

THE BLUE NIGHTGOWN

CHARLES GROSEL

I don't remember much about my mother. A car ran her down when I was two, hit and run. She had been crossing Maple Avenue to mail a letter while I was taking a nap—I got this from Aunt Rita, her sister. The police guessed who it was from the return address on the envelope she was mailing to the Yellow Stamp Catalogue Company. You collected these yellow stamps when you bought groceries and pasted them into books the size of a *TV Guide*. Each book was worth points, and when you filled up enough books, you could order from the catalogue. My mother was entering the Cat in the Hat Book Club, a present for both of us. My father wanted a rack of fireplace tools, though the chimney had been bricked up for years. He said I already had more toys than I knew what to do with.

"Books aren't toys," my mother tried to explain. She was a reader and had passed that on to me. I loved books even before I could read, Aunt Rita told me, and my mother made sure we had plenty of them. My father was a doer, though, and as far as he was concerned, reading wasn't doing anything. My mother was trying to get the letter in the mail before he came home from work, a small firm of engineers for which he was the head draftsman. The nearest post office was inside the drugstore across Maple, the main drag, three lanes both ways, the nearest stoplights several long blocks from our street in either direction. Using these lights added time to the crossing, so most people on our block just waited for a break in the nearest lane, pin-balled their way to the center island, collected themselves, then made another break for the far side, where there was a grocery and Woolworths as well. Every couple of years someone was hit and killed. That year, while I napped in my new bed, my mother, hurrying to get to the post office before the

last collection, became one of them. Aunt Rita told me all this, too, when I was older—well past the time of this story.

The police came to the house, let themselves in the unlocked side door (these were different times), and called my father on the work number taped to the fridge with other emergency numbers. My father called Aunt Rita, then went directly to the hospital, where Aunt Rita joined him. She got hold of Uncle Bob, who swung by the house for my cousin Toni, and then came to get me. I was still sound asleep, with two policemen slouched in chairs at the kitchen table. They lectured Uncle Bob about leaving children home alone, then left us to ourselves.

What I remember from that night is four-year-old Toni shaking my arm and yelling, "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy. You're mother's dead and you're coming to our house." I think of it as my first memory, though I don't remember anything else from the day she died. It wasn't until some months later that I woke to me and my father alone together.

By the time I was old enough to ask the obvious questions, my father didn't talk about my mother. He didn't talk about much of anything at all. He gave instructions. "Butter your corn like this." "Take a wee like that." "Pull the weeds by the roots." He spat out these commands like he was prompting me on stage and I had to get it right or I'd upset the rhythm of a performance only he seemed privy to.

I soon learned that asking about my mother got me nowhere. "That's not for you to know," he'd say, or else he'd say nothing at all, simply give me a look, then get on with whatever he was doing—sprinkling the flower beds, plopping a can of something into a pot on the stove, grimly watching TV.

I figured he just didn't think about her, that he was able to forget her in a way that I, who never really knew her, could not, that it was one of those adult mysteries, like going to work or life insurance. Then one night I got one of my earaches, only worse. I usually just rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, since I was under strict orders not to leave the room once I went to bed. But that night it hurt so bad I couldn't hold still, and the more I rolled around, the more it hurt, and I couldn't wait until morning. I slid out of bed, tip-toed around the toys scattered on

the floor, then crept into the hall, holding my ear and my breath.

The house was an older two-story, with patterned wallpaper that curled in the corners and old wooden floors covered with worn rugs instead of the carpeting at Aunt Rita's. The bedrooms were on the second floor. Hand against the wall, I made my way along the edge of the thread-thin runner, where the floorboards were tighter and creaked less.

My father's bedroom was down the hall, across from the spare room, which was on the same side as mine. His door wasn't shut all the way, the openings edged with a low yellow glow. I pushed the door open a few careful inches further. Sometimes he fell asleep with his clothes on, but that night he was awake, kneeling at the side of the bed facing away from me. We went to church with Aunt Rita on Sundays, so at first I thought he was praying. Then I saw a shiny wooden chest the size of a breadbox sunk in the mattress, everything on the bed—scarves, strands of beads and other jewelry, tiny cards in their envelopes, miniature spray bottles—sliding in towards the hole it created.

The wardrobe in the corner was open, too, something I had never seen before. Normally it was locked up tight. Whenever I asked about it, my father told me it was just some old stuff and he didn't even know where the key was. But there it was, the old key, snug in the lock. A bunch of clothes hung in the cabinet, some plain and others flowery with color. I held my breath so hard my heart ticked in my nose. These must be my mother's things.

As I watched, my father took a sprayer in one hand and a rosy scarf in the other, spritzed, then waved the scarf in the mist. With the lamp behind it, the scarf gave off a light of its own. The air smelled tangy sweet, the droplets glowed like magic dust in the dim light. I felt instantly lighter, and for a moment, I forgot the pain in my ear and smiled with the same feeling I had when I woke up from a sweet dream. Still kneeling, my father brought the scarf to his face, closed his eyes, and breathed, beaming like the saints in my children's missal.

Then he rose like a priest from genuflection, went to the wardrobe and pulled out a blue, shimmery nightgown, removed it from its hanger, then hugged it to him. He swayed gently, as if he were dancing, then

twirled. He *was* dancing. I couldn't have been more shocked if my mother herself had appeared in the room. He went on like that for a few turns, adding more intricate steps. I knew I shouldn't have been watching, but I couldn't look away from this incarnation of my father, younger, lighter, *dancing*.

He went on for what seemed like a long time, finally slowed, then stopped. He replaced the gown on its hanger, made space in the cabinet, and hooked it on the pole. He turned to the bed to pick up the items there, replaced them with care in the box, the happy stranger fading back into the man I knew, stiff and stern.

That was my cue to get out of there, but when I backed away from the door and turned toward my room, a bolt of pain sparked ear to ear, and I stumbled into the wall with a thud. A hand came down hard on my shoulder. My father pulled me around to face him.

"What are you doing?" When he got angry, he pursed his lips like a fish, and a bump like a peach pit formed above his chin. "I told you to stay in your room."

"My ear," I sobbed.

He pushed me against the wall. "Can't anyone get any privacy around here?" He stepped back, ran his hand through his hair, rocked from foot to foot. I inched away, but he pushed me against the wall again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I said all in a whoosh. "I know I should stay in my room but it really hurts so I came to get you to get some medicine and your door was open and I didn't see anything. It hurts so bad. Please. I didn't see anything."

"Stop your crying," he said, watching me closely. Then he let me off the wall. "You and your ears." He lifted his hand to my forehead. "Let's get you some aspirin and drops. Now back to bed." I staggered back to my room, dizzy and exhausted, climbed under the covers, lay on my back. The bed spun like a merry-go-round.

My father arrived with a small brown bottle and a dropper. "Turn your head."

I turned my head, watching him sideways. He was all face and head and hands. He squeezed the dropper, slurped up the medicine.

"Your ear."

I turned away.

He clamped my mouth with his free hand, twisted my head to expose the ear, my nose in the pillow. "Hold still." He stuck the dropper in my ear, then squeezed. The cold liquid gurgled like ice melt. The pain spiked, I shrieked, but when I opened my eyes, the pain was already backing away. He thunked the bottle on the night stand. "You'd think you were dying. Here, take these." He held out two orange aspirin. After I put them in my mouth, he watched me chew. "I was sorting through some things, is all. Now get to sleep. And stay in your room like I told you." When he left, he shut the door firmly behind him. He was a great believer in closed doors.

When I woke the next morning, my ear still hurt, so my father took me to Aunt Rita's instead of sending me out for the bus. On a normal day, Uncle Bob picked me up after morning kindergarten and took me to their house, where I had lunch and stayed until my father finished work. I liked it there. My cousin Toni was my best friend, I didn't have to be so careful about what I said or did, and Aunt Rita gave me little snacks throughout the day. That morning she administered the ear drops while I was lying on the couch in the den, *Captain Kangaroo* on TV. She scratched my head lightly with her nails until I closed my eyes. I said, "Ready."

"Already done." She smoothed my hair until the TV blurred into waves of light and sound, and I fell asleep. I slept most of the day, waking only for lunch of a boiled hotdog in folded bread bleeding with ketchup. I didn't eat much of it. I went back to sleep, but when Toni came home from school, I felt better and Aunt Rita let me go outside to play without too much fuss.

I sat on the edge of the sandbox, sucking my finger for comfort, a habit my father couldn't break me of, no matter how many times he pulled my hand from my mouth. Toni was kicking a soccer ball against the backboard Uncle Bob had built when the kids next door came through the gap in the hedge. They had moved in months before, and since they knew few others in the neighborhood, they often came over while I was there. The sister was tall and skinny, with a high pitched voice. She was a year older than Toni and always wore a dress or a

jumper, even to play in the yard. She called Toni a tomboy for the way she dressed in blue jeans and sweatshirts, and for knowing about sports. The brother was Toni's age, but my size. He asserted his seniority by tripping me whenever Toni wasn't watching, and making up names when she was.

As soon as he saw me with my finger in my mouth, he sang out: "Tommy, Tommy, retard."

"Ignore the idiot," Toni said in a loud voice, thumping the ball harder and louder against the boards.

I popped the finger out of my mouth. A string of spit swung from chin to fingertip.

"Eww," the sister said. "Retard."

"He is not." Toni planted her foot, turned suddenly, and kicked the ball into the hedge, missing the girl's head by no more than a foot.

The girl ducked late, then screeched. "You just missed me."

"I'll aim better next time."

"Retard can't fight his own battles?" This was the brother.

"Don't call him that. He's smart. He can read better than you, I bet."

"I doubt it."

"Can too." Toni rocked up on her toes and spread her arms like she was going to shoot off into the air. "I'll prove it." She dashed off toward the house.

She was right. I could read better than just about anyone we knew. I had learned before I went to school, I don't know how. One day I picked up one of Aunt Rita's books, opened the pages, and the letters fell into words that made sense. These were real books, not the ones with pictures. Toni was prouder of this than I was. She wasn't much for reading herself, but she liked that I was good at something.

Toni returned, still running, book in hand. She opened to a random page, and stuck it in my hands. "Go ahead, show them." It was one of my favorites, *The Three Musketeers*.

"He can't read that," the sister said.

"Show her."

I read the words in my head, but when I opened my mouth to say them out loud, nothing came. The kids laughed. Toni's face grew red.

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"C'mon. Like you do in the house." I tried, I did, I wanted to do it for her, but the more she urged me on, the more the words stuck in my throat. The kids laughed again. I grew dizzy; my ear started to hurt. I put my finger back in my mouth.

Together they chanted: "Tommy, Tommy, retard."

Toni grabbed the book from my hands. "Shut up." She lunged toward them. "Shut up or I'll pound you."

They stepped back, moved closer to each other, but kept up their chant. "Tommy, Tommy, retard."

Toni held the book in two hands, swung it side to side. She would never hit them—Aunt Rita would not have stood for it—and once the kids realized that, they chanted louder. "Tommy, Tommy, retard."

Finally, Toni shouted, "His mother's dead, all right, so shut up, how would you like it?"

That did shut them up, like a switch. All of a sudden they couldn't look at me.

"She is not," the sister said so quietly you knew she believed it.

"Why do you think he comes here every day? There's no one to watch him at home."

"What happened?" asked the boy.

"Accident," Toni said.

"She's in a grave," the sister jumped in.

"Or cremated," the brother added.

"You don't even know what that means," Toni said.

"Burned to ashes," the girl answered for him.

The only burning I knew about was of the demons in hell, also depicted in grave detail in my missal, and damn if that was happening to my mother. I ran at the girl with my hands out. She dodged as I reached her. I grazed her arm and spun myself to the ground, bawling. I heard Toni yell, "I'll cremate *you*," and saw the kids push through the hedge in a hurry, the branches snapping back in place behind them.

"I don't care what you say," the girl yelled from the other side. "He acts like a retard."

"What's going on out here?" Aunt Rita called through the screen door, then stepped onto the back stoop, the door winging shut behind

her. "What's wrong with Tommy?"

"Nothing," Toni called out. Then she hissed to me, "Stop it. You're all right. Cut it out."

"You tell me right now, young lady, what's going on out here or you'll eat standing up for a week."

"They made fun of Tommy. I stuck up for him."

"Then why's he crying?"

"I think because his mother died."

"Oh, boy." Aunt Rita crouched next to me, combing her fingers through my hair. "Why don't we wash you up and get you one of your favorite orange popsicles, then you and Aunt Rita can have a talk. Would you like that?"

I snuffled and nodded.

After we washed our hands, Aunt Rita wiped my face gently with a warm cloth, draining away some of the heaviness. Then she sat us at the kitchen table, Toni in her own chair, me sitting on a telephone book, popsicles in hand, empty bowls laid out on paper towels in front of us. Aunt Rita let us slurp in silence while she was busy at the counter. I was enjoying the popsicle and sitting higher than Toni, well on my way to forgetting what had happened, when Aunt Rita pulled up a chair next to me, stroked my free hand, and said, "Do you have any questions?" Aunt Rita wore pointy cat glasses and looked exactly like the volunteer librarian she often was.

"They said my mother was creamed."

"Cremated," Toni corrected.

"Oh, honey, your mother wasn't cremated." Aunt Rita bit her bottom lip. "She's in heaven, watching over you and praying to protect you." By the lilt in her voice, she made it sound like it was the best thing in the world my mother was dead.

I thought about that, then said, "What's it like, being dead?"

"Like sleeping," Toni said.

"I don't need your help," Aunt Rita said sharply to Toni. Then to me: "Hold your popsicle over the bowl, honey. That's it." She guided my hand. The juice had dripped down the stick, then to the tablecloth below, where the droplets held their shape, quivered, then disappeared in blotches. She thought for a moment. "Toni's right in a way. It's a little

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like sleeping. But for a long, long time. Forever.”

I pictured a woman in a bed like the one in my father’s room. “I want to see her.”

“Oh, honey,” she said, nudging my cheek. “She’s in heaven, far, far away, farther than you can even imagine. But you can talk to her. You can talk to her every night in your prayers. She’ll hear you wherever you are.”

“Can she answer?”

“When good things happen, that’s her answer.”

“Oh,” I said. “I wish I could remember.”

She peered at me through the lenses of her glasses, then sat back. “I’ve got something for you.” She left, then returned with a thick book and a shoe box wrapped in rubber bands. “Your father didn’t want you to see these till you got older, but I think it’s time.” She paged through the book, put it down, then sprung the rubber bands from the box, which was filled with a jumble of photos, some wrapped in rubber bands of their own. She sorted through them. Finally she stopped and held one out. “There’s a good one.”

I reached for the picture. She pulled it away, but held it up for me to see. “Your hands are sticky.”

The picture was in black and white. A young woman sat on the steps of a doubledecker. She wore blue jeans and a white blouse, and sat with both knees off to one side. She bent forward, her right arm resting on her leg, a cigarette between her first two fingers. The other arm was tucked across her waist as if in protection. Her lips were as dark as her hair, and her hair was done back with clips, though tufts had sprung loose around her forehead. She looked like she was thinking, as if she hadn’t really wanted her picture taken. I stared at it for a long time, trying to connect the mother of my imagination with this dark-haired woman.

“That’s your mother,” Aunt Rita said softly. “You’ve never seen a picture?”

I shook my head.

“Dear Lord, your father wasn’t kidding.” She shuffled through some of the other pictures. “Here, one of you both.”

She showed me a photo of the dark-haired woman and a baby

on a blanket. The baby was small and dark, dressed in a light-colored sleeper, and pushed itself up until its chest was off the floor, head up, unsmiling but inquisitive. The woman—my mother—was on her side on the floor, propped up on one elbow, the other hand on the baby's back, looking at the camera. She stuck out her tongue.

"That's me?"

"When you were a baby." She looked at me a long time. "There's more. Wash up and go sit in the living room."

Toni and I took turns on the stool in the bathroom to wash our hands again, then we sat on the floor in the living room, where Aunt Rita placed the box. We spent the rest of the afternoon that way, looking at pictures one by one.

My father wasn't in a lot of them. "He was usually taking the pictures," Aunt Rita explained. But when he did appear, I noticed, he had this big goofy grin on his face like he had just won the sweepstakes—the way he had looked the night of the blue nightgown.

As we sorted through the pictures, I kept the first one by me, the one of her alone, and when Aunt Rita busied herself with the other stacks, I picked it up to look at it more closely.

"That's a pretty one," Aunt Rita said. "I miss her every day."

"She's your sister?" I wasn't exactly sure how these things worked. To me Aunt Rita was Aunt Rita.

"My little sister, the baby. Everybody loved her, but I got so mad at her sometimes." She smiled, remembering. "She got away with everything. But when trouble came, we went running for each other, like the musketeers," she nodded, knowing that was one of my favorites. "But just the two of us. Let me get something for you." She went to the drawers below the bookshelves, pulled one open, and rummaged inside until she pulled out an empty picture frame. She came back to the floor and reached out her hand.

"No," I said.

She knelt down in front of me. "I'm going to put it in a frame for you, then you can take it home and look at it all you want."

Only then did I let her take it. She slid the cardboard out from behind the frame, inserted the picture, replaced the cardboard, then handed it to me. "For your very own."

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I took it from her and on impulse landed a sloppy kiss on the glass.

"It's not for kissing," she laughed. She reached out for the frame and wiped the glass with the sleeve of her house sweater. "Just for looking." As she released her hand, she turned to the sound of a car door slamming in the driveway. "Your father." Aunt Rita glanced at her watch. She pushed the pictures quickly together in a pile, then reached for mine and said, "Let Aunt Rita."

I hugged it to me.

By then my father had rapped on the door and let himself in. "Greetings, Peoples," he said in a tired voice, standing at the doorway still clutching the doorknob. It's what he always said when he came in the door.

"Uncle Doug," Toni squealed. She ran and grabbed him around the legs.

Aunt Rita leaned toward me and whispered, "All right, then. But let me tell your father."

"Princess Antoinette, I presume." My father patted Toni with his free hand, then said to me, "Help clean up. The car's running."

"Why don't you turn it off and come in for a while?" Aunt Rita said to him. She spread some of the photos on the floor in front of her. "We've been looking at old pictures."

Toni pulled his hand, lifted herself in the air. "Stay, stay, stay."

My father released the doorknob and let Toni drag him into the living room.

"Swing me. Swing Me."

He held her two hands and swung her back and forth, something he never did for me.

I wasn't going to let Toni get all the attention. "Look at what Aunt Rita gave me." I held up the picture.

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He looked at it once without seeing, then looked at it again. He pried Toni's hands from his legs. "That's enough." Then to me he said, "Give it here." I gave it to him. His face went tight. He walked among the

other pictures on the floor, toeing the snapshots with his shiny blunt shoe, as if stepping through a playground of glass. He snapped his head up, glowered at Aunt Rita. "You had no right."

"He never saw a picture?"

"None of your business."

"None of my—she was my sister, Douglas. He's my nephew, and he practically lives here. Some of us knew her and loved her and want to talk about her. There's no harm in that. I'm sure he misses her."

"Not if you just shut up, he won't. He gets all worked up." His voice was increasing in volume like someone turning the knob on a TV. "You talk about her, and it hurts so bad you can't breathe. You talk about her, and...and... and...." He choked himself off, breathing hard, as if he had just run up the basement steps.

"He gets all worked up?" Aunt Rita put herself between me and my father.

"Not if I can help it," he said, misunderstanding. He swiped his hand in the air, then pushed the picture at her.

"That's Tommy's."

"Keep it." When Aunt Rita didn't accept the picture, he put it in his jacket pocket.

"I've got feelings about this, too," she said.

"Keep your feelings to yourself."

"I'm not as good at it as you."

By now I was crying, big, loose, snotty sobs.

"See how it is? Maybe he just shouldn't come here." To me he said, "Get your jacket."

"Don't hurt the child to spite me." Aunt Rita pulled a tissue from her pocket, crouched down between me and my father, wiped my nose.

"It's for his own good." He stepped toward us, reached over her back to take hold of me. "Get out of the way."

Aunt Rita stood up, staying between me and my father. They stared at each other, my father red-faced and leaning forward as if he was going to come down on top of us, Aunt Rita standing her ground. She held his eyes until he rocked back, lowered his arms, moved away.

Only then did she step aside and bring me around in front of her.

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He pulled my arm, then pushed me along in front of him toward the door.

"His jacket," Aunt Rita called out.

"The heater's on in the car."

Outside it was dark, but not yet as dark as it would be. The big old Ford rocked in place, as if impatient to take off. My father yanked open the side door, then swung me hard into the seat. The heat from the running car hit me like an oven. "Stop your crying," he said.

Once the Ford got moving, I did stop crying, then worked up the courage to ask for the picture. I wanted to hold it on the way home.

"I'm going to hang on to it for a while," he said.

I would have been surprised if he had said anything else.

My father's side of the family had been winnowed to a great aunt and uncle in Chicago, so they weren't an option for babysitting. After a selection process of one phone call, my father decided Mrs. McIntire would stay with me in the afternoons starting the next day.

"I *hate* Mrs. McIntire," I said.

"You shouldn't hate anyone."

"I hate you," I said, but this time only in my head, at first horrified, then welcoming of the thought. At that moment I did hate him—for taking away the picture, for not letting me go to Aunt Rita's, for the suffocating silence in the house. I closed my eyes, waiting for the wrath of God to come down on me. When it didn't, I lost some respect for God, let me tell you.

The next day my father surprised me at pick up. I had forgotten the new arrangement. When we pulled into our driveway, I said, "I want to go to Aunt Rita's."

"Go get Mrs. McIntire like we talked about."

I jumped out of the car. Mrs. McIntire lived by herself three or four houses down. I never knew a Mr. McIntire. Mrs. McIntire looked about a hundred to me, but every trash day while I was waiting for the bus, she carried a huge garbage can to the curb, leaning back and holding it against her stomach. Then she swept the sidewalk, the driveway, the porch. Sometimes she'd make her way to where I stood and gleefully

say something like, "Locking your doors at night? A man was killed in his bed with a hammer the other side of town." I never knew how to respond.

On my way I counted cracks in the sidewalk to slow myself down, but finally I climbed her splintered porch and knocked on the door. Mrs. McIntire answered right away as if she had been watching for me, dug into the pockets of her dress, then pressed two Oreos into my hand. "A little something for you. Don't worry. I checked for poison." She carried a large canvas bag and wore a hat and coat as if she was going downtown instead of four houses down the street.

"Thank you," I said. The cookies were the consistency of Play-Doh, and since she hadn't mentioned what she had discovered when she checked for poison, I dropped my hand to the side of my leg and crumbled the cookies to the ground.

Once we got to the house, my father helped Mrs. McIntire out of her coat, then laid it over the back of the sofa and said, "Thanks for coming. I've got to get going. Tommy knows where everything is. I'll be home by six." Then he headed back to work.

Mrs. McIntire sat on the couch and pulled a small tub and a box of powder from her large bag.

"What's that?"

"A little bubble bath for my footsies," she said. "They're not in such great shape, I'm afraid. I just need some hot water."

I showed her where the bathroom was and watched as she filled her tub and carried it back to the living room, water sloshing onto the old rug. She sat on the couch, dumped some powder in the water, took off her shoes, and put her feet in. They were red and scaly, the four little toes clenched under the big one. They looked like the dead kittens Toni found in the park once. My stomach turned over. Mrs. McIntire put her feet in the water, laid her head back against the cushions, then said suddenly, without opening her eyes, "Can you read?"

"Yes," I said, not sure what the right answer was.

She opened her eyes and leaned forward. "You look a little young to me." She reached into the bag and took out a newspaper, which she unfolded like a magazine. The writing was huge and it had a lot of

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pictures. "Maybe you can read me some. My eyes aren't so good, you see. That one there." She pointed with a knotty finger at the headline that blared "Body Rises During Storm." I read her the story, about a crossing guard who went to clear a flooded storm drain only to find a body stuck in the opening. His post was downhill from a cemetery, and some of the new graves must have flooded, the article explained, and disgorged their occupants. I wasn't really sure that that could happen, but I wasn't sure it couldn't, either.

After I finished reading, I said, "My mother's in a grave."

"I'm sorry for that," Mrs. McIntire said, opening her eyes and talking to me rather than past me for the first time. "Your mother looked in on me, brought food sometimes, and not just on holidays. She was a nice girl. Had a spark of something in her." She reached into her bag, pulled out an alarm clock, wound it up, then set it on the floor next to the tub, and sank her head back against the couch. "I'm going to rest my eyes now. Be a good boy."

She fell asleep faster than anyone I had ever seen, and though she didn't snore exactly, every so often, she gasped and held her breath so long I had to shake her arm to make sure she was alive. Then she'd come choking back without waking and breathe steadily until the next time. I went short of breath just listening to her. The alarm woke her in time to dump the water and gather her things before my father came home.

That's how it went the rest of the week. Mrs. McIntire would set up her footbath and alarm clock, I would read her a story, the more gruesome the better, then she'd tell me about my mother—how when she took me out in the stroller she would stop to adjust my little cap; how in iffy weather my father chased my mother down to bring her a sweater; how one time I had gotten away from my father and my mother had gone up and down the street knocking on doors only to find me sleeping in the shade under the back porch—and then she'd nod off. I crackled the newspaper to wake her for more, but once she was out she was out, she was out, and I had the rest of the afternoon to myself.

I'd read or build Lincoln logs and think about my mother, since we had just been talking about her. Then I'd think about the wardrobe, standing in my father's room, unattended. Why did *he* get to see her

things? But such was the strength of his authority and my fear of his anger that it took several days for indignation to work its way to action. Finally, later in the week, after Mrs. McIntire fell asleep, I calmed my spongy stomach and climbed the stairs to my father's room.

I opened the door but stopped short at the entry. My father may not have been there, but his presence was heavy. I turned to leave, then turned back. When else would I get the chance? I plunged through the doorway before I could turn away again.

When you walked into the room, you were at the foot of the bed. The wardrobe was on the wall to the left, about the size of a refrigerator, large and brown, lightly beveled and polished, set a few inches off the ground on a platform with a scrolled kickboard. The rest of the furniture matched—a nightstand against the wall on the same side as the wardrobe, a tall chest of drawers opposite, the bed's foot- and headboards.

I went right to the wardrobe and twisted the fancy handle, but it was locked. I should have expected that. Where would he keep the key? The junk drawer in the kitchen? No, too far. I scanned the room. Under the pillow? Maybe. In his underwear drawer? Another maybe. Then I saw the cowboy boot ash tray on top of the chest, the color of a dull penny, a souvenir from Texas, I understood. Since my father didn't smoke, he kept junk in the shallow receptacle—paper clips, Canadian coins, buttons, random keys. Keys. That had to be it. I scrambled over the bed to get to the chest, which was higher than my head. I reached up on my toes, felt around the tray with my fingers, and there it was, a large old-fashioned key like they use in old movies.

I scrambled back over the bed, held still, listening for noise, but didn't hear anything other than Mrs. McIntire's intermittent gasping. I put the key in the lock, turned it carefully one way. Nothing. I turned it the other way. Nothing again. Then I jiggled it back and forth, in and out, all for nothing. It was the wrong key. I put my ear up against the wardrobe door, as if that would help, then pried at the closure with my fingers. Still nothing. I tried the key again, using more force this time. It wasn't working. I was near tears, having come this close only to fail. I pounded on the right-hand door, and the other door popped open, bringing the tang of scent into the room.

Grosel: The Blue Nightgown

And there it all was. I ran my hand across the hanging clothes, which were soft and smooth, not like the scratchy pants my father wore. They brushed the top of the shiny box on the wardrobe floor. I leaned in to lift the box, but it was too heavy. I returned to the clothes. A blue flap of sleeve stuck out from the bundle. The nightgown. I pulled it out further and brought it to my face. This is what my mother's hand would feel like on my cheek. I tugged the gown harder to get at more of it, and it slipped off the hanger, floated down on top of me. I buried my face in the gown's softness, then without thought or shame, I raised my arms and pulled the gown over my head and shoulders. It fell easily to my feet. My cheeks and the tip of my nose and fingers buzzed with warmth and excitement as I took in the scent that lingered there. I swayed like my father had, calling up something familiar beyond memory. This was as close as I would get to her.

I was deep in the reverie, alone, or so I thought, until I heard the creak of the floorboards in the hall. Mrs. McIntire can't walk that fast, I remember thinking, then spun around.

My father dodged around the bed and charged at me, the peach pit prominent on his chin. "Take—that—off."

I turned to get away, but my feet tangled in the hem. He grabbed the collar as I tripped. The thin fabric ripped, and for a moment I hung in the air. He yanked again. The cloth tore the rest of the way, whipping around my neck while taking off patches of skin. I fell onto the edge of the mattress, bounced, then slid sideways, banged my face on the bed-frame, smacked onto the floor in a daze, rolled onto my back.

My father's face puffed red. "Look what you did. Look what you did." He clenched the twisted pieces of the gown in his hands, stretched them tight like a strangler in a horror movie, stepped toward me. I crabwalked backwards until my shoulders hit the wall. He popped the cloth back and forth in his fists. I pressed myself against the wall. He stepped closer. I covered my face. He stepped again. "What were you thinking?" he said, his face twisted like a dish rag left out on the sink.

"About my mother," I answered, truthfully.

That stopped him short. He lowered his hands, dropped onto the

bed with a squeak of the springs, unwound the gown from his fists, held it out in front of him, then held it to his face. "This was your mother's," he said, as if I wouldn't have known that. "She got this for her trip to the hospital to have you. She was terrified. Terrified and excited, because when she came home, she'd be bringing you, whoever you were going to be. But terrified, too. Someday you'll know what I'm talking about. We always thought boy, for some reason, and when you were born, she was thrilled. She liked to tell the story about when the nurse first put you in her arms and she burst into tears. The nurse asked her what was wrong, and she said, 'Nothing. I'm just so happy.' And she was. And because she was happy, I was happy."

He held parts of the gown in each hand. For a second I thought he was going to give a piece to me, but he balled them together and stuffed the bundle in the cabinet. He caressed the sleeves of the clothes, then closed the door and shook his head, turned back to me. "Do you understand? Maybe I hope you don't. Because when your mother died—I don't know. My engine stalled. It flooded with all this—" he gestured toward the wardrobe—"and I couldn't start it up again. I know it's not your fault, but I couldn't help thinking—well, I couldn't help thinking." He reached down. "Come on up off the floor." He grabbed my hand. My fingers popped as he lifted. "After I take Mrs. McIntire home, I'll call Rita."

"Mrs. McIntire's okay," I said. "She talks about my mother."

He gave me a careful look, then said, "Now she won't have to." He pointed to the nightstand. "Open it."

I went to open the top drawer.

"Not that one."

I pulled open the bottom drawer, and looked back at him.

"Grab what's on top there."

It was a picture frame, face down, the one from Aunt Rita's. I picked it up, afraid to turn it over without his say so.

"Go ahead," he said, as if I should have known what he wanted all along.