

1999, what I wanted

by AMTL

We're checkout girls.

She's 26, a decade older than me, a single mom with four kids. She pulls a picture from her bubblegum-pink leather purse. The edges of the paper are frayed and cottony-soft. They're boys, wearing red sweaters and flanked by poinsettias on either side -- a Christmas portrait.

"Cute," I say.

The break room is cold like a walk-in fridge. I slide the picture back across the table, and one of the edges sucks up a bead of moisture from my Diet Coke.

"So did you do it?" she asks.

Last night in the shower, I felt only vaguely aware that something in me had changed. I rinsed the soap out of my hair, and the bubbles gathered in a ring around my feet before disappearing down the drain. It had been that simple: I was, and then I wasn't.

I nod, tugging at my shoelaces and grinning wildly. My armpits bead with moisture like the wax-paper soda cup on the table.

She shoves a chip in her mouth and slams her jaw closed, the crunch more like a pop, impossibly loud, her chipped front tooth rubbing against her lower lip. Her large, pale eyes are dark-ringed, and the delicate structure of her bones is visible beneath her thin skin. She was beautiful once.

"If I give you a five," I say, "will you buy me some cigarettes?"

