

Pink heat, blue heat

On the morning of June 6th, the day she turned 12, Rachel Elizabeth Versoza rubbed her eyes awake. Pink as the skin under a scab, the ceiling above her bed greeted her good morning—it was Mama’s ceiling, she decided on the pink, not Beth. Mama had decided, too, that the ceiling needed texture so now it looked like ants had feasted on the pink cake frosting of her ceiling.

The housepainter had arrived at 7am two Fridays before. Mama said, “See, this room makeover is a birthday present for you – Dad insisted.” But Beth had never asked Dad for a room makeover. Liezl, Beth’s sister, now Liezl might ask Dad for bedroom makeover, but not Beth. If Beth had asked Dad, she bet he wouldn’t even have known what a room makeover was. Dad was too busy at work – he had a new intern at the office. Dad liked this new intern, too. He said so, often enough, at dinner. He had no time to discuss pink walls or pink ceilings. He left those things to Mama—and that was the problem.

As the house painter taped down sheets of old newspaper on the floor, Beth said, “Mama, can my walls be navy blue or gray with flecks of gold?”

She snorted, rolled her eyes, and puckered her lips and said, “Can’t you just be grateful?” Translation: *‘I’d-already-bought-that-paint-and-I’m-not-taking-it-back-to-the-store.’*

The housepainter brought paint in dark green buckets so Beth asked, “Ma, will my ceiling be black? I want black.”

“It’s always ‘I want this, I want that,’ with you.”

“Okay, but can I paint my ceiling myself when I get home from school?” Beth wanted to mix the paints herself and use the paint roller with the long handle.

“Not all Beth wants, Beth gets.”

“If I paint my own ceiling, you wouldn’t need to pay the housepainter, Ma.”

“You always insist on what you want – there may be better things out there than what you want. You should think about that.”

The housepainter opened one bucket with a screech and a pop—but no, the paint inside wasn’t a rich blue. The second bucket wasn’t a strong red, either. And, no, the third wasn’t a bold yellow, even. The painter wasn’t going to mix paint – it was pre-mixed paint – no fun, at all. With each pop of the lid, drops of liquid cotton candy sloshed out of the paint bucket and Beth’s stomach churned. Maybe, those were base colors. There were three smaller cans beside the gallon tins – maybe they were tinting colors. Maybe she’ll have a good surprise when she got home, after all.

Maybe she'll like it. Pink was a warm color, almost red but not quite, the color of blushes and dolls' lips, but she had a Math quiz, a Science quiz and an English quiz every Friday so paint colors dripped away from her mind.

Later that afternoon, when she had come home from school, the walls were pink – not subtle or shy carnation pink, not bold and insistent fuchsia, not mysterious amethyst pink, not even rich ruby pink or rebellious neon pink – neon pink was cool, – but, no, it was baby pink—but Beth was no baby, and her room was no nursery—Beth was turning 12, after all.

Beth stood in the doorway; the housepainter stood on a ladder. With a palette knife, he smeared peanut-buttery pink paint on the wood of the ceiling. He pulled the sticky mess until it stood in soft peaks like the well-beaten egg whites in home economics class. Then he smoothed the peaks over with a float until her ceiling looked like the pock-marked surface of the moon, if the moon were pink.

Mama should have left the plywood bare; Beth didn't mind. Whitewashed plywood squares and rectangles would've been so much better – even Mama knew it, too –the furrows between her eyebrows were as pink as the ceiling as she stood next to Beth in the doorway, her fisted hands on her hips. Beth clamped her mouth shut. Mama had not chosen pink because it was the cheapest paint available in the hardware store, it wasn't on sale, either. And Mama chose pink, not lavender, not powder blue, not sea green, not even sunshine yellow. Mama chose pink on purpose –it was payback.

Beth could have laughed it off – Mama's grand experiment at a makeover was a bust. But, no. It was Beth's room, not Mama's. Beth had to live in it, not her. Beth should decide, Beth should choose what color the ceiling would be, not Mama. Without telling her, Mama had bought matching bed sheets, bedspreads, coverlets and comforters of every shade of pink to go with the failed ceiling. They waited for her on her bed when she got home from school. Later, at dinner, Mama fished for a "thank you very much" and asked if Beth had not seen the pink linen avalanche she had gotten her for her 12th birthday. Beth covered her mouth with her hand and mumbled her gratitude. Mama told her she ought to know better than to talk with her mouth full, but she was welcome.

Dad patted Beth's knee under the table. If Beth complained about Mama to Dad, he'd say Mama knew best about the house and all that. Always. And it didn't matter that Beth preferred midnight blue with spatters of gold to resemble stars against a night sky or twilight gray with hues of orange just like the sunsets on a beach in La Union where they had vacationed before she began first grade—it never mattered what Beth wanted – Mama never thought to ask.

When she was 6, Mama had taken Beth clothes shopping. Mama sat her just outside the fitting room and told her to sit like a lady but Mama took too long and Beth's legs got tired swinging under the chair. Mama kept asking the sales lady to give her a different size or a different color. Beth wanted to go to the toys. There was no way Mama would buy her a toy – it wasn't her birthday and it wasn't Christmas, so she was only going to look.

Beth looked up and saw unfamiliar faces and bounced against legs of strangers but she didn't cry. Her heart thumped like drums in a parade. She brushed her hands against the softness of the clothes on the rack. She had thought that if she jumped out from behind the clothes racks, she'd land someplace else like the girl in a book Lola had read. She didn't find the toys on that floor of the store so she found her way back after what seemed to her like hours and sat just outside the fitting room. Mama came out after having decided not to buy any of the dresses she had tried on.

The night sky made Beth feel exactly the way she felt when she had wandered off in the mall when she was 5. The night sky made her heart beat faster, as though she were waiting for something more, something better. When she turned 10, she had taped posters of Van Gogh's *Starry, Starry Night* on her wall. Every night she pressed her hands to her chest to feel her heart ram her rib cage as she stared at the posters—Vincent Van Gogh must have looked up at the sky outside his cottage at night, too, over a hundred years ago, and it was like she was seeing that same night sky with him right there as she lay on her bed.

She covered her school notebooks in black or navy-blue paper and splattered pink and gold glitter glue on it. If Mama had only bothered to look, it could not have been more obvious, baby pink was not Beth's color. If only Mama bothered to notice, why, every time the nuns at school asked for donations for typhoon victims, Beth gave away the pink dresses and pink skirts Mama had always bought her until all that was left in her closet were clothes that were black, brown, navy blue, army green, lipstick red, Sunkist oranges, or banana yellow. Beth would've worn fig leaves like Eve, a floor mop, a bed sheet, even, anything, anything else, but baby pink.

Worse, Mama hadn't even bothered to tell Beth that she had decided on pink all along. Beth would've howled if Mama had told her. Well, no, not howled. If she had howled, Mama would have raised her penciled-in eyebrow and said, "Only wolves howl, dear. Time for the cub to grow up." If Mama watched National Geographic with her, she'd have known that only the wolf hunting party howled. Cubs hid in the den because cubs couldn't howl just yet, they yipped, they snarled, they may growl, but they couldn't howl just yet.

Beth would've stomped her feet. Well, no, she wouldn't have, either. For if she had, Mama would have pursed her lips and said, "Mountain goats stomp their feet, dear. Do grow up." If Mama

watched Animal Planet with her, she would know that goats didn't have feet, they had hooves. And stomping hooves were acts of aggression for goats. Maybe if Mama paid attention she'd notice things. She'd notice that Dad worked late every night now, weekends, too. Dad whistled when he showered, when he shaved, when he dusted his car. Dad whistled all the time. He was happy about something only Mama never noticed.

She couldn't howl or stomp so Beth pouted and sulked— Beth was expert at it—why, she'd had had lots of practice: when Mama gave her the Barbie doll instead of the bouncy ball, the giant doll house instead of the trampoline, the pink bike with a basket and training wheels instead of the inline skates she had asked for. Beth never got what she wanted, she only ever got what Mama had decided that Beth should want. And Dad was no help. Mama and Dad barely spoke at dinner except to say, "Please pass the rice, dear".

It might have been the paint fumes or the paint thinner she had been inhaling for two weeks, but on the morning of her birthday, the day when she should have woken up bouncy and perky, Beth woke up dry and brittle inside. The day after her ceiling blushed two weeks before, cogs in her brain turned and turned, set off smoke, then sparks, until something bright and hot flashed inside her chest at the sight of her ceiling. Each whiff of the paint she inhaled fed that small spark.

Every morning for the past two weeks when Beth opened her eyes and the pink ceiling greeted her, and every night when the pink ceiling sent her off to dreamland, even in her sleep, the pink and orange sparks inside sprayed on the dry and brittle shavings of past resentments. The sparks smoked and burst aflame but it sputtered and flickered when she thought of homework. Every time she thought about that pink ceiling, the flame swelled. The longer she thought about it, the steadier the tongue of flame grew until it stopped flickering and grew into a steady blue flame like on the Bunsen burner in science class. The flame fed on something inside Beth's mind.

Beth cupped her hands around that small flame everyday so Mama wouldn't see it, touch it, or blow it out. It was Beth's and Beth's alone – she had made it herself, that flame, she had made it grow inside her just with her mind and it was not pink.

But then, final exams, moving up and Easter vacation fell like cold wet towels on that flame. Like veils they blanketed Beth, but even under wet rags, the small blue flame smoldered in the back of her mind. Even with school out and all she thought about was her birthday, the flame waited, ready. The thing about flames, no matter how small, once they spark to life, they smolder even when they don't burst into a bonfire. Birthday thoughts, birthday wishes and birthday plans crowded around the flame but failed to smother it. The flame breathed in time with Beth's breathing. It had come to life.

As early as March, after the last day of school, Beth had already encircled June 6th on her calendar. She had read about how monks recopied texts and illuminated them so she had taken her Sharpies and made that June 6 square on her calendar her own work of art. There was no pink in it, thank you very much. She built a wall to separate her birthday from the flame. Her birthday was the 6th day of the 6th month. She turned 12 (a multiple of 6) and in 6 weeks, she'll start 6th grade. That must be a mighty coincidence and she wouldn't let her pet flame feed off her 12th birthday. So, she trained her flame to heel.

The morning of her 12th birthday, when her alarm went off. Beth burrowed deeper under her pink sheets – in the darkness under the sheets, there was no pink, anyway. No rushing allowed. She wanted to slurp every tingly minute of her 12th birthday, and make it last for as long as she could. She groped under her pillow for her cellphone. She finally opened her eyes. No messages. Her best friend Jeannie must still be asleep. She sat up in bed and stretched. She ran her fingers through her hair to see how long it had grown. She'd worn it short since she was 6 years old. It was wash-and-wear and saved her time. With her hair short, Mama gave up trying to French-braid it, stopped trying to make it pretty.

Short hair was hard work, though. She needed a trim every month. At first, it was a ritual, a monthly pilgrimage to the salon but that soon faded into a chore. And then, one day, she was mistaken for a boy and the short hair wasn't such fun anymore. She hadn't had a haircut since Christmas. She grew her hair out that summer so she wouldn't be mistaken for a boy when 6th grade started. She didn't really care how she looked, really, as long as she wasn't mistaken for a boy, because she wasn't one and didn't want to be one. Her growing hair would be neater, though, if she were a boy, because boys went to barbers whose job was to keep boys hair neat; girls went to salons and hairdressers at salons, well, their job was to make girls pretty.

Beth went to the Assumption Convent and if she were a boy inside instead of just looking like a boy outside because of her hair – she'd be like an undercover agent or a spy – the only boy among all those girls. Assumption was okay even if Mama had decided that Beth would go to school there. Mama herself went to the Assumption. When Mama's amigas came to the house for mahjong, Assumption was all they talked about. Assumption was the glue that held Mama and her amigas together.

One Friday night, Mama threw her mahjong tiles in and said, "If the Assumption nuns admit boys to increase enrollment, it wouldn't work." Later, she said, "The nuns accept anyone these days, even daughters of OFWs. It would be a disaster if they let in boys, too – sons of OFWs. Imagine."

Beth liked the idea of boys and girls in school together but in the Philippines, boys went to all-boys' schools – everyone knew that. Beth's male cousins, the smart and rich ones, they went to Ateneo, the Jesuit school. Her other cousins, the ones who weren't as smart but just as rich, went to De La Salle. All the other cousins who were not as rich, whether they were smart or not, went to Claret. If they got kicked out and their parents wanted to teach them a lesson, they went to Don Bosco – they learned baking or putting computers together. Otherwise, their parents would send them to Brent School and that solved two problems for their parents – the naughty boys stayed away at boarding school in Baguio (so their parents wouldn't have to think about them) or if they didn't stay in Brent Baguio, they could still go to Brent Laguna—then their naughty kids had to get up at an ungodly hour every morning for the school bus to take them through the traffic to Mamplasan, Laguna. Sitting through traffic was worse than being grounded – Beth knew as much – she was on the school bus an hour and a half each way every school day. So, on second thought, no, there shouldn't be boys at her school—boys were gross and immature. And having such short hair would not be good for Beth this year, either – she wouldn't want to be mistaken for a boy.

“In our time, the principal was Belgian. Remember, Soeur Hélène?” The amigas nodded and giggled.

“Ay, Soeur Hélène was ancient. She stopped the girls in the hallways and made them kneel. If the hem of their uniforms did not touch the floor, the girls were sent home,” said one lady with blood red nail polish on her talon-like fingernails.

“I had the bad luck of having had a growth spurt in the middle of the year, I cried and cried until my parents bought new uniforms for me – it always showed when the hem was let out. Only the girls on scholarship wore skirts with the hem let out,” said another.

“The Assumption nuns, at least, were not like the nuns at St. Scholastica's. They're all about growing social awareness.”

The amigas all gasped at that.

“Oh, I know. My niece who goes to St. Scho went on a school field trip to a home for unwed mothers, another year, her class went to a holding center for juvenile delinquents, and an orphanage,” said the lady with the red finger nail polish with a shudder.

Mama's concern for the poor was limited to the Social Club's Sweetheart Ball. It was the only fund-raising event for charity that Mama supported. Mama wanted Beth to be Club Sweetheart when she turned 12, just as Mama was Club Sweetheart when she was 12. Mama had Beth's knees and elbows bleached, her stubbornly frizzy hair tamed with a relaxing and a rebonding treatment, and Beth had already got braces for her teeth. Mama was talking about Lasik to treat her

myopia but Mama considered contact lenses, instead, because Lasik was too expensive and Beth could only have Lasik when she turned 18. No, thank you. Beth didn't want a laser beam to scrape her corneas. She didn't want to stick her finger in her eye just to look pretty, either.

In January that year, 6 months before Beth turned 12, Mama's checklist of improvements for Beth had gotten too long, Mama sighed at the expense. She had taken one long good look at Beth and decided to wait two years for Liezl, to turn 12, instead. Liezl was already pretty without fuss and without trying— all she needed was a good dress and she'd win Club Sweetheart without breaking a sweat. No heroic measures necessary. Liezl had a much better chance – Beth was not Club Sweetheart material, at all.

When Mama kicked Beth out of her beauty pageant boot camp, Beth tried to look glum even when she danced inside—best news, ever. Mama ignored Beth but she turned pirouettes, for once: Beth was free to slouch, read in bed, eat ice cream and cookies, ride her bike, climb up the guava tree, and play volleyball and basketball under the hot sun. It was even better than skipping first Friday mass at school, better than skipping Sunday School with her Lola. With the Club Sweetheart gig erased from her schedule, turning 12 would have been paradise, if not for the pink ceiling situation.

Turning 12 meant getting birthday money, too. Twice every year, on Christmas and on her birthday, Lola and Dad gave her money. Last Saturday, Lola held out to Beth a small red envelope with cash in it and said, "Set aside 20 percent for savings and 10 percent for tithes." She always said this just before she gave Beth money. Lola was Baptist – she believed in giving back to her church a small portion of all she earned. It was Lola's way of worshipping God, thanking Him for the power to get wealth.

Beth didn't think God needed to be bribed to hand out blessings, but she smiled, nodded, and hugged her grandmother. Only then did Lola put the envelope on Beth's outstretched hand. The next day, Sunday, Beth sat with Lola in the morning service. When the offering plate came their way, Beth made sure Lola saw her place in the offering basket a crisp ₱500 bill, God's well-earned commission from her birthday money. Lola patted Beth's arm and smiled.

Then on Monday, Beth will deposit ₱1000 in her bank account. Lola sometimes asked to see Beth's bank book so Beth kept it updated and the withdrawals column, she kept immaculate and unsoiled. The rest of her birthday money was hers to spend after that. She'd spend it on books, of course, and on writing journals. She loved journals – and pens. Lola already gave her Lolo's fountain pen when she turned 11. She said, "Use that when you sign the Roll of Attorneys, hija.

Make Lola proud.” Lola wanted Beth to be a lawyer just like her. Lolo, when he was alive, thought Beth would be more useful if she became a pediatrician or a gynecologist.

Two days a year, on Christmas and her birthday, she loved the obesity of her wallet in her hand. She loved it as much as she hated asking Mama for money (Mama interrogated her so when she asked for money) so Beth stretched her money to make it last. She browsed the second-hand bookstall at the mall. Before she paid for a book, though, she made sure she had read as much of it to convince herself to buy it. Sometimes, she got too hooked into the book, the cashier came and asked her if she was ready to pay. Beth devoured their collection of children’s novels without spending a peso that way.

This year, for her 12th birthday, she decided she wanted a Kindle account. She had used her Dad’s account but he got angry because she had downloaded too many samples and used up his smartphone’s memory. And then, he didn’t want Beth looking at his phone—she never looked into his messages, she just read on his Kindle. And besides, he was rarely home. She needed a credit card in her name for her own Kindle account, so Dad’s birthday present for Beth was the next best thing—a prepaid debit Mastercard. Dad loaded it with ₱5,000 for Beth to buy herself a present and her school supplies. Her own credit card was the best thing about turning twelve. She’d read the T&Cs in the flap of the letter it came in—she had to be 16 to use it. When she told Dad, he said, “Who’s going to know?”

She went to the bathroom to shower. She and Liezl shared a pink bathroom sandwiched between their bedrooms. They shared it but Liezl hogged the counter. Skin cleanser, toner, sponges, brushes, eye-liner, mascara, hair dryer, curling iron, hair iron, lip gloss, lip balm, lip tint, moisturizer – what a ten-year old needed with moisturizer, Beth never understood. Beth’s things, all her beauty and hygiene products fit in the one drawer on the top right. But Beth had her pens and her notebooks and books, right?

She liked her hair best when it was wet. Mama had wanted it straightened, said she looked like an Aeta but Beth liked it wavy like the ocean in back as it brushed her shoulders, and loved the ringlets around her face. She stepped out of the shower and planted her foot on the braided bathroom rug – her project in Home Ec. First, she took two opposite corners of her towel in her hands and rubbed her back dry – she didn’t want to catch pneumonia on her birthday.

She bent from the waist and gravity pulled her hair to the side. Small beads of water dripped on to the floor. She held her hair in one toweled hand and patted it dry with kindness. She smiled into the mirror – it was the first time she had met her brand new 12-year-old self. She flipped her damp hair and put her hands on her waist, still smiling. The towel fell on the floor. She raised one

arm and ran her fingers on her armpit – a soft fuzz tickled her fingertips. Beth mentally added deodorant to her to-buy list.

The same fuzz, but darker, now grew in that triangle at the top where her thighs met. She stroked that, too, as she would a favorite pet, and grinned. She cupped her breasts – well, they were only nipples and areola, not enough to fill her cupped palms, yet. She frowned and stood askance of her reflection. Even with hair growing in all the right places as they should, and with the hair on her head growing longer, her figure was still very much that of a boy.

She should look for a bra at the mall. Another item, added to her list. Mama only bought her baby bras and chemises. Beth did the breast exercise just as she did every morning when she woke up and just before going to sleep at night – Jeannie said the exercise would increase her bust if she did it religiously. It probably wouldn't work. She was just one of those girls who –

Bang!

The bathroom door swung open.

Beth doubled over, picked up the towel from the floor, and wrapped it around herself.

The door knob smacked the wall so hard the button on the knob sank into the lock position and stayed there, hiding.

Beth checked the heat rising from her stomach before it pushed a scream out her throat – “What is it?” she said. Mama didn't like locked bathroom or bedroom doors, she never knocked, either.

“I've been calling you. You haven't answered.” Mama narrowed her eyes. “What were you doing?”

“Nothing, drying myself.” She turned her back on Mama. She pulled out a drawer to find her hair brush.

“I'm taking Liezl shopping. You don't want to tag along.” Mama paused. “You hate shopping.”

Wrong, Beth hated shopping with Mama. Mama's voice did not rise at the end of the sentence, so it was a statement, not a question, not an invitation, still Beth said, “Oh, no, thanks. Jeannie and I are shopping together.” At least, Jeannie carried her own shopping bags. She never made Beth carry her shopping bags for her, and Jeannie was much better company, anyway.

“You’ve made a list, of course,” Mama said. But before Beth could even answer, Mama added “Stick to your list. Don’t let Jeannie talk you into buying stuff you don’t need. And you don’t need more pens or books, either.”

“I won’t.” Beth always had a list even if the list was inside her head. She never bought things on a whim, not when she was counting every peso because her birthday money had to last until Christmas. Besides, she was saving to buy the ebooks on her Kindle wishlist.

Mama stood in the doorway, her hand on the doorknob. She looked at Beth and let out a breath the way she did when her beloved shi tzu, Pepper peed on the floor. Mama was about to turn to go but then she clicked her tongue when her eyes rested on the mirror above the sink. Mama yanked out a tissue from the box on the counter with a twist of her wrist. It tore.

So, Mama yanked out three more. She barged inside the bathroom again and rubbed the mirror until it squeaked. “You should take better care of your things. I can’t keep spending money on things.”

Beth looked up from the bathroom drawer to face Mama in the mirror. “Dad gave me money, don’t worry.” Well, Mama never did worry, not about Beth, that’s for sure, she’d have to be concerned about Beth to worry about her – that was never going to happen.

Mama yanked out more tissues from the box and attacked the bathroom counter next. “Really, Beth. You never keep your space clean.”

But those were not Beth’s things, they were Liezl’s – Liezl was pretty but she was a slob about her stuff, Beth was about to say, but she didn’t. No, Mama will not ruin Beth’s mood on her 12th birthday, but inside her head, smoke ribboned up from under the pile of wet rags covering her flame.

Mama tore open the closet doors under the sink. She grabbed the bathroom cleaner in the spray bottle and squirted the counter with it. Flick. Flick. Flick. Beth covered her nose and mouth with her hand. She stepped back from the fine spray. She didn’t want to wear the scent of bathroom cleaner on her 12th birthday. The flame hissed at the wet rags and the rags curled up in smoke, too.

Swish, swish, swish. Mama pulled out more tissues and rubbed the counter until that squeaked, too. “Don’t forget to buy socks and undies.”

“I won’t.” The flash of heat, the spark, the flame – it barreled its way from the backburner of her mind to the front and center. The flames licked away and made smoke of all her happy birthday thoughts.

“Don’t take things from the rack –” Scrub, scrub, scrub.

“Okay.”

“Try things on first.” Wipe, wipe, wipe.

“Okay.”

“Buy only what you need.” She stopped scrubbing. Her gaze lingered on Beth’s chest. “The camisoles I bought you at Christmas, they still fit.” She threw the wad of tissues in the waste basket with a thwack. “I’m buying Liezl her first bra today. She needs one already.” Mama smiled at Beth and stared at the vast plain on her chest that her towel covered.

With two hands, Beth clutched at the towel corner that she had tucked in that shallow valley that was her chest. Liezl was only ten, Beth was almost twelve but she still used a training bra. Life wasn’t fair but, no, she won’t let Mama push that button today, either. Too late, the flame in her chest hissed. It sputtered and sputtered and sprang long and tall.

“Don’t wear shorts at the mall—“

Beth shook her head. But the flame shot up like a geyser and spread. It touched all the dry, thirsty, brittle parts inside her and they leaped to life.

“ – people stare.”

“Okay,” she kept an even tone but her nostrils flared. The smoke from the bonfire in her chest had to come out somewhere.

“Don’t giggle or call attention to yourself.”

“No.”

“And for God’s sake, tie up your hair – you know how it frizzes in the heat.”

Beth’s chest heaved. Mama should leave the bathroom. Flames curled out of Beth’s nose with every breath.

“Try to look presentable.”

The pastor’s sermon from yesterday’s service echoed: *Whoever hates his brother without a cause commits murder*. The fire inside her paused but it had gotten too big, too hot to ignore, too wild contain with the damp bath towel she covered herself with.

Beth said, “Dad’s new assistant, Olivia,” she paused, “You remember her. She’s taking me and Jeannie to a movie and then pizza, and shopping.”

In the mirror, Mama's shoulders rose as she held a big breath. Yes, this time, loud and clear, Mama heard Beth. Olivia's name had spouted of Dad's mouth too often the past few weeks. Now Olivia's name sprouted from Beth's lips, smoky hot and young Olivia.

Locked and loaded, safety switch off, Beth let loose a volley from the flame thrower in her chest. "You remember Olivia, right? Dad's office assistant, his new intern?" That's right, Dad's Olivia, the smart Olivia, the Olivia that did research for him, the funny Olivia, the Olivia this and the Olivia that.

Mama's back stiffened. She exhaled before she walked away. "I hope he pays her extra for babysitting you."

"Dad gave Olivia the day off," Beth said.

Voom.

Mama banged the bathroom door shut behind her.

Beth turned to face the mirror, made a gun with her finger and thumb and blew out the small flame at her fingertip. She was 12 years old now, and packing heat.