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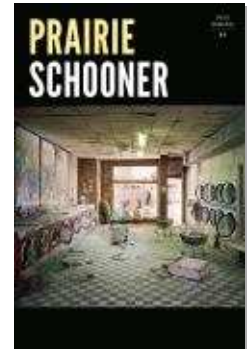
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Prairie Schooner, Volume 77, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 6-20 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: [10.1353/psg.2003.0041](https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.2003.0041)



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Sharon Oard Warner

Signs of Life

Surely this house is darker than most. The lack of light can be explained in any number of ways – small, recessed windows, for instance, or the scarceness of overhead fixtures – but Peggy prefers the mystery. Give her a simple answer, and she'll wave it away, reach instead for the improbable or even the impossible. In this case, she attributes the darkness of the house to the adobe bricks from which it's made. They soak up the night and release it indoors, so that instead of being a refuge, their home becomes a container. All of them – Peggy, Sophie, Ian, and Sophie's friend, Tamara – float in this dense, dark night.

Light a match, then, and you'll find Peggy treading slowly toward the bedroom, a slight figure weighted down with a bottle of rum, drifting in and out of all the rooms along the way. She's hoping to hide her burden, though not in the dirty clothes hamper, or inside the linen closet, or stuffed underneath the dog's bed – all too obvious. Briefly, she considers Ian's room, but her twelve-year-old son might come across it, and then what? Every gesture a mother makes is fraught with unintended consequences. She can just see him at an AA meeting twenty years hence: "Mother invited me to drink by hiding liquor in my room. She never loved me as much as she loved my sister, Sophie." As it happens, Peggy is too weary to outsmart her daughter, which means she'll have to sleep with the damn bottle. If Sophie ferrets it from under Jack's pillow, then perhaps she deserves a drink, despite the fact that she's so clearly underage. Sophie is precocious, dangerously so. At long last, Peggy's begun to realize this fact.

Upstairs, Tamara can't help it. She wants to call the 1-900 PSYCHIC number. She *needs* to call the 1-900 PSYCHIC number. Her whims have a short gestation period: within minutes, they hatch into de-

sires then metamorphose into needs. Tiny frantic moths, they flutter and dip around the girls' heads. Tamara is only dimly aware of wings brushing her cheeks, the way they tickle and itch. Sophie sighs then waves her hands in the air. "Get hold of yourself," she says sharply. Ever since her stepfather took off for Alaska, Tamara's been a real pill. It's a big mystery, Tom's leaving: not even Tam's mother, Lucinda, knows what he's doing or when he's coming back. In another year, they'll fish a battered postcard from the mailbox: depicted on the front will be a swatch of Alaskan wilderness, verdant but still somehow chilly, on the back, a scrawled message of apology, no return address.

Dressed in identical evening wear – extra-large white T-shirts stretched over their knees – the two girls perch on a mattress in Sophie's upstairs bedroom. Underneath her shirt, Tamara wears pink panties that are a little too snug and a bra at least one cup size too large. Despite Sophie's ribbing and her pleas to "get thee to Victoria's Secret," Tamara prefers to stuff. Like her mother before her, she employs Kleenex wadded into small uncomfortable balls that migrate toward her armpits as the day goes on. Sophie wears panties, too, but no bra. She keeps her sweet, sore breasts pressed to her knees. Somehow, the constant, gentle pressure calms her. Not surprisingly, she dislikes bras on principle and yearns for a chance to burn hers, though she'd only torch the white ones. It's disappointing to come of age in the new millennium; the new millennium is boring. No one does anything outrageous anymore; Sophie theorizes it has something to do with shopping malls, which enforce a kind of uniformity and anonymity. Even so, she visits Cottonwood Mall as often as any of her friends.

Just now, Saturday night is spinning into Sunday morning. The girls have been guzzling Diet Coke for hours, waiting impatiently for Peggy to go off to bed. Because they're at Sophie's house, Sophie is in charge of entertainment. Earlier, she promised Tamara a good drunk or at least one good drink, but that's not going to happen. Peggy's hidden the bottle of rum and no telling where.

"Please," Tamara begs. She's not above begging; in fact, she seems to enjoy it.

"We've been all through this," Sophie replies. *We've been all through this* is one of Peggy's retorts, and realizing this, Sophie wants to hit something. Never any good at impulse control, she leans across the mattress and jabs her friend in the shoulder,

knocking her off-balance, so that Tamara topples face-first into the mattress, a sheath of long blonde hair spilling across the spread. She might be a carnival target, that's how hard she falls.

Even so, she doesn't seem to notice she's been hit. "*Please, Sophie,*" she wheedles in a muffled voice, lips pressed to the purple Indian bedspread, which smells strongly of patchouli and faintly of mold. Before Sophie dug it out and pressed it back into service, the spread spent years neatly folded in Peggy's army locker. "Don't you want to find out what's going to happen between you and Will?"

Sophie glances away from her friend to the bank of windows on the far wall. "I know what's going to happen between me and Will," Sophie replies. Nothing could be further from the truth; this has to count as the biggest fib she's told in a while.

Tamara sighs and fingers the pimple on her chin. It's larger than it was an hour ago, she could swear. "I can't stand not knowing what's going to happen to me," she mutters. "One quick call. I'll keep it short, promise."

Sophie shakes her head, though her heart isn't in it. For weeks now, she's been hearing about Tamara's calls. The first psychic declared that Tam's old boyfriend is a jerk. No news in that. But the second one promised that Prince Charming is on the horizon: Tamara should wear pink every day, the psychic instructed, because her Prince will recognize her that way. Last Saturday, the girls made a trip to Cottonwood to buy pink socks, pink T-shirts, pink underwear, all charged to Lucinda's VISA card. No Prince yet, but Tamara's wearing the panties right now, just in case. Any minute, he could take the stairs on his white horse, blunder right into Sophie's bedroom, a little dazed and sweaty, but all the more irresistible for that.

It doesn't happen, of course, but something else does. Entirely out of character, Tamara remembers a story Sophie told her once. "Didn't your mother tell fortunes in that commune in Taos? Doesn't she have cards?"

Sophie nods slowly, her eyes straying from Tam to Peggy's army locker on the other side of the room. She can see them now, wrapped in a blue silk scarf for safekeeping and stowed in a pine box. With a sigh of relief, she rises from the mattress, jerking the stretched and baggy T-shirt over her butt as she crosses the room. Why didn't she think of it? This time Tam's way ahead of her and knows it. Her friend is gleeful, rolling back and forth across the

bed, squealing with happiness. It looks like they're going to have some fun after all.

Around 2 A.M. – she no longer allows herself to glance at the clock, a practice that promotes insomnia – Peggy heads back down the long hall to the bathroom. She's smiling, enjoying a moment of small triumph – the bottle of rum is right where she left it. Occasionally, the older generation still rules. Her feet tread lightly over the cool brick floor, hard enough to break a heart. Drop something, and whatever it is will shatter on impact – glass, pottery, ice cubes. Fall, and you're liable to break a bone, but kneel gently, and the bricks will seem to give, firm but pliant sponges, porous as the adobe in the walls.

Tonight, Peggy leaves a trail of blood in her wake, small drops of brilliant red that fall to the floor unseen. By tomorrow, the floor will soak up the small splashes, and what's left, a dark red sheen, will be virtually undetectable. She bleeds erratically these days. Her periods are like the rains in New Mexico. For the most part, they arrive in the evening and progress through the night. Although surprising in their intensity, they are generally quite brief. By morning, this one will be gone.

The slight cramping in her gut she attributes to the steak they had for dinner. Sophie was craving meat and insisted on barbecuing. Afterward, the four of them sat in rockers on the front porch, plates cradled in their laps, gnawing at corn on the cob and hacking away at half-cooked slabs of meat. Early on, Peggy made the mistake of offering to help Ian cut his steak. He raised his eyes and appraised her coolly. "I'm not a baby," he replied. But that's not entirely accurate, at least not for Peggy. When she peers closely at her son, she can still make out the placid infant interposed with the thumb-sucking toddler tucked next to the awkward little boy, all of them shoved up against the droll, deadpan adolescent he is now. Although she needs assistance to see the future, Peggy has a very clear accounting of the past. If anything, she recalls too much. "Ian doesn't hate you," Sophie tried to reassure her mother recently. Peggy isn't so sure. Lately, he certainly seems to.

As she makes her slow way to the bathroom, her hand slips down to trace the curve of her abdomen. The habit began eighteen years ago, when she was newly pregnant with Sophie and the slightest pressure from her bladder caused her to toss and turn. If she didn't rouse herself, Jack would reach over and jostle her.

"Peggy," he'd hiss. "You need to go, sweetheart." And so send her off down this same long hallway, slightly off-balance and oddly happy. Along the way, her right hand would cradle her swelling belly, a touch of reassurance. Although the reason is gone now, the gesture has long since become reflexive. Whether rounded, flat, or now, in middle age, a little deflated, like an old balloon, her belly is a kind of nightly talisman, a reminder of who she is and isn't anymore. Tonight, her fingernails skate above the skin of her crotch, and she can't help wondering if she's had her last real sex, if that part of her life is over now. Wouldn't that just be a bitch?

The toilet is low to the floor, and the first thing she does when she enters the bathroom is to lean down and feel for the seat. It's still up, signaling that Ian was the last one here. After lowering it, she squats until her buttocks rest on the smooth surface, no gown to grapple with. These days, she sleeps in the nude. With Jack gone, she prefers the simplicity of it. All day long she's dealing with clothes – selecting them, wearing them, displaying them, selling them. At night, she wants rid of them.

Funny thing, she thinks as her bladder empties into the bowl, a sweet tinkling she listens to in the darkness. For the first dozen years of their marriage, Jack was adamantly desirous of her nakedness at night, his own being a foregone conclusion. "Please," he'd say, a small panting sound she equated with begging. "I need to feel your skin." The idea was seductive, and so was his voice, thick with lust. Sometimes she gave in and spent the night with his bulky body tucked tightly against hers, but she couldn't relax. Steeped in the Baptist faith, Peggy still clung to the notion that familiarity leads to contempt. Sooner or later, she reasoned, Jack's eyes would fix on her flaws – that odd, distended bellybutton for instance, cute on a little girl but absurd on a grown woman.

Only recently she's recognized the obvious, that she and Jack perceive the world through two sets of eyes. All along, he's insisted on this – his own vision – but she wouldn't hear of it. "I find you entirely beautiful," he swore time and again, crossing his heart and hoping to die. Now she comprehends that he truly meant the whole of her – ugly bony knees and shapeless breasts alongside splendid green eyes and long lean arms. Here all these years she might have appreciated herself through him. How happy that would have made her!

"You're a fool, Peggy," she sighs. Rising from the toilet, she registers again the twist of pain in her left hip – bursitis, the doctor says. She hasn't told anyone about it, and she doesn't intend to;

merely uttering the word would mark her as an old woman. She turns on the cold tap and rinses her hands in the sink, not bothering to dry. The air will steal the moisture from her skin before she reaches her bed.

"It's not fair!" Tamara cries, indignant over Sophie's wishy-washy stance on the Page of Wands. First, the card was a new boyfriend. Now Sophie's changed her mind and is insisting it represents Tam's stepfather, Tom. "Make up your mind for God's sake!"

"I'm trying," Sophie mutters, sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, her butt going numb with the hardness of her situation. Tamara faces her from the edge of the mattress, pink panties glowing from between her legs. Her face is rosy with excitement. In the light from the lamp, the pimple on her chin seems to pulse. She's fingered it so often over the last few hours that it's getting infected.

Sophie's deciding she's no good at fortunes. When they started this, she felt pretty sure of herself. After all, her mother is a psychic, or used to be, so Sophie might have expected to inherit the gene or the predisposition or the magical third eye. Whatever. Now, her hopes are dimming. From one minute to the next, she can't decide what to say. Without a book to go by – and she can't find anything resembling instructions in that damned army locker – she's had to resort to studying the cards, intuiting what they mean. They've been at this for hours, lighting candles and incense – the place positively reeks of sweet jasmine – shuffling the cards and laying them out in circles, in squares, in crosses.

"Looks like your stepdad, Tam," Sophie persists. "I can't help what I see, can I?"

"You haven't really *told* me what you see." Tam gnaws a hangnail on her index finger, smelling chocolate on her skin and something else.

The whole fortune-telling thing begins to feel uncomfortably life-and-death to Sophie. Should she be making these pronouncements when she hasn't the faintest idea? The Page of Wands *looks* like a man, but even gender seems up for grabs. He/she is dressed entirely in burgundy red – including cape and hat – and clutching a staff from which buds sprout. Sophie peers at the card again; this time, she studies the stretch of mountains behind the figure, purple peaks that disappear off the edge of the card. She can't help it, can she? The Page looks intent on discovering the new world or at least some portion of the Alaskan pipeline. "Basically, I don't

think Tom's coming back anytime soon," Sophie tries again. "I'm sorry, Tam. I know you really liked the guy."

"Not a problem." Tam shrugs dramatically. "You know me. I roll with the punches. Thing is, I would rather have heard about a boyfriend."

Tamara's had a hard year in the romance department; she's had a hard year overall. Right before he took off for Alaska – they were actually saying their goodbyes in the driveway, just the two of them – Tom grabbed her up under the armpits so that her feet actually left the ground. The fingers of his large hands pressed into her carefully stuffed bra. He hesitated, stared intently into her startled blue eyes, and then kissed her passionately on the mouth. Tam was still sixteen, and Tom's departure was only seconds away. Not a word of explanation. He just set her back down and climbed into his truck. Once he was good and gone, she turned a full circle, allowing her gaze to travel over the front windows of her house, the perimeter of the yard, a length of street, the houses across the way, all in the hopes of discovering someone or something to verify her astonishment. Even a bird would have been better than nothing, but there were no witnesses. She had to wipe away Tom's saliva and go on. Since then, she hasn't told a soul, not her mother and not Sophie. Right now, she's in the process of convincing herself it was simply a bad dream. She's had bad dreams off and on; they can be very convincing.

"I spoke too soon," Sophie says apologetically. "I should have studied the cards first." Then: "You have to understand this isn't real, Tam. I don't have the first fucking idea of what I'm doing."

"It's real," Tamara insists. "I believe in it, Sophie." She swallows with difficulty. "Can I have a drink of water before we go to bed?"

"Sure." Sophie leans forward and scoops up nearly a dozen brightly colored scraps of cardboard. They tell stories, these cards. In the one under her finger, a man lies prone under a black sky, ten swords piercing him from neck to hip. He appears to be dead, but Sophie suspects he's alive, though in terrible pain and stuck in some unbearable situation. On another card, labeled "Temperance," an angel with red wings walks on water while pouring liquid from one golden chalice to another. Over the top of her head a rainbow arcs. Before she picks them up, Sophie slides these cards together so that the sides touch, willing the angel to rise up and pour the contents of her chalice over the man's wounds. It could happen, she thinks, but it doesn't. Instead, Tamara calls

from the doorway. She wants a drink of water. She *needs* a drink of water and a good night's sleep.

The sky lightens and the cholla outside the window takes on shape and color. Tall and contorted, the cactus resembles an ancient and arthritic man wielding several broken canes. Sometimes, the man appears furious, on the verge of striking a blow at an innocent passerby, one of the children maybe, but he has his spells of happiness, too. In early May he celebrates spring: flowers the color of fruit punch emerge from his joints, and he turns downright jaunty. By fall, the flowers have shriveled and blown away; he is weary, at death's door, which as it happens is also Peggy's kitchen door. It's November, well past the monsoon season in a dry year, and he's thirsty. Just a minute, Mr. Bojangles, Peggy thinks. She's been referring to him this way for years, but only in her head.

She no longer expects Jack to pull into the driveway, kicking up dust in his old Taurus station wagon, though he occasionally still arrives to tend his bees. Even so, she takes up her station at the narrow window beside the door. "He could come," she tells herself. In the last month she has added this disclaimer: "but he probably won't." You might say she's traveled a ways down the road.

From the other end of the long room comes the drip of percolating coffee. When the machine beeps – signaling another day with coffee has arrived – Peggy goes on standing at the window, just to prove she doesn't really need it, at least not right away. This is the first of her small daily hurdles, tiny tests she sets for herself, nothing too strenuous, no large leaps of faith.

She's wrapped in her new robe, a deep purple satin number she brought home from the store when it didn't sell. Rather than relinquish the robe "for a song" – her sales rack is marked with a sign instructing customers to hum show tunes while she rings up discounted merchandise – she gave it to herself. The sash is cinched uncomfortably at her waist; underneath, she's still naked. Her bare feet are chilly.

Before pouring coffee, Peggy fills a green glass pitcher with water and carries it out to toss at the cactus's feet. Afterward, she waits on the square of cement that passes for a porch and watches the water soak into the ground. Yes, there it is. She could swear Mr. Bojangles sighs with relief. Naturally, it's not the sort of thing you can see. His limbs are rigid, after all, but listen carefully and you'll hear it, a slight expulsion of breath. Other things breathe,

Peggy reasons. Life is all around us. Best to keep that firmly in mind.

Already, Sophie is waking to a room suffused with morning light. The lace sheers on the four windows filter the New Mexican sunshine into brilliant patterns that splash the bare white walls, the hardwood floor, and the two girls huddled beneath one thin Indian print bedspread. Despite Peggy's pleas, Sophie won't hear of real curtains, the kind that provides what her mother calls a *modicum* of privacy. Sophie doesn't like curtains; she doesn't *believe* in curtains. That's the way she talks these days. Recently, she's announced that she doesn't believe in automobiles or political candidates or even God Himself. She's decided in her opinions and needs very little in the way of facts to form them. Information gets in the way, makes it harder for her to come to a clear conclusion. As Peggy might say, Sophie *eschews* information. So, even though the coming of day in this room would wake most anyone else, Sophie's a stubborn girl. She doesn't *believe* in distractions like sunlight. Most often on the weekends, she snoozes until noon through a sheer act of will.

Not today. Today her eyes blink open, and she finds herself staring at the back of Tam's head, only partially covered by a lumpy pillow. Long blonde locks crisscross the white cotton sham, and dazzled by the sight, Sophie reaches out and gently fingers a strand. Tam has amazing hair, purely golden and so soft, some of the best hair God's ever made, that is if you believe in God, but Sophie doesn't. The cards are wrapped in the scarf and tucked under her pillow, and while she strokes Tam's hair, she rolls her cheek back and forth over the edge of the stack, imagining purple peaks, enormous eight-sided stars, and somber-faced moons.

No one is more interested in the future than a teenage girl, than *this* teenage girl. Within minutes, she'll be tiptoeing down the stairs, heart pounding in the narrow cage of her chest, wearing a lavender terrycloth robe to ward off the morning chill. The cards will be stowed in the patchwork pocket of her robe, a weighty little package jostling gently against her thigh as she descends.

Downstairs, Peggy huddles over the *Albuquerque Journal*, sipping coffee with her toes curled against the cool floor. November is past time to shut down the swamp cooler and fire up the furnace, but Jack isn't around to climb on the roof, and Peggy hasn't had the heart to call in a professional. Instead, she yells for dimwitted,

dutiful Lady, their fat old golden retriever, who lumbers in from Ian's room and skitters across the floor, still a little befuddled from sleep. "Come here, Lady Luck," Peggy says, waving her hand to indicate the space under her feet. The dog is only too happy to oblige. She saunters over and drops her fat old ass onto the chilly bricks, and Peggy slides her feet under the dog's wide furry belly.

At most, she has only another fifteen minutes to relax. This is *luminaria* season in Old Town. In the late afternoon, volunteers will proceed in small stooping steps along the perimeter of the plaza, lighting many hundreds of votive candles nestled in brown sacks; stores will leave their doors open until eight or nine, and by nightfall, every square inch of the plaza – sidewalks, adobe walls, the twin gothic spires of the mission church, San Felipe de Neri – will be bathed in gentle flickering light. The whole area will be packed with locals and tourists, lots of good-natured jostling and Christmas carols belted out in English and Spanish. Not that Peggy will get much chance to enjoy the scene. She'll be rushing between register and gift wrap. Christmas is still weeks away, but already she regrets this year's choice of paper, which features endless lines of howling coyotes decked out in Santa hats.

Sophie slips up behind her mother's chair and peers down at Peggy's wild mane of grayish-brown hair, piled into something resembling a bird's nest. Her mother's hunched shoulders shimmer in the dim light. She's getting very thin; the notches of her spine are clearly visible through the silk wrapper. Distracted as she is, Sophie can't help worrying. In a gesture of concern, she slides a hand down the curve of her mother's neck.

"Who touches there?" Peggy asks, not that she needs to. These days, Ian goes out of his way to avoid contact, shies away from hugs and kisses. It's Sophie who can't keep her hands off things: paintings in museums, stalactites at Carlsbad Caverns, young men she thinks she knows. Her hands reach out and probe whatever is under her gaze. It's not enough to see something; no, she must feel it, too.

"Will you read my cards?" she whispers. She can't wait any longer; for heaven's sake, she's been waiting all night long.

"What?" Peggy asks.

The Tarot cards arrive over her shoulder with a loud pop, scattering across the article she was skimming, a so-so review of a community theater production that stars an acquaintance, someone Peggy doesn't care for. She was enjoying the review, but it

doesn't matter. This is more interesting. "Here I thought I'd hidden all the intoxicants," she mutters, then, with a deft movement of her left hand, sweeps the cards into a stack.

A whole lifetime ago it seems, she read these cards for her dinner, for a place to crash, and occasionally for a little pocket money. But, it's been a long time, maybe a dozen years since she last touched them. Vaguely, she recalls a desperate reading before Ian was born but nothing since. Even so, they feel familiar – the resistance of the edges, the sheer size of them, bigger than regular playing cards and a little unwieldy. After handling them for a minute, she raises the stack to her nose and takes a deep whiff. They smell faintly of their pine box and of something else forgotten and sweet. "I hope you and Tamara haven't been playing with these," she says. "A deck of cards belongs to one person and one person only."

"Playing?" Sophie is offended and also a little guilty. She hopes she hasn't ruined the cards, though her worry is entirely self-interested: She wants to know her future; she *needs* to know her future. "Remember, Peggy," she says haughtily. "The trunk is in *my* room. If it's all so damn private, what's it doing up there, anyway?"

"It's been in your room for years, but it's always been off limits. You know that." Already, Peggy has shifted the cards into her lap and begun a fumbling shuffle. "You have your things, and I have mine." Isn't this the same weary sermon she gave the little girl who scribbled in open books and bathed the dog in her mother's sweet-scented bath oil?

Sophie leaves her post behind the chair and arrives on the other side of table. Her hands are on her hips; she looks serious, ready to drive a bargain. "I want you to read my cards." Her hair is a storm of brownish-black curls, that one white lock hanging across her left eye. A few months back, she began bleaching a handful of her hair a shocking shade of platinum so that now she's reminiscent of Lily in that old sixties show, *The Munsters*. Sophie could be the daughter Lily never had, all grown up now and sporting her mother's severe hairdo.

"I don't do readings for free, you know," Peggy says.

It's a stalling strategy and Sophie knows it. "Charge my account," she replies. She's kept one card back, and she holds it up now, the face hidden from view, recalling for her mother their endless games of Old Maid. Little Sophie loved the game but detested the Old Maid card. Each time she drew it, she'd arrange it exactly

in the middle of her fan, holding it up for her mother to choose, a grimace of concentration on her small face. Peggy couldn't bear to disappoint her; she took it every time. No harm in letting the child win, she used to think, secretly pleased to have raised a daughter so recklessly in favor of her own happiness. Now, she's not so sure.

Today, Sophie holds the Page of Pentacles. After revealing it, she brushes aside the paper, sweeping it to one end of the long table. "This is my significator," she says, pushing the card between them and plopping down in a chair. "I'm ready when you are."

"How do you know about significators?" Peggy asks, her brow furrowing. "You haven't been going to see that ridiculous woman in Old Town, have you?" Just down the sidewalk from Peggy's shop, Everyday Satin, there's a small storefront specializing in palmistry and card readings. "Because Josie's not smart enough to tell you your cat's name."

Tamara told her about significators, not that Sophie's about to admit it. Instead, she shrugs and slouches more deeply into her lavender robe, feeling constriction in her chest at the mere mention of Alexandra, a sleek black cat with a small white star tucked under her chin. Alex is wild and defiant – as apt to scratch as she is to purr – but she generally stays close by. Usually, she's curled in a rocker on the porch, that is when she's not chasing lizards. "I haven't seen Alex for weeks," Sophie admits. "I'm worried."

"Maybe we should do a reading about your cat," Peggy says, smiling.

"Not now, please. This is important."

"Really? Isn't Alex important?" Peggy reaches out and runs a finger over The Page of Pentacles, the very same card she used to represent herself when she was Sophie's age. "All right, then," she agrees, hoping she still remembers the Celtic Cross. "Frame the question carefully. Make sure it's clear in your head. Then shuffle."

For once, Sophie does as she's asked, awkwardly rearranging the deck, mixing them up as best she can before returning them to her mother, silently, her green eyes evasive and fearful. That part doesn't surprise Peggy; she's seen it dozens of times; first readings are always a little scary. Immediately, she begins laying out the cards with sharp little pops, keeping her cross large and using all the available space. She mutters the words to remind her: "What covers her? What crosses her? What crowns her? Beneath. Behind. Before. Herself. Her house. Her hopes and fears. What will come?"

Sophie scoots back, startled. She's never seen her mother like this. Over the years, Peggy's movements have grown more and

more circumscribed. When she's angry, she yells, but she doesn't wave her arms or stomp her feet. The most she might manage is to strum the tabletop with her fingertips. If she's sad, she goes as still and stiff as the cholla outside the kitchen window. Now, Peggy's hands sweep across the table, slapping the cards face up, one after another. The sleeves of her brilliant purple robe fill with air and rise around her arms. She doesn't hesitate or hold back.

Once the cards are down, she glances first at them and then at Sophie. All the energy of the last few seconds is gone. Suddenly, the robe seems to swallow her; she's a rag doll of a mother.

"You okay?" Sophie asks, her heart pounding. Oh God, she thinks. This isn't just a little game they're playing.

"I'm sorry," her mother says, shrinking back and folding her hands in her lap. Underneath the table, she jabs Lady's side with her toes, again and again. She can feel the poor old dog flinching. To stop, she has to pull her feet out onto the cold floor. "Guess I'm not up to this," she says quietly.

"Try," Sophie says. "Won't you just try?"

The pleading confirms it. How simpleminded mothers are, Peggy thinks. We think we can hide a bottle and have our duty done. "Sophie," she whispers. "Don't let's do this, please, sweetie."

"I have to," Sophie whispers back.

"But why?" Peggy wishes she could lie like other people – like Jack, for instance – and she wishes she could forget occasionally as well. Why is it she has to remember every blessed thing: the Celtic Cross, the faces of the cards, the deepest desires of all the desperate souls who've ever sought her counsel? Most often, the questions are about love or money, or sometimes love *and* money. Cups or Pentacles, Pentacles and Cups. In Peggy's experience, you can toss out the Wands and Swords; that's how seldom they enter the picture. Sophie's question is Cups, of course it is, three in a row straight up.

"Please, Peggy. Please, please." Sophie's wheedling, but she can't help it: that's her future in front of her, so close she can practically smell it. If she has to, she'll bend over and press her chest to the table, intuit the cards' meanings using only her heart. "What about this one?" Sophie points to the number five card – what may come to pass. The Fool sallies forth, his gaze on the bright yellow sky, his feet on the edge of a cliff. Another step and he'll plummet to his death, but he never takes it; eternally, he's on the verge. "Does this mean I've been foolish?"

"Not necessarily," Peggy replies. "The Fool's about expecta-

tions and impossible goals. He's hope, baby." Reaching a hand over the spread, she squeezes Sophie's arm. "The Fool tells you to take the plunge and follow your heart."

Across from The Fool, in the number six spot, is the Knight of Swords. "The decision," Peggy says slowly, "has to do with a young man."

Sophie gazes at the Knight on his horse, sword raised as he rushes headlong into battle. Behind him, the sky is streaked with dark clouds, and in the distance, heavy winds bend the cypress trees.

"He has a strong *will*," Peggy adds. The word hangs in the air between them.

"You know my question, don't you?" Sophie insists. "Just say it, why don't you?"

But Peggy won't; she can't. Instead, she sweeps her hand across the table, scattering the cards. Several lift briefly into the air before drifting to the floor – The Fool and then The Empress, still insisting on her due – but Peggy refuses to look at them or at Sophie. "I had no business doing this," she says. "It's been too long, and besides, I'm late for work."

"You can't do that, god damn it!" Sophie cries out. But it's already done.

In her rush to get away, Peggy kicks Lady in the side, raising a howl of protest. "I'm so sorry!" Peggy calls over her shoulder, a blanket apology. She's flying down the hallway, the satin robe rising around her thin frame, her feet slapping at the bricks. In another minute, she's shrugging off her robe in the bathroom, turning on the shower. Tears are running down her face, but that's okay. She can weep in private, and, if necessary, pretend later she hasn't wept at all.

By the time Peggy returns, dressed for work in a flowing green pantsuit that passes for holiday cheer, Sophie is hunched at the end of the table, her back to the door and her head bent forward. All that wild hair hides the movement of her hands, but she's concentrating, doing something that takes all of her attention. Briefly, Peggy watches from across the room, and as she calls out good-bye, Sophie straightens and turns, revealing a house of cards.

Peggy shouldn't be surprised, and she isn't, not really. After all, she taught her daughter this trick years ago, using the Old Maid deck. On those rare occasions when little Sophie lost in spite of her mother's best efforts, Peggy would console her by building

a house with the cards, saving the Old Maid for last. "Look, sweetie," she'd say, balancing the cards against each other, like a line of hands raised in prayer.

To the outsider, the structure probably appears delicate, but the first story is sturdy. Blow as hard as you like; you won't knock it down. The second is another matter; it's as apt to collapse as it is to stand. Already, Sophie's finished the first two floors. The Tarot cards make a large and handsome house, all bright colors – red, green, yellow, blue. As she attempts the third story, Sophie bites her lip – she holds four cards, two in either hand. To stand, they must be planted at the same instant. Steady, Peggy says, or maybe she doesn't say it. Maybe she's just thinking it. Once the cards are in place, Sophie leans back and takes a ragged breath. "This next is the hardest," she says.

"I know."

"You chickened out on me, Peggy."

"I wanted to protect you," her mother admits, bending to collect The Empress and The Fool from the floor, then handing them off to her daughter. For now, neither notices the loss of the Knight of Swords, carried away in Lady's mouth. The Lord of Wind and Breezes, as he's called, is already buried in the depths of Ian's cluttered closet and, like the cat Alexandra, won't be seen again.

Scattering the cards didn't change a thing; Peggy sees that now. The Empress is still in her all-important number ten spot – what will come. A large and lovely woman, she sits regally on her throne, the very vision of *fecundity*, another of Peggy's favorite words. Later today, she'll turn it over in her head – *fecundity*, *fecundity* – but she won't say it aloud just yet. Perhaps it's a trick of the imagination, but the house of cards seems to glow, filling the murky room with all its available light. Peggy sighs. Life's sweeter, she thinks, when you take it one day at a time, one hour at a time, this moment and then the next. No one is less interested in the future than a middle-aged woman, than *this* middle-aged woman. Still, her heart lifts a little as she says the words: "If I had to guess, I'd say you're pregnant, sweetie."

Sophie pinches the cards, yellow sky to yellow sky, and holds them, trembling, above the fragile foundation. She doesn't look up, but she gives a slight nod. "I think you're right," she replies.