

2ND PLACE
FIFTY-FIFTY FICTION AWARDS*KAREN HEULER

COOKIES

MY COUSIN SILVER HATED ME: it came as a shock. She looked at me with that impassive face, her gray eyes void, her mouth perfectly in place. No betrayal. No aunt or uncle could intercede with a stern, "You two make it up right now!"

There was nothing to make up. I felt it like a little thrill of terror, my own little horror movie. She didn't hate me because of anything I'd done, so I couldn't apologize. She hated me for me. Instead of the prince who would come and love me for myself, I got someone who hated me for myself. No one had told me about this, how both good and bad emotions sometimes came stripped of justification.

When I realized that Silver despised me, I tried for a while to figure out how to win her. I was especially nice to her sisters, since I knew (all the cousins knew) how fierce she was about them. I saved candy for them and made sure Silver was around when I gave it out. I exchanged good dolls for bad, I let them win at games, spiritually and intellectually empty games – talking through dolls, making up boring pretend lives for them, clutching the boring pretend lives they themselves wished for. I tried my best to do what I thought they wanted, but I could do it only so long before a creeping contempt would overtake me, a contempt that I'm sure had exactly the same taste as Silver's contempt for me. I'd have angelic intentions and a sugary high-pitched voice for an hour, and then I would feel it creeping in, the snaky, spidery, jellyfish tone.

"My dolly just spit on yours," I'd say. "Oops."

Usually, they'd look at me solemnly. They had learned to be suspicious.

"And that was rude, what she just did," I'd say benignly.

Ethel always fell for it. "What did she do?" she asked.

"Didn't you hear? She said it was all your fault. I don't know what she meant, do you?"

Ethel's lips began to tremble, but she was learning to be tough. Sometimes I would leave her alone when her lips shook; other times it egged me on.

"*What* was your fault?" I'd ask, almost tired. "What terrible, terrible things did you do?"

And then I'd wait for her to cry, and it became so satisfying that I didn't even need Silver to be around. I liked to think she heard these things and respected me.

And I always had a cookie to give the crying little girl. I think, looking back, that it was the gift of that cookie that was the cruelest part.