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FOUR-IN-HAND

Andrea's father liked to walk her to school. Though he would stop back at home before leaving for the day, he was already dressed in the crisp slacks and button-down that he wore to work. Her mother knotted his tie and smoothed down the collar every morning. He had lost an arm in Vietnam, and the empty sleeve was always folded neatly and pinned against his bicep.

Sometimes, after the dinner dishes were dried and put away, Andrea's mother would set up the ironing board in front of the television. She liked comedies: *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Who's the Boss?*—sometimes *ALF* if she was in the mood. She would watch *Cheers* or *Three's Company* in a pinch, but she preferred the family shows.

If Andrea had finished her homework and drunk her milk without complaint, then she was allowed to watch, too. Her mother had removed her apron after dinner, and she stood in front of the TV in a lightweight dress and her house slippers.

First there was a hot bead of water sizzling on the iron, then the scent of the clothes. Andrea liked to press her hand against the cotton while it was still warm.

It was dark outside, a crisp fall night. Her father sat at his desk in a circle of lamplight, going over a stack of papers. Andrea got a quilt out of the hope chest in her parents' bedroom, and she curled up on the couch.

The room filled with the sound of the laugh track, but no one looked at the television and none of them laughed. Her mother was flushed from standing over the stove, then the sink. Andrea watched as she set down the iron and rubbed the back of her wrist across her forehead. Her mother had a scar on the inside of one arm where she had rested it against the handle of a Dutch oven and burned a long pink crescent shape.

Andrea didn't know why she always returned to this night. The lamp, the quilt, her mother's arm.

The next morning, her father was leaving on a business trip. That night, Andrea sat on the bed and watched her mother pack.

She folded the shirts and slacks and laid them in the suitcase. Standing in front of the mirror, one by one, she looped his ties around her own neck, then gently loosened the knots and lifted the ties over her head. She wrapped them all in tissue paper and placed them into his suitcase.

A taxi arrived early to drive him to the airport. Lights slid across the front windows of the house; car doors slammed outside. He was already gone by the time Andrea woke again and went down to the kitchen for breakfast.

Andrea's mother usually stayed at home in the morning. She kissed Andrea goodbye and stood at the door waving as they set off toward the schoolyard; she must have carried her dishes to the sink a million times as she waited for her husband to return for his second cup of coffee before continuing on to work.

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Without him there, the machinery broke down. Her mother was still wearing a bathrobe when it was time to take Andrea to school, and instead of going upstairs to change, she slipped on a pair of shoes and went out to the garage in her nightgown and robe.

Uncertainly, Andrea followed, carrying her book bag, and climbed into the back seat of the car.

Her mother put the key into the ignition and started the engine. The radio was playing too loudly. Andrea hadn't slept well the night before, and her head hurt.

They were already backing down the driveway when she remembered her math homework, still inside on the table. She had written the problems neatly and showed her work and circled the answers, the way her teacher liked, and she couldn't leave it behind; she had to run back inside even though now they were really going to be late.

Her mother was muttering as they drove toward the school, the specific words drowned out by the music, but Andrea knew she was upset about the pink slip, about having to go into the office and sign Andrea in. They were almost there when they saw the girl on the bike hit a rock or a crack in the sidewalk and go down.

Andrea's mother pulled over, yanking up the parking brake. She hurried over to the girl, and Andrea followed. The girl was crying, and Andrea couldn't understand anything she was saying. Blood was gushing out of her head.

Run to the school, Andrea's mother said. Tell them to call 911. She pulled off her bathrobe and knelt, next to the girl, in her white eyelet nightgown. She pressed the robe against the girl's cut.

Andrea ran. In the office, her heart was pounding so hard she could barely get the words out. There were spots in front of her eyes. She had to catch her breath before she could go back, with the school nurse jogging alongside her.

Her mother was still kneeling next to the girl, blood on her hands and the sheer white nightgown, and Andrea wondered if this was what she had looked like when Andrea's brother had died, when Andrea was too young to remember.

Sirens cut through the cold air, and the girl was loaded into an ambulance. The blood-soaked bathrobe belonging to Andrea's mother lay on the ground. They stood on the sidewalk watching the police and firefighters and everyone drive away.

The street became still and quiet again. A row of birds lined up on a light pole and peered down at them.

They got back into the car and drove home. When Andrea was home sick, her mother would draw her a bath and make soup and tea, and so Andrea went into her parents' bathroom and started the tap.

Her mother came out in clean clothes, with her hair combed. They lay next to each other on the couch. Andrea pressed her body tightly into her

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mother's side. All afternoon, they remained together, half-watching reruns of *I Love Lucy* and waiting for her father to come home and bring them back to life.