

A Touch of Lavender

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We grew up like mice nesting in a rotting sofa, my sister and I. Even when I was only nine and she was an infant, I thought of us that way. At night, when she'd be asleep in the curl of my belly and I'd be half-falling off the old sofa we used as a bed, I'd hear the mice nibbling and moving inside the upholstery beneath us, and sometimes the tiny squeakings of the new-born ones when the mother came to nurse them. I'd curl tighter around Lisa and pretend she was a little pink baby mouse instead of a little pink baby girl, and that I was the father mouse, curled around her to protect her. Sometimes it made the nights less chill.

I'd lived in the same basement apartment all my life. It was always chill, even in summer. It was an awful place, dank and ratty, but the upstairs apartments were worse, rank with urine and rot. The building was an old townhouse, long ago converted to four apartments upstairs and one in the basement. None of them were great, but ours was the cheapest, because we had the furnace and the water heater right next to us. When I was real small, three or so, a water main beside the building broke, and water came rising up in our apartment, maybe a foot deep. I woke up to my stuff floating beside me, and the old couch sucking up water like a sponge. I yelled for Mom. I heard the splash as she rolled out of bed in the only bedroom and then her cussing as she waded through the water to pick me up. Her current musician took the whole thing as a big joke, until he saw his sax case floating. Then he grabbed up his stuff and was out of there. I don't remember seeing him after that.

My mom and I spent that day sitting on the steps down to our apartment, waiting for the city maintenance crew to fix the pipe, waiting for the water to go down and then waiting for our landlord.

He finally came and looked the place over and nodded, and said, hell, it was probably for the best, he'd been meaning to put down new tile and spraysulate the walls anyway. "You go ahead and tear out the old stuff," he told my Mom. "Stack it behind the house, and I'll have it hauled away. Let me know when you're ready, and I'll send in a crew to fix the place up. Now about your rent . . ."

"I told you, I already mailed it," my Mom said coldly, looking past his ear, and the landlord sighed and drove off.

So my Mom and her friends peeled up the cracking linoleum and tore the sheetrock off the walls, leaving the bare concrete floor with stripes of mastic showing and the two-by-four wall studs standing bare against the grey block walls. That was as far as the re-modeling ever got. The landlord never hauled the stuff away, or sent in a crew. He never spraysulated the walls, either. Even in the summer the walls were cool and misty, and in winter it was like the inside of a refrigerator.

My Mom wasn't so regular about paying the rent that she could raise a fuss. Most of the folks in our building were like that: pay when you can, and don't stay home when you can't, so the landlord can't nag at you. The apartments were lousy, but complaining could get you kicked out. All the tenants knew that if the landlord had wanted to, he could have gotten a government grant to convert the place into Skoag units and really made a bundle. We were right on the edge of a Skoag sector and demand for Skoag units was increasing.

That was back when the Skoags were first arriving and there wasn't much housing for them. It all had to

be agency approved, too, to prevent any "interplanetary incidents." Can't have aliens falling down the steps and breaking a flipper, even if they are pariah aliens. These outcasts were the only link we had to their planet and culture, and especially to their technology for space travel that the whole world was so anxious to have. No one knew where they came from or how they got to earth. They just started wading out of the seas one day, not all that different from a washed-up Cuban. Just more wet-back aliens, as the joke went. They were very open about being exiles with no means of returning home. They arrived gradually, in groups of three and four, but of the ships that brought them there was never any sign and the Skoags weren't saying anything. That didn't stop any of the big government people from hoping, though. Hoping that if we were real nice to them, they might drop a hint or two about interstellar drives or something. So the Skoags got the government-subsidized housing with showers that worked and heat lamps and carpeted floors and spraysulated walls. The Federal Budget Control bill said that funds could be reapportioned, but the budget could not be increased, so folks like my Mom and I took a giant step downwards in the housing arena. But as a little kid, all I understood was that our place was cold most of the time, and everyone in the neighborhood hated Skoags.

I don't think it really bothered Mom. She wasn't home that much anyway. She'd bitch about it sometimes when she brought a bunch of her friends home, to jam and smoke and eat. It was always the same scene, party time, she'd come in with a bunch of them, hyped on the music like she always was, stoned maybe, too. They'd be carrying instruments and six-packs of beer, sometimes a brown bag of cheap groceries, salami and cheese and crackers or yogurt and rice cakes and tofu. They'd set the groceries and beer out on the table and start doodling around with their instruments while my Mom would say stuff like, "Damn, look at this dump. That damn landlord, he still hasn't been around. Billy, didn't the landlord come by today? No? Shit, man, that jerk's been promising to fix this place for a year now. Damn."

Everyone would tell her not to sweat it, hell, their places were just as bad, all landlords were assholes anyway. Usually someone would get onto the Skoag thing, how it was a fine thing the government could take care of alien refugee trash but wouldn't give its own citizens a break on rent. If there'd been a lot of Skoags at the cafe that night, Mom and her friends would get into how Skoags thought they were such hot shit, synthesizing music from their greasy hides. I remember one kid who really got worked up, telling everyone that they'd come to earth to steal our music. According to him, the government knew it and didn't care. He said there was even a secret treaty that would give the Skoags free use of all copyrighted music in the U.S. if they would give us blueprints of their ships. No one paid much attention to him. Later that evening, when he was really stoned, he came and sat on the floor by my sofa and cried. He told me that he was a really great musician, except that he couldn't afford a good synthesizer to compose on, while those damn Skoags could just puff out their skins and make every sound anybody had ever heard. He leaned real close and told me that the real danger was that the Skoags would make up all the good music before he even got a chance to try. Which I knew was dumb. While Skoags can play anything they've ever heard, perfectly, no one had ever heard them play anything original. No one had ever heard them play Skoag music, only ours. I started to tell him that but he passed out on the floor by my sofa. Everyone ignored him. They were into the food and the beer and the music. All my Mom's parties were like that.

I'd usually curl up on one end of the sofa, face to the cushions, and try to sleep, sometimes with a couple necking at the other end of the sofa and two or three musicians in the kitchen, endlessly rehearsing the same few bars of a song I'd never heard before and would never hear again. That's what my Mom was really into, struggling musicians that were performing their own stuff in the little "play for tips" places. She'd latch onto some guy and keep him with her aid check. She'd watch over him like he was gold, go with him every day, sit by him on the sidewalk while he played if he were a street musician, or take a table near the band if he was working cafes and clubs. They'd come home late and sleep late, and then

get up and go out again. Sometimes I'd come in from school and find them sitting at the kitchen table, talking. It's funny, the men always looked the same, eyes like starved dogs, and it seems like my Mom would always be saying the same thing. "Don't give up. You've got a real talent. Someday you'll make it, and you'll look back at them and laugh. You've really got it, Lennie (or Bobby or Pete or Lance). I know it. I can feel it, I can, hear it. You're gonna be big one day."

The funny part is, she was always right. Those guys would live with us for a few months or a year, and suddenly, out of the blue, their careers would take off. They'd be discovered, on a sidewalk or in a cafe, or picked up by a band on its way up. They'd leave my Mom, and go on to better things. She never got bitter about it, though she liked to brag to other women about all the hot ones she'd known "back when they were nothing." Like that was her calling in life, feeding guitar humpers until someone besides her could hear their songs. Like only she could keep the real music flowing. One night she brought home a disc and gave it to me. It was called "Fire Eyes" and the guy on the front had dark hair and blue eyes, like me. "That's your daddy, Billy boy," she told me. "Though he don't know it. He took off before I knew you were coming, and was on a national tour by the time you were born. Look at those pretty, pretty eyes. Same as you, kid. You should have heard him sing, Billy. I knew he had it, even then. Even then." I think that was the first time I ever saw her sit down and cry. I'm still not sure if she was crying over my dad leaving us, or something else. She didn't cry long, and she went to bed alone that night. But the next night she brought home a whole pack of musicians from some open mike. By next morning, my Mom had a new musician in her bed.

Sometimes during a party, if my Mom was really stoned, or safe-sexing someone in the bedroom, I'd get up in my pajamas and make for the food, stuffing down as much as I could and hiding a couple of rice cakes or a handful of crackers behind the sofa cushion. I knew the mice would nibble on it, but hell, they never took much, just lacing around the edges. I figured they didn't do much better than I did anyway. If I was really lucky, there'd be some girls in the group, and they'd fuss over me, telling me how my big blue eyes were such a surprise with my dark hair, and giving me gum and Lifesavers from their purses, or maybe quarters and pennies. Like people in sidewalk cafes feed sparrows. If my Mom caught me, she'd get mad and tell me to get to sleep, I had school tomorrow and didn't I want to make something of myself? Then she'd smile at everyone like she was really saying something and go, in a real sweet voice, "If you miss school tomorrow, you miss music class, too. You don't want that to happen, do you?" As if I gave a shit. She was always bragging that I had my Daddy's voice, and someday I was going to be a singer, how my music was my life, and that the school music lesson was the only way she could get me to go to school.

Dumb. Like singing "Farmer in the Dell" with forty other bored first graders was teaching me a lot about music. Music was okay, but I never understood how people could live for it like my Mom did. She'd never learned to play any instrument, and while she could carry a tune, her voice was nothing special. But she lived for music, like it was air or food. Funny. I think the men she took in might have respected her more if she'd been able to create even a little of what she craved so badly. I could see it in their eyes, sometimes, that they looked down on her. Like she wasn't real to them because she couldn't make her own music. But my mother lived music, more than they did. She had to have it all the time, the stereo was always playing when she didn't have an in-house musician of her own. I'd fall asleep to her swaying to the music, singing along in her mediocre voice. Sometimes she'd just be sprawled in our battered easy chair, her head thrown back, one hand steadying a mug of tea or a beer on her belly. Her brown eyes would be dark and gone, not seeing me or the bare wall studs, not seeing the ratty couch or scarred cupboards. Music took her somewhere, and I used to wonder where. I thought it was dumb, the way she lived for a collection of sounds, for someone else's words and notes.

I know the day my life changed. I was about three blocks from home, partway into the Skoag sector, listening to some Skoags on a street corner. Not listening, really, so much as watching them puff their greasy skins out until they looked like those stupid balloon animals Roxie the clown used to make for my Headstart class. Then when they were all puffed out, membrane ballooned over corally bone webs, they'd start making music, the skin going in and out just like speaker cones on really old speakers like my Mom had. They reminded me of frogs, because of how their throats puffed out to croak, and because of the wet green-yellow glints on their skins.

I kept a safe distance from them. Everyone did. From the "Don't Do Drugs" sessions at school, I knew what the stuff on their skin could do to me. I'd seen Skoag gropies, wandering around bald-eyed, hands reaching to grope any passing Skoag, to get one more rush even if it deafened them. Skoag gropies were always getting killed, squashed by cars and trucks they could no longer hear, or dreaming themselves to death, forgetting to eat or drink, forgetting everything but groping a fingerful of Skoag slime. But there were no gropies around these Skoags, and because they all still had crests, I knew they were new to earth. Skoags usually lost their crests pretty fast in our gravity. One of these Skoags had the tallest crest I'd ever seen, like a king's crown, and purple like a deep old bruise.

There was a mixed crowd around the Skoags. In-lander tourists who'd never seen a Skoag before, taking videos, making tapes. Locals panhandling the tourists, sometimes pretending they were passing the hat for the Skoags. Older boys and a few girls, just hanging out, calling the Skoags dirty names to shock the tourists, making out with a lot of tongue. And a few kids like me, skipping school because the sun was shining and it wasn't too windy and we didn't feel like doing the weekly pee-in-the-bottle thing. The Skoags played for us all.

They'd been playing all morning, the usual Skoag set. They did "Happy Trails to You," and "Horiko Cries," and "When You Were Mine," and then "America the Beautiful." That was the weirdest thing about Skoags, how they'd pick up any music they fancied, and then play it back in any order. They'd started "Moon over Bourbon Street" when I saw my Mom coming.

She and Teddy had gone to pick up her aid check that morning. But Teddy wasn't with her, and I knew from her face that another musician had moved out. I was glad, in a selfish way, because for the next few days there'd be regular meals on the table, and more food, because the check would only be feeding us two, and my Mom would talk to me twice as much as usual. Of course, she'd make sure I actually got up and went to school, too, but that wasn't much price to pay. And it wouldn't last long before she'd hold another party and reel in a new musician.

So I was determined to enjoy it while it lasted. So I ran up to her, saying, "Wow, Mom, you should hear this purple-crested one play, he's really something." I said that for about four reasons. First, so she wouldn't have the chance to ask me why I wasn't in school, and second to show that I wasn't going to notice that jerk Teddy was gone because he wasn't worth her time. Third, it cheered her up when I acted like I was interested in music. I think she always hoped I really would be like my father, would grow up to be a singer and redeem her, or justify her life or something. And fourth, because the purple-crested one really was something, though I couldn't have said why.

"You playing tourist, Billy Boy?" my Mom asked me in her teasing way that she used when it was only she and I together again. And I laughed, because it was dumb the way the tourists from inland came down to our part of Seattle to spy on the Skoags and listen to them jam. Anybody who'd lived here ignored them the way you ignore supermarket music or a TV in a store window. All you ever heard from a Skoag was the same thing you'd heard a hundred times before anyway. So what I said was sort of a

joke, too, to make her laugh and take the flatness out of her eyes.

But Teddy must have been better than I'd known, because her smile faded, and she didn't scold me or anything. She just stooped down and hugged me like I was all she had in the world. And then she said, very gently, as if I were the adult and she were the little kid explaining something bad she'd done, "I gave him our check, Billy Boy. See, Teddy has a chance to go to Portland and audition for Sound and Fury Records. It's, a new label, and if things go like I know they will, he'll be into the big money in no time. And he'll send for us. We'll have a real house, Billy, all to ourselves, or maybe we'll get a motor home and travel across the country with him on tour, see the whole United States."

She said more stuff but I didn't listen. I knew what it meant, because once one of her guys had stolen both checks, her Career Mother Wage and my Child Nutrition Supplement. What it meant was bad times. It meant a month of food bank food, runny peanut butter on dry bread, dry milk made up with more water than you were supposed to use, generic cereal that turned into sog in the milk, and macaroni. Lots and lots of microwaved macaroni, to the point where I used to swallow it whole because I couldn't stand the squidgy feeling of chewing it any more. I was already hungry from being out in the wind all morning, and just thinking about it made me hungrier. There wasn't much food at home; there never was right before the aid check was due.

I just went on holding onto my Mom, hating Teddy, but not much, because if it hadn't been Teddy, it would have been someone else. I wanted to ask, "What about me? What about us? Aren't we just as important as Teddy?" But I didn't. Because it wouldn't bring the money back, so there was no sense in making her cry. The other reason was, about three weeks before, Janice from upstairs had sat at our kitchen table and cried to Mom because she'd just given her little girls away. Because she couldn't take care of them or feed them. Janice had kept saying that at least they'd get decent meals and warm clothes now. I didn't want my Mom to think that I wanted food and clothes more than I wanted to stay with her.

So I wiped my face on her shirt without seeming to, and pulled back to look at her. "It's okay, Mom." I told her. "We'll get by. Let's go home and figure things out."

But she wasn't even listening to me. She was focused on the Skoags, actually on the one with the big crest, listening to "Moon over Bourbon Street" like she'd never heard it before. It sounded the same as always to me, and I tugged at her hand. But it was just like I wasn't there, like she had gone off somewhere. So I just stood there and waited.

My Mom listened until they were done. The big purple-crested Skoag watched her listen to them. His big flat eye-spots were pointed toward her all the time, calm and dead and unfocused like all Skoag eyes are. He was looking over the heads of the tourists and hecklers, straight at her.

When the song was finished, they didn't go right into another song like usual. Purple stood there, watching my mother, and letting the air leak out of his puffers. The other Skoags looked at him, and they seemed puzzled, shifting around and one made a flat squawk. But then they let their air out, too, and pretty soon they were all empty and bony, their puffer things tight against their bodies again. My Mom kept staring at the Skoag, like she was still hearing music, until I shook her arm.

"I'm coming," she said, but she didn't. She didn't even move, until I shook her arm again and said, "I'm hungry."

Then she jerked, and looked down at me finally. "Oh, my poor little kid," she said. She really meant it.

That bothered me. I thought about it while we walked home. I wasn't any more selfish than any kid is, and kids have a right to be selfish sometimes. So I walked along, thinking that she really did know how awful this month was going to be, and how much I hated squidgy macaroni, and she probably even knew that the sole was coming off my sneaker. But she'd still given the check to Teddy. And that was a hard thing for a kid to understand.

So we went home. Mom switched on the stereo and went right to work. She was real methodical and practical when there wasn't a musician to distract her. She sorted out what groceries we had and organized them in the cupboard. Then she went through all the pockets of her clothes, and dug inside the chair and got together all the money we had. It was ten seventy-eight. Then she sat me at the table with her, like I was one of her musicians, and told me how she was going to get us through the month. She explained that if I went to school every day, I'd get the free morning milk and vita-roll, and free hot lunch on my aid ticket. So I'd be mostly okay, even if there wasn't much for dinner. We'd get through just fine. After all, we were pretty tough, weren't we? And couldn't the two of us beat anything if we just stuck together? And were we going to let a month of crummy groceries knock down tough guys like us? All that stuff. But suddenly, in the middle of the pep talk, she got up and knelt by her stereo. She twiddled the knobs, frowning. "Signal's drifting, or something. Damn, that's all I need. For this to drop dead on me now." She tried about three different stations, then snapped it off. "Lousy speakers," she complained to me. "Everything sounds tinny."

It had sounded okay to me, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I sat still and watched her take out a pot and run water and take things from the cupboards for dinner.

We had oatmeal for dinner, and toast with peanut butter melting on it. Mom gave me the last of the brown sugar for my oatmeal. "Good grains and protein in this meal," Mom said wisely, as if she had planned it rather than scraped together what we had left. I nodded and ate it. It wasn't so bad. At least it wasn't macaroni.

That evening Mom sat at the table, reading a paperback that Teddy had left and wearing his old sweatshirt. I guess she felt pretty bad. Every so often, she'd turn on the stereo and fool with it for a while, then shake her head and snap it off. She'd read a little longer, and then she'd get up and turn the stereo on again, searching through the stations, but never finding what she wanted. In between, I was listening to the building sounds, spooky at night. The water heater in the utility room was growling and gurgling through the wall. I was coloring a "Don't Do Drugs" handout from school, wishing they'd given me more than three crayons. I wanted to color the spoon and syringe silver. Yellow just wasn't the same.

Mom had just snapped the radio off for about the twelfth time. In the quiet I heard a sound like someone dragging a bag of potatoes down our steps.

Mom and I looked at each other. She lifted her finger to her lips and said, "Shush!" So I sat perfectly still, waiting. There came a slapping sound against the door, and whatever was slapping pushed against it, too. The door thudded against the catch.

My Mom's dark eyes went huge, scaring me more than the noises outside the door. She went to the kitchen and got our biggest knife. "Go to my room, Billy Boy," she whispered. But I was too scared to move. Like a monster movie, when the music screams and you know they're going to show you something awful, but you can't look away. I had to know what was outside. And Mom was too scared to make me obey. Instead she crept a little closer to the door, holding the knife tight. "Who's out there?" she yelled, but her voice cracked.

The pressure on the door stopped, and for a moment all was silent. Then there was a sound, sort of like a harmonica wedged in a trumpet, and someone blowing through it anyway. It was a silly cartoon sound, Doofus Duck smacked with a rubber mallet, and my mother looked so startled that I burst out laughing. It was a dorko noise. Nothing scary could make a sound like that. Then a voice spoke, a low, low voice, like cello strings being rubbed slowly.

"That is my name on my world. But Humans call me Lavender."

"The Skoag?" Mom asked, but I was already past her and undoing the flimsy deadbolt on the door. I had to see it. It was so impossible for a Skoag to be outside our door at night that I had to see it was real. "Billy!" Mom warned, but I dragged the door open anyway.

The Skoag was there. The same purple-crested one we had listened to earlier. Only he looked a lot smaller with all his bladders deflated, not much bigger than my Mom. He was wearing a sort of pouch thing on his front, and in it was a brown grocery sack, a bouquet of flowers wrapped in green tissue paper, and a skinny brown liquor store bag. He was draped in the transparent plastic robe Skoags were supposed to wear in Human dwellings. His skin glistened through it in the watery street-lamp light like oil on a puddle, iridescent and shifting. His fat little flippers waved up and down slowly, like a fish underwater. His murky blue eye spots fixed on my mother.

She stared back at him. She still had the knife in her hand, but she had forgotten it. She crossed her arms, a closing, denying gesture. "What do you want?" she demanded, in the scared stubborn voice she kept for the landlord.

A little bladder above his eyes pulsed with his cello voice. "To come in."

"Well, you can't," she said, at the same time as I asked, "How did you get down the steps?"

"With great difficulty," he pulsed at me, but there was a violin squibble above the cello that made his answer a sort of joke. I grinned at him, I couldn't help it. He'd noticed me. He'd answered my question before he paid attention to what my Mom had said, and he'd answered it in the way one buddy might kid with another. I felt two feet taller.

He looked back at my Mom, waiting.

"Go away," she told him.

"I cannot," he said, all cello again. "Earlier today, I heard you listening to us. I think. My companions tell me it was not so, that I am tricking myself because I want too badly. But I am not deceived. I have hope only. I have brought gifts. Flowers and wine for you, as is fitting, and food for your child, who said he was hungry. May I come in?"

She just stood there, staring at him. A car shushed by in the rainy street outside, and the wind gusted, blowing cold air down our steps and in past the Skoag. And still they both just stood there, waiting for something.

"I love you," the cello thrummed and the sound swelled like a big warm wave washing through our apartment. The sound didn't end with the words, it went on with music, like embroidery on the edges of

the thought. I listened to it pass and fade, and then the silence came behind it, separating us again. The silence seemed unbearable.

"Come in," said my mother.

So Lavender came to live with us.

Everything changed.

Everything.

Within just a few days, the neighbors stopped knowing us. I'd walk down the streets, and rocks would bounce around me, but I'd never see who'd thrown them. The radio was never turned on again. There was real food, every day. Mom stopped looking at street musicians and haunting the open mikes. The street people called her ugly names, and our mailbox got ripped off the wall in the upstairs lobby. I got into so many fights at school that the principal said I had to stay in at recesses for the rest of the year. After that, I was left totally alone. I didn't care. Because I had Lavender at home.

Every day I went to school, because Lavender said I should. It would be important, later, he assured me, and that was enough for me. Everyday I came home and slid down the ridged ramp that had replaced our steps. And Lavender was always waiting for me to come home, even if my mother wasn't there. Always before, Mom's musicians had tolerated and ignored me, treated me like a cat or a houseplant, a semi-annoying creature that lived in my mother's house. Not Lavender. He knew I was there, and he was glad. He made me important. We would have a snack together, he rubbing his sludgy porridge through a membrane on his chest, me munching cookies and milk. Then I had to show him every single paper I'd brought home, read aloud from every library book I'd checked out. All I did amazed him. But mostly we'd talk and laugh. His laugh reminded me of a giant grasshopper chirring. Once he told me that Skoags had never laughed before they came to Earth, but the idea of a special sound made just to show happiness was so wonderful that now it was the first thing that all exiles were allowed to do. Each Skoag got to make up his own kind of laugh. He said it like it was some big favor for them. Then he told me that my laugh was one of the best ones he'd ever heard. That first day, when he'd heard my laugh in the street, he'd known that anyone who could create so marvelous a sound had to be very special indeed. And then he laughed my own laugh for me to hear, and that set me laughing, and we laughed together for about ten minutes, in harmony, like a new kind of song.

Looking back, I know he didn't understand much of basic human needs. Because he learned mostly from me, he had a seven-year-old boy's idea of what was important. Food he understood, and he always made sure there was plenty of it, though he tended to buy the same kinds over and over again. He loved bright, simple toys that moved, yo-yos and tops and plastic gliders, marbles and super balls and frisbees. I'm convinced he thought that flowers were essential to my mother, and he filled our little apartment with graceful glass vases full of them. I never thought to ask for anything more than what he brought and I know my mother never did. She was too used to giving to learn taking easily. Still, Lavender tried to provide for us. I remember the day I came home and found him cautiously touching his flippers to the protruding nails and scabs of sheetrock on the two-by-four wall studs. "This pleases the Mom?" he asked me.

"No. It's really ugly. But it's all we've got," I told him. A wrinkling ran over his deflated bladders, a gesture I had learned was like an excited grin. "This would please the Mom?" the cello thrummed, and he began pulling yards and yards of stuff out of his belly pouch. Shiny like plastic, but soft like fabric, and so

thin you could crumple a square yard of it up in your fist. He began fastening it to the wall, in graceful drapery, and as it fell straight, the room warmed with both color and heat, the musky basement smell faded, and a gentle light suffused the room. Then we hid in the closet until my Mom came home and was surprised by it. "Oh, Lavender, you cover up all the rough edges of my life," Mom told him. For a long time, I thought she meant the wall studs. He could make the hanging different colors, and he adjusted it almost daily, though I never asked how. If I had, he would have told me. I just didn't ask.

He told me anything I wanted to know. I knew more about Skoags than any of the "experts" of that time. Anything I asked him, he answered. I knew that they had been exiled to our world because they sang in public, and that was not permitted on their home world. I knew that they sang only other people's music, because making up new music was something only a holy leader could do. The earth Skoags were religious rebels, sort of like the Pilgrims. They believed singing was so worshipful that Skoags should do it all the time, everywhere, and that everyone should do it, not just priest-Skoags. On their own world, that was heresy, and anyone caught at it had to choose between exile or "a most unfortunate happening." For a long time I didn't know what he meant by that. A lot of what he told me was puzzling. Lavender kept trying to explain to me that singing was a circle, and that if one sang well enough to make the perfect music, it would create the one that would close the circle. My Mom, he said, was "Close. Almost the end of the circle. The one, but not quite." I never understood what he meant, but it was very important to him. A day didn't pass without him trying to make me understand. There just weren't human words for the Skoag ideas. It worried him very much. It was the only hole in our communication. He told me other stuff, like how some Skoags had long, articulated flippers like my fingers, and how they were dehydrated for their space journeys, and how they thought of Humans as "half-sexed" because we weren't self-fertile. Anything I asked, he answered. But if I didn't ask, he didn't bother me with it. I never asked him if he had come to end his people's exile, or if he were a very important Skoag on his world or how their spaceships operated. Or he would have told me. But I didn't ask.

In the long evenings, Lavender made music for us, playing anything we wanted. He knew every song my mother ever asked for, and could do them in any artist's style. She would sit on the end of my couch, my feet warm against her, listening raptly while Lavender played until I fell asleep. Mornings I would waken to his slaps on the door and run to let him in. He'd be laden with cereal and milk and fruit and a packet of his own gruelly food, and always fresh flowers for my Mom. He'd play back to me all the new sounds he'd heard in the night city, not just the music that drifted out from the bars, but sea-gulls crying over the bay, and the coughing of winos and the barking of dogs. It was always hard to go to school. I was sure they had fun without me all day at home, but to please Lavender, I went.

Life was good. There was food and talk and warmth at home and that's all most kids ask. But on top of all that, I had Lavender. The value of that is too great to tell. For over a year, the world was as good as it could possibly be.

One day my mother touched him. By accident. I know, because I was there when it happened. So simple, so stupid. She slipped on the kitchen floor, reached out to steady herself and caught Lavender's flipper. Lavender's bare flipper tip, shining with Skoag slime, caught my mother's hand, steadied her, and transported her to ecstasy. Her face changed, she cried out, a simple "oh" like a kid seeing his first Christmas tree, and sat down on the kitchen floor: She just sat and smiled. Lavender gently pulled his flipper free of her grip, but it was too late. His dark blue eye spots fastened on me.

"You didn't do it on purpose," I told him. "It wasn't your fault." But my heart was shaking my whole body.

A scant second later, my Mom was standing up, saying, "I'm all right. Don't be upset, Lavender. Stop flapping like that. Billy, don't stare, I'm fine." She caught at the edge of the kitchen table, sat down in one of the chairs. "Shit. What a rush!" she said a moment later, and then sighed. And got up from the table and went to the stove and started stirring the spaghetti sauce again. And that was that. "Whew," I thought as my mind darted to my *Don't Do Drugs* book at school. "I'm glad Mom didn't turn into a Skoag gropie."

But, of course, she did.

At first she never touched Lavender when I was around. And kids don't notice gradual changes. I'd get home from school, and she'd be sitting at the table, humming to herself. It got harder to get her attention. More and more, she told me to fix my own supper. At first she'd tell me what to cook, but later she'd just wave at the fridge. After a while, Lavender learned about frozen dinners and bought them for us. One day when I got home, I found that Lavender had replaced our little aid-issued microwave cooker with a more elaborate one. I cooked all the meals from then on. But even then, I didn't catch on.

If I suspected anything, it was only that Mom and Lavender were growing closer. That first night he had said he loved her. That had never seemed strange to me. I loved my Mom, a lot of musicians had said they loved her, so why shouldn't a strange Skoag standing on the doorstep say it? I never doubted it was true, and I don't think Mom did either. Lavender never missed a chance to show how important "the Mom" was. Not just the flowers, or the way he played whatever she wanted him to play. It was the way he respected her in a way no one else ever had. He made her listening as important as his playing.

And it started being more and more important. Now when he played for her at night, he'd stop, sometimes in the middle of the music, and say, "Is that it? Is that right?"

"No," she'd say, and he'd deflate with despair.

Or, "Almost," she'd say, and hum a bit to herself, a swatch of music nothing like what he'd been playing, but he'd say, "I think I hear," and try again.

And if she said, "Yes, yes, that's it," he'd play the piece over and over again, while she sat and nodded and smiled.

Slowly she changed. She didn't care about her clothes anymore, and seldom went outside. She got fat, and bought big men's shirts from the secondhand store to cover her belly. She became fussy about her hair, brushing and combing it like a fussy fiddler tuning his strings. Her voice changed, becoming dreamy and muffled, the ends of her words blurring. Sometimes when I got home from school, she'd be sitting at the table, dreaming with her eyes open. I'd talk to her but get no response until Lavender came to stand beside her. Then she'd focus on me, and answer my questions in a sweet dreamy voice.

It was easier to talk to Lavender instead. He always knew everything anyway, and Mom was so happy and dreamy that I didn't worry about anything being wrong. She wasn't like the filthy, skinny Skoag gropies in the school book. She was clean, and shining with health and dreams, plump and pretty. About then I found out Lavender didn't always leave at night anymore, but sometimes lay on the bed beside her, with Mom gripping his flipper all night, her head pillowed on his plastic coated body. So I should have known she was a Skoag gropie, right, and realized she was stone deaf? How could I? I was a kid, she didn't look like a gropie, and even if she ignored me a lot, she was still my Mom. And she still listened every night to Lavender's playing.

Even I was enchanted by his music. Mom no longer asked for stuff by titles, and I had never cared what he played. What had mattered to me was that he was playing for me as well as for Mom. That last bit of special attention at the end of the day was what mattered to me. But slowly that changed, as the music he played changed. He started playing a lot of stuff I didn't know. Some of it was dreary and mournful, and sometimes the words were in a different language. Sometimes it was full of strings and campfires, and sometimes it sounded like brass challenges and steel replies. But sometimes the music was so strange and wonderful it made the hair stand up on my arms and legs and tickled the back of my neck. I began to understand how my mother could live for music. Some of the music he played made my heart want to dance outside my body, pulled me from my sofa to sit beside Lavender's fat calloused feet-flippers, hypnotized me with joy. And some of it made me cry, isolated stinging tears because I could almost, but not quite, tell what the music was about.

That had to be Lavender's music. No one else could have made up such music, music that knew me so well. It had to be his original music. But Skoags weren't allowed to make their own music. Unless they were priest-Skoags, composing for the temples.

In February the first package came for Lavender. It was at the bottom of the ramp when I got home, and I picked it up and took it into the house. Just a little flat black plastic box. "Look what I found," I said as I came in the door, and Lavender came immediately and took it from me.

"For me," he told me. "A message." His cello strings quivered unnaturally as he slipped it into his pouch. I never saw him open it, and he didn't speak of it again, just asked to see my school papers.

There were three more after that, or perhaps four. Always at the bottom of the ramp when I got home from school, and always Lavender took them. One day it started raining on my way home and when I got to our house, there were flipper prints outlined on the ramp, leading to the flat black box. So Skoags left them. I wondered why the Skoags were sending him messages instead of just talking to him.

The last message box was silver, not black. Lavender held it for a long time, just looking at it. Then the muscles around his eye spots moved and he looked at my Mom for a long time. She knew something about those message boxes, and it wasn't good. I wanted terribly to know what it was, but I was too frightened to ask. Silence wrapped me so tightly it cut into me like wires. I went to my Mom, and she held me against her fat stomach and stroked my head like I was a baby. Then she gave me a gentle push and pointed to the door. I was to go outside.

"I'm not a baby anymore," I said angrily, knowing I was being shut off from something.

"No," said Lavender. He moved a slow flipper, and my Mom let go of me. "You certainly aren't. You are old enough to be trusted with important things." He paused, then the cello thrummed rapidly. "Billy Boy. I have made the other Skoags very angry by being here with you. They demand I come back to them and live as they wish me to live. I cannot. Tomorrow I will go to tell them that. There may be . . ." the cello sighed wordlessly, then went on, "a great unpleasantness for me. A most unfortunate happening, perhaps. Until I come back, I will rely on you to take care of the Mom." He turned slowly until he faced my Mom again. "That is all there is to say. Billy does not need to leave." She bowed her head, accepting his wishes. He spoke no more about it, but went about the apartment tunelessly humming and adjusting the wall hanging from pale mauve to a sky blue.

That evening he played long, wordless songs with lots of strings and high pitched wind instruments. I fell

asleep to music like sea gulls crying after a storm.

The next day when I got home from school, Lavender wasn't there. My Mom was sitting at the table. She didn't even look up until I slapped my school books down in front of her. Then she looked up with eyes as flat and dark as Lavender's eye spots. Her face was like the day she'd given Teddy our check, but a thousand times worse. "Billy," she said, in a low swollen voice like her mouth was packed with marshmallows. She reached for me, to pull me near, but the palms of her hands were scarred with iridescence, like the pictures in the *Don't Do Drugs* textbook. Suddenly I couldn't let her touch me. My mind tagged and rejected the truth. I pulled back, feeling betrayed, knowing something was terribly, terribly wrong. "Lavender!" I cried, but no cello sawed an answer. I looked again at my Mom, at her scarred hands and her deaf loneliness. I saw what he had done, but his not being here, now, was worse.

"Don't hate him," Mom said, in her slow, sticky voice. "We had to do it, Billy. We couldn't help ourselves. And someday it's going to be all right."

She couldn't have known how bad it was going to get. All that long empty evening, she'd shiver suddenly and then wrap her arms around herself and cock her head as if seeking for a sound. I sat on the couch and watched her and tried to imagine her loneliness. My mother cut off from music, from all sound. As kind to seal off her lungs from air. But he loved her, he loved me, he couldn't leave her empty like that and me alone, he wouldn't just go away. I watched her digging her fingers into her ears like she was trying to claw out a stopper. Her nails came out with tiny shreds of dry skin and scabby stuff. She wiped at her ears with pieces of toilet paper, and they came away pink. It was awful to watch. But the worst was the sound of flippers on the ramp, and the heavy slap at the door. The worst was me jumping up, believing that Lavender had come back and everything was going to be all right. I ran to the door and dragged it open for him, and he fell halfway into the room.

It was a terribly clattery sound, his fall, but he didn't cry out. My Mom didn't make a sound as she went to him. I stood clear of them both, watched her roll him over.

I screamed when I saw what they had done to him. The remains of his bladders fluttered in feeble rags and a pale yellowish stuff oozed from the torn edges. They had slashed them all, every sound membrane on his body. He tried to speak, but made only a ridiculous sound of flapping curtains and newspapers blowing down the street, a terrible fluttering of ripped drumheads. My mother knelt over him and lifted his flippers and pressed them to her cheeks. Even now, I don't believe it was the act of a junkie trying for one last rush. There was terrible wisdom and love in her eyes as his shining iridescence ate into her skin and marked her. His tattered membranes fluttered once more and then hung still.

I ran out of the apartment and down the streets. They were shiny with rain, shining like his skin, and wet like the dripping stuff from his wounds. I ran as far and fast as I could, trying to run away from those terrible moments to a place where it hadn't happened. I don't know who called the police or the ambulance or whoever it was that came and took the body away. I know it wasn't my Mom. She would have sat there forever, just holding his flippers while his music faded.

I came back in the grey part of morning. A man and a woman were waiting for me. They wore long overcoats and stood, as if sitting in our chairs might make them dirty. An outline was chalked on the floor, and they wouldn't answer any of my questions. Instead, they asked me questions, lots of them. Had the Skoags killed Lavender? Why? Did I see them do it? Did my Mom help them do it? Why had a Skoag been living with us? Had he ever tried to touch me? But the anger inside me wouldn't let me answer their questions. "Where's my Mom?" I demanded each time, and finally they put me in a car and

took me to the Children's Home and left me there.

The women at the Children's Home all wore grey pants and white shirts. They all called me "honey." They gave me two pants, two shirts, underwear, socks and shoes and a bath. They threw away all my own stuff. Then they showed me a bed with a brown blanket on it in a row of beds with brown blankets, and told me the bed and the box at the foot of it were mine.

The next day, more people came to talk to me. Nice people, with kind voices and gum and Lifesavers. A lady told me my Mommy was sick, but was in a place where she'd get better soon. But she said it like really my Mom was very bad, and had to stay somewhere until she was good again. They told me the Skoag was gone and I didn't have to be afraid anymore. I could tell about it and no one would hurt me. They told me the best way to help my Mom was to answer all of their questions. But their voices sounded like creaking cage doors and iron gates swinging in the wind. I knew that talking to them wouldn't help my Mom. So when they asked me questions, I always said I didn't know, or answered the opposite of what was true. I contradicted myself on purpose. I said Lavender was my father. I said my Mom was his secretary. I said I was going to throw up. Then I did, trying to make it hit their shoes. After three days they left me alone.

After that I had to go to school classes each day with the other Home-kids and special anti-substance abuse classes for the kids of junkies. I got beat up nearly every day. The bigger kids called me "Billy Bun, the Skoag fucker's son." One of the kids had a checkstand newspaper with a picture of my Mom on the front and big black print that said, "SKOAG'S LOVE SLAVE WITNESSES RITUAL EXECUTION!!! Gropie confesses, 'They killed him for loving me!' " I hit that kid and grabbed the paper and tore it up, and the playground lady said I was an animal not fit to associate with other children. I had to stay in for three recesses. Which was fine with me. That night I got out of bed and went down to that kid's bunk and pissed on the foot of it. So he got in trouble for wetting his bed. I learned fast.

A very long time went by. Probably it was only a month or two, but it seemed forever. My real life had ended, and someone had stuck me in this new one. I felt like I was someone else, that both Lavender's life and Lavender's death had happened to someone I knew, some dumb little kid who hadn't seen his Mom was a junkie and his friend was her pusher. I'd never be that stupid again. The counselor told me that I must always remember that none of it was my fault. I was only a child, and I couldn't have done a thing about my mother's decision to become a Skoag gropie. They worked real hard at taking away my guilt and replacing it with bitterness toward my Mom, who had ruined my life. But then a spring day came, and I looked out the classroom window and saw a lady with a coat and hood and gloves and a scarf wrapped around her face. I didn't recognize her, so I just went back to arithmetic. At recess they let her take me home.

Things are simple when you're a kid. So simple and so awful. I accepted what happened and the aftermath, just kept on day after day, and nothing surprised me because I never knew what to expect. So I wasn't shocked to find that our door had been busted in, and someone, our neighbors or the street kids, had trashed the place. The smeared chalk outline was still on the floor, with piles of human shit all over it. Lavender's wall hangings were dead brown tatters, and his flowers were a moldering mess of brown stems and petals and broken glass on the table. The cupboard doors had been ripped down, the microwave was gone, and my couch smelled like urine. Food had been thrown around and mouse droppings were everywhere.

Mom picked up a kitchen chair and set it on its feet and brushed off the seat. She took off her coat and scarf and gloves and put them on the chair, baring her scars so matter-of-factly that they didn't shock me.

They were part of her now, like her fat belly and dark eyes. She picked up a scrap of paper off the floor and wrote down a list of cleaning supplies and cheap food and gave me some money. Then she picked up our old broom.

No one bothered me on the way to the store. The check-out man stared at me for about two minutes before he rang up the stuff. Coming home, I passed a Skoag on the street, a big fat one, and he turned and started following me. But all Skoags are slow, and I ignored the way he tooted for me to come back, he wanted to be my friend, he had candy for me. I just hurried, going through alleys until I lost him.

I got home, and the place looked almost normal. Most of the mess had been scraped into brown sacks for me to shuttle out to the dumpster. The chalk lines were gone, and as if that was some kind of undoing magic,

I half expected to see Lavender come out of the bedroom, or to hear his cello thrumming. Instead there was silence, and the crisp brown tatters of his wall hangings dangled over the edges of a garbage sack.

I stood there and the silence filled me up, made me as deaf and isolated as my mother. Welling up with the silence came the sudden grief of knowing he was really dead. I sat down on the floor and started crying and calling out, "Lavender, Lavender!" My Mom kept right on trying to put the cupboard doors back on, using a table knife for a screwdriver, and I kicked my feet and slapped my hands on the hard cold cement and screamed until someone upstairs started pounding on the floor with a broom handle. I guess Mom felt the vibrations. She came and held me until I stopped crying, and said I was okay. But I wasn't. I knew just how alone I really was. My pain was like an invisible knife stuck in me that no one could see to pull out. I knew my mother was hurt just as badly, and there was nothing I could do to help her, either. That was when I decided to forgive her for the awful thing she had done to me, for making Lavender go away.

We found a rhythm in our days, a steady beat that kept us living. Mom became a very good housekeeper, mostly to fill her time. Everything was cleaned up and she pieced back together the broken stuff. She saved from each aid check until we could buy an economy microwave and have hot foods again. She mended all my clothes, and sewed things from my outgrown stuff. Every two weeks she'd put on her gloves and scarf and go after her aid check, but I did all the shopping. I went back to school. I got beat up every day on the playground. Then I stole a baseball bat from school and laid for the kid that had done it and really worked him over. The third time a kid beat me up, and then got bushwhacked, the other kids made the connection. They left me alone. They knew they could hit me at school, but sooner or later the price for doing it was higher than anyone wanted to pay. So I got by. I'd still see the fat Skoag outside the grocery store, and he'd call to me, but I outran him. So no one bothered me. The silence of my home spread out and wrapped me up. No one talked to me much, and that seemed fitting. What better way to mourn Lavender's passing than with silence? I was nine years old, and the best part of my life was over.

Mom got fatter and slower. I thought she was going to die. She moved like an old, old woman, and sat like she was blind as well as deaf. Once a week an aid lady came, with pamphlets about how not to be a Skoag gropie, and Don't Do Drugs coloring books and balloons and crayons for me. She'd give Mom a signed slip, and Mom had to turn it in to get her aid check. The aid lady was younger than Mom and wore grey pants and a white shirt. I secretly believed she was from the Children's Home and might take me back there. She always made me show her my hands, and every week I had to pee in a bottle for her, even though everyone knows that Skoag slime won't show in a pee test. She left signing booklets for my Mom, but she didn't want them. So I took them and learned to sign dirty words to the kids at school.

And Lavender was never there.

That's how it would hit me, I'd be going along, doing a math page or signing out something about someone's sister or folding up my blanket or getting a drink of water, and suddenly I'd notice, all over again, that Lavender wasn't there. It always felt like someone had suddenly grabbed hold of my heart and squeezed it. I looked all through the house one day, trying to find one thing that he had touched, one thing he'd given to us that we still had. But there was nothing. It was like he'd never existed, and the silence was like he'd never made music.

One May day I came home from school and Mom had a baby. She hadn't warned me, so it was a big shock to find her lying in bed with this little pink thing dressed in a nightgown made from one of my old T-shirts. I knew someone had helped her from the neatly folded towels by the bed, and the grey box of paper diapers. More aid stuff My Mom's fat stomach was gone, and I felt really dumb for not knowing she had been pregnant. I saw pregnant women in the streets all the time, but it had never occurred to me that my Mom could get that way. I knew, too, that she couldn't get a baby unless she'd done it with somebody. And the only one who'd been living with us . . .

Mom wasn't saying much, just watching me as I looked at the baby. What fascinated me the most was those tiny little fingernails she had, thin as paper. I kept staring at her hands.

"Go ahead," Mom finally said. "You can touch her. She's your little sister, Billy. Put your finger in her hand." Her voice dragged like an old tape, and she sounded really tired.

"Is it . . . safe?" I asked. But she wasn't watching my mouth, so she didn't know I'd said anything. I went and got my school tablet. On it I printed, very carefully, "IS SHE PART SKOAG ON HER SKIN?" Then I took it back into Mom's bedroom and handed it to her.

She read it and crumpled it up and threw it across the room. Her mouth went so tight it was white around her lips. It scared me. She'd never been mad at me while Lavender was around, and since he'd died, she'd been too beaten to be angry at anything. "Shit!" she said, and the word came out with hard edges, sounding like she used to. She grabbed my wrist, and I could feel the hard slickness of her Skoag scarred palms. "You listen to me, Billy Boy," she said fiercely. "I know what you been hearing. But you knew Lavender, and you damn well know me. And you should know that we . . . that we loved each other. And if he'd been a human and we could have had a baby together, we'd have done it. But he wasn't, and we didn't. This baby here, she's all mine. One hundred percent. It sometimes happens to women who get hooked on Skoag touch. They call it a self-induced pregnancy. This baby's a clone of me. You understand that? She's the same as me, all over again. Only I'm going to make sure she comes out right. She's going to be loved, she's going to have chances. She's not going to end up in a dump on aid, with no . . ."

Her voice got more and more runny, the words souping together. She let go of my wrist, and started crying. She lifted her hands and curled her fingers toward the tight skin on her palms, and held them near her face but not touching it. Her tears trickled into the flipper scars that her final touching of Lavender had left on her face. Her crying woke the baby up, and she started crying, too. Her little face got red and her mouth gaped open, but no sound came out. Then my Mom said to her, in the most terrible voice I've ever heard, "Baby, what'd you come here for? I got nothing to give you. I got nothing to give anyone." And she rolled over and turned her back on her.

I stood there, watching them, thinking that any minute Mom would turn back and pick her up and take care of her. But a long time passed, and Mom just lay there, crying all shaky, and the baby lay there, all red and crying without sound.

So I picked her up. I knew how, I used to hold Janice's baby before she gave her kids away. I held her against my chest, with her head on my shoulder so it wouldn't wobble. I carried her around and rocked her, but her face stayed red and she kept breathing out through her mouth, really hard. She didn't make any sound when she cried, but I thought maybe newborn babies didn't cry out loud. I thought she might be hungry. So I went in the kitchen and I checked the refrigerator, to see if Mom had bottles and government aid formula in plastic envelopes like Janice used to have. And there was, so I warmed one up in the microwave until the plastic button on it turned blue to show it was the right temperature. Then I sat down and put the bottle in her wide open mouth. But she acted like she didn't even know it was there, and kept up her unbearable screaming.

I sat down on the couch with her on my lap. Her little legs were curled up against her belly. I looked at her red wrinkly feet and her teeny toes. My old T-shirt looked dopey on her, and I wished I had something better for her to wear. Maybe she was cold. So I pulled a corner of my blanket up over her. Her mouth stayed open and her face stayed red. I really wished I had a suck-on thing to stick in her mouth. But I didn't. So I started rocking her on my lap, and singing this song Janice used to sing to baby Peggy, about a mockingbird and a ponycart and all sorts of presents the baby would get if she'd be quiet. And right away she closed her mouth, and went back to being pink instead of red. She opened her eyes that she'd squinched shut and looked right at me. Her eyes were kind of a murky blue. I looked into them and I knew Mom had lied. Because she looked at me just the way Lavender used to, when I didn't know if he was looking at my face or at something inside my head. I knew she was his, and as long as I had her, he wasn't really gone. This baby was something he'd touched, something he'd left for me to hold onto and keep. Part of him for me to keep.

I suddenly felt shaky and my throat closed up so tight I couldn't breathe or sing, but she didn't seem to mind now. She just kept looking up at me and I kept looking at her, and I wondered if this was what Lavender had meant about closing a circle. Because I knew she was loving me as much as I loved her. It was as important as he had said it was. I held her until her eyes closed, and then I carefully lay down on the couch with her on my stomach and my blanket over us. Her face was against my neck, breathing, and every now and then her mouth would move in a wet baby kiss. Before I fell asleep, I named her Lisa, from an old song Lavender used to sing about Lisa, Lisa, sad Lisa, Lisa.

After that, she was more my baby than Mom's. Coming home to her was like coming home to Lavender. I meant that much to her. She was always crying and wet when I got home. Mom never seemed to notice when she needed changing, and even if she hadn't been deaf, she wouldn't have heard this baby cry. So I'd clean her up and feed her and hold her and rock her. And I'd sing to her. She liked that the best. She was just like my Mom that way. I got the idea of tuning the stereo to an all-music station and leaving it on for her when I had to go to school in the morning. Since our place had been trashed, the stereo always had a background sound like cars going by in a wet street, but Lisa didn't care. I'd put her down in the morning and turn on the stereo for her, and she'd still be happy when I got home from school. She slept with me at night, since I was afraid she'd fall out of Mom's bed. But my couch was perfect, because I could put her between me and the back of it, and she'd be safe all night long, just as safe as the little mice nesting inside it.

A new pattern came into my life. I was taking care of things, taking care of the Mom, just like Lavender had told me, and taking care of him, in the form of Lisa. Mom didn't have to do much at all. She got her

checks, and kept the house clean. I took the checks to the store and got food and sometimes a few extra little things for Lisa. She loved anything that made a noise, rattles, bells, anything. The only time Mom got mad was when I spent seven dollars on a stuffed lamb with a music box inside it. She yelled at me in her mushy voice, because to get it I had to buy tofu instead of hamburger and skipped getting margarine and eggs and jam. But it was worth it to watch Lisa wave her little fists excitedly every time the lamb started playing.

After four or five months, I noticed Mom wasn't keeping the house as clean. She still swept and stuff, but not like before, and I was doing almost all the cooking. Something had gone out of Mom and left her flat, something more than just a baby coming out of her stomach. I think she had expected more, had thought that Lisa was going to be better somehow. Disappointed was how she acted at first, and then later, disinterested. I felt mad about it, and I'd try to make her pay more attention to Lisa. I'd take her to Mom and show her how Lisa was learning to smile, or how she could sit on her own. But it didn't do any good. Mom would hold her awhile and look at her, and then she'd go set her down on the couch, without even making sure she couldn't roll off. She never talked to Lisa or played with her. And after a while I knew she never would. So I started loving her even more, to make up for Mom not loving her.

It got harder as Lisa got bigger. Summer went okay, but by the time school started again, it wasn't safe for me to leave her all day. I tried putting her in a cardboard box while I was gone, but it was hard to find ones that were strong enough. She'd get hold of the edges and try to stand up, and I was afraid she'd fall. She was eating more, too, so even if I left a bottle inside her box for her, she'd still be really hungry when I got home. Mom didn't notice her at all, and of course she couldn't hear Lisa's silent crying. Mom didn't seem to notice much of anything. She'd tidy up the house each day, and then just sit at the table. Late at night, she might put a scarf around her face and go out for a walk. But that was about all she did, and it didn't make me feel any safer about leaving Lisa all day. So after Christmas I just didn't go back to school and no one ever noticed.

When I think about those days, with Lisa starting to be a real person and all the time we had together, they're almost as good as the days with Lavender. Lisa's eyes turned brown, but they never lost that Lavender look, where she could look right through me while I rocked her to the music. Her hair was dark like Mom's, but curly at the back of her head, and she was almost always smiling. I hated dressing her in stuff made from old T-shirts. The stuff was too small, and Mom hadn't made her any new clothes. So I asked the aid lady who came about once every two months then, and she told me where I could get baby clothes that rich people gave away. She gave me slips for Lisa and me and Mom, and helped me write down the right sizes on them. That aid lady wasn't too bad.

On Monday I took the slips and Lisa and went, using my aid pass to ride the bus. Everyone on the bus thought Lisa was cute, and kept calling her honey and touching her hands or bouncing her feet. She was real good about it. One old lady who sat beside us part of the way gave me a five dollar bill and told me to buy my little sister something with it.

She was really nice. When she got off the bus, she kept saying, "Bye-bye, sweetie. Bye-bye," like she expected Lisa to say something. "She doesn't talk," I told her, and the old lady just smiled and said, "Oh, she will pretty soon. Don't you worry."

It was the same at the clothes place. A lady at the counter kept talking to Lisa, saying, "You such a sweet thing! You such a good girl, aren't you?" Lisa would smile, but never make a sound.

"She's shy, isn't she?" the lady said. "I bet she babbles her head off at home."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and then felt bad for lying when the other lady came back with three bags of clothes for us. They showed me the stuff they'd picked out for Lisa, little dresses with lace and a new blanket and a chiming rattle that Lisa grabbed right away. Lisa's bag was the fullest of all, probably because she was so cute.

I should have felt good going home. But the bags were heavy and it was hard to carry them and Lisa. There was another baby on the bus, making fussy angry noises. It sounded awful, but I wished Lisa could do that. Her being quiet at home had never worried me, but now I was thinking, she won't always be a baby at home, and what then?

I got off the bus with the heavy bags, and Lisa was wriggly. It was getting dark and starting to rain and I had eight blocks to go. I felt like I couldn't take another step when the fat Skoag bounced out of an alley right in front of us.

"Hello, little boy!" he honked.

"Stuff it up your ass!" I said back, because I was really scared. Even if I dropped all the clothes, I couldn't run with Lisa. In the dark and the rain I might fall on top of her and kill her. I squished her close to me, hoping the Skoag wouldn't see Lavender's eyes, and kept walking. Maybe if I just kept walking, he'd leave us alone. But his flipper feet kept on slapping the wet sidewalk beside us.

"I've got something for you," he said, and I got even scarer, because that was just like the guy in the OKAY TO SAY NO book at school.

"Stuff it up your ass," I said again and walked faster. One of the bags tore, and I wanted to cry. I'd have yelled for help, but it was dark and there was no one on the streets. This close to home, even if I did yell for help, no one would want to come.

"Boy," he tootled softly. "It has been hard to find you, for it was commanded that none should speak of it. Every time I speak to you, I put myself in danger of a most unfortunate occurrence. Please take these and free me of a heavy promise."

Lisa was wriggling in my arms, trying to get a better look at the tootling voice. She kicked out and one of my bags went flying. Before I could grab it up, he took a package from his pouch and dropped it into the bag. Plastic baggies, taped together, but I couldn't tell what was inside them. I stood still and stared through the dark at him. I was scared to pick up the bag because I didn't want to get close to him and I didn't know what he'd put in it. Drugs, maybe, something I'd get arrested for having. But it was the bag with Lisa's clothes in it, the ones I'd gone through all this for.

"What's that?" I demanded, trying to sound tough.

"One for each of your months. Green trading paper, what is the word for it? Money. For you to take care of the Mom."

"Lavender." I said his name, knowing there was a connection but not figuring it out yet.

"Silence!" the fat Skoag honked, and he sounded like a scared Volkswagen. "To speak the name of a blasphemer is to invite a most unfortunate occurrence."

"But . . ."

"My task is done, until your next month begins. Next time I call, do not run away. This task is heavy and I would call back the promise, if I had known what would befall the one who asked. Go away quickly, before I am seen with you."

He waddled off like a frightened duck. I managed to snag up the fallen bag. All the way home, my heart was banging against my lungs. I felt like I'd seen Lavender's ghost, that he was still around somehow, looking out for us. I kept wondering about the money in the bag. Not how much it was, or what I'd use it for, but what Lavender had been thinking when he made the fat Skoag promise. If he'd known he was going to die, why'd he go to the Skoags who killed him, why didn't he go to the police or something, or even just come home and ignore those message boxes?

Somehow I got Lisa and the bags down the ramp and managed to turn the doorknob without dropping anything. When I got inside, there was only one light burning and Mom wasn't there. I didn't know if she'd gone looking for us because it was so late, or just gone out on one of her night walks.

Some things you just have to do first. So I changed Lisa and got her a bottle and put one of the new nightgowns on her and put her in a cardboard box with her bottle, the chiming rattle and the new blanket. She looked so sweet, all done up in new stuff that it was suddenly worth all I'd gone through. I turned the stereo to some soft music and she settled down.

Then there was time to think, but too much to think about. The package in Lisa's bag was money, little rolls of it in plastic baggies. I opened it carefully and threw the bags away, even though the slime on them was dried, and dry Skoag slime isn't dangerous. Each baggie was the same, five ten-dollar bills. I unfolded every single one, looking for a note, or some sign from Lavender to help me understand why he had left us and let someone kill him. But there was only money.

I wrapped the money in one of Lisa's old nightgowns and stuffed it down the couch. I wasn't giving it to Mom. Lavender had left it for me, because he knew I would buy the right things with it. I already knew I was going to get Lisa a playpen so she didn't have to crawl on the cold cement anymore. And fresh, real bananas instead of dried banana flakes that always looked like grey goop.

I went over to her box and looked in at her. She looked back at me, her legs curled up on her tummy and helping hold the bottle, one little leak of milk trickling down her cheek. I reached down and wiped it away, but she smiled at my touch and more milk trickled out of the corner of her mouth. Her dark Lavender eyes looked at me and through me, and for a second he was there, like any moment his cello voice would fill the room. But Lisa had no voice.

And that was another thing to think about.

She could hear, that was for sure. So why didn't she make noises like other babies? I took her bottle away and tried to look in her mouth. She sucked on my finger, but when I tried to open her mouth, she got mad. Finally, she opened it herself, in one of her silent screams. I looked in, but if there was anything wrong in there, I couldn't see what it was. I looked until she was all red and sweaty from her soundless crying. Then I gave her the bottle back and rocked her to make up for being mean. And I thought.

Lisa was asleep and I was bedded down beside her, nearly falling off the couch now because she'd

grown so much, when Mom came back in. She didn't turn on any lights or say anything, she just came in and went straight to her room, making a little humming sound as she went.

And I lay there on the couch and I knew. I knew what she'd gone out for.

God, I was mad.

I lay there and shook with anger and being scared. Because she was going to blow us all up. I wanted to get up and go into her room and scream at her. But she wouldn't hear me, and if I held up a note, she'd just ignore it. I could go to her and tell her everything, about the money from Lavender and the new clothes and Lisa not being able to talk, and she wouldn't even care. She'd only go on with her idiot humming and staring. Because she didn't care, and probably never had, not about anything except her damn music.

She wasn't stupid. She'd keep the house clean and dress decent and pick up her aid checks. She didn't want to be a Skoag gropie in the streets. She'd sneak out by night, find Skoags standing outside the clubs listening to the music, and touch one. I knew it as plainly as if I'd seen it. That was what mattered to her, a press of Skoag flesh. She didn't care that if the aid worker caught her with slimy hands, they'd take Lisa and me to some Children's Home. I remembered what it was like. I could imagine Lisa there, her silent crying going ignored, growing up not able to tell anyone when someone was mean to her. They'd put her with the other ones they called "Special" in a big room with a lot of baby toys and ignore her. I'd never see her and she'd forget about me. I'd lose the only thing Lavender had left me. Because of Mom.

I watched Mom the next day, hoping I was wrong. But the signs were there, in the rhythmic way she swept the floor, her chin nodding to the unheard beat. She was groping Skoag slime. It was such a slutty thing to do. I had thought that her touching Lavender had been because they loved each other. Now she seemed like a whore to me, someone who'd touch any Skoag just to make music in her head. I hated her.

The next day I went out to the secondhand store. I bought Lisa a stroller, a playpen, and a piece of carpet to go in the bottom of it. And one of those suits with the feet and a hood. It took me two trips to get everything home.

When my Mom saw all the stuff, she tried to ask me where it had come from. But I just ignored her and her mashed potato voice. She grabbed hold of my arm and shook me. "Biw-wweee! Wherr aw thisss-tuff frum? Huh?" That's what she sounded like. I grabbed her hand off my arm and turned it over and pried her fingers open. The Skoag scars were shiny, and wet in the cracks. She jerked away from me.

"I don't have to tell you anything," I said as she held her hands to her chest. I didn't yell it. I just said it real clearly, making sure she could see my mouth move. I picked Lisa up and took her to the couch. I started playing pat-a-cake with her, ignoring Mom. After a while, Mom started going, "Huh. Huh-uh-uh! Huh!" She sat down and put her scarred hands over her scarred face and rocked. After a while I realized she was crying. I didn't go to her. I remembered DON'T DO DRUGS at school, and I knew it was true, that junkies don't have friends, don't love, don't care about anything but their next fix. No one can afford to love a junkie. So I did what the books said. I ignored her. And that was the day I was ten years old.

I took control of things. I found the sign language booklets that the aid lady had left, and I started making Lisa sign. Simple stuff at first. Hold up your arms to be picked up. Finger in the mouth for bottle. Nod

your head for stereo turned on. It was harder for me than for Lisa. Because I knew what she wanted, but I couldn't give it to her until she signed, no matter how she cried. I'd make the sign and then I'd take her hands and make the sign. But after a while, I had to make her sign herself. She cried a lot. But finally, she started doing the simple signs. By the time she was two, we were on the ones in the pamphlet.

Things went okay for a while. Mom was careful about her habit. None of the aid ladies caught on to her. She was always home when they visited, and the place was tidy. Once, I came back from the store and found her giving Lisa a bath in the sink. But it was only because the aid lady was there. It was just a trick to have her hands busy, and if the aid lady saw the wetness in the cracks of her palms, she'd think it was bath water. Lisa was splashing water all over and smiling like it was normal for Mom to take care of her. I set the groceries on the table and said, "Hi Mom," like we were a happy little family. Mom kept on sponging Lisa, and finally the aid lady said she had to go, but she was glad that things were going better for us.

As soon as she left, I got a towel and took my Lisa and dried her carefully. Lisa kept signing for "cookie" while I was drying her and dressing her while she was kicking and wriggling. Mom gave her one and it wasn't until I got her shoes tied and set her on the floor that I realized what that meant. It made me madder than her using Lisa's bath to keep the aid lady from checking her hands. I found the sign booklets on her nightstand. I carried them out and slapped them down on the kitchen table. Mom was watching me.

"These are mine," I told her, making my lip movements plain. "Leave them alone."

"Bwee," she said pleadingly, and I could see how big and purple her tongue was getting inside her mouth. It made me feel sick and sad and sorry, for Lisa and myself, mostly. That big purple tongue was a withdrawal symptom for a Skoag gropie, it meant she'd been down for more than forty-eight hours. I thought about her washing Lisa, keeping her back to the aid lady. Hiding. She'd still been hiding from the aid lady, it was just a different way from the one I'd figured. She was still using us.

She wasn't getting her slime. I didn't know why, but I knew it was dangerous for us. She wouldn't be able to last. Before long, everyone would know. It hit me. I'd have to take care of it. One more thing for me to handle to keep Lisa safe. It made me angry and at the same time, hot and satisfied because I'd been right about her, she was just going to drag us in deeper and make it all harder. I'd been right to stop caring about her, because she was just going to hurt us if we let her be important to us.

Everything was getting harder. They'd tracked me down for school, and now I had to get there an hour earlier for remedial math. Which meant leaving Lisa with Mom for even longer. And Lisa was walking, so if you left the door open she'd head up the ramp and out onto the sidewalk. I'd sit in school and wonder if Mom had gone out to finger some Skoags and left the door open and Lisa had toddled out and been hit by a car. Or worse, just wandered off, and I'd go home and call her but she wouldn't be able to answer. . . . My imagining made school hours torture.

I'd race home each day, and each day Lisa would be okay. Every few nights Mom would go out and I didn't know what to hope for. That she'd score some slime and come home hummy, but easy to spot as a gropie? That she wouldn't get any, but then she'd be trying to sign to Lisa and showing off her withdrawal? Maybe that she wouldn't hear a delivery van coming down the alleys?

It all came together one night when I went to get another envelope from the fat Skoag. The street lamp was glinting off his skin, and flashing off his voice membrane each time it swelled like a khaki neon light.

He was holding out the envelope in a plastic-mittened flipper, but I said, "I need a favor."

"No," he tooted. "No favors." He flapped the envelope at me frantically. He looked toward the alley mouth, but there was nothing there. I took a breath.

I said calmly, like I was sure of it, "You promised Lavender you'd look out for me and the Mom."

"Yes. I bring you the money, every time."

"Yeah. Well, that's good, but not enough. I need you to come to my house, twice a week, late at night."

"No." He said it fast, scared. Then, "Why?"

"Yes. You know why."

He rocked on his flippers like a zoo elephant. "I can't," he tootled mournfully. "Please. I can't. Take the money and go. Dangerous for me."

"Dangerous for me if you don't. And you promised Lavender."

"I . . . Please. Please. Once a week. Wednesday night, very late. Please."

He shoved the envelope into my hand. I watched him rock. If I demanded it, he'd come twice a week, but he'd hate me. Or he'd come once a week, and think I'd let him off easy. "Okay," I said, settling for the second one. I might need something else someday, and once a week would hold Mom together.

He came late Wednesday. It startled me awake, his flipping down the ramp and then slapping the door. Mom had stayed in, looking at her hands and sighing, and gone to bed around midnight. It was two A.M. when the fat Skoag showed. I'd gone to sleep, thinking he wasn't going to come. Odd. Just the sounds of him coming down the ramp, and me opening the door like I used to for Lavender made my heart pound. Like maybe I'd open the door and somehow it would be Lavender standing there, gently waving his flippers and waiting for me.

But it was only the fat Skoag. He was pressed into the darkest corner of the stairwell, staring up at the sidewalk. As soon as I opened the door, he scuttled in and pushed it shut.

"Quickly," he said, pulling off a plastic mitten. "Quickly, please, and then I will go."

"This way," I said, and led him into my mother's bedroom.

She wasn't asleep. She was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. The bed, wedged in a corner of the small room, was a tousled wreck. Some movement of air as we came into the room turned her eyes to us. She stared at us, between dreaming and awake, and suddenly she sat up and screamed "Lavender!"

The word came out crisp and hard and real, like she used to talk. Then she saw it wasn't him and she broke. She made this horrible laughing-crying sound. The fat Skoag freaked when she screamed and waddled frantically for the door, but I was closer, and I slammed it and put my back to it. "No," I said, gripping the knob. "You don't leave until she's touched you."

His eye spots went flat and dead. He turned and slowly walked toward the bed. Her hysterics trailed away in broken sobs. I watched her face, her shock fading and being replaced by horror as the fat Skoag came closer. "No," she said, clearly, and then, "Nooh. Nooh." She backed up on the bed, pressing into the corner. "Noooh. Doanwanis. Goway. Bwee. Pease. Trynstob. No." But when the Skoag held his flipper out, she suddenly lunged across the bed and gripped it like a handful of free lottery tickets. She held on and her body jerked in little spasms, like the kid at school who had fits. Her eyes went back and she threw her head way back on her neck and her tongue came out. I felt sick and dirty, like I was watching her have sex with someone, or watching a doctor work on guts. But I couldn't look away. The Skoag stood there until her hands slid away. They were thick with his slime, and iridescent in the darkness. The stuff was thick, like the goop she used to rub on my chest when I was little and had a bad cold. She crumpled over onto her side. I pulled the blankets back up over her. As I let the Skoag out, I wondered why I had bothered to do that.

"Remember," I said, as he waddled up the ramp. "Next Wednesday. It's important. And you promised Lavender."

I was thinking that Wednesday was about right, because the aid lady always came on Thursdays or Fridays, and Mom would still look okay when she got here. The fat Skoag paused on the ramp.

"For Lavender," he said, like brass trumpets coming from a far hill. "Only for him would I do this thing. Only for him."

I knew then that the fat Skoag was close to hating me tonight, and that it didn't have to have been that way. If I hadn't demanded this, he might have become my friend. I watched the fat Skoag leave and felt pimpish and sly and small for trading on his loyalty to Lavender. But I had to, to keep Lisa safe. Sometimes the only thing I was sure of was that Lavender had entrusted Lisa to me. I went back to bed, curling up around Lisa. I fell asleep hoping that the things I did to protect her wouldn't stain her.

So that's how it went. The fat Skoag came once a week. Mom stayed slimed and happy. The aid lady never suspected a thing. I went to school enough to keep everyone happy, and took care of Lisa. Lisa grew. She turned into a little kid. On Saturdays we'd bus over to Gasworks Park. I'd push her on the swings or we'd watch the fancy kites people fly there. I kept her away from other kids, so she wouldn't be teased about being mute. When some Mommy would say hello to her, or say, "My, such .pretty hair," I'd step in and say, "She's real shy. And my Mom says don't talk to strangers." Then I'd take her away and buy her ice cream. No one expects kids to talk while they're eating.

She was three when the message came. The radio was always on for Lisa. Classical music made her close her eyes and sway, or suddenly shiver. Jazz made her hyperactive. If I wanted her to go to sleep, it was good old rock and roll. I should have heard about it. But I never listened to the news, or wasted food money on a newspaper. So I scowled at the check-out guy when he shoved a *Seattle Times* into my brown bag.

"I ain't paying for that," I told him.

"On the house, kid," he told me. "I figure you got a right to know, it being your Skoag and all."

He'd never talked about Lavender before that. He'd treated me decent while Lavender was alive, and he'd never given me a bad time about shopping there after Lavender died. Not like the laundromat where they threw me and our laundry out because they didn't want "Skoag slime clogging the drains." Anyway,

he turned right away to the next customer so I knew he didn't want me to say anything. I headed home.

After I got dinner cooking, I unfolded the paper, wondering what I was supposed to look at. The headlines jumped at me. "SKOAG PLANET CONTACT CONFIRMED." I read slowly, trying to understand it. The story said the rumors were confirmed, without saying what they were. The big deal was the Skoags officially sending a message to Earth, planet to planet. The newspaper went on about the sending technology being based on stuff we knew but hadn't thought about using together, and stuff like that. I had to sort through the whole paper to find the last few lines. They scared the hell out of me. Sources wouldn't say what the message had been, but didn't deny it had to do with the ritual murder of a "highly-placed Skoag exile in Seattle."

I didn't know the microwave had buzzed until Mom set food in front of me. I looked up, and Lisa had already finished eating. I hated it when Mom did stuff like that. Like she was pretending she was a good little mommy, taking care of her kids instead of a Skoag gropie who didn't give a damn. In the drug classes at school, they called that "ingratiating behavior" and said junkies and alkie used it to fool their families into thinking they were changing, especially if the families were close to sending them to a cure station. It didn't fool me. I crumpled up the paper and gave it to Lisa to play with, and ate dinner.

Two nights later, the man came. Maybe he thought no one would notice a grey government sedan pulled up in front of a slummy house at midnight. I heard someone nearly fall down the ramp, and when he knocked, I opened the door on its chain.

"Yeah," I said, but my stomach was shaking. Skoag slime dependency wasn't supposed to show up in pee tests. That's what all the kids said, and I'd always believed it was true, but what if they'd changed the test and knew from Mom's pee that she was a gropie? But I tried not to let any of that show on my face as I stared out the crack at the government man.

"I have to come in," he said, whispery. "I have to talk to your mother." "Too bad," I said, being tough. "She's deaf. You can write it down, or you can tell it to me, but you can't talk to her."

"I can sign," he said nervously, echoing with his fingers.

"She can't," I said, and started to close the door.

"Please," he said, not quite shoving his foot in the crack, but leaning on the door to keep it open. "It's about the dead Skoag. Lavender. And it's important, kid."

We stared at each other.

"Look, kid," he finally said. His voice came out normal, not whispery, but real tired. "I can come back with cops tomorrow and kick this door in and drag you out. It's that important. Or you can let me in now, and we'll keep this quiet."

My mom reached past me and undid the chain and the man came in. I hadn't even known she was awake. She looked awful, with her scarred face shining in the streetlamp light leaking in the door. All except for her hair, which was as pretty as ever. She clicked on the light and shut the door behind him. He looked around and said, "Oh, Jesus Christ." It was the first time I'd ever heard a grown man say it like a prayer. Then he sat down at our table, and started signing to my Mom.

He wasn't an aid man, or a drug man, but a real, high up, government man. The second surprise was that my Mom signed back to him. I suddenly remembered I hadn't seen the signing books around in a while. Probably in her room. Ingratiating behavior. I wondered what she'd been signing to Lisa while I was away at school each day. Then I forgot that and paid attention to what he was saying. He talked out loud as he signed, like it helped him keep his place or something.

"Lavender's . . . people . . . are very angry . . . about his death. He was . . . important Skoag (the sign for Skoag was to put your fingers on your forehead and make your hand do pushups, like a pulsing membrane). Not exile . . . but like a priest . . . or civil rights worker."

He went on about how important Lavender had been, how he had come in the hopes of reconciling the exiles and instead he started sharing their beliefs, and then went further than they did. It didn't match what Lavender had told me, but I kept my mouth shut. The heart of it was that news of his death had finally reached his home planet, and a lot of Skoags were very upset. The way he said it, I didn't know if the message had just taken that long to get there, or if the exiled Skoags had kept killing Lavender a secret. But I still kept my mouth shut. Anyway, the planet Skoags were going to send someone to look into it, and our government had agreed to co-operate fully. Including letting the Skoag talk to my Mom and me. I felt like telling him it was up to us whether we met the Skoags. But I didn't. He went on about how this was a real opportunity for Humans to establish diplomatic relations with the Skoag planet, and it might be our first step toward deep space, and the U.S. could lead the way, and all that shit. Then he suggested the first thing we'd have to do was move.

That's when I opened my mouth. "No," I said, firmly, and was surprised when my Mom repeated it, "No," very clear.

He talked a lot about why we had to move. The Skoag ambassador or whatever was coming, probably within two or three years. (I was surprised they didn't know exactly when, but they didn't.) And we had to be somewhere nice, so the U.S. wouldn't be embarrassed, and somewhere safe, so no terrorists would try to kidnap us or kill us, and somewhere more official, where advisors could tell us what to say to the Skoags.

He was still explaining at four in the morning, when Mom stood up, said, "NO" very emphatically, and then walked back to her bedroom and shut the door.

He stared at the door. Then he sighed, and ruffled up his hair. "This is a big mistake," he said. And he shook his head. "A damn big mistake that we're all going to hate remembering. You're going to blow it for all of us, kid, for the whole damn human race. Shit. Well, I guess we work around it, then."

So he left.

For a while I lay awake, wondering if there really was danger, if our neighbors would turn on us or terrorists would bomb us. But then I decided that at least terrorists wouldn't try to take Lisa away from me and put her in special school or a home while they treated Mom for being a gropie. That would happen for sure if they moved us, because there'd be no way to hide Mom's addiction. That was why Mom said no, too. She was afraid of losing her Skoag slime source. As for me, I could never leave the only place I'd ever shared with Lavender. I stared at the spot where he'd died. The chalk marks were years gone, but I could still see them.

The government man was trickier than I thought. A month later our neighborhood was picked for Facelift

Funding. All owners were given eighteen months to upgrade or lose the funding. So our walls got spraysulated and paneled, and they foamed the floor and put in carpet-heat and a tiny insta-hot unit under the sink. Then the old furnace room became part of our apartment, as a second bedroom.

The whole neighborhood changed. They jackhammered up squares of sidewalk and put in skinny little trees, and all the buildings got new siding. They hauled away the trash heap from behind the building, including our old linoleum. They put in a tiny fenced play yard, with organo-turf and big plastic climbing toys. They put flower boxes around the streetlamps. I hated it. They were trying to cover us up, trying to say, these aren't poor people living in their own trash, these are nice folks like in the readers at school. The daddys and mommys have jobs, they go to church and their kids drink white milk and eat brown bread. I hated it, but Lisa loved it. She kept picking the flowers and bringing them to Mom. Mom always put them in a vase, just like Lavender's flowers. Sometimes I wanted to smash it.

I came home from school one day, and a moving van was just pulling away. Scared hell out of me. Had Mom decided to move after all, had she kidnapped Lisa and left? But she was there. "Govamin" she said disgustedly, and stood there like there was no place to sit.

All our old stuff was gone. Even the cupboards and fridge were different, and the cooker was huge, with hot beverage taps on the side. My couch was gone, the friendly smell of mice gone with it. The new one matched the fat chair beside it. The stereo was about as big as a loaf of bread, but it was a real wall-shaker. There was a vid-box, a keyboard console and a mini-dish. Guess the government wanted us to look good.

The new bedroom had twin beds with a dorky little screen between them, like I hadn't been bathing Lisa since she was born. Lisa was bouncing on her bed already, looking like a kid in a catalog. I caught her as she jumped, and for just a second, as she came down in my arms, she looked just like Mom. Exactly. Same hair, same eyes, and I knew it was true, she was Mom's clone and would look just like her when she grew up. Except that her hands and cheeks would never be scarred. I set her down and she ran to Mom and hugged her around the knees. And we stood there and looked around, like there was no place left for us.

So they thought they changed us, so we wouldn't shame the U.S. when the Skoag came. But they didn't change the fat Skoag's secret Wednesday visits, or Mom's blank humming. The chalk lines were still there, and I could see them right through the carpet. And our neighbors still didn't talk to us.

We waited. One year. Two years. More Skoags came, but not the Skoag we waited for. Three years. Someone wrote a big article in the paper that the whole thing about a Skoag ambassador coming had been a scam, a hoax. The fat Skoag told me the truth. He'd come. He'd talked to the ones that killed Lavender. And he'd agreed it had been necessary. He hadn't wanted to talk to Humans at all.

The carpeting got worn spots, and Lisa scribbled on the new paneling and Mom couldn't get it off. Four years. Graffiti on the buildings, and beer bottles in the flower beds. We forgot about the government and the government forgot about us.

Lisa was seven, nearly eight. We were walking home after a day at Gasworks Park. I was worrying because a letter had come from the school. Someone had turned us in, had reported that a child in our home was being deprived of an equal education. If Lisa didn't go to school, they'd cancel the aid checks. We couldn't get by without the aid checks. I didn't know what the hell to do. I was thinking about running away with her. I was fifteen, nearly old enough to get work somewhere.

A bunch of Skoags were jamming on the corner, same old thing. I kept walking. I never listened to Skoags anymore. I was a block past them before I realized Lisa wasn't with me. I ran back, but it was too late.

All she was doing was listening. Eyes big, lips parted, listening like she always listened to music. The Skoags were playing some old Beatles thing. There were a few tourists, a few hecklers, the usual mix, and the Skoags were playing and Lisa was listening.

Then all of a sudden they stopped, their membranes all swelled out, and they all looked at her. Colors washed through their crests, bright colors, and they started making a sound, an incredible sound like Jesus coming in the sky on a white horse to save us all. It got louder and louder. Skoags started coming out of buildings, flipping down the sidewalks, and as soon as they came, they started making the sound, too, and colors started racing through their crests. They surrounded Lisa, pushing to get closer, all making the sound. It was a glorious Alleluia sound, and Lisa loved it. She glowed and her eyes were huge. I shoved my way in there. I grabbed her hand and I dragged her out of there, past Skoags who reached for us with shining flippers. I snatched her up and ran all the way home and I locked the door behind us.

The next day our street was packed so full of Skoags that cars couldn't pass. Silent Skoags, standing and swaying on their big flat flippers, but not making a sound. Staring at our building. Copters flew over, and the film was on television, but the news people had no idea what was going on, they just "urged inhabitants of the affected neighborhood to stay inside and remain calm while officials determine what to do."

It lasted for two days. The streets packed with Skoags, our door locked, and my heart hammering the whole time, until I thought my head would blow up. Suspecting, almost knowing.

On the third day, I woke up to a sound like birds harmonizing with the rush of ocean waves and the laughter of little kids. The sound had been part of a very good dream I was having, so when I woke up and still heard it, I wasn't really awake. Then I realized what had wakened me. A smaller set of sounds. A chair being pushed across the carpet to the door. The chain being undone. I jumped out of bed.

The street was empty, almost. There was only a grey government sedan, and the same government man who had come four years ago. And a big, big Skoag, with a tall purple crest. He was singing the harmonizing bird song, and Lisa was walking straight toward him. She was smiling, and her hair was floating on the wind. Like a dream walker. Then the Skoag opened his mittened flippers to her, and she began to run.

I screamed her name, I know I did, but she didn't seem to hear me. The Skoag picked her up, and I was still running down the street as they all got in the car. The government man gunned it and they were gone.

And that's the end of the story. Almost.

Mom was standing in the doorway, crying. The tears went crooked where they met her scars and flowed around them.

"Go after her!" I screamed. "Get her back. They can't just take her."

"No." She said each word carefully, signing them for emphasis. "They didn't take her. She wanted to go. She *had* to go. She shouldn't have to come back, not just for us."

"You can't know that!" I screamed. "How can you say that?"

She looked at me a long time. "Because I heard it," she signed slowly, silently. I watched her scarred fingers move, the wonder that flooded her face. "I heard it, and it called me. But it wasn't for me, not the me that's here. It was for the other me, the one you made. The one you made for them. The circle closer. The one who listens so well that she has no need to speak. The me done right. But this me heard it and knew how bad she wanted to go."

Then Mom went back in her room and closed her door.

Nothing happened after that. The fat Skoag never came back and Mom never went through withdrawal. I guess the last song was enough to last her forever. I never went to school again, and the government people never came to ask about us. They never came to tell us anything either. There were no write-ups in the paper, no news stories about a little girl stolen by the Skoags. No one ever asked why Lisa never came to school. No one ever asked just how much one little girl is worth to the government. Or to a Skoag with a purple crest.

But the next month Boeing got a huge government contract that put half of Seattle back to work, and the papers were full of news about the break-through design that would give us the stars. So I didn't need it spelled out. Do you?

The world gets the stars, the Skoags get Lisa, and I get nothing. Lisa's gone, and with her every touch of Lavender. It was a hard thing he asked of me, but I did it. I looked after the Mom. The Skoags can go back home now. Every day, there are fewer of them on the streets. They always bow to my Mom and me. They no longer sing, but all their crests ripple with color. Sometimes I wonder if Lavender even knew what he was asking.

Or maybe all he meant was that I should look out for Mom, and the rest of it was just an accident. I don't know.

Mom and I still live here. Next month I'll be eighteen. I'll have to register with the Aid office as an adult, and with the Job office for training. Mom's Career Mother checks will stop and she'll have to get job training or lose all her Aid. I'll have to move out, because Aid receivers aren't allowed to let other adults share their homes. Mom will probably get a smaller place.

That's too bad. Because just last night, as I was falling asleep on the couch, I heard a mouse, nibbling inside there.

It's been a good home, really. I had good folks. •