Sleepwalking and other stories

Cheryl Anne Latuner

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Latuner, Cheryl Anne, "Sleepwalking and other stories" (1994). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 16094.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16094

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Sleepwalking and other stories

by

Cheryl Anne Latuner

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English

Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1994
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SARATOGA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE ARK</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRIMSTONE</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY MOTHER’S GARDEN</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLEEPWALKING</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lydia inspects her hands, folded flat, one over the other in her lap. They are the pale color of eggshells—of good cloth. She uncrosses her feet at the ankles, and her right toes press forward—the same tentative motion she wearies of, day in and out, depressing the sewing machine pedal. Her body follows, leaning toward the great wooden desk.

"A little girl, please," she says, her tongue lingering stubbornly on the "t"s and "l"s, so un-American, sticky, when she wants her words to be crisp and clear. The woman who has the power to give—or not give—Lydia a foster child is tiny behind the huge desk. Her face is tiny behind large pink plastic eyeglass frames. The effect for Lydia is of things receding to a pinpoint—just the tendency in her life she’s hoping to reverse. She runs her tongue over her lips. A companion, she almost says.
"Please, not an infant."

She has filled out all the forms, has printed in the strong, embellished letters taught her in grade school. Her English is good and she’s good with numbers. Very good. She is expert with homework. In fact, she wants to declare outright that she is intelligent; but in America such a claim would be boasting, rather than simple fact.

"There’s not a good chance," says the woman with the small face. "The fact is, we really only place children in families."

For "Spouse," of course, Lydia has had to print "deceased"; but she has been careful to note in "Comments" that she is close with her son, Mark, who is married and a lawyer.

The woman bureaucrat smiles. "It’s expensive to raise a child." She looks away from Lydia and addresses a row of books on the wall. "You realize there wouldn’t be any money left over."

Outside the building, the Poughkeepsie sun is brutal as usual, undiscerning. Lydia hurries across the street to the relative shade of the bus stop. In her life, she has never known a city by a river to be so rude.

"Mrs. Chivu?" The voice of the woman at Lydia’s door--
a black woman as large or larger than any man—is surprisingly high and sweet, but her eyes are practiced in official wandering. Lydia feels diminished, not by the woman’s actual size, but by the enormity of the evidence mounting against Lydia—which the woman’s size seems to represent. Lydia knows it will do no good to point out the photograph of George on the wall, smiling George pulling up radishes at their old Yonkers home. She knows it will do no good to explain that her move here was her choice, a lightening of the load, a shedding of houses and possessions—it will not do any good since what will be more important from her visitor’s standpoint is that Lydia has lied.

"You’ve written on your application that your apartment has two bedrooms," the woman says.

Lydia has, in fact, afforded her apartment (on paper) a full complement of rooms—living room, dining room, sewing room. She has merely exaggerated the boundaries between the areas that function as these rooms. An unexpected strength bolsters her voice. "It has two beds," she tells the woman. The strength of the liar protecting her lie.

"But this is an efficiency," the woman argues. She has not lifted her arms, from which hang a black purse and a dark brown portfolio. She does not lift them now. She
In her concentration, the heavy grocery bags weighing in her arms, Lydia almost doesn’t see the little girl on her stoop. The girl makes no attempt to move out of her way. She’s like a little brown Sphinx rooted in stone. Her skin is the color of the last autumn leaves. Her face reminds Lydia of a pug.

Lydia says, "Where did you come from?" The girl points across the street. Lydia knows the girl doesn’t live in any of the houses across the way. But there are alleys, and several blocks beyond, like a dark inner city, a housing project, as desolate as the slums of Bucharest, a place of odors and stillness and despair. Lydia has bought fresh lemons. "Would you like some lemonade?" she asks. The girl nods. "What’s your name?" says Lydia. The girl’s voice is like a cricket’s. "Coh-REEN," she answers.

In her mailbox, Lydia finds a third note this week from her landlord. She stuffs it in her pocket and unlocks the heavy front door. The little girl slips in in front of her, climbing the flight of steep stairs two at a time, with big awkward steps.

After Lydia has squeezed each half lemon, she sets it on the counter. Corinne picks it up and sucks on the
rind. The girl's face is pale as ashes, her tongue long and off-color as a slice of smoky salmon.

"Does your mama know where you are?" Lydia asks. After she's said it, she thinks this is a bad question. Perhaps there is no mama.

Corinne shakes her head. "She's at WORK," she pipes. "Ah!" says Lydia. "What sort of work is your mama doing?"

The palms of Corinne's hands are flat on the counter, fingers spread, padding about like dusty duck's feet. She shrugs. She lays a whole brown arm against the white surface, her fingers arching like inchworms, making toward the little group of ceramic vessels that hold Lydia's condiments, closing on the salt shaker. She sprinkles some grains into her palm and licks her palm clean.

Lydia remembers something she's seen done in cocktail lounges. She wets the rim of Corinne's glass and presses it into a mound of salt, then fills the glass with lemonade. To her own glass she adds a teaspoon of sugar.

She takes the landlord's note from her pocket and files it with the others. She decides she will finally pay the rent, today. She doesn't know why she likes to keep the landlord waiting for her rent check. Perhaps it's a private protest against the coming of another month that will fail to liberate her spirit. Perhaps she would feel
freer living right in the streets, making a home in the wide air, outside the confines of even these four, small walls. Perhaps she is inviting her expulsion.

The room is silent, except for Corinne's noisy slurping, her tongue licking her lips broadly after each sip.

"Is it good?" Lydia asks.

Corinne nods.

Lydia decides it's not important to ask Corinne questions. She is seated on a stool behind her counter, elbows stippled with salt, when Corinne drains her glass of the last lemonade and slips out the door.

Lydia is at the sewing machine, setting another skirt placket into another new suit for a regular client.

Corinne's head appears in the doorway to Lydia's room. Her pug face twists in the hot, dim air like the head of a snake looking for a crevice to bury in.

Lydia wonders how the front door came to be unlocked, but doesn't ask. "Come in," she says.

Corinne walks about the room, guardedly looking over Lydia's belongings. Lydia resumes sewing. Then Corinne is behind Lydia's shoulder and her cricket's voice is shrill. "It's LOUD!" she says.
Loud? Lydia has never thought of the machine as loud, only as full of sound, the only sound Lydia thinks she hears sometimes, all day. "Loud?" she says. She pulls the iron-textured gabardine from under the foot. "I can make it softer. Come and feel." She sweeps the table clean and locates a piece of red felt in the scraps box. She draws Corinne close, leans over the child's boxy shoulders—and smells the depths of dirt and disgrace in her hair and clothes. "Hold your hands here," she instructs. "One on either side steadies the cloth. I am going to press this pedal with my foot. Are you ready? Now we go."

Lydia raises her voice above the gentle rattling. "Is it loud?"

Corinne's head shakes vigorously, the frizz between her pigtails jigging under Lydia's nose. "It's like HORSES. Like on TEE-VEE," Corinne says.

"Horses?"

"You KNOW!" Corinne squeals. "HORSES! They RUN! They're FAST! You KNOW!"

Lydia reverses the cloth, starts another row. "Do you like horses?"

Corinne's head nods. "I saw a horse once." She rocks against Lydia. "He was BIG! He was all BLACK! He LICKED my HAND!" She pushes away from Lydia and the sewing machine and hurtles around the room.
Lydia tries to remember the last time she had a real outing, the last time she thought it would make any difference to go. She studies the cross-eyed figure that drops to her living room floor. "I’m having an idea," she tells Corinne. "How would you like to go to Saratoga?"

Corinne is asleep on the steps of Lydia’s house when Lydia descends and pulls the big front door behind her. "You’re here!" Lydia says. "Why are you here? I was to pick you up. I was to meet your mother."

Corinne lifts her head, her face riddled with patterns of concrete. "You CAN’T!" She yawns, and digging with the backs of her fingers, rubs her eyes. "She’s not HOME!"

"Not home? Well, where is she?"

Lydia seats herself on the steps, waiting for Corinne’s reply.

Corinne stands and rubs her hands down the front of a pair of dark, stretchy shorts. "Let’s go," she says.

Lydia says, "But where can I find your mama? We have to ask her."

Corinne is still. Her face takes on the texture of stone. Her eyes have stopped in their orbits, and rest like glass.

Lydia rises. She should not go. No one has given her
permission. But--she is tired of the company of old people, oppressed by the shape they would make of her future--small and box-like and suffocating. Besides, there's no one available to give permission. Look! Corinne is lucky to be with her! She could have picked anyone! Lydia starts down the sidewalk. "We're going," she says.

Lydia hands the conductor two tickets, which he punches: to Saratoga Springs. She sits backwards, watching how the view pulls away, closes up behind the train. She imagines the headlines that might be written: "Woman Rejected by Foster Care Agency Kidnaps Small Girl." It gives her a pleasant feeling, like a thrill at a movie, that vicarious sense of danger.

On their trips out of Bucharest, George would sit just so, look up from his legal briefs, sigh loudly and gratefully. They were fleeing, for a few hours, his highly-placed clients--wandering toward the Danube, out over the plain, or up into the rugged hills. Lydia often sat as Corinne sits now, her face so close to the window that her reflection seemed to flit like a ghost over water and shore, mountains in the distance, sky. What does Corinne imagine? The desert, Lydia thinks, horses coming over the
blue hills; and a cowboy, red bandana flapping at his neck, sand like salt blowing against his skin. The train sways like a cow.

A single white taxi stands in the train station. Corinne runs to it and pulls on the handle. Lydia lets her in. The taxi carries them through town—along a Main Street of silent stores and a few straggling shoppers who look up with blank expressions as the taxi passes—then into the park. The taxi windows, rolled down, rattle loosely, and a freshness, cool and green, leaps over them and into Lydia’s face, her lap. Outside, wide swaths of lawn have the plushy look of wetness, light and dark, under the rows of tall, soldierly, possibly ancient oak trees. "Horses, horses, horses," Corinne chimes. "We’ve come to see them," Lydia assures her. Outside the track, where the taxi drops them, Lydia stands and breathes the charged air of expectancy.

And finding herself amidst the confusion of the wide public space outside the betting windows, Lydia is reminded of her girlish fervor for such places—for the pressing crowds at the central railway station in Bucharest, people surging toward the shortest lines at the ticket windows, hanging impatiently over one another’s shoulders. Such welcome chaos! Pent up energies with somewhere to go! She elbows toward the old men shuffling past the windows, the
couples talking loudly over racing forms, the single men and women retracing their small, tight trajectories between the odds board and a view of the horses showing on the track. She has been to the racetrack twice before. Never again! George had said, though it hadn’t been her betting that he minded. It was her losing sight of the odds, her willingness to get caught up in it all. George had called her reckless! She tightens her hold on Corinne’s hand. Corinne’s body tugs absently, wanderingly, at the other end of her arm.

By the time she leads Corinne down to the stands, Lydia has collected two white straw bowlers with black bands–replicas of the hats racegoers wore in the twenties and thirties–drinks and hot dogs, a racing form and a two-dollar bet on a horse named Jangle Jewels. Jangle Jewels was Corinne’s pick.

"HORSES!" Corinne screams. They are in time for the second race and the horses are already on the track, trotting and pawing and tossing their high-strung heads. "BALLOONS!" she chirps.

Lydia turns to find a vendor at her shoulder carrying a bouquet of helium balloons. "What color?" she must ask Corinne. And all at once, plucking the green one requested by the little stranger, she has visions of her arrest by the police, the fierce indignity of the mother, and more
than anything, the hideous explanations to Mark. She is sickened by the sight of the balloons’ helpless bobbing, each puckered neck tethered to a short, common string.

She glances at Corinne in the white straw hat: Corinne now looks like a little pygmy, a little bush person. Lydia imagines the two of them in the lens of a camera, the tall white mama and her heedlessly-abducted bush baby. The picture is so offensive that Lydia stifles a moan of anguish.

"Which one is Jangle Jewels? Which one is Jangle Jewels?" Corinne’s voice is high-pitched enough to sound like a whole schoolyard of children.

"Shhh," Lydia says. "Not so loud. He’s there. Number twenty--the one with the jockey in red and green."

"What’s a JOCKEY?" Corinne squeals.

"It’s the little man on top," says Lydia.

"That KID?"

"It’s not a kid, it’s a young man." Lydia sees a few heads turn from the seats below in their direction. She sits up taller. As if of their own volition, her shoulders lift and square.

"He’s so FINE!" Corinne cries. The horse is a deep cherry brown, a little shorter than some, but as sleek as any. His head is cocked at an odd and hurtful-looking angle. "He’s MINE!" she squeals in Lydia’s ear. Corinne’s
face already bears the bright stain of orange soda. Her shirt—a dingy white shirt with a row of half-torn out snaps at the shoulder—is streaked with a bloody smudge of catsup. "I picked him and he’s MINE!"

Corinne grips the edge of her seat and Lydia tries to see the race through Corinne’s eyes: the horses plunging with all their bridled strength toward the rail; the jockeys clinging low at their necks, bottoms raised—like stunt clowns at the circus; the whole herd like a cloud of magic dust in the back stretch; the hair-raising approach on the final turn; the earth-pounding drum of hooves at the finish line...

Instead, she foresees the whole afternoon—the repetitive races under the hot sun, Corinne’s flagging interest, the fatiguing trip home. George’s admonishment pounds in her conscience. Reckless! Reckless!

"He WON!" Corinne screams.

"No," Lydia says. "Not this time."

"He DID! He WON! Jangle Jewels WON!"

Corinne scoots back in her seat and lifts the container of orange soda that’s empty now and chews on the straw.

Lydia sighs. There’s something in Corinne’s posture, in the idle poking of her tongue around the straw that Lydia takes to mean, This is finished now. Like everything
else, this is done.

She lifts the small hand on the seat beside her and examines the pink scars on the knuckles, the black lodged under the fingernails. "Guess what?" she whispers. Corinne seems too far away to have heard. "Guess what?" Lydia repeats. "More is coming."

"Huh?" The response is distant and foggy.

"More. More races. More horses for us to see. More horses for you to pick." Lydia reaches under her seat for the racing form. "Here. In this next race are seven horses. You can pick Potter’s Molly, Holy Highness, Equilibrium, Star Sister--"

"I want Star SISTER!"

"Don’t you want to see them first? The horses will be on the track. It will be any minute now. You can look before you decide."

"Uh-uh. I want STAR SISTER."

"Okay, then," Lydia says. She has the strange, lightheaded sensation of not knowing what comes next. She takes a tissue from her purse and wets it with saliva, wipes a caked smudge of catsup from Corinne’s cheek.

"Freeda has THAT hat," Corinne says.

Lydia, next in line at the betting window, folds the
twenty-dollar bill she has taken from her purse into the palm of her hand. "What?" she says, pulling Corinne closer. "What did you say?"

"THAT hat."

A woman in the next line is wearing a white painter’s cap, set on her head with the brim to the back. "A hat like that?" Lydia says. "Who has a hat like that?"

"Freeda."

It’s Lydia’s turn at the window. She slips her twenty-dollar bill and, inadvertently, her ticket from the second race under the plastic window. The man takes her ticket and slaps four dollars back at her. "Two to one on Jangle Jewels," he says.

"Excuse me?" Lydia says.

The man speaks as though he’s talking to his top shirt button. "First horse disqualified. Two to one on Jangle Jewels."

Lydia retracts her twenty, limp and creased in her hand. Corinne has begun rocking—possibly dancing?—at her side. She pushes the twenty back under the plastic window. "Twenty dollars for Star Sister—for showing," she says. The fluttering in her ribcage seems loud enough to be heard.

She moves Corinne away from the windows and toward the concessions. With a little difficulty, she squats down to
Corinne’s height. "Jangle Jewels," she says. "He did win!"

"Jangle Jewels WON!" Corinne squeals.

Lydia’s thighs burn in this position. Corinne sets her lips together and trains her eyes on something over Lydia’s shoulder. "Now," Lydia says, "Who is Freeda?"

The girl’s face screws into a wily smile. "My SISTER," she says.

"I see," Lydia says. "And is she little, like you? Or is she a big girl?"

Corinne rolls her eyes. "BIG!" she squeals. "She works at Taco BELL!" She has begun dancing in excited spasms. "I go there. Mama tells me, ’Don’t you go there by yourself!’ But I go there. Freeda has a hat like THAT!"

Lydia rocks on her heels attempting to stand. "Of course," she says. "You go to Taco Bell. You go there whenever you like." Her anxieties, her fears of indiscretion subside. Having found her balance, she reaches for Corinne’s hand. "Let’s get a hat like that," she says.

"Let’s get one!" Corinne echoes.

Shielded from the sun now by matching white painter’s
hats, Lydia and Corinne unwrap two more hot dogs waiting for the third race to start. Corinne is intent on the horses, the jockeys, the movement on the track.

Lydia points out Star Sister, a tall, dark-brown, spirited horse.

"What's that on her head?" Corinne asks.

"That's a hood," Lydia explains. "It keeps her from looking sideways and watching the other horses."

"How can she SEE!" Corinne thrusts her face nearly to Lydia's nose.

"There are holes for her eyes," Lydia says, feeling a slight glow of body heat from Corinne's skin.

"She's got SOCKS, too!" Corinne turns and secures Lydia's face with her hand. "She's the queen," she says softly. "Star Sister is the queen."

She turns toward the track. "Yellow and green," she says. "I'll be watching for yellow and green. Star Sister is yellow and green, isn't she?" Lydia nods. Corinne stands and thrusts her chest out: a rooster crowing. "GO! STAR SISTER!"

There's the gun and the race begins, and Star Sister is quickly at the rail. Lydia presses forward, eyes fixed, tracking--yellow and green. Star Sister moves out with the front horses, and Lydia hears an urge inside her, over and over again, like a voice riding her own heartbeat,
repeating Star Sister’s name. The horses enter the final turn and Lydia’s breath is short, as if she’s been running, and just then the race is eclipsed—she hasn’t seen the finish. Corinne has jumped on top of her, scrambled into her lap.

Lydia’s head is thrust toward the sky. Corinne in her lap is solid and coarse. Lydia feels the boundaries between the girl’s wiry body and her own soft flesh. Above her the clouds are wispy—possibly the "mare’s tails" forerunning unsettled weather. Lydia only sees how they add perspective to the wide sky—make it seem broader, deeper, vaster than any sky of solid blue.

Lydia trembles when she collects her sixty dollars at the betting window. She moistens her fingers and counts it again and again—six tens. She taps it into a stack, and shaking, pushes it back through the window. She plays all of it on the Daily Double.

Corinne listens carefully to the horses’ names. She doesn’t hesitate. She knows just what she wants: Super Shoe and Whycancha Try in the fourth and sixth.

On impulse Lydia lifts Corinne to show her a bird’s-eye view of the track. Corinne is heavier than her size suggests—a dead weight. Mark, when he was this size,
would wrap his legs around Lydia's hips, make himself light. Mark was this size when Lydia came to America.

Lydia always remembers those first years in America with great clarity. Arriving in New York, the largest, most modern city they had ever seen. Settling in Yonkers, the only house they ever owned. Enrolling Mark in the huge American public school. Everything appeared to be adorned with a banner attesting to its value: promise.

It didn't take long to learn to scale back expectations. George's credentials as a lawyer were not satisfactory here; he worked as an accountant. Lydia's abilities as an accountant were exploited in the only jobs she could get--as bookkeeper in small, private firms. To augment his salary, George took on extra clients and he and Lydia did the bookwork at home. In addition, Mark's career in the public school was short-lived. After enduring a year of ridicule for his uncommon language, and suffering from the mediocrity of his courses, he agreed to let Lydia and George enroll him in a private school. It drained their income of every other luxury.

She sets Corinne down, leads her just outside to the highest rung of chairs. The racetrack is far below. One would need binoculars to see well from here.

Still, the fourth race goes by clearly enough. Super Shoe, in red and blue, leads after the half. When he
crosses the finish line with a lead of three heads, sighs of disgust rise around Lydia, and a man in a pink shirt nearby tears up his racing form. Lydia turns to the big board, with its spread of numbers, behind her. The odds on this horse were sixteen to one.

Lydia leads Corinne back to her seat. The green helium balloon tied to their bench bobs dizzily in a sudden gust of breeze. Corinne stands up on the bench and stamps her feet. "Super SHOE! Super SHOE!" Lydia sits quietly, letting her eyes wander where they will--over the faces of people jostling in the crowd, over the track in its peacefulness, in its lull before the next event--and tries to still her heart.

By the sixth race, Lydia is damp with perspiration--the sun is hot, the breeze has died. She knows it’s completely unreasonable to expect--even to hope--to win this race, but her mind is full of plans. There they are at the mall--cool shops, haughty salesladies, lunch at Hardee’s, Corinne in white sneakers and brand new size-seven jeans. And there--at the circus, the Bronx Zoo, the Horse Show at Madison Square Garden. She surprises herself. "You’re a silly woman," she says under her breath. "Stop that nonsense."
But she is not a silly woman. She knows that. She is intelligent—always full of expectations. She cannot stop her visions now—visions that balloon, spirit-like, like secret wishes too-long trapped in a stuffy box. She conjures herself and Corinne as adventurers, cutting the City down to size, refusing to take excuses, boldly going into the crowds and among the people with power, finding possibilities. The track is before her and the odds on Corinne’s favorite are only three to one. The little voice inside her—the one so good with numbers—can’t let her forget that.

Corinne turns to her. "Are you a Grandma?"

"Yes," Lydia says. "I have a grandson. Why?"

"I don’t KNOW! You LOOK like a GRANDMA!"

Corinne scoots to the edge of her seat. "I know a song," she says. She turns and plucks the string of the balloon with her index finger. She sings:

Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder where you are...

Lydia hums along. She remembers this melody, though she had forgotten the words. The horses for the sixth race have come out on the track. Corinne watches them absently, plucks the balloon, sings the song three times through.

The gun for the race goes off. "LISTEN!" Corinne
22

says. She’s staring at Lydia. She sings:

Bringing home a baby bumblebee,
Won’t my mommy be so proud of me...

Lydia folds her hands around Corinne’s hands which are
cupped in front of Lydia’s chest.

"NO! Don’t hold my hands! The BUMBLEbee’s IN there."

"Oh," Lydia says. "Silly me."

"I’ll start AGAIN," Corinne says.

Bringing home a baby bumblebee,
Won’t my mommy be so proud of me...

Lydia stands. The horses rounding the final turn are
like one huge animal. She can discern no leader. The
colors are undetectable in the cloud of carmel dust. She
reaches her arm out for Corinne’s shoulders, while, at the
finish line, a herd of horses, none distinguishable,
charges by. She spins around, listening on all sides for a
voice, any voice, to say what the outcome was.

Ouch! He bit me!

"Oh!" Lydia drops into her seat and pulls Corinne
into her arms. "What!"

Corinne is squealing, laughing. "I GOT you! I GOT
you! It’s the SONG! It’s the BUMBLEbee!

Lydia reaches around Corinne, who is standing between
Lydia's knees. She fumbles in her handbag and finds a handkerchief. She dabs her face, her neck.

"LISTEN!" Corinne is saying.

Lydia stands and is surprised at her own strength when she whirls Corinne around, pulling on her arm, nearly dragging her up the rows of steps. Corinne is singing songs and calling riddles to Lydia. "Why does the chicken cross the road? Because his MAMA's on the other SIDE! How does the elephant hide in the pea patch? He paints his TOEnails GREEN!"

Lydia reaches the payout window and presents her ticket. The man looks at her ticket without interest. He palms the ticket and tosses it aside.

Lydia turns away.

"Hey, lady!" The man is calling to her. "You want your money, or not?" Lydia's chest heaves. With her next breath she feels capable of just about exploding. "Yes" is all she can say.

The man with dirty hands and fingernails counts her money. He is quite competent to count. There are over three thousand dollars.

Lydia folds the wad of bills into her purse and leads Corinna away from the window, back outside.

The track is quiet. A few horses trot by below, pulling at their bits, trying to yank loose the reins.
Lydia breathes deeply, loving those horses, knowing soon the jockeys will give them their heads; and their bodies, following, will surge, as if unbridled, nearly wild. For a moment, they will be barely controlled—and perfectly free.

She returns to her seat, settles Corinne against her body. She clasps Corinne’s fingers, and remembering those extraordinary, everyday moments of intimacy with Mark, shows Corinne the finger games—the birds and spiders and small animals of all kinds. She tells the parts of the stories she can still recall. They come back to her more easily than she would have suspected.

Corinne presses against her belly. Her fingers are dusky in Lydia’s palms. Her heartbreaking scent is familiar and emboldening. Lydia whispers something to her, but Corinne is too rapt in their fingers to hear.

"Be reckless," Lydia has said.

In the last race, Lydia wagers no money. She notes the slant of the sun over the racetrack, the late afternoon creeping into the color and texture of the light. On her trips out of Bucharest, this time of day meant stopping for dinner, or, on the final day of the weekend, it meant turning home. Lydia has never been able to reconcile the two strong feelings this sunlight gives her: one of rest
and comfort, the other of resignation, even weariness.

She unwraps Corinne’s fourth hot dog, tucks a paper
napkin around the girl’s collar and smooths it against her
chest. "This is the last one," she says. "I can’t take
you home with a bad stomach."

Corinne is swinging her feet under the bench, catsup
seeping from the corners of her mouth. She says, "Lamont
and Jamal never saw the horses."

"Who?" Lydia says.

Corinne stuffs another bite of hot dog in her mouth.
"Lamont and Jamal," she mumbles. "They give Mama a bad
time. They fight. They got a gang. THEY never saw the
horses." She tweaks the string of her helium balloon.

"Untie it," Lydia says. "Soon we’re leaving. Untie
it now."

Corinne rubs her mouth and hands brusquely on her
napkin and balls it up. She unties the balloon.

"Let it go."

Corinne lets the string of the balloon slip through
her fingers. She follows the silent ascent with her eyes.
"I still see it," she tells Lydia from time to time. "I
still see it."

"I see it too," Lydia tells her. She sees it in her
mind’s eye, even when it has slipped entirely out of sight.
The grass in the park under the old oaks is even and cool. Lydia instructs Corinne to take off her soiled, laceless sneakers. She takes her hand and leads her toward a pasture where a racehorse is grazing. Corinne calls it by all the names of the horses she has picked that day. "That horse can’t hear me," she tells Lydia. "That horse is hungry." Lydia knows Corinne is not hungry.

At the train station, Lydia takes Corinne in the restroom and washes her face and hands. She attempts to scrub the catsup stains out of her shirt. She very nearly uncoils the girl’s pigtails to wash her hair.

It’s early evening, about five-thirty. Somewhere nearby, the sunlight is falling full and golden on the countryside. From the train depot, there’s not much to see: the tracks stretching away, angling toward the next station.

But Lydia feels giddy, even though she wishes they were both going anywhere but Poughkeepsie. She gives a fleeting thought to the police, to Corinne’s gang of brothers, to the prize of three thousand dollars in her possession. The important thing, she thinks, is to have been to Saratoga.
THE ARK

It seemed to Fran that her family had always owned this bungalow in Wading River. Her great-grandparents had it first when her great-grandfather had been a stock broker on Wall Street, when the trip from New York City of seventy-odd miles on little more than farm-linking Long Island dirt roads had been like a trip to the end of the earth. There'd been no running water in the bungalow then, no electric lights. The photos of her great-grandparents in her family album showed them with their pants legs rolled up to the knees, clamming in the north shore tidal pools along the Sound, or frying farm eggs and local oysters for breakfast over a campfire, smiling exuberantly, the face of the bungalow (two windows like eyes set on either side of a mouth-like door) yawning its own contented "good morning."

Now the bungalow belonged to Fran and her sister. When their parents moved to Florida they had proposed
selling the place, but Fran had vehemently refused. Leni had supported her, even tried to help with the upkeep, because Leni was like that—she cared about what other people cared about. Fran reached up with a paper towel and took a swipe at a cobweb hanging from the wood frame of the porch screen addition her grandmother had built on. Leni had been like that—before she had succumbed seven months earlier to bone cancer.

Inside the bungalow, Fran’s guest tuned in an old WNEW staple on the radio, a slow Benny Goodman number. Fran watched the fireflies blink and turn like drunken foxtroters. There was still a glow of embers from the small stone firepit where she and Randy had done some fresh halibut in a skillet with butter and lemon, and afterward, had roasted marshmallows. They—she and Randy—had made a secret pact to start this summer not mourning Leni’s death but celebrating her short life. Randy had been Leni’s husband.

It was turning out to be a cooler evening than the past few. On her way inside, Fran turned down the sleeves of her flannel shirt and buttoned them across her wrists. Randy was at the old bow-fronted Frigidaire popping a beer. He was tall and nearly hairless with golden skin and
tight, firm, well-defined muscles. He wore his hair nearly crew-cut and had the kind of interesting, angular face that takes a few minutes to appreciate, but has lasting appeal.

"Care to dance?" she said.

He gestured with the arm not holding the beer, opened it out to her. She stepped up to him and they took a few sliding steps, made a half-turn in the room. The song was nearly over. Their reflection flitted by in the antique rummage-sale mirror she’d bought with Leni the summer before. Her hair had grown out since then--she’d stopped having it bobbed short. It hung now unshaped, straight and uneven.

Randy took a swig of his beer and kissed her with cool lips on the forehead. She stepped closer, and placed her head against his chest, wishing the song would go on longer. Leni had had beautiful long brown hair. She liked it in a mass of silky crinkles and crimps. She loved her hair and she loved the gay hairdressers where she got her permanents--they gave the best hairwashes. She loved everything creative, everything New York. Yet, where Fran was an illustrator, Leni had worked with other peoples’ creative work, doing layout for a small magazine. She liked paste on her fingers--no ambition, no pretention. At night, she was a literacy volunteer--she taught men with thick forearms to read and write.
The song was over and Fran offered to make coffee. Standing in the kitchen, she heard Randy spill out the Scrabble game. It had become a ritual by this, their fourth day of retreat. She was beginning to hate the game. It had been something to do the first night when he had talked and talked about the life he would have had with Leni—a farm somewhere up in Vermont, with cows and horses and pigs. Leni had teased him about giving up live basketball games at Madison Square Garden for cow pie matches along lonely back roads. "She thought I’d miss civilization," he’d said. "But I said, 'Civilization is where you make it. Ours will be a civilized farm. You’ll be doing your layouts from a studio in the house and when you look up, I’ll be out in our very own fields tending to everything, getting our good products ready for the co-op in town—and we’ll take a trip to New York whenever we feel like it, or to Boston, or Portland, or Toronto. We’ll be in the center of the best North America has to offer.'" He said she would cross her eyes and say she was glad he’d been able to work it all out, it was too much for her brain cells to compute.

Fran had drawn while he talked—in the margins of the newspaper. She’d drawn his animals and dressed them in city clothes: a duck in tuxedo, a piglet in rapper pants, a goat like a rabbi, a lamb like a hooker. A city farm. She
made him laugh and laugh, and that was when he decided to collect only words for farm animals to play on the board. But it had made the game incredibly long. She was bored and restless and thought that was why she hadn’t slept well.

Now she stood in the doorway with a pot of decaf espresso. Randy was reading the dictionary.

"Tonight I thought I’d play a new version of menagerie," he said. "Listen to this. There’s an animal called a ‘t-a-k-i-n’—pronounced tock-een—a huge, hairy cross between a goat and an antelope that lives in Tibet. You ever hear of that? I bet you there’s dozens of animals we don’t know about. They could fill a new Noah’s Ark—one of each kind for the beginning of a whole new world."

She returned to the kitchen for cups, and spotting the bottle of Sambuca, reached for it too, thinking "takin" suggested the idea of safari to her, such a welcome thought, because for some reason tonight, more than the others, the whole house seemed to be closing in on her.

Randy hulked over the board, elbows spread. "This is not going to be given to me," he said. The only thing I have for ‘takin’ is an ‘i.’"

Fran poured a little of the clear, sticky liquer in her cup and licked her finger. Like licorice, the black bark kind she and Leni bought right around here at some
country store. "Maybe you need to round up more critters before you try to load them," she said. She didn’t care if the game never got underway.

"Good idea." He went back to the dictionary. She watched his long fingers--middle finger tapping the table top, index finger sliding, searching down the page. She watched his fingers huddle around the tip of the pencil and transfer short words to a piece of pink phone-message paper: "hyrax," "dugong," and "okapi." She knew those hands had stroked her sister, had slid through her curls, and she wondered how he could bear to look at them now. She poured more coffee and Sambuca in her cup.

"I have an aunt," she said "who loves to play Scrabble, but she spells all the words wrong." When her voice stopped there was silence--a studious, almost suffocating silence. "No one can figure out whether she does it from ignorance or shrewdness because the thing is, even though she cheats, she doesn’t always win. Though sometimes she does. When she loses, people find her spelling quaint, and when she wins, they’re bitter with her for cheating."

"People who are bitter always think it’s someone else’s fault," Randy said. "I mean, not to get too cosmic or anything, but people can choose not to be bitter, right? Isn’t that what we’re choosing by being here?"
She said it was, and then there was silence again as she thought of how they hadn’t seen much of each other over the last four months, how she’d started yoga classes and he’d enrolled in World Religion and South American Cultural Studies courses at the New School, how they hadn’t met for dinner in the Village the way the three of them—or the three of them plus a date of Fran’s—had been so used to doing. They’d sort of avoided that—purposely?—and had scrambled to set up new routines. Randy screwed his mouth absent-mindedly. She asked him, "Do you think it’s possible we’re both in denial here?"

He closed the dictionary and its light "whump" sent a ripple through the scrabble tiles like the sound of trickling glass. "I wouldn’t know." He added "serval" to the scrap of paper, scanning the list he probably knew was much too short. "I’m not planning on paying attention to it, if I am. I figure I’ve been cruising obliviously right through denial—and whatever they say the next stage is, I’ll float over that one and the next until I can finally arrive at being adjusted about this." He fingered his tiles and frowned.

She started toward the kitchen with her coffee cup, and stopped at the woodstove. She thought briefly about whether she should light it. She was grateful that her grandmother hadn’t ripped it out of the bungalow to make
room for the cook stove from Riverhead--that it hadn’t gone the way of the kerosene lamps and the hand-pumped well. She could still fall asleep nights tucked under her great-grandmother’s thick, heavy quilts, sweating from the wood heat circulating into her bedroom, then wake in the mornings with a cold nose but a cushion of warm air around her limbs and a miraculous sense of being close to her great-grandparents’ source of pleasure. Wrapped in their famous, incredible blankets, she could pretend she’d been their daughter.

They drove east along 25A for short stretches before the two lanes bogged down in speed zones or at an occasional traffic-lighted intersection. They were battened down tight in Randy’s white Volkswagen Rabbit, under the securely-latched convertible hood. It was threatening rain.

It was all familiar to Fran: the mom-and-pop-run "fast food" places, all slapped together and white-painted, that barely stood off the shoulders of the road; the unkempt barns with "Suzuki" or "Firestone" hung over the doorways; the signs pointing down grass-encroached roads toward "Antiques" or "Vineyards"; the occasional modern shopping "Plaza"; the periodic strips of McDonalds and Roy Rogers;
the long, open, windy-looking farms. She was seeing all of it like snapshots she might put in a photo album to show her grandchildren. This is where we stayed, and this is where we drove and this is what we saw along the way. She was showing herself these things—the way she had seen it all with Leni.

Randy drove with both hands, said he could feel once in a while a tug of wind. In his fisherman’s sweater, his long neck was exposed. She glanced out his window occasionally so that she could eye his jaw, his Adam’s apple, for some sign of a crack in his composure, and finding none, she stared out her own window at the passing farm of shin-high pepper plants and another of turnips, and then another, disconcertingly familiar. It was announced by a graying white sign sketched with a misshapen black outline peppered with black specks: a strawberry.

She wanted to ask Randy to turn in at this place she and Leni had visited a couple of times those days when it just seemed like a good idea, even though they’d passed one farm stand after another with strawberries boxed neatly, to range up and down the rows and get red stains in their sneakers and that funny, fuzzy sensation in the fingertips from picking around the prickly bushes. But before she could suggest turning in, Randy did.

The old farm sat way back off the road, behind a
ragged-looking front field. Its yellow house and gray, weathered barn both listed east, away from the wind. Randy pulled in next to the only other car, a dented blue Chrysler station wagon. The family it belonged to was picking out in the far end of the field.

"I thought we could have strawberries tonight," he said.

"Sounds okay to me."

He jumped out of the car as if he were suddenly in a big hurry, closing the door loudly and firmly; but once he was outside he just stood there at the side of the car with his fingertips in the pockets of his jeans, seeming to study the rear hubcap.

She closed her door and looked over the field. The family—five figures of different sizes and shapes—was scattered over the last few rows. Randy was walking away from the car, away from the field, toward the house. He looked back then, as if he heard some question Fran hadn’t yet asked. "I’ll just be over here a few minutes. Not long."

The wind was sporadic but stiffening, with an occasional sputter of what seemed like rain in it. Oblong baskets were piled on the tailgate of a pickup parked at the edge of the field. She took one, stained inside with bright pink smears. Near the front rows, she squatted
where a few plants still looked healthy and full. To her right, the family wore sweatshirts and hardly spoke to one another.

A sketch took shape in her mind—those lumpy shapes, the stunted bushes, the low sky. It was that feeling she carried with her, the legacy of her last memory of Leni.

It was the day Leni died, that morning. She lay in her bed at New York Hospital, her head hairless against the pillow. She was emaciated—thin, gaunt, bruised-looking—and her eyes were glass-like and huge. Fran needed some air—just a few minutes. "I’m going to the store," she told Leni. "A nice store. What can I bring you?" Their eyes locked and Leni blinked twice. They were silent a long time and Fran saw how hopeless it was, how ridiculous.

"I thought you’d never ask," Leni finally said. "Don’t you think I could use a change of pajamas?"

And the next thing Fran knew, she was standing at Leni’s door again and Leni had died. It had happened just moments before—so recently that no one had had time to ward her off, to prevent her from going near the room. She’d stood at the entrance holding a pair of gift-wrapped Donna Karan pajamas while everyone—doctors, nurses, her parents, Randy—bustled and worked and shouted and cried. And there was no one to give the pajamas to. She stood there holding them, and before she did or felt anything
else, she felt the impossibility of ever being able to give those pajamas to Leni.

Behind her, where she had turned her back so as not to stare, Randy stood on a small, cement porch with a man who had come out of the house. Two little kids, a girl and a boy, swung from the bars of a swingset that had seen better days, and a dog tied to a long rope sat on his haunches and panted, watching them. Randy stood in the same arrested and thoughtful way he had earlier, beside the car, fingers wedged in his jeans’ pockets, face inclined toward something on the ground. The man was the one speaking.

When Fran finished picking, a large child, a chubby boy, appeared from out of nowhere to take her money. He must have been sitting in the cab of the pick-up. As he bagged her strawberries, Randy returned, unsmiling. Fran felt a chill through her cotton sweater and shivered. She wanted the comfort, the familiarity of the bungalow.

Sometime around dawn the next morning she woke from dreams. She rose to shake them off, but when she lowered her feet to the floor next to her bed, a great, swooning sob built in her chest. The room was dim, and the outlines of the furniture hulked, forbidding half-seen shapes: the wardrobe, the old caned rocker, the chiseled mirror above the huge oak bureau.
She stood and felt her way along the bureau to the door. She moved slowly, soundlessly—and the door seemed to swing open in her hand.

Randy was standing there in the middle of the outside room, facing away. He hadn't heard her, and was wearing only a pair of white jockey shorts and a white tee shirt hanging loose and large. If she'd thought faster, she might just have pushed the door closed again, but she wasn't thinking, not actually thinking yet, and she took one more awkward step. Startled, he turned toward her and ran his hand over his head.

"Sorry. I woke up," she said.

He said nothing, but tugged his t-shirt down and wrapped his arms around himself, then paced off the few steps to his room.

Fran waited until she was sure she'd heard his door close, then retraced her steps, and slipping under the weight of her great-grandmother's quilt, turned to Leni's side of the bed. The sheets there were cold, almost stinging. She rolled onto her stomach and stretched her arm toward the place where Leni wasn't, where against the cold, her arm seemed to burn.

The morning sky was gray and close, almost smothering—
and yet it hadn’t rained. Fran made breakfast, turning things over and over in her mind. Just now she had thought of how much Leni had loved weekends in New York. A little window shopping, a walk up Columbus, lunch in a quiet place, an hour or two in a museum. But also, how she always came when Fran called her out to Wading River, and how she never complained, though Fran knew she was sensitive to mosquitoes and pollen, that she wasn’t strong enough for most of the chores.

Fran would call her: "So I hear you’re coming to the bungalow this week."

"Uh oh. Were you talking in your sleep again?"

"Can you come? I miss you. I’m sick of guys. You won’t have to do a thing."

"This weekend. Hmmm. I’m checking my calendar and my computer, and maybe I should call my secretary."

"You don’t have a secretary."

"Right. Well, looks like I can’t do it."

"Leni!"

"I could do it, if I just didn’t have this meeting of the National Association of Citizens Against Catalog Sales."

"What do you have on your calendar?"

"Nothing major. I can move it. But I’m not coming if we don’t stop for marshmallows this time."
"I’ll get them. Big or little?"

"If you make this too hard, I’ll change my mind."

Fran had never insisted on knowing what Leni "moved" on her calendar. She’d always been afraid it might turn out to be something she couldn’t ask Leni not to do.

Randy came in from running and sat at the table. Fran handed him a plate of pancakes heaped with strawberries and he stared at it. "You know that farmer yesterday," he said. "The one I talked to?"

"At the strawberry farm?"

"Yeah. He’s an interesting guy. He hasn’t been out here that many years. He’s from California originally, then he worked in advertising in New York, then got sick of that and moved out here." He picked up his fork and moved some strawberries off the pile. "I wanted to see if he would remember me."

"Remember you?"

"Yeah. When Leni and I were out here once together we stopped at that farm and he was outside doing something and we just started to talk. He remembered Leni. He remembered the ‘beautiful young lady with the rash across her cheeks’ -- she’d eaten a dozen strawberries in a row and reacted. He remembered how interested she was in all his farm stories. I swear, she took it in as if he were some kind of oracle -- the Farmer’s Almanac or something. And I
kept asking him so many questions. How to raise fruit
trees--he'd done that in California. How many acres a
person can handle by himself." He pushed the plate away.

Fran set her own plate on the table. "You know," she
said, "now that I think of it, it surprises me, all the
planning she did with you, all the farm stuff. I never
knew Leni to want to live on a farm."

She thought she heard him say softly, "I know"; but
just then

there was a loud clatter outside at the porch. She
was glad for a reason to get up and go to the door.

Outside, trailing a long piece of washline that had
evidently come unfastened, was a neighbor's dog. A few
people in the area were full-time residents and Fran
recognized this dog as belonging to one of them. Randy
came up behind her.

"I don't know his name, but I know where he lives,"
she said.

Randy stepped out and petted the dog's head, scratched
his ears. "That's good. I'll take him home." He went
back in, to his room, and came out wearing long pants and a
jacket. Fran explained where the house was.

"Come on, doggie," he said. He wound up the extra
line until it was leash length, and set off down the road.
Fran had cleaned up the dishes and stood outside now, where the wind had eerily stopped blowing, and stared up the road, past the blackberry hedges, in the direction Randy had gone. He was not to be seen. She turned back toward the house, and stopped a minute, taking in its grim, added-on facade with its bank of screen frames like a row of unsmiling, grittingly-set teeth. There was work to do around the place. The forest-green trim needed repainting. Weeds were growing fast and needed cutting between the slates of the path to the front steps. The wegelia and forsythia and lilacs needed to be clipped. Fran had always loved these chores before, but this time they had made her simply tired to think of them. It was as if the natural process so clearly eager to overtake her bungalow was overtaking her too, and she had no will or desire to resist it. On the contrary, she wanted to give in.

Inside the house, she stood in the center of the room a moment and looked around at the things she and Leni had collected just the past summer: the antique mirror, a blue pottery vase, a pair of needlepointed throw pillow covers. At that point they thought there was still hope—Fran did. She never knew what Leni really thought, not then, and not later, when the intensive chemo seemed to accelerate the
disease. Leni had just looked around the bungalow and said, "Hey, this place is great, but it could be cozier. Let’s go look for cozy." And she found cozy, or it found her. It was the most fruitful antiquing jag Fran had ever been on. But then, Leni was the "antiquer," Leni the one who seemed to know what she wanted. Fran no longer knew what she wanted from this place--or rather, right this moment, she wanted only one thing: to add that sketch of the strawberry pickers she’d thought of making the day before. She was staring at just the place for it--above the old chest where a floral print now hung.

She lifted the lid of the chest, where she kept the family albums, and removed a white envelope with her name marked on it that contained some old family pictures that had been Leni’s. Leni had marked the envelope. She had wanted to make sure Fran got them.

She shuffled through the pictures as she’d done several times before. They were all photos of her great-grandparents--nothing surprising. They seemed like versions of photos Fran had seen over and over again: the toothy grins, the erect postures, the flaunting of a respectable eccentricity. She began to fit the photos into the album and saw she’d have to rearrange some of the pages. She pulled back the plastic sheathing and lifted some photos out. Her great-grandparents, in all their
pioneer gentility, beamed up at her. Their ability to move her was uncanny, with their gusto that she adored, their resoluteness in the face of anyone who’d make fun of them. Her attachment to two people she’d never known could not have been more keen.

She reordered the photos, holding them in her hands. She looked at them for a long time. There was something in them, something she’d never noticed before: something like Leni, though not a likeness of looks. Something else.

Fran closed her eyes, feeling exhausted, past caring to find a word to describe something that did not matter anymore anyway. But when she opened her eyes, even through her fuzzy, unfocused, unwilling glance at the pictures, a word came to her: determination.

She was cold. She loaded the woodstove with kindling and wood and lighted it, then sat in front of it and pulled an afghan around her until the room started to get warm.

There was a terrible swirling of wind hissing in the trees, then rain, and then her mind fixed on that moment in Leni’s hospital room where she had stood with that box of pajamas in her hand. The first thing she had felt was the impossibility of ever giving them to Leni, and next thing was the necessity to disappear. She did not want the pain she knew was coming; she did not want the world. She just wanted to be gone.
And later it was the uselessness of her life she didn’t want, and the meaninglessness of anything she did. For months now, she had wanted nothing more than to evaporate, and for everything, especially memory, to cease. She had been wanting not to live anymore. She had been wanting to die.

It was raining in sheets--she didn’t need to look. She heard it driving into the old boards over the well, swishing through the tops of the trees. She heard it pounding against the grass and the mud.

She heard the porch door, and Randy came in, stamping the rain from his shoes. He stopped in the center of the living room and unzipped his jacket. He sighed.

She sat staring at the woodstove, as if she were sleeping, though her eyes were open. Randy pulled a kitchen chair near the stove and sat down, dripping.

"I took that dog home," he said. "I just tied him to the fence. I didn’t even talk to anyone. Then I just started walking. I don’t know what got into me. I got to the water and everything turned so dark. I thought about how many times we’ve gone in that water and it seemed so safe. Just now it made my blood cold to go near it. Or maybe it was the storm. I just know I was afraid."

Fran looked at him and saw his hands, both sets of his long fingers raking through his hair.
"I need to tell you something," he said. "I need to tell you that the hardest thing is thinking I wouldn't have made her happy."

He slumped against the back of the chair, arms wrapped across his chest. His toes stretched toward the cast iron.

"She wanted nothing. She demanded nothing. Now I feel like I gave her nothing. I had all these dreams--the farm, anything. If she'd lived, she'd have done anything I wanted."

Fran sat up, shifted closer to the edge of her seat.

"I'd have let it happen," he said. "I came so close to making this unforgiveable mistake."

Fran opened the woodstove and added a few sticks of wood. It was things like this she had always liked this place for--adding the wood like this, doing the little things around the bungalow she knew her great-grandparents had done exactly the same way. It was like a lifeline, a direct connection to their strong wills, their zest for life, their love of turning adversity to charm.

"You can't assume what would have made her happy," she said. She closed the door to the woodstove, set the firetongs to hang on the nails her great-grandparents had nailed into the wall to hold them.

"I want to believe you," Randy said. He put his hand to his hair, felt around him. "God. Everything's wet."
Here I’ve done it again, all this without thinking. And you didn’t say anything." He took his jacket off, then his sweater, and rubbed the water out of his hair.

Fran listened to the rain on the roof. "You better go change your clothes or you’ll catch pneumonia," she said.

When he’d gone to his room, she stood up. The afghan trailed at her feet. She gathered it around her waist and held it. Beyond the house’s original windows she saw the rain falling outside the porch screens. She went to see it closer.

The rain was truly a wonder. Truly torrents of it fell and fell, like ropes of heavy glycerine stretching from the earth to the sky. After she had watched it for a long time, she sat in the old Adirondack chair against the siding of the house. She moved some magazines on the table next to it and found her sketch pad. She opened it.

She began three times, sketching the lumpy bodies of the family in the field, trying to get just the right sadness in their bent, bunchy frames, the right blank grayness above them in the sky.

She turned her head, catching her reflection in the ancient glass her great-grandparents had set in the windows of their house. She looked back at her pad. What was missing was something she did not want to feel anymore. What was missing was something that hadn’t really
been there.

She began again, a row of low figures, backs rounded, heads even; and then a new figure, about her height, a figure that wanted to stand, wanted to look straight out of the picture, into the viewer's eyes. She watched as she sketched, and an arm lifted, shading the glare of the glossy, gray sky, the hand tipping back then, just slightly, in a gesture like waving goodbye.
Marlyse hears how her mother’s words are picked and arranged--to make the news seem normal, easy to handle--while in her mother’s pale hands, the veins that sometimes pop large and blue are invisible, flowing secretly, shriveled in the hollows between her long, thin bones. Most of all, her mother says, she must not be afraid, death is natural; Nanna, their good Nanna, is this moment at peace and happy in heaven.

The bedroom curtain flaps at the window, letting the sunlight in. A sheer, white curtain, it lifts with every puff of breeze. The sunlight fills the window frame, the curtain lifts, and the brightness of the afternoon spills into the room.

Outside, on her front porch, Marlyse curls herself around her sister until they’re like a ball and she feels her sister’s sobs against her chest. The leaves of the
azaleas and rhododendrons have hardened, dark and glossy. The grass is long and deep. She imagines heaven, sees a dark blue void in a nameless, cloudless sky. She sees the pointy, paper-thin leaves of the birches rustling in the breeze, scattering the spots of sunlight at her feet.

When she sets the table for dinner, she counts out four plates instead of five, considers how to place them around the table. In the next room the TV is quiet. It’s three hours past the regular time for *All My Children* and *One Life to Live*, three hours past their usual routine: snack tables in the den, decaf for Nanna in the fancy white china cup, grape Kool-Aid for Marlyse, and multiple rounds of rummy, while they figure out ahead of time what’s going to happen—who’s cheating, who’s lying or pretending to be on someone else’s side, who’s going to get it.

Her father’s tie hangs from the kitchen cabinet knob. He has joined her mother in the bedroom. Tomorrow evening the visiting at the funeral home will begin.

From last year’s eighth-grade earth science class, Marlyse knows about earthquakes: how the plates of the earth rub against each other, build up forces, move, and how scientists can predict where the quakes might happen. No one has predicted her grandmother’s heart attack.

* * *
She drags a chaise lounge into the side yard, and stretches out in it, her legs slowly growing warm in the morning sun. The branches of the trees next door sway. Against the side of Mrs. Fisky's house, bright spots of sun shiver, fade, blaze. She opens her book, knowing the day will be long, with lots of waiting in it, like the long hours before the start of a birthday party or the unwrapping of Christmas presents--only this time the thing waited for is also dreaded. She wants to get it over with.

"Maybe you've seen it."

She looks up from the page squinting, black type and shadows swimming. "Are you talking to me?"

"Maybe you've seen it," the boy says again. He has appeared in the yard next door. "I was looking for this croquet ball we're missing from the set."

He pokes around with a croquet mallet in the zinnias along Mrs. Fisky's fence. "Those kids--they were here last night and they were playing with the croquet set and they lost one of the balls. My brothers. You know what I'm talking about?"

His blond bangs slant toward one eye. He has a broad face, except where his cheeks are sunk in, as if he is biting them.

"I didn't see anything going on last night," she says. "I was busy." Usually she brings a towel out with
her to sit on if she gets hot. She wishes she’d remembered it today. Her legs seem to go on forever.

"Well, they’re gone now, anyway." He is leaning against the split rail fence, with his feet in the zinnias. "They drove home with Dad this morning. I’m flying home with Mom in a couple of days. It was a gift—the flight and the trip to New York—for getting on the Honor Society this year."

"Where’d you come from?" she asks. She’s never heard anyone with such a weird pronunciation of words like "Mom" and "Honor."

"We’re from Ohio. Visiting our grandparents. They used to live in Ohio, too, but they moved here to be closer to my aunt—my father’s sister." He bounds over the low fence. "I’m Russell," he says. "What’s your name?"

Her fingertips feel for the hem of her shorts. Maybe they’re long enough. "Marlyse," she says. Her biography does not rush to her mouth to be told.

"Pretty name," he says, and bites his lip, pretends to check out something in the sky.

"So you’re flying home," she says.

"Couple of days. What are you reading?"

She shows him the cover of her book. "Gulliver’s Travels."

"I’ve read that," he says.
"I just got to the part where he’s small and gets what he needs by outsmarting everyone."

"Yeah," Russell says. He squints at the sun, then squeezes his eyes closed hard, and swings himself onto the top rung of the fence.

"I love Long Island," he says. "We’ve been to the beaches and MacArthur airport. New York was great. Mom and I did that alone. The World Trade Center. Radio City Music Hall. Do you go to New York a lot?"

"Not very often. We had a field trip to Rockefeller Center last year. Dad goes there on business."

Russell nods. "My grandmother’s getting lunch ready. Wanna come for lunch?"

"My grandmother passed away yesterday," Marlyse says. Russell looks at her. His mouth is red and wet-lipped and hangs slightly open.

"I’m sorry," he says. "Was it your father’s mother or your mother’s?"

"My mother’s."

"I haven’t lost any grandparents yet." He lifts his eyes to his grandmother’s house. Marlyse is sure he has been surprised into thinking that this grandmother, old Mrs. Fisky, could go.

"I’m hungry," he says. He jumps the fence. "If you’re around later, I brought some stuff with me I could
show you. I’m a collector."

"I don’t think so. I’ll be--" She doesn’t finish her own sentence.

"I mean, if you’re around."

He turns and bolts toward Mrs. Fisky’s front steps.

He’s never in his life read Gulliver’s Travels, she thinks, watching him take the front steps by twos.

The room at the funeral home where her grandmother has been laid out is lighted like the big pizza restaurant her family goes to some Friday nights, where there are waiters in black pants and white shirts and glowing Budweiser signs behind the bar. She lingers at the edge of this room, like someone waiting for another party to be seated.

She keeps her mother in view, her tall, thin, dark-haired, dark-eyed mother who smiles when people approach her, which seems to put them at ease. Beside her mother, Aunt Siggie, the older sister, holds a tissue, sniffs. Siggie’s hair is short and blond and her eyes are blue. Her head droops forward most of the time and she cries openly when people talk to her. Marlyse has been told she will grow up to be her mother’s twin. She prays this is true.

Her sister, Tracy, sticks to their father’s side.
There are lots of boy cousins here, with shirt tails coming loose from their pants, and flushed cheeks from running around in the parking lot. They kick the rungs of the chairs, whisper, giggle.

The thought that she can get this over with and go home and everything will return to normal flits like a dream she can’t wake up from in her mind. It is only when she has seen Nanna’s face that the dream dissolves and her mind knows it’s time to quit wanting her dream and get up and get on with her day.

Nanna’s face is not frightening— it’s just unreal. The skin pulls and folds in unfamiliar places and the make-up is thicker than anything Nanna would be caught dead in when she was alive. Nanna never wore that pearl pendant, that long, blue dress, the silver shoes, toes pointing up, nor her straight, yellow-gray cap of bobbed hair so teased and pouffy.

The people who did this are morons.

She’s curious to touch her grandmother’s hands; but the idea of it turns her instantly cold. What if Nanna doesn’t feel real? What if her body is flimsy and papery and not solid?

She sets the sprinkler out on the lawn, figuring so
the tips of the spray will land in the junipers. In a half hour she’ll move it to soak a new section. She’ll do it four times, finishing near the lilacs. This is her chore and she likes it. She does it barefoot, flicking the spray overhead a few times, making it fall like soft rain.

Mrs. Fisky’s front door clatters open and shut. Russell crosses the lawn, coming her way.

"I was wondering if you’d ever get home," he says.

"The funeral parlor closes at nine o’clock." She puts her hands to her hair and quickly braids it. Her hair is slightly damp and she likes the feeling of it and of being barefoot and just a little messy all over. Russell’s hair is combed neatly, with something wet. He wears a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, smells sweetly of cologne, and holds a rectangular tin box in his hands. Standing next to him she feels free or carefree or beyond caring. For the first instant all day, she feels relieved.

"Like to go for a walk?" he says.

"Where to?"

He shrugs. "Don’t you need some shoes?"

She shakes her head. "Let’s walk toward the school," she says.

They pass his grandmother’s house, then two, three, four streetlights. There’s just enough twilight left to
see where the tops of the trees meet the sky. Sprinklers are going on most of the lawns. When she can, she walks in the edge of the grass, where it smells earthy and feels good.

Russell talks and talks. Marlyse likes the sound of his voice—it makes him solid, a whole person beside her.

They reach the gates of the elementary school. They’re locked, but there’s a low retaining wall at one end, enough of a shelf to sit on.

Russell scoots up on the wall. "Check this out," he says. He opens the tin box.

Inside are lots of tiny compartments filled with rocks.

"Some of these are common quartz and feldspar," he says. "But then some of them are semi-precious stones." He turns one over. "Here’s a lapis. And here’s an amethyst. Did you know the amethyst is really a kind of quartz? What makes it special is its color and clarity." He holds one up in the fuzzy, yellow glare of the streetlight. "See what I mean?"

"They’re beautiful," she says. "Where did you get them?"

"Some I’ve found. Some I’ve bought at shows. I trade."

She reaches into the box, rubs one between her
fingers. "I love to touch them." She lifts out a dark one with a crinkly surface, weighs it in the palm of her hand.

"The thing is," he says. "They’re so interesting. If you see a big hunk of rock by the side of the road, you don’t even think about it. But one of these little stones, you can look at it over and over and keep noticing different colors, and all the facets, how the different minerals shine."

Marlyse is happy for the rocks. She keeps a smooth one clenched in the palm of her hand. "Did you really read Gulliver’s Travels?" she asks.

"Not yet." He closes the lid of the box and strokes the top of it with his thumbs. "But I think I’d like it."

"I can lend it to you," she says. She opens her palm and rolls the gray stone forward and back.

"That’s polished turbidite," he says. He touches her hand and holds it.

She sees her hand in his, the first time she’s ever seen her hand held by a stranger.

Russell says, "You’re so pretty."

She feels his cheek next to hers, turning slowly toward her mouth. She feels the brush of coarse hair on his upper lip. Then his lips are on hers, and the shock of their softness, the unexpectedness of tasting him, reverberates through her body.
Two candle-like lamps hang on the wall above the casket with a crucifix between them. She tries to pray.

Her soul is clean. She went to confession three weeks ago and nothing much has happened since then. Nothing much ever happens. Confession is a joke. She doesn’t dishonor her parents, commit adultery or covet her neighbors’ goods. She makes things up in the confessional box--she talked back three times, lied twice--but in fact, her confession is the only lie she tells.

But...Russell, she suddenly remembers.

She looks up at the crucifix and slowly says some Hail Marys.

She loves Jesus, but hates the idea of the crucifix--hates the stories of the death of Christ. She hates those pages in the family Bible, the thick, slick, gory pictures with the glorious-sounding names: "The Scourging at the Pillar," "The Crowning with Thorns." And--she usually doesn’t even let herself think of it--the nailing of the hands and feet.

When she was small and afraid of her own death, she would lie awake and think, how could it be? The planets, her parents, without her? It will be, a voice inside her said. Her mother always said she should try to think about
the angels. So she would conjure up angels--huge, white-winged, terrifying--and wait for them to save her.

Now the old question is back. How can it be? It might help if she could just locate the place where Nanna has gone, find it on some map of the constellations. Not the body--she knows that goes in the ground. But the Nanna part. The part she misses. The part she can't believe will never be back again.

She kneels until her knees are sore, stands, touches the edge of the casket, and turns away. A stranger is watching--a neighbor of Nanna’s before Nanna moved in with Marlyse’s family--head cocked pityingly to the side. Marlyse decides this place is like the zoo, people standing at the cages watching the animals grunt and spit and pick at one another. She’s sure everyone is waiting for her to cry.

She has hardly been able to wait for the coming of darkness, for her parents to bring her home. Russell had been sight-seeing all day, and the day was too long. She tried to read her book and write in her journal and study constellations to find in the night sky.

Finally, she is kissing Russell again. They are kissing with their lips and tongues, while holding hands or
with him touching her hair. They kiss at the picnic table, under the trees, against the fence. All these ways. She wants to be kissing him more than she has ever wanted anything before.

But then with his hands on her waist, she thinks she has felt his fingers slip under the hem of her shirt.

"No!"

"What!"

She looks down. His fingers rest safely on top of her shirt, but her heart is so near to leaping from her throat that she thinks she will suffocate on it. "Don’t you know," she yells, "that my grandmother has just died!"

Inside the house, she stands at her grandmother’s bedroom door. She hasn’t entered it in two days. She takes a step into it, into the dark.

She throws the switch and the small lamp on the endtable next to the bed lights. She sits on the edge of the bed, then stretches out, her head on the chenille covering the pillow, her sneakers jutting over the side of the spread. She looks at the ceiling. This is the ceiling her grandmother looked at night after night before going to sleep.

She wonders what’s happened on All My Children. She
wonders if Nanna can keep track of it from heaven, or if she knows all of it now without having to watch.

She rolls over on her stomach, across the bed. Her wrists dangle over one side, her ankles over the other. She wonders if Nanna is watching her, and if she would approve. Once, she heard Nanna, after a rousing bingo game at St. Mary's, trash the idea of eternal damnation—Nanna with her sleek, movie-star pageboy and delicate, papery skin, looked beautiful at bingo. Her lips, broad and flat, tugged against her teeth when she grinned. "Hell was invented by the priests to scare the pants off everyone," she said, tittering from the excitement of her evening. That was when Marlyse, too, decided she didn't believe in it.

She lifts her head. In her line of vision is a chair draped with clothes.

She springs off the bed, takes a housedress from the chair in her hands. Its lily of the valley smell does something strange to her insides. She trembles where her heart and lungs are pressing tight together. She holds the dress to her nose, hoping she can never breathe all the smell in it out. She holds it up to her body, across her chest, and looks in the mirror. The neckline scoops across her tee-shirt, a couple of sizes too small.

On the bureau is a plain, thick candle. She knows
where the matches are in the top drawer, how to lift the glass globe off the candle to light it. She does it. She and Nanna used to watch the yellow glow in the mirror. She sifts through the costume jewelry in that top drawer--sets of button earings, lengths of knobby beads. She tucks her hair behind her ears, clips on a pair of earings, takes a tube of lipstick and writes "MARGIE" across the mirror--her grandmother's name. Her reflection is broken by red lines, and wavers in the yellow light.

She leaves her grandmother's room, and enters her own. She lies down in the dark. Then she remembers something.

Back in Nanna's room, she rummages only a short while among the panties and slips before she finds what she's looking for: a small, zip-lock plastic bag containing a chunk of beautiful yellow stone they bought together at the Living Creatures Fossil Museum in upstate New York.

"When I get home," Russell says, "I'll have a job for the rest of the summer. I'll work at the nursery--water plants, help with deliveries, cut some lawns--whatever they have for me to do. The owner's a friend of my dad's." He pauses. "First thing, though, I'll write to you."

She's dressed for her grandmother's funeral service
and he's dressed for his trip home on the plane.

"I'm sorry if I acted funny last night," she says.

"No, really. You didn't. I understand."

"At least I can give you this before you leave." She gives him her yellow stone.

"Wow!" he says. "It's just great. Do you know what it is?"

"No, do you?"

He shakes his head and reaches in his pocket. "I have something for you, too. It's a piece of rose quartz. You could have someone put it on a necklace for you."

She takes it solid in her hand and kisses him, thinking, now she knows what kissing is; she knows how to do it.

When Russell gets home he'll consult a book and identify her gift. He'll find out it's brimstone—a kind of sulphur—easy to ignite, readily burned.

And sitting in church, she'll have a hard time keeping her mind on the service. She'll think about Russell. If she writes to him, what will she say? Will she sign, "Love, Marlyse"? If she could have one of them back, Russell or Nanna, which one would it be?
Pat, my huge, shaggy brother, was ranting about gays in the military. Drunk, sloppy, he climbed on the table. "We can't have this become a cultural norm!" he shouted. "It's...." I waited for meaningful words to fail him. "Disgusting!"

Swinging his head from side to side, he was a fully-adult and ridiculously out-of-place bear at the circus that I could jump, wrestle. ("Here's a cone-shaped hat for your head!") Mike excused himself to check on our girls. I folded my hands.

Everyone else at the table was mute, stifled like squirrels with nuts in their cheeks. None of them wanted to go against me--"the liberal"--because I'm family and they wouldn't think of alienating me. But their side was my brother's.

I said: "How can there be two standards for human
beings? Let the army dictate conduct, but not the right to serve." Pat, drooling, nearly drove his fists through the table.

I have earned the title of liberal in my family. I have a history: one little girl conceived out of wedlock, two in; the first two by my first husband, one by my last. "Here's a fact," I continued, while my mother's eyes grew rounder and more terrified to see us argue, and my father tapped three fingers on the table edge--argue over what? he might have said. Gays aren't even human beings. "Counting uncles and cousins, there are twenty-six males in our immediate family. Statistically speaking, one of them's bound to be gay."

That was about a month ago, the Sunday before my best friend called me to tell me she was pregnant. Frankly I laughed out loud. The irony of it, the incredibly bad timing. She's thirty years old and a year away from being married to a guy she's madly in love with. "Guess you'll be pushing up the wedding date," I said.

Paulette groaned and then sobbed. "Oh, God!" she said. "What'll I do? I'm sick I'm so sick!"

"Don't take anything," I said. "Eat small amounts."

"But what'll I do?" she said. "What'll I do?"
"Well, maybe you can work something out at the office." We work together in the Manhattan offices of Scholastic Magazines. The maternity policies are pretty progressive. "Come in late in the mornings, stay later at night. I've heard about these patches you can get for your wrists now, or your ears, I'm not sure, but we can look into it."

She sighed loudly and for a minute I thought she dropped the phone. "Paulette?"

"Nancy," she said. "Nancy, you're not listening. I'm asking you, what'll I do?"

Last spring I helped my mother plant a garden. My younger brothers had cleared a small plot for her between the white ceramic bird bath and the bright green corrugated edging that bordered the forsythia against the fence. I helped her as she bent over, muttering, in her favorite polyester house slacks. She wanted in her garden lettuce and tomatoes—for salad. I said, "You never get lettuce and tomatoes together. So what you'll have is lettuce for half the summer, and tomatoes later, for making sauce." I said, "What will you do with all the tomatoes? Unless you can them?" My mother doesn't can tomatoes. Canned tomatoes come from the store. Red Pack—or Progresso, if
it's on sale.

My mother looks like Dr. Ruth Westheimer, only jowlier, with darker skin and beauty parlor-curled and hennaed hair—but small and tough and wiry like that. She held a box of sickly green flats she’d bought at Food Club and knit her brows. "Salad," she said. "All I want is salad." It was too much for her. She wanted a dozen of each—lettuce plants and tomato bushes.

I said, "How about brussel sprouts, swiss chard, long thin French beans?"

She laid the flats in the moist dirt. She said, "Why don’t you buy a house? Why don’t you move out of the city? Pat got that beautiful house, so close. You could have a garden. Then you could bring me brussel sprouts and swiss chards. And you and Mike wouldn’t have to drive so far to bring the girls."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Lettuce and tomatoes—have it your way."

"And these," she added. She unwound a rubber band from the stems of half a dozen red and green pinwheels. "They chase away the bugs."

"Mom, they don’t do that. A few birds maybe. Not even. They’re just for looks. And if you really want to know, they’re kind of gaudy."

"Gaudy?" She stared at them.
"Don't worry," I said. "If you like them, put them in. They're colorful!"

There must be statistics to show that a daughter is bound to fail in her mother's garden.

The next evening after Paulette called with her news, I took the girls to visit her in her apartment. They stood ahead of me, each one a head taller than the other, spangled barrettes flashing in their baby-fine hair, when I rang at Paulette's door.

"I called in sick," she said, opening, and like a blind old woman, turning away. She trailed a blanket over her shoulders. "I told them I had the flu." She looked like hell.

"Are you still retching?" I said.

"Not for the last couple of hours."

I looked around her apartment—all her stark, black and white Ansel Adams prints in shadow. It was dark and sad. There was only one light on in a corner, high on a bookcase. The couch was piled with pillows and blankets, curved in the soft outline of Paulette's body. It was gloomy and the girls, cowed by it, moved off to a corner and huddled over the tiny Little Mermaid dolls they'd hid in their pockets.
"Come on," I said. "Let's shake this. You'd think you were in mourning here." I reached for a light switch.

"Don't!" she said. "I need this. I can't stand that glare. I'm not happy. I'm in no mood to celebrate."

So, I thought, she's in shock over the surprise. She can't believe how sick she feels. She wasn't prepared.

"You might wash your hair," I said. "That might start to help you brighten up." Her hair was yanked back in a kerchief tied up like a babushka.

"The thought of putting my head under the sink," she said. She turned visibly greener. "The thought of doing anything. My arms and legs feel like lead is flowing through my veins. I'm exhausted."

"Puking takes a lot out of you." I said. "You need nutrients. I can go to the store and whip up some minestrone in a minute."

She dropped to the couch and let the blanket fall around her like a shroud. "No, I'm mentally exhausted."

She was convincing me that her mood was too rigid a wall to break down. Maybe she just needed to indulge herself a little bit. Or maybe she was distraught over being so far from Marty. Marty lived in Syracuse, was getting his Ph.D. there.

"Are you in contact with Marty--regularly?" I asked. "You should have an open connection to his place at a time
like this. Maybe he can even come down for a few days till you work this through."

"I can’t get him. He’s with Outward Bound this week. He’s on a river somewhere. I can’t reach him." She burst into tears.

"Oh," I said. "That’s the problem. Well, I know Marty. I love Marty. He’s a level-headed guy. He won’t go over the deep end on this. So, it happened. So, we’ll deal with it. That’s what Marty will say. It’ll be okay!"

Paulette was watching my girls across her dim living room. "I know. He’ll be so reasonable. We’ll talk and talk and by the end of the week I’ll be having a baby."

"So?" I said. "Isn’t that what you want? For all of this to work out? To have Marty on your side, an ally when you go to your parents?"

She bit a piece of cuticle and ripped it off. "Nancy, have you ever considered suicide?"

"Whoa!" I said. This radical talk was spooky. "Sure. Everyone has considered suicide. But it’s just a mood, a funk, you come out of it. You have to give yourself time. This," I said pointing at her, pointing at Paulette, who was visibly unchanged (just the same body, no bulges, no hints at all of what was going on inside), "this is hormones!"

"Nancy," she said. "I need your help. I don’t think
I can live with this. And I can’t wait for Marty. The cells are multiplying by the minute, by the second. I have to decide. I think I have to do something about it."

My mother often spends Sunday afternoons taking my girls to the flea markets. She’s discerning—only works the big ones: the Long Island Arena, Roosevelt Field. She buys the girls little pink pinafores that could hold their shape under nuclear bombardment, slinky synthetic jersey sets and Osh B Gosh knock-offs that don’t last through two washings. When they’re especially bad, I can make her take them back. The trouble is, the girls beg to go to the flea markets with her, and when they go they come home with all these things Nanna let them buy. I imagine she gloats privately in the kitchen while the girls swarm over me. She knows I have this rule: if they choose it themselves, I can’t take it back.

My mother is not a confronter. Long before the big events of my life began colliding with one another like billiard balls headed for long, deep pockets, she steered a careful path around the controversy in my life. There were times when I thought her two cents would have been helpful somehow, but she never offered them. One such time haunted me into adulthood. I preserved it, like a grudge—-a
catastrophe I think of as "My First Big Date."

The guy was someone I met at my cousin's wedding in Queens, a friend of my cousin's new husband. I was dressed in green taffeta, and over my hair--my own long, unruly hair, which I had begun ironing (section by section, according to high school ritual--quite an art, not getting fried!) I wore a long, brown, silky and straight fall. The fall, which had cost me my last babysitting cent, didn't match my real hair exactly, but I tacked a green bow the color of my dress over the spot where the fall and my head met. I was seventeen.

My beau only liked to dance slow. At every opportunity, we slid against each other like a medieval couple adorned with breastplates--his cumberbund and thick lapels, my ruffled taffeta and padded bra. Toward the end of the night he asked me out to the movies.

But when we said goodbye under the pink globules of the teardrop chandelier, I tipped my head back for a kiss that landed on my chin, and I lost my fall--it slid down my back. I remember crying that night in my mother's arms. I was sure, so miserably sure I'd never see him again. He'd seen me with just my hair.

But I did: a week later he showed up as scheduled at my house. Mom asked him in for ice cream (he turned it down) and stood too long at the door making silly
small talk. We were late for the movie. I thought she took an unusual interest—probably because he had subtle, critical links to family. She should have known, I decided afterwards, should have kept me from going because she knew what came next—how at the drive-in movie was where things became strange. He took off his leather jacket and there we were—he in his thin tee shirt and I in my thin (though long-sleeved) blouse. All that protective armor gone. When he began to maul me, I was indefensible—except for my shallow willpower. I think I started to cry. He was disgusted. I couldn’t tell you about the movie. He drove me home and I never saw him again.

I didn’t cry with my mother that night—didn’t dare admit to my shame and the aura of danger that now seemed to color my experience. And she never asked about it. She never, in fact, seemed to notice that he never came back.

I called Paulette three times the next day from work. Time number one I got her out of the bathroom.

"I can’t talk now," she said. "I have my face in the bowl. It wants everything, every ounce I’ve got. Call me later."

Time number two was no better. "I’m crying," she said. "I’m sobbing." She sobbed. "My body is racked.
I’m in mortal pain."

I almost left work then, but I had two meetings back to back--meetings I had called. There was no way out of them.

I called a third time, between meetings. "How do you feel? Any better?"

"I feel like that quiet, that sickly quiet before a hurricane. That quiet when the wind doesn’t stir and the sky is green grey. I feel like that deathly stillness before something terrible."

I arranged for a babysitter and went to Paulette’s straight after work. I heard her turn the locks and bolts slowly, like a jailor. The apartment was still dark--and dank. "Open some windows," I said. "Let some air in."

"I’m cold," she said.

She still hadn’t washed her hair and had dispensed with the kerchief to boot. Her hair hung in limp, greasy strands. "Have you taken a bath?" I said.

"No. I’d be seasick."

"Well, Aunt Nancy can help."

I opened her back windows and a light, sooty, New York breeze came in. I ran the water in her bath. "You got bubbles?" I asked.

"No! Please! I couldn’t stand the smell!"

So I ran her a clear bath and helped her out of her
clothes. "Sit quietly," I said. I ladled warm water over
her head with a coffee cup the way I did with my girls, the
way my mother had done with me.

"My stomach's flat as a board," Paulette said. "How
deceiving. There's nothing left inside me but it. But my
tits! They're so swollen and tender--so full. It's
already storing up what it wants. The hell with what I
want. Already!"

I gave her a fresh towel off the linen shelf and a
fresh tee shirt and panties. I wrapped her in the clean
guest blanket and carried the stale ones down to the
laundry.

She nibbled soda crackers. I hooked the hair dryer up
with an extension cord and blow dried her hair. "Look," I
said. "This will pass. I know you don't think you'll ever
feel normal again, but believe me, all this goes away as
quickly as it came. There'll be other feelings. You'll
like them. They kick! You get so you know where the head
is. The doctor puts a stethoscope to your belly and you
hear its heartbeat!"

"Stop!" She was not crying but looked at me wildly.
"You don't understand, do you? I don't want to hear those
things. I don't want to think about those things. I'm
thinking about me. I feel as if I've been invaded, like
there's some alien inside me. Remember that movie we hate,
Invasion of the Body Snatchers?"

I tried, but I could not sympathize. I had never felt what she was describing. Even with my first one, the one I "contracted" before I was married, the moment I knew, I felt luminous. I was happy to feel like a vessel. I felt I had precious cargo. I felt chosen. My own sense of mission was how I battled my parents' anguish. Who could question the will of God? I said. All of their fears had to wither in the face of His overwhelming manifestation. I showed them how I could drive their shame and embarrassment--slithering, barking seals--back into their cages. I had the tigers of righteousness and predestination on my side.

"I'd better go," I said. I like to kiss the girls goodnight before they fall asleep."

Paulette walked me to the door and opened it as if it were a great weight. I slipped out and she stood with her face peering into the hallway. "Nancy," she said. "Please help me. I need your help. I have no one else. You have to help me decide."

I got home just in time to tuck the girls in. I looked up at the natty texture of their high-ceilinged rooms and thought, as I often did, of how lucky we were to
be able to live in Manhattan. We’d bought in early when our building, one of the few huge old pre-war buildings on the East Side, was just going coop. We bought side-by-side apartments and tore down the dividing walls. Mike and I could work and afford day-care. We lived where you could walk a few blocks and take the girls to a museum, hop in a taxi and see a movie at the Ziegfeld, take them to Broadway, to Nathan’s and a matinee. Mike also came from a family with little cultural conscience. We wanted our daughters to have vistas, to have chances and choices we thought we had almost missed.

Mike was reading Newsday and watching a Seinfeld we’d taped. "What’s up?" he said.

"I’m letting Paulette down because she’s pregnant and doesn’t want the baby, and I can’t seem to give her the green light, say it’s okay. I’m a liberal having a reactionary crisis."

"Hmmm," Mike said. I was sure he knew by my tone that he shouldn’t say much. He was good at pretending to be blase at appropriate moments.

I sat on the floor. "I spent every third year in my twenties being pregnant," I said. "It was a way of life. It was good. And the results. Anything else would be unimaginable." Mike had started nodding his head. He kept nodding. I scratched at my legs through the stockings I’d
been wearing all day. "I have this urge to go to my mother’s. I want to sit in her garden. Maybe there’s some inspiration in Nature."

Mike turned the page. "It’s getting late," he said. Kramer shuffled into camera range and mumbled something in Brooklynese.

I stretched out on the floor and rolled down my pantyhose. "I’ll be back by midnight. One at the latest."

On my way through my parents’ house I ran into my father in the living room. "I’m going to die of this war," he said. "I’m going to die of watching it every night on TV. What’s with this thing in Bosnia? Why the hell don’t they drop bombs, like they did in the Gulf?"

"The Gulf was about oil," I said. "This is more complicated, you see--it’s about people."

"Ho! It’s Jane Fonda!" It was Pat, coming out of the bathroom.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"And you?" he answered. And I remembered how many times I’d had quarrels with men over my frequent visits to my parents’. My divorce had been about that, essentially. My four younger brothers still lived at home, Pat and his family lived just ten minutes away--and me, I showed up at
my parents' house nearly every weekend. My excuse was always that my girls needed to know their Nanna and Grandpa.

"I wanted to tell you," Pat said, "that I met one of these 'fellas' you're so hot to protect. A new guy at work, a sickly-looking thing. Didn't last a week--got around fast what he was doing after work, the filthy places he went, the scum he screwed around with."

"And who would know?" I said. "Unless someone had been in those same filthy places to see him?" I didn't like the heat in my voice. If I lost my cool, Pat would pounce. "I know lots of gay people." I glanced at my father, who was easing out of the chair, achieved his full mountain height and tottered off to the kitchen. I hissed: "I know more gay people than you can shake your dick at."

Pat shook his shaggy head. "That's vulgar. You're disgusting. Where did you learn this?"

"I know tons of gay people. What you're talking about is perversion. The gay people I know are quiet. They're couples. They go to dinner in restaurants. They go to concerts. They watch TV at home, just like Mom and Dad. They're civilized. Not like some people I know."

"I believe you're taking this personally," he said.

"Why not? You do. Where did you get this nutso fear? From growing up with a girl's name? Pat?"
Pat threw his head back and roared, his big nose greasily gleaming. I stormed off to find my mother. I knew Pat’s name had nothing to do with his attitudes, though he’d probably had to deal with it. The truth was, everyone in my house thought just like my parents, except me. It was a distinction I clung to. It helped me know who I was.

My mother was out in the last bit of twilight with a flashlight, batting mosquitoes and fireflies (both equally ferocious to her) and nudging slugs into a Food Club coffee can filled with gasoline. "Disgust!" she cried over and over. "Disgust! Can a garden be worth this? Why am I giving myself agita? Where do these disgusting things come from? They come out of nowhere! They grow like the blob! I have nightmares about these things." She set the coffee can down and sat next to me in the plastic flea market patio chairs. "How are my babies?" she said. "Why are you here on a work night? Did you get fired? Madonna! You’re not fired are you?"

"No," I said, "I’m thinking. I came out here to think. Isn’t that nice?"

"I thought I smelled the wood burning." She scratched her arms. "I’m going in. The coffee’s on. How long will you be? I have ice cream and pound cake." She started inside.
"Send Pat home," I said. "I'm not eating pound cake with him. I'm not eating pound cake if you didn't bake it."

"Sara Lee baked it," my mother said, standing behind me. "Pat's not staying long." She was quiet and I could hear her coping with how she was going to skirt my agitation, win me over.

"Forget it," I said. "I'm coming in a little while."

So I sat in my mother's garden a while longer and thought about the matter I'd come to think over. But I couldn't hold it in my mind. Long Island was getting cool, the way it does at night--a little breeze coming off the South Shore--and I looked where the lettuce had been. All that was left were little mounds of stubble--what hadn't been picked had been masticated by the rabbits. But the tomatoes were just coming into their own. In the backyard bug light their green skins shone as if they were lighted from within, like eerie green jack-o-lanterns. They were large, their skins already tight and stretched. They weighed the vines down. Even where my father had driven stakes and tied the works up with red and white salvaged bakery string, they had wrestled the vines to the ground. There were so many of these glowing orbs. Hundreds! Enough for a small army! Too many for even a large family. I began to think of them like the slugs, appearing
out of nothing and nowhere, a kind of grotesqueness in their sheer numbers. There must be a lesson in this, I thought, in all of Nature’s wanton excess.

My mother brought me coffee and pound cake and wedged a piece of cardboard under a leg of the wobbly white plastic table.

"You look tired," she said. "Maybe you should get fired. This way you’re never home. It would be better for the girls."

"Mom, I’m not getting fired. No one’s talking about getting fired."

"What are we talking about?"

The steam off my coffee rose visibly. It would be nice to tell her, I thought, nice if she wouldn’t be shocked, if we could talk about Paulette rationally.

"It’s nothing, really," I said. "Just something going on at work." My mother had a cup of coffee but no pound cake. She never ate dessert. It was her way of holding to principle--she claimed it kept her weight in line.

"Were you ever torn?" I said. "You wanted to say something, make an issue of something, but you kept your mouth shut?"

She was thoughtful. "I think so," she said. The garden was dark, a dampness was settling, and my mother smelled of bug spray. "I think that might have happened to
me once or twice." Her fingers drummed the table.

"Well, I’ve got this friend," I said. "She’s got to make a decision. And this decision she’s got to make, I don’t like the way she’s leaning. But who am I to tell her what to do? She wants me to help her decide. I can’t tell her what she wants to hear."

My mother pressed her lips together, appeared to think hard. Her face was full of—I couldn’t pin it down at first, then suddenly I knew it—struggle. She raised her eyebrows and the struggle dissolved, and something just a little sad, a little disturbing lingered.

"Nobody hears what they don’t want to hear," she said.

"That’s true." I visited my own mountain of milestones—untimely pregnancy, marriage to the wrong guy, custody battles on top of divorce—my mother’s pain. Her daughter’s life crumbling into a scrap heap of statistics. But the blue light at the end of the tunnel—three little girls, Mike, all of us at her table nearly every Sunday dinner.

I reached over and drummed my fingers on top of hers. A broken pinwheel, stick snapped off at the middle and lodged in a hole in the center of the table, shook slightly, like a flower in a vase. I was considering how I had always come by the guts, the blind determination to do whatever I was going to do. It was clear my mother had
always kept her mouth shut on issues that tore her apart about me. She'd done it all of my life.

On the way back to the city that night, I made my mother happy. On the passenger seat a paper bag held half of the uneaten pound caked and approximately three pounds of huge green tomatoes to set on my one sunny windowsill ("They'll ripen!"). When I'd carried those tomatoes to the car they'd made me think of the heft of a baby inside you at around seven months. I knew, driving home, that I wouldn't be able to help Paulette decide.

But by the next morning, she had decided herself.

"I have an appointment for this afternoon," she said. "Do you think you could take half a day? I'm afraid. I don't know who else to lean on. You're the only one I have."

"But wait. Don't you just think you should talk to Marty," I said.

"I don't see that it would help. I've thought about it, but what does he have to do with it? For him it would be just an inconvenience--something you get over, take in stride in two months. Nancy, I know what he'd say. And Nancy, that's not what I want to hear. I don't want to be told to live with this. That's what I decided, late last
night. I don’t want to be told to live with this. Not now."

I picked her up at one o’clock. I had a cab waiting outside, and I went in and helped her out. She was green as my unripened tomatoes. She seemed as frail as a skeleton, like a starvation victim. Her eyes were puffy and red, underscored with dark circles, too.

The cab bucked and bobbed along the wavy, potholed avenue. We stopped twice at the curb at the Pitch In baskets, and poor Paulette did. We shot as straight as possible down Second, the stink of truck and bus fumes turning even my stomach. Once, when we stopped for a light, there was a travel agency at the corner and a huge poster in the window of a sheer mountain peak, and suspended from it, a woman rock-climber, spinning out toward the lip of a craggy overhang, limbs splayed and groping; she was suspended from a single rope, like a spider from its silk, a tenuous link to an invisible spot, but a link of her own making, a thread just thick enough for one.

The doctor’s office had that tense, superficial calm I have always hated about doctors’ offices—those waiting rooms where all those phantom diagnoses are wrought: that your ovarian cyst is cancerous; that you child’s migraine is a brain tumor. Paulette was whisked away like an
emergency patient, which left me with the direst of helpless sensations: the patient was going to die.

There was nothing I could do but flip through magazines. I chose the few with gurgling, cherubic babies on the covers and inside. I wished that Paulette had had to wait. I wished for things I might have said more forcefully. I paged through the photographs and remembered a favorite game: imagining what had really gone on before the shutter clicked. How many times the outfits were changed. How many toys were presented as bribes. How many fits the mother subdued. How many lunatic faces the photographer tried on. I wished to know what my mother might really have said. I wished for that conversation--like so many--we hadn't really had, and that we might never have an opportunity for again.

I must have dozed and when I awoke, Paulette was tapping the back of my hand. She was smiling--and crying. "It's over," she said. "Let's go."

She took her checkbook out and paid the doctor's assistant. She sighed deeply and slipped her arm through mine. "Can you spare a few more minutes," she said. "I'm hungry."

We walked to a restaurant at the end of the block. "It's amazing," she said. "It's over. It's simply over. It's gone. I'm me. I'm myself again."
The little restaurant we’d walked into was a new place—a place with soups and salads, French rolls and croissants. The tables were tiny but cute, topped with shiny black slabs like spotted marble. Each table had its own salt and pepper shaker and a glass vase. Each vase held a pair of fresh pink carnations.

Paulette ordered soup. "I can’t believe it," she kept saying—and neither could I. "I thought I’d need to get over it, physically and other ways. But I feel perfectly normal, perfectly unscarred. Perfectly unneurotic." She smiled at me and I smiled back, wistfully. "You helped me, Nancy. I know you don’t think so, but you did."

"Yeah?" I said. I hadn’t expected her gratitude. I didn’t think I deserved it. But I was immediately grateful; and then I immediately wanted to confess my weaknesses. My self-absorption, my terrible inherited predisposition to be stubbornly fixed in my views. It suddenly seemed desireable to have it back to do all over again, the right way, to be a real friend.

"You were there for me. You groused a little. You voiced a perfectly reasonable objection. But you didn’t stand in my way."

"Yeah?" I smiled at her and she smiled back. Her smile was so broad. She hugged herself, smiling.

The soup came and she began eating. She set a
spoonful on her tongue and closed her eyes. "It's delicious," she said. She reached for my hand under the table, and with the other shoveled in the soup. I was happy for her—how eagerly she was stuffing the life back into her mouth.
SLEEPWALKING

I remember the damp coolness in our double bed the first night—that’s what woke me up. That, and the sounds coming through the open windows from the kitchen under our room. A chair scraping across our linoleum. The lid clinking on our sugarbowl. Boxes tumbling in our pantry. In the window on the side of our house that wasn’t "attached," the curtain moved, sucking a breath against the window screen, and letting it out with a voice like my sister’s, but low, like a moan. I was ten years old. I went downstairs.

Ginny was sitting in the dark, having cereal. Before I could ask her what she thought she was doing, she said, "It’s very dark in here."

"Stupid!" I said. "Are you crazy?" I switched on the light.

"It’s very dark in here," she said again, and my heart
fluttered like a bird's and I felt my head swell. There was no cereal in her bowl. The Corn Flakes box stood upside down on the table.

"Ginny?" I said.

She looked toward me, her eyes unfocused as a sick person's, her lips red and open so that they looked swollen. She said in a dead voice, "I should do something about that light, don't you think so, Momma?"

I ran upstairs, afraid of her and afraid of what I had to do, which was try to wake my mother up.

Other nights I'd wake to see Ginny standing in the doorway, half a doorway tall. Her nightgown, a pale blue with ribbons of pink roses, looked yellowish-white in the nightlight from the hall. There were nightlights everywhere now, though Ginny never hurt herself and she kept up the sleepwalking until she was fifteen. I had my theory about why she did this crazy, special thing. It was because my mother liked her better than she did me. I thought she waited in our doorway those nights to tell me what was wrong with me.

In the summer of 1951 I nearly drowned. I was twelve years old and Ginny was ten. We were taking my mother's one-week vacation from the dress shop and spending it at
Lake Ronkonkoma. My father looked like a taxi driver behind the wheel of the Buick he'd borrowed. My side of the car was "his" side. I slipped my wrists through the looped strap and took the jet of the breeze from his open window till it dried my eyes and spiked my hair.

My mother, who couldn't drive, criticized his driving. "You're too close. No one gets this close. Can't you see? Look around." He'd stare at her, taking his eyes off the road too long, or speed up, crunch closer, swerve into another lane. His smells under my nose were the few mixed-up clues I had about him: laundry starch mixed with machine oil; sweet aftershave mixed with cigarettes and beer. He worked night shift at Con Edison and claimed to be in thick with the foreman who loaned him the car.

I leaned over the front seat to watch what my mother was doing. She slid her small black sunglasses farther up on her nose and readjusted the mending in her lap. With her needle she caught the edges of the holes in my father's cotton socks and jerked up on the thread. Her hands were short and square, like mine, weathered-looking and lightning fast. Every few stitches, she turned her face toward her window--always looking away.

Her hair was wiry and straw-colored like mine, standing out short and stiff all over her head. I liked
the feel in my scalp of combing my hair, and I thought just then of dragging a comb through my mother’s windblown mess. She turned. "Beth," she said, "You’re in the way of Daddy’s rear view mirror. Sit back, Sweetie." She tapped my hand.

I plopped back in my seat. Ginny watched me, her face white, smooth and pointy like my father’s, her hair jet-black and wavy, like his, eyebrows black and thick. She had been humming. She stopped.

"I’m a bird," she said.

"You’re not a bird."

"Peep," she said. "Peep, peep, peep." She flapped her elbows and shimmied in her seat. My mother made an unusual sound, a chuckle. My father said, "Don’t let that bird crap in this car!"

I had a bad dream--no, it was real: my mother’s arms reaching up, Ginny flying over the front seat, nestling her head in my mother’s lap, going to sleep.

My mother decided the sleeping arrangements in our cottage. Because of Ginny’s sleepwalking, she said, she’d share the double bed with Ginny--in the one real bedroom in the place. I got the cot in the second room, and my father slept on the couch. At night I heard every June bug on the
window screen, every animal scraping around outside. I watched the fireflies— they burned like matches about to flare, then went out with no flame. I’d hear my father get up—he was off his schedule—and pop a beer.

Eventually there was Ginny’s voice. She’d rattle the old dresser and the lopsided closet. She’d try the door to her room—it was locked. I worried because my mother slept like the dead. I thought of the nights I stood over her, watching the "0" of her mouth for movement, shaking her, crying sometimes, and touching a cold washcloth to her eyes.

In the daytime my mother worried about Ginny, took her to doctors who said there was nothing they could do. But at night she always slept through. I never understood how she could do it. I was glad I slept lightly, half my senses awake just under the surface, ready, expecting any minute to come to.

I stayed awake for Ginny in that strange place. I listened for the soft ratchet of the pull chain on the lamp, and when I thought I heard it, I fell asleep.

In the middle of the week it was my father’s birthday. We had lunch by the lake, and then a birthday cake. My mother had brought along the round yellow layers
in the cooler, plus sugar, butter and cocoa for the icing. She had four short blue candles for him to wish on. We sang a round of "Happy Birthday."

In spite of all the preparations, my mother looked bored. She said she was tired. She ate a small slice of cake, then lay down to rest in a reclining lawn chair. Ginny climbed up between her feet. My father sat on the edge of the picnic blanket in his swim trunks looking out over the lake, white chest tucked against the black hairs of his thighs, a mixed drink between his feet.

I had come across a blackberry thicket behind a neighboring bungalow, and for no other reason I can think of except that they were there, I picked some for my father's birthday. I didn't get many. The berries didn't fall off in my fingers they way I thought they should. I gave them to my father in a paper cup.

He tipped the whole cup of berries into his mouth. The next second he shot up and spit the berries into a bush. "Don't worry," he said, touching my shoulder. "Give that bush another week, we'll make schnapps." He rinsed his mouth with his drink.

My mother's hair was wispy at the edges of her kerchief. The black sunglasses cut into her sunburned nose. The hand she put to her forehead covered her whole face. "Momma?" I said.
Her other hand inched up Ginny’s back until her fingers were in Ginny’s hair. "Sweetie, just ask before you do things."

Ginny stroked my mother’s ankles. "Didn’t you taste them?"

I looked at the water, the blue sky. I walked away.

I swam out to the float, a big old wooden raft propped up on inner tubes and empty steel drums. I pulled myself onto it and flopped onto my back. My head was low and tilted. The float bobbed. The blue sky turned white with glare. Everything was swoony, quiet, warm.

The edge of the float dipped and I opened my eyes. Ginny stood dripping in her ruffled peach suit, her hair and eyebrows black and plastered against her head.

"You sleeping?" she said, as if another possibility was that I might be dead.

"How could a person sleep around here?" I said.

Ginny looked out over the far end of the lake. "Ho!" she shouted. Her echo sprang back to us. She cupped her hands to her face. "Ho! Ho!"

"Ha!" I called out, but my "ha" seemed to shatter over the lake without an echo.

"Watch this," Ginny said. She did a cartwheel on the float, just catching her balance at the end. She crossed her eyes. "Ooo, it makes me dizzy. Watch." She did it again, stumbling like a drunk. Then she added words.
"Humpty Dumpty sat on a waaaaaaaall! Humpty Dumpty had a great faaaaaaaall! All the king’s hooooooorses! and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Huuuuuuuuupty! Dumpty together again."

I jumped off the side of the float. I thought, I could show off, too. "Guess where I’m gonna come up!" I shouted. I heard her yell, "What?" as I dived deep. I planned to swim under the float and come up on the other side.

When I saw what I had gotten myself into, I panicked. The water under the float was cold and dark and deathly still. The shapes, what I could make out of them, were bulky, bloated. My fingers brushed an innertube, slid in slime. I gagged, turned, thinking to go back. I opened my mouth, stuck my tongue in the back of my throat, lunged at the water, pulled at it, pressed on it.

My father rescued me. On the picnic blanket, he slapped me on the back over and over. I choked and coughed, rolled onto my stomach, then my back. He hovered over me, dripping, unshaven--amazed. The sky was blinding and water ran out of my ears. I heard my mother’s voice. "Is she all right? Should we take her to emergency? Will she be all right?" I turned my face in that direction. What I saw was like a snapshot and I filed it away. It was too scary to think about then--though part of it was
pleasant: my mother’s bare, frowning, frightened eyes. It was the rest that cancelled out the comfort in my mother’s concern. Around her body, Ginny was wrapped tightly, wet and clinging like a baby monkey, face buried skin to skin, mouth to flesh, in my mother’s neck.

II

When my Jana was born, I was wide awake for it, and in all that pure, purposeful pain, I disappeared. My body was a tunnel, wide and dark, an aching, yawning tunnel, contracting, pressing against her. I screamed, letting everything go, and then the nurse put her in my arms.

She was my first, and holding her flesh, I felt all the good reasons for my own. I got her sucking at my breast, her tiny, bony mouth grasping and gasping, and I was thankful for the things I was made for. I already knew I was made for sex. Now I knew I was made for babies.

Ginny came to see us in the hospital. Jeremy picked her up at the train from Manhattan. She stood peeking in at the doorway dressed in a black skirt, a black sweater, and a red scarf.

"I’m not going to throw her to you," I said.

She smirked. She took a step into the room, arms behind her back, a black bag dangling from her hands, and
looked up. Her eyes roamed over the ceiling, down the pudding-colored walls, to the wide-opened slatted blinds of the window. She sniffed. "It smells like something in here," she said.

"It smells like babies," I said. "And hospital stuff." I thought it might be my milk that she smelled. I’d let her guess that.

She pursed her almost black-red lips and shook her black, wavy hair. I was about to tell her she looked like a vampire.

"No, it smells like a ship." She turned to Jeremy. "We’re doing a play about a ship and we’ve been imagining all the smells."

Jeremy sat against the covered radiator. He smiled and shrugged. He didn’t mind Ginny’s theatrics. From the first time I’d met Jeremy, I’d known he was what I wanted. Easy-going but strong. Still water running deep. The kind of constitution great firemen are made of.

"It doesn’t smell like a ship in here," I said, "and you know it. There’s no way it could smell like a ship in here. There isn’t one single ship thing around." She still had not said anything about or even peeked at the baby.

"There’s rope on a ship. I smell that in here. And lots of polished, oily metal things. I smell that too."
"Can you smell a baby?" I said. "Is there anything in here that smells to you like a baby?"

"Don’t rush me," she said, "I’m getting to that."

"Take your time," Jeremy said. "We’ve got her whole life." He grinned and glanced over his shoulder out the window. I could see a piece of sky between the buildings. It was glad it was blue.

Ginny raised up on her tip toes and took a deep breath. Jana pressed against my diaphragm, a feeling like being full after a glorious meal. Ginny let out her breath. "Yes," she said. "I smell a baby on this ship." She turned to me and Jana and walked slowly toward us, like walking a tightrope. "It’s a baby that was cast out on the sea in a small, tin tub."

"No," I said. "I don’t want a story like that. Make up something else."

"The sailors found her," Ginny continued, her eyes wide open, not blinking in a pretend trance. "And they brought her on ship. They feed her fish oil and seaweed juice. They dress her in sail cloth. She has a sharkskin blanket--and a crown of urchin shells."

She stood by the bed. "There’s one sailor who’s already in love with her. He’s vowed to wait for her, all her life, until she grows up. Then she’ll be his bride."

"What if she doesn’t like him?" I said.
"Let me hold the sea princess." She leaned down and I got a sick feeling. Her breath smelled like alcohol.

I pulled Jana closer. "You can look," I said. I undid the blanket around her head. In her puffy face her eyes squinted and opened, squinted and opened.

"C’mon," Ginny said. "You gonna be a miser?" She slid her hands under the baby bundle and lifted her up. She held the baby high, against her shoulder and cheek. "You are, ya know. You’re queen of the misers." She walked around the room, cooing and clucking at Jana. I tried to make eye contact with Jeremy, but he looked at his shoes.

I felt I was the one at sea then, my little bed like a boat adrift. No oars to pull with, the white sheets bound around, anchoring my legs. "Isn’t she beautiful?" I said, like calling through the fog. Ginny’s back was to me, gently bouncing with the baby, up and down. She turned. Black eye make-up ran down her cheeks. She bit her lip. "What would Momma make of this?" she said.

My mother had died after pneumonia and complications two years before Jana was born. She’d missed me being married. She’d missed Ginny’s high school graduation by six months. We’d both taken it hard. Sitting at the
kitchen table night after night, drinking black coffee, we held hands across the table, put our cheeks to the oilcloth, foreheads touching, and cried. At night we lay in bed like lovers, in each other’s arms.

I met Jeremy while I worked at J.C. Penney. He was a manager in bed and bath, the department where I was a regular on my break from accessories, pricing the new sheets and towels, feeling and smelling them, buying. I could save money better than anyone I knew, and I invested it carefully, in a trousseau.

The first time I ever saw Ginny drunk was after her graduation. I had a party at the house, which I thought would cheer her up, take her mind off our mother not being around. Of course, it didn’t have that effect, and I realized too late that no matter how the day passed, the only thing Ginny was going to remember about it was that Momma wasn’t there. But I bought soda and chips and made sour cream and onion dip. I decorated the house in pink and green crepe paper, for summer, and bought little paper and toothpick umbrellas to stick in everyone’s glass. My father bought beer.

From the start, Ginny was weird. She’d been in all the school plays, and most of her friends were kids from the drama club. She met them at the door, handing each one a can of beer and saying, "Initiation time! Time to grow
"up, boys and girls!" My father thought it was a gas.

By the middle of the afternoon, Ginny had them all in a circle in the living room, leaning against each other to hold each other up, four to five paper umbrellas stuck in each one’s hair or clothes. She acted out something from their play that year, *The Music Man*, a scene as Marian the Librarian. Then she started the whole group singing a chorus of the song about Marian, and while they swayed back and forth, she slunk around in the middle, stumbling into the coffee table and the bookcase and the TV. Her friends had made one mess after another in the bathroom and I checked and cleaned it for the third or fourth time. While I was mopping up around the bowl, where the boys didn’t care if they missed or not, I heard a crash, like something small, but heavy and glass. In the living room, most of Ginny’s friends were heading out the door, and she was walking around and around the broken pieces of one of my mother’s old crystal bowls. My father knelt near her with a broom and dustpan, smiling and calling goodbye to the kids as they left. Ginny stopped when she saw me. She stared at me blankly. The face I recognized was her sleepwalking face, that made me so afraid.

I held Jana’s christening in an Italian restaurant
around the corner from the little apartment Jeremy and I had. You stepped down into it, a long, narrow place, with red, plushy-upholstered benches along the length of each wall, then tables and chairs facing them. You could have tables made up for six or eight or ten or as many as you wanted, so we took one whole side of the room. The paper on the walls was fuzzy, red and gold, the lighting dim and yellow, the flatware heavy. It was the best we could afford.

We ordered big platters of pasta—linguini with clam sauce, fettuccine with red sauce and capers, shells stuffed with chicken and cheese in white sauce.

"You didn’t tell me everything was going to be fattening," Ginny said.

I was so touchy about my weight then, after just having Jana, that I couldn’t even take her joking as a joke. "Don’t eat," I said. Later I realized her complaining was a farce. She hardly ate anything anyway, and drank a lot.

I’d brought Jana in a white basinet with big white ribbons pinned all around and on the hood, and dressed her in a long white crocheted christening gown I’d saved for and bought long before she was born. I sat with her and Jeremy and Ginny at one end of the table. Ginny wanted an outside chair so she could get to the bathroom. I put my
father and his new wife down the other end. In between were Ginny’s friend, Hector, some friends of mine and Jeremy’s, and our two old aunts, Hetty and Leah.

Leah wanted to make a toast. She stood and held a swaying glass of our jug red wine. "To the first of a new generation," she said. "May God grant her all of our blessings."

"And none of our trials," came a low, thin voice that was Hetty, staring into her plate. She was a big, shy woman, my mother’s sister.

"Yes, that’s right," said Leah. She began to sit, then leaned toward the table and called down to me, "By the way. That priest of yours looked a little snooked."

Everyone laughed and my father said, "Only way any of 'em make any sense." He flopped a long arm over the shoulder of Pat, the divorcee he had married before my mother had been dead a year. With time, if it was possible, my father seemed more and more like a scarecrow to me, thinner, and lacking anything at all tangible inside. He already lived on his union pension and according to Pat’s plans. I rarely saw him anymore.

I lifted my sleeve over the forks and cloth napkins and squeezed Jeremy’s arm. He turned away from talking to Hector and looked at me with that solemn, deep expression that he sometimes wore and that could mean anything at
all. I knew he would keep that same poker face if I told him what I was thinking right then, that I wanted to go home and make love. Get completely naked with the baby between us—we’d done that already. There was just no way I could get too much flesh.

Ginny lit a cigarette.

"Hey!" I said.

"Cool it!" she said. She blew an unsteady stream of smoke in the air. She squared her face and thrust her chin at me. "I smoke, okay? What’s next?"

It occurred to me that I could stand up and wring her like a little chicken. Or slap her silly. I glanced at Hector who was gawking at us as if we were the funny act on stage. I decided not to be bested. "What’s next," I said calmly, "is that it’s not good for the baby. It might choke her."

Ginny rolled her eyes. She grinned at Hector and exhaled a smoky breath. She tamped out the cigarette. "My godchild, after all," she said.

Jana cranked in her basinet and I rocked it lightly.

Hector said, "Your sister’s got it, you know. She could be a star."

Jermey nudged me. "What are the odds we’ll catch Ginny in a show before she’s twenty years old?"

I let go of the basinet and looked down at my plate,
sliced a bite of pasta with my fork. "All I need’s a babysitter," I said.

"She’ll do some real off-Broadway pretty soon."
Hector smiled at Ginny. "The call went out for Taming of the Shrew. I told her she’d be a shoe-in. She’s getting too big for our little group."

"The audience is best off-Broadway," Ginny said. "Sometimes I buy a ticket just to watch them. They really appreciate. Anyway, Broadway’s going to the dogs. Rhinoceros! Who wants that? Give me Long Day’s Journey into Night, Glass Menagerie. Give me Jane Eyre!"

"She’s nostalgic already," Hector said.

Ginny pushed her food around in her plate with her fork. The others down the end of the table took second helpings or folded their napkins beside their plates. Jana began to fuss louder.

"Damn," I said. "I fed her right before we came down. I thought she’d last two hours."

"Well, ya got the bottles on ya. Right?" Ginny said, lifting her breasts in her hands.

I felt my neck blush. How could Ginny do something like that in public, especially in front of Hector, a stranger? Jana was really crying now, so I took her in my arms. People at other tables were starting to look around. "I’m going to the ladies room," I said.
The ladies room was what we called a "oner." No stall, just a closet with a toilet and a sink. One person at a time. I locked the door, and tried it to be sure. I folded the lid down on the commode--thank God there was a lid--and sat there with Jana. I unbuttoned my blouse and opened the flap on my nursing bra. Jana sucked hard.

There was a wild knock on the door and I flew off the toilet.

"It's me, Beth. It's an emergency. Open up."

Jana's wet mouth slid across my blouse and I didn't know whether to button up or what to do.

"Come on! I mean it!"

I unlocked the door and stood behind it. Ginny crashed in. She slammed and locked the door.

I stood there with my blouse trailing and Jana sucking at air. I held her over the opening in my bra. "So?" I said.

"So?"

"So go."

"I don't have to." Ginny looked dreamily up at the ceiling, laced her fingers behind her head and stretched. "I just wanted to be with you."

I could have killed her. "Ginny," I said, "is this some kind of a joke? Do you think you drank enough wine yet? All I want to do is feed this baby, and have her
cake, and go home. Is that all right with you?"

She pouted at the floor. "You’re mad." Then, before I could say anything she smiled sweetly and took me by the shoulders and steered me toward the toilet. "I really mean it. I want to be with you." I sat down and she stroked Jana’s head. "You don’t really mind if I watch, do you?"

It was incredible, how private I kept my nursing. Ginny and I knew each other’s bodies, better than some sisters. But with Jana nursing, it was different. It was mine—something Ginny couldn’t be part of.

I pinched my nipple into Jana’s mouth again, and Ginny squatted in front of us, smiling. Jana sighed and sucked, and I tried not to be tense because I knew it would be bad for her. Ginny rested her hands on my knees. "You’re such a good mother," she said. She stroked Jana’s head. "You really got big with all this milk." My breasts had swelled enormously. I hardly knew them myself. "They’ll get normal again," I said.

Ginny stared. "Can I touch it?" she said.

"What?"

"Your breast?"

Before I could really fathom what she was asking—or tell her, no, she had reached my limit—she touched me lightly with her fingers. But it was childlike, her touch, testing, exploring. I relaxed. "What do you feel?" I
"It's hard," she whispered. "Your skin is cool and underneath it's hard. It's special, isn't it?" She seemed to concentrate on Jana's face. Then she slid her pinky finger alongside of my nipple into Jana's mouth.

The most incredible sensations shot through my body. All my alarms went off. Mostly there was fear. Ginny was invading. She knew how to do that. I hugged Jana and took Ginny's hand by the wrist. She looked up, searching me with her eyes. I pushed her hand away.

When we got back to the table the cake had been served. Jana was quiet, so, even though I felt empty and wasted, we spent another hour there, and I watched while everyone talked and joked. I drank water and Ginny opened another jug of wine. She moved down to the other end of the table and bantered with my father and Aunt Leah. Jeremy and Hector talked city politics and I held Jana, my excuse not to get involved.

Ginny began to have a strange look about her. She was talking louder, and it seemed, picking a fight with my father.

Waiters passed by, two and three at a time, taking away empty cake plates and refilling coffee only if asked. One of them made his way down the side of the table as Ginny started back up. They collided. Ginny wheeled
around and slapped him. The waiter tried to catch his balance, but his leather heel went out from under him, and in falling he grabbed the end of the tablecloth and pulled a pitcher of water down. Ginny stepped over him and took her bag. "It’s a christening, isn’t it?" she said. We all watched her leave the restaurant and Jeremy helped the waiter up. Hector said quietly to me, "She gets like this sometimes."

III

The sound in the night was like a baby crying. I lifted my head. Mandy was asleep in her crib. I punched the pillow. The sound kept on. The twins were too old for feedings. Jana was six. Jeremy shook me. "It’s Hector," he said, pushing the phone into my hand. "It’s Ginny."

Hector spoke low but fast, the voice of someone who’s agitated but trying to stay calm. "She’s okay," Hector said. "She’s not in great shape, they pumped her stomach and all, but she’s okay."

The trip to the hospital was hot, the hottest night of the year. I held Mandy in my arms. Jeremy got Kenny and Kyle into their carseats. Jana lay next to me up front with her head against her father’s shoulder, eyes open, but expressionless, watching whatever it was passed through her
line of sight out the top of my window. We were cramped and sticky.

The elevated approach to the Midtown Tunnel was empty and eerie at night; it seemed it couldn’t lead anywhere. Then suddenly we were pouring into the winding, turning tunnel, yellow-lighted, that seemed constantly to be curving back to where we came from. But at the end of it, we were in Manhattan. Mountains of black plastic garbage bags reeked at the curbs. Jana stood up and bumped her head on the windshield trying to see the tops of the buildings. The stoplights made a perfect, straight row down Second Avenue, hanging in the dark like Christmas lights. Everything was hard edges, so real, the avenue two streets wide, all lit up but not at all cheery. We bucked along, in and out of potholes—and we were just about the only car on the road.

The Village hospital was small, and somehow cozier than I would have expected, in a bleak sort of way. Low ceilings. Home-type odors like Sani-Flush and diaper pails. Jeremy brought the twins in with the double stroller and I handed Mandy to him. When I left them all, they were huddled in bunches in the orange plastic chairs. It made me sad to see them that way, and then to walk away from them.

Hector was standing outside Ginny’s room. "She’s
sleeping," he said. He looked bleary eyed, as if someone had just that second got him out of bed. His arms were folded across his chest. "She called me to say she was going to do it."

The doctor I called said Ginny had not taken enough amphetamines to kill herself. He said what she’d had was a nervous breakdown. Seeing Hector standing there so concerned I realized how enraged I was with Ginny. On some level, always ready to come to the surface, was the feeling I had deep inside that Ginny did whatever she did to get attention. It was the same feeling that always made me think she didn’t have to be an actress. She didn’t have to live in a small, lousy apartment and work a million temporary jobs. She didn’t have to act like life was such a complicated, hard thing to get through.

"You knew she did pills sometimes," Hector said. "You knew that."

I shook my head. "I knew she drank." There was a lot I didn’t know or want to know about Ginny’s life. I tried not to let it be too obvious to Ginny, but I didn’t want to know about her acting, her constant chasing after roles; and then when she got roles, her obsession with the audience—they were dead or brutal or cheesy; or they were inspiring, spiritual, life-giving. It seemed she believed the audience went to a show not for the play, for what was
going on, but for her—to build her up or break her down.
It seemed to me completely self-centered and small.

"Thanks for taking care of her, Hector," I said. I stepped into the room.

"Who's there?" Ginny said from behind a white curtain.

"It's Beth," I said, in case seeing was not enough to convince her.

"It's the middle of the night," she said.

"How do you know?" I pulled the white curtain back. It had made her space too tiny, too claustrophobic.

"I always know when it's the middle of the night," Ginny said. She looked toward the window, where there was another closed curtain. "It's dark."

I stood close to her. "You got a private room," I said.

She ran her eyes over it as if she had just noticed. "I guess they didn't want me to infect anyone."

"I guess they wanted you to get some rest. How do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" she said, as if asking herself. "The way I feel is--"

I saw her eyes get bright, dart back and forth, looking for some made-up thing, some crazy thing to say.

"I mean, do you have a sore throat, a headache?"

She let her eyes wander over my face, my body, my
hands. "Sore throat? Headache?" Her voice got very low. "Yup. I guess you could say that's how I feel."

She reached up and I knew she wanted to hold my hand. I took her hand in my left and touched my right to her forehead. "You look like hell," I said.

"And I did it all by myself. I drank a half a bottle of gin, and did the doctor tell you how many pills I took?"

"Let's forget it," I said. "We can talk about this some other time."

"Beth," Ginny said, "Have you ever taken a pill?"

"Not without a prescription." I reached down and straightened the blanket folded at the end of the bed.

With fast little movements, she kicked her feet under the sheet and pushed the blanket off the edge. "Have you ever thought about taking a pill?"

I knew I had never thought about taking a pill, but I pretended to look back over my thoughts to be sure. "No, I can honestly say I have never thought about taking a pill."

"It's amazing," she said.

"What's amazing?"

"Well, Daddy drinks, and Momma took pills, and I do both, and you don't do either. How do you figure it?"

She was squeezing my hand so tight it hurt because she knew if she let go I would pull away, possibly run away. In fact, before I did that, I would have smacked her.
"Where did you get your information?" I said. I ground my teeth. She was not going to make me cry.

"About Momma taking pills? Her sleeping pills? I saw her. She didn’t hide it from me. You she protected. She probably knew how we’d turn out."

"Stop it!" I yelled. "You’re lying!"

"Shhhh," she said. "I’m the one who’s crazy."

Hector had come in. "Is everything all right?"

"Hector," Ginny said, "I’m tired of Beth never knowing anything, aren’t you?"

"Just behave yourself," Hector said.

"That’s all right," I said. "I’m leaving anyway."

Hector followed me to the door.

"Beth, come back!" Ginny called.

"I have to get a sitter for my kids!" I yelled.

"Maybe two!"

"Come back!" she yelled. "Come back!"

In the hall, I wrapped my arms around my chest and faced Hector. "So what’s all this about," I said. "You’ve known Ginny a long time. You’re her boyfriend. Why’s her life such a mess?"

Hector stuck his hands in his pockets and kicked a piece of paper on the floor. "I’m her friend," he said. "But I’m not the boyfriend type." He looked at me as if we knew each other better than we did, as if he was about to
apologize. "Didn't you know? Ginny doesn't really go for boys."

Ginny spent eight weeks in a detoxification and rehabilitation center and then I brought her in to live with me. By that time, Jeremy was store manager and we were renting a big old white house on two acres near the South Shore.

The first night Ginny was with us, she roamed the house all night long. Not sleepwalking--she was wide awake--but wandering down the stairs and from the kitchen to the living room, turning the pages of magazines, talking low to herself. The doctors had told me in warning tones that she was "nocturnal." I said that was not any surprise to me at all.

Jana, whose room was next to the one I gave Ginny, came to me in bed that night where I was lying awake, tracking Ginny's steps and listening to Mandy breathe in her crib. Jana had not smelled like a baby for a long time. That night she smelled like the outdoors--like the leaves that were starting to accumulate under the trees--and like pencil lead from doing her first-grade homework before going to bed. When she talked to me, I got a whiff of vanilla pudding, too, and I realized she had broken the
bedtime "rules" again and hadn’t brushed her teeth.

"What’s Aunt Ginny doing?" she whispered.

"She doesn’t sleep real good at night," I said.

"We’ll get used to her."

"When does she sleep?"

"In the morning. She’ll be sleeping when you get up." I stroked her hair and held her against my body. I knew her essence better than I knew myself. It was a calm but curious essense. Quiet but questionning. Watching.

"She’ll be awake before you get home from school."

Jeremey rolled over. "What’s wrong?" he said.

"Nothing I hadn’t expected," I said. Jeremy had been so matter-of-fact about having Ginny move in with us, much more than I was. He thought, the house was big enough. We’d all take it in stride. Where else could she go? If I’d thought there was any other choice, I’d have been against it. But I knew he was right.

I got up, scooping Jana with me. Mandy had started to fuss. I lifted her out of the crib and steered Jana back to her bedroom, bringing Mandy along.

Jana got in bed and I sat on the end and nursed Mandy in the dark. I figured our footsteps could be heard by Ginny downstairs. I listened for sounds and heard nothing. Jana’s breath deepened, and Mandy fell off to sleep, too--unusual for her. I put her back in her crib
without even changing her.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I listened. I hadn’t told Jeremy about the "new thing" I knew about Ginny. I told myself there was no way I could bring myself to talk about it, but actually, there was no way I could bring myself to believe it. Hector was wrong. It was another "bit" of Ginny’s to get people to notice her. I was through being shocked by her.

"What are you doing?" Jeremy said.

"Trying to hear what Ginny’s up to."

He reached past me and picked up the clock to see what time it was. "You know she’s not up to anything," he said. He lay back and yawned. "But if you’re worried, why don’t you go down and check on her?"

Water ran in the kitchen sink. Something struck the stainless steel—a firm, flat sound, not dangerous.

"The therapist said not to encourage her to disrupt the family," I told him.

"So who’s doing the disrupting?" He rolled toward me and slid his arms around my belly.

"See?" I said. "We can’t even make love when she’s around. She’ll hear the bed and all."

"Don’t tell me," he said, "that you think Ginny worries about what you’re up to."

I nudged him over and lay down. I looked at the
ceiling and felt the way I had felt nights long before as a girl, wondering what it was going to be like to feel a man touch me, to sleep with him in a bed, to make love, to have a baby—the feeling that somehow it was all going to be impossible. I turned my head and looked at Jeremy’s profile. "You’re taking her side, aren’t you?" I said. "Why?"

Jeremy’s voice was clear, unsleepy. "I don’t see sides, Beth," he said. "I see decent and not decent. Taking Ginny in right now is decent to me. Not ideal. Not what I really want. But decent. And not the worst thing in the world."

We were still. His breathing became even, slow, came from deeper and deeper inside of him.

In my thoughts I slid into a "play" I had attended night after night since Ginny’s stay in the hospital. In the play my mother and Ginny sneaked away to the kitchen, or to the bathroom, or to the bedroom—the scenes always changed—and my mother took pills. Ginny watched out for me. Where was I? I searched for myself all over the house and couldn’t find myself. Then, there I’d be, watching TV or doing homework or folding wash—"protected," as Ginny had called it, unaware. Unwanted. Really, unnecessary.

* * *
The view from my kitchen window included half our property and our two huge old oak trees, then the road, and past it, a field. Since we’d lived there, that view was like living inside a painting for me--beautiful and peaceful--like my life with Jeremy and the babies.

I stood at the window, making strawberry jello and stealing glimpses of the view, trying to "get" the feeling it usually gave me, when Ginny came down her first day with us.

"There’s no air in that room," she said. She finished tying her bathrobe and shuffled toward me, red-painted toes poking out the tips of thin green slippers. Her hair stuck up in wavy bunches--she had not even tried to comb it.

"We’ll open the window a crack tonight," I said. "But we have to be careful of the heating bills. Want breakfast?"

"No. But I’ll take coffee. You have coffee around here?"

I put the extra coffee I’d brewed that morning in a saucepan to heat. The twins, hearing voices, ran in from the living room. They’d been quiet for a whole twenty minutes, watching Shari Lewis and Lambchop on TV. I sat them at the kitchen table with milk and cookies, which, as usual, they dunked in each other’s glass. Mandy woke up. I took her in the living room, nursed and changed her.
Ginny was still sitting when I came back to the kitchen, holding her coffee cup at arm’s length. She said, "You’ve got this all down pat, don’t you?"

I didn’t like her tone of voice. "I just do what needs to be done," I said.

"I couldn’t do it." She pulled a pack of Viceroy’s from her bathrobe pocket and lit one. I thought of how the smoke would smell up the house, our hair, the kids’ clothes. "Don’t smoke in here," I said. "Smoke outside."

She got up without any sign of grudging, opened the back door, and stepped outside. She turned her back to me, looked out over our yard, the field. It was about 50 degrees out there. I folded canned fruit cocktail into the red jello. She smoked the whole cigarette, and bent down, probably putting it out. She came in, carrying the butt. "Where do you want these?" she said. I felt hot and angry, like she was making a fool of me. "In the trash will do," I said.

By the afternoon, she was still in her bathrobe, though she’d put on lipstick, and hadn’t wanted anything to eat. She’d wanted another pot of coffee was all. She went to the stove and poured the last of it into her lipstick-blotched cup. I moved the ground beef from the refrigerator to the drainboard to finish defrosting for dinner. She leaned against the stove and I felt her eyes
on my back. "I’m not crazy, you know," she said.

I turned around. "Nobody said you were crazy. You need a rest, that’s all. And when you’re rested, then maybe you need a little job, something besides all that acting. Something real."

"That’s the trouble with you," she said. "You think you know what’s real."


She went to the back door and looked out, then tapped with her fingers on the glass and waved. "Jana’s here," she said. I saw the yellow bus pull away. The door opened and Jana burst through. She ran for my legs and I squatted down and hugged and kissed her.

"What about me?" Ginny said.

Jana approached her, slower now, and spread her arms wide. "Come here, Ginny said. She sat on a kitchen chair and pulled Jana up close to her.

"What time did you get up?" Jana said.

"Before lunch," Ginny said.

Jana nodded. "Are you going to stay up all night again?"

"We’ll see."
Jana squeezed the pack of Viceroys on the table. "Did you smoke a cigarette? I smell it."

"Yes I did. Your mother says it’s okay if I do it outside."

"Outside?" She raised her head to check out this information with me.

I wanted to shake my head at how ridiculous this all must seem to Jana, but I nodded.

"Listen," Ginny said. "Tell me about your day. What did you do?"

Jana stared off for a couple of seconds. She was thinking. She never answered questions lightly.

"Did you have fun?" Ginny prodded.

"A little. Mostly we worked."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Reading," Jana said quickly.

"Good," said Ginny. "What did you read?"

Jana scratched her head, glancing around. I knew she was looking for her schoolbag which had slipped under the table. She was going to show Ginny exactly what she had read.

"This is like pulling teeth," Ginny said impatiently. "Jana, use your imagination. If you have to, make it up!"

"She doesn’t have to make anything up if she doesn’t want to," I said, wiping my hands on a towel. I lifted
Jana right out of Ginny’s arms. She was heavy and long. Her outdoor smell was pungent. I was getting a nervousness in my stomach. I put my face in Jana’s hair and kissed her, then set her down. "Go say hi to the twins and I’ll make you a snack," I said.

Ginny watched me get out the peanut butter and jelly. I decided, for once, to say what was on my mind.

"I don’t want you to talk to her about making things up," I said. "She’ll think you’re talking about lying. Anyway, she has all kinds of imagination. She’s a happy kid."

Ginny lit a cigarette and headed for the back door. She opened it wide and let the breeze blow in. Her shoulders were small and curved, and for a minute she looked just ten or twelve years old again. "Lying," she said. "For God’s sake. What are you afraid of, that she’ll become like me?"

I was afraid of something. That feeling in my stomach when I’d picked Jana up, that was fear. I hadn’t been so afraid in a long time.

I was sleepless that night and by five a.m. I was up for good, filled with more than my normal obsession for neatness and order. I ironed creases in my house slacks.
I fed Mandy and dressed her in a new outfit. I washed and set my hair.

When Ginny came down for coffee, I told her, "From now on put some clothes on when you get up."

Her lipstick was blood red. "What's the difference? I'm not goin' anywhere, not doin' anything."

Kevin and Kyle were sitting at the kitchen table with us in crisp new matching striped overalls, sipping orange juice from blue and green plastic cups.

"You're messy," I told her loudly, pleased when the boys stopped slurping and looked up.

Kyle bit the edge of his cup, making a chomping sound. "Stop it!" I said. He turned to Kevin and sipped quietly.

Ginny ran her hand dramatically through her hair, then slumped over the table, hanging her head in her arms.

The twins slipped off their chairs and crept out of the room.

I stood and cleared away the orange juice, then returned to Ginny's chair and rubbed her back. Her shoulder blades were small and bony, but her skin and spine did not offer the resistance I expected. My resolve began to crumble, but I had started this, so I tried to finish it. "You'll see," I said. "It'll make you feel better."

She folded her hands and rested her chin on top. I
sat in my chair again and tried to smile. She locked eyes with me and stared as if she could see through me and right out the back of my my head. "Beth, you don’t know what makes me feel better," she said.

I would soon begin to believe I didn’t know what made anyone feel better. At the stroke of 1:20 that afternoon, Mandy took a breath, gasped, and brought up my milk. My eyes shot to the clock. Jeremy had a 1:00 appointment and would be out of the store for the rest of the day. He couldn’t come home and take us to the doctor.

I felt something like panic sweep through me, knowing I couldn’t get to Jeremy. Mandy’s skin burned and I took her temperature—101. I crushed a tiny pink St. Joseph’s aspirin and dissolved a few grains in my milk. She spit it back at me. I held her, bracing my pelvis against the kitchen counter, staring out the kitchen window, while Mandy choked and tried to cry.

Ginny came in and sat at the table. She was dressed—soft red pants and a long, red and white striped top with a mandarine collar. She’d brushed her hair severely away from her face and pinned it in place.

It was as if I hadn’t seen her in a very long time, and standing there, I felt myself a teenager again, wary
and furtive, sneaking peeks at her smooth white skin, the even hairline, the dark, broody eyes. I’d forgotten how beautiful she was. It came to me like a thud in my chest, pressing out against Mandy’s bobbling body. The two of us shook like a couple jolted by an electric shock.

The kitchen was hot—I’d been baking muffins when Mandy became sick. I reached for the kitchen window and shoved it with the heel of my hand. It wouldn’t budge. I pulled at the neck of my blouse. Mandy’s hot, dry forehead knocked against my collar bone again and again.

"Beth," Ginny said. "Maybe if you sit down."

I turned to see her sitting poker straight, clinging to her Viceroy’s, frightened.

"It’s nothing," I said. "Maybe the flu. There’s not much I can do to make her comfortable. Just wait it out."

That’s where my mind was—on waiting it out. Waiting for Jeremy, waiting to get to the doctor, waiting for medicine—waiting for something I could really do.

Outside, the branches of the oaks shook in the wind. I saw the movement reflected in Ginny’s face. The whiteness there was not what I had thought—her skin was drained. Her eyes, too—darker, sunken.

"What’s the matter?" I said.

Her eyes looked through me still, past me. I couldn’t even be sure she was really talking to me.
The words came out of her, nightmarish, spooky. "You look so helpless," she said.

That night, the doctor diagnosed Mandy as having a severe bronchial infection. If I wasn't careful, it could turn into pneumonia. I dribbled antibiotics with a medicine dropper between her stiff, cracking lips. In my mind I saw her little lungs, swollen and congested. Dozing with her head raised against my body, I dreamed them filling and clogging solid, an oozing web, hardening into rubber.

At three in the morning I wandered to the kitchen with her. Ginny was there.

I poured a glass of water and sat at the table. Mandy wasn't crying anymore. Her breathing was so shallow and fast. Her eyelids fluttered, unable to relax in sleep.

Ginny's hair was loose and wild. She sat with her feet tucked under her on the chair and hugged her knees. "I've been remembering things," she said.

I looked at her but didn't say anything. Mandy was beginning to doze.

"Remember that friend of mine who died when I was thirteen? Remember that?"

I shook my head, not trying to remember at all.
"Leukemia. Her name was Karen Lohman."

I tried to let Ginny’s voice drone and not sink in. The girl had had frizzy, frizzy curly hair and Ginny thought she was so pretty. Then her hair came out and she wore hats to school—some little stocking cap things.

Ginny took a cigarette from her pack and tapped it on the back of her hand. "I never felt bad for her. I thought she looked even prettier in hats!" She put the cigarette, unlit, between her lips. "I adored her. I was infatuated."

Mandy heaved a deep, choked sigh. I remembered the girl. Ginny brought her to the house once or twice. "Why do you need to think of something like that right now?" I said.

She didn’t answer me. "I thought she was the beginning of something for me. I was so...honored, or something, that she would come to my house. I made plans around her. I dreamed up things we would do together, places we’d be seen together. I felt I was becoming somebody new because she was my friend."

She raised her head. Her eyes were wide. "Then she was just gone. I wasn’t invited to the funeral. Nobody knew I was her friend. She just disappeared. I could not get over it. It scared the shit out of me. I had lost her, and all the beautiful dreams I was dreaming, and on
top of that, I didn’t know where she’d gone. I had nightmares. I couldn’t sleep."

I closed my eyes and watched the patterns swirl behind my eyelids, the patterns of my blood boiling. "Why?" I said. My eyes were closed and my breath barely escaped between my teeth. "Why would you want to tell me stories about a dead child now?"

I opened my eyes. The cigarette, stained with her lipstick, lay on the table. Her face was buried in her knees. The back of her head shook side to side. "I just can’t get it out of my head." She looked at me, her face dry as bone. "And other things, too. You. At the lake. When we were kids. Do you remember?"

The room was quiet, except for Mandy’s breath, like a rapid snore. I stood up, holding Mandy to me like my own heartbeat. "No," I said. I carried my glass to the sink and for a second I thought I would not be able to let it go. "Goodnight," I said. "I’m going to bed."

On the second day, when Mandy was worse, my anxiety flowed to the twins, who soaked it up and oozed it back to me. They hung from my legs or fought with one another, until, late in the afternoon, Kenny pushed Kyle into the TV cabinet and split his lip.
It was while I stood at the sink, sponging blood from Kyle’s lip, Mandy starting her wheezy, congested, airless bawling, Kenny clinging to my leg, he and Kyle both sobbing—until all four of us were crying—that I realized I didn’t know where Jana and Ginny were. Vaguely I knew that they had sat together at the kitchen table when Jana got home from school. But now they were gone.

I climbed upstairs with Mandy on my shoulder, leaving the twins with blotchy faces, lying on the couch on big pillows, sucking their thumbs in front of the TV.

It amazes me how quickly the mind can latch onto something ugly, like those pictures that flash—how many hundreds per second?—in violent movies. By the time I hit the stairs, I’d imagined every way Ginny might be trying to get too close to my daughter. But then something odd happened. I couldn’t hold those pictures in my mind. What I saw instead was Ginny and my mother, meeting secretly, sharing my mother’s problems, her worries, her habits, my mother needing Ginny some way she’d never needed me.

I felt sick and headachy. The door was open.

They were sitting on the bed with Jana’s boxes of Chinese checkers and Chutes and Ladders open on the rumpled covers. They watched me, looked from me to Mandy breathing so stuffy on my shoulder. Everything was ordinary. But I had heard their laughter as I got near the door, and now
they sat so quiet and still—the fun on hold while they waited for me, the interruption, to be gone. It was worse than anything I could imagine I would find.

Some of Jana’s stuffed animals and dolls were propped up on Ginny’s pillow. Jana reached for one and held it over her head. "See! We’re making them play parts, like in a play!"

Mandy convulsed on my shoulder. I felt the pain in her lungs fill my own. I felt my own breath and mind connect and fall short.

"I don’t want this!" I yelled, head pounding, aiming my voice at Ginny, over Jana’s head.

Jana turned on me with a fierce look of disbelief. "Mommy, why not!"

Ginny looked startled. She picked up a small cocoa-colored bear I’d given Jana on her third birthday, squeezed its chubby waist and danced it in front of Jana’s face. "Because Mommy’s too tired for make-believe," she squeaked.

And not two hours later, I was changing Mandy on the kitchen counter, putting the first pin in her second-dozenth clean diaper, when I heard voices and shushing and Jana’s excited giggle, just inside the living room. The next second the two of them were standing in the kitchen
doorway dressed in baggy clothes. Jana wore the Confirmation dress my mother had made for me and that I kept in a bag in my closet, and an old hat I’d been given by Hetty, a little beige pillbox with a net veil. Ginny wore one of Jeremy’s dark suits. I looked at Jana’s cheeks, heavily rouged, her lips thick with red lipstick, and at Ginny’s greased-back hair and the black mustache drawn over her lip—and it finally sank in that they were dressed up as bride and groom.

I snatched Mandy off the counter and with my free arm I grabbed Jana by the wrist and whirled her around. "March upstairs, take it all off, and scrub your face." Jana stared at me for a whole horrified, confused second. "Mommy! You forgot about Halloween costumes!" She yanked her arm away from me and ran upstairs.

For the first time I could ever remember, Ginny looked shocked. "You’ve lost it," she said. "I’m supposed to be the one."

"Well, you are the one!" Mandy squealed on my shoulder. I shouted. "Who do you think you are? Look at you! This is my house! These are my kids! We do things my way! You can mess up your life if you want to, but you’re not going to mess up mine!"

Ginny squinted, like someone who has a migraine. Her hands were hanging, limp and pathetic, at her sides. "When
did you start hating me?" she said.

"I don't hate you!" Mandy and I battled, pitching hoarser and hoarser. "I just want you to wake up! You're normal, you know! You're just as normal as I am!"

Her mouth began to drop open. "I need a drink," she said.

I took a few steps toward her. I held Mandy tight to my chest. "You don't need a drink." My jaw was so tight I could hardly get the words out. "You don't." She started to turn away.

"Explain to me," I said, "all the things I supposedly don't understand about you. Let's have it. Just for starters, let me in on this business Hector dropped—that you 'don't go for boys.'"

She looked at Mandy, whose whole chest rattled, looked at the back of Mandy's head while I jounced the baby up and down in my arms. "That's not easy," she said. "I go for anyone who wants me."

The doctor prescribed a new antibiotic for Mandy and her lungs began to clear up right away. Jeremy got us through Halloween, buying the kids costumes and walking them door to door. Jana didn't forgive me. She was stiff—didn't let me touch or kiss her. She clung to Ginny: two
little bodies hovering in the dimness of the living room—
two little heads turned toward the TV.

And one day, while I was standing at the sink
squeezing green dishwashing liquid onto a yellow sponge, I
turned my head toward the back door. Outside, Ginny was
standing in what might have been the last bright warm day
in November, smoking and lolling her head from side to
side—singing to herself, I thought, the way children do—
and it dawned on me: Ginny was not leaving anytime soon.
She was not going anywhere. She didn’t have any plans.

"She’s never leaving," I said to Jeremy on Saturday,
over an early breakfast, in those few minutes before the
kids are up. "How are we going to deal with that?"

"Of course she’s leaving, someday," he said. "Have
some compassion."

"I have it," I said testily. I rubbed my head, trying
to rub the source of something, something like an old pain,
a nagging feeling that never left me alone.

Kyle padded in, trailing an old stuffed rabbit by the
ear. "You know what I think?" Jeremy said. "I think
you’re cooped up." Kyle raised his arms to me, but Jeremy
lifted him off the floor. "Take a break. Take Jana
shopping today. Stop thinking."
"What if Jana won’t come with me?"

"What if you play things loose for once and see what happens?"

Jana didn’t argue about coming with me. She acted as if she was doing me a favor.

I left Jeremy with instructions about the babies and was out of the house before Ginny got up.

I strapped Jana into the passenger’s seat.

"Will you help Mommy shop?" I said.

She nodded.

"Should we try Big Time?"

She shrugged.

At the huge discount department store, I took a shopping cart, but did not suggest that she ride. We browsed through housewares and picked up dishtowels. We stopped at health and beauty aids for toothpaste and razor blades. I remembered the days I’d done my shopping at Penney’s, those days just before Jana’s birth when everything was ahead of me, the beginning of my own family, my own life. Everything had begun to happen just as it should. Jeremy was a responsible man, a good father. I was a good mother; one beautiful baby after another. They all loved me and I loved all of them.

I looked at Jana and ached for how things were going wrong. Her disappointment in me was as deep and dark as
her six-year-old soul could fathom. I couldn’t bear that, at six, she was already on the verge of being her own person. My hugs and kisses no longer made everything right.

I steered closer to the toy department, hoping to let her choose one of anything she wanted.

She stood looking, stubbornly at first, and then sadly, at the rows of colored objects. She walked with me politely up and down the aisles. I lifted out balls and dolls and even a miniature plastic "real" stove. She wanted nothing.

I felt her grasp loosen from the cart. I was reaching for a box that held a game I thought might appeal to her in a more grown-up way, and then, when I looked, she had crumpled into a little heap on the floor. Her palms were pressed to the dirty floor. Her shoulders shook and she sobbed into the backs of her hands.

The box, the cart flew, and she was tight in my arms. Then I had no idea what to do. A blackness hovered so near my eyes I thought I might pass out. I said, "Jana, Mommy loves you." I said it over and over again. I, who had vowed never to be a mother who caused pain.

Some minutes later I was pushing the cart slowly, with Jana in the seat and no destination, turning the corners at the ends of aisles. Jana swiveled as we passed shelves of
Hartz bird seed and rawhide chews for dogs, trying to make out where the animal sounds were coming from.

She had never been in a pet shop before, a place, I had to tell her, where people bought animals to take home with them. She wanted out of the cart, and when I put her down, she walked solemnly along the row of cages. She watched the puppies for a long time, and then became transfixed in front of a litter of black and white kittens.

They were mostly black with different shaped spots of white on their faces and paws. They were huddled one on top of the other, their backs heaving with their breathing. She watched as a few got up and roughhoused, and she opened her eyes wide at me when they meowed. Finally, she pulled on my hand and whispered: "Mommy, I don't want a toy, I want a kitten."

I knelt down, and with her small, moist palms she cupped my face. "Mommy, please."

A breath filled my lungs. I didn’t even know I had taken it. Her answer came without any effort on my part. "Yes," I said.

She picked the one she wanted. She clung to my hand. We loaded kitty litter and a plastic pan. She trotted up and down the ailes, nuzzled my arms. At the cash register she wanted to be picked up. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her warm, flushed face into my cheek.
Driving home, I felt that super, tender alertness I had often felt when I’d got up near dawn so many mornings to feed a baby. That cool, calm, still feeling, looking out the window at the first light bringing shapes out of the grayness, the baby and your body and the world coming alive all at once. I turned down our drive and my house was there, a solid white house under two large old leafless oaks, a house under a sky white and thick enough to threaten an early snow, a house that had been around longer than I had, a house that had contained many families and that now contained mine. I felt the way I did in those early mornings. I was fully awake.

I let Jana out of her seatbelt and into the house with her bulky present.

"Daddy!" she said when Jeremy met us at the door. "Look!"

Jeremy watched me, probably for signs of what this could possibly mean, and whether I’d gone nuts.

"Aunt Ginny!" Jana yelled. We opened the box and pulled the small, frightened kitten out.

Ginny appeared in the doorway. "What’ya got, baby?" she said. Jana took the kitten gingerly in her small hands and brought it to Ginny. Ginny knelt down and Jana said,
"I got it for us to share." She placed the kitten on Ginny’s shoulder and the little black puff clung to the collar of Ginny’s button-down shirt.

I remembered now what Ginny had said, about us at the lake. That time I was twelve years old and nearly drowned. That snapshot I had of Ginny clinging so hungrily to my mother’s neck. I saw what she meant now, what she had remembered—her terror, my limp body, how hopeless it must have seemed.

Ginny smiled at Jana. She ran her hand over and over the kitten’s short black fur. "She’s perfect," she said. "Put your ear close here and listen to how she purrs." They put their blond and black-haired heads together.

I wanted to reach out now and comfort her, tell her it was not how it looked, I was not going to leave her. My head was pressed firmly to Jeremy’s shoulder. I’d have to wait just a little, because right this minute, Jana was in the way.