

among the damned. Soon the thought frightens me so much I run into my father's room, even though Ma banned me from there weeks ago.

He's asleep in the hospital bed across from his desk, the sweet smell of cancer and sour body odor thick when I stretch out beside him. Without saying a word, he lifts one spindly arm and grabs hold of my hand. Our bodies match. My angles fit his. With my ear to his back I hear life, a slow-beating heart. I miss him so much. Even though the scent of him, rotting and unwashed, the reek of cancer, makes me gag, I can't leave.

LAURA DURNELL



Needs

THREE BLOCKS AWAY, IN HIS BEDROOM overlooking the lake, my father is dying, but I am at Amanda's laughing, touching photos of nude men. We study and laugh at the men's baggy genitals, their curly body hair, the ridiculous props positioned between their legs. One of the centerfolds holds a quill pen and parchment, a goofy powdered wig crooked on top of his tanned, square head. One centerfold smiles like the priest in homeroom, whose words echo in my head each night I ride my bike home from Amanda's.

"Sex before marriage is sinful," the priest tells our class, "and you'll burn if you give in to your needs." That's how he put it. Needs. To a bunch of eleven-year-olds whose only need in the morning is to pee.

"Will I ever have needs?" I asked Ma that night.

"Needs?" She wiped the area on the bathroom floor where Dad had just thrown up, White Linen and disinfectant heavy in her hair.

"You know. Needs. Like needs that make you want sex."

"Oh. Yeah, eventually you will," she said, pausing from her scrubbing, not looking at me. "When you're a woman. You'll have to be careful. Strong. Needs can make you do things you regret." She swallowed hard, then started scrubbing again.

At night before I pray for my father to get well, I pray to remain a girl. No breasts. No curves. No underwear hair.

"Please, God," I pray. "Give me nothing that leads toward needs."

With Amanda in the daytime, men overwhelm me, stir a sensation that resembles a tickle, but deeper. At night, however, in the amber glow of my night light, I wonder if my soul can survive