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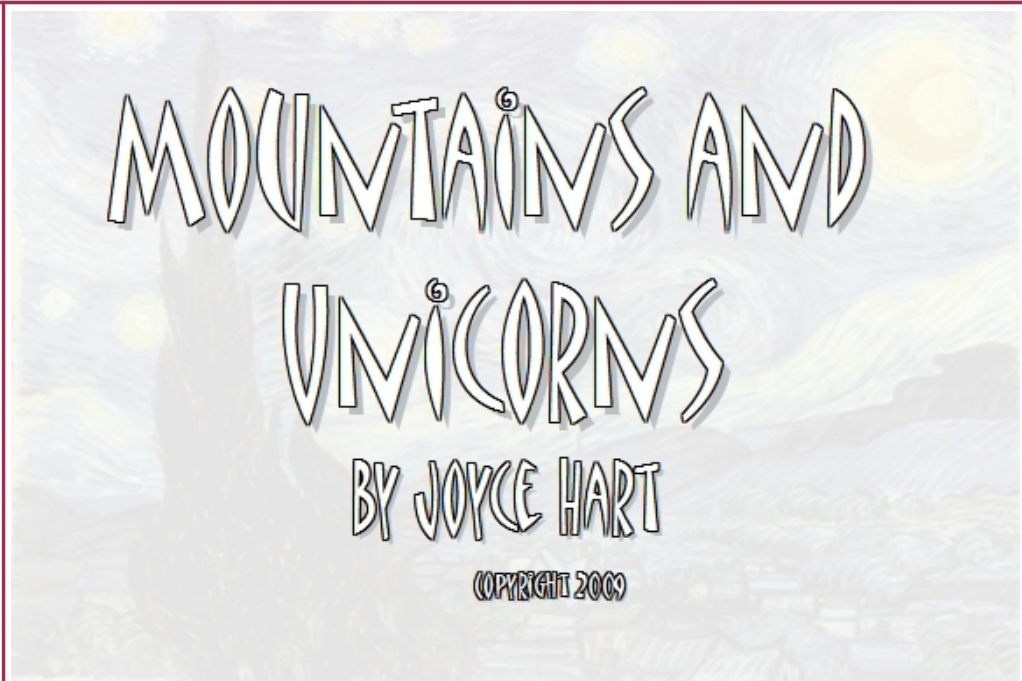
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Just as my daughter hit puberty, I ran smack into menopause and wondered which one of us would survive. I also wondered, in my lighter moments, if her father died young so as to avoid this inevitable collision.

It was seven in the morning and already hot in Tampa when Keisha slumped into the passenger seat of our small Nissan and slammed the door. I'd been running the engine so the air-conditioner would make the air cool enough for us to breathe. The late October heat was as tiresome as the last mile of a marathon. We'd moved to Florida that summer so I could get my master's degree and Keisha could get to know the white side of her family. I also thought my sisters might help soften the hormonal battle that was stirring between Keisha and me. That particular day, as I sat in the car waiting, all the decisions I'd made to get us to this point seemed wrong.

"Ready?" I faked a light tone that turned out to be a wasted effort.

Keisha jerked her head toward me so I could see her roll her eyes, a trick her father had taught her when she was two. It was cute then.

I put the car in reverse and said: "This will be fun," and patted Keisha's knee. She looked out the side window. I'd thought she'd like this trip; but then I'd thought a lot of silly things like husbands don't die in their thirties and politicians don't lie.

We were heading for Tallulah Gorge in Georgia, just far enough north to cool off. The state park was a popular site for autumn color. I was hoping the long drive and change of scenery would put us both in a more meditative mood. Keisha had been in school for two months and hated it. My classes weren't going much better. It was social for Keisha. Her bronze skin and dark, curly hair led the Hispanic kids to think she was Puerto Rican. But when she didn't speak Spanish, telling them she didn't know how, they thought she was trying to deny her heritage, so they bullied her. Then when she didn't speak

American black slang, the African-American kids thought she was putting on airs. She talked too white. At first, the white kids thought she was cool—as a token. But that tokenism was easy to spot and quickly worn thin on both sides.

As for my school experience, I found the teachers insecure and therefore both overbearing and boring. The art program had been obviously created without much thought and was on the verge of collapse by the time I enrolled. I'd chosen the school because my mother and five sisters lived in Tampa. After Ron died, Keisha and I had moved from DC to the Pacific Northwest, and the thought of Florida's sunshine and short winters sounded like a pleasant change, at least from the distance of three thousand miles, a whole lot of rain, and several rough winters in a row.

I let Keisha choose the radio stations and tapes during our otherwise silent five-hour drive up the interstate. As we neared the Georgia border, I pulled off at a sign for one of those country inns that promises all-day big breakfasts. It was a Saturday and the parking lot was crowded. We were the eighth party on the waiting list, but there was a large gift shop in the lobby that helped to keep our hunger at bay. I gave Keisha a twenty, and she went looking for a tee-shirt. It was nice to put a little space between us.

I wandered to the other side of the shop and found a set of shelves that housed a curiously well done collection of figurines. They were meticulously detailed creatures from myths. Keisha still loved fairytales, the hard kind, like the Brothers Grimm. But she also loved stories of unicorns, mostly because of Ron's brother. Clyde was a jazz pianist and traveled a lot. We seldom saw him, even when Ron was alive. But after Ron died, Clyde took to calling us once in a while and then started sending Keisha unicorns. She had plastic ones she used to play with in the bathtub; stuffed ones she slept with still. She wore a small silver one that hung on a delicate chain. And almost every night before she went to sleep, I would hear the tiny, bell-like tones of the white ceramic unicorn that held a music box inside its base. Clyde had sent that one from Germany last year for Keisha's twelfth birthday.

So of course, I was drawn to the black unicorn made out of a translucent glass that sat at the back of one of the shelves. Its front legs pawed the air, rearing up as if it were anxious to set out on some magical journey. I looked around for Keisha then took the unicorn to one of the clerks who wrapped it in plastic bubbles and put it in a box. Keisha never asked what I'd bought. On that day she wasn't particularly interested in talking to or looking at me.

Two hours later, we were in the Georgia mountains, and I turned off the air conditioner and rolled down my window as the car climbed a narrow road that smelled of dry leaves. I kept pointing out big rocks to Keisha as if I were discovering gold. "Look. Rocks! I can't believe how much I've missed them." Before coming to Tampa, Keisha and I had lived in the Oregon foothills of the Cascade Range. Our house sat on the side of a small butte that we often climbed. The rocky slope was a measure of our fitness. Keisha, who was on her school's track team, was able to run it. I climbed way more slowly. But once I reached the top, I loved to look down at the small town of Eugene and imagine seeing our house. I would pretend to shrink it down to a proportional size for the distance and then put a tiny proxy of myself inside of it. If I were that small, I'd console myself, my problems would consequently be all but

invisible.

Tampa had no rocks. No hills. No fall color. In contrast, the Georgia Appalachians were filled with all the landscape I'd been missing. As we continued up the winding road, I saw a makeshift stand that had bushels of apples stacked around it and a sign that advertised fresh cider. I pulled over and bought a gallon of the juice and a bag of the crisp fruit. When I came back to the car, Keisha didn't respond except to re-adjust her position, sitting a little straighter, leaning a little more forward.

"Help me look for the turnoff," I said as the car moved back onto the road. I'd marked the distance from Clarksville on the odometer, and when we'd gone fifteen miles, I sensed we'd gone too far. So I pulled into a small food market that appeared around a corner. A German shepherd lay across the welcome mat at the door. It sat up when we got out of the car.

"Oh, don't worry about him." An older woman had swung open the screen door. She had purely white hair that hung over her shoulder in a long, thick braid. "He's harmless," she said. "Sort of like my husband." She turned to a man sitting behind the counter and laughed, then rubbed the dog's head.

Keisha walked straight to the refrigerated front counter that held six containers of differently flavored ice cream. "They've got ice cream cones," she said. We both got one.

"We're not used to all this heat," the woman said. "You must have brought it with you from Florida." I stared at her, trying to understand how she knew where we were from. She pointed outside. "License plate," she said. "We travel a lot. It's an old habit to check out where people are from. We've done Florida quite a bit. Where do you live?"

"How could you leave this?" I pointed to the big picture window at the end of the counter. You could see a single mountain peak in the distance whose base was visible, spread out across the deep valley floor. I figured that must be the gorge. I'd read that there was a spectacular waterfall nearby.

"Sometimes you get tired of looking at the same old thing no matter how beautiful it is." The woman glanced at her husband again. "We go away and when we come back, we appreciate it more."

I nodded my head and smiled in agreement, then turned toward the door when I remembered why we'd come in. "Do you know where the turnoff for the Tallulah Gorge Campground is?"

"There's a small sign," the woman said. "No more than a quarter mile down the road." Then she'd added as she looked around to her husband: "But I thought the park was closed for the season."

"This is the last weekend," her husband said. "You'll probably have the whole campground to yourself."

At first, having our own private forest seemed a pleasant thought after living in Tampa's congestion of work, school, and family. But when we pulled into the park, the man's words sounded more like a warning. The vacant setting inspired images from one of those gruesome teenage movies whose plot is based on screams and blood. There really was no one else there. No

campers. No hikers. No daytime tourists. The empty campsites made me feel vulnerable. Keisha and I had done a lot of camping in the past, but we'd done it in a VW camper. Locked doors. Metal encasing. I'd sold the camper before we left Oregon, and now all we had was a flimsy tent.

Why wasn't there anyone else there to enjoy the autumn colors? I drove around the marked-off campsites again to make sure I hadn't missed a posted sign: DANGER. BEWARE OF RABID BEARS. Or CAMP AT YOUR OWN RISK. POISONED WATER.

"This one. This one," Keisha yelled, pointing to a site that dipped a little closer to the water than the rest of them. It sat right on the beach and not far from a short pier that reached out like a finger into the lake. It was perfect. Maybe other campers would come before nightfall, and we'd be the lucky ones with the best site. After I stopped the car, I also noticed a squatty, slightly rusted trailer on the other side of the pier. The trailer was no more than a one-bed-and-kitchen-table size. On a stake by the pier, there was a sign that read: Ranger Station. I let out a sigh. But by the time I inhaled, I was tense again. Which was worse? Sleeping in the woods by yourself or with some stranger living in a cramped trailer—possibly toting a gun.

"Maybe we should just eat an early dinner here," I said. "Then drive back to that little town and sleep in a motel."

Keisha looked at me, her eyebrows crunched down toward her nose. "No," she said and stepped out of the car. "We've come so far." She looked up at the sky. "I want to sleep under the stars."

I pulled on the emergency brake and got out. I knew that the sun would set early because the mountains would cut off the light well before the sun came near the lowland horizon. We had to get the tent up, the bedding unloaded and spread, the flashlights and lantern positioned, wood for a fire gathered, and the food ready to cook before we could relax. We had maybe two hours left of strong light.

I went to the car trunk and started pulling out the gear. When I looked up, Keisha was walking down to the water. "At least no alligators," I called out. Then added: "I'll need your help." She didn't look back.

Keisha had started her period the day before we left. It wasn't her first. But we were in the early stages of her pubescent journey and were both still getting used to her mood swings, especially her need for silence. I wasn't yet comfortable with her not wanting to talk. I'd always enjoyed hearing her thoughts. For ten years it had been just me and her. We'd been skin tight, and I missed her. In the past few months, all she seemed to want was to get away from me. My periods were running twice a month, which didn't make me a model of compromise. The chaos of hormones inside me made me crave order in the outside world. I'd grown used to directing Keisha's life and expecting her to follow my prescribed course. Not rigidly, of course, but at least approximately. But recently, with our PMS-ing and menstrual withdrawals coming at us at least three weeks out of each month, we were like rocket-propelled magnets that had turned their negative ions toward one another then repelled themselves in opposite directions into separate and distant black holes.

When Keisha came back, we struggled with the tent. It belonged to one of

my sisters and didn't come with any instructions. I'd meant to practice at home but never got around to it. Of course, Keisha and I had different opinions about how all the metal poles should go together and where to put them once we sorted them out. But in the end, the floor was spread out on the ground and the zipper that opened the front flap was pointing up like it should, though not quite as straight as a pine tree. As soon as we got the tent together and the bedding and cooking stuff in place, I was ready to take a nap. But just as I was about to pull out the freezer chest of food from the backseat of the car, Keisha said: "I want to take a walk."

My feet felt tight in my shoes and my spine was pinched somewhere near my pelvis. I let go of the food chest and bent over to stretch my back and to readjust my shoe strings. "Good idea," I said and pushed my exhaustion into a side pocket. So maybe menopause had only slightly diminished by obsession to be a chronic compromiser. "Where should we go?"

"Alone," Keisha said.

When I straightened up, I saw Keisha had walked away. I just stood there and watched the distance between us increase.

"Wait." I took a few hesitant steps toward her. "Where are you going?"

She swirled her arm above her head. "Around the lake."

"Wait," I repeated, though my shouts were like misaimed lassos, looping hopefully in the air but falling way short of their target. I walked quickly to the edge of the water and tried to see the full perimeter of the shoreline. It was not really a lake. It looked more like a large pond. But I couldn't see the edges of its eastern edge. And when I looked up, neither could I see the sun. "It's going to get dark soon and we should eat while we have some light." Keisha kept walking. "Why don't we do this tomorrow?"

By then Keisha had rounded the small curve of the shore and was on the opposite side of the lake, heading up the bank. I knew she'd heard me, but she didn't respond. Instead, she broke into a jog up the hill and disappeared into the forest.

"Keisha," I yelled out as I started to run around the bend and looked up among the trees. I felt a deep cramp, hard like early labor pains, so I stopped running and braced my hands across my lower back. I could chase after her, but what good would that do? She was too big to be pulled back by the hand. She was too stubborn to listen to reason. I could insist on following her. I could hide behind her and secretly follow her trail. But I had only a vague idea of where she had disappeared.

My stomach growled and closed in on itself like a clenched fist. I hated these feelings, desperate and out of control. The last time I'd felt like this was when I'd gone to pick Keisha up from school one day. We only lived a little more than a mile away. But Keisha hated riding the bus. So I thought I'd surprise her. I watched all the kids come out the school's front doors but never saw her. When the buses took off, I walked into the school and asked someone in the office to call for her over the PA system. Still no Keisha. I rushed home. No Keisha there, so I went back to the school, driving slowly and looking down each cross street. I was ready to call the police. No Keisha.

This was more than a mother's panic. It was the residue from Ron's death. Ever since then, I felt the gods were out to strip me of everything I loved. I lived on the rim of a bottomless pit, waiting for the next blow that would knock me over the edge.

Right after I got home the second time that day Keisha walked in and smiled. She and the boy who lived across the street had taken a short cut home through the neighbors' yards. "He wants to go to the pool. Can I?" She had no clue of the hell I was swimming in. When she left, I sat on the couch, cross-legged, and tried in vain to release all my imagined fears that had clamped down on my chest like that enormous shark in *Jaws*.

I walked back around the curve of the lake and went straight to the ranger's trailer. I could see the outline of a lamp through the window, but no sign of life within. I found a padlock on the front door. I sucked in my top lip and bit down on it as I looked across the water. Keisha was stretching the umbilical cord way too far. Who was this child-monster? Where had she come from? What happened to the purring kitten I used to cuddle up with to keep us both warm?

Water lapped against the floating pier, which reached out about twenty feet into the lake. I strode out to the end of it and stared into the woods on the other side. What was Keisha wearing? Jeans, sneakers, a tee-shirt with Bob Marley on the front. Or was it Bob Dylan? I closed my eyes. I couldn't remember. I knew it was white though, and when I opened my eyes, I tried to catch a glimpse of something white moving among the trees. Nothing caught my attention, except for some falling leaves.

She's nuts, I thought as I walked the length of the dock and turned around and walked back. I did this about ten times, listening to the creaks in the boards under my feet. There's no one here. There's no one here. There is no one here. What if I needed someone? There's no one to turn to. But what if there is someone here, someone hiding in the woods. What if there's not, and Keisha gets lost. What a stupid, arrogant child. I looked down at my feet, counted my steps. I could feel my pulse pounding at my temples. But then, it's her life, I told myself, trying to release my grip on her. It's her decision. Her responsibility.

But she's mine too! She's a part of me.

I heard an eagle's cry and looked up and saw the bird's wide wing span, circling above my head. *Is that you, Ronald? Are you looking out for her now? I can't see her and have no fucking idea about what in hell I'm supposed to do? And why the fuck did you have to leave?*

Although I never talked to him like that when he was alive, I'd learned that it felt good to do so after he died. Ron died when Keisha was three. She hardly remembered him any more except for the photographs and the stories I'd told her over the years.

I need you, you bastard. She needs you.

I turned and walked the length of the dock again, then came back and stood at the far edge and rocked from one foot to the other, looking off into the

distance of the curving shoreline wandering how far she'd gone. Was she sitting in the woods watching me? Hell no. She wouldn't waste her time. Then I looked down at the water and wondered how cold it was. I didn't know why that thought crossed my mind. I had no intention of jumping in.

I stared at the reflection of the trees on the lake's surface. But then my vision suddenly changed. I was surprised at how clear the water was. I could see down to the muddy bottom. There were small fish biting at some vegetation growing on the submerged rocks. Something hidden in the mud moved. A crab or turtle, or bottom feeder fish. I didn't know. I bent over so I could see better and watched a mound of mud rise then fall. The longer I stared, the more I saw. There was some kind of worm oozing in and out of the mud and at least five different shapes of fish. I finally lay down on my stomach and hung my head over the edge. The warm wood felt good on my belly. I saw tiny fish and wondered if their mother worried about them? There were so many creatures that could gobble them up. I closed my eyes and concentrated on Keisha, remembering in quickly passing mental pictures various stages of our relationship.

She'd been born a month early and had continued being in a hurry to experience her life. She'd come to me in a dream two months before I became pregnant. It was one of those double dreams where you think you've awakened only to find, a few minutes later, that you're still inside a dreamscape. I thought I was awake when I heard footsteps of a child walking down the hall. Then there was the sound of running water, and next the toilet flushed. I opened my eyes and saw her standing at the side of my bed. She was about three years old and had a crop of dark curls hanging down to her shoulders.

"Ron." I had turned to wake her father. But when I looked back, she was gone. And I woke up for real and wondered about the vision. Was a baby finally coming?

Ron and I had tried for three years to get pregnant. Ron's doctor had said Ron's sperm count was all but nonexistent. Our chances of having a baby were all but nonexistent. This didn't stop us. We made intense love on a regular and frequent basis. I even visited an old church one day when we went to Annapolis for lunch. Ron laughed when I sprinkled holy water on my belly but wouldn't let me sprinkle any on his pants. "The lizard's no longer Catholic," he told me. Truth was he just didn't want to get his pants wet.

When the moon was full, I talked to it while I sat on a rock down on the beach behind our cabin. I begged for lunar intervention. I knew the moon god could impregnate me if he wanted to. I thought I just had to figure out what he wanted in return. I never did. At least not consciously. But a couple of months after Ron and I moved back to Prince George's county to be closer to Ron's school, the home pregnancy test finally read positive. I couldn't believe it. So I went out and bought another one. Positive again.

I drove to the high school and ran into the gym. When I saw Ron, I stopped, smiled, and then nodded. He was leaning against a wall and had been talking to Jack Decker, a fellow teacher. At first Ron just stared back at me. Then he looked away. To a stranger, it would have seemed that he was taking a tally of everyone present. But I knew he was straining to recall our conversation that morning before he went to work. When he did remember, his broad smile mirrored mine. My smile grew, then suddenly shrunk when

Ron slowly slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. Jack Decker panicked, bent over Ron, then squatted down next to him. I knew what Decker was thinking. It was the same thought I was having. Was Ron having another heart attack? Ron even grabbed at his chest with his right hand. A murmur spread across the basketball court and everyone in the gym froze. When Ron raised his left arm as if in surrender, I caught my breath and walked over and kissed him on the top of his head. Then I left him to explain the news.

The eagle called out again and woke me out of the past. The sky was considerably darker. I had to get a fire going. When I stood up, my legs felt weak, or it might just have been the sway of the pier. I looked as far around the lake as I could. Still no sign of Keisha. I thumped the flashlight against my thigh three times and swallowed against the tightness in my throat. I was angry and frightened in equal measure. I should have followed her. .

I took a deep breath and resigned myself to my decision. The musty smell of damp ground and dry leaves reminded me of how much I loved the woods. As a kid, I used the woods as a shelter, a refuge from my five noisy sisters and bickering parents. I felt more at home in the forest than I did in a house. Maybe a walk in the woods by herself would be good for Keisha. Maybe it's all right just to let her go; to let my fears go too. Give Keisha time and space to find her own peace. The lake wasn't that big. All she had to do was keep an eye on it and the shoreline would lead her back to me. Maybe I was over-reacting.

I refocused my thoughts on preparing our campsite and gathered dry kindling and a couple of sticks we could use for the hotdogs as I walked back to the tent. There were several small logs left at the neighboring sites. I placed them in a pile next to the ring of large stones and filled the bucket I'd brought from home with water. It took just a few minutes to get a fire going. Then I opened the can of beans, poured them into a small pot, and placed it on the rusty grill. My appetite had faded, but I hoped Keisha would be hungry. The word *hope* struck me. That's what was missing. Hope was so much better than fear. But *knowing* was even better. Knowing Keisha would soon be sitting next to the fire, famished. How badly I wanted to know; wanted to see her smiling face.

Damn her hide.

When I reached into the backseat of the car for some extra blankets, I saw the box and carried it over to the picnic table. I wanted to see the unicorn again before I gave it to her. I untied the silver, elastic cord and pulled the ball of plastic bubbles out and unwrapped it. The glass figurine stood about six inches tall in the palm of my hand. I turned toward the fire and raised my hand to catch the glow in the glass. With my arm extended and my thoughts absorbed in the glittering crystal in my hand, my shoulders were pushed forward, and I heard: "Boo!"

Both my heart and the glass unicorn jumped. My heart remained safely inside my chest, but the unicorn flew up then fell to the ground like Icarus. The beautiful black unicorn splintered off a rock and showered the ground

with tiny crystal shards.

"What was that?" Keisha asked. She bent over the rock. I could see tiny diamonds of firelight reflected off the unicorn's remains.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"What is this?" She knelt down and ran her fingers gently over the pieces of glass.

"What was it, is more likely. You scared me to death."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I just thought it would be funny to sneak up on you."

"I don't mean that. I mean your being gone so long."

"Oh, Mom. It was just a few minutes."

"A unicorn," I said.

Keisha looked at me for a few seconds then grabbed the flashlight and shined it toward the rock. She got down on her knees and sorted through the broken pieces.

"Be careful. Don't cut yourself."

She let out an audible sigh as she picked up the small unicorn head that was still intact. "Oh," she said, holding it up to the fire just as I had done. "It must have been beautiful." She placed the head on a yellow leaf and brought it to the table. "I'm so sorry." She wrapped her arms around me and leaned her head on my shoulder.

"Better the unicorn than you," I said, as I felt the tension slowly releasing its grip on my chest. We sat there for a while, remembering the feel of our bodies touching, the rhythm of our connected breaths and hearts.

All through dinner, Keisha talked in between mouthfuls as if she couldn't decide if her hunger or her need to express her thoughts were more pressing. She filled me in on more details of what was going on in school. During her walk, she'd decided to go out for the jazz band. She also told me about a magnet school across town that specialized in the performing arts. She said she really missed her friends in Eugene. Then we enjoyed a big laugh when she told me that one of her male cousins confessed he liked trying on his mother's underwear.

Maybe it was the fire and the surrounding darkness and the smell of the forest, but as we toasted marshmallows, I remembered something I'd read about an ancient menstrual ritual—the older women formally inviting the younger girls into their circle. I wished my sisters and nieces were with us. I thought it would do Keisha and I some good to have a symbolic ceremony of what we were going through.

I got up and used my hiking boots to clear a small section of earth next to the fire. Then I pointed the stick I was holding to the ground and drew a large

circle around me. "Come here," I said, and motioned for Keisha to stop on the other side of the line. "Inside this circle are all the women who are menstruating. This includes your aunts, your older female cousins, some of your girlfriends, and all the other women around the world." I motioned for Keisha to join me. "We all welcome you to womanhood."

When she stepped inside, I saw that she was crying. "What?" I asked as I lifted her chin.

"I'm so sorry I broke it."

"You didn't break it. I did. Or maybe the gods did it because the time has come to move beyond unicorns." I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her to my chest and we stood there for a long time. I was sad too. I had wanted to give her something nice to remember this trip, to keep in mind where we came together instead of just focusing on how we differed. I understood it was natural for her to push away, but I didn't think the process required her throwing me in the trash.

My hands were locked behind her back. And my fingers were playing with the gold bracelet Ron had given me when Keisha was born. "Hey," I said, releasing my hug. "I've got something better." I undid the clasp and placed the bracelet on Keisha's wrist. "I think your father would have wanted this."

"No," Keisha said. "It doesn't seem right. He gave it to you."

"Your father, in the ten years we were together, gave me only two gifts. One was this bracelet and the other was you. Now they are both together."

I braced my hands on Keisha's shoulders then stepped away. "And there's one more thing. As you enter this sisterhood of menstruating women, I must leave it." And I walked outside of the circle.

We both just stood there, disconnected now, with her alone inside the small circle and me lost in the undefined space of everything else. "Wait," Keisha said. She picked up a stick and drew another circle around my feet. "You belong to a whole group of older women."

"Yes. Crones," I said. But it still didn't feel right. Keisha and I were still separated. Although this was exactly how I'd been feeling, as if I'd been banished from womanhood, weren't Keisha and I still connected? "Wait. I've got a better idea." I stomped my feet on the ground to erase the second circle then drew another one that intercepted Keisha's. "We're both still female." I put one foot in my crone circle and one foot in the portion that overlapped Keisha's. Keisha did the same.

"But we need another circle—one for where I used to be." Keisha drew a third so we ended up with a trio of interlocked circles. Then we jumped from one to the other, laughing like crazed dames of the forest. Our laughter was so loud that we did not hear the footsteps, the cracking of small twigs in the brush. But when I looked up, I saw the reflection of the fire in a pair of eyes, and I instinctively pushed Keisha behind me. I wanted to search for a large stick but I was afraid to take my eyes off the faint outline of its body. It stood still, calculating its find.

"What is it?" Keisha whispered close to my ear.

"I don't know. Maybe a wolf."

"Where?"

I realized Keisha hadn't seen it. I pointed. "Right over there."

The creature must have taken my outstretched hand as a signal. It came out of the brush and walked into the firelight, wagging its tail.

"It's the dog from the store," Keisha said. "He probably smelled the hot dogs."

Keisha walked toward it and I dug a hot dog out of the food chest. We sat down on the picnic table and watched the dog eat. When it was finished, the dog stretched out at our feet. "Maybe it will stay here for the night," Keisha said.

"Especially if we zip her up in the tent with us," I said. "It's not really safe for her to be walking along the highway at night all alone."

After putting another log on the fire, we pulled our sleeping bags out of the tent and spread them on top of the picnic table. Then we laid down head to head, our knees pointing up to the stars. "Remember . . ." I started to say.

"...how Dad used to take me out to see the stars?" Keisha finished.

"Yes."

"I don't really remember, but you've told me about it so much that it feels like a memory."

"Whenever you couldn't sleep, he'd take you out and point to the stars. I don't know what he would say to you, but when he came back inside, you'd be asleep."

Just then, a star streaked across the sky. "Did you see that?" Keisha asked. "I always think he's sending me some kind of message when I see a shooting star."

My body jerked when something touch my shoulder. Then I felt Keisha pull on my sweater. "Give me your hand," she said. And I did. We locked our fingers together. It was an awkward position and after a while, my hand started to fall asleep. It was a bit painful, sort of like motherhood; and I didn't want to let go, because it also felt so good.

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Joyce Hart is an author of over forty nonfiction books and more than one hundred literary essays. She is a teacher of creative writing and a professional editor of other writers' fictional works. This is her first published short story.