NATALIE SOUTHWORTH

SOLITARY GIRLS

IN THE EVENINGS, I ASK my daughter Allie, who is fifteen, to take a break from her homework and come downstairs and watch TV with us. We miss her, I call out. She calls back that she's watching TV on her computer. She does this while studying and texting a new guy she likes who works as the night manager at the Mmmuffins near our house. Allie says she applied for a job there just to make him nervous. It's the latest example of her steeliness, her complete lack of giddiness around boys and now men. Phil, my husband, looks to me to make sense of it. What's happened to our daughter he asks, as if it's a secret I'm keeping.

Similar to me at her age, Allie's interests are solitary. The connection she seeks from the world requires a kind of unnatural application of force. No more badminton team, or jazz and tap; she's stopped inviting friends over. At school, she joined the track and field team, runs the two hundred-metre hurdles. Her only contact is between her and the metal gate.

Mostly, though, Allie stays in her room doing homework. She carefully plans her study schedule months in advance, drawing up charts and weekly calendars and using coloured highlighters for different subjects. It's all preparation: very little time is spent letting the information soak in. She's become good at predicting test questions, what angle a teacher will take, what information is best suited to in-class learning and thereby irrelevant for tests. Recently, she learned—avoided learning—about President Kennedy's space policy. She went to Wikipedia and a few links later was reading how the President regularly had sex with women in the elevator at the White House. Allie told me this at breakfast one morning.

"He's a pig," she said, her voice hard and flat.

She peered up from her cereal and glanced around the kitchen as if checking to see who might've heard her, and I could tell she was confused by her own intensity.

Like me, Allie was curious about sex early on, starting around age seven. Hard to say if it was a purely physical discovery that led to more

questions, or intellectual precociousness that opened up the topic and made it flourish. I know she's had sex with a boy called Edward from summer camp, that she's on the pill and chats online with a lot of different men. She mocks their bashfulness, their online profile photos, sometimes she dares them to date her.

Phil is hoping Allie's hyper-sexuality, or sexual aggression, or sexual preoccupation—we don't know what term to use—is a stage she'll grow out of, and what will last are the critical thinking skills she's developing at the Helena School for Girls. I tell him I'm not sure it's that clear-cut, that her intense sexuality is a stage, and that it will just stop one day with her adolescence.

Not long ago, I drove Allie to a dentist appointment where, pasted on the wall of the underground parking lot was a row of identical gritty movie posters. The posters showed a woman standing over a half-naked man on his knees, wrapping his mouth and cheeks with black tape, his eye bulging. I felt Allie's shoulder press into mine as she stood next to me. I saw that she was smiling, her eyes excited, as if she'd finally seen something she hadn't expected. When we got home, she went upstairs to her bedroom with another image to add to her archive, one more idea to tinker with, to forget, or to transform. For me, I couldn't get the man's eyes—which weren't so much bedded with fear or intrigue as with resignation—out of my mind. The image stayed with me, those bulging brown eyes, shining out from the past.

My upbringing was more uncomfortable than traumatic. I spent my early teens at my neighbour Mrs. Dixon's house. Mom and Dad had divorced after he grew tired of living in the basement. Mom found a job as an executive assistant in one of the big insurance agencies downtown, and Dad moved with his new girlfriend to Spain. I didn't see him much after that, maybe once or twice every few years. He sent me postcards from European cities, with his signature underlined three times and one or two words, usually, "Paradise!" Rather than reread the postcards, or search for some hidden message in their pictures, I stashed them in a box, stacked in order of most pathetic to least. The postcard of a bridge in Prague that included nothing but his signature was on the bottom; the one with my name and "You'd love it here" remained on top.

To earn money I helped Mrs. Dixon with her home catering business. I liked listening to her chatter, the way she made swift sense of everyone's lives, and in her soft rumble nothing seemed a judgment. There was never a lack of visitors, Mrs. Dixon's church friends, women who brought swatches

for their quilts, an intricate design of patterns and colours, colours so vivid they lit up the kitchen, each thread alive, woven into the next like a roadmap I wanted to keep following.

One day Mrs. Dixon's twenty-two-year-old son Randy unexpectedly walked into the kitchen, home from university. He kissed his mother's cheek, whispered something in her ear and smiled the smallest, most confident smile I'd seen. His eyes didn't pass over the table as he headed out the back door to the garage. Mrs. Dixon, seeming put off, followed behind still holding her iron casserole lid. They paid me no notice and I knew it was time I went home.

Going home meant possibly running into Bing, Mom's new special friend. Mom would wait up for him watching the TV on mute. She sat with a blanket across her legs, shoulders hunched and turned in like she couldn't get warm, or she was bracing for something. She'd pulled the kitchen phone into the living room, where it sat on top of her feet.

I didn't like to sit with her in the evenings and took up running to escape the heavy lull of the house, the endless wait for Bing.

Once, out running, I saw Randy in the garage at the back of his house. A lone light bulb shone over his head as he removed the back wheel from his bike. I knew from Mrs. Dixon that university wasn't working out for him; he wanted to use his hands, and I imagined those hands firm around my waist. Quickly, I picked up a rock and scratched my arm, letting it bleed as I walked toward the garage.

"You have a cloth in there?" I didn't have a plan, but I'd found a voice, unabashed, to the point.

We had sex on the exercise mat he laid out behind an old bookshelf. He kept saying in his slow baritone: "You're my little neighbour, what am I doing?" and I found myself speaking out from under him with a new voice that came from a deep, pressured place: "Get over it."

Randy and I did it a few more times, always on the mat in the garage, before I started to find the experience irritating. The more he showed interest, the more I backed away, no longer understanding the point. I told no one about him, although Mom saw me coming home late one evening, my knees covered in bike grease, cheeks flushed. From the kitchen, she watched me undo my runners, a grim smirk on her face, but made no comment. When I came close, she seemed to disappear into the wall. She barely ever raised her voice above a whisper. At dinner, which she hoped I'd have with her and Bing, she tried to make it comfortable, looking for ways to get Bing to understand me, which came in the form of an upsell.

"I have to get the dictionary out to understand Sarah these days," she'd say, looking up at me like I was an awe-inspiring specimen. "What did you get on that last geography quiz? Can we even count that high?" Or, her favourite: "Sarah is apt to be anything she wants."

She didn't follow up with any ideas or suggestions. Bing, who was much older than Mom and had never had kids, was a good sport. He set down his fork and looked at me keenly, like he was getting a much clearer picture.

We learned the muffin man's name is Gary. Allie says he dropped out of high school because he got 4% in World Issues, wanted to play the drums and have money of his own. He failed his driver's license twice and spent three summers at the Wachekeo Camp for boys. We know everything and nothing about Gary. He still lives in what we assume is his parent's beige-coloured sixties bungalow, which, according to Google Maps, backs onto a ravine.

Allie gets him to call her after his shift ends, around two am. He leaves messages on her phone as she sleeps, until her mailbox is full. I don't know what he says that's so captivating, but every morning Allie listens to the messages on her walk to school. Phil sometimes catches me stuck between the flouncy curtains in the living room watching her leave, her long chicken legs somehow powering up the sidewalk, knapsack weighing down her shoulders, earbud nestled in her ear. Phil smiles and touches my shoulder like I am the embodiment of the universal mother.

He doesn't know I agreed to let Allie go to a concert with Gary.

"I'm not sure I like the age difference," I said, as Allie and I waited together at the front door.

"He's really immature."

"I'm serious, Allie. You know you don't have to oblige anyone, especially someone older with more experience."

Allie looked out the window, her face the product of two hours of precise and careful tinkering. "Don't worry, Mom. Gary's a wuss," she said, reaching into her purse. Smiling, she pulled out a bent Valentine's card with Gary's barely legible handwriting—"Dear Allie. Get an emotion why don't ya."

That changed the conversation. "You're not mean to him are you?"

At that moment, a cab pulled up to the curb. Gangly, with wispy blond hair past his shoulders, Gary got out and immediately opened the other passenger door, as if he'd forget if he didn't do it right away. Before he could make it to our front path, Allie hurried down the steps.

Growing up, I wasn't completely devoid of acts of tenderness. For a long time, Mom and Bing hugged a lot in the middle of the kitchen. Bing's cat Gleeson eventually moved in along with Bing and they cared for her like a little human. Mom would bring Gleeson over to me before bed: "Glee needs a kiss," she'd say, looking at Gleeson, stroking under his chin, and I'd oblige, although it bothered me that Mom spoke through a cat.

Later I realized Mom was skirting around me, unsure how to warm us up. It's no different with Allie and me. The first time Allie came out jogging, she didn't last long. Her phone vibrated and that was that. Then, one day, she stuck it out, even pushing the pace. As I stopped, bent over my creaky knees, sweat dripping off my chin, I sensed Allie's irritation. But, once we were off again, she slowed into a rhythm next to me. I took us beyond the roads in our neighbourhood to the wild moraine. Allie looked like she was in another world, not running towards it. When I had to interrupt to tell her to watch the marsh puddles, she looked at me gently, and though we ran unnecessarily far apart, it felt close.

The trickiest part of my past arrived the day that Mom, facing a close call with ovarian cancer, decided to tell me that Bing was actually my biological father, that she'd had an affair with him at the beginning of her marriage to Dad.

"I don't want you thinking you have no family left, no blood relations," she said from the bed Bing set up in the living room.

I didn't think it was so terrible. She'd gone back to Bing, which seemed courageous and romantic, words I'd not associated with Mom. They'd had their troubles, but in the end they'd stayed together. It was when I was older, coming and going as I pleased, that Bing was around, hurrying past me in the hallway with his nervous eyes. I hardly knew him. He'd stayed silent on the matter, presumably following Mom's lead. I didn't remember a time when I'd felt he wanted to reach out to me, or let his guard down, but maybe he had, maybe it'd been subtle enough for me to ignore. When Mom told me this I was thirty-four, had just met Phil, a kind man I wanted to do right by. Bing was by then in his eighties, partly senile. I was glad we'd been spared that conversation. I had no desire to force a father out of him, to shine cruel focus on what was achingly clear.

"Your Dad knows," Mom said. "He's known a long time."

I didn't have a clue growing up that Dad wasn't my real father. With his terrible eyesight and delicate painterly fingers, he was enough like me.

When I was young, I told myself that dads worked a lot. Dads needed to be left alone. When he left for good, he said change was essential; he was doing what he had to do. I didn't want him to leave, but I carried one of his bags to the curb and waited with him in silence until his cab showed up. He thanked me for my help, assured me he'd be okay, kissed my forehead and told me to look out for his letter.

It's possible these dynamics had something to do with how I treated boys. At sixteen, the year I met Randy, something set fire within me. I discovered I couldn't be nice to them. If a boy hung on, in a sticky love clench, I backed away, which made him come on even stronger. I let him punch in walls over me and I smiled in secret at his caveman impulses.

After Randy came Paul, who became my boyfriend far too easily. Within weeks I was sleeping with his best friend, watching through the peephole as Paul, who'd found out, banged on my front door, his face still pale from the shock. I kept a half dozen boys squirming on a line, mayhem often breaking out so that I locked doors, pulled the cords out of phone jacks and turned out the lights when I was home.

In my last year of high school, a classmate became so obsessed that he stopped eating until I agreed to go out with him. He bought me week-old pink carnations, pushed notes into my locker. I wrote him back that I was going to file a harassment complaint with the school.

At university I studied late into the night, looking up to watch the guys who lived in the male residence across the courtyard stumble back from bars, pass out, attempt to climb up the downspout on their building, moon the girls' windows and eventually disappear into their rooms. In my watchful solitude, I imagined tying guys up. In my fantasies, I'd leave and come back to find them squirming on the bed, reading my face, trying to understand what I was thinking, feeling, what I'd do to them next.

I've started taking Allie running through the ravine that borders Gary's parent's house. The ravine dips before it ascends, and halfway up there's a trail leading to a large estate, a film history centre surrounded by well-tended gardens. Once, when we reached the gravel path, lined with vibrant lavender bushes and a tall exotic grass that reminded me of a plant in Mrs. Dixon's hallway, I slowed down and pulled off a few sprigs of lavender, crushing them in my hand. I opened my palm to show Allie and she walked closer when I pointed out the foamy white saliva.

"Tiny spittlebugs are hiding under all that spit," I said. "It's like a massive comforter for them."

I felt Allie's interest wane, her focus shift to the hand holding the sprig, fleshy with age, swollen from running. She walked away, one finger in her ear, saying she was listening to an urgent message. I tried to seem busy, as if I wasn't listening to the muddled rush of words coming from her phone. Bending over, I leaned in to read the name of an amber-coloured shrub with star-shaped leaves, but the label had come undone. Picking up the white plastic tie, wondering what to do with it, brought back thoughts of Dirk.

Dirk's confidence was sewn into his skin. Almost immediately I started to fantasize about hurting him. In the cafeteria I saw his arm draped over another girl's shoulders. Girls threw unlit cigarettes at him as he searched his empty pockets. Girls called him a mama's boy when his care packages arrived full of cup-a-soups and tubes of Pringles. Girls made a point of telling him they'd seen him jogging shirtless around Beckman field.

We had sex one afternoon—and the next, for about a week, and I acted as disinterested as Dirk, only he moved on and I couldn't stop thinking about him. I walked around campus searching for him, visiting student residences, glancing behind library cubicles. I went to his studio apartment on the edge of campus. He wasn't there, but the door was open. I took dimes and nickels and pennies from a jar on his desk. Another time I rifled through his bureau drawers, stealing photos of him with friends, leaving a snapshot of him with someone I presumed was his father, the two standing next to a homemade go-kart. Dirk wore thick sports socks, the kind that come with a rugby uniform, and I stole those, too. Digging through the back pockets of his jeans, I found condoms. I searched for the box to see how many were left, and spotted it on his desk next to a coffee maker and a bag of Folgers. The more I saw of his life, the more familiar he became.

The day it happened, Mom called me, crying. Bing needed a break. He was moving to Halifax to help his brother with a new cottage-rental enterprise for their retirement.

"I don't understand," she said, and I could hear the wet tissue against the receiver, fumbling to get under it, to wipe her nose.

"He's not even upset. He asked me to say goodbye to you from him," she said loudly, as if trying to impart Bing's gall in her tone. "So that's what I'm doing."

Later that night, after searching the bars, I found Dirk at a campus pub. Back in my dorm room he kicked off his shoes, lifting his shirt over his head with one hand as he crawled towards me on the bed. I asked him to turn onto his side and place his palms together around his back. He didn't flinch when I pulled out the white nylon rope.

"Hot," he said, as I tightened the rope, squeezing his skin into small folds.

Doubling the rope, I wrapped it around his wrists three times and back through the underside, as I'd read about. He had tan lines surprisingly high up on his thighs and on his buttock bruises I'd not seen before, but assumed were the mark of steroids. Dirk seemed too laconic to be a serious athlete and I knew he didn't play on any university teams, but his body, naked and flat under the glaring ceiling light, was perfectly formed, intricately defined.

"You're okay being blindfolded?" I asked.

"As long as you don't tie up Captain Winky," he said, moving with my help onto his back, his chest shaking as he laughed.

I noticed the dusting of blond hair near his forehead was gelled and styled haphazardly, as if to give the appearance of abundance. All I could see was the pink flesh below the scant blond roots. I covered his eyes with a winter scarf and turned off the light.

"My ride's here," I said, hurrying to the door.

Dirk didn't lift his head in surprise. He didn't ask where I was going. Quietly, I sat on the other side of the door, waiting for him to call me, not Hey, or Sar, but Sarah, over and over again, Sarah.

After ten minutes I'd heard nothing. As time passed, I expected swearing, some kind of struggle. Peeking through a crack in the door, I saw that his legs were still stretched out, his neck tilted back. It looked like his entire body was flexed in anticipation, although he had no idea if or when I was coming back. Then I heard what sounded like a whistle. Not a jaunty whistle. Or a proud one. It was resigned, as if he had no choice but to be there, as if only by being tied up and left on somebody's bed would he know what would happen to him next.

My plan had been to leave Dirk there all night, but after half an hour I went back in, switched on the light and removed his blindfold. He didn't look at me with the careful attention that had filled my fantasies. There was no anger or fear in his eyes, just weary resignation. He looked like he was losing hope, as if he'd been hoping the pain I might inflict on him would be greater than his own. As I untied his wrists he seemed more uncomfortable

than when he was tied up. His back rounded as he sat up, like he didn't want to face, much less flaunt, the exquisite body he'd created. As he dressed, the disappointment on his face grew more apparent, his glazed brown eyes, his empty smile. I had to look away, struck by the futility of what I'd been doing. I wanted him to go, to let him go, knowing that he was hurting enough already.

After Allie was born, I felt her warm weight against my arms, the weight of a warm loaf of bread, and it was this sack of weight that I fell in love with. It wasn't long before I discovered that I couldn't soothe her, especially after a feeding; she wailed until she vomited. I read about milk allergies, colic, acid reflux. On one particularly bad night, Phil came into the nursery. He had his guitar with him and a cup of black coffee. I placed Allie in her bouncy chair and Phil sat on the floor in front of her. He began strumming songs whose lyrics he'd downloaded from the Internet, ballads by Lynyrd Skynard and Stevie Ray Vaughan, 'kid songs,' he called them. Allie didn't fall asleep, but her crying stopped. When Phil ran out of songs, he began counting the fat rolls on her legs and trying to name the stars in the constellation I'd stuck on her ceiling, and from our bed in the other room I listened.

It was ten o'clock and Gary wasn't answering the number I had for him. I found Allie's cell phone in the crease in the couch, where she must've dropped it when waiting for the cab. In the message that she'd saved, Gary sounded like the voice on one of my yoga tapes, as if he cared more about the pause he was about to get to than the word. He talked about a place with a lake, a dock unanchored from the mainland and a small triangular canoe. I gathered the plan was to go to there with Allie. He said he was looking into borrowing a friend's tent. He'd have his license in a week, as long as he passed. He said it wouldn't be long now, sweet sleeping Allie. Hold on a little longer. She'd have what she wanted. Soon enough she'd be in the middle of nowhere.

She came home through the basement door. Fully clothed, holding her keys, purse, a concert T-shirt hung limply over her arm. As she reached the stairs, passing under the hall light, I saw her eyes. Even in the late hour, the day done, Allie's eyes held an open, searching stare. I knew that look, as if life would become more real, less abstract, the more of it she lived, and the notions teeming in her head would fill the holes in her life.

She didn't look for me on the couch, in my mother's cotton nightgown, Mrs. Dixon's thick quilt laid across my legs. I wanted to call out, bring her to me, wrap the quilt around us and hold us there together. I was surprised

by the strength of my desire to be close to her; the longing seemed to pin me to the spot.

Listening to her movements overhead, the eventual silence, I was aware of the inexplicable loss of something profoundly warm and tender. A loss I'd passed on, like a mysterious gene that grows bolder with age, more resolute, hard to undo.

I'm not sure how long I waited outside her bedroom, but I watched the light under her door until it went out, and maybe it was the flicker into darkness, but I knocked.