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Title: Love in the Time of the Vespa

Part: 1 of ?

Summary: When my parents return to Japan, I decide to remain in the U.S. Living with the family of my best friend. The story follows events as our relationship deepens into a romantic entanglement.

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WARNING:

This story contains adult situations and homosexual themes involving relationships between minors. If you have not reached the age of majority in your jurisdiction (usually 18 or 21), if the content contained within is considered contraband in your jurisdiction, or if access to such materials is counter-indicated in the Terms of Service provided to you by your Internet Service Provider, please read no further than this paragraph prior to discarding and heuristically, or physically destroying this file.

A note from the author:

Be a patriot of the human condition and commit a thought crime daily, you may have less time than you think left to do so. I want to thank Moloko, IAMX, and Goldfrapp for keeping me focused, and to thank Konno Oyuki, and Yazawa Ai for bringing depth to a shallow genre, but most importantly I want to thank my friend and confidant Summer for poking her fingers through my massive plot holes. This was written in Notepad++ using the speech plug-in to aid in revision. Spell checking, was done with GNU Aspell.

I encourage, welcome, appreciate, and intend to respond to: comments, questions, criticism, praise, flattery, encouragement, and abuse, just not necessarily very rapidly (this includes correcting my crappy romanji, as I am the first to admit I suck at Japanese XD). Please direct all such correspondence to me at: saitou.nanami@gmail.com Do not send spam, attachments, or solicitation.

You can also follow my progress, or lack thereof, as well as peruse my general musings on my blog at <http://saitounanami.blogspot.com/> or review my completed works at http://www.asstr.org/files/Authors/Saitou_Nanami/

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Love in the Time of the Vespa

Part 1

I knew I was in trouble when my parents called me into the living room. Both of them were sitting on one side of the *kotatsu*¹ which was the main physical concession to our family origins in the home, and refusing to look at me directly. This is normal behavior when something needs to be discussed, but is not a comfortable topic. This is the same way they had acted when they decided I was old enough to warrant having "The Talk" shortly after I turned seventeen. This was to my general mortification, seeing as I had been through sexual ed classes, and oh so many years of teen-hood without it having yet come up (I had hoped to avoid it entirely).

The room was filled with a palpable tension as I hesitated in the doorway searching my recent memory for anything I had or had not done to land myself in trouble. I was unable to come up with something warranting any great disapproval. My mother made an open handed gesture indicating that I should sit across from them, as they both continued to avoid meeting my questioning eyes.

I suppose that you would have to understand some of the culture differences to really get what I'm saying, but my parents are not weak willed people who let me walk all over them, they were just both raised very traditionally. Which to a certain lesser extent I would say I was as well. Both of my parents are from Japan, if you haven't figured that out yet I'll forgive you. They were born there, they grew up there, fell in love, married there, they even conceived me there, and as they've reminded me ever so often they intend to die there. Are you beginning to see where I'm going with this?

Following the mood in the room, I quietly joined my parents at the table, tucking my skirt underneath me, and sliding my knees under the futon. Mind you, I would usually never voluntarily sit *seiza*² unless it was under the sharp eyes of my grandmother, who would launch into a tersely hissed lecture if she caught anyone being anything less than proper. However, sensing that it might make things go easier if I met my parent's expectations of an obedient daughter than it would if I did not, I gently settled into it.

Visibly hesitating, my father stammered lightly for a few moments before beginning, "Um, you are of course aware of the family's business back home in Hokkaido?"

Rather than pushing my luck by pointing out that 'back home' for him was not the same as 'back home' for me, I nodded, remembering the distillery and shop that was owned and operated as the main source of income for my father's family in Japan. It was fairly well

1. A *Kotatsu* is a type of low table from Japan found in the common rooms of most households. It features a heating element underneath the surface and a quilted blanket which skirts around the table, so that one can sit with their legs under the table warmed by the heat trapped by the blanket. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotatsu> for a more extensive explanation.

2. *Seiza* is a style of sitting used in Japan especially on formal occasions, such as tea ceremonies, it is somewhat uncomfortable if you are not practiced at it. It involves tucking your legs underneath you and sitting on your heels with your feet flattened on the floor. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza> for a more extensive explanation.

known for the soba shochu³ it produced, but it was still a small family owned affair content to subsist solely on domestic sales.

As I was growing up, we had visited Japan during the summer about once every three or four years. I had found that each time I went with them, it became more and more apparent that I would probably never really be able to live there. Oh, I could speak Japanese, at about the same level as a preschool student. I could probably even take classes and learn to speak the language proficiently eventually, but I seriously had no hope of being a functioning adult there as the written language with its three alphabets was well beyond my grasp. Even if I were to get past those issues, the thousands of tiny cultural differences that made me an American would forever mark me as a foreigner in the xenophobic eyes of the people there, despite my appearances.

"Then you are aware that it has been your uncle who has been managing the family affairs since your grandfather died?" he continued.

Of course I remembered this, my uncle Kaito was a stolid man with the most expressive eyebrows I had ever seen. He was almost always smiling, and seemed to think that if I was around, I belonged either perched on his back, or sitting on his knee. Keeping in mind that I haven't seen him since I was fourteen, I'm certain that this opinion of his hadn't changed. Don't for a minute think that this is because he is some sort of lecherous monster, he is just a very indulgent man.

He dotes on each of his three daughters, giving them just about anything they ask for even if it means he would have to go without. If it weren't for his constant flattery of my aunt Sayuri I'm certain this aspect of his nature would be the bane of her existence. The only one who could make my cousins behave like something other than the spoiled brats they are was, as you can probably guess, my grandmother.

For some reason, my rudimentary grasp on the language amused him to no end, and I think it is the fact that he could comfortably continue to talk baby talk with me even after his own daughters had long since grown out of it that made him especially fond of me. He often affectionately called me chibi-nikkei-jin, which is literally like saying 'little emigrant', and it would have been an insult in anyone's mouth but his.

As I nodded, my father's frown deepened, and I realized that we were coming to the topic he least wanted to broach. My mother nodded and took over at this point, "Nanami-chan, your uncle has had a heart attack, and we need to return to Japan to help out."

Crap.

Oh Crap.

Crap, Crap, Crap.

"We?" I squeaked out, and then quickly recovered enough to focus on the more important element here, the well being of my uncle. "Is he okay?" followed almost immediately.

My father's grimace deepened as my mother continued on, "He will be okay as time goes by, but he will not be able to return fully to the duties required." She gently coughed and nudged my father with her elbow.

3. Soba Shochu is a low calorie distilled spirit made partly from buckwheat. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shochu> for a more extensive explanation.

"Your presence in Japan is not required." My father managed to almost make it sound as if I were being fired for slacking off on the job.

"What he means Nanami-chan is that if you wish to stay here in the United States, we will do what we can to help you do so." She continued, "We are aware that it would be difficult for you to complete your schooling in Japan at this point."

Though I was still ill at ease over my family's misfortune, this mitigation of what I had seen as an oncoming sentence of unending strife, greatly relieved me. "So I will stay here alone?" I asked.

My mother nodded as my father's face began to silently explore a number of awkward skin colors from mildly reddish to faintly purple. "You have given us no reason to think that you could not be responsible enough to manage to complete the year on your own." As she said this, I could see her hand seeking out my father's beside her, to deliver a reassuring squeeze.

She was obviously taking this much more easily than my father, but that was to be expected, as it was his brother who was unwell, and his only daughter whom he was having to 'let go' of before he had a chance to really prepare. I was quietly glad I hadn't been seriously involved enough in a relationship to bring home someone to introduce to my parents yet.

Expelling the breath he had been holding, my father said "We will not be affording this home, you will need to find an apartment, or other arrangement."

It dawned on me what he was worried about. My father was concerned that I would be out from under his watchful eye, and susceptible to the corrupting influences of, well, goodness knows what exactly he expected. I bet he was imagining me shacking up with some guy, and throwing away my future becoming yet another unwed teen mother. As if, right?

"Would it be okay if I were to see if I could stay with one of my girlfriends from school?", I asked. "It seems silly to rent an apartment for just four months."

Still on edge, my father managed "We will be glad to interview their parents." At which my mother smiled and gently rolled her eyes for my benefit. "If it is an acceptable arrangement, we will of course be providing adequate compensation."

Putting on my most adorable smile, I shuffled around to where I could hug him, and cooed at him "Chichi⁴, don't worry, I'll come see you over the summer before I come back for college."

"That was a given." he said much more softly as he wrapped an arm around my back and pulled my head to his shoulder. I could feel a tear on my temple where he had tucked his chin in my hair before abruptly letting go of me completely. When I sat back onto my heels, there was no sign of anything resembling tears though, as he had obviously made quick work of them with his free hand before releasing me.

4. Chichi, is a childish familiar word for father it's basically like saying "Daddy" rather than "Father". See <http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/cgi-bin/wwwjdic.cgi?1MDJ%C9%E3> for a less extensive explanation.

From the way things had gone after the initial confrontation, I had half expected to awaken the following morning to an empty house. While there had been a palpable anxiety during the beginning of the exchange, to my relief things had eased enough so that my parents and I had been able to construct a plan very rapidly and amicably.

They had of course met a number of my friends, but few of their parents. They had asked me who I thought would be good to approach, and I had made a number of suggestions, a few of which had been dismissed immediately. I can only guess that they had not approved of their dress, or manners for some reason, as my parents really didn't flow in the same circles as their families did.

We ended up agreeing on three possibilities. My father had insisted upon asking on my behalf, in order to make it absolutely clear that we were not seeking charity, nor was I running away. I didn't really see the need to go that far, but I figured it would be best to give him his way.

My first choice was my best friend Allison. I guess you could say that if I ran in a clique, she would have been the leader. I believe that her appeal to me was the fact that she was always the more daring of the two of us. I always had fun when I was around her because she was certain to cook up something I would never even dream of doing, and then find a way to look cool doing it.

Allison has always been confident and charismatic, quick to make friends, easily converting all but the most stubborn of enemies to her side. She is what you might call the sporty type, if only because she is well coordinated and energetic. Not especially quick, or strong, but certainly capable of doing anything she put her mind to. It seemed like every year I had known her, she had been interested in something new. One year, it was ballet, the next cheer leading, then karate, followed by volleyball. Every instructor at our school was just as sad to see her leave, as they were happy to see her join whatever team was her flavor of the moment.

When we were twelve we had managed to work our parents into arranging for us both to go to the same summer camp halfway across the country. She had quickly made a number of friends through her tomboyish bravado, but had made it clear to everyone who sidled up to her that I was part of the deal if they wanted to hang out with her. I guess you might say that she had been responsible for making sure that I didn't just shrink inside my shell and weather out the entire three weeks without making any new friends.

Second on the list, but certainly not my second choice, was actually my father's suggestion. A colleague of his, who had invited us to a number of social gatherings, his name is Itou Takahashi. I think you can guess why he was so insistent upon including him in the list. Mr. Itou had one daughter, Hatsuka who went to a private school. She was no friend of mine, and had made it clear to me that she had no wish to change that fact. If she managed to turn her nose any farther upward at my company, she would probably have to start parting her hair down the middle in order for it to be seen.

Third on the list was another friend of mine from school by the name of Rachel. She and I had both been involved in the student government during junior high, and so our parents had met and talked quite a bit after a few of our fund-raising efforts. Subsequently they were actually on pretty good terms.

Rachel's parents were from South Korea, but unlike mine they had no real ties left overseas, and so they had put every effort into assimilating completely with what they considered to be American culture. My father had quietly expressed his puzzlement at their behavior to my mother on a few occasions, but she had always turned it back on him that I was only marginally better informed about my origins than Rachel was.

When High-school had started, we had actually drifted apart a little initially, as her interests became more artistic, and mine more literary. But in the end these interests had brought us closer together during our junior year when we discovered that we were both attending classes at the local junior college after school. That first semester the classes we had been taking only overlapped on Mondays, but we had coordinated our schedules afterward, so that we were both heading over on the same days and getting out of class at close to the same time.

I'm certain it is obvious where I was not interested in living for the next four months until I graduated high-school, besides Japan of course, but I was equally happy with the possibility of either of the alternatives. Both of the girls whom I considered to be the real options were friendly and kind, they both enjoyed my company, and we had never really quarreled. Between the two I would probably get more studying done at Rachel's house than at Allison's, but aside from the upcoming work in my junior college class, there wasn't much studying to be done really. I had already completed all of the requirements for each of my classes, as well as the senior project which each student was required to present before they could graduate. All we really had to do was take our finals and then go through the various ritual senior activities such as 'ditch week'.

As I walked into the kitchen, still pajama clad, my mother was straightening my father's tie as he folded his newspaper into his briefcase. With much less stiffness than the previous night, he turned and asked me "Can you please arrange to invite Brooks-chan and her parents over for dinner tonight, and your mother will ask Young-chan's parents to join us for dinner the next night." I nodded sleepily, glad that the first two people on my list were going to be the first two people we approached.

"I will speak to Itou-san about it today at lunch, as I will be depending on him to take over a number of items I am responsible for at work." Ah, well, it was to be expected that my father's list and my list were not weighted the same. I reminded myself that even if he was just humoring me by allowing me to float my choices, it would only be four months that I might end up stuck with that Hatsuka.

"Okay dad, I'll talk to her, but I really don't know if they have anything planned or not." I sighed at the thought of where I might end up if they all happened to already have something going on.

He managed a noncommittal half-grunt before kissing my mother and leaving. As soon as he was out of earshot my mother tried to comfort me, "Don't worry too much, if I know Itou-san, when your father says he is leaving, he will say something like: 'This puts me at a very difficult position.' and your father won't even be able to bring up the idea of you going to live with him."

"I do hope so." I replied wistfully before trudging off to take care of my daily necessities before school.

When my oldest cousin Miu had come with my grandmother to visit us last year, the one thing she had been most jealous of happened to be the same thing I was most embarrassed about. When I had turned sixteen my father had interpreted my request for a nice, small, economical scooter to mean that I wanted him to buy me the enormous nineteen-seventy-seven brownish Ford Thunderbird I was navigating through morning traffic toward school. Not that the car wasn't serviceable; every time I had needed repairs, I had been just barely able to afford it out of the previous month's pay from my part-time job as a cashier at a discount designer clothing store famous for their off beat advertising, flag tees, and flip-flops. The fact that the engine would stop running if you didn't pop it into neutral before coming to a complete stop wasn't even that bothersome when you got used to it. I didn't even mind that it had earned the nickname 'poo-mobile' based on its color and propensity to make a farty belch from the tailpipe when you killed the engine.

The problem is that I am almost five foot tall, if you let me stand on the phone book to be measured (the yellow pages, and the white ones too please). As you are hopefully imagining in a kindly way this presents certain difficulties. In order to see through the wheel, and thus over the dash, I have to keep the seat slid all the way forward and leaning completely upright. I even have a cushion intended for garden furniture hidden under the seat cover to help me out. But wait, it gets better, I am also very slight of build, which is to diplomatically say that finding certain items of my apparel which were both age appropriate, and in the correct size is, well let's just say god bless padding and leave it at that shall we?

Subsequently to the eyes of your average American, I look rather like a child taking a joy ride in someone's clunker. I might have trouble counting the number of times I have heard the phrase 'Aren't you a little young to be driving missie?' using the hairs on my head, let alone fingers and toes. Once on the way to J.C. With Rachel I had been pulled over and the officer had asked her to step out without even speaking to me. He had immediately launched into a lecture about how dangerous it was to let her little sister drive. If I hadn't started waving my license out the window at him, her laughter would have ended up landing her in handcuffs I'm certain.

It had surprised Miu as much to learn I had my own car as I was jealous of her for only being able to legally drive a motorbike. After she got over her initial discomfort at being on the wrong side of the road, she had steadily increased mine by demanding to go to places further and further from my usual routes. I wasn't afraid of getting lost, both of our phones had GPS, even if hers couldn't even recognize the towns we were in, let alone help us navigate the streets. What frightens me is that when going into unfamiliar territory, I don't know what hazards I need to be especially careful of. Things like being prepared to see nothing but sky when I bump up the small incline into the school's parking lot.

As I pulled into one of the few spots left in the student area I tried to compose the way I would be explaining my predicament to my two friends, because of course it would be unforgivable if I was not the first to share this nugget of drama with them. Somehow I had to keep up with my friend's responsibilities without taking the wind out of my father's sails. Absentmindedly I made an assessment of the comparative hassle of opening the three and a half foot long door on my side into the space occupied by a generically gigantic S.U.V, or into the expensive detail job of the overly customized rice burner on the other side. With a sigh I rolled down the window and dropped my bag and purse onto the ground so that I could brace myself for the humiliating backward crawl out, as if I were a miniature version

of some T.V. Addled hick. It would truly be a blessing if someone was gullible enough to steal it just because the window had been left open.

At just the wrong moment, the familiar whack of Allison's field hockey stick on my bumper turned my tenacious grasp of the door frame into an uncontrolled free fall which landed me bridged between the S.U.V. And the bane of my existence by virtue of my knees hooked over the sill of my door and my shoulders propped against the other. The way the long, but loosely flowing hippie-esque skirt I had chosen to wear today had managed to find its way up past my hips to hang fluttering limply like a windless flag below me was the least of my worries as my arms flailed about in search of purchase. Allison jumped forward to pull me up and out onto my feet laughing hard until tears of embarrassment started to well up in my eyes.

Cutting short, she hugged me, patting my back and probably looking daggers at the people still laughing a little way off, for they abruptly stopped. It was irksome to realize that if the situation had been reversed it would have been catcalls not laughter, and she most likely would have reveled in it. Then the incessant waves of anxiety that had started testing the walls of my resolve the night before put forth a concerted attack as soon as they realized the doorway to the waterworks was now slightly ajar. The battle was quickly lost and Allison's concern redoubled as I buried my face against her and tried to quietly muffle a wave of sobs.

Between the repetition of querying "are you okay?" and stating "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Allison quickly explored my head and then my shoulders and back, no doubt searching out a physical trigger of my distress in the form of a cut or goose-egg. Bracing my elbow in her hand she abruptly squatted in front of me to run her free hand under my skirt to feel at the backs of my knees. My hand instinctively shot down to protect my already sundered modesty, and I started to back away blindly wiping my tears.

"No, I'm not hurt." managed to escape my lips just in time for my feet to find that my bag and purse had the inclination to change that fact. Despite Alison quickly springing forward to catch at my hands, I still fell with a bruise inducing thwack to the ground. I suppose I can thank her that it was only my butt and not my head hitting the sidewalk.

With a small groan, I found my feet and gathered my belongings. I hadn't gone more than a few feet when she said "Come on, hop on." and squatted in front of me holding her arms out for me to climb on for a piggy back ride. The irony of this following my reminiscence of my uncle Kaito doing the same was not lost on me as I carefully positioned myself behind her. And like it was an everyday thing she set off toward the school. It would have been impossible for her to be convinced that the ride might hurt my vanity more than walking would hurt my derriere.

It was of course only then that we garnered a catcall. From a group of boys I vaguely recognized as some sort of jocks from the sophomore class came a shout of "Whoa, a double decker!" or perhaps it was "double dipper", it was "double" something though, and even if the wording is lost to me now, the meaning was clear enough to us both at the time.

I tightened my grip on Allison's hips and shoulders, hissing "No, no, no, don't stop, let it go." as she stopped, slowly turned and gently set me on my feet. The group of boys had quickly dwindled to a crowd of one, and I don't know if he was the slowest among them, or just the bravest, but he was certainly the biggest, and he weathered her withering gaze with stoic placidity.

I knew that I was going to be the one to regret what happened next when her arm slowly raised with a dramatically pointed finger, so I turned to make my escape as her preposterously campy voice modulated to a surprisingly deep timbre commanded him "You shall carry the subject!" and I felt rather than saw him shrug as he easily swept me (and the skirt I was starting to hate as much as the car) up into his arms. At his prompting for a destination, she continued on with that silly voice from a Mary Shelly inspired B-movie "To the la-boor-ah-tour-y!"

"I think she means infirmary" I translated, "but if you could just put me down, I'm fine, please."

Unfortunately it dawned on me that any scrap of luck I ever had was truly gone from me now, for he grinned down at me as I sank into mortified silence, and he bellowed out "Yes Master! To the laboratory on the double Master!"

I could feel the waves of glee radiating off of Allison as the two of them marched me along the most roundabout way possible to the nurse's office, keeping up the show the entire way. This is exactly what I meant when I told you about her. I began to truly wish I had managed to crack open my skull, as a nice quiet ride in an ambulance would have caused less commotion.

My great reprieve came only a few feet from the nurse's doorway as the crowd of trailing onlookers parted around the Principal like I would imagine herring would part around some malevolent shark floating in an ocean current. "Miss Brooks, and Mister Taggart, What is going on?" As wise as he was authoritatively foreboding, his incredulity had won out against any concern for my well being to control the better part of his curiosity.

Not skipping a beat, Allison gave the would be Igor a shove to keep him moving toward their intended destination before turning about and reporting "She fell and broke her tail bone, he is taking responsibility." Left with only that tidbit to work with as Allison followed us into the relative safety of the nurse's domain, he set about clearing the hall of onlookers, and restoring order along the path of disruption we had left in our wake.

Managing not to wince as he set me down on the barely padded pleather surface on one of the two cots, I offered him my name "I'm Nanami."

"Saitou, I know, you can call me Dan" he shrugged. When I looked at him, puzzled, he scratched the back of his neck and offered "It was your speech, when you ran for treasurer a few years back you were the only one who took it serious."

Remembering back all the way to eighth grade I realized he must have been at least somewhat aware of my comings and goings for the last four years to have kept my name ready, as I think even the teachers I saw on a daily basis didn't bother to remember let alone use my family name, why would they when there probably wasn't another Nanami in the county let alone the town? Pulling me from my reverie he shifted from foot to foot and asked "would you, maybe like to go out sometime?"

As I searched through my surprise to find an adequately gentle rebuff, Allison bounced into place on my other side, and scooped up my hand as she said "ahhh, sorry, you're too late, she's already fallen for me." Which was off beat enough to elicit a chuckle from him, while I merely groaned at her punny attempt at wit.

"Yeah, that's what the guys said, but I still had to try." He shrugged.

"Wait, what?" I laughed, "she's just joking." I pulled my hand from hers and waved it in front of my face to ward off the confusion hanging in the air. "we're not..."

"No, it's cool really, I don't mean in a gross way, just you know, you should be yourself." He muttered.

I looked to Allison for some support in correcting the misunderstanding she had created. She gave me a funny little frown, and then made a shooing motion at him, saying "you can go now."

The rebuff stood like a wall across the room, territory had been claimed, and troops were marching the border. Suddenly I had literally become no-man's land. Allison, who was so hardheaded she could open a coconut with it, squinted ferociously up at him, And you could see his shoulders squaring up as his injured pride started to inflate. The main question in my mind wasn't so much if hostilities were going to be exchanged, but if it would come to fisticuffs, or possibly even a full blown propaganda war.

Mustering every ounce of acting ability, I sat forward a bit on the cot, and then yelped and winced a bit too much to be believable. Both of them switched their focus to me.

Dan seemed to hesitate a bit, then he flushed red as he frowned tersely. "I'm going to go now, sorry to have bothered you." As he turned to walk out the door, I heard him distinctly muttering "who wants a fucking dyke anyway."

I turned on Allison and fought the urge to give her the most painful pinch I could muster.

"You're welcome." She said.

"What the hell for?"

"He was a goober, standing there drooling over you like that."

"You're the one who had him carry me in here!" I retorted.

"How was I supposed to know he had a crush on you?"

"And just what is so bad about that?" I shot back. "now he's going to run off and tell everyone we're... you know." I faltered at the end, not wanting to give voice to it.

She made a pouting face, and said "What's so bad about that?" under her breath.

Forcing a laugh, I goaded her, "what was up with that anyways, marching me around like that?" as the nurse, Ms. Cuthbert walked through the doorway into her office.

"It must not be too bad if you can laugh about it, Miss Nanami."

At the same moment, I said "really I'm fine" and Allison said "she's broken!" Which earned a glare from both myself, and the nurse.

"Miss Brooks, do you have an ailment?" Ms. Cuthbert asked in a tone that would not tolerate any nonsense.

"No, but..."

Cutting Allison off, she retorted "I thought not, you can go to class, or you can wait next door in the office, your choice. Get my door on your way out."

Sighing, Allison made her withdrawal, and Ms. Cuthbert proceeded with her cursories "so what's wrong?"

"I tripped and fell onto my butt, but it's not as bad as she made it out." I told her.

"The fact that you can sit on it is a good sign. Do you want a doughnut to sit on?" She asked as she scribbled on a pad.

As I told her "no thanks." she handed me two sheets.

"That will get you both into class, come see me if it starts to hurt. I believe you'll find Miss Brooks just outside the door." she said as she hooked her thumb over her shoulder at the exit.

Sitting at the bench of the picnic table on the far side of the courtyard, which had served as our lunchtime refuge whenever weather had permitted, Rachel, Allison, and I went over the way electrons spinning against each other defined the shape of the electron cloud around an atom yet again. We were attempting to construct an adequate explanation to penetrate Allison's good humored density. Don't misunderstand me, she was a natural with chemistry, and seemed always able to predict exactly what would happen when we started in on a lab. But when we had left the beakers and burners to start discussing the basics of quantum physics that guided the reactions she understood so well, somehow it just hadn't added up for her.

Sighing, I gave up and popped a pair of electron olives into my mouth while Rachel still attempted to conjure a shape out of thin air with her hands. I still hadn't divested my news, and as the day wore on, it would only become more difficult. Summoning my resolve, and swallowing my doubts with my elemental particles, I decided to just get on with it.

"My parents are moving back to Japan."

The table went silent, Rachel's hands dropped, and she looked back and forth between Allison and I as if she knew that the complexities this presented would be slowly dropping into place like puzzle pieces.

"When?" Allison got directly at the critical point.

"Soon, probably a week or so, my Uncle had a heart attack, so they have to go back and help out."

"When will you be back?" Rachel asked.

"I don't think they are planning on coming back. At least not permanently." I stated as succinctly as I could.

"No, You can't leave like this, we didn't even graduate!" Allison protested with a pout.

"That's just it, I think they're thinking about letting me stay here."

"All by yourself?" Rachel's incredulity was well founded.

I shrugged though, and simply said "I think they're trying to find a way around that, they wanted me to ask your family over for dinner tonight Allison, and my mom said she was going to talk to your mom today Rachel."

"I can't imagine your dad likes that idea." Rachel shrugged "but I'm sure my parents wouldn't mind, you know what it's like at my house though."

I nodded remembering the crowded coziness of the small home that Rachel's father took immense pride in having bought outright for cash. It would afford the affects of another teenage girl about as easily as you could use a whole chicken as stuffing for a turkey.

Turning to watch Allison's face as she spoke, she clarified "unless you don't mind the couch or the floor, you would have to sleep with me."

I sensed an unknown undercurrent flowing beneath the surface of the conversation, but there was a definite finality when Allison pronounced "no, you're staying with me," as she stood up to throw away the remainder of her food. She trotted back towards the school headed in the general direction of the office.

Turning back to Rachel, I sighed "I was going to eat that," and she choked a laugh past a sip of water.

"You gotta be quick around her," she pointed out, "you two really deserve each other." she laughed.

"Not you too." I sighed. The school's hallways had suddenly become noticeably less of an obstacle course as the day had worn on. It was as if a bubble had grown around Allison and I. The word had been spread covertly, but efficiently, about the 'lesbian seniors'.

"Look," she said, "I'm your friend right? And I'm Allie's friend too, but if we are friends, then you and Allie are more like sisters or something."

"Okay, I can see what you mean, but still..." I protested weakly.

"Seriously Nanners, you need to take a look at it from another angle, why wouldn't people who don't know you two think that way?" She started packing her lunch things away. "Hell, why wouldn't I think that way?"

"Wait, you don't really think we...?"

"What I think, is that I'm not the one you need to be having this conversation with."

I grimaced, "Ugh, I can't even imagine how that would go," I paused for a moment, then continued "I mean, I love Allie, but..."

Before I could compose the rest of the statement she cut across "start from there, and think about how she feels... I'll tell you the same thing I told her: 'Try just being honest'."

"Honest? With her? You think I'm not honest?"

"With her, with you, with me, everyone, whatever... just think about it." With that She stood up, and said "And that's all I'm going to say about it."

Feeling like I had missed something, I said "thanks" in that tone of voice that really means 'Fuck you too.'

Sighing, I propped my elbows onto the table and pressed my palms into my eyes. Rachel gave my shoulder a squeeze before wandering off, and I thought 'really, this is all too much'. When the bell rang I seriously thought about heading back to the nurse's office.

When Rachel and I got to the T-bird in the parking lot, Allison had already planted herself in the back seat, and was occupied with waving at us as if the gesture would make us

break into a run to join her. I pushed my bag into the window behind the driver's seat, so that it fell onto the floor of the back seat. The S.U.V. From that morning was just pulling out of its spot, leaving little doubt as to how Allison had gotten in the car.

"We've still got classes, and you have practice." Rachel reminded her as she opened the door on the far side.

"Canceled." came Allison's simple but obvious lie.

I pulled the little black rubberized catch which allowed the seat to flip forward hard enough to sound a short beep on the horn with the headrest. "They made a special exemption to let you start playing as a senior" I chided her.

"Fine then I quit, this is too important." She hunched back in the seat pouting at me.

Sighing, I flipped the seat back to it's usual upright position and settled behind the wheel. "Suit yourself but we're still going to class." Ignoring the whined protests from the back seat, I went on, "and you're not following me to my class to pester me either, you can go with Rachel and help her out."

"I'm not babysitting her, she's your child" Rachel quipped as I pulled the gear lever down to reverse and blew the horn to warn any potential victims that I was about to roll.

"She could power a pottery wheel, or pose nude or something." I shot back.

Kicking the back of my seat to punctuate the exception she took to this Allison said "you'd like that wouldn't you!"

Rachel sighed theatrically, "I guess you better just leave the windows cracked so she doesn't suffocate, hopefully nobody will be scared by her barking." Which prompted Allison to tickle Rachel mercilessly around the seat until we reached the freeway on-ramp, at which point Rachel shouted out "Hold on to something!" and made quick in taking her own queue.

Allison looked up and said "Hoshit" before throwing herself back and clicking the child-locking mechanism on the seat belt tight around her.

This was why I really loved this car despite its many drawbacks, it was still a Thunderbird, even if it looked like shit, and at some point in it's past someone had put a lot of love into it. I punched the gas as soon as we hit the ramp and the car awoke like a lion roaring and rearing underneath us. The back end fishtailed slightly at the top end of the curve, where we came parallel to the roadway, but I was used to that and a small twitch of the wheel and a quick pump on the gas pedal and everything was sorted out. I gunned the engine again and we hit the freeway, flying from the end of the short acceleration lane at about sixty-five (about 105 kph) to squeeze between two lumbering semi's and out into the middle lane where I goosed it up to eighty (about 125kph) and left their blaring horns behind.

Here, on the freeway, for fifteen short minutes in each direction, I was truly a menace to the motoring public, but both girls shared my exuberance, hooting out Rachel's window as we flew towards the next town over, where the J.C. Campus was. Now, pulling the same sort of stunt on the off-ramp was not nearly as easy, and two out of the three times I had tried it Rachel and I had ended up facing the wrong direction at the light at the end of the ramp. The reason I mention this is because when we passed the truck weigh station that preceded our exit at full speed, she turned and shouted "No!"

I grinned like a demon, and then Allison started screaming "Brakes! Brakes!" As I nosed onto the off-ramp, obliging her, I slammed my foot on the brakes and steered into the turn, throwing everyone and everything forward inside the massive machine as I felt for the magic moment when the lighter rear end would break traction. My heart thudded in my throat once and then I felt it, spinning the wheel full round against the curve, and gunning the engine, we whipped around the curve and came to a shuddering stop halfway between the mouths of the off-ramp, and the on-ramp in a sea of yellow stripes, I had gone wide from the lane, but we were facing the right way. The engine of course had done it's trick of dying when we stopped, as I hadn't had an extra hand to pop it in neutral.

Rachel laughed while clutching her chest and exclaimed, "You crazy little bitch!"

It was Allison, who was less used to riding with me on the freeway, that snaked her arm out to try and steal the keys. She had no luck as they wouldn't disengage while I was in drive. I slapped at her hand and put it in park so I could restart the engine. She begged from the back seat "Please, please, please never ever do that again!"

Smiling but not saying anything I resumed my granny style driving until we got parked at the campus. Getting shakily out of the car, Allison pulled her bag out with her, and asked Rachel where the nearest bathroom was. She shot me a look of death before setting off holding her bag behind her as she went. I glanced down at the seat and laughed when I saw the softball sized wet spot on the seat.

Rachel, already having realized what happened shouted after her "Bad girl! We do that outside! Not in the car!" as if poor Allison had been a dog after all.

"I seem to remember you having done the same thing once," I said as I dropped my school bag into my trunk and grabbed out the bag I kept my J.C. Stuff in.

"She doesn't need to know that though." Rachel said.

"I think maybe she does," I countered, "you saw how shook up she was."

She shrugged, "you gonna skip class and take her home?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Probably... I can get a ride if you want." she suggested.

"No, we'll find something to do and meet you back here when your class is over." I dropped the bag back into the trunk and trotted off after Allison.

Stepping into the room I called out "Allie-doodles, are you okay?"

From the farthest stall she responded with more than a little sarcasm "Oh, I'm just great, piddled myself in your car is all, like a kid."

"Would it make you feel better if I said I had my employee discount card with me?" I asked the closed stall door.

"I thought you had class."

"I did, but I'll survive. I feel guilty Allie."

"Are you paying?"

"One top and one bottom, I can't afford a new wardrobe for you."

She flushed and the stall door creaked open. She was wearing her hockey shorts, and still looking ruffled. "you have to promise never to do something like that again."

I sighed, "fine, I promise never to take an off-ramp too fast again." Her eyes narrowed at all the things the promise didn't entail, but relented anyway. Grabbing her hand I pulled her back towards the car. The spot had almost dried by the time we hit the local store of the company I worked at.

The manager on duty was a girl who had been promoted out of my store. We stood near the registers chatting for a bit about the comings and goings of the people we knew at the two stores while Allison looked at the stuff up front near the windows, which is to say she was looking at the newest, most expensive stuff in the store. Sighing, I asked if there was anything new back in clearance, which got a non-committal "who knows what's back there?"

Laughing, I grabbed up a handful of red tagged go-backs from the counter behind the cashiers and headed off to wrangle my friend. Interrupting her search, I thrust half of the pile at her, "They put me to work, you come help, these all go in clearance." and so we made the journey past the overpriced features, end caps, and mid-aisles to the chaos of the clearance section. As we found homes for all the stuff in the bundle I got the lay of the land.

Now, I don't know about other stores, but in our brand there are usually two clearance areas, the general one, and then the secret one within. At first it might look as if it is the spot where anything that doesn't have a home is shoved, but in truth it's where all the really good stuff gets put to age. As seasons and styles shift across the aisles, all the leftovers get cheaper to encourage sales, the longer it sits, the cheaper it gets, and the bigger the store the easier it was to hide. It was generally an unspoken agreement that you only pulled out what you put in, but there was no helping it if a customer managed to sort out your faves, and since this wasn't my store, today I was a customer. I had managed to score a two year old, but timelessly styled, hundred and eighty dollar wool pea coat for fifteen bucks by poaching in this manner once.

Waving Allison over to what appeared to be a bunch of hideous madras tents, She took one look and said "I don't care how cheap those are, I'd rather wear my pee pants."

I moved the crap out of the way, only to reveal a collection of mini skirts, embroidered and quilt patched jeans, stretchy long sleeved v-neck sweaters whose thin material gave out an inch or two above the waist to leave a little bit of midriff exposed, vertically ribbed cotton camisoles, and nearly see through extra long layering tees with large floral patterns died into them. All of it was in pinks and whites, with the exception of the jeans, but someone had good taste. It was almost a shame to pilfer the stash, but almost everything there was Allison's size, so she scurried off with the majority of it bundled in her arms to make her assault on the changing rooms while I searched on in hopes of finding an elfin sized deposit. When I finally found one, it turned out to mostly be crap, so I just left it be, and went to see the fashion show.

She was already out and wearing the jeans and one of the white and pink patterned translucent tees which spilled down past her hips. Her beige bra was clearly visible underneath. "what do you think?" she asked.

"Well, you either need another layer on the top, or something else, but I like the way it goes with the jeans to show off your waist and hips." Smiling broadly she spun and pulled on a cream colored sweater, and I realized she had already decided this was the outfit she

wanted, but she had gotten me to say she needed another top in order to weasel past my one top, one bottom limitation.

Sighing I said "give me the tags so I can go pay, and you put the rest back."

"That won't be necessary." The attendant said.

"Do you know whose stash it was?" I asked her.

When she nodded, taking the hangers from Allison, I told her "tell her thanks for me, and let her know there's still at least three pair of the jeans left in [my store]."

Tags in one hand, jersey and shorts in the other, she skipped happily along like a kid with a new toy, her attitude as completely transformed as her outfit. She chirped along beside me about what we should do next. Checking the time stamp on the receipt, I informed her that we had to pick up Rachel in an hour so her idea of going to the movies was out.

"Let's just go to the bookstore then!" she said obviously trying to pander to my interests rather than hers.

It was just a couple of stores down so we dropped the bag with her jersey into the trunk of the car and then wandered over and into the coffee bar that was conjoined with the bookstore to get a pair of frou-frou-she-she drinks that were almost more whipped cream than coffee.

She followed me over to the area where the meager collection of manga was kept. I picked out a couple volumes of a series I had at home but liked reading over again periodically, and she picked out some god awful romance where every girl's eyes exploded with sparkles and every boy was basically a girl without a halo of sparkles.

We found a loveseat with a table in front of it for our drinks and got busy wasting time. It wasn't long before she dropped the book onto the table and tucked her feet up into the chair so that she was leaning up against me as she sipped her coffee.

I felt more like a prop than anything else, but the day had held so much tension that I wasn't really able to focus on the pages I was slowly flipping through anyhow.

'Be honest' kept bouncing through my head. 'What does that really mean?'

I thought, 'right here and now, I'm happy, I'm comfortable.'

'No,' I countered myself, 'I am comforted. If she wasn't here with me, I would probably be worrying about everything.'

I shifted the book into my other hand and wedged my arm behind Allison's back, so that I could reach up to run my fingers into the somewhat shorter hair on the back of her neck. Where my fingers touched her, I could feel her arching into it like some old tomcat would do.

She sighed, and shifted so that she could wedge herself completely between the arm of the chair and my lap, where she lay her head down, curled up in a fetal position like a kid would do. This was of course a ridiculous thing for her to do, but completely Allison nonetheless.

This huggy, snuggly, cuddly, affectionate side of her was nothing new, but usually was held in reserve to a greater extent when in public. Not having come from a family disposed to great amounts of physical displays of affection, it had been off putting initially when we

had played together as children, but perhaps that is more a reflection of the isolation of the only child than over exuberance on her part.

Over the years, more than just merely becoming accustomed to her propensity towards skintimacy, I had actually grown to be as comfortable with initiating it as I was with reciprocating. 'What would someone who didn't know us think?' I wondered lazily as I slipped my hand up underneath her sweater to scratch at her back through the material of the shirt underneath.

Her hands, sheathed in the sweater sleeves were wrapped around my thigh, one wedged under her cheek, and the other wedged between the seat cushion and the thin material of my skirt. 'Do -friends- have these moments?' I grinned as she let out a soft groan. I had poked my fingertips, and the shirt's material, up under her bra strap so that I could get at the skin underneath with my nails. This was -the- spot, had been ever since we had started wearing bras, which she had needed, while I was just noisily jealous until my mother had relented.

'What's so bad about that?' I repeated the question to myself. 'Be honest' bounced back across my brain. I pulled my hand back out from under her sweater and rested it on her hip.

'Well, there's kissing...' I realized I had stopped flipping the pages with my thumb, and started up again.

'Who did you think you learned about kissing with then?' I felt the familiar burn of a blush rising from my chest.

'And being naked.' The blush began to climb up my neck, groping towards my cheeks.

'You mean like the dozen or so times you've showered, or changed clothes together in the last month alone?' I was beginning to wish Rachel had just kept her fat mouth shut.

It wasn't really a surprise when Allison reached out and spread her sweater clad hand in front of my book. She had always been more of a 'girl doing' than a 'girl being'. Now that we had put coffee in her that would only be on the increase.

'And then sex...'

I smiled sweetly down at her and set aside the book in favor of the coffee. "So," I said, "what's next?"

"How much time do we have left?" she asked while pulling at the waist of her shirt in order to dislodge it from under the bra strap.

I pulled the sweater back on her arm to expose her watch and checked the time, "Thirty minutes. Wanna just head that way?" I asked, to which she nodded vigorously and bounced up off of the seat. We finished our drinks outside the store because my car had been built before the invention of cup holders.

Heading back to the car, Allison, still chirpy, trotted ahead of me some ways, and I noticed again how good she looked in the new clothes. I saw, as if with new eyes, the many ways that Allison as she was before me today, was quite apart from how I pictured her in my mind. Her athletic nature had given her slightly thick but shapely legs which were defined by her muscles as they worked. Her hips were not fat, but wide, and without them she would have nothing to hold up her pants, because she had barely any butt to speak of. None of this sounds very flattering, but it came together in her to create a figure that screamed 'I am woman' and she truly was beautiful.

I made my way carefully back to the J.C., all the while I got the definite feeling that if it had not been for the disparity in the position between the driver seat, and the combination passenger plus hump seat, she would have been leaning on me just as she had in the book store. I was glad that she was happy again, and even happier that it hadn't broken the bank. There was a real give and take in our friendship though, and I knew that the favor would undoubtedly be returned at some point in the near future.

We found a spot in the lot close to where we had dropped Rachel, I rolled the windows down and then hopped out. Allison had already seated herself on the hood with her heels dangling past the bumper, and was beckoning for me to join her. I sat on the hood between her knees and propped my feet on the bumper, allowing her to wrap her arms around my shoulders and pull me back so that I leaned against her with my head nestled under her chin. It was quite nice to be perfectly honest. Besides which, I knew better than to make her chase me down when in a mood like this, she had at least twenty pounds of muscular advantage over my clumsiness, and her glomps could be brutal.

'What's so bad about this?' I relaxed back against her, hooked a hand in the crook of each of her elbows and closed my eyes. 'Nothing whatsoever.' I smiled, and let my head loll to one side. Allison's cheek was warm against my ear despite the hair between us.

"You really do spoil her you know." Rachel tsk-tsked at us as she walked up to us where we sat against the hood of the car in the parking lot. I felt the blush rise immediately to my cheeks. "Looks good though, who picked it out?"

Allison immediately piped out that I had been the one to select the outfit, almost making it sound as if I had also personally put the clothes on her.

"So did you guys work some stuff out?" Rachel asked.

I looked sheepish. Allison coughed. The ride back to town was quiet, slow, and awkward.

Standing in the corner of the Brooks' kitchen where the old wall hanging phone guarded against the insidious threat of technological advancement in the passing of time, I punched out my number into the keypad with a hand already wrapped nervously in the absurdly long pigtail cord.

"Moshi moshi"⁵ my mother answered the phone in a sing-song way.

Despite the sixteen hour time difference which made it only about nine in the morning in Japan, my mother must have been expecting a call, or she never would have answered the phone that way. My mind raced as I made the connection that this probably meant someone had already called her. "What's happened mom?" I asked, feeling suddenly panicky.

"Nothing has happened Nanami-chan, I've just been talking with your aunt is all." she said soothingly.

"How is she?" I asked.

5. Moshi moshi is used as a greeting when answering the phone, there are many interpretations of its origin, but the one I like best is that it is an abbreviation of Moshimasu moshimasu, which means "I am going to speak, I am going to speak." Currently it is used as if to say "Hello, is someone there?" and can pop up in daily conversation, as a way of making sure that the person you are talking to is paying attention, or to express incredulity. See http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/moshi_moshi for a less extensive explanation.

"She is okay, but anxious to have us there."

"Have you talked to dad?" I dreaded the answer.

"Yes, you have no need to worry."

"Great, cause the Brooks are all coming over. Um, what are you making for dinner?"

"Nanami, we are just as worried about making the right impression as you are."

"Mom, Allison's little sister Ellison is going to be there too, I need to know what to warn her about."

The story goes that when Allison had been born, they had deliberately not chosen a name until after she had been born, I'm not entirely certain why; but when they had handed her to Mrs. Brooks for the first time, she smiled down at her and said "Indigo Allison Brooks" a few times before falling asleep. Mr. Brooks had saved Allison a lifetime of teasing by registering her birth certificate as Allison Indigo Brooks. It had worked out well enough the first time so they decided to do it the same way again. This time, Mrs. Brooks had said "Oh my beautiful Allison Indigo". And I think you can figure out the rest.

"Oh, well, your father is bringing home sushi⁶ from the city, so I'm making miso shiru⁷." She said as I wondered why she thought I would object to that.

"Oh! Ask him to get me a natto-maki⁸ and some tamago⁹. Do we have the stuff to make burgers just in case?"

"I think so, let me look." I listened as she rattled off what she had on hand "onions, tomatoes, eggs, meat."

"Don't use eggs Mom, actually, just let me make them if we need to. What about buns and cheese and lettuce?"

"Oh, no we don't have those." she admitted, not surprising me in the least.

"I'm gonna bring Allie and Ellie over with me now, do we need anything else from the store?"

"Cokes, and maybe rubber bands, do you have money?" she asked.

"I should have enough mom, why do you need rubber bands?"

"For their waribashi¹⁰."

6. Sushi is a traditional Japanese food mostly composed of rice and raw fish. There are many subtle varieties in the making and serving of sushi, which I will not go over. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sushi> for a more extensive explanation.

7. Miso shiru - Is a traditional simple soup which is a staple of the Japanese diet, See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miso_shiru for a more extensive explanation.

8. Natto is fermented soybeans which have a sticky consistency and a pungent smell, maki means roll, therefore Natto-Maki is a rolled sushi using Natto as the main ingredient. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natto> for a more extensive explanation.

9. Tamago literally means egg, but specifically refers to Tamagoyaki, which is a sweet egg cooked similarly to an omelet, and rolled up before slicing. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamagoyaki> for a more extensive explanation.

10. Waribashi are disposable chop sticks usually made of cheap pine or bamboo, and usually sheathed individually in a paper package. Generally speaking, these are used when eating take-out or in a restaurant, as most people would not bring their own chop sticks with them everywhere they go. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waribashi> for a more extensive explanation.

"Ahhh... okay, we'll be there shortly."

As I hung up the phone three sets of eyes were carefully studying my face for clues as to what to expect. Embarrassed at the sudden rapt attention, I felt my cheeks flush, but it was Mrs. Brooks who broke the spell by asking "Well are you going to warn us or not?"

I nodded, and started spelling it out for them, "My dad is buying sushi, and my mom is making a soup to go with it." looking across their faces was like reading a set of flash cards, Mrs. Brooks was relieved, Allison was eager, and Ellison's crinkly nose gave her look of dread a tinge of disgust.

"Raw fish?" Ellison asked dubiously, "that's why you're gonna make burgers right?"

Allison jumped right into teasing mode, "no way scroat! The burgers are for them cause we're the guests!" at which I slapped her shoulder.

Mrs. Brooks chided her daughters, "Allie, don't call her that. Ellie, Don't believe your sister, Nanami will help you pick stuff you will like." Which sent both girls poking their tongues out at each other. Turning to me she said "Don't let them get away with anything, they are to be polite and helpful." Then she faced her two girls again, "Nanami is in charge, you do what she says, I'm gonna start getting ready." She started to walk off but turned just in time to catch me poking my tongue out at Allison and Ellison, "almost forgot, what time?"

"Oh, anytime after seven-ish should be okay." I told her thinking that would give us two hours easy to get everything ready.

She nodded and winked conspiratorially at me before pointing a warning finger at her daughters, and then walking off into the interior of the house. Almost immediately Ellison started bombarding me with questions, so Allison and I just herded her towards the door, promising to tell her all she needed to know in the car. If we went over it all before leaving, we'd never get there.

Once everyone was situated, I held up my hand and said "let me tell you everything I can think of first, then you can ask questions, okay?" to which Ellison echoed 'okay' as I began navigating my way to the grocery store.

"First off, If they offer you anything to drink but coffee, tea, or coke, don't take it, you won't like it, I promise."

"Unless its milk, you still like milk Ellison," Allison chimed in.

"My mom only keeps soy milk, she won't like that" I said while shooting her a warning look.

"When they offer you tea, always accept it, smell it, say thank you, and then let it sit because it will be too hot to drink right away, even if you blow on it. Make sure you at least take a sip when it cools down, it won't be sweet, but it won't be bitter either, more like nutty, and you don't have to finish it but you must at least taste it."

"Or else it's a horrible insult, and you have to commit seppuku¹¹." added Allison.

"What's that?" asked Ellison.

11. Seppuku was a form of ritual suicide that involves cutting the squishy bits of yourself out with your own sword. I don't recommend it. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seppuku> for a more extensive explanation.

Before she could launch into the gory details I clapped a hand over Allison's mouth, which produced a giggle from Ellison. "It is a way to kill yourself, nobody does it anymore, and you wouldn't do that over tea anyway."

"Oh..." Ellison said, and then popped her sister in the back of the head.

"You deserved that..." I warned Allison, before she could escalate hostilities.

"When you sit at the table it's okay to sit Indian style, but keep your knees underneath. Don't ever leave your utensils in a dish, watch where I put them when I set mine down. There will be a spoon with the soup, you can use it if you want, but it is also okay to drink it from the bowl it's served in, that way you don't have to put down your chopsticks. Don't worry we're gonna make you some cheater chopsticks¹². You will like the soup, it doesn't have any fish at all, just tofu and a few greens."

"Good cause that soup your mom made that one time was, Ugh... I can't eat anything that is staring at me." Allison pulled her eyelids wide with her fingers, and sucked her cheeks between her teeth to approximate the fish head she had found so offensive. This of course made Ellison giggle again.

"Before you start eating, you put your hands together like you are praying and say 'Ih-tah-dock-eee-mas' all run together to sound like Itadakimasu, which basically means 'thanks for the meal' and when you are done you say 'Go-chee-soh-sama desh-tah' all run together to sound like Gochiso-sama Deshita, which basically means that the meal was delicious."

"And to say thank you you say 'Aaho unchi baka'" Allison said, exhausting her vocabulary of mildly naughty words. I laughed.

"Does that even mean anything?" Ellison asked me.

"Umm... basically it means 'Idiot poop stupid'. This time Allison ducked in time to not get smacked.

I coughed, and continued. "With the sushi, the rolled up ones are called maki, if it doesn't look like bright red or pink meat, it probably isn't raw, which doesn't mean you will like it, but if you decide to try it, you should only grab one at first, and if you can manage to, finish it even if you don't like it. Some will be spicy but most of it will be bland. The idea is to take your time eating it so that you can appreciate the flavors. If you're not sure, it is okay to ask first what something is."

"The green stuff is mint flavored..." was all Allison managed to get out before Ellison popped her in the back of the head again.

"Thank you." I said.

Ellison replied very primly "You are ever so welcome." while Allison began to sulk.

12. How to make good Cheater Chopsticks:

- a) Remove the sticks from the paper wrapping tearing the paper as little as possible.
- b) Pull apart the chopsticks so that the heads both have about the same amount of wood on top.
- c) Fold the paper in half length ways, and roll the paper up tightly as you would a tube of toothpaste.
- d) Put the paper roll between the chopsticks so that it is near the heads.
- e) Secure it all in place with a rubber band, making slightly more wrappings on the head side of the roll than on the tong side.
- f) Adjust the positioning for ease of use.

"The green paste is wasabi, and it is hot like the hottest horseradish you ever tasted. The pink stuff is pickled ginger, you may or may not like it, you don't have to eat either of them, but a lot of people mix a little wasabi into their soy sauce before dipping the sushi in it."

"The other pieces are called nigiri, that's 'nee-ghee-rhee' and for the most part they will be raw fish. Shrimp and crab is always cooked. If you think something looks like fish eggs you are probably right. The ones that look like a yellow rectangle on top of the rice are eggs, like from a chicken, that have been cooked, they will be sweet. If you decide to try the nigiri, you only dip the rice part in the soy sauce, and you put it in your mouth with the topping side facing your tongue. It takes practice to do with the chopsticks, so if you want to pick it up from your own plate with your fingers that will be okay."

"Okay" Ellison echoed.

"Our parents have to discuss some important things, so they will expect us to leave the room after we've eaten, even though it's mostly us that they will be talking about. At that point we can do pretty much whatever we want." and that brought us to the grocery store. As we got out of the car and headed in, I let them know I was done with my spiel "Okay... now we can do questions, one at a time."

Ellison went first, "Can we stay over?"

At that Allison gave her a little shove, "She's my friend, dork."

"She said we could do whatever we want, Hercules" Ellison taunted back.

"It's actually a pretty good idea. You'll have to ask your parents first though."

"What is Nado?" Ellison asked.

"Ahhh... that's my favorite, it's pronounced Na-toh with a pause between the 'Na' and the 'toh', and it's fermented soybeans. The trick is to eat it without smelling it, because it smells really bad but tastes really good. You can try it if you want, nobody but me will eat it."

"And tomago?" asked Ellison.

"That's the sweet rectangle shaped eggs I was telling you about. Good job remembering how it was pronounced though!"

"Do we get to wear Kimonos?" Ellison asked.

I couldn't help but laugh. "If I had one, I would let you wear it for sure, but the only one we have is my mother's, it's very expensive, and it would be a little too big for you anyway. We do have a few yukatas, which are similar, but lighter and made out of cotton for wearing during the summer. I'll show you the ones from when I was younger if you like, but they won't fit any of us. Nobody's going to be dressed up anyways."

The questions seemed to dry up there and so we finished the shopping and got back to the car in relative quiet as Ellison seemed to be mulling everything over. Once we were rolling again, she asked "Can we practice the before and after we eat phrases?"

I smiled and we rode the rest of the way to my house repeating 'lh-tah-dock-eee-mas', and 'Go-chee-soh-sama desh-tah' together, with Ellison picking it up a lot quicker than Allison had when we were kids.

When we got home, I parked the beast over it's customary oil spot, and tried to load the girls evenly with stuff from the store. Poking my head into the house, I called out "Tadaima¹³!" and started to toe off my shoes to put into the rack by the door.

My mother's answering "Okaeri¹⁴!" echoed from the general area of the kitchen. She had already set four pair of flip-flops on the floor pointing inward just past the tile of the entryway. There was no step up like there would have been, but the delineation was just as clear, and living in a western style house in America had made little impact on a number of customs we had brought from Japan. There was also a pair of larger, heavier sandals beside the door of each bathroom, and just outside the back door was another collection of flip-flops.

Allison, who was used to the drill, slipped off her shoes, and pulled her socks between her toes before slipping on her usual pair of yellow flip-flops. Noticing Ellison grimace slightly I told her "you can go in your socks if you want" taking the groceries from her.

When Allison and I walked into the kitchen, my mother was drying her hands on a towel, and she welcomed Allison with a smile, "It is nice to see you again today Allison, is your sister with you today? I had hoped to see her again, it has been a long time." Ellison stepped shyly around the doorway into the kitchen, her fingers twined behind her back. They both nodded and smiled at each other.

"Would you like something to drink? Should I make us tea?" my mother asked politely. "What about cake?" she winked at Ellison, who had begun to nod enthusiastically.

"Is there anything that still needs to be done?" I asked my mother.

She nodded, "You can help me put away the futon from the kotatsu, but that can wait."

I started putting away the groceries that we had brought with us as my mother went about making tea, and slicing a few pieces of a cake that she pulled out of the refrigerator. Once I was done with putting everything away, I pulled Allison away from her study of the pieces of cake, and into the living room to help me with the kotatsu. We pulled off the table top, setting it aside, then rolled up the futon, and I carried it into my room. Then we carefully set the tabletop back in place, and I removed the electrical cord from the heater underneath.

My mother then came in with a tray bearing the tea and cake, Ellison trailing behind her visibly chewing on what was undoubtedly some sort of sweet my mother had given her once we slipped out of the kitchen. She set the tray down and arranged everything around the table.

Ellison sat down at the table, pressed her hands together and intoned "Itadakimasu."

Clapping her hands together, my mother beamed down at Ellison and said "Aa sugoi! Anata wa Nihon-jin desu-ka? Watashi mo Nihon-jin desu." At this Ellison turned to me wide eyed.

13. Tadaima transliterates to "I'm home" but is used in a habitual manner, often even people who live alone will announce Tadaima into their empty home. See <http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/cgi-bin/wwwjdic.cgi?1MDJ%A4%BF%A4%C0%BA%A3> for a less extensive explanation.

14. Okaeri is a shortened, familiar version of 'Okaeri-nasai' which transliterates to "Welcome home" and is the habitual response one would make to the aforementioned Tadaima. See <http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/cgi-bin/wwwjdic.cgi?1MDJ%A4%AA%B5%A2%A4%EA%A4> for a less extensive explanation.

"Kaa-san, dameyo. Sore wa hazukashii." I turned to Ellison and said "she asked if you were Japanese, because she is also Japanese."

"And what did you say?" Ellison asked.

I blushed, "I told her not to say stuff like that because it is embarrassing"

"How do I say 'No, I'm American.'" Ellison asked.

"lie, watashi Amerika-jin desu." My mother sounded it out slowly for her.

Allison poked her sister, "If you're not careful she will make you teach her the whole language tonight" she warned.

"Oh, it's okay, it is good to be curious, they wait so long before they start teaching other languages here." my mother beamed.

As we sipped our tea, and ate our cake, we made small talk, punctuated frequently by Ellison asking my mother how to say one thing or another in Japanese. The time was pleasantly spent; our cups and plates were all too soon empty. When I started to collect up everything onto the tray, my mother sighed, and then stood up to precede me into the kitchen.

"Why don't you show Ellison into Nanami's room?" My mother suggested to Allison as she slipped out of the room.

"I will be in shortly." I promised them, then carried the tray out to set it on the counter in the kitchen. "So, what's wrong?" I asked my mother. It wouldn't have been apparent to most people, but I could tell from the way she had been acting with us in the living room that something was up.

"Oh, well, Nanami-chan, we have to go sooner than we thought. Your Uncle has to have some surgery done, and your grandmother has collapsed from worry. Sayuri cannot take care of them both, and your cousins, well, you know how your cousins are."

"How soon?" I asked.

"Your father will be flying out first thing tomorrow morning, and I will follow him as soon as you are settled, and our affairs are in order here."

"Wow, that is quick." was all I could manage to say.

"I know it may sound strange, but It would make it easier for him if you were not here to say goodbye to." my mother said quietly.

"So what? You want me to just go, and not see him at all tonight?" I asked incredulous.

"No, that is not what I mean. I just think that if you were to say goodbye tonight, and spent the night with Allison, it would make it much easier for him to leave in the morning."

"Ah, no, that makes sense in a dad sort of way." I sighed. "I'm sure that they won't have a problem with it. Allison has already decided I'm living with them no matter what you decide anyway."

My mother laughed. "She has always been very stubborn, like your father, I think." she sighed, "Ellison is a very good girl too, I think that you will be in good care with them." between us passed a rare moment of tenderness, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and hugged me for a few moments.

"Are you okay Mom?" I asked.

She sighed again. "I am going to miss you, that is all. I wish we hadn't left off trying to teach you Japanese, so that you could come with us and just finish school there."

I hugged her tight, not bothering to fight the tears that welled up in my eyes. "I love you mom, and dad too." I assured her, "we will talk on the phone, and I will visit, and you will visit, but I don't think I would want to move to Japan for good, even if I did fit in there."

"I know, I know, but you are my precious daughter, watachi no taisetsu hitorimusume." She squished my face in her hands and kissed my forehead before letting me go to wipe away her tears.

I wiped at my own eyes, and told her "No more crying, or the miso will be too salty." I smiled, and we both had a thin laugh at the joke. I stopped on my way back to my room, and washed my face in the sink, but the only thing that would give me away was a very mild redness to my eyes. I took a deep breath and held it, puffing my cheeks out, and shook my hands in front of my chest loosely, as one would do to awaken a limb gone numb, before quickly exhaling.

When I trotted back to my room, Ellison was on the floor, propped up on her elbows reading one of my manga, it was an older one I had found in a used book store so the paper was pretty crappy and had faded considerably, and the pages were all reversed so that it read like a comic book rather than a manga. Allison was curled up on the corner of my bed her back against the wall with her knees held up under her chin. She had an eyebrow cocked at me as if she were silently saying 'well?'

I playfully stepped on Ellison's butt before hopping up onto my bed. "Sorry kiddo, no can do on staying here tonight."

She rolled over and whined, "Aww, why not? Is it cause I was asking all that stuff?"

"Nope, not at all, I'm sure if you asked, my mom would take you back to Japan with her." I sighed, "It's just kind of complicated, so I'm gonna spend the night with you guys if that's okay."

Allison's eyebrow ratcheted up another notch, and she asked "Shouldn't you be spending as much time with them as you can before they leave?"

"Well that's just it, my dad has to leave tomorrow, and it would be better to say goodbye tonight." I tried to explain.

"That makes no sense whatsoever." Ellison pointed out.

Almost as if we were reading from the same script, I said "you don't know my dad." at the same time Allison said, "you don't know her dad, jinx."

I rolled my eyes and punched her in the calf, and she half-yelled "All right! All right! Nanami!" and laughed while rubbing her leg.

"So you guys gonna just watch, or do you wanna help me pack up some stuff?" I asked them.

"What do you want us to do?" Ellison asked.

"You can start by pulling the stuff I usually wear to school out of my closet, and folding them up so that I can put them into my suitcase, which I'll go get from the garage."

Allison hopped off of the bed and opened up my closet, telling her sister "I'll pick, you fold." which started a mini-argument I didn't stick around to follow. Instead, I poked my head in on my mother, who was drinking another cup of tea as she talked softly on the phone. I smiled at her and then ducked out to the garage to grab my suitcases.

They were a nestling set of three soft sided bags. All of them had rollers, and when you linked the three of them together, you could pull them along like a family of elephants holding each other's tail. This wasn't really feasible for regular use, and had held ample frustration for me when I had used them on our last trip to Japan.

Now those of you who have never had to travel abroad in order to visit family may not understand why there would be a need for three suitcases. Understand that when we made these visits, my father would fly there with me, and spend what time he could spare from his work visiting with his family, in whose care I would be left. Then, some time near the end of the summer, my mother would fly out and pick me up to spend two weeks visiting with her family.

With that in mind consider this, all young girls have necessities, and though toiletries are among them, they are not the whole of them. A favorite pillow, an important book, a stuffed animal, there is an endless variety of things that one cannot do without, and as her age changes so do these necessities. The smallest, innermost bag is solely for these. Then there is the middle bag to hold months worth of clothing to cover every possible need or occasion, with spares of everything to cover the inevitable losses. The third, and largest case would have a minor fraction of its space allocated to shoes, but the majority of it would be crammed with gifts, both going, and coming back.

I figured that now was as good a time as any to make a start in packing up the things I would want to bring with me to Alison's house. And so today we would put all three of the cases to use, It wouldn't take long really, as there was no need to make the various decisions on what to take, and what not to take, there would be time for that later. The essentials are quintessential though. Clothes, a girl has to have clothes to live, and all the accessories and accoutrements that make clothing into an outfit. I frowned, trying to figure out how much space I would be able to steal from Allison as I maneuvered the suitcases through the house towards my room.

"Okay" I announced "we're gonna start with the big bag, and work from there." I flopped it up onto the bed and threw the lid up, so that it propped against the wall. "I want the stuff I wear everyday in here first, and then we'll see where we're at."

Ellison started arranging the things they had already pulled out and set aside in the suitcase, and I turned to my dresser to go after the essentials, socks, tights, panties, bras (shhh! I don't want to hear it), pajamas, and whatnot else. With an armful, I turned back to the suitcase and then turned back to drop it all back into the dresser, as I sighed in exasperation.

I put my hand on Ellison's shoulder, and she stopped what she was doing. "Allison dear?" I called sweetly.

"Yes darling?" she said as she poked her head out from behind the sliding door that would cover either one side, or the other of my shallow, very non-walk in closet.

"What do you think you are doing?" I asked, with the sweetness of honey dripping from the words.

"Picking out the stuff you should wear every day, just like you said." She rolled her eyes at me theatrically.

I held up a top I had worn ONCE, it was a pale paisley print baby-doll with cap sleeves. The important element here is that while it is one thing to accept (albeit grudgingly, and with much chagrin) the fact that I have a body comparable to that of the thirteen year old standing next to me, it is quite another thing to -look- like a thirteen year old, which is pretty much what it accomplished. "What I said, Is that I wanted the things I -do- wear every day, I'm not a paper doll."

But you look adorable in that." Allison whined from inside the closet.

I rifled through the collected clothes, and picked out about a half dozen things I would never wear and handed them to Ellison, "here, try these on, and if you like them, they're yours."

Ellison began to protest "But they're..." but I held up my hand to stop her short.

"They're new, only worn once at most, and they'll just sit in my closet till they no longer fit anyway." One of the curses of working for a clothing store is that you never have too few clothes, because with discounts and promotions and whatnot, you end up buying many things on a whim, or out of wishful thinking. Most of my cast-offs were collected by my mother and either mailed to some distant cousin, or donated to charity, and I didn't mind that at all, but it would be nice to actually see some of it put to use.

Beaming, she worked through everything I had handed her like a quick change artist, only stopping momentarily to check herself in the mirror. Most of it was much more flattering to her than it ever had been on me, and by the time we had worked through everything I wanted to do without from both my closet, and my dresser, a good size pile had accumulated, worthy of its own suitcase.

In the end, we had filled the big suitcase with my clothes, the middle one with shoes and Ellison's clothes, and the little one was filled with miscellanea such as toiletries, make up, brushes, CD's, books, a couple of empty purses, bands and barrettes for my hair, and a dozen other marginally necessary things.

Another nice thing about the Thunderbird is that the spacious trunk, and stiff rear suspension meant that it was perfect for moving bodies, probably five or six at a time, and if they were big fat guys named Guido, you could drop the back seat forward and still meet quota. Not at all like those stupid Cadillac cars they use in the movies, where you have to wrestle two skinny guys into place and then you ride around looking like a low rider with malfunctioning hydraulic controls.

Just so you don't think I am showing my age, in the smaller of the two cities my town is nestled between, there is still (as of the summer of 2009) a drive in theater in operation, and it still shows a double feature on each of its six screens every night of the year, rain or shine. Since it was about 40 miles away, we didn't go often, but not once had the staff said a word about why two girls would need enough lawn furniture and blankets in the back seat for a half dozen or more people. We didn't even do the clown car routine because of money, but rather because the first time a big group of us had gone, I had jokingly suggested it, and Allison had then done what Allison does best.

So you should now understand what I mean when I tell you that after loading the suitcases in the trunk, we still had room for a small horse, not that the horse would be

comfortable, or that I had a horse. The other thing we had no more of was time, as I spotted my father's commuter car, a spartan Honda Civic hatchback come rolling around the corner onto the street. Oh, how I wished he had just let me have that car instead of this monster.

When the dinner had been demolished, including not one, but two burgers which I had whipped up for Ellison after she had seen the sushi being moved from their Styrofoam boxes onto the trays they would be served on, We three excused ourselves to go back to the Brooks' house.

My father popped up from where he sat at the table and asked "before you go, may I see you in the other room Nanami?" I nodded and followed him back into the room that served as a quiet place for me to study, or for him to work on stuff he brought home. He opened his briefcase and pulled a small but fat envelope and a small set of keys on a baby pink fob from his briefcase.

He held the keys up so that the label on the fob was hidden but the keys were obviously too small to belong to the Honda, or the Toyota Camry my mother drove around town. I put my hand over my mouth and said "no way" in a hushed voice.

"This is for you to drive, you've done very well with the Ford, so I think I can give this to you early." he set the keys in my hand and when I saw the label emblazoned in white across the fob I must have shocked everyone with my squeal of delight.

When I threw my hand over my mouth in embarrassment, I heard Mrs. Brooks and my mom laughing, and Mr. Brooks telling his daughters to leave us be. I had to ask him, I just couldn't believe it was true, "is it really a Vespa?"

He smiled a little wistfully and handed me the envelope saying "Here is the title to the Ford, and the paperwork on the bike and the trailer for it. The dealer will fix the T-bird so it can pull the bike and show you how to secure it. If you need anything done, you take the bike back to them and they will fix it for free, tires, oil change, engine work, anything."

"Good warranty" I murmured as I opened the envelope, and thumbed through the contents.

"And a house account" my father added "I won't have you being unsafe, so you have to promise to get your motorcycle license before you drive it." I nodded and pulled out a checkbook cover that had been hidden under some of the papers. Inside was a thin starter checkbook with about 10 checks inside, and two big brass keys, both stamped with 'Do Not Duplicate'. He coughed, "The round one is for our post office box, The square one is for the box at the bank, I removed your mother and my papers today when I set up the new account for you."

"But I already have an account of my own, and money too from my job." I protested.

"This is not your money," he said stiffly, "this is my money, and you will use it as I see fit, to take care of my daughter."

I smiled, tucked everything away, and threw my arms around his neck, he kissed my forehead and I sighed "I wish you didn't have to go".

"And I wish you didn't want to stay." He sighed. I popped up on my tip-toes and kissed his cheek.

"Oh, Where is the bike? I want to see it!" I chirped.

"Ah well, I couldn't bring it home, and so it has been waiting at the dealer, you can get it tomorrow if you want," he turned and pulled some photos from his briefcase. It was a gorgeous traditionally styled Vespa that could have come straight out of some old Italian film, if not for the perfectly delicious diagonal baby pink and white stripes that met in a series of points down the center of the bike. On the pale pink (presumably leather) seat sat a pair of matching helmets in the same pretty pink.

I said "I love it! It's so pink!" and hugged him again.

He chuckled and said "Nobody will be crazy enough to steal it," but I was already running out of the room.

I hunched down behind my mother, and waved the photos in front of her, and chirped "Look! Look what Daddy got me!"

She laughed, then turned and kissed my cheek, and said "I know, I was the one who told them to make it a pink one."

I hopped up and danced over to show Allison, and of course Ellison crowded in to see too.

"Wait, Is he crazy? Has he ridden with you in your car?" Allison asked a little too loudly, which got a few laughs from the table as Ellison punched her in the ribs.

I started pushing her out of the room as she started to protest "no I'm serious, this is a horrible mistake" etcetera.

Once I had her outside, I told her "Shutthefuckup or you're riding in the trunk." and then pranced inside to grab my purse, and wave to my dad. Smiling angelically, I said, "I love you Daddy, thank you so much, I'll see you later!" and then I trotted out of the house.

By the time I had the doors unlocked and was hopping behind the wheel, my hands had begun to tremor slightly, and the key took some convincing to find the ignition. When the engine had come to life and I threw it into reverse, I felt like someone was sitting on my chest. When I threw it into drive and started down the street, my eyes had started to well up. When I turned the corner, the first hot tears rolled down my cheeks and I bit my lip to hold back the huge wracking sob just hiding there behind the catch in my throat. As I dropped the car into neutral and coasted it to a stop, the first embarrassing trickle of snot slid down the roof of my nostril. Allison put the gear lever up all the way to park as my face fell into my hands.

I felt her get out, and flip the seat forward so that Ellison could climb up into the passenger seat. She opened my door, unbuckled me, slid the seat back, allowing me to tilt even further forward as I tried to suffocate the sobs before they could escape. She picked me up and slid me over into the center seat where Ellison lifted enough hair out of the way to buckle the waist strap around me, and then she wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and put her hand on my arm as I doubled myself into my lap.

Allison just drove, and when she didn't have to play with the gear shift, she had her hand on my back, patting or rubbing, and as I lost my way into a selfish oblivion of grief, Ellison

was there too, never letting go of my arm even as she alternated between stroking my head and squeezing my shoulder. Nobody said a word, nobody made a sound, except me.

I don't know how long we drove around, or what route exactly we took, but when I was all cried out, and had managed to clear my eyes, and nose, and throat, we were rolling to a stop on the street in front of the Brooks' House. I sat up, pushed my hair back, and managed a genuine smile for them both, even if my eyes and nose were reddened, and my face was puffy.

I grabbed each of their hands, and said "thank you, I'm okay now." at which they promptly made me into the gooey center of a Brooks sisters sandwich hug. Mock choking, I fended them off "Okay, okay! Enough!" and we all laughed.

As we pulled the bags from the trunk, Ellison simply said, "there's ice cream in the fridge, you know."

And I laughed out loud, "What? Did I just get dumped?"

"Fine then, I get dibs on anything with peanut butter in it." Allison went straight for the kill zone.

"The hell you do!" I shouted after her as she scampered off with the little suitcase, leaving Ellison and I to wrestle the bigger ones into the house.

"Do you -have- to sleep down there?" Allison's query came as she made one of the most adorable pouting faces I had yet seen from her repertoire. She was perched to look over the cliff face of the day bed's mattress at me down in trundle land. "what if I have to go pee? I'll probably fall all over you."

This was the standard argument whenever I had slept over, but those were one night affairs, and we had usually slept little on those occasions anyway. It was my hair really that was the problem, for some reason it fascinated her to no end. Granted it was as dissimilar to her wavy auburn locks as could be, but it was still just hair. As children we had of course played with each others hair, but with hers we could shuffle comb or pin, and come up with a dozen different looks, all of which she would eschew for a simple ponytail. My hair on the other hand only really had three options: cut, uncut, and tied up. I think we were five the first time she cut my hair, and if my mother hadn't fixed it before my father had seen, it probably would have been the last time.

Fine is not a word I would use to describe my hair, shiny, smooth, and thick all applied, but no word described it more accurately than straight. You cannot even say 'bone' straight as bones have curves to them. Once she had gone through tying complicated little knots in my hair only to see them banished by a night's sleep and a quick combing out. It also grew very quickly so there was really never harm done when Allison had gotten it into her head to try some new experiment on me. For the past few years though she had seemed content to let it alone. It had almost felt like a betrayal when I had to face her pouting after the last time I had cheated on her with a local hairdresser, so I had contented myself to letting it grow out.

At the moment it was about a month away from being so long that I would have to worry about sitting on it, which is about where I was planning on drawing the line in letting Allis-

on have her way with MY hair. It's not even as if this was an even sided arrangement, her hair hadn't hung beyond her chin since we had become freshmen. Her current cut looked to me more like an electrified q-tip than the A-line she claimed it was supposed to be, not that I would ever say so.

I leveled my finger up at her, "You, will leave my hair alone." it was not a request.

She moaned and flopped over on the bed above to whine "not even a little? Please?"

Laughingly, I admonished her gently, "what are you, five still?" And knowing the struggle was already mostly lost, I decided to offer a compromise: "five minutes starting now."

"Fifteen!"

"Two!"

"No fair! Okay ten, starting when you're under the covers."

I mock sighed knowing I had a much better chance of gainful sleep with her than on the rock hard trundle anyway. I held my hand palm up at the edge of the upper mattress, and simply said "Scrunchie?"

"No scrunchie!" she wailed, but I could hear her grinning behind it.

"You know you can't be trusted after your time is up." I reminded her.

"Fine, I'll grab one, you put that thing away."

And so I stood up to push the trundle back under the bed, while Allison picked out what seemed to me to be the most likely scrunchie to work its way free in the night.

She scooted toward the back trellis of the bed, and held the covers back as I climbed up in with her, setting my pillows next to hers. I had slept in the same bed with her enough to know that she had no trouble sharing a blanket, being more prone to snuggling than thrashing as she slept, but she tended to discard pillows in her sleep, so I would need my own supply. No sooner had I set my head down and turned away from her onto my side, when both of her hands were buried in my hair, stroking, combing, braiding. At one point it seemed like she was trying to wrap it around her own head. It was at about this time when I decided it had been long enough, and pulled my hair forward over my shoulder and trapped it in the scrunchie.

She sighed and dutifully turned over so that our backs touched, my butt seemed to fit perfectly in the small of her back, but if she found the warm closeness as comforting as I did, she only said "I'm glad you're here with me Mimi" using the nickname only she had ever called me by.

"I am too, Leilu" I responded with like familiarity. At which she half turned over and kissed the back of my head near my ear before settling back down. It wasn't long before I had fallen asleep. As expected at some point in the night her pillows had been flipped onto my head and subsequently the floor. At one point I had awoken to find her curled around me, both of us in a fetal position interlocked like puzzle pieces. What had awoken me though was the tickle of my hair in her hand as it worked its way up under the hem of my pajama shirt to brush against my tummy. Unsurprised, I merely tugged my hair free, then twined my fingers with hers, and pulled her arm up closer around me before returning to sleep; lulled by her reassuring warmth, and rhythmic breathing against my neck.

When I awoke in the morning to the noises of the house coming to life, and the smell of coffee, I found myself on my back, with Allison wrapped against my side. I realized that Allison's fingers had again found their way into my hair, but it was not the hair on my head. Her left hand had found its way past the protective barriers of the waistbands on the loose shorts and panties I was wearing, her fingers had tunneled into the depths of my foliage, and her fingertips were dangerously close to where no-man's-land began.

Sensing an opportunity to catch my unflappable friend off guard, being careful to not shift my hips any lest I lose my advantage, I shifted up onto one elbow and loosened my barely scrunchied hair to fall over Allison's face. Then I leaned down close to her ear, and gently whispered in what I figured was a very intimate way "Allie darling, wake up. It's time to wake up Allie dear."

I suppose I wasn't prepared for her reaction to my cooing when she turned her face up into the cloud of my hair and kissed me. When I felt her tongue hit my lips in search of passage beyond, I quickly pulled back in surprise. Her eyes shot open like she had been hit, and her hand whipped out of its hiding place like a child pulls burnt fingers from a stove-top. It was so comical, that I couldn't help laughing uproariously despite the shock I had felt the moment before. I fell back onto my pillows, and she unceremoniously pushed me off the bed with her feet. Poking my head back over the edge of the bed and grinning like I had made short work of the canary, I taunted her: "Is there something you want to tell me Leilu?"

"No!" she shouted as I ducked to avoid my own pillows as they flew at my head.

Possibly for the first time since I had become friends with her, she turned a deep scarlet, and bolted from the room and across the hallway into the bathroom she shared with her sister, slamming the door behind her. A moment later, lathery toothbrush in hand, Ellison was launched from the bathroom to immediately turn and scrabble at the locked door. As we heard the shower cut on, Ellison turned to me wide eyed and managed to convey that she needed someplace to spit.

Even though she was an inch taller than me, I said "Come on kiddo" and steered her by the shoulders toward the stairs leading down into the kitchen. She immediately turned to the sink and spat, eliciting a grunt of distaste from Mrs. Brooks.

Ellison whirled on me saying "What the hell was that?"

As I shrugged, Mrs. Brooks scolded her "language please, and find someplace else to do that, I'm cooking in here."

When Ellison had wandered off to finish up in the downstairs bathroom, Mrs. Brooks nonchalantly said "You two sure are noisy this morning."

"I'm sorry, I hope I am not a bother already." I apologized, finding myself instinctively bowing at the waist, Grandmother would have been proud I'm sure.

"Oh no, not at all dear," she assured me, "I just wish I knew how you did it, I usually have to bang pans together to get that girl up."

Barely able to contain my laughter, I told her "I think maybe I burned her hand." Which earned me a puzzled look as I turned to trot back up the stairs.

Pausing at the door to the bathroom I did my best cop-knock on the door, which earned me a surprised yelp from inside. Sweetly, I called through the door "want me to wash your

back?" which really was no big deal, we had showered together more often than I could recall, but after a moment of wondering if I had pushed her too far, I figured I would grab a bobby pin and force my way in past the simple vanity lock, but when I returned, it was unlocked. I slipped in and locked the door behind me.

I quickly stripped down and grabbed a scrubby and my little shampoo caddy, stepping into the back of the tub and hanging the caddy from the cord they had kindly dangled from the curtain rod so that I wouldn't have to climb in order to get at my stuff. Allison just stood under the water letting it flow over her head and shoulders, which were slumped in a picture of woe. I put a liberal amount of body wash onto the scrubby and tapped on her back so that she would back up a little. The back of her neck was as scarlet as her face had been, and the mottled blotches of red on her back and legs told me as well as the water around my feet that it was not the temperature that was the problem.

As I started to scrub her back, she stammered "I'm sorry."

"I know" was all I could say, now worried that I had hurt our friendship as well as her sensibilities.

"I'm sorry" she repeated.

"I know."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know."

"Mimi, I think... I think I love you."

"I know, I love you too Leilu," and I knew that it was true, I loved her, in a deep and subtle way, I loved her, I always had. Where I had failed my friend, was in not allowing myself to realize that the love we shared had always been more than what was shared between friends because, well I hadn't figured out why yet.

She got very still and very quiet, and I almost didn't hear her over the shower when she said "No, I think I'm -in- love with you Mimi." Somewhere deep inside I had known really, It was not something shocking or horrifying, I loved my friend dearly, and she loved me like she had no other.

I dropped the scrubby and wrapped my arms tight around her just under her breasts, pressing myself tight against my dear friend's backside and simply said "I know, I know." as I pressed my cheek between her soapy shoulder blades I felt her ribs heave with sudden sobs. I didn't know if she was wracked with remorse or relief, but as she worked through her tears, I felt tears of my own form in sympathy. While I wondered how long she had been struggling with this in silence, how long it had been tearing her up inside, her knees slowly gave way, and rather than try to hold us both up, I followed her in her slow descent to the floor not letting go of her as the tepid water washed over us from above.

After crouching for a while together on the floor of the tub, Allison let out a great shuddering sigh, and gave my hand a squeeze where it was pressing into her ribcage as I still held her tightly. "Come on, my turn now" she said as she started to stand up.

With her initial crisis seemingly passed, I was now very conscious of the fact that I stood naked, wrapped around, and pressing up against the girl who, also naked, had just professed her love for me. I knew in a moment that if I acted any different than I would have before her confession, she would see it as a stark rejection of not just her affections, but

possibly her friendship. It also struck me that only a day ago, I had never allowed myself to consider the idea of being 'pillow friends' with someone, let alone the possibility that my first true love just might be another woman. There was no denying however that I loved her, and I had no doubt that she had serious, romantic feelings for me. It amazed me how much strength it must have taken for her to make that simple statement.

Steeling my resolve as much as I could in the hopes that I could meet the high standard of honesty and openness that she had set, I took a deep breath, and gently let go of her. I gave her the freedom to turn about and look at me, to reciprocate the touch of my embrace, or to reproduce the intimacy of her nocturnal caressing. I didn't know what exactly to expect, but I was going to meet it with my heart and eyes wide open.

Turning sideways toward the curtain, she gestured for me to step past her into the spray of the shower-head far above. I immediately manipulated the faucets, bringing the water almost to a scalding hot level, as I knew was both our preference. She grabbed my shampoo from it's caddy, and squeeze a cold dollop onto the top of my head, then started to work it into a lather against my scalp. At my prompting she handed me the body wash, and I picked up the scrubby with my toes, and started working on cleaning everything I could reach easily. After she had worked the lather all the way down to the ends of my hair, I leaned forward into the spray feeling my hair slip down around my face to hang in front of me in the flow of water. I held the scrubby and body wash up at my shoulder for her to take, and she gently started to scrub the soap into my back.

I gave her a reassuring groan, for it really did feel like heaven to have her scrubbing away at the spots I often found just too hard to reach. When she was satisfied, I let the water rinse the soap off and then turned to face her. Parting my hair, and slipping it back over my shoulders, I looked up at her, and saw that she was fighting back tears again. Without hesitating a moment, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her again, pulling myself tightly against her. It didn't matter to me anymore that we were naked, for it only meant that she was as vulnerable as I.

When she pushed gently at my shoulders, I let her separate the embrace, and frowned silently at the gentle reproach I saw in her eyes. "You are not a lesbian" she had put it as succinctly as she could, and as was her nature, she was clearly using all of her hardheadedness to set this opinion.

I had only dated a few people, and none of them had been female to our knowledge. But as I have told you before, I was never really seriously involved either. So I felt confident when I turned it around on her "neither are you."

She frowned, and shook her head "no, I've never really been interested in guys at all."

Thinking back, it dawned on me that she was right, she had never confided a crush to me, she had never joined in with the other girls discussing who was hot and who was not. In hindsight, all of the attention she got from guys seemed to be one directional, but I had just subconsciously written it up to them not being good enough for my friend. "Do I have to be a lesbian?" I asked.

This seemed to perplex her, so I went on: "can't I love you without necessarily proving that I am a lesbian? Do I have to have a track record of dating other girls before I'm allowed to return your feelings?"

She shook her head again, "no, but, you don't feel that way about me."

I was dumbstruck. I had an urge to slap her, and to kiss her, to punch her in the arm, and to hug her tightly all at once. There's no way you can wake up one day and just say, 'wow, today I think I'll be a lesbian,' but what was the point of all that god damned 'honesty'? I had finally figured out something big, and beautiful, and apparently obvious to everyone but me. True, she was my best friend, and knew me better than anyone else in the world, but how could she just assume that I did or didn't feel one way or another? That was just too much.

So I just stepped out of the shower. I threw open the door to the bathroom, and walked sopping wet and naked as could be across the hallway and into Allison's bedroom. I yanked my suitcase from the back of her closet, yanked a wad of my clothes off of the rack, and threw them at the still closed bag. Allison, also sopping and naked, and Ellison, drawn by the commotion, stood gawping in the doorway. I gave a short frustrated half growled yell, and then kicked the suitcase up into the closet again along with the clothes, stomped over to grab Allison's wrist and yanked her into the room.

I turned back to Ellison, and bowed formally "please excuse the disruption" then closed the door to her.

I heard her thudding down the stairs wailing "Mom!" but so far as I know nobody came up to check on us.

Thank you Mrs. Brooks.

When I turned on her, Allison seemed ready to crawl inside of herself and hide. I strode up to her as if I were a samurai in full battle regalia. I imagined that I could feel the anger drying the water in my hair, and on my skin. The room had become a battleground, and it seemed as if she were determined to loose. My frustration welled within me, and even though I am almost a foot and a half shorter than Allison, I put my hands on her shoulders and gave her a great shove. The horror and hurt in her eyes tore holes in my armor of righteousness as she fell back to slump against her bed, sliding to the floor, looking for all the world as defeated and deflated as could be.

I stood akimbo before her, and glowered down at her as I rode the peak of my anger with my fists and teeth clenched tight. For the first time in my memory, I was so angry that I could not put together a coherent string of words, and as I quivered before her, I saw her eyes go from welled with wounded tears, to glossily dull. She had given up completely, and withdrawn to some state I had never before seen her in, and as quickly as it came I felt the anger drain away, leaving me hollowed out, and confused about all but one thing.

I strode over to her and carefully tilted her head back by her chin, and pressed my mouth against hers. When she opened her mouth to protest, I pushed my tongue between her teeth and closed my eyes as I attempted to radiate the warmth of love at her just as my anger had cowed her moments before. As I gently probed at her tongue and teeth, one hand found its way into her hair, the other to the gentle slope between her neck and shoulder.

It didn't take long before the undercurrents of lust she had been feeling toward me overtook her spiral of self pity and brought her rising against me. I could feel it in her mouth as she reciprocated the kiss, in the way her tongue sought out mine, and found its way beyond my lips. I could feel it in the way her muscles bunched so close beneath the surface where my hand rested on her shoulder. Her hand rose up to caress my face and then to twine in a greedy fistful of my hair. With her other hand, she found the delicately ticklish spot where

my hip meets my torso, and using it like a handle, she pulled me to her. I found myself settling astride her lap, face turned slightly upward toward hers, and then our roles were completely reversed, and she had become the warrior, and I was her conquest.

This was not the Allison I had gone to bed with the prior night, with her truest self chained up and locked away. This was not the Allison who had been mortified to find that she had done in her sleep what she never would dare when awake. This was not the Allison who had slumped dejectedly in the shower, nor the Allison who had been so sure that I was not capable of loving her the way she loved me. This was an altogether different person, who I had brought from the depths to shine in the light. She burned with such passion that she was radiant, and above all she was hungry.

There was little tenderness in those first moments, as she pulled my head back and leaned forward to bite and then suck at the tender flesh just under my jaw, along the side of my neck, down to my collarbones, and then as I arched against the hand she held behind my back, surrendering to her support and passion, she took my right nipple into her mouth and drew her tongue roughly across the lax surface of my aureole. She cupped the bud at its apex in her curled tongue and drew it to attention with gentle suction before pulling away. Her hunger then drove her to find a number of places just beyond the now crinkly brown circle that was my teat, where she roughly closed her teeth against the small rise my breast made against my now heaving chest.

Each breath she sent across the moistened skin there sent tingling shivers into me, quickening my breath into a rapid succession of shallow pants. The premiering of these new sensations within me served to encourage my nipple to contract further into itself to form a tight little knot of nerves as my head began to swoon foggily.

Under her ministrations, it was difficult to resist interfering to assuage the gentle ache within my tautening nipple, but I held out until she decided to switch sides. Only then did I reach up to tenderly pull at the tip to loosen the tightness gathered around it like a medieval army besieging a castle. I could feel Allison's lips curl up tightly into what was most likely a satisfied grin as she called the dispersing troops from my right side to rally on the left.

She radiated desire so strong it was a tangible presence in the room, washing like waves of electricity across my skin wherever she touched me. The room grew dim around us as the sun turned away from the sky, embarrassed at having intruded on that desire, but the light within her was growing exponentially as if the two of us together had found our critical mass. I found I could smell it in the air, the slightly musky pungency of my own need, mixed with a similar but distinctly different scent that could only have been hers. I was wet, inside out, and I knew that my Leilu was too.

Behind her head, my fingers locked together and I pulled my face back to hers, pleading with my eyes for what I knew not, but eagerly ran toward. Breathing heavily, eyes half closed, I held my face so close to hers that I could feel her eyelashes as they brushed against my cheek but it was her lips that made the journey between us, and when she found my mouth already half open, she pulled my lower lip between hers and I felt her teeth as they clamped around my lip just a half shade from causing pain.

I felt her hand loosen from my hair as I pressed myself forward into her embrace, the hand she had been bracing my back with began a wandering trail from my back down along my hip, and then around to cup my right butt cheek. It was with this hand that she lifted

me up to kneel over her lap rather than recline within it. With half lidded eyes, I watched hers dart away and down from my own. It was then that I felt the fingers of her other hand as they slid down and across my wetness. She didn't pull or probe, or tease me in any way, she just held me there, captive, like a mouse held delicately in a child's fist.

It was at that moment that my embarrassment found its way to the surface of this flood of passion. My hands flew up to cover my face, and I mewled a bit as I buried my face in her neck. Her hands, noticeably reluctant to leave their treasures, wrapped around my back, and she held me tightly. She nuzzled gently against my neck, and I yawped and wiggled as if it was the most ticklish thing ever. Then she gently whispered into my ear "Want to stop for now?"

Giggling a bit as I pushed back from her, I shook my head at her "no, don't stop," even though I knew that my own momentum was quickly dwindling. "I'm just nervous, that's all Leilu."

"I've never done this before, Mimi." She confided.

"Neither have I!" I laughed, as I let myself fall back to lie on the floor, almost immediately regretting the way it left me more exposed than ever, but Allison gave a grunt and flopped herself down onto her tummy beside me.

"You were going to let me... fuck you... weren't you?" she asked quietly.

"Not if I had to fuck you first." I jibed, as I jabbed at her ribs.

"So, what now?" she asked, sounding hesitant and mildly dissatisfied that the spell of the moment had been broken.

"Now, we get dressed, and we go downstairs, and we eat breakfast, and act like your sister is crazy." I stated, bringing our immediate surroundings back into focus for her.

"What about us though?" She wasn't going to let it go until I had placated her need for vindication. "What does this mean for us?"

"Can we figure that out as we go along?" I pleaded. "You were there right?"

"Yeah."

"Do I seem like the type of person who would fake it?"

"No."

"Do you need to feel how wet I am to believe it?"

She paused for a moment, and then grinning like the Cheshire cat said "Yes, I think I do!" which earned her a laugh and a good solid pillow to the face.

"I'm glad you're done being stupid then, now get dressed!" I pushed at her with my feet until she started getting up.

"I'm glad you don't hate me." she said.

"It's more than that you know." I replied as she stood over me offering a hand to pull myself up with.

When she uttered the simple "I know." Her face lit up with a smile so bright, so warm, so effused with happiness, that I found myself having to fight back tears of joy.

TEASER:

As she gently lay me back onto the soft downy comforter, her eyes ran over my body so greedily that I could feel them as they traced across my skin. I could see it in her expression that she was going to memorize every moment, to take every indulgence she could, just in case this never happened again. I managed to whisper out to her "please Leilu, be gentle", but there was no need to add that it was my first time.

She reached down between my legs and skipped right past the touches I expected her to use to explore my delicate areas, instead grasping my hips; she pulled me by the waist until I was pinioned with my shoulders against the mattress, and my butt rested against her chest just above her breasts. My legs had instinctively tried to wrap around her head, or to hook over her shoulders to keep me from sliding away and down, but the angle at which I was canted up from the bed made purchase impossible for them to gain. Grinning, she hooked a hand behind each of my knees and then folded them down onto my chest.

I was not comfortable physically or emotionally with the way she had chosen to bring this moment so fully under her control. It was clear, however, from the surety in her movements that she had put no small amount of thought into this moment. Held as I was, helpless before her, completely exposed, and utterly incapable of withdrawing from what was going to come next, I was effectively her captive. Worse than that I was positioned such that she would see every emotion as it flickered across my face, just as I would see as well as feel every detail of what she was doing. I knew that it would be unforgivable to cover my face with my hands this time, so I forced them to find her hands, and twined my fingers with hers where they held my legs in check.