young girl in cornrows and a hand-me-down dress, the blue faded by harsh lye soap rubbed across scrubbing boards and the heat of the

sun. The girl tossed a pebble at a line of squares scratched in the dirt. Glancing over her shoulder, she giggled, then jumped one, two, three.

Like that, said the voice.

Is that you?

A deep rumbling like the sound of gravel in a wheel well rolled through my head. *No, Chile. That's not me. At least not how I am now.* Hopscotch girl smiled, then dissolved into a sturdy middle-aged black woman in a white kitchen apron standing on a sharecropper's porch.

Who are you?

Call me Granny Roz. Now jump!

I jumped.

Bouncing from the mud to the surface and back again, my six-year-old legs finally walked up the shore, feet crunching through the thin salt crust over mud.

Mom looked up from her book. "Where's your swan?"

I sniffled, sucking snot and saltwater up my nose. "I—"

Mom shook her head and held up a hand. "Kari, I don't want to hear it. You lost it five minutes after you got it."

"That's—"

"Tough titty said the kitty. I didn't bring you all the way to the Great Salt Lake to listen to you cry. Go play with the other kids like a big girl."

"But—"

She flicked her hand in dismissal. "Go. You're dripping all over my towel."

I didn't want to play with the other kids. Instead I sat in the shallows and listened to Granny Roz's stories about a life spent on a dry farm in Kentucky. *Always save tater water for gravy, she told me, and be sure to set the water a boilin' before pickin' the corn.*

Later, as we walked past pavilions and balloons pointing the way to another girl's pretty pink princess pony party, Mom muttered about waste. I ignored her and watched Granny Roz crimp a scalloped edge on a piecrust.

"Don't expect another one," Mom snapped, grabbing my arm and twisting.

"What?"

I said you can lick the bowl. Granny Roz smiled.

Over the years when things got bad, I made my way back to the Great Salt Lake. I'd wade out until I could slip my head under the water. Holding my breath, I'd think about a trouble that couldn't be named and a new voice would appear in my head with answers. Big Frank taught me about the power of no when one of Mom's boyfriend's hands wandered where they didn't belong. Bunny held me after the scary voices shouted in the night and the fires started. There are others; shadow troops I call them; they lurk in the background, waiting for I don't know what. Only three keep me company: Granny Roz to guide, Big Frank to fight, and Bunny to comfort.

For the past week, my pinky toe hole has been easy to hide under a sock and tennis shoe. Out of sight, out of mind as long as I pay attention to the differences between grass and tile, carpet and cement. As I walk to school, I glide my foot like an ice skate or rollerblade.

My eye catches the ink running over my left hand, lines smeared by soap and scrub brushes. Bunny pulls blankets over her head. *That wasn't one of our brighter moments.*

It's fine, says Big Frank. You're over-reacting.

We got in trouble, Bunny mumbles. I got us in trouble.

Not trouble, I soothe. Dr. Susan gave us hope. Despite the holes, there's a chance we might get out of here in one piece.

Granny Roz clucks her tongue. *You better hurry, Chile. You gonna be late.*

I pick up the pace, but the ink still catches my eye. I push back my sleeve and remember how just yesterday morning the world changed again.

I was cutting a pattern on a square of linoleum in art class when the second hole appeared on my left arm, the size of a silent dime.

Trouble at seven o'clock, Big Frank shouted. Prepare for attack.

Bunny's head popped out of her burrow, her nose wiggling furiously. Her eyes darted left, right; her head swiveled front, back, up, and down. *No, she said. We're good.*

Granny Roz rested her broom against the kitchen table and walked out her front door. *Show me, she said.*

I raised my arm to my eyes. The hole appeared shiny, like water on asphalt, black ice on a bridge. I could see the edges where skin ended and the hole began, but no blood or bone or sinew; there was no sense of looking through or into. The hole was a void, an abyss that led nowhere and was filled with nothing.

This is our arm, Granny Roz said, her words knocking the air right out of me.

Nothing. I am filled with nothing.

As my warm breath rushed out, it coalesced as mist and frosted the tiny hairs on my arm.

Just like reeds in truest winter, Bunny shivered.

Granny Roz shook her finger. *Don't you touch it, Kari. Hear me. This is the devil's work.*

I'll smash whomever is doing this to us. Big Frank put down his binoculars and picked up his sniper rifle. He chambered a round.

It's not Her, Granny Roz said. *She's not even here.*

It's somebody. I'm going to find 'em and make them pay.

No, Bunny said, throwing her paws wide, the pale pink of her ears standing tall. *We don't know why. It's better to watch and wait.*

The best defense is offense. We hunt. Big Frank slipped his buck knife into its sheath and pulled his canteen snug against his shoulder.

A sharpie is better than a bullet, Bunny said.

What are you up to, Rabbit? Granny Roz crossed her arms.

A picture formed in my mind. Tossing the x-acto knife back into the pencil box, I picked out a thin sharpie marker. A flick and a twist, and hole was now part of a butterfly's wing. I drew flowers and vines wrapping my wrist; leaves tickled my knuckles. I put the black ink down and picked up red, blue, silver, and green; highlights and shadows—

“What do you think you're doing?”

Lost in creation, I looked up, startled. Mr. Harcourt loomed. The design sprawled from elbow to fingertips. “I—”

“That's what I thought.”

Near the pottery wheel someone tittered. “Crazy Kari.”

“She's cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.”

“You think?”

Mr. Harcourt sighed. “That's enough. To the counselor's office, Kari. You want to tattoo yourself, do it on your own time.”

The student chair in the counselor's office was wider than normal and squishy. It wrapped around my hips and sucked me deep into the padding like a hug. Big Frank squirmed. *Metal folding chairs are more honest*, he grouched. *Give me a three legged stool any day.*

The light from the big picture window framed Dr. Susan in silhouette, highlighting bits of fly away hair rising from her scalp like a crown.

L'Oreal number 8g, Golden Summer Sunshine. Granny Roz rolled her eyes. *Just look at them eyebrows. Who does she think she's foolin'?* No way that color's anywhere close to natural.

I think it's pretty, said Bunny. *Like Goldilocks or Cinderella.*

More foolishness, Granny Roz said.

Dr. Susan tapped her keyboard. "How's this week been, Kari?"

I tugged on the edge of my sleeve, squinting.

Dr. Susan glanced up. "Sorry," she said, twisting the blinds closed. "It's that time."

I tugged some more on my sleeve and tried not to stare at the hole in my arm.

Relax, Granny Roz chided. *It's not getting bigger.*

The mouse double-clicked. My eyes darted to Dr. Susan's face.

"So tell me about this week. How're things, Kari?"

I shrugged.

Dr. Susan waited several beats. I fiddled some more with my sleeve. "Kari?" she prompted.

"What?"

"I asked how things were."

With a finger, I traced the edge of the butterfly. "Good," I managed.

Mouse click. Big Frank adjusted his binoculars. *She just checked a box labeled lack of eye contact.*

“When you say this week has been good, what do you mean?”

“Good,” I said.

Mouse click. *She checked disengaged*, Big Frank said. *We’re heading into the danger zone.*

“Are you getting your school assignments in?”

I nod.

“How are you sleeping?”

Another shrug.

Big Frank gasped. *Incoming! The cursor is hovering over parental consultation. We have a red alert situation, people. Mobilize.*

Sit up! Smile! barked Granny Roz from the porch. *You wanna get us locked up in the nuthouse?*

I sat up and forced my lips back. “I mean, I’m sleeping better. The pills seem to be working.”

“No more nightmares?”

“No.”

Yes, Big Frank said from the tree blind. *But you’re right, stick to name, rank, and serial number. Everything else is strictly need to know.*

Dr. Susan peered over the rims of her glasses. “Kari, I’m concerned about the way you’ve drawn all over your arm.”

“It’s just ink.”

“It’s a lot of ink. What are you trying to cover up?”

Bunny’s eyes widened. *Careful. There are wolves about.*

“Nothing.”

“Bruises? Did Charlotte or her friends hit you?”

I have bruises, yellow, purple, and green, but not from Charlotte or her friends. Mean girls punch with their words.

Say nothing. Bunny pressed her lips tight.

Dr. Susan nudged a box of tissues closer. “Did someone shove you into a locker?”

Bunny hid her head. “Kari? Talk to me. This is a safe place.”

Big Frank placed the laser dot in the center of Dr. Susan’s forehead. *Target acquired,* he rumbled. *Just say go.*

“Is it bruises, Kari, or something worse?”

Say something, Chile. Anything, Granny Roz said. *Silence is becoming her truth.*

“It’s not bruises. It’s nothing. I just felt like drawing.”

Dr. Susan leaned forward. “Is it cuts? Are you cutting, Kari?”

Cutting? Bunny held her breath.

“It’s okay. Lots of girls like you cut themselves. They think it relieves the pain. They think it gives them control.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Kari, if you’re cutting, I need to know. Cutting is dangerous behavior.”

Slow, Chile. Relax. Think about flowers and vines. Butterflies. You’re too tense. She thinks you’re lying.

“Girls who cut need help, Kari. They can’t do it on their own.”

You're not alone, Big Frank said. *You got us.*

"I know you want to stop, but you can't. Let me help." Dr. Susan reached out to touch me. I jerked away.

"I'm not cutting. I don't even know what that means."

Dr. Susan leaned back, considering. "I get it. You don't trust me."

"I'm not cutting."

"Okay. You're not ready for this."

"I'm not cutting."

"All right. I believe you." She tossed a pamphlet at me. "This can help."

I slipped it into my backpack and stood. "We done?"

"Not quite. I've been talking with YWF."

"YWF?"

"Young Writers of the Future. I sent them your essay."

"I didn't say you could do that."

"Sit down for a minute. Mrs. Miranda thinks you're a gifted writer."

Wary, I dropped my backpack and flopped onto the chair.

"You've heard of the YWF's summer programs?"

I shrugged.

"They were impressed."

"I can't go."

"Yes, you can."

"There's no way—"

"They're offering you a full-ride scholarship. You just have to show up ready to work."

I bit my lip and studied my knees. There's no way Mom'd ever let me go.

"Things change, Kari. You won't be in high school or living with your mother forever.

Remember that."

I flinched.

She's not a mind reader, Chile, Granny Roz said. It's just a lucky guess.

Play it cool, said Big Frank.

"Do you want me to talk with your mother about it?"

I shrugged.

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, Bunny chanted.

"Kari, you're a smart girl. High school isn't the end. You have a bright future ahead of you. Like that butterfly on your arm, you can be anything you want to be."

"We done now?" I stood up again.

"Yeah, we're done. Let me know about the summer writing program. You know I care, right, Kari? Come back anytime. I'm here for you."

And so are we.

Later that same afternoon, the third hole the size of a pea appeared on my inner thigh. I was hiding in a bathroom stall with my regular clothes stuffed in my backpack. Everyone knew Coach Jensen did one shower check each gym class. Skipping the shower was easy if you changed in a stall.

As if gym wasn't awkward enough.

Unlike the hole on my toe or arm, this one wasn't streaming cold. I sat on the closed toilet seat and poked at it with a pencil. No pain; no pressure. I pushed harder and watched as the

pencil slid inside my leg all the way to its nubby eraser. With a flick of my finger I let go. It disappeared.

WTF?

I pressed along the edges of the hole like it was an over-ripe pimple needing a little encouragement. No bulge of a yellow number 2. I kneaded my thigh like bread dough.

Nothing.

How many pencils and pens could I stuff in? Rummaging around in my pencil case, I found my x-acto knife.

Linoleum carving was such a bore.

I popped the safety cover off the blade and considered. I felt the troops stir.

Power, Big Frank said. *Control*.

Pain, Bunny said.

Freedom, Big Frank said, *for girls like us*.

Foolishness. At her kitchen sink Granny Roz peeled carrots lickety-split. *There's only one good use for a knife*.

I listened to a locker slam followed by the sound of running feet. The tardy bell rang. White noise filled my ears, ebbing and flowing as I sat like a stone in a river. I rolled the x-acto knife between my palms, then held it to my cheek, drinking in the coolness of metal against hot flesh.

Granny Roz shook her head. *Lord, grant me strength. Chile, you done wore me out*. Dropping her paring knife among the carrot shavings, Granny Roz left the sink and sat in her rocker on the porch. In no time she was napping, head back with a little bead of drool pooling against her lips. Bunny was curled like a kitten in her burrow.

Against my skin, the blade warmed.

From his hideout in the trees Big Frank nodded. *Power*, he said. *Control*.

I cut.

It was hard at first, rubbery like the surface of an egg or a squishy piece of steak. The blade teetered on edge, then bit, catching the lip of the hole. My skin split, popping like the seal on a jar of pickles. Red, sticky blood welled, filling the hole and flooding my thigh with warmth.

Relief.

Stupid Dr. Susan was right about one thing.

One cut was enough. I stopped the bleeding with a wad of toilet paper pressed flat against my thigh. It wasn't much, a teaspoon of blood at the most, but it cleared my head. Colors were brighter. The taste of lemons and grass filled my mouth. Exhaustion swept over me.

Sleep, Kari, we're here.

I curled around the toilet, resting my flushed cheeks on the tile, inhaling the faint scent of bleach and pee.

Writing camp. I'm getting out of here and going to camp. I'm going to college. I can break free and be my own person. Another little slice and I can feel like this again and again. The empty holes mean nothing. I closed my eyes and didn't wake until the janitor's bucket bumped against the door. I—

Kari, watch out! Big Frank yells.

Breaking from the memory, I leap back to the curb as a car swooshes around the corner and into the high school. "Stupid kid!" the driver yells. "Watch where you're walking. You got a death wish?"

Yeah, right back at ya, butt-head.

Keep it together, Granny Roz says. That's the second bell.

I'm late to biology. All eyes are on me as I slip into my seat.

"Let's get started," Mr. Cooper says. "Homework out, please."

"What's that on Kari's face?" Becca snickers under her breath. "Looks like toilet tissue."

"Probably cut herself shaving," Charlotte says. "She's such a troll."

"Yeah, Troll, where's your bridge?" Becca taunts. "Go live under it."

"No, go die under it," Charlotte says.

Bitches. My eyes start to water.

"Oh, look. She's going to cry! Charlotte, you made her cry." Becca holds out her knuckles for a bump.

Sticks and stones, Chile, Granny Roz clucks. Don't fret. I'll make you a cherry cobbler.

They can't actually hurt you, Bunny says. Not here in front of everyone. Mr. Cooper won't let them. All they can do is talk.

Charlotte bumps Becca's fist with a laugh. "Now watch. Right after class the little loser is going to scamper back to Dr. Susan. That's what you do, right, Loser? Tattletale about the mean girls. You're such a troll."

I open my notebook and pick up a pen. *Ignore them, Big Frank says, running a bore snake down his barrel. I got your back.*

When Mr. Cooper walks by, I don't bother handing any papers in. He doesn't even break stride. Head down, I concentrate on drawing intricate spirals, circles, and loops between the ruled lines. As long as they're small it looks like I'm taking notes.

"Baby scribbles," Charlotte mocks. "You're so retarded."

I'm going to writing camp. I've got a scholarship. This is just a way stop on my way to a much better place.

With the homework stacked on his desk, Mr. Cooper clears his throat. "Jonah, you're up," he says. "Now I need all of you to pay attention to the presentations. I'm going to be marking participation grades, so don't think you can just check out when you're not up here with your PowerPoint. I want questions, class. Let's engage our brains. Tiko, dim some of the overheads, please."

It's warm and stuffy in the room. *Chicken coop. Incubator*, Granny Roz mutters. *Do we need eggs?*

Jonah drones on about energy and life coming from the sun. In the darkness, eyelids droop as graphics of leaves and cells blur across the screen. After ten minutes the class is comatose. It takes Mr. Cooper longer than it should to realize Jonah is finished.

"Very good. Any questions?"

No one can muster the energy to think let alone raise a hand. My notebook is filling with ink.

"Thank you, Jonah. Eric?"

Eric bounces up like an over-caffeinated kangaroo. He rubs his hands and bubbles like a salesman making the pitch of his life. "My topic is how parasites rule the world. There is no free-will. It's awesome."

Granny Roz stands up. *Chile, we need to leave. Now.*

It's the middle of class.

Now, says Granny Roz.

I can't leave. I can't risk a zero for participation.

Mr. Cooper rolls his eyes. “Eric, we discussed this.”

The class perks up. Eric is smarter than the teachers. Everyone but Mr. Copper knows that.

“But Mr. Cooper, I have proof! Check it—this ant lives in South America.” Two large black ants, one with a cherry bulb for a butt fills the screen.

We have to go, Big Frank says. You have to go. Suddenly my stomach rumbles and cramps. Or there'll be trouble.

Mr. Cooper is annoyed. “Eric—”

Eric advances his slide. “And here’s another ant that’s controlled by a liver fluke. At night it makes the ant climb up a blade of grass so a cow can eat it.”

“That makes no sense.”

Kari, says Bunny, if you love us, you have to leave now.

We love you, Kari. From the shadows the troops surge; there are more than I can count.

At the front of the class Eric grins. “It’s the cycle of life. Climbing trees and grass to get eaten is not natural behavior for these ants. They’re being controlled. If it can happen to ants—”

“People are more complex than ants,” says Mr. Cooper.

“It’s not just ants. It’s spiders—”

“Insects are not human.”

Kari, Kari, Kari, the voices call. The cramps are unbearable. I’m going to barf.

“—fish, grasshoppers, worms, crabs—” Eric won’t stop.

“All lower creatures, Eric.”

“How about rats, Mr. Cooper? We use rats to test human drugs, right?”

“Eric.”

The voices are a bandsaw in my brain, drowning out Eric and Mr. Cooper. I can't think, can't breathe.

"There's a single-celled parasite that changes the behavior of rats in ways that increase the likelihood that an infected rat will get eaten by a cat. You know why it does this?"

The situation's critical, Bunny says.

"Eric—"

"The parasites need to do it in a cat."

The class roars.

"Principal's office, Eric. Move it."

Now? Big Frank asks.

Not here, Granny Roz says. *Too many witnesses.*

I fall out of my chair as the world fades to black. I can't see, only hear Skylar say, "Uh, Mr. Cooper? I think there's something wrong with Kari."

The whole ride home is torture.

"You made me miss work again, Kari." Mom whips the car into the driveway. "You're not a baby anymore. If you've got a headache, take medicine like a normal person. Don't go whining to the school nurse."

"I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"Yeah, you never do. Get out. I'm late." I grab my bag from the floorboard and open the door. "I want the laundry and dishes done before I get home. If you're not going to school, you're going to work."

"Okay."

“Take chicken out of the freezer for dinner. And if you put my nylons in the dryer, I swear I’ll—”

“I won’t.”

“You’re not too big for the belt, Kari. Maybe you need a little reminder.”

“I won’t forget,” I say.

Mom cocks her head at me. I don’t like the look in her eyes. “Somebody’s getting uppity. Thinks she’s better than everybody else.”

“I’m not,” I say quickly. This is headed nowhere good.

“I got a call from that counselor of yours this morning. Something about a writing camp.”

“She talked with them, not me,” I say.

“So you don’t want to go? Dr. Susan said it’s free.”

I take a deep breath. “I want to go.”

“What?”

“I want to go to a summer writing camp.”

Mom leans over and slaps me across the cheek. “Yeah, and I want to be a size six again. Forget it. Neither of us is getting what she wants.”

The pain makes my teeth ache. For once the voices are silent. I don’t care. This is my life, and I’m breaking free.

“I’m going to a summer writing camp.”

Mom laughs. “Oh, look at you. Think you can take me? Go on, try little girl.”

I can’t meet her eyes.

“That’s what I thought. You’re not going to camp. I told Dr. Susan you’re not well. You need to be here with me. End of discussion.”

“When I graduate next year, I’m leaving and going to college.”

“Not with those grades. You’ll live here with me. You know you can’t manage alone. You’ll see when I die.”

“I—”

“Why are you still sitting here with your mouth open like a retard? Get out and shut the door. It’s your fault I’m late.” I push the door closed and step back. Mom shakes her head. “I said, shut, not slam. College? Right. Only if they hire you to scrub toilets.”

I stand in the driveway watching the car roll past the stop sign. The sun feels good on my face.

In the kitchen, I lift each glass out of the dishwasher and put them upside down in the cupboard. Dr. Phil is nattering on the TV, telling a woman with smeared mascara that she is on a journey to find her authentic self.

I’m going to writing camp. I’m going to college. I’m not going to be anyone’s slave any longer. I’m going to tell Dr. Susan about Mom. There are places in the world for girls like me. I don’t have to live like this anymore.

My stomach growls. First, I’m going to eat. I get out the bread and make a peanut butter sandwich. There’s no milk. I make do with water.

When I sit down in the living room I feel it—an itching, burning sensation under the delicate skin of my cheek. The slap.

Fire ants, Bunny says.

No such thing, silly, Granny Roz says. *Eczema. A little dry skin.*

Poison ivy, says Big Frank.

Hush, now. You'll frighten her. Go wash your face, Chile. Things will be better, you'll see.

I rise and head to the bathroom. When I flip on the light switch, I see terrible crackling lines spreading along my hand, arm, leg. In the mirror I see fine webbing on my face, neck, shoulders. "Crazing," I say aloud. "In pottery it's called crazing."

With a whoosh, the tissue cork in my cheek pops out. The hole tears and widens, but there's no pain, just the sound of a freight train's whistle.

It's time, Granny Roz says.

We're coming, says Big Frank.

Hello, says Bunny.

I lean closer to the mirror. The hole on my cheek is no longer empty. An eye peers out.

THE END