

hygienists and Dallas Cowgirls. But I'm in a card shop and I asked Dorothy, the saleswoman, to direct me to cards for a girl of fourteen and this is where she

That's the last card. The words are so tiny and crowded, I can barely make them out. I'm a sucker, I tell my mom. That week he stayed with us, she made him iced coffee with condensed milk the way they used to drink it together that summer he lived with her. One night, they went out to hear music and that's the night he kissed my eyelids. That thing he said about Dallas Cowgirls was pretty nasty because when she was in high school, my mother was a drill team captain. She wore shining pantyhose and white boots up to her knees, and marched in the Cotton Bowl.

"He thinks he's so quirky, but really, he is very obvious," I say to her. She brushes my hair back, and then lets her palm rest in the nape of my neck, like a hug. I'm writing a report about the sun and the moon, and I keep on writing and she keeps her hand there for a long time.

There's going to be a solar eclipse this Saturday. You're supposed to look at it through cardboard, with your back turned. I tell her that's what I'm going to do. But I intend to look at it directly.

THE SKY IS A WELL

IT IS THE night before Christmas. My brother has his stocking on his head. He thinks that is what a stocking cap is. I show him the picture from our Little Golden Book. A stocking cap, I tell him, is what old men wore in the days of yore. They also wore nightgowns. Our own father sleeps in the nude. Friends' fathers wear pajamas, or boxers. Only ladies wear nightgowns, my brother says. But he knows that if I tell him something, it is probably true.

There are pudding pops in the freezer. We each take one, then tiptoe outside in our bare feet. Or, as my brother calls it, berry feet. It's too warm for Christmas. Too cold, really, for bare feet. The pudding pop sends icicles through my teeth and pierces the top of my skull. Brain freeze, my brother says.

Every Christmas I pray for snow, but I'm beginning to think that is unrealistic. God probably doesn't bring snow to the desert unless you are, say, a prophet spreading His Word. Or at least a saint. Or a beautiful, innocent child. I am not innocent, and I'm cute, at best.

Under a gnarled mesquite tree is our sin. I've buried our sins for us in little scraps of paper. There is also a

ANGEL WINGS

small puppy there, one we found on the side of the road after a hard cold night. He'd probably frozen to death, I explained. My brother is too little to write his sins for himself so I wrote them for him. But he is too good, he's never done anything really bad. Here is what I write for him: I used a popgun in the house. I passed some gas at the table and said it was my sister. Sometimes I get so mad and I want to hit someone. I had a frog and I didn't feed him, and then he ran away.

My sins are folded into doves and stars. I won't tell him what they are. I hope, buried beneath the earth, they tangle up with the roots of the tree. I want them to stay down there, get strangled by the roots and eaten by worms. One night, I dreamt the doves came alive, tried to chirp, then suffocated. Evil, dark, dank thoughts.

I'm cold, my brother tells me.

Wave to the moon, I tell him. And make a wish.

We look up at the moon. She's shivering in between branches of our little tree.

MY FATHER WASN'T home. He had been gone for almost three days this time. When he came home sometimes he tickled me until I almost peed in my pants. But when he was gone, I felt calm. I stuck my tongue into the groove where my front tooth had been. It tasted good, kind of sweet and rusty.

My father had punched the tooth out. Nobody asked about it. They just assumed I'd lost it. Not telling wasn't lying. Your father has never told a single lie, my mother told me. As she said this she swallowed, hard, and looked straight ahead.

She said that loving a great man wasn't easy, but she knew, in her heart, it was the path God had chosen for her. Sometimes I sat on the stoop with her while she smoked. I liked the way she tapped the cigarette case against the steps. Her lips were stained Wine on Ice, a red deeper than blood. Lipstick was all she ever wore on her face. That was something her mother taught her, she said. Less can be more. Don't let them think you try too hard. I listened carefully. When she smoked she seemed different, not the lady she was when my father was home. "Everyone has their vices," she told me, "you don't need to tell Daddy about this."