

TERESA BURNS GUNTHER

Lilies

Jennifer walked the final block, head down into a fierce wind that pulled at her hair. A mouse scurried across her path, but she saw only the cracks *break your mother's back* and the lines *break your father's spine* in the sidewalk. She squinted up at her apartment building, blinding white in the electric sky then hurried up the steps. Home.

Her door, 3G, pushed back, resisting. She froze, conjuring an intruder on the other side until she discovered a manila envelope wedged with her mail under the door. She yanked it out and heard a ripping sound. The answering machine beeped as her door closed with a snap. Then she remembered, rushed to the phone and dialed.

"Pick up," she whispered.

"Happy Trails Preschool, Kelly speaking."

"Hi, Kelly, I forgot to tell you--."

"You sound awful."

"Well, that's why I came home."

"What's up?" Kelly said.

"Elise's father is picking her up, her babysitter called. I forgot to tell you," Jennifer said, and twisted the cord. "Her mother's out of town, and with their divorce, well...."

"You worry too much," Kelly said.

"I'm just . . ." Jennifer pressed her lips.

"Who's the Dad?" Kelly asked.

"Dr. Benson," Jennifer said, running her hand down her thigh. "Green eyes, dark hair; like Elise. Kind of handsome."

"Oh! The one you have a crush on," Kelly said, making Jennifer regret telling her about the parent-teacher conference, when Dr. Benson had met with her after school. She'd been concerned about Elise who'd been hiding, usually in the miniature kitchen, cradling plastic fruits in her lap. He'd made Jennifer tense and tongue-tied, so handsome in a crisp shirt and his neatly trimmed beard, leaning in when she spoke. She ran her thumb across her lips and felt a buzzing excitement just remembering. Jennifer tucked the phone against her shoulder to blow her nose. She hadn't been sick in almost a year. Before she'd moved out on her own she was always sick, causing her mother to fret, *What if it's AIDS?*

"I hate to ask," Kelly said, "but will you take Hairy? Everyone else is going out of town."

Jennifer shrugged out of her coat and sighed. "I thought you were taking him."

"I can't," Kelly said, "Michael's waiting. You know how it is." But Jennifer didn't know. No one waited for her, especially since Kelly met Michael on HeavenMadeMatches.com. Kelly had tried to sign her up, but cyber-dating was alien to Jennifer. And how would she explain it to her mother? She wondered if Kelly would ever share their Friday night ritual again--movies, popcorn and doing each other's nails. "I'll get someone to drop him—Max, we don't put crayons in our nose—um, so, you're sure? You don't mind?"

"I guess not," Jennifer said, though she'd hoped for better company than a hamster over the long weekend. Kelly thanked her and said,

"Feel better."

"Have a good weekend," Jennifer said, with an enthusiasm she didn't feel, but Kelly was gone.

It hurt to swallow and her head ached. She was out of aspirin but found her thermometer and popped it in her mouth. She shuffled into her tiny kitchen and opened the refrigerator covered with handmade magnets and children's works of art. The frigid air was cool on her face. She scanned the shelves, but found only a wrinkled apple, ranch dressing, and a wedge of suspect cheese. She leaned against the counter, working the thermometer in her mouth, surveying her apartment with pride. It had been her present to herself on her twenty-fifth birthday, the result of three careful years of planning.

A red light blinked on her answering machine. She pushed Play, then Stop when she heard her mother's voice, then crossed to the windows and opened the blinds. She had a beautiful view of the Sawtooth Mountains if she crooked her head just right. She slumped down in her sofa and frowned at the manila envelope addressed in careful cursive writing. She slit it open, bits of newspaper and scribbled notes spilled out. There was one about a young woman's murder with her mother's red inked command: Read This! She stuffed it all back and tossed it on the table. She smoothed the torn cover of her *Artist* magazine, admiring the look of her name and address on the label. She read for a while but her eyes studied words she couldn't absorb. The thermometer read 100.1°. When the phone rang she let the machine answer.

"Jennifer," her mother's husky voice was punctuated by the brisk tapping of her heels. "You still have your name on the message, someone will know you're alone." Jennifer heard her exhale, could almost smell her cigarette smoke, then the machine cut her off.

The buzzing of the door startled her. She hopped to her feet. The room spun. She clasped her head to steady herself.

"Yes?" she called through the intercom.

"Miss Jones?" a man's voice said.

"Yes?"

"It's Jerry Benson, Elise's father. We have something for you." Was this Kelly's idea of a joke?

"I'll have to come down. My buzzer's broken." She kept forgetting to ask her landlord to fix it, though her mother reminded her daily. *What if you need the police?*

She stepped out of the elevator and saw a dark shape through the watered glass. Dr. Benson with his neatly trimmed beard stood outside, a cage in his hand. He towered over Jennifer's five feet six inches. A little girl with long brown hair hid behind him.

"Hello Elise," she said.

"Surprise, Miss Jennifer," Elise peeked out with a shy grin. The sky had darkened. Jennifer pulled the door wide to let them in.

"I don't know if you remember me," Dr. Benson said. The tweedy green of his jacket matched his eyes. Jennifer felt herself blush.

"Yes, of course I remember."

He extended his hand. Worried she might be spreading germs, but not wanting to refuse him, she shook it. He lifted the cage, and said,

"We brought the hamster."

"Thank you Dr. Benson, but--." What had Kelley said to get him to come? "Did Kelly ask you to bring him?"

"Jerry. Please." His smile never wavered. She hesitated. Was he saying please about his name or coming in? Her confusion was lost in a string of violent sneezes. He looked alarmed as she took a staggered step toward the cage.

"Oh, dear, I'm a little dizzy."

"Please, let us help you with this." He took her elbow.

"Thank you," her voice sounded far away and she worked her jaw to open her ears. Dr. Benson held the elevator door and she stepped inside.

"Come, Elise," he called. The girl stood outside eyeing the thick black padding that draped the walls. She jerked her body NO twisting right and left, hair swinging, blue skirt twirling at her waist. Jennifer slipped into her singsong teacher voice and said,

"It's okay. Someone's moving. They put these up so nothing gets hurt."

Elise stepped inside, eyes narrowed at the padded walls as the doors slid shut. Up they went the three joined together in the reflective doors. Jennifer examined her faded jeans and turtleneck, her pale face. A Mrs. Potato Head, she thought, all her features representing a convergence of the oddities of her family tree. How she wished she could have inherited her mother's good looks; her eyes looked so large, her mouth too wide for her narrow nose. Her ears, she hid under her straight blonde hair, had once earned her the playground nickname of Dumbo. Elise made faces at their reflections while Hairy skittered around his cage.

"I overheard the other teacher --," Dr. Benson started.

"Miss Kelly," Elise interjected.

"--saying that the hamster,"

"Hairy--"

"Elise. Please don't interrupt--," Dr. Benson said. Then to Jennifer, "She said that you were sick and the hamster was to go to you. So," he said with a shrug, "I offered to drop it off." The doors slid open.

"Well, I hope I'm not contagious," Jennifer said. She hadn't been sick since moving out of her mother's home. Dr. Benson waved off her concern and followed her down the carpeted hall. Elise walked beside her and took her hand.

"What kind of medicine do you practice, Dr. Benson?" Jennifer asked, she'd slipped into her singsong voice again; it sounded false to her ears.

"Psychiatry," he said, smiling, his eyes closing slightly.

"Really?" She could hear her mother sniff. *Shrinks*, she'd say, *crazy waste of time and money*. Jennifer opened the door and led them in. Elise walked around the living room wide-eyed, touching things, testing the chintz sofa for its bounce and dipping her fingers in the fountain that bubbled in the window's fading sunlight.

"Where would you like it?" Dr. Benson asked, hoisting the hamster cage.

Jennifer removed a cushion from the window seat to make room.

"I'm sorry Kelly put you to all this trouble."

"It's no trouble. Really. I insisted." Jennifer's head throbbed. She rubbed her temples. "Are you okay?" he asked, setting the cage down. "Is there someone to take care of you?"

Elise peeked into her bedroom.

"A family member?" Dr. Benson asked, giving Elise a look. He jerked his chin and Elise hurried back to his side. Dr. Benson waited for a response. "A friend or neighbor?"

"My friend's meeting her boyfriend's parents this weekend." She shrugged. The closest thing she'd had to a serious boyfriend was George, when she was still living at home. Somehow, she'd managed to keep him a secret from her parents, the whole nine months. But, in the end, he'd said he saw himself with a more ambitious woman. One who wore a suit and heels to work, a woman he could meet for drinks downtown and have something other than kids to talk about with his colleagues and friends. But it was his friends and colleagues who'd cornered her at parties, seeking parenting advice. "She's great," they'd said, and "she knows so much about kids." But George never matched their esteem, confiding that he didn't

really like kids. Sure he'd have one or two eventually—it's what one did. But he didn't want to make a life of it.

Dr. Benson coughed.

"They're pretty serious," Jennifer told him. "You know how it is." He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. Jennifer choked back a lick of laughter. He nodded, with a curious smile. "I'll be fine. It's just a cold." She crossed her arms, embarrassed. "Aspirin and rest, that's all I need."

"Who lives here?" Elise asked her father.

"Just Miss Jennifer," he said, surveying the room.

"No. She lives at Happy Trails," Elise insisted, frowning at Jennifer as if she'd caught her in a lie. Before she could respond, Dr. Benson said,

"Nice apartment. Colorful." He pointed to the red coffee table and walked to the floor to ceiling shelves painted a golden cream, filled with novels, children's picture books, and how-to books on arts and crafts. She cringed at the row of books with bold titles like Embracing Fear and Find the Courage to Live.

"You don't usually pick Elise up," she said to divert his attention.

He stopped, one hand poised above a book. "Well...no." He sounded defensive. "But now, with the divorce final, things are going to change." He began to pace.

"I was sorry to hear about your divorce," she lied.

"Yes. Thank you."

Elise whispered into Hairy's cage, "She doesn't live at school!" Jennifer gave her a quick, reassuring smile, and sat on the edge of the sofa.

"What's this?" Dr. Benson asked pointing to an easel turned to the wall.

"Oh, that...?" she said. "Just a painting."

"May I?" Dr. Benson asked, touching the easel frame.

Jennifer's heart beat high in her chest, and in spite of herself she said, "OK." Dr. Benson carefully spun the easel and pulled off the drape, revealing her painting. His eyes traveled the still life's three stark white flowers against a background of purples and greens, flowers stiff in a too small vase. Opaque-eyed faces stared out. Jennifer studied the swirl of confused color emerging from the center, she wasn't sure yet what it was trying to be.

"You made flower faces," Elise said. Then wrinkled her nose. "Eew, they have knives sticking in."

Jennifer leaned closer, amazed to see the petals did look like sharp knives stuck into the head of one of the lilies. She twisted a throw pillow back and forth in her hands.

Dr. Benson rocked on his heels, hands in pockets. "Interesting," he said. "What do you call it?"

"Garden party." She hadn't had a name. It just popped out. Elise climbed on the sofa next to her.

"So, a teacher *and* an artist," Dr. Benson said.

She shook her head, hiding an uncomfortable smile. "I'm just a beginner." She felt feverish. He opened his mouth to say something, but the phone rang. Jennifer hugged the pillow. Dr. Benson raised his eyebrows and puckered his lips.

"Would you like me to get it?" he asked, jerking his head toward the phone.

She shook her head, "No!" Her outgoing message filled the room. *Hello. This is Jennifer. I'm sorry I've missed your call. Please leave a message after the tone.* She cringed; it was so dull. Not like Kelly's message with snappy music and her cat meowing good-bye.

"Jennifer? Honey? Are you there?" Jennifer flinched. "Did my package arrive? It should come today, but in *that* neighborhood, it might have been stolen. Jennifer?" Her mother paused, inhaled and the machine clicked off.

"My mother thinks I should paint pretty pictures to make people happy," Jennifer said. Dr. Benson frowned. "She thinks my paintings are sad and angry." Jennifer stood up and draped her painting;

embarrassed she'd revealed so much. Her head felt like it was splitting in two. "Do you have any aspirin?" she asked, rubbing her temples. "I ran out."

Dr. Benson straightened and said, "No, but I can go get some."

"Oh, no," she said, alarmed. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. It's no trouble."

"Daddy," Elise whined, "what about our special vacation?"

"Special is helping people when they're sick," he said, taking her hand.

"Dr. Benson, this really isn't necessary. You have plans, and I--"

"May I tell you something?" he said. She nodded. "Going through that divorce was a constant litany of what's wrong with me. It's nice to do something for a woman who appreciates kindness."

Jennifer hugged her arms. The only man she'd dated since she'd been on her own was a cousin of Kelly's. Appalled at her mother's hysterics, her parent's unyielding control, he'd tried to run interference, coaching her to "cut the cord." It had only made things worse. He broke up with her; said she'd never be free until she learned to let people help her.

"Besides. I insist. Doctor's orders," Dr. Benson said, with mock sternness.

"Well," she said, smiling, "Thank you."

"Come on, Elise," he said, and pulled her by the hand. He pointed to Jennifer's keys. "I'll just take these, so you won't have to come down again."

The door clicked shut behind them. She collapsed on the couch and put her feet on the table, smiling at her new high-top tennies, a vast improvement over the crepe-soled everyday shoes her mother bought her. Jennifer closed her eyes and heard her mother saying, *You gave a strange man your keys? He has a beard! He's hiding something!*

Dr. Benson returned with a grocery bag in one arm, followed by Elise cradling a paper bundle that he took from her and carried into the kitchen.

"This is so nice of you," she called to him, struggling into an upright position. She tucked her hair behind her ears then quickly fluffed it out again. "I'm not usually so helpless."

"I don't think you're helpless--" he called back.

"I do--," Elise said, studying the bows on her shoes, peeking at Jennifer out of the corner of her eye.

"Your father's very kind," Jennifer said, surprised by the girl's boldness.

Dr. Benson returned with a vase of flowers and slid Jennifer's mail aside to make room on the low red table. Jennifer inhaled sharply at the sight of the large white lilies, so like the ones in her painting, but so alive and just beginning to open.

"Elise picked out some food for Hairy," he said. Elise frowned at the flowers.

"Are those for Miss Jennifer?" she asked, in a pouty voice. His look silenced her.

"The divorce was hard," Benson said, then followed Elise into the kitchen. Jennifer heard him talking, but couldn't make out what he was saying. He returned a moment later with a glass of water and laid two aspirin and two other pills in her hand. His mouth twitched. "Take these," he said, handing her the glass.

"What are they?"

His face fell. "Just aspirin," he said. "And something for your cold."

Jennifer recognized aspirin and shrugged. She swallowed the pills and wondered if her mother had taken her meds.

"You must be very good at what you do," she said. She'd begun to sweat.

"Mommy says he's infectual," Elise said, carrying purple grapes to the hamster.

"*Ineffectual*," her father corrected, then his mouth drooped at the corner. "She does?" Elise smiled, proud of her big word.

"What's it mean?"

"It means that your mother has hostility issues." Benson's shoes clicked on the floor as he paced, hands behind his back. Jennifer tried desperately to think of something to say to break the tension. He stopped at the window staring out. "Carol's just one of those women," he said, "who doesn't appreciate a caring man." He closed his mouth as if biting words. Jennifer wanted to tell him to look the other way, to see the mountains, but she found it too much effort to form words. Besides, he was probably anxious to go. She pushed herself up but was so dizzy she had to grab onto the arm of the couch.

"Oh dear," he said, "let's get you to bed."

"Let's?" Jennifer said. He nodded, as if she were agreeing, and suddenly his presence in her apartment felt wrong. She didn't really know him. "You should go," she said. "I'm fine--," but her blood rushed to her feet and the room turned around and around.

She woke in her darkened bedroom. She heard voices and realized they were just outside her bedroom door.

"Who's there?" she called, her voice a cracked whisper. It hurt to swallow. She was hot from sleeping in her clothes. When she opened her door, Dr. Benson was sitting on her couch, talking on his cell phone. "What's going on?" she asked.

"You shouldn't be out of bed," he said, flipping his phone closed and popping to his feet. She groped her way along the bookshelves to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator humming in its arched alcove. There was fresh orange juice and a basket of ripe, red strawberries she didn't remember buying. "Let me help you," Dr. Benson said. He took the juice from her shaking hands and helped her to the couch. Elise was crouched in a cave she'd constructed with cushions and pillows. She peered out at them as she sang softly to Hairy, "...the itsy bitsy spider climbed up the waterspout..."

"What's going on?" Jennifer asked again, alarmed to find them there.

"You fainted."

"I did?" she said.

"Yes. I carried you to bed."

"I've never fainted." She tucked her legs under her and frowned, "And I don't understand why you're here." She pulled a crumpled tissue from her pocket and blew her nose.

He poured her a glass of juice and sat, leaning toward her, elbows on his knees. "I couldn't go, not after you fainted." His voice was soft, his eyes sincere. "I was afraid you might fall and hurt yourself." He looked so concerned. But then she noticed a suitcase inside her front door. Dr. Benson hurried to explain, "We always went away as a family at this time of year," he said, massaging his hands. Jennifer had the urge to reach out and touch them. Elise knocked down one of her pillow walls and came to stand beside him.

"We go to the snow. It's fun," she said. "Mommy can't go." Elise looked at her father, "She's away." He sighed.

"I thought we'd try something new this year, just us," he said, patting Elise's shoulder. "But," he turned to Jennifer, "I won't leave until I know you're okay." Jennifer saw the gray in his beard. She felt grateful, and a little guilty for her suspicions. Elise scowled and turned to the bookshelf.

"I have Stellaluna," Jennifer said, "you like that."

"What do you say, Elise?" her father said.

"Thank you," she said and pulled two books off the shelf and trudged back to her pillow cave.

Jennifer felt her apartment swell with the life it held: a man, a woman and a child. She lifted the sweat-beaded glass and drank. It was cool and sweet on her tongue. It soothed her throat. "Oh..." she moaned, "this is good." She closed her eyes and licked her lips. When she opened them he was watching. She covered her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"I'm glad you like it," he said and smiled. "You should drink lots of fluids." Jennifer felt weightless. He asked her about her work at Happy Trails.

"You're good with children," he said. She told him she loved teaching the pre-K class, but for some reason started telling him about Kelly's big weekend and lost her train of thought, her voice trailed off. Then she laughed, a barking sound, imagining Kelly's face when she told her about Dr. Benson.

"Do you work with children?" she asked hopefully.

"No. I do couple's therapy. Psychoanalysis," he said and cleared his throat.

Jennifer looked into her glass. "You're so kind," she said, "I don't know how to thank you." He said it was nothing, the least he could do. Then she surprised herself by saying, "Maybe I could cook dinner for you, sometime?" Her legs chose that moment to wake, a million tiny pinpricks. "Oh!" she cried, struggling to straighten her legs and set her feet on the table. She rubbed at the painful sensation. "Oh...Agh..." she groaned. She laughed at his startled expression. "My legs fell asleep," she explained and felt the creeping return of her shyness.

He reached across the table and lifted one of her feet, cupping it in his hands. He began to massage, kneading his fingers into the hollows of her sole. He said something about nerves but she began to giggle and couldn't stop. She tried to pull her feet away, but he held on to them, smiling.

"Ticklish?" he asked.

"Yes! No! Stop!" she gasped. But he didn't. "Stop it!" she shrieked and pulled her legs back, wrapped her arms around them and hid her face in her knees. When she finally looked up, her face pulsed with heat.

Elise inched over and tentatively began to tickle her father. "Ticka-ticka," she said, digging her small fingers into his leg. He patted her and told her she'd better watch out or he'd get her. She jumped up, smiling wide as she ran across the room, but he didn't follow.

"No running," he snapped.

"It's okay," Jennifer said, but Elise scowled and plunged back into her cave. Dr. Benson watched his daughter for a moment and shook his head. He leaned forward and picked up a framed photo from the coffee table. He had lovely, long-fingered hands.

"Is this your mother?" he asked, studying her image, the dark eyes and olive skin. So regal, like she had the world balanced in the palm of her hand. A photogenic lie. "Are you close?"

"Close isn't the right word," she said. She shook her head, "It's a long story." She wondered what he'd think if she told him all the crazy days, the rollercoaster of her mother's episodes. She imagined he might understand. "She insists I call her Mommy." Jennifer turned the glass around in her hands.

"She's beautiful," he said.

"That's how she fools people," Jennifer said and smoothed her hair, so unlike her mother's dark curls. He tapped his finger on the frame, returned it to the table and sat back, his hands on the arms of the chair. "It all started with an accident," Jennifer explained. "I was six. There was lots of blood. My father said that's what made her so . . . ill." Jennifer was suddenly exhausted. His eyes flicked to the shrouded painting.

"May I draw you a bath?" he said. Tears filled Jennifer's eyes. Nothing was as it should be.

Jennifer closed her bedroom door, and locked the bathroom door behind her. She undressed and slid down into her tub with a sigh of pleasure. He'd added bath salts to the water. He'd been in her cupboards.

Eyes closed, she moaned as the heat soaked into her body. She ran her finger along the puckered pink scar on her abdomen, a tiny smirk from the childhood accident. As a girl, her mother pointed it out at every bath. She'd felt a deep shame all of her life for what happened. She was four. Younger than little Elise, in her Easter hat and yellow dress, running through the Sunday garden party on a too bright day with a large knife, the sun scampering down the blade, singing *three blind mice* giggling, *see how they run*, chased by warning adults, *they all run after...* a barking dog *...cut off their...* tripping in slow motion and falling hard onto the sharp knife, and the screams, the sirened rush, the enormous bed, the tubes, the frigid sound of beeping machines and somber, white coated men, all vivid in her mind. She rubbed the scar wondering suddenly why her memory was from far away and watching. She let her fingers slide over her abdomen, along her hips, down the tops of her thighs and up the insides of her legs. She pictured Dr. Benson's fingers cupping her breasts. Then someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"Jennifer?" Dr. Benson asked.

"What?" she cried, and sat up quickly. Water sloshed out of the tub.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She clutched the side of the tub. Her heart pounded in her ears. When she heard him leave she pulled herself out and dried off. She combed her hair; her reflection fogged in the mirror. She emerged in her bathrobe and a cloud of steam. Her bed was straightened, the covers turned down. She crawled in, lightheaded from the heat. There was a knock at the door, but before she could answer, Dr. Benson came in carrying a tall glass of frothy pink liquid.

"What's this?" Jennifer asked, amused by the sight of him in her apron.

Elise climbed up on the bed. "Health shake," she said through a yawn. Her hair was pulled into a clumsy ponytail.

"Elise," Dr. Benson warned. "Get down."

"It's okay," Jennifer said, patting the bed. Elise gave Jennifer a sleepy smile and lay at the end. Jennifer wondered if this is what it would be like to have a husband and a child.

"Daddy puts lots of vitamin medicine in to make us feel better," Elise said.

"Are you getting sick?" Jennifer asked, concerned, but Benson handed her the glass and said,

"She's fine. How are you feeling?"

She sipped the shake, conscious of his eyes flicking over her breasts, her damp skin against her robe. "I little better, thank you," she said. "Weird dreams though." She set her glass down and leaned into her pillows. "Dr. Benson?"

"Jerry," he insisted.

"Jerry." The sound of his name on her tongue gave her a tiny thrill she rubbed down her arms. "You've been so kind. But, I don't want you -- or Elise -- to get sick or spoil your vacation."

"We're fine," he said, mirroring her worried expression. "Don't worry."

She grimaced. "I sound like my mother. She's always worried."

"My mommy worries about me too," Elise whispered, eyes closed. Dr. Benson looked at Elise and pursed his lips.

Jennifer remembered her mother's alarm when she'd seen the queen-sized bed in her apartment. She pulled her robe closed. She hadn't returned her mother's call. Her mother would be frantic; they never went a day without speaking at least twice. She knew she should call, but she was so tired. Her eyelids began to droop.

"Drink it all," he said, pointing at the shake. "It will help." He ran a hand through his thinning hair.

He roused Elise from sleep. She followed him out, rubbing her eyes and closed the door with a bang that echoed in Jennifer's chest.

When Jennifer woke she felt weighted to her bed. A sharp, long ago memory surfaced of waking with her pajamas legs pinned together, trapped in her too-small crib. She stared at the ceiling and listened to the rattle of her breath, water tapping at the window, the swish of cars outside on the wet street. She pushed back the covers.

Dr. Benson was still there, on her sofa. Elise was asleep in her cave with Hairy.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. He brought a glass of water and held it while she drank, then led her back to bed. He fluffed her pillows with vigor and she leaned into them. He pressed a hand to her forehead, the small gesture made her want to cry. When she'd taken the apartment her mother had become erratic, vacillating between ugly accusations of ingratitude and tearful recitations on the dangers of living alone. She'd agreed to have a security system installed, but it made it hard to sleep, she'd laid in bed tense, listening, dreading the alarm's shriek, imagining ski masked men with more than jewels and stereos on their minds. She wondered if it still worked. She'd only been living on her own for nine months. She loved her apartment and freedom, but had always imagined more friends, maybe parties. No man had ever spent the night, until now. Until Dr. Benson.

He gave her the thermometer. She tried to tell him she was fine, but it came out jumbled. When she pulled the thermometer out, she couldn't read it. He took it from her hand.

"101.3°," he said. He shook two aspirin from a bottle. "Careful," he said as she swallowed. She felt a tick of fury. "Drink slowly."

"Dr. Benson--" her hands trembled the glass, "I--" the words were heavy on her tongue,

"Jerry," he said, "why won't you call me Jerry?"

"I can take care of myself," she whispered, startled by his tone. "You should really leave."

"I won't leave you here. Alone," he said, like an accusation. "Not when you're so sick." He smoothed his trousers with rough jerks of his hands. He'd changed his clothes.

"Where's my clock?" she asked. It all felt like a dream.

"Do you want to know the time?" He turned his wrist and pushed up his sleeve.

"I just want my clock."

He smiled a half smile. "Of course. I had to make room." He motioned to the small bedside table crowded with glasses, tissues and aspirin. He stooped to retrieve the clock from under her bed. He plugged it in. Digital 8's flashed at her.

"What time is it?"

"Time to rest." He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

"Where's my phone?" Her voice was sharp.

"I unplugged it so you'd sleep."

"Did my mother call?" she asked, suddenly panicked. "I need to call her."

"She'll be fine," he said. "Don't worry."

"You don't understand."

"Oh," he said, with a tight smile, "I think I do." Jennifer sat up, pushing the covers off, bile rising in her throat. Dr. Benson reached for her, telling her to stay in bed. "Let me get you what you need," he said. Her stomach lurched.

"I'm going to be sick," she gasped and pushed past him. She dropped to her knees and threw up in the toilet. He held her hair and patted her back. "Please," she gasped, waving him off, "Get out."

"It's okay," he said, offering a cool cloth.

"What's the matter?" Elise asked wide-eyed, peeking in.

"Not now, Elise," Benson snapped.

"Don't talk to her like that," Jennifer said. She flushed the toilet and sat back against the tub.

"You see, Elise," he said, hovering in the doorway, "Miss Jennifer has a hard time letting people take care of her."

"'Cuz she's a teacher?"

"Maybe." Then he said something about her being alone.

"Get out," Jennifer said. When he stepped out of her bedroom, she hurried out and pushed the door shut. She turned the lock, then stumbled back to the bathroom floor and held the cool cloth to her face.

"Are you going to spit-up again?" Jennifer jumped, surprised to see Elise hiding behind the bathroom door. "'Cuz it stinks," she said, holding her nose.

"I think I'm better now." Jennifer put her forehead on her knees and leaned back into the chill of the tub. Elise got on and off the bathroom scale.

"Throwing up is yucky," she said. She squatted down, her green eyes wary, studying Jennifer.

Jennifer began to shiver. She pulled herself up and brushed her teeth. Her eyes were bright and feverish, and suddenly she felt light, almost giddy. She crawled up on her bed.

Benson knocked on the door, "Jennifer, don't do this."

Why had she let him stay so long?

Elise tried to crawl under the bed. "Hey. Why is a phone under here?"

Jennifer knelt down and peered under the bed. "Come on out."

"I like to hide," Elise said.

"I know," Jennifer said. Elise pushed the phone out to Jennifer. She scooped it up and cradled it in her lap. Elise crawled out and sat beside her on the floor. Benson knocked harder. Elise's lower lip trembled.

"Do you want me to call your mother?" Jennifer asked.

Elise shook her head.

"Are you sure?"

The girl nodded. And Jennifer remembered, her mother was away.

"Well then, it's time to go."

Elise followed Jennifer to the door, her small fists clenched. Jennifer listened for Benson's footsteps. When they moved away she opened the door, let Elise slip out, and quickly locked it again. Benson's steps hurried back. He jiggled the handle.

"I was only trying to help you," he said through the door.

She perched on the edge of her bed, shivering. Her clock flashed 8888. The phone sat beside it, unplugged. His words echoed in her head. Finally, her front door shut with a bang.

Jennifer tied her bathrobe close and cracked open her bedroom door. There was only silence. She checked to find her keys still hanging on their hook. A loud squeak made her jump. But it was only Hairy, running fast, on his wheel, round and round, *squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*