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Pulse Literary Journal

Year's End Fiction 2011



Stories for a winter's night

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2011

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The Theorem of Everything

by Melissa T. Romo

Her name was Stacy, but everyone just called her Kitty. Maybe it was because of her eyes. She had wide-set, green eyes that narrowed at the corners. Or maybe it was because she was good at gymnastics, especially the bridge. Or maybe it was the way she followed boys around a little too much. That's what my mother said anyway, so I avoided Kitty. It didn't really make sense to me, that a pretty girl would have to follow the boys around and then the boys would say mean things about her later. Boys didn't make sense to me. Nothing made sense to me, not the way I wanted it to.

Kitty disappeared on the Monday of the last week of school. She was in my Algebra class, third period, and when I got there that day her seat was empty. Mr. Pelkin, our teacher, asked me if I knew where she was. He asked me because I sat in the seat behind Kitty, not because I was her friend. Not that he would know that. I shook my head, which I think I did to say both that I wasn't her friend and that I didn't know where she was.

We went on with the class, taking a last quiz that Mr. Pelkin had said would be "for fun," though I never managed to see quizzes that way. It covered the quadratic formula, irrational numbers and the Property of Opposites. The Property of Opposites stated that for every a element of the Reals, $a + -a = 0$. That was the only part of the quiz I did well on. I felt like I understood how things could add up to equal nothing. Towards the end of class, Mr. Pelkin handed back the quizzes. Mine was marked with a 74%, with a few "?" scribbled next to some of the quadratic formula problems that I couldn't finish. He wrote a smiley face next to the four questions about opposites and wrote a word next to the face that started with "Ex." I think it said "Excellent." I thought it was weird that a man would write smiley faces like that, especially teaching the seventh grade.

After he passed back the quizzes, he announced that his wife had made cupcakes for the class. Mr. Pelkin sent around a large Tupperware container that had a spot for each cupcake to rest inside. I took one and smudged the icing off the cupcake next to the one I took. While I was licking the chocolate frosting and sprinkles off the side of my hand, the principal came to the door and asked Mr. Pelkin to step outside. After he did, the classroom grew louder, as if sound was being pumped in, like air into a balloon. My two best friends were in the Algebra class across the hall, so I just ate my cupcake, which was moist and very good. I wondered what Mrs. Pelkin looked like. If she made cupcakes a lot, I assumed she would be fat. But Mr. Pelkin wasn't fat. Maybe she made them, he didn't eat them, and it caused a lot of fights between them. Mr. Pelkin was often in a bad mood. Maybe they fought over cupcakes.

When Mr. Pelkin returned to the class, he shuffled the papers on his desk until he found a folder with a typed name on the tab – I figured it was Kitty's name – and went back into the hall with it. I wondered if Kitty's absence had something to do with math. Kitty usually got the best grades in the class; most of us envied her. I didn't understand how someone so pretty could be good at math. It didn't seem to make sense, but maybe it was like the Property of Opposites:

pretty Kitty + ugly math = 0. Then I was sure it had to be math that explained her disappearance. Even though I didn't understand it so well, I was amazed at how math explained so many things. There was always an answer. Always. As Mr. Pelkin came back into the classroom, I looked at the "74" and the "%" – too swirly for a man to write, in my opinion – and felt a little bit lucky that I wasn't good in math. Maybe that would turn out to be a good thing.

After the last day of school, we started going to the pool everyday – me with my best friends, Kristin and Lisa. I didn't have much chest. Kristin did, and she even wore bikinis that showed off her boobs. Kristin's boobs were awkward to be around, kind of like a rash that everyone's curious enough about to want to touch even though they know they're not supposed to. When just Lisa came to the pool, I had a better time than when Kristin was also there. I started to invite Lisa and say I forgot to call Kristin on my way out to the pool, though I think Lisa knew I didn't forget, but she didn't ever say anything to me. Lisa was a good friend, better than Kristin. I wondered if the boobs prevented Kristin from being a good friend. I started imagining the two of them like this: $Lisa > Kristin^{boobs}$.

A boy named Roger kept asking us if Kitty was coming out to the pool, too. I guessed he didn't know what happened. Eventually Lisa told him, and then he seemed embarrassed and didn't talk to us anymore. He worked at the snack bar and whenever we went up to get ice creams he would go into the back storage room and pretend to be looking for something, even though I knew he wasn't. He smelled like potato salad, so it was fine for me that he avoided us. He wasn't the kind of guy Kitty would go for anyway. I hadn't seen him in school, so I even wondered where he lived. Not in our town.

Kitty was still missing when school started again in September. All the parents whispered that she had to be dead. They thought we didn't hear them, but of course we did. I saw Kitty's mom at the grocery store once when I was there with my mom. She looked tired and her hair was in a lopsided knot behind her head. I felt bad for her. My mom stared, which I thought was a little rude, but then she went over to the iceberg lettuce to talk to Kitty's mom. I tried to think of something in the store I needed to go get. I couldn't, so I followed behind my mom as she went up to Kitty's mom. She was holding a head of lettuce in her hands, a palm on each side, like how you'd hold a baby's head while you're bathing it. I saw my aunt do that once with her new baby.

"Hi, Susan. I'm Brynn's mom." My mom pointed at me and I nodded. I wanted so much to go look for something to buy, but I couldn't think of anything at that moment. In fact, the vision of Kitty's mom's lopsided hair knot had made my mind turn to a complete blank. I couldn't even think of smelly Roger from the pool or what to eat to make my breasts grow, which was usually always on my mind. I looked at the prices over the kale and spinach and remembered what Mr. Pelkin had taught us about absolute value. The absolute value of a number is the positive distance that the number is from zero. If Kitty were a number – which to most of us now she was, especially to the police – then her absolute value was 78. Kitty had been away from home for 78 days. Just then, I realized I had been counting the days.

“Oh. Hi,” Kitty’s mom said back. Her voice cracked, like she hadn’t talked to anybody in a long, long time. The way my voice sounds after I’ve been grounded for a whole weekend.

“I just wanted to tell you how much we, how we really say prayers for Kitty, you know, and your family,” my mom said.

I knew my mom never went to church so the bit about prayers sounded so strange coming from her. I held on to the side of the cart and nodded, like I said prayers too, which I didn’t. And then I felt bad about nodding and pretending, the way my mom did. I hated Pretenders. Pretenders were 0, and everything multiplied by 0 equaled 0.

“Sure. Thank you,” Kitty’s mom said, looking even more tired. I guess she got this a lot, this thing about prayers. And you only pray for sick or dead people, so it couldn’t feel great that people were praying for your daughter. Why did my mom have to make it worse? So many times my mom $\neq$ cheerfulness. I would even say my mom is usually the opposite of cheerfulness, such that Anything Cheerful + -Mom = 0.

“Have you heard anything?” my mom asked.

Kitty’s mom nodded. No, they hadn’t.

“Can I do anything?” Then my mom held up her hand, like she does when she’s figured out the Pictionary answer. “A lasagna? Maybe I could bring one over. They freeze well, too.”

“Oh, thanks, but that’s OK,” Kitty’s mom whispered, her voice cracking so much she had to cough to clear her throat. The cough turned into a sneeze.

“God bless you,” my mom said.

“Thanks.”

“Sure. Anything you need, just let me know.”

Kitty’s mom nodded and turned to put the lettuce in her cart. It had a rotten brown spot on the bottom of it, but I didn’t want to say anything. I figured things were bad enough for Kitty’s mom. My mom smiled back at her as she pushed the cart past us. I wondered if Kitty’s mom knew what my mom said about Kitty chasing boys.

My mom was quiet during the rest of the shopping trip. She piped up again while we were loading the grocery bags into the trunk.

“It’s so sad, about Kitty,” she started. “Do you want to talk about it, honey?”

No, of course I didn’t want to talk about it. What could I say about it anyway? I didn’t know what happened to her. Kitty had met her opposite. Or maybe Kitty had met a 0. Maybe some really terrible person had come along, a 0, a pretender maybe, and multiplied himself to

Kitty and now she was a 0, too. I wondered if something could make me a 0 someday. In fact, I *knew* something would make me a 0 someday; it was just a question of when. Secretly, I counted on it. Being a 0 must be easier than being anything else.

“Do you kids know what could have happened? Do you think she ran away?” my mom asked.

I shrugged again. I thought about all that pressure Kitty must have felt chasing boys, and wearing the right clothes, and knowing how to put on makeup and who to sit with at lunch. And then even being good in math on top of everything. I wondered if she got her math skills from her mom. It didn’t seem like it. Someone who was good at math would know how to pick a better lettuce.

I got into the front seat next to my mother and she put the key in the ignition. The band Huey Lewis and the News was on the radio asking if I believed in love. I didn’t actually, not since my parents split up. Not since boys were so mean to Kitty. Not since I noticed that all the other girls were so curvy with shiny hair. My hair was frizzy. I didn’t have hips or breasts. A lot of times, when I saw myself in the window of a store or at school, I thought I looked like a boy. How could I believe in love? Love was for girls like you see in the movies, the ones who are so hypnotically pretty that even other girls look at them.

“You know, honey,” my mom said, touching up her hair in the rear view mirror. “You know not to talk to strangers right? I feel silly telling you this because we talked about it so long ago. When you were little. But you remember that, right?”

As my mom looked at herself in the mirror, I noticed how her hair had little waves around her face that made her eyes look nice. My mom had long eyelashes. Maybe she had been like Kitty when she was in school. I turned away from her and tried to find something I could look at in the parking lot. I saw a very fat woman coming up to the entrance of the supermarket, barely able to slide her legs along, pushing a cart with a front wheel that kept wildly spinning in circles, like it was protesting having to bear the weight of the fat woman’s cart.

“And if anything ever happens, you know, if someone does something to you,” my mom stopped and I heard her sigh. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that she was gripping the top curve of the steering wheel like she was having a fight with it. “If someone *touches* you, I mean. You have to talk to me about it. OK?”

I nodded but didn’t turn around. The fat woman was scowling at a driver behind the wheel of a red pick-up who honked at her while she was crossing, too slow I guess.

“Brynn? Nothing like that has ever happened to you, has it?” my mom asked again, her voice more tense, as if she had decided that my non-answer was really an answer and that I had been touched by someone.

I nodded at the fat woman. No, it hadn’t. My mom let out a long breath and I felt her move an arm, probably to tuck her hair behind one ear, which she always did before backing up.

“OK. Good. I just want you to know you can talk to me. That’s all. And be careful, where you go and who you talk to. That’s all.”

I nodded again. The fat woman disappeared into the shadow of the supermarket doorway. As our car swung out of the parking lot, I looked to see if I could see her inside, what she was buying. Some box of doughnuts from Entenmann’s or Chips Ahoy cookies or Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. She would have to eat like that to be as fat as she was. There was no way she could be that fat and eat well. Entenmann’s + Chips Ahoy + Ben & Jerry’s = Too Fat To Shop.

On Halloween morning, a Saturday, my mom sent me down to our church three blocks away to bring our donation of old coats for their annual coat drive. She had stuffed the coats into a Hefty Lawn & Leaf Bag that you could see through. My blue velvet pea coat was towards the top. It reminded me of the fourth grade when I had a crush on a boy named Pete and he said once that the coat looked nice on me. Wearing that coat was the only time I ever felt hypnotic. I wore the coat too long after that, long after the sleeves had gotten short and it wouldn’t button.

The bag was too big for me to carry, but my mom rushed me out the door saying something about that day being the last day to bring a coat and please go because she was crazed with everything she had to do for the party. My parents hosted a costume party every Halloween and invited more people than could ever fit in our house. My brother and I usually went around the neighborhood with school friends and then found a corner of the backyard to sit in and trade candy when we came back. My parents always had a costume that coordinated: ham and eggs, or Mr. & Mrs. Potato Head, or detergent and fabric softener. This year they were dressing as Rhett and Scarlett. My mom had spent days bending wire hangers to make a hoop skirt. When she shooshed me out the door, she was wearing a low-cut shirt and another shirt tied tight around her waist so that lots of her boobs were showing. I was glad I wasn’t going to be home for the party.

I started down the sidewalk towards Saint Matthew’s. After half a block, I couldn’t carry the bag anymore and started dragging it. It scraped as I walked until I knew it would be a shred of a bag by the time I got to the church. I felt bad for the poor people who would get the coats, that they would have scuff marks on them from the sidewalk.

I saw her when I was crossing the street onto the block where the church was. Kitty was walking towards me with a large backpack on her back, jeans and a red windbreaker. I could hardly believe it was really her. Kitty’s absolute value by that day was 113. When we came closer, she slowed down and stood in front of me with both hands wrapped around the straps of her backpack.

“Algebra, right?” Kitty said. She was smiling at me like we might have been friends, even though we weren’t. I wondered if we would be friends now, now that I was the first one to see her come back. She looked really good, and older. Her face was tan and her blond hair was almost white. She looked like she had been at the beach.

“Yeah,” I said. And then, though it felt too much like something my mother would ask, I said: “Where have you been?”

“With my boyfriend, Steve,” Kitty said. “He has his driver’s license. He asked me to go to the Grand Canyon with him.”

“So that’s where you went?”

“Yeah.”

“He drove you in the car there?”

Kitty looked tired of talking to me already. “Sure. Are people mad that I was gone so long?”

“Your mom. She was pretty upset all summer. Did you ever call her?”

Kitty shook her head. “She wouldn’t have let me go.”

“But she thought you were dead.”

“But I wasn’t. I was just in the Grand Canyon.”

My mind wandered for a minute to my Uncle Jason, my mom’s little brother, who got killed when his motorcycle slid out of the lane he was driving in and into the front of an oncoming van. It was a green van. I saw the pictures of it later. The front was all smashed, like it had hit a wall, and I couldn’t believe that it was Jason’s bike and body that had smashed it up like that, but it was. Uncle Jason used to take my brother and me trick-or-treating while my parents were setting up their party and we were still too young to go by ourselves. I wished Uncle Jason had come up the street just then, not Kitty, and said he wasn’t dead he was only in the Grand Canyon.

“Did I miss anything over the summer?” Kitty asked.

I remembered Roger. “There was this guy at the pool who kept asking about you.”

“He smelled like potato salad?”

“Uh, huh.”

Kitty waved her hand. “What a loser.”

This felt good to hear. I had been thinking the same thing all summer, but would never have said it. Now Kitty and I had something in common. “So what happened to Steve?”

“We had a fight. It was starting to get too cold to camp on the rim so he left to go to Mexico. I wasn’t sure about leaving the country. So I came back.”

I had let the Hefty bag slide down my leg to rest on my foot and was bobbing it up and down now with the front of my shoe. Kitty was watching me, and the trash bag, like she was trying to make up her mind about something.

“Hey, can you come with me? When I go home now?” Kitty asked.

I stopped bobbing the bag and slid it partway behind my legs. Kitty wanted *me*. Me. Maybe Kitty liked me after all. There must be something between us that I had missed. Maybe my boobs were bigger than I thought.

“I’m supposed to drop off these coats,” I said, waving my hand at the trash bag.

“OK, so drop them, and then we can go back to my house.”

Kitty turned and started walking with me to the church. I wasn’t sure I really wanted to go to Kitty’s house, but I couldn’t say no. Maybe this was the beginning of a whole new chapter in my life at school. Brynn and Kitty, best friends. I wondered what I would wear to the junior high homecoming dance and if it would be cool enough to be worn by somebody who was supposed to be Kitty’s best friend. I would have to convince my mother that I had to buy something new, definitely. I wondered if we would go on double dates, and if Kitty knew any other boys who drove besides Steve. I wondered if Kitty and Steve had sex at the Grand Canyon. Maybe she was even pregnant, and didn’t know it. I hiked the trash bag up on my shoulder and glanced quickly at her stomach. It was pretty flat.

“So what happened at the Grand Canyon?” I asked.

“We hiked a lot. It’s hot in the daytime. It gets cold at night. It’s like a desert there.”

Kitty pulled out a pack of gum and offered me a stick. It was tutti frutti, which I hated. It was too sweet and gave me a stomach ache. I took the stick she held out and put it in my mouth.

“Just hiking?”

Kitty started laughing. She doubled over while we walked. “That’s for *me* to know, and for *you* to find out!”

We got to the front of the church and walked up the three steps to the door. I thought it was strange that we were at church and had just been talking about sex, or sort of had been talking about sex. I wondered if we were supposed to stamp our feet a few extra times on the doormat or something. Or say a prayer, or confession or something. Not that Lutherans confessed stuff.

I dropped the bag in a corner of the entrance, next to a cardboard box that had been cut open to receive donations, but was already overflowing. Kitty pointed at my blue velvet pea coat and pulled the sleeve out to feel it.

“Blue velvet?” Kitty said. “Is this yours?” She threw her head back and held her stomach. “I bet you looked like Elvis in that thing!”

“That? No. It was my brother’s coat.”

There. I was being a Pretender. That made me a 0. I was standing with Kitty being a 0. Maybe if she hung around with me long enough, she would multiply herself with me and also become a 0. But I didn’t want to be a 0, or make her a 0, really. I wanted her to make me what *she* was.

“Then, sorry for saying it, but your brother must be a queer!”

Kitty hit the door with the heel of her wrist and went back outside. I followed her, three blocks further down the street and another three blocks over until we were standing in front her house. It was a white house and the roof was sloped with three windows across it where the bedrooms were. The shutters were bright blue. I had never been in Kitty’s house, but I had a friend with the same house so I knew how it was inside.

“She’s gonna kick my ass,” Kitty blurted.

I wasn’t used to having friends who said “ass.” I wondered if I would need to talk like that to be Kitty’s friend.

“C’mon,” she said, taking me by the arm. I really felt like leaving at that point. I knew her mom would kill her.

Kitty swung open the screen door and then pushed open the heavy inside door. The house smelled like carpet cleaner and bleach. The living room was clean and everything looked just vacuumed.

“This isn’t good,” Kitty said as she looked around.

“What?”

“It’s so clean. She only cleans when she’s freaking out about something.”

“But she thought you were dead, Kitty.”

“Shh!” Kitty hissed.

We both looked up and saw her mom coming down the stairs slowly, sliding her hand down the railing. She was wearing a white fuzzy bathrobe and black slippers. Her face was frozen with a kind of shocked look, her mouth partly open. She looked like she was seeing a ghost, which I guess she thought she was. Kitty didn’t move. I felt like, really, I should leave.

Her mom's mouth moved as if to say "Kitty?" but no sound came out.

"Hi, Mom."

Then her mom swooped down the stairs like it was a slide at the playground, sort of running, sort of falling. It was like you see in the movies: her mom was grabbing her, hugging her, sobbing uncontrollably, asking her if she was OK, where had she been. And then, like it does in the movies, it got worse from there.

"What do you mean you went to the Grand Canyon!"

"I just wanted to see it, Mom. That's all."

"But you RAN AWAY!" Kitty's mom screamed, backing up.

"I left you a note," Kitty said coolly.

A few seconds passed in which nobody said anything. I heard a drip from their guest bathroom tap. It was unexpectedly comforting to know that something in Kitty's life didn't work right.

"What note?!"

"You didn't get it?"

"No. There was NO note, Kitty."

I knew there hadn't been a note. Kitty would have told me about a note when we met on the sidewalk, but she didn't. Wow, I would be so mad if I were Kitty's mom. I remembered the brown head of lettuce. I was so glad I hadn't mentioned it back at the supermarket. Things must have been bad for Kitty's mom all this time.

"I wrote it at school," Kitty turned to me. "Didn't you see me writing the note?"

I looked at Kitty's mom. I had pretended in the store with Kitty's mom so I knew I could do it again. It had been a good idea in the store; maybe it would be a good idea now.

"Sure. Sure I did. During Algebra."

"Yeah. And I gave it to you. I asked you to give it to my mom. Remember?"

Now I knew what Kitty was doing. She was turning me into herself. It was like the distributive property: Kitty was in trouble, and then I was in trouble, too. I had been safe inside those parentheses of life, and now I was being multiplied by Kitty, who had been hanging around outside, and she was pulling me out and changing my value. Like this: $Kitty (me - x) = Kittyme - Kittyx$. But then everything was about Kitty.

Kitty's mom turned to me. Her robe was opening a little bit but her boobs were drooping too low for me to see. The zit above my left eyebrow was starting to throb.

"Where's my note?" she demanded.

I still didn't know what to say. I had already agreed there was a note, so there must have been a note.

"I don't know."

"You don't KNOW?"

"Sorry."

"I lost my mind these months. Do you KNOW that?"

"Yes. Sorry," I stammered.

"What's your name anyway?" she asked. "Where do you live?"

"I'm Brynn. My mom talked to you in the supermarket."

Her mom cocked her head and "tsked" once with her mouth. "Of course. The lasagna."

"Uh, huh."

"Did SHE have the note?"

"No. No, she didn't know anything about the note."

"What is WRONG with you, Brynn? How could you have lost that note. And then you KNEW all the time where Kitty had gone and you didn't say anything?"

Her mom spun around and headed for the phone. Now the robe was practically open, flying behind her. Her legs were bare above the black slippers. I hoped she had at least a t-shirt on because I think she had a lot of boobs and I didn't really want to see them.

"I'm calling the police," she announced.

My eyes flew to Kitty. *The police!*

"Maybe you should just call her parents first, Mom," Kitty suggested.

My parents! I gaped at Kitty like the Halloween pumpkin my parents had put out on our porch; the mouth was carved in the shape of a humongous "O".

Her mom stabbed the phone to cut the call and dialed another number. Three digits. 911?

“Yes, can you give me the number for – “ she turned to me, “what’s your last name?”

“Chambers,” I said. Why was Kitty doing this to me? I thought we were friends.

“Chambers,” her mom said into the phone. “Here, in Lonnville.”

Kitty’s mom held the phone against her face and waited. The operator must be connecting the call directly to my house. My mom was going to kick my ass.

“Yes? Are you Brynn’s mom?” I watched Kitty’s mom’s face. Her mouth was twisted up like a towel, right before my brother snaps me on the legs with it. “Yes. I’m standing here with her. AND with my daughter. With Kitty!”

I heard a scream through the phone. I could tell my mom was laying on lots of *Ohthankheavenourprayershavebeenanswered* and so on.

“Thanks. But you should know that your daughter KNEW all this time where Kitty was.”

Jesus. Mary. And Joseph. I wasn’t allowed to say that, but I was saying it now, in my head. Kitty’s mom passed the phone to me. My mom was mad and I had to wait for at least 30 seconds before she stopped talking and I was supposed to say something. Kitty was watching me, her face looked nervous for the first time that day, maybe for the first time ever. Kitty was like an irrational number, a number that couldn’t be turned into a fraction. Kitty couldn’t be turned into anything, I realized. Like Pi. She was what she was and nobody could change what she was. Kitty was Pi. I wished I were like that. Especially in that moment, I wished it hard.

“Mom?” I said.

My mom didn’t say anything.

“Do you know what Pi is?”

“WHAT!”

“Pi? The number for Pi?”

“This is what you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m just telling you about Pi. It’s irrational.”

“Get home. Now. You are in so much trouble you have no idea.”

I looked at the phone and heard my mother hang up, like an old car door slamming, full of jangling and metal making contact with other metal. Then I hung up. Kitty looked relaxed now and she smiled at me and shrugged a *goshsorry*.

“I gotta go,” I said.

“You stay away from my Kitty. You understand me?” her mother said, sweeping me towards the door.

I nodded and slipped out the front door, not looking at Kitty. I knew I wasn’t going to look at Kitty again, not ever.

When I got home, my mother was standing on our front lawn dressed like Scarlett O’Hara. She was wearing a green and white dress and was carrying one of those little umbrellas like they had in the Old South. This was the way Scarlett was dressed for the barbecue at Twelve Oaks, I remembered from the movie, when Scarlett was so sweet and charming to all the men around. My mom was holding the umbrella out, pointing it straight at me.

“How could you *do* this, Brynn?” she said.

I wanted to tell her I liked her dress, but I knew it would get me a slap. Everything felt like a lie: Kitty, my mom, Halloween, Algebra, Scarlett. I didn’t know what to say when things were just lies. I felt like another lie would come out.

“A NOTE!” my mom shrieked. “What is she talking about that there was a NOTE?”

“I didn’t know there was a note.”

“But her mom said you had it. YOU!”

“But I didn’t.”

“Do you realize how much that woman suffered for the last four months. And the whole town out looking for that girl. And the police. Oh God, Brynn,” she said, slapping her palm across her eyes and covering them. “You’re going to be in trouble with the police now.”

“But I didn’t have a note.”

“Why would her mother just make that up?”

“Because Kitty made it up.”

“Oh? Prove it.”

In her rage, my mother had dropped the little silk umbrella on the grass and I picked it up, wanting to have my hands on something. It was no heavier than a Christmas ornament, and I could see now how it could be so easy to twirl it around while you were flirting with a boy. I felt different holding it. Like I could be hypnotic and attractive to boys.

I popped the umbrella open. My mother took a hop back, her skirt swinging like a fruit basket. She looked like she couldn't believe her eyes. The umbrella blocked the hot afternoon sun from around my face and I enjoyed the shade for a moment, wondering what you were supposed to do when you couldn't prove something but you just knew it to be true. Even though I was in trouble, I enjoyed knowing something absolutely for certain, something other people couldn't prove. Such a thing felt mysterious and powerful. I turned the umbrella with one hand and the spindle of it rotated in my other hand, its ridges and ruffles traveling in shadows over my face. The swirling of it reminded me of the Minnie Mouse umbrella Uncle Jason had given me when I turned five. Everyone said Uncle Jason went to heaven when he died. I wanted to see a picture of it -- like there were housing developments and grocery stores and movie theatres there -- but nobody had one. For a long time, I believed Uncle Jason had gone nowhere. I believed he had just become a 0.

When the umbrella stopped spinning, I pulled it down close to my head and then tipped it back. The sun skipped off the edge of the umbrella and gave a glow to my mother's form -- her two hands gripping each of her hips above the dome of her skirt.

"I can't prove it, Mom," I answered. "Some things you can't prove."

I let the umbrella swing towards the ground and then I brought it back up again, making a wide circle. It moved effortlessly through the air.

"Some things you just have to believe."

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