Driving to India

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"The childhood you remember never existed."
— My mother, misquoting Freud.

I

When I think about all of the times that I lay in bed, upstairs, awake, trying to fall asleep because if I didn't, I wouldn't be able to go to school the next morning, my mother's voice breaks through running up the whole length of stairs and then explodes above me like a fire-cracker. My mother's voice traveled. Her laugh ran without dissipating. I don't remember her touch or her feeding me or her breath. But her talking, that I remember. No matter what time of year, winters, when her voice leapt up the stairs two at a time from the living room, or summers, when her voice floated up from the back porch, entering through the square spaces in the screens, there was her voice. There were always people around, friends, to listen to her stories. And when they had left, then it was just Helen and my mother talking, which they did endlessly, like a compulsion, having some discussion or argument over the finer points of this person's character or what they really meant when they said that or who was the greatest person, ever. They talked like there was no way to stop talking. I started talking early so I could fit in with this

family of talkers. My mother always stood two feet away from me so I could see what she was saying.

It isn't really fair to put my mother's voice on paper. The pace of her voice, the strange accelerations can be transcribed, but the pitch can't. Using a chain of multisyllabic words--who cared if they didn't all make sense--she formed a crescendo to meaning or some hoped for meaning that was ultimately very important to her. People's voices change over time, with age, if they are nervous, if they are insane. But there were phrases that were repeated, regardless of the story, regardless of the tone of her voice at the time: "Rare Quixotic moment." "Ahead of his time." "Oh well, what would you expect." "I'm telling you." "The Psalms, that's poetry." "Christ was a great man." "It's just a question of remembering." "They were all geniuses." "My family..." "The Irish..." "Life is all about repetition..." "Did I never tell you that story?" "Oh (low rumbling undertone attached to that word)--that is a story."

I listened to my mother's voice rise and fall, up and down, like the keys of a piano being played one after another. I will remember something and I say, "Oh, I know that story." It is narrated by my mother. "Memory is just a story, your childhood is a story." This is my mother, the narrator, talking.

The characters from my mother's life floated up into my child-sized bedroom: my great aunts and uncles, my grandparents, her cousins and friends and schoolmates. She even talked about herself and me, "my kid," she called me, sometimes using my name, "Katrina." My room, the square room with the balcony and its rotting banister, became crowded with these people that my mother conjured up.

My mother's stories about her family always began with her father's mother, who bore my grandfather three months premature and was so determined that he should survive that she swaddled him in cotton wool and placed him in a dresser drawer, a home-grown mahogany incubator. At the turn of the century, my grandfather survived, a time when he probably should not have.

Once he left the drawer my grandfather never had the same kind of attention. My great-grandmother was not a maternal figure. She dyed her hair, which caused it to fall out. She put vermouth on her head and a few hairs came in so she went to the beauty parlor and had them dyed red. She drank and smoked and played poker. "It's my life," she said, and from that day on never called him "son" or "child," she called him Michael and his brother Mark. The two boys adored her. Who wouldn't? She was something between a cabaret dancer and a homesteader.

My grandfather drifted to his thirty-fifth year. He had been to college, he even finished a law degree, but he had given up law as soon as he finished school in order to become a life guard. In Chicago, where he was born, the pictures show him wearing a well cut trench coat and Fedora. In Florida, where he went to escape, he is bronzed and small and has blonde hair. He would have stayed in Florida, as far away from the cold of Chicago as he could get if his mother had not stepped in again. At thirty five, he was told that it was time to get married and if his true love Louise, the beautiful girl with blue eyes, has said "no," he might as well find someone else who will say "yes." The next time he asks he wants to make sure that the woman can't refuse.

Irish-Catholic and very pale, my grandmother's family lived within the confines of houses filled with too much furniture. They were people who never went outside. The rooms of the house were small and dimly lit. My great-grandmother, who was usually ill, could not be exposed to too much light. The one picture I have of her is hand-tinted, the face encircled in a rose colored hue. She was always more dead than alive.

My grandmother's father and his father had both been lawyers. My grandmother's grandfather had even been a judge. But something went wrong with my grandmother's

generation. They should have become lawyers or politicians. Instead, they did nothing. She and her siblings were like a litter of puppies that couldn't take food properly and just didn't grow. There was something wrong with them. None of them left the house. None of them had any intention of getting married. It was as if they were all dead set on annihilating the family line.

In her mid-thirties and still living with her parents on the West side of Chicago, my grandmother was told that she was the daughter who would get married. She would do it for the family, for her father and her mother.

My grandmother built a new drawer for my grandfather. She dressed him and coddled him, treating him in much the same way that his mother had--he really didn't matter that much as long as he survived and went to the law firm everyday and supported my grandmother and her family.

After their first child was born, my aunt Louise, my grandfather mattered even less. He became like one more piece of furniture that got a bit dusty but never went away. My grandfather complained about being a piece of furniture and about my grandmother's family but he never did anything about it except drink and sometimes yell. He was passive by nature. Without my grandmother he would not have been as

well taken care of. I think he finally couldn't imagine any other kind of life.

The one thing that he finally insisted on was having a son. My grandmother took care of that by getting pregnant again. As much as my grandfather didn't matter, his happiness did matter--everyone's happiness mattered to my grandmother. And although the child, Henrietta, whom everyone called Henry, turned out to be a girl, this second child was so much supposed to be a son that she was deemed just that: The son. Then the family was complete: mother, father, son, daughter.

It was a world where everyone played one's role: Louise dated boys, Henry fell in love with girls. The pictures of Henry and her sister show a blonde hair blue eyed beauty--my aunt--next to a child of indefinite gender. My mother's dark hair is cropped close to her head, she is wearing coveralls and, although she could be a girl, it seems unlikely when she is sitting next to the example of girlhood that she is sitting next to. My aunt Louise was always the real girl, a girl with make-up and boyfriends and hair that had to be set.

Henry once had a crush on a boy named Dicky Hoff when she was eight, but after that it was all about girls. Girlie girls, especially. Girls in white angora cardigans, girls with airy hair-dos, girl teachers (which meant, because it was a Catholic

school that she developed crushes on nuns), girl neighbors, tall girls, short girls, girls who moved to Evanston.

And then both Louise and Henry went to college, for a while, at least, until my aunt dropped out in order to get married and Henry was sent to Rome because my grandfather found her in the back seat of the car kissing a girl.

Henry returned from Rome just in time for my aunt's wedding. She had moved into a studio apartment downtown with her friend Ruby. Ruby liked the young English actor who was in town performing Shakespeare. He had dark hair and pale skin. After the performance, she found him backstage wearing a wool sailor's cap with a brim and a blue insignia embroidered on the front, just barely discernible. Ruby asked him out for a drink. Henry didn't want to come. She thought it was "Ruby's thing." But Ruby insisted. It was past midnight, late for Chicago, and they sat in a basement bar somewhere on Erie Street or Michigan Street, or one of those streets in Chicago named after the Great Lakes. Henry chose the place because she thought the atmosphere might impress him. "It's not really old, but it's as close as we can get here."

Henry tells the actor that she has seen Shakespeare in England, at Stratford. She mentions her one funny story

about England, about the place in Tunbridge Wells with the antimacassars and the deeply repressive air. Then she compares Tunbridge Wells with Rome, where she had once studied. "Rome, where you can actually breathe," she says. When Henry talks about Rome, she makes the place seem completely irresistible. She doesn't talk about anything specific, the streets or the river or the views. She just gets excited, so excited that you have no choice but to get excited with her. A hundred times, I have heard her voice hit the lowest note in her register when she says the word "Rome," but each time, it conjures a million possibilities. I imagine the whole scene as if it were filmed in Super-8, Henry in Rome with her long black hair and olive skin, riding around on the back of vespas with men whom she can barely communicate with but who think that she is fluent in Italian because she is such a good liar.

"The English," she says, "they don't know how to live. But the Italians..." She talks about the food that she ate, the people she met, the afternoons she spent, all in the most unspecific terms. But, if you happen to love something as much as she is making it seemed she loved this, you know immediately what she means. The Englishman is amused by the criticism of England, knows how one-sided and foundationless it is, but he is dissatisfied there, knows what she is talking about. And although he doesn't want to live in

Italy, he is certainly interested in living in a place that matches Henry's imaginary Italy.

They walk up the stairs, still wearing winter coats because it sometimes snows at the end of April in Chicago. There is no one on the street though there are some people in the bars along the way. Warm light pours out from the windows onto the sidewalk. They talk for a while in the street, still laughing, and then start to say good-bye. Henry's strange blue eyes that must have reminded him of Iceland are set off by her pitch black hair. It is clear that the man is going to go home with one of them. The man says goodnight to Ruby. He left for England the next day.

When Henry found out that she was pregnant, she told her mother. The words fell off my grandmother as if they were feathers falling to the floor. Weightless, semi-real. "I don't understand," she said. "How?" In her kitchen with the red floor and the dull knives, she could imagine the baby just disappearing.

It was around this time that Henry first met Helen. Helen was still wearing a habit the first time Henry saw her. "I saw this nun walking around the streets of Chicago with her mouth wide open, staring up at the tall buildings. I had to do something. I didn't think she could last more than an hour

without being taken to the cleaners." But that is one of Henry's apocryphal stories. I file it away next to the real story, which is that they were in the same psychology class together at the university.

Helen and Henry became friends, then lovers. They were perfect together--the nun and the girl who had grown up falling in love with nuns. Helen had ever met anyone like Henry. She was so exotic and erratic. "When I met your mother, she didn't even know how to turn on the stove." They talk and talk, on walks, late at night, in the mornings, next to each other in bed. It was like Henry was the perfect radio station and all she had to do was play.

Helen was fifteen years older than Henry and had grown up during the Depression. She came from a family of dairy farmers in Kentucky. Her father dumped a hundred gallons of milk over a field because there was no one to sell it to. Her childhood was all starched and ironed, white linen with tight fitting collars, straight back chairs, and a lot of rules. "We always had enough, that was true." But definitely not more than enough. "Just one Sunday dress, a school uniform and two pairs of shoes."

The convent had been a way out of the small rural town in Kentucky where Helen had grown up. Rather than getting

married and living down the road from her parents, she moved to Cincinnati and joined a convent. She left the convent right around the time of Vatican II. The convent broke up and they all left, like an exodus, all happy to have had an excuse to leave home and then another to enter the real world.

Helen took Henry to meet her family, brought her to the little town in Kentucky when Henry was pregnant. "Where's the father," they asked. "No one knows" Helen said, thinking this awfully funny. Henry was like a fluorescent bulb being introduced to this family of incandescent light fixtures. She drank Diet Rite Cola for breakfast, didn't go to church and stayed up until two in the morning reading books. In Henry's eyes, they were just as odd. They ate rancid butter and vegetables that were cooked until they were brown. "Everything they ate had to be dead. It was all preserved or pickled or smoked. They never liked me."

Henry's family, on the other hand, loved Helen. And when Helen got a job in Southern Ohio, in a town called Laretta, where she would be organizing social welfare programs, my grandparents were thrilled to hear that Henry would be going with her.

Via Sacra

Helen and Henry arrived in Laretta after the Dutch Elm Disease, but during a time when the Betsy Ross Club still acted as a social center of gravity. With a population of fifteen thousand, the town functioned as a kind of polis. There were few "foreigners" in Laretta, maybe none, except for my family and a handful of hippies who lived in Fenton, which was a really small town across the river, famous for Fenton Art Glass, a blue glass that was made into vases and wine glasses.

In Laretta, where everyone was either a banker or an insurance broker, and where everyone had been there for generations, Henry and Helen were exotic fish, fish that arrived from elsewhere. It is all conjecture why they stayed in a town where they were exotic fish. Helen had a job and Henry couldn't stand the idea of not being with her. It was a good idea for Henry to have a place to hide while she was pregnant. But they didn't hide there, they lived there. It was too small a place to hide in.

When Henry was eight months pregnant, she invited her friend Ed Leary down to visit. She asked if he wouldn't mind coming in uniform. Ed was always up for things like that. His father had invented the screw-top lid for Heinz Ketchup and

Henry rationalized Ed's recklessness as a latent genius that ran in the family. “I have no idea where he could have found the uniform, it was probably stolen,” Helen said. They walked around the town together, arm and arm. “Just once,” Helen told me. “That was enough.” The citizens of Laretta looked out onto the town square. They didn’t stare because they didn’t want to intrude on the couple’s privacy, “you know, it’s been so long since they last saw each other." They parted the curtains and looked out, just to make sure that he was real. Helen thought it was funny to think about Henry being married to a six-foot-one Marine officer. Whenever she said the word “husband” out loud she couldn’t stop laughing.

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My mother never forgave Helen for waiting an hour after her water broke to call the doctor. Helen was too busy sewing outfits for me, ones that would not fit until I was two years old. When Helen did call, the nurse said “She’s a city girl, she’s going to be in labor a long time.” My mother insisted on going to the doctor’s office anyway. The nurse made plans to have her spend the day at her house so as “not to be cluttering up the office for hours and hours.” But when they arrived, they had less than a half-hour to wait. Just the doctor, the nurse, Henry and Helen. No drugs, no epidural, no fall-back emergency plan. There were no complications. My

mother's cervix was "wide enough to drive a pickup through," in the words of Doctor Whittier.

My child's geography of Laretta makes everything much too big--the house, the distances, the people. But it is true, also, even if the scale is wrong. I can draw the geography still--the corner where the house stood, the neighbor's brick house with the patio, the brown river. We could walk to the river by crossing the big road that ran alongside our house, the Via Sacra, and the Indian Burial Ground, which was the name of the park by the river. The fact that the Indian Burial ground was on that road was why the road was called Via Sacra though why the town gave the road a Latin name was a mystery.

Laretta was rolling hills, the river, the wild daffodils in the spring, the mimosa trees with their yellow flowers and lacy leaves, the fact that everyone knew each other, the sense of security, timelessness. There were pristine houses mostly built in a 1920s American style, big lawns, lots of trees. Of course, like anywhere, it was once even more beautiful. Laretta before the elms died was a place to behold.

My earliest memory is of summer. I am standing at the top of the bright silver slide at the park across the street from our house and staring up into a bright white Southern Ohio sky.

But the sky isn't white, it is purple. I am looking at it through my purple sunglasses. I hold on tight to the bars at either side, look up again, like the lavender color the world has become and slide down over the bright silver metal, letting it warm the back of my thighs.

The moon landing and the opening sequence of Mission Impossible, a match being lit and burning blue on the screen, are the only things that I remember of the world outside of Laretta along with the pins that Helen would wear with "Out Spiro" or "Recall Nixon" or "Adelaide Now" slogans on them.

When I think of this time, the colors are deep like the Fenton blue glass. Henry and Helen are at a public park with their friends. They are near the river, there is a picnic table. One of the men with long hair has white face paint on. I am on his back in a canvas baby carrier. The light filters through the trees in patches.

There was one protest march organized at the college--my family knew some kids involved, didn't attend like our neighbors, the "glue sniffers," but supported it nonetheless. The march was not in opposition to the Vietnam War, it was more of a "me-too" gesture, something about being unhappy

with the administration. Nothing was broken. But it was still referred to as "that violent time."

I remember the house that we lived in as a kind of castle-- labyrinthine, endless rooms, long staircases. Each room in our house had a different theme with decor fashioned out of rags and plywood. There was a name for each room based on what it looked like-- a "green room," a "red room," a "plant room." The image being more important than the design, things eventually fell apart. But even after the decoration had fallen to pieces or been torn away, the rooms all kept their names.

The house was Helen's first palette. She had been able to paint some furniture while she was in the convent but never entire rooms. She stuck newspaper onto the ceiling of the kitchen and painted a room-size head of Jimi Hendrix over it with snakes for hair. The counter top was a large marble slab that had been salvaged from the bathrooms of the Laretta Memorial Hospital. The living room was where they held their therapy groups and Helen covered big pillows in deep hued velvety material and spread them over the floor. There was a strobe light that they turned on in the evenings. "I taught the people of Laretta how to communicate," Henry says.

Helen sewed the costumes for all of the events--summer picnics, bicycle rides, birthday parties. The clothes-- rabbit coats with oversized buttons, pink and orange polka dotted skirts, long quilted vests with matching hats--were an expression of something they must have brought with them from somewhere else. For my first birthday, I wore a light cotton yellow schiff. I am prim and proper, the only one really playing the part of the clothes.

We had a blue tandem bicycle with a baby seat on the back and Helen sewed riding outfits for Henry, herself and me--red and white striped jackets with wooden lug buttons. On weekends, we pulled out the blue tandem bicycle and the three of us rode around--Henry in front, Helen behind, me in the baby seat. We biked into town and waited for the weekly parade to start. At three, I was made honorary drum-major because I was taking baton twirling lessons.

There are some pictures from that time. One, of me peeing on the slate sidewalk outside. I am wearing a matching dress, coat, and hat, all made from the same purple and green wool plaid. I am looking up at the camera and I know that I am doing something that I shouldn't even as I am doing it. Then there is the photo with the dark background, the one of me hanging onto the banister. I am wearing a thermal undershirt and no pants or diapers. I have a bottle of Diet Rite Cola in

my hand. I look like an infant gone to seed. The funny thing about all of the pictures is that I am always alone. Helen "is not any good at photography" so it is my Henry who takes the pictures. When Helen appears in the photos, she is never holding me, instead she is walking beside me, chaperoning, in charge. There are no pictures of Henry and me together. Helen says that when they brought me home Henry was so afraid that she would "break me" that she wouldn't even give me a bath. Helen did that, each night, in the kitchen sink.

The lie about the father suited Henry. She liked the town, liked the order, liked the idea of being married without being married. The odd thing was that even while inventing a history for herself for the town's sake, ultimately for my sake, she always made sure that I knew the truth. Hypocrisy was not a word that Henry understood. She liked to adjust her reality to the reality that was around her. She said: "I respect these people. Why should they have to believe everything I believe. If they want me to be married, I'm married. But I'm not going to lie to you."

But, eventually, Henry and Helen had to bring the two realities--my reality and the town's reality--together. They had to do something about the father to make the issue go away, to make people stop asking questions. They decided that it would be best if he just died. And it was a shock to them

both when he did die, or when they said he died. They started telling their friends. My mother looked serious and went out less frequently. I was dressed in dark colored clothes. We all went up to Chicago soon after they told the town the news of my father's death. Ed arranged a party for the event. And then Henry and Helen and I went into mourning for six months.

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Ruby must have arrived sometime during the mourning period--I remember only because I was wearing a black dress, which matched the pink and black curtains in the kitchen. Ruby walked in and Henry changed; her eyes became brighter. I loved Ruby too. It was as if she were making up everything as she went along. Everything she did, everyone she met was some kind of new discovery. Helen would send her to the grocery store and she would come back three hours later because she had gotten involved in a conversation with a man she felt she must have known in some other life.

Ruby was six months pregnant when she came down to visit. She had gotten pregnant when she was traveling San Francisco. One night while she was visiting, we went to see a performance of the Vienna Boys Choir at the local high school. Helen had just bought a brand new car, an orange

Barracuda with a big engine and big doors. Our old car, the navy blue Opal Cadet had trouble getting up hills and couldn't go over sixty. The Barracuda had a hood that was as long as the car body, a white leather interior, and a lot of horse power. Helen bought it on a whim after her father had given her some money.

Henry drove. We dropped Helen off on our way since she had a meeting. After Helen got out of the car, I sat on Ruby's lap in the front passenger seat. Ruby was wearing one of the rabbit coats that Helen had made and she wrapped the folds of the coat around my legs. When we arrived at the high school, Henry pulled up to the front to drop us off since it was a walk from the parking lot to the school. There were people around, being let out of cars, beginning to go in, getting ready to hear music. Ruby opened the door and swung her legs to the side. It was tricky holding me and also making sure that the giant door didn't shut on her legs. She got out of the car carefully with me in her arms, pulled the coat around her and reached back to push the door closed. It took only a small push because the door was so heavy--once it had any momentum, it swooshed shut. Henry revved the engine and pulled away. Ruby felt something pull. She set me down on the curb. People started yelling when they saw Ruby being dragged behind the car, one pelt of the coat caught in the door.

Henry heard only the initial thump. She braked, looked around, saw nothing, and drove away. Ruby was dragged over a hundred yards. She was taken to the hospital and came home with red scrape burns and bruises up and down her body. But, miraculously, the doctor said, nothing happened to the baby.

Ruby stayed with us while she was recovering and then she stayed when she was better. She and Helen had never gotten along. Helen thought that "Ruby was always out there, kind of in her own world," which, to Helen, meant that she never did the dishes.

Ruby and my mother were becoming macrobiotics, a very long word that all of us became because Ruby did all of the cooking. There were so many rules surrounding the preparation and consumption of food in the house that I began to believe that something might happen just through eating. Vegetables had to be stirred in one direction to harmonize their kinetic energy, grains were sifted and rubbed and toasted before we could cook them. And before preparing zucchini, which we ate almost every day because it grew wild in the back garden, I had to rub one end against the pure white interior of the vegetable until a liquid that looked like puss came out of the "veins." All of this was somehow

reminiscent of my one visit to church with my grandparents: lots of rules, which, if followed, promised something surprising results.

At dinner we talked and chewed, chewed until the brown rice was sweet like candy. I knew that Gerber's baby food was poison, that all of those kids who were eating it would someday turn an atomic orange. Everyone had a mantra and friends of my mother's would come over and ask me what my mantra was, just to be funny, because they knew as well as I did that I wasn't supposed to tell them. Bob Dylan crooned in the background and I wondered whether there were multiple mantras or whether everyone's was "Om." I tried meditating and objected to the Dylan noises. I made my mother turn it off. "It hurts my ears," I said.

I can't remember where anyone slept after Ruby arrived. There were also more parties. Ruby knew some kids at the college, "punks," Helen called them and they came over in the evenings. Even the neighbors, "the glue sniffers," came over now. The house was filled with people every evening, not the same people who used to come when Henry had her gatherings, different people, who came to talk to Ruby about cooking or politics. One night, as people were arriving and I was being sent to bed, I saw Ruby at the foot of the stairs wearing a long black dress that clung to her at the hips. Her

hair was down. A young man came up to her and told her she looked really beautiful. She had a far away look in her eyes.

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The night that Ruby was in labor, Henry sat up with her doing the I-Ching. They wanted to know everything about the baby before it was born and Ruby was in labor a long time while she and Henry were figuring out the baby's astrological chart. Ruby was wrapped in a gray blanket and off-white sheets and Henry sat next to her, holding her. When Henry saw the baby's head, she went and got Helen, who was sleeping in the room next door. Helen had seen animals being delivered on the farm. She also knew how to dress a wound. They just acted through the whole thing. "Get some towels," Helen said to my terrified mother. "Call Dr. Whittier." I was there also, twirling my baton.

By the time that Dr. Whittier arrived, Ruby had already delivered Katia. She was born on a Tuesday in early February. Helen was trying to figure out what to do with the umbilical chord when Dr. Whittier got there just in time to cut the chord and tie it. Dr. Whittier sent Ruby and Katia up to the hospital. When Katia came back, she was black and blue and had big black marks under her eyes. She looked a lot like Ruby had the night of the accident. Helen blamed the way

that Katia looked on the town. She cried when she talked about Katia. "She didn't look like that when she was born, she didn't have those marks on her." Helen thought that the town was beginning to become aware of the fact that there were no men and no money in our house.

I once found Ruby and Katia together in the front room upstairs where Katia slept. The room was empty except for a make-shift crib that was close to the ground. Ruby had Katia on her lap and was rocking her back and forth, nursing. I was very curious and came to take a look at what was going on. The warm afternoon sun reflected off the maple slats of the floor. I leaned over the breast, tight with milk, traced with blue veins, and Ruby offered me a taste.

Katia drooled. I remember being mean to her. She was always very excited to be around me. "You were always so sweet to Katia," Ruby's voice wafts through my head. "I wasn't," I interrupt the voice. I put her on top of the coffee table in the living room and let her fall off. She howled and I walked away. Her complete passiveness allowed me to treat her like a toy. But I didn't dote on her like I did my other toys. She looked like a cucina doll. Those brown eyes. They were perfect round pools.

Katia couldn't sit up by herself, she was developing slowly. She didn't speak. She only made noises. No one ever said what was wrong with Katia. I began to think that I had made her the way she was by letting her fall off the table, by wishing that she would just go away.

A Chinese doctor, a Dr. Yu, was coming to the local college and Ruby decided that he would tell her what to do for Katia. The night we were going to see Dr. Yu, Henry's and Ruby's terror was intense. We were going to see Dr. Yu so he could diagnose Katia, but because there might be something really wrong with her, they focused the visit on me. I was their experiment. I was the one they would be congratulated on, the child who might be better than normal, maybe even spiritually gifted. We stood in a long line. When it was finally our turn, I was lifted onto his lap and sat stiffly on the soft black folds of his gown. His legs were warm and kind of jiggly and he looked at me. There was a long silence. Henry and Ruby looked proud. And then, awkwardly, almost like a fart, he proclaimed "Too much eating" and set me on the floor. I knew that I had done something wrong. Katia was next and she sat on his lap, not paying attention, drooling. "Find a good doctor," he said.

After that, things start spinning, spinning so quickly that I can remember almost nothing. The force of the movement was

causing things to change, to come undone. The house was breaking up. Ruby was leaving with Katia and moving to Chicago where there were better doctors. Henry was leaving with me and Helen was leaving by herself. I must have asked for some explanation but I can remember hearing none. Helen was going off on her own, to find her own house and her own job. She didn't need us.

First Street

When we moved to Iowa City the summer before Henry was to begin graduate school, I knew that things had changed because of the car that we drove. Helen kept the orange Barracuda and took a government job in Columbus. Henry bought a used Dodge Dart. "There's no better car than a Dart. It's the T-bar structure. They're indestructible."

I remember the rain that June> It seemed to rain the whole month. I thought it might start raining inside the flimsy boxy apartment that we moved into. A street lamp outside the building cast a yellow glow to the living room, the room

where I slept, and there were noises at night that I had never heard before: sirens, voices, which Henry explained came from the people living close to us on the other side of the wall.

We lived in an apartment building on a dead end street. There was a lumber yard at the far end. Fork lifts backed into the street and workmen wearing helmets yelled as the lifts went by. I made friends with a boy in the building who didn't have a bicycle. I let him use mine until one day he ripped the chain off. "Why did you do that?" I asked him. He didn't say anything. I asked him again and then knew to stop. Henry said that he had probably done it on purpose. I felt like some Madame Alexander doll, the kind with movable joints and batting eye-lashes, who had found herself in the company of stuffed animals won at a carnival.

It rained the night that we were going to visit Henry's new friends Eliza and Si. Driving along the dark streets through the outskirts of town, slowing down to look for the address of the house, we were hit from behind. This time the sirens came with flashing red lights that reflected off the pavement. I heard someone say "drunk driver," but I didn't know what that meant. I sat very close to Henry that night in Eliza's living room. I wanted her to make some of the noise in my head go away.

"Should we take you to the hospital?" Eliza asked.

"No," Henry said.

Eliza and Si were older than Henry but they had a daughter, Elena, my age. The things I knew about Eliza and Si, I knew from the moment I met them though I can never remember anyone telling me these things: that they were Marxists, Jewish, and very nice. Eliza had a single gray hair that grew out the bottom of her chin and Si had a huge salt and pepper beard that blended in with his hair and ended at his chest. The smell of pipe smoke and moth balls trailed behind him wherever he went.

Their house had thicker walls than ours did. It was square and had two stories, stucco outside and a big square front-porch. Just as there are "railroad" flats in cities, there are "railroad" houses in university towns. The floor plan of every house on any given block is the same. "Eliza is the only nice person in this town," Henry said every time we went to see them, "she's not a snob like the rest of these people."

The Dart was replaced with a 1963 Pontiac LeMans. Now, I sat in the front passenger seat of the Pontiac, slid around on

the black seats as we rounded corners, making endless trips between libraries and administration buildings and stores.

The dry smell of cracked vinyl and fine dust fills the interior of the car. I put my finger half-way down into the crack in the seat, the yellow foam rubber underneath has a funny texture and is warm. Henry drives up to a small stretch of curb where there are no parking meters. I dig my finger deeper into the seat, pull out a pinch of foam and roll it between my fingers. "I'll just be a sec," my mother says. She is parked in a tow-away zone, leaving me in the car as bounty. "What if the police come?" "The police won't come." "How do you know?" She slams the door. As revenge, I scrunch up in a little ball and squeeze into the space behind the driver's seat. Face down to the floor mats, I breathe in the smell of hot rubber, determined not to let her get away with breaking the law.

When we stopped at the grocery store, clerks, teenagers with squeaky Midwestern accents, treated us differently when Henry pulled out food stamps to pay for our groceries. "Do you accept food stamps?" she asked them in the most off-handed way. "Why do you have to ask?" I whined. "Why can't you just use them." "Because, they might not take them," Henry explained. I resented the funny colors that they made the food stamps in--orange and rose and a runny blue.

Why couldn't they make them at least look like regular money? Why make it so obvious that we were poor? I eventually refused to go to grocery stores with her. So I sat in the car, in a legal parking space, looking out over the endless rows of white lines painted on the black asphalt. I shifted between the sunny and shaded parts of the seat, testing myself to see how much heat I could stand.

That summer, Henry decided to supplement our state subsidized income by going into business. It was especially hot, over a hundred degrees every day, the hottest summer on record, so hot that the clock at the bank that also told the temperature couldn't even record how hot it was. "What are people going to pay the most for when it's this hot?" It was obvious to Henry. Liquids. The annual town Art Fair was held during the third week in July and Henry saw the heat and the crowds as an opportunity. The fact that she required a permit to vend anything was a superficial formality. "This is America, after all." Her "partner" was some local pizza store owner, whom she had conned into letting her use his refrigerator for a certain share of the profits. He was probably quite taken with her since she still looked like a young Italian beauty then, with her olive skin and jet black hair, her piercing blue eyes. She was always forming partnerships with odd people, men, usually, who liked how much she talked and must have thought that she was pretty. Eliza was also in

on the plan. She was going to deliver ice since she had a free parking space close to the university.

I stood on a plastic milk crate behind our card table and arranged the paper cups into a pyramid shape. Henry poured the brownish cider into the cups and I handed them to our customers, who were willing to pay anything for a cold drink. I listened to Henry explain to Art Fair officials why it was that she did not have a permit to sell apple cider. We were going to make a "fortune" if the stupid city bureaucrats would stop intervening. When the police officer arrived and grabbed the tower of paper cups, it was like the hand of a giant breaking through a house of cards.

I longed for Helen to come back, to put everything back in order. The whole world had lost the dimension that it had in Laretta. There was no background or foreground, everything happened in a single plane and all at once. I sometimes rode my bike down the street, all the way to the other corner. There were a couple of stately houses, one with a porch that wrapped around the whole first story, another with a turret at the top. I imagined that families lived in these houses, families who had traditions that required them to keep the doors and windows shut in order to protect their exclusive rituals.

I spent one afternoon each week at my dentist's office. I marveled at the fact that everything inside the dark brown office building was in such perfect order. There was the receptionist, who was always very nice, the bland gray office carpeting, and Dr. Morris, smiling, trying to make me feel better even though I really didn't mind being there at all. I liked the rows of shining instruments, all of the little drawers, how there were micro-differences between instrument sizes and that Dr. Morris had to have fourteen of the same instrument for different situations.

Dr. Morris' assistant took me into the back, "Boy, you sure have a lot to be work done? You know that means you're special." I knew the assistants by name, Linda, Julie, Rose Ann. They wore white and found magazines for me to read while I waited for the Doctor. I sat perched in the big reclining dental chair, all plastic and vinyl and sterile and high off the ground because I was so small. When The Doctor came in, in his big square glasses, smelling of after shave, I felt very much at home. Me, this tiny thing being looked over by two giant adults. I imagined that they were my parents and this was how life should be. I knew the taste of Dr. Morris' hands and the smell of his breath intimately. His hands tasted salty and his breath was hot and gave off a sweet-sour smell, the smell of mouth wash mixed with whatever he had had for lunch. The only thing that I hated about going to the dentist

was getting fluoride treatments. All of the rest was fine with me, even the drilling, because I knew that it wouldn't hurt. I particularly liked having teeth pulled because I could put my tongue in the dark purple hole that was left when the tooth was extracted and experience a taste at once salty and bloody, which reminded me of pickled plums.

Now that Helen was not there to make my clothes with the sewing machine that she made drive like a car with the pedal on the floor, Henry had to buy me clothes. We walked through the little white wrought iron gate, down a path and into the store, which smelled of fifty years of accumulated dust and mold. I hated going in and pawing through the used clothes sorted by color and hung on wire hangers. It was like a rainbow of shame: all white, then yellow which bled into orange, and finally red. There were mounds of tweed next to down jackets with shiny patches of brown dirt on them, wool sweaters that had been hastily washed with water so the wool became matted and tough. "What do you think of this?" she asked me. "I hate it." "OK, what about this?" "No." The white haired ladies who worked there looked at me as if I were a difficult child. The only concession that Henry was willing to make was to buy my shoes new.

That fall, Henry's classes were beginning and she found a school for me also. It was a Montessori school that was

housed in a big stone church. Although she had sworn that she would never have her daughter educated in a church, she couldn't find anywhere else with room to take me so she had no choice.

I began refusing to walk the right way on the balance beam. Perhaps I knew that Henry didn't like the place. Or, maybe the teacher had something against me or against Henry. It all came to an unexpectedly sudden end when I curled the tip of my tongue behind my front teeth and showed Robert Smith the underside of it--a mass of blue veins that bulged outward and made him cry. I didn't know that I had done anything wrong but I was sent to the office and told to wait until Henry came to pick me up. They informed her that I had been suspended.

This left more time for me to run around with Henry, running errands, picking up movies to show to her Intro to Psychology classes. She would take me with her to the classes, which were held in lecture halls that looked like movie theaters, only the seats had wooden desks that folded away at the sides. She showed The Red Balloon to her students. The old-fashioned projector, a reel to reel, crackled and I watched the numbers flash before me, bits of light shooting through because the film was damaged. Then the rich red colors of the film came on and there were pictures of streets that I

decided had to be far away. "I want you to write a paper about attachment," she'd tell the students after they saw the film. "Write something about what it means that this boy has a relationship with an object."

After Henry had started her psychology program, most of my childhood felt like I was in some kind of ongoing study. I sat at the dinner table one night and was asked a series of questions: "What is your favorite color?" "What side of the room is your closet on?" "What does bread smell like?" My mother's study group watched my eyes, noting down the direction they went in when I thought of different sensations. They were always watching us as kids. They wanted to know what we thought and what we dreamt. "That's fascinating," they said, "tell me more," and I can remember exactly the tone of voice that they used and how they underscored "fascinating" in all of the same ways.

And when I couldn't fall asleep because I knew that a thing (neither monster nor human) was going to come in through the door or, my worst fantasy, that I might strangle myself in my sleep, Henry sat on the edge of the bed and talked to me. She was a night person, and I never received this kind of attention in the mornings. Sitting in the dark, the hall light in the background, I could ask her whatever I wanted. "But you told me that people can do all kinds of things when they are

asleep," I said to her. "Yes, I know, but they can't strangle themselves." "Why not?" I asked. "It's just unlikely." My mother spoke in low measured tones. "Imagine your body disappearing bit by bit. Start with your toes. Once your toes have completely disappeared then you can move on to your feet. Then your ankles. Keep going until all of you has disappeared." I would usually never get past my toes since I had to do one toe at a time.

Park Place

As I was falling asleep, in the next room, I would hear Henry on the telephone talking to Helen. Sometimes she would be crying. The conversations always lasted longer than I could stay awake. One morning, I woke up and Henry told me that Helen was coming the next week to find a place to live in Iowa City. "I convinced her that she couldn't live without us," Henry said.

"What's life without a little bit of family," Helen sang out, after she had bought the house in Iowa City that Eliza had helped her find. If it was that simple for Helen to come back, I wondered why she hadn't come back sooner.

The fact that Helen picked things up exactly where they had been left, even reading the same books to me before I went to sleep, seemed to mean that she could make no more sense of why she had left than I could. Even though I was a year older, she assumed that Gypsy Girl's New Shoes was still my favorite book. Each night, after tucking me into bed, she read the gypsy girl story, the one about the little girl who has no mother and whose father is a minstrel. The gypsy girl wants nothing in the world so much as a pair of new red shoes. Her father can't buy them for her so she dances for the shopkeeper, who finds her dancing so beautiful that he gives her the shoes. Helen cried over the pages of the pink book that had been read so many times the binding was broken. I assumed she cried because the gypsy girl looked just like me with her long brown hair and slightly tattered clothes.

I was starting kindergarten that year and Eliza had told Henry and Helen how important it was that I go to the right school. I loved the new house not only because it was solid and square, not flimsy like the old apartment, but also because it had been bought because of me.

Helen wanted to construct a perfect sleeping room for Henry, a womb-like environment of red velvet and carpet and burlap fabric. My mother and Helen made a frame for the bed that filled up the entire room and the bed was sunk in the middle.

Around the bed, they built a catwalk, covering it in geometric patterns made out of lightening-blue and lipstick-red carpet remnants. Then Helen sewed the curtains and bedspread out of a deep red velvet which was as soft to the touch as the fur of a kitten. The bedroom was a perfect place for running around and playing tag or doing gymnastics from the platform to the mattress. But from Helen's snickers when she showed the room to friends, I began to understand that the room was really about things that I could not understand.

It was evening the first time Henry and I went to school. We walked all the way from the house, up the long tree lined street and into the school yard. The school, lit up from within, glowed as the dusk settled around it. Our footsteps echoing through the empty halls, we found the classroom and put our coats in a small locker. Mrs. Phillips, a woman whose voice wrapped around you, greeted us with a big pink lipstick smile. She was my new kindergarten teacher. The voices that night were soft and comforting as all of the five year olds were being shown the room. I found a math book the thickness of a magazine and started working. I didn't want to leave. And when Henry, sitting at the little round table in the child sized chairs, told me that we had to go, I insisted on taking the book with me so I could keep working. Mrs. Phillips laughed. "You know you can come back tomorrow.

The book will still be here." I didn't understand why I couldn't just stay.

The grade school was in a big red brick building that had been built in the early part of the century. There were two playgrounds close to the school and then the outer school yard, which spread out from the little school and which had been the site of the original town race track. The oak trees that formed the oval boundary of the track had grown big and stately. Each recess, we played a game called Cootie Kissers. Alex Keller was Cootie King and various girls were selected as Queen. I was sometimes chosen as Queen and I sat atop the jungle gym, and watched everyone run around. The game was not about kissing but about avoiding kisses. The girls chased the boys around the playground and tried to kiss them. The boys dove and swerved to avoid being pecked on the cheek. Alex was sometimes nice but more often terrifying. He taunted me with the words like "dildo" and "genitalia" that he said he found in the dictionary.

I loved everything about the school, the routine, the school work, the library, which was one floor above our classroom. We went to the library once a week and before the librarian read to us in the back, we were allowed to look through the pages of a huge dictionary that sat on a lectern in the main room. We were told to touch it gently as we turned the pages,

looking for the color sections, the ones that listed names and pictures of flags and trees and flowers. The shiny paper that the picture sections were printed on was so white compared to the brownish pages that just had words and black and white drawings on them. I made sure to look at the gem section each week--amethyst, emerald, opal--the words and colors both excited me, they were complicated, just like the colors that were in the book.

Each morning, after Mrs. Phillips took attendance, I walked the class roster to the central office, which was just down the hall from our room. I handed the purple mimeographed sheet to Mrs. Fletcher, the school secretary, who said "Thank you Katrina" as she handed me a list of the children who had to leave early that day or who wouldn't be in class because their parents had called to say that they were sick.

I made friends with two girls who lived in my neighborhood. My friend Susan lived in a big house right at the edge of the park. Her mother played the harpsichord and had blonde hair and a long nose. My other friend, Sally, lived in a house where everything matched. There was a La-z-Boy chair in what they called the "den" and a brown wood-laminated table in the dining room. Walking in the door was like stepping back into the 1950s. Her mother didn't work and so Sally, unlike everyone else in my class, went home for lunch everyday.

Sally's mother, whom I called Mrs. Stevens, was always at home, smoking, cleaning, making dinner over the stove that I found remarkable because it didn't have any burners. The stove was electric but instead of having round coil burners, it was a flat plastic surface with the shapes of burners etched onto it.

"Sally's half-sister was leaning against the stove in the old house and she had this long straight brown hair that was really too long. We were talking and then all of a sudden I smelled something like burning plastic. I looked over and the end of Sue's hair was on fire."

Mrs. Stevens had a separate sponge to clean the floor and the sink with and I was always coming over and using the sink sponge for the floor and the floor sponge for the sink and Sally then had to throw both of them away. Sally's father sold insurance and every year made more money.

"This year my Dad made a million dollars," Sally told me and I was impressed that this man who wore a toupee and dentures was so successful.

"Dad didn't make a million dollars, honey," Sally's Mom told her, "he sold a million dollars."

"Oh," Sally said. "But that's why you're going to Hawaii, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

There were always lots of cookies and crackers and meat in the house. I couldn't understand how Sally didn't eat herself to death like I would have if our cupboards had that many cookies in them. For dinner, they ate pot roast and meat loaf and iceberg lettuce.

On the afternoons when I didn't go to Sally's house, I walked down the street to the dance school with the other girls from my class whose mothers worked. I wore the same unwashed navy blue leotard every time and moved around the class with the others, pretending to be a big oak tree with roots going down into the ground, my arms the branches swaying in the wind. Sometimes we had performances, at which point we would practice more structured dances, like the Mexican Jumping Bean dance. At one performance in the big gymnasium, my class finished our routine and the parents clapped after we had jumped up and down. And then there were some other performances, and then finally, as a finale, the tap dancing class performed. There were only eight girls in the tap dancing class, all a bit older than me because tap

dancing required maturity, signified by the small bumps showing under their leotards. They were dressed in eight matching outfits bedecked with sequins and each wore a shiny top hat spray-painted silver. Their shoes were made of patent leather and they pounded and tapped until the whole audience was on their feet. I had never seen anything like it. The tap dancers finished with a big stomp, more clapping, and then they had to take me out over Helen's shoulder in tears. I refused to leave without a promise that I would have a pair of tap shoes and be with those girls next year. They promised and I quieted down. The next weekend we went out and found a pair of black patent leather tap shoes with ribbons for laces.

My mother had "no problem buying the shoes," but it was either the shoes or the lessons, "not both." I chose the shoes, the more immediate choice, thinking that somehow the lessons would follow. The tap shoes glistened like jet beads. The ribbon along their edges had a moiré pattern and the shoes were heavier than regular shoes because of the tongue shaped metal taps on the toe and heel. We took the shoes home and Helen cut a three foot square dancing platform out of plywood that I could put over the wood floors so I wouldn't scratch them. When we had company, I dutifully pulled out the platform and stomped around. But having no idea of what I was doing was a disincentive--tap dancing, I

discovered, was not as effortless as the movies made it seem. I eventually grew out of the tap shoes, sliced the backs off of them with an Exact-O-Knife so I could maintain the illusion. Still no lessons and I knew somehow that once I grew out of this pair there was no hope of getting another.

I never thought about my father then. My mother never talked about him and so many kids at school had parents who were divorced that I just included myself in the same category. Natalie, the new girl in our class, sucked her thumb and carried a blanket, baby things that she couldn't grow out of, it was explained, because her parents had gotten divorced. When her father arrived at the door to our classroom, looking kind of lost, Natalie ran up to him. "Daddy," she said. And he smiled. Even though I knew Tuesdays and Thursdays Natalie stayed at his house, I always had the sense that he was abducting her. "Isn't it strange to have two houses, to only see your father certain days?" I wondered. Once, over lunch at the long plastic picnic tables that we ate at, I told my friends that it was easier not to know your father, it was less disappointing. I can't remember who it was who had told me this.

In December, Helen pulled out all of the Christmas things from the attic, the cardboard boxes of shiny bulb ornaments, the big box of unbreakable ornaments that we had made or

been given, ornaments that I thought were ugly but that she loved. "I remember when you made this for me," she said as she took out the cookie dough Santa that I had made in nursery school. "You made this one too," a Shrinky-Dink Christmas Tree that I had baked to miniature size in my grandmother's oven. My mother and Helen had a blue angel that they put on the top of the tree. Its name was Marlene Dietrich. Ribbons and bells and bows were hung all over the house. In the dining room, Helen strung the best red ribbon from the light fixture, making a canopy over the table, and then tied fresh holly to the ribbon. Over the table, she hung a single silver bulb that caught the light of the candles. The holly dried quickly, was sharp on the edges, and crunched below my feet when I walked over pieces that had fallen on the floor. Christmas. Helen loved Christmas.

Helen told me stories about Christmas when she was young. "We didn't have any wrapping paper so on Christmas morning we came downstairs and found the presents scattered on the floor. We all really believed that Santa had brought them." Santa was not something that I ever believed in. "I don't want her to grow up with a lot of lies in her head," Henry said. "Santa is a construction. He's a story. Helen and I give you presents." The only real myth that I had surrounding Christmas had to do with the blue angel that sat at the top of the tree. "Who's Marlene Dietrich?" I asked

Henry. "The most beautiful woman in the world," Henry answered.

As we opened gifts by the multi-colored light of the Christmas tree, Marlene looked down at us from an odd angle, wearing what looked like blue pajamas with feet. We opened presents on Christmas Eve. This tradition had started because during my mother's miserable childhood everyone was too hungover to get up in the mornings. I never knew whether this was the real reason or whether, as she sometimes said, it was an Irish custom to open gifts the night before Christmas. I was curious to know what other people's Christmas mornings were like. I couldn't imagine opening presents in the stark white light of morning.

We invented our own rituals for Christmas, standing in the over-heated kitchen stirring pots of gruyere and Swiss cheeses to make fondue. "The kirsch is the important ingredient," Helen said. I chopped up bread into cubes and arranged vegetables on a platter. Once we had finished cooking, we went upstairs to dress. Christmas was a formal event requiring formal attire and I always had a new dress, something in velvet to compete with the bedroom curtains.

I always bought Henry and Helen presents with money that they had given me. And next to my very small presents, there

were huge suit boxes, oblong shaped, from some department store with Henry's centerpiece gift to Helen in it. Helen inhaled a lot of air as she opened the gift. "Oh Henry!" she exclaimed when she saw the contents, a silk extravaganza that Henry thought would look beautiful with Helen's hair. There was also a certain nervousness in the air, like all of us wanted to impress each other. "See, I really know you," was the reward for a gift that someone truly liked. I gave Helen a set of glass animals our first year in the house, three tall giraffes, a father, a mother, and a baby. Their necks were as delicate as icicles. Helen said she "loved them," that they were a "perfect gift." Then the paper and tissue paper and boxes were collected in big black garbage bags and Helen fed handfuls of the wrappings to the fire. I watched the tight balls of green paper explode in the fireplace, convinced that the house would catch fire next.

Over dinner, we dipped the bread and vegetables into the fondue, debating which vegetables were best suited to being eaten in this manner. Cherry tomatoes were the worst because their slick skins couldn't hold the cheese. It was between broccoli and celery for the winning category. Helen and Henry made me feel very important as I decided which vegetables were best.

After my grandmother called and told me in her sweet voice how much she liked my gift to her, we moved back to the living room and ate date-nut pudding with fresh whipped cream. Helen and I tried on the new outfits that Henry had bought us. I walked down the stairs as if it were a runway. "You look just like someone out of a Fellini film," my mother said.

I stayed up as late as possible, until the moment when I was told I had to go to bed. Upstairs, I could still hear the sound of the fire crackling. The smell of department stores and unworn clothes filled my bedroom. As I fell asleep, I heard Henry and Helen talking, first laughing, and then after a pause, like a bubble in your stomach, they started arguing. I couldn't hear much of these arguments because at some point Helen would say "she's going to wake up" and they would start whispering. Then slowly, their voices returned to a normal volume. I only heard words: "money," "house." I expected to wake up the next morning and find that one of them had disappeared. I thought people could just disappear like that, all of a sudden, because they were angry. If their voices got really loud, I would get out of bed and sit at the top of the stairs until Henry noticed that I was there. "What is it?" she asked in her most strident voice. "I'm afraid the house is going to burn down. Will you put out the fire?" Henry's and Helen's faces were red, from the heat and from

arguing, but other than that everything was as it was when I had left. “Do you think that I would let the house burn down?” Henry asked. “No,” I said. “I’ll put it out in a few minutes. Go to bed.” I slunk back up the stairs.

Ellsworth Drive

"Do you think that the plane will crash?" I asked Henry every day the week before I was going to visit my grandparents.

"No, I don't think that the plane will crash."

"Can you promise me that the plane won't crash."

"No. But if you don't want to go, you don't have to. I don't want you to be scared."

We drove to the airport and Henry waited with me until the plane was ready to leave. A stewardess came over and took my hand. "We'll take good care of her," she said to Henry.

I was the last person to get on the plane. There was just one seat left and when I sat down, I felt like a piece of a board game being put into its place in the box. The vent above my seat hissed as air was forced through it. I looked around and saw men wearing suits and sitting very upright, looking straight ahead or down at a newspaper.

"Its only a forty minute flight," Henry had told me. "That's including take-off and landing so you won't have time to be scared."

When the stewardess came around to serve drinks, I ordered a 7-Up and drank it slowly, thinking it would make the time pass more quickly. I asked the man across the aisle what time it was. "It's twelve thirty," he said. "We should be on the ground in ten minutes." Ten minutes later, I asked him again. He told me and smiled.

The pilot got on the loudspeaker, his voice coming out of nowhere and seeming to be everywhere, telling us that because of traffic, we would be circling around for a while. He would let us know when we would land. The plane tipped as it went around the circle. I imagined it turning, like a car, around a corner. We circled for long enough for me to think that we were either going to run out of gas or have to turn back. But, finally, we landed.

My grandmother was the only person waiting by the gate. She looked smaller. "I'm shrinking," she often told me. She was only four foot ten but she was still taller than me. Her white hair was curled and set and looked almost metallic against the pure white of her skin. I liked kissing her cheek and feeling how soft and powdered it was. Her purse hung like a black case across her arm and made her look authoritative; it gave her a military air, until she opened it and revealed wads of lipstick stained Kleenex and stacks of coupons or Rosary cards all held together by rubber bands.

"I was so worried about you," my grandmother said when she saw me. "It was such a long trip. I hope at least that you had someone to talk to."

I told her that there was no one to talk to.

"Those bums," she said, as we watched the line of men in dark suits walk by us hurriedly.

"Frank is downstairs with the car. I told him to leave and come back because the plane was so late."

As we walked down the wide hall, her shoes made a clicking sound. Her legs were not much longer than mine so we walked at the same pace, which gave me the feeling of being very grown up. "Look it!" she said as we passed the window, "look how big that plane is." We walked over to the window the size of a wall and my grandmother squeezed my hand. Airports were something magical to her. She used to come alone on a Sunday afternoon just to look at the planes and the people getting off them.

When we got down to the lower level, my great uncle Frank was waiting for us, standing next to his car. The concrete

overhang above made it seem like it was dark and cold even though it was hot and sunny on the other side of the drive.

I never kissed Frank, just said "Hello," and he said "--- Katrina," always taking out the first word. "-- a good trip?" I knew not to answer because my grandmother had to give Frank the information. It was as if her voice was the only one at the right frequency for him to hear.

Frank's face looked clammy, like a dead person's, with just enough stubble to give the grayish white of his face a little shadow. He wore a raincoat, unbuttoned, that hung like a separate appendage from his shoulders, the lining trailing out one side. For a long time I never knew what it was that Frank did--he had once traded options, had been to Venice, had lost three fortunes. He drove a decade-old Buick with tape on the seats and always smelled of newsprint. He had been, according to one of the stories, a grain inspector. I imagine Frank with his ten-day stubble and his shuffling galoshes, head and shoulders bent, wearing a black trench coat, counting grains somewhere on the east side of Chicago.

Now that he was retired, he arrived at my grandmother's house at three in the morning to read the papers and shuffle around. Then, at ten or eleven, when the rest of the house was just waking up, he would leave. I suppose that we all

thought he was a genius because he rarely said anything. He just whistled. He laid his upper and lower teeth close together and blew the air through. An airy whistle. He also made a type of clicking sound, which he interspersed with the few words he would say, words that were hunched and hooded, like toads: "Well," shuffle "Hello John," click, "Mar told me", "Half and half."

I never understood why my grandfather didn't bring my grandmother to pick me up. Once he was "watching a game on the television," another time, he was "watering the yard." When we walked in, he would be standing in the living room with a look on his face like he had just forgotten what it was he wanted to say.

"Your grandfather has butter pecan ice cream at home. He's looking forward to seeing you," my grandmother informed me.

I didn't like butter pecan ice cream and didn't understand why he bought it for me. It was an "adult flavor," like rum raisin, which I was afraid to eat because I thought I might get drunk from it.

Frank dropped us off in the driveway but didn't come in because it was after noon. My grandmother took me into the

kitchen and I sat in one of the big leather arm chairs. "Be careful of the spring," she said. "Can I get you something to eat? Did you bring any laundry with you?" My grandfather stood in the door jamb looking like he wanted to say something. He never asked questions. Instead he made statements--"The door is open." "The Cubbies are playing today." "Peaches are thirty-nine cents a pound at the Jewel."--and I was never sure whether I was supposed to respond.
The chair made a high pitched squeak as I rocked it back and forth on its uneven legs. Every piece of furniture in their house poked at you or wobbled. I tried to get the table and chair to move in the same direction. "Hold on," my grandmother said, "stay right where you are," and she bent down and put a matchbook under the table leg. "There," she said, as if it would never wobble again.

My grandparents' house had violets and growing lamps for violets and a lot of clutter. The violets smelled of dirt and sat in terra cotta colored plastic pots on a mahogany table. I stared out of the big picture glass window at the motionless scene outside. Park Ridge was the quintessential suburb, with no sidewalks and sloping curbs. During the summers, there was a persistent smell of chemicals from the treated lawns. The house across the street did not have a front door. This was a design feature of many of these houses, the "vault" concept. "Do they enter through the back? Through the

garage? Do people live there at all?" I asked my grandmother. The residents were as unreal to her as they were to me. My grandmother's world was made up of shadow puppets--the neighbors, the city, the world. It was a world without any order, just images reflected on a screen. There was no center, even though there were so many players, so many responsibilities and siblings, deaths and illnesses.

Meat and the lottery were the two things that I took for granted those summers that I spent with them. Whatever money they had they spent at the butcher, buying filet mignon and pork tenderloin and lamb chops. "Meat that was like butter" is how my grandmother described the meat they sold at the Canfield butcher shop. My grandmother had the butcher's home phone number just in case there was ever a meat emergency.

After my grandmother had prepared everything except the chops, when the kitchen was steaming hot from the stove and the boiling pans of water, she would put everything on hold. At 6:25 every evening my grandmother walked into the living room, took the remote control from my grandfather and turned the TV to channel 2. Then, she flopped down in the overstuffed chair and leaned back, chewing on a small piece of paper and picking at her teeth while the commercials played. It was one of the few times that she sat down for

more than five minutes at a time. When the black space appeared on the television, a millisecond of silence, she pulled all four foot ten of herself forward and sat at the edge of the chair. The slip that she wore as a house-dress was hiked up to her thighs and she held the remote expectantly between her knees. The screen suddenly flashed onto a bright white set and a series of brief electronic tones, composed for maximum anticipation, played in the background. I watched the weightless balls bounce around in the rotating hopper. As each ball was sucked out, the host announced the number inscribed on the ball. One night we were only one number off.

It was my grandmother's understanding of the family fortune she had almost inherited that made her so certain she would win it big someday. My grandfather's father had operated the first street-car barns in Chicago. "He made a fortune," according to my grandmother, charging "a nickel for every car that came in. Every time. A nickel. That's a lot of nickels." After the street-car barns, he decided to parlay the money into dog racing but some overzealous freshman representative in Springfield spoiled the plan. "Do you know how much money you can make running a dog track?" my grandmother asked. "No one ever wins at dog racing! It's worse than the horses."

We all walked through their suburban ranch house like ghosts, uncertain whether we really existed to anyone outside of those walls. Had one of my grandmother's schemes for making money worked, and the world, as expected, had changed, we would have been found out as ghosts and we would have, in all likelihood, disappeared. But we remained ghosts, weightless and oblivious to things inside the house that we otherwise might have run into, the square mahogany side tables with the sharp edges and cracked gold trim, the side board in the dining room that stuck out five inches into the doorway, the yellow chairs with tassels that spun around and made a whirring sound as they turned.

It infuriated my mother that my grandparents played the lottery. "Do you know what the chances are of winning one of these things, Ma? The chances are seventeen times worse than being struck by lightening!" To which my grandmother responded: "Do you know that there were nine people struck by lightening last Saturday?" I knew that all nine had been struck under the same tree, which I thought was important. "You're a smart aleck," she told me, "but you'll never be as smart as your mother."

Illinois was on the frontier of the state lottery system and initiated Lotto in the mid-70s. Unlike the normal lottery cards, which were yellow slips of paper with blurred purple

numbers on them, the Lotto cards were printed more crisply on heavy card stock, to indicate that the risk, like the rewards, were far greater. I preferred the "Instant-Win" one-dollar cards that you rubbed with a penny. I could feel my grandmother's excitement rise even when it was I, not she, rubbing the card. I collected the metallic residue underneath my fingernail, tasted it and wondered what it was made from.

What I saw was a dimmer version of what Henry saw. As a child, Henry had gone with my grandmother to the race track every week. They stopped by the butcher shop, got the odds from Mike and then arrived at Belmont in time for the Daily Double. I had only been to the track once with my grandmother, when my great aunt Felice took us out for the day. I found it difficult to understand how my grandmother could like such a dirty and noisy place. A man's voice, garbled and gravely, came over the loudspeaker announcing the names of the horses. I asked my grandmother how she knew what horses to bet on. "I know which ones are fast," she said, "plus you want to make sure you're not picking the favorite because then you win more money." The racing sheet in her left hand, she circled the names of two horses--Irish Tulip and Fit to Win--and told me she was putting "two dollars" on "my" horse, Purple Summaria. Both my grandmother and I loved purple.

After my grandmother had stood in line and given her money to the man behind the Plexiglas window, we went outside and watched the race. She pulled out her rosary as the horses were lined up at the gate. I saw her lips move, forming words that she whispered as she rolled the glass beads between her finger and thumb. "What are you doing?" my great aunt asked when she noticed that my grandmother was praying. "I can't believe you," she said and my grandmother put the beads away, being careful to hold them to her lips while my aunt wasn't looking. The race only lasted a couple of minutes and then everyone turned around and threw little pieces of paper on the floor. My grandmother's horses came in first and second and I thought she would be happy since she had bought a Perfecta ticket. "You won!" I exclaimed. My grandmother looked unhappy. "I should have bought two tickets," she responded.

On the drive back, we were stuck in traffic and then a man in a black car cut us off. "You stupid kike, why don't you learn how to drive," my grandmother yelled out the window.
"You know you better be careful," my great aunt said, "you might not go to Heaven if you keep talking like that."

"I don't have to worry," my grandmother said, "I already have a place earned and waiting."

That night, my great aunt stayed over and I had to sleep with my grandfather in the big bedroom, his room, that smelled of sweet piss and medicine. He had a strange looking elastic belt with a wooden nut on it the size of a racket ball. The belt hung over the bed post. I knew that the belt had something to do with something that was wrong with him. My grandmother wouldn't tell me what it was for.

I had never liked the master bedroom, it was kept very dark and was dusty and the top of the big dresser was covered with things--half filled glasses of water, key rings, small boxes without lids, pennies, match books. If I snuck in during the afternoons, alone, and dug through the drawers of the big bureau, I thought that I would eventually find some kind of secret treasure.

"Do you know that your grandfather fell out of bed last night?" my grandmother asked me the morning after I had slept in the big bed with him. "No," I said, not remembering anything like that happening. "You pushed him out of the bed when you rolled over. He could have really hurt himself." I knew how hard the cement floor of the house was. The thin carpet in the bedroom barely covered the cold beneath it. But it seemed so silly to me that an adult could fall out of bed. Wasn't that something that children did?

At least one afternoon a week, my grandmother would take me shopping. She sat on the bed and rolled her stockings over her calves, fastening the top of the nylon tube to her garter belt. The equipment she used to get herself ready was so elaborate it made me think of hospitals. Having removed her "everyday" slip and "everyday" brazier, she would dig through a drawer and find a slip that was less frayed and a brazier that held her in tighter. To put the brazier on, she bent over with her head down until her breasts, long and flaccid, almost touched the ground. She safety-pinned up the straps so the slip wouldn't show below the hem of her dress and then went to the closet to choose something to wear, some navy blue dress that she had bought for one of last year's weddings. Her dresses were wide and short, made in "half-sizes" she said, and bought at special stores that sold such wide and short dresses. The dress hung in the bathroom, while she got ready. Then, she removed her engagement ring and pinned it into the pocket of an old coat that hung in the closet. "You have to be careful," she said as she put the ring away, "but I never take off my wedding band." Just before we would go, at the very last minute, I stood on a chair and lowered the dress over her head, covering up the whole array of elastic and pins and nylon and garters.

Since my grandmother didn't drive, Frank drove us to the closest El stop. My grandmother and Frank had apparently

always had an odd relationship. Frank had accompanied my grandparents on their honeymoon. And, though my grandfather did speak to him, offering a dentureless "Hello Frank" every morning when they would pass each other in the living room, I don't think that my grandfather liked Frank in the least.

After Frank had dropped us off, we took the El and then a bus and then another bus to the Loop. Standing in that "bad neighborhood," waiting for the second bus, my grandmother turned her wedding band around so the six diamond chips could not be seen. But once we left the bus and were just about to walk through the revolving brass doors to Marshall Fields, she turned the ring back around. Then, everything was fine. The clouds of perfume from the makeup counters on the first floor fed her and she strode across the black and white marble tiles as if she had arrived. My grandmother flourished in this environment, like a tropical plant that needs the right amount of moisture in the air.

She did not always buy me something but when she did it was the nicest thing that we could find. "You know I'd like to buy you everything," she said, "and someday I hope that I can. The first thing I'll buy when I win the lottery is a new car for Frank and then a trip to Florida for your grandfather. Then the rest will be for you and your mother and your aunt and

your cousins." I was a bit hurt that I was not first on the list but I knew that she would buy me lots of things even if Frank was first.

Anything that I loved, my grandmother loved also. So when I told her about my teacher Mrs. Phillips, who was so nice and who liked pink, she helped me find a perfect pair of clip-on earrings because "knowing if someone has pierced ears is a personal thing." We took the earrings up to the counter and a sales lady asked if she could ring it up for us. My grandmother reached down the front of her dress and unpinned the bills that she had safety-pinned to her brazier, handing them, warm, to the cashier.

She never tried anything on for herself--I was the only one we shopped for. But I knew to walk slowly when we were on the floor with the ladies' hats. While my grandmother was never bold enough to think that the ladies who worked in the Marshall Fields hat department knew her (which they did), she was always very kind to them and very careful when she handled the hats. She could not try the hats on, of course, because she had set her hair that day and the hat would ruin the silver white Aqua Net cloud that she had constructed.

After looking at the hats, we took the escalator to the restaurant on the top floor. Over lunch, my grandmother

talked about her duty and mine, hers as wife and mother, mine as granddaughter. She told me who was ill, who was dying, and who was getting married. We talked about my cousins, whom she told me she "loved equally as much as her granddaughter." My cousins and I were important, Henry and my aunt more important, my grandfather most important of all.

And then, through the serious facade would bubble up her other part, childlike and excitable. That side of her sat with me at the little square table with the white table cloth and told me about things that she liked. If I was visiting around Christmas, she pointed out her favorite ornaments on the enormous tree that sat in the middle of the room. The tree had to be cut in half and then reassembled to get it up to the top floor. My grandmother knew everything about big Christmas trees--the one that was put up outside of City Hall was not one tree but twenty three all strapped together. The one in the dining room at Marshall Fields was constructed using a similar principle. When she saw an ornament that she particularly liked, with her miniature hand she grabbed onto mine and she squeezed together her pink painted lips so tightly that the white skin around her mouth would crinkle and she made a high-pitched squeaking noise. Then, she seemed taller and her eyes sparkled. I was always surprised at what a brilliant blue they were.

Had my grandmother been wealthy, she would have lived beautifully, in a world of petit fours and tea rooms. I don't think that her material desires ever went beyond things as simple as this. Her life was like the hard icing on little tea cakes, made with a bit too much sugar. The whole world would be falling to pieces but when it was just the two of us, it was as if the world were just one elaborate Christmas scene in the windows of the big department stores downtown.

We were tired by the time we headed back. Frank wouldn't pick us up from the El station so we took the suburban bus which dropped us a half-mile from the house. Walking down the sidewalks with no curbs, past the chemical smells and the ornate concrete grid work, I asked my grandmother whether she "would be sad if my grandfather died" and I saw her turn her head away. She could discuss her own death endlessly, as if it were about to happen tomorrow. But my grandfather's death, that would be a real tragedy, something that simply should not happen. "How could you say a thing like that?" she asked me, whimpering. I had not meant to make her sad. I knew that something had gone wrong, some spring wasn't working in my head. We walked in silence all the way back to their brown ranch house, past the dark green hedges, through the dirty screen door.

I sat on her bed, on the thin cotton blanket and left her alone in the kitchen. Usually, I would have turned on the television and done my gymnastics routine in honor of Nadia Komanichi in the living room. That afternoon, I didn't want to make any unnecessary noise, or any noise at all, that might remind her that I was there. I waited for what seemed like a long time before I went into the kitchen. I felt too bad to apologize, so I just asked her if there was anything that I could do. "No," she said, "Do you want anything?"

She had two old ice boxes and a stove that had to be lit using a magical arrangement involving pieces of hand-rolled newspaper. The doors of the ice boxes swung open almost by themselves since they were so heavily freighted with glass jars of sweet pickles and red cocktail sauces. I would stand in the light of the door, touch its aluminum casing as I contemplated what sweet concoction I might want. If I stood barefoot on the peeling kitchen floor, the soles of my feet would turn black.

It took her two hours to prepare lamb chops and mashed potatoes and green beans. We ate dinner in the dining room, a small room between the kitchen and the living room. With the dining table and two side tables, it felt like there was more furniture than room. When there were no guests for dinner,

the newspapers were left stacked on a chair in the corner and the silver was unpolished.

After dinner, we moved to the kitchen and sat at the round table. My grandfather went and found the vinyl poker mat and spread it in the middle of the table. I had been taught a "Las Vegas regulation cut" when I had to sit on telephone books to reach for the cards. "I can see your cards," my grandfather said to me every once in a while, and I would hold them closer in.

Black Jack was my favorite game since it was the easiest way to win money quickly. I learned to play Black Jack when I came to visit the summer that I was five. I told my grandmother about a very beautiful pair of shoes that cost nine dollars. She wanted to buy them for me but felt that she shouldn't just give me the money. "I know, we'll play cards and maybe you can win the money." The fact that my grandparents were Catholic was somehow always related in my mind with their interest in cards. Religion was something that promised to put things in order. I put the rummy cards in order by number and then by suit: clubs, hearts, spades, diamonds.

My mother called once a week and my grandmother got up to answer the pink phone with the twisted cord that hung on the

wall in the kitchen. Usually the conversations lasted only a few minutes. "I'm fine," my grandmother said every week. "Sis is in the hospital. Kate's moving to Dubuque. Say hello to Daddy before you hang up." But this week the conversation lasted longer than usual. I had already talked to Henry and told her that I had been to the King Tut exhibit with Frank. "You went to the museum with him alone?" Henry had asked. "Yes," I told her and it was then that she asked to speak with my grandmother. "But Henry, I couldn't go with them, I had to visit Sis," I heard my grandmother say. My grandmother was quiet for a while on the phone and I could hear Henry's voice through the receiver even from where I was sitting at the table. It was as if her voice was spilling out of the line. But I couldn't understand what she was saying, I could only hear the tone of her voice, which rang out in a definite pattern, loud and then louder still. My grandmother looked at me in a pleading way. I thought she might want me to leave the room but I stayed where I was and shuffled the cards.

After my grandmother hung up the phone, she told me that Henry was coming to pick me up. "Why?" I asked. "Is something wrong." "No," she said, "she just wants you to come home."

I was very sad having to leave my grandmother like that, having been yelled at. I felt worse because I had enjoyed the King Tut exhibit. I was more impressed with the fact that the Egyptians had slept with stone "pillows" than by all of the gold and jewels. The exhibit hall was very dark and small lights illuminated the cases that were strewn around. I discussed the mystery surrounding the King Tut excavation with my grandmother. She was not surprised that curses had been placed on the original explorers--finding that much money had to have some strings attached.

When Henry came to pick me up from my grandparent's house, she looked like she was in the middle of something, some life that she led when I was not around. She would only stay for one night before we left.

My grandmother insisted on making us a lunch to take with us on the ride back--ham sandwiches with butter and relish, a bruised banana, some special apple that she had bought for our trip but that looked exactly like every other apple I had seen before.

"No Ma, don't make us anything. We don't need anything for the trip."

"But Henry, you'll get hungry and you won't want to stop."

I looked forward to eating the box of squishy pastries that my grandmother packed. She said to-be-careful with the box, to keep it on top. The napoleons that she packed turned over on their sides and left big gray grease marks on the white box. The pastries made me kind of sick and we never finished them. Halfway through eating them, I wondered why I had thought they were so good.

My mother tried to forget to bring the big brown paper bag with the lunch in it. But my grandmother remembered, went inside to get it and brought it to the car. She stood at the front of the car looking sad but determined. I was sad also but, for some reason, I never cried until we were out of the driveway.

"Roll down the window," she told me. She leaned in. "Do you have everything?"

"Yeah Ma. And if we don't, you can send it."

"Now you're sure you know how to get to the tollway. Frank says that with the construction you have to make a detour around the Loop. And you won't forget the signs for the tollway. You have to follow the signs to Indiana, not Iowa."

"Ma, how many times have we done this?"

"Well Henry, you know how much time it takes if you miss the tollway. It'll add an hour at least to the trip. What time will you get back? Call me. Just so I know you got back safely."

My mother started the engine. I smelled exhaust mixed with the moldy smell of the driveway. My grandmother stepped away from the window, her lips moving.

"I'm saying the prayer for travelers," she told us. "O God, our heavenly Father, whose glory fills the whole creation..." fell bluntly on my ears as we rolled backwards.

I waved and turned my face away.

Foreign Cars

On the drive back, Henry stopped at a pay phone. "Who are you calling," I asked. "Sophia." "Who's Sophia?" "Someone I want you to meet. She may come to live with us for a while."

We got back onto the freeway but we couldn't go anywhere. The traffic had stopped moving. I looked out the window and saw that the cars were lined up for miles. "Fuck!" Henry exclaimed. "Why does this always happen!" I thought she might start crying. The people in the other cars looked equally helpless. "We can't stay here," Henry said, "we have to get back." Henry grabbed the wheel tightly but there was nowhere to go. "Listen," she said, "go lay down in the back seat." She motioned out the window to the car to the left of us as I climbed into the back seat. The car pulled up just

enough so we could squeeze through to the breakdown lane. "You know, I don't think we're supposed to do this," I said. "If they stop us, I'll tell them you're sick. We're rushing to the hospital." We sped over the loose layer of gravel. I heard the sirens. I tried to look ill.

Sophia wasn't there when we got back but Helen had met her. Helen talked about her, about not wanting to live with her. My mother assumed that the four of us would all live in the house together. But Helen didn't think that would work.

"Why don't you just admit that you want to live with her instead of me!" Helen screeched at Henry from the basement steps.

When Helen was really angry, she started working, cleaning whatever she could find, the heavier and dirtier the better. This meant that things were often being torn out of the house. Carpets that had just been laid were pulled up, taken to the driveway, and pounded. Or, she decided to wash down every surface in the house and buckets of water were strewn everywhere. From the upstairs bathroom to the one in the basement, the entire house was wiped down. She cried the whole time, furious at Henry's fickleness.

"Why did I ever agree to live with you in the first place?" she yelled through her tears.

"This is what I get for just trying to be nice to everybody," Henry pleaded.

"I'm not going to stay in this house and pretend that we're one big happy family. The world doesn't revolve around you, Henry."

Helen packed her clothes in her car, left all of the furniture and moved across town.

When I finally met Sophia, I was surprised by how plain she was. There was nothing particularly remarkable about her except perhaps the large size of her breasts. I could tell that she was younger than Helen. My mother said that she was a student at the university. She had short mousy brown hair and a muscular body.

Now, Sophia's navy blue BMW 2002 was parked in the driveway. Henry hated the car. "It's such a piece of crap, when are you going to get rid of it?" But Sophia wouldn't even consider giving up the car. Sophia looked like a toy figure when she drove it, all upright in the boxy car with its oversized steering wheel. Whenever we went anywhere, we

always took the big green LeMans which roared through the streets like a speed boat.

I knew that I didn't like Sophia and despite her up-front statements like "I really like you Katrina," I doubted that she liked me. It was unfair from the beginning since she could never be as perfect as Helen. To me, Sophia was an irresponsible friend to Henry, encouraging her to do whatever she wanted, rather than telling her to stop, like Helen might.

Henry and Sophia burned incense in the bedroom and candles in the bathroom. When Sally came over she asked "what that funny smell was" and "whether my Mom was sleeping in that room, she's so quiet." I told her, "no, she's meditating." "What's that?" she asked me. "I don't know," I lied.

I asked Henry to stop meditating when my friends were over. "I have as many rights in this house as you do," she said. Sophia and Henry were becoming more and more involved with an ashram in town. They got up at five thirty in the morning and came back at nine, draped in shawls, reeking of scented oils, bindis on their foreheads.

"Yesterday I saw the blue pearl," Sophia told Henry over breakfast. Based on Henry's reaction to this, I assumed it was a big deal. I wished they would both just be more like everyone else's parents. My mother ignored my half-baked schemes for making our lives appear more normal. "You know, just by eating pre-sweetened cereal, we're not going to turn into the Brady Bunch."

Sophia had a dream about Shalimar perfume. It was the perfume that Henry used to wear but didn't anymore. She had given me the bottle when she had stopped wearing the perfume. I liked how the tapered plug fit so perfectly, the sound of glass fitting into glass and the way the cut crystal of the top glittered all the more next to the opaque brushed glass of the plug. I also liked the purple velvet box with the slot fitted to the bottle. The whole thing reminded me of royalty. I kept the box with the bottle in it in my closet.

"Sophia saw the whole bottle in the dream, even the lettering on the label. I don't know how she knew what it looked like. You know Sophia just wants to borrow it," Henry said. "It's really important Katrina. It's not like she needs to keep it forever."

"But it's mine," I said. "Why don't you buy her a new one and I'll keep the old one."

"She needs to have that one in particular," Henry said.

I didn't feel as if I had any choice but to hand over the bottle. I wanted to break it into pieces and then give it to her.

"Could I just give her the bottle and not the case?" I asked.

"No, she needs the whole thing."

I eventually handed it over, letting Sophia know that what she was doing was very unfair. Until the last minute, I kept hoping that she would change her mind, realize how ridiculous it was for her to ask for the bottle and tell me that I could keep it. She finally took both the bottle and the case.

At the moments I tried hardest to get along with Sophia, I would think of her as the sister that I never had.

"Sophia, are you ever going to get married?" a question I thought a younger sister might ask of an older sister.

"Why don't you ask your mother," she responded flatly.

For school vacation that spring, I was invited to go to Minnesota with Susan's family, to a house that they had all

built by hand. There were black eyed Susan's that grew alongside the road to the house and we could walk to the lake from their property. Susan pointed out the log in the house that she had stripped of its bark using only a butter knife because she was too small to use anything with a sharp blade. There was an outhouse and at night, if you had to go to the bathroom, there was a metal bowl that we all would pee in. One night, I sat on the bowl and caused it to break and the urine went all over the floor. They said that it happened all of the time.

When our time up north at the cabin was over, we drove to Minneapolis. Susan's family was going to visit a great aunt. Sophia and my mother were picking me up and we were going camping. As we pulled into the circular driveway to her aunt's house, Susan leaned over and said "My aunt has six bathrooms." A maid showed us in through the side door and Susan quickly found the closest bathroom. "You can use this one," she said. We had not bathed in almost a week. The bathroom was like a small boudoir, heavily perfumed, decorated with fabric and littered with baskets of potpourri. I found it difficult to breathe as the heavy oils of jasmine and rose clung to my nose. I pretended that I had traveled back in time, that I was using a bathroom sometimes used by royalty. The bathroom was so cushioned that when I walked out and closed the door, it made almost no sound at all.

I followed Susan and her sister up to the bedroom where they would be staying. "This is where we always stay when we are here," Susan told me. Then their mother came upstairs to give them the welcoming gifts that had been set out by their aunt. She handed them three boxes that were covered in glass and had little shelves cut out inside, on which sat little dolls or pieces of furniture or were filled with different colored beans. As the two of them were looking at the boxes, I realized that even though there were three boxes and only two of them, I was not going to get one. An hour later Henry and Sophia came and took me away.

I had never liked camping, it made you dirty and you had to eat food that was dirty and I hated hearing Henry tell me that everything "tasted better when it was cooked outside." I would have preferred to get a suite of rooms at the big lodge where they had the swimming pool.

In the mornings, Henry cooked eggs in the cast iron skillet over the camp fire. When I looked at the flames of the fire during the daytime, the waves of heat that floated through the air were the only indication that there was a fire at all.

"There's dirt in my egg," I said as Henry handed me my plate, "I can't eat it."

"That's not dirt, it's pepper."

"No, it's dirt. See." I pointed to the speck of black on my egg.

"OK. Take mine. Hand me yours."

"I don't know why you let her behave like this," Sophia said.

"Sophia, don't," said Henry.

Sophia reared back her head like a colt and walked away. She always came back, despite my secret wishes that she might disappear, be eaten in the forest or fall into the hole in the portable toilet.

The next morning Henry made pancakes with edges black like carbon and bubbling with hot butter. My mother always made silver dollar pancakes and I poured maple syrup all over the little pile. I watched my plate fill up with a brown syrup carrying a whole colony of black ants. They were still alive, some of them, even as I dropped the plate on the ground. "Oh my God," Henry said, "they must have gotten into the food at night. Here Katrina, give it to me." I started crying. I couldn't stop thinking about what it would have felt like to

eat the ants, the crunching sound as I bit down, what their bodies would feel like lodged in the spaces between my teeth.

It was a very dry spring and the place where we were camping was supposed to have beautiful waterfalls, but that season they were no more than trickles. The ground was the color of sand because there had been so little rain. After spending the afternoon hiking, we came back to the camp site and discovered that someone had stolen our water pitcher.

"It must have been that crazy lady," Sophia said.

She meant the lady who lived in the car parked next to ours in the parking lot. Her car was an old VW Beetle that was stuffed full of things. Peering in the driver's side window, which was the only window you could see through, I saw that every inch of space was packed tight with things. Clothes and books and odd pieces of cardboard were all jumbled together. The head of a rake was pressed flat against the passenger side window and in between the tongs were more things, little things. The woman had wrapped heavy chains around the girth of the car, chains that went right underneath the car and then over the top, twice. She secured the chains with several padlocks. Locked to the chains were whatever things she needed for the day, making the whole contraption look like a kind of charm bracelet around the car. When we walked

down to the parking lot, we saw our blue water jug there, fastened to the outside.

"Hey, you know, that's ours," Sophia said when she saw the woman walk slowly out of the bushes.

The woman didn't respond. She just stood still and stared, her long white hair greasy and tangled.

"Did you hear me?" Sophia belted out.

I wanted Sophia to leave her alone, to let her have the stupid plastic water jug. We could get another one. We had to get another one. We couldn't use that water jug anymore, it was sick, just like that lady.

"She's crazy," Sophia said, disgusted that the woman would steal.

The woman walked away quietly and started busying herself with the things attached to the car. I wondered where she went to the bathroom. Afterwards, I thought that the woman might blow up our camp site or maybe kill us in the night with a gun. Whenever my mother pulled into the parking lot, I asked her not to park next to the VW Bug. I didn't like to

get too close to it. I thought that the insanity might be contagious.

As we pulled into the parking lot the day before we were leaving, Sophia sped up and then braked suddenly, screeching to a halt, inches away from the VW Bug.

"I should just hit that car," Sophia said. "That would teach her."

"But you're not supposed to hit other cars," I said.

"Why are you so attached to rules, Katrina? Why can't you just let go a little."

"Because rules are important."

"So what are you saying, that no matter what the rules are, you will follow them?" Sophia asked me.

"Yes," I said. "No matter what."

"Well, what if the rule was that every time you ate dinner you had to spit food out on the floor. There are certain cultures where that is accepted. In fact, there are certain cultures where it's considered impolite if you don't spit on the floor."

"If that was the rule, that's what I would do," I said.

"You are such a conformist," Sophia said.

I took this as a compliment, getting out on Sophia's side so I wouldn't have to walk near the lady's car.

On Tuesday evenings that spring when my mother taught her late class and Sophia and I were alone together in the house, she pushed all of the furniture to the sides of the living room and put on her favorite record. She whirled me around, teaching me how to dance. Really it was all her dancing, I just spun around and around as the music played. On weekend mornings, when Sophia and Henry went back to bed after their morning chanting at the ashram, I would get into bed with them and play with Sophia's oversized breasts. "What do you think of them?" Sophia asked me. "They wobble like Jell-O," I said.

Since I was friends with Susan, the most popular girl in the class, I was invited to Matthew Chambers' eighth birthday party, as was Sally. Matt's parents were organizing a kind of coming of age party for him, a co-ed sleep-over. Matt invited Richard Armstrong and Doug Andrews.

Mrs. Chambers, whose bright red lipstick made it look like she was used to dressing up, greeted Sally and me when we arrived. She said she was hosting her own Flamenco party that night for her and her husband's friends, also in celebration of Matt's eighth birthday, and we could join them later if we wanted. But first, we should go sit in the breakfast nook, girls on one side, boys on the other. I don't think that any of us had ever thought that there was any difference between boys and girls until that night when we were told to sit on opposite sides of the breakfast nook. Mrs. Chambers said we were going to spend the evening playing spin the bottle and would be entirely unsupervised. "I don't want you just to use the time to play together as you do at school," she said, "This is different. I want you to play by the rules of the game."

A big wooden salad bowl filled to the brim with different types of candy was sitting at the center of the table. "I want you to take as much candy as you want. But ," she said, standing up, "don't eat anything yet." She pulled a dried red pepper from a bunch of chilis hanging against the wall. "I want you to taste this and then taste the candy. It will taste so much better then." I thought their kitchen smelled funny. Mrs. Chambers cut up the chili into six equal parts. I wondered if you could die from eating that much chili. Sally asked Mrs. Chambers to cut hers down to a smaller size,

while Susan hid hers in her pant pocket. I put the whole piece in my mouth just like the boys did and then thought that there would never be enough Tootsie Rolls in the whole world to get that taste out of my mouth.

Afterwards, we were led downstairs to the basement, which had six mattresses spread out on the cement floor. There was a single bare bulb lighting up the room and an empty beer bottle was set on the floor. Mrs. Chambers briefly explained the rules to us. "Whichever girl the bottle stops at has to kiss the boy that the bottle stops at." Then she walked up the steep flight of stairs and locked the door. We sat for a few minutes, all a bit stunned, and finally decided to start playing. We initially played by the rules but then began making up our own. Wouldn't it be better if the person who the bottle stopped at got to choose the person he or she wanted to take into the back and kiss? There was a small closet in the corner of the basement where the two chosen people went. I imagined that Susan's time in there must be much more passionate than my own. Or, was she just as disgusted by the site of Matt--closed eyes, lips glistening with spit? Finally, it became clear that all of the boys only wanted to kiss Susan and all of the girls only wanted to kiss Richard and that both Susan and Richard only wanted to kiss each other. As the night wore on and the noise upstairs from the Flamenco party got louder we all became more and more

uncomfortable with one another until we decided just to go to bed. I was relieved when the light was finally turned off and the windowless dark of the basement settled around us.

In the morning, when Mrs. Chambers came down and woke us up, eager to find out how things had gone, I felt as if I hadn't slept at all. Susan said that Matt and Richard had snuck upstairs and danced to the Spanish music with Matt's father's graduate students. Mrs. Chambers wanted to make us breakfast but Sally wanted to go home. She had already called her mother and Sally was my ride. She and I waited out on the porch, our sleeping bags rolled up and cradled in our laps. The minute that we got into the car, which was warm and smelled of cigarette smoke, Sally started crying. "Honey, what's wrong?" her mother asked. "Didn't you have a nice time at the party? What on earth happened?" "I hate that woman," Sally blubbered. I tried to disappear into the back seat while we drove the ten blocks to my house. I hopped out with Sally still crying.

Sophia and Henry got back a few hours later. They asked me about Matt's party.

"It was fine," I said.

"We went to a party too," Sophia said.

"How was your party?" I asked her.

"It was great. It was a costume party. Sharon Goldstein came as a Freudian slip and Karen Richardson dressed as a pregnant bride. Karen won the prize for best costume," Sophia told me.

"And Sophia got a real kick out of her shame-faced groom, Jeffrey."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Sophia asked.

"Well, he was paying an awful lot of attention to you."

"Henry, he was not! Will you just stop it."

I didn't know what they were talking about. Jeffrey used to come over for dinner. He once brought his dog and asked me to guess the dog's astrological sign. I said "Gemini" and Jeffrey, who had long blonde hair and a nice dog, was astounded that I knew this. "I only said Gemini because that's what Henry is." But he didn't care. He preferred to believe that I had magical powers.

I had heard my mother once say that John was in love with Sophia. John was an architect and lived in a house with very few pieces of furniture. He had a mustache and went to my mother's therapy groups. We went swimming with him at somebody's house and he and my mother went into the pool naked. I wore a bathing suit. "See, I'm different looking from you," he said, when he had gotten out of the pool. I didn't say anything. I watched his genitals spread out wide as he leaned back against the lounge chair.

The next morning, Henry came into my room. It was still dark outside.

"Get dressed," she said.

"What time is it? Where are we going?"

"To find Sophia."

"Where?"

"Just hurry up."

Henry looked strange. I asked her to drive more slowly. She didn't say anything and she didn't slow down. I could see that she was crying.

"What's wrong?"

"Sophia and I are having an argument."

"Oh," I said, "well you know Sally and I sometimes have arguments. Good friends can get into big arguments."

"Katrina, this is different. Sophia and I aren't just 'good friends,'" she said.

I looked straight through the windshield and as far into the distance as I could. We were driving along the long tree-lined street that I walked down every day to get to school. I couldn't speak. I couldn't believe what she had just told me. I didn't even know how it was that I knew to be ashamed. But in telling me that she and Sophia were more than "friends," I suddenly had an understanding of who Henry was and how very wrong it was to be like that.

"Don't," I said.

"It's who I am Katrina."

The windshield went out of focus. It was like I was looking through a window covered in rain. I looked down the street,

straight ahead, trying to record all of the details surrounding me, trying to make everything stand still.

Breakdown

I stayed with Helen more once Sophia had moved out. She brushed my hair a hundred times before I put my pajamas on and got into bed. At her apartment, I slept in the same bed with her. I liked sleeping there with her. The heavy, slightly oily smell that she gave off gave me a sense of security. Everything in the room matched, it was all black and white, the carpet, the bed spread, even the new clock-radio, which had numbers that flipped over with the changing minutes. The sound that the numbers made as the minutes changed reminded me of the sound that very neat and concise words made, words like "nook." On the desk in the bedroom, Helen kept the family of glass animals that I had given her. The three giraffes, the tall father, the mother, and the baby, sat atop a round mirror.

I was falling asleep to the sound of the numbers changing when I was woken up by Helen's voice, yelling. I could hear Henry's voice, then Helen's. They were arguing. My mother wasn't supposed to be there. I got out of the bed and ran down the hall. Standing next to the door to the living room, I could hear Henry screaming at Helen.

"She's my fucking daughter and I will do what I want with her. Let me go, I mean it, let me go."

I was worried that Henry might be hurting Helen. I tried to get up the courage to open the door. But I waited, knowing that the door was closed for a reason. I had half convinced myself that what would be on the other side of the door could have absolutely nothing to do with what I was hearing. As if these voices were piped in from somewhere else, and really, when I opened the door, they would just be sitting on the couch having a normal conversation. But as the yelling continued and I heard Helen crying, I knew that I had to make it stop. I turned the chrome door-knob and opened the door. The light in the room was very bright on my face.

"Mom," I said in a sleepy voice, "what's wrong?"

They froze, mid-action, as if they were in a still photo taken from a film. Helen was down on all fours, guarding the door. My mother was riding on top of her. My mother came over and held me very tightly.

"I'm here, I'm not going anywhere," I said.

The three of us sat on the foam rubber couch in the living room and Henry cried.

I don't know who made the decision that first night to take Henry to the hospital. Perhaps Helen called her therapist or one of her therapist friends. In any case, Henry went willingly. Helen took her to Lakewood, the private mental hospital in town that was gated and had private grounds and was made out of old bricks.

I was not allowed to visit Henry at the private hospital. But when we would drive on the highway and pass by the back of the Lakewood grounds, I took a deep breath and held it, just like we were told to do when we were on school field trips and passed cemeteries as we were riding on the bus. One of our teachers had told us it was rude to breathe when those who were buried couldn't.

"That means she's crazy," I thought to myself.

My friend Sally's father had been married before he married Sally's mother and his first wife had been sent to live in a mental institution. Whenever anyone spoke about the first wife or where she lived, they lowered their voices.

After Henry was hospitalized and had come home, I remember her being very quiet. She was medicated and embarrassed. The house was quiet, I was quiet. It was as if we had all forgotten how to speak at a normal volume. Helen moved back to the house and no one talked about what had happened. Time started moving very slowly, the days took forever, but as I join them together they are like jumps in a record.

My mother went back to school, finished her course work and started the process of collecting information for her dissertation. She decided to do her thesis on quitting smoking and she needed to gather original research. She designed a series of exercises to alter addictive behavior. Her office was in the basement of our house and she saw clients there in the afternoons and evenings. I sat at the top of the stairs and cracked the door to the basement so I could hear what was going on. I heard lots of crying and beating and moaning and then Henry's voice, soothing, calming.

I started following the lives of the regular patients. I knew which ones "hated their mothers," which ones were "depressed." Since there was no doorbell at the side door which led to the basement, they all had to come through the front door and I would relish the opportunity to lead them through the house.

"What's wrong with Barbara," I asked my mother one night over dinner.

"I can't tell you. It's professional ethics to keep things like that confidential."

"Well, I already know that she's had an abortion. Why does she cry so much?"

When my friend Sally came over during the afternoons, I got her to spy on the patients with me.

"It's Tuesday," I told Sally, "that means that Barbara is here."

We staked out our position at the top of the stairs and opened the door just a crack. We couldn't see anything but the length of stairs that led to the side door but we could hear their voices. Through a variety of hand and body gestures, I motioned to Sally that we had to be very quiet. There was just

mumbled talking. Sally began to get bored. She didn't know the whole story. We squatted down, tottering on our toes, ready to jump backwards like a loaded spring in case someone walked in. Our calf muscles were getting tired from so much squatting when I heard some low groaning noises. I motioned for Sally to be quiet again, just to get her attention. And then, there came this scream. It was Barbara, yelling at her mother. "I know," I could barely hear my mother say over the cries.

I was auditioning for a university production of The King and I. I had seen Singing in the Rain earlier that year and had decided that I wanted to be a singer. I wondered why people didn't just sing all of the time since everything seemed better when they were singing. My mother picked me up in the green car after school and we drove to the high school across town where the auditions were taking place. When we entered the big cafeteria, the room was filled with children. A tall man with a bald head was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room and the mothers were standing by their children holding them by the shoulders and whispering to them. Someone clapped and asked that everyone be quiet. "We're going to start the tape and then we want groups of ten children to come up around the throne. When you walk away from the throne--this is very important--when you walk away from the throne, you have to walk backwards. OK? Everyone understand?" I was put into a group. The music started. We

walked up and then walked away. I wasn't chosen because I turned my back to the King. I walked back to Henry, through the children who had been chosen and who formed an oddly tight-knit group now. My mother held my shoulders and I looked up into her face. She looked as disappointed as I felt though she said "don't worry about it, there's always another time, so what if you turned your back."

"You're not upset, are you?" Henry asked, once we had gotten back to the car.

"It just doesn't seem fair," I replied.

"It's not about fairness," she said, "it's about who did the absolutely right thing, the thing they wanted."

Somehow her words made me feel more like crying. I slouched down. Singing, I decided, was something I could do on my own.

"Can we go see the performance anyway?" I asked Henry.

"Sure," she said, "I don't see why not."

"And next year," I said, "there'll be another performance."

"Assuming we're here next year, that's right."

"Where else would we be?"

"Maybe somewhere where there are more regular people," Henry said.

"Aren't all of the people here regular?"

“No, they're not regular in the least. I am sick of going to a coffee shop and ordering eggs and then having to find out that the waitress is finishing her doctorate in particle physics!"

"But I like it here."

"Well it may be good for you. But it's a place where nothing ever happens and everyone is so stuck up. If nothing ever happens, at least the people should be nice. They think that just because Robert Frost was denied tenure it's somehow an important place. I don't get it.”

My mother had been home from the hospital for almost six months when I walked into the house and felt a cold breeze blowing through the living room.

The Christmas tree was no longer standing where it had been, it was propped against the wall. I stood in the middle of the room. My mother was walking from the kitchen to the dining room to the living room. Helen came running up to me.

"I want you to go to Sally's house," she said to me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Your mother's crazy," she said, her voice beginning to break. "That's what's going on. She threw the Christmas tree through the front window."

Her face was red as she stood by the door holding a dustpan and broom. She cried more as she swept up the pink and silver shards of glass.

"Would you just stop it," Henry said, storming into the room. "You're scaring her. I'm fine Katrina. I'm fine. We can all stay here. Everything is fine."

I heard Eliza's voice in the next room. She hung up the telephone and came into the living room.

"Henry, you need to go to the hospital. You need some medication. I know that you're a smart person. Why don't you just take care of yourself."

"I am fully capable of taking care of myself and my daughter, thank-you-very-much. With all due respect, Eliza, I don't think that you know a God-damned-fucking-thing-about-any-of-this."

I went and sat on the couch, hoping that Henry would follow.

"Come on, why don't you just sit down," I said and patted to a spot on the couch next to me.

"You know, I'm not a fucking animal Katrina. You don't have to be as condescending as the rest of these fuckers."

I started to cry. Helen was crying also and came and put her arms around me.

"Look what you're doing to her Henry!" Helen screeched.

"Well, its an unkind world, didn't someone say that, or maybe it was me, and I don't think I should keep that a secret from the kid."

"You're being an ass," Eliza spit out.

Henry stood up and walked over to Eliza.

"Do you now how long it's been since I had sex. It's been a long time."

"Have you ever tried masturbating, I hear that you can do that by yourself," Eliza responded.

"You know, in fact Eliza, I have, and you know what, it's just not the same."

There was a knock at the door. Helen went to get it and there was a policeman standing there.

"Hello Officer," Henry said in her most polite voice, sounding as if she were greeting the Avon lady. "What can we do for you?"

"Well, M'am, I received a call that there was some noise here and that there might be a problem."

"A problem. A problem. There sure is a problem," Henry said. "These two ladies here want to have me hospitalized and

I don't think that is a very good idea. They say that I am," and she lowered her voice, "crazy, that's what they say. Well, Officer, I have a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and I know what it is to be crazy."

The police officer stood very erect, a foot taller than the women in the room. He looked like a play-action hero, all muscles, all blue, and made our living room look suddenly very small.

"You know she's the one who should be locked up," Henry said, pointing at Helen. "Not me. Take both of them. Do you know what they do at night?"

"You have two choices," the police officer said, "you can come with me willingly or I can take you against your will. It's your choice?"

"I want you to understand that no one in this room has any right to lock me up!"

"So you're telling me that you are not going to go willingly?"

"Fuck you!" Henry said.

The police officer pulled out a pair of handcuffs and took Henry's arm, bending it behind her back until she couldn't move. She resisted but in what seemed like a second, he had her on the floor and was putting the handcuffs around her wrists. My mother was screaming at him but her screaming was muffled by the carpet, her voice was powerless now that she was on the floor. He pulled her up and took her to the car.

That night, Helen told me that Henry was manic depressive. "It's a disease, your Mom is sick, it's just like having diabetes."

The next day, walking home from school, I saw the tinsel from the Christmas tree tangled in the blades of the brown winter grass.

I sat in the basement alone in the afternoons. The phone rang. It was Henry calling from the hospital.

"Is Helen there?"

"No, she's at work."

"Listen," she said to me as if she were about to tell me a secret, "you've got to get me out of here." "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you."

"I don't like it here. Can you come and get me?"

"Mom, I'm sorry."

I heard voices in the background. They had taken her to the state hospital because she couldn't afford the private mental hospital anymore. I imagined that mental wards were places with plastic furniture where a dozen people sat around, some talking uncontrollably at the air, others bent over and silent. Helen had told me to just hang up if Henry called. "You shouldn't have to deal with your crazy mother."

"Katrina, you need to get me out of here."

Her voice became more desperate, searching. I held the receiver away from my head and looked at it, looked at the voice coming out of the phone as if it were like voices coming out of telephones in cartoons. I could still hear her voice, but it was someone I didn't know on the other end, not Henry, some person. I set the receiver down and the

voice stopped. The sound that the phone made as I set it down on the cradle was like a lid closing. The sound absorbed all of the other noises in the room.

One afternoon I came home from school and Henry was sitting in the dining room.

"Hi Henry," I said. "Does Helen know that you're here?"

"Yes."

When Helen got home she took Henry back to the hospital.

"But how did she get out?" I asked Helen.

"She put on her clothes and pulled herself together and just walked out the door like anyone else."

This led me to believe that the line between sanity and insanity was very thin. Measured, perhaps, only by the fabric of one's clothing.

"Well maybe she'll just end up in the back ward of a mental hospital," Helen used to say. I imagined the back ward looked something like a back porch, a screened in one with rocking chairs lined up on it. The really crazy patients were left there

to rock back and forth endlessly. In my vision, time stood still. The patients didn't age. There was Henry, exactly the way I saw her then, rocking in her chair.

When Henry came back from the hospital, the times when she was officially discharged, she was as unrecognizable as she was when she went in. The circles under her eyes would be darker, from things she had seen and couldn't tell me about, I imagined. She kept the rooms dark, there couldn't be too much noise. She wouldn't talk about anything that had happened. I'd overhear Helen talking to her about credit card bills.

"You don't remember buying the desk?" Helen asked. "We have to take it back. We can't afford it."

"I can't go back there," Henry whined.

I began to understand why things started appearing before Henry was sent to the hospital. I became phobic about new things being brought into the house. Cameras. Jewelry. Furniture. "Can we afford this?" I asked whenever I saw anything new, particularly if it was nice.

And then there were other conversations. Conversations about medication.

"Why won't you just take the lithium, Henry. Just try it, just for a little while," Helen pleaded.

"I'm not going to spend my whole life taking drugs. You don't know anything about those drugs, what those drugs really do to you. Kurt Vonnegut's son took those drugs and do you know what he said, he said that he would be more than happy to take any drug that any psychiatrist gave him, as long as the psychiatrist tried it himself first."

Finally, she would begin to break through the fog of the medicine and then even her hushed embarrassment went away. We all pretended that everything was fine.

This state of nervous calm would last anywhere from a month to three months. Then, falling asleep some night, I would hear the stereo go on full volume. Worried that the neighbors might hear, I'd go downstairs. Henry had moved a chair and lamp to the front porch and propped open the front door. She wore a purple cloth hat that shaded her eyes, making the dark circles under them that much darker.

"Henry, you know I can't sleep with the music on."

“I’m sorry Katrina,” she said in highly articulated syllables, trying not to slur her words, “I’ll turn it down.”

“Aren’t you cold sitting outside?”

“Yes, but that stinking fucking friend of yours threw me out of the house.”

“Henry, you know that isn’t true,” I heard Helen yell from her bed upstairs. I went to bed. “We should call the doctor,” I thought to myself. I knew it was time because Henry had started wearing hats.

Henry woke me up the next morning at dawn.

"Get ready," she said.

"Where are we going?"

"We're leaving."

"Does Helen know?"

"Yes, Helen knows. Just get ready."

I put on the clothes that I had planned on wearing to school that day. It was a gray day near the end of winter and the light that morning was dim. But I didn't turn on the light.

"I'm just going to say good-bye to Helen," I said, trying to play along and not make Henry suspicious. "She'll want to know where I am."

I walked into the bedroom. Helen was sound asleep, lying on her side and snoring. To wake her up, I had to shake her.

"Henry wants to go away," I said.

"No," she said, "she can't do that. What time is it?"

My mother had gone downstairs and started the car. I looked out the bedroom window and could see her standing on the brown lawn near the car, the exhaust coming out white in the cold air.

"Are you going to get down here Katrina or am I going to have to drag you down?" Henry yelled at the top of her voice.

"Helen, you have to make her stop," I said. "The neighbors are going to come out."

Helen pulled her nightgown around her and went downstairs. She didn't have any slippers on so she walked barefoot across the pavement. She hadn't fully woken up, I could tell, because she kept tilting her head to one side. I should go down and help her, I thought.

I watched them argue on the lawn and then I saw Henry push Helen away from her and the front screen door slammed shut.

"I'm giving you two minutes, Katrina. You get down here with whatever it is you're bringing with you or else that stupid friend of yours is going to get arrested or sent to the hospital."

I thought Henry might hurt Helen if I didn't come downstairs. I felt short of breath, like I had had the wind knocked out of me, and I suddenly had to go to the bathroom. The brown corduroys I was wearing were rubbing against my thighs. I had to change my pants before I could go.

"Mom, I'm coming. I just need to change my pants."

I went to my bedroom to look for something to wear but Henry ran up the stairs and pulled me out of the closet.

"Would you just get downstairs. I don't give a fuck about your pants."

Helen was standing by the open front door. Her nightgown opened at the front as Henry pushed by her.

Helen grabbed me and yelled "Go! Do whatever you want. Just leave her out of it."

"You know she's my daughter. You have no legal right to keep her. Give her to me."

"Mom, I don't want to go."

"I told you already that I don't care what you want." She put her hand on my arm and twisted the skin.

"You're hurting me," I said.

"Either you let her go or I rip off her arm," Henry said calmly.

Helen let go. I ran past Henry and out the door. I lost one of my shoes as I was about half way down the block. But by then one of the neighbors had come out to see what all of the

yelling was about. When Henry saw them, she spit at me and got in the car.

Speeding

Henry came back after two months. She said that she had been to Florida to see her guru. She had also been in the hospital in Florida. Now, she was "fine." "I'm fine," she said emphatically and said she didn't want to live with Helen anymore.

Henry found an apartment by ringing the doorbells of houses that she liked. "Guess what," she told me, "the Lowenthals are moving to Chicago." I didn't know how she knew this. "We're moving into their apartment."

Evelyn Lowenthal was a friend of mine from grade school. Her parents were divorced and she and her brother lived with their father. They were all moving to Chicago because her father had met a woman and was going to marry her. Evelyn was famous because even in the fourth grade, she had a full "head" of pubic hair. When the Lowenthals left the apartment, they sold some of their furniture and their dishes

to Henry. I liked that the apartment was filled with other people's things--the brown corduroy couch, the big gothic dining room table, canvas chairs, blue china plates, wine glasses finely etched with a flower pattern. I thought that living with other people's things might make our lives different.

We shared the apartment with two boarders whom Henry found through the ashram, a school teacher named Lisa and a psychology student named Nils. Lisa had grown up in Sandusky, Ohio, a place famous for its amusement park. She told me stories about Sandusky, which is on Lake Erie, situated on what is known as the "roller coast," a designation made up by the amusement park since each year they build a new roller coaster along the shore. From Lisa's account, Sandusky was right next to nowhere and her family was completely crazy. "Why did my parents move to an amusement-park town?" she would ask, "so they could have more fun." I felt as if she were doing a stand-up comedy routine for me. She sometimes paraded around the apartment with her bra fastened around the top of her head, pretending she had ears "like Micky Mouse's." I played the prude in the face of her D-size cups.

Lisa taught English at a junior high school and her students loved her because she was cool. She never loved me. She

liked me, and felt sorry for me, in the way that someone feels sorry for some exotic animal that is being mistreated but that they would never want to be responsible for. She thought that I was smart, just like a student of hers who was so smart and so neurotic that she didn't like her very much. If I had been at all capable, I could have learned a lot from Lisa. She knew more about junior high school boys than I would ever know. She occasionally asked me what I thought of the "ash-ram," pronouncing the first half of the word like "ash." "What do you think about all of those weirdoes singing and chanting and gurgling." But I knew how involved she was in the ashram and I didn't understand how she could take it seriously herself and make fun of it around me. I was weirder than she was, which I think finally made her uncomfortable.

The other boarder, Nils, must have been fairly desperate to continue living with us. With the all-night vigils that Henry kept, the pallor of depression which hung like a fog around the apartment, the periodic spying sessions through his keyhole organized by me with the help of a couple of my girlfriends. My bedroom was right next to his and was a converted back-porch. The room had shaggy lightening blue carpet. I filed away my Halloween candy in the closet by category and stored it--hard candy, chocolate, coconut, caramel--until it was so stale that it had to be thrown away.

The lay-out of the apartment allowed me to separate myself from Henry. Her room, where she slept and meditated and saw clients, was off to the side of the big living room. Then there was a long hallway that ran past the dining room and the kitchen to the three bedrooms in the back. I pretended that I was just one of the boarders living at the back. It annoyed me that Nils and Lisa kept associating me with Henry. I was as distant from her as they were. She was usually at the ashram or out of town and she would leave them instructions to "water Katrina every day" and take off. They had Helen's phone number.

I went to school and then after school, went to whatever lessons I had, violin lessons, dancing lessons. Henry had found a new violin teacher for me and I didn't like her very much. One afternoon, when I was supposed to go to a lesson, I decided that I just didn't want to go and went home and watched television instead. I was happy that I hadn't gone and didn't think about the fact that she might call Henry and tell her that I had not come. The next week, when I arrived for my lesson, I knew that I had to tell her something.

"I'm really sorry that I couldn't come last week," I said, "my mother's best friend died and so we had to go out to California."

"Oh my God," my teacher said with a genuine note of alarm. "I'm terribly sorry. How old was she?"

"She was my Mom's age," I said, thinking that at that age a person was certainly old enough to die.

"What happened? I mean, was she ill?"

"No, she wasn't ill. She just died. They came in one morning and she was dead. She had fallen out of the bed."

After school, I spent most of my time in the dining room, which was also the television room, just off the kitchen and next to the telephone. My mother would call from wherever she spent her time in the afternoons to check to see if the TV was on. I wouldn't even bother turning the volume down while I lied to her over the telephone. Then some woman with a sweet voice called and asked me if I wanted to be a model.

"Sure," I said.

"Well, tell me a little bit about yourself."

"I'm five foot eight and I have dark hair."

"And how old are you?"

"Eighteen."

She asked my weight and I said something and then she asked my bra size and I didn't know, but she wanted to set up an appointment anyway. I talked to her several times until she finally wanted to know why I hadn't come in. Then, somehow, Henry intercepted one of the telephone calls and told her that I was eleven years old and wasn't that obvious and that was the end of my modeling career.

During our time in the apartment, Baba, Henry's guru, was spending most of the year in the United States, setting up ashrams around the country. There were big ashrams in Los Angeles, Oakland, Miami, and the major one, kind of the headquarters, in New York State. I now realize that Baba divided his time between these places based on the season of the year: winters in Miami, fall and spring in California, summer in New York State. The fact that there was an ashram to visit gave Henry's compulsion to travel when she was manic a purpose. "I have to go see Baba," and the statement sounded like a cry. It was as if she were following a commandment, some holy edict.

I was sitting in class and a school secretary peeked around the door and motioned that I was wanted. "Your mother will be here in ten minutes to pick you up," the secretary said once we are in the hall. I wanted to tell her that I didn't want to go, that Henry was "crazy." But I had no choice, I knew that the school was powerless to refuse the wishes of a parent. I went quietly, walked through the silent halls of the school down to the door by the parking lot and waited for the big green car to come speeding up. I knew what Henry's voice could sound like, the look in her eyes. It was all starting again and I was beginning to realize that there was nothing that I could do to make her better. Having raced into the parking lot, Henry jumped out of the car, the engine still running, the driver's side door open.

"Get in," she said to me.

"But I need to be in school," I whined. "You can't just leave school whenever you want."

"You can do whatever I want you to. Get in the car. Now. Right now. We're in a hurry."

"Where are we going?" I asked. But I knew. To California, to Florida.

"But Mom, I haven't packed."

"I already packed," she said.

Then, as some kind of sick game, I asked her exactly what she had packed, acting as if for once she had packed all of the right things, everything would be OK. "Did you bring my shirt with the red and white checks? Did you bring my blue pants?" No, she hadn't brought that, she had brought whatever she could lay her hands on. I could plead all I wanted but the fact was we were leaving for the airport then. Right then.

I became very attached to things and also to rules about just about everything--what to pack, what to wear, what to say. I became attached to these things because I felt like they might slow down what was happening. If I didn't have my shirt with the red and white checks, maybe we couldn't go.

We drove to the airport at some incredible speed--even when Henry was not manic, she drove twenty miles over the speed limit. I was afraid of having an accident or of being stopped by the police, and this would annoy her.

"Stop acting like that, I am a great driver, nothing's going to happen to you."

At those moments, I did and did not believe her. I believed her in the way that I believed an airplane that I was riding on would not crash. When she passed other cars on the entrance ramp to the highway I knew that she had to be breaking some kind of law from the way that the people in the other cars looked at us. Sometimes, we were stopped by the police. She pulled over, got out the car ("this is a sign of respect, police officers like to feel that you are being subservient," she told me), apologized profusely.

"No, Officer, I had no idea that I was going above the speed limit."

"Well, M'am, we had you clocked at eighty-seven."

They always sounded surprised that she hadn't been aware of this.

"I'm sorry Officer, we're on our way to the airport."

Usually, they just gave us a warning, sent us off by saying "try to keep your speed down, I'm giving you a break this time." Sometimes they would ticket us. If it looked like the guy was going to give us a ticket, she tried flirting with him, and then, having pleaded sufficiently with him to avoid being ticketed,

would get back into the car and say "you can get out of anything, it's all about how you talk to people."

We arrived at the airport and she left the car in the Passenger Drop-Off Zone to be towed.

"Mom, what about the car?"

"Don't worry about the car. Someone will take care of it."

And they did. Sometimes she would even leave the keys in the ignition and the engine running, just to make it that much easier for it to be taken away. Then she grabbed the two over-packed bags with clothes in them, along with innumerable smaller bags that held anything from one sock to one can of Coke and we headed into the airport. We took whatever flight was leaving first for a city that was in the general vicinity of our destination. Baba was staying in Miami Beach that winter and we booked a flight to Miami that was leaving in an hour.

My mother liked airports. The people who work there "are paid to be nice to you."

"I'm sorry ma's, we can't check these unless they can be closed."

The bags were taken off the scales and I was told to "do something with them." I tried. I got one closed.

"We'll take the rest on the plane," Henry said.

"Only two carry-on bags are allowed on this flight," the clerk reminded us. We took five and no one ever said anything.

Since it was mid-afternoon when we started these journeys, the airport was sparsely populated. We sat in an airport bar for an hour or so, the muzak and smoke swirling around us as we sipped four-dollar cokes, well iced, served in tall skinny glasses. My mother had not slept for days. Part of the reason that she liked airplanes was that she could finally fall asleep. It was as if the days leading up to getting on the airplane were all about arriving there.

Once we were actually aboard the plane, it felt like the culmination of something. I could relax since there was nowhere to go, no one for Henry to yell at. I worked on whatever homework I had been able to take along with me or surveyed the large pages of a Wall Street Journal, which I had developed a habit of buying at airports because I thought that it made me look more normal. People stared at me when I pulled out the paper. I had no interest in it but I tried to

pretend that the information contained in its pages was meaningful to me.

"They've started you out in investing young, haven't they?" the middle-aged sales rep sitting on the aisle said to me.

By just looking up at him and smiling, I hoped that he would assume that I was some kind of child-genius with a gift for predicting the stock market. Later on, he picked up one of the three small empty bottles of bourbon that were sitting on his tray-table and offered one to me.

"My kids love these, but I have one extra, would you like to take it home with you?"

I thanked him and said no.

When we arrived, we went to whatever car rental desk that had the shortest line.

"Do you have a reservation?"

"No."

"OK, well, I think that we have cars available, what kind of car would you like?

"Whatever you have. Whatever you have, sir, whatever you have that you can give us right now."

"I need your license and your credit card and I need you to fill out this form."

My mother took the form and scribbled on it as fast as she could. Signing her signature with a flourish.

"I guess its legible," the agent said.

"Do you want me to fill it out?" I asked, making the agent laugh. He thought I was joking.

"Can't you hurry this up a little bit?" Henry asked.

"No, M'am, we can't. You have to wait just like everyone else in this line." The airline reservation clerks would never say things like that, I thought, as we stood close to a woman with a lot of matching luggage.

"Do you think that she's drunk?" the woman standing next to us said. I held on tight to the little green purse that I had made Henry buy me.

It was dark by the time we started driving from the airport. Along the way, we saw women standing along the streets. They were wearing fish-net stockings and red shiny boots. I rolled down the window and pushed my face into the humid night air. The smell of salt and asphalt mixed together as we crossed the long bridge to Miami Beach.

The ashrams had to be in places large enough to accommodate at least a thousand people and so old hotels were leased and gutted. The ashram in Florida was set up in a big pink stucco building that faced the ocean. The faded sign out front still read "The Palms" in cursive writing. It had all of the accouterments of a hotel, a bar, a swimming pool, a front desk. But the bar had been disassembled and the pool filled in with dirt and turned into a garden. The old ballroom was converted into the Meditation Hall and the walls were painted a light blue.

We were put in a room with a mother and her two daughters. The woman, Lally, was also a single parent. Her two daughters Sarah and Chris were only a bit older than me, but old enough to be wearing bras and having periods. Unlike the other ashrams, where the beds had been removed and replaced with wood-frame bunk beds, the double beds were still in the room. My mother and I slept in one bed, Chris, the younger girl, and her mother in the other, and Sarah slept on

a cot because she said that she had to sleep alone. Sarah had big red hair and beautiful big lips and too many freckles. She introduced the vibrating bed machine to me the first night that we were there. She put a quarter in a square metal box and it made the bed shake back and forth. I dropped a quarter into the slot and the machine started making a low rumbling noise as the bed shook back and forth. According to Sarah, I had to keep putting quarters into the box in order to keep the bed shaking. But I realized that my quarter was lasting a long time. The machine wouldn't stop. I didn't even need quarters. I found the cord that connected the box to the wall and discovered that I could make the machine start and stop at will, just by plugging it in. On our second night, I over-indulged in the vibrating bed and vomited all over the room.

My "Indian name" was Indu. Baba had given me the name. Baba gave names to all of the devotees, who requested to be named as they bowed at his feet during Darshan. Indu was the Goddess of the Moon in Hindu. I did not think that it was a bad name but I had mixed feelings about it because Henry told me that Baba gave it to me because I had such a round face, not because of any particular connection that I had to the moon. The name-tag that I wore around the ashram had "Indu" written on it in calligraphic letters. The

badge was laminated and had a passport-sized photo of me with my short cropped brown hair and chubby face.

A somber atmosphere had descended on the ashram because Baba had had a heart attack the month before. I was used to the silence during the afternoon working hours when we all did chores. But now it was silent all of the time. It was eerie to hear the sound of anyone's voice, as you would when the phone rang and the person taking reservations, the only person working who was allowed to talk, would answer the phone. It was so quiet that as I walked through the halls I could hear the sound of food cooking.

I became part of the inner circle at the ashram because I played the violin. And, although I really didn't want to be there, I began to enjoy being there more as it all started to seem like an elaborate palace intrigue. The young girls who sat near Baba at the evening program were immaculately behaved when they were around him and most were devout. I decided to begin taking things more seriously, even try getting up for the 6am Guru Gita, which was something that I had sworn that I would never do. The morning program lasted two hours and there was music and chanting and the lights were dimmed. The Gita was composed of 300 verses that were chanted while a harmonium, which was like an accordion without keys, was played. The harmonium

expanded and contracted like a lung and made a low groaning noise. Every verse was different but it was all in Hindi and I never bothered to look at the translation. I found it hard to stay awake in the darkened room and to sit for two hours with my legs crossed. The tingling sensation in my legs shot down from my knees and made my legs hurt. I looked around wondering how all of these people could stay so still. I wanted to curl up and go back to sleep, lay my head in the girl's lap next to me and wake up when it was all over.

Near the end of the program, I could smell the sour soup which was served for breakfast. The soup was a yellowish color and highly spiced and it was the consistency of a thinned down porridge. We all stood in line and people held out their bowls for the yellow slosh. I believed the soup was flagellant food, part of the torture that they all seemed to enjoy inflicting on themselves.

The privilege of being a musician meant that I could enter the Meditation Hall during the middle of the day when no one else was allowed in. I opened the double doors to the Hall and slipped in. It was like opening the lid of a scent box. The air was full of incense and oils and, even during the day, when there would be just the remnants of incense from the Guru Gita, the air was cloudy with smoke. On the walls of the Hall were blown-up black and white photos of Baba's teacher.

They were ten foot high grainy pictures showing Baba's teacher standing on dusty ground somewhere in India, wearing a loin cloth. The room looked like an amphitheater with no seats, just lots of floor space. At the center there was Baba's chair, the only chair in the room, set on a platform. I skipped down over the tiered seating area and ran to the door at the bottom. I felt like I was at a swimming pool with no life-guard on duty since there was no one to tell me to "stop running." I knew that I shouldn't spend too much time there but I also liked being in the big Hall alone. I could do anything I wanted, but then didn't, because I believed that anything that I did in that room would not be a secret.

My mother came into the room where we were staying at odd hours. She was only sleeping two or three hours a night. When I saw her during the day, she had ashes streaked across her forehead in the center of which was a large, powdery bindi. Two dozen yellow roses had been placed in the lobby. "Your mother had them sent for Baba," one of the women at the front desk said to me. I avoided Henry when we were around other people. In the room, I ignored her. She wasn't really there. Her eyes wandered when I looked at her. When I saw her in the Meditation Hall, she had multiple shawls wrapped around her shoulders and she flung her body back and forth during the chanting. There was a name given to people at the ashram who have spirits in their heads. My

mother seemed to be turning into one of the fanatics. I stayed away from those people.

We rarely went outside of the ashram since everything that we needed was there--food, a little store, an ice cream parlor in the basement--all set up by the ashram, for the ashram, which gave the place the feeling of being state-run. But one afternoon Henry wanted to take me swimming in the ocean. "It's just like the Mediterranean," she said. I felt lucky to be in Florida in the winter; it was where all of the rich people from Iowa City went when it got cold. I wiped off my bindi and pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, which I put on at the beach since I was not allowed to be seen in shorts inside the ashram. My mother wriggled into her bikini underneath her ashram clothes.

On the beach, we saw people walking, old people bowed over with canes, Hasidic men with curved backs, wearing tall black hats and curls. The Hasidic men dressed in black suits even on the hottest afternoons. They stared at us and I stared at them--all of us looking at each other like scared animals. My mother told me that "they were Jewish," and that was all. So everything Jewish became mixed up with my image of the Hasidim--the accents, the hotels, the people at the beach. They were Jewish, but not Jewish in any way that I knew from home, they were a much stronger strain and lived in

much more religious ways down here, I reasoned. We sat down on the sand, next to ladies with dyed black hair sitting in chairs that sat close to the ground. “They’re from the ash-rahm”--a word that rhymed with ash-can--the ladies announced when they saw us. And then they talked about how those “ash-rahm” people had converted that old hotel and had done quite a nice job. “But you would never guess what they did to the ballroom, ripped everything out and carpeted it. A disgrace. And the swimming pool--they’ve turned it into a garden filled with statues of elephants with clothes on!” We sat very close to these ladies, almost on top of them. Their heavily lipsticked lips formed dramatic shapes when they opened their mouths wide to make O’s and A’s. They discussed the ashram in a normal volume, making no attempt to conceal the conversation from us. They assumed that we spoke a different language or didn’t speak at all.

When I came back into the room, I found Sarah ironing her bra. The room smelled of burnt plastic. "Oh my God," Sarah cried. "This is my best bra!" She ran to get her mother. "It's polyester, it's melting. Whoever told you you could iron polyester!" They yelled at each other in loud bursts, throwing words back and forth like a volleyball. "How dare you come and get me for something like this!" Lally yelled. "The iron is ruined too!" Lally left and went back to her class and Sarah sat on her bed and cried.

I had to write a report and I had brought the "W" volume of the Worldbook Encyclopedia with me. We were studying World War II and I thought that the best way to present the report would be to pretend to be one of the people involved in the war. There was a black and white picture of Mussolini in the Worldbook. He was wearing a small hat and a uniform. I decided to dress up like him because I had a khaki dress with buttons down the front that looked a lot like the uniform he was wearing. But I needed a hat. "You're such a brown noser," Sarah said. "Why did you bring homework with you?" I told Sarah that this wasn't vacation and that I needed to keep up with my school work. "The problem is, I need a hat," I told her. "Why don't you make one?" she said. Since the hat was like a cap, I thought I could cut up pieces of cardboard and paste them back together. All I needed was a flat top and a little bit of a brim. Then, I could put some Italian symbol on the front. The color of the cardboard would be the same color as my uniform.

I found an empty box of Tampax in the garbage by the sink. It was the wrong color on the outside, but if I turned it inside-out, it was brown. I traced a circle on the box and cut it out. Then, I cut out pieces from the sides to form the base and brim of the cap. It was a bit small but it sat on my head like a real hat. The only problem was that Tampax was

printed in blue letters all over the inside of it. I just had to be careful not to let anyone see. I finished copying out the article from the Worldbook, replacing all of the "Mussolini" parts with "I" and felt satisfied that my report would be better than anyone else's.

Baba was only giving Darshan once a week and then only for an abbreviated time. He wouldn't stay for the chanting and when he sat in his big velour armchair, his body leaned slightly to one side. It was almost as if I could see the life seeping out of him, like air being let out of a balloon. There were lots of people at the ashram because everyone was scared that Baba was going to die and they wanted to be there when he did. And the "management" kept trying to calm the devotees down, so they wouldn't panic. But still, there was the sense that fourteen hundred people were preparing to mourn the death of their father.

In the afternoons, when I didn't have a chance to hide in the room and do my homework, I would be captured and put to work with the other devotees. Long tables were set end to end in the dining room and about sixty people sat on each side of the table in silence peeling garlic. I worked slowly. No one checked up on my progress and I knew that there were adults who were more ambitious than I was, more convinced that good work translated into good karma, who would help

us to meet our quota for the afternoon. I was working listlessly. The late afternoon sun played against the white walls and I was beginning to feel sleepy. Everyone looked up when the doors to the room were opened. Una, one of the old swamis, walked in and whispered something to the person in charge of our work team. Una had an old wrinkled up face and was exactly my height. Her orange sari made her look striking. Una had once told me a story about Baba giving her a piece of candy. It was the most delicious thing she had ever tasted. She asked for another one. He gave her another. But it just tasted like a piece of candy. "You cannot ask for things. They are only given to you," she told me after she had finished telling the story. After talking to the supervisor, Una motioned for me to follow her. She said that Baba wanted to see me. I was to go and wash my hands and go up to his apartment.

I was led to a suite of rooms that were so plushly carpeted that every noise was completely muffled. As I walked across the carpet, my feet sank all the way into the into the fibers, leaving footprints. The room smelled of incense and I could see into the room that was at the end of the hallway, Baba's bedroom. I walked towards it. I stopped when I got to the door, peeked in and saw Chima, his translator, standing by the bed. She told me to come in.

There was a large bed in the middle of the room and there were no chairs. The only other thing in the room was a set of glass shelves on which were arrayed, in perfect order, hand-made angora hats in every possible shade of red. Baba was bald and wore wool hats whenever he went out. The way the hats were laid out made them look like they were very precious. The red hats led to the pink hats and then bled into light pink hats. It reminded me of a color spectrum study, or the paint sample strips that I had seen at the hardware store. Baba was sitting cross legged surrounded by several large pillows. He was not wearing a hat. I had never seen him without a hat on and the sight of his bald head scared me. It made him look much older. He looked tired. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and tell him that it would be OK, he wouldn't die, I didn't want him to die. The sheets and blankets that he was sitting on were a blue that reminded me of the sky. Chima grabbed my shoulders and maneuvered me into a position next to the bed. I was afraid to look directly into Baba's eyes because I had been told that no one ever looks directly into his eyes--it was, people said, like staring at the noontime sun. I looked down at his lap. Then, as if out of nowhere, Baba spoke a very brief sentence in Hindi and Chima smiled. "Baba wants you to sit down," Chima told me. I looked up at her. I knew not to touch Baba unless he touched me first. I didn't know how to sit down without turning my back to him and I knew that I could not turn my

back to him. Chima helped by showing me how I could put my back against the pillows and sit in the space between Baba and the edge of the bed. I could feel Baba's eyes on me more intensely. "You like playing the violin?" he asked me through Chima "Yes," I said, "very much." Baba reached down into his bopi and pulled out something that he held tightly in his hand. He unfurled a fresh-pearl meditation bracelet and held it high above his palm. He dropped it into my lap and patted me on the head. Chima told me I could go. I walked over the carpet in a daze, thinking how jealous everyone would be when they saw my new bracelet.

Driving to India

My mother didn't return from the trip to Florida with me. I moved back to Helen's house and when I went back to school, I told my friends that Henry and I had been at ballroom dancing camp. "It's the same camp we go to in the summers. It's the camp where I have to wear long skirts."

I delivered my oral report, dressed as Mussolini. I started the report by saying "I am the reason for the Second World War, I was behind the power of Adolf Hitler, I am not a German, who am I?" Everyone was very quiet during my report. The teacher told me it was well researched. The brown dress was uncomfortable and I wished that I had brought something else to wear.

After the report, Matthew Chambers picked up my hat. He started giggling when he looked at the underside of it. I tried to grab it from him but he wouldn't give it to me. "Look at this," he said to Doug Andrews "She used a box of tampons to make the hat."

I assumed finally, that Henry simply would never come back. It was easier when she wasn't around. Helen and I ate dinner together and after dinner she listened to me recite homework exercises. I was taking Latin. I wanted to be able to speak Latin, I wanted to speak it perfectly.

We watched Raisin in the Sun together and Helen cried. "It's just the injustice of it, Katrina, those people didn't deserve to be treated like that." I remembered Henry telling me that it was "any type of suffering that made her cry." "Even the end of Bambi," Henry said. Helen used to cry over the pages of Heidi as she read the book to me when I was younger. "Heidi was abandoned, Katrina." But I knew somehow that it is also a happy story.

It was around that time that I began looking for lives that I could disappear into. My grandmother had given me an instamatic camera and I took some photos of the biggest house in the neighborhood. Whenever I met anyone whom I

didn't know and whom my family didn't know, I showed them the photographs and told them that I lived in that house, that my mother was very rich and often away, that I was taken care of by servants.

After a year, when Henry finally returned, the aftermath started, the bills and having to find a job, which she couldn't, at least not in the area. So she widened her search. To other towns in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Indiana.

When she got a job in Normal, Illinois, I was relieved. "Don't you think that it's funny that your mother is moving to a place called Normal?" Helen asked, her voice high-pitched by the end of the sentence, as it always was when she said something that made her laugh. "Well, I don't know."

Her apartment in Normal looked a lot like every other apartment we had ever lived in: white enamel painted cabinets, wood floors, nice fixtures, very little furniture. She still had all of the dishes from our old apartment but somehow there seemed to be fewer of them now. I made the requisite summer visit down there before I went to spend the summer with my grandparents.

Near Henry's apartment, there was a small park. It had tall black gas-lights around the edge and wrought iron benches

scattered in the middle. The elms were planted in a square around the park and the grass was always well tended in between the walking paths that circled around. The park was quite small, just one city block , but it was a place that was meant for strolling. There was a statue of President Jackson in the middle and in the evenings, the gas lamps gave off a warm light.

I spent the afternoons taking professional aptitude exams at the hospital where Henry worked. I had practiced perfecting my answers so the computerized exam would tell me to become a doctor. My mother and I were getting along well. She was in her super professional "get along with everyone" mode and being fairly docile. We did, however, have one argument, when one of the psychiatrists got wind of the fact that I wanted to become a doctor and asked me if I might be interested in observing an electro-shock therapy session. My mother said "no, absolutely not." But I convinced her that she would be intruding on my freedom as an individual if she didn't let me. "I mean, when I do become a doctor I will see all kinds of things." I don't know whether she actually took my argument seriously or just didn't want to displease her new boss, but she finally agreed to let me attend the shock therapy session. Henry was going to come along and watch since she thought that it was inappropriate for me to go alone.

On a blistering hot Indiana afternoon, we watched a sixty-five year old man have wires attached to his head and convulse each time the current went through him. "It makes him feel better," the doctor told me, "it helps with the depression." The old man hadn't said anything before the procedure, just smiled. I stood there, notebook in hand, white lab coat specially made in my size, red engraved name-tag that read "K. Lewis, MD" attached to the lapel. I imagined that a real medical professional would not have any emotional response at all. I was surprised when Henry winced each time they turned up the current.

Henry lasted less than a month in Normal. Helen called my grandparent's house to tell me that she had left.

"She's totally out of it," Helen said, "I just wanted you to know, in case she shows up there."

"You understand that you can't let me go with her, she's crazy?" I said to my grandmother, once Henry had arrived.

"There's nothing that I can do when she's like this," my grandmother said.

"Just let them go," I heard my grandfather pipe out behind her.

I turned around and looked at him with an unbelieving stare.

"You're just going to let me go?" I asked again, this time more panicked.

"It's going to be OK," my grandmother said.

My grandmother was making pigeon cooing noises and nudging her head forward, almost pecking at the air, which was her way of crying. I knew that I had to do something. I ran into the kitchen to call Helen. But then I heard Henry's voice coming into the house, booming into the house, high and clear.

"Where's Katrina?" she yelled.

My grandmother must have motioned towards the kitchen. My mother jerked me out of the room by the arm.

"Mom, I just need to make a phone call," I said, trying to sound calm.

"NOW!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. It was as shocking as taking a breath on a very cold morning.

I was crying and my grandmother was crying and my grandfather was being very quiet. He had his arm around my grandmother's shoulders and I couldn't remember a time that I had ever seen them standing like that. The white rental car was in the driveway with both car doors wide open and my grandmother came just to the screen door to say good-bye. My mother revved the engine and we screeched away.

"Where are we going?" I asked Henry once we had raced onto the highway, my hands clenched until the fingertips dug into my palm.

"We're going to India."

"You know that I don't have a passport and that I haven't had my shots."

"That doesn't matter."

"It's dangerous to go to India without shots, people die."

"You don't need shots at the ashram. Nothing's going to happen to you there."

I looked at my own reflection in the side mirror and pouted at the image. She didn't care if I died in India. I could see myself being borne on a pyre, dressed in gold threaded fabrics and buried in some river.

We got to O'Hare in what seemed like five minutes and Henry drove right up to the passenger drop-off curb and parked the car.

"Come on," she said.

It was about ten o'clock in the evening and there were very few people at the airport. She found out that we had missed the last direct flight to New York, where she planned on getting the plane to India.

"God damn these people, they just don't fucking understand." She had tears in her eyes.

"Well, why don't we stay here and then leave tomorrow," I suggested, thinking that in the meantime I could call someone to get me out of here.

"You just don't get it, do you, you don't get that we have to get there as soon as possible. Baba may be dying and you don't seem to give a flying fuck."

She started the car.

"Where are we going?" I demanded.

"We're driving there. We're driving to India."

I think that she just planned on driving to New York City. She said once that in New York you can get wherever you need to 24 hours a day. I knew that you had to go to New York to get to India. We got onto the tollway and headed east. It was around midnight and the highway was deserted. I looked over at the speedometer and saw that it was close to the 100 mark. I was half praying and half terrified that a cop would pull us over. I tried to stretch out my hand but the muscles just tightened up.

We were sixty miles outside of Chicago when Henry decided that she was tired. She started to get off the highway.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Will you just shut up?" she said in the highly articulated way that she did when she wanted to sound really snide. "Don't you think that I know where we are going?"

We drove up to a little motel. There were cabins scattered in a semi-circle around the main office. This was good because other guests would not be able to hear Henry if she started yelling. This was bad because there was only one telephone in sight and it was in the middle of the semi-circle of cabins. I would have to wait for her to fall asleep before I could get out to the phone. "Where was I?" I looked up when we got out of the car and I saw a water tower in the distance, lit up by small green lights. It read CHESTERFIELD. At least I knew where to tell them to come and find me.

My mother was keeping very close tabs on me. She must have known that I was scared. I was trying to act casual as I sat on the bed, the small incandescent light attracting bugs.

"I'm going to take a bath," she told me.

"OK," I said, flipping through the pages of a magazine.

I could hear the water running. I was trying to figure out who I was going to call. Helen would come but she was too far away. I had to call Ruby. She was the only person I knew in

Chicago other than my grandparents. I knew that she would come and get me. I would tell her it was urgent.

I waited until I heard the long sigh from Henry as her body sank down into the bath water. Then, I got up quietly and walked to the door. I still couldn't unclench my fists, which made the process of getting the door open difficult. I was finally able to turn the knob by using both hands and I heard the lock click and the door spring open. I pulled it back and had my hand on the screen door when Henry flew out of the bathroom soaking wet.

"Where the fuck do you think that you are going?" she said in her faux Southern accent.

I let the screen door slam shut and turned around.

"Am I going to have to bring you in here with me to get you to sit still?" she asked.

I started crying.

"I just wanted to see what was outside," I said, wondering if I had ever lied so badly in my life.

"I know exactly what you are trying to do and you know what, you can't. None of those mother fuckers are going to come and get you now. You're just going to have to stay here with me."

"OK Mom, that's fine, I'll just sit here until you're finished."

"No, you're going to come in here with me."

"Mom!" I whined "I don't want to."

"I don't give a shit what you want. I want to take a bath and you won't even let me do that simple thing!"

She grabbed my arm, dragging me into the bathroom. "Get in there!" she yelled.

I sat on the toilet, which was damp from the steam from the bath. From the bathroom, I could see her naked, looking around the room for the key. Her dark hair stuck to her back and there was steam coming off her body. She locked the front door from the inside and then came into the bathroom and slammed the door. She dropped the key into the bathtub and I heard it clink as it hit the bottom.

"I'm really hot in here," I said.

"I told you already that I don't care what you are!"
"Stop crying," she said, "you always feel so sorry for yourself." "Listen to me, I'm your mother, I can do whatever I want and I know how to hurt you in ways that no one can see. What are you afraid of, that you'll die? You've got nothing to worry about. I was already dead before I was born. I rode a tricycle down two flights of cement steps when I was three fucking years old. And you know what, the only thing that happened was that I broke my arm. I should be dead. We should all be dead considering what there is to live for. Except for you. My darling, brilliant child. Do you know what Shirley Temple's mother said to her every morning when she woke up? Shine, Shirley, Shine. And that's what I've always said to you. Shine, Katrina, Shine. I used to walk around the block at night when you were a baby telling people to be quiet, to not make any noise, my darling baby daughter is sleeping."

"You know Mom, you really need to go to a hospital," I finally interrupted.

"Do I want to go to a hospital? Do you know what they do to people in the hospital? Do you know? In 1968 they took Dr. Whittier's daughter to the mental hospital and they shocked the fuck out of her brain. She was a doctor too but

that didn't stop them. That's right. They asked me to drive Dr. Mary Whittier to the hospital. Ask her, she's a nobody no job, no doctor, ask her to drive her to the hospital and let her watch when they put the wires to Mary's head. Fucking true. Uh hmmm. 'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.' Do you know who said that? Do you know? Of course you don't because you have an IQ of 5. Janis Joplin said that. And you know what? She was right. Do you know what my very first psychiatrist told me? He said that the one thing that he would have recommended for me to do was to never conceive. It's genetic. Live with it. That's what he said. I'm telling you verbatim. So you better watch out cause you have it too."

I tried not to laugh, which was hard. Crying would have been a better expression of how I felt but sometimes I couldn't help but laugh. I think she liked it when I laughed. Then she could laugh, or keep talking.

"They killed Thomas Merton. The fuckers killed the greatest prophet of the century in a fucking bathtub. Do you know that? Do you know that he died by being electrocuted in a bathtub? I haven't had sex in five years. Five years without a fuck."

"Mom, I don't want you to tell me this," I yelled. "I don't want to hear it. Do you know what you are saying to me?"

"O.K. fine, so you don't want to know. But you're going to have to know someday."

She let the water drain out of the bathtub, stepped out of the bath and wrapped herself in the three towels that were hanging on the rack. Her body was the color of a roasted nut and her long black hair stuck to her wet back.

"I'm really dying from this heat," I said, "I'm just going to go into the other room."

"You can go when I tell you you can. And right now, you can't go."

When Henry finally opened the door to the other room, I felt as if I were truly free. But it quickly dawned on me that I was in exactly the same position that I had been in a half-hour ago.

"Let's get out of here," Henry said once she had put on her clothes.

"But Mom, I want to stay here."

"Well, that's not what you told me a minute ago."

"Fine. Where are we going?"

"It's too far to drive. We're going to take the plane instead."

We got back to O'Hare at about four o'clock in the morning. The airport was completely empty but it was open. My mother went up to the one counter where the one airline reservation agent was standing and bought two tickets to New York City. My mother yelled at her because the airline didn't fly to India. The woman behind the counter gave us the tickets and checked in our bags. I was dressed in a white embroidered skirt suit, looking very proper. The conveyer belt wasn't moving, even the baggage department was closed, but the woman put the bags on the belt anyway.

"Is there anywhere to get anything to eat around here?" Henry asked her. "I'm starving."

"I think the cafeteria in Terminal B is open all night, you might want to try there."

We walked away from the counter, over the big squares of white shiny marble. The whole place was buzzing with the

sound from the fluorescent lights. As we were walking, I told Henry that I really wasn't hungry.

"Well I am. I want some pancakes."

"O.K. Mom, why don't you go have some pancakes and I'll wait here for you," I said in the sweetest voice I could possibly muster.

She must have been really hungry because she didn't even hesitate. She just kept walking.

I went to the silver bank of pay phones to call Ruby. I called information and got her number. It was so early in the morning, I knew that she would be asleep and I felt bad about waking her up. But I knew that if I waited, Henry wouldn't let me call. When Ruby picked up the phone, I told her that I was at the airport and I had nowhere to go. She told me not to worry that I had woken her up and said to get into a taxi cab and come to her house right away.

"Ask one of the people at the airport to put you into a taxi." She gave me her address. She would pay for the cab when I got there. I told her that I had money.

"I'll see you soon," I said.

I got up and walked back over to the woman at the counter. "I know that I look very young," I said, "but you need to believe me anyway. My mother is crazy and I don't want to go with her. I'm taking a taxi to a friend's house. I was wondering if you could give my suitcase back. I don't have any other clothes"

The woman looked down at me.

"I really can't give you the suitcase back," the woman said. "It's against the law. Once you've checked it, I can't give it to anyone, not even you. But you shouldn't be alone at this time of night. I'll take you out to the taxi."

She flipped down a sign indicating that the desk was now closed and grabbed some keys. I saw her look at the suitcase. She picked it up, took my hand, and we walked outside to a taxi.

I arrived about a half hour later. Ruby gave me a big hug when she saw me and we went into the kitchen and I drank a glass of Hawaiian Punch. We called Helen and woke her up and she cried because I was there and not on an airplane. She told me that she would never let Henry take me away again.

II

Everything was much whiter than I expected inside the police station. I looked up at the crisscross pattern of the grills covering the fluorescent lights. The lobby had a completely hygienic feel to it.

"I'm looking for Henrietta Lewis," I said to the woman in a uniform sitting behind the glass and metal window, "is she here?"

The woman looked over a list and picked up a clipboard. "I'll call in to tell them that you're here. I just need your signature at the bottom of the release form," she said as she placed the clipboard onto a revolving metal tray and spun it toward me.

I heard two bolts being unlatched and then Henry appeared, flanked by two guards. She had an amused expression on her face and her clothes were slightly wrinkled. She must have slept in them. I tried to look angry.

"I guess my daughter has already taken care of the bill," she said as I handed the clipboard to one of the officers.

"We have to go," I said. Seeing the two policeman next to Henry made me want to get out of the station as quickly as possible.

"Well I'm happy to see you too, Katrina."

We picked up Henry's purse from the woman at the window. "You didn't have anything else with you?" I asked Henry. "What happened to the U-Haul?" I added, unable to keep myself from smiling sarcastically at the thought of my mother barreling down Washtenaw in a 30-foot moving truck that she rented after wrecking her own car the day before. She had never been arrested before for her outbursts at police officers so the whole thing left me wondering what she could have possibly said this time to land herself in jail.

"It was towed," the woman said, handing me a card. "You can call this number, pay the towing and holding fee and then pick it up."

"Thank you," I said and walked toward the automatic door, which opened, letting in a gust of cold wind. Henry had kneeled down to tie her shoe and I waited impatiently in the door jamb until she had finished.

"Nice car," Henry said when I unlocked the door to the red Mustang that the rental agency had insisted on giving me as an upgrade.

"I didn't choose it."

"That figures," she said, before getting into the car.

It was with a mixture of relief and nervousness that I started the car, afterward looking in the rearview mirror to make sure that I could back up safely. I tried to always appear as though Henry's antics didn't bother me, or at least didn't get to me in any kind of profound way and that whatever situations arose, her late-night fights with girlfriends, economic insecurity, various embarrassing displays in public, were all just part of the drama that was Henry's life, that crazy, unpredictable show that everyone at work thought was simply hilarious. But there were times like this when I looked at her with a sense of rage mixed with pity. There was no one in the world I hated or loved so fiercely.

"I'm starved," Henry announced, as I drove towards the parking lot exit. "Where are you taking me to lunch? That's what your grandmother would do when she was having a difficult day, just put everything down and go out to lunch."

"Why don't we go to the hospital instead," I said in a dispassionate voice. I had a palpable sense of becoming a different person; it was like feeling my own personality split in two. I was inventing this personality to take charge, to take care of Henry.

"I don't need to go the hospital," she said, "The hospital, the hospital," she added mockingly, "do you want to go to the hospital?"

"Where are you going?" Henry asked as I turned left and started driving out of town.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," I said and smiled, aware of how absurd my answer sounded.

"Life, Katrina," Henry proclaimed, "is a hospital. Do you know who said that?"

"Yes," I responded, "Baudelaire did, though you're using the quote out of context."

Henry laughed. "You're right Katrina," she exclaimed, "Life is really much more like a hotel, or at least it should be. You know your aunt wanted to live in a hotel, like what's her face, Heloise. Just order room service everyday, wake up and call downstairs, have everything delivered, never do dishes. It would probably end up being cheaper—I mean think about all of the money you'd save on light bulbs and laundry detergent."

"Henry, this isn't a joke. You need to go to the hospital."

"We had that conversation already, you remember?" Henry replied.

"I'm in charge of you now, remember?" I responded, "You signed yourself over to me when I came to pick you up, remember?"

"Oh no you don't," she said, pulling herself up in the seat and opening the passenger side door.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Would you please close the door," I shouted.

She pulled it closed and I accelerated.

"Thank you," I said, "I'm more than willing to listen to any suggestions you might have for resolving this situation but as far as I'm concerned the only truly efficient way to handle it is to take you to the hospital. If you can come up with some other solution, just let me know, I'm already here, I've already left a thousand other things that I should be doing..."

"Would you just calm down Katrina. You're the one who's crazy. You're the one who needs some help. I don't know how I ever survived around any of you people. You're all nuts."

"Look Henry, don't. I'm not crazy. Don't tell me that because I'm not. Let's not even say that you're crazy. It's a terrible word, plus you're not crazy, you have a chemical imbalance..."

I pulled into the left hand turn lane, waiting for a break in the oncoming traffic so I could make the turn.

"I've had it with all of you people," Henry said, opening the door, "Sayonara, have a nice life. It's been nice knowing you."

She slammed the door and then quickly walked across two lanes of traffic, waving at the honking cars that were barely able to stop before hitting her. When she got to the

sidewalk she started walking, shaking her head and flicking her arms to each side as if she were trying to get rid of something that was sticking to her. I made my way out of the turn lane and started following her, trying to keep her in sight. I rolled down both windows.

"Henry, listen," I yelled, "just get back into the car. We'll go back to the house..."

She shook her head from side-to-side. I was trying to drive at the same pace she was walking, signaling with my free arm for traffic to go around me. I glanced in the rear view mirror and saw a van trailing me. "Go around," I said and waved out the window. But he wouldn't. He drove up right behind me, almost hitting the back of the car. I decided to pull into the next driveway and leave the car there since I thought it would be easier to catch up to Henry while I was on foot. But as I started to pull over, I saw Henry walking in the opposite direction. By the time I had parked the car, I had lost her. She must have turned a corner somewhere.

I decided to go back to the house and wait for Henry there. She had left her purse in the back seat of the car and, without any money, I knew she wouldn't get very far. The door to the house was unlocked.

I found a bottle of pills in Henry's purse with the name and number of a doctor listed on the label and walked into Henry's study to use the phone. She had found a child's

school desk at a flea market. "It's the first desk I've ever had that fits me," she told me over the phone the day she bought it. I sat sideways in the chair since I couldn't fit my legs underneath the desk and called information for the number of the doctor. Then, I left a message with the answering service and asked that he call me. It was an emergency, I said.

When the telephone on the desk rang, I picked it up, hoping it might be the doctor. But the person at the other end hung up as soon as I answered. The phone rang again.

A computerized voice came on the line asking me if I would accept a collect call from Randy.

"Yes," I said and then heard the sound of cars driving by. I could barely hear over the noise.

"Katrina? Listen, I'm here at a motel and I seem to have misplaced my credit card. Could you go to my desk and look up the number of the card?"

"Henry, where are you?" I asked, relieved that she had called.

"I told you already, I'm at a motel where I will be spending the night."

"Where you are?" I asked again.

"It doesn't matter. Maybe I just want to spend some time alone. You like to be alone sometimes, don't you?"

"Will you stop it Henry. Just tell me where you are and I'll come pick you up," I said, trying to focus on the practicalities.

"You're assuming, my dear, that I want to see you, which I think is a fairly big assumption," she said with a slight British accent.

"Where are you? I'll come get you and we can talk."

"I don't think I want anything to do with you right now," she said resolutely.

I wanted to hang up the phone but I needed to find her. "I have your credit card," I said, "But I'll only give it to you if you tell me where you are."

"I checked into the Best Western at the 246 junction. The people here have been very nice and I want to make sure they are well-paid for their services."

I imagined her ordering shrimp cocktails for the entire staff. "I'll tell you what," I said, "I'll come out there and bring you the card, OK?"

"I told you already Katrina that I don't want to see you."

There was a pause in the conversation. I could hear Henry's breathing through the end of the phone. "Why wouldn't you want to see me," I finally asked.

"Because I can't trust you. You seem to be out of your mind."

I found Henry in the lobby of the hotel with a pitcher of coffee and a big tray of tea sandwiches in front of her. She was sitting on an overstuffed couch, resting her right elbow on the armrest and holding a half-eaten sandwich in the air. Her head was turned away from the door and she didn't see me as I walked in. She seemed to be listening to something, something quite pleasant, something that she found extremely engaging.

"Hi," I said, sitting down next to her.

"Well hello Katrina, fancy meeting you here."

On the way over, I had decided that the only way to deal with Henry was to play along for a while, get her to trust me again and then suggest, rather than insist, that she go to the hospital.

"I'm sorry that I got angry with you in the car," I said.

She shrugged, still not looking at me.

"Will you accept my apology?" I asked.

"I don't see why not Katrina. I'm cool."

Her tone annoyed me as she smiled at nothing in particular and then laughed.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Huh?," she said, looking at me blankly, "Oh, it doesn't concern you."

"I'd like to take you home," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder, "How does that sound?"

"That sounds boring," she said.

I sighed and leaned back into the pillows of the couch.

The room was done up in a hunting lodge theme and had obviously been recently renovated since everything in it looked brand new. There were cheap oriental carpets on the floor and a big plastic moose head hanging above the gas fireplace. I looked over to one of the women standing behind the front desk.

"That's Linda," Henry said.

I smiled at Linda, trying not to look embarrassed, trying to look like I had expected to be sitting with my mother in the lobby of a hotel and picking at tea sandwiches.

"I'd really like for us to leave soon," I said to Henry.

"There are lots of things that I would really like to do Katrina," Henry responded in a matter of fact tone. "I'd like to learn how to read Sanskrit. I'd like to sleep with Brigitte Bardot. Look at you, I was told that the one thing that I had to do was to make sure that you became the finest violinist in the world. And," she said, chuckling to herself while chewing on a bite of sandwich, "I admit that maybe I started you out a little bit late, ten, which by Suzuki standards is about the equivalent of forty-five."

She was laughing as a bit of sandwich flew out of her mouth.

"Excuse me," she said, still laughing, and picked up a napkin, "a man closer to God than anyone on this planet today Swami Narananda said one thing to me," she said in a somwhat lower register, "he told me to do just one thing, to make sure that you became the world's finest violinist. It didn't matter what it cost. I was supposed to get you one of those violins, a Shostakovitch, what do you call them?"

"A Stradivarius," I said.

"Yeah, a Stradivarius, and find you the best teacher in the country so you could play your violin. I said 'yes, of course,' because what was I supposed to say, I don't have any money and don't know where to get any, that I barely have a pot to piss in… "

"I think you've told me this story before," I said, interrupting her.

"Well I'm going to tell you this story again Katrina. You need to know these things. They're part of your history."

I rolled my eyes at her and then looked away but she continued.

"So I go to Susan Hadley's mother, I was in love with her anyway, and now I have an excuse to talk to this beautiful blonde, a real blonde, an aristocrat at that, and I ask her when you were ten if it was too late for you to start playing the violin. She looked at me and she said 'well, maybe, but maybe you should get her a violin anyway, maybe it's not too

late.' Now Margaret Hadley, she was a beautiful woman. A great musician as well."

"Henry, what is your point?"

"You don't get it, do you?"

"No, I don't get it," I replied.

"Well then, you don't. Too bad for you," she said with a note of finality and a toss of her head.

I looked at her and breathed deeply, trying to restrain my anger.

"Henry, I'm not going to fight with you. We don't need to fight."

"I don't want to fight with you either Katrina. That's all people ever do. So let's not fight. That's a good agreement."

She picked up a paper napkin from the pile on the table and put on her glasses. She squinted through the lenses and then began writing quickly.

"I'll sign this napkin here. It'll be a non-fighting agreement. You sign here, beside my signature."

I picked up the pen and signed the napkin. The blue ink ran across the soft white fibers and the pen got stuck, making a deep hole through the napkin, as I signed the first letter of my last name. I set the napkin and pen on the table.

"Do you mind if I try one of these?" I asked, pointing to the tray of half-eaten sandwiches. "And, perhaps now that we aren't fighting," I said before I took a bite of a tuna

sandwich, "we can talk about the fact that you haven't been acting quite normal and what we are going to do about that."

"Oh, I see, normal," she said, leaning back and considering the word. "Normal," she continued, raising her voice and crossing her arms in front of her, "you know what they say about normal, Katrina, they say that normal only applies to a person you don't know. So what's normal anyway? I've never met anyone who was normal, not you, not Helen, not my mother."

"OK Henry, I agree, maybe normal wasn't the best way to put it. I'm just saying that some people are better at taking care of themselves."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Now that's funny. You don't have a clue about psychology if you think a person's ability to take care of themselves is the definition of sanity."

"You're not listening to me," I said, throwing a napkin onto the table.

"I'm certainly trying. You were saying..."

"I was saying that there are certain things that people are supposed to do..."

"You realize that you're losing this argument, don't you? Now sanity is a question of good manners?"

"No, sanity is being able to realistically assess the factors in your immediate environment," I said, as though I were reciting a definition from a dictionary.

"Oh, I see." She paused and then looked directly at me. "So was Jesus sane? I doubt it. Not if he was willing to die for a bunch of screwed up people who didn't understand a thing he was saying for more than maybe a second and a half. What about Mother Theresa? That's sane. Go live in Calcutta and watch a thousand babies die everyday."

"Will you stop being so melodramatic."

"It's not melodramatic Katrina, it's true," she said emphatically, "I don't make these things up. Go look it up in one of your books if you don't believe me."

"Henry, I came back here because I want to help you. I want to make this stop. Haven't we been doing this for long enough?" I asked.

"Doing what? Living? Maybe we have been doing that for long enough. These people in this town don't know anything Katrina."

"So who knows Henry?" I asked, "Why don't you tell me? It's obvious that I don't know, that I don't 'get it.' Tell me who you'll listen to. I'll go get them. I'll do anything for you," I pleaded.

"Don't patronize me. I'm not an idiot," she said snidely, jerking her head to one side.

"No, you're not, but you're really pissing me off."

I reached for her arm and she jumped back.

"You want to fight? Is that what you want? I'm a lot stronger than I look. And a hell of a lot stronger than you."

"Look, I'm not going to make a scene. This is your last chance. You either come to the car with me or I'm leaving."

I stood up and looked down at her. She was so small. My mother was, in reality, such a tiny person. I suddenly felt sorry for her. I picked up the napkin stained with blue ink.

"No fighting, remember?"

"I'm not fighting with you," she said, laughing.

"I'm about to walk out the door again. Is that what you want? For me to leave and come back, leave and come back? Believe it or not, I do have better things to do with my time even if most of them are fairly meaningless."

Henry stopped laughing and looked at me.

"You know what the clinical definition of insanity is, don't you?" she asked.

"No, I don't," I said, "why don't you tell me."

"The clinical definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again."

I sighed before sitting down on the couch.

The woman at the front desk was talking on the telephone. I hoped that she hadn't heard any of our conversation even though we were the only people in the lobby. I often wondered what people thought of me and Henry when they saw us together. We looked nothing alike and I was always surprised when anyone asked if we were related. Her skin and hair were much darker than mine and

she was four inches shorter than me. The resemblance between us was only obvious if you looked at pictures of Henry when she was in her mid-20s. I had never looked like her as a child but, as I got older, I began to look more and more like her former self. Henry had always looked young for her age but now the skin around her mouth was sagging and she had a paunch around her middle, which she tried to conceal by wearing long vests that fell to her knees and ended up making her look shorter and older than she actually was. She had never liked clothes--instead, she treated them like objects that got in the way, things that tormented her or that she didn't understand. Her one conceit in fashion was high heeled shoes. "Never let them know your true height," she said to me once as she wedged her feet into a pair of three inch heels.

The dark shadows around Henry's eyes made them look more intense, a more brilliant blue.

"When's the last time you slept Henry?"

"Huh?"

"When's the last time you slept through the night?"

"I don't know. Why?" she asked.

"Maybe that's what you need, some sleep."

She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes.

"Tell me a story. That will help me sleep."

"I'm not good at telling stories," I said curtly, "I'm better at analyzing them."

"You're no fun Katrina," she said, just as she used to when I refused to play cards with her. She was the one who liked games.

"You must have some story to tell. Come on, you know about a lot of things."

"Well I can't think of any stories right now," I said, looking over at the picture hanging on the wall beside the fireplace. It was a forest scene with two deer standing next to each other in a clearing. The surface of the picture was too flat to be a real painting, it must have been a reproduction.

"I have an idea," she said excitedly, "Why don't you tell me a story about a woman named Katrina who comes to visit her old, worn out mother who broke her back trying to give Katrina everything. That's a good story. Tell it with 'jewels and binoculars,' to quote Bobby Dylan. Everyone thought he was crazy too," she added, pointing her finger at me to emphasize her point. "I want to hear the best story that you have Katrina--no kidding around, no faking--the best story."

"Didn't you always say that everyone has the same story," I asked in an ironic tone, trying to stifle her enthusiasm.

"Did I say that?" she asked, still sounding excited, "I'm more intelligent than I thought. They all tell the same story, all of my clients. Every single one of them. That's what they teach you in psychology programs, to be smart

enough to know there is only one story--at least only one story that matters. If you just show me a person, let me sit with them for ten seconds, I get their story. I just get it. I do Katrina. Not everyone does. That's why I'm such a great psychotherapist. I understand their story. They just sit down and they tell you the story. Boom. They're all dying to tell that story. You put them in the chair and it all comes out in five seconds. What a stupid profession."

"OK Henry," I said, interrupting her tirade, "I have an idea, why don't you tell me your story."

"That's so you Katrina. Only you would ask that question. Outside the box, that's what you are. Only you would look at me and have me tell you my story. Well I'm a little different," she said coyly, looking at me and laughing.

"Come on Henry, you can't be that different."

"OK," she conceded, "The central story of my life was that I was raised by a bunch of loons who didn't give a shit that they were loony. You know, when you're in a psych program, in graduate school, at least, people are always arguing, nature or nurture, nature or nurture, all of those whiny graduate students, back and forth, like the weight of the world is on their shoulders, trying to decide whether environment effects someone's mental health. And the truth is, it's both. I mean what mother fucker who's insane is going to set up a healthy environment for their kid."

Whenever Henry talked about her miserable upbringing, all I could think about was the clutter in my grandmother's house: the tops of dressers covered in dusty bobby pins and loose change, the chipped china, the glass figurines on the shelves in the dining room, the tarnished silver coffee set resting precariously on a stack of old newspapers. I imagined Henry's head being filled with these same dusty objects.

"At the time, of course, I was a behaviorist," I heard Henry say as I started paying attention to her again. "I had to be. It was the only way I could have any hope. Because otherwise, I was a hopeless case."

"Is this your story Henry?" I asked, trying to make her focus.

"I'm getting there, I haven't forgotten," she said, "I'm just less linear than you sometimes. I'm really a committed behaviorist. Almost as much as Skinner."

"What does Skinner have to do with anything, Henry?"

"What doesn't Skinner have to do with everything is a better question. You never read that book of his, the one about raising his daughter in a box, a kind of glass cage. She ended up on a motorcycle in the middle of New York City when she was eighteen, completely naked. That's what you get for having a perfect childhood," she said, still laughing.

"OK. My story. But wait, Skinner, you don't know who he was, he was a lunatic genius who taught at Harvard who believed you could teach anyone anything. So Skinner takes a pigeon and spends about twenty five thousand hours training the pigeon to do a dance with an umbrella, a pigeon," she exclaimed, "I mean the stupidest animal in the world. Actually, I don't know that it is the stupidest but pretty close. I think it took them about five thousand hours just to get the pigeon to pay attention."

"Henry, you're making this up," I said.

"I am not, it is a hundred percent true," she insisted, "Go look at his books."

"Your story doesn't make any sense," I said.

Henry laughed hysterically and put her face close to mine. "That was the point, my dear."

I looked at my watch.

"It's almost midnight, Henry."

"Do you think there's a bar in this place Katrina? Maybe we should go have a drink. That might help me sleep. Your story doesn't seem to have made me sleepy. It made me more awake."

"I didn't tell you a story," I said.

"Well, your question then. Your question made me more awake. What do you say we go have a drink. We've never done that together. I was always too afraid of becoming an alcoholic like everyone else in our family but it's

probably a little late now for that kind of thing to happen. I don't even know if you drink Katrina."

"It's interesting how much you don't know about me Henry. You might want to keep that in mind sometimes."

"Now that's not a very nice thing to say," Henry exclaimed, "I only know as much about you as you tell me, besides all of the information I have about you. You were the most carefully observed infant on the planet. I've been watching you since before you were born."

I started picking up the napkins and cups on the coffee table.

"Just leave it there Katrina."

"We need to find out where to put it," I replied, impatiently.

"You can leave the tray over there on the table," the woman at the front desk said as I carried the tray toward her.

Henry raised her eyebrows and looked at me, just in case I hadn't noticed that she had been right.

I put the tray back on the table next to the couch where we had been sitting and walked back to Henry, who was leaning her elbows on the counter and looking up at the woman behind it.

"Is there anywhere in this whole wide world where we can still get a drink at this time of night?" she asked.

"Well, you know, M'am, this is your lucky day because the restaurant through that door stays open until

two. They only serve food until midnight, but you can still get a drink."

"You're the greatest," Henry said.

"Well thank you," the woman responded enthusiastically.

"Anytime," Henry added, "I'm actually thinking about moving in here since you people are all so nice."

"Henry, let's go," I said, grabbing her arm and taking a step toward the restaurant.

The bar was at the far end of the room, past all of the tables that had been set for breakfast the next morning.

"You're still serving?" I asked the woman behind the horse-shoe shaped bar. "Sure are," she said, "sit wherever you'd like."

There were two men sitting on the other side of the bar. One of them looked up as I slid onto a bar stool. I smiled but he quickly returned to his conversation.

Henry was making an exaggerated attempt to get back onto the bar stool after she had slid off.

"Whoa Nelly," she said, and tried again to lift herself up onto the red seat.

I held out my hand to steady her and she was finally able to get up onto the stool. Johnny Cash was singing in the background. I looked around for a jukebox but didn't see one.

"What can I get you?" the woman behind the bar asked.

I ordered a whiskey, straight up, with water on the side.

Henry said she would take one of everything.

I told her that wasn't possible. "Just decide," I said. "Do you have a menu?" I asked the woman.

"Our specials are listed on this card," the woman said, pushing it toward us.

"Perfect," Henry said, "I'll have a Piña Colada, straight-up."

I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my purse.

"What the hell are you doing Katrina?"

"I'm having a cigarette. Didn't we agree that tonight we would do whatever we wanted? No criticisms? So I want to have a cigarette. I could tell you that I have to go to the bathroom and smoke there so you wouldn't see but I feel like smoking here. Do you mind?"

"I hope to God that you have a child someday so you will know what pain really is. To watch your own child kill themselves. That's something. Give me one of those cigarettes."

"But you don't smoke," I responded.

"Oh ho, that's what you think. I don't always have to be the person you think I am, do I?"

I handed her a cigarette, which she daintily between two of her fingers.

"I don't light them, I just hold them. It's the same kind of thing."

She made a show of smoking the unlit cigarette.

"Can I light that for you?" the woman behind the bar asked.

She lit a match and held it toward Henry, who was laughing so hard that she blew it out. The woman lit another one and lifted it toward the cigarette. Henry blew the second one out on purpose.

"The third time's the charm," Henry said, laughing, "I'm sorry, I'll be serious," she added, holding the end of the cigarette into the flame. She took a drag on the cigarette and then started coughing as she blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air.

"Give me another one," Henry said as she put out the cigarette in the ashtray, breaking it in half as she stumped it out.

"You're just wasting them," I said.

"One more," Henry pleaded, "That'll be it. I'll just hold it. See. I promise."

I pulled another cigarette out of the pack.

"I'll buy you a whole pack later," Henry said as I picked up the glass of whiskey and took a drink.

Henry dunked the slice of pineapple into the Piña Colada and then started sucking on it. "I never did like the taste of alcohol," she said, making a face after she tasted the white liquid. "These are good because you can't taste the alcohol, but she must have put a lot of rum in this one. Did you ever drink a martini? That's what your great-grandmother used to drink. 'Just give me a glass of pure poison.' That's what she'd say when she ordered one. I'm gonna have a martini after this."

I took another drink of my whiskey and tried to imagine what Henry would look like drinking a martini, a child playing the role of a grown-up, I decided.

"Your story Henry. We got side-tracked," I reminded her.

"I almost forgot," she said excitedly, "My story. It's not that interesting. You're probably the most interesting part of my story. Life got a lot more interesting after you were born. I wish that I had had more kids. Like ten or twelve. That would have been great."

"How could you have had that many kids?" I asked, choking on my drink and coughing, as I added, "Who would have supported you?"

"Well I suspect my husband would have supported me," she said, batting her eyelashes.

"What are you talking about," I asked. "I always wanted to get married. Sylvie and I were going to get married. But we didn't."

"Thank God," I muttered under my breath.

"When I was younger, I still thought I'd marry a man," she said in a subdued voice.

"When?" I exclaimed.

"When you were a baby. I kept looking for the right father for you."

"Henry, you're joking," I said, leaning back slightly and looking at her.

"I am not," she insisted, shaking her head for emphasis, "I just didn't find the right candidate. That was a crucial problem."

"But Henry, you don't like men."

"Who says Katrina? I like men. I have a tremendous amount of respect for men."

"But you're a lesbian," I said, swallowing the last word so the woman behind the bar wouldn't hear.

"Well Katrina," she said turning to me, "I have news for you, I'm a lot of things."

I ordered another whiskey, leaving Henry with her Piña Colada, which she had only half-finished.

"The bartender's pretty cute, don't you think?" Henry asked, after the woman had set down my drink and re-calculated our tab.

She was probably a student at the university. She looked young. She had blonde hair that she wore puffed up and set with so much hair spray that not a single strand moved. Henry was now staring at the tight black uniform that the bartender was wearing. I hated it when Henry made it obvious that she found someone attractive.

"Tell me your story," I said, beginning to feel the alcohol going to my head. It had a numbing effect and felt good even though I was beginning to feel self-conscious about slurring my words.

"Oh right, my story. I'm sure I've told you."

"Probably. But I want you to tell me again."

Dolly Parton's voice came out from the speaker that was hanging from the ceiling.

"I'm just a coal miner's daughter," Henry sang along, appreciating each word. "Dolly Parton is a saint. You may make fun of her but talk about a story. She was born in a log cabin and didn't have a pot to piss in."

Henry picked up her drink and took a sip. Then, she made a face like she was about to fall over because the drink was so strong.

"The central story of my life," she announced after she had finally swallowed, "has to do with not being dead."

"What the hell does that mean," I asked. "I was fundamentally not supposed to survive. That was your grandfather's story too. He wasn't supposed to survive

either. So I'm second generation not supposed to survive. They kept trying to kill me. Over and over again."

"Henry, I don't think that's true," I said in a serious tone.

"I'm telling you the truth Katrina. I know. I was dead before I was born. So I'm this dead person, a live dead person, and they keep trying to kill me in whatever way they can. And these people weren't too subtle in the ways that they tried to kill me either," she said laughing.

I put my hand on her arm, "Your mother loved you," I said, reassuring her.

"Sure she did. I know that she loved me and God knows that I loved her but there just wasn't enough room for me. They lived in a crowd--all of the aunts and uncles--on Mom's side--they all needed her attention. She didn't have time for me. I was Daddy's child, the boy, remember? That's who I was. And he was incapable of taking care of a flea. He didn't give a damn about anyone but himself. You knew him Katrina. You knew what he was like. Mom's too busy taking care of her relatives and Daddy was just too out of it or too drunk to do much. It was a death march, my whole life, and everyday I expected to be dead."

I shook my head. She was making this up.

"You don't believe me? Your grandmother put your aunt and me on the city bus when your aunt was seven years old! Alone. At seven! We might never have come back. I

was five and a half at the time. Your aunt was seven so she at least knew where we were going. I didn't have a clue. She sent us to the dentist. Alone. And the day I cracked my head open, I came running into the house, crying. And the only person who's there is your grandfather. 'Oh it's just a little scrape Henry, here,' he said, and he put a Band-Aid on top of my head. I can't make this stuff up Katrina, it happened. I'm bleeding like a quart of blood from my cranium and he goes and gets a Band-Aid and puts it right on top of my hair. Mom came home and took one look at me and rushed me to the hospital. He didn't know what he was doing Katrina. He just didn't know. He wasn't there. Even more in the past than when you knew him, he wasn't there. At least he'd stop drinking by the time you were little. But the guy couldn't hold his alcohol, I mean not at all, so he'd have like two beers and be out like a light."

"You're saying that they're responsible? They're finally responsible for everything that ever happened in your life?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that that's my story. And the story doesn't go away Katrina. It never goes away. And ultimately, I'm responsible for myself just like you're responsible for yourself. Didn't Sartre say that? He may have. It doesn't matter who said it. I'm saying it. You can't do anything for other people or because of other people."

"So what are you saying, that I should just stop feeling responsible for you."

"Well I would recommend starting there. You can't touch me with a ten foot pole Katrina. You can't touch anyone, really. That was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life, thinking that other people were the most important thing."

I closed my eyes and felt myself sway on the bar stool. I knew that she wouldn't remember any part of this conversation and I wondered why I was taking it so seriously. I didn't know where it would go in her mind, whether it would just disappear or burn up, like some unstable molecule that never really had any physical manifestation in the first place. I had had three glasses of whisky and nothing to eat other than a bite of tuna sandwich. But I didn't feel that drunk.

"So what's important?" I asked.

"God," she said without hesitating.

"What about Dolly Parton?" I added, ironically.

"To the extent that she's closer to God than some people, she's important."

Henry ordered a martini and expressed her disappointment when it arrived in a tumbler instead of a tall glass with a stem.

"This isn't quite the image I had of the thing," she said to the bartender.

"Well it's the ingredients that count," the woman responded, winking.

Henry asked for more olives and the bartender brought a whole saucer full. As far as I knew, Henry didn't like either gin or olives but she filled the glass to the top with the shiny green fruits stuffed with red pimento and, with one finger holding her nose, took a drink of the clear liquid.

"Here's to knowing you," she said and then took another drink.

I couldn't stop laughing.

"What?" she asked, "What's so funny?"

"Henry, stop," I said, still laughing, "you'll make yourself sick."

"It's just alcohol Katrina. I've been given worse."

Having finished the drink, Henry closed her eyes and placed both her hands on the bar.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm waiting to get drunk," she said and then smiled.

"You might want to move your head around in circles, that might hasten the effect."

She moved her head side to side.

"Do you feel anything yet?"

"Nope."

"Well the bar closes in half an hour so you better hurry."

She opened her eyes wide and looked at me.

"I guess I never became an alcoholic because the stuff just doesn't effect me."

"Sure, Henry," I said, feeling my own head beginning to spin.

"How are we getting home?" I asked her.

"We're driving."

"Well I'm a little too drunk to drive and you don't have a license with you."

"That doesn't matter."

"Oh yes it does," I said, "or do you not remember being in prison this morning for a traffic incident?"

"It wasn't an incident Katrina, I was driving too fast."

I had to lie down and close my eyes.

I didn't think that I could wait another minute.

It felt as urgent as having to go to the bathroom.

"Henry, why don't we stay here. I need to get some sleep."

At five o'clock in the morning, I walked into the bathroom to get a glass of water. The water came out of the tap cloudy and lukewarm but it tasted good. I drank three full glasses and then walked back into the main room. There was only one bed and Henry was lying right in the middle of

it, on top of the bedspread. I didn't remember coming into the room, only Henry opening the door with a key, which, she said, someone had given her earlier in the evening. I thought about leaving, just walking outside through the damp morning air and taking the car to the airport. The sun was just coming up and the sky was a luminescent white. I lay back down next to Henry, on the margin of bed that she had left, and breathed in her smell. Usually when she was manic, she reeked of incense and Jean Naté but tonight she just smelled like herself, a hint of violets mixed with old socks and warm skin. I curled up next to her and fell asleep to the sound of her breathing.

I had had no intention of getting involved with Henry's latest episode when I heard from Sylvie that she wasn't well. It had been almost two in the morning, when the phone outside my bedroom in New York City rang again. I got out of bed, walked over to the machine and turned down the volume. I hated the sound of my own voice and I had heard enough of it for one evening. I had not seen my mother in over a year, ever since my graduation from college, but she had been calling and hanging up every ten minutes, after Sylvie, my mother's girlfriend, had phoned at midnight.

"I've had enough, Katrina," Sylvie, had said in a steady, practiced voice, "Your mother's been like this for

three weeks now. She wrecked the car the other day and she could have killed herself. I just wanted you to know that I'm leaving."

"And what am I supposed to do?" I asked, annoyed, as I always was, by Sylvie's tone.

"I really don't know," Sylvie said.

I could hear my mother yelling in the background, commanding Sylvie to hang up the phone.

"I'm two thousand miles away," I said, trying my best to sound calm, "and that means that it is very difficult for me to take care of anything from here."

I didn't believe Sylvie would actually leave. There was a pause in the conversation.

"Well," Sylvie said, "you're the closest blood relative." Before I could respond, she had hung up the phone.

I climbed back into bed and looked up at the thin crack in the ceiling. The apartment, which I shared with my friend Julia, was in a pre-war building on the upper west side of Manhattan. The rooms were big and square and had high ceilings and front windows that overlooked the Hudson River. At night, the view of the lights glistening on the river was magnificent. Because it was a one bedroom, Julia and I slept in the same room in two single beds, side by side. But that night, Julia wasn't there. She was spending the night at her new girlfriend's apartment downtown.

I had no idea what to do after I graduated from college. I had considered going to graduate school or teaching high school or getting a job with a newspaper, but I couldn't make up my mind. Julia convinced me to move to New York with her and share the rent-controlled, one-bedroom apartment that her grandmother had recently left her. Julia had grown up in New York City and was, like me, an only child. Her parents were both stage actors. Her mother had done musical theatre and her father still worked as a character actor on Broadway. Julia was also an actor and a playwright, but she had no interest in Broadway theater. She performed her own experimental pieces downtown and wanted to start a theatre company.

Julia's mother had helped me get my copyediting job at a theatre magazine because she thought I had the right temperament to be an editor, and because she knew people there. I loved Julia's mother, though, unlike most other mothers I met, I never wished that she had been my mother. She and her husband treated Julia more like a friend than their child. And Julia referred to each of them by their first names, Janet and Bob, unless she was really upset with them, when she would call them Mommy and Daddy. Julia's father had sandy colored hair that Julia said he had highlighted. He was raised in Ohio, but spoke with a distinct English accent, and wore tweed suits throughout the fall and winter. Like Julia, he had beautiful hands and long, thin fingers that he

kept well manicured. Otherwise, Julia looked nothing like him. She had dark hair and eyes while her father was fair and pale. She was also larger than he was, bigger somehow, even though she was not near his six feet in height. Even with the weight Bob had recently gained, his face and body were as delicate as a young girl's. He always looked a bit startled when anyone referred to him as Julia's father.

I had never been as close to anyone as I was to Julia and I was happy to be living with her. We would stay up very late, talking to each other from our single beds and giggling, until we finally had to force ourselves to get some sleep.

Many of the people I met in New York seemed stuck or penned in, as though they didn't have enough space to move around in. Or, perhaps I just felt stuck since I was having such a hard time moving in any one direction. Julia kept trying to help me figure out what I should do. "You can do anything you want to," she said. No one had ever believed so much in my abilities. I only wished that I could share her confidence or that she could be more specific about what it was she thought I should do. Because, for some time, I had no sense at all of what that was. I didn't mind my job at the magazine, where I sat in a gray cubicle and looked for errors on the big galley pages of the weekly mock-up. But I could not imagine being there any more than six months, maybe a year. I didn't want to end up like some of the people I worked with, who had been at the same magazine for more

than a decade. They had been to good colleges and were well spoken and intelligent. But something must have gone wrong somewhere, or else, I knew, they would have become more successful.

"You act like this is your career," Julia said when I told her that I didn't see where my job at the magazine might be leading. "It isn't as though this has much to do with the rest of your life." But I felt that she could be wrong. She was doing exactly what she wanted, and even if she wasn't a professional actor yet, she was at least performing. I had been so determined to leave Iowa and get into a good college that I thought this would settle things for the rest of my life. I knew how people became doctors and lawyers and academics, but I didn't necessarily want to be any of those things, and I didn't have any idea how anyone became anything else. If Henry really needed me to get her life back together, I didn't see that there was any reason why I couldn't take some time off and go back to Iowa. I might even gain some perspective on what to do next.

"Have you lost your mind?" Julia asked, when she returned the next morning and I told her about my decision to return to Iowa. "Do you not remember what happened at graduation? She never apologized for that, did she?"

Julia was sitting on the edge of my bed, still wearing her winter coat. I could feel the cold air from outside on the thick, black wool as she sat next to me.

"I've hardly talked to her," I explained, "she's been manic since then. I doubt she even remembers the dinner."

"I know she's your mother, but she's hardly been the most generous one in the world, at least not in the past, so I don't know why you have to screw up your life to take care of her."

I rubbed my eyes and propped myself on one elbow.

"I'm not screwing up my life," I responded sharply, annoyed as much by the fact that I wasn't quite awake as I was by Julia's question.

"It's not as though I have any deep purpose in being here."

Julia looked hurt.

"Don't take that the wrong way. I mean, I'm very happy living with you, you know that. But she's my mother. Who knows what could happen to her. A lot of manic depressives end up killing themselves."

Julia leaned back and sighed. "Has your mother ever been suicidal?"

"No," I admitted after deciding not to lie, "But that's not the point. Who knows what she might do?"

"And what about her girlfriend?" Julia asked, taking off her coat and laying it on her bed. "Is she just going to walk out on her?"

"That's certainly how she made it sound last night. I never thought she would leave. But I guess she just can't handle Henry when she's really bad."

I tried to block out my most recent visit with my mother and concentrate on the times when she was well. Julia was right. My mother's visit at graduation had been a complete disaster. But she wasn't always that way. I thought about her standing by the gate at the airport whenever I came home to visit during college. As soon as she caught a glimpse of me walking through the exit door, she would start jumping up and down, pumping her arms in the air.

"Alright!" she would say as I walked towards her, raising an arm for emphasis. She gave me a giant hug. "You look beautiful. You are beautiful. You're my daughter. I never have anyone to talk to when you're not here. I was just thinking about that. About how remarkable you are."

I was always so happy to see her. I told her about my week, "how absurd life can be," aware of how much I sounded like her as I said it. As we walked down the long hall of the airport, gliding now, more like images than real people, she asked how the flight was. I rolled my eyes. "Why is it that I am always seated next to the family with seventeen children."

She laughed, grabbed my hand tighter. "You know, I always think something is going to happen to you. I worry about you. But I'm your mother, I'm supposed to worry about you, right?"

I smiled and looked down at her dark hair, which was cut short. Her rose silk blouse was tucked into her pants and she wore a belt cinched tightly around her waist so the pleats puffed out around her stomach. She had gained weight. This was because she was taking her medication, the lithium that for years she refused but that she now took because she was "committed to staying sane, to not being manic."

As we stood at the baggage claim, I didn't have to watch her too closely. She wasn't sick. She had a good job and was planning on keeping it, she had even bought a new house with her new friend, Sylvie.

"How are things at the office?" I asked.

"Good good. Things are good. Boring, but good. I don't know why I would expect things to be any other way. Stuff at the office is fine."

I could not have been happier standing next to her and having a conversation that any two people could have. I walked over to the carousel and pulled off one of my bags. Waiting for my second bag, I decided, reluctantly, to ask about Sylvie.

"Well, I'm happy you asked, Katrina. She's fine."

Henry put on her therapist's voice when she talked about Sylvie. It was like water running over smooth stones. When she talked to me about other things, her voice was less steady. I preferred the voice that was more unpredictable.

We both began watching a man with light brown hair lift an oversized suitcase from the luggage carousel. He tilted with the weight of the bag and then stumbled.

"Goddammit," he exclaimed, "what the hell did you put in here?"

I squeezed Henry's hand and glanced at her while trying to refrain from laughing. She made a face and looked up at me.

"Shhh," she said, "be nice. They're just people like you and me."

"I know, it's just they were bickering at each other the entire trip. It was so annoying."

"He reminds me of Sylvie's ex-husband, all nicey-nice on the surface but you better be careful of what's underneath."

The couple with the children were walking away, when I finally saw my black nylon bag coming toward us. "Have you met her husband?" I asked, before I leaned down to pick up the bag.

"No, are you kidding? He thinks I'm the anti-Christ," she said and then laughed, "I can't believe what straight people put up with."

Sylvie was the receptionist at the clinic where Henry had started working the year after Helen's death. I couldn't stand the thought of my mother living with this woman whom most men would consider "a real bombshell." I felt that Sylvie was a fraud. I disliked her the instant I met her, which was nothing new, I had hated all of the women my mother brought home when she wasn't with Helen. I tried to be rational in explaining to Henry why Sylvie was wrong for her.

"She is nothing like you," I said to Henry after we had gotten into the car, "she's a suburban housewife who's decided overnight to become a lesbian! "

She turned to me with a look that was both annoyed and amused. "Since when do you know anything about being a lesbian?" Henry asked.

"Well, I grew up with one, didn't I?" which at least made her laugh, making me feel that I had brought her back to my side for a while.

We drove out of the parking lot, Henry rolled down the window, said "well thank you very much" to the woman collecting the parking money. A half mile of straight road and then we were merging onto the exit for the freeway. When I think of going home, it is always this curve in the exit ramp that I trace. I would have liked to stay there, in the no man's land between the airport and I-80, watching Henry drive her new Japanese car that she "loves" because it is "so

sensible," telling me again how happy she is to be sane and "back to normal."

Julia walked over to the window. She pulled open the curtains and the room was filled with bright light.

"What time is it?" I asked, looking around for the alarm clock. "It's about eleven," Julia said, as she looked out over Riverside Park.

"How was last night?" I asked.

"Don't change the subject, Katrina. And, anyway, it was fine."

"Is this serious?" I asked, putting a pillow behind my back and leaning against the bed frame.

Julia looked at me and walked into the bathroom without answering my question.

I got out of bed and decided to make coffee while Julia was taking a shower. The white enamel painted cabinets reached all the way up to the ceiling. I opened one and took out the tin of coffee. I felt awkward being in the kitchen in the morning, since Julia usually made the coffee. She always woke up before I did, even on the days when I went to the office. Usually, she would have already have gone for a run in the park by the time my alarm rang. I would miss having coffee with her in the mornings. A friend once said to me that the most important part of a relationship is being able to have coffee together in bed. I had never experienced that

with anyone except Julia, not even with Stephen, my only boyfriend.

I heard Julia turn off the shower and I pulled two cups off the dish tray, and walked into the bedroom.

"The coffee will be ready in a minute," I said, as Julia appeared from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, her long hair dripping water on the floor.

"I have a rehearsal at one," she said, "and then I'm waitressing tonight."

"Oh, right, it's Saturday," I said, wondering what I was going to do for the weekend. Maybe I would go to the library, and then spend Sunday at the museum, even though it was always too crowded on the weekends.

"I think you should really give all of this some thought," Julia said, running her fingers through her curly hair, trying to get some of the tangles out, "I mean, what's the rush, right? If your Mom's crazy now, she'll probably still be crazy next month."

I looked at Julia. Her head was tilted to one side and her fingers moved rapidly, as though she were counting something.

"That was a joke, Katrina" she finally said, as I stared at her.

"That wasn't a very nice thing to say," I responded.

"What, you can say whatever you want about your mother but the minute I say anything, it 'isn't a nice thing to say?'"

"Well, yes, that's right," I said, trying to look stern, but beginning to smile. "But I'm not sure that you're understanding how serious this is. If you'd been here last night…"

"Katrina," Julia said interrupting me, "we've been through this before and you panicked then, just like you're panicking now. I'm just trying to remind you that you have time."

As I stood in the kitchen, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, I realized that Julia just didn't want anything to change. It wasn't so much that she wanted me to stay, in fact, if she decided that she wanted her girlfriend to move in with her, she wouldn't hesitate to ask me to move out. But for me to make the first move was too disruptive. It wasn't part of her plan. And Julia, I knew, always had some kind of plan. If I told her that I was going away for a while, maybe even taking a leave from my job, she would be fine with my decision. It would seem temporary, and it would give her time to get used to my not living with her. She had acted the same way when I started dating Stephen. She disliked him at first. She had even said that she didn't understand why I would go out with him. Everything that I found most interesting about him, she criticized. "He's intelligent, but

he's awfully full of himself," she said. Even though I felt the same way about most of the women she dated, I was still annoyed. Stephen was my first boyfriend and Julia had had dozens of girlfriends. Enough, I thought, to have made some better choices. But by the time that Stephen and I stopped seeing each other, she seemed genuinely disappointed. "I always liked him," she claimed, once we had broken things off. And, even if he had never liked her, she had never noticed.

I poured the coffee into the ceramic pot and placed it on a tray, along with a pitcher of milk, and carried it into the bedroom. Julia was putting on a pair of pants and said she only had a minute before she had to leave. Whatever argument we had been having had still not been resolved; I could tell by the way she was moving around the room. Her actions were studied, rather than fluid.

"So maybe I'll just take a leave of absence from work," I said, "you know everyone's taking time off for Christmas anyway. They probably won't promise to keep the job for me, but they might even do that for a month or so."

Julia was pulling a black turtleneck over her head and one arm was still out of the sleeve, when she scowled at me. "You are the most stubborn person I have ever met."

"More than you?" I asked.

"That's not funny," she said, "I may seem stubborn at times but I'm constitutionally stubborn. You're irrationally stubborn."

"I think that's an oxymoron," I said.

"One would think that was the case," Julia replied, "but you are, in fact, living proof that it isn't."

"Oh Julia, I'm just leaving for a little while," I said, trying to appease her.

"No you're not," she responded angrily, "I know you. If you weren't happy, you could have told me and I would have understood. It's as though you don't remember the things that you've said to me. You said that you weren't going to see your mother anymore, or at least not until she got herself together. And now you're telling me that you've decided that you need to go back there. Do you remember anything that happened last spring?"

"I remember everything, Julia," I said curtly, interrupting her before she could relate the details of how supportive she had been to me at that time. I couldn't stand the thought of her exacting a price for being my friend. I was always there for her and I didn't dole out my interest with the expectation that she would reciprocate in kind. "Can't people change?" I asked, sounding less assured than I had hoped. I had not intended to respond in such a watered down manner, but to say anything more specific would have sounded like a personal attack. I didn't want to fight with her. We had tried

that once in college and had ended up not speaking to each other for a year. "I'm going to jump in the shower," I said, not looking at her.

"Well, goodbye then," she said, "I have to go to rehearsal. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

I woke up and saw a dim light coming through the slats in the horizontal blinds of the hotel window. Propping myself up with my elbows, I slowly sat up and glanced around the room.

"Henry?" I said, thinking that she might be in the bathroom.

"Henry?" I said again, getting up to look for her.

The bathroom light was on and the bath mat on the floor was damp and crumpled up next to the tub. I looked at myself in the mirror. The bright fluorescent light made my skin look blotchy and accentuated the dark circles around my eyes. I washed my face and smoothed out my hair with my hands. I didn't know where Henry could be.

Warm air was blowing through the vents in the ceiling as I walked out of the bathroom and over to the window, and pulled on the long thin cord at the side to open the blinds. I looked out across the parking lot at a dull gray sky. Cars moving in two different directions sped down the four lane road outside the hotel. I couldn't hear any sounds from the

road, just the steady rush of air from the vents. Henry must be downstairs having breakfast, I decided, and turned to look for my shoes and socks, which I found next to the large double bed. I couldn't remember where I had put my purse. It wasn't on the table in the corner or on the dresser. I walked back into the bathroom but the purse wasn't there. After opening every one of the drawers in the dresser and slamming each shut when I found it empty, I knelt down and peered under the bed, running my fingers over the greenish brown carpet. I must have left it in the bar.

I hurried out of the room and quickly walked down the hall to the elevator. The hotel was only two stories high and I could not understand why the elevator was taking such a long time to travel up one floor. I walked around the corner, looking for a flight of stairs but only found a fire door and then rushed back to wait for the elevator, which still wasn't there. I pressed the button again and heard a ding as the light above the doors lit up. After I had gotten in and pressed the button for the lobby, the doors slowly moved together and the elevator started descending.

I heard the sound of dishes and silverware clanking as the doors of the elevator opened onto the lobby. I made my way toward the dining room. There was no one seated at any of the tables but the cups and saucers were no longer perfectly set as they had been the night before. Now, the cups sat upright, some half-filled with coffee, there were

napkins and glasses scattered on the tables. I had the feeling of having missed something.

"Just one for breakfast?" I heard and turned around to see a waitress standing behind me.

"I think I left my purse here last night. Did you find one by the bar? It's black, medium sized."

"No, I didn't hear about anyone finding anything last night but you might want to talk to the front desk."

"Thank you," I said and walked back out to the lobby.

I smiled at the young man behind the reception desk and asked about my purse. No one had found anything from the night before and, he informed me, "that Mrs. Lewis had checked out earlier that morning."

The dark jacket he was wearing looked two sizes too big for him and his hair was slicked back with gel. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

I took a short breath and then laughed. "I suppose there is," I said calmly, feeling my hands go numb.

As he turned his attention to two women with white hair who had just walked in, I ran out to the parking lot. The space where the car had been parked the night before was now empty. I stood and looked at the asphalt, trying to figure out what to do. I imagined Henry speeding down the highway in the red rental car, the windows open, classical music blaring over the speakers. I couldn't believe that I had

been so stupid. It didn't matter whether she had planned this as an elaborate trick or whether she had just felt like leaving when she woke up. I had no money and no plane ticket, no credit cards, no car and no one to call for help. She had won.

I went back inside and sat on the couch in the lobby where Henry and I had talked the evening before. I didn't even have a book to read. There was a newspaper on the couch and I flipped through the pages. A car had been stolen from a local dealership, merchants in the downtown association were happy that Christmas fell on a Tuesday, the reviewer of the annual town production of the Messiah called the performance "uplifting."

She might never come back. She could have gone to the airport, gotten a flight somewhere and left me here. But she had told me herself that she didn't have anywhere to go. I leaned back and closed my eyes. If you lose something, Henry used to say, the best thing to do is sit down, mentally retrace your steps, and figure out exactly where you could have left the thing. "Nothing is ever lost," she always said, as if she were talking about the displacement of matter in the universe. There were only two places Henry could be--at the house or at the airport. I would call the house first, then the airport.

I walked over to the pay phone in the lobby, muttering the numbers of my phone card as I did. I was afraid I might reverse the digits or forget the number entirely--I had never been good with numbers--and for the time being the card was the only way I could contact anyone. I dialed Henry's telephone number and the machine picked up after three rings.

"Thank you for calling 335-3179," Henry's voice slowly and meticulously began. And then continued, "no one is here to take your call at this time so please leave a message after the beep."

"Henry, it's Katrina. I was just calling to see if you might be at the house. You know where I am, I presume, so if you get this, give me a call. Call the main number at the hotel. I don't have the number but you can look it up."

I hung up the phone and then realized that if I ever expected her to call, I had to leave the number of the hotel on the machine. I found a card listing the number by the reception desk and called Henry's machine again.

Three rings, a click as the machine picked up, and then Sylvie's voice, "Thank you for calling 335-3179, no one is here to take your call at this time."

I pressed the pound button on the phone and heard a loud beep but it didn't make the machine skip forward, just temporarily drowned out the sound of Sylvie's voice. "Henry, I found the number so you don't have to look it up.

It's 354-7770. That's 354-7770. Ask for me. They'll know where I am."

I stood by the pay phone and considered calling Julia since she would, at least, help me to see some humor in the situation. She would also tell me that I should not have made the trip in the first place.

There was nothing she could do from New York, I decided, and it was better not to get her involved. I wanted everything to be completely cleared up when I called her. I wanted to be able to tell her that I had made the right decision and the last thing I wanted her to tell me was "I told you so."

The two women with white hair were now sitting in the armchairs facing the couch. They reminded me of birds, they were so delicate. I started studying their faces, comparing their noses, which were narrow and slightly crooked in the middle, and their eyes, which were partially hidden behind gold framed glasses. They were almost identical looking. I wondered if they were sisters.

One of the women pulled back her sleeve, revealing a bone thin wrist with a small gold watch on it. "Now I don't know what time it is. My watch stopped. Excuse me," she said to me "do you have the time?"

"I think its almost eleven," I said and then looked at my watch to make sure.

"Yes, it's eleven," I reassured her, winding the square antique watch on my wrist. Henry had given it to me for my

birthday the year before. It was an old rose gold watch that often stopped. "At least I think it is eleven," I added, "this watch sometimes stops."

"Thank you," the woman said, re-setting her watch and then winding the knob back and forth. "Constance said she would be here at ten thirty," the woman said turning back to her friend.

"Miss Lewis? Miss Lewis?" I looked up and saw the young man from the front desk standing above me.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't see you. Do I have a phone call?"

"No," he said, still standing, "that's what I came to tell you. I'm leaving now, Katharine is taking over and I told her who you were just in case anyone called."

"That was very kind of you," I said, looking up at him.

"Hospitalizing is our business," he announced and I had to repress the urge to giggle.

"Well, it was still very 'hospitalizable' of you to tell me," I replied and smiled, noticing again how young he was.

His face was almond shaped and his forehead shiny, covered in small flesh colored pimples. "What is your name?" I asked.

"I'm Kevin," he replied.

"And I'm Katrina," I said, reaching out my hand, "Thank you again for your help, Kevin," not knowing what else to say.

He smiled and then looked down at his feet.

"You aren't going into town now, are you?" I asked.

"No, I'm going home. Why?"

I bit my lip, hesitating. "And your car is here?"

"No. I mean yes, I have a car here, but it isn't my car, it's my parents' car."

"I'm asking because, as you know, I've been waiting here a while and I'm wondering if my mother maybe thinks that I have another way to get back to the house. We may have crossed messages. I mean, our messages may have crossed or something. And I'm here and she's there, and…"

"Where are you going?" he asked.

The simplicity of his question made me feel that I was using too many words to explain my situation, but I also felt that I couldn't help it.

"My mother's house is in Silver Lake but if that's too far, you could just drop me off on Main Street."

"And then how would you get home?"

"I don't know," I said, and laughed, "I'd considered walking."

Kevin turned his head and looked puzzled. "That would take a long time," he finally said.

"Yes, I know, but it is possible, don't you think?" I asked, my voice squeaking at the end of the sentence.

"Come on," he said, "I'll give you a ride."

Kevin's car, his family's car, was a tan Cutlass with a torn vinyl top. The car had big doors and looked like it had once been a very fancy car. But it was by now ten or fifteen years old and was showing its age. After sitting down on the wide leather seat, I stretched out my legs, surprised by how much room there was in front of me. Kevin started the car and then put the transmission into reverse, looking over his shoulder as he backed out. We drove to the exit, where Kevin slammed on the breaks, flicked on the turn signal and looked both ways several times before he turned into the road.

"There have been a lot of accidents here," he said, once we had made the turn.

We said nothing to each other until we had driven two or three miles and passed a large shopping center.

"I live right over there," Kevin said, pointing to a subdivision to the right.

"So this really is out of your way," I said apologetically.

"It's OK, I have some time. I like to practice my driving anyway. I haven't had my license for that long."

"Well it is very kind of you," I added, trying to sound more polite than worried.

"Is your seatbelt on?" Kevin asked after we had driven in silence for another five minutes.

I reached around to my right side and pulled the seatbelt across my waist. Kevin nodded at me when he heard the metallic click of the belt being fastened.

"So when are you graduating?" I asked, unsure whether he was in high school or college.

"This June. I'm a senior."

"At Cedar High?"

"No, at the Catholic high school."

"Oh," I said, "I went to Cedar. I thought we might have had some of the same teachers but I guess we couldn't have."

"Your Mom seemed to be in a real hurry when she left this morning," Kevin said.

I was tempted to ask him if she had said anything about where she was going but then decided that I shouldn't since I didn't want him to know that I didn't know where she was.

"We get some strange people in and out of the hotel, I'm not saying that you're strange or anything, I'm just saying that sometimes there are strange people there."

"I understand," I said, watching the light change from red to green.

We drove like that with the conversation stopping and starting, all the way to Henry's house. On the highway, Kevin would push down on the accelerator until it almost hit the floor, get scared and then pull up on it. It looked like he was running, the way he pushed down and pulled up on the gas pedal. I felt myself becoming nauseous because of the jerky motion, the fear that we might die, and the fact that we didn't seem to have all that much to say to one another. I kept trying to find something that we had in common, but came up empty every time. The only thing we shared was the fact that we had both grown up in the same town.

Henry's house was on a hill overlooking a small lake. Kevin pulled into the steep driveway, rounded the first bend and then stopped. My red rental car was parked in front of the garage and he couldn't pull up any further.

"It looks like someone's home," Kevin said, putting the car into neutral and letting it idle.

I felt embarrassed for having asked Kevin to bring me all the way out here just to find that Henry was at home.

"I would love to invite you in to thank you for bringing me out here," I said nervously and then paused, hoping Kevin might say something.

"Let me just run in and grab my purse, I'd really like to give you some money, at least for the gas."

I opened the door, stepped onto the gravel driveway and leaned back in, "I'll be back in just a second."

I ran past the rental car, up the two wooden steps and onto the front porch. The screen door creaked as I opened it. I found my purse sitting on a small table in the front hallway. "Henry?" I called out.

"Your Mom's in the bathtub, Katrina." It was Sylvie's voice. And then Sylvie appeared, carrying a glass of iced tea.

My jaw tightened. I looked at her, hardly believing that she was really there. There were no lights on in the hallway and we stood looking at each other in the dull light that came in through the window in the front door.

"I'll be right back," I said, grabbing my wallet from my purse.

Kevin was leaning back against the head rest and had his eyes closed. I knocked lightly on the driver's side window and he quickly sat up.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he said.

I looked at him and smiled. When I opened my wallet, I found that I only had twenties and although I wanted to give him some money, twenty dollars seemed a bit excessive. But asking him for change was out of the question.

"Here," I said, "I want to give this to you."

Kevin took the twenty dollar bill, pulled out his wallet, and carefully placed the bill inside.

"Thank you again for bringing me all the way out here," I said, feeling disappointed that he had accepted the money.

"You don't need a ride anywhere else, do you?"

"Not right now," I said as I stepped away from the car. I waved as he backed slowly out of the driveway and then turned around and walked inside.

Henry was standing in the middle of the large front room. She was wrapped in a bath towel and combing her hair. Drops of water fell to the floor as she combed one side of her head over and over again, revealing the white lines of her scalp through her dark hair. The big white towel was tucked into itself just above her breasts and the pudgy flesh at the top of her arms spilled over the top. Her eyes narrowed and then widened, darting back and forth.

I finally went up to her and grabbed her shoulders. She shook herself away from me.

"Don't you dare put a hand on me," she said in a deep voice.

I was only four inches taller but I felt myself towering over her.

"Do you know where I have been for the last six hours?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Do you know?" I asked, again, when she didn't respond.

Henry thrust her head forward and stared at me, mocking the look that I had given her when I walked in.

We stood glaring at each other until she turned and left the room.

I followed her into the living room, where she flopped down on the couch next to Sylvie, leaned her head back on the arm of the sofa and stretched out her bare legs onto Sylvie's lap.

"Do you know?" I asked for a third time, aware that I was now yelling.

"Katrina, if you have something to say to your mother, why don't you just say it," Sylvie said, lifting up the book that had been sitting on her lap in order to make room for Henry's legs.

I felt like I was playing hide and seek with Henry, or rather, she was playing the game with me.

"If someone had kept you waiting for six hours, don't you think that you might be a bit angry, Sylvie?"

"You're supposed to be talking to your mother," Sylvie responded.

"I'm trying to," I said.

"I'm surrounded by insane people," Henry announced to no one in particular. She stood up and the towel fell open to her waist. With no show of modesty, she

picked up the ends and tightened the towel around her body again.

"I told you that I was going to pick up Sylvie," Henry said, walking across the room.

"When?" I blurted out.

"Last night, this morning, I don't know, it's really not that important," Henry said, sounding bored.

"Not that important," I echoed sarcastically. "Fine, never mind when you told me," I continued, "when were you planning to come and get me?"

"As soon as you called, of course." She was leaning over the stereo, shuffling through a pile of compact disks.

"Did you get my message on the machine?" I asked.

"No, we haven't checked the machine," Henry said sounding distracted, "You should have called again."

Henry pressed play and then stood up as the first movement of Vivaldi's Four Seasons blared out of the speakers.

"Could you turn that down, please," I commanded, over the music.

"Sure," Henry said, reducing the volume slightly and walking into the kitchen.

I adjusted the volume to a normal level and then sat down on the couch next to Sylvie, who was flattening out the page of her paperback book. She smelled of too much perfume, Charlie, I remembered. Henry had once told me

that she bought Sylvie a bottle each Christmas. She was wearing a bright red turtleneck and matching lipstick.

"Sylvie, what are we going to do?" I asked, relieved that Henry had left us alone.

"About what Katrina?"

"About Henry," I answered deliberately, annoyed that she had to ask.

"Well, your mother has promised me that she is going to start taking her medicine and I believe her. That's why I'm here."

There was something doll-like about Sylvie's face and, looking at her, I understood that she once must have been very pretty. She painted on this face each morning in the bathroom, she once told me rather proudly, before asking if I ever wore makeup.

"But I thought you had decided to leave her," I said, trying hard not to make the question sound like an accusation.

"Not forever, just for a while. I think I made that clear."

I sat at the edge of the couch and rested my chin on my hands. I focused and unfocused my eyes as I looked across the room at the fire place and the small toy banjo on the mantle.

"No, Sylvie, you didn't," I responded flatly.

Henry walked back into the room, waving her arms up and down, pretending to conduct the music. She pricked at the air with her fingers, stressing the beats and leaning her head to one side as if she were straining to hear all of the notes.

"You're not even going to apologize?" I asked Henry as she walked by the couch.

"Mea culpa. Mea culpa," Henry said, pouting and clasping her hands together as if she were praying.

"Henry," I snapped, "I'm serious."

"All too serious, Katrina. I raised a serious daughter. Serious. Serious."

"Henry, I think you should go put some clothes on," Sylvie interrupted, "that towel is wet."

Henry turned around and walked out of the room quickly, still following the beats of the music, which were now very fast.

"She's not well, Sylvie, you can see that can't you?" I asked.

"Your mother is a very intelligent woman and quite capable of taking care of herself."

Sylvie's definitiveness always surprised me. Everything she said sounded as though it had been rehearsed. She got up slowly, placed her book face-down on the coffee table to mark her place and walked to the kitchen. Her three grown children had all stopped speaking to her since she had

gotten involved with my mother. Whenever she tried to contact her children, they hung up the phone. I had thought that the children might have something to do with why Sylvie had left.

"Katrina, dinner's almost ready," I heard Sylvie call from the kitchen.

Henry was laying the silverware and napkins on the wooden dining table, engrossed in the task, which she seemed excited about. She was wearing one of Sylvie's silk blouses, which was two sizes too big for her, over yellow sweat pants.

"Nice outfit," I said, looking at her.

Henry stuck her tongue out at me, pulled a tube of lipstick from her pocket, daubed it onto her cheeks as rouge and then worked the color into her skin with her hand.

"Can I do anything?" I asked, by reflex.

"No, just sit down," Sylvie said, as she ashed a cigarette into an ashtray next to the stove.

She opened the oven and pulled out a rectangular Pyrex baking dish that she set down with a clank in the middle of the table.

"We're having chicken," she said, which I could see for myself now that the boneless breasts covered in soy sauce were sitting in front of me.

She knew I didn't eat meat and I tried to remember the last time we had talked about that fact. It had to have been less than a year ago.

"Sylvie makes the world's best chicken," Henry said, helping herself to a piece.

Sylvie was still standing by the stove, finishing her cigarette. "Anything to drink, Katrina? I'm sorry but I don't think we have any wine."

"Just water, thanks," I said, looking at the chicken. I felt my stomach grumble and then turn over. It was churning. I hadn't eaten anything all day and I wondered if I might be able to swallow a few bites.

"You know, I'm not that hungry," I said, as Henry began devouring her chicken.

"Or, maybe I'll just have some salad," I said, getting up and walking over to the refrigerator to see what I could find.

I opened the door and bent down to look inside. The scent of rotting meat spread over me. In the bottom drawer, where the vegetables were kept, I found two brown stalks of celery. I sat back down at the table and felt my chest tighten until I couldn't keep myself from crying. The tears flowed down my cheeks and I did nothing to stop them.

"Katrina, what is it?" Sylvie asked.

"I, I, I just can't believe this," I stammered. "Were you just going to leave me there?" I could hardly breathe.

"Katrina," Henry said sternly, "you need to calm down."

I tried holding my breath. But that only made things worse. I shut my eyes as I gulped at the air, curling up my tongue and tasting the salt from the tears that had collected above my lip.

"Why don't you excuse yourself and go the bathroom to clean up, Katrina," Sylvie suggested.

"No," I said, more loudly than I had intended.

Sylvie looked at me and then focused her attention on cutting her chicken.

"Henry," I said in one sob. Henry looked up, seeming surprised that she was the topic of conversation. "I want an apology. I deserve that at least."

"What is there to apologize for," Sylvie asked, crossing her legs, "that your mother has a life of her own?"

Henry pursed her lips and glared at me.

"Don't," Sylvie said, "you don't have to answer her."

Sylvie leaned her elbow on the back of the wooden chair. "Do you know what I think Katrina? I think it's time that you took some responsibility for yourself. I've been meaning to tell you this for a while," her tone growing more emphatic, "your mother has done more for you than you'll ever know. She's sacrificed everything for you. Every mother does." I wanted to cover my ears.

"You know very well what my mother has done," I said stridently.

"That's ancient history Katrina," Sylvie interjected.

"What about today, what about yesterday? When is she going to stop this!" I demanded.

"Would someone just take her to the hospital," Henry pleaded, sounding exasperated.

"I'm not the one who needs to go to the hospital!" I yelled.

"Are you sure?" Henry asked.

"Henry, you don't understand how difficult things have been for me," I said, shaking my head and leaning toward her.

"Oh grow up Katrina, your mother has been dragged over the coals long enough for her past. Just stop it. Stop it," Sylvie screamed.

She had never raised her voice at me before. I was sobered by it. I sat up and felt my head clear, as if someone had just administered a dose of smelling salts to revive me.

No one said anything but the motions we made seemed to make noises of their own--my arm moving down to my side, Sylvie turning her head, Henry crossing her arms. I grasped the wooden seat of the chair and with a loud squeak, pushed it back.

The next sound I heard was the screen door slamming shut and then the crunch of the gravel under my feet as I quickly walked toward the road. When I reached the end of the drive, I slowed down. Nothing was in focus. The trees were a dark blur alongside of me as I took long strides,

following the white line on the asphalt. I could feel tracks of cold down my face as the tears came in contact with the wind. I held in one sob and then another to stop myself from crying. As my breathing slowly returned to normal, I noticed the small white clouds that formed when I exhaled and realized then that I had forgotten to put on my coat. I could feel the cold through the thin cotton of my shirt. I had to keep walking fast if I was going to keep warm enough to stay out for long.

There were no street lights on the road and I could just make out the bare branches of the trees because they were a pitch black against the dark gray sky. I suddenly felt as if I had not really been involved in the conversation that had taken place at the dinner table--it seemed made-up, like something that I had watched and not actually participated in. And it must have been that sensation that made it possible for me to consider staying. I didn't feel that I had any choice in the matter. You can't choose your family, at least that was what Helen had always said. No matter what Henry did, she still loved me. It was a feeling I could taste even if I couldn't explain it to anyone. I remembered waking up very late one morning once when I was visiting Henry. It was almost noon and, still in my pajamas, I went into Henry's bedroom to say good morning. She was wearing a loose fitting navy blue sweatshirt and was just waking up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. I lay down on the floral patterned comforter and

watched as she yawned and then stretched both of her arms above her, gracefully flexing back her hands once her arms were fully extended, like a dancer. It was exactly the same gesture that I made every morning when I woke up. After she had relaxed again, I held her small hand in mine and lay in the warm spot that she had just moved from. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," she said as she grasped my hand more tightly. I was twenty years old, a year away from graduating from college, and felt like a little girl who had just climbed into her mother's big bed. I yawned and put my head on Sylvie's pillow, trying to ignore the smell of makeup that clung to it and instead immerse myself in Henry's soft, sleepy smell. Henry and I talked for a while about what we might do that day, and decided that we just wanted to spend the day together talking. We would go out for breakfast and then see what we felt like doing after that. Then, we both fell asleep again, having decided that breakfast could wait another hour.

And then, everything just started coming apart again. Having gotten used to my mother being well, the last thing I expected was for to be unwell in exactly the same ways that she once had been. I suspected that something wasn't right when we started planning Henry and Sylvie's trip out for my graduation. There was something in Henry's voice that just didn't sound quite right. Sylvie had never been to the

northeast and she and Henry planned on visiting Cape Cod after they spent the weekend with me. My boyfriend Stephen's parents were also in town for graduation and he suggested that our families get together for dinner. He had heard so much about my mother and he was interested in meeting her. I sensed that he wanted to meet for dinner just to avoid having to spend too much time alone with his parents. I had met his parents several times before and I liked them. I liked how solid they seemed and how sure of themselves they were.

Henry arrived at the restaurant wearing an emerald green and yellow shirt that was buttoned to the top, making her look like a stuffed bird. She had dark circles under her eyes, which were made darker by the eyeliner and mascara that she had put on. Sylvie wore exactly the same outfit as Henry only Sylvie looked better in her version since really they were her clothes, her idea of what someone should wear to her daughter's college graduation dinner. I could not believe that my mother was wearing blue eye-shadow. She played with Sylvie's make-up like a little girl, putting on too much in isolated patches. But even with all of the make-up and the brightly colored scarf around her neck, she looked fierce.

Stephen's father asked Henry what she thought about being a psychologist.

"I think about it as little as possible," she replied.

"But it must be quite interesting," he insisted.

"Actually, Franklin, it isn't interesting at all," Henry responded flatly.

"Oh," he said, before he looked up at his wife.

"You know," Henry said loudly, leaning forward and resting both elbows on the table, "I'm sure that you are all good people. What if we start just acting like good people and stop being so polite for a while? Let's just do something that we don't think is polite at all. It'll help the conversation. It's an old psychological trick."

She picked up the bottle of champagne on the table and poured half of it onto the floor.

"How was that for a start? Who's next?"

"Gee Henry, why didn't you just pour it over your head?" I asked.

"At least she has a sense of humor," Henry said, laughing, though no one else was.

Stephen's father looked at me. He seemed to be taking in all of the similarities between my face and Henry's--dark hair, a misshapen nose.

The manager of the restaurant appeared at our table. Stephen's father told him that "everything would be just fine, it was just a little outburst, nothing more. I don't think we'll have any more champagne though," he said, chuckling.

"Oh, I'm sorry Franklin," Henry interrupted, "I take it you've forgotten that I am a full-grown adult and I would like some more champagne."

Her words were slightly slurred. Her voice was taut. It reminded me of cords being stretched across a suitcase that won't quite close.

"Henry, stop," Sylvie said sharply, though she seemed to know it wouldn't make any difference.

Stephen looked at his mother, who was expressionless, poker faced.

I took another bite of smoked salmon.

"I'm not feeling well," Stephen's mother announced after the appetizers were cleared away. "You'll just have to excuse me, I'm so sorry." It was said without any attempt to cover up the fact that she was lying. "Frank, will you take me back to the hotel?"

"Certainly. Do you kids want a lift back too?"

We all decided to leave, everyone but Henry, who said she didn't want to cut the evening short.

"I'm sorry Katrina, I guess Henry really wasn't in any shape for this visit," Sylvie said as we walked out to the parking lot.

"Why didn't you tell me that before you came?"

"Well she wanted to see you. And you wanted her to meet Stephen's parents. I'm sorry, what more can I say. Your mother's an adult. I can't control everything she does."

Stephen's father waited by the door of the restaurant for me and Sylvie. I smiled as he held the door open and he winked at me. Sylvie said goodnight to us and walked back into the restaurant to get Henry.

I climbed into the back seat of the Allen's rental car with Stephen and wanted to disappear, just erase myself bit by bit. I held Stephen's hand and looked out the car window. The houses along Hutchins Avenue were dark. They looked haunted.

"I think we'll have brunch at Clark's tomorrow," Stephen's mother said from the front seat. "Is 10 o'clock too early?"

"No, that's fine, Mom," Stephen said.

"Do you think that your Mom will be alright by then?" she asked, glancing at me in the rear view mirror.

"No Mrs. Allen, I don't think she will be."

"Well that's a shame but you'll come with us anyway, won't you?"

"That's very nice of you but I think that I should spend the day with my mother. She came all the way out here--even if she's not very well right now and..."

Mr. Allen pulled up to the curb next to my building. "You're sure you won't come to the hotel with us?" he asked.

"We could just have a drink and then I can drive you back here, how does that sound?"

"I'll be fine, thank you. And thank you for dinner. I'm so sorry for what happened, you know, I really can't tell you how sorry I am."

"No reason to apologize Katrina, you didn't do anything," Mrs. Allen said.

Stephen squeezed my hand and gave me an awkward kiss on the cheek.

I smiled at him and noticed how distant he looked, but I had too much on my mind to worry about him. I slid over the vinyl seat and got out of the car.

The doorbell rang at five in the morning. I knew it was Henry but I answered the door anyway.

"Hello Misses, any rooms to spare?" she asked in a badly rendered Cockney accent.

"Do you have any idea how humiliating that was?" I asked her.

"You take everything so seriously. All of you fuckers do. It's all bullshit anyway," she said, sounding like she was drunk.

"What's bullshit," I asked.

"It's all bullshit," she repeated, this time emphasizing "all."

"What does that mean? Do you have any idea what you're saying?" I asked, wondering why I was even bothering to argue with her.

"Katrina, my dear, I always know what I'm saying. Maybe you should think a little about what it is that you are saying for a change."

"Do you think you could at least apologize for what happened last night?" I asked.

"I have apologized," Henry said, "I've spent my whole life apologizing. What do you want? For me to get down on my knees and say mea culpa, mea culpa? Who do you think you are asking for something like that? You're not God, Katrina, you're not perfect, and if you happen to think that, I suggest you stop right now."

I slammed the door closed.

Henry started ringing the bell again. She knew that there was only one doorbell for the building and that by ringing it she would wake everyone up.

"OK," I said, after I had opened the door, "you win."

When we called Sylvie's hotel in the morning, we were told that she had already checked out. I was able to change Henry's ticket but her flight left early the next morning and she would be spending the night with me. We decided to walk to the hotel to pick up her luggage.

"It's a half-hour walk," I explained.

"I love walking," she said.

But half-way there, she said she was tired.

"Maybe we should find a taxi?" she said.

"There are no taxis in Massachusetts," I told her.

"No taxis, Katrina, I'm sure we could find one somewhere. This is boring. Maybe we could rent a car."

I laughed. "It isn't that much longer," I explained, trying to sound encouraging.

She stopped walking.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "I told you, I'm tired. I don't want to walk anymore."

"Well we don't have much choice, do we?" I asked, aware that I was sounding like an impatient mother talking to her child.

"Oh ho, that's what you think. You were too young to remember but when you and Helen and I were waiting for a train once in Europe, I decided that I couldn't stand it anymore. So we just left the station--I had absolutely no idea where we were, I mean no idea--and we just hitch-hiked. It was so much fun. You don't remember that. It was my idea. Helen was really a lot of fun then. She was my best friend and she always thought she was your mother too, which she wasn't, but she was a pretty god-damned good substitute mother."

"I don't want to talk about Helen," I said.

"I really loved her Katrina. I mean I really loved her. Do you know that? That I was in love with her?"

"Henry, I really don't want to know."

"Well, you should know something about it cause she's more your family than just about anyone," Henry said as she started to cry.

She pulled a coffee stained napkin from her pant pocket and used it to wipe her nose. "I loved her more than I've ever loved anyone. More than Sophia or Ruby or even Sylvie. More than any of them. They're nothing compared to Helen. I mean they were all OK but they couldn't hold a candle to her. I mean that truly. She was a saint."

"Stop it," I finally said, unable to contain myself any longer. "I really don't want to talk about this. Let's go!"

By that afternoon, I couldn't stand to be around her. I left Henry in the apartment and went to the library. I felt like I used to when I was ten years old. All I could do was cut her off, distance myself. When I got back to the apartment, her clothes were scattered over the floor, along with shopping bags full of things that she had bought along the way that afternoon--baseball caps and t-shirts, wind socks, tennis shoes. She looked at me as if she didn't recognize me.

"What are these?" I demanded.

"I don't know, gifts," she said.

"You don't need these," I said impatiently. I was about to tell her that we had to return everything. We could get the money back. I would explain to the shopkeepers that she didn't know what she was doing. It would be just like it used to after her old spending sprees, when we would return whatever we could, keeping the rest, placing what remained on consignment. It helped that I was a child then; the shopkeepers had to be kind.

She looked embarrassed.

I looked around the room at the clothes and socks and papers.

"I'm just pulling my stuff together," she said, picking up a shirt, looking at the duffel bag, setting her nightgown on the coffee table. As she picked one thing up, she put something else down in its place. There were tiny bits of paper, gum wrappers, and crumbs scattered everywhere on the floor, on the furniture, wherever she sat down.

"Sit down," I said, trying to pull myself together.

"OK," she replied, looking relieved to have someone take control. She sat on the couch. I sat on the floor, looking up at her from the futon where she would sleep that night.

"Henry, I'm worried about you." She didn't look at me. Her eyes were wandering, looking at the ceiling, at the walls. She wasn't paying attention. I wanted to ask her where

she would rather be, or perhaps a better question, where she was.

Henry pulled a plastic prescription bottle from her pocket, popped off the lid with her bottom teeth and poured the contents into her open palm. She had been taking pills every hour since she arrived.

"What are those pills that you're taking?" I asked, after she had selected several from the pile and then popped them into her mouth.

"They're just to help me sleep," she mumbled through the pills in her mouth.

"What are they?"

She swallowed hard and then took a drink of water. "I told you, they're for sleeping."

"And the ones you took earlier today?"

"They're for my stomach."

She seemed to be taking everything except her lithium. Half a blue pill, a whole white pill, small pills, big pills. She took the pills while she was still chewing gum.

I asked her to show me the drugs she was taking.

"Go ahead," she said, pointing to her duffel bag.

There were dozens of plastic bottles in the bottom of her bag. Some of them had Sylvie's name on the prescription, some Henry's. I couldn't find any with the word lithium on it.

"I want to see what you just took," I said.

She handed me the bottle from her pocket, and inside, I found an array of pills in all different shapes and sizes and colors. I would never be able to figure out what all of them were.

"Listen Henry," I said dropping the pills one-by-one into the bottle, "I just want you to start taking better care of yourself." I tried to come up with something concrete to focus on. "Like your teeth," I said.

"What about them?" she asked.

The enamel was flaking off the sides of her teeth, leaving brown patches, which she picked at with her pinkie nail. There was a long silence.

"I'm just so afraid," she said. The sentence seeped out of her.

"Of what?" I asked. She seemed to be listening to something, not me, some other voice.

"Of what?" I asked again.

She could not focus her eyes on me.

"I need to make a will," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm afraid that they're taking things from me that should be yours."

"Who's they?"

"Sylvie, her children," she said in a child-like voice.

"Well, I agree, you should make a will," I said authoritatively. I was pleased that we were finally talking

about something concrete. I looked up at her, waiting for her to tell me more about what was going on with Sylvie.

"Do you know how hard things are for me?" she asked.

"No," I said, "why don't you tell me."

She was quiet.

I asked her again to tell me what was wrong. But she no longer seemed interested in the conversation

The alarm rang at nine o'clock the next morning. The taxi would arrive at nine-thirty and she would leave. I could hear Henry snoring in the next room. I walked out to the living room to wake her up. Half her body was on the floor, the other half on the futon. She had not put the bottom sheet on the futon, instead, she used it as a blanket and the white elastic was tucked beneath her chin. Henry was lying on her side, on top of a small pile of papers and manila file folders that she must have been looking through before she fell asleep. Her nightgown was pulled up to her thighs and tucked between her legs.

"You need to get up," I said.

"Huh?" Henry said groggily, rolling over onto her daytimer, which was also laying open on the futon.

"You need to get up," I repeated in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes, OK," she said, sounding more confused than sleepy. She stretched her arms above her head.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Time to get up," I said, "the taxi will be here in a half hour." I crawled back into bed. I didn't want to look at her.

I decided to close my eyes while Henry was in the shower. I was startled when I woke up again. The apartment was oddly quiet. It was the quiet of people sleeping.

"Henry!" I yelled, looking at the clock that read twenty five past. "The taxi will be here in five minutes," I said quickly getting out of bed.

"I must have fallen asleep," she said groggily.

"You have to get up," I said, standing over her as she stretched on the futon.

"I know, I know, I'm getting up, give me a minute."

"You have to hurry."

She sighed, deeply.

"Look, you have to get up," I said.

"Katrina, I'm getting up, can't you see that!"

I walked into the kitchen to make some coffee.

I saw her standing in the doorway between the living room and kitchen and I was relieved that she was awake. She would leave soon, I reminded myself, there was no reason to get so worked up about this.

"Do you think that the taxi driver will take a check?" she asked, "I've run out of cash."

I didn't have any cash. She was never going to leave.

"Of course the taxi driver won't take an out-of-state check!" I said impatiently, "Why didn't you tell me that you didn't have any money? We could have gone to the bank last night!"

I walked into the living room. "You're not even packed! You have to leave in five minutes and you haven't even packed!"

I threw on a pair of pants and a shirt. "I'm going to the bank," I said curtly. "You better be packed by the time I get back. The car will be here in five minutes and you're getting in it."

When I returned from the bank, the car was out front.

"She'll be right out," I told the driver. "I'm terribly sorry."

The driver nodded. I ran up the stairs to the apartment and opened the door. Henry was still in her underwear. Her six bags were spread around her, the three shopping bags propped against the wall. With her one free hand, she picked up a shirt and folded it in half, placed it in a bag, looked at it. There were two pairs of shoes on the floor, all of her clothes, the t-shirts and baseball caps that she had bought.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm packing Katrina."

"No you're not, you're not doing anything," I yelled angrily.

I pulled armfuls of clothes off the floor, stuffed them into whatever bag was open. Shoes went on top of clothes, the papers were being bent. I didn't care.

"You are so incompetent," I muttered through clenched teeth, "I can't believe you."

She retreated to the wall and stood there. "Katrina, why are you being mean to me?"

The childishness in her voice made me hate her more. I said nothing, squatted on the floor and continued stuffing things into bags.

"Be careful," Henry whined.

I paid no attention. I finished packing the bags in a matter of minutes. "I'm taking these out to the car and you bring the rest," I commanded. "You have two seconds, I mean it," I said curtly and then walked down the stairs with four of the bags.

I expected that I would have to wait for her but at least the car couldn't leave while I was standing there. She appeared after only a few minutes though there was a deliberate nonchalance to her pace as she approached the car, carrying the rest of the shopping bags. I shoved forty dollars into her hand as she got into the backseat.

"You owe me forty dollars," I said.

"I'll send you a check," she replied, "Or else I can give you a check now."

"Give it to me now," I said.

She was keeping the driver waiting but I didn't care. She handed me the check, making sure to fill in the amount. Usually, she would have just signed the check and said "you fill in the rest, OK?" But today, she wrote in everything. We didn't even say good-bye.

Julia came over and stayed with me for the next couple of days. Her parents were in town and they had planned on using her apartment during graduation. She said she'd sleep better at my place anyway. Her parents would understand. Stephen left a message the day after Henry had left saying how all-consuming his parents' visit had become and that he would call in a couple of days. He didn't mention anything about Henry. I saw him only once again before he left for Europe, where he was spending the summer traveling with friends. I had considered meeting up with him for a couple of weeks in Italy or Greece, but I knew that wasn't going to happen now. "It doesn't have anything to do with your mother," he insisted, "it's really about me and you, Katrina. I need some time to think about things." We hadn't been alone together for over two weeks, and then, as some kind of pitiful gesture, either from guilt or left-over desire, he

started undressing me. We lay down on my bedroom floor, and some part of me floated to the ceiling, watching us and not particularly liking what I saw. I saw us touch each other mechanically until he reached an orgasm.

I graduated at the top of the class, which was some small consolation since I knew things like that mattered to Stephen. I ran into Stephen's parents and they were, as always, very kind to me. But their kindness now seemed a bit too sweet, like charity extended to sick people.

My classmates were off to medical school or law school or to Wall Street. I had always felt we all had so much in common, but by graduation, I felt like them and different from them at the same time. My parents hadn't given me airplane tickets to Europe or a check to cover extra expense at graduate school. I was spending the summer with Julia in New York and needed to get a job as soon as possible. I collected my diploma and felt, for the first time, how much I didn't belong in that pristine place.

The moon had come out and I could see clouds floating in and out of its light. They were a sooty black and looked like exhaust from some giant smokestack. In the distance, I heard the sound of a car's wheels on gravel. I slowed down as the sound got louder and stepped on the side of my foot, turning my ankle slightly. I hopped on my other leg for a few steps and then set my foot down. It was fine, just a bit tender. I

walked more slowly now, waiting for the car to pass and stepping lightly on the sore foot. The car sped by, just a few feet away from me and then stopped and backed up.

"Where the hell are you going?" Henry asked, leaning out the car door.

I kept walking and Henry started following me, driving slowly with the car door still open.

"Katrina, what the hell are you doing?"

I stopped and started laughing. I couldn't stop laughing as I got into the car, still sniffling a little from crying and from the cold.

"What's so funny?" Henry asked.

"Do you remember when I was ten and you decided that I should start running?"

"No," she said, "I don't remember that."

"What do you mean you don't remember? You used to follow me around the neighborhood in the Pontiac to make sure that I was actually running. Just as I would slow down to a walk, I'd hear this roaring engine behind me and you'd be shaking your finger at me. 'I can see you even if you don't think I can,' you would say."

"I think you're making this up," Henry said.

"I am not," I said in a high pitched voice, still giddy from the memory of Henry tormenting me. "I hated running and I hated it when you would follow me. I used to try to find places to hide in the neighborhood."

"But you couldn't, could you, I always knew where to find you."

"So you do remember!"

"No, I think you've invented all of it."

I thought she might be joking. I decided she wasn't. "I didn't make it up," I insisted.

"Well, you know what Freud always said."

"No," I replied, feeling annoyed that she couldn't remember anything that I felt was important, "what did Freud say."

She stopped the car abruptly at the entrance to the driveway, and leaned over so her face was very close to mine. "Freud said," she announced in her most professorial voice, "that the childhood you remember never existed." She nodded to herself and then laughed before she put the car into drive and raced up the driveway.

Warm light poured out onto the gravel driveway from the living room windows and I walked into the house feeling a sense of excitement mixed with fear. I felt like I was returning to school after a long bout of the flu and was about to see people again for the first time. I didn't want to apologize to Sylvie for having stormed out since I didn't feel that I had done anything wrong. And I didn't have to since the way Sylvie said "Hello," when she saw us made me understand that she also wanted to make things pleasant.

"Let's just pretend," she seemed to say, which was fine with me. I was happy to just pretend that we were starting over from scratch.

"I put on some water for pasta," Sylvie said, walking into the kitchen. "It's almost boiling. Do you want some?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm pretty hungry."

I ate two big bowls of pasta with butter at the wooden dining table while Sylvie drank decaffeinated coffee and played two-handed bridge with Henry.

"The dishwasher's broken," Sylvie said from across the room when I opened it to put my bowl inside.

It was filled with dishes encrusted with food—bits of egg yolk, flakes of cereal, smudges of red sauce. They looked like they had been there for quite a while. "I'll just wash it out by hand," I said, and placed the bowl in the sink.

"You want to play cards?" Henry asked as she shuffled the deck in front of her. "We'll play for money. We'll play for every penny I have," she added, "it will make it more exciting."

"Henry," Sylvie said, "watch it."

"What?" Henry asked, "I'm not doing anything wrong." "How about poker?" Henry suggested, dealing out the cards, as I walked back to the table, "aces, deuces and one eyed jacks are wild."

Then, she quickly gathered up the cards before we could even look at them.

"Since I can tell that you two ladies are not in the mood for gambling, I suggest that we play a game of Scrabble instead," Henry said in a haughty tone of voice.

Sylvie sighed as she got up and went to find the Scrabble board. Henry continued shuffling the cards. Sylvie lay out the board while Henry gathered the wooden tiles in a bag and, with a flourish, drew out a letter.

"B," she said, "try and beat that."

I drew a "Q" and Sylvie an "M," which meant that Henry got to go first.

We put the letters back and then proceeded to draw out the letters that we would use to start the game. Sylvie lit another cigarette as Henry played with her letters, making faces as she discovered new words. She always gave the sense that she would ultimately win, that her luck at drawing letters gave her some incredible advantage, not to mention the fact that she knew all the tricks of the game. The way she lined up the tiles, it looked as if she would use all of her letters with each turn and I was always surprised when, after about to pick up all seven letters, she actually laid down only three or four.

"H...O...M...E," she announced, setting down the tiles on the board. "That's a good word," she added and then drew another four pieces from the bag.

My turn was next. "F...O...M...E...N...T," which I constructed using Henry's "M."

"That's misspelled."

"No it isn't," I insisted.

"How much do you want to bet?" Henry asked.

"A million dollars. I'm right. I know I'm right."

"Well, you better be because if you aren't," she said, taunting me, "you not only have to pay me a million dollars but, more importantly, you lose your turn. We're playing by the real rules tonight. Where's the dictionary?"

"It's upstairs," Sylvie said, sounding bored.

Henry leapt up and went upstairs to get the dictionary.

I was sure that she wouldn't find it. It seemed like a good time for me to say something to Sylvie about what had happened earlier in the evening but I didn't know where to start. We sat side by side, rearranging our letters, until Henry reappeared.

"Ah ha!" she said, discovering the word in the dictionary, "you're right. But you have to define it before you can use it."

"That's not part of the rules," I said.

"Well, it is tonight, so come on smarty pants, what does the word mean."

"It means to brew beer by the light of the moon."

Henry erupted in laughter. "Do you really not know what it means?"

"I know what it means."

"OK," she said, but we're playing with that rule for the rest of the night.

Sylvie ended up drawing the "X," the "Z," and both blanks, and beat Henry and me by more than forty points.

Sylvie ripped the page off the small pad of paper, which she had used to keep score for the last game, and carefully laid out the columns for the next, writing each of our names in a florid script at the top. We drew letters again to see who would go first.

"Did you know that Miss Sylvie Brown was a virgin until the night of her wedding?" Henry asked as she shook up the bag of letters.

"Henry stop it. What's wrong with you?"

Henry looked offended. "I don't think there is anything wrong with me."

I shifted in my chair.

"The hymen was broken on the marriage bed in fucking Niagara Falls."

"I'm not going to listen to this Henry," Sylvie said.

"Isn't that hilarious?" Henry asked, laughing so hard she had to pinch the end of her nose to keep from blowing snot on the table.

Sylvie was silent.

Henry looked at me and shrugged, indicating that even if Sylvie didn't get what was going on, I must have.

"Where are you going?" Henry demanded as I got up from my chair.

"I'm going to bed," I said, "Maybe you should go to bed too."

"I'm not tired," Henry replied, pushing her chair back and turning toward me.

"Tell me, Katrina," she said off-handedly, "when's the last time you had sex? It's been so long since this woman over here touched me, I think I may have forgotten what it's like."

Sylvie turned bright red and slapped Henry across the face.

Henry responded by slowly gathering up the saliva in her mouth, which made a swishing sound that I could hear from where I was standing, and spitting it in Sylvie's face.

Sylvie started crying, which I had never seen her do before. She wept quietly into a tissue, emitting small boo-hoos each time she breathed.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Sylvie shook her head.

I put my hand on her shoulder and she rested her hand on top of mine.

"I thought you were going to bed, Katrina," Henry said, glaring at Sylvie.

"I am," I said.

Henry was sitting at the kitchen table with her hands wrapped around a cup of coffee when I walked downstairs the next morning.

"Where's Sylvie," I asked.

"I don't know," she said, blowing on the steam that rose from her cup. She frowned as she took a sip of coffee.

I sat down across from Henry. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"I threw her out."

"Oh, I see," I said, wondering how I was going to get Henry to the hospital without Sylvie's help and then quickly realizing that I was probably better off without her.

"When did you throw her out?" I asked.

"Last night. She threatened to kill me."

I turned sideways in the chair and rolled my eyes before turning back toward her and asking "How?"

"With that knife," Henry said, pointing to the one sitting on the kitchen counter.

"Do you think she was serious?" I asked, as I tried to imagine Sylvie holding the knife to Henry's throat.

"What do you think, Katrina? She's a lot bigger than me. At one point she had her hands around my neck," Henry said, then showing me how Sylvie had held her.

"So first she tried to strangle you and then she tried to slit your throat?" I asked.

Henry didn't respond to my question.

I should have been furious that Sylvie had run away again and left me with Henry. Instead, I sat at the table feeling like I was watching a movie that I had already seen before.

"Why didn't you call the police," I asked her.

"I did," she said, "but Sylvie left before they got here. I filed a full report. If she comes back, all I have to do is call them and they'll come and arrest her."

As the details of Henry's story settled around me, I felt more and more like I was dreaming. I wondered why I hadn't woken up if all of this had actually happened the night before. I wondered if Sylvie really was capable of being that violent. It was pointless to try to get to the bottom of the story and I was sure that Sylvie's version would have been as convoluted as Henry's.

"Do you think Sylvie might come back?" I asked.

"I've got a warrant out for her arrest so I doubt it," Henry replied, smugly.

"Well," I said, "I guess that means it's just the two of us for Christmas. We've never done that before, have we?" I added, surprised by the note of sincerity in my voice at the end of the sentence.

"What is this phony good cheer Katrina. You've never liked Christmas any more than I have."

"No, well," I hesitated, "what else are we going to do?"

"Anything," Henry responded, with emphasis, making it understood that any other torture would be preferable to that one.

"You mean that we could do anything or that you would rather do anything but celebrate Christmas?"

"Both," she said.

"In that case, perhaps you'd prefer to go the hospital," I said, resolutely, as though I were concluding a logical argument.

"You're not starting with that crap again, are you?" Henry replied, "because if you are, you know what will happen."

"I don't know," I said off-handedly, ignoring her attempt to start an argument, "between Christmas and the hospital I sense that it might be a difficult choice to make." I looked at her and smiled, unable to keep myself from laughing at my own joke.

"If you promise not to bring up the issue of the fucking hospital again," she said looking at me sternly, "we can do something."

We went out and bought a Christmas tree. I couldn't remember ever doing that with Henry. My memories of Henry at Christmas were usually of her rolling her eyes at

Helen's exuberance. "Make it stop," she seemed to say, "there must be some other way." Helen's glee was unbounded as she decorated and trimmed every object in the house with ribbons and bells and bows. Sprigs of fresh holly hung from every doorway and over the dining room table, where we ate by candle light every night during advent. It was always Helen and I who went to buy the tree. Usually, on a school night, after Helen had returned from work, she and I would head out in the six o'clock darkness and drive to the local church parking lot. Strands of multi-colored lights were hung on the perimeter of the lot and the light they gave off was warm and festive. The smell of pine was everywhere. I felt like I was in a little forest in the middle of town. We always chose a long needle tree, a Douglas fir, not the short needle kind, which looked a bit naked. Then the man would bundle up the tree in twine and we would pay. I had never purchased a Christmas tree in the afternoon and, I realized driving into the church parking lot, that it was definitely the wrong kind of light for buying a Christmas tree. Instead of the little colorful bulbs casting warm light, there was just the stale feeling of a cold afternoon.

Henry said she would stay in the car while I picked out a tree, but I made her come with me.

"I'm not going to do everything by myself," I said.

She reluctantly got out of the car and walked with me toward the end of the lot, where the remaining trees were standing.

There were very big trees and very small trees, ones that were missing a few branches at the bottom and ones that were crooked at the top.

"What's the cheapest?" I asked the man who was wearing a blue coat and heavy canvas gloves and whose red face made it look like he had been drinking.

"Try over there," he said, pointing to a pile of trees that were not stacked upright but were lying on the ground.

I knelt down and started sorting through the trees. The needles went right through my black suede gloves. I stood up when my knees began to ache and looked around for Henry. I saw her walking by a row of trees that were leaning against a temporary fence. She wasn't looking at the trees, she was just passing by them, back and forth, with her red knit cap pulled down until it almost covered her eyes. I decided that I wouldn't bother consulting her. I called out to the man and asked him to come over and pull out the tree at the very bottom of the pile. It was a short-needle pine that was just Henry's height and that didn't look too damaged or crooked. He stood the tree upright and bounced the trunk on the ground two or three times to pull down the branches.

"Ten dollars," he said.

"So cheap?" I asked, since there wasn't anything particularly wrong with the tree.

"Tomorrow they all go for free," he said, offering a half-smile.

"Henry," I called, after I had handed the man twenty dollars and he gave me change.

"The car isn't far," I said, watching him tie up the tree with twine.

"It's probably small enough to fit in the back seat," the man said as we walked toward the car.

Henry caught up with us and said good afternoon to the man carrying the tree.

"Do you want to put a blanket down in the back?" he asked, "or do you have something to tie down the trunk with?"

"We'll just put it in the back," I said.

Henry couldn't stop sneezing as we got onto the highway and headed back to the house. I turned up the heat until the interior of the car was roasting but she continued to sneeze over and over again.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"I'll be fine," she said, and sneezed again.

I unloaded the tree by myself while Henry went inside to find a tree stand. She and Sylvie always had an artificial tree because Sylvie was allergic to real pines and Henry didn't

know if they had kept the old stand. I pulled the tree out of the back seat and rested it on the ground. I tried to lug the tree in by myself but as I grabbed the stump and started dragging it toward the house, I realized that all of the needles were falling off. It would take two of us to carry it in. I left the tree where it was and went inside to get Henry.

"Did you find anything?" I asked, standing above her as she sat on the kitchen floor with a bucket and a couple of bricks next to her.

"Not much," she replied, "do you think we could put it in a bucket and then put the bricks around the bucket to stabilize it?"

She looked up at me and I smiled. I could not think of two less mechanically inclined people than Henry and myself. For anyone else, it would be a question of just finding a couple of flat pieces of wood and a nail. For the two of us, it really was like rocket science or reinventing the wheel.

"We might as well try it. Are you sure there isn't a stand in the attic?" I asked.

"There might be," she said and sighed.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Why are we doing this?" she asked as she frowned and looked up at me.

"Because I don't know what else we're going to do, that's why," I said and stormed upstairs to look for the stand.

I found the decorations stored in the attic but not a stand. The ornaments from Helen's house were also in the attic, packed in the same cardboard boxes that I remembered from when I was a child. There was the yellow whiskey box that contained all of the old silver and red bulbs, and the wide flat box, which was filled with the unbreakable ornaments that we had made or been given, ornaments that I thought were ugly but that Helen loved. "I remember when you gave this to me," she would say every year as she took out the cookie dough Santa that I had made in nursery school. "You made this one too," a Shrinky-Dink Christmas tree that I had baked to miniature size in my grandmother's oven. And then, when all of the lights were strung around the tree and the ornaments were arranged, we used to take the blue angel from its special box and place it at the top of the tree. Its name was Marlene Dietrich. The angel was a small stuffed doll with blonde hair, dressed in what looked like powder blue pajamas. Santa was not something that I ever believed in. "I don't want her to grow up with a lot of lies in her head," Henry had said. "Santa is a construction. He's a story. Helen and I give you presents." The only real myth that I had surrounding Christmas had to do with the blue angel that sat at the top of the tree. "Who's Marlene Dietrich?" I once asked Henry. "The most beautiful woman in the world," she answered.

I carried the boxes downstairs.

"I decided to use the old ornaments," I said, setting the boxes on the floor.

"Which old ornaments," Henry asked. "Helen's, ours, the old ornaments," I said, thinking this was obvious.

"What's wrong with the new ornaments," Henry asked as we walked outside to get the tree, "at least they all match."

"I think that's the reason I don't like them," I said, as we lay the tree in the middle of the floor.

It looked like a dead fish that had washed onto shore. We still needed to find a stand before we could set up the tree.

"Do you think the hardware store is open?" I asked, looking at my watch.

"We can figure something out," Henry replied, sounding surprisingly confident. "What if we used some rope to prop it up--we've got some of that," she added.

We rigged up the tree by tying rope around the stump and between the branches near the top. In the big, open dining room, we were able to attach the rope to a banister on one side and, on the other, to a hook that was hanging from the ceiling, where a dying spider plant had been. We had a hard time getting the tree level and once we did, it was still suspended above the floor by almost six inches.

"Just leave it," Henry said, "it's good enough."

"We can't leave it like this," I said, but I knew how difficult it had been for us to get this far and I doubted that we could do any better. "OK," I conceded, we'll leave it like this.

I stood back and surveyed our work. The tree was lopsided but I was impressed that we had been able to get it upright. "Not bad for two impractical people, don't you think?"

Henry smiled. "It kind of floats," she said.

After we hung the lights around the tree, I opened up the box of unbreakable ornaments.

"You put them on the tree, okay, I've never liked doing that," I said.

She moved a chair over to the tree and climbed onto it so she could reach the top branches.

"That's the one part of Christmas that I actually like," she said.

As I passed the ornaments to Henry, I expected her to comment on each ornament just as Helen once had.

"Do you remember when you made this for me?" I heard Helen's voice exclaim as I handed the cookie dough Santa to Henry. "And this one?" regarding the Shrinky-Dink tree.

But Henry didn't say anything as she took each ornament from me.

"Do you remember this?" I finally asked her as I passed her the clay snowflake that I had made in the first grade and that was so heavy it had to sit on a branch by itself.

"No, am I supposed to?" she asked.

I pulled out the needle-point wise man and gave it to her. "What about this?" I asked.

She examined the wise man carefully. "Nope."

"You don't remember when I made that?" I asked, "Come on, you're joking."

"No Katrina, I'm dead serious. I remember seeing them on the tree, but what else am I supposed to remember?"

I knelt by the wide flat box, staring at the remaining ornaments and the yellowed newspaper that lined the inside. I felt my chest tighten and I tried to stop myself from crying.

"Can't you just pretend? Isn't that what everyone else does?" I yelled at Henry, "I mean where would you rather be?"

She finished hanging a clear glass bulb on a branch and looked at it. "I'd prefer to spend the day in an ashram, praying," she said.

"But," I stuttered, as I looked at her and narrowed my eyes, measuring her, trying to determine whether she had meant what she had said. "You mean it makes absolutely no difference to you that I'm here?" I asked.

"Well not really Katrina, I think it is a ridiculous holiday. I've never liked it. It's supposed to be about Christ and instead it's just about a lot of bullshit."

"Bullshit! Am I bullshit?!" I protested.

"Don't be ridiculous. This was your idea," she said, sounding more rational than she had in days.

I picked up a small felt bunny dressed in a Santa outfit and asked again, "So am I bullshit?"

She shrugged.

As I held the miniature stuffed animal in my hand, I noticed that it was missing one eye.

"I hate you," I yelled at the top of my lungs. And then everything was quiet.

Henry stepped down from the chair and walked over to me. "Do you think that I care if you hate me?" she asked and started toward the living room.

"Henry," I sobbed, "I'm not finished. Come back here and talk to me."

"Would you stop yelling Katrina," she said as she sat down on the couch, "there is really no reason to get so worked up about all of this. I'm tired. I'm going to sit down and rest for a while."

The tree bounced slightly every time I put an ornament on one of the branches and my nose kept running every time I bent down to get a new one. As I continued

decorating, fitting bulbs with new wire hangers, trying to vary the colors and shapes of ornaments just as Helen used to, I began to feel less angry and more ridiculous for being there at all. I hung the last ornament, a gold snowflake with a tiny bell hanging from it that had my name printed on the cheap, painted metal and then climbed on the chair to place the blue angel at the top.

"Henry," I yelled, "the tree is finished. Do you want to take a look?"

She didn't respond and I called again.

I walked into the living room feeling irritated that she wouldn't even come look at the tree. Henry was wrapped tightly in a blanket, shivering.

"Did you say something?" she asked. "I feel terrible," she said, before I could answer her, "I think I'm dying."

I felt her forehead.

"You don't have a fever. I'm sure that you'll be alright."

"Katrina, it feels like I have hives in my throat. I can hardly breathe."

Henry lay in the back seat of my rental car, wheezing. It took less than twenty minutes to drive to the mental hospital. I decided to take her to the university mental ward, a place she had never been before, instead of the private mental hospital or the state mental hospital. It was only after

we had arrived at the big medical complex and walked into the building housing the mental ward that Henry realized we were not going to the emergency room. But she was too sick to do anything about it. I explained to the admitting nurse that Henry was bipolar and needed some medication.

"Did you call her psychiatrist?" she asked.

"Well, I tried to get in touch with him," I lied, "But because of the holiday and…" I trailed off. "She's become quite violent," I explained to the nurse, "she threatened me physically."

Short of convincing the nurse that Henry was suicidal, I could think of no other way to get her admitted. Henry was, at least, helping to instantiate my lie by screaming that I was the one who was crazy.

The nurse agreed to let her stay and be evaluated. Henry was given a shot for the allergic reaction and something else to help her sleep. The resident couldn't say what exactly had caused the reaction, probably something she ate, he said. He looked at me incredulously when I told him it was probably the Christmas tree.

"She doesn't really need to stay here," he said to me in the waiting room, "and she might be more comfortable at home."

But I asked him to keep her, just in case she had another reaction, and because I was hoping that one of the

staff psychiatrists would look at her blood levels when they returned to the hospital after the holiday.

I walked outside into the cold air and took a deep breath. I could have been sent to jail for what I had just done, I thought to myself as I stood near the entrance to the mental ward. The hospital complex was located on one of the few hills in town and I looked out at the white street lights along Main Street that glistened in the distance. I felt like celebrating, and then realized that there was no one to do that with as I walked slowly down the curved sidewalk that led to the parking lot.

I called the hospital the next day and was told that Henry was too sedated to receive visitors. I spent most of the day in bed, trying to ignore the fact that it was Christmas. Late in the afternoon, I got up and groggily started cleaning the kitchen, washing the dirty dishes in the dishwasher by hand and sweeping the pine needles off the floor. I didn't bother getting dressed. I stayed in my pajamas and kept moving, making a circuit, living room, dining room, kitchen, study, and then starting over again.

Once the ornaments were put away, I untied the rope attached to one side of the tree and watched it sag, half-way, to the floor. Untying the other side, I expected that the tree would land with more of a thud, but it landed gently, like

someone lying down into bed. I pulled my boots onto my bare feet and put on an old coat that I found in the hall closet. Having wrapped the tree in a sheet, I dragged it outside and down the steep driveway to the side of the road. It really did look like a body. At least it would be dark soon, so the neighbors wouldn't notice that the tree was already in the garbage.

My feet were freezing by the time I walked back into the house. The cold went right through the leather of the boots. I should have put on a pair of socks before I went outside. I took off the boots and sat down in front of the heating vent in the big, open room, where the Christmas tree had been. As the warm air blew from the furnace, I felt my toes begin to tingle, and, slowly, I could feel each one of them again. Finally, my whole foot was warm, just as the metal grid of the vent was becoming too hot to touch with bare skin.

In the winters, at the old house, I used to sit on the living room floor by the heating vent every afternoon after school, reading, moving only to follow the cycles of the furnace. The air blew slightly cold at first and then warmed up until it was, for a few minutes, just perfect. The vent's metal grid made a pattern on my back as I leaned against it, and I waited until I almost couldn't stand the heat before I would finally change position, knowing how cold my back would feel once I moved away, not just the regular 68 degree

cold of the house but something much colder. The sun set by four thirty, and I would let the room get so dark around me that I could barely make out the letters on the page. But I wouldn't turn on a light because I was too absorbed in the book to get up and stop reading. I also knew that Helen would be home soon and turn on the light for me.

Helen made a whoa-ing sound as she stepped in from the cold. "Whoa, its cold out there," she said loudly, stomping her feet hard on the hall rug and taking off her coat. Even inside, after she had slammed the door, I could see her breath. "Wouldn't you rather talk to me than read that book?" she asked, after she poured herself a glass of white wine in the kitchen. She bought the wine by the gallon in big glass containers with screw off tops and then transferred it to a clay bottle with a cork stopper that a potter-friend of hers had made. I sat on a stool in the small kitchen and helped her cook dinner. With the refrigerator stocked with nothing more than a bunch of celery and canned water chestnuts, Helen would create her version of Chinese stir fry: a sweet, gingery dish covered in soy sauce that I understood wasn't really Chinese but was as close as anyone got in Iowa. The kitchen warmed up quickly with the stove on and Helen sipped her Chablis as she chopped the celery, her face reddening slightly as she finished half the glass, careful to save the rest to drink at the table.

I woke with a start and found that there was not a single light on in the house. I didn't know how long I had been asleep, but I felt as though I hadn't slept so well in a long time. I was lying by the vent and I didn't know how I had been able to fall asleep with my head on the wood floor. I still felt groggy and decided not to turn on any lights or look at the clock, just to walk upstairs and climb into bed.

I arrived at the hospital the next morning for visiting hours. The mental ward looked nothing like what I expected. Everything was very clean and all of the furniture looked just like what you would find in a motel. I thought mental hospitals were supposed to be more menacing, all stainless steel, cold cement floors, dirty. As far as I could tell, the only thing that was noticeably different was the fact that there were no doors to any of the rooms. I stopped in the hallway just before I got to Henry's private room and peered into the doorway. I saw her sitting on the hospital bed. She kept dozing off and then abruptly waking up again. She was dressed in the same clothes that she had arrived in, sweat pants and an oversized turtle neck sweater. I stood there for several minutes, watching her and thinking about what I was going to say to her, before I finally walked in.

When she saw me, she got out of bed and stood directly in front of me with her arms crossed in front of her.

"Get me the fuck out of here," she commanded. "NOW!" she yelled, raising her voice.

She looked like a toy soldier, rigid and small.

"I can't do that," I said calmly.

"You like to be the boss, don't you? You get off on it," she said.

"No Henry, I don't," I responded curtly, wishing that I was better at ignoring her when she said such nasty things.

"You know, you can't keep me here," she said, "that's the law Katrina, I know my rights."

"You know what, Henry, you're right," I said sarcastically, "why don't you just leave. If you don't feel like being here, I think you should just..."

"So Ms. Lewis," the doctor said as she entered, "how are we doing today?"

I watched my mother gather herself. Henry knew what she had to do to make the right impression on this dark haired woman who was just a little bit taller than me.

"Who's this?" the doctor asked, when she looked up and saw me.

"This," Henry said, "is my daughter," emphasizing the words in such a way to make them sound like a formal title.

"Hello," the doctor said, and shook my hand firmly, "it's a pleasure to meet you." She picked up the metal file

that was hanging at the end of Henry's bed, opened it and began flipping through the pages inside.

"Sleeping?" she asked, turning her attention to Henry.

"There's just about nothing else I can do," Henry said, "even when I want to stay awake."

"Good," she said, as I watched the glare of the fluorescent light bounce off the right lens of her glasses.

"Any more allergic reactions?"

"None that I'm aware of," Henry answered.

The doctor put her hand on Henry's wrist and held it there for a minute while she looked at her watch.

"We'll just stay the course for now," she said, not looking up at either one of us as she made a few marks on the chart. "OK," she said, in an upbeat tone as she replaced the chart, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"That's it?" I said to Henry after the doctor had left.

"What did you think they did here?" Henry asked snidely.

"Well I didn't really know," I responded, "I thought they might talk to you."

"Psychiatrists don't talk Katrina, they don't know how to, which is half the reason I don't want to stay here. I don't like people who don't know how to talk."

"Come on, there has to be a little bit more to it?" I said, realizing only afterwards that Henry was the last person I should be asking.

This was supposed to be the best hospital in the state.

"Listen Henry, I'll be right back, and then we can talk about what to do."

I walked up to the nurses' station down the hall and asked if I could speak with the psychiatrist in charge of my mother's case.

"That would be Dr. Etsky," the nurse said, "She's making her rounds now but you can wait here for her to finish. She may be able to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Thank you," I said, and sat down on the black vinyl couch in the hallway. I waited for twenty minutes, occasionally looking up at the nurse and smiling.

"She takes her time in the mornings," she said, nodding.

After another twenty minutes had passed, she winked at me. I smiled back, trying to conceal my impatience.

When the doctor finally appeared at the nurse's station, she gave her a few instructions and then disappeared into an office before I could tell her that I had been waiting to talk to her. I sat down again. After another five minutes, the nurse looked up and, without having had any apparent signal from the doctor, announced that the doctor would see me.

"Thank you," I said and was shown to the same door the doctor had disappeared into a few minutes earlier.

"So what can I do for you?" Dr. Etsky asked, motioning to a seat in front of her desk and inviting me to sit down.

"Well," I said, leaning back in the gray velour chair that rocked back slightly with the weight of my body, "I wanted to talk to you about what happens next with my mother."

"Your mother is quite a character," the doctor said and smiled.

"Yes, I know," I replied, nodding at her and wondering whether she understood that my mother was not always such a character.

"Do you think that this is the best place for her?" I asked, looking around the room, which was decorated uniformly, all in black and white and gray.

She frowned.

"I don't know why you would ask that," she said.

I kept searching for something that didn't fit in with the color scheme. I couldn't. Everything from the carpet to the bookshelves to the pen holder on the desk was perfectly coordinated.

"Your mother's responding very well to the medication. Once she's stabilized, we just need to figure out a more sustainable plan."

The doctor was younger than Henry, though I couldn't decide exactly how old she was—forty, forty-five.

She was married--I could tell from the ring on her left hand but there were no photographs of children in the office.

"Right," I said, "that's exactly what I wanted to find out. What I will need to do next."

"How long are you here for?" the doctor asked, "your mother mentioned that you live in New York City."

"She did?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Oh. Well, I hadn't actually planned on going back there."

"Really?" she asked, "why is that."

"Don't you think that my mother needs me to stay here?"

"She hadn't said anything about that."

"Really?" I asked.

"Perhaps she just didn't mention it."

"So you have a job here, is that why you've moved back?" the doctor asked.

"No," I said, "I have a job in New York, or at least I used to. It isn't much of a job, so I was planning on leaving it."

"And doing what?"

"I hadn't decided," I said.

"Ms. Lewis," the doctor said, leaning on her desk, "you know that there is no reason for you to stay here for your mother."

"But there isn't anyone left to take care of her," I said, insistently.

"Well what about us?"

I looked at her, half-smiling.

"I see," she said, and looked down at the papers on her desk. "Think about it this way. Your mother remaining stable is not really about anyone but her, and to some lesser extent, us. She will have all of the proper care here."

"I have no intention of leaving my mother in a mental hospital for the rest of her life!" I exclaimed, much more forcefully than I had intended.

"And she won't have to, at least not if she doesn't want to. I think it's time that your mother took care of herself for a while."

"But you realize," I said, "that that is exactly what she is not capable of doing."

"Why not?" the doctor asked calmly.

Put so simply, her question seemed irrefutable.

"But what am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Whatever you have been doing," the doctor said.

"But I'm not doing anything," I said, "at least not anything of any particular importance."

"How old are you," the doctor asked. "I'm twenty three," I said.

She smiled. "Well then whatever it is that you're doing at the moment is probably pretty important."

Her voice reminded me suddenly of my mother's psychologist friends, who used to come over when I was a child.

"Thank you for your time," I said, reaching out my hand and clumsily standing up, "it's very nice to meet you."

"And it's very nice to meet you," she said, smiling, and I walked out of the room.

I drove through downtown, past the old movie theater and the bookstore and parked the car on Main Street, in front of what had once been Samuel's Toy Store. The curved glass window of the old store was still there, but instead of the toy circus scene that had occupied the display for as long as I could remember, there were two manikins wearing short skirts and T-shirts. Every time I had passed by the shop as a child, I would stand in front of the window and try to notice some new detail in the miniature world that was carefully constructed there. In the center, there was the big-top tent made from real canvas and next to that a parade of hundreds of toy animals that circled around it. The lions led the parade, followed by the elephants and then the bears. A long train of tin cars with clowns riding in them ran in a track. Up and down the window, there was a trapeze from which dozens of little toy monkeys would swing with the help of some well-hidden mechanism. I could still see the whole scene quite clearly even though it was no longer there.

I planned on having lunch at Drake's, a candy store and luncheonette that was also an Iowa City landmark. But, when I arrived in front of the old green storefront, I found that it too had disappeared. There was a sign in the window announcing the grand opening of Iowa City's Own New York Bagel Café. The new bagel store was decorated in red and white tile and, according to the big signs behind the counter, served not only bagels, but sandwiches and wraps, and an array of juice drinks that were freshly squeezed and named according to the effect they were meant to produce. "Power Energy Drink," one was called, "Pass Your Test," was the name of another. On the walls of the bright square room filled with tables, there were historical photographs representing scenes from life in "Olde Iowa City." The sepia toned reproductions showed antique cars parked on a long dirt road, which was marked Main Street, and a few men walking on a raised wooden walkway. Drake's was featured in each one of the photos and it looked just like the Drake's where I used to go as a child to get jaw breakers the size of baseballs and long ropes of red licorice and, years later, to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes in the dark wooden booths at the back. By the time that I started going to Drake's as a teenager, the place was staffed by young pale women, most of whom were art students and all of whom dyed their hair in a range of colors—raspberry, blue, black, white. They were very skinny and rarely smiled, always going about their jobs of

weighing out candy or making milkshakes with a languid, melancholy air.

I turned to the long counter that lined the newly tiled wall and ordered a bagel and coffee from a healthy looking young woman with brown hair. "Have a great day," she said as she gave me my change. I smiled and thanked her. There were people sitting at several small tables. I carried my tray over to a clean, bright table near a window and sat down, thinking how much I would have preferred to be sitting in one of the old booths that were illuminated by small dirty lamps. The light they cast was dim and yellow, and reminded me of fireflies. I remembered sitting in those booths for hours and hours, all the time breathing in the candy sweet smell of Drake's and talking with my friends. I had spent a whole Saturday there once with my friend Susannah as we slowly consumed a pint of whiskey by mixing it with the free refills of watery coffee that we would get up at the counter. We were both drunk and wired by late afternoon. I made her laugh by telling her about the strange co-ed sleepover I had been to in the third grade, when we were commanded by a friend's parents to play spin the bottle. I had no idea what had become of Susannah. The last I had heard, she had moved to California, hoping to go to acting school at UCLA. I thought I might see her sometime on a late-night infomercial or dating show—the two best ways, she had told

me that afternoon we drank the whisky, to be discovered by talent agents.

I noticed that there was an escalator that connected the first floor of the bagel shop to the second, something that in "Olde Iowa City," the one of my childhood, would have been considered extraordinary. For many years, there had been only one escalator in town, located at Goodyear's, the big department store on Main Street, and when we went there to buy winter coats or underwear, I would play on the escalators until one of the sales ladies had to tell me to stop. The store also had a pneumatic system for sending bills directly to the accounting department. The lady at the counter would put the bill and the cash in a brass canister and then open a latch with a rubber ring around the lid. I would hear the swooshing of air and then she would drop the canister into the hole and close the latch. In a matter of minutes, we would hear a thump, the lady would open the latch, take out the canister and inside would be our change and a receipt. None of it was there anymore. The Scientologists had taken over the building when the department store had gone out of business, renovated it and replaced the old escalator with a new one, because they had wanted a waterfall and artificial plants between the up and down sides.

I looked out the window at Main Street. I felt I had stumbled upon a place where I thought I had once been—in

fact, from the name, I knew I had been there—but recognized so little of what was around me that I wondered if I had ever really been there at all. I looked at my watch and realized that visiting hours were over. I felt a strange emptiness at the thought of not saying goodbye to Henry. She might worry about me, I thought, and then wondered why I thought such things. I wanted her to worry about me. The truth was, at that particular moment, she wasn't worried about me at all. I looked at my watch again. It was three-forty-five.

I called the hospital and left a message for Henry. I told her that I loved her and that I was looking forward to seeing her when she was feeling better. Then, I called Julia and left a message on our machine. I would be back that night, I said. I didn't know how late. I was going to the airport and getting on the first plane I could.

I drove out of town exactly the way I had arrived, across the railroad tracks, by the old antique store, past the new gas station and recently built hotels. And, until I reached the entrance to the highway, I didn't notice the absence of voices: excited voices, questioning voices, will-we-get-there-on-time voices, or my own voice from long ago, making declarations and contingency plans, how I might leap out of the car at the last minute, what I wanted my mother to do at the airport, how I hoped she would behave, how I knew she

wouldn't. There wasn't even the pounding sound of my own heart in my ears. I was perfectly calm as the car merged with the flowing traffic.

I had memorized the drive to the airport a long time ago. There was the one curve that gave you a glimpse of the drive-in movie theatre on the outskirts of town, an old brick factory near a small reservoir, two large overpasses, a section of new road that sounded smooth under the tires, the motor-home dealership looking like a village unto itself, and then nothing, just straight road with empty, disused land on both sides, until the little green sign that indicated it was only three more miles to the airport. I always had the feeling that, along with the curves in the road and the one or two landmarks, I was watching myself on this drive, in order to remember what was happening, or that this was where I was from, trying to preserve some image of what home looked like, in case I wouldn't be back for a while. I accelerated to pass a car and get into the exit lane to the airport, which was on the left hand side, not the right, something I always thought was strange. After I made the turn, I looked down the road to the terminal and realized, then, that I had to pay attention. I had no idea where to return a rental car at the airport. Wherever that was, I had never been there before.