

I keep having the same dream: I'm at the altar with Claude Kelei, the Hungarian kid who moved away in 4th grade after none of us would help him when he said he'd been molested. We're waiting. My mother's in the front pew. My father never shows. I want to tell Claude let's forget it, but don't have the nerve. He's been waiting so long, his whole body shakes. His skin is wrinkled and he looks rabid. We've been standing there for 10 years. The only way to wake up is to kick and scream in real life until the whole scene vanishes. Then I'm alone, in a sweat, under the covers in my dorm room.

I know why I still dream about Claude. It's because of his letters. Those stuffed yellow envelopes keep showing up in the campus mailbox, thanks to my mother. My mother always said he liked me. She has a fantasy of me marrying someone foreign, which is why she still forwards his mail. In the same envelope she tucks magazine ads featuring slinky women in the latest fashions, and wedding announcements for girls I never liked. It's annoying, but I don't have the heart to tell her to stop. Lately I just let the envelopes pile up in the mail room, hoping they get shipped to a dead letter office. I imagine a big incinerator, and those letters addressed to me being tossed in, one by one, to their silent cremation.

If only I'd told off Claude back in fourth grade. That day at school we watched the space shuttle launch on television. The first space shuttle ever—and the world's first reusable space craft. We were supposed to be impressed with the recycling, but all I

could think of were the trash heaps that piled up when mom didn't feel well. I didn't believe progress could be made with trash.

I got home that day to see the Empire State Building displayed on our kitchen table: a card with my name chopped up on the back in pasted-on, cut-up letters from different magazines. The glossy finish shimmered under our fake chandelier. The message was one word: "Remember?"

My stomach remained tight when I took it behind the garage and burned it. I knew the sender, and so did my mother. With her eerie sense of clairvoyance, she already had something to say about it.

"You're going to leave that poor boy hanging." She always said the same thing. I pictured Claude dangling from a tree with a noose around his neck, choked. Sometimes it was the only thing she'd say to me all week. Unless there wasn't a return letter on the table the next day. Then she'd say a lot. I was a loser. No one would ever love me. I deserved no one, because I had no manners. She'd usually break something, and hurt herself in the process. She was a terrible mother, she'd cry. Then she'd stay in bed for days, recovering. Being a bad mother just killed her.

During these episodes, I'd invite myself to friends' houses for dinner. It became easy to charm other families, slicing steak and telling jokes, while diverting questions about my mom's job that kept her working so late. When I got home mom would still be in bed and I'd bring her tea, whatever the hour. I got used to the drill. She'd stay in bed and life would be flat for a while until something small jarred her out of her funk.

Something like a letter.

“I’m not going to ask what’s in there, Polly,” my mother said once about a letter I hadn’t touched. I was in eighth grade and had just cut off all my hair. She painfully stirred a batch of peanut butter cookie dough, still in her robe, hair matted. She spoke in whispers. “But I *am* going to ask that a letter go back to that young man by next Saturday.” I knew that if I did what she asked, the refrigerator would be full again.

My mother liked that Claude was a boy and so persistent. She also liked the idea of befriending the foreign family after the tragedy. The testimonies in the papers carried on for weeks, describing the pants he wore, the kids in the house, the spaghetti-os they never ate for dinner. But mom never said whether or not she believed him. “Everyone has their burden,” she was fond of saying. She said it whenever conversations with neighbors at the grocery store became complicated. She said it so often, they almost came to expect it.

She meant that people were supposed to be discreet. People shouldn’t pry into other people’s business. And she lived by these rules. For example, she never said more about my dad than, “he left one day when you were two.” She was silent about his checks that came in the mail. She also never asked how I was doing at school—though I knew my marks had to be high. She didn’t let other kids call her by her first name, nor did she befriend Mr. E. like so many parents and students. She believed teachers were supposed to teach the kids, not make friends with them which I guess was true but Mr. E., everyone believed, was an exception.

My next door neighbor, Will, told me about Mr. E. He bragged about going to a nighttime Yankee game with him—a field trip with no other adults, just kids and Mr. E. Will’s parents let him do anything, but I didn’t believe him. So I watched out my

bedroom window. As the moon rose, a green Nova rounded the corner and slowly pulled up to the curb. Will bolted towards the car faster than I'd ever seen him run, his Yankee hat on backwards, smile as big as his face. Mr. E. waved from the front seat of the car. He wore a forward facing Yankee hat and a satisfied grin as the kids in the back opened the door and Will dove in on top of them, the last leaf in a pile.

According to babysitters, older brothers, and every kid who ever had him, Mr. E. wasn't just a teacher: he was a hero. His fourth grade class was the one place kids could learn and run amok at the same time. The classroom was rigged with quadraphonic speakers, a jukebox, a shag rug, and as many games as you could think of; a bunker in case, for some tragic reason, all the adults disappeared. By the time I was nine, I longed to witness his playful magic and legendary tickle tortures first hand. Mom, of course, didn't buy into it.

One night I told her how badly I wanted him for a teacher. She was in bed with the breakfast tray balanced on her lap. The laughter from the sitcom filled the room. At first her vacant stare didn't waver. Then a strange sound rose over the laugh track. It was something between a moan and a wail. The tray went flying and tea spilled onto the rug. Why was it that I always wanted something she couldn't give, she cried. I told her not to worry, that it was okay. I got a warm wet rag to scrub the tea off the rug. It was really no problem.

I would have gotten close to Mr. E. that year if it wasn't for Claude Kelei, with his cabbagey scent and weird Martian voice always looking for attention. Claude's mom was dead and his dad was about eighty years old. Their ochre-colored house two blocks away always smelled like stew. My mother sent me over to play with him one afternoon.

She'd met his dad after church around Christmas time; they had only lived in our town for two months. He was loading some Tinker Toys into his car donated by kids who didn't want them anymore. He told her in a soft voice that Claude would really like it a little better if he had some friends. Mom sent me over there the next afternoon, and Claude was waiting on the front steps for me.

It was a beautiful winter day but Claude led me into the living room, to a big black table half covered with old books in another language, probably Hungarian. The only games to play were puzzles made of wood and the Tinker Toys. The puzzles belonged to Claude's dad when he was a little boy in Hungary. Just looking at the scenes on the boxes-- villages full of people dressed in colorful, drapery clothing, hunters in a forest-- made me instantly sad, like I was starving and would never be fed something I recognized while at Claude's house. I checked the grandfather clock, dust-covered in the corner, but it said the wrong time.

Claude dumped the puzzle pieces onto the table and picked one up listlessly.

I started collecting all the pieces with red on them. "That's cheating," Claude said, once he noticed my strategy.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he mimicked his dad's pronunciation of every vowel, "you have to see what *shape* fits where, not what color."

I didn't understand his rules, but he still insisted I was doing it wrong. No natural light came into Claude's dining room, though there were plenty of windows and it was a beautiful day. Every piece of puzzle I snapped together he took apart. So to show him how it felt, I started taking his pieces apart. He began to cry. "Why don't you like me," he

wailed. At the sound of his cries, his dad flew into the room, clapped his hands together and said in his wavering voice “Okay, Polly, it is time for you to go to your home.” I stiffened when Claude hugged me, afraid for a moment I would turn into a Hungarian kid, too.

By fourth grade most of us already had our playmates and had seen each other at our best and worst: we saw each other pee in class, throw up during birthday parties, pull a team together in order to win kickball. Through natural selection, the class divided into who was a friend and who was just a kid. Claude arrived in the middle of second grade, but the dividing had already taken place. He immediately dropped into the leftover pile. Even after two years he was still new, which told most of us he was just a kid.

My mom insisted we become friends. We had nothing in common, except one parent and Mr. E.’s reading class. Reading class was an experiment that combined the smart kids like me with the dumb kids. Claude wasn’t dumb. He just couldn’t speak English very well, and so was shuffled into the “slow” category with Greg W., who was on the brink of special Ed.

But Mr. E. even taught Greg W. to read. He did it by pretending he was an Opera Singer, and sang really loud, bad opera in class until Greg W. couldn’t stand it anymore and started reading from *Black Beauty*. It was a miracle.

To celebrate, Mr. E. had the entire class clap and chant: G-R-E-G, G-R-E-G. Every time I missed a clap or took a rest from chanting, Mr. E. found my eyes. He waved his hands like a mad conductor until I started again. We kept it up, spilling off our seats onto the shag rug in hysterics. I couldn’t believe this was learning, this silly thrill that made me sweat and feel a little sick. I imagined telling mom about it, and her angrily

withdrawing me from the school. I imagined her strong and vibrant in the mornings, with a pencil and notebook intending to teach me herself. By noon she would be exhausted, draped over the couch, keeping me captive until the sun went down and I could escape to bed.

When teachers heard Greg W. was reading, they looked to Mr. E. with new admiration. The kind more suitable for a rescue fire marshall or the cowboy who runs the villain out of town. At the Teacher of the Year Awards, Mr. E. held the plaque heroically over his head repeating his favorite saying, “It’s not me who deserves this award, it’s your kids.”

Somehow he knew. It was like he had an x-ray vision that saw all of us and our struggles. There weren’t a lot of great beings like Mr. E., but now that I had found one, I wasn’t going to miss my chance.

The postcards started coming six months later, after the trial, Mr. E.’s plea of guilty, and his flee to Turkey. For the first year Claude sent postcards of the Empire State Building; sometimes close-ups of the whole building, or just of the top lit up green for St. Patrick’s Day. On the back his messages were forceful, one or two sentences at most. *Why won’t you answer*, and *You haven’t told*. He sounded more Hungarian now that his dad home schooled him. By fifth grade I thought about sending a postcard back in black magic marker *Forget It*, but I never had the guts. At some point I remember thinking, if I don’t read them they’ll go away. When they didn’t go away, I still hoped they eventually would. Of course, they didn’t.

By sixth grade Claude’s postcards had turned to letters—long and raving. Sometimes I wouldn’t hear anything for six months, and felt free. But then I’d get a

postcard again, one drawn over with thin, permanent markers. Once he drew a pretty good King Kong hanging off the top of a building, sweeping his monkey hand down to two little stick figures, one with long hair, which was me, and one with a cowboy hat, which was him.

He was talking about the class trip, the one I had to lie about in order to go on. My elaborate tale to mom described a full day of apple picking at Tices Farms with Ann B. and her family. Her eyes grew weary that morning as she relented, then stumbled back to bed. I told Mr. E. to pick me up at the broken bus bench on a corner four blocks from my house. If he questioned the pick up location, I was ready to tell him because it was my favorite bench, which it was. I loved the chipped paint, the split seat, and how even as it crumbled it was still a functioning bench--still useful, still important. But he never asked.

That morning the air was warm, and the light rain blurred the edges of every tree, house and car I looked at on the way to the bench. No other cars passed me as I waited, and I almost wondered if Mr. E. and his magical world would remember to pick me up. Then the green Nova rounded the corner. I thought I would be excited. Nervousness filled me as it crept to a stop in front of my bench. In the back were Ann B. and two other lucky kids chosen for this trip, squirming excitedly. Strapped in the front seat, primely situated next to Mr. E. sat Claude, wearing the permanent frown of being stuck on the wrong bus.

Mr. E. leapt out of the car and greeted me with a squeeze on the shoulder. His grip was hard and awkward.

“We’re just getting started, Polly, but before we go any further, let’s look in the trunk.” In the backseat Ann B. fought happily for leg room with the others. I followed Mr.

E. The trunk clicked open. Inside I stared into a half dozen grocery bags filled to the brim with Mary Jane's, Pixie Styx, Peanut Butter Cups and Snickers Bars.

“Go ahead,” Mr. E. said. “Use two hands.”

Though there was no way she could see, I heard my mother's shriek of horror. The car shook with sugared kids, alive and accustomed to freedom. I reached forward and grabbed handfuls of everything, feeling like a thief. Mr. E. slammed the trunk. A slow grin of approval crossed his face. I had done it, now. Joined the team. By touching the candy, I was in. It was that easy.

I climbed over the kids in the backseat and my candy fell on the floor, all over the seats, in between people's legs. Soon the floor of the car would become a sea of sweets and wrappers, some half eaten chocolates, some still wrapped and waiting for later. I crammed in behind Claude, who sat still, his arms crossed over his chest.

“We're off!” Mr. E. yelled, accelerating slowly. “Now where are we going again?” We all cheered as he drove around local streets, none of which, I noticed, led us to the George Washington Bridge. We were going the back way, Mr. E. told us. We weren't in a rush, were we? No, we all screamed. We rambled first through our town, passing all of the major sights, to which Mr. E. pointed and told us to shout rude words like, “Pansy!” and “Fart!” right at the moment we passed in front. It was fun, I found, to shout these words out the window. To scream at the top of our lungs. After each sight I unwrapped another piece of candy to pop in my mouth, for fuel. We must have passed through five different towns past schools, horse stables, cemeteries and parks turning left, going in reverse, driving on the sidewalk. Through the blur and chaos I felt a hole inside of me closing. I had been right all along to lie.

After about thirty minutes our candy was gone and only one or two of us yelled each time we passed a school or a library. Everyone looked really stupid all of a sudden. We needed to load up again from the trunk.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Mr. E. called to us as he turned onto the highway. “Who wants hot dogs?”

“Yeah!” we screamed, weakly. Out the window billboards sped past near where mom got her car washed, a place I considered far away. Kids called out the different ways we liked our wieners: extra catsup, chili-cheese, chicken fried, mustard and onions, mustard and sauerkraut, plain on a bun. The words made me salivate, though I’d just eaten my fill of candy and felt a little sick. But something about lunch being offered by Mr. E. made me hungry for it. When Mr. E. stuck out his finger into the backseat and asked, “Hey look, I found a hotdog. Who wants it?” three of us lunged at the chubby pointer. Someone even took a bite.

Within minutes we pulled into the parking lot at Hiram’s, a famous dog joint on the highway about ten minutes from the George Washington Bridge. The wind blew hard but we sat outside devouring our lunch (Mr. E. ordered 12 hotdogs for five of us). Above the trees loomed the New York City skyline. The Empire State Building witnessed our pit stop. After half a hotdog, I felt sick. The destination seemed too far, we hadn’t even gotten there yet and already the trip was too long. I watched Claude eat the hotdog bun first, leaving the wiener. Everything about him was retarded. The trip would have been so much better without him.

Mr. E. raised his index finger to the park across the street and, like zombies, we followed his lead.

“Who wants to take a few death rounds on the merry-go-round?” he said. The boys looked at each other and leapt up from the picnic table. The half eaten dogs remained scattered, along with cups, used napkins, and whatever else we had wanted twenty minutes ago. Mr. E. ignored the cross walk and marched out into the street. He held up his hands like a crossing guard, and all the kids tore across the street wherever they wanted. Except for me, I walked to the crosswalk. Claude lagged behind me.

“Polly, what’s a death round?” he asked in his little Martian voice.

I told Claude to get on the merry-go-round and find out what a death round was for himself.

The sun shined brightly on the park, revealing the decay. The chains of the swings were knotted together and the slide had been bashed in by someone bored and destructive. My classmates lined up beside the merry go round, the only thing that worked. Mr. E. lifted the boys into the sky before placing them on the red and blue platform. He shuffled around the ride, pushing each rail with his whole body weight. Dust swirled where the grass was long gone.

I climbed up on top of a cement cylinder for a good view. Mr. E. kept pushing, laughing, and shouting out jokes. The kids were wobbling, hanging on for dear life. Their mouths contorted from smiles to screams. There was no way to stop unless Mr. E. stopped pushing. To look at their eyes, their noses, their teeth and their widespread fingers, you could say their whole bodies—separate and clenched and distinct—were alive. You could say that they loved the game so much, it would be impossible to ever say otherwise.

When Claude's hotdog left his mouth everyone instinctively backed away from the orange mixture. But not Mr. E. He stepped towards the merry go round, heroically grabbed Claude off the still spinning ride, and lifted him high in the air. I thought Claude was going to hurl again right on Mr. E.'s head, and I silently egged him on. But instead when Mr. E. placed him standing on the bench, all Claude did was cry.

Mr. E. snapped into action. He placed the back of his fat hand gently on Claude's forehead. "No temperature," he said in a dopey voice. The other kids laughed. Claude's mouthed closed and he tried to steady his breathing.

I stood up. "Mr. E., are we ever going to the Empire State Building?" I expected all the kids to snap out of it and remember what we were supposed to be doing. The reason why I had lied, had risked sending my mom into weeks of illness, was not to watch Claude get all the love and attention.

But this was not the right question to ask. Everyone stared at me like I was crazy.

"Can't you see a good thing when it bonks you on the head?" Ross W. whispered. Even Claude, as his neck and shoulders were being kneaded, furrowed his brow at my request to change the mood.

"Well," Mr. E. checked the sky. "It still looks a little cloudy to me. What do you think?"

Everyone looked at one another, uncertain.

"What do you think, Claude?" Mr. E. said, lightly poking him in the belly.

Claude's hands jerked to where Mr. E. had touched, then fast fell away. No one had ever asked him what he thought before. Adults weren't supposed to change the plan

according to what the kids thought. Real adults decided what would happen and the kids got pulled along.

When someone asked what time it was, Mr. E. didn't tell us the time. "How about my house for games and dinner instead?" he asked.

A few kids yelled supporting sounds of encouragement. Mr. E. beamed. Claude lifted his arms like a child does to his mother. Mr. E. scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. They began a march to the car, with the other kids cheering behind Claude's dangling torso.

This is the part when I started watching the night like I was watching a movie.

We arrived in front of a flat roofed, one level ranch house after a half hour of driving. Dusk cloaked the sky. Inside his house Mr. E. had the same things other adults had; a dark wood dining room table with a plastic table cloth, a china cabinet filled with dishes, a green fabric couch and brown lazy chair. None of the furniture had scratches or seat prints on them. "Do you really live here?" I asked him, laughing.

"All by my lonesome," he said loud enough for the group to hear. But I was the only one who looked at him. He pressed my nose like it was a special button. I squealed, I remember, because I wanted him to do it again.

We scattered in the house, running into the other three rooms, the den, the bedroom, the bathroom, in search of toys or records, things that we would like. We found lots of special edition action figures, oversized stuffed animals, magazines and art supplies in what looked like a play room. Mr. E. disappeared into his bedroom, he said, to change. When he returned he wore balloon pants and a t-shirt. A yellow hat with frogs on it topped his head. We stared at him, his toys in our hands, never expecting to see Mr. E.

wearing anything but his teaching outfits. He reminded me of a giant fourth grader, the kid who always had candy and lots of friends.

“I’ve got a game I think you all might like,” he said.

He explained how to play Scary Monster in the Dark, but my mind had returned to mom. It was getting late. I needed to call and tell another lie about not coming home for dinner. If she found out the truth, she’d be in bed for weeks. None of my friends would be able to come to the house. This might be my last outing. I swallowed, burying the problem with my other secrets of stolen cookies and t.v. sneaking, searching the photo boxes for pictures of dad. But this was heavier and darker than anything I had ever tried to hide. I looked to Claude for support.

“Ride ‘em, cowboy!” he yelled wildly. He stood in the middle of the den, his hands on his hips. He had found a man-sized cowboy outfit, which he had pulled on in the bathroom. Now he flapped the sleeves above his head. The other kids ignored him.

“Ride ‘em Cowboy,” Claude said louder. All he wanted to do was have fun, like all of us. I stood slightly behind him, placed a beach pail on my head and flapped my sleeves, mouthing Claude’s words just after he said them. The other kids burst into laughter. I remember thinking that I was so much luckier than Claude—that no matter what happened to me, I would never be ignored like a Hungarian kid.

Mr. E. called our attention. It was time to learn how to play.

The way the game worked best, Mr. E. said, was if we turned off all the lights. The four of us were to hide while Mr. E. closed his eyes and counted. He said counting turned him into a Scary Monster and if we ran safely to home base we would get a surprise. As the counting began, I followed Claude into the den.

“Hey,” I said as he crouched to crawl under the bed. “Don’t you think we should get home?”

Claude stuck his tongue out at me and crawled under the bed. I followed him under there and pushed his leg out of the way. He pushed it back. I was surprised that he could do something so aggressive.

“Hey,” I said. “Don’t forget who your only friend is. Just because Mr. E. likes you today, doesn’t mean he’s going to like you tomorrow.”

Even in the dark of under the bed, I saw Claude’s face fall and was immediately sorry. He was fragile. His eyes grew wide and I could see a whole life of loneliness. We had more in common than he knew. I went to put my arm around him but he squirmed out from under the bed so quickly, the heat off his body shocked me in the close air.

The door burst open and in came Mr. E., a wolf mask on over his head with the yellow frog hat on top. He extended his arms, fingers flared, towards Claude who sat down in resignation. It was like his legs melted. Mr. E. dropped his scary monster arms and crouched down beside Claude. He kept his mask on. I watched from under the bed.

“Do you like the cowboy outfit?” Mr. E.’s voice sounded muffled through the mask.

“It’s too big,” Claude said in his wavery Martian voice. I stared at Mr. E. hoping he would notice me under the bed. I could see his eyes through the little holes in the mask. I couldn’t see any of the silliness and excitement that was usually there.

Mr. E. stared fixedly at Claude. “I’ll trade you the wolf mask for the cowboy outfit.”

I remember thinking it was an excellent trade. When Claude started unbuttoning his shirt, and then his pants, I was still convinced he was doing the right thing. Mr. E. didn't take off his wolf mask. Instead he helped Claude out of the shirt.

“Quickly,” he said. “We can switch outfits before the others catch on. Then you can be the scary monster.”

Excitedly, Claude threw the cowboy shirt onto the ground and, bare armed, began fumbling with his pants. When I saw his egg colored skin, my stomach started to clench. Under the bed I had been hoping it was still possible for the day to end normally. That at any minute this game would stop, the wolf mask would drop to the ground, and Mr. E. would announce it was time for all of us to go home. My mom would be out of bed when Ann B.'s parents dropped me of. I wouldn't have to tell them about how Mr. E. pulled down Claude's copper zipper, and instead of helping him step out of the trousers he pulled from Claude's underpants his small, scared Thing.

I told my mother the day ended with a hot apple cider around a picnic table with Ann B. and her family. I didn't tell her—or the other kids—I saw Mr. E. touch Claude Kelei's Thing. Once you tell one secret, the rest come tumbling out unordered, without censorship, like farts or angry words. And even if you keep the secrets safe, you still remember when they happened the first time, before they became secrets. Remembering something doesn't just happen once. It happens again and again, like a film reel that runs in the corner of your brain. Even if you sink it down deep like I did, beneath years of middle school, friends' birthday parties and bar mitzvahs, taking mom to the doctor, first kisses, strip poker, high school graduation, scholarship applications, the woods at night

with the guidance counselor, and buying a one way bus ticket to college, the reel still plays like it's all happening, still, for the first time ever.

A ruckus in the kitchen broke Mr. E. out of his trance. He patted Claude on the bottom and sailed out the door to tend to the other kids. Once he was gone Claude and I were alone in the room together. Except for the fact that his pants were down it was almost as if nothing had happened.

I told myself I'd be nice to Claude on Monday at school. But he never showed up. Neither did Mr. E. The days began to crumble. Our teacher got called to an emergency meeting. At large in the classroom, kids shrieked when they saw the police walk by in blue uniforms, and orange tape go up over Mr. E.'s classroom door. A few of us were called down to the principal's office where a police man gave us a talk about telling the truth. The whole time I remember telling myself that telling the truth was for other people. People who didn't have a vault of secrets that would spring open, spilling out the exact number of weeks in bed it took for mom to start smelling, and how many nights I fell asleep crying, how fast I would become just like Claude Kelei, the kid nobody liked.

The custodians emptied Mr. E.'s room of the gumball machine, the jukebox, the shag rug, dying plants, and leather couches by piling it all on the curbside. The trial was over and Mr. E. pleaded guilty. I couldn't believe he was gone. No one ever saw Mr. E or Claude again. By ratting on Mr. E.—bringing him to trial—Claude became the town villain. He had to move away, but that didn't help his reputation. For the rest of junior high Claude's name became a dirty word. Anytime someone wanted attention, got hurt, threw up, or started to stand up against the crowd, they were called "Claude" and made

fun of for days at a time. At first I felt bad about not defending him, but then I figured it was his burden to bear.

“We all have our burdens,” I remember mom saying when I told her Claude wouldn’t stop bothering me. Sometimes she reminded me of the wise, slightly evil hag in legends, the way she knew things about the future and did nothing to change the course of action, even though she had the power.

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Just like the dream I used to have, none of this ended the way I thought it would. Campus security only knocked on people’s doors who were in serious trouble, or who had a family tragedy. Not on my door, at 11pm, with the address of the institution 17 miles outside of my hometown, and a plane ticket for a flight at dawn. The smoothness of the night air, security’s hushed tones, and my escort to the airport seemed like a continuation of that film that started nine years ago. On the plane I read the accident report, the levels of gas in the house, which ribs broke when she fell. I told the cab driver the address of the institution. It was a place all the kids used to make fun of; when we called each other retards and escapees from “the Institution” we were talking about this place. In fact, the building looked a lot like a big library—white, stately, with a nice lawn that probably never had a single weed in it.

“Are you getting married?” mom asked as soon as I entered. She was thinner, her hair tufted and frayed and more pink colored than the red I remembered. She smiled widely like a crazy angel.

“No mom, I’m in college.” She looked disappointed. “And I will never, ever marry Claude Kelei.” As soon as I said it, I wanted to find an empty room with a clean bed, full of white sheets, and sleep for nine years.

I checked the mail room the first day I got back on campus. There was one letter dated three weeks earlier. I opened it. It was stuffed with almost a dozen postcards from Claude. I turned one over that had a photograph by Weejee—one of a car wreck with a dead kid in the back seat. The word BITCH glared at me. I stuffed it back in the envelope. With the return address I could track down the phone number. And the call would be easy. The words already flew out of me, outloud, right there in campus mail, all the way up the hill back to my dorm room. There was nothing to be angry about anymore. Terrible things happen to everyone. There’s no reason for it. It’s just the way it is.