



A lot hasn't happened yet. Our president is still young and almost handsome. His wife on the black-and-white screen is still wearing a pillbox hat.

(One day we'll pile into the car and drive north fast, because of Cuba, but not today.) Today is a bright Sunday in the month of March. I'm in second grade with Miss Kneeter and my brother doesn't even go to school yet. We're swinging in the backyard but he doesn't know to pump.

"Stick out your legs," I tell him.
He does but the swing swivels on its chains.

"Not like that!"

Our mother Bertha appears at the back door, wiping her hands. She has dark eyebrows in a wide sunlit face. Soon she'll call us inside. "Push your brother," she calls.

"Bend your knees," I tell him.

Nathaniel bends his knees, which are like and unlike the knees of lovely Miss Kneeter.

(Miss Kneeter, who never frowns, bends her stockinged knees when we hide under our desks. Sunlight filters between the slats. *This is how it ends*, I think. But at home our father Arthur scoffs at air raid drills. Sometimes we hear him on the telephone with other professors. *Put your head between your knees*, he chortles. *Now kiss your ass goodbye.*)

"Push him," Bertha calls from the doorway.

But Nathaniel points at something on the slate path: a praying mantis!

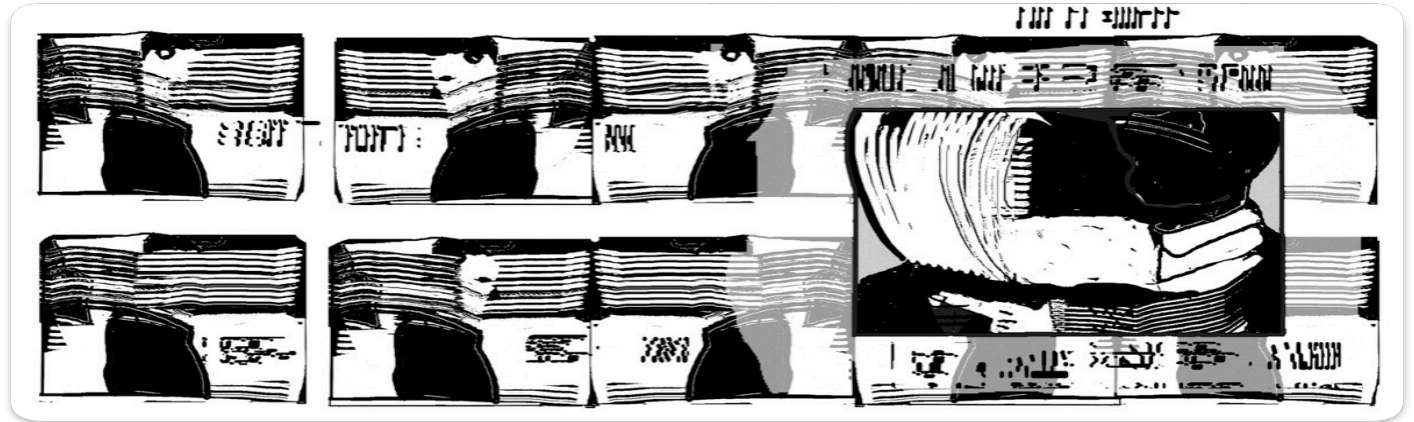


We just love praying mantises, their protection under the law and their mandibles.

So I shove Nathaniel between the shoulders until he jerks, hands flailing, head wobbling on his stalk of a neck. Bertha lifts her hands into the air. She looks like a protected species.

"I'm falling," Nathaniel announces.

After that we go inside and don't move while Bertha finds the First-Aid kit. If he cries, I will, too. Later we eat meatloaf. Nathaniel chatters on about swings and our insect friends. He has a Band-Aid on his forehead. We love Band-Aids and the mysteries of brand names. Someone reaches for the salt. Someone says *Say please*. Arthur, stroking his beard, explains about drills: nothing could save us, not even a bunker. (But one day he hangs up and orders us into the Dodge Dart: there is a missile crisis. We drive north while Nathaniel points out *deciduous* versus *evergreen*. I feel carsick so I pinch him and they say *not now, not ever*. We drive for a long time, it seems, before Bertha leans to switch off the radio and Arthur turns the car around and more time passes. Lyndon Baines Johnson is our new president, jowly and sly-looking. I pray every night with



my hands lifted like a Christian, although we are Jews, for him not to blow up the planet and also Teaneck, New Jersey.)

Nathaniel sleeps in the top bunk because of his allergies. If he wheezes, Bertha brings in the vaporizer. Year later, when he suffers his first breakdown, she'll hover outside his door all over again, weighing the doctor's advice against her tendencies. When Nathaniel writes a manifesto, she reads it to me over the phone. It makes sense (about capitalism, about the military-industrial complex) and then it stops making sense (about Che Guevara and certain 800 numbers).

"You're praying!" Nathaniel says now, staring. His bangs hang out instead of down and his upside-down eyes bulge.

"I am not," I say, retreating under my covers.

"I'm telling," Nathaniel says but I know he won't. We did something yesterday we weren't supposed to, what with being siblings: we pricked our fingers (I had to prick his) and touched our two spots of blood together.

Once that happens, there can be no question of betrayal.

