

THE TWO HEADED GIRL

—Paul G. Tremblay

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I have to keep swinging an extra fifteen minutes before I can go downtown and to the Little Red Bookstore, because Mom wants to run the dishwasher and the blender tonight. I wonder if my time on the swing will generate enough extra juice for those appliances, or even if she's telling me the truth. I've been having a hard time with telling-truth or truth-telling.

Anne Frank is on my left again. I only ever get to see her in profile. Whenever I'm around a mirror she is always someone else. Today, she's the early-in-her diary Anne, the same age as me. Anne spent most of my swinging afternoon pining for Peter. But now she wants to talk to Lies, her best friend before the war.

She says, "I feel so guilty, Lies. I wish I could take you into hiding with me."

I get this odd, stomach-knotty thrill and I pretend that she really knows me and she is really talking to me. But at the same time, I don't like it when she calls me Lies. I say, "I'm sorry, Anne, but I'm Veronica." The words come out louder than I intended. I'm not mad at her. I could never be mad at Anne. It's just hard to speak normally when on the downswing.

Anne moves on, talks about her parents and older sister, and then how much she dislikes that ungrateful dentist they took in.

"Nobody likes dentists," I say and I want her to laugh. She doesn't. I only hear dead leaves making their autumn sounds as they blow up against the neighbor's giant fence and our swing set and generator.

Mom sticks her only head out of the kitchen window and yells, "Looks like we need another fifteen minutes, sorry honey. I promise I'll get Mr Bob out here tomorrow to tune everything up."

This is not good news. My back hurts and my legs are numb already. She's promised me Mr Bob every day for a week. She's made a lot of promises.

"Hi, Veronica." It's that little blond boy from across the street. He's become part of my daily swing-routine: when I come out, he starts off hiding in our thick bushes, then he sneaks along the perimeter of my neighbor's beanstalk-tall, wooden plank fence, and then sits next to the swing set and generator.

"Hi, Jeffrey," I say. Jeffrey has a withered left arm. Anne is quiet. Both of us try not to stare at it.

He says, "Where's your Dad?" His little kindergarten voice makes me smile even though I'm sick of that particular question.

"I don't know, Jeffrey. Just like I didn't know yesterday, and the day before yesterday." I try not to be mean or curt with him. He's the only kid in town who talks to me.

Anne says, "My Dad is hiding in the annex."

Jeffrey stays on my right, which is closer to my head. He only talks to me. I know it makes Anne lonely and sad, which makes me lonely and sad, just like her diary did. I don't remember what came first: me reading the diary or Anne making a regular rotation as my other head.

Jeffrey says, "You should ask your Mom or somebody where he is."

I know Jeffrey doesn't realize what he's asking of me. Just like I know people never realize how much their words hurt. Sometimes almost as much as what isn't said.

I say what I always say: "I'll think about it."

"Can I ride on the swing?"

Anne is mumbling something under her breath. My heart breaks all over again. I say, "No, sorry, Jeffrey. I can't let you. You'd have to ask my mother." I find it easier to blame everything on Mom, even if it isn't fair.

Jeffrey mashes his fully developed right fist into his cheek, an overly dramatic but affective pantomime of I-never-get-to-do-anything-fun.

I say, "Do you want to walk downtown with me when I'm done?"

He nods.

"Go ask your parents first."

Jeffrey runs off. With his little legs pumping and back turned to me, I let myself stare at the flopping and mostly empty left arm of his thin, grey sweatshirt. I watch him scoot onto his front lawn and past a sagging scarecrow, a decoration left out too long.

My legs tingle with pins and needles, and Anne is crying. I wish I could console her, but I can't. And now I'm thinking about the question I've always wanted to ask Anne, but never have because I'm a coward. I could ask her now, but it isn't the right time, or at least, that's what I tell myself. So we just keep swinging; a pendulum of her tears and me.

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Jeffrey and I are downtown, playing a game on the cobblestones. I have to step on stones in a diagonal pattern. Jeffrey has to step on the darkest stones. I've seen him miss a few but I won't call him on it. I'll let him win.

Anne is gone and Medusa has taken her place. She is my least favorite head. Not because she is a gorgon. Just the opposite: I wish she was more gorgon-esque. Medusa is completely un-aggressive, head and eyes always turned down and she doesn't say boo. I feel bad for her, and I hate Athena for turning Medusa into a hideous monster because she had the audacity to be raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena was the one with the big-time jealousy and beauty issues, kind of like my mother. I used to try and talk to Medusa, to make her feel better about herself. I'd tell her that her physical or social appearance doesn't measure her worth and that her name means *sovereign female wisdom*, which I think is really cool for a name, so much cooler than my name which means *true image*. But she never says anything back and when I talk her snakes tickle my neck with their forked tongues.

Jeffrey shouts, "I'm winning," even though he keeps falling off dark stones onto light stones. Balancing with only one arm must be difficult.

I say, "You're really good at this game."

It's getting dark and I know Mom will be mad at me for being so late, but I'm allowing myself to champion the petty act of defiance. We make it to the Little Red Bookstore with its clapboard walls, cathedral ceiling, and giant mahogany bookcases with the customer scaffolding planks jutting out at the higher levels. There are people everywhere. Customers occupy the plush reading chairs and couches, the planks, and the seven rolling stack-ladders. I hold Jeffrey's hand as we wade through the crowd toward the fiction section. No one notices us.

Jeffrey is as patient as he can be, but soon he's tugging at my arm and skirt, asking if we can find dinosaur books, then asking if we can go home. I need a stack-ladder to go after the books I want. They're still all taken. But even if I could get a ladder, I can't leave Jeffrey unattended and he can't climb the ladder and walk the bookcase scaffolding with me. So I grab a random book, something I've never heard of by someone I've never heard of, because I have to buy something. Then I walk Jeffrey to the kid section and to some dinosaur books. He sits on the ground with a pop-up book in his lap. He knows all the dinosaur names, even the complex ones with silent letters and *phs* everywhere, and I've never understood why boys love the monsters that scare them so much. Above my heads, people climb in and out of the ladders and platforms and book stacks.

I say to Medusa, "I think they look like bees in a honeycomb." Medusa sighs and doesn't lift her head.

Jeffrey sounds out an armored dinosaur's name, an-kie-low-saur-us, ankylosaurus, then he stands and swings an imaginary tail at me.

I say to Medusa, "Come on. Tell me what you think. Something. Anything!"

Medusa's snakes stir, rubbing up against my neck. She says, "Unlike my sisters, I'm mortal."

Everyone in and above the stacks stops what they are doing and looks at us, looks at Medusa, who for once returns their stares. No one turns to stone, at least not against their will, and I know it's time for us to go. The customers look upset with us, likely because we shouldn't be talking about mortality in a bookstore.

I brush a particularly frisky snake off my neck and I say, "Me, too," but

enough time has passed so I'm not sure if Medusa knows I'm responding to what she said. Communication is so difficult sometimes.

We walk to the register and pay for the book I don't want.

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It's dark when I get home. Mom is sitting at the kitchen table. She's dressed to go out even though she won't. Tight candy-red top, the same red as her lipstick, with a black poodle skirt. Her black hair bobs at her shoulders. She could be my sister back from college ready to tell me all she's learned about life and love as a woman. But she's not.

There are two white, Irish-knit, turtleneck sweaters on her lap. On the counter, the blender is dirty with its plastic walls dripping something creamy. The dishwasher is in a loud rinse cycle. My dinner is on a plate, hidden under a crinkled, re-used piece of tinfoil.

Mom says, "You shouldn't keep Jeffrey out so late. He's only five years old. You know better than that." Her voice is naturally loud. She looks at me quick, like a jab. Then she goes up the left side of one sweater with the scissors.

She's right. But I'm not going to acknowledge her rightness. Just like Mom won't acknowledge that my other head is Jeanne D'Arc. I say, "Jeffrey had a great time at the bookstore and his parents were fine with it." Suddenly not quite ready for an argument to start, I add, "Everything okay with the blender and dishwasher?"

Jeanne whispers a prayer, covering her face with my left hand, very pious and humble.

Mom says, "So far so good, thanks for asking. You're such a sweetheart." Mom goes up the right side of the other sweater. She works so very fast. "It's going to be cold out tomorrow, so I'm making you a nice, warm, and presentable sweater." She says presentable as if anyone will see me. Mom gets up and goes to her sewing machine next to the kitchen table. I wonder if Mom planned the sewing machine into this evening's allotment of electricity and then I'm worried that I didn't spend enough time on the swing today, and then I hate myself for being so trained.

I say, "What's for dinner?"

"Mushroom chicken, corn, rice pilaf. Go wash up first. And you are

going to do your math and science homework tonight, Veronica. No excuses. I can't put off your exams any longer. They're due in the post in three days."

I mix truth with a lie. "I bought a book that I really want to read first."

"Tomorrow night is your book club and the next night you have to take the exams. You are going to do your homework tonight."

Mom is always so reasonable, and I hate it. Makes me feel like I'm the bad one for wanting to fight. I say, "I don't care," but not very loud. I think Mom is going to let it slide, but then she breaks protocol by commenting on my other head.

"Why is there a boy on your shoulder?"

Jeanne crosses herself.

I don't know what to say. Other than when she's making two-headed clothing, Mom usually ignores my other head. I manage to say, "Real nice, Mom. She's Joan of Arc." I don't say her name in French because I don't want to remind Mom that she hasn't given me a French unit to work on in almost two weeks.

"I didn't say that to be mean, Veronica."

"Then why did you say it?"

She stares at me. "I won't let you start another fight with me over nothing," she says and turns on the sewing machine.

I throw myself into a chair and pick at my lukewarm dinner. I don't wait for Jeanne to say grace.

There's a spider fern hanging above Mom and the sewing machine. Some of its leaves are browning. With the machine's vibrations, some leaves break off and fall onto Mom's head. She sews quickly and the result is a beautiful Irish-knit turtleneck sweater with two turtle necks. No visible seams where two different sweaters came together. She is very talented and I hate her. Okay, I don't hate her but she makes me very angry without me being able to rationally explain why. Yesterday, I constructed an elaborate Cinderella fantasy where my father, a man I no longer remember, was driven off by my evil and shrewish mother. I suppose it's the only desertion scenario that doesn't hurt me.

I offer Jeanne some of my food but she is fasting. Now I feel guilty. I struggle to finish what's on my plate. I think about Jeffrey insisting that I ask Mom where my father is, or better yet, how come he doesn't see me if he really lives in the same town as us, but I know tonight is not the night for that conversation.

Mom says, "Try the sweater on, sweetie. Make sure it fits."

I pull the scratchy wool over our heads. Jeanne doesn't like it.

Mom tugs at the shoulders, waist, and sleeves, inspecting her work. She says, "This fits nice. Very nice. You look great." Mom is still at least six inches taller than me. I don't know if I'll ever catch up. Mom folds her arms over her thin chest, her defense and attack posture. Big smile, quite satisfied with herself, with what she's done for her daughter. It's a very intimidating look. One I don't know how to overcome.

She says, "Homework time. I'll check your answers when you're done."

I leave the kitchen with a full belly and empty of fight. As I walk into the living room and past the snarling fireplace, Jeanne closes her eyes and says, "Allez!" which means *go!* I already feel bad about the food so I hurry away from the fire, but I trip and fall, my hands scraping on the brick landing in front of the fireplace. Jeanne spasms and twitches, trying to remove herself from my body and away from the fire, and I'm crying, but not because of the pain, and somehow this must be all Mom's fault too.

"Sorry!" I get up and dash up the stairs to my bedroom. My hands sting and I look at them. The palms are all scraped up and bloody.

Jeanne says, "It's only stigmata. But keep it secret. Go wash it off and don't tell your mother."

At least, that's what I think she says. My French is a little rusty.

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Mr Bob was my science teacher when I went to school. I don't miss school and the taunts and the stares and how incredibly lonely I could be in a lunchroom full of other people. Nor do I miss Mr Bob, even though he's always been nice to me.

Mom and I are standing next to the swing set, watching Mr Bob. Odd and misshapen tools that couldn't possibly fix anything fill Mr Bob's fists and spill out of his tight, too short, and paint-stained overalls.

My mother says, "Can you fix this?"

Mr Bob says, "No sweat."

My other head is Marie Curie, child-aged, so no one recognizes her. She's very plain and I find that beautiful. Marie says something in Russian that sounds vaguely commiserative. Mom ignores this head.

Unprompted, Mr Bob launches into an explanation of how the swing set works. Maybe he does know that I have young Madame Curie with me and he's trying to impress her. If so, that's really creepy.

Mr Bob says, "This swing set is one big friction machine. Mounted on the horizontal bar above is an axle with ten circular plates, each plate turning and rubbing against pads when you swing. As the pads and glass rub against each other, they make an electrical charge. The prime conductors, in this case, long brass pipes, follow the frame of your swing set. The ends of these conductors carry metallic combs with points bent toward the faces of the glass plates. The combs collect the charge, and the pipes bring the charge to the collector/generator and then to your house. Really it's very simple, but not very efficient."

Mom says, "Nothing Veronica's father did was very efficient."

I want to tell Marie Curie the obvious: that my father made this swing set, but he isn't here anymore and I don't know where he is but supposedly he's still in town, somewhere. But I don't think Marie has learned English yet. The next time I go to the bookstore, I'll get her biography, and maybe some books on electricity and friction machines so I can fix this without any help.

Mr Bob climbs a ladder to get at the axle. Tools drip and drop like a lazy rain. As much as I'd like the swing to be tuned up so it'll be more efficient, I don't want Mr Bob touching any of it. The swing is my only connection to my father and I'm afraid Mr Bob will ruin everything. Wanting to be random and unpredictable, but knowing different, I blurt out, "Where's my father?"

Mom folds her arms across her chest and says, "Why don't you go inside and wash up. Don't forget you're hosting the book club tonight and

you haven't prepared any of the hors d'oeuvres."

I stare at Mom and I want to cry. Marie stares at Mr Bob and clucks her tongue at his apparent incompetence. Marie says something in Russian that I think would translate as: I'd like to see this contraption's schematic, you talentless monkey.

Mom softens, and bends to whisper in my ear. She says, "We can talk about this later if you really want to. If you need to. But it's for the best, Veronica. Really. Go on, now. Set up for your book club."

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My book club is here. Six women, ages ranging from Peg Dower's somehow rheumy thirty-six to Cleo Stanton-Meyer's health-club fifty-three. Our chairs and bodies make a circle, a book club Stonehenge, but with an end-table loaded with coffee, tea, water, chips and spinach dip, and biscotti at the center. Everyone has their dog-eared copy of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf on their slack-clad laps.

Mom stays in the kitchen and doesn't participate in the discussions even though she reads all the books. She insists this is my *thing*. I hear the sewing machine turn on and off sporadically.

Bev Bentley, white-blond and DD chest (Mom is so jealous), says, "Excuse me, but is that her, Veronica? Will we be able ask her questions?" Hands cover faces all over the circle. Peg and Cleo groan much like a crowd at a sporting event when something bad happens. Bev is the something bad happening. She asks me the same question every meeting. And every meeting I answer: "Sorry, Bev, she's not the author of this book." It is rather insulting for her to continually think that my other head is that simple or predictable. But I don't tell them my other head is Sylvia Plath. They should be able to figure that out on their own. Sylvia just smirks and takes it all in, burning Bev down with a look that could shame an entire culture.

Our discussion begins with Peg trying to compare Clarissa Dalloway to Catherine from *Wuthering Heights* but no one agrees with her. Sylvia laughs but it sounds sad. I redirect the discussion to the book's themes of insanity and suicide and reality and the critique of the social system. None of us say anything that's new or important, but it is still satisfying to discuss something that matters to us. Cleo wonders aloud how autobiographical this novel was for Woolf, and I wonder how hard Sylvia is biting her tongue or maybe she just doesn't care enough to join in. I'll need to keep me and her

out of the kitchen and away from the oven.

Then book talk is over before everyone's tea cups and coffee mugs are empty. And as usual, our talk deteriorates into town gossip.

"Darla has been sleeping with that new pharmacist."

"William Boyle?"

"He's the one."

"He must be ten years younger than Darla."

"Fifteen."

"And her divorce isn't even final yet."

They move on to discuss the high school gym teacher and his secret gay lover. As best as I can figure, this mysterious lover is more abstract ideal than reality. Sylvia is still disinterested. She's flipping through my copy of *Mrs Dalloway* and doodling in the margins. And there's more of the who's-sleeping-with-who talk followed up with who's-not-sleeping-with-who talk, which includes Cleo's third husband's erectile dysfunction diagnosis and her daily countdown until he fills one of those blue pill prescriptions, likely to be handed out by the philandering pharmacist.

The sewing machine in the kitchen is quiet and has been for a while. Mom stopped sewing once the book discussion ended. I know Mom thinks this book-club-cum-gossip-session is a substitute for all the wonderful teenage conversations I don't have with other teenagers. I don't know if it is or not since I'm not having those teenage conversations with other teenagers. I generally don't mind the town dish as I do find it entertaining. But tonight it seems wrong, especially on the heels of Woolf's book. I mean, this was what she was railing against.

So, inspired by Virginia to say something meaningful, or at the very least to yank everyone out of complacency, I say, "Does anyone know where my father lives?"

In the kitchen, the sewing machine roars to life, stitching its angry stitches. Sylvia whispers, "Atta girl," into my ear. I look out into the newly silent Stonehenge of women. All of them here, all of them totems in my living room only because my mother asked them to be here. I love Mom and I hate her for the book club; not either-or but both at the same time.

The women, they shrug or shake their heads or say a weak *no*. Then they fill their plates with chips and biscotti. I know it's not fair to make them uncomfortable, but why should I always be the only one?

Our discussion slowly turns toward TV shows and movies, and then what book should we read next. Peg finds the book I didn't want to buy sitting unread on the fireplace mantel. She passes it around. Everyone claims to have heard about this book that no one has heard about. They mumble agreeable sentiments about it being challenging, something new, having buzz, and they decide, without asking me and before the book makes it way around the circle back to me, to make it our next book club selection. Sylvia thumbs through it and doesn't say anything.

Mom reappears from the kitchen with everyone's coat in her arms. Polite, light-pat-on-the-back hugs are passed back and forth, even when I insist upon handshakes, and then everyone leaves. I'm left with Sylvia, no answers to my father question, a mother pouting and sewing in the kitchen, loads of dishes and cups and trays to wash, and a book in my hands that I don't want to read.

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I am up and out of the house before Mom wakes up. We haven't said anything to each other since the book club. Getting up and eating breakfast alone quickly becomes an hour on the swing set. It's cold and there's no way of knowing if Mr Bob's tune-up did any good. The swing doesn't seem any different, or more efficient.

I really don't want to do this today. It's not helping that my other head is changing by the downswing, almost too many heads to keep up with. There's been Cleopatra, Bonnie Parker, Marsha Brady, Fay Wray, Emily Brontë, Cindy Lou Who, Janis Joplin, and even that vacuous snot Joan Rivers.

My heads never change this fast, and I hate it. I really wanted nothing more than to sit out here and talk with one of the heads, have someone help me decide what to do, or what to think. I don't know why finding my father is all of a sudden so important to me. Last week and pretty much all the weeks before that week, he was never more than a fleeting thought, a forgotten dream.

The swing coupled with my changing heads is making me dizzy, so I put my legs down, scraping my sneakers on the sand, digging an even

deeper rut, and I stop swinging. Then I go and sit up against the neighbor's wooden fence with my head in my hands, trying to regain some level of equilibrium. Joan Rivers is yammering in my ear about my terrible clothes and iffy skin. The leaves I'm sitting on are cold and wet. I get up and walk.

I walk downtown to the cobblestones and the Little Red Bookstore and Joan Rivers becomes Lauren Bacall becomes Calpurnia becomes Scout becomes Boo Radley's mother, which is confusing. I stand outside with my hands cupped on the bookstore's bay window. The place is empty and I'd have the shelves to myself but I keep walking, past the Little Red Grocery and Little Red Hardware and the Little Red Candy Shoppe and the Little Red Bank, and out of the downtown area and through the town square, and Boo Radley's mother becomes Lucille Ball becomes Karen Silkwood becomes Mary Shelley becomes Susan Faludi. I walk past the Little Red Library and the Little Red Schoolhouse, which was where I dropped out during my sixth-grade year. Tommy Gallahue showing up to school with a papier-mâché second head was my last day of sixth-grade. Susan Faludi becomes Blanche DuBois becomes Alice in Wonderland. I walk past the town high school and I walk past without any regrets. Alice becomes Rosa Parks becomes Vivien Leigh. I walk through residential neighborhoods, peeking over fences and into yards randomly, looking for the man I don't remember, looking for the man I know I'll never find. Vivien Leigh becomes a starving Ethiopian girl that I don't know but have seen on commercials becomes Zelda becomes Flannery O'Connor. I don't have a watch but it must be noon as the sun is directly over my heads and I'm very hungry, so I start walking back home, taking a different route back, staying in the small neighborhoods, still looking through fences and even inside a few mailboxes for what? I'm not sure. And Flannery O'Connor becomes Oprah becomes Nancy Drew becomes Maya Angelou becomes Shirley Temple becomes Eponine becomes little orphan Annie becomes Amelia Earhart and I'm home.

My mother is on the swing. She's actually sitting on the swing that apparently is not calibrated to precisely my weight. But she's not really swinging. She's sitting, her legs folded under, her toes tickling the rut in the sand, her face in her hands, and I can't be sure, but I think she's crying. She's wearing an Irish-knit turtleneck sweater like mine, but with only one turtle neck. Amelia Earhart becomes Shirley Jackson becomes Hester Prynne. I'm hiding where Jeffrey usually hides, in the thinning shrubbery next to our neighbor's fence. Then Jeffrey runs out of his house, across the street and to my mother. No one has seen me yet. Jeffrey is talking with her. I guess, for him, it doesn't matter who is swinging. I won't hold it against him. He's only five. I wonder if he asks her the same questions he asks me. Mom laughs then scoops up Jeffrey into her lap and they swing

together. Hester Prynne becomes the witch accusing Abigail, and I'm angry-jealous, or jealous-angry, and maybe they're the same emotion, each just wearing something a little different. I walk out of the bushes and to the swing. Abigail doesn't say anything but just points with my left index finger.

Jeffrey says, "Hi, Veronica!" between giggles.

"Hi."

Mom stops the swing. She says, "Jeffrey, you can swing by yourself, as long as you promise not to go too high. Promise?" If she was crying before, there is no sign of it now.

Jeffrey puffs out his chest, "I promise."

I want to ask how Jeffrey is going to manage this with his withered arm. But he hops right on the swing, tucks the left chain of the swing under his armpit, grabs the other chain with his good arm and starts pumping. We watch him swing for a few minutes and Abigail has become someone else but I haven't bothered to look and see who it is.

Mom says, "We'll be right back, Jeffrey. I need to talk to Veronica for a bit. Keep pumping, kid." She puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me to the house. After a few paces, she says, "What?" like I've been staring at her expectantly, but I haven't. Then she says, "I need someone on that swing today. I need the juice to vacuum the floors later."

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We're in the kitchen. I sit down. Mom stands and paces. She doesn't wait for me to say anything and starts right in with a simple declarative.

"You and I came home early one afternoon and I found more than the expected amount of heads in my bedroom."

I say, "How old was I?"

"One."

My other head is Mom. Mom when she was my age. Despite her pigtailed, she manages older-Mom's fierce, intimidating look. I don't know what she's thinking, and I'm tired of trying to figure out who's thinking what.

I ask, "Who was he with?"

“Does it matter?” Mom doesn’t waver, doesn’t get all choked up or anything like that, not that I expected her to.

“I don’t know if it matters, Mom. That’s why I’m asking.”

“The woman was the middle school science teacher that Mr Bob replaced. She doesn’t live in town anymore.”

I imagine a woman who looks like Mr Bob. She wears baggy clothes that have chemical stains and Bunsen burner singe marks. She has short, straight hair, mousey brown, wears thick glasses, and no make up. Pretty in a smart way, maybe. I imagine Mom finding her in the bedroom with my father, who I can’t describe in such physical detail, no matter how hard I try to conjure him.

Young-Mom doesn’t say anything but just stares at her older self. Is this look of hers studied observation or soul-deep sadness?

“Did he leave after you caught him?”

“The very next morning.”

“Did you tell him he had to leave?”

“No.”

Young-Mom says, “Do you really need to know any more of this?” which I don’t think is a very fair question. And it’s not fair to be double-teamed by Mom like this, even though I know that I can’t always blame everything on Mom. I fight the urge to tell the Young-Mom to shut up.

I say, “That’s terrible. I’m sorry that happened, Mom. I really am.”

“Thank you.” Mom says it like she’s accepting a throwaway compliment about her shoes. Young-Mom pouts. They are both so intimidating but I stand up and stutter-walk to Mom and give her a hug. She doesn’t uncross her arms off her chest so the hug isn’t soft and comfortable. I make contact mostly with the angles of her bones and the points of her elbows and the sweater wool scratches my face, but Mom does kiss the top of my head, twice. That’s something, maybe even enough.

“Thanks again, sweetie.”

I break the one-sided hug and say, "What did he look like?"

"You."

"Can I ask where he lives?"

Young-Mom sighs and shakes her head. Her pigtails tickle my neck, feeling eerily similar to Medusa's snakes, but I don't mind them as much.

"I thought I was ready to tell you, Veronica. But I'm not."

I want to ask if she knows who my other head is. I want to ask if she knows what it means. I want to ask if she knows that most days I dream about becoming her.

She continues, "It's not you anymore. I know you can handle it now. But you'll just have to give me more time." Mom uncrosses her arms and looks around the kitchen, at the cluttered counter and the sewing machine, looking for something to do.

Young-Mom turns, whispers directly into my ear, "Are you happy now?"

I unroll the neck of the sweater and pull it up over her mouth and nose. She doesn't stop me or say anything else.

I say, "Okay, Mom," but I don't know if it is okay and I don't know if I feel guilty or satisfied or sad or angry or scared. What I'm feeling no one has bothered to name or classify or dissect, or maybe this feeling has already been outed by somebody else and I just haven't stumbled across it and that seems likely but at the same time it doesn't, and then I think about all the books in my bedroom and the giant stacks of books in my Little Red Bookstore and I wonder if *it* is there or here or anywhere else other than inside me.

Mom says, "Alright, back to work then." She claps her hands and I feel my other head change but I won't look to see who it is yet. "Could you go and take over for Jeffrey on the swing? He's making me nervous. I appreciate it, honey. And don't forget about your big tests later."

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It's windy and cold. The temperature dropping by the minute. Jeffrey

stops swinging, but stays on the seat. "Do I have to stop now?"

"Yes, my mother wants me to take over."

He doesn't argue, but he hasn't moved off the seat either. He releases the swing chain that was tucked under his armpit. "You and your Mom had a talk?"

"Yes, Jeffrey." I notice I'm standing in my Mom's pose, but I don't change it.

"Did you ask her about your Dad?"

"I did."

"Did she tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Tell you where he is."

"No, not yet."

Jeffrey nods like he understands. Maybe he does. He says, "Maybe you should ask someone else."

"Like who?"

"Me?" He says it like a question, almost like he doesn't know who *me* is.

I play along. Anything to keep me off the swing for another few minutes. "Okay, Jeffrey. Do you know where my father is?"

He nearly shouts, "Yes."

My arms wrap tighter around my chest. This isn't fun anymore. "Then where is he?"

Jeffrey scoots off the swing and points behind him. He points at the neighbor's big wooden fence. "He lives there. Right next door."

That's impossible. Isn't it? Wouldn't I have seen him by now? I think about who lives there and I can't come up with anyone. Is that right? Has he

been this close all along and I just haven't noticed, or haven't wanted to notice?

Jeffrey says, "I'm not lying, Veronica. I've seen him."

"I didn't say you were lying."

He says, "I think he's even out in the yard right now. Go and see."

I look at the fence, seven-feet high, completely wrapping around the property. "How?"

"There's a knothole in the fence behind your bushes. You know, I usually hide in your bushes."

I snort, ready to charge. "Okay. Jeffrey, go home please."

He reacts like I hit him, and tears well up.

I soften. "You can come back over later, but I need to do this by myself."

Jeffrey nods, still fighting those tears, then sprints home, this time gripping the empty arm of his sweater. I walk to the bushes, to where Jeffrey hides, the same bushes I hid in earlier. There is a knothole in the fence, the size of a quarter, plenty big to see through. I should've seen this earlier, but I guess I wasn't looking for it.

I remember my second head. The turtle neck is still rolled over her nose and mouth. I roll it down and find Anne again. Only this Anne is older, older than me, even older than the one in her diary. Her skin has sores and is sallow and tight on her face, deepening and widening her already big eyes. Her hair has thinned and I see white scalp in too many places. This Anne doesn't ask any questions. This Anne isn't chatty. This is the Anne that no one dares imagine after reading her diary. I want to help her, take care of her somehow, and I think she senses this, because she points at the knothole with my left hand and nods. Before I look into the hole, I think, selfishly, that this might be the right Anne for the question I've always wanted to ask.

There's a man in the back yard. He's wearing jeans and a moth-worn, olive-green sweater, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He's raking leaves with his back turned to me. When he stops raking, he walks over to a tire-swing tied to a thick branch of an oak tree. The branch has an axle and

generator set-up similar to my swing set, but no one is riding the tire-swing. There are rocks duct-taped to the bottom of the tire. He pushes the tire-swing a few times, to get the pendulum moving, then goes back to raking leaves. This man has two heads.

I wait and watch. He rakes and pushes, but he doesn't turn around so I can see either of his faces. His hair is brown and short on each head, and now I wish I never looked through the hole.

Anne says, "Why has he never contacted you? Why does he hide so close to home? Does he do this so he can see you when he wants? Or is he just being cruel, mocking you, mocking your mother?"

I want to stay crouched in this spot and let leaves and snow gather on me and never stop watching, but I do pull my eye away from the knot. Anne and I scan the length and height of the fence. I don't know the answer to Anne's questions and I know the likelihood is that I may never know.

I decide to ask Anne *the* question. I hope it doesn't seem callous or even cruel to her. I understand how it could be interpreted that way, but I hope she understands me and why I do what I do. I still hope.

I say, "Anne, in your last diary entry, you wrote something that ... that I need to ask you about. *This you* in particular. Do you know what I mean by *this you*?"

"Yes."

I say it. "Do you still believe that people are really good at heart?"

Anne sighs and closes her eyes and it's terrible because it makes her look dead. She holds my left hand, the fingers suddenly and dangerously skinny, over her mouth and chin. She's thinking and I know she will give me an answer. But now that I've asked, the answer isn't as important to me as it was a few days ago, or even a few seconds ago. Because no matter what she says, I'll go back to my swing-set and to feeding my house what it needs and I won't tell Mom that I know where he is and I'll take my tests tonight and try my best and help her with the dishes and then talk to her about *Mrs Dalloway* and the women in my book club and maybe even convince Mom to become an official member. Because, maybe foolishly, I still hope.

But I'll sit in the bushes and wait as long as is necessary to hear what

Anne has to say. I owe us that much.