

The girl could hear sobbing in the front room. Her mother was always crying about something or other, so the girl didn't take much notice. She just kept staring at the vidscreen in the corner of her bedroom. It was playing a vacation ad, all blue sea and white waves and sand like a field of honey. She wished she could just climb into the vidscreen and stretch out on the sand, dip her toes into the water, and never return. She would stay there and watch the world from the other side of the screen.

Then the knocking on the front door began. The girl thought that was odd, because they had a perfectly good doorbell. The knock seemed almost like a message. It went *rap-rap-rappety-rap*, as if it was a friend or a neighbor who always did their own special knock. But friends never came after dark, and the neighbors kept to themselves.

The girl heard a noise behind her. She turned and saw her mother. A dark birthmark the size of a fingernail and the shape of a star protruded from her hairline. Her cheeks were still damp from crying; her eyes were red and scrunched up like meat from a butcher's shop. She hadn't answered the door. Instead she lifted the girl up and pressed their faces together. The girl kissed her mother and tasted salt. Her mother smiled, as if to tell her that everything was OK. Then she said she had some presents for her. The girl didn't understand. Her birthday was months away.

Her mother produced a small cloth bag and brought out three objects. The first was a picture of the girl's grandmother and grandfather, mounted in a bronze frame. Her grandfather wore a black suit with a cravat, and her grandmother wore a long pale dress and a floppy dark hat.

The second was a beautiful old silver watch with a fine leather strap that she said had once belonged to the girl's father. She said she ought to have something to remind her that she did once have a father.

Finally she gave the girl one more thing: a golden locket containing a tiny photograph of her mother on her wedding day. She hung it gravely around the girl's neck. Then she put the framed photo and the watch back into the little cloth bag, handed it to the girl, and kissed her.

The knock on the door came again, louder this time. *Rap-rap-rappety-rap.*

Her mother left the room. The girl heard the door catch

being released, and then her mother began to shout. She heard a man's voice, stern and official sounding.

A few seconds later, a man wearing a uniform and a black peaked cap walked into the girl's room and, without a word, lifted her up. She could hear her mother crying. The man didn't pause to let her say good-bye to her mother. He started to carry her down the stairs. The girl went limp. She felt unable to speak.

The door closed behind her. Then she heard her mother's voice through the thin panel of wood.

"The locket. Read the words. Never forget the words on the locket."

In the harsh light of the street, the girl studied the back of the locket. She could just make out three lines of faint engraving. The girl pushed the locket inside her blouse and closed her eyes. She didn't resist as the man bundled her into the back of the ugly gray car with no side windows, started the engine and drove away into the darkness.