

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Delicate Edible Birds

Lauren Groff

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# About the Book

Lauren Groff's critically acclaimed *The Monsters of Templeton* was shortlisted for the Orange Broadband Award for New Writers 2008, and critics hailed her as an enormous talent and a writer to watch. In *Delicate Edible Birds*, she fulfils that promise.

*Delicate Edible Birds* includes nine stories of vastly different styles and structures. 'L. De Bard and Aliette' recreates the tale of Abelard and Heloise in New York during the 1918 flu epidemic; 'Lucky Chow Fun' returns to Templeton, the setting of Groff's debut novel, for a contemporary account of what happens to outsiders in a small, insular town; the title story of *Delicate Edible Birds* is a harrowing, powerfully moving drama about a group of war correspondents, a lone woman among them, who fall prey to a frightening man in the French countryside while fleeing the Nazis.

With a dazzling array of voices and settings, *Delicate Edible Birds* will cement Lauren Groff's reputation as one of the foremost talents of her generation.

## About the Author

Lauren Groff was born in Cooperstown, New York. She has a BA from Amherst College and an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and has won fellowships to the Vermont Studio Center and Yaddo. Her debut novel, *The Monsters of Templeton*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and was shortlisted for the Orange Broadband Award for New Writers 2008. She lives in Gainesville, Florida and is at work on her second novel.

**ALSO BY LAUREN GROFF**

*The Monsters of Templeton*

# ***Delicate Edible Birds***

LAUREN GROFF



WINDMILL BOOKS







EVERY VILLAGE HAS its rhythm, and every year Templeton's was the same. Summer meant tourists to the baseball museum, the crawl of traffic down Main Street, even a drunken soprano flinging an aria into the night on her stagger back to the Opera. With fall, the tourists thinned out and the families of Phillies Phanatics ceded the town to retired couples with binoculars, there to watch the hills run riot with color.

Come winter, Templeton hunkered into itself. We natives were so grateful for this quiet—when we could hear the sleigh bells at the Farmers' Museum all the way to the Susquehanna—that we almost didn't mind the shops closing up. In winter we believed in our own virtue, lauded ourselves for being the kind of people to renounce the comforts of city life for a tight community and spectacular beauty. We packed on our winter fat and waited for spring, for the lake to melt, for the cherry blossoms, for the town to burst into its all-American charm, and the rapid crescendo of tourists.

This was our rhythm, at least, until the Lucky Chow Fun girls. That year, the snow didn't melt until mid-May, and the Templeton High School Boys' Swim Team won the State

Championships. That year, we natives stopped looking one another in the eye.

I WAS SEVENTEEN that spring and filled with longing, which I tried to sate with the books of myth and folklore that I was devouring by the dozens. I couldn't read enough of the stories, tiny doors that opened only to reveal a place I hadn't known I'd known; stories so old they felt ingrained in my genes. I loved Medea, Isolde, Allerleirauh. I imagined myself as a beautiful Cassandra, wandering vast and lonely halls, spilling prophecies that everyone laughed at, only to watch them come tragically true in the end. This feeling of muted-ness, of injustice, was particularly strong in me, though I had no particular prophecies to tell, no clear-sighted warnings. On the nights I stuffed myself with myths, I dreamed of college, of being pumped full of all the old knowledge until I knew everything there was to know, all the past cultures picked clean like delicious roasted chickens.

All March, I skidded home from school as fast as I could in my ratty Honda Civic to look for my college acceptance letters in the mailbox; all of my friends had gotten in early, but because I was being recruited for swimming, I had to wait for the regular acceptances. All March, there was nothing. By the time my little sister, Petra—Pot—trudged the mile home over the snowdrifts, I would be sitting at the kitchen table, having eaten an entire box of cereal plus a bowl of ice cream, feeling sick.

"Oh, God, Lollie," she'd say, dumping her backpack. "Nothing?"

"Nope," I'd say. "Nothing."

And she'd sigh and sit across from me. Her days were also hard, as she was too weird for the other fourth graders, too plump, too spastic. She never once had a sleepover or even a best friend. But instead of complaining,

Pot would try to cheer me up by mimicking the new birdsongs she'd learned that day. "*Drop-it, drop-it, cover-it-up, cover-it-up, pull-it-up, pull-it-up,*" she'd sing, then say, "Brown Thrasher," her dumpling face suddenly luminous. That year, Pot was on a strange ornithological kick, as if her entire pudgy being were stuffed with feathers. She fell asleep to tapes of tweets and whistles and had a growing collection of taxidermied birds scattered around her bedroom. I had no idea where she had gotten them, but was too moony with my own troubles to ask. I avoided her room as much as possible, because she had one particular gyrfalcon perched on her dresser that seemed malicious, if not downright evil, ready to scratch at your jugular if you were to saunter innocently by.

Those melancholy afternoons, Pot would chirp away until my mother came home from her own bad day at the high school in Van Hornesville, where she taught biology. No—my mother never came in, she blew in like the dust devil of a woman she was, stomping the snow off her boots, sending great clouds of snow from her shoulders. "Oh, God, Lollie, nothing?" she would say, releasing her springy gray hair from her cap.

"Nothing," Pot would trill, then leap up to rejoin her stiff little aviary upstairs.

My mother would look at the wreckage of my snack, frown, and hug me. "Elizabeth," she'd say, and I could hear the vibration of her words in her chest, feel the press of each individual bone of her rib cage. "Don't you worry. It will all work out in the end. You're no Podunk idiot like the kids I teach—"

"Spare me," I'd interrupt, and give her a kiss on the chin. Then I'd stand, late for swim practice, and leave my nervous little mother to peep out the window at me as I pulled away. That spring she was dating The Garbageman, and when I came home I may have seen her before going to

bed, or I may not have seen her until morning, singing during her preparations for school.

THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF VERSIONS of the Cinderella story throughout the world: Serbian Pepelyouga, Norwegian Kari Trestakk, Chinese Yeh-hsien, German Aschenputtel, French Cendrillon. What most of the stories have in common is both a good, absent mother and an evil, present one. Fairy tales are not like real life in all its beautiful ambiguity. There are no semigood semiabsent mothers. Or, for that matter, semipresent very good ones.

THAT WINTER, IT WAS ONLY IN THE POOL, feeling the thrust and slide of my body through the water, that I felt good. Only then could I escape the niggling terror of what would happen to my mother and sister when I left them, their sad dinners, my sister talking only of birds, my mother talking only of the crap day she had at school, neither heard by the other, neither listening.

I was the captain and the only girl on the Varsity boys' swim team that year, though not much of a leader. During the long bus rides, I only giggled nervously at the boys' boasts about boning chicks I knew they never touched. I wasn't chosen as a captain because I was a leader, but rather because of my teammates' small-town gallantry and my minor celebrity as an oddity in the papers. I was the fastest butterflier around and could beat everyone, boy or girl, in the region, save for one lightning-swift boy from Glens Falls. The papers all the way to Albany couldn't stop chortling over this fact. They ran photos of me every week, careful to take only my fairly pretty face and leave my—let's face it—overweight body on the cutting room floor. I was very heavy. "Rubenesque," my mother called it, but the boys were clearly no aesthetes because they never looked

directly at me, not even when I was on the block, waiting for the start. I was no pushover, though. If a boy made fun of the way I bulged in my bathing suit, calling me Moby Dickless, for instance, that boy would find himself stunned on the pool bottom, having been swum over by my own impersonation of a great white whale.

One Friday night in March, after an exceptionally hard relay practice, Tim Summerton leaned over the gutter when I came trundling in from the last race. He was no looker, all wonky-eyed and stippled with pimples, but he had a heart so kind he never went without a date to any school dance. He spat a stream of warm water into my face; I ducked and spat back at him, laughing. Then he grinned.

"Hey," he said. "The divers and I are going to the Lucky Chow Fun. Want to come?"

I looked at the little clump of divers snapping one another with towels. Those three boys were the exhibitionists of the team, with, truly, a little more to look at in their pick-lesuits than the swimmers had. I would know: I could see underwater remarkably well. "Oooh, Fun, Fun," the divers were saying in a vaguely ethnic impression. "We have fun fun at Fun Fun." They were not the smartest boys, our divers, but I suppose anybody who tries to shave his neck with the end of a diving board must be a little lacking in brainpower.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure."

"Great. Meet you there," he said, tapping my swim-capped head with a pull buoy. I was overwhelmed with the desire to grab his hand, clutch it to me, cover it in kisses, laugh like a madwoman. Instead I smiled then went back under the water, holding my breath until I could hold it no longer, then sent it up in a great silvery jellyfish-bubble of air. When I came up, Tim had gone.

That night, I showered with special care, washed the chlorine off my body, lotioned, powdered. And when I

walked out into the cold night, all the gym's lights went out behind me and the last employee locked the door behind my back. I left my hat off to let my hair freeze into the thin little snakes I liked to crunch in my fingers, and thought of moo goo gai pan.

It was a Friday night, but there was a basketball game at the high school, so the town was very still as I drove though it. Only the Ambassador's mansion gave a sign of life, every window burning gold. The Ambassador was our local hero, a former ambassador to France and Guyana, and once-upon-a-time my father's great friend, and I always felt a wash of fondness for him when I passed his fine fieldstone mansion on the river. He was an erect, gray man of eighty years old with thin, bluish fingers and canny eyes. He had, they said, a huge collection of rare goods from all over the world: a room entirely devoted to masks, one for crystal bowls, one for vases, even one for his miniature schnauzer, with paintings done by great artists of the snarly little beast. Nobody knew for sure, though, because when we were invited, we saw only the ground floor. In any case, my family hadn't been invited since we lost my father.

Now, on Main Street, only a few shopwindows had left their lights on, casting an oily shine on the baseball bats in the souvenir shops, making the artificial flowers in the General Store glow. The Red Dragoon Saloon was open and there were three Harleys in the sludge on Pioneer Street, but still I was able to park right in front of Lucky Chow Fun, behind Tim Summerton's Volvo.

The restaurant was newish, maybe two years old, and the town's first tentative step toward ethnic food, unless one counted Gino's Pizzeria and the Mennonite bakery on Main Street. It was a cheap linoleum joint, with an ugly, hand-drawn sign flapping in the wind off the lake, lit from above by a red light. It served a lot of sticky Americanized Chinese food, like General Tso's chicken and fried rice, and I loved it all, the fat and salt, the scandalous feeling of

eating fast food in a hamlet that banned all fast-food places, the miniature mythmaking of the fortune cookies.

That night, when I stepped out of the car and around to the sidewalk, I almost knocked into a small, shivering figure in an overlarge tee-shirt, sweeping the new powder of snow from the walk. "Sorry," I mumbled, and stepped away, not really looking at the girl I had nearly trampled, gathering only a vague impression of crooked teeth and a jagged haircut. She was just one of the girls who worked at the Lucky Chow Fun, one of the wives or daughters of the owners. Nobody in Templeton cared to figure out who the girls were, just as nobody figured out who the two men who ran the place were, calling them only Chen One and Chen Two, or Chen Glasses and Chen Fat. Only later did we realize that no part of their names remotely resembled Chen, nor did the girls resemble the men in any way, either.

I feel the necessity of explaining our hard-heartedness, but I cannot. Templeton has always had a callousness about outsiders, having seen so many come through town, wreak destruction on our lake, trash the ancient baseball stadium, Cartwright Field, litter our streets, and move off. This wariness extended even to those who lived with us; anyone who wasn't related to everyone else was suspect. Newcomers were people who had lived in town for only fifteen years. The one black family who lived in Templeton during my childhood promptly pulled up roots and moved away after a year, and, to my knowledge, there were only three Jewish children in school. The only Asians were preternaturally cheery and popular, adopted kids of the wealthiest of the doctors' families in town. This was a town that clung ferociously to the shameful high school mascot of the Redskins, though if we were any skins, we should have been the Whiteskins. I was born and raised in this attitude. That night, without a second thought, I stepped around the girl and into the fatty brightness of the

restaurant, past old Chen Glasses, snoozing over his Chinese newspaper at the door.

The restaurant was nearly empty, the long kitchen in the back sending out a fine oily sizzle, girls like ghosts in white uniforms chopping things, frying things, talking quietly to one another. The back-lit photos above the register struck me so powerfully with their water chestnuts and lovingly fried bits of meat that I didn't at first see the divers, who were pretending to be walruses, chopsticks in their mouths like tusks. When they saw me, they took the chopsticks out so fast that it was clear who they were imitating. I was not unused to this. In fourth grade, the Garrett twins had named their science project, a miniature zeppelin, *The Lollie*. That night, I did what I always did, stifled the pang, pretended to smile.

"Very funny, boys," I said. "Have you ordered?"

"Yeah," said Brad Huxley. He was in my grade and blessed with a set of eyelashes that made every girl in school envious. He gave me a dimpled smile and said, "We each ordered our own. These two freaks don't like sharing," nodding at the others. It was his sorrow in life that he was not endowed with hand-eye coordination; otherwise he would have been on the basketball court that evening with the cool kids. He overcompensated in the diving pool, and in a few weeks, at States, would come so close to the board on his reverse back pike that he flayed a strip of skin from his neck to mid-back and got a perfect score for that dive.

I was standing at the front, deciding what to order from solemn and scornful old Chen Fat, with his filthy apron, when Tim Summerton came from the back where the bathrooms were. His face was drawn and pale, and he looked half-excited, half-horrified. He didn't seem to see me, as he walked past me without a glance. He sat down at the table with the others and began to hiss at them something I couldn't quite make out.



Huxley sat back with a little smirk on his face. "Duh," he said, just loud enough for me to hear. "Everybody knows." The other two divers looked pale, though, and smiles broke out over their faces.

I was about to ask what they were talking about, but Chen Fat said, "Hem hem," and I turned toward him. His pen was poised over a pad and his eyelids were drawn down over his eyes. I couldn't quite tell if he was looking at me or not.

"General Tso's, please," I said. "And a Coke."

He grunted and rang up the bill on the old register, and I forked over my hard-won babysitting money, two dollars an hour for the Bauer hellions. When I sat down, the boys were already digging into their food, and the girl who had served them was backing away, looking down, holding the round tray before her like a shield. This one was pretty, delicate, with pointed little ears and chapped lips, but the boys didn't seem to notice her at all. Tim Summerton was just pushing around his mu shu pork, looking sick.

"You okay?" I said to Tim. He looked up at me, then looked away.

"He's just a pussy," said Huxley, a grain of rice on his lips. "He's all nervous about Regionals tomorrow. Doesn't want to do the five-hundred free."

"Really?" I said. "But, Tim, you're the best we've got."

"Eh," said Tim, shrugging. "Well, I'm not too nervous about it." Then he blinked and, clearly making an effort to change the subject, said, as my plate of crispy delicious chicken was placed before me, "So, who are you taking to the Winter Dance?" None of the boys really wanted to talk about this, it was clear, but spat out names: Gretchen, Melissa, maybe Gina, maybe Steph. Tim looked at me. "Who you going with, Lollie?"

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe just my friends." Depressing thought: my friends were the girls I ate lunch with, all buddies from kindergarten who knew

one another so well we weren't sure if we even liked one another anymore.

Huxley gave me his charming smile and said, "Because you're, like, a dyke, right? You like chicks? It's okay, you can tell us." He laughed, and the other divers laughed with him.

"No," I said, putting my chopsticks down, feeling my face grow hot. "What the hell? No, I'm not a whatever, I mean, I like guys, Jesus." My excitement, the invitation to eat with them, soured a little in my gut. I looked hard at the curls of chicken on my plate.

"Relax, Lollie," said Tim, grinning at me, his wonky eye traveling over the window, where the world was lit pink by the light over the sign. "He's just teasing you. Brad's a dick."

And, charmingly, Huxley winked at me and showed me his mouthful of half-chewed food. "I know you're no dyke," he said. "But you could tell us if you were."

"Yeah," one of the other divers said. "That's totally hot." And when we all looked at him a little funny, he blushed and said, "Well. Maybe not you, Lollie. But lesbians in general." He gathered high fives all around, hooting, until something in me burst and I gave him a little high five on his cheek, and he sat down again, abashed.

IN THE CHINESE MYTH, the goddess Nügua created the first humans from yellow earth, carefully crafting them with her own hands. Though they pleased her, these handcrafted humans took too much time, and so to speed the process along, she dipped a rope into darker mud and swung it around her head. In this way, she populated the earth with the darker mudspatters, who became the lowly commoners, while the handcrafted were the wealthy and higher-caste nobles.

Nugua, they say, has a woman's upper body but a dragon's tail. She invented the whistle, the art of irrigation, the institution of marriage. How terrible that this dragon-goddess is also the one who grants children to mothers; that this impatient snob of a goddess is the intermediary between men and women.

IT WAS LATE WHEN I CAME HOME because we sat around after we ate, as if waiting for something to happen. At last, Tim stood and said, "I'll escort you out, Lollie?" and I had the brief and thrilling fear that he was going to ask me to the Winter Dance. But Tim only opened my car door for me, then pulled off, his old Volvo spitting up smoke. I drove home over the black ice and into the driveway of our cottage on Eagle Street.

My mother's car was gone, and only one light was on in the kitchen when I came in. Pot was sitting in the half-shadow, looking at me with a tragic face.

"Potty?" I said. "What's wrong, honey?" Her little face broke down until, at last, her eyes filled, huge and liquid, with tears.

"I wanted your food to be warm," she said, "so I put up the heat. But then you didn't come home, and it burned a little, and so I put it down. And then I got scared because you still weren't home, and so I put the heat up again, and now it's all ruined." She poked the foil off the plate, and her lip began to tremble.

"Oh, I'm so, so sorry. We went out for Chinese," I said, looking at the charred remains of the chicken and couscous my mother had saved for me. I hugged my little sister until she began to laugh at herself. Then I said, "Petra Pot, where's Mom?"

She frowned and said, sourly, "The Garbageman's." We called our mother's new boyfriend The Garbageman, though he was actually a Ph.D. in garbage science and

owned a lucrative monopoly on trash removal in the five counties surrounding ours. He certainly didn't look like a garbage-man, either, being fastidious to the point of compulsion, with his hair combed over a small bald spot on his head, his wrists doused in spicy cologne, and the beautiful shirts he had tailored for him in Manhattan. Though Pot hated him, I was ambivalently happy for my mother's sudden passion: since we lost my father, she hadn't seen anyone, and this, I privately assumed, had made her as nervous and trembly as she had been in recent years.

When I say we lost my father, I don't mean he died: I mean that we lost him when we were on a sabbatical in England, in the bowels of Harrods department store. This was back when Pot was five and suffering acutely from both dyslexia and ADHD. Her inability to connect language in her head, combined with her short attention span, frequently made her so frustrated she didn't actually speak, but, rather, screamed. "Petra the Pepperpot," we called her, affectionately, which was shortened to "Pepperpot," then "P-pot," then "Pot" or "Potty." The day we lost my father was an exceptionally trying one, as, all morning, Pot had screamed and screamed and screamed. My dad, having coveted the Barbour oil jackets he'd seen around him all summer long, had taken us to Harrods to try to find one for himself. But for at least fifteen minutes, he was subjected to the snooty superciliousness of the clerk when he tried to describe the jacket.

"Bah-bah," my father kept saying, as that's what he heard when he asked the Brits what kind of jacket they were wearing. "It's brown and oily. A Bah-Bah jacket."

"I'm sorry, sir," the clerk returned indolently. "I've never heard of a Bah-Bah."

Thus, my father was furious already when my little sister fell into an especially loud apoplectic fit, pounding her heels into the ground. At last, my father turned on us. His

face was purple, his eyes bulged under his glasses, and this mild-mannered radiologist seemed about ready to throttle someone to death. "Wait here," he hissed, and stalked off.

We waited. We waited for hours. My mother rubbed her thin arms, frightened and angry, and I was sent to the vast deli in the basement for sandwiches. Cheddar and chutney, watercress and ham. We waited, and we had no way to contact him, and so, when the store was about to close, we caught a cab back to our rented flat. We found his things gone. He was in a hotel, he said later when he telephoned. He had arranged our tickets home. My mother shut the sliding doors in the tiny kitchen, and Pot and I tried to watch a bad costume drama on the telly, and when our mother came out, we knew without asking that it was all over. Nowadays, my father lives in an Oxford town house with a woman named Rita, who is about to have their first child. "Lurvely Rita, Meeta-Maid" is what my mother so scornfully calls her, though Rita is a neurologist, and dry, in the British manner, to the point of unloveliness.

But the evening of the Lucky Chow Fun, my father wasn't the villain. My mother was, because who leaves a troubled ten-year-old alone in a big old house in the middle of winter? There were still a few tourists in town, and anyone could have walked through our ever-unlocked front door. I was filled with a terrible fury, tempted to call her at The Garbageman's place with a sudden faux emergency, let her streak home naked through the snow. And then, after some reflection, I realized *I* was the villain: my mother had thought I'd be home by the time she went out, Pot had said.

Stricken with guilt, I allowed Pot to take me upstairs to her own creepy ornithological museum. In the dark, the birds' glass eyes glittered in light from the streetlamps, giving me the odd impression of being scrutinized. I shivered. But Pot turned on the light and led me from bird to bird, solemnly pronouncing each one's name, and giving a respectful little bow as she moved on. At long last, she

stopped before a new addition to her collection, a dun-colored bird with mischievous eyes.

Pot stroked its head, and said, "This is an Eastern Towhee. It goes: *hot dog, pickle, ickle, ickle.*"

"Neat," I said, feeling the gaze of the gyrfalcon on the tenderest parts of my neck.

"*Hurry, worry, blurry, flurry,*" Pot said. "Scarlet Tanager."

"Cool," I said. "I like it. Scarlet Tanager. Hey, you want to watch a movie?"

"*Quick-give-me-a-rain-check,*" giggled Pot. "White-eyed Vireo."

"Pots, listen up. Do you want to watch *Dirty Dancing*? I'll make popcorn."

"*If I sees you, I will seize you, and I'll squeeze you till you squirt,*" my baby sister said, grinning so hugely she almost split her chubby little cheeks.

I blinked, held my breath. "Uh," I said. "Where'd you get that one, Pot?"

"That's the call of a Warbling Vireo," she said with great satisfaction. "Let's watch *The Princess Bride.*"

My mother was up before we were in the morning, flipping omelets and singing a Led Zeppelin song. "Kashmir," I think. She beamed at me in the doorway, and when I went to her and bent to kiss her on the head, she still stank of The Garbageman's cologne.

"Ugh," I said. "You may want to shower before Pot gets up."

She looked at me, frowning. "I did," she said, pulling a strand of her springy peppered hair across her nose. "Twice."

I took a seat at the table. "That's the power of The Garbageman's scent, I guess," I said. "Indelible. He sprays you like a wildcat, and you belong to him."

"Elizabeth," my mother said, sprinkling cut chives atop the egg. "Can you just try to be happy for me?"

"I am," I said, but looked down at my hands. I wasn't sure what I was happy for, as I had never been on a date, let alone done anything remotely sexual, and it wasn't entirely because I was fat. The hard truth was that nobody really dated at Templeton High. Couples were together, or broken up, without really having dated. There was nowhere to go; the nearest theater, in Oneonta, was thirty minutes away. And though I suspected there was some sexual activity happening, I was mystified as to how it was instigated.

My mother took my hand in a rapid little movement, kissed it, and went to the stairs to shout up for Pot. My sister was always a furious sleeper, everything about her clenched in slumber—face, limbs, fists—and she never awoke until someone shook her. But that morning, she came downstairs whistling, her hair in a sloppy ponytail, dressed all in white, a pair of binoculars slung around her neck. We both stared at her.

"I am going bird-watching on the nature trail," she announced, taking a plate. "I'm wearing white to blend in with the snow. Yummy omelets, Mom."

"Oh. Okay, Honey-Pot. Sounds good," said my mother, sitting down with her own coffee and plate. She had decided when my father left to be a hands-off parent, and went from hovering nervously over everything I did to allowing my little sister the most astounding latitude.

"Wait. You're going alone, Pot?" I said. I glared at my mother, this terrible person who would let a ten-year-old wander in the woods alone. What would she do when I was in college, just let my little sister roam the streets at night? Let her have drunken parties in the backyard, let her squat in the abandoned Sugar Shack on Estli Avenue, let her be a crack whore?

"Yup," Pot said. "All alone."

"Mom," I said, "she can't go alone. Anyone can be out there."

“Honey, Lollie, it’s Templeton. For God’s sakes, nothing happens here. And the nature trail is maybe five acres. At that.”

“Five acres that could be filled with rapists, Mom.”

“I think Pot will be fine,” said my mother. She and Pot exchanged wry glances. And then she looked at the clock on the microwave, saying, “Don’t you have to be at the gym in fifteen minutes?”

I stifled my protest, warned Pot to take the Mace my mom carried as protection against dogs on her country runs, and struggled into my anorak. Then I stuffed a piece of toast down my gullet and roared off in my deathtrap Honda. When I passed the Ambassador’s mansion, I saw him coming up the walk, back from the Purple Pickle Coffee Shop, steaming cup in hand, miniature schnauzer on a lead in the other, and they both—man and beast—were dressed all in white, with matching white pompommed berets. *Curious*, I thought, but that was all: I was already focusing, concentrating on the undulations of my body through the water, envisioning the hundred butterfly, watching myself touching all the boys out by an entire body length.

IN THE GRIMMS’ STORY “Hansel and Gretel,” it isn’t the witch in the gingerbread house who is the wickedest character, as the poor wandering siblings easily defeated her with their small cunning. Rather, the parents of the children were the ones who, in a time of famine, not once, but twice, concocted the plan to take their children into the dark forest and leave them there to starve. The first time, the children dropped stones and found their way back. The second time, the forest gobbled up their trail. The witch did what witches do. The parents were the unnatural ones. This speaks to a deep and ingrained fear: that parents could, in their self-interest, lose sight of their duties to their



children. They could sell them to the dark and dank wilderness, send them to the forest, let them starve there. And each time, those two little children, hungry for home, came struggling so bravely back.

BUT NOTHING HAPPENED TO POT THAT DAY, and we won Regionals, as nobody could dent our team that year. It was late when we returned, and I was reading *Bulfinch's Mythologies* for the nth time, under the red exit light in the back of the bus. I was marveling over the tiny passage on Danae: *Daughter of King Acrisius of Argos who did not want her to marry and kept her imprisoned because he had been told that his daughter's son would kill him. Jupiter came to her in the disguise of a shower of gold, and she became the mother of Perseus. She and her child were set adrift in a chest and saved by a fisherman on the island of Seriphos.* There was something so haunting in the story, drama packed so tightly into the words that images burst in my head: a white-limbed girl in a dark room, a chink in the roof, the shower of gold pouring over her dazzled body; then the black chest, the baby squirming on her stomach, the terrifying rasp of the scales of sea-monsters against the wood. A story of light and dark. Purely beautiful, it seemed to me, then.

I was daydreaming so happily as we trundled over Main Street that I didn't at first notice what was happening until one of the freshman boys gave a shout. The bus driver slowed down to rubberneck as we went around the flagpole on Pioneer Street, and I saw it all: all eight of the town's squad cars up the hill to our left, all flashing red and blue in syncopated bolts, glaring on the ice and snow, and the ambulance with the stretcher being swallowed up inside it, the running police, the drawn guns, the Chens, both Fat and Glasses, up against the Lucky Chow Fun's vinyl siding, arms and legs spread. A huddled ring of the Lucky Chow Fun girls on the steps. I could pick out the girl with the