

WHORES

by Elizabeth J. Colen

When I was small I had a friend who hated her mother for adopting her.

“My real mother's a whore,” she said.

“What's that?” I asked about the word “whore,” though I didn't know what adoption meant either.

We sat Indian-style on a quilt on my bed that my grandmother had made for me when I was small. Bright-colored swatches with patterns of flowers met at complicated intersections where the lip of some pieces lifted off the quilt due to wear.

I ran my finger under a blue and white piece of fabric that had thinned from wear. I liked to run the fabric under my fingernail and feel it there, to wet my fingers and curl them dry back and forth back and forth over the baby blue, to see it tighten into a cigarette shape that I could pretend to smoke, dipping my head to the bed, smiling at Cathy. Each time I sucked the laundry smell into my lungs and held a moment, two moments before letting go. I didn't tell Cathy I knew how to inhale. I made imaginary smoke rings like my mother's boyfriend did, but nobody saw them but me.

“What's a whore?” I asked her.

Cathy didn't answer. “I never met her. But I hear there's lots like me around, all from the same mother.”

Suddenly I imagined the babies my mother must have been hiding, wondered if I would know them if they passed on the street. Would I know them in the checkout line? Would mother admit to them if they called her *Mother*, would she take them home and raise them? I didn't know yet how babies worked. That they belonged to no one after the nine months in the womb.

