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Miriam Cohen

## Skank

I was getting into my Little Red Riding Hood costume for my high school's production of *Into the Woods* when my twin sister was returned to us. That was how the newspapers put it, returned to us. As though we owned her. I was alone backstage, using mascara to paint on the freckles no one thought were a good idea. Mr. Cooper, the drama teacher, sat down next to me and told me. I made a black streak all down my face.

"You don't need to comfort me," I told Mr. Cooper. "She's not dead."

"You must understand," he said, "some things are worse."

Mr. Cooper felt bad for me, he said. I told him I felt bad for me, too, and that was something he didn't like, I could tell. He looked me right in the eyes, the way he had in his classroom, when I was just any student, and he was in charge.

I told Mr. Cooper it was my party and I could cry if I wanted.

"You just joke," he said.

He put his face in his hands. He was so much older than me, he said. He had a child almost my same age. Didn't I get it? Didn't I see how terrible it was? What we were doing?

I told Mr. Cooper what I'd already told him maybe a hundred times: What was age? We loved each other. And by love, I meant, of course, his taking me to an empty classroom after school was over and my parents weren't wondering where I was (or maybe somehow really did think play practice routinely went until dusk, sometimes past, most nights of the week), locking the door and riding me like a cowboy, all but shouting, Giddyup!

Once, he'd wanted to wear the wolf costume, but I told him no way.

Mr. Cooper shook his head. "Do you think Allison's abductor was just some high school kid?"

I said no, I didn't think that, because I did know who the abductor was. He was a man who used to live in our neighborhood until Allison and I were in elementary school. Everyone called him the candy man, because he always had free candy to give out to kids. We were told, of course, never to take candy from strangers, but he wasn't a stranger. No one we knew had seen him in ten years, but now everyone in the whole country was seeing his face on the news.

Mr. Cooper kicked the wall next to where I was standing. "Goddammit," he said, "what's wrong with me?"

"The abductor"—that word shot a thrill down my spine, settling in at the bottom, the coccyx, buzzing—"he's a crazy person."

And I thought Mr. Cooper might slap me.

I lifted up my chin so he could see all that soft, open skin. I didn't feel afraid.

A journalist came to our house later that week. If we invited a journalist in we would at least control the media, said the lawyer who'd entered suddenly into our lives, acting as if he'd been there all along. The journalist's name was Sylvie Smith, and she was beautiful, blue-black hair all down her back. She was wearing a single, sensible pair of gold studs, but I could see a line of tiny holes extending all the way up her ear, almost to cartilage. She'd dressed up for us.

We'd dressed up for her. We'd dressed up as a family: mother, father, twin daughters in high school. My father was staying with us now that Allison was back, now that the journalist was taking stock, even sleeping in the master bedroom with my

mother, as far as I could tell, anyway. It was possible he crept out at night, stealthy as a criminal. Allison had brushed her hair, or our mother had done it for her. We'd both gotten taller in the time she was gone, but she had no clothing and so had to wear mine, the result of which meant we ended up looking like we had the same style. It was strange to see her in my clothing, as if she were approving of me, and how I'd continued without her.

For almost a year no one had looked at us and decided: She was prettier; I had a wider face. She was smarter; I was funnier. She was more athletic; I was more of a bookworm. But I wasn't that funny, I didn't like to read as much as everyone thought, and soccer turned out to be something I was good at. For almost a year, no one had looked at me and asked, Which one was I? No one said her name meaning mine. They stopped saying her name at all.

Sylvie Smith flipped on her tape recorder, a rat's eye of red watching us now. "I can't imagine how hard this must be," she said. "How literally unfathomable."

"Allison's back," my mother said. "So that's all behind us now."

Sylvie Smith nodded a few times too many. "The adjustment must be a difficult one," she said.

"A joyous one," my mother said. She had never used that word before. I wasn't sure if she had changed or was just pretending.

"An adjustment for everyone," said Sylvie Smith, trying again.

"A happy reunion."

"Some anger at the man who did this, certainly?"

"Forgiveness."

"A need for justice, I imagine."

"We're just so glad to have her home with us."

Sylvie Smith asked, after a while of this, if she might speak to Allison and me alone.

My father clapped his hands together and said to my mother, who only drank tea, "You and I could really use some coffee, don't you think?"

And my mother said, "You know what, fine."

So that left me, Allison and the lawyer, who sat all the while in the corner of the room, unobtrusive as a sofa, but ever-ready, I knew, to pounce.

“What was it like,” Sylvie Smith asked, “to be separated from your twin for almost a whole year?”

“Who are you asking?” I said.

Sylvie Smith smiled. It was such a fake smile. “Of course that question goes for both of you. But Allison. What was it like for you? Because the bond between twins, of course, is a special one. Did you try to send your sister messages in your thoughts? Maybe a certain kind of twin telepathy you tried to call upon in times of despair?”

“ESPN?” I said. Our old, unoriginal joke.

Sylvie Smith said, snapped, even, “Well, if you aren’t going to take this seriously—” But then she stopped herself. “What an ordeal for everyone,” she said. She worried the cartilage of one ear in a way that made me know she didn’t realize she was doing it. It was like catching her asleep.

She told us a story. There was a documented case of twins, separated at birth. The twins were both given the name James by their adoptive families. They grew up and both married women named Linda, divorced their Lindas, and married new women, each named Betty. Sylvie Smith looked from me to Allison, smiling as if she, Sylvie Smith, were a cat presenting us with a bird, its feathers open in a fan of blood.

Allison looked back at Sylvie Smith and not at me.

Here’s the story we didn’t tell:

It was winter, freezing, but we were outside the drugstore, smoking gum cigarettes and exhaling, pretending our white breath was smoke.

Allison grabbed my arm. “Oh, god,” she said. “The candy man.”

We hadn’t seen him in so many years, it was like our childhood come to say hello. And I felt so aware then of how we were exactly on the cusp of becoming—what?—ourselves? Soon our gum cigarettes would be real. It made me feel old and sad to realize this, nostalgic already for the moment I was in.

The candy man looked almost exactly the same, too tall, too thin, sparsely-bearded as a boy. He saw us and squinted.

I smiled at him. “Hey! Remember us?”

He smiled back. “The twins,” he said. “Double trouble.”

“Where were you?” I said. “It’s been forever. We’re all old now.”

Allison laughed in the throaty way I knew she’d been practicing.

The candy man said, “I moved away. They thought it was best I move away.”

I felt so confident, like I was better than him. I said, “Who’s ‘they’?”

He stepped closer to us. I could see how dry his lips were, a tiny bit of white foam at the corners like he was thirsty. “They thought I shouldn’t always be around children, even though I never did anything.”

“You were always so nice!” I said. “But who’s ‘they’?”

Allison pushed her elbow into me. Her eyes were wide, like, Stop it. Like, Let’s go. Like, something is wrong.

“Who?” I said. “You can tell us. We don’t judge.”

I felt like I was better than him, but also like I was sexy now. I wished my coat weren’t so bulky and long, trimmed at the hood with fake white fur like something a mother picked out. Like something my mother actually *had* picked out. I wished it were summer, so I could jut my hip and he could see.

He rubbed his hands together. They made a dry sound because he wasn’t wearing any gloves.

“You should buy some gloves,” I said, and Allison said, “I’m leaving,” so I rolled my eyes at the candy man, smiled, and followed her.

“You’re so dumb,” I said.

She turned back around. She wasn’t dumb, she said. We were across the street now from the candy man, halfway down the block. I watched her turn around, cross the street the other way, back to him, where he was waiting, sitting in his car now, not starting the car, as if maybe he were hoping, or even knew. I watched her get into the candy man’s car. I was across the street, but I didn’t cross the street. And I thought, with rage, with admiration, Skank.

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*Miriam Cohen's story collection, [Adults and Other Children](#), is published by Ig Publishing. (See Caveat Lector editor Ho Lin's review of the book at [Foreword Reviews](#)). Her stories have appeared in The Black Warrior*

Review, StoryQuarterly, West Branch Wired, Cream City Review, The Florida Review, DIAGRAM, Carve Magazine, Cimarron Review, The Collagist, Bennington Review, Joyland, Fugue, Hobart, Image, Witness, Third Coast, and Lit Hub. *The recipient of a Carol Houck Smith Fiction fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, she received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College.*