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As If She Had Three Days to See

Catherine L. Black
CUNY City College

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As If She Had Three Days to See

Author: Catherine L. Black (Kiki)

Faculty Advisor: David Groff

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Summer School

I.

Polly and Mary Pat flew to the mailbox like spring birds, but the postcard with silver glitter from Uncle Chappy wasn't there. He hadn't sent one for months, but they still waited.

Besides the card, he used to telephone from Pittsburgh to Sweet Water every day, asking "Is this a bacon or an egg day?" and the girls would tell him whatever they were doing at home on 270 Grant Street and on the other three streets, Thorn, Academy and Linden, that made up their block: a Harold Lloyd movie, the Snow White marionette show they were staging, stilts Dad made from clothes poles, or a birthday party at Connie's, Libby's, Peggy's, Ceora's, Jane's or Cousin E's where they'd have packs of fun playing Mumblety Peg, Kick the Can, or Chase the Balloons Around the Chairs (hitting them with a rolled-up magazine). Or they'd boast to their uncle if they got a green star for reciting Oberon's speech or playing at a piano recital. He'd write a poem about it. When they had a run-in with a dog, he wrote:

I wonder who frightened the Jarvis dog?
He ran like a honk honk and jumped like a frog
He made the Sprague girls shake and shiver
when he jumped over the rail and into the river.

The girls knew the cards weren't coming because last May Uncle Chappy's son Jamie had died in the European war. He made it back with only a bullet scratch but died of infection in a camp in Philadelphia on April 5, 1918. Their cousins who were old

enough went to war by the end of the previous summer. Polly and Mary Pat had swum on their older cousins' backs out to a raft in Hyannisport last August, and they had a picture of Mary Pat on Jamie's shoulders. The sisters had watched soldiers march down Main Street on their way to camps or Europe.

Later in the parlor, Mary Pat lay flat on the Persian rug and cut horse illustrations out of magazines for her Note Book. Polly sat up straight in her favorite chair, the armless kind for women's hoop skirts long ago. On a desk blotter, she drew a story of two girls in a tiny ribbon-bound book. There was a photograph of the sisters on the wall above them. The sisters pose in organdy dresses the color of the ocean that they wore as flower girls for Cousin Maggie's wedding last spring. Mary Pat stands on the window seat and Polly on the floor below her. Polly has reached up to hold her younger sister's hand. They are facing their friend Freddie Brown's house, which can be seen faintly.

"Do you think we'll ever get another card?" Polly asked Mother.

"I hope so, dear. Lord knows, we've called and written many times since the funeral."

Mother knew how big their uncle was in the girls' lives. He filled the gaps left by her ma and pa who they never knew, though they did have Grandpa Sprague in Brookville. The only connection Polly and Mary Pat had with Mother's parents was at night when they said, "Now I lay me down to sleep: God bless Grandpa T.L. and Grandma Clara in heaven."

"Do you think he's so sad he can't call or write?" Mary Pat asked, cutting out yet another horse for her collage.

Mother sighed. "I'm afraid so."

They paused and looked at Mother. Mary Pat thought of his voice on the phone that always sounded as if he were about to laugh. Polly recalled how he called her Wild Rose because of her pink cheeks. They both remembered his handsome face with the curly mustache.

“Say!” Mother said, looking over her brother Chappy’s cards to the girls. “Look at these. silly soldiers.” The girls crowded around Mother. One postcard was a drawing of a boy soldier about six years old marching and swinging one arm in front of him. He carried a huge rifle, and the caption read, “And Dad Said Be a Man.” Another showed a caricature of a tall skinny soldier and a fat short soldier. They wondered why people would make cards about soldiers funny or draw a picture of a boy soldier about Mary Pat’s age. They remembered how excited Jamie and their other cousins were about the war.

Polly asked, “Can’t we go see Uncle Chappy and barge in?”

“Let’s go, Mother. Please!” Mary Pat pleaded. “We can take the train over the bridge to Pittsburgh and get the fericular —.”

“— Funicular,” Polly said.

“—funicular and trolley to his house,” Mary Pat continued. “Please, Mother.”

“Let’s see when you and Daddy get back from Grandpa’s and Mary Pat and I get back from Cape May,” her Mother suggested. “If there’s no card, we’ll pick up the phone and call. You can call him, Polly.”

Polly was happy they were splitting up to visit different relatives, and she had Grandpa to herself. She loved visiting the farm in Brookville not too far away in the Pennsylvania countryside where Grandpa, Daddy, Chappy and their sister Anna grew up.

She loved that Grandpa had been in the Civil War. She didn't like history class, but she liked hearing stories from her Mother like the time her mother's Aunt Kate who was a nurse in the Civil War found a cannon ball in Yorktown she kept. Dad said Yorktown was one of Grandpa's stops in the Civil War when he was a captain. She liked that Mother's aunt and Dad's dad both stopped in the same town. The ball was rescued when Great Aunt Kate's house was torn down. Grandpa T.L. was coming down the street and saw boys playing with the cannon ball. He rescued it. She looked at it on the parlor mantle now.

Grandpa never told stories about the war. The bits she knew were from Mother and Dad. Grandpa didn't say much anyway, but when he did say something, it wasn't about the war. Like Uncle Chappy, he wanted to know what she and her sister were doing.

"I promise I'll call Uncle Chappy when I get back," Polly said.

II.

The sunset had the whole sky to show itself off at the Brookville farm. From her window, she could see the field Mary Pat and she would race across to the edge though she couldn't run as fast as her younger sister. They would roll down the hill, squealing and panting, to the creek, where they would make villages of mud and pebbles. Polly ran and rolled today from habit, but she felt a little silly doing it alone. She skipped making villages — she had a better project — a birthday card! Although the China ink drawing didn't really look like Grandpa, it had the beard, the half-closed eye he got from the Civil War wound that looked like he was winking at her, the cane and — to top it off — Polly

and Mary Pat poking fingers into the bullet hole in his wrist like they always did. Polly drew chickens racing around the border. She prayed Daddy wouldn't call her to dinner. Her poem! She wrote it hurriedly inside the homemade card.

“Pol-ly! Din-ner!” Daddy called.

“Coming!” Polly yelled. She scribbled, “Your favorite granddaughter, Polly Ann Sprague, August 15, 1918.” Gee, good thing Mary Pat didn't come to the farm this time. She'd be mad!

Polly dashed down the front stairs and through the right-hand parlor to the dining room. Crystal and china reflected candlelight from the chandelier and candelabras. Grandpa sat at the head of the table. Daddy and Aunt Anna looked alike, tall the thin and serious. Uncle Sam was very different, big and red-faced. Cousin Tinka huddled between her parents. Polly took the seat next to Daisy, the housekeeper, whose braids were held in glittery combs. She warmed paraffin over a candle and gave it to Grandpa, who plugged up the hole in the roof of his mouth so he could eat.

The talk drifted to Jamie. They talked about how in summers when he would visit Brookville he led the young ones on hikes. As the oldest, he was the first of numerous cousins to learn to swim, to go to college, to wear a tux, to play the banjo and to go to war.

Anna said, “In Pittsburgh he was a daredevil. He'd swing from one railing to another under a bridge near the house.”

Talking about Jamie began to sadden everyone so they grew still.

Dad tried to stop the silence from taking over their dinner. “Just like Chappy,” he said. “We always copied big brother, didn't we Anna?”

“He hasn’t sent us any postcards,” Polly blurted out.

“He didn’t send his father a birthday card,” Dad said.

“Oh” was all Polly could say. Uncle Chappy hadn’t sent a card. He hadn’t even come to his father’s birthday. He’d become the Hermit on the Hill.

After they had cake, Daisy announced, “Polly has a surprise for her grandpa.”

Everyone laughed when Polly jumped up so fast her chair screeched. She read her poem, and she did a little pantomime at the same time.

Grandpa’s beard is white
It’s a snowy sight
What do you think
of his wink?
He plugs up to eat
That’s a real treat!
I like his hoarse talk,
his wobbly walk.
Happy birthday!

Nobody did anything. Their faces looked like the dolls on Polly’s shelf, with the forever half-smile.

“Let’s go for a walk,” said Aunt Anna. That meant go to the outhouse. “Wait on the porch.”

Polly sat on the swing and studied the porch roof decoration that Mary Pat called summer icicles. Aunt Anna came out with a lantern, and without a word, led the way.

Halfway to the outhouse, Anna said, “Polly, how could you? Your grandpa lay in that battlefield for days. Maggots saved him — they ate the rotten flesh. Otherwise he would have died in camps like thousands did and you’d have no grandpa.”

Polly lingered in the outhouse, scrunching up her face to block tears.

Later, from her little sofa that ran across the foot of Daddy's bed, Polly said, "Daddy, I hurt Grandpa. What should I do?"

"You're a big girl, Polly. You've been seven-years-old for a whole week. Ask him to tell you about the war."

"Grandpa's mad at me. He won't talk. I could tell by his face."

"Polly, he's not mad. Your grandpa smiles inside. Wouldn't you be mad if you thought somebody was making fun of me?"

"Nobody likes me anymore, Daddy."

"Calling Polly! Calling Polly! Yoooo-hoooo! Anyone seen the chatty little girl with the white bow in her hair?"

"She's here, Daddy, but—"

"— Talk to him! Tinka's so shy she only talks to you. You talk to everybody. Ask him to tell you war stories."

"What if he doesn't want to?"

"Tell him it's for school. You'll think of something. You're a smart girl. Now go to sleep, Polly."

"Goodnight, Daddy."

The only sound at breakfast was the crack of knives knocking the top off soft-boiled eggs. Polly twirled the Lazy Susan, pretending she couldn't find the salt.

Daisy asked, "Who wants to go see the cow?"

"I can go with Polly," Daddy said. "Anybody else? Anna?"

“I want Grandpa to show me the cow,” Polly said, looking at her uneaten egg. “I won’t go unless just me and Grandpa go.”

Grandpa limped out to the barn, leading her by the hand.

III.

When Polly and Grandpa patted her, the cow, whose name was Bernice, closed her eyes and lifted her head.

Polly looked up at Grandpa and saw a grin make its way through his whiskers. She thought how seldom he smiled. She wanted to memorize his face as it looked now so she could draw it later. She wanted to remember the pattern of sunlight on the tree leaves above him.

“Tell me about the war, Grandpa,” she said.

Polly, Grandpa and his cane sat against the 200-year-old tulip tree so wide it used to take seven children to encircle it if they stretched to touch fingers.

“Polly, do you remember when we lined up tiny toy soldiers and played war?”

Polly giggled at the memory. “The boys slapped each other’s soldiers down.”

“Well, think of big men slapping with big weapons. Picture soldiers falling — 10,000 on one side, 7,000 on another — at places with pretty names like Shiloh.”

They listened a while to the rustle of tulip tree leaves.

“Was it horrible, Grandpa?” Her words came out like the bullfrogs in the creek down the hill.

“The camps were peaceful. We talked. Played cards. Someone would strum a banjo. Sometimes we sang.”

They watched Bernice watch them. They heard her moo softly.

“Tell me what happened to your eye and your mouth and leg, Grandpa.”

“A bullet entered under my eye, went through the roof of my mouth, hit my leg and ended up in my wrist.” He held up the wrist with the bullet hole Polly and Mary Pat had often poked a finger into. “I had lots of raw flesh for worms to gobble up.”

“Eeeeeuuuuuw.”

“They took care of me, Polly. They gobbled up bad flesh.” He squeezed her shoulder. The sunlight had made him shut his bad eye to a slit, but she could see it was focused on her.

Polly thought if he had died there would be no Polly. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the world being there, but she wouldn't be there with it. She got dizzy thinking about it.

“Did you know I almost died a second time?” Grandpa asked.

“What happened? Did you get shot twice?”

“I was almost hung up by a rope around my neck.”

Polly tried to be a big girl and not cry. She swallowed and looked at her Grandpa as he spoke.

He told her how people in Texas got mad he was helping freed slaves after the war ended. When a fire started and burned up part of the town, they blamed Grandpa and threw him in jail. They would have hung him, but troops arrived and got him out of jail.

“Why did you go to war, Grandpa?” she asked

His scratchy voice grew louder than she had ever heard it.

“I was in love with Abraham Lincoln. He asked for volunteers. How could I not enlist?” Then his voice became as soft as the movement of the leaves above them. “I was lucky. I would have died of infection in the camp like everyone el—”

Grandpa didn’t finish what he was saying to Polly. He leaned back and closed his eyes. Polly and Grandpa were no longer in the sun because shadows cast by the tulip tree had shifted while they had been talking.

Polly wondered why Jamie died of infection in a camp when worms saved Grandpa on the battlefield. Grandpa went on to be a Congressman. Would Jamie have married and had children? Would he have been a lawyer like Daddy? Would he have been an artist like she and Mary Pat were going to be?

Though Grandpa tried to stop it, a tear slid out. Polly watched it hurry down the scarred cheek to the safety of his whiskers. She didn’t know if it was because Grandpa was glad he lived or sad that Jamie died.

IV.

Rays of morning sun had pushed around Pittsburgh factory smokestacks, through bridge railings, along river currents and across the patterned furniture in Uncle Chappy’s living room. They managed to gild a bronze tray near the windowsill and spotlight the uncle’s unsent silver-glitter postcard — a little Irish girl in green. She was wearing an oversized bonnet. She held up her skirts and danced in buckled green slippers. The card bore the message:

*I got two letters from my nieces,
I was thrilled to pieces.
If I could write that snappy,
I'd be a happy Uncle Chappy.*

But stretch and reach as far as they could, the rays were only able to outline the china and crystal cabinet and languish against the smoked mirror wall around the fireplace. The family tree that sprawled between the windows was a blur, the Sprague family shield a red splotch. The determined rays crept up the legs of a desk near the fireplace and caressed items displayed on the open surface: cards with flower bouquets arranged in a circle, a picture of a family of four in bathing costumes, an orange and black-striped Princeton jersey, a tennis trophy, a baseball cap, a wood plane model, a ukulele, a copy of *Treasure Island* opened to its inscription page. Open letters with foreign stamps, infused with light, became angel wings.

A phone rang.

Slippers shuffled down a corridor from the furthest bedroom. The phone on a foyer table just through a living room arch clicked as its receiver was lifted.

The only sound was a crackle of electric current. Then a child's voice came through.

"Uncle Chappy? Are you there? I heard you pick up. It's Polly."

The electricity crackled expectantly.

"Uncle Chappy? C'mon, I know it's you."

A throat cleared. Then, hoarsely: "Is this Wild Rose?"

"Yes, it's Rose. No, Mary Pat. Go away! Stop it! Give it to me! Mother said it's my turn. Oh, all, right. Mary Pat says hi." A pause. "We miss your cards, Uncle Chappy.

Mother said there'd be one when we got back from Grandpa's, but there wasn't a card when we got back so I'm telephoning." Then in a small voice she added, "We wrote you letters."

"How's Da — your Grandpa?"

"I had packs of fun! When we went to see the cow, Grandpa told me all about his marches and battles and camps, how he ran and ran as fast as he could to join because he loved Abraham Lincoln, how he almost died twice because people were mad at Grandpa and almost hung him in a jail before he was rescued and in a battle a bullet zigzagged through him. That's why he looks like he's winking, plugs up his mouth and walks funny and if worms hadn't eaten his wounds in the battlefield, he would have died in ca—"

Silence. A cough.

"Oh, gosh. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Uncle Chappy. I was just trying to tell you about Grandpa and the cow."

His words wheezed out like the pump at Grandpa's. "Tell me about the cow, Rose."

"Well, we went to see Bernice," Polly began. As she spoke, she imagined soldiers, handsome in brass-buttoned khaki uniforms and high boots, marching down Main Street. One soldier, tall and blond, turned and smiled. Then she saw Jamie as he was last summer before he left for the war — in Hyannisport, tall and bony in his bathing suit — the striped sleeveless top and shorts — and she rode on his back to a raft in her droopy navy blue bathing suit and little white mob cap made of rubber.

When Polly finished talking about Bernice, she heard the question she'd been waiting months to hear. A giggle escaped in a little shriek when the question was spoken in that Santa Claus way her uncle used to have.

“Wild Rose, I completely forgot to ask: Is this a bacon or egg day?”

Field Trip

I. Rally

Polly wanted to push her dresser against the door to keep Mary Pat out. Her sister had blown in like last summer's Cape May hurricane, her arms flailing every which-way. Polly felt herself cranking up, as if her sister were Dad and she an old car, because she wanted to finish her art book before school started. She had collected her favorite well-known poems in a black, two-ringed binder and written on the opening page, "Anthology of Verse by Polly Ann Sprague. Years: 1926–1927."

Two men Polly had never heard of had been imprisoned in Boston and might be executed. Mary Pat wanted Polly to go to a protest in New York City two days from now because she believed the men were innocent. Polly knew her sister was in a tizzy about this rally and other things because of Barry Ganzkopf. Barry and his parents were always going to rallies and protests. Why couldn't Mary Pat stick with our old friends Libby Bowman, Lib Higgins, Connie Murdoch, Jane Delaney, Geogianna Collins, Peggy Hamilton, Ceora Huffuntal, Cousin E as well as Mary Pat's own pals from school? Before Barry, her sister had been happy winning golf and tennis trophies.

Polly told herself she should thank Mary Pat — fear of interruption gave Polly spurts of creativity.

Even if her letters were so angular they made the poems look like they were written in Russian instead of English, Polly liked the way the poems looked on the page. Anyway, everyone knew the William Wordsworth "Daffodils" poem that begins, "I

wandered lonely as a cloud” as well as they did “Fog” with its little cat feet or “Sea Fever” with its star to steer you by.

Daffodils chased each other around three sides of the poem. They threw back their heads and waved their arms the same way they did when Wordsworth ran into a crowd of flowers on his wanderings. Her waves curled across the poem’s lower border from right to left. When she had begun to brush in the waves and the spray at their crests with blue and white paint, the waves began to break and couldn’t wait — till her sister burst in.

Mary Pat was unstoppable. She always got excited about something and tried to draw Polly into whatever it was she was excited about, and Polly tried hard not to get caught up in whatever had caught her sister up. The faster Mary Pat went, the slower Polly went.

The past week she’d barged in right as Polly was casting a ray of sun on a sail. Another time Polly was cutting paper. She needed to give it all her attention because she cut paper without an outline like Matisse used to do, and she didn’t want a jagged row of city buildings for the “Fog” poem. The tighter Polly huddled over her work, the louder Mary Pat became, ranting on about how two men were being murdered because they’re foreign and because they organized to get workers fewer hours, decent pay and better work conditions. Scapegoats! The trial was a joke! They’d been in jail six years!

And here she was again, leaning against Polly’s doorway all gung-ho about the rally, which sounded more like a vigil.

“Polly, people are demonstrating in London, Geneva and Buenos Aires. For Pete’s sake, don’t you read the papers?”

Polly put her paintbrush in her paint can and swiveled her desk chair to face her oppressor. Her sister was liable to make her splash an angry yellow streak through a poem.

“Of course I read the papers, silly,” Polly answered good-naturedly. She always chose not to speak sharply if she thought it would hurt someone’s feelings. “Mary Pat,” Polly continued, wondering if her teachers felt this way with unruly students, “you know as well as I do I read the papers. Look at my Note Book. It’s got everything in the world in it.” Her favorite was Admiral Byrd — the Mercury of Modern Science — who lost to Lindbergh in the Atlantic race this summer but flew over the North Pole the year before.”

Polly stood up and looked out her window at the garden where the sisters had planted flowers and sketched them when they bloomed. She sighed as she remembered how close Mary Pat and she had been the summer before, like Siamese twins, though Polly was taller, a year older and had hair that was dark and very thick, not silky blond like her sister’s. Since they were toddlers, they’d kept Note Books. They sketched caricatures of teachers, pools and golf courses, saved playbills, tickets, menus and pressed flowers, made lists of “Books I’ve Read,” and composed poem after poem.

“Mary Pat,” Polly began, speaking in her most understanding voice. “I know you want to go, but we don’t know these men ... We can’t go... Mother and Dad hate protestors.”

Mary Pat tossed her head like one of Polly’s daffodils and gave her best Sweet Water society drawl: “Not *protestors*, my dear. *Protestants*. That’s the word the *New York Times* uses for the Union Square strikers. We are Protestants. Ask Mother. Thomas Rogers—“

“—galloped around Pennsylvania and started the Reformed Presbyterian Church,” Polly broke in, giggling in spite of herself. “Left his Aunt Charity and brother Nixon in Tyrone. Came over at 16 with 16 dollars in 1816.”

She signaled with a whisk of her forefinger.

“BEFORE THE FAMINE!” they both shouted.

This was important to Mother, Mother’s mother and her mother too. People in Sweet Water she’d known for years would gab with Mother about her family and denomination when she telephoned to them or they dropped in. Their parents didn’t go to church. They dressed up as hobos and maids or music hall performers with canes and straw hats and glittery frocks and sang songs like *Ain’t She Sweet?* with their friends at the piano. They liked the one about Lindbergh that talked about the world ringing for Charlie. One night they kept their daughters up pounding the floor with the Lindy.

Lindbergh! Everything was Lindbergh! If he sneezed, it made the news.

Polly dabbed the last white speck of spray on a wave crest and rolled her eyes to see what Mary Pat was up to. Her sister seated herself on edge of the bed. She crossed her legs in an uncharacteristically ladylike way and sat with her back perfectly straight. Polly frowned. Was her sister imitating her? What weapon will she use for her final assault?

Mary Pat took Polly’s hands in hers and said, “Edna St. Vincent Millay was arrested in Boston yesterday.”

Polly threw her sister’s hands off hers. “WHY WOULD THEY DO THAT, MARY PAT?” she screamed.

Mary Pat only flinched as if a butterfly had wandered too close to her garden bench. Then she said, “Barry said she was carrying signs and shouting that if Boston murdered these men we will never associate the city with justice.

Polly did a racing dive onto her bed. She lay with her head deep in her pillow. Edna St. Vincent Millay was her idol, though Dad hated her for protesting the war, especially since Uncle Chappy’s son Jamie was killed in the war. Edna was always fighting for something. Polly wanted to put one of the poet’s sonnets in her book, but she couldn’t put a war one in. Nor could she use the poem where Edna wondered how many lips the her lips had kissed. She wondered if she could find one about nature.

That did it. She would protest whatever Edna protested.

In a voice muffled by her pillow, Polly asked, “How could we get to New York? What ... I mean ... what would we tell Mother and Dad?”

Mary Pat sprang up and paced like a soldier in *The Big Parade*. The film Polly went to last week, *For Ever After*, was a takeoff on *The Big Parade*. They all imitate it. She gave Polly the drill. Mother and Dad already said it was OK, though it took hours to persuade her. Barry and his father came over to convince them. She had already said Mary Pat might come along. They were to meet Barry at the Pittsburgh train station and his parents in Union Square. It was a history tour with Professor Ganzkopf — with a movie thrown in Connie Ganzkopf knew the girls would want to see. They would go to New York to see the film, then Washington, D.C., to the White House and Washington Mall, then back through New York again to historical sites. The only part that wasn’t true was the film.

“Barry’s parents will stake out seats in the stands. We say we’re going to the matinee Norma Talmadge double feature *Kiki* and *Within the Law*, then to Washington where we’ll dine on the train. We’ll call them that night to let them know we’re OK. If we get stuck, we’ll say the projector broke and delayed the film and then you hurt yourself on the theater steps and went to the hospital. C’mon, Polly! We have to go!”

Oh, great — lies within lies! Someone would let it slip later. Mary Pat must be dreaming if she thought they would get away with it. Polly began to pace and plot. Although she rose from the bed, she felt as though another Polly lingered in the pillow, a Polly who wasn’t keen on this at all. “Okay, Mary Pat. We know the plot for *Kiki*. I’ve seen *Within the Law*. Norma gets framed — uh, she gets blamed for stealing at a department store where she works — it’s called Guilford’s but I’m sure they used the Macy’s building — and she goes to jail but gets revenge later. We’ll have to whisper around Trudy. Don’t ever say we’re going to the film *Kiki*. She’ll have a fit. She’ll want to go.”

Trudy was their six-year-old sister they sometimes called Kiki after they saw the play *Kiki* starring June Walker two years ago on a trip to see Aunt Trudy in Cleveland. Trudy had bangs and cropped hair so she looked like June Walker as Kiki the French waif when they put a beret on her and lipstick. They dressed her up in an old tweed jacket that looked like a coat on her. For the part where Kiki becomes a showgirl, they dressed her in their mother’s apricot wool bed jacket with the white rabbit fur collar and pinned on a tiny feathered hat. They posed her under the living room stand-up lamp. They got her to pout and tilt her head. With difficulty, they had her prop herself by the

sole of one foot against the lamp. She'd remember why she got the nickname and want to go no matter who starred in it this time. They still dressed her up on rainy days.

Thinking of that dear little thing and how fond they were of her made Polly reluctant to leave home. Posing Trudy reminded her of the marionette show of Snow White she and Mary Pat had put on. They did everything, ropes for curtains, scenery that slid into wood holders. She knew she'd be leaving more than Trudy at home if she went to this demonstration.

"I have to finish my art book," Polly whimpered.

"You'll get inspiration, Polly! Just a sec," said Mary Pat. She ran out and tiptoed back, holding something large and square behind her back.

"Do I have a surprise for you! You have been chosen to do two portraits — Sacco and Vanzetti. Barry will pick the sign up tomorrow and make sure his parents get it. So if you start now, it'll be dry. A photograph is on the back. And ... uh ... Barry wants a red background — to match all the others."

Polly didn't blink.

Mary Pat pointed to the daffodils. "They're exquisite! You're the only one good enough. You're the real artist around here."

II. Poster Girl

The rest of the afternoon Polly painted the two men with their names in arcs around them. She said their names over and over as she painted the letters. Nicola Sacco. Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Following the photograph, she drew them in suits, Sacco with a bowtie and hatless, Vanzetti with a hat and tie. Her Vanzetti was thoughtful and

mysterious, peering out from deepset eyes over an aquiline nose and black drooping mustache. Her Sacco had a broad brow, wavy hair and an open, good-natured face. Headlines — Mary Pat’s and the real ones in the paper — popped up around the faces as she painted, making her dizzy: *Braintree Paymaster and Guard Killed. Alibis: Shoemaker Sacco Getting Passport, Vanzetti Delivering Eels. Judge Thayer Says Morally Culpable Whether or Not Guilty.*

She painted flowers to blot out her imaginary pop-ups — were flowers ominous? She’d been decorating Wordsworth’s poem and Browning’s “The Year’s at Spring” with flower borders. Now she may be beautifying an epitaph. All summer she cut tiny circular Lindbergh and Byrd faces out of newspapers. Now she was painting huge portraits for crowds to see of two men whose names she’s never heard till Mary Pat flopped down on her bed a few weeks ago.

Everything under the sun had happened that month. Last week she’d written in her diary “August 8th I turned fifteen. I grew a great deal in experience that day. My first car wreck! Dad let me drive. It skidded and while I was righting it, it went up the bank — turned over on its side. Dad was on top of me. And when he saw I was all right, he inquired of Mary Pat. None of us were terribly affected by it. I got out and felt more like laughing about it than crying. ‘Why cry over spilt milk when there’s enough water in it already?’ Trudy says. Mary Pat and I came home in a taxi, but Dad had to wait for a gang of men to turn the car over... Right after that I got into Dobbs! I was crossing my fingers ever since last winter when Mother and I had tea at the Master’s School with Mrs. Cushing. It’s on a plateau with a Hudson River view. I got my order from Best and Company of required Dobbs clothes: bloomers, felt hat, navy beret, silk negligee,

toweling robe, navy skirts, blouses, dresses, tan shoes, black shoes for evening wear. I had my picture taken for Dobbs too. And at the club, I saw Gene Tunney, the heavyweight champion.”

The next morning they had one glitch. When Barry walked out with the canvas, Mother came out to the porch and asked, “Barry, what have you got there?”

Barry turned in slow motion, all horn rims and boniness, and hid the canvas behind him. Thank God Mary Pat had wrapped it in brown paper and string.

Polly thought fast. “It’s surprise for Daddy! Barry’s going to frame it for me.”

“Oh! Polly, you didn’t! May I see it?” Her mother started toward Barry.

Polly grabbed her arm. “Mother, please. It’s my first canvas. I want it to be framed first.”

“Well, all right dear.” Mother patted her hair even though every strand was in place. She still wore long hair in an old-fashioned bun on top of her head, white blouses with billowy sleeves, and long skirts. “Barry, come back and visit us soon. Have some lemonade and cookies next time.”

Mother was especially nice to Barry because his father was Polly’s history teacher and Polly’s A in that course helped her get accepted at Dobbs. Mary Pat was going next year. Dobbs was important to Mother. That was probably the main reason why she finally let them take the trip. Daddy had gone with the girls to the White House three years before — they still had their admission ticket stubs — and he was happy they were now visiting two cities they could learn more about with their professor.

Just as Polly turned to go back in, she saw Freddie Brown looking out his window across Grant Street. Their mothers wished he was a beau of hers but Polly didn’t. She

didn't have beaus, and since his blond bangs had been cut into a porcupine hedge, he'd changed. Once he cornered girls in a classroom with his friends and beat them up until they ran out. When he was little, he lowered his spotted terrier Biff in a basket one day so they could play with the dog a while. Everyone called Freddie Little Lord Fauntleroy because he was an only child and his mother babied him. Polly studied his face in the window. He looked like — impossible! — Admiral Byrd. She waved and smiled.

The girls packed everything for the two of them in one valise and put on low heels, white sailor dresses and their favorite cloche hats. What does one wear to a protest? It didn't matter. They had to dress for the theater, not a demonstration. The five family members got into the car to go to the train station. After the tumble, Polly didn't drive. Mother had never learned to drive. Dad drove. Dad, so tall and elegant in his tailored suit, was the only person Polly knew who, on clambering into a car, looked like he was modeling the suit or the Nash. Everyone kept their promise not to mention the name of the movie so in the backseat Trudy happily chattered about the paper furniture and houses she had constructed. That girl is going to be an architect and go to college, Polly thought. After all, Mother had gone to college. Mary Pat and Polly? Who knew? They wanted to be artists.

Polly wondered if Trudy would travel to Southampton, Cape May, Brookville and Hyannisport like Mary Pat and she did, toboggan and skate in winter, play golf and tennis in summer. Polly knew her parents were trying to keep up with their fancy friends, hiring a nurse and maids and paying club membership dues and a Jackson Hole ranch Dad went to summers. Things had been peachy, but she'd heard Dad and Mr. Brown saying everyone might be flying too high: films, stars, cars, travel, slinky fashions, parties,

Charleston, forays to the North Pole and everywhere else. Gee, if it might not last, why did Mary Pat take everything for granted and throw it away for something new!

One thing for sure: Trudy won't be indulged as much by relatives. She won't get a silver glitter postcard from Uncle Chappy every week — postcards with shamrocks and Colleens and soldiers and cartoons with poems he'd written especially for them. How they missed the postcards when he died November 1918. Trudy never got to sit in Grandpa's lap and pull his long white beard, feel his kind gaze through the one good eye and one half-closed. The sisters would poke their fingers in the wrist wound he got from the Civil War, and they would help him heat paraffin on the dining room candle to plug his mouth. They used to visit the cow in his barn and only liked to go when Grandpa took them. He died in 1920, the year before Trudy was born.

Another thing Polly could safely predict: Trudy won't have the sidekick instigator Polly had.

III. True Protestants

They enjoyed the train ride with Barry to New York City. Fear of what lay ahead made the trip exciting. After they arrived at Grand Central Station, they sat on the top of the open bus down Fifth Avenue. When Polly had been there with Mother and stayed at the University Club, seen some shows, and gone to the Metropolitan Art Museum, they tramped through slush. With all the cars, it took ages to cross the intersection then. It did today too.

She thought today as she had last winter of the man directing traffic: "Poor policeman. I pity him," she whispered to herself. The traffic was inching forward.

When they stood near the bus driver to get off, he gasped when Mary Pat removed from her bag and unraveled a red banner that said “Justice!”

“I would never have taken you young ladies and this young gentleman for little Reds. I’m sure your parents know nothing about this.”

“We’re meeting my parents at *The Daily Worker* at 30 Union Square East. Near Klein’s,” said Barry.

The driver shook his head. After a few moments, he said, “I’m letting you off at 18th Street. Be careful!”

They took the driver’s suggested detour east on 18th and turned onto the corner of 17th and Union Square East. The park was filling up. It was mostly men in roadster caps and fedoras. Almost every man had a suit on out of respect to Sacco and Vanzetti. Women dressed in coats and jackets over their dresses. Some wore shawls and scarves. Children were there, mainly boys with their fathers. They were in dark clothing: black, navy, gray, brown. The sisters’ white sailor dresses, along with Mary Pat’s blond and Polly’s red-highlighted curls poking from beneath the cloche hats, made them look like cast members of a musical who’d lost their way. The double line of policemen who encircled the park on foot, waited on horses on the corner, and kept watch on rooftops were probably Irish, Polly thought, but who could see under their helmets?

A woman who was watching the demonstration with a well-groomed group of friends pointed at Mary Pat and her sign and shouted, “She’s a Red!” A policeman spun around.

Mary Pat rolled up her banner. They tried to lose themselves among the throng on Union Square East, but even the people who had come to protest with them stepped back

from them and gaped. Some whispered to each other or spoke to the girls in languages they didn't understand. Barry took each sister by an arm.

Signs and banners floated over the protesters and spectators. Many had drawings of the two men with the word "Justicia." The girls read the signs out loud slowly: "Liberate. Vindicate." "Liberata o Morte." "Sacco and Vanzetti are Innocent." "Free the Innocent Men." "Ghastly Miscarriage of Justice ' — American Federation of Laborers" Polly nudged Barry to read one that said, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned and the capitalists of Boston dance while Sacco and Vanzetti burn." Mary Pat pointed at another that read: "If you want to see legalized murder, come to Boston."

A priest put his hand on Mary Pat's head and asked gently, "Catolica?"

"Yes" was Mary Pat's smiling reply. Thank goodness she didn't say Protestant, though they all were today in the true meaning of the word — not in the way Mother would define the word. It's better she told that little lie. Polly wanted say they were children of shoemakers or fishermen, Italian, Catholic, from Braintree, anything. She wished they were in dark shawls and skirts speaking another language. She thought of wrapping the navy cardigans she had in their valise around them like shawls, but then decided that would look like they were on their way to play tennis.

A couple in black stood before them. She couldn't stop looking at them and held out her arms to hold Mary Pat and Barry back. The woman with her scarf and shawl looked tired. The man with his white beard made her feel she was saying hello to Grandpa. The couple was staring at them. It's Grandpa and Grandma but it isn't, thought Polly. Did they remind the couple of someone too — maybe something make-believe. The five people stood still a full minute before they were jostled. Polly tried to smile and

give a little wave, but the couple didn't change their expression. When Barry pulled them, and Polly looked back, the woman gave her the tiniest smile. Polly held up her head because that smile gave her more than any of birthday gifts she'd just received, more than the Dobbs coat, the fox pin and the enamel bracelet. She felt at least as happy as she did when she got the desk set from Dad.

They spotted the sign "S. Klein" and its catch phrase, the one Uncle Chappy liked to use — "On the Square" — on the southeast corner. Nearby the two faces Polly had drawn were wagging. It helped that the person holding the sign, Daryl Ganzkopf, Barry's father, was the tallest man they knew.

"Hi, girls. Hi Barry," called Mr. Ganzkopf. He was standing under a newspaper building strung with banners and a large sign that said, "The Daily Worker."

"You girls all right?" he asked. "You look pale."

"We're OK, Mr. Ganzkopf," Mary Pat answered, nudging Barry. "Barry coached us. I've never so many people in my life, Mr. Ganzkopf!"

"Me neither," said Mr. Ganzkopf. "Today you can call me Daryl, girls. Connie's in the stands, saving us seats."

IV. Living Theater

They climbed one of several rickety stands. The stands were located on the east side of square not far from the rendezvous spot. They faced south where a stage had been set up.

A young man in black who could have understudied Rudolph Valentino gave Polly his arm. "Signorina. Prego." Under his breath she heard him say, "Madonna. Che bella bambina!"

"Grazie, signor," Polly answered as politely as she could. She understood "bella." He may have been a little forward, but he sure was glamorous looking. The two couples made their way up the stands that shook every time they took a step. They finally got to Connie. Valentino bowed and took his leave.

"Hi kids," she said. "That's the place you want to look: The window of *The Daily Worker* building beside Klein's."

Polly looked at offices above the sidewalk where they'd met Barry. *The Daily Worker*. *The Freiheit*. *The Volkzeitung*. Connie told them that that's where the wires from Buenos Aires, Mexico and London were posted about strikes and injuries. Daryl and his wife Connie, who taught history in another town, sat like protective bookends at either end of the three young people. While they took in the scene, Daryl would give Polly bits of information about the two condemned men while Connie did the same with Mary Pat, although Mary Pat seemed quite satisfied to be sitting that close to Barry.

On the stage in front of them, speakers jabbered like nobody's business. One fired away at Governor Fuller, Judge Thayer, Wall Street and President Coolidge. He got some cheers and applause. Another spoke in Italian from the newspaper *Nuovo Mondo*. As she listened, Polly thought of a poem called "Sweeta Guiseppina" by T. A. Daly in the book she was preparing. She felt her face flush. Still, she would keep it in the book as a tribute and wouldn't read it as a joke. She wouldn't read any of her poems the same way. It started with the words "Joe Boretta's Guiseppina/She's so cute as she can be/Just come

here from Messina/Weeth da resta family.” Each time another person sat down, he or she squeezed in as if there was no one else there. Polly was amazed to see that when a person squeezed in, no one popped out. Luckily they were in the stands. Others had to keep moving around the park, down Broadway, across 14th, up Union Square East, across 17th or Union Square North.

“The policemen won’t let them form a procession,” Daryl said. “I saw a painting of the massive march in 1882 that started Labor Day. The streets were cleared, and unions and organizations marched round and round the park with their signs. Not today.”

So it wasn’t because it was badly conducted like the last birthday party Polly went to she had to admit was a flop. These people had no choice. They didn’t have anywhere to march or even stand. The crowd was swinging back and forth like bathtub water does if you jump in too fast. They were prodded at the fringes by two lines of patrolmen. The circle would back up as policeman tried to let 14th street cars through and then push forward when policemen prodded the crowd from behind.

Polly’s thoughts set off on ocean flights and sailed into frozen, uncharted territory. She was playing tennis and golf, clipping photos and putting a poem book together. For the Dobbs picture, Mother had her pose in profile because she said Polly’s bones were classic, that she got the best of Mother and Dad’s looks. Mother was talking about the debutante tea she would give Polly next year. She had her pose different ways because she might send the picture to the newspaper way ahead of time.

She looked down the bleachers full of spectators shouting and talking or telling others not to shout and talk, down to a speaker gesturing at a podium, then over to the equestrian statue of Washington, then across 14th Street packed with stalled and

curious cars, to the department stores on the opposite side and down the Avenues lined with buildings as far as she could see. How lively and talkative the dark-clothed people in the stands were, even in these circumstances, she thought. How they cared for each other. How they held each other or stood and sat close to each other as they waited for news that was bound to be grim. It was not just the suits and shawls that were worn out. They were worn out, even the children. They worked in factories and went home to dreary apartments. They were there to honor men who wanted to make things more bearable. The portraits she painted could be the men she saw in the stands.

Their lives were so far from hers. How could she fit these two worlds together? Mary Pat happily blended two worlds to see what concoction she could come up with. Barry talked excitedly to Mary Pat, waving his gangly arms. Was Mary Pat here for justice or Barry? Polly began to see he wasn't goofy. He was taking everything in, sifting it through his mind. He was so unlike Little Lord Freddie Fauntleroy. Mary Pat and Barry could use up some the energy they had too much of for back home.

Someone posted a sign in the *The Daily Worker* second floor window. "Paris to boycott American films."

"Good grief!" Polly exclaimed. "They're nuts. Why would they do that?"

"Just think, Polly," said Mary Pat. "No Clara Bow. No Norma Talmadge —."

— "No Buster Keaton. No John Gilbert," Polly added.

Valentino the Sheik was looking right at her. She looked back.

"Rosa. Ireland? Si?" He shouted.

“Si,” Polly yelled back.” Did she really do that? It didn’t seem odd. Uncle Chappy had called her Wild Rose because of her pink cheeks.

Barry hooted and said, “He’ll be singing, ‘My Wild Irish Rose’ in Italian.”

Daryl explained the Paris American film boycott. “Remember Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sign about Boston and justice? Just like she condemns Boston, Paris condemns the United States. But they know some of us are with them because they’re getting the news of our protests and strikes too.”

Other languages Polly didn’t understand were being shouted from the platform. She knew one was German from songs like *O Tannenbaum* or Barry giving Mary Pat lessons. The Italian she understood because of her French and that poem — the signs anyway. Others could be Russian. Her sign was one of the best if she did say so herself, Polly thought. But they had to be careful not to block views. Daryl held it up the times he yelled with the crowd.

V. Universal Sigh

As it got later and darker, the mood got gloomier. Behind them there was a commotion. Several hundred women unfurled a banner that said, “United Council of Working Class Housewives.” They formed two files. But the police dispersed them so they mingled with people below the newspaper offices.

When it was posted in the second floor window that Sacco’s wife Rosa and Vanzetti’s sister would plead for clemency, the crowd grew silent. The girls and the Ganzkopfs could hear some sobs from women. Luigia was the sister’s name. Polly never

heard that name before, but she wouldn't forget it. Everyone in her family was Elizabeth or Mary. She was going to suggest that one of them change her name. Luigia Pat.

"The lights will flicker so the people in Boston will know when the men are being electrocuted," Daryl told them.

Polly hadn't known how they would die. How horrible. She guessed that's what the signs meant by "burn." Words and images from her poems she was decorating flashed through her. From Byron's "Chillon": "O light broke in upon my brain — It was the carol of a bird — And cheering from my dungeons brink — Had brought me back to feel and think." Would some brightness break through for these two men?

Their group of five could see arrests made in the throng to their right. They heard "He's Red!" and "I am moving as fast as I can, officer!" They could hear scuffles and see men being led to paddy wagons.

"There's detectives circulating and bomb squads," Daryl told the girls. No one's safe. The Red Scare's gaining momentum. Who knows who has my number?"

Polly wondered if he'd be back in his class in the fall. She did feel sympathy for Mary Pat if she lost Mr. Ganzkopf as a teacher because the sisters loved history and he made it come alive. She wondered if she'd be blacklisted from Dobbs. Dobbs! Right now it wasn't real. It was a miniature village spread out on a parlor mantelpiece.

Fourteen patrolmen on motorcycles blasted down Fourth Avenue into the square, didn't stop, and continued on. The crowd jumped and then relaxed. They'd thought it was over and they'd have to disperse.

It was nearing midnight. Daryl couldn't telephone to Mother and Dad. If their parents called the New York City police, they would be told Police Commissioner Warren had all police in Union Square or ready to go there.

A sign appeared in the second floor window. "Sacco is murdered."

Polly let out a little moan with the crowd. It sounded like the earth was letting out all the tension of the day, months, years. A few hisses. Then silence.

In her book she'd included Hamlet's quote about hell breathing out contagion to this world. Had the world's graves yawned and had hell breathed in the guise of patriotism? She understood the grim words now. Now darker poems glowed brighter than the light ones.

They heard a commotion and saw in the window: "The Workers' Party must not forget its martyrs." A few minutes later they saw, "Vanzetti murdered." Another groan rose to the top of the workers' offices, Klein's, the office buildings, hotels, stores and the statue of George Washington.

VI. Floral Offering

Patrolmen began to walk among the crowd and disperse them. They climbed down from the stands and headed out. They found themselves in a crowd going south across 14th Street and down Second Avenue. The leaders broke into the "Internationale." Mounted police closed in from the sidewalks at 12th Street and swung nightsticks. Polly saw a woman get hit with a horse's hoof and a man get hit with a club. Barry and Mary Pat were knocked to the ground in the chaos, but he stood up before he was trampled and

pulled Mary Pat up. Polly lost everyone. The crowd was squeezed from all sides. She couldn't breathe. Patrolmen rode into the crowd and the crowd packed closer together.

Out of nowhere Valentino pushed his way over to her and helped her out. The little group found each other and made their way over to First Avenue and up several blocks to a bus. Just as Polly was getting in, Valentino handed her a rose, kissed her hand, and said "Adio." She never figured out where he found that flower. In the bus she thought of Freddie, and then she didn't. His face dissolved into the face of her rescuer watching her pull away.

Daryl called the Spragues from Penn Station. He pretended he was calling from Washington and gave them the projector and hospital story and said they had taken a late train. Dad and Mother didn't know how close that hospital story came to being the truth. In the ladies room, Polly and Mary Pat scrubbed their dust-streaked dresses, washed their faces and wiped dust from their hose and shoes.

VII. Assimilation

On the train to Washington, Barry sat across the aisle looking out a window. Behind him, his parents snuggled, their eyes shut. Daryl had Polly's sign wrapped in his coat. Mary Pat and Polly sat as immobile as the others, but Polly's mind crackled. What if she had jumped into Mary Pat's mind and Mary Pat into hers?

Her first political event!

Union Square. Dad told her about the gathering in support of the government at the time of the Civil War that may have made Grandpa enlist during his spring break from college. They were looking at George Washington's statue like those people

had. The park was a raceway, an auditorium, a circus, a parade ground and a theater. Come to think of it, Sweet Water didn't have parks because the whole place was a peaceful park of hedges, flowerbeds and perambulators.

What was Dobbs to her now? Winning the rival girls' team in basketball? Spotting Gene Tunney? Her Best and Company tweed coat she could wear with or without the belt? Swooning over John Gilbert? Cutting out a picture of Rear Admiral Richard Byrd?

Today she stepped outside her Sweet Water world and saw it as a tiny planet among many, like the balls of bubble gum they got for a penny from the glass globe dispenser. Today she navigated dark clouds high above the Atlantic and battled icy gusts above the North Pole.

She wondered about Trudy. Would she be in danger of turning her back on the things that might seem frivolous but that made their lives worthwhile? Unlike her sisters, Trudy was practical, but she was as willful as Mary Pat.

Mary Pat's face in the lights streaking by the window looked beatific. She was one of those people blessed with a permanent little smile. In repose, she could easily be mistaken for a nun or a saint. Awake she would be a very cranked-up saint.

"Mary Pat?" Polly whispered. "You awake?"

"Hmmm."

"Remember when you ran away at four and Nurse Essie found you "down over the hill," as Mother calls it, playing with a little factory girl. Do you want to run away now?"

“I can’t afford to run away,” Mary Pat answered sleepily. “I’m going to the Arts Student’s League after I follow you to Dobbs.”

Polly gave her the Bony Elbow. “If they find out where we were, they may throw us out.”

“I know who would take us in,” she whispered softly, so no one but Polly could hear. She was looking across the aisle at the sleeping couple and the young man looking out the window.

Grand Tour

I. On the Road

On their Pittsburgh to Pasadena trip, Polly and Mary Pat ate little and did nothing that cost money. Thank goodness Dad loaned them the Plymouth as well as his Standard credit card. Polly realized Dad felt bad that the '29 crash had changed plans they had for their daughters. His daughters hadn't gone to college or Europe and had had only a year of formal training in the Boston art school. In a place like Sweet Water, attractive though they were, they may have lost opportunities. He wanted to make it up with the trip, and when Polly had pushed for it, he did what he could to help out.

The panorama assaulted Polly's senses. It was how she'd felt walking into tea at someone's house when she had an orchestra playing on the Victrola. How different the landscape was from the tree-lined streets and hedged Victorians of their hometown, Sweet Water. How different it was from Pittsburgh's hills and three rivers. Polly and her sister loved the factory fumes they could see from Sweet Water that shimmered green and blue like Northern Lights over the Ohio.

Scenery flickered from pastoral to industrial and back again. The girls laughed about all the arguments Mary Pat had used to persuade Polly to come.

It hadn't been easy because the financial crisis they thought was going away had settled in. Polly knew Mary Pat had seen the rampant poverty in New York when she was studying there and thought it was frivolous to go for a whole winter to Pasadena.

Polly thought the money situation was exactly the reason to go have fun. She was always eager to travel and see new things. After all, as the oldest with two sisters behind her, she'd been pulled out of high school first — didn't even graduate like Mary Pat —

then out of art school a year later. Her education stopped at seventeen, and she'd been doing whatever she could short of formal training to further her education. This had been mainly through reading, painting and travel.

Regardless of the economic situation, things were swell in Sweet Water. She had her modeling, and society pages referred to them as post-debs of a few years ago who weren't back numbers at all because of trips to relatives in Southampton and Cleveland. Polly had marveled that their rich relatives didn't seem to be affected by the crash — guess they had had enough to absorb the loss. The sisters' frequent artistic, charitable and athletic obligations were photographed for local and Pittsburgh papers. Mary Pat admiring jonquils during a fundraiser for the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation. Polly in fashion spreads. The sisters displaying tennis trophies. Why, Mary Pat had whacked her way to the western Pennsylvania championship! The sisters sitting next to their watercolor honorable mentions. Mary Pat had snagged first prize for her latest etching! Last month she'd made the Carnegie Artists Association's 1933 list of Young Artists to Watch.

Disdainful feelings about her younger sister's prizes sometimes elbowed their way into Polly's consciousness, but she shooed those nasty creatures away. Mary Pat was her best friend and sidekick and the trip would be simply dismal without her.

Mary Pat had tried everything to convince Mary Pat to go — Aunt Anna's frequent invitations, tennis with Cousin Tinka, spottings of the exciting new stars who had replaced their silent film idols — to no avail.

Then a tiny square of light had appeared in Polly's mind and slowly expanded into the 1930 *Time* magazine cover of an artist. She said to her younger sister, "Henri Matisse said you need doses of travel to create."

"Let's go!" Mary Pat had cried.

As they passed from Pennsylvania into Ohio, Polly asked, "Why were Mother and Dad so gung-ho that we go?"

"Search me. Maybe it's the poor man's version of the European Grand Tour," Mary Pat said. She poked Polly, sucked in her cheeks like Marlene Dietrich and said, "Vatever it is, dahling, wie vill make it the Graaaaand Tour."

"Moooother taaaaaaaught us well," Polly cooed from the side of her mouth a la May West, wiggling a hip.

II. Riches to Rags

Their first stop was Fairmont Avenue, Cleveland Heights, Aunt Trudy and Uncle Bob's mansion with a top-floor ballroom. Aunt Trudy had gobs of energy to shop and lunch at her club. Five years ago, it was plays and concerts. Now it was movies, not because her relatives were cutting back but because movies were the thing. They saw ladies dancing on plane wings in *Flying Down to Rio*. They declined to see a *Frankenstein*, Uncle Bob's favorite. When a light snow started, the girls packed and pointed the Plymouth south.

Sometimes in industrial towns, geometric shadows lurched across the road. They agreed they were wise not to have seen the monster film on their last stop. Polly thought

of the etchings Mary Pat did at the Art Students League in New York. She'd etched Central Park trees against dirt piles. She sliced oil drums and tin cans into the landscape, slashed out slabs of wood grabbed for firewood, turned the fences they'd been stolen from into lopsided crucifixes. Buildings gaped, laundry strung across their foreheads. Shawl-covered women huddled on benches. Men in ragged coats clutched their knees or lay flat. How artfully her sister had crosshatched bleakness and scratched poverty into her lithographs. Polly thought this was worth exploring, but she didn't say so.

Even in November, fields undulated in banana and plum. Silos and barns sat angularly, unsettled. Mary Pat thought how Polly had captured such color in her still-life oils and that it was something to investigate herself, but she didn't mention it.

In Appalachian Kentucky, they boarded with a soot-covered family, who gave up their rooms and slept in the tool shed. They gave them a ride on the car's running boards. When they paid, they handed them a bird pin and pink satin gloves. They stayed with a farmer's family in Tennessee, took pictures of horses or kids to sketch or paint later, and with their boarding fee threw in a poodle bag and butterfly berets.

They drove away as the tattered family waved.

"From princes to paupers," Polly said. "Our Cleveland mansion to Tennessee hovel journey reminds me of what's happened to our family since the crash."

"The pauper part is true if you mean our money situation," Mary Pat said. "Don't know about the prince part. Daddy and Mother just knew how to put on a good show."

III. Artistic Rift

"What did Aunt Trudy mean when she said, 'Now it's your turn, Mary Pat'?"

Mary Pat asked.

Mary Pat had one stocking foot on the dashboard and the other crossed over her knee. Her silky light-brown bob, already awry, became more so each time she ran her hand through it. Polly drove with her back erect to maintain her posture. Her wide-brimmed hat was pulled down over her face to block Arkansas rays. Her curly, dark hair, though cut and thinned for the trip, kept pushing the hat up.

“Your first prize for your etching *Ezekiel Saw the Wheel*,” Polly answered. It consisted of men lying exhausted on the floor, some climbing stairs, other sliding off a platform in a torrent through a hoop held by a giant.

“Your watercolor got honorable mention.” After a pause, Mary Pat continued. “Aunt Trudy’s a good old gal, but she’s nuts. You won the rebel exhibit at 16.”

“That was then,” Polly said. *Still Life with Bottle*. Chartreuse background drapery. Giant Cuban glass jar. Cloth, actually her negligee, tied loosely round its neck. Gourds snuggling on a plate. Pears leaning toward the jar. She’d rushed to Pittsburgh with her canvas when artists who were rejected from the annual Carnegie Institute exhibit put on their own show at Gimbel’s.

“What’s the matter with you?” exclaimed Mary Pat. “All those fashion spreads!”

“I’d rather display artwork.”

A long pause ensued while Mary Pat took that in.

“Your watercolors are always picked for exhib—!” Mary Pat gave up. After a few miles of mud-caked expanse, she pulled her legs down and faced Polly. “We’re not *taking turns*! This isn’t Mumblety Peg or hopscotch!”

“Aunt Trudy’s right. It’s your turn.”

“Polly, for an older sister you’re such a cry-baby!”

“I am not!”

“You are!”

“I AM NOT!”

Polly’s eyes moistened. Mary Pat and she had never fought. She tightened her fingers around the steering wheel. Good thing this stretch had few cars and no curves. She wished Mary Pat would drop it but she didn’t.

“Did it bother me you got A’s at boarding school and I got straight C’s? That your “Fish Story” got an “excellent? No! We loved it! Did it bother you when I made the first hockey team? No! You called and wrote from art school, turning inside-out as I did about it!” Mary Pat’s voice was gentle, a little hoarse, but at its deep register now made Polly recall Dad’s words “Mary Pat has a keen sense of drama.”

“THAT WAS THEN!” Polly cried. She remembered their letters, how everything was “peachy.” Her first fall away she wrote from school to ask what Mary Pat would wear at Halloween.

“Stop saying ‘That was then!’” Mary Pat growled. “For Pete’s sake, you were voted one of the most beautiful girls in town by the bachelors’ club.”

Polly let out a long breath. Mean-spirited feelings stomped, tore their hair and wailed. Though she usually paused between each word, Polly’s words shot through her teeth. “Mary Pat, why do you talk about beauty contests when we’re talking about art? Anyway, pussyfooting down runways isn’t acing tennis serves! I’m an artist!” Her words bounced through the car interior and plopped down on the dashboard.

Mary Pat put her both feet on the dashboard and said calmly, “I was the drab, short sister tagging along with you to parties and crying because I wasn’t welcome. You were tall and gorgeous and talked to everyone. I’ve caught up with prizes, trophies, and the not-too-bad shot of me in my swimsuit lounging in the club lawn chair. Drop it!”

“You brought up Aunt Trudy!”

“You talked me into this trip!”

“You didn’t have to go!”

“Wish I hadn’t! You’ve spoiled it!” Mary Pat tried to poke some sense into her sister’s silly brain with the map she’d twisted into a thin roll.

Polly shrieked and batted her away. The car zigzagged onto dirt. Polly jerked it back on the pavement, hissing, “Mary Pat, you are a B.I.T.C.H.!”

They crossed into Texas in silence.

IV. Preview of Coming Attraction

Polly and Mary Pat and their Plymouth were holed up in San Antonio because Polly got the flu. Mary Pat sent their parents a telegram and returned to their motor lodge room with some tea and over-the-counter tablets and syrup. They decided to see if Polly would feel better in a day or two before calling a doctor.

“Gosh, will we ever get to Aunt Anna’s?” Polly asked, worried Mary Pat might strangle her in her sleep. She was worried she might be strangled by her own feelings. She was never envious or jealous. She was happy in her own skin, *heureax dans sa propre peau*, as the French saying went. Whatever private depression her sister was in or whatever inadequacy Polly sensed had had plenty of open space to get lost in. They had no business saying around.

“It would be best to get some rest now” was Mary Pat’s reply.

Since the spat, Mary Pat spoke stiffly to Polly as if they’d just been introduced. It was ghastly. Polly shut her eyes. In a dream, she found herself beside Mary Pat staring up wide white steps. Descending to the right and left on the stairs were ladies in skimpy costumes and huge plumes. Compared to the dancers, the sisters looked like werewolves. They had on pointy felt hats and shawl-collared fur coats.

High above, a blond who was packed into a glittery gown said from the corner of her mouth. “Need help, honey?”

Polly said, “My sister and I need to get to Pasadena.”

“Go to the Stitched-Head Giant and get my car keys,” said the blond, waving her cigarette holder at a white Rolls Royce. “I’m meeting my agent in Pasadena so I can drive you there. SCRAM!”

The sisters found a flowering tree with weeping leaves.

“Where’s the Stitched-Head Giant?” Mary Pat asked.

“First, you must sketch a mate for this poor tree,” said a black and white big-eared mouse in shorts, handing her a paint set.

Polly outlined a muscular tree. She gave it every color of green and brown in the set. The tree winked and bounded off the page. The lady tree’s weeping leaves billowed upward into an elaborate do like Polly’s aunts up the Pittsburgh funicular.

“Wear this magic flower,” squeaked the mouse.

“This way to the giant’s castle!” the flower blared from Polly’s lapel.

They hop-scotched, jump-roped, climbed through pipes and barreled down slides. A green face with a stitched forehead peered out a window. The flower released frankincense and other alluring vapors.

“Charm him,” whispered the flower.

As Mary Pat painted the giant’s portrait, Polly massaged his shoulders and told him he was even taller than her Dad and had more beautiful stitches than Trudy got for her appendix operation. Mary Pat crosshatched the background and made a face of black and green angles. The giant gave them keys to make their way west.

Polly slept till the following evening. Over tea and a snack, she told her sister, already tucked in for the night in the bed next to her, how in her dream they had sketched their way out. A mmmmmmmph escaped from her sister at the word SCRAM. A similar eruption escaped her sister by the time Polly got to the portrait sitting. Polly knew that gurgle was how Mary Pat laughed and imagined that her sister’s hand was covering mouth even though no one was in the room but the two of them so she didn’t have to hide her laugh from anyone. Later Polly was awakened by the sound of Mary Pat laughing out loud for the first time in her life.

V. Art Show

It was a quiet drive through New Mexico as it had been through Texas. In Tucson, Polly and Mary Pat stayed with Cousin Mary K who was taking in the dry air to recover from TB. They could both talk to Mary K so it didn’t matter that they weren’t speaking directly to each other even at the same table. It was silent through New Mexico, but in

Pasadena they had Tinka and Aunt Anna to speak to here so the silence didn't matter as much as it did in the car.

Aunt Anna's potted palms were decked with tree lights for her holiday party. She'd invited show-biz and non-show-biz friends. Mary Pat wore a beaded dress and Polly a sequin dress — leftover 1920s dresses from Cousin Maggie — but eyes were on them. No one seemed to care they couldn't afford the current designer dresses. This was Hollywood, a place to be whatever you wanted to be.

A blond starlet in a form-fitting white silk dress was introduced as Hope. Walt Disney arrived, as animated as his creations, and Frankenstein joined the party: Boris Karloff! He wasn't grim to Polly. His tuxedo was set off well with his tiny waist and wide shoulders. His skyscraper brow was absorbed by his long face. The other men, even Tinka's boyfriend Byron, looked doughy in comparison.

After several sips from a bowl-sized martini, Polly remembered an article where Helen Keller said if she had three days to see she'd memorize everything she saw — its color, shape, smell and touch — so she'd be able to recall things any time she wanted to. That's what Polly wanted to do. Byron's uncle did Aunt Anna's décor the way he'd decorated the Coconut Grove Night Club. Palms that didn't look fake grew ceiling-high from huge Chinese vases. Alhambra arches divided rooms. Couples on murals did a lively cha-cha. Mount Fuji took up one wall. Under it, a white-coated man in a miniature bandstand changed records. Other men in white coats passed out finger food and drinks. A woman with a strand of flowers hanging from her neck and iridescent fushia material draped round her hips passed out cigarettes. The lighting was ideal! It wasn't as extreme as it had been from the car window. It wasn't blinding. It wasn't shadowy.

Walt Disney and Byron told Aunt Anna and Polly about how this year may be the swan song of prurience as everything was being censored.

“I can’t believe it!” Polly blurted out. “We just had a turnover of stars, and now stars might have to become only a little of who they are. What’ll they do?”

“Who knows?” Byron said. “Disguise it in Bible epics, or musical extravaganza dancers will flaunt themselves.”

“Are you with a studio?” Walt asked Polly.

“No,” Polly stammered. “I had one line in a play: ‘Here comes the Burgomaster!’”

“Charming!”

“Polly models in Pittsburgh,” Anna broke in. She grabbed Mary Pat from another conversation group. “Both nieces are artists. Mary Pat is on a 1933 artists to watch list.”

“How nice,” Walt said, looking at Polly. “Can I get you another drink?”

He swept his eyes across her face. She felt her face lit up and zoomed in on, every inch of it exploited. She moved her head slightly so she’d be out of focus.

Polly could see Mary Pat’s face flush.

They danced everything from the Charleston and Lindy to the cha-cha and rumba. Polly abandoned her dainty-step style and shook everything loose. Mary Pat moved gracefully, her hesitant smile full-blown. Walt Disney wagged his head to the peppy Bing Crosby song “What Is It?” and led a conga line with ladies in low-backed dresses shaking their bottoms and everyone wiggling fingers toward the floor and to the ceiling as they called, “What is it? What is it?” Only Hope was immobile. She sat with an elbow on a

sofa arm, her chin propped up by a hand so her head was at just the right tilt for the lamplight.

They played guess-the-scene charades. Byron did a wicked waddle as Chaplin. A mousy woman had people howling when she imitated Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong*. When Boris Karloff tried to enact Gary Cooper, people gave up guessing. Polly had lost her enough stiffness to do King Kong, grunting around the room and mock-climbing a lamppost. They decided to play a grownup hide-and-seek game called sardines. The object was to find others in the dark and pack together till the last one left was it.

Polly groped her way through a den. Mary Pat, showing Walt Disney lithographs to candlelight, was getting a critique.

“You draw zombies. I draw Mickey Mouse. Make me bright backgrounds and characters.”

Your turn after all, thought Polly.

“I love the way Polly expresses herself in color. I want to do what she does.”

Polly collapsed to her knees and held her face. Did she hear correctly?

The nipple on Hope’s exposed breast was staring right at Polly. So were fingers of a man’s hands around her waist.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Byron called. He was “it” in this round of sardines.

Polly ran into a closet. She looked up at the protruding brow of Frankenstein. She screamed and dashed into a room with a bubbling fountain. Its centerpiece was Oscar, the Academy Award statuette. She clutched Boris Karloff’s elbow as he ran by.

“Sorry, Mr. Karloff! I made the monster association even without the fake skull extension,” she said. She paused. “Oops. That’s not what I meant.”

Boris grinned. “Happens all the time. Can I get you a drink?”

“Please,” said Polly. “A martini is fine.”

Boris and Polly talked about star turnover and then Polly and Mary Pat’s turnover. When she was done, Boris said, “I finally made it in my forties. I walk in weighted boots in order to lurch, have wax on my eyelids to look sleepy and need hours of makeup to extend my skull. Hard times placed you in art school at sixteen and forced you to excel. Focus on yourself, not your sister. Go after inspiration with a club, Polly!”

His words had as soothing an effect as the water bubbling in the fountain. They could hear an occasional sardine giggle or “shush.” Young men Polly knew should have Mr. Karloff’s brain inserted without extending their exquisite skulls unnecessarily.

She sketched and thought of her little sister Trudy ordering a navy skirt and cardigan, tan shoes, dress shoes and felt hat to take to boarding school like Polly so long ago. Trudy, who built furniture and toys and Mary Pat, who changed worlds like clothes, weren’t Polly. Nor were starlets who looked like holograms. She was Polly again, almost a grownup at twenty-one years old, and glad she wasn’t anyone else.

With a black ballpoint pen, Polly jabbed hair back from the tip of a “V” on his forehead. It was her San Antonio dream with the mouse and the monster — in reverse! The sisters had switched artistic styles. She said to her subject, “I can etch — sort of!!”

Someone cleared her throat. Mary Pat leaned against the doorway, looking like a flapper in her beaded dress. Mr. Disney was behind her. Mary Pat’s face had that beatific look it used to have. The drive back was going to be better.

“That’s a swell portrait of Mr. Karloff. You almost got my shading.” Mary Pat said, putting her hand on Polly’s shoulder. “Here’s mine.” In her sketch flowers and trees exploded in unusual color.

“It’s getting there,” Polly said. She squeezed her sister’s hand.

“That deserves a toast!” Mr. Disney said, handing out martinis.

“A star turn, ladies!” Mr. Karloff said, raising his glass and bowing.

They clinked glasses.

“Scavenger hunt!” Aunt Anna said, poking her head in.

Teams assigned items to individuals, and each person dashed off with his or her list, some to neighbors’ homes.

Polly went upstairs to Aunt Anna’s closet for a pink satin high-heeled shoe. When she reached for the shoe, someone grabbed her breasts from behind, twisted her against his body, and pinned her arms behind her. He explored her face with his lips as if he were blind and wanted to remember every contour.

“Oh, for Pete sake!” came a familiar voice from the door.

Out of the corner of her eye, Polly could see Mary Pat’s silhouette. She was holding a gold wicker scavenger basket Aunt Anna had given everyone.

Mary Pat growled, “Looks like you’ve discovered more interesting art work, Mr. Disney!”

Blitz

I. Alliance

“Stand up straight,” Freddie said, taking Polly by the shoulders and steering her toward the full length in the church corridor. He needn’t have worried. Polly was a Horne’s Department Store runway model and stood straight. He needn’t have worried about himself either. Freddie in his navy dress uniform looked simply devastating. He wanted a quick primp for both of them, though, because his mother Harriet was collecting the red rose. Freddie’s ancestor Baron Heinrich Wilhelm Stiegel had given land to the church, stipulating a red rose be paid to a descendant each June. The Baron made exquisite iron stoves, hearth plates and heart and tulip-painted glassware. Trumpeters atop towers in Manheim and Shaeffertown heralded his arrival in a coach and four. He’d died penniless in the late 1700s — somewhere between Boiling Springs, Bucks County, and Philadelphia. Finally, today, June 1941, they were dedicating a monument on one of his many alleged burial sites. The Manheim Zion Lutheran Church was packed with church members and tourists. *Women’s Wear Daily* was there.

As they promenaded to the front pew, Freddie whispered, “Wunderbare Dinge,” echoing the Pennsylvania Dutch words on Harriet’s dishtowel rack back in Sweet Water.

Harriet accepted her rose rent from an attorney and signed for it as the girls’ bell choir performed. In her acceptance speech, she pointed the giant rose toward her son Freddie and his fiancée Polly. Freddie, she announced, was a lieutenant in the U.S. Naval Reserve based in Philadelphia. Everyone turned to look at them. Polly’s cheeks burned redder than Harriet’s rose.

The following December Polly and Freddie married in Polly's house at 44 Thorn Street in Sweet Water, he in the navy uniform, she in a satin gown that made her feel she was swimming. Their minister and friend Lockhart married them, and childhood friends they had gone to birthday parties with, the Libbys, the Peggys, the Kits and the Wills, were all there, as well as cousins like Donnie, Hallie, and Tinka. Freddie Sr., Mother, Dad and aunts and uncles sat in a semicircle. Harriet sat in the center with a natty hat and an animal stole with paws that snapped together and a jaw that clamped onto a tail. The grownups hid eyeglasses in one hand and raised Scotch glasses in the other to the photographer.

Polly and Freddie were pleased the wedding was as festive as it was considering Freddie had had to interrupt his Pittsburgh legal career and train in martial law at the Philadelphia Naval Yard for the past year, and the war everyone thought of as taking place so far away seemed to be getting closer and closer.

II. Deployment

The couple took a honeymoon to Cape May. They stayed in Pink House, where Polly had vacationed. Their wedding night really was the night Polly was losing her virginity, something that should have dreaded but only be someone who didn't know her husband well. She wasn't with a stranger — it was someone she'd known her whole life whose world she had shared. Though it was in fact the first time they'd been intimate, and the first time Polly had been intimate with anybody, it struck them as funny, another chance to kid each other like they always had. Aside from Polly's momentary pain, they

giggled and sometimes howled with laughter. Their merriment spilled out to the beach as they bundled themselves up for hours with a wine bottle and picnic.

“Guess our mothers are still at the champagne!” “Polly giggled.

“Harriet and Bess must have grabbed Mark and Andy and waltzed down Main Street!” Freddie said.

“If they even bothered with their husbands!” Polly shrieked.

They hated being forced together because it was what their mothers wanted — the hints and schemes to unite them were corny. It was silly to marry — or even date— the next-door neighbor, especially when the Spragues and Browns had ended up living next to each other twice. Still, Polly and Freddie were miserable when either of them dated anyone else.

“To Harriet!” Polly said, raising her wine glass.

“To Bess!” said Frankie, clinking her glass.

The biggest joke was that, except for a few rare moments, they were alone for the first time at ages twenty-nine and thirty-one.

A small boy made plane noises beside them. He spread his arms and lowered and raised them. He dove and ran, saying “The Japanese! Whooooosh! Here they come!”

“Stop that, Leonard!” his mother cried.

The Victorian scenery shifted, sounds built, winds started. Polly and Freddie grew silent and started back. Polly thought of Cousin Jamie, who died in 1917. On a visit to Cape May, they’d gone to visit the naval barracks where he died.

The hotel clerk held out a telegram to Freddie that told him Pearl Harbor had been bombed and ordered him to return immediately to his naval base in Philadelphia.

III. Widowhood

Everyone in Philadelphia was hysterical down deep, even though they weren't getting shot at or suffering from wounds in the Naval Yard Hospital like the veterans whose brows or wrists Polly touched on her volunteer shifts. Heavens, at Wanamaker's, where she worked as a floor model, you saw bloated canned-beef-and-powdered-milk bodies — she'd kept trim lifting bowling-pin shaped weights. Polly and Cousin Maggie visited the Italian Market and townhouses with little iron boot cleaners near the steps. They sought relief seeing Fred Astaire tap dance in *Follow the Fleet* after they suffered through *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* that had you sitting in a cockpit.

Pearl Harbor changed things for Polly and her sisters. Mary Pat and Chip were sent to Panama. Trudy was assembling bombshell tread measuring devices. Freddie and Polly clung tight. They became each other's air, light, everything. How odd that she had ended up with the boy next door who lowered his pet dog Biff in a basket for Mary Pat and her to play with, the porcupine-haired boy who with others beat up her and her friends until they had barely escaped. How silly that he'd ring the bell whenever she had a new beau and that he had proposed only after she had become engaged to Slayton Underhill.

Freddie had been in England for eight months, and who knew when the war would end and he would be shipped back. He was relatively safe in military courts and officer quarters, but when he wrote that he had stepped on an open severed hand she worried he would be hit by something in the Blitz. Freddie had only been with their son they called Huber, after Freddie mother's family, until Hubbie was a year old. Hubbie

was Polly's company now. Hubbie tap-danced in light, zoomed in wind, and softened her face when he touched it.

Polly kissed Freddie's navy portrait before bed. Then she would mentally sketch the aquiline profile and blue eyes so she could look at him anytime she wanted to during the day. Though she tried to keep her thoughts on anything else she possibly could, she would wonder whether some WAVE or WREN had become *his* air and light.

IV. Bombardment

In London's Bayswater Hotel Café, Freddie (Lt. Frederick Stiegel Brown, United States Navy Reserve) recalled Polly's calm "you'll be fine" when they had parted at the Warwick Hotel in New York. It was July 9, 1944, and though Russians were going somewhere, the meat-grinding Normandy battle was at a stalemate. Three years in the Philly naval yard had put a halt to his civilian legal career. He had spent four months in England prosecuting or defending navy deserters, thieves, rapists and homosexuals. After a Nottingham trial, a cabbie took him to a forest that wasn't Sherwood and left him in the rain with his poem book. Worse, he was himself one-third German, though his ancestor the Baron dealt roses, not debilitating V-1 robot bombs that hummed, paused and exploded.

A tall woman with upswept black hair sat down and stared at him. He followed her outside and asked her to the Junior Officers' Club.

"Pipple veel tink I em jus' a peek-op and all I am iss lunley," she said, while enjoying two steaks. Her Kaiser-Wilhelm smile turned the corners of her mouth up almost vertically.

“No, no! Nobody will know us here,” Freddie reassured her.

When Uffie paid him back for the “vaunderfool” steaks with a home-cooked Hungarian meal and greeted him in a green silk gown, he attacked. He poked the hard visor of his navy hat against her forehead. He tore her bra off.

Later, when he apologized, she said, “Dat’s hokay. I haf keep da fires low on da deener.”

She told him about her escape from Hungary. Her parents hadn’t been so lucky. She showed him a family album and pointed out other family members missing or known to be dead.

Except when her Brit husband was on leave, Uffie stayed in the lavish apartment at 3 Grosvenor Square next to the U.S. Embassy Freddie shared with two Legal Department friends who liked chess, bridge, Scotch and war widows. Sometimes they were on opposite sides in court, and Freddie wasn’t a match for them. Spence was a wealthy Atlanta lawyer, smart and charming though lazy. Sheetz was a CPA with enough ambition to assure him a career in politics. Almost every night Uffie was waiting for him, as she had a key, and a discreet corridor ran from the front door to the bedrooms.

They walked to Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park and laughed at natural comedians; they walked through church ruins. They often dined out with others. She was a sport, laughing when the roommates had a colleague pose as a waiter and act obnoxious to unknowing guests at one of their parties.

The V2s were worse than V1s. They didn’t stop and burst. They nose-dived. Tiny lead bathroom panes ballooned out and saved Uffie from being sliced by flying glass when he was drying her. They joined the crowd outside to look at a huge pit where a pub

had stood. A door in the next building's wall opened, and a drunken sailor appeared. He'd gone to take a leak in the pub bathroom that was located in the next building. He looked down at the pit and then did a little dance for the onlookers. They cheered.

When Uffie told Freddie she was pregnant, he borrowed money from a friend, took advance pay and sold his navy coat to pay for the abortion. Afterward, they tried to pick up where had they left off, but Freddie just couldn't rouse himself. They went out to dine, and once regained some of the old feeling when they danced one night, but one day he reached for the phone, heard it ring in her office, and decided to hang up.

Shortly before he left for Paris, Freddie was distributing socks and black silk ties to Spence and Sheetz that Polly had sent for Christmas. Uffie arrived unannounced ("jest beezness") with gloves she was selling. They bought them all.

Freddie took her to the elevator. The Kaiser-Wilhelm smile faltered.

"Leetle, leetle poy. Pye, pye," she said.

The elevator closed.

V. Reentry

Hubbie ran toward the man with the camera, pointing at him and laughing at the man's funny faces. Hubbie was told the man was his daddy, but Hubbie didn't remember him. The man picked him up and scared him, but when Mommy held him at the same time it wasn't scary. Even Polly felt wary around this man who was Freddie but wasn't — it'd been 18 months till he returned in 1945 — so long so soon after their marriage. They were more intimate than ever, but she missed the old Freddie, less amorous but closer.

Polly and Freddie's parents threw open their homes for their children and their children during the war. Several months before Freddie returned, Polly and Hubbie moved back to 44 Thorn Street in Sweet Water with Dad and Mother. Before that, Mary Pat and her daughter (born in Panama) stayed at 44 Thorn while Chip served on the carrier *Pennsylvania* that twisted and turned to avoid German artillery in the Bay of Salerno. Mary Pat and Chiquita left 44 Thorn when Chip was transferred to Caracas in 1945. 1945 was a busy year for Trudy also. She went to Caracas for six months to take care of Trudita, Mary Pat's second, who was born May 8 when the war ended. Chip wanted to name her after V-E Day: Victoria Europa de la Paix Davis but Mary Pat wouldn't have it. A month later, in Arizona visiting Cousin Tinka, Trudy met one of the hundreds of scientists helping Oppenheimer assemble atom bombs. She married him a few months later in Sweet Water, with Polly and Freddie and a few others in attendance.

Freddie's parents had moved out and given up their house to Polly and Freddie. 60 Thorn, a cozy yellow house, had ivy walls and a big hedge. Though dingy compared to the surrounding mansions, Polly glorified it in a watercolor she painted from the alley next to the house. She rendered a neighbor's ferns and bushes in olive, red and lime strokes in the foreground. She let trees and bushes from that garden cast a beige and yellow leaf pattern on the back of the house between up- and downstairs windows with green shutters. She encircled the house with the green fence Freddie built in a trellis style.

Polly sat at the master bedroom dressing table, getting ready for her Horne's modeling shift. She tucked her dark hair into her fake bun and put on her fire engine-red lipstick. She studied her face — the prominent cheekbones, the nose that was neither prominent nor snub, the rosebud lips that could be parted to show large, even teeth — and

dabbed a tiny bit more powder on shiny spots. As she started for the car, she picked up the mail and noticed a London return address she'd seen before. She was curious before and this time couldn't resist. She pried it open, careful not to tear it. The contents included a letter with a poem and a picture of a smiling couple next to a bombed-out church.

V. Amnesty

Polly clutched the steering wheel as if it were a life raft. The Ohio River waves under the bridge to Pittsburgh became tiny flames. In the break in her modeling shift in Horne's first-floor tearoom, she called Freddie at his office and said, "I read Uffie's letter. I want a divorce."

"Oh, swee — "

She hung up.

Freddie snuck into the tearoom. Above his *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, he watched Polly and others model suits. How beautiful Polly looked as she turned to show side, front and back views.

Afterward, Freddie pulled her into a telephone corridor.

"Polly, I was a wreck. The V1s. The V2s."

"Not to mention the UFFIEs."

"Think of our parents. And Hubbie."

"You managed to forget them."

She started up the escalator to the lockers. Freddie knelt on the escalator step behind her and unwrapped the gift he'd rolled in the *Gazette*. The wood slats of the elevator step dug into his knees, the sharp edge of the step bit into his shins.

Polly found herself face to face with a red rose bigger than the one Harriet received.

“O my luve’s like a red, red rose,” Freddie began.

On the descending escalator, a blonde Polly had just modeled with looked at Freddie and murmured, “I wouldn’t turn *him* down, honey.”

“That’s newly sprung in June.”

“We need to get you one of *those*, Peggy,” a woman a few steps above Polly said to her daughter.

“O my luve’s like the Melodie ... “

Two descending businessmen gave the thumbs-up to Freddie. “You’re a lucky man!” one said.

“That’s sweetly play’d in tune.”

“We’ll take him if you don’t!” yelled three girls from the second-floor railing.

Polly gripped the rose, her gloved little finger touching Freddie’s thumb. In his face she saw the child with blond bangs and sailor suit lean out his window with a basket and lower a puppy for Mary Pat and her to play with; she saw the spiky-haired boy who ran after the sisters with his friends and pulled their hair; and she saw a well-combed college boy walk through the gate and ring her bell. They were connected by countless threads — their long ancestries, their parents and child, their relatives, friends, places, their moments together, their conversations. She didn’t want that delicate web to be ripped apart. She knew he didn’t either.

She nodded.

Sighs were followed by applause. Polly stepped off the escalator and pulled Freddie after her.

Both were careful not to lose hold of the rose.

Never in Its History

I.

“If she comes out again, I’ll smear the wall with her brains.”

The man’s words froze Polly. She was sure Cricket would come out of her room again — she always played peek-a-boo through the banister.

“I see you, Mommy,” she’d say.

Please stay in your room, please, please, Polly begged silently. Cricket always came back out. She was sure she would. She had to stay calm. She had to slow down, go numb. If she got hysterical, he might kill her like he said he was going to do when he came in, when they did that little dance and he maneuvered her into a dining room chair.

He had tricked her. First he called to say he had an important letter for her husband, Fred Brown, at Kopper’s Company. Then he called again to say his cab broke down and could he leave the letter at her house. She *knew* him. He was James Siefer, one of the drivers that Kopper’s always used to take Freddie to the airport. He was a nice-looking black man with a long jaw, and he dressed very well. She recognized him when he rang the bell and she looked out her bedroom window.

She stared at him from the dining room chair next to him. What was he holding in his raincoat pocket? A gun? A knife? She couldn’t tell.

“What do you want? I only have twelve dollars.”

“I have to kill you, you know,” he said again.

This was the second time he said it. The words set her in slow motion. She had to do what he said. She had to live so Cricket would live. And she was supposed to pick

Lorna up at kindergarten soon. Lorna would wonder where her mother was. Hubbie would have walked in to lunch soon — he always walked home from the fifth grade for lunch — but — thank heavens — he was staying with his grandparents so he would go home to them for lunch.

“But first I’ve got to get some of your money,” he said.

“I only have twelve dollars, I told you. I can write you a check. I think we have \$250 in the Mellon account. My bag’s on the table by the door.”

Polly felt him watch her as she went to the table by the door for her handbag. She sat down and took out the cash and her checkbook and pen. She tried to steady her hand as she wrote the check to cash. She phoned the bank. Siefer called a cab to deliver it to the bank and bring back cash. The bank phoned and said there would be an overdraft so she wrote another for \$200, and the driver came, took that check back to the bank and brought the cash.

Between cab arrivals and phone calls, Polly told herself to nod and look at him. She had to let him know he was in control. She had to let him know she understood he had to kill her. As she settled herself into a world that consisted of captor and captive, she began to feel grateful to him because he hadn’t cut her or shot her. She felt he was being kind to her when he stopped talking about killing her. He said he had been watching them come and go many evenings. He could see them getting into their car to go out. Sometimes late at night he’d see them walking home from friends’ parties, all boozed up and laughing.

She exhaled quietly and swallowed secretly so he couldn't see. She turned slightly to the side and rested her chin on her hand when the side of her face began to tremble. She hid her fingers so he couldn't see them shaking.

Cricket didn't come out of the room again even when the phone rang or when he had her open the door to get the money.

How can this be happening? Polly wondered. Not in *Sweet Water*. Not on this block where I grew up. Not in my home.

"Let's go upstairs. To your bedroom," he said. He pulled Polly up. He smiled slightly, and then shoved her ahead of him.

"Maybe you have more money up there," he said.

II. What Cricket Remembers

The taxi driver who used to take Father to the airport kidnapped Mom January 24, 1952. He came into the house when only Mom and I were home. I looked through the stair banister and saw her talking to a man in a raincoat. He saw me and said something that made her make a face. Maybe I think I remember this because when Mom told us a few days after my ill-fated wedding twenty years ago what he would do to me if I came out again, the image of me sitting on the stairs sticks in my mind like a DVD on pause.

The reason I don't think I remember a thing is I would have remembered it the rest of my childhood. My parents may not have told us until we moved to Caracas six years later. Nobody brought it up in school or anywhere when I was a child.

Lorna was sitting there at the table in Mom's boyfriend Cocktail Jack's house when Mom talked to us after my wedding. She said she felt sorry for the kidnapper and

said AAAAAAWWWWW. My future ex, Lorna's husband Derrick and I were flabbergasted and groaned "Lorna!" But now that I know she's hard of hearing but didn't wear a device then, I think she didn't hear Mom say he almost brained me against the wall.

Anyway, I don't remember anything except the stuff about don't take candy from a stranger and don't get in a car every kid was told. It's funny how when I walk around New York City and wonder whether people are hooting and snorting at me or not, I think of how she always told us not to laugh when we passed people or they would think you're laughing at them.

They didn't make us stay home after that home invasion like you might think they would. We always walked to school maybe from the first or second grade on, and life seemed what I can imagine life in a suburban town was like, though I've had nothing since to compare it with. Until we moved to Caracas, I rode sleds in winter, swam at the club in summers and jumped in leaf piles in autumn. The big event for me at four and a half was Saturdays in front of the TV when I'd lie on my stomach on a comforter, or eiderdown, as we called it, in my pajamas, my elbows resting on my pillows. A small ponytail hung from the upper right side of my forehead. I snuck down to the TV room usually before six because the holding pattern that looked like the front of the Little Engine That Could was still on the screen. When Mighty Mouse flew up and sang in that operatic voice that he was here to save the day, it'd be six o'clock.

I'd always tiptoe so I didn't wake up my big brother Hubbie or Mom and Father. Lorna watched TV too, only she'd still be sleeping. She always kept me up with her sinus

snoring over there in her bed on the other side of the radiator. It was like a whistle. Wooooooooooooo. Wooooooooooooo. She cheated me out of our dollhouse miniatures.

“Oh, let me see the wood and velvet sofa you bought at the Five and Ten, Cricket,” she’d ask. “Lemme see the standing lamp that goes with it.”

“I just bought them,” I’d tell her.” I want to keep them.”

Lorna would say, “Look at the bathroom things I got. This toilet handles moves. See? The lid flaps up and the seat too. Isn’t it cute? Try it!”

She could talk me out of anything. She’d say, “Look, Crick. The hamper lid comes up and down too. The wastebasket looks wheaten.”

We always called wicker wheaten.

She’d end up with the old-fashioned fabric living room and bedroom furniture and I’d have plastic bathroom and garden furniture. She’d get the old-fashioned elegant parents and boy and girl family that you could bend at the joints.

She’d tell me she was going to have a boy and a girl.

“How do you know you’ll marry?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m definitely getting married.”

I wondered how anyone could find the right person to marry. I still do.

She married in college and had a boy and a girl.

I’d wait and wait for the TV to start and watch all morning. After Mighty Mouse came My Friend Flicka, I Love Lucy and The Lone Ranger. Lots of Bugs Bunny. I liked the Mouseketeers. My favorite Mouseketeers were Annette, Karen and Cubby. I liked Winky Dink. That’s when we took out the plastic and stuck it on the screen. We drew rope bridges to rescue Winky Dink.

Father worked in Pittsburgh as a lawyer. Mom painted pictures and sold houses. She sang with a choir in Pittsburgh. She worked at Horne's Department Store as a model. Once she took us with her to a lunch-hour show they had.

My sister and I modeled in green plaid winter coats and berets with a pom-pom on top. They let us keep the clothes. Lorna and I wore them in our first-grade and kindergarten pictures, respectively. My glamorous mother with her dark hair in a bun had on a winter coat and pumps. I talked to Mary Hartline back stage, she of the platinum hair and pink tutu on the trapeze swing, she of Super circus and Kellogg ads on TV. She sat on her swing, lovely and friendly like the Good Witch of the North in The Wizard of Oz. Suddenly my mother, Lorna and I were on stage. I looked down at grinning Howdy Doody faces. Laughter rippled through the auditorium.

I tried to hide behind Mom.

III.

As Polly and Siefer climbed the stairs to the master bedroom, Polly stepped softly so Cricket wouldn't come out. The stair carpet muffled his footsteps. She handed him five dollars from an evening clutch on the dressing table. She took a pin-up picture of herself and placed it facedown. It was one of many Freddie took and developed himself in a photo shop he set up in the bathroom. The floral dress, bandana and Rita Hayworth pose — her hands clasped behind her head — looked ghastly now. The picture knocked over a lipstick that she quickly set upright. When the girls put on my red lipstick at the dressing table, they missed their lips and part of the lip outline would end up to the side

of their mouths. They stuffed their hair into Polly's fake bun Cricket called a bird's nest, and teetered in her high heels like they were on playground slides. Polly looked at her reflection and made her frown lines relax and her mouth turn up a little. She dug her thumbs into her suit belt when she saw him sit on the bed behind her.

"C'mere," he said, patting the mattress.

She sat beside him.

He put his hand on her knee.

She breathed calmness through each limb, each vein. She didn't pull away when he touched her. If she screamed or scratched him, he would kill her, then Cricket.

She had to think of some way to stop him. She couldn't say Freddie was coming. He knew Freddie was on a plane now or in Cleveland because he dropped him at the airport. She tried something else she hoped he would believe.

"We can't stay here," she said as mildly as she could. "Harriet and Freddie Sr. — my in-laws — stop by every day at 1:30. They should be here any minute. They watch Cricket when I pick up Lorna at kindergarten."

"That's a shame," he said. His eyes traveled from her face to her knee and back again. It could have been minutes. Then he said, "You won't be here when they visit this time. We'll get in your car to get your daughter. You can leave a note. You'll drive."

IV. What Cricket Remembers

Sometimes I'd cry for Mom outside her door and she wouldn't answer. I must have done that a lot because I remember the waiting and crying very well. Sometimes

she'd let me watch her put on makeup. I'd burn my hair when I tried to dry it next to the fuzzy Franklin furnace embedded in the wall.

I idolized her and now wonder what it would be like to be motherless at four and a half when she was forty. She became my best friend much, much later. When she was ninety, I phoned her on Mother's Day.

She asked, "I wasn't much of a mother, was I?"

Her question floored me. After a moment, I answered "Nooooo, but you sure became a good friend. You care."

I wanted her to live forever whatever happened to her body so I could have someone to tell my problems to and share a joke with. Nobody talks to me with that mixture of warmth and dry wit. Nobody talks to me. Period.

Sinny was our black Cocker Spaniel. Sinny, come here, I'd say, when I was watching TV. I loved to sit and hold her in my lap and hug her. She was so furry and warm. She made me feel safe.

When my big brother Hubbie babysat us, we played Murder in the Dark or he took us to the movies to see the giant tarantula grab a picnicker with its fangs. In Monopoly, Hubbie and Lorna ended up with red hotels on Park Place, and all I had were stupid green houses on Baltic Avenue. I couldn't do anything about it. When I asked Mom to have a baby so I wouldn't be the youngest, she said, "You're the baby."

Maybe that's another reason I say I have a memory of the kidnapping. Hubbie and Lorna remember the kidnapping, and I don't want them to gang up on me after all these years by having memories I don't.

V.

Polly and Freddie's Ford station wagon was parked out front. Siefer waited till she slid over to the driver's seat before he got in. His hand never left the coat pocket, reminding her he could kill her whenever he thought it was the right time.

Why did he pick her? He said he'd seen Freddie and her dressed to go out. Maybe he saw her fashion photographs in newspapers. She and Freddie really did go to town, didn't they? People said they left the kids at babysitters' homes too much. Polly had painting clubs and events, the Mendelssohn choir. But couldn't he see his mistake now?

She and Freddie had no money. Their ancient station wagon had a mushroom-infested rumble seat the kids would complain about when they slept there with their blankets and pillows and waved at oncoming cars on trips to Cape Cod. Hubbie slept in the backseat. Their house at 60 Thorn Street, anemic yellow under wisteria, cowered among Victorian homes. They couldn't afford to send the kids to the Sweet Water Academy where she and her sisters had gone. Now Siefer was probably so angry he got so little money and didn't get a chance to rape her upstairs that he would do horrible things to her later.

Just as they started up, Cricket walked toward them down the brick path that ran from the front door to the hedges.

"Please let me put her back in the house!" Polly begged.

"We'll both put her back."

Polly tried to stop tears as she grabbed Cricket's hand. Should she scream and run? He could kill both of them behind the high hedge. She walked her daughter to the door and looked back. Siefer stood at the hedges.

Polly knelt and held Cricket. She rubbed her arms that had gotten cold from her short walk. Cricket looked at her quizzically.

Polly told her, “Be a big girl and go to your room and stay there. I’m getting Lorna, and I’ll be right back.” She watched her walk toward the stairs and wondered if she’d see her daughter again.

As the old station wagon rumbled away from 60 Thorn, Siefer said, “We’ll pick up your daughter and leave her a block away so the in-laws won’t see us.”

VI. What Lorna Remembers

The kidnapper and Mom picked me up at school in our car. I sat in the back. Mom was driving and didn’t say anything but a cheery “Hi. This is Mr. Siefer, Lorna.” He had a big smile and asked what grade I was in and did I like school. I also remember they left me a block away at Tabby’s house and I was mad I had to trudge through snow. Cricket and I got bored in our room so wandered out and played with snowballs. We went outside the big hedges to the street at some point, maybe because the snow was higher. That’s when Mrs. Boyle saw us playing in the snow in our dresses and got us into her car. I remember she put her blankets around us inside her house. She gave us jacks to play with.

I remember this because we didn’t play jacks or marbles or anything but dollhouse at home. Sometimes we played Clue and Monopoly with Hubbie. We watched way too much TV, every night in the little sunroom off the living room. In Canada where I brought up my kids, I made sure they had limited TV time, and I tried to play games with them. I built my daughter a Victorian dollhouse.

Usually Cricket stayed home with a book, and I'd go off with Willie and Lloydie and play with bows and arrows. We also would light matches and dig up arrowheads behind the Booths' garage.

Lloydie and Willie lived on Thorn Street so we'd meet up and go places like the old drainage pie we called Dead Man's Pipe. In winter, Thorn Street looked like a tunnel of snowy branches. In summer, the tiny ferns on the Fergusons' hedge next door closed when I touch them. At the corner of Thorn Street and Grant Street, the minister's daughter Tabby and her brothers put on plays on their lawn. At Easter, Dinghy's family would stick tin chicks, rabbits, eggs and baskets into their lawn.

In the fall we visited Great Aunt Anna in Brookville. We'd buy pumpkins. Cricket, Hubbie and I would run as fast as we could toward the grassy slope with our dog Sinny. Cricket had to work hard to keep up. The lawn was huge and wide and stretched off in fields and woods to the horizon. We rolled down the hill.

I have a very good memory. I can remember things that happened at three or four. Cricket can't go back as far as I can and remembers nothing about the kidnapping. When Cricket wrote about Sweet Water, I wrote back from Portugal or wherever Derrick and I were. We're retired in England now, but we travel a lot. It's lonely over here in this little town but I see my daughter. My grandsons are a joy. I give tours in Exeter and sometimes work at Thayer's Department store. I won a sound system for outselling everyone else!

Anyway, I wrote back and told Cricket the pet chick Rooster Peep was mine, not hers, that Debbie Woods was my best friend, not anyone Cricket would be going swimming with, Grandma Harriet's restaurant was the Community Kitchen not the Bandbox, Grandma Bess's house was grey not blue, the dog was Sinny like cinders not

Sindy and a hundred other things she got wrong. I handwrote the letter as I always do because if I ever used a computer I might press the wrong button and break it. Derrick uses one in the library. They're pretty dear. I'd rather spend money going to Macho Picchu. At least I write! Crick and Hubbie never write letters. Ever since I went away to school in the eighth grade I wrote my parents together then separately after they divorced — 52 letters a year

Everyone talks about the kidnapper like he was so vicious. I'm sure he didn't mean any harm. All he wanted was a little money. Poor thing. I feel sorry for him.

VII.

Siefer made Polly drop Lorna off at a snow-piled curb at Thorn and Grant Streets.

Lorna was angry and wanted to know why they were dropping her in the snow.

“Why do I have to walk, Mom? The house is right there. It's cold,” she whined from the back seat.

Without turning around, Polly told her they had to hurry to the hardware store because the nice man was helping Father do basement repairs. She didn't say anything about the in-laws in front of Lorna because Siefer would know she was lying. Thank God he hadn't mentioned them to test if she had made up the in-law story.

“Good-bye, Lorna,” Polly said. “Go play with Cricket. I'll be right back.” She couldn't say anything else or hug her. She just smiled at her very annoyed daughter when she got out and slammed the car door. Polly hated to think that the image of Lorna standing outside her car window in the snow glaring at her would be the final image she would have of her daughter.

When they turned toward town, Polly's friend Betty Sweeney crossed in front of them. Polly begged Betty to please look at her, to look at her eyes. Polly couldn't honk or shout — what would he do? Kill her? Force her to return home and kill Cricket and her together? Kill all three of them? They'd just driven the route up Thorn from the school — the route Hubbie took every day. The girls will soon walk to school. Will they? Will he kill them later because they are witnesses? Will he kill her and let them live? Lord in heaven hallowed be Thy name, Polly prayed. Don't let me abandon them. She jerked her head back. She had to make a sign to Betty. Siefer poked her leg.

“Don't do it,” he said.

His other hand remained in his pocket holding what she now thought must be a knife but she wasn't sure.

She numbed up again.

She looked at people and homes she knew as they passed through town. She didn't want the part of the town she knew to pass out of her view but it did. They started to cross over the Ohio River on the Sweet Water Bridge. Polly knew once they headed out to the countryside he would kill her. They slowed for a light in the middle of the bridge. Polly floored the gas pedal and rammed into the car in front of her. Siefer was stunned by the jolt and fell back, then forward. Polly grabbed the door handle. She couldn't get it to work. Then it moved. She jumped out and ran to the limousine behind her.

“HELP ME! HE'S GOING TO KILL ME! Polly screamed.

Tears streamed down her face. She pounded on the windshield. A woman in a mink coat stared at her from the back seat. Polly banged on the driver's window.

“PLEASE LET ME IN!” she shrieked.

He opened his door. She crawled over his legs into the passenger seat.

Polly took long wheezing breaths.

The chauffeur pressed his forefinger against the windshield and said, “I know that man Siefer. He’s no good.”

They watched Siefer move into the Ford driver’s seat and drive off.

VIII. What Hubbie Remembers

“Is it true she piled into a car?”

“How is Mrs. Brown?”

“Did she know her kidnapper before he abducted her?”

About a dozen reporters were shouting questions from the staircase outside my grandparents’ apartment. I looked down on them from the front door Father had opened. Mom, Father and I had gone to Grandma Harriet and Grandpa Fred’s apartment in the East End of Sweet Water, where they lived above a garage. Our house at 60 Thorn had been staked out by the press. The girls stayed at Mrs. Boyle’s.

“There will be no interviews at this time,” Father said.

They kept firing questions. They had pads and pens and hats with press cards in the bands I guess from the Sweet Water Tribune and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Flashbulbs were going off so I had to squint and hoped they didn’t get me and my big ears that made me look like Alfred E. Newman. (I had them fixed at twelve.)

“I’m sorry,” Father said in his calm deep voice. “We have no statement to make.”

His labor lawyer skills came into play.

I know a year later when we met Grandma Bess at the train in Hyannis, I dressed as a reporter in a raincoat, hat and shades, with a pad and pencil and card in the hatband. I must have been inspired by that night but it could have been Dick Tracy or Clark Kent.

That's it. That's all I remember. The reason I probably remember is I spent a lot of time at the grandparents' place. I was in the fifth grade at school, a lot older than my sisters, the Herd, as I call them. I was staying with my grandparents at the time, though I'm not why.

Those days I'd go from my room at 60 Thorn Street to the bureau in the living room and get my stuff, sling shots, you name it. I'd go off in my Davy Crockett hat to blow things up with Kit Boyle. We'd send someone older to buy the ingredients and head for a garage.

Cricket found a 1958 letter from Grandpa Brown to Sonny — his son, my Father — in Caracas. It was sent before Mom and the girls went down February 1959. I didn't go down there but stayed with my grandparents in Cape Cod, where they had moved by that time. I went to Chatham High, then Taft, where I'm going to my 50th reunion soon. Anyway, Grandpa's letter said thanks for the checks for him and his wife Harriet and Harriet's sister and it's good you got away from provincial mediocrity. Sweet Water was and is not provincial mediocrity. I guess Freddie Brown Sr. never got over the Depression. But after the letter, Cricket understood what I had been saying all along was the reason they moved: money. Mom and her sister Mary Pat's close bond was part of it, of course. For Father and Mom, violins play when Sweet Water is mentioned. It's a posh suburb and everyone from Sweet Water Heights and the regular Sweet Water pretty much

mingled. As for us kids, Sweet Water is also Brigadoon or Valhalla. Maybe my wife Penny and I have recaptured a little of what my parents had in Sweet Water, though it's a little lonely on Cape Cod in the winter. Peggy does her landscaping and I got a Ph.D. at 67 in American History so we're busy. I've worked like a dog all over the U.S. and Europe. Now that I'm retired, Penny and I give dinner parties and go to them. We've extended the house, with a loft for Peggy's work and huge windows to look at the ocean and pine trees. We went to the Galapagos Islands and Teirra del Fuego recently.

We may bankrupt Blue Cross/Blue Shield because of major health issues. "Surgery," I remember John Houston growling when a talk show host asked what his secret to longevity was. I thought it was a riot at the time. He wasn't kidding. It's kept us around.

My sisters lived a lot of places too but are comparatively isolated and uprooted in New York and England. The distance between them and Valhalla-Brigadoon-Sweet Water is greater. The distance between them and reality is greater also. Lorna's a turkey, though a nice turkey. Cricket's an insect. We really went at each other about the divorce and then Mom's care much later. Sometimes she visits with her seasonal boyfriend. He's a good buffer.

Every day I took the paper to Mom the five years she was in Independence Nursing Home. Before that, we rescued her and put her in the cottage next to our house when her boyfriend deserted her. She stayed there seven years.

I didn't speak to her for ten, maybe twelve, years after her divorce. She'd kicked me out of the Cape Cod house one summer so our relationship was rocky anyway. We had a chance to make up for lost time. Because Father died a little early, I feel like I was

deprived of time I might have had to go over our lives with him. Penny and I got two in one with Mom in her old age. She was the child we never had as well as a mother. It was the same feeling Cricket had I'm sure. It was like having a very mature, interesting, beautifully mannered daughter. But she was our Mom as well. She cared about her family and loved to talk about the past. She was our link to history. I miss her.

Thank Christ she jumped out of that car.

The doubled salary Uncle Chip promised and delivered would seem to be the reason they left their friends and families for Caracas, but I think the kidnapping changed their feeling about Sweet Water, no matter how many generations they had lived in the area or how many people they knew there.

IX.

“There’s something fishy going on here,” the policewoman said.

Polly had self-anesthetized during the ordeal and hadn’t snapped out of her trance. With that, and her depleted energy, she didn’t defend herself. She just looked at the policewoman.

She had *told* the woman she knew James Siefer as someone who drove her husband to the airport, and she had gone over and over the letter hoax and his threats and her escape. She couldn’t lose her temper here either or she wouldn’t be able to tell them as many details of her captivity as she could.

The limousine chauffeur, whose name Charles Beamer, had dropped Polly off at the police station. He had been driving an executive’s mistress to the airport. That was the reason she didn’t want a hysterical woman getting in. The woman never appeared at the station or the trial. Polly felt she was very lucky that the Standard Steel Bolt

Company executive's driver recognized Siefer and knew him as "bad." She wished he were here now as she tried to explain what was happening. Beamer did identify her abductor to the police before he went with the mistress to the airport.

Polly answered questions from a Lieutenant Jones and Chief Rutherford. They also tried to get her to tell them if there was a relationship. It was dispiriting to have to look at their smirks and listen to their insinuations after being accused by a woman she would have thought would be more sympathetic. But after she had landed in Beamer's passenger seat and saw him point to Siefer, she had felt relieved enough to bear anything. She jumped up when she saw Freddie and hugged him tight. He told her how Mrs. Boyle had found the girls in the snow. He told her he had packed some things because reporters were already at 60 Thorn Street. They'd followed him in. He had to leave by the kitchen door and go down the alley. And get a neighbor drive him here. They were going to hide out at Freddie's parents' place.

Reporters found them anyway at their hideaway, but Freddie handled them well.

The next day Polly got a call from Janet Vogt, whose husband also worked at Kopper's Company. She was at the police station. Siefer had tried the letter trick on her also. Her husband was also way, and Siefer knew this also. She refused to let him in. He said it was urgent. She still refused. Polly was relieved for Janet. Polly wished she hadn't been such a dumbbell and had seen through the letter hoax like Janet and had not opened the door.

In the evening news, Polly saw her face in profile from a modeling picture and a picture of Janet sitting in a golf cart with the accompanying headlines "Crash Foils Gunman" and "Another Socialite Accosted."

The police told Polly they found the car in Coraopolis. Siefer had not been found. She was scared he would come back to finish the job.

X. What Freddie Remembered

They called me at the hotel in Cleveland when Polly was brought to the police station. I took the next plane back. We both cried when I saw her sitting there. I went right into the interview room, grabbed her and pulled her away from the two cops who were interrogating her. She was so scared he was going to kill her that we had to lock everything and get a cop to watch the place.

That bastard Siefer terrorized Sweet Water after Polly and Janet Vogt's pictures appeared and the articles said the man was still roaming around. One headline said "Terror Reigns in Refined Sweet Water." Can you imagine? Sweet Water was a place where Polly's and my parents had left doors unlocked, both in their homes and cars. Never in its history, one newspaper said, had anything happened like this in refined Sweet Water. Refined. That's what they called it. Sweet Water was refined.

I certainly don't remember anything like this happening. Polly's youngest sister Trudy told us about a distant Sprague cousin Elsa who taught nursery school in Pittsburgh and was raped and killed at the school. But that happened years earlier and the cousin was a very distant one and it was Pittsburgh, not Sweet Water. Sweet Water is where all the best people come from. Well, maybe all the best people don't come from Sweet Water, but they should.

Christ, the town went haywire. Siefer was on the loose. Hardware stores ran out of padlocks. People barricaded themselves in. Kids were kept from school; people didn't go to work.

The police called us three days later and told us Siefer was arrested in a Pittsburgh hotel. He had been taking cabs everywhere and the cab drivers had helped police track him from one hotel to another. Would you believe the son of a bitch went on a clothes-shopping spree at a men's store in Pittsburgh? Finally they tracked him via a cab driver to a hotel in Pittsburgh.

Then we had to deal with the trial April 18. Too bad I couldn't try the bastard. I wish I were a criminal lawyer, not a labor lawyer. You know, Polly got up there and told the whole story without breaking down. She gave them every detail. She stuck to the facts. I was proud of her.

XI.

“That’s why they find all those bodies in the countryside,” the judge said after Polly finished telling about her escape.

Polly had sat up straight and told the story with Siefer sitting right there in front of her. She looked at him once and saw him leering at her. She decided she would look at her lawyer and answer his questions. She handled Siefer’s lawyer’s questions well, though he tried to confuse her and suggest that Siefer was at least a family friend and possibly a special friend of Polly’s.

“You can step down now, Mrs. Brown,” the judge finally said.

Polly watched Janet Vogt tell how she wouldn't let Siefer in the next day. Polly gave Janet little encouraging looks, though she didn't smile or even raise an eyebrow because Freddie and her lawyer had coached her well. Janet was a tennis-anyone big blond, while Polly was slender and brunette. They wore almost identical black suits and white blouses with wide lapels. They wore white gloves and little black hats with the veils pushed back. Janet's was a bean-shaped headband, and Polly's was bow-shaped and pinned on a slant.

Janet spoke briskly as if she testified about potential murderers every day of her life.

Then the limousine driver got up to testify. Charles Beamer made Polly want to kneel and pray. What were the chances of jumping in a car with a kindly, elderly black man who knew Siefer from his neighborhood? Mr. Beamer said Siefer was well known for terrorizing his community. He also said Mrs. Brown was so hysterical she was almost unrecognizable as the same person, but he knew the woman sitting in the court in front of him was the same woman from her voice.

The lieutenant and chief testified. They said how they had tracked Siefer through taxi driver witnesses and finally arrested him in a Pittsburgh hotel.

Then Siefer took the stand.

Siefer's attorney let him explain that he owed support money and he was desperate to make the payments. Polly's lawyer got a laugh from the court when he got Siefer to admit he blew the money he was supposed to have taken for child support payments on new clothes.

Siefer talked about how he had watched Polly in her furs and Freddie in his fine clothes.

“I thought they were rich,” he said.

Yes, just what I thought you thought, but how wrong you were, Polly thought. And to think you only got \$217 from me and spent it on clothes. You were going to kill me for \$217.

Siefer’s lawyer tried to prove that his client’s conduct was a result of the war. Polly’s lawyer discussed past assault, firearms and forgery charges. Finally the judge ordered Siefer to be evaluated in the Behavior Clinic.

Polly never felt safe again. Sweet Water wasn’t the same place any more. She had to try to go on as before, but she wasn’t the same person. She couldn’t joke around with people easily. It was as if she’d been locked away from people a long time. It took a while for her friends to treat her as they always did. They thought she was a zombie back from hell. Well, she wasn’t. If anything, she was more attuned to what was going on. Maybe we all could use a little sobering up, she joked to Freddie. Her daughters didn’t know what happened except Lorna must have remembered the snowy corner drop-off and staying at the Boyles’ house. Hubbie thought reporters were neat and wanted to be one.

Siefer went to jail and got out early for good behavior. He became the driver for the owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Art Rooney. Rooney had won the Irish sweepstakes and lived in the house that Aunt Lizzie had lived in above the Pittsburgh funicular. Polly had often visited and remembered Aunt Lizzie kicking up a booted foot and saying, “I’d rather dance!”

Siefer knifed a woman in a bar and went back to jail again.

When Polly heard that news, her hand went to her throat. Maybe she had the luck of the Irish. The quick thinking of Polly was more like it she decided.

Polly's sister Mary Pat and her brother-in-law Chip had wanted the Browns to move to Caracas and have Freddie join Chip's law firm. At Asti's Restaurant in New York, the two couples listened to waiters and guests sing opera. Later that evening they toasted the decision to move to Caracas.

The kids could go to better schools. Life would be exotic and fun down there. They'd still go to Cape Cod in the summers.

Freddie and Polly knew the kidnapping had something to do with the decision. They both knew Polly had had a jolt from something that happened just before Siefer was let out early for good behavior.

Two policemen Polly didn't recognize pulled up to the curb when she was walking on Main Street. The policeman in the passenger seat leaned out the window and said, "Siefer's getting out and he's coming to get you!"

Making Vernon Laugh

“Vernon’s so grim,” said Polly. She was curled up on the silver brocade couch next to Freddie, her feet with the skinny-strapped sandals tucked up under her. “We should do something silly to make him laugh.”

Vernon was the first fiancé of the Brown and Davis families’ younger generation. Polly and Mary Pat’s families had spent Cape Cod summers together, but now they spent most of their free time together the rest of the year as well ever since the Mary Pat and Chip had talked Polly and Freddie into moving to Caracas. Polly felt as interested as a mother in her niece Chiquita’s fiancé. Maybe they all expected too much, but he didn’t seem to have Chip and Freddie’s joie de vivre or Hubbie’s impersonation skills. The Browns spent most of every cocktail hour discussing the Davises. Tonight Vernon was the featured topic because the Davises were coming to Christmas dinner with Vernon in tow.

When Polly got no response, she repeated herself, this time putting it into a direct question. “How can we make Vernon laugh?”

“*I-dun-no.*” At least that’s how Polly interpreted the three-note hum from either Cricket or Lorna.

Her daughters, home from boarding school for Christmas, sat on the Persian rug in red Chinese pants and jackets she’d bought at the China Shop run by their friend Bully Hatch. For years she’d gone there to buy things like lacquer jewelry boxes and tiny white porcelain horses for the girls. Cricket was sitting with her legs sprawled out. She was playing with mechanical toys they planned to give to the Davises. Lorna was neatly folding and packing her gifts.

“Chiquita sure picked a sphinx,” her son Hubbie said, reaching for his Scotch. He sat near Polly in an armchair. He was reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, the book he and his father had coincidentally given each other for Christmas.

Natalie Wood on the *West Side Story* sound track was singing about how tonight wasn't going to be just any old night. Natalie was getting competition from triki-trakies, fireworks that resembled tiny dynamite bundles and sounded like machine guns.

Their maid Maria came in and told them dinner was almost ready and asked where the Davises were. “Y la familia Davis? Cuando vienen? La comida está lista, señor.”

Freddie shrugged, made a face, took a drag of his Viceroy, and said, “Christ, where ARE the Davises? I know we owe them Christmas dinner after all these years at the Hacienda, but Godammit, where are they?”

Polly had urged Freddie to treat her sister Mary Pat and Chip and their three daughters (plus Vernon) this year, though Christmas at the Hacienda had been a tradition the four years since they moved from Sweet Water January 1959. Christmas at the Hacienda was a table piled high with cornmeal (arepa) patties, meringue cookies, and neatly knotted tomares. Mary Pat and her daughters bought gifts Christmas Eve on the Sabana Grande Boulevard and wrapped them in colorful tissue paper. The Browns and Davises would open gifts in a raised living room that spilled down tile steps to a fountain with a horse statue by Mary Pat. After they'd devoured a gringo turkey meal, Mary Pat played the piano and everyone sang. She would persuade Maria to sing *Cielito Lindo*. Maria's voice was strong and deep, delighting everyone including herself. “Canta y no llore. Porque si cantan se alegren, cielito lindo, los corazones.”

In addition to the family feast, Mary Pat ran the church pageant. She made angel wings out of hangers, cloth and glitter. She gave a children's party at the Hacienda afterward. Freddie called her Saint Mary.

"You know the Davises are at least one hour late," said Cricket.

Freddie told Maria he didn't know when they'd arrive. "No sé, Maria. Want a freshener, sweetie? Anyone else? Otro whisky escocés. Para todos."

Maria left with the empty glasses

"Vernon's OK," Lorna said. "He's just serious like Chiquita. He plays the guitar and knows a lot of folk songs."

"He's a Venus fly trap," Freddie said.

"Maybe Uncle Chip doesn't let him get a word in when he talks with grownups," Lorna said. "He talks to us."

Hubbie imitated Uncle Chip by speaking with a Southern W.C. Fields inflection in a warm avuncular way. "Go to HAWL-ly-Wood! You're so PUR-dy! Don't stop for LUNCH! They broke the MOLD when they made you!"

It amazed Polly how many times she and her daughters heard Chip say those words and still fell for them Sundays at the Hacienda. Mary Pat would dance in bare feet to *Persuasive Percussion* in the roofed porch around the pool, taking a break from teaching classes in her sculpture studio. Trudita might strum the cuatro and sing a song about Valencia. Chip would deliver one-liners and martinis, Polly and Freddie the happy recipients of both. Trudita, Pollita, Lorna and Cricket would swing in the hammock and play with Pancho the monkey. Hens and roosters would roam the grounds, and the adopted strays, Tessie and Andy, and the old dog Puppy, would sleep on patio tiles.

“In that case we have to make him laugh,” Polly said. She adjusted her Japanese lounging jacket, uncurled her legs and crossed one black velour leg over the other. “I’ve got it!” she said in her soft, Jackie Kennedy voice. “We’ll be the House of Pong. The girls and I are ready dressed.”

“Are we performing *Flower Drum Song*?” Cricket asked. You’re the only one that knows the words.

Polly had played songs on the piano from all the musicals and sang them for years, but most of the family knew the words because they had the records.

“Let’s do *South Pacific* — I was in the kick line at camp,” Cricket continued. She sang about washing men right out of her while she did hair-washing motions and pranced to one side and then to the other.

“No, sweetie,” Freddie laughed. “We’re just dressing up silly to see if old Pasty Face smiles.”

“Better forget it, Cricket,” Hubbie laughed. “You’d look like the Chinese doll in the story that comes to life and rocks on its base into the bedroom with its twelve arms dripping blood and kills everybody.”

“You’re funny, but your stupid face beats you to it,” Cricket retorted.

“Don’t do that, Hubbie,” Polly said. Polly had had to sit up with Cricket after Hubbie told her horror stories.

“We must be un poco borracho, Poll,” Freddie said. “We just went to the Colliers’ Broadway party.” He stood up. “Let’s find the chopsticks and braid.”

Freddie and Polly went through the den Hubbie used as a guest room. A statue of Mary Pat's, a bare-breasted woman, cradled her arms as if to hold a baby. They always put a champagne bottle in her arms on holidays.

Polly heard Hubbie say, "Pong yourselves to death. Count me out."

A *West Side Story* gang member sang about being cool, man, not bouncing like a yo-yo or blasting like a rocket.

Polly turned around and said to Hubbie, "Hubbie, it'd be silly if you don't join in."

"How can anyone NOT dress up in this costume-crazy family?" yelled Freddie from the bedroom.

"Oh, all right. Later. You'll pay for this, Cricket. You started it."

"I did not. Mom did. Shut up, Hubbie," Cricket hissed.

Lorna got up and went through the den to the bedroom the girls were sharing.

"Cut it out! Just stop!" Polly called as she entered the master bedroom.

Since Freddie had taken over the bathroom, Polly lay on the bed. She had to have a moment to herself. What had happened to her children? Lorna and Cricket hadn't spoken a word to each other since they moved here in 1959 except when necessary — that G.D. third-grade teacher that flunked Lorna for writing with her left hand! It didn't matter in the big Sweet Water elementary school, though Cricket stayed inside and Lorna ran off to dig up arrowheads. It was hard with cancelled school because of gunshots and burning buses. They picked a great time to move here, just in time for the Fidel Cuba Si-Yankee no era. But the biggest problem was the Caracas fourth grade had eight students so Lorna and Cricket were thrown together. Apartment living and living in a city threw

them together also. Everyone dressed their girls alike, but maybe Polly shouldn't have. Maria said they sat in silence at the dinner when she and Freddie were out. Polly broke up their spitting and scratching fights. Hubbie was mean to both, but both ganged up on Cricket. Was it because they left Hubbie in the states with his grandparents that he — although smart and funny — was so mean? He loved his grandparents and was heading for Taft the next year anyway. Why didn't her kids get along like she and her sisters had? Polly and her younger sister Mary Pat had been inseparable and adored baby sister Trudy.

Polly grabbed chopsticks and a makeup bag, and started back toward the couch to chat and primp.

As she entered the living room, she heard Cricket say to Hubbie, "Mom said we were two little mistakes. I never heard her say THREE little mistakes."

Polly stopped. She was aghast. Why in the world would she bring that up? She put on her brightest smile and said, "Oh, Cricket, you know I was kidding — I say everything under the sun in bad traffic on the Hippopotomo—"

Maria entered with the Scotch and waters on the rocks. She handed drinks out. "Los Davises no esán aquí todavía," she said, referring to the fact the Davises were still not there and the turkey was waiting. She handed drinks to Hubbie and Cricket and set others down on the coffee table.

"Gracias, Maria. Si, yo sé," said Hubbie. He told her he knew, took a drink and shrugged with his glass.

Maria left.

“You said it a few times, Mom. Not just in traffic,” Cricket protested. “And Father said he was surprised with your and his looks they only had one child with regular good looks — Hubbie.”

“Freddie’s nuts! I give up!” Polly said. She grabbed two Scotches, left one on the master bedroom night table for Hubbie. She was fed up with Freddie and the kids so she sank into a secluded seat in the den to do her makeup. She opened and propped up her large hand mirror with the tortoise shell rim. Her puffed-up highlighted hair that split into two big waves on either side looked fine. She pinned up her hair in the back and crisscrossed the ornate chopsticks into it. She applied red lipstick and purple shadow and drew a black line from her lower and upper lids up and out. Not bad for fifty-one, she thought. How rude of Freddie to say that about the kids, but now that she thought about it, Lorna had Freddie’s profile, and though Cricket looked like Polly, Polly had more bones in her face than Cricket did.

She looked at Mary Pat’s champagne lady statue, her graceful back and long hair reflected in the ceiling-to-floor gilt-edged mirror behind her. Sure, her sister and she had bickered over art competitions, but that was over. Mary Pat won one national sculpture first prize after another, including the prize for creating the Venezuelan Oscar, but it didn’t bother Polly. She painted with her group. Her tropical landscapes were in shows and had been reproduced in greeting cards. It was because of Mary Pat and Polly’s bond that they’d let the Davises at Asti’s Restaurant in New York talk them into leaving their friends and emigrating to Caracas at forty-seven and forty-nine. Well, Freddie did earn much more in Chip’s law firm. People would say it was more than nepotism and snicker about Chip and her, but it was heavenly here with the embassy parties, the costume

parties, and visits with the Davises. And now they had a house — or at least the bottom of a duplex. Quinta Atalaya — the Watchtower — with his tiled floors, arches, stained glass and antique bell. And that tooled leather dining room set the last renters let them keep for a while! Sometimes she missed the view from the penthouse they had lived in. They could sit on the terrace and look across the Caracas valley and watch cloud shadows move across the Andes foothills. They made up names for the ranges: Sleeping Giant and Mount Sinny, the latter named after the beloved Cocker Spaniel they left behind.

Hubbie continued holding forth, happy to have an audience, even if it was Cricket. “The sixty-five thousand dollar question: Are we going to make Vernon laugh or will it backfire? He doesn’t need comic relief — he needs sanity. Uncle Chip’s THINK YIDDISH-DRESS BRITISH! or IT’S LATER THAN YOU THINK is funny for us, even a million times. How do you think Vernon as a prospective family member is handling it?”

Several sets of triki-traki fireworks exploded outside.

Cricket didn’t answer. She had more important things on her mind. “Hubbie, I think Uncle Chip’s having an affair with Mom. He crawled onto the couch with me when I was lying in a bedroom in my bathing suit at the Hacienda. He said, ‘Aaaaaw, Cricket! The Little Bag is getting as pretty as the Old Bag’ and put his arm around me.” Cricket proceeded to relate what Uncle Chip then said to her.

Polly dropped her makeup mirror and eyeliner brush and put her face in her hands.

Hubbie threw his book at Cricket and screamed, ”YOU LITTLE BITCH!”

Polly jumped up and peered into the living room. She saw Cricket hold up her hands to block the book. She saw her shake her hands to lessen the pain. She heard her sob and scream, “What’s the matter with you, Hubbie?”

Polly braced herself, ready to spring like a mother lion to save her cub.

Hubbie crouched next to her and hissed in her ear, “That’s character assassination! That’s our uncle and our mother you’re talking about!”

Cricket pushed Hubbie away and snarled, “I hate you, you bastard! I’m trying to tell you something. I thought we could talk. You never talk to me. You’re just mean to me. People are right when they say you have a lousy personality — you and your father!”

Polly saw Hubbie stand with his fists clenched, but he didn’t move. Finally he sat down. When Polly saw that Cricket wasn’t going to be clobbered by her brother, she sank into the chair in the corner she’d been sitting in. She put her face in her lap and whispered, “God help us!”

“Oh, yeah, you little jerk?” Hubbie said. “Well, you women are flaky idiots — I pray I have more of Father’s Teutonic genes than Mom’s artsy-fartsy leprechaun genes!” He took a sip of Scotch and added, “The women in this family are weak.”

Polly bolted upright at that and gave a little snort. She said to Champagne Lady, “Hubbie’s a chip off the old block, isn’t he?”

Champagne Lady didn’t turn to acknowledge her remark and continued to stare maternally at the Champagne bottle.

Cricket gulped down her Scotch so loudly Polly could hear it. She took a gulp of her own. She was amazed to hear Cricket speak with quiet authority. Did she retrieve it from a hidden reserve, emotional exhaustion or whisky?

“The men in this family are morose,” she said.

“Bravo, Cricket!” Polly said, raising her glass. Polly thought that Cricket not only had guts to say it but also had nailed it. Besides the sibling factions, the males and females in her family seemed to be divided into separate camps, much more so than other families. Was it because she and Freddie had opposing temperaments, much closer to the opposite ends of the spectrum than temperaments of other couples? Were the women too frivolous and the men too serious?

Hubbie exhaled and said, “You’re right about Chip and Mom. Father was down here getting our first Caracas apartment. I walked into Grandma Bess’s living room and there was Uncle Chip and Mom on the couch. Kissing. First base. I turned around and walked out.”

Polly fell into a crash-landing position, this time clutching the front of her legs. She’d smeared the eyeliner, shadow and lipstick with tears and rubbing. She didn’t know if the accusations hurt more than her children’s hatred of each other.

Cricket said, “I guess ... Father did say they dated and it was embarrassing. Aunt Mary Pat went out with Father too, did you know that? Maybe it’s not true — so he felt her up. Uncle Chip’s sick. He tells me to look in the mirror and see how much I look like Trudita. But I’ve got Father’s funny eyelid. Let’s drop it and get ready.”

“Don’t say anything,” Hubbie said.

“I won’t,” Cricket said. “I have some eyeliner if you want it,” she added.

“Okay, let’s go,” Hubbie answered.

Polly heard Hubbie and Lorna go into the girls’ room. They didn’t see her or pretended they didn’t. She dashed into the master bedroom and headed for the bathroom

past Freddie who was taking a little lie-down. He had on a satin cap and a robe and slippers. He'd applied eye makeup and had a braid and mustache in his hand.

Where did Freddie get the hat and braid, Polly wondered. No doubt they'd dressed up for *The Teahouse of the August Moon* or some such party. Polly doused water on her face, cleaned the makeup off with cold cream and remade herself. When she walked out, Freddie said, "Come here, sweetie."

Polly lay on the bed beside Freddie.

"Too bad you didn't have that getup for the Japanese embassy soiree."

The event had been fun, Polly remembered, though at first Freddie had said, "I'm not going!" because it was in honor of Hirohito.

Polly got right to the point. "Chip climbed onto the bed with Cricket when she was resting in her bathing suit and said he wanted to lick her between her toes."

Freddie closed his eyes and said, "Christ O Mighty."

"What can we do about it?" Polly asked.

Freddie sighed. "God, I don't know. He goes after everybody. It's just awful."

"But this is our daughter!"

"Trudy says you have to lock your door at their Cape Cod place, and he jumped in bed with Chiquita at the Cape once."

"Are you listening, Freddie? This is Cricket!"

Freddie sighed again, this time letting all his breath out and taking a big inhale. "I'm embarrassed enough about what he says about you two and how he overextends the greetings and good-byes. It's terribly embarrassing. He took you out before I did, remember?"

“I’ve dealt with that for years, but now it’s Cricket. Stop him, Freddie.”

Polly wandered out through the den to the living room. She drank down the rest of her watery Scotch.

Lorna, with a Geisha roll in front and a neat French twist in back that was decorated with a silk red rose, walked behind the screen that hid the record player and put on *San Remo*. She sat in her ladylike way without saying anything to Polly. She sipped a drink and listened to the soothing strains of *Al Di La*.

“What do we have for the Davises, Mom?” Lorna finally asked. Gifts were important to Lorna. Cricket told Polly that she’d seen Lorna’s neatly wrapped Christmas gifts on her dorm desk in November.

“Well, we have these mechanical toys again for them. They probably have more for us. Lorna, are you and Cricket fighting?”

“No. We talk sometimes. She came over to my school once. I visited her at her school and modeled a bathing suit for her and her roommates.”

They knelt on floor. Lorna flicked switches. A granny cat knitted and rocked, a monkey played drums, a beagle flipped pancakes. Charlie Weaver shook the shaker, poured a drink, turned red and blew smoke out his ears. They laughed.

“Bravo, Charlie Weaver!” Lorna cried. She paused. “Mom, Aunt Mary Pat said Uncle Chip and you two have an apartment together here.”

Polly felt like she had been slapped in the face, but she cocked her head, smiled and spoke sweetly as if tickled by the comment. “Oh, for Pete’s sake. That’s the silliest

thing I ever heard. Mary Pat must have been drunk as a skunk.” She heard footsteps on the tile floor and looked up.

Freddie, Cricket and Hubbie walked up to them.

“Oh good heavens!” she cried.

Lorna shrieked, “Oh, my God! I don’t believe it!”

Freddie had a long black braid and a long mustache, a little cap on his head, a long robe and slippers. Hubbie had a long robe and garish eyes and eyebrows. He twirled a gold and black Oriental cigarette holder.

Freddie and Hubbie did the can-can and sang a spoof of Natalie Wood. “I am zippy! Oh so nippy! It’s frightening what lightning I wieweeeld!”

Cricket said, “Now I’ve seen everything — Vernon might get the wrong idea.”

Lorna applauded. “Vernon’s has to laugh! Where did you get the braid and mustache, Father?”

Polly forced a laugh and answered for Freddie, “Oh, we have everything under the sun back there. Didn’t you get the photo of Freddie as Roman tennis player and me in my blond wig and black negligee for the *On the Way to the Forum Party*?”

Sparklers crackled near the window. Polly remembered that neighbors sat on their lawn during holidays. When they moved here with Cricket — Lorna had gone away to school early for eighth grade — they’d called for her many nights. “Niña! Niña!”

“Gee,” Polly said, “The neighbors are really going to town tonight — on our front lawn.” She walked to window at the front of the stage and looked out for a while.

Hubbie, Freddie and Cricket looked at Polly and Lorna. Everyone was quiet.

“I have the toga picture of you guys framed on my desk at school,” Lorna said.

“I’ve got it too. Wish I had Mom’s — or Lorna’s — legs,” whined Cricket.

Polly saw Lorna start to put her hand on her shoulder. Polly also saw the others staring so she moved away and did a little shuffle. She shook her fists as if they were maracas. “A one... two .. cha cha.” She was dancing to a romantic Italian song so it wasn’t convincing. “Uh... Let’s get in the Christmas spirit — for Vernon. Maybe we should switch from *San Remo* to the French carols. No, I’ve got it. Put on Venezuelan aguinaldos. *Niño Lindo, Noche de Paz*, that stuff.”

Lorna went to change the record.

A single firecracker exploded like a wartime bomb.

“Good grief! That was really loud, Mom,” Lorna said. “Can you believe it?”

Polly paused even longer than she usually did between each word when she said, “God-awful... Just... ghastly.”

The bouncy folk Christmas song *Niño Lindo* began to play.

Polly let the music flow through every capillary and relax her. She giggled and said, “These Venezuelan songs are so cute and jumpy.” She did a few meringue steps. She looked at her robe and Hubbie’s and frowned. “Say, are we Japanese or Chinese?”

Polly took a tiny fan from her sash and gave it to Lorna. “Here, Take this, Lorna.”

Lorna loved accessories as much as Polly. Polly felt Lorna’s hand squeeze hers as she took the fan. They smiled wanly.

A car door slapped shut. Vernon and the Davises. Finally.

Freddie gave them the drill. “Okay, gang. Names. I’m Ping Pong. Lorna’s Na-Ting. Then Madame Pong, Crick-King and Son-King. We run with baby steps to the door.” He demonstrated. “We put our hands together like this, bow, and say, ‘Welcome

to house of Pong.’ Cricket, bong the big bell. I’ll tiptoe up first and welcome them. Polly, say ‘I’m Lady Pong.’ Hubbie and Lorna, you run up.”

Cricket ran to the stained-glass window behind the piano. The Spanish colonial bell hung from one of the wooden beams in the front hall. The dining room through the arch opposite the living room was set with red candles and crystal. Lorna turned the music up. Children sang in Spanish about going to see el Niño Jesús.

The doorbell rang.

Maria entered through the dining room and saw them in costumes. She started to rattle off some of the words she had said when she used to drag the girls by their feet to the dinner table. Her favorite was ‘*Sús*. It was short for *Jesús*.

“‘*Sús*. Ay, Dios mio. Ay. Señora Brown. Señor. Ay, mi madre! Vamanos, hombre. Coño, carajo! Santa Ana.”

Everyone ran and hid. Polly peeked behind the living room arch when Maria opened the door, Mary Pat and Chip entered. Chiquita and Vernon followed them.

GONG! Cricket sounded the colonial bell.

Maria spotted Mary Pat and lit up. She grabbed Mary Pat’s hands reverently and boomed, “Ay, Señora Davis. Gracias a Dios. Cómo estás? Feliz Navidad, Señora.”

Mary Pat greeted Maria with her Melanie in *Gone With the Wind* voice. “Hola, Maria. Feliz Navidad. Cómo estás?”

Maria answered, saying as far as Polly could make out, I’m lighting a candle for you crazies. “Voy a iglesia. Voy a comprar una candela para esta pobre familia. Y otra candela para usted.”

Mary Pat made her mmmmmph laugh and said, “Maria, por favor. Basta.”

Freddie ran up in tiny steps, nodding and bowing. “Greetings! I am Ping Pong! Welcome to the House of Pong!”

Chip roared. Mary Pat giggled with her hand over her mouth. Pollita shrieked with laughter. Trudita gurgled, “Oh, Uncle Freddie!” Vernon remained expressionless.

Polly twinkle-toed up and sang, “Hello! I’m Lady Ping! Pong!” She flung her arms in exasperation. “Lady Ping-Pong. Who knows? Welcome!”

Chip roared, “Aren’t you the purdiest thang. They broke the mold and threw it away when they made you! Mmmwwwwaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!”

He grabbed Polly and pushed her backward. He gave her a long, long kiss. Polly leaned back further from the force of Chip’s lips. She felt the silence and stares. She heard Freddie’s forced laugh. Should she push Chip away? Stop the ritualistic greeting after all this time? As if she could do anything about Chip. He was Freddie’s boss. His ego engulfed them like a sea creature opening its cave-like mouth for minnows. Through her one eye not blocked by Chip’s face she saw Vernon’s stony face and then saw the back of his head as he turned to leave.

Polly could hear Cricket say softly to the bell, “Oh no. Please no.”

Polly saw a corner of Mary Pat’s benevolent smile. Chip finally disengaged himself, flung his arm around Freddie and led him into living room, growling, “Time for a quick drink, old boy?”

Mary Pat held Polly’s elbows and said, “You’re lovely, dear.” She pecked her cheek. “You look like Suzie Wong in *Flower Drum Song*.”

Polly and Mary Pat walked into the living room with arms linked. Hubbie, Lorna and Cricket, who'd been waiting in the wings, baby-stepped to Chiquita and Vernon, Lorna fluttering her fan.

Cricket said, "We're Cric and Son Li—."

Pollita and Trudita, behind Chiquita and Vernon, cried, "Cricket! Lorna!" Chiquita was not forthcoming. She usually groaned when everybody laughed.

Vernon managed a feeble wave and a "Hi."

Polly pulled away from Mary Pat and saw Vernon stumble against the piano for support. She heard Cricket mutter to Hubbie behind her fan, "Vernon's face is green. I think he's going to vomit!"

Polly took Vernon's arm and said, "You okay, Vernon? VER-NON! That's the spirit! Come have a drink."

Cricket and Polly pulled Vernon into living room. Cricket mouthed to Polly behind his back, "Chiquita's engagement's gone to hell" and gave a thumbs-down.

Free Fall

I. Takeoff

“What makes you think I’m going to Caracas with you?”

Polly heard the words but wasn’t sure they were hers. Funny how one question — ten words — could propel her from the edge of the twin bed into the backyard outside of her Cape Cod house so that she was looking in at a couple in a basement bedroom about to cast off from each other. Her words kept echoing in the silence as if she’d said them to her husband through a tunnel and he was standing at the other end of it.

Freddie froze at the mirror. His hand held the comb in his hair. Slowly he put the comb down on the dresser. Polly could see his shocked reflection in the mirror. His expression made Polly think her words had bounced him elsewhere and he also was watching an exchange between an attractive but unfamiliar middle-aged couple. She’d caught him by surprise just as he’d asked her what date they should make the plane reservation back to Caracas. They had been doing this since they moved to Caracas from Pittsburgh in 1959 but continued to summer on the Cape. It was now September 1969 — ten years.

Ten words, ten years — was this preordained? Polly wondered. Hardly, unless the boy next door isn’t the right one after all, unless the definition of marriage is living apart, unless every husband ages as badly as hers did and decides late in life to drink like a fish and acquire mistresses, God knows why, maybe to imitate Venezuelan colleagues or his own brother-in-law boss or maybe to fend off old age.

How could a man she knew so well change so much? Men had usually been wonderful mentors and friends, especially her relatives. She adored her elegant, reserved

Dad, her doting Uncle Chappy, her fascinating Grandpa, her bon vivant older cousins like Hallie and Donnie who took her to deb parties, and most of Polly's and Freddie's male friends except that God-awful best man of Freddie's who came to the house drunk and asked why Freddie was building a castle for his kids at Christmas. How could the charming man she married have turned into an ogre?

The memory of the castle decades ago in Sweet Water and the memory of her handsome young neighbor Freddie Brown coming through the Spragues' gate more and more often made Polly sad.

She was startled to see Freddie facing her, looking as hangdog as a fourteen-year-old whose steady has told him she didn't want to see him, not like a man pushing sixty.

"Sweetie, what are you talking about? Why wouldn't I think you were going back to Caracas?" he asked.

Though he enjoyed a good laugh and loved parties, Freddie's demeanor was usually serious, and he often reflected on life and shared his conclusions about it. His large blue eyes always looked sad in repose. Right now those eyes, together with the aquiline nose and thin-pursed lips, made him look tragic.

This was going to be more difficult than she thought.

He sat down on the twin bed so he was directly opposite her.

Polly looked right at him and said, "I don't want to go back to that apartment. You're out most evenings. You're usually drunk. Your whore lives in the next apartment. Do you know what she said in the elevator? She said she loved my vintage purse."

"Sweetie, she's just someone I met. Yeah, we've had a few drinks."

“Like hell, Freddie. I hear you two howling as you get off the elevator and disappear into her apartment. Don’t bother lying. Next door, Freddie! How crude!”

“Oh, c’mon, Sweetie, she’s noth—“

“I’m sorry Freddie. It’s been months and months. I’m not going back. She’s not the only one. You’re out or you’re drunk.”

“Look, Polly, I know I’ve been bad. Give me another chance, for Chrissake.”

“Freddie, do you know the first word you said to me when I picked you up at the Hyannis airport? ‘Balls!’”

“I’m sorry, Polly. I’ll change.”

“No you won’t, Freddie. I asked you, begged you, not to be mean a million times, in the car, at parties, in the living room, in the bedroom. You embarrass me in front of Maria, Mary Pat and Chip, our friends. If you were nice, the charade could go on. But you aren’t nice. Even your mother said you weren’t aging well. I don’t want us to be one of those elderly couples always yelling at each other.”

They climbed the cellar stairs and moved their discussion to the kitchen over coffee. It was a strange arrangement, the basement bedroom, but Freddie’s parents had built the bedroom for them when they came up to 68 East Main Street in Chatham (Brown Acre) summers from Pittsburgh and then Caracas. The kids and grandparents slept on the upper floor. Freddie and Polly still stayed in the basement even when the grandparents moved out and even now with Cricket back in college, Lorna married in England, and Hubbie working in New York City.

Further discussion didn't change Polly's mind. It gave her a chance to list more grievances. He stopped denying things, admitted he had done the things and apologized like a madman. He begged. She stood firm.

Freddie moved his things upstairs that night and Polly stayed below. Polly moved out to Mary Pat and Chip's place in Harwich. They began to make arrangements.

It was over.

II. Retaliation

"Everything I've worked for my whole life is a pile of dust."

When Freddie heard his mother say those words and then wipe her eyes and tell him she cried herself to sleep each night since he told her the news, he snapped out of his grief. He got angry. He remembered how his mother and father had struggled, how his mother had to close her restaurant the Community Kitchen in the Depression, how when his father's fire insurance sales went down, they'd had to borrow from Uncle Bob in Cleveland who ran White Motor for Freddie to go to Harvard Law, how Freddie sold hot dogs to rich kids and was devastated if he broke his watch and had to beg his father for twelve dollars to fix it.

His parents had been delighted when he and Polly Sprague got engaged. She was so pretty and mild-mannered, and the Spragues and Browns were friends. They'd sung songs around the piano and dressed up. Oh, the twenties were grand, they'd say to Freddie. Freddie teased Polly and her sister Mary Pat but secretly had a crush on both of them.

Freddie began to set up a support system.

He got the sale of 68 Main Street under way when Harriet said in disbelief, “Does she really think she can live there?”

When Harriet informed him of various admirers visiting the house in the summer, especially “Father Time,” the mechanic and fisherman from across the street, Freddie sent a detective to find out what else had gone on or what might go on in the months till the divorce went through even if nothing was happening now. He would cash in his life insurance. He would end up paying Polly \$1, 200. He called Hubbie, who hurried up from New York to join his grandmother Harriet and Freddie and plan revenge.

Freddie called Lorna in England, who wailed and sobbed, and he hated to hang up. They headed up to Cricket’s women’s college in Norton, Massachusetts.

Freddie and Hubbie walked around a pond at Cricket’s college with Cricket in between them. Freddie knew she had no idea why they were both there. Freddie told her he and her mother were divorcing. When they reached the far end of the pond, they sat down on a bench.

“I don’t believe it. You guys got along,” Cricket said.

Freddie and Hubbie sat across from Cricket in a nearby restaurant. Freddie told her about the drinking and the mistresses and that he begged Polly to relent and she didn’t. He even told her about the “Balls” greeting at the airport.

Hubbie kept injecting little invectives.

“How old is the old lady? Fifty-nine? Sixty?” he asked.

“She’s a beautiful, somewhere-in-between fifty-seven and sixty-year-old,” Hubbie answered. “We haven’t kept track of our ages for years.”

“OK. A beautiful fifty-nine,” Hubbie said. “That’s way up there. What’s she going to do?”

Another time Hubbie snapped, “The old lady’s missing a screw.”

“Why are you maligning her, Hubbie?” Cricket demanded. “He just said he had a mistress and drank too much.”

“He apologized,” Hubbie retorted. “You don’t just say, ‘What makes you think I’m going to Caracas?’ They were married thirty years and knew each other their whole lives.”

In the background, Dionne Warwick sang how she’d never fall in love again. It was a bouncy tune, but all they heard were the lyrics. As the irony settled over them, Cricket’s face crumpled and she tried not to cry. Freddie knew she’d never seen him cry and was probably trying to feel brave for him. She’d never seen him in the reverse role before, asking her to listen and be sympathetic. Tears streamed down her face. The waitress halted at the table several times and did an about-face. She finally grabbed their order and ran.

“We’re giving them a private soap opera,” Hubbie said.

At one point in the Brown Acre kitchen part of Freddie’s plea to Polly, Freddie asked Polly to wait till Cricket was finished with her senior year and settled, and she’d refused. Freddie hated to leave his youngest daughter behind and wondered what impact this would have. He could see the divorce would tear up the family. The rift between Hubbie and Cricket was already wide. It would become an abyss.

Freddie was glad he had Hubbie to put him on the plane.

Freddie turned around for another look at his son. They both waved.

III. Backfire

“Harriet’s running me out of town,” Polly said. She was sitting in a rental near the lighthouse cliff and talking to Cricket, who was visiting from college, and her niece Pollita. They were drinking tea and looking at the grey late-autumn ocean through the living room wraparound windows.

“Harriet supported me and said she told Freddie he wasn’t behaving well,” Polly continued. “She knew what was happening and was sympathetic. Now she’s telling the Hudsons from Sweet Water, who as you know hit the cocktail circuit most nights, and everyone else to snub me.”

“Maybe when it actually happened, she freaked out,” Pollita ventured.

“Harriet was always going to sell that house so she’d have money for her old age,” Polly said. “But I didn’t think she’d sell it this fast.”

“I dunno about wanting or getting old age money, Mom,” Cricket said. “Gramma Harriet tore through the house, and all I picked up was a paperback and a hairbrush. She kept muttering how stubborn you were. And then Mel Watson lost all the sale money Father gave him in the stock market.”

Polly let out a groan and put her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Cricket said. “The stock market is awful I heard. I hated to see that house go. It was worth more than any amount of money.”

Polly thought of Brown Acre, how its shingled second floor poked above the high hedge. The living room was tastefully furnished with Harriet's floral panels that framed the fireplace, and the walls and décor were cosy earth colors. Polly had sketched the ocean and boats from the back screened porch and set up fruit bowls and flowers for still-life paintings. They had had guests for cocktails there. The kitchen also looked out at the ocean, and cardinals would appear in the birdbath outside the window. Four bedrooms upstairs and two bathrooms were enough for the kids, and there was a guest room. Harriet sold it under her nose, and now Polly had no place to live. Harriet and Freddie, her Little Lord Fautleroy, thought all her years caring for Freddie and the family amounted to zero.

"I never should have married." Polly said. "And you three. My three little mistakes," she said.

"C'mon, Aunt Polly," Pollita said. She had a soothing voice like her mother, Polly's younger sister, Mary Pat. "You don't really mean that."

"Oh, yes I do," Polly answered. "I never should have married. I wanted to be an artist."

"What about all the Caracas parties?" Cricket asked.

Polly noticed a look of horror on Cricket face. She was looking at Polly like she had just crawled up from the ocean.

"To hell with the parties. I could have lived without them," said Polly in a dry voice. "Everything was a mistake. Freddie. Kids. I lived my life wrong. And Freddie gave me \$1,200. I don't have a penny."

“Mom will help you, Aunt Polly,” Pollita said. “She told me she would give you money every month. And you have your Aunt Trudy money.”

Polly smiled at the memory of Mary Pat looking at her with her beatific face and telling her that she would take care of her with a special fund. Freddie had the right name for her. She was Saint Mary. Mary Pat was a constant, her anchor. If anyone could sympathize it would be Mary Pat. Why, Mary Pat and her three girls had stayed in Sweet Water a year when Chip and Mary Pat were going to get divorced and didn't. Now they were chums, with Chip calling her Patrick and she calling him Chippie as they served each other Scotch for breakfast.

Everyone else ignored Polly or stared as if she had committed a crime. Freddie was the criminal. She was the victim. She hadn't abandoned him. She had escaped. Apparently the news had spread through Sweet Water like wildfire, and Freddie had been in touch or even visited with their old friends. They'd taken his side and agreed she was out of her mind.

Polly could see that Cricket seemed more horrified than hurt by Polly's comments. Polly knew Cricket wondered if the wise-cracking woman she had become was someone who had jumped into her mother's body. She knew Cricket was upset, had had Harriet, with the roaring Auntie Mame voice they never knew to complain or waver, phone and cry and to tell her about the heap of dust, which couldn't have been too flattering. And then here Polly was calling her a mistake. Polly had said that a few times before, but never while just sitting and talking over drinks. She knew Cricket was taking Harriet's Secondals, that Cricket had no plans and was unlikely to focus on any now. But

Polly had been deserted and couldn't do anything to advise Cricket. She needed more help than Cricket did right now.

Maybe Joe would come through. He'd first been just the mechanic-fisherman neighbor who brought over stuffed quahogs and steamers. He made a Boston bean dish too. They'd become more friendly since Freddie left. They had copied Lorna and gone to the Portuguese Algarve like Lorna had last year on her honeymoon. Joe certainly wasn't Princeton and Harvard, but he was good-natured and had a Sean Connery appeal if Sean Connery were older and had a mustache. Who knew what would happen, but he was someone else who cared.

What did it matter who she ended up with since her friends as she knew them weren't friends anymore?

"Uncle Bob in Cleveland said I have to get married again," Polly said. She'd gone to Cleveland to split Aunt Trudy's things with Trudy and set a few treasures aside for Mary Pat when Aunt Trudy died that fall. Dear Aunt Trudy, Polly thought. She'd left them all money because she'd been brought up by Polly's Grandma Clara when she was delivered by Great Uncle George in a shoebox with, among other things, his late wife's wedding dress.

"Father had a detective find out about your and Joe's trip to Portugal," Cricket said. "He had someone check your passports."

Polly let out a groan louder than the previous one. He was accusing her of adultery when he had been cheating while they were living together as a married couple. Not to mention the WWII fling.

After the girls left, Polly looked at the ocean. She'd been victimized long ago when kidnapped and cops pulled up and asked if she knew Siefer was coming to get her. Now her mother-in-law and husband were coming to get her. In the winter of 1952, she'd been trapped with a knife-wielding person. Freddie's weapons were nastiness and absences. He would have killed her psychologically if she'd stayed.

And what did she care for all the mansions and parties in Caracas? It was a strain to go out and see many of the same people over and over that she wasn't close to. She'd be with more basic people now but they were more genuine. She could paint. Why, when Joe and she went to Albufeira, a British woman on the street, practically the first person they spoke to, offered them a house right for almost nothing. She'd have to go elsewhere and live, somewhere far away, with an ocean in between her and Freddie, Harriet and their henchmen.

IV. Tropical Hijinks

"Our party is December 14th. We have several parties to go to after that," Freddie said to Cricket, who was visiting Caracas Christmas 1974. He told her who was giving the other parties and when. He pointed to the cartons of whisky and gin near the kitchen door. "I've ordered almost everything we need."

They were sitting in the living room of Freddie's apartment sipping Scotches. He had just picked Cricket up at the airport and was setting up the social agenda. Freddie loved parties and had met a whole new group of people since he'd come home from Cape Cod without Polly. Most of the people he knew now were Americans. This was unusual, because the Davises, who had been in Caracas since WWII, were friendly with Germans

and British and of course many Venezuelans connected with Chip's law firm where Freddie worked. Freddie was tight with parents of a girl Cricket was friends with way back in the sixth grade, and a fun-loving family with kids younger than Cricket that always entertained and had lived everywhere.

Freddie told Cricket about the three Ms he was dating: Maggie, a Dutch woman who'd run a hotel in Trinidad, Maggie, a church-going Texan, and Marian, the widow of the late American ambassador.

After he finished telling her about his love life, Cricket said, "You're going through some of the same things I am."

"I don't think so," Freddie laughed. "I didn't get caught in a war zone like you."

Cricket had stayed in England after Freddie took her there after graduation in 1970 to show her wartime haunts, most of which no longer existed. She had been on what she herself called a magical mystery tour ever since. She'd actually disappeared, but a colleague of Chip's saw her in Florence and said she was just fine. Freddie knew the divorce had probably catapulted her across Europe and further. Harriet, Hubbie and Freddie hadn't really been supportive and he remembered Harriet, growling, "No plans! She has no plans!" She had been pretty horrified that her mother had picked Joe Slackman to marry.

Freddie visited her in Greece in 1972 to see if she'd become a hippie or junkie or worse. They took a cruise. Cricket became friends with their Irish courier and that was how she got the ship hostess, purser and assistant director jobs. She'd been working on ships in the Caribbean and Europe and even in South America, though she was based in Athens. The last ship had made several war detours last July when Makarios was ousted

just as the ship pulled out of Famagusta, Cyprus on its Footsteps of St. Paul tour. She'd finished the seven-month tour October and was wending her way back to the western hemisphere by visiting Caracas, going back for a final ship job search and then making the final move back.

“This seems like a war zone,” Cricket said. “All the signs and demos. No rest for the weary!”

Freddie told Cricket his colleagues had been having despedidas or farewell parties because Carlos Andrés Pérez or CAP was nationalizing everything. He was adding a “Ven” for Venezuela to all the nationalized oil and other companies. Chip said when CAP went to hell it would be InfiernoVen. Of course at the Travieso Gonzales Ponte and Davis law firm, business was brisk helping people wrap up.

Cricket told Freddie taxi drivers in Athens weren't taking dollars — only drachmas — and anti-Americanism was rampant. The banners over Plaza Altamira proclaiming “Today the Oil, Tomorrow the Iron” seemed like more of the same anti-Yankee sentiment.

“I guess it really is time to go back to the states,” Cricket sighed. “Anyway, it seems you're happy now.”

As Freddie poured fresh Scotches, he said, “It was hard at first. Very lonely. Maria couldn't understand it. She lit a candle for the Señora every Sunday so Polly would come back.”

He sat down and handed Cricket a drink.

“I kept busy writing a novel about wartime London. Maria threw the sheets away, and I had to start again. It was handwritten. Then I found out people liked having another

man around so I started going out. You know, Crick, I'm really looking forward to our party."

Freddie was delighted the party was a triumph. It helped that the small apartment and tiny balcony were so jammed guests could only rotate slightly and were face to face with a new conversation partner. The ex-Ms. Venezuela with her filigree pipe talked about her erstwhile roommate, Carlos the Jackal. Old Fredericka and her husband held court on the couch with Olga, the dynamic young lawyer in Chip's firm. A deep-voiced doyenne told Cricket she would pay her to have an affair with her son she was sure was gay. Of course Mary Pat, Chip and their daughters Chiquita, Trudita and Pollita, named after Polly, Mary Pat (Chiquita for short) and Trudy were in attendance. Waiters passed finger food, and a bar was set up near the kitchen. Almost every bottle was used up. People would be talking about this party, Freddie thought. He was glad he gave his first.

Freddie was glad Cricket had been whooping it up. He always felt the divorce timing was off where she was concerned and was glad she was re-entering the western hemisphere.

At their recap afterward when a few stragglers finally left, Freddie chuckled when Cricket said, "You're not the formidable father figure anymore. Don't hate me for saying this, but it's nice to know you now."

V. Hell in Paradise

Polly and Joe got married out in Conopinit, Chip's and Mary Pat's place in Harwich. It was small, with some of his friends and some new ladies she'd met working at the Cape Cod Hospital Thrift Shop. Lorna was in England, Cricket had disappeared in

Europe, and Hubbie hadn't spoken to Polly since she left Freddie. Joe's daughter was there, who'd been Miss Chatham once, and his son who was in the navy.

"Life is too short for Joe Slackman," Chip said as Polly was taking dishes into the kitchen.

Polly pretended she didn't hear, but how could anyone miss Chip's roar of a voice. Is this the way it's going to be? she wondered. Joe did look unusual in a suit and seemed awkward talking to people. He was grand in his own house, and it had been nice to finally have a place to live. She flushed as she remembered Cricket excusing herself to run to the bathroom when Polly asked, "What would think if I told you we were getting married?" Polly thought Cricket liked Joe and his dishes and his jokes. She even went quahogging with him once. But she guessed Cricket didn't like him as a stepfather. It was too much of a change from Freddie.

Joe and Polly bought not one, but two houses in Portugal, one a semi-attached one with a garden and a view of the ocean right up stone steps from the esplanade and another that took a taxi to get to but had an orange tree growing right out of the porch. The houses cost twenty-five thousand and eighteen thousand, and she used her Aunt Trudy money and money from Mary Pat. Joe contributed. Taxes were 35 dollars each a year.

Polly wasn't sure when things started deteriorating, but she knew by 1972 things were getting uncomfortable. Both in Chatham and in the house closest to town in Portugal called Casa Felicidad (an Angolan doctor had moved into the other one and by law they couldn't evict him or even get furniture), Joe had no tolerance for any kind of social event. She was meeting all kinds of British and Irish and South African and

American ex-pats or perennial travelers that Joe had little interest in meeting. A visit by Cricket from Greece somewhere around that time did not go well.

Polly heard him repeat the same comment over and over to Cricket that her childhood had been deprived. In his heavy New England accent, it sounded like “Yarah childhood has been saaaadly deprirahved.”

He yelled when Cricket couldn’t get the front door key to work and he had to come and open it.

One dinner when she told him she thought he had a good disposition as he had nothing else but now she realized he didn’t even have that, he pressed his thumb and forefinger together and said, “I carah for you this much.”

Polly started to cry, left the table and ran upstairs to her bedroom.

The main problem was that they just were too different, or it was too late in life to think that someone with a background different from hers would be compatible with her. Polly wondered if she was a cocktail creature after all. She certainly wasn’t cut out to be a fisherman’s wife. Polly painted the ocean, the cliffs, the flowers, the country people and scenes. She went for walks and met with friends, but even in paradise, her husband created a hell. Maybe Cricket had been right. His grouchiness made him worse than Freddie since he wasn’t classy like Freddie. Freddie did snarl sometimes but usually when he got morose he really was saying something about life, grim as it was. Joe said nothing or barked at her.

When they went to Chatham on visits, it was worse. He began to call her Your Highness and make up stories about Her Highness's past. He told her cousin that she gave him VD.

It exploded one day when he didn't let her into Casa Felicidad and said it was his.

When things settled and property was divided, she had Casa Felicidad and he had the other house. His daughter sold it, complete with the Angolan doctor. Mary Pat took Polly to Barnstable on the Cape to get a divorce. She'd been there before with her daughters. As a matter of fact, there were what Chip called bad-luck churches all over Harwich and Chatham they would point out as they passed.

One reason Joe had let her have the house was that he was dying. He went back to Fall River where he was from and died early 1974.

Polly then lived above garages and in cottages around Chatham and visited Albufeira twice a year. One moonlight night she took a long beach walk and listened to a distant fado singer. She missed her old life and friends. She missed Freddie.

At the New York City Stanhope Hotel in the Renaissance room, Cricket and Polly were dining with Chip. Chip stayed at the Adams Hotel on 86th and Fifth where all of them stayed when they came up to the states in the summer, and when the girls were in school, they stayed there going to and from Caracas at Christmas as well. They ate at the Stanhope or at a diner Puffin Billy. Mary Pat liked to walk to the Met museum.

Polly remembered once in the elaborate but deteriorating dining room at the Adams, a pleasant couple at a nearby table had said to her and Cricket, "You girls are having so much fun. Are you sisters?"

“Freddie would like Portugal.” Polly said as they started in on the steaks they usually ordered.

“Mom, do you really think after all this time — I mean it’d be wonderful —I even had a dream once that you were together again — but honestly— “ Cricket began.

“—If your old lady wants to give it a try, we’ll let her,” Chip brayed.

In the taxi outside the Stanhope, Polly murmured, “You’ll get Freddie back for me, won’t you, Chip?”

She could see Cricket staring wide-eyed as they prolonged the kiss.

Chip, embarrassed, disengaged himself, turned to look at Cricket, turned back to Polly and said, “Why don’t you visit next Christmas?”

VII. Brief Reunion

“Portugal is paradise, really. I love it there,” Polly was saying. “You would love it.”

“Are you getting any painting in?” Freddie asked.

“Oh yes!” Polly said. “The house — you wouldn’t believe the view from it — is full of my paintings, and Bizarro and the Bread Basket sell them.”

Freddie and Polly were sitting by the pool at the browns’ place La Hacienda and engaged in a pleasant conversation. Cricket, Hubbie and his wife Penny were down from New York on what Freddie had indicated might or might not be his last year in Caracas because younger partners were easing the older ones out, perhaps getting into the CAP spirit of claiming what they considered rightfully theirs. It was true a few partners had

spent too much time at Vienna operas and everywhere else, but Chip was livid. He'd helped build that firm.

Freddie and Polly's children were not at the Hacienda at the time of their parents' brief meeting, although they'd seen their mother at the Davises' big holiday party. Mary Pat and Chip were sitting in the pool area as well but kept getting up to get drinks or sat quietly. It was Christmas 1978, eight years after Polly had asked Freddie why he thought she would go back to Caracas with him.

The old girl looked good, Freddie thought. She hadn't aged a second since he last saw her. Her hair was done in the familiar bouffant style with the two swirling curls, and she had on one of those wraparound slinky material floral dresses she liked that balled up into a suitcase. The legs were as good as ever, the smile as dazzling. No, he'd never dated anyone as gorgeous as Polly. Not the three Ms, that's for sure. Anyway Maggie had married a blustery Irishman, who'd died shortly after. Margaret had gone back to Texas. Feisty Marian, the ex-ambassador widow, had been kicked in her driveway by a robber when she fought him. She seemed to be getting better but died in the hospital.

He was seeing Elaine now. She was fifty-one and had had already buried two older husbands — not auspicious. She'd lived all over the world though she was from New York City, spoke Spanish well and had worked here and there in tourist offices and real estate. She had outstanding legs and a seventeen-inch waist, and her hair was always perfectly coifed, but her face was pleasant, not beautiful. They would probably marry and go to live in the Fort Lauderdale apartment Cricket's friend had sold him around the time Cricket got off the last ship she ever worked on in 1976. Cricket had gone to Miami and

joined ships when things looked bleak for jobs in the Northeast on her re-entry to the U.S. after five years abroad.

But he couldn't figure how for the life of him why Polly was here. Mary Pat had explained she was visiting and wanted to see him terribly. Could she have come all the way down here just to say hello? Surely she didn't want to get back together again after all this time, which is what Chip told him on his way in. As far as he was concerned, she was part of an existence so long ago, it was as if it hadn't happened in this lifetime. It could have been the previous existence some religions espoused. And all the Portugal talk. Was she inviting him over there? He'd heard the fisherman had left her and had in fact kicked off the planet. That couldn't have been any loss to humanity.

"Luckily I got the good house closer to town. Joe wanted it but finally let me have it," Polly said.

"Sorry to hear about your divorce, Polly," he said. Actually she had brought it up. Was this another invitation?

"What about you, Freddie? You never got around to marrying again?" Polly asked with her biggest smile.

This was going too far. "Actually, I'm seeing someone now I may be brave enough to tie the knot with," Freddie said.

Polly's smile died then resurrected. "Oh, that's great news, Freddie."

Her smile went through the same motion several times as he told her how fifty-one years ago Elaine was born on a ship coming from Germany.

The conversation didn't last much longer. Freddie gave her a little peck on the cheek good-bye the same as he had given her a little hello peck.

That night over cocktails, Freddie, said, “Well, the old gal looks good.”

“I’m surprised you agreed to meet. Why did come down here? She wrecked my vacation,” Hubbie said.

“Don’t say that,” Cricket said.

“Oh, go to hell. Cricket.”

“Kids! Stop it!” Freddie roared. “I did for Mary Pat. I don’t know why Polly thought I would take her back.”

“She has a screw loose!” Hubbie hissed.

Freddie shook his head and wondered about the wisdom of having Cricket and Hubbie here at the same time, though he knew it was the divorce and the divided camps that were causing the friction. It hadn’t gone that swimmingly. Hubbie and Penny had split the trip between Columbia and Venezuela. He and Hubbie had had a fight about that — wasn’t Caracas good enough for a full visit? — with “fuck-you’s” flying around the apartment. Freddie was surprised how wounded Hubbie was by the expletive. Actually Freddie had to admit it had been said once and actually he had said it. Then VIASA cancelled the tickets home as usual. They had to get as usual a family friend Dominic to fix it. But Hubbie got so nervous Freddie used the same expletive. Didn’t Hubbie remember VIASA bumped everyone every year?

They seemed to have more fun out at cocktails than at home bickering.

Polly’s visit didn’t help and may have been the reason for Hubbie’s Columbia detour.

VII. Reincarnation

Polly shed a tear or two on the plane home, more out of humiliation than anything else. And the feeling of being a phantom in a place she'd belonged to once.

Cricket had told her that her friends had said they missed her terribly, but after eight years, who knew where they were? She guessed it had been a silly idea to try to get back with Freddie, but how would she know if she didn't try?

It had to be obvious to Freddie her marriage was a disaster and obvious she'd traveled this far to try to get him back. It was clear it was too late.

How dear Mary Pat and Chip were to help her reunite with Freddie. Mary Pat, how saint-like she was, all hunched and grey and lined, always mistaken as Polly's older sister. When Mary Pat smiled, she had the loveliest face on earth. Mary Pat had welcomed Polly even though she was making glitter hanger wings for the church pageant and hosting a kids' party and giving her sculpture classes. She'd won a national prize for a man sitting resting his head on his arms. He was as good as Rodin's *The Thinker*. Mary Pat did well to stay with Chip. The exotic life suited her, starting with her friendship with Papillon and her friends. She made him clay ashtrays that said the name of his restaurant, Mi Vaca y Yo. Because she was rich, she could be considered eccentric instead of batty when she danced around the pool on tiles and showed everyone her latest poems. Maybe they were all in a dream world and wanted to go back to the togetherness the four of them had had when they clinked drinks at Asti's Restaurant and made a pact to live together in Caracas.

Had she made a mistake leaving Freddie? Polly wondered. Life in that apartment was unbearable. Harriet had supported her. The house should have been her grandchildren's but Harriet didn't care for Cricket and her favorite was off in England. Polly definitely made a mistake with Joe. Her face reddened to think of the scandals. But Harriet thank God died in 1971 and now Joe was dead.

She had the house in Portugal and could rent in Chatham. She had her art. As for men, well, Mother always said all men were crazy. Mary Pat had set up a fund. She was independent.

Who did she know with good marriages? Her baby sister Trudy and Rick. He was a professor, and they lived the quiet life of the mind, devouring knowledge.

Portugal would never have happened if it wasn't for the divorce. She had friends there that she visited in their countries like Maisie in Scotland on her way to Portugal. Sometimes she took side trips to Spain and filled up notebooks with sketches and notes.

For once, Polly wasn't someone's daughter or wife. Hubbie may come back some day, and Lorna and Cricket always understood why she left Freddie. Now she was just known as Polly Sprague Brown Slackman, the artist who was friendly, liked to travel and was game for a get-together. Should she drop Slackman? No, she didn't want to be Polly Brown again. She would spell it Slagman, at least on her paintings.

Freddie died in Fort Lauderdale spring 1981, one year after he married Elaine. He had lung cancer. He was buried in Chatham beside his parents. Hubbie didn't speak to Polly and Polly couldn't go to the graveside service with Hubbie and Elaine there, but she gave her daughters china eggs when they came over because it was around Easter.

Polly started to write *Reflections*, a piece about her life. She wrote about the Irish above the Pittsburgh funicular running through mud and picking up their skirts, about Aunt Lizzie dancing the jig. She wrote how her mother's beau wrote "I care for you no more than a stewed prune" in soot on her porch when she stood him up. She wrote about how she and Mary Pat looked out their window at the circus elephants in Sweet Water, ran out to meet the organ grinder with the monkey and heard music from the Ohio paddleboats.

Polly met a man who used to work in public relations at ABC in New York. They went to parties in Chatham, even at homes of former Sweet Water people. Things were looking up, and life with Freddie if he'd had her back would have been very short.

"I'll be damned if I haven't made a life for myself," Polly said aloud on a Chatham Lighthouse beach walk. "I've mapped a course in uncharted waters."

St. Patrick's in Portugal

I.

At her breakfast table under the bougainvillea vine that clung to the upstairs balcony, Polly watched fishing boats arrive with their catch. Sometimes three-petaled purple flowers landed beside her grapefruit and mug. She'd always been grateful Casa Felicidad and the three houses it was attached to were among the few on the cliff that had an ocean view because a cypress-lined cemetery lay further down the hill. A monstrous cat with a half moustache wailed and screeched and darted behind the century and pampas plants. Polly had picked a red hibiscus and put it in a vase. She loved the bright red flower and had painted one on a black background and hung it inside the glass sliding doors right above the dining table. Seagulls shrieked on Moorish chimneys, a rooster's crow sounded like its last. White and lavender daisies known as four o'clocks, geraniums, morning glory, and wild roses decorated the backyard hedges and lawn. How she loved to sit and look at the yard and ocean. At night the upstairs balcony vista outside her bedroom featured the moon and its blazing trail across the ocean, clearly delineated constellations, and brightly lit fishing boats on the horizon.

How ironic that life's upheavals uncover opportunities. Divorce from Freddie and the ensuing ostracism forced her to this peaceful spot, and even though settling here with Joe ended in a second divorce, she had enjoyed almost twenty-seven years of pleasure in this beautiful corner in the world. Here it was, 1997, she was eighty-five years old, and she'd bought it in 1970 when the first person they ran into on a walk offered her and Joe the house. After Joe was no longer in her life, what a lovely time in the 1980s she'd had travelling with her companion Jack to places like Toledo, Spain, and St. Petersburg,

Russia, and ending their trips in the Algarve. She'd come here alone (while he went on his annual cruise with friends) every spring after she swooped through Scotland and England to see friends she'd met in Albufeira. Albums and tiny travel logs were jammed with notes and sketches of bridges, cathedrals and of course flowers. Her Albufeira calendar was full of lunches and cocktails, trips to the mountains and Bizarro book meets.

What twists and turns her life had taken. When she fell in the Lisbon airport and a few other times four years ago, Jack had put her in the Cape Cod Hospital. Her family had only found out when they happened to call his house where Polly had been living for the past five years. Jack took her home for a few days and then dumped her at the cottage after they'd been companions for over twelve years. How Hubbie had rallied! Hubbie had sat up all night listening to her say she couldn't believe Jack did that. But that was the end of Jack, though he took her to dinner once a week. What a turnaround of relationships! Since 1969 when she left Freddie until the early 1980s when Cricket set up a dinner meeting in New York City, Hubbie hadn't said a word to her and now he'd fixed up a cottage for her on his property and sat up all night with her as if she were a heartbroken teenager and he was her father.

Thank God for Hubbie! Months before Jack ditched her, her niece Pollita had called and said the Davis family could no longer pay her the monthly allowance. Just like that! Pollita was laughing when she said it! Mary Pat had promised she'd always have that money! What a shock and how cruel to do when she was eighty.

Polly felt herself literally shrivel up. She'd looked years younger than her age until eighty, or until Pollita's call, and then seemed to waste away. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but Polly couldn't help wondering. When she came back to Portugal she

could hear the maids and others whisper about how she'd aged. Cricket made light of it and did a little pantomime at a party Polly gave at Bizarro where she gasped and pretended Polly was Rose Kennedy. And then the legs lost more of their circulation.

Mary Pat was no longer around to fight for her, and God knows the Davis funds were dwindling fast with Pollita and Trudita's shrink bills and hospitalizations. Not only did Hubbie fix up a cottage, and Cricket and Lorna pay the cottage rent to Hubbie, but Cricket and her husband or Lorna would somehow get her over here once a year so she could sit here. Polly knew it was hard, and that she was a wheelchair candidate in denial, but they got her over here. Thank goodness for the kids.

“Bon dia.”

Amelia, who still came to the casa to clean sometimes, opened the sliding doors and came out to the terrace. She was little with the sun-baked skin the Albufeira women shared, and she still wore Cricket's preppy Fair Isle skirt and sweater sets. She said she couldn't believe how late everyone slept — Polly's daughters Lorna and Cricket and her grandniece Emma and husband Raul who were visiting from Spain. Polly struggled with her limited Portuguese to explain that they'd been out all night dancing and that Cricket had come right off the plane and just off the bus from Lisbon when Lorna dragged her out. Amelia and Polly laughed at the fact that her daughters were acting more like teenagers than women in their mid to late forties. Cricket and Lorna were here without their husbands. Lorna's husband Derrick was off on some sabbatical or other, and Cricket's husband Damian was afraid to take a vacation before starting another default job at New York City's Human Resources Administration. This time he'd been fired from the deputy mayor's office when Mayor Guiliani traced Damian's call when he was

trying to find out who was pushing for a Catholic Board of Ed Commissioner. Damian, as the fall guy for the Catholic deputy mayor and her cronies, was given the HR job. Cricket's husband went through jobs like water.

"Hi, Aunt Polly," Emma said. "What a night! Your daughters have a lot of energy."

Amelia went off to do chores, and Emma gave a recap of the evening. Raul, Cricket and Lorna joined them and filled in details. They'd started out on a karaoke bar, where Emma tried to sing "It's My Party" but couldn't hear herself sing or remember the words. Then they'd hit a dance place by the town steps and danced with every wizened elderly or strapping young fisherman in town. Cricket had had young Lord Harlan, who was actually Captain Jim's boyfriend, carry her piggyback home.

"What a great start! I really feel like I'm on vacation!" Cricket said.

"Aunt Polly, can I give you a hundred dollars for that painting of the town above the dining room table?" Emma asked.

"Sure," Polly said.

"Wait a minute! Get your mitts off her paintings! That's one of my favorites!" Lorna cried.

"It's okay, Lorna," Polly said. "There are plenty left for you to have eventually."

They were quiet a while. Polly and the others didn't want to think about or talk about a time when her paintings would be divided or even a time when Polly wouldn't be able to enjoy her house. She liked to entertain the thought that they wouldn't enjoy it without her.

Polly's paintings in the front hall and in the living room greeted her each year: the three fisherman widows looking out to sea on the steps of the shortcut route Polly and the girls took to the esplanade; gondola fishing boats in red, yellow and blue colors with bow decorations like eyes; ornate chimneys and white-washed domes rising behind tiny esplanade figures peering seaward; a Moorish castle above a wood wheel pump; a fishing village with the houses and boats a mosaic of luminous ovals and squares. Above her bed was a large painting of a religious procession in the rain, the figures brushed in white against a dark blue background, the Madonna covered in a plastic raincoat to protect her from the elements. Now that Polly couldn't meander through bougainvillea-festooned alleys and take long beach walks past fishermen displaying their catch, she was glad she had her paintings around her.

The dining and living room area had funky furniture that was lopsided and missing feet but enhanced with pillows that looked like mini patchwork quilts made by women in a mountain town they used to visit. She'd arranged some of Aunt Trudy's and her own treasures on living room shelves: a porcelain Shakespeare and Churchill, a wooden monk, local clay figures and tiles, silver quail and fish, portraits of ancestors and her children. She'd graced the living room walls with a *Realities* magazine portrait in a baroque silver frame, a gold-framed mirror, a ceramic floral tray, antique woven children portraits and matching scone candelabra.

She was delighted she'd found a place for herself and also a place for family reunions. Thank goodness in her time of need she had this gift to share with them and to leave the girls — it had certainly appreciated in value (she had long ago willed it to the two of them at a time when Hubbie and she were not in contact). She was also glad

that her daughters knew how important it was for her to enjoy the house as long as she possibly could.

II.

“My soul is wrinkled,” said Raul.

He was speaking across the dinner table to Cricket, who had just remarked that he had no wrinkles. In his Madrilèno accent, it sounded like *rinclulles*.

Emma frowned as she poked through the salad.

“It’s pretty fresh on the top,” Cricket said. She got a laugh when she added, “You might see some of your friends from earlier this week if you dig too far down.”

They picked the lemons from the front yard for their gins, and the produce was very fresh and the cod wonderful, but Cricket and Lorna tended to recycle food.

Raul, who Emma had met and married while she was studying in Spain after long stays in Japan and Hawaii, was saying that he used to think you married a woman if you kissed her.

“Like Elizabeth Taylor!” Cricket yelled loud enough for Lorna to hear because her somewhat deaf sister was missing some of the repartee.

“If you take any old truck driver,” Polly remarked.

“Hey, we should plan the St. Patrick’s Day party!” Lorna said.

After dinner they cut out shamrocks in green and purple construction paper. Polly watched Cricket cut the shamrocks without scissors — Matisse-style, Cricket said. Between sips of almond liqueur, they outlined the shamrocks in silver glitter. They planned to hang some shamrocks from the dining alcove chandelier and stick others on

mirrors and lamps. They set aside balloons and shamrock confetti. Lorna talked about how she would leave notes and team up with a few people to spread the word.

“Are you inviting any of your boyfriends, Lorna?” Cricket asked.

Lorna had missed a dinner or cocktail party or two because she was seeing Norman or one of the Luises. Polly knew Cricket liked the Luis who looked like one of the ugly-but-sexy Rolling Stone band members Polly had chatted with in a Paris hotel lobby. Luis One ran a tourist shop and sent a bouquet of flowers to what he called the two beautiful daughters. It was partly because his Cocker Spaniels next door had bitten Polly’s houseguests and barked a lot in the past, but in truth he was charmed with Lorna’s perfect French and her exuberant personality. The other Luis played tennis with her and would remark on her “nece ligs.”

Norman was one of a few men who were perpetual travelers and camped in a fancy site outside Albufeira where Captain Jim had wined and dined Cricket and Lorna. Norman’s non-itinerant wife had left him, and he would have loved Lorna to join him.

“Ridículo!” Raul said to Emma, no doubt in reference to Lorna’s flirtations.

“It’s so strange, that word,” Cricket said. “You’d think *ridiculous* would be *ridiculoso* in Spanish.”

“Uh, no,” Raul said, embarrassed that he’d been understood. He’d said it often.

Polly and Cricket were a little puzzled by all of Lorna’s dates, but they figured Lorna was just having fun after the long Alberta, Canada winters. Talking to people was a thrill for her. Polly was glad Lorna was giving Cricket relief from a job she loathed and a difficult husband by dragging her out to dance with the band members at Roca de Mar Hotel and elsewhere.

“Uh, well, we have to invite Norman and Don and the trailer and van gang,” Lorna finally said, ignoring the boyfriend remark. “And Hillary of course.”

Hillary was the cantankerous South African woman that seemed to get along with the campsite men and a few others. The only woman she could abide seemed to be Polly.

“We’ll have to invite Tulio,” Polly said. Tulio had what was left of a valley estate that he had just sold to a marina. He was going to keep his house on a little island because the valley was to be filled with water. Polly couldn’t believe they were going to push a button and the Mediterranean would rush through a cliff tunnel into an entire valley. Polly loved watching women till fields and the gaunt swineherd pass through with his pigs.

She was looking forward to seeing some her old friends. She had taken taxis down to the esplanade restaurant Bizarro to see the owner Joan and her friends but even walking from where the cab had to leave her because of construction was an ordeal.

Polly listened to the four guests plan a trip the next day. Emma and Raul were driving to the mountains. Cricket and Lorna, never having had the nerve to rent a car here, were going to go on a bus tour through some towns they hadn’t seen.

III.

“Don’t you hear? Are you deaf?” yelled one of the local cleaning ladies in Portuguese from across the shopping plaza. She was placing her hand to her ear and shouting that the hairdresser they were taking Polly to was closed. She was also implying that Lorna and Cricket had dragged their poor mother down Cerro da Piedade and caused her much discomfort for nothing.

“Okay. Okay. Obrigada. No faz mal,” the girls answered.

Polly felt sorry for her daughters being yelled at by the woman and others. They were all used to people thinking she was being abused when actually her daughters were trying to walk her to places. She didn't want to make the move to a wheelchair and preferred clutching furniture and banisters and making her way around houses. Her hands had become geometric and bony, contorting to hold onto things. Her fingers didn't close that tightly or have too much strength, and freckles had expanded into age spots. She remembered the last painting she'd done that she gave to Cricket. A blurry cliffside town was rendered in oranges and greens, but Polly knew the buildings were less articulate, the light less dramatic than in some of her earlier Albufeira paintings.

“Oh, God, the bus tour leaves at 8:30. Can you call a cab to get you home?” Lorna asked.

“It's OK. I'll be fine,” Polly said.

They took her to a café table where she asked for a coffee and pastry. She watched them hurry down the hill to a station they called the Dust Bowl to catch a tour bus. Polly looked at the homes that curved from Casa Felicidad on Samaro Barros down the hill. They had names like *Three Brothers* and *Serenity*. Above her was Orange Street where her friend Maisie still came sometimes and where she used to go to cocktail parties at many British and Scottish friends' houses. In past years, she had met more Americans for some reason; maybe they were finally discovering a resort known much longer by Brits and Germans.

Polly got home and down the stairs okay but slipped in the living room by the heater. She lay there a few hours until her daughters returned. She could feel her leg heating up but couldn't move it. It was the bad leg that was near the heater.

While she lay there, Polly lamented her helplessness. How much longer could people take her here or even keep her in the Cape cottage? She fell there too and had to be picked up by men who were sent by the hospital.

She'd been lucky, though. She'd lived so much longer than Hubbie. She'd had the whole 1970s and 1980s to paint, meet people and travel. Mary Pat had died in 1990 and Chip in 1993. She hadn't gone to Chip's funeral because after he cut her off she hadn't spoken to him. She was away and missed Mary Pat's graveside service. Strange how no one had a proper funeral service!

She thought of Mary Pat in her pale blue robe covered with cigarette holes, her wiry form bent forward as she went from the barn wing of Conopinit to the bar area in the blue room where company would sometimes be. She would mix breakfast Scotches when Chip called, "Patrick, get me a drink."

The coffee and side tables near the couch where she slept were covered with art books and magazines. Cigarette butts filled Scotch glasses.

"Hi, dears," she'd said to Polly and Cricket their final visit. Her smile was more ethereal than ever as she cracked a joke. "When I asked Doctor Brown about my lungs, he said, 'Skip the lungs, Mary. Let's talk kidneys.'"

She handed Polly a legal pad with a poem. Polly asked Mary Pat to read it. Now Polly tried to remember it.

Old Time

*Don't tick me away, Old Time.
I still need more time
For my rhymes and my dreams.
Don't scheme away, Old Time.
Don't be so tricky and mean.
Come mend me, don't end me so soon.
There are things you could find
In the gloom of my attics
Or underneath cushions of chairs.
Surprises — to open your eyes.
So please have a care for me and my kind.
Don't tick me away, Old Time.*

How the words resonated now for Polly. After Mary Pat read the poem, she handed Cricket a clay statue of a water carrier the size of a jumbo detergent bottle and said, “Here, dear. I know you wanted my Thinker, but take this.”

She must have been keeping it handy to give Cricket.

Polly thought of Pollita and Trudita on meds and running to hospitals. Trudita had thought creatures from the sea were after her once when she was looking after Polly and said so on the phone to Cricket. Cricket called Lorna in Canada who said not to worry, Pollita would never hurt Mom, but Cricket remembered when Trudita was collecting knives and they'd fled Conopinit. Polly had to assure Cricket it was okay. Both girls would be penniless eventually, a friend who was handling their money said. Chiquita had her own life in Savannah, and her offspring Emma had the same independence. Thank God Polly's kids were independent. But where were they?

When the girls came back, they cried, “Mom! What happened?”

They dressed the leg and put Polly in bed. Later in the trip they'd try to dress it again, but Polly was afraid for them to touch it even when they begged. She didn't know

why — maybe she just didn't want to be hospitalized there or just was afraid of the pain if they dressed it.

Polly lived to regret that. Hubbie's wife Penny would be horrified at the burn infection and wouldn't understand that they couldn't dress it. She never let Cricket or Lorna take Polly to Portugal again.

IV.

The party was a smashing success. It was packed. Lorna and her sidekick, Hillary's care person Joyce, had invited Tulio, guys at the camp and everyone else. They'd even made calls to British and American folks who, unlike Polly, had a phone.

Polly sat on a chair near the front door to greet guests. Her hair was puffed up and she wore her black velour slacks and a colorful silk top with lots of green in the pattern. Later she was helped down the stairs to join the guests.

People squeezed into the living room and spilled out to the porch. Lorna looked slim and elegant, with a flamboyant Connie Francis hairdo. She was dressed in a purple and green dress to match the purple and green shamrocks. The British didn't seem to mind and never made a comment about the fact that it was a St. Patrick's Day party. It's not like anyone was going to sing "Danny Boy" or do a jig. Polly's family was from the north of Ireland anyway and she always asked Cricket when Cricket called on St. Patrick's Day if she was wearing orange.

Polly's friends who had offered Cricket and her husband Damian marijuana when they had visited them up the hill turned out to be outstanding bartenders. The bar was on

the sideboard behind the plate-laden dining room table. Joan from Bizarro and her staff served finger food she had been hired to prepare.

Even the Hudsons from Sweet Water and Chatham were in attendance!

Cricket talked to everyone she could, and Emma and Raul tried Spanish with Portuguese guests, although they knew the long history between the two countries.

Toward the end of the party, Norman sat happily on the couch with his arm around Lorna.

V.

“Bye, you guys. It was the best vacation I ever had,” Cricket said.

Polly watched her struggle not to cry as she took her leave. Cricket had had three weeks this time and had had packed everything in: dance all-nighters, side trips, beach walks along the cliff, shopping and of course the triumphant St. Patrick’s Day party. They hugged her and watched her carry her bags to the taxi. She looked back after she went down the path and up the steps to the gate. She was crying openly then.

Emma and Raul had left by then also so Lorna and Polly went down to Bizarro. It was a real struggle to get there with the construction. Polly ordered a juice and posed while Lorna snapped a picture. She had tied a scarf around her neck and had on a purple bowler-shaped hat and purple sweater. She was glad she had her nails done because Lorna seemed to focus on the orange juice and her hands.

Polly looked down at the zigzag steps that ran down to England Rock. A few brave Brits swam in the gray March ocean. She imagined jeeps pulling boats out of the water further down. Polly could see some of the rock formations on the cliff where they

walked along an orange-paint-marked path. Rocks were shaped like warring rhinoceroses, a dancing pig and a reclining elephant.

Polly and Lorna watched a young plump blond couple walk by with a carriage and listened to them talking in Dutch. They looked deliriously happy and much too young for a child. They saw Fernando the boat carver go buy. They had bought his boats made of matchsticks, camera bulb lights and nets with pearls for weights.

“Oh, my God, Mom,” said Lorna. “There’s one of our dancing partners from the first night here.”

A sea dog like Fernando strolled by with a similar “roadster” cap. He weighed about sixty pounds but wore stylish black jeans and a snazzy shirt. His black wig caught the sun.

Polly breathed in the ocean air. In her mind she painted the esplanade. She used firm strokes and generous coats of oil like she had when she painted the back yard and Cerro Piedade and the valley so that when she left Albufeira she would be able to move from one landscape to another like a visitor in an art gallery.

Final Fling

I.

“Commet c’est va, Polly?” asked the handsome young Haitian orderly. He stretched across the bottom of Polly’s bed as he’d done many times before. Polly was a favorite stop for many nurses and aides because of her passable Spanish, French and Portuguese.

“Tres bien, merci,” said Polly.

He handed her a note.

She gave him a big smile, which displayed her perfect straight teeth and the recently applied red lipstick she kept at the ready on her night table beside her daughter Lorna’s weekly letters. She liked the volunteer hairdressers to dye her hair auburn and cut it straight and evenly at jaw-level. That hairstyle set off the exquisite bone structure that got her the full-time modeling job in Pittsburgh at nineteen. She reached for the note with her long, freckled fingers, the nails of which were carefully manicured and painted red. It was a note from Bob asking her to come watch the evening news in the community room.

“Ooooooh,” she murmured. The elation she felt from the message from Bob made her so light she left her body on the bed and hovered above it.

“Oo-la-la, Pol-lee!” the orderly shrieked. Polly blushed and gave a little giggle. She could see he had been studying her face and had detected a little of what she felt.

“Let’s go! Tout suite!” Polly said. She reached for her brush on the night table. He brushed her hair, grabbed her under her arms and, pushing her wheelchair as close to the bed as he could with his body, lifted her up and shifted her onto her wheelchair. Once

she was seated, he pulled her up straight and made sure her legs weren't dangling outside the footrests.

While Polly was being pushed down the corridor, she looked in doors and waved at the residents seated in chairs or on their beds. Some responded with a smile or wave. Others whose coherence had leaked out like a punctured bag didn't respond. They sat slumped in their chairs and stared.

Polly had become accustomed to the non-response as well as the prevailing smell of disinfectant and urine. She and Bob thought it was funny that one of the public rooms was called the activity room because people sat with their heads resting on their arms at the Bingo table. She had gotten used to Laverne in the other bed in her room. Laverne had had a massive stroke carrying a picnic basket on the Chatham outer bar. She pulled at the curtains that separated them and made little squeaks to try to talk to Polly. When Polly was moved once into a room with a woman who could talk but didn't, Polly missed Laverne and had asked to transfer back to her old roommate.

Except for the crazy woman across the hall who yelped for hours like a stranded Chihuahua, and the tantrums thrown by borderline patients, it was peaceful for Polly at Independence Care Center. It was a Cape Cod home run by some major health care conglomerate, though one gregarious nun — who liked to talk about whatever was in the news and usually cracked a joke about it — harked from the time the home was run by nuns. Bob was just down the hall, and if she missed him in the community room, she knew he'd save a place for her and her wheelchair beside his at Bingo, Trivial Pursuit or the evening news. Bob was the best thing that had happened since she came here a year

ago in fall 2001 for what she thought was a short recoup from her latest fall and slowly realized was for the duration.

The orderly wheeled her into the community room next to Bob. Polly was in the center of a semicircle of six men like the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi. Louis, a wiry French Canadian who spoke with more energy than anyone in the place, Ira from Brooklyn, who was the baby of the group at sixty-six, Dan and Ron, two affable types from Connecticut, and big Hank from Vermont made up the rest of their little group. Ethel, the one other woman who was included in the semicircle, wheeled herself in and placed herself at one end of the animated group as they watched the news.

Bob placed his hand over hers. When she felt the warmth of his large hand over hers, she felt her legs and the rest of her body shed their dead weight.

“I missed you at mocktails and didn’t see you at dinner,” Bob said as low as he could make his elephant trumpet of a voice. Mocktails was the name Bob had given to the juice served with cheese and crackers before dinner in the community room. Now it was part of the everyday lingo on the half of the second floor where Bob and Polly lived.

“The throat again?” Bob asked.

“Yes,” Polly answered. “I’ve been having dinner in my room lately.”

Because of what the doctor said was a pocket of flesh and reasons too numerous to go into, Polly coughed almost every time she swallowed, and visits to the dining room were getting harder. It had also been getting difficult for her dinner buddy Ethel who had the perpetual smile of a saint on a French cathedral Polly had cut out of the magazine *Realities* to show her. Ethel would dribble most of her food down her sweater when she

ate. Bob didn't sit at Ethel and Polly's table, but Polly could hear his booming one-liners across the dining room and see him looking at her when she looked his way.

He squeezed her hand.

II.

Polly's youngest daughter Cricket walked in as the news was ending to say good-bye because she was driving back to New York the next day. She'd taken Polly to visit beaches as usual and ended up in Hubbie's driveway. Polly could see that the cottage she'd lived in till last fall was still there, but it had shiny light brown shingles and was attached to the main house. Cricket took the long way back because of the Cranberry Festival. It took so long that Polly had missed mocktails with Bob.

When Cricket wheeled Polly past Bob in the hall, Polly said, "I'm glad that's over." She was afraid Cricket heard her and had her feelings hurt so she was glad her daughter stopped by tonight.

Polly could see Cricket's face freeze with surprise as she approached their jolly little semicircle.

She saw her daughter take it in for a moment and say, "Uh, hi there."

"Hello!" roared Bob.

"A-lo!" said Louis.

"I...uh ... I just wanted to say good-bye to Mom. I don't know if we met. I know Ira. Hi Ethel."

Polly watched Cricket's face soften as she absorbed some of the glow from Ethel's face.

Polly made introductions. When she said, “And this is Bob,” she could see Cricket’s eyes were glued to Bob’s and her intertwined hands.

“Where do you drive to?” Bob asked.

“Staten Island,” Cricket answered.

“A Staten Island girl, a New Yawker,” Ira said.

“Are you married?” Bob asked.

“Divorced,” Cricket answered. The way she said it made it clear the divorce was fresh.

The long look she gave Polly also indicated it was a raw subject. Polly remembered Cricket’s call July, exactly a year ago, to the cottage from a payphone in Plaza Bombiero asking for help to hunt for her husband. He hadn’t shown up for their vacation at Polly’s house in Albufeira, Portugal. Polly’s aide at the time was crying as they looked up numbers for Cricket to call to track him down. He had eloped, or so Cricket had described his grand jete. Not long after, Cricket had run off the ferry right into 9-11. She’d sent Polly what she called her 9-11 journal describing the torn-up city and her apartment that was starting to resemble the World Trade site.

Louis asked Cricket how long she was married. She said 10 years. Like mother, like daughter, Polly thought. That was about as long as Polly had lived with her boyfriend Jack before he plunked her in the Cape Cod hospital in 1993 and notified Hubbie she was out of his hands. She had fallen once too often and embarrassed him in the Lisbon airport.

“I’m sorry,” Louis said.

Cricket waved away their sympathy. She looked at the happy faces looking up at her and said, “You guys have a better social life than I have.”

From what Cricket had told Polly today, it sounded as if her lonely vigil in the family house on the hill in Portugal last August was continuing in Cricket's lonely apartment on the hill in Staten Island. Since Bob had arrived, Polly found herself impatient with Cricket's calls. And to think how many times she'd called Cricket in New York to say, "It's Mom. Give me a call sometime."

When Polly was wheeled to the nurse station phone or picked her own phone to talk to her daughter, Polly had to say, "Cricket, this must be costing you a fortune. We've been talking a long time." In her seven years at the cottage at Hubbie's place, Cricket had held her captive talking about medical problems as if Polly didn't have any. Still, Polly was glad to see Cricket trudge through unplowed snow and through the cottage door in the deep of winter to visit. Every holiday she would appear, and Cricket and her now ex-husband would tug, pull and lug her to Portugal in pre-wheelchair days. Cricket loved family history. They'd spent hours reading Polly sister Mary Pat's and Polly's childhood letters and journals. Polly read and reread Lorna's weekly letters. Hubbie's smile when he walked in every morning with the newspaper made her glad she got up every day. He was so funny when he did imitations of politicians and celebrities. But since she met Bob, all Polly could think about was the time lost that she could have been spending with Bob.

Bob shouted to Cricket, "We're the best people in the place!"

Polly noticed Cricket still had that look of surprise at the camaraderie she'd encountered. Cricket was wide open to the warmth Louis was sending her way. He told Cricket they liked Polly and everyone was nice in the place, they liked each other, they

communicated, they took care of each other, her mother was a wonderful woman and they would take care of her.

As Cricket left, Bob grabbed her hand, kissed it and said, “WE LOVE YOU! YOU’LL BE FINE!”

Cricket said, “You’re delightful.”

“YOU’RE DELIGHTFUL! WE LOVE YOU!” he bellowed.

Polly watched Cricket take steps backward as she gave the group of friends a final look. She was laughing but Polly saw her rub an eye as she turned and walked out of the community room and past the nurse station to the elevators.

She and Bob looked at each other, and he grabbed her other hand so he could hold both her hands in his.

III.

“Mom, Penny says Bob is putting his hand down your blouse and into your pants. None of the other patients want to go into the recreation room. I didn’t want to bring this up in the car, but I met with the head nurse today,” said Cricket. She was sitting with her legs crossed in a place Polly knew had become a favorite refuge — the foot of her mother’s bed. She was on the Cape for Thanksgiving vacation.

Cricket went on to say that Penny, who was Hubbie’s wife and handled paperwork and because Cricket lived in New York and Lorna lived in England, had called Cricket and told her the news. Cricket told Polly she wanted to hear more but didn’t want to talk about it in earshot of coworkers in her Manhattan office cubicle so had whispered into the receiver, “Keep me posted.” She asked Polly if it was true.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Polly said.

She was still wearing the purple scarf, hat and leisure suit from their outing and sitting in her wheel chair, her hands folded in her lap. Polly said those words in a voice that was even gentler than her already soft voice and looked up at Cricket like a little girl who had done something bad but didn’t mean to.

Cricket told Polly she approached the head nurse because she was unable to meet with Independence authorities. Penny was the only one available to have non-holiday or non-weekend appointments with medical care professionals.

“That tough blond head nurse Barbara took another nurse and I into a supply closet next to the nurse station to have privacy. Barbara, to avoid syringe and med packages, stood on her toes on the baseboards and pushed her hands against the walls for balance in her corner and I did the same. The other nurse just stood in the middle, I guess, to referee. Barbara said, ‘It’s abuse. He’s a big man. Your mother’s frail. He plus his wheelchair might crush her. If it was my mother, I’d be after him like a Doberman.’ ‘But they want to be together,’ I protested. ‘Couldn’t they have a room somewhere? At least she won’t get pregnant.’”

Polly started laughing, began coughing and had to grab a tissue.

Cricket ran to get her a glass of water in the little kitchen in the corridor. The glass shook a little as Polly took a few sips and said in her Jackie Onassis voice, “That was very funny, Cricket.”

She reached for her lipstick and opened her mouth wide to apply it. “Anks for trying to ‘elp. Airyone is ‘eing perf’ly silly.”

“Is he abusing you?” Cricket asked.

“ We didn’t do anything. We cuddled and some old crone snitched.”

Polly and Cricket sat there a while.

All Polly wanted was to be with Bob. She tugged at her fingers as if she were trying to make them longer than they were.

“The thing I like best about Bob is that he never leaves me alone.”

Cricket then said something that sent Polly over the moon. She told her mother that Penny said, “Your mother’s a man magnet at ninety-one.”

Polly took a moment to soak up the compliment. As she grew older, such compliments, rare as they were, made her feel as if she’d been anointed with holy oil.

“Let’s face it,” she said. “Nothing makes you feel better than the moment some guy decides you’re attractive and his face lights up.”

“I honestly don’t remember,” said Cricket.

Polly had seen other mature marriages like Cricket’s end in disaster. Cricket had married in her forties a man ten years younger. Polly was well informed that the ten-year marriage was, as Cricket so eloquently summarized it, shitty and sexless.

She turned her good eye toward Cricket — not the one with the cloudy iris and pupil — and said, “We really picked some lemons, didn’t we?”

Polly thought of Cricket’s emotional eunuch husband everyone referred to Damian. Before that was Barry, the gay man she’d taken years to try and convert. Between those two was Trip, who had eight breakdowns. Polly thought of her own lineup: Hubbie, Lorna and Cricket’s father, Lord Fauntleroy Freddie, her first husband. Then came Joe the crabby fisherman and last but not least, Cocktail Party Jack, the boyfriend who unceremoniously dumped her in a hospital.

“Cricket, Bob and I are two people who waited our whole lives to meet each other.”

IV.

Polly and Bob were told their wheelchairs had to be ten feet apart, but the head nurse Barbara let the rule go when they saw Bob was behaving himself. Polly hurried to his side after outings with her children or any activities that didn't involve Bob. They were inseparable. Since Independence wouldn't let them live together, they decided to try outside the Center.

On a visit the following spring, Bob's daughter Doris wheeled Bob into the community room and asked Cricket to wheel Polly downstairs with them. When the four of them got to a small room, Doris backed her father in and Cricket wheeled Polly in so Polly and Cricket were facing Doris and Bob. The room had a black and white checkered floor and chairs with heart-shaped backs. It was like a little French café. Part of the reason they liked it there was because it reminded them of their dear friend Louis, who had died the previous January.

Polly watched Bob look up at Cricket and say, “I love your mother. I want to marry her. We can live in the Chatham cottage and the Portugal house.”

Bob said Independence prohibited them to live together so they needed somewhere where they could have privacy and be man and wife. Bob size alone commanded attention and his voice reached the corners of every room he entered. His argument was powerful.

Polly could imagine Cricket's expression when she saw Doris nod emphatically to Cricket to assure she wasn't hearing things.

"Portugal's gone, Cricket wailed.

Polly could see Doris look toward the floor and knew it hurt Cricket to tell her what she had half known from Lorna's letters.

"And the cottage isn't set up for wheelchairs," Cricket continued.

Polly had seen the cottage wasn't the cottage anymore. It had been remodeled from the foundation up into a studio or something. The four of them were silent. No one offered any other solutions. Polly knew Cricket was not the decision maker as far as Polly's welfare was concerned and couldn't do much to help. They'd met in the café with Penny. Penny had been equally surprised and had told them like Cricket that the cottage wasn't wheelchair-friendly and Portugal was even less likely a place to live.

She loved Bob for dreaming and trying so hard to build what may have been a fantasy world for them, the "Somewhere" she remembered Natalie Wood singing about on her balcony in *West Side Story*. She knew he'd keep trying. She gave him a little air kiss.

"If I had the money, I would build you guys a palace," Cricket said.

The meeting dissolved soon after Polly and Cricket and Doris and Bob went upstairs to separate rooms.

There were other discussions with Penny and Cricket and Cricket and Doris about marriage or a room together, but the room at Independence never materialized — it just had never been done — and marriage presented inheritance ramifications — real or imagined from his family — so they stayed put.

Cricket visited the Cape about a month after Bob's proposal in the café. Polly sat on the base of Polly's bed, her favorite refuge. Cricket read Polly a poem a young woman who worked as a janitor at Independence had given her.

*Polly and Bob had a love so true,
the pure love known by few.
He rolled right into her heart;
she wheeled into his heart too.*

*They dreamed of never-never land
where their love was not indicted,
where she would wear a ring on her hand
and their love could be requited.*

It is requited, Polly thought. If by *requited*, the janitor really meant *consummated*, it was that too. Their furtive touches and kindnesses meant more than Cricket's steamy trysts or loveless marriage. Polly looked at Cricket's face, something she liked to do because she could see herself in her daughter's face, though Cricket's cheekbones weren't as substantial, and her nose was just a nose. Cricket's face as she read the poem was a landscape painting in progress. Each muscle movement spread fresh color onto the canvas. When Polly giggled at the wheelchair love part, the love Polly knew Cricket had for her made her mouth corners turn up into a half moon and her eyes close into crescents. When Polly sighed at the never-never land part, regret rippled Cricket's forehead and clouded her eyes. When Cricket read the unrequited part, her eyes moistened in disbelief that Polly wouldn't be around to laugh with and tell her problems to. It finally dawned on Polly what the emotion was that ran across Cricket's face like ocean waves making their way up the beach at high tide: ENVY.

Epilogue

I. Afterlife

“You know, there’s room at the top of the urn. You can put little souvenirs in there,” said Brigit.

“That’s a great idea,” cried Lorna.

“It’ll be like a time capsule,” Brigit said.

This broke the lull that had shrouded the kitchen conversation pit when Brigit had run out of mortician stories to amuse Cricket the grieving sisters. Cricket and Lorna were fascinated by this cheery young mortician, and they found themselves laughing at the time Brigit and her fellow morticians, on a pool break from a convention, had cleared a swim deck of vacationers by discussing their cases.

Cricket and Lorna needed a laugh. Their mother, Polly Ann Sprague, had died September 8, 2005, a date they’d always remember. The vigil for the assisted transition had worn them out, though it was a royal sendoff. Cricket kept calling it a suicide and kept getting corrected by nurses and the chaplain who checked in from time to time. When Cricket called from her office to ask Mom if she really wanted to do it, Mom said she didn’t want to be like her roommate Laverne. Cricket had been relieved Mom didn’t die September 11. Cricket’s birthday was September 13 so she’d hoped Mom wouldn’t die on that day.

Cricket watched her older sister Lorna — always game for a new project — jump up. She heard her heels click on the steep stairs as she ran to her room and returned with a bright red lipstick.

“Perfect!” Cricket shrieked. “Fire-engine red! Mom’s favorite!”

She pictured Mom at her dressing table. She saw her tuck her hair into her fake bun, outline her lips with a pencil and paint them the deepest red.

Cricket ran upstairs and dumped her cosmetic case onto one of her twin beds. This made the mess messier — the guest room twin beds and floor were strewn with her clothes and accessories. Added to this were mementoes they'd displayed at the funeral table. Her mess had defiled her brother Hubbie and his wife Penny's pristine Cape Cod house, as had the sand Cricket had tracked in on her sneakers and dents Lorna's heels had left in the new soft wood of the kitchen floor. The sisters had been staying at their brother's place through the vigil and the funeral and now were waiting for the ashes to be returned from the Boston crematorium.

Cricket took a lot longer than Lorna to return with red nail polish and a nail file. She put them in the plastic bag Brigit held in her lap to take back to her laboratory.

Penny, who had been running the vacuum cleaner behind them, ran to the master bedroom and paused by the stand-alone kitchen counter. She held up a green rabbit's foot.

All three howled. "Luck of the Irish!" they yelled.

Cricket remembered Mom telling hospital nurses, "We came over before the famine, you know."

"Can I feel it please, Penny?" Cricket asked. She reached for the rabbit foot and squeezed it before she put it into the bag.

Cricket located a paintbrush in the pile of things she'd contributed to the funeral exhibit. She recalled how they watched Mom the fourth day of her self-induced famine making painting motions in the air.

Lorna threw a penny into the bag and a tiny lead rooster key chain from Portugal.

Something about music — a CD, a record cover — because Mom always sang show tunes at the piano in my room in Caracas, Cricket thought. Then she felt her face redden. She'd sung every song she could think of for hours at the hospice, and she never could sing. She scooped up a *Paris Match* magazine, a few letters and some photographs.

When she gave them to Brigit, Lorna protested. "Don't do that, Cricket. They won't fit. I can give them to Carl and Olivia!"

"No! I'll squeeze them in!" Cricket cried. Mom loved magazines like *Paris Match* and *Realites*. Mom loved their letters and photographs. She would reach for letters on the coffee table and read them over and over.

Brigit took the rolled-up offering, inserted it into a larger plastic bag and placed it in her substantial lap beside the smaller bag. Her cherubic face became more so when she smiled and said, "No problem, ladies! She can have something to look at when she dries her nails!"

II. Clearing Space

"This a tough one!" Hubbie said.

He and his nephew Carl tugged and dug at the massive root. Finally they unearthed it. They hadn't jeopardized the bush on the crest of the Browns' plot but removed ends of its outer roots and leftover roots elsewhere. They had decided to fix up the plot before Hubbie's mother — Carl's grandmother — was laid to rest in the ceramic urn painted with blue, purple and yellow flowers. The cemetery people had marked off a small square with pegs.

“Plenty of room on this side of the hill for us,” Hubbie thought.

Carl stood up and did some twists at the waist to straighten his spine.

“Let’s clear out the stones,” Hubbie said.

They picked up compliant ones and dug out stubborn ones. Hubbie was glad he was doing this. His sisters couldn’t do this kind of work. Last time he saw them, they were talking shop with that gabby mortician like they were at a cocktail party.

“She’s my mother too!” Hubbie had protested when his sisters had shown him a mock-up funeral table display and program. Just before the funeral, he’d taken Mom’s paintings and hung them on the chapel wall. The sisters delivered their oft-practiced speeches, Lorna’s her last letter to her mother and Cricket’s a series of vignettes: her mother posing in a Caracas gaslight costume, shrieking at a loose crab scuttling around a Cape cottage, painting on the Portuguese esplanade. They’d used French, Spanish and Portuguese phrases. They tried to make him give a speech, though he didn’t want to. He had the chaplain read some notes he’d written for her. The chaplain read them verbatim.

Carl and Hubbie tugged at a rock. Hubbie pried it loose with a shovel.

“How did my notes on Mom come across at the service?” he asked

“Notes? You nailed it. Artist. People lover. Traveler. I liked the line “ She mined life for its riches.”

“Really? Great!” Hubbie said. He poked a root with his toe. “Oh, God. This one’s a monster.

“Really, Hubbie. It was a lot more to the point than your sisters’ speeches.”

They chuckled a bit over that one.

They used a battery-operated saw to slice the root. By the time they finished yanking it out, they were dripping with sweat.

“Christ! The old girl sure makes us work!” Hubbie said.

“You’re not kidding,” Carl said. He spoke the next words in the melodramatic high register he sometimes used. “She went out like a queen.”

They did knee bends like they did when Carl came up from Boston for Cape mini-marathons.

Hubie sat back and thought how Mom made them work that week and how they hadn’t minded because they wanted to do things for her. They were wiped out , even though they drove to his house to take sleep breaks. How elegantly she had taken her leave, holding out her hand to greet people, saying “I’m so glad you could come” and later murmuring “Thank you” and giving them little smiles the week it took to her to die. As he moistened her lips with ice, Mom’s face with straight, cropped red-brown hair framing it had looked like her schoolgirl portrait on his wall, the girl who stood on the window seat with her sister to watch circus elephants pass. As he combed her hair, Mom’s beautiful profile evoked the model in a tweed suit coming up the Thorn Street walk to the front door. He marveled that the hand he held had poked a finger into a wrist wound of a grandfather who marched when Abraham Lincoln called. He became head nurse, coordinating their shifts with Penny’s assistance. Cricket arrived two days into Mom’s fast; Lorna arrived from England, escorted by Carl, to have a few moments with her before unconsciousness. When she slid into a coma, Mom became an island, her knees its highest point, its waves the love that flowed from them to her and back again.

Hubbie walked to the bush on the top of the hill and surveyed the torn-up area where they'd worked. He walked a few steps down the other side to the much narrower slope, already crowded with Mom's ex-husband's — Hubbie's father's — plot. He looked at Freddie Brown Sr., Harriet and Freddie Jr.'s three small plaques lined up in a row. He sat down in front of the plaques. Because he was the oldest child, six years older than his sisters, he'd been able to get to know his grandparents — and his father for that matter — much better than his sisters had. It was nice his father was with his parents.

“Do you think Mom will be lonely over there?” he called over to Carl.

“Let her have some privacy!” Carl said. “Her kids will be moving in soon enough!”

III. Wide Swathe

“I can't leave Mom here,” Lorna said to her husband Derrick.

“Sprinkle some anyway,” Derrick said. “Think of it as it was.”

They'd trudged up the hill to Casa Felicidad, the house Mom bought after her divorce and had visited twice a year.

After hearing the sisters complain they wanted the ashes to go to Portugal, Brigit had found a solution. She isolated some ashes in a marbled plastic urn before the bulk of the ashes were buried in a ceramic urn in the Cape Cod cemetery. Lorna took it home to England in September, but they couldn't travel till November. They had risen at 4:30 a.m., flown from Heathrow to Faro and driven to Albufeira.

One window and balcony were missing; on the front of the house; the door was white aluminum. The front garden where they picked lemons and figs now had a small

tiled-roof shed and a manicured patch of ferns. Behind the casa and its neighbors, swimming pools lined up like dorm sinks. She remembered Mom's oils that had greeted them when they entered the house and previewed coming attractions: colorful fishing boats drawn up with their catch, whitewashed homes with Moorish chimneys rising from the cliffs, hibiscus and bougainvillea-covered walls, and tiny figures peering seaward from the esplanade. The huge half-mustached cat that lived in the backyard pampas plant wouldn't stop to pee there now.

Lorna thought of fish dinners, terrace breakfasts, the summer she stayed there with Derrick, Carl and Olivia, the St. Patrick's Day party with Cricket. She imagined the partygoers under the purple and green shamrocks with silver glitter that hung from the chandelier. She wanted to paint it and mix the ashes in.

"Mom couldn't do enough for us on those vacations," Lorna said.

Sobs started in her stomach and took control of her body. When the sobs slowed, Derrick put his arm around her. They stood there a while.

"She made life fun," he said.

Lorna took in a jagged breath and blew out as hard as she could. "She sure did," she managed to say.

She looked at the label on her container. "Polly Ann Sprague, August 7, 1912 — September 8, 2005." Under the name of the Boston crematorium was the date "September 13, 2005." Cricket's birthday!

She pulled the tape off and opened the lid. She left only a bit of Mom in the garden. They walked around the corner and down Cerro Piedade. To their right, the valley where women tilled and pigs and sheep grazed had been gouged out and filled

with seawater let in through a cliff canal. Garishly painted hotels, condos, and nightclubs packed on piers made it look more like a parking lot than a marina.

She had wanted to throw ashes smack across one of the scenes Mom painted — the green valley, the water wheels, the farms, the donkey path above the valley where they followed orange paint marks along cliffs for miles — but on a walk with Cricket a few years before, agave plants that millionaire homeowners had planted in the path pricked them and drew blood.

“She won’t like this,” Lorna said.

“It’s still the valley, not the marina, for her,” Derrick said.

Keeping her eyes on the edge of the road and not the ex-valley that stretched below her, Lorna released Mom to the old landscape.

“This isn’t easy,” Lorna thought, but they’d come so far. She was determined to do what they had made the trip to do.

They made their way to their next stop, the local cemetery. Because of the cypress-lined cemetery, Casa Felicidad looked straight out to sea. All of them had liked walking around it. The cemetery was locked, but the gatekeeper let her in. She waited till he looked the other way. She sprinkled Mom near a curly haired child angel sprawled in its smock on a tombstone.

Further along the street they noticed where Francisco the sea dog and boat carver had lived in a tiny room with his bed and stove. Someone had taken two one-room houses and made it into a tile-fronted petit palace. After they had bought the exquisite red, blue and yellow fishing boats with matchstick riggings, Francisco would have a new haircut and a new boom box. She shook out Mom like holy water.

They descended the zigzag steps she and Derrick, her kids and Cricket had run down for swims or walks. She jettisoned more of her precious cargo, *cinzas seja nostos mortais*, ashes of our deceased, words she'd learned to say for customs as she produced Brigit's letter. The esplanade was torn up, punctuated at intervals with piles of pipes and cobblestones.

“ I can't take it,” Lorna said. “Algave-blocked paths, marina, swimming pools, and this!”

“She painted here, Lorna.”

She poured out some Mom, covering the rest so the wind wouldn't blow all of her out.

They entered the empty, dark Bizarro Restaurant and asked for their friend Joanna, the proprietor. Two employees offered no condolences and informed them Joanna would be in Monday — too late. On the far wall her mother's flower and landscape paintings glowed and, for a moment, evoked happy memories—birthday parties, Brazil Night, the book swap, she and Cricket chatting at the bar in matching floral skirts Joanna made from old jeans. Outside Lorna envisioned her mother holding court with British and American friends. She imagined her cracking a joke and sipping her orange juice. She sprinkled Mom near a table that had a red and white umbrella.

They found themselves on the beach next to O Peneco or Lorna's Rock. The giant boot-shaped rock she and her kids played beside, though eroded, looked the same. This is where everyone came first. They would run down zigzag steps when the moon made the ocean glisten or morning sunrays tiptoed up the sand. Derrick stood aside to give her that moment alone, but he took a photograph so they'd remember the sacred

spot. She tossed the rest of Mom onto the sandstone side of the rock. The ashes cut a large graphite swathe.

“I hope you’re happy where I left you,” Lorna said aloud. The purple and pink streaks being brushed across the sky on their walk to the hotel made her think so. From their balcony, they could see the dark swathe on Lorna’s Rock. It remained on the sandstone despite heavy tides and rain the following day. It was still clinging to the rock their last morning.

“Now she can live in Cape Cod and vacation here,” Derrick said.