

One night when I was eleven, an unnamed worry wrapped its arms around me, and I tossed and turned, the sheets as tangled as my feelings. Finally, I abandoned my bed. Uncertain why I felt such anxiety, I tiptoed downstairs and across the linoleum floor of the kitchen, aware only of the need to escape my distress. Awake then, I stepped into the living room doorway, and as I did, I saw something move. I froze.

Gradually, the shadowy figure slumped on the couch became recognizable. Mom.

I blinked several times, willing my eyes to adjust to the dark. With her arms crossed over her chest and her head lowered, she looked asleep. But then she lifted her chin and stared right at me.

She made no sign of greeting. No acknowledgement of my presence.

I took a step closer, but still she said nothing. The relief I'd felt began to slip away. What's going on? Is she okay? Maybe she's sick. Or maybe something bad has happened.

*What are you going to do?* the voice inside me demanded.

"Mom?" I finally whispered, worry paralyzing the words. "Mom, are you okay?"

And then her words slithered across the room.

"I wish to Christ you were all dead."

In the cold silence that followed, I struggled for breath. And then

backed out the doorway. Stumbling up the attic stairs, I crawled into my bed. Flo slept on. Hard knots formed at the base of my neck. I lay there staring at the ceiling, panicked that I couldn't slow the bleed of hurt that spread through my body.

*Maybe she's right—maybe it would be better if you were dead.* I put all my thoughts on pause, knowing what needed to follow if I had any hope of holding myself together in the middle of this hideous dream. I must take responsibility for what had happened: *Why were you so stupid to leave your bed in the middle of the night? Why did you barge in on her when she needed to be alone? What kind of idiot are you?* I asked myself. *Thinking you can be the sort of person who can help her?*

A horrible possibility, one I didn't want to believe and hoped wasn't true, pushed its way forward: *What if she's really crazy and this never stops?*

I just lay there then, hyper-aware of each time my sister rolled over in her sleep and of the shifting pattern of the moon on the floor. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't ease the throb of my pain.

At last I slept, but I woke early, feeling bruised. I dressed slowly, stalling for time. I dreaded facing my mother over the kitchen table. I really had only two choices. The first: to accept that she did indeed wish her very own children dead, and then bury those blinding words in a hole so deep they could never be unearthed. The second: to admit that I, as one of those children, had somehow failed her yet again—and then strive to redeem myself by becoming an even better, more dutiful daughter. One who would take her mother's burden and carry it on her back.

I chose both, vowing to kill my mother's words and promising also to atone for my failing. I would bear, like a sack filled with bricks, the weight of her misery.

