FirstBorn

Caroline Bock
CUNY City College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Bock, Caroline, "FirstBorn" (2011). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/70

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the City College of New York at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
FIRSTBORN

Caroline Bock
December 6, 2010

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

Copyright © 2010 Bock
“Days are scrolls: write on them only what you want remembered.” — Bachya ibn Pakuda 11th century
1974
Chapter 1

From the edge of my bed my father stared down at me. He didn’t have to say anything to wake me. I had already taken to not sleeping. He said he’d left twenty dollars for emergencies in his top dresser drawer. He had to go. He paced the length of me, two long steps. I had to understand that I was old enough, his oldest, his firstborn. He’d be back on Sunday or Monday. He had to go. I could understand -- but I was dumb, wide-eyed, understanding only that mothers and fathers leave even when they say they don’t want to go.
I was twelve, motherless, the oldest of his four children. I didn’t protest. If I knew then what I know now, I would have demanded he stayed. Protected us. I swear, I wouldn’t have let him leave. But there’s both powerlessness and a belief of power in a girl of that age, at least there was in me.

That morning, a wave of rubbing alcohol shot from him. Scraps of toilet paper stuck to his face like flies. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, a skinny striped tie. His shirt tucked into his grey polyester pants. His belt was notched tight. His black curly hair was sheared for summer. The crew cut showed off his dimples, hairy ears, broad sunburned neck, his manliness and boyishness. He was the most handsome man in the world.

Restless, careful not to lean against my legs or arms or hips, he bent over me. He had stopped claiming my hand when crossing streets after my mother’s murder. He hadn’t touched me, not a kiss, not anything in maybe a year.

This past week, he couldn’t even hold my gaze across the dining room table. He was ashen-grey. It was the fault of the City of New York. The Board of Education. Eleven thousand teachers were being laid-off as of September, including my father. Though he
still had to finish teaching summer school, American history, with nobody showing up for class at eight in the morning. September was a long way off to worry about school, I had said, repeating his own words to me. That didn’t help. I tried this, ‘The way you make your bed is the way you sleep in it.’ That helped less.

Now his breath, full of coffee, fired down on me. He wore a freshly laundered shirt, full of starch; one of his last ironed ones. I had promised him that I’d learn to iron. He said that wasn’t a top priority. He didn’t mind wrinkles. He grazed his hand over my head.

I kicked off my sheet. I’d follow him.

“Go back to sleep, toots.” He swept his eyes over me as if he didn’t like what he saw.

He shook his head as if ridding me from his sight. “Tell your brothers and sister not to worry. Everything’s going to be okay. You’re in charge now. Close your eyes.”

So I stayed in bed. I pretended to sleep. I thought: he was going to find his heart’s desire, and return to us, a happy man.
Even though he said none of this, I could make myself believe it. I thought, maybe, he was going to stroke my head again. I could smell the soap on his palms.

“I got to go,” he said, pulling away.

He crossed to Jennifer’s bed. She stirred, found her thumb and sucked it. Naked dolls surrounded her. Some were missing arms or legs, one headless, dismembered in efforts to save them. She wouldn’t give them up even though she was ten. They were tucked into bed with her each night, a petulant, round-cheeked collection. Jennifer refused to shut her eyes until my father kissed her goodnight. For her, he’d even kiss the dolls.

I didn’t think that he’d kiss her good-bye now. He hadn’t kissed me. But she was his favorite, I’ll admit that. She was the girl who ran into his arms. She was the one who had our mother’s chestnut brown hair, wavy and sun-streaked.

The kiss was quick, tender. He breathed out hard after it. He knew better than to wake her. She’d never let him go. She’d squeeze her arms around his neck. She’d wrestle a hug from him, a promise. She’d flail, plead, cause pain for herself, and for
him more. She could do things like that. She didn’t have my responsibilities, not then, not ever.

He left our room. The hallway’s hardwood floors gave up his steps until, as I strained to listen, he was next door, in my brothers’ room. I imagined him debating whether to take one of them with him. He was always treating them special, offering to throw a baseball to them, even when Matthew hated baseball and Gabriel couldn’t catch at all.

Matthew’s hoarse snores penetrated the walls. He was one year younger than me, more than six inches shorter. If he were a shape, it would be square, blocked, low to the ground. And he squinted.

Glasses for Matthew were on the list, my father’s proverbial list of things to do. I didn’t think leaving was ever on that list.

More than anything, more than my father, or me Matthew liked comic books, Wonder Woman and the Hulk. Strewn around his bed like bulwarks against the rest of us were his comic book collection, his drawings and scribbles. He often turned himself into the Hulk, though he was even more partial to Wonder Woman.
He’d jump off the couch, and magic lasso Jennifer or Gabriel, never me, the oldest.

If my father could take any one of us to wherever he was going, he’d pick Matthew. He worried about Matthew, never me. Matthew had no friends. He had phobias: autophobia, a fear of being alone; noctiphobia, fear of the night, and others, which I liked to research and name for him. Mostly, Matthew had a fear of fear, which spurred his caution and retreat when others were around. Maybe that’s what my father was thinking. That he’d take Matthew. That he needed an adventure.

Gabriel, the youngest, would be icy-cold even bundled in blankets. He slept buried by stuffed animals. His favorite was named ‘The Bear’ in the same way our father called the Bronx, ‘The’ Bronx. The bear was a beat up brown bear with a wrinkled red ribbon bowtie and hard glass eyes. He smelled like pee even though my father was always throwing him in the wash, drowning him, Gabriel would cry. Washing him, my father would argue. My father would threaten to throw the bear away, next time. The rest of us teased Gabriel that he wasn’t part of the family, that he was adopted, found on the doorstep. This would later corrupt his soul, make him an angry man. But the bear stayed.
Gabriel whimpered. Gabriel, the blondest of us all, a strange creature, was always afraid he’d wake up and we’d all be gone. Unlike the rest of us, he was bone-thin with burnt-brown summer skin. My father could easily carry Gabriel into the car, could drive away with him, and Gabriel would sleep on. And Gabriel would agree to do anything in return for attention to his lost cause of being five and forever the youngest, and being doomed to have my father look at him like he couldn’t quite place him.

I pressed my ear against the wall. My father could change his mind, stay. I was used to adults saying one thing and doing another. Instead, the front door-- then the screen door-- slammed.

A breeze shuddered across me. The wood-framed windows were all pushed up, swollen with humidity. The summer was as much inside the house as outside: whirring with mosquitoes and crickets, lush with overgrown hedges and pines scraping up to the second floor, empty now. Until last Sunday, Millie, our housekeeper, had lived in our attic.

I buried my face in my pillow. I opened my mouth, loosened my tongue. But it was no good practicing kissing even though it had been my summer’s major preoccupation until then. I had to listen
for my father to return, for him to change his mind. The pine
trees brushed against the house. Matthew snored. My heart
thrust against my ribs. Let him go, I thought, without any
promises other than to return. Let him go. I’d plan on making
these next days my own. September was a long ways off. Let him
go. We’d be safe in this sleepy house, in this nothing-ever-
happens neighborhood, in the dreaminess of our childhood’s
everyday nightmares.
Chapter 2

Of course, there’s courage and there’s courage. I could say let him go, but I couldn’t brave the sound of the station wagon’s engine turning over, its clack and rattle and spit. I could say let him go, until the brake was released, and my father never stopped the car, even in the flat of our driveway without the emergency brake on as if the car would slip away without it. I repeated to myself: let him go. And I was saying this even as I raced down the short hallway, flung open the front door, and tore outside, heart pumping and bare feet slapping the driveway.

“Don’t go.” The station wagon jolted to a stop at the end of the block, signaling a right turn. “Don’t. Go.”

I ran. My white nightgown barely reached my knees. I ran, over our neighbor’s -- the one we never spoke to-- lawn. I trampled through her rose garden. “Don’t go.” I shouted as if three repeats, each one softer than the next, were the incantation that would stop him. But they didn’t. I’ve always believed he glanced into the rear view mirror, saw me, and was more afraid of turning back, of facing me, than going.
Maybe I should have been afraid. But I was furious. Now I had to take care of my brothers and sister until he came back. I didn’t let myself think, for more than a few seconds, that maybe he wasn’t coming back. I snapped a rose off, and then another. Thorns pricked my fingers. Roses, pinks and yellows and reds, collapsed in my hands. I waved them over my lips. Rubbed them into my cheeks. The rose-smell tangled into my hair. I fluttered petals up and down my bare arms, thinking what a thing it would be to wear a dress only of rose petals. I stripped the bushes of buds. I wanted to bury myself in those petals. Even now, I can’t hold a rose without thinking of that morning.

I would have stayed with the roses if Jamie Smyth hadn’t skidded his sky blue Camaro into his driveway, next to ours, as soon as my father was out of sight.

All the mothers on the block liked Jamie, except his own mom. He climbed out of his car with a brown bag in his arms. He saw me looking his way, roses around my feet, and whistled to the air.

He was bad news, my father always said.
As I walked back to my house, I watched him watching me. His parents weren’t home either. It was different for him. Parents like his went on vacation in August. I once overhead his mother mention a heart-shaped bathtub to my father, who blushed bright red. It was okay for his parents to leave him. He was 17 and had no brothers or sisters at home, only an older brother long gone. I whistled back at him, a short, dry-mouth call, a poor imitation, and he just watched.

“Aren’t you cold?” he finally asked.

My nightgown billowed out. My bare feet played with the pebbles caught in the driveway cracks. “No.”

“I can see right through whatever you’re wearing. You shouldn’t be prowling around in that.” And he stared at me longer as if going to say something else.

“I’m going back to bed,” is what he said, “and so should you.”

He waited for me to go.

“I’m going to tell your Dad that you’re out here spying on me again.”
I wasn’t spying. I was deeply observant.

“You’re going to get in real trouble one of these days,” he said, laughing at me, shaking his head, whistling more, slipping inside his house. This was the most Jamie had said to me in years except: ‘get out of here. Go play in your own yard.’

“See you later, Jamie,” I said as my nightgown rose up my legs. I felt brave. I shook my hair out. I had a rat’s nest in there according to Millie, who had spent way too much time trying to brush my hair out. I jumped up and down because I had to move. I couldn’t stand still. My father always said that I had ants in my pants -- that he got me economy-size on account of my height -- that I was probably somebody else’s daughter.

The shimmering cherry blossom tree, the moon fading as if being erased, and the idea that of all the things I had done in my life, I had never seen the sun rise, caught me. I read every book in the Bookmobile, though. It was a good thing I was going into 7th grade. I had nothing else to read. I had argued with the Bookmobile librarian that I was uniquely mature for my age to no avail.
I hopped from bare foot to foot. Other things I’d done in my life?

This week, I taught myself to cook. Specifically: Bisquick pancakes, hamburgers, and spaghetti and sauce and roasted chicken. On Monday, I boiled the spaghetti for two hours and cooked the chicken for twenty minutes. My father thought it was funny and ate the spaghetti. On Tuesday, the spaghetti was ready an hour before the chicken and turned into a grey, glue-thick lump in the pot. Yesterday, I got it right. The chicken and the spaghetti were perfect, or so claimed my father. Timing is everything in life, he continued, chewing into his chicken breast. You know your mother was a good cook-- and he stopped right there and finished his dinner in silence --

He’d be home Sunday or Monday. I’d make something special for dinner, something fully cooked. I could clean. I could cook better, or more, or differently.

He could love me then.

Other things I had done in my life? I had promised my mother to be a good girl.
I picked up a stone, tossed it onto the hopscotch, since no one was looking, and began the game, thinking of where I had come and where I could go, starting on number one.

Once, we lived in the Bronx, in an apartment, on the fifth floor. Now, we live in a house, in New Rochelle, on Dutch Farms Drive, with our father.

I twisted around the end of the hopscotch and headed back.

Once we had a front window, over a street of double-parked and big city buses. Now, we have a lawn. The smallest on the block. The one that needs its grass cut. The one with the hopscotch painted on the driveway. I bend a knee to pick up my potsie, step safely over the home line.

Once, when we lived in the Bronx, my mother had said that she’d take us out after our naps. We could dance under the park’s sprinklers, she said. I was seven. I didn’t need naps. I was all ready to go in my polka dot bathing suit. After a nap, she repeated. I heard her rustling in the kitchen. I scooted after her, not one for sleeping even then. She had taken to wearing a sweater all the time, and she had on her white one, a baby-soft lamb’s wool sweater. She said that she was only running
downstairs to have a word or two with her brother. My Uncle Stanley. Be a good girl. Watch your brothers and sister sleep, she had said. I don’t want to go but I have to--

When she kissed my head, her perfume, Joy, was left in my hair. I could smell it for hours.

Late that night, my father sat me down next to him on his bed, my mother’s bed. Where were Matthew and Jennifer? Gabriel, only a few weeks old? Taken away by a neighbor? All I knew was that I was there with my father. He also said I had to be a good girl. ‘Why?’ I had asked of him. ‘Why?’ I didn’t know if I was asking why I had to be a good girl or why my mother was gone. He clutched me to him. He cried into my hair, smelling her too.

I stopped. My legs were wide open on the six and seven. Cool air scoured my knees. My face blanched. The nubs of my chest curled up. I flung the potsie off into the blue pine tree. I was too old for hopscotch. I wasn’t playing the game against anybody but myself.

I ran to the end of the driveway. I took several deep breaths as if I’d run far. I was losing the night.
The dawn stretched across the end of the block. I faced the rising sun. Beyond the end, where the road curved away from our neighborhood, was a field and a stream beyond the field. I had always wanted to know where that stream led, and maybe this weekend, we’d follow it just to find out.

Quickly, other things I had done or other things I could do?

I shivered, cold inside. I opened my eyes. The world was light. I forced myself to stand absolutely still.

I had nothing more to lose, or so I thought.
Chapter 3

My first instinct was to escape back into the house, and this only goes to show how first instincts like first impressions are often wrong.

Even so, I crashed the screen door open. My nightgown was plastered to me, streaked with dirt and roses. I was more wild than tamed. Matthew snored. Jennifer mumbled, mewed and sucked furiously on her thumb. Gabriel tussled with his covers, strangling himself. The Bear reeked of urine. I let them all sleep.

I raced through the house in less than a minute. My father had done all the laundry before he left. Pants, shorts, t-shirts, sheets, pillows, towels and socks and dishtowels, and things I didn’t think you needed to wash but my father did, like stuffed animals and sneakers, were piled on the orange couch -- waiting to be folded and put away -- I guess by me. Newspapers hid the entire dining room table. My father read the New York Times in the morning and the NY
Post in the evening and in between the Standard Star was delivered. This morning’s paper was unread. A trail of crusted, blackened, stuck together dishes and bowls; half-full glasses; pots and pans and a colander with spaghetti hardened to the holes; forks, knives, spoons, a spatula, a peeler, and a potato masher littered the path from the dining room table to the kitchen to the kitchen sink. If I didn’t see the mess, I reasoned, I didn’t have to clean it, so I ran through the kitchen, down the short hall, into his room. He had left his bed unmade, his dirty clothes and underwear, boxer shorts, in a pile on the floor; a stale, closed-in permeating odor; and a disarray on his desk of papers and files. I reached for the top drawer of his dresser. Behind the twenty-dollar bill, was the key to the upstairs storage room, my escape.

I fled to the top of the stairs. To the left was Millie’s room, with its low-lying eaves and slats instead of a solid floor. One had to stand in the center of the room or else be very short. My father had set up a double bed and garage sale bureau and a battered black and white television. Millie had left tufts of hair across the room. Her steel bobby pins were wedged into the straw area carpet. She had lived with us the longest of any housekeeper, about a year.
Last Friday night, like always, we were told she was going home. Brooklyn. On Sunday, after my father had stripped her bed, I laid on top of the bare mattress. It smelled of her coconut, palm and baby oils. ‘I had to let her go,’ he said.

As if measuring the room, he had paced down the middle. He said he’d put down a real floor. He said he’d make this room over for me. I thought it meant then that I would be the housekeeper.

I wanted the room on the other side, to the right, the storage room. I had never been in there. Only boxes in there, he said, adding that we weren’t to go in the storage room. Not ever. Not under penalty of death and destruction, his exact words.

The storage room door was unpainted. Where there should have been a door handle, there was a tab of wood and a square lock that stretched to the wall. I jiggled the key into the lock. A turn, a push, and I was in.

Gnats, dust thronged the high center of the room. The walls sloped as in the housekeeper’s room on the other side of the house. The floor was slats in here too, though there was no carpet. The floor
was painted a midnight blue. Sun lazed in from one far rectangle of a window.

There were a lot of boxes along the sloping sides of the room. All were taped shut. It would take a long time to pry them all open and find my mother’s soft sweaters, our baby pictures and other odds and ends. I wouldn’t do it this morning.

First, I trailed my fingers over the red-painted bookshelves that lined the walls on both sides of the door. On the lower shelves were gold-leafed volumes: *History of the World* and *The Complete Greek Myths*. Above these sturdy volumes, on the very top shelf, near the ceiling, were paperbacks. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t know that we lived in a house that could come down under the weight of books.

I climbed up a stack of boxes. I’d start at the top. I pulled out a book and then another -- yellowed, stained, marked up, brittle, the *Second Sex, The Bell Jar, The Tropic of Cancer, The Feminine Mystique*. I remember these titles though I don’t remember if I ever read them.

I leaned my face into the stacks and smelled dust and mildew and something familiar that startled me, almost made me lose my
balance: the smell of perfume, of Joy. I held onto the shelves.

Luckily, someone had bolted them to the wall. I grabbed open another book, a sturdy, red leather one. It was made to last, or even outlast, its writer and reader. Great American Poems of the 20th Century. And what I found was her. Louise Goss was boldly written on the inside. I dropped it. I opened another, not poetry. My mother. Her signature was half a page, swooping, cursive, mesmerizing as if she wrote her name for me to find it. Another. I passed my fingers over her name. This was her maiden name. It was the name my grandmother had insisted on when she married my long-dead grandfather. ‘Goss,’ was shorter, more American, and more ‘elegant’ as she put it, than the other name, which was never to be uttered aloud in her presence. I pulled out more books. Volumes of Harold Robbins tumbled on my head. I didn’t care. More books. Another.

I wanted to open every book and see my mother, see her signature—trace it with my fingers, see if I could find her scent unfold—but I crashed through the top of the box, overturned it, leaped to the side. Magazines spilled out. Their bright, shiny covers of naked women scattered. My feet raked over the slipper pages—Playboy. Hustler. Penthouse. Girls! Girls! Girls! read one cover. Naked women with super-sized breasts. It was like they’d been sleeping in this box.

Bock/2010
I gathered them up. I didn’t want them near my mother’s books, even though they were my father’s and looked lonesome, sprayed across the floor-slats, smiling at no one. They would stay in hiding with me. I wasn’t going to tell Mathew, Jennifer, or Gabriel about this room. Not even my best friend, Sallie, needed to know. I’d keep my mother’s name, her books, the gold-leafed books, even the naked ladies on slick, cool to the touch paper, to myself.

How often I have gone back to that room in my mind’s eye, I can’t count. Over the course of my life I have searched for safe rooms like that in many cities, and found none. But that morning, I had the key.

As I was mesmerized by the largeness of my discovery, by its possibilities, I heard someone babbling, a gasping of oh baby oh baby that pierced through our open attic window from across the way--from Jamie Smyth’s bedroom window.

Through our bare open window and age-old summer screens, I could see Jamie and Daisy. Breaking up the word in my head into slow syllables – maybe foreshadowing the way I’d later break the world into scenes and the scenes into lines – I said aloud, I can see every-thing. That’s how I thought of it. K-i-s-s-i-ng. Spelled out.

Bock/2010
Something connected to the 5th grade film strip on menstruation. And more. S-e-x.

Jamie was nuzzling up Daisy the Cow in his twin bed. He was kicking off his blue plaid bedspread and reaching up his arms so they blocked my view of his 1969 Amazin’ Mets poster. He wasn’t seeing me at all, though it has served me well to focus on one thing to the exclusion of all others, and that is exactly what I did. Focused. I pressed up against the screen, the metal denting and ridging my face.

If I climbed out onto our flat garage roof, I could take a running leap and be on Jamie’s roof. Our house was exactly like his. Except his was a pretty house, painted white with green shutters and daffodils, while ours was plain white. We had no flowers. And, even from the outside, I could see that his mother had added real bedrooms upstairs and a bathroom.

Daisy had Jamie pinned. Only her head bobbed up and down. The brown bag he had been holding in the driveway was on his dresser. Bagels were strewn on the bed like mini life rafts. Jamie’s deep tan cut him into light and dark pieces. He was a summer lifeguard, from that window, I could outline exactly what his bathing suit
covered. He had pimples spotting his chest and his nipples were oversized red buttons. Just to totally annoy him, I waved to him and called out, “Top of the morning!” which was what my father liked to say if we overslept.

Jamie roared up, without a stitch, in the raw, in his birthday suit, buck-naked. I stuck my tongue out at him. Daisy yelped. A bagel dropped from her hand, rolling under the bed. He wrapped his hand around her mouth because while she had forgotten about his mother, Jamie hadn’t. I could say this: Daisy could probably make it into any of my father’s magazines. She was round in all the right places. She had waist-long hair that swung back and forth and kewpie doll eyes that blinked as if on a hinge.

Jamie and Daisy gaped at me. They were watching me watch them as if they were in some kind of zoo, and at the Bronx Zoo, I always liked the great apes because sometimes you catch them mimicking you. If you scratch your belly, they scratch their belly.

Once, my father pointed out a grey-bearded ape wiping his bony hand over his privates and licking. My father said it was because he was sad and sick of having to live in a cage all by himself, without a partner in life. Even though they weren’t humans, my
father said launching into the subject, the treatment of apes was
pernicious, dehumanizing, demoralizing--

Now I aped Jamie and Daisy. I rubbed my belly, scratched my head
and whirled.

Jamie struggled with the Venetian blinds and a string knotted up
like a hangman’s noose. Daisy was giggling and gasping and
jiggling in pink and blue Wonder Woman bikini underpants.
Innocently, I thought that Mathew would love to wear those
underwear.

“Moo!” I yelled across the path. “Moo!” She really deserved the
nickname I had bestowed upon her.

“I’m going to get you!”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m going to tell your father.”

He sounded like a baby saying that. I wanted to say, ‘Go tell.
There’s no one to tell.’ Instead, I said, “First you have to find
your shorts.”
Daisy ripped out a laugh. She clutched a white sheet over her top, and wiggled behind him. “You and I have to talk sometime, Carrie.”

Jamie’s penis shot up. He elbowed her in the side. “This is one psycho little girl we’re dealing with. Don’t encourage her. She has issues.”

I had no idea what he meant by ‘issues.’ I didn’t have a mother but that wasn’t an ‘issue;’ it’s as my father says, an unfortunate ‘fact-of-life.’ I was ready to threaten that I was going to tell his mother about Daisy, though I never would, when Jamie got the string to the venetian blinds to work. He yanked, and the blinds clattered down with a thundering smash.

I swiveled away from our own bare window. I bet Jamie would like to see my father’s magazines. Maybe I’d tell him about them later. Maybe I’d be nice to him, invite him up here, only him. For now, I piled up all the girls back into the box, closed them up, safe and sound. For a second, I wanted to climb into the box with them, shut the top on me, be totally safe.

What my father always said was this-- that history isn’t ever one man’s story, but how that one man fits into the larger picture. I
felt I could stay up here and the world would go on. I don’t think that’s the point he meant to make but like so much of what my father said it stuck in my brain.

From downstairs, my brothers and sister made it clear that they were awake. “Daddy. Carrie. Daddy. Carrie,” they cried out. They alternated our names until it sounded like one: “DaddyCarrie.” They were yelping and stampeding from the kitchen to the dining room, living room, hallway back to the kitchen, slamming doors, panicking.

Good thing my father wasn’t here or he’d be shouting his head off. I never understood how adults hit you to stop you from hitting, yell at you to stop yelling, tell you to speak the truth when they can’t look you in the eye. I vowed from my very heart and soul to see if I could go the whole weekend without screaming at Matthew, Jennifer or Gabriel, even if they deserved it.

They cut down their shouts to “Carrie” and then to nothing. What was I going to tell them? I was boxed in, outside history, and I didn’t want to be found.

Matthew was urging Gabriel to go upstairs and look for me. He was afraid of the stairs, of climbing them alone. He was
afraid of the darkness at the top, afraid of abandoned rooms, and afraid of waking with fear in his heart. I heard Gabriel’s first step and Jennifer screeching my name anew, from the well of her slight frame. She screamed as if she was being chased, as if her world was ending, and Gabriel, in response, took another step up the stairs and wept.

My instinct again was to escape. But there were no escape routes. I had nowhere else to go within this house. They had me.


“Who’s hungry?” I demanded.

Nobody answered.

“What were you doing?” said Jennifer, jumping at me. “What? Tell me,” she said as if no one else was there. “Me. Look at me.”
“Stop crying,” I ordered Gabriel, “or I’ll give you something to really cry about.” He sniveled, inched toward me, wanting me to hug him, cowering. His face was grimy from the day before, flush with tears.

“We thought you had gone,” said Jennifer.

They hadn’t realized yet that it was our father who had left. They were alone too, except the difference was, of course, that they had me.

I yelled even louder over their screams. “No crying. I don’t want to hear any crying this weekend, you got that?” I pushed past Gabriel. I roared. I toppled my fears, and theirs too. “I am making breakfast, and you’d all better eat it. You hear me?”

So much for vows.

I’ve learned since not to make them.
Chapter 4

Pancakes sizzled. I stood at the stove in my white nightgown stirring up more yellow batter, spooning it on to the hot griddle, smelling butter rise and smoke as if seeking sugar and maple syrup. I flipped one and then another with fast flicks of my wrist as if I had done this many times before.

Matthew, Jennifer, and Gabriel stumbled into the kitchen in what they wore to bed, the same clothes as yesterday, or even the day before: Matthew in a striped shirt and plaid shorts and Gabriel in a tee shirt hung to his knees. Gabriel resented Matthew for his hand-me-downs and had protested changing his clothes all summer. Jennifer slid into the kitchen last, barefoot, in her well-worn pink and green sundress, sucking madly on her thumb.

There are times in childhood when you know, without being told, that the world has changed while you slept. They knew that I shouldn’t be making pancakes. Pancakes were for Sunday mornings not Friday mornings. Our father made pancakes. They knew by the smell of burning batter that their world had changed.
They claimed their places at the countertop between the kitchen and dining room with exacted, strained politeness as if I was going to feed them stewed prunes.

“Pancakes,” I said stating the obvious. I lifted one off the grill, out of the popping butter, determined not to have the Bisquick and water and vanilla fail.

“We’re going to have fun this weekend.”

Jennifer whimpered.

“We have twenty whole dollars to spend.” I emphasized this. They needed to understand that it was a lot of money and responsibility went with it and that I controlled the money, the responsibility, them. They didn’t have the same sense of purpose with money that I did.

“And we have scores to settle.” They perked up. They knew what I meant. Brad Dalara and the Skarzy twins.

In a few minutes, I had a dozen pancakes cooking on the griddle over two flames. One by one, I flipped them all. Only one landed
on the grey linoleum. I ate that one. More butter scorched on the grill. Smoke filled the kitchen with more or less familiar smells.

"Why do we have this money?" Jennifer couldn’t be happy.

"It’s for emergencies."

"What emergencies?"

"For the weekend."

"Are we splitting it? The 20 dollars?" interrupted Gabriel. "I want my share. How much would that be?"

"We’re not splitting up anything. Daddy entrusted me with it for the weekend."

"Why did he go?" asked Jennifer. "You must know why," she kept on. All their faces anxiously turned to me. "Why?" she said in one last dramatic sigh.

They were waiting for me to answer, as if I knew why. If I had to grow up maybe they did too. If they asked me why I was upstairs, I
could give them some answer like I was searching for a book to read. If they asked me why men and women came together and then apart, sometimes abruptly, brutally, sometimes sweetly, I could tell them I had just seen Jamie and Daisy making out. But I couldn’t tell them why our father had left us.

We’d all blame ourselves, albeit in different ways, for our parent’s actions: leaving us, dying in the street. The truth was it all had very little to do with us. But at 12, it was a comfort to think that I was at the center of all things, even terrible ones.

“Why should I know?” I finally said, a smile on my lips as if I did know and just wasn’t going to tell them.

“He’s not coming home, is he?” accused Jennifer. She swung her legs underneath the countertop, dinging and scuffing the wall, ignoring her pancakes. She was half the size that I was at age ten.

“Eat,” I said.

Her shoulders rounded over her plate. Her face scrunched up. She sniffed the pancakes as if I had experimented with the Bisquik recipe in some way.
“Of course he’s coming home,” said Matthew, the first thing he had said all morning as he gazed out the window. No one believed him, not even me.

“Sure he is,” I said, serving up Matthew and Gabriel their pancakes. Perfect. Golden.

Matthew slopped his in syrup. Gabriel counted his stack against the others. I owed him one more. He scowled and shoved an entire pancake into his mouth.

“So what are we going to do with Brad Dalara?” asked Matthew.

I nibbled pancake droppings, burned my tongue and blurted out the plan: “War.”

“When is Daddy coming home?” Jennifer asked, making faces on her pancakes with raisins -- none of them happy. I just knew she wasn’t going to eat any of it. She didn’t like to eat in front of the rest of us.

“We have serious things to discuss here,” I said.
“Did he tell you where he was going?” Jennifer continued.

“No.”

“Did you ask?” said Matthew.

“Everybody’s a lawyer, now?” I said. That’s what our father always said when we were asking too many questions. But I hadn’t asked. It wasn’t the point of where he was going, but that he was going. He could be around the corner, sitting in the station wagon, and it wouldn’t have made a difference. He wasn’t coming home tonight to us. Hopefully, he’d keep his promise and return. Childhood yearns for certainty. We had none except what little I could offer up.

“How do you know that he’s coming home at all? Did you ask what day? What time?”

“Sunday or Monday,” I said.

“No, you didn’t. Did she Matthew? Gabriel? Sometimes you think you say things and you don’t. Maybe you just think them. Maybe you have them in your head and you want to keep them from us?” Jennifer lolled in her seat. Her eyes turned dark and confused. She gave up on her pancake face, ate her raisins.
Matthew sneezed across his pancakes, but finished them anyway. Pronounced them almost as good as Pop’s. He called our father ‘Pop’ because I called him ‘Daddy’ as if we were in a naming contest. He licked the plate because he knew I thought that was disgusting. A breeze, nothing much, swept in through curtain-less windows.

I rattled the kitchen door open to see if anything was going on out back. I always felt like I had another life, parallel to this one, happening somewhere else. The grass, lush, was even higher back here. The three-foot pool set up by my father at the beginning of the summer was layered with dead bugs and swamp smells. Nothing stirred. What would I do if I could step into that life? Was that my escape?

“Why didn’t he take us?” asked Gabriel, his mouth full.

“He doesn’t have to explain everything he does,” I said, backing away from the door. “He’s a grown up.”

“What if something happens?” Gabriel continued.

“Like what?”
“The house burns down,” he said, always the pessimist.

“It better not burn down,” I replied.

“Or one of us gets sick or hurt?” said Jennifer, her voice trembling in the way that always made my father take her up on his lap.

“That’s not happening either, you understand me?” I said this especially toward Gabriel who had a habit of dislocating his shoulder, breaking his right arm, slamming his fist through the backdoor’s window when he couldn’t get his way and needing a dozen stitches. My father always joked that his goal in life was to keep Gabriel in once piece until he shipped him off to college.

I gulped down my milk. “Brad has already sent word that he wants to meet up with us today.”

I think Matthew knew I was lying when he asked, “He has?”

“Yes.”
“When?” Matthew opened his watery brown eyes wide and sat up very straight. He had never changed course from any of my plans. I said ‘war’ and it was going to be ‘war.’


“I wish it was kickball or red light, green light, sighed Jennifer. “Red light, green light is my favorite. You always know when to go or stay if you’re paying attention.”

“You stink at red light-green light,” said Matthew, adding because he could, “And yet you always think you know how to play the game better than anyone else.”

She hugged herself. “You’re sure Daddy is coming home on Sunday?”

“Or on Monday, I said.” I cleared off the plates, adding them to the pile of dishes in the sink. “Is there a reason any of us can think of that he wouldn’t come back?”

All three of them stopped fidgeting, twirling, kicking the scuffed up wall under the countertop and looked scared. I stood still, challenging them to come up with a reason, and hoping that I didn’t
look as frightened as they did. “He always does what he says, doesn’t he?”

“That’s what he says,” said Matthew joining in with me. “So what’s our plan?”

“Man plans, God laughs,” slipped out of me. This was one of our father’s favorite expressions.

“Money buys everything except brains,” remarked Matthew back.

Jennifer caught on. “The way you make your bed is the way you’ll sleep in it. I still don’t know what the hell that means. What the hell does it mean?” She was imitating him or his words, in her high-pitched semi-serious way. She could be very funny when she wasn’t being a pain-in-the-ass.

“Don’t say hell,” I said, grinning at her.

“I don’t remember anything he ever said.” Gabriel twisted away from us. He kicked the screen door.

“You can remember this one I offered: ‘Lie down with dogs and get up with fleas’ or ‘heaven and hell can both be had in this world.’”
“I’ll take the first one.”

“It’s yours.”

Gabriel pawed the air as if catching the words.

“Take the one about money and brains,” reasoned Matthew as if giving a gift, “you need it.”

We all laughed, even Gabriel.

“If your grandmother had a beard she’d be your grandfather. Does anyone even know what that means? Milk shot out of Matthew’s nose. I pounded his back, laughing too, as he choked back tears and milky snot.

“A wise man knows what he says, a fool says what he knows, isn’t that right? Isn’t that what he always says? What does that mean?” said Jennifer, in the exact inflection of our father, rising on the ‘wise’ and ‘fool’ and startling us.
We looked around at one another, thinking that maybe it was foolish to be happy like this, that maybe it was better not to laugh.
Chapter 5

Everyone had to get dressed.

“Now,” I said to my brothers, after the pancakes were completely eaten, even the droppings scrapped from the pan and scooped up by Matthew. “I don’t care what you wear as long as you didn’t sleep in it.”

In my bedroom, I tugged on my cut off jeans as Jennifer sat cross-legged on her unmade bed watching me as if I would leave too if she wasn’t careful.

I sucked my stomach in and buttoned up. As the summer progressed, these shorts had grown shorter and tighter. The embroidery along the pockets, which I had attempted by myself, had loosened and swarmed, more bugs than flowers.

I shimmied into my blue and white striped tube top even though it inched higher from my waist and lower from armpits in a constant rub between the elastic top and my skin. My clothes were fated to last only this one summer.
I ordered Jennifer to get dressed too.

Someone had to take charge. That’s what my father had said last Sunday night after Matthew, Jennifer and Gabriel had sulked off to bed. He didn’t tell me that the repercussion of being good at it was that he’d leave.

But last Sunday night, my father and I were in the living room sitting in the dark together. His mug brimmed with untouched tea. It was hotter inside than out. He was a shadow against the picture window, slumped in his plaid chair.

‘Why was it my job to be in charge?’ I meant why couldn’t he hire another housekeeper? He said he had no money. We were broke. It was the ‘we’ that hit me. My fate was bound up in his, and I had no say in it all. I flung myself from one corner of the room to another.

“Matthew will want to be in charge,” I said. “He’ll say he’s the boy, the oldest, boy.” I said this even though at the time I knew it wasn’t true. If my destiny was to be the oldest, Matthew’s destiny was to forever follow me.
“Stand still,” my father said. He looked over my head. He hated looking at me, maybe that’s why he left. “Answer this question: Who was the first President, toots?”

“George Washington.”

“Second?”

“John Adams.”

“Third?”

“Jefferson.”

His dimples shone. He knew I could go all the way through Richard Nixon. I had trouble with the Vice Presidents. But the Presidents he had drilled into me.

“You’re in charge, toots.” There was nothing more to be said except he had to say, ‘the way you make your bed is the way you lie in it, you know that, toots’ as if we were in something together that couldn’t be changed or affected by the actions of either us.
I tugged on my tube top, which was squeezing the air out of me. The strength in my arms and legs and heart were being sucked out too. I dropped down in the darkest corner of the living room, held my knees to my chest and hurled my death ray look at him.

His face was slick with sweat. He gulped down scalding tea. He was melting more than me into the dark. He closed his eyes. I didn’t expect him to say, “And we got to get you a bra.”

We never did.

This past week, I had taken charge. I had assigned chores. I had made sure we were all dressed and washed up and our hair was, at least, brushed once through. No one, especially not my grandmother, my mother’s mother, was showing up and finding us in pajamas or in yesterday’s clothes. She had already warned us that she thought my father was criminally ill suited to singularly care for four children, housekeeper or no housekeeper. In the history of the world, women raised children, not men. Your father, the teacher, should know that. Her exact words.

Now, the day was slipping away from us. The kitchen clock read 10:30 a.m. It was the kind of clock you found in a school -
round and black and serious. But it was set a half hour ahead so it was in real time only 10:00 a.m. Our father never wanted to be late. He said time was subjective; memory, subjective; only death, objective.
Chapter 6

I was determined for things to go smoothly. First, we had to clean the house. I didn’t expect anybody. Not my grandmother or Uncle Stanley. But in order to be ‘in charge,’ the house had to be clean, or at least what I thought at the time was ‘clean.’

“Let’s do our jobs,” I said to the others. I had come to like the word ‘job’ more than ‘chore.’

“Are we ever going to start getting paid for these jobs?” asked Gabriel right away. He was always focused on money though he never had any.

“No.”

“I think we should start getting allowance,” continued Gabriel.

“There’s no money for allowances.”

“You said Daddy left us twenty dollars.”
“For emergencies. Not for allowances.”

“Can we get ice cream later?” offered Matthew.

“We don’t need ice-cream,” said Jennifer. She was the only one I knew who thought they were allergic to ice-cream.

I thought about this. Sometimes my father gave us a dollar to share at the Good Humor truck, not every night, though every night the jingle tempted us long before we ever saw the white truck. It lured us to the curb even if we had no money.

“If we do our jobs, we can each have a Good Humor,” I decided.

“Can I have my own dollar?” asked Gabriel.

“No,” I said.

“I never get anything of my own.”

Matthew sulked too. He picked at a scab on his arm.

“You’re going to get that infected,” I said.
“So what?”

“Then we’re going to have to amputate your arm,” I said, echoing my father’s outlandish threats that none of us believed but somehow sparked us into action. “Okay, then. I am going to clean the kitchen, do the dishes, wipe down the counters, and wash the floor. You, Jennifer, are going to vacuum and dust the living room. Matthew, you get the bathroom—”

“No way.”

“I want you to clean the toilet and scrub the tub and sink. Use Pine Sol. And Comet. And add some elbow grease,” I ended with another of our father’s hard-working expressions. Part of me wanted his voice out of my head now. I was done with it. I was in charge.

“Gabriel—” I said.

“I’m only five and a half.”

“I know how old you are.”
“Your job is to sweep the dining room floor and clear off the table. But do it in the opposite order.” I wanted to be specific. I didn’t want them overwhelmed. I needed them to listen to me. Gabriel only looked confused.

“That’s the easiest job,” Matthew grumbled, scratching his scab. “He’s your favorite.”

“He’s the youngest,” I said.

“He’s not doing his fair share. Our jobs should be equal.”

“We don’t live in a communist country,” I said.

“That’s what Daddy always says.”

“He’s right. This is the United States of America and what I say goes.”

“We should vote,” said Matthew, picking into the scab, dissecting skin, studying it.

“There’s nothing to vote on.”
“Who made you boss?” said Matthew.

“Yeah,” said Jennifer, then Gabriel.

“I’m the oldest.”

“I don’t even know if we’re supposed to use the vacuum,” added Jennifer as if she was being helpful doing absolutely nothing.

“Are we, Carrie?”

Matthew yanked at his scab and dug at the pus. Blood dripped across his arm, smeared across his shorts. Gabriel rushed over, always enthralled by blood. “You’ll live,” he pronounced, in a Daddy-imitation.

Jennifer skipped off. “That’s disgusting. I would never do that. Mutilate myself.”

“You’re afraid of everything else, not this?” I said to Matthew, grabbing a dishrag, greasy with crumbs and smelling like feet. I wedged it between the dishes and the faucet, spraying hot water on it, and demanded, “Your arm.”
“Do you think I’m going to have to go to a doctor?” he said, sticking his arm out to me, away from the rest of his body. “Maybe I have an infection?”

“Maybe you do. Maybe they’ll really need to amputate.” His whole body shook.

I stretched the cloth across his wound and whispered. “You have to help, Matthew. You have to help me. We all need to chip in, or, I don’t know what we’re going to do. I don’t know what’s going to happen to us.”

“If we don’t vacuum?”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t know when Daddy is coming home.”

Mathew squinted at me. “What?”

“We just have to be prepared. He could walk in the door right now,” I said. Even I looked toward the door. Part of me did believe words had powers.

“Maybe it will be like Mommy? He won’t come home ever. I feel dizzy,” said Jennifer. She leaned into me and I braced myself
against the kitchen door. I yearned to run outside, keep running.

Gabriel retrieved a Band Aid and the bottle of iodine. I stained Matthew’s arm with a slash of the bright red liquid. He yelped. Everyone knew iodine hurt so why bother saying that it didn’t? Gabriel maneuvered the Band Aid on and petted his older brother’s back with a ‘there, there.’

Matthew scuffed the linoleum. His black daddy socks and his lace up shoes dragged toe-to-toe with my bare feet. “I don’t believe that he’s coming home.”

“He’s coming home,” I said because I felt I had to. “And when he does he’ll be happier.”

“Why?” Matthew mouthed.

I was thinking of ten things at once. Why? First Jennifer had to dwell on ‘why’ and now Matthew. I hated that word. I didn’t ask it of my father. I didn’t ask him why he was leaving. I knew that things happened for reasons best not to ask. The world changes at the moment you think it will never change and no one tells you why.
“If he’s not happier,” I said, “he shouldn’t come home and no more ‘whys’ from any of you.”

Mathew scowled. “I’m sure he’s going to listen to you.”

“Let’s get going.” I cajoled us all with a burst of hand clapping. Even then, I knew that physical work could be a refuge from fear.

“Let’s clean up for Daddy,” I shouted out, and chucked the dishrag, dripping, blotched with my brother’s blood, spinning and squashing into the sink. That morning for the first time ever, I made all our beds, tucking in sheets, smoothing down blankets, fluffing pillows, thinking of my father’s words: the way you make your bed is the way you sleep it in. I’d show him. I made them so nobody would want to mess them up. Maybe I’d make them sleep on top of the covers, I thought. I even stripped his bed. I threw his sheets and his pillowcases that smelled of sweat and peppermint, his hair, its dark curls, into the dirty wash and wrangled on queen-size clean ones. I fought with the mattress like it was a living thing, calling the others to help. All four of us wrestled with making that bed perfect. He’d come home. His bed would be made. He could start over.
As I brushed down his blankets on one side of the bed, competing with Matthew now for perfection, I saw his plight as the second-born. He’d never be me. I stepped back. I let him finish the bed. He could tell Daddy he did it all.

We all heard the tap, tap, tap on the living room picture window and froze. I glanced around my father’s room. Everything was fine. Neat. Nothing was on the floor after I kicked underwear under the bed. The others looked over at me. I hadn’t locked the door. We never did. Our grandmother and Uncle Stanley knew that.

We could hide, I thought. Run together. The tapping was light but persistent, a fist pattering as fast as it could, which made sense, our doorbell never worked. It was on my father’s proverbial list to fix.

“Be quiet,” I said. “I’ll go.”

She leaped when she saw me, waving as if I’d miss her in the center of our picture window.
Her velvet black hair was two neat braids. Her face washed. Her clothes clean, starched even, new from the day before. She was the same age as Matthew, eleven, but more mature. Sallie glittered. On every finger was a ring. On her wrists were homemade bead bracelets, on her neck, a turquoise choker.

Sallie spent part of everyday with us, every day after school, and all day in the summer. Her mother, Mrs. Abbott, rarely left her house. She didn’t drive. She had streams of white hair, sometimes caught in a bun, and a voice so clamped down I never heard her speak, only saw her lips move, though Sallie said she heard her fine. My father always said that Mrs. Abbott was a refugee from the flower power era. Sallie was their only child.

We flew out the door to meet her. I led the way. Matthew scrambled to follow. Gabriel abandoned his broom and wanted to bring The Bear but I said no, no bear or you stay home. We were done with cleaning, with the house, with its demands and its fears.
Chapter 7

Outside everyone but me scooped up his or her bike. Gabriel shot down the driveway on an orange one that had once been mine and before that Matthew’s and before that Jennifer’s. Matthew had a three-speed with a triangle seat, new to us, as my father would say. Jennifer had a banana seat bike, less new, from a different garage sale. Sallie circled three times in her white wicker basket and horn and streamers, each time more frantically ringing her bell. My ten-speed was two days gone with Brad. I hadn’t told my father. He always said there were things you only had to learn on a need-to-know-basis. He didn’t need to know that the garage sale ten-speed that he had handled down was gone. (Bargaining meant handling, he had explained when he offered five dollars for the ten dollars posted and ordered me to stand by it and ‘look pathetic’). I’d get my bike back.

I jogged alongside Sallie. We all wound up on Gladstone Road, which led to the dead-end with the chain link fence. Sallie dropped off her bike. We squeezed through a gap at the far end, between metal and thorn bushes, and onto the private school’s playing fields.
The football fields were lush-green, perfectly cut. Even in summer someone consecrated lines upon them as if any second a game would break out and there would be need of perfect grass and white lines. At each side of the field grew thick brush. Beyond the brush were fallow ditches. Abandoning their bikes, they followed me over the ditches, down into our fields and the school’s junkyard.

Now, if my father had been home, he would have sent us outdoors, and we would probably have gone to those fields as we did that day. Though, maybe, it would have turned out differently.

Go out and play, he would have said, puttering from inside the garage. Be back before dark.

In this way, he was like any other father or mother of the time. He had bought a house in the suburbs so we could have the outdoors as our own. He had no idea what we did, and he was fine with that, and so were we. No kids today own the world the way we did.

Now, this wasn’t any ordinary junkyard. It was our battlefield. There were mounds of desks and other discards from the private school. The desks were of the smoothest blonde wood and were
perfect to align as barricades. Boxes of old textbooks, geometry and handwriting primers, were gathered as mortars. Old school doors, pot marked, scuffed, marked with signs ‘boys bathroom,’ even though this was an all-boys school, were positioned as towers. We built our fort with them too. Pointers and blackboard erasers doubled for swords and shells. The world was ours for the taking on this side of the field.

Brad and the Skarzy twins had their own fort on the other side of the field, down the left side ditch and in another similar junkyard. We had long agreed that things should be decided between us by brute force. Maybe it was all those images of the Vietnam War from the evening news in our heads. Maybe because playing at war was fun. We were all together, united against our many enemies.
Chapter 8

Heaven and hell were to be had.

Within a half hour of arriving at our fort, Matthew gathered a collection of rocks and sorted them by size and color and wouldn’t let anyone else touch them. Gabriel had found a pointer stick as slim as he was to use as a sword. Jennifer had danced around the center of the fort calling out Brad’s name, taunting him to come and get her since he was nowhere in sight.

Sallie trailed me, pressing me, clicking two rocks together. We patrolled along the ditch.

"Why can’t we play peace or go swimming instead? I’d love to go to Saxon Woods and swim," she said. "It’s too hot for war."

"We have no way to get to Saxon Woods," I said, the community pool being over five miles away, and no father to bring us there. Though along that blistering grassless plain, I joined her in yearning for the pool, for the plunge into cold water and the obliteration of sound. But we had our plan for the day, my
day, my plan, and we’d keep to it. I grabbed the two rocks out of her hand and chucked them across the ditch.

“You know what I want to do?” I said, as if I had thought this out.

“What?” she said, stroking my arm as if I’d leave her behind.

“Meet at midnight. Just you and me,” I said, kicking up the dirt.

“What would we do?” she whispered.

“It would be just us. We could do anything. We could have an adventure.” I squinted into the sun and stretched to see across the empty green football fields.

“Tonight?” I said.

She looked at me and bit her lip. “Just you and me?”

I knew this would be the most appealing part to her.

“Where would we go?”
“Anywhere we want,” I said.

“Would we never come home?”

Never come home?

I shrugged and kept walking while Sallie said to my back, “‘Cause I wouldn’t want to go home.”

We marched along until the sun rose high in the sky. We stomped up and down the side of the ditch until we were bored, ready to fight each other.

“Nobody is coming,” said Matthew. “I give up.”

“When is lunch?” added Gabriel.

Jennifer sighed. “Look at me. I’m all sweaty.”

That’s when Brad and the Skarzy twins charged our fort in a fury of shouts and whoops and name-calling of ‘Beckstein,’ as if they could stab us with our name alone. The Skarzys wore their cowboy hats and each had a lasso, brown leather whiptails, from their
last vacation out West. They swooped their lassos over their identical red heads. And then there was Brad --

I was used to seeing Brad in black creased pants, white shirt and tie, the private school’s boy uniform. I saw him trekking home from school almost every day. He was always one step behind the other boys like him, scuffing his shoes, cursing under his breath. He didn’t acknowledge me when he was with his school friends. It was only this summer, in the brief time he was best friends with the Skarzy twins that he began to taunt me, call me by my last name, Beckstein, like it was a curse, steal my bike, draw me out of the house with dares.

He wore a white tee shirt, so blinding white it must have been new. His blue jeans were new or at least very clean. Over the summer, he had let his hair grow long, shaggy, reckless. Now, head down, ramming speed, Brad barreled toward Matthew.

“Come get me,” I taunted. “What are you? Afraid?” He had stolen my bike, not Matthew’s. He should fight me.

Matthew took off, abandoning his rock pile of ammunition, diving toward the scrub bushes.
“Afraid that I’m a girl?”

Jennifer screeched and tumbled head first down in the dirt as if she had been the target.

“Brad! I’m waiting here for you. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Brad struck Gabriel across the shins with his sword-stick. Gabriel waved his sword mightily - it was at least a foot taller than him. He normally used it to point at diagrammed sentences. Brad shoved Gabriel. He yanked the sword from his hands and swung it against the side of my youngest brother’s head. I jumped on the brilliance of Brad’s white tee shirt. I would defend us all.

Gabriel wrenched free. I screamed, “Run, run!” and the Skarzy twins swept after them. Gabriel scaled down from our fort. With Jennifer and Sallie, he trampled over buckets and books, toward the green fields and the gate. Brad muzzled my mouth and shoved me down on the ground and said I had this coming and ripped down my top and plowed down on my stomach staring at my nipples exposed to the cloudless sky.
Jennifer, Gabriel and Sallie escaped though the side of the fence with the twins chasing them. I didn’t know where Matthew was, maybe hiding. I put my faith in Matthew to morph into the Hulk or Wonder Woman and charge out at us—

Brad straddled me across my middle. His knees dug into my hipbones. He grinned.

“I want my bike back, I said.”

“Aren’t you going to do something about your shirt?”

“It’s a tube top.”

“I can see your --.”

“My what?” I challenged him, “My T-I-T-S?”

He stared at me, smiling. “Can I touch?” he said, reaching over.

I yanked at the tube with one hand, just enough to cover them up. “Touch yourself,” I said, sticking my tongue out at him.
He smacked the side of my head.

I punched his sides. He didn’t feel real and neither did I. I wanted him off me. I was as tall as him but needed help.

“Matthew! Matthew! Now!”

“He’s gone,” Brad said calmly, outlining the top edge of the tube top with his pointer finger.

In the heat of the late morning sun, I shivered. I concentrated on Brad. Was he trying to tear it down or pull it up? And where was Matthew? He couldn’t have left without me.

Brad’s finger snagged between the stretch and my skin. He blushed a deep crimson. “Doesn’t your father teach you anything?”

“Doesn’t your mother?”

“My mother likes to laugh at me.”

His mother was very young; everyone had noticed that. She liked to wear short white sleeveless dresses. Her hair was perfectly
straight, ironed said Sallie, who knew these things from her mother.

More hair, my hair, whirled about. He had hit me in the head again. “Don’t laugh at me,” he was saying as my ears rung. I squinted back tears. Was I laughing?

I twisted, heaved, rocked. I couldn’t believe that I couldn’t wrench him off me.

“I should make you touch me, Beckstein.”

“Yeah? You’re already sitting on me, so I am touching you. It’s disgusting.” I laughed then, even louder to show that I wasn’t afraid.

He crunched his eyes like he was in pain. I tapped his lips with my pointer finger to make sure he was breathing. He opened his mouth. I pushed my finger in a little.

He closed his lips around my finger and wrapped his tongue around its end. The smell of tobacco and his sweat and the eggs he must have had for breakfast dropped on me.
Without warning, he grabbed my hand from his mouth. He pinned my arms down. Stayed down next to me, panting.

“Should I break your neck, Beckstein?”

“I want my bike back.”

“Your bike?” he repeated as if that wasn’t the reason for all this. On top of me, he bore down, feeling even heavier than he did a few second before. He leaned his face close to mine. His mouth was open. I could see he still had his tonsils; mine had been removed years before. Before I could turn my head, his tongue jammed its way into my mouth. I couldn’t breathe. His tongue licked my tongue, my teeth, his lips closed over mine.

I bucked to throw him off and tore at his white shirt, which wouldn’t tear, and saw out of the corner of my eye Matthew balled up in a corner by a clump of old desks, frightened and wordless and watching, squinting. What was he doing? Searching for a brigade? A storm of siblings? Wonder Woman even? He needed someone to follow. Or maybe, he just couldn’t see me. I freed my mouth from Brad’s mouth with a violent twist of my head.
“Matthew!” I screamed. “Matthew.” I dragged out his name.

He scrambled from the brush toward me then veered, wide away, skittering on loose rocks, up out of the ditches, through the brush.

“Matt!” He skidded onto the green of the football field, panting, his breaths like wings, abandoning me.

Brad jabbed his elbows into my windpipe, pinning me. His face was magnified -- the start of a mustache and the sideburns and acne and sunburn blotched together with scratches and pus. “Don’t laugh,” he said, his stomach pressing against mine.

“Is this part of ‘war’?” I mocked, hearing my father’s voice in my head. He was questioning, ‘What, you don’t know the President during the Civil War? World War I? How about II? Or Korea?’ Lincoln. Wilson. FDR. Truman.

“Stay still, Beckstein,” Brad said with great seriousness. He fumbled over my tube top as if that would help. Pebbles rolled out. The high sun hit us full on. The sky was a blue-blue. The air was thick with grasses, the mottle of tar, the rustle of
trees. He dug his fingers into my shorts. Snapped them open.

“Don’t laugh.”

But I did. I laughed. I bent my knees and drilled him off me. I caught his one arm and then the other. I pinned him down. I bent over him, panting, clutching his wrists into the dirt. I said, “Hold still,” and he did to my surprise, watching me closely. I had no choice. I jammed my lips against his. I darted my tongue into his startled mouth. He liquidly grasped my sunburned back. We tumbled against each other until I untangled from him, spit at the side of his cheek, bashed my fist into his heart, and ran.
Chapter 9

In a shot, less than ten minutes behind the others, I was home. I banged through the house, shouting out, “Jennifer-Gabriel-Sallie” as if that would make them appear. They were gone. They had left me too.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a peach, so ripe the fruit dribbled down my chin. I ate another. I wasn’t hungry. I wanted the sour taste of Brad Dalara out of my mouth.

The house was hot, airless. I screamed their names again, even included Matthew, this time. I wanted to go look for them, but I couldn’t. Brad was on his ten-speed, powering through the stones that always seemed to accumulate in front of our house. For a minute, he steered without hands on the handlebars as if he was testing the bicycle’s faithfulness. And then he was screaming, “Beckstein,” hunching forward, hands down, circling in tighter and tighter circles.

I was safe behind our picture window. But I knew I had a power over him, like a witch, like a sorceress, like a fairy, except that I wasn’t good, and for the first time in my life, I was afraid that I didn’t know myself at all.
Chapter 10

It was a standoff between Brad and me. I stood behind the screen door. Brad went nowhere on the deserted block.

A mosquito buzzed, rammed its stinger through a tear in the screen, stung me hard on the hand between by thumb and forefinger. I squealed.

Brad laughed.

“I have sweet blood,” I shouted. That’s what my father always said. You have sweet blood, toots.

My legs were bruised in the places Brad had shoved me to the ground. My jaw and lips hurt, not unpleasantly. My head rung. I sucked at the mosquito venom.

I wasn’t going to stand there with him laughing at me. I turned back into the living room and switched the television on, stood there, in the middle of the room.

Something had happened in the world.
I switched channels. All eight channels on our black and white 24-inch television set had the same image: President Richard M. Nixon, climbing into a whirring helicopter, flashing me the peace sign. He had resigned.

I felt like flashing a peace sign back. Actually, I didn’t know what to think. The world had changed that morning and I hadn’t been paying attention. My father always said that the key in life was showing up. The second was to pay attention when you did, take notes if you must.

I turned off the television.

Right then and there, alone in the house, I didn’t want to fight Brad anymore. From the living room’s picture window, I flashed my peace sign at him. He skidded into the driveway. He could have ridden right up to the screen door. But he swooped around, stopped in the middle of my hopscotch board. Grinning, he picked up one of my potsies. His shoulders hunched forward, his white tee shirt hung off his body, still a blinding white. He played with the stone, for a moment, before flinging it at the picture window, at me.
Luckily it missed. He found another stone. I could see it smooth in his hand, a bigger one. I screamed, not a name, but as if I was in pain, and then, we both saw her.

She was slight and tan in her tennis skirt, and in a hurry. He swung around, started off. She grabbed his handlebars. Like she was in rodeo, she twisted his bike to a stop. She didn’t look that strong. I was impressed. He swerved. He tumbled into the street, mean and defiant, but only for a second, only until he heard his mother’s laugh and her threat that she wasn’t done with him.

She snatched him up by his hair. As she closed in, she hissed at him -- that she didn’t want trouble from him this summer -- that he had promised -- that she would ship him to boarding school. To military boarding school.

She rolled his ten-speed up off the driveway with a violent casual shove. He followed.

I crashed open the screen door after them. “Stop!”

His mother ignored me until I raced right up next to her and Brad. I blocked their way. I tugged at my tube top, panting,
hoping she didn’t notice the bloodstains. I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’d like my bike back.”

“My, my, my,” Mrs. Dalara finally said.

“I’d like my bike back, please,” I said in a fake-nice way. Brad stole a look at me. I grinned.

“Aren’t you a wild child? One should be cautious in accusations, wild child.”

“He took my bike.”

Mrs. Dalara swatted a mosquito away from Brad’s forearm and flashed me a smile. “Tell your father that I will speak with him when he gets home, understand me?”

“I want my bike back.”

She smiled at me like she knew something I didn’t. I crossed my arms tighter. I glared at her. She had a better stare back, unblinking, mean and smiling all at the same time. “I was boy-crazy once too. I think you need to channel that energy into something productive. Have you thought of Girl Scouts?
Softball? Maybe transcendental meditation? TM? And here’s one more bit of advice. Comb your hair. Wash your face. Lose the tube top. Are we cool?”

I kicked pebbles at her smooth legs. When do you begin shaving your legs, I wondered. I hadn’t noticed if mine were especially hairy. But my armpits were. I wasn’t growing like a weed. I was a weed.

“I want you to stay away from Bradley. Are we cool with that?”

“My bike.”

Brad had a choker of sweat. His white shirt hung more grey than white, soaked through with grime. He yanked off his mother’s grip but wouldn’t meet my eye.

“My. My. My. If we have your bike,” and here she paused, and chuckled.

I cringed. It was the meanest laugh, low and meaningless. I had said nothing funny.
“If we have it,” she continued smiling for no reason either, “you’ll get it back when I speak to your father. Brad told me how you and your brothers and sister attack him and his friends on a regular basis when they are playing ball or whatever on the fields.”

“Thank you,” was all I could think of saying to this.

“No, thank you. Slow down Bradley, let’s walk together.” She cuffed his head, throwing her bare arm over his shoulders. She nuzzled her face into his neck and sweat, and giggled -- and so did he.
Chapter 11

After watching Brad Dalara and his mother recede up the street, I weighed whether to go off to the elementary school or into the backyard or even down to the stream to search for Matthew, Jennifer, Gabriel and Sallie. Not that they’d go any place without me. The heat beat down on me. I was grimy and tasting my tongue thick and dry in my mouth, and in that moment that I hesitated, my uncle swung his black Cadillac in front of our driveway. The front end of the Cadillac blocked me in. Brad and his mother glanced back, curious, and I wanted to run after them and beg them to take me home with them.

“Carrie, what’s with you? You don’t give your grandmother a kiss anymore?” My grandmother wheezed out the car window. She stuck her nose in the air. It was an imposing sculpted nose. It was a nose I was glad not to have inherited.

Uncle Stanley hurried out of the car and opened the door for her. My grandmother stepped out, a mink stole flung over a sky
blue polyester pants suit. Even from a distance, she smelled like mothballs and dead flowers. I wouldn’t dare kiss her.

“Look how she runs around, Stan. Like they live on Delancey Street. Get over here. Right now.”

I always wondered who lived on Delancey Street. But, I kept my distance from her, frozen in the August sun.

“Who visits you? Do your other grandparents ever?”

I shook my head, my mind racing. My other grandparents lived on a chicken farm in New Jersey. One of my earliest memories is gathering eggs from the chickens. My father always said chickens were the most stupid animals on earth. They’d drown in puddles, he said. I knew them as vicious birds, pecking at my fingers and my legs and flanking me with feathers and claws and beaks and stinking, putrid wet straw and earth and shit. Only chickens, my father would say. I don’t know what it means when your earliest memory is one of pure fear.
"I’ll tell you who visits," said my mother’s mother, clucking her false teeth against the roof of her mouth, “me and your Uncle Stanley. We’re your only real family.”

Uncle Stanley bounced on the balls of his feet, a bloated, twitchy man who lived with his mother. She must have bought him the tie he was wearing: flowered, wide, fashionable for another guy. He always looked like he had forgotten something -- like my name. “She looks like Louise, don’t she?” he muttered.

“She looks like nobody I know with those dirty knees. Where’s your father?”

“At work.”

“Work?” she snapped back at me. The false teeth clattered. I was afraid that she was going to say something about my father--like she did the last time I saw her, at her Passover Seder.

So, she continued, while I quickly devised plagues that could befall her: a swarm of frogs or locusts raining down in her hair--
“That’s right, Stan, he’s so committed. But he should be home from summer school soon, no? Your father, the big important high school teacher in the South Bronx, has to work summer school to make ends meet.”

Pestilence. I always liked the sound of that. Boils too --

“Okay, Ma. Not in front of the kid.”

Firstborns. Killed. Her firstborn, my mother, had already been taken. I struggled to remember other plagues told to me by her, my mother. They were somewhere in me like DNA.

“I’ll tell you, Stanley, I don’t think this one is going to be a kid for much longer. Look at her. Little titties and all.”

She didn’t even notice the blood on my top. My uncle’s fingers jigged against his pant leg. Rattling his pocket change, he snatched looks at me like he hadn’t seen me before. “Ma, come on. Think of the kid. She’s a good girl, aren’t you?”

I shot him my death-ray, drop-dead, you got to be kidding me poke-in-the-eye, that’s what my father would said of this perfect look.
“What are you two giving each other the evil eye for?” seethed my grandmother, squeezing her son’s arm. “We got business here, Stan. I’ve come for something.”

My uncle stammered, “So you know when your Pop will be home? We got a proposal for him.”

My grandmother leaned into me. Onion-breath. I thought I’d choke to death. “I want him to drop this cockamamie civil suit against your uncle. Enough is enough. We’re family. We have to live with this forever. Your mother ran in front of the car. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

I coughed.

“I hope you don’t have T.B."

I wiped my hand across my face, breathed deep into my hands. I didn’t know what T.B. was, but my grandmother often asked if I had it. She liked to assign diseases to people.

“Enough, Ma.”
“She had just had a baby, the fourth in how many years? Four babies in a two-bedroom apartment, what was your father thinking? I’ll tell you, he was thinking with only one thing.”

“She doesn’t know what you’re talking about, Ma. Let’s go. We got to talk to Eli, not the kid.”

“Wait a minute. I came here for something else. I want my mother’s silver candlesticks back. She always used them for the High Holidays. For Pesach. That’s Passover to you. I know your father teaches you nothing. You should know. Your father and his family are communists and atheists and peaceniks and worse.”

“She doesn’t know where the sticks are, Ma. Come on.”

“She knows where those candlesticks are.”

“I know all the Presidents.”

This didn’t impress either my grandmother or uncle. They looked at me with a mixture of disgust or pity, puckering their lips, avoiding my eyes, like they practiced this at home. I was useless to them except for one thing – those candlesticks.
And I was playing dumb. I knew exactly where those candlesticks were, in the back of my father’s closet. I had found them wrapped in grey velvet, weighing a ton each, tarnishing from silver to black as if our neglect had bruised them.

We were a house full of hidden things.

“Eli is suing us and all you care about are the damn candlesticks, Ma. Come on. You’re going to drive me to an early grave.” And neither of them was ever going to take those candlesticks from me.

They were unsmiling, grim even. My uncle picked his teeth. My grandmother rubbed her mink stole down as if it would leap up if she didn’t, and said to her son, “Let me tell you, they were my mother’s. I never would have given them to Louise if I had known --”

“--Known what, Ma? Known what? Leave them to the kid.”

“She can have them when I’m dead.” My grandmother grabbed me by my shoulders, suffocating me against her mountainous chest, smashing my cheeks against the animal fur. She cried, clutched, flung me away.
For a moment, I thought she had said, "When I was dead." I appealed to my uncle for relief, which he ignored, blinking his eyes at me as if a switch was stuck. I rammed my eyes into his. I wouldn’t say a thing. Not a thing that could endanger my brothers and sister or me.

“I need a drink,” was all he could muster.

“Don’t you date, Stanley. And you, you,” she said. “I know that look. What are you thinking? What is she thinking, Stanley? And she’s smiling. Is something funny? I could use a laugh.”

“How am I supposed to know?”

I was remembering the phone call my father received yesterday, last night, Thursday, a lifetime ago. He rarely had phone calls. He marched up and down in the kitchen, spitting into the phone at his cousin-the-lawyer, Bob Lutz, three words over and over like a chant: “Inebriation. Manslaughter. Bob? I’m going to keep repeating it, goddamn it. Inebriation. Manslaughter. Bob. I know the criminal case was dropped. He was found not guilty because he was drunk. I know it’s been five years since Louise’s murder. I know it every day. Today is the anniversary.
Not our wedding anniversary. What anniversary do you think?
When she was killed, yes. Inebriation. Manslaughter. Bob? If you won’t help me, I’ll find another shyster-lawyer—.”

Inebriation. Manslaughter. I knew that the first meant ‘drunk’ and the second meant death. Nothing was funny.

“Where are your brothers and sister?”

“In the house.”

“Who’s watching them?”

“Me.” I hoped that they wouldn’t appear from the street or the woods at that moment. I sent mental signals for them to stay wherever they were.

My grandmother’s eyes narrowed, shrewd, mean, threatening to lie us down with dogs so we’d get up with fleas. “Make a note of that, Stan. And where’s that lazy housekeeper of yours?”

“On vacation.” Secrets may have been kept from me, but I knew well enough to keep some of our family secrets too. I pursed my lips.
“Look at her,” she said to my Uncle. “She looks like Louise. Those big brown eyes. Though, too bad, she has her father’s anti-social hair.”

“You want to see the other kids, Ma?”

“Next time. Just tell your father we were in the neighborhood and dropped in and that I want my mother’s candlesticks returned. I expect to hear from him. Enough is enough. You hear me? That’s right. Just keep on staring at me like that. It’s good training. I wish your mother had that look. Maybe she would have resisted your father.”

Whatever claim of blood they had on my mother, mine was greater. That added to my power.

“Keep looking at me like that. Perfect. Hate me. It’ll make you stronger.”

“Okay, Ma, enough,” my uncle pleaded, hoarsely. “You be a good girl, sweetheart.” He yanked out a money clip from his shirt pocket. His jiggling fingers peeled over a bill. Suddenly, I was sorry for my uncle. He had to live with her.
“That’s a lot of money,” said my grandmother blocking his hand from reaching me. I brushed the fur and pulled back, queasy.

“Ma. Let me do it. For Louise, okay?”

She collapsed against his shoulder. “I am lost without her. Lost. What do you think Stanley. Do I look like a dybbuk? You know what that is little girl? A condemned soul. I am a condemned soul. You father can’t do nothing to me that I haven’t done to myself.” Her voice quavered. She waved her hand for him to continue his offer and for me to take it as if she had orchestrated the whole thing.

I had never seen Benjamin Franklin on a bill. The bill was sweaty, worn, dirty, crumbled. I folded my fingers around it.

My uncle smirked. “You hold onto it.” He led my grandmother to the car door and made sure she was seated and comfortable in the cooled air and closed the door for her. She disappeared -- zapped behind tinted glass. And he returned to me. “Come here,” he said, “Let me give you a hug before I go.”

I hugged him, maybe even clung to him.
He didn’t know what he should do with his pudgy arms so he patted my head, clenched my shoulders, pulled me to him and red-faced said, “You really have grown up,” and ran his fingers through my hair, inhaling me, holding me against his waist even as I knew it was a long enough hug for any uncle. “Don’t mind her. She loves you.”

“She doesn’t,” I whispered into his belly.

“Ah, well, you know your mother said the same thing to me once.” He held me closer and coughed and jabbed his leg against my hip. “I’m enthralled by you.”

“I know what that means.”

“Good for you.”

He drew me to the cover of the blue pine tree. His leg stopped twitching. His fingers jagged across my cheek. “I have something to say. I’m supposed to say. Sorry. I’m sorry. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life and what happened with your mother was the worst of them all. It changed my life. But I’m working on sobriety, you know what that means?” He sobbed
big fat tears. He gasped, dropping his head into my shoulder, weighing me down with this unforeseen sorrow, enraging me. He was the grown up. I was the kid.

“What does ‘inebriation and manslaughter’ mean?” I asked, untangling my arms from his in a swift break.

He breathed hard, snorted. “Be careful of asking too many questions, sweetheart. Or thinking, you know. You don’t know what you don’t know.” He sniveled his tears across the back of his hand.

His mother honked the horn for him. He cringed. His index finger stabbed at the base of my throat and ended in caress. “Make sure your Pop calls tonight, or there’ll be hell to pay.”

“What don’t I know?” I asked.

“You know something? You know what your father needs?” He shifted from leg to leg as if one was sore, or had been broken again.

My grandmother stabbed the horn again. I bent down, halved the hundred dollar bill, and hid it in my socks.
“Your Pop? He needs to be laid. I know my sister always thought she was smarter than everybody else, but I’ll tell you, she was too smart for her own good. How good a lay could she have been? Always reading. Always with a damn book. He’s got to get laid, I’m tell you, for his own good. It’s as simple as that. He’s got to get laid. Tell him I’ll help him if he can’t figure it out himself.” He cupped my chin with his fat fingers and drew me to my feet. “How’s that?”

“What else don’t I know?” I said, pulling free.

He just grinned at me. “What you don’t know, you don’t know for a reason. But I like your attitude.”

I knew why my mother left us alone that morning in the Bronx. She was turning down my uncle’s offer to bring my father into his thriving business. I learned what I didn’t know many years later. The business. It was distributing stag films, eight-millimeter pornography. But by then, technology, and prison for tax evasion, had put him out of business. But on that afternoon, all I knew was that I wanted to protect my father from my uncle and grandmother. And as I stood there, my uncle reached out and ruffled my hair, resting his hand on the back of
my neck, yanking me toward him. “I’ll always be here for you kids,” he said uncomfortably, releasing me with a push toward the pine tree and clomping back to his Cadillac, sliding behind the dark glass, roaring the engine. Gasoline burned around me. I stepped out from the blue pine tree. I waved to my uncle and grandmother in a mad way, as if they were my favorite people, as if I couldn’t bear them to go. An act. To throw them off course. I didn’t want them to think anything was wrong and come back too soon. My uncle buzzed down his car window, jangling his fingers at me.

I didn’t hesitate. I grinned back. I had something on him. I couldn’t label it. But I had him too.
Chapter 12

I waited, five, ten minutes, until there were no signs of my grandmother or uncle or Mrs. Dalara or Brad, until I was the only living person outside in the middle of that August day. I squinted directly into the sun thinking no one would even care if I went blind. If I went blind, my father would come home and he’d find me wandering around in the middle of street. He’d blame himself. My mother was found in the street. Blood pooled around her. Killed, instantly, a hit and run, or at least that is what the New York City cop reported to my father in bland tones from the apartment kitchen with its one window overlooking the street where it happened between the candy store and the corner, with the light yellow and the walk/don’t walk sign flashing it’s final ‘walk,’ which my mother always said meant, ‘hurry.’

It was only later that my uncle came forth. Said he was drunk. Couldn’t see straight, drunk. Apologized. Begged forgiveness.

As if any of that changed things, my father said to me.
My father always said that he couldn’t blame himself for my mother’s death. But I know he did by the way he moved us out from the Bronx to New Rochelle within weeks of the funeral, and by the fact that he never mentioned that day to me, not ever. Never asked me what she was wearing or what was the last thing she said to me, or if I saw anything from the front window. Thing is I saw everything: her step into the street toward my uncle’s double-parked Cadillac, her bend into the passenger side window, for what seemed like forever, maybe it was a minute, and him, gun the engine, take off, swing around, an illegal turn, and strike my mother, who was hurrying back in the crosswalk to us, pulling her white fluffy sweater close around her as if it was a cold day. I have had to relive it by myself.

My Uncle Stanley’s hundred-dollar bill in my sock itched my ankle. A hundred dollars was a lot of money, I thought, as I removed the bill, smoothed it out, wondered, is it real? I don’t think my father ever pulled a hundred dollar bill out of his sock. I had possibilities now.

Though I heard something that startled me. The nihilistic maw of missing children echoed down the block. I thought words like that - ‘nihilistic’ and ‘maw’ even if I didn’t say them out loud. Those were my words. My father handed me words like
those. And if I wanted to, if I cared, because it didn’t sound like they cared about me -- they were off playing fine without me -- but if I wanted to, I could find Mathew, Jennifer, Gabriel or Sallie. Their voices were in the air. Instead, I turned and ran.

Inside, out of the sun and blindness, I hid the hundred-dollar bill under my pillow as if a fairy dropped it there. In the bathroom, I doused my face with cold water. Towels were hung haphazardly like moss. My hair did need a good brushing out. I picked up my father’s black comb, greasy with his curled hairs, and tugged it uselessly against my scalp. I threw it back into the sink. I had to find them. I shouted out, “Mathew, Jennifer, Gabriel and Sallie,” as if by saying their names loud enough I could make them appear.

They had to be near. They must have known I was coming back. They wouldn’t have gone far. I banged through the house, knocking the walls and chairs.

I slammed open the door to my father’s room, and called out: “Matthew! Jennifer! Gabriel! Sallie!” as if they’d be in there. I was bone-tired. I glanced at his closet and thought of the candlesticks. Maybe I should move them to another hiding place,
maybe upstairs in one of the boxes of naked women. Instead, I laid face down on his bed. I could smell my father’s hair, the wild root hair cream, in the depths of his pillows. If I suffocated, he’d find me here. I splayed on the bed.

“Carrie,” yelled out a voice. “Carrie!”

“Carrie! We have a big opportunity. A once in a lifetime opportunity.” shouted Jennifer.

“You’re not going to believe this —” added Matthew. “Where is she?” They had scrambled around the house in the same way I had. “Doesn’t she know we have a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Where’s Carrie?” Gabriel repeated. “She didn’t leave us too?”

“Maybe she’s still with Brad?” said Jennifer. “You guys shouldn’t have left her.”

Now that I knew they were okay, that they hadn’t abandoned me, I was fine by myself. I heard them though, distinct, disembodied yet anchored in me, forever, voices —
“You left too,” said Matthew, full of what Daddy called falsely placed righteous indignation. He was accusing Jennifer of leaving me in the fields when he left me. He was shifting like he always did. It was someone else’s fault, not his.

“I’m just a girl,” said Jennifer throwing up the obvious as if it was big news.

“She told us to run,” said Gabriel. “Didn’t Carrie? I do what I’m told.” Gabriel followed orders too well. He should have stayed and fought.

“She’s supposed to be watching us.” How could Jennifer accuse me of not watching them? “What if I got hurt?” Of course, everything was about her.

“Do you think Daddy will care that we go?” asked Gabriel.

“We can go without her,” said Matthew, acting like the boss. But I knew he’d never go without me. He wasn’t one for working once in a lifetime opportunities— that was my job.

I couldn’t move, except to sneeze violently into the pillow. No one blessed me. Go where?
“No going without Carrie,” said Matthew, usurping my role as the oldest, making decisions that were mine to make. Of course, they couldn’t go without me, but go where?

“When do you think Daddy is coming home?” asked Jennifer, her voice breaking.

“Carrie is lying to us,” said Matthew.

“Carrie never lies,” said Gabriel.

“I think he’s going to come home sooner,” said Matthew. “He wouldn’t leave us for two or three days with only Carrie. What kind of father does that?”

“When is he coming home?” Jennifer wailed.

Gabriel screeched in response. I could hear him running in circles, puffing and heaving odd noises at nothing but the sense that catastrophe was near.

“Let’s just go,” said Matthew, changing his mind. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.” Matthew, who had abandoned me
in the junkyard, now took a stand — now, thought he was in charge —

“Go where?” I demanded from my father’s bedroom. Jennifer grabbed my forearm. “I thought you had left me!” Gabriel mashed his peanut butter and jellied face into my armpit. A babble rose from a place I recognized, a place of fear in the pit of our chests. Better to have noise than quiet.

Matthew planted himself in front of me, hands on his square hips and reported: “Sallie’s father is going to drive us to Saxon Woods. We have to get going. We need towels and bathing suits and tanning oil,” he said as if he had made a list. “And now we have only five minutes to get ready.”

It was my job to say yes or no. I could make us stay here and wait for our father to come home, or we could go on faith that he was returning when he said he would. They encircled me as if having found me we had to stay close.

“We should fold the laundry and do the dishes,” I said seriously. Their faces fell. Gabriel tried to press himself up to me, saying, “Please, please, please,” in a high pitch that escalated into despair.
I pushed him away. The way you make your bed is the way you sleep in it, I almost said. Then I remembered, with some self-satisfaction, we had made our beds today. We could go swimming. We could do anything we wanted to do. And I didn’t want to grow up that weekend either.

Let’s go!” I shouted and all of us, me the loudest and fiercest, cheered.
Chapter 13

Soon, we wedged into the backseat of Sallie’s father’s Buick, backs of our thighs stuck to the fake red leather and to one another. The car stunk of cigarettes and motor oil, and we couldn't wait to go. We cranked down the windows. A dusty breeze flittered in, died. We clutched our towels on our laps. Sallie’s father glanced at us in the rear view mirror.

“Everybody in?” he said, his voice splintering, annoyed, as if he wanted us all out.

We didn’t know why he was home; he never was home. He was very grey -- his hair, his hands, silvery hair floated off the back of his hands and out of his shirt collar and from the inside of his ears. He was already old when Sallie was born.

We curled against each other like cats. Except for Sallie-- she was ramrod straight, waving to her mother. Her mother, who we all strained to see, was leaning out the front door, in long sleeves and a shawl as if this wasn’t summer at all. Her
father coughed, lit a cigarette, coughed more, and stuck the cigarette in the corner of his droopy lips. He didn’t wave.

Our father always said that Mr. Abbott looked ‘dissipated,’ a word that I’d always associate with him. He gripped the wheel with both hands (our father always drove with one hand on the wheel and one hand out the window even in the winter) and drove very slowly out of his driveway and down our block. He made no effort to talk with us like our father always did. Our father liked to point out interesting things along any trip, or in lieu of anything interesting, he liked to quiz us, have us add, multiply or divide in our heads, calling out fractions, asking the capitol of states like New York (Albany) or hard ones like Alaska (Juneau) or goofy questions like what war was in 1812 (the War of 1812 of course).

My father would often bring us to the pool after work. We’d go in our bathing suits so we wouldn’t waste time changing. Then we’d race into the deep end, near his chair and call out to him. Our father would take his time getting into the water, splashing his freckled arms before plunging in, roaring, spitting water out, the chlorine vapors rushing into our pores. With at least one of us, if not all four, tugging at his freckled back, he swam a deliberate breaststroke. He was a great whale and all of
us his pups if we could keep up. In those late afternoons at Saxon Woods, I could believe that we were born only of him, that we sprung from him, that the mother who alternately was so clear to me and so lost, had never been.

My mother liked the beach, not the pool. Instead of chlorine, there was salt and sand and the taste of meatloaf sandwiches dripping with ketchup. I liked licking the cold meat, tomato, salt and sand off the sandwiches.

The sea was her second skin, she said. She loved the water. In the Bronx, we took the bus to a beach with a name of trees: Orchard Beach. She warned us to stay near her, to sit beside her, hold her hands or play between her legs or on the ripples of her stomach as if we were mollusks instead of babies; as if we were rightly still part of her, and would always be.

In Mr. Abbott’s car, I was pinned between Sallie and Jennifer. Each claimed one of my hands. Matthew was mashed against the window; Gabriel rode on his lap.

“Brad?” Sallie murmured into my ear.

“I got him.”
"You got your bike back?"

"Not yet."

Jennifer glared at us. She knew when she was being left out even if she was on my right-hand side. She tipped her head toward me and played with the ends of my hair. "Don't leave us again, Carrie."

"You left me."

Sallie stroked my hand and whispered in my ear, "You okay?" She wound my hair back behind my ear with her delicate fingers. "What happened with Brad? You can tell me."

I shrugged, watching our house recede, our block, the blue metal mailbox on the corner, our life and its boundaries. Even without our father, we were safe there in a way we would never be safe anywhere else, though I didn’t know that then.

Sallie rubbed both of her hands over mine. She folded her elbows and knees against me. She was excited for me, for both of us, for all the secrets we held and would ever hold. Her hair...
had been re-arranged, pulled back from her face. Her mother had
brushed and re-braided it and made her wash her face even though
we were going swimming.

I whispered to Sallie, “I’ll tell you everything tonight.”

“Tell me,” shouted out Jennifer, furious at our secrets. She
even yanked my hair, which forced me to tug her tangled strands
back.

“Stop it,” whispered Sallie with desperation. “No hair-
pulling. No fighting. Not in the car.”

Her father grunted.

“Tonight,” I cupped my hand around Sallie’s ear. “Midnight.
I’ll come get you.”

Jennifer squealed. She wanted in. But I didn’t want her near
my secrets. I elbowed my sister.

“That hurts,” she screeched. She pinched my waist. I sat up
straighter and fixed my tube top for the hundredth time that
day.
Sallie’s father cranked his head at her. He slowed down even more. His teeth were clenched around the cigarette; the ashes blew on his shirt. I thought he’d catch on fire and that would certainly be the end of our trip to the pool.

“Please --.” begged Sallie.

I shot Matthew, Jennifer and Gabriel my death-ray- sit-and-be-quiet-now, or die look.

Our father could never threaten us with only a look. We’d dance around him. Another favorite expression: ‘If I have to get up’ always sent us into a mock panic. I supposed it meant that if he rose up from his seat at the head of the table that he couldn’t contain himself, that all hell would break loose, that the skies would open up and that would be that forever more. But all that would happen is that he’d shake his head, rub his face, shoot out a rueful laugh or look at us like he couldn’t comprehend that we belonged to him for that day and forever. I was sure that Sallie’s father was different. He’d stop, let us loose.

To Sallie, I whispered, “Tonight. Midnight?”
“Just you and me?”

I nodded, and Sallie was smart enough not to say another word.

“So, where’s your old man today?” asked Mr. Abbott.

“Who?” asked Jennifer.

“I’m talking to your sister. The smart one.” Mr. Abbott bit down on his cigarette, squinting at me in the rear view mirror.

Jennifer didn’t look offended. “That makes me the pretty one.”

“Our Dad’s away,” I replied, falsely upbeat, in tones reserved for grown ups and big dogs. “Just for a few days. On business,” I added since I knew that Mr. Abbott was always away for this reason.

“That’s what he told you?”

“It’s true,” said Matthew as if defending our entire family’s honor.
“Good looking guy, your father. Must have a lot of girlfriends.”

I never thought of this. But I quickly said, “He has no girlfriends.”

A plume of smoke snorted through Mr. Abbott’s nose. I suppose we believed that what all grown ups said was true until we didn’t believe anything at all.

He didn’t know anything about my father. Even if he wasn’t on a business trip, even if he didn’t come home on Sunday or Monday, Mr. Abbott knew nothing. He knew less than nothing. He didn’t have a girlfriend. Not one. I was sure of it.

“I’ll tell you about business trips,” began Mr. Abbott as if I had asked. “A fellow spends his life on the road, and what do you get? Your biggest clients cut from you. Your commission cut. Everything -- the gas for this car even, going through the roof --and they cut your mileage expense. You get it up the ass by your boss, by your government, and even by your President. Did you hear Nixon resigned? Voted for him twice.”
The cigarette ash shook onto his grey shirt again before he flung the butt out towards the trees. He looked intensely at me, instead of the road, as if I would deny anything he had just said. Then, he reached down the side of his car and discovered a dull flask and drank from it like it was water. He drove even slower. His eyes were bloodshot and half opened as if the effort to get us to the pool was almost too great.

He pulled the flask away from his rubbery lips. "I didn’t know a president could resign. Just leave. Abandon his country, his supporters, his obligations." Mr. Abbott swung us into the pool’s entrance, jolted us into a parking spot. "He royally screwed us, honey."
Chapter 14

Women stripped behind flimsy curtains.

Sallie, Jennifer and I raced through the women’s locker rooms at Saxon Woods Pool. Matthew and Gabriel had gone reluctantly with Mr. Abbott.

The changing rooms had concrete floors and metal lockers and cold showers and the sky for a roof. Finding an open locker, I glimpsed a mother and daughter behind a curtain. They had matching freckled backs. Their hands flew to one another, removing wet bathing suits, as if they had to touch more than see each other. The curtain bumped, swung out and in with their effort. The mother laughed in a way that I had heard mothers laugh: lightly, teasing, a little tired, but with a yearning that hoped that her little girl would never grow older than she was at that very moment.

I once danced with my mother that way. I’m sure of it. Her fingers threaded through my hair. She pulled wet clothes over my head. I pressed my face into her stomach and found her belly button and stuck my finger in there -- and she squealed and poked my belly button back -- as if we had discovered something new.
Sallie and Jennifer didn’t bother with changing rooms. They shucked off their clothes. Underneath they wore their one-piece Speedos. I slipped behind a curtain, peeled off my tube top and shorts, and pulled on my prized white bikini with yellow cornflowers.

It had cost me. I had had to tell my father that my one-piece blue Speedo no longer fit, that I needed a new bathing suit and that I needed a bikini.

He had grinned back at me, ‘who needs a bikini?’ And he surprised me next by saying, ‘you sound like your mother. She had to have one. She had to go buy it even though we were broke. She had to wear it for me. I walked in one day and she answered the door in a bikini and was all legs and arms, and boy oh boy.’ I waited for him to say more, but that was it, a shaking of the head, a blush. ‘Your mother could be something else.’

What? What else? But he was done. When I paraded through the kitchen in my new bikini, swishing left and right, doing a little cornflower dance, he said ‘very nice’ in a tone that I wasn’t sure approved or didn’t, but was sad nevertheless.
My bikini was stretched tight. I had worn it all summer. If I bent the wrong way or shot out of the water too fast, I bulged out of the top. I tried not to do that: to be so impetuous and unthinking. We were here, and the heat that was oppressive outside the gates was glorious now. The roofless locker room sheltered us only temporarily. The puddles in the changing room lured us toward greater water. The luxurious chlorine, a head-clearing scent, beckoned us.

I stocked our belongings together, and wriggled the key with its rubber chain onto my ankle. We always rented one locker. I flung my towel over my shoulder, and interlocking hands with Jennifer and Sallie, we dashed passed the metal storage, onto the stark wide expanse of concrete beach and the pool more blue than the truest blue.

From the men’s door, Matthew and Gabriel emerged. Gabriel yanked up his trunks to his chest, Matthew’s hand-me-down of course. Matthew wore red, white and blue trunks that he hated because he had wanted the orange, pink and blue psychedelic ones, surfer shorts. The boys raced us. The lifeguards’ warnings to slow down were ignored. The concrete scraped our bare feet. We threw down our towels next to Mr. Abbott. He hunched in his
street clothes, which was against the rules, on the last bench. He wore black socks, plaid shorts, a buttoned-up top, and said, miserably, “We’re not staying long.”

It was late afternoon, after four. The crush of people was gone. The pool was ours.

We plunged into the deep end, our hot skin instantly freezing cold. Sallie swam sleekly. Her rings and beaded bracelets sliced across the pool. Jennifer splashed water in the air, shouting, “look at me, look at me,” even though no one was looking at her. I swished some blue water through my lips, swallowing some. A sharp taste of chemicals cut down my throat. If I drank more, I could be a science experiment. The girl in the blue water jar --passed around science class like the sheep’s brain.

I dove deeper, burring my lips, air escaping. I had never touched the bottom in the deep end. Today I was determined to do so. I left the others on the top, clinging to the pool ropes, another rule-breaker. My eyes burned. My breasts hardened, nipples iced and puckered, eased out of my bikini top, not part of me. I was the girl in the blue water jar -- on display, stripped to mass without purpose.
Fearfully, I propelled the bikini top in place, plunged to the bottom. I smoothed my hand over the concrete, white like coral. I forced myself to keep my mouth closed. I clasped my legs together, swirled in the blue. I was a fish, a dolphin. There was no other life for me, no father leaving, no Brad, no grandmother or seedy Uncle Stanley, no being-in-charge, being the oldest, being the firstborn, nothing but the waters and me.

All I saw was the blur of a leg or arm, the kicks, false waves. I stared very hard and willed myself to stop the struggle for even one breath, a sea of searing blue.

And then there was white. I wasn’t alone. My mother floated in front of me. She, in her white bikini, shook her head at me. I wanted to go into her arms. Stay underwater in her arms. She had what the fairy tale book called ‘tresses’ not hair. I danced in her arms.

I listened as if she had begun to sing. She had liked opera. Italian opera in the kitchen. Other languages in other rooms. Her mouth formed a perfect ‘o.’ I couldn’t hear her voice underwater, so I closed my eyes, and heard the opera. I opened
my mouth in imitation of her. I held my heart, airless, ignoring its pleas.

Swim, she mouthed, but I was there with her, why would I swim away?

She enveloped me into her arms -- come to me --

The rush of sun and air and screams and shouts and from somewhere nearer than far, the screech of whistles, tumbled over me.

I was without her.

The world crowded around me. Jennifer was screaming the loudest. All I wanted was for her to stop and for everyone to let me breathe. Maybe even to go back into the water and find her.

Matthew and Gabriel peered down at me, their eyes fiery red from the pool. How did they get so tall? Their legs, scabbed, bruised, knobbed-kneed bumped into me.
A familiar yet unfamiliar face pushed close. Familiar only across lawns or rooftops, only when it mocked me, not like this, never so serious, concerned even. Jamie. His deep-set blue eyes and big hands cleared back the crowd. He knelt next to me. His hands were cool to the touch. In his orange lifeguard bathing suit, he was somehow larger than in his real life as our next door neighbor. He pounded my chest with his fist, spurting out, “Carrie, Carrie, Carrie” into my face, which started Jennifer, Matthew and Gabriel cheering, or screaming, or both as if that would help.

“Cover her up, for Christ’s sake,” shrieked Sallie’s father. In a rally of bare feet toward me, only his black socks, scrunched down his spidery legs, inched back.

Sallie’s towel fluttered over me. I groaned. I tried to raise my arms but couldn’t. The straps to my bikini top had fallen off my shoulders and the cornflowers were knotted around my waist strangling me.

“She almost drowned,” screeched a fat lady in a muumuu, “and you’re worried about a little innocent exposure? What kind of father are you anyway?”
“Not hers.”

The muumuu swiveled away from him, and gratefully blocked the sun from me with her righteous hips. My limbs were thick and sodden. I could just lay here, if Jamie would let me.

“I think you’re going to be okay,” offered Jamie. “If everyone would just stand back.”

He reassured the crowd in the way that good-looking men taking charge often do. The crowd stepped back, except for Jennifer, Matthew and Gabriel who rushed toward me, needing to touch me, to reassure them that I had not left them too. “Give her air,” Jamie said to them as if conjuring it up. “Air.”

I spit up bluish, greenish bile next to Jamie’s tan legs. My teeth chattered independently of the rest of me. In lieu of my mother, I hung my head with the spit and vomit around the edges of my lips against Jamie’s thigh. He propped up my shoulders, as if he’d release me and I’d float away.

I felt blindfolded though nothing covered my eyes. I couldn’t see faces clearly. I had burned out my eyes. An announcement blared about the pool closing in thirty minutes.
“Can we have one more swim?” begged Jennifer of me, before asking the question again to Sallie’s father. He blanched and fluttered his fingers go or good-bye, as if signaling that he had long ago dismissed our family from his own well-ordered life.

“I want you here,” he said to Sallie, pointing to the bench next to him. The father and daughter were a blur to me.

“Back to normal?” asked Jamie.

I blinked, pushing back the blindness, smelling chlorine in my pores or his. I shook myself away from his hands, from the crowd, already dispersing, returning for one last swim. My siblings scuffled wordlessly around me. Matthew squinted out to the pool. Jennifer sniffled. Gabriel reached out to pet my hair. I curled up on the cement, pulling my arms and legs into my chest. I longed for her, my mother of the blue waters, to fold me back into her arms.
Chapter 15

We swam more -- until the pool closed at 7 p.m, and we tumbled damp, raw, emptied into the back of Mr. Abbott’s Buick.

“"I give your Pop a lot of credit,” he said as soon as I slammed the car door shut and he lit a cigarette. “I couldn’t do it. Not with you kids. What was that act? You were pretending, right? Faking the drowning, kid? Sallie says you’re a good swimmer? What did you do it for? Man. I give your Pop extra credit. Let’s get home. I could use a drink. Or two.” He didn’t wait until we were home but drew a long drink from the flask and flashed us a warning not to say a word. I was hardly breathing.

Back home, I made us boiled hot dogs for dinner, all five of us. Sallie stayed with us, running from her father’s car too. I switched on the television to hear more news of the 37th President of the United States resigning with a sadness that seemed to overcome him and the newscaster and made us wonder what else could end.
I informed the others that we had a new President. Gerald R. Ford. Number 38. I made my own mental note to add him to my list and impress my father. I ate my hot dog in three bites.

“If we can have a new president, can we have a new daddy?” This was Jennifer. Her eyes fixed on the mute telephone, willing it to ring.

I chewed up her hot dog in two enormous bites. She didn’t care. She said she was waiting for Daddy to come home to eat. But I knew she’d sneak food later, maybe even a raw hot dog or two, one of her favorite things to eat in secret.

When the phone rang, we were frightened. No one wanted to answer its shrill calls. On the third fierce ring, we leaped. We expected his voice. He had a gruff, abbreviated way that he talked on the phone like he was only speaking in exclamation points. Who’s this? Carrie? Matthew? Jennifer? Gabriel? He’d go through our names like a roll call. He claimed that we all sounded alike to him on the telephone. In fact, it was something he rarely did -- phone us. We expected him at the same time every night. If he was late, it was the damn traffic: the bungler, the rubberneckers, the moron in front of him. I
always pictured him on the highway with cartoon characters behind the wheels of the other cars and trucks.

I pulled the phone’s receiver away from the others. They were all screaming ‘Daddy’ into the phone. He expected me to be in charge. They watched me carefully. Instead of his voice, there was wheezing, a sneeze and cough, and my heart fell. He was sick. He couldn’t speak. Neither could I. There was more breathing, a panting, a rasping, a laugh, and another, more nasal and searing than the first. “Who is this?” I said, dizzy, underwater, again, but now alone. “Brad, if it’s you, I’m going to get you. I’m really going to get you next time.”

The phone line crackled, shattered, a hoarse laugh exploded. If only it was a bad connection, a wrong number, if the intent wasn’t shown in the way the caller listened to us listening. Matthew grabbed the phone from me. He tucked his chin down, deepened his voice. “Who is this?” Maybe it worked, the line died. He slammed the phone receiver back into its cradle all the while Jennifer hung onto my arm.

“Do you think Daddy will call tonight?” she asked.
I yanked away from her. I didn’t want anyone to touch me after that call.

“He should call me at least,” she continued ready with tears. “I won’t be able to sleep without him saying ‘good night’ to me, he knows that.” She sniffled, purposely pathetic.

“Too bad you can’t call him,” said Sallie. “Is he staying at a hotel? My mom always has the number of the hotel my father stays at when he goes on business. Sometimes she’ll call him three or four times in a night when he’s away, but then she won’t talk with him when he’s here.” She sipped her glass of Kool-Aid. I always wished she said more about her mother. I always thought that there were consequences of having a mother that I couldn’t figure out.

“I don’t think you have to worry about your father,” she continued. “He likes you guys.” Sallie nibbled on her hot dog. She could take all night to finish a meal, or at least that’s what my father always said. Except for Jennifer, we all ate like it was our last meal. At that moment, I wanted to scream: “But he left us.”

“Let’s make more hot dogs,” Matthew said. “Who wants another?”
I shoved the rest of my hot dog, my third, slathered with ketchup and green relish, into my mouth and said, “No more hot dogs. Let’s go.” I didn’t want to wait for the telephone to ring again, for our hope to rise, or for the world to seize us before we could seize it. I grabbed Sallie’s hand and we beat our way back out the door, the others following, faces and shirts smeared with ketchup like blood.
Chapter 16

The sun layered ribbons on the end of our block, casting shadows of our legs and feet.
These other shadow selves were taller than we were, bending and stretching bravely into the street. Blades of grass cut the backs of our legs. Fireflies alit. We were side-by-side on the curb in front of our empty dark house.

In the street, a football was tossed in wide arcs, a brown bird, a meteor. We yearned to have the teenagers flub a catch so we could race to the ball and pitch it back with an off-hand ‘here you go.’ But there were no unheralded connections. They tolerated us even if we snatched the ball before it hit the sewer and tumbled among the runoff, leaves and raccoons. Among the football players were the Skarzy twins’ older brothers. Like the twins, these two near-men had hair that flew down over their eyes, scraped their faces, crawled out of their tee shirts-- emblazoned with ivy league college seals-- red hair, a pernicious undergrowth.
Jamie once remarked that they weren’t getting anywhere near Harvard or Yale except to sell nickel bags. They threw the ball with laconic loops. They barely shifted from the middle of the street, winging the ball over passing cars. I prayed the next car would be our yellow station wagon. My father could catch the ball with one hand. He could outrun all of them. He never even watched a football game on television but I knew it must be one of his many skills. The football dived at us like a bomb. I picked it up, gravelly leather, white binding, and rolled it in my hands.

“Give it back,” screamed the oldest and most acne-scarred Skarzy. He had jagged rivulets along his cheeks, gangly freckled arms, was in the same grade as Jamie though I never saw them together. “Give it back.” He snarled.

“It was out of bounds,” I yelled back.

“You don’t make up the rules.”

“I do too.” I spun it toward him. My new rule was not to get into another fight today.

His friends jeered. “Freak.”
“Freak,” I repeated louder. This gave my side the reason to cheer and yell ‘Freak’ with me until mocked, belittled, embarrassed the teenagers broke up their game.

I lay back on the grass and watched the teenagers abandon us.

“Maybe we should try being friends with the Skarzy twins? Maybe even Brad?” asked Sallie.

“Being enemies is more fun,” I said, adjusting my hands behind my head.

Sallie aligned her body next to mine, put her own hands behind her head. The others followed too.

Soon, the sky stripped away all but the last bruised violet edges of the sun. The end of the block, the trees and traffic circle and the houses by the far stream, were lost from easy sight. The streetlights, suddenly on, shone yellow hazy orbs.

Bluish television lights radiated outward from all houses except ours. The horizon blurred. The anticipation of full darkness was
a thrill. I wanted to run into the street and shout or dance or -- "We could pull the fire alarm and see how long it takes for the fire trucks to come?" I offered.

"The fireman said he’d take you to the station if you did that again," said Matthew, rolling on his back, squinting at me, taking up too much space, crowding me. I knew he was afraid of the night, of the sounds, of the blackness that descends quietly then all at once.

"Let’s go inside," he reasoned.

"No, I want to stay out," I said even though I knew we should be inside too.

Matthew crept toward me, and the others did too, like runts, a cast aside litter. I could feel their heat. Hands reached for mine. We searched the sky. We were swept into a sea of grasses and stars, our lives out of bounds. Night fell.
Chapter 17

“Did you know that is Venus?” Matthew pointed to the brightest star. “Venus,” he demanded of me. I turned my back on him just to get him angry.

Gabriel tickled my arm with a blade of grass. I ignored him. He snuffled through early fallen leaves and stuck me. He was persistent in the way he liked to be, going from tickling to sticking, always the youngest.

“I know that is Venus,” said Matthew, squinting, poking me.

“How do you know that’s Venus?” I sat up straight and studied the sky. He shouldn’t know something I didn’t know. I thought of an odd line from my uncle: those who know don’t say. Those who say: don’t know. He always jingled the change in his pocket when he said this. I still hadn’t told anybody about the hundred-dollar bill tucked in my left sock. The star -- or planet -- flickered.
“Venus is the goddess of love,” interjected Jennifer. “Did you know that?”

“Everyone knows that,” Gabriel said, having no way to know this but wanting to be in on the talk. Sallie smiled at him. She indulged him like a good dog.

“But you didn’t know that that was Venus, Carrie,” Matthew said triumphantly. “Venus appears at twilight, rising at the western horizon, dazzling. Jupiter is visible on the horizon in the early morning. I have stood right here, with Daddy, in the morning, when you were all asleep, to see Jupiter through his binoculars in the sky. That’s the eastern sky to be exact.” When he sounded like our father, he had an easy, confident authority. He was showing me up, knowing something I didn’t.

Venus sparkled, the brightest light. My heart burned. Why wasn’t I brought outside to seek the heavens through his binoculars?

Gabriel drew a line with a green blade up Sallie’s back as if cutting her in two. He mumbled, “Guess your parents don’t care
if you come home tonight or not. Guess nobody loves you either.”

“They say they love me all the time,” said Sallie.

Gabriel looked over at me as if I’d echo something about love to him. But I couldn’t become responsible for love too. I wasn’t used to saying those words. I must have said ‘I love you’ to my mother, and surely, she said it back. My father never said that word, and unlike Jennifer, I couldn’t blurt it at him. I couldn’t question him with it. He looked confused when she did it. ‘Do you love me? I love you’ She demanded he answer her. He’d blush and ruffle her hair. She made him say the words like she was a teacher, and he, the student. But he had to be called upon for those words and like any bad student was almost defiant in giving the answer. Our last housekeeper used ‘love’ all the time to punctuate sentences. She was from Trinidad. ‘Get me a drink, luv,’ she’d say when she needed her orange juice, her massive frame faint on our flowered couch. But even that wasn’t ‘I love you’.

With Gabriel still gazing on me, I flopped over. Grass pricked my bare stomach. I couldn’t be responsible for love too, could I?
Instead, Gabriel jabbed Sallie with a blade of grass.

“Come here,” she said, grabbing the blade away from him.

“Why?” he said.

Sallie inched over to him. If she hit him, I’d have to hit her and I didn’t want to hit her. I had my plans to meet her at midnight.

“Listen to me,” she said in a grown up voice to Gabriel.

He wagged his head.

Sallie grabbed his arm and pulled him to her. I sat up on my haunches. She was going to ruin everything. I was going to have to hit her.

“Gabriel?” she said, her hand clenched on his thin arm. “Are you really part of that family? I only ask ‘cause you don’t look anything like your brother, or your sisters.”

“Maybe you’re adopted,” said Matthew.
“Yeah, maybe you are,” said Jennifer, looking over at me as if for confirmation.

Sallie brushed Gabriel’s cheek with the blade of grass. I jumped as if that was what would scar him.

“Stop, he’s not adopted,” I said. “At least I don’t think he is.”

Gabriel let out a woof as if he was a puppy and not a boy, who could be irreparably hurt by words.

“I think he is,” said Matthew. “Sallie’s right. He doesn’t look like us.”

“None of us have blonde hair,” said Jennifer, tossing her hair, even more sun-streaked than this morning.

“Don’t be mean,” said Sallie, even though she started this, and we’d all taunt Gabriel for years about whether or not he was adopted or not. Of course, he wasn’t. “Don’t listen to them,” she said to Gabriel, and stopped, distracted.
Two doors down, her front door slipped open. Her mother beckoned her with a faint wave of her arm. Sallie hesitated.

“Maybe you should stay with us,” said Gabriel to Sallie with a small boy’s tenderness. “You’re here all the time anyway.”

“She needs to go and we need to get into the house,” I said even though our pitch-black house offered us no invitation.

Sallie whipped the blade of grass across Gabriel’s cheek one last time. She rose out of our shadows, over the lawns, to her house. We all watched as her mother tied Sallie up in an embrace and led her inside their fiercely lit home.
Chapter 18

We shivered as if from Sallie’s loss.
I rolled on the grass, wheeled away from Mathew, Jennifer and Gabriel. I rooted in the dirt, in the night-dew. At the far edge of our lawn I lay wondering if it was even possible to count half of the stars, wondering where my father was, why my mother died, and if I would ever really be kissed. Matthew, Jennifer, and Gabriel eased over to me. Jennifer asked what I was doing. I said counting stars. She started to count too, from the opposite direction. We would meet at the top of the world. Matthew pressed right against my side. Gabriel crouched at my feet, uneasy, alert. He slapped a mosquito off my ankle a moment too late, after it stung.

“You know I was thinking,” began Jennifer, raising her arms, as if snatching the stars into her pockets.

“Don’t think,” said Matthew. “Let me do it. I’m the boy.”

“I was thinking,” she continued insistently and I cringed inside. “I was thinking that Daddy went to find Mommy.”
“He can’t find her,” said Matthew, tearing up a fistful of the lawn, pitching it into the air. “She’s dead.”

“Maybe, just maybe, she’s not,” Jennifer in a small voice. “Maybe she just had to go away.”

Jennifer wasn’t at the funeral like me. I was the only one there -- at my father’s side. I was wearing a checked red and white sundress. He wouldn’t let go of my right hand. He squeezed my fingers so tight they cracked in his own. I couldn’t feel them after a while. Even though it was summer, I remember being cold all over, especially my hands. I didn’t cry out -- not when they lowered her casket into the hole -- not when he twisted me towards him, muffled my face into his heaving stomach as if he was afraid I would throw myself upon her. Maybe I would have.

“Our Uncle killed her,” I said, lying on my back, giving the stars a hard look. “Not on purpose. He was drunk or that’s what Daddy said to cousin Bob, the lawyer. Drunk. He hit her with his car.”
"The Cadillac?" Gabriel inched toward me, peered into the street, as if our Uncle would appear now. "And what did he drink?"

Jennifer shivered dramatically as if she was cold. "He didn’t mean to, did he?"

"Daddy says that he and Grandma have a lot to be sorry for," I said, contemplating the lights along the horizon, trying to keep my eyes on Venus. I wanted to remember to tell my father that we spotted Venus.

"Uncle Stanley needs to be responsible," added Matthew in a way we all knew he was only parroting our father. "That Uncle Stanley is irrevocably un-responsible." He drew out the word 'responsible,' folding his lips down, heavy on the last syllable, a favorite word of our father’s. He always said that there were people who take responsibility in this world and those who don’t. Richard M. Nixon and Uncle Stanley fell into the latter category.

Jennifer rocked, sniffled, and sneezed into the grass. "Was Grandma in the car too?"
“Of course not.”

“Someday I’d like a Cadillac. A purple one,” said Gabriel, staying focused on cars. “Also a dog.”

“I don’t get it,” Jennifer cried out, stretched her hands over her face in a web. “I like Uncle Stanley. He’s nice to me. He always tells me that I remind him of Mommy.” Her thumb found her mouth.

“Doesn’t Daddy always say not to play in the street?” said Matthew. “What was she doing in the street?”

She was pacing, wearing her billowy white sweater. She was waving down a bus. We lived in the Bronx and big, fuming city buses were her favorite way to travel, or at least that’s what she always said. He jumped the sidewalk, pinned her between the walk/don’t walk and the grate of his Cadillac. Maybe he meant to scare her. A month or so after she was killed, maybe more, we moved to here, New Rochelle, to the smallest house on the north end of town, to a station wagon, to what is now.

Maybe Mommy isn’t dead I mused to myself before I could stop. Maybe she’s turned into an ant. Or a mosquito. No, better a
firefly to be nice. Who’d like to spend their life sucking blood? I slapped my leg. Missed. Ankle swelled. Sweet blood.

“Lucky I’m not afraid of insects,” said Matthew, swatting another mosquito.

“Entomophobia, fear of insects, or even the more specialized arachnophobia, fear of spiders,” I said. If my mother was reincarnated into a mosquito or spider, none of us would be afraid of her, though we’d probably try to kill her, a strange thought.

“Ever think of the word ‘phobia’? Sounds like foe,” I said.

“Or fiend,” added Matthew. “Or fiery, fire, photon?”

“Or fear, oh, that’s what it means, I’m so silly, aren’t I? I’m the funniest in this family, aren’t I?” Jennifer added.

“Or fart,” said Gabriel because at eight years old, just the word ‘fart’ was enough to rocket him off. Like Jennifer he wanted me to join in, to laugh too, as if all the world was about being eight like Gabriel or nine like Jennifer.
I was quiet. This made us all anxious. This reminded them, and me, that there was only us. That perhaps, it would always be so --

Jennifer flung herself back, her arms back over her head. “I was just thinking that’s all.” Her voice caught and then rose. “I was just thinking that Daddy could be with her. That he knew where she was and was bringing her home.”

At this even stranger and wondrous thought, none of us stirred from our burrows in the grass. A wind rose and stripped the summer leaves prematurely from the trees.

Gabriel rolled on his stomach. He barked like a puppy so I called him that, ‘Puppy.’ He barked louder. I rubbed behind his ears. I let him nuzzle his head on my lap. Jennifer ruffed. She said she was a dog, too, a poodle.


“You’re not mine. My dog wouldn’t run away. He’d protect me.” I turned to Gabriel, rolling back and forth in the grass next to me. He hadn’t protected me either but I was in what my father
would call a contrary mood. He was the youngest. It wasn’t his job to protect.

“Puppy,” I said, “Come here.” I had never thought of owning a dog before this moment. Matthew yapped. Jennifer licked my cheeks. Gabriel, or ‘Puppy,’ thrashed, chewed my fingers, nipped my palm. All three flopped over me, a pack, until with perverse glee I said only Gabriel could touch me. He was my puppy. He nuzzled his head into my lap, quieted, and I ignored him.

Matthew sat cross-legged and picked a bouquet of dandelions. He wasn’t like me. I’d have popped off their heads off one by one. He just sat there holding the yellow weeds like flowers.

Jennifer bounded up. “Maybe we should all wish upon a star? Starlight. Star bright. First star I see tonight --.” Frenzied fireflies sparked around her. She squeezed her eyes closed and waved her palms upward, a lonely fairy courting the night.

“You’re too late for the first star,” Matthew said. A Corvette whizzed by. A beat up Chevy. He trudged forward on his knees
toward the edge of the curb. A station wagon, brown with paneled sides lurched past.

Gabriel arched his head back, his delicate, burnt-sun boy-neck. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Maybe Mommy is a star.”

I had a responsibility as the oldest to tell the truth, or at least that’s what my father would say. “Which star?” I asked instead. “Show me. Which star is her?”

Jennifer quivered and pointed toward the horizon.

“That’s not a star,” I said.

That was Venus.
Chapter 19

An hour or so later, we fled the darkness of the outdoors to the darkness of our house.

“Don’t turn the lights on,” I said, entering the house first.
“Let’s go right to bed."

We slid in between mangled sheets and summer-thin flannel blankets. Our pillows, flat, worthless, older than any of us, stung cool to our cheeks. The Bear wedged in Gabriel’s arms. Matthew too was fast asleep against the chaos of the night.

“Where do you think Daddy went? I wish we knew. We could call him. We could go to him. I wished we knew,” said Jennifer in the bed across from me.

I only wished that she’d go to sleep so I could leave.

“I was thinking he went to see Grandma Sophie and Grandpa Sol,” she said, wide awake.

“It’s a long way to that chicken farm in New Jersey.”
“Maybe he missed them in the way we miss Mommy. I miss her everyday, Carrie. I do.”

“Jenn, I think Daddy is going to come home on Sunday, not Monday,” I lied. “How’s that? Can you go to sleep now?”

“How do you know?”

“I just know things.”

What else could I say? ‘Sweet dreams,’ caught in my mouth. My father wouldn’t say that. “Go to sleep,” shot out of me. That’s what my father would say.

To Jennifer, bunched up with her dolls, I also said, “Close your eyes. Stop looking at me.”

“What’s going to happen in the morning?” she asked.

I flipped over on my stomach, groped for the one hundred dollar bill under my pillow.

“Are you going to make pancakes again?” she persisted.
I smoothed the hundred down like I was putting it to sleep. Our bedroom clock accurately read 10 p.m., hours until midnight.

“Do you think he went far?” she asked in her own far-away voice.

“I don’t know.” I emphasized each word.

“Maybe he got lost? He’s trying to find his way back. He’s in a forest and it’s dark.”

“Fairytales.”

She glowered upwards. We had cobwebs in the ceiling’s corners. I thought of a spider weaving my sister into a web, eating her, more fairytales.

“You’re not going to sleep, Carrie, are you?”

“I am.”

“You’re going to be here when I wake up?”

“Where else would I be?”
"Promise?"

"Now. Go to sleep. Now." I stressed each word like Daddy would. He always gave me the sense that we only go forward. We do not ever look back. History serves the future. I had heard him say this more than once. Jennifer blustered to say one more thing.

"Now," I said, dropping my voice, cutting her off stopping from a catfight. I mashed my face into my pillow. "I’m sleeping."

"I’m never going to forgive you if you leave me, Carrie." Her hand crept out. Grubby fingernails. The hand wavered, pudgy, grass-stained, smelling of dirt and chlorine and hotdogs. I grasped it and entwined her fingers with mine.

Soon, Jennifer wilted into her bed sheets. Through the walls, I could hear the boys curl like mutts on top of their blankets, soiled clothes, and worn out teddy bears. They were more trusting than Jennifer, or at least, they didn’t badger me with questions. Someday, I thought, I’d have all the answers. I’d know the vice-presidents as well as the presidents. I’d have memories and love, and know how to keep both uncomplicated. Maybe I’d know the future as well as the past. So were my hopes.
My sister’s hand fell away, swung off the side of her bed until she tucked it under her chin, sighing, and mumbling ‘Daddy’ as if searching for him deep in the forest. The whir of crickets pitched and fell. On some nights, our father would appear in the doorway and watch us in our beds, wavering there, never saying anything, never saying he would leave, or maybe those nights I was dreaming.

After a long while of listening to the three of them breathe, of listening to my own heart, I slipped out of bed. I pulled on my jeans, the newer ones with the better embroidery. I had worked on the trellis of flowers up each leg. They were to be my first day of junior high school jeans but tonight, the embroidery half-finished, I felt I owed myself something new. I wedged the hundred dollars into my right sneaker under my heel. With a hundred dollars I could go anywhere.

The clock in the kitchen read midnight, which meant 11:30 p.m. I wiped down the kitchen counters and lined up the cereal boxes to be ready for breakfast. We had agreed to meet at midnight. That was the plan. Untold magical things happened at midnight. That was the fairytale memory of midnight and I was sticking by it.

Bock/2010
I washed out the bowls -- rinsed down the plates -- drizzled the lemon dishwashing liquid around the mouth of the sink and scrubbed that down too in a fury of hot water. I wouldn’t have said a week ago that a clean house mattered to me. I wouldn’t have thought of it. I was only a kid a week ago. But now, I couldn’t leave the sink full of dirty dishes. Before she left in her white sweater, my mother filled her coffee cup with water and soap and said to no one, “I’m just going to let that soak,” as if she had to make an excuse for her disorder.

I wasn’t going to leave even one damn dirty soaking dish. There were big things in the world to be greatly concerned about: we had a President resign. But I could clean.

This had never happened before. I knew my Presidents well enough. We had assassinations. Lincoln. McKinley. Kennedy. We had a really dumb president catch a cold at his inauguration and die. Harrison. Now, we had a new one. No one had voted for him in the entire United States. He had a name like a sturdy car: a Gerald Ford. I scrubbed the sink white.

I swept the linoleum with a broom my father always said was older than him: wooden, rectangle, horse-haired, given to him by an old
janitor, who wanted it to have a home, the same as the clock. This broom bashed back and forth into the stove and sink and I think I lost more dust than I caught but I wanted the appearance of clean as much as clean.

The broom gashed across the kitchen. The pit of my stomach churned. I was famished, afraid, realizing that this wasn’t a good idea, asking myself my father’s question: is that a smart idea?

Maybe it wasn’t a smart idea.

I slid toward the back door anyway. I listened for Matthew or Gabriel or even Jennifer to wake up and seize me. They were breathing, that was enough for me. I listened for my father as if he’d return right at the moment of my departure. Maybe, I even listened for my mother, or looked for a sign.

Night air seeped through the screen door. All was quiet and still. I smelled roses from somewhere.

I’d go, and come back before they woke, wouldn’t I? I had never been up this late in my whole life. My skin tingled. Black birds steered toward the moon in a perfect ‘v’ formation.
My father wouldn’t want me to go. He left me in charge. But then, he’d never know. If something happened to them, it’d be his fault, not mine -- he left first. Though I was sure that nothing was going to happen; it never did.

Treetops, their shadows, and clouds crossed the moon. The clock, its oversized numbers, warned that time was indeed moving forward with or without me. It was exactly midnight – the real midnight. I dropped the broom, crashed out the back door, flew.
Chapter 20

Everything I thought about being outside at midnight was true. What was familiar was exactingly altered.
I was entering the forest. Our ordinary backyard trees bent toward one another, caught the shadows, danced against the moon. If I was hungry or fearful or filled with a frantic energy in the kitchen, it was expelled by the summer night and I was calm, free.

I looped around front to see if that was different too. I thought I’d find every house alert to my presence so I was careful at first. A front stoop light flickered at the witch’s house, an upstairs light at Jamie’s, but none from our house. I should have brought a sweater, the night was chilly, the first hint of autumn, of school. I couldn’t bear to think of 7th grade, of taking the bus halfway across town by myself. But then I didn’t have to think.

I whirled out into the street, in a black hole, a body-length from the yellowed streetlight haze. I could go, couldn’t I?
I stopped all motion, wide-legged and wide-armed in the middle of the street. If he saw me right now, my father, he’d say that I looked like Atlas having a hell of a time holding up the world. I liked that thought. I was brave in it. I wanted more. I wanted my father to be there, to see me, fearless. Not our father. I wanted mine. I wanted my father, the one who lectured me about the Presidents and American history and current events, and facts like the Greeks believed that Atlas shouldered the world, his burden.

I was afraid to say his name, as if that would break some kind of spell, shake free other memories, wake the neighbors. I should have stuck to our original plan -- gone out the back door and through the backyards to Sallie’s house. I wasn’t supposed to be in the front yard. It was as plain as that. I wouldn’t have spotted him.

No, not our father. I saw our mother’s only brother. Uncle Stanley. He wasn’t hiding. He wasn’t lurking in the shadows that swarmed over our house. He wasn’t there like a watchman for me or us. His black Cadillac had a straight shot view of our house. Uncle Stanley’s Cadillac. Was there ever another in our family?
His hair was strung across his face. His mouth was dropped open on his chest like he was waiting for someone to feed him -- my father always said Uncle Stanley had a big mouth -- and yes, he was alone, sleeping, I guessed.

But he was there -- wedged behind the steering wheel. Now the logic may seem twisted, but then it made more sense to stay with the plan, to meet Sallie, to even backtrack and go the way we had planned. So I keyed myself up-- got myself off the street, onto the grass, back into the other world trees. The clothesline between the oak and the maple in the backyard had fallen and it caught me at the neck, a noose. I ducked. I skirted along the edge of our property through Jamie’s backyard, dead quiet, and into Sallie’s, where the mulberry tree’s purple-blue berries looked like patches of blood on the slate porch. And there was Sallie slipping out her back door, smart enough to wear a sweatshirt -- and God -- ethereal.

Her hair was loose, flying about her waist. She smelled wrapped in talcum powder, freshly bathed. Her face glowed, her lips, fire-red, smeared with stolen lipstick. She hopped from one foot to the other. Her voice was a deep whisper, gravelly, breathless as if she had run much farther than her house to the street.
Sallie hadn’t discovered that to truly feel the power of midnight one had to stand still and so I grounded her. My hands pressed down on her slim shoulders. We breathed in unison until we couldn’t breathe and had to run. Fingers entwined, we set off.
Chapter 21

In the whole neighborhood, one house had lights blazing – the Skarzy house. It was also the only house at the time that had raised the roof, added a dormered second floor, another bathroom. Their house looked overgrown, like a high school senior in elementary school.

We tracked the moon there and stopped.

The twins and their older brothers slept in the old bedrooms on the first floor. The parents got the new floor. Their shades were up. Their father had only his pajama bottoms on. Their mother was dressed, a ruffled skirt, a peasant top, all in aqua blue, loose, swinging, at first I thought she was doing a dance. It was like watching a play.

Unlike Mrs. Dalara, Brad’s mother, Mrs. Skarzy would smile my way anytime I rode past her house. She was long-limbed and loose with her sons, carelessly athletic. She’d shoot the green snake of a water hose at her twins or race them into their home. She was the fun mother on the block. I listened for her, her voice, bouncy and light; it went along with the smile.
However, it was Mr. Skarzy’s voice that first to burst out, odd, low pitched, strangled. “Get out.”

“Screw you,” she said.

“Screw me? Screw you.”

“Screw you. You heard me.”

The whole neighborhood did. I ventured closer. My face rose to their window.

“I was faithful. You know the meaning of that word?”

“Let’s talk about it in the morning.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m not going downstairs.”
“Obviously.”

“You go downstairs.”

It was as if the house was squeezing them together.

“What about the boys?”

“What about the boys?” Mrs. Skarzy mimicked his high-pitched whine.

“You let our sons run wild.” He deepened his voice, sounding out of breath, strangled, defeated.

“They’re boys. They’re going to be real men someday. Go out into the world. Raise some hell.” Her voice rose even higher.

“I’m going to check on the twins.” Mr. Skarzy walked backwards, his eyes on his wife, like he was afraid to turn his back on her. She’d disappear.
“See, this is what I mean. They’re sleeping. What else would they be doing? But you want to run. Hide. Go now and that’s it.”

Sallie tugged my arm. “What about us?”

The schoolyard. The swings. The Hill. The famous or infamous Hill. Of course, the object of our desire was always: The Hill. Our night was ahead of us. Sallie flitted around me. “We need to go,” she said.

“Is it over? Let it be over. Please, let it be over.” This was Mr. Skarzy, drawing me back to him and his family. He stepped into view. He was everything my father was not. His chest was mottled white, flabby, splotched with hair down to his belly. I’d hate to be hugged by him too. “Pray let it be over. I’ve had it with you -- with us --with the kids-- with this house -- and I’ve had it with me. I didn’t plan on being this guy. This loser.”

“Jesus Christ,” she screamed, like she was calling Him down personally. Her blonde hair tumbled down her back, Rapunzel hair. She screamed out the window nothing, no words, just a calling down of the heavens. She was a fairytale mother gone mad.

Bock/2010
Sallie tagged behind my back, hiding in plain sight.
I was entranced. No one acted like this in the daytime. I had taken charge, swept myself into the night and now I was being rewarded.

Mrs. Skarzy spun toward her husband. “You left the window open. What the hell did we put in central air for? Is the whole damn neighborhood supposed to hear our damn business? And what the hell?”

She stuck her elbows onto the ledge, shoved the glass higher when I thought the better thing to do would be to close them shut—and so did her husband. Her peasant sleeves billowed. “What are you doing out there?” she called out before her husband, pressing his pumice skin upon her back, distracted her.

“No, it’s not the boys,” said Mrs. Skarzy. “Why would they be outside at this time of night? It’s that girl from down the block. Yes, that one. The one without a mother.”

She muffled her voice, slammed the window shut, struck down the shades; each one of them appearing and disappearing in turn. I bellowed, “Skarzy family,” marking their house, naming them...
fearlessly. Sallie giggled, cautiously. She grabbed my hand, pulled us down the block into the open night. Not another house was awake between theirs and the schoolyard, and the Hill.
Chapter 22

At the school, we galloped across fields muddy with night-dew. We were eager and lithe like mares. If we had stopped for a minute and thought about it, we would have imagined ourselves wild horses on a northern island. But we didn’t stop to think.

The school was at a highpoint in the neighborhood. There were no junkyards, no discarded school supplies, no forts or war here. Surrounding the building were playgrounds. Swings swayed in the night-wind, relieved of us. Next to the playgrounds were pools of blacktop as large as a landing field and lined with hopscotch and box-ball and kickball triangles. These markings were decipherable by us during the day or by space aliens at night. There was a promise of the future in that schoolyard, which all of our parents, mostly first generation from the Bronx or Brooklyn like my father, marveled at when passing by. A handball court signaled their nostalgia. No one except old men played that game. Their palms rapped pink rubber balls against the wall and their hearts yearned for the tough streets of their own youth, as we would someday, some of us, yearn for this.
Cars were strung sideways, across the lines, in the teacher’s parking lot -- more than a few new cars, a borrowed station wagon, a VW beetle with ‘make love not war’ stickers faded on its back. Jamie’s Camaro wasn’t there, or at least, when we turned the corner I didn’t see it. But Corvettes and Mustangs were among those stabled while their owners gathered just beyond sight on the Hill.

Sallie squeezed my hand. I felt like her: other-worldly.

We skirted along the cars in the teacher’s parking toward the Hill. Bottles clinked. We could smell beer and cigarettes. Someone played a guitar. Badly. Someone else shouted that they needed some serious rock, and riffs shot up into the sky like fireworks. I wanted to cheer. I felt wild. I didn’t care if this was a smart idea or not, it was a great idea. I could stay out all night. I had a right to be here. I was ready for it all. I should have been paying more attention, been more observant.

Music pulsed.

Twenty or 30 high school kids gathered on the official Hill that night. They were stretched out next to or on one another, some on blankets kept solely for the purpose of hanging out on the Hill.
It was more a grassy slope than a true hill. During school hours, little kids tumbled down it. Sometimes, at night, high school kids did too, but not this night. I wanted to claim a spot at the edge, listen to the music, to them.

But we didn’t stay at The Hill. “Come on,” said Sallie. She led me around the far-end of the school, to a side entrance, isolated, unlit, unused except for fire drills, tucked into our sleepy, brick-walled elementary school. Who thought to look closely in there. It was about five feet deep ending with locked metal doors, dark like a cave. Is it enough that the Skarzy twins were there?

They caught my arms like we were in a game of tag. They reeked of beer. With their lassos, they bound my arms behind me, shrieking and whooping.

Brad mashed his face into mine. His nose was like a beak, ramming my brow; the ground damp, putrid; his skin fuzzy, harsh feathers; his voice cackling, breaking; it made me think of birds, of too many chickens in a coop, of being pecked to death. “Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, don’t laugh,” he said, jamming me into the darkest corner.
Sally ran – I thought for sure she was going to get help. The twins giggled, wagged their red heads, said they’d meet him later, partner.

I think I laughed at Brad. And he knuckled his fist into my mouth and shoved me down to the ground. I was eye-to-eye with discarded gum wads, cigarette butts, the damp concrete. What he wore was clean. Bleached. His forehead touched mine. A wave of bleach struck me. He said that if I laughed again, if I said anything, I’d really get hurt. He said, “My mother is sending me away because of you. To military school.” His fists clanged the side of my head, drew blood from my ear. *Sweet Blood.* “I have sweet blood” echoed in my head.

He crouched on my jeans, on the embroidered violets. “Get off of me,” I yelled, forcing out a laugh to show him I could.

“Say anything else and I’ll hurt your brothers and sister too.”

He had a cold pudding of a face. He laughed back. Something in that laugh scared me more than anything else. A bark as much as a laugh, a sound in the pitiless dark disconnected to joy.
I shot him my death-ray-you-are-going-to-die look. His eyes were flat, seeing and not seeing, angry and blank. My death-ray failed.

He clamped his hand over my mouth and nose even his skin smelled of bleach. I felt faint. He tied a red bandanna around my mouth even though I struggled and tried to bite his hand. This wasn’t a game. This wasn’t even war.

Real laughter was in the distance. Mosquitoes or worse bit my ankles. I gagged. Bucked. I should have folded the laundry. I should have run after the station wagon. *Daddy!* I couldn’t hear his voice in my head. I could hear nothing but Brad’s panting in my face, suffocating me.

“I’ll leave your bike in your driveway, Car-ree,” Brad sing-songed my first name, for the first time that summer.

I was cold. My head hung to the side against the concrete. His thumb dug into my neck. “Promise. Carrie. No screaming. No laughing.”

He let me breathe. He tore open my jeans with both hands. He struggled more with his own jeans, zipped them down, and pushed a
stick at me, no not a stick. Pink and brown, mottled in black hair, from inside his jeans. It took me the longest minute of my life to realize what I was seeing. It was bigger than my brothers’. After a shower, Gabriel would almost always race around the house searching for a clean towel cupping his hands down the front of his skinny, scabbed legs. Matthew would wrap a towel around his middle, imitating my father, and sometimes just because I could, I’d snatch it away and he’d sidestep into his room and slam the door shut. This was different. No one was running from me. I wasn’t chasing anyone. I twisted away, wordlessly. He dug his hips across mine. With my hands tied behind me, with Brad on top of me, I was hurting myself more, scraping my arms on the concrete, scalding my cheek against the school’s brick. He didn’t understand. I looked straight at him. I had to go. I had to take care of the others, back at the house, in their beds. He had to understand. I was the oldest—I had to go.

He giggled—
Chapter 23

After a time, and then all of sudden, at the end of the cave, was Jamie, red-eyed, stoned, slurry. His shirt hung out of his jeans. It took him a minute to comprehend what was going on, that this wasn’t a game, before he threw himself on Brad.

And I had this crazy thought that I didn’t want him to see me. I curled up, ducked my head, hid in plain sight. Blood trickled from my ear.

Jamie’s arms wrapped around me. He carried me to the Hill. Now serious rock and roll was playing from an eight-track tape deck. He smoothed back my hair.

He said that Daisy had seen me go around the corner – not that it was his job to look after me now. He said that he should or would or could call my father.

The Hill, its beaten down grass, burrows, rocks sloped before us. He grunted, made as if he was putting me down, and I held him tighter. He could have been transporting me to his castle. At
night, this corner of the school was lit, shadows played off the brick, off the top of the ridge. Below, the blacktop was a moat. The slides and jungle gyms: catapults. The others, in various stages of dress and sobriety: minstrels, wayfarers, or orphans like me. I felt my heart closing, if that was possible.

Brad fled across the blacktop. I was an observer to this all, outside myself.

Jamie laid me on his cloth next to Daisy who sheltered me in her arms. She was in short shorts, a halter-top and Charlie perfume. She made a commotion about getting me something to drink, and she must have meant water, but instead I was given a can of warm beer to sip from her hands. She ran her arms up and down my bruised and raw ones. Marijuana floated around us. But others kept their distance. The length of Daisy’s body shielded me on one side and Jamie flanked me on the other. She stroked my hair and so did he. Jamie rubbed his thumb along my lips. He jiggled a loosened tooth and said, “that can be fixed.”

I crossed my arms over my face. To hide, to be buried, to dig into the dirt and lay untouched, a root with no flower, to have neither nightmares nor dreams—this was my hope. I wanted all my teeth to fall out. I wanted to die right then and there.
“Look up,” he said. “Look at the sky.” He cupped my chin with the crook of his thumb and forefinger. He wouldn’t let me pull away. I had to open my eyes. And there all around us, the sky was falling. Shooting stars.
Chapter 24

*Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas* -- but what if the dogs forced you down, attacked, savaged your already fragile heart?

I was on the Hill, curled up, wanting to cry and unable to cry. Jamie and Daisy? They were seventeen and in a week, the end of August, they’d go off to college. His mother would soon sell their home and move away. And I was wishing I could easily die -- my pants with the embroidery never to be worn again -- my tooth loose -- my head swimming as the stars tore across the night-sky.

“Shooting stars,” he said or she or I did, again.

The sky was falling.
“It’s going to be all right,” one of them said. They leaned close and floated their lips onto mine, tasting of smoke and other kisses, and kissed me.

I remembered it this way for a long time. I couldn’t remember it the other way. They way it probably happened: I stumbled out of that doorway cave, saw Brad Dalara laughing at me, staggered to the edge of the Hill, sat, clutched my legs into my chest, rocking, my heart closing, and was ignored. Didn’t want anyone to know, anyway. Couldn’t have anyone find out that my father wasn’t home.

The sky.

Shooting stars.

So instead this was how I remembered it until now: he kissed me, and then she did, on the forehead, cheeks, lips, pillow-soft and safe. The sky. Shooting stars.
I don’t know how much later, an hour or so, late enough that some of the high school kids had disappeared into their Corvettes or Mustangs or parent’s station wagons, I found Sallie on the swings. Her turquoise choker was luminescent in the moonlight. She was giggling, babbling that she was starving, passing a roach between her and the Skarzy twins, her new best friends. She tripped off the swing. She wound her arms around me, singing, tuneless.

Shooting stars criss-crossed the sky, raining down on us, falling into our arms.

I freed myself from her. I stumbled. I never wanted to see her again or the Skarzy twins or Brad, of course, or this school and its Hill and sky. I dodged falling stars, pummeling through the field-mud, across sprinkler-soaked lawns, past the Skarzy’s, Sallie’s, Jamie’s until I smashed through my own front door. I was back in my bed before anyone else woke up -- older, bruised, loved, hated, defiled, older most of all, no longer a child, the past, present, future, without a framework, my pillow over my face, my heart dense, closed for sure.

(To be continued....)

###

Bock/2010