

Marie Manilla

Hand. Me. Down.

Holy Thursday, 1965, I squatted over the heater vent in the kitchen picking knee scabs when my father's voice boomed from down the hall: "You kids get in the car!" His reverberating diktat roused a pummeling of footsteps up from the dank cement basement where the KKK tortured crickets or mice or my younger brother, Duff. The KKK was an apt acronym for my three older brothers, terrorists all, Kevin, Kieran, and Killian, ages twelve through fourteen. At the top of the stairs, the KKK banged out the back door and skittered and slipped up the muddy hill, their great escape unfoiled since my parents had lost control over them long before. The storm door squealed shut behind them in the April drizzle. Duff started to follow, testing his six-year-old mettle, but Killian roared: "Not you!"

Duff slumped there, eyes welling.

Mom wiped crumbs from the supper table and recentered the doily and bowl of emerald glass balls, the ones I tried to juggle when no one was looking.

Dad thumped down the hall sliding his scary belt through the loops on his waistband. "Where are the girls?" he muttered, though I was crouching right there, one of his girls. I looked too much like him, a Black Irish reminder of his father's mean joke: *Who'd yer mother bed to squeeze out the Black-assed loiks-a-yew?* Mostly Grandpa lobbed this insult at my dusky father. The first time he flung it at me, however, when he was out of earshot I whined to my mother: "I'm not Black."

"Of course you're not, Doreen." She stopped darning a sock and patted her knee, a rare invitation. Once I was settled on her lap, she spun a fantasy about Spanish sailors in a sixteenth-century Armada who set off to invade England. The Armada shipwrecked off the Irish coast, however, leaving a few water-logged survivors struggling for shore. The Irish women took pity on the pathetic crew and soon they married and started a dark-skinned, dark-eyed bloodline.

"That's rubbish," Grandpa O'Leary snarled from the hall. "She's kin to Irish colonizers who mixed with those West Indie, Montserrat niggers."

Mom sat there, stunned, and it took her four months to convince me that I was as white as my older sisters, nearly, who were not only twins, but willowy, pale-skinned, blue-eyed fairies like Mom.

"Change your shirt," Mom whispered to me as Dad buckled his belt.

I knew better than to grumble in front of Dad, so I scuffed to the room I shared with my ethereal older sisters, my narrow twin bed looking like a lone dinghy beside their luxury liner of a French Provincial queen. Still, it was better than the two sets of bunk beds crammed into the boys' room, the wall beside Duff's mattress slathered with dried boogers because that was the KKK's designated booger wall.

My eleven-year-old sisters sat shoulder to shoulder on the upholstered bench in front of the vanity we inherited from Dad's mother along with the luxury liner queen, combing their golden tresses, the blunt-cut ends skimming their backsides.

"It looks better parted on the left," Mary said to Meg. They lifted identical combs to re-part their hair and secure the corn silk locks with matching barrettes.

I slid open the closet to dig through the box of clothes I had recently inherited from a neighbor girl three years my senior. Her leftovers would smother my sisters, whose slight shirts and pencil-leg pants would never accommodate me. I found a striped turtleneck, faded from washing, but new to me, and punched my melon head through the taut opening. It only choked a little. Hunching forward, I tried to wedge between the twins and peer into the vanity to see just how unkempt my own wiry mane was, if I needed a brush or my fingers would suffice.

My sisters pressed their shoulders together more tightly, a bony gate slamming. "Use the mirror in the bathroom!" they jointly bleated.

Mom doled out coats and scarves from the hall closet and we crowded there tugging and grunting, buttoning and zipping. Duff and I stole peeks of Dad's face trying to decode the pucker of his mouth, the squint of his eye. Dad wedged his Sunday wingtips into slide-on galoshes which sent Duff, another Black Irish disappointment, rummaging through the mishmash of snow boots and sneakers at the bottom of the closet for his outgrown rain boots. When he found them he backed out and plopped against the closed bathroom door trying to yank them on over his shoes. He groaned with effort, biting his lower lip, and finally succeeded, though he had the right boot on the left foot, the left on the right. He saw his mistake and his face collapsed, but he stood up anyway since Dad was already banging through the front door. "Hurry it up!"

Duff tried to walk, his mouth pulling tight against the pain that was still better than the sting of a whipping.

"Sit down," I whispered, yanking off one boot, then the other, before ramming them correctly in place.

Duff held out his hand and I tugged him upright and outside where Mom and the twins huddled under an umbrella and we scuttled down the front steps.

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Dad opened the driver's side door, his diagonally striped necktie fluttering up and over his shoulder. Dad never slicked up for the annual trek to collect Mom's mother from the train station, so I knew his attire had to do with our impending car ride. Sliding behind the wheel was still a novelty to him—to all of us—since we had recently acquired our first automobile, a glorious elevation into solid middle class even if the car was used.

It was a black 1955 Ford Country Squire station wagon with faux wood paneling on the doors and tailgate. It sported wide white-walls and blunted tailfins cradling round taillights. The Squire was top-of-the-line when it rolled out of the factory and into Uncle Merritt's driveway. By the time it rumbled down to us the slick black paint had faded, the decaled wood finish was dimpled with dents, the whitewalls scuffed and gray, and one of the taillights was cracked. Still, we were happy to get it and it could seat nine—our number exactly when our complement was complete—since it was also equipped with a rear-facing bench seat in the cargo area—the designated slot for Duff and me. We were the youngest of the O'Leary brood and thus had no vote, not that any of us had voting privileges besides Dad, not even Mom.

Mom and Dad sat up front, the twins behind them, and Duff and I settled into the rear, kneeling forward on the seat, bums on our heels, so we could avoid motion sickness. Dad started the engine, which choked and coughed and finally held steady so that he could back out of the driveway, tailpipe farting blue smoke. Dad steered down our street and I craned to look at Easter decorations taped in our neighbors' plate glass windows: giant cardboard eggs and bunnies and crucifixes. I caught sight of commotion between the Franks' and Hollanders' houses. Three shadowy figures lobbed eggs or rocks or dog turds at the second floor window of Gary Hollander's room, a hare-lipped, mildly-retarded teen who wore his pants too high and a girl's pink watch. The three goons were my brothers and I was delighted to see them leveling their thuggery at someone other than Duff or, more precisely, me.

The KKK learned early on not to target the twins, Dad's greenhouse beauties whose slightest pouts and pointed fingers would earn stripes to the KKK's backsides when they were young enough to catch. Duff and I learned that our best defense was invisibility and Duff spent hours twisted inside the tight cabinet beneath the bathroom sink. In warm weather I played in the woods; in winter I climbed through the trapdoor in the hall ceiling to the attic and pretended I was a gymnast tiptoeing back and forth on the narrow boards, trying not to fall into the insulation that would leave me scratching for days. Or worse, smash my foot through the ceiling which would incur harsher penalties. We couldn't hide forever, though, and the KKK's preferred torture for Duff

included Indian rub burns and holding him down while they related gruesome details of how they killed various birds, squirrels, turtles, and frogs. True or not, the cruel exploits left Duff's face sticky from snot and tears, and I think if given the choice he would have chosen the rub burn every time. Our family never owned a pet.

Their favored torture for me was bending my fingers backward toward my wrist until I cried Stupid-Ugly, their nickname for me. I tried to endure it, keep my face placid as I recited multiplication tables in my head. $2 \times 2 = 4$; $4 \times 4 = 16$. But I hadn't yet mastered the art of disassociation and eventually I would concede: "Stupid-Ugly. Stupid-Ugly. *Stupid-Ugly!*"

I don't know if Dad spied the KKK between the houses, but he barreled out of our neighborhood, windshield wipers squeaking, leaving behind his immune sons whose hides and dispositions had finally thickened under Dad's repetitive belt- and tongue-lashings.

"Mother will love the car, Dolan," Mom said, pulling a compact from her purse to powder her dishwasher-steamed face. She peered into the mirrored disk in the evening's last light and tried to fluff her hair and apply lipstick because she never had one single minute to gussy up at home.

Dad grunted, spine straightening as if he'd forgotten about the dents and dings and his older brother's smug mug when he handed over the keys. "Don't ride the clutch," Uncle Merritt had said. "Change the oil more than once a year. And don't ever let those wild boys drive it!"

"Maybe she'll buy us new Easter dresses!" Mary said, a thought that set the twins shivering, and me, too, but for different reasons. I remembered too well the previous year's shopping disaster, all that purple chiffon and itchy lace because the three girls had to match—though I was no match for my sisters.

"Don't you girls pester Grandma," Mother said, craning around to better glare at the twins, her eyes more fearful than challenging. Clearly she remembered my father's ear-steaming rant when he discovered that his mother-in-law had clothed his daughters in a grander style than he could ever afford.

"Didn't your mother just make you new dresses?" Dad said, his black eyes peering into the rearview, a look that would have me stuttering but that had no effect on the twins.

"Nobody wears homemade clothes anymore," Meg said.

I looked at the back of Mom's head, her shoulders stooped as if she were still hunkered over the sewing machine with the bobbin that routinely clotted with thread. The way her eyebrows furrowed whenever she tried to untangle the knotted mess, as if she wanted to hoist the blasted machine over her head and hurl it through the side window.

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“Your mother wears handmade dresses,” Dad said. “What’s good enough for her should be good enough for the loiks-a-yew.”

“Then let *her* wear them,” the twins spat.

The turtleneck pinched my neck as Duff and I glanced at each other, both of us holding our breaths. I don’t think Mom was breathing either.

“Spoiled brats,” Dad finally muttered, his voice firm, but the crinkle around his eyes betrayed pride in his mouthy offspring.

I marveled once more at the twins’ nerve.

“Your father called today,” Mom said, tugging her earlobe in that frantic way she always did when she delivered bad news.

Dad’s shoulders drew up. “What for?”

“He wants you to pick him up after Easter mass and bring him to our house for dinner.”

Dad hunkered over the steering wheel, jaw grating back and forth. “Something wrong with his car?”

“He didn’t say.”

“He can’t drive two miles?” Dad said, voice raspy.

Mother didn’t answer because what could she say?

“Why can’t he eat over at Merritt’s?”

Even I knew the answer to that. The last time the extended family gathered at Uncle Merritt’s for a family meal, Grandpa knocked over his water glass. He mechanically drew his hand back and swiped at his wife, who would have been sitting beside him if she hadn’t bluntly died a month before. Instead, Grandpa struck Merritt’s eight year-old daughter who wailed like the banshee she was.

Aunt Sally swung around from the stove, spatula in hand. “Did he hit you?” she asked her sniveling daughter. “Did you hit her?” she spat at Grandpa.

Mom and Dad slunk down in their seats as Uncle Merritt thundered up his basement steps, bottles of homemade beer clinking in his arms.

“Your father hit her!” Aunt Sally squealed.

Uncle Merritt gawped at the red handprint blooming across his daughter’s cheek.

“Do something!” Aunt Sally implored.

Uncle Merritt looked at his father, his brother, his wife, his poor little slobbering daughter, the pathetic sight of her turning his neck splotchy, but that only made me want to kick her under the table and yell: *Don’t show it!*

Uncle Merritt peered down at his father and seethed: “I don’t care if you did just lose Ma. No one hits my daughter. No one! I want you out of my house!”

Grandpa’s eyes rounded as if he couldn’t believe the sudden

expulsion, and neither could I. We'd just gotten our salads. Grandpa slammed his fist on the table, water glasses trembling, pushed out of his chair, and stomped to the front door, but not before thumping my dad's ear and growling: "Dolan! Get in the car!"

Dad shot up. Grandpa was our ride, after all. "Come on, Marge," he said to my mother, who was shoveling in peaches and cottage cheese as fast as she could.

"Not you," Aunt Sally said to Mom. "I'll give you and the kids a ride home after supper. Stay, please."

"Marge!" Dad seethed. "Get the kids in the car!"

Mom cringed and we all tugged the napkins from our collars and piled them on our empty plates.

At the curb, Grandpa raised his fist to the house. "I'll not stay where I'm not wanted!" he railed before smacking Dad once more. Dad's face paled and he whipped around to yank Kieran by the elbow and hurl him into the backseat of Grandpa's sedan, followed by Killian, then Kevin, their bony shoulders and skulls clacking together like coconuts. The twins quietly slid onto Mom and Dad's laps in the front seat, and Duff and I balanced on the KKK's knobby knees for the grueling ride home. That was the night the KKK devised the rubber band/emery board/coat hanger torture.

Eighteen months after that, in our new old car on the way to the train station, Dad stopped at a traffic light. I looked out the window as two wet dogs rooted for scraps from a tipped over, rusted-out, trash can. They fought over a wad of tin foil, the smaller one winning, and I was glad.

Meg fidgeted in her seat and finally whined, "Why can't we take the train to visit Grandma? She invites us every summer."

Every time Grandma visited she prodded my father: *Dolan, let Marge and the girls come to Pittsburgh. Surely you and the boys can fend for yourselves for two weeks.*

Even I was afraid of that notion, imagining a mass grave in the backyard upon our return. Filled with exactly whose bones I wouldn't hazard to guess, but maybe then I could have my own room.

"Grandma doesn't want you squawking brats up there," Dad said.

"She does, too," Mary wailed. "She wants us to move in forever!"

Grandma never told me that, or Dad, I'm sure. The light turned green and Dad emitted a low growl before pressing the gas as he no doubt considered the tense week we were about to endure. The trouble Grandma Lorraine always stirred. The only perk for me was that I would be relegated to the living room sofa where I could pretend to

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sleep while Mom and Grandma sipped highballs in the kitchen after Dad went to bed. Invariably Grandma would slur: *Why did you have to marry a coal miner, for God's sake*, a puzzling dig at our West Virginia roots since Dad was a telephone lineman and Grandma knew that.

Truthfully, I had never seen a coal mine or a miner in all my nine years except on TV. Often a newsman would stand before a mineshaft as helmeted men hopped onto a contraption that would drive them into the gaping black hole. I knew those men and their families lived in a strip of dingy company houses on the east end of town. Shantytown, everyone called it. I had also seen coal trains winding through our shadow-filled valley, whistles howling, car after car piled high with the glistening black stuff that would bounce out and ping like popcorn against the iron rails. The miners' kids went to my school and on my very first day of first grade Meg and Mary impressed upon me that I should never talk to a coal kid, not even to borrow a pencil or a piece of paper. If at all possible I shouldn't breathe the air around them because their skin was cootified with noxious mine fumes which would turn my skin even darker than it already was.

I didn't talk to the coal kids, but I watched them run in packs on the playground, their lungs laboring, their skin ruddy. I stole peeks of them greedily eating together in the cafeteria, never leaving one crumb. Afterwards, a few of them hovered around as the hair-netted lunch lady scraped off uneaten morsels from other kids' trays. When her back was turned they reached their hands into the bin of mangled food to steal hunks of cheese, half-eaten sandwiches. Coal niggers, the KKK called them, both black and white, after routinely chasing them away from the school bus stop. *Run on home you little snot-nosed, soot-skinned, coal niggers!* More than once they added: *You too, Doreen!*

The twins started rocking in their seat, twittering about Grandma's visit, hoping she would paint their nails and let them wear her jewelry and for the millionth time describe her two-story house which had four bedrooms, two full bathrooms, and a solarium: a glassed-in porch filled with African violets, white wicker furniture, and streaming beams of sunlight. If we ever did make it to Pittsburgh I would muscle my way to the solarium and stake my claim. The twins could have all four bedrooms for all I cared.

"Maybe she's bringing the piano!" Mary said, a reference to the upright Baldwin Grandma offered to ship down so the twins could take lessons.

"Like we have a place to put it," Meg sniped.

Dad grumbled at this gibe at the cramped quarters he provided. He clicked on the left turn signal and paused for oncoming traffic at the entrance to the train station parking lot. The windshield wipers

squeaked. The turn signal tick-ticked.

“I hope those boys aren’t into my cheese ball,” Mom mumbled to herself, a valid concern since the KKK devoured everything, regardless.

“They’d better not be,” Dad said, probably wondering, like me, if they were balancing buckets of mice on doorjambs or hiding copperheads under Grandma’s blankets.

The twins pressed their fingers to their chins and in their best Grandma imitation said: “What those boys need is a good military school. They’re out of control, Marge! Completely out of control!”

Dad looked in the rearview at his treasured girls, though it didn’t look as if he treasured them that second.

Meg leaned over the front seat—a brave maneuver, I thought. “Mom, Mrs. Ottman puts pineapple rings and cherries on her ham—”

“And pokes cloves into it,” Mary added, leaning forward, too. “Can we do that this year?”

Mom started tugging her earlobe. “That sounds pretty, but—”

“Those damn boys better not be fooling with my Easter ham,” Dad spat.

“And brown sugar!” Meg said. “She rolls the whole thing in brown sugar mixed with Coca-Cola!”

“That’s sounds fun,” Mom said, pulling her fleshy earlobe nearly down to her shoulder. “But I thought we would eat something different this year.”

“Something different!” we all said, even Dad. Even Duff.

My little brother looked forward to Easter ham even more than the chocolate bunnies and Marshmallow Peeps the KKK would inevitably “trade” for their black jelly beans. Of course no one anticipated it more than Dad. He made an elaborate production of sharpening his knife and pulling down the wire ham stand from its place on the highest shelf in the kitchen as if he were a priest pulling the Eucharist from the tabernacle during mass. It might have been the singular joy Duff and Dad shared. Emboldened by hunger, Duff would hover around as Dad positioned the ham firmly in its stand before sawing off slice after slice and piling them onto the good china platter. Every now and then Dad would slide a piece into his mouth and offer one to Duff. “Atta boy,” Dad would say. “That’ll put muscles on you.”

I could hear Mom exhaling even from where I sat. “Actually, we’re going to have roast chicken this year—stuffed with wild rice! Doesn’t that sound exotic?”

“Wild rice?” said Meg and Mary, plopping back in their seats, practically cracking me in the nose, and Duff, since we were still leaning over their seatback.

“Wild rice!” said Dad.

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“Everyone has ham for Easter,” Mom said, flapping a dismissive hand, pushing out a laugh that sounded more like a sob.

“We can’t have chicken for Easter dinner,” Dad said to himself. “We can’t have chicken for Easter dinner!” he said to the rest of us. “My *father* is coming, for Christ sake. And your mother!”

“They both like chi—”

“You know what Merritt is serving?” Dad railed.

By the way Mom’s shoulders jerked I knew she was bunching up the hem of her skirt as she often did.

“Do you know what Merritt is serving?” Dad asked her again.

“No,” Mom said.

“A standing rib roast *and* ham. *And* ham!”

“What’s a standing rib roast?” Mary asked.

“Why aren’t we having ham, Marge?” Dad said. “Tell me. What made you think we shouldn’t have a ham?”

Mom sat there, pleating her hem, looking at her lap.

“Marge! Why aren’t we having a ham!”

“Because the boys needed new shoes,” she whispered.

All the air was sucked out of the car, all sound, too, until Meg opened her fat mouth and said: “We can’t afford anything nice.”

Dad jerked around in his seat, hand raised as if he were going to strike one of his precious lilies, but a car horn wailed from behind. Detoured by our ham plight, my father had missed numerous opportunities to turn into the parking lot.

Dad shook his fist at the driver behind us. “Shut up!” he yelled. “I’ll stay here all night if I want to!”

I turned to look out the back window as the burly driver honked again, a long, lingering wail followed by a staccato burst from yet another car stacked up behind him.

Even with the windows closed I heard the burly man howl: “Make the goddamn turn!”

Dad started to open his door but Mom grabbed his arm.

“Dolan, Mom’s train is due any minute.”

Duff and I bent over to scan the station. We always looked forward to waiting on the platform, leaning as far over the painted yellow line as we could before some Black porter tugged us back by the elbows. *You kids don’t cross the line, now. Don’t want to get hit by the train.* We wanted to be the first to spot the train’s white headlight in the distance barreling toward us, followed by the squeal of the brakes as the train neared, growing larger and larger, a slick, coal-burning, black monster that awed us completely.

The man behind us leaned on his horn once more. “Move that hunk-a-junk before I rear-end your ass out of the way!”

Dad hunched down in his seat and punched the gas pedal, hard,

sending Duff and me into the cargo hold, but instead of turning into the parking lot, Dad drove straight.

Duff and I righted ourselves as Dad veered right onto Main Street and headed east, revving the engine as if he were torquing his nerve.

“Where are we going?” Duff whispered to me.

I shrugged, turtleneck tightening as we sped away from the station, from Grandma’s train maybe pulling in that very minute, her face pressed against the window of the passenger car as she looked for her daughter and her daughter’s brood.

“Dolan, where are we going?” Mom asked, hands gripping the dashboard.

“Can’t afford an Easter ham,” Dad seethed.

The windshield wipers whined and the ignored turn signal tick-ticked.

“Mother’s train,” Mom said, the words thin and wispy.

“Can’t fit a piano in our house,” Dad said. “I’ll show you kids what real poor looks like.”

Meg and Mary looked at each other practically nose to nose. I wondered if they were as alarmed as Duff and me until Mary mouthed: *I’ll show you what real poor looks like!* which sent Meg into a giggling fit.

“You kids be quiet back there!” Dad said, propelling us forward like a torpedo barreling over winding roads that dipped and swelled, my stomach dipping and swelling, too. My mind mechanically calculated numbers to distract my quivering gut. $5 \times 5 = 25$; $6 \times 6 = 36$.

Dad finally slowed down and I knew where we were by the row of narrow boxes pretending to be houses. Shantytown.

There they were. The stuff of myths. A dozen of the tiniest houses I had ever seen all lined up in a row. Each box was maybe 12 feet wide by 30 feet long. Even our house was bigger. I tried to imagine the internal layout, if there were walls that separated one room from the next, or if everything was out in the open: unmade beds, the kitchen table, the commode.

Dad stopped the car in the middle of the road and rolled down his window to better gape at the spectacle, the wet wind blowing in and whirling around the car, ruffling his hair, and Mom’s. The twins huddled together in the middle seat, their blonde hair whipping Duff and me in the face, stinging our eyes. They tried to capture the loose tendrils and hold them in place.

“Close the window!” they yelled.

“Take a good look,” Dad said. “Maybe then you’ll be grateful for what you have.”

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Meg and Mary didn't take a good look, but I sure did. There were lights on in windows and I saw people inside going about their lives, oblivious to the carload of gawkers appraising their poverty. In one house five kids were crammed onto a couch, flickering lights from the black and white TV pulsing against their skin. In another a whole family was squeezed around the supper table, elbows and mouths flapping wildly until they all started laughing, every single one of them, even a fat-cheeked toddler strapped into a high chair.

"How would you brats like to live out here?" Dad said, jutting his chin at the display.

Duff gripped my knee. "Us too?" he whispered, tears already rimming his frantic eyes as he peered into the dilapidated shacks, no doubt searching for a tight cabinet under a bathroom sink.

"You kids have it pretty good," Dad said. "A nice house. A new car."

"I'm not moving in with a bunch of coal niggers," Meg muttered.

Mom whipped around in her seat. "What did you say?"

Meg didn't have time to answer because Mary pointed her finger at a lanky boy trotting up the mud path that served as a sidewalk. "That's Mark Bailey!"

"I didn't know he lived down here," Meg said about their classmate. "His Daddy's not a miner."

"His father works with you, doesn't he Dolan?" Mom said, trying to deflate the tension.

Dad looked at the kid ambling up the front steps of one of those houses and entering without knocking. Dad gripped the steering wheel and nestled his rump in the seat. "That's not Bailey's house."

"Sure it is," Mom said. "That's Hank sitting right there in the living room."

"In his underwear!" Meg said, exploding in laughter.

"He probably can't afford pajamas," Mary said

Dad slunk even lower. "You kids think this is funny? I'll leave you here right now," he said, a hint of fierceness drained from his voice.

"I see London. I see France," Meg said, snorting.

"You hear me?" Dad said to the twins who only tipped their heads together and giggled, their hair wildly whipping. "I'll leave you here right now!" Dad said.

"Nuh uh," Meg said. "We'll move to Pittsburgh and live in Grandma's solarium!"

"No!" I blurted, immediately clamping my hand over my mouth.

"The hell you will," Dad said, fierceness fully inflated once

more. "I'll toss you to the curb this very minute! I mean it!"

"I mean it!" the twins echoed as if they didn't believe a word he said. "We'll sleep on her wicker couches and sip lemonade in the sun!" Mary said.

Dad twisted around in his seat to better glare at his prized girls, his power circling the drain. The twins lifted their impervious noses and the only thing left for Dad to do was look past them at Duff and me trembling there, believing him utterly.

"You hear me back there, Duff! Doreen! If you two don't appreciate what I provide I'll put you out right here and let you fend for yourselves! You hear me?"

$7 \times 7 = 49$. "Yes," I answered for both of us since Duff had no voice to offer.

"I'll do it, too!" Dad swiveled back around and looked at Mom who was slouching so far forward she looked headless.

I spun around in the rear-facing bench seat, the turtleneck a tight hand wrapped around my throat as I glared out the back window. Dad sped away, the row of shanty houses disappearing in the gray rain as if we were tunneling deeper and deeper into a mineshaft, away from Grandma's bright solarium filled with streaming beams of sunlight that my sisters had already claimed.

Duff turned around, too, still trembling, and nestled close to my side. Too close. "He doesn't mean it, does he?" Duff whispered.

I looked over at my little brother trying to twine his fingers through mine. But looking at him only made my gut clench until I felt something crack open deep inside. A burning wave rushed through my stomach, legs, arms, head, a hot heat that demanded release, the pressure building as the turn signal ticked, the windshield wipers screamed, the turtleneck tried to choke me to death.

The only thing I could do was wrap my fingers around Duff's closed fist and start squeezing. He looked up at me, startled at first, accepting, even as I squeezed harder and harder.

"Stop it," he whispered, finally trying to tug free

But I wouldn't let go. I leaned close to his face and the more he whimpered the better I felt, so I squeezed even harder, $8 \times 8 = 64$; $9 \times 9 = 81$, imagining his delicate finger bones splintering. I was immune to his pleas: "Stop it, Doreen. It hurts."

Which only made me angrier so I leaned close to his ear and seethed: "You're nothing but a stupid-ugly Montserrat Nigger. You know that?" $10 \times 10 = 100$; $11 \times 11 = 121$. "A stupid-ugly Montserrat Nigger. Say it. Say it. *Say it!*"

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