

Chapter 1

The convent must have been her first romance, the way Christ and Mary weep, bleed, and sweat, from image to image, for the sake of purity, and the stone cloisters, where suffering equals the tight arms of the divine; because she always wanted to be a nun.

Wandering through the forest paths of *The Grotto*, Portland's sacred Catholic gardens, I imagine my father watching her intently as she became delighted with each saint and relic wedged into the rocky hills, the Oregon dew pulling the scenes into her bones where the images lodged as love, and marriage.

When they moved to Arizona, walks in the desert replaced afternoon mass, he said, and she remembered the smells from her childhood in the dead center of Nevada, the hot sunny glare of westerns, the pulsing of acoustic ballads and uncles telling stories of World War II, clinking their ice cubes for refills of iced tea; the desert, another romance for her; for me, the desert smells like clammy memories of her death rolling upward in my consciousness.

Her ghost chills me more than my first east coast winter, the fever of her hotter than the dry heat she died in. I move through New York City, fogged with life experiences I don't remember; tidbits arise like flecks of broken mirror.

I was almost three when she died. I run through the events of her life and death I have collected, telling stories about anything I can find on the surface of the dark truth lurking like a crater in me. New York has become a map of these memories. Each corner I turn holds the promise of new vision, anywhere from the sterile industry of Flatiron-meets-Chelsea-meets-Fashion, to the festive lights and accents of Little Italy, to the rank smells of Chinatown; all the way to the thuds, beats, and hisses of Harlem.

I was almost three and she was twenty-seven. My father says a car accident but I know different. The flat Wickenburg expanse, the hot dusty terrain where she breathed her last, precisely before I came into the age of conscious memory, comes up more since I drove the southern route across the country to see what I could stir up. My father won't say more than that she loved the desert, and that on their first date he threw a rock up on a bridge, and he held his hands over her head when they heard it clank clank clank, and when it fell, it grazed his head instead, and she laughed.

We're like tall, gangly twins with delicate chins, flat foreheads, high cheekbones, slightly hooked noses and big eyes. She was skinny like me and the only noticeable differences are big differences; her hair was strawberry blond, mine is brown; her eyes were blue, mine are hazel; and most markedly, in pictures, at least, and in notes, she was happy. Whatever I do to imitate the playful look on her face, especially in pictures where she is holding me, glancing at me and laughing - her mouth was always ready for a laugh - I cannot; in fact, once when I tried, so determined, I burst into tears.

When she was seven, she wouldn't take off her white communion dress. My grandparents have recalled the story countless times, the way she was stubborn that day, and she got in trouble for it. Otherwise, she was a pleaser. I imagine it was the bridal romance, and maybe that's what made her so happy; she also liked sagebrush, and the smell of desert weeds that would send my grandmother into an allergic fit when she brought them in the house, she liked Willie Nelson and her red Mustang with the white hardtop. I walk down Grand, in Lower Manhattan; stupidly, not looking for anything, just seeing what I already know of her, which is very little, but is in my blood.

Christa Schneider