

# The Girl Who Can Take the Most Electricity

Anna Mantzaris

I am the girl who can take the most electricity. Mr. Lemons, the fifth grade teacher, has me stand in front of the class and place my hands on the glass ball filled with thin tangled pink wires as he turns the long arm of the crank.

‘An experiment,’ he says biting his lower lip.

My hair fans out like a scared exotic bird as a small jolt of electricity runs through my body. I stand with my arms extended like shaking plywood until he says, ‘Agatha, it’s not safe to stay on that long.’ When I return to my desk still reeling from the currents that have raced through my blood, Douglas Beckman pokes my neck and says, ‘Agatha Papadopolis, Bride of Frankenstein.’

At the age of eleven my name is something I am eager to abandon. At home, one of my favorite activities is to ‘christen’ myself. I come up with names I wish I had. ‘I christen thee Summer Bartholomeu,’ I say making a gesture of the cross and flicking lemonade on myself. ‘I christen thee Sarah Harper Morgan.’ With the names I give myself, I imagine I could change. With the right name, I could have stick-straight blond hair, a small nose. I could stretch out my long pale legs and dip my feet in a backyard pool. With a different name I would some day grow tall into the sky. But I was named Agatha. Agatha Papadopolis. A name you could cut your tongue on. It sounded like a dinosaur or a sore throat. What I wish more than anything was that I had been named Hannah. The perfect spelling, the same forwards and backwards. As Hannah, I imagined I would have skated through grade school in one town. I would have been the girl who wore a heart-shaped pendant on a gold chain from Fimmer Brothers. I would have walked the halls with a friend on each side, a new notebook under my arm. Hannah would have gone on to have Friday night parties in her parents’ modern den, complete with VCR and guys invited over from the Lacrosse team. Hannah’s mother would have brought down Ellio’s mini pizzas. She wouldn’t have tried to make her daughter’s friends eat bitter chalky *halvah*, and show them her rosary beads. Hannah would never know the smell of the carnival grounds on an August morning. As Hannah, I could have been perfect, the same, any way you looked at me.

I remembered that the people at Carl’s Raceway and the Littleman fair didn’t want *baklava* thick with honey. They didn’t want squares of *pasticcio* when they could have pizza or hush puppies standing tall on Popsicle sticks. They flocked to the vendors that sold fried dough, funnel cake, and kettle-popped corn. The scent of these foods reached out to them, while our cooking was laced with the thick smells from chicken drenched in heavy cinnamon or

fresh mint chopped in ground lamb – smells they equated with foreign. I knew that my parents' food was strange to small children living in households with mothers that served macaroni and cheese, meatloaf, and sweet fruit pies bought from Savemart.

The fairgoers spent their money trying to win large stuffed bears with pasted on pastel eyes and walked away with Chinese yo-yos made from thin paper. They aimed their hard-earned coins (from laboring at the local electric company) at fish tanks filled with guppies clamoring for dried food, but my parents were always hopeful. My father stood in his short-sleeved pressed shirt in the hot sun of upstate New York waiting patiently for customers, as my mother, with her long dark hair pulled back, continued to prepare more sheets of pastry even though they were stacking up like our unpaid bills.

I thought if I stared hard enough I could will people to our stand. A technique I would continue to use when I wished for things like new shoes or a friend to eat lunch with. The local families walked in herds, their hands clasped tightly around their children making sure they would never get lost. The children walked alongside their parents carrying Ziplocs filled with the swirling trapped fish they won, or hanging on to the strings of sagging balloons suffering from lack of helium.

When I was nine, my last summer traveling the fairs, a woman with a large floppy sun hat and two small blonde children made her way to the trailer that sold cotton candy and bomb pops. I repeated 'Come over here' silently like I did for all of the people I saw. I said this over and over until my head felt thick with jumbled words and the phrase sounded as foreign as my parents speaking their loud and fast Greek in the stand behind me. The smallest girl with her shoes tied tight and her hair brushed straight looked into my dark eyes, and I looked into hers. Her eyes were pale and blue like the cotton blanket my mother wrapped around me late at night. I imagined this girl was a lighter version of myself – her hair, three shades lighter than the deep brown of my own, her skin, a toned-down version of my olive complexion. She pulled her mother's arm and gestured in my direction. She came towards me and reached her hand out. I lifted my hand and she pressed a cold coin into my palm. The small family then veered right to the stand with waffle cones and blue ices.

When someone did come to our stand for food, my father would ask me to take care of the 'monies' as he carefully cut an oversized piece of *baklava* and placed it on a paper plate. It was my job to handle the finances. At the age of nine, I was somewhat of a math genius. I was teaching myself algorithms and geometry. I knew fractions and my multiplication tables, but numbers were of no interest to me. What I dreamed of was becoming a master of words, an expert on the English language. At night, I taught my parents how to read in English. We slowly went over my textbooks from the school year before. I fanned out my playing cards on our small fold-up table and showed my parents the numbers and taught them the names in English. In the winter months I brought my composition notebooks home full of assignments and words I had scribbled down at school. My parents were eager to do the same homework as me.

Every night with my father's sleeves rolled up and my mother's hair pulled back, after they packed up the lemons, honey, and put away the large sheets of pastry, I read to them so they could hear the sound of the English language in an American's voice. They read the same passages over to me, and I fell asleep with parents speaking in voices from their new home.

When I get home from Elmwood Elementary, my mother is in the kitchen mincing hamburger and dropping raw eggs in. She plunges her small hands into the metal bowl and flips the meat, letting more egg drip in each time. Her wedding ring grows larger, clumped with strings of ground beef. Sometimes she stands for hours as she wraps tiny triangles of *phyllo* dough and bastes them with butter. I fantasize about the day I will come home and find my mother baking a Bette Crocker cake or heating up a can of Chef-Boyardee ravioli.

'Do I have to go to school anymore?' I ask. 'Mr. Lemons, he electrocutes me,' I tell my mother.

'You'd be dead if he did that,' says my mother pouring what is to be our dinner into a bread pan coated with thick white grease. 'You used to love school,' she says.

'When?' I ask, but my mother is off, calling the restaurant to see when my father will be home.

'You can eat first,' she says hanging up the receiver. 'He won't be home until late.'

'Why late again?' I ask, but I know the answer. My father has worked for the past two years building up the most popular restaurant in Elmwood – a large diner off the highway that serves Greek food and American specialties like pancakes and hamburgers that I never see at home. After years of my family traveling up and down the East Coast from fair to fair, a cousin from my father's village asked him to take over his business so he could go back to Europe and we could finally settle down. It was a small luncheonette that attracted few travelers in the lower part of the state. Now my father has hired sixteen people to keep up with the crowds and built on two additions.

It is late at night when I see my father. Because I cannot sleep, he sneaks food into my room. He brings small plates piled with olives, feta, and leftover cinnamon chicken. On nights when he comes home extra late from the restaurant, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his pointy elbows, his hair neatly combed back, he bears slices of sweet fruit or heavy bread with sliced tomato and taramasalata. I wonder if he fears I will somehow starve during the night, that he might come to my doorway to wake me for school, and find that I have simply withered away to a small pile of Agatha dust. I wonder if he is under some strange misunderstanding that a girl of eleven could become malnourished in a matter of hours.

My mother is not as accepting of my childhood night life, though I suspect she knows my father feeds me when she finds the small ceramic plates that I forget to bring to the kitchen before breakfast, and the trail of crumbs that often leads from my bed to my doorway. On school nights, my mother comes to my door every thirty minutes on the dot until she goes to bed, to see if I

am sleeping. Upon hearing her climb the tall staircase, I fall into a fake sleep, squeezing my eyelids shut, curling my body into a fetal position. My inability to stay still for more than a minute, and curiosity to see if she has left my door, gives me away each time.

'You better be sleeping in five minutes,' she warns, as if I could fall into a slumber upon command.

When I see her small shape leave the doorway, I quickly resume my games until I suspect she is coming for another check. I start to think of my mother as a nurse on nighttime rounds at the local hospital. When I hear the muffled voice of my parents' television go off, and the click of their bedroom door shut, I swing eagerly into full nighttime mode.

I love the dark, the quiet. I love the cool air that floats in through my window after humid days that seem like they will never end. My nights are filled with more activity than my days. I consider myself on night patrol and I wait for any creak that sounds suspicious. I imagine I will save my family if a burglar enters. I stay awake partially to protect them, but mainly because I can not imagine sleeping when the sun falls. The night is when I don't have to worry about being called Agatha Papadopolis, Bride of Frankenstein. I want to take in everything it has to offer – including the time away from my classmates. I wonder if there are others like me. I imagine if there are, they live in big cities where they can wander the streets with other people of the night.

Tonight as I wait for my father, I 'paint' over the wallpaper. Carefully, methodically, I trace the smooth floral designs that cover my walls. I pretend my pointer finger is full of beautiful dark ink. The night shadows make it look as if the body of a gorgeous iris is flowing from my flesh. I paint the irises, the magnolias, the tiny daisy patches, switching fingers for different colors until I believe I have created the beautiful garden mosaic that fills the walls of my bedroom.

After painting, I play ballroom with my fingers, matching up the pinkies, the pointers, and the middle fingers into couples. Occasionally I leave singles to suffer momentarily, only to be pleasantly surprised when the missing pinky pops up and everyone is with a mate again. My last game for the night is when I 'sew' my quilt. I run my teeth along the pale stitching until my mouth is cottony, and my throat, dry. I anxiously await the glass of juice my father will bring me.

'Tell me, how was it at school today?' my father asks tonight standing at my doorway with a small pile of *spanakopita* cut into wedges and a glass of juice.

'No *baklava*?' I ask.

'This is what I have,' my father says placing the dish on a small nightstand and sitting on the foot of my bed. 'What did you learn?'

'Nothing. I learn nothing there,' I say reaching for the apple juice. Although I hate when my father asks me about school, I am happy he is here.

'You must study hard, Agatha. Learn all you can,' my father says. 'I did not have that opportunity. And friends, your friends are important there,' he says raising his dark eyes.

What I don't tell my father is that I don't have any friends at school, though I suspect he must already know this. In the land of Elmwood, I'm like an oversized lobster advertised at the carnivals, clodding my way through halls filled with department store clothes and feathered hair. I know we have more money now, but my parents insist I wear the clothes that come in cardboard boxes marked with stamps from Greece. The packages arrive every few months with embroidered clothing – jackets with pompoms, sandals, and small leather bags. There is always a strange smell that wafts out of the cardboard boxes. A musty heavy scent that I have learned to expect. What I long for are Garaniamals, Health-Tex shirts, and fluffy parkas from a department store. But the Greek gifts from relatives I have never met come year round – sandals and blouses in spring, wool hats and coats in the winter. There is no escaping them.

'I'm not like them,' I tell my father. 'They hate me.'

'Still, try and make friends, Agatha,' he tells me. 'They just don't know how special you are yet.' And before I can answer, he is gone, walking quietly down the hall to where my mother sleeps.

At the audition for the annual end-of-the-year concert, my fellow classmates stand around belting out bars of tunes from Oklahoma and Oliver. When I'm called, I carefully sing Happy Birthday. I make sure to hold out the notes like my mother suggested when we practiced the night before.

My voice shakes and my notes are flatter than usual, and Mrs. Atkinson, the music teacher, cuts me off after the first verse.

'That's enough,' Mrs. Atkinson says, dropping the arm she used to make a sweeping cut motion through the air.

I start to worry I won't be picked for the chorus, but then I remember auditions are just a technicality, everyone gets in. 'All students are welcome,' Mr. Lemons had read with the morning announcements.

I'm the last to audition and Mrs. Atkinson takes a moment scanning her yellow legal pad. She calls out the list of students for Sopranos and I'm not named. I figure my voice is deeper than I thought. Then she reads the Altos, but still I'm not called. I watch as the newly formed groups assembled, all girls in the Soprano camp, except for David Higgins, a pale boy who ate egg salad on toast for lunch everyday. I am the last one standing.

Just as I'm ready to turn and sneak out of the cold auditorium, I hear, 'What about Aggie haggly!' Douglas Beckman is standing in the middle of the Altos with a large smile. Mrs. Atkinson turns her stiff square body, moving like a block of ice, and asks to see me behind the curtain.

Staring into Mrs. Atkinson's eyes, I think of the cold dark asphalt of the playground. Her ruby cheeks and tight forehead tower over me. I take a deep breath and wait to hear what she has to say.

'Agatha, every year we have these auditions and every year I divide you kids into two groups.'

Nodding, I focus on the small silver stickpin of a treble clef sitting on her right shoulder.

'But you're flat. Really flat,' she says running her hand through her coarse silver hair.

I try to concentrate on the treble clef but my eyes started to well up. I dig my hands deep into my wool jumper, fingering my own little set of orange glass worry beads my mother insists I carry.

'With some practice, maybe you could get better, but not in time for the concert.'

'I can't be in the concert?' I ask.

'You can be a mouth,' she says.

'A mouth?' My mother said that Toula Karamitsos, her favorite singer, was neither a Soprano nor an Alto, she had a large range, but I had never heard her referred to as a mouth.

'What's a mouth?' I ask.

'In almost every chorus there's a mouth,' she tells me. 'The mouth learns all the words and the music and can attend the rehearsals and concert, but doesn't sing. They just mouthe the words,' she adds.

I imagine telling my parents I haven't been picked for the chorus, but know I can't do it. I tell Mrs. Atkinson I will be a mouth as long as I can be in the concert.

My mother tells me not to hunch. She hates the way my already short neck is lost as I pull my shoulders up to my chin, almost covering my ears.

'Whatever you do, keep your shoulders down,' she tells me dressed in an embroidered blouse that matches the scarf around her head. I try and picture my mother in a tailored skirt and sweater set like Mrs. Beckman or a long ironed buttoned dress like Lori's mother.

'We are very proud,' my father says as I make my way to the back of the auditorium to show them their seats. 'You were picked because you have a beautiful voice.'

Standing in the bright music room, Mr. Lemons, dressed in a plaid jacket, shouts out last minute directions and hands out wrinkled sheet music to the orchestra. Lori's mother sets up a station for kids to have their hair combed. Carlie Meyer breaks a string on her violin and her face reddens to the shade of pickled beets. Beatrice Oberlin is laughing in a corner with the Butler twins and Becky Dunmore. I stand with an army of tin music stands and wrap Minky tightly around my neck. The kids in the neighborhood are afraid of Minky's orange eyes, his long pointed nose clip, and his thin unstuffed body. Douglas Beckman calls him Roadkill. Even my mother, who insists I wear everything relatives give me, wants him gone. But I love the amber beads placed carefully in his little crescent eye sockets, the way his soft dark fur feels around my neck, his cleverly designed nose that carefully and securely holds his furry tail. I feel like a movie star when I wear him, even to sleep in my twin-size bed. Before my father comes at night, I whisper into Minky's small pointed ears. I lovingly caress his tail.

My *Papou*, a furrier from Kastoria, came to visit on my tenth birthday last year and handed Minky to me.

'It's mink,' he said, ' for you.'

'What's a mink?' I asked taking the soft pelt into my arms.

My *Papou* told me that minks were raised for fur. I pictured tons of furry little creatures scurrying around, waiting to be sewn into beautiful coats and stoles.

Petting Minky in the corner of the music room, I count how many students are ahead of me for hair combing – just David Higgins and Martha Putnam. To avoid Lori's mother running the stiff metal comb through my hair, I ask for a bathroom pass.

'We're starting in five,' Mr. Lemons says handing over the thick blue piece of paper.

I make my way down the tiled hall and stop at the cracked porcelain fountain. Mrs. Beckman is talking to Mrs. Atkinson by the Science room. Mrs. Atkinson is dressed in head-to-toe black and has a 'Sing Out' pendant dangling from her thick neck.

'Douglas says they practically let her wear rags to school,' Mrs. Beckman says straightening out her stiff skirt wrapped tightly around her narrow hips. I move closer and stand behind an oversized blackboard to listen.

'Did you see the fur?' Mrs. Atkinson says. 'It's ridiculous, not to mention the beginning of summer.'

'You know Larry stopped at their diner on his way to the office one morning, just to grab a cup of coffee, and he said they can't even do that right.'

'It's amazing they can run a business,' Mrs. Atkinson says, 'the man can barely speak English.'

I am just feet away, but they do not see me. I quickly turn and make my way back to the crowded music room. My heart is pounding and my head feels heavy. Mr. Lemons has started lining my classmates into a crooked single file. He gestures for me to fall in line ahead of Katie Parsons. I try and pretend I haven't heard Mrs. Beckman and Mrs. Atkinson. I recite the alphabet in my head. I count to twenty. I do not want to cry in front of my classmates. I tell myself that they must be talking about someone else – that it's Tara Powers or Kerrie Martin's parents. I tell myself that there is another girl in a fur, another father with a diner. I want to believe that it could be anyone, anyone but us.

Mrs. Atkinson has placed me in the front row of the Sopranos. The heavy velvet curtain is filled with dust and David Higgins stoops over waiting out one sneeze after another.

Douglas Beckman flaps his large pink lips up and down in an exaggerated gesture, pointing at his face.

'Break a leg, Mouth!' Douglas says to me.

I want to break his legs, push him off the stage. I want to leave this school and this concert. I want to live some place outside Elmwood, get back in our silver concession bus and drive to another town. As I think about what it would be like traveling from town to town again, sleeping on a cot, going from one fair after another, the curtain is raised and Mrs. Atkinson takes her place center stage.

The music begins with the motion of her long stiff arm, and the drum beat starts. We do a version of *This Land is Your Land* followed by *Lady of the Air*. I lip synch and look for my parents. It's easy to spot them. In a sea of navy blue and black, my mother's brightly embroidered scarf tied around her long hair stands out like caution tape. My father is the only man not wearing a suit. He has the largest smile of any of the parents. My mother's dark eyes lock into mine and I remember to pull my shoulders down and extend my neck.

I'm tired of lip-synching, tired of being a mouth. *They can't even do that right*. I feel a tight ball in the pit of my stomach. *The man can barely speak English*. I dare myself to sing the refrain. I feel the vibrations in my throat bouncing off the others. I decide to sing just every other bar, so no one will notice. Carrie Martin, who stands next to me, looks over flipping her shiny bob, but I continue to sing, waiting anxiously for the lines where I can hear my own voice. We are singing *Marching to Pretoria*, and in the final refrain, I find myself singing out all the words. I sing as loud as I can hoping that someone will hear me.

The streets of Elmwood are dark. We drive slowly along Route 8. The Tasty Treat Ice Cream stand, which usually has a snake of kids from my school lined in front, is closed, and the Double Twist sign is off. My father drives cautiously, moving through the dead traffic lights as if he were navigating a small ship. The Elmwood Mall parking lot is empty, the stores shut down like hollow cocoons. I reach to the front seat and play with my mother's hair. It is silky and long and I twirl it around my fingers. I'm glad she doesn't tell me to stop.

'Good thing it didn't happen during the concert,' my mother says looking out the window. 'Everything's out.'

It is hot and humid and only the beginning of June. The backs of my legs stick to the pleather seat and I take Minky off and curl him up next to me. 'I can't believe it's already summer,' I say to my parents.

'We've made it another year without having to travel the fairs,' my father says.

While I imagine my father is thinking about the long months we spent selling our food under the hot sun, I'm thinking of the upcoming time away from my classmates.

Our town looks different without lights. It seems bigger, like there are places to go that I have never seen before. There are few cars on the road and the lanes seem wider. As we turn onto Long Meadow Drive, I see an electrical line down. The wooden pole is cracked in half and the pieces of black wire are ripped apart, resting like tangled, oversized pieces of licorice in the grass. I'd like to ask Mr. Lemons what happens when the wires aren't connected. I'd like to know if the electricity flies straight up into the sky or if it hovers in the air all around us.

Anna Mantzaris's work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Lascaux Review* and *The Sand Canyon Review*.