

Sometimes I think
that I am on an island—
a deserted one
with just a single coconut tree.

Other days I think
I'm trapped in a bubble
floating aimlessly through a void.

Wherever I am
no one sees me.

My class is made up
of groups:
the sporty boys' group,
the ballet girls' group,
the library kids' group,
the bus kids' group,
the rough kids' group.

I am in a group of one.



Miss Bruff
teaches our class.
Every day she stands at the front
and tries to inspire us
with lessons about planets
and conservation
and the magic of math.
Her singsong voice
floats through the air —

swirling,
swinging,
swaying.



It should encourage us,
fill us with hope
and with happiness.
But mostly, when it reaches us,
it thuds like concrete.

Mitchell Mason is scratching his knee,
Joseph Little is picking his nose,
Lucy Wong (who used to be my friend)
is planning a game of hopscotch
for recess.

And me?

I am thinking of home
and what is happening there.



Miss Bruff wants us to write poems.

I am.

Miss Bruff wants poems that rhyme.

Mine don't.

Rhyme is okay sometimes,

but my poems don't rhyme

and neither do I.

There was a young lady called Pearl
Who was not a rhyming type girl.
She said, "I've no time
For poems that rhyme,"
Which made her poor teacher go hurl.

There is no nicer noise
than the sound of the bell
at the end of the day.
One minute you are agonizing
over what word rhymes with *sausage*
or what is the answer to 11 times 12
and the next
you are released
by the *brrringing*
and *rrringing*
of the final bell.

And you know that no matter how hard
your day has been,
now it is over
and you can get out of here.
You try to stay still
while you say
Good afternoon, Miss Bruff.
But it is hard
and soon your legs are carrying you
away from the classroom
that has been your prison
for the day
and home,
where you belong.

There are three people at our house:
me,
my mom,
and my granny.

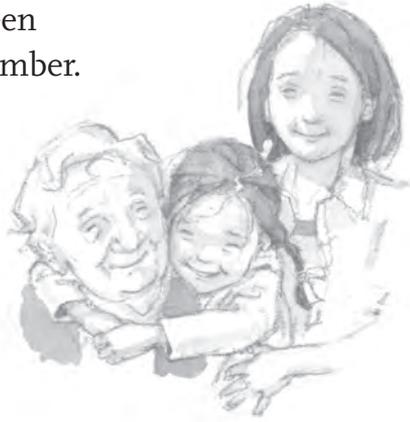
And that is how it has been
for as long as I can remember.

Dad went away
before I was born.

His loss, Mom says.

I don't care.

How can I miss
someone I never knew?



But I know my granny
and Granny knows me.

That is why I miss her so much.

She is still here with us
but she doesn't remember who we are.
She lies in her room
sleeping, or drooling, or tossing wildly.

Granny is fading.
So are Mom and me.

Mom, I say.
Mmmmmm, she says.
She doesn't look up.
Nothing, I say.
She keeps reading.
I want to ask:
Will Granny get better?
Will she sit up and smile
when I enter the room?
Will she make me laugh
with her jokes about chickens and roads?
But Mom is tuned out.
She is reading,
shut in the world of her novel.
Perhaps things are happier
there in those pages.
Lucky Mom.
Maybe I should get a book, too.



My bookshelf is filled
with the books Granny bought me
when I was little.

Fairy tales, mostly.

I read.

*There was once a little princess
who was trapped in a high tower
by a wicked witch
with a wart on her nose.*

Miss Bruff is a wicked witch
but she does not have a wart on her nose.

I don't think.

Perhaps she does and she hides it
with all that makeup she wears to school.

*Every day the princess sat at her window
waiting to be rescued by a handsome prince.*

I wonder if the prince was as handsome
as Mitchell Mason.

He is very handsome
even though he is not a prince.

Just a boy in my class.

But I wonder,

Why does the prince need to be handsome?

I wonder if all princes
are supposed to be handsome.

And why does the princess
wait for the prince, anyway?
Why doesn't she do something about
rescuing herself?

She should be proactive.

That's what Mom would say
if she wasn't lost in her own book.

The princess sat, and while she sat she spun.

Spinning, spinning, spinning.

All day, spinning.



Spinning is fun
even when it makes you dizzy.
I like to stretch my arms out wide

and spin,

spin,

spin

until I fall over.
Then I lie on the grass
and watch the clouds spinning above me.
But the princess doesn't seem
so big on spinning.
Maybe her kind of spinning isn't so fun.
I don't like this story.
Time for a new book.

At school Miss Bruff
is still wanting poems.

*Good ones, she says.
With lots of rhyme
and rhythm.*

Miss Bruff, I'd like to say,
there is no rhythm in me.
There is no rhythm in my life.
How can I write it down
on a page
when it isn't there?
But Miss Bruff is not
that kind of teacher.
So instead I write:

A teacher known as Bruff
Was very, very gruff.
She preached and she taught
Much more than she ought
Till the class had had more than enough.

I snicker.
Mitchell Mason looks over my shoulder
and reads what I've written.
He smiles.

My world is filled
with rhyme
just for a moment
until I see Miss Bruff coming down the aisle.
She will not smile when she sees my verse.
I crumple my poem into a tight ball
and I stare at a fresh, empty page,
waiting for new words to come.



On her way past my desk
Prudence Jones,
prettiest girl in the class,
most popular girl in the class,
most perfect girl in the class,
bumps my desk.
My pencils cascade
onto the floor.
Prudence! Miss Bruff gruffs.



Prudence's face
is a picture of innocence.
Sorry, Miss Bruff, she says.
It was an accident.
But down on the floor
as she passes me a pencil,
she nudges me and hisses,
That's for stealing my boyfriend.
Does Prudence have a boyfriend?
And how could I steal him
when I don't know who he is?
And would he let himself be stolen?

