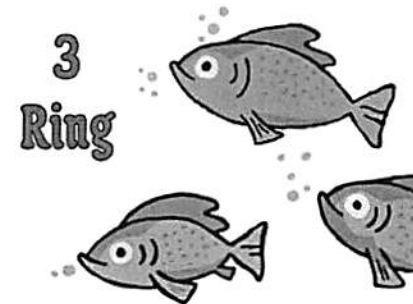


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Browser tabs: People StyleWatch June - JCPenney Must-Haves - YouTube | Account - Charlotte Mecklenburg Library | The Fourteenth Goldfish

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Warm air drifts through my bedroom window. We live in the Bay Area, in the shadow of San Francisco, and late-September nights can be cool. But it's hot tonight, like summer is refusing to leave.

I used to love how my bedroom was decorated, but lately I'm not so sure. The walls are covered with the painted handprints of me and my best friend, Brianna. We started doing them back in first grade and added more handprints every year. You can see my little handprints grow bigger, like a time capsule of my life.



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But we haven't done any yet this school year, or even this summer, because Brianna found her passion: volleyball. She's busy every second now with clinics and practices and weekend tournaments. The truth is, I'm not even sure if she's still my best friend.

It's late when the garage door finally grinds open. I hear my mother talking to Nicole in the front hall, and I go to them.

"Thanks for staying," she tells Nicole.

My mom looks frazzled. Her mascara is smudged beneath her eyes, her red lipstick chewed away. Her natural hair color is dirty blond like mine, but she colors it. Right now, it's purple.

"No problem," Nicole replies. "Is your dad okay?"

An unreadable expression crosses my mom's face. "Oh, he's fine. Thanks for asking. Do you need a ride home?"

"I'm good!" Nicole says. "By the way, Lissa, I have some exciting news!"

"Yes?"

"I got a job at the mall! Isn't that great?"

"I didn't know you were looking," my mom says, confused.

"Yeah, I didn't think I'd get it. It's such a big opportunity. The ear-piercing place at the mall!"

"When do you start?" my mom asks.

"That's the hard part. They want me to start tomorrow afternoon. So I can't watch Ellie anymore. I totally would have given you more notice, but ..."

"I understand," my mom says, and I can hear the strain in her voice.

Nicole turns to me. "I forgot to tell you. I get a discount! Isn't that great? So come by anytime and shop."

"Uh, okay," I say.

"I better be going," she says. "Good night!"

"Good night," my mother echoes.

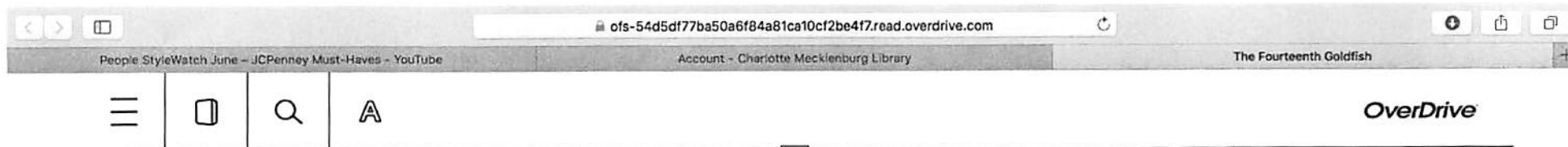
I stand in the doorway with my mother and watch her walk out into the night.

"Did she just quit?" I ask. I'm a little in shock.

My mother nods. "This is turning into a banner day."

I stare out into the night to catch a last glimpse of my babysitter,





but see someone else: a boy with long hair. He's standing beneath the old, dying palm tree on our front lawn. It drops big brown fronds everywhere, and my mom says it needs to come down.

The boy is slender, wiry-looking. He looks thirteen, maybe fourteen? It's hard to tell with boys sometimes.

"You need to put your trash out," the boy calls to my mom. Tomorrow is trash day and our neighbors' trash cans line the street.

"Would you please come inside already?" my mom tells the boy.

"And when's the last time you fertilized the lawn?" he asks. "There's crabgrass."

"It's late," my mom says, holding the door open impatiently.

I wonder if he's one of my mom's students. Sometimes they help her haul stuff in and out of her big, battered cargo van.

"You have to maintain your house if you want it to maintain its value," he says.

"Now!"

The boy reluctantly picks up a large duffel bag and walks into our house.

He doesn't look like the typical theater-crew kid. They usually wear jeans and T-shirts, stuff that's easy to work in. This kid's wearing a rumpled pinstripe shirt, khaki polyester pants, a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, and leather loafers. But it's his socks that stand out the most: they're black dress socks. You don't see boys in middle school wearing those a lot. It's like he's on his way to a bar mitzvah.

He stares at me with piercing eyes.

"Did you make honor roll?"

I'm startled, but answer anyway.

"Uh, we haven't gotten report cards yet."

Something about the boy seems familiar. His hair is dark brown, on the shaggy side, and the ends are dyed gray. An actor from one of my mom's shows, maybe?

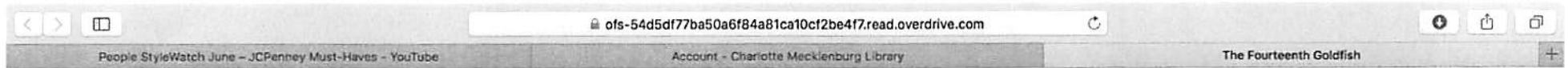
"Who are you?" I ask him.

He ignores me.

"You need good grades if you're going to get into a competitive PhD program."

"PhD program? She's eleven years old!" my mother says.





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“You can’t start too early. Speaking of which,” he says, looking pointedly at my mother’s outfit, “is *that* what you wear to work?”

My mom likes to raid the theater wardrobe closet at school. This morning, she left the house in a floor-length black satin skirt and matching bolero jacket with a frilly white poet’s shirt.

“Maybe you should consider buying a nice pant-suit,” he suggests.

“Still stuck in the Stone Age, I see,” she shoots back.

Then he turns and looks at me, taking in my tank-top-and-boxer-shorts pajama set.

He says, “Why are your pajamas so short? Whatever happened to long nightgowns? Are you boy-crazy like your mother was?”

“All the girls her age wear pajamas like that,” my mom answers for me. “And I wasn’t boy-crazy!”

“You must’ve been boy-crazy to elope,” he says.

“I was in love,” she says through gritted teeth.

“A PhD lasts a lot longer than love,” he replies. “It’s not too late to go back to school. You could still get a real degree.”

Something about this whole exchange tickles at my memory. It’s

like watching a movie I’ve already seen. I study the boy—the gray-tipped hair, the way he’s standing so comfortably in our hall, how his right hand opens and closes as if used to grasping something by habit. But it’s the heavy gold ring hanging loosely on his middle finger that draws my eye. It’s a school ring, like the kind you get in college, and it looks old and worn and has a red gem in the center.

“I’ve seen that ring before,” I say, and then I remember whose hand I saw it on.

I look at the boy.

“Grandpa?” I blurt out.

