



IN THE MEAN TIME

"In the Mean Time is a formidable collection, as disquieting as it is beautiful."

—Kevin Brockmeier, author of *The Brief History of the Dead*

PAUL TREMBLAY

Advance Praise for *In the Mean Time*

“Paul Tremblay’s *In the Mean Time* is a dark, heart-twisting collection of short fiction which defies categorization and requires your complete attention. The children, parents, and teachers who inhabit these stories exist in the ways we all exist—through those old historical longings which are rarely answered. Tremblay offers no solutions, but in the end, somehow, we walk away with a greater understanding of ourselves. Or, at the very least, the kind of selves we are but rarely see.”

—Jessica Anthony, author of *The Convalescence*

“Paul Tremblay creates images of terror and wonder. Lean, mean, and just a bit on the nasty side, he’s a hardnosed prose stylist with a heavyweight punch. Tremblay is a bona fide contender.”

—Laird Barron, author of *The Imago Sequence and Occultation*

“*In the Mean Time* is a formidable collection, as disquieting as it is beautiful. They shock and they gleam, these stories, and the moods they provoke linger powerfully in the imagination: the dread of those who see the trouble coming and the strange relief of those upon whom it has already fallen.”

—Kevin Brockmeier, author of *The Brief History of the Dead*

“Rumor has it that the world will end in fire and ice, but then again, if Paul Tremblay is to be believed, it may conclude in preternaturally active plants, amusement parks, sudden brain aneurisms, and silence. In *Mean Time*, end of the world scenarios brush up against the traumas of more personal apocalypses. The resulting stories are as stressful and quietly traumatic as they are fluidly and lucidly written.”

—Brian Evenson, author of *Last Days and Fugue State*

“The power of these stories is that you think you’re reading them, that there’s that distance, but really you’re living them, experiencing them, and that’s how you remember them later. Not as something you read, but an event you lived.”

—Stephen Graham Jones, author of *Demon Theory* and *The Ones That Almost Got Away*

“*In the Mean Time* is a miscellany of voices—witty, wise, weird, assured. These stories push at boundaries, not just within genre; they play alongside the uneasy undercurrents of lives we’d usually call ordinary. Stories to read and read again.”

—Helen Oyeyemi, author of *White is for Witchin*

“Paul Tremblay’s stories sneak up on you quietly and then . . . wow! You don’t know what hit you, but you like it. And you want more. Powerful, emotional and unforgettable; these are stories that work their way into your brain and into your heart. Highly recommended.”

—Ann Vandermeer, Hugo Award-winning editor of *Weird Tales*

“Paul Tremblay disappears into the dark places that most writers are afraid to venture, and he returns with something gleaming and beautiful, stories that are absolutely unforgettable. In Tremblay’s work once the thrilling shock of seeing a two-headed girl wears off, he reminds you of what’s most important, the single beating heart inside of her. With this collection, Tremblay announces himself a master of the fantastic, and I look forward to reading each new word he writes.”

—Kevin Wilson, author of *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*

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Paul Tremblay



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always, for Lisa, Cole, Emma,

sometimes, for m

“Perhaps in time the so-called Dark Ages will be thought
of as including our own.”

—Georg C. Lichtenberg

“All good things arrive unto them that wait—and don’t
die in the meantime.”

—Mark Twain

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The Teacher

We loved him before we walked into the room. We loved him when we saw his name on our schedules. Mr. Sorent says, "All right, this is going to be a special class." We love him because of the music and movie posters on his walls, the black stud earring in his left ear, his shoulder-length hair. We love him because of those black horn-rimmed glasses; the same glasses we see people wearing on TV and in movies. We love him because he looks like us.

He stands at his podium. We love him because bumper stickers, many with political messages we want to understand, cover that podium. He says, "Because you guys are seniors and you're going to be outta here and out *there*," and he points out the window with his miniature baseball bat, and we love him for that, too. "We're going to learn more than just AP American History." We love him because he wears jeans. We love him because he makes fun of teachers we don't like. We love him because he plays guitar and he knows our songs.

There are only eight of us in his very special class. Four girls and four boys. We sit at a circular table. There are no desks. His is the only room in the school designed this way. He passes that smile around the circle. That smile we share, that smile we hoard for ourselves. He says, "We will be doing things outside of the book: special lessons. These lessons won't be every day or even every week, but they will be important. They will have weight and meaning. Certainly more meaning than the AP test you'll take next May."

We love him because he tells us the truth. Mr. Sorent leaves the podium and sits on a stool. "Just know the after school rules apply to our special lessons." We love him because he lets us talk to him after school. He lets us be confidential. He lets us talk about beer and parties and drugs and parents and abortions. "This is so exciting. I really can't wait. Maybe we'll have a lesson tomorrow." We love him because he is the promise that growing old doesn't mean becoming irrelevant.

At dinner Mom asks me about my soccer game even though she watched it. She's dressed in a sweatsuit as bright yellow as our kitchen. She leans over her plate to hear my answer. She's eager. She wants the coach to put her in the game. I tell her it was good because we won. Mom then answers her own question by announcing that those girls on the other team were playing dirty. Dad apologizes for missing the first game of the year, but it's perfunctory. He's wearing a yellow sweatsuit too. He doesn't want to be left out. I tell him it's okay and there'll be other games. My brother Lance is six years old and stirs around the unwanted green beans. I stare at his dinosaur plate and Spider-Man fork and wonder why everything has to be something. It's my turn to ask Lance how was his day. This is what we do at dinner. We ask about each other's day as if it was an actual object, something that could be held and presented. Lance giggles, covers his face, and tells us normal stuff happened. Everyone smiles even though we have no idea what normal stuff is. Dad asks me more questions and I try some humor; I say, "How could I possibly describe my day in a manner that would truly communicate my individual experience and world view concerning what had happened in that randomly delineated time period?" My parents laugh, and make we're-impressed faces. Dad says, "Did you learn that in school today, Kate?" He manages enough sarcasm for my approval. Mom shakes her head, then grabs my nose. Her fingers are cold. I look just like Mom. Right there, in the middle of my stir-fry, I make a solemn promise to never colour my brown hair auburn, or wear a yellow sweatsuit.

After dinner, I go to my room to do homework and Facebook my friends. Dialogue boxes pop up on the lower right corner of my screen. We type messages on walls. We don't capitalize. We use bad grammar and code words. We chat about who is seeing whom and how far each couple has gone. We chat about TV and we chat about Mr. Sorent. We chat about weekends past and future and we chat about nothing, and it's a comfort. I don't hear my friends' voices but I know all their secret names.

A TV on a rolling stand replaces his podium. Mr. Sorent is a live wire. His hands are pissed-off birds that keep landing on his face and then flying away. We sit and whisper jokes about Molly's short skin and Miles's porn moustache, but we don't take our eyes off Mr. Sorent.

He says, "There will be more films and even some live demonstrations, but today's clip is the arc of the course." One of us turns out the lights without being asked, and the TV turns on.

A black-and-white security video of a classroom. There are finger paintings and posters with big happy letters on the walls. Stacks of blocks and toys and chairs that look like toys are strewn on the floor. There is no sound with the video, and we don't make any sounds. Five preschoolers run around the room, two more are standing on chairs and trying to knock each other off. The teacher is a young woman. She wears white, unflattering khakis and a collared shirt with the school's logo above the breast. Her hair is tied up tight behind her head, a fistful of piano wire. She breaks up the fight on the chairs, and then another child runs into her leg and falls to the ground. She picks up the squirming child, grabbing one arm and leg. She spins, giving a brief airplane ride, but then she lets go. Mr. Sorent pauses the video, and we know the teacher did not simply let go.

Mr. Sorent doesn't say anything until we're all looking at him. He says, "I don't want to say too much about this." He edges the video ahead by one frame. The airborne child is a boy with straight blond hair. We can't see his face, and he's horizontal, trapped in the black-and-white ether three feet above the carpeted floor. "Your individual reactions will be your guide, your teacher." The video goes ahead another frame. The boy's classmates haven't had time to react. The teacher still has her arms extended out. If someone were to walk in now and see this, I imagine they'd want to believe she was readying to catch the child. Not the opposite, not what really happened. Mr. Sorent moves the video ahead another frame and a wall comes into view, stage right. Class ends, and none of us will go see Mr. Sorent after school.

At dinner we eat spaghetti, and we're quiet. Everyone's day is a guarded secret. My parents missed my soccer game and when they ask about it, I tell them I scored a goal when I didn't. I think they know I'm making it up; my parents are smart, but they don't call me on it. They're still dressed in their work clothes, not their usual sweatsuit dining wear. Mom sits up straight and I can almost hear her spine straining into its perfect posture. Dad crouches behind a glass of water. Lance won't speak to us. He shrugs and grunts when we ask him questions. Dad sighs, which means he is pissed. Mom tells Lance it's okay to have a cranky day. I imagine Lance flying through the air, toward a wall, and I get the same stomach dropping feeling I get sometimes when I think about the future.

I don't eat much and I go up to my room early to Facebook. My friends are all here on my computer. No one talks about the video. We know the rules. But no one knows what they're supposed to write in their notebooks. Mr. Sorent handed us special-lesson composition notebooks that he wants us to decorate. We're supposed to write down diary entries or essays or stories or doodles or anything we're moved to do after reflecting upon the lesson. My notebook is open but empty, a pen lying in the spine. I've tried to write something, but there's nothing, and I get that afraid-of-the-future feeling

again.

Days and weeks pass without another special lesson. We've had plenty of time to waste. Our first term grades are good and we lose ourselves in the responsibilities of senior year: college recommendation and applications and social requirements.

On the first day of winter term the TV returns. Mr. Sorent doesn't have to tell us what to do. We pull our chairs in tight and put away our books. Mr. Sorent says, "Lesson Two, gang."

There is a collage of clips and images—nothing in focus for more than a second or two—of car accidents. The kind of stuff some of us saw in driver's ed. The images of crushed and limbless and decapitated bodies are intercut with scenes from funerals, and there are red-eyed family members, the ones who never saw any of it coming, wailing and crying and breaking apart. Then the video ends with a teenage boy, alone in his room. There's no sound. His head is shaved to black stubble and he wears a sleeveless white T-shirt. The room is dark, and he scowls. There's no warning and he puts a handgun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. A dark mist forms behind his head and then he falls out of the picture. Mr. Sorent switches to the preschool video, still paused where he left it. He runs the video for a frame, then a second. The boy is still floating and horizontal, but getting closer to the wall. On the wall, bottoms of the finger paintings are curling up, heading toward the ceiling as if everything could fly. None of the boy's classmates know what is happening yet. But we know.

Mr. Sorent says, "Don't forget to do your homework."

There was this time I was waiting for Mom to come home. I had a Little League game in an hour. I wore my white uniform and black cleats, ponytail sticking through the back of my hat. I was in front of my house skipping rope, even though I didn't like skipping rope, but I liked the sounds my cleats made on the pavement. I was nine years old but if anyone asked I pretended I was ten. Three neighbourhood boys, three teammates dressed in their white baseball uniforms, came by, grabbed me and forced me into one of their backyards. I didn't resist much as they used the jump rope to tie my arms behind my back, but I screamed a little, just enough to let them know that I didn't fully approve especially since they never talked to me at baseball practice or games because I was a girl. They led me toward the edge of a stranger's wooded property, to a woodpile buried in dried pine needles and spiderwebs. They'd hanged a bullfrog by its neck from a piece of twine. It was as big as a puppy, kicking its legs out and covering itself in web and debris. The jump rope went slack on my arms but the boys didn't care. They told me to watch. They threw rocks. They had a BB gun and shot out one of the frog's eyes. Then they took turns pulling and pinching the frog, dancing at the base of the woodpile in their bright white baseball uniforms. Everything was white. They had a book of matches

I left the jump rope in the grass like a dead snake and walked home and sat down in front of the TV. Nothing was on. Mom was late coming home and we missed the first inning of my game. When it was my turn to be the pitcher, I closed my eyes before releasing every pitch, afraid of what might happen.

Jake sits in a chair at the front of the room. Jake is elderly and has no hair. His face is a rotting fruit, and he moves like a marionette with tangled strings. He grins. Big yellow teeth break through his purple lips. He wears only a hospital gown, blue and white socks, and brown slippers. None of us wants to be here. Jake says, "Thanks to the loving support of family and friends, even if I don't beat

this disease, I'll still have won, you know what I mean?" We don't know what he means. We couldn't possibly know. He says more heroic things, things that win us over, things that speak to the indomitable human spirit we always hear about, things that inspire us, that make us want to be better people, things that make us believe.

Then Mr. Sorent says, "Okay, Jake." Jake drops the curtain on his yellow teeth and he slouches into his chair, his marionette stings cut. He tells us everything he's just said is bullshit. He tells us to fuck off. He hates our fucking guts because of our health and youth and beauty. He hates us because we expect and demand him to be brave in facing his own withering existence, because we expect him to make our own lives seem better, or tolerable. He tells us we're selfish and that he'll die angry and bitter if he wants, that he's not here to die the right way for us, fuck you, you fucks he tells us, he doesn't give two shits about us and he tells us that we'll all die the same way he will. Alone. He limps out of the room, limbs shaking and moving in the wrong directions.

Mr. Sorent says, "Look here," and he points with his bat. We hate that stupid bat now. We want to steal it or break it or burn it. It's meaningless to us. The bat points at the TV screen tucked away in a corner of the room, framed by all those posters that are no longer cool, but trying too hard to be cool. We want to destroy those too. We want to destroy everything. Mr. Sorent is still pointing with that ridiculous bat at the floating-boy video. It moves ahead another frame. Class dismissed.

I help Lance with his homework. Lance sighs like Dad whenever we finish a problem, as if he'd just completed the world's most demanding task. I tell him he'd better get used to it. His eyebrows are two little caterpillars fighting on his forehead. I want to tell him about the bullfrog and about pitching with your eyes closed.

My cell phone rings and Lance ducks under the couch cushions. He thinks he's funny. Caller ID says it's Tom, my boyfriend, and I crawl under the cushions next to Lance. Lance giggles and tries to push me out, kicking me in the head and chest. Tom hasn't called me all week. I hold the ringing phone against Lance's ear, and mock screams mix with his giggles. My last date with Tom was a movie. We watched the previews intently. During the movie, I wouldn't let him stick his hand into my jeans. I told him to stick his hand in his own pants. I thought I was funny. He pouted the rest of the night. I don't and won't answer Tom's phone call. I'm going to break up with him. He's starting to scare me. Lance and I emerge from the couch after the phone stops ringing, and Lance rushes through the rest of his assignment, his eights looking like crumbling buildings.

I go upstairs to the computer. I tell everyone that I'm going to break up with Tom before I tell Tom. Tom hears it from somebody else and he yells at me through cyberspace: capital letters and multiple exclamation marks and no smiley faces. I make jokes about him masturbating to porn. I make jokes about the size and smell of his dick. I don't do any homework for Mr. Sorent's class.

All eight of us in Mr. Sorent's special class, our grades aren't good anymore. We are not in good academic standing. Some of us drink. Some of us smoke. Some of us will fuck anyone and everyone, or we punch and kick and destroy, or we drive really fast and late at night, or we stay locked in our rooms. Teachers openly talk about the changes, our senior slides, our early spring fever, and they pretend to be more knowing than they are. But they don't know anything and they won't do anything.

Mr. Sorent has stopped teaching us AP American History because we don't listen. Most days he sits at his desk and reads the paper, smelling of old cigarettes and something else, something organic none of us cares to identify. His hair is greasy and formless. His jeans don't fit his waist correctly, no

cut to the length and style we want. He doesn't shave and his beard grows in patchy and rough. He wears old glasses now, the lenses too big. He is an old man trying to act young. He's a fraud. He knows nothing. He can teach us nothing. We know this now, even if we didn't know it then. We've stripped his podium of the bumper stickers, stolen his CDs and his miniature bat.

We only listen to Mr. Sorent during the special lessons. One class he showed us a PowerPoint presentation of crime scene photos: there was a man beaten to death with a bat, only his sausage-size lips were a recognizable part of his face, and there was an old man hacked to death with a samurai sword, and there was a woman who shot herself in the chest with a shotgun, she was a junky and so withered you couldn't tell she was female, even with her shirt off. Another class was war footage, soldiers and civilians in pieces and burnt and eaten away by the chemicals neither side was using. Another class was snuff and torture films and the sound was the worst part. In other classes we saw the Columbine video, terrorists beheading kidnap victims, grainy newsreel stuff from Chernobyl and Hiroshima, and from Auschwitz and Cambodia and Rwanda and Kosovo and their endless piles of bodies.

And there's still the floating-boy video. Moving only frame to frame with each new day. Some days we can believe there has been no progress, as if that boy will be trapped in the amber of TV forever, but that's not right. He has progressed. He's almost at the wall.

No one talks at dinner. Just forks on plates. Mom says she already ate and then goes out wearing heels and sunglasses and not her yellow sweatsuit. Dad takes off his tie and unbuttons his shirt and dumps Lance in front of the TV with his dinosaur plate and Spider-Man fork. Lance has dark, purple circles under his eyes, his skin carrying something heavy. In all the hours of TV Lance has already logged, I wonder if he's seen the floating boy. Dad disappears into his bedroom, and then the master bathroom. Both doors shut at the same time. I'm the only one eating at the table. Maybe this is how it always was. I go upstairs. Online I find my friends arguing without me. Tomorrow is our last class with Mr. Sorent. Its arrival will be unheralded and inevitable. I still haven't written anything in my notebook. I can't decide if I want that to mean anything. If I were to write something down, I'd tell Mr. Sorent about the bullfrog. No, maybe I'd just tell him about me pitching in the Little League game. Tell him how when I closed my eyes, I hoped the ball would stop somewhere between me and the catcher and just float. I would hope so hard I'd believe it was really happening. With my eyes closed, I'd see that ball just hovering and spinning and I'd follow the path of those angry red stitches along with everyone else; we'd all stare it for hours, even when it got dark. But then I would hear the ball hitting the catcher's mitt, or the bat, or the dull thud of the ball smacking into the batter's back, and open my eyes.

Mr. Sorent has shaved and cleaned himself up, has a new mini-bat, bumper stickers back on his podium. He's a cicada, emerging fresh from his seven-year sleep. He says, "You think you know why I'm doing this. But you don't," which is something so teacherly to say and utterly void of credibility or relevance. "So let's begin again."

We're tired and old, and we've experienced more and know more than he does. We know we can never begin again. We hand in our special notebooks. They are decorated and filled with our blood, except for one notebook that is empty. One of us closes our eyes after releasing the empty notebook, refusing to watch its path to the teacher's desk.

Mr. Sorent turns on the TV and the floating-boy video. The boy's head is only inches away from the wall. Some of his classmates are watching now, but they probably don't know what is really going

on, or even what is going to happen. We hope they don't know. We hope they aren't like us. The teacher has retracted her arms and is facing the boy and the wall. Her face is blurry and because we haven't seen the entire video at normal speed, we don't know if this means she's trying to look away or if it's just a quirk of the video or if there's some other meaning that we haven't unearthed, or if it's all meaningless.

Mr. Sorent rewinds the video, the boy flies backward and into the teacher's embrace. We know it won't last. He says, "I need a volunteer."

This isn't fair. He is trying to break us apart, turning we into me. Doesn't he know that we'll hate the volunteer? The volunteer won't be able to rewind back into the we. We will never be the same. Maybe we are being melodramatic but we don't care. We believe the volunteer to be irreversible; there is no begin again, Mr. Sorent, why can't you understand that? But I volunteer anyway.

I leave our circle and it becomes *their* circle. I walk to the front of the class, next to the TV, and I imagine the floating boy finally hitting his wall and then smashing through the right side of the television and into me, into my arms.

"Stand here and face that wall."

I do as he says. I feel their eyes on me. Them who used to be we.

"Please walk halfway toward the wall. Everyone else watch the video." I take four steps and stop. The TV is behind me so I can't see the screen. "Please halve the distance again, Kate." I take two steps. When I move I hear the DVD player whir into action and then pause when I pause. "Again, Kate." I take one step. I could touch the wall now, if I wanted, and rip down the movie posters that we once tore down.

"If you keep halving the distance, Kate, will you ever get there? Is forever that far away, or that close? What do you think, class?" He says *class* like it's the dirtiest of words. I close my eyes, and take a half step, then a quarter-step, an eighth-step, and I still haven't hit the wall.

"That's good enough, Kate." I don't move, but not because of what he said.

"Go back to your seat and we'll let you decide whether or not this little boy will ever hit the wall." I don't move. My eyes are still closed and I'll stay here until I'm removed. I haven't touched it yet, but the wall is intimately close. It's impending, and it's always there. Mr. Sorent says something to me but I'm not listening and I'm not going to move. I'll stay here with my eyes closed and pretend that where I am is where I'll always be. Where am I? I'm at the dinner table discussing days with my dissatisfied parents. I'm helping Lance and his caterpillars with homework. I'm at the computer instant messaging secrets to secret friends.

"Return to your seat so we may finally watch the video, Kate."

No. I'm staying where I am. I'm the baseball pitch that stops before home. I'm an empty notebook. I'm half the distance to the wall. I'm the video with an ending that I won't ever watch.

The Two-Headed Girl

1

I have to keep swinging an extra fifteen minutes before I can go downtown and to the Little Red Bookstore, because Mom wants to run the dishwasher and the blender tonight. I wonder if my time on the swing will generate enough extra juice for those appliances, or even if she's telling me the truth. I've been having a hard time with telling-truth or truth-telling.

Anne Frank is on my left again. I only ever get to see her in profile. Whenever I'm around a mirror she is always someone else. Today, she's the early-in-her diary Anne, the same age as me. Anne spent most of my swinging afternoon pining for Peter, but now she wants to talk to Lies, her best friend before the war.

She says, "I feel so guilty, Lies. I wish I could take you into hiding with me."

I get this odd, stomach-knotty thrill and I pretend that she really knows me and she is really talking to me. But at the same time, I don't like it when she calls me Lies. I say, "I'm sorry, Anne, but I'm Veronica." The words come out louder than I intended. I'm not mad at her. I could never be mad at Anne. It's just hard to speak normally when on the downswing.

Anne moves on, talks about her parents and older sister, and then how much she dislikes that ungrateful dentist they took in.

"Nobody likes dentists," I say and I want her to laugh. She doesn't. I only hear dead leaves making their autumn sounds as they blow up against the neighbor's giant fence and our swing set and generator

Mom sticks her only head out of the kitchen window and yells, "Looks like we need another fifteen minutes, sorry, honey. I promise I'll get Mr. Bob out here tomorrow to tune everything up."

This is not good news. My back hurts and my legs are numb already. She's promised me Mr. Bob every day for a week. She's made a lot of promises.

"Hi, Veronica." It's that little blond boy from across the street. He's become part of my daily routine: when I come out, he hides in our thick bushes, then sneaks along the perimeter of my neighbor's beanstalk-tall, wood plank fence, and then sits next to the swing set and generator.

"Hi, Jeffrey," I say. Anne is quiet. Jeffrey has a withered left arm. Both of us try not to stare at it.

He says, "Where's your Dad?" His little kindergarten voice makes me smile, even though I'm sidetracked by that particular question.

"I don't know, Jeffrey, just like I didn't know yesterday, and the day before yesterday." I try not to be mean or curt with him. He's the only kid in town who talks to me.

Anne says, "My Dad is hiding in the annex."

Jeffrey stays on my right, which is closer to my head. He only talks to me. I know it makes Anne lonely and sad, which makes me lonely and sad, just like her diary did. I don't remember what came first: me reading the diary or Anne making a regular rotation as my other head.

Jeffrey says, "You should ask your Mom or somebody where he is."

I know Jeffrey doesn't realize what he's asking of me. I know people never realize how much the words hurt, sometimes almost as much as what isn't said.

I say what I always say. "I'll think about it."

"Can I ride on the swing?"

Anne is mumbling something under her breath. My heart breaks all over again. I say, "No, sorry, Jeffrey. I can't let you. You'd have to ask my mother." I find it easier to blame everything on Mom, even if it isn't fair.

Jeffrey mashes his fully developed right fist into his cheek, an overly dramatic but effective pantomime of I-never-get-to-do-anything-fun.

I say, "Do you want to walk downtown with me when I'm done?"

He nods.

"Go ask your parents first."

Jeffrey runs off. With his little legs pumping and back turned to me, I let myself stare at the flopping and mostly empty left arm of his thin, grey sweatshirt. He scoots onto his front lawn and past a sagging scarecrow, a decoration left out too long.

My legs tingle with pins and needles, and Anne is crying. I wish I could console her, but I can't. Now I'm thinking about the question I've always wanted to ask Anne, but never have because I'm a coward. I could ask her now, but it isn't the right time, or at least, that's what I tell myself. So we just keep swinging: a pendulum of her tears and me.

2

Jeffrey and I are downtown, playing a game on the cobblestones. I have to step on stones in a diagonal pattern. Jeffrey has to step on the darkest stones. I've seen him miss a few but I won't call him on it. I'll let him win.

Anne is gone and Medusa has taken her place. She is my least favourite head but not because she is a gorgon. I wish she were more gorgon-esque. Medusa is completely un-aggressive, head and eyes always turned down and she doesn't say boo. I feel bad for her, and I hate Athena for turning Medusa into a hideous monster because she had the audacity to be raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena was the one with the big-time jealousy and beauty issues, kind of like my mother. I used to try and talk to Medusa, to make her feel better about herself. I'd tell her that her physical or social appearance doesn't measure her worth and that her name means *sovereign female wisdom*, which I think is really cool for a name, so much cooler than my name which means *true image*. But she never says anything back and when I talk her snakes tickle my neck with their forked tongues.

Jeffrey shouts, "I'm winning," even though he keeps falling off dark stones onto light stones. Balancing with only one arm must be difficult.

I say, "You're really good at this game."

It's getting dark and I know Mom will be mad at me for being so late, but I'm allowing myself to champion the petty act of defiance. We make it to the Little Red Bookstore with its clapboard walls, cathedral ceiling, and giant mahogany bookcases with the customer scaffolding planks jutting out at the higher levels. There are people everywhere. Customers occupy the plush reading chairs and couches, the planks, and the seven rolling stack-ladders. I hold Jeffrey's hand as we wade through the crowd toward the fiction section. No one notices us.

Jeffrey is as patient as he can be, but soon he's tugging at my arm and skirt, asking if we can find dinosaur books, then asking if we can go home. I need a stack-ladder to go after the books I want. They're still all taken. Even if I could get a ladder, I can't leave Jeffrey unattended and he can't climb the ladder and walk the bookcase scaffolding with me. So I grab a random book, something I've never heard of by someone I've never heard of, because I have to buy something. Then I walk Jeffrey to the kid section and to some dinosaur books. He sits on the ground with a pop-up book in his lap. He knows all the dinosaur names, even the complex ones with silent letters and ph's everywhere, and I've never understood why boys love the monsters that scare them so much. Above my heads, people climb in and out of the ladders and platforms and book stacks.

I say to Medusa, "I think they look like bees in a honeycomb." Medusa sighs and doesn't lift her head.

Jeffrey sounds out an armored dinosaur's name, an-kie-low-saur-us, ankylosaurus, then he stands up and swings an imaginary tail at me.

I say to Medusa, "Come on. Tell me what you think. Something. Anything!"

Medusa's snakes stir, rubbing up against my neck. She says, "Unlike my sisters, I'm mortal."

Everyone in and above the stacks stops what they are doing and looks at us, looks at Medusa, who for once returns their stares. No one turns to stone, at least not against their will, and I know it's time for us to go. The customers are upset with us, likely because we're talking about mortality in a bookstore.

I brush a particularly frisky snake off my neck and I say, "Me, too," but enough time has passed. I'm not sure if Medusa knows I'm responding to what she said. Communication is so difficult sometimes.

We walk to the register and pay for the book I don't want.

3

It's dark when I get home. Mom is sitting at the kitchen table. She's dressed to go out, even though she won't, wearing a tight candy-red top, the same red as her lipstick, with a black poodle skirt. Her black hair bobs at her shoulders. She could be my sister back from college ready to tell me all she's learned about life and love as a woman. But she's not my sister.

There are two white Irish-knit turtleneck sweaters on her lap. On the counter, the blender is dirty with its plastic walls dripping something creamy. The dishwasher is in a loud rinse cycle. My dinner is on a plate, hidden under a crinkled, re-used piece of tinfoil.

Mom says, "You shouldn't keep Jeffrey out so late. He's only five years old. You know better than that." Her voice is naturally loud. She looks at me quick, like a jab. Then she goes up the left side of one sweater with the scissors.

She's right, but I'm not going to acknowledge her rightness. Just like Mom won't acknowledge that my other head is Jeanne D'Arc. I say, "Jeffrey had a great time at the bookstore and his parents were fine with it." Suddenly not quite ready for an argument to start, I add, "Everything okay with the blender and dishwasher?"

Jeanne whispers a prayer, coving her face with my left hand, very pious and humble.

Mom says, "So far so good, thanks for asking. You're such a sweetheart." Mom goes up the right side of the other sweater. She works so very fast. "It's going to be cold out tomorrow, so I'm making

you a nice, warm, and presentable sweater.” She says presentable as if anyone will see me. Mom gets up and goes to her sewing machine next to the kitchen table. I wonder if Mom planned the sewing machine into this evening’s allotment of electricity and then I’m worried that I didn’t spend enough time on the swing today, and then I hate myself for being so trained.

I say, “What’s for dinner?”

“Mushroom chicken, corn, rice pilaf. Go wash up first. And you are going to do your math and science homework tonight, Veronica. No excuses. I can’t put off your exams any longer. They’re due in the post in three days.”

I mix truth with a lie. “I bought a book that I really want to read first.”

“Tomorrow night is your book club and the next night you have to take the exams. You are going to do your homework tonight.”

Mom is always so reasonable, and I hate it. Makes me feel like I’m the bad one for wanting to fight. I say, “I don’t care,” but not very loud. I think Mom is going to let it slide, but then she breaks protocol by commenting on my other head.

“Why is there a boy on your shoulder?”

Jeanne crosses herself.

I don’t know what to say. Other than when she’s making two-headed clothing, Mom usually ignores my other head. I manage to say, “Real nice, Mom. She’s Joan of Arc.” I don’t say her name in French because I don’t want to remind Mom that she hasn’t given me a French unit to work on in almost two weeks.

“I didn’t say that to be mean, Veronica.”

“Then why did you say it?”

She stares at me. “I won’t let you start another fight with me over nothing,” she says and turns on the sewing machine.

I throw myself into a chair and pick at my lukewarm dinner. I don’t wait for Jeanne to say grace.

There’s a spider fern hanging above Mom and the sewing machine, some of its leaves are browning. With the machine’s vibrations, some leaves break off and fall onto Mom’s head. She sews quickly and the result is a beautiful Irish-knit turtleneck sweater with two turtlenecks. No visible seams where two different sweaters come together. She is very talented, and I hate her. Okay, I don’t hate her but she makes me very angry without me being able to rationally explain why. Yesterday, I constructed an elaborate Cinderella fantasy where my father, a man I no longer remember, was driven off by my evil and shrewish mother. I suppose it’s the only desertion scenario that doesn’t hurt me.

I offer Jeanne some of my food but she is fasting. Now I feel guilty. I struggle to finish what’s on my plate. I think about Jeffrey insisting that I ask Mom where my father is, or better yet, how come he doesn’t see me if he really lives in the same town as us, but I know tonight is not the night for that conversation.

Mom says, “Try the sweater on, sweetie. Make sure it fits.”

I pull the scratchy wool over our heads. Jeanne doesn’t like it.

Mom tugs at the shoulders, waist, and sleeves, inspecting her work. She says, “This fits nice. Veronica. You look great.” Mom is still at least six inches taller than me. I don’t know if I’ll ever catch up. Mom folds her arms over her thin chest, her defense and attack posture. Big smile, quite satisfied with herself, with what she’s done for her daughter. It’s a very intimidating look. One I don’t know how to

overcome.

She says, "Homework time. I'll check your answers when you're done."

I leave the kitchen with a full belly and empty of fight. As I walk into the living room and past the snarling fireplace, Jeanne closes her eyes and says, "*Allez!*" which means *go!* I already feel bad about the food so I hurry away from the fire, but I trip and fall, my hands scraping on the brick landing in front of the fireplace. Jeanne spasms and twitches, trying to remove herself from my body and away from the fire, and I'm crying, but not because of the pain, and somehow this must be all Mom's fault too.

"Sorry!" I get up and dash up the stairs to my bedroom. My hands sting and I look at them. The palms are all scraped up and bloody.

Jeanne says, "It's only stigmata. But keep it secret. Go wash it off and don't tell your mother."

At least, that's what I think she says. My French is a little rusty.

4

Mr. Bob was my science teacher when I went to school. I don't miss school and the taunts and the stares and how incredibly lonely I could be in a lunchroom full of other people. Nor do I miss Mr. Bob, even though he's always been nice to me.

Mom and I are standing next to the swing set, watching Mr. Bob. Odd and misshapen tools that couldn't possibly fix anything fill Mr. Bob's fists and spill out of his tight, too short, and paint-stained overalls.

My mother says, "Can you fix this?"

Mr. Bob says, "No sweat."

My other head is Marie Curie, child-aged, so no one recognizes her. She's very plain and I find that beautiful. Marie says something in Russian that sounds vaguely commiserative. Mom ignores the head.

Unprompted, Mr. Bob launches into an explanation of how the swing set works. Maybe he does know that I have young Madame Curie with me and he's trying to impress her. If so, that's really creepy.

Mr. Bob says, "This swing set is one big friction machine. Mounted on the horizontal bar above is an axle with circular plates, each plate turning and rubbing against pads when you swing, making an electrical charge. The prime conductors, your long brass pipes, follow the frame of the swing set. The ends of these conductors carry metallic combs with points bent toward the faces of the glass plates. The combs collect the charge, and the pipes bring the charge to the collector/generator and then to your house. Really it's very simple, but not very efficient."

Mom says, "Nothing Veronica's father did was very efficient."

I want to tell Marie Curie the obvious, that my father made this swing set, but he isn't here anymore and I don't know where he is but supposedly he's still in town, somewhere. I don't think Marie has learned English yet. The next time I go to the bookstore, I'll get her biography, and maybe some books on electricity and friction machines so I can fix this without any help.

Mr. Bob climbs a ladder to get at the axle. Tools drip and drop like a lazy rain. As much as I'd like the swing to be tuned up so it'll be more efficient, I don't want Mr. Bob touching any of it. The swing

is my only connection to my father and I'm afraid Mr. Bob will ruin everything. Wanting to be random and unpredictable, but knowing different, I blurt out, "Where's my father?"

Mom folds her arms across her chest and says, "Why don't you go inside and wash up. Don't forget you're hosting the book club tonight and you haven't prepared any of the hors d'oeuvres."

I stare at Mom and I want to cry. Marie stares at Mr. Bob and clucks her tongue at his apparent incompetence. Marie says something in Russian that I think would translate as: "I'd like to see this contraption's schematic, you talentless monkey."

Mom softens, and bends to whisper in my ear. She says, "We can talk about this later if you really want to. If you need to. But it's for the best, Veronica. Really. Go on, now. Set up for your book club."

5

My book club is here. Six women, ages ranging from Peg Dower's somehow rheumy thirty-six to Cleo Stanton-Meyer's health-club fifty-three. Our chairs and bodies make a circle, a book club Stonehenge but with an end table loaded with coffee, tea, water, chips and spinach dip, and biscotti at the center. Everyone has their dog-eared copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf on their slacks-clad laps.

Mom stays in the kitchen and doesn't participate in the discussions, even though she reads all the books. She insists this is my *thing*. I hear the sewing machine turn on and off sporadically.

Bev Bentley, white-blonde and DD chest (Mom is so jealous), says, "Excuse me, but is that her, Veronica? Will we be able to ask her questions?" Hands cover faces all over the circle. Peg and Cleo groan much like a crowd at a sporting event when something bad happens. Bev is the something bad happening. She asks me the same question every meeting. And every meeting I answer: "Sorry, Bev, she's not the author of this book." It is rather insulting for her to continually think that my other head is that simple or predictable, but I don't tell them my other head is Sylvia Plath. They should be able to figure that out on their own. Sylvia just smirks and takes it all in, burning Bev down with a look that could shame an entire culture.

Our discussion begins with Peg trying to compare Clarissa Dalloway to Catherine from *Wuthering Heights*, but no one agrees with her. Sylvia laughs but it sounds sad. I redirect the discussion to the book's themes of insanity and suicide and reality and the critique of the social system. None of us says anything that's new or important, but it is still satisfying to discuss something that matters to us. Cleo wonders aloud how autobiographical this novel was for Woolf, and I wonder how hard Sylvia is biting her tongue or maybe she just doesn't care enough to join in. I'll need to keep me and her out of the kitchen and away from the oven.

Then book talk is over before everyone's teacups and coffee mugs are empty. And as usual, our talk deteriorates into town gossip.

"Darla has been sleeping with that new pharmacist."

"William Boyle?"

"He's the one."

"He must be ten years younger than Darla."

"Fifteen."

"And her divorce isn't even final yet."

They move on to discuss the high school gym teacher and his secret gay lover. As best as I can

figure, this mysterious lover is more abstract ideal than reality. Sylvia is still disinterested. She's flipping through my copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* and doodling in the margins. And there's more of the who's-sleeping-with-who talk followed up with who's-not-sleeping-with-who talk, which includes Cleo's third husband's erectile dysfunction diagnosis and her daily countdown until he fills one of those blue pill prescriptions, likely to be handed out by the philandering pharmacist.

The sewing machine in the kitchen is quiet and has been for a while. Mom stopped sewing once the book discussion ended. I know Mom thinks this book-club-cum-gossip-session is a substitute for all the wonderful teenage conversations I don't have with other teenagers. I don't know if it is or not, since I'm not having those teenage conversations with other teenagers. I generally don't mind the town dish as I do find it entertaining, but tonight it seems wrong, especially on the heels of Woolf's book. I mean, this was what she was railing against.

So, inspired by Virginia to say something meaningful, or at the very least to yank everyone out of complacency, I say, "Does anyone know where my father lives?"

In the kitchen, the sewing machine roars to life, stitching its angry stitches. Sylvia whispers, "Atta, girl," into my ear. I look out into the newly silent Stonehenge of women. All of them here, all of them totems in my living room only because my mother asked them to be here. I love Mom and I hate her for the book club; not either/or but both at the same time.

The women, they shrug or shake their heads or say a weak *no*. Then they fill their plates with chips and biscotti. I know it's not fair to make them uncomfortable, but why should I always be the only one?

Our discussion slowly turns toward TV shows and movies, and then what book should we read next. Peg finds the book I didn't want to buy sitting unread on the mantel. She passes it around. Everyone claims to have heard about the book that no one has heard about. They mumble agreeable sentiments about it being challenging, something new, having buzz, and they decide, without asking me and before the book makes it way around the circle back to me, to make it our next book club selection. Sylvia thumbs through it and doesn't say anything.

Mom reappears from the kitchen with everyone's coats in her arms. Polite, light-pats-on-the-back hugs are passed back and forth, even when I insist upon handshakes, and then everyone leaves. I'm left with Sylvia, no answers to my father question, a mother pouting and sewing in the kitchen, loads of dishes and cups and trays to wash, and a book in my hands that I don't want to read.

6

I am up and out of the house before Mom wakes up. We haven't said anything to each other since the book club. Getting up and eating breakfast alone quickly becomes an hour on the swing set. It's cold and there's no way of knowing if Mr. Bob's tune-up did any good. The swing doesn't seem any different, or more efficient.

I really don't want to do this today. It's not helping that my other head is changing by the downswing, almost too many heads to keep up with. There's been Cleopatra, Bonnie Parker, Marsha Brady, Fay Wray, Emily Brontë, Cindy Lou Who, Janis Joplin, and even that vacuous snot, Joan Rivers.

My heads never change this fast, and I hate it. I really wanted nothing more than to sit out here and talk with one of the heads, have someone help me decide what to do, or what to think. I don't know why finding my father is all of a sudden so important to me. Last week and pretty much all the

weeks before that week, he was never more than a fleeting thought, a forgotten dream.

The swing coupled with my changing heads are making me dizzy, so I put my legs down, scraping my sneakers on the sand, digging an even deeper rut, and I stop swinging. Then I go and sit up against the neighbour's wooden fence with my head in my hands, trying to regain some level of equilibrium. Joan Rivers is yammering in my ear about my terrible clothes and iffy skin. The leaves I'm sitting on are cold and wet. I get up and walk.

I walk downtown to the cobblestones and the Little Red Bookstore and Joan Rivers becomes Lauren Bacall becomes Calpurnia becomes Scout becomes Boo Radley's mother, which is confusing stand outside with my hands cupped on the bookstore's bay window. The place is empty and I'd have the shelves to myself but I keep walking, past the Little Red Grocery and Little Red Hardware and the Little Red Candy Shoppe and the Little Red Bank, and out of the downtown area and through the town square, and Boo Radley's mother becomes Lucille Ball becomes Karen Silkwood becomes Mary Shelley becomes Susan Faludi. I walk past the Little Red Library and the Little Red Schoolhouse, which was where I dropped out during my sixth-grade year. Tommy Gallahue showing up to school with a papier-mâché second head was my last day of sixth-grade. Susan Faludi becomes Blanche DuBois becomes Alice in Wonderland. I walk past the town high school and I walk past without any regrets. Alice becomes Rosa Parks becomes Vivien Leigh. I walk through residential neighbourhoods peeking over fences and into yards randomly, looking for the man I don't remember, looking for the man I know I'll never find. Vivien Leigh becomes a starving Ethiopian girl that I don't know but have seen on commercials becomes Zelda becomes Flannery O'Connor. I don't have a watch but it must be noon as the sun is directly over my head and I'm very hungry, so I start walking back home, taking a different route back, staying in the small neighbourhoods, still looking through fences and even inside a few mailboxes, for what? I'm not sure. And Flannery O'Connor becomes Oprah becomes Nancy Drew becomes Maya Angelou becomes Shirley Temple becomes Eponine becomes Little Orphan Annie becomes Amelia Earhart and I'm home.

My mother is on the swing. She's actually sitting on the swing that apparently is not calibrated to precisely my weight. But she's not really swinging. She's sitting, her legs folded under, her toes tickling the rut in the sand, her face in her hands, and I can't be sure, but I think she's crying. She's wearing an Irish-knit turtleneck sweater like mine, but with only one turtleneck. Amelia Earhart becomes Shirley Jackson becomes Hester Prynne. I'm hiding where Jeffrey usually hides, in the thinning shrubbery next to our neighbour's fence. Then Jeffrey runs out of his house, across the street and to my mother. No one has seen me yet. Jeffrey is talking with her. I guess, for him, it doesn't matter who is swinging. I won't hold it against him. He's only five. I wonder if he asks her the same questions he asks me. Mom laughs then scoops up Jeffrey into her lap and they swing together. Hester Prynne becomes the witch accusing Abigail, and I'm angry-jealous, or jealous-angry, and maybe they're the same emotion, each just wearing something a little different. I walk out of the bushes and to the swing. Abigail doesn't say anything but just points with my left index finger.

Jeffrey says, "Hi, Veronica!" between giggles.

"Hi."

Mom stops the swing. She says, "Jeffrey, you can swing by yourself, as long as you promise not to go too high. Promise?" If she was crying before, there is no sign of it now.

Jeffrey puffs out his chest. "I promise."

I want to ask how Jeffrey is going to manage this with his withered arm. But he hops right on the swing, tucks the left chain of the swing under his armpit, grabs the other chain with his good arm and starts pumping. We watch him swing for a few minutes and Abigail has become someone else but I

haven't bothered to look and see who it is.

Mom says, "We'll be right back, Jeffrey. I need to talk to Veronica for a bit. Keep pumping, kid." She puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me to the house. After a few paces, she says, "What?" like I've been staring at her expectantly, but I haven't. Then she says, "I need someone on that swing today. I need the juice to vacuum the floors later."

7

We're in the kitchen. I sit down. Mom stands and paces. She doesn't wait for me to say anything and starts right in with a simple declarative.

"You and I came home early one afternoon and I found more than the expected amount of heads in my bedroom."

I say, "How old was I?"

"One."

My other head is Mom. Mom when she was my age. Despite her pigtails, she manages older-Mom's fierce, intimidating look. I don't know what she's thinking, and I'm tired of trying to figure out who's thinking what.

I ask, "Who was he with?"

"Does it matter?" Mom doesn't waver, doesn't get all choked up or anything like that, not that I expected her to.

"I don't know if it matters, Mom. That's why I'm asking."

"The woman was the middle school science teacher that Mr. Bob replaced. She doesn't live in town anymore."

I imagine a woman who looks like Mr. Bob. She wears baggy clothes that have chemical stains and Bunsen burner singe marks. She has short, straight hair, mousey brown, wears thick glasses, and no makeup. Pretty in a smart way, maybe. I imagine Mom finding her in the bedroom with my father, who I can't describe in such physical detail, no matter how hard I try to conjure him.

Young-Mom doesn't say anything but just stares at her older self. Is this look of hers studied observation or soul-deep sadness?

"Did he leave after you caught him?"

"The very next morning."

"Did you tell him he had to leave?"

"No."

Young-Mom says, "Do you really need to know any more of this?" which I don't think is a very fair question. It's not fair to be double-teamed by Mom like this, even though I know that I can't always blame everything on Mom. I fight the urge to tell the Young-Mom to shut up.

I say, "That's terrible. I'm sorry that happened, Mom. I really am."

"Thank you." Mom says it like she's accepting a throwaway compliment about her shoes. Young-Mom pouts. They are both so intimidating but I stand up and stutter-walk to Mom and give her a hug. She doesn't uncross her arms off her chest so the hug isn't soft and comfortable. I make contact mostly with the angles of her bones and the points of her elbows and the sweater wool scratches my

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