

NIGHT COMES LATER

She looks for Loraine. November and the darkness coming and Madge feels afraid of it and more afraid of not finding her. Loraine had told her, *Come November we're gone*. She walks the streets of downtown Seattle: south on 4th, west on Spring. Her eyes scan doorways. There's a bus shelter up ahead with two kids huddled: Slo-Mo, Pearl Earring.

I got a fever I can't burn off, Pearl Earring says, smacking his pimpled forehead. *Think a rat bit me*.

Slo-Mo's got that sad look-away stare you're not supposed to have till you're older. He spits into the traffic, arms crossed over his jean jacket. The sky falls in gray sheets. Businessmen lower umbrellas before creeping into strip clubs. Two women shriek in their wheelchairs backwards-rolling down the sidewalk, clubbing one another.

It's 11 a.m.

Pearl Earring coughs then turns to Madge. That

namesake ear looks infected. *Hear about Whats-his-face?* He slits his throat with a finger wrapped in a dirty band-aid.

Madge asks have they seen Loraine.

Who?

Loretta. Because sometimes Loraine was Loraine and other times she was Loretta.

Two can run faster, she said.

She goes down to the water to watch the ferries come across the Sound and the sad old Indians fishing from the pier. Gulls plead overhead.

Rewind six months. Madge hitchhiked to the city and took up with the kids in the park downtown they call Accidental not Occidental. The kids in Accidental: tenor-voiced con men and teenage whores. Loraine said, *Don't turn tricks. Girls dropping like flies.* Loraine took her to the rooftop overlooking the Sound. Madge was 14 (freckle-faced, with pink lips she chewed white) and up there the whole world could go ahead and disappear. *Don't get too comfortable, never know who might show up.* Loraine. 15, with her stark, sharp cheekbones and those green eyes that cut to the stairwell door when she said, *Always be ready to grab what you can and run run run run run!* Loraine charging across the rooftop while all the stars wheeled overhead. Madge chased after her, calling, *But where? Where do we run?* Faster now: the Sound and sky coming quick. *Right over the edge,* Loraine said and skidded in her boots, pebbles rushing into the dark. *Like flying. Away.*

Loraine cleaned her fingernails with a matchstick and sang Bessie Smith between drags on a Newport, but it was Loretta who filed those nails sharp and cursed at sailors' serenades.

She walks east on Marion. Nightlight reclines against a lamppost. Black hair plastered to her cheek. Nightlight's older brother Addison stands with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his face while he shakes a paper cup. A sound like two pennies and a dime. Between the raindrops and the passersby he keeps the cup crushed into his armpit. Later these two will go to a laundromat and splurge that dime on one of the big dryers. *Better warm than clean.* In will go their jackets and sweatshirts, their filthy socks. They will sit on the floor, curled into one another beneath the machine's tossing lull.

Addison shakes the paper cup at a crew of men in hard hats and orange parkas. His free hand is a slow wave in the air at Madge. She can't see his eyes inside the hood. Her feet keep walking, fists pumping. Addison hoists the cup into the air in a toast.

She turns a corner to head south on 2nd, past men in rags holding rose-stamped plastic bags over their heads. Dice get tossed from their hands to a wall covered in graffiti tags (*Loadead, Smokescreen, Last Dance, Neverever*). Ducking into a repair shop, she blows rotten breath over numbed hands. The floor is piled in dead television sets. One black and white model rests on the counter, its face full of static. Madge's bloodshot-blue eyes draw to it. She sees wasps swarming a bulb or rain in an unbusted headlight. Toward the back of the shop, behind an American flag hung as a curtain, faint music plays. An oldies station. A fat man in an untucked tropical shirt peeks out from behind the flag, a soldering iron in his hand.

The first time she saw Loraine: on her knees in an alley, petting a cat. Madge jumped from the second floor window of a condemned building, wincing at the sunlight as her body fell through the air. Trash bags exploded when they broke her fall, showering leftover spaghetti, emptied ashtrays, expired coupons, losing lottery tickets, a stained pillow. Madge crawled out of the dumpster to cross the alley. Another kid leapt from the window, calling out her name as he dropped through the sunlight. That was What's-his-face, the boy whose name nobody could remember. He'd arrived in Accidental just after Madge. Some 15 year old kid with his cardboard suitcase and that strange, unpronounceable name he said was Hungarian. What's-his-face. He fell, calling *Madge! Ma*—into the garbage. Her shadow eclipsed the cat on its back then the girl on her knees. Loraine's tongue clicked at the cat, her voice husky in the silhouette eclipsing her as she said, *She's pretty but she won't last.*

Her eyes lift from the screen while her feet back-pedal for the door. A fat man walks through the American flag, tucking in a loud shirt. He's moving fast. *Looking for something?* She turns and bolts out the door, racing along the drowned streets.

She goes to the arcade full of cigarette smoke and the racket of pinball machines. Ms. Pac Man, Q-Bert, Donkey Kong, Donkey Kong Jr, and Centipede stand in a line-up against a wall plastered in Missing Person flyers. Z and Ajax lean against the payphone, trading looks. They're dressed identical in acid-wash overalls they outgrew last year. Together they work the room, Z fingering the machines' slots while Ajax watches for the coin attendant: an ex-con with

smear tattoos plus an apron filled with silver. Madge's hands stay buried in the pockets of her army jacket. She watches two other boys with long hair and leather jackets rack a game of pool. Really she's eyeing a stack of quarters at the table's edge, but one boy catches her. In his palm an eight ball spins.

They learned to pickpocket from a scrawny 16 year old named Jack of Diamonds. Jack of Diamonds in his pegged pants and dented hat—he told them, *Lose your hands.* Practicing on one another in Accidental, Madge had partnered with a 13 year old lisping girl, Michaela, who wore a beret and said she was French but everyone knew was from Tacoma. You'd see her standing on a downtown street corner at night smoking a clove cigarette, tattered dress clinging to her skeletal frame as she poised an outthrust hip toward the oncoming traffic. Madge tried to forget her hands and let them go out to Michaela, who flinched, lisping, *I'm not ready.*

It was summer when they lost their hands, released the fingers that went out to bring back wallets holding photographs (wedding portraits, school pictures) they tore to shreds. And all the useless keys they flung into the Sound. *Never come back!* Everything after was brought to Jack of Diamonds, who'd go off to splurge. He'd return with a jug of blush wine or a dime bag of laughing grass. Jack of Diamonds was also a little in love with Loraine he called Loretta. He got loaded one night on horse tranquilizers he crushed up and snorted off a cardboard sign, over the words *Anything Helps*, tracing the curve of a backwards S. Then he tried putting the hands he remembered on Loraine. His dented hat flew into

the air. Her nails tore at his cheeks. Jack of Diamonds hit the ground spilling tears before blood. Loretta spit at the felled body, cursing his figure: *Dead man!*

Loraine said she'd do it for her. If they tried to get their filthy hands on Madge she'd claw their eyes out. Fleeing Accidental, the girls ran into the shadows of downtown alleys. Madge's feet went sore in her boots hammering the cobblestones. Loraine rushed past a restaurant's back door propped open with a cinder block where Madge paused, tying up a shoelace. The smell of fish frying in a pan. Rosemary. Lemons and salt water. Madge's stomach moaned. She stared into the doorway, listening to the sound of Loraine's boots running away into the dark.

Madge backtracks north along 1st. Tourists' umbrellas are sucked inside-out by the wind. She halts before a barroom full of sailors and transvestites, head swiveling left to right, right to left, then straight ahead through the open door. Inside, a popcorn machine overflows in the orange glow of its plastic cage. A group of uniformed men growl sea chanteys at the end of the room. Pitchers of black beer sway through the smoke. At the bar the resident ladies wrap long violet fingernails around straws sunk into their gin and tonics, bedazzled eyes watching Madge—too young to be in here. She's at the popcorn machine, opening its plastic door. In a white vinyl booth looking loaded or half-asleep is What's-his-face. Her stomach folds over itself and she gags, then goes to the kid. He's pulling a cherry pierced by a tiny red plastic sword out of his glass of Coca Cola. The maraschino shines in the pulsed neon of an Olympia beer sign. He slides the cherry from the blade to his mouth, turning to Madge as he chews,

his eyes all out of focus. It's then she remembers his name.

I heard you were dead, she says.

I heard YOU were dead.

She pinches her forearm but doesn't feel a thing.

Maybe I am.

Maybe we all are.

Sailors slow dance painted ladies across the room.

Glen Miller on the jukebox.

I'm looking for Loraine.

The boy rolls his eyes into the back of his head, crossing himself with the sword. He forces a laugh that sounds like he's choking. *Maybe we all are, he says.*

Halloween Loraine disappeared through the rooftop door and descended to the streets below full of monsters and ghosts. The sky had gone all the way into the Sound. *Blue plus blue makes black.* Madge sat on the roof's edge watching the scene below: princesses, ninjas, clowns, pirates, and vampires running through the streets. She spat over the edge as she heard the stairwell door slam. Then she whispered, *It's a trick.*

November, 1986. Seattle. Darkness coming. Madge has been alone on the rooftop over a week. No word from Loraine. She is afraid of the dark, of the stairwell door opening in the middle of the night, of a stranger appearing on the rooftop, of having to gather the sleeping bag and *Run run run run run run!*

She dreams of leaving the edge. In the air she looks back to Loraine in the doorway. Too late.

She lies on the rooftop and hears the stairwell door opening and closing all night long. She clenches her fists and gets ready. Her eyelashes stay drenched with rain. She remembers Loraine relighting a half-smoked Newport under the burn of a July moon, blowing plumes of smoke that spiraled into what she called evening, not night. *Night comes later.* The stairwell door opens, closes. Loraine said, *Evening the stars come out, but night, that's November, when it goes dark. Run off the edge right into a shadow—they never find your body.* A flick of her cigarette. Red-orange sailing blue-black. She's still talking as she crawls inside the sleeping bag with Madge: *Easy to go into the dark, that's not what I worry about.* Arms holding her close as they tighten. Curled inside her fist is the red plastic sword. *What I worry about, it's coming back.* She's just a whisper now in Madge's ear, a lullaby like a seashell breathing.