



*more praise for*

## Girl Power and Other Short-Short Stories:

“Reading *Girl Power* is like being kissed by a hammer. It’s affectionate and damaging, poetic and gut wrenching—rich with bittersweet insight and the harm and loss we inflict on one another and our own selves. There is a lot of love and hope and, oddly enough, humor in these pages, but there is even more hurt. These brief stories left me bruised and still I kept asking for another and another.”

—Michael Garriga, author of *The Book of Duels*

“*Girl Power* traces the lives of women from growing pains to achy joints, creating a collage of stories that speak to the challenges, heartbreaks, joys, fears, and wonders of the worlds we inhabit. Cortese weaves effortlessly between the real and mundane (backyard barbecues and neighborhood bars) to the fantastical (fairy tale lands and side show acts), and uses her mastery of the flash form to find the perfect detail that leaves her readers reeling, story after story after story.”

—Tara Laskowski, author of *Modern Manners for Your Inner Demons* and editor, *SmokeLong Quarterly*

“*Girl Power* is a great read. These stories beat against the walls of reality, from girlhood to old age, with wit and fantasy, confronting both “the marvelous things we ... dream of becoming” and loss (the girl at the prom swallowed by a black hole, from which “a breeze rose ... cool and forgiving”). This is a writer you’ll want to see more of.”

—Robert Shapard, author of *Motel and Other Stories* and editor of *Flash Fiction International: Very Short Stories from Around the World*

“Writing flash fiction means catching lightning in a very small bottle, and holding it up for the reader to see. An entire collection of flash fiction demands a writer who can do this over and over again. Katie Cortese is one of the rare writers who can pull this off, and *Girl Power* is full of stories that leap wildly between playfulness and heartbreak, not just within a single page, but sometimes within a single sentence. This is a surprising, moving collection.”

—Caitlin Horrocks, author of *This Is Not Your City*

“Katie Cortese’s *Girl Power* lives up to its title in every story and on every page, because in every sentence she writes you can sense her boundless empathy for and belief in the many girls and women who star in her stories. At first glance, it seems each of these women gets only a few short pages of our attention—but thanks to Cortese’s powerful writing it quickly becomes clear that what they’ve each really been gifted is a life, full of humor and hope.”

—Matt Bell, author of *Scrapper*

“Like the boys and men and babies that surround the girls in *Girl Power*, Katie Cortese’s compelling stories grab you, pin you down, bargain with you, even try to swallow you. And, like her hard-knocks, hard-nosed protagonistas, these stories inspire and empower. The girls of *Girl Power* lie and swear, they “watch the dollar bills mount,” they cook the fish they bought as pets, and they close their eyes and wait until it’s over. Meanwhile, the girls around them die in swimming pools, fall through holes in the earth at high school dances, get eaten by oranges, get taken, get lost, perdido, poof. And the men and the boys they know buy them drinks, shoot gym teachers, bruise the girls, and make love to them. The pregnant women ride roller coasters, lose their babies, or just give them up, before they are even born. These intense and piercing stories of maidens, mothers, and matrons facing life’s realities and surrealities reveal the myriad forms that girl power can take.”

—Kelcey Ervick Parker, author of *Liliane’s Balcony: A Novella of Fallingwater*



Girl Power  
and Other Short-Short  
Stories

Katie Cortese

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*For the three wisest women I know:  
Nana, Nonni, and my mother, Sandra M. Cortese,  
whose love of language gave me permission to speak.*



*... it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.  
And there are so many silences to be broken.*

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation  
of Silence into Language and Action”



# CONTENTS

## I. Maidenhood

The Junior Superheroes Club of Tallahassee, FL	3
Play Dead	6
You Must Be This Tall to Ride	8
Best Laid Plans	10
The Moon, That Bright Tether	13
Food, Water, Shelter	15
St. John the Evangelist's Belfast Summer Exchange	17
Swallowed	20
Disappearing Act	22
Invisible	24
In the Beginning of the End	26
Rules of Combat	30
Let Down Your Hair	33
LETLUVIN'TRIN®	37
Gentleman's Game	41
Run All Day, Run All Night	46
Sum of Her Parts	48
Before the Monsoon	52
A Geologic Survey of Love	54
Camping Christopher Creek	56
Gravity	58
Favorite Things	61
Faking It	65
Under the Weather	68



## II. Motherhood

Paula's Old Tyme Pirate Photos	73
The Secret	76
Mead or Mulberry Wine?	80
Hide and Seek	82
What to Expect When You're Expecting	84
Thrill Ride	87
Labor Day	89
Independence Day	92
Baby Pictures	95
Insatiable	97

## III. Matronhood

Anger Management	103
Accord and Satisfaction	106
Another Man's Treasure	109
Dinner at Margie and Stan's	111
Fine Art at the San Diego Zoo	114
Italian Classes at Tony's Tower of Pizza	116
Physical Imperatives of Entropy	119
Gliese 581g	125
The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam	127
Girl Power	130
Acknowledgements	135



I

MAIDENHOOD





## **The Junior Superheroes Club of Tallahassee, Florida**

**W**e formed the club after Geraldine Marshall drowned in the pool on John Knox. It was high time. If Frog Boy was in business two weeks ago, when Geraldine tried a triple-flip and knocked her head against the board, she might still be here today. We don't give him a hard time, Arthur Bip, a.k.a. Frog Boy, because his power is swimming the length of the pool underwater, and not telling the future.

Allyson's power is bagpipes, which her mom plays too. When she juices that tartan bag, crows pour out of the Magnolias, and Arthur's father gets his BB gun for target practice. Arthur's father was a Navy Seal, which is where he gets his power.

Shelby practices flying by jumping off the swings. She thinks her sister should be admitted into the club, because she was the lifeguard on duty when Geraldine died. We think her sister is brave for hauling Geraldine to the pool deck and pumping her double-fisted hands against Geraldine's heart, even though the EMTs said no amount of CPR could have saved anyone after a "head injury of that magnitude," but superheroes have to be more than brave.

We're invincible, those of us with matching rings from the machines outside of Stein Mart. It took a lot of quarters and a lot of

plastic eggs to find seven purples, and we can't spare one for a non-life-saving lifeguard. Even a brave one. Shelby says she understands, but she missed the last meeting. There's talk of taking back her ring. If she isn't serious about flying then we owe it to Tallahassee, to the panhandle, to the whole sunny state, to find someone who is.

Barron and Jarron are the Terrible Twosome. Incredible Hulks plus red hair, times two.

Wolf's real name is Robert. He was born without a larynx, and he's so blond his scalp shows. Since none of us are great at sign language, he writes everything out. His superpower is thinking. He has written that no one should blame Shelby's sister for Geraldine's death, but she will blame herself all her life. He has written that Shelby will chicken out before she masters flight, but we shouldn't blame her either unless one of us learns to do it first. He has written that Geraldine is in neither heaven nor hell, but in "suspended animation" waiting for a baby to animate. Wolf told us not to tell her parents. "They're too sad still," he wrote. "It wouldn't help."

Wolf believes animation begins when a mother starts to love her unborn child, which is sometimes right away, and sometimes not until they feel it move or hold it. If it never happens, those kids grow into stabbers and bombers and terrorists. My mother calls Wolf "wise beyond his years," which she thinks is from living without a body part the rest of us take for granted, but which we know is from the soul animating him, someone calm and loving and fair and bald. I'm not saying Gandhi for sure, but maybe. Wolf has written that Geraldine's death is the hardest kind for people to understand because there is no one to blame.

I wish my superpower was leaping over the capitol building, or levitating everyone in the fourth grade, or freezing time, so I could have snapped my fingers when Geraldine leapt off the board, then snatched her from the air before her head cracked open, as Shelby

says, like the plastic egg her ring came in.

Instead, my power is memory. Mom calls me Rachel Recall. At every meeting, I remind us of a good deed we've done. The time Allyson stuck up for Big Dave on the bus, or when Shelby shared a box of Jelly-Bellies someone gave her sister after the accident, but which her sister wouldn't eat. Shelby's sister doesn't eat much of anything now.

Today, I tell about Geraldine Marshall teaching us to double-dutch at recess. It was a year ago, when she first moved here, and she spun her end of the ropes so fast I saw a portal open in time—me on one side, a saber-toothed tiger on the other. If she'd lived, time travel would have been her power. "She'd have sent us back," I say, "one by one, to right the great wrongs of history." Everyone looks at Wolf, and when he nods, they do too, like they knew it all along.

## Play Dead

Ever since a sicko took Joanie Graham last week, my mother and I eat pancakes and watch *Law & Order* like that will help to crack the case. I say we should watch *America's Most Wanted* instead, but she flaps her hand for silence since she can't hear me and Detective Stabler at the same time. The pancakes taste of baking soda. We rip them apart and dip them in pools of Aunt Jemima on a paper plate between us.

When news updates pop up, Mama switches to The Weather Channel and I look for Summerland Key—just a little teardrop running off the end of Florida's nose—but we're always too small to see. On The Weather Channel we are not big news, but everywhere else we are “local islanders” reeling from the “trouble in paradise” that has wounded our “smalltown hearts.”

As soon as Mama gets up to pee, I flip to a clip of Prissy Henderson telling a big, black microphone that she hopes Joanie comes home soon, but when I hear the toilet flush, it's back to *Law & Order* where Jennifer Love Hewitt guest stars as a rape victim smeared with fake blood.

Mama blames every tourist who's visited the island since 1978 for Joanie's disappearance. The sicko that took her was either one of them or one of us. One minute she was in her yard practicing round-

offs and splits, and the next: gone. Vanished. Policemen came to school and searched her desk like her pencil box was stuffed with clues instead of yellow No. 2s.

When Daddy's truck pulls in, Mama throws out the syrup plate with the leftover pancakes. I scoot under my covers and she starts reading Chapter Five of *The Secret Garden*, which we finished last week. I pretend to listen until Daddy sticks his head in the room.

"There's my girls," he says.

Mama almost-shuts the door on her way out. I listen to them kiss, staring at the blade of light between the door and the jamb. If a sicko pushed it open, the only thing I'd probably think to do is play dead, though I think that only works on bears.

In the hall, Daddy's voice sinks. "They think they found her body," he says. Mama yanks shut my door.

"Where?" she says, when what she means is why. I can't hear his answer as they move away, leaving me to study the way my curtains are lit up by moonlight.

I picture Joanie Graham practicing no-hands cartwheels on her lawn, and then dead at the bottom of the marina with fish nibbling at her freckled nose.

On the island we are used to hating mainlanders who overcrowd our beaches and triple our traffic, but it's January now. The beaches are empty. When word got out she was gone, before Mama turned to pancakes and reruns of *SVU*, she'd spent two days locked in her room. "How could it be one of us?" she'd cried.

I couldn't hear my father's answer then either.

## You Must Be This Tall to Ride

For her ninth birthday, Laura asked her parents for a trip to the North Florida Fair. For all three of them to go, at the same time. It was Daddy's idea. His first present was a Daffy Duck t-shirt, and she put it on in a port-a-potty even though it showed the bottom of her tummy. Then he won her a giant, stuffed frog at a dart game where the leathery carnie grinned a flinty smile, saying, "Son, you bested me. Don't bother coming back now, you hear?"

Daddy rode The Monster Coaster with her, and Mom went on the Tilt-a-Whirl twice, but both of them said no to the giant swings. At the same time. Then laughed about it, which Laura counted as her third present.

"What about the kiddie swings?" Daddy asks now, leading the way to the baby rides. Laura tugs at the hem of her shorts, which have crept up the insides of her legs, and says okay.

She's plenty tall for this one; the other kids are covered in facepaint, riding cotton candy highs. Laura picks a swing where she can see her parents on the other side of the metal fence. The seat's a tight fit, but her heart is buoyant already. She's eager to see the fair blurred against the twilight into one beautiful mess, a thousand twinkling candles on a birthday cake the size of the mall parking lot. She can't wait for her feet to leave the ground.

An attendant moves kid to kid, buckling everyone's belts, but stops when he gets to Laura. "Sorry, hon," he says. "You're too big." Her cheeks fill with flame. Looking down, she sees he's right. Daffy's beak rises and falls with her breath between the buckle's metal parts.

Her father calls, "What's the problem, bub?" which makes Laura's mother put a hand on his chest, the first time Laura's seen her touch him in months.

"Too big," the carnie says, shrugging, staring at the squiggly lace of one untied sneaker. "Screw you, buddy," her father says, leaping the metal barrier and pushing through the forest of chains until his thick finger erases the "Do" where the man's shirt says "Just Do It."

"Randall," her mother calls, tented hands going to her mouth. "Forget it. Let's just go."

"Come on, sweetie. Suck in," Daddy says, squatting before Laura's swing and straining to marry the clasp so hard she's afraid he will catch the skin. Her mother is yelling; she should never have agreed to this, she should have known better.

"It's okay, Daddy," Laura says, letting go of the swoop and dive that would have come next, the delicious feeling of being flung through the air until she felt separate from her body. Sweat dots her shirt as he struggles. She tries to stand—kids have begun to titter—but he makes her sit with one iron glare, then takes up the straps to try again, nowhere close to giving up.

## Best Laid Plans

A month after Lynn Platter watched her baby brother choke to death on a round of sliced-up hot dog, she spent a week with her cousin in Brookline while her parents went to Nantucket “to take stock,” as the hospital’s counselor recommended. An air mattress had been inflated in Jasmine’s room, and Lynn sat in its saggy center.

“You look the same as the last time I saw you,” Jasmine said, peering down at Lynn from the height of her day bed, working her fingers in the lace fringe of her white comforter.

Lynn drew her knees under her chin. City sounds leaked in through the window frames, tires shushing over wet streets. “I’m an inch taller.”

“Oh,” Jasmine said. She began braiding a hank of hair. “Do you feel different?”

“Because I’m taller?” Lynn went to the window. Back at home, in Pawtucket, Mrs. Mellon would stop by to feed Thunder and Lightning soon, the twin Persians. Bringing them to Brookline had been “out of the question,” though Lynn couldn’t sleep without them anymore. On Nantucket, her parents would be picking at a lobster dinner. Outside, it rained and cars flowed steadily down the one-way street. So many cars with their lights on. A never-ending stream.

Jasmine's voice got very thin. "I mean because of Billy," she said.

"No," Lynn said. "I don't feel anything." It wasn't precisely true. She felt cold radiating from the window. She felt lightheaded from not having eaten breakfast or lunch. She felt much, much older than eleven years.

"Do you think he's in heaven?" Jasmine asked.

"Do you think he isn't?" Lynn asked. Her brother had been laughing. Correction: Lynn had been making him laugh. Pulling faces at the table while their mother stood at the stove. The average hot dog was the exact diameter of an average child's esophagus. The one Billy had been eating was "All-natural" and "Kosher" with "No preservatives!"

The girls were ten months apart in age. Lynn sat next to Jasmine on the day bed. "Give me your hand," she said, and Jasmine held out her left for Lynn's inspection.

"Pinch me, here," Lynn said, positioning Jasmine's thumb and pointer on either side of her windpipe, at the base of her throat. "Pinch hard." Jasmine sunk her stubby fingernails into her cousin's neck until their purple polish disappeared. "Harder," Lynn croaked, eyes watering.

Jasmine chewed her lips, concentrating, and Lynn lay back. "Harder," she whispered.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Jasmine asked. She kept squeezing for a handful of seconds and then drew back as if she'd been bit. "Lynn? Lynn? Are you okay? Open your eyes."

The girl did. The ceiling was pure white, unscuffed, blank as a sheet of paper. She was supposed to be on Nantucket too. And Billy. It had been planned months ago as a family vacation. They were going to rent bikes. They were going to eat ice cream. "Coward," Lynn said.

Jasmine slipped off the bed and curled into the deflating air mattress like an armadillo, armor out.

## The Moon, That Bright Tether

The year her parents divorced, she stood in what would soon be her old driveway, at her old house, with her older neighbor, Jeffrey, who held a new basketball fast between arm and hip. Though it wasn't late, or not very, the moon was out—but not quite full, just above the treeline.

“Weird how it looks like it’s moving,” Jeffrey said, pointing at the bright disk.

“It’s not?” she asked, glancing up fast, chiding herself for not knowing whether it was waning or waxing. Seventh graders were supposed to know that kind of thing, she thought, though she’d only been one for three weeks.

Jeffrey didn’t smirk the way he might have just a few months ago. As fall began to tear into the air with its cold little teeth, a change had come over him too. He already seemed taller at the start of his first year at the high school, wiser, and serious, the way he would seem next summer when she let him touch her whenever he asked. He’d reminded her of a scientist then, an explorer, though their experiments always ended in failure, him scurrying away with his head down, mumbling a goodbye. Alone, she would dress slowly, waiting for the brief magic of being wanted to bloom the way it only did after he’d left. Then she’d brush the dirt from the back of her

jeans before biking the three extra blocks to her mother's new apartment along the same hot sidewalk where she'd first learned to ride.

Now, though, months away from those rendezvous in the park behind the equipment shed, he touched her for the first time, lightly, on the arm, drawing her forward two steps and two to the right. "You can see better this way," he said, setting the basketball down between his feet, and bending to put his head ear to ear with hers. "Catch a branch in the moon. See how it stays still? Only the wind and the clouds are moving."

She peered up into the tangle of oak limbs whose leaves turned black against the lopsided orb. She knew this phase was called gibbous; most of the surface was visible, but some was still in shadow.

"I like it better this way," she said, going back beneath the hoop where only moments before she'd won their game of Horse—because he'd let her, she suspected. Once again, the white sand dollar seemed to creep against its black beach. In the house, behind her, something broke. Glass against tile.

"I should go home," Jeffrey said, dribbling the ball just once.

She counted his steps until they petered out at forty-three. Inside, her parents had come to a decision. She sensed it in the sudden stillness, the lack of slammed doors, the distant tinkling of glass fragments swept into a dustpan. *When the moon reaches the roof, I'll go inside*, she thought, watching the sky, goosebumps peppering her arms, as if in a minute it would.

## Food, Water, Shelter

The boy says, “In the world after this one, we’ll last six months easy.” He runs his hand along a row of canned corn, and wipes the accumulated dust on his jeans.

Jenny only goes halfway down the concrete stairs, the farthest any slant of sun will descend into the room crammed with two bunk beds, a chemical toilet, barrels of water, metal shelves packed with protein powder, and a bunch of unlabeled white buckets.

“There’s only one world,” she says, hugging knees to chest, relatively sure.

Jenny is supposed to go right home after school, but the boy was carrying a heavy tub into his backyard as she passed, and she went to him when he called for help.

“It will be so different, you’ll think it’s another planet,” the boy says, lowering himself to one of the bottom bunks. He seems sad, alone down there, all elbows and knees.

“I should go home,” she says. Her new house of the last month is two doors down.

“It’s only me and my dad,” the boy says, hands between his knees in prayer position. “But four beds. If the worst happens, we’ll take you in. Your sister too, but that’s it.”

Jenny bumps her butt down a step, then another, until her feet

rest on the floor. It's cool at the bottom, and smells of new paint. The boy flips the top off the heavy tub, revealing bags of dried pinto beans, which he starts to stack on the one empty shelf.

"What's the worst?" she asks. He has to be older than twelve because she's never seen him at the middle school. Her parents keep telling her to open up, smile more. *Look at your sister*, they say, who joined the high school's swim team, and is swimming already in friends.

"A bomb. An asteroid. A flu that kills everyone off. Either way, we've got all we need to survive down here." He slips one hand into a pocket bulging with keys, his dad's maybe. Swiped from a nightstand. The cabinet he unlocks is tall and narrow. When she stands, some of the guns inside are exactly her height. He selects one. Polished wooden stock. Oily black barrel.

"I should go," she says, but the boy's arms spin her, fit the stock to her shoulder, crook her fingers under his on the trigger, and lift the barrel to the square of sky she can still see. He smells like burning leaves, up close, and the only truth she'll remember is his solid warmth against her, and the purr of his voice she can feel when he says, "This is just for enemies. Problem is, enemies are everywhere. Sometimes they pretend to be friends."

Warm breath shrouding her ear.

Months later, when he shoots the Phys. Ed. teacher at her sister's school, not quite killing him, Jenny will dream of the cell sunken into the boy's yard. Four walls. Bunkbeds. Bland food getting dusty in the dark, waiting to nourish someone.

## St. John the Evangelist's Belfast Summer Exchange

Sunday, we took our Irish girl on a whale watch. She was scared of the boat, clutched her old-fashioned wool sweater to a body barely big around as a two-by-four. My mother said, "This will be something to write home about."

The girl shook her head in a way we took to mean yes.

I was supposed to like her because we were both girls, but my brother was allowed to mimic her accent on the phone while she and I played endless games of Monopoly. The Irish girl was a terrible capitalist. Instead of admitting defeat, she just mortgaged all her properties one by one. Marvin Gardens. Connecticut Ave. Poor, piddly Baltic. Poverty didn't scare her.

"I sometimes get seasick, but I'll try not to," I told her now, both of us clutching a cold metal rail. The pale wisps too short to go in my ponytail blew straight back in the wind.

She nodded and picked at a flake of gray paint by her thumb. Dave stood on her other side for a second, then made a farting noise into the crook of his elbow and disappeared into the crowd. I straightened my back when he left, sipped air through my nose.

In the cabin behind us, my mother sat with a paper cup of Earl Gray and my father read a Louis L'Amour. I could see them if I

turned, but didn't dare upset my equilibrium by moving.

"Do you miss Ireland?" I asked her. I'd seen *Circle of Friends* so I had a good idea of what it was like there: green, Catholic, prudish. Not all that different than here. Honestly, I wasn't all that interested in her country, or her homesickness, though I knew I should have been, but it had become a game to get her to talk. Two weeks with us in the States and the only thing she'd asked for was permission to use our phone so she could call her family with her International Calling Card. We had four weeks to go in the exchange program—which was only a one-way deal and fine with me that way. I'd have been scared to travel that far.

"Aye," she said into the wind. "Sundays 'specially."

We were at the limits of the harbor. My mouth filled with saliva and I swallowed and swallowed again. "Why Sundays? You like your church better than ours?"

She looked down at the rail with a wisp of a smile not meant for me. "My gran cooks a roast the size of a pill. I have five brothers and they only thing they like in common is food."

"Five brothers?" I tried imagining five Daves and failed. "A pill? Like an aspirin?"

She brought her face sideways and looked at me. Her blond hair seemed gray in the flat sun and beyond her, beyond the rail, the ocean was green and brown, iridescent and crinkled like taffeta. We'd barely cleared the harbor and already I felt an oily weight in my gut, sloshing side to side, a tingly heaviness in my limbs.

"A pill is a ball, the kind for rugby," the Irish girl said. Her voice was clipped and proper. My mother called it darling.

"Oh," I said. "Neat." I consulted my Hyannisport Whale Watch pamphlet and pointed to the thumbnail shots. "We get right whales and sperm out here. Sometimes humpback." I offered her the pamphlet, but she only pulled harder at her sweater.

“I saw a dead whale once on holiday,” she said. “Touched it, too.”

No land in sight now. No crowd either. There must have been a sighting on the other side of the boat drawing everyone away. I swallowed again, hard, and scanned the horizon.

“What would you be doing now?” she asked. It was the first time since she’d gotten here that she seemed curious about me. The overhead speaker behind us crackled then quit. I saw that the buttons on her sweater were wooden, hand-carved. “If I wasn’t here, like.”

I needed another dose of Dramamine. Or maybe to lie down. “I was supposed to go to tennis camp,” I said. My best friend Marcie had met a boy there already. All neat buzz cut and his dad’s cologne. Thirteen, like us. “Excuse me,” I said, stumbling sideways as my stomach double-clutched, chin involuntarily shooting out, a hot stream of tomato soup spurting over the rail I’d just been holding and speckling the gray rivets at my feet. Some fine drops splattered the Irish girl’s sweater, but she didn’t scream or gag the way I would have. She only took my arm and walked me to a wooden bench bolted to the deck. It felt good to sit. I knew my mother must have seen through the window. She’d probably gone in search of a mop.

Over our heads, the PA system crackled again. This time a man’s voice announced a pair of bottlenose dolphins on the port bow. “Go see, if you want,” I croaked, my throat useless and raw. And worse, even as a white-shirted teenager sopped up the mess I’d already left, I could feel a new gathering in my belly, a new static in my head.

“I’m not bothered,” she said, her face smooth and implacable and blank as if she’d already seen worse than me and expected worse before she was through. Even in the breeze, the sweat beaded on my forehead and I closed my eyes, promising to be better when I opened them.

## Swallowed

I didn't really know the girl, so I'm not as sad as I should be. And anyway, time makes things blurry. There are people who'll say Maria Alvareño never lived here in Phoenix, or maybe that she never existed. All I know is I was in the stands with my boyfriend Lenny when she made that backwards Hail-Mary-seconds-ticking-down shot from half-court. She was pretty enough to make Lenny want an eyeful. We lost the game, sure, but Maria won over the crowd; especially *los chicos*.

Girl got eaten by an orange. Lenny saw it too. We were behind the Circle K waiting for his brother to pick us up. There's an alley back there and Maria came down it with two guys, rolling oranges down the road so they'd spray juice everywhere and leave this dark trail behind like a sticky shadow. I was gonna make a joke about the sticky trail when Lenny's face blanked.

I looked over and saw Maria hopping around on those long, basketball legs and screaming so rough my own throat felt raw. Normally, I wouldn't want Lenny to watch since the skirt she had on just hopped along with her, but by then both of us were past caring what color her underwear was. Maria was waving one arm around. First thing I saw was how much shorter it looked than her other arm; next thing is that where her wrist should've been there was only a