



DUST

The receptionist hung up the phone and it rang again immediately. "Allergies and audiology," she said, holding the phone between her head and her shoulder while her fingers tapped the keyboard in front of her.

Rachel Harris, sitting in the waiting room where she had a view of the receptionist in the wood-paneled and glass booth, had been listening to this refrain, "allergies and audiology," since she began coming to this clinic for shots these last few years. Looking around the waiting room, Rachel could easily discern who was allergy and who was audiology. Patients were either sniffing into tissues or shouting something, often, "My hearing aid isn't working!" at the receptionist or a fellow patient.

She often wondered why the clinic coupled allergies with audiology. The only thing she could come up with was the alphabetical sequence, the alliteration. Were pediatrics and podiatry housed together on another floor?

She looked at two posters side by side on the wall directly across from the receptionist's booth. The first one was a colorful sketch of a small boy with yellow hair smiling as he held big white pillows on either side of his head over his ears. The caption read, "Start Protecting Your Hearing Now." People normally averted their eyes from the second poster, a hugely magnified drawing of a dust mite. This caption read, "Invisible to the Naked Eye." Flinching as she looked at the spidery, humped bug, Rachel wondered why *everyone* wasn't allergic to dust mites, why everyone's immune system radar didn't perk up to their presence and say, *no way*. She felt an odd pride that her body was aware enough to put up a defense against something so repulsive, but she worried her allergies would worsen, that she'd become asthmatic like Rose Braxton, the girl in her third grade class who'd died from a respiratory disorder.

Rachel thought of Rose every year on Ash Wednesday. She had a mem-