

## MICHELLE ROSS

### *Virgins*

The summer Meredith Goobis lost her virginity, Star was eight years old. She'd known Meredith only a few days before it happened. She met her at church camp, which Star and her brother, Harris, ended up at because their grandma Myrna said she was fed up watching them all day long every day June, July, and August. She had stuff she wanted to do, she said, though everyone knew full well that gossiping on the telephone, working crossword puzzles, and reading trashy romance novels were all things she could just as easily do and did do when Star and Harris were in her care. Still, she wasn't paid anything to watch them, so when she said it was about time they got a religious education and that she knew for a fact that Bayou Baptist, her church, charged less tuition than any other summer care in town, less than their mama probably spent on wine in a given year, the matter was settled. Their dad would drop them off at church in the mornings. Their grandma Myrna would retrieve them at two in the afternoons and keep them until their mama could pick them up after work.

Meredith's mother, Mrs. Goobis, was the teacher for the sevens and eights. She had the round, mottled face of a cauliflower.

That first morning, she led the children in the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag and, seemingly, the Texas flag, which stood pompously beside its more discreet companion. Then she taught them a verse: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

She offered a translation: "That means ya'll will experience many troubles in your lives, but instead of being sad or angry, you should be happy. By giving you trouble, God tests your faith in him. As your faith grows stronger, you'll learn patience."

"Patience for what?" Star asked. Before church camp, all Star had known about God had come from her grandma Myrna, and mostly what

she taught was that you should constantly pray for what you wanted, no matter how trivial, because if you didn't have the foresight to do this, your life would consist of an endless series of irritations. Think long lines at grocery stores, dogs yapping day and night, television programs that don't record when they're supposed to, corns on your feet aching even when you wear the most comfortable of shoes.

Mrs. Goobis frowned. "We raise our hands and wait to be called," she said to the room of children sitting cross-legged in a circle. The rug they sat on was a dingy pattern of browns and oranges. The walls of the classroom were covered in wood paneling from which all manner of ghoulish faces stared out.

Mrs. Goobis stared at Star. Star stared back, thinking the teacher was formulating a response to her question about patience.

A furry-eyebrowed girl with tight ringlets of coppery hair and cheeks the color of raw beef turned to her and said, "Mommy is waiting for you to raise your hand."

Star never would have guessed she'd grown in Mrs. Goobis's belly. She was the spitting image of her father, who'd been the church's organist before he took off and left his family, Star's grandma would later tell her. Nobody, not even his own mother, knew where he'd gone.

"Star," Mrs. Goobis said when she raised her hand.

"Patience for what?" she repeated.

"Why, patience that your faith will be rewarded."

Star raised her hand again. "Like the suicide bombers getting thousands of virgins in paradise?"

She'd heard this on the radio in her dad's car. The men who'd flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had believed that after death, God would reward them in paradise with 72 virgins apiece and that each of those 72 virgins would be attended by another 72 virgins and that they too would belong to the same man. Star didn't know what made words like *girls* or *women* insufficient, but she knew that whatever virgins were, 72 multiplied by 72 was a lot of them. She'd pictured her grandpa Gene pulling off the top of a sardine tin to find rows of little women stuffed inside. The women wriggled their shoulders and hips to try to make room. They grunted and groaned and pinched each other. In each woman's tiny fist was another sardine can, and these cans rattled as the even smaller women inside them squirmed.

Now Mrs. Goobis's face turned the color of her daughter's cheeks. She cleared her throat. "Those people, they're not Christians." Then, "Heaven is a place where your troubles are taken away forever."

Mrs. Goobis fingered the gold cross pendant around her neck. "But you have to have faith and patience. Take the story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Now, life doesn't get much worse than that. But Abraham trusted God, knew he was a good God and that he must have his reasons. Abraham did as God commanded. He took his son out to the mountain God had chosen. He was heartbroken, for sure, but he was prepared to do as God had asked. Then, just as he was about to take his son's life, God stopped him. He explained that he'd just been testing Abraham's faith."

WHEN THEIR MAMA came that afternoon to pick them up, Harris was watching a PBS program about supernovas and said he just had to see the end of it.

Their grandma Myrna barely lifted her eyes from her book to say hello. The book's cover showed a bare-shouldered woman with long, flowing hair. A man lurked in the shadows behind her.

Their grandpa Gene sat next to the kitchen window, his eyes squeezed shut.

In a white bucket next to his chair were two crabs. Since retiring the previous year, he spent a lot of time fishing and crabbing along the Texas City dike. Usually, he didn't catch anything.

The crabs tapped and scraped their claws against the inside of the bucket while a pot of water heated to a boil on the stove. Their grandpa meant to put the crabs into the water alive. Star was plotting how to save them.

Their mama asked their grandpa if he was all right.

"I'm telling that dog yapping away next door to calm down and shut its trap," he said.

Their mama said nothing at first. Her pants, which had looked neat and smooth that morning, now sagged around her bottom. Her blouse had sweat stains. She fixed herself a glass of iced water and jiggled the ice so that it sounded like the crabs, like it, too, was trying to escape.

"How are you doing that, exactly?" she asked finally. She stood in the opening between the dining area and the living room, where Star and Harris sat on the stiff carpet in front of the television.

“With my mind,” he said, without opening his eyes. “I’m concentrating on the dog. I’m picturing it in my head—its scrawny body, its mangy brown fur. I’m telling it everything is okay, there’s no need to bark, and it should go lie down and enjoy the sunshine.”

“What makes you think this is going to work?”

“It works,” was all he said.

So far it hadn’t, though.

“How long does it take? To calm a dog with your mind?”

“It depends. It’s all about focus and concentration, and you’ve just about destroyed mine with all your goddamn questions.” With that, he opened his eyes.

“Sorry,” she said. “Kids?” She turned so quickly toward the living room it was as though her body were connected to their grandpa’s eyelids like some kind of Rube Goldberg machine.

“Five more minutes,” Harris said.

“You’re a scientist,” their grandpa said. “You know thoughts are energy. When you think, you literally send energy out into the world.”

“I’m not a scientist.” Star’s mama’s job was to write science questions for tests for kids all the way from kindergarten up through high school. She’d written some of the questions Star had had to answer in the second grade, questions such as *What pattern does the sun make in the sky?* and *How do animals sense their environments?*

Now, Star wanted to know, did Grandpa Gene not know that crabs have senses? Did he not know that they have nerves just like him?

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“So what if thoughts involve energy transfer? What does that have to do with this? By your rationale, can I lift a two-ton truck with my mind if I just focus on it?”

Star’s grandpa slapped the table and stood up. “I would have thought you of all people would understand.” He bent over and lifted the blue-speckled crabs from the bucket. Their core bodies were about the size of a generous slice of bread, but with their legs and claws extended, they looked like they could manage the steering wheel of a car. He held them away from his body, as if he might come after Star’s mama with them.

Star bolted for the kitchen, taking the back way past the hall bathroom and the pea-green refrigerator. She stood between her

grandpa and the pot of boiling water. "Please! They're living things! They feel pain!"

"I've had just about enough. Elizabeth, you come get this kid of yours out of my way."

"Can't you wait a few minutes?" her mama said. "We're just about to leave."

Her grandpa stood there facing Star and the pot, his arms outstretched with the crabs, like some kind of monster.

"One minute," he said.

Star's mama put her arm around her and walked her around her grandpa and out of the kitchen. They'd barely stepped from the linoleum to the dining room carpet when there was a splash and the click of the lid against the pot. Star screamed.

Her mama said, "For Christ's sake, Gene, what's wrong with you?"

STAR WAS SO hot that night that before bed she turned her ceiling fan on high and lay naked on the floor of her bedroom to cool off. When she went to sleep, she forgot to turn the ceiling fan back low again as her mama had instructed when they'd come home from the pet store with her hamster, Willie Nelson. He couldn't tolerate the temperature getting too cold.

The next morning, Willie Nelson was as hard as the ground after a frost. This was not how sacrifice was supposed to work. The story she'd told herself about the crabs was that though they had suffered, something good might come of it other than her grandpa Gene enjoying a meal out of them. She'd thought of the virgins in paradise.

She imagined they lived in a place like Pirate's Cove along the Gulf Freeway just off the exit for her town. The building was shaped like a ship, complete with pink barnacles, and after Star begged to go there for dinner one evening, imagining the waiters would be dressed like pirates and the booths shaped like boats, her mama had said, "Honey, there aren't any pirates, just a bunch of naked women dancing on tables. It's not for little kids."

"Who *is* it for?" Star had asked.

"Men," she'd said, at which point Star's dad had started to object, but her mama said, "I won't lie to my children."

Star pictured a backdrop with an image of the ocean, cardboard palm trees, and the aroma of coconut tanning lotion spraying out

of vents. Everywhere women danced naked atop tables littered with drinks containing little umbrellas. The women had to step gingerly to avoid toppling drinks.

Her grandpa sat in a beach chair and watched them. He wore a Hawaiian print shirt and huge bug-eye sunglasses.

But what did the virgins want? Star wondered. Clothes? A break from dancing? Let the sacrifice of the crabs bring something good to the virgins in paradise, she'd wished.

What she got was a dead Willie.

She carried Willie into the kitchen in a blue handkerchief and set him next to her plate of scrambled eggs and toast, which she didn't touch. Willie lay there with his limbs sprawled out just like those of the iridescent green June beetle displayed in a little wooden box she'd bought at a garage sale. It occurred to her for the first time that the beetle probably hadn't died of completely natural causes either.

Her mama acted as though there was still a chance Willie might be okay. She said she'd take him to the veterinarian while their dad dropped them off at church camp. Star knew she was just trying to make her feel better, though.

IN THE CHURCH bathroom, as she and Meredith washed their hands, Star said, "Is that story about Abraham true?"

"It's in the Bible."

"It's terrible."

"That's blasphemy."

Star said, "Do all problems really go away once you're in heaven?"

Star started to turn the water off, but Meredith objected. "You can't possibly have sung all the way through your ABCs twice already."

Meredith yanked out four paper towels, one right after another.

"Heaven is whatever you want it to be."

"For everyone?"

"For everyone who goes to heaven. I'm going to have trees made of chocolate cake. I'll be able to go into a toy store and point to everything I want, and it'll be mine."

"Do animals go to heaven?" It made Star feel better to think that Willie was somewhere far, far away, enjoying a pile of hamster pellets.

She dried her own hands, wiping them on her jeans to try to make up for Meredith's excess paper towel use.

Meredith frowned at this. “That’s unladylike.” Then, “Animals don’t believe in God.”

Meredith pulled a shimmery blue container about the size of a large gumball from her dress pocket and held it out for Star to see. Inside was a tiny porcupine ballerina in a pink tutu. The ballerina twirled around and around. “I suppose animals could be in heaven if you want them there. Maybe I’ll ask for a real dancing porcupine.”

That past year, in the second grade, Star had written a story about a girl named June Beetle, who went to the zoo, but as she moved from one exhibit to another, no animals were to be found. At the end of the story, the girl left the zoo having seen nothing but rocks and concrete and all manner of barriers. Star’s teacher, Ms. Sidney, had said she wondered what happened to the animals. “Now *that* could be a story,” she’d said. So Star had rewritten the ending so that the snake was in its exhibit and it was the size of a house because it had eaten all of the other animals at the zoo. Their bones were piled around the snake.

“Doesn’t sound like much of a heaven for the porcupine,” Star said to Meredith now.

THAT AFTERNOON, STAR lifted the Virgin Mary from the manger scene in her grandma Myrna’s Christmas corner and studied her.

Her grandma’s holiday decorations were on year-round display to forego the trouble of hauling boxes in and out of the attic all year long.

The lurid Technicolor figurines in the manger scene could just as easily have been part of the Halloween display. The mouths of the three lambs and the Virgin Mary were a curious red as though they’d been feasting on flesh.

“Why is she called the Virgin Mary?”

Her grandma didn’t hesitate. “Because God, not a man, put Jesus in her belly.”

“So a virgin is someone who’s pregnant with God’s baby?”

Her grandma thought, then said, “A virgin is someone who is pure and innocent.”

“That’s what Mrs. Goobis said about lambs and about Jesus. They make good sacrifices because they’re innocent.” Mrs. Goobis had also said that sacrifice was like a payment: the more expensive the thing you wanted to buy, the higher the price you had to pay.

“It’s a different kind of innocence.”

“So are you a virgin if you haven’t had a baby with a man?”

“Something like that.” She disappeared into the kitchen to make pork chops for dinner. If Star’s grandpa Gene caught anything that day, it would have to go into the freezer, her grandma said, because she wasn’t about to wait a second longer.

Star pictured her grandpa out on the dike, wiggling his fishing pole in the water. She could see him so well in her mind—his pale blue fishing hat pulled low over his eyes, tackle and hooks dangling from the brown band wrapped around it; the rough leather watch he still wore though it smelled like toe fuzz; the top button of his white shirt undone, tufts of hair creeping out like tentacles. She thought then about what Mrs. Goobis had said about sacrifices being like payments for something you wanted and what her grandpa had said about thoughts having energy, and while she hated at that moment to credit her grandpa with anything, if he was right and if Mrs. Goobis was right, then she might as well use her thought energy to trade her grandpa for Willie. She concentrated on Willie Nelson coming back from the dead and her grandpa Gene taking his place.

When their mama picked them up that afternoon, she said, “Good news, Sweet Potato! Willie Nelson’s okay! The vet said it was a rare condition, some kind of temporary paralysis. Willie’s good as new now!” Star was skeptical, but she ran to his cage as soon they pulled into the driveway. There he was with his strange red eye (the other one brown), his teeth chomping down on hamster pellets.

She didn’t buy that temporary paralysis thing for a second. What other explanation was there but that she had brought him back to life with her mind?

But then she remembered her grandpa. Had he and Willie really changed places? Was this what Mrs. Goobis had meant when she said that everyone has God inside them?

JUST BEFORE MORNING recess the next day, a woman brought in a platter of watermelon slices and cookies. The students were directed to take no more than two cookies and two slices of watermelon, but Star watched Meredith Goobis slip an extra couple of cookies into the pocket of her white eyelet dress. They weren’t well concealed in

that pocket full of pin holes, but no one else seemed to notice, so Star shoved two extra cookies into the front pockets of her shorts, one onto the front of each thigh.

They were then sent outside to the playground. “Go on, go,” Mrs. Goobis said.

On the playground, Star watched Meredith take off for a steel tunnel that burrowed through a grassy hill. She followed her at a distance. Meredith crawled in and settled with her back to the church.

The boys from Star’s class picked up sticks and pretended to shoot each other. The other girls sat in a neat little row, each braiding the hair of the girl in front of her. After several minutes of this, the girl in back moved up to the front of the line, rested her hands on her knees, closed her eyes, and smiled.

Star squatted at the opening of the tunnel. Meredith’s hand moved from her dress to her mouth. Star wondered if Meredith didn’t have much food at home. Her mama was forever talking about how lucky they were to have plenty of food to eat, a roof over their heads, and money to take vacations.

“You want mine, too?” Star said.

“What are you talking about?” Meredith snapped her head around. She wiped the chocolate from her lips with the back of her hand.

“I saw you take extra cookies,” Star said.

“I did no such thing.”

“I took extra, too. You can have them if you want.”

Meredith eyed Star suspiciously. “How do I know you’re not going to tell on me?”

“I guess you have to have faith.”

Meredith considered this. “You have to have faith in God and your parents. The Lord didn’t say nothing about having faith in other kids.”

“Suit yourself.”

Meredith put her palm out then. Star placed one cookie in it, then the other.

“I brought my hamster back to life from the dead,” Star said.

Meredith ate a bite of cookie. She said nothing.

“I did it with my mind.”

Meredith finished chewing and said matter-of-factly, “Only God can bring a dead animal back to life.”

“Well, I guess this just proves I have God inside me.” Star tried not to think about her grandpa, torn apart by a shark.

Meredith looked at Star the way people often looked at Tony Green, the boy in her second-grade class who wore eyeglasses so thick they magnified his eyes to the size of golf balls and whose khaki pants were always coming unzipped, his penis popping out like a cuckoo bird from a clock. Sometimes he’d chased her around the playground, calling “Twinkle, Twinkle! Twinkle, Twinkle!”

“That’s sacrilege. Now come here,” Meredith said.

Star inched her way into the tunnel. She sat down against the lukewarm steel, gritty with sand. It was 90 degrees outside already, and humid, but here in the morning shade, the air wasn’t so bad yet.

“Open your mouth, little lamb,” Meredith said.

“What?”

“I’m going to feed the lamb as Jesus has asked me.”

Star thought that perhaps it was Meredith who was crazy like Tony Green. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Trust me.”

Star reluctantly opened her mouth.

Meredith did not spit into her mouth as she’d feared. She didn’t fling sand. Meredith held up the last of the cookies and placed it gently onto Star’s lower lip. Although the cookie was the same variety she’d eaten earlier back inside the church, it tasted sweeter and richer now, when the hand offering it was not her own. Meredith offered her another bite and then another until the cookie was gone and Meredith’s fingers pressed against her lips. Star felt a strange pulsing then in the place where her pee came out. *Vagina* was the word her mama used. Her grandma Myrna called it a *hoo-hoo*. Star had never heard her dad or her grandpa Gene speak of it one way or another.

Meredith said, “Jesus *is* inside you, Star. You just have to listen.”

What Meredith seemed to mean, as far as Star could tell, was that Jesus was saying yoo-hoo from her hoo-hoo. Her hoo-hoo seemed like a peculiar place from which Jesus might speak, but then again, maybe this was precisely why her grandma Myrna called it her most sacred place.

STAR’S GRANDPA GENE did return home the day Willie Nelson rose from the dead, but the next afternoon he was not himself. His

body crumpled over the dining table like a yellowing plant. He ate a piece of dry toast.

“What’s wrong with Grandpa?” Star whispered.

“His back. The painkillers haven’t taken effect yet. That old man acts like he’s still in his forties. It’s a wonder he’s not worse off than he is.”

Star noticed the black toenail on his right foot and how it dangled from the skin beneath by a tiny thread. Toenails weren’t like baby teeth. Her grandpa wasn’t losing his toenail so that a larger one could grow in. The most logical explanation for that toenail and his crumpled posture was that he was dying.

After her grandpa went back to bed to rest his back, her grandma Myrna spent the afternoon gossiping on the telephone. She talked about how foolish this one was, how pitiful that one was, and how ugly another one was. Star could hardly hear a word from the television, and to make matters worse, when Star’s back was turned, her grandma snuck chocolates into her mouth without offering her or Harris any. All that nasty gossip and those chocolates and the heat made Star want to smother her with her dingy old peach-colored armchair pillow.

When her grandma hung up the phone for the third time that afternoon, Star said, “I could kill you with my mind.”

“What did you say?” Her grandma pushed her glasses higher up on her nose and looked down at Star.

“Grandpa’s dying because I was so angry with him for taking the lives of those crabs and then Willie Nelson. I focused on Willie coming back and Grandpa taking his place, and now here we are.”

Harris turned around and shook his head like their mama did when she said someone was a lost cause.

“It’s true!” Star said.

“Child,” her grandma said. “What kind of foolishness has gotten into you?”

But Star didn’t stop. She told her just what she thought of her nasty old gossip and her stupid books and her being stingy with her chocolates.

On the car ride home, her mama said that what she’d said was hurtful and that Grandpa Gene was most definitely *not* dying. She let out a big sigh as they got out of the car to pick up burritos for dinner.

The next morning Star learned she was no longer welcome at her grandparents’ house, not for a few weeks at least. She would have to go to Aunt Constance’s in the afternoons, which meant Harris would, too,

since it was too much of a pain for their mama to have to pick them up at different locations.

Aunt Constance had four kids, so her house was always loud. Plus, the oldest kid, Walt, was 12 years old and loved to torment Harris. Harris called him the Human Garbage Disposal because he had an affinity for funky meat products like Vienna sausages and Spam.

“Nice work,” Harris said to her.

IT WAS A few days later that Meredith “lost her innocence” as Star overheard one of the teachers say about it later.

Meredith had been in the restroom an unusually long time, and Mrs. Goobis sent Star to fetch her. Star passed two other classrooms along the way. Through the window of one door she saw the fives and sixes crowded around a red puppet stage. On it danced a white-robed figure, presumably Jesus, his hair long and wavy as Star imagined Meredith’s hair looked in the mornings before her mother got to it. Through the window of the second classroom, she saw older kids rolling around on the floor laughing.

When she opened the door to the girls’ bathroom, she thought she’d chosen the wrong door. The shoes within the only shut stall were not those of a young girl. Large black sneakers nearly the size of her dad’s shoes were what she saw. They were facing the toilet. Star was leaning against the bathroom door, ready to get out of there quick, when she saw little red Mary Janes dangling above the black shoes like ornaments from a tree. She was a little girl, Meredith, several inches shorter than Star, and Star’s own feet only barely scraped the floor when she used the church toilets.

She thought, Meredith passed out, and someone is giving her CPR. She thought, crazily, Meredith fell in, and he’s pulling her out.

She called Meredith’s name.

There was a barely audible, “Shit.” Soon the door to the stall opened, releasing energy in an explosive burst the way tectonic plates do when they push past each other. The boy, a teenager she guessed from his height, gave her a quick, guilty look as he whisked past her. His cheeks looked hot to the touch. Then he was out the door.

Star found Meredith sitting on the toilet as though on an ordinary chair, her skirt neatly laid out over her knees. She ran the back of one

hand across her mouth. With the other hand, she held a Barbie doll dressed in a bright, sapphire blue gown that sparkled. She held it up as though it were a prize she'd won.

"Your mother sent me for you," Star said.

Meredith asked Star to hold the doll for her while she washed her hands. She cupped water into her hands, swished it around her mouth, and spit.

Star watched her. She didn't know what she had seen, but she had a bad feeling about it.

"You want some juice?" Star asked.

Meredith nodded, so Star led her to the kitchen where they helped themselves to apple juice that had a grainy texture as though the skins had been ground up into it.

THE NEXT DAY, neither Meredith nor Mrs. Goobis was at church camp.

Star didn't hear the new teacher, Mrs. Fox, read or explain the verse for the day. Her mind was on Meredith. That Meredith was no longer eligible to become one of the virgins in heaven was little consolation for her having a baby. Star wanted Meredith's innocence to be returned to her somehow. She pictured her lying in a field of colorful wildflowers. She said to her there, *Relax, everything's okay. Feel the sunshine on your face.*

For three days, she concentrated her thoughts on making Meredith okay again. She squeezed her eyes shut and saw little supernovas going off in her head like fireworks. She drank gallons of water, and every time she peed, she listened for the voice of Jesus. What she got was a headache and a swashing feeling in her stomach as if she were carrying around a miniature ocean.

IT WAS HER grandma Myrna who took her to see Meredith. Her wood-paneled Chrysler careened into the driveway, kicking up dust and rocks. She said simply, "That girl could use a friend right now," and she handed Star a Tupperware container of strawberry muffins when she climbed into the back seat. Her grandma didn't say a word during the drive to Meredith's, not even when they passed the highway billboard sign for Pirate's Cove, which boasted "all-you-can-eat ribs for

\$7.99,” and which normally elicited some word of condemnation from her. If she heard Willie Nelson scratching around in Star’s backpack, she didn’t let on.

Mrs. Goobis answered the door in a night shirt that ended just above her knees. It read, “I don’t do mornings” and featured a cat with rollers in its fur, bunny slippers concealing its front paws. She held a piece of jerky in her hand. Her eyes were vacant. Star wondered whether Mrs. Goobis even saw her standing there with her grandma.

Once they were in the house, Star’s grandma put her arm around Mrs. Goobis, and she motioned Star toward the hallway to find Meredith. It wasn’t difficult. The door to her room advertised itself as such in pink wooden letters.

Star knocked on the door expecting that she wouldn’t answer or that even if she did, she’d be in a similar state as her mother—vacant and nibbling jerky.

But Meredith beamed and said, “Star! Mommy didn’t tell me you were coming over for a playdate!” Star had been right about Meredith’s hair. Without those ringlets, it was long and wavy.

Maybe her thought energy had actually worked, Star thought for a moment, but as Meredith took her hand and showed her around the room, telling her the names of each of about fifty baby dolls and stuffed animals and the circumstances of her acquiring each one (the Barbie with the sapphire blue dress was nowhere in sight), Star felt a growing uneasiness.

Meredith’s excitement frightened her. Something terrible had happened in that bathroom. Star had known it when she’d found her. Her absence and the teachers’ talk had confirmed it. Whatever that boy had done to her, it had to have been bad indeed for her grandma to come get Star though only a few days had passed since she’d said she was done with Star indefinitely.

Those tiny explosions must have just fizzled out in her head like dud supernovas. Concentration alone was not enough.

Meredith said, “I know! Let’s swim!”

“I don’t have my suit.”

“You can borrow one of mine.” Meredith pulled her golden yellow dress over her head, and Star stared at Meredith’s beige belly and imagined it growing to the size of a watermelon. Meredith

stepped into a red suit, which was dotted with flowers. Star changed into a purple ruffled suit that was tight. She left her clothes on Meredith's bedroom floor.

Meredith took Star's hand and led her to the backyard pool.

"You two be careful," Star's grandma said as they passed through the living room. She was on the couch, her arms wrapped tightly around Mrs. Goobis, whose head was slumped onto Star's grandma's shoulder like a brick.

Star suddenly wanted to throw herself into her grandma's lap and beg her forgiveness.

As they stepped out into the sunshine, Star turned to Meredith and said, "Don't worry, Meredith. I'm going to resolve your troubles."

Meredith scrunched her eyes at Star. She ran and jumped into the deep end, creating a large splash, then swam toward the diving board where various noodle floats rested along the ledge like bloated snakes.

Star walked over to the shallow end and submersed herself slowly. Waist deep, she turned her back to Meredith. She opened her backpack where it sat on the ledge, and she pulled out Willie Nelson, concealing him from Meredith's view. She kissed Willie's warm body and looked into his red eye, gritting her teeth so she wouldn't cry. Then she looked up toward the face of the sun, and she whispered, "I'm here, God. Just like Abraham. I'm proving my faith."

She lowered Willie until his body just grazed the water. "Come on, God," she said as she wept silently. "If you're really out there, then it's your turn. You're supposed to stop me now." But she felt like June Beetle at the zoo. Everywhere she looked, there was nothing but rocks and concrete and empty cages.

Star submerged Willie slowly, millimeter by millimeter. Her arms trembled with the effort to give God every chance she could. When she pressed Willie's face into the water, he clawed and bit her, his long teeth piercing the flesh between her thumb and forefinger. But God, he was silent.

She knew then that she couldn't save Meredith any more than she could help the virgins in heaven. So she did what she could: she saved Willie.

