

ROSANNA STAFFA

Pink Cadillac

She was a child, and soon a little girl. Women said so. *That's right*, her mother smiled in response, red lips parted like a wound. The child's hair resembled honey, men said. When the wind drifted through it she felt like the models in the magazines: head turned staring hard, no smiling. She figured she would be that skinny one day. Only with shorter legs, just like her mother. While she washed her face at the sink she wondered when a woman would appear in the mirror. Maybe it would happen fast, like a rash, or a pregnancy. She had overheard women laughing about that, shushing each other.

On Sundays her mother spent the day at the Mall with her girlfriends. It was her day. They all didn't have a dime to spare, but they had time. They took off early in a car and returned late in the evening, loud like drunks. They laughed describing how they had tried on this, that. Everything. They couldn't buy a thing and they didn't give a rat's ass, they said. Her father stood in the doorway, a slender shadow with a cigarette, a can of beer. Hey handsome, the women hollered out the car windows, taking off. Her mother's mood grew quiet once she was back in the house; she sat in the armchair covered in frayed chiffon not listening to a thing anybody said.



Her father was rushing off on a Sunday: a mess to fix at work. He had been napping on the bedspread in his boxer shorts but was already dressed, had his shoes and cap on.

Jesus Christ it's Sunday, her mother said, what am I supposed to do with the child. Her mother was already standing by the door in her flowing skirt, high heels the child wanted to have one day. Strong perfume, the one that made grown men turn. The one the child tried on in secret, eyes closed shut.

Take her with you, he said. This time take her, she's almost eight. It'll be okay.

It looked like the wind was picking up outside. The sky went grey. Make a wish, her mother said to herself with a cryptic smile. Make a wish and see what you get.

After her father rushed off, leaving them alone with the clock ticking and

a light rain starting, her mother called her over and brushed her hair, fast and hard. You are a big girl now, she said. You come with me. She described what they would do but it was confusing, pretty much like a dream remembered in the morning. You can try things on, her mother said. Anything, it's free.

She sat close to her mother in the back seat of the car. There was a smell of old coffee and flowery perfumes. Her mother looked shy, hands clasped in her lap, emitting little hums at what her friends said. The one driving had a blunt haircut, thick glasses. I'm no good with kids, she said with a chuckle. My whole shitty life alone. The friend in the front seat went *shst*.

She caught the stories they exchanged in snatches, the way it is in strong gusts of wind, and understood nothing. Words seemed to cut: the women whimpered, *uh, uh, oh*. The people they spoke of were a strange breed: they did mysterious things, like angels. One ate nothing, one fled through a window one night, one kissed a sleeping woman. There were hints of babies who could not hold their heads up, husbands who vanished in the back of bars.



They headed straight to the upscale department store with the best-groomed staff. In the store her mother clutched her hand, racing through the aisles, giddy like a girl caught in a downpour. The friend who was quiet in the car picked out a red dress, joked of men liking red the most, hooker red. They all cracked up. The child did too. Her mother held high a sparkling top, it fluttered in the lights like a fish. For the usual night club tonight, she said, my wild Sunday. They roared with her. The take-out pizza club. *Uh-uh*. The pizza is cold, but the men are hot hot hot. *Uh-uuh*. Her mother mimicked a man combing his hair with one hand while pulling up his pants hanging loose. The child recognized her father. The women cracked up. Her mother was the loudest. Stop it, the child stomped. They all stared. She's just a child, her mother said. No, I'm not, she said. Words formed slowly in her head, but they came fast now. I'm not a child, she said. She could dress by herself. She knew the alphabet. You are all mean, you are ugly, she said. Her father spoils her, her mother said. The child was tearing, her face in her palms. The friend who drove went to get her an ice-cream and the child dipped her tongue in the cone, not saying thank you. She sat on a bench outside the fitting rooms, turning her back to their fuss. She talked to herself. Just herself.

In the ride back, the car was dark. A warm smell of sweat rose from the bodies. It made her squirm. The women hummed, *Well, honey it ain't your money/ 'Cause I got plenty of that/ I love you for your pink Cadillac/ Crushed*

velvet seats. . . . She dozed off. Her mother carried her inside the house. The TV was crackling with canned laughter. She smelled pizza, and through half closed eyes saw her father come from the kitchen. There was a crudeness to his haircut. His usual shuffle, shoulders bent, made him look ape like, and much older than he was. He was combing his hair with one hand, and held his pants up with the other. They were speckled with dirt, and too big. He came close, and his fingers touched the child's hair gently. She turned her head away and shut her eyes.

Rosanna Staffa is a writer and playwright born and raised in Italy, currently living in Minneapolis. She holds an MFA in Fiction from Spalding University. Her recent writing has appeared in *American Fiction 2015* and *Story*. Her plays have been staged in Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Minneapolis.