

HEAVEN

MELEE

Their father fell away from them gradually, in pieces, with small plops and soft thuds. He fell like the apricots did when they got too soft and heavy to hold on anymore.

July sat between her sisters and had to keep covering her eyes with her hands to keep them from opening.

"I see ferns," said June. Her eyes stayed shut by themselves, but she was older than July by two years so it was easier for her. July watched from between her fingers as June's still, calm lips curved upward. "And I see cellos," June added.

July shook her head. "Tambourines and sunflowers," she said.

Augusta fidgeted under the table and batted out the creases in the Chip 'n Dale sheets; the three of them huddled safe inside the fortress of bright cartoon trees and clothed rodents.

"Heaven," Augusta said when her turn came, "is a garage sale." And when the older two laughed she placed one stubby finger to her lips and regarded her sisters with grave, gray eyes. "It's true," she said. "I swear it."

Augusta was seven years old. She was the youngest and the smartest of the three. She was her daddy's favorite. "The child is a true pragmatist," he used to say, proudly. He'd just about burst the time she traded her Barbie doll with the little girl down the street for a zip-loc bag full of pumpkin seeds. "Excellent source of vitamin A," Augusta had explained.

"The child is a monster," their mother argued, but she always wrapped her arms around Augusta and nuzzled the soft dusty folds of her neck when she said it. Augusta would wriggle away then grumbling about being treated like a baby, and June and July would stand there with their mouths hanging open because that kid never did get in trouble for anything.

But Augusta was their baby too. She let them dress her up in scarves and pearls and old fedoras and glittery gold pumps.

She sat still for them too, as still as a movie star July said, when they painted her finger and toe nails. She only just sighed now and then, understandably, when they fumbled the Fiesta Red or the Crystal Violet or the Suddenly Cerise up onto her tiny cuticles. But she never pulled away.

"Redundant," Augusta said once, when their father's familiar but wavery voice singing "You Are My Major Chord" floated in and out with the breeze through the knotted boards. They were up in the tree house, listening to an old recording of the first and last song their father had ever written.

June and July looked at each other and giggled, then took turns pumping her for answers.

"What is? The pickles and sauerkraut?"

She pursed her lips and shook her curly hair no.

"The gray hat and tie? The pink and rose rhinestones? The flies and mosquitoes?"

Augusta closed her mascaraed eyes and folded her plump arms across the wide satin cumberbund her sisters had safety-pinned around her chest. Wrong wrong wrong wrong she said to every suggestion.

"She doesn't know what the word means," July whispered to June as loud as she could.

Augusta sniffed at her sisters and did not bother to open her eyes.

"Then prove it," July said.

Augusta's Shiny Pink Champagne lips slid into a smile. She nodded back and forth to her sisters as an orchestral conductor nods to his strings, his winds, his brass, his percussion. "June," she said, with dignity. "July." Slowly she cranked her veiled face heavenward and lifted her sticky arms to the sun. Gravity sent thin pink rivulets of melted red popsicle trickling toward her armpits. "Redundant," she said, "is being up here and happy at the same time."

June was the talented one. She would one day be a concert pianist, or a ballerina, or an opera singer. June loved ferns and cellos and ballet-pink slippers. That was why June said what she did when they played "Heaven."

"Heaven" was one of their favorite games. They draped sheets over the dining room table and chairs, then hid

underneath and watched the sun make shapes on their arms and legs when it streamed in the window, strained through the lace curtains and the patterned sheets. They pretended to be in heaven and they told each other what they saw. They were allowed to see anything they wanted as long as it was real -- that was the only rule. No misty airborne stuff like "happiness" or "more time together" or "peace inside our family" --all those had been tried at one time or another and judged to be invalid. In order to count, they decided, it had to be real enough to see or touch or taste.

This was not a game that could be played without sheets. They could not, for example, talk about heaven while actually sitting in the chairs and eating food off their plates with their mother and father. Their father had his own definition of what was real, and games (even pretending games about God or Heaven or other things that scared him because they looked to him too much like nothing), he pushed back and away with a grunt and a scrape, just as he pushed his chair from the table.

July invited their mother to play with them once. She thought it might cheer her up after her younger sister, their Aunt Poppy, died. She'd remained in a coma for a week after the crash, but then she died. "She just let go," July's mother told them when she came back from the hospital that day.

"She should have held on," July said, but that made her mother frown and turn away.

"Come on," July said then, because no one else was saying anything. "It's fun." Their mother smiled with just her mouth then crawled underneath and folded her legs Indian-style, like they did. But when the sun fell on the swirling arabesques in their gold linoleum, their mother saw something that made her not want to play anymore. "What do you see?" July asked, but her mother didn't answer so July pulled Augusta into her own lap and they all just sat there. When her mother finally spoke again it was to tell the girls it was time to put away the sheets and to set the table for dinner. She told them to remember to fold the napkins like diamonds because their daddy would be home soon.

June was getting too big to be playing "Heaven." Her legs were too long under the table and always in the way. They were scratchy because she had just started shaving, and no one,

not even their mother, knew about that except July. June was twelve years old and growing breasts. That worried June but July assured her that they were small, good, careful breasts. So far. June said there was a chance they might still go wild and grow all out of control. July promised to keep her fingers crossed for her sister to keep that from happening.

July was still only ten years old -- the middle child. She overheard her mother talking about her on the phone one day and learned that she had "middle-child syndrome." July asked her mother what that was and how you can tell if you've got it. Her mother sat on the floor and banged through the pile of cake pans and muffin tins in the bottom cupboard to find a cookie sheet. "You're probably just fine," she told July. "Don't worry about it at all." But then she called her office and told Wanda that she couldn't see any students that afternoon and the two of them baked chocolate chip cookies. Her mother didn't follow recipes and the cookies came out kind of salty and brownish, but she kept on hugging her daughter throughout the whole sifting, measuring, leveling, creaming, folding procedure and July could tell that it made her feel better.

Truth was, July didn't really care if she had the syndrome or not. She felt just fine and what people didn't realize about being sandwiched between a beautiful, talented older sister and an adorably brainy little one, was that she was the one they told their secrets to.

The three girls had birthdays scattered all over the year but were named for the summer months because Mr. Turrett felt strongly that one should pick a theme and stick to it. He had landed a job as a taxonomist right after June's first birthday, and informed his wife that he had found his true calling at last. "Organization!" he'd say with one finger in the air, gently chiding her for serving foods of too many different colors at the same meal.

Then Mrs. Turrett would just shake her head but July could tell that her mother was happy when her father was like that, when he was working and immersed in something, anything, again. She'd even scrape the green peas or the red bell peppers off his plate and onto her own, if it really offended him. She humored him on the "season" thing too, but was really pushing for spring instead of summer. All the way up to the day of July's

birth, Mrs. Turrett had held out hopes of going backwards from June, to May, and then maybe April. But their father lost another job just before July was born and he started acting so strangely (dropping the spoons right in with the forks and once hanging a claw hammer on his workshop wall in a space clearly outlined for a coping saw), that their mother gave in.

July eavesdropped sometimes when her mother talked on the phone. She'd duck around corners and watch as her mother wound herself up in the cord. She generally caught only little chunks of the conversations. "I kept hoping that Carey ... I didn't know that he... all that crap..." was about it most of the time. But she'd watch her mother fan the fruit flies away from a bowl of bloated nectarines as she spoke, or fan her own face with an article on dolphins. The phone cord around her mother's neck made her voice come out sharp and narrow, like wind squeezing through a tunnel. "But we're all fine now," her mother always said before she hung up. That was how July knew when to tiptoe back down the hall.

He'd been at a convention when Augusta was born. July remembered that Aunt Poppy was the one who brought her and June to the hospital. Children weren't allowed in the room but Aunt Poppy led them through a muddy garden filled with red oleanders, then propped them up on her hips against the window. Their mother was in a high bed with white sheets. Her hospital gown was a pale green, exactly the color of honeydew melon, and it made her arms look fat and white. When she saw them all at the window she smiled and held up a pink and puffy Augusta. Augusta had little mitts over her hands and July wondered if she had paws instead of fingers.

Their mother's face was pink and puffy like the baby's. July couldn't remember why. She mainly remembered Aunt Poppy carrying them back over the mud and the oleanders and plopping them into her big red car, then driving somewhere real fast and buying each of them a root beer float in a frosted mug. The ice cream bobbed up to the top of the glass and was prickly crisp where it touched the sweet foam. The girls kept laughing, July remembered, trying to smash the ice cream down with their spoons, but it always managed to roll over and wiggle out from under and bounce up to the top again.

Augusta was three and a half weeks old when their father came back from the convention. July remembered wondering what conventions were and why they took so long to be over with. Their mother was nursing the baby in the brown wicker rocking chair (it still had tiny drops of breast milk and spit-up from the first two babies splashed along the bottom part where their mother never looked) when he came back.

July was trying to climb up on her mother's lap with Augusta; her mother's nightgown was peach colored and silky and slippery as wet moss. June was playing the "William Tell Overture" on the piano.

He stuck his key in the door and walked in.

His eyes were red. He dropped his suitcase on the sink counter without looking up. He went out to the garage and came back with a beer. June stopped playing. They all watched him, even Augusta, July remembered, as he petted the cat, blew the crumbs off the top of the toaster, glanced at the headlines and straightened the edges of the newspaper. Then he crossed through the dining room to the piano. He touched June first -- petted her hair as he had Apollo's and kissed the top of her head. She didn't speak to him but turned back to the keys and began playing "Eleanor Rigby."

July had just barely finished her slippery climb to the top of her mother's thighs when he stepped in and lifted her up, away from her mother's soft milky breasts, away from her baby sister's soft silky hair -- he lifted her far away and held her high in his hard arms against his wide hard chest. She held tight to his neck and let him hold her, let the stiff whiskers on his cheeks prick her face, let the rough wool of his sweater scratch her bare arms. He felt just like the rough grey block walls that lined their alley -- the walls that kept the huge black snarling heads of Mrs. Washtay's German Shepherds from leaping over and eating her intestines. That was the first time July cried without knowing why; she brushed the tears quick away because it was a stupid time to cry and because she didn't want him to put her down.

She kept clinging to him like a monkey as he leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek and peer into the grave, gray eyes of their newest Turrett. Augusta looked skeptical, even then. Her mother didn't speak so July filled up the silence for her. "She's alive," July said.

Her father nodded, then bent his knees to lower her back to earth slowly, gently.

"Monica," he said to their mother and when she looked away and buried her face in Augusta's silky baby hair, he knelt down and buried his in the slippery folds of her gown. July stared at them for a while. Then she ran and sat by her sister on the piano bench. They pounded out "Heart and Soul" over and over, until the baby finally started crying and their parents had to take her into another room to calm her.

July knew their father held on for as long as he could. He changed the baby and mowed the lawn and put antifreeze in their mother's radiator and repainted the eaves every spring. It was true that he fell a little further into himself each fall. But he stayed on anyway, and that counted for a lot. He told June she looked pretty in her new braces; he helped July paint planets for her solar system mobile; he coached pee-wee soccer for Augusta's team; he bought lilacs for his wife when she finally had her wisdom teeth pulled.

"He's doing his best," July said. But June wouldn't agree. It was an argument that had grown up through the seasons the same way they had. June was mad at him again, this time because their mother was crying in the bathroom. Their mother had been smiling in a crisp and shaky way when she scooped out their cantaloupes for breakfast, but when June asked her what was wrong she went straight into the bathroom and locked the door. They heard the whoosh of kleenex being ripped from the box, then a sharp burst of water from the showerhead.

"It's Sunday morning and he still isn't home from his meeting last night," June said. "What do you think?"

"He won't go away," Augusta said with a mouthful of Kix.

"I don't think anything," July said, and she tried hard not to but she did anyway. Little pieces of her father had been falling away for some time already. First his hair, then his stories, then his diamond-folded napkin at the table. He was trying still, July told herself. But he'd just lost another job and they were all getting heavier and he couldn't (July realized as she stabbed into her cantaloupe and lifted it to her lips but forgetting how to swallow spit it back into the bowl again) hold on much longer.

July was the only one who cried when he left. June banged him away from the piano with a Chopin waltz. It was the piece that swirls and spirals and climbs like a vine up a trellis. It always made July think of girls in long white dresses and magic dancing shoes who stood on their tip-toes and stretched their arms up to heaven. They dance slowly at first, then get faster and faster until they're spinning like tops, until they're dizzy and crazy and sad, until they weep out loud and claw at their long blowing hair, until they collapse in exquisite agony and madness into heaps of white petals and then they die.

That's what that waltz used to make July think of, but after he left it made her think of her mother dressed in baggy jeans and a flannel shirt. Her mother yanking weeds out of the pumpkin patch as her father drove away. July at least brushed down her bangs and put a barrette in her hair before she saw him off. She did that much for him and she didn't care if her mother liked it or not. She hugged him for a long time; he finally pulled her arms away. "He's leaving," she kept saying to her mother, trying to get her to look up at least, at least to wave.

Augusta stood in the driveway wearing her new patent leather party shoes. July worried that Augusta might take it the hardest, but she smiled just as she had in the tree house, and blew bright kisses to the car. "I'll see you tonight, Daddy!" she called. "I'll make you a surprise!"

Mrs. Turrett took a second job at night, with a caterer. Wanda had a sister-in-law in the business who said she could probably manage to take on one more server if she had to. Four nights a week, after dinner, Mrs. Turrett changed out of her pretty Art Teacher clothes into a coal black skirt and a starched white apron. She pulled her hair back tight into a bun or a braid and always drank coffee before she left.

It was fun for the girls at first -- having the house to themselves, being in charge of themselves, but after a while it settled into a routine -- of July always cleaning up the dishes, of Augusta dragging old picture books out from under her bed, of June always talking on the phone to her friends and playing "West Side Story" over and over again. June did that even when July was trying to do her homework, even when July slammed

her books on the table to get her to stop. Even then June kept on, thought only about herself, until one day July hauled off and smashed her sister's bud vase on the kitchen floor. But that only made June laugh in a mean way and say that she didn't care about the vase anyway because it was only from Pic 'n Save. "And just wait until Mom sees what you did to the floor," June added, turning the stereo up louder.

When June started junior high she stopped telling July her secrets altogether. She began wearing make-up and July would've been only too happy to help her hide it from their mother, except that no one ever asked her to and besides, their mother never noticed. One time, June asked July if she had ever kissed a boy and July's heart raced, thinking finally her sister was back and here they go just like before. But before she could answer, June flicked on the stereo and started singing "A Boy Like That" with Maria and Anita; she was making her eyebrows arch and tears pop into her glassy eyes and July knew she had lost her again. July noticed that June's breasts were growing again, and wondered if June realized that. They were still good breasts, July pointed out to her, but leaning dangerously to the other side of careful. But Tony and Maria were singing "Somewhere" then and June had to run to the mirror to see what she looked like when she cried. July stuck her hand right in front of June's face and first crossed, then deliberately uncrossed her fingers. "You are such an idiot," June said.

July hated her mother's white apron. It changed her into a different mother. Just by tying it around her waist she became one of those mothers with rounding backs and dark circles under their eyes.

"Tell me stories about my mother," Augusta said sometimes. And July would remind Augusta of the time their mother had polkaed each one of them in and out of the hallways and around the apricot trees in the front yard. Or she would remind her of the time their mother stood on the coffee table and sang "Old Man River." But the stories sounded like stories, July noticed. Like a "once upon a time" up front would sound just right.

Augusta worked her way backwards, from encyclopedias, to Black Beauty, to Dr. Seuss, to the "I CAN READ" books. Her favorite was Little Bear. She brought it to

July at 2 o'clock in the morning sometimes, if their mother wasn't home yet. "Read me 'Little Bear Goes To The Moon,'" she'd say in a phoney baby voice that made July want to smack her. "Read me 'Little Bear's Wish.'"

But July never did smack her and she did read her the stories every time she asked, because Augusta was still just a little kid and she still needed parents and it wasn't her fault that her own mother couldn't just look up and smile, just look up from her stupid weeding and just smile at their father one last stupid time, when it might have changed everything.

And besides, July kind of liked the stories too. Mother Bear was large and soft and plump and wore long dresses with pinafores. Mother Bear took care of everything, patiently, tirelessly, without any Father Bear there at all. July wished Mother Bear lived at their house.

July gave their mother the note from Augusta's teacher after dinner. Her mother read it and sighed. "Oh, Baby," she said to Augusta and tears fell out of her eyes. It wasn't like she cried anymore, it was more like the tears were so close to the edge now that they fell out whenever she tipped her head to one side.

"And the worst part is," their mother continued, and her lips were really quivering then, "is that I can't even stay here to talk to you about it." She squeezed and kissed Augusta, then stood up angrily. "Because now I have to go and get dressed," she said, narrowing her eyes. She hissed out the last word and bit it off at the end, as if it stood for everything she hated.

She came home early. It was only nine o'clock when the headlights slapped across the kitchen window. July watched as they focused, then dimmed. Augusta was in the tub with an old baby doll she'd found in a box marked "Goodwill." June was lying on the floor in the living room with her pointe shoes on, listening to "Tonight." July's hands were pruning up in the sink with the soapy tupperware.

July ran to the door without drying her hands, still holding a burpless seal. It scared her a little -- her mother so early, the way she was smiling. "What happened?" July asked.

Her mother's smile swelled into a laugh. "Screw em," she said. "That's what." She stepped inside and untied her apron. She wadded it into a ball and tossed it into the dirty dishwater. July watched it sink. June wandered in when she heard their mother's voice.

"America" blared from the living room. "Arriba! Arriba!" their mother shouted above the music, clapping her hands over her head and stamping her feet on the linoleum. "Ole!"

Augusta came running out of the bathroom in her pajama bottoms. She wound her wet arms, still dripping with bubbles, around her mother's hips and let herself, giggling, be bounced and jiggled and swung around; her feet barely missed hitting the hard rungs of her father's chair as she flew through the air.

July remembered this mother but was a little afraid of her. "I'll get a new washing machine..." she sang loudly, flatly, in her best Puerto Rican accent.

"What will you have though to keep clean?" her mother joined in, singing and whirling Augusta at the same time.

June jumped up on the coffee table and balanced on pointe. "Everything's free in America..."

Her mother jumped up on the coffee table too. "...for a small fee in America..."

Augusta and July climbed up and shoved their way in; they nearly knocked each other off, bumping and grinding and fan-kicking, pretending they were Puerto Rican dancers on a tenement rooftop, like in the movie. They froze in their poses for the grand finale of "America" and held them, unsteadily, through the little ridge of silence in the record. Then Mrs. Turrett began snapping her fingers and shaking her head, loose-lipped, to the opening bars of "Cool." July and her sisters snapped their fingers too, hunching forward and pretending to be West Side gang members. They followed their mother as she lead them (singing "Boy, Boy, Crazy Boy, stay loose, Boy...") off the coffee table and (July first dashing into the bedroom for one of her father's Trojan sweatshirts to slip over Augusta's head) into the Chevy.

On the way to the store their mother explained that she'd had it, that's all. She said that the silver trays were breaking her back and that she hated it when Roquefort dressing oozed down

the side of those huge jars and onto her fingers. And besides, she missed them.

July wanted to leave it at that: the night sky fresh and blowing right into their own car, the mother bright and apronless and there, the little sister damp and small and smiling, the big sister giddy, asking only the right kinds of questions -- nothing about how they would be able to buy new jeans now, about how they were going to pay for June's recital costumes, about how they were ever going to be able to fix that hole in the kitchen floor. She felt like kissing June, for asking such good and stupid questions, for making their mother laugh as she answered.

It was in the ice cream aisle, while Augusta drew hearts in the little frosty windows on the ice cream lids, that Mrs. Turrett told her daughters the rest of it. She told them in a whisper (because people were all around them, poking their nose heads down into the frozen sections) that one too many men with one too many gold chains and one too many Old-Fashioneds had grabbed her from behind. Augusta pulled her frosty finger away from the cartons. "So anyway," their mother continued, in a low voice. "Tonight I grabbed one back."

"You grabbed a man's butt?" Augusta said before July could stop her, in a voice that ricocheted off the frozen peas.

Mrs. Turrett stood up straight, nodded to Hal, the store manager, and said "Yes, French vanilla, I think." She checked the prices on three different brands, decided on the cheapest, and whispered no, that's not exactly where I grabbed him. She lowered the ice cream into the cart next to the root beer and a ten pound sack of potatoes.

July was the first one out of the car and into the house. She ran to the cupboard for the plastic Sea World mugs which, despite the Shamus, looked a lot like the frosted ones she remembered with her Aunt Poppy. As they watched the root beer sizzle and fizz, their mother assured them that everything would be okay. She told them she was thinking about giving private art lessons out of the house, or maybe even freelancing because she was still that good, she knew she could be, even though it had been years since she'd done anything but teach.

July filled her mouth with ice cream. She closed her eyes and frowned. "Ccoold" she said. But really she was

making her eyes and mouth stay shut in order to keep her mother's promises from leaking out and dribbling away.

Augusta dug out the Chip 'n Dale sheets. Mrs. Turrett crawled underneath with her daughters, laughing because her ice cream kept popping up to the top of the float.

June was silent so July began it.

"Sunflowers and tambourines," she said.

"Root beer floats and bright, brave daughters," said their mother.

June began to cry.

"Preposterous," said Augusta. The moon threw a lacy pattern over Augusta's cheeks when she said it that really did look a lot like ferns.

But by then July was studying the deep, jagged trench the vase had gouged out of the floor. She was wondering if those globs of ugly black tar had always been down there beneath the golden linoleum. She wondered if they had been just been biding their time all along, waiting, like evil trolls beneath a bridge, for some stupid kid to stumble by and set them free.

Her mother had stopped smiling too; she was studying the deep black gash. Her mother must have been seeing the same things July saw because her eyes were blank and round and white as the moon.

"Cellos," July said, nudging June in the ribs so she would start please June start playing Heaven so July could stop thinking. But June kept on crying, and their mother just kept staring at the raw, black, angry tar.

July pulled Augusta's head against her own heart, forcing her sister's eyes away from the terrible hole in the floor. She scooted them both backwards, closer to the wall, and moved her feet away from it, just in case. She couldn't take her own eyes away. She worried that she might be hypnotized. She worried that the evil might already be seeping out of the gory ooze and into their own atmosphere. "Hold your breath," she told Augusta. She worried that it might never be fixed.