

## "The Natural Order of Things"

Billy Charity was beautiful and mean, which seemed the natural order of things. Maria stared out the window of the junior high bus, dreaming of him. It was Wednesday when she first saw the woman in the tiger print coat. She was staring at Maria.

That afternoon, the woman walked into Maria's parents' store. She was tall and stunning with a brilliant red mouth; she walked like she'd never been afraid. When she stopped in front of Maria, she stared a little too hard and squeezed Maria's hand when she took her change.

After that, Maria saw her everyday. Mornings, she watched Maria watching her from the bus window. Afternoons, she came in the shop, always squeezing Maria's hand and holding on too long.

"I really like your coat," Maria said one day. "Tigers were my favorite when I was little."

"I remember."

Before Maria could question her, she was out the door.

The next time she came in, Maria was crying.

The woman stared at her, her mouth agape.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I remember this."

"Huh?"

"Some guy was cruel to you?"

Maria nodded.

"But you like him anyway?"

Maria nodded.

"Don't."

"You don't get it. Junior high, it's like a--"

"Jungle?"

"How'd you know I was going to say that?"

"Don't waste the next four years obsessing over Billy Charity for God's sake!"

"You have no idea what it's like to be me," Maria said. "I'll never be you. I'll never have a coat like that."

"It's just a coat."

Maria rolled her eyes.

"You want it so much? Take it."

"It doesn't fit me," Maria said.

"It will."

The woman tossed the tiger coat on the counter and walked out of the store and strode away.