



If you can see the future, can you change it?

CARNIVAL MAN

by Cristie Coffing

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Carnival Man

Cristie Coffing

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It took place at the kitchen table. A round, discarded antique, worn and scarred by pencils, cigarette burns and coffee rings. A pedestal table, surrounded by four mismatched oddly colored chairs. A centerpiece sitting in a well-worn rental house atop scratched linoleum in the town of Tolt, Washington.

Rosalene sat at the table; her red hair fell in spirals down her straight spine. Emma sat to her right, slouching and fingering her brown hair. Kimmy sat across from Emma, her blonde hair hitting shoulders that could not hold still.

"Let's try again." Rosalene held her palms high. "I feel the energy today."

"This is dumb," Emma said.

"Emma, I want to try. Your mama had the dream again, about my mom. I want to talk to her. Your mama has my message; she has to give her my message or I will die inside, again. Do you know what this means to me?" Kimmy's blue eyes were sharp.

"I'll do it for you Kimmy, but I hate this shit," Emma looked directly at her mother.

"Emma! Show respect for the powers of the universe, for the powers of the dead!" Rosalene shouted.

"Fuck the universe."

"Be Quiet Emma! Hold hands," Rosalene said.

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First Edition

Dedication

This book goes out to Greg and my mom, my family and my friends, who support me in all I do. Thanks to Susan Ross and Suzanne Sievert for your generous help. Thanks to Bob who wrote a novel and started the whole thing, even though we never found it. It is in the ethers. Thank you Kenya Dillon for the legal prowess. Thank you Race Dillon for the gorgeous photograph.

Chapter One: Emma; The High Priestess

If you've ever spent the beginning of summer in a river town, then you know what it's like. Everything changes. Everyone relaxes and gets pent up in a different kind of way. Like a mating season feeling. The river pulls you to it like a force and there you change into a completely different person. When your clothes are shed everything is exposed. School is out, so the person you were at school you can shed as easily as your pants or boots. The water, the incredible sound and the smell when you first come upon it, makes you believe that every moment is a new moment.

Maybe it was the river that made mama fall in love so many times with so many different men. And maybe that's why she fell in love with Carlos the carnival man over and over and over.

Mama fell for Carlos the first time he pulled up in his white truck with the ring of fire and the Bengal tigers painted on the door. The lettering above read "Ramos Brother's Carnival". There were no tigers and no brothers so I don't know what the painting was all about.

That summer the air smelled so good, it smelled like wild roses and grass clippings and fresh hay all rolled into one. Kimmy and I played each day in the hot sun and each night in the glow of a silver moon. Our friends came in and out and we made mud pies and forts and grass hills and went to bed exhausted, covered in those smells. And the carnival smells rose above that for three long weeks in July.

When the carnival rode into town we had two days of anticipation. The carnies were scruffy and colorful and they transformed the grassy field into a plethora of senses. Colorful awnings of red and white and flashing signs lit up the night sky and buzzed in the daylight. Sounds of shouting and laughter drifted over us like pink clouds in the wind.

Kimmy and I sat on the grass for three hours the day before the carnival opened, our legs stretched out before us, sunglasses on. We were eleven and we wore short shorts and flip-flops and talked about the boys we'd like to kiss. It seemed the carnival would never be ready.

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The next day the carnival opened. Mama walked over with Kimmy and I. She wore a tight white skirt, sandals and a wide brimmed hat; her red hair tumbled down her back. I loved mama's hair. The air swirled with excitement. Red and white striped popcorn bags and hanging tufts of pink cotton candy were everywhere. Smells of elephant ears stacked row upon row, fresh sugary scones and roasting hotdogs swirled about me until I thought I would explode. I loved walking on the fresh straw. It felt good to be the first ones there, before any litter or trash had touched the field.

"Mama, let me have my money," I said.

"Listen baby, I don't want you spendin' all this in one day, you hear?" She handed me a ten-dollar bill so crisp I didn't want to fold it.

The day was magic and the colors and the sounds melted into the sky. The whir and grind of the rides, the low hum of generators and the "next" call of the carnies handling the rides were exhilarating. One thing at a time, I kept telling myself. Remember, you can come back tomorrow and the next day, but I felt like I wanted to open my mouth right then and there and take a big swallow of everything.

Kimmy and I spent hours and hours playing games and riding rides until we felt our feet grow swollen. It was time to find mama. She wasn't where she was supposed to be. Kimmy and I wandered around looking. We each had a cone of cotton candy that just about covered our eyes and it was hard to eat and look for her at the same time.

"There she is," Kimmy pointed to the milk can toss booth. Mama was sitting on the edge of the booth, her legs crossed, holding her hat and letting her curls roll about. Was she playing a game? Trying to win Kimmy and I a prize?

"Mama!" I yelled.

She turned and it was at that instant I got the sick feeling in my stomach. The feeling I got when mama was interested in something other than me. The feeling I got when we had an extra plate at dinner, or she put out a glass ashtray instead of a tin soup can because someone was coming over. I looked at Kimmy and she smiled as big as the summer day. She loved mama.

Mama waved us over, her smile as big as Kimmy's and I knew what she was about to say... "You all, meet so and so," and then he was

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going to end up over for dinner and he'd be there for breakfast and then dinner again and so on and so on, until there were days of empty whiskey bottles lying about. She'd forget to make my breakfast and forget to give me my lunch money and I'd do my own laundry. When mama had a man around she forgot about everything.

I've always had two mamas, an inside mama and an outside mama. The inside mama tucked me in at night and tickled me with her red curls when she bent over me. The inside mama read regular fairy tales, then reread them with changed plots and characters until they were silly and nonsensical. We performed them in the living room with the curtains wide open. We clapped and bowed for ourselves and fell into mounds of laughter.

"You and me Emma. We are like stardust, bright and shiny amongst the dirt of the earth," she said. The inside mama liked being with me when we were alone.

The outside mama I shared with everyone. Mama attracted people like insects to a light on a hot summer's night, especially men. People talked to her, cooed over her, walked close to her and stood by her in line. If they got a smile and a wave from mama they lit up like a sunbeam. She was an intoxicating scent and I watched those around her get drunk with the smell of her. They found her a mystery, a magnetic enigma and whether they believed in her tarot cards or not, curiosity lined their eyes.

That was the other mama. The mama that changed forms no matter how hard I stared. She faded further and further away until she became an unrecognizable figure on a screen, like a character in a love story at the theater. And there was no popcorn or juju fruits to go with that movie, only a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Girls, come here. Come over here, there's someone I want you to meet." She waved her arms in delight. Kimmy ran; I walked slow, dragging my feet through the straw. She hopped off the counter, wrapped an arm around each of us. We were her momentary prizes.

"This is my baby, Emma, and her friend Kimmy." She paused, flipped her curls, and smiled bigger. "And Emma, Kimmy...this is Carlos." Carlos smiled and flashed a gold tooth. His eyes were as brown as dirt.

"What beautiful girls." He reached out to touch my chin. I pulled away. His eyes locked with mine. "Ahhh, to have such a beautiful mother of course it would be as so." Carlos spoke with an accent. "You want to try the milk toss game?"

"Yeah," Kimmy shouted. I shrugged my shoulders like I could care less, but really, I did want to throw the ball and try to win a statue. I especially liked the pony. It was reared up and dazzling in purple and yellow and sparkly with glitter.

Carlos came outside the booth and put a baseball in Kimmy's hand. Kimmy threw three balls and did not hit a one of those milk bottles, but Carlos shouted anyway, "A winner, we have a winner!" He kicked the milk bottles over with his boot and handed Kimmy a small stuffed snake.

"Do you want to try Emma?" he asked.

"Okay."

He handed me a ball, looked me in the eye and winked. I took the ball and I threw it as hard as I could. I could pitch softball. Everyone in town knew I could pitch softball. I pitched that ball like I was Jim Palmer and then I closed my eyes tight.

"Emma, my god, did you just do that?" Mama looked down at me.

The ball had knocked down all six milk bottles, hit the side counter and bounced into the other stack of milk bottles hitting the three top ones.

"In all of Cuba, I have never seen a curve ball like that, in all of Havana...Saint DiMaggio of baseball saints protect us." Carlos dropped to his knees and gave himself the sign of the cross and I couldn't help but laugh. "Pick your prize," he said as he got to his feet.

I went home with the purple pony. Mama walked behind us and the world looked very good at that moment. Carlos came for dinner at eight, after his carnival game replacement showed up at the booth. Mama made pork chops with lots of gravy and after dinner, she got out her cedar box. She unwrapped her tarot cards from their white silk cloth and covered the kitchen table with a purple silk shawl. She held the cards in one hand and waved her other hand back and forth over the top. "God channel through me and protect me and let me see the truth delivered by yourself and your five hundred angels," she said with her eyes closed. When she opened them she smiled at Carlos. She

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shuffled the cards quietly, over and under, over and under. Carlos smoked. He was falling for it, the whole ceremony of it. I hated those cards.

The next morning I looked in mama's room. Mama laid all twisted up, her silk dragon bathrobe half open. Carlos had an arm splayed under her and he was snoring. I'd seen it all before.

I walked over to Kimmy's. She was dressed, watching cartoons on her color television. I loved Kimmy's house. She had everything. She had great art stuff, pens and paper and cutouts of ponies to trace. She had a Spirograph and plastic horses and a stereo for 45's and she had her own room with purple and pink wallpaper. I got her a butterfly poster for her birthday last year and we colored it together on her back deck. She didn't want to color anymore; she wanted to write the names of boys over and over again on notebook paper.

"Emma, you want to go to the carnival and see who's there? John Wright said he was going today." She chewed on her lower lip and stared at a Scooby Doo cartoon.

"Yeah, I want to go, but I just want to ride the rides," I said.

"Okay then, no games."

We walked to the carnival and as we approached the field I could see Carlos' booth. There was a woman working behind the counter. I let out the breath I had been holding.

"Yesterday you won a pony at the milk bottle toss," Kimmy said. "You think you can do it again?"

"They'll only let you win a prize once," I lied. "Besides it's stupid."

"Let's try it," she said. Before I could stop her, Kimmy had run to Carlos' booth and was digging in her pockets for change. I stood beside her and tried to focus on something, anything, but I couldn't get a take on one thing. All the colors of the carnival swam together.

I felt hot air on my shoulder, Carlos' voice, "Are you playing again or are you looking for your mama?"

I turned in time to see his gold tooth flash. He smelled like fresh soap and his black hair was slicked back into a ponytail. He wore a white undershirt and Kimmy stared at the tattoo on his bicep.

"Is that a carousel pony?" she asked.

"Yep. Do you want to see it move?" He flexed his bicep over and over and the carousel horse went up and down. Kimmy had her mouth open; even I was impressed.

She reached out and touched it. She stroked that horse up and down with her fingertips and Carlos smiled.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

"Are you going to play your game or not? You paid your money, do you want your throws or not?" The lady behind the counter was leaning forward holding out the three balls.

"Darla, this here is Emma. Emma has a baseball arm that the New York Yankees would buy in a minute. She can toss off the milk bottles from ten paces, can't you Emma?" He put his hands on my shoulders.

Before I moved, he had put a baseball in my hand. I wanted to throw it at him, but Darla in the booth was smiling real nice.

"No," I said, "I already won a big prize. Let Kimmy try again."

"Why, isn't that the nicest thing? Now how many kids do you know would do that Carlos?" Darla smiled even nicer.

"Emma's a special girl," Carlos said. He handed the ball to Kimmy.

Kimmy looked like she was going to bust open. She smiled and her body shook. "Here goes," she said.

Her throw was terrible again. It hit the side of the booth. Carlos winced and Darla flinched out of the way and covered her head with her hands.

"Shit," Carlos said. "Can we give a prize for over achieving?"

Darla laughed and she didn't have a gold tooth, but she had dimples in her cheeks and her eyes crinkled up. I liked her. She gave Kimmy a pony like mine and Carlos made a big production of handing it to her with a bow.

"Let's go Kimmy." I tugged at her arm. She wouldn't budge. "Let's go." I tugged harder.

"Bye...thank you, thank you so much. I mean really, really thank you." Kimmy held her pony like it was glass.

"I'll see you tonight Emma. Your mama's gonna read my cards," Carlos said.

She did that with every guy. Read their cards. They went all mushy about it, looked her in the eyes and thought she was so clever. Mama read the cards every morning. She spread the purple cloth over

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the scarred kitchen table, unwrapped the cards, said her hocus pocus spell and then shuffled them slowly.

She laid them out carefully, making sure they were evenly spaced, face down. She turned them over one by one. She kept her coffee next to her. The steam rose and mixed with the woodsy smell of her perfume. Mama always smelled like perfume, anytime of the day or night. She lit her cigarette in between cards and clucked her tongue or shook her head and mumbled to herself.

"There's magic here Emma," she tapped the deck of cards. I knew there was something, but I didn't call it magic. I called it her hocus-pocus and I didn't want to believe in it. It took mama away from me. I shared her with anyone who came close enough for her to cast her spell. She told me she saw things too.

"Emma, I can touch a person and see scenes of their life. It can be very disturbing." I didn't know what she meant, but I had seen her do it. Once at a garage sale, she stared and stared at a woman who wandered the driveway, picking up odds and ends and turning them over. Mama reached out and touched her shoulder and said, "Don't do it. Don't lie to save your love." The woman recoiled and turned her back on us. She pretended to be interested in a blue china bowl, her hands shook when she picked it up.

"Why did you scare her?" I asked her walking home.

"That woman will lie about a pregnancy, she will pretend to carry a man's child and when the truth is found out he will beat her to unconsciousness. I tried to warn her that's all. I just don't know." She shook her head and her eyes watered as she looked down at the sidewalk. "That's why I try so hard not to see."

I looked at her cards once, when she was working at the library book sale. I unwrapped them from the white silk handkerchief and I looked at each and every card. Some were very pretty and some were horribly ugly and frightening. How they could tell you what to do with your life I couldn't figure out. I laid them out like she did; then I held them in my hands like poker cards and fanned myself with them. I wrapped them back in the silk and put them in the cedar box before she came home.

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Carlos came at eight and we had noodles with meat sauce on them. He smiled at me across the table. He told a dumb joke and mama laughed. I stared at him. It was kind of funny, but I didn't laugh.

After dinner mama told me to do the dishes and she cleared off the table. The purple cloth came out and it got real quiet in the room.

"Put on some music Emma," mama said.

I went to the stereo and started a record.

"Not that one," she said, "give me a Sinatra."

I put on a Frank Sinatra record. Carlos stood and wiggled his hips. I ignored him and mama watched him. She shuffled the cards real slow. She read his cards with her hypnotic voice. Carlos's eyes glassed over. They drank wine and smoked and the night stretched out like a cat.

Carlos kept coming for dinner and kept getting his cards read for three weeks, until the carnival rolled up its tents and folded up its awnings and tucked the ride buckets in tight.

The day the carnival left town, we walked to the field together to say goodbye. Mama wore a floral print dress and high heels and her floppy hat. I stood by the edge of the field and watched her say goodbye to Carlos. It was strange to see how the carnival turned into regular looking trucks and trailers. The only way you would know there was a carnival inside was by the paintings on the sides of each truck. Carlos scooped up mama and spun her around; she held her hat with one hand, the other hand wrapped about Carlos' neck. She laughed and tossed her long red hair in the sunlight. Her legs dangled as she flew round and round while Carlos' pony tattoo went up and down.

Carlos put mama down and walked toward me. He bowed at the waist making a big gesture with one arm. "Sweet Conchita, my beautiful sea shell, I will miss you terribly. Where else will I find a pitcher with such a great baseball arm, eh?" He smiled, his gold tooth flashed. "Take care of your sweet, sweet mama." He took my hand and pressed something into my palm. "For you." He turned back to mama and kissed her for a long time. Long enough for me to see two airplanes cross the sky.

Mama didn't cry after he left, she just acted like she always did. "It wasn't in the cards for us," she said. I opened my hand as we walked

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back to the house. It was a small chocolate bar, wrapped in fancy gold paper, just starting to get soft around the edges from the heat of my palm. The rest of that summer was hot and full of bugs.

Kimmy got a bra that fall. Her dad took her to the super mall in the city and bought her one. She showed it to me the next day. It was white and silky on one side, with white stitching of flowers and leaves around the edge. The inside felt like a soft silky towel.

"Why did you get it?" I asked her.

"I'm going to wear it, you dope. What do you think Emma?"

"I mean you don't need it, do you? Won't it just get in the way when you're running and stuff?"

She looked at me like I was the dumbest kid in school. "You wear a bra when your boobies are growing so they know how to grow right you dope. Otherwise they end up all long and saggy like National Geographic boobies."

"Oh."

I asked mama for a bra that night at the table. "We don't have the money right now," was all she said as she took a long drag off her cigarette.

Kimmy didn't have a mom, because she died when Kimmy was six, so her dad was always doing nice things for her. I think he felt bad that Kimmy's mom was dead. I once thought since I didn't have a dad and Kimmy didn't have a mom, her dad and my mama should get together. Then Kimmy and I could be blood sisters.

But when I told her she said, "My dad thinks your mom's weird."

Kimmy played the flute. It had been her mother's. It was beautiful silver; she kept it wrapped in velvet inside a black velvet lined case. She played songs that made me think of butterflies. The notes danced in the air and wrapped around me as soft as silk. She only played outside. "I try to get the fairies to come out," she said, "or my mom." But I knew she played outside because of Carl, her dad. The only time I saw Kimmy play inside, Carl stalked into the room.

"Stop it," his face was red and sweaty, "I don't like that." Carl leaned his body into the doorjamb and turned away. "I don't want to hear that."

Kimmy's mom had played the same flute. The sounds that washed over me broke Kimmy's dad's heart, I could hear it cracking in two.

The next time Kimmy's dad took us to the super mall I went too. I had my French poodle purse and wore my sandals with the black heels. It felt great to walk the mall with Kimmy. So grown up. Her dad let us go off by ourselves while he went into the Pizza Factory for a root beer. We went to Frederick & Nelson and tried on jewelry and watches, flung scarves over our shoulders and swung beads around until the saleslady scowled us at.

"I'll show you where I got my bra," she whispered.

On the second floor was the prettiest underwear I had ever seen. Pink and baby blue and frilly and lacy and silky and smooth. You could buy any kind of underwear in any color. If I got new underwear it was always packs of white with tiny flowers, three to a pack. They were pretty, but nothing like this.

"This is where I got my bra. I have it on."

We stood by the rack and I touched the bras, one by one. They were white and simple with tiny details, like ribbons or lace. I held one up that was silky, like Kimmy's, but with lace at the top edge.

"This is beautiful," I gasped.

"You should buy it," Kimmy said.

"I don't have any money. Mama said she doesn't have any money."

Kimmy looked at me. She didn't understand, because her daddy always had money. He was a logger and he went to work every day. He came home with wood chips around the bottom of his pants and on his boots and he always smelled like pine.

"I'll ask my daddy to buy it for you," she said. "He will you know."

"Don't."

Kimmy started to walk away. I don't know how I did it, even now, but I just slipped that bra with the lace on it right into my French poodle purse and left the hanger on the floor beneath the rack. I ran after Kimmy, my voice shaking, "Hey, wait up."

I put the bra in my underwear drawer, way in the back, so no one could see. I never wore it and I couldn't get myself to look at again. Thinking about it made my stomach feel sick. Two weeks later mama took me to the variety store and bought me one. It wasn't as pretty or

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as fancy, but I loved it. I loved the way it felt on and the way it made me feel. It made me stand up straight and tall.

Mama read my cards every other day, whether I wanted her to or not. "They keep the world straight for me," she tilted her head and smiled. She didn't know it, but I had my own magic, the river. The river swept through me. It made my soul burst apart and join it, flowing free over banks of silt and rocks. I walked to the river every day, by myself or with Kimmy, or with Marsha when she got off work at the 2 x 4. Marsha was a waitress there. "Pretty sassy," mama said, "that's why I like her." Marsha was ten years older than me, but she listened and she talked in a voice that I understood. Her life was fascinating.

"My mom was a lesbian and divorced my dad to live with her girlfriend." She flung her cigarette in the dirt. "She was a designer and was featured in Sunset Magazine. I'll show you, it's far out." She showed me the article. The rooms were decorated in reds and shades of green, lots of plaids and her mom's picture was in the corner. She smiled delicately and wore tiny horn rimmed glasses. "I think my dad was beyond jealous when he saw this," she laughed. Marsha's little house was at the end of Entwistle Street. It was colorful and full of exotic statues and findings from thrift stores and antique shops.

"I love this town," she said as we sat on a big log watching the geese fly over the river. They landed with dramatic splashes, their landings created ripples that lapped to shore. I closed my eyes and listened to their calls. "I moved here to change. To morph into someone nobody recognized, not even myself. You know what I mean?"

"Yes." I did. I wanted to morph every day.

"You can reinvent yourself. I don't have to be the lesbian's daughter anymore. I used to hear people in the grocery store say, 'Poor Marsha, her mom left her dad for another woman'. I hate being talked about when I'm standing right there. It was like I was transparent. I got so transparent, I disappeared and I ended up here."

Marsha wore her hair long, it was dark with streaks of gold and she never dressed in anything special but she moved like a princess. She smoked a lot of cigarettes. Her and mama smoked dope together

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and drank whiskey and talked in husky voices when mama read her cards, which was at least once a week. "I'm getting my cards read tonight by your mama. You're so lucky." She looked at me. "You don't know that yet do you?"

"I hate it when she reads the cards and tells me shit."

Marsha laughed. "Yes, I guess you would. I hated a lot of things my mom did too. Your mama's magic though. Magic. I'm really in love with her." The words hung in the air.

That winter when the leaves fell and collected on the slopes of the river, mama started dating a logger named Ned. Ned smelled like the forest, like wood chips, fresh and clean. Ned had sweet smelling earth beneath his fingernails and embedded in the cracks of his hands, old earth that had been around for hundreds of years. Our town was a logger town. The air smelled like wood chips and chainsaw grease, river and stone. The smell could fill a grocery aisle or permeate an entire café. I loved it and swallowed it in big gulps. Years later, the smell of fresh cut wood could make me cry.

Ned had dinner at our house every night of the week. Ned bought us groceries, the good kind of groceries too; not the kind that we normally got from the food bank. He bought ice cream and popcorn already popped in the bag and licorice and icy pops. Ned didn't drink whiskey. He drank tea while mama drank whiskey with tinkling ice. Ned didn't like having his cards read, instead he played solitaire on the living room floor while mama read cards at the kitchen table, drumming her fingernails on the wood and talking to herself. Ned paid attention to nature. He watched birds from the window and took long walks along the river. He spotted cougar tracks and deer tracks and we once followed a coyote's trail for two miles together. Ned understood the magic of nature and the magic of the river. He taught me more magic.

"Put your hands here," he said one day when we walked by the bank of the river. He wrapped my hands around the trunk of a birch tree. "Do you feel that?"

I closed my eyes. I felt something, a quivering. "Yes, I think so."

"It's going to flood. The trees vibrate when the river starts to swell, it shakes the earth." It flooded that night. The river swelled like a

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pregnant mother's belly and jumped its banks flooding the highway, barns and pastures.

"Ned knew, mama. He knew it was going to flood," I told her.

"So did I," she said. She let out a drag of her cigarette.

Ned and I hiked a trail on the bank of the river the next day to look at the wild water. "A logger can always tell a weather change," he said.

"How?"

"By the smell. I'll tell you." His breath came out in smoke puffs. "When the air smells sweet that means it is going to clear and get sunny. The warm air stirs the flowers and the herbs and creates a perfume." He grabbed a stick from the ground and twirled it. "And when the air smells like pine and fir it's going to rain." He stopped, put the stick near my nose. "Smell this."

"Mmm, that smells so good."

"That's the smell of rain I'm talking about."

"What about snow?"

"Oh that. That's not a smell. That's a sound. The forest gets quiet. It gets so still you could swear you're the only person left on the earth."

I remembered everything Ned taught me and held it in my heart like a perfectly round pebble.

Ned stayed through the winter. Life was good, sixth grade was easy. Kimmy let me use her lipstick on the corner in the mornings before school. We applied the color to our lips in rounded arches before we reached the playground. We were having junior high orientation that week and we wanted to look our best for the seventh grade boys. Kimmy had started wearing eye make-up and mascara and she let me borrow that too. In the bathroom that always smelled of little kid sweat, we would pucker our lips and stick out one hip and try on the make-up until the morning bell rang and ruined our trance.

"Who's your mom's new boyfriend?" Kimmy asked.

"Ned. He seems okay."

"He's cute," Kimmy said. "My dad said he knew him from the mill. My dad asked how many boyfriends your mom's had this year."

"I don't know," I said.

"Do you think hundreds, or maybe thousands?"

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"It keeps her busy," I said. "I like Ned."

"Maybe he'll be your daddy." The second bell rang. Kimmy grabbed the mascara out of my hand and shoved it in her bag.

"I don't want a daddy."

"Everybody wants a daddy."

Truth was, I did want Ned to be my daddy. I felt like we belonged to each other. He spent time with me; he picked me up and twirled me when he came up the front walk, even if I was going on twelve.

One day, when the ice was starting to melt, Ned came home from work smiling wide. He lumbered up the walk, through the front door and said, "Hallelujah, get your clothes on".

"Oh, we've got our clothes on Ned honey," mama said.

"No, I mean get your good clothes on baby. I got lucky today and we're going to the city.

"The city?" mama asked.

"We'll go get a fancy dinner!" he laughed like a little boy with a new toy truck.

Mama danced around him and kissed him hard on the cheek. She put on a flowered dress and red high heels and danced some more. I put on the only dress I had, which was getting a little bit small so I wore cut-off jean shorts underneath. We drove in Ned's big white truck to Seattle and had dinner in a fancy restaurant by the water. The waitress told us her name was "Cecily" as she spread our napkins in our laps. Ned and I had big fat steaks and hot baked potatoes with sour cream piled in mountains on top. Mama had prawns with hot melted butter. Mama and Ned kissed in the red candlelight and I watched the ferry land at the dock, slow and majestic. I watched the people disembark with their satchels and their secrets, the city lights danced behind them like fairies.

Ned stayed through spring. He came to my baseball games and sat in the front row of the stands. He somehow got mama to come to some of the games; she had never come before. "I abhor organized sports," she said. Mama seemed to be pretty happy, though, sitting next to Ned in her tight Levis and peasant tops. She only brought her cards out in the mornings and on Friday nights and she hadn't done a reading for Ned yet. That wasn't too surprising. Ned didn't need the

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cards to be woozy over her. He touched her and stared at her loopy all the time. I swear she was afraid she would scare him off with her mumbo jumbo fortune stuff. Thank god. I was sick of hearing about my future in those cards. Ned cheered for me. Ned told me, "Great job." The coach asked if he was my dad.

"No," I said. "I don't have a dad." And that was the truth. I had never known my dad, I didn't know what he looked like or what he smelled like or what kind of car he drove.

One night mama was sitting on the back porch smoking and watching the night sky. Ned was inside doing the dishes. I sat beside her on the cold concrete step. I asked her about it, about him.

"Who's my daddy?" I asked.

"I don't know baby. I mean I know, but I don't really know, if you know what I mean."

"No."

She took a drag off her cigarette, let it out in a slow stream, it took off with the moon. "He was a looker, I'll tell you that. And look at you, it's pretty obvious with your long dark hair and green eyes, you are my star." She touched me under the chin. I looked at her and she was soft around the edges, like a painting in an old book. "Your daddy was only around for a few weeks, or actually it was me who was around for only a few weeks. He worked an arcade in Pittsburgh and he was something. He practically ran the whole show, and he with his great looks and the lights of the arcade and the smells of the cotton candy and the summer heat. Well, it was enough to make you pregnant; and it did. I left after three weeks. I left for the west coast."

"What about him?"

"Oh, he was traveling, they did shows all over the world, even in Europe. He didn't want a baby, but I did. I wanted you worse than anything. I had to have you. You were in my cards in a big way. I loved your daddy, but I didn't miss him. He was just one piece in the puzzle you know."

"Do you ever try to contact him? Does he write? Does he want to know about me?"

"Oh honey, he flew away with the wind."

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I was unwanted, unwanted by someone I didn't even know, someone who didn't know me. If you didn't know each other was it possible to want each other? "Is that why you like Carlos, because he works at a carnival?"

Mama laughed and looked me square in the eye, "Honey, Carlos doesn't work at that carnival; he owns that carnival." She took a drag, looked at the top of the apple tree. "Carlos keeps my feet on the ground, that's why I like him."

"Are you going to go back with Carlos?"

"It is in the cards. He's a prominent player, there's no doubt about that."

"What about Ned?"

"Honey, Ned's going to lose something very important to him pretty soon, so he will probably move."

"You don't know that." I wanted to plug my ears and scream at her at the top of my voice. Instead I asked her calmly, "Did you ever try to tell my daddy about me?"

"Nope," she stood up and stretched. "Don't have to."

And that was it. She kissed me on top of the head and went through the screen door, leaving me with the dark sky. I watched the stars take their place one by one.

Mama got a job that spring at the library stacking and recording books so I didn't have to go to the food bank for awhile, what with Ned bringing us groceries and mama's new job.

That was my job. Every Wednesday afternoon I walked to the food bank by myself. Every Wednesday afternoon the puckered faced old woman at the front table would say the same thing.

"Where's your mama?" she'd ask.

"At home."

"I'm not supposed to let you in without an adult."

I never answered, I just stared her down until her eyes crinkled up tight and she looked away. "I'll let you in today," she said every time, "but you tell your mama to come with you next time." I knew what the word "welfare" meant.

I walked the five blocks back to our house with bags of cheese and bread and butter, white rice and flour. Sometimes I'd get peanut butter

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and cereal, and once in a while stale cookies. Ned kept us well fed though, so Wednesday afternoons were my own, thank god. Mama still went to the clothing bank though, so my clothes were hand me downs and cast offs from other kids in the valley. I wore them, praying no one would notice me in the t-shirt or skirt they had just donated to the "needy", to me.

Everything was great until school got out and the summer stretched before me. I knew the carnival was coming back to town. My stomach hurt every day. I was afraid Carlos would come back and mama would pick Carlos over Ned and that would be the end of it all. Mama would quit her job so she could drink and smoke with Carlos and I would go back to the food bank and everything would be back just the way it was.

I went to the corner drug store a week before the carnival was due to unload.

"Where's your mama been Emma?" It was Jake McWeyer asking, one of the young pharmacists. He smelled of spicy aftershave. He was one of mama's audience members.

"She's got a boyfriend." I said it real snotty and turned away before I saw his reaction.

There were two carnival posters on the front window. "Excited for the carnival Emma?" he asked me.

"No."

"Let's go to the carnival Emma." Mama brushed her long red hair. She wore a pair of tight blue jeans and a blue gypsy shirt that flowed around her like holy water. Ned was at work. He left the house at five in the morning.

"Okay." This would be the worst day of my life. Ned was going to be gone that night; I just knew it. No more river walks with him, no more tracking coyotes or following squirrels, watching them hide their stash. No more rock hunting and stick gathering at the water's edge. I would be on my own again.

The morning was sunny and the carnival was setting up when we got there. The red and white awnings, the cotton candy trucks, the great trailers with the rides and the painted ponies, all the colors made me sick. I saw a truck parked on the edge of the grass. I looked for

Carlos. Then I noticed the door of the pickup. There were no tigers and no ring of fire painted on the door. There was a picture of a gypsy lady, and the words, "J&J Enterprises".

"Mama," I grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"What?"

"Whose carnival is this?"

"What honey?" She had her eyes shielded from the sun and was scanning the carnival horizon.

"Mama, where is Carlos? Is this his carnival or not?"

"No dear, Carlos is in Bellingham. They go where the best jobs are, you know that."

I felt a million sparrows light from my shoulders and fly away.

"How do you know that?"

"I read it in the cards, he won't be here for another yearly cycle and besides, he writes to me." She grabbed my hand and we strode off toward the movement of colors and sounds.

Everything was all right for now. Seventh grade would start in the fall. The thought of it made me feel sick; at least I had Kimmy.

Kimmy and I spent our lazy summer days at the river. All we needed was a towel and a few magazines and we were content. We sat at the edge of the river and dug our heels into the silt, letting the water run over our legs. We swam and raced across the river to the bank on the other side. We dove for the bottom and let our bodies float the current. Sometimes it felt like Kimmy and I were one person, other times I felt a division growing wide between us. Kimmy wanted to move forward and become another person. I didn't want to be anything. I closed my eyes, breathed in the scent of the water and left my body behind, becoming a wisp of vapor, moving with the current far, far away. There were a lot of high school kids at the river and the smell of cigarette smoke mingled with the fresh summer air. Kimmy flirted with the boys. She talked different and jutted her hip out. I thought of mama. When the heat got to be too much we walked with our towels over our shoulders and went to the 2x4 café for diet cokes. Marsha worked in the afternoons and she gave us paper umbrellas for our drinks. "God, are you two jailbait or what?" she asked.

"What's that?" I asked Kimmy when Marsha was out of sight.

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"It's a girl who is too young to fuck, but they want to fuck her anyway. Like me." She played with her blonde hair, stroked it up and down like a kitten. "If you're too young, they go to jail," she laughed. "I can't believe you don't know that, especially with your mama."

"How do you know that?"

"I read." And she did. So did I, but I read books from the library. Kimmy read fashion magazines, music magazines and gossip magazines.

One hot day Kimmy and I read each other's pebbles on the beach. We laid them out on a towel, just like mama laid out her cards and we told each other fantastic tales and predictions.

"This is the pebble of babies," I said with a mumbo jumbo voice. "You will have five babies and ten husbands."

She laughed, "No way!"

"And this is the pebble of baseball," she said, turning over a stone. "You will hit your dream lover in the head with a baseball, that's how you will know him."

"Right."

It was the summer of change. Our bodies changed, our friendship changed. Kimmy talked about boys and sex, even though we weren't sure how it all worked, and we spent all our free time at the river.

That fall Ned lost his job. It was a night when the wind howled about the small house. The wind blew in through the cracks of the house and tumbled through the air and circled the kitchen table where Ned sat, his head bent forward in his hands crying. Ned crying. I'd never seen a man cry before. I'd never heard a man cry before. Loud sounds came out in rhythms like a goat's bleat. Tears rolled out of his eyes and landed on the table. Mama sat quietly beside him. Occasionally she made purring noises and stroked his back.

The next morning while Ned was down at the union office, she took her cards out of the box and lit a white candle. She talked to herself. She waved the deck of cards back and forth in the air and chanted. I tried to ignore her and watch T.V., but I couldn't.

She shuffled her deck, cut it three times and slowly laid out a spread of cards that looked like a cross with a straight line of cards on the side.

"That's what I thought." She said this like she would have said, "The sky is blue." She picked up the cards, put them in a neat pile and put a white piece of paper over them. She sprinkled thick salt on the paper and said a bunch of words that didn't seem to go together. She took the paper with the salt and dumped the salt down the drain of the kitchen sink, and ran cool water down the drain. The cards got wrapped back up in the white silk and went back into the cedar box. This was nothing new. This was how she "cleared" the cards, she said, so she could get all the old energy off of them. I didn't see any old energy on them, and I didn't see anything going down the drain either. I never did.

When Ned came back from the union office, his eyes looked red and he had a file folder tucked in his armpit. "I got a job in Aberdeen if I want it," he said.

"You should take it," mama said.

"Aberdeen is four hours away." Ned hung his head and looked down at his feet, like a puppy dog.

"That's not so far."

"But I love you Rosalene."

There, that was it. That's what I wanted to hear, but I wanted to hear him say he loved me and that he wanted me to be his girl, that he wanted to be my daddy because I didn't have a daddy and he didn't have a girl and he'd always wanted a girl. Say it, I willed him.

"Come with me," he said. "We could all live in Aberdeen together. I could work and Emma could go to school there and it would be good. The water is not too far away, you know."

"It's really wet there," mama said.

"I don't care, we could be happy even if we were wet, you know that Rosalene."

"I may never find another rental that I can afford if I give up this one. And that's just a chance Ned, who's to say what you'll think of me in six months or a year."

"Damn it Rosalene!" He stomped his boot. "How can you give up so easily?"

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"It's in the cards Ned."

Shit. Those goddamn cards! I slammed my bedroom door and crawled onto my mattress on the floor. I cried while I watched the clouds pass over the moon.

Ned took his stuff with him the next week. He wrapped me up and kissed me on top of the head twelve times. "You're going to come out and see me as soon as I get a place; you and your mama. We'll go to the ocean. You'll love it Emma. There is a lot of magic at the ocean. And I'll be back to see you soon baby." He pushed a folded piece of paper into my hand. "It's my address. I want to know what the coyotes and the birds are up to."

I couldn't say anything because I was trying hard not to cry. I didn't talk to mama for three days. I don't think she minded, in fact, I don't think she even noticed. She hummed a lot, played some old records, smoked five packs of cigarettes and drank two bottles of whiskey in the course of three days; so she didn't even notice that I wasn't talking to her. I didn't see Ned again until I was grown up and on my own. He wrote a lot and sent me funny postcards; he drew himself into the pictures as a stick figure. He always did something goofy in his drawings. I wrote him as much as I could. God I missed him.

By the end of sixth grade I began to figure it out. Mama could get men fast and she could let them go just as fast if she needed to. It was as if she was a keeper of birds. She'd feed them, love them, groom them, take their attention and then when the time was right, send them off to fly.

"I just love them all, whether they stay or go." That's what she told me when I asked her if she'd wished Ned had stayed, because I sure missed him a lot. She dated the guy at the dry cleaners, the pharmacist, the produce manager at the market, a truck driver she met on the bus, the driver of the library truck, and the barber on Main Street. The only guy she never dated was our landlord. "I never mix business with pleasure," she said. But he wanted to go out with her. He was intoxicated, just like the rest of them.

Carlos came back the next summer. The summer before Kimmy and I were going into eighth grade. He rolled into town with his tiger

trucks and his pony tattoo and his gold tooth. He looked exactly the same. He smiled at me and tousled my hair. "Boy you've gotten pretty," he said. He lit a cigarette. "Where's your mama? How is she?"

"She's fine. She's got a boyfriend. She always has a boyfriend."

"Nah, she'll see me," he said. "We've been writing each other. She doesn't have a boyfriend. At least not after I get over there tonight." He smiled and looked me square in the eye.

Mama got off work at the library and headed straight for the fields where they were setting up. She saw Carlos and ran into his arms. He scooped her up and twirled her around, just like he had the day he'd said goodbye. Time moved backwards and I was eleven years old again.

Carlos spent every night at our house. He and mama smoked at the dining table and she spread her silk out and read his cards. They whispered and clinked their glasses together and I went to Kimmy's, leaving mama and Carlos alone with their drunken laughter.

I walked to Kimmy's house in the dark. I loved the way the night smelled. Like the smell of a perfect gentle old woman, fresh and clean with hints of flowers that are so intermingled you can't name the exact source. The mountains were the woman's dress, dark and silhouetted, and the moon, her tiara.

Kimmy's dad wasn't too hot about her going out at night so I threw pebbles at her window, progressively bigger until she heard. She crawled out the window in her cut off shorts and we walked around town. We hung out with boys at the market or got stoned behind the Texaco, and sometimes, if the moon were just right, Kimmy would bring her flute. We would walk to the football field at the high school and Kimmy would play music to the moon and then we'd lie down in the soft grass and stare at the night sky, just Kimmy and I and our dreams.

One night we walked to the cemetery. Kimmy had her flute under her arm. The moon was hidden behind a cloud. "Watch this," Kimmy said. She sat on a cedar stump and began to play. The notes sailed through the night, soft and grey. "Did you see it?" she asked when she had stopped.

"See what?"

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"The dead dance. I can raise them all, but I can't raise my mom." Her head drooped and tears fell on the soft cedar.

We were smoking cigarettes and pot that summer. I stole the cigarettes from mama and Kimmy got the pot from a ninth grader, Jim Berry. He had a drum set in his garage. After school Kimmy and I hung around and listened to him play. He loved ACDC; we heard "Hells Bells" a lot. He wasn't that great, but he did sweat a lot and he could get us pot and he had the most amazing blonde curls. Kimmy made out with him one day in his basement. I felt jealous. Not because I wanted to make out with him, but because I didn't want Kimmy liking anyone better than me. I felt twisted up and mad inside. I hardly spoke to her walking home.

"He uses his tongue," she said.

"Gross. Wasn't it?"

"No," she said. "I kind of liked it. That's what they do in France you know." I didn't know that.

The carnival was nearly over and Carlos told us that he had time to stay. Oh boy.

"I've got a good three weeks between shows this summer," he announced, "I could stick around and help you out Rosalene. That is if you want me. I know you want me darlin'."

She pinched his butt. "Okay." That night we had chicken from one of the carnival vendors. He came over and gave it to Carlos.

"Leftovers man. Hey who's the chick?" He looked at Kimmy intensely, up and down.

Carlos put his hand on the chicken man's chest and gave him a little push. "Back off. She's thirteen."

"You're just getting too pretty Kimmy," he told her later. "You too Emma, I'm going to keep an eye on you both." Funny, I didn't think of myself as pretty. When I looked in the mirror I saw a girl with crooked teeth, green eyes, and brown hair with a little red in it, from mama I guess. I saw a baseball player with a mixed up face, a girl without a daddy. I didn't see a pretty girl. When I looked at Kimmy I saw beautiful blonde hair with beautiful blue eyes, eyes like a clear sky in

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the spring. She knew how to wear her clothes and she had boobs. No one else in our class had any to speak of, especially me.

Carlos stayed three weeks. While he was camped out in mama's bedroom he convinced her to start doing tarot card readings for money.

"You could charge fifteen dollars for a reading," he told her, he rubbed her shoulders at the kitchen table. "You're so good baby everybody will be clamoring to have you tell their fortune." They got drunk and wrote notes all over my flowered notepad doing their "business plan." That's how it started. That's how my mama became the fortuneteller of the Tolt valley. That's how I became the daughter of a witch. That's how the inside mama faded further into the distance.

"Are you going to write me?" Carlos asked me. He was packing his bag.

"I only write Ned. I don't have time to write anyone else." I said it to hurt his feelings. He looked at me with his head cocked. He didn't say a word. He finished packing his duffel bag and left, after kissing mama about five hundred times all over her face. Another bird flew away.



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