On the day of his sister Clare’s funeral, Harry’s mother took his arms and shook him, hard.

“We’ll find her,” his mother said. “I don’t know how. But we will.”

“Okay,” Harry said, trying not to look at the white coffin where Clare lay. It was sitting on top of a piece of green fabric that made Harry think of the miniature golf course where they sometimes went on summer afternoons like this one. The course was run down and the water wheel was always getting stuck, or litter inside the lighthouse prevented the little colorful balls from passing through. Last summer, Harry had stuck his hand in to free Clare’s hot pink ball and pulled out a dirty diaper.

“Do you believe I will do this?” his mother was saying. She shook him again, not as hard this time. Harry was trying not to look at her either because ever since Clare fell out the window, his mother scared him. For one thing, she wasn’t wearing her contact lenses and instead had on a pair of oversized wire rimmed glasses that hung crookedly on her face. For another thing, she chewed her lips so much they bled all the time; small dots of blood appeared, then hardened, giving her a feral look.

His mother dropped her hands from his arms and wandered off toward the limo that had brought them here.

“Mom?” Harry said, not really wanting her to come back, but feeling responsible somehow for her departure. He bent his head, watching the shoes he’d borrowed from his father as he walked. The shoes, black wing tips, were a couple sizes too big. But it was
too early for new school shoes, and he’d outgrown his old ones. It was summer, which meant he wore flip-flops or boat shoes, neither appropriate for a funeral.

Harry slid into the limo beside his mother. The driver had left the car running so that it was cool inside. Outside, the sun shone too brightly on all of the headstones, making them seem like happy things. Harry studied the closest ones. Other families’ dead people didn’t upset him. The pale pink stone with the interlocking wedding rings looked kitschy. The gray obelisk with a long list of names engraved made him think of the Washington Monument. They had gone to Washington, DC, his parents and Harry and Clare during April break, but the Washington Monument was covered with scaffolding, so they couldn’t actually see it very well. Clare thought the scaffolding was fake, a device meant to keep terrorists away. She had collected cherry blossoms in her pockets. She had bought a red stuffed dachshund with a pen attached to its neck; the pen was for writing on the dog and Clare had each of them sign their names. Harry had signed his on the dog’s butt.

“What I need to do,” his mother said into the cool air of the limo, “is get on one of those TV shows, like that James Van Praagh.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry said. He didn’t like the really old headstones that had shifted and sunk. He decided not to look at the headstones anymore, and he closed his eyes.

“Or Sylvia Browne,” his mother said. “She’s good.”

Then his mother started to sob in the way she had been sobbing since Clare fell out that window: deep, body-shaking sobs that sounded like an injured animal. In his short lifetime, Harry had seen his mother cry. She cried at Fleetwood Mac songs and certain foreign movies, all weepy and glistening. When his father made her angry, she tightened her lips and cried hot silent tears. But he had never seen anything like this, and watching her made him cry too. He hoped no one from his class was still out there. Then he remembered that the windows of the limo were tinted black and he let himself cry good and hard.
His mother wrapped her arms around him and the two of them kept crying. The limo driver came back and sat behind the wheel without even looking at them. Harry had thought that driving a limo would be cool, but now he changed his mind. Who would want to drive sad people to cemeteries and churches every day?

“Why don’t you do one of your tricks?” his mother said, trying to soothe him. “One of the handcuff ones?”

Harry was studying to be a magician. He read books and bought tricks over the internet. The secret to any trick with handcuffs was, of course, keys. He had been training Clare to be his assistant. She would hide a key in her mouth, and after she locked him in handcuffs, she kissed him good luck, slipping the key from her mouth to his. Without Clare here as his assistant, Harry didn’t really want to do a trick.

As suddenly as his mother had started crying, she stopped. A pinprick of blood appeared on her bottom lip, then another, and another. His mother rapped on the back of the driver’s seat. “Could you put on the radio, please?” she said.

He did and the sound of Fleetwood Mac singing “Sentimental Lady” filled the entire car.

His mother gasped, and clutched at Harry’s hand. “It’s a sign,” she said. “From Clare.”

Harry didn’t have the heart to tell her that it was a coincidence at best. If Clare was going to send them a sign, “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” would have come on the radio. That was her favorite song. She had even had their father video-tape her dancing and lip syncing to it and given everyone copies for Christmas last year.

His mother patted him. “I’ll find her,” she said, her voice stronger than it had sounded all week. “You’ll see.”
Metamorphosis

Clare falling out the window had been a terrible accident. No one was to blame, except maybe Clare herself. She was seven years old, and prone to strange ideas. Like those cherry blossoms she had collected. She wanted to preserve them in wax and then make art with them. But they turned brown and dry before they got home, so instead she sewed them into sachets and gave them to her mother and grandmother and various other women for Mother’s Day.

Clare was convinced she could attract hummingbirds to their yard. The summer before, she had planted particular flowers in one small corner of the yard to attract butterflies. It hadn’t worked, but instead of getting discouraged, she changed to trying to attract hummingbirds. She built feeders out of old plastic liter soda bottles that she picked from the neighbors’ recycling bin; they weren’t allowed to drink soda in their house. She painted the feeders red.

“What if you attract bulls instead of hummingbirds?” Harry had asked her. He was eleven, and he felt it was his duty to annoy her whenever possible.

“Well,” Clare said, “if any bulls fly by, they’re welcome to have some sugar water too.” Sugar water was what she put in the dish she attached to the plastic. She took a book about hummingbirds out of the library, and kept showing him pictures of them. One hummingbird was the size of a bumblebee. Another looked like a sewing needle.

From a perch on the windowsill at the far end of the hall, Clare could monitor the feeders without scaring away any hummingbirds. Harry thought that maybe she had been successful, that a hummingbird, maybe the bright blue one with the yellow beak, had found the sugar water. In her excitement, maybe Clare had reached for the bird, to touch its helicopter wings, or feel the wild beating of its tiny heart, and fallen out the window. If
she had fallen just a little farther out, the tree would have broken her fall and she would just have had cuts and scrapes. If she had fallen closer to the house, she probably would have just broken her ankle or something. But that reach toward the mysterious something, leaning, leaning, made her fall right on her head. The ambulance guys said she died right away. Harry hoped she at least got to touch that hummingbird.

All of August, Harry’s mother watched the psychics on television. She sat with a phone on her lap, hitting redial, trying to get through to them. One night, Larry King had five psychics on at once, and Harry and his father watched with his mother in the hopes of getting convinced themselves.

“If you can talk to the dead,” one caller said, “then who really killed JFK?”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” his father said.

Another caller said, “What am I wearing right now?” Larry King hung up on the guy.

“I wish these cranks would stop calling so someone desperate could get through,” his mother said, punching redial and getting another busy signal.

One of the psychics, a woman with an Irish accent, was telling a caller about the woman’s dead mother. “Her name starts with either an M or an S,” the psychic said.

“No,” the caller said.

“But you know someone whose name starts with an M or an S?”

“That’s rubbish!” Harry’s father said. “My name starts with an M.”

“Sshhh,” his mother said.

“I guess so,” the caller said.

“Remember that,” the psychic said mysteriously. “M or S. My spirit guide wanted me to tell you that.”

“Uh-huh,” the caller said, confused.
“Your mother wants you to know she liked what you’ve done to your house. Did you paint a room? Or put up new curtains?”

“Yes! I put up new curtains in my kitchen!” Now the caller was blubbering with excitement.

“Aha!” Harry’s mother said, leaning closer to the television and practically pounding the redial button.

“But Sara,” his father said, “that’s silly, isn’t it? Why would this poor woman’s mother, who died when the caller was only a teenager, tell her she likes the new curtains?”

“It’s a sign from her mother. A way of letting her know that she’s with her all the time.”

“But everyone paints a room or hangs new curtains or something,” his father insisted. “It’s too convenient.”

The show was coming to an end. Harry saw that his mother was on the verge of tears because she hadn’t gotten through.

“It’s something, Michael. It’s at least something. I mean, Clare is just gone. We get no signs from her except that day. Right, Harry?”

Harry had become involved in the next show in which a reporter was at a zoo pointing to an empty cage where apparently a man had been killed by a lion. Then a zookeeper had shot the lion. Two big bumps lay in bags near the reporter, and Harry was trying to figure out which bump was the lion and which was the man.


“That one by Fleetwood Mac,” Harry said, knowing his father would not take that as a sign. He should have lied and said “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” had come on. That would have convinced his father.

“‘Sentimental Lady,’ Michael,” his mother said triumphantly.
“The oldies station plays that song all the time,” his father said, pouring himself a glass of Maker’s Mark. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Harry wished he had said, “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” That would have ended it. But now his mother was getting upset, reminding his father that “Sentimental Lady” was her all-time favorite song.

“I heard it today at CVS!” his father said. “The oldies station plays it all the time.”

“Hey!” Harry said turning away from the dead man at the zoo’s tearful family who had witnessed his mauling and the shooting of the lion. “That woman on tv. The psychic? She said she was getting a message for M and S. That’s you guys! Michael and Sara.”

His mother’s hand shot to her mouth. “Oh my God,” she said.

“She said M or S,” his father corrected. “And it was about curtains.”

Harry shook his head and spoke so vehemently he almost convinced himself. “She said, M and S. She said remember that. Then the dead lady came in with her comments about the curtains.”

“M and S,” his mother repeated softly.

Harry’s father glared at him, but Harry went back to trying to figure out which body was which on the television.

III

The Upside Down Water Torture Cell

Harry was almost relieved when school started up again. Even though kids whispered in the hallways and the lunchroom, casting their eyes downward when he walked past, it was still better than the endless summer days at home. He knew too that eventually his sister’s death would fade into the background of some other
news: a pregnant teacher, someone getting suspended for especially bad behavior, or—as always happened—some seemingly normal teacher would do something outrageous. Last year, Mrs. Krunk had thrown erasers and chalk at the class when they were too slow to dare: Drop Everything And Read. Marly O’Connor had run from the classroom, yelling, “Attack! We’re under attack!” and the janitor ran to their defense. The year before, mousey Ms. Leahy had announced to her fourth grade class that she had not had the flu the week before, but had gotten an abortion. Jessie Williams had burst into tears, even though she had no idea what an abortion was. Every year, the school held its breath, waiting to see which teacher would crack.

But until then, kids stared at Harry with great pitying eyes. Or whispered about Clare. Her class, the second grade, planted a tree on the first day of school, solemnly standing in the playground with spades and watering cans. Harry’s parents had been invited, but they’d declined. His mother confessed at dinner the night before that she was afraid she would attack the class with a shovel, all those children alive and healthy while Clare lay dead.

They invited Harry too. But he told them he had Spanish class and worried about falling behind. Still, he could see them out there, small faces concentrating on planting that tree. A thin wavering voice read a poem; Harry heard only the lilt of language and not the words. As soon as the tree was planted, the little girls began to play hopscotch and tag, and Harry understood what his mother said the night before. He felt like he could go out there and do something terrible to every one of them.

That night, his father heated dinner while Harry began the complicated task of setting up his various notebooks and binders. Each class required different kinds of paper and specific pens, pencils and markers. The kitchen smelled strange. People were still delivering dinners to them every night, so that for the past couple of months Harry had eaten odd foods like veal stew, lamb curry, vegetarian enchiladas. He missed his mother’s pork chops, which she always served with store bought applesauce and
scalloped potatoes; her homemade macaroni and cheese, a messy concoction of three different cheeses and elbow macaroni in a thick white sauce; the way she cut up hot dogs and put them right in the baked beans with ketchup and molasses.

“What is that awful smell?” Harry said. Maybe he would start to cook for the family. That might jump start his mother, get her making dinners again. How hard could it be to open a can of beans, cut up some hot dogs, and add ketchup?

“Tuna casserole,” his father said. “Disgusting stuff. Tuna and egg noodles and some kind of sauce. Looks like there’s peas in here too.”

That did it. Tomorrow night, Harry was cooking dinner.

Just then his mother wandered in, frowning and confused. “Harry,” she said, “have you been putting sugar water in the feeder?”

He almost told her that Clare never explained how she made that sugar water. But when he tried to say his sister’s name, it strangled him. So he just said, “No,” which was true, and put the three-holed graph paper in the two-and-a-half-inch binder.

“Michael? Did you?”

His father sighed and told her no in a way that let everyone know that he didn’t want to discuss sugar water.

“Well,” his mother said, “somebody did.” She wandered out of the kitchen and soon Harry heard her footsteps walking on the floor above them, which meant she was at that window again.

His father set three plate settings and put the tuna casserole on the table. He scooped some onto each plate, and began to eat right away. Harry watched his father chewing.

“I think there’s water chestnuts in here too,” his father said, shaking his head. He got up and came back with a water glass half filled with Maker’s Mark.

“How was school?” his father said eventually.

The tuna casserole crunched and stuck simultaneously, a strange combination of things that didn’t belong together. Harry thought he tasted potato chips. He wondered if he should bring
up the tree planting. Ultimately, he just shrugged. “You know,” he said. “School.”

The tuna casserole grew cold on his mother’s plate. “Tomorrow night,” Harry told his father, “I’m going to make dinner.” “That’s great,” his father said, as if it didn’t matter one way or the other.

IV

The Disappearing Handkerchief

Harry’s first big school project of the year was to draw a map tracing Lewis and Clark’s journey west. Usually, Clare helped him with projects like this. She was always full of ideas. For example, last year, the first-graders had to use canvas bags instead of backpacks and Clare had stood in purple and pink finger paint and then walked across her bag, leaving perfect footprints on it. And when Harry had to make a diorama of a colonial craft, Clare had helped him make the fire in his blacksmith’s forge using aluminum foil.

Now, Harry stared at the blank poster board on the floor in front of him, uninspired. Should he draw the map in free hand? Or trace it? Should he use colored pencils? Or markers? “Harry?” his mother said, looming over him. “Have you noticed anything unusual lately?”

Harry almost laughed. Nothing around here was normal anymore. Everything was unusual. But he said, “Like what?”

His mother opened her hand. Three dimes were in it. “So?” he said. He wished she would help him with his Lewis and Clark project instead of being sad and weird all the time. The dinners had slowed and the family had been left to feed itself, which was almost worse than the tuna casserole and the other stuff. Harry had made the baked beans one night, but they just didn’t taste right. Now, every night around six o’clock, his father stared at the kitchen shelves, opened various cans of things: pinto
beans, tomato soup, artichoke hearts, mixed them together and poured them over spaghetti. Mostly, his mother didn’t even come into the kitchen. She was growing thinner and thinner and Harry wondered if she would simply disappear one day.

Harry’s mother glanced around the room nervously and lowered her voice. “Every day, I find three dimes,” she said. She had stopped biting her lips, and instead of bleeding and scabbing over, they looked bumpy.

“Where?” Harry said.

“All kinds of places. On the floor of my car. In my coat pocket. Today, I went to Starbucks and the guy gave me three dimes for my change. Not a quarter and a nickel, which is how you would expect to get thirty cents. Three dimes.” She held them closer to Harry as if for inspection or validation.

“Three dimes,” he said.

His mother smiled smugly. “It’s a sign.”

Harry nodded. “I have to do this,” he said.

“How about I call for a pizza for dinner?” his mother said. She had bent her fingers over the dimes now and was holding on to them good and tight.

“That would be so great,” Harry said.

She kissed the top of his head when she left the room.

The next day, he came home to find his mother at the stove, stirring. “It’s a beef stroganoff kind of day, isn’t it, Harry?” she said.

He grinned at her. “You bet.”

His mother motioned with her chin to the table where they kept a little bowl for keys. On the table, lined up in a row, sat three dimes.

“Wow,” Harry said, unsure what to make of it.

“Don’t touch them,” his mother said. “When I came in from the supermarket this afternoon, I put my keys in the bowl and there they were. Those dimes. Just like that.”
“Really?” Harry said. He wanted to believe that these dimes meant something. His mother seemed so much better ever since she’d started finding them.

“People who pass over to the other side communicate with us as energy. TVs flicker on and off. Light bulbs explode. Metal things break or materialize.”

Harry eyeballed the dimes.

“Don’t tell your father,” she said. “He’ll ruin it.”

But a few nights later, when his mother went to sit at the kitchen table, she paused with her butt hovering above her chair.

“There are three dimes on my chair,” she said. Harry could tell she was close to tears. “All day I waited and I had almost given up.”

“I dropped those,” his father said. “I was sitting over there and when I got up my change spilled out. Hole in my pocket.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, and picked up the dimes and put them in her own pocket.

His father shrugged. “You can keep it. I mean, thirty whole cents. It’s yours.”

“It is mine,” she said. Harry wished she would shut up and eat her chicken. But she kept talking. “It’s from Clare.”

“Jesus,” his father muttered.

“Ask Harry,” she said.

His father glared at him. “What do you know about it?” he said.

“Nothing,” Harry said, betraying his mother.

“Harry!” she said. “Tell him about Starbucks. And the key table.”

“The key table?” his father said, laughing harshly. “I put the same three dimes that fell out of my pocket on the key table. Then they fell out again today when I was sitting over there and that’s when I figured out I had a hole in my pocket.”

His mother shook her head. “Let me ask you this,” she said. “How would you give someone thirty cents change? Say a coffee
cost two dollars and seventy cents. And a person gave you three dollars—"

“I don’t know, Sara. I might give her three dimes.”
“You never would. And you know it.”
“Jesus,” his father said again.
“We’re doing Lewis and Clark in school,” Harry said. “Their westward journey.”

His mother walked out of the room and his father shook his head again.
“They recorded everything they saw,” Harry said. “Flora and fauna and wild animals.”
“What?” his father said, looking at him as if Harry had just landed there out of the blue.
“Lewis and Clark?” Harry said.
“This is tough, isn’t it, Harry?”
Harry stared at the chicken. Clare was the only one who ate the chicken legs, and now they sat on the platter, untouched.
“It’s got to get better,” his father said. “I know that much.”
“I know,” Harry said.

V

_The Substitution Trunk_

Harry decided to write the names of all the flora and fauna Lewis and Clark found on their journey west on the borders of his map. It didn’t look very good. His handwriting wasn’t especially neat, and the words sloped downward and bumped into each other. It was too late to do something different, so he sat on the floor and continued copying the list. Clare would never have let him do such a sloppy project.

While he wrote, he kept his eye on his mother, who was slowly folding laundry. The doctor had recently prescribed some kind of pills for her, and they made her seem dreamy and slow-witted. She insisted they helped her sleep better, but when she
was awake, she acted like she was sleepwalking. That afternoon in assembly, the second-graders had given a recorder concert. They played “Hot Cross Buns” and “Ode to Joy,” screechy and shrill. Harry saw Clare’s best friend, Hannah, up there, nudging Libby Hsu while they played. He supposed Libby was Hannah’s best friend now. Hannah’s mother hadn’t let her go to the funeral. She was afraid it might upset Hannah too much. Now, whenever Harry saw Hannah’s mother, he pretended he didn’t, letting her big smile go nowhere.

It seemed like his mother had been folding laundry forever, that was how slowly she did everything. He watched her pick up a towel and stare at it, as if trying to remember what it was for. Then carefully laying it down and folding it, smoothing each crease. The pills made her mouth dry, and he could hear her unsticking her tongue from her teeth, clicking.

“Harry?” she said. Then, a million minutes later. “Come here?”

Harry felt his heart start to race. “Okay,” he said.

He stood in the doorway. Despite her slow and careful care with the laundry, everything looked all sloppy, seams not lined up and shirtsleeves drooping out of the rectangle of shirt.

“Look,” she said, her lips smacking open loudly. She pointed to three dimes at the bottom of the laundry basket.

“Wow!” Harry said. He placed his hand on his mother’s shoulder. “Three dimes.”

She turned to him, so hopeful he almost started to cry. “It’s a sign, right?”

“It is, Mom,” he said. “It really is.”

The next morning she found three dimes in her coffee cup. The pills made her eyes kind of dull, but Harry imagined that without them, her eyes would be shining. Every day she found the dimes: on the seat of her car, inside her shoe, on the front steps. She always showed Harry when she found them, holding the dimes out to him like a treasure.
At Christmas, they went to the Florida Keys instead of facing the holiday without Clare. Palm trees and long white beaches did not seem Christmasy at all. Except for the string of lights on the thatched roof of the restaurant, they were able to forget that it was a holiday. Harry woke one morning and saw his parents walking hand in hand up the beach. His mother had her head resting on his father’s shoulder, and her sarong skirt wrapped around her legs in the breeze. Watching them, Harry smiled. Then he got up and put three dimes in his mother’s jacket pocket.

VI
Ttwo Ladies

In the month of June, the one-year anniversary of his sister Clare falling out of the window, Harry went to sleep away camp for the first time. The camp was three hours away, on a lake in New Hampshire. Harry had signed up for sailing, archery, and magic. He had brought his old magic books and some of the tricks he’d learned. While he was at camp, his parents were going to be in a rented cottage on Cape Cod. He kept trying to picture his house, empty and alone. The hummingbird feeders still hung from the Japanese maple in the backyard. He saw squirrels clinging to them, hoping for food. If Clare decided to come back, no one would be there. This worried Harry.

The camp sat amidst tall pine trees. Low bungalows were scattered through the woods. Harry’s was called Hummingbird. He stood with his trunk and stared at the name painted on the side of the cabin. Harry knew what his mother would say if she were there. He knew what she would think. Slowly, he went inside. He had the bottom bunk near the window. In the distance, he heard boys shouting, a whistle blow, a fog horn off in the distance. He was homesick already.

Harry opened his trunk and pulled out the t-shirts on top, sending something jangling to the floor. He bent and saw two
dimes and a third spinning to a stop. Scooping them up, Harry wondered if his mother knew he’d been giving her the dimes all these months, if this was her way of telling him thank you. Then another thought crept in to his mind. Maybe his mother had nothing to do with it. Maybe Clare had put them there. He pressed the dimes into his palm.

He wouldn’t speak of it to his mother. In the rented house on Cape Cod, she would have to rely on the cool breeze blowing in from the sea, the light in the summer sky, the steady rhythm of her own heart. He put the dimes in his pocket and stepped outside. There, flitting and dive-bombing in the air, were dozens of hummingbirds. Harry stood, watching them, a great swell rising in him as they aimed their sharp beaks into the delicate heart of the large red flowers and drank. He reached his hand out, as if to catch one, but they were too fast, too elusive, and as soon as he tried, they were gone.