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COPPER

The cookie jar was in the same house that I ate hair spray in. It was a small grayish green one-story, with two bedrooms and a short front porch leading to the sidewalk, front lawn, two cottonwood trees and then the street. When I peeked out of one side of the curtains covering the living room window, I saw that any afternoon might be filled with kids running into and out of the shade.

I remember the bathtub very clearly, mostly because that's where I was when I swiped the can of Aqua Net off the sink counter, pressed down on the button and then re-adjusted it so it would shoot into my mouth. After we left my Daddy and came into town, I became restless that way. I began to do things that I would never have thought of doing before then. I swallowed pennies, silently waving good-bye, and not good-bye. So long, I was thinking, I'll see you later.

I moved the couch away from the wall just far enough to let myself squeeze in between and squash silly putty into the carpet. I liked to remember it when we watched the TV at night, and would sometimes sit on the green scratchy fabric of the sofa that I knew was directly over the Spot. I nudged my Mother over a few times in order to hit the Spot exactly right. I smiled real big and waited for her to notice me.

"Girly, you got a canary in there? What's wrong with you?"

I didn't think any words were necessary. She seemed to know about everything else I did.

Since we moved, she talked on the phone more than she used to.

Grandma Hampton would call, and Mother would nod into the receiver, a loop of deep red hair coming out from behind her ear. She nodded and re-tucked, and shifted her long legs for what seemed like hours to me.

So sometimes I would get myself into the bath that she had started to run for Rose and I. If Rose had hers first, most of the time I would dry her off and make her sit on the toilet while I climbed into the tub, so that I could teach her everything I had learned that day in school. We went through the alphabet first, every time, even though we could both read and do numbers better than the other kids in my classroom. That was just our way of getting started.

That day, the day I doused my throat with hair spray, I got to jump in first. Usually Mother would come and sit in Rose's place, barefoot in her nylons, her skirt tenting over her knees when she rested her back against the tank. But she had come home from work and had gotten a phone call right away. I could hear her talking to Grandma all the way from the tub.

"No, he's not."

Then she'd listen for a little while.

"That's right, Edith. That's Friday that I have to be in Hoisington after I get off work, and the girls have been asking to see you."

I could hear the hard tips of her nails hitting the varnished surface of our kitchen table.

"What do you mean I can't? They were seeing each other before we left."

It was OK, but not all that I thought it would be, eating hair spray that is, so I switched my focus to the cookie jar.

My Mother loved the cookie jar; it was one of the oldest things she owned, and in the shape of a foot-high teddy bear, brown paws wrapped around its round tummy, tongue sticking out of the corner of its snout. Its red nose, the beam of a lighthouse, zeroed the attention of my sister and I when we came home from pre-school, or whenever our Mother went out front to get the paper.

Mother liked to stare at the cookie jar and fill it with tollhouse chocolate chips, oatmeal raisin cookies and snickerdoodles. She kept it out of reach, like she tried to do with the silly putty, even though we found that.

I remember the first day that I ever saw snow because that was the day that I discovered that if I moved a chair in front of the counter, and then stood on it, I could reach the bear, lift off his head, and bring cookies for Rose and I without Mother's participation.

I felt good about figuring that out and as my fingers latched onto the biggest chunks near the bottom of the bear's feet, I saw Mother come in from the bedroom where she's been taking a nap, and head straight for the kitchen. I pulled my arm back reflexively without making sure that I had cleared his neck, and pulled the bear onto the counter, where he broke into five large pieces. He gave up tiny pieces of M and M's, cinnamon dust and flat pieces of oat that seemed larger than they should be.

My Mother stood in the doorway, with her mouth wide open, and began to cry, and because I hadn't expected to see this, and because I felt so bad, I began to pick things up from the counter top and put them into my mouth.

Broken cookies, stray hairs, and a penny, which I held on my tongue for as long as possible, tasting its bloody lemon essence, before swallowing.

My Mother stopped crying when she saw me swallow the penny, took her hands away from her face and came over to me quickly.

"What did you do? What did you do?", she said, and pinched my cheeks together, forcing my jaws open to try to get the penny out. Since she wasn't crying anymore, I thought I would start, and as I felt the penny slip down my throat, my face began to feel hot, my ears were

red, and I let her fingers poke down the back of my throat while I tried to get air and make noise all at once. She lifted me from the chair and carried me into the living room in front of the couch where Rose was watching TV, and turned me completely upside down. She held me by the feet, up against her body and smacked me hard between the shoulders over and over again.

She said, "Spit it out. People don't eat money, Spit it out."

I was coughing, not crying anymore, just coughing to make her feel better, even though I knew that the penny was in my stomach by then. Maybe it would come up from all the way down there, but it didn't, and she stopped pounding me eventually, put me down, and just sat on the couch next to Rose and cried again.

"That was my cookie bear," she said. "I've had that forever," and then she put her hands back up to her face.

I went into the suitcase that Rose and I kept our toys in and hunted around in my school supplies for kindergarten next year.

"Look Mother," I said, copper on my tongue, "Don't worry."

I held out my new bottle of Elmer's Glue as far in front of myself as I could, and she stared at it for so long that I wondered whether she had forgotten that it was Monday.

She hadn't though, and after a while she walked away from the couch and started to bake.