

a lump that made it impossible to swallow.

"Do you promise?" she asked. I remembered the way I had once thought of her as strong and funny and smart and wild and carefree. She would be a superstar, be stunning, dazzle the world the way she had dazzled me. Of course she wouldn't die. Of course I promised her.

I visited her in the hospital, bringing cards from her classmates and flowers from teachers and more flowers from neighbors and friends of my parents. I read to her—not that she couldn't read, she just wanted me to do it. She was fed intravenously, but sometimes she vomited anyway. My parents waited in the lounge, sitting stiffly on the vinyl seats. My mother teetered back and forth when she stood, and when she talked to Corie, the only time she didn't sound like a kindergarten teacher was when she said "I love you."

Corie died in July, while I sat in the den and watched a soap opera and tried to decide whether I should get my hair cut. She died even though I had promised her she wouldn't, and even though she had believed me. A hundred times a day, my mother said, "If only we had gotten help for her sooner . . ." and my father patted her gently. At the funeral, a lady crooned a hymn that Corie would not have been listening to. She would have been looking away, making eye contact with a man who was twenty-five, thinking of herself, thinking of tomorrow.

My face became swollen with the tears. Arms were wrapped around me, arms of hundreds of people whose faces I barely noticed. "Poor young Corie," they said, and, in response, I cried a fresh set of tears, my nose dripping, more faceless people stuffing tissues into my fists. I waited for an end, for the finale, but there never was one. There is only what Corie left behind: the dance clothes, her stupid youth, her curly hair, and me, her younger sister. ★

Queen of Spades

"Watch out for jellyfish," Sashie will yell when we bang open the screen door. We'll be carrying pails, towels around our necks, and sucking Popsicles if any are left from the night before. "And splinters," calls Aunt Terry. Jace will wave one arm in the air to let them know she heard, and then we'll go down to the dock.

Sometimes snakes are curled up by the bushes. We have to pass them because the bushes are next to the stone path that leads to the dock. They're usually long, black, pretty gross, but if you walk fast you can just pretend they're not there. When we were here

last year, Sashie saw a snake her second day and she never went outside again. I'm not joking. Jace and I counted the number of times she left the house and it came to eleven. That includes going out to dinner, once to McDonald's and twice to Baby's for softshell crabs.

I think even Donald is less scared than Sashie, and he's seven. Firstly, Sashie doesn't like being out



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in the country. She's not exactly what you'd call a city girl, but she likes going to movies, shops, whatever. Plus, she thinks she's too skinny and refuses to swim. About two years ago—we would never do this now—Jace and I took her bras out of her bureau and tried them on. Jace was kind of pudgy then and I had to buckle her in and then one of the straps popped because we had started laughing so hard. Just then, Sashie walked in. I almost died! Sashie was wearing this fancy purple velvet thing, it was Christmas, and her face turned about the same color as the dress. "Get out of here, you little brats!" she yelled, and of course, we did.

When we got out in the hall, Jace said, "Shut up, Miss Ironing Board." We started giggling again; I mean, it was pretty funny. But Sashie hadn't shut her door all the way and heard us. She told all the parents, and Jace and I had to go to bed at 9:00, even though it was Christmas Eve.

Since then, Sashie hasn't developed much, if you get what I mean. She grew her hair longer, though, which I told her looks nice. She stared at me all funny, as if to say, "Oh, yeah?" She's impossible to compliment, I swear. The thing that gets Jace and me the worst is how Sashie pretends to be perfect. She won't even admit that she's afraid of jellyfish and snakes and us seeing her dumb little body in a swimsuit. When Donald asks why she won't come to the dock, she says in a purring voice, "Oh, I like to sit in the kitchen and talk to Mom."

That's a joke and a half because everyone knows that Sashie likes my mother better than she likes her own. I've heard her say, "Aunt Paula, you understand me so perfectly." My mom says these corny things like, "You're such a great girl," or "You're my favorite niece." (Too bad for Jace, I guess.) All Sashie talks about to Aunt Terry is can she pleeeeeease go to

California with Colleen? I swear, I feel like I know Colleen as a sister by now. I've never even laid eyes on her (except by photo—Jace and I found a picture of Sashie, Colleen, and some scrawny guy when we were looking through Sashie's wallet). But I know that Colleen is going to visit her older brother in San Diego, and Sashie wants to go, too. Colleen's brother is out of college and so cool, and all of his friends are sooooo hot. But Sashie guesses that we wouldn't know much about that, would we now? Jace and I just roll our eyes; as for me, I've had four boyfriends. Like I mentioned, Jace is a little large so she's only had one, but I found him to be pretty nice.

Anyway, Sashie wants to go to San Diego in August and so she begs and begs. "I'll get straight A's for all of tenth grade," she wails, and Jace whispers "nerd" to me. That seems like a pretty stupid promise since Sashie already gets straight A's, but she has some idea that she's pulling the wool over Aunt Terry



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I've ever met!"**



and Uncle Reed's eyes. She's really strange, I have to say.

Nights here we play Monopoly or watch TV. If something like "Cosby" is on, Jace and I like to see it. Unfortunately, Sashie sits in the back of the room and critiques the entire show. She's so annoying. She'll start up with, "Oh, yeah right, like Bill Cosby would really be around the house all the time if he was a doctor," and by then the studio audience is laughing hysterically and we've missed the joke.

Once I was so mad, I said, "What *do* you like, Sashie?"

"I prefer 'Thirtysomething,'" she said, and she looked down at me from her honky nose. Jace and I made this plan to wait till "Thirtysomething" was on and then talk the whole time. When our chance finally came, we went and lay on the rug as usual, but the show was so boring and confusing that both of us fell asleep before the second commercial break. So, of course, we never got revenge.

Another thing: Sashie cheats at cards. She taught us the game of Hearts and since you need three people, we have no choice but to include her when we play. She always waits till one of us has too many of a suit and has to keep throwing them out, and then she sticks you with the queen of spades. The

queen is thirteen points, unless you shoot the moon, which of course never happens when Sashie is playing. She's one of those people who has two points when everyone else has 37 or 54.

I have to be polite to all the Rowetts, though, seeing as this is their vacation place and not really mine. Last year we put a banana—a piece of *fruit*, for gosh sakes—in Sashie's bed and she thought it was a snake and freaked. She flicked on the lights and started bellowing until Uncle Reed came up to the kids' loft. After he scolded us and then took Donald to the bathroom, he went downstairs again, and that's when Sashie pounced. She said, "Judy Duvell, I hate you. I've hated you since you were a baby. Do you know that all the clothes you wear used to be mine, including that nightgown you have on right now? Our dad pays for you to go to private school because your dad is so lazy that he can't even stay in one job. And we let you come to this house with us, as a favor." She was really worked up by then, talking so fast, so excited to finally be telling me off, that she tripped over some of the words. "You're the rudest, most obnoxious little snot I've ever met—besides maybe you, Jace—and I think it's terrible because you're just living off us." Then she let out this sigh so we'd know, even in the dark, that her Grand Speech was finished.

"Oh, be quiet, you ugly cow," Jace said, and even Donald started laughing. Sashie went to sleep on the floor of her parents' room. The next day she came down to the dock—that was one of the eleven times—while we were swimming.

"Come here, Judy," she said. I swam over. I felt pretty dumb, actually, because I remembered that the suit I had on had been hers before. It had pink ruffles across the stomach. "I'm sorry for what I said to you. I'm three years older"—of course she *would* stick that in—"and we're cousins, and I should know better."

"It's okay," I answered. Actually, I'd started crying after Jace and Donald fell asleep. But from the way her mouth was pinched up, I knew I'd better say it didn't matter.

"Good." Then she turned and walked her bony legs up the planks of the dock, as if she were a Southern belle.

That incident happened last summer, so I try not to think of it. Even though Sashie is as unlikable as ever, at least she doesn't say anything about my parents. They're getting a divorce now, so I'll be with the Rowetts until September, maybe longer. They live about an hour north of us and it looks like I might even start school with Jace. We'll both be in seventh grade; I'm definitely switching schools, I just

don't know where I'm going. Now it's the end of July—not much longer till Sashie might be going to San Diego. Jace and I are crossing our fingers that she stays out there for good. ★

Kati and Marty and Heather

When Kati signed her name, she dotted the i's with bubbly hearts. I thought they looked stupid. Kati was always trying to be a big shot. Marty and I sometimes talked about her, but then we felt bad. Once Kati made Marty cry. "Your sister is a slut," she said, pursing her lips and squinting her eyes. We were in fifth grade, but she already wore eyeliner. My mother wouldn't let me.

"No, she isn't," Marty had yelled. Her face had become all red and splotchy, like it did when Mrs. Harney called on her to read aloud in English class.

"What's a slut?" I asked, but they ignored me.

"My older brother told me so." Kati grinned wickedly. She had pointy teeth. She scared me when she was trying to be mean.

"I hate your brother," Marty said.

"Just say that to his face." Kati whirled around and left us. We were at the mall in Oakridge, and I knew that her mom was picking her up soon anyway, but Kati always tried to be dramatic.

"What's a slut?" I said to Marty.

"I don't know." She was sniffing like a little dog. I handed her some pink Kleenex from my coat pocket.

"Then why are you crying?"

"I know it's bad. I know how Kati is."

"She's just trying to be cool." I patted Marty's shoulder. I hoped she would stop bawling. People walking by looked at us like we were weird.

By seventh grade, we knew what slut meant. That's what we called Kati, but not to her face. In gym class, she sneaked out the door in the girls' locker room and did stuff with the eighth grade boys. For a few weeks, she was hanging around a lot with Richard Hilzen.

"Is he your boyfriend?" I asked one day. We were at her house.

"Shhh!" She looked at me sternly. "My dad's upstairs."

"Why is he home in the afternoon?"

"Because he lost his job." Kati was spreading peanut butter on a piece of Wonder bread. She accidentally stuck the knife through the slice of bread.

"Oh."

"Yeah, well . . ." She carried her plate to the

table where I was sitting. "I'm sure my dad will get . . . another job. He's really smart." She grinned at me. I couldn't tell if she believed what she was saying; if Kati felt bad she never let you see it.

"So about Richard?"

"Nothing." She shrugged her shoulders.

"But I always see you two together."

"Like he'd go out with me." Kati gave a brittle laugh. "Like anyone would."

"Of course they would. Chad Michaels sits with us at lunch every single day."

She looked at me strangely. "He likes *you*, Heather."

Kati never gave credit to anyone. I didn't know what to say.

In November they started smoking. They liked Camel Lites, and when Jill Harrison brought in animal crackers, they all said, "Give me a camel, where are the camels? I loooove the camels!" They eyed each other like it was funny. I never smoked. My mother used to and it took her three tries before she could quit.

"Why don't you ever light up?" Marty asked me.

"Light up?"

She held an imaginary cigarette between two fingers and pretended to drag on it. "You know."

"Oh. Well, it's kind of gross."

"What?" Marty looked like someone had just told her the world is flat. "Are you serious, Heather, or are you teasing me?"

"I'm serious."

"But it's so relaxing."

The year before it would have cracked me up to hear her say that, considering that she almost



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coughed up a lung every time she inhaled. But now it just made me sad. "I don't know. I just don't like how it smells."

"Oh." Marty nodded her head rapidly. "I see what you mean."

The best time the three of us ever had was at Marty's sister's Sweet Sixteen party. We were the youngest ones there, and all these older guys asked us to dance. After a while, we sneaked some beer and went inside Marty's room. Everything any of us said seemed so funny. I almost peed in my pants, I was