

## THE ESSENTIALS

### LAURI ANDERSON ALFORD

The summer of the dust storms was the summer Claudia stopped eating. She sat in a rocker by the window with her feet tucked under her body, her knee as sharp as the pointy end of a heart. Outside, dirt swirled in red gusts, rocking our trailer and sending our mutt scrambling under its rusty skirt. I tried everything. I brought her tangerines from a highway stand and Hershey bars from the 7-Eleven on the corner. I crossed the field that separated our park from the gated subdivision to the north and brought her fallen pecans in the pouch I made of my shirt. Still, she wouldn't eat. All night the windows rattled in their frames, and in the morning when I woke, my sheets were gritty, and Claudia was still asleep in her chair.

My father stayed away. He picked up extra shifts at the rig and worked long into the night, sometimes sleeping in the cab of his truck. When he came home, it was only to shower and shave and leave a stack of bills for food and rent and electric. I was supposed to be in summer school, having "stupendously" failed the seventh grade, in the words of my guidance counselor, Mrs. Loveless. But I couldn't ever make myself stay past ten o'clock. Every morning, when they herded us into the giant cafeteria and made us scribble into a packet of worksheets, I stayed for half an hour and then slipped my packet into the waistband of my jeans and pretended to go to the bathroom.

Then I rode my bike home. I never got caught. None of the teachers wanted to be there, either.

Once, when I was supposed to be at school, I saw my father take his hat in his hands and kneel before Claudia, laying his head in her lap. She ran her hands over his bald spot and bent to kiss it. Then he rose to leave again. In the kitchen, I caught him by the arm. "I've been writing that letter," I said. In truth, I'd finished it and was keeping it in the top drawer of my nightstand. I'd started it out, To the Parent or Guardian of Claudia Reynolds, which is how all my letters from school came. I'd even found an address on an old greeting card in Claudia's dresser.

*Dear Claudia, the card read, Try to be good to yourself. Love, Mother and Daddy.*

My father turned slowly, seeming to notice me for the first time in weeks. "Why aren't you in school?"

"Her people should know she's sick," I said. "They don't even know about the baby."

He dropped his head. "Give her a couple more weeks." He moved toward the door and paused, his hand on the knob. "And don't let her hear you call it that. It wasn't a baby yet." When he reached his truck, he climbed inside and then rolled down the window. "School tomorrow!" he shouted at me across the dead yard. I gave him the thumbs-up sign, but both of us knew he wouldn't be around in the morning to make me go.

The summer itself seemed to dry up and crack open. On the news, grassfires swept through the fields east of town. The reporter at the edge of the screen gripped her microphone while her hair swirled upward in a giant wave. Smoke drifted through the park, and I stuffed towels around the doors and windows. Still, the house filled with a smell like burning. Sometimes, I heard a knocking like someone was at the door, but it was only the wind. Still, I couldn't shake the idea that it was trying to get in, that if I let it, it

would rush across the threshold, ghosting our curtains and sweeping Claudia's collection of souvenir shot glasses from its shelf.

If Claudia moved from her chair, it must have been while I slept. Sometimes I'd find her wet footprints on the bathroom rug or her shucked underwear in the corner. Otherwise, she sat and rocked. I knew what it meant. Maybe not that day, but one day, she would disappear, having shriveled and dried out, turned to dust and slipped through the cracks in the linoleum. Or maybe she would just walk out the door. It didn't matter how. Eventually she would become like everything else: lost in the wind.

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Houston was where we found Claudia. Then, my father was working offshore, twenty days on, twenty days off. I was eleven, old enough to take care of myself. During his twenty-on, I stayed in our apartment on the outskirts of the city with the upstairs landlady looking in. I tried to go to school, really I did. But I'd never been very good at it. I never had the right hair or the right clothes. I got distracted easily, and some things it didn't make any sense to learn. What I wanted to learn was how to balance a checkbook or clean an oven or how to know which switch to flip on the breaker. Our downstairs neighbor got cable for free from a secret box. I wanted to know where did he get that box, and what happened if anybody found out. What we learned instead were protons and acid rain and does your subject agree with your verb. But then Claudia came along, and she seemed to have most of the answers I needed, aside from the cleaning ones. She said we weren't the kind of people who stooped, so she used some of her trust fund money to hire a maid. But when Claudia wasn't looking, I asked the maid to show me how to clean an oven anyway. If I've learned one lesson from school, it's that good things don't last. For

example: real soda in the vending machine. For example: Old Yeller. For example: the ozone.

My father met Claudia at a bar, a dive, she would sometimes say, though I got the feeling it was only a dive to her. She was a college girl, twenty-two, just finished her junior year and itching to do some real living, is what she said. The night they met was the first night of my father's twenty-off. She drove him home in her shiny white car and never really left.

Used to, Claudia would teach me things. The Essentials, she called them. How to paint the nails on your right hand. How to pretend to take a shot. How to shave your legs at the sink. She taught me all the names of the characters on *The Young and The Restless* and the words to her sorority's loyalty pledge. School, she said, was peripheral. "I've been going to school my whole life, and look . . ." She raised her arms to the room. "Here I am in the same place as you."

The next week, she pretended to be my mother and signed me out of school for good. "Home school," she said. "There's something I can get my head around." After that, I had daily lessons in Restaurant Etiquette (Wear something dangerous. Then it won't matter which fork you use.) and Body Hair Maintenance (You *pluck* a chicken. Ladies *tweeze*.) and once a week, a quiz over sexy movie men (The answer was always Johnny Depp.). There were shorter seminars, too: Retail 101, Drink Mixology, and, of course, Dancing.

In the living room, with all the furniture pushed against the walls, I learned to waltz and two-step and jitterbug. Claudia, her pajama pants hiked up around her knees, demonstrated the electric slide and then pulled me in to join. Later, I wouldn't remember the steps, which way to turn, how long to pause. Only this: Claudia's hand on my shoulder, her hips grazing mine, the way she laughed and spun and clapped her hands when the song ended, how she held me to her, and I could feel her heart beneath her clothes and skin and ribs.

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Technically, I wasn't old enough to have a job, but the lady who ran the park's laundromat—her name was Peg—said I had an old soul and was it okay if she paid me in cash, and then she handed me the key to the closet that held the soap and softener. Every afternoon, I walked past the row of trailers and the rusted playground equipment to the laundromat, the only building in the park that wasn't on wheels. It was built from cinder blocks that had been painted a deep forest green, but for some time, the paint had been peeling away in patches to reveal the concrete blocks beneath, giving it the look of camouflage.

Whenever I opened the door, I felt like I used to when Claudia would call to me from the bathtub to fetch her another wine cooler—the rush of wet air, the smell of something getting clean. On days when the wind sent our trashcans careening down the road and loosened the stop sign from its stake, when dirt took the paint off cars and tumbleweeds collected on our porch, the laundromat was balmy and still. Sometimes, looking out at the entrance to the park and the road beyond, I felt like I was part of two worlds at once—the dried-up one where Claudia and my father lived, and the one where the air was heavy and sweet and the machines drowned out the wind.

Once a week, Peg came in to collect the quarters from the machines and counted out my share, sliding them to me across the counter. Most days, she left me alone. I didn't mind. There wasn't much to keep track of. I Windexed the front windows and cleaned out the lint traps and made sure no one sat on the washers, but mostly I helped Carl, the maintenance man, water his plants.

In another life, Carl said, he'd owned a nursery specializing in rare plants, which he sold to rich people, I assumed, people with money to spend on something that would eventually die. But Carl said he made good money, and he liked working with his hands, the sun on his back, that good kind of

sweat at his collar. He didn't have a wife or kids; he didn't have a big house or a fancy car, but he had a little money saved, and he had the nursery. That was, until he went to prison for killing his brother Dusty with a gardener's spade to the jugular.

It didn't matter that Carl thought Dusty was an intruder, or that Dusty was so tweaked out on meth, he thought Carl was growing psychedelics in the greenhouse. It didn't matter that Carl was working late, paying bills, or that the news had been reporting a rash of break-ins, to lock your doors, set your alarms. It didn't matter that Dusty ate every single one of Carl's organic chanterelles and was in the process of spraying the rest of the plants with urine. What matters is that Carl caught a stranger in the beam of his flashlight.

Carl said not to tell anybody about Dusty and the greenhouse, that when people found out they treated him differently, like he was some kind of murderer. I asked him why he'd decided to tell me of all people, and he said, "Because you're a good listener." Although it might have been because I didn't have anyone to tell besides Claudia, and she wasn't exactly up to having conversations.

Claudia and I hadn't spoken in weeks, and I worried about her all the time. If my mother were here, she would gather Claudia up—no backtalking—and sit her down at the kitchen table with a bowl of oatmeal and wouldn't let her leave until she'd eaten at least half. But if my mother were here, then Claudia wouldn't be, and so I felt bad about wishing for her when it meant we'd have never met Claudia, who was nothing like a mother, but something like a friend.

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Before here was Houston, and before Houston was Mobile, and before that, Tallahassee. Before Tallahassee was my mother and a house with a backyard and days and days of no lumps and then finally a day with one—in her left breast, the size of

a cashew. After she died, we moved away from the house that smelled too much like her and my father took a job off-shore and I started signing my own field-trip releases. Once, I made an A on spelling test. Once, I placed first in a field-day race.

But with Claudia everything was different.

The day we left Houston was the day after Claudia found out she was pregnant. They were up all night, Claudia and my dad, arguing about what to do. She wanted to get married. She wanted my father to find another job that didn't take him away so often or for so long. My father must have wanted those same things, too—at least a little—because he didn't put up much of a fight. By morning, when they stepped from their room, Claudia's cheeks were rosy and my father had a smile on his face, though his eyes seemed different. His pupils darted around the room like the birds I'd seen caught inside Wal-Mart, cutting and diving through the rafters as if there was no place safe to land.

That day, we loaded our few belongings into the back of my dad's truck and set off across the state chasing a lead he had on a job, a rig in West Texas, a sub-lease on a trailer. Claudia and I followed behind my father's truck in her shiny white car, and I felt like we were outlaws, but the good kind, running toward something instead of away.

Claudia was so excited about the baby, she didn't seem to mind that the trailer was small and dirty and old or that the yard was tree-less and yellow. She just went to work on the baby's room, using her trust-fund money to fix it up with pink paint and expensive bedding. She told me it was a girl, even though she wasn't yet showing, and we flipped through a baby name book together. *Sarah, Allison, Rebecca*. Those names were too common. Claudia wanted a name with flair, something to make people look twice, something French maybe. *Genevieve, Estrella, Nicolette*. I wanted whatever Claudia wanted, and for a little while everything seemed like it was going to be okay. We swept the dirt out of the trailer and

stocked the refrigerator with healthy stuff no one wanted to eat and Claudia bought a patio set for the carport.

But then the wind started, slow at first, just enough to make a mess of your hair and send your skirt flying up. But it got worse. On accident, we left the baby name book outside, and the wind carried it off. I found pages all over the park—*Brittany, Beatrice, Belle*—stuck to the fence and wrapped around the rusted monkey bars. The next week the lady at the bank said Claudia's trust fund had been suspended, the funds frozen. I woke not long after that to find the chairs from the patio set in the next yard over. I went scrambling to get them back, and that's when I heard Claudia shrieking from inside the trailer.

The door to the bathroom was locked. She wouldn't let me inside. "Call you father," was all she would say. "Call him now."

When he finally showed up and Claudia let him inside, I tried hard to listen to what they were saying, but all I could hear was my father's murmurings and Claudia's sharp sobs. He carried her from the bathroom and buckled her into his truck and drove away. When they returned the next morning, Claudia was wearing a hospital gown, and my father set her up in a chair by the window, which is where she stayed. Outside, the sky looked like it was boiling.

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Mid-afternoon when things were slow at the laundromat, I'd join Carl in his little makeshift office, and he'd tell me stories about all the things his brother Dusty had ever stolen from him. So far I'd counted two bicycles, a car, a set of golf clubs, a fiancé, and a little abandoned Labrador mix Carl had fed with a bottle until Dusty saw it. According to Carl, there was just something about Dusty, something sad and a little lost. "People were drawn to him," Carl said. "They were always trying to make him happy." The dog went willingly. And maybe the girl,

too.

If his mood was right, Carl would tell me about the night Dusty died. Once, when we were under a tornado watch, and the noon sky turned black and the wind shook the power lines until the lights went out, we huddled in the doorway of Carl's office. The dryers had stopped humming and the laundromat was eerily quiet, except for the low roar of the wind. I tried not to think about Claudia in our trailer, how I imagined she wouldn't move from the window even if the roof were tearing away. I could tell Carl was scared, too, because he started talking, and he didn't stop until the lights came back on, and the machines remembered their turning. In the dark, he told me about that night, how in one second, the man in his flashlight's beam was a stranger, and in the next, it was Dusty, except that his throat was carved out. Carl told me about the blood, which I didn't like to think about, but which was everywhere: all over the floor, all over Carl, splattered all over the tall glass of the greenhouse.

Once Carl realized what he'd done, he took off. He drove until his car ran out of gas and then laid out for two days in somebody's sunflower field where the blooms were as big as his head. I thought about this a lot: the blooms, how they must have looked like a thousand upturned faces. This is something Claudia would have liked to hear about, how he slept on the ground between their stalks and how he felt like they were guarding him, that somehow they knew that Carl was only trying to protect his life's work. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe Claudia wouldn't care.

Finally, half eaten alive by mosquitoes and hunger and guilt, he stumbled back to his greenhouse expecting to walk into a crime scene with caution tape and a chalked outline, but everything was quiet. The police had come and gone. Someone had washed away the blood.

Carl knelt where Dusty's body had been. He knew he should say a prayer, and he was thinking of what to say, how

he was sorry and angry and embarrassed, how Dusty deserved better, even if he was a fool, but from somewhere in the back of the greenhouse, he heard a noise, footsteps. When he turned, he saw a woman. Her face was streaked with mascara. Her hair was falling from its bun. They stared at each other, and Carl was aware for the first time of his blood-stained clothes.

"Peg," he said. He'd only met her once—Peg swallowed in lace up to her chin, Dusty swaying so bad through the ceremony that Carl had to hold him upright, had to show him which finger the ring went on.

Peg turned her face away. "He wasn't a good man," she said, "but that doesn't mean he deserved it."

Carl didn't know what to say. He watched Peg go, and then he sat for a while in the steamy greenhouse. When morning came, Carl did the only thing he could: he went to the police station and turned himself in. Then, he spent the next ten years writing Peg a letter a day and feeling terrible about what he'd done. Once he was free, he went to see her where she was living in Dusty's old trailer, and when she came to the door in a housedress with no bra underneath and her hair—the same hair but with a little gray mixed in—curling at her temples, Carl could see he'd always loved Peg, and he told her that flat out, him standing on her front steps, her with a dishtowel thrown over her shoulder.

"What did she say?" is what I always asked Carl at this point in the story. Carl would take off his baseball cap and run his hand across his sweaty bald spot. If he'd already opened a beer, he'd take a long drink, and I'd count the times his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"I forgot," he always said after a good long time. "You tell the rest." And so I told him what Peg had told me, that she'd taken a cigarette from the pocket of her housedress and took her time lighting it while Carl waited for an answer. She took three long drags, blowing the smoke over Carl's head, and then

stubbed out her cigarette on the doorframe and tossed the butt into the yard. Then, she opened the door a little wider and—this was my favorite part—she snapped her fingers twice and told him to “get on up” before she changed her mind. As Carl hurried past, she gave his rump a little pat.

That’s how Carl ended up in the park living the life Dusty left behind. He sat in Dusty’s old recliner and slept in Dusty’s old bed and found that Dusty’s old clothes fit him just fine. He got Dusty’s old job at the laundromat, and once he discovered the conditions were right—how the air was moist from the washers and warm from the dryers, how the light tunneled in through the big front windows—he brought in some shelves and set up a miniature greenhouse in the vestibule where he kept his tools and extra parts.

On days when things were slow, Carl taught me about plants. I learned how aloe helps with itch and how marigold leaves can cure stomach cramps. I learned that rosewater trickled into the ear can cure infection and that anise, crushed and stewed, can stimulate the appetite. When I heard this, I told Carl about Claudia, and he fixed up some dried blossoms to steep in hot water.

“It won’t work right away,” he said. “But give her some time.”

My father had told me this, too, to give her some time, but what he and Carl didn’t understand was that Claudia didn’t have a lot of time. She was *dying*. Not all at once like Dusty, but a little bit every day, and I wasn’t willing to watch that happen. Maybe I’d seen it before with my mother. Maybe I’d watched her waste away from the sickness and the drugs and the terrible hospital food while my father was gone, working or hiding or whatever he wanted to call it, just like he was doing now. Maybe it was me alone who sat beside her stroking her hair until I realized her chest had stopped moving up and down. I didn’t like to think about it, but sometimes it came over

me, and later I'd realize I had been standing still as a statue in the laundromat with a ball of lint in my hand, looking straight at Carl, but seeing instead my mother in her hospital bed in the moment before the nurses came in, when I could still pretend it hadn't happened yet.

At home, I steeped the leaves and set the mug on the windowsill next to Claudia, the steam making a wet circle on the glass. I held my breath while she brought the mug to her lips.

*Dear Claudia*, the card had said, *Try to be good to yourself.*

She paused. She sniffed and made a sour face. "Smells like cat piss," she said and set the mug back down.

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When my father was away, and Claudia was sleeping, I sometimes passed my evenings with Carl and Peg. They had a big TV and brand-name chips and a huge sofa in the shape of a U that took up most of the living room. Sometimes I'd fall asleep watching Animal Planet or some other channel we didn't get at home, and I'd wake up alone on the sofa, Carl and Peg having gone off to their bedroom. Usually I snuck out, locking the door behind me and hurrying across the park to our trailer, but once, when it was extra late and I was the kind of tired that makes your legs not work, I decided to stay. No one would miss me anyway. I turned the volume low on the TV and snuggled down into the sofa and tried to sleep, but it wasn't long before I heard noises coming from Carl and Peg's room.

I knew sex when I heard it. Claudia and my father used to do it all the time when they thought I couldn't hear. Usually all it amounted to were several kinds of sighing and the creaking of the mattress. But that night at Carl and Peg's I heard something more than noises. I sat up on the sofa and craned my neck toward the bedroom. Carl was huffing like he was pushing a wheelbarrow up a steep hill, and Peg was saying

something, soft at first, but then louder and louder, as if she were hurling the words, as if they were dangerous. I should have gone, but I couldn't move. I crept down the hall. And then Peg's words became clearer. I laid my head on the floor, trying to see under the crack in the door. "Oh Dusty, oh Dusty!" she was saying. And then I heard Carl's voice in return, hard as gravel: "Say it, Peg. Tell me my name. Tell me!"

I scrambled out the door and across the park, dodging plastic water bottles and patio seat cushions the wind had picked up. The whole way there, I kept thinking someone else had been in the room with them, that Dusty wasn't dead at all, or worse, that he *was* dead, as in *he had been* dead and now was not. I kept imagining Dusty with his neck slit, angrier than ever, thumbing his lighter in the corner. But when I reached our trailer, I stopped to catch my breath and realized that it was impossible, that I'd only heard two voices in the room and both of them I recognized.

Our trailer's porch light was off and when I reached for the doorknob, I found that it was locked. I reached inside the collar of my T-shirt for the key I wore on a chain around my neck, but it was gone—the necklace and the key—probably lost in the creases of Carl and Peg's couch. Rain mixed with the dust in the air. Lightning lit the porch, and I could see the trailer's windows were streaked in mud. I raised my fist and knocked, gently at first and then louder as the wind grew stronger, pushing me into the porch rails. Finally, the porch light flickered on and the door swung open a few inches. I slipped through as I heard a tearing sound behind me. When I looked back, a three-foot section of the trailer's metal skirt was skittering end-over-end across our yard and into the darkness. I shut the door and flicked off the porch light. There, in the dark of the trailer, Claudia stood before me wearing just a T-shirt and underwear. Her knees were small and hard, like under-ripe fruit. A creased sheet of notebook paper dangled from her hand. It was my letter, the one I'd hidden in my night

stand.

*To the Parent or Guardian of Claudia Reynolds, I'd written.*

"Where have you been?" she asked, but that wasn't the question she wanted answered. Outside, the wind was like an animal, sick or hurt. It kept throwing itself at the trailer and then rising again, broken and scared. It was so loud it felt like it was in the room with us.

I kept hearing Peg's voice in my head, the hard "d" of Dusty, the slick lisp of the "s." I wanted Claudia to explain it to me like she'd explained French manicures and how to get out of a speeding ticket. Wasn't this essential knowledge, too—why you'd want someone you loved to be someone else? Something told me she knew the answer, but we were past all that. The look on her face said I was some kind of stranger; it said she didn't know me at all. In her hand, the letter was smudged with eraser marks from all the ways I'd tried to get it right.

"What else was I supposed to do? All you do is sit!" I hadn't meant to scream the last part, but that's how it came out, like I really was the stranger she saw in me. Claudia took a step back. All at once, outside, the wind seemed to stop. The room around us sounded hollow, as if the air had been sucked out. By the window, her rocking chair was moving, and we both turned to look at it. I knew then that she had been sitting there, waiting for me in the dark.

"You wrote to my *parents*?" Her voice was quieter now, but she said "parents" like it was a curse word, like it was something you could get slapped for saying. "Do you know what would happen if my parents came here? Do you have any idea?"

I shook my head and tried to focus on the wall behind her. It was too hard to watch the twisted shape of her mouth, the way her eyes had turned to black holes.

Claudia said her parents would take her away, back to Houston, back to the place she'd been living before she met my

father. "Do you even care what that place is like?" she wanted to know.

I thought at first she was talking about the sorority house, where all the girls walked around in their underwear and crooned Roy Orbison songs into their hairbrushes. I thought that was probably the best place for Claudia. That was where she belonged. But she wasn't talking about that place. I felt a tingling behind my eyes, and from the look on her face, I knew Claudia didn't want to say what came next.

She began folding and refolding my letter, making a tinier and tinier square until it became too small and thick to manipulate. She clenched it in her fist. "First they take away everything you need. Your curling iron, your razor, your makeup. Then they make you share a room with a stranger. Do you understand what I'm saying? A sick person!" She tapped her temple with her index finger. "Think about that. Think about waking up at night and seeing eyes in the dark. Sure, you can roll over. You can look at the wall, but they're still there. They don't ever blink." She stared off into space for a moment, and then she flinched as if she'd been hit. Something seemed to come over her, a kind of trembling. She crossed the space between us and pulled me to her. She had no breasts. There was only the bones of her chest against my face and the sharp edges of the folded letter pressing into my back. She rested her chin on the top of my head. She began to twist us slowly, first one way and then the other, as if we were doing some sad new kind of dance.

"I didn't know any better," she said. "I swallowed whatever they gave me. Swallow when you wake up, swallow at lunch, swallow before you go to bed. It's like your brain turns off. If you swallow, you're gone. You try to be you. You try to think your thoughts, but you can't remember how. It's like you never even existed." She began to sob. I wanted to push her away, but didn't know how without breaking her. "Why would they want that?" she was saying over and over again. "Why would

they want that? Why would they want that?" And then suddenly, she let go. She lifted my chin so that she could see into my face. Her cheeks were wet, but she had come back to herself. "Do you want that?" she asked me, her voice so low I could barely hear it. "Do you want me to be locked away?"

I didn't want that at all. I wanted the old Claudia back. I wanted to drink virgin daiquiris from mason jars and watch *The Young and the Restless* and paint the pink room back to its original beige. I wanted to pretend the whole thing had never happened. But now I was picturing strait jackets and three-inch needles. I imagined little red pills in plastic cups. She'd told us she was a sorority girl, but that was just something she'd said. Everything had been a lie. Nothing, including me, had ever been essential.

But what had made her do it? I could see why she'd hidden the truth in the beginning—she didn't know us. She didn't know how we'd take it. But later? After all those nights we spent dancing in the living room and naming the future out of a book. Why couldn't she have told me then?

"Well?" she asked.

"No. I want you to stay."

"Then, here." She handed me the folded-up letter. "Get rid of this."

Released from the pressure of her fist, it began to work itself open, but slowly.

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The next afternoon I found Carl behind the laundromat, squirting canned cheese onto crackers.

"Peg is looking for you," I said. I'd just come from inside, where Peg was doing the books, turning over every piece of paper in her office and slamming her desk drawers. I could tell something was on her mind, so I'd slipped out the backdoor.

Carl was wrestling a cracker from its cellophane sleeve.

"You look sad," I told him.

"Things with Peg," he said, "are getting complicated."

"Oh?" I was suddenly terrified he was going to tell me something I didn't want to hear. I took a cracker and stuffed it in my mouth, the crunching in my ears enough to drown out whatever he said next. But he only nodded and shook the can to get out the last bit of cheese, which he oozed onto the cracker in a yellow coil. We sat for a while finishing the crackers and then Carl held the cellophane between two fingers and let it go in the wind. It tumbled away, and in the distance, snagged in the snarly branches of a mesquite tree, it looked almost beautiful, a torn paper lantern.

"My mother died," I told him. "She was sick, and I held her hand." The words came out, and I didn't know why I'd said them.

The sun was sharp in the sky, and I could feel it on my shins and the tops of my feet. Carl dropped his head to stare at his hands. "You know, I thought I owed him something," he said, and I realized that he hadn't heard me, that he'd been thinking about something else. He looked up at me, but he wasn't seeing me at all. When he spoke again, his voice was on the edge of something. "When he died, I swore I'd make it right, but the truth is, I've been trying to make it right for years, and it won't ever be right. Not like this."

"Are you talking about Dusty?" I asked, but I already knew the answer.

From inside, Peg was screeching his name, but he didn't seem to hear her. I wanted to tell him that things with Peg would be all right, that people pretended to be other people all the time.

I opened my mouth to speak, but then I thought better of it. Maybe Carl and I weren't the kind of friends who offered each other advice. Maybe we weren't friends at all. After a while, he stood and dusted off his jeans. Before he left, he gripped my head in his hand and shook it back and forth, but

gently. I could guess what that meant. Then he slipped through the backdoor.

I sat for a while longer, thinking about everything: My mother and Claudia, Claudia and my father, Carl and Peg. The funny thing about pretending, I thought, was that we let each other do it. We even *wanted* to be fooled. The night before, I'd stood over the sink with a match in my hand and watched the letter I'd written shrivel into ash. Then Claudia had turned on the tap and we'd watched the drain swallow it. Satisfied, she'd gone back to her chair by the window. I guess she thought that was the end of it. I guess she thought we could go back to pretending everything was fine. But I could never forget what I'd written. I'd write that letter again and this time I'd send it. Claudia would probably hate me later. She'd probably never speak to me again, but if she couldn't be good to herself, at least I could be good to her.

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Long about October, the wind settled down and the cotton fields surrounding the park put out their white blooms. Claudia's parents showed up, having followed the directions I gave them, and when she saw them coming down the road, Claudia rose from her chair by the window and shrugged into some jeans and met them at the door. She didn't put up a fight and neither did my father, who watched the whole thing from the driver's seat of his truck. Even though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was relieved to see her go. He loved her, or once had, but it wasn't that strong kind of love, the kind Peg had for Dusty, the kind that could help you pretend the person you were with was the person you needed him to be.

Eventually, we left too, my dad and me. He found another

job on a rig in Wyoming, and we left everything we couldn't fit in the truck. On my way out for the last time, I closed the door to the pink room, and stood in the hall for a moment with my hand on the knob, imagining what the new tenants would think when they opened the door. Maybe they'd have a little girl of their own and set her down in the crib and finger each of the tiny dresses in the closet, amazed at their luck. Or maybe they would see that the tags were still on, that none of the tiny dresses had ever been worn, and then the pink room would make them sad in the way it had made Claudia sad. Maybe then they'd cross this ad off their list and keep looking, and for a long time our trailer would stay empty, a veil of dust covering everything we'd left behind.