

*In the Never-Never**I Am Not the Girl*

I am not the girl from the corner down the block where my mother found my name. Something pretty plucked from the sparkling, quartz gravel of the street. *Josette. Elle a sauvé le nom.* Hidden in the arc of a curled palm, a polished umber acorn in the damp flannel of her winter pocket. *Josette.* A secret lyric salvaged for September and a Thursday child. She liked the sound. The shape. The image of the corner girl.

I understood her to be a watercolorist. The girl. *Josette. Un petit artiste.* I picture her gathering buckeyes in a scarlet beret, her bouclé coat swinging at the knee. Round-faced, dark-eyed. Dimpled. “I’ve found a pretty!” My mother’s pronouncement upon her discovery of anything she admires. “*Jolie fille! Quel joli nom!*”

She is an illustrator, *ma mère.* Like the French Impressionists, interested in the illusion of image. From the metamorphosis of Realism the Impressionists emerged, delicately painting side-by-side tiny *cédilles* of pure color. Viewed at a respectable distance, the diacritical marks blend into landscapes, rendering an illusion of the natural world. Lambent images of what is real.

I am not *Josette, le petit artiste.* I cannot draw a straight line from one end of the block to the next. From here to there. I am not *Jacquelynn,* my sister who, along with me, was born during my mother’s French phase. Bookended between the first three and final two in her gallery of children. In a still life we stand seven, end to end, like too many apostrophes cupped within an end quote. Above us the spirit of an infant brother lingers. An illusory question left unanswered, an unexplained stoppage of breath. His ghost an invisible umlaut marking a shift in familial assimilation.

I, too, am a ghost. *Josette,* a secret lover in afternoon’s *Dark Shadows.* When breathing stops. When another brother secretly hovers over me, cups the tender breast before its raw, umber budding. Another shift in familial assimilation. *Mon autre frère.*

At our discovery can she proclaim, “*J’ai trouvé une jolie!*”? *Non.* No. She lifts her artist’s brush instead, combines her palette with

his strokes, stands respectably apart. Rendering an illusion of our world. Lambent images of what is real. Names the likeness, *Josette: Fille du Coin*, and at the community exhibition insists, “*Si jolie!*”

At home she secrets the portrait under a canvas cloak. The image vanishes like an apparition. *Un mirage*. And I am not the girl. *Je ne suis pas. Josette*.

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### *Waking in the Never-Never*

We are going away. Florida. The gun-shaped state from our plastic map puzzle. My mother shakes us awake just enough to tumble the stumbling youngest of us through the back gate of the car where she has spread navy sleeping bags, unzipped and opened wide for us to sleep. Soft golden flannel patterned in green-headed mallards and downy brown cattails cocoons our bodies in a whiff of smoky campfire. We cuddle into cool pillows, quickly falling into dreams, the muffled *bump!* of car doors closing against the wintry night.

My makeshift bed slides across the cargo floor when the car careens hard against a curve. I raise my head, searching for home. Jackie and the boys sleep in dark mounds beside me. The three oldest slump ahead in the center, Johnny and Jennie against the windows, Jamie cramped over the hated middle hump. Overhead, the night rolls by with rhythmic interruptions of fluorescent street lights that brighten quickly, then dim and fade into darkness. Low murmurs rise and fall with the news report and return me to dreams.

We are going away. Vacation in winter. The wheels of the blue station wagon whir, spinning us in a centrifuge, whirling us south to Never-Never Land. We dream and wake, dream and wake. Dream. The silvery hubs spin forward, then backward, rotating dizzily inside themselves. Spinning and wheeling into our dreams again, again, again, again, again.

We wake.

Four of us in twisted flannel bags on flat seat backs folded into the floor. Jeff leans forward a little, then slowly drools a long line of spit over Jay’s languid face. He lets it dangle, foamy and wet, just above Jay’s mouth, before quickly sucking it back again. We giggle.

My mother turns around and says, “Be quiet back there. Dad will stop the car.” I wonder if her father ever stopped. She dozes. Does she dream of Never-Never Land? We drive all night and into day. The clock on the dash has made a full circle. Minutes. Hours. Days. Decades.

In Australia, the remote country of the Northern Territory is called The Never-Never, and locals think of the beautiful harsh land with nostalgia. It reminds them of the long-ago wanderings of the old outback. But European emigrants say it is the place you never, never want to go. The white hot heat of the red desert will dry you up like a baked turtle, and only your shell will remain.

A jerk yanks me through the open hatch. Grabbing wrists, my father whips us from the car and into the dewy roadside grass. Orange flames snap at a wheel in the early light. Dawn is setting our lives on fire. Black smoke rolls, burns my nose and eyes with rubber. We stand, gaping, and watch my father smother flames. My mother tightens the sleeping bags around our shoulders.

A driver pulls up and jogs over the sandy shoulder. He’s the one who saw the flames sparking, pulled close and brayed his horn, until my father spotted the flames licking at the back left wheel. We’re lucky to be alive, he says.

We spend the day at a service station awaiting repairs. We sit at a concrete table, inhaling the ocean, studying palm trees and debating how best to reach a coconut in the sky.

Florida. Orange trees roll by our window, row, after row, after row. I watch my brother’s eyes as they track the pattern of orange navels dotted on emerald scrubby trees. We are almost to Never-Never Land. Almost to the never-never. We are going away, only to come back.

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### *Shoes*

He bends to tie his shoe, the grey lace smoothly slipping through his fingers with a practiced ease I can never accomplish. They say Converse, once white and new and smelling of rubber and canvas, but now a dull grey that no amount of washing will remove.

It's done. Simple as that. He scootches up his jeans and slips out of the bathroom. The linoleum is still cold under my thigh, as if my ability to produce heat were forced out of me with his collapse against my naked chest.

I pull on my strappy shirt, pink and flowered and wrinkled. I can't get my underwear right, both legs tangle in the same hole, tripping their way out. I need to hurry. I need to get out. Get out. Before my mother comes home.

My stomach hurts from holding my breath. If she catches me, I will be beaten. Hurry. Fumble with the door. I need to get out. Bare feet. No shoes to tie. I am lucky.

One day she comes home early. I crumple myself into the bathroom cupboard, the bottom one where we store the sweeper. I crouch as small as I can, hugging my bare knees, one foot in front of the other, balancing on the cold Eureka canister. Head and shoulders bent under the low ceiling, I try not to breathe. The dark smells of plywood and sawdust, my fingertips of damp and private skin.

I hear paper bags crackling in the kitchen, then her footfall approaching down the carpeted hall. Her knock echoes through the hollow door, against the wall, around the tub. Into my hiding place.

"I don't know where she is," he says. His pants are already on, and I can hear him buckling. He is brave.

"I got her some coloring books," she says through the door. What did she get him? I wonder. A Jim Croce record? Some velvet platform shoes with silver stars?

"Okay. I don't know where she is," he says into the fluorescent air.

She waits, wondering. If I had two sets of eyelids I would close them both to seal out discovery.

Her shoes move down the hall toward my room. Stop. I can hear her looking.

The footfall starts up again, grows louder, stops outside the door.

"Are you sure you haven't seen her?"

"No." His voice is cool and closer now. A drawer rolls to its stops. I hear a fumbling. A sliding comb? He must be looking in the mirror. Reaffirming his innocence against her hesitation.

I am breathless.

Waiting.

Her step finally moves away again, toward the kitchen. The bags crumple, cupboards open and close, stocked to fill our need. People talk.

“Stay in there,” he hisses against my door.

Through a crack, the yellow bathroom light goes black. The door whooshes open. He goes out.

I listen to the empty room, the voices down the hall.

Wait.

No one’s coming.

I push the door and quickly squeeze into the shadowed room. Silently I turn the knob, hush the door closed, slowly release the latch until it catches. My pinched fingers muffle the light switch snap. Squinting against the brightness, I rush into my clothes, the shoes I cannot tie. Flush the toilet. Eyes, teeth, jaw, press tight. Nostrils flare, check the air’s pulse. Breathe.

Out and down the hall, into the commotion of the world.

“Where have you been?” she asks.

“In my room,” I say. Surely the lie is open flat across my face.

“Oh,” she says, looking at me, studying. “I got you a coloring book,” and hands me a thick, pink tablet of zoo animals outlined in black. I thumb through the pages. Pictures I will put away in a dark drawer and never take out. Colorless. Blank. Empty.

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### *Buena Vista*

Like me, Minnie Mouse sits at the back of a dark cupboard. Permanent veneers on pearl white mugs for us both, sealed in the shadows. Souvenirs of memories stashed in cupboards, under drawers. Where finely filtered sawdust falls and dried up dusty spiders crawl. A year ago we might have been a dream. Unknown. Red dress, white dots and rumba tights. Now a dream awaking, surrounded by orange groves. Where reels of black and white flicker someone else’s vision of who we are. Animated by artists’ hands. We live in a castle in the land of Buena Vista. The good and pretty view. Innocent and perfect. How my mother has painted me. *This is you*, she says. *This is you*.

But in that other world of disbelief and through a tunnel dark,

I see dreamy murals. Madras Bermudas in windowpanes, translucent pool blue and butter-yellow plaid cut sharply at the leg. Brillo thighs pressed against my sleeveless arms. Hard knees. A linen shirt leaning in and damp, curdled breath. Sweaty human. Caught between familiar strangers and a Cinderella mural. *This is you.*

In this never-never land, a magical mosaic. Broken glass. Shattered crimson. Pieces of a princess, a girl I might have been. *Just pretend*, my brother says. Something lost, beautiful and fragile. *The buena vista. This is you.*

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