

LINDSAY SPROUL

Playing France

GOLDY WALKED INTO the small kitchen wearing her white cotton nightgown, stood by the refrigerator and ran her fingertips over the primary-colored plastic alphabet magnets. Then she opened its door, found it empty except for an old jar of pickles floating like turds in green juice and a tin of expired sardines, some clear nail polish and AA batteries. It never made sense to her why Mummy kept those things in there, on that cold shelf.

She closed the refrigerator door and wandered into the den. Ollie, the boarder, was seated on the davenport, his nose in a Herman Hesse paperback. He didn't appear to be reading it, only smelling. He was the kind of young man who smelled books often, who wore leather jackets unzipped, who loved having his hair washed with baby shampoo while his head was cradled in the arms of a girl. Her fingers on his scalp: back and forth, back and forth. He loved that.

Ollie wouldn't say where he came from, but it wasn't California. It was assumed that his hometown was somewhere bleak and glacial, on some kind of polarity, because of the way he talked of the heat. When asked what brought him to Ojai, he would shrug, and his answer was different every time.

Goldy walked over to him, dropped her storybook at his feet and nudged him with her knee. You, she said.

Ollie looked up from the book, his eyes bloodshot. Hey, Chookies, he said.

She reached for his earlobe, squeezed it between her fingers, and he scooped her up by the waist and cradled her in his lap. She turned her head into his neck, which smelled salty and oniony. Her nose found a bone mantle to rest on, and she pressed it there.

Got your storybook, Chooks?

Mmmhmm, she breathed through her nose into his skin.

You gonna read to me?

Yes, said Goldy. Yes, maybe even twice.

I love twice, he said.

Leaving her storybook on the floor, she reached for the Herman Hesse instead. She sat up straight in his lap and he pressed his head into her flat

chest. The fabric of her nightgown flapped in the wind of his breath.

Then she began reading in her Kind Voice.

Chookie Brain, he whispered, when she paused to turn the page. Keep reading; I love your voice. And she did, until she felt his body relax, and soon he was snoring. She looked down at his face, the pretty mounds of his cheekbones, the slight shadows that his eyelashes made on his cheeks.

He started to mumble something, and Goldy said, What, Ollie?

He sighed. Guys, the party's upstairs, he said. There's a place we are and a place we need to be.

And she listened until the snoring came back. It was like there was some kind of tiny engine inside of his nose. She stopped reading and let the book rest against his stomach. She kept still and held him, waiting for Mummy to come home from work at the restaurant.

While she waited, she turned the pages of her storybook, which told the tale of a woolly mammoth named Charles. Mammoths like Charles had six sets of teeth, the storybook said. Six whole sets of teeth in a lifetime. When one set wore out, another would move into place.

ON THE SCHOOL BUS the next morning, Goldy and Meryl showed each other their vaginas in the third row of seats from the rear. It was easy—they just lifted up their skirts and tugged the seat of their underpants to the side. Meryl and Goldy were best friends. They both liked it when the bus went over bumps and the engine made their privates vibrate, but only Goldy would admit it out loud.

Meryl said, Mine is purpler than yours.

You say that every time, Goldy said. Then she said, Purple is my favorite color.

I know it, said Meryl.

They're like another lips, said Goldy. Another pair of lips. Can I touch yours?

Yes, said Meryl. But only for three seconds.

They counted seconds together, in hippopotamuses.

At the end of the three seconds, Goldy pulled her hand away and smelled her fingertips. They smelled like that fancy stinky cheese that comes from France. If they talked like regular lips, she said, they would probably say our most biggest secrets.

Probably, Meryl said.

Mine would say, Goldy began, wiping her fingers on her starched collar, mine would say: Goldy loves Ollie's earlobes. And his breath.

You do?

In the middle of supper, said Goldy. Just in the middle of supper, it would say that. In front of everybody else.

Don't worry, said Meryl. They don't talk.

I know it, Goldy said. But if they did. Just think, if they did.

Meryl laughed.

Shh, Tigerlily, said Goldy.

Meryl laughed some more.

Tigerlily, shh! Goldy pulled down her skirt and grabbed Meryl by the waist, trying to will her mind to remember, later on, to smell her collar and see what remained.

AT SUPPER, Goldy passed Ollie raspberries under the table. She kept her movements tidy where Mummy could see.

The after-school care directress phoned, Mummy said, her eyes locking on Goldy. Mummy's lips were done all reddish, ready for the restaurant. Some of the red had rubbed off on her teeth. Blood-drinker, Goldy thought. Person-chewer.

Ollie glanced sideways, popping a raspberry into his mouth. For supper, they were having berries and Fig Newtons. The centerpiece was a jar of Nutella, which you could eat with a butter knife, if you wanted.

Goldy dipped her finger in the Nutella and sucked on it deliberately, eyeing Ollie. Her other hand passed him another raspberry, and she felt the hard metal of his wristwatch knocking her fingers as he took it.

The directress phoned, Mummy said again, to let me know that you kicked her yesterday afternoon with your rain boots on.

Yes, Goldy said around her finger, which still dangled from her lips. On the shin, she added.

Why? Mummy asked crossly.

Ollie swallowed a laugh and Goldy watched it descend over his Adam's apple.

Goldy, why?

The truth is, Goldy began, taking a deep, wearily patient breath, There was a mess. And the directress demanded that I clean it up because she said she *saw* me make it. Only, God's truth, I was in the refrigerator box in the rear hallway the whole time. I was playing jacks. I was even winning.

Mummy looked dissatisfied.

I hate it there, Mummy. It smells like a basement, all mushy and cool. Meryl doesn't have to go. Her mother waits for her after school

with cookies and clotted cream.

Mummy explained about the necessity of lunch shifts at the restaurant in addition to night shifts, about paying for new saddle shoes and starched blouses, about suppering on snack food, protein-deficient diets, white blood cells, lock-and-key children.

I could do it, Ollie said suddenly. I mean, I could look after Goldy until you get home.

Mummy narrowed her eyebrows at him. How old are you, again? she asked.

Twenty-two. He smiled bashfully when he said it, and Goldy noticed a raspberry seed in the gap between his front teeth. She stared at his dimples, which would have been deep enough to house pumpkin seeds or cherry pits.

You know what? Fine, Mummy said. Fine. That's fine. Then she said, You around tonight?

Ollie shook his head. Date, he said remorsefully, shrugging in abdication.

Mummy snorted. She told him to have a nice time. She pushed her plate of cookies and fruit away from herself and asked Goldy to do the dishes. She reached for her spring jacket. She said, Shift number two.

Shift number two, Goldy repeated.

Shift number two, said Ollie, because it seemed necessary.

After Mummy left out the back door, Goldy asked, Where you taking her?

Oh, Ollie said. He swatted his hand at nothing, invisible dust motes or skeeters. Just the picture show.

Goldy asked, What picture?

Ollie smiled. Dunno, he said. What do you recommend?

One with blood, she said.

After Ollie left for his date, Goldy went out for a wander. She collected some rocks and one pinecone. Goldy was a lot of things. She was tender and pink—a poor speller, a left-handed smoker but right-handed doodler, a lightning bug trapper, when possible, and a getter of pretend malaria. She stole cigarettes from Mummy's apron pocket and already knew how to smoke them in a provoking way.

After her wander, Goldy went inside and lay wrongways on her bed, curling her toes around the warm lip of the window. She waited for the key to turn in the front door, and then for the footsteps up the staircase, and then Ollie's nighttime sounds. Mummy was still at the restaurant. She got up, went into the hall, and stood in his doorway.

Chookies, he said. He gave her a smile that was green and sleepy. What are you doing up?

Waiting for you, Goldy said. What was her name?

Wendy, he yawned and scratched at his stomach. I suppose it still is. Chooks, get me a beer?

Goldy went downstairs and opened the icebox—the smaller one used only for liquor. She pulled out a brown bottle and opened it with her bare hands, watching the cool mist rise from its lip. Ollie seemed hungry, so she decided to make him a sandwich. She pressed four After Eight mints onto a slice of white bread and folded it in half, then carried it upstairs to his room.

Ollie took the sandwich and thanked her very seriously. He bit into it and then washed it down with a big sip of beer.

Wendy, Goldy said. What kind of a person was Wendy?

Ollie sighed, and finished the sandwich in three more bites. He reached for Goldy's cheek and brushed a loose eyelash away. He said, You know when someone pronounces foreign words a little too authentically?

Goldy smiled. She said, Like when they say hummus like hoomahs, and the back of their throat sounds like it's full of spit?

Wendy does that, he said, and immediately, Goldy could see Wendy's feathered hair, her trying lipstick, her lacquered fingernails, her work uniform—its melancholic pastel fabric and crooked seams. Wendy. She might not have been an actual dental assistant, but she may well have been. She probably hated pictures with blood.

I'm sorry, Goldy offered, though she was glad.

Oh, Chooks, Ollie said, leaning back against his thin goose-feather pillow. Lay with me, Chookies, he whispered to her.

Goldy stood over him, the sandwich plate resting politely on his stomach, and he looked so small and new. It suddenly occurred to her how easy it would be to kill him, then. His neck was so pale and exposed, his head back, his eyes closing. The funny thing about people is, it's usually the pretty things they want to kill.

She removed the plate and set it down on the floor, then crawled on top of him, her legs straddling his stomach. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his hands against her bottom, pulling her against him.

Chookie Butt, he said. You smell like wet pottery.

Goldy lined up their pelvis bones and asked, Would you rather marry a weasel or a parking meter?

Hm, said Ollie. Definitely a weasel.

When you grow up, Goldy asked, what do you want to be?

One of those guys, Ollie said, who climb telephone poles in those yellow baskets. And a musician on the side. I'll travel around on a tour bus and eat freeze-dried food.

I'm going to be a miller's daughter, Goldy said.

Goldy, Ollie asked, where is your daddy?

Somewhere else, she answered. He's been there since I was six.

When Ollie took his next breath, she heard it catch on a jag in his throat. He put his face in her hair and said, Hold me, Chookie Bug. Will you? Just please, hold me.

She did. She said, Shh, Tigerlily. Just sleep now; no more words. She put her mouth on his earlobe and sucked on it until his breathing steadied and they both slept.

OLLIE STARTLED AWAKE and was at once comforted and alarmed by the warm body in the bow of his arm. Carefully, he moved out from under her so that he could get a look at his wristwatch, its glow-in-the-dark face smearing against the darkness like the eye of the Kabala.

It was dead night, and Goldy's mother would be home from the restaurant soon. He knew he had to put her back where she belonged, but it pained him.

He allowed himself to look at her a moment. Her nightgown was bunched up around her chest, broadcasting the smooth hollow of her stomach, the skin hanging like a hammock from her rib cage and her pelvis.

There was something boundless and enduring about her, and it confused him that she could be so small. He knew already that she would become one of those artists who achieve gorgeous insanity. He could tell by the abrupt inclines in her handwriting, and the calculated drowsiness with which she moved her arachnidan limbs.

Each night he tried to tell himself to pull away from her, but when she approached him with her palms flat, he was powerless to alter her course.

Sliding his arms beneath her, Ollie lifted her and headed for her bedroom. Her body was flimsy with sleep, but when her head pressed against his neck, he felt her joints tugging.

Ollie, she breathed, cupping her hand around his ear, did you know?

Know what, Chooks?

Did you know, Ollie, that the difference between a nook and a cranny is that a nook is a corner and a cranny is a crack?

Is that right?

After that, Goldy seemed asleep again. He propped her up like a rag doll on her stained cotton sheets, pushing strands of hair off of her hot cheeks. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and launched one of her arms forward so quickly that Ollie thought she meant to hit him.

Peninsula, she announced, holding her arm straight out in the darkness. It looks like a peninsula, she said.

You're absolutely right, said Ollie. Your body is the mainland.

Then she did something remarkable. She buckled her arm and took Ollie's hand in hers, leading it up her leg from her kneecap to her thigh, and upwards still.

Goldy, he whispered. What are you doing?

She said, Shh, Tigerlily. And she smoothed his hand all the way up to the cranny where her bloomers met her thigh, then gently pushed his fingers through the leg hole.

He said her name again, but then his breath caught.

Don't worry, she said. I want you to.

His hands were on her, and he didn't say anything. His stomach gurgled like old plumbing.

Open your fingers, she said. Open them, like a scalloped wing.

Like this?

Yes.

The room seemed hotter. Ollie pulled his hand out of her bloomers and stared at it. He had half expected it to come out as something else—a dagger, maybe, or a stiletto, or some other kind of tool used for shanking, but it was still just his hand.

Thank you, said Goldy. She pulled the quilt up over her waist and rolled away to face the window. Then she lifted her head for a moment and asked, We shouldn't tell Mummy, should we?

No, said Ollie. One of his eyebrows inched further up his forehead and the other scrunched down toward his eye, the thinking way. No, I suppose we shouldn't he said, his voice sounding gray and chewed.

Goldy said, Tell it on your deathbed so it doesn't go to waste.

Ollie touched her cheek before he went. Then he was outside on the front porch, smoking a hand-rolled stogie. A crazy California skeeter made a pass at him, and he got up to loosen the bulbs in the porch lanterns in case the light was attracting bugs. It was a dark night, moon aside, and Ollie felt as though his heart had already been broken, or at least painfully chipped. Regardless, he knew he would keep going until something else stopped him.

The idea of adults seemed weird; after only one hour with Goldy, Ollie could barely remember their purpose.

THEY WERE IN THE SMELLY forest behind Meryl's house. They had brought Goldy's Hasko Talking Board with them, and they crouched like jailbirds in the clearing between the long necks of fallen eucalyptus trees. The ground was wet, but that couldn't be helped. Behind them, the pines slipped deeper into each other's arms.

Goldy was smoking a stolen cigarette with her left hand, and Meryl thought she looked sexy holding it, but she didn't ask to have one for herself.

Close your eyes, said Goldy, letting the cigarette rest in her lips, leaving her hands free. She was trying to make the forest more terrible than it was. Imagine wolves, she said. Imagine murderers and racketeers.

The night seemed felty and close to their faces. Meryl sniffled imaginary boogers and stared at the candlewicks so she didn't have to look Goldy in the eye. God will be upset, she said quietly, about the talking board.

Goldy ignored her. She placed the planchette on the surface of the paper-wood, so that the finger of its Mystic Hand pointed straight at the letter O.

He might send us to hell, Meryl whispered.

There is no hell, stupid, said Goldy.

Meryl bristled. Of course there is, she said.

Goldy said, Pst. God would never do anything so dumb as make a hell.

Meryl's nostrils flared. Her cheekbones were highlighted by the candlelight and the nook of her nose was swallowed up by shadows.

Goldy told Meryl to put her fingers on the planchette. Now, she said, let's find out who loves us.

Easy, said Meryl. Everybody loves you and nobody loves me.

Meryl was one of the richest girls in Ojai, and her saddle shoes were always shiny. She had a new pair of ballet slippers twice a week, and her hair was always pinned up in perfect plaits. She came from a ranch, and behind it there was a garden with a pergola that Goldy loved.

Meryl was described by some as pleasant looking, and the depth of her dozy blue eyes was inarguably alluring, but she was obscured in Goldy's presence.

I'm sure someone will find you attractive, one day, Goldy said uncertainly. Now, put your fingers on. It only works when there are two of us.

Meryl obeyed. Don't you dare cheat, she warned.

It made sense that they were friends. Meryl was pretty enough to establish status without posing a threat. Goldy could have shared lunches with anyone at Topa Topa Elementary, but Meryl brought chicken salad with chopped-up grapes in it, and linden-flavored tea in a thermos. Together, they were very valuable. They decided which children would be treasured and which would be chucked aside, and it was in the neighborhood of impossible not to follow their lead.

Their fingers hovered over the Mystic Hand.

Goldy's sincere voice: We invite those spirits who are only for our highest good. Any spirits who come through who are not for our highest good are to be absorbed by the white light of protection, harming none.

She spat her cigarette filter onto the ground and stomped on the cherry with her bare calloused heel.

Goldy knew what Meryl must be thinking: I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry, God, I'll be good forevermore. She thought of hell, and its flaming portal, and the people there whose skin would be melting and falling off in gluey lumps. They probably didn't have eyeballs or teeth, and their arms stretched toward her. It was very terrible. She hadn't told Goldy, but she had thrown salt over her shoulder to ward the spirit off, and sprinkled some into her underpants just for extra coverage.

I'm scared, Meryl said sternly. We should have asked Ollie to keep boogies for us.

You can't keep boogies on spirits, Meryl. You know very well that spirits are invisible.

What we need is a guard dog, said Meryl. Guard dogs can smell evil and hear every little noise that humans can't even hear on account of the pitch being too high, which spirit pitches are.

Hush, girl, Goldy said. Stop talking and put your fingers down. The spirit can't get a word in eggwise with you talking on and on like this.

They asked the spirit who loved Goldy. When the planchette inched toward the *O* and then the *L*, Goldy's stomach jumped up into her throat. She couldn't be certain that she wasn't willing it to spell his name, and she couldn't be certain that it wasn't a coincidence brought on by blind hope. The Mystic Hand finally reached the *E* at the end of its journey, and she promised herself that she wasn't the one responsible for its outcome.

Meryl asked, Do you love him in return?

I'm afraid so.

Like a daddy?

No.

Like what, then?

Goldy's voice dropped several octaves and shrunk to a whisper: Like something entirely else, she said. I'm not sure what.

AFTER SCHOOL EACH AFTERNOON instead of after-school care, Goldy and Ollie would play France. France was mostly in Goldy's bedroom, but sometimes it spilled out into the hallway and then the kitchen. They drew themselves mustaches with Mummy's eye pencil, wetting the tip first so it was more paintlike. Ollie gave Goldy red lips and pinched her cheeks hard until the skin was pink there. There was one dusty, moth-eaten beret, which they shared.

Goldy stood on her bed and pointed at things, shouting: Look! There is the North Sea, and there is the Rhine!

Her telescope was her fist, which allowed her to view the bodies of water that were braided rugs on the hardwood floor.

Now, we must write poetry.

Now, we must sit in a café and look tragic and beautiful.

Now, we must be in love.

Where is the cheese that we must eat?

They would wander down to the kitchen and open the refrigerator, which never had anything in it but pickles and batteries. Goldy sniffed her collar longingly.

Ollie would sit down in a wooden chair by the window and sigh. If we had any ham, he would say, we could have ham and eggs. If we had any eggs.

Goldy would say, in her most catastrophic voice, Well, monsieur, there is nothing in the world left for us to do now but kiss.

Ollie looked down into his lap. Madam, how wretched, he would say. How terrible and sad.

Yes, I know, but kiss me. Kiss me the French way, with your tongue.

You're the boss, Chookies.

Ollie was an accomplished kisser, and he kissed her all over. He kissed her palms and the soles of her feet, and the tips of her elbows and each of her earlobes. The dusty beret fell to the floor, and it was forgotten until the next afternoon, when they returned to France.

THE SUMMER CAME, and with it the dryness in their nostrils. Fires sometimes erupted in the mountains and spread from one tree to an-

other, leaving thin layers of ash on people's cars.

Underneath the pergola in Meryl's backyard, they summoned the spirits of Chumash Indians. They predicted change for the town of Ojai, The Valley of the Moon.

What kind of change?

T-A-B-U-L-A R-A-S-A

What does that mean?

The Mystic Hand told them to be lionhearted; it said that everything would be wiped away, that they would need to begin again from a new place. They were afraid.

Ollie began to take long wanders in the mornings and the evenings, and he wanted to be alone. He brought back gifts for Goldy: eucalyptus seeds and handfuls of dirt pressed into glass bottles, dried-out leaves that had been nibbled on by worms. Parting gifts, Goldy knew, was what they were.

He asked her one night, Can I sit beside you?

There was a chair next door to her bed that was occupied by three porcelain dolls.

My dolls are sitting there, Goldy answered. They're having a picnic, and they were just getting to the meat course.

Oh, said Ollie. He backed toward the doorway.

But, Goldy sighed, you can interrupt them if you need to.

I need to, he said. He picked them up and held them awkwardly in his arms, and their tiny legs made him look oafish. His hovering was strange, the way it made even his beautiful face seem clumsy and wrong. Goldy loved him even more for it.

Chookies, he said.

Don't call me that.

I know, he said. I know, I know. He lined up the doll legs in a row across his lap, and the middle one's feet went pigeon-toed. He forced himself to look straight at the little girl, and her nightgown made him sad.

My treasure, he said. I've got to go.

I know it, she said.

This is all wrong, you know.

I know it, she said again. It's because I'm not older. It's because my suitcase and telephone are plastic and pretend.

No, that's not even it. It's not even that. Because you *are* older, it seems to me.

Yes, except look, she said. She pressed her palms flat on her chest and they leveled out there. See this? See? I don't even like dolls, she said. I like mountains more.

Ollie touched a doll arm and raised it into a salute. I'll never be right, he said, his voice cracking a little.

Me either, said Goldy. But where will you go?

The desolation suddenly drained from his face and he got his pinkness back. He threw the dolls on the floor and they looked down at the porcelain bodies, limbs far and wide, and they both laughed.

I was thinking, he said, that I would go to France.

France?

Well, Ollie said, not real France. I'm leaving real France for fake France, you know, across the Atlantic.

Forward me some cheese? Goldy asked. In a parcel?

Certainly will, he said. Then he left the chair and joined the little girl in bed, their bodies touching all the way from their hair to their dirty toes.

Their breathing became a pattern, and Goldy imagined it as a chart, with the little colored line going up and down on a grid. That line made her think of mathematics, and those standardized tests that they made everyone take in school, and how hers always came back as a dot that was way below the red line saying, you should at least be here.

Someday, Ollie whispered, turning his face into hers, you could visit me there.

You say that, Goldy whispered back. But the truth is always Probably Not.

How do you know?

Just do, she said. And then, lower, From Daddy. I learned it from him.

My little treasure, he said, his voice gathering potency. I have a gift for you.

What is it?

You'll have to wait and see, he told her. One day, after the fires are over, you'll look up into the mountains and you will see it there, but you'll have to wait. I can't tell you what it is, or it will be spoiled.

Well, said Goldy. So long.

Her premature sentence hung in the air, as if they had said goodbye but kept walking in the same direction.

Eventually, they took off their clothing and lay nude beside each other, their hands moving over each other's skin, trying to find things to remember. Goldy's hands searched for a body part that she could love because it

was her decision to touch it, and she found it. She wondered what Ollie was looking for, but she didn't ask and he didn't offer.

In the morning, Goldy woke with her nightgown on and her quilt tucked tightly around her. After untangling herself, she went into the hallway and found Ollie's door open, his room empty.

She went outside and took thirty strides away from her little house, then turned around for a look. It was different. Everything was there: the tired-looking, shutterless windows, the mustache of moss on the front stoop, but it was different, all right.

She turned back around and stared northeast at the Topa Topa Mountains. She thought briefly of walking toward them, but changed her mind.