

Kinderwhore

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Aschehoug 2018

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Pp 1-36

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I want to be the girl with the most cake

I fake it as real as I'm beyond to fake

I love you so much it just turns into hate

Someday you will ache like I ache.

Courtney Love, Doll Parts

PART 1

Mama's gloves were leather, and they felt like her skin. They were soft, with some small creases. I tried to imagine they were pale, with nails and veins. I was seven and it was morning and Mama was asleep. I took one glove in my hand and went out into the gray morning air. It was windy, but the glove was warm in my hand. If I concentrated, I thought I could feel her pulse beating through the leather. We went to the shop, through the roadwork and exhaust and fog, I bought a cinnamon roll at the kiosk and ate it in the damp air as I held the glove in the other hand. I got powdered sugar on my face and let the glove brush it away. It was Saturday, and Mama and I walked together through the fog.

Mama worshipped a woman who screeched more than she sang, who had a voice like sandpaper that scratched and ground at my heart. Courtney Love was my lullaby. She posed in pictures with cold sores and mascara like spider legs, she dressed in tiny pink dresses – sometimes low-cut, sometimes with huge collars like a doll's dress – she had dishevelled hair, red lipstick and red, intoxicated eyes. When Mama went out in the evenings, she dressed herself like her – in short, pink, Kinderwhore dresses, shoes with ankle straps, heavy eyeliner. She looked like a cat proudly carrying a dead mouse in its mouth. I went into my room and stared up at the ceiling. I picked up my journal. It was lying on my bedside table and had a lock, as if Mama were even interested in poking around in my business. I wrote: “There was a girl who had two enemies called Afraid and

Sad, and she put them in a box under her bed and never wanted to think about them again. But at night, Afraid and Sad clawed inside their box, so much that the bed shook, and the girl couldn't sleep, and when she did fall asleep, the bed shook and gave her nightmares." After I'd written, I lay down, and the ceiling vibrated, and the bed vibrated, and I lay perfectly still with my eyes wide open. I fell asleep eventually. You always fall asleep eventually, but eventually can take a long time.

I remember the first time I tried to switch off my heart. I was sitting at the window and waiting for Mama to come home. I didn't want to blink because then I might blink her away. That was something I'd come up with. The apartment buildings and the people grew blurry and the contours of everything meandered together like watercolors. Had I been weaker, I would've used it as an excuse to start crying. I eventually blinked and then I thought everything was ruined. I just sat there, staring out into the evening that grew darker and the cars that grew fewer, and eventually almost all of the lights in the neighboring apartments were off. Then I heard the door and the sound of high heels clicking in the hallway.

Are you up so late? said Mama.

I'm the night watchman, I said.

She smiled. I got to sleep in her bed, but all I did was lie there and stare at the ceiling, as though there was something I was still waiting for.

I liked the smell of freshly laid asphalt. Going barefoot on the sun-heated ground and trying to avoid shards of glass, gravel, cigarette butts. The apartment buildings in Veitvet were always sleeping, high on something or other, while I was a kind of dream that was trying to escape. I used to come across a little cat. It slinked against the walls, small, black, and light as a shadow. I called to it. Come, come. It came to me, slinked around my legs, purred. Its ears were soft and stiff at the same time. I scratched behind one of them. You weren't allowed to have cats in the apartment, and anyway it would be a hassle for me to have one more mouth to feed, but I still thought, in a way, that the cat was mine. I owned it for a half an hour one summer evening when I picked it up and let it rest against my chest, feeling its soft paws against my heart.

One morning at home I was sure I didn't exist. Or that Mama didn't. One of us had to be a lie. She walked from the bedroom to the bathroom and from the bathroom to the bedroom, right past me. Again and again. I pressed my nails into the palm of my hand. I was there, I knew it. She came out of the bedroom again. Her hair and body and face looked like they were going to fall apart from one another. I stood in front of her. She took a step to the side, but I was quicker than her; no matter which direction she went, I was already there. I waited for her to ask me to let her go by, but she said nothing, just stared at the bathroom door.

Cut it out, Charlotte, she said.

I just stood there, trying to meet her eyes. She took a step to the side. Then she walked past me into the bathroom.

Escada. The vial of perfume in the bathroom was yellow with flowers on it. It smelled sweet, it smelled of sun, it smelled of Mama turning on the sprinklers in the backyard and watching me running through them from the balcony. It smelled happy, it smelled of tonight's dinner, it smelled like the arrival of a new father. I smuggled the vial into my room under my sweater and sprayed the scent on my pillow. I fell asleep and it almost seemed like happy Mama was sleeping next to me, stroking my hair and telling me that we were going on vacation. Everyone else in my class went to Mallorca and Greece and Spain. If Mama was having a good day, she'd say that we could, too. When we had a bit more money. When she had a new boyfriend. I fell asleep to the scent of Escada, as though my head were nestled against Mama's cheek.

The sound of the blackboard. Chalk. Even the smell of a dry, old eraser. School was my hideaway, my home. During recess I dribbled passed the boys in the schoolyard or I sat with Fahima on the stairs and explained how the world worked.

You don't have a dad, Fahima said, and it sounded like an accusation.

What are you talking about? I said. I have loads, you only have one. Look at me, I never get tired of them because I keep getting a new one, but you just have the same old one all the time.

Fahima nodded. We were eight, and I was right as usual.

The other kids in the class would start crying if they got pushed off the play structure or they were happy just because someone lied and said that their drawing was good. We had a neighborhood cleanup and I had a white rubber glove. I stood watching the others picking up discarded cigarette butts and milk cartons. I didn't understand the point, since there was always more trash anyway. I looked at Lisa. She had curls in her hair. Her mom curled her hair every day. I picked up a chocolate wrapper from the ground and my glove got dirty with soil.

Your hair's so pretty, I said, stroking her head with the dirty glove. She looked at me, her eyes lighting up.

Thanks, she said.

I pulled my hand away, spreading my fingers out in the dirty glove. During our lunch break I saw she'd put her hair in a ponytail and she walked staring down at the ground.

Hey, I said, What happened to the curls? You looked so pretty.

She looked at me and ran into the bathroom. That's all it took. I am strong, I am strong, I am strong.

Fahima's house smelled like spices: curry and cinnamon. It smelled strongly of her mother's perfume jasmine, I think. She was plump, and when she turned from the kitchen counter to go to the kitchen sink we had to move so she could pass. She made chana dal. I looked at her hands, they were rough, not like Mama's doll's hands, but hands that pulled back the curtains when she woke up in the morning, that made breakfast, that stroked Fahima's cheek and waved when she left for school. She hugged me, too, and I wanted to squirm away. She had room for me, but I didn't.

I woke to sounds coming from Mama's room. I went in, and she was crying and saying that she was so *fucking alone*. I tried to hold her thin hand.

He's probably just a jerk, I said.

He had a good job, said Mama, and cried some more.

I went into the kitchen, sliced up some bread and made coffee. Mama was lying on the bed staring up at the ceiling when I came back with breakfast.

I'm not hungry, she said.

The point is to survive, I said.

Exactly, Mama said, there's no point. Everyone just leaves. I'm going to die alone.

I'm here, I said.

I took out the coffee grounds, paper towels and banana peel Mama had just thrown into the garbage without putting in a bag first. Then I turned the garbage can over and emptied everything into a bag. I swept coffee grounds off the floor. I carried the garbage can into the shower, poured soap in the bottom and filled it up with warm water. I emptied the dirty water into the toilet, dried the garbage can and put a bag in. I cleaned the kitchen counter, the cabinets, the fridge, they were all spotted with something and I didn't know what it was. Just like Mama, I thought. She had spots I didn't understand.

When Lena at the salon let Mama work for her a bit I would see her more than usual. We finished at school at noon and I went to the salon afterwards.

Look at you! said Lena, little princess.

I read in Elle: *A good concealer is alpha and omega in covering up unwanted spots.*

Mama came out. Hi, sweetie, she said, I'm so glad you came, I have my lunch break now. Let's see if we can fix up your nails.

I sat with my hands on the little table while Mama filed my nails, put on base coat and nail polish and top coat. She primed me with nail files and rouge and hairbrushes. I had a French manicure, I was as pretty as a doll, I was the strongest in my class and the smartest: I could multiply, count, read, write, and now even spell "concealer". I looked at myself in a car window on our way home. I looked at my hands, at my nails that Mama had filed into points. Little princess. I scratched the car door until until it was noticeable.

In Norwegian class I wrote a story, *The Glass Pearl Girl*. It was about a girl who cried for the last time, then she linked all her tears together into a chain, shiny as glass pearls. Then she put the chain in a jam jar and screwed the lid on. During the day she carried the chain in her pocket and secreted it into the bags and clothes of everyone else at school, so people cried and had to go home or into the hall, while the girl just sat there with dry eyes that became red, but never shiny.

Mette, my Norwegian teacher, gave me the story back and asked if I could stay after class.

You're quite good at writing, said Mette. You have a *talent*, she said, and kind of nodded as she said that.

I nodded too. She was right. I had a talent. I looked out the window. I wanted to leave.

After school I went to the Happiness Room. I had to walk quickly and kept looking behind me, but I was alone. No one saw me. I looked at the sign, the sign that had the four most beautiful words a person could hear: THE LIBRARY IS OPEN. I went in, past old men who were reading the newspaper, and over to the children's section. Here, and sometimes at school, my mind could dance – here, there were worlds that weren't my own. Suddenly I was lost in a story about elves or witches or flowers that could laugh and lost track of where I was. Then I heard the familiar clacking of sensible ladies' shoes. I turned, and there was Rita. Rita smiled. She had dirty blond hair, like a dusty country road during summertime. She had glasses and no makeup and a grey fleece and she was the prettiest lady in the whole world.

Have you finished reading *The Lionheart Brothers*? she asked.

Yes, I said.

You read quickly, she said.

I read at night.

Did you like the book?

It was good, I said. I like the idea of going to another world when you die.

Rita grew serious.

You know you can talk to me about anything, right? she said.

No one would take me away from Mama, no one would take away the love I stole from her when she slept, when I stroked her face with a cloth and she didn't shove me away. I removed her blush and foundation, but when I tried to pat her eyes she jerked away, so I let it be. Her face was naked without makeup, almost like a child's. I stroked her face with my fingertips. Her skin was so soft that it hurt. I put a hand over her heart and felt it beating. I wondered if it was beating for me too, at least a little bit. When the one you love is sleeping, then you stand a chance.

No new father came. Mama disintegrated like a sleeping pill on a tongue. Her nightgown and makeup became a cocoon around something that wasn't there. Are you awake? I said. Just a little, Mama said. I went into the bathroom, looked at my face in the mirror. Would I too disappear beneath my own skin? Become just as pale? I stretched up to reach the medicine cabinet and pulled out her makeup bag with all its colors inside, everything that got her to smile red and flutter dark and blink blue. I rubbed the cream over my face. It looked like I was wearing a lumpy white mask and I thought of when we made plaster figures of each other at school. I put lipstick on my mouth and cheeks. When Mama made herself up, the sickly face became healthy. When I made myself up, my face became sick.

Mama pulled the curtains shut so the light wouldn't get in, but it slipped through the cracks. I went out and jogged over to Fahima's in my new sneakers. Mama had gotten some welfare support for new spring shoes. I knew that because I was the one who filled out the form. Fahima's mom had a box on top of the TV, and she took out two twenty-kroner pieces and gave one to each of us. Now you can buy something fun, she said, and I wondered how much Fahima's family cost. We took the subway one stop to Linderud Shopping Center and went straight to Brio. Fahima wanted to have both bubbles and ice cream at McDonald's, but we didn't have enough money, so I took some bubbles and smuggled them out under my sweater. We each bought a sundae at McDonald's and walked past the old women in the pastry shop who smiled at us, out in the sun. We ate the ice cream as we walked home. Fahima and I ran between the apartment blocks and blew bubbles. I tried to save the echo of all of it in my brain. The taste of soap in my mouth. The sun that shone on the bubbles and the bubbles that had all the colors of the rainbow. The lightest and the darkest. They dissolved in the air and exploded. They exploded so quickly. I couldn't stand it.

Eraser. Paper. Pencils. I could never get enough. I could write something, decide exactly what I wanted to write myself, and if I didn't like it, I could just rub it away. At school, I was the one who decided. I would write stories about monsters who caught the sun in a glass and children who had to fumble around in the dark to find it and open it up. Or I stole a bloody tampon from the trash at home, wrapped it in toilet paper and put it in a plastic bag and went to school. When Lisa was in the bathroom, I stole her Norwegian book from her backpack, took the tampon out of the plastic bag, and put it on a page where an explanation of male and female-gendered nouns got stained with blood. Fahima stood in front of the desk and covered for me while I did it, then I slipped the book back

into Lisa's backpack. When she came back, she took her Norwegian book out and opened it where the thread was sticking out. Everyone screamed, and Lisa started crying.

Mette said I had to stay behind after class. She sighed.

You're so gifted, she said. Why do you use your strengths to trouble others?

I'm just raising them, I said.

That's their parents' job, said Mette.

Then they haven't done their job well enough, I said.

I'm going to ask your mom to come in for a parent-teacher talk, said Mette.

After school, I went into Mama's room where the bedclothes smelled like tea that had been sitting on the kitchen counter for weeks, and put the note from Mette on the nightstand. Mama was sleeping in a shirt with *Carpe Diem* printed on it. Her sleep was tainted. It seemed like she slept twice as long as everyone else because she slept half as much while she was sleeping. She talked in her sleep, tossed and turned, the duvet got so wet with sweat that I took it off, hung it to dry on the balcony, fetched a new one and changed the duvet cover while she slept.

On the day of the parent-teacher meeting, Mama was sitting at the kitchen table when I got up. Her gaze was alert, clear.

I'll see you later, then, she said, and I wondered what she was planning.

The meeting started at noon. Mama came right on time. In jeans. Just a little makeup. Mette poured a cup of coffee for her and Mama took the cup. Her hands shook a bit. It made coffee slosh onto the table. Mette found a bit of Kleenex and dried it up.

So, Mama said, her voice quivering. I hear Charlotte has been bullying other children. That's not good at all.

Charlotte is quite gifted, Mette said. She stands out, at least in math and Norwegian.

That's great, said Mama, smiling. She takes her books home and reads them, she said, laughing, a bit too loud and long.

In Norwegian, we're working on verb conjugations, and I think it's too easy for Charlotte. She can just write her own stories during class time instead. And she can get the level six math book, work on that a bit on her own.

Mama smiled, and her hands didn't shake around the cup anymore. Three pills, and Mama is just like the other mothers. None or ten, and she shook and sweat or lay in bed and slept or tried to forget.

But that bullying... said Mette.

Yes, said Mama. You'll have to stop that, Charlotte.

Of course, I said.

At home there were routines and timelines for everything. 10:10: Good Morning Norway. 1:55: Dr. Quinn. 2:45: MacGyver. 5:30: Hotel Caesar. 10:30: Everybody Loves Raymond. Mama ran on two timetables, and I knew them both. One was the pill alarm. The pills took about a half an hour to start working, and they lasted a few hours before she needed a refill. When she'd taken the pills, she smiled suddenly, gave me a hug, found some things in the fridge if we had food, and we ate together. Cheese, bread, candy. Then she went to lie down, maybe took one more pill to fall asleep, and I sat watching her as she slept, stroking the contours of her face with my fingers. I wondered if she would say anything in her sleep, maybe that she loved me, but there was just mumbling. Once I thought she said my name, but it might have just been something that sounded similar.

One Christmas was different. I was almost ten years old. Mama was with the best of all the fathers I'd ever had, Yassine. He helped her clean and decorate, so when I woke up, everything was like new. They'd hung up stars in the windows. Mama wasn't wearing any makeup, her face was naked and honest. She blushed every time she looked at Yassine. They'd gotten a plastic Christmas tree and Yassine made pita bread with hummus since that was the only thing he could make. We all drank eggnog. For dessert we had rice pudding served neatly in bowls. I got the almond and Yassine took out a gift. You always destroy all your dolls, he said, so now you're get something that can handle being kicked around a bit. I got a soccer ball with the autographs of everyone on the national team. Then we can play with it in the summertime, said Yassine, and I wondered how long a summer could last. I got a few other gifts, a doll and some colored pencils, and I was even allowed to draw Mama and Yassine. I used to draw Mama when she slept, but now she was smiling, lively. Are you my papa now? I said to Yassine, and he laughed

and said that at the very least we were a family. So I wrote: “To Mama and Papa, on the best Christmas ever” on the drawing. That night I kept myself awake until morning, my ears were ringing and the world was unreal, but I knew that everything could disappear if I let the day end.

Christmas lasted for a year. Yassine took me to ice hockey and I watched while he practiced with his friends, and afterwards we played together. On the way back we bought hot chocolate. My hands were cold and the cup was hot, the taste filled me with something that was so warm in my chest that I thought something would melt in there. Winter turned to spring, and we juggled the soccer ball in the yard. I could juggle to a hundred. I’d learned a lot of useful things from Mama. Like how to put my feelings in a box and tears in a jam jar. From Yassine I learned how to juggle a soccer ball.

You’re a good girl, said Yassine. He gave me a hug, and I didn’t squirm away.

In July we went on vacation. Yassine rented an RV and we drove to Sweden. When we got to the border we bought pounds of candy, and Mama said there should be candy shelves just with pills for grownups, and everybody laughed. I got an ice cream and made a mess in the car and Yassine got annoyed, and I was upset, but also happy, because it meant that what I did actually meant something to someone. Yassine put Moroccan music on the car radio and Mama moved her head, danced with her long, dark hair. When we got there, Yassine unlocked the RV. It smelled stuffy and plasticky. I inhaled the scent.

Yassine taught me how to catch jellyfish in the ocean. They’re summer’s snowballs, he said. You could throw them at people you wanted to annoy, they were slimy and cold. Yassine and I went swimming. I felt seaweed and kelp beneath my feet, the water was cold, and Yassine splashed water at me. We laughed and swam out together. I dunked my

head underwater and the world became fuzzy and unclear. I swam back towards land, and when I could stand again, I picked up a jellyfish. Mama was sunbathing on her belly.

Now we have to be quiet as mice, whispered Yassine.

But my brain was never quiet, it roared and rattled each night so I couldn't sleep. It made noise in the daytime, too, while Mama dozed in the sun. I crept up to her and put the jellyfish on her back. She shrieked and jumped up. The jellyfish tumbled down onto her towel and Mama tossed the towel away, laughing.

You guys have to get that... *thing* away, she said.

I waded out and freed the jellyfish back into the water and swam out, but not to escape.

When we got back to town we played Crash Bandicoot. Crash had to crush Doctor Cortex and I pressed as hard as I could on the control, I jumped on him, I threw boxes of dynamite, he will die, he will die.

You have to take it easy, said Yassine, Think tactically. But I just want to win, and I then ran straight into a box of dynamite. GAME OVER. Mama came out into the living room. She was wearing a nightdress and her hair was dishevelled.

You could've woken me, she said.

I thought you wanted to sleep, said Yassine.

She went into the kitchen, came back and looked at us.

Charlotte, she said, Could you go out and play or something?

We're in the middle of the game, said Yassine.

Right, said Mama. You are.

She went upstairs and didn't get up before it was evening.

One day when I got home from school, I heard arguing through the living room door. I stood in the hallway, took a hat from the hook. It smelled like wet wool and Yassine and I

inhaled the scent. It had rained through my shoes and socks, so I took them off and stood barefoot on the cold floor. Yassine came in and wanted to give me a hug, but I squirmed away.

Here. Gone. Here. Gone. I saw mothers playing with their children, their hands in front of their eyes before they shoved them away. The children laughed; they thought it was a game.

Mama didn't drink very often, but when she did, she did it properly. When I came home from school I knew immediately she'd been at the liquor store, and in a way that was progress. She took two pills as appetizers, then she got started on the wine.

King Alcohol, she said, Finally a man who's faithful.

After half a bottle she started calling Yassine. Three times. He didn't pick up.

Can't *you* call and leave a message, maybe he'll call back then?

She flung the phone away.

I'm so lonely that I don't even have anyone to drunk dial!

She took another pill and a glug from the bottle.

Maybe we should go to bed, I said. It's getting late.

But Mama went into the kitchen and opened a new bottle. She drank with concentration and determination. *Carpe diem*. Then she fell to the floor. I thought that enough was enough and took the bottle.

Hey, she said.

She tried to get up but fell back down on the sofa. I went into the kitchen to pour the wine down the sink, but suddenly had a better idea. I put the bottle to my mouth and took a sip. Then I took another and another, and the world started getting warmer. I

leaned against the kitchen counter. This is my thing, I thought, I can do this. I drank some more, and the floor cradled me like a mother. I felt that I understood Mama much more now.

In the living room she was lying on the couch, staring into space.

Charlotte, she said, where's the wine, has it left me too?

I leaned against the table, suddenly needing to vomit.

Oh Jesus, sweetie, are you drunk?

She got up. I fell onto the sofa and she washed the vomit off the coffee table, a bit unstable in her movements but otherwise precise and effective. She took a cloth and dried my face, helped me into my room, got a bucket. She lay next to me and stroked my cheek until I fell asleep, and when I woke she was still lying beside me. I was nauseous and had a headache, but was no longer an orphan.

After Yassine left, Mama thought there wasn't any point in cleaning the house when it just got dirty again the next day. There wasn't any point in eating because you just get hungry a few hours later. And there wasn't any point in getting up because you have to go back to bed soon anyway. She'd understood something, and while I did laundry, made dinner in the microwave and vacuumed, she lay in bed and knew better. I often wondered what was like to spend your life sleeping, like Mama, and in a lot of ways I could understand why she chose it. It kept her thin, she said, since she always slept through meals. And men wanted skinny women, thin like paper dolls that they could pick up and throw away with the same ease.

Afraid and Sad were in their box but they made a ruckus under my bed. The bed trembled and the ceiling quivered and everything around me shook. Why does my heart beat, why do I breathe, why do I sweat? Anger wasn't in the box, Anger was my best friend, and I smashed my fist into the wall. I got up and went into Mama's room. I said, I can't sleep. She didn't open her eyes. I pushed her, pulled her hair, she writhed and said something in her sleep, but she didn't wake. She stole my sleep, because for every hour she slept, I lost one. It was those Sleeping Beauty pills. I opened her drawer and found them in the box with a red warning triangle. I took one and swallowed it without water. It tasted like cardboard. It took a few minutes, but then everything started floating around in my brain. I went back to my room, Afraid and Sad were sleeping soundly. It was so easy to get them to leave me alone. I was ten years old and had found a way.