**Seven**

Michele Lovell

 Her silver teeth shine in the fluorescent light of the shelter. She comes to stay after the police find her wandering on 82nd Avenue while her mom smokes meth in one of the bars. Her sisters, all five of them, will follow one by one in the months and years to come but for now it’s just her. I give her a pair of pajamas, still new in the package and she smiles, folds the plastic and places it in the red vinyl purse she keeps with her always.

 She looks at me, suspicion in her old crone’s eyes. She wants to know what I expect in exchange for this present.

 The first night I pour the chemicals onto her head to kill the adult lice that crawl through the mats behind her ears and around the base of her dirty neck. Then I scrape the eggs off each stubborn strand with a fine-toothed comb, so the babies don’t live to take more blood from her.

 She tells me she dreams her whole family floating on rubber rafts in a lake with no bottom. The sun is so bright it’s blinding. She feels the kitchen knife in her small hand, puts an end to the terrible floating. She watches them sink slowly, the murky water filling their noisy mouths. The baby stays the longest. His raven hair is shiny and stuck to his head. “He looked like an otter,” she giggles, “but he couldn’t swim.” And she doesn’t know why he wasn’t crying.

 “My birthday’s in September,” she says, as I pour the warm water through her hair, rinsing and rinsing. “I didn’t have a cake or nothin. When I woke up in the morning, they all said happy birthday to me. That’s how I knew I was seven.”