



VINTAGE

BLUE DIARY

ALICE HOFFMAN

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About the Book

Ethan and Jorie, a perfect, beautiful couple, have been married for 13 years, and are still very much in love. Ethan is a pillar of the community, but 13 years ago he committed a brutal rape and murder. A young girl's phone call exposes him, and nothing will ever be the same for any of them - as nothing could ever be the same for that other young girl who was raped all those years ago, or for her family.

Blue Diary is a powerful, disturbing novel about the dark shadows in ordinary lives, about the ripples that carry on indefinitely from a violent act. And the blue diary of the title belonged to the dead girl ...

About the Author

Alice Hoffman is the author of thirteen novels, including *At Risk*, *White Horses*, *Turtle Moon*, *Second Nature*, *Practical Magic*, *Here on Earth* and *The River King*, many of which have been bestsellers in the USA and Germany, and she has also written screenplays. Alice Hoffman is married with two sons, and lives in Massachusetts.

Also by Alice Hoffman

Property Of
The Drowning Season
Angel Landing
White Horses
Fortune's Daughter
Illumination Night
At Risk
Seventh Heaven
Turtle Moon
Second Nature
Practical Magic
Here on Earth
Local Girls
The River King

For Children
Fireflies
Horsefly
Aquamarine

Alice Hoffman
BLUE DIARY

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

*Heaven belongs to the Lord, and the earth He has
entrusted to mortals.*

PSALM 115

One

The Hanged Man

IT'S THE LAST monday of the month, a brutally gorgeous morning brimming with blue air and the sweet scent of honeysuckle which grows wild in the woods beyond Front Street, when Ethan Ford fails to show up for work. On this glorious day, the brilliant sky is filled with banks of motionless white clouds, fleecy as sheep, but so obedient and lazy they haven't any need of a shepherd or a fence. June in New England is a peerless month, with long days of glittering sunlight and roses unfolding. This is the season when even the most foolish of men will stop to appreciate all that is set out before him: the creamy blossoms of hollyhocks and English daisies; the heavenly swarms of bees humming like angels in the hedges, hovering over green lawns trimmed so carefully it can seem as though the hand of all that's divine has leaned down to construct a perfect patchwork, green upon green, perfection upon perfection.

On any other day, Ethan Ford would have already been hard at work, for in the town of Monroe, Massachusetts, there is not a more reliable man to be found. On the chain that he carries, he has the keys to many of the local houses, including the Howards' on Sherwood Street and the Starks' over on Evergreen. For the better part of a month, Ethan has been remodeling both homes, renovating a kitchen for the Howards, installing a second bathroom for the Starks, a family whose three daughters are known for their waist-length hair, which takes half an hour to shampoo, so that

there is always a line in the hall as one or another of the Stark girls awaits her turn at the shower.

Everyone knows that if Ethan promises a job will be done on time, it will be, for he's a man of his word, as dependable as he is kind, the sort of individual who never disappears with the last ten percent of a project left undone, tiles left ungrouted, for instance, or closet doors unhung. He's an excellent carpenter, an excellent man all around; a valued member of the volunteer fire department well known for his fearlessness, a respected coach who offers more encouragement to some local children than their own parents do. Most folks who know him would not have thought any less of him had they been aware that on this day Ethan doesn't show up for work because he's in bed with his wife, whom he loves desperately, even after thirteen years of marriage, and whom he still considers to be the most beautiful woman in the Commonwealth.

Jorie had been standing at the sink, washing up the breakfast dishes and staring out the window with a dreamy expression, when Ethan came to get his keys. He took one look at her and decided not to leave, no matter what a mess his schedule might become and how late he'd have to work for the rest of the week. Even the most dependable of men will stumble every now and then, after all. He'll trip over his own shoes, waylaid by bumps in the road or circumstances he never expected; he'll throw off the bonds of both caution and common sense. Fortunately, Jorie and Ethan's son was on his way to school on this Monday of the last week of sixth grade, for there was nothing that could have kept Ethan away from Jorie on this day, not when he felt the way he did. He came up behind her at the sink, and as he'd circled his arms around her and whispered what he planned to do once he took her back to bed, Jorie laughed, the sort of sweet laughter that summoned the sparrows from the trees, so that one after another perched on the windowsill, just to listen, just to be near.

We shouldn't be doing this, Jorie told him. She began to list the reasons they had to abstain, the many responsibilities facing them on this busy weekday, but even as she spoke, her tone betrayed her. She was already being drawn into the bedroom, diverted by her own desire, and she smiled when her husband locked the door.

People in town would not have been surprised to know that Ethan bent to kiss his wife then, and that she in turn responded as deeply as she had on the night when she met him, when she was twenty-three and convinced she would never fall in love, not really, not the way she was supposed to, head over heels, crazy and rash, all or nothing at all. It was that way for them both even now, though they had a house and a mortgage and a calendar inky with family obligations, those potluck dinners and Little League games, the intricacies of married life. Their union was a miracle of sorts: they had fallen in love and stayed there. Thirteen years after they'd met, it seemed as though only an hour or two had passed since Jorie had spied Ethan at the bar of the Safehouse one foggy November night, minutes after she and her best friend, Charlotte Kite, had set up a wager of ten dollars, the prize to be claimed by whoever found herself a sweetheart that night.

And now, on this hot June morning, when the sky is so brilliant and blue and the tree frogs in the gardens trill as though they were calling birds, Jorie wants Ethan just as badly as she had on the night she first saw him. She had left her friend Charlotte behind without even the decency of a proper good-bye, which simply wasn't like her. Jorie was as prudent as she was kindhearted, so much so that when her older sister, Anne, arrived at the Safehouse to see her goody-two-shoes sibling leaving with a stranger, she ran after the truck, signaling for them to slow down; not that they paid Anne the slightest bit of attention or listened to her cries to be careful on the icy roads.

Jorie gave Ethan directions to her apartment over on High Street, where she brought him into her bed before she knew his full name. Certainly, she had never in her life been as reckless. She was the girl who did everything right and, as Anne would readily complain to anyone willing to listen, had always been their mother's favorite daughter. Jorie was the last one anyone would expect to act on impulse, and yet she was driven by what might have appeared to be a fever. Perhaps this explained why she veered from her normal, reliable behavior and unlocked her door for a stranger on that cold November night. Ethan Ford was the handsomest man she had ever seen, but that wasn't the reason she'd fallen so hard. It was the way he stared at her, as if no one else in the world existed, it was how sure he was they were meant to be together that had won her over so completely and effortlessly. She still feels his desire when he looks at her, and every time she does, she's the same lovestruck girl she was when they met. She's no different than she'd been on the night when he first kissed her, when he vowed he'd always been searching for her.

Today, Jorie has once again left her poor friend Charlotte in the lurch, with no explanations or apologies. Instead of meeting Charlotte to discuss the final weeks of her marriage to Jay Smith, blessedly over at last, Jorie is kissing her own husband. Instead of offering comfort and advice, she is here with Ethan, pulling him closer until all the world outside, all of Maple Street, all of Massachusetts, might as well have disappeared, every street lamp and apple tree evaporating into the hot and tranquil air. Some people are fortunate, and Jorie has always been among them, with her luminous smile and all that yellow hair that reminds people of sunlight even on the coldest winter's day when the wind outside is howling and masses of snow are tumbling down from above.

Whenever Jorie and Ethan are hand in hand, people in town turn and stare, that's how good they look when they're together, that's how meant for each other they are. On evenings when Jorie comes to the baseball field at dusk, bringing thermoses of lemonade and cool water, Ethan always walks right up to her and kisses her, not caring if all the world looks on. Along the sidelines, people stop what they're doing—the mothers gossiping by the bleachers, the dads in the parking lot discussing what tactics might win them the county championship—they can't take their eyes off Jorie and Ethan, who, unlike most couples who have entered into the harsh and difficult realm of marriage, are still wrapped up in the vast reaches of their own devotion, even now.

It's therefore no surprise to find them in each other's arms on this June morning, in the season when the first orange lilies bloom along roadsides and lanes. They make love slowly, without bothering to pull down the shades. The sunlight coursing through the open window is lemony and sweet; it leaves a luminous grid on the white sheets and a crisscross of shadow upon their flesh. Next door, Betty Gage, who is nearly eighty and so deaf she can no longer make out the chattering of wrens nesting in her cherry tree or the chirrup of the tree frogs, can all the same hear their lovers' moans. She quickly retreats to her house, doing her best to walk briskly in spite of her bad knees, leaving behind the phlox and daisies she'd begun to gather in a ragged jumble of petals on the lawn. Startled by the strains of so much ardor on an ordinary morning, Mrs. Gage turns her radio to top volume, but even that doesn't drown out those passionate cries, and before long Betty finds herself thinking of her own dear husband, gone for nearly forty years, but still a young man when she dreams of him.

Later, Jorie will wonder if she hadn't asked for sorrow on this heavenly day. She should have been more cautious. She'd been greedy, renouncing restraint, forsaking all

others but the man she loved. Who did she think she was to assume that the morning was hers to keep, tender hours to spend however she pleased? She was thoughtless, indeed, but the bees swarming in the garden seemed to be serenading them, the sunlight was a pale and lasting gold. If only such fleeting moments could continue indefinitely. If only they were cunning enough to trap time and ensure that this day would never alter, and that forevermore there'd be only the constant sunlight pouring in and only the two of them, alone in the world.

Jorie is not ordinarily prideful, but how can she help but see herself in her husband's eyes? She imagines ancient prehistoric flowers as he moves his hand along her belly, her spine, her shoulders. The flowers appear behind her eyelids, one by one: red lily, wood lily, tawny lily, trout lily, each incomparable in its beauty. She listens to the bees drifting through the hedges outside. If any of the men in town who thought they knew her, the ones she's been acquainted with since high school, for instance, those she runs into every day at the bakery or the pharmacy or the bank, were able to look through the window and spy upon her, they would have seen a different woman than the one they chat with on street corners or sit next to on the bleachers at Little League games. They would have seen Jorie with the sunlight streaming over her and heat rising up from her skin. They would have witnessed what true love can do to a woman.

You are everything to me, Ethan tells her on this morning, and maybe that sentiment was too arrogant and self-absorbed. Assuredly, they were only thinking of themselves, not of their son on his way to school, or the shades they hadn't bothered to close, or the neighbor at her window, listening to the sounds of their desire. They weren't the least bit concerned about the friends they'd kept waiting, Charlotte Kite, who'd already left the bakery for her doctor's appointment, or Mark Derry, the plumber,

one of Ethan's closest friends, stranded outside the Starks' house without a key, unable to work without Ethan present to let him in. The phone rings, long and loud, but Ethan tells Jorie not to answer—it's only Charlotte, and Jorie can talk to her anytime. Or it's her sister, Anne, whom Jorie is more than happy to avoid.

How often do we get to do this? Ethan asks. He kisses Jorie's throat and her shoulders, and she doesn't say no, even though it's close to ten o'clock. How can she deny him, or herself for that matter? Love like this isn't easy to find, after all, and sometimes Jorie wonders why she was the one who'd been lucky enough to meet him that night. November in Massachusetts is a despicable and ruinous month, and Charlotte had needed to talk Jorie into going out for a drink. *You have your whole life to sit around by yourself, if that's what you want to do*, Charlotte had assured her, and so Jorie had grudgingly gone along. She hadn't even bothered to comb her hair or put on lipstick. She'd been there at the bar, already itching to leave, when she felt a wave of energy, the way some people say the air turns crackly before the weather takes a turn, or when a star is about to fall from the sky. She gazed to her left and she happened to see him, and that was when she knew it was destiny that had made her trail along after Charlotte on that damp, foggy night. Fate had led her here.

She closes her eyes on this, their stolen morning, and as she lets the phone ring unanswered, she thinks again of lilies, shimmering on their green stems. She thinks about the pledges they've made to each other, and about devotion. What she feels for him is so deep, she aches. She supposes this is what people refer to when they say the pangs of love, as if your innermost joy cannot help but cause you anguish as well. It is painful when he leaves her merely to go into the kitchen, where he fixes them iced coffees and bowls of strawberries from the garden. He loads their breakfast onto a silver tray, a wedding present

from Charlotte, and brings it back to bed for them to enjoy. Jorie still has never seen a man as handsome as Ethan. He has dark hair and even darker eyes. He isn't a lawyer cooped up in an office like Barney Stark, whose wife complains that he's grown fat, or a beer drinker like Mark Derry, who spends most evenings sprawled out in an easy chair. Ethan uses his body, and the results are evident. When he takes off his shirt at the baseball field, the women stare at him, then look at each other as if to say, *That's what I wanted, but that's not what I got.*

All the same, Ethan is the sort of man who doesn't seem to be aware of his own good looks. His visits to the gym aren't driven by vanity, but are a necessity for the work he does as a member of the Monroe Volunteer Fire Department. He needs strength and stamina, both readily apparent last fall when he climbed onto the roof of the McConnells' house, long before many of his fellow volunteers had gotten out of their trucks. That particular fire had started in a pan of bacon, but by the time the first volunteers arrived, it was burning through the house, one of those sly, scarlet infernos that moves with unexpected speed. There was so much smoke that day, the white chrysanthemums outside Hannah's Coffee Shoppe turned gray and remained that way for the rest of the season; frogs in the shallows of the lake began to dig themselves into the mud, ready to hibernate, misreading the ashes falling from above for an early dusting of snow.

When it became clear that the regulation ladder wouldn't reach the McConnells' little girl's window, Ethan had taken matters into his own hands. From his perch on the roof, he went on; he pulled himself across the shingles and over the peak, then went in through the window. Outside, the crowd watched as though bewitched. Not a word was said after Ethan disappeared through the window, especially not after the flames rose up, a burst of heat circling into the clotted gray sky. Ethan found the

child hiding in her closet, and it was a lucky thing he'd been so nimble scaling the roof, for the girl hadn't more than a few minutes left before she would have begun to suffocate. By the time Ethan carried her out of the house, half the town was gathered on the lawn below, holding their breaths, inhaling smoke, blinking the soot from their eyes.

It's no wonder that people in Monroe adore Ethan Ford. Why, even Jorie's sister, Anne, who on most occasions cannot find a nice word to say about anyone, is surprisingly well behaved in his presence. There's rarely a time when Ethan walks down Front Street and some child he once coached doesn't lean out a car window in order to shout his name and wave. The parents are just as pleased to see him; they honk their horns and switch their headlights on and off in a show of appreciation. Warren Peck, the bartender at the Safehouse and a courageous volunteer fireman himself, refuses to let Ethan pay for his own drinks, and why shouldn't he be grateful? Ethan was the first on the scene when Warren's nephew Kyle's Chrysler LeBaron caught on fire in the parking lot of Lantern Lake, with sweet-tempered Kyle sleeping it off in the front seat, sure to have been burned alive if not for Ethan's intervention. The senior center, where Ethan serves Thanksgiving dinner each year before coming home to celebrate the holiday with his family, still has a banner up in the rec room: *Three Cheers for Ethan*. Ethan himself would have already torn down that banner if the very idea didn't chill some of the seniors to their bones, for the residents of the center sleep better with the knowledge that Ethan is watching over them.

He is truly an extraordinary person in many ways, even in the eyes of his wife. Jorie Ford gazes at her husband the way another woman might appraise the sunrise, with equal amounts of familiarity and awe. She had wished their son would resemble Ethan, but Collie Ford is pale and fine-

featured, like his mother, with blond hair and blue eyes and a sweet, cautious nature. Collie is cool where his father is hot, easygoing and, at twelve, tall for his age. Still, he's shy in spite of his parents' love and support; he's prone to let other boys edge right past him, at school and on the playing field, even though he has more brains and talent; it makes no difference that he's bigger and stronger, he's content to remain on the sidelines. He's an A student happy with Bs, an outfielder who should be pitching, too good-natured, it sometimes seems, for the deceptions and the difficulties of those who excel in the world.

You know what his problem is? Ethan says as they lie in bed on this morning with the window shades drawn up and the bees in the garden drifting over blooming roses and phlox. Jorie is eating a strawberry and it has turned her mouth red. *You baby him.*

Oh, please. Jorie laughs. *You're just jealous. You want me to baby you.*

That's true. Ethan slides his hand between her legs and she feels those pangs begin. *Baby me,* he tells her, so near that every word burns. *Give me what I want.*

Jorie thinks of lily of the valley, hyacinths, star-of-Bethlehem. She thinks of the night they had made Collie, a starry August evening at Charlotte's family's vacation house at Squam Lake. Jorie is sure her son was conceived there because a big white moon rose into the sky, a lantern in all that darkness, and she had cried when they made love. Afterward, she had stood out on the porch while Ethan slept and as she searched out the first summer star, she'd made a wish that things would never change between them.

I have to get going, Jorie says now, pushing him away. She feels absolutely derelict to still be in bed at this hour. *I'm so late, Charlotte will kill me.*

Jorie rises and stands squarely in the sunlight, her long hair turning from gold to platinum. She has never lived

anywhere but Monroe, nor would she want to, even though this is a town in which there are more apple trees than there are houses. She had once believed she could predict exactly how her life would turn out, but then she met Ethan. There were several local boys who'd been after her, and she'd imagined that someday she'd give in and marry one of them. She still feels sheepish when she runs into Rick Moore, who she dated all through college. But bygones are bygones, and Rick himself is married now, with two boys of his own, and he teaches over at the middle school, science and health. Why, Collie will probably be in his class next year. There are no hard feelings, and when they meet accidentally, on Front Street or at the annual Little League barbecue at the end of the season, Rick and Jorie are always polite; they hug each other and pretend that neither one remembers the way Rick cried when Jorie broke up with him.

Time has drifted by lazily, and Jorie is amazed to see just how late it is. There won't be much headway on the Starks' construction today; no plumbing will be installed and no measurements for the new tub will be taken. By now Mark Derry has grown tired of waiting and has decided to leave a note for Ethan on the back door. *Hey, asshole—where the hell were you?* is the message Sophie Stark, aged twelve, will find tacked up when she gets home from school.

In point of fact, Ethan is getting dressed at the very moment Mark Derry is pounding his missive into place, using a nail he'd found in the dirt, used to add iron to the soil and encourage the hydrangeas to turn a deep indigo. Ethan Ford has never been one to rush, not even when he's late. He takes his time and knows what he wants. He believes it's his duty to live his life in the right way, and he never grouses when emergency calls come in on cold, icy nights. If he's old-fashioned, so be it. He figures he owes something to his neighbors. He has never once turned down a friend when asked for a loan; Mark Derry and

Warren Peck both know from personal experience that when Ethan writes a check he doesn't even ask what the advance is for. Trying to thank him for all the good he's done is another matter entirely. He flatly refused a public ceremony after he'd rescued the McConnell girl, which would have greatly pleased the mayor, Ed Hill, who's always looking for a chance to promote his own favorite cause: a third term in office. Ethan is known for the sort of conviction only a man who's been blessed can possess. What can he want, when there's nothing he's lacking? Why should he rush through this life, when he's lucky enough to have everything he needs? He runs one hand through his dark hair now as he gets ready, without bothering to look in the mirror. He knows who he is, after all. Lucky as a man can be, that's Ethan. Lucky, through and through.

Outside the window, the last milky petals from Mrs. Gage's cherry tree are aloft in the air, weaving through the blue light, settling on rooftops and lawns. Jorie has gone into the kitchen to fill a thermos with lemonade to ensure that Ethan will have a cool drink to enjoy later in the day, when the sun is high and the heat is all but unbearable as he carts old cabinets out of the Howards' kitchen. Jorie smiles at what is already becoming a memory of how impulsive they've been today. She is the sort of woman who doesn't need to tell her most private business, not even to her best friend. She has never been tempted to admit to Charlotte that she always thinks of lilies when she and Ethan are in bed. Sometimes, at the height of their passion, she opens her eyes and is amazed to find white sheets and walls rather than the vivid fields she's imagined, brilliant with orange and yellow, as if sunlight itself had been caught behind her eyes.

Someone once told Jorie that plants you least expected were members of the lily family, asparagus, for instance, and onions, both of which she plans to add to her garden, a large patch of earth in the backyard. Jorie doesn't like to

boast, but her garden is perhaps the best in town, yielding bushels of beans every year, and fire-red tomatoes, and such generous amounts of blueberries that Jorie often grants her neighbors free rein to pick as much as they'd like for jams and jellies and pies.

Jorie is thinking about her garden, how pretty asparagus plants will be against the fence, how faithful onions are once they take hold, when she hears someone at the front door. Right away she thinks something's odd. It must be a stranger come to call, because everyone knows the Fords always use the kitchen door, which opens to the driveway and the garden. The postman, Bill Shannon, brings their mail around the back, and even Kat Willams, Collie's friend from down the block, knows not to use the front entrance.

I'll get it, baby, Ethan says. He's come into the kitchen, to grab his key ring, stopping only to reach into the cookie jar for some petty cash he'll use to buy lunch at Hannah's later in the day. He looks happy as he heads for the hall. Jorie hears him open the door, and then she hears nothing. The silence is unnatural. It's as if Jorie has been thrown headfirst into the cold embrace of the sea and water fills her ears. Rattled, she drops the coffee cup she was about to refill, but she doesn't hear it break on the hardwood floor. She just leaves it there, in pieces, and hurries down the hall. She's moving through water, drowning in green waves. There are some people who insist that every time one door closes, another door opens, but this isn't always the case. There are doors that are meant to stay closed, ones that lead to rooms filled with serpents, rooms of regret, rooms that will blind you if you dare to raise your eye to the keyhole in all innocence, simply to see what's inside.

Jorie takes note of the way he's standing at their own door, her husband, Ethan, whom she loves more than anything in this world. He's so rigid, anyone would think he's been shot. She glimpses the other men who have

gathered on the porch, and as she recognizes them, local men one and all, she wants time to stop, then and there. She is reminded of another summer's day, when she wasn't more than eight years old; it was a hazy afternoon, and she'd climbed one of the apple trees in the orchard that was then behind her mother's house, acres of Baldwins and McIntoshes and delectable Empires, known for their delicate pink blossoms. She looked up at the sky, mesmerized by the thick, lazy white clouds, and for a minute she truly believed she could reach up and take all that she saw into her arms. She had wanted heaven for herself; she was greedy and hopeful in equal measure, convinced she could have anything her heart desired, if only she'd grab for it.

When she fell, she was reaching out for those clouds, but there was nothing between herself and the earth save the pale and heedless air. She broke her leg in two places, and she still remembers the pure shock of falling to earth, the foul taste of her own blood in her mouth as she bit through her lip. It was the season when the orange lilies appear in Monroe, wildly, randomly, in every ditch and thoroughfare, as it is again now. All these years later, Jorie still always tastes blood when the daylilies bloom, and here in the doorway to her own living room, on this fair and glorious day, she knows why she's never chosen to grow any of those lilies beside her own door, no matter how beautiful they might be. They only last for a single day, and then, no matter what a person might do to save them, they are fated, by God, or circumstance, or nature, to fade away.

True

THE FIRST THING I noticed was that he could walk past a mirror without casting a reflection. My grandmother always told me that a mirror can shine back a person's dishonesty, but what did it mean for a man to have no reflection at all? Something bad, I knew that for certain. Something people should stay away from. I carried my knowledge around inside me until it started to hurt, like a splinter in my finger, throbbing and too tiny to see. Every time I went into their house, I avoided the living room, where there was a big mirror framed in gold. That was where I'd seen him turn to look at himself. He didn't seem surprised to find that nothing was there, only empty glass the color of dishwater. He didn't even flinch.

I told Collie that the living room was too fancy for my tastes, with their nice furniture, and that anything too nice made me nervous because I was bound to break something. Collie believed me because he knows I'm clumsy; he didn't guess I had my fingers crossed behind my back. I told my best friend—my only friend—a lie right to his face, and that was just the start of my deception. I like nice things, as a matter of fact. The fancier the better, that's the way I see it. I want to grow up to be rich, so no one will think they're better than me, the way everyone at school does. All the same, I had the strangest feeling every time I went in that house, although we stayed clear of the living room where the mirror was, and Collie's mother was always so nice to me, going out of her way to tell me things that are obviously false, like how I would be beautiful someday,

when anyone can tell that will never happen. Not if I wait for a hundred years.

Of course, I made certain not to be there when Collie's father was around. I could tell when he was about to arrive the way some people say they can sense when it's likely to rain. I was like a dog who knew when his master was getting close to home, only in reverse. Instead of sitting by the door panting, I did the opposite and got out of there fast. Usually, I went out the side door and headed across Mrs. Gage's yard, which separates my house from Collie's, darting past the cherry tree and the willows. Sometimes, when the sky was dark or when the wind was howling, I ran. If Collie tried to stop me, if he said, *Come on, Kat, stay*, I told him I had a migraine. No one can deny a headache. I know that for a fact because my sister, Rosarie, who just turned seventeen, has migraines and you can't talk to her when she gets them. She lies on her bed with a cold cloth over her forehead and the lights turned out, and we have to tiptoe around her like she's the Queen of Sheba. My mother brings her orange juice and Excedrin tablets, and when it's really bad some sort of medicine my sister shoots into her arm that makes her go limp, like a rag doll, and then she sleeps for ten hours straight, which, if you really want to know the truth, is a big relief for us all.

Lying on her bed, with the lights out and her dark hair tangled on her pillow, my sister actually does look like a queen. I'm always jealous when I stand there watching, though I know she's my sister and I'm supposed to want the best for her. I wish I felt that way, but I don't. At such times, I am tempted to pour vinegar over her clothes or sprinkle her with sugar water, so when she awakes there will be ants entwined in the strands of her hair and she'll smell bitter. It's a terrible thing to feel this way. My jealousy is bound to clog my veins and turn me even uglier than I already am, which is what my grandmother says is the unhappy but well-deserved fate of envious people.

When this happens you can see it in someone's face if you look closely, a faint and poisonous green rising up through the skin. *That's envy*, my grandmother tells me. *Make no mistake about it. That's their price to pay.*

I am named Katya, after my grandmother, but they have always called me Kat, and I've always been curious, probably too much so for my own good. Rosarie says I shouldn't ask so many questions. She tells me a girl who can't mind her own business will wind up with nothing but enemies, but I don't care. My sister is five years older than I am, and in that time she has learned everything she needs to know to get whatever she wants. The meaner she is, the more beautiful she becomes. It's not fair, but it's true. She shimmers when she stamps her feet and insists on having her way. She glows when she pulls my hair or calls out a stream of curses.

When I lie on the floor and watch her get ready to go out on Friday nights, I have to admit I'm impressed by her beauty. I find myself doing whatever she tells me—I run to get her mascara, I lend her my hair clips, I search the kitchen for spring water so she won't have to wash her face with ordinary tap water like the rest of us. I'm her slave and I don't even like her. I can only guess what it's like for some unsuspecting individual to see her for the first time; it's perfectly understandable how fast somebody like that could fall under her spell, how easily they might be taken in by what is only skin deep.

Rosarie pretends to be good when it suits her. She comes home at midnight, the time of her curfew, kisses our mother and grandmother good night and goes upstairs, as if she were the last person on earth to consider breaking the rules. But as soon as everyone's asleep, she climbs back out her window, like a blackbird, finally free of us, flying down Maple Street, with her long hair trailing behind her. She goes off with her boyfriends, taking as much delight in breaking their hearts as she does in winning them.

Everyone knows she swims in Lantern Lake with no clothes on and steals flowers from Mrs. Gage's perennial beds and lipsticks from the pharmacy. She torments the other girls in town by not caring what they think of her. When it comes right down to it, the only opinion that matters to her is her own.

In the morning, when Rosarie finally gets out of bed, she combs her hair. She yawns and doesn't notice what falls out from among the strands: fireflies, petals, white moths, heartache. When some new boy follows Rosarie home, our grandmother never lets him past the front door. She shakes her mop at the lovelorn boys in our yard and tells them they're too young to be pining after someone, especially if that someone is our selfish Rosarie. As far as my grandmother is concerned, those boys are nothing but moths caught up in a spider's web, but I have compassion for them. I bring them Cokes with ice and listen to their sad stories; I offer them consolation, along with cookies and chips. Someday they'll think fondly of me, the ugly little sister who sat beside them on the grass, or maybe they won't remember me; they'll only recall the sweet sodas they drank as they looked into Rosarie's window, hoping for a glimpse of her beautiful face.

You would think that what has happened in our family would show up in my sister in some way, that her complexion would turn yellow, or her dark eyes would be dulled, or her red mouth would fade to an ugly white pucker, but none of that has happened. Unfortunately, the same is not true for me. You can see everything in my face, which is why people tend to stay away from me. The ones who are frightened by what they see call me names behind my back, and I don't blame them. Even the biggest fool could take one look at my miserable complexion and sorrowful features and know well enough to avoid me. Even someone like that could see bad luck written all over my face.

Some people might guess I took a dislike to Collie's father to get back at my own father for leaving us the way he did, and that I was looking for somebody to hurt, but that wasn't the case. My father made certain choices because he was sick. It was too bad that my sister was the one who found him. My grandmother and I were up in the attic, going through the belongings she'd brought when she came to stay with us. If it had been me who opened the garage door, everything else would have been easier. I would have known that he loved us, now and forever, but my sister didn't understand, and our mother's reaction was worse. She didn't speak for six weeks after our father died, not even when Rosarie burned his clothes on the back patio. Rosarie poured lighter fluid over everything and lit it up so high that the leaves of the mimosa trees caught on fire and Collie's father, who is a volunteer fireman, with one of those blue globes he sticks to the top of his car, which allows him to speed to the scene of a fire, jumped over Mrs. Gage's fence and came running to ensure that our house wasn't burning to the ground.

This year the leaves of the mimosas have come back blackened, black feathers hanging from the branches, falling on the slate and on our bare feet as if there were a flock of blackbirds living above us. Collie and I sit on the patio to study the mimosas almost every evening. We don't have to speak about the way my father died; we don't have to talk at all. Silence doesn't frighten us. We can just look at each other and recognize that there is pain in this world, even on beautiful nights when twilight settles in our backyards, sifting through the grass and the hedges. We take a blanket out there and look up through the black mimosas; we call out the names of the constellations we know until we're too tired and dizzy to look up anymore.

I probably would have been on the patio gazing at stars that night if Collie hadn't come down with a fever. But he was home in bed, and it was no fun being alone in the dark.

As a matter of fact, it was kind of scary, with those sour black leaves and so many stars you could never hope to count them all, not if you tried for a thousand years. My sister had a new boyfriend, Brendan Derry, who seemed to think that Rosarie belonged to him, and he wanted her to spend every second of her free time with him. Poor Brendan didn't have a clue that he'd be gone before long, another speck in my sister's romantic history. Still, Rosarie liked a good time, even when she was breaking somebody's heart, and I knew she wouldn't be back for hours. I felt free to go into her room and turn on the TV she'd gotten as a Christmas present from one of her boyfriends the day before she dumped him. None of us remembered his name anymore, but the TV worked great.

I threw myself down on her unmade bed without bothering to take off my shoes. Rosarie was the lazy sister, she was the rude sister, but she was the sister who had everything, and I was the one watching TV all alone. I had brought a bowl of popcorn with me to her room, even though I knew Rosarie would kill me if she found a single kernel in her bed. Frankly, I didn't care if popcorn accumulated on the sheets. I could be mean, too, after all. I could be selfish and thoughtless when I tried, or at least that's what people around here said. Maybe that's because everybody was crying at my father's funeral except for me. When you do things like that, when you stand there and shut your mind until all you can hear is the humming of bees, people think you don't have any feelings. They think what they see is what you feel deep inside.

As I sprawled out on the bed with nothing to do but eat popcorn and envy my sister, my mother came in to say good night. She was still pretty, and she wasn't old, but she wasn't the same as she used to be. She hardly ever talked anymore. Just the bare essentials. Just *Pass the green beans* and *You have a dentist appointment* and *Don't forget to shut the front door when you leave*.

Sometimes I'd catch my mother staring across the yards, watching Collie's parents as they worked out in the garden, laughing and having so much fun. I knew what she was thinking. She'd been short-changed, with my father and all. She was forty-six years old and living with her mother and her two thankless daughters, and how had that happened? Once she'd figured that out, she'd probably start talking, but for now, she was keeping it simple. She sat on the edge of Rosarie's bed and ran her hand through my hair, even though her fingers caught on the snarls at the base of my neck. Those knots hurt, but it had been so long since anyone had touched me, I didn't complain. I have terrible hair that sticks up where it shouldn't and makes me even uglier than I already am. When I see Rosarie's beautiful long dark hair, I want to pull it out, and every time I feel that jealousy, I know my true self. In spite of everything Rosarie's done and how selfish she is, I'm far worse than she'll ever be.

After my mother went to bed, I stayed in Rosarie's room, eating popcorn and making a mess. I could feel myself curdling; I was a sour pudding, a recipe made of envy and spite, green at the edges. When I feel that kind of badness inside me, I am capable of anything. I really am. I opened the window even though it was raining. I did it on purpose, just to see something of my sister's be ruined. I let raindrops splatter all over Rosarie's pillow, and her white quilt, and her night table where she keeps her jewelry box, the one my father gave her for her sixteenth birthday, a gift she now says is nothing but a piece of junk.

I had the TV on, but I was busy sorting through my sister's jewelry, the tangled gold necklaces various lovestruck boys had given her, the earrings missing crystals and beads, the silver rings she wore on all of her fingers. When his picture came on, I wasn't really listening. I just looked up and there he was, as if the image that should have been cast in the mirror had somehow arisen on my