

Trudy

Turpentine from those large orange and black cans. (But do these things convey home or homesick? I cannot tell the difference, it seems.)

This is the kitchen where mother lifted me onto the porcelain sink and sponge-bathed me. In the 105th Street kitchen, I gave sponge baths to our little girls. (The kitchen where the linoleum curled up and cockroaches nested and startled when the light was turned on, the constant smell of them, even with the window open to the sooty outdoors.)

Meggie and I cleared a space under the forsythia at the bottom of her driveway to eat Ritz crackers. Barbara and I dug out homes for our trolls in the gnarly hickory roots. Yesterday, Meena and I sipped martinis and she held my hand saying, "You must take care of yourself, dear Kimiko."

Deviled Ham

漬物³

stairwell, the Rittenhouse Hotel, the floor of his office, café, car, dogwood, shower stall

3. 漬物—tsukemono—Japanese pickles

Mothers, Lock Up Your Daughters Because They Are Terrifying

Alice Sola Kim

At midnight we parked by a Staples and tried some seriously dark fucking magic. We had been discussing it for weeks and could have stayed in that *wouldn't it be funny if* groove forever, zipping between yes, we should and no, we shouldn't until it became a joke so dumb that we would never. But that night Mini had said, "If we don't do it right now, I'm going to be so mad at you guys, and I'll know from now on that all you chickenheads can do is talk and not do," and the whole way she ranted at us like that, even though we were already doing and not talking, or at least about to. (We always let her do that, get all shirty and sharp with us, because she had the car, but perhaps we should have said something. Perhaps once everyone had cars, Mini would have to figure out how to not be a total bitch, and she would be leagues behind everyone else.)

The parking lot at night looked like the ocean, the black Atlantic as we imagined it, and in Mini's car we brought up the spell on our phones and Caroline read it first. She

always had to be first to do anything, because she had the most to prove, being scared of everything. We couldn't help but tease her about that, even though we knew it wasn't her fault—her parents made her that way, but then again, if someone didn't get told for being a pill just because we could trace said pill-ness back to their parents, then where would it ever end?

We had an X-Acto knife and a lighter and antibacterial ointment and lard and a fat red candle still shrink-wrapped. A chipped saucer from Ronnie's dad's grandmother's wedding set, made of china that glowed even in dim light and sang when you rubbed your thumb along it, which she took because it was chipped and thought they wouldn't miss it, but we thought that was dumb because they would definitely miss the chipped one. The different one. We could have wrapped it all up and sold it as a Satanism starter kit.

Those were the things. What we did with them we'll never tell. For a moment, it seemed like it would work. The moment stayed the same, even though it should have changed. A real staring contest of a moment: Ronnie's face shining in the lunar light of her phone, the slow tick of the blood into the saucer, like a radiator settling. But Mini ruined it. "Do you feel anything?" asked Mini, too soon and too loudly. We glanced at each other, dismayed. We thought, perhaps if she had just waited a little longer—"I don't think so," said Ronnie. "I knew this was a dumb idea," said Mini. "Let's clean up this blood before it gets all over my car. So if one of you got murdered, they wouldn't blame me." Caroline handed out the Band-Aids. She put hers on and saw the blood well up instantly against the Band-Aid, not red or black or any color in

particular, only a dark splotch like a shape under ice. So much for that, everyone thought, wrong.

MINI DROPPED CAROLINE off first, even though she lived closer to Mini, then Ronnie after. It had been this way always. At first Caroline had been hurt by this, had imagined that we were talking about her in the fifteen extra minutes of alone time that we shared. The truth was both a relief and an even greater insult. There was nothing to say about Caroline, no shit we would talk that wasn't right to her face. We loved Caroline, but her best jokes were unintentional. We loved Caroline, but she didn't know how to pretend to be cool and at home in strange places like we did; she was the one who always seemed like a pie-faced country girleen wearing a straw hat and holding a suitcase, asking obvious questions like, "Wait, which hand do you want to stamp?" or "Is that illegal?" Not that the answers were always obvious to us, but we knew what not to ask about. We knew how to be cool, so why didn't Caroline?

Usually, we liked to take a moment at the end of the night without Caroline, to discuss the events of the night without someone to remind us how young we were and how little we knew. But tonight we didn't really talk. We didn't talk about how we believed, and how our belief had been shattered. We didn't talk about the next time we would hang out. Ronnie snuck into her house. Her brother, Alex, had left the window open for her. Caroline was already in bed, wearing an ugly quilted headband that kept her bangs off her face so she wouldn't get forehead zits. Mini's mom wasn't home yet, so she microwaved some egg rolls. She put her feet up on the kitchen table, next to her homework, which had been completed hours

ago. The egg rolls exploded tiny scalding droplets of water when she bit into them. She soothed her seared lips on a beer. This is the life, Mini thought.

We didn't go to the same school, and we wouldn't be friends if we had. We met at an event for Korean adoptees, a low-ceilinged party at a community center catered with the stinkiest food possible. Koreans, amirite?! That's how we/they roll.

Mini and Caroline were having fun. Ronnie was not having fun. Mini's fun was different from Caroline's fun, being a fake-jolly fun in which she was imagining telling her real friends about this doofus loser event later, although due to the fact that she was reminding them that she was adopted, they would either squirm with discomfort or stay very still and serious and stare her in the pupils with great intensity, nodding all the while. Caroline was having fun—the pure uncut stuff, nothing ironic about it. She liked talking earnestly with people her age about basic biographical details because there was a safety in conversational topics that no one cared about all that much. Talking about which high school you go to? Great! Which activities you did at aforementioned school? Raaaad. Talking about the neighborhood where you live? How was it possible that they weren't all dead of fun! Caroline already knew and liked the K-pop soundtracking the evening, the taste of the marinated beef and the clear noodles, dishes that her family recreated on a regular basis.

Ronnie rooted herself by a giant cut-glass bowl full of kimchi, which looked exactly like a big wet pile of fresh guts. She soon realized that (1) the area by the kimchi was very high traffic, and (2) the kimchi emitted a powerful

vinegar-poop-death stench. As Ronnie edged away from the food table, Mini and Caroline were walking toward it. Caroline saw a lost and lonely soul and immediately said, "Hi! Is this your first time at a meet-up?"

At this Ronnie experienced split consciousness, feeling annoyed that she was about to be sucked into wearying small talk, in addition to a nearly sacramental sense of gratitude about being saved from standing alone at a gathering. You could even say that Ronnie was experiencing quadruple consciousness if you counted the fact that she was both judging and admiring Mini and Caroline—Mini for being the kind of girl who tries to look ugly on purpose and thinks it looks so great (ooh, except it did look kinda great), her torn sneakers and one thousand silver earrings and chewed-up hair, and Caroline of the sweetly tilted eyes and cashmere sweater dress and ballet flats like she was some pampered cat turned human.

Mini had a stainless-steel water bottle full of ice and vodka cut with the minimal amount of orange juice. She shared it with Ronnie and Caroline. And Caroline drank it. Caroline ate and drank like she was a laughing two-dimensional cutout and everything she consumed just went through her face and evaporated behind her, affecting her not at all.

Ronnie could not stop staring at Caroline, who was a one-woman band of laughing and drinking and ferrying food to her mouth and nodding and asking skin-rippingly boring questions that nevertheless got them talking. Ronnie went from laughing at Caroline to being incredibly jealous of her. People got drunk just to be like Caroline!

Crap, Ronnie thought. Social graces are actually worth something.

But Caroline was getting drunk, and since she was already Caroline, she went too far with the whole being Caroline thing and asked if she could tell us a joke. Only if we promised not to get offended!

Mini threw her head back, smiled condescendingly at an imaginary person to her left, and said, "Of course." She frowned to hide a burp that was, if not exactly a solid, still alarmingly substantial, and passed the water bottle to Ronnie.

Caroline wound up. This had the potential to be long. "So, you know how—oh wait, no, okay, this is how it starts. Okay, so white people play the violin like this." She made some movements. "Black people play it like this." She made some more movements. "And then Korean people play it like th—" and began to bend at the waist but suddenly farted so loudly that it was like the fart had bent her, had then jet-packed her into the air and crumpled her to the ground. She tried to talk over it, but Ronnie and Mini were ended by their laughter. They fell out of themselves. They were puking laughter, the laughter was a thick brambly painful rope being pulled out of their faces, but they couldn't stop it, and finally Caroline stopped trying to finish the joke and we were all laughing.

CONSEQUENCES: FOR DAYS after, we would think that we had exhausted the joke and sanded off all the funniness, rubbing it so often with our sweaty fingers, but then we would remember again and, whoa, there we went again, off to the races.

Consequences: summer arrived. Decoupled from school, we were free to see one another, to feel happy misfitting with one another because we knew we were peas

from different pods—we delighted in being such different kinds of girls from one another.

Consequences: for weeks after, we'd end sentences with, "Korean people do it like ppppbbbbbbttth."

THERE ARE SO many ways to miss your mother. Your real mother—the one who looks like you, the one who has to love you because she grew you from her own body, the one who hates you so much that she dumped you in the garbage for white people to pick up and dust off. In Mini's case, it manifested as some weird gothy shit. She had been engaging in a shady flirtation with a clerk at an antiquarian bookshop. We did not approve. We thought this clerk wore thick-rimmed hipster glasses to hide his crow's feet and hoodies to hide his man boobs so that weird high school chicks would still want to flirt with him. We hoped that Mini mostly only liked him because he was willing to trade clammy glances with her and go no further. Unlike us, Mini was not a fan of going far. When the manager wasn't around, this guy let her go into the room with the padlock on it, where all of the really expensive stuff was. That's where she found the book with the spell. That's where she took a photo of the spell with her phone. That's where she immediately texted it to us without any explanation attached, confident that the symbols were so powerful they would tentacle through our screens and into our hearts, and that we would know it for what it was.

Each of us had had that same moment where we saw ourselves in a photo, caught one of those wonky glances in the mirror that tricks you into thinking that you're seeing someone else, and it's electric. Kapow boom sizzle, you got slapped upside the head with the Korean wand, and now

you felt weird at family gatherings that veered blond, you felt weird when your friends replaced their Facebook profile photos with pictures of the celebrities they look like and all you had was, say, Mulan or Jackie Chan, ha-ha-ha, hahahahaha.

You felt like you could do one thing wrong, one stupid thing, and the sight of you would become a terrible taste in your parents' mouths. "I'll tell you this," Mini had said. "None of us actually knows what happened to our mothers. None of our parents tell us anything. We don't have the cool parents who'll tell us about our backgrounds and shit like that." For Mini, this extended to everything else. When her parents decided to get a divorce, Mini felt like she had a hive of bees in her head (her brain was both the bees and the brain that the bees were stinging). She searched online for articles about adoptees with divorced parents. The gist of the articles was that she would be going through an awfully hard time, as in, chick already felt kind of weird and dislocated when it came to family and belonging and now it was just going to be worse. Internet, you asshole, thought Mini. I already knew that. The articles for the parents told them to reassure their children. Make them feel secure and safe. She waited for the parents to try so she could flame-throw scorn all over them. They did not try. She waited longer. And she had given up on them long before Mom finally arrived.

WE WERE HANGING out in Mini's room, not talking about our unsuccessful attempt at magic. Caroline was painting Ronnie's nails with a color called Balsamic.

"I love this color," said Caroline. "I wish my parents would let me wear it."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I can't wear dark nail polish until I'm eighteen."

"Wait—they really said that?"

"How many things have they promised you when you turn eighteen?"

"You know they're just going to change the terms of the agreement when you actually turn eighteen, and then you'll be forty and still wearing clear nail polish and taking ballet and not being able to date."

"And not being able to have posters up in your room. Although I guess you won't need posters when you're forty."

"Fuck that! No one's taking away my posters when I get old."

Caroline didn't say anything. She shrugged, keeping her eyes on Ronnie's nails. When we first started hanging out with Caroline, we wondered if we shouldn't shit-talk Caroline's parents, because she never joined in, but we realized that she liked it. It helped her, and it helped her to not have to say anything.

"You're all set. Just let it dry."

"I don't know," said Ronnie. "It doesn't go with anything. It just looks random on me."

Mini said, "Well." She squinted and cocked her head back until she had a double chin, taking all of Ronnie in. "You kind of look like you're in prison and you traded a pack of cigarettes for nail polish because you wanted to feel glamorous again."

"Wow, thanks!"

"No, come on. You know what I mean. It's great. You look tough. You look like a normal girl, but you still look tough. Look at me. I'll never look tough." And she so

wanted to, we knew. "I'd have to get a face tattoo, like a face tattoo of someone else's face over my face. Maybe I should get your face."

"Makeover montage," said Caroline. "Koreans do makeovers like pppppbbbbbth," we said. Caroline laughed and the nail polish brush veered and swiped Ronnie's knuckle. We saw Ronnie get a little pissed. She didn't like physical insults. Once she wouldn't speak to us for an hour when Mini flicked her in the face with water in a movie theater bathroom. "Sorry," Caroline said. She coughed. Something had gone down wrong. She coughed some more and started to retch, and we were stuck between looking away politely and staring at her with our hands held out in this Jesus-looking way, figuring out how to help. There was a wet burr to her coughing that became a growl, and the growl rose and rose until it became a voice, a fluted voice, like silver flutes, like flutes of bubbly champagne, a beautiful voice full of rich people things.

MY DAUGHTERS

MY GIRLS

MY MY MINE MINE

Mom skipped around. When she spoke, she didn't move our mouths. We only felt the vibration of her voice rumbling through us.

"Did you come to us because we called for you?" asked Mini. Mom liked to jump into the mouth of the person asking the question. Mini's mouth popped open. Her eyes darted down, to the side, like she was trying to get a glimpse of herself talking.

I HEARD YOU, MY DAUGHTERS

"You speak really good English," Caroline said.

I LEARNED IT WHEN I WAS DEAD

We wanted to talk to one another but it felt rude with Mom in the room. If Mom was still in the room.

LOOK AT YOU, SO BEAUTIFUL

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE WORLD

Who was beautiful? Which one of us was she talking about? We asked and she did not answer directly. She only said that we were all beautiful, and any mother would be proud to have us. We thought we might work it out later.

OH, I LEFT YOU

AND OH

I'LL NEVER DO IT AGAIN

AT FIRST WE found Mom highly scary. At first we were scared of her voice and the way she used our faces to speak her words, and we were scared about how she loved us already and found us beautiful without knowing a thing about us. That is what parents are supposed to do, and we found it incredibly stressful and a little bit creepy. *Our parents love us*, thought Caroline and Mini. They do, they do, they do, but every so often we cannot help but feel that we have to earn our places in our homes. Caroline did it by being perfect and PG rated, though her mind boiled with filthy, outrageous thoughts, though she often got so frustrated at meals with her family during her performances of perfection that she wanted to bite the dining room table in half. *I'm not the way you think I am, and you're dumb to be so fooled*. Mini did it by never asking for anything. Never complaining. Though she could sulk and stew at the Olympic level. Girl's got to have an outlet.

Mom took turns with us, and in this way we got used to her. A few days after Mom's first appearance, Caroline woke herself up singing softly, a song she had never before

heard. It sounded a little like: *baaaaaachudaaaaa/neeeeed-eowadaaaa*. Peaceful, droning. She sang it again, and then Mom said:

THIS IS A SONG MY MOTHER SANG TO ME WHEN I DIDN'T WANT TO WAKE UP FOR SCHOOL. IT CALLS THE VINES DOWN TO LIFT YOU UP AND—

"Mom?" said Caroline.

YES, SWEETIE

"Could you speak more quietly? It gets pretty loud in my head."

Oh, Of Course. Yes. This Song Is What My Mother Sang In The Mornings. And Her Hands Were Vines And She Would Lift Lift Lift Me Up, Mom said.

Caroline's stomach muscles stiffened as she sat up by degrees, like a mummy. Caroline's entire body ached, from her toenails to her temples, but that wasn't Mom's fault. It was her other mom's fault. Summers were almost worse for Caroline than the school year was. There was more ballet, for one thing, including a pointe intensive that made her feet twinge like loose teeth, and this really cheesed her off most of all, because her parents didn't even like ballet. They were bored into microsleeps by it, their heads drifting forward, their heads jumping back. What they liked was the idea of a daughter who did ballet, and who would therefore be skinny and not a lesbian. She volunteered at their church and attended youth group, where everyone mostly played foosball. She worked a few shifts at a chocolate shop, where she got to try every kind of chocolate they sold once and then never again. *But what if she forgot how they tasted?* She was tutored in calculus and biology, not because she needed any help with those subjects, but because her parents didn't

want to wait to find out whether she was the best or not at them—they wanted best and *they wanted it now*.

Once Ronnie said, "Caroline, your parents are like Asian parents," and Mini said, "Sucks to be you," and Caroline answered, "That's not what you're going to say in a few years when you're bagging my groceries," which sounded mean, but we knew she really only said it because she was confident that we wouldn't be bagging her groceries. Except for Ronnie, actually. We were worried about Ronnie, who wasn't academically motivated like Caroline or even *c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, what's next* motivated like Mini.

That first day Caroline enjoyed ballet class as she never had before, and she knew it was because Mom was there. She felt her chin tipped upward by Mom, arranging her daughter like a flower, a sleek and sinuous flower that would be admired until it died and even afterward. Mom had learned to speak quietly, and she murmured to Caroline to stand taller and suck in her stomach and become grace itself. The ballet teacher nodded her approval.

Though You Are A Little Bit Too Fat For Ballet, Mom murmured. Caroline cringed. She said, "Yeah, but Mom, I'm not going to be a ballerina." But Mom told her that it was important to try her best at everything and not be motivated by pure careerism only.

Mom told us we were beautiful and special and loved, but that is not to say that she was afraid to criticize the fuck out of us. Once Caroline tried to sing the song about getting up in the morning to please Mom, and Mom just laughed. *Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha, Oh Sweetie, Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha!*

"Mom," said Caroline. "I know the words."

You Don't Speak Korean, Mom told Caroline. *You Will Never Speak Real Korean*.

"You speak real English, though. How come you get both?"

I Told You. I'm Your Mother And I Know A Lot More Than You And I'm Dead.

It was true, though, about Caroline. The words came out of Caroline's mouth all sideways and awkward, like someone pushing a couch through a hallway. Worst of all, she didn't sound like someone speaking Korean—she sounded like someone making fun of it.

But if we knew Caroline, we knew that this was also what she wanted. Because she wanted to be perfect, so she also wanted to be told about the ways in which she was imperfect.

MINI WAS THE first to actually see Mom. She made herself Jell-O for dinner, which was taking too long because she kept opening the refrigerator door to poke at it. Mini's brain: c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon. She walked around the dining room table. She tried to read the *New Yorker* that her mother had been neglecting, but it was all tiny-print listings of events that happened anywhere but where she was about five months ago. She came back to the fridge to check on the Jell-O. Its condition seemed improved from the last time she checked, and anyhow she was getting hungrier, and it wasn't like Jell-O soup was the worst thing she'd ever eaten since her mom stopped cooking after the divorce. She looked down at the Jell-O, as any of us would do before breaking that perfect jeweled surface with the spoon, and saw reflected upon it the face of another. The face was on Mini, made up of the Mini materi-

al but everything tweaked and adjusted, made longer and thinner and sadder. Mini was awed. "Is that what you look like?" Mini asked. When she spoke she realized how loose her jaw felt.

"Ouch," she said. Mom said, *Oh, Honey, I Apologize. I Just Wanted You To See What Mom Looked Like. I'll Stop Now*.

"It's okay," said Mini.

Mom thought that Mini should be eating healthier food, and what do you know, Mini agreed. She told us about the dinner that Mom had Mini make. "I ate vegetables, you guys, and I kind of liked it." She did not tell us that her mother came home near the end of preparations, and Mini told her that she could not have any of it. She did not tell us that she frightened her mother with her cold, slack expression and the way she laughed at nothing in particular as she went up to her room. Caroline would have said: "I can't believe your mom had the nerve to ask if she could!"

Ronnie would have thought: there's being butt-hurt about your parents' divorce, and then there's being epically, unfairly butt-hurt about your parents' divorce, and you are veering toward the latter, Mini my friend. But what did Ronnie know? She was still scared of Mom. She probably hated her family more than any of us—we knew something was wrong but not what was wrong—but she wouldn't let Mom come too close either.

"HAVE YOU BEEN hanging out with Mom?"

"Yeah. We went shopping yesterday."

"I haven't seen her in a long time."

"Caroline, that's not fair! You had her first."

"I just miss her."

"Don't be jealous."

We would wake up with braids in our hair, complicated little tiny braids that we didn't know how to do. We would find ourselves making food that we didn't know how to make, stews and porridges and little sweet hotcakes. Ronnie pulled the braids out. Ronnie did not eat the food. We knew that Mom didn't like that. We knew Mom would want to have a serious talk with Ronnie soon.

We knew and we allowed ourselves to forget that we already had people in our lives who wanted to parent us, who had already been parenting us for years. But we found it impossible to accept them as our parents, now that our real mother was back. Someone's real mother. Sometimes we were sisters. Sometimes we were competitors.

Our parents didn't know us anymore. They couldn't do anything right, if they ever had in the first place. This is one problem with having another set of parents. *A dotted outline of parents.* For every time your parents forget to pick you up from soccer practice, there is the other set that would have picked you up. They—she—would have been perfect at all of it.

RONNIE WAS WASHING the dishes when a terrible pain gripped her head. She shouted and fell to her knees. Water ran over the broken glass in the sink.

Honey, said Mom, You Won't Let Me Get To Know You. Ronnie, Don't You Love Me? Don't You Like The Food I Make For You? Don't You Miss Your Mother?

Ronnie shook her head.

Ronnie, I Am Going To Knock First—

Someone was putting hot, tiny little fingers in her head

like her head was a glove, up her nose, in her eyes, against the roof of her mouth. And then they squeezed. Ronnie started crying.

—And Then I'm Coming In.

She didn't want this; she didn't want for Mom to know her like Mom had gotten to know Caroline and Mini; she didn't want to become these weird monosyllabic love-zombies like them, them with their wonderful families—how dare they complain so much, how dare they abandon them for this creature? And perhaps Ronnie was just stronger and more skeptical, but she had another reason for wanting to keep Mom away. She was ashamed. The truth was that there was already someone inside her head. It was her brother, Alex. He was the tumor that rolled and pressed on her brain to shift her moods between dreamy and horrified.

Ronnie first became infected with the wrong kind of love for Alex on a school-day morning, when she stood in front of the bathroom mirror brushing her teeth. He had stood there not a minute before her, shaving. On school-day mornings, they were on the same schedule, nearly on top of each other. His hot footprints pressed up into hers. And then he was pressing up against her, and it was confusing, and she forgot now whose idea all of this was in the first place, but there was no mistake about the fact that she instigated everything now. Everything she did and felt, Alex returned, and this troubled Ronnie, that he never started it anymore, so that she was definitively the sole foreign element and corrupting influence in this household of Scandinavian blonds.

("Do you want to do this?") ("Okay. Then I want to do this too.")

Ronnie hated it and liked it when they did stuff in the bathroom. Having the mirror there was horrible. She didn't need to see all that to know it was wrong. Having the mirror there helped. It reassured her to see how different they looked—everything opposed and chiaroscuro—no laws were being broken and triggering alarms from deep inside their DNA.

Sometimes Alex told her that they could get married. Or if not married, they could just leave the state or the country and be together in some nameless elsewhere. The thought filled Ronnie with a vicious horror. If the Halversons weren't her parents, if Mrs. Halverson wasn't her mother, then who was to be her mother? Alex would still have his family. He wasn't the adopted one, after all. Ronnie would be alone in the world, with only fake companions—a blond husband who used to be her brother, and a ghost who would rest its hands on Ronnie's shoulders until the weight was unbearable, a ghost that couldn't even tell different Asian girls apart to recognize its own daughter.

Mom was silent. Ronnie stayed on the floor. She collected her limbs to herself and laced her fingers behind her neck. She felt it: something terrible approached. It was too far away to see or hear or feel, but when it finally arrived, it would shake her hard enough to break her in half. Freeing a hand, Ronnie pulled out her phone and called Mini. She told her to come quickly and to bring Caroline and it was about Mom, and before she could finish, Mom squeezed the phone and slammed Ronnie's hand hard against the kitchen cabinet.

*YOU ARE A DIRTY GIRL
NEVER*

*HAVE I EVER
SLUT SLUT
FILTHY SLUT*

Ronnie's ears rang. Mom was crying now too. *You Do This To These People Who Took You In And Care For You*, Mom sobbed. *I Don't Know You At All. I Don't Know Any Of You.*

*YOU'RE NOT NICE GIRLS
NO DAUGHTERS OF MINE*

WHEN MINI AND Caroline came into the kitchen, Ronnie was sitting on the floor. Her hand was bleeding and swollen, but otherwise she was fine, her face calm, her back straight. She looked up at us. "We have to go reverse the spell. We have to send her back. I made her hate us. I'm sorry. She's going to kill us."

"Oh, no," said Caroline.

Mini's head turned to look at Caroline, then the rest of her body followed. She slapped Caroline neatly across the face. *You I Don't Like So Much Either*, Mom said, using Mini's mouth to speak. *I Know What You Think About At Night, During The Day, All Day. You Can't Fool Me. I Tried And Tried—*

Mini covered her mouth, and then Mom switched to Caroline. —*And Tried To Make You Good. But Ronnie Showed Me It Was All Useless. You Are All Worthless.* Caroline shook her head until Mom left, and we pulled Ronnie up and ran out to the car together, gripping one another's hands the whole way.

We drove, or just Mini drove, but we were rearing forward in our seats, and it was as though we were all driving, strenuously, horsewhippingly, like there was an away to get

to, as if what we were trying to escape was behind us and not inside of us. We were screaming and shouting louder and louder until Mini was suddenly seized again. We saw it and we waited. Mini's jaw unhinged, and we only didn't scream because this had happened many times—certainly we didn't like it when it happened to us, but that way at least we didn't have to look at it, the way that it was only skin holding the moving parts of her skull together, skin becoming liquid like glass in heat, and then her mouth opened beyond everything we knew to be possible, and the words that came out—oh, the words. Mini began to speak and then we did, we did scream, even though we should have been used to it by now.

DRIVE SAFE

DRIVE SAFE

*DO YOU WANT TO DIE BEFORE I TEACH YOU
EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW*

The car veered, a tree loomed, and we were garlanded in glass, and a branch insinuated itself into Mini's ribs and encircled her heart, and Ronnie sprang forth and broke against the tree, and in the backseat Caroline was marveling at how her brain became unmoored and seesawed forward into the jagged coastline of the front of her skull and back again, until she was no longer herself, and it was all so mortifying that we could have just died, and we did, we did die, we watched every second of it happen until we realized that we were back on the road, driving, and all of the preceding was just a little movie that Mom had played inside of our heads.

"Stop," said Ronnie. "Stop the car."

"No way," said Mini. "That's what she wants."

Mom sobs again. *I Killed Myself For Love. I Killed My-*

self For You, she said. *I Came Back For Girls Who Wanted Parents But You Already Had Parents.*

"Mini, listen to me," said Ronnie. "I said it because it seemed like a thing to say, and it would have been nice to have, but there is no way to reverse the spell, is there?"

"We can try it. We can go back to the parking lot and do everything but backward."

"We can change the words. We have to try," Caroline said.

"Mom," said Ronnie. "If you're still here, I want to tell you that I want you. I'm the one who needs a mother. You saw."

"Ronnie," said Caroline, "what are you talking about?"

From Mini, Mom said, *You Girls Lie To One Another. All The Things You Don't Tell Your Friends.*

Ronnie thought she already sounded less angry. Just sad and a little petulant. Maybe showing all of them their deaths by car crash got it out of her system.

"The thing I'm doing," said Ronnie, "that's a thing they would kick me out of the family for doing. I need my real family. I need you." She didn't want to say the rest out loud, so she waited. She felt Mom open up her head, take one cautious step inside with one foot and then the other. Ronnie knew that she didn't want to be this way or do those things anymore. Ronnie knew that she couldn't find a way to stop or escape Alex's gaze from across the room when everyone else was watching TV. Stop looking at me. *If you could stop looking at me for just one second, then I could stop too.*

Mom, while we're speaking honestly, I don't think you're any of our mothers. I don't think you're Korean. I don't even think you come from any country on this planet.

(Don't tell me either way.)

But I don't care. I need your help, Mom. Please, are you still there? I'll be your daughter. I love your strength. I'm not scared anymore. You can sleep inside my bone marrow, and you can eat my thoughts for dinner, and I promise, I promise I'll always listen to you. Just make me good.

They didn't see Ronnie for a few months. Mini did see Alex at a concert pretty soon after everything that happened. He had a black eye and his arm in a sling. She hid behind a pillar until he passed out of sight. Mini, at least, had sort of figured it out. First she wondered why Ronnie had never told them, but then, immediately, she wondered how Ronnie could do such a thing. She wondered how Alex could do such a thing. Her thoughts shuttled back and forth between both of those stops and would not rest on one, so she made herself stop thinking about it.

As for Mini and Caroline, their hair grew out or they got haircuts, and everything was different, and Caroline's parents had allowed her to quit ballet and Mini's parents were still leaving her alone too much but she grew to like it. And when they were around, they weren't so bad. These days they could even be in the same room without screaming at each other. There was another meet-up for Korean adoptees. They decided to go. School had started up again, and Mini and Caroline were on the wane. Mini and Caroline thought, maybe, bringing it all back full circle would help? But they knew it wouldn't be the same without Ronnie. Mini and Caroline saw us first before we saw them. They saw us emerge from a crowd of people, people that even Caroline hadn't befriended already. They saw our skin and hair, skin and eyes, hair and teeth. The way we seemed to exist in more dimen-

sions than other people did. How something was going on with us—something was shakin' it—on the fourth, fifth, and possibly sixth dimensions. Space and time and space-time and skin and hair and teeth. You can't say "pretty" to describe us. You can't say "beautiful." You can, however, look upon us and know true terror. The Halversons know. All of our friends and admirers know. Who are we? We are Ronnie and someone standing behind her, with hands on my shoulders, a voice in her ear, and sometimes we are someone standing inside her, with feet in her shoes, moving her around. We are Ronnie and we are her mom and we are every magazine clipping on how to charm and beautify, the tickle of a mascara wand on a tear duct, the burn of a waxed armpit. We watched Mini and Caroline, observed how shocked they were. Afraid, too. Ronnie could tell that they would not come up to her first. No? she said to her mother. No, she said. For a moment Ronnie considered rebellion. She rejected the idea. Those girls were from the bad old days. Look at her now. She would never go back. Mom was pushing us away from them. She was telling Ronnie to let them go. Ronnie watched Mini and Caroline recede. The tables, the tables of food and the chairs on either side of them, rushed toward us as their two skinny figures pinned and blurred. We both felt a moment of regret. She once loved them too, you know. Then her mother turned our head and we walked away.