

MARJORIE CELONA

This Is When I Love You the Most

After Thea falls asleep, Bobbie sneaks into Mr. Radcliffe's office. She finds an ashtray on his desk and pulls a cigarette from her cardigan. Mr. Radcliffe told her at dinner that he owned four thousand novels, kept in alphabetical order by author, in special bookshelves made of birch and pine. When Bobbie asked for the pepper, she called him "Sir," and he laughed and told her, "Mr. Radcliffe will do just fine." He finished his dinner quickly, kissed Thea and Mrs. Radcliffe on the cheek, and left the house without an umbrella or a hat, though it was pouring rain.

"Swims twelve laps every night with his friend," Mrs. Radcliffe said and scooped another piece of quiche onto Bobbie's plate. "Then they drink."

Mr. Radcliffe's bookshelves reach the ceiling and are lit with halogens. The top shelves are filled with pottery and small lamps, a Slinky made of brown paper, two egg-shaped rocks. He has *The World Book* collection but Bobbie hasn't heard of the other books, all of them hardcover. She runs her finger over *Sexing the Cherry*. On the floor, a banker's box filled with paperbacks says "Sort and File" in careful cursive on the side. Someone flushes a toilet upstairs and Bobbie holds her breath, stubs out the cigarette and hides the filter in her hand. She sits in Mr. Radcliffe's ladder-backed chair and looks through the bills on his desk. They owe \$400

to the gas company and Mr. Radcliffe has already made out a check. It is attached to the bill with a paperclip. Mr. Radcliffe is a trust lawyer. He works in a white office building on Rock Bay Road, in the same building as Bobbie's dentist.

The Radcliffe house looks like Bobbie's, which is next door. The two homes were registered in 1912 and Bobbie's mother mistakes that for being the year they were built—they could have been built any year, 1879, 1901. Pitched roofs, newel posts, steep stairs, little doors—people were smaller then, Bobbie heard somewhere. Bobbie likes the doors. She likes to duck her head. The Radcliffes keep neat hedges. Their home is two storeys and grey with dark green trim and a black door. Some things need fixing: the porch, the balcony, a few missing shingles. They're old houses; they lean and creak.

Bobbie is staying with the Radcliffes for a week while her mother is in Daytona. The Radcliffes are their landlords. The Radcliffe's only daughter, Thea, is a private-school girl who comes home at 3:30 and does her homework until 5:30, then practices the clarinet until she's called for dinner. She eats quietly, without scraping her fork across the large white plates that Mrs. Radcliffe warns are hot from the oven. Thea sets her alarm for 7:41

and is in the shower by 7:50 and ready for school by 8:15. She has shapely, athletic legs and a strong jaw, pale brown freckles and white-blond hair. She has an oval face and milky skin, Mr. Radcliffe's flat nose and Mrs. Radcliffe's cheekbones. Tiny eyes like she's finding fault. While Thea is in the shower, Bobbie pulls on her jeans and sweatshirt and turns her socks inside out so she can wear them again. She sits at the edge of the bed and pretends to do her hair, fiddles in her suitcase for an imaginary makeup kit.

"Mascara's on the dresser," says Thea, in a big white towel. She stands in front of her full-length mirror with her eyes closed and tugs her hair into two French braids. She takes her uniform into the bathroom and shuts the door halfway.

Thea's bedroom is painted navy blue with gold stars. Thea says her mother did it last year with a stencil kit and a can of spray paint. She has an antique wrought-iron bed frame with a feather bed, white sheets with gold trim. The room's ceiling is sloped and has a window seat, where Mrs. Radcliffe set up a small foamie and sleeping bag for Bobbie the first night she arrived. She said it was where all of Thea's friends slept when they stayed the night.

"We're happy to have you here," she said to Bobbie and transferred one of Thea's bears onto Bobbie's pillow. "You're no trouble. I wouldn't want Thea alone in our house, either."

Bobbie shrugged. She and her mother had argued for days over staying with the Radcliffes. Bobbie's mother said she didn't trust Bobbie not to throw parties and make a big mess if she were

home alone. "Your key. Hand over your key," her mother said, and rolled her suitcase to the curb. "Be nice to those people. Be gracious. For God's sake, be a good girl."

"I have to go soon," Thea calls to Bobbie. She steps out of the bathroom with her tie in her hand. She wears peach blush and two smudges of black eyeliner. Her kilt is hemmed above the knee and when she dips to get her backpack, Bobbie sees the white of her thighs. "I'll be home at 3:30."

Bobbie watches through the window as Thea runs out the front door and down the stairs, where Mrs. Radcliffe is sitting in the Saab with the heated seats, the engine idling, already warm.

While Thea is at school, Bobbie crawls under the hedge that separates the Radcliffe's house from hers and slides her library card under the window of her mother's bedroom. She pushes it open with her other hand. She turns over the garbage can and lifts herself up and through the window, knocking over the porcelain figurine of the tortoise-shell cat her mother keeps on the sill. She walks to the hall telephone and erases the messages to her mother telling her that she has been absent from school and makes a peanut butter sandwich. She can see her breath. She pulls the blinds and watches *Wheel of Fortune* on the La-Z-Boy. She leafs through the mail and lets it drop back to the floor.

Her mother's bed is unmade. Bobbie climbs under the covers and smells the pillowcases. White Diamonds by Elizabeth Taylor and the faint apricot of her mother's new mousse. She rolls onto her back and looks at the tops of her breasts,

the hard crease from the underwire in her bra. She lifts her shirt and watches her nipples grow in the cold.

Cal. Mr. Radcliffe's first name is Cal. Bobbie finds his name funny because there's nothing to it. Mrs. Radcliffe calls him Cally. Her first name is Isadora. Cal is balding. He's a Jehovah's Witness. Bobbie's mother says that Mrs. Radcliffe is Episcopalian. "Everyone needs to find their niche," her mother says. "Jehovah's Witnesses are good at making people who feel they don't belong anywhere in the world feel that they belong perfectly." Bobbie tries to imagine if Mr. Radcliffe used to be a handsome man. Sometimes she can tell by the back of a man's head whether he was handsome in his youth. Mr. Radcliffe was thin and immature, she decides. He wore glasses as a child and had blond hair.

Last night, Bobbie asked Thea how old she was and Thea said, "Thirteen," and Bobbie calculated that Mrs. Radcliffe would have been forty-two when she had Thea because she had read in Mrs. Radcliffe's journal that she was going to be fifty-five in June:

That's the problem with living here all my life: I am born and Cal has already been born and we both get jobs and move away—Cal first—but our parents die and so we inherit the houses and move back and everyone else has changed on our street, even the houses have changed, so many are duplexes now, but here I am, the same, and me and Dorothy swap recipes and I have her over for tea and when Cal goes swimming I draw the blinds and sit with my back straight, my butt half off the arm of the couch,

my bare feet perched on the floor of this godforsaken room . . .

Bobbie's house is brown and beige. Mr. Radcliffe repainted it for them last summer. The same brown, same beige. When Bobbie and her mother moved in, he put in wall-to-wall carpet (to save the hardwood, he said) and took out the stained-glass window in the front door, which he put in his basement. The walls are stark white. They have a two-year lease. Bobbie's mother is a psychiatric nurse but is on disability for a frozen shoulder. She has a cortisone shot every two months and says it does nothing.

"What if I can't ever go back to work?" she says to Bobbie when her shoulder hurts. "You might have to find your own way."

Both Bobbie and her mother like cats and have porcelain figurines of them on every surface. At night they watch *Jeopardy* in the living room and talk about getting a fish or a guinea pig. Bobbie's mother shuts the door to her bedroom and calls her boyfriend in Daytona and leaves Bobbie with the television set. She turns down the volume so she can listen to her mother, who laughs and then says, "You always say that."

At three o'clock, Bobbie smooths the covers on her mother's bed, puts away the peanut butter, and turns off the TV. She parts the blinds in the living room with her fingers and watches Mr. Radcliffe pull into his driveway with a new car—a dark blue convertible with a white racing stripe. Mrs. Radcliffe is waiting for him on the front steps with her arms out, as if she's about to catch a ball.

Mr. Radcliffe gets out of the car like an old

man. He wears cargo shorts and a black short-sleeved shirt with a grey collar. His socks are pulled to the knee. Mrs. Radcliffe scurries over in heeled sandals, and they embrace. Bobbie watches Mrs. Radcliffe open the door to the new car and run her hand over the upholstery. Her hair is dyed light red and has been flat-ironed. It is chin length, but short in the back like a boy's. She wears a blue Kimono jacket and capri pants. She whispers something to Mr. Radcliffe and he shakes his head, waves his hand.

Bobbie climbs out the window, slides it shut, and replaces the garbage can. She crawls under the hedge and waits until neither Mr. nor Mrs. Radcliffe is looking, then skips across the lawn. "Hi. I'm back."

"Bobbie." Mr. Radcliffe points to the car. "Mercury hardtop. '63. Like it?"

Bobbie looks at his hair, gray and white, a big bald spot at the back, and his small eyes, his flat nose. "Mom and I had a classic car calendar last year," she says. "Our favorite was the Ford Fairlane."

"Nice car. Year?"

"Oh. I don't know."

Mr. Radcliffe squints and walks around the side of the house. He reappears with an electric lawn mower, drags it onto the front lawn, and starts fighting with a bright orange electrical cord that has twisted itself like a king cobra. "Give me a hand?" he calls.

Bobbie steps forward. "Yes, sir."

"Mr. Radcliffe."

"Yes, Mr. Radcliffe." She reaches for one end

of the cord and the two of them untangle, loop, and straighten the cord until it lies in a neat coil at their feet. Mrs. Radcliffe sits in the passenger seat of the Mercury, flexing her calves and watching the muscles move. The midday sun is hot and the lawn is muddy from last night's rain. Bobbie's mother wouldn't mow the lawn if it were wet. "Rusts the mower," she'd say.

Mr. Radcliffe plugs in the cord and adjusts the height of the mower. "Good time at school?"

"We went on a field trip," says Bobbie. She nudges the electrical cord with her foot. "To the zoo."

"Lucky girl." Mr. Radcliffe winks.

Bobbie watches the back of Mrs. Radcliffe's head as she drives. She can see a spot where the hair dye stained Mrs. Radcliffe's skin. It's small, on the hairline. She told Bobbie she sometimes works as an interior decorator, but only when she gets bored. She is ten pounds overweight and has a manicure. Her nails are pink and an inch long. Bobbie's mother likes to make fun of her. She says that all Mrs. Radcliffe needs are a pair of white sunglasses and a headscarf.

"Bet we'll be getting a call from your mother soon," Mrs. Radcliffe says. "Must be having the time of her life." She drives with one hand on the wheel, looks in the rearview when she talks to Bobbie.

"She'll send a postcard." Bobbie takes off her sweatshirt and wads it up beside her. The wind blows through her thin undershirt. One of her bra straps slips off her shoulder and she watches Mrs.

Radcliffe raise her eyebrow in the rearview.

"How old are you, Bobbie?"

"Seventeen." Bobbie clears her throat. "I failed grades six and nine." She feels a sense of pride when she says this, as if it's a swear word.

"Smart girl like you?"

"We lived an hour away from school. Two hours if the bus was late." She doesn't feel like explaining any more than that, the hurried rush out the door, her mother forgetting to give her bus fare, the apologies, the phone calls. *We're doing the best we can.*

The '63 Meteor smells like vinyl. It has cream-colored bench seats and a big black and silver steering wheel. Mrs. Radcliffe stops, and the car hiccups when she puts it in park.

Thea's private school is a brick building with stone steps and a fancy columned entrance. She and the other girls sit and wait for their parents in small groups. A girl whose kilt is longer than the other girls' sits by herself reading a book, but Bobbie can't make out the title. Thea is braiding a chubby girl's hair. She looks up, frowns at the new car, and shouts something in their direction. Her shirt is untucked and her tie is thrown over her shoulder. Some of her hair comes loose and flies around her face in soft white wisps. Bobbie wonders if she knows that she is beautiful.

"Would you get Thea?" says Mrs. Radcliffe. She taps her pink nail on the steering wheel.

Bobbie opens the car door and walks toward Thea and the girls. "Hi, Thea."

The chubby girl looks at her outfit. Thea drops the girl's braid and it unravels. "She's staying with

us for like a week," she says.

"Gawd." The girl takes a tube of gloss from her pocket and rubs it over her lips.

"My mom's in Florida," says Bobbie. She looks at the girl's shoes. They have small heels and pointed toes, a buckle.

"West Palm Beach?" she says to Bobbie.

"Daytona."

"Let's go." Thea grabs her backpack and jogs to the Meteor. "Nice car, Mom. Come on, Bobbie."

Thea gets in the front seat and rolls down her window. She sits tall, her back rigid. She smells like skin lotion.

"Ice cream?" Mrs. Radcliffe swings the car around and accelerates hard.

Thea looks back at Bobbie. "Not for me."

Every night is the same: Mrs. Radcliffe carries the warm plates with oven mitts and sets them in front of Thea, Bobbie, and Mr. Radcliffe. They take turns telling one another about their day. Thea complains about needing new runners for gym class and Mrs. Radcliffe tells them she went to Dorothy's for tea and received an email about a consulting job for a couple who own a ranch.

"We went on a field trip today," says Bobbie. "To the planetarium."

Mrs. Radcliffe tilts her head and looks at her.

"That's some school," says Mr. Radcliffe. "Thea? Want to go to public school? It's only a block away."

Thea narrows her eyes at Bobbie. She moves her food around on her plate and chews longer than

anyone Bobbie has ever met. While they eat, she takes her hair out of the French braids and rubs her scalp, then twists it up into a bun. Her neck is long, graceful.

"Spent the morning in meetings," Mr. Radcliffe says. "Afternoon, Jim stopped by and we played a few rounds."

The Radcliffe's dining room is the same size as in Bobbie's house, but they have nicer furniture. The table is black and shiny and has a gold runner. They have black velvet chairs and heavy drapes. The walls are off-white and decorated with pen-and-ink drawings in ornate frames—a tennis shoe, a woman with her arms around a giraffe. The hardwood has been stained steel blue. Bobbie dislikes the cutlery, which is fancy and difficult to eat with. Her soup spoon is shaped like a miniature ladle and the handle tapers to a fine, sharp point.

"Bout that time." Mr. Radcliffe kisses the top of Thea's head and squeezes Mrs. Radcliffe's shoulder. He winks at Bobbie and leaves the room. Bobbie listens as he jangles his keys in his pocket, opens the front door, and locks it behind him.

"Good night, everybody," he calls.

Thea puts on her pajamas in the bathroom, then stands in the doorway rubbing a cotton ball over her face. "Want some?" She holds out the cotton ball to Bobbie.

Bobbie sits on the window seat, her legs over the edge. She tugs her T-shirt so it covers more of her thighs.

Thea walks toward her in a silk camisole and

yellow pajama pants. "It's witch hazel. It will help." She leans over Bobbie and rubs it on her forehead, brushes her long bangs out of her eyes. It feels cold and slimy on her skin. It stings. "I'll cut your hair for you tomorrow. If you want."

Bobbie zips open the sleeping bag and moves Thea's teddy bear to the floor. She watches Thea arrange her pillows in a neat stack behind her head and tuck the comforter under her arms. She can hear Mrs. Radcliffe cleaning the kitchen downstairs, the soft hum from the dishwasher, some music playing. The phone rings and Mrs. Radcliffe says something, then starts to come up the stairs.

"Bobbie?" She taps lightly on Thea's door. "Thea? Bobbie? Can I come in?"

"Yep." Thea yawns and looks at Bobbie.

Mrs. Radcliffe stands in the doorway, an apron tied around her waist and her hair behind her ears. There's a wet spot on her shirt and Bobbie can see through to her skin, the bottom of her bra. "Your mother is on the phone."

"Okay. Thanks." Bobbie climbs out of the sleeping bag and follows Mrs. Radcliffe down to the kitchen. It is dark except for the fan hood light over the range. The telephone is on the wall at the end of a long row of counter space. They have stainless steel appliances, a black fridge. A stack of paper and two pencils sit on the counter, a grocery list, half a loaf of rye bread. A potted plant has taken over much of the kitchen, its vines reaching to the ceiling, around the windows, to the floor. Thea told her it was a hoyia, that when it bloomed, its flowers looked like they were made

of marzipan.

Bobbie picks up the phone, and Mrs. Radcliffe looks at her watch and leaves the room. "Mom?"

"How're things?" Her mother's voice is loud, animated. A man is talking in the background. She can hear music, maybe slot machines or arcade games.

"It's kind of late," Bobbie whispers, cups the phone with her hand. "Where are you?"

"In the hotel bar. It's only midnight, Bob. It's not that late. How's school?"

"Fine." Bobbie wraps the phone cord around her finger until the tip turns dark.

"Okay, good. Good. Good. Hey, got you something. You'll like it. It's hot here. Hot. Are you taking care of yourself? Are Cal and Isadora being okay?"

"It's fine. Mom, hold on." Bobbie presses the phone to her chest and listens as Mr. Radcliffe's car pulls up to the house and the engine shuts off. She brings the phone back to her ear and listens to the sound of the hotel bar in the background. Someone is talking to her mother about the price of gas. "I didn't bring enough underwear, Mom. Or socks."

Bobbie's mother coughs into the phone. "I asked you if you'd packed right. Borrow some from the girl."

"She's a lot smaller."

"For Christ's sake, Bobbie. Okay, okay. Come on, talk to me. Miss you. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing. They bought a new car. They have a nicer house than we do." Bobbie listens as Mr.

Radcliffe turns his key in the lock and opens the front door. From the window in the kitchen, she can see his reflection in the foyer. She cradles the phone in her neck and pulls her T-shirt down as far as it will go. Mr. Radcliffe nudges off his shoes, puts his keys on the hutch.

Bobbie's mother takes a sip of something and Bobbie hears the ice cubes clink around in the glass. "Listen for a sec. I need you to put Isadora on."

"I don't know where she is. She went to bed."

"I need to talk to her."

Bobbie watches Mr. Radcliffe switch on the light to his office and close the door. She takes a deep breath. "Can't you call tomorrow?"

"I can't, Bobbie. Don got us this suite for two more days, he wants to stay. There's some big greyhound race this weekend. He wants to catch it. We have to call the airline."

"I thought you were coming home Friday." Bobbie picks up a pencil and draws a spiral on the grocery list. She reaches for the hoya and fingers its waxy leaves.

"Monday. Tuesday. We'll see. I need to talk to Isadora, make sure it's okay."

Bobbie digs her toe into the cold hardwood floor. "You can't ask people to do something like that. It's not polite."

"Bobbie?" Mr. Radcliffe flicks on the kitchen light and puts his hand on the counter. His hair has been combed in dark rows across his scalp and his cheeks are flushed. He is wearing brown slippers and a black tracksuit and his eyes are smaller than usual, tired and bloodshot.

Bobbie puts the phone on the counter. "It's my mother. Can—can I?"

"I'll talk to her," Mr. Radcliffe takes the phone and pats Bobbie's shoulder. "Go put on a housecoat. It's cold down here."

Mr. Radcliffe lights a cigarette and drums his fingers over his checkbook. He flips through a stack of bills and takes a long drag, ashes into a triangular marble ashtray. His office is dark except for the backlit bookshelves and a small amount of light from the window and a few passing cars.

Bobbie watches him bring the cigarette to his lips. His hair has started to dry and is sticking up in small bunches around his head. His tracksuit is unzipped in the front and Bobbie can see the hollow of his neck, red and freckled with a patch of white hair. He has a pale-colored mole above his left eye, right under his eyebrow. It looks heavy, like it's pulling on his eyelid. He licks his lips every time he takes a drag. "I left home when I was sixteen," he says.

Mr. Radcliffe has framed photographs of Mrs. Radcliffe and Thea on the wall behind him. Two of the photographs are black and white: a grainy picture of a boy riding a pony and a young couple holding a baby in front of a fire truck. In the photographs of Mrs. Radcliffe, she has long brown hair and wears large circular glasses. She is chubbier than she is now and laughing. Next to it is a picture of the back of a naked man with hair to his shoulders, his arms raised above his head, a clear blue lake beneath him.

"We grew up together," Mr. Radcliffe says and

motions to a picture of Isadora. "She in this house and I in the one you and your mother live now. Both only children. Our parents were friends."

Bobbie rubs her feet together and shoves her hands under her thighs. The thin housecoat she found in Thea's bathroom is magenta and made of fleece. It has pink flowers embroidered on the pockets and a hood. She looks at her toenails, the dirt caked in at the edges. Her ankles have deep ridges where her socks held too tight.

Mr. Radcliffe opens his checkbook and fingers a cream-colored check. "On my fifteenth birthday, my father died of smoke inhalation. He was a fireman, like his father. It's what he wanted me to be. My mother had six brothers and sisters and spent her childhood looking after them instead of going to school. She was dyslexic. She was always cold. When my father died, she got a job as a social worker and started drinking vodka with breakfast. The neighborhood wasn't the same back then. It's nice now, a lot has changed. It was harder then. This was a working class neighborhood, a lot of immigrants. I walked Isadora to school every day. You didn't want to make eye contact with anyone. Isadora's family had a lot more money than we did, but they hid it well. Her father owned the bookstore on Twelfth and made an okay living, but it was her mother who came from money, old money, family money. These books are mostly her father's. Isadora didn't want them. She was never much of a reader." Mr. Radcliffe runs his hand over the marble ashtray, works the ash between his fingers. He closes his checkbook, stubs out his cigarette and lights another. "I don't know what to

do with the paperbacks. They never look as nice on the shelves."

Bobbie inhales deeply, tries to suck in some of the smoke. "I think you have a very nice life," she says.

"I applied and was accepted to a boarding school on full scholarship for my final years of high school, Bobbie. Left my mother to sort herself out. I was no use to her. After that it was law school and the city, and I didn't come back except to visit at Christmas. My mother did okay. She met a woman about her age and the two of them lived together in the house—always wanted to ask her if they were, you know, lesbians, but I never found the words. We were close, but there were things we never discussed. Her drinking. My father. When she died, I came back to sort out her affairs and Isadora's parents had died a few years before and she was living back here—we'd lost touch over the years. I'd been married in my twenties. Isadora has been married twice. She has a son who's going to medical school in Ireland; he's about thirty-three now. Lives with his father over there. Nice folks."

"My father is Scottish," says Bobbie. "He and my mom lived together for a year."

Mr. Radcliffe takes a toothpick from a little jar on his desk and picks his teeth. "Do you see him?"

"Used to." Bobbie's eye is watering. She wonders if Thea is asleep.

Mr. Radcliffe offers Bobbie a mint and she takes it. "I've let everyone down, Bobbie."

He stands and walks to the bookshelf. He takes

down one of the egg-shaped rocks and twists it. It opens in two halves. "When my father died, I found a three-page letter in his glove compartment. He was about to leave us. The letter was well written, carefully written. He was lonely, he said. He was going to take an apartment. My mother and father used to come into my room at night and stand over my bed. I had the bedroom at the top of the hall, your room. My mother would rub my back and whisper, *This is when I love you the most*. She said it every night and then they would shut the door to my room. It was my favorite moment of the day." Mr. Radcliffe takes out the letter, blows away some dust and puts it back into the container. He replaces it on the shelf. "I keep things, and I don't know why I keep them."

Mr. Radcliffe runs his hand over his face. "I'm leaving, Bobbie. I've met someone else." A door shuts and someone walks down the stairs, each stair creaking loudly in the still house. Bobbie rolls the mint around in her mouth and looks at Mr. Radcliffe. He faces the bookshelf, his shoulders hunched.

"Hi." Mrs. Radcliffe pushes the office door gently with her shoulder. "It's late." Her bathrobe is white terrycloth with navy stripes. She has cream on her face and her hair is wrapped in a peach towel.

Mr. Radcliffe turns to her. "Hi."

Thea is asleep when Bobbie comes into her bedroom and zips herself into the sleeping bag. Her hair smells like cigarette smoke. She is cold from being downstairs and wraps the housecoat

tight around her body. The blinds are slightly open and Bobbie can make out the shape of her house, their backyard, a telephone pole. Thea is breathing in noisy, short breaths. She has her teddy bear in her arms.

Nothing about the house is like her own. It smells musty and of furniture polish. The walls are complicated by ornate trim and fancy framed paintings. Some of the antiques look cheap. Twice she's heard the scuttle of mice in the attic; the ancient floorboards are scratched and worn. Bobbie pushes her hair behind her ears and listens as Mr. and Mrs. Radcliffe come up the stairs, their footsteps heavy and slow. Bobbie sees their shadows at the bottom of the door. Mrs. Radcliffe opens it and looks into the small room. She walks in and shuts the door behind her, glancing at Mr. Radcliffe as he walks past. The cream on her face is streaked and some of it is on the collar of her

bathrobe. She takes the towel off her head and shakes out her hair, drapes her bathrobe on the foot of the bed. She wears men's pajamas with a paisley pattern. Bobbie watches her lift the covers back from Thea's bed and climb in beside her, holding both the girl and the bear in her arms. Sometimes Bobbie and her mother sleep like this. Her mother gets cold at night, sleeps with two pairs of socks, flannel pajamas; one night she wore one of Bobbie's woolen toques. She holds Bobbie, rubs her feet together and blows hot breath on her fingertips, her nose, the back of Bobbie's neck. They often fall asleep this way, intertwined, until sometime during the night Bobbie turns slowly, finds a cool spot at the edge of the mattress, shifts her feet out from under the covers, and falls asleep once more in the damp air of the downstairs bedroom. Her mother wakes, reaches for her, pulls her close, until there is no space between them.

