

THE NIMROD LITERARY AWARDS
The Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction

SECOND PRIZE
JILL LOGAN

Little House

"This earthly life is a battle," said Ma. "If it isn't one thing to contend with, it's another. It always has been so, and it always will be."

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

It's Laura's question about sexual predators that prompts Caroline Ingalls to get up from her knees, set down the bug spray, and yank off the rubber gloves.

"How do they get in?" Laura asks, standing barefoot in the grass, the hair on her thighs and knees lit by the sun. It's the long, fine hair of an eleven-year-old who's never shaved her legs but will soon need to.

"You mean, how do they get into the house?"

"No," says Laura. "How they get into the *girls*? Someone said that the men get into the girls."

Caroline has explained sex to her daughter, but apparently Laura hasn't made the connection between the act that's been described to her and what's implied by this crass use of prepositions.

"Who told you that?"

"Nellie Oleson."

Caroline doesn't like to think of eleven-year-olds as bitches, but it's difficult for her to reconcile a fifth-grader with a girl—whose age is belied by blonde highlights and thick makeup she wears to mud over her acne—who is constantly responsible for creating the next drama that Caroline is not yet ready or equipped to handle.

"I think it's another way of saying that they have sex with the girls," Caroline explains in a delicately measured tone. "Is it something you want to talk about?"

"No," says Laura, staring at her toes as she tramps through the grass, the little cup of her belly overhanging the twisted waistband of her black leggings. "Did *you* know about it?"

Caroline wonders if Laura is asking this as an accusation or because fifth-graders believe that anything sexual is a recent invention. As Caroline attempts to formulate an answer, Laura screams and hops sideways across the grass.

“Ouch! Something’s biting me!”

The fire ants have chosen the seams of the front sidewalk to make their nests. Their segmented little bodies crawl all over town, but are noticeably worse in this little house on the edge of the new subdivision that backs up to a field of buffalo grass. Caroline sprinkles soapy-smelling white granules on a mound and hits it with a long shot of bug spray.

“Let’s go inside,” she tells Laura. “And I told you not to run around without your shoes on. Where’s Mary?”

“She’s coming. She said I should get my ugly face the hell out of her face because I was getting on her nerves.” Laura’s eyebrows come together in a helpless little peak on her forehead.

Caroline worries about Laura—her gullibility and innocence, her awkwardness, the way she follows the other girls around, most of all the fact that she never stands up to Mary. Caroline leans against the rail of the front porch, wondering how much of this is her own fault.

She steps on a plump green grasshopper, crushing it with a twist of her shoe before it can pop into the house. *It’s funny*, she thinks, *thresholds used to have such a romantic connotation.*

* * *

Mary sits at the kitchen table, clicking and clattering away at the family laptop.

“When is the essay due?” asks Caroline.

“Friday. But it’s not an essay. It’s a Reader Research Response.” Mary has stacked towers of books around her like a little fort, alternating spines and pages with military precision.

“Do we need to take you to the library?”

Mary stops typing and looks up at her mother, frustrated.

“It’s all on the Internet.”

The house smells a little like a hamster cage, and Caroline wonders how that’s possible, with only three females living inside its walls and plumeria-scented plug-ins steaming fragrance oil into every room. It’s occurred to her that an animal may have slinked

out of the field behind the house—a rat or possum or shrew—and died in the dark recesses of the crawlspace. But it also smells a little like the family from whom they are renting the house. (Caroline used to teach school with the mother, a woman who inexplicably stank of hot dogs.)

Laura, already in her monkey pajamas, scratches at the tops of her feet where the fire ant bites have begun to pimple and ooze. Caroline takes a tube of cortisone from the windowsill above the sink and squeezes a cold star onto her daughter's foot.

"There. All better," she says. "Do you want to help me hang curtains?"

Laura nods a sulky nod and opens the package of plastic curtain rings, putting them on her hand, one by one, until her index finger resembles a fat brown caterpillar.

"Can you make me some curtains for my room at Dad's house too?" Laura asks.

Caroline's heart slides into her belly. *Dad's house*. It had once been *their house, the house, our house*. They bought it fifteen years ago, three bedrooms back when they only needed one. They dug for the pool. Knocked out the wall for the open-concept kitchen before people wanted open-concept kitchens. Added the doggie door in the utility room for Jack—a little rectangular opening for his convenience and independence until the day he disappeared.

"What's wrong with the purple curtains that are in there?" Caroline asks, balancing on the laminate countertop to measure the kitchen window frame as Laura stands below her.

"That was my old room," she says. "I'm not in there anymore. I'm in Mary's room and Mary has the basement."

Caroline notices a pile of dead roly-polies in the windowsill, their gray carapaces balled up and dissolving between the screen and the storm pane. Mary's typing has stopped.

"Why did you move rooms?" Caroline asks. "Just needed a change?" She turns around, attempting to read her children's faces.

"It's Tami's office now," says Laura.

"Oh." The word is an involuntary aspiration, as Caroline tries to control her tone. "So Tami moved in there? At your Dad's house?"

"Last weekend," says Mary, pushing aside a graffitied social studies textbook. Caroline can tell the girls are waiting to see what

her reaction will be. Mary's turquoise fingernails are poised over the keyboard like she's waiting to record a transcript of their conversation. Laura stands frozen, the curtain rings hanging stock-still from her finger.

"Oh. Well, that's fun that you guys get to switch rooms."

Caroline turns around and spreads the curtain fabric over the rod so that it completely covers the window. "But I wish you all would tell me stuff like that sooner. Don't feel like you can't tell me stuff like that. Okay?"

"I like your curtains," says Laura.

"Thank you." Caroline breathes in through her nose and rubs at a wrinkle in the fabric.

"But maybe they should be shorter," adds Laura, "the kind that are just at the top. Because now we can't see out the window."

Mary returns to her typing.

"Did you know white people stole babies from Native Americans?" she asks from the table. "So they could get the Native Americans' land rights for oil and stuff? And all this after they made them move from their homelands? Freakin' unbelievable." Mary rearranges her notes on the kitchen table. "Hey Laura, run into my room and get my thumb drive."

"I can't right now. My feet are still lotion-y."

"Please," says Mary, resorting to her favorite mode of sibling manipulation. "I'll be your best friend."

As Laura runs down the hall to her sister's room, Caroline wishes she'd specified *no living together* in the divorce settlement. What idiot wouldn't do that? she wonders. But then again, why would she assume Charlie would consult her first? And she had known Charlie and Tami's relationship was getting serious, especially after they made the rounds together at Christmas and then vacationed together at a hunting safari in Texas. Had he proposed to her there? While they were shooting non-native species? The girls were full of questions and couldn't stop talking about the stuffed boar's head they'd brought back and hung in the living room. *What is that? Why did he do that? Why did they have to kill it? How does Dad know how to do that? How long will it hang up there? Is it a pig?*

Charlie helped Caroline to find this house after the divorce—actually found it *for* her (as if it were easier for her to move out than for him). *It has a fireplace, he'd said, just like you always wanted,*

making Caroline wonder what she was supposed to glean from this gesture of how well he knew her. An apology? Rubbing it in? And she wondered why it wasn't more feasible for Charlie and Tami—two real estate agents—to find a new place, rather than for her to be shunted into a strange new home. “Tami said she thought you'd like the paint color, all the rooms in *Walnut Grove*,” Charlie had said, perhaps the most ridiculous, insulting comment of all—to hear the implication of familiarity from this strange woman whose profession it was to sell things that didn't belong to her.

And suddenly Caroline has a vision of Tami helping the girls decorate their new rooms: Tami with breasts as round and firm as doorknobs, with webby black eyelashes that Caroline suspects are false (how can it be so hard to tell?), with that tattoo on her shoulder that Caroline sometimes gets a partial glimpse of but can never completely make out. And now this woman will become a role model for her daughters, a formative figure in their development.

After Laura hands her sister the thumb drive, Mary calls out, “This whole allotment thing was a freakin' scam to break up Indian tribes so the government could steal back their land!”

Laura returns and leans against the kitchen counter, nesting her chin in her crossed arms to watch Caroline.

“Do you want me to braid your hair before basketball practice?” Caroline asks her.

Laura groans, sticks out her tongue, then pulls her long hair in front of her neck and yanks it like a noose.

* * *

Blowing at the hot cup of chai, Caroline stares at Hester Sue's painting on the wall: three calves under a tree, lapping from a puddle of milk next to their dead mother's carcass, which looks like a truck has driven out of it. Caroline sometimes marvels that she and her sister are even related. She sighs.

“I just don't want her living with them,” Caroline explains. “Charlie didn't even talk to me about her moving in with them.”

“Well holy shit, Caroline, you'd think he didn't have good judgment.” Hester Sue rolls her eyes.

Hester Sue lives outside of town, along a small canyon where the goats and chickens and two emus can run around and Hester Sue can live without what she sees as the stagnating geometry of

neighborhood blocks. She makes her own bread and muesli, sews pants for the three kids, and paints what she calls Alternate Landscapes. She's presently consumed with giving chicken pox to her kids (and some other people's) the all-natural way.

"So what do you do at a Pox Party?" Caroline asks, looking at the guest list.

"First we're gonna let the kids share drinks, so I'm passing around these colored straws. Then they get to swap t-shirts. Then the lollipops—the big thing is the lollipops. Take a few licks, pass it around. We'll do nose and mouth swabs at the end so that we don't freak anybody out."

"And which kid is Typhoid Mary?"

"His mother's driving him over from Clinton," says Hester Sue. "He's an eight-year-old named Edison. So what are you gonna do about Tami?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure that it's worth going to court for. They're going to get married anyway, and I don't want to make things worse. Do you think I'm overreacting?"

Hester Sue shakes her head and scoops a measuring cup of sugar from a canister.

"She's encroaching on your territory. It's freaking you out. It's natural."

"I don't even want to go in that house anymore. I had to pick up the girls the other day, and I almost had a breakdown just walking to the front door. Seriously. I felt weak and started sweating, so I just went back and waited in the minivan like a weirdo. What can I do now?"

"You can help me pour the next batch." Hester Sue holds up a rubbery red lollipop mold and then, as Caroline moves to the counter, Hester Sue looks her sister over.

"Are those skinny jeans?" she asks.

Caroline looks down like she's peering over the ledge of a skyscraper.

"No, they're just low-rise."

"Well they look trashy."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm just being honest. Can you fill these with the red stuff?"

Caroline sighs and pours the liquid sugar into the mold, watching the long drip of gel extend, like an icicle reaching out

until it touches the form, reminding her of making snow candy with their mother as little girls, the cozy days inside the log house when they poured hot syrup in the shape of hearts into a tin pan of new snow, the smells of white pine and caramelizing sugar and their mother's wrists filling the room. She wishes the moment itself could have hardened, could have been taken out of a mold and sealed and preserved to be used later in life, to be given to her own daughters. But here it rarely snows.

"I think you should see a therapist," says Hester Sue. "How about Dr. Baker? It's just not healthy to keep all these feelings bottled up inside you."

"It's not that bad," says Caroline, wrapping a finished lollipop in wax paper and tying it off with a little yellow hair-ribbon.

Hester Sue smiles and winks at her.

"I know! After the party we can take one of the infected suckers over to Tami and Charlie, and tell them to suck on it."

* * *

Laura is erupting like an oil gusher. Tears, snot, sweat. Incapable of talking, she lets her trembling fingers release the Hello Kitty cell phone into Caroline's hand. Caroline holds it up in the quivering fluorescent light of their kitchen, the phone's pink plastic back sticky with the residue of preteen girl. The frosty gray bubble of text on the screen reads:

UR the kinda girl who giz RAPED

The word itself is violating, the A like a pair of legs spread apart. Caroline can feel her heart pounding and her throat constricting, almost like a reaction to a rattlesnake bite or yellowjacket sting.

"Who wrote this? Laura? Who wrote this?"

"Nellie Oleson."

"She just texted you this? Out of nowhere?"

"I saw them texting each other on the bus, so I texted her to ask what they were texting because I thought they were texting about me."

Laura chokes out the words as Caroline holds her daughter's face against her chest and softly strokes her tangled hair.

"This is ridiculous," she says in her calmest voice, alarmed but not wanting to alarm her daughter. "I want you to delete her from your phone, and we're going to block her calls. I'll phone her mother."

"No, no, no," Laura wails. "I don't want her to get mad at me."

"I have to call her parents."

"But it will just make things worse."

Mary yells from the table, "Laura, if you think your life is bad, you should read about what they did to the Choctaw tribe."

"Are we going to Aunt Hester's party?" asks Laura, dragging a sleeve across her nose, settling down a little in the cool and hum of the house's central air conditioning.

Caroline pulls a balled Kleenex from her pocket and explains, "It's only for kids who haven't had chicken pox vaccines. You have."

"Then why can't we go?" whines Laura.

"There's no reason for you to go."

"That seems elitist," says Mary.

"Then are we going to Dad's house tomorrow?" asks Laura. "I want to see what Tami did with my room."

* * *

Caroline smells the thick, bitter odor of something burning. It's the onion she put in the oven hours ago—a tip she read in one of Charlie's home-selling guides: *Bake an onion to make your house smell homey!* She does it sometimes when the girls are away with Charlie and Tami, when the house seems extra lonely. The fire alarm on the popcorn ceiling screams until she jabs it with a broomstick and the room falls silent again.

Then she sits down in front of the laptop, which waits there in the middle of the table, as if it might be something as innocuous as a bowl of fruit—nutritious even. She enters the family password (a seemingly useless protective device since the laptop never leaves the house): *stinkbait. Mary's paper sits at attention on the desktop, its icon carefully labeled *stealfromindians.doc*. Caroline clicks open the Internet browser and goes to Laura's Facebook profile.

Nellie Oleson has posted to their fifth- and sixth-grade basketball team page. *Gonna jack dem girlz up.*

What bothers Caroline most is that she knows all of these kids. They are the same ones she taught as first-graders, whose tiny hands she held as she guided them to the kid-sized toilets, down the long hallways to drink their chocolate milk, to lie on red and blue plastic mats as she read them children's books about bears and bees and manners.

Seeing nothing on the Facebook page she would categorize as bullying, she closes out Laura's page and checks her own. There's a message from Alice Garvey, wanting to know if Caroline will go out with them to see a Springsteen cover band fronted by a former classmate. Caroline has put off Alice's invitations before, sometimes because she would be the third wheel, sometimes because the night-time is just too big and dark a field for her to wander out into. But now she wonders what Tami would do in this situation—if Tami still goes out, or if she's more content to stay in their house, picking out paint colors and bedspreads, decorating their old house like an animal pushing out the used straw from another animal's den.

* * *

The microphone whines, and Caroline can feel the vibration of the bass through the brown glass of her beer bottle.

"Edwards still looks good, right?" asks Alice, as she texts her babysitter with one hand and swizzles her Bloody Mary with the other. "The beard kind of hides those scars he had on his face."

Caroline assesses Edwards as he adjusts his guitar strap in the center of the low-rise stage—a woolly cap covering his head, a flannel shirt hanging open over a tight white t-shirt. He's turned out much better-looking than she would have guessed—lost weight, kept his hair, found his drinking limit. In high school Edwards was arrested for breaking and entering after he kicked in someone's basement window and made off with a garbage bag full of CDs and movies. After graduation he did the reality TV circuit in L.A., finally making it onto a show where people had to survive using only goods and implements from the 1800s. (He got knocked out in an early episode after a producer found a Trojan under his straw ticking.)

A cigarette sticks up from the strings of his guitar head, the smoke rising from it like an incense stick. His band, Born to Rerun, seems to be doing most of the work, while Edwards's guitar does

more smoking than playing. Caroline mouths along to “Atlantic City” and he nods at her, making her feel warm and nervous in the acknowledgement as she checks the positioning of her blouse, trying to subtly swing her crossed legs out from under the table without uncrossing them. Edwards hoots the intro to “Johnny 99,” and she’s drunk.

Three hours later they’re standing in the parking lot, Edwards with his guitar case slung over his shoulder while the rest of the band members pack their instruments into the trunks of their Hondas. Caroline twists the toe of her shoe into the gravel and Edwards steps onto one of the railroad-tie curbs. The Garveys have left to meet their babysitter’s bedtime.

“Maybe we could hang out for a while,” he says, lighting another cigarette.

“There’s not really anywhere to go. Not this late. Maybe Jerry’s, if you want a piece of pie.” Caroline realizes that *pie* sounds sexual and she’s not sure she means it to, so she adds, “Or meatloaf.”

“You still have a house here, right?” he says, and his smile breaks into something young and familiar. But his phrasing puzzles her. *You still have a house here*. As if it’s an exotic vacation home in Belize or an apartment in San Francisco. Perhaps she’s bothered by the emphasis on *still*, as if she were expected somehow to have moved on.

“I’m renting,” she says.

* * *

The naked Walnut Grove walls seem wider, whiter, stranger with the mid-morning light that has snaked through the blinds. Caroline is using Edwards’ flannel shirt as a sheet, and it smells of cigarettes and fruit beer and the oil from his hair and skin—morning smells, strange and musky, like the scent he might use to mark a tree in the wild. She points her toe and uses her leg like an insect’s feeler until her foot brushes against her underwear at the end of the bed. She wishes it were his house so she could just sneak out and disappear, but this is her bed. And her girls will be home in an hour.

She tries to remember where she last left her phone, took off her pants, put his keys. He is a strange mound next to her, a hill

in the distance that doesn't seem to belong there, a landmark that might indicate she has taken a wrong turn. She nudges him awake and immediately offers him the bathroom.

"Good morning," he says.

"My girls will be home soon," she answers.

While she waits outside the bathroom door, nervously twisting her hair into a tiny bun, Edwards leisurely whistles a folk song at the sink and punctuates it with the sounds of her aerosol deodorant. She sniffs at the air.

"Sorry if this house smells," she says, trying to make conversation. "I probably need to burn a candle."

"Didn't notice anything," he answers. "It's probably just that you're a woman. Your olfactory senses are heightened."

Then, standing at the front door with his keys in hand, he says, "I'll call you," and she notices a small dab of her toothpaste collected in his beard.

"It's okay," she says.

"What does that mean?" he asks. "*Don't* call you?"

"I'm sorry. I mean I just need to shut the door. So the ants and grasshoppers don't get in."

* * *

The hard, lacquered bleachers beneath her feel like a vibrating buckboard. Caroline tries to breathe but the inside of the gym yields only the overpowering smell of sock sweat, popcorn, and wood oil. The scream of the referee's whistle and the echo of the fifty or so parents shouting in the stands brutally punish her hangover. Her phone buzzes but she doesn't look at it.

She's grateful to have both of her daughters in her line of sight, Mary sitting on a bleacher in front of her playing Oregon Trail on her iPhone, and Laura in her uniform on the court being elbowed in the rib by a girl from the opposing team. The other team gets the rebound but Nellie Oleson steals the ball back and returns to her post position, her arms over her head, squeezing her cleavage so that it shows above the V in her polyester jersey. She screams *Ball!* in a shrill voice that seems to scratch against the walls of the gym.

Tami sits next to Charlie on the bottom row of the bleachers. (Charlie and Caroline have agreed to sit near-but-not-together at

the girls' events.) Charlie calls out, "Use your elbows, Half-Pint!" a slightly off-putting nickname now that Laura is the chubbiest little girl on the team. And Caroline watches as Tami's French-manicured hand spreads open across Charlie's back like a souvenir fan.

Mary yells at her iPhone game, "Dammit! An eagle flew off with my son!"

Before Caroline can reprimand the profanity, her phone buzzes again, and she reluctantly pulls it out of her purse. It's Edwards: four missed calls. She doesn't know how he got her number. She remembers letting him into her car, her house, her bed, but wonders how he got into her phone, a space she doesn't remember giving him access to. Parts of the previous night keep floating back to her—like his asking what she named her breasts, or his discussion of how difficult it was to assess a girl's age in a bar. The referee's whistle shrieks and she wants to climb under the bleachers, where all of the trash and the lost jackets go.

Nellie Oleson's mother whistles behind her, and Caroline wishes she were in better form, less hungover, more able to broach the subject of the "rape text" with her. Still, she's considering it and shifting positions on the bleacher when, suddenly, Laura catches the basketball, looks around like a cornered raccoon, and hurls up an air-ball that sails out of the court and crashes into a rack beside the visitors' bleachers, spilling a barrage of orange balls onto the floor. Tami stands up and screams, "Good try, Half-Pint!" as the cross of rhinestones on her ass winks at Caroline like an arrow on a neon sign.

Nellie Oleson's mother puts a hand on Caroline's shoulder and says, "Don't know if you know it, but your phone's ringing."

* * *

Caroline sits in the minivan outside the old house, waiting for the girls. The garage door yawns open, revealing folding tables piled with clothes and books and furnishings. A garage sale? Charlie never wants to get rid of anything. But out comes Tami in a concert t-shirt and sunglasses, carrying one of the lamps that used to sit on the table in the entryway. She waves to Caroline with her free hand, and then calls inside to the girls.

Laura runs out and bounces up to the minivan window. "Is it okay if I get rid of my pink dresser?" she asks.

“But you’ve had that since you were so little.”

“Well, Mary wants to sell hers too.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Go back inside and tell your sister it’s time to go.” Caroline watches Laura’s bare feet as they slap the pavement, and she suddenly begins to feel a little lightheaded.

And then, under one of the tables in the garage, she sees the doghouse—a red and white painted doghouse that they’d all built for Jack when the girls were little.

Her phone rings, and she tries to turn it off, but her palms are too wet to slide the shut-off button across the screen. And suddenly all she can think about is the day when Jack ran away, the frightening emptiness of the house, her own regret about the doggie door—and two days later when they found his body alongside I-40, like an oily rag that had flown out the back of someone’s truck into the center lane, hit more than once.

Her heart is racing, and she suddenly feels as if her breathing may stop, so she forces herself to breathe. In, out. In, out. She feels as if she will faint in the heat, as if her body will just shut down and not know how to breathe. Her hands are cold and wet on the hot steering wheel, and she opens the door, trying to focus her view of the house through the smears of bug guts on the window. She closes her eyes and thinks of the babies in Mary’s Research Response, taken from their mothers, of things crawling into the house, sugar ants through electrical sockets, gnats around the fruit bowl, a scorpion in the bathtub. She thinks of the fiddle-back bite on Charlie’s thigh that first summer they met, black and massive and mysterious—a shadow that rotted and spread until someone, the doctor, finally cut it out.

* * *

Dr. Baker leans back in the cheap rolling desk chair that’s a few inches too small for him. He crosses his legs once again and looks up from his legal pad at Caroline.

“And when did you begin to feel better?” he asks. “When did you know that it had passed?” He cocks his head sideways like a child with an ear infection.

Caroline pulls a Kleenex from the tissue box, just to have something to knead between her hands. She suddenly feels as if

seeing a therapist may have been overkill; surely Dr. Baker has more important patients to see. But there's also a kind of relief.

"I felt better once I was in the pool," she tells him.

"You went swimming later?"

"There's a pool in our backyard, their backyard. I love water. I had to get out of the car, and all I could think about was getting to the swimming pool and being able to sit down and put my feet in there. So I did, and I tried to breathe deeply."

"And did Tami see you?"

"She was the one who told me to breathe deeply."

"Oh good," says Dr. Baker, writing something down.

"Yes. Good," Caroline echoes.

Caroline thinks back to Tami fixing her bra strap for her, tucking it under her tank top, rubbing her back like Caroline was a sick child. *And what were they?* she remembers wondering at the time. Two women who had shared a man and shared a house without any intimacy between them at all? And somehow then, with her feet in the cold water of that backyard swimming pool, her thighs stinging from the hot pavement, the smell of chlorine infusing the air, it seemed like their relationship had been changed.

"Has this happened before?" Dr. Baker asks her.

"Not really. Maybe once. When I had to drive across the Mississippi River one summer. I'm scared of bridges. And of heights."

"Well, if this happens again, keep track of where and when it happens and what you think triggers it. With agoraphobia people have panic attacks from several different stimuli."

"Isn't agoraphobia the fear of open spaces?" Caroline pictures the vast plains, a dizzying, brutal wilderness, acres and acres of moving grasses and the abysmal sky.

"Not necessarily. But when people have had many panic attacks, they sometimes become afraid that something they encounter after leaving the house will trigger another attack, so they stay inside as an act of avoidance. But I don't think that's the case with you."

She studies his desk, trying to read the title of a sideways book. Some kind of romance novel. Maybe a western.

"I feel stupid," she finally admits. "It sounds very illogical, panicking for nothing."

"It's natural," says Dr. Baker, uncrossing his legs again as the little chair moans beneath him. "Panic is what helped our species escape dangerous situations. A bear. A snake. A warring tribe."

* * *

The girls have beaten her home from school, and the house smells of pickle juice and sunscreen. Mary has affixed a Velcro dartboard to the living room wall but is attempting to throw darts at the now-pink ant bites on Laura's feet.

"Quit it!" Laura yells.

"Mary, did you turn in your paper?" Caroline asks. "I mean your Research Response?"

"Not yet," Mary moans, firing off another dart that tags Laura in the knee. "I still have to do a word count. Laura, will you count the words for me? I'll be your best friend."

"I don't want to," Laura says.

Mary nails her with another dart—this one in her hair.

"Stop it!" yells Laura.

"Quit it," says Caroline.

But Mary launches the last dart from the table, sailing it across the living room, where it grazes Laura's ear.

"Mary!" Laura screams, untangling the dart from her hair and turning around. She steps up on the center of the slip-covered couch, balancing on the cushion with her toes gripping the fabric, her hands in tight fists. "Fuck you!"

The words, crisp and clear and loud, cleave the air as if swung by a seven-foot lumberjack.

They all are shocked—even Laura, who begins to cry. Caroline doesn't know whether to punish her or hug her—for finally standing up for herself, for taking a stand.

"Girls!" is all she can think to say, looking back and forth between her growing daughters. "Go to your rooms."

In silence the girls trudge down the hall and hole themselves up, and for a while Caroline sits at the kitchen table, wondering where Laura learned the word (the Internet? Nellie Oleson?) and considering how she should handle it. Strangely, there's something in the moment that offers her a brief feeling of peace.

She begins to dial the home phone but calls the cell phone instead. It's not Charlie who answers.

“Tami?” she asks.

“Hey, how are you feeling?”

“Better.” Caroline looks at her finished curtains hanging over the kitchen window, the hems slightly crooked but probably noticeable only to her. “I wanted to let you know that Laura has learned a new word.”

That afternoon Caroline spends a long time sitting in a warm spot where the sunlight shines through the window. She tells Tami about the F-bomb and Nellie Oleson and the text. She thanks her for the loan of a jacket after the panic attack. She tells her about Dr. Baker. The two of them talk for the better part of an hour, until they are interrupted by a call from Hester Sue. She has phoned to say that the Pox Party was a success—all three kids are infected.



From the collection of the Senior Advisory Editor, photograph