

*One, two, three, four
A penny skip and dollar more
Five, six, seven, eight
Three more skips to make me late*

It was a hot, dry summer the summer it happened. The children would spend so much time down in the street, jump rope in hand singing that song. Everyday for hours they would sing and I would watch. Three little girls in the street of New York. I would sit across from them smoking, privately cheering them on. They were determined to get up to a million. Each day they would start back at one, with a look on their face like today would be the day. Every day around dusk their mom would call down from their apartment, calling them in for super. Their singing stopped as they went upstairs, a little disappointment on their faces. The streets were quiet. The whole neighborhood seemed to be hunkering down for the night. Even I would stub out my cigarette and go in for the night.

It was a hot summer. Unbearably so. You couldn't be inside more than ten minutes without pit stains. The whole city was beginning to stink, garbage bags lay listless in the streets. Nobody wanted to move when the sun was up. The only thing to do was to sit on the stoop and smoke. And watch those kids. I don't know how they did it everyday. Sweat would pour into their eyes, bleary hands would wipe at it only to leave behind a trail of their own. But they wouldn't falter, just jump with the rhythm always counting upwards. The whole block would watch them. We would even let out a sigh when one of them lost track, catching the rope sharp against their knees.

And then one day dusk came along and mother did not call. The girls didn't notice the thumping of the jump rope ticking away the minutes. They didn't notice the sunsetting above their heads as their count reached numbers they hadn't seen before. You could see the excitement in their eyes as they didn't notice the first stars appearing in the heavens above them.

A big white van glided silently down the street behind them like a great white shark. Other than the constant hum of its tires the streets were empty, the other neighbors having retired to their own dinners. Except me. And my cigarette.

The van slowed as it approached the little girls. They didn't notice. I could see their little bodies quivering with the excitement of their goal. I could tell that each little hop, each click of the rope was another click to the impossible.

The van pulled alongside them, the passenger window rolled down.

"Hey," a man's voice rang out. "You know the direction to Bay Ridge?"

The little girls didn't look at him. They just kept jumping. Stranger Danger, their mama taught them right.

"Hey," the man's voice rang out again. "Bitches which way to Bay Ridge?"

The girl in the rope stopped jumping. The rope smacked at her shins but she didn't flinch. She was the oldest one, no more than seven or eight. She stood staring at the van with a small frown on her face.

The man seemed encouraged, "Yeah you bitch. Why don't you tell me how to get to Bay Ridge? Are you a little cunt who won't talk. Are you afraid of the bad man in the car?"

All three girls were staring at the man now. The littlest scrunched up her eyes and began to cry. Only then did the eldest look away from the man.

"Oh look, did I make the baby cry?" His cold voice drifted out of the window.

The little one sat down on her haunches, tears pouring down her face as she clutched the arm of her older sister. The eldest took a couple steps toward the van.

"Go away," her quavering little voice said. It was barely loud enough for me to hear over the idling of the van.

The car door opened and the man stepped out. "What did you say," his voice too, was deathly quiet. He strode closer to the girl, "What did you say to me?" He was yelling now, right in her face.

The little girl shrank back from him, tears springing to her eyes now.

The man reached out and smacked her with the back of his hand. "Never tell me what to do."

He got in the van and drove away.

The other two girls ran over to their sister but the girl was already climbing

to her feet. She stared in the direction of he drove off in. Tears were running down her face. As she turned back to her sisters her eyes caught mine. We stared at each other for a long moment reaching on into the impossible.

He mother called to the girls from above. Her voice wasn't as panicked as it should have been. The girl turned away from me and helped her sisters inside. I stubbed out my cigarette and retreated inside. The heat still hadn't left my apartment as dried hamburger greeted me for dinner.

The little girls didn't reappear on the street the next day. There was no more click-click of a rope to keep the neighbors amused. Everything was silent in the oppressive heat. Everything smelled rotten.