

Mothers & Daughters-1978

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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 gone 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 my eyes. But I go in there, when she isn't at home. I turn the pages of 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 lead. 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 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.