

Juliana Grace

### Thank Heaven

She watched closely as I criss-crossed my arms and pulled my T-shirt over my head, exposing the cotton pink training bra I didn't really need yet. My fingers paused at the top of my jeans. They were still too broad for my hips, but my mom said I could grow into them. I had to undo the safety pin at the fly before I could unzip the pants. I was picking up high-pitched alien transmissions, a nervous tick with no name.

My friend was impatient. *Take them off, she ordered. The bra too.*

Why? I complained, that's against the rules.

Elle's lips curled. *Rules are made to be broken, Jen. We've been playing this game long enough to update the rules.*

She peeled her scoop-neck top over her head and unhooked a bright red under-wire bra. She wiggled out of her stretchy skirt, and with one leg, sent it soaring onto the bed. She was wearing black sparkly panties. She struck a pose like those pictures of horses some girls keep in their lockers. They're all named "Bluebell" and "Snowflake."

*See? No big deal. We're bigger now, that's all. Well, she said, giving me the once-over, well, I'm bigger.*

She had a black mass of pubic hair that reminded me of my mom's when I'd see her undressing for the shower. Her nipples were long and dark—gross. She made sure I got a good look at her before she helped me pull down my underpants.

*That too,* she said, meaning my bra.

Avoiding her eyes, I fumbled with the back hook. I sighed and stamped my feet as I worked behind my back.

She frowned.

*You want me to do it?*

No. I got it. Um...

As soon as I'd get one hook loose, the other would catch: a losing battle. Plus, my hands kept slipping. I went to wipe them on my pants but remembered they were on the floor.

They were pretend kisses, and pretend noises, and it was a pretend scenario—of Elle's imagination—but the singing in my ears was real, and I suddenly couldn't imagine anything more fun than watching her copy of *Now and Then* for a second time. My favorite scene was the one where Christina Ricci and Devon Sawa hold hands on the porch swing. Lightning bugs circle their heads and they sip on cans of soda.

*Okay,* she directed. *We're older, like sixteen or nineteen.*

Yeah, I said. Nineteen.

My favorite babysitter, when I used to need one, had said she was nineteen. She used to wear red lipstick and tugged at her eyelashes a lot.

*Okay. We're sisters. Twins. And...we're orphans who've just been kidnapped from the orphanage in the middle of the night.*

We scurried around the room with the lights off, holding our clothes and whimpering like we had our mouths gagged. We held hands tightly and fake-cried. She always played the protective older sister, and would give me frequent pecks on the forehead. I was supposed to cower against her. I liked those moments. Sometimes I wished that were the whole game.

*Now, we get to the house. It's a mansion...in India.*

Elle had lived in India one summer with her mother. She bragged about it a lot, and it was always the destination in our games. Her step-dad's house was filled with statues of dancing elephants and statues with four, or six arms.

Who kidnapped us, Stella? I whispered in the dark.

She always wanted to be called Stella because it was close to Elle but meant star.

*A tall man in black leather. And he tells us to get on a motorcycle. We have to hang onto the back of him, and he's really strong.*

Yeah, he's tall and strong, and he's got long-ish blonde hair, right?

*No. Dark brown. Across his face.*

Fine. Yeah, brown and he's got blue eyes! So hot, I giggled, but she interrupted me.

*No, no, no. Brown and brown. Trust me. Like John Marks, on the varsity lacrosse team at my school. He plays JV for Bethesda High too, already. They recruited him. He's got brown hair and brown eyes, and really strong arms. Super hot. Just trust me.*

I conceded. Okay, okay. And he says, I wish we didn't meet this way, 'cause you girls are really pretty...

*Right*, she approved. *He says, You girls don't look like twins. You have to hide in here. And then the bed is the room.*

My brain felt like a balloon floating above my awkward limbs as I crawled onto the bedspread. Then, as she usually did around this point in the game, she switched roles.

*Now I'm him.* She smoothed a hand over my cheek. *Oh, Jen, you're so pretty...*

Not Jen. I want a better name too.

*What about Jezzie?*

I curled my lip. What's that?

*Short for Jasmine. There's a really pretty Indian girl at my school named Jasmine. She's really popular, everyone knows her, and they call her Jezzie. And it's close to your name already.*

She hadn't stopped touching my face.

Uh—okay. I'm Jezzie.

*Jezzie, you're really sexy. Don't you wanna kiss me?*

I tried to pretend we were Barbies, kissing with our smiles. I tried to pretend she was John Marks. I tried to imagine Devon Sawa like this, above me. Only I imagine he wouldn't be comparing our budding breast sizes and showing off his rehearsed sex noises. But then again, I thought, don't actors have to practice stuff like that so they can do it in a movie? How do they make sure the guy doesn't, like, accidentally slip it in? Do they wear cups or something? I tried to imagine myself as Devon Sawa's cup.

I was pretty sure we shouldn't have been doing what we'd been doing. My gentle Protestant guilt tugged at me—that's how I knew it wasn't normal, neither the game itself nor the way she reacted when I showed up at the door the next week and refused to play it.

Can't we just play Barbies? I suggested, although I knew I was too old.

*Are you serious? Barbies? What're you, two?*

No. I'm not two. I just don't want to play the game. It's weird.

*Am I weird, Jen?*

She said it softly and I sensed danger. Her arms hung straight at her sides and her snake-green eyes searched each of my features. I could tell she was trying to force tears. She loved the way her eyes turned turquoise when she was crying.

No...you're not weird. But doesn't it feel weird? The game...*that* game, I mean. If we keep doing it, doesn't it mean we're gay?

*I'm not gay, Jen. You think I'm gay? I get more guys than anyone in my grade.*

I know, it's just that—

She was always interrupting.

*I'm just getting you used to it. Don't you want to know what to do when you go out with Collins?*

Yeah, but—he hasn't even asked me out yet.

*That's because he can tell you don't know what to do. I'll bet you. I'm your coach, and you're really lucky because I'm good. I'm the best. Trust me, you'll thank me later.*

My mother picked me up an hour later. By then we were sitting at the kitchen table picking out juicy little seeds from a pomegranate. Elle's mother was in the extended living room cuddling with her rich husband. I heard the door first and I jumped up to open it. My fingers left sticky red smears on the doorknob. "Hi, Mom," I said, trying to rub them off with the end of my sleeve.

"Hi, hon," she said. "I have your books for class. Are you girls ready?"

Elle had appeared behind me silently, so I jumped when I turned around.

*Hi, Mrs. Paulson,* she cooed smoothly. She leaned against the door, sucking juice off her fingers. She did not look ready.

“Hi, Elle. Let’s get going. You don’t want to be late.”

Elle and I rolled our eyes at each other. We would’ve loved nothing more than to skip about half our required Communion class in that mildewed room in the church basement.

*I just need to change*, Elle said, making no moves. My mother looked her up and down, from her busy blue camisole top to her striped leggings.

“Okay, quick like a bunny. Where’s your mother?”

*The den*. She ascended the stairs, sliding her body against the banister. At the top, she turned and made a covert gesture for me to follow. But her mother had heard our voices and was wrapping me up in a tight squeeze from behind.

“Hi, Nancy,” she greeted my mother cheerfully. “Thank you again for driving the girls over there.”

“Oh sure,” said my mother. “It’s my pleasure. You’ve helped us out plenty of times before. Which reminds me, Hal and I will be in Singapore for a week in June...”

“How exciting!” Elle’s mother exclaimed.

“Yes, and a bit difficult trying to figure out how to maintain business back here. We have a neighbor taking care of this one,” she placed a hand on my head, and I shook it off, “...throughout the week, but then *they’re* going out of town that weekend.”

“We can take her!”

“Could you?”

“Sure! Elle, baby,” she called, her clear singer’s voice echoing off the marble tiles and hardwood stairs.

“How’d you like Jen to stay with us for a weekend in June?”

Elle appeared from her doorway looking pissed. I hadn't come upstairs, but adult presence trumped her authority. She was brushing her long brown hair slowly and gazing down haughtily at us. *Sure*, she said, without a hint of enthusiasm. Her mother frowned at her attitude, but she turned away and disappeared again.

"I'll be in the Islands myself on some business, but Alex will be here."

"Oh..." My mother shifted her purse from one shoulder to the other. Alex made her uncomfortable. He was always making weird jokes with the kind of punch line where you're not sure anymore if it was a joke or not. But he was still an adult figure, and we all knew he was the disciplinarian of the two, despite not being Elle's biological father. "Well if it's no extra burden..."

"Not at all! Alex, honey? Would you mind having Jen here with Elle the weekend her parents are in Singapore?"

The brown curly head watching T.V. in the recessed den didn't move. But an open-throated voice said, "Suuuure. She'll have to pass the test first, though."

Elle's mother blinked a lot, squeezing her eyes shut and reopening them wide. She wore a permanent smile.

She shook her head at us as if to say, *No, no, he's just joking*. But he lifted himself off the couch and strolled into the hallway in his socks.

"Are you ready to take the test?" He asked me. All the adults stared at me. A drop of sweat made its way down my back. I reached a hand back there and tried to catch it with my shirt.

Um, sure.

"*Um, sure?* What kind of an answer is that? You say, 'Yes sir!'"

Uh—yes, sir?

"OK—here's your test: What is the hypotenuse of a triangle?"

Elle's mother cut in. "Oh, Alex." She was still smiling.

"How old are you?" He demanded.

Eleven.

"Eleven. You should know the hypotenuse of a triangle. Fine. Another one. This is your test." His eyes were bright green, menacing like Elle's, but brighter like a cartoon character's. He often made dirty jokes when her mother was gone. Elle got them and I pretended to. He could tell I pretended.

"Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?"

I know this one, I thought with relief. My own father was fond of it.

Grant, I answered, and they broke into a chorus of impressed "Ohhh"s.

"Elle?" Her mother called again from the bottom of the stairs. "It's five 'til, baby, you're going to be late! Let's go! What is she doing?"

To my mother's and my mutual despair, she began climbing the stairs to look for her daughter, leaving us with Alex and his interrogations. He worked for the government somehow. I got the sense he could smell fear. My mother smiled politely and I looked at my shoes.

"So," he said, addressing her. "Singapore, huh?"

"Singapore," she nodded.

"It's gonna be hot. *Real* hot."

"That's what I hear."

"You should go in September."

"Oh?"

"Go in September. It'll still be there, promise."

“I’m sure it will be. Hal...” She started, but he cut her off. He did that a lot too.

“And take this one with you,” he said, glaring at me. “She’ll stay out of trouble in the hotel room while you two go club-hopping.”

It was an absurd notion to think of my middle-aged parents “club-hopping,” my dad in his cummerbund that he wore for formal dinners, and my mom in her square-shaped reading glasses. It was like he could read my thoughts, judging by his impish grin. As usual, my mom ruined the joke.

“Hal’s there on business. I think he’ll be too busy to go out much.”

“So why don’t you stay? Watch the little terror here.”

I cursed him silently. My mom looked confused, but just then we heard Elle arguing with her mother and a door slammed. The elegant divorcee rejoined us, apologizing. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “She’ll be down in a minute.”

“I was just saying,” Alex said, “Nancy should wait to go to Singapore until they can have some fun.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Nancy,” she said, winking. “Hal’s company always plans some nice excursions for the spouses on these conferences, don’t they? Nice luncheons and tours...”

“That’s right,” my mother said, relieved. “They bring the country right to you, no hassles or stress. It’s terrific. Just what I want from a vacation.”

“If you wanted to be bored, you could just stay at home. No need to go to the other side of the world.”

Elle’s mother poked him in the ribs. “I think it sounds lovely. You’ll have a wonderful time. Don’t worry about a thing. I’m sure Elle will be thrilled to have a whole weekend with Jennifer. Elle!”

She appeared at the top of the stairs, pouting in a powder blue collared shirt buttoned to her collarbone and a pair of blue jeans. She sat on the banister and slid halfway down until she almost fell off.

“The next time I see you do that while we don’t have company, there will be consequences,” Alex thundered. She rolled her eyes. “What was that?”

We stood in embarrassed silence while she mumbled, *I didn’t say anything.*

“Excuse me?”

*I said, I didn’t say anything.*

“And I said, the next time I see you do that there will be serious consequences. Do you understand?”

*Yes*, she said, raising her eyebrows.

“What was that?”

*Yes*, sir.

“It’s five now. You’ve made everyone late.”

We could only stare while they had their standoff.

“Thanks again, Nancy,” Elle’s mother broke in apologetically. Alex put his arm around her, drawing her back into the den.

Elle was the only thing that made the forced routine of church bearable. With her help, I could continue to learn about that secular world my parents were trying so hard to keep from me. I blamed them for my awkward status among my classmates, my non-existence to boys and zero athletic renown. I still wasn’t allowed to watch television other than the kids’ networks, but even some of those shows were too “rude.” In daily verbal battles at school, I was the one running to the bathroom stall to cry and curse and read the ballpoint penned invectives against me on the walls:

*Jenny Paulson has a stinky vaj.*

*Jenny Paulson is a bra size negative AA.*

*Jenny Paulson is a lifetime virgin.*

My mom told me girls were just jealous that I was smart and “getting pretty.” She said I’d have more dates than those girls soon. But thanks, Mom, the wisdom didn’t stop the smirks, comments in the halls and pictures on the walls. A few changes in myself could, though.

Elle had promised me she’d save me from all this so I wouldn’t have to endure throughout high school too. I needed to do a few things: first, start wearing jeans that actually made it down to my ankles and didn’t start at my ribcage. Next, learn to flip my hair over my shoulder, tuck it behind my ear and play with it around boys. She’d taught me how to walk like a bitch—arms and hips swinging, chin raised and eyes lowered—so I wouldn’t be their constant punching bag. I needed to learn the names of the members of groups like Destiny’s Child, the lyrics to Puff Daddy songs, learn all the music video dances. My peers operated on a completely different consciousness, becoming teenagers while I was trapped in reluctant childhood.

“Project Jenny” had to be worked on at church, or afterwards at her step-dad’s house nearby because we didn’t go to the same school. Her school, one neighborhood closer to the city, seemed to be full of richer kids with later curfews, T.V.’s and phones in their bedrooms, those windows to the outside world. They hooked up, made out, went to the mall in groups and came back with sexy clothes and inside jokes. They didn’t sit around at lunch and talk about class. They were more mature and street-smarter than the relatively nicer, more childish kids at my school. I was too obviously good at school to get guys like Collins to flirt with me like he did with Allison Forsythe, the lovable ditz who wore spaghetti-strapped tank tops and visible thongs sticking out of her low-rider jeans. My oversized tourist T-shirts with the names of obscure countries and foreign languages failed to be the conversation-starters my parents must have imagined they would be. They were very confused by my lack of popularity. My mom

said I was “worldly, well-read and polite, pleasant-looking besides.” Why was I worried about getting dates anyway? I was still a kid. I should just be having fun. How could I explain that to normal kids, “fun” meant filching LED lights from Sharper Image, making out in the dark corners of un-chaperoned coed parties, and learning to incorporate the terms “mother-fucker” and “dick-sucker” into my vernacular? They didn’t get it, but I couldn’t explain it either. Being a “nice girl” didn’t have any perks—for one thing, I had no way to defend myself against social attacks.

Elle kept a list—she called it her hit list—of people from her school she intended to “destroy.” Their malefactions were as major as slander and as minor as a dirty look. A girl who supposedly had called Elle a slut came to school one day to find her locker smeared with a smelly brown paste. A guy who’d called Elle stupid in class started finding typed letters in his locker—he transferred schools, they said. The origins of these middle school “hits” were never discovered, and she never fell under suspicion. Adults loved her. She used a sophisticated level of sarcasm, was a master of uncovering artifice and developing complex ideas. She brought gifts for congregation members in wheelchairs. She hugged everybody. No one like that could do bad things. Our pastor said she had “a way about her.” I wondered if I was the only one who really knew what that meant.

That Sunday, I found myself actually listening to the sermon.

“The Devil, as we define him today, is less of a being than a natural force of evil, responsible for cruelty and corruption in the world. Thief of youth and innocence, he is master of smoke and mirrors, appearing in many forms, like a harmless garden snake. It allows him to spread his volatile influence in a chain reaction, eventually infecting the whole human race until we are unable to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong.

“We fight a very different battle today than our parents did a generation ago. These destructive paths of corruption have become valued, even mainstream, embedded in every aspect of modern youth culture. That’s why it’s important, friends, that we teach our children to walk with God *now*, so that when the Devil inevitably enters their lives, they will have the strength to turn him away right then and there and spend the rest of their lives wrapped in Jesus’ love.”

Then everyone murmured in imperfect unity, “Lord, give us strength.”

I wish I had been strong enough to resist her. I learned much too late in life that I didn’t have to say yes to everything. But Elle was a girl who was not used to hearing no, and I was not used to having the opportunity to say yes. I wanted what she had. I wanted to be invincible.

God-is-great, God-is-good, lettuce-thankum for this food. By-his-hands, we-are- fed, thank you God for daily bread. Ah-men, I recited with as much devotion as I would “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” It had been the family dinnertime prayer since I was old enough to speak. It was easy to remember, and didn’t make my dad too uncomfortable to mumble under his breath. He used to have faith, he said, before he moved to the Washington, D.C. area. “Now the Democrats are God,” he’d say.

They began discussing the new plans for me to stay with Elle for the weekend. I should bring my bathing suit so I could swim in their pool, and Mom would get to work marking my name in all the tags of my clothing with a Sharpie pen so Elle and my clothes wouldn’t get mixed up.

“I don’t think there’s much danger of that,” said Dad.

“Why do you say that?” asked Mom, a portrait of innocence.

Dad chuckled, but not like he did at those insurance commercials. “Come on. I think it’s safe to say there is no chance of mixing up Jenny’s clothes with hers. Did you see what she wore to church the other week? Jeez. I’ve never seen so much cleavage at the communion altar before. I think Pastor even blushed.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mom, sharply dismissive. “You can’t blame the girl for developing early.”

“For crying out loud, she’s a hop skip and a jump away from standing on K Street in some of those clothes, Nancy. I mean, those heels had to’ve been about eight inches. And with *cherries* on them? I mean, *Christ*.”

“Well,” said Mom defensively, “She is Jennifer’s best friend, and her mother is just lovely. That Alex, though...”

“Oh, he’s a creep,” said Dad with a mouthful of steak. “Don’t you find him to be creepy, Jen? I pity that girl having to live with that guy. It’s like being a gangster crook is legal now.”

“What a life that girl’s had, though,” said Mom. “She deserves a nice house like he has for them.”

My parents wouldn’t explain why they talked in hushed tones about Elle. They told me I would understand when I was older.

But one time she told me a story about her life in Alabama before her mother married Alex and joined our church. My parents were right: I was too young at the time to process the implications of a stepmother who used six-packs of beer as bludgeoning devices, or a step-uncle who played with Elle when she was too little, or the things someone did to her in the backseat of a car while her mother sat up front with the driver. I thought she was the biggest liar in the world. Even if what she told me *was* true, I thought maybe it was the best thing that ever happened to her because now people fell over themselves to shower her with attention and expensive gifts, excusing away all her tantrums and mischief. I should be so lucky.

Her life was a source of fascination to me, like the price tags on dresses worn by celebrities in gossip magazines. She had a princess's ransom in glass bottles, each one the shape of the body she was developing. In her room full of mirrors and magazine cutouts of heartthrobs, the colors and tubes were dazzling. I wanted to use the sparkly nail polish as finger-paint, and the wands, applicators and brushes reminded me of little feather dusters and princess gowns. In my house, these things were as forbidden as any dress shoe with more than a one-inch heel, or any skirt above the knee. One time, I used some of my contraband Tinker Bell sheer pink lip shimmer on the way to see a musical with my parents. My mother caught it in the rearview mirror in time, and pulled over to watch me wipe it off. She said that next time she caught me, we would turn around and go home. The gloss had felt cool and slippery, like lingerie for my lips. When I wiped it off, the tissue was smeared with pixie dust. I rolled it into a ball and kept it in my pocket all night.

I stood at the large double oak doors on Friday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, trembling with excitement. This was my ticket out of childhood. This would be a weekend full of sneaking sips of vodka, digging through her step-dad's porn collection, and prank-Instant Messaging people we hated. Like sexy girl summer camp. Maybe I'd leave with a makeover, or new leads on a boyfriend, someone more mature than the scaredy-babies I went to school with. There was just one stipulation, a promise I'd made to myself: I would not agree to play that game again.

*This is gonna be awesome*, she squealed as she smoothed her curtained hair in her vanity mirror. I sat on her bed, watching her in the mirror, studying her beauty routine.

*Alex is gone from like five in the morning 'til eight at night. It's the best. We can have John Marks and some of his lacrosse friends come over.*

Oh my God, oh my *God!* I yelped, jumping up and down. My first kiss, my first kiss!

She smiled sweetly in the mirror at my silly enthusiasm. *That's great sweetie, but um, first thing is? You can't act like that around him. You gotta be cool.*

Right, I said, right. Cool. Cooooool.

*Second thing is, he's already had a couple girlfriends. So we need to get you ready.*

Yeah! I said, A makeover! Can I borrow a push-up bra?

*You're going to need more preparation than that. Let's go downstairs.*

The basement had its own door that could be locked from the outside. The steps down were narrow and slippery. There were three doors at the bottom: the one on the right was a storage room filled with boxes of canned food and toilet paper, the one in the middle was a marble-floored bathroom, and the one on the left was always locked—that's where Alex kept his guns, Elle said. The rest was a big, open space divided in half between the tile-floored bar area and the carpeted home theater area, separated by a sliding glass partition. There were no windows. Mirrors lined the wall behind the tiered shelves of sleek liquor bottles, and the home theater section had lights in the floor.

Awesome, I said, gazing inexpertly at the bottles. Which ones taste good?

*I think the vodka and the whisky taste the best. Try this one.*

She handed me a bottle of Grey Goose. I held my nose as I tipped it back into my mouth. I let go of my nose. I had the sensation of having swallowed rubbing alcohol. I coughed, and gagged, and the tears streamed down while she giggled.

*You're supposed to mix it with something, silly.*

She reached below the bar and brought up a can of cranberry juice. She poured it and the vodka in a stubby glass and told me to drink it like cough medicine.

*Knock it back.*

I did, and tried to restrain myself from convulsing as she poured a tiny glass full of Knob Creek and threw her head back with it.

*Wanna watch something?*

We studied the movie cabinet. She said I needed to do “research.” So she isolated a few choice options including *Pretty Woman*, *Striptease*, and *Nine Weeks*. We put them each on, just for the scenes she’d already memorized. I felt like falling asleep right away, and I started to nod off. She jumped up and grabbed a can from the refrigerator and a bottle from the cabinet.

*Here, take this and wash it down with this.*

What is it?

*It’s good for you. It’ll keep you awake.*

I’m not supposed to take anything without knowing...I said, immediately losing my new sexy girl credibility. Sexy girls did not ask precautionary questions.

*Oh shut up, Jen. It’s just Adderall and Red Bull.*

Is it dangerous?

*No, silly. I take Adderall everyday, and my mom drinks a Red Bull every morning before work. It just helps you stay awake and alert so you don’t fall asleep.*

I placed the blue pill on my tongue and took a swig of the rubbery drink.

Bored of the movies, she used the big screen T.V. to play our favorite Jock Jams CD. We danced around the room, our arms waving wildly and our laughter getting shriller and faster. This was going to be a *great* weekend. I was going to learn so much. I was going to go back to my school in the fall and blow everyone away with my maturity and sexiness.

A sharp, shrill tone filled my head and my stomach started lurching. I ran to the bathroom with Elle calling after me. I felt as if my body were trying to turn inside out. I was crying, retching, and gagging on the searing liquid running down my throat. She appeared in the doorway, laughing. Then she kneeled beside me and drew my hair back. She was whispering things to me I couldn't understand. It felt like she was dabbing the back of my neck with a sponge, but once my vomiting subsided I sensed a very different thing going on. She was sucking on my neck.

I pushed her off. She fell back onto the floor, stunned.

I don't want to play the game anymore, Elle, I slurred, trying to reach the toilet paper. She just glared at me.

*You're drunk. You don't know what you want.*

No, no, I said. She appeared once, twice, again, and again, like the numbers on the Deal or No Deal wheel, like I was in a giant balloon rolling downhill.

Her expression softened and her voice got that scary, quiet tremble.

*Poor Jennee, she sing-songed, caressing my hair. I threw up the first time too, it's okay.*

She crawled on her hands and knees towards me and gently pushed me against the side of the bathtub.

*You got puke on your shorts. And your shirt. Wanna take a shower?*

She reached over and turned the knobs. It was the most welcoming sound I could've imagine at that moment, so I began undressing. She helped me pull my shirt over my head and my shorts over my knees. I felt like

a limp puppet. She giggled, and squeezed my thigh. I wiggled away a little and tried to stand. It didn't take much effort to make me sit down again. She leaned over me with both her hands on my thighs.

*You ever felt this before?*

She shoved a hand inside my underwear, up into me, and suddenly my muscles all seemed to jump at once.

Later on, the adults would determine that since I had a bruise on my knee that matched the mark under her chin, I was responsible for her concussion, occurring when the back of her head hit the marble with a dull, sickening crack, and therefore also responsible for her erratic behavior that followed. It would almost have been as if I myself had unlocked the door on the left with a key I wasn't supposed to have and held the gun myself, unloading a .9 mm bullet into my own arm. My own worst enemy.

Forgive her, father! for she knows not what she does.

And yet, she shall reap what she sows.

Elle never became a pregnant teen, as everyone had expected. Her stepdad enrolled her in an alternative school for troubled kids. Her mother divorced him after discovering a tracking device under her car. Everything went pretty much according to the prophecies.

But there was one thing no one expected, least of all me. I *missed* it. The Game. Never again did I hear that shrill scream, that primordial alarm of danger. The silence that folded around me in her absence was unbearable. Every night before I fell asleep, it was like there was a meeting in which everyone was speaking at the same time, with the same urgency. It lasted for hours, so deafening that I began stuffing my ears with plugs. When that didn't work, I began my regiment of Valium, prescribed me by a lady psychiatrist.

When that didn't work, I began begging my lady psychiatrist for something stronger. She prescribed Ambien, but I told her, "I want something stronger. Like a pussy." She told me she couldn't help me, but I proved her wrong. And when I did, over her protests and whining, bargaining and logic, I heard it again. The pure, feminine scream of danger and pain and familiarity. It's continued ever since.

I have regained control, and thereby my life. When I met Natalie—whom I call Nell—I knew that nothing had been an accident. She allows me to be myself, to pursue my pleasures the way I want. She wants nothing but the chance to be less. It's perfect.

I am not beyond saving. This is what I have been told to say. I am a whole person, not a shred of what I once was. My desires and dreams are valid, and I don't have to be threatened by them anymore.

But I'm through with desires and dreams. I'm through with the idea of evil. It only exists in that one place, the place where my parents were too ashamed to go anymore. A community of supposed do-gooders, until one of them does not do-good. Until one of them steps outside. And then you're supposedly lost forever.

But I'm not lost. I'm not a simp. I don't have to fall for that baloney anymore. Elle taught me that. In her lessons of coolness was the wisdom to see that I was being held down. I was made to believe that to deny myself pleasures was to make myself into something acceptable to something greater. But there can be nothing greater than getting to hear my lullaby again. I want those people at the great bedtime meeting to *shut up*. And if it means losing everything...

God works in mysterious ways.

All I'm left with is gratitude. My prayers have been answered—I'm free.

Elle is great, Elle is good.

Lettuce thanker for my cool.