

Appearance

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

After you lost sight in your left eye, mom made me go on the road with you that last summer to help you see. We stayed in the same little towns in Oklahoma every week and at night I'd play with my slinky outside where it was cooler, sometimes on curbs, or on steps, maybe steps of places that were closed for the day.

One night in a cafe next to our hotel we ate supper in a booth with padded red seats and an older waitress named Shirley waited on us, looked at us like she smelled something bad. To her maybe we looked suspicious, sharing a room in a ratty old hotel, a man and a young girl, my breasts budding out brand new.

While you read the menu Shirley clicked her pen in and out, a red and white plastic ballpoint pen with the writing worn off. I wondered what it used to say. Above the swinging door to the kitchen a big fan sucked the air conditioning right by us and Shirley turned toward it, away from you, her eyes closed, and the air blew her red and gray hair back from her face like a whisper.

Later I played with my slinky on the hotel stairs that went right down to the street, no lobby, and you showered in the bathroom at the end of the hall. Outside over the open doorway an orange sign blinked, spelled HOTEL downward like in a crossword puzzle, the last two letters burned out, black and buzzing like something sizzling inside, and the walls of the stairwell pulsed orange. I'd start my slinky on the top step and see if I could get it to fall to the beat of the light, not too fast, not too slow. Sometimes I could.

The light was out when I came into our room but I could see from the streetlamp and from the glow of the HOT sign around the corner, a winking orange shadow. You were in bed turned away from my side and I slipped under the sheet dirty, the bottoms of my feet

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black because I hated strange bathrooms. A black wire fan on the bureau blew air over us and I heard people laughing, cars starting up and driving away. You smelled like soap and were already asleep, waking only to close the window when thunderstorms came.

The room heated right up, the fan blowing hot air like a furnace. I hid from the lightning and pressed my face, forged my face, into your back, your ribbed cotton undershirt, woke in the morning with its pattern on my cheek, wished Shirley could see.

