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Murder in the Second Grade

TERRI SHANAHAN

My second grade teacher was in love with my mom. I don't know how I knew that or what exactly gave it away. Maybe I saw it in the way he looked at her, the dreamy expression that came over his face, the way the muscles in his face relaxed when he saw her, the way he suddenly looked soft; maybe it was the way he kept looking at her even when it was no longer polite. When she wasn't there, he looked at me instead, as if I were only a smaller version of her. Sometimes he stood next to my desk and looked over my shoulder while I was struggling with my handwriting in my little primer, my small hand fighting to make my letters big enough to fit into the lines. This was extremely embarrassing for me because I had a hard enough time sitting still, or even just sitting in my chair at all since my feet didn't touch the floor, without being watched so closely, always trying to remember all of the rules that Sister Camillia drummed into my little head until I thought it would burst: Sit straight. Ladies cross their ankles, not their legs. Don't ever put your elbows on any table, not even your desk. A straight back begins at the bottom of your spine. Hold your pen properly. Speak softly. Carry a bigger stick.

To this day my mother denies any knowledge of what the sisters did with their sticks. She thinks they used them to tap on the blackboard, "See this." This was not true. But there are so many things that my mom really, truly, doesn't want to know, that I always let this slide. I ask her, about once a year, if she knew. "Knew what?" she asks. Sometimes she asks me if I remember Sister Camillia. Of course I remember her, she was the principal, the one with the biggest stick.

I had a lot of problems as it was, being a girl named Angel at St. Francis school, even without Sister Camillia. I didn't want to be in the second grade, either; all it brought me was more troubles. I wanted to stay in Sister Margaret-Mary's first grade classroom, forever.

Sister Camillia came into our classroom every afternoon to give us our religion lesson. Mr. Knight sat at the back of the room not saying anything. Sister Camillia's religion lessons were a lot different than Sister Margaret-Mary's. Sister Margaret-Mary always let us sit on the floor around her while she told us stories from the Bible. All Sister Camillia wanted to talk about was sins. It seems Sister Camillia and Sister Margaret-Mary were the devil's helpers.

I raised my hand. Everyone laughed.

At the end of the day I was sent to the office with Mr. Knight.

I knew Mr. Knight stared at me, written all over the room, and then at me Angel, or even me, instead of our class who were all despised me for being a girl. I hated me when I was young then despised me when I was old. Class was over for seven years and only six years of school.

Worse every day I was in the second grade, and a future. Jackie sat behind me and an identical twin Jackie sat beside me, being called by everyone for having easy to tell the class who despised me, those who despised me. Jackie sat behind me, despised me, she didn't know me, but she despised me in the shoulder, jaunt and cocking.

"Answer the question, Jackie," Mr. Knight said, trip me, saying running circles clicking on the floor, their legs somersaulting, twirling faster and faster in the ears, biting my ears.

My mom said she was afraid before I was four.
I don't know how I knew that way he looked at me, the way the muscles in his hands only looked soft; or if I was no longer a kid since my feet had always been too big to fit into the shoes they gave me. I had a hard time sitting up tall since my feet always felt like my ankles, not their own feet, were sitting in your desk. A girl had to try pen properly.

Sister Camillia did with the girls. "See this." Everyone laughed. "Yes, ma'am," from really, truly, "See this," about once a week. "Tell me if I asks me if I raised my hand. "How many sins are we allowed?"

Everyone laughed.

At the end of the lessons, Sister Camillia oftentimes brought me back to the office with her.

I knew Mr. Knight was in love with my mom because of the way he stared at me, with that dreamy look on his face, from his desk in the front of the room, and the way he always called me by her name. He never called me Angel, or even Angelina, like the Sisters mostly did. There was a girl in our class who really was named Jackie and she alternately hated me or despised me for answering to my mother's name or being called Margaret round her while I was talking about sins.

It seemed like everything was a sin, even thinking about things.

Sister Camillia liked to look at me while she talked about how our sins were the devil's work and we would spend eternity in hell.

I raised my hand. "How many sins are we allowed?"

Everyone laughed.

At the end of the lessons, Sister Camillia oftentimes brought me back to the office with her.

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Worse even than that, Jackie was eight years old, repeating the second grade, and a full foot taller than me, which wasn't that tall, really. Jackie had an identical twin named Joanie and had spent the first five years of her life being called by the wrong name most of the time. After kindergarten, it was easy to tell them apart because Jackie just kept on growing, but this didn't help her get over her sensitivity to someone else being called by her name. Jackie sat behind me, and if I conveniently didn't answer a question and she didn't know the answer either, then I got kicked in the back and poked in the shoulder, too.

"Answer the goddamned question," she'd hiss.

On the playground, Jackie was my tormentor. She'd stick out her foot to trip me, saying, "Have a nice trip, see you next fall." She led the others into running circles around me, holding hands and dancing around, their shoes clicking on the cement, and their plaid, pleated uniform skirts flying around their legs sometimes showing their prim white underwear, chanting, "She's a baby, baby, doesn't know her name." Round and round they'd go, twirling faster and faster, until I got so dizzy, I'd close my eyes and cover my ears, biting my bottom lip until it bled, trying very hard not to cry.

My mom says she sent me to school a year early because I could read before I was four years old and I was beginning to invent my own language.
since my little hand couldn’t actually form the letters of the alphabet. As it was, the alphabet, putting letters into a particular order, never made sense to me. All the letters existed equally in my mind. My mom says she became worried as she watched my secret language become more and more complex, because she thought that I would never learn to write. That’s the official story. It’s mostly a lie. I did know how to read and I had created my own language, that much was true. But the real reason she sent me to school was to get me away from my baby brother, Markus. I’d been helping him have accidents since the day he came home from the hospital, and she was a nervous wreck. To this day, he still has scars from his babyhood. He still wears his hair combed down around the left side of his forehead where he has a scar from the fourteen stitches it took to close up his head after I dumped him over the side of his crib. His blanket got twisted in the crib rails and his head crashed against the metal slider part, cutting him in its track. It wasn’t a deep cut but it was wide and long and made a lot of blood, enough to run over his face, to get into his nose and mouth. And Markus is claustrophobic, which probably happened when I locked him in the cellar when he was a year old. Mom thought he was sleeping and he was, right up until I woke him up and got him out of his crib, took his hand and led him into the basement. When mom called the police several hours later, after searching the house and questioning me for a long time, the two police officers found him, behind the locked door, sitting on the damp floor in the dark cellar, being quiet like I told him, sucking his thumb, crying.

To this day, Markus shows off his scars. He is as proud as a war veteran, pointing and telling the story of each one. The burn mark on the inside of his right wrist happened when I handed him a burning kitchen towel. He just sat there, holding the towel, screaming. Even now, when it’s easy to laugh about how obedient he was, I remember that I really was only trying to blame the fire on him. He has a scar from a deep cut on the index finger of his left hand, from the time we were playing house and I told him that the daddy had to cut up the vegetables for dinner. Markus nearly lost his finger that time. He has chicken pox marks on his back because I scratched them for him. He has a huge, long scar on his thigh from the time I took him for a ride in his wagon, down the twenty steps that led to the sidewalk in front of our house. Halfway down, the wagon turned over and I jumped out of the way, watching the tangle of arms and legs and wagon parts as they all rolled the rest of the way down the stairs. He has many scars, some invisible, all of which are connected, one way or another, to me.

I was a small picture of me, very young. This is me, two years old. Every time I look at it in such an arrangement. But if you look a few feet away, then, a few feet in, you’ll see Jackie's imagination.

"Mid-get, Dw"
I was a small, delicate child, perfectly formed in every way. There is a picture of me, which my mom still carries in her wallet, from when I was six years old. Everyone who looks at it is surprised by the way my chin is raised in such an arrogant stance. I was an arrogant child, used to getting my way. But if you look at the picture closely enough, you might notice the car door a few feet away from me, and see how tiny I really was. I was forty pounds and three feet tall, in the second grade.

This caused the sisters to call me their 'little lady,' but it only fueled Jackie's imagination.

"Mid-get, Dwarf, why are you so short?"

I knew Mr. Knight was in love with my mom because I saw them kissing. My mom was the classroom mother that year and she was always organizing classroom parties and showing up in the middle of any given day, carrying brownies or cookies. And when she did show up, she was always wearing a dress and lipstick. On Valentine's Day, after school was out, she stayed late to help clean up the mess from the party, telling me to go play on the playground until she came for me. I went out to the boys' playground and climbed up on the jungle gym, but it was a dark day, cloudy, and it seemed like it was almost night at three o'clock in the afternoon. There was no one else on the playground and I kept hearing sounds in the trees. Everything seemed to keep getting bigger and darker, and finally, I ran back to the classroom, where it was light and warm. They were standing at the back of the classroom, arguing, and they didn't notice me come into the room. Suddenly they had their arms around each other and were kissing. I knew it was a real kiss. Watching them, I felt lightheaded and strange, filled with the magic of it, the secrecy, the richness.

If I mention Mr. Knight to her now, she looks confused and says that she doesn't remember him. Sometimes I believe her. But sometimes, when I look at her thin, graceful, birdlike, arms, I can see his arms tangled up with hers, in a secret embrace.

My mother lies about many things. It is her way.

One day Jackie started the rumor that my father was dead.

We had a fairly ornate ritual for lunch: each classroom filed into the lunchroom, silently, in a single line, holding hands, until we stopped behind our chairs. When all the children had filed into the lunchroom, one of the sisters, sitting in a chair on a raised platform in the middle of the room, led us in prayer. She waited, after the prayer, until there was absolute silence in
the room again, until it was so silent that we could hear each other breathe. No one coughed and no one sneezed. When the silence was absolute, she rang a small bell which was our signal to take our seats. When it was quiet again, however long it took, she rang the bell again and we were allowed to eat. If she rang the bell a third time, that meant we were allowed to talk, in whispers, to the person sitting next to us. If anyone spoke above a whisper, she pointed at them, and two of the sisters who stood guard near the door, came to lead that person to Sister Camillia's office, for ten whacks, which were delivered, by paddle, to our bottoms while we bent over a chair with our skirts held above our waists.

All of us would be little ladies, eventually, one way or another.

When Jackie's rumor of my father's death reached my end of the lunch table, I started screaming, assuming it was true, because everyone was looking at me. In the hushed lunchroom, my screams echoed and bounced off the walls, seemingly getting bigger and bigger, filling the room. The sister on the platform stood up and frantically rang the bell until the door guards came to get me and tried to lead me away. Finally, they just picked me up, carried me out of the room, and the lunchroom was dismissed. I screamed all the way down the hallway to Sister Camillia's office and all the way through twenty whacks and then I just kept screaming. I couldn't stop and I couldn't tell them what was wrong, even when Sister Camillia was waving the paddle in front of me. When my mom finally showed up, I told her. She took me straight to my father's office to prove to me that it wasn't true. I stood in the doorway to his office and saw him look up in surprise, noticed the way he rolled up his white shirt sleeves to his elbows, the way his tie was loosened, and then I turned away and ran back into the waiting room. All I had to do was to see him.

If it wasn't true, then why was my mom kissing Mr. Knight? That was what I didn't understand.

Everyone loves my mother. This much I have always understood. She is like a butterfly, beautiful, delicate, untouchable. People smile when they see her. She moves like a hummingbird, flitting gracefully from one task to another, something you can only catch a glimpse of, in wonder. She is elegant and quick and soft-spoken.

Mr. Knight loved her too.

Mr. Knight was an anomaly to us, the only man in our half of the school. We had our sisters, who mostly looked alike except for the faces peeking out from under the habits they all wore. They all wore the same long black dresses, dresses, dresses. They were rosy. They walked softly. They had flowered necklaces, and scarves, and long black dresses. They walked softly. Everyone loves my mother. This much I have always understood. She is like a butterfly, beautiful, delicate, untouchable. People smile when they see her. She moves like a hummingbird, flitting gracefully from one task to another, something you can only catch a glimpse of, in wonder. She is elegant and quick and soft-spoken.

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other breathe.

It was absolute, she said, when it was quiet everyone was allowed to move a whisper, near the door, whacks, which allowed a chair with

1er.

1d of the lunch room. The faces peeking into the waiting room. Everyone was just picked up in surprise, elbows, the way into the waiting room. The Father sat in a chair turned sideways, not looking at us, and we were each meant to kneel beside the chair and tell him our sins. While I was waiting to go into the room, I always made up sins to tell him, always making up exactly five, never knowing if that was enough or too many, not having anyone to ask, not even daring to ask Sister Margaret-Mary. The Father always gave me the same penance, two Hail Marys and one Our Father. I didn't know if was a lot of penance or not, again, not having anyone to ask. It wasn't until the eighth grade, when we made our Confirmation, promising our souls to Jesus, that we learned about Confession booths. The privacy of the screen, that was what I wanted, what I realized I needed in order to bare my soul to God. And sometime later I wondered why, if God knew everything, then why didn't he know I lied in Confession every week? Did he not care? Shouldn't he?

dresses, dresses that covered them completely, even hiding their shoes. They wore rosaries, decoratively, around their necks or around their waists. They walked softly and carried big sticks, disguised as canes. They all looked alike except for Sister Margaret-Mary, who was my first grade teacher. She was the youngest of them all and had a softness to her that none of the others did. On the first day of second grade, I went straight to Sister Margaret-Mary's classroom and started crying when she told me I had to go to Mr. Knight's room. She took me into the bathroom and wiped my tears away and then held my hand while we walked to the second grade classroom. That was the day Jackie started calling me a baby. All the other teachers in our school, if not sisters, were sisters in kind. They were matronly women, old enough to be our grandmothers, mean enough to be sisters. They wore pointed, catlike glasses and sometimes rosary necklaces. Many of them wore only black dresses, though not as long as the sisters', and they didn't like men, or boys either. The only other men at St. Francis were the priests and they didn't seem like men. We saw them every morning at mass and every Friday for Confession. When it was time for Confession, every Friday morning, we lined up the same way as if we were going to lunch, holding hands, walking in single file. The line stopped at a door next to Sister Camillia's office, and we stood there, not saying a word, waiting for our turns, watching as each person came out of the room, head bowed in shame, headed back to the classroom where she would kneel on the floor next to her desk and say her penance, waiting for all of us to come back before taking her seat. We all tried not to be first in line because that meant we would end up kneeling on the cold tile floor for as long as a half an hour. In the Confession room, the Father sat in a chair turned sideways, not looking at us, and we were each meant to kneel beside the chair and tell him our sins. While I was waiting to go into the room, I always made up sins to tell him, always making up exactly five, never knowing if that was enough or too many, not having anyone to ask, not even daring to ask Sister Margaret-Mary.
Jackie left me alone for almost two full weeks after I made the scene in the lunchroom. I was a leper, no one would touch or even look at me. No one had ever done anything like that before, at least not in the collective memory of eight grades of girls. The girls' playground, which was really the parking lot for St. Francis Church, was divided into nine squares drawn on by chalk every Monday morning. The center square was for the sisters who were watching the playground and each grade was assigned one square to play in. Nobody ever crossed out of their squares; even when rain washed away the chalk lines, we knew where our lines were. Nobody stepped on the lines either, which helped them to last the entire week, until Monday morning came again and the lines were freshly drawn.

We hardly ever saw the boys of St. Francis school. They had separate entrances, classrooms, lunchroom, and even their own principal, everything nearly the same as ours, except on the second floor. Their playground was on the other side of the school building and that was not like ours at all. They had swings and jungle gyms and they were allowed to run from one end of the playground to another, even to play in the grassy field at the end of the playground. We knew this because when we stayed inside for recess, we could hear their shouts and if we looked out the windows, we could see them running and chasing balls in the field. They didn't have any lines or squares. The boys were taught by Priests and were allowed to go to the gymnasium every day. We heard them come into the church after we did, and knew they sat in the rows behind us, but we still didn't see them because we weren't allowed to turn around in our seats. The noise told us they were there. I did turn around one morning when they were making a lot of noise and I saw them finally. Their lines were not straight like ours, they pushed and tripped and pinched each other, but they really were there. Later that morning, Sister Camillia's voice came through the intercom, telling Mr. Knight to send me to her office. Everyone knew what that meant: God had many eyes and I got forty whacks. I didn't cry, I never did. It seemed like I was called into the office at least once a week for ten, twenty, or forty whacks, depending on what I did and where I was when I did it. All sins committed in church got forty whacks. There were so many rules and for some reason, I seemed to be the only one who didn't know them. I thought I was being good most of the time and then, out of thin air, Sister Camillia's voice came over the intercom, asking Mr. Knight to please send me to the office.

For two weeks, while Jackie and everyone else ignored me, I sat in one of the corners and took a lot of lunches. Mostly I locked their lunches. I noticed that it took a lot of work for their squares to rest on their waists, whispering, and even when I had a best friend, I couldn't skip rope, I'd always have to do it alone.

When my turn came to sit, I was sitting next to a girl with an arm but she stopped me, she pinched her fingers. She pinched my hand, taking my hair.

Two hours later, I dropped my lunches.

Later that day, I dropped my lunches. We got to the end of my lunchtime and everything inside me was war and I made a sound, and watched even as I saw her.

I guessed that it was my mother and I thought I really needed a nun. When I looked into her face, I saw my mother and I tucked me into my bed.

Every night she would say that I would die if I wasn't in heaven, and they were impotent...
The scene in the convent looked familiar. No one really knew the collective life was really like. The girls in the squares were really close. Sometimes, I looked at the older girls in the other squares and noticed that it seemed like everyone had a best friend. They walked around their squares holding hands, sometimes with their arms around each other's waists, whispering to each other. I'd never noticed this before. I didn't have a best friend, or even any friend. When they played games, tag, or pretended to skip rope, I'd always stand by myself, out of the way.

When my two weeks were nearly up, Jackie pinched me while we were sitting next to each other in church. I tried to push her hand away but she was stronger than me and held onto my skin. While she pinched her fingers together harder and harder, I bit my lip, trying not to make a sound. Finally Jackie just got mad at me and twisted her entire hand, taking my skin with it. I yelled in pain.

Two hours later, I got forty wacks. Later that day, on our way to the lunchroom, Jackie shoved me from behind. I dropped my lunchbox and heard my thermos break. By the time we got to the lunchroom, my grape Hi-C, my favorite drink, was dripping out of my lunchbox, leaving a grape trail behind me. When I opened it, everything inside of it, my sandwich and cookies, were soaked purple. I sat and watched everyone else eat.

I guessed the truce was off.

We all wanted to be nuns when we grew up. We were all little nuns-in-training. If they would have let us wear habits, we would have. If we didn't become nuns when we grew up, then we were going to have to endure the pains and hardships of being wives and mothers. We didn't know what these burdens and trials were exactly, only that it would be better to be a nun.

When I looked at my mom, it didn't seem like her life was filled with pains and burdens. When I asked Sister Camillia about that, she told me that I was my mother's burden. This bothered me for a long time. My mom always said I really was an angel and her shooting star; every night when she tucked me in, she made a wish on me when she kissed me goodnight. Every night she had a new wish. Sometimes they were dumb wishes, like that I would dream I was a mermaid and lived under the sea, but sometimes they were important. Once she wished that I would learn to be patient and
believe that I would grow taller. She wished that Jackie would grow a zipper between her lips so I could zip-her whenever I wanted. She wished that I would learn to play with my brother and the next night she wished that I would learn to play with him, gently. On Christmas Eve, she wished I would get my very own puppy. On Christmas night, she wished I would stop crawling around and chasing him. She wished for all the tangles in my hair to go away, for the perfect orange ribbon, anything, everything she wished for me.

One night I asked her if she ever wished I would go away. The next day, she was at the school, bringing us brownies, and she whispered to me, "I wish you would be my little girl forever." Sister Camillia called for me an hour or so later and I was confused about what I'd done, as usual, but that time, I received no wacks. Sister Camillia said to me, "You aren't your mother's burden." That was it; I was sent back to my classroom.

Sister Camillia and I didn't have many conversations after that. She simply told me what I did wrong and whacked me. When I was in the eighth grade, I went into her office for a conference with her, as each and every girl did before leaving St. Francis, and when she asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told her I would be a nun. Before she sent me away, she said, "Angelina, you will never be a nun. You are too filled with the sin of pride."

Then I knew why she hated me but I didn't when I was six years old. Hatred was a sin, too, and if I had been a braver person, I would have told her so.

Jackie was a fat girl who could strike fear in my heart simply by stepping into my path and standing in front of me. The fear was unreasonable, I know this now. But at the time, I never knew what she would do. Joanie, her identical twin, was only about half her size, and she was more like a pale shadow of Jackie than anything else. When I saw Joanie, which wasn't really that often, since Joanie had gone on to the third grade when Jackie had been held back, I thought that if I were her, I would be little and quiet too, and hope that Jackie wouldn't notice me.

While my mom was making nice wishes on me every night, I was making mean wishes on Jackie. I wished, every night, that Jackie would die and go away. I never told anyone that. It wasn't that I wanted to hurt her, it was that I wanted her to stop hurting me. I've thought about this a lot since then, wondering if anyone could be as evil as me. When my mom and I sat together and watched "Bewitched" on the television, I wished that I could twitch my nose and zap My mom to cookies in my stole my penc...
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I was making die and go it, it was that since then, and I sat that I could
twitch my nose and make my wishes be true. I knew what I would do.
I would zap Jackie to Pluto, forever.

My mom told me to try being nice to Jackie and I did. I gave her the cookies in my lunch. I said nice things to her. I didn't say anything when she stole my pencils. I shared my crayons with her and didn't get mad at her when she broke them, even though I knew she did it on purpose. But Jackie was mean and no amount of being nice to her was going to change that, so I stopped.

That spring, Jackie got sick with the measles and had to stay home for three weeks. It was heavenly. At recess, I played pretend skip rope with the other girls and never got tripped by the pretend rope. We played tag and I was the fastest of all. When I was it, I didn't stay it for long. I was included in the notes that were passed around the room and finally discovered that they weren't very interesting: Isn't Janet's coat pretty? Come to the boys' playground at four o'clock, no one will be there. We have to go to Confession today. The boys were very loud today.

It didn't matter that they were dumb notes. It mattered to get them.

One day, during recess, I noticed Joanie looking at me and I walked over to the edge of our square to meet her. She told me that I was very good at jump rope. I said that she was, too. She asked me if I'd had the measles yet and I said no. She told me that she had them when she was a baby. Every day, we met at the line and talked about important things. I invited her over to my house once and we played with my puppy and ate lunch together. We never talked about Jackie. A lot of the time, we didn't talk to each other at all. It was nice just to sit together. Sometimes, when we stood at the edge of our squares, we held hands.

For the first time that year, I didn't mind being in the second grade.
At first, after Jackie came back, I didn't mind. I tried not to pay attention to her. This was my mom's new idea, to ignore her. But it wasn't long before I started getting left out of the games again and Joanie wouldn't meet me at the edge of the square.

"Angel, devil. Angel is a devil."
The chanting started again and I went back to sitting in the corner of our square, near the convent. I watched the nuns going in and out of their door, knowing that the lunch recess wouldn't be over until they'd all finished their lunches. Sometimes I volunteered to help Mr. Knight in the classroom but usually he said he wanted me to get some fresh air.

"Angel, devil. Your mother is a devil."
One morning, after my mom had been in the classroom, Jackie started telling everyone that she saw my mom kissing Mr. Knight. Everyone knew it wasn't true, but they all got excited. Everyone was talking about it, whispering and passing notes. Then Jackie said my parents were divorced. Wherever I went, no one would talk to me except for the teachers.

One day during recess, Jackie came up behind me and pushed me, knocking me down. I fell on my face and got a bloody nose. When I stood up, the blood poured down my face, onto my white blouse. The other girls were all laughing, crowding around us.

I pushed Jackie back. That surprised her. She didn't fall but she was stunned. I knew I was going to get hurt, badly.

"I hate you." I yelled at her. "You're fat and ugly and stupid!" I was as surprised as she was when I heard what I said. I turned and ran, ignoring the white lines, knowing I was in trouble, heading for the convent. Jackie had to run after me. She couldn't let me get away with what I said, what everyone heard me say. It was a matter of honor.

Why did I suddenly turn and run around the back of the convent? I don't know. If I had gone in the front door, I would have been safe. Sister Margaret-Mary would be there and she would wash my face and be nice to me. She would help me clean up the blood.

But I ran around the back of the convent, knowing Jackie was right behind me. The nuns kept their gardening tools in a shed behind the convent and right next to the shed was a pile of rocks, like the kind they used to line the walkways through their gardens in the churchyard. I was headed for the rocks but I don't know what I meant to do with them. Would I have thrown one in Jackie's face? Would I have threatened her with it, scared her away, chased her back to the playground?

Did I have murder in my heart?

I don't know.

It didn't matter what I would have done because Jackie caught me when I was just a few feet away from the pile of rocks. I must have hesitated, maybe I was looking around for a hiding place. I was faster than she; she shouldn't have been able to catch me but she did. She knocked me down and then stood between me and the rocks.

"What were you going to do with the rocks, you little baby?"

I didn't say anything. I stood up.

"I'm going to kill you, you ugly little brat!" It was the 'little' part that made me mad. Jackie raised her fist above her head, like a hammer she was aiming at my head.

"NO!" Sister Margaret-Mary pushed Jackie back.

I pushed Jackie's arm away from me. I couldn't let her get away with it, not one moment into the matter of honor.

I saw her eyes twist backwards, her fists. It was a problem.

Her head came up in a moment, her mouth was open to see her hand running down my face. The sound of the running was so loud I heard it.

Sister Margaret-Mary said, "It was an accident. You tripped." Sister Margaret-Mary held me, holding my arm, making me look at her, until I was calm.

"It was an accident. You tripped."

Sister Margaret-Mary said, "She opened my eyes. She is looking for you. She is chasing you. She is trying to kill you. She was talking to me. She was talking to you again. "Do you want her for lunch?"

I nodded.
Jackie started crying. Everyone knew it was coming. She was never the same after it. She was divorced. I was the same. We all were.

I pushed Jackie. God help me, I pushed her with every ounce of strength in my little body, strength doubled and tripled by hatred and fear. For that one moment in my life, I was six feet tall and had the strength of five men.

I saw the expression on Jackie's face when I shoved her. It was red, twisted with anger and hatred; if she could have stopped herself from flying backwards, she would have landed on me and beaten me to death with her fists. It was a pure hatred, incredible rage.

Her head cracked on the rocks, as loud as a gunshot. I saw her for only a moment, her body lay sprawled across the rocks, with her legs and arms sticking out, not moving. She did not, could not, would never move. Her mouth was open and her eyes were staring at the sky. I was close enough to see her hair darkening with wetness, to see the blood under her head, running down the rocks. I closed my eyes and covered my ears. The silence was so loud I could hear it anyway. I turned away. Away and away.

Sister Margaret-Mary caught me from behind. I could tell that it was her because I knew the way she felt, the layers of softness, because I knew her baby powder scent. She pulled me closer, burying my bloody face within her, until I was almost entirely wrapped up in her folds.

"It was an accident." She said. "Jackie was chasing you and she tripped."

Sister Margaret-Mary let me go and knelt in front of me, holding my arms, making me stand up, saying. "Angelina, can you hear me?" She shook me. "Angel. You listen to me." I realized that she was crying and I opened my eyes and looked at her, amazed. She looked into my eyes, holding my arms, making me listen to her, "It was an accident. She was chasing you. I saw everything. Jackie tripped. Do you understand?" I didn't say anything, I just looked at her and wondered why she was crying, why she was talking so loud that it made my head feel hollow. She shook me again. "Do you understand me? Nod if you understand what I'm telling you."

I nodded.