

Destination

Sarah Stonich

At Miriam's insistence, Estelle has scheduled her flight so they could meet at the concourse and cab into the city together. Given their mission there's a likelihood one of them could back out, and besides, neither should be alone as they approach the business at hand, the crime.

Estelle is the first passenger up the ramp, calf-sueded and cashmered with colorful dashes that complement the dyed fur trim of her coat. Up close, Miriam sees the fur is real, and sighs. It's not as if they haven't had this conversation. Estelle is practically a spectacle next to Miriam in her wool car coat, tan slacks and tan cardigan – an ensemble that could be tossed into a dustbin, should there be any need to dispose of evidence. Similarly non-descript replacements are in her overnight bag.

The sisters bump cheeks and each quickly comments that the other is looking well. They turn down the vast concourse.

For a dozen yards, Estelle watches her sister in the periphery. Miriam has faded some, Estelle thinks. Less like herself, more like a widow.

Miriam can feel the deceptively soft gaze Estelle employs. She turns and they make real eye contact. “You hardly look the part, Estelle.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you hardly look like a killer.” It comes out much louder than intended.

Estelle’s eyes swivel to the family of travelers just abreast – a couple with two beefy teens in varsity jackets with athletic patches on their sleeves that look like Oreos. She squeaks, “Well, neither do *you*, Miriam.”

As the family moves ahead, Estelle sees the patches are embroidered hockey pucks, and though they pass quickly out of earshot, she attempts small talk, pointing out the many shops and kiosks along the concourse. “Airports were never like this back when Roger and I were traveling. They’re like malls now, aren’t they?”

To Miriam, the airport seems identical to the one in Boston – the same Starbucks and Cinnabons situated on the same corners, so that she must concentrate to place herself in Minneapolis. As they walk, she fidgets with the bangles that had set off the metal detector at Logan and wrecked her nerves for the morning. She hesitantly tells Estelle about her run-in with security.

“Do you think getting rid of them might be more prudent than risking more trouble on my return flight?”

Estelle picks up her sister’s wrist then drops it. “I’d toss them.”

Miriam sniffs. “You would.”

“You *asked*.”

The silver bangles are souvenirs from a trip to Mexico with Dennis, but Estelle wouldn’t know that. Rearranging them, Miriam notices a new liver spot on her wrist and frowns – they are definitely multiplying in spite of the expensive cream she’d ordered from an infomercial.

The guaranteed two-week trial period has already passed twice. Suddenly ashamed for her brief flight of vanity, she shoves her hands in her pockets, deciding to keep the bangles and throw away the cream.

Estelle trawls for conversation, “Is that coat new?”

“No.” Miriam stops. “There’s nothing about me that’s new.”

“Well, you look fine, Miriam. Very nice.” The hairstyle could easily be fixed. “By the way, did you get my birthday present?”

“I did. Thank you very much.”

“Did you get the joke? The amount, I mean...a hundred for every year?”

“Of course I *got* it, Estelle. It’s a lot of money.”

Estelle shrugs, “Well, my kid sister only turns seventy once!”

“I’m seventy-*two*. Since you started fudging your own age, you can’t keep anyone else’s straight.”

“Oh. Well, remind me to send you another two.”

Miriam inhales as Estelle starts humming her self-conscious hum. *Kid sister*. With her young face and lollipop voice, Estelle makes an unlikely elder to her and to Penny, the in-between-sister they’ve come to see. Miriam looks hard at Estelle – her skin is taut with procedures and peels, any worry lines buffed away – if her sister worries at all, Miriam thinks, it would be over the sorts of things other people only dream of worrying about.

They will visit Penny. If it’s as bad as all that, if she’s doing *that* poorly, they will say their goodbyes. If things seemed stalled, and Penny really needs their help, Estelle and Miriam will fulfill the pillow pact and murder their sister.

Miriam whispers, “Maybe.”

“Pardon, Mir?”

“Nothing.” Penny could live for weeks yet. Months. Her sons seem to think so, anyway.

They move on, scanning open storefronts, making full stops to look at cleverly displayed bags of wild rice, plush loons, and novelty snacks. Estelle examines such items as if they are necessities, choosing packages of Gummy Mosquitoes and Viking bobbleheads for her grandsons, a flickering blue night-light shaped like a bug-zapper, and a pair of trout-shaped oven mitts for Francesca.

A shop in the far periphery catches Miriam’s eye. “What time is it?”

Coming from opposite coasts, each is hours removed from the other’s time zone. Estelle pulls back a fur cuff to reveal her Omega, “Only 10:15!”

Miriam is out of the novelty store and charging toward the other shop – one that sells sleep number beds. She’s never seen such a store in an airport – in the window a mattress is sliced in half to show its innards slowly expanding and contracting as if breathing. She watches for a few huffs before heading inside to the next display, a fully made bed roped off against children or anyone else naturally inclined to lie down when tired. Miriam steps around the barrier to sit on the duvet. A lamp glows pinkly on the nightstand next to a water glass and digital alarm clock – she might be in someone’s bedroom.

Appearing with her packages, Estelle’s her shoulders slump, “Oh no. Miriam, Really.”

“What? I need a bed.” She lifts the price tag and makes a tiny noise. “And I have all that birthday loot burning a hole in my pocket.” As she lowers down onto the pillows, a groan escapes her. *Not bad.* Squeezing her lids to feign sleep, she can hear Estelle breathing and soon enough, pacing commences next to the bed. Miriam is just beginning to drift along to the rhythm of footfalls when they stop. She opens one eye to Estelle staring down, very near. With a twinge Miriam realizes she is in the same position poor Penny will be in an hour or so – prone, trapped, and at the mercy of sisters – those who love but have no obligation to like.

“I’m *so* tired, Estelle. I had a two-hour drive to Boston and two flights.” She pauses before adding, “Both in coach.”

When Estelle sits, Miriam shifts over, believing her sister might kiss her forehead. But she only clucks, “You should have said something, Goose, I would’ve upgraded you.”

Miriam rises to her elbows, suddenly fighting tears. “I really did not sleep a wink.”

“Of course you didn’t. I only got six hours myself.”

“I might not have the energy for this, you know.”

“But Miriam, you *said*...”

Miriam knew what she’d said. That she possessed the required detachment to do the Kevorkian thing, if it came to that.

She’d actually had some practice over the autumn, albeit on a dozen easy victims. When the eaves of her house were invaded by the very squirrels she once fed, Miriam lured them with peanut butter into Have-A Heart traps purchased at a discount with her PETA membership card. In the beginning, she drove them to the next county and released them. But when the carpenter took her on a crawl of the attic and handed her the repair estimate, Miriam quit ferrying and filled a wheelbarrow with water. After lowering the traps in, she’d look away for the time it took, singing to drown out the bubbles of distress – usually something upbeat, like Sinatra or Bobby Darin. *Longer than always is a long, long time.*

Yes, Miriam could kill – squirrels, anyway.

“You do remember it don’t you? That night we promised?” Estelle is staring at her.

“The *actual* pact? No.”

Miriam sees a salesman circling, working up momentum to either chase them off or begin his spiel. She sits up and quickly reaches for her purse. Pulling out a pocketbook she opens it and when the man nears, she presses a forefinger into the mattress, declaring, “I’ll take it.”

She hands over her credit card, but when he begins to open his mouth Miriam shakes her head as if regretting he won't be allowed to speak. He slowly backs away to get his forms and run her *MasterCard* through his machine.

Blow up mattress – \$1,979.00. She considers the look on Estelle's face.

"Priceless."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Miriam, stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Mumbling things and then refusing to repeat them. It's rude."

"Sorry. Where were we? Do I remember the pact? Frankly, I don't. I remember being at Naledi – and all the strange weather that year...but one particular conversation?"

Estelle sighs, "Selective memory?"

"No need to snipe. I'm not backing out."

"But you must remember *something*."

"That it was just after Mama passed."

"And precisely why we agreed to spare our own children that sort of awful death watch."

One evening thirty years before, between one highball and the next, back when they could put it away, Penny draped herself in a rocker on the porch that smelled of ozone and mice and came up with the pillow pact.

Miriam tries to recall Penny's words, tries to conjure her voice, but memories form stubbornly silent as old super-eight movies. She can *see* Penny as she was – tan and boyish in her Capri pants, one espadrille swinging loose from a toe as smoke from her Virginia Slims gave

shape to her stories and dead-on imitations. Had Penny spoken the words of the pillow pact in her own voice? A born mimic, she seldom used her own.

Penny loved to do the cranky Czech who ran the resort, and guests that arrived each Saturday to providing her with new material. That year there'd been a high-strung minister in number four who Penny imitated in stuttering, irreverent sermons. And the couple from Georgia whose fisticuffs always ended in noisy lovemaking, the husband squalling, "Who's your big bear Sugar? *Who's Sugar's big bear?*" The dog-crazy opera singer from Ontario Penny did not try to emulate, preferring to wag her bottom like one of the soprano's Dachshunds, yipping and howling the score of *Die Fledermaus*.

"Miriam, are you even listening?"

"Uh huh."

What words and phrases Penny spoke that Miriam cannot recall, Estelle is unable to forget. Conversely, Estelle struggles to remember Penny's face, but not one feature will surface, she cannot envision the mouth that formed those eradicable words.

Estelle begins again, nearly word for word, her voice enough like Penny's to be haunting. "*What if one of us was struck by lightning, stunned into a vegetable? What if one of us catches something fatal?*"

Miriam envisions Penny's curls bouncing as did her Harpo act – the minute something physical needed doing around the cabins Penny would grow mute, teetering atop tables to change flypaper, leaping to tennis-racket bats, puffing air into swimming mattresses. Penny's cheeks always went apricot in the sun and she never wore a dab of makeup at Naledi. They called her *Pretty Penny*. To her many nephews she was *Aunt Pretty* and is called so still, when she's decidedly not.

Miriam's vivid screen of memory blurs as Estelle insists, "You remember her saying '*I'd do the same for you. If two of us do it together, like a firing squad – if two are pressing the pillow or feeding the pills...neither can really be responsible. That's not murder.*'"

In the echo of Penny's words, they turn to see the clerk frozen like a mime in mid-step. Miriam motions him forward impatiently and takes the papers. She fills in an address form, signs the delivery order and folds away her receipt.

Once outside the shop, they roam to the moving walkways, glad to be carried along rather than rely on their legs. They falter some when approaching the ends, stepping off and on with trepidation, neither quite able to take the other's elbow.

"It's discombobulating."

Miriam frowns. "Is that really a word?"

"I think so." Estelle squints. "I'd been searching for a word for us...for *today*. There are names for such things you know – *infanticide* or *matricide*. But what about a sister? Is there such a word as *siblicide*?"

When Miriam doesn't answer, Estelle looks up to discover they are gliding alongside a great span of windows, revealing her first glimpse of snow in years. It looks like plastic flakes swirling in a souvenir globe.

At the taxi queue, a digital sign loops the time and weather. As they mine their bags for scarves and gloves, Estelle shakes her head. "*Five* degrees! It's too cold for jewelry." She pulls gold clips from her ears, wincing, "I'd be dying too if I had to live here."

Miriam secures her collar. "Is that your idea of humor?"

After they give the driver directions, Miriam closes the Plexiglas slide. They are out of sight of the airport before she rallies the courage to open the overnight bag on her lap, tipping it

carefully to expose the white zippered bag within. To her horror, Estelle plucks it out and opens it. Three syringes roll onto her palm, along with one of the vials.

The liquid is a deep amber – the color of Penny’s stained fingertips. “Oh, my. This is how? I thought they would be pills. You mean we have to...?”

“Inject Penny? Not directly, just her IV.” Miriam gently takes the vial and syringes. “You’ve no idea how hard it was to get all this. I had to drive to Quebec.”

“No. I didn’t know. Goodness. I guess I thought there’d just be some plug to unplug if it comes to that. Some machine to switch off.”

“For God’s sake, Estelle.”

Estelle begins absently tracing circles on the glass. “Oh, Mir...I wish we could go back.”

“Back?” Miriam considers her sister’s far-off expression. “Oh. You mean summer.”

They both mean Naledi, where their parents first took them during the war, and where they returned every July, eventually with their own children in tow. They sometimes wondered what made them return – the resort made no claims in its brochure other than being clean, which it was, freakishly. It was miles from the nearest town, Squaw Inlet, and the lake itself was so far north the swimming raft often drifted to Canada. It was also remote enough their husbands weren’t inclined to visit.

The summer of the pillow pact, the sisters had nine children between them, all boys but one, ranging in age from ten to twenty. Estelle’s Max was the eldest, on break after his first year at Berkeley and supposedly keeping an eye on the younger teens. But by then the boys didn’t pose many dangers to themselves – all could dogpaddle and make their own sandwiches, and two had Red Cross certificates. Miriam’s daughter Lilith had a driver’s license and could be trusted with a grocery list. During these vacations, the sisters read fat paperbacks, boned up on their

French listening to the Ontario stations, and played bridge. They made occasional forays through cabin kitchens to put away mayonnaise or sweep sand, and tossed coins to see who would venture to the lodge basement to launder beach towels in the shuddering aqua Maytags. For a full month they were happily idle.

Sometime during cocktail hour – when supper either burnt or didn't, depending on whose night it was – one of them would aim the binoculars toward the dock or the beach for a headcount of Lilith and the boys. One thing about Naledi, there wasn't much trouble to get into.

They learned differently only a few years ago, when Lilith, after her second stint of rehab at Hawthornden for dependence on codeine and Zinfandel, embarked on her twelve-step program with zeal, skewing Step Four to include others in her fearless moral inventory. She ratted out old digressions on behalf of cousins and brothers – revealing that all the boys had smoked copious amounts of pot and even hashish at Naledi. Max, in fact, had supplied his minor cousins with dime bags bought from a state employee who nurtured his crops among pine saplings in a DNR greenhouse.

Such revelations were a bit of a shock to the sisters, but it *had* been decades ago, and boys being boys... They were a good bunch overall, and all had earned the requisite diplomas, married wives who produced mostly tolerable grandchildren and settled in acceptable neighborhoods of decent cities. The marijuana would have been water under the bridge, except for Max.

Max, as expected, had progressed from golden boyhood to golden adulthood – Dean's list at his law school, headhunted into a prestigious firm, and partnered by his thirty-fifth birthday. A few years later just as Max's temples had prematurely silvered as if on cue, he nabbed a senate seat, where one of his first votes was against legalizing medicinal use of Cannabis, inspiring Lilith to tattle

Like any politician, Max adroitly deflected any culpability. Since stones were being thrown, he said, he *had plenty on Lilith* regarding those summers. He also suggested that Aunt Pretty was likely more angry that he'd run on the GOP ticket than over a little weed.

Penny became incensed. Max, foolish and spoiled and smart enough to know better, had been *dealing* – selling to his underage cousins and others at Naledi – the Saturday maids, the dock boy who pumped gas and God knew who else...

Estelle wouldn't admit outright her son was a hypocrite, and Penny wouldn't let it go. After Penny threatened to leak information to the press, the two stopped speaking.

Initially Miriam was a neutral go-between, passing along pertinent news and family gossip between Estelle and Penny. But when Penny took ill, Miriam nearly scripted her phone call – smugly informing Estelle that one of the medications Penny most needed – the one that might help her keep food down during chemo, was difficult to procure and a crime to use, thanks in part to Max.

“And you know she has glaucoma too, on top of everything else? Have you any idea how *that* might be treated?”

“I've done my research, Miriam.”

Both lean back, hands resting on the bags in their laps.

Estelle sees Miriam no longer wears her wedding ring. Since Denny's passing, her sister seems to have become more austere. She wonders if Miriam isn't a bit relieved, as widows so often are. Her hands make small static movements. Of the three, Miriam is the bustler, nothing if not practical, especially now, when it's easier to do than to think. Her nails are trimmed and clean and bare of polish. There's a tension in Miriam's hands that matches the held-in quality of her face – the skin over her knuckles has mottled with age spots, a sight that bothers Estelle more

than it should. She makes a mental note that once back home she will send a jar of cream from that spa in Marin.

Why is traffic moving so slowly? Estelle cannot remember a longer cab ride. Her own fingers, weighted with platinum, idly smooth over the leather of her shoulder bag.

Miriam watches the slow movements of Estelle's hands. She's always found diamonds gauche herself, but realizes now just how well they suit cool, elegant Stella. It's been a long time since she'd been called that – ages since the boys stood on the mossy steps leading up to the cabins and shouted *Stelllaaahh* in their best Marlon Brando voices. Estelle had pretended to hate that.

Stella, Miriam shakes her head. None of it – nothing she owns, none of the ease or luxury she's so accustomed to could have made those last months with Little Roger any easier. And Big Roger walking out so soon after, leaving Estelle to go it alone, just herself and Max and that pile of blue chip stocks – a period Penny crassly referred to as Estelle's abject prosperity. Miriam sighs, no wonder really, that Max was, *is*, so spoiled...

At the hospital curb they split the cab fair to the nickel, tuck pocketbooks away and gather their things. The pavement is icy, and they balance while watching the taillights recede into the snow until the car is too far to call back. Estelle minces several yards to the salted safe zone and turns, "Come *on*, Mir."

Remembering the unsavory phrase that Lilith utters whenever faced with something difficult, Miriam looks to the hospital entrance and straightens. Just cunt-up and do it.

The doors are centered by a statue of a martyred saint run through with spears. When Penny was told she had cancer, she chose St. Sebastian's for it's proximity to her sons and for

the irony – Sebastian being the patron saint of dying people, diseased cattle, and enemies of religion.

“Perfect for an atheist, really,” Penny had joked to Miriam over the phone while making a doodle of an arrow, “Just shoot me.”

Once through the revolving doors, Estelle inhales hugely, as if she cannot get enough hospital air. She breezes through the gift shop to buy a large bouquet of lilies and, inexplicably, two Mylar balloons that say *Happy Today*. She hands one over, “Here. One from each of us.”

Miriam holds her balloon low, nearly stumbling on it as she trails Estelle and all her swinging parcels into the elevator. As the door seals them in, Miriam tisks at the mirrors on every surface. There is nowhere to look and not see a crowd of themselves. “Why? In a *hospital*, of all places...”

Miriam maintains there are two kinds of people – the kind that will paint over a piece of tape rather than bother peeling it up, and those who do things properly, thoughtfully. She makes such distinctions so regularly that her sons roll their eyes before she can finish, no matter the topic. Kyle, her youngest and kindest, has observed that one’s defining traits tend to exacerbate with age – the nitpicker picks more nits, the self-absorbed become ultra-absorbent, and the mean become nasty.

She resents the suggestion. It’s not that she’s judgmental, it’s simply that there’s no reason not to take proper care with things, including oneself. The Surgeon General warned Penny on every pack, but did she listen? It’s difficult for Miriam not to be angry when she’s supposed to help ease the way. And Estelle hasn’t begun to comprehend the seriousness of Penny’s illness, certainly not the finality of the pact. She’s brought fudge!

The elevator bell *tings*, and for an instant gravity lifts the weight from their heels and a fleeting lightness rises through both sisters. Each looks quickly to the many reflections to see if

the other has felt it, but just as suddenly they are set down again onto their bones, and the doors chug open to slide their many images away.

The hall is a tunnel of pistachio tile. At a station at the far end they find a nurse chewing a pencil, engrossed in the daily *Sudoku*. When Estelle says Penny's name, the nurse straightens. She turns her monitor so they can't see and taps her mouse. "Right. Dr. Bell's patient...Lancaster, P."

"Lancaster, *Penelope*." Estelle says firmly.

"Yes." The nurse comes out of the station, "You can follow me." With an offer to find a vase, she takes the lilies from Estelle and leads them down another hall, remarking how the Minnesota weather can make traveling such a trial, as if knowing they've come from the airport.

They are taken to a small waiting room. After shedding their coats and shaking their scarves, they pile their things in a corner. They circle a small table before sitting to wait.

Who knows for how long? The nurse hadn't even offered coffee. Estelle watches the door a minute before dragging her shoulder bag close. She pulls out a gift bag from a trip to London, embossed *Marlbey's Teas, LTD*. Inside is a pillow-shaped package wrapped in tissue.

"Tea?"

Estelle lowers her voice, "Well, not quite." She peels layers of tissue to reveal a large ziplock bag packed tight with smaller bags filled with a dried, green herb.

"That's isn't...Estelle, that's *not*?" Miriam's stifles a yelp and her eyes dart to the door.

"I should hope it is, considering what I paid."

"You carried that on the *plane*?" The package weighs at least a pound.

Estelle shrugged. "I could have Fed-Exed it, I suppose. But since Penny needs it now, and since I didn't have any trouble flying from Negril with it..."

"Negril? Jamaica?"

“Well, goodness, I wouldn’t know where to get such a thing in Palm Springs. I thought of Mexico, certainly closer, but Lord knows what sorts of things go on down there. I just decided to visit the Robertson’s – you’ve met Kitty and Earl. They have a winter place there, and their driver, Eddie is was such a nice young man, has those deadlocks though...”

“*Dreadlocks*, you mean?”

“As I said. How they keep *those* clean. Anyway, Eddie took me to a special plantation where a woman gave me some lovely tea, very relaxing, and sold me this.” She rewraps and stows the package.

Miriam sucks her teeth. “Well.”

Estelle leans back. “Well.”

They look around, scanning the tank of lazy angelfish, the stack of *Highlights* magazines and the crocheted wall hanging shaped like a crucifix, just the sort of thing Penny would make fun of. Once they’ve taken everything in, there is nothing to do but wait. One of the *Happy Today* balloons ticks against the wall just above a heat vent.

It seems an eternity, yet can be no more than a few minutes before the door opens. The nurse wordlessly ushers in a white-frosted woman and quickly backs out.

They stand.

“I’m Dr. Bell.”

They shake hands and peer at the tiny letters on the doctor’s nametag until she offers, “Melissa Bell, Oncology.”

She’s pretty, like Penny.

Once they sit, the doctor wastes no time. She gives each of them a pinched smile and says in a voice of practiced succor, “Your sister took her own life this morning.”

The air in the small room shifts and collects, thickening just over the table.

Dr. Bell takes three empty prescription bottles from her lab coat and places them on the table. Two envelopes with their names written in Penny's hand are eased from a folder and slid forward. "I'm so sorry."

Neither sister moves or speaks. The doctor presses a palm over each of their hands. After a full minute she rises. "I'll be right outside, if you have any questions. Your nephews are waiting in the room, in case you'd like to view..."

Both shake their heads and Dr. Bell nods, edging away, "Of course. I'll have the floor nurse tell them where to find you."

The door bumps shut. Miriam and Estelle do not look up, do not acknowledge the pill bottles, or the envelopes, or each other. For the second time during the long morning, the sisters gazes settle on hands – this time their own, focusing on the flesh the doctor's hands had pressed and warmed, now growing cool.

Estelle blinks and stares at the facet of a large ruby, Roger Junior's birthstone. She spreads her hand flat. *Well, that's that. Aunt Pretty's coming to join you, RoJoe...* She hadn't thought before, but now she's suddenly glad that Penny and little Roger will be together – that her boy will no longer be alone. That Penny won't be. Just then the thing Estelle has struggled for all day comes to her with more clarity and vividness than seem possible – Penny's face, her *girl*-face, bolts into focus. A scene fills in around her little sister. They are all on the porch of cabin two, she and Miriam are cross-legged on the floor and Penny is on her knees, laughing and pressing a raw hotdog through the mesh of the screen door. On the other side, Dandy, the old chocolate lab, frantically laps and scrapes his teeth against the metal. Sunlight carried from his tail flickers across Penny's nose and chin. *That face.* That sight and even the smells come back to Estelle; scents of rain, of mice and hotdogs. Her eyes close like shutters to seal the moment. *How could I have forgotten that?*

Across the table, Miriam is examining her thumbnails. On Dennis' last night, she'd fallen asleep in the chair next to his bed. When his breathing had stopped she'd bolted awake to the lights of the monitor flashing along to each second of silence. Miriam cannot know what became of him, and now, she cannot know what will become of Penny besides ash. She doesn't have Estelle's faith, yet cannot quite embrace Penny's lack of it.

Will their sister just dissolve away, to silence?

Just as she's wondering, Miriam hears a shriek of familiar laughter – a shriek that pricks the cotton wool that has muffled any recall of Penny's voice all day. Miriam hears Penny perfectly now, as if the volume from the past has suddenly swelled, as if her sister is next to her, snorting and hysterical.

She can hear Dandy, too, the gross squelching noise – the rasps of tongue, muzzle and teeth. She can see and *hear* - all of it.

Squatting in front of her sisters, Penny can barely catch enough breath for one small word, her exhalations are hooted out.

“See?” Penny says, the pitch of her voice is high and nasal with allergies.

She pivots toward Miriam and Estelle, her sneakers making rubbery squeals on the floorboards. The hotdog is gone now, the wax wrapper crinkled under Penny's heel. Her palm is still on the screen, but she's only teasing Dandy now, enjoying the tickle of each desperate lash of his tongue. She looks squarely at her sisters as if demanding an answer, “See!” She insists, “*See?*”

Penny is eight years old, nothing important has happened to her – her big teeth aren't even all in yet. Her legs are folded reeds with scabbed kneecaps and her eyes are fierce with this one moment. A bit of hotdog is caught in her bangs and tears of laughter lacquer her freckles.

This is not a memory. Estelle and Miriam both see her clearly, hear her perfectly. Penny is laughing the pure kind of laughter that can make her wet her pants. She is helpless with it.

It's infectious. They can hardly help themselves. Jeweled and mottled hands reach blindly to link as the small, smooth pair slips from reach.

[end]

word count 5110