



**THE
STONE GIRL**

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CHAPTER SAMPLER

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KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

1

IT IS SEPTEMBER in New York City and Sarah Beth Weiss has just turned seventeen. For as long as she can remember, she has been called Sethie; her parents, her grandparents, even cousins and uncles who barely know her name at all, know that she is called Sethie. Only new teachers get it wrong. At school, when they go through roll call, Sethie has always had to interrupt to explain. It happened just today, the first day of her senior year. She thought all the teachers at her small school would know her real name by now. But there was a new math teacher today. It wasn't his fault, and Sethie knows it, but she was angry at him. She was frustrated that he made her explain about her name. She felt bad, later, for having been angry.

Sethie is rushing. She goes to an all-girls school, the Franklin White School, or the White School, or White for short, a name whose irony—or complete lack thereof—is lost on none of the homogenous student body. School has ended for the day, and all Sethie can think about is the boy,

the boy, the boy. All summer long, she didn't have to wait until three-fifteen to see him, and now she can't remember how she managed before. And she remembers waiting even longer, last year, when she had yearbook editorial meetings that lasted past five, or appointments with her SAT tutor at the coffee shop after school.

Shaw, Shaw, Shaw. She sings it to herself, rushing, like a horse being taunted with a carrot on a stick—must get that carrot, must go faster, must get to Shaw.

There are two things that are true about Sethie: one is that she is always hungry, a mean, angry kind of hunger that feels like a piece of glass in her belly; the other is that she is always missing Shaw.

When Shaw says her name, Sethie feels it on her skin. Her name sounds serious coming out of his mouth, in his deep voice, a voice that belongs somewhere else—in an opera house, on a film screen, coming out of the radio. A voice that deserves to be anywhere but on her bedroom floor, actually speaking to her, paying attention to her, saying her name. Giving her name heft it never had before.

Shaw, Shaw, Shaw. The name that feels like it never finishes, like it's missing a letter at the end. She knows that he can't have missed her all day, not the way she has missed him. Shaw would never be bothered with missing anyone. Shaw doesn't believe in relying on someone else for his own happiness. Shaw's friends were mostly away all summer; he probably actually enjoyed his first day back at school, probably enjoyed seeing all of those other people, getting new

books, pressing freshly sharpened pencils into loose-leaf paper.

Sethie knows Shaw's pencils are freshly sharpened, because last night she cleaned out his school bag. Shaw was in the shower, and she threw away all his chewed-up and worn-down pencils and replaced them with fresh ones of her own. A surprise for his first day back.

Sethie has approached this whole day with speed, rushing from class to class, running up and down the stairs, watching the clock, willing it to be eighth period. The other girls walked slowly between classes, catching up, complaining about this or that teacher, agonizing over college applications. Sethie arrived to each class early, turned to the first page of her notebook, and pressed her pen to the top of the page, ready to get on with things. Her classmates sat in the senior lounge; they'd waited years for that lounge, long and skinny, with doors to close the teachers out. It's very small; Sethie thinks that at another school, it might be too small to fit the entire senior class inside it. But all the girls at Sethie's school are skinny. Since most of the girls have been there since kindergarten, Sethie imagines the application process. No overly-sturdy-looking four-year-olds would have been considered.

The most exciting thing about the senior lounge is that it has a pay phone in it. All the girls have been waiting for it since they began attending White and were faced with the faculty's rigid no-cell-phone policy. Sethie remembers what a big deal it was when she was ten years old and her mother

finally let her have a cell phone; having the pay phone in the senior lounge seems just as exciting. Sethie still has that same cell phone, in a box under her bed. Sometimes she recharges it and looks at the old text messages she and her friends sent each other in fifth grade. Today, Sethie's classmates all called the boys they like at other schools to give them the number to the senior lounge. The phone rang all day. Sethie has decided she won't give Shaw the number. That way it won't bother her when he doesn't call.

Sethie knows that for all of her rushing today, all of her running from class to class, Shaw has been strolling. Shaw takes his time. Shaw does not rush.

It's one of the things Sethie likes about him. He never worries about being late; he gets to the places he's going when he's ready to be there, and so it's always the right time. She would love to feel that kind of calm, would love to crawl up inside him for a day and feel what it's like to be inside that body: so assured, so smooth, so taut, so lean, and so slow. Shaw doesn't have to rush for her, after all—she does enough rushing for the both of them.

When Sethie finally sees him, Shaw isn't waiting for her. He's on the corner with his friends, but he's not waiting. Had they discussed that she would meet him after school? She thought they had, but now he looks so surprised to see her that she thinks maybe not; maybe she just decided she would come here, and now she's just lucky that Shaw is here.

"Hey, kiddo," he says, and she stands next to him. He does not kiss her hello. He does not put an arm around her.

To show she is his, she takes his cigarette from him, and takes a long drag from it.

Shaw's school, Houseman Prep, is coed, so the circle on the corner of the block in which Sethie stands with Shaw includes girls and boys, not just girls, like the corners outside Sethie's school. All the different schools uptown are really just like one big school laid out on an enormous campus. It wouldn't even qualify as an enormous campus. Sethie bets there are some real campuses that are even bigger. In California, maybe, or in Europe.

Everyone begins walking. Sethie isn't quite sure, but she thinks they're going to her building. Sethie lives with her mother a few blocks away, and there is a vacant apartment next to theirs, one that has yet to be rented. No one locks it—the building people leave it open so the Realtors can go in and out with prospective tenants. But all summer long, it's where Sethie and Shaw went to smoke. Sethie knew, of course, that it was risky, but where else could they go? Sethie's mother works odd hours, constantly breezing into and out of the apartment, and Shaw's mother doesn't work at all, and is always home. So they went next door.

But Sethie is fairly certain she didn't invite all these people back to the vacant apartment. She only intended for the two of them to go there. She doesn't want them all back there. She only wants Shaw to come. If all of these people come, when will she and Shaw have a chance to be alone together? And will these people know they have to be quiet? Will they bring other people back again, some later time? Will they be done when she's ready to go home, or will she

have to wait for them, wanting to go home, when her apartment is right next door? But she won't be able to leave, because she'll be responsible. She'll be the host. She wishes she were Shaw. Responsibility rolls down his back like water in the shower. She wishes she didn't care what anyone thought. But she knows too well that the landlord hates her mother, who is occasionally late with the rent. Sometimes he calls Sethie's father, who lives in California, for the money, as though it's the absence of a man that's making Rebecca late. But Sethie knows that like Shaw, Rebecca can't always be hampered by dates and times. Though her lateness isn't smooth the way Shaw's is. Rebecca's lateness is always messy, choppy, harried.

Sethie knows the landlord would love an excuse to evict the tenants of 12A, Rebecca and her daughter, Sethie, the quiet girl who no one would have guessed might be a troublemaker.

"Shaw?" Sethie asks, quiet, scared.

"Yeah, kiddo?"

Sethie loves when he calls her kiddo. Even though she's actually a month older than he is, he seems ages wiser.

"Where are we all going?"

"To the vacant apartment."

The vacant apartment. Not theirs. Not even hers.

"All of us?"

"Why not?" He shrugs like it's no big deal, and Sethie nods. If Shaw says it's okay, says it's safe, then it must be.

Sethie wants, more than anything, more than kisses, more than sex, more than drugs, to take Shaw's hand just

then. Actually, she would prefer Shaw take hers, but she'd settle for taking his. But he's never, not once, held her hand. Not even while they were messing around. So she cannot take his. He's never done anything to let her know that holding hands is okay. She imagines what it would be like if Shaw took her hand. He would do it so casually, so weightlessly, the way he did everything else. He would hold her hand like it was nothing: light as air, fluid as water. She would feel his skin against hers intensely, want to hold tighter, dig her nails in, press her fingertips against the bones on the back of his hand. But he would hold her hand loosely. He would drop her hand if she squeezed too tight. If she hurt him.

Someday he'll take her hand. Sethie can wait. When your boyfriend is someone who's always late and you're someone who's always early, you become good at waiting. *Boyfriend*. Sethie rolls the word around inside her mouth. She can't say it out loud. Instead she enjoys the feel of it on her tongue, between her teeth, filling up her mouth until she has to swallow it whole to keep it from escaping.

They haven't stopped walking, and soon they are in Sethie's lobby. How many people are here? Sethie looks around. Four people, plus her and Shaw. Four isn't so bad, she reasons. Four people won't get her in too much trouble. She only knows two of the others. Three boys and one girl. Sethie likes it that this feels like a boys' thing to do—sneak into an apartment, smoke pot, evade adult capture. In the elevator, Sethie holds her wrist. When she is nervous, Sethie wraps the fingers of one hand around the opposite

wrist. She finds her wrists reassuring: this is how thin she could be, if she only just really applied herself.

It's hot inside the apartment. No air-conditioning, windows closed. It's the first week of September, but August hasn't given up yet. Sethie thinks that August is like summer's bitter older sister—everyone looks forward to June and July, but by August, they want summer's refreshing half brother, September. No one longs for August by the time it rolls around. And then August doesn't even have the good manners to leave on time.

Bitch, Sethie thinks with satisfaction.

The heat doesn't bother her, since she knows it won't last long. Smoking pot always makes Sethie cold, and today is no exception. After the pipe has been passed around, the effect Sethie feels most acutely is the air upon her skin, making the hairs on her arms lift, making her shiver. She wants to get closer to Shaw, curl up beside him, but Shaw's skin is always cool to the touch, so it wouldn't make her warmer. Sethie sits on the floor. She refuses the pipe when it is passed to her a third time. The floor is hard underneath her, but Sethie likes that, since it means she's skinny today. It means the fat on her ass isn't thick enough to protect her from the wooden floor. In a while, she rolls over so that she is lying on her stomach, propped up on her elbows. She lies like this mostly so that she can feel her hip bones against the floor, hard like rocks, leaving bruises.

They aren't being quiet. Sethie looks to Shaw for help. Surely Shaw knows they're being too loud, right? But Shaw is laughing along with them. Maybe they're not too loud.

Maybe it's the pot, making her hearing sensitive, just like it does her skin.

She presses her hands against the floor and stands up. Leans against the wall that separates her apartment from this one. Her bedroom is right on the other side. She puts her ear to the wall, as if somehow that will tell her whether the noises they are all making are detectable from her own apartment on the other side.

"What are you doing, Sethie?" the other girl asks from the floor, watching.

Sethie flushes, embarrassed. She doesn't know this girl's name.

"Just listening. That's my bedroom, on the other side."

"But why would there be sounds coming from your bedroom when you're here with us?"

Sethie shrugs. "I don't know. I was just trying to figure out how loud we were being."

The girl stands up, comes over, and leans her ear against the wall. Sethie wishes she knew her name.

"Are you worried we're being too loud?"

Sethie isn't scared to tell her the truth. "Yes. I don't want my mom to get in trouble." Sethie wonders whether this sentence sounds strange: she knows it should be the other way around.

The girl laughs, but quietly. Then she turns to the four boys on the floor, even to Shaw.

"Hey, guys." They all look up at her. Sethie is impressed by the way she commands the room, this girl without a name. She's wearing jeans and a tank top, and her skin is

covered in a slick of sweat, but her clothes don't stick to her skin; she's so skinny that the tank top hangs off of her shoulders, like her bones are merely hooks for the straps. Sethie is deeply aware of the ill-fitting kilt pressing against her waist—her school uniform, fitted to her in the ninth grade, a constant reminder that her body has gotten bigger since she was a freshman. It was too small even when she bought it; she'd wanted it short and hadn't quite realized that a smaller size meant tighter, not shorter. Every day when she gets dressed, she wishes she'd bought a bigger size and just rolled it, the way all the other girls in her class seemed to know how to do. She's jealous that Shaw's school doesn't require uniforms and this nameless girl gets to wear new clothes that fit her seventeen-year-old body. Not that it looks like this girl's body has changed since ninth grade like Sethie's has: there is no new roundness in her hips or her breasts, those soft spots that seemed to develop on girls like Sethie somewhere between freshman and senior year.

"We should bolt," the girl says. "It's not fair to Sethie to stay here too long."

Sethie looks at her, impressed. Then at Shaw, to see his reaction.

"All right, chickadees," Shaw says, getting up, wiping nonexistent dust from his pants. "Let's get going. Don't want to get Sethie in trouble."

For just a second, Sethie is angry. Or maybe embarrassed. Shaw has blamed her for ruining the fun. Sethie should never have said anything to the girl who sweats but doesn't get sticky. But Sethie's anxiety doesn't last long,

because she realizes that if everyone leaves, Shaw might stay, come with her next door, into her own apartment. They might be alone together.

But he doesn't stay. Each of the five others kisses her on the cheek good-bye as they wait for the elevator; Shaw's kiss is last, and he lingers so she can feel his breath on her, a burst of air she feels not only on her face but all the way down to her feet. It even makes her ankles tingle. Then he leaves with the others, into the hallway, down the elevator, through the lobby, out the door. Sethie doesn't like being stoned alone. She goes to her room and curls under her covers and tries to get warm. Her teeth chatter.

She forces herself out of bed and into the kitchen. It is time for her to chug her water. Every night, Sethie must drink one liter of cold water in under twenty minutes, and she is not allowed to pee until she's finished the bottle. The water brings the coldness under her skin into her belly. She stays under the covers. She waits to use the bathroom. She steadies the chatter of her teeth. Soon, she'll be sober, and the air will feel warm again.

2.

SETHIE COULDN'T TELL you when she began drinking her water every night. She doesn't remember why she's not allowed to use the bathroom until the bottle is empty. She knows the water has to be cold, because cold water is supposed to burn calories; your body uses energy to keep you warm. She read that on a Web site called [anorexication.com](#), before it was blocked, or taken down, or whatever they do to Web sites like that.

Inside her room, Sethie picks up the notebook next to her bed. She calls it her journal, but it's really a list of what she eats every day. She began keeping the notebook six months ago. She writes everything down; even pieces of gum (five calories) and sips of coffee. She considers writing that Shaw didn't kiss her today, not once, not really, but she's too embarrassed.

She hears the locks in the front door turning; her mother is home.

"Hi, honey!" Rebecca calls out.

“Studying!” Sethie replies; Rebecca won’t interrupt her if she thinks Sethie’s working. Rebecca is very proud to have a daughter, Sethie thinks, with such good grades.

“Okay, honey,” Rebecca says, and Sethie can hear her walking through the apartment; she can hear the buttons of Rebecca’s jacket tapping against a dining room chair when Rebecca folds it over the back, can hear Rebecca’s shoes hitting the floor when she takes them off in the living room. Sethie likes communicating with her mother with the bedroom door closed between them.

“There are leftovers in the fridge,” Rebecca calls. She doesn’t cook, but a few times a week she has dinners with the lawyers at the firm where she works. They usually go to steak houses, and Rebecca always orders the filet, and she always brings half of it home for Sethie. Sethie never eats it; her mother orders her meat rare. At restaurants, she tells waiters “mooring,” which both embarrasses and disgusts Sethie. By the time Rebecca brings the meat home, it’s cold, and looks raw. When Sethie used to try to eat it, she could barely swallow it. Rebecca doesn’t seem to notice that after a couple of days, the meat disappears from the fridge because Sethie has thrown it away, not eaten it. Rebecca doesn’t seem to notice that at restaurants Sethie orders meat well-done.

Sethie is still slightly stoned when she begins her homework. Last year, before she began seeing Shaw, Sethie always began her homework earlier; she never waited until just before bed, and she was certainly never stoned while she did it. Tonight, she’s surprised how easy it is to read

a history textbook stoned, sitting up in bed, balancing her water bottle between her knees.

There are rules for Sethie's water, other than that it must be cold. Sethie must finish the entire bottle in fewer than twenty minutes. She may not pee until she has drunk the entire bottle, no matter how much her body wants to. She must always drink her water before eight-thirty; if she finishes later than eight-thirty, she'll still have to pee later, when it's time to go to bed. Still, every morning, she wakes up and can barely make it to the bathroom. It's usually the urge to urinate that wakes her, in fact. She doesn't even need an alarm clock, though she always sets one.

Before Sethie falls asleep, she imagines what she will eat the next day. Every new day, Sethie thinks, is an opportunity to be good. Lying in bed, Sethie imagines the clean slate of a day spread out for tomorrow; when she closes her eyes, she sees an enormous empty plate. She plans exactly what she will eat. Sethie doesn't mind going to bed hungry; planning for the next day is more exciting that way. She imagines how satisfied her belly will be when she fills it with exactly the right amounts of only the things she should be eating. Tomorrow, perhaps she will wake up the kind of girl who doesn't get hungry for a snack after school, who simply forgets to eat lunch because she's so busy. Tomorrow she might wake up thinner than she woke up today.

Sethie has never been much of a breakfast eater. When she was younger, she skipped it because her mother skipped it, and it made her feel grown-up. Today, the second day of school, she allows herself a coffee from the cafeteria; the

students aren't supposed to eat the food that's laid out at breakfast time—it's meant only for the teachers—but some girls always sneak it. Today, Sethie is pouring sugar (sugar is allowed; no fat and an extra bonus burst of energy) into her coffee when she overhears two juniors debating about sneaking some food.

"I think I want a corn muffin."

"So get one."

"What if I get caught?"

"Then you'll put it back."

"Anyway, I'd rather do what's healthier."

"It's healthier to take the corn muffin. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

The other girl rolls her eyes. "No, I mean healthier like better for my diet."

"Oh."

Sethie thinks that the teachers are hypocrites: they're always warning the girls about the dangers of dieting, but then they restrict the students' access to breakfast. Sethie remembers the taste of the corn muffins here; she stole them herself from time to time, when she was in ninth grade, maybe even in tenth. She remembers how scared she was of being caught; she was the kind of student for whom stealing muffins might be considered acting out. She remembers that they were always warm, and the way that they crumbled when she bit into them.

At lunchtime, Sethie spreads peanut butter over a bagel in the cafeteria. She is standing by the pastry table, where there are all kinds of breads so that the students can make

their own sandwiches. At Sethie's school, you're not allowed to bring your own lunch. The cost of the school lunch is included in the tuition. Sethie added it up one day, and it came to something like eight dollars a meal. Not for me, Sethie thinks, balancing the bagel on a textbook; Sethie is on full scholarship. She wants to spread the peanut butter on thick, lick the leftovers from the knife. Behave, she says, almost out loud. Be good. *Half* a bagel. *Thin* layer of peanut butter. Coffee with sugar and skim milk. She must be good at lunch because there's no telling what she might have for dinner tonight. On the phone last night, Shaw said that they're going to Jane's house tonight. When he told her that, Sethie realized that Jane is the name of the girl from yesterday, the one who listened to the other side of the wall with her.

The editor of the yearbook, Dana, stands next to her at the bagel table.

"Hey," she says to Sethie. Dana reaches over Sethie for a cinnamon raisin bagel.

"Hey," Sethie says, thinking, Calories, Calories.

"You're not coming to the meeting today?"

"Can't," Sethie says. Sethie has dropped yearbook this year. Since she did it all last year, she's still going to be listed as managing editor on the masthead, and she can still put it on her college applications, so she simply doesn't see a need to keep it up anymore.

"Oh," Dana says.

Sethie shrugs and folds her bagel up inside a napkin, to take to the library. Dana, Sethie thinks, couldn't possi-

bly understand. Dana is tall and thin. Dana can eat a whole cinnamon raisin bagel with hot, melting butter, and not gain a pound. And Dana can have two yearbook meetings a week for eight weeks straight, meetings that begin right after school, when everyone is starving and begs to order in pizza and Chinese food. Meetings that end so that you get home just in time for dinner, which you eat anyway, because the pizza or the Chinese food at the meeting was only an after-school snack. Sethie's school is filled with Danas, girls who are genetically predisposed to thinness, girls who can't possibly understand that Sethie has to work at it, that Sethie simply cannot go to yearbook meetings this semester.

3

JANE LIVES ON 72nd and Park Avenue, in one of those apartments the elevator opens right into. The floors in the foyer are marble. Her kitchen is behind a swinging door, and Jane leads the way straight there. Sethie thinks she could have found the kitchen without having been led, the smell of food in the apartment is so strong.

No one else is home. Jane is an only child, and her parents travel a lot. The housekeeper has already left for the day. The kitchen counters gleam. The air-conditioning is set so cool that it makes the room seem cleaner. The housekeeper has made sure there is enough food for everyone for dinner. Jane must have told her she was having friends over. Sethie, Jane, and Shaw gather around the island in the center of the kitchen. Sethie eyes a bowl of nuts in the middle of the island. She is waiting until someone else—Jane or Shaw, she doesn't care who—begins to eat them so that she can eat them too. If she doesn't wait for them to eat first,

she will be like a pig who only came here tonight for the food.

Jane, Sethie thinks wryly, is anything but plain. She has thin blond hair to her shoulders and wears big hoop earrings, short shorts out of which pop skinny legs. Her eyes are dark with kohl, her lips bright with Vaseline. She looks, still, like she just got out of bed—but in a sexy way, as if only to remind you that her bed is close by.

“You guys woke me up,” Jane says, reaching, Sethie notices gratefully, for a handful of nuts.

“We did?” Shaw asks.

“Yeah. Fell asleep watching *Taxi* reruns.”

Sethie’s head snaps away from the nuts to look at Jane. “I love that show,” she says seriously.

Jane grins. “Me too! My dad recorded every episode back when it ran. I used to watch it sitting on his lap.”

Sethie smiles back. “My dad, too. Even now, whenever I hear that music from the opening credits, I think of him.”

“Me too,” Jane says, and smiles, so that Sethie knows that Jane’s father isn’t around much, either, though perhaps for reasons more interesting than divorce. Jane hums the *Taxi* theme song, and Sethie joins in. Shaw looks at them like they’re both crazy, so Sethie stops, and then Jane does, too, but she’s laughing.

Sethie and Shaw went to Shaw’s apartment before coming here. Shaw wanted to show her his new bong. Sethie had never smoked from a bong, and Shaw had to teach her.

“Put your hand there. Okay, now I’m going to hold the

lighter, and you inhale. Got it? Then you take the bowl out and breathe it up, just like that, good girl.” Shaw was very tender. He rubbed her upper arm; he was sweet when it took several tries. And then, something caught, something worked correctly, and the smoke filled Sethie’s mouth and throat. She wasn’t sure whether the calm that came over her was from the pot or from having used the bong correctly.

Then Shaw took a hit. Sethie admired his expertise. He leaned in, after, and Sethie went to kiss him, thinking that it had been two whole days since they kissed and longing for his kisses, for what always came after. But she did something wrong. Shaw pulled away, his eyes red.

“You have to inhale, Sethie,” he said, coughing, but not angry. He had been blowing smoke into her mouth. He hadn’t been kissing her. Sethie wished she’d done it correctly. Maybe now he won’t do it again. She wanted a second chance.

Shaw put the bong down, lay on his back. Sethie hesitated, then lay down next to him, but not quite touching. She always waits until he touches her first. She thought it was strange that he hadn’t kissed her for two days. Maybe she could remind him, somehow, of how it’s supposed to be. She felt distinctly the space between them. She waited for Shaw to reach for her, waited for him to tell her it was okay.

And then his hand went to her face, and then down, over her arms, lower, pulling her close, rubbing her back, pulling her leg over his.

It's not real unless he kisses me, Sethie thought. It doesn't count unless he kisses me.

She grabbed at him, feeling clumsy, turned her face up at him. Please kiss me, please. His hands, always cold, on her upper thighs, under her school uniform, reaching for the curve of her ass. His face, buried in the pillow, looking away. Was he teasing her? Did he know it didn't count until he kissed her?

And then, he turned, fast, and kissed her. Sethie felt relief, everywhere. She sank into the bed, curled underneath him. His mouth was always cold, his tongue always slipped between her lips like ice water. She wondered, briefly, whether it was really pot that made her cold or the fact that she only ever smoked with Shaw, the boy whose caresses would never make you warm, against whom it was pointless to lean for heat. The boy who kissed ice cubes into her mouth until she swallowed, so that the cold filled her belly. She didn't care if she was ever warm again. Sethie knows people don't end up with their high school sweethearts, not anymore, not in New York, but she also couldn't imagine ever being there with anyone but Shaw. Would anyone else ever know her body like this, know to put his thigh between her legs and rub her scalp with one hand, while grabbing her bottom with the other? She didn't even know she wanted to be touched in those places all at once until Shaw did it. She wanted his kisses never to stop.

But of course he had to stop. Jane would be waiting. And so here they are in Jane's kitchen, and all Sethie can think

about are the kisses she wants to continue. The fact that those kisses are still available to her, that what they had isn't over. More kisses, more arms, more legs, all still coming. The way he can kiss her neck and her ear without tickling her. The first time Shaw ever kissed her, he first rubbed his fingers up and down her arms from behind her, where he was standing.

"That tickles," she said, giggling.

"It's not supposed to," he said, sounding irritated, and she wondered what it was supposed to do. She'd been waiting for him for months at that point, from the very start of junior year. Sethie can't remember a time when she didn't know Shaw. Their apartments are close to each other; their parents brought them to the same play groups when they were toddlers. They weren't friends, not when they were that young, and not through elementary school, when boys and girls didn't really make friends with each other.

Sethie remembers seeing Shaw at middle school dances, ridiculously outdated rituals where no one danced with anyone of the opposite sex, and in fact no one danced at all, because no one cool would ever dance at a school dance. She remembers thinking that he'd grown into a funny-looking kid, his hair a shade too dark against his pale skin, a lot of baby fat left in his face; somehow he didn't look like he had a chin. Not tall enough, a hint of acne on his cheeks.

But sometime between sophomore and junior year, Shaw grew three inches; freckles popped up all over his body, turning what had been pale skin into something colorful and interesting. His jaw became pronounced, his

chin square and jutting like Clark Kent's in old *Superman* comics. And his voice changed, becoming deep and gravelly, as though over the summer he'd gotten into the habit of munching on rocks. But Sethie could never put her finger on these changes; she could never pinpoint what was new about Shaw. All she knew, and all that mattered now, was that she wanted him. She couldn't explain anything more than that; she couldn't list his fine qualities, though she knew they were abundant, and she couldn't tell you what they had in common, though she knew there was plenty; maybe she couldn't even always remember what color his eyes were, but she knew they were the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen. And, she didn't know what it would be like if he kissed her, but she knew with certainty that Shaw must kiss her before the end of junior year. She saw him kiss other girls, out at parties, but instead of feeling jealous, she paid attention. She noticed what the other girls did before he kissed them, trying to see what it was he liked about them. And finally, one night, he was rubbing her arms so that it tickled.

He kept doing it until she understood the feeling that came after the tickles passed. Then she was grateful he hadn't stopped; she knows how close she came to sending the wrong message: I don't actually want you. Your touches make me tickle instead of tingle.

Remembering this has even distracted Sethie from the nuts. Shaw and Jane are both eating them now, and Sethie hasn't even had one.

Jane, Sethie thinks, is probably not a girl who waits for

boys to kiss her, certainly not the boy who's been kissing her for at least five months. But Jane doesn't know about Shaw's kisses. Shaw's kisses are worth waiting for. And Jane doesn't know that. Sethie is proud that Shaw chose her. Nothing else makes her this proud; not her straight As, not her 2270 on the SATs, not even the day she stepped on the scale and was under 110 pounds. All of those things are important, she knows. She worked hard for them, wanted them for a long time. And Shaw is not more important; she knows that, too. But she worked harder to get Shaw, waited longer and wanted more, to have Shaw, the boy with the beautiful cold hands, the deep voice, the eyebrows that turn blond in the sun.

"Elsa made Thanksgiving," Jane says.

"What?" Sethie asks dumbly.

"My housekeeper, Elsa, made Thanksgiving food—turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes. Shaw, can you carve a turkey?"

Shaw shrugs. "Never tried."

"Here." Jane reaches into a drawer and brings out a knife. "Give it a try. The turkey's in the oven."

"Why did Elsa make Thanksgiving?" Sethie asks Jane. They both watch Shaw, lifting the turkey onto the stovetop, holding the knife above it, trying to decide where to begin.

"It's my favorite. Elsa always feels bad when my parents are gone too long."

Sethie wonders how long is too long. "How long have they been gone?"

“Only a week so far. But they won’t be back for another week. And Thanksgiving food makes for good leftovers.”

Sethie considers what would happen if there were leftover turkey, stuffing, potatoes, and pie in her kitchen. Surely she wouldn’t have the discipline to make it last a whole week.

Jane starts bringing Tupperware out of the fridge.

“Wait until you try this. It’s my favorite thing in the world. Ritz-cracker stuffing.”

“Are you kidding?” Shaw says from the stove, where he is elbow-deep in turkey. Sethie notices that when he tries to cut the turkey, the juices at the bottom of the pan spill onto the countertop.

“I know, I know, it sounds weird. Just wait.”

Sethie doesn’t think it sounds weird. Sethie can barely wait. This past summer she and Shaw spent three weeks at Shaw’s parents’ country house. There were other kids there; Shaw’s parents basically opened the house to all of his friends, but only Sethie stayed the full three weeks.

Sethie usually spends that time of year with her father. He left New York for California when Sethie was ten, after her parents split. This year, she didn’t want to leave Shaw. Sethie’s father didn’t question it when she said she was taking an SAT prep class all summer and couldn’t come. He said he was proud of her for giving up her vacation to work so hard, and Sethie almost laughed out loud. As if sitting on his couch watching TV every day was her idea of a vacation.

Three weeks with Shaw was a vacation. Sethie had to

sleep in a guest bedroom on a twin bed alongside another girl so that Shaw's parents wouldn't know they were sleeping together. When Shaw was gone during the day—he was landscaping with a local company as his summer job—and all his friends were at the beach, or sitting by the pool, or shopping in town, Sethie stayed at the house, and waited for Shaw to come home. If she went out with everyone else, she might not be there when he finished with work; he usually came home around three. When he came home, he almost always took a quick shower, and they almost always had sex before going out to meet his friends. Sethie liked it that after a few days, Shaw knew she'd be waiting for him. Having sex was the only time they were alone; Shaw's friends were waiting for him at the beach or by the pool. He couldn't spend a whole afternoon or evening with Sethie and Sethie alone; it would have been rude, and Sethie understood. Other girls sat on boys' laps at the beach, held boys' hands walking through town, kept a hand on a boy's leg under a table. Shaw didn't like public displays of affection; he told Sethie so. But Sethie could stand near him on the beach, sit next to him at dinner; Sethie wanted always to be close to him.

At the country house, while she waited for Shaw to come home from work, Sethie ate only Ritz. Shaw's parents kept the house stocked with food, and there was an enormous box of Ritz crackers in the pantry. Each day, Sethie allowed herself a maximum of six. She stretched them out over Shaw's absence. He left early, at seven-thirty. Sethie always heard him leave, but she would force herself to go back to

sleep; a few more hours of sleep were a few fewer hours to be hungry. After everyone else left, she moved into Shaw's room and watched TV in his bed. Then she had two Ritz, and promised no more. Shaw would be home by three, and then they would figure out what to eat together. Surely she could make it until three with two Ritz. But then there were two more. The guilt began when she reached six and was still hungry. One day, she ate eight. She wonders, now, how many are in the stuffing. She is glad she had a small lunch.

Jane heats up gravy, Shaw carves the turkey, and Sethie just sits, watching. Jane gets out three plates, forks, and knives, puts them down on the kitchen island around which they'd been sitting on bar stools. Soon the island is covered with food. Soon they are eating. Sethie laughs at the gravy running down Shaw's face, at the jagged slices of turkey he'd cut.

Then there is pecan pie and vanilla ice cream. Sethie watches Jane eat. After a few bites of pie she leans back in her chair.

"I am so full." She puts her fork down. She stops eating.

Sethie puts her own fork down. She might be full too, but she can't be sure. Everything tastes so good.

"Should we clean up?" Shaw asks.

"No, it's okay. Elsa gets here early. I'll just put the leftovers in the fridge so they don't go bad."

Sethie knows Jane is her age, that this is her parents' house, but Jane seems like a grown-up in her own apartment.

Shaw looks at his watch. "Can I use your phone for a minute?" he says. He doesn't explain why.

“Sure,” Jane says. She gestures to Sethie. “Come on, let’s watch TV.”

In another room—Sethie decides to call it the den—Jane sinks into a couch, turns on an enormous television.

“I am so full.”

“I know,” Sethie agrees, “I can’t believe I ate so much.” My hand will hurt, she thinks, after I finish writing down everything I’ve eaten.

“I know. I could barely even stop when I was full.”

“I couldn’t stop even then.”

Jane laughs. She thinks Sethie is kidding.

Sethie says, “Sometimes I wish I could just stop eating for one week, just take a week off.”

“I know what you mean,” Jane says. “I tried to do one of those weeklong cleanses once, but I only lasted a day and a half.”

Sethie didn’t mean a cleanse. Sethie meant she wished she could just stop eating. She thinks it would actually feel better than this: What good is fullness that kicks in too late to stop her from eating too much?

“I’m so full my stomach hurts,” Sethie says.

“If you really feel sick, the bathroom’s right there. You could throw up.”

Sethie shakes her head. “I almost never throw up. No matter how sick I feel, nothing ever happens. Not even when I try.”

Jane shrugs. “I can show you, if you really want.”

“What?” Sethie sits up straight, feels her stomach going out slightly, not concave under her tank top like Jane’s is.

Sethie hadn't meant try like that. She meant the way you try when you don't feel well, crouching by the toilet waiting for something to happen. Not that she hasn't tried the other way. She has reached her fingers into her mouth as far as they will go, but it's never worked. The most she ever got was the occasional dry heave.

But Jane knows how to make herself throw up.

"It's really easy." Jane looks at Sethie carefully. "You sure?"

Sethie tries to stay calm. She can't let Jane see how excited she is. A solution for those nights when she overeats, when she can't stop herself.

"Yeah," she says evenly, lightly. Like she's just curious.

"Come on."

Jane leads Sethie down a hallway and into an enormous bedroom.

"This is my parents' room," she explains. "Their bathroom is perfect for this."

Sethie wonders what makes a bathroom perfect for lessons in vomiting. But then she sees. The bathroom is huge, with two toilets, each with their own door, each private. A bathroom two people can use, privately, at the same time.

"Okay, so this is the key. When you tried before, what happened?"

"Nothing. I'd gag, but nothing would come up."

"Okay, that's what you're doing wrong. You're stopping too soon. When you start to gag, keep going—keep your fingers in your mouth."

“That’s all?”

“It’s the easiest thing. Trust me.”

Sethie turns for the bathroom. She notices Jane standing by the sinks.

“Are you going to too?”

“No, I stopped doing this in the tenth grade.”

Sethie feels childish now, for needing to do this. A minute ago, it seemed exciting, illicit. Like the first time she smoked pot or the first time she and Shaw had sex. But now she feels like a baby, sloppy and fat, someone who hasn’t learned to control her hunger. About to begin something she ought to have outgrown by now. Not like Jane, who stops when she’s full.

“Don’t do it if you don’t want to, Sethie.”

Sethie definitely wants to. She closes the door behind her and crouches in front of the toilet. She is pale from a summer spent mostly indoors, and her veins are visible, up and down her arms, tiny but turquoise under her skin. She doesn’t notice that this floor is one solid piece of marble, so when she crouches on it, it won’t leave a pattern on her bare legs. The floor of her own bathroom at home is criss-crossed with tiny tiles.

When Sethie comes out of the bathroom, Jane’s back is to her; she is looking at herself in the mirror. “How’d it go?” she asks, without turning around.

“Just fine,” Sethie says, like it’s no big deal, trying to conceal her pride. She is so excited she wants to snap her fingers, spin in a circle, jump in the air.

“Here, use this soap.”

Sethie brings her fingers to her nose. They smell. A side effect of the trick Jane has taught her: she had to keep her hand in her mouth while she was vomiting, so as she did it, her hand was covered in vomit. She wiped it off with toilet paper that stuck to her skin. Sethie thinks it's interesting that she is a lefty but she couldn't do it with her left hand. She'd had to use her right.

She must wash her face before Shaw sees her.



In the living room, where they left the TV on, Shaw is packing a bowl.

“So where are your parents, anyway?” Sethie asks Jane as they settle beside each other on the couch.

“South America, I think.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Caracas.”

“Is it for their work?”

Jane shakes her head, then reaches for the pipe. Sethie thinks she takes a hit prettily, like a girl. Sethie smokes like a boy, because Shaw is the one who taught her how.

“Not anymore,” Jane says before exhaling.

“Anymore?”

“My dad's kind of semiretired. He just plays with stocks these days.”

“How old is your dad?”

“Huh? No, it's not like he's retired because he's old. He was just really good at his job, so a few years ago, he quit.”

“He was so good that he quit?” The logic is lost on Sethie.

“Yup. Now he just invests our money, and they travel all over.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Jane shrugs.

“Do you ever go with them?”

“Sometimes, over the summer. But for the last couple of years, I just kinda wanted to stay closer to home, you know?”

Sethie nods, looking over at Shaw. He’s taken back the pipe, and stands up to smoke. Sethie watches the way his chest expands when he inhales and imagines her head lying against his rib cage, rising and falling with his breath.



“You don’t look like a Jane,” Sethie says later, when the pot is gone and Shaw has taken control of the remote, perched on the ottoman in front of the couch where Jane and Sethie sit. Sethie means what she has said as a compliment.

“I know,” Jane says. “What a dull name. Jane Virginia Scott.” She wrinkles her nose. “I’ll be a Daughter of the American Revolution one day.”

“I’m going to call you Janey. You deserve more than one syllable.”

Janey smiles. “I like that,” she says.

Sethie is happy to give Janey something, even just an extra syllable, after the lesson Janey gave her tonight.

“Sethie is a cool name,” Janey says, stretching her arms above her head, staring at the ceiling. “That watermark looks like a horse head,” she adds.

“Where?” Sethie crosses the couch and puts her head beside Janey’s, leaning against her. “There.” Janey points, and then brings her arms down, around Sethie, “Can you see it?” she whispers.

“I see it now.” This makes Sethie relax, lean back against her new friend. They giggle. Shaw turns around to look at them.

“What’s so funny?”

“Girl stuff,” Janey says possessively.

“Girl stuff,” Sethie agrees.

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