

Girls, at Play by Celeste Ng (2010)

This is how we play the game: pink means kissing; red means tongue. Green means up your shirt; blue means down his pants. Purple means in your mouth. Black means all the way.

We play the game at recess, and the teachers don't notice. We stand on the playground by the flagpole, arms ringed with colored bracelets from the drugstore, waiting. The boys come past us, in a bunch, all elbows, laughing. They pretend not to look. We pretend not to see them. One of them reaches out and snaps a bracelet off one of us, breaking it like a rubber band, fast and sharp as plucking a guitar string. He won't look back. He'll walk back the way he came, along the edge of the football field. And whoever he picked, Angie or Carrie or Mandy, will watch him go. After a minute she'll follow him and meet him under the bleachers, far down the field, where the teachers can't see.

We play the game every day. In eighth grade we're too old for four-square and tetherball and kickball. It doesn't have a name, this game, and we don't talk about it even when we're by ourselves, after school, the boys gone off to football or paper routes or hockey and no teachers around. But the game has rules. You go with the boy who snaps your bracelet. You don't pick the boy; he picks you; they're all the same to you. You do exactly what the color prescribes, even if you hate him, like we hate Travis Coleman whose fingernails are always grubby. No talking other than hello. Don't tell anyone if you hate it, if his tongue feels like a dead fish in your mouth, if his hands leave snail-trails of sweat down your sides. No talking with the boys outside of the game. No talking about it afterwards, no laughing, no anything, even if it's just the three of us. Pretend it never happened. Rub the dent on your arm, the red welt where the bracelet snapped and split, until it goes away.

Ask anyone in Cleveland and they'll tell you that girls in Lakeview Heights don't play this kind of game. Maybe down in Cleveland Heights they play it, or across town on the west side. Maybe there are a few naughty girls at the high school, reapplying lipstick in the rear view mirror before they slide out of their cars and tug their miniskirts down over their thighs. But certainly not at the junior high school, where the kids still get recess, where parents still pack lunches sometimes, where Mr. Petroski the principal still comes on the P.A. every morning to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. Not in this tidy little world where there are still four-square courts and hopscotch grids painted on the blacktop. Certainly no one plays games like that here.

The other girls pretend not to know us. Their worlds are full of wholesome extracurriculars: riding lessons, field hockey practice, violin, ballet. They crowd like cattle on the playground, whispering and looking our way. Some of them say we're stupid, or high. Some of them say we don't know any better. Some call us sluts. We are the fallen women of Lakeview Heights Middle.

We aren't stupid, or high. We don't do it because we don't know better. And it isn't hormones either. If you asked us, we couldn't explain, but it has something to do with their stares. They've always stared. Because we live south of Scottsdale Avenue, where the houses are smaller and

mostly rentals. Because we carry our lunches in plastic grocery bags instead of paper sacks, since crisp little paper sacks cost money and we get plastic bags free from the Sav-Mart. Because Carrie's dad works nights at the liquor store, and Mandy's mom wraps gifts at the mall customer service desk, because Angie lives with her grandmother and her parents are off in Vegas maybe, or is it L.A.? We hate the stares and we love them too and maybe that's why we play the game.

After school nobody says, "Should we stop by the drugstore today?" We just walk single-file, the automatic door half shutting between each of us, like it's saying, "All right, Angie, but not you, Carrie—all right, Carrie too, but not you, Mandy—all right all right." We walk through the candy aisle to the back of the store, and Carrie maybe picks up a Baby Ruth to eat on the way home. Then we stroll down the toy aisle, with its neon-plastic cars and its fake Barbie dolls, the ones with fake Barbie names like Trissy, whose skin is a little too orange, whose hair is a little too blond and you can see the roots of it set in little holes. We hate them because when we were younger our moms bought us Trissy, as if we couldn't tell the difference between the real thing and the cheap imitation. Sometimes we turn their boxes around so the dolls face the chipped paint on the back of the rack. Once Angie stole a black Sharpie from Mr. Hanson the gym teacher and we drew on the cellophane window of every doll, big handlebar mustaches and goatee-beards and devil-horns. On the last one, a Trissy in a frosting-pink tutu with ribbons up her legs, Angie X'd out the eyes and drew a balloon squeezing out of her mouth. It said, "I'm an ugly whore."

Today we don't mess with the dolls. We go straight to the fake jewelry and pick a pack of bracelets each. These aren't the hard plastic kind spray-painted fake gold. Those are for little girls, girls that still want to play princess. Ours are thin as spaghetti and stretchy, all different colors and a dollar for five. We take them up to the register and pay for them and while we walk home we open the bags and slide the new stack of bracelets onto our right arms and toss the empty bags onto someone's lawn. The next day we hold our arms across our bodies like we're pinning towels to our waists and wait for the boys to come by. We are ready to play the game. We are stores of iniquity with a wide, wide selection.

This is how we are when Grace moves to town.

From all the way across the blacktop we can see that everything about her is wrong. Her shirt is too big: she's tiny and it's huge and hangs down past her butt. The cuffs of her pants stop at her ankle and a band of black cotton sock shows between hem and sneaker-top. Her shoes are too new, too stiff, too blindingly white in the lunchtime sun. Even the way she stands is wrong, hands clasped behind her back, index fingers linked, like she's been told not to touch.

The other girls don't tease her, or call her names, or throw things at her. They just stand in a knot looking at her and talking loudly about other things, fingering the silver O charms around their necks that are *in* this year.

We've never seen her before but something about her looks familiar: the way she stands, heels at right angles, left toe pointing towards the girls, right toe towards the football fields where the boys are shuffling our way. Then she turns her head towards us, and we remember exactly what it's like to be her, alone and awkward on the open prairie of the playground. We know how those stares feel like blinding sunbeams, how you find yourself squinting when they hit your face. One shoulder comes up towards her ear, as if she's half shrugging, and her ridiculous T-shirt puffs in the wind and we feel tenderness welling up inside us.

We cross the asphalt and cluster around her, like mother elephants circling a calf. We shield her from the stares with our bodies. The boys drift toward the abandoned flagpole, their eyes longing after us. Without us they seem lost. One of them puts out his hand to the cold steel of the pole. *Olly-olly-oxen-free*.

"What's your name?" we say, and her face goes pink with surprise. Up close we can read her T-shirt. Under a picture of animals in the jungle it says, "If the Macaw saw what the Leopard spotted, then the Toucan can, and you can, too! SAVE THE RAINFOREST!"

"Grace," she says.

"Grace," we repeat. "Grace." We like the sound of it, the round single syllable, like a polished metal bead. A simple name, a sweet name. A name not yet corrupted into a diminutive. We wonder, for a moment, if with Grace we can be Angela, Caroline, Amanda.

"I like your bracelets," she says. We push them under our coat sleeves.

"They're nothing," we say. "Just old junk. Come sit with us. Tell us about you." We lead her over to one of the picnic tables by the pine trees where no one ever eats, because we eat in the shiny cafeteria where the tiles are painted with vegetables and fruits and the food pyramid.

She's twelve, a year younger than us, and her birthday is in July and she's in the seventh grade, Mrs. Derrick's class. She came from Ketchikan, and before that she lived in Montana, and Louisiana, and Del Norte, Colorado, and Eureka, South Dakota. "My dad works for the army," she says. "We move a lot." She's an only child. She had a dog once, a brown-and-white spaniel mutt named Goober, but he died three years ago. Her favorite food is lemon cake with chocolate icing. Her favorite color is blue. We drink in the minutiae of her life until the bell rings and it's time to go in. Grace stands and looks around, as if she's forgotten the way back into the building.

"Meet us after school," we say, and tuck a stray lock of blond behind her earlobe. Then she smiles and runs off.

That afternoon we don't go to the drugstore. We take Grace over to the Tasty-Q and buy her a chocolate-dipped cone. She's never had one before. She licks the melting ice cream from her

fingers and the way she sits with her arms wrapped around her knees, trying to take up as little space as possible, you'd think she was ten.

Grace tells us that she's never lived in one place for more than six months. She's never finished a school year in the same place she started. Her father does some kind of engineering work. We know engineers build bridges, and we picture him in a trim navy worksuit with blueprints in his hand. Her mother died of cancer when she was three. "Most days," Grace says, "I'm a latch-key kid." She doesn't say so, but we know we're the first real friends she's ever had.

At her house Grace pulls out toys—real toys, toys we had long ago, when we were still kids. We play Monopoly through the afternoons, Operation, even Candyland. We flub the Funny Bone and Charley Horse and Broken Heart operations just to feel the buzzer tingle our fingers. Weeks pass and we don't go near the flagpole. At recess we see the boys out of the corner of our eyes. Some of them move on to other things, football, kickball, skateboarding. But some keep on, as if out of habit, moving towards the flagpole like a fog and then dissipating, disappointed. After a while we forget to even watch them. We're busy, with Grace, because she hardly knows anything at all.

We teach her important things, like how to find the best seats in the movie theater. Asking for butter in the middle of your popcorn, not just on top. How to snap your gum. How to tell the future with straws: Tie the paper wrapper in a knot. If it breaks the thing you're thinking of will happen; if it stays knotted it won't. Grace doesn't know any of this. We give her things she's never had before: cherry Cokes, Pixy Stix, curly fries. Things we can afford on our allowances, things we forgot the joy of. We teach her the rules. Hold your breath when you pass a graveyard; punch your friend's shoulder when a VW bug drives by. Pick up a penny when it's heads up, but not tails up or you'll have bad luck. And we teach her about making wishes: on maple-tree helicopters, on cottonwood puffs, on dandelion heads, when you see the first star at night. And on eyelashes, held on someone else's finger, the most sacred of wishes, a tiny curl bearing your most secret hopes.

"Can you wish for the same thing twice?" Grace asks one day, and we are surprised. We have never run out of things to wish for. Now we are ashamed to realize that our lives are filled with infinite longings. We pause, then nod.

"Of course you can," we say. "If you want to." That afternoon, as we roll the dice and push our pewter tokens around the board, we savor Grace—the way her hair falls over her face, the clumsiness of her movements, the artlessness of her hands. We are awed to be in the presence of someone who wants so little.

But it doesn't last. One Friday after school Grace is fidgety, restless. She doesn't want to play any games; she doesn't want to go out for milkshakes. Is she mad at us? we wonder. Have we

done something wrong? Her T-shirt has pulled askew, and we straighten the seam along her shoulder.

"What is it?" we say. "What's bothering you? Tell us. We'll fix it." We are like fairy godmothers, wands out and eager to please. We want to preserve her lovely clumsiness, that artless, awkward smile. But she won't talk to us. She sits moping, drawing on the sole of her sneaker with a blue Bic pen.

Maybe she's just bored, we think. We suggest a movie and Grace shows a glimmer of interest. "Okay," she says. "Maybe." We open the paper and spread it on the floor. "Anything you want," we tell her.

"*Closer*," she says, jabbing at the newsprint.

We're shocked at her choice. Under Grace's finger, a quote over four half-faces reads, "Sex, Lies, and Betrayal!" Another, from *Rolling Stone*, says, "Vibrates with eroticism." For a moment we don't know what to say.

"It's rated R," we tell her. "You're too young."

"So are you," she shoots back. And we know she's right. We've seen R-rated movies dozens of times, and somehow Grace guesses this, and we feel like hypocrites, and we can't say no.

At the theater, there's no one else in line and we hop over the red velvet ropes. We look at the board, where it says *Closer* – 4:00 and smile at the pimpled clerk through the ticket-window glass and say, "The 3:50 *Polar Express*, please." Then we file into Theater 5 and sit in the back row.

"You said we were going to see *Closer*," Grace whispers. "I don't want to see this. It's for babies."

"Shush," we say. "Give us a minute. Trust us, honey, please."

The movie starts and CGI snowflakes blow across the screen. We wait five, six, seven minutes. Then we tug Grace's hand. We slip through the swinging doors one by one, so the light from the hallway doesn't attract attention, and we run across the hall into Theater 6, where Natalie Portman and Jude Law have just locked eyes.

"That's it?" Grace says afterwards. "So easy. I should have thought of it myself." She licks butter-flavored oil from her fingers and tosses the empty popcorn bag into the trash. She smiles, not at us but to herself, a little half-smile we've never seen before. It troubles us. Later we will look back to this moment and wonder if this was where we went wrong. Was this our first mistake, showing her how easy it is to sidestep her age?

The next week we're in her room playing dress-up. Grace has a box of costumes, capes and wide-brimmed hats and purple fans, and we say, you're never too old. Though it's only March, we tell her where the best neighborhoods for trick-or-treating are, who gives out whole candy bars and who just gives out boxes of raisins. Next year, we tell her, tugging clothes over our heads, we'll take her. Everything is a little small, but if we hold our breath, it still fits. We drape capes and scarves over our braceleted arms. We put on crowns and wigs and bunny ears and mug in the mirror, and it's then that we see Grace behind us. She's not wearing a costume. She's put on our clothes—Angie's little lace top and Carrie's denim skirt and Mandy's platforms—and she's looking not in the mirror but down at herself.

Grace looks up when we stop talking. But it's not until we start to take off our costumes that she looks at herself one more time and peels off our things. We snatch them up from the carpet where she's dropped them and hold them against us. They are warm as skin and they smell like Grace, and we wonder if they will have changed somehow, if they will no longer fit. But they do, and when we emerge from our shirts, Grace has pulled on her own clothing and is tossing the costumes back into the box.

When the last piece is in, Grace settles back on the carpet and says, "I look like a big old cow." She pinches the front of her T-shirt and pulls it away from her, then drops it. We watch the letters settle against the flatness of her chest in silence: POLLUTION IS A DIRTY WORD.

"Haven't you noticed?" she says. "I'm the only girl in school who wears stupid shirts like this." There's a little hole in the front, near her shoulder, and she puts her finger in and drags. The fabric rips with a noise like radio static. Through the tear we see the pale white of Grace's bra. We know that bra. It's the kind we wore years ago, the kind our mothers bought us from Sears or J. C. Penney, before anyone but us ever saw them, before we began to buy our own.

"You're perfect, sweetheart," we say finally. "Your shirt is fine. Don't change a thing."

But Monday Grace comes to school in a little sweater: V-necked, black, stretchy.

Soon after that Grace begins to look like a TV with the colors tuned too bright. Her cheeks glow orange, her lips are magenta, her eyes look darkish and bruised. When we press her, she admits that she's been using the watercolors from her painting kit as makeup.

We take her into the bathroom and wash her face, dyeing the washcloth in a face-shaped smudge. Then we take the makeup out of our bags and teach her to put it on. Foundation on your red spots, blush from your cheekbone to your temple. We teach her how to hold the mascara wand steady, to keep her eyes open and apply tiny coat after tiny coat. We watch her in the mirror, her elbow up like a violinist, and feel proud.

She finishes one eye, then recaps the tube and passes it back. "My dad will never buy me any of this," she says.

We look at each other, then back at Grace, whose undone eye is startlingly blue and wide, the other dark and plush as fur.

"All right," we say. "Come on."

We take her to the drugstore. We circle the store once, poking packages of diapers, rattling bags of cough drops. Then we enter the makeup aisle and pull a package of mascara from its hook. Put it somewhere it won't show, we explain. Not in your purse; if they catch you, they always look there. Put it on your body. Put it somewhere they're afraid to touch.

Each of us steals something, to show her how. Angie slides a deep red lipstick into her jeans pocket. Carrie tucks a pack of Twizzlers up the sleeve of her shirt. Mandy pops a bottle of nail polish under the tongue of her sneaker. Then finally Grace pulls the pink-and-green tube of mascara from its package and tucks it down the neckline of her sweater.

We're nervous now. We never were before, when we'd lifted perfume and fancy glitter lotion and condoms, even that time when we stole an entire bag of potato chips and a can of dip to eat in the park behind Angie's house. But this time is different somehow. Our fingers shake and our palms get damp and we wipe them on our jeans and look over at Grace, who doesn't look at us but touches the tube under her shirt with the tips of her fingers.

The clerk at the counter doesn't even look at us. He leans against the counter, turning the pages of a glossy celebrity magazine and eating M&Ms from the pocket of his smock. In the black-and-white monitor screens behind him, an old woman shakes a bottle of vitamins. A housewife pulls her toddler's hands away from the aspirin. And we stride out the automatic door, single file, Angie Carrie Mandy Grace, and walk slowly all the way across the parking lot wanting to scream, before we begin to run. We don't stop until we reach the corner and realize that Grace isn't with us. When we look back she's walking steadily towards us, looking straight ahead with a face of perfect serenity.

We never take Grace shoplifting again, but she comes to school with pinkened cheeks and reddened lips. We wonder if she's gotten an allowance now, or if her father buys it for her, or if she's just practicing what we've taught her. Sometimes we look at her, at this new creature with darkened eyes and sleek clothing, who keeps her head up in the hallways, who sees people look at her and bats her eyes and smiles. At first she looks like a stranger. But there's something familiar about her, like she's someone we saw once in a movie, or someone we knew as a child but haven't seen in years. We stare hard and screw our eyes up, trying to keep that something in focus. She's still Grace, we remind ourselves. We cling to the simple things, to Candyland, to milkshakes, to eyelash wishes. She's still our Grace.

Then one day Grace says, "Carol Ann in my English class told me you used to play some kind of game at recess."

She says it matter-of-fact but we know it's a question, a heavy one. It sinks slowly and settles on us like soot. We are unsure. Should we bluster it out? Should we lie, deny everything? We can't imagine telling her. This is something we can't bear for her to know. But when we turn back to Grace we know we've made a mistake. She's seen us exchange glances and her face closes up.

"It's nothing," we say. "Just a way to kill time. Just something stupid we did before we met you."

"All right," she says. "Don't tell me. Carol Ann said you wouldn't."

Don't listen to Carol Ann, we want to say. Forget Carol Ann. Forget about the game. Let's pretend it never happened. Let's never talk about it again. But of course it doesn't turn out that way.

Grace doesn't talk to us for eight days. During recess we sit at the picnic table, fiddling with our bracelets, watching her giggle with the other girls across the blacktop, waiting to see if she'll come back. We trace the initials there with our fingers. T.G. + A.B. J.T. + D.H 4-EVER. Generations of ancient, chaste, hand-holding love. Finally, on Friday, Grace arrives. Her face is pale and the fingers of one hand clutch at the other. She walks slowly, like a doll might walk, legs stiff and in perfect parallel, untouching.

"I think I'm sick," she says. She doesn't sit down. "I think I might be dying."

The look on her face frightens us. How big her eyes are, how still her closed lips, as if she's been turned to wax. We forget that we were angry.

"We'll take you to the nurse," we say, stroking her shoulders, her hair. "The hospital. The emergency room." We feel her forehead for a fever. "What is it? Where do you hurt?"

"I don't hurt," she says. "I don't hurt. I just—" She touches her hand to her belly, just below the navel.

We take her to the girls' bathroom on the third floor, the one no one uses. The nurse is not needed now. Didn't you know, we keep asking her. Didn't someone explain? An aunt, the health teacher, someone? We see now the faint dark stain on Grace's skirt. We press tampons into her palm and turn her towards the handicapped stall at the end of the row. Grace looks down into her hands as if we've given her a weapon. Then she backs into the stall and shuts the

door. She stays in a long time, and when she comes out she's changed into her gym pants, and she wads up the skirt and tucks it into her bookbag.

That afternoon we take her back to the drugstore. We take her into the ladies' aisle, as the sign calls it, telling her what we know. The wrapper of this kind rustles—everyone in the bathroom will hear. This kind is small enough to fit in your front pocket. She nods and listens and we're happy again, to walk her, sure-footed, through unfamiliar territory.

Then, as we head to the register, Grace stops.

"Look," she says. "Is this where you always get them?" In her hand she's got a little plastic package. Without realizing it we've led her up the toy aisle, and through the cellophane window on the package we can see the bright bracelets inside.

"Put those back," we say. We snatch the bag from Grace's hand and throw it back onto the shelf. "These aren't your style. Save your money."

"But you wear them," Grace says, and we tuck our arms behind our backs. "Why can't I?" She puts out her hand again and this time we slap it.

"Leave them alone," we say. "Forget about them."

"I'm not a baby, you know," Grace says. The pride in her voice is obvious and bleating. She pushes past us and darts out the door, and we let her go. Then we pick up the box of tampons she's dropped and pay for them ourselves, and we leave them on her doorstep, swaddled in their plastic bag.

On Monday we don't see Grace before school, or in the hallways. At recess, we find her across the schoolyard, standing alone. After a minute she comes over to us, but she doesn't sit down. Her eyes look sideways, at the row of pines planted between the table and the brick wall of the school.

"I don't think we should hang out anymore," she says.

"This is about the bracelets, isn't it," we say. "About the game."

"No," she says, "no, it isn't."

We hear everything she doesn't say. She touches her forearm with her fingers and frowns. Then she looks up at us with a scowl, like we're keeping something from her, like we're evil stepmothers keeping her rightful crown under lock and key. We know, now, that we can keep nothing from her, that we will have to teach her everything we know. The girl in front of us

doesn't even look like our Grace anymore. She looks like a Trissy doll: tiny clothes, perfect makeup, everything but the cartoon bubble drawn from her mouth. She looks just like us except for her bare wrists. We want to slap her, to tell her she's ungrateful.

Instead we look at look at her, hard.

"What do you want," we say. "Do you want to play the game?"

"Yes," she says at last. "Yes. I want to play the game."

We grab her by the shoulders and force her down. First onto her knees, then into the grass. Her shoulder hits the ground and she winces as we roll her onto her back. Then we push up our sleeves and pull off our bracelets in handfuls. They don't want to go on. They catch on the bumps of her knuckles, then the knob of her wrist, and we push harder, forcing them onto her thin arms. The rubber leaves red brush-burns against her skin, and Grace whimpers and twists. We hold her down, pressing her shoulders flat against the damp ground, pinning her legs in place with our knees. We don't look at her face. We focus on what we're doing, thinking only about the bracelets. We strip every one off our wrists and thrust them onto hers, and only when our arms are bare do we stop, our hands shaking, and step back.

Grace has stopped struggling. She sits up slowly, pushing herself up with both palms. She touches her face, then her arms, as if the bracelets are new skin she's seeing for the first time. A few crushed blades of grass cling to the back of her blouse. We reach out to brush them off, but she waves us off and gets to her feet alone. Without the bracelets, our outstretched arms look smaller, bonier, like little girls'.

We don't look her in the face. Instead we take her to the flagpole. As we cross the blacktop, the boys see us and silently follow. At first there are only a few, but by the time we reach the flagpole they are a pack. We leave Grace there alone. She stands, watching us go, her face set, her eyes wide but her mouth closed. The boys circle her, soft-footed, eyeing the bracelets on her arms. After a long, lonely winter they are lean and hungry. One reaches in and pulls off a bracelet. So does another. Another. From where we stand we hear—or think we hear—the thin spaghetti-snaps against her skin. The boys head off, one by one, toward the bleachers. Strings of colored rubber hang limp from their fingers like old, worn-out streamers.

We turn away then, and close our eyes, so we never know if Grace follows them to the bleachers or not.

Maybe she pushes them away with her hands. Maybe she holds them off with her eyes, stares till they're embarrassed to come near her. Maybe she never leaves the flagpole at all, maybe she stays standing there forever, one hand on the metal like it's home base, only she's really *it*.

Maybe she follows them after all, as if she's in a trance, not understanding what's to come, and afterwards wipes away her mascara, which has run, with her fist.

Or maybe—and this is why we close our eyes—maybe she follows them with her head up, eyes trained on the horizon, like the day we taught her to steal. Maybe she lies down with them in the brittle grass. And when she leaves the bleachers, maybe there's a look of triumph in her eyes, as she walks back, unsquinting, into the stares at this end of the asphalt.