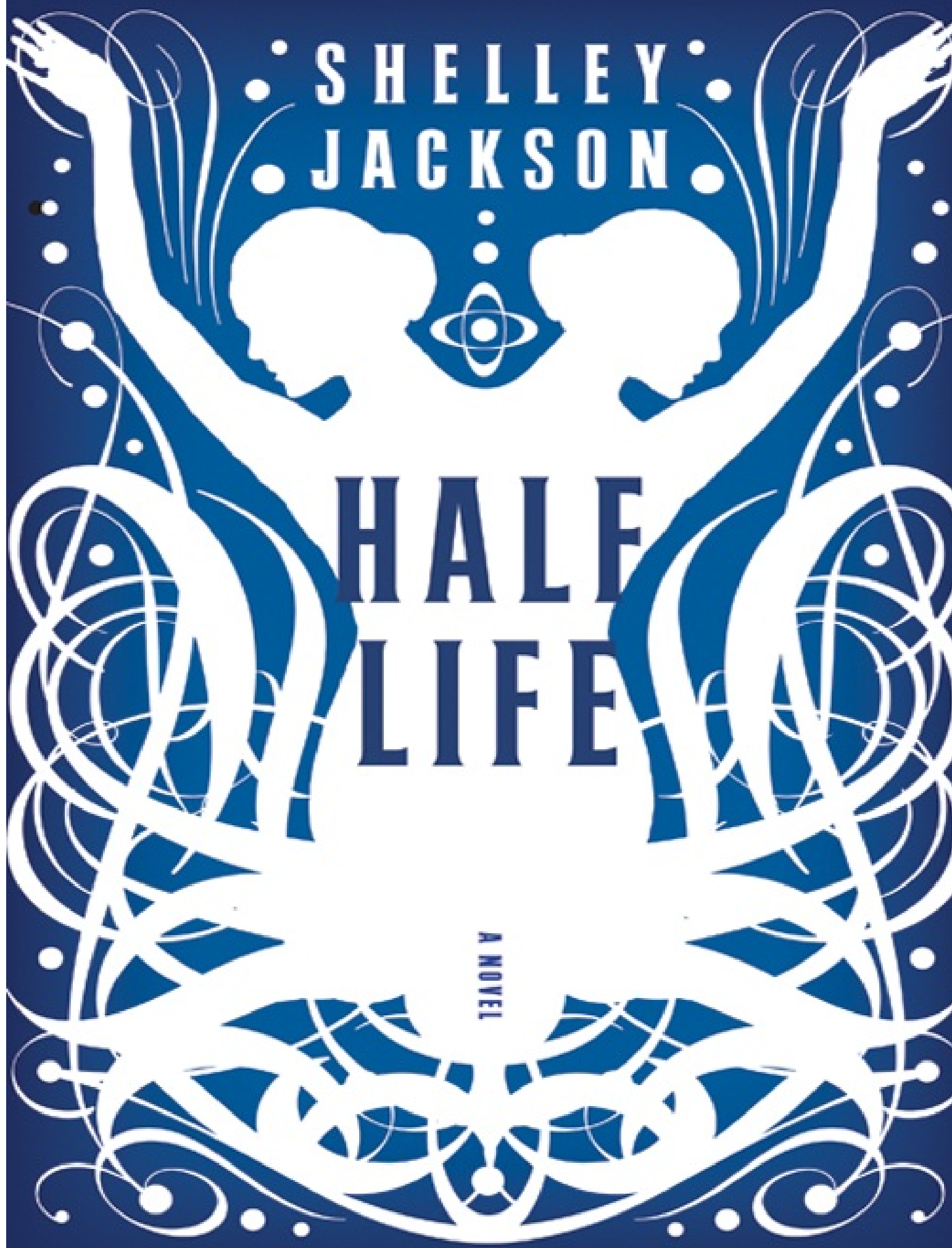


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HALF LIFE

A Novel

Shelley Jackson

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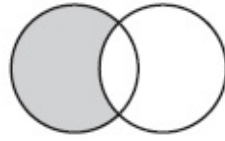
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PART ONE



Boolean Operator: NOT

You should have received two copies. Each twin should fill out his or her own copy. If, as in the special case of an insensible or “vegetable” twin, only one copy is submitted, the *Non Compos Mentis* box must be checked. Please consider your answers carefully and append a personal statement in which you explain your decision at greater length. If you require more space you may attach another page or pages with a paper clip, NOT a staple. Your cooperation will help us meet the needs of future clients.

I, NORA GRAY OLNEY, a ___ male / female twofers, age 28, being of sound mind and body, request the surgical removal of ___ myself / my conjoined twin BLANCHE GREY OLNEY for the following reasons(s) [please check all that apply]:

___ euthanasia (___ my twin is / ___ I am suffering or moribund)

___ mental health (my twin is crazy or I am crazy)

___ self-defense (I have reason to believe my twin will harm me)

___ self-sacrifice (I have reason to believe I will harm my twin)

___ sexual thrill (___ for me / ___ my twin)

___ religious beliefs (___ mine / ___ my twin's)

___ philosophical convictions (___ mine / ___ my twin's)

___ determination to quit this vale of tears (___ mine / ___ my twin's)

irreconcilable differences

I am / ___ am not acquainted with the philosophy of the Unity Foundation. I am / ___ am not prepared for the censure of society in general and the Togetherness Group in particular. I am / ___

am not prepared to sign an oath of secrecy regarding the existence and identities of doctors and fellow patients, the location of the clinic, and anything else I may know or suspect about the Unity Foundation, including its rules, philosophy, patient profile, physical plant, waste-disposal practises, medical equipment, funding, legal status, etc. I am / am not prepared to sign a statement absolving the Unity Foundation of any responsibility whatsoever, whether for the failure *or success* of surgery, later complications, or any change of heart that I or my twin may have during or after surgery. I understand / do not understand that this operation is irreversible and that the removed twin will be in a condition nonconducive to life.

My twin is *compos mentis* / *non compos mentis*.

I am the recto / verso twin. The twin to be removed is the verso / recto.

Signed 

Blanche, white night of my dark day. My sister, my self. Blanche: a cry building behind sealed lips, then blowing through. First the pout, then the plosive the meow of the vowel; then the fricative sound of silence.

Shhhh.

Blanche is sleeping. She has been sleeping for fifteen years.

I can tell you the exact moment I knew she was waking up. But allow me a day's grace. Let me remember that last afternoon, unimportant in itself, wonderfully unimportant, when I was still Nora, just Nora, Nora Olney, Nora alone.

The flags lining Market Street from Church to Castro flexed and snapped, showing sometimes one, sometimes two linked rings. The stop signs shuddered on their spines. The wind had picked up in the late afternoon, as usual, and now the whole sky seemed to be toppling sideways over the Twin Peaks, carrying with it whorls of smoke from the incinerators and pure white spooks of fog. I was meandering home from the movie theater without the tickets I'd gone there for, juggling two oranges in a plastic bag and going over my excuses. Blanche was sleeping. Of course she was. I dropped into the gutter to skirt some crowd-control fences ganged in readiness against a streetlight, and our heads collided. A distant, confused echo of her pain overtook and lost itself in mine, but her breathing stayed steady and deep.

I was threading my way along the curb. The sidewalk was already thronged with out-of-towners already dressed for Pride in brand-new T-shirts with rubbery silk-screened slogans, "One's Company" and "2²" and "YESIAMESE." They were strolling in twos and threes and fours of varying molecular structure, exchanging glances of appraisal and nervous pleasure. The singletons anxious to understand to be seen understanding. The twofers beaming, indecently grateful for one weekend of sanctioned self-satisfaction. Tomorrow they'd all be here: Siamese and Siamystics, conjoined and joiners, doppelgängers and gruesome twosomes, double-talkers, double-dealers, twice-told tale tellers. An odious prospect. Already I was getting looks of curiosity and sympathy, like the birthday child in a leukemia ward.

The twin amplifiers flanking the temporary stage back at Eighteenth Street retched, rid themselves of five beats of that ubiquitous "We-R-2-R-1-4-Ever," went dead. No we're not, I thought reflexively. I pulled one hood of my hoodie farther over Blanche, but her blond hair spilled out

reflexively. I pulled one hood of my hoodie farther over Blanche, but her blond hair spilled out, catching a rogue ray of sun, and the tourists gave each other quick digs with their elbows. It's Sleeping Beauty! As for the hag with the two-faced apple in her pocket, everyone knows how the story goes. Sooner or later she'll have to turn the other cheek.

"Repent," advised the wizened lady in the plastic visor who protested every day at Market and Sixteenth. Today her hand-lettered sign read "GO BACK TO SIAM."

"Oh, I *do*," I said, fervently, hand on hearts. She slit her eyes at me, suspicious.

Let me be clear, while I still can. I am a twofer—what they used to call a Siamese twin, though I prefer "conjoined," with its faint echo of the alchemists' *conjunctio* and those copulatives copulating in grammar books. I'm the one on the left, your right. Blanche is on my right, your left. I—oh, say it: *we*—have strong cheekbones, long earlobes, hazel eyes, and dirty-blond hair, which is also usually dirty blond hair. Glamour is not very important to me, and it seems goofy to groom Blanche, like trimming my pubes into a heart. But I'm not really a hag. I am stern, though, and wear the marks of habitual sternness, while Blanche is smooth as soap. I never used to need a mirror to see what I looked like, I just turned my head. But we have grown apart, Blanche in her beauty sleep and I.

Dicephalus dipus dibrachius. That's two heads, two legs, and two arms: standard-issue twofer. Aside from that pair of face cards we hold an average hand, not much different from yours. Novelties include the short third collarbone we share between us; a spinal column that begins to divide in two around the sixth thoracic vertebra, flaring the upper chest; two windpipes, two and a half lungs, and a deuce of hearts. Audrey says vampires also have two hearts, one good, one bad. While the good heart beats, the vampire is as capable of kindness as any human soul, but when the good heart stops, the beat of the bad heart strengthens in the dying breast, and makes a decent woman rise from her coffin to prey on everyone she once loved best. The blood of kinfolk wets her chin.

If this is true of twofers too, I know which heart is mine.

I cut around the flower stall at the corner, vaulting a white bucket in which a single sunflower was privately flaunting itself, filling the whole bucket with a secret glow. My shadow eclipsed it for the duration of a blink. Blanche's head jerked when I landed, but this time, my hand was there to steady it. In the lee of the stall, I suddenly felt the lingering warmth of the June day. My temples prickled. The smell of smoke and roses rose around me. The light strengthened, the streetcar tracks shone like new scars, and I thought of the young woman recently killed by a streetcar on Church—"Decapitated,"

Trey had reported with relish, though you couldn't believe everything he said—and let go of Blanche's neck.

"Nora!"

Across the street, a duplex figure in a festival T-shirt waved a fluttering pink flyer. Cindi and Mindi? I could not remember their names, but I had a feeling they rhymed. Twofer names so often do. Jane and Elaine, then, or Mitzi and Fritzzi, were passing out flyers with both hands next to a leaning cutout of RubiaMorena this year's Pride queen. Knowing it was futile, I kept my face lowered as I

about of RubiaMorena, this year's *THE QUEEN*. Knowing it was false, I kept my face lowered as I crossed, as if trying to read something in the shadow that glided along with me, symmetrical and terrible as a Rorschach blot.

“Nora! Blanche!” A flyer sailed past me and plastered itself on the trunk of one of the palm trees on the meridian.

Grimacing, I raised my head. These activist twofers always seemed to make a point of saluting both of us. Both of her chugged up, twin chins doubling as they beamed with the bliss of outreach. (Kelly and Shelley?) We did the tongue and groove kiss, the one where you dock your heads together and kiss the air between. *Left*. The first time a San Francisco hipster tried this on me, I thought he was trying to tongue my saddle. An honest mistake, but he never forgave me that snap kick. *And right*.

Over their shoulder, I watched RubiaMorena stagger, spin, and fall. Some Togetherists attempted to right her, then gave up when the wind felled her a second time. I'd been seeing their orange T-shirts all month. The open secret that most of their members were singletons had become an embarrassment to them; they'd be recruiting aggressively this weekend.

“Everytwo's so looking forward to Audrey's film. Tyou must be so proud! Tyou'll be at the premiere, of course?” The second person plural a local twofer rights group had tried to introduce a couple years ago had not caught on, but a few devotees still used it with enthusiasm.

“Blanche might go, but I don't think I can make it,” I drawled.

Technically, they laughed—a simultaneous nasal huff—but only out of nervousness. A subordinated twin was *not funny*. “Well, we'd all be delighted to see tyou. And I'm sure it would mean a lot to Audrey.” They reached out and hooked a strand of hair out of Blanche's mouth. I wondered if one of them had a crush on Blanche. Talk about pathetic fallacy! Might as well have a crush on a freckle or a polyp.

“Don't go by the listings in the paper, we've made some last-minute changes. The latest times are on the flyers.” Pressing a couple into my hand, they turned. “Oh no!” They hurried toward their fallen queen, whose blank back was already paisley with footprints.

“I think I can make do with just one,” I said, lunging after them. “Thank *tyou* anyway.”

Ugh! Departing, I made an involuntary warding-off gesture. The oranges, flung out and jerked back, bounced together, reminding me of a toy from our childhood, two Plexiglas balls on cords knotted to a ring. You raised and lowered your hand, letting the balls bang together harder and harder until they met at the top as well as the bottom of their arc, completing a circle to which each contributed half. Granny had always said (with, I think, a morbid pleasure) it was an accident waiting to happen. She said this about a lot of things, and had proved to be right about some of them.

“Excuse me, are you radioactive?” said a bald girl with a clipboard. I shouldered past her and turned toward home, zipping up my hoodie. It was getting cold; the fog was closing over the handsome narrow houses with their rainbow beach umbrellas, their twofer beach umbrellas, their rainbow twofer beach umbrellas. I looked up, and farther up, straining to see the rocky top of the hill whose name I still don't know, though I've lived in its late-afternoon shadow for almost ten years. The sky was one mute shriek of white. I dropped my gaze, shot through with cheer and comets, and located

sky was one mute shimmer of white. I dropped my gaze, shot through with sheen and comets, and located the sun I hadn't seen in its violet afterimage. Then I looked up again and found the sun proper by following its ghost. My eyes watered, the sun wobbled and slid apart into twin suns, abominably, and thought, I have to get rid of Blanche.

This is going well, I think. The greenish, narrow-lined pages of the notebook I acquired from an old-fashioned stationery store out on Judah (National Brand Chemistry Notebook: Blue Cover, 120 Numbered Pages, Item No. 43-581) are steadily filling with small, black, left-leaning script. My hand moves slowly down each page, darkening it, as if I were pulling down shade after shade in a long, windowed hall. I'm writing with my left hand, though my penmanship is better with the right, because I trust it more, though even my left, while it never succumbed to that Lithobolia business, is not entirely clear of suspicion. It hovers, fidgets, dips down to tease out another phrase. Are these my words? I read them over. "Rid of Blanche." Funny. At the time I would have been justified in thinking I already was.

One day, Blanche shut up. When I looked right, she no longer looked left, neither to see what I was plotting nor to give me a chill of similitude. (Fear of mirrors: there's probably a name for that. Look it up if you like.) Her eyes closed, and she fell into a long, long sleep.

Sometimes, stirred by a dream she was dreaming, my finger twitched, my toe tapped. Sometime while checking the date on a yogurt container or knotting a shoelace, I felt an incongruous rush of adrenaline. Aside from these tiny reminders, our body was mine. It grew up. I grew up, and Blanche was left behind, like a vacation puppy too dumb to bark after the shrinking license plate and the desperate faces tinged with aquamarine behind the glass.

My life really began then. I don't remember much of what came before, and what I do remember lacks heft. My memories are a clutch of images as unconvincing as those faux-antique photographic portraits (\$15, \$25 with gilt frame) tourists could pose for back in my hometown of Too Bad, NV, their flip-flops hidden under the hoop skirt, sunglasses and souvenir visors waiting just out of view on a plastic chair. I don't mind, I prefer the present tense.

But it turns out that what you don't know *can* hurt you.

In disentangling two pieces of string, one looks for the ends. If I am having trouble, at this late date, telling the two of us apart, the obvious solution is to go back to the beginning.

She should have thought twice. Mama wanted to give a baby to her girlfriend, Max, as a tribute to Max's almost perfect masculinity. A surprise. It is possible that this explanation was conceived after the fact.

The fact was conceived on the bus from Hollywood, where Mama's big break had just fallen through. She had fired her agent in a fit of pique and was going back to New York, where they loved her. *They* being the regulars at a bohemian nightclub where she did a theatrical number that combined song and dance with dramatic monologue. Men wet their hankies when she did the sad song, and ladies in top hats licked their lips and sent her flowers. Mama peevishly plucked greasy bits out of a bag of doughnuts. Across the aisle sat my father, with sandwiches and soda and a dollhouse on his lap.

A man with a dollhouse! He looked like a giant. He had not bought a ticket for the house, so he only slowly and with much looking around decided it was safe to move it off his lap to the seat next to him. He quickly took it on his knees again when the driver turned to show his long, sad, dung-colored mustache. Somewhere between Hollywood and Agua Sucio Mama asked to touch the door with working handles, the chimney with the flue that opened, the toilet with its tank and little chain. Maybe their hands met like two beasts in the bedroom.

Who can resist a dollhouse? With working hinges...tiny mahogany doors with tiny brass latches...a miniature book with only four pages? The dollhouse had two halves that swung open to reveal the rooms inside. Two dolls could be side by side in a room and the next moment at opposite ends of the house. How marvellous! The furniture was elegant, if higgledy-piggledy: the sofa stuck sideways in the stairwell had tasseled throw cushions. Mama stuck the tip of her baby finger in a ceramic potty with painted-blue ducks in the bowl, felt warmth flood her cheeks.

A man with a dollhouse on his lap, that's not a sight you see every day. His thighs tensed underneath it, keeping it stable despite the lurching bus. He had to sit a little sideways to fit, so the dollhouse blocked her view of his face, and she felt free to examine the big scuffed shoes set firmly on the floor, the shapeless dress pants that were hitched a little high, the white ankles, thick and knobbly with pale hairs that stood straight out, the square fingers spread gently around the cornices.

But the dollhouse deserved closer attention. It was grand. A house of tinkling tea parties, cut flowers in vases, sealed envelopes on a silver salver. Silver salver? my mother wondered, distracted by the off-rhyme. Maybe *salver* was the wrong word. In any case a house of snowy aprons with big crisp bows, a Boston or a Philadelphia house. The kind of house she would want to settle into, had she not settled *on*, remember (she told herself, sternly), a gayer life, in every sense, actors and sexual perversity and little flats with noisy radiators and portable cocktail bars, political discussions and

sophisticated humor and yes, a certain amount of tragedy, maybe not in her own life, but in some life close by. Hushed conversations over bad coffee in late-night New York delis where the pies—languished under fluorescent lights and the dishes were too loud, the waiters huge and perfunctory, the napkins papery and flimsy as toilet paper, so they stuck to your lip in bits when you blew your nose—no, your despairing friend blew her—*his* nose and you had to reach out your hand and remove the tag of paper, a simple gesture but eloquent.

The dollhouse had real glass windowpanes. She had been staring at them for some time, trying to make out behind the glass the shapes of chair backs and mantelpieces, before she noticed an eye watching her through the dollhouse. This was possible because the windows lined up, front and back. She let out a little scream, and went to the bathroom to spritz perfume on her cleavage.

There was a vagrant on the side of the road, flagging the bus, her greasy black-walnut-colored hair sticking out in blades from under an unseasonable woolly hat. Improbably, the driver stopped for her—did he know her?—and she made her way down the aisle, accidentally-on-purpose banging a few shoulders with her ratty knapsack. Sitting down in the aisle seat next to Mama, who was not yet anyone's mama. They looked down at their respective laps. On the one hand, we have the crisp yellow dress. On the other, the dingy jeans going to threads in the scuffed patches, a three-cornered tear disclosing a patch of surprisingly innocent leg: clean, slightly downy.

The vagrant reached across the aisle and knocked whimsically at the tiny front door of the dollhouse.

“Knock knock!” she said.

Papa flinched at the black, cracked nails tapping at the tiny glass panes.

While she glared at him, the tapping stopped. “Knock knock, I said!”

Papa cleared his throat. “Who's there?” he said.

“Interrupting cow.”

“Interrup—”

“MOO!” shouted the vagrant, and laughed loudly. She plucked open the tiny door. Mama found herself sharing a pained look with Papa, as the dirty hand hooliganned through the downstairs. (Much later, Papa discovered something was missing: a tiny canary in a filigree cage, perhaps.)

Mama began to suspect she had wound up on the wrong bus, as the sealed hum of its progress down the interstate gave way to the old-ladyish squeaks and exclamations of a chassis asked to cope with stretches of—can this possibly be a *dirt road*?—hard ruts and cattle guards, as it flounced heavily through what seemed to be the tiniest burgs in creation. Mama, a Brooklyn baby, had never seen towns, uh, *hamlets* like these—you could only call them towns in contrast to the practically interstellar emptiness around them. One toaster, an armchair, and a standing lamp would look like

Manhattan against, for example, the salt flats they'd passed a while ago, where a small dog pointed out by her smelly seatmate as a "ky-ote," though it looked like any old mutt to her, had looked back over his shoulder at her, one paw raised, stopped in mid-trot on some important but not too pressing errand by the spacecraft passing through. It was a memorable look, both knowing and disinterested, a look Mama would like to try out herself in other circumstances. Now, in town, "town," they stopped in the middle of the street, engine running, while the driver sloped off into the tinted blue deep end of the windshield and disappeared, probably into a bar, as Mama thought gloomily, while her strange seatmate (but Mama wasn't scared of her, she was from New York, she was used to characters) said it right out loud, "Probably gone for a tall one." It didn't look like much of a bar, it was a long low building with a heavy overhanging roof like a shoebox with the wrong lid on it, and the few letters still dangling from the signboard outside, B, W, didn't spell anything that made any sense to her. The bus was rumbling under her like a hovercraft. She was awfully high, she could look right over the scattered trailers and, well, she'd call them bungalows, they weren't houses (houses looked like the one the nice man opposite was holding in his lap), and while they were hovering there, there was time for a lone tumbleweed to enter town by the same road they'd come in on, naturally, since it was the only road, bounce, flop, flirt, and whirl the length of the main street, pass them, pause, and with a single madcap bound continue on its way out of town eastward into the gathering dusk, while her seatmate sang in a cracked voice, "Drifting along with the tumbling tu-ummmbleweeds." Or was it "tumbling along"?

After this the bus drove interminably over a bad road in what looked very much like the wrong direction, to let out, late that night or early the next morning, one passenger (Mama recognized him; he'd boarded the bus back in town, some kind of local business, a favor, the bus driver didn't think they'd notice, but you couldn't fool a Brooklyn girl, savvy to tricks and gimmicks) in the middle of nowhere. She could make out the metal legs of a small water tower in the headlights but nothing else besides the innumerable bugs and larger things—bats?—that flashed through the light too quickly to be identified. A few passengers let out wordless squalls of protest, out of the dark maternal interior, and then settled down; the jouncing was soothing, and most of them fell asleep as the road rewound.

Sometime in the night she awoke and saw the dollhouse's black silhouette against the almost black, maybe deep purple windows, then with a start she caught a glint from Papa's eyes and realized he was looking at her. I suppose it must have happened then, but what about the tramp, who is in the way where I've placed her, even if (as one can easily imagine) she has drooped and slid down in the seat and is now scarcely more than a bundle of rags, over which Mama can easily clamber (holding onto the back of her seat and the seat in front) in order to get to Papa. Our conception was a deadline she had to meet. In retrospect we can say it was now (tonight, on the rocking bus) or never, despite the inconvenience and even unlikelihood of it. What luck that Mama (a Brooklyn girl and a bohemian) had never been shy, least of all now (it's easy in the dark) as she directed him with signs and whispers to move the dollhouse onto the seat beside him. Had he really held it on his lap all night, dozing, with an empty seat beside him? Well, yes, it's an heirloom, and he's a punctilious man, and what's one night of sleep? He liked the forked silhouettes of the saguaro cacti against the sky, and the orchestra sleepers around him. But now, without hesitation, he did what the lady asked, though to protect the guttering of the dollhouse against the metal back of the seat in front of him he first wedged his jacket between them.

Mama took the place of the dollhouse in his lap, looking back over his head into the resonant interior of the bus. The idea that some of the dark forms back there might be watching quickened her

breath. Papa closed his eyes and felt her collarbone warm and hard against his lips. He dared to kiss it, then ducked his head to reach the warm hollow under it, concentrating on this and not the operation Mama was performing blind on his belt buckle, though he did raise his hips when she tugged down on his trousers. Her fingers slipped on the elastic of his boxers, which snapped smartly against his erect cock. He sucked in his breath, felt her dress softly cleave to his mouth. They both froze, listening. Snores, the creaking of the bus. It occurred to him that she would go back to her seat now, and that that might be a relief. But she gave him an intimate, apologetic pat, drew his boxers carefully down, shuffled forward, and fit herself down over him, one knee jammed against the metal joint of an armrest. Deep in her throat, he heard a tiny, unself-conscious grunt. Suddenly he was happy. He bit her dress, grinning. Mama didn't see this. She didn't think about much as she moved, smiling calmly into the darkness. She felt invisible, impossible, free. She could do anything, be anyone. She didn't know what we know, that she was becoming something permanent and necessary as an astrological sign, right now—yes—wait—yes, right now: my mother.

My mother climbed back over the vagrant into her own seat and slept a little. My father took the dollhouse on his lap again and continued his vigil. At three or four in the morning the bus stopped at a gas station in another podunk town, for another endless wait above the simmering engine, while bugs crazed by the pump's lone fluorescent light pinged against the windshield and bats strafed the windows. A few passengers roused themselves and trudged to the bathroom. The vagrant revived and let herself out the back door. Mama craned her neck around in time to see her receding form briefly silhouetted against a distant bloom of pink neon. Then she turned back to Papa. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," he said.

"What's your name?" They both laughed, ruefully on his part, joyfully on hers. What a life she had, honestly. What adventures.

She hooked her finger familiarly through the front door of the dollhouse, and they told each other their stories in murmured snatches. Then the bus driver eased himself back into his seat, and the bus threw itself onto the freeway again, and the hum and the rocking started up again.

They all woke at once at what was not quite dawn yet, with the impression they'd been summoned somehow, or that a big celestial palm had dealt the roof of the bus a clap, and the interior slowly filled with the sounds of people adjusting and with quiet grumbling surmise. The bus driver kept driving, unmoved. An orange-pink stain spread across the sky. A strange high plume of cloud raced northeast above them. Something streaked the dark shapes of yuccas, saguaros, cattle. The bus driver put his wipers on. But it wasn't raining, it was snowing. In summer? Silvery particles spilled off the sides and top of the windshield.

The sun rose and the banked heat of the desert flared up as if worked by a bellows, but still the snow that could not be snow sifted and ran along the windows of the bus.

There, we exist. A half-teaspoon of ink, and already much to regret. The bus could have been a train. My mother could have been wearing jeans, not a dress. The vagrant: maybe a figment. Does it matter? Only Blanche knows.

I stood in the dark, listening. A mewling cry floated down from above. I slid my foot forward through a slick litter of envelopes until it bumped a carpeted bottom step that I knew to be a particularly bilious green, though with the front door closed and my eyes still jazzy from the dance diagrams of the sun, I couldn't see it. The cry came again. It would have been an eerie sound had it not been so familiar. Audrey was an experimental filmmaker and taught part-time at the Art Institute, but she made her real living doing phone sex. So did Trey, so did I. The house was always moaning, whimpering, sighing, as if it were alive and in heat. We called it the House of Voices.

The Mooncalf, Audrey's chocolate lab, appeared in silhouette against the dim light at the top of the stairs, her ears held stiffly out and down with pleasure. She danced from paw to paw, indecisive, then hustled down the stairs to greet me.

"Moony! Moon-unit! Looney-tune!" I stooped, meeting her cold nose halfway, and scrubbed the chronic itch at the base of her tail while I swept my other hand over the carpet, gathering the mail by feel. Mooncalf followed me up to the kitchen, frolicking. I slid the letters onto the red boomerang-patterned linoleum table, slung the oranges into the hanging baskets. There was a mug ("DON'T MESS WITH TEXAS") with a dry tea bag in it on the counter by the stove. I lifted and shook the kettle, which twanged and hissed, turned off the gas, set the kettle on the back of the stove to cool.

I tapped lightly on Audrey's door as I passed. My room was at the other end of the apartment. It had once been the living room, and connected to Trey's, the former dining room, via great, heavy sliding doors. These we kept closed, though sound passed right through. Across the gap on my side hung a thrift store painting of a purple cow. On his side, a picture of fashion designer Craig Craig torn out of *W2 Weekly*.

The cow uttered a loud trill. On the other side of the wall, Trey picked up the phone in mid-peal. "Yup. OK. Got it." Then his voice changed registers. "Hello, Professor," he gurgled. "'Course I remember." Trey, "she-male" over the phone (Candi Cornhole!), was in person hollow-chested, artfully bearded, and, theoretically, straight. It was a treat to watch his goatee hop while he described his full red lips, his flawless skin.

I got down the Manual from its place on the mantel and took it back to the kitchen. Audrey was at the table, waiting for me.

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