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SWIFT RIVER

A Novel

ESSIE CHAMBERS

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**SWIFT
RIVER**

**ESSIE
CHAMBERS**

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For Christine

someone inside me remembers

—From “far memory” by Lucille Clifton

PROLOGUE

Picture my Pop's sneakers: worn-out and mud-caked from gardening, neatly positioned on the riverbank where the grass meets the sand. This is the place where the Swift River is at its widest and deepest, where a jungly mix of trees makes you feel like you're all alone in the wilds somewhere, even though the road is so close you can hear cars humming on the other side. We'd come here as a family on hot summer nights—the one spot where we could splash around freely without people staring at our black, white, and brown parts. Ma even swam naked sometimes, her pale body like a light trail moving through the dark water. Pop couldn't swim. He'd stand hip-deep, hold me high in the air, and launch me out from his arms like a cannonball. Over and over again I'd paddle back, his proud, fluorescent smile my beacon.

* * *

July 1st. The current is extra strong and the water is churning—restless, as my Grandma Sylvia would say, from summer rains. Pop leaves early that morning, long before Ma and me are out of bed. He forgets to make me breakfast before he goes. He leaves the car in the driveway. When Ma comes downstairs she frowns at the door, wrestling with something on the other side of it. She moves to the window and beams her worried look out into the distance. I decide not to put sugar on my cereal even though no one's paying attention. Answers come to questions I don't ask: There isn't enough gas in the car for both her and Pop—she has to get to her job and he has to go find one. He must be off on foot somewhere.

Two days later, his shoes turn up. Tucked inside them: his wallet and house keys. Pop is gone.

All through the next week, men in boats drag long hooks and nets across the river. They look like the fisherman we saw in Cape Cod two summers ago, except these nets are out to snag a person, my person. The men pull out a tricycle, a mattress, and a dead deer whose antlers were stuck in mud. But no Pop.

The search moves outward from the water, farther and farther away from those sneakers—to the deepest parts of the surrounding woods, to the abandoned factories up and down the river, to hunters' cabins and tool sheds, under porches, and inside our house, all through the dank, dirty basement Pop wanted to turn into a TV room one day. Then back to the water again, where it fizzles. Soon summer is gone, too.

Fall comes and I start the fourth grade—life snapping back to its normal ways as if I don't have a missing dad and a mom who's afraid to let me leave the house but also forgets to feed me. At school, we read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I am the tallest and the smartest one in my class. I am also the only Black person at school, and now that Pop is gone, the only Black person in the whole town. The kids call my dad "Nigger Jim" because: he's Black, he's somewhere in a river, and he has no shoes. Mrs. Durkin hands out detentions, hugs me, and pulls her long fingernails through my knotted curls, saying, *Kids can be so cruel but if you just ignore them they'll leave you alone*. I cry into her chest because she's so nice and so wrong, and I wish I didn't know this with such certainty. Pop stays gone.

Gone hangs in the air without landing and, after time (a summer, a fall, a summer), gives permission to fill in gaps with meanness and nonsense.

Like: Pop was murdered by a racist serial killer who scalped him and used his Afro as a dust mop; or, he went for a swim and was pulled out to sea by a water Sasquatch; or, he faked his own death and is off somewhere with stolen money, a new life, and a new white wife.

Years pass and the story turns one last time. Now Ma and me are the beasts. We hitchhike through town seducing men, robbing them and jumping out of moving cars. We wander along the banks of the river at night, looking for some secret thing my father buried before he took off. When the fireflies are so thick they look like mini lanterns, and a stray pulse catches a passing car, they say that's us—Diamond and Ma—up to their old tricks, out with their flashlights digging for treasure.

I don't hear this dumb shit until I am long gone from that place.

* * *

Back to us three. Before I am a riverbeast, before the kids hold their breath as they pass my house, before I lose my name altogether. Before all of this. I am a small brown girl in the back seat of a VW Bug, watching the pavement flash through the rust holes in the car floor like it's TV. Ma and Pop are in the front. "Cut that out," Ma says without turning around, as I toss things through the holes experimentally: a smooth stone from the river, a penny, a broken Happy Meal toy; they clack against the bottom of the car. We are on one of our Sunday two-days-after-payday-full-tank-of-gas drives, a family luxury. I lift my head to catch the side of the road action flying by: farm stands and yard sales, wood piles and jerry-rigged rabbit coops, dumb dogs tied to trees, choking themselves trying to nip at our tires.

"What if we just keep going and never come back?" Pop asks us.

"What about my toys?" I say after some thinking.

"Come on now. We can always get more toys," he says, winking at me in the rearview mirror.

"We can't leave my mother alone in this town," Ma says. She's not in on the joke.

"We can always get another mother," Pop says.

I can't see Ma's face, but when Pop reaches out to touch her cheek she swats his hand away.

"Diamond and her toys need space in the back seat, so we'll have to strap Sylvia to the roof," he says. I picture one of Grandma's beige stockinged legs, thick ankles puffed out around her sparkly dancing shoes, dangling next to my window. Ma tries not to crack, but when she chuckles, her whole body shakes.

Time is bent. Everything I could ever want is in this car, except for Grandma Sylvia. I calculate that loss and decide to embrace what's here—Ma's feet out the window, her donkey laugh. Pop's off-pitch humming of no recognizable song, his big hand rubbing the back of Ma's neck with careful fingers, like he's afraid he might snap it.

Time is shaken. We've never even lived in this town; we're just passing through. Where we're from, all the people are kind and brown like me.

Simon and Garfunkel on the radio: "The Only Living Boy in New York." I am the only living girl in Swift River Valley.

A mosquito trapped in the car chomps out a constellation on my legs. I dig into the pink bumps with my nails, carving out tiny blood crosses. I'm excited for the scabs to come so I can pick them.

"Should we keep on going, sweet pea?" Pop says again, looking in the back seat at me. Ma the nag is locked out of the conversation now.

Yes! Yes! Yes! I say, stomping my feet against the front seat partition. *Keep going!*

Time is folded in half. There is no "us three." Black people live here, they call this town home. They are millworkers and cobblers, carpenters and servants. A "Negro" church sits next to a "Negro" schoolhouse; the mill bell carves up their days. They fill the streets of The Quarters, voices calling out to each other *Mornin'* and *Evenin'*; clotheslines stretch across yards like flags marking a Black land.

In one night, they're gone. Those were my people.



This isn't a mystery or a legend. It's a story about leaving.

It starts with my body. My body is a map of the world.

1

1987

The summer after I turn sixteen, I am so fat I can't ride my bike anymore. So I let it get stolen on purpose.

* * *

“You got a new boyfriend?” Ma the smartass yells out the living room window, laughing through her smoker's cough when she sees me lying on the ground in front of our house, wrapped around the bike with a bucket and a cleaning rag.

“Are you humping that thing?” she asks. I ignore her and she leaves me be, puffing away on her Newports—a faceless blob in the dirty window screen. The whole house looks like it's having a cigarette.

It's hot out, and the bike is fiery from lying in the yard all morning. I'm curled around the frame so I can get to all of its parts; it's the only position my body will allow. I scrub at the street grime until a bright red frame pokes through for the first time in years. It mocks the rest of the junk around it: skeleton lawn chairs, broken push mower, Pop's dead car in the driveway.

“You trapped under there?” Ma shouts as she watches me struggling to stand. She is testing my forgiveness with her stupid jokes. An hour ago she told me she got herself fired again, this time for telling off her boss at the fertilizer store after he refused to pay for another sick day. Now we will have to live off my check from the Tee Pee Motel, the same job she had when I was little. I keep reminding her we'll have to choose between electricity and heat once the winter comes, but she

tells me not to worry myself, that adults plan things and their kids don't always know about it. "I have my ways," she sings from her crater in the couch.

Ma is a break in the long line of a family who worked the same *one* job their whole lives. I am a break in their pure Irish stock; the first Black person, the end of the whites.

"Something blocking your ears?" She tries again. I decide I will not speak to her for two days.

As I push myself onto all fours, a laser-like sunray jumps across my hand, spilling onto the grass in front of me. I turn to see my neighbor and her friends—dumb freshman girls—out on the front lawn in fluorescent bathing suits laughing and trying to beam me with the tinfoil tanning reflectors they hold under their chins. They are close, only two houses away, but their faces are a blur of baby oil and braces. I like to think that if I wanted to, I could stroll over there and dump my dirty bike water on their ratty towels and pale, greasy bodies. Slap a face or two. But I'm not like Pop; I can't fight everything, everyone.

"Thank you for all our times together." I touch the wheel of my bike. "I made you pretty again. You're free."

* * *

Later that afternoon, I lay the bike gently against a light pole outside the CVS like an offering. Ma has sent me there to get her monthly prescriptions, which takes about five minutes, but I sit in the back of the magazine aisle for an hour reading *National Gardening Magazine* and *Seventeen* until the cashier tells me to buy something or go find a library somewhere. When I come outside and see the empty space around the pole, my panic is not for the bike, it's for the basket. I've forgotten to take out the ribbons my Grandma Sylvia had woven in—rows of bright red, white, and blue stripes that purred in the wind the faster I went. They're the same ribbons she braided into my hair when I was little, when my kinky curls just wanted to feather like the rest of the girls. I'm still sick over Ma throwing away Grandma's sewing supplies after she died. Ma does not like the clutter of feelings. She saves empty Coke bottles ("they make pretty vases"), old *TV Guides*, and a garbage bag full of travel-sized lotion she stole from the Tee Pee when she worked in housekeeping. But her own mother's things get tossed.

In this moment, I'm so mournful for Grandma Sylvia's yarn and zippers and buttons and scraps of cloth that smelled of Jergens lotion that I feel dizzy and heavy, like the full weight of me—two hundred and ninety-eight pounds last time I checked—might fall out on the sidewalk. For a second I consider yelling *Police!* into the empty street, but I remember the feeling of my legs pressed into my stomach with each spin of the pedal, my body no longer making room for my lungs so that I can breathe. My three stomach rolls have filled out into one solid ball. I am unbendable. My legs are heavy ghosts that move me from place to place. The bruises and stinging raspberries all over my body from weekly falls are constant reminders that the bike doesn't want me on it anymore; we don't want each other.

Goodbye, Grandma ribbons.

* * *

It's a two-mile walk home from the CVS—a new, ugly brick building on the south side of Main Street. It stands apart from the long row of old-timey storefronts that follow, with their thick, hazy glass windows and cutesy signs hand-painted by someone's cousin who can do calligraphy. The paper mill, where Pop used to work, is close by. Ma and me live all the way north, in one of the identical houses that once belonged to the French Canadian mill families. White people call it "The Quarters," but there used to be Black people who lived there before them—they ran the textile mill. They called it "Little Delta," because the area was shaped like a triangle and reminded someone of their old Southern home by a river. They all left except my great-aunt, Clara. She died before I was born, so I never even got to meet her. Pop says she was a midwife. Every now and then someone says, *Your grandma delivered my dad!* And I wonder why that doesn't make them treat us any different, any better.

* * *

I don't call Ma to come get me from the CVS. She can't drive, and taxis are expensive—just to be used in an emergency or on payday. We're the only people in town who actually walk to get somewhere. There are no buses except for school buses, and the only real sidewalks wind themselves around the mile of stumpy

blocks that make up the downtown. Sometimes you see Homeless Richard hugging the edge of the road near the entrance to the highway, skip-kicking imaginary rocks at the entry-ramp sign like he's testing the limits of a force field. Ever since the start of the deer overpopulation we call "Deerpocalypse," you also might see a few deer on a street corner, shuffling around like bored teenagers. Otherwise, it's just us out there, single file on the left side against traffic when we don't mind the walk, and doubled up in the right-side flow of it when we're hitching.

* * *

On my bike, the stretch of town between Main Street and home had been a haze of places to pass without stopping, all the shitty memories of each fuzzed over by the air on my face and the pounding in my chest. Now, on foot—all kinds of terrible in sharp focus: here comes the barbershop where they refused to cut Pop's Afro; there's the moldy-smelling department store selling stale saltwater taffy and Garfield the cat figurines; or the diner where Ma and me used to come for splurge Sunday dinners until I was accused of stealing tips off of tables.

If I'm on foot, people stare so hard it's like I'm on fire. Heads in cars flip all the way around. Workers in shop windows stop what they're doing to look at me blank-faced—as if I'm not their daughter's classmate, their friend's co-worker, like they haven't known me my whole life. When I forget the spectacle of myself, I look behind me to see who is the me. Sometimes Pop used to stop in his tracks and stare back, saying nothing, until they turned away. Mostly he ignored them until the final bad months. Nowadays, Ma might yell something like, *What, are you jealous?* and then swish her skinny ass in their direction.

Halfway home, I take a break at the only pay phone on Main Street. It has a seat and the doors close and I'm grateful; everything hurts. Feet, knees, swollen sausage fingers—the pain throbbing out a code: *Rest until you're ready*. This has been happening a lot lately, where an ache plucks at some body part and then a message shoots right to my brain. Not like my inner genius or God speaking; just a clear, steady voice that's me but not mine. That's how it came to me—I may be too fat for my bike, but I'm going to learn how to drive. I haven't told Ma. The thought is like a puddle with a river inside it.

I flip through the phone book, wishing I had someone to call to come get me. We don't have friends as much as people who do us favors. I have one friend-like person: Fat Betty. I don't know her phone number because we've never spoken except about books and library business. Betty is an adult woman—our town librarian—who used to weigh four hundred pounds until she started going to the Diet Center a year ago. She's half of her old self now, but people still call her Fat Betty. I don't think her new body will ever earn her a new name in this town, where everything that's ever happened to you is a stain that fades but won't come out.

Betty is very encouraging of me—tucking cheery, handwritten library slogans inside the books I take out. As she got smaller and I got bigger, she started leaving her old clothes—nice ones from Lane Bryant that we could never afford—at my door; first anonymously, and then with her friendly-style notes attached. *Self-confidence is the best outfit!* Then came healthy snacks and books she thought I'd enjoy, like *Sophie's Choice* and *The Color Purple*. She's like a wise person from the future, come to tell me things I'll need to know, give me things I'll need to fight my way out of here. "Here" being this town and my body.

For kicks I look up our phone number instead. It's still listed under *NEWBERRY, Robert*. Right next to it someone has scribbled, *NIGER*. I pull a pen out of my purse and finish the sentence—*The third longest river in Africa!*

Even after sitting for a few minutes I can't catch my breath; no more thoughts are coming to help me. Only doubt bouncing around my head. *Was I supposed to hang on to my bike?*

* * *

"Aw, that sucks, sweet pea," Ma says when I tell her it's gone.

She's standing at the stove cooking dinner in a bra and cutoff sweatpants tied at the waist with a shoelace, her permanent morning hair going every which way. Whatever it is that she's stirring gives off a confusing smell—sweet and fishy, like she took what little food was left in the house and threw it all in a pot. She's not the worst cook in the world, but if she strays from the basics—sloppy joes, fish sticks, tuna casserole—it's anyone's guess what will end up on a plate. Straying means she feels guilty about something.

“Get in here and try this.” She motions to the kitchen table with a gunked-up spoon. “Your mother is a food magician.”

“That’s it?” I say, still standing in the open doorway, pulse jumping out of my neck. I forget I swore off speaking to her. She doesn’t notice I’m wheezing so hard each breath is a whistle. She doesn’t ask how long it took me to walk home (two hours).

“Your overweight friend must have sent you something again.” Ma points to a package addressed to me sitting next to the front door.

“Pop would have gone out there, found the bike, and kicked some ass,” I say.

I don’t use Pop that often, but right now I want to make contact, and I do. From the back I see Ma’s body droop, like she’s been unplugged. She sways a little, as if dizzy. This is what gets to me: the curve of her back, on its way to the scoliosis hump Grandma Sylvia had in her final years, spine nearly a right angle.

“Stand up straight, Ma,” I say more gently.

“Kicking ass never helped,” she says, arching her back but still not looking up from the stove. “Only made it worse.”

I shake the CVS bag full of her pills like a maraca, and her head whips around for the first time.

“I got your Tic Tacs,” I say.

We call Ma’s pain meds Tic Tacs. She planted the joke, working it so often I was forced to partake against my will. We don’t talk about her pain, which is from the accident we don’t talk about either.

“I’m sorry about your bike,” she says.

“My basket,” I say. She nods.

I line the prescription bottles up on the windowsill behind the sink where Grandma Sylvia used to keep her chia pets. The chia hedgehog was my favorite. Ma once had a fit when Grandma brought home a chia man with a wide nose, giant lips, and a green sprouted Afro; she threw it out the window because she said it was racist, Grandma was racist, and how could she even live with herself knowing she had a Black granddaughter. I felt bad for Grandma; she looked so confused, like she just couldn’t put the two together. “Did I do something wrong?” she whispered to me later in my room as she kissed me goodnight. “Yes and no,” I told her, because that seemed like the right answer.

* * *

We sit down to eat what turns out to be Spam and gravy with boiled potatoes. Normally I have snacks I take from the vending machine at work hidden throughout the house for when there are dinners like this, but my stash is gone. To help it go down, I drink powdered milk and Pepsi like Laverne from *Laverne & Shirley*. I always wanted a best friend like that.

“I’m gonna get you one of those grocery carts,” Ma says. “I’ll make it look pretty, like your basket.”

I know Ma doesn’t have the money to buy a new cart, or a new anything. There’s always cash coming someday, except this is the summer it’s supposed to be real. It’s been almost seven years since my dad disappeared, and Ma says we can finally declare him legally dead, then get his life insurance money. She calls it my inheritance. This has crept around every hope-for-the-future conversation we’ve ever had—it’s the thing that pulls us up but leads us nowhere. “By next year the house will be ours again!” “We’ll get your knee fixed and buy waterbeds and recliner chairs!” “Soon we can buy ten of those!” she says about any one thing we want to buy. Each time Ma passes by the six-month-old *Bank Owned House for Sale* sign jutting out from our yard weeds, she gives it a good kick. She dreams of the day we can throw a pile of money on the banker’s desk and tell him to suck it. She seems to think it will be for sale forever, instead of this fact—we could be out on our asses any day now.

Lately I let myself think about the money, too, careful to pull back my hopes as soon as they wander out too far. By the time I turn seventeen I want: a birthday party with German chocolate cake and friends, new clothes with the store smell still in them, shoes that fit. I imagine buying an Atari at Caldor even though I don’t like video games—just to have it around for visitors to play. Tossing extra change in a jug like I won’t need it that day, that week. Leaving this place, leaving Ma. That thought hurts too much and I pinch it down to nothing.

We move to the living room so the TV can take over our brains. Ma wants to watch *Perfect Strangers*, but I win with a tape of *Good Times* reruns because it’s a Black show and that will always shut her up. We slurp up melted Cool Whip and laugh at this world we don’t really know. I think about how Ma has met more

Black people than me, which is very unfair. I get up and grab a box of glazed donuts to dip in the Cool Whip.

Our rusted metal tray tables are unsteady on the blue shag wall-to-wall carpet, so our knees do the balancing. Grandma Sylvia let Ma choose the carpet when she was a little girl. Ma thought it looked like blue grass. I've always loved how it felt to roll around in it, even now. Ma also picked out wallpaper to match, with enormous blue flowers on twisty green vines against a yellow background, now faded to gray on gray. Grandma gave us this house when I was little because she moved into an apartment building for seniors. Over the years, Ma has tried to get rid of all the sentimental snow globes and ancient china figurines, but there's still the same fifty-year-old furniture coughing up dust, the same sagging tin ceiling, squeaky twin beds, and checkered linoleum kitchen floor. Even the wooden plaque painted by Grandpa Joe still hangs above the front door, a happy-looking four-leaf clover welcoming all to the home of a long-gone family: *The O'Briens, Luck of the Irish!* Like we're babysitting for ghosts. Or living somewhere we don't deserve, yet.

Only my room feels like mine.

I escape TV time with a stack of Ritz-Cracker-and-Cheez-Whiz sandwiches carefully balanced in one hand, kicking the box from Betty into my room and shutting the door. As I plop down on the bed, my head bumps the wall's hollow wood paneling and I hear Ma shout, "What happened?" from the living room. She does this every time. The paneling gives the room the feel of a ship's cabin from the movies. Or a giant bulletin board. I've made it into both.

There is only enough space for a single bed, a dresser, a tiny desk, and a few footsteps in between each. On either side of my bed, I have pictures of portholes I tore from a book, *Cabin Class Rivals: A Picture History*. They almost look real if you turn away quickly. The rest of the wall is covered with pictures of places I want to visit: the pyramids in Egypt, Stonehenge in England, the redwood forest, the New York Botanical Garden. "Why go all that way to see plants and trees? We have those!" Ma says.

She keeps giving me things she hopes will make it onto the wall—torn-out pages from a stack of equestrian magazines Mrs. Konkol threw out, with *We'll be riding these someday!* written across the prancing horses. Old photos of us

standing stiffly in front of the house when it was still pretty, ads for diamond rings from a Zales insert, with Ma's note: *They got nothin' on you!*

On my nightstand is my tape recorder. Ever since I quit chorus last year, I do this weird thing where I record myself singing a song, play it back, and harmonize along with it. Ma says I have a perfect voice, but she's supposed to say that—she's my ma. The chorus teacher said it, too, but the chorus kids would sometimes *moo* when I sang.

As I lie back with a tower of cracker sandwiches on my chest, I notice that the black specks on the ceiling are spreading down the wall toward an old Yoda poster. I used to imagine the specks were distant planets, the water stains clouds in a night sky. Now I see mold and a rotted-out ceiling from a leaky roof. When this was Ma's room, the ceiling was painted blue and the walls were covered in posters of "heartthrobs" from corny shows where there were always enough brothers and sisters to form a band or a baseball team.

My stomach feels dangerously full.

I touch the skin on my belly—tight and hot, a volcano of food gurgling beneath. White jagged stretch marks look like lightning bolts striking across my middle. It hurts in there and I wonder what it would be like to go too far. I wait for it to settle.

I pull out a driver's ed manual from its hiding place under the mattress and start reading the "Safety First" chapter. I've been studying "License Classes" and "Restrictions," and plan on having memorized all the laws before I start class next week. I already aced my permit test and forged Ma's name on the application like all things needing parent approval. I'm trying to focus on brake lights and turn signals when I see a person-sized shadow pass by my window. People nosing around the house isn't unusual, especially since the *For Sale* sign went up. But normally they just stand in plain sight, looking into windows and poking at the rotted wood shingles as if no one lives here. Ma sometimes screams at them, *If you buy this house we're comin' with it!* Right now, the thought of somebody out there makes me so mad I'm up and out the door before I can even think about my bursting tummy. I can hear Ma snort-wheezing inside, so I know she's fast asleep on the couch. That sound—usually annoying—is a comfort now, like a rope that ties me to the house so I can't be pulled out too far into the night.

I stand a few feet from the door on the walkway that splits the yard in two, listening for the sounds of a sneak about to be caught—twigs snapping underfoot, an uncontrolled sneeze, the giggle trail of a kid running away after a stupid prank I'd hear about later from some neighbor who felt sorry for us.

I look over at my dad's once red, now brownish VW Bug, parked in the back of the driveway close to the edge of the woods behind our house. We called it Ladybug. I half expect a car door to be open, or some other sign of a person passing through. I'm prepared for nothing, but I'm hoping, as I always do, for something else.

"Who's there?" I say.

I want to call out to my dad. Weirdo thoughts like this are always with me, but never more than when heat and summer smells make me feel like something is missing or about to happen. I don't even know who I expect to answer—dead man or live disappeared person. I've said this to Ma a few times when I was feeling mean and wanted her to be confused, too. *They never found his body, Ma. Doesn't that ever make you wonder?* She's not a person who wonders.

I'm sweating so much the drops are like tiny fingers moving up and down my back. My shirt is soaked. Sometimes if I'm looking extra gross, I imagine what he'd think if he saw me now. He probably wouldn't even recognize me.

"Hello, someone?"

The answer comes in the form of an especially long snort from Ma inside, like she's laughing at me for standing out here in the dark, trying to catch some idiot who's probably long gone.

"Whoever you are, leave us alone," I say to no one.

When I get back to my room, I nearly step on the torn-out magazine page Ma must have slid under the door earlier. It's an ad for Nature Valley granola bars. In it, two friends riding bikes through the countryside stop on the side of a tree-lined road for some tasty treats. They're looking at each other in a knowing, happy way, like the bars are the secret to all that country goodness. I've had those dry, wannabe cookies, and they are not the secret to anything. If this were my friend, we would both spit them out, spraying each other with crumbs, and then laugh at our foolishness for thinking fake dessert could satisfy us after a long journey. The bikes are real beauties, though. One is metallic blue and the other is silver—not a

trace of dirt or any sign they've been ridden anywhere. Just the girls' thin legs casually hooked around them. Carefully written in pen across the bottom of the page, almost as if it's part of the ad:

Us. Real soon. At least 10 of these. Love, Ma. I tack the bike girls above my desk and vow to stop speaking to her tomorrow.

I pull the Betty box onto the bed. I notice that, unlike her other packages, this one was sent through the mail, not dropped off, and there is no return address on the front. Inside, a bunch of random stuff—records, a quilt, a miniature sweater. And an envelope. On the front of it:

To: Diamond, From: Auntie Lena.