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Mothers & Daughters

Do you see that girl, sitting in the booth there, a hamburger and Coke in front of her? She is my daughter. Thirteen. Sullen. Aware, already, she has something men want, and aware how I worry about that fact.

I follow her here, certain she has come to meet that boy. He'll be coming soon; it's the same every time she leaves the house, wearing his ring on a chain under her sweater. She walks out, saying something about the library, Sue's house, or cheerleader's practice. She has never been, she has never wanted to be, a cheerleader. I know that she is headed out to meet that boy, to share with him the success of her lie — to parade before him my failure as a mother.

I don't know this girl, my daughter; hair, not very clean, hanging nearly to her waist; I do not know her at all. She won't allow me in her room, she stands in the doorway, blocking even my eyes. But I go in there, when she isn't at home. I turn the pages in her notebook, and see how her mind jumps from $X = A$, to L.R. + J.S. I sit down on her bed, to examine the plush stuffed animals grinning with red felt mouths. I try to remember why I, too, once buried my bed in toys long after I had outgrown them.

I know my daughter is in a conspiracy with that boy; a tall, skinny, acne-ridden basketball player who touches those private places she has been hiding from me for years. She hides them whenever I walk into the bathroom, accidentally. I always apologize, tell her it was an accident, I wasn't thinking, next time I'll knock, we'll buy a lock, I'm sorry — but it's always too late. She pulls a robe or towel between us, looking at me with those terrible thirteen-year-old eyes, until I long to know what it is that's so bad about being a mother . . . what it is that's so bad about being me.

She is in a conspiracy with her father, too, never showing him the way she has perfected that flip of her head . . . never letting him hear the filthy words she knows so well . . . never revealing to him how terrible her eyes can be. She becomes a woman — prematurely — at the sound of his key in the door; what a shrewd and calculating rival. Watch how she curls up on his lap, as if she were a loving child, willing to be held. Doesn't she know I am able to read such blackmail a room away? Doesn't he see what she's doing to him, what she's doing to this marriage?

I followed her here today, to reassure myself that she lies; she is not worth the worry, pain, or tears. She feeds and dresses herself; there is nothing more I can do. Her destiny is written. I will tell her, on her eighteenth birthday, she is free to go. I will ask her to just take her things and go. Then I can begin my own life. I can go back to the university, learn all I must know for a career in social work. I'll reach out to people with a darker, more twisted existence than mine. My husband will not question where I am on late winter evenings. He will not guess I am in class, he will imagine nothing. I will pay for school out of my grocery allowance, and after graduation it will be a year, two years, before he knows I have taken a job. It will puzzle him; that is all.

Where is that boy? My daughter is early. She must know that she is very early. She does not consult the window, or the watch that hangs on a chain around her neck, like that boy's ring. She wears the watch on top of her sweater, where I can see, a reminder of the presents my husband gives her, in addition to the ones we give her together. It is a flag, a triumphant flag signalling my destruction. When will he divorce me, and will he replace me with a woman like this thirteen-year-old woman?

My daughter does not look around, anxiously, for that boy. She stares at her food, intent on the job of eating. She will probably grow fat, like me, and try the same useless diets. She will have to accept the fact of her body; it is given to her by her mother, also inclined to overweight, like my mother. And she will have my tendency to see life as it really is. I pity her the days ahead.

What would she do, if she were to glance up now, and see me watching her? Would she deny, would she claim that I have read her wrong, would she try to blackmail me with the words that work so well on her father?

She thinks that I am crazy. I have seen it in her eyes, across the breakfast table. She won't ask for a ride to school. She is afraid to ride with a crazy woman. Often I wish that she would leave. My separate life cannot continue when she is there, in the house. After she leaves, I become her friend, her mother. I go into her room and read the gentle words of love, written to her by that boy. I read the letters, and I do not blame; I understand. But she must never be told that I see and understand and love the person she is, or that I grieve for her innocence. She takes comfort in identifying me, the enemy.

Does that boy reason with her, in the darkness of his car? I have forbidden her to enter that car, but she enters, knowing I know. Does he hold her, and tell her that all mothers seem a distant and opposing force when you are thirteen? Does he speak from the wisdom of sixteen, to plead my case? I hate that boy. I don't want him taking my defense. She is my daughter. Mine.

Where is that boy?

I tried to tell a doctor about my daughter. He nodded, and made no notes, no suggestions. I reject all doctors. How can a doctor change the life I have brought upon my daughter; how can he understand that this homely basketball player is my fault, the ruin I have brought upon my lovely thirteen-year-old daughter.

I do love her and she loves me, and we preserve that love by not using it — wearing out our hatred instead.

Where is that boy? He's not here, and she is leaving, paying for her food, alone, and leaving. Look at that hair. I wish she would wash it; I would never go six days without washing mine, but she will and does and shall. How can my daughter defy me so? Must I strap her down, wash her hair as though it is my own?

She doesn't fool me: she knows I am here; she has known it all along. She's leaving before that boy arrives. She is looking at the floor, hiding a smirk. She knows that boy is on his way, that he's nearly here, and she plans to lead me home before he comes. Oh, why does my daughter lie to me this way?

I will not be deceived. I will let her go home, to worm her way into my husband's lap. But I will wait here for that boy. I will sit right here and wait; I will confront him with the evil he has planned.