

KIRSTIN VALDEZ QUADE

FICTION PRIZE WINNER

KIDLINE

When she heard the blind girl was coming to spend mornings at the normal school, Jill suspected they'd stick her in the desk next to hers. She had the best grades and the fewest friends, a combo that made her uniquely qualified to keep company with a cripple.

As usual she had finished her fractions first. Everyone else was hunched over worksheets or whispering to people in their pods. Nikki Beckstead and Brittany Schlembach were passing notes and rolling their eyes and making a big show of reading what they wrote, even though they sat right across from each other and could talk just as easily. No matter what they did, they acted like people were watching, and as much as she hated them, Jill often was. Only Jill's pod was quiet, because she was alone: boring Sarah was gone—her mother was always letting her take Personal Days—and Mrs. Bohardt had made Duncan sit in the desk next to hers so she could explain each problem to him. That was fine with Jill. Duncan had dirty elbows and asked for help on everything so he could copy off her.

The blind girl stood in the doorway beside the Resource teacher, holding a red, white, and blue cane. Her eyes were squinted nearly shut. When the Resource teacher tapped the doorframe, Mrs. Bohardt looked up from Duncan's worksheet and rushed over to them, all smiles. She led the blind girl to the front of the room.

Mrs. Bohardt clapped and called out, "Okay, people! Announcement!" She put a flabby arm around the blind girl and introduced her to the class. Lacey. The blind girl smiled a dopey smile.

"I hope you'll all make an effort to welcome Lacey and make her feel special. There's a great deal we can learn from one another's differences."

Across the room Nikki Beckstead and Spencer Tindall exchanged smiles over the word "special." There was a song they sometimes sang to Duncan based on a television commercial. *I don't want to grow up, I'm a Special Ed kid. There's so many of my own boogers that I can play with!* Jill hummed under her breath. It was a catchy song.

Lacey held Mrs. Bohardt's arm above the elbow and they made their way across the classroom toward Jill. Just great, thought Jill. Lacey walked, squinting with her head tilted, tap-tapping the linoleum with her cane, tap-tapping the legs of chairs and desks. She wore a boy's lizard

t-shirt and jean shorts and skater shoes that looked too big on the end of her skinny legs. And, Jill saw, she didn't shave yet. Jill had begun shaving her own legs that summer, so it was something she noticed. Lacey's were disgusting: short dark hairs all over. Jill almost felt sorry for her; how would she ever find out she wasn't normal? She couldn't see her legs and she couldn't see anyone else's. The girl didn't have a chance.

Mrs. Bohardt set Lacey's hand on the back of the chair next to Jill's. "Alrighty, hon. You have any questions, just ask Jill. She'll be your welcome wagon." Mrs. Bohardt gave Jill an encouraging little scratch on the back when she passed.

Jill narrowed her eyes.

"Hi, Jill." Lacey collapsed her cane and set it on the desk. "So we're partners?" she asked, scooting her chair in. Her eyes were gray and shrunken in the sockets. The left one slid to the right and then up. The right one didn't move at all.

"We're not partners. We're sitting next to each other."

Lacey's brow creased.

"I only meant," Jill said, "that we aren't doing partner work. It's *math*." Lacey's hairy legs were no further than fourteen inches from Jill. Something about them made the blind girl seem grubby, but when Jill gave an experimental sniff in her direction, she just smelled shampoo.

"Oh. So, is Mrs. Bohardt nice?"

"She's a complete tool. We call her Mrs. Blow-Hard."

Lacey laughed and opened her blank eyes wide, which pleased Jill. She hadn't even made that up. Lacey leaned forward. "At ASDB there's a teacher named Mr. Whitehead. We call him Pop the Whitehead."

"ASDB?" asked Jill.

"Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind."

It was amazing that there was an entire school filled with kids who couldn't see or hear. They probably spent most of the day bumping into each other, shouting, fumbling their hands over each other's faces.

Duncan came back to his desk, crumpled worksheet in hand. His shorts were twisted to the side, athletic socks bunched around pale ankles. He stood beside his desk, looking at Lacey, breathing through his mouth.

Jill rolled her eyes. "Aren't you supposed to be getting help from the teacher, Duncan?"

Duncan picked up Lacey's cane and extended it. "Dang! You could put someone's eye out with this thing!" He lowered his voice. "You don't know this because you can't see, but our teacher is a total joke. We call her Mrs. Blow-Hard."

"I already explained that, Duncan."

Lacey laughed. “How about Blow-*Fart*?”

Duncan dropped into his chair and cackled hysterically, flinging himself from side to side. Across the room, Mrs. Bohardt looked up from her desk, smiling because the blind girl was making friends. “I never even thought of that one!”

Not all the hair on Lacey’s legs was hideous. On her thighs it was fine and almost golden. Jill wanted to touch it. You’d think her mom would tell her about shaving, Jill thought. You’d think her mom would at least make her wear pants. Jill’s own mother had bought her a pink razor and a can of men’s shaving cream that made wonderful thick peaks of foam in her palm.

“I know—” Duncan was really getting worked up. It wasn’t every day that people talked to him. “Blow-Mart! Get it? Like a store for farts?” Duncan cycled through a series of sound effects. Across the room Nikki Beckstead and Brittany Schlembach exchanged a look.

Lacey held her hand as though she were talking into an intercom. “Attention, please,” she said. “We have a fart-spill on aisle three, I need a clean-up on aisle three.”

“Amusing,” Jill said in her most bored voice. “Ve-ry amusing.” Clearly it had been a mistake to engage these people.

Duncan and Lacey stopped laughing. Lacey turned her head in Jill’s general direction. She looked at Jill for a moment, except that, of course, she wasn’t looking at anything at all. “Why don’t you like me?”

Jill was stung. No one in sixth grade asked that. Did she, Jill, ever ask Spencer Tindall why he called her Ho-Bag? The answer was no. She felt her face become hot and was glad Lacey couldn’t see.

“I don’t not like you,” she muttered. “Whatever.” Jill picked up her pencil nervously and turned to Duncan. “Some of us have work to do, *Duncan*. No wonder you get everything wrong.”

“I do not,” he said and ducked his head over his smudged worksheet.

Lacey pulled a large book out of her bag. “Okay, guys,” she said. “Work time.” The pages were heavy and covered in raised dots. Jill had only ever seen Braille on elevator buttons and soda lids. She would have liked to ask what Lacey was reading. She would have liked to touch the book, to know what the words felt like under her fingers. Instead she scowled at her completed worksheet. Beside her, Lacey’s fingers began to scuttle over the page.

Just before lunch the Resource teacher came to pick up Lacey to send her back to ASDB. After Lacey had gathered her backpack and extended her cane she smiled in what was almost Jill’s direction. “We should talk on the phone sometime.” She dug in her pocket and pulled out some slips of paper. “Here.” She held one out, head cocked and eyes squinted

as though she were looking at something on the ceiling. When Jill made no move to take it, Lacey dropped it on the desk. “Bye!”

Lacey’s name and phone number and *Call me!* were printed in wacky font on the slip. Jill pictured Lacey and her mom sitting together in front of a computer, typing it out, copying and pasting, then cutting up the slips after. Lacey was saying how excited she was about going to the normal school, and Lacey’s mother was thinking happily that her daughter was going to make friends. The whole thing made Jill feel empty.

Each day when Jill got home from school, she switched on the TV, made a pack of Mr. Noodle, and called Kidline. Kidline was a local number you could call to discuss your problems, or get help with homework, or they’d just play games with you, like *I’m Thinking of an Animal*. Jill guessed it was to keep kids like her, who were home alone after school, from joining gangs and jacking cars. On the news, Jill had seen a boy her age who was arrested for shooting a woman in the thigh in the Costco parking lot. “I always carry my own weapon,” the woman had told the reporter as the camera zoomed in on her bandaged leg, “but I left it at home that day. There’s a mistake I won’t make again.”

Sometimes when Jill called she gave them highlights of documentaries she’d seen about man-eating anacondas or elephants driven to insanity over habitat depletion, or updated them on the plot of *The Pillars of the Earth*, or gave examples of how idiotic Nikki Beckstead and Brittany Schlembach were. Some days Jill pretended to be someone else, or she invented problems, which, she supposed, amounted to the same thing. Someone at school was peer-pressuring her to take drugs. She was bulimic. She was battling early-onset lung cancer from her father’s second-hand smoke. If they believed you, you could talk for over the fifteen-minute limit. They’d ask open questions, encourage you to brainstorm solutions. If they really believed you they’d give you the numbers of social service agencies. But they didn’t usually believe you.

Now whenever Jill called she kept her eyes on the clock, and when she was at fourteen minutes, she’d start in on a long story. Sometimes she could keep them on the line for eighteen or nineteen minutes. Those were good days.

Several different people answered the phone. They never told you anything about themselves—Jill had tried asking questions, which they evaded, saying, “Let’s talk about *you*” — but recently Claudio had told her he was in college. Claudio was her favorite. Jill thought he probably had curly brown hair and straight teeth. Now she thought about Claudio at night as she fell asleep, what it would be like to have him gazing at her,

what it would be like to be in his arms.

Jill had started to piece together a schedule. Claudio worked Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays.

She knelt on the carpet, crossed her fingers, and dialed.

“Hey, thanks for calling Kidline. This is Claudio.”

She smiled into the phone. “Hi, Claudio. It’s me, Jill.”

“Jill! It’s great to hear from you.”

“Great to hear from you, too.” Some days she had to work to come up with interesting things to talk about, but today it was easy. “We got a blind girl in school this morning.”

“A new girl, huh? What’s she like?”

“I don’t know,” said Jill coyly. “Blind.” Sometimes she pretended to be shy. She liked it when Claudio coaxed things out of her.

“Could she become a friend? Did you get to talk to her?”

“Some. She doesn’t even shave her legs yet.” Jill hoped he could tell from her tone that she did.

“Hmm,” said Claudio. “Well, I guess some people shave and some people don’t. I guess there are lots of different choices people can make about their bodies.”

Sometimes his tone drove her insane. “Whatever,” said Jill. “It’s sick.”

“Hmm,” he said again. “So. What’s this girl’s personality like?”

Jill told him about Lacey’s skater shoes, and her cane, and the names she’d come up with for Mrs. Bohardt. Jill forgot to keep her eye on the clock; before they’d even gotten a chance to have their real conversation, she’d wasted it all on Lacey, and Claudio was saying, “Well, Jill, it looks like our time is up. It was good talking to you this afternoon.”

Jill dialed again. When Claudio picked up she tried for an English accent.

“Hell-o.”

“Come on, Jill,” he said. “Give another kid a turn.”

Jill dialed her mom’s cell. Her mom picked up after the fourth ring. “Hey, sweetie. Everything okay there?”

“Yeah.”

“Listen—I can’t talk. I’m rushing to get some papers done A-sap. But I’ll be home just after six, all right?”

“Yeah,” said Jill, but her mom had already hung up. Her mother worked for a lawyer, but you’d think she was an ER surgeon, the way everything was always some massive urgent deal.

Jill sat against the wall and fingered Lacey’s phone number in her pocket. On TV Oprah was interviewing children who had changed the world. A skinny boy in a suit was talking in a monotone about marshland: “There are seven hundred and eighty-nine species that most people don’t even think about.” Jill hated television kids.

She could prank Lacey. Jill knew a prank where you pretended you were being flushed down the toilet.

She dialed. A woman answered.

Jill hesitated, considered hanging up. "Is Lacey there?"

"Just a sec. Lacey!"

Jill pictured Lacey stumbling through the house, knocking into furniture in her rush. On TV a girl with blond hair blown out like a newscaster's was telling Oprah about a club she'd gotten together for foster kids in her town.

"Hey."

"Hi. It's Jill."

"Jill!" Lacey sounded a little desperate for friendship, but it made Jill feel good. Here she was, making a difference in the life of someone less fortunate.

"I just thought I'd call to see how your first day was." Jill doodled spirals on her social studies book in a way that she thought looked casual.

"Great! Hold on. Let me shut the door." Lacey lowered her voice. "So I didn't tell you today? Because I didn't want to say it in front of Duncan? But I think I'm going out with someone."

Jill stopped doodling. "At your blind school?"

"Eric. I'm his peer-tutor. He doesn't know Braille that well yet because he lost his sight from a sickness last year. He's so funny and nice. We'll probably kiss soon."

"You mean he was going to a normal school literally last year?"

"Yep. He's cool. You should meet him."

So the boy was blind, diseased, illiterate. Jill didn't know why she felt jealous. She wondered if he knew how hairy Lacey's legs were.

"So..." said Lacey. "Do you like anyone? Duncan?"

"No! God." Jill drew stars, fierce sharp lines. "Actually," she said, and her voice sounded assured, "I have a boyfriend. His name is Claudio." Jill was surprised. She hadn't even known she liked him that much.

"Is he in our class? Have you guys kissed?"

"Yeah," Jill said disdainfully. "We've had sex." Then, by way of explanation: "He's in college."

"But you're only twelve."

"Oh," said Jill, "we've been doing it for a while now."

"My god. Does your mom know?"

"No way." Jill was surprised by the firmness of her voice. "She wouldn't care, though. I'm very mature for my age."

"Geez." Lacey was quiet. She appeared to be thinking about this.

It made Jill nervous. "Listen, I have to go. I think Claudio is on the other line." As she hung up she could hear Lacey's tinny voice saying

goodbye.

Jill leaned against the wall and looked at the quiet apartment: the floral couch she'd once thought was so classy, the kitchen table cluttered with mail and plates and her mom's solitaire cards. She still had to do the breakfast dishes and fold the laundry and make a salad and get the fish sticks started before her mom got home, but she sat for a little longer. Jill began to wish she hadn't lied to Lacey. Or at least that she hadn't gone so far. The idea of having sex with Claudio was creepy if you thought about it. He *was* in college. She could call Lacey back, say, "Did you know gullible isn't in the dictionary?" She wondered if blind people even had dictionaries.

On television Oprah turned to the audience. "How's that for inspiring?" All the people cheered.

Jill was stretched out on the living room floor when her mother got home. She had been absorbed in writing out sentences from the vocab list, but when she heard her mother's keys in the lock she remembered where she was and suddenly felt grouchy. This had been happening more and more recently.

"What a day. How was school?" Her mother dropped her purse on the ground, unzipped the back of her suit skirt, and sat heavily on the sofa. She slid her feet out of her shoes.

"Okay. Whatever."

"Come on, Jill. Don't do that. I've had a long day, too." She sighed. Her lipstick had worn off and her mouth was thin and pale. "What are you working on?"

"Nothing."

"Please, Jill." Her mother's voice was small.

Jill refused to look up from her notebook. She felt her throat tighten and tears gather in her eyes.

"Fine," said her mother, exasperated, and went to the kitchen. Jill heard her run water into a glass, punch some buttons on the microwave. She heard her walk around, switch on the TV in her bedroom. The neat sentences in her notebook blurred. Jill gathered her papers, went into her own room, and, after a moment of indecision, slammed the door.

Before Jill had made it to her bed, her mother had whipped open the door. Her hair was down and she was in sweatpants. Her mouth was furious, twisted. "Don't you ever slam this door again. You'll spend the rest of the evening in here." She glanced around. "And you can pick things up while you're at it." She pulled the door shut firmly behind her.

Jill threw her notebook against the wall. It glanced off and flapped

uselessly to the carpet.

Some nights when Jill was sad her mother pulled her to her lap and stroked her hair. This is what Jill secretly hoped for each evening when she snapped at her mother. More often, though, it ended like this.

The next morning Jill was late for school. Mrs. Bohardt, on her cell in the hallway, took Jill's late pass and waved her into the classroom for Silent Reading.

"What up, Ho-Meister," said Spencer Tindall cordially as Jill passed his desk.

In Jill's pod Boring Sarah was talking about the episode of "As the World Turns" that she watched yesterday while everyone else was at school. "Carly almost *dies* she's so frozen, but Holden gets to her just in time."

Duncan was smiling proudly at Lacey like he owned her.

"Jill!" Lacey leaned close as Jill sat down. "So guess what. After we hung up, me and Eric talked for over an hour. He's my partner for science, but we barely even talked about that."

Duncan looked suspicious. "Who's Eric?"

"Oh," said Lacey. "My friend from ASDB. We're doing a project on eclipses."

"Hey!" Sarah squawked. "I saw an eclipse once!"

Suddenly something occurred to Jill. She turned to Lacey urgently. "Wait. Have you ever even seen the moon?"

Duncan and Sarah both looked shocked. "Jill," warned Sarah.

Lacey shook her head. "Uh-uh."

It was distressing to think that this was a person who'd never seen the moon. How would she, Jill, even describe it? Say it was silver? That it moved across the sky and changed shape? And that there were stars. Lacey might be imagining the wrong thing. Jill felt panic squeeze her chest. "You've never seen it?"

"Nope. I've been blind since I was a baby."

Jill was relieved. "So you might have seen the moon then? It might have stuck in your brain?"

Lacey ran her finger along the edge of her big blank book. "I know about the moon. I know about meteors and craters and stuff. I know there's a flag up there."

Lacey's eyes reminded Jill of the mottled gray inside of an oyster shell. Yet another thing Lacey hadn't seen. "But you can't really imagine it." If she told Lacey that the sky was black, she wouldn't be able to picture the endless depth of it. What if she was imagining the moon like a big

cardboard circle up there? Or a ball? What if she imagined it taking up more space in the sky than it really did?

She thought about blind people on television feeling each other's faces. Lacey couldn't feel the moon. Touching a globe couldn't make you picture mountains and valleys, the shape of the continents against the ocean.

Lacey shrugged. "I pretty much get it." She didn't even sound concerned.

"But when I say *silver* you don't even know what I'm talking about." Then something really scary struck her. How did Jill know for sure that the moon she saw behind her eyes was the same moon her mother saw? Suddenly she missed her mother.

"I imagine it. Don't worry. I can't explain it. When you talk about the moon I have a moon in my head."

"But it might be wrong."

"It doesn't really matter, does it? If my moon is bright and in the sky and changes every day, and your moon does too, it doesn't matter if we're really seeing the same thing."

"But you don't even know what seeing is." Jill's voice rose. "You don't even know what a picture is." Sudden anger flared in her chest. She wanted Lacey to admit something.

Lacey shook her head. "But it doesn't matter."

"Yeah, Jill," said Sarah. "It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't *matter*, Jill," chimed in Duncan.

Jill frowned. She'd let it go, but the panic didn't dissipate. Of course it mattered. If it didn't matter, what was the point of even talking? What was the point of trying to explain yourself to anyone?

Lacey opened her book and her fingers began to move across the page. Jill opened her own book, and something heavy and desperate spread through her.

That afternoon Jill called Kidline and told someone named Stephanie that her name was Elizabeth and she had to do a report on eclipses and she was blind. "I mean, I don't even know what light is. How can I be expected to explain an eclipse?"

"Hmm," said Stephanie. "There are lots of books out there on astronomy. I'm sure the library has some audio books."

Jill shut her eyes. "Can you explain it to me?"

"Well, an eclipse is when the moon passes in front of the sun, right? So it blocks the light from the sun and you get a kind of halo."

With her eyes closed Jill drew a circle in the carpet. "What's a halo?"

“Like a ring of light. Like, imagine someone is sitting in front of a lamp. They block it with their head, but some light still comes around.”

Jill could feel panic flutter in her chest again. “I’m blind, remember? I can’t imagine that. All I can see behind my eyes is black. You’ll have to explain it some other way.”

Stephanie paused. “That’s a really tough question, Elizabeth. I’m not sure I can explain it some other way. Is there a teacher at your school who can help you?”

“No,” said Jill. She sighed heavily into the phone. “I guess I’ll just have to fail. Thanks a lot.” She hung up and tried watching TV with her eyes closed, but felt like she was drowning.

Monday morning Mrs. Bohardt led the class outside to the playground. They were studying the desert landscape, and they were supposed to go around in pairs making notes on the scraggly plants that ringed the dirt field, speculating on the water-saving adaptations of each species. Lacey’s hairy legs stuck out of soccer shorts.

Jill and Lacey stood on the hot asphalt by the tetherball pole as pairs dispersed over the playground. The heat pressed in on them from above and below.

“Want to be partners?” Sarah asked, running up to them, and it took Jill a moment to realize she was talking to Lacey.

“No,” Jill said. “We’re already partners.”

“We could all be partners,” Lacey offered.

“Partners means two.” Jill took Lacey by the arm and led her away.

Jill watched Nikki Beckstead and Brittany Schlembach skip off toward the weeds on the other side of the softball diamond. They actually skipped. Unbelievable, Jill thought. She wondered what they were talking about.

“So,” said Lacey. “Where should we start?”

“No problemo. I did a report on this stuff last year, so I know it already. I’ll just write some stuff about the palo verdes. You know, little leaves.” Nikki Beckstead and Brittany Schlembach were hunched together laughing. Every once in a while they’d wave at Spencer Tindall, who was making gagging signs and pointing at Duncan. “Let’s get out of here.”

Lacey shrugged and took Jill’s upper arm. “Okay.”

Jill led Lacey to the deserted Lower-El playground where she usually spent recess. If you added it up Jill had probably spent whole years of her life out here on this playground, enduring under the bleached sky and throbbing sun. Pale dirt and burning concrete: there wasn’t a single spot in the whole city of Tucson to rest your eyes that wasn’t glaring and hot. “I can’t believe they send us out in this,” Jill said. “We’re all going to

get skin cancer. They're child-abusing us."

"Seriously. So," Lacey said cautiously, "how's Claudio?"

"Oh, he's good. We'll probably hang out after school again. Hey, can you get up here?" Jill placed Lacey's hand on the monkey bars.

"Sure," said Lacey. She leaned her cane against the base and crept up, feeling for each bar with her hand. When she got to the top she flipped herself and hung upside down by the crooks of her knees. Her long hair grazed the sand.

"I can do that for fifteen minutes," Jill said. She liked the aching swell of the blood in her head, the moment of blackness behind her eyes when she finally dropped down. "It takes stamina." Very quietly she took Lacey's cane, tapped it on the sand experimentally.

"Easy. I could probably do it for an hour."

Jill closed her eyes and took a couple steps with the cane. "So Eric just suddenly went blind out of the blue? What was the sickness? Is it contagious?"

"I doubt it. It was a fever or something. His retina detached."

"God. You'd think you could count on your retina staying attached."

Jill opened her eyes. Lacey's hairy shins were right at eye level. "Hey," said Jill. "Why don't you shave your legs?"

"I haven't asked my mom."

"You don't care if you look like a monkey?"

Lacey pulled herself up, her face purplish-red. "I look like a monkey?"

"Not really," said Jill more kindly.

The summer before, they'd fixed up the lower elementary playground and installed a new three-level climbing structure with steps and ladders and a twisty slide. Jill tapped the bottom step with the cane. Just after school started it got tagged: *Chico* and *Panik* and *Surly* written with a black marker. They'd had an all-school assembly where the principal talked about how much the structure had cost, and what it meant for the safety of each and every one of them to have gang names on the playground. Mostly it made Jill wonder what name she'd pick if she were ever asked to join a gang. Probably Spike or Gouge.

Lacey didn't know about the gang tags. She didn't even know about the new climbing structure. It was funny to think that if no one mentioned it to her Lacey would never know—not unless she bumped into it.

Jill quietly set the cane on the top level of the climbing structure, on the platform where the little kids lined up to go down the slide.

"Well, at least hairy legs are a problem you can do something about."

Lacey reached up and touched her ankle. "They're not that bad. Are they that bad?"

Jill thought about Sarah trying to horn in on Lacey. "Don't worry

about it. Just because Sarah judges you doesn't mean everyone does."

Lacey grabbed the bar with her hand, lifted her head. "Sarah judges me? What does she say?"

"Nothing too mean. But I stuck up for you. There's lots of choices people can make about their bodies. We should go in now."

"I can't believe she was mean about my legs. I thought she liked me." Lacey dropped to the sand and felt around the base of the monkey bars. "I can't find my cane. Do you see my cane?"

Jill made scuffing noises like she was looking. "Didn't you just have it?"

Lacey dropped to her knees and began patting the hot sand. "It was right here."

For a moment Jill considered giving the cane back. Instead she said, "We better go. If we're late we'll be in deep trouble."

"But I need it—"

Jill scuffed the sand again. "I don't see it. It's not here."

"Just look." Lacey's voice was surprisingly whiney. "Just *look*. It didn't walk away."

Jill felt very adult and calm. "I'd know if it was here, Lacey. Are you sure you even had it?"

Lacey looked like she might cry. Her face turned blotchy and her voice rose higher and wavered. "I don't get it. I'm sure I had it."

"Listen, it's okay," Jill said, and she took Lacey's hand. "I'll lead you."

Lacey pulled back her hand sharply. She craned her neck as though she were looking, which of course she wasn't.

Jill almost forgot she hid the cane. "Listen," she said impatiently. "You can stay here if you want, but I have to get back to class."

Unwillingly Lacey took Jill's arm.

At the edge of the playground enclosure Jill stopped. "There's a step here."

Lacey didn't say a word, but she put a foot out, tapping. She gripped tighter to Jill's arm and stepped.

"See?" said Jill, patting Lacey's hand where it rested. "You're doing fine."

Jill's stomach was still hurting when she got home that afternoon. She began to make her Mr. Noodle, but the smell of something burning under the coil of the stove made her sick.

When they'd gone in, the Resource teacher had been waiting, and Lacey had had to explain that she couldn't find her cane. Jill wished she could have led Lacey out to the van, ridden with her back to the blind

school. Jill would call out every step and crack in the sidewalk. She'd go home with her, guiding Lacey around every obstacle, and they'd talk. Jill would be better than any cane.

During lunch Jill had gone back out to the Lower-El playground, but the cane was already gone. For the rest of the afternoon she had ignored Duncan and Sarah and tried not to look at Lacey's empty desk.

Now, at Kidline, some chipper woman picked up. Her voice was high, like she was speaking to a little kid. "Thanks for calling Kidline! This is Rachel."

Rachel was obviously new. She was probably the college version of Nikki Beckstead: blond and mean and spunky. "Is Claudio there?"

Rachel paused. "Yeah, but he's talking to someone else right now. What would you like to talk to *me* about?"

Jill hated whatever kid Claudio was talking to, and she hated this Rachel. "I'd like to talk to Claudio." She didn't think she'd tell him what she'd done with the cane but she might. "I need to talk to Claudio."

"Well, we here at Kidline don't really encourage callers to request specific listeners."

"He won't care. Let me talk to him."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Fine," said Jill savagely. "Have it your way." She hung up.

She pressed her palm into the carpet, pretending she was on the beach pressing her palm into sand. She looked at the print for a long moment, thinking of the plaster handprints they had made in kindergarten for Mother's Day. Hers had hung in the living room of the old apartment until one day it fell off its hook and cracked. Her father rose in her mind, so she clenched her eyes and shook her head hard to squeeze him out. Lots of things had broken when he still lived with them. Jill lifted the receiver and called again.

"Hi! Thanks for calling Kidline! This is Rachel."

Jill hung up. Stupid ho.

She paced her bedroom, tore a Scholastic puppy poster from her wall, stomped on it. She tried calling her mom at work, but her mom's cell must have been switched off. "Hi, Mom," she said. "It's me." She was silent a minute before she hung up.

Slowly she dialed Lacey's number.

No one picked up. Jill tried to think of all the places Lacey might be. Maybe her mother had taken her to the mall or out to eat. Maybe Lacey was on a date with her boyfriend. But then Jill remembered that she didn't have her cane. Maybe they were buying a new one. Maybe Lacey had fallen into a pothole and was strapped to a gurney in the hospital. "Hey, Lacey," she said when the answering machine beeped. "It's Jill."

Don't worry about your cane. I promise we'll find it tomorrow."

She set down the receiver, then lifted it and dialed once more. "Hi Lacey, it's me again, Jill. I wanted to tell you that I have a surprise for you tomorrow."

Jill got her pink razor from the side of the bathtub and put it in her backpack. Then she turned on the TV, but she couldn't even focus on the commercials.

The third time she dialed Kidline, Claudio answered. In her mind he was right there, and Jill hurled herself into his wide-open arms. He lifted her sad chin with a finger and smiled so kindly into her eyes that she had to smile back.

"Hi, Jill. Rachel said you called."

"Who even is she? You should probably know she wouldn't let me talk to you."

"Well, I'm on the phone now. What's up?"

"What does she look like? Rachel."

"Rachel is another Kidline volunteer. What's on your mind?"

When Jill didn't answer Claudio asked, "So how was school today? Anything interesting happen?"

"Fine. No."

After a moment, Claudio said, "I'm sensing maybe you don't want to talk about school. Is there something else on your mind?"

"Yeah." Jill knew she sounded sullen.

"Tell me, what's going on with you?"

Jill wondered how to put it into words. "I stole from the blind girl. I stole her cane." But that didn't seem to cover what she wanted to say.

"Wow," said Claudio. "Why do you think you did that?"

"I'm kidding," she said. "I wouldn't do that."

"I really thought you were serious. Why do you think you'd tell that story?"

"I don't know." She'd wanted to lead Lacey. She'd wanted Lacey to need her most. She was thinking so hard and coming up with nothing that she didn't realize they were sitting in silence, until Claudio said, "Well, Jill, if you're not in the mood to talk, I'm going to let you go so other kids can get through."

"Bye then. I hate you." Jill hung up so hard the receiver bounced back, so she cracked it against the wall, leaving a dent in the wallboard the landlord would probably charge them for. Jill thought she might throw up.

She considered calling Claudio back to apologize, to tell him she never meant to hurt him. But Claudio would just have to wait. She might never call him again.

The next morning when Jill hung her bag on the back of her chair, Lacey's cane was lying collapsed on the desk. Relief rushed through her, until Boring Sarah leaned toward Jill. "Where's Lacey? She said she'd be here today."

Before Jill could ask Sarah what she was talking about, Lacey came in, tap-tapping across the classroom with another cane.

"Hi, guys," said Lacey.

"Someone found your cane," said Jill.

"Oh," said Lacey breezily. "Good thing I have a couple. I don't know why I was so worked up about it yesterday. So, what's the surprise?"

"You'll see at recess," Jill said mysteriously.

At recess Sarah lingered with Jill and Lacey in the hall while everyone filed outside. "Lacey said you have a boyfriend, Jill. That's so great." Sarah leaned forward and whispered, "Is it true you've had sex?"

Lacey flinched.

Jill's throat tightened. "We have things to do, Sarah," she said. "Come on, Lacey." She grabbed Lacey by the arm and pulled her toward the bathrooms.

The powder soap in the dispenser didn't foam as much as Jill would have liked. She mashed it in her hands into a gray blob and spread it on Lacey's leg. It was like sand, but it did leave Lacey's skin slippery.

"That soap smells so gross," said Lacey. "I hope I don't get in trouble."

"I don't see what your mom could say. It's your body. Plus we're twelve."

The black hairs were darker and uglier now that they were wet. The rough grains of soap were not dissolving.

"I should have brought shaving cream." She couldn't believe she'd forgotten it; she'd spread the thick lather over Lacey's legs, the soft richness between her hand and Lacey. "I'm trying to get some bubbles." Jill rubbed hard.

"Ow," said Lacey.

"Sorry," said Jill. "This soap isn't ideal. Okay, here goes."

She started at the ankle and shaved up, against the growth, like on the commercials. Lacey's skin under the hair was pale and blank. Jill ran her wet finger up the smooth track of skin.

"So," Jill started. She wasn't sure what she wanted to say. "You told—"

Two fourth-grade girls walked into the bathroom talking. They stopped and looked with interest at Lacey's leg hiked up on the sink.

One said to the other, not very quietly, “She can’t see.” The other girl nodded.

“Can we help you?” Jill glared at them and they disappeared into stalls.

Jill ignored her anxious stomach and focused on Lacey’s leg. She had to keep pressing on the faucet; it would run for a second, then shut off. She rinsed the razor. The clumps of hair swirled in the sink with some sand and a Starburst wrapper. The water drained slowly, and the hair caught in the trap.

It was a bigger job than Jill had expected. And this was only the first leg. She moved faster with the razor. She found she was enjoying the movement of her arm, enjoying the rhythm.

The fourth-grade girls flushed and emerged, eyes on Lacey. At the sink, they pressed the faucet, but didn’t even run their hands under.

“Do you *mind*?” Jill said, and they hurried out. She felt like a professional; she imagined herself working at the Coyote Pretty Salon. More than that, though, she liked ministering to Lacey. She wondered if it made Lacey feel good, too. They were quiet, listening to the scrape of the razor over skin.

Suddenly the razor slipped. A thin line of blood spread along Lacey’s wet shin. Jill stepped back. Lacey could have AIDS.

“Ow. Did you cut me?”

Jill began working again, shaving around the thin bleeding line. “Sometimes it just hurts slightly,” she said with authority. “You’re fine.”

“My leg’s getting tired,” said Lacey. “I need to put it down.” When she drew it down, water and blood trickled into her athletic sock.

“Let’s do the other one.”

They were silent for a long time while Jill worked. She hoped she’d finish before the bell rang.

Finally Lacey ventured, “So do you mind about Sarah?” Her eyebrows were knit over her squinted eyes. “I’m really sorry. She said she wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Whatever. It’s not like I’m ashamed.” Jill paused. “When did you tell her?”

“Yesterday. My mom took us to Golf ‘N Stuff. I was going to call you, but you said you were hanging out with Claudio.”

Jill was sick with disappointment. Her eyes filled, and once again she was glad Lacey couldn’t see her. Jill shaved, clearing long swaths of pale flesh. When she spoke she tried to keep her voice even and casual. “So you two are pretty good friends?”

“Yeah,” Lacey said. “She’s cool. I’m surprised you guys don’t hang out. Anyways, I’m glad you’re not mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

Lacey was quiet, then she leaned toward Jill. Her eyes were open, disconcertingly foggy and opaque. “Sarah told me she never said anything about my legs. She said she thought you made it up.”

Jill was suddenly cold, her mouth dry. “She did?”

“Why would you make that up?”

Jill’s vision was shaky. She pressed hard with the razor and raked it all the way up Lacey’s shin.

A whole layer of skin came up. For a moment the peeled flesh was stark white, glossy, bare. As Jill watched in horror, watery blood rose in beads and then spread.

She looked at Lacey’s face, and then wished she hadn’t. Lacey’s mouth and pale eyes gaped wide with pain, gruesome and naked.

Jill ran. Lacey’s wail rose behind her, then was cut short by the slamming door.

Outside the heat was thick with laughing bright-colored children. From this distance they looked like they were having fun. The sound of their shouts was dulled by the throbbing in Jill’s ears. Jill gripped the razor and pictured the blood spreading on the green bathroom tiles, Lacey fumbling for her cane, her awful pain doubled in the blurry mirror.

That evening Jill called Kidline quietly from her room. The phone and TV were off-limits after what had happened today, her mother had said, but she’d gone out. She needed to drive to her office to pick up the work she had left unfinished when she’d been called to the school. “Can I trust you alone for even a little while?” her mother had asked, voice spliced with anger. “And when I get back, you’re going to explain yourself.” But at the last minute she’d placed her hand against Jill’s cheek. “I won’t be long.”

When Claudio answered, Jill didn’t even wait to think. “I’m really in trouble. Things are really bad.” She meant to whisper, but it came out gurgled and she realized she was crying.

“Jill? What’s going on?”

“I mean, it was an accident. Mostly.”

“Take a deep breath, Jill. What’s going on?”

“I really hurt Lacey. In school today. I tried to shave her legs and I really hurt her.” She told him about the soap, the tiles, the fourth-grade girls. The only thing she left out was Lacey’s expression.

After Lacey had been found by a monitor and taken to the nurse’s office, Mrs. Bohardt had brought Jill into the hall. She’d wrung her hands like a nervous hostess, pleaded, “It was an accident, right, Jill? Right?” and Jill had said, “Yes.” But Mrs. Bohardt still took her to the

principal's office. Had it been an accident? Jill wondered as she sat in the folding chair waiting for her mother. She wasn't sure, wasn't sure at all, and panic jittered through her. The principal had explained almost apologetically to Jill's mother that what Jill had done was very serious, maybe even assault with a weapon, and regardless of her intentions, policy dictated that Jill was not welcome back at school for two weeks. As he got up to shake her mother's hand, he patted Jill's shoulder. "You'll be back in no time."

But if the principal believed the best of Jill, her mother knew better. "I don't understand," her mother had said in the car. "What were you thinking? Why would you try to shave someone's legs? Why would you hurt a blind child?" Jill had just sat there, not saying anything. In her head one thought looped: I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

Claudio said, "It sounds like you feel really bad about hurting this girl."

"I do!" Somehow Jill had to make Claudio believe her. "I really do."

"What was going through your mind when you hurt her?"

All afternoon Jill's mother kept asking, Why? Why? Where had she, Jill's mother, gone wrong? But Jill hadn't been able to answer.

"Nothing was. I didn't even know I was mad until it was over." This was the truth, she realized. The truth was that she had meanness in her that could spew forth before she'd even registered its pressure. Once again, Lacey's expression rose in Jill's mind: her silent cavernous mouth, her unseeing eyes, the surprise and betrayal. Jill had never seen anyone in so much pain. "And then I just felt awful."

"It sounds like you have a lot of complicated feelings."

"Yeah." Jill was afraid to say what she was going to say next. She took a breath. "I told Lacey you and I were going out. I told her we had sex."

There was a long silence on the end of the phone. There were a lot of ways the conversation could go from here. Claudio could tell her she was mature for her age, that she was his most interesting caller, that he waited for her every shift.

Finally Claudio said, "Jill, you know that's not true. I am concerned that you have an inappropriate attachment to me. I think someone else is better equipped to get you the support you need."

"But I can't talk to anyone else."

"Jill, I can tell you're really distraught, so I'm going to pass you over to my supervisor."

"No!" cried Jill. "Please. They're going to take Lacey away from me." But Claudio was already gone. "Claudio!" Then a woman's voice said, "Hello?" and Jill hung up.

Out of habit, she looked at the clock. Twenty-six minutes. She'd never

made it this long. She knew she would never call Kidline again.

When I get back, you're going to explain yourself, her mother had said. What Jill needed to explain was that the meanness was in her, and she didn't understand it, and she was afraid that, now she'd seen how easy it was, she'd wouldn't be able to stop cutting people from her life until there was no one left.

But it was dark already, and still her mother wasn't home. Jill had the sudden terrified conviction that she might never come back. She was lost to Jill, as lost as Lacey, as lost as Claudio—more lost, because, unlike them, her mother had once truly known her. With longing, she thought of her mother pulling her to her lap, stroking her hair.

Jill peered out the blinds to watch for her mother's headlights, but she did so without hope. What she saw made her gasp. Over the silent parking lot the moon was rising. It was huge, swollen in the sky, a moon unlike any Jill had ever seen, and as red as fire or blood.