

“ID”

By Joyce Carol Oates, *The New Yorker*, 2011

“For an *eiii-dee*,” they were saying. “We need to see Lisette Mulvey.”

This was unexpected.

In second-period class, at 9:40 A.M., on some damn Monday in some damn winter month she’d lost track of, when even the year—a “new” year—seemed weird to her, like a movie set in a faraway galaxy.

It was one of those school mornings—some older guys had got her high on beer, for a joke. Well, it *was* funny, not just the guys laughing at her but Lisette laughing at herself. Not mean-laughing—she didn’t think so—but like they liked her. “*Liz-zette*”—“*Liz-zette*”—was their name for her, high-pitched piping like bats, and they’d run their fingers fast along her arms, her back, like she was scalding hot to the touch.

They picked her up on their way to school. The middle school was close to the high school. Most times, she was with a girlfriend—Keisha or Tanya. They were mature girls for their age—Keisha, especially—and not shy like the other middle-school girls. They knew how to talk to guys, and guys knew how to talk to them, but it was just talk mostly.

Now this was—math?—damn math class that Lisette hated. It made her feel so stupid. Not that she *was* stupid. It was just that sometimes her thoughts were as snarled as her hair, her eyes leaking tears behind her dark-purple-tinted glasses—*pres-cription* lenses—so that she couldn’t see what the hell the teacher was scribbling on the board, not even the shape of it. Ms. Nowicki would say in her bright hopeful voice, “Who can help me here? Who can tell us what the next step is?” and most of the kids would just sit on their asses, staring. Smirking. Not wanting to be called on. But then Lisette was rarely called on in math class—sometimes she shut her eyes, pretending that she was thinking really hard, and when she opened them there was one of the three or four smart kids in the class at the board, taking the chalk from Nowicki. She tried to watch, and she tried to comprehend. But there was something about the sound of the chalk clicking on the board—not a *black* board, it was green—and the numerals that she was expected to make sense of: she’d begin to feel dizzy.

Her mother, Yvette, had no trouble with numbers. She was a blackjack dealer at the Casino Royale. You had to be smart, and you had to think fast—you had to know what the hell you were doing—to be a blackjack dealer.

Counting cards. This was forbidden. If you caught somebody counting cards you signalled for help. Yvette liked to say that one day soon she would change her name, her hair color, and all that she could about herself, and drive out to Vegas, or to some lesser place, like Reno, and play blackjack in such a way that they’d never catch on—counting cards like no amateur could do.

But if Lisette said, "You're going to take me with you, Momma, O.K.?" her mother would frown as if Lisette had said something really dumb, and laugh. "Sweetie, I'm just joking. Obviously you don't mess with these casino guys."

Vegas or Reno wasn't where she'd gone this time. Lisette was certain of that. She hadn't taken enough clothes.

In seventh grade, Lisette had had no trouble with math. She'd had no trouble with any of her school subjects. She'd got mostly Bs and her mother had stuck her report card, open like a greeting card, to the refrigerator. All that seemed long ago now.

She was having a hard time sitting still. It was like red ants were crawling inside her clothes, in her armpits and between her legs. Stinging and tickling. Making her itch. Except that she couldn't scratch the way she wanted to—really hard with her fingernails, to draw blood—and there was no point in just touching where her skin itched. That would only make it worse.

The ridge of her nose, where the cartilage and bone had been "rebuilt"—a numb sensation there. And her eye—her left eye, with its tears dripping out. *Liz-zette's crying! Hey—Liz-zette's crying! Why're you crying, Liz-zz-zette?*

They liked her, the older guys. That was why they teased her. Like she was some kind of cute little animal, like—a mascot?

First time she'd seen J.C. (Jimmy Chang—he'd transferred into her class in sixth grade), she'd nudged Keisha, saying, "Ohhhh," like in some MTV video, a moan to signal sex-pain, though she didn't know what that was, exactly. Her mother's favorite music videos were soft rock, retro rock, country and Western, disco. Lisette had heard her in the shower, singing-moaning in a way she couldn't decipher—was it angry or happy?

Oh, she hated math class! Hated this place! Sitting at her desk in the row by the windows, at the front of the classroom, made Lisette feel like she was at the edge of a bright-lit room looking in—like she wasn't a part of the class. Nowicki said, "It's to keep you involved, up close like this," so Lisette wouldn't daydream or lose her way, but it had just the opposite effect. Most days Lisette felt like she wasn't there at all.

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She swiped at her eyes. Shifted her buttocks hoping to alleviate the stinging red ants. Nearly fifteen damn minutes she'd been waiting for the teacher to turn her fat back so that she could flip a folded-over note across the aisle to Keisha, for Keisha to flip over to J.C., in the next row. This note wasn't paper but a Kleenex, and on the Kleenex a lipstick kiss—a luscious grape-colored lipstick kiss—for J.C. from Lisette.

She'd felt so dreamy blotting her lips on the Kleenex. A brand-new lipstick, Deep Purple, which her mother knew nothing about, because Lisette, like her girlfriends, wore lipstick

only away from home, and it was startling how different they all looked within seconds—how mature and how sexy.

Out of the corner of her eye she was watching J.C.—J.C., stretching his long legs in the aisle, silky black hair falling across his forehead. J.C. wasn't a guy you trifled with. Not J.C. or his "posse." She'd been told. She'd been warned. These were older guys by a year or maybe two. They'd been kept back in school, or had started school later than their classmates. But the beer buzz at the back of Lisette's head made her careless, reckless.

J.C.'s father worked at the Trump Taj Mahal. Where he'd come from, somewhere called Bay-jing, in China, he'd driven a car for some high government official. Or he'd been a bodyguard. J.C. boasted that his father carried a gun. J.C. had held it in his hand. Man, he'd fired it!

A girl had asked J.C. if he'd ever shot anybody and J.C. had shrugged and laughed.

Lisette's mother had moved Lisette and herself to Atlantic City from Edison, New Jersey, when Lisette was nine years old. She'd been separated from Lisette's father, but later Daddy had come to stay with them when he was on leave from the Army. Then they were separated again. Now they were divorced.

Lisette liked to name the places where her mother had worked. They had such special names: Trump Taj Mahal, Bally's, Harrah's, the Casino Royale. Except she wasn't certain if Yvette still worked at the Casino Royale—if she was still a blackjack dealer. Could be, Yvette was back to being a cocktail waitress.

It made Lisette so damnangry! You could ask her mother the most direct question, like "Exactly where the hell are you working now, Momma?" and her mother would find a way to give an answer that made some kind of sense at the time, but melted away afterward, like a tissue dipped in water.

J.C.'s father was a security guard at the Taj. That was a fact. J.C. and his friends never approached the Taj but hung out instead at the south end of the Strip, where there were cheap motels, fast-food restaurants, pawnshops, bail-bond shops, and storefront churches, with sprawling parking lots, not parking garages, so they could cruise the lots and side streets after dark and break into parked vehicles if no one was watching. The guys laughed at how easy it was to force open a locked door or a trunk, where people left things like, for instance, a woman's heavy handbag that she didn't want to carry while walking on the boardwalk. Assholes! Some of them were so dumb you almost felt sorry for them.

Lisette was still waiting for Nowicki to be distracted. She was beginning to lose her nerve. Passing a lipstick kiss to J.C. was like saying, "All right, if you want me—whatever—hey, here I am."

Except maybe it was just a joke. So many things were jokes—you had to negotiate the more precise meaning later. If there was a later. Lisette wasn't into thinking too seriously about later.

She wiped her eyes with her fingertips, like she wasn't supposed to do since the surgery. *Your fingers are dirty, Lisette. You must not touch your eyes with your dirty fingers. There is the risk of infection.* Oh, God, she hated how both her eyes filled with tears in the cold months and in bright light, like the damn fluorescent light in all the schoolrooms and corridors. So her mother had got permission for Lisette to wear her dark-purple-tinted glasses to school. They made her look cool—like she was in high school, not middle school, sixteen or seventeen, not thirteen.

"Hell, you're not thirteen—are you? You?" one of her mother's man friends would say, eying her suspiciously. But, like, why would she want to play some trick about her *age*? He'd been mostly an asshole, this friend of her mother's. Chester—*Chet*. But he'd lent Momma some part of the money she'd needed for Lisette's eye doctor.

This morning Lisette had had to get up by herself. Get her own breakfast—Frosted Wheaties—in front of the TV, and she hated morning TV, cartoons and crap, or, worse yet, "news." She'd slept in her clothes for the third night in a row—black T-shirt, underwear, wool socks—dragged on her jeans, a scuzzy black sweater of her mother's with "TAJ" embossed on the back in turquoise satin. And her boots. Checked the phone messages but there were none.

Friday night at nine her mother had called. Lisette had seen the caller I.D. and hadn't picked up. *Why should I talk to you?* Later, feeling kind of scared, hearing loud voices out in the street, she'd tried to call her mother's cell phone. But the call hadn't gone through. *I hate you anyway. Hate hate hate you!*

Unless Momma brought her back something nice, like when she and Lisette's father went to Fort Lauderdale for their "second honeymoon" and Momma brought back a pink-coral-colored outfit—tunic top, pants. Even with all that had gone wrong in Fort Lauderdale, Momma had remembered to bring Lisette a gift.

Now it happened—and it happened fast.

Nowicki went to the classroom door, where someone was knocking and—*quick!*—with a pounding heart Lisette leaned over to hand the wadded Kleenex note to Keisha, who tossed it onto J.C.'s desk. J.C. blinked at the note like it was some weird beetle that had

fallen from the ceiling, and without glancing over at Keisha or at Lisette, peering at him through her tinted glasses, with a gesture like shrugging his shoulders—J.C. was so *cool*—all he did was shut the Kleenex in his fist and shove it into a pocket of his jeans.

Any other guy, he'd open the note to see what it was. But not Jimmy Chang. J.C. was so accustomed to girls tossing him notes in class, he didn't have much curiosity about what it was that the snarl-haired girl in the dark glasses had sent him—or maybe he already had a good idea what it was. *Kiss-kiss. Kiss-kiss-kiss.* The main thing was that J.C. hadn't just laughed and crumpled it up like trash.

By now Lisette's mouth was dry like cotton. This was the first time she'd passed such a note to J.C.—or to any boy. And the beer buzz that had made her feel so happy and hopeful was rapidly fading.

She'd had half a beer, maybe. Swilling it down outside in the parking lot, where the buses parked and fouled the air with exhaust, but the guys didn't seem to notice, loud-talking and loud-laughing, and she could see the way they looked at her sometimes: Lisette Mulvey was *hot*.

Except she'd spilled beer on her jacket. Beer stains on the dark-green corduroy, which her mother would detect, if she sniffed at them. Whenever she returned home.

This Monday, in January—it *was* January. She'd lost track of the actual date like she'd lost track of the little piece of paper from the eye doctor that her mother had given her, for the drugstore, for the eye drops. This her mother had given her last week, the last time she'd seen her, maybe Thursday morning. Or Wednesday. It was some kind of steroid solution that she needed for her eye after the surgery, but she couldn't find that piece of paper now, not in her jacket or in her backpack or in the kitchen or in her bedroom—not anywhere.

Nowicki was at the door now, turning to look at—who? Lisette? It was like a bad dream, where you're singled out—some stranger, a cop, it looked like, coming to your classroom to ask for *you*.

“Lisette? Can you step out into the hall with us, please?”

Next to Nowicki was a woman in a uniform—had to be Atlantic City P.D.—Hispanic features and skin color, and dark hair drawn back tight and sleek in a knot. Everybody in the classroom was riveted now, awake and staring, and poor Lisette in her seat was paralyzed, stunned. She tried to stand, biting at her lip. Her feet were tangled in her backpack straps. There was a roaring in her ears, through which the female cop's voice penetrated, repeating what she'd said and adding, “Personal possessions, please,”

meaning that Lisette should bring her things with her. She wouldn't be returning to the classroom.

So scared, she belched beer. Sour-vomity-beer taste in her mouth and—oh, Christ!—what if the cop smelled her breath?

In the corridor, a worse roaring in her ears, out of the woman's mouth came bizarre sounds. *Eiii-dee. If you are Lisette Mulvey, come with me.*

Eiii-dee, eiii-dee—like a gull's cry borne on the wind, rising and snatched away, even as you strained desperately to hear it.

Turned out, there were two cops who'd come for her.

The Hispanic policewoman introduced herself: Officer Molina. Like Lisette was going to remember this name, let alone use it. The other cop was a man, a little younger than the woman, his skin so acne-scarred you'd be hard put to say if he was white.

Both of them looking at Lisette like—what? Like they felt sorry for her, or were disgusted with her, or—what? She saw the male cop's eyes drop to her tight-fitting jeans with a red rag patch at the knee, then up again to her blank terrified face.

It wouldn't be note-passing in math class that they'd come to arrest her for. Maybe at the Rite Aid the other day—plastic lipstick tubes marked down to sixty-nine cents in a bin. Lisette's fingers had snatched three of them up and into her pocket, without her even knowing what she was doing.

“You are Lisette Mulvey, daughter of Yvette Mulvey, yes?”

Numbly Lisette nodded.

Officer Molina did the talking. Lisette was too frightened to react when the policewoman took hold of her arm at the elbow, not forcibly but firmly, as a female relation might, walking Lisette down the stairs, talking to her in a calm, kindly, matter-of-fact voice that signalled, *You will be all right. This will be all right. Just come with us.*

“How recently did you see your mother, Lisette? Or speak with your mother? Was it today?”

Today? What was today? Lisette couldn't remember.

“Has your mother been away, Lisette? And did she call you?”

Lisette shook her head.

“Your mother isn’t away? But she isn’t at home, is she?”

Lisette tried to think. What was the right answer? A weird scared smile made her mouth twist in the way that pissed off her mother, who mistook the smile for something else.

Molina said, “When did you last speak with your mother, Lisette?”

Shyly Lisette mumbled that she didn’t know.

“But not this morning? Before you went to school?”

“No. Not—this morning.” Lisette shook her head, grateful for something to say that was definite.

They were outside, behind the school. A police cruiser was parked in the fire lane. Lisette felt a taste of panic. Was she being arrested, taken to *juvie court*? The boys in J.C.’s posse joked about *juvie court*.

In the cold wet air she felt the last of the beer buzz evaporate. She hated how the cops—both cops—were staring at her, like they’d never seen anything so sad or so pathetic before, like she was some snivelling little mangy dog. They could see the pimply skin at her hairline and every knot in her frizz-hair that she hadn’t taken the time to comb or run a brush through, let alone shampoo, for four, five days. She hadn’t had a shower, either. That long, her mother had been *away*.

Away for the weekend with—who? That had been one of Momma’s secrets. Could be a new “friend”—some man she’d met at the casino. There were lots of roving unattached men in Atlantic City. If they won in the casino they needed to celebrate with someone, and if they lost in the casino they needed to be cheered up by someone. Yvette Mulvey was the one! Honey-colored hair, not dirt-colored like Lisette’s, in waves to her shoulders, sparkling eyes, a quick soothing laugh that a man wanted to hear—not sharp and ice-picky, driving him up the wall.

Lisette had asked her mother who she was going away for the weekend with and Momma had said, “Nobody you know.” But the way she’d smiled—not at Lisette but to herself, an unfathomable look on her face like she was about to step off a diving board into midair—had made Lisette think suddenly, *Daddy?*

She knew that her mother was still in contact with her father. Somehow she knew this, though Momma had not told her. Even after the divorce, which had been a nasty divorce, they’d been in contact. That was because (as Daddy had explained to her) she would always be his daughter. All else might change—like where Daddy lived, and if Daddy and Mommy were married—but not that. Not ever.

So Lisette had persisted in asking her mother, Was it Daddy she was going away with? Was it Daddy? Was it?—nagging at Momma until she laughed, saying, “Hell no! No way I’m seeing that asshole again.”

Her mother had gone away for the weekend. “I can trust you, Lisette, right?” she’d said, and Lisette had said, “Sure, sure you can.”

Alone in the house meant that Lisette could stay up as late as she wanted. And watch any TV channel she wanted. And lie sprawled on the sofa talking on her cell phone as much as she wanted.

It was a short walk to the mini-mall—Kentucky Fried Chicken, Vito’s Pizzeria, Taco Bell. Though it was easier just to defrost frozen suppers in the microwave and eat in front of the TV.

The first night, Keisha had come over. The girls had watched a DVD that Keisha brought and eaten what they could find in the refrigerator. “It’s cool your mother’s gone away. Where’s she gone?”

Lisette thought. Possibly her mother had gone to Vegas after all. With her man friend, or whoever. This time of year, depressing cold and wet by the ocean—the smartest place to go would be Vegas.

“She’s got lots of friends there, from the casino. She’s welcome to go out there anytime. She’d have taken me, except for damn, dumb school.”

“So when did you last speak to her?”

The cops were staring at her now, waiting for an answer, as she was guiltily faltering, fumbling. “Could’ve been, like, just yesterday—or the day before.”

Her heart thumped in her chest like a crazed sparrow throwing itself against a window, like the one she’d seen in a parking garage once, trapped up by the ceiling, beating its wings and exhausting itself.

Yvette Mulvey was in trouble with the law—was that it?

The only court Lisette had been in was Ocean County Family Court. There, the judge had awarded custody to Yvette Mulvey and visitation privileges to Duane Mulvey. If something happened to Yvette Mulvey now, Lisette would be placed in a foster home. It wasn’t possible for Lisette to live with her father, who was a sergeant in the U.S. Army, and, last she’d heard, was about to be deployed to Iraq for the third time. Deployed was a strange word—a strange sound. *De-ployed*.

Daddy hadn't *meant* to hurt her, she knew. Even Momma believed this, which was why she hadn't called 911. And when the doctor at the E.R. had asked Lisette how her face had got so bruised, her nose and eye socket broken, she'd said that it was an accident on the stairs—she'd been running, and she'd fallen.

Which was true. She'd been running, and she'd fallen. Daddy shouting behind her, swiping with his fists—not meaning to hit her. But he'd been pissed. And all the things that Daddy had said afterward were what she'd wanted to hear; they'd made her cry, she'd wanted so badly to hear them.

“And your father? How recently did you see your father, Lisette?”

In the cruiser, the male cop drove. Molina sat in the passenger seat, swivelled to face Lisette. Her cherry-red lips were bright in her face, like something sparkly on a billboard that was otherwise weatherworn. Her sleek black hair shone like a seal's coat, her dark eyes shone with a strange unspeakable knowledge. It was an expression that Lisette saw often on the faces of women—usually women older than her mother—when they looked at her not in disapproval but with sudden sympathy, *seeing* her.

Lisette was uneasy with the expression. She'd seen it on Nowicki's face, too. Better was the look of disgust, dismay.

Must've been two, three times that Molina explained to Lisette where they were taking her—to the hospital for the I.D. But the words hadn't come together in a way that was comprehensible.

Eiii-dee. Eiii-dee.

“We will stay as long you wish. Or not long at all—it's up to you. Maybe it will be over in a minute.”

Molina spoke to Lisette in this way, which was meant to soothe but did not make sense. No matter the words, there was a meaning beneath them that Lisette could not grasp. Sometimes adults were uncomfortable with Lisette because they thought she was smirking, but it was just the skin around her left eye, the eye socket that had been shattered and repaired, and the frozen look of that part of her face because some of the nerve muscles were dead. “Such a freak accident,” her mother had said. “Told her and told her not to—not to run—on the stairs. You know how kids are!” And half-pleading with the surgeon, though she already knew the answer to the question, “Will they heal ever? The broken nerves?”

Not broken but *dead*.

At the hospital they parked at the rear of the building. In a lowered voice Molina conferred with the male cop. Lisette couldn't hear what they were saying. She had no wish to hear. But she wanted to believe that the Hispanic woman was her friend and could be trusted. It was like that with Hispanic women, the mothers of her classmates—mostly they were nice, they were kind. Molina was a kind woman, you could see how she'd be with children and possibly grandchildren. Weird that she was a cop and carried a gun—*packed heat*, it was said.

Lisette's mother knew some cops—she'd gone out with a cop. She'd said that the life of a cop was so boring; once in a while, something happened and happened fast and you could be shot down in that second or two, but mostly it was very, very boring, like dealing blackjack cards to assholes who think they can win against the house. *You never win against the house.*

They were standing just inside the hospital, on the first floor by the elevators. People moved around them, past them, like blurs in the background of a photograph. It seemed urgent now to listen to what Molina was telling her as she gripped Lisette's arm again. Did Molina think that Lisette was going to try to escape? The male cop held himself a little apart, frowning.

What Molina was saying did not seem relevant to the situation, but later Lisette would see that, yes, everything that the policewoman had said was relevant: asking Lisette about Christmas, which was maybe two or three weeks earlier, and New Year's—and what had Lisette and her mother done over the holidays, anything special?

Lisette tried to think. "Holidays" wasn't a word that she or Momma would use. "Just saw some people. Nothing special."

"You didn't see your father?"

"No."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

Lisette tried to think: he'd been gone by the time of the face surgery and the eye surgery. She'd been out of school. Must have been the summer. Like, around July 4th.

"Not more recently than that?"

Lisette swiped at her eye. Wondering, was this some kind of trick like you saw on TV cop shows?

"On New Year's Eve, did your mother go out?"

Yes. Sure. Momma always went out, New Year's Eve.

"Do you know who she went out with?"

"No."

"He didn't come to the house to pick her up?"

Lisette tried to think. If whoever it was had come to the house, for sure Lisette had hid from him, just like she hid from Momma's women friends, and why? No reason, just wanted to.

Lisette, how big you're getting!

Lisette, taller than your mom, eh?

They took the elevator down. Down to the floor marked "Morgue."

Here the hospital was a different place. The air was cooler and smelled of something like chemicals. There were no visitors. There were very few hospital staff people. A female attendant in white pants, a white shirt, and a cardigan sweater told them that the assistant coroner would be with them soon.

They were seated. Lisette was between the two cops. Feeling weak in the knees, sick—like she'd been arrested, she was in custody, and this was a trick to expose her. Casually—for she'd been talking of something else—Molina began to ask Lisette about a motel on the south edge of the city, the Blue Moon Motel, on Atlantic. Had Lisette heard of the Blue Moon Motel? Lisette said no, she had never heard of the Blue Moon Motel. There were motels all over Atlantic City, some of them sleazy places, and she did not think—as Molina seemed to be saying—that her mother had worked at any of these motels, ever. If Yvette Mulvey had worked at the Blue Moon Motel, she'd have heard of it. She had not. Lisette said that her mother was not a motel maid or a cocktail waitress but a blackjack dealer, and you had to be trained for that.

Lisette said, like she was groping for a light switch, "Is Momma in—some kind of trouble?"

A twisty little knot of rage in her heart against Momma. All this was Momma's fault.

Molina said that they weren't sure. That was what the I.D. might clear up.

"We need your coöperation, Lisette. We are hoping that you can provide—identification."

Weird how back at school she'd heard *iiii-dee* not I.D. It was like static was interfering, to confuse her. Like after she'd fallen on the stairs and hit her face and her head and she hadn't been able to walk without leaning against a wall, she'd been so dizzy, and she'd forgotten things. Some short circuit in her brain.

"Can you identify these? Do these look familiar, Lisette?"

A morgue attendant had brought Molina a box containing items, of which two were a woman's handbag and a woman's wallet. Molina lifted them carefully from the box, with gloved hands.

Lisette stared at the handbag and the wallet. What were these? Were they supposed to belong to her mother? Lisette wasn't sure if she had ever seen them before. She stared at the brown leather handbag with some ornamentation on it, like a brass buckle, and straps, and the black wallet, shabby-looking, like something you'd see on a sidewalk or by a Dumpster and not even bother to pick up to see if there was money inside.

Molina was saying that these "items" had been "retrieved" from a drainage ditch behind the Blue Moon Motel.

Also behind the drainage ditch was a woman's body—a "badly damaged" woman's body, for which they had no identification yet.

Carefully Molina spoke. Her hand lay lightly on Lisette's arm, which had the effect of restraining Lisette from swiping and poking at her left eye, as she'd been doing.

"The purse has been emptied out and the lining is ripped. In the wallet was a New Jersey driver's license issued to 'Yvette Mulvey,' but no credit cards or money, no other I.D. There was a slip of paper with a name and a number to be called 'in case of emergency,' but that number has been disconnected. It belonged to a relative of your mother's who lives, or lived, in Edison, New Jersey? Iris Pedersen?"

Lisette shook her head. This was all too much—just too much for her to absorb. She didn't recognize the handbag and she didn't recognize the wallet—she was sure. She resented being asked. These items were so grungy-looking it was an insult to think that they might belong to her mother.

Close up she saw that Molina's eyes were beautiful and dark-thick-lashed, the way Lisette's mother tried to make hers, with a mascara brush. The skin beneath Molina's eyes was soft and bruised-looking, and on her throat were tiny dark moles. It did not seem right that a woman like Molina, who you could tell was a mother—her body was a mother's body for sure, wide hips and heavy breasts straining at the front of her jacket—could be a cop; it did not seem right that this person was carrying a gun, in a holster

attached to a leather belt, and that she could use it, if she wanted to. Anytime she wanted to. Lisette went into a dream thinking that if she struck at Molina, if she kicked, spat, or bit, Molina might *shoot* her.

The male cop you'd expect to have a gun. You'd expect he would use it.

Daddy had showed them his guns, the ones he'd brought back from Iraq. These were not Army-issue but personal guns, a pistol with a carved-wood handle and a heavier handgun, a revolver. He'd won these in a card game, Daddy said.

Maybe he hadn't brought them from Iraq. Maybe he'd got them at Fort Bragg, where he was stationed.

Lisette was saying that if her mother's driver's license had been in that wallet maybe it was her mother's wallet, but definitely she didn't recognize it.

As for Iris Pedersen—Aunt Iris—that was her mother's aunt, not hers. Aunt Iris was old enough to be Lisette's grandmother and Lisette hadn't seen her in years and did not think that her mother had, either. For all they knew, the old lady was dead.

“We tried to contact her and the Edison police tried to contact her. But—”

An I.D. by someone who knew Yvette Mulvey well was necessary, Molina said, to determine if, in fact, the dead woman was Yvette Mulvey—or another woman of her approximate age. The condition of the body and the injuries to the face made it difficult to judge, from the driver's license photo. Or from the photos on file at the casinos where Yvette Mulvey had worked.

Molina went on to tell Lisette that they had tried to locate her father—Duane David Mulvey—to make the I.D. for them, but he was no longer a resident of Edison, or, so far as they knew, of the State of New Jersey.

Lisette said, “My father's in the U.S. Army. My father is a sergeant in the U.S. Army. He used to be stationed at Fort Bragg but now he's in Iraq,” and Molina said, “No, Lisette. I'm afraid that has changed. Your father is no longer a sergeant in the U.S. Army, and he is no longer in Iraq. The Army has no record of Duane Mulvey at the present time—he's been AWOL since December 26th of last year.”

Lisette was so surprised she couldn't speak. If Molina hadn't been gripping her arm, she'd have jumped up and run away.

She was shivering. The corduroy jacket wasn't really for winter—this nasty wet cold. Momma hadn't been there that morning, scolding her, “Dress warm! For Christ's sake, it's January.”

Another morgue attendant, an Indian-looking man—some kind of doctor—had come to speak in a low voice to the police officers. Quickly, Lisette shut her eyes, not listening. Trying to picture the classroom she'd had to leave—there was Nowicki at the board with her squeaky chalk, and there was J.C. slouched in his desk, hair in his face, and Keisha, who breathed through her mouth when she was excited or scared, and there was Lisette's own desk, empty—though now it was later, it was third period, and J.C. wasn't in Lisette's English class, but there was always the cafeteria. When the bell rang at 11:45 A.M., it would be lunchtime and she'd line up outside the doors, with the smell of greasy food, French fries, macaroni and cheese, chili on buns. . . . Lisette's mouth flooded with saliva.

She smiled, seeing the purple-lipstick kiss on the Kleenex, as J.C. would see it when he unfolded it—a surprise!

Her mother didn't want her to wear lipstick, but all the girls her age did.

Last time she'd seen Momma with Daddy, Daddy had been in his soldier's dress uniform and had looked very handsome. His hair had been cut so short.

Not then but an earlier visit, when Daddy had returned from Iraq for the first time, Lisette's mother had covered his face in purple-lipstick kisses. Lisette had been so young she'd thought that the lipstick kisses were some kind of wound, that her daddy was hurt and bleeding.

The times were confused. There were many times. There were many Daddys—she could not “see” them all.

There was the time Daddy took Momma to Fort Lauderdale. They'd wanted to take Lisette but it hadn't worked out—Lisette had had to be in school at that time of year. She'd gone to stay with her mother's friend Misty, who worked at Bally's. They were planning on ten days in Florida but Lisette's mother had surprised her by returning after just a week, saying that that was it, that was the end, she'd had to call the police when he'd got drunk and beaten her, and in a restaurant he'd knocked over a chair he was so angry—that was it for her, no more.

Yvette had had man friends she'd met in the casinos. Most of them Lisette had never met. Never wished to meet. One of them was a real-estate agent in Monmouth County—Lisette could almost remember his first name. It was something unusual, like Upton, Upwell . . .

The Indian man looked very young to be a doctor. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, his eyes were soft-black, sombre. His hair was black, but coarse, not silky-fine like J.C.'s hair.

He was leading the cops and Lisette into a refrigerated room. Molina had a firm hold on Lisette's hand. "We will make it as easy for you as we can, Lisette. All you have to do is squeeze my hand—that will mean yes."

Yes? Yes what? Desperately Lisette was picturing the school cafeteria, the long table in the corner where the coolest guys sat—J.C. and his friends, and sometimes certain girls were invited to sit with them. Today maybe J.C. would call Lisette over to sit with them—*Lisette! Hey Liz-zette!*—because he'd liked the purple-lipstick kiss, and what it promised.

"Take your time, Lisette. I'll be right beside you."

Then—so quick—it was over!

The female body she was meant to I.D. was not anyone she knew, let alone her mother.

This one had hair that was darker than Yvette's, with brown roots showing, and it was all matted like a cheap wig, and the forehead was so bruised and swollen, and the eyes—you could hardly see the eyes—and the mouth was, like, broken. You couldn't make sense of the face, almost. It was a face that needed to be straightened out, like with pliers.

"No. Not Momma."

Lisette spoke sharply, decisively. Molina was holding her hand—she was tugging to get free.

This was the *morgue*; this was a *corpse*.

This was not a woman but a *thing*—you could not really believe that it had ever been a woman.

Only the head and the face were exposed. The rest of the body was covered by a white sheet but you could see the shape of it, the size, and it was not Lisette's mother—obviously. Older than Momma, and something had happened to the body to make it small—smaller. Some sad, pathetic, broken female, like debris washed up on the shore.

It was lucky the sheet was drawn up over the chest. The breasts. And the belly—the fat-raddled thighs of a woman of this age, you would not want to look at. Guys were quick to laugh, to show their contempt. Any girl or woman who was not good-looking, who was flat-chested or a little heavy—she had to walk fast to avoid their eyes.

"This is not Momma. This is no one I know."

Molina was close beside Lisette, instructing her to take her time. It was very important, Molina was saying, to make an *eiii-dee* of the woman, to help the police find who had done these terrible things to her.

Lisette pulled free of Molina. "I told you—this is not Momma! *It is not.*"

Something hot and acid came up into her mouth—she swallowed it down. She gagged again, and swallowed, and her teeth chattered like dice being shaken. She wanted to run from this nasty room, which was cold like a refrigerator but smelled of something sweet, sickish—like talcum powder and sweat—but Molina detained her.

They were showing her some clothes now, from the box. Dirty, bloodstained clothes, like rags. And a coat—a coat that resembled her mother's red suède coat but was filthy and torn. It was not the stylish coat that Momma had bought a year ago, in the January sales at the mall.

Lisette said that she'd never seen any of these things before. She had not. She was breathing funny, like her friend Keisha, who had asthma, and Molina was holding her hand and saying things to comfort her, bullshit things, telling her to be calm, it was all right. If she did not think that this woman was her mother, it was all right: there were other ways to identify the victim.

Victim. This was a new word. Like *corpse*, *drainage ditch*.

Molina led her to a restroom. Lisette had to use the toilet, fast. Her insides had turned to liquid fire and had to come out. At the sink she was going to vomit but could not. Washed and washed her hands. In the mirror a face hovered—a girl's face—in purple-tinted glasses, her lips a dark grape color. The scarring around the left eye wasn't so visible if she didn't look closely, and she had no wish to look closely. There had been three surgeries and after each surgery Momma had promised, "You'll be fine! You'll look better than new."

They wanted to take her somewhere—to Family Services. She said that she wanted to go back to school. She said that she had a right to go back to school. She began to cry. She was resentful and agitated and she wanted to go back to school, and so they said, "All right, all right for now, Lisette," and they drove her to school. The bell had just rung for lunch, so she went directly to the cafeteria—not waiting in line but into the cafeteria without a tray and still in her jacket, and, in a roaring sort of haze, she was aware of her girlfriends at a nearby table. There was Keisha, looking concerned, calling, "Lisette, hey—what was it? You O.K.?" and Lisette said, laughing into the bright buzzing blur, "Sure I'm O.K. Hell, why not?" ♦