

The Two Stairways

by Kelli Trapnell

Led Zeppelin was, of course, the most iconic band of the 60s and 70s rock scene in America. Their songs suggested to a restless, disenfranchised youth that transcendence was possible, if only you listened hard enough to the music. If you could decipher the lyrics, if you could melt into the tune, you could escape from the limitations of the world and find solace in something higher. It was both a battle cry and a white flag raised. And understanding, accessing, the strange song called “Stairway to Heaven” meant that you had reached the apex of this mystical quest, that within the world of the stairway you would find peace, if only for eight minutes. Now, in the present day world of music, the song has been drowned out by autotuned pop ballads and syncopating blares of electronic dubstep, but there are still those who discover its power to realign the world they live in. This is a story about a life rearranged, a life transposed, by the elusive Stairway to Heaven.

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By far one of the most popular bands in the world of experimental music today is English rock band, Led Zeppelin. Broadcast off of wind flecks to every major regulated city and suburb across the continental USA, the band looks primed to become just as illustrious as classics like Lady Gaga and Frank Sinatra. Their music has been called mystical, psychedelic, and has played an important role in the national “baby boom” planned by the Clinical Institute of Genetic Alterations and Reproduction Services (CIGARS)— the reproductive mixers planned with song schedules that include Led Zeppelin have proven to lead to more pregnancies on the whole. But even those denied reproductive privileges want to hear the band. Most requested is “Stairway to Heaven,” a song which invites the notion that anything is possible, that you can change your station in life, if only you focus hard enough on the lyrics' meaning. This is a story about a life rearranged, a life transposed, by the elusive Stairway to Heaven.

Having just come in out of a cold, driving rain, Mary Frederick unlocked the door to her shitty new sublet apartment, dumped her purse and the soaked paper bag of groceries on the plastic counter, and kicked off her ruined driving mocs. She forgot to breathe mainly through her mouth, and she nearly gagged on the thick smell of sodden pet hair and cheap dish soap and canned cat food that had slowly leaked through the crumbly hardwood floors of the sublet over the course of the day.

She shook off Elise's new trench coat, the one she'd left at the apartment last time it was Mary's weekend to have her. Mary hated the way it reeked of cigarette smoke and Axe body spray, but there hadn't been time to go back to get her own trench from Chris, and anyway, she had no desire to see her ex-husband, especially not when he was trying to steal all her stuff. So, she'd spent her day smelling like some post-walk of shame groupie. And now the pet store. Ugh. She tossed the coat toward the couch and missed, which sent her iPhone sliding across the floor. It whistled at her. New voicemail, probably from George about the custody hearings.

Something pushed at her eyes, pinched in her chest. Her nostrils spread like they always did when she was about to cry. No, she was better than that. She clenched her teeth, pulled the hair thing out of her hair, tried to still her face.

On the table was a stack of bills. On the chair, a paper plate where half of her sandwich from lunch dried out. She thought of Chris, the picnic. A dog yapped downstairs. The phone whistled again.

So many things to do, so many things she had to remember to forget. It was hard to have to think about them and also not think about them. Didn't make sense. Often, she found herself stuck standing somewhere, on the sidewalk, in her office, in front of the fridge. In her doorway. All she wanted was a way to go somewhere without feeling paralyzed by all the things that she'd decided did and did not exist.

And, as if on cue, here it all came again. The picnic, Chris's hand on hers, without his ring. His face, hurt, as though she were the one at fault here. The underwear, not hers, and certainly not Elise's, in the hamper in their bedroom. The letter. The flowers. Her suitcase. Bottle after bottle of red table wine in the too-small hotel trash can. Finally, the papers, highlighted yellow in places she should pay particular attention to, places she should know to sign here, to initial there. They kicked in her stomach, they melted her bones. They throbbed and throbbed in her brain, all these imaginary things that she had to remember did not exist, that she had to stop thinking about.

The phone rang and buzzed against the floor. Mary locked the door behind her, strode across the room. On the way to the phone, she caught a flash of movement framed in the open doorway to her bedroom: her reflection in the full length mirror that leaned against the wall. She stopped, threw the fallen trench coat onto the couch, let the phone clamor on.

Her long brown hair hung in tangles on either side of her smudged day-old makeup face, her jeans were soaked with rainwater from the knees to the waist, and her green v-neck had two giant, dark circles of sweat underneath the armpits, and a deep line just under her bra, where the shirt dug into her layers of fat.

Mary stared at herself in the mirror. She was a mess, contrary to what her coworkers at Regency Medical Suppliers had been saying to her over the last six months, in sympathetic tones over lunch, or more often, when they saw her skipping lunch to go meet George, Chris, and Chris's attorney at the firm, to yet again spend her break time arguing over the dining room table or the car or the house or Elise. Mary, you look great! Mary, how do you stay so fresh when you're dealing with...you know... all that? Oh, you've been losing sleep? Well, you could have fooled me! Then a quick raise of their stained coffee mug or their brought from home microwaveable leftovers, and they ducked out of sight and moved onto more entertaining bits of office gossip.

She smoothed down the top of her hair, pushed it behind her ears. That looked worse. Naturally. Mary pushed the heels of her hands against her forehead. Her hands felt cool, solid against her throbbing skull. She tried to remember the last time she'd actually spent time on her appearance, the last time she'd even looked in the mirror, you know, really looked. She looked terrible.

Of course, she'd never really bought into all the false flattery at work. It was unwaveringly one-dimensional, half-hearted, and insincere. Most of her co-workers resented her quick rise to success in pharmaceutical sales, despite her questionable background as a second-rate pianist who'd quit while she was on the rise. There wasn't a day that Mary didn't regret giving up the music. Nobody likes a sell-out, except, apparently, Mary's heaving, corpulent boss, Regional Account Manager Wade Simpser. And that fortuitous circumstance was far from consoling, given that Wade's contract was about to be up for renewal. It was common knowledge around the office that Corporate was just looking for an excuse, as far as Wade was concerned. Which didn't point to good things for Mary. If she was extremely lucky, if Wade could somehow coast through this next quarter without managing to piss anyone off—fat chance-- she had about two months of work left as Lead Sales, Northeast Division.

The phone rang again. God, couldn't it just wait for ten minutes? That wasn't asking too much, she didn't think. She looked back at her reflection. What she needed was a shower. She turned to the entertainment center, opened the bottom cabinet, and pulled out her record player. She opened the lid, checked the last record she'd played. The seven inch Led Zeppelin Stairway to Heaven single. Yep, that would work nicely.

Mary shut the lid of the record player, carried it to the bathroom. She shut the door, put down the lid of the toilet, and rested the old Monarch on the lid. Then she plugged it in, put the needle on. She wrapped her arms around her waist, peeled her shirt up over her head. Unbuttoned her jeans and wriggled out of them. The bra came next, the high-waisted underwear that made her feel less like 45 and

more like 80. As she undressed, she listened to the scroll of the vinyl. She turned on the hot water and cracked her neck while the shower ran and steamed in the chill air, took one last glance at herself in the mirror clouding above the sink. Then she stepped carefully into the broken Jacuzzi tub and hissed the dirty plastic shower curtain along the rusted rod.

Marie Jergunson's hands were clumsy as she ripped open the lumpy yellow envelope from CIGARS (the Clinical Institute of Genetic Alterations and Reproduction Services). It had finally come today, after almost a year of waiting. She climbed the stairs of the little townhouse she lived in by herself. The package was thick, that was a good sign, wasn't it? And why was it so difficult to open? She turned the corner at the top step, hand on the banister, and plopped herself on the couch. She'd managed to get one of the taped down corners open, and the paper had started to rip.

Okay. The moment of truth. She took a deep breath and tore through the package, leafed through the papers on her lap until she found the cover letter with the official CIGARS seal on it. Gold flakes that had gotten stuck in her hair from the wind outside fell onto her lap as her eyes skimmed the letter's contents.

Dear Ms. Jergunson, We appreciate your application...we receive several thousands per year...we regret to inform you...family history of biological inferiorities...encompasses a range of disorders such as schizophrenia...obesity and deformity being among the least common...included are our fundraising forms and volunteer opportunities...remember, your lack of participation ensures the survival and continued beautification of the entire human race...thank you, best of luck in your other endeavors, CIGARS. An emptiness gaped in Marie's chest. She remembered how one time, on accident, she had gone into work at the piano warehouse on St. Lucien's Day, when everyone else was home with their families, gathered around the roast pig and the Lucien tree all lit up with candles and popcorn. She remembered how cold it was in the factory that day. A few of the high windows stood open as usual,

necessary for ventilation when the machines were all running, when the concrete floors were packed with the sweating bodies of warm human workers. The curved, unsanded wooden skeletons of unfinished pianos stood like guards at the end of each production line, and the various tools lay abandoned on the scattered workbenches. Flecks of the outside air hung suspended halfway above the immobile steel ceiling fans, and the sunlight glinted through them, throwing cracked glass rainbows across the empty work floor.

That was her body now, she thought, wishing the tears would come. Stopped production, work conditions deemed unfit for employment. She would never give life, never have a child of her own, and the worst part about it was that CIGARS didn't say exactly why. If she had known why, even a hint, she could have cut out that piece of her, begged for another chance. But of course, she knew that CIGARS word was final. The schools taught that along with puberty education in grade five. Created by Albert Lucien in 1782, CIGARS was not supposed to be viewed as cruel, but as life-saving, life-preserving. It was their decision and theirs alone as to whether you were granted access to the mating pool, and after that, which mating pools you were eligible for, how many babies you would conceive, how many consummation partners you would be assigned. Only they had access to all of your genetic and biological information, only they could enforce the efficiency of natural selection. It was a universally celebrated entity, the reason for St. Lucien's Day, and most of the other major holidays. Still, today Marie found it hard not to hate CIGARS for what they'd forever taken from her.

Marie stood up from the couch. The volunteer catalogs spilled to the floor, their glossy pages of baby faces bent against the rough beige carpet. Rubbing circles into the palm of her left hand with her right thumb, she walked over to the window, looked out on the suburb where she lived. Yards and trees, quaint houses. Farther away, another block of townhouses designed like hers rose up flat and

unimposing, a subtle fence for the split-levels and tudors and ranch style houses in the suburbs proper.

And everywhere, families bobbed along the sidewalks. Moms with gold reproduction cuffs on their wrists pushed howling infants along in prams, fathers wearing silver approved mate I.D. badges around their necks bounced grinning toddlers on their broad shoulders. A ten year old on a bike stopped to help his little sister who had taken a spill on the concrete. Across the street, sandy headed twin boys who looked to be about five gathered weed flowers and presented them to their blonde mother, who smiled and scooped them into a kneeling hug. Their happiness gleamed like the shining flakes of wind that raced around in the sky. Before, when it had seemed like a prophecy, she had loved the view. Today it felt like an attack.

Marie turned away from the window, walked back across the living room, passing the piano on the walk to her bedroom. She thought of the empty factory again and frowned. In her room, her king bed beckoned. She flopped down on it, hoping for sleep to take her away into nothingness, into anything but this spiked disappointment, this unending betrayal. But when she closed her eyes, all she felt was an intensification of the pain inside. Maybe a shower would help.

She rolled sideways off the bed and stripped off her clothes as she made her way to the bathroom, pausing to click on the radio that she kept next to her sink. She stepped into the shower, pulled the glass door shut behind her, turned the faucet on to hot. Over the sounds of the running water, Marie heard the radio DJ announce the next song.

“Give it up for the newest hit by rock band sensation Led Zeppelin! To everyone just tuning into KTRJ The Star, we are now climbing the Stairway to Heaven!”

As the first few notes of the song twanged in the air, Mary stepped into the pummeling stream of the shower and threw her head back, tracing tired fingers through her stringy, lifeless hair. The woodwinds began their dance with the acoustic guitar, and the hot

water stung as it hit her closed eyelids. The song deepened, spread out wide, prefaced the story about to be told. Mary licked her lips, let the music and the water melt away her thoughts of Chris, of Elise, of bills and of work troubles, of everything concerning the divorce. She reached for her shampoo blindly, but her hands closed around nothing but empty air. She opened her eyes. She was no longer standing in the shower, the water had disappeared. But the music was still playing, although it sounded different—Mary could no longer detect the clarity of the vinyl, now it sounded almost staticky. She looked around her—she stood in front of a carved vanity and a massive king sized bed, still made. It was no place she'd ever seen before, at least that she could remember, anyway.

luxurious living room. There was a couch, beige leather, across from a bookshelf lined with Ray Bradbury titles she'd never heard of before, Flannery O'Connor and Virginia Woolf. No Hemingway or Steinbeck to be found. She decided she liked whoever lived here, even if they had drugged her. In the corner was a beautiful, shined grand piano, open and black, its keys beckoning. With a smile, Mary started toward the bench, then paused. Someone might hear her. "Hello?" she called, and immediately regretted it. Wherever she was, she was stark naked, and had no real explanation for her presence there. In the next room over, she could hear the shower running. Her breathing quickened, her tongue dried out. She snatched a throw off of the bed, wrapped it around herself, and tiptoed into the bathroom. She jumped at her own reflection in the mirror, but when she rounded the corner, the glass-walled shower was empty, its stream on full blast. A radio opposite the sink crackled out the melody of Stairway.

Still, when was the last time she'd even been this close to a piano? Whoever had brought her to this place would certainly know that she was there, right? She took a breath, steeling herself. What if she was terrible now? She'd been out of practice for so long—they hadn't owned a piano ever since Elise had turned five, when she had gotten ahold of the scissors one day that the top was left up (keeping the top of the baby grand closed whenever the piano was

not in use had always been a rule, ever since Elise had been born), and having climbed on top of the keys, had cut through nearly all of the strings that made the piano function as an instrument.

But the temptation to play was too great to pass up, even if she did let herself down. Mary slid onto the polished black wooden bench and rested her fingers on the keys. For a moment, she closed her eyes and just bathed in the past. She was in Carnegie
There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold...

Frowning, Mary tightened the blanket around her chest and left the bathroom, leaving the shower running. She didn't want to touch anything else—what if this was some kind of weird hallucination she was having? She could think that she was turning off the shower and really be turning on the gas stove back at home in the sublet. Still, there was something so real and separate about this place that she seriously doubted her hallucination theory. How had she gotten there, then? Had she been drugged? As she thought about her current and inexplicable situation, she walked through the bedroom, which incidentally seemed normal enough, and stepped through the doorway into a small, but luxurious living room. There was a couch, beige leather, across from a bookshelf lined with Ray Bradbury titles she'd never heard of before, Flannery O'Connor and Virginia Woolf. No Hemingway or Steinbeck to be found. She decided she liked whoever lived here, even if they had drugged her. In the corner was a beautiful, shined grand piano, open and black, its keys beckoning. With a smile, Mary started toward the bench, then paused. Someone might hear her.

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But the temptation to play was too great to pass up, even if she did let herself down. Mary slid onto the polished black wooden bench and rested her fingers on the keys. For a moment, she closed her eyes and just bathed in the past. She was in Carnegie Hall, it was the first big solo concert of her short-lived career, and her hands were shaking from nerves. That was back when she was with Lou, the sweetheart conductor from Paris, so fond of Chopin and his nocturnes, his ballades. How she had loved his music, his tastes. But she hadn't loved him, exactly, not in the way that she'd come to love Chris Frederick, the tanned, wild-haired man who stood and burned in the corners of every party at Julliard. But then Chris hadn't ever understood her music, not really, even when he swore that her concertos were the reason he'd noticed her in the first place. But then that's what Chris ended up being good at. Spotting the musicians with talent and getting every one of them to bend to his will.

She opened her eyes, straightened her posture, rounded out her hands, and softened her fingers. The first note she played sounded sharp and unnatural, but then Chopin's ballade number one climbed up the scales and floated through her as though she had never left the bench. Trusting her fingers more and more with each successful chord and note, Mary sank into the song, closing her eyes again. Tears pricked behind her eyelids as she moved into the first allegro of the piece. She smiled in the empty apartment, opened her eyes. Suddenly, with a clattering halt, she remembered where she was, and she stood up from the bench abruptly, decapitating the florid, immersive melody. No longer able to stand the beauty of the piano, Mary turned to face the large windows on the opposite wall. Led Zeppelin crooned in the piano's silence.

Ooooh, makes me wonder...

She crossed the living room, stood before the open window, and stared. The world inside the stairway (because that's what this was, wasn't it? This must have been the place that all those ledheads

used to go on about, the nirvana or whatever that you finally could access with the help of Stairway to Heaven and some good weed or acid)—the world inside the stairway was a world at first glance caked in gold dust, actual flakes that fell from the sky like snow or ash. It was kaleidoscopic, so to speak, in that the colors in these constantly swirling fragments of terrain shimmered and slid in and out of mirrored iridescence. The neighborhood was suburban, the houses were familiar, but the sky danced with flecks of light. It was impossible and breathtaking, and Mary never wanted to leave.

Faint now, the song started its last uphill climb—she could tell by the accelerated tempo, the changed tone of the piece. Mary still didn't know where she was, but she knew that she needed to think of something, and fast. She pulled herself away from the window and looked around the room.

There was a pile of fallen baby magazines on the carpet near the couch. What if she got stuck here? What would happen to Elise? Chris would probably get her for good, and then who knew where the girl would end up? With one last glance at the piano in the corner, Mary raced back through the bedroom and into the tiled bathroom. She had one idea, and although it wasn't very inspired or scientific, she figured it couldn't hurt to give it a try.

And if you listen very hard, the truth will come to you at last...

She yanked open the door to the shower, flung the throw behind her, and jumped into the shower, praying to God or Jimmy Page or Robert Plant, to whoever it was that had created this beautiful solitary space for her, that she could get back home to her cat food-smelling sublet. As the song faded out, as the water poured over her bare skin, Mary wondered if she did get home, if she'd ever be able to come back here again.

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Almost as soon as she had shut the shower door behind her, just as the water had hit her bare shoulders, Marie found herself standing, no longer in her own bathroom, but at the head of someone's unmade, bright green twin-sized bed.

“What the fuck?” she said aloud, and hopped down from the bed. The bedroom, if that's what it was, was tiny, and there were dirty clothes strewn all over the wooden floor. Marie scrunched her nose. The air smelled like cat food and must, or maybe mildew. Terrible, in any case.

She had heard that CIGARS had been working on some new genetic alterations that were rumored to have teleportative qualities, but those were just rumors told by the bored housewives that lived in the biggest houses at the end of the cul de sac. Still, maybe this was some kind of adaptability test that CIGARS was using for parenthood eligibility. Maybe it was all part of a larger test, to see if she could handle rejection, if she could learn to adapt quickly to changing surroundings. From all that she heard about it, being a parent sounded like trying to survive on a desert island, dangerous, tiring, and less glamorous than it seemed.

She was stark naked, and a little wet, and the air in the apartment was freezing. She kicked aside the dirty clothes, walked the two steps it took to get to the closet, and pulled open the doors. Suit, suit, skirt suit, sheath dress, suit...whatever woman lived in this shitty apartment seemed like they never got out. Maybe they had been denied the mating pool too, though that certainly wouldn't have stopped them from being able to have casual sex, at least not after their operation. Maybe this woman had just found out about her rejection from CIGARS, too.

As Marie flicked through the hangers in the closet, she heard the plucking of a guitar paired with the trilling of a flute, and stepping out into the main room of the apartment, which was still disproportionately small, discovered that the song was Stairway to Heaven. She wondered if this had anything to do with her sudden relocation as she followed the sound to its source, a little bathroom just to the right of the main door to the apartment. A curious apparatus was playing the music—inside of a grey felt box, a round black thing like an oil slick spun on what looked like a griddle, beneath a long-handled needle.

Marie had never seen anything like it.

There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure, because you know sometimes words have two meanings...

She looked around the bathroom. Behind the blue shower curtain, a steady stream of hot water poured into a bathtub edged with rust-colored soap scum. She stuck her hand into the falling water, and her fingers fuzzed in and out of sight, bent and waving like the images on a faulty TV channel. She blinked and pulled her hand away. It became solid again. She held her palm up to the light in the bathroom, turned her hand this way and that. She shook it. She punched the wall with it and yelped in pain. Then she stuck her hand back into the running stream. Same story—it looked as though her skin were disintegrating into wavelengths that spiked and bobbed along with the music. When she took her hand out of the water a second time, she was not surprised when everything went back to normal. Frowning, she reached around the water and turned off the faucet. Then she waved her hand over the space where the water had been just a moment before. Nothing. Marie raised an eyebrow. This was by far one of the weirder things she'd ever experienced. Well, if this was a test, if CIGARS execs were watching, she wanted to pass it, and that meant, she guessed, acting normal about the whole thing. She stepped into the crunched-in pair of jeans on the bathroom floor and pulled on the discarded tee shirt next to them. Then she left the bathroom and opened the refrigerator, took out a bottled spring water. When she closed the door, she noticed a grocery list and two photographs on the fridge door—one of a young, but beautiful blonde girl smiling in a shiny turquoise beaded gown, standing outside somewhere, a clump of flowers at her wrist. The other, Marie pulled away from the magnet. It was a picture of her, or someone who looked like her, anyway, sitting at a table with her arm around the blonde girl from the other photo, though in this picture, the blonde girl was much younger, probably around ten or so. The two were wearing party hats and smiling behind a cake that said Happy Birthday, Elise, in yellow script. Your head is humming and it won't go, in case you don't know...

Just then, Marie heard the lock turn in the front door, and before she had time to react, the door opened, and the blonde girl from the photos stepped into the apartment, wearing heavy makeup and holding a lit cigarette between her fingers. When she saw Marie standing in front of the fridge, she rolled her eyes and put out the cigarette on the marble kitchen countertop.

"Sorry, Mary," she sneered. "I didn't realize you'd be here. I came for my coat." Then she pushed past Marie and grabbed a tan trench coat off the beaten-in couch.

"It's Marie, actually," said Marie. She stuffed the photo into the back pocket of her jeans. "Um, how was your day?"

"Mom," Elise said. "Don't try to be cute. Your name's Mary, not fucking Marie." She smelled the inside of the trench coat. "Oh my god! Did you wear this?"

"Um," said Marie.

Elise pulled a phone out of her pocket and answered, holding a finger up toward Marie. "Hey," she said into the phone. "Yeah, I'm on the way. My mom is here, and she's acting like a fucking weirdo, so it's taking longer."

Marie heard the speed of the music pick up. She shifted her weight. What happened when the song ended?

And as we wind on down the road, our shadows taller than our souls...

Elise hung up. "Okay, one, please don't wear my shit when I'm not around, got it?" Marie nodded. Elise pushed past her toward the door. "And two, Led Zeppelin, mom, really? God, you're old."

"Wait!" said Marie as Elise reached for the door.

The girl whipped around. "What?" She stared at Marie. "Oh, right. Love you. Whatever." Then she leaned in for a one-armed hug. Marie stiffened and something bubbled like champagne at the top of her brain. She smiled.

From the bedroom came a giant noise like bedsprings creaking. The song was almost over.

To be a rock and not to roll...

“Shit!” said Marie, and she ran for the bathroom, jumped in the bathtub, and cranked on the water. As though from very far away, she faintly heard Elise say, “What the hell, Mary? Why are you naked? And didn't you just run into the bathroom? I must be more drunk than I thought.”

As the water rushed over her, drenching her clothes, she mouthed those precious words again, over and over. “Mom. Love you.”

Mary stumbled into her own living room, dripping and thoroughly confused. When she saw her daughter standing at the front door, she rushed over to her. “Elise, honey. Are you alright? I'm so sorry I disappeared. I don't know what happened—”

Elise recoiled and threw her arms up in front of her face. “What the hell, Mary? Why are you naked? And didn't you just run into the bathroom? I must be more drunk than I thought.” Then she cupped a hand in front of her mouth and nose, huffed and sniffed, checking her breath.

Mary grabbed her hand. “Elise,” she said, in full mom voice. “This is serious.”

“Mom,” said Elise, in the same exact tone. “I seriously have to go.” Then she pulled away, adding for good measure, “And you seriously need some clothes.” She gestured to herself. “Serious emotional scarring, that's what's serious right now.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Fine, then throw me my clothes, will you? They're in the bathroom.” She watched as Elise disappeared into the next room. “And by the way, you're not going anywhere if you really are drunk, young lady.”

Elise sighed in the other room before she emerged, a towel in hand. She tossed it at Mary. “There are no clothes in here, Marie,” she scowled. “And I'm doing whatever the hell I want, old bitch.”

“I'm not going to let you talk to me like that!”

“Oh really? Cause I think I just did.”

Mary had had about enough of this. And what was the Marie thing about? Who knew.

She wrapped the towel tightly around her body. There were too many things to cover, she didn't even know where to start. Elise

sulked over to the fridge, started playing with the magnets. Before Mary could think of what to say next, Elise remarked casually, "I can always call Brendan, you know. I'm sure he'd be interested to hear how you're mistreating me. It's not very motherly of you, leaving me here all alone." She turned to glare at Mary, who crossed her arms in front of her barely covered chest.

"Leave your father's lawyer out of this, Elise."

Elise rounded on her. "You know, I don't know why you're getting all pissy with me, anyway. It's your fault—if you hadn't decided to get a divorce and completely fuck over our lives, I wouldn't have to be talking to lawyers anyway," she said. Her words slurred together ever so slightly. "Ever think of that, Sherlock?" She turned back to the fridge, started tearing the grocery list into tiny pieces. In spite of the anger rising in her chest, making her fingers throb, Mary smiled a little to see her daughter's quirks coming through. She always worked so hard to hide these small eccentricities, viewing them as weaknesses, faults of character, and nothing Mary said could convince Elise otherwise. They reminded Mary that Elise was not entirely unbreakable, that she was not the battle-worn tank of a girl she pretended to be most days.

"I know this has been hard on you," Mary said. "It's been hard on everyone."

Elise ripped with a particular ferocity, and the whole list came off the fridge.

"Yeah, well," she said, quieter now. "That doesn't matter to you, or you would just call

off the whole thing." She bent to pick up the notepad, deliberately avoiding eye contact. Mary thought her daughter might be crying, and she reached out to her.

"Honey, it's not my fault that your father decided to cheat."

Elise's eyes snapped, and she slapped Mary's hand away. "He hasn't even done anything that is technically cheating. It's for his job, Mom. Even I understand that," she said. "God, you're just as paranoid as Dad says you are. All you care about is yourself." She turned back to the fridge, fingered the edge of her photograph

absently. Her face stormed, and Mary understood. This whole divorce thing was like a giant swamp full of unseen painful shit, and it always came up to bite you when you least expected it. But she had to be the strong one, she was the mom, after all. It was her job. "It doesn't matter if he's not technically cheating," Mary said. "It still counts."

But Elise wasn't listening. She was staring at a blank space on the fridge. Mary furrowed her brow. Elise looked up at her, her expression fragile as knives. When she spoke, her voice came out dangerously level. "Where is our picture? The one of my birthday. Where is it?"

Mary stared at the fridge. "I don't know," she said, after a moment. "I'm sorry."

"You don't know."

"No, hun, I told you, I'm sorry," she said, throwing up a hand. "I'm a little busy trying to keep my life together to keep track of every picture on the fridge." Elise didn't fire back immediately, and Mary's anger swelled and burst within her. "You know what, sweetheart? Why don't you add that to the list of things you're going to cry to Brendan about, hmm? 'Mom loses random pictures.' Well, if that's not a reason to fucking burn me at the goddamn stake, I don't know what is." Mary looked at Elise. The anger had gone from her daughter's face, and all that remained was the brokenness. Tears gathered and trembled in the corners of Elise's blue eyes. Mary looked down at the floor. She suddenly felt her own nakedness, and all she wanted was to go put on some clothes.

"That picture was special," Elise choked. Then she picked up her coat and her purse and unlocked the front door. "I have to go," she said, her voice cracking. Mary felt the door slam deep in her brain—one more thing to add to the list of nonexistent things. She sunk to the floor, balled her legs up beneath her, and let herself cry. It would be two months before she listened to Stairway in the shower once more, though on that day, she swore to herself never again.

That day, as soon as Marie got back to her townhouse, sopping wet in someone else's clothes, she ran into her bathroom and plugged in her hair dryer, pulled out the quickly crinkling photo of "Mary," whoever that was, with her daughter, Elise, and blow dried the photo on low, from at least six inches away for two and a half hours. She was terrified that this small record of Elise, by all means her own daughter in a way, would be destroyed, and to prevent against its destruction, she spent the whole hour afterward making and printing out copies of the photo on her home scanner. The first month, Marie kept her job at the piano factory. She made as much money as she could, then went out and spent it all on things that teenage girls wanted. She even bought Elise a car, one of the new hoverhybrids. She could not wait to take her rightful place as Elise's mother. Everyone who was acquainted with Marie, all of her friends at work, in the neighborhood, said that they had never seen her so happy as during that first month. She was still putting off her mandatory historectomy, but that wasn't anything out of the ordinary; plenty of busy women wanted to wait until a bank holiday to get it done, so that they didn't have to call in sick for work during the surgery.

What they didn't see was that Marie had started showering once every hour that she was at home, and sometimes during work, she'd go home to shower while listening to Stairway to Heaven in the hopes of getting back to Mary's tiny, odiferous apartment, where she thought she could convince Elise to come back and live with her instead. But it never worked, no matter how often she showered. It didn't matter that she tried her best to recreate exactly what her actions before she'd taken the fateful shower—she reopened the CIGARS letter, she re-dumped the volunteer magazines on the carpet, she replopped herself on the right side of her bed, then she stripped on the way to the bathroom and, as nonchalantly as possible, she'd turn on the cd-player, where Led Zeppelin's single EP for Stairway to Heaven spun in the disc reader. She'd tried to wait for the song to just happen to come on, but now the band was coming out with new songs like "Kashmir" and "Immigrant Song"

and “Rock and Roll,” and nobody wanted to hear Stairway when they could hear the new ones instead. It was all very frustrating for Marie.

Certainly, she still wondered if it had all been some kind of test by CIGARS, but she supposed that since she hadn't heard anything from them about it by now, she had probably failed in some way or other. Marie tried not to dwell on these negative conclusions.

Optimism was the only way to deal with what she'd been through, and she knew it wasn't a dream—she had the photograph as proof of that. Yes, she told herself, all she had to do was be patient. Good things came to those who waited, or whatever. Nevermind that she'd never placed much stock in clichés before—this one fit her purposes, and really, she saw no other way to proceed regarding the matter.

During the second month of waiting, however, Marie began to get impulsive. The doctors at CIGARS kept calling, day and night, asking her to schedule at least the mandatory briefing session regarding the historectomy surgical process, and she was running out of excuses. She started losing sleep, hearing and seeing things in the shadows of her single occupancy townhouse—mysterious beings with scalpels for hands and searching red eyes that gleamed from the shadows of their bodies just above a bloodstained white surgical mask, demon babies, fallen angels, piano skeletons which had been brought to life, and which gnashed at her with their teeth. Utterly fatigued and always on edge, she'd at least had the good sense to quit her job at the factory after a particular incident involving a round saw and a fresh baseboard at the next production line over. If she'd gotten herself fired and she was on CIGARS' shit list, well. It would only be a matter of time before she wound up imprisoned on some false charge or taken in for questioning, and she didn't know how well she'd hold up under that kind of verbal attack. Especially not from CIGARS. Their “polite” letter about her exclusion from the mating pools had been devastating enough—she didn't want to know what they would say if they were trying to insult her. By now, her skin was becoming so dry from her multiple showertimes that she carried a bottle of shea butter on her person at all times—the skin

on her arms and chest was so parched that, lying in bed alone at night, she could run a hand down the opposite arm and a full sheet of skin would flake off, no less easily than if she had been a snake, sloughing her old skins.

Finally, she did go down to CIGARS, two days before the breakthrough. She broke the cardinal rule that she'd been taught in grade school. Never act as though you know better than CIGARS. But she did. She had seen her offspring in person, she pleaded with the vapid secretary at the modern-style reception desk, and after security had gotten a clear photo of her face, and after they'd forced her to sign up for her surgery, the two burly officers had escorted her from the building. The next evening, she made national news. CIGARS reject Marie Jergundsen, 43, launches nonsensical invective against mating pool program. Oh, the phone calls she'd had to field that night.

Mary hadn't really intended to go back there, not really, even though it had been a particularly rough day—Simpers had totally bombed his contract renewal meeting, and he'd been sent packing that very afternoon. Not a pleasant start for Mary, either. But at least George, was making some progress, and Elise seemed to hate her a little less these days. Her father, fucking Chris, had recently acquired a more permanent piece of eye-candy to show off around town, and Elise was missing the attention from his side. Plus, prom was coming up, and Mary had caved and bought her a designer dress at the last minute. Mary hated those children of divorced parents who felt like they were somehow entitled to twice as much stuff and half as much responsibility, but to Mary, Elise didn't really seem to have the money bug, not really.

But the real reason Mary was trying to get back was that she had recently had a dream about finishing the Chopin ballade she'd once started on the piano in the stairway, and this dream had proven too persistent to be denied. This time, though, she bathed fully clothed, with a trashbag over her entire body so that when she crossed over, she wouldn't find herself completely in the buff. And she'd chosen a

night when Elise was planning to visit, so she knew that ahead of time that she would only have a few minutes of playing time. Just as anticipated, she found herself teleported to the same spot as before, right between the vanity and the bed. Her clothes made it this time, though, so that was a relief. Mary wasn't the kind of girl who just liked to traipse around in nothing but her skin. Upon reaching the other universe, a sense of profound happiness washed over her entire being. Until she glanced around the room. Everywhere, hung up all over the walls of the bedroom, blown up to massive proportions, the missing photograph from the fridge, of Mary and Elise at her 10th birthday party, grinned down at them. If that weren't enough, the far corner of the bedroom was cluttered with gadgets all tagged and labeled, "For Elise, my sweet, beautiful daughter."

Something growling and dark stirred in the base of Mary's stomach, and she ran to the running shower. Whoever this woman was, it ended today. As the water ran down her face, Mary clenched her fists and waited to be brought back to her own reality. On the night of her return to Mary's apartment, to Elise's world, Marie had decided to give it all up. She was scheduled to have the mandatory historectomy the next day, and the only reason she really even showered to Stairway to Heaven at all was that she had become accustomed to the routine. Unaware of the momentousness of the occasion, Marie had stripped off her clothes, cranked on the showerhead. Then she kicked on the CD player, and stepped into the shower, into the stairway.

Marie had taken to carrying a cutout from the original photo in a locket that she wore around her neck at all times. She wasn't comfortable leaving home without it, she would never have taken it off just to shower. So, it was by lucky happenstance that she came to return the stolen photograph to its original owners.

When she first landed on the green twin bed, when the cat food air hit her again, Marie thought that she must be dreaming, that she must have just fallen asleep in the shower, that it couldn't be

possible. But, she bounded off the bed, in full nude, and the place was real, she was back.

And she's buying the stairway to heaven...

"Elise!" she called, her voice cracking. She didn't even bother, this time, to put on clothes. She ran out into the main room, screaming her long-lost daughter's name, but the only response she heard was

Led Zeppelin and the pounding of footsteps down the outside hall.

Then the door opened, and Elise, the wonderful, impossible Elise was there, finally. "Mom?" her voice was high, wobbly. "Are you okay?" She rushed to her side. "Where are your clothes? Are you having a fucking stroke or something?"

Marie wanted to answer all these questions and more, but words failed her. Instead, she sat there, crumpled on the floor.

And a new day will dawn for those who stay long...

Marie looked on as Elise attempted to take care of her. Of course there was nothing wrong, not really. But Marie wondered how she could use this situation to her advantage. Elise motioned for her to lean forward so that she could wrap Marie in a fleece blanket from the couch.

Then she heard the groan of bedsprings from the little, and before she had time to react, Mary lunged at her, trimmed fingernails bared.

Out of instinct, Elise tried to protect Marie from her attacker, but once she saw that Mary was the one going in for the kill, she staggered back, away from the brawling women, completely at a loss. Even Mary stopped, her fingers wrapped around Marie's throat. The two women could have been identical twins. In nearly every way, the two were indistinguishable from each other physically. Lithe, tanned bodies, a bit past their prime, but in no way obese. Large breasts, or relatively so. Long, tangled brown hair. Thin, elegant fingers. Full lips, freckles across the nose, which was straight and pointed slightly upward. The only difference between

them was their eyes—Mary's were light greyish blue, Marie's were light greenish grey.

They only paused a moment, then Mary grabbed Marie by the hair and dragged her to her feet. Marie yelped in pain, clawed at Mary wildly.

“I don't know who you are, but I will tell you this only once,” Mary said, her voice low and steady. She stared this strange version of herself in the eye. “You will never come back here ever again. Do you understand me?”

Marie's eyes flicked over at Elise, who held out her phone as though getting ready to call the authorities. “Mom?” she said, her voice barely more than a whimper. Mary didn't take her eyes off of the intruder.

When Marie said, “Yes dear?” Mary slammed her against the open door frame. “Stay away from my daughter.”

Mary watched her counterpart, but her eyes seemed lost, off somewhere. “Do you understand me?” she yelled again. “I'm not losing my daughter to anyone! Not to you, not to Chris, not to anyone. She is mine, and I am hers, and that is something you can never sever.”

Elise was breathing hard through her nose, Mary could hear her. “It's okay, honey,” Mary said. “I've got it under control, okay? Just go, drive over to your dad's house. I'll pick you up when I'm done.”

“No fucking way,” said Elise. “I'm not a baby. This is just freaky as hell.” Mary smiled in spite of herself. “You're telling me.”

All the while, Led Zeppelin crooned in the background. Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on...

Marie seemed to come to at this lyric. She looked from Elise to Mary, and back again. The change was so drastic between them, from the way that Elise had once spoken to her, Marie, thinking she was her mother, that she realized the folly of her plan. She swallowed hard. As Marie considered her next plan of action, she watched the two women argue as though she'd known them all her life.

“Mom, come on! What do we do with her?”

“Hush, baby, I’m trying to think.”

Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow? And did you know? Your stairway lies on the whispering wind...

Marie thought of all the love and the hurt that Mary and Elise must have had to go through in order to get to the imperfect place where they were today—arguing over how to dispose of a naked doppelganger from another universe, a stranger brought to them by the power of music and of the human need for escape.

Maybe that’s what she needed anyway. Just an escape from this world, from her own.

And if you listen very hard, the truth will come to you at last...

“Mom!” Elise yelled. “What happens when the song runs out?”

Mary frowned and let go of Marie as though just remembering she were there. “I don’t know.” Marie watched calmly as Mary grabbed her shoulders now. “Hey, um, what’s your name?” But Marie just smiled back at them.

“It’s Marie,” Elise said after a moment. “Right? You told me that, the last time.”

Marie nodded, and walked over to sit down on the couch. She took off the locket and placed it gingerly on the coffee table and folded the blanket more comfortably over herself.

To be a rock and not to roll! sang the members of Led Zeppelin, as the last frantic verse wound down into acoustics for the grand finale.

Mary looked as though she were running late for a train she knew she would never be able to make. “Hey, listen, um Marie, you had better get going...”

“I want to stay,” said Marie. She reached out toward Mary, who gave Marie her hand.

And there, together with her would-have been daughter and her alternate persona, Marie Jergundsen became the first person to access the Stairway to Heaven. The song strummed to a slow trickle of musical notes and a whirl of the gold flecks from the other universe engulfed the trio. Mary and Elise watched, holding hands

tight, as Marie disintegrated into fragments of light, against the song's last verse.

And she's buying the Stairway to Heaven.

