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RUSH

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RUSH

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.

RUSH

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Prologue

“Get in,” the boy told me. The sequence runs like film tape through my head: the wide open mouth of the car door, my footsteps echoing across the parking lot as the last radiant throb of light bleeds out of the evening sky. The wind has risen, shadows sweep across the fields, and the heavy clouds, filled with rain, hang so low, it was as if the boundary between heaven and earth vanishes. I want to grasp this picture before the tape rolls on, grasp that glow of green light that suffuses the sky as I climb into the truck.

Listen, I can tell you I heard the engine idling, smelled something damp and rich and pungent. “Cocoa hulls,” the boy told me later. “Some crazy guy around here uses cocoa hulls for fertilizer.”

I can tell you I tasted the rain when it started to fall, tasted earth as sweet as chocolate. I heard wind rush through cornstalks, heard a car approaching, blinked into its headlights as it drove by, sped right by where I lay fighting in the mud. I can say I was afraid I was going to die; for he told me he would kill me. But the truth that doesn't let me go is that I sensed danger and walked right towards it. In the distance I saw dark green clouds ride abreast the horizon. Listen, I drifted towards that horizon like a vessel unmoored.

A DESIGN FOR LIVING

“How does she expect me to get around,” My sister Joanna asked. “If I don’t hitch?”

“Well, you could take BART,” our father answered. “Or the bus.” After a moment he added. “Claire doesn’t hitchhike.”

“Claire doesn’t hitch.” Joanna muttered.

The conversation had started so casually over Thanksgiving dinner. We were seated around our father’s dining room table. The table he and our mother, his first wife, had built from an old door when they were first married. Our father--the bon vivant, the famous art historian and erudite professor and infamous womanizer--was semi-single. Recently divorced from his fourth wife Irene, he was between marriages, and--with the exodus of his last wife, her ten-year-old son Jason and all their furniture--from out of the back of his storage closet, this table had suddenly reappeared. Joanna was telling us how she traveled from San Francisco State, where she was taking theater classes, across the city and all the way down to Ghirardelli Square for her job in a coffee shop. “I told Mom it would take four buses to get there, so I had to hitch. She just blew her stack. But I never told her”--Joanna turned to our father--“That you taught us to hitch.” I could tell Joanna wasn’t lying when she said this, but there was an ingratiating tone to her voice nonetheless.

“You taught your daughters to hitch-hike!” Gail glared at him. Gail was my father’s new girlfriend. Well he was keeping company with her until he found another wife, which we all knew would happen soon.

“Noo, I never did.” Our father, from his place at the head of the table, wagged his head over his turkey.

“Berkeley was full of hippies. It was safe then,” Joanna continued. Her head was bent over a tureen. She is a vegetarian and on Thanksgiving and Christmas she makes her own separate casserole of stuffing.

“How old were you?” Gail asked.

“Well, I was nine which means Claire was eight.” Joanna threw back her head and howled. “The late sixties! You should have seen Daddy then, Gail, with his turtle necks and love beads.”

“Good Lord,” Gail said. “Charles Manson was prowling around up here then. He was a hippie, too!” Gail was a compact, square woman with dark curly hair. Once she said to me. “I’ll say this for your father; he doesn’t have a type.”

“I gave you bus fare,” our father protested. “I know I gave you bus fare.”

“No,” Joanna insisted. “That’s not how we got home from day camp. Daddy couldn’t pick us up from camp so he taught us to hitch. He said you just stick out your thumb like this.” She stood up and demonstrated.

All this time I had been sitting next to Martin Clay Pierce, our father’s favorite graduate student. Now, Martin said, “Really Paul, your own daughters, tsk, tsk.” Then he said to no one in particular, “But you couldn’t expect him to

know what to do. After all, they were only here in the summertime. Isn't that right, Claire?"

"I don't remember." And I couldn't. Not with Joanna in the room. When she had arrived she had sucked all the air right out of me.

Blowing in the front door, stomping rain from her boots, shaking a wet umbrella on the wood floor, she had pulled off her hood to reveal a wild Afro of bleached blonde hair. "What do you think? Everyone says I look like Barbara Streisand in *A Star is Born*."

Two years ago, I'd been the first one to follow our father west, moving from our mother's house in Illinois to attend college in California. A few months ago, I'd returned to Illinois to help Joanna move too, driving with her and all her belongings and her two cats in a run down car all the way across the country, because she couldn't do it alone. Now, we both wanted the same thing--to be with our charismatic father and have that relationship with him we'd only ever dreamed of. From the other side of the table my sister stared at me as if she was daring me to speak.

"Well," our father sighed after Joanna had finished her hitchhiking demonstration and sat back down to eat. "Isn't it nice to have us all together!" And he reached his arms out benevolently around his long dining room table.

Later, while our father drove off with Gail, ostensibly to take her home, and Joanna was glued to the television set she had lugged into the little bedroom upstairs, I told Martin that I did remember the rides--following my older sister in

and out of cars, licking the pink peppermint ice cream cones she had bought for me.

“What happened?” Martin poured himself an Armagnac; then he came over and knelt down beside me.

“Nothing. Sometimes we took the bus. Sometimes somebody’s mother drove us home. Well, I mean, he hadn’t built this yet.” And I gestured to the expanse of white living room, the sliding glass doors, the bearskin rug, the fire burning on the iron hearth. My parents had been divorced since I was six, my father continuously remarrying, my mother pinning for him. “Every time we came out it was a different house. Along with the wives he was trying out architectural styles. Greene and Greene, California Bungalow, Bauhaus, and some shingled old thing with a huge garden,” I sighed. “That was my favorite.”

“So sophisticated for one so young.” Martin set his glass down, leaned over and bit my lower lip.

“I am hardly sophisticated.” But, I smiled.

“Do you even know what it means?” He was already stretching out on the rug, pulling me by my hair gently towards him. Odd, I always thought when I kissed him; he looks like he could be my brother.

“Lack of innocence,” he said. And for awhile we were silent.

It was all over very fast. Martin had incendiary habits: the biting, the whispered phrase, and the leftover taste of burnt cigarettes on his teeth. Nothing delicate or subtle. He acted like a little boy who’d gotten hold of a book of matches. And on this night perhaps he was nervous that his professor would

come home to find him romping on the living room rug with his younger daughter.

I wasn't a bit nervous.

"Claire," Martin said. "I really never expected us to become intimates."

He sat beside me pulling on his trouser socks, his black curly hair poking out from the top of his white dinner shirt. He turned to me. "Well, did you?"

For a moment I was thrown. I didn't know what he meant. I was not accustomed to hearing the word intimate used in reference to sex. Our father had always told us, *why go beyond the first date if the sex isn't good?*

In the morning our father drove Joanna down the hill to the BART station so that she could catch the train back to her apartment in the city. She'd left her kitties alone overnight, which was almost more than she could bear. Clumping out of the house in her heavy shoes she'd halted in front of me, held me by both my shoulders so I couldn't turn away, and said trying to stare into my wandering eyes, "I'll understand you."

When I didn't answer she curled her lip in disdain or anger, I couldn't tell which. "I don't know why I even try with you," she said. "What the hell does that guy see in you anyway?"

In the early afternoon Martin called. He'd promised to stop by with an obscure record for our father, but when I picked up the receiver he only said, "I'm all tied up," without so much as a salutation, and clicked off the line.

I returned to college at Santa Cruz where I was sharing a third floor apartment near the boardwalk with a marine biologist named Becky Killpatrick. A neat, orderly girl, or so Becky appeared, for she liked to arrange food in the refrigerator alphabetically, and collect little glass chotkas of marine life--whales and dolphins, starfish and sea birds--which she kept lined up in rows by descending size on the window sill. Becky was currently working for a laboratory that was doing experiments on button mushrooms. On Friday afternoons she would drag home cartons of mushroom causalities. Mushrooms shot through with drugs and grown to the size of large turkeys. We ate them: raw, fried, steamed and sautéed. God only knows what we were ingesting.

It was my junior year in college. I was failing Latin and Astronomy, had dropped out of a Women's Gynecology class (my school's idea of a science credit), and never turned in my paper for my Joyce seminar. Instead, I had waltzed out of my final handing in a blank blue book. Even my Art History Professor, a boyish woman named Lenny Berman who was also, apparently, an ex what? Student, colleague, lover, of my father's-- called me into her office one afternoon. She sat me down in a soft chair in a sunny corner, under her spider plant. She talked for awhile about the chickens she was raising with her new boyfriend. Eggs were hatching even as we spoke, she told me. Then she said. "Getting anything out of you these days is like trying to pull teeth."

I smiled and looked out her window. In the courtyard below three girls were sunbathing topless. Even then I knew that gestures like that were only temporary.

“Aren’t you hot?” Lenny asked.

I pulled at my black wool sweater. “No, thank you.”

“Listen Claire, one of my students visited the crisis center on campus. She was depressed and it helped her to talk to someone. Maybe you could try calling them.”

“I’m fine, really.”

I was oddly peaceful. After my visit with Lenny, I went out and bought myself a pet. A black and white guinea pig I named Dolores who lived in a metal cage that sat on my bureau. One Saturday Becky and I planted bright orange and yellow marigolds in flowerpots and set them on the balcony outside the kitchen window. Up in the city, my sister Joanna was in love with her roommate’s boyfriend. Even still, she said she was happy. For he came to her in the middle of each night while his pregnant girlfriend slept. Joanna had plans for her life. She was going to act, be a star. If Joanna could start fresh, then why couldn’t I?

All that I needed, I decided, was to change my major. Instead of following in my father’s footsteps and studying the work of an increasing array of crazy and/or dead artists, I would become a maker of things. I do not know why I hit upon the study of architecture. It was a far reach. Perhaps all those houses my father had lived in over the years had tweaked my curiosity.

In any case, I convinced Professor Hubert Beagley to let me into his introduction to architecture class. The title of the course, Design For Living, had sprung out at me from the syllabus, like a book calling me from the shelf. In this

class, he explained, we would study the fundamental ecology of all design, the interconnectedness of objects to place. Our final project would be to build a contraption made entirely of popsicle sticks that would hold secure a raw egg. Hold it so secure, in fact, that when the egg, inside its constructed house, was tossed off the eighth floor of the Political Science building, it would land without so much as a crack to its shell. Professor Beagley, who told us to call him Hubert, wasn't an architect; he was an anthropologist. He wore a scraggly, unkempt corduroy jacket covered in lint and what looked to be cracker crumbs, and he drove a rattling old car with a noisy muffler. He picked me up hitchhiking down from campus one afternoon. "I know your type," he said, eyeing my thick woolen garments. "You need to drop out. Take time to travel and your troubles might unravel."

When we reached the bottom of the hill he asked, "how is your box coming along?"

"What?" On his dashboard was glued a miniature, half naked mermaid whose tiny breasts jiggled with each turn of Professor Hubert's wheel.

"The contraption to safely land your little bird." He waved his arms in the air as if he were fondling a space ship.

"I've smashed three so far," I confessed. For I had been practicing tossing egg encased boxes off my little kitchen balcony. However, each attempt--more layered and intricate than the last--had ended more disastrously with a broken pile of popsicle-stick house and glue, eggshell and yoke, bleeding on the pavement below.

Professor Hubert glanced at me from under his bushy eyebrows. A long hair grew directly out from a mole above his upper lip. I'd seen one just like it on a waiter in a Chinese restaurant, a sure sign of wisdom I'd been told at the time. "It's always a marvel, isn't it?" He sighed. Then he added cryptically. "A mouse can fall indefinitely without being injured. Their bodies are so light shock passes right through them." And he drove off, his muffler clanking behind him.

Strolling the sidewalk in front of the house I shared with Becky, as if conjured up by my own imagination, and by Professor Hubert's hints of travel and escape, I found Martin waiting.

"I was on my way to Los Angeles," was his only explanation. "Care for a drive?" He tossed his keys in the air and then snatched them back. Without a word I climbed into his Avanti.

I've never known where Martin got his things. His cars, apartments, first editions, art. For awhile I thought he had family money, but he didn't. Martin came out of the northwest from nothing. "You know I moved out here just to study with your father," he once told me. My father likes to say that Martin gets all his things from women, but I doubt that. I know, for instance, that he stole his entire music collection, and I mean a collection that filled a small room.

That afternoon Martin drove us first to the delicatessen, then down to the boardwalk. The amusement park was closed for the season. An empty roller coaster loomed over the beach like the giant hull of a ship or the skeletal frame of a dinosaur. Only a few months earlier I had ridden that roller coaster--lights flashing in my eyes, drunk on slow gin--and I'd felt beautiful and powerful, my

teeth blazing in a fierce grin, as I'd soared through the air out above the sea. Now I sat out on the edge of the pier, bundled up in two heavy sweaters, unwrapping my sandwich. Seagulls reeled overhead. From out of the folds of his cashmere jacket Martin casually produced a bottle of wine and a jar of pickled herring.

"You stole that?" It wasn't that I really cared. I was just surprised. In my world only kids stole.

Martin, a good-looking young man with a clean unblemished complexion--no stray hairs grew on him--grinned at me with the happy face of a retriever after a good hunt.

I rubbed my neck, cramped from its perpetually cocked position. "And did you steal those gifts for my father, too?" I asked Martin point blank. "The Philip Glass records, that book on Art Nouveau posters?"

Instead of answering me, Martin said. "Your father asked me what you were like."

My heart rattled its little cage. My head shot up, suddenly alert. I tried to picture my father asking this question. In what circumstances had the topic come up? And what did he mean, "What was I like"?

Now, Martin said, "What do you suppose he meant by that question, Claire?" There lurked in Martin's tone the hint of an insinuation. Once Martin had told me he planted information in my head subliminally, during our visits, in order to provoke my dreams. I'd driven home from our encounter desperately scanning the billboards along the freeway. Perhaps meanings lurked everywhere.

Forbidden images hidden in giant displays of sparkling ice cubes and towering bottles of amber Cognac.

Neither one of us spoke for a moment. Then, Martin laughed abruptly as if he had just told me the punch line to an off-color joke. With his eyes averted he reached a teasing hand up under my bulky sweaters, but I wouldn't unhuddle for him.

Martin stayed with me that night in my bare, little room in Becky's house. I had a bookcase, a bed, and an old bureau of Becky's. On my wall I'd hung a poster of a Rothko painting. A deep red, rectangle on a vibrating black field, that looked, more than anything else, like a bloody door. For a long time, Martin stood in front of that poster in his under shorts and t-shirt, and even though I had never slept a whole night with him, I could tell he'd never fully disrobe in bed with me.

Then I heard him say softly, almost to himself. "Every time I sit at your father's dinner table I think, Rothko ate here." Maybe Martin didn't know I was watching him from the bed. It was a foolish and charming thing to say, and I suddenly understood why this man had imagined I might be sophisticated. Perhaps Martin sensed how much that comment had revealed him and that is why he whispered to me a few moments later, in the voice of a lover, "Claire, if you hadn't been so easy for me, I would have raped you." He took my breath away when he uttered those words. Leaning over me, those dark curls of his nearly identical to my own, he sent an exhilarating charge through my body. A shock of

recognition. On the floor beside my bed, Dolores, my little witness, squeaked and scampered and chewed the metal bars of her cage, and I hardly heard her for the thumping of my heart.

A brilliant student, a silly, petty thief, I knew Martin's idea of a criminal was William S. Burroughs. "I'm a man," he told me once, "not equipped for anything really. Just games and thoughts." And he waved his hands slowly through the air. You see, everyone has perverse desire hidden inside. Martin was ugly in his honesty and I liked that, it felt clean. Gail, my father's girlfriend thought he was sleazy. "At least he's up front about it," I replied to her, more shocked than angry at her comment. After all, she'd just girlishly told me how they flirted with one another at my father's dinner table. "He followed me into the downstairs bathroom," She'd emphasized with a smirk. And though I tried to picture them together, Martin lifting Gail's skirt and fondling her in my father's newly marbled toilet chamber, my sister Joanna kept sliding into the frame. Pulling me by my shoulders as she eagerly prodded me in that same bathroom. "They've caught him. Now we can go back."

But wasn't I back in California, back down in Santa Cruz and back in school trying desperately to secure an egg for a plummeting fall?

Even my father said it when he called me on the phone. He kept promising he'd drive down for a visit so we could spend some time together alone at the beach. Just as soon as he got back from San Diego or Princeton or Chicago. Wherever there was a show he was curating and a lecture he was giving. "I just want you to be happy, Claire. Do something that will make you

happy” he pleaded. “Look at me.” This was inevitably followed by a broadcast of his latest book. Occasionally, when my father found himself as confounded by my silence as he was by the choices of my life, he laughed and said. “Who of us is ever really happy? Better not to be bored.”

Martin left the next morning for Los Angeles. “I’ll be back. I told your father I was going to look after you.” And with a laugh, a shrug, and a wink, he was gone.

An egg house doesn’t work, doesn’t protect an egg from breaking. Or at least mine didn’t. How could it? I tried though. For weeks I tried to build a house that would ferry my egg safely to shore. From her perch on top of my bureau, just below Rothko’s door, Dolores gnawed on the bars of her cage, while down on the floor I glued pyramids and boxes, eight, nine and ten layers thick. It didn’t matter; they all cracked or exploded on impact. Even my former art history professor, my father’s old chum Lenny Berman, upon hearing I’d enrolled in Professor Hubert’s class had commented. “Claire, this is just another useless credit you’re accruing in your pursuit of an alternative education.” She thought the study of ancient Greek Kouri would have been a far more productive endeavor.

I don’t know what set me off. I wish I could say it was because my father didn’t show up as promised, but that wasn’t the reason because my father invariably did show up. Up the three flights of stairs to Becky’s apartment he clambered with his girlfriend Gail, my sister Joanna, and even Martin in tow.

“Hello, hello,” my father called out when he saw Becky and me standing in the doorway. “I’ve brought you some company.” He gestured to the small army mounting in his wake. I shouldn’t have been surprised; my father can’t go anywhere alone, even to the movies. We didn’t have enough seats for everyone. Joanna, after snapping her fingers in front of my face saying, “Look alive, Claire, or someone will mistake you for dead,” wanted to hold Dolores. I let her. She sailed out of my bedroom with poor fat Dolores clutched in her hands and cooed with delight, “Isn’t she the cutest thing?” My father shuffled across the floor aimlessly for a few moments muttering, “Well, isn’t this lovely?” before attaching himself to Becky’s arm for a tour of our little apartment. Martin poured everybody a glass of wine from a bottle that seemed to materialize from behind his back. “Cheers!” he said, clinking my glass. Then, “What do you think that’s about?” He was gesturing to my father and Becky who were standing in front of the window. It seemed that my father had suddenly developed a keen interest in all of Becky’s little glass trinkets, the chotka’s, for god’s sakes, that were lined up along the windowsill by descending size. “What are these?” My father asked as he lifted each one and gazed at the dolphin, the whale, the walrus, his eyes zeroing in, not on the trinket in his hand, but on Becky’s soft curls, as a little boy’s smile of wonder spread across his old face.

That was the moment I downed my first glass of wine. In the next moment we heard Gail squeal. When she’d first arrived she’d disappeared into the kitchen and now, suddenly, she poked her head breathlessly through the door and said, “Come and see Paul, Claire’s planted flowers.”

Thus the afternoon's visit came to its ludicrous, albeit brief, climax. For, Gail led my father, and then the whole party to discover, not the planted boxes of yellow and orange marigolds, but a dozen eggs, a few already secured deep within their popsicle stick cages. Within minutes of my hasty explanation, eggs were flying, pell-mell, towards the street.

From the doorway Becky and I watched in stunned wonder. "I love your family," Becky confided to me after they left. My father had won her over. For, amid the mayhem of smashed eggs and stick houses, he'd casually picked up one of my eggs, unadorned with any popsicle stick house, and tossed it off the balcony towards the ground below where it had landed in a bush across the street, perfectly unharmed. Beaming with satisfaction at my sister and me, at all of us, he'd said "See," as if this accidental toss to safety made up for all his past infractions.

By the end of the afternoon, I had drunk too much Chablis with my Crab Louie during the lunch my father carted us all off to, including dazzled Becky, who sat transfixed next to him. I witnessed Martin charm first Becky, then Gail, who still had a jury out on him, but not Joanna. Joanna was too engrossed in the dessert menu. She ended up skipping her main course entirely and plunging right into a chocolate mousse soufflé with a slice of cheesecake on the side. In a dusky restaurant, not with a view of the turbulent Pacific, but of the mall of downtown Santa Cruz, Martin lifted his glass. He was seated directly opposite my father and for a flickering moment I only saw the two of them, man and boy, teacher and

son, glasses raised in unison. Then, Martin recited Baudelaire's "Spleen," to a rapt and finally silent table.

*I am like the king of a rainy country,
Rich, but powerless, young and yet very old,
Who scorning the bows and scrapes of his tutors,
Is bored with his dogs as with other animals.*

and on and on until . . .

*He has not been able to restore warmth to this dulled corpse
In which, in place of blood, the green water of Lethe flows.*

It was a beautiful performance.

I went to bed before dark that night with the dry mouth and dull head pains of an already encroaching hangover.

It was pitch black and the middle of the night when Dolores woke me. She was frantically rattling her cage, running from one end to the other and chewing on the bars. I hated her. I hated the feel of her coarse hair, the way she smelled, the pellet food she ate, and the horrible sucking sound she made as she teethed on her water bottle. I particularly hated the nervous way she chewed on the metal bars of her cage all night long. No, she wasn't cute as my sister had said. She was an ugly little pig. Without a thought, only a throbbing head and the desire to be rid of her and back to sleep, I plucked her out of her cage, her small body squirming in my hand, walked through the dark apartment and out onto our kitchen balcony and tossed Dolores, past the flower pots of brilliant marigolds, and over the edge.

It wasn't that high a fall. I thought maybe she might land safely next to my father's egg in the bush across the street or, like Professor Hubert's mice, the shock of impact might pass right through her. Although the truth is I didn't really care. I have no idea what happened to Dolores. I never found her body. Nor do I know why I threw her away so abruptly, though I blame my father and a tiny room stuffed full of clamoring voices the last of which was unfortunately Dolores's. I even blame Baudelaire. I went back to bed and slept soundly through the night, only remembering in the morning how upset and angry that frantic chewing noise, like a rattling from the grave, had made me feel.

I was wrong. About everything I was wrong. I was failing my classes, having brief sexual dalliances that ended abruptly, couldn't save my egg from cracking or keep my pet alive. Still I plowed on, the mechanics of motion dragging me along like an older sister pulling me by the elbow into an unknown car.

I helped Becky clean up the apartment and threw away Dolores's cage . Eventually, I took the Rothko poster down. It had begun to scare me. So many things hovered behind that door. Like digging a hole deeper, my mother used to say of Rothko.

A CHAIR AT A TIME

She wasn't as tall as I was. Standing side by side I could see just over the top of her head, and she was slightly plump in a college girl way. Too many tacos and candy bars at night when she burned the midnight oil, and she burned the midnight oil a lot. She had doughy flesh that looked as if no muscle existed under the skin, though it turned out that she was exceptionally strong. She was white complexioned whereas I was olive skinned, so you would have thought she'd been sequestered all her life with that nearly transparent tissue. And in a way, she had been. She wore small, wire-rimmed glasses, never contacts. She liked playing with her glasses, taking them off and putting them back on for effect, to emphasize a point she was making. If those glasses were not on her, they were near her, sitting on her bedside table. If she could have, she said, she'd have slept in them. For she liked the barrier they placed between herself and the world. I thought Evelyn was an exceptionally self-aware person. Her own best critic.

Her clothes: my god they were ugly clothes. A little vest with gold buttons, a plaid wool skirt and jacket. The clothes of a different decade. I found out later her mother--who was old enough to be her grandmother--made them for her. Designed and sewed each one herself.

We were twenty then. The same age Evelyn's brother had been when he'd died. His life and death had played out before Evelyn and I were even born. Well, we had that in common, the missing yet ever present sibling: the brother who was dead, the sister I often pretended did not exist. I never knew much about

his story, or any of Evelyn's own history. It was always my life we focused on, and for a long time I thought that was the fault of my own selfishness. Still, I remember the way Evelyn used to call her mother every night without fail to reassure her she was still alive.

Evelyn had come into my life by degrees. I have no clear memory of when we first actually met. She has told me she noticed me a long time before I noticed her, and that is true. As a freshman, she said, she was the girl working in the filing room of the administration building when a group of students, of whom I was one, commandeered it. We had staged a sit-in for a cause that was not insignificant, though it was not a life and death matter, as Vietnam had been ten years earlier. We'd missed that decade however, a point that we seemed to need to make by protesting a Supreme Court decision in favor of reverse discrimination. And so we'd marched, our cause, our demand, was that the Universities, all the Universities of California, reverse, reverse discrimination.

Evelyn said she noticed me right away. Since I was in my bathrobe, I was not hard to miss. It was actually a man's smoking robe: a long, black velvet coat with beautiful white stitching embroidered down the front. I'd bought it in an antique store right before I'd left for College and I was wearing it that afternoon, while I was reading in my dorm room, when I heard the noises, the shouts and demands of the marchers. Running out to investigate, I'd been swept up by their enthusiasm and into the parade. And, though I did not understand exactly what all the fuss was about, the idea of commandeering a building appealed to me.

I suspect that I was not the only one who felt they'd missed the boat on protests, and not the only one who hoped that perhaps this little dingy of a march might speed us along until we caught up to the great ocean liner of late 60's love ins and black panther radicalism. Yet, unlike the rest of the protesters who seemed to know what they were there for, and unlike Evelyn who was not protesting that day, but only trying to earn her book money by filing in the Registrar's office, I was such a muddle of a girl that, on that particular afternoon, and for a long afterwards, I failed to distinguish between these two polar extreme movements: Hippies making love and discrimination. It was all theater to me. A backdrop to my own life.

Besides, as my father said, one had to grab occasions when they arose. Santa Cruz was a liberal school, built on a sprawling hillside whose green meadows each morning were covered by fogs as thick as whipped cream. By mid afternoon, when we emerged from our classes, a forest of redwoods reappeared. This school, founded in 1965 and home to numerous professors who claimed, at least to my ear, to have fled the tyranny of the east cost ivy leagues, overlooked a liberal city below, and farther still the blue waters of Monterey Bay. In such an environment as this there wasn't much opportunity for protest.

"There you were," Evelyn said. "Sitting at the Chancellor's desk as if you owned the room, busy as a bee making long distance phone calls." There was not the slightest bit of sarcasm in her voice.

We had this conversation two years later, bent over cups of raspberry tea, one chilly afternoon, discussing these past adventures as if they'd happened to much younger selves.

I shook my head in wonder remembering how excited I'd been. I'd wanted to call my father and tell him, "Turn on your T.V." As it turned out, we were never on T.V., and since my father wasn't home, I'd dialed up just about everyone else I knew in the world.

Evelyn pushed her glasses up her long nose and said. "I was so jealous of you. I thought, how does she have the nerve to waltz through a crowd like that." Evelyn blew into her mug. "Well, at least we weren't arrested."

I suddenly remembered the girl walking right beside me as we'd decamped from the administration building late that night. It had all ended very quietly. No television crews or tear gas or helmeted national guardsmen. Instead, only a group of city policemen, one of whom had been kind enough to pull both of us aside and ask, "Do you two really want to be arrested?"

"No," we'd shaken our heads and looked at each other. Not even a year out of high school: one in a hand knitted sweater with matching cap, the other in a Victorian bathrobe.

"Then go back to your beds, sweethearts."

I did not see this pale, quiet girl in her prim clothes for a long time afterwards, did not in fact think about her at all until one day in the winter of my junior year, when I looked up and noticed a small, unobtrusive figure sitting catty corner across a table from me in a poetry workshop. She was wearing a headband

and she was smiling at me. The next day, though the headband was gone and a ponytail clasped and held her nondescript brown hair out of her face, she was smiling at me again. A few days after that, she had moved to my side of the long workshop table. Then, only one chair away from me and finally, one day, she sat down beside me. In such a way, did Evelyn Kovich inch her way across a table and into my life, one chair at a time.

I am thinking again about our clothes, Evelyn's and mine. It seems to me our clothes had a lot to do with us and with our story. As I've said, Evelyn's mother sewed all her clothes for her. Sometimes sending down to school two new outfits a week. One day Evelyn said. "My mother made you a dress." I hadn't even known she'd talked to her mother about me. At that time, I spoke rarely to my own mother about myself. I was uncomfortable with her long pauses over the phone, as if she were testing the current of my emotions each time we spoke. This overly cautious behavior of my mother's made me see myself as some sort of passive victim, as injured or sick. And so, during our weekly conversations, I revealed little of my life to her.

"You'll have to come up so she can fit it," Evelyn said.

What sort of dress this was I had no idea.

Evelyn's mother lived in a tiny, characterless condo above a dry cleaner's shop, in the better section of the Oakland Hills; only a few miles, but a whole world of difference, away from my father's house. Even Evelyn's room was void of personality, as if Evelyn's mother had come to this place and planted

herself here only yesterday for the sole purpose of continuing to sew for her only remaining child. The fact is, I knew from Evelyn that they'd lived in this condominium for years. Yet, there was no way to see this. Evelyn's mother was in her sixties then--a stout woman with metal gray hair as bristly as steel wool, who sat at her sewing table, at one end of what would have been a living room if it had contained a couch or coffee table. But there were only that sewing table, an ironing board, and a rack of half-finished clothes. A long mirror stood at one end of the room. It appeared that Evelyn, and the sewing for Evelyn, were this woman's only reason to live. Quite frankly, I found this attachment of a parent to a child, revolting.

From that rack of clothes Evelyn pulled out a cream colored dress with a yoked color and puffy sleeves. It was the sort of dress a good girl might wear. A girl who could take dictation and ate only half a sandwich for lunch at a soda bar. I put it on and let this old woman kneel at my feet to pin up the hem.

"It needs a slip." Evelyn's mother grunted, rising. "But otherwise the fit's perfect."

Listen, in Santa Cruz I had a little red dress, cut like a man's shirt, and only that long, for it barely covered my bottom. It had white buttons down the front and pockets over the breasts, and I wore it without any underpants. I don't think Evelyn knew this.

Evelyn had picked out the material and the pattern for that spinster's dress herself. I don't know why she wanted to put me in that costume. I suspect that she didn't know either. But I was passive, or curious enough, to let her. Even, to

accept the gift of that dress and wear it once, to a party where a man mistook me for another type of girl, and sat all night long by my side, talking to me about his ailing mother.

It was after we left her mother's home and we were on our way back down to Santa Cruz that Evelyn, who had watched me dress and undress for her mother, said with a bemused smile. "Claire, why don't we photograph you?"

I already knew Evelyn liked to take pictures. She often walked with a camera bag slung over her left shoulder as we strolled from class to class along the network of pathways that connected our colleges. She had even shown me a few of her pictures. One of her boyfriend, a boy looking off over his shoulder and scratching his beard, and another of the wrinkled face of an old woman who she said worked as a fortune-teller down near the boardwalk. They were not exceptionally original photographs. Vaguely interesting and almost entirely portraits. Evelyn told me a long time later that her camera allowed her to approach people. She felt courageous behind it.

Up until that day, no one had ever asked to take my picture before. I had failed one modeling job. In the only photograph I have left from that encounter, I am unrecognizable to myself, so totally obscured is my face under the layers of makeup the stylist applied. Even as a child I was hardly ever photographed. I was the second child. My sister Joanna had been exceptionally lovely and delicate as a baby, and there were many pictures taken of her. But, I was neither delicate nor lovely in the same passive way as Joanna had been. And, as my mother has told me, I was not inclined to hold still.

“You can come down to my house tomorrow afternoon.” Evelyn said, writing down an address and a street I had never heard of before and handing me the slip of paper.

I found Evelyn’s street down near the old amusement park. It wasn’t an actual a street, it was a courtyard located on the other side of a parking lot, behind a group of run down motels.

Evelyn lived alone in one of the shacks (she called hers a bungalow) that made up the little community of this courtyard. These shacks, I was to learn, were mostly rented to the Carney’s who ran the game booths and rides at the park a few blocks away. I was aware, as I approached her front door, of old faces--transient faces, half sleeping faces of people who were only now, in the late afternoon, waking up--peering out of uncurtained windows at me as I passed. Laundry lines stretched out of kitchen windows connecting all these shacks together in an intricate web of rope and wet clothing.

Inside her home the wooden floor buckled in the kitchen and you could hear an incessant dripping sound, the slow and steady leak of water in the pipes behind the living room wall. Still, it was a cozy, warm little space. A fringed lampshade hid the single bulb in the ceiling and a Klimt poster of an elegant, hauntingly thin woman in a long patterned gown, hung over Evelyn’s single table.

At twenty, it had never occurred to me that it was possible to live alone. When I thought of my life--waiting for me beyond the horizon line of my present--living in solitude was not something I imagined lay in that far off picture.

Perhaps she liked the character of this world, liked the solitude of living in such a different environment from that of our college life, and so vastly different from the life she had shared with her mother in their barren condominium in the Oakland hills. When I asked Evelyn what she was doing in this isolated place, among people she had not even the remotest connection to, for even my life in Becky's sterile apartment made more sense than this choice, Evelyn replied "But, I've always lived alone." It struck me at that time that her answer was odd for a girl who had in fact never lived alone before and whose mother was only a thread line away. "I'm in love with ideas, Claire," she added in a confidential tone as she pulled open the legs of her tripod and screwed her camera atop it. "Not so much with people. People are often detours." I should have paid more attention. I thought at the time that she was saying this for the effect, for the glamorous way it sounded to say you were only capable of loving an idea. Well, we all have our mothers to break free of, don't we? Evelyn's mother clung to her with such a tenacious hold, insisting that she ring every night and dress in the fashions of a different decade, while my own mother locked herself out of reach. Her grip on my hand had been so tentative when I was a child, as to be nearly feeble, the grip of an invalid. My sister Joanna could command her attention, but I, I used to dash out in front of cars in an effort to wake her.

"Are you ready?" Evelyn asked. She peered through the lens of her camera a moment before motioning for me to sit down on the couch.

Then she disappeared behind her camera. Her whole face seemed to be obliterated by it and only the black rectangle of the camera was left looking at me.

“You know, you’re beautiful,” a voice said suddenly. It was Evelyn, but in those few seconds, her timbre, even her intonations had changed drastically. I hardly recognized this new voice; it had dropped more than an octave so that a rich baritone came out from her chest.

Evelyn began snapping my picture, one swift click after the other. “Slide down further.” This new voice commanded.

As I slid down the couch she plucked her camera from the tripod and was up above me. First standing over me, then hovering on the arm of the couch like a bird perched in the branches of a tree, all the while snapping pictures. Her voice cooing the words a lover might use. “Yes. Oh yes.”

“You’re making me laugh.” I said. Because, it was funny this seduction by camera was a caricature, yet, not in any way offensive. A moment later when Evelyn asked, “would you take off your clothes for me?” it was not a question so much as an assumption.

Being naked in front of women as well as men was not uncommon for me. This was California--Santa Cruz after all--where girls could sunbathe topless on campus and half the beaches along the coast were nudist. But here was something different, more intimate. For this nakedness was not about sport, or sex, about touching or penetration. The originality of this gesture was in the revelation of Evelyn’s gaze and my eager submission to it.

She was only two feet above me, fluttering with her camera. Occasionally she would whisper another command. “Roll to your left. Now, look over your shoulder.”

And so we progressed through the afternoon using up rolls of film. Both of us laughing, for there was something tender and sweet and girlish in that room. Something that reminded me of sleepover parties, of girls in long nightgowns kissing their pillows. We were buoyant that day, not yet burdened by our own histories, or if we were we did not understand the consequences. By that I mean that there were not so many layers to shed. It was still possible to be naked.

This was not the last, but it was the first time I let Evelyn photograph me. Over the next six months, she continued to take my picture, with and without my clothes on. I'll tell you though, I never experienced again, no matter how much I sought it, such a heightened awareness of being seen by someone.

THE REPOSITORY

Joanna's voice came out of the dark. Out of the heavy night air, traveling down from San Francisco those eighty odd miles of mountain coast, reaching for me. Her shrill cry, "Claire, Claire, are you there?" Yanking me back towards family and past. I knew her call would come eventually, that she had not disappeared like a stone cast into the bottom of a lake.

When the phone rang, Becky who was closest answered. I was sitting on top of the heating grill in my long blue terry cloth bathrobe. Becky liked to say that I hovered around heat sources and patches of sunlight like a cat. And it's true; I'm always a little cold.

It was a Friday evening; Becky's limp blonde hair was rolled up in curlers. She was going out on a date, meeting her old boyfriend--old professor actually--I shook my head in mock shock when she told me--for a redo.

Becky, who had been laughing the moment before, handed me the phone and said, in a suddenly hushed voice, "I think this is your sister."

Even from across the room, I heard her cries through the receiver.

My sister and I were not in the habit of calling one another. Though she had moved to California six months earlier and now lived only two hours away, I still hardly ever spoke to her or saw her. The fact is, I went out of my way to ignore her invitations to visit, to meet her roommates or see where she lived. Only an emergency or one of the rare attempts we both still made to converse, would incite one of us to call.

When I put the phone to my ear, I could hardly hear Joanna's voice for the screaming in the background.

"Claire, are you there?" her voice was frantic. Then she snarled. "Shut up, you bitch."

"What? Joanna what's going on?"

"Not you. My stupid roommate." Behind my sister's voice I could hear yelling, and what sounded like a cat screeching.

When we were little, when her eyes would dart about the room unable to land, I used to snap my fingers in front of her face. But she couldn't see me now. "Hey, Joanna." My voice had gone flat, dead calm.

"I need someplace to go." My sister wailed.

The last time she had said this, that she needed someplace to go, she decided it was California that would change everything. She would come to our father, she would follow me. At the request of my parents, I quit my job three weeks early and flew back to the Midwest to help Joanna move--to drive with her in her rundown car across the country, because I did not know how, could not even conceive of, refusing any of them. I mean my parents or my sister.

"We can't let her go alone," my mother had said.

And my father had promised. "You'll have fun together. You'll see the country."

Now, my sister said. "You owe me."

“What happened?” I asked Joanna. I was stalling. I knew it didn’t matter what had happened. It hadn’t mattered what had happened in the Midwest.

Besides, she was right, I did owe her.

“She wants me out. I have to leave, now!” Then, to the voice berating her in the background my sister yelled again, “Go away. Let me talk!”

There seemed to be a lull in the noise, the tide receding.

“Let me talk to her, Jo.”

A woman’s voice came over the phone. She was crying in a hiccupy way. Clearly, she was only beginning to understand the depth of the rage inside my sister and now unleashed in her apartment. Still, I barreled on, cutting through her tears and begging, “listen, can’t she stay the night at least? Give her a chance to find another place.” Joanna had two black Siamese and I could hear them howling: Little witches, her babies. Joanna, I knew, was afraid to leave her cats. She no longer had her car, would not consider taking a taxi to our father’s (and perhaps she was right; when had we ever felt welcome, able to arrive unannounced at his door?) and so she would have to wait until morning and travel with her cats on a bus down to Santa Cruz and to me. I tried to explain some of this to her roommate.

“I’m pregnant,” the woman suddenly sobbed. “I’m pregnant and she hit me. I should call the police.”

“Jesus,” I said

“Give me that phone,” I heard Joanna yell. “I want to talk to my sister.”

I heard what seemed to be struggle, a yell and a grunt, the howling cats and something breaking. Then, the line went dead. Perhaps one of them in their struggle over the phone, had pulled the cord.

Without thinking I dialed the police. I did this automatically, without considering what the consequences of such an act might be: the betrayal and arrest of my sister. I don't think I dialed the police out of concern for this pregnant woman and her unborn child, although that's what I told myself later. I just wanted Joanna to stop. I wanted her silenced. So I dialed the police, reported a fight, and gave them an address I had never visited, but written down in my phone book. Then I set the phone back in its cradle and waited.

From the bathroom door, swallowing her toothpaste, Becky asked. "You're going to bring her here?"

"She'll be fine," I told her. "You've met her. She's not really dangerous."

"You just called the police."

"Yes, but it'll just be for the weekend. She'll go back, she'll find another place."

"Okay," Becky said, not sounding very sure.

I tried not to think about Joanna, but images of her face floated into my head like still photographs. Joanna was the naturally photogenic child. Beautiful, delicate, and, unlike the rest of us, fair skinned and blonde. Her face registered every emotion. "Your whole family drama," a friend of my mother's once said. "Is playing out across that child's face." Joanna was our repository. And so I

was thinking about the photographs that used to hang along our front hallway when we were children, and still crowd my mother's walls: The isolated little girl in black and white. Joanna's fragile, knitted brow, her hunched, almost cowering shoulders. The screaming three-year-old child, standing in a bathing suit on a ruin in Italy, the day after our parents came to get us, her mouth open so wide a volcanic eruption might issue forth.

I did not want to call our father. He had put Joanna's violence out of his mind a long time ago, and would only continue to go about his business, his plans, a little annoyed and saddened, but no longer surprised. "You handle it," he would say. "She'll listen to you." Joanna, must have sensed this. Must have known he'd given up on her. For my god, this man, our father, had fought our mother to have her put away. "I divorced your father," my mother has said to me on more than one occasion, "to save your sister." Joanna was afraid that he'd find out about these failures in her life. She was afraid, not only of his disappointments, but that she would prove him right.

I knew that eventually, Joanna herself would call our mother and tell her what had happened. Our mother's voice would grow faint, she might cry after she'd hung up the phone. Sitting in her living room with only a reading lamp burning, her hands folded like a woman at prayer, she would try and not let her grief engulf her. After awhile, our mother's eyes might wander upwards to the images of my sister that surrounded her. And there, there, they would find and light upon the photo, the one of the baby playing with a peacock feather, a bubble of happy laughter spilling from her mouth. Then, the next day our mother would

call Joanna. She would believe that Joanna could pull herself out of this mess--out of any mess--and start a fresh. Our mother says her belief is Joanna's hope.

Within the hour, Joanna called back. "Somebody called the police," she said coolly. "So, I'll see you in the morning, right?"

"You can stay there tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's calm. She says she's going to the Emergency Room to have her baby checked out. I didn't hit her hard. She says I punched her in the stomach, but she's exaggerating the whole thing. The police said she probably won't press charges if the baby's okay."

My sister now sounded so serene it was eerie.

When I hung up the phone the first thing I thought was that Joanna had no idea that I had been the one to notify the police. She must have thought a neighbor had heard the noise and reported the fight.

"Don't tell my sister," I said to Becky. "Let's not tell her I called the police, okay?"

Becky nodded. She stood by the front door in a tight little skirt, her blonde hair bouncing in long curls around her heart shaped face. "What do you think?" She asked, cocking her head to the side.

"You look like a fairy tale."

That night I had a dream, which I knew, even as I dreamt it, was actually a memory. In my dream we are riding on a train--my mother, my father, Joanna and I. We are riding on a train through the night, in and out of tunnels, through valleys and over mountains. My mother has taken Joanna into her berth, my

father has taken me. That's how they always separated us. "You were your father's," my mother has told me. At the end of the train ride I know what is going to happen. I know because it is a dream and because it has already happened. But, I still feel the anticipation, the dread that it is going to happen again. Joanna is three and I have just turned two, and I know that at the end of the night of this train ride through Italy and into the Alps of Austria, my parents are going to abandon us. And so they do. The train stops and we are standing in front of the Kinderheim, a children's school. It is a sunny morning. There is a green meadow and a courtyard. Two women are standing at the entrance. They are wearing white pinafores and the same little, pointy white hats nurses used to wear.

I awoke abruptly. Becky was leaning over my bed. She looked ethereal, back lit by the moonlight that illuminated my bare window. "He's here," she whispered. "My professor's here. I brought him home." Then she was gone.

I could not fall back to sleep. I could not sleep because even over Becky's perfume, which lingered in the room, I could smell that damp, green meadow. I could feel the rumble of the train wheels in the night, and see my father's face leaning over me, wide-eyed with wonder.

What is so horrible about being left in a sunny little children's school in the Alps? I'm sure this is what my parents thought. I'm sure they said this to themselves. They said how much they loved us. My mother even remembers thinking, "My baby is just beginning to speak," when she kissed me goodbye. Where did my parents go that they had to leave us so abruptly? My mother has

told me that they only decided at the last minute, when we were already in Italy, because my sister wouldn't stop crying. It is interesting to me that they did not stay together after they left us. My father sped off, first to Warsaw to interview artists for a show he was curating, then for a quick rendezvous in Prague for an affair. My mother traveled down the mountain to a hotel in the valley with a stream running through it. She traveled there to write and to sleep. In her hotel room, overlooking the valley with the bubbling mountain stream, she tried hard not to think about her marriage which surrounded her--even in a quaint little Alpine Village--like a field of broken glass, or her eldest daughter, who had screamed steadily and with vengeful hunger, on the boat all the way across the ocean. My mother wrote. Maybe my mother thought that she could write the pieces of her life back together again, that she could dream her life whole and unbroken. But how could she do that? For what life is whole and unbroken except in the womb, in the sheltered, undamaged egg of the womb?

Before they departed, my parents promised us they would only be gone for lunch, for the time it took us to eat our lunch with the other children. But it was nearly two months before they returned and by then we were both speaking German and Joanna was mad. She was filled with so much anger and fear that she will never be able to reach the bottom, but will fall forever through it. And I, I am grateful to Joanna. For as long as she is angry, I will not be the child who is falling.

In the morning, Joanna descended from the Greyhound Bus carrying two hissing cat boxes. She had on a fierce face of makeup. Caked purple eye shadow that matched her nail polish and the purple ribbons that held her pigtails, which, because of her recent perm, stuck out from her head like two askew antennas. Round circles of rouge were painted on her cheeks. “To hide my zits,” she told me.

When we got back to the apartment Becky was still asleep. I had heard her professor leaving in the early dawn hours, his heavy footfall through the house and out the door.

I asked Joanna to lock her cats in my bedroom--I was afraid they would scratch Becky’s furniture. From the depths of my little room I heard her call out, “God Claire, why don’t you decorate a little?” When she emerged she was wearing a brown crocheted bikini. It was January, the temperature wasn’t even out of the 60’s, but Joanna wanted to go to the beach. “I need a tan,” she insisted. “With no lines.”

“I don’t want to go to a nudist beach, Joanna.”

“What are you afraid of?” my sister demanded. She was standing in front of me, her arms crossed over her chest. She had washed off all her makeup and her face looked scrubbed and raw.

I could feel my jaw tensing. “I don’t want to sit naked on a beach in the cold.” But, I knew I would go. I would go because I didn’t want to have a fight. Because I could never stand my ground with my sister, when the ground kept

shifting, and shifting not in any subtle, imperceptible way, but like the strip of coast we lived on. Joanna was earthquake territory.

We rode the bus out of Santa Cruz, winding up through this city, which nestled in the apex of Monterey Bay, curled around itself like a snail's shell. On Locust Street we passed a row of Victorians, their once garish colors bleached to soft pastels by the salty air. I wanted to leap out then, while the bus was still moving, leap out and slip into one of those houses, behind their dense curtains, into their front parlors and let this bus, bearing my sister and me, lumber on past.

I lifted my hand and waved to the houses.

“Who's that? Is that anyone you know?” Joanna glanced out the window with a look that can only be described as worried curiosity.

We disembarked at a stop on the line where there was rumored to be an unmarked dirt road, leading down from the highway to a hidden section of beach in a rocky cove. It took us a moment to find the path, which seemed at first glance to lead straight off the cliff. It was muddy and slippery climbing down. After all it was winter in California, the season of rain, floods and mudslides. The beach itself was strewn with sharp little rocks and shells. We settled on a spot near the entrance to the path. Not far up the beach two large women and a thin little man sat on a blanket, eating their lunch. They were naked in the chilly sun.

Joanna peeled off her bikini and lay face down on her towel. I sat beside her with my knees pulled up under my chin. I was still in my long jean skirt and Mexican sweater.

“Aren't you going to take off your clothes?” my sister asked.

“No.”

“Suit yourself. So, tell me about your life? You never tell me anything.”

I lifted my head from my knees and looked at my sister. Her legs were hard and muscular. She had strong thighs and a heavy walk. She would have made a good wrestler. Her hands were always wet and uncomfortable to hold, with those long pointy nails. Years later a psychiatrist told me to try and look at my sister with empathy, but I couldn't, not when she was beside me.

“Why did you hit her?” I asked.

My sister sighed. She lifted her head, “Remember I told you I was sleeping with her boyfriend? He came into my room at night and she found out. God, he was so gorgeous.” She sat up and reached into her purse. “Look,” she said, handing me a snapshot. “Doesn't he look like Jesus Christ?”

In the snapshot a delicate man was standing between Joanna and a very pregnant girl. Joanna was in a wild pose, her hips thrust forward one hand puffing up her blonde Afro, a huge smirk across her face. The girl on the other side was staring down at her stomach with a frown. I looked closely at the boy in the middle. She was right; he did have the chiseled features, the long, brown, wavy hair framing his narrow face, and that same glazed, schizophrenic look in his eyes that the paintings of Christ have. Joanna, I remembered, had always liked light men, and I mean weightless.

“Hah!” Joanna laughed. “My roommates!” And she flopped back down on her towel.

Down the beach the group of three had finished eating their lunch. They stood up from their blanket and walked towards us. When they were only a few feet away one of the women said, looking down at me. “This is a nudist beach.”

“I know.”

“Well,” The other woman demanded.

“Well, what?” Joanna had flipped over.

“She can’t stay here if she doesn’t take off her clothes.” The first woman had turned away from me and was addressing Joanna.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said.

They didn’t move or look at me.

Joanna jumped to her feet. “This is a free country. She doesn’t have to take her clothes off if she doesn’t want to.”

The little man who, so far had not said anything, now poked his head out from behind the two women. “We just don’t like people to come down here to look.”

Joanna squinted at the little man, her hands on her hips. “Look at what? She’s not bothering anyone.”

“If she wants to stay, she’s got to take her clothes off.” He was bouncing up and down excitedly on the balls of his feet behind the two large women.

I looked over at my sister whose face had curled into snarl. *Uh-oh*, I thought, *here it comes*. I started to laugh, burying my face in my hands. These people, if they’d only known, when they’d stood up and sauntered over, what they were walking into.

“You know what you are,” Joanna spat. “You’re a bunch of fascist pigs.” I let her continue for a while. Through my peals of laughter I heard her yell, “You think you’re going to insinuate my little sister’s a pervert and get away with it.” Eventually the little man and the two women retreated to their blanket down the beach, glancing back over their shoulders at my screaming sister. Maybe my father was right when he taught Joanna to hitchhike at the age of nine. For who, in their right mind, would mess with my sister?

Finally, I said. “Jo, let’s go home.”

By the time we returned to the house it was dark. Becky had left a note saying she was out at the movies. *Tell your sister*, she had written, *that I’ll make mushroom lasagna tomorrow.*

“Nice roomie,” Joanna said. “You have all the luck.”

That night, Joanna and I snacked on cheese and crackers, leftover Chinese noodles and oatmeal cookies. Really, whatever we could find in the kitchen.

“This reminds me of when we were little,” Joanna said.

I looked at my sister who was grinning from ear to ear. “Cottage cheese and cucumbers,” she sang out.

“Peanut Butter out of the jar,” I countered.

“Canned tuna!”

We laughed for a few minutes until we fell silent.

Even from the ages of seven and eight, our father thought we should be able to take care of ourselves. Summers, when we came for our visit, we were on

our own. We were the children who made friends with everyone on the block, although the block kept changing with each new house. We were the children who had surprisingly large appetites, whose pockets rattled with loose change for ice cream and for bus fare, who were always--and at the last minute--ready to sleep over, or at least I was, for I was already beginning my escape. One summer we had a stepmother who tried to feed us liver. Joanna threw up her liver all over my father's second wife's shoes. One of our father's girlfriends accidentally scalded me with boiling water when she was removing lobsters from the pot. In the end, we took better care of ourselves.

“Do you remember,” Joanna said. “How scared you used to get every time Daddy moved? You thought the trees got up and walked around in the night?”

Joanna, who'd rarely shared my bed even when we were children, slept with me that night. Her cats circled her pillow, kneading her head with their claws. She was again wearing that worried look, picking at her lower lip with her nails. All she said when I asked her what was wrong was, “Why me?”

I didn't want to answer that. Didn't want to slip into a territory I knew would swallow me whole, and so I rolled over and ignored her. I began imagining doors shutting, one by one, down a long hallway, separating her from me. The room was heavy with the odor of trapped felines and their litter box. Once I awoke so palpably filled with rage and hate I wanted to kick her to the

floor. Later still, I thought I heard Joanna sobbing. Or was it actually my own muffled voice?

THE DREAM INN

For many years I believed in a sort of capricious destiny to my life. What I understood about myself was that events were not only meant to happen, they were both forewarned and unavoidable. I believed that my life was like a dog on a leash, pulling me into oncoming traffic. But, was I the dog, the owner of this leash, or both: the puller and the pulled. I confessed this to Martin one afternoon not so very long ago during a short trip back to California, while we were sitting on the deck of my father's house, watching a group of sparrows getting stoned on the pyracantha berries that overhung the driveway. Martin, whom I'd once thought of as more than a lover--as the male image of myself, with his identical black curls, and the pale, oval resemblance of his face--was the version I had once aspired to, for he loved my father as a son would have. Even in the intervening years, while I had moved away, Martin had stayed behind. He was now cataloging and researching for my father. What I said to him on a perfectly sunny day--in the perpetually temperate climate of Berkeley, while plump little birds fluttered below us getting drunk in the shrubbery--was that I felt more than compelled, I felt choiceless. "If you had dropped me anywhere," I told him, "on a desert island or in a tropical jungle, I would have found my way to drugs."

From upstairs my father's irregular snores and snorts--a shuddering, slumbering dog sound--floated down towards us. He was napping directly over our heads.

“You were on a rampage.” Martin put a maternal arm around me and chuckled. Then he said, speaking, I think, of himself. “It’s hard when it seems as if there’s so much to choose from, but there really isn’t.”

Below us the birds tore berries savagely from the tops of the shrubbery, chewed greedily and then fell with soft little thuds onto the roof of my father’s Honda. They rolled slowly down the windshield and onto the hood, where they fluttered for a moment before passing out completely. The car looked like it was speckled with flecks of blood from all the scattered red berry droppings. It was truly something to behold.

“Did you know,” Martin said. “That they do this every year? Flock here without fail when the pyracantha’s are in full fruit.” After a moment he added thoughtfully, “Maybe I should move his car.”

My mother saw life differently from me. She believed in the theory of the fixed moment in time. She believed--and I let her--that I had been on course until an outside force redirected me. The fact is, she believed the same of Joanna. According to my mother, my troubles began only a week after my nineteenth birthday, soon after I’d arrived in California. Joanna’s began at the age of three, when she was abandoned in the Kinderheim. For me, it is not that certain. The beginning has always been hard point to locate.

There is this issue of drugs, for instance.

For each time I came to them, I did not come fresh. It is a perplexing and beguiling point. A twist in the mechanism that blinded me for a long time. The

fact is, that whatever chemical change drugs effected, I had already felt the result churning inside me long before the actual ingestion took place. The romance of drugs is akin to the anticipation of love. You are wet and in the throes of passion far in advance of the encounter. The drug, whatever drug you romance, is only the sign posted. The flag that confirms your chosen route.

Like many children I started smoking pot in high school. As a drug it was not the most intriguing for me. Not the lover of my dreams. The one I yearned for and knew I would recognize. For I already sensed that what I preferred had a little more power, a little more kick and action than a toke off a joint. And I knew these things lay further ahead, just beyond the bend in the road. For one thing, while stoned on marijuana I was high but not high *enough*. I was still able to function, go to class, read my *Julius Caesar*, although it might--and did--take me an entire study period to finish a paragraph.

As a drug, it was not too hard to leave behind. Next came amphetamines which caused my head to tingle, made me function at a fast, if sloppy, rate and provoked great irritability. Then, when I was fourteen a stranger gave me a hit of windowpane at my first rock concert. I came home only to discover that I couldn't find the nail polish remover to take off my bloody red nail polish, which was beginning to scare me. So, I told my mother. I walked into her bedroom and announced that I was on my first acid trip and had to get the blood off my nails or I would claw off my own fingers. My mother rose to the occasion. "Would you like a piece of chocolate cake?" She asked me. Then she let me climb into her bed, and we lay side by side, through the night, while I described to her what I

saw trailing across her ceiling. What I saw lay beneath her skin: the delicate green veins on my mother's neck, an infinite maze, a network of vast tunnels I am still swimming through. I looked away from her then as I look away from her now. Joanna's sadness lay in that maze, and my father, my father still whirled around in her like dust storm, blinding all of us.

My mother's accommodating behavior was not so extraordinary if you consider the facts, and I did, for I knew her story well. In the early sixties when my parents and their circle of artist and psychoanalyst friends began experimenting with hallucinogens, my mother was the one who sat with them, sober, through their trips. She was the self-designated baby-sitter. Or as she says, "I've always been a watcher."

Still, the morning after my acid trip, my mother did ground me. Later she sent me to Dr. Rosenbaum, my first psychiatrist. A fat man who let me sleep through my sessions, because he said, "You find comfort here."

It was not until college, however, when I first tried cocaine that the sea opened up. An inexhaustible blue sea as compelling as it was frightening, for it was not contained by four walls, but bled out the windows into the world beyond. And I reached towards it. I arched my body into it, the true arch of a lover towards her chosen mate. "Look at that sea, Mom! I'm no watcher now. Do you see the sea?"

In Santa Cruz I wandered through Becky's apartment in an insomniac ecstasy. Out on the balcony I had visions of a giantess. I'm not saying that I

hallucinated, but on those evenings when I was sleepless and alone, my mind expanding exponentially, I believed I spoke in concert with the world.

My wandering tread at night made Becky nervous. Poor Becky. Of her own mother she once said that she neither slept nor woke, but lived in a sated depression. Each morning throughout her youth Becky had awakened to find her mother vacuuming the thick carpet of their suburban house so that the fibers all faced in the same direction. Each night she trod across that same carpet with such a heavy gait that Becky found it too disturbing to watch. Was she erasing her own steps through the night? And now there was my lumbering through the apartment, my pacing out in the cool night air. Poor Becky! She cleaned house with a vengeance. Each pillow plumped and in its place on the couch. Her bottles of nail polish lined up and graded by hue on the bathroom shelf. Was Becky now obliterating my passage? I wouldn't blame her if she were. I had started bringing home a series of men, boys really. I couldn't sleep and it made the nights a little shorter. There were many, and their names are gone. A boy who smelled like cloves, and another with the same forename as my Grandfather, and yet another because he had an English accent and told me his receding hair line made him virile, and though I didn't believe him, his line had made me laugh. They passed through Becky's door and into my room--into my bed--without leaving a trace. I was neither desirous nor undesirous. Lying in my bed--under my fingers--they became landscapes, varied terrains I was traveling across.

And Becky? Innocent, inexperienced Becky who believed she could revive a dead bird that flew into her plate glass window with a thimble full of

Courvesier. “It will be right as rain,” she said as she poured the Cognac down its lifeless gullet. At twenty-two, Becky was still a virgin, saving herself like some exotic sea creature, for marriage. Even her married Professor, I later learned, never fully penetrated her.

So of course I must have made Becky nervous. She acted like a cat edging farther out along the ledge. When the cleaning frenzy abated, the drinking began. Maybe it had begun before I knew her and had just restarted; I’ll never know now. Becky sat at the kitchen table in her long-sleeved black leotard, a bottle of wine open before her, and smiled at me as I slipped out the door at night. What was she waiting for? Her married professor who had stopped calling? For Evelyn and me to invite her along? We wouldn’t have done that. There was something about Becky--you knew that if she followed you she’d just get hurt. I found her one morning in the kitchen frying eggs. She was dressed in a hostess robe and wearing blue eye shadow and thick, midnight blue mascara, though it was not even eight in the morning. She was due at work by nine, and here she was decked out for a cocktail party. After having spent years in a household of women, I suspected that her costume had something to do with men. In particular with the boy I had brought home the night before who now lay parked in my bed. Joanna and I used to deck ourselves out in our best party dresses whenever our father flew in for his visits. Our mother dressed up, too. And the house--we used to adorn the house with “Welcome home, Daddy” banners when we were children and china plates stuffed with appetizers as we grew up. Even during the times--especially during the times when I went alone to visit our father, I dressed up for

him as well. Cover-Girl make-up, the whole bag of tricks. One day in high school my boyfriend said to me, “Why do you put that other face on whenever you see your father?” But still I couldn’t stop.

“Where are you going like that?” I asked Becky.

Becky grinned and waved her spatula. “I’ve fried you both some eggs.”

She was looped. When I took her back to her bed I found an empty bottle of Chablis by her bedside. Next to her make-up tray she’d left a sticky open bottle of Grand Marnier. She fanned her hair out on her pillow, and then she leered up at me. “You slitherer! Why don’t you ever make a pass at me?” Then she passed out.

This was a short phase--my rampant cocaine use. One that I would come back to again and again whenever I felt trapped. Trapped in Becky’s apartment, in the long, dark nights, in my own skin. Being high was like finding a trap door out of my own claustrophobic flesh. It was instantaneous and allowed me to connect immediately with a flight already in progress inside of me.

Evelyn, although she dabbled, was not much of a user herself. She liked to hit the nail on the head every time, and like my mother--or so I believed then-- Evelyn was more of a watcher. And so, our roles set, we began our game. Becky, the virgin was cast off the board. Evelyn’s job was to watch, sometimes to suggest, but most often she functioned as audience, as my chorus. And me. I was the one to rev up and go crazy. To take too many drugs and walk into a bar

beside Evelyn and say, “Choose. You choose anyone, and I’ll go home with them.”

Our game had started one night when, fueled on a cocktail of cocaine and White Russians, I found myself next to Evelyn leaning up against the bar of The Dream Inn, surveying the room for a target.

Years before they had held the Miss California Pageants at the Dream Inn. The lobby was hung with a collection of photographs of the contestants. Row upon row, year after year, of girls lined up on the beach in their one-piece bathing suits, each one with her head cocked, smiling at the camera, her right leg bent at the knee and slightly ahead of her left, as if they were all about to waltz off the stage in unison together.

Once a grand place, where girls bunked with their chaperones, The Dream Inn had sunk into disrepair when the contest was moved south. The carpet was still red, but it showed age; tattered, worn through and roughly patched in many places along its well-traveled route. Now, roped sashes that had all but unraveled up to the bows held the heavy gold curtains that had once implied a world of elegance. Yet a mystique still clung to The Dream Inn, like an aura around an aging screen siren.

Up these famous steps and across the faded carpet Evelyn and I paraded as if we were marching onto a Hollywood stage set. We thought if we walked fast, with a self-assured sway to our hips, we’d make it past the front desk. We were either right, and our cocky little attitude worked, or we were just lucky. In any

case, we made it into that hallowed ballroom, the crowning room, which had just recently been revamped into a disco lounge.

“If we all just stop eating for one day,” Evelyn was saying as we approached the bar, “just stop long enough to pay attention, it will solve world hunger.”

At first I thought this was a new diet, but halfway across the lobby I realized this idea of fasting was performed, not for our waistlines, but to raise our consciousness. Evelyn had recently completed The Est Training. In the convoluted logic of EST, raising consciousness would solve world hunger. It was easy to see that Evelyn had all the enthusiasm of the recently converted. Like a girl who has taken her first hit of acid, she spoke of the largest issues in the world as if they only required the simplest of solutions. *I can see it all so clearly. Nail polish remover will destroy the evidence. World hunger is just a metaphor for all we withhold from one another.* Well, yes but no. This was a reach even for me. My father had once, and for a short time, heralded the teachings of Est, too. Joining movements with the same frequency and fervor that he married, he had gone through a black gospel period, and even, in the early days before Jonestown, nearly joined Jim Jones’ The People’s Temple, too.

“You can’t be serious.” I said. I didn’t even attempt to engage in a rebuttal, and my dismissal must have pissed Evelyn off.

She swung her head away. “Well, thank you for sharing your knowledgeable opinion.”

This was our first spat, if you could call it that. Evelyn was taking the high road, smiling through tight lips. I knew that face. I had seen it on my mother whenever she spoke of my father's indiscretions.

And so I was also sad that night. It is hard to be high and sad at the same time. Sadness is something to avoid at all costs when one is high. Who wants to ride a rocket down? To have your finger pulled from the socket that connects you to the Universe. The communion with the world is gone then.

Above our heads a mirrored light was spinning, and the beat of the music in that large room was so loud and insistent that I could feel it vibrating through my feet.

That evening I wore a long purple skirt with a matching top. Gold threads ran in a zigzag pattern through the material, and the sleeves of my shirt were long and pointed. I thought of this as my disco witch outfit, the clothing of a sorceress. Evelyn was most likely wearing a pair of ill-fitting jeans and a shirt with a high collar, her usual conservative attire.

We were a pair. And I mean that: a perfect match.

It all started as a game. A game that was not meant to be completed. Evelyn and I were not meant to split up. I was not meant to depart from the bar or the dance floor with the chosen boy. Our game was all about the seduction, not conquest. I don't know why we ended up playing so casually with boys. Perhaps because we could. In any case, this is how the game started. On this night, when she turned away from me and I, trying to win her interest back, said. "Choose, You choose anyone, and I bet I can pick him up."

Well, what was she going to do?

“Claire,” she said. “What are you trying to prove?”

“That I can.”

Evelyn thought about this for a moment. I could tell that my answer made sense to her and that she understood it was somehow important to prove that you could do something. Even this stupid thing that I had chosen. And I was going to prove it to her. In a way, it was a gift to her. She frowned and then she smiled. It was like watching a fast motion film sequence, an instantaneous sunset and sunrise spread across her face. Which is of course what drugs do: compact experience.

“Okay, over there, that one.” Evelyn was pointing at a boy across the lounge. A blonde-haired boy, so delicately beautiful he could have been a woman.

“Adios,” I said, slipping off my stool.

He was a stupid boy though. As stupid and as easy as a cliché. This was only meant to be a joke. A joke between Evelyn and me. “Did you know?” I said, standing in front of him, “that bees show each other where the nectar is by dancing.” I wanted him to laugh at my line and send me back to Evelyn. But he didn’t laugh, he didn’t even know that I was telling him the truth; he just stood up to dance with me. When I turned back for Evelyn she was gone. The flashing disco ball spun overhead, fragmenting all our bodies in mirrored light so that our parts looked interchangeable. I wondered briefly why it was so easy to slip in and out of people’s lives.

Later that night, I let this boy drive me back to his home. He was a surfer. His hair was bleached white from the sun and his body burnt brown. He had a sway back and the most slender waist I'd ever seen. "I'm missing a rib," he told me.

I left before dawn while the moon was descending the horizon. When I stepped outside I realized I had no idea where I was. There was just one road, a highway stretching along the coast in both directions and I chose one direction, although I couldn't tell you if it was north or south. Those sweet, White Russians' had made my temples throb; my head felt like a cement ball, too heavy to hold up and so I walked with my head hanging down. I could feel the shambles of my brain, like marbles rolling loose in a cave. I walked for what seemed like hours, following along the yellow hyphenated dashes of the highway as if a rope around my neck was leading me forward. With my long black hair in tatters down my back and in my glittering gold dress I must have looked like a displaced queen. At one point I heard the ocean, and when I looked up I saw that the sun had risen, a red ball rolling over the mountains in the east. By a miracle I had reached the beach. In the dark I had wondered back to The Dream Inn and I was now standing in the same spot where all those girls from long ago had once posed and vied for the title of Miss California.

Before my eyes, white waves galloped onto shore, cresting and frothing like a great stampede of horses. A soft mist rose from where the sun touched the wet earth, and the whole world was sparkling in the pure, dawn light, as if it had been formed from chips of mica. Creation must have looked like this.

It wasn't even 6:00 a.m. when Evelyn opened the door to her bungalow and without a word I climbed into bed beside her. I was safe. In all that time I hadn't seen anyone on the road, not one car.

"What was he like?" She asked.

I shook my head. I wanted to tell her, but how could I say that this boy's body, with its narrow indented waist, had felt like a woman's?

I slept. In sleep I was aware of Evelyn's body, curled as mine was, like a shell on its side. There was a space between us the width of a mountain stream and we were the two banked sides. In this hollowed trough lay nothing but air, yet so much vibrated there. I slept until the early afternoon, and when I awoke I had a shocking headache and my throat was parched. In those last moments of sleep I had been trying to drink from that stream.

I sat up panting.

"There's juice over there," Evelyn gestured with her chin at the bedside table. She was sitting beside me in her pajamas, reading. Her glasses had slipped down to the bottom of her nose.

I drank a glass of orange juice in one long swallow. That clear, acidic scent that I cannot smell, even to this day, without remembering my mother.

"Peel yourself an orange," she used to say wandering into the room, "so that I can smell it."

"I don't even know why I did that," I said lying back down with a groan.

"For awhile I thought I was lost."

Evelyn glanced at me from over the top of her book. “You should eat,” she said.

“Ugh! I’ll vomit.” But I went into her little kitchen and toasted myself a bagel.

While I was eating she came into the room and sat down across from me, both elbows on the table, her chin balanced on her palms. “Claire,” she said, “what do you dream?”

“I can’t remember.” Because I didn’t want to tell her I had just dreamed of her.

“No,” she said. “What do you dream of doing in your life, Claire? What are your dreams?” She peered at me through her thick glasses and I could tell she was working something out. All the differences between us. She was separating herself from me.

When I didn’t answer she said. “I have so many dreams. I want to be a photographer. I want to write. But first, I want to waitress in Denny's for a month or so. Just wear the uniform and pretend to have the life of a waitress. Like a secret life. I want to work at the boardwalk and pretend that that’s my life, too. A carnival life. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t have any dreams.” I realized with a shock that this was the truth.

Evelyn sighed and smiled. “Then what will move you forward?” She asked, reaching across the table and smoothing a hair from my forehead.

Now I wonder why it was that as women we found it so difficult to take possession of our lives, so much easier to inhabit metaphor?

Virgin Becky.

Ever watchful Evelyn behind her thick glasses.

My dancing seductress.

Miss California.

Even in our desire to break free and define ourselves we slipped further into hyperbole and symbol.

Later Evelyn took upon herself the name of Eve, that ever watchful girl who first learned too much and thus destroyed paradise. But that had yet to happen. For now, we were still at games.

The back door was open and the sun shone on the threshold. A soft breeze wafted around the room. I was saved. I had made it through the dark night. Like a bird plummeting to earth, my addiction was the sheer joy of surviving each flight. Each time life was a clean, new miracle and my sins--if that is the word for them--were washed away. I had no dreams, but it didn't matter, because that morning grace was abundant. Grace flowed down the mountains and was carried into shore with the dawn.

NOT LOVE, FALLING

Time, in my father's house, ran fast. All the clocks were set slightly ahead, maybe only a few minutes, but ahead nonetheless. This was not done deliberately; my father didn't plan this so he'd be on time for his appointments. Being German he was, quite naturally, on time. No, he set his clocks, and his watch a little ahead because he was always hoping for things to happen a little sooner. Always eager to be on his way, for things to begin.

Beginnings. He showed a marked preference for beginnings. So I shouldn't have been surprised when he called in the early spring, and his first question, before he even said hello was, "What are you going to do now that it's almost the summer." He had already made his plans. He was off to Europe he explained over the phone. "I'll be there for six weeks," he said happily. "Now, what will you do?"

I felt a vague sense of air all around me, the stirring of a wind. But I ignored it. I said that I thought I would attend summer school, for that had been the plan, my father's suggestion in fact. To go up to Berkeley, attend summer school, and graduate a semester early so that I could, as my father liked to say, *get started with my life*.

"Well," my father said. "We need to talk about this. Why not come on up and see me, I'm lonely."

Two days later when I arrived for the weekend he shuffled into the kitchen in his slippers. "Gail thinks I'm too old for her," he'd sulked, his

shoulders drooping for emphasis. “I’m not old, I don’t feel old. I’m too busy. Nobody my age does as much work as I do.”

“Picasso,” I said dropping my knapsack down onto the kitchen floor, “fornicated into his 90s”

“Really,” my father replied, ruffling my hair. “The way you talk to your old man.”

Over dinner at La Pena, a South American restaurant in downtown Berkeley and a *lefty hangout*--my father had raised his eyebrows approvingly at this--he asked me again about my summer plans. “You know,” he said. “I’ve sublet the house.”

He was eating his bouillabaisse with gusto. I had ordered a spicy chicken dish, but I hadn’t touched it, preferring instead to focus on our carafe of red wine.

I shook my head over my glass. “Where will I live?” For we had agreed that while I was attending summer school in Berkeley, I would stay with him in his house.

“Oh,” my father said, pouring me another glass of wine. “This year’s been so hard. There was the divorce to pay for. Well, how could I have known?” He hesitated as if he was thinking. But I knew this was only theater for my benefit. An idea seemed to flash before his eyes, and he grabbed it. “Maybe we can find you a sublet, or even a house-sitting job. I’ll ask around. I’ll ask my colleagues. Besides, that house is too big for you.”

“That house,” I replied, “was designed for just one person.” When I said this I sounded like my mother. I said it like the woman who had all his numbers. Who had, as she said, *his dance steps memorized*.

My father glanced up inquiringly. “Aren’t you going to eat your dinner?”

I took a bite for show. “I’m not very hungry, I guess.”

“Listen,” he said, “you’d be happier if you ate regular meals.”

We were sitting on the edges of thatched chairs across from one another at a wooden table. The legs of the table were jarringly uneven; our glasses shook, our plates slid, whenever either one of us rested our elbows on its surface. From the chair bottom, tiny twigs of thatching had begun to poke through my clothes. Suddenly I blurted out, “Why is it that socialists always embrace discomfort?”

“What are you talking about?” My father frowned. “Maybe, if you were concerned with what’s really important . . .”

Behind us the door banged open and we turned simultaneously away from each other and glanced across the room. A woman strode in from the street. She wore a scarf with a striking, geometric pattern on it was wrapped around her neck. In her hand she was carrying a coffee mug. She made her way to a large group at a table near the stage at the far end of the restaurant.

“I think she knows me.” My father gestured towards the woman. “Hello,” he called waving his hand in the air as if he were hailing a taxi.

By desert we had joined her table. Alison Green was a strong woman with broad shoulders and a square back. She sat planted among a throng of friends, solid as a boulder. Alison says she tried to talk to me that evening, to

look me in the eye. She told me later she always tried to look *kids* in the eyes to see if they could meet her gaze, steadily. I, of course, did not want to meet her gaze. Instead I fled to the tiny restaurant bathroom where I snorted some crystal methadrine an astronomy student had given to me the day before. Within moments my insides were turning somersaults, my heart felt like it was jumping on a trampoline, and my mind was leaping through hoops. I couldn't hold onto my thoughts, they darted about the room, ricocheting off the walls and reappearing in different disguises. I kept drinking more wine, trying to even out my high. At some point I saw my father inching his chair closer to Alison Green. Alison gave him a frank stare that said, *no*, but he didn't seem to see it. Instead, he threw me his keys. "Why don't you take my car? I'll get a ride home."

"Doesn't she want to stay for the film?" Alison asked. A projector and a screen had been set up on the stage; we had all turned our chairs; the lights were dimming. Everyone was getting ready to watch a film on Russian avant-garde artists.

"Listen," my father had said earlier that evening before we left for the restaurant. "These guys were trying to create a utopian society through their art. An art of social function. That's the kind of thing I wanted to do when I came to Berkeley." My father, when he said this, sounded as if he was solely responsible for both the Russian Revolution and the Berkeley Peace Movement. Now though, he only asked. "Well, do you really want to stay?"

I couldn't have sat through that film even if my father hadn't thrown me his keys. Not with the drugs racing along my limbs. Nonetheless, I felt a jolt

when I picked up his keys. The gust of wind that I had felt a few days earlier had picked up speed. A gate was blowing shut somewhere. I was back on the side with Joanna, our toes and fingers searching for balance, for a steady place to stand on this swinging gate. On the other side our father was already gone.

When I was halfway to the door, he called after me. “Hey, this was good. I’m glad we did this.”

Too rattled to go home, I called Evelyn from the pay phone outside the restaurant. That weekend, Evelyn was also up from school for a visit, staying with her mother while attending an Est seminar at the San Francisco Hyatt. I don’t suppose I really thought she’d be free at this hour, but I was flying along on my high and I just wanted things, events to happen. What I wanted was to hurl objects up into the air--myself being one of the objects--and see where we all might land.

“I can’t go out,” Evelyn said in a hushed voice over the line. “I’ve volunteered to help set-up tomorrow and I have to be there by 5:00 a.m.” I could picture her, whispering into the phone in her pajamas and slippers, rubbing the bridge of her nose where her glasses usually sat. She had a way of looking beautifully tired when she did this.

“What’s this one about?” I didn’t really want to know so much as I wanted to hang onto the image I had of Evelyn standing beside the phone. I suppose this is in some way the same vision both my sister and I cling to of our mother, cloistered in her house, waiting for our calls. Once I heard Joanna say to

the weeping voice on the other end of the line. “There, there little mama. There, there.”

“Love,” Evelyn said softly to me. For now, Evelyn was focusing, honing in on love. “It’s a seminar on love where we get to examine all our issues surrounding it. I never knew I had so many issues concerning love, Claire. I used to think that love was one of those things like life and death. Always recognizable. But, now I’m not so sure.”

Love was something I wasn’t ready to think about, maybe not for years.

“Love has issues?” I replied hostilely. “I thought love was a spice. Sprinkle it on and it makes your food taste better.”

“I know you’re making fun of me,” Evelyn said, and then gave me the standard reply. “If you did the training you’d understand.”

But, I wasn’t about to understand, not then and not a month later when Evelyn said more. This was in the middle of the night, shortly before the last time I saw her. Evelyn said. “I’ve discovered that I love you Claire because I’m smarter than you are, but you have a soul.” We were sharing a cigarette in the kitchenette of a hotel suite, while two men waited, graciously for at least this brief respite, in a back bedroom. Below us, seventeen stories down, San Francisco slept under a great, fog blanket. At that moment I thought Evelyn was with me again, for I was flattered by what she said, but it seems that I cannot separate the people I love from the fantasies I have of them. For though Evelyn’s words often seemed to be a beacon in the dark night, her heart eluded me, receding into mist.

Now, when I hung up the phone I felt as if I were dangling outside my body. It was as if Evelyn's tired voice, her quite understandable preoccupation had set me loose. I felt like a skinless creature. A soul lost outside all the safe confines of shape and form. Cars zoomed by on the street, their lights leaping ahead. I felt myself to be as pure and illuminating, as uninhabited as those lights, which seemed to slice through all the darkness that surrounds us. There was nothing to be done in this state, but drive over to the city and go in search of some distraction.

I have always loved the dark night drive across the Bay Bridge from Berkeley spilling out into the city of San Francisco. I love it still. A ride across a bridge that feels alive, like weather or music. There is often an acute sense of danger and motion on bridges. Of forces strung and held but not contained. It can be a soaring and unsteady ride. I've known women--Becky was one--who are afraid to drive on highways or across bridges, although there are pearls waiting for them on the other side. On drugs this ride is even better. A flat expanse crossing black water. A bridge that is threaded with lights, dressed for a party. In the center of the bridge a dark island rises which must be penetrated in order to reach the gleaming city. And then a deep ride through the tunnel bathed in a red and golden glow, cars speeding in their lanes like blood through veins to the core. Finally, the glide up and out again. The climb skyward, high up into the eaves of the bridge. This is a bridge that hurtles you towards heaven like the vault of a gothic cathedral. Far below is the city, a sparkling jewel on an emerald bay. Behind it, the hills roll like the body of a slumbering giant.

Exiting off the bridge I barreled up Broadway. Strip clubs and Italian Restaurants lined the streets. Carole Doda's giant breasts lit up the Avenue, her nipples flashing like two bright red Christmas lights. Rudolf's red-nosed reindeers. *Who will guide your sleigh tonight?* Outside a man in a tight-fitting suit grabbed the arms of passing tourists and tried to entice them inside. They were said to be a marvel, Carole Doda's giant breasts. Certainly the three-story neon billboard advertised as much. "The eighth wonder of the world," I heard the man holler. "She's a real life accident of nature, a freak."

Abruptly I turned off Broadway and headed up Columbus towards Martin's apartment. I parked my car on the steep side of the street and nearly fell out the door and rolled down the hill to his front stoop. Once Martin had brought me here in the middle of a chilly afternoon, when I was visiting surreptitiously from school. Up a long narrow staircase and across a parquet floor I saw a pair of dime store handcuffs gripping the leg of an old metal radiator. I knew instantly that Martin had put them there, a surrealist touch to his decor, a toy for me to trip on. He so desperately wanted to look subversive.

But he wasn't home when I rang his bell. Wandering around the corner-- did I think I would find him? Yes, I thought I would find him, for doesn't love lead you, aren't you pulled along by your poor red nose by love--I found instead his roommate Ben sitting alone in a coffee shop. A big man, with soft, droopy eyes, Ben was sipping his espresso, dribbling his fingers on the little round table in front of him, humming along to the Puccini blasting from the juke box.

“If you’re looking for Martin . . .” Ben’s voice faded off and he lifted his shoulders with a shrug.

“What’s love?” I asked. Sitting down across from him. “Tell me what you think of love.” I was hoping for some sharp, brittle answer, some of Martin’s banter. I was hoping to bounce my crazy, cranked up mind off someone.

“Claire,” Ben said, kissing my forehead. “You are the French song of my youth.” He took one long look into my eyes, at my shaking foot and chewing jaw and said. “You need to go to sleep, kiddo.”

“I don’t want sleep. I want brandy.”

“Just come with me, and I’ll give you anything you need.” These words were said so softly, with the laying of a hand gently on my elbow, that even I heard.

Back at Martin’s apartment Ben gave me a shot of brandy, although he mixed it into a glass of hot chocolate. And he read me a poem about love with a thousand cigarettes strewn from wall to wall across a room, and another about the Spanish Civil War. “It will come back to you,” I heard him say, before I fell asleep. And I do not know if he meant Martin, or war, or love, or the cigarettes. I slept on a cream colored couch that I recognized from my father’s house. I’ve slept here before I thought, and who else?

I blinked my eyes, and it was morning. Ben was gone. In the kitchen Martin was making coffee. “Good morning,” he said, handing me a plate of scrambled eggs.

“I hate eggs,” I told him. “They taste like sponges.”

Martin glared at me, his hand on his hip. He was only wearing an apron over his jeans and cowboy boots. No shirt. He had a surprising amount of hair on his chest, which I did not seem to remember him having before. I sat down and studied him. Curly brown and black hair wound up his middle like a vine on the trunk of a tree and branched out across his chest like waving leaves. Where had I been that I hadn't noticed this bushy tree on him before? "When did you grow all that hair?" I asked.

Martin looked irritated. "I hear you were out and about last night," he said crossly. "Are you in the habit of just showing up on people's doorsteps, Claire?"

"You do it!"

Martin muttered something under his breath.

"What?"

"I said, well, aren't you the old man's daughter?" And he laughed.

When I was ready to leave Martin suddenly pulled me towards the living room. "Look at my new couch," he said pushing me gently down. "Don't you like it? It's the perfect size."

I don't know what I expected from Martin. Something more than banter. Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I understood that Martin was like a sentence fragment, an incomplete thought. I wiggled back into my jeans and buttoned up my shirt while Martin stood in the alcove of his bay window, half hidden by the curtain. He'd now pulled a t-shirt on over his forest of thick, black, chest hairs. He stared out at the street, his back turned towards me. I wondered for a moment if he was waiting for someone, but then I realized he was hiding from me. I thought of him

then as being afraid. I mean really afraid, like the kind of person who won't drive on the freeway or cross a bridge at night. From behind the curtain he asked.

"What drugs are you carrying?"

"Just some crystal meth."

"Leave me some," he said. He went into his kitchen and brought me out a little china plate.

On the phone, when I called my father, his voice was full of joyous outrage.

"You've absconded with my car! Where have you been all this time?"

"I stayed at a friend's. I'm going to have lunch with Joanna and her new roommate."

"Well, try and get your sister to do something about her hair," my father said. "She looks ridiculous. Talk to her. Maybe she'll listen to you."

After I hung up, Martin walked me down the long hallway towards his front door. The walls, I noticed for the first time, were hung with several of Man Ray's photographs. All slightly contorted, suggestive in some way of sex and violence and beauty. Like those poems, I thought. You don't know if it's love, or a bullet, or only a cigarette rolling towards you. At the door, Martin grabbed me by both shoulders and I thought then that he was surely going to say something important, something final, even a salutation like *it was good to see you again*, but all he said was, "That shirt's too big for you, Claire."

Out on the street when I gazed back up at his apartment, Martin was again standing in the alcove of his window, his body half hidden, half exposed, by the curtain fabric. I was certain he saw me, but he did not lift his hand to wave.

Before I went to Joanna's I drove around the city in my father's Honda. Itchy, spring air was blowing off the acacia trees. At the top of Nob Hill a group of old woman were doing Tai Chi in the dew. I headed straight for the glass tower of the Hyatt on Union Square. Its facade was lit and gleaming like a prism and light bounced off the surface like sparks of fire. Somewhere inside Evelyn was attending her seminar on Love. Love as idea. Love pure and simple, before it is beheld and reflected. Turning my car away I doubled back and circled the building a few times. I don't know what I hoped for. Maybe that she would appear suddenly, out from behind the mirrored facade of the building.

It was still early. The sky that morning arched above me like the vault of a cathedral, high and colorless. It made me dizzy to look, vast and transparent, and with an endless momentum that pulled me up. I kept driving, spiraling up through San Francisco, trying to reach that one intoxicating point where I could have it all. Just once and only momentarily glimpse something whole, the complete unbroken egg of it. But it wouldn't hold still for me.

At the crest of California Street I parked my car in front of Grace Cathedral and entered the church. It was Saturday morning and there was a splattering of tourists inside. The Men and Boys Choir was rehearsing at the far end of the nave, their voices spilling out, the pure, unblemished chant of

worshippers. I wondered what they were singing about. Divine love perhaps. I sat down and tried to imagine a love that was never returned. You could create anything in that space. My father had married his second wife right here in this very church, in a side annex called The Chapel of Grace. Joanna and I were not at the ceremony. Nor were our two new stepbrothers whom we were to meet-- briefly--for a dinner many months later. What I remember of these two rather bratty boys was playing the game of telephone with them. Whispering words in each other's ears, while we waited for our Beef Wellington, all of us dressed in our best clothes for a wedding long past that we had not been invited to. There, in the Stanford Court, around a white linen table set with sparkling crystal glasses that we were not allowed to touch, we bent our heads to unfamiliar ears, and sang out phrases in hushed voices, words that were sent out, around a circle and then returned muted and unrecognizable. *The last supper* by the time it came back to me had been transformed and into *A fast jumper*. That's what love looks like I thought that morning in the church: a strange, altered form, staggering back towards you.

By the time I left the Cathedral it was late enough to have lunch with Joanna. She was now living in The Haight. In the last two months, since her winter visit down to Santa Cruz, she had moved twice. At the moment, she was ensconced in a building called the pink palace, one block from the corner of Haight and Ashbury. "My god," she'd screamed over the phone. "Can you believe I'm finally living in the Haight?" The building wasn't exactly pink, it was

salmon colored and filled with hookers, students and junkies. All this Joanna had also told me, rambling on over the telephone, effusive, delighted, for I was finally coming to see her, while beside me Martin frowned out his window. My sister can be so eager to talk, that nothing gets said for hours.

That afternoon at the pink palace, when I rang the bell of the apartment number Joanna had given me, a thin girl opened the door and silently kissed me on the mouth in greeting, thrusting her tongue down my throat before she turned away abruptly and walked back down the hall, leaving me to find my own way into their dwelling. Suddenly, Joanna appeared from around a corner--dancing. I had the sensation that she wanted me to see her dancing, that she had been waiting for me to ring the bell, to send her roommate to get me--although the kiss was not something Joanna would have approved of had she known of it--then to make her entrance. To start the music, and greet me with a dance. The roommate's name was Cleo. Cleo, who danced about the room with Joanna, slithering around my sister's body like a gauzy fabric, while I sank down onto the floor with my coat still on, leaned back against the wall and watched them. I felt like a spy, so outside their performance. I think I kept my coat on during the entire visit. They fed me something heavy and packed with vegetables.

Joanna was wearing overalls that day. Her hair was pressed down and tied back. Looking at me from across the room she tilted her head and smiled. I was startled. For the briefest moment I was reminded of that first shy glance of Evelyn's.

“We did your sister’s hair,” Cleo said. “We changed her makeup, too. We made it softer.”

“Don’t you just love Cleo?” Joanna beamed at her new friend. “She just glows. Everyone tells her there’s a pink light all around her. That she emanates love and joy.”

No, I didn’t feel love, I felt like jumping up and fleeing from the room. And not because of Cleo’s oppressive affection. The way she hovered at the periphery like a hungry beast. No, it was not Cleo and her petting of my sister and her sinuous dancing that trouble me. It was Joanna’s look that scared me. That look of a twelve-year old suddenly struck dumb with love. In her overalls, with her hair pulled back and her unfocused gaze floating across the room, she looked diffused. So much like Evelyn, with her glasses off that I could barely speak.

“Cleo’s a vegetarian, too,” I heard Joanna say.

“Garbage in garbage out,” Cleo sang.

Joanna laughed. In the next instant she snarled. “I just don’t eat anything that has a mother.”

She said this so forcefully--a bone vomited up, that I nearly choked on my own food. Joanna was still present all right, even behind that mask of a smoothed out demeanor. When I looked at my sister she seemed oblivious to the words that had just issued from her mouth. Those words haunt me still. The innocence and force of them. I doubt she even knew what she was saying. Having been sent to psychiatrists since the age of six, Joanna has been adamantly

opposed to self-examination. What exactly was she was trying to tell us? That she was trying to save the mother or the child? And what of the father? I think for Joanna the father was, by this time, unforgettably gone. But the mother still persisted. The mother couldn't be ignored or devoured. Now, Joanna was, as strange as it may seem, in her every gesture down to her very intake of food, trying to save the mother for the child.

At the door Joanna hugged me or at least tried to. A great, big hug that I shied away from. I froze like a frightened animal in the beam of her embrace. "You're so cold to me," she said. "You have no love in you, Claire." With those words my sister shoved me backwards, nearly out her door. And I fled at a near gallop down the steps of the pink palace, heading back across the Bay Bridge to Berkeley and our father's house.

I could hear my father, when I came up the walk, singing along to the "Ode To Joy" in his native German. The huge, sliding glass doors were open and a strong wind was stirring through his house. What sort of man builds doors for giants to enter? Even the most magnificent, gothic cathedrals had little doors set inside the great ones for people of normal stature to enter. I stood on the threshold and watched my father for a moment. He was dressed in a tweed jacket--his gray hair waving widely on the top of his head like a dervish--and he was drinking a scotch and water. "My," he said when he caught me staring. "You've certainly been gone a long time. I was beginning to worry."

I walked over to him and patted the top of his hair down. “I went to see Joanna.”

“Well,” he said, his voice dropping an octave, his face taking on the look of a child confronting the unpleasant task of eating a plate of brussel sprouts.

“How do you think she’s doing?”

“Fine.” I said, although I did not think Joanna was doing fine at all.

“She’s wearing her hair back, she looks tidy. She has this new roommate who’s also in the drama department.”

“Yes,” my father nodded at the mention of Cleo. “Maybe she’ll be good for Joanna.” My father liked Cleo he told me, because she addressed him as Doctor Richter. He took a long swallow of his scotch. “Let me fix you a drink. Gail is picking me up in half an hour. “

“But, I thought you weren’t going out with her anymore. She said you were too old.”

“That’s ridiculous. I am not too old!” My father raised his eyebrows at this idea and he looked both wicked and surprised. “Besides,” he continued. “We already had the tickets. Why don’t you have a scotch with your old man before he leaves? I’ve hardly seen you this weekend.”

We drank our scotches. My father turned up the Beethoven just as the movement accelerated. He closed his eyes and nodded his head along to the thundering rhythms of the music. He didn’t seem to notice the cold air churning through the house like a whirlpool. I suddenly couldn’t bear it--the enormous weight of everything in that room: my father’s bravado and that colossal song

and all the emotion it contained. I felt the walls of my father's house expanding, like a living, breathing beast. For some reason my mind kept returning to Cleo and her garish kiss. That kiss had felt like a seal, a secret handshake. I sneaked out of the room then, away from my father while the music still surrounded him. In the bathroom I scrubbed my lips with a soapy washcloth, although there was nothing to take off. Before I left the bathroom I tapped the rest of my drugs into my scotch and drank the powder down.

When I came back out my father was in the dining room, rummaging through the drawers under the bar. "Do you have a cigarette?" he asked.

As I handed him one out of my purse, he said. "You shouldn't smoke. When did you start to smoke?"

"I don't really," I told him. "Just sometimes."

"Me, too." He smiled and then he asked. "What did you think of Allison Green?" I thought again of the woman who strode into the restaurant last night with an odd pair of earrings on brandishing her coffee mug. I guessed that she scared me a little, but all I said to my father was, "I don't know."

"Her friends drove me home," he told me. "She hasn't returned my call today." He shrugged and laughed. "Maybe she doesn't like me. Oh, well." And my father wandered out of the room in search of his glasses.

By the time he was ready to leave that final dose of drugs had kicked in. I was shaking, my teeth were chattering and sweat was beginning to dribble down the sides of my skull. "What is the matter with you?" My father asked. "You are going to be okay, aren't you?"

“I’m fine.”

“Sit here while I get my coat.”

I sat. Within the next instant I went up another octave. Now, I was beginning to feel frightened. The air at this altitude felt thin and I was afraid I might never come down, but fly right out of my skin. Picking up the phone I dialed Evelyn’s number. The beatings of my heart were tripping over themselves, falling. “He’s too much.” I cried as soon as she answered.

Into my ear Evelyn whispered. “Tell him to leave you alone. Tell him I’m coming over.”

“I’m fine,” I repeated to my father who now strode over to me with his coat and Homburg on. “Just go. My friend’s coming over.”

My father, in his eagerness and anxiety to be on his way, reached down, took the receiver from my hand, and hung up the phone. “There.” He said crossing his arm over his chest, as if this grand gesture had solved all my problems.

But, I couldn’t stop shaking and weeping, and the next thing that happened was that I began to choke on my sobs.

My father patted my back. “Gail’s waiting outside in the car.” He said. “Let me go and get her and then we’ll have a nice talk.”

So, there I stood in the center of the living room ripping my clothes off. The living room was designed as a sort of stage--floating three steps above the rest of the floor and hung with spotlights. I was still sobbing, and both hot and shivering, but I didn’t have the strength to slide the doors shut against the wind. I

grabbed at my shirt--the shirt that Martin had said was too big for me--and held it tight around me like a straight jacket, trying to still my shaking body, to hold everything inside it intact. I stood like that, sobbing and barefoot, in the middle of my father's living room stage, waiting for him to return.

The first thing Gail did when she walked up into the room was switch off the music. "Whatever's the matter? You have hardly anything on, Claire. Let me get you a blanket. And Paul, shut those doors."

"Come on over here." my father said, pushing me down between himself and Gail on the couch.

I stopped crying and tried to catch my breath. "Is this a new couch?" I finally asked my father.

"Italian." He told me, stroking the couch. "Like it?"

"What seems to be the trouble?" Gail asked again. This was only the second time I'd met her. She sat on the edge of the couch, her body turned towards me. In her lap she clutched a purse of see-through plastic. I couldn't take my eyes off it: I could see her lipstick, wallet, comb, and three-inch nail file, everything a neat and compact size.

On the other side of me my father leaned back into his plush new Italian upholstery with his coat on, his Homburg balanced on the crown of his head.

"Tell her," he encouraged. "She can help."

All I could think of to say was, "I want to drop out of college."

"Nonsense," my father said. "What would you do?"

"Travel."

“You can’t just go gallivanting around the world,” my father said.

“You can’t just run off without knowing what you’re running away from and what you’re running towards,” Gail added matter-of-factly.

My father beamed at her. “You’re so smart.” Then, turning to me, he said. “See, what did I tell you?”

As soon as Evelyn arrived my father stood up. “We’re off,” he called, hurrying for the door. “We don’t want to miss the beginning.”

At the door he turned back, lifted his hat up and down like Charlie Chaplin’s mocking Little Tramp and said to Evelyn, “On your next visit here let’s make sure we have time for the tour.” And he gestured around his house. Then he was gone.

Evelyn sat down on the coffee table in front of me. She glanced around the room, nodding at the walls of paintings. “You’ve got a lot of mythology,” she said finally. “Way, way too much luggage.”

I laughed. I unwrapped myself from the blanket--the shaking having subsided--and sat in my great, white shirt, with my legs curled up and the dirty soles of my feet tucked under me. “Is that what they tell you?” I asked. “Isn’t that a little too easy?”

“It’s all easy if you let it,” Evelyn replied softly.

I could see that what Evelyn wanted was a life like a clean, fresh slate, unencumbered by personal history. Onto this freshly plowed terrain, she might cut and paste a borrowed history and set forth on a journey.

Perhaps such a place existed for her, but not for me. I sensed all this, yet I didn't understand what it would mean.

“Well, then I'm not going to let it,” I said stubbornly. Meaning that I wouldn't erase what I understood to be my life in order that it be easy.

Evelyn squinted at me through her glasses as if she were looking at me through her lens. “You look so fragile and beautiful tonight. I wish I had my camera with me.”

I don't know much about love. I used to think I knew when it was present and when it was absent--like life and death as Evelyn had said--but now I'm not at all certain. I know it is not an abstraction, but neither is it solid like a piece of furniture whose shape and size you can measure. It is not a room or a house with a door that you enter and exit through. It can not sustain a house. I have never seen love sustain anything, not by itself. Although I can imagine a house, tended and cared for with a diligence stronger than love. Love, my god, love is certainly not a toy. Martin had a house full of toys, mutations and disguises and although they distracted me, none of them resembled love. Maybe Joanna was right. Maybe love, the feelings of love, are as close to pure light as we get on this earth. Particle and wave, reflected and absorbed image. When my mother tells me the story of my birth, how she insisted against Hospital policy and her doctor's orders, on wearing her earrings--long and dangly with golden petals on them that tinkled slightly when you shook them-- because she wanted to look pretty for her new baby, is that glittering light love? And has it been there inside me since those first moments, the stretchy, pliant balloon of love, waiting to expand?

Evelyn and I were silent for a long time. Beyond the window, on the other side of that sparkling bridge, the city shimmered above a low bank of clouds.

“It looks as if it’s rising.” Evelyn whispered.

I can still see us sitting there--Evelyn perched on the coffee table in front of me. We are lit up in that bright living room, surrounded on three sides by walls of sliding glass, such an easy target in the black night.

THE KISS

I shared a house with Evelyn in the summer of 1979. It was a blue little house that my father found for me to house-sit, down in the Berkeley flats, around the corner from the old Co-Op grocery store.

All the cooperative stores in Berkeley are gone now; they went bankrupt and were bought out by Andronico's, a fancy food chain that propagated throughout the Bay Area in the 1980s. Gone too are the mimes who used to practice in front of the store for loose change, and the old man who sat on a crate, sharpening knives, scissors and pruning shears while Evelyn and I did our shopping. But the house, with its painted blue clapboard siding, is still there.

It was my idea for Evelyn to live with me that summer.

"Please," I'd begged her. "Why don't you stay here, too?"

We were sitting in the living room of this little blue house. The walls of the living room were painted a deep, brothel red; an iron grating sealed the fireplace; and a threadbare oriental rug covered the floor. Both the two chairs and couch were upholstered in a brown, hairy material that reminded me, more than anything else, of the fur of a stuffed animal. I remember this ugly, hairy upholstery because the dog that Evelyn brought home after she was robbed outside the house one night, chewed it all to threads. Mr. Pinkus--Rupert Pinkus--the owner of the blue little house with the ugly furniture was a cranky, perpetually unmarried man who taught in the film department. I knew him vaguely from my

father's parties and from the ten minutes we talked one afternoon before he left for France and I came to live in his house. He said I was to water his garden and sort the junk from the mail. In exchange I could stay in the house. "And please don't go moving in any boyfriends," he warned. "This place is old and fragile."

Just like you, I thought, but held my tongue. For, although I liked this house with its pale, baby blue color, I was not so keen on being pawned off here by my father.

"It'll just be me. I'll take good care of everything." I promised as I stared curiously out at Mr. Pinkus's garden, where weeds and ivy had nearly strangled the small patch of grass.

This was the summer of my 21st year: the summer of 1979 when Evelyn and I still had a year of College to finish. I had only the vaguest idea of my future after that. When pressed I would answer that I wanted to move to New York and study drawing at the Art Students League, or that I wanted to travel Europe. But, the truth is I didn't want to do either one of these things. And I hoped, that once inside this quiet, little blue house down in the flatlands of Berkeley, I would be able to decide on a course of action. That's what my father had suggested when he told me about Mr. Pinkus's offer. "You'll have your own place," he had said excitedly. "And, this way, you can take a few classes and get a part-time job and figure out your future." A reasonable wish of a parent for their child.

But, after my suitcases were unpacked and I was utterly alone, I was unable to sleep, unable even to read. I jumped at every noise, every twinge and creak that blue little house made. I was used to the presence of a roommate.

Even a roommate like Becky, who mostly drank alone in her room and was prone to sudden cleaning binges, was a comfort. In Santa Cruz, the night before I moved out, I awoke to find Becky weaving around my room in a hot pink halter top she'd pulled from one of my suitcases. The halter top and nothing else: she was naked from the waist down. "It looks better on me," she'd said as she staggered from the room. And though I thanked god I was finally going to move away from Becky, for I often found her actions unhinged and ludicrous, I longed for a friend, another body in the house. Almost any body.

Living alone was not turning out as I imagined. For one thing, I was scared of the dark. I kept all the lights burning through the night, both upstairs and down, imagining the glow of lamps could conceal the heavy silence that surrounded me. Yet even then I could not fall asleep until dawn, when soft gray light brightened my windows and the sounds of the waking world could be heard again.

These nights, these two weeks of nights alone in this little blue house, were as terrifying for me as the nights of my childhood when I was left in the care of Joanna. Even Becky parading naked through my room in the middle of the night, could not compare with Joanna. For in her rages, my sister would lock her bedroom door at night, and in my grief and fear I slept on the floor, on the threshold outside her door. I slept there for years. For back then, even Joanna's tantrums felt better than being alone.

After two weeks in Mr. Pinkus's house, I was exhausted but still too frightened to sleep, hungry but unable to choose what to eat. At the Co-Op

grocery store, I didn't know what to buy. I picked up food and fed myself in the random way that Joanna and I had done as children in our father's house. Meals of pickled herring out of the jar, salted cashew nuts and chocolate bars. I drank shots of Mr. Pinku's brandy mixed with milk and sugar. If I blended it with ice and tossed in a raw egg, I discovered it made a sort of potent ice cream. In the freezer I found half a dozen old mozzarella sticks and chewed these up still half frozen.

So when Evelyn showed up two weeks into my stay, I was hungry and desperate for company.

Evelyn wasn't so sure about living with me. For one thing there was only one bedroom.

"There's a cot in his study. We could convert that into your bedroom," I offered.

"I don't know." She stared dreamily out the window. "I've always lived alone."

"But you're staying at your mother's."

Evelyn shrugged as if her mother's presence was as easy to circumvent as a piece of furniture.

"You could go back and forth," I suggested.

"Hmm," was Evelyn's answer.

In the end, however, she did agree to stay on, and in this careless way I broke my promise to Mr. Pinkus. Although Evelyn wasn't a boyfriend, she was another person, and someone he hadn't met would now live in his house and sleep

in his study. I knew he wouldn't have liked that. So I made Mr. Pinkus--in my mind--into an even sourer, more unpleasant old man, and in this way he was easy to disregard. Now I was happy, for I was no longer alone. If Evelyn was afraid of the future she didn't show it. She had so many plans; how could there be room for fear? Later that afternoon, we walked around the corner to the old Co-Op grocery store and bought a refrigerator full of food and cooked, stir-fried chicken in a dusty old Wok we found high up on a shelf.

The next morning while Evelyn drove off to her mother's to pick up not only her camera equipment and clothes, but also a supply of essentials--there were only three towels in this place, and she hadn't been able to locate a broom or a dustpan. More than that, more than anything else though, she said we needed music: We needed the Rolling Stones, we needed Blondie, I had a visit from--and a fight with--Joanna.

She had taken two buses, then the BART train and then walked half a mile to come and see me. I had promised her after our visit, I would drive her up to our father's house where she was due to spend the night before he left for Europe. I was standing outside the house collecting Mr. Pinkus's mail when Joanna turned down my street. At first I wasn't quite sure that the girl waving frantically and running up the block, her thigh muscles rippling under her bright pink leggings, was coming for me. I thought she was one of the mimes from the grocery store, but it was Joanna coming for me. Up close I could see that the garish make-up was back in place: the pink, purple and blue eye shadow, the round red circles of rouge, the bright pink lipstick to match her leggings. She stood in front of me

panting and said, “Now, we’ll live so close. You can come and visit me all the time.” The idea, that I would traipse across the Bay Bridge, on foot, and train and bus, to visit with Joanna and her sex-crazed roommate, appalled me.

When she leaned forward and raised her clown’s face up towards mine-- that eager face, with it’s brilliant colors and the panic in the eyes that couldn’t be painted over--I nearly turned away. I wanted to. But, Joanna stood her ground on my doorstep, obstinately waiting to be kissed, and so I had no choice but to lean forward as well, and embrace her. In the next instant I felt Joanna in my arms, the weight of her whole body, which had been tensed and held in its stubborn, almost stoic refusal to back down, sighing in relief. Her relief was so palpably grateful, so full of history that I couldn’t bear it, and then I did turn away.

“Hah,” Joanna said. “There you go again. You just can’t stand to touch me.” She walked by me and into my little blue house.

“That’s not true,” I called after her.

“Yes, it is,” Joanna said spinning around, her handbag flying out so that I was forced to dodge or it would have knocked me in the face. “You spent years pretending I didn’t exist. Well here I am.”

Joanna was right. I had spent the entire four years of high school looking right through or away from her. My technique, when I saw her walking down our school hallways, was to open my locker door and feign interest in the contents inside until she had passed by. I never said hello to her. When I saw her in the cafeteria, sitting alone, her body hunched over her lunch tray, her brown hair hanging in front of her face like a fence, I walked silently past her, my head

turned, my gaze averted. Sometimes I heard her muttering a profanity after me, or even just calling my name.

Our mother says it wasn't always like this. She remembers her two daughters playing paper dolls on the floor their bodies tangled together like worms.

The Joanna I remember picked at her lips, at her own flesh and mine, until they bled. Her hands were sharp instruments flying through the air. What was it she was trying to rip from the world? I have asked my mother, and she answered instead a question I never asked. "I was all that stood between her and the world."

Perhaps she did stand there, her back forming the shape of a tired tree trying to shade my sister. But Joanna stood there too. Joanna was like glue and our mother the curling wisp of smoke, often more apparition than tangible presence. She needed hands as fierce and sticky as my sister's to hold her in this world. Smoke is as hard to see, as it is to clutch. The world is an ambiguous and subtle place and it is easy to lose your way. For, behind the obscuring cloud of smoke, truth shifts and escapes us. Difficult work then, to untangle two worms and pry them apart, especially if you are one of the worms.

For one entire year I said goodbye to my sister. This was the year of our parents divorce when Joanna was in second grade and I was in first. For that whole year I walked Joanna to her classroom door every morning. Joanna and I marched holding hands, each morning, up the staircase to her second grade classroom. We wore matching, black patent leather mary janes and our footsteps

echoed through the building--clippity-clap—we were late. Joanna was afraid to go into her classroom and I think we postponed entering the school as long as possible. At the door, she would pull me into her by my elbows and I would hold onto her elbows as well. Then, locked together like a box we kissed--slow and deliberate--on the lips. I had to stretch up a little bit, because at that age, Joanna was still the taller one. Finally, Joanna let go, opened the door and disappeared into her classroom.

Inside Mr. Pinkus's blue house I endeavored to make room in the only closet upstairs for Evelyn's impending onslaught of clothes. I pictured a never-ending trickle of ugly knit suits and pale eyelet blouses streaming off her mother's sewing machine. Joanna, who had followed me upstairs, flounced down on the bed and upended her handbag all over the spread. "So who is this girl, Evelyn?"

"What are you doing?"

"Do you have any gum?"

"I hate gum." I was holding a black jacket with an emerald green peacock embroidered on the back.

"Oh, that's pretty," Joanna immediately abandoned her gum search and grabbed the jacket from my hands. "Where did you get this? You spend so much money on clothes. You should try going to thrift shops and the Salvation Army."

I didn't answer her. I didn't answer because I wanted to hit her with a hanger or throw a book at her. After having spent years wearing my sister's hand-

me-down clothes, I now refused to wear anything vintage, anything that wasn't brand new.

“Can I meet her?” Joanna had the jacket on. She was tilting her head and admiring herself in the mirror. I wondered whom she saw. Then, her eyes fastened on my reflection behind her. “You know, you never introduce me to any of your friends. You're so secretive!”

It was hot and clammy in the bedroom. Joanna rummaged beside me in the closet. She picked up--then immediately tossed down-- my satin baseball jacket. “That's not my taste,” she said and turned to examine another item.

I remember exactly where, exactly how, my sister sat in her second grade classroom. I stood outside, after she entered, watching her through the glass panel beside the door. But I would know anyway, even without my vigil. Joanna sat pressed up against the wall, the farthest point from the center of the class. Her once blonde hair had darkened to brown by then, and she wore it pressed behind her ears with a thick headband. She worried her fingers. She almost never looked up, and when she did, she looked scared. She had few friendships. Those that she did have were brief: the new girl or the older girl who was left behind a year. Joanna would cling to these friendships with the grip of an octopus. I mean that her longing would come grabbing at you like a multitude of arms.

Childhood is full of rituals. Of ceremonies that make life familiar and safe. I walked Joanna to her door and stood and watched for years. And then, one day I didn't. I'd like to believe that I had some sort of epiphany. But the

change was simply a matter of circumstance. Joanna was moved to another school, then another, and another, and by the time we were in the Midwest attending the same school again, I had gotten used to an identity unencumbered with Joanna. I was a teenager and Joanna mortified me. Her existence embarrassed me, and so I refused even to look at her.

After a while, Joanna tired of trying on my clothes. She drifted out of the room and began wandering through the house touching all of Mr. Pinkus's belongings. In his study, she peeked into his desk drawer. She found an old shaving brush on the ledge above the bathroom sink, which she stroked along her jaw. Downstairs, for I was following her now, she opened up his curio cabinet and examined his knickknacks: his snuff bottles and glass vases. In the living room she found an African drum and banged it and, when that didn't grab my attention, she pulled down a Mexican Mask hanging on the wall and tried it on. "Boo, boo." She laughed.

"Joanna," I finally said. "Those aren't even my things."

"Well, then let me help you. I'll write you a shopping list." All this said from behind a green skeleton face and bright red fangs.

"No, I don't want help," I said crossly. "Just let me finish and then we can go up to Daddy's."

"You never want anything from me." Joanna flung the mask aside and threw herself down on the ugly brown couch. She picked up a magazine and began idly flipping pages. After a few minutes she settled on an article. Slowly,

her right hand drifted across the couch and began pulling at the hairs of the upholstery in the same nervous way she pulled at her own skin.

“Did you know,” Joanna said quietly from behind the magazine, “that he has a new girlfriend?”

“Would you stop pulling at that!”

“What?”

“You’re ruining the furniture. Just leave it alone. This is my place and I’m supposed to take care of it.” I was so angry suddenly that the words came flying out of me on a stream of spit.

“God,” Joanna said. “You need to calm down, Claire. They just took me to dinner, that’s all.”

Whatever else she is, Joanna is not stupid. After she said that we were silent until we left for our father’s house.

It was on the freeway; in my father’s maroon Honda--the car that he was lending to me while he went to Europe, to me and not to Joanna, because Joanna, after our trip across country, never drove again--that we fought. Joanna asked me question. A question as simple as, “So, what’s new? You never tell me anything.” She reached out and touched my arm on the steering wheel.

Maybe it was her touch. Her touch since those tantrums, hers and mine on opposite sides of her locked door, has repelled me. How could we once have kissed, our arms clamped onto each other like vises? I shuddered then. I did not like remembering our need. In that cold building, on that elegant marble staircase, I was as reluctant to let go of her as she was of me. But let go I had.

Now she was right, I never told her anything. What would I have told her? That even alone together she embarrassed me.

“What did you do to your face?” I asked, meaning her make-up.

“Fuck you,” Joanna snarled.

Maybe I’d been waiting for her to say that, to curse me, to give me just one little reason to be rid of her. For, I abruptly pulled the car over onto the shoulder of the freeway and began to scream. “Get out! Get out of this fucking car!”

“It’s not your car!” Joanna yelled back at me. “You just want to hate me. You want to blame me for everything. What are you going to do now Claire, ditch me or run me over?”

“You just shut up.” I screamed so fiercely then at my sister that the words rang between us and we both sucked in our breath with a hissing sound and stared, not at each other, but out our respective windows. Beyond the car the gray waters of the bay churned against the shore. Someone had constructed a giant snake out of twisted pieces of rebar. It seemed to slither towards us through the long grass. Its scales a metallic sheen, its the eyes, the spinning wheels from a baby’s carriage turning slowly in the breeze.

Starting the car, I drove on again in silence. My sister’s body beside me was rigid as a wall. Even though I hadn’t really abandoned her on the shoulder of the freeway, we both knew I had tried.

As soon as we reached our father's house, Joanna bolted ahead of me, pushed through his brightly lit door and rushed up the stairs, slamming herself into the guest bedroom.

"What happened?" My father asked more irritated than surprised.

I looked over his shoulder into the space my sister had just run through. It was as if I could still see Joanna leering at me from behind Mr. Pinkus's green skeleton mask. As if the space itself still held her imprint. There wasn't a sound from upstairs, but I knew Joanna was listening. I rolled my eyes and grimaced. "Oh Dad, you know Joanna." Then, before my father could ask anything else, I said, "I'll be back in the morning to drive you to the airport."

"I already have a ride."

"With who? I already told you I would do it." I was backing up, but I stopped on the threshold. I could see from the way my father hesitated, clearing his throat and shuffling impatiently, that he had something to say to me.

"Alison Green," He looked pleased. "She remembers meeting you. Do you remember her?"

"That woman from the restaurant who wouldn't call you back?"

My father nodded and chuckled. "Well, I guess she changed her mind. She said she'd be happy to drop Joanna on our way. She's coming with me to Europe."

I shook my head. Bits and pieces, images that hadn't formed a coherent picture, suddenly did. Of course my father wouldn't have gone alone to Europe.

"Isn't it marvelous?" He was beaming with satisfaction.

From the upstairs bedroom, as if on queue, the door opened and Joanna's head appeared hanging over the top of the stair rail. At first she was laughing. "Ha, ha," Her mouth open, her curly hair the color of rusted springs. Then that odd brittle laughter became a snarl, "You don't know what a bitch your little darling is. And you think she's so wonderful."

"Oh for Christ's sake," my father muttered. "What did you do?"

I shrugged and bolted for his car.

From above my head my sister continued to scream. "That's it. I'll never speak to you again!"

My key in the ignition, my foot on the gas, I sped away from them both, down the hill towards the blue little house waiting in the flats. Joanna's voice rang in my ears, so I rolled the windows down in an effort to blow her away. Not so easy a task I found out. For like my father when he was gone, Joanna's absence left a grand and resounding space, gouged in my life. A space like a vacant theater or an empty ballroom, just begging to be filled.

Then Evelyn moved in, and I crossed a threshold and forgot about Joanna and my father for awhile.

EVE

“You read.” Evelyn suggested.

We were sitting at the scarred wooden table in the kitchen of our little blue house; the newspaper spread open between us. The kitchen was a small sunny room with a tiny pantry that opened into the back yard. The table sat under three large windows that overlooked an alley running between our house--our house, how we loved to say that at first--and the neighbor's.

I looked down and, with my pink Magic Marker poised, read aloud from the Help Wanted section. “*Counter Person, Oakland, exp'd Hardworker. Food knowledge. What's food knowledge?*”

Evelyn shook her head. She began to delicately peel the shell off a hard boiled egg, one of the few foods allowed on her new diet.

“How about this? *Waitress--exp'd people need for busy dwntwn restaurant? .*” I flipped back a page and scanned the columns. “*Escorts,*” I read. “*Discreet company for the man of distinction!*”

“What are you doing?” Evelyn laughed. “Come on, be serious.”

“This is so boring. Let's just go on the interview. It's so bleak looking for a job. This'll be fun.”

“We've hardly looked at all, really.” Evelyn bit through the creamy white flesh of her egg. “At least not with any intention.”

She was right. Although each morning we read aloud to one another from the help wanted section and marked our choices, we had never made any calls or

gone on any interviews. Instead, we tossed the paper into the garbage cans in the alley outside our kitchen window. We were busy with other things, we told each other. Evelyn had converted her bedroom at her mother's into a dark room, and now drove back and forth each day between her mother's and our little blue house. I had enrolled in a summer class on the history of modern architecture that met each morning on the Berkeley campus from 10:00 until 12:30. In the afternoons I roamed the bookstores on Telegraph Avenue. Berkeley used to have the highest ratio of bookstores per capita in the United States. I don't know if that's true anymore, but it was in 1979. Hardly a block without a bookstore, or a man, sitting with a towel spread in front of him, selling Thoreau or Nietzsche or a cookbook. More often than not though, I'd abandon the bookstores and walk up from the flats and into the hills, following Joanna and my old tracks. Like a migrating animal, I'd find myself in front of one of the many houses my father had rented in the six intervening years, between his first move to Berkeley and the completion of his house. I never went up to the doors or rang the bells. And I never hung around very long. I don't know what I thought I would find. They were beautiful houses of varying architectural styles. Once I saw a station wagon pull up and unload a car full of children and a mother carrying grocery bags. Once I thought I saw a dog I used to know, but when I called her name, she slunk into the shadows.

Even though Evelyn and I didn't really want jobs, we continued our morning ritual of reading through the Help Wanted Section. It was as if we believed that the perfect job would pop out of the page, lit up like a marquee. But

it was now well into the summer. We were both broke and it was time to make some money.

It wasn't the desire for money though, that caught my attention when I read the advertisement for Escorts. The allure lay elsewhere, and had been planted some time ago, purely by chance, by a girl named Rose McGregor.

I'd met Rose McGregor earlier in the year, when she'd sat in the back of the lecture hall of my astronomy class. A class I later failed, for I had thought I would be gazing at stars, but instead I was confounded by a maze of mathematical theories. Rose, on the other hand, hardly ever showed up, but that didn't matter because she was the sharpest student in the room. She could see through the rows of numbers on the blackboard the way some women go through a rack of clothes, always picking the perfect item, the exact fit. One afternoon over a cup of coffee, she told me a secret. Sipping the foam off the top of her cappuccino she confessed to being a topless dancer. "They like Coeds." She'd giggled.

Rose's hair was cut short--its left half streaked with purple. She was a little overweight; the way college girls often are, both opulent and firm. That day she wore a large t-shirt that hung off one shoulder revealing a bra strap that dug into her pink flesh.

I don't think I said much more than, "Really." I wasn't shocked, but I didn't have any revelations of that nature to share in return. "There was one night," she continued, "when I let a couple bring me home. They paid me a hundred dollars to bathe me in their bathtub."

After she said that we changed the subject, talking instead about the midterm I expected to fail, she to ace. Then I quickly left the table. I didn't want to hear anymore. What she had told me was utterly beautiful and horrifying. I could see it all so clearly: the bathing of this girl's pale pink, almost marbled flesh, like the polishing of a Roman statue. And this couple who needed, for the purpose of my fantasy, to remain faceless. There was too much behind her story that excited me, and I sensed that the details, particularly Rose's details, would ruin it.

Now I said to Evelyn, "Tomorrow! We'll make our job calls tomorrow. Besides, you always told me how you wanted to explore other people's lives." I began to imitate her. Gazing up into the far reaches of our kitchen ceiling, I declared. "What do you dream, Claire. I have so many dreams. I want to work at a Carnival. I want to pretend to have the life of a waitress. I want to write!"

Evelyn wiped her fingers thoughtfully with her napkin. This was a challenge I knew she would not be able to resist. "Just for a lark," she finally said, "I'll go. But only if you call."

A woman with a tired voice answered the phone; behind the voice, the sound of a television set rose and fell. She told us to meet her in the Denny's parking lot across the bay, just outside Sausalito. She would wait for us in a silver coupe.

Evelyn followed me upstairs to my bedroom. "What should we wear?" She stood in my doorway, her thin brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a blouse with a Peter Pan collar and a pair of baggy jeans.

“Something sexy, maybe.” I grinned at her from the mirror where I was already curling my eyelashes. “You can borrow something of mine.”

Evelyn opened my closet door. “You’re going to miss your class,” she said as she began browsing through my clothes.

That morning I wore a leopard-print halter-top and tight black jeans. Evelyn put on my black wraparound dress. We braided her hair with a brilliant pink scarf.

At the ages of twenty and twenty-one, could we really have looked so ludicrous? When I see girls dressed the way we were then, sexy and heedless, their faces still round with baby fat, their stride hesitant, suggestive, and yet threatening, challenging someone to take them on, I wonder how I ever thought I could manage it, remain unscathed. Free-fall through my life.

The woman sitting in the silver coupe had white-blonde hair set in curlers under a blue net. She seemed old to me, but I realize now that she was probably only in her mid-thirties. Eve (Evelyn had insisted on the way that we change our names; however, I refused to change mine) sat in the front seat beside the woman, and I climbed into the back, sinking down into her plush gray upholstery. The car had Venetian blinds on the windows, so that the sunlight came through in brilliant diagonals, slicing Evelyn and the woman, all of us, into long, thin strips of white light.

“The guy calls me,” the woman explained. “Then I call you and give you his number. Remember when you call back to describe yourselves. They like

that, little details they can think about while you're on your way over. And remember your watch. I get twenty-five out of every hundred."

"Can we go together?" Evelyn asked.

At this the woman looked from Evelyn to me. "Have you two ever done anything like this?"

"No," I said quietly.

"Well, you can go together if they'll pay. It's really up to you. Just make sure I get twenty-five out of every hundred. You can split the rest any way you want."

Back in Evelyn's Karmann Ghia we were both silent until we had crossed the Richmond Bridge. "What did you think?" I finally ventured.

"Well, I think we should go home, put on lipstick, and wait by the phone."

"You're kidding. You want to do this?"

"Uh-huh." Evelyn smiled, keeping her eyes on the road ahead of her. In 1979 the new freeway had not yet been built. You still had to drive through Richmond--not around and over it--and it was easy to mistake one stop light for another, to make the wrong turn and get lost. "Of course I do. Don't you."

"I want something." I looked away from Evelyn and out the window. A row of identical housing developments littered the waterfront. Low buildings painted mustard yellow and olive green, the kinds of colors that even fresh in the can look dirty.

By the time we had returned home from the interview, Evelyn was miles ahead of me. She charged into the little blue house, planted herself next to the telephone and read *The Waste Land* while she waited for the phone to ring. As soon as the first call came, Evelyn dialed the number of the motel room the woman had given her and introduced herself as Eve. When she got off the phone she told me the man said he liked little girls, so she changed quickly into a white dress with heart-shaped buttons down the front and wiped off most of her makeup.

When she came downstairs and saw me still dressed in my leopard halter-top and tight jeans, Evelyn said, “I think you look a little sluttish for this guy. He sounded so sophisticated. Debonair.” She was clutching a pocket book with a gold snap closure that I knew had once belonged to her mother.

I shook my head and followed her out the door. Evelyn went into the motel while I sat in the car and waited. I’d lost my appetite for this enterprise. Evelyn sailed off in her billowing white baby-doll dress like a balloon that was drifting farther and farther from my grasp. But a few minutes later she came back and rapped on the window. “He wants both of us.”

Inside the room, the man sitting on the edge of the bed was the spitting image of George C. Scott. “Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“I can’t believe this.” I grabbed Evelyn’s arm. “He even sounds like him.”

“I know,” Evelyn giggled.

I threw back my shoulders. “Scotch, please.”

“You’ll find what you need in that little refrigerator. Eve and I were just finishing our champagne.” And he lifted his glass to Evelyn.

“Champagne’s fine with me, too.” I poured myself a glass from the bottle on top of the little refrigerator.

And then this man with the face of George C. Scott leaned back against the pillows and opened his arms to both of us.

Ever since we’d read Colette’s *The Other One* in college, Evelyn and I had talked about sleeping together. It was a subject we spoke of in low voices; the idea of it, its secrecy and exclusion of men, made us feel independent, as if we had truly left home. Certainly it was not what our mothers expected.

What shocked me about touching Evelyn, touching Eve—for that was who she was on those nights—was how delicate and fragile she felt. Her jaw, her tongue, her teeth, were all tiny versions of the mouths of men I had kissed. It repelled me, this delicacy, and yet, walking into that motel room, I felt like a man. Suddenly I was the one in control; I was the one to leave. The idea, as I had understood it in the woman’s silver coupe that morning, was to fuck them and leave. And that idea fascinated me.

It fascinated Evelyn more. After just one other encounter together--with two men visiting from Colombia, men we were convinced were drug lords (for they paid for an entire night, kept us till dawn in a suite of hotel rooms high above the city and, when we left, two other girls showed up to take our places)--I got a job a few blocks away at the health food restaurant, but Evelyn continued to go out on calls. Within a few days she had cut her hair into a pageboy, a style we

thought looked very elegant, very French. She wandered around the house in my silk pajamas and a Chinese bathrobe she'd bought at a thrift store. One afternoon she took my black wraparound dress home to her mother and had her copy it. Like her weight loss from dieting, these things happened right in front of me, gradually, a little more each day, almost unnoticeably, until suddenly one night I heard Evelyn answer the phone in my voice. I mean that the inflections were mine. She raised her voice at the end of each sentence; the way people had always complained I did.

Evelyn was working only three nights a week--Thursday night through Sunday morning. At the end of a month she had saved over two thousand dollars. Perhaps because I was working for meager wages and tips, or perhaps because I was alone so much then, those four weeks seemed to stretch out and around us, to envelop us in a secret world. For there was no one else who knew what we were doing, and it was *we*: Evelyn was taking bits and pieces of me off with her into the night. My cashmere sweater thrown over her shoulder was forgotten in an apartment in Walnut Creek.

I wasn't just flattered; I was thrilled. In her transformation Evelyn chose my strangest quirks to imitate: the way I ran, shaking my head back and forth like a pendulum, or how, when I sat crossing my legs at the knee, I would cross them again at the ankle.

In the middle of this long month, Evelyn was robbed outside our little blue house coming home one night while I was sleeping

Shaking me awake she said, "Claire, Claire, wake up, we were robbed."

She must have said this many times, because I heard her voice for a long time before I opened my eyes.

Evelyn was standing beside my bed, back-lit by the light streaming in from the hallway. For a moment I couldn't bring her into focus. When I did I saw that she looked more irritated than scared. "Would you please wake up," she said, crossing her arms over her chest and frowning down at me.

The sleeping--specifically the ability to sleep alone--had arrived soon after Evelyn moved into the little blue house. At first I would wait up for the tippity-tap of her high heels on the walkway, the sound of her key in the lock, her "hello" and "good night" and the quick recap of her evening when she found me still reading. Once she told me a man tried to force his friend on her, a customer who hadn't paid and whom she didn't want. "I sweet-talked my way out of that one," she said proudly. The next day she went back and threw rocks at the man's house, breaking some of his windows. Yet even this story barely permeated my sleep. As the month progressed, my ability to sleep--in fact, to conk right out--became more pronounced. For the first time in my remembered past, I slept straight through the night without awakening. As Evelyn receded further into the night, sleep enveloped me like a friend. I was zippered shut in it.

"Claire, we were robbed," Evelyn repeated. A guy had run up to her and grabbed her favorite pocket book right out of her hand. "You know," she said. "It's the black one with the gold snap closure that belonged to my mother."

"Where?" I asked.

“Right outside, right now. He was coming down the street from the direction of the Co-Op.”

There was a liquor store across the street from the Co-Op I reminded Evelyn. He must have been coming from there.

“I’m tired,” I said. “Are you going to call the police?”

Evelyn bit her lip and frowned. “No, he didn’t get that much. It’s just that that was my mother’s purse.”

“Sleep in here.” I slid over in the bed.

Evelyn sighed and sat down beside me. “We were robbed,” she said again.

But, it was only Evelyn who was robbed, and I was already drifting back to sleep.

The next afternoon Evelyn brought a dog home from the pound. A mangy thing with a brown coat that resembled Mr. Pinkus’s ugly upholstery. The dog, whose name I have chosen to forget, liked to chew on the chairs and couch while we were gone. To wrestle with a fur that resembled his own.

“Bad dog.” Evelyn and I said in unison when we came home from grocery shopping and found he’d (or she’d, I have no idea of the sex of this beast) mauled the arm of the sofa. The upholstery was matted and stripped bare in patches. A sound came from the dog like a soft chuckle. We locked the dog in the bathroom.

“What good is the dog going to do you locked in the house?” I asked Evelyn.

“The dog is to protect you, Claire.”

We kept the dog. We kept the dog even though I knew it was ruining Mr. Pinkus's furniture because I was afraid if I turned out the dog Evelyn would leave, too.

Then, one evening a call came for Evelyn, and she asked me to go in her place because she was having dinner with her mother. She was dressed in her old clothes--a skirt and matching jacket set her mother had sewn for her--and although she was slimmer, she looked like Evelyn again.

"Why can't you just cancel?"

"Oh just do it," Evelyn said. "It's some older couple. It's a gift, not for her, for him. It's his fantasy for her to watch."

Somewhere in this tangled description I thought I saw Rose's story swimming towards me. A vision of a girl, helped by two strangers, rising from the bath water. I have a midterm, I thought, but I said yes.

I rode BART over to the city. I thought if I don't drive and take the train, I can study for my midterm. None of the words--of course--made sense in the glaring light of the train. And it was so fast. The doors of the train slid shut with a silent click and we hurtled forward, sucked through the tunnel that ran under the Bay itself. I blinked my eyes and suddenly we were in the city and the doors opened again with a *Whoosh*, and I was blown forward and out into the night.

On the phone the man had been brief: it's true, he wanted his new girlfriend to watch him with another woman, but when they opened their door I realized she was the woman, I was the girl. They were both so old, so old to me

then. He said he was fifty-seven. The girlfriend I guessed, was somewhere in her forties. “Does that bother you?” he wanted to know.

For a moment I thought he was being kind to ask, but I knew he wouldn't have cared if I had said yes. He would have convinced himself otherwise. So I said what I thought he wanted to hear. “I've always been curious about older men.” I wasn't curious, and I wished Evelyn was there.

The man lay down on the living room rug while the woman took me into their bathroom. I undressed in front of her while she kept telling me I was beautiful, as if that was something I needed to hear. I wanted to tell her to shut up, that this was not a seduction happening here. When I was naked and about to leave the bathroom she said, “Wait one minute.” She stepped in front of me--almost forcefully, almost pushing me aside--reached across the sink and grabbed a glass bottle from the counter. “Here,” she said. “Let me.” Then she sprayed me, showered me from head to toe with her own perfume. I was so startled that I slapped at my own skin. Her perfume had a thick, pungent odor and stung my flesh.

This is the image that has stuck with me and followed me through the years. The image of that poor woman camouflaging me with her own scent. More than anything else, I remember her sad gesture, and my own naked, frantically waving arms. More than the man underneath me, or the woman standing to the side, watching. It was quiet in the room and although the man hardly moved at all, it was over very fast. Afterwards the woman followed me

back into the bathroom and stood there, looking at both our reflections while I dressed.

“You’re so elegant.” she said, finally. “How do you make love with such elegance?”

I thought, because I don’t care. Because it’s not love we were making and I’ve been watching myself even more closely than you’ve been watching me. But I only shrugged and laughed and pocketed my money. I should have told her.

We’re all just a bunch of dogs, tearing each other to bits.

The train ride home was much slower. BART chugged along on an elevated rail, winding through the dark streets of Oakland. All the stations were dimly lit and barren of people, as if the lights had been blown out, as if a war or a plague had descended upon the landscape and I was the only one left alive, traveling through the night. I didn’t even attempt to open my books.

FIRE SEASON

My father returned in the middle of August, in the heart of the fire season. Up and down the coast nine forest fires raged. Household water was now restricted to minimal use. So minimal in fact that I'd been forced to water Mr. Pinkus's backyard patch of grass with our meager dirty dishwater. Even the ivy, which had been a lush, dark green at the beginning of my stay, was parched and brown. Even the weeds had dried to a dull yellow and died.

My father called to tell me he'd had a splendid time. Everywhere he went, he told me, people marveled at how busy he was. There was Paris to hear about, and a villa in Italy where each room was covered--floor, walls and ceiling--in white tiles. There, in this vast ancient villa, nestled in the hills on the outskirts of Rome, he had lunch with an Italian film star. One of the actresses in Fellini's *Casanova*. "We ate until dark. In this truly pristine and splendid palace. I've never had such a meal. They served us freshly slaughtered veal."

I tried to imagine such a place. A home with an interior as white and virginal as a fresh winter snowstorm, and my father sitting in the middle of it with some big eyed movie star.

More than his words, I remember his eager voice on the phone. "What have you been up to?" Had I been working and taken a summer class as he'd suggested? Did I have any more thoughts of what I would do after graduation next year?

What could I really say? To all his questions I responded with lies or evasions, half-truths. I told him I was doing well in my architectural history class when in fact I was barely passing. I told him I had waitressed all summer, a partial truth. On the other end of the line I could hear my father's impatient breathing, and I could tell, just by the way he listened, that he was eager to get off the phone. "Listen," he interrupted. "I need my car back. Can you drive up tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll come up and see you."

After I hung up the phone I sat for a long time in the front hallway. I could still hear his voice, booming in the room. The clatter and roar of an invading army. For the first time in years, maybe in my life up to that day, I dreaded seeing my father. For no matter what I did, my life seemed small in comparison: a disfigured dwarf of a life, limping to catch up to his. Still, the next afternoon I drove his maroon Honda back up the hill to his house, and came upon my father in his succulent garden embracing Alison Green, the woman whom I had met at the South American restaurant, the woman who had just returned from Europe with him, the woman who would soon become his fifth wife.

They were standing in front of the house, on a rise above the driveway where Joanna and I had helped my father plant agave and ice plant years ago. My father lifted a gloved hand and waved a greeting to me as I parked the car. Then, just as I came up the walkway, he quickly reached for Alison, grabbed her by both shoulders and pulled her towards him in a brief, bear hug. Nothing passionate, nothing sensual, but surely definite. Alison stood there like a great tree in the

middle of his embrace. Her hands were bare and dirty and she held them away from him, out to her sides, so she wouldn't soil his clothes.

When I reached them my father swung his arm around my neck and kissed the top of my head. We all stood there for a moment, my father between the two of us, one hand still on Alison's shoulder, the other around my neck. Then, abruptly and at the same moment, he disentangled himself from both of us. "Well," my father said. "Here we all are." Then he pointed to his century plant. "Look," he said. "It's finally bloomed."

While the rest of Northern California burned, my father's garden had thrived. For, sure enough, from out of the prickly base of the plant, a giant stalk shot up, a great pinnacle of white blossoms towering over all our heads.

"With the right care," Alison said thoughtfully, "it will flower more frequently."

It occurred to me to ask her what the right care might be, but I never did. Instead I turned to my father. I hadn't seen him in nearly six weeks and now here he stood, beaming at both Alison and this giant stalk of a plant, with a brand new pair of garden gloves hanging from his hands like ill-fitting oven mitts.

There was a moment of awkward silence and then my father asked me. "You do remember Allison Green, don't you?"

"You cut your hair," I said to my father.

"We thought it looked a bit too wild, like a mad professor." Alison said affectionately.

“I liked it,” I snapped. And I had. For now his round, bald crown was exposed. A soft pink scalp that looked like a wound. Where was the man who flew in and out of my childhood, whose soft gray hair sprouted from his head like plumed wings?

Alison looked down at her dirty hands and began wiping them slowly on her skirt. She stood with her feet slightly apart. Her sandals were soled, I noticed, with the recycled rubber from tires; she was solidly planted in front of my father’s house. After her hands were sufficiently clean, she reached forward and held one out to me. “Your father was just telling me about you,” she said.

I tell you I wasn’t prepared for Alison and certainly not for her offering hand. If I had been younger, I could have loved or hated her. I could have clung to her or cried.

Instead of taking Alison’s hand, I said to my father. “What were you saying?”

“Alison has a daughter only a few years younger than you. She’s just about to enter college,” my father replied. “I thought maybe you could give her some advice.”

“About college?”

He shrugged. “It was just an idea.”

“Well,” said Alison wading back into the bed of ice plant. “Nice to see you again.” She bent over and began pulling up clumps of crab grass.

“Listen,” my father said, taking his keys from my hand and turning to walk me towards the car. “Why don’t you have us over for dinner, cook a meal

for your old man? Then we can all get to know each other. Alison, what do you think?"

"Fine." Alison called without looking up.

"We'll have to think of something special to make." Evelyn said when I told her.

"I don't know. I was thinking of something easy like spaghetti."

"Oh no, he's just been to Europe." Evelyn insisted. "He's been in Italy. It's full of spaghetti. He's been eating stuffed veal. He'll expect you to do something special."

"It's no big deal." I told Evelyn. But of course it was. My father's visits had always been a very big deal.

Over the years he had brought his girlfriends and his future wives home to meet our mother, his little family. He brought them across country and sat them down in front of her in her own living room. Our mother, out of pride and politeness, even dressed up for the occasion, spraying on a heavy scented perfume--she still had one of the bottles of *Je Reveins* our father had bought her in Paris--and painting her mouth with a brilliant red lipstick that Joanna and I dubbed "poison red" after the witch in Snow White. For these visits she piled her platters of good Misen china high with stuffed grape leaves and tried, I suppose, to have an opinion of these women, although I doubt she could hear much of what they said over the din in her ears, the constant ringing bell of our father. This repetitive fiasco came to an abrupt end sometime during the year Joanna stopped

speaking to our father. The door was shut. Our mother forbade him entrance to her house, and I was forced to wait for him outside. What had he wanted with those visits? On more than one occasion and to more than one woman I have heard my father say, "Jealousy is not a civilized emotion." Now, suddenly he was bringing someone home to me, into my living room and for me to feed. Believe me when I tell you I desperately wanted this to be no big deal. But it was years too late for that. I was still the child waiting on the sidewalk with the same mixture of dread and excitement. Outside my bedroom window I could almost see him rolling down the hill towards us, his presence filling our little, blue house like rising tide.

Evelyn and I poured over cookbooks finally deciding on *coq au vin*. I'd never made *coq au vin* before. It was a dish that seemed incredibly complicated, simmering for hours. Over the next few days, we shopped and prepared the house, even renting a rug shampooer for the Oriental rug in the living room. A disastrous mistake it turned out, because it shredded that ancient old rug beyond repair.

Don't you remember the first time you cooked for your parent, in your own little house, and you set a table just as you had learned all those years at your mother's side? Don't you remember the crisp smell of ironed linen, the polished goblets of ice water and wine you placed at each setting? The fresh bouquet of daisies in the middle of the table. And how you prepared, not just your home, but yourself. We were meticulous and slightly ridiculous in all our preparations. The shampooed rug, the newly bought and ironed linen, the matching hand towels

hung side by side in the bathroom. The morning my father came to dinner Evelyn even agreed to hide the dog. Whatever happened to that dog? It disappeared as easily as it had appeared, into the back of Evelyn's Karmenn Ghia and in all the craziness that followed and my hasty departure, I never thought to ask where it had gone.

And yet, if I had listened I would have heard the sound of my own feet dragging. If for a moment I had lifted my head and opened my eyes, I might have noticed Evelyn's odd excitement pitched even higher than mine. In the liquor store, she insisted that we buy an expensive Chambertin, paying a price that seemed like an exorbitant amount of money for a bottle of wine that was meant to be poured into a pot of chicken. But, who was thinking of money? Money had showered down around us that month, around our heads and bodies, like all the rain that wouldn't fall.

"God, Evelyn," I said finally. "They're not going to notice all this trouble. Besides, this recipe says to make it with an ordinary red wine. That's the whole point of the dish." I said this, but the truth was I hoped they would notice. I suppose I hoped to impress them.

Evelyn just glared at me.

When my father arrived he said, "I remember this old place."

He was a tall man and our house was little. From the front door, he could have reached his arms out and embraced someone standing in the kitchen. His long arms could have stretched and snaked up the stairs. Or so it seemed to me.

Alison was holding a small jade tree and three dishtowels in her arms. “Here.” She set her gifts down on the scarred, kitchen tabletop. “A gift from your father and me.”

“How nice,” I heard Evelyn say. She had removed her glasses, and with a little apron tied over her slacks, and her new, short haircut and high heeled sandals, she looked like the hostess at some sophisticated cocktail party.

In fact, we had both dressed up for the occasion. I had put on a long Indian print dress and amber earrings, shaped like tear drops that my father had given to me years ago. I had painted my lips red, although a deeper shade than the poison red my mother used to wear, and I had even applied black eyeliner along my lids, slanting the stroke up at the corners, in the same way I had seen her do. Standing in front of the mirror, before I had come down the stairs to answer their ringing bell, I saw an image that looked both familiar and mysterious. My own mother hurrying out the door to follow my father’s receding steps, the sting of her perfume lingering in the empty hallway.

My father noticed it, too. “In that getup you look like Elaine,” he said. Turning to Alison my father repeated. “She looks just like her mother.”

“Dad,” I said, scowling at the floor, feeling like a marionette whose strings had just been yanked, “You remember Evelyn, don’t you?”

Evelyn smiled up at my father.

“Oh, yes!” my father said. “Good to see you.” He said this with such enthusiasm that I was certain he couldn’t possibly recall meeting her before. And truly, how could he remember her, for here she stood completely transformed

from the girl who had come over while I lay sweating through the residue of a speed high. At that time, my father had been so eager in his flight out the door that he'd barely said hello. Yet now, here he was lifting one of Evelyn's small hands into both of his. "It's a pleasure you're joining us, too."

What I remember most about this meal were the omissions. The omission--for instance--of anyone's comment on the *coq au vin*, on any of the food or wine. The omission of a toast. The omission even, of my father's voice, for he was exceptionally quiet during this meal. Alison chattered brightly on about her plans for my father's garden: they were going to remove the succulents and plant fig and olive trees. She told us about the Shakespeare festival they were due to attend in the fall, and her daughter's exhaustive college search. At this point my father did say, "Claire, what do you think of Bard? I think Berkeley's as good as any East Coast Ivy league school." I didn't even know where Bard was.

Throughout the meal, throughout all these brief conversations and until our last course, Evelyn trod quietly, in and out of the dining room, her movements as constant as a ticking clock.

Then, while we were finishing our salad, as if an alarm had suddenly gone off in my father's head, he focused in on Evelyn.

"What do you plan to do in the fall?" he wanted to know.

"Finish my degree in photography."

"What kinds of photographs do you like?"

Evelyn set her fork down. "Still life's."

“I thought you like to photograph people.” I said. “All your pictures are of people.”

“Oh no Claire, you’re wrong. I’m interested in the arrangement of objects.”

I felt a tingling sensation along my spine, as if a spider had crawled down my shirt. I stared at Evelyn. Her profile--with her hair slicked back and her glasses gone--was as precise and distant as the etched image on an ancient coin. This was the girl whose skin my fingers had read like Braille, but I no longer seemed to know her.

Alison’s eyes flickered from Evelyn to me. “Maybe you take pictures of people as if they are objects.”

“Exactly,” my father said. He cleared his throat, and I knew he was about to launch into a lecture. He started to say something about subject turning into object through the lens. How all art objectifies its subject. “Why, it is in the very act of gazing that we are altered,” He told us. “A photograph fixes a moment, and just like that.” My father snapped his fingers over the table. “It fixes a person into an object, into a stilled life.”

I thought this was rather poetic for my father and I was going to tell him so, but when I opened my mouth I heard myself say, “What? What the hell are you talking about? You’ve never even seen her photos.” I directed this mostly at Evelyn, but if she heard me she did not acknowledge it.

“We are talking theoretically, Claire,” my father said.

“Yes,” Evelyn echoed. “Well, yes I’d say that’s what I’m trying to do.” She seemed immensely pleased with my father’s description.

I threw down my new linen napkin, pushed myself away from the table and walked into the living room. I sat down on the couch--on the tattered and chewed upholstery still slightly damp from dog spit. Behind me I heard my father say, “If you’re really interested I know a few people you could talk to.”

For a moment I couldn’t hear anything. From out of what depth does this image now rise to the surface. My father leaning forward over that mute, bucking woman on a bed. “Fantastic,” he is saying. “Isn’t she fantastic?” We are sealed, deep within Harrison’s studio. Harrison himself all but blocks the doorway, laughing. An image lies before us, an image beyond naked, sealed beneath a pristine lacquered coating. All our eyes are focused on this beautiful frozen woman, subject and object, dummy, corruption, still life.

Suddenly my father was standing beside me. I thought for a moment he was going to say something about Mr. Pinkus’s house, about the mauled couch and chairs, and the shredded Oriental rug under his feet, but he didn’t. He didn’t seem to notice any of his surroundings. Instead he asked, “How’s your sister, have you spoken to Joanna yet?”

I shook my head. “Haven’t you?”

“Well, I was going to call her tomorrow, but you know you should really try to speak with her, too.” He looked sad and a little confused, as if he’d wandered onto a road he didn’t know. As if he’d missed a turn that lay far behind him.

I took him by the elbow then and turned him away from the ruined living room. I knew he wasn't capable of noticing the changes. Later, he would hear from Pinkus about what a disaster I left the house in, and only then, would he be upset and write me a mean-spirited letter, complaining that I'd destroyed his friendship. This was still some time off, though. Now I led him back into the dining room where the women were waiting, where Alison was just telling Evelyn, "None of my friends thought I should go out with him, but he was like a big dog, wagging his tail every time I opened my door."

Somewhere there was a bell ringing, pulling me through the residue of sleep. A bell echoing down a long tunnel. Up ahead, I could see Joanna boarding a plane. She was alone, receding down a long hallway, through the gate and into the open mouth of the airplane. I remember the curve of her narrow back, the way her shoulders pressed forward, the way she clutched her fringed suede purse against her body as if she were shepherding a small child to safety.

When I opened my eyes it took me a few moments to realize the phone was ringing. Evelyn was standing in the doorway of my room. "It's 2:00 A.M.," she said. Neither one of us moved to answer the phone. I thought that it was just another call for Evelyn from a man in the dark. Eventually the phone stopped ringing and we stared at each other, transfixed as much by the silence as by the ringing phone.

"It's over," Evelyn finally said. I understood that she was telling me that the men, their nightly calls and her response to them, were over. She walked

through the doorway and came towards my bed. Without a word she lay down at the foot of the bed, curling up like a cat on top of the blankets at my feet.

I believe she slept for she neither moved nor spoke. But I could have been wrong. She could have been wide awake under her closed lids. I lay above her, stretched the length of the bed, my skin slightly damp and chill as if I were recovering from a fever.

Towards dawn a gray pearlescent light began to illuminate the sky. I heard a tapping at the window pane, and for a moment I thought it had finally started to rain. When I rose to investigate, I thought I saw long fingers reaching to get in, but it was only the pointed tips of the eucalyptus leaves scratching against the glass. Crawling back into bed I fell into a half sleep. I was conscious of the position of my body on the bed, lying on my side, my back to Evelyn, and my face to the luminous window. I could feel the crisp sheet against my skin, wrapped tight around me like a bandage, and sense light slowly brightening the room. I was conscious of the shift of Evelyn's body, the subsiding of the weight of it on the bed when she rose and left the room.

The hang-ups began the very next afternoon. When the phone rang, I was watching a soap opera on the small black and white television set in Mr. Pinkus's living room. Periodically, I have attempted to watch soap operas believing that if I could just follow one of these plots, I would understand my life a little better. But I can't seem to understand the bizarre weaving of each story line, or the way everything suddenly unwinds like a spool of thread tossed carelessly across the floor. And it is so careless. There is a great lack of vigilance in our behavior.

Our eyes must have been sewn shut--I mean Evelyn's and mine. I often dreamed that summer that I was blind, and that no matter what I did, no matter how I stumbled and tore at my eyes in my dreams--I couldn't pry my lids apart.

Evelyn wasn't home that afternoon when the phone rang. She had left me a message saying she would be at her mother's developing some old negatives.

"Hello," I said into the receiver.

On the other end of the line there was a hesitation; I heard a throat being cleared, but then the caller hung up and the line went dead.

I received another call the next day, and two more the day after that. Always when Evelyn was out. Each time, the same: the caller would wait until I said hello, then there would be a brief pause, sometimes the clearing of a throat, before the click and the buzzing sound of the dead line.

The calls, the hang-ups, didn't seem to upset Evelyn much. "They're probably just some bored kids," she said when I asked her. She was bent over a box, sorting through the pile of photographs she had just developed. I sat down beside her and peered over her shoulder and into the box.

She tilted her head and smiled at me and without saying a word she handed me a contact sheet. At first I didn't recognize the girl multiplied across the page; there were dozens of shots from various angles. In all of them I am seated in the corner of our college library, my hair twisted on top of my head in a knot and held in place with a pencil. The pictures must have been taken during the preceding winter, before we had even become friends, because my long swing coat is draped around me like a blanket.

“When did you take these?” I couldn’t remember posing for any of them.

“Mmm.” Evelyn said. “You were so absorbed in your book. I don’t think you even knew I was there. When I saw you sitting there I thought you looked like a Renaissance painting.”

“They are beautiful,” I said. For in truth they were. Only a thin stream of light fell down through a curtain above me, illuminating just a narrow sliver of my face and hands. The rest of the picture--my head, my body, the chair I was seated on, even my book--were cast in deep shadow.

“Evelyn,” I asked softly. For something about those pictures and the fact that they had been taken surreptitiously, that made me want to speak gently. “Did you give our number to any of your guys?”

Evelyn took the contact sheet from my hand and snapped the lid of the box closed. “No,” she informed me. “And I told you, I’m not doing that anymore.”

It was true; she had stopped going out and was home every night. During the day she sometimes disappeared to her mother’s or to run errands. At other times she was just gone and I had no idea where she went. Once I came into the house after work and found a pot of rice still cooking on the stove, only the top layer unburned and edible.

Our summer was almost over. Mr. Pinkus would return shortly and we were due back at school by the end of the following week. Yet, as far as I can remember we had made no preparations, not even the slightest plans for our return to school. All my clothes were still hanging in Mr. Pinkus’s closets. Evelyn’s film canisters still overflowed the refrigerator shelves.

When I look back on that last week all our gestures and conversations appear so obvious. What I missed seeing then seems as insanely predictable as a soap opera plot. (Of course, you say after the fact, how could I have missed noticing that the crippled woman in the wheel chair was only pretending she couldn't walk so that she could win the sympathy of her rival's mate and marry him?) There is a method to madness. A perpetual sameness to it like a broken record. Objects tend to shatter at the weakest point.

When Evelyn spoke to me now she turned away. She kept her face averted, not allowing eye contact. If her gaze happened to stray in my direction, her glance would skirt my face and fall onto my shoulder, or out the window. We said little to one another. A lot of this time I was not looking at Evelyn either. Instead of speaking, we left messages taped to the refrigerator door or on the table in the kitchen. It was as if, by mutual agreement we had decided to move softly, to tread gently around one another and the secret that lay between us. I assumed that this secret was sex, and I was both right and wrong about that. Once though, when I did look up, I found Evelyn watching me thoughtfully from across the room with the sweetest smile on her face. And I mean soft and gentle and maternal in its loving glance.

Yet, still the phone kept ringing. By the end of the week I was jumping every time I heard it.

It never occurred to me that these calls could have come from Joanna. When Joanna left our father's house the summer she was fourteen--boarding a plane alone and returning ahead of me back to our mother's home--she was

deliberate, obstinate even; refusing to speak to our father for over a year. And when she did finally consent to see him again, it did not begin like this: provocatively. She strode towards his waiting form with a stricken but deliberate stride.

At the end of the week, Evelyn brought home a coat, a long swing coat her mother had made for her just like the one I had been wearing in the pictures she had taken of me in the library. She twirled around the living room, the coat sweeping along the floor. And, for the first time since she had begun to copy my clothes and mimic my gestures, I resented her.

“Evelyn,” I said, “that’s my coat.”

She looked so pleased, flouncing down on the floor like a child, the coat melting around her in a great puddle, that I laughed. All the same, I felt an ugly hand groping for me. For even that gesture, the gesture of a child bouncing into a room in her dress up clothes, was more mine than Evelyn’s.

The very next morning when I came back from the grocery store I heard Evelyn talking in the kitchen. It was the sound of her voice, the high girlish lilt to it that struck me, and rang through me like a broken cord. I did something then that I hadn’t done since I was twelve and eavesdropped on Joanna’s phone conversations on the rare occasion when a boy called her. I lifted the hall extension.

“When can I see you again?” I heard my father ask.

I slammed down the phone.

In the kitchen Evelyn was drumming her fingers on the scarred wooden tabletop. She gave me a long, serious look as if I were suddenly her child. “He’s been calling all week. He wants to see me.”

“What happened?”

“He came by when you were at work the other day.”

“I’ll bet he didn’t even remember you.” I sat down at the kitchen table with the grocery bag clutched in my lap.

“Well, he remembered kissing me in here the other night.” Evelyn had not taken her eyes off me since I entered the kitchen. The corners of her mouth were tilted upward in the faintest smile.

“What?” I still didn’t understand what she was saying.

“At dinner,” she said softly, her small eyes magnified behind the thick lenses of her glasses.

Where, I thought looking around the room. Over by the stove? Hidden in the cold, open doorway of the refrigerator? I wanted to ask her about this kiss, where had I been when it had happened? I thought of my father’s wet, sloppy kisses on my forehead and of Evelyn’s delicate jaw, like a tiny mouse trap. The image made me shudder. “Evelyn,” I said. “You can’t do this.”

“He’s the one who keeps calling. He’s the one who invited me out.” At this, she finally looked down. She reached for the bag in my lap and began to empty the groceries onto the kitchen table.

“This is unbelievable. You don’t really want to go out with my father.”

“He’s charming.” Evelyn said. She looked thoughtfully at the jar of artichoke hearts in her hand. She walked over to the pantry and placed it on a shelf with an emphatic little thud. When she swung back around she was no longer smiling. She looked sad and resigned, as if her great knowledge had leaked completely out of its container.

“It was him hanging up on me?”

Evelyn nodded.

Then I heard myself say in the unmistakable voice of Joanna. “Who are you, bitch?”

I have always known that I carry Joanna inside me. It’s my ugly little secret. That all the anger and violence that flows through my sister resides in me too. If I’m not careful, not vigilant, it finds a crevice and seeps through like molten lava.

I left the house. Left Evelyn alone with the groceries. Outside I stood on the front stoop of the little blue house, my hand clinging to the door knob, for a long, long time. I wanted to flee, to dart up the street in a fast and furious rush, not only away from Evelyn and what she had revealed, but also from that voice of my sister. The one that had just burst out of me. I saw myself sprinting with purpose up the block, down the long road to the freeway, all the way out to the ocean, but I couldn’t even lift my feet.

And so I stood, the heat of that August afternoon bearing down on me. In the distance rose the hills that circle Berkeley. The relentless drought had burnt

the grass down to a golden stubble. To my father these hills resembled the body of giant women, her rolling dips and rises. But to me, on that day, with their sun burnt, sheared and exposed scalps, they looked like a vast, bald army surrounding me and stretching as far as the horizon.

It was the mime cavorting down the street that finally caught my eye and reminded me of the phone booth in front of the Co-Op grocery store. He was playing that elementary game of pretending to be trapped in a box, hands raised and pounding against an imaginary surface. Shutting myself inside the telephone booth I thought again of Joanna. Of the voice that rose and rose inside her for years, finally spilling out into acts of anger and anguish. Once a fey, delicate child that even I--younger and smaller than she--could beat her up. After years of being taunted and chased out of school by an older group of girls, our mother had finally taught her how to fight. How to scratch and kick and open her mouth and scream bloody murder. My sister grew nails as sharp as daggers and had such a pair of lungs on her that she never had to back down again.

Later still our my mother had said to my sister, “You can’t allow your father to treat you like this. You must tell him to stop.”

“How?” Joanna had sobbed.

“Your father responds to firmness.” Her voice had been tight and sad. How do you tell these things to your child?

For a while, Joanna had silenced even our father. As obstinate as those soap opera girls, she refused his phone calls and returned even his Christmas gifts. I could not remember what had prompted this action. “He put me down,” Joanna

said when I asked her once. “I knew he thought I was worthless.” Another time she told me, “He chased me with a broom.” I don’t know what happened. Joanna is good at keeping secrets. It is all possible.

Outside my stuffy little phone booth the mime was shrinking under the weight of his box until he was crouching on the pavement like a turtle under his shell.

As he sank down, Joanna’s face rose before my eyes as if she were peering in through the glass of the phone booth. How colorless Evelyn looked in comparison to Joanna. How bland and white and silent. Like that mime. She’d felt like such a balm to all Joanna’s exaggerations. To my sister’s voice. Most of the people I’ve known in my life are murky next to my sister. Perhaps that is my choice. The purity of Joanna’s anger and its vividness--though irreplaceable--are terrifying, sometimes even brutal.

“Darling,” my mother had told Joanna. “You must threaten him.”

But, of course, I couldn’t.

When my father answered the phone he said, “Good, I’m so glad you called. I was just talking to Lenny; she says you need to start thinking about your thesis. Any ideas?”

Lenny who? I thought. Then, I realized with a shock that he was talking about my college advisor. My father was planning my return to school.

“I’m leaving.”

“What?” He said.

“You can’t keep calling Evelyn.” These words came out very softly. I stuffed the rest, all the rest of the words I wanted to say but did not know how to say, back inside me.

There was a long pause. I could hear my father breathing and twice he cleared his throat--as if he too wasn’t sure what to say. As if he was gauging me.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. His word, sorry. The sound I heard in his voice, the way he drew out the r’s--soooooo, was a sound I remembered from my childhood. It resounded in my ear like an echo trapped in the chamber of a bell that has just been rung. I saw again the man waiting in the cold, with a baffled look on his face, pressing his finger into the bell and twitching with irritation at the closed door of our mother’s house.

“You won’t tell Alison?” My father asked.

I felt dry. My throat, my eyes, my heart dry little shells, as brittle as the grass that covered these sun baked hills. “No, I’m not going to say anything to Alison,” I said very fast. “I don’t care what you do to her. That’s your territory, but you can’t come over and do this shit in mine.” When I said this I was pretending to be someone else. Someone who was capable of saying such strong words to a father.

“You’re right,” my ridiculous father said. Then he laughed. “You’re so right.” He sounded grateful; he sounded oddly happy.

After I hung up the phone I stood in the booth opening and closing the sliding door, creating a little breeze on my face. I liked the way I could control the level of noise with the movement of the door, a child’s game of sticking

fingers in ears. Along Telegraph Avenue the traffic snarled; a car had overheated in the afternoon heat and was blocking the intersection. The black suited, white-faced mime sprang up in the air and did a sort of dancing little jig. Waving his hand at me, he ran across the parking lot and disappeared into the traffic, chasing an imaginary balloon, or was it an airplane? Something in flight before him.

That evening Evelyn and I went to a neighborhood bar, one that we had never entered before, but had always talked about visiting. We didn't say much but watched the fog gather and cover the windows in a heavy gray mist. Everything that had happened sat quietly there between us like the heavy glass ashtray on the table. That giant that we had awakened was feigning sleep. A man approached our table and introduced himself. He seemed foreign to me. A little foreign man, with a heavy mustache and a ring of short dark hair around a shiny bald spot. When I stood beside him I could look down on this naked little patch and feel comforted by it. Like the soft spot on an infant's head, vulnerable and exposed. Kenneth's eyes, though, were a cold, nearly colorless blue. So pale they were almost white. Piercing eyes, I thought later, like mirrors, like tiny traps. Perhaps the foreign quality of Kenneth Brock was the result of his money and his travels. He bought us a round of drinks, and then another. A drink with fruit in it and rum and some other liquor that felt like smoke going down my throat. He told us he'd been around the world, that in Bangkok he stayed in the Oriental Hotel. Once upon a time it had been a king's palace with seven dining rooms. Now, it was a hotel with seven restaurants. I could tell he bored Evelyn.

She kept squinting at me as if a secret were being squeezed out of her eyes, like mail through a slot. I wanted him to stay seated there between us. It was easy to let him talk. A relief.

I let him pick me up that evening and spirit me away from Evelyn.

Early in the morning I came home and began packing my bags. Evelyn came into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of my bed, watching me fold my clothes. I was slow and deliberate, folding each item carefully, as if I already knew I wouldn't see my things for a long time. "I want to tell you something," Evelyn finally said. "The last year of my father's life he was so sick that after his stroke he was paralyzed and had to lie in a bed that was constantly rocking up and down, up and down." And she showed me, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth on my bed. "I was so little I had to wait until the bed rocked down before I could climb up and see him. That's all I remember of my father, rocking in bed with him."

How can we foretell how our lives will play out? Which connections will be formed and reformed, and which will be severed forever? I would never have guessed that the mousy-haired girl in my poetry workshop would blossom into Eve, and in one fell swoop cut such an emphatic gash through my life, or that my father would settle--to all outward appearances--contentedly down into his fifth marriage for upwards to twenty-five years.

The next morning we both left the little blue house. I assumed Evelyn went to her mother's, although I did not think to ask her where she was going.

My father told me in a letter that Mr. Pinkus was very angry when he returned. His house was a shambles, he complained. I beg to differ; it was just the couch and the chairs that were ruined. The oriental rug was already very old and it was not our fault that it fell apart. The garden too--his garden of weeds and ivy--the drought killed them, not us. But by that time I didn't care about Mr. Pinkus or any of his belongings. I didn't even care that my father was upset with me. By that time I was very far away.

Evelyn, I heard, went back into Est for awhile and dated a paraplegic there. Then she disappeared. Many years later I got a postcard from Japan. "I dream of you often," she wrote. "If you want, you can find me here." She had written her return address below. The postcard showed a path leading into a grove of trees. The path was made of stepping stones and covered--littered--with brilliant red and orange maple leaves.

At the bottom of the card she had added a postscript. "I called your father to get your address," she wrote. "I don't think he knew who I was."

I held Evelyn's postcard in my palm, letting it rest there like one side of a balance. It was as light as a maple leaf, as if it had blown across the sea all the way from Japan to reach me.

OPEN YOUR EYES

When I woke up in the middle of the night the room was ablaze with light and Kenneth was leaning naked, over the bed. He had switched on all the lights in our hotel room. Behind the curtains the windows were open wide. I could see the wind billowing out the drapes. The bed had been stripped, and I was wrapped--swaddled in white sheets from head to toe. Kenneth had left just a small opening for my face.

“Too bad you woke up,” Kenneth said. “I was just going to tell you I loved you.”

I struggled in my sheets, but he had wrapped me up so tightly that my arms were pinned against my sides. “What are you doing?”

“Protecting you.” He hovered over me--a small man, completely naked except for a 22-carat gold cord he wore around his hips like a holster. He never took that gleaming, metal belt off, not even when he gained weight and it dug into his flesh. He wore it under his clothes, coiled around him like a pet snake. He even slept in it.

“From what?” I rolled across the bed, wiggling my arms to loosen the sheets around me.

“The mosquitoes.” Kenneth smiled, his face and body slick and damp with sweat. He was high. I could smell that tangy, acid scent of cocaine, almost taste it in the back of my throat. Still, it struck me that this was the most

considerate gesture Kenneth had made towards me in the two months I had known him. He knew I was allergic to insect bites, so allergic in fact, that when stung, my skin swelled up pink and tender, three times in normal size.

I couldn't fall asleep again. The look of the hotel room--light exploding from every fixture, Kenneth pacing naked among the baroque furniture, the heavy damask curtains flapping into the room like loose sails--was too startling. In the bathroom I ran the water and climbed into the tub. Kenneth came in, sat down on the lid of the toilet and lit up a joint. Reaching out his hand, he offered me a drag.

"You know I don't smoke." I sank further down into the water. I was aware of him watching me, his eyes flickering over me, assessing and comparing my naked body.

"Claire, you take so many baths, one day you're going to pucker up for good."

Kenneth laughed.

"I like baths. They relax me."

Everything but my head was now immersed in warm bath water. I felt detached from my arms and legs, my whole torso. Beneath the surface my limbs floated beside me unformed as embryos, slippery as eels. *I am some unrecognizable sea monster*, I thought. *This is not my body. It is his.*

"What have you got to be tense about? You've got it great. You're in the lap of luxury." He said this in a happy, buoyant tone of voice. I had never heard Kenneth raise his voice or yell, although I'd once heard him growl over the phone to his brother--his partner. Now, he gazed down at the burning ember of his joint. He was smiling, although behind his thick mustache it was sometimes hard

to tell his expression. Ashes clung to the hairs around his mouth. Lifting the burning joint and holding it in front of him like a light, Kenneth began to speak, “You know what my father did once when I was only six years old? He was taking a bath and he called me into the bathroom. He said ‘get in here’”--Kenneth motioned into my bath water--”Get in here right now.’ I was still in my school clothes so I started to undress, but my father yelled, ‘NOW!’ So, with my shoes, socks, and everything still on, I sat right down in the water. Then my father laughed at me; he lay there naked, laughing at me. He asked, ‘Are you always going to obey everybody; are you always going to do everything they say?’”

I poked one of my knees up through the water, but I did not speak.

Kenneth was still smiling, still gazing at the joint he held out in front of him, although it had burned down to his fingers--burned out, perhaps even singeing his skin--while he’d been talking.

Most of the time when he ranted, a jumble of moralistic poetry and phrases spilling out of him like some new-age preacher (he especially liked to quote Rudyard Kipling and Alan Watts) I wouldn’t speak. I was often too high to form words, to hang onto a thought long enough to utter it. And, like any preacher, I knew Kenneth was interested only in the response of a suppliant. That night however, I was sober. Still, I didn’t speak.

After a while he stood up and leaned over and kissed the top of my head, his mustache prickling my scalp like a brush. “You’re just a child, a mere baby,” he whispered softly. At the door he turned back. “I’m going out,” he said. And I knew he was going out to find a woman.

As soon as I heard the door of our suite shut I leapt out of the tub and ran naked and dripping through our rooms. I turned off the overhead light; the two floor lamps, the desk lamp and the bathroom light, and pulled the windows shut. Stark naked I stood in the dark room and listened to the wind howling along the canals and shaking the windowpanes. It was mid-October. I should have been immersed in the first semester of my final year in college; I should have been in sunny California. Instead I was in Amsterdam where it was already getting cold.

Outside the wind moaned. It swept out of the canals and tunnels in great, long sighs. It was not a sound I would have associated with this city. Everything in Amsterdam looked fabricated and magical, like pictures in a book of fairy tales. Everything there was the size of a toy. I'd imagined a city of windmills and tulips, but now water was rising, dikes were breaking and surprise floods rushed unchecked like wind through a narrow canyon. Across from our hotel a string of carnival lights that had been carefully threaded on poles along the Amstel River, were whipped free. They landed in the water and sank like a school of glimmering fish underneath the bridge.

I climbed back into the king size bed and waited. Soon, I knew, Kenneth would return, and he would not return alone.

He had promised to take care of me. We had made a deal, a pact in the car that first night I left Evelyn for him. "I'll take care of you." That was his part of the deal. My part was equally vague. "You will be my slave of love." He really did use that word, love. Perhaps he wanted someone to love, someone he

believed he was caring for. But that was not the word that attracted me. The word that I hung onto and hungered for was slave. I wanted to belong to someone, even to the point of having my body controlled by that person. As it turned out, I was neither his slave nor his lover; I was his witness. And perhaps in that, I was also his slave.

That first night, he had driven me to his apartment building high up in the steep hills of San Francisco. The building was secured behind a locked gate, and we rode the elevator up to the ninth floor where Kenneth pressed a security code into a panel on the wall before the apartment door swung open so we could enter his home. Inside I wandered through a maze of hallways, the floors strewn from wall to wall with Turkish Kilms. Rugs piled three and four atop one another undulating in soft ripples down the long hallways. The rugs, I would later learn, were like his gold business, a fabrication, a detour, a maze within a maze, a business that concealed a business. At the end of this long, plush corridor lay Kenneth's bedroom. The bed was covered in a brilliant yellow silk quilt with a red Chinese dragon embroidered on its middle. When I sank silently down on it Kenneth said in a flat voice, more a command than a question, "You feel like you belong here." Staring at me with his ice-chip eyes.

"If it hadn't have been you, it would have been somebody else," I replied. I wanted to appear equally cold, to appear flippant and in control to this little man who wanted me for a love slave. I wanted to establish a little room in myself that he couldn't enter. A room with my own lock and key. Really, we did not talk to each other. We used words like *love*, and *slave* and *belonging*, words laced with

innuendo in sentences that snaked around each other but revealed nothing. Once he called me dangerous but that was at the end, after Joanna's midnight visit, and he was referring to me in the third person, as in, *beware of Claire, she's dangerous*. Well, I know he was only being nasty. How could I have been dangerous to Kenneth?

But, I belonged there, as much as I belonged anywhere. I felt safe with Kenneth behind his coded doors. His guns and alarms. There were plenty of things I needed hidden. *Go ahead, I thought, try and find me*. As for Kenneth, he thought he was saving me, he thought he was saving all of us. Later I would find out from Kenneth's other girls that this was true of them as well. We had run out of places to go. "Where would you be without me?" He'd laugh. We were his foundlings. Girls who fought with parents; who were estranged from families; troubled girls on the run who leapt out of moving cars, so eager were we to escape our lives.

That first night he'd crawled up next to me on his majestic silk bedspread. Have I said that he was a small, compact man? He squatted on top of me, excited, sweaty and yet controlled. Kenneth was a master at focusing his energy. At some point I gave into Kenneth. I let the whole, obviously remote and mechanical aspect of sex with him overtake me. It was a trick I knew, but still I came. Kenneth never came. Not once did I ever witness him in a moment of complete abandon, not even close.

Afterwards he rose slowly from the bed, walked across the room--that strange golden belt riding his hips--and retrieved a silver brief case from the back

of his closet, where I would learn later, his safe was hidden. If I had known what to look for, I would have seen how practiced he was at this act, the bestowing of a reward. Flipping the lid up he prodded me to select a gold chain from a row of ten or twelve. He said, “Here, let me give you this. Won’t this look beautiful on you. Sure you want one, baby; I know.” His tone of voice was soft, yet insistent, as if he were tempting an infant to eat.

I sat up on his bed. All of them except for one were plain gold chains. Bhat chains we used to call them. “They’re from Thailand,” he said. The one I wanted was delicately hung with tiny, hammered golden leaves.

“That one.” I pointed a greedy finger.

“Oh,” he said. “You want the prize.” For a moment he hesitated. “You think you deserve this?” He asked laughing at my furrowed brow (my furious reading face my mother always called that look of both consternation and concentration) and crawled over to me again across the rumpled golden coverlet. “Here baby, lift your hair so I can secure it for you.”

As smart as he was, and he was very smart, I wonder if he understood the symbolism of that gesture, his fastening that necklace around my neck. I wore it like a garland, like a laurel crown. Only later, when I sat at the head of his dinner table with the other women, the girls in his life--his mother and his sisters, his old girlfriends and his young, new ones--and I saw that each of us, a dozen or so in all, wore one of these chains, did I understand. *We’re his chain gang*, I thought. I wanted to howl it down the length of the table. But what good would that have done.

In Amsterdam I fell hard, almost fainted, into a sudden sleep, as if sleep itself were a great sobbing mouth, swallowing me. The sound of the moaning wind drifted into my dreams like a lullaby. I awoke to the click of a key turning in the lock, the creak of the suite door opening, followed by a soft thud as it was gently closed. The clock beside the bed read 4:33 a.m. I'd been sleeping for over an hour, yet I felt utterly exhausted and out of breath, as if I'd been running a long race.

I listened for voices but heard none. Then Kenneth was in my doorway, the light flooding in behind him.

“How's my princess?” He was dressed in a three-piece suit making his small frame look tidy and efficient. He walked swiftly across the room and sat down on the edge of my bed.

“Where is she?” I asked.

His jaw tightened and then relaxed. “They're all just schemers,” he said. He sat there, not moving to undress or join me. I had spread my hair out across the pillow, a gesture that usually enticed him. And indeed he did begin to play with the long dark strands, twisting and braiding them between his fingers. “She'll be up in a minute,” he finally said. “I want you to stay in here.”

I sat up. I would like to believe that I was relieved, but I wasn't. I didn't want to listen to Kenneth on the other side of the wall with this woman.

He leaned forward and touched my necklace, he pressed his forefinger against the chain and into the nape of my neck ever so gently, until he had guided me down, and I was lying flat on the bed again.

Then he smiled and without another word he left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. He did not lock it however, as I knew he wouldn't. Just as he knew I wouldn't try to open it.

I quickly climbed out of the bed and pulled on my clothes. After a few minutes, I heard her voice, a high whisper, on the other side of the door, and Kenneth's gravelly rasp running underneath it, like stones at the bottom of a river. I knew from her whispering that Kenneth must have told her I was in the next room and I started to pace, back and forth in front of the door, sighing loudly every few minutes, so that they would hear me. In the front room of the suite I imagined Kenneth laying out lines on the little baroque coffee table. They were sitting there getting high, the prelude to whatever sex they were going to have.

A few days after I had first met Kenneth in California he had brought a sales girl home from a tie store on Fell Street. He had gone there to buy a tie, and instead came home with dozens of ties--all different colors but all the same wide, striped design--dozens of ties and the sales girl who sold them to him. I'm not kidding. She had long dark hair like mine and a round face and the tilted almond eyes of a Hawaiian princess. She said Kenneth had told her about me, about a beautiful, long-haired girl just like herself, waiting up in his apartment. He had made me sound so hungry, as if I had anticipated her, as if I had, in fact been

waiting, when I had not even known she was coming. I wasn't sure how I felt about this. Yet, the idea of that kind of hunger, the devouring hunger of children in fairy tales, intrigued me.

"I've never done anything like this," she said standing in front of us, in front of that bed with the dragon-embled quilt, as she pulled off all her clothes. Neither had I. Certainly not like this. I had never before been someone's bait.

Kenneth liked to live with a girl. Girls attract other young girls. If you watch you will see them on the move, always together, in groups of two or three. In front of high schools, in shopping malls, packed into bathroom stalls sharing makeup and cigarettes. Kenneth liked to have two or three at a time. In the beginning it felt a little like a slumber party, except for Kenneth hovering near by. But he was indulgent. He would get us high, and then serve us bowls of ice cream. The drugs were part of the bait, too. We all knew he dealt drugs. The story he told us was that he had started as a marijuana grower, then moved into the traffic of hallucinogens--blots of acid disguised as candy and trading stamps--he proudly showed us some which he'd kept as souvenirs. Now, he was moving into cocaine. Even his mother knew it. A well-known professor of sociology. Still, she occasionally showed up to help him by counting out his money. Well, I liked cocaine. I liked the fact that there were mason jars of it beside the bedside table that I could dip into. Excess was something I understood.

After he got us high, Kenneth would play his Michael Jackson tapes and watch us dance with each other and with our own reflections. His seduction scenarios generally followed the same pattern. At some point--and this, I learned,

was his signal--Kenneth would switch on his favorite movie, "The Third Man." We would all flop down on the bed to watch. Kenneth and I sat at the top of the bed, the chosen girl down by his feet. Near the end to the movie, when Orson Wells is chased like a rat through the sewers, Kenneth would pull the girl up between us.

Now, from the front room of the hotel suite I heard a tinkling giggle, high and trilling like a bird's call, and I stopped pacing long enough to stamp my foot and clear my throat a few times. There was a brief hesitation on the other side of the door and then the click of the television set being switched on and after that I heard nothing except the scrambled sound of voices speaking in a language I did not understand.

Eventually I grew bored with my pacing and went to the window. Outside the sky was beginning to brighten. The wind had died down and the storm had passed. The river was calm, a brilliant blue bolt of silk, unraveling in the dawn light. I knew he wouldn't be long now. She was on a clock after all.

I thought of Evelyn then. Early in the summer she had gone out and bought a new watch with a simple, brown leather strap. Nothing fancy, she'd said fancy would invite trouble. But trouble wasn't selective; it had come regardless.

The door swung open and Kenneth was standing in the doorway beside a small, blonde woman who was peeking around his naked body with a smile. She was even shorter than he was. Kenneth's forehead was wet, and he was dabbing

at it with a towel while he thanked the woman. Then he sprinted for the bathroom, calling back, “Claire will show you out.

I stood for a moment staring at the woman in the doorway. She was tiny; hands, head, even her short little boots were as petite and delicate as porcelain figurines. She was wearing a pink leather jacket of a size that might fit a big doll. I stepped closer and peered at her smudged makeup as she smiled up at me. On close inspection I could see that she was considerably older than me. “You do not look like an American girl,” she said.

“People are always telling me that.” I liked the idea of not looking American, of not looking like I belonged to the place I had just left behind. And I laughed, suddenly relieved that she, too, was not an American. That instead of another young girl, this little doll-like woman had appeared on the other side of the door.

She laughed, too. A laugh like a tinkling bell. “Well,” she said and shrugged. “Would you like some grapes?” She pulled a bag from her purse and handed me a bunch of tiny, green grapes with her elfin hands. “They’re a little sour,” she continued, “but that’s how I like them.” We stood in the doorway for a few minutes, eating her grapes while I kept saying thank you to her and she just stood there, glowing in her pink leather jacket while her laugh tinkled down the hallway. Eventually, she waved goodbye and left me alone, her small figure gradually floating away until she completely disappeared into the elevator. When I went back into the bedroom I found Kenneth wrapped in a towel, sleeping on a pile of puffed pillows, in the center of the bed.

This is a period in my life in which I find it hard to distinguish my waking state from my sleeping one. My dream world--a world of nightmares and visions--merged with the real world of what I understood to be made up of memory and experience. The usual flow, the usual structure of a day, of things happening one after another, even the progress of light changing--vanished. In its place were endless parties with their parades of people, and not just girls, but it seemed that everyone passed through Kenneth's doors. One evening I looked up and saw, in the circle seated at Kenneth's feet, a famous ambulance chasing lawyer and a ceramist who used to imprint her nipples directly into the wet clay. I'd drunk from coffee mugs shaped like her breasts. These people I knew from my father's circle, but if they recognized me in that drug-charged room, they did not show it.

In some familiar and yet distorted way, this world of Kenneth's shadowed my father's world. The parties of my childhood, when my father's house had overflowed with all the glamorous and slightly dangerous atmosphere of a train station. Then, life had felt expectant. Now at Kenneth's everything was askew, twisted and wrenched out of place. Day was night and our meals were infrequent, and then overwhelming. There was only bottled mango juice and butternut ice cream in the refrigerator; in the cabinet, stale crackers and a joke gift of chocolate covered ants. When we did eat, we all went out en masse to a bistro or club, and sat down, in our exhausted lethargy, to a heavy French meal. Time seemed to stretch out, then swallow itself up without any delineation, just endless nights that turned into days, but how would we know, the blinds were always drawn. It was

always night time. A time that went on and on, until we came up suddenly as if for a breath of air, only to discover that we had come to the end of the last line of cocaine. Then we would rattle around until we could sleep. Kenneth's sleep was a wet, unpleasant sleep, fractured and restless. Wrapped in towels, and floating on stacks of pillows, like the princess on the pea. And dressed or naked, he always wore that belt which slid around him like a glittering holster. The clasp of the belt was a face, a snake or a dragon, biting its own tail. My sleep was more of a waking paralysis. For in it I could hear, and sometimes even see shapes, the outline of the furniture, the maid moving in and out of the blackened room, but I could no longer move. After a day or two of sleeping, of the incessant sound of the television the few hours we were awake, and the mountains of food we consumed, we would again resume our party. Life was a contorted reflection in a fun house mirror.

Later that morning I called my mother from the hotel room. "Claire, I can hardly hear you," she yelled. "Why are you whispering?"

"Why are you shouting? Kenneth's asleep; I don't want to wake him."

"Why the hell not?" my mother said crossly. "Then I can talk to him."

The last time I had called my mother Kenneth had lifted the phone right out of my hand and with a wink at me he had said, "You should be happy for your daughter, Mrs. Richter. She's found herself someone who can take care of her in a manner to which she's becoming accustomed."

I'd started to laugh so hard then that I'd had to hold my hands over my mouth to stifle my squeals. For the truth was, I was very happy to hand the phone, to hand my life, including my mother, over to Kenneth. I didn't want to speak to her: to listen to her criticism, or her pleading, or her poetry.

When I called her now--and I called her everyday, for she had extracted that much from me, the promise to call her every day of my trip--my voice would fade to a hush, a whisper. I knew she was alarmed, but I didn't care. Maybe I was secretly glad. Often, she would weep during our calls reminding me that as a child I had once asked her if the angels wore overcoats in wintertime.

Today she was lamenting that she'd never held me enough. "You were such a square sturdy baby," she said. "So easy to hold. Everyone used to say how you molded yourself to fit in their lap."

When she said these things, when she held up my baby self as being the preferred and uncomplicated version--"You were the one I felt relaxed around," she'd said during an another conversation--I felt both anger and pride. I knew I was not Joanna but sometimes I wished I could be as fierce and as memorable.

Eager to change the subject now, I said, "Did you know Mom, this place was once a palace?" This was not true of course. But, there was no way for me to say anything plain and straight to my mother. Either it had to be screamed or captured in poetry. And I was tired of these phone conversations. Tired of angels flying around my mother's thoughts in their winter coats. Besides, I thought a palace might make my mother happy. "We have a suite overlooking the river."

On the other end of the line my mother asked. “What does your father think of all this?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. For I did know. Right before I’d left for Europe I’d gone to visit my father. I’d taken a cab across the Bay Bridge, which irritated him. It was an expense of nearly a hundred dollars, and he thought that was a shameful waste of money. “How can this guy afford this?” My father had asked, his voice betraying a little envy along with the spite. When I’d stood below him in his living room, staring up at where he sat perched high in the overhanging balcony of his study, and told him about Kenneth and our trip, he’d said somewhat sarcastically, “What a splendid opportunity for you to see Europe.”

By then his house was overrun with Alison’s things. A row of jade plants, as regal as ancient warriors guarded the front door. Taped to the refrigerator door was a photograph of a blonde girl. She was wearing a vintage dress with a flowered print, and she had a mouth shaped like a perfect bow.

“That’s Alison’s daughter Hazel,” my father had told me. He had followed me into the kitchen and was looking at the photo over the rim of his glasses. “She’s working down at Walnut Books today.”

I’d always wanted to work in a bookstore. To look so young and vulnerable and have my lips form a cupid’s bow. But when I look out at people from the pictures of my youth I already look weary. My body is slumped. My mouth, thin. My expression, and there is no other word for it, gloomy.

Hazel’s life turned out to have its own set of problems.

I'm not sure why I didn't want my mother to know all this. I suppose I was embarrassed at being so easily replaced.

"Mom," I said now, "do you think everyone gets corrupted eventually?"

My mother was silent for a long moment. The static on the line buzzed between us like a chorus of whispering women. Finally she said, "I don't know, honey. Maybe just everyone we know."

I ate breakfast alone downstairs in the cafe. Kenneth was still sleeping, grinding his teeth down to stubs. As soon as we returned, they were all due to be replaced by glistening, new caps. After I finished my meal--a mug of hot chocolate and a heaping plate of bacon--I decided to take a walk along the Amstel. It was still early. On a narrow street leading away from the river a mist as delicate as a curtain of lace hung between the buildings. I walked slowly down this street and into the mist. It blew ahead of me in patches, in balls like billowing snow. Below my feet the cobblestones had buckled into rippling waves from the years of floods. It began to rain again, a soft fine spray, and so I bought a raincoat in one of the fancy shops along the river. It was a floor-length trench coat and a little too big for me. In the store, the coat had looked gray, but outside the fabric turned a metallic rose and glowed.

I wandered along the streets that twisted off the river, lit up in my cloak. Have I said how beautiful this city was, how I swam forth in her tributaries like a glimmering fish. Eventually, I found my way to the red light district. On our first night in Amsterdam we had come here and strolled up and down the streets--pink,

red, yellow and purple lights flashing from the windows like prisms--while the girls stood, half undressed and in their awkward poses, on the other side of the glass. That evening Kenneth didn't find anyone who interested him, and so we'd gone to a show and watched a woman smoke a cigarette with her vagina. I had to look away, afraid she'd burn herself and that I'd see something I could never forget.

But today, alone in the morning light, I could look. I stopped in front of a window. Already at this early hour a woman was sitting on a small stool reading a magazine, her foot tapping impatiently in its too tight shoe. She was an opulent woman with meaty red flesh. Her face was coarse, her features as rough as if they'd been hacked out of wood with a blunt instrument. Not an ugly woman but unformed, like a cloud or the dark image in a dreamscape. A complete opposite from the elfin doll Kenneth had found last night and brought back to our hotel suite. Now, she glanced up from her magazine and stared through me. I was obviously not a customer so I was not worth acknowledging. I could see my own reflection playing on the surface of the glass like the murky reflection on a pool of water. In my iridescent coat, open and flapping in the breeze, I looked like a moth beating its wings gently against the pane. The woman herself was fully dressed in a skirt and blouse like any business woman. Perhaps it was this attire and the way she sat so solidly in her chair--her block-like face bored and unimpressed by the view--that made me draw back. For it suddenly occurred to me that she might live a very normal life, much more normal than mine. She probably had children and a husband to whom she returned each night. The world

she saw through the glass before her each morning did not shock and startle her the way my world did me. She did not have to turn away from it and close her eyes.

Hours later, back at the hotel, Kenneth was sitting, buttoned up in his three piece suit, on the edge of the bed.

“I thought maybe you disappeared, Claire.” He looked so small sitting at the foot of the bed. So neat and remote.

I shook my head. Until he said it, it had never occurred to me that I could just vanish like that.

“Where were you? I’ve been waiting and waiting. Don’t you have a watch?”

“No. I don’t know,” I said. “I bought a coat. And I pivoted on my heel so he could see the rose gold material shimmering around me.

Kenneth crossed over from the bed and stood in front of me. “This,” he said clicking his tongue. “Well, it’s much too big for you. What were you thinking?”

There were moments when I thought I loved this man. These feelings of love would overtake me, and like a decision or a decree they seemed to come from outside my body. They would last for an hour, or a day, long enough for me to pause and for a confusion, a paralysis to take hold. Now, I said to myself that I cared for this man standing in front of me, the effects of the night before washed away. His nails were clean and buffed, even his shoes were polished. Often, especially after his encounters with the random girls and women he found,

he would stroke my hair as if it were myself that had been given to him, as if the girl, who had been so essential only moments before, was now invisible. Maybe, it was this feeling, of being suddenly special, the chosen child, that pulled me towards him with a gravitational force. For without the other, the unfavored, discardable one, how would this love between us have been possible? Or perhaps these are all just reasons and guesses. Really, I think I forced myself to love him, like eating Brussels sprouts at the beginning of my supper. It was the task that had to be accomplished before anything else was possible. And to travel beside this man, without some excuse of love, would have been intolerable.

“It was raining,” I told him now. “And you said to buy anything I wanted.”

Kenneth poked at the shoulders of my coat. “But it makes you look like a man,” he scowled.

I laughed. I’d seen him charmed by girls, disarmed by their giggles. But I did not have this effect on him. The sound that came out of my mouth was almost shrill.

Kenneth turned abruptly away and walked back over to the bed. He sat down and crossed his legs at the knees, like a prim little woman. When he looked up at me he was beaming but his eyes were as flat and cold as snow. The look of irritation that had been so obvious a moment before was completely erased.

“Anything you want baby. You know I’ll give you anything you want because that’s what you deserve.” Then he added, “Now, you better change, or we’ll be late for dinner with Onika.”

I never explained the coat, never explained how this great multi-colored robe, while displaying me like a peacock, hid me like a secret. Kenneth was right; we were all of us plotters and schemers with secrets to hide. From the bed he twirled his foot and sang out, *we are family*, while he waited for me to slip into a dress and brush my hair. Even though I knew it still displeased him, I decided I would keep that coat. It lay beside him on the bed, like my discarded skin--my payment. Things--especially extravagant garments, the six sweaters from Sweden, the boots from Italy with pointed toes and the scalloped cuffs of a baroque cornice, that were so high I towered over Kenneth like an Amazon when I wore them--all these things were part of the price I extracted for being with him. We both knew it. A deal is a deal.

When we were ready to leave, Kenneth slipped the coat around my shoulders and pulled my face close down to his by the collar so he could kiss my mouth. Not a hard kiss, but it was orchestrated. It was composed. I opened my eyes in the middle of this kiss and saw Kenneth's eyes, right up against my face, watching me.

Only Onika understood that coat. Later that night, when she greeted me at the door, Onika said, "it flows like a sari around you." And I loved the sound of the word, spilling out of her mouth, mournful and beautiful at once.

In the evening Kenneth and I boarded a red ferryboat and rode along the canals. A boy, tall and blonde as a Viking, was at the helm. He wore a thin mesh shirt like a fishing net and I could see his back underneath it, his shoulder blades

pressed together like folded wings. The sky was a brilliant crimson from edge to edge, the water beneath our boat a deep, nearly black, rippling current. We sat, pressed together, Kenneth and I, in the bow of the boat. Kenneth in his crisp, three-piece suit, me in my shimmering coat, which unfurled behind me like a billowing sail. Our boat floated below bridges, threading its way deep into the heart of Amsterdam. Above our heads, each arch was lit with millions of tiny lights so that our pathway was a brilliant corridor, a sparkling tunnel winding towards a bloody horizon.

We were on our way to have dinner with Onika and Dirk. Onika and Dirk ran the Anne Frank Foundation and lived next door to the Anne Frank House. Onika was an old girlfriend of Kenneth's. She'd met him years ago while she was backpacking through India. Dirk was her new husband.

The house where Onika and Dirk lived was narrow and dark. An odd little, misshapen building with nooks and corners and floors tilted at an almost precarious angle. It is no longer there, at least not as it was then, with built-in cabinets and an old stove. Eventually, the city of Amsterdam renovated the buildings on either side of the Anne Frank House and opened what is now called the Renewed Museum.

After the meal, Dirk poured four glasses of brandy. He was a heavy set man with ruddy cheeks, and a network of green veins twining under the surface of his skin. As he passed the glasses around, he asked Kenneth if he'd brought any cocaine.

Kenneth pulled out a vial from his jacket pocket and handed it to Dirk and we all did a few spoons of coke while Kenneth talked about the gold market, the silver market, the worth of copper pennies and of nickel nickels. The conversation rattled around me. Then Onika said. “Did you know that Anne Frank’s diary was really pretty pornographic? Her father edited it heavily.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, she had a crush on that boy, Peter, and she really did sleep with him. Her father cut that part out.” Onika was a small, delicate woman in her mid-thirties. Her hair was pinned to her head in a tight bun. As she lifted the spoon of coke up to her nose, I wanted to laugh. But when she undid her hair, and ran her fingers through it, I suddenly saw this girl whom Kenneth must have nearly lost control of his car to catch.

“I’d hardly call sex pornographic,” Dirk said.

“Spoken like a true Dutchman,” Kenneth said. Turning to me he added, “To the Dutch sex is always prosaic.”

“And what is it to you?” I asked.

Kenneth patted the top of my head. “See how smart she is,” he said.

“They want to publish a new un-edited version of the diary now.” Onika continued as if this interruption had never occurred. “They’ve had to wait for Otto to die. There was a lot of resistance; people have such an attachment to her innocence. To innocence in general, I suppose.” As she spoke, she looked at none of us, but down at her long fingers laced around her brandy glass.

“That’s what she represented,” Dirk said emphatically. “The death of innocence.”

“And now it’s everlasting life,” Kenneth pronounced.

“Can I go up there” I asked, “and take a look around?”

“Well . . . “ Onika said.

“Oh no!” Dirk stood up suddenly and his chair flew backwards with a loud thud. “You’ll have to come back tomorrow when the museum is open.”

Then, just as Kenneth spread out his arms and flapped his hands and said, “Tomorrow, we’re leaving”, Onika looked up, stared me squarely in the eye, and smiled.

Now, there comes a lapse in my memory during which I must have dozed off, or perhaps even blacked out. What I remember next I know can not have happened, for I remember climbing the stairs and entering the Annex. So, this climb must have happened later, the next day, if indeed we stayed on and did not leave the next day. The way I remember it though, I was alone without even Onika to guide me. How could I have been alone? Surely they wouldn’t have let me go alone. I remember the steps were worn and beveled from the tread of so many feet. At the end of a second flight I pushed through a door. I was expecting a space like a jail, but what I found myself in resembled nothing so much as a small, one bedroom apartment. There was no furniture in the rooms, only that odd array of postcards and movie stills hung; it seemed, at first haphazardly, on the wall. But when I examined the pattern more closely I could see shadows,

faded images on the wallpaper. I understood that the arrangement of postcards and movie stills had once been dictated by the placement of the furniture in these rooms: beds, bureau, and a table.

The walls, the whole Annex were yellowed, as if it had been dipped in tea. And it was quiet and smelled of damp wood.

I do not for a moment believe that I was ever really alone in that place. And yet those rooms were familiar, inhabiting some threshold between the real and imaginary. It strikes me also that it was not an empty space. The sense of pressure in those rooms, of confined trapped air, was crushing.

It was later in the night that I found myself stretched the length of Onika's black leather couch. A man sat across the room watching me. A television set was playing beside him. He had long dark hair, which lay matted down his back and even darker eyebrows. His black eyes shone out from under these hoods like candles deep in a cave.

I sat up. "Where is Kenneth?"

The man pointed and sure enough, in the dimly lit alcove of the room, I saw the three figures of Kenneth, Onika and Dirk still hovering around the dining room table like a group at a séance. Kenneth began to speak, the deep gravely sound of his voice reciting a poem I recognized. He loved Rudyard Kipling and used this same poem on nearly every girl he picked up. By now, I knew the words by heart. "*If you can dream -- and not make dreams your master*;" he intoned. I'd been seduced by those words, too. But he had ruined

them for me. Did Kenneth really imagine he could strut around in Kipling's shoes?

I turned back to the man with the sunken eyes. I understood that he must have come here after dinner, perhaps for drugs. Maybe that's why I had blacked out. Or maybe I hadn't blacked out. Maybe I just couldn't remember my life anymore. The man turned back to the television screen, engrossed by a movie. Beside me on the couch my coat was folded into a little square, as neat as a pillow. Onika's handiwork. She must have lifted my head and placed the coat so gently beneath me that she had not even disturbed my dreams. It was a small gesture, but it shook me. We may have passed Kenneth on, one woman to the next--girl to girl--like a bad joke, a shared tragedy, our collective nightmare, but we took care of one another, or at least we tried.

Across the room the man smiled, his teeth a glistening white against his dark skin. Then I too suddenly leaned forward in recognition. For, out from the box of the television set came Judy Garland's fierce and quavering voice. She was singing *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*. That forlorn and saccharine cry, the anthem of all lost little girls in their gingham dresses longing for home. Even those three figures engrossed over the table turned to listen.

A wave of alarm that settled into anguish swept over me. Perhaps it was all just a dream and my mother was right, that it was possible to imagine our way back into our fancy shoes and winter coats, lift our wings, and find our way home again, but I doubted it.

Yet, in sleep all worlds collide. The past bleeds into the present, fantasies and nightmares bite the tale of reality. What if when we sink into the dark recesses of our dreams, instead of closing our eyes, we opened them? What would we see then?

I lay my head back down.

FORCE OF NATURE

A hot, midmorning in early November, a sky without a cloud. The car that Kenneth had hired to take me to my father's house barreled down the Freeway. Along the meridian bloomed dense shrubs of oleander, heavy with poisonous pink clusters. A rich, perfumed scent I could almost taste, blew in the open window.

"Here," I said leaning forward across the divide that separated me from my driver. I pointed. "Take the next exit."

I sank down--alone in the middle of the back seat--but my neck, the whole upper half of my body, craned forward like an eager little bird. Only two days before, Kenneth and I had returned from Europe, and now, today, I was on my way to my father's house, bearing him a gift.

We left the freeway, my driver and I, and wound our way through downtown Berkeley. The obelisk of the University campanile rose in the distance. On University Avenue we drove past the movie theater where *Last Tango in Paris* played endlessly each Saturday night. I'd taken Martin on a date there last year and he'd pretended to sleep through all the sex scenes, feigning lack of interest in me or the eroticism on screen, I was never sure which. Farther on, we drove past the Co-Op and the street down which I knew the little blue house lay hidden like a nest in a thicket. Ahead of us stood the hill that led straight up to my father's house. And it suddenly hit me that this great hill upon

which my father had built his house, rose before us like the summit of a giant mountain. *This is the peak, I thought, this hill, whose magnificence all but obscures something vast and transpiring beneath us.*

I remembered the first time I'd seen it, the hill--with the land upon which my father wanted to build his dream house--looming so steep that it was nearly vertical. It was impossible for me to imagine that any house could stand in that slanted thicket of trees clinging to granite. My father had led Joanna and me across his property, the three of us scrambling up through the trees and shrubs, the impenetrable acacia and wild roses. How wonderfully uninhabitable it had all seemed then! At the top he'd pointed. "There," he'd said. "One day you'll see everything from this spot, the whole bay. The Golden Gate, all of San Francisco spread out around you." I couldn't see anything except the naked trunks of the eucalyptus trees; their long pointy leaves hanging down like misshapen fingers, until my father lifted me up and held me above his head. There, beyond the trees, I could just make out the tip of an emerald green bay, one wing of the Golden Gate strung like a harp across it. The city was obscured in a froth of fog.

Behind us Joanna had climbed onto the great granite outcropping of rock that still guards the entrance to this lot. She stood on tip-toes and called. "I can see it, I can see the bridge."

My father set me down and strode over to her. "The bridge is this way." He said turning her body like the pin point of a compass until her arm had swung sixty degrees east. "The bridge is over there."

Then my father returned to me. He reached down and clasped my hand. I was eight; he was nearing his forty-seventh year. Below us, down the hill, in the house across from Live Oak Park, his second wife was packing up her boxes. After announcing their imminent divorce earlier that morning (to which my sister had asked the only pertinent question. “Daddy, who will pick us up from day camp now?”), my father had cleared Joanna and I out of the house on the pretext of our annual summer hike and picnic in the redwood forest. First though, he wanted to stop and show us his new lot. “Just don’t mention this to Caroline.” Caroline was the name of my father’s second wife, but all at once I’d understood that certain details--like her straight blonde hair and pointed nose, even her name--all these details were suddenly irrelevant because she was leaving. My father was selling their house and Caroline would return east. I did not know that my father would move around nearly a dozen times in the next five years before his dream home was finally completed.

Even now, in the car, the driver was confounded by that hill, and we proceeded up it at a cautious pace. I wanted to tell him *no, this is not the way to drive up our hill. You’ll see, you will only roll down or go nowhere.* And we so we did. The luxury car, on which Kenneth had spent hundreds of dollars to hire for me, suddenly stalled and rolled a few feet back down the hill. I leaned forward on the edge of the seat, ready to whisper the secrets of this hill to my driver. He switched the gears down: once, twice, three times, before he felt confident enough to proceed, and we inched forward slowly. I bit my lip. This

was not the way. This was not the way I had learned to conquer the hill. The only way I'd ever known how to climb my father's hill was to rush upwards full force and at top speed. To barrel up blindly, hoping and praying while holding my breath. For, three quarters of the way to the top--the city of Berkeley had actually had the gall to install a stop sign. This is the steepest point on the hill so that you, and your car, are forced to wait, trembling with fear lest the car stall then roll backwards down the hill. Only after this hair-raising pause could I exhale and cross to safety.

My driver though--in his own fashion of jerking stops and starts--finally made it up the hill and deposited me in front of my father's house. Alison was just backing out of the driveway, the flatbed of her truck brimming with plant life. She stopped and I thought for a moment that she was going to get out of her car and embrace me, but she didn't. Perhaps she sensed my unease, my distance, which lay like a desert between us. Things were already growing there, but it would take me years to see them. The only thing I knew at that moment, was that Alison had arrived just in time to take care of my father, but much too late for me. Now she thrust her head out of her cab window. A red bandana tied up her hair. But a wild disarray of curls poked out on all sides. She smiled and waved towards the house. "He's all ready for you," she called.

I found my father lounging on his deck under the shade of a new, striped sun umbrella. He looked like a bather at the Riviera, a straw hat pulled down to his eyebrows. "Don't you like it?" He thumped his hands on his new deck table. This was not a question. Once, years ago, I had kidded him about the round water

bed he kept on his roof deck. “That,” he told me proudly “was the first water bed in California.” How do you know something like this? The water bed had come from a gallery in Los Angeles where it had been used in an exhibition. I’ve never learned if the exhibition took place on the water bed or if you lay on the bed to view the art. For all I know the bed *was* the art. But I have learned not to press my father, nor to express my distaste for his furniture.

For the occasion of my return from my first sojourn to Europe my father was fixing us a German potato salad for lunch. In the kitchen he chopped scallions while I poured a large glass of beer for him and wine for myself. Then, he pointed to the counter and said that they were going to rip out the wall and install a sliding glass door. “That way it will be easier for us to entertain on the deck,” he announced.

“Daddy,” I asked. “Are you going to marry her?”

“I should imagine so,” my father answered.

At first I didn’t understand why I kept thinking about those hikes. The ones that our father used to insist Joanna and I take when we were children. All through our meal while my father discussed his new deck furniture--Italian not French--my mind drifted back to those hikes. We had always driven to the redwood grove in Muir woods, which lay on the other side of Golden Gate Bridge. Most of the time we made a small loop of a mile or so, stopping to have sandwiches on a stump or a fallen tree along the way. But the summer of my father’s second divorce, while Caroline and her movers tagged and loaded her

furniture --by evening all presence of her had been erased from our lives-- our father decided we should hike all the way down out of the redwoods until we reached the ocean floor. I suppose he wanted to give Caroline plenty of time to vacate the house so as to avoid what we had heard him call, her “unpleasantness.”

“Listen,” he told Joanna and me, trying to convince us that this hike to the ocean was not such a preposterous ordeal. “It’s not so far, you can even hear it in the distance.” And though Joanna and I both cocked our heads in the direction our father pointed, we heard nothing. But our father insisted. “Yes, this is the year we will walk to the ocean.” And set off we did, my father marching ahead of us down the path, while I trotted in quick pursuit and behind, Joanna reluctantly followed.

“Didn’t you go to Paris?” my father inquired now. “Not to Germany?”

I shook my head. No, I had not been to Germany, to the country of my father’s birth. Nor, had I been to Paris and seen the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, the winged Nike flying down the stairs. Kenneth and I had been to Denmark, Sweden and Holland. We traveled from taxi to hotel, the landscape speeding by the car window as if it were an endless loop of film. We could have been anywhere in the world; it wouldn’t have mattered to us.

Only an hour earlier on the drive over I had felt so eager. And I’d felt eager the night before when I had called my father and said, “I’m back! I have so much to tell you.” I’d called him right away, practically as soon as our plane had landed. Then he’d invited me to join him for lunch. Just the two of us for a lunch

together. Kenneth had offered to hire a car to transport me. He was now monitoring my excursions after a few sojourns in Europe when I'd wandered off for hours, only to return with a blank look and a vague explanation. While he'd dialed the number and made arrangements for my visit to my father's house, I'd bounced off the bed and walked around the room humming to myself, my limbs like a child's, flying in all directions.

Now though, typically, to all my father's questions I had only curt answers. Yes, I nodded, The Tivoli Gardens were ridiculously charming. In Holland, yup! I saw the Rembrandts and breezed through the van Gogh Museum. My father looked perturbed. He was always especially put out when someone spoke irreverently about art. "You breezed through the van Goghs?"

It was no use. I couldn't concentrate on our conversation because, instead of hearing my father's questions, my mind was digesting the impact of Allison. I kept seeing this lot before the house was built upon it. At the beginning, before one thing was piled upon another. For with each new wife had come, not only a new set of furniture, but structural alterations. It was a little funny when you thought about it. You could walk through the house and date each change by a marriage, the kitchen being the room that had undergone the most changes. Still, things kept disappearing, structures dissolving.

What had happened on that trip into the woods? All that morning and into the afternoon, Joanna, my father and I hiked along that quiet path. Occasionally

our father would thump his hand on the trunk of a tree, and exclaim, “These are some of the oldest and tallest trees in the world!”

“You tell us that every year,” Joanna retorted.

By mid afternoon we had not reached the ocean. Periodically my sister and I would complain, “Can’t we stop? How much further is it? Are we there yet?” We were small--eight and nine--and it was a long walk. Well, more of a march. But, our father kept insisting, “Just a little more. Soon, very soon the trees will thin out and we’ll see the ocean.”

“It’s just an ocean.” Joanna muttered. “Who cares about the ocean?”

Our father did. A few years later, I would repeat this walk with my father, this time alone, without Joanna. On that occasion we did indeed find the ocean, although it was in a different direction entirely. And for a moment I glimpsed my father, witnessed his face, his unrestrained joy at conquering the hike and beholding the sea. I understood what he must have felt, when as a very young man, he’d climbed up and out of the inferno of Hitler’s Germany, left one world for another, crossed a great barrier of water, and reached a distant shore. That would be a moment that someone might spend his whole life trying to recapture.

Now, in the dark woods, lost on the wrong path, I trudged after my unfathomable father. He was bigger than the ocean to me then. Finally our path did open up and our father led Joanna and me into a clearing, a circle of bare trees surrounding a huge stump. “See how the trees grow in circles spreading out from the center,” our father told us. “That stump was once the father of all these other trees. When his seeds fell down and sprouted the new trees grew up around the

parent tree. This whole forest is a series of concentric circles.” He smiled eagerly at my sister and me. “This is a good place to stop and eat,” he added, setting our lunch basket down.

Joanna and I gazed silently around the clearing. It was a peculiar spot for a picnic, for all the trees in the immediate area were charred and barren. The trees that circled us, and that our father had just pointed out as being the offspring of the great father stump upon which he now collapsed, were burnt and dead. Later, I would understand that a forest fire had flared up in this clearing. But, our father didn’t seem to notice our surroundings, for he asked quite suddenly, as if it had just occurred to him, “How’s your mother feeling?”

How do we know what we know? Can we ever trace a thing down to its original source, especially if that source is a memory? I keep thinking that if I dig in the dirt long enough I’ll unbury the hidden feet of the rock, the base of the mountain, But eventually the rock and the dirt become one.

In the woods, among those ghost-like trees, Joanna regarded our father with a serious adult’s scrutiny. “She misses you,” she stated matter-a-factly. Then, as if regretting what she had just revealed, she sprinted off between the bare and branchless trees, her feet kicking dust and dry needles up into a storm. One of the beautiful things about my sister was that she often sang when she ran, and she did this now. She spread her arms out and sent her clear voice soaring forth, unrestrained. It was a singularly elegant cry, a fierce and lonely call, unmolested by language.

I sat quietly next to my father on that ancient, petrified, tree stump. He didn't seem particularly unhappy with the news of our mother. He smiled, a big, malleable clown smile as he handed me a liverwurst sandwich.

Eventually Joanna tired of her zigzagging run. Trotting over, she frowned at my father's ill considered meal. "Gag," she said.

For a moment no one breathed. As Joanna glared, our father looked down and away from her. I'd seen him, on more than one occasion; shove her meal down her throat, half chewed lettuce and saliva dripping down his arm. At this moment though, he was too distracted to bother with Joanna's comment. He simply handed her some grapes, which she took and, without another word, sat down beside us to eat. After a moment our father said something out into the quiet forest that took a moment for us to grasp. "Wouldn't it be great to see her?"

We both looked up at our father's excited face. "Who?" we asked in unison.

"Well, your mother."

"No," Joanna said in a whisper that only I heard.

I looked away then. I didn't want to listen anymore. Down below, between my feet, a worm was endeavoring to crawl over my sandal. Reaching down, I grabbed it between my thumb and index finger and pinched that worm in half. The two halves dropped to the ground, lay stunned for a moment, then wiggled to life and burrowed back under the soil. When I turned back to my sister I found that Joanna was watching me with a grimace plastered across her face. One of those smiles that look stiff and painted on. They were going to do it.

That's what my sister's smile said. They were going to try again. Caroline was leaving and our mother was arriving. No one had to say anything because Joanna and I knew. Our father though, buoyantly explained that our mother was coming at the end of the month for the last few weeks of our visit. "We'll all go on a trip together," he said. "Won't that be fun?" Then, "Who knows?" he ended hopefully. They'd done this before, and before it had never lasted. A week, two days. During their last attempt at reconciliation I'd put my fist through a window to stop the fighting. Joanna was trapped in the middle between our parents, and I was outside watching her through the plate glass of the front door. It was cold. I remember feeling cold but not much else. I wasn't angry; I didn't pound on the window, I simply pushed my hand straight through the pane. What I thought-- quite clearly--was that I could reach Joanna through the glass and pluck her free.

My father's complaining cut through my reverie. "I'd hoped you would have gone to Italy at least." His curiosity about my trip had turned to disappointment. Why had I not seen anything of Europe he wondered?

"Wait," I said. Suddenly remembering, I reached down into my purse and handed my father his gift. There it was. His smile. The reason I had come bearing this trip in front of me like a banner.

"Well," my father said.

To all his questions and incredulity I had found nothing to say. But now my gift lay opened and in the palm of his hand. "Is this Italian?" he asked.

I smiled and shrugged. The golden key ring he now held, which sparkled between us in the sunlight, I had selected earlier that morning from the safe box in the back of Kenneth's closet.

Then I said, "We went to Italy."

My father raised his eyebrows and waited for me to continue. He had gained weight in the last month. His red suspenders curved over his very German belly.

Now, the feeling of eager anticipation I had had riding in the car, the feeling that had carried me, buoyed me up the hill and deposited me at his door, was dissolving. With every word and glance, with every stalled conversation his interest, and my ability to sustain it, slipped further away. How could I tell him about Italy? He wanted to hear that I had wakened in Rome with a strained neck from wandering around the Vatican for hours the day before, and of course, I hadn't.

My father, sensing something, sipped at his beer and watched me over the rim of his glass. He tilted his head and his eyes slid to the corners. His glance came to rest on the driver, waiting in the sedan across the street. "That guy's a crumb!" My father spat out.

"Who are you to talk?" I shot back. I turned away from him and glared at his house, at the new garden Alison had planted.

"So, then." My father laughed and threaded his thumbs under his red suspenders, pulling at them slightly. "I should know."

Then he shook his head. “Listen,” he told me quietly. “This is a good thing.” Opening his arms wide he spread them out to include the new garden below us. “What do you think?” All the succulents--the hens and chicks, I had helped him plant one afternoon when I was ten--had been ripped out. It was true. They had never done well. No one, until Alison, had taken care of anything in this house. The California ice plant that grows like weeds along the freeways had been replaced by plants that belonged in a fairy tale. There was something called a princess flower plant, with huge purple blossoms and bright green leaves as thick and soft as velvet. Prostrate rosemary and woolly thyme crept up the walk. Slender young fig trees grew beside the house, their flat, wide leaves overhanging the deck like open palms. Of course it was beautiful. It was enchanted.

I wanted to enjoy it with him, to sit on the warm deck and laugh with him, sparkling like my glass of white wine, like the golden key ring he twirled casually around his finger. That day so long ago, when he had lifted me above his head as we traversed this inaccessible property, he'd first shown me this view. And, though I couldn't quite see it, I'd envisioned how everything would look: the city and sea sparkling just out of reach like a gem behind a plate of glass. It had all, I mean especially him--my father--seemed to be beckoning, calling. *Come and join me.* Yet here he was, sitting in a garden I could never enter. This was his house I knew, multi-layered and piled high with memories. But some of the memories were mine.

Now, a new family had yet again moved into this house. I'd always hoped that this house, this dream, would include me. For hadn't I traveled all the

way across the country to join him? It had cost me a great deal, almost everything. But I'd finally arrived, with Joanna and her two skittish cats in tow, only to be confronted with a threshold I could never cross. There was no room, not in the house, nor in his life. I had this to tell him, yet other words welled up inside me and rose to the surface like a wave. I knew, just as suddenly as I spoke, that this was what I had come here to say. To ask this awful and hopeless question: "Where were you when I was growing up?" I sobbed.

My father looked suddenly sad and shocked at the same time. He opened his eyes purposefully wide, an unblinking caricature of surprise. His mouth hung slightly ajar like the opening of a cave and I thought anything might fly out of there, even bats. After a moment he said rocking forward on his chair. "If it's a question of money . . ."

"It's not money," I said quietly and with relief. Just as quickly as the wave of emotion had risen and crested in me, it receded. For it was true, I was not ready for this conversation either, and perhaps I would never be. At least not the conversation I carried around and sheltered, like a hungry little bird in my chest. My father reached out his hand; it lay there waiting for me in the middle of the table. A wing, his little gesture of thanks.

We both rose at the same time, my father dusting the crumbs from his lap. Our meal together was over.

I had nearly pulled the car door shut-- my driver sitting in the front seat, ready to go--when my father suddenly leaned out over his balcony and called

down to me through the branches of the young fig trees. “I hear your Mother is coming out for the New Year.”

Then I did shut the door, my driver pulled away, leaving my father framed by his fig trees, while we descended the hill.

My mother will tell you that she knew, even before her plane hit the tarmac and she emerged from the gate to see our father in the terminal, that this reconciliation was doomed. “I knew in the air,” she has said to me. “I knew when I was flying in and I didn’t feel any eagerness at all. But then I saw my two little girls standing beside their father, and you were all there to greet me.” Then my mother will add the way she does, pausing to fall backwards into herself. “It was your sister that convinced me.”

The first thing I noticed when my mother floated off the plane was that she was wearing a fall. A black hairpiece pinned to the crown of her head and hanging to her shoulders in a style that I believe was called a flip. She looked perky, like a young Mary Tyler Moore. Except that my mother had never been perky and she was no longer young. My mother had been thirty nine for the last two years.

This was all that I remember of her arrival. My mother smiling at us, my father saying, “Oh this is good. Isn’t this good Elaine?”

We must have gone back to the house across from Live Oak Park, which Caroline had recently vacated. We must have stayed there that night, the four of

us as a family under one roof, but I do not remember my parents together, although they were together, for that was the whole point of the trip.

The next day our father showed our mother around the Berkeley campus. With Joanna and me as escorts, he took her to see his new office and the plans for his museum. Above his desk hung the blackboard picture that Joanna and I drew each summer and which he kept, for the year--our bright chalk figures fading to ghosts--until we returned annually to change it. Our mother stood in front of our drawing and sighed. I remember her sigh because Joanna asked quickly, "Why did you do that?" At which point our mother took each of our hands and we pulled her between us out the door and after our father's quickly departing back. Later that day our father drove us again up the hill to show her his new piece of land, that precipitous slope. *Wouldn't you like to live here?* His stray dog eyes asked.

That evening our father in his restlessness announced that we were all going to take a short trip up to Echo Lake, one of the little glacier lakes rimming the outskirts of Desolation Valley. Her had a friend who was lending us his cabin for the week. Mr. Von Siegel was my father's divorce lawyer, but I didn't know that for years.

We drove the five hour trip up to Desolation Valley and parked our car by the entrance to the lodge. The only way around Echo Lake and to Mr. Von Siegel's cabin was either a forty-five minute hike or by motor boat. We chartered a boat and driver and were deposited, in the soft dusk of a late summer evening, in front of the cabin. If we wanted anything our driver informed us: groceries, help,

to get out, we'd either have to hike or wait until 10:00 each morning or 5:00 each evening when the lodge sent a boat to drop off and pick up day hikers. There was no phone in the cabin. We had our bags of groceries and suitcases. Old-fashioned, hard suitcases that city people carried. What were we doing there? This was semi-wilderness, after all. People still died in the sudden fury of early blizzards that tore down through the mountain passes each fall. We lugged our suitcases and bags up the side of the rock face, a long steep and nearly smooth surface and into the cabin. It was a beautiful cabin with a stone hearth that ran along one wall. Dead deer and bear heads hung above the fireplace, but they didn't bother me. I thought they were magnificent. A rustic wooden banquet table stood at one end of the room. Animal skins were scattered on the floor. There were two bedrooms. I remember my sister and I stayed that first night in a room with two twin beds on squeaky metal frames. The mattresses were bare and covered with striped ticking and we spread our sleeping bags out on top of them. I don't remember the room my parents shared.

In the morning they split us up. My father took Joanna for a hike, my mother stayed with me. This was the exact reversal of what usually happened. My father should have taken me. I wanted to go. I was the hiker, not Joanna. But, that morning, a headache had hit me like a huge wrecking ball, slamming into the left side of my head. When I opened my eyes, specks of light and shimmering spots were dancing in my peripheral vision. I felt nauseated. Soon, I might vomit.

“She can't go,” my mother insisted.

And so my father, who could never understand altering his plans, even for something as simple as a hike, took Joanna.

For its sheer beauty I have almost never seen anything as spectacular as Desolation Valley. A series of glacier lakes cascade down the rugged mountain range. They sit in bowls of smooth granite rock, rimmed by pine trees and pale mosses. Fields of wild blue lupine grow beside patches of snow. All this Joanna and my father passed through. They hiked all day. Joanna said she did not know where they were going. When I'd gone hiking with my father and Mr. Von Siegel, along the very route they took, and they both had commented on my stamina, I was flattered. I was a child, after all, and they were both German men who had hiked in the Alps. This place they said, looked like the Alps. Mr. Von Siegel was not with my father and Joanna that day and so, of course, my father got them both lost.

Back at the cabin I lay motionless in my sleeping bag. My mother had dragged a mattress outside onto the slope of rock, hoping that the heat and sun would help me. My hands and feet were freezing even though it was a baking hot day. My mother was wearing her white fringed bikini bathing suit. I remember her sitting beside me on the rock, and the long flip of that black fall dragging across my face when she leaned over me. I didn't recognize her. I mean I knew she was my mother--I wasn't delirious--but she looked odd and out of place, still wearing her city girl hairdo in the wilderness. And of course, she was out of place suddenly appearing beside our father in this California landscape. I resented her.

I felt a distinct dislike for this thin, nearly naked woman, who couldn't help me. What was she doing here with her ineffectual hands? Every half hour or so she would heat up a wet washcloth on the stove and lay it across my forehead. Once a doctor had told her that my headaches were from lack of circulation. And though neither my mother nor I believed that was the problem, for we both knew the problem personally, she still kept plying my head with hot rags.

I'll tell you something about my mother, I never liked her touching me, even when I was sick, maybe especially then. She had pretty, useless hands and a loose grip. She was very proud of her thin, elegant hands though. She kept her long nails filed to a perfect, rounded tip, and she decorated her fingers with strange rings. An antique black Opal that flipped open to reveal a secret compartment where vials of poison could be hid. When she pressed the hot cloth onto my head I could feel the delicate scrape of her nails across my skin, and I wanted to shove her hand away. But I knew better then to move.

At mid day, there was no sign of Joanna or my father.

By late afternoon they had not returned, nor by evening.

All day I lay out on that long slope of rock. Periodically I would sob. I was only eight, and it was hard not to cry even though I knew crying just made the headache worse. My mother talked to me in a soothing voice. That was something I liked, her voice pouring around me. Eventually, my mother went into the cabin and returned with a book of poems. I don't remember anything she read. Sitting slightly behind me so that I couldn't even see her, her voice flowed musically down the slope of rock and finally carried me off to sleep. Later, when I

opened my eyes I saw my mother standing by the edge of the lake, staring into that cold mountain water. She was muttering to herself, a whole rattling conversation of whispered words. Her hand kept moving up to her hair and fluttering in front of her face like a humming bird. What could my mother do? There was no phone, and she couldn't leave me to hike out to the lodge.

It was dusk. A soft dusk that fell on the lake like a blanket of snow. My mother dragged my mattress back into the cabin and left me lying in the middle of the room under the dead deer and bear heads while she made spaghetti with tomato sauce for dinner. I lay very still. I had discovered that there was a spot, a small sliver of white light in the middle of my head that didn't hurt. If I didn't move, I could live there without pain. The rest, all around this white sliver of light, was black and red agony.

My mother has the rare ability to float free when catastrophe strikes. She detaches like a balloon and simply floats above the anxiety and panic. It's as if she were in another world entirely. Or maybe that's how I remember her, for it was only after she finally let go of my father that weekend, that she took shape for me.

So, my mother was in the kitchen heating up tomato sauce because we needed to eat something, when my father and Joanna finally struggled into the cabin.

“Hello,” my father called. “Where is everybody?”

I was on the floor at his feet, but he thumped directly over me and to the long wooden banquet table, sat down and yelled. “Elaine, let me tell you what

happened to us!” Then, when he heard our mother at the stove in the kitchen, he banged through the swinging doors saying, “Weren’t you the least bit worried? Don’t you want to hear what happened to us? Come and sit down so I can tell you.”

Lying on the floor underneath the opaque gaze of those dead animals, I watched for my sister. I had rolled my eyes to the corners so I could see the door without turning my head, and even that slight adjustment hurt. When Joanna entered she came very quietly into the house like a little cat slipping in the cracked door. I couldn’t tell anything by looking at her, except that she had been crying. She was pale and her eyes were puffy. She wasn’t crying anymore though, and she wasn’t angry, but she had obviously made some decision too, about our father.

“Daddy got us lost,” Joanna finally said. She sat down at the table, in the spot our father had just vacated, and now she was addressing the huge open room and my prostrate and silent form on the floor. “He slipped and twisted his foot, and I had to practically carry him down the mountain. Finally, we met a park ranger and he helped us the rest of the way back.” That was all she said. At nine Joanna weighed less than eighty pounds and our father nearly a hundred more. But I didn’t think in terms of weight then. I pictured my sister’s narrow, bony back, her thin, twiggy legs, and our father leaning on her as if she were his walking stick. How she managed to descend that rocky mountain face with this clumsy bear of a man, weighing on her, I still do not know. Joanna refused to say anything else. Perhaps these accidental abuses embarrassed her. For her head

sank down between her shoulders. Our father has overturned two cars in his lifetime, completely over onto their roofs, and both times Joanna has been the only passenger with him. The first of these accidents was already behind her, the second would not happen until her early twenties. And, on those occasions as well, she has given only the most minimal explanation of the events.

In the kitchen doorway our mother now stood bearing her platter of food. She was staring intently at Joanna. Behind her our father limped into the room. “Ouch,” he said sitting gingerly down beside my sister. “Would you look at my foot?”

To me Joanna just looked tired. Perhaps because my own pain had commandeered all my energy, I didn’t see the puncture right away, didn’t see the way my sister sat, collapsed in on herself, like a raft beginning to slip under the surface of the water. Joanna had already been sullen and frowning when she had left that morning, dragging behind our father up that smooth face of rock. She didn’t want to go, she’d said; she wanted to read her movie magazines. Our father had made an ugly little scene about the magazines, about her lack of interest in this spectacular scenery, “the forces of nature” he called them. In the end, Joanna had thrown her magazines aside and said, “I’ll go if you just stop it,” and followed him up the mountain. Now, she sat silent and exhausted at the table. No scenes, no injuries. Just deflated. Our mother was the one who looked strange to me. Her lips were pressed so tight she looked as if, instead of cooking all this time in the kitchen, she’d been busy sewing them shut.

This was our mother's style though, to torture you with silent disapproval, and she did this now to our father. Those tight lips of hers were almost smiling.

Our father was beside himself and kept twisting this way and that, looking around the room at all of us. "Just take a look at my foot, Elaine," he complained pulling off his sock.

Frowning down at our father's long, white foot, our mother finally said, "Maybe it's a little strained."

That night we ate spaghetti with canned tomato sauce, or rather they did. I lay in the middle of the floor on my palate of pain. My father built a fire in the fireplace without opening the flue, and we had to move outside and sleep on our mattresses under the stars because of all the smoke. I remember opening my eyes in the middle of the night and seeing showers of lights raining out of the sky. This too, was real, and not a delusion from the migraine. Hundreds of stars were shooting across that black basin of late summer sky.

My headache shrank by degrees. It was as if the headache was a tenant that was slowly vacating the house in my head, moving out room by room. In the morning there was only a small corner of pain in the upper left quadrangle of my skull. The light was dim and my jaw was sore from clenching my teeth for eighteen hours.

It hadn't worked out. We left that morning on a ten o'clock boat full of day hikers. We drove out of Echo Lake and Desolation Valley down the mountain pass, and I almost killed my father deliberately on the way home.

Here's how that happened.

In the front seat my father twisted his head and hunched up his shoulders. “I’d love it if you’d rub my neck,” he told me.

I leaned forward and kneaded my fingers into his shoulders. I used to love to rub my father’s back. To press with my hands into the skin at the base of his neck. I used to love it when he’d groan and say, “Oh, that feels good.”

Beside him my mother gazed dreamily out the window. She wasn’t there anymore. Only her shell, topped by that flip of false black hair, sat beside our father. In the back seat, next to me, Joanna played cat’s cradle, her long fingers diving in and out of the string. We were all silent except for my father’s moaning pleasure. We were descending Tiaoga Pass winding down the steep side of the Sierra Mountains. To the right of our car was a solid rock wall; to the left, a sheer drop thousands of feet to river rock and valley below.

Now, my hands moved up my father’s neck to his head. I massaged his skull, ran my fingers through his hair. Back then his hair was black and blue and gray. I stared into the back of his head, into this multi-colored mass of wild hair. I wasn’t angry, but there was a sense of inevitability. Joanna had felt it the day before when she’d sullenly walked up the mountain on her forced march. Disaster was unavoidable. I knew that when I had pushed my hand through the glass window. Our mother knew it when our father disappeared into the wilderness yesterday leaving her with a sick child. You make spaghetti sauce. You do the next thing in front of you, and if the next thing in front of you happens to be dinner, then you make dinner. Earlier that summer in the redwood forest, I had finally led my father and Joanna out of the woods. Our father--in his fervent

desire to find that elusive ocean and thus avoid Caroline: the boxes, the mess of goodbyes, perhaps his little girls' tears, but most importantly that sense of failure that if he didn't flee it, might paralyze him--continually led us back, again and again, to that burnt circle of trees. We had lost the main path. It was as if those dead trees were following us, reappearing at every turn. We walked for hours on that day too, until the late afternoon, but still our father wouldn't leave the forest until Joanna and I had posed for a photograph. I still have it. There we are, two limp little girls standing on either side of a giant tree. It's one of the largest trees in Muir Woods, and years ago someone cut a whole in it big enough for a car to drive through. That's where our father posed us, on either side of a gutted tree.

Here's the thing. We indulged him. Yet, I think that each of us was very practical when it came to my father. At some point we all knew when to take over or when to step back. But giving up is harder. At that very moment, sitting beside my sister and behind my parents, I knew I held my father's head in my hands. I lifted my fingers and pressed my fat little palms over my father's eyes and held them there tight.

Our father slammed on the brakes; our car lurched first to the cliff side, then to the mountainside. My sister smacked up against the passenger door, her head hitting the glass. I shut my eyes and grabbed the edge of my seat. We skidded and screeched and spun and when we finally stopped our car was facing in the opposite direction.

"My God!" our mother yelled.

"I'm sorry," I cried, blinking. "My hands slipped."

Joanna was still pressed up against the window.

“Is everybody all right?” Our father asked. “Jo?”

“It’s just a bump.” Joanna said touching her forehead. Turning to me she asked, “Are you crazy?”

Was I crazy?

This near killing of our father, of all of us really, was attributed to my recent illness, the dim lighting in the car, my slipping hand. Three days later our father drove our mother to the airport and she too, like Caroline earlier that summer, returned east. How did she say goodbye to us, I wonder? We were not at the airport to wave her off, as we had been to greet her. But where were we, and who took care of us? I don’t remember a baby-sitter ever--in California, although our father went out all the time. I remember a dog though, a German Shepherd that used to visit from up the street and herd Joanna and me around the yard like sheep. There were still two weeks left of our summer holiday before Joanna and I were due to follow our mother. We returned to day camp. Each morning from nine till noon we practiced water ballet and archery. Neither one of us was very good at these sports. I used to sink straight down like a log when I lay sculling on my back in the pool, while Joanna was completely double jointed and so, although she could contort herself into the strangest poses, she could not maintain any of them. As far as archery was concerned I don’t think either of us managed to hit the target once that summer. Joanna’s elbows inverted when she pulled back the bow, and I shut my eyes when I released my arrow. Camp let out at noon. In the parking lot the moms waited in their cars. Now is about the time,

Joanna has told me, that we started to hitch-hike. “It was how we got home from camp after Caroline was gone and Daddy just couldn’t pick us up. So he told me we should hitch. I was nine,” she has said. “You had just turned eight, and Charles Manson was driving around Berkeley then.”

That is exactly how Joanna says it. “They must have been crazy to let us hitch-hike.” And all the anger and fear that we didn’t know was inside us, is in her voice. I’ll tell you how she looked when she came down that mountain. She looked scared: pale and wane and ghostlike. A broken stick of a girl. It gives me the chills, goose bumps, a slamming headache. Crazy. Our mother says she never knew what happened during our summer holidays although it was right in front of her, if she’d only asked. As far as Joanna and I were concerned, when we stuck out our thumbs we were just following an inevitable path. We were just trying to get home.

THE SCREAM

Joanna couldn't decide on what to eat. She pulled at the tender flesh of her lower lip, her long fingers folded up in front of her face like an insect's legs. This was our first visit together since we were back on speaking terms. For her Christmas present, and for her forgiveness, I had promised to take her to dinner and then to see Beach Blanket Babylon Goes Around the World, a song and dance review that had been playing for years in San Francisco.

I had come to this meal eagerly, excited to be reuniting with my sister. For in spite of our fights, in spite of her screaming tantrums and my often ambivalent behavior, I was surprised by how much I had begun to miss her, even her outrageousness. Perhaps my isolation in Kenneth's apartment, or my severed friendship with Evelyn, contributed to my longing for Joanna. I was no longer in school and alone a great deal of the time.

Over the phone Joanna had said with a certain finality, "Now we'll have the relationship I've always wanted." That comment should have been my cue, my warning bell. But if it rang, I was not listening. I tell you, I truly missed her. She was my sister. She is ever still.

Now, here we sat before the show, on opposite sides of a table booth, in a restaurant off Sacramento Street, called Healthy Choices.

First there was her gift. Held out in the palm of her hand and wrapped in a Christmas paper that pictured two bouncing kittens tangled up in a ball of yarn under a tree. "Open it. I bought this for you."

I hadn't expected a gift. Her own offering. In my hands it was flat and weightless.

"Don't you love this wrapping?" Joanna asked with eager anticipation.

I nodded and tore off the tape, ripped open her carefully selected wrapping, and exposed a small pad of note paper with neon rainbows painted around the margins.

"Thanks," I flipped through the pad, bright rainbows bleeding into one another. She must have seen a look on my face that was not overwhelming gratitude. Have I told you how Joanna saves all the gifts--unopened--that have been sent to her for birthdays and Christmas? If she has a place to travel to for the holidays, she will wait, cart whatever presents have previously arrived, and open them among company. I don't know anyone else who does this. She is middle-aged now, but still she assiduously sets aside her presents and waits for that magical moment when she can open them slowly, thoughtfully, carefully, and always under the admiring gaze of others.

Of course, I did it all wrong. I opened her gift quickly and then dismissed it. "It's nice, Joanna." I tried, though not very hard, to sound enthusiastic. "I like it, really."

"You know I don't have any money. Not like you with that guy." My sister frowned. She picked up her menu and held it in front of her face. "What are you going to have?"

I looked down at the plastic folder describing a mostly vegetarian fare. This restaurant choice had been Joanna's idea. As with almost everything else,

we were on the opposite sides of the food consumption debate. My sister was well on her way to becoming a vegan. I adored red meat. “The Chicken Salad,” I said.

“How can you eat that flesh?” Joanna muttered. Slowly she lowered her menu and peered at me, those pale eyebrows of hers knitting together as she gripped the edge of the table. *Here it comes* I thought, still a little stunned at how swiftly I’d let this reunion between us disintegrate. It was as if we were allergic to one another, so extreme and instantaneous were our reactions. “Do you know what they do to those poor animals before they die?” she continued. Leaning across the table she thrust her jaw forward. “Let’s take chickens, for instance. Try to imagine being cooped up with your own waste with thousands of others like you. Being grown so fat and fast that your legs can’t support your own body. And do you want to know how they’re slaughtered?” With each word her voice began to rise. She spat her statistics out as if she were reciting from a pamphlet. And of course she was. She had it memorized.

My father had told me that Joanna had joined an animal rights group quite recently. Now she was breaking into the laboratories on the Berkeley Campus releasing mice riddled with cancer and cats selected for brain implants. “Can you imagine the embarrassment?” he’d wailed. “And on my own campus. How did this happen?” He’d sounded truly bewildered.

I agreed with my father. It was hard to imagine Joanna sneaking into a laboratory in the middle of the night. Not because she wasn’t capable of bold

action, but because she was not a deceptive girl. I've never known Joanna to do anything without a certain display of ferocity.

She sat within arms reach of me, speaking vengefully, as she described the horrible, protracted death of these creatures. Clearly she identified with helplessly waylaid animals. Perhaps in her righteousness, she saw in me all the compassionless killers, for I felt as if, on some level, Joanna was blaming me for these deaths, too. Or maybe she just didn't see her position as extreme. Joanna was never one to proportion her behavior. But you could say the same for all of us in our family.

Joanna had almost finished describing the de-feathering process. She must have seen my attention wander however, for suddenly she waved her arm in the air and said. "I'm going to ask them why they call this place Healthy Choices. They shouldn't get away with it if they're going to serve meat here."

"You're not going to ask them that. Put your hand down!" Which was of course, the wrong thing for me to say.

"Who are you to tell me what to do? You always think you can boss me around, but I'm the older sister."

"I'm paying for this meal!" I spat out. Why did I continue? She'd already lowered her arm. A sane person, a person who was not Joanna's sister, would shut up here. Inside my own head I screamed at myself, *stop!*

Joanna's face flushed. Her eyes were so wet, but she wouldn't let the tears fall. Grief never comes out of her like that. And if it did, it might drown us all. Joanna slammed the door on grief years ago and now she just screams it down.

Across the table, her thin face with her jutting chin and red eyes looked almost noble. She'd been dieting again and her cheeks were hollow and the bones below her eyes were large and finely shaped. She tanned with such fervor that her skin, even in her teens, was leathery. And I suddenly realized, in that slowed-down moment, with her savage face glaring at me across the table, what she was saying to me. *I'm the older sister.* Oh God, I thought, if only that were true.

We could have a huge fight here. One of us could go slamming out the door. But this was the first time I'd seen her since the summer, since we had fought in the car on our way to our father's house, and she had refused to speak to me for months, cursing at me each time I called, profanity roaring at me like an ocean over the telephone line. I wasn't ready for that to happen again, not so soon. Both my parents had pleaded with me to reconcile with Joanna.

"I sometimes wonder if you're going to wait until I die to learn to get along," my mother had said.

My father had his own version. "You can't just abandon your sister."

Looking around the restaurant I tried to spot the waitress. "Let's just have a nice meal," I said to the sister I could neither embrace nor cast aside. I sounded like our father then, side stepping out the door.

"That's all I want." Joanna countered. "But you never talk to me. You're closer to your friends than you are to your own sister. You never even talked to me about what happened on our trip. Not once, and I was there. How do you think that makes me feel?"

In that next second, the time it took her words to fly out her mouth and buzz around me like a swarm of flies, my whole body dropped out below me. My head was floating, severed and bloody, in the middle of the table. I hate horror movies. I fail to see their humor and am not amazed at the grotesque. Joanna-- even right in front of me, even while I am sitting on my seat, gripped and watching, can mutate--can crash through glass with a hatchet in her hand.

And so I said, in an icy and controlled voice--because how else do you address the intruder that you know well and have, on occasion, let into your own house--I said. "If you were there Joanna, why do we need to discuss it?"

"You know why," my sister said, nodding her head emphatically. "You know why."

Well, I did know why. Violence calls upon violence. Soon enough secrets beget their own disguise. Festering until that is all you are. Neither butterfly nor caterpillar but chrysalis itself, I had become my own cocoon. The shell of the egg that conceals the larva inside. The hatchet swung through the air. Joanna, my hazardous witness, flashed the shiny blade of her only weapon--what she had seen--at me. My sister was right. She had been there.

Joanna settled on a pureed broccoli soup and pasta shells stuffed with three cheeses, ricotta being one of the cheeses. Her pasta sat, four large shells marooned in a sea of tomato paste, while Joanna devoured the first three with sequential concentration. The last, lonely shell she took with her in a doggy bag, carrying it throughout the night, like an evening purse dangling at the end of her

wrist. She does this with food, clings to it. A few years ago she flew East to visit me, transporting half a banana in her knapsack. When the banana was left, inadvertently in a locker at my gym, she lost control of herself in the parking lot. I won't say what she did, but she has yet to forgive me for not retrieving that half banana.

I merely picked at the chicken salad I had ordered. There was something crunchy in it, which felt when I chewed, like little wing and neck bones breaking in my mouth.

Stunned into our separate silences we were quiet through our meal and on the short walk to the show. At the theater--which was actually a cabaret--we had to order drinks to maintain our table. It was a tiny table--like a thimble, a toadstool on a forest floor--where we perched in equally tiny chairs in a dark room, and I slammed down gin and tonics while Joanna drank a Mai Tai and then a Zombie. In front of us, under the colored spot lights, a parade of dancers marched. Each wore a towering hat that was made to resemble a historical monument: The Empire State Building, The Great Pyramid, The Eiffel Tower--even a lighted effigy of Times Square was represented. They tap danced and sang in a long synchronized line, melodies of old New York, and Gay Paree, weaving in and out between one another, their heads abloom. At foot level, Joanna sat enraptured by this strange extravaganza, and she began to sing along loudly to the tunes she recognized, her feet shuffling under the table, tracing out the steps of the dancers above us. Occasionally she would glance in my direction, wave her arms

and grimace. She was again happy, like the child I had witnessed creep out and run singing through the woods. I believe she was looking for my reassurance.

Over the years I've dealt with Joanna's displays differently. There are times when I have scowled and shushed her like an angry parent, and there have been a few times when I have even joined in. Mostly, I find some way to disappear. The gin and tonics were helping. Joanna, of course, could tell. She shot her arm out towards me and grabbed my shoulder and shook me gently, her face pressed up so close to mine, I could smell sweet rum. She was trying to shake a laugh or a smile out of me. To elicit my companionship, and hadn't I given that to almost anybody else? Yet, I couldn't give it to her. She had too much on me. We'd seen each other so compromised by then, that there was no comfort left in being together. Did I know that? Not completely, no. But my body did. I scooted my chair back from the table.

Joanna snarled, literally. She must have known I was trying to pretend she didn't belong to me. She curled her lip and emitted a growl. Then she thumped her feet down heavily on the floor, and turned a bony shoulder to me. There she sat for the rest of the show.

God, I couldn't stand that back. I'd seen it all through my childhood. Fragile and rigid and motionless. Angry as a black line, or hurt and curved, hunched over like a snail's shell. What could it shelter her from? The bones attenuated, the clavicle and shoulder blades, all the ribs visible through her shirt.

We were out on the street now, Joanna storming ahead of me, but not too far, pulling me forward like a leashed dog. What can you do? You either yank

the rope back or cast it away. It's an awful thing to have that kind of power over another person. Sometimes I believed, I truly did, that if I put out my hand and touched her, I could transform everything. That, as easily as a magic wand or a kiss in a fairy tale could transform a frog into a prince, or wake a sleeping damsel, I could turn and touch Joanna and my irritation, my disgust, would blossom into love, my pity into empathy. Then, maybe she could be my older sister after all. And so I did finally run the few steps towards her and reach out for her hand. I got her doggy bag of food instead, which she swung fiercely at me.

“You think I'm an insect,” she cried.

“That's not true.” Because who would want to believe those words.

We stood there, both paralyzed. Finally I said. “Joanna, let's go back to Kenneth's so we can talk.”

“Why would I want to go there? Daddy says he's a creep.”

Because it's a place to go and we've run out of places. I thought.

Because this night is going somewhere, I can feel it. And I'm tired and maybe I want it done. I didn't say that, of course. What I said was, “Come on. We'll have another drink and talk.” Cautiously I rested my hand on her arm again. I didn't want to, but I did anyway. Joanna believes that I've been trying to change her my whole life. The truth is, it's my own nature I wish I could alter. *What the fuck.* Perhaps I'd intended to bring her home all along. In those days I still tried occasionally to integrate her into my life. She would, of course, disagree with that, but I hadn't completely abandoned her. She shrugged off my hand on her arm, but she came with me to Kenneth's.

We couldn't find a cab, and walked down Columbus Street, past Washington Square Park, then up over the hill, and down towards the Marina, to the penthouse apartment where Kenneth and I had recently moved after our return from Europe. Heads bent and side by side, Joanna and I stomped along in silence. We were both so intent on our walk, panting as we hiked up the hill--a neighbor had once told our mother how the two of us walked to school, plodding along, never lifting our eyes from our feet, even as cars passed, and that is how we proceeded now--and so, we didn't notice the mist of fine, light rain that permeated the air, or the moment at the top of Nob Hill when we barreled right into a dense cloud. A flurry of rain blew all around us, and for a moment I thought I'd lost Joanna, for I could no longer see her. But then I heard her familiar pant beside me, her heavy footfall, and so we continued on, heads bent, eyes on the pavement. Have I said our mother was flying in that night? Of course I haven't. Joanna and I never spoke of it. In another few minutes we were descending the hill and the storm was gone. Still, we were both soaked to the bone when we emerged from the night and entered the bright lobby. Upstairs the elevator deposited us in the vestibule, an octagonal room, all eight walls and the ceiling covered in mirrors.

Ever since I'd first stepped off the elevator and entered this apartment, I'd avoided looking up as I crossed the room. It was too much: the panel upon panel of mirrored glass that reflected my image infinitely, like an endless echo that paraded after me as I traveled from the outside world into Kenneth's domain.

Seeing this room however, Joanna sprang to life. “Wow,” she said, setting off like a twirling top across the floor. She stopped when she came to the center of the room, flung off the Mexican poncho that I had given her years ago, stuck her hands on her hips, and grinned widely at her multiple selves. “You know,” she said glancing up and down at me. “We look alike.” She was right. With her permed afro of wet hair now matted down by the rain, and the wild multi-colored make-up nearly washed away, Joanna and I bore a surprising resemblance. I had always measured myself by our difference, but here suddenly our similarities surrounded me. We have the same chin and jaw, the same thin upper lip. Even our backs, I knew without checking, had the same elongated S-curve. I gave her a half-hearted smile, but I didn’t want to look anymore. For this was the moment I had been dreading nearly all my life. The moment I disappeared into the image of my sister. Joanna jubilantly reached out, grabbed my hand and pulled me across the room towards her, turning her head to watch our reflections merge as she did this. “Hey there, sis!” she yelled as if she expected someone to take our picture.

In the next moment, one of the mirrored paneled doors flew open and out stepped Lydia and Kenneth as if they’d been waiting there, on the other side of the glass, for us all along. Both were dressed in matching burgundy silk pajamas, though Kenneth looked like a midget standing beside the majestic Lydia. A balding, happy little dwarf beside his long, blonde haired princess.

“My,” Kenneth said brightly, “We thought we heard voices. Don’t you two look a sight!”

“So you guys are like what, a happy family? Is this some Mason thing?”

Joanna and I were toweling off in the guest bathroom.

“No,” I said. After a moment I added, “There’s nothing to tell, we’re all just friends.”

Joanna squinted at me in the bathroom mirror. She was trying to fluff up her perm. “So, well who is she?”

“She’s a friend,” I lied again. Lydia was no friend. Lydia was my replacement. An eighteen-year-old cocktail waitress Kenneth had met in the lounge of the Fairmont Hotel. I’d come home from a brief two-day visit down to Santa Cruz, to gather up my transcripts, and found, upon my return, the long body of Lydia stretched the length of the bed, clad only in my Panache T-shirt. She was friendly enough in a cold way. She even wiggled over to give me an edge of mattress. I wasn’t angry or even upset. In fact, I was surprised at how relieved I felt by her presence. I knew it was only a matter of weeks maybe only days, before I left this world of Kenneth’s. He must have known it too. I didn’t see how I could explain any of this to my sister. But, Joanna having known me since I was born, knew instantly that I was hiding something from her.

“You’re so full of shit,” she snapped, her mouth instantly knotting up. “Why should I even bother? I thought that this time things would finally be different between us. But, you’re totally incapable of communicating!” She threw her towel down in the sink and slammed out of the bathroom. I heard her walk down the hall, she made sure of that, stomping her feet hard on the long trail

of Turkish rugs, and entered Kenneth's bedroom. Then I heard my sister say, "How can you stand her? She's such a bitch."

Perhaps Joanna was right. Perhaps I am a bitch, incapable of communication. (Though, if I am a bitch I must be communicating at least my bitchiness). But, what could I have said to her? This loud girl with her wild, uncontrolled hair bleached an unnatural color, and that clown's face of make-up she wore. I didn't understand her, I never had. Was she trying to disfigure herself, or transform herself into someone we might all love? In the past, I have told my sister that her clothes don't fit. "Why are you wearing that dress?" I've scolded. "It barely covers your ass." I had chastised her, but I had not told her much else. For instance, I never told her that when we were teenagers and she sat alone with me, thrusting her legs wide open without any underwear on, this act of carelessness scared me. Over the years I'd grown numb to such behavior, but she could still rattle me. I knew then, that she would never keep my secret. It lay inside her like a trapped animal waiting to be sprung.

Out of the bathroom and down the hall I crept. At the bedroom door I stopped. Inside my sister was seated on the floor, her chin resting in her hands, gazing up at Lydia with the wide-eyed awe of a teen age boy. And who could blame her. For there beside Kenneth sat Botticelli's Venus, a curtain of blonde hair reaching to her waist. An old Bette Davis movie was playing on the television set, but no one was watching it. From high up on his bed, Kenneth

intoned. “You know what I think, Joanna? I think we all create our own problems in life.”

“I do not.” Joanna snapped.

Kenneth’s voice was thick and heavy. “Yes, you do. You are the sole creator of your own experience.” I realized with a creeping sensation, as if the knowledge was buried under a sedative, that he had the same baritone pitch as my father. He was idly chopping up lines of coke on a plate in his lap, slicing and reslicing as if he were shuffling a deck of cards. “Even your experience of Claire could be construed as your own creation,” Kenneth added.

There are times when I’ve waited at the edges of things, believing with an inviolable conviction that I was only there to bear silent witness: like an object: a statue, or a mirror perhaps. I thought, if I don’t move, if I don’t speak, if I just lie here, no one will notice me.

Occasionally this method has worked. It just depends on how much you can stand. At first, none of them noticed me hesitating on the threshold. From the floor Joanna grunted, “Look, I know what you’re saying. But she looks at me with contempt. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Why do you feel contempt?” Kenneth asked a little pebble of excitement creeping into his voice. “Maybe you have contempt for yourself?”

Joanna shrugged. She seemed immune to them, even slightly immune to the drugs. She has told our mother that on that night she tried cocaine for the first time. Our mother holds this out to me, as if this act of introducing Joanna to Kenneth and Lydia and thus to her very first line of coke, balances the scales.

But, those scales were broken years ago. There is no fairness. No way to even out the role of the dice.

Now, I heard the word “love” being tossed about the room. “Truth is Love,” Kenneth said.

And Lydia insisted, “If you speak the truth, love can’t help but embrace you.” Then the girl with Rapunzell’s locks lowered her beautiful head over the plate in Kenneth’s lap. When she lifted it again, she stared straight at me and said, “Joanna, it will blow your mind. When you finally shed your resistance you’ll shed your past. None of it really matters anyway.”

Well, that was more than my sister could bear. All she’d ever wanted to was shed her past. “I’ve always been a loser,” she cried.

It had slowly dawned on me that Kenneth and Lydia had no intention of seducing Joanna. For one thing, the wrong movie was on--*The Third Man* was nowhere in sight. For another, Kenneth and Lydia sat above my sister, not with looks of sexual hunger. No, their bright, cocked-up eyes, watched Joanna with the anticipation that people have at a car wreck. Where is the body? They were wondering.

I must have given Lydia a look of disgust because she asked, “What’s the matter Claire?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“We’re all just getting acquainted,” Kenneth said, stroking Lydia’s river of hair. “Claire’s a little worried. She thinks I might try and seduce you.” He smiled

at my sister. “But we’re just here to speak the truth. Isn’t that right, Joanna? To find love and acceptance for who we really are inside.”

Joanna laughed. She turned and made a face, a really nasty face at me as if a bad smell had just assailed her, and said. “She’s not a bit worried about me. She’s just afraid I’m going to say something that will embarrass her.”

“Jesus Joanna, nothing you can do will embarrass me anymore.” Which was another lie. I wrinkled my nose and returned her face. After that, I abandoned my guard dog post, and headed for the terrace where there were no mirrors. Just the whiteness of the fog, the black bay, the sleeping city. Then, abruptly, the heavy layer of fog that hung over the city like a blanket sheltering a sleeping child, cleared. In front of my eyes clouds parted like oceans, and I could suddenly see. Something, I knew, was about to happen in the bedroom behind me, though what I couldn’t yet say. It was very late by now, and most of the lights in the buildings below us had been dark for hours. Across the water, almost directly in front of me, rose the hill to my father’s house. I knew it was much too far away for a human eye to see anything, but I was certain I recognized the spot where the road jutted up like an exclamation point, and the houses fell off to the sides. The night was piercingly clear and bright. My mother would have no problem landing. At any moment her plane might burst out of the darkness, swoop across the sky, red and blue lights flashing, and circle in a beautiful, wide arc towards the airfield. Then the earth, with all its creatures, would rise sharply back into focus. She was probably down already, maybe sleeping in her hotel. It was only later that she admitted to me what she had actually done that night.

How she had run the water full blast in the tub and sink and screamed under the noise of the flushing toilet.

When I came back into the bedroom Joanna had center stage. I guessed that Lydia had told a story: a confession of abuse, for that was how these evenings usually went. There was something about Kenneth that brought that out, almost a requirement of his. “Time to own up. To shed the weight of your past and embrace your destiny.” Or some such nonsense. Maybe Kenneth thought that these confessed declarations united us all on a common plane of suffering. But, there are some truths that are greater than others. Up until now, I’d always resisted. Not Joanna, however. On this night it was finally her turn to speak, and she was going to relish every minute of it.

She stood up, her back as straight as a board, though she did not face the bed and the figures seated upon it as you might expect, given the circumstances. Nor did she look at me, where again I stood vigil in the doorway. Instead, Joanna turned her back to us all, and began addressing her own reflection in the long mirror of Kenneth’s closet door.

“See, we were trying to get to California but the car kept breaking down. God, I loved that car. It was my first car, my only car. And Claire made me sell it in Nebraska to those guys in the gas station. After that, I told her not to go. But do you think she’d listen to me. Oh no. It was her own fault. She went off with both those guys to the bar.” My sister spoke as if she were auditioning for a theatrical part. She threw her voice out across the room and swept her arms open in a wide gesture. She gazed upwards with her titled head as if she were pleading

with someone, God maybe. She knew I was in the doorway, witnessing all this; maybe she wanted that, or maybe she didn't. In any case it was too late for her to stop. And I'm sure she wouldn't have or couldn't have, for she had such a rapt audience. Kenneth had set the plate aside and switched off the volume of the movie, though Bette Davis could still be seen batting her pop eyes at Leslie Howard on the screen. Beside him Lydia sat forward on her heels. Joanna raised her voice even louder. Now, even those images on the television set, those movie stars, were silent for her. "Then, after she'd left I just turned on the TV. Eventually one of those guys, the skinny one, came back to the room and tried to rape me. Well, first he was as sweet as pie, as if we were on a date, saying 'My friend's with your sister, I should be with you.' But, he was creepy. They were both creeps. Losers, Users and Abusers. That's what I call those types. I certainly wasn't going to let him touch me. That's when Claire finally showed up. Well, after the police came the guy who was with me confessed to his friend's rape. He said he was the one who had raped Claire." A breath, Joanna took a deep breath and continued slowly, "Like I said, a total weirdo." And she spun around. My sister spun around and faced us all. "And what do you think Claire did then, when we finally left that place. She floored the car and drove straight into him."

There was a moment of utter silence. Then, from out of this room, heaving like a bellows, swarming like a plague of locusts, came my scream. The scream came up and out of me like a huge roar, a howl that when it rose I flung my arms around and rode. I screamed to cover Joanna's voice, to deafen her, to

distract Kenneth and Lydia, to burst my own ear drums. I couldn't believe it. Exhilarating, intoxicating, contagious, contaminating, like a laugh that just made you laugh harder, only it was my own endless scream that pierced the air and went on and on. Swimming up out of my scream, came the whole contents of my life. I could see it, the sounds my life made rushing forth. The glass shattering, my bloody fist, my father placing a candle stick in his suitcase--a blue candle stick--then taking it out and giving it to me, his sobbing child, before he walked out the open door. "Try and love people the way they need to be loved," Evelyn had whispered. Was it a dream? Evelyn sitting up on the bed, legs crossed under her soft pink bathrobe and smiling at me like a Buddha. Rock, rock went the bed but still I could not reach her and her smile just went on and on. "I can't, I can't, I can't." I wept in return. A whole symphony filled my throat and poured out mouth, glittering and awesome. And, in the hotel room down the street, under the sound of rushing water, my mother screamed in concert. I screamed like Joanna, like she has all these many years. Standing high up on her chair in the Kinderheim, four nurses circling round; pulling the brown pinafore over her head, for our parents had finally come to retrieve us. "Mommy come, mommy come," on and on Joanna screamed. *God, what a pair of lungs that child has*, the nurses muttered. They heard her all the way down that mountain road. Fat little baby on the floor, I knew she was screaming for both of us. They weren't dead, no they weren't dead at all. For here they both come, pretty as a picture, mother in her swirling skirt, father's throat clasped in a white shirt. And after that, who would have let those two girls drive off alone in a car, two cats locked in a cage no less.

Why did you bind my fate to hers, sealing us together in that tomb? No screams came out of that cornfield nor out of that hotel room where my sister lay trapped. What follows is inevitable. The film spools on the reel, silent except for the thump of the boy's body as he smacks the hood of the car. "What did you do?" Joanna cried. "What have you done?" But it was late. Too late.

The air was finally out. When I opened my eyes, what I saw in the mirror was almost unrecognizable. My features had gone slack. My jaw hung open like an unhinged door and all my limbs dangled loosely about me as if they had been wrenched from their sockets.

Up on the bed, both Kenneth and Lydia were gazing out the window, two embarrassed little smiles across both their faces.

But, neck craned Joanna stared at me all the way across the room. Grabbing up her poncho, still peering at me through her thicket of matted hair, she finally said, "Why don't you shut up, Claire?"

Then, without another word she walked out of that apartment, passing back through the glass paneled room, the door snapping shut behind her, and descended into the world below.

LACUNA

I've left out things. Important things. Details that shouldn't have been omitted. There are so many gaps in my story, for I am riddled with holes. Shot through like a target. If you held me up to the light, you would see for yourself. But a hole is a way in, a port of entry.

On the steps to the Legion of Honor, my mother paced. Her undone hair, dyed a red brown color, blew about her face like a dust storm. When I reached her, the skin on her cheeks was as soft as tissue paper and wet with tears.

"You are so late," she wailed. "I was beginning to wonder if you would ever come."

"Kenneth had to make a stop." My voice came out as a whisper, a gasp. Last night it had poured out of me in a torrent and there it still lay, splashed about the bedroom like an ugly stain. It was a lie, too, that I was telling my mother. Kenneth had made no stops. He had not even come with me. I had been late all on my own. Which wasn't so hard after all. Oh, if she only knew how slowly I had come to meet her. How deliberately I had dressed and redressed, finally settling on the robin's egg blue dress my father had bought for her towards the end of their marriage.

I couldn't look at her. Not directly, not while she was staring at me and I was whispering and lying. She must have sensed this, or been used to by now, my

hushed conversations over the phone line. For she didn't ask anything. When I did finally let my eyes stray for a moment to her, I saw this slight, disheveled woman--my gentle mother--standing before me, her small eyes, so like Joanna's in shape, but without the meanness, gazing at me as if she were gazing at her own heart, beating outside her body.

In the next moment she clutched me in a fierce hug. And for the briefest instant, while I was held tightly within the span of her thin arms, with the drum of her heart knocking against my own ribs, I wanted to be that heart. I wanted again to be the child asleep on the other side of my mother's wall, dreaming her dreams.

It was useless though. I hadn't lived in concert with her thoughts for years. We unhooked from one another. Shivering in her too thin spring coat, my mother held a Kleenex in her gloved hand up to the end of her pointed nose and said, noticing my dress. "I remember that dress."

"You gave it to me." My voice crackled and strained like a car too tired and cold to start up.

She smiled. Smiled at the memory of her younger self wearing this blue dress, with its short sleeves and the hem that stopped just above my exposed knees. "I wore that on the vaporetto crossing over to Torcello." Her eyes drifted over my shoulder as if she were even now gliding away towards an island in the Venetian littoral. "I wasn't very happy then. It was a magical place though. A Byzantine ghost town."

"Are you happy now?" I whispered.

My mother blinked. She looked like a marsh bird--spindly limbed, with slender body and snakelike neck. Like those darting creatures, my mother too slipped easily beneath surfaces. "Piffle." She laughed.

I took my mother's small, gloved hand and beckoned her up the stairs. Inside the museum the Rodins waited. *Let's go in now*, my own eyes said.

My mother came with me, sighing I knew, with the relief that I was finally there. This daughter, who had never before been late for anything--who had waited up for her no matter how long the night, whose goodnight kissing ritual had consisted of four kisses to each cheek, four to the forehead and four to the chin, because sixteen could be divided into four equal parts, quartered four times by itself like the slices of a pie--evenly. And, though I didn't understand the concept of square roots, this sense of balance, of safety, of being surrounded by equal kisses of love as the four walls of my room surrounded me with shelter, was paramount in my child's mind--this silent daughter clad in a beautiful, outdated dress the color of a robin's egg, had finally arrived an hour and a half after the scheduled meeting time.

My mother however, was not the impatient parent. My mother could wait for hours, still as a lizard on a rock. Even now, I could feel her waiting, a princess in slumber, for one of us, for all of us to return. With the tug of my hand, she sucked in her breath. Filling her twin lungs with the image of the two of us together she came with me up the stairs and into the museum.

We were silent wanderers. Passing first Rodin's Thinker, the giant that he created to sit brooding over the Gates of Hell. Further on, The Prodigal Son, back

arched, struggled up from his father's feet. His place was relegated to the base of the Gates. We knew--because these are the things our family knows--all about Rodin's Gates of Hell. A massive set of doors he'd spent most of his life creating, his eulogy to Dante. All the sculptures displayed at the Legion of Honor, in fact most of Rodin's sculptures, were originally fashioned for the Gates. Here they existed alone, truncated from the Gates as from their own narrative.

My mother made a beeline for Rodin's Kiss. Two twisted and fused bodies that rose out of a single block of luminescent marble, spiraling around one another in an endless embrace. These bodies had no separation, no clarity of contour. They were collapsed in on one another as if in a dream. Circling these figures, these split trunks of the same tree, she said, "It's not as if they make sense in the real world. It's as if he's reaching us through our dreams."

I didn't answer. Once we had existed together as one, but the world, life, had pulled us apart. What was there to say?

Again we wandered. My mother floating beside me as if she was borne on a gentle current. I was not paying a great deal of attention to the sculptures. I pulled away from my mother's side and followed slightly behind her through the cold marble halls. She let me go, distracted by art or her own imagination. She knew I was here now, that I was not going to fly out of the room, which was more than I knew about her.

Today I was finding the Rodins hard to look at. Like my mother they continually slipped from my gaze, as inaccessible and impenetrable as another

body and yet so familiar, so like my own. How much easier to drift around them as if I were drifting through a silent crowd.

My mother was having an easier time. Back hunched like a shore bird searching the sand, she leaned over a long Plexiglas case. Looking closer I saw that spread out below her, laid out in rows, were dozens of hands. Beautiful sculpted hands: one of a pink white marble showing a plump open palm, another whose long dangling fingers were made of green gold bronze, and still another cast in plaster and clenched into a tight fist. Grasping, beckoning, empty hands, all smooth and unblemished. Some, turned over, seemed to stroke the surface upon which they crawled. Like crabs scuttling across the velvet backdrop.

My mother smiled down at the hands as if she might pet one. “How lovely. It’s about time I guess. And the repetitive process of time.” Her gloves were off and her hands lay open on the surface of the Plexiglas, her pale, elegant fingers mimicking one of the Rodin hands directly below.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to the hands. A black onyx hand lay open like a mollusk. I was so tired. I wanted to sleep, to place my life inside that black hand--that envelope of night. My little body curled up snug and tight.

Very quietly I heard my mother say. “Last night I couldn’t stop crying. I was sobbing so loud I turned all the water on.” She used to do this when we were children. Go into the bathroom and cry under the sound of rushing water so we couldn’t hear her. But we did. We heard her.

“What were you frightened of, Mom?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. I know because I felt the shake of her head without looking and turned to see the shaking stop. “No, I do know. I was afraid of seeing you. Not being able to reach you.” She was staring at me, her face beginning to crinkle, her hands still resting open on the case. Open and empty. “You’re my child, my child, my love.” Her voice broke.

She had spoken neither loudly nor softly, but the word vibrated through the room like a silent alarm. *Love*. A shiver went through me. I could feel my skin prickling under the surface of my dress. It was as if we had stolen something. Broken through the Plexiglas and lifted one of Rodin’s hands right out of its box. And here we both stood now, surprised at the audacity of our own action, ready to flee with our treasure. *Love*. Heads shot up. A bored, slouching guard suddenly thrust his shoulders back. Across the hall, two old women, dressed in matching white pantsuits, lifted their heads in unison to her whispered utterance. *Love*, my god, how alert they looked, like birds catching sight of a fish. I’d seen these two, it seemed everywhere, the last few weeks. I couldn’t step out of the apartment without noticing them linked arm and arm, walking along the street or coming out of a movie theater. Now, here they were again, hovering beside *The Kiss*, smiling eagerly at my mother and me with their bright red lips.

Such a shockingly beautiful word. It flashed above us like a bright light, a beacon, a warning. I too, wanted to possess it. To catch it and reel it in. This sparkling star--my mother’s call to me.

We spill so many things. So many things spill out of the holes in us. Last night I had vomited up my story in an endless scream and hers lay in that single

word. *Love*. I was the child she let go at her moment of first love. “I fell in love with you when I dropped you off at the Kinderheim.” I’d heard those words so many times. Our love, hers and mine, was inseparable from our parting.

My mother’s long neck curved downward, her right hand now searched the dark recess of her purse for a Kleenex. Each night she had bent that beautiful long neck to me, lowered her smooth face, her small eyes always closed to receive my blessing. My goodnight kisses. Let me bid my farewell. Sixteen little pecks from my lips circling around her face.

She was talking again, telling me, “Joanna accused me of favoring you. You were my cuddly, square, adorable, sturdy marvel. Who wouldn’t favor a child so easy to raise? After your father left, you were the one I could always depend on. Oh, I know that was too much for a five-year-old. I know.” She nodded more to herself than to me. But her sore red eyes pleaded with me to agree.

Oh, what perfection those kisses had been! Squared off and given by a child afraid of sleep to a mother afraid of waking.

I wondered now, what my mother saw, gazing at me with her teary eyes. How did I look to her? Did she see a girl so thin in her blue dress that she looked like a sliver of ice, or did she still see that square little child with her four even sides? I knew a lot of things about my mother’s love for me. I was her gem, her shining heart, her prince. With me, sleep was possible. “You were the one I could relax around.” Such an undemanding child compared to the magnitude of problems Joanna had presented. I had been easy and sturdy and square. Above

all square. I had wanted to be. Safety lay in the unequivocal reliability of a balanced system. It lay in ritual. It lay in a system that did not rely on anything outside, but referred only to itself. Even if I didn't understand it, I needed this to be true. I needed no gaps, no holes, no escapes, surprise entrances or sudden switching of direction in my system. And now here I stood, complicated, impenetrable, cold. And ruined. Above all ruined. Her child riddled now with holes.

I felt my fingers tighten. My own hands were blunt and veiny. Lately in the mornings I would wake with them clenched, the fingers curled as if I'd been clawing at something in my sleep. I didn't want to be lulled by my mother's tears. To be pulled back into her dreams. Into a version of my childhood where I stood as solid as a statue outside her bedroom door. And so I blurted out, my voice suddenly returning in full force, "Did Joanna tell you Daddy's going to marry Alison?"

"No." Now, it was my mother's voice that faded to a whisper. "The old fool." She lifted her head and turned her face slightly away from me so that I saw her in profile. The outline of her forehead, nose and chin: sharp, lifted, ready for flight.

"The thing is to be tough, Mom."

"Don't be a stupid girl. Look at you. You're shivering. Why did you wear that silly blue dress? I was always cold in that dress. Your father bought it for me. Now, you sound just like him . . . and like that Kenneth. Tough, shmuf.

That man has no passion. I bet I'm right about that. No real, genuine passion for belief--for the unknowable."

"You have too much." I snapped. But, she was right about the flimsy dress. I was cold, standing in that marble palace surrounded by smooth, naked sculptures. It chilled me just to look at those perfect bodies. And all those hands, those groping, grasping, empty hands--lifeless and dead.

My mother wrapped her arm around me and tried to pull me against her, but I shrugged her off.

I thought for a moment then, that she was going to sulk or stalk away, but she surprised me. "Maybe," she said quietly. "Maybe I do have too strong a passion for the unknown. I don't mean all that stupid physic stuff, but like these hands. I'm interested in the stuff we grope towards."

"You want to live in blindness?" If I hadn't been so cold, I might have started to cry.

My mother gave me a stern look. She'd once taught Literature to high school students and looked at me now as I was deliberately missing the intricate narrative thread of the story. The underlying river of meaning. "I want you know, it takes a long time to understand something. A lifetime. In the end that's all you have, Claire. Your life. The things you remember."

She held her breath for a moment, as if saying this, or thinking it, hurt her. And in that heartbeat the little bird of her thought rose up and flew towards me.

"Do you know why I married your father?" My mother asked suddenly.

I shook my head. No tears now.

“Because I knew he would never know me.”

All around us the statues were moving. Rustling like waking giants under their stone skins, like trees swaying in the wake of a storm. Melting and shifting until they were once again coalescing before me into the Gates of Hell. And my mother, watching me shiver, grabbed my arm and dragged me through the doorway of the museum and out into the light.

Completed in 1880, Auguste Rodin’s Gates of Hell are a stunningly early example of being immersed in art as an event. They are a gateway, after all, designed to be entered and walked through. For they too, are a hole, a portal, a way in and out. These gates happen around you. What Rodin knew or guessed, was that meaning occurs within experience. If it is not static, how could sculpture be? And so his gates resist all attempt to be read as a coherent narrative. Instead they suggest that comprehension moves like the flight of a firefly, from here to there, without any apparent, linear path. In the end, we are left in darkness with just these glimmering images. These yearning forms, which seem to beg so desperately for life and yet cannot escape the stone from which they were hewn. Rodin often left his forms raw and unfinished--or undelineated--a hand or a profile, melting into stone.

In depicting these figures as anatomically incomplete, as manifesting their own process of creation, was he in fact, like my mother, suggesting that there is never any distance from our own lives? Never a clear observation point, a place to stand still and see the completed form? That we grope and grope through

varying degrees of blindness with our one hundred per cent imperfect vision?
And how could it be otherwise? For aren't we incapable of seeing things for what they are, only for what *we* are? And we are full of holes. For some of us, like my mother, this unknowing, this hovering in the doorway, in the empty space of our lives, is a wondrously comfortable state, as idyllic as a warm bath. But not for me. I did not trust memory. Did not trust either its tenacious grip or its precarious scaffolding. Like sculpture itself, memory hovered between stillness and motion.

We were outside again. The day had warmed up. The two old women who had stared at us in the museum, marched past us down the steps, the clippity-clap of their identical shoes slapping the stone. Sisters, I thought. Twins.

From the large dark interior of her purse, my mother extracted a cookie and waved it in front of my nose.

"Chocolate chip," she sang out.

I could smell the delicious sweet flavor of brown sugar even through the saran wrap.

"No, thanks."

But, she pushed it into my hand anyway. The cookie was large and round. I undid the clear plastic wrapping slowly. I didn't want it to crumble. I didn't want to lose a morsel of this giant cookie the size of a small pizza. When I bit off my first bite, the chips of sweet chocolate melted in my mouth. I'd never tasted such a wonderful cookie.

My mother grinned at me.

Maybe it was the warm sun on my back and my mother smiling at me while I ate her large cookie, but suddenly I was crying. Tears were spilling out of my eyes. My own wet salt water was in my mouth. I couldn't see, but I could feel my mother's arms around me, as I collapsed in sobs into the delicate fold of her embrace.

"That's better," she said.

"I can cry," I sobbed.

"You're my great, big-eyed girl," My mother said, stroking my shoulder.

"My great, big-eyed girl." Her little hands felt like feathers dusting my back.

"You don't have to be afraid to look."

In the distance a car honked. A dog barked. My mother said, "You don't have to be afraid to speak." I don't know if that was a plea or a command or a certainty. A rush of wind shook the eucalyptus trees.

"Start," she said.

But I was afraid to tell her. Even though I knew Joanna must have finally said something. Having let the cat out of the bag last night, there was nothing left to protect, and yet, there was everything to protect. The story was all that had held me together for over a year. My mother's were around me She was rocking me gently on the bench. "You are my brave, big eyed girl. You can tell me what happened."

And so I began the journey again.

RUSH

(1)

There are limits to what I can know so I hang onto details. What I retain is random, peculiar, bits of broken glass, a tune playing on the radio, a missing pair of sunglasses.

But I want to understand the system. I want to track it down. Like weather it has to start somewhere.

Yet, how can I understand what I cannot know?

Two boys were at the gas station that day. Two. And although they weren't brothers, they could have been. Two boys, two girls, the perfect mirror image of one another. By the time we met them, Joanna and I had been traveling for five days, screaming at each other, only the scratchy sound of Joanna's barely audible car radio separating us. Those five days that we were stuck together in her stifling old car seemed like years to us, like our whole lives. And there was no air conditioning. Just the hot midwestern wind rushing through the open windows. After the car broke down, there was not even any wind.

No, wait. I'm forgetting Joanna's cats. Those cats she would never travel without. There were two of them as well, locked in their respective red wooden boxes in the back seat. Two snarling black Siamese. Joanna's babies. The way

they meowed, hot pink tongues panting, forlorn howls like fog horns through the metal grates of their cages, gave me the creeps, the heebie jeebies.

This, of course, is not where we started, already in a car traveling west. If I am going to get it right, then I must begin at the beginning. We started in Chicago, backing out of the driveway, waving goodbye our mother, as if this were a fairy tale, sending her two girls off into the world to find their father. I see her red apron depicting a huge, naked fat lady on the front. She loved to tell us how much she wanted to be fat. To have plump, meaty thighs, a round tummy and voluminous breasts. Was the apron a gift? Does it matter? She desired that opulent body, with its weight and solidity, so unlike her own fragile form. Well, who really cares what she actually wore that day, except that her real body, my delicate little mother, was hidden behind that giant, red, fat lady waving us off. Goodbye, Goodbye.

There we were, setting off, heading west in a run down old car. I'd traveled back thousands of miles to escort my sister to California. In fact, I'd been sent back. Who else was there to do it?

“This is a real beginning.” She had told us. “Now you can have a relationship with your father. Goodbye, goodbye.”

And off we drove.

We were in a hurry. I'd forgotten that. How could I forget that we were in a hurry to help our father? Back in California he had barreled through an

intersection making a left turn without waiting for the traffic to clear. A car had hit the passenger door and thrown Irene, his fourth wife, into his lap. She was in the hospital. “Hurry,” he’d call to tells us only the night before, “Hurry.” “I have Jason to take care of.” Jason was Irene’s ten year-old son.

Eyes focused ahead, my sister gripped the wheel at ten and two o’clock like she’d learned in driver’s education. Occasionally, her eyes would dart off the road and fasten on me. I know what she was thinking. She needed me. They, our mother and father, wouldn’t have let her travel without me. She must have hated that.

I must admit this realization had only just dawned on me. At first I had liked the idea of quitting my summer job a month early and traveling across the country, cities and towns unrolling before me. Memories of high school and cutting classes with my best friend to drive around in her car getting stoned, singing so loud we drowned out the radio, danced in my head. But I was not with the best friend, pulling off to the side of the road to nap in a patch of sunlight. I was with Joanna. And when I had dreamed of this road trip, I hadn’t placed my sister in the car beside me. What kind of an adventure could I possibly have with Joanna?

Except for a brief Christmas visit, before last week, I hadn’t seen Joanna in nearly two years. Two years! I didn’t understand, until I’d stepped off the airplane and back into our mother’s house, what had been missing from my life. Joanna had been missing. “Hi there, bitch,” she’d purred, grinning at me with a

look of perverse affection, the gleam in her eye like that of a cat who doesn't believe its luck in discovering a mouse has just fallen into its bowl.

Our mother had stood in the background. I saw on her face the effort to correct her eldest daughter: she scowled, stepped backward. "That's no way to greet your sister." Then, she retreated down her long hallway, calling nonchalantly over her shoulder, "I going to let you two work out how to get along. You'll have to learn sometime."

"Little darlings, little darlings, come on out." Joanna made kiss-kiss noises, coaxing *the Cute One* out of her respective cage. A black shape darted out of a red box and leapt onto the bureau. There she perched, elegant as a sphinx, licking an uplifted paw.

We'd snuck the cats into the motel room, which wasn't very hard. Our car, Joanna's ugly, old Ford Fairlane, was parked just outside the door. From the other cage, the moody cat--*The Bitch*--hissed from the corner of her box and tried to swipe my reaching hand.

"She hates people." Joanna spoke from directly in front of the air conditioning unit, which was imbedded in the lower half of an uncurtained window. She'd peeled off her shirt and stood topless with her arms upraised. Joanna had a fascination with her own naked body. She slept stark naked, even alone. Although neither one of us was ever very modest, it still surprised me to see her striding about the room with her firm breasts completely exposed to any

passerby. Joanna is the only woman in our family in three generations, to have a sizable bosom to show off.

Now she said, regarding her snarling pet, “She only lets me or her baby touch her.”

I should have remembered this.

The cats, God those cats. Later, Joanna pulled a framed photograph of them out of her suitcase and set it next to her bed. And they were in the room now! *The Bitch* and *The Cute One* both, stalking around furniture, sniffing. Skinny little black rats with tails like whips. Years ago Joanna had brought them home from an animal shelter on Halloween. Two black cats on All Hallow Eve. She named them after the characters in her favorite T.V. show, which at the time was “Bewitched”. The one I called *The Cute One* was really named Samantha, after a pretty, young witch who used her magic for good. *The Bitch* was named Endora, after the mean, interfering mother witch who liked to meddle and cause trouble for the whole human population. And sure enough, these cats took on the personalities and the roles my sister assigned to them. Endora and Samantha, a mother and daughter witch team.

First we dialed Illinois. National Public Radio could be heard in the background. *Lake Woebegon* was playing. “You’re still in Illinois?” Our mother wanted to know.

“Mom,” Joanna said, “turn the radio down so you can hear us.”

“Where are you?”

“We’ll be in Iowa tomorrow.” We were passing the phone back and forth. Rolling our eyes, shaking our heads, grinning at each other. For here we were having left her side, both of us cut loose from her apron stings. Wasn’t that what we’d always wanted?

She was unaware of our game. She kept speaking as if we were one child.

In my ear now, she said. “Your uncle says to tell you to check the water in the radiator every morning before you start out.”

For, we’d skipped our tune-up. We’d been in such a hurry. This trip, which had been advertised when I’d left California as an idyllic jaunt across the country, had turned urgent. There was no time to tune up Joanna’s Fairlane because, two days ago, back in California, our father had crashed his car.

Who made this decision to leave without checking the state of Joanna’s car? It almost doesn’t matter.

“OK, Mom,” I said.

But, I can’t help wondering what we might have learned had we tuned up Joanna’s car. After looking at that engine, would anyone have suggested not sending us across country in that car? Would we, or our parents, have listened?

She sighed. Was she sad? Sitting on her bed in the evening light, the Moonglories just opening up outside the window. I heard it all in the sigh. The profundity of fatigue as she sat gazing up at the drawing of a Madonna and Child that our father had once given her. (High Italian Renaissance no less.) In that stillness, over the connecting wire, I drifted along to the melody of her thoughts,

and saw her the moment she first pushed her daughters out into the world. The moment she first beheld us and the moment she first set us down.

“Call me tomorrow,” she said. “Same time.” And again that sigh.

When we called our father next, he groaned. “Irene is still in the hospital. I’m the only one here with Jason.” That’s right, there was little Jason, whose thick, chubby torso was as unformed as a pillow. At least he’d not been in the car a few days ago, when our father had swung grandly into oncoming traffic, injuring most severely, Irene. Like a nervous pet, Jason now avoided the rooms my father was in, and in that wide open house, that meant just about every room. “Where is he hiding?” Our father wanted to know. “I’ve never hit him.” No, although he’d just nearly killed his mother.

Our father, I suppose feeling momentarily contrite about Jason, offered, “Tomorrow do you think perhaps I should take him to the beach?”

There are many things that can happen on an outing with our father, a car accident being only one of the possibilities. At the mention of a beach trip, I grimaced and whispered to Joanna. “He wants to take Jason to the beach.”

“What?” my father said.

Joanna fell off the bed laughing, as if she were rolling into a ditch. “Tell him to wear a seat belt.” She squealed.

“Are you sure?” I finally asked.

“Oh,” our father moaned, “it’ll be so good to see you both.”

Was it then that the little trap door, my heart, sprang open? Of course we'd hurry. For here he was, opening his arms, telling us to come quickly now. For he was ready to displace this new boy child for us again. The truth is we were not a bit concerned about Jason; we hardly thought of him. None of us really wanted to be encumbered by this doughy ten-year-old boy.

No, my father was the one foremost in my thoughts. A lurking little boy could not compete with this man, who, one summer visit, had limped forward with a wilted offering of a bouquet of flowers. His foot had been wrapped in a soft cast. Leaning heavily onto the slender and semi-clad shoulders of his current Teaching Assistant, he'd greeted us with the words. "Your poor old man broke his foot sleeping around to pick you these flowers." And he held them both out, bandaged foot and dead daisies, for us to see.

Poor Daddy. We didn't quite understand at first. Sleeping around for flowers?

His teaching assistant stifled a laugh.

"Schlepping," Our father had said. "I meant schlepping around for the flowers." And he shrugged and sheepishly grinned at his obvious mistake.

Now we both reassured him. "It should only take us a few more days."

"Let's go have a drink," Joanna announced when the receiver was back in its cradle.

This was still our first day. A drink sounded wonderful even if it was with my sister. We had never done this before, gone out and drunk socially in a bar

together. In some ways, the only moments I've ever felt close to Joanna were the moments like this one, when hanging up the phone--my father's voice gone dead on the line, my mother's having faded long ago--I realized that except for Joanna, I was alone in the world. I didn't much like the fact that the world that had abandoned me, had abandoned her right beside me. But, if that's all you have . . .

We crossed the street to the bar on the opposite corner. A swarm of grasshoppers nearly the size of my fist sprang about the parking lot. I'd only read of locust plagues before. But in western Illinois that summer you couldn't step outside without crunching them under your feet. Some people carried brooms in their cars to sweep them out of the way.

Just an hour earlier our mother had asked over the phone if we'd seen the swarms yet. She'd sounded oddly envious when we'd told her, "Oh yeah, entering this town was like driving into a noisy cloud."

"Write it all down for me," she'd begged.

In front of the entrance to the bar stood a woman neatly dressed in a smart pink suit with white piping at the collar. She carried a sign that read. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* As we skirted past her, she swatted a locust off her padded shoulder and hissed, "For they have the power of horses in their mouths."

"Maybe we should tell her we're on our way to California to join a commune," I suggested.

"Hey lady . . ." Joanna started to call out, but by then she'd already begun accosting another patron and we were inside the smoky glass interior of the bar,

squealing with laughter, running our fingers through our hair, for you could never be sure where you might find a locust buzzing.

No one thought to card us. I was nineteen then and up until that moment I'd mostly drunk deserts: Tequila Sunrises, Daiquiris, Kaluha and Cream. For some reason though, as soon as we were seated on our stools, I'd ordered my father's drink: a scotch on the rocks.

Here we were, same little hitchhikers. Only grown up now and with breasts; swiveling on our stools, sipping our cocktails in our little skirts.

Outside bugs were scaling the walls, but inside you wouldn't have known it. The lights were dim, the air was smoky, the radio was playing and we sat up tall and leaned our elbows on the counter as if we'd been coming to this bar for years. Joanna told me how her yoga teacher's hair had always smelled of incense. She had not dated him in over a year but still she sighed. "I'll never get over him. He's the only guy who didn't dump me after the first date. Now he thinks I'm crazy."

I said nothing, but slipped the heart-shaped sunglasses I wore constantly that summer over my eyes and drank my scotch in long swallows. It burned like fuel going down my throat. In the hollow of my stomach I imaged coals glowing.

On the radio a song began to play, a lament with the words. *She cuts you and laughs while you're bleeding but she's always a woman to me*, to which my sister, thank god, did not get up to dance. We'd heard it maybe half a dozen times that afternoon in the car, and the words had begun to haunt me. What did the

song mean exactly? That you loved people no matter how much they injured you?

Just then, two men with bellies tucked into their button-down shirts that turned out to be, what else, salesmen of course, sidled up next to us munching handfuls of peanuts.

First one man said. “Ever seen anything like this?” He nodded his head towards the window. Outside three teenage boys were hovering over a picnic table. A spark flared as locust burst into flame. “Brings all the loonys out.”

“I’ll say.” Joanna muttered. “I hope I never see this place again.” It was clear by the dismissive tone of her voice that she meant both the plague outside and these two overweight salesmen inside. No sweet, thin, incense smelling men here.

Now, the second man tried. “Where’re you from?”

“How do you know we’re not from here?” I answered coyly.

The man eyed my outfit, my little flowered skirt, my painted toenails in my wedged shoes and the perfect red hearts over my eyes. “You’re certainly not from around here.”

“Why are you talking to them?” Joanna said. “I’m here.”

Joanna was there. And even though she’d lost thirty pounds subsisting on a diet of carrots and broccoli and granola and now weighed less than me, she sat with such a solid density, such an emphatic, weighted presence--her skin glowing like a dangerous metal--that within a few minutes these two large men had wilted under her blazing glare and slunk back down the bar. I turned to look at her now.

Even through my dark glasses I could see that her jaw was ready to snap. She'd been so relaxed only a moment before. Now, she was hunched forward and chewing on the soft skin of her inner cheek. I felt sorry for her. How desperately she must have wanted this new life in San Francisco, for she'd created a new body to go with it. Although I thought her beautifully thin, I knew she'd nearly starved herself to get that way.

She finished off her drink and marked the calorie count on a little pad she kept for this purpose in her purse. "I'm hungry," she announced.

I passed her the bowl of peanuts the men had left behind.

Joanna wanted to go find a salad, she wanted to graze. I wanted another scotch, which, god forbid, I knew my sister would never allow on our allowance. "But whatever," my sister suddenly offered, surprising me. "If you want to flirt with these two jokeheads be my guest." Her conciliatory gesture was a bit of a shock until I realized that she must have felt she could afford to be generous. For the first time since we were very young children, Joanna held the reins: the car, the keys, the money and travelers checks, which our mother had given to her, even me.

Later in the room when I laid my clothes out on the chair, she asked. "Why do you always wear the same thing?"

I shook my head in reply, not wanting to explain. I'd always done that with my clothes. Found a favorite outfit and worn it to death. I guess I too, wanted a new life. Putting on that outfit that summer was like donning a new skin. Once inside it, I became sexy and mysterious--most of all, I became

adorable, someone deserving attention--or at least that's what I pretended to myself.

Joanna stripped her clothes off and came and stood beside me. Looking down at my beautiful skirt, with the pattern of tiny wild flowers on it, like a spring meadow draped over the chair's arm, she said, "I remember once you wore this red bathing suit top and little red shorts all summer long, even when Daddy took us hiking in the Sierras. There was snow on the ground and you were in your little red hot pants! You must have been cold, stupid."

One of us turned the lights out. Joanna fell asleep naked in her bed, her cats pawing around on the comforter until they had found a satisfactory place to land.

I stood at the window. It was dark outside, but the dim lights of the parking lot revealed a pavement crowded with rippling bugs. Like great waves they seemed to shift and crest in unison. *And the earth shall tremble beneath them* that pink suited woman had called to us when we'd left the bar. I switched the air conditioner off and listened for a moment to the vibrations as the locust rubbed their back legs together, like violinist at their instruments, tuning up for a show.

In the morning they would all be gone. In their wake all vegetation would be denuded, piles of discarded scales would be left behind as well as a few dying bugs still buzzing quietly in the gutters. When they amassed and rose up into the air for their exodus, their numbers were rumored to reach a billion, their sheer density to blot out the sun. We'd heard that in the towns up ahead of us, they'd

eaten the laundry right off the lines. The swarm would progress slowly eastward as we headed west. In another day our mother would get her visitation, too. Over the phone she would describe to us how you gently knocked against the screen doors until they all fell off. Then, covered in her big red, fat lady apron, she swept them into little piles, picked each one up in her rubber gloved hands, and froze them in jelly jars for her neighbor to later feed to a pet raccoon. Thus, she protected her cherished moonglories until her swarm, as well, heaved up and flew on, the sky darkening with their passage.

Joanna and I too, were cutting a swath across country, not of destruction, but of mishap. We were following Interstate 80, which cut across the middle of the country from the George Washington Bridge in New York, all the way to San Jose, California. Almost a straight path from door-to-door of our parents' homes. To this route we would stick with an unquestionable diligence, matched perhaps only by those hungry locusts. In the intervening years I've thought a lot about our persistence, about our inability to wander or stray from our track. Events both great and small blocked our course and tried to waylay us, but like starving insects we plowed straight through them and stuck to our mission with a purity of focus that is almost unimaginable to me now. Only my father could have engendered that in us. Not that we loved him so much, though we did crave love. As those bugs craved food, we craved the commune of family we pretended lay in front of us. For, never once did we veer off track.

I've read that all species have either a high or a low level of vagility. Which is a way of measuring their ability to adapt to new and changing

environments and gain strength by wandering. Being free to wander denotes survival. It is essentially the key factor. What if Homo sapiens had never wandered up out of Africa, or across the Bering Straights? What if they had never survived that journey? Certainly, when we started out, Joanna and I had what would have been measured as very low levels of vagility. I mean, here we were, two girls, one who lived solely on a diet of broccoli, carrots and granola, the other whose wardrobe choices favored coquettish baby doll outfits, who knocked back scotch on the rocks like 7-Up, and who peered out at the world over the rims of her perfectly red, heart-shaped glasses. What kind of survival skills do you imagine we possessed? But, survive we did.

And so the road. It was both our umbilical cord and our noose.

(2)

Joanna sat on the cool cement floor of the gas station, a cat box on either side of her, picking her lip.

I walked outside. I walked back inside. I asked the attendant what was wrong with her car.

The boy stepped back from underneath Joanna's hood and announced with some authority, "It's your radiator."

"Oh course it's the radiator," Joanna snapped. Then she caught herself. She sucked in a long breath of air and exhaled, pushing her arms down alongside her body as though water, or some substance heavier than air, held her in its grip. "What do we do?" She asked quietly.

The boy smiled at me over the hood of the car. “I’ll have to call my mechanic.” Turning away he sauntered towards the back of the garage. A skinny boy who actually swayed his narrow hips and his head when he walked. It was an oddly deliberate walk and I was momentarily distracted from our problem, for I found his movements both vulgar and graceful. He must have known we’d have no other choice than to watch and wait.

Beside me Joanna grunted and flipped her finger at his retreating back. “Who does he think he is?” She muttered.

Of course it was the radiator. The radiator our uncle had warned us to water. To keep watered, to feed each and every morning before we set off. This was only the second day of our trip. Just across the Iowa border the car ground to a halt, steam spewing from the cracks of the hood. We’d both remembered instantly, that we’d been in such a hurry that morning, such a frantic hurry. For, hadn’t I told Joanna to ship those stupid, scared cats, *The Bitch* and *The Cute One* both? Now they’d gone and secured themselves behind the baseboard of the motel room closet, and we’d had to smash a little hole in the wall large enough to slip Joanna’s arm through and wrangle those miserable cats free. After that fiasco, we’d driven off without a word to the desk clerk and hence we’d forgotten to pour the water into that radiator.

“What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?” This is what Joanna screamed on the side of the road.

I started to walk away--the smoke pouring from the hood, my sister, literally wringing her hands beside the car.

I didn't get far. Maybe five steps. Where would I have gone? Anywhere! I should have gone anywhere between New York and San Jose. Instead, I went back to the car.

I don't remember how we got the car towed. This was before cell phones.

We paid with our traveler's checks, first for towing the car, later for the mechanic. In the gas station the attendant was in no hurry to fetch his mechanic. He stood in the dingy bathroom at the back of the garage, combing his hair over the sink. He'd left the bathroom door ajar, which I was now certain, like his swaying walk, he did purposefully. Joanna and I could see him through the opening: skinny legs, no hips, the shoulders still of a child. The bathroom was next to the office and we could also see into that room. A fat man with a large pink head sat behind a desk covered with crinkled yellow receipts, shuffling them aimlessly with his doughy hands like a soft breeze rearranging the leaves on a grassy lawn. Joanna and I watched them both in silence, as if they were two separate films playing together on the same screen: fat man and skinny boy. The only sound was a fly buzzing back and forth between our heads as if passing a secret.

Eventually, the skinny boy went into the fat man's office and whispered something into his ear. Next to the fat man, the small boy's body was practically engulfed, and his head looked like a tiny offshoot, next to that large pink one. Slowly the fat nodded and heaved himself up from his desk. Squeezing through the door he floated over to us on a pair of tiny feet.

“Okay then,” the skinny boy said. Picking up a visor he slipped it over the large man’s eyes. Then he handed him the soldering iron and ducked out of the way.

It was painful to watch, all that pink flesh sweating in the heat. He moved so slowly, gingerly. How did he even fit under that hood? With his upper body and legs sticking out, it looked as if Joanna’s car had bitten off his large, pink head. The skinny boy disappeared again, perhaps back into the bathroom to finish his grooming. Joanna rolled her eyes, “This place is retarded,” she said stomping out of the garage.

I found her out on the concrete slab, muttering, again picking at the flesh of her upper lip. I knew not to stop her. Besides, I found her familiar gestures of self-mutilation oddly comforting. At one point she looked up at me and said. “I knew this was a mistake, but mom said if I wanted to move to California, I should drive my stuff out.” Even then, this still didn’t seem like such an outrageous proposition. “Your father and I drove across country when we were first married,” she’d explained gaily. “We had a wonderful time on our trip.” Why couldn’t we too, have seen this trip as an adventure, even with the breakdowns? But we couldn’t. Our dream was up ahead, at the end of this road. Not here, not together. . .

It was so hot under the unrelenting glare of the sun. I could see the heat, waves of smoldering dust, floating above the ground. Cars came and went and filled up at the fuel pumps. I paced back and forth in front of the station. The locust swarms had passed through here too, stripping the leaves from the trees and

chewing the paint right off the wooden billboards. I was still slightly overweight, in the tail end of my chubby, post pubescent girlhood. Whenever my thighs touched, whenever I crossed them, or they accidentally stoked one another, they stuck and burned. I squatted down on the cement and drank orange crush and watched the cars fly by on Interstate 80. My skirt kept blowing up in the dusty wind that rose off the prairie, and after a while I stopped trying to push it down.

By then, Joanna had gone back inside the gas station. She stood between her cat boxes, glaring at the fat, pink-headed man. At one point she said, “What do you think you’re looking at?” and I turned to see him smiling at her.

Her lip curled. Even from this distance I could see her snarl, feel her indignation at being singled out by this obese, pink man. She must have felt like she was being tagged to play on a team she had no intention of joining.

I turned away again. There was something about the two of them, his stupid grin and her frowning disgust, that made me nauseous. And so we waited through the afternoon, the realization slowly creeping towards me that I was stuck, mired out here in the middle of nowhere with Joanna.

“We think we got the problem.” It was that boy again, the skinny one who vainly swished his hips as he walked towards me.

“Finally,” I said. “I’ll get my sister.”

“Yeah,” he repeated. “It shouldn’t be too much longer.” But he didn’t move away. He stood in front of me, his gaze resting on the ground between us. A dead locust was smooshed into the pavement. Perhaps that was what he was staring at. I suppose I could have walked around him. For some reason though, I

didn't. I waited. Suddenly he looked up and said. "Is something wrong with her?"

"Why, what's she doing?"

"Nothing."

Then suddenly, I understood. I understood why he'd dawdled all afternoon, why he'd kept us at the garage. "That's your brother?" I asked, nodding. Of course they were brothers; how perfect. We stumbled upon a Midwestern version of Frankenstein and his monster. One spoke and the other didn't. What did he think I was going to do now? Exchange crazy sibling stories? You asshole, I thought. Usually I was eager to give an explanation of Joanna's behavior to people, but not this time. How dare he assume I had anything in common with him or this place. Go ahead, let him think whatever he wanted to about her. Let him think we were both whacked. The wind took my skirt again, and I sashayed right past him in pursuit of my own monster.

The rest of the afternoon we took turns at the wheel. During all our time in the garage the cats had slept peacefully in their cages, but as soon as we hit the road again, they began to howl. Have you ever heard a Siamese howl? Imagine two, a duet. They sounded like sirens chasing after us on the road.

"Oh this is terrible," our father wailed during our collect call later that night. "What are you going to do?"

Another dreary motel room and only one large bed between us. My sister spread across, from corner to corner, as if she'd fainted. And in the window, the

noisy air conditioner rattling like there was loose change being blown about inside.

“Don’t worry,” our mother advised when we reached her, “You’re doing fine. I’m sure you’ll have enough money to make it to California.” I don’t know what she thought. That this journey was some sort of coming-of-age ritual?

Oh, what meager progress we’d made, what little distance we’d actually covered. Bit by bit, hour by hour, California was receding in front of us over the earth’s edge. Why was I stuck in the middle of this god forsaken, plague ridden land? That is the thought that pounded in my head. Why was I here? Even that dainty boy in the gas station today had figured it out. Joanna and I were each other’s keepers. Just then, Endora--the nasty, mother cat-- jumped up on my side of the bed--Joanna had reluctantly inched over--and hissed at me. Just stood there, and for no good reason, hissed. That was it. The panic that had been welling up inside me all day, like a sea of bile, burst and I kicked the cat off the bed and turned to my sister and yelled, “This is all your fault. I wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“What are you doing kicking her, are you crazy?” She yanked the cat from underneath the bed where it had retreated and held it up to her face, cooing. Jesus I could hardly bear to look at my sister then. Cooing into that mama cat’s face, in spite of the fact that the cat was still snarling.

“You didn’t have to come,” Joanna snapped, guessing at my anger. “You can go anytime you want.” As if either one of us ever had that option.

If I could have then, I might have hurled anything between us. The lamp, a chair. What I chose later was a boy, how obvious a choice. But that was down the road a bit and maybe not even my choice by then. It was the cat I had kicked though, and not Joanna. Over the phone our mother had promised, “Tomorrow will be a better day.” Thank god we only saw what looked to be a straight road ahead. *Your hands, that never held onto anything much. Your waving, goodbye hands. Why couldn't you have held us just a little bit?*

(3)

We survived the night. In fact we both fell asleep instantly as if we'd been shot full of barbiturates. Given the fact that we were on the verge of strangling each other, perhaps sleep, deep sleep, was our only recourse. She was my sister. I was used to fighting with her. Used to moving into the next day stiffly, awkwardly, but moving into it nonetheless.

Joanna was driving, fiddling with the radio. I wished she would settle on a station, but no station seemed to please her. Next to her, I was attempting to read *Grendal*, the parting gift our mother had given me to read on the road. Grendal. Cannibalistic, feral, monster most foul, for my companion. Poor wretched Grendal, half man, half fiend, clutched in the night by his speechless mother. I had been carrying the book in the bottom of my purse. Whenever it was not my turn at the wheel, I opened and read the same page again and again. *O hear me, rocks and trees, loud waterfalls! You imagine I tell you these things just to hear myself speak?* For some reason, I couldn't move beyond this page.

Around midday, just after we'd passed through Des Moines, it started again. The chugging sound the engine made just as gray smoke began to pour out of the hood of Joanna's car.

"Keep driving, keep driving." I waved my hand frantically at the dashboard, at the road that was fading from our view, even as we continued to move forward.

"Don't yell at me." Joanna clutched the wheel, but she drove us, heavy smoke blanketing the windows, a car almost on fire, down the freeway ramp and luckily--a small piece of luck in all this mess--to a garage proximally located at the foot of the ramp.

We were both crying. Perhaps it was the smoke. The heat in that car, by the time we pulled over, was unbearable. The temperature gauge had jumped into the red warning zone and stopped moving. When Joanna turned off the ignition she began to sob, holding her head in her hands. Poor Joanna. I wished then that I had been nice to her the night before. These were all her things: her cats, her car that she'd saved her own money to buy. My crying was quieter. An echo of hers. I shed a few silent tears, which flowed down my cheeks as I hung my head out the open window.

This time we were told we would have to completely replace the radiator and that would take the rest of the day. A new radiator had to be sent from a nearby garage. The car wouldn't be ready until tomorrow. Joanna and I wiped our tears and looked around. Although the delay was not good news, at least there was no pink-headed, fat man behind a desk covered with fluttering receipts.

Instead, there were filling cabinets and a stout woman was filling out a form for Joanna to sign. When she looked up and saw us dripping with sweat, smeared with soot, and each clutching a boxed cat, she pointed across the street. “There’s a motel over there. Why don’t you check in and have a nice swim? Pick the car up first thing in the morning.”

At the mention of a swimming pool Joanna became ecstatic. If she was still angry at me, she forgot it instantly. “I can do my laps,” she practically screamed at this woman.

And so we decamped from the car, checked into the motel, and parked ourselves by the edge of the pool. Or rather I did. Joanna proceeded to swim thirty laps. Shouting the number out each time she passed me. God, she could be rigorous.

It wasn’t such bad place. That’s what I said to Joanna when she finally toweled off and sat down beside me.

Joanna snorted. “I’m going to kill Daddy when I see him.”

On the other side of the fence we could hear the cars, feel the wind from their momentum, the heat from their engines.

I opened my book.

Joanna reached over and tilted it up to examine the title. “Why are you reading that?”

“It’s a good book.” Which was not exactly true. *Grendal* was not a book I traveled easily through.

Joanna, who had more entertaining fare to occupy her, said “Suit yourself,” and flipped open a movie magazine. She had a pile with her in the car. Which had shocked our mother. “You’re taking those with you?” Our mother had whined. For wasn’t it bad enough that Joanna read that crap at home? Now, she was taking her collection of *Screen Sirens* all the way across the country. I wondered what my mother would have chosen for Joanna to read, if my sister had let her?

Joanna’s favorite stories were the tales of old Hollywood, when stars were discovered sitting at soda fountains, and instantly immortalized. This was the dream she wanted to pursue in California. Joanna hoped to be discovered in a coffee shop, her true talent recognized as she brewed an espresso behind the counter. No one in our family took her dream seriously. Our father thought it in the realm of make believe. My god, that she might rise up out of the dust of his life and actually overshadow him was incomprehensible. For a short time, our mother indulged Joanna by sending her to drama school. Yet, she too, was dubious about my sister’s emotional volatility ever being transformed into art. For, although our mother put on a great show of encouragement, helping Joanna memorize lines for parts she would never get, you could always hear the undercurrent--the real state of mind--whenever she spied one of those magazines. Perhaps if Joanna had been reading *Hamlet* instead of gossip . . . Onstage concentration furrowed Joanna’s brow. I guess it was hard work, nearly impossible work, climbing up in front of all of us and pretending not to be Joanna. Still, like her lap swimming and focused dieting, she persevered. Out of

stubbornness, the need to have something, in spite of the fact that it was viewed as a fantasy, Joanna continued to cling ferociously to the notation that one day her temperament--herself--might be celebrated instead of scorned. We all rely on dreams for our salvation. Why should Joanna have been any different?

Secretly, I was envious of her trashy magazines. They looked like a lot more fun than *Grendal*. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring myself to ask her to let me read one. I too, thought they were beneath me. Instead I leaned out of my lounge chair and tried to peek over my sister's shoulder at the pictures. Without looking up, Joanna opened the magazine a little wider. She smiled and I pressed closer.

"Here," she said tossing me the magazine, "you're breathing on me."

In that moment and for a short time afterwards we were both happy. Side by side, on the edge of a rather dilapidated old swimming pool. But, a pool nonetheless. Joanna wore her tiny bikini; I wore the one piece I still had from my high school gym class, for I was as averse to swimming as Joanna was keen on it. I must have looked ludicrous in that old, modest bathing suit, with my sexy little sunglasses perched on the end of my nose. Like two pieces of the puzzle that did not fit together.

We pored with puckered brows and frowning concentration, over Joanna's stash of gossip and intrigue, of smarmy lust.

And so, for the rest of the afternoon, the door that had been shut on this trip, finally swung easily open and we fell back into our mutual childhood. The words that flew between us were few and brief, for our imaginations were linked.

It was this feeling of goodwill that allowed me, later at the bar that evening, to reveal to Joanna my story of infidelity. We were both a little bombed by the time I told her of the affair I was having with a man who I imagined was considerably older than I, although I did not know for sure. I didn't know anything about him that was certain and I liked that. And I told her I'd been seeing this man for some time, even before I'd left my boyfriend. "He gave me these glasses," I said.

"You're lucky to even have a boyfriend." Joanna said emphatically. "If I had a boyfriend I wouldn't betray him for a pair of dumb glasses."

"It wasn't for the glasses."

"Yes, it was. I know you, Claire. You're just like Daddy. You're spoiled."

I contended this. I said, "No, you're wrong. I'm not." But secretly I was glad for the comparison.

Maybe I had been bragging about my multiple lovers, but I didn't understand how difficult romance was for my sister. After losing her virginity to a boy when she was sixteen--he'd slipped in her window one evening solely for this purpose and left very soon after, never to return again, she'd had as yet, only this one brief relationship with her yoga teacher that he had insisted they keep a secret.

Of course, fidelity was something I was not raised to adhere to. My father had always said that jealousy was an uncivilized emotion.

Joanna was staring at me now with all the pain of a future of rejections in her eyes. I thought her too dramatic. This was obviously another bad performance. She was acting as if I had said I was casting *her* aside, and not my old boyfriend. At that time I couldn't imagine love, let alone the absence of love. Joanna it seemed, could imagine both, and her need, that hunger she sensed might never be filled, oppressed me. I clamped down. My jaw locked and we spoke little the rest of the evening.

Perhaps if we had understood one another a little better it might have made a difference. Events might not have unfolded the way they did. I'll never know. The problem with life is, that it really is only a one-night stand.

Outside the motel bar window Interstate 80 unraveled, a long glowing cord of light spiraling into the black night. Cars sped by at an alarming rate as if they were locked on a track that was sucking them forward into the blackness.

(4)

The next day we got off to a late start, both of us sluggish with hangovers. In the four days we had been traveling, we'd made little headway. Like salmon swimming upstream, we were constantly being tossed downward again by a strong, adverse current which seemed to flow, unseen, beneath us. By this time we had finally resigned ourselves to our halting pace, for we fought not at all, both of us wrapped up in our own dreams.

Before us, Interstate 80 rolled out into the flat, monochromatic landscape of Nebraska like the reading of a heart monitor on a dead person. There were no peaks and valleys, just an endless, uninterrupted highway that cut across dusty farm country.

What my sister thought about, sitting hour upon hour beside me, I don't know. Maybe she was hopeful: her car had been repaired, we were close to the time line. Slowly California was drawing nearer.

Periodically that song we had heard on our first day of driving, played on the radio again. Billy Joel sang about a girl who was a thief and a killer but still a woman ahead of her time. I understood that the song was an allegory, and that the killing and thievery was of a heart, and not a human life. Still, it appealed to me. It made me think about the conversation I'd had the night before with Joanna. Joanna had called me spoiled, and I hadn't disagreed. When I'd broken up with my boyfriend, my father had thrown an arm over my shoulder and said, "It's always better if you leave them." Meaning I suppose, better not to be left. I acted tougher than I was. Underneath everything, I was still a kid whose mother ordered her underwear for her from the Sears-Roebuck catalogue.

It was towards the end of the day, just before we hit Elm Creek that I began to see something stirring in the periphery of my vision. I was at the wheel, driving for what seemed like an eternity, across the great expanse of the Cornhusker state. Nothing had been visible for many miles, except the occasional silo in the distance towering above the dense waving corn stalks, when a blurred image seemed to rise up before me in the shimmering heat. No sooner had it

appeared, than the image, whatever it was, immediately vanished. At first I thought it was the fault of my sunglasses. For the very cut and shape of the glasses--the way the bottom of the hearts pointed down letting light flow up under the glass--impeded my sight rather than improved it. Still, even knowing that I was purposely driving half blind, I had the oddest sensation that, for a split second, I recognized the image. This continued for quite some time, as if a residue was hovering just beyond the confines of our car. Each time I tried to fix on it though, it would vaporize into the hot air.

When I asked Joanna if she had seen anything she had no idea what I was talking about.

Then, suddenly and quite clearly, just outside Lexington, it happened again and this time I saw in a flash--Joanna. Again, it was only for the briefest moment, yet in that moment I saw all the secrets, the permutations of our life together, revealed. It was as if I had been staring at a tangle of worms all my life, and suddenly realized that what I thought was a nest of maggots was actually a dense web of veins, each glowing, each throbbing with life. Yet, and here was the part that most astonished me, these glowing worms were not separated. They were a throbbing whole, all fitting together like a mass of brain matter. That is how I saw my sister and me driving through Nebraska. I wish I had pulled over, stopped the car, and clung to her.

Instead I let the moment pass and with it forever the vision I'd had. Nothing that is broken can ever be fully repaired. That much I learned from *Grendal*.

That night, having nothing to report, no disaster of the day, we saw no point in calling our parents. Later, my mother would remember this silence as an omen.

(5)

Soon after breakfast the next morning we ground to a halt just outside North Platte, Nebraska. We were twenty miles from crossing the Central Time Zone. California was still 1500 miles away.

We were in the gas station, actually filling up the tank with gas and so there was no warning smoke, no steaming car, no fire. Only, when we turned the ignition to pull out of the station and back onto Interstate 80, the car wouldn't start. Nothing, it wouldn't even turn over.

And so the boy, a tall skinny boy like the first one, same bony narrowed shoulder body and thin long face--maybe they were related I thought insanely for a moment--came walking slowly through the shimmering heat towards Joanna's car.

After investigating for a few minutes under Joanna's hood, sweat dripping from his face and into the black open mouth of the car, he turned and said matter-of-factly, "Your block's froze."

I didn't understand what this meant, even after he explained it to us. It wasn't the radiator, though maybe the radiator had been old and rusted, maybe it too had been useless. But the engine was certainly useless.

“What do you mean the engine’s useless?” Joanna repeated.

“It’s seized. It’s frozen.”

Joanna and I didn’t say anything. We were both standing beside the car and we simultaneously fell against it.

It was hard to breathe just then. The heat, that boy looking at us through wet, squinted eyes.

“I’ll call my friend,” he said. Just like that, and we didn’t ask why. Why? Why did we need his friend?

We carried the cat boxes into the station. It was cold inside. Shockingly cold, almost better out in the heat. We each ate a candy bar and then we called our mother.

“What!” I could hear our mother’s voice even though Joanna was the one holding the phone. Her voice sounded high pitched, irritated. “Why hadn’t we called last night?” Last night everything was okay, now it wasn’t. In the end, vexed, our mother said. “Why don’t you call your father and see what he suggests.” And I don’t remember being terribly surprised by this answer.

When we called our father, Irene answered the phone. Only the day before, she told us, she’d been released from the hospital.

“Where are you?”

“Nebraska.”

“God, that’s still a long way.”

“The car’s dead.” Joanna said. “My car’s dead.” She was gritting her teeth, trying to be brave.

“Oh honey,” Irene said now--Irene was the kind of woman that said honey and hugged you a lot--“Oh honey, did you talk to your mom?”

Poor Irene, she did everything including changing her name--her first name no less--to please our father. “Irma,” he laughed later. “Can you imagine?” As if this name he didn’t like, felt was beneath him, summed her up and placed her.

“Mom told us to call Dad,” Joanna said.

“Your dad’s not here.”

We went back and forth, bouncing between mother and stepmother. We called our mother again, we called Irene. Every once in awhile the attendant would interject with a suggestion. He seemed to have summed up our situation accurately. “Maybe you could sell the car. My friend will buy it; he’ll be able to use the parts.”

Joanna said, “Just a minute,” into the phone to one of the mothers. “How much?”

“Three hundred dollars.”

I’d forgotten that. I’d forgotten that we’d agreed to sell Joanna’s car to this friend even before we met him. In the middle of all these phone conversations the friend showed up. He walked into that freezing cold gas station room as if he already understood the whole situation. He was little, short with a round head. A boxy, square shaped man. A pug.

Bending over the cat boxes he said to Joanna without even looking at her-- without even looking at her car, "You just leave your car here, and I'll take you to rent a new one."

Joanna was sitting behind the desk now. She stared at these two boys in front of her with a look of disbelief and fear, her face even more pinched and gaunt than usual. "Let me think, let me think," she said.

"Here kitty, kitty," the friend clucked. He poked a finger through the grill of one of the cages, and that cat, the temperamental bitch, swatted and drew blood.

He didn't even flinch. He pulled out his finger, a bright red spot of blood blooming on the end, and hid it behind his back.

We all watched Joanna who was clutching the table's edge. Finally, I leaned over hissed in her ear. "Just sell him the damn car, we don't have any other choice."

Earlier, before the friend had arrived, while Joanna was still on the phone, I had gone out into the heat with the gas station attendant. Then and there, on that windless cement slab, I had decided that whatever opportunity came along, I would grab it.

"You guys don't look like you're from around here. Where're you from?" the attendant asked.

"California." I named it. I named the place I wanted to belong to.

"Where'd you get those glasses? They're cute."

“A friend.”

“After I get off work,” he told me, narrow face narrowing, “we’ll all go have a drink.”

Now, while the friend sucked on his scratched finger, Joanna agreed to sign over the registration to her car. That must have been hard for her. It was her first car, and Joanna has never parted easily with anything.

When we called the car rental company though, they needed a credit card. Without even hesitating Joanna called Irene. “Here’s what you do. You give me that car rental guy’s number, and I’ll call him for you and give them my credit card. Honey,” she said. “It’ll be okay.”

It took a while for Irene to convince the guy in the car rental office to let us rent a car to drive to California. This was 1978 and she couldn’t even fax him a copy of her credit card. It was just Irene, the sound of Irene’s voice vouching for us. But she was a kind woman, and she had a way of talking to people so that they knew she was pretty and sweet and trustworthy. Maybe everybody likes to be called honey.

In the late afternoon, Joanna drove with the friend of the gas station attendant to the car rental company and picked up our new car. I stayed back at the station with the attendant. I know we talked, but I don’t remember anything we said. Sometimes I wonder if I said something outrageous or even suggestive to him. I was nineteen, and I often wanted to make an impression on people. At that time in my life I made a lot of pronouncements: “I only drink scotch,” or “I don’t

believe in love.” Lies or things I’d heard my father say. Once I said to someone, though not, thank god on this occasion, “You are only something for me to do between the lights going off and coming on again.”

When Joanna returned she was driving a long, dark blue car. We transferred everything: her boxes and magazines, her suitcases, some odd pieces of furniture, two desk lamps, a little beidermier table from our grandmother, a grocery bag of granola with almonds. (“I made some for Daddy,” she’d told me. “Do you think he’ll like it?” Why couldn’t she have made it in California. Why did she have to cart fucking cereal across the country?) Two red cat boxes with stunned cats who leapt about and rocked their cages as we carried them from the cold office of the gas station to the back of the new air conditioned car. An old T.V., we had an old T.V. with us on this trip, and all of Joanna’s record albums. I remember one by a band called The Pink Peppermints and the sound track to *The Sound of Music*. We were moving her whole room, her life in that car. Cans of cat food, a new omelet pan.

The gas station attendant and his friend locked up the station and closed for the night. Still we didn’t think anything was weird, but I guess we didn’t know how late gas stations stayed open. They had offered to escort us to a motel, after that we would all go for a drink. So off we all drove. We followed both the boys across town to the motel they recommended, located next to a drive-in movie theater. Later, in the middle of the night I would forget the name of the motel where my sister and her cats and all her belongings in the world lay

waiting, and I would frantically try to recall it, only finally remembering the drive-in's huge white screen.

“Why are you going out with them? You're an idiot, you shouldn't go?”

“It's just a drink, Joanna.”

“They're creepy, Claire.”

They were kind of creepy and smelly. They were gas stations bums. They had greasy dark fingers and smelled of fuel. Their hair was dirty.

“I just don't understand you!” my sister said, slamming into the bathroom. “I'm not going.”

What could I say in answer? It was obvious to me why I was going with them. The thought of spending yet another night in a cramped motel room with Joanna appalled me and I was bored. I had been looking for an opportunity, a boy to flirt with, someone to admire me, since our cross-country trip had started.

I never changed my clothes. I wore the same skirt I'd been wearing much of the trip. That lovely wrap around with rose buds and forget-me-not blossoms scattered all over it and a turquoise t-shirt with capped sleeves. I had white underpants on with a blue, cross-stitched pattern on them. Because I had my period I had a tampax inside me. And of course, I wore my heart shaped sunglasses even though it was beginning to get dark.

We'd checked into the motel around five-thirty, parking next to the front office and walking across the courtyard to find our room. Just a front bedroom with two double beds, a hallway behind with a bathroom opening off the little

hallway. Most of Joanna's belongings we left locked up in the back of the long, dark blue rented car. The boys came with us, following slowly behind. They didn't enter the room, but stood outside waiting. I could see them through the window: they weren't talking, weren't even standing beside one another. If I'm not mistaken, there seemed to be a thread of anger running between them.

Listen, I never claimed ignorance. I thought I was a sophisticated girl who came from a sophisticated world. But, I was a girl, nonetheless. I was very full of myself in my swirling, twirling skirt, my sister scowling at me, flipping through the T-V guide, stomping off into the bathroom, the two boys waiting tensely in the courtyard while I brushed my hair. I imagined every one of them was held on a string that I alone pulled.

There are still times when I feel that delusion swelling up inside me. It's as overwhelming as the onslaught of the flu, and I can't turn away from it. I just have to let it roll through me--a dark cloud that obscures everything. It's on days like this, when I believe I have ultimate power over the people closest to me, that I sense my father manifest, and I am scared shitless.

I drove off in the boys' pickup truck, squeezed into the front seat between them, straddling the gearshift. Overhead dark green clouds puckered the sky like the bottom of an egg carton. It had gotten dark much faster than usual. "There's a storm coming," one of the boys said.

At the bar I ordered a scotch on the rocks, while they drank beer. Then the gas station attendant loudly ordered a scotch, too. I placed my sunglasses on the tip of my nose and peered between the dips in the hearts as if the sunglasses were

a toy and my watching a game. How many bars had I really been in by then? Not many. Two so far on this trip with Joanna. Once last year Irene had taken me for a celebratory drink just before she married my father, to a place down by the water, overlooking San Francisco Bay. That seemed like a lifetime ago, the waves lapping against the dock, the golden light over the city, Irene's enthusiasm about a new chapter beginning in her life, in all our lives. This bar in North Platte was a different sort of place. It was packed with kids my age whose chapters it seemed, were already written. Kids who called each other 'Bud' and 'Sissy' as if they'd known one another all their lives.

A boy with a box pack of cigarettes rolled up under the short sleeve of his t-shirt leaned in and said, "You're awfully cute for a Mexican girl.

"I'm not Mexican. I'm from Berkeley."

He looked at me with incomprehension as if no one there had heard of Berkeley. Beside me the gas station attendant was babbling, but I wasn't listening. His friend, the short one with that round, pug head--all his features, eyes, nose, mouth squished together in the center of his face--was as quiet as a stone.

Suddenly, the door to the bar blew open and a boy with a girl hanging on behind him, rode a motorcycle clear into the room and right up to where we were sitting at the bar. I'm not kidding. I thought, *what is this, some wired remake of The Wild Ones?* The girl swung her leg over the bike and stepped off. She wore a shirt that read--and again I'm not kidding--*Bad Dreams*.

“This is my sister.” The short boy introduced us. Her name--all their names--are completely gone from my memory.

At some point the gas station attendant, the skinny boy with the narrow shoulders and face, grabbed my hand and pulled me into a back room. “Let’s play some pool.”

“I don’t play pool.”

It didn’t matter. He stood me near the pool table. “I want my friends to see you with me,” he said staggering off for a cue stick.

I was aware that the square little friend had followed us. The room was crowded and he stood nearby, though not too close, watching, silent. He was waiting, but I didn’t understand that yet. I’d drunk two, maybe three scotch and waters by that time, though I wasn’t really drunk. I don’t remember feeling the giddy rush of alcohol. Just tired and disappointed. I thought with a pang of envy, of my sister curled up on the bed in the motel room with her cats, watching T.V. and munching granola. I wanted very badly then, to get out of that bar.

Just then the gas station attendant lurched across the room, and I knew he was going to try to kiss me. His eyes were glazed and I watched, transfixed as his narrow face with his wet mouth smelling of yeast and fuel moved towards me in slow motion. He looked as if he was falling through water. I don’t know if it was curiosity or my own inertia, but I didn’t get out of the way. It certainly wasn’t desire. As he fell against me, I finally did cringe and turn my head so that his kiss landed half on my mouth, half on my cheek.

That is how I ended up leaving with the short, quiet friend. I tried at first to ask this skinny, narrow faced gas station attendant to take me back to the motel, but he didn't want to leave his pool game just then. "No, stay, stay." His words were slurred and like his kiss, slowed down and sloppy.

At that point I walked right over to his more sober friend--Square Pug face, who had bought Joanna's car for \$300.00 that afternoon--and said, "let's get out of here." Which could have been misconstrued. His sister was standing beside him, and she waved a hand and said good-bye and nice to meet you. She was pleasant, in spite of her t-shirt, and I'm sorry now because of what happened later. Nobody should have to learn such things about their brother in the middle of the night.

Just as we were leaving, there was a scuffle between the gas station attendant and his friend. I suppose it was a fight, but it was not the way Joanna and I fought, with screaming. This was completely silent--not a single word was exchanged. The gas station attendant walked over and pushed his friend. The friend shoved him back, hard, so that he fell against the pool table and jostled the balls, to everyone's displeasure. I heard a "hey, fuck you," and "What do you think you're doing, asshole?" from the crowd around the table. He staggered back up, and right away his friend locked him in a grip, a sort of ugly embrace, a wrestle that lasted only for a moment, until the skinny gas station attendant said something in his friend's ear. Immediately he was released. I understood that they had been fighting over me, over who would take me home. And I realized

the skinny boy was too drunk to stand up to his little friend whose body was shaped like a box, that wouldn't, when pushed, roll over, and I was glad.

In the pick-up truck the friend, the square little pug faced friend, said, "I'll take you somewhere."

I acquiesced because I thought he meant he was taking me to another bar or back to Joanna in our motel room.

We were on a two-lane highway. The night was thick and black around us. It was the end of summer and the vegetation was incredibly dense. In the headlight beams I could see tall, green stalks of corn forming the walls of a tunnel on either side of the road.

Our windows were open, and a heavy scent, not just of earth, but of something deeper, richer, sweeter, blew into the window. "Cocoa hulls," the boy said. "Some guy who fertilizes his corn with chocolate." We both laughed. I leaned my head out the window and inhaled, wind whipping my hair behind me like a trail of smoke. I could feel the boy's eyes on me. Suddenly he jerked the wheel and the car swerved off the road. I grabbed the dashboard, just as we broke through an opening in the wall of corn. I thought at first that he was trying to avoid something, a deer or a rabbit perhaps. Then he slammed on the brakes and the car stopped. Directly in front of us, almost underneath us, was a bare patch of flattened, mowed down corn stalks. Empty beer cans and bottles lay scattered on the ground.

"Where are we?"

But he never told me.

Because of what he said later, I believe this boy assumed I was ready for him. What did he say to me? Did he tell me he wanted to fuck me? Words like that didn't come out of his mouth. He'd fought silently in the bar with his friend, and he was silent now. That scared me, the silence as he pressed towards me and pushed me back against the doorjamb. I remember my own reasoning and bargaining. "Not here," I said. Then, "I have to pee." But, he wouldn't let me out of the truck. "I have my period," I confessed.

Why did I continue to talk? Why didn't I get out of the truck and run? Cars were passing on the road behind us, lights swinging by in fast arcs. This didn't seem to trouble him, as I babbled on with all my explanations, I was as immobile and fixed as Joanna's car had been that afternoon. Suddenly he broke a bottle of beer on the dashboard and held the jagged edge up to my face.

Maybe this is what got us out of the truck and onto the ground. *Not my face*, I thought. *Not my face*. Then my sunglasses were gone, and that is all I thought about for awhile.

But that isn't really true. I thought about a lot of things. I thought: *some crazy guy uses chocolate to fertilize his crops*. I thought: *my tampax is still up inside me*. I thought: *this boy is soft and the fact that he's soft just makes him struggle harder with me, makes him angrier with me*. *I have to do something*. *I have to do something to get this over with*. So I helped him.

That was my thinking at this particular moment in my life: *If I help him it will be over*. *Oh my god I'm getting him hard so he can rape me*. *Where are my sunglasses?*

Years later, I listened to a group of women in a support group discuss rape. Most told stories of just lying there, or fighting and trying to flee. That is not what I did. My solution, if you can call it that, was to fuck this pug-faced boy back. I found a rhythm in his violence and tried my best to match it. I was efficient; I thought he'd be done sooner. I wanted to believe I had some measure of control over what was happening. That I had the power--that god awful delusion of power--to transform anything--even rape--into sex. Later, this knowledge that I had participated in my own rape mutated into a fear that I had orchestrated it. That was when life became very difficult for me.

I never found my sunglasses. Later when he had finished, I groped around in the flattened stalks for them, but they were gone.

Back in the truck--yes, I climbed back into the truck with him--he turned to me and said, "I wouldn't be embarrassed to take you anywhere." Then he leaned across the seat, this time gently and without force, to kiss my cheek goodnight. And I sat very still and did not turn away.

He let me off in front of a motel. I knew instantly that it was the wrong motel because the motel where Joanna was waiting had the huge screen of a drive-in movie glowing beside it. This motel was next to a slender, white church.

My underpants were full of blood. I was alone on the side of the road when the black starless sky opened up and fell on me. Sheets rain poured down and immediately drenched me as if I had been standing under an open faucet. I had to do something about my underpants and about the tampax still wedged up inside me. On the front lawn of the church was the most symmetrical bush I'd

ever seen. A great, green sculpted orb, just the perfect size and shape to squat beneath, remove my tampax, and bury it along with my ruined underwear in the mud.

Perhaps this seems like a crazy act, the act of an animal hiding a bone, not of a thinking girl. And yet, moving without hesitation I dug my hole and hid my evidence, as if this was the most natural thing I'd ever done. By this time I understood that Joanna and I had landed in a place of lawless impulse.

I had to flag down a car to get back to Joanna. I told the man who stopped to pick me up, that I was staying in a motel next to the drive-in movie theater. He seemed to know which motel I was talking about. Then I told him I'd been raped. "That's too bad," he said. "Would you like to get high?" And he offered me a joint.

When I got out of his car in front of the drive-in movie theater, now high on top of everything else, a movie was playing up on the screen to a completely empty parking lot. It was an old black and white western. Specks of canvas shone through like stars where the negative had been eaten away. Giant men with holsters paraded down a long road. Through the pouring rain I saw black shadows leap across empty space. I saw a man fall gracefully--soundlessly--off a wooden balcony onto a dusty road. It was all silent except for the pounding of rain. I remember halting as I dashed across the lot, to stare at this arrestingly beautiful melodrama playing out above me like a heavenly vision of avenging angels.

How easy it is to hide behind an image, especially one of beauty. To slip under its surface and cloak oneself in the web of metaphor. My mind still clings to certain figments-- the gray muted tones of that giant, pantomimed gunfight overhead, the deep rich scent of chocolate emanating from the earth right before we veered irrevocably off the road--as if the sheer weight of their loveliness can save me.

When I came across the courtyard I could see all the lights were on in our room, and Joanna was in a face-off with the gas station attendant. This night, it seemed, wasn't nearly over yet. I did not burst into the room, but stood outside in the rain, watching them for a moment, bracing myself. They were standing about five feet from one another and Joanna had a hair brush in her hand. The boy--I could tell he was crazy. He was trying to grab my sister, and you don't do that. Joanna was yelling. "Where's my sister?" That's when I opened the door.

"Your friend raped me," I told the gas station attendant; maybe I even used the friend's name. I don't know anymore. In the first few minutes in that room I assessed the whole situation. I could see the night, the other side of this night, suddenly so clearly. This boy, after I had rebuffed him, had come back to the motel and tried to score with Joanna. My sister would have had nothing to do with him, certainly not after I had turned him down. It had escalated, she demanding that he leave, he refusing. Her cats would have been scowling, maybe even hissing, from her bed. "Where is my sister?" Joanna would have shouted. She was close to hysteria by the time I walked into the room and told them I'd been raped. I was soaked and muddied, my shirt was ripped and I was minus a

pair of red, heart shaped sun glasses, and my underpants. Now, this poor, weak boy wanted to rape Joanna. He was close to hysterics, too. Screeching, “It’s my turn. It’s my turn.” In his mind it was a competition between himself and his friend. Like I said, he was a little crazy. I could see he wasn’t going to leave, and I was tired and needed a tampax.

“Excuse me. I have to use the bathroom.” And just like that I walked down the hall and into the bathroom shutting the door behind me.

Through the wall I could still hear the boy’s high-pitched squeals, his demands, and Joanna’s emphatic, “What did your friend do to my sister?” Joanna appeared to have control of the situation for now. What I was afraid of was that his friend might return. Outside the open window the sound of rain poured down like a waterfall. So much noise in one night it was nearly unbearable. Even inside my own head the racket was growing and growing, like a million locusts rising up in a storm cloud. I held my hands over my ears. Things were clawing inside me that might never escape. Above the toilet-seat rain splashed down onto the floor. There it was--a hole, a gap, the window cracked open just big enough for a body to slip in and out. I climbed up on the seat and, as I began to close the window, something clicked quite sharply in my brain, and I suddenly saw myself slip through that narrow crack and run. In that moment everything was quiet again, and I was watching myself up on that huge movie screen leap across empty space. Desire became action instantaneously without any time for consideration. I’d like to think that I was acting heroically, trying to help Joanna. But, I just don’t know. I only remember my overwhelming need to move.

When my feet hit the ground, I took off like a race horse freed from the gate. Halfway across the courtyard though, I came smack up against a wall. Where was I going? Behind me Joanna was still in our room. A boy was accosting her. Maybe he was feeble and drunk and incapable of really hurting her, but how could I be sure? By this time the one certainty I had was that there was no way of predicting anything here. We were in a nightmare now. A terrifying fun house in which all doors seemed to lead back to the same room. A room with one of those boys in it. I knew there was danger still lurking out here, somewhere in the night. But from out of which door this danger would now pop, I wasn't at all sure.

The front office of the motel was locked. Pounding on the door I began to yell. For the first time that night I opened up my mouth and screamed. "Help," Such a clichéd call. "Somebody help me. Help me, help me, help me. My sister is being raped." Pounding and screaming until finally I just cried, "My sister, my sister." For I suddenly realized what I had done, escaping out that window. For the second time that night, I had left Joanna behind.

A dazed, sleepy man in his undershirt eventually drifted out of the back room. Perhaps he too thought he was in a nightmare. For there before him, standing, drenched wet and screaming outside his glass door, was a girl in a torn shirt, her once beautiful wrap around skirt, soiled and untied, blowing around her like an undone apron.

I fell silent and we stood there for a moment, watching one another, a look of fear and incomprehension on his face. Backing away from the door, backing away from me, I saw him fumble for the phone sitting on his desk, mouthing the word *police* to me as he lifted the receiver. I turned and ran then, back towards my sister.

Bursting back into the room I saw that no one had moved, not even the cats. Joanna still clutched her brush in her hand. “Get the fuck out of here,” she yelled again.

A few feet from her the gas station attendant countered. “You can’t make me leave.”

“Where’d you go?” Joanna asked, for the first time noticing that I had not come back out of the bathroom, but in the front door.

I walked right between them and sat down on the bed. “I just called the police,” I announced. “I went out the bathroom window and called the police.”

“See, you better get out of here,” Joanna said very quietly, one last time, to the boy.

“You better leave now.” I echoed.

Not far off we could hear the cry of a siren. The boy backed up towards the open door. I could tell though that he was still reluctant to leave, for he never took his eyes off the two of us.

They questioned us. A male and female officer, both very nice. It didn't take long. They stood in the little room in their dark blue uniforms with their guns, and flashlights, and clubs, hanging off their belts. They had pads and pencils and walkie-talkies. It seemed there was a crowd of them, but there were only two. They never asked me for any details or suggested that I come down to the station to look at photographs. Back then, I knew both the boys names, as well as the name of the friend's sister. This was before I permanently misplaced their names from memory. It seems odd to me now, how eager those two officers appeared to believe my story. I didn't lie, but I edited down the details. For instance, I left out the sale of Joanna's car. And I left out the fact that I had returned to find Joanna in the room being threatened by the gas station attendant. Joanna and I could barely grasp what was going on, so how could we explain it to them? Who would have believed the strange series of events that had led us to this motel room? Perhaps they only wanted a truncated version. The story of a girl being raped in a cornfield by a boy she hardly knew. Joanna did not volunteer any additional information either. The fight the boys had in the bar, the man who picked me up and offered me a joint--all were left unsaid.

Suddenly the skinny gas station attendant was back in the room, sopping wet and announcing, "It was me. I did it."

"No." I said. "No he didn't. He's just the guy's crazy friend."

"He's not the one who raped my sister," Joanna said.

"What are you doing here?" I yelled at the boy.

The two officers stared at him, too. Then, just as suddenly as he'd appeared, he skidded out of the room again and off into the night.

"Don't worry," one of the officers said. "He won't get far. We'll pick them both up." Of the friend, the one who had raped me, he only said. "He's a troublemaker around here." A troublemaker. That was the expression my mother used to use when we were kids, and we rang the neighbor's bells, and then ran away.

As soon as they were out of the door I turned to Joanna. "We have to leave."

"I'm going to sleep." She sat down on her bed and pulled both her cats up to her face. Their bodies went limp in her hands, like two black socks dangling in front of her mouth. "My poor little babies," she cooed. God, those cats. It's a wonder we didn't lose them. At the time I thought carting those two beasts across the country an act of sheer craziness. But not Joanna. Joanna couldn't leave a banana behind. Besides, she understood how thoroughly our mother had wanted to be done with the whole lot of us.

"I can't stay here, Joanna. Get your shit together. I'm taking a shower and then we're leaving."

She must have seen something in my eyes. A look she wasn't used to, because she didn't argue or fight with me again after that. Not once in the next three days did she try to contradict or stop me.

I showered. I was soaking wet but I still showered. This all happened over twenty years ago, before there were any movies that showed a women being raped or the aftermath. Years later, I switched on the television set to a movie already in progress. I didn't know the name or the plot of this movie. But I remember watching Elizabeth Montgomery--oddly the actress Joanna named her cute cat after--who used to play that pretty blonde witch on "Bewitched." All she ever did on that show it seemed, was wiggle her nose to get out of trouble. In this movie though, she was standing under a shower with her clothes still on. She was crying. No nose wiggling here. I knew instantly everything there was to know about this story. All the details of the plot: beginning, middle and end. It was such a cliché.

Yes, I showered with my clothes on, but I did not cry. I wrapped my skirt with its pattern of tiny wild flowers and my torn shirt carefully up in a towel and then in a plastic bag. Then, I changed into a short slip that my mother used to wear as a nighty. It had a hem of purple lilacs. Joanna had everything packed when I came back into our room. Even the cats were boxed and ready to go.

Within a few minutes we had loaded up the rented car. The rain had slackened for a moment. The movie screen in the parking lot behind us was dark and hung across the sky like a giant curtain.

"Where are we going?" Joanna wanted to know. "In the middle of the night."

“Another motel,” I said. But I knew we were going to cross the time line. One hour at that point, wouldn’t have made a hell of a difference either way. And yet, it seems to me, crossing that line made all the difference in the world.

We were in the car. The lights were on, the key in the ignition, engine running. Joanna was sitting beside me and I was backing up, glancing over my shoulder, my arm over the back of the car seat. Sirens wailed in the distance. They seemed to be approaching closer and closer. Then Joanna screamed.

He rose up in front of the car right into the beam of the headlights, out of nowhere, out of the ground beneath us. A weed. His hands were on the hood, they made a wet slapping sound. I stopped the car and stared for a moment. I didn’t understand what he was saying. For a moment I didn’t even know which one, which boy it was, that was blocking our way out of town.

“You can’t leave.” I heard him say that. Joanna started to whimper. Yes, it was the gas station attendant, and he was back yet again for he wasn’t going to let us leave.

The boy stood there, for the first time he looked substantial to me. Like a thin metal pole, the spring in the jack-in-the-box, I thought. Here he is popping back up again and again, and I am the one who finally gets to slam the lid down.

I pressed my foot hard on the accelerator, right into the floor of the car. We jolted forward, the car smacking into the boy. Because he was directly in front of me I hit him in the middle of his thighs, and he slammed across the hood of the car, almost on top of us. In the next instant he rolled sideways and slipped off

into the darkness beneath us. We heard a sound, a light thump. We couldn't see anything, and besides we never stopped to look.

Joanna swears now that she saw a rustling movement off to the side of the road.

But I saw nothing but the road in front of me.

Then she was crying into her hands. "What have you done."

"Shut up." I said flatly

We couldn't find our way out of town. We kept circling. The wailing cry of sirens racing over the wet roads at each turn. At a railroad crossing we had to stop and wait for a train to pass. Cattle cars--real cattle cars with cattle in them--were moving slowly through the night. A long line of cars waited in front of us. Then the girl appeared. She banged on our window. I've never understood how she knew where to find me and which of all those cars was ours. But, I've never understood much about that night.

"What happened to my brother?" the girl screamed. "Why are the police chasing him?" It was his sister, Bad Dreams t-shirt and all.

I stared in front of me. I wouldn't look at her. "It's his sister," I finally told Joanna.

Joanna leaned over me and rolled down the window. "Your brother raped my sister." That was all she said. Then she rolled the window back up again. The crossing bar rose, the cars in front of us moved, and we left the girl standing in the middle of the black road.

Within a few minutes of leaving that town, Joanna and I crossed the time line. All night long, it had only been a few miles away. Where we were driving now, it was one hour earlier. For years I was fixated on this fact. As if those measurable yards and the lost hour they represented, could have made a difference. This idea, that there is somewhere an arrested hour between my life before and after, still gives me pause.

(6)

What is there left to say? Wyoming was a beautiful state to cross and I should have paid more attention to it. Once I called my mother.

“There are bad people in this world.” I said right before I hung up. Who these bad people were, of course, was getting harder and harder to discern. Maybe one of them was me. It took us three more days to reach California. I drove, but I must have been blind. Joanna never drove again. Not once in her entire life after that night, did she get behind the wheel of a car. She doesn’t blame this on me. But, our relationship, always strained, now carried the additional burden of that night. Joanna though, kept my secret for as long as she could bear it. For we never spoke of running that boy over, not even to each other. Not until that night at Kenneth’s apartment when Joanna finally let the cat out of the bag. I’m not angry at her for that. Believe it or not, I thank god for Joanna.

Did I feel bad for hitting that boy with our rented car and leaving him to suffer on the side of the road? No. I felt nothing, not for years. I never found out

what happened to him--whether I hurt him--or not. No one in that town ever came after us. Joanna received one phone call. The police found her car and tracked her down through the registration. All they wanted to know was what she wanted to do with the car. They didn't even bill her for towing it to the dump. She says they asked her if I wanted to come back and testify against the boy who had raped me. He had finally been apprehended for some other trouble not far from North Platte, Nebraska, and had shot his mouth off about me. About the trick they had played on us, conning us out of Joanna's car. They'd recognized her Ford Farlene. What they'd known and we hadn't, was that Joanna's car was a muscle car--a real screamer--used in street racing, the value of its parts alone, worth a considerable sum of money. Still, even hearing that, I told her no, I didn't want to go back there. I would never go back there, not in a thousand years. Of the gas station attendant, nothing, not a sound, a peep, as far as I know, has ever come from him.

No, I'm not angry with Joanna. I don't blame her for any of it.

It is all over and time has passed, except that it's not over, not for us, and no time has passed, not even an hour. Joanna and I are still stuck on the side of Route 80. Trapped between a refrigerated room inside and a heat so baking hot outside that I remember bugs literally being fried dead on the ground where they landed. And stuck beside her in that car, I was as close to Joanna as I would have been had we shared the same inhospitable womb. I never finished reading *Grendal*. A dragon put a charm on him. That's the last part of the book that I remember. Poor Grendal, the fiend, was doomed to roam the earth, a nearly

indestructible force of evil. What was dark, became darker still. That song on the radio followed us across the rest of the country. Sometimes I imagine that it was playing when I ran my car into the boy. *She cuts you and laughs while you're bleeding, but she's always a woman to me*, and the words make me feel strong. For, I have wanted so desperately to make sense of what happened, to give it a form and a shape, like a road with a destination, and thus a reason, that I now see even those words, even the song and the cries of Joanna's poor cats, as signs posted. But I know that they really don't mean anything. None of the details in this story means anything. Not in the real world.

I remember one single, glorious sight though, descending into Salt Lake City in the final moments of a sunset. There before me I saw a vision that I know did mean something, and that will never leave me. Joanna had drifted off to sleep at my side, her breathing synchronized to that of the small cat she clung to in her lap. For she had taken the *cute one* out of her cage. In the back seat, *the bitch* was just as happy to be left untouched. I heard her soft, muffled purr for the first time since we'd set out on this journey and I realized sadly, that like our mother far behind us, all this poor beast ever wanted was to be left alone. All around us now rose the Rocky Mountains. I had driven through the final half of Nebraska and all of Wyoming without eating, only stopping for gas and to let Joanna use the bathroom. We had a desert left to cross, but I wasn't thinking about that yet. I was thinking about all the towns, all the names of the towns I had poured over on the map, as we journeyed across this country. Names like: Nevada, Iowa; Saratoga, Wyoming; Pacific Junction, Montana. And I was thinking about all the

people before us who had named these places on their own journeys west. Maybe, they had been heading to the real Pacific, but Montana was as far as they ever got. In the end, they said, this spot is far enough, this spot will do. This spot is our destination now. So they stopped their wagons, and they built their houses and they named their towns. They named them after the places that they were headed for, the places they dreamed of, the places they never made it to. Peru, Illinois. Who were the people that landed there? And had they been headed for someplace else? Or, was that a place like Brooklyn, Iowa that someone was unable to leave behind? Most of us never get where we're going. And, if we do, what then?

For now, I only knew that I believed in the inherent power of movement. I had become vagile.

Ahead of me, below me, Salt Lake City sparkled in the fading red light of the sun. Millions of tiny salt crystals, I mean the desert earth itself, were transformed into a basin of light that seemed to catch and reflect the last glimmer of the day. One road led in, one road led out. This was the real west. The threshold to the Great Salt Basin, the final element we had to cross. And I swept down, out of the mountains and into that luminous valley.

