

**Emily Ross**  
from *Half in Love with Death*

The night Jess left us, I sat on the front step twirling my little brother Dicky's top round and round. As the black circles blended into gray, I watched the stripes disappear, wanting to believe it was magic, but I knew it was an optical illusion. I was drawn to things that were not what they appeared to be. I used to want to be a magician, but Jess told me girls couldn't do magic.

I wiped the back of my neck, damp with sweat. It was getting late, but not a bit cooler. Darkness was erasing the green from the grass, the blue from the sky. The palm trees that lined our street looked like black cutouts. The swing sets were still. There were no more shouts of "olly olly oxen free." The younger kids who'd been playing hide and seek had all gone inside.

The time of day between dinner and bedtime sometimes made me lonely, but that night I had something to look forward to. I was going to the drive-in with Jess and her boyfriend, Tony. My sister was seventeen, two years older than I was, and she was in love with Tony. I couldn't wait for him to show up, take her hand and then mine as he turned to my dad and said, "I'll bring your two princesses home before midnight, Mr. Galvin. Promise." All the girls loved Tony, but he belonged to Jess and when he took my hand I couldn't help but feel he also belonged to me.

I squinted at the distant place where the road met the desert, willing his gold car to appear.

Behind me a door creaked open, and let out a cool rush of air. "Come in, Caroline. It's like an oven out there," Mom said. It *was* hot, but it had been hot ever since we'd moved to

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Tucson from Boston a year ago. I dragged myself up. I wanted to stay there and wait for Tony, but unlike Jess, I did what my mother told me.

I stretched out next to Dicky, who was lying on the living room carpet coloring. Mom and Dad sat in front of the TV with their scotches, Dad in his leather recliner, Mom on the sofa, smoothing her dress. Spending Friday nights with my parents bored me to death. I couldn't wait for my real night to begin.

It didn't matter that Jess and Tony were only taking me to the drive-in because they had to. My parents foolishly believed I could prevent my sister and her boyfriend from making out. They didn't know that Tony was at least eighteen, and had dropped out of high school, and that sometimes he gave me money to get anything I liked as long as I waited a while before coming back. I didn't mind. Watching the movie from the snack bar was better than watching them kiss. I loved seeing the story unfold on the big white screen with cars in front of it, and the trees, moon, and stars behind it. It was magical when someone walked by and for a second became part of the picture. Sometimes I wished I could step out of my life and into a movie.

My parents didn't know any of this and I'd never tell because everything that happened when I was with Jess and Tony was a secret. We even had secret names when we were with him; he called her Jezebel and me Twinkle Toes. Jess said if Tony gave you a secret name it meant he liked you. All I knew was that a glance from him could take my breath away.

I looked at my watch. Dicky bore down hard with his blue crayon. The ice clinked in Dad's glass. Jess wasn't ready yet. She'd been in a mood all day. If she didn't hurry up she was going to make us late for the movie. She made us late for everything. She didn't understand that events like sunset and darkness falling wouldn't wait for her to get her make-up right.

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Finally she came downstairs, her blond hair held back with a blue headband. She wore denim pedal pushers, a blouse knotted above her belly button, and white Keds. She stopped in the middle of the room and stared past us, as if we weren't even there. Then she opened her big red purse and gazed into it as if contemplating the mysteries of the universe.