

## FAMILY OF TWO

*Janice Deal*

She hadn't known.

There were no hurricanes in the Midwest. No earthquakes worth mentioning. Teddy had lived on both coasts and what she did know was weather.

Her hair was blonde and gave off a hard white light. She'd had braces and now her teeth were straight as swords, but she wore her clear plastic retainers all the time, even though she didn't have to. They were like little trays for her teeth; she'd delicately pop them out at lunch and line them up on her napkin: the top retainer, the bottom.

"You don't have to wear those during the day, you know," one of the cheerleaders said. It was Helene, whose long brown hair descended her back in a glossy braid. "I had braces, too. See?" She set her lunch tray down, baring her excellent teeth and leaning across the table, which was meant for four but

seated, just now, Teddy alone. “I wear my retainers at night, and it works just fine.”

Squeezing her sandwich, Teddy looked at Helene until Helene glanced down and walked away.

“Freak!” one of Helene’s bunch muttered, loud enough for Teddy to hear. It bothered them that Teddy had brought Helene down a peg, Teddy thought, Helene being the nicest of their bunch. But Teddy didn’t care about jocks. She went back to her sandwich, the same stingy peanut butter and jelly that Flo made every day.

Flo was Teddy’s mother. It was just the two of them; they’d moved to Ephrem when Flo got her job at Meadows Community College, or “Ghettos,” as it was sometimes called. Flo was a social worker and a socialist. Teddy’s father sold metal garage doors and hadn’t been a part of Teddy’s life since before she’d started school. Teddy and her mother had left him in San Francisco—that’s how Flo put it—moving out because Flo said Teddy’s father lacked ambition. The two of them landed in Fort Myers; Flo, who said she had always wanted to live in the southeast, had worked at Gulf Coast University, and they’d stayed in Florida for almost ten years before coming to Ephrem, which

was 9,000 people on the border of Illinois and Wisconsin. “Now it’s 9,002,” Flo said when they moved in.

“Will you miss Florida?” she’d asked Teddy, already knowing the answer. In seventh grade, Teddy had had a run-in with a group of girls. Teddy would find things, damp and ugly, in her locker. She’d acquired nicknames, also ugly. “Mean girls,” Flo pronounced them, and when Teddy’s grades started to suffer, Flo began thinking about a fresh start. Once, long ago, Flo’s family had lived near Ephrem: great aunts and uncles, her mother’s people. They’d been “farm folk,” and Flo recalled visits to the area when she was a girl. She remembered liking it there, though the relatives were long dead and Flo’s efforts to find the old farmstead, once they moved, didn’t amount to much. It was probably a shopping mall now anyway, she said.

“It’s okay,” Teddy had told her mother. In fact, even before the business with the mean girls, Teddy had never taken to Florida; the hurricanes scared her, and she’d never liked the beach, the itchiness of it. “I don’t mind moving, Flo.” Near the end of the Florida years, when Teddy hit puberty, Teddy’s mother asked Teddy to use her given name, which was Florence. “But you can call me Flo,” she said.

Since moving to Ephrem, Teddy had made one friend, a girl in her freshman English class named Darlene Dressler. They were both also in band—the oboe section, which was where they had met, though Teddy played first chair. Darlene had large, pillowy breasts and a fretful expression. Her parents were both optometrists and she dressed like a much older person, in brocades and quilted fabrics that sometimes gave her an upholstered look. Darlene had a brother, Austin, who was a student at Ghettos, and she possessed an anxious friendliness completely unlike the boredom practiced by the popular girls.

But Teddy didn't mind Darlene's tendency to cling. After school, when kids ran to the bus in pairs, they had each other; usually they went to Teddy's, an untidy trilevel that smelled like cigarettes and candy and stew. Darlene liked it there. She liked the packaged snacks Flo bought.

"I don't know how you stay so skinny," Darlene said to Teddy the day everything started. Teddy shrugged. They were eating store-bought cupcakes in Teddy's room, and Teddy had already methodically eaten three. Perched on the windowsill with her knees pulled close to her chest, Teddy didn't take up a lot of space, Darlene saw. Teddy wore her gym shorts, which were emblazoned with the Ephrem High mascot, an eagle with flames for feathers, and the skin on her knees was tough and yellow-gray.

“I hate Mrs. Benedict,” Darlene said. “But I love these cupcakes.” She licked pink frosting from her fingers. Flo liked Valentine’s Day and had stocked up on everything pink; even the cupcakes were red velvet.

Mrs. Benedict was their English teacher, a tall, solid woman with a rear end built like the back of a bus. “Benedict gave me a C-minus on that report,” Darlene said. “She’s a bitch. She knew I was sick, but she didn’t give me any extra time.” Darlene had indeed been sick, with mono, which she said came from kissing Bobby D., but of course everyone knew that wasn’t true.

Teddy nodded and started eating the next cupcake. Moist crumbs fell into her lap like red snow.

“I think we should prank her,” Darlene said.

Teddy stopped chewing and stared at Darlene. They finished their cupcakes in silence, but then Teddy stood up and popped her retainers back in. She pulled her coat, still zipped, over her head. The room was almost dark; they hadn’t turned any lamps on. Darlene stood too, and they went down the steps, past Flo watching television in the living room. “Be careful, you two,” Flo said. “Don’t forget your house keys.” Flo was smoking a cigarette and working through a plate of heart-shaped cookies while she watched the news. If she noticed that Teddy was going outside in shorts in late January, she didn’t say.

On the wall behind her, a metal wall hanging of a tall ship picked up blue light from the TV.

“We’ll be careful,” Teddy said. She wiped her mouth, which was sticky with frosting. “I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Pot pies at 7!” Flo said. “I’ll make three, just in case.” She watched her daughter go into the darkness of late afternoon, wondering about the fat friend, who seemed sly. But at least Teddy had a friend. Teddy excelled at math and art and was accomplished enough at oboe to play in the Ephrem High jazz band. But it didn’t seem to make a difference. Flo loved her daughter; she saw her capacity for loyalty. It was a singular mystery, why Teddy never seemed to fit in.

## §

Teddy and Darlene walked to Mrs. Benedict’s house, which was a trilevel built on the same plan as Teddy’s, but located one subdivision over, in Birch-Brook. Without conferring they stuck to the streets, which were well lit; when they got to Mrs. Benedict’s they stood by the curb and stared. The house didn’t have the same messy warmth that Teddy’s house did, and perhaps this is why it offended her: the bushes under the front bay window were trimmed into perfect spheres, and, like her neighbors on either side, Mrs. Benedict had two

concrete lawn ducks positioned on the front steps. "Concrete ducks are all the rage," Teddy smirked. In the yellow porch light, you could see they wore tiny puffy parkas.

"I hate Mrs. Benedict," Darlene said again.

Now that they were here, though, it was hard to know what to do. The girls snuck around the house, which, unlike Teddy's, butted up against a field. In the summer, corn grew here. The girls stood in the field looking at the back of Mrs. Benedict's home, frozen stubble pressing into the bottom of their boots. They could see Mrs. Benedict moving around her yellow kitchen. A bald man came up behind her when she stood at the sink; he kissed her on the neck. Mr. Benedict.

"Maybe we should just go home," Darlene said.

"Naw," Teddy said. She'd taken her keys out of her pocket, and now she tossed them lightly between her hands. The jingling sound they made was merry. "Come on." She headed back to the front of the house, where Mrs. Benedict's car was parked in the short driveway angling down to the garage. The teacher drove a red Volkswagen Beetle that she kept in pristine condition. It was always washed and waxed to a shine, even in the winter, like now, when everyone else's car was dull with salt. Once, Mrs. Benedict had given Darlene

a ride home. There had been a plastic daisy in the little built-in vase on the dash, and the inside of the car smelled like lemon. Remembering this now, Darlene felt uneasy.

“Let’s just go,” she said. But her voice lacked authority; it was almost a whisper.

“You were sick, and she gave you a C-minus anyway,” Teddy said. Transferring her keys to her right hand, she walked along the passenger side of the car. The keys poked through her clenched fingers like spikes; the sound they made on the enamel was terrible, and Darlene laughed in horror. Teddy finished up on the driver’s side. Then she pocketed the keys and nodded at Darlene, who simply stared. “Let’s go,” Teddy said. “I promised Flo I’d be home for dinner.”

The girls walked back to Teddy’s house in silence, then stood on the front steps for a moment, stamping their feet in the cold. “You want to come in?” Teddy gestured at the front door.

“Naw, I’ve got to go home,” Darlene said. She thought about the pot pies Teddy’s mother had promised, each plump in its ridged silver tin. Darlene had had them at Teddy’s before, and they weren’t shared in sensible halves, the way Darlene’s mother did on the rare occasions when she agreed to make



them. At Teddy's house, everyone got their own pie. Darlene thought about the dinner that would be waiting at her own house. Her parents were probably out, but her mom would have left something dietetic in the fridge, covered neatly in plastic. There would be carrot sticks. Celery, but not with peanut butter, the way Teddy ate it.

Still, this night Darlene preferred to go home. When she got there, dinner was exactly the way she'd imagined, and she ate it alone because Austin had class on Tuesday nights. But for once it was good to be home, and if she thought she'd have trouble sleeping, she was mistaken. She slept like the dead.

### §

Darlene didn't know what she expected, but she was surprised to walk into her English classroom the next day and find Mrs. Benedict there, at her desk like always. Mrs. Benedict wore the same red lipstick; there was her plastic *I Got a Deal at Carver's* bag, which she used to carry schoolwork back and forth, hanging on the hook by the door like always.

And yet there were differences. When Mrs. Benedict stood to address the class, she tottered for a moment. Darlene saw that, and for the first time she thought that beneath the careful foundation and blush, her teacher looked old, almost shabby, makeup sewn into the long creases that bracketed her mouth.

When class was over, Darlene hurried out of the room instead of waiting for Teddy as she usually did. Later, when Darlene saw Teddy by the gymnasium, she turned away.

Teddy followed her down the hallway. “Want to come over today?” she asked. “My mom got more cupcakes.”

Ephrem’s high school was old, with high ceilings. The floors were wood, and the hallways were filled with a waxy yellow light. Darlene stared at Teddy. Her friend’s skin looked peculiar, as if lit from within. The thought came to her suddenly that Teddy looked like a sea creature.

“I’m not supposed to eat that shit,” she said. She looked over Teddy’s shoulder. A group of girls from band was gathered around the lockers, giggling. “I have to go,” Darlene murmured, moving past Teddy towards them, fixing a smile on her face.

## §

The next day Teddy waited for Darlene after school, near the side door that let out into the parking lot where the bus was. They usually met here and made their plans for the rest of the day, but today Darlene was evasive. “I don’t know. My brother’s picking me up,” she said.

“I thought we could walk over to Old Benedict’s later,” Teddy said. “You know, see what’s going on.”

Darlene shook her head. “I don’t want to do that anymore,” she said. She shifted from one foot to the other, leaning over to see past Teddy. “There’s Austin coming now.”

“He could sure drive us over to my house, then,” Teddy said. Austin Dressler drove an old Chrysler that he worked on himself, and today she could see that he’d hung something from the rearview mirror. Some sort of crystal, maybe, the way it caught the light, though it was hard to tell because the windows were fogged over from the cold. Austin himself always put Teddy into a state of unease; it had something to do with his jaw, which was squared off and bore exactly one dimple, distractingly deep and sunk in his chin like a thumbprint in dough.

Once last fall, when Teddy had accompanied Darlene home after school, Austin was in the backyard with a friend, tossing a softball back and forth. Squatting like a catcher, Austin conveyed an authority Teddy had never seen in boys her age; the hams of his legs bulged through the worn fabric of his denim pants. When the boys came inside for a soda, Austin looked Teddy up and down and asked her if she wanted to take a turn at bat. Darlene pouted

when Teddy said yes, but then when she saw how bad Teddy was at hitting the ball, she said, "See, she's just like me." Teddy didn't care. She had liked the feel of the bat in her hands, the way the weight of it stretched out her shoulders as she swung. Austin stood a few feet to her right and gave her tips; the loneliness had lifted away from Teddy like fog.

Now he rolled the passenger-side window down and nodded curtly at Teddy. "C'mon, Darlie. Mom wants us home." Darlene had confided in Teddy that Austin wasn't always nice to her, but today his tone conveyed concern. Teddy drifted along beside her friend; Darlene got in the front passenger seat, but when Teddy put her hand on the handle of the back door, Austin revved the engine. "Not you," he said. Teddy stared at him. "Your mom's a bitch," he said then, almost courteously, as he took his foot off the brake and glided away.

## §

That night there was chow mein casserole for supper, and green beans, and soft white rolls. Teddy was silent through most of the meal. The beans, crusted with salt, made her thirsty, and while Flo washed the dishes, Teddy drank glass after glass of water. It was her job to dry, which she usually did with a thoroughness Flo always commented on. But tonight, Teddy was careless, snatching a dishcloth and swiping at the plates, stacking them damp.

“How was your day?” Teddy asked.

“It was fine, honey,” Flo said. Her hands were plunged into soapy water; she blew a strand of her hair, which was barely gray, coarse as a horse’s tail, out of her face. She turned to look curiously at her daughter. Teddy never asked about her day.

“What did you do?” Teddy persisted.

“Oh, I counseled the usual stressed-out college kids,” Flo said.

“Like, kids taking tests?”

“Sure. And kids who just broke up with someone, maybe. Or maybe their parents are getting a divorce.”

“I never went to a counselor,” Teddy said. She leaned against the counter and wiggled her toes inside her sandals. In the house, even in winter, Teddy always wore sandals. She studied her hands.

“You’re special,” Flo said. “And you’ve got me.”

Teddy looked up at her mother. “Do you know someone named Austin?” she said. “Austin Dressler?” Flo was wearing cut-off sweatpants and a cardigan over a tight tee-shirt that her bra showed through. She was a little thick, like some of the other mothers, but her clothing hung on her strangely, as if Flo’s body were not rounded in the usual places. She didn’t look like the other

mothers. She didn't look like anyone else Teddy knew. There was the sweater, discolored and nubbled with pills, that had belonged to Teddy's father. And Flo somehow always carried with her a whiff of unwholesomeness, like fruit gone soft, though when Teddy stepped closer her mother just smelled the way she always did, of soap and wood and tobacco.

"Everyone knows who Austin is," Flo said dryly. She wiped her hands on the towel she'd draped over her shoulder and pulled the metal plug from the sink. Soapy water rushed away from her, from Teddy, from the narrow confines of the room.

"Do you like him?"

"Austin Dressler is an entitled son of a bitch," Flo said.

Teddy considered this. "Okay," she said.

"Honey, I'm gonna go watch some TV," Flo said. "I'm bushed tonight." Teddy watched her mother hang the dishtowel neatly on the broken towel bar and crack her back before disappearing into the front room.

"I know," Teddy said.

## §

She did go to Mrs. Benedict's house that evening, but first she went to Darlene's, which was in the nicer part of town, on a wooded lot. The house

looked like a cube, with walls of glass it would be something to clean. When the lights were on at night it was like watching a play. Teddy could see in, to where Darlene was talking on the phone. Darlene stood up, walked around the dining room table, then sat again; she waved her arms as she talked, in a way that was unfamiliar. Teddy just looked for a while, then she walked to Mrs. Benedict's house. It was cold, and by the time she got to the subdivision where Mrs. Benedict lived, she was losing heart. She just did a walk-by; there was the red car, still scratched, and the tidy yard. There were the geese.

Sometimes, after that, Teddy would get to Mrs. Benedict's house and sit in the back field and just watch Mr. and Mrs. Benedict come and go. They were like a TV show, she thought, where the same things always happened; dinner was always at the same time, and Mrs. Benedict's routines—when she graded papers, when she turned on the television with Mr. Benedict and pulled out green yarn and a crochet hook—were predictable. At first Teddy thought they must be unhappy—weren't they *bored?*—and yet Teddy returned, night after night.

One evening, after a day when Teddy knew for a fact that Mrs. Benedict was under the weather (her teacher's nose had been candy-apple red in class, and she had assigned the class quiet reading so that she could sit quietly herself,

grading papers and not, as she said, taxing her voice), Mr. Benedict made dinner. Something in the microwave, and Mrs. Benedict sat at the table, drinking something from a mug (tea, Teddy guessed) while he cooked. The way Mr. Benedict wrapped his wife's shoulders in a shawl, the mindfulness with which he set out their two plates, the folded cloth napkins, made Teddy feel strange.

After that she came more often, almost every night, in fact. Because she usually arrived from the street side, Teddy began to watch for how Mrs. Benedict changed what the concrete ducks on her front porch wore: as the weeks passed, parkas changed to capes changed to slickers. Mrs. Benedict kept on this, Teddy thought, better than her neighbors, some of whom still had their ducks wearing Santa coats. Then Teddy would circle around to the back of the house, where she imagined her presence was less obtrusive. On more than one occasion, Teddy thought she saw Mrs. Benedict glance up through the glass patio doors at the back of the house and look right at her. But it was dark out, of course. It wasn't as if anyone could see her.

Teddy wasn't seeing much of Darlene except in English, but Darlene always seemed to manage to hurry out after class before Teddy could pull her books together. One day Teddy did catch up with her and kept pace all the way to Darlene's next class, which was remedial math and nowhere near



where Teddy was supposed to be. She stood in front of the classroom door so that Darlene had to look at her.

“You should come over sometime,” Teddy said. She chewed at her retainers. She could see that Darlene had lost some weight.

“I dunno,” Darlene said. She moved her jaw back and forth—like a cow, Teddy thought, suddenly spiteful—then shifted her books to the other arm and gave an elaborate yawn.

“Why not?”

Darlene shrugged, looking away from Teddy, off to the side. “My brother says your mom’s weird,” she finally said. Another kid bumped past just then, and Teddy had to move over; in that instant Darlene escaped into the classroom, too.

By late March Darlene had tried out for the school play and gotten a minor role as a monkey/cloud. Teddy didn’t know the play, but when she heard about the casting, she caught Darlene, breathlessly in the hallway, to say she’d come. “Sure,” Darlene said. Darlene had started hanging out with some of the other, lesser oboes, and one of them, Julia, passed by and raised her eyebrows when she saw Teddy. “You do that,” Darlene said. She turned away abruptly then to join Julia, leaving Teddy standing there with her hands hanging at her sides.

There was a stinging in Teddy's cheeks and eyes, but she made herself watch the two girls disappear down the hallway. Their heads were dipped together, almost touching, and Teddy told herself that they weren't talking about her—or about anything important at all.

### §

The days were getting longer, but it was still dark when Teddy walked between the houses—Darlene's and Mrs. Benedict's—after dinner. Mrs. Benedict had outfitted her geese with flowery garlands that Teddy had to admit were very colorful. Darlene was almost never home. Walking through neighborhoods with their bare saplings and lawns ragged from winter, Teddy imagined her friend's glamorous new life with the other oboes. There were no sidewalks, anywhere, so Teddy walked in the street.

"Where's your friend?" Flo said once. "I haven't seen her around for a while."

Teddy stared at her mother through half-shut eyes and summoned all the things about Darlene that bugged her. Darlene breathed through her mouth. She wasn't particularly intelligent. Her school things had pictures of baby animals on them. How could Teddy possibly miss someone with a panda on her math binder? "She doesn't like you," Teddy said.

“Well, fuck her,” Flo said good-humoredly, but it was hard to miss the little bit of hurt in her voice.

## §

“Theodora,” Mrs. Benedict said after class one day. Teddy was still at her desk, slowly loading her backpack with books. “Can I speak with you a moment?”

Teddy came and stood mutely before Mrs. Benedict’s desk. The desk was like every other desk at Ephrem High, made of pressed wood and peeling in odd spots, though Mrs. Benedict had tried to cheer it up with a floral blotter and a pencil cup painted with cows.

“Theodora,” Mrs. Benedict began. Her usually brisk manner seemed softer, almost maternal. “Your last essay, dear . . .” Mrs. Benedict held Teddy’s recent paper between the tips of her fingers. “You employ some disturbing images.” When Teddy didn’t say anything, Mrs. Benedict cleared her throat. “That scene with the dog, dear. It was certainly . . . graphic.”

Mrs. Benedict peered at Teddy, then set the paper down on the desk. She fiddled with the chain around her neck, which held glasses Mrs. Benedict never wore. “Is everything okay?” She straightened in her chair and cleared her throat again. “At home?” She looked down at some notes, words scrawled

on a notepad printed with THINK BELIEVE DO in block letters at the top. “I notice your parents didn’t make it to conferences.”

“My mom never goes to conferences,” Teddy said, which was true. Flo didn’t believe in conferences.

“And your father, dear?”

“We’re a family of two,” Teddy said.

“Oh, my dear. Yes. Well, I’d love to talk to your mother sometime.” Mrs. Benedict rose from her chair and came around to the front of the desk. She stood high on her toes and then settled back down into her shoes, which were leather flats surmounted by tiny bows. “If she can manage it.”

Teddy suddenly had the mental image of Flo driving up to Mrs. Benedict’s house and getting a load of the concrete geese, and the thought of her mother’s reaction made her want to giggle. Garlands on geese were stupid, Teddy knew, and to think otherwise seemed suddenly ridiculous. Disloyal, even.

“*You’re* a family of two,” Teddy said. Mrs. Benedict’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sure she’d love to talk to you,” Teddy added hastily. “Can I go? I think the bell’s going to ring.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Mrs. Benedict fluttered her hand dismissively, but she looked preoccupied, as if she were trying to remember something. “I’ll

write you a pass, dear.” As she bent over to fill out a slip, she looked up at Teddy and something flitted behind her eyes. “Do you live near BirchBrook, dear?”

Teddy’s heart flapped in her throat like a trapped bird. “No. No, I don’t,” she said. She grabbed the pass and made herself walk out of the room, though she felt like running.

Only two more months, she thought. Summer was almost here.

## §

When Teddy got home, Flo was already on the couch watching a documentary about climate change, and Teddy didn’t tell her anything about Mrs. Benedict. “Our world is in a fix,” Flo informed Teddy. “Come have dessert.” She nodded at a foil pan of brownies, which came from the local Jewel and were cut into generous squares. “They’re for spring,” she said.

Teddy sat down next to her mother and helped herself to a brownie. It was thickly frosted, decorated with sugar flowers in green and pink. Over the next few hours, she and Flo finished off the entire pan, even as they learned about the rising oceans and the poor ruined polar bears. Climate change was causing tremendous storms, the documentary said. After it ended, another one began, this one about cows and how much they burped and farted and what

that did to the environment. Teddy, who couldn't imagine someone like Darlene ever watching this with *her* mother, laid her head on Flo's shoulder. "I wish you were my age," she said.

"Oh, honey." Flo reached across the coffee table for another cigarette, then sat back and turned to her daughter. "Don't let the bastards get you down."

### §

That night a storm was coming in, and the air had a green electricity to it that made Teddy anxious. The wind came in exaggerated, breathless huffs, but there was a stillness behind it that suggested something more. Teddy made her way to Mrs. Benedict's. Coming straight from her own house like this, she could approach from behind, crossing a creek choked with last year's leaves and the field filled with stubble. A little snow still lingered here and there, yellow in the storm light. Teddy's windbreaker snapped, and her hair swirled into her eyes. The wind was so intense that it was hard to catch her breath, but she stumbled over the ruts in the field until there she was, standing behind Mrs. Benedict's house.

It wasn't quite dark yet, and it was hard to see into the house. Teddy crept closer than she usually did, stopping near the Benedicts' gardening shed, which

was a neat little building, though some pieces of old trim were piled up against the back of it. The wind rushed in her ears.

She turned and looked at the field she'd just crossed; beyond the stubble, the trees were bent almost double. If you didn't have hurricanes, there were bound to be tornados; it was as simple as that. The wind caught at Teddy's breath, and she didn't know what to do with her hands, so she shoved them deep into the pockets of her windbreaker. When she turned back to Mrs. Benedict's house, something caught her eye—a mouse? No, an ermine, still in its white winter coat, as if spring hadn't even come. Teddy watched it flash around the corner of the shed. She squatted down and picked up one of the pieces of trim from the pile by the shed. Maybe she could make a towel bar out of this. Surprise Flo. Her shoes sank into the muddy earth, and the little bit of snow left leaked into them, spilling over the low tops.

“What are you doing here?” Suddenly there was Mrs. Benedict, coming around the side of the shed. An afghan wrapped her shoulders, green as the pines that grew on the hill behind Darlene's glass house; Teddy saw it was the one Mrs. Benedict had been crocheting all winter.

“Nothing,” Teddy said. She stood and swallowed hard. “Thinking.”

“About what?” Mrs. Benedict’s voice was not unkind. Her usual makeup had been cleaned away, and Teddy could see the blue pouches under her teacher’s eyes. She could see spots from the sun. The wind roared.

“Did you ever get your car fixed?” Teddy asked.

“Theodora, why don’t you come inside?” Mrs. Benedict said. “This storm is turning into something else. We shouldn’t be outside, either one of us. I’ll call your mother, why don’t I?”

“Leave my mother alone,” Teddy said. She closed her eyes and immediately pictured Flo’s face, its familiar heart shape. It had always, *always*, been the two of them. Teddy opened her eyes and shook her head. “What did she ever do to you?” she said.

“We shouldn’t be outside in this,” Mrs. Benedict repeated.

“You’re not my mother,” Teddy said. The woman stared at her with her tiny blue eyes. Her expression was muted. She made a chuffing sound, like a cat, then fell to her knees in the mud. She tipped over, her mouth still parted.

The trim hung from Teddy’s hand. Mrs. Benedict didn’t say anything more. Teddy looked at her on the ground, then sat down beside her, grinding her teeth against the hard plastic of her retainers. Her hands were spattered and wet, and she wiped them on her jeans.



That one time, at Darlene's, Austin had said to hold the bat lightly. He had told her to let its weight carry the swing. She had looked over at him and felt all the glow of Ephrem's meager possibility.

Mrs. Benedict, Teddy thought. The wind had stopped like a caught breath and the sky was a pale, smooth green; no birds sang. Poor Mrs. Benedict. Teddy could think that now that the tornado had come.

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**Janice Deal** is currently working on a collection of linked short stories, *Sick Beasts*, which explores the fictional town of Ephrem, Illinois. Her work has won the Cagibi Macaron Prize for Fiction, and has appeared or is forthcoming in magazines including *Fiction*, *The Sun*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *Zone 3*. Her first story collection, *The Decline of Pigeons*, was published by Queen's Ferry Press in 2013. Learn more about her at [janicedeal.com](http://janicedeal.com).