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Decades
By Jessica Staricka

She flashes through her vanity mirror like a ghost. Her bedroom door squeaks. Did it ever do that before? The stairs stick to her feet and make a dry smack as she descends. She slides into slippers at the bottom step. Scuba snores in his kennel. She doesn't scratch his ears as she passes.

Audrey is eleven. Her mom's bedroom has a plastic accordion door, brittle, an artifact from some decade before Audrey was born. It's brown, but it looks navy blue in the moonlight that seeps into the wooden house from curtainless windows. She touches the plastic handle. This part always makes her heart do jumping-jacks.

But she has a backup plan. If her mom wakes, Audrey will crawl into bed with her, quake beneath the sheets, and whisper about a bad dream. Believable. She really does have bad dreams. To prep for the backup plan, she kicks one purple slipper back toward the bottom of the stairs and musses up her hair as if she's been asleep.

She slides the bedroom door open and finds her mom, a breathing hill of sheets. A tiny light blinks in a corner. The room smells thick, oily, like ancient lipstick that could only be maroon. As she passes clusters of socks and pantyhose, she flashes through this vanity mirror, too, and looks clammy, washed out, porcelain hiding a hammering heart.

Audrey tugs open her mom's leather purse. She pulls out her camera. Then she exits and unfolds the accordion door shut behind her.

Audrey uprights her bike from the dewy lawn and pedals down the driveway, then past chirping frogs and crickets on a crunching gravel township road. Reeds and fence posts scroll by. Balmy night air fills her. The camera bounces against her hip in her hoodie pocket.

She thinks of the old plastic accordion door and of decades. She's only started her second. She's in the same decade as when she'll be sixteen, and eighteen, and twenty. Sometime later this decade, she'll drive. She'll kiss someone. She'll go to college.

Maybe in this decade her mother will find a boyfriend. Maybe he'll take Audrey on nighttime walks like her father did. Or maybe he'll try, but she won't go with.

Patches of moonlight blink up from ditch water. The swamp smells frothy.

Tears roll down her face and under her jaw and over her chest and make her skin itch so maddeningly that she almost brakes to stop and wipe them away.

She pedals faster. She hates the new decade. The new decade is cold and uncomfortable. The old decade was warm, full of her father's smiles. When and why did she start thinking "mother" and "father" instead of "mom" and "dad"? Would this decade be formal? All curt and polite? The old decade was different. It was soft. Until it ended with one big rudeness.

Audrey fondles the camera in her pocket. She needs to capture the echoes of that decade before the new one devours them. She's *been* capturing them. Her mother doesn't know it, but her camera is filling with photos of pets and farm sheds and favorite trees and stuffed animals that could disappear with the previous decade, the first decade, the best decade.

She rides up a gravel curve and onto a lawn. Just outside of the shadow of the church tower, she finds a glowing new headstone at the end of a row. She snaps photos of her dad's name and the four decades he lived in. The letters shine. He loved moonlight.