

Hoops

by Cynthia Hawkins

Backs in the grass, legs straight, bare feet resting at angles, Rachel and I, both of us seven, looked up through the oak limbs that made black lightning cracks across a blinding blue sky. Three hula hoops sat trapped in the trees' sprawled grasp. I crossed my hands over my chest, feeling my voice buzz there when I said, "That one's important." I jutted a chin toward the pink hula hoop, bright pink with stripes, the one suspended furthest out on the limbs. One pink, one metallic green, one the color of a penny with silver glints.

"Why's that one important?" Rachel asked, a dismissive chortling in her throat at the end of it. Her head shifted in the grass, her pale gaze angling for me. She made a longer line in the grass than I did. Her arms could spread out wider. Her fingernails scratched at the dried ground along the roots. "Why's that one so important?"

"Because. That's the last one you go through before you're on another planet." We thought if we stared hard enough, we could launch ourselves through the hoops and end up somewhere else. But it had to be through one and then the next. I'd explained this already, but Rachel was digging at the ground and staring me down instead of the hoops. We'd been best friends since we were three.

"Should be the green one that's important," Rachel said.

"If you go through the green one last you'll be someplace different," I warned.

"Good. I don't want to go where you're going if you think pink is better. Because it's not, and that's how much it's not."

"Well," I breathed, and as the grass, dried and brittle, started to make my back itch I began squinting hard at the green one.

"Green will take us to the ocean," Rachel said.

I went to the gulf with Rachel and her parents once. Just for the day. She crammed seaweed down the back of my bathing suit, and I walked out into the deep waves to wash it free. When I got even with a fistful of wet sand smeared across her sun-browned shoulder blade she cried. Her mother made me apologize. We rode on a

cycle rickshaw down the boardwalk with orange sodas and bloodshot eyes, trying not to let our shoulders touch on the bumps. And then her parents drove us all the way home in the dark. I slept against one window. She slept against the other.

"Is it an ocean on a completely other different planet?" I wanted to know.

"No. It's a regular ocean."

"Will there be popsicles?"

"How would I know?"

I sighed again. "Well, I guess we'll find out when we get there." I stared at the green ring with narrowing eyes, my nearly-joined lashes making it seem to blur and hover.

Rachel pushed up, walked into her opened garage, and came back with a broom. She jabbed it's handle into the air, rattled the branches, and one after the other the hula hoops dropped to the ground with a hollow thud and smattering of leaves.

