

Hopper's Girl

By Samar Rita Fitzgerald

He was standing over the toilet with his legs parted, his eyes closed—a man enjoying a moment alone after a long car-ride with three females—when the bathroom door swung open. He scrambled to tuck himself in, fumbled with the zipper.

“Oops. Sorry, Dave,” she said.

She didn't hesitate with his first name. And she lingered a few seconds before backing out. There was time, if Dave wanted, to consider the fullness of her young face, the long sweep of hair, dyed a cheap shade of yellow, time even for his eyes to cast on the thin braid of purple string around her ankle.

Her name was Chrissie. She was his daughter's friend and guest for the week. Hannah had campaigned hard that year to bring her boyfriend up to the lake, but Dave and Mira had said no, maybe next year, sixteen was too young for that. First though, they'd argued about it, he and his wife. Mira said that if Hannah had a penis then Dave wouldn't be making such a big deal. He accused Mira of encouraging their daughter to be reckless. Besides, hadn't he been a reasonable father? When Hannah turned seven and Mira took her to get her ears pierced, didn't he keep his mouth shut? When she was fourteen and came home with her stomach red and puckered from a new tattoo, didn't he join Mira and act nonchalant? Yes. Yes. Was it too much to ask for one more year at the lake before he had to worry about his daughter in the room next to his, doing whatever it was she was doing? It was not.

And so, instead of the boyfriend, who peered down at Dave under a nest of dirty blond hair, mumbled bland hellos and goodbyes, there was Chrissie—brazen and flirtatious, not exactly pretty but a girl, he could tell already, who instinctively knew how to get men to notice her and also, Dave imagined, what to do with them. A loose girl, he thought, with little judgment or feeling. In his day, that is what you called such a girl.

She wasn't a close friend of Hannah's. At least, not an old friend. He had seen her only once before today. It was still spring, a school night for Hannah. The doorbell buzzed unexpectedly during dinner. Dave answered and found himself standing before a young stranger; her eyes red and puffy, her lips swollen with grief, but still nothing timorous or shy about her. She stood with her right leg cocked and greeted him with one slow shrug of one shoulder, then asked for Hannah. His daughter appeared instantly and ushered Chrissie upstairs, where the two of them vanished for the night. Hannah reported back later that her friend had been through a "terrible breakup." Perhaps he should have felt sorry for the girl—he wasn't beyond remembering the ache of a high-school romance—but there was something maudlin and false about her, he was sure.

"What about Allison?" Dave had asked, when Hannah announced her guest a week ago. "Didn't she have fun with us last year? You guys are still close aren't you?"

"I guess. I just felt like someone new this year. You'll see. You'll like her, Dad." And she smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

Although he and Mira had clearly said, "We think you're too young have a boyfriend up to the lake," Dave suspected that Mira told Hannah, on the side, maybe on one of their shopping trips: "It's your father, not me. I'd be okay with it."

He should think of Chrissie then as Hannah's blithe revenge. This was how his daughter handled him, rather ingeniously. She was not a teenager who'd turned surly with bad skin and an awkward figure. She never raged and skulked off to her room to curse his name in some closely guarded journal. Not as far as he could tell, anyway. If she defied him, if she challenged him, she did it smiling, she did it right in front of him.

The door closed behind Chrissie, and Dave finished buttoning his shorts. He looked out through a small porthole above the toilet, facing a large grove of leafy trees. Where they lived, in New Jersey, wooded tracts were rarely more than the width of a highway median, but up here the foliage was dense and even gnarly, especially as you moved close to the water. Although he'd inherited the bungalow from a distant relative, Dave believed he would have chosen this exact spot to summer. The house seemed to fit his family: two bedrooms, a small reading room for Mira near the entrance, a shallow loft for Hannah to watch movies, and a long and narrow kitchen for himself, the cook—one step and a pivot brought him within arms' reach of anything he needed. The property backed up to an inlet, with a few neighboring cabins on either side, none of which were visible from the bungalow's windows. From inside the bungalow, one could see a small meadow, trees, the unpaved driveway, and pieces of the lake. True that these views were not as impressive or grand as the landscapes of the northwest—a friend of his had just bought a ranch in Montana—but it all felt pleasingly simple and timeless, less boastful.

He opened the porthole and luxuriated a minute in a warm breeze. When he stepped out, Chrissie was leaning against the wall, waiting. She smiled matter-of-factly.

“Oh,” he said, and held the door for her. She slipped by. He smelled her perfume, and his chest tightened, an unbidden hot flare beneath the skin. The smell was familiar,

he realized: soft, sugary—exactly like the potion in the tall frosted bottle that his daughter and Mira liked to share. He imagined Chrissie dipping her hand into Mira’s toiletries and pilfering a drop. Or more probably, he had to admit, maybe Hannah had simply offered it to her.

He could hear Mira in the kitchen. He found her pulling plates and bowls down from the dusty cupboards to soak and rinse. It had been less than an hour since they’d arrived but already she’d changed into her swimsuit, a sporty blue one-piece. His wife was a tall and lean brunette who ran eight miles a day, five days a week. She’d always been slight, but she was even thinner now than when she and Dave had started dating twenty-two years ago. She walked around the kitchen in nothing but her suit—no khaki shorts, no matronly wrap—with the unselfconsciousness of a professional swimmer.

She stopped moving and looked over her shoulder. “There you are.”

Her face was mostly strong, angular features: a narrow chin, a long imperfect nose. “She’s so striking,” Dave’s sisters had said, genuinely, after they first met Mira. And they were right. Depending on the angle and the light, Mira’s face could be lovely or it could be cruel. He was no expert, but he’d always thought Edward Hopper would have liked to paint his wife. Except Mrs. Hopper had placed the artist under strict orders to paint no one but her. Dave had learned all about it from an art history major he’d dated in college. Not that long ago, there was a temporary Hopper show in New York, and one of his company’s international clients had asked to go. Dave followed the client from canvas to canvas. With the exception of small differences in hair color, age lines, and the shape of the nose, the exhibit seemed to present the same female, over and over. He thought

about that still. How the intensely distracting secretary in *Office at Night* and the withdrawn, contented figure reading in *Hotel Room* were really the same person.

He opened the silverware drawer, pulled out handfuls of forks and knives and carried them over to the sink. Mira started filling the old white basin with hot, soapy water. He watched her. The truth was she had become striking in a different way. Her skinny arms were sinewy, her face was gaunt—her cheekbones more salient. She looked great, everybody said so. The running. The hand-weights before bed. But he couldn't help thinking: more severe than striking.

“Where are the girls?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Unpacking?”

“Oh? I thought I heard them leaving out the back door.”

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “Is that so?” he whispered into her ear. She laughed softly and brought her shoulder and head together, tickled.

“Day-ave. Help me dry these.”

He did as he was told. He found a roll of paper towel in one of the boxes Mira packed for the week and tore off several sheets. His wife handed him clean dishes.

“You ever meet her parents?” he asked.

“Whose?”

“Chrissie's. Who else?”

That morning, when they had picked her up at the start of their trip, she was waiting for them outside. She was lying on the front steps with a big purple duffel bag tucked under her head. The driveway was empty and the house behind her was dark,

although it was early, and gray, and the world on the precipice of rain. She pulled herself up and shuffled sleepily over to their car, her hips swaying even in her somnambulant state. She was wearing little black cotton pants—they looked like pajamas bottoms—folded so low it seemed doubtful she'd bothered with underwear, and a band of yellow, glittery material across her breasts. In the backseat, Hannah was asleep with the hood of her sweatshirt drawn snugly around her head. “I mean, did anyone call you to make sure we weren't psycho-killers?”

Mira shook her head.

“Don't you think that's a little strange?” he said. “How long has Hannah been hanging out with this girl?”

“They're not ten anymore. But—” She withdrew the plate she was about to hand him to dry. “Don't tell Hannah, Dave, but I don't like that girl. I don't know what it is. No...I do know.”

Don't tell Hannah.

In New Jersey, his wife and daughter were always leaving the house together. Mira never told him what the two of them talked about on their urgent missions to the mall or on their more venturesome excursions to flea markets along the Pennsylvania border. They'd disappear for hours on a Saturday afternoon, tooting the horn for him as they pulled out of the driveway. While they were gone, he mowed the lawn, fixed lunch, read through back issues of the paper. Eventually he'd drift into the narcotic influence of a nap, come to at the sound of the garage door opening—and find that the light in the house had grown thin. Then Mira and Hannah would appear at the foot of the bed, carelessly dropping their shopping bags and collapsing alongside him before scurrying

off again to try on their purchases. They'd returned two, three minutes later, affecting model pouts and struts.

"Twirl ladies," he'd say, and they'd laugh. Mira'd extend her hand. Hannah would take it, turning once under her mother's arm. When this happened, he was not one of them, he was an outsider looking on, thinking: the daughter looks so much like the mother!

Hannah had the same oval face, the same nose, the same chestnut shade of brown hair, the same height and natural leanness. Only she didn't have Mira's new severity, or Mira's tautness. But Hannah wore her hair long and straight, usually in a loose knot at the back of her head, just as Mira had always worn it before she cut it very short several years ago. "It's better this way, when I run," she'd explained.

It was not an ordinary resemblance. Sometimes, Dave caught Hannah entering or leaving a room and for a second—no, more—it was Mira. She was twenty-two again. He was twenty-five. Together they were remarkably good-looking, a couple so fresh-faced and attractive that older strangers at the supermarket sometimes commented. Once, Mira seduced him in the stairwell outside her apartment, with the sound of the neighbor's talk radio. It was unlike them, and he resisted at first. But her flesh was supple and soft to touch, like a ripe eggplant.

Who was to say what Mira made of the changes in his body—in his case, the shift had been from firm to less firm. A small bulge over his belt was there, and sometimes she'd acknowledge it with a friendly pat. Probably what bothered her more than the bulge itself was the fact that he wouldn't make much effort to change, the casual defeat implied.

“Mira,” he said, his voice softly scolding. “Don’t get mean. Hannah seems to like her. We should give her a chance.”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“You’re right. I don’t like her either. But what can we do?”

For dinner he grilled burger patties blended with parsley, Worcestershire sauce, and onions. Mira fixed a salad. The girls went for a walk and returned with a riotous bouquet, so big they needed to distribute it between three or four of the cheap vases they kept at the lake—daisies, sunflowers, wispy white stalks with dainty violet blooms. They ate on beach chairs on the dock, the sun slowly sinking behind the house, and the water around them turning still and dark as black felt.

Hannah talked to Chrissie about their local favorites, like the penny candy store and the bike path that meandered past the little town and right through a farmer’s raspberry patch.

“I used to love that candy store,” she said, with a wistfulness and nostalgia that struck Dave as new. Chrissie asked about a small boardwalk with an arcade they passed on their way up, the sort of place where local high school students gathered and made plans for the night.

After dinner they all left their dirty plates and silverware and took the old Bowrider with a mustard stripe (“It’s retro Dad,” Hannah had reassured him last summer) across the lake and into town for dessert at the ice cream bar. Mira asked for one small scoop and added a single cherry. Dave and the girls piled their Styrofoam bowls high with gummy bears, warm fudge, peanut butter cups, cookie crunch, whipped cream.

The boy who rang up their order was a little older than Hannah and Chrissie. His skin was pimply around his jaw-line, where he had just started to shave, but he was good-looking, one could see that. Dave caught his eyes leaving the register to sneak a peak at Hannah, who was attempting, with her tongue, to stop a cascade of fudge and candy from dripping down her forearm. Chrissie asked him if he lived here all year.

“Not any more. Starting college this fall.”

“But you grew up here?”

“Went to high school here.”

“That seems so weird,” Chrissie said.

“Bet you guys hate us tourists,” his daughter tossed out.

Dave picked up his smorgasbord sundae. The sight of it was making him sick now. “Come on girls,” he heard himself say. “Hannah, Mom is waiting outside.”

The first night at the lake Dave always slept poorly. So it was little surprise when he lay awake for two hours after Mira had started dreaming. Still, he heard something move in the den and then began to imagine that the girls had snuck out and taken the boat back into town, back to the pimply boy at the ice cream shop. Hannah wouldn't have risked it with Allison, but with Chrissie here he couldn't be sure. And Hannah would know how to ease the boat away, how to nudge it far from the shore before starting the motor. She could dock it in town no problem. He'd shown her everything two summers ago. He'd told her what parts of the lake to avoid—where the water grew shallow and rocky and

where packs of jet-skiers were likely to lurk—before he'd understood the real danger of Hannah on a boat by herself.

It was so quiet. Mira was sleeping sweetly. He couldn't even hear her breathe. He had stopped hearing the crickets. Occasionally, a boat passed the inlet, or a small animal rustled outside the window. A car drove by. Hannah and Chrissie were on the other side of the wall, sharing a queen bed.

He had grown up with four older sisters. They had taught him to cook. And to prefer red wine to beer. In his early twenties, he used to joke, especially on dates, "You know those stories about children raised by wolves? Well, I was raised by five women." The dates seemed to like this; they thought it was cute and a little sad.

He gave up on the idea of sleep, wandered into the den. Hannah's door was closed. Should he open it, make sure everyone's in? No, he would just go outside and check on the boat and that would have to be enough.

The floor creaked under his sneakers. Moonlight on the lake, the back of bungalow glowed like a soft nimbus. He stepped off the porch and followed the short path down to the water. He could hear small lake-waves lapping rocks, and he listened for the sounds of the Bowrider hitting the dock. When he saw it, perfectly, stupidly, where he'd left it, he stopped, thinking okay, now what?

He decided to stay. He dropped into the boat, retrieved four seat cushions, and made a bed of them on the wooden planks of the dock. He tried it out. Not bad. He would just lie there and number the stars and trace the rough edge of the three-quarter moon. He told himself to listen to the water, and the nearby meadow, until tomorrow arrived. Once

he had made this honest pact with himself not to wait for sleep, at around three or four in the morning, it finally came.

It was not daylight that woke him five hours later, or Mira's voice calling from the porch. Something was causing the corner of the cushion, the one under his head, to depress. He opened his eyes. In the foreground, a few inches from his face, he saw her big toenail, painted a metallic blue, and the purple braid of string. She stepped back. He pulled himself up on his elbow and blinked up at her. She was wearing men's boxers and a short t-shirt, without a bra. Her hair was pulled around to one shoulder. Her legs were shapely. Her full and happy tummy poked out of her t-shirt.

"I brought you this," she said, extending a mug with tiny sailboats on it. "Mira went for a run. She asked me to wake you if you weren't up by now."

The way she used their first names. "What time is it?" He was pulling himself up onto his feet, taking the mug.

She shrugged and looked out over the water, suddenly appearing bored and disinterested. "I don't know. Early. Too early for me."

"Not a morning person huh? Me neither."

"The bed's really comfortable," she said, turning back to him. "It's just—I'm not used to sharing it." She balled up her hands and tucked them under her t-shirt, exposing more of her stomach. She rocked back on her bare feet and dropped her head to one side.

A question, he thought.

Even if they had been the same age, she wouldn't be someone he would choose. He'd always preferred women like Mira, patrician some might say, a little aloof with strangers, a sexual energy and confidence that revealed itself later, with a blush. Perhaps

he was not like most men in this way but he could get uncomfortable with the brute, animal side of things, the more vulgar view of sex. Porn made him nervous. He didn't want to know other people's fetishes and perversions. And when he looked at his daughter and saw the perfect illusion of his wife some twenty years ago, and his thoughts strayed where they shouldn't—

“No coffee for you?” He made his way to the edge of the dock. He lowered himself and dangled his feet over the edge. Then he gestured for her to join him. “Please.”

She sat next to him, leaning back slightly with her palms flat on the dock.

“Mira is in such good shape,” she said. “Hannah says she's in better shape than anyone on the track team. And Hannah's good.”

“What about you?” he asked. “Do you play a sport?”

“Actually, I'm an actor.” She crossed one leg over the other and swung them together. The boxers rode high up her leg. He noticed a little dimple at the top of her thigh.

“Really? Hannah hasn't said. Were you in the school musical?”

“Yeah, but I'm not really a singer.”

“No?”

The sun was inching its way above the lake. She turned her head and squinted up at him.

“I've been in a commercial, you know. I have an agent.”

He suppressed a smile by squinting back. “That sounds like a very good start.”

“Do you really think so?” she said. Her earnestness surprised him.

“Sure. I do.”

That night Dave was so tired that he slept remarkably well. He woke up feeling young and weightless and began slowly, in the way it most pleased him to start the day: with coffee and wordlessness on the porch. In the late morning, he watched the news on TV and in the afternoon, he packed a lunch and took the boat out, grabbing at the last minute the cobwebby fishing pole that came with the bungalow and a little flask of wine. He knew nothing about fishing, and on this day, as with most days, he didn't even cast a line. But he was wryly amused by the idea of himself as a man who walked away from the afternoon with a fishing rod in hand.

No one said a word to him as he headed off. At the lake, they all observed a tacit pact not to interfere with each other for most of the day. Mira did her morning workout and then, typically, headed off to the market with a list of groceries that Dave clipped to the fridge. When she came back she sunned on the dock in her suit. On gray days, she retreated to the reading room with a biography, cocooning herself in the lives of great female athletes. Sometimes in the afternoon she'd browse antique shops.

Hannah and her guest—Allison, the past five years—usually swam in the lake, watched movies. There was no Internet connection in the bungalow—Mira and Dave had decided not to install one—but in recent years the girls were spending more and more time on the minuscule keypads of their cell phones. Their daughter, having absorbed her parents' habits, would also sometimes leave Allison and wander off on her own. Allison had understood the necessity of this and always brought her own stack of books. Dave could remember finding her alone on a rock a little ways down from the dock.

Chrissie, though—she seemed less comfortable on her own. She called friends on her cell as soon as Hannah left her. She tried to talk to Mira, or found Dave in the kitchen and offered to help.

A few nights after arriving at the lake, he had a dream. It was one of those dreams that take place on the thin, wobbly edge of reality. He knew he was dreaming, even though the dream offered familiar signposts. Mira in her running shorts and sports bra, drawing a bath. The cold tile of their bathroom in New Jersey. What was different maybe was the lighting, which was granular, a thing to touch.

In the dream, Mira is not feeling well. Dave is trying to help her out of her sports bra. Though she is ill, he is deeply aroused and starts kissing her, hard. He pulls back, to make sure she is okay, and sees that instead of kissing his wife he's been kissing Hannah. Which couldn't be right. So he starts kissing her again. She tastes and feels like Mira. He pulls back again: Hannah. He ought to stop, but he wants to keep going so much. Hannah is Mira. They look exactly the same, and if he wants one he must want the other too. That's nothing to wonder about is it?

He tried to shrug off the dream in the morning. But while he was drinking his coffee on the porch he decided he wouldn't go fishing that afternoon. Instead, he stayed in the bungalow, sent Mira out with a long list for the market, and embarked early on an ambitious dinner, thinking: spices, a blast of fiery flavors to blacken the mouth.

He was cracking eggs for the cornbread when Hannah popped her head in the kitchen to let him know that she and Chrissie had invited the boy from the ice cream parlor over for dinner. He wasn't sure when or how they had managed to extend the

invitation. Perhaps Mira had dropped them off in town yesterday before cruising her antique shops. A tiny triangle of eggshell fell into the batter, and he teased it out with the tip of a spatula. He nodded, that was all. The chef was too busy to comment right now. It wasn't a question, anyway. She simply had been telling him.

Closer to dinnertime, Hannah and Chrissie lurked around the kitchen, picking at cornbread crumbs in the pan and eating baby carrots that Mira put in a bowl with ice. He noticed that they'd dressed up a little. Hannah was wearing a solid pink sundress. Chrissie was wearing an impossibly short jean skirt and another tube top.

"I wish my father cooked like this," Chrissie said. "I mean I wish he cooked ever."

Hannah twirled with a carrot in one hand, held above her head. "It's my Dad's therapy," she said, with extravagant emphasis on "therapy." "Right dad?"

He gave her a weak smile, and her mouth closed around the carrot.

"Dave, maybe you can teach my dad. Robert so needs therapy," Chrissie said. Hannah chuckled. And then the two of them laughed uncontrollably.

The boy drove himself over. As the tires of his car crunched over the gravel of their driveway, Mira whispered in Dave's ear that afterward he was taking Hannah and Chrissie to a movie. Why did his wife treat him like a difficult, confining father when he was no such thing?

"What's his name Mira? Someone want to tell me his name?"

She shrugged. "Aaron."

They ate on the farm table in the den. Aaron sat between Chrissie and Hannah. He looked very deliberately at Hannah when she talked. Chrissie touched Aaron's arm

absently when he asked the girls about their school in Jersey. Mira, perhaps inspired by Hannah's dress, was wearing some dangling earrings and a little clip in her hair. Dave remembered meeting Mira's parents for dinner for the first time and drinking too much. She looked nice tonight; he loved his wife.

How ordinary everything was. The family on vacation. The dinner table with the mismatched plates. The noise of utensils. Their jaws working and the frantic movements of a fly trapped on the wrong side of the screen door. How ordinary, and how safe. He looked over at Hannah in her dress. He was going to let himself look at her through Aaron's eyes for just a brief second: her summer tan against the pink fabric of her dress, her young, un-chiseled arms.

His wife rescued him. "Dinner's good Dave," Mira said. "Maybe too spicy for me?"

Cajun red snapper, salsa, fried rice, jalapeno cornbread, and a hot Mexican chocolate cake for dessert—every tongue burned from the meal. Mira filled the water pitcher twice. But still the food was not hot enough for him.

The same dream again; he is kissing a woman that could be Mira or Hannah. The only difference is that he doesn't keep pulling away from the kiss to check.

"Does your Dad fish? Or your brothers? Do you have brothers?" He was holding his boat shoes over the path and tapping them to release small rocks and dirt, picked up when he anchored the boat on an undeveloped strip a few days ago and waded to shore.

She appeared to be heading to the dock to sun—she was carrying a towel and wearing that same jean skirt with a bikini top. A teeny pocket in the skirt bulged with her cell phone. She was the one who had stopped. She was the one who had asked first, without him saying anything: “Do you ever actually catch fish?”

He had said, “Almost never.” Then, for some reason, “I suck.” She had laughed at this and nodded approvingly. Now he wanted to say it again: “I suck.” Such an exuberant phrase, if you thought about it.

“I have an older brother,” she said. “But he’s crazy. I don’t know. Fishing seems boring.”

“Yes,” he said, straightening up. He was done cleaning his shoes, and he slipped them on. “I guess I like boring sometimes. But you should try it before you decide for sure.” It was one of those things fathers learned to say, but he knew she would take it as an invitation.

She shrugged, followed him down the path to the boat. “Okay. I’ll touch the worms, but don’t make me touch any fish. It’s gross when they start flapping around.”

He handed her the fishing pole. She took it brightly.

Once they had pulled away from the dock, and the silence between them felt awkward, he confessed, “The truth is, I don’t always do much fishing. I just—well, it’s just time alone. The fishing pole is a prop, you know, sort of like your phone. A security blanket.”

He was seated behind the wheel. She was kneeling on the seat to his left, facing the boat’s wake and watching the shore and the bungalow disappear from view. “But I use my phone,” she said, turning to him. “A lot.”

“That’s true.”

He shifted gears, picked up speed, and let the wind—powerful in their ears—take care of conversation. He decided to show her a long, narrow cul de sac of water, with an enormous weeping willow shading it. He looked over at her, still kneeling on the seat cushion and taking in the receding shoreline. He registered her breasts in the skimpy bikini top pressed against the seat, the backs of her calves slack, the little braid on her ankle. Her long hair whipped around like a yellow kite.

He would anchor the boat behind the curtain of the weeping willow. He would split his sandwich with her. After that, she would make it easy for him. She would unclasp her bikini strap without him asking. She would help unzip his pants. Her fingers in his hair as he touched her breasts. Her lips parted. Her neck arched. He allowed himself to imagine it all right then, without flinching. His mind rushed to embrace every detail right down to the sour, pithy taste of a terrible mistake when it was all over.

She touched his arm and pointed out an array of sailboats in the distance. He nodded and smiled. He wanted to tell her how grateful, how utterly grateful, he was.