

*Hide & Go Seek*

“Put some on me.”

Melissa Lark stood on the toilet seat. Nora swept pink blush upwards along her cheeks and then squinted through one eye the way the makeup man on a set would do. “Such a pretty girl,” she said, turning back to the mirror.

“More.” With one hand, Melissa pushed her dark hair back from her forehead, the gesture of a grown woman. “On my eyes, like you.”

Nora opened the plastic case. “Close them tight.”

Melissa’s lashes quivered as Nora passed the brush once, twice over each eyelid, leaving behind a dusting of brown sparkle.

“Let me see.” Melissa held out her arms, and Nora swung her onto her hip. Reflected in the mirror, both faces surrounded by dark curls, they smiled at each other. “You’re pretty anyway, you know, without this gunk,” Nora said.

Melissa shook her head, removing the two fingers she’d stuck into her mouth. “I want to show my daddy.” She took Nora’s hand as they left the bathroom, her wet fingers sticky against Nora’s palm.

“All set?” Joanna was in the kitchen scraping corncobs into the trash. She straightened. “Wow, you look nice.” She was still in the shorts she’d worn all day, as was Todd. He sat on the couch, leafing through a magazine, while Emmylou Harris crooned a sad-hearted song.

“Daddy!” Melissa ran to him. “Nora put eye stuff on me!”

“Oh dear,” Nora said. “I just assumed it was a party.”

“It is a party,” Melissa said. “Daddy, look!”

“We stay pretty casual around here,” Joanna said, rinsing plates. Todd held Melissa’s chin and tilted her face this way and that. “Wow!” he said, and whistled. “You’re ready for a party, all right.”

“Did you tell Nora thank you, Melissa?” Joanna closed the dishwasher and pushed buttons. “I can’t think when I last put on mascara even.”

Not just mascara: Nora had also put on a long skirt and dangling earrings. One always wore makeup for a party; in Los Angeles, she

kept a small kit in her car, applied blush and eyeliner en route to the grocery store or the laundromat. There was no telling what fellow actress, even casting director, one might run into.

"Anyway," Joanna said, as the dishwasher began to hum, "you girls both look very nice."

The four of them set off down the block, Joanna carrying picture books and Melissa pushing a plastic perambulator into which she'd stuffed three dinosaurs and a doll. Nora slipped off all but one of her five silver bangles and stored them in the side pocket of her purse, thinking that if she were to write Michael a letter, if she were to upset the process of silence-and-disentanglement they had agreed upon, she could title the letter like one of Michael's video projects: *Three Days in the Life of the Larks*.

"Here on Friendship Street," the narration would begin, "Todd and Joanna Lark appear to have become adults. They seem to occupy their new home happily enough, although at times Todd is apologetic about the expensive wood floor and the vast collection of CDs their burgeoning business allows them to afford, while Joanna remains sturdily convinced that their glass is half empty..." Here the voiceover would grow more intimate, more personal: "Melissa has lost all trace of the baby fat that might be remembered from their visit to Hollywood two years ago: her limbs are quick and her lashes long. And you didn't prepare me for the color of the lawns here, Michael; I can only compare it to my memories of Ireland, which we saw too fleetingly, as usual, from the windows of our rental car—"

But as always the bitterness would find a way to creep in. Nora stared with ferocity at a stretch of lawn, as if by doing so she could burn away the tears that could still take her by surprise. "So green," she said. "Like something inside the grass makes it glow."

"Yep." Todd's pace was a slow lope in battered Reeboks. "Suburbia at last."

"Nothing wrong with suburbia." Joanna's voice came fast, clipped, as if this was an old argument.

The houses they passed did not look exactly alike, although when Nora looked around she had a hard time distinguishing the Larks's from the others along the broad, tree-lined street. Each two-story structure sported a patch of lawn before the front door, awnings or

shutters over the kitchen window, a two-car garage, with or without bicycles sprawled on cement driveways.

“Michael and I swore, *blood brothers*, that we’d never ever succumb,” Todd said. “We swore we’d never settle—”

“Todd,” Joanna said.

“Well,” Nora skipped forward to walk between them. “Michael always swore he’d never wear a tie, and look what—” She stopped. The hospitality the Larks had shown her had included an astonishing lack of expressed curiosity about Michael. “The two of you couldn’t get on climbing in Yosemite forever.”

Todd’s “Why not?” was buried beneath Joanna’s passionate: “Some of us got good and sick of living like hippies! Besides, the neighborhood is great for Melissa.”

Todd shrugged scrawny shoulders inside his worn T-shirt and surged ahead. Joanna stared at his back and bit her lip.

“And then there’s me,” Nora scrambled to fill the silence. “I mean, I was one of those nasty, self-righteous people who proclaimed—” she made her voice teensy, self-righteous— “‘*Those that can, act; those that can’t, teach.*’ And look where I’ve landed.” She laughed. “It’s just a different kind of settling, I suppose, another kind of suburbia.”

“But you’ll get to direct, too, right? I mean, you’re a visiting *artist*.” This distinction was clearly important to Joanna.

A wheel of Melissa’s perambulator got stuck in a crack in the sidewalk, and Todd knelt to free it. Nora tried to imagine Michael in that same position. Would a daughter of theirs have inherited his black hair, or her brown? The wheel jerked loose. “There you go,” Todd said, touching the whole of his hand to Melissa’s back. Nora, watching, found she was holding clenched fists over her heart. She made a face; had this been a scene in acting class she would have been lambasted for choosing such a hackneyed, clichéd gesture.

“Hey!” she said, flinging her arms wide, wanting to lighten the mood that had settled over her, over the Larks, over the whole street, echoing the cloud cover that pressed down with its doughy humidity. “The path just gets narrower, that’s all,” she said, and twirled, cocking hands over head in the stylized position of a flamenco dancer. “Who’d have dreamed I’d wind up in the *Midwest*, so incredibly far from Hollywood’s neon?” She twirled again, knowing she would be indulged; she was the performer, after all.

Joanna giggled. Todd was some distance ahead, one hand in his pocket, the other dragging the perambulator. Melissa walked backwards, sucking on her fingers, eyes gleaming. “Look at me!” Melissa twirled too.

“Look at you!” Joanna echoed.

Melissa galloped ahead to dance on a cement path that led to an open door. “I can play with Jonathon?” Her father said, “Sure you can!” and Melissa ran up the sidewalk, yelling, “Ready or not!”

Their hostess, Grace Franks, had black hair that fell to her waist, divided into two halves by a white line of scalp. “I’ve heard a lot about you,” she said, handing Nora and Joanna glasses of wine. With her black pedal pushers and her toenails painted the color of her lips, she looked as if she had walked off the set of a fifties movie. “It sure is nice you have the Larks to stay with while you find a place to live.”

“Oh my God, yes,” Nora said. “It would have been terrifying, otherwise. Knowing nobody, starting from scratch.”

Grace’s backless sandals clacked against the linoleum as she moved about the kitchen, getting a beer for Todd, apple juice for Melissa. “Your husband just stayed in L.A.? Your kids in college already? Mine is too—I mean the first one.”

Joanna shook her head without looking at Nora. “You know what? You’ll both be at University this fall. Grace is going back to school!”

Nora told her congratulations. They touched wine glasses. “Listen though,” Grace said. “My daughter—from my first marriage? We’ll *both* be at the U this fall. Is that weird or what? I mean, where’s the time *go*?”

Nora sipped her wine. If such a thing as wrinkle calipers existed, something that would measure the length and breadth of crow’s feet, the lines that deepened around Grace’s eyes and those of Nora’s own would measure about the same. And Grace had a child in college.

Grace poured herself another dollop of wine. “Let’s go find Webster.”

They followed her towards a screened-in porch, Nora pausing to help Melissa lift the perambulator up the step from the kitchen. A harp, shrouded in a green shawl, rose from a corner of the living room. A map of Ireland monopolized one wall and harp music waft-

ed from a CD player. Grace slid open a screen. “Webster, sweetie, this is Nora. She’s that friend of the Larks that got that job in the drama department. That’s Alexandra, Nora.”

Webster wore a wife-beater T-shirt and, incongruously, held a pipe, which he did not smoke. Alexandra was napping in a Snugli on his back, her cheek scrunched onto his bare shoulder. “Well, good for you!” Webster said, shaking Nora’s hand. “I heard there were hundreds of applications for that position.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I’d have applied if I actually thought I’d get hired.” Nora put her hand out to the baby’s wispy head of hair. Grace was in her 40s, Webster appeared to be in his late 50s, and they were starting another family. Her smile caught against dry gums. “It was quite a decision to make. It’s like starting life over, in a bizarre kind of way.”

“Now there’s a good attitude!” Grace said. “Of course, you’ll be teaching. For me, going back to school’s like going back to prison.”

Todd laughed. He and Joanna were inspecting a picnic table crammed with desserts: several plates of cookies, a chocolate Bundt cake, two cheesecakes, a bowl of fruit. “You sure wouldn’t find me doing it,” he said.

“Todd,” Joanna said.

The doorbell rang. “That will be the Tobars!” Grace, holding her glass, slipped back through the door to the living room.

For a brief moment the sun, low on the horizon, broke through the scrim of clouds, and the rosy light, dimmed by screens that had been placed over the porch windows, crossed the floor in pale, mote-spangled stripes. “Well, here’s to you.” Webster raised his glass. He reminded Nora of someone, the way his lower lip pouted out, a little shiny, the way he sat, legs wide apart, feet rooted in the floor. “You think you’ll stay? You interested in tenure?”

Nora let the question float. She herself felt unmoored, as if she might very well drift through the screen windows and dissipate into air, into thin air. Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were but spirits. She sipped her wine and holding its too-sweet taste in her mouth, swallowed it in bits, slowly.

Grace ushered the Tobars onto the porch, and then began to light candles that stood amidst the array of desserts. The Tobars had two sons: Davie wore overalls and his diapered bottom hung pear-like

behind him as he held onto a chair, bending pudgy knees in minuscule pliés. Jonathon was about six, skinny and dark.

“Jonathon!” Melissa squirmed off her father’s lap, but Jonathon ignored her and ran to the dessert table, grabbing cookies with both hands. His mother dragged him away. Grace introduced Nora over Jonathon’s shouts.

“Nice to meet you,” Bea Tobar said, running a hand through blond hair, already tousled in curls. “One at a time, Jonathon!” Her voice edged upwards. “Just one. So you’re the actress. Well, you sure do look like you’re from Hollywood!”

Nora almost laughed. You should see what the real ones look like, she wanted to say. She held her elbows with opposite hands.

Steven Tobar sat down next to her. His face had pleasing planes to it, cheekbones, jaw line, forehead, everything smooth and freshly shaved. He was very tan, and as he crossed his thighs a muscle rose like a welt beneath the edge of his shorts. Nora closed her eyes against the sudden image of Michael bending to step into his jeans, his muscled legs paled by the morning sun that streamed through their bedroom window, closed her eyes against the sudden certainty that she really would never see him do that again.

The doorbell rang again, and Grace scuttled off, as Jonathon screeched, reaching toward the cookies, dancing against Bea’s grasp. “You’ve already had three,” Bea said. “And you know what sugar does to you.”

“Do you know where I could find a hardware store?” Nora asked abruptly. “Where one can get a toaster, a muffin tin, a lamp, that sort of thing?”

Everyone stopped talking to listen as Steven gave her directions to Tru-Value. “It’s not too far from Sears,” Steven said. “But hey, what you need is a man about the house. Any man about the house would know where Sears is!”

There was general laughter but Bea raised her top lip in what barely passed as a smile and flicked a look at her husband. Steven’s face got even ruddier, and he folded his arms, looking away from Nora. Nora turned the bracelet around and around her wrist, wishing she hadn’t worn a sleeveless shirt. She was an actress, and perhaps to Grace, to Bea, even to Joanna that meant she was a shark, circling, ready to dive and bite; she was a single woman in this foam of families; she wore makeup and clothes that revealed bare

arms; she was here to steal their husbands away. After all, that's what they did in the soap operas, in the tabloids, in the movies. She rubbed her fingers against her cheekbones, removing the blush she'd applied earlier.

Grace urged a blue pottery bowl towards her.

"She won't eat dessert," Bea said. "I just bet."

"I do. I will," Nora said. "Everything looks just wonderful." And she thought she might; she no longer had to be ten pounds thinner always. She would probably become fat and blowsy, now that she didn't have to worry that TV would add weight, that casting directors would judge her upper thighs. She would wind up like her high-school drama teacher, those chronically red eyes, hair straying out of pins, with a drinking problem. She patted her stomach, pulling it tight, and sat up straight.

"So," Bea said, "Have we seen you on anything?"

"Oh, she's done a ton of television," Joanna said. "Plays and things, too."

Little Davie planted his hands on the floor and pushed his bottom into the air. The circle around him grew silent as he stood there, swaying. For one magic instant it was as if they had all clasped hands to ensure he would stand forever.

"Good boy!" Steven said, and Nora stored her wine glass between her knees and clapped. "Any day now! He's going to walk!" Steven said to her, grinning. His face shone.

"Any day," Bea said. She stretched one leg out along the bench of the picnic table. She wore shorts and her round calves, newly-shaved, gleamed in the lamplight.

Jonathon ran towards Davie and stopped abruptly. Startled, Davie dropped to the floor and began to cry. "Baby, baby, baby," shouted Jonathon, dancing in little boxer steps around him.

"Jonathon," Bea sighed. Davie stuck his thumb in his mouth.

Two more couples arrived, with more children, who yelped with glee when they saw the array of desserts. Nora pushed her bangs back from a sudden press of perspiration on her forehead. "So, Grace, what will you be studying?"

Webster answered. "Education. Gen Ed. She's been teaching for years but she needs a Master's if she's going to get anywhere."

“By which Webster means teaching,” Grace said. She was scraping a puddle of candle wax off the tablecloth with a plastic spoon. “Money money money.”

“I noticed the map and the harp in the living room.”

“Hopelessly in love with all things Celtic. My ex included.” Grace looked at Webster, who pulled on his unlit pipe, leaving its stem slick and shiny in the candlelight. “I always wanted to be a harpist, but silly me. I should just throw that harp away, give it to the local library.”

“Do you play it?”

“Only at night when I’m drunk. When there’s—”

“Would you, I mean, for us?”

“—when no one’s around. Which I guess means no.” She left the porch, her sandals clicking against the wood. “Just changing the CD.”

This time it was Todd who broke the silence. “Nora wanted to know how much watering it took to keep the lawns so green.”

Everyone guffawed, as if this were the funniest thing in the world.

“Rain,” Webster said, portentously. “Humidity.” Alexandra looked like a gnome, sleeping on his back.

Nora suddenly remembered who it was that Webster reminded her of: the director of a movie for which she had auditioned. It was a wonderful story, one of the few projects she had ever wanted passionately, about a rural farming couple who try to buck government corruption. James Sweeney: that was the director’s name, and he’d told her, his lower lip pouted out like that, how much he admired her work, while the producer had shown her location pictures. “We’ll be shooting in and around Santa Fe,” the producer said, his shoulder pressing against Nora’s as they sat side by side on a vast leather couch. “They’ve got this gorgeous hotel there, fireplace, hot tub. And wait ‘til we take you out for the huevos rancheros they serve at Pasqual’s—amazing. That chile verde sauce!” He wiggled his eyebrows at her and licked his upper lip, then continued to sort through slick color photographs of arroyos, a barn, shadowy mesas, herds of cattle, the farmhouse in which they would shoot interiors. Nora felt her heart tilt and lift at the thought of the panoply of cameras and sound equipment and technicians and makeup artists and hairstylists that would be brought together in the middle of New

Mexico to make a movie in which she, Nora, would stride, in character, towards this barn with a bucket in her hand; herd these cattle with this tractor which she would learn to drive; sleep at night in a fancy hotel room in Santa Fe.

She read scenes with the male star. She lunched at the studio commissary with the star, the director, the producer. She was called back a third time, a fourth. She drove the freeways, her back straight to keep from wrinkling the ironed shirt, checking her makeup constantly in the rearview mirror, her heart in her throat: this was the big one. She was given VIP parking, the secretaries knew her by name, she breezed through the studied-yet-casual-chit-chat at the studio. And then—it was a Friday night—her agent, Colleen, called to tell her that the part had gone to someone else.

“But why?” The sound of that wail was clear to her now as if she had just uttered it. The “why?” had started high and slid down an octave.

Colleen talked fast. “Mr. Sweeney wanted me to make sure to tell you that he thinks you a prodigious talent. That’s a quote, sweetie.” Nora had kept the phone to her ear but upside down, the mouth-piece held into the air so that Colleen wouldn’t hear her crying. “But he said the producer thought you lacked the edge the character needs.” Colleen put the word “edge” in quotes. “Too soft. That’s what he said, hon, it’s that softness thing again. I’m sorry.” Her voice was warm, comforting. She had done this before. Delivering news like this, Nora thought, must be an awful part of an agent’s job. “It’s the pits, hon, I know. But there’s just no second place in this biz. No runners up.”

“Hey, Melissa.” Todd stood up, his lanky body almost toppling the fruit bowl. “Let’s go swing.”

“Hide and go seek!” Melissa said. She ran and took hold of Nora’s hand.

Nora stood, smoothing her skirt over her thighs, aware that Bea was watching. “Will you come too, Joanna?”

“No, please. I’ll actually have time to eat something—slowly!” Joanna reached for a brownie. “Nora’s incredible with Melissa,” she said.

“It’s easy to look good when you can give them back as soon as they start to cry.” Nora swung Melissa up onto a hip, hugging her close.

Joanna shook her head and smiled. “When you’re a mom, Nora, you don’t want to.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Bea said, flexing and pointing her toes. Beside Nora, Steven cleared his throat.

Bea laughed. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. It’s so rewarding. It’s absolutely something every woman should do.”

Webster swayed ponderously to his feet, saying, “It’s too damn hot up here.”

Nora started to laugh, but it was clear that Webster hadn’t intended to be funny. He moved towards the door that led to the outdoor stairs, holding Alexandra’s calves within his large hands.

Steven got to his feet.

“Definitely you should go,” Bea said. “Show what those muscles of yours can do.”

Steven moved his hands vaguely in the area of his hips and then perched them at his waist. “Well. Actually I was just going to use the facilities.” He tugged at the back of his shorts as he left the porch.

“Works out every day,” Bea said. “Which is about all he does.” She laughed.

The boys thundered down the steps to the lawn, followed by Webster and Todd, and Nora came slowly behind them, carrying Melissa. She shook her head against the thought that perhaps all love deteriorated, eventually. She pulled Melissa even more tightly against the curve of her hip. Sometimes things came clear so suddenly, like this: why women had hips.

“Me first,” Jonathon yelled. He already had his arms and face pressed against the tree in the middle of the lawn. Nora was amazed at how much of the game she had forgotten. What was the point? Ah yes, to hide, and then to sneak towards the tree without being caught.

“Onetwothreefourfive seveneight nine tenteen twelveteen fourteen fiveteen nineteen—twenty! Ready or not, here I come!”

The phrase, sung out into the darkness, exploded through Nora’s body. With Melissa squealing on her hip she ran, zipping in to touch the tree just ahead of the shouting Jonathon. She turned, triumphant, but Jonathon was after Webster as he dodged and darted his way up to the tree. Alexandra, round-eyed, was sitting up, pudgy fingers holding onto her father’s forehead. “You’re it,” Jonathon

screamed, dancing around Webster with his fists thrust into the air, a miniature football player scoring a touchdown. "You're it!"

Webster counted, his voice floating through the air, deep and resonant. "You want down?" Nora whispered to Melissa. Melissa shook her head, humming with nervous excitement. She held on with both hands to Nora's neck as they ran towards the tree.

It was Todd's turn next. "Where shall we hide this time?" Nora murmured into Melissa's hair, which smelled of baby shampoo. Melissa pointed to a sapling and gripped Nora's waist with her knees. There was no way to actually hide behind the tiny tree; in the darkness Todd spotted Nora's white skirt instantly. Melissa screamed as her father almost tagged them. With a sudden surge of energy, Nora twisted away from his reaching hand, her feet sliding against the leather of her sandals, and slapped the tree. She was breathless with laughter, and for a moment she stood still, inhaling this ancient, forgotten pleasure.

They hid behind the slide of the swing set, beneath the slope of the stairs, and then simply squatted in the middle of the damp grass as if by an act of will they would not be seen. Nora had forgotten that when you were tagged you had to turn around and tag others, but Melissa loved that part. She demanded to be put down and she and Davie chased each other, hopelessly, round and round the tree. Nora pressed her hands against her sides, aching with laughter.

Webster, panting, paused beside her. "The point of this particular game doesn't seem to have anything to do with hiding," he said. "Or even seeking."

He seemed startled by the degree of laughter this evoked. "Oh, yes!" Nora said, clapping. She wanted to hold onto this possibility. "Yes!"

It was Todd's turn again. Nora, listening to him count, stared up at the candlelight filtering through the screened windows. Melissa was locked again on her left hip, a part of her. The murmurs and laughter from the porch above the lawn were as distant and as comforting as when she was a child, when she could be a Queen, a Witch, a Doctor, a Lady-in-Waiting; when all things had still been possible. Her breath came fast, her forehead was damp, tendrils of hair curled about her face. She wiped at them with the back of her wrist and then held her hand to her chest. Beneath the cotton of her shirt, her heart beat a polyrhythm. Perhaps she should have leaned

back against the producer's shoulder, maybe that vague promise—acted upon or not—was what they meant, the casting directors, the producers, when they said she was too soft, that she lacked “edge.” And too, there had been nothing to stop her from making reservations at L'Hermitage and asking the waiter to put an engagement ring into a champagne flute for Michael to find; he could only have said no. Or she could have left the diaphragm out once or twice, after six years together, and in spite of the insistent refrain that they must wait for their careers to stabilize, she could have fought harder for the right to make a child.

“Here I come!” Todd yelled. Melissa kicked Nora with her heels, urging her to go. But Nora couldn't move.

She had spent her life playing princesses and wives; queens and fairies; mothers, nurses, a ghost, and a divorcée; she'd been a goblin, a tap-dancing rabbit: still she was a lady in waiting.

“You're it,” Jonathon screamed, dancing around them.

“I am it.” Nora smiled. Melissa slid off her hip, and arms outstretched, ran towards her father. Her skirt flared above pumping knees.

The night seemed suddenly too dark, too damp. As Nora walked towards the tree the air draped against her bare arms like a wet sweater. She placed her palms against the knobbly bark, pressed her forehead into her hands and took a breath. It shook in her throat. It was like stage fright, she told herself, and she forced herself to breathe. “One. Two—” she began. She used the voice she had coaxed and trained into hugeness so that she could project Shakespeare across long distances on outdoor stages. “Three. Four—”

Jonathon squealed. Todd said, “Let's go, Melissa!” and Webster whispered, “Davie, follow me!”

The sap of the tree swelled beneath her hands; she felt it rising towards its distant, precise, known destination.

“Nineteen,” she said. “Twenty.” She lifted her head. “Ready or not—”

She heard a giggle, a rustle. “Ssh!”

“Ready or not!” she said again, pushing back the silence and the darkness. The voices upstairs stopped. Except for the chirp of crickets it was silent.

She stepped away from the tree. She'd pressed her eyes against her hands while she'd counted and was no longer accustomed to the

dark. Squinting, she tried to locate a movement, a sound, a piece of clothing that would give something away, anything that would tell her where to begin to seek. Several lawns over a woman yelled, “Kevin! Bedtime!” The voice keened, long, diminishing notes, holding onto the vowels. Then came the slap of a screen door. Above Nora, on the porch, the drone of voices started up again.

She took a few more steps, arms pressing into the space before her, stepping carefully. “Yoo hoo,” she called, trying to sound both coy and confident. “Here I come!”