

DARLIN' NEAL

BLUE STAR

MAGGIE IS NINETEEN and her muscles and joints ache. She feels like she has the flu, and old. She lives on Baltimore Street with a stripper named Susan. Susan's acting crazy, giggling and jabbering away in the high voice of a child, then crying about a lost boyfriend.

"Shut up!" Maggie says. "I don't know what's worse—when you giggle or when you cry."

Maggie is a little girl. All the kids in her evening day care make up stories. The teacher holds a notebook and writes them down. Maggie's are filled with details and movement: One day a man and a woman were walking through the desert and, Poof! They were gone...A skunk and a jackrabbit went to Hobbs...They dined on Granddaddy's chili and cheese...Oh skunk! Oh skunk! You elegant punk. With you I'd like to roam....

She tells her teacher she has no bed in her home. She tells her teacher she's always in the corner. She says, I'm the little girl that no one loved.

Oh dear, says Mrs. Bailey. Maggie, you have to know that's not true.

It is, says Maggie. Then she whispers, but don't tell anyone.

Mrs. Bailey wishes Maggie would act her age and she says so to Maggie's mother.

And what age would you like her to act? Maggie's mother wants to know. What should she be accomplishing at four?

Four! Mrs. Bailey is mortified. I thought she was at least eight!

Maggie is so tall and she will always be tall, her body rushing her to the size of an adult. And Maggie's always hurrying as if she's trying to meet that person she will become. She hurries to the tire swing. She hurries to the bus. She hurries to eat her dinner and her stepfather, the Psychologist, makes her eat every bite. Sometimes she gags. Sometimes Maggie's mother sits at the table and cries about this. Sometimes her mother grabs the plate and fights with him.

Maggie listens and hopes her side will win. Once she saw the Psychologist hitting her mother and ran between them. The Psychologist hit Maggie by accident and she flew from one side of the room to the other and it didn't hurt. The Psychologist was so shocked he left the house.

She doesn't think about fights. She rushes until it's time to go to bed and dream.

Maggie likes baths but only when her mother is the only one home. When the Psychologist is there he comes in to pee and accuses Maggie of trying to peek around the shower curtains. Maggie's heard the word repression. She knows that hers mustn't be broken or she'll have no conscience. The Psychologist likes to swat her wet butt because then it sounds the loudest.

Maggie tells Mrs. Bailey, We have a wooden paddle at home named Mr. P.

Mrs. Bailey wants to know how often it's used but Maggie starts talking about swimming instead.

She says, I love to swim in the lake with my granddad. He comes to get me almost every weekend when it's warm. I like having almost no clothes on, the way the water feels rushing between my thighs and on my arms. The way it flaps against my stomach. I like to splash water high in the air, then swim down deep inside until it gets dark.

Oh my, says Mrs. Bailey.

MAGGIE LISTENS TO HER MOTHER talking to Mrs. Bailey, but she doesn't care. She is far away and nineteen. She lies beside a man. She is in Baltimore. She hears the neighbors arguing. In a Bronx accent that grates on Maggie's ears, a woman cries, "Harry! Harry! Harry! Did you get the crack?"

Maggie's mother frowns at Mrs. Bailey. She is tired of people expecting too much of her daughter. She takes Maggie's hand and Maggie smells the perfume she loves. Once she had a teacher who wore that scent and all day she felt like she was with her mother.

She runs ahead. They are walking home today in the bright New Mexico sun in spring. Maggie runs too far ahead and her mother is calling. She turns quickly and finds her mother there, still coming up behind.

They stop in a playground. They swing with Maggie in her mother's arms, happy to not be home. For so long she just sits there being swung, listening to the air rush back and forth until her mother asks, would you like to slide?

Maggie doesn't answer. She is with the man. He grabs her hair in his hand. He kisses her until her lips feel bruised. He runs his lips over her neck.

She goes to the store with her mother. She loves Cocoa Pebbles and her mother buys them and Skittles and brownie mix. So much sweet pleasure! Still Maggie fears it will run out too fast. She runs up and down the aisles, hurrying and looking but not asking. Each trip to the grocery she's only allowed one request.

Her mother sits her inside the basket to help her keep still.

At home Maggie reads. She reads all the time. She tells her mother she wants to marry Jughead when she grows up. She tells her mother about Raggedy Ann:

You know why this book is so good? Because it's like you are right there with her.

She reads in a magazine about a boy who was stolen and found. One day she will feel there is no difference between the two, but now she wishes to be stolen and found.

Mama! Mama! If I were stolen, what would you do?

I'd search to the end of the world until I found you. Then she frowns and says, why do you ask me that? Her mother's fears are not entirely secret to Maggie. She likes to see them in her mother's eyes, for her.

Because I just don't know how you'd ever find me. Thieves plan out how to hide little girls and boys.

Maggie goes to her room and turns out the light. She is a bed-wetter and she lies on a plastic air mattress. The Psychologist punishes her when he finds the sheets wet. Through her window she can see the sky. Her daddy is a blue star she prays to.

She wakes crying at night. She used to be able to run to her mother. She runs to the door and waits there wishing her mother would hear her whispery movement and come to her. The Psychologist says little girls can't be getting into bed with their parents. She stops crying. She stops waiting.

THE MAN IS WITH MAGGIE IN ANOTHER ROOM. He is old as her daddy would be if he were alive. He removes Maggie's sweaty t-shirt. He unbuttons her jeans. It is Easter. Easter has always been nice, coloring eggs with her mama. Lilies on the tables to plant later outside. Maggie likes it that the man has traveled the world playing in bands. He has loved many girls. He has four children somewhere. She wants to be a little girl with him. She's hurried to this place and arrived.

She hears the neighbor woman crying. She sits up in bed and looks out the window. The man and the woman next door stand on their porch. The man backhands the woman and blood spews from her nose and mouth, splattering on white walls and dirty windowpanes.

Maggie is wasted and she's run out of money. Maggie calls her mother and speaks to the answering machine. "I hate living in this part of town. My friend's in a porn mag. I'm drinking too much. The neighbors are white trash. Black men harass me on Baltimore Street. Talk about prejudice. You know they actually call this place Pig Town? Oh God," Maggie says. "Never mind. I love you." Her mother will be so upset when she hears that message, but Maggie can't take it back.

SHE IS A LITTLE GIRL and her mother calls her to the kitchen in the morning. She loves the smell of vinegar and dye. With the wire holders her mother shows her how to stripe and dapple the eggs. Maggie's fingers turn pretty colors, then black.

Look at your beautiful eggs! her mother says.

Maggie arranges the dried eggs in a basket of lime green straw.

The kitchen is hot and Maggie has worked so hard she sweats. Her mother takes off Maggie's gown and opens the door and Maggie sits in her panties with wonderful air coming over her. Goosebumps travel her body. She doesn't want to eat but her mother makes toast anyway. She steps outside and scatters crumbs for the birds on the brick fence and on the ground and then on her stomach when she lies down. She watches the black birds hop her way. One comes right up beside her and she can see the bluish membrane covering and uncovering its eye. It pecks at her stomach and she reaches a finger out slowly, touching the blue shimmering in its feathers as it flies away.

MAGGIE AND HER LOVER are full of such longing. She is wise and knows it's time to stop wishing for what they wish for. He is so much older than she and waits for the wonder in her. He wants to feel it through her. She is a pale, pale girl and usually that paleness is beautiful. Now she is gray though her skin still perfect. Her eyes so large and blue now with the deepest shadows. She asks him to draw the window shades, to bring the bottle. She wishes to live with open windows. The neighborhood stinks. The fruit rots. Stray dogs dig in the trashcans.

The man jerks her hair gently. "Are you asleep? Am I that boring?" She longs for him to keep tugging on her hair.

He leaves the room.

She was asleep and now she's just tired. She drinks a beer. She goes to the bathroom and vomits. Her body is full of bruises. Bruises for no reason. Her arms are full of tiny punctures. She flushes. Her lover is coughing in the next room. She hears him through the wall.

She cleans her mouth. He comes back into the room. His eyes are so blank. She grabs his hair. She wants it to be longer. She wants it to hurt when he pulls.

MAGGIE! SWEETIE! Her mother is calling. How did you run into that door?

I was just thinking and you know how sometimes when you're thinking, you can't see?

THERE'S A MESSAGE ON THE MACHINE. "Maggie, honey, do you want a ticket home?"

Maggie calls back, "I haven't eaten for days. I can't stop crying. I feel like I have the flu, but it won't stop. I'm sorry for telling you about Susan. Anyway she's not doing anything with anyone. She's just spreading her legs. I think I want to come home soon, but I'm not ready yet."

The man is impatient. He wants to go to a bar. They watch Susan dance on stage. They watch her take off her clothes. Maggie knows the man is aroused. So many girls have aroused him. She looks out the window at a sign sparkling with happy colors, yellow, orange, red and blue. On the wall above the window, false beer pours from a Bud Light sign. She looks all around the place. She loves the cheesy lava lamps. The man turns her face to his. He kisses her slowly. He touches her slowly, slower than the lights. She pushes him away. I want a drink, she says. He grabs her arms tightly so that she cannot move them. He looks her straight in the eye and she looks back. He laughs nervously and goes to order. Susan dances on the stage. She throws her panties at Maggie who throws them back.

A biker comes up in all his leather and chains. He has his hand inside his belt.

"I need a bourbon and seven," he says.

"Sorry," Maggie says.

"A bourbon and seven," the biker says. "Wild Turkey."

Maggie looks behind him at the bar in the distance, so far to walk, all those people making deals. An old-time register rings.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm not working tonight."

MAGGIE! MAGGIE! Her mother almost sings. What are you thinking? Are you hungry? Would you like to go to Peter Piper Pizza and play the games?

It is spring and Maggie is five. They live beside the college campus, beside the park. Maggie's mother is always reading, always studying for tests and she's married to a Psychologist. When she is not studying for tests she looks up at Maggie and she knows nothing.

Come on, come on, little desert girl. Maggie walks to the living room with her mother. There the Psychologist sits. He is an expert in children. When Maggie is alone with him he tells her of all the children's sorrows, of their broken bones, abandonments and scalding tubs.

Her mother braids Maggie's hair and wraps it on her head in pretty circles secured with butterfly barrettes. She presses Maggie's cheeks in her hands, oh that face, she says.

She looks closer. What's wrong, Maggie? She gets a washcloth and wipes Maggie's face. She frowns at Maggie's arm. Always bruised, she says.

The Psychologist says, She's an easy bruiser and she plays too rough.

Maggie's bottom is hidden with all its bruises. Once the Psychologist gave her mother a black eye and said, you just want everyone to see and feel sorry for you.

Then he was sorry, sorry, sorry, himself. He never gave her a black eye again.

Maggie will find a way for someone to see, a way he can't blame her for.

But then her mother is ill. She stays in bed for days. The Psychologist takes Maggie to the bedroom door to look at her mother lying there, but Maggie can't go in. He says she might catch what her mother has and die. He tells Maggie her mother is dying and when she does it'll be just the two of them. Doesn't she want it to be just the two of them? Doesn't she want to stay alive and not go with her mother? He asks her over and over until she says, yes. He sits with Maggie on the couch. He shows her pictures of her mother in various states of undress. Isn't her mother pretty, he asks? Isn't she sexy?

But Maggie's mother gets well and Maggie is so happy and she will find a way to make him leave.

MAGGIE IS HUNDREDS OF MILES AWAY and congested. Now *she* is always ill. She sits on a couch in her living room in Baltimore beside the man. She is watching Susan tell stories.

Susan is twenty-four, Maggie tells the man. And all she's got is made up stories. She can't help herself for lying. She hasn't done a thing with her life. I don't want to end up that way. I want to do something with my life in the next five years. She feels the man's breath against her cheek, moist.

He takes her hand and they go out to find another bar.

Maggie's dancing is something to see. The way she feels it all. The way she has no inhibition.

They go sit down to have dinner. A woman is crying at a nearby table. Maggie turns off the overhead light and looks out at the stars.

"Look at me! Look at me," a man is saying to a woman at another table. "Don't you know all I've ever done, I've done for you?"

"Hey, asshole," Maggie says. "Hey! Fuck yourself. Don't you know that's never true of anyone?"

Maggie's mother touches her face. Maggie and her mother stare at the empty table. There is anger everywhere, but not in the Psychologist's eyes.

You'll still come see me, he says to Maggie. While I work it out with your mama and come back home to you.

Oh, I never want you to come back, her mother says. There's no question there.

Maggie wonders what she can do to make it certain she'll never have to see him again.

She waves from the doorway while her mother looks in the garden. The rosebush is high with fragrant roses. Together mother and daughter cut some to take inside and they are free and her mother stays in bed a few days and doesn't get up, but then she is all right, just like before.

That is over and it's another time.

"You've been sleeping all day," the man says to Maggie. He is practicing very poorly on his guitar.

"Goddammit," Maggie says. "I'm so tired of rockabilly and now I'm tired of punk, too."

Everything is white—the sheets, the walls, the comforter. There's a hole in the wall and Maggie sticks her arm inside. She takes out a baggy of white powder. "Sorry, I lied," she says. "We didn't get rid of it all." He looks disappointed and hungry.

"I think you're going to have to leave soon," she tells him. "Your problems are too old and I'm just a teenager trying to get my life started."

"Would you want to get married?" he asks.

Maggie laughs. "Oh, let us be married, too long we have tarried." Her flu, her crying are getting better.

She gives him the powder. She picks up handcuffs and cuffs him to the bed. She goes back and sits on a chair.

"Hey," he says.

"Not now."

"Then undo me."

"I'll undo you when I'm ready. I'm not joining you on this one. Don't you feel good yet?"

It seems like hours pass and she's sleeping and then realizes he's sleeping too, his arms out like he's crucified.

Outside the door her mother calls. Come on Maggie. Sweet Angel! Come on and let me give you some medicine.

She watches the man drool. He is alive but he cannot cough. There is more. Maggie puts it back in the wall. She grabs a blanket and wraps it around her shoulders, twists ends tightly around her arms. She crawls under the bed, into coolness, hidden in dark, where she is relieved to feel no cobwebs. She wishes her mother were there to hold her. In the morning she will call. She runs fingers through her own hair. She reaches. A piece of lint bounces up and falls into her outstretched palm.