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Transparent Bridges; The Bird and the Alligator

Lori L. Laffrado

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TRANSPARENT BRIDGES

by

Lori L. Laffrado

A.B. Vassar College, 1979.

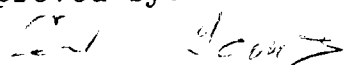
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"Right before they put me under, I said, "Remember to pickle the boob for me. Don't throw it away.' They all cracked up and the anesthesiologist said, 'You're going to sleep now, Diane.' They said they'd never forget me. I must be distinctive, you know?"

Diane leans forward, her long, brown hair clinging unevenly to her back and shoulders. Already she wears a scarf to hide the patches of skin on her scalp.

"And last summer when I was hit by a car--I was on my bike--the woman stopped and came running over, and when she saw my face, she said, 'Oh, my God! I know you! I know your mother! How is your mother?' And I must have been shook up from the fall because I said, 'My mother's dead. She died last April.' I mean, she did ask how my mother was. I guess I'm too blunt sometimes, huh?" Diane speaks quickly, eagerly, rattling each word. She is too blunt most of the time, but that's one of the reasons I like her.

Today after class, Diane was waiting for me outside the door. When the period ended and everyone else walked out, she walked in. I hadn't seen her since last semester when she took my Remedial Reading course. Every day after class she would stay and talk. And talk. There's always one student who talks before class, during class, and after class. I listen. Two years of teaching and not a semester

without one. I make sympathetic noises and think of finally being able to wash the chalk dust off my hands and wipe the smudges of chalk dust off my clothes, but I don't act as though I want to leave. Maybe I'm kind or maybe I'm spineless; I don't know which. All I know is I sit there.

"I told the doctor I don't want no operation. I see how those people were in the county home when I worked there. They're no good after an operation. I tell him, forget it, you're not cutting me open. And he says--" Diane pauses, straightens in her chair, lowers her chin, and lets her glasses clip her nostrils as she imitates the doctor. "He says, 'Diane, you're a difficult patient. You're only 28. If we don't operate you'll die within a year.' He said that to me, and I said, 'Look, my mother, my Aunt Josie, her daughter, all dead from cancer. I'll die soon anyway and I'd rather die with two boobs instead of one.' He turned all red when I said that. After they operated, he said the cancer had spread to the lymph nodes in my neck, see, you can see how it is here."

She tilts her chin to show me a pillow of white flesh above her collarbone. The skin there is white, like the underside of my arm, especially white against the rough red of Diane's face. Diane is five years older than I and last semester was much bigger--bigger boned, fleshier. Now she is pale in some places, puffy in others, her skin

sagging in loops and curves on her bare arms. I imagine her in front of an x-ray machine, the radiation leveled at her in a tangerine glow, soaking into her pores, saturating her bones. I think of asking her what a chemotherapy treatment is, but am afraid she will once again offer to show me her scar. It is bad enough that I imagine the puckered scar making a relief map of her chest, mountain and river. I have followed this disease. Diane talked all semester about the cancer, first the small lump under her arm, then the swollen breast; now, in mid-March, the breast is gone, but the cancer remains. I still do not know what to say to her.

"I'm going to write this all down," she is saying. "I'm going to write this down and give it to you, so you'll know it's a true story, so you can read it. This could only happen to me. You know, since Doc Greenwald died, I haven't felt right about this cancer. With him, he was my family doctor, he treated my mother, when he said I'd have a 70% chance of getting the cancer back--even after chemotherapy--I knew he told me the truth. I want my old doctor back. Who would believe I have cancer and my doctor died?" Diane is grinning at me, inviting me to laugh with her, the ceiling light spreading over her broad nose.

Diane cut class for a week last winter after Doctor Greenwald's plane crashed in the mountains. She came in

during my office hours and began crying as soon as she saw me, clutching a wadded gray handkerchief that crackled as she uncrumpled it. What would she do? How would she find a new doctor? Snow flurried outside as she wept. By the time she left, a cliff of snow had gathered on the window ledge and I had promised to try and do something.

That afternoon, I went to the head of the department, asking about area doctors, cancer specialists. Professor Meyers politely told me about medical listings in the yellow pages. When she saw my quick frown, knowing that I had come for a recommendation of a specific doctor, she slowly began to pare an orange that she had been holding since I walked in.

"I try to encourage young teachers to make a practice of keeping their students at a distance," she said, her fingers working the rind into a spiral. "Talking to them about their schoolwork is one thing, but becoming involved in their lives is quite another. I don't encourage such associations."

I felt my jaw stiffen the way it always does when someone criticizes me. Who cares what you encourage, I thought, as the orange rind rocked on the desk top. Meyers divided the orange into sections.

"I know you don't like what I'm saying, Wendy," she

said around a mouthful. "But you'll learn soon enough that there isn't much you can do for anybody."

Her hand brushed her nose as it delivered an orange section to her mouth, and a juicy piece of pulp remained, quivering on the end of her nose as she chewed.

"Especially," she continued, swallowing, "For people who will be so different from you. They won't be polite; they won't know not to call at 3 am screaming for you. And when they do call, you won't know what to say." The pulp nodded in agreement.

Sweat prickled under my arms and between my legs. I pinched a piece of palm between my thumb and forefinger, tried to think of something awful, something that would choke the laugh that pressed in my throat.

"Aside from that," she said, leaning forward, "How are your classes going this semester? Are you enjoying teaching Remedial still?"

Part of me answered her questions, while another part still wanted desperately to laugh loudly, rudely. You can't laugh now, I told myself. Diane, think of Diane. That's terrible, I thought, but already part of me was inspired, pushing forth images promptly, eagerly, making the laugh boil back down my throat. Moments later, I walked down the hall, bangs clinging damply to my forehead. I pushed the bathroom door closed and leaned against

it, laughing a queer bark of a laugh that rose again whenever I thought of Meyers and her nose. I laughed until the film of sweat chilled dry on my face, and I remembered Diane.

"I thought you liked your new doctor," I am saying sternly, frowning at Diane. "Do you or don't you?"

"Oh, ya, ya, he's okay," she says, pleased that I have questioned her. The smile that stretches her taut skin is a familiar one. All last semester I watched Diane beam while I taught, not listening to the material, but watching my face, my hands. Sometimes she would turn and look at the rest of the class from her front row seat, nodding to them proudly, inviting their admiration of me.

"When's your next treatment?"

"Next week. I have to see all my teachers before that, to make sure I'm still enrolled and to ask for incompletes. If I don't stay enrolled, the insurance company won't pay my bills. My Sociology teacher, he says no way, he won't give me an incomplete. You're a prick, I told him. Right to his face. You're a prick. He didn't care. He says Diane, some people will say anything to get an incomplete. So I pulled off my scarf and showed him my bald spots. He didn't care. What can I do? It takes me a month to stop throwing up from the chemotherapy, and then it's time

for my next treatment. How can I go to classes?" Diane looks to me for comment, her eyes bulging out from her chapped face.

"You want me to go and talk to him?" I ask. At least this will be something I can do. I know if I walk in meek and polite, act as if the man would be doing the world such a big favor, nod in sympathy when he grumbles about Diane's behavior, he'll agree to the incomplete.

"Oh, that would be so nice of you. You're so nice to me," Diane says, leaning forward, her hand closing around my forearm as the campus bells strike 5:30. We have been sitting in the darkening classroom for over an hour.

"I have to go," Diane says. She pulls on a quilted powder blue jacket and stands up in calf-tight black boots that squeeze bracelets of flesh up around her knees. "I'll call you. Is that all right? You'll know I'm still alive that way, so you won't have to waste time reading the obituaries looking for me." She tugs her skirt down as she talks. "I won't stay out of touch again," she tells me. "I'll keep calling until I get you. Come on, Diane, shut up and go," she tells herself, waves and leaves.

The door shuts on a sliver of hall light. I chew on the side of my finger and think about poor Diane going home to her dingy apartment, the smell of vomit in the bathroom, thatches of hair on the bedroom pillows. Why should

she bother to clean up, knowing that the treatments will keep her sick for a year? I sink my teeth into my finger to stop them from clenching and grinding. Maybe she'll be too sick to call me for awhile, I think. Just forget about this, I tell myself. I stand and erase the board, squinting to see the tails and curves of letters in the dusk.

A week later, Diane calls me and asks me to meet her at the campus Legal Aid office the next day. I arrange it so that I can stay no longer than an hour, so there won't be time for coffee after the appointment. She is waiting outside when I get there, her face blotchy, her blue scarf flat against her head. There is no longer any hair straggling down beneath the scarf.

"So what are we doing here?" I ask when I reach her.

"It's Blue Cross. They turned down all my bills. They said it was because of preexisting."

"Preexisting what?"

"Preexisting cancer. That it was there before I had the insurance, before I registered last fall. A letter came yesterday. I was sitting on the can reading my mail when I opened the envelope and I sat there and bawled for a half hour. When I went to get up I saw all this dark stuff floating in the toilet and it was my pubic hair!

Doctor Anderson promised me that my pubic hair wouldn't fall out--he said no one else's had--but I bet they were just too embarrassed to tell him. I always thought that if I got real poor I could go out and walk the streets, find some rich grandpa to shack up with me. But who'd want me like this? One boob, bald, no pubic hair. Maybe an old, old grandpa," she says, grinning. "One boob would be all he could handle."

"Oh, Jesus," I say, pretending to be exasperated.

"Don't worry," Diane says, nudging me happily. "I won't talk like that in front of the lawyer."

In the Legal Aid office, we wait in plastic chairs across from the secretary's desk. Whenever she glances at us, Diane smiles at her, trying to get her on our side, she whispers to me. As we walk into the lawyer's office, Diane draws back and I have to give her a push to get her through the doorway. She sits next to me, her legs apart, her handbag swinging between her thighs.

"I think I have the general picture from these," Vivian, the lawyer says, brushing her hand over Diane's bills. "But why don't you tell me in your own words what it is that you want done?"

Diane glances at me.

"You talk," I say. "I'll interrupt."

"Okay," Diane says. "This dear one," she tells Vivian,

"Is my English teacher. She's helping me. Anyway, last semester I went to the health service because there was a lump under my arm. That was when Doc Greenwald, my family doctor, was still alive, you know."

I tilt my wrist to see the face of my watch. Not a chance I'll make it to the faculty meeting on time. Meyers will be real pleased. I don't have to watch Vivian's pleasant, troubled face to know that there is little chance that Blue Cross will pay Diane's bills.

"And I went down there yesterday. I go in and the lady says, 'Can I help you?' and I say, 'I want to see the head honcho.' And she says, 'What about?' and I tell her none of her business. I don't want to sit there and fill out forms. She said that everyone was out to lunch, so I waited, but then I started feeling sick from the medication so I had to leave."

While Vivian makes a note on her pad, Diane pauses and breathes heavily.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Ya, I'm just faint from the last treatment," she whispers.

I squeeze her fingers and they slip out of my grasp and wrap themselves over my hand.

"And I don't have no money. I went to the Welfare and the lady says you don't have any income at all and I said no,

but I get some food stamps. And she said, well, what are you doing about paper goods? And I said, you mean toilet paper? Yes, she says. So I told her I tear off one little piece at a time like it's the Depression. Sometimes I sit there and try to drip dry. So she gives me an eight dollar coupon for paper goods. Big deal, right? Eight dollars from Welfare and I'm supposed to kiss her you-know-what."

"You haven't received any other payments from Welfare?" Vivian asks.

"No, it's all this red tape stuff. I told that worker at the Welfare, I said, 'You know, maybe I should just go out and get pregnant, then maybe I'd start getting some money pronto.' She got mad and said, 'Diane, don't talk that way. If you talk that way, I won't be on your side anymore and you'll never get any money.' Like it's coming right out of her pocket, you know? She doesn't know what I go through. I mean, I don't hate her or anything--she doesn't know the way things are, that's all.

"Somebody has to pay my doctor's bills. I paid my Blue Cross fee and now they're pulling this preexisting. I told Doctor Anderson and he couldn't believe it. I'm so antsy about all this. What if I end up on the street because I don't have rent money?"

"And everyone you know will just leave you there, right?" I say. "I'll just walk by and say, 'Hi, Diane,'

and keep going."

Diane jerks her thumb at me and says to Vivian, "She's a smart one."

"Well, I'll see what I can do about all this," Vivian says. "The very least I can do is make a big stink, so that they'll be forced to make their policy much clearer to students." She closes Diane's folder and stands. "Don't you worry about this in the meantime, though. I'll do whatever can be done."

In the doorway, I squeeze Vivian's arm in thanks.

"I'll be in touch soon," she says.

Outside, Diane tells me she has to go to the bathroom.

"I've got two minutes to get to my class," I say.

"She was nice, wasn't she?"

"I hope she'll be on my side."

"I think she is already. Look, I've got to run." I hug Diane quickly, my arms sinking into her quilted jacket.

"I'll call you," she says.

I run all the way to the English building, my knapsack thumping my back, my breath coming in gasps by the time I push open the classroom door.

"Here she is."

"We were beginning to wonder, Wendy."

"Guess who's late this time."

They are smiling at me with mid-semester friendliness,

waiting for me to say something. I stand behind my desk for a moment, smiling stupidly, watching the sharp afternoon sun glare off the worn brown desk top.

"Three more chapters in the Woolf and two to three pages about what you read for this time," I say, looking up at them through my bangs. "It's too nice a day for you to be inside. Go on, get out of here and I'll see you on Friday."

The room empties quickly and loudly. I can hear their voices echoing in the hall. They fade, then are unexpectedly loud again beneath the classroom windows. I close my eyes to shut out the faculty meeting I've missed, the students I've let out early. Usually, four or five of them stay after class to talk, to ask questions. Today, no one has stayed and I imagine that they have seen on my face what I am feeling. How can I teach them? How can they possibly take me seriously? Diane could have been so many other places and instead she sat in my class, listening to my tidy speeches on grammar and punctuation. Stop the melodrama, I tell myself, but I don't forget that five minutes ago when I walked into this room and saw my students, I couldn't have taught a decent class if my salary had been tripled and my life depended on it.

"I know we're going to get warts from this floor."

"Well, we haven't gotten any so far, Nance. Or at least I haven't," I say, twisting to get one of my swimsuit straps straight. "Have you?"

"I don't think so, but I'm sure it's only a matter of time. Are you ready?"

"Almost. Let me lock my stuff up."

While I hang my clothes in the long metal locker, Nancy peers at her face in the mirror.

"I look like shit," she calls to me.

My skirt slips off the clothes hook and crumples onto the floor. "You can't look any worse than I do," I call back, stuffing the skirt in the locker and closing the door quickly. I hear the skirt fall again, but do not care. "I slept about four hours last night."

"How come? I look fat, don't I?"

"No, and no one'll see you in the water, anyway," I say. "Come on. Because of that student of mine. You know. The one with cancer."

"Um. Right." Nancy says, gripping the metal handrail as we go down the ramp.

Already our voices echo slightly as we approach the pool. The tiled floor is wet and slippery and I step from tile to tile slowly, curling my toes for traction.

"She still calling you?"

"Oh, yeah. Hey, looks like we're the only ones here."

"Good. Is she bothering you? Shit. There goes my nipple again."

"I'll tell you after I do a couple laps," I say, as Nancy pauses to stuff her nipple back into her suit. "See you in awhile."

The water is warmer than usual today, but I still feel a quick wave of gooseflesh as I kick to the surface. I swim the first length in a crawl. Nancy passes me in the opposite direction, dog paddling vigorously. One of her kicks splashes my face and I taste the chlorine as it floods my mouth and nose. I gurgle and roll over into a backstroke. Beads of water drip off my face as I kick to the other end of the pool. The frosted panels of the ceiling are dimly lit by the outside light as I pass beneath them.

When I finish the sixth lap, I sit on the edge of the pool, breathing the moist air, thighs spread on the tile, feet in the water. Nancy floats on her back nearby.

"I mean, I do feel sorry for her, terribly sorry," I am saying. "She's brave. She handles it so well it's amazing. But, Jesus, I couldn't even teach on Wednesday. I've never felt that way before. Not even on the first day I taught. It was like I was paralyzed."

"So what that woman told you was right?"

"What woman?"

"You know. What's-her-name. The department head."

"Meyers? Well, no. Not really. See, I think it's just me. I'm learning how to handle all this."

"Sure you are," Nancy says skeptically and jackknifes down to do a handstand. I slip back into the water while she is under and do one myself.

"Nancy," I burble. Her eyes jerk open and I laugh, the air bubbling up out of my mouth. Our hair floats around us as we rest upside down for a moment, toes touching in the cold air above. Nancy runs out of breath first and zooms to the surface. I stay a second longer, watching the trail of air bubbles rise.

"You should just drop her," Nancy says in the locker room. "Seriously. Especially if you haven't been teaching well. This all isn't worth your job, is it?"

"Well, no," I say. "Hang on, I think I weigh more if I talk." The metal bar on the scale teeters back and forth slowly. "Shit. I lost weight again."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"Yeah, I love my job, but how can I just cut Diane off?"

"Just do it." Nancy snaps the waistband of her panties for emphasis. "Maybe someone else could handle Diane and teaching. You can't. Unplug your phone. Change your office hours. Just go ahead and do it."

"But what'll happen to her?"

"Look, Wendy, she lived a long time without you. It's

either all or nothing. You've got to choose."

"Right." I jam my suit into a plastic bag.

"So, you going to do it?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess I am. I guess."

I shake my head and a thread of water traces a quick line from my neck to my waist.

At the end of the week, I walk to my office to pick up my mail before I go home. Tacked to the door is a piece of paper with my name scrawled on it in large, loopy letters. Diane's writing. I unfold it standing in the hall and read, "They found more lumps Dr. Anderson told me. The treatment isn't working. Tried to call you but couldn't get a hold of you. Are you okay that your not answering your phone. I hope your not sick Diane."

I lean my head against the wooden door frame. More lumps. Cancer in remission is probably the best Diane can hope for and it sounds worse than that. My shoes tap out I-hope-your-not-sick-Di-ane, I-hope-your-not-sick-Di-ane, as I walk down the hall and outside. The chemotherapy will keep her alive for awhile, I think, as I kneel to unlock my bike. I have to blink hard to see the combination dial, as the tears rest in half-moons below my eyes.

At the stoplight of Raymond and College, I wait and wait. My pack shifts on my back as I stand, straddling my

bike. The bike frame is cold through my dress. I peer at the passing traffic, sniffing. There's not a hell of a lot you can do, I tell myself. Meyers and Nancy are right. If you didn't let your students talk to you in the first place, you wouldn't know any of this right now. But I do know. Then help Diane. Offer to nurse her. Go and help her with her reading a couple times a week. She'd jump at the chance to have you around.

And she would. Last semester she said, "I don't want you to stop teaching me. I'm going to nail your feet to the floor so you won't leave, so this won't stop." No, I think, no. There must be a horrible sick smell, and it won't be enough to go there once in awhile; I'll have to go all the time. But she's sick, she's dying, and you're talking about the time it would take to see her. Next time I'll talk her into taking some money from me, that'll help. I'll believe it when I see it.

The light changes. I push off with my left foot, three quick paws of the road to get momentum. In the middle of the street I feel a tug as the bike chain snags and catches my skirt. I teeter for a second, then clearly see the links of the chain woven with my skirt as headlights hit me. I feel the heat from the engine as the car jerks to a stop, knocking me from my bike. My left hipbone grazes the pavement as I roll with the fall.

"Are you okay?"

The pavement is cool and hard beneath me. I sit up, legs spread in a V, skirt riding up my knees. One bike wheel spins innocently in the frame.

"I didn't even see you. Can you stand up? Do you want a doctor?"

I am not hurt badly, I think, shifting slightly. Someone drapes a jacket over my shoulders. I shrug it off as I put weight on my arms and squat. Nothing collapses and so I stand and watch a woman untangle the piece of material from my bike chain. I shift my weight and wince, knowing that the pad of flesh on my hipbone will be swollen by morning.

"A pretty girl," I hear a woman's voice say behind me.

You're right, I think, I am pretty. When Diane was hit by a car on her bike last summer, she was pretty, too. Is this the start of a cycle? Will I nurse Diane for months, then get the cancer myself? Will we be roommates, taking turns throwing up, comparing small patches of hair, the length of scars? No need for me to worry about being unable to teach. I'll be too sick to teach. Good-bye, Diane, I think. You won't be hearing from me again.

"Wendy? Is that you? Wendy?"

Larry, Composition 100, third row back, second seat

in, and one of my favorites, comes out from the dark. I hear his breath catching harshly in his throat.

"Crossing the field," he breathes. "Ran all the way to help. Didn't know it was you."

"It's me," I say, trying to smile. I am suddenly weak and so I press my palm flat on the hood of the car, lean into my splayed fingers. Larry's arm hovers behind me, then settles uncertainly around my waist.

"I'm okay," I say. "Really."

"Jesus Christ, Wendy, Jesus Christ," he says.

I am glad that there is someone here I know.

"Come on," I tell him. We walk toward my bike, which stands waiting for me. Neither of us is hurt badly. Larry and I move the bike to the side of the road.

"Look, is it okay if I walk you home?" he asks.

"Sure," I say.

"Didn't even see you," the man says again, as he climbs into his car. The woman who worked the bike chain waves her hand and walks away.

"Good night," I call to their silhouettes. They go home to their safe dinnertime kitchens, the oven hissing softly as they say, "Bike accident. I helped."

I will go home, too, I think. I will go to bed, keep the phone unplugged for a week or so. I'll cancel my office hours. I will see Diane again, next week, per-

haps, but not now. Later. I have had enough thinking about disease, rotting flesh. I shiver and Larry says, "Easy, Wendy."

I press my fingers into his shoulder and rest, just for a second, before we pass under the street lamp and head for home.

The Bird and the Alligator

by

Lori L. Laffrado

I've been thinking of translating everything I write in this notebook into French and mailing it to Robear's aunt in Buffalo, with a note asking her to forward the whole thing to Robear, wherever he is.

I still think about Robear a lot and yesterday I marked a star on my Bank of Montana calendar, because it was exactly six months since I met Robear. That was last January in Buffalo, when I was still living at home, long before my parents ever thought of sending me out to Montana to live with my Uncle Felix.

I remember walking down the street on my way home from school and seeing my mother in the doorway, waiting to meet me. As soon as I saw her, I knew something must be up. She knew that I hated to have anyone talk to me right after school, because I hated school so much and I was always crabby at the end of the day. Besides that, I could smell her perfume and she had going-out clothes on, even though she was at home.

"Marie, darling, I have a surprise for you." I thought of just going right back out the door. My real name is Maria and usually that's what I'm called, and my brother and sister call me Ria, but when they call me Marie, I know it's for somebody else's benefit. Probably because Maria sounds so Italian, and Marie is more French. I put my books on the hall table and sat down to take off my boots.

"Your French tutor is here!" I have to give my mom credit for some things. Like the way she brought that one

out so that anyone who couldn't see her face would think everything was normal, while the whole time she was leveling one of those gazes at me that mean best behavior or else.

"He's in Daddy's den." Another key word; no one calls that room a den unless we're out to impress someone.

"Am I gonna have a lesson today?" I asked, as my mother straightened my collar, pushed my hair off my forehead and took my books off the hall table.

"Why, you'll just have to ask Mr. Jeffries that dear. You go right in. I'll take your books up to your room."

Rule number one hundred and three: no books on the hall table in case company comes. I sighed and headed down the hall. Now that I think about it, I guess I should have been more nervous, but I really liked French, and at Sacred Heart School senile old Sister Angelica taught all levels, and all she did was drool over herself for an hour. One and a half years of her was enough to make anybody a little frantic for learning, so this tutor wasn't a new person to meet, he was a new source of information. I was only feeling a little shy when I opened the door and walked in.

"Hi," I said, and then looked around. I couldn't see anyone in the room.

"Hi to you, too." The voice came from the bookshelves behind the desk. I was kind of embarrassed and waited for him to stand up and appear. All I can say is that it was a damn good thing that I wasn't holding my breath waiting.

Finally, I walked over to the rocking chair (which is huge and fat and just the right size for me to read in, because I can curl up and everything) and sat down.

"Are you Marie?" Again the voice without a body.

"Yes. Are you my French tutor or am I in the wrong room?" I knew that was a dumb thing to say, but it came out before I could stop it. Sometimes I get that way, saying really dumb things because I'm nervous.

"You're in the right room. How do you do, Marie? I'm Bob Jeffries." He stood up suddenly from behind the desk, holding a book in one hand and a pair of gold-rimmed glasses in the other.

"I do hope you'll call me Robear." What he really said was the name Robert in French, but I heard it phonetically the first time, and that's the way my mind spelled it. I thought he was being a little sarcastic with the I-do-hope stuff, but before I could think about that, he sat in the desk chair and started speaking French.

Now, even though I like French and I'm pretty good at it, I've never been to France, and I think you have to live in a country for awhile to get to be what fluent really is. All that means is that when he started pouring all that French out at me, I had a choice: either I could think about the way he looked and what he'd said so far in English, and therefore miss most of what he was saying in French, or I could shut off all of my brain except for the French speak-

ing part, and show him that I really did know my stuff. That's one of the bad things about being smart--you can't bear to have anyone think you're stupid. So I started thinking in French.

I'm not going to write down everything that he said in French, because I hate it when they do that in books. The kind where they have a quotation in front of every chapter, sometimes in Greek, or Latin, or French or whatever, and then you feel like you're missing something if you don't translate it. This is what I remember him saying.

"I'm your new French tutor and this conversation will tell us if you have the ability for me to teach you. I already told you my name. I'm thirty years old and I was a professor of French at a college outside of New York City up until two months ago. I was not given tenure and so I left. Until I decide what I'm going to do next, I'll be around Buffalo, and I'll be glad to give you French lessons. I assume your parents don't speak French? Good. I don't like interference. I'd only give you lessons for six months or so, so don't expect me to guide you through the next few years. Your mother has told me that your French is good, but that you are not learning at school. Now you tell me what you want to learn."

Since I'd been following him closely, I understood almost everything he'd said, except for one sentence when I slipped and took a good look at him. He had black hair

and a black moustache, a high forehead that reflected the ceiling light, and he had put on the gold spectacles. That was all I managed to get when I peeked, but I wished that he'd let me speak English so I could compute everything that was going on. No such luck, and so, I began.

"I want to learn more French in general and be more at ease with it, so that I can read French literature without having to read English translations. I don't think that it will take you more than six months to teach me what you know."

I'm getting embarrassed just remembering that I said that. I couldn't believe that it came out that way, but again, there it was, and I scrambled to correct myself and of course, made it worse by going straight into English.

"Jesus, I'm sorry, I didn't mean--" and then the sound of my voice in English hit my ears and I just shut up and started turning red. It was one of those bad blushes when it's not enough for your cheeks to turn red, but your whole face turns red, so red that it starts to burn and you can feel every pore on your face flame open. I tried to squirm around in the rocking chair so that he wouldn't see so much of my face, but it was useless.

"Ha! Ha!" and then, "Ha!" He had the kind of laugh that makes people turn around and smile when they hear it.

"No more than six months for you to learn all I know?" He laughed again and by then, even though I was still embarrassed, my face had begun to cool off a little. There

was a slight knock on the door and my mother came in. I'd sort of forgotten about her since I'd walked in there.

"How are you two doing?" my mother asked, smiling at me, but directing the question at him. This was the first opportunity I'd had to relax and take a good look at him, and while he talked to my mother, I soaked in everything I could.

He was wearing a light gray, wool sweater, the kind with fat braids woven down the front, with a button-down collar shirt under it. He was sort of funny-looking, with a long nose and the kind of mouth that doesn't show any teeth when the person talks or laughs. I think that was what made him look kind of weird. I couldn't even see an edge of white enamel. His left wrist poked out of his sweater sleeve and it was tan and covered with black hairs, just like my father's wrists are.

"Yes, I think Marie seems to have an exceptional grasp of the French language," he was saying. "Especially for someone with her limited training. I think we'll do just fine. What about you, Marie?"

There was that sarcastic tone again, as though he really didn't have to ask what I thought.

"Yeah, just fine. I think it'll be fine, Mom." I put that last line out brightly for her sake.

"Well, that's wonderful! Now, about lesson times--" my mother began. I like it when she takes care of the details of these situations. I hadn't even thought of lesson times.

"What do you do on Saturdays?" he asked me.

"Uh-I-"

"Good. How about this Saturday? We'll see how that works. I'll pick you up around ten."

"The lessons won't be here?" My mother sounded surprised, and I was glad she asked, because I was surprised, too. If I'm ever famous, I'll make her my agent.

"Why, no, Mrs. Leone. Marie needs to get out and practice her French, not only in conversation, but in different environments. It's the only way to learn in big steps, as opposed to the stagnation she's been going through at school. I think this was a wonderful idea you had."

Of course that sealed it, and my mother was smiling, and he was smiling, and I was so confused and everything that I felt like a puppy in a room full of people.

"So, I'll see you on Saturday." He walked out the door with my mother. I stayed in the rocking chair and listened to him say a couple things to her, and then I heard the door close after him. I got out of the chair and ran upstairs to look out my bedroom window. I got there in time to see him going down toward the end of the street, in a puffy blue jacket that gleamed against the light of the snow.

My parents were happy about the initial meeting with Robear. The French lessons had been their idea in the first place, and my mother seemed a lot happier about me in general.

I guess that she had been worried about me for awhile, since I had gone to Sacred Heart for high school, instead of going away to Miss Parker's, this fancy boarding school that my sister Lynn went to. There was a big argument at my house after I refused to go to Miss Parker's, and that was when my parents started viewing me as the problem child. I probably could have won some award for being the most yelled at nice kid in Buffalo.

I was careful not to seem too excited about the lessons, even though I was. No use in letting them know that. Next thing you know they'd realize that I might like French lessons, and so they'd start saying things like, "If you're not nicer when your Aunt Laura comes over next time, we'll just have to stop your French lessons." You can't trust my parents at all, since they'll hang anything over your head.

Now that I'm in Missoula, and far away from everything, it's easier to see that I was kind of lonely then because Lynn was away at college, and my brother Mark was at some school in Connecticut. I really didn't know anyone in school, either. I mean, I talked to people and stuff, and had a couple of friends, but no one I really wanted to hang around with. So, I was excited about having French lessons, and I guess it's okay to write it down now: I couldn't wait for Saturday.

When Saturday did come, I was kind of worried because

I didn't know if we were going to walk around, or drive around, or if we were going anywhere in particular. For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to wear. And the fact that I was thinking about what to wear made me crabby. So, I put on my corduroys and a shirt, figuring that was good enough, and went down to breakfast.

"Well, you're not going to wear those old pants, are you?" My mother started in right away.

"I've got them on, don't I?" I hate those sentences that start with you're-not-going-to, and end with are-you?

"Maria! Upstairs! Change your pants and put on what your mother tells you to!" I can't remember exactly what my dad said, but it was something like that. About once a week he goes into a time warp, and treats us all as though he's still in the Marine Corps, for Christ's sake, barking out orders and glaring at everybody.

"Why don't you put on the new corduroys you got for Christmas?" my mother said. Since it wasn't really a question, I didn't bother to answer, and went back upstairs, changed, and came back down again. I sat around and read the paper after breakfast, and then I started getting nervous, hanging around the kitchen like that. What if he forgot? I'd feel pretty stupid ready to go and just standing there.

"Maria! Don't pull on those curtains! I'm sure Mr. Jeffries would not like to see you hanging out the window when he gets here!" My mother always knows how other people will feel and what other people will think. I'd been watching

TV for a couple minutes when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," my mother said, on her way past the family room. I got up and shut off the television. I could hear my mother talking.

"All ready to go?" Robear asked, as I came around the corner into the living room. I took my jacket off the chair and started putting it on.

"You should bring gloves and a scarf, too," he said, and then smiled as my father came into the room. While I was getting ready, they shook hands like men always do, which I think is stupid.

"So, where are you two going?" my father asked, trying to make it sound like a natural question, but it really wasn't. There was no way I was going to get out of there without them knowing where I was going.

"Hasn't Marie told you?" he asked. I was glad nobody was looking at me when Robear said that, because I must have looked goofy with surprise. Nobody had told Marie anything.

"She doesn't tell us much," my dad laughed, and I felt about eight years old.

"Why, we're going to the zoo. Come on, Marie, we're a bit behind schedule already."

My parents said goodbye as we went out, but I could tell they were still curious. After all, they didn't know when I'd be back or anything.

"In the passenger's seat," he said, as we went down the driveway toward this beat old Volkswagen.

"And close the door carefully. If you slam it, it might come off." I looked up to see if he was joking, but he was already getting in the car.

"Are we really going to the zoo?" I asked, as he started the car and zipped out of the driveway almost simultaneously.

"Of course we are. And from now on, we speak French, all right? Not a word of English, unless, of course," he continued, now speaking around a cigarette in his mouth, "I set myself on fire and don't notice." He lit the cigarette with the book of matches in one hand, flipping the match against the striking strip without ripping it off.

I looked around the car, which had all this junk piled up on the dashboard. There was such a heap of stuff on my side of the dashboard that I had to sit up straight to see out the windshield. I pretended I was at one of those birthday parties where somebody's mother brings out a tray full of stuff and you have to memorize as many things on the tray as you can. I counted five cellophane packs of Camels, all squished, a bunch of matchbooks, one piece of Wrigley's gum, a pencil stub, a big blue and yellow pen with "Union Carpenters" printed on the side, half of a movie ticket, sunglasses, stamps, ashes, a Swiss Army knife, a blueberry yogurt carton, some loose change (that I couldn't see, but could hear every time we turned a corner) paper clips, safety pins, keys, and then, as the car swung left and everything rearranged itself,

a brown sort of thing.

"Yu-uck," I said, before I could stop myself. At school, nobody said one-syllable "yuck," it was always divided into two syllables and stretched out.

"Oh, the city of Buffalo isn't that bad," Robear said, squinting at me through a cloud of smoke. "You have to accept it for what it is: a dying, industrial city, yet one that maintains a level of culture."

The brown thing on the dashboard had disappeared since Robear had spoken, and it took me a couple of seconds to translate what he had just said, so I looked out the window and watched Buffalo go by.

We live in a suburb of Buffalo that used to be rural, but isn't anymore. There are suburbs here in Missoula that resemble our block, older houses with well-kept lawns. The city of Buffalo proper is quite different from its suburbs. There are lots of old brick buildings, big ones, and you can tell in the 1920's or 30's, that Buffalo was the place to be. The worst part about driving into Buffalo, and I had only been in there with my dad whenever he went to pick up my Aunt Mary who still lived downtown and used to babysit for us when we were little, is the poverty. Downtown Buffalo is a cool place, but you have to go through the really poor areas first, where the windows are busted and even in the middle of the winter, laundry is hanging out to dry between buildings.

We passed the Rivoli theater where my Aunt Mary had taken us all once to see a movie and my grandmother had been mad when she found out we were there. Even though it did smell like pee inside, it was beautiful, with balconies and carved ceilings and real velvet curtains that were pulled up, and another set that swished open right as the movie started. The Rivoli marked the end of the Polish section of town where you'd see Krasinski's Bakery and names like that and you could tell that it was still an actual neighborhood and not a city block.

After that, there's the black section, the ghetto really, and it was growing all the time. My father said that in five or ten years my Aunt Mary would be living on the fringe of the fringe of the ghetto. When we started getting near Jefferson Avenue, Robear reached behind me and locked my door. and then glanced at me.

"Black people here," he said, "have so much hate. Nobody in this city gives a shit about them, and so no matter who you are or how you feel about black people, you drive through here with your door locked."

The houses were the worst there, all packed together, some without doors, most with no real windows, just cardboard, and people walking fast to get out of the cold. We passed a parking lot where an old black man stood, squinting in the

sun, peeing on the pavement. I looked at Robear to see if he had noticed, and he grinned at me, though it was getting hard to see him with all the smoke in the car.

"Shit, why didn't you tell me it was like this in here?" He coughed and rolled down his window. "I can hardly breathe!"

By the time we turned into the zoo parking lot, the smoke had cleared and I was silently practicing yelling "Shit!" in French in the middle of Sister Angelica's class.

As far as I know, the Buffalo Zoo is open during the winter every year, but I don't think many people go there during the colder months. I sure never had. On the day we were there, I swear there were maybe four other people on the whole zoo grounds, and Robear's Volkswagen was the only car in the far parking lot.

The last time I had been there was for a field trip in fifth grade. Whenever they plan a field trip, it's always to the zoo, to Niagara Falls, or to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, which is this fancy place in Buffalo that has paintings and sculptures, and some neat things, like a room where everything is made of mirrors, the floor and the ceiling and the furniture, and you take off your shoes before you go in.

Anyway, anywhere they take you on a field trip is a pain and the only thing I remembered about the zoo were

these plastic monkeys on the end of a pole that you could buy at booths where they sold popcorn and cotton candy. I know that's a dumb thing to remember, but it's because on field trips the teacher, or somebody's mother, is always pushing you along and you never really get to concentrate on anything except things like plastic monkeys.

"Come on," Robear said, jerking me back to French. "We've got work to do." I felt the cold air on my face as he opened the door and wished that I were back home. But I got out and wrapped my scarf around my neck, because it was one of those really cold days when you inhale through your nose and all your nostril hairs freeze.

"What's the matter?" He was walking briskly ahead of me.

"It's cold out!" Talking about the weather in French is a cinch, even when you're freezing to death.

"Come on, sissy. You should be used to this weather. You grew up here, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I grew up here, but I never went messing around in cold weather." I could feel my nose starting to freeze.

"Don't you ski?" He was still walking fast, and I had to hurry to keep up with him.

"No."

"Ice skate?"

"No."

"For Christ's sake! Don't you go out in the winter at all?"

"I'm out now aren't I?" I said. I was feeling bad by

then, because I felt like he was picking on me, and I didn't like it. We were near this lake that's in the center of the zoo and it was all frozen over, so I pretended to be looking at that, instead of talking to Robear. There was an old man sitting on one of the green park benches around the lake, just sitting there. He looked up when we walked by and I felt neat that we were speaking French. He probably thought we were from Paris.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing," I said, but I knew I said it too fast, and he knew I was lying. I didn't want to say anything about what I was thinking.

"Don't they teach you winter sports at school?" he asked.

"Not really. They have some sports, but I don't like any of them. I don't like playing on teams and all that stuff. And my mother doesn't like me going out a lot in the winter because she's afraid I'll get sick, okay? But I'm out here now, and I'm freezing, so I don't see what I'm missing that's so great."

I thought maybe that would shut him up about making me feel like a hermit. I thought I said it all in a very dignified way, too, especially the way it sounded in French.

"Oh, my!" he said sarcastically and then started laughing at me again. "If you're so cold, it's because your blood isn't circulating. Come on!" And then the weirdo grabbed

my arm and started running through the snow. It took me a second to realize that we weren't going to the Reptile House or any place heated. We were headed right for the lake.

"Hey! Hey!" I was yelling something dumb, because I didn't want to fall in the snow or break my leg on the ice or anything, but he didn't hear me. He was making too much noise all by himself.

"Look out!" I yelled, but it was too late. There we went sliding on the edge of the snow, falling and then a long, cold rush of a slide right on the ice.

My gloves had slipped down and my jacket sleeves up, so that my wrists were bare and freezing, with snow jammed up my sleeves from the fall. I managed to sit up on the ice and got my leg out from under his stomach.

"You--" I started.

"French. Say it in French," he said, trying to sit up. I realized that we hadn't spoken more than a few words of English since we had said goodbye to my parents. I kind of liked that idea, and so I wasn't as mad as I had been. Then I saw a man on the shore of the lake, motioning to us.

"Hey. you! You two! Get off the lake! Isn't safe!"

I looked at Robear, who looked at the man on the shore.

"What you say?" he yelled in this real broken English accent. "We do not the English speak."

"Come! Off the ice!" The man on the shore was not only shouting, but was waving his arms at us in an exaggerated sign language. I could feel a laugh coming.

"Not a snicker out of you," Robear said, as he started crawling on hands and knees to the shore, making a path through the scattered snow that we had strewn all over the lake.

"You can't go on the ice, mister. See the signs?" The man was glaring at Robear.

"What is it he says?" Robear looked at me.

"I don't know," I said in French.

"Damn Canadians," the man said in disgust. "Look!" he shouted. "No go on ice! See? No go on ice!" He reached down and pointed to the ice emphatically. I was glad I was so cold, otherwise I really would have started laughing.

"Oh! Ice!" Robear exclaimed, but made ice sound like "ees."

"There's a fellow." The man clapped Robear on the shoulder. "Now, go on, go on!" I heard him blow his nose loudly as we walked away, talking softly in French.

"Jesus," I said, as I shook the snow out of my mittens. "How come you did all that?"

"Wasn't it fun?" He stopped walking and looked at me closely.

"Oh, yeah. But that man--" I always get embarrassed

when people look at me closely. I'm not very good-looking and I'm afraid they'll think I'm real ugly up close.

"Oh, that man, huh? Don't worry about him. Now he has a story to tell all his buddies about the damn foreigners around here."

I put my mittens back on and looked around. We were almost to his car, parked alone in the huge parking lot.

"Are we going?" I asked, surprised. "But we didn't see any of the animals!" I had especially wanted to see the giraffes, because I think they look impossible. I mean, I can envision an elephant, maybe because elephants are so solid and sturdy that they just seem like they should be around, but envisioning a giraffe is another matter entirely. They're so tall and fragile, and then to be covered with spots like the outside of a dog food bag makes them impossible.

Then again, I was relieved that I wouldn't have to grope for adjectives to describe the animals, since I sure didn't know the words for most zoo animals in French.

"Who said we were going to see the animals?" He was fumbling for his car keys.

"Well, we're at the zoo, aren't we?"

"Look, animals in the zoo are sad. They just are. They don't belong here, any more than you or I belong in a cage. They've just adjusted to living that way. I don't know that any of them would leave if they could. They're not free,

can't you see that?" He had found the car keys and was talking to me over the roof of the car. "They can't follow any of their instincts, Marie. They make me sad, that's why we didn't see them." He opened the car door and got in. Sister Angelica would have had to go a long way to top that in French class.

"You don't have to yell at me," I said, and I closed my door.

"I wasn't yelling. Besides, there's another reason why we didn't see any animals. We didn't have time."

I looked at my watch and it was one o'clock.

"Oh, I forgot," my mouth said, before my brain could stop it.

"Forgot what?" He started the car.

"Uh-that-I--"

"That they pay me for this?" he grinned.

"Yeah." I felt dumber than ever. Having a French lesson, and speaking French, and Robear and everything were so much to think about that I'd forgotten the money part.

"Seems like a silly thing to get paid for, doesn't it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, I do," he said. "After all, how many people have you ever heard of who get paid to spend a couple hours running around in the snow with a charming young person such as yourself?"

There was that sarcastic voice again, and I tried to put it out of my mind. I felt like even though he said charming, he really meant the opposite.

"Now what?" he asked. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Nothing--"

"Don't say nothing! What is it? Don't tell me it's because I said you were charming? Can't you take a compliment?"

"Well, I--"

"Well, then you're younger than I thought. Now listen to me," he said, as he drove the car out onto the road. "When someone pays you a compliment, you say, 'Thank you' or you smile or acknowledge it with a glance, but," he pounded on the dashboard, "You do not get a funny look on your face as though they didn't mean it, hear me?"

I nodded, but I was afraid to say anything, because all of a sudden I had this terrible feeling that I might cry.

"Find me a match, will you?" he said around his cigarette. I found a pack on the dashboard and struck one. He puffed vigorously as I held it up to his cigarette.

"There! You don't smoke, do you?"

"No. I never have," I said, but my voice sounded high and awful even in my ears.

"What--" He looked at me in surprise. "Here! Chew gum!

Smoke!" He waved his cigarette in my face. "Jesus! Do something, but don't cry! I'll sing!"

He was really frantic and was driving the car fast, all over the icy road, and then he started singing "God Bless America" at the top of his lungs.

I started laughing, and he yelled, "That's better! There, that's better! You sing, too!"

And we sang "God Bless America" until he pulled into the driveway of my house.

"Come on," he said, as he opened his door.

"Are you coming, too?" I could see my mother at the door.

"No, but I'm going to walk you up there, and I'm late already, so hurry."

We walked up to the door and he shook hands with my mother and said he'd see me next Saturday, if that was all right with my mother's schedule. Then he waved a hand at me and went back down the drive.

"How was your lesson?" my mother asked, as I was pulling off my boots.

"Good. Great." I smiled like an idiot.

"Is he a good teacher?" she asked, taking my gloves and my scarf.

"We spoke French the entire time!" I said. "It was great!"

I took off my jacket and headed for the bathroom with it, to shake off the snow into the bathtub. When I walked into the bathroom, I saw my face in the medicine cabinet mirror, all red and still grinning. Then I closed the door quietly, sat down on the toilet and started crying, with my face pushed into the wet of my jacket so that no one would hear me.

The day after my first lesson with Robear, my sister Lynn came home from college for a surprise visit. She had done the four year program in three years and so she was graduating in June, a year early. This surprise visit was different from others in the past for two reasons: first, she had brought Norman with her and nobody had met him before, though we sure had heard about him enough, and second, she announced that she and Norman wanted to get married right after graduation.

"That's barely six months away," my mother said, in a fair imitation of her normal tone.

"Yes, we know." Lynn smiled at Norman. "Only six months!" Norman smiled at Lynn. I thought I was going to throw up.

Nanny, my grandmother, who had come over to see Lynn, smiled, and said, "The first to marry, first to marry!" Lynn went over to hug her. I love Nanny. I think she'd love us no matter what we did or said.

"I'll leave most of it to you, Mom, and I already made out a guest list." Lynn started rummaging in her pocketbook. My father and Norman were trying to establish the world's record for the length of one handshake. My mother was looking at Lynn as though she had invited the National Guard to our house for dinner that night.

"Here it is!" Lynn pulled out a piece of paper and brought it over to my mother. "You'll have to have Norman's parents over--"

"Come on, Maria. You can help Nanny in the kitchen."

Nanny put her arm around me as we left the room. She always tells us that she was much taller when she got married, and now she's only 5'1", and that that's what she gets for living so long. Even though she makes herself sound like she had the height of a basketball player, she only says things like that so we'll run and hug her and tell her how much we love her, but that's okay with me. I like to be hugged.

"Looks just like a frog, doesn't he?" she said, as the kitchen door swung closed.

"Nanny!" I said, starting to laugh.

"Just like a frog. You think he's handsome?"

"Well, no, but you can't say--"

"Am I going to say it to Lynn? Tell her her husband looks like a fat frog? No. I tell you. You think we made

enough food?"

"I don't know. If eight hundred more people show up, we might not have leftovers."

"Oh, you always say that!" Nanny loves to be complimented on her cooking, and to her, quantity and quality are as important as olive oil and garlic.

Norman didn't look the way I expected him to look. I mean, he wasn't grotesque or anything, but I sure wouldn't want to spend the rest of my life with him. Besides, he looked just like a Norman. If you put Robear in the same room with Norman, it would be a cruel joke.

"And is he Italian? No. That's your father's fault. Your mother's, too. Both of them. They act like being Italian is something to be ashamed of."

She said something to the eggplant in Italian. I could understand some Italian when I was little, but not anymore. My parents never spoke it, though I know my dad can understand Nanny when she speaks Italian.

"And you! You're this genius in French! Do you speak Italian? No. You learn Italian for your old grandmother?"

"Sure, Nanny, if you want me to."

"Yes. I do. You're the only true Italian here, anyway. That curly hair and those eyes. I get homesick for Italy just looking at you."

She was right. Tie a scarf around my head and give me a bowl of pasta and I could be the Italian national symbol.

"Lynn timer, she looks Jewish. Probably bad blood on your mother's side. Maybe it's better that you didn't go to that school where Lynn timer went. She changed, you know?"

Comical as Nanny can be, no one would ever be able to accuse her of being stupid. She sees just about everything.

"Ooh, I bet the wedding food will be horrible. I'll feed you lunch before we go. That way we won't starve."

The door opened and Lynn came in. "So, how's my favorite bridesmaid?"

"No! Aw, Lynn!"

"Sorry, Ma would have a fit if you weren't one, so you're stuck. It won't be that bad and it's going to be a beautiful wedding." She opened her mouth and Nanny put an olive into it.

"Your only sister, of course you have to be a bridesmaid. You want people to think we're not a close family?"

"Right." Lynn said. "I'll start setting the table. Hey, do you like him?" She paused at the door.

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"Anyone you pick would be wonderful," Nanny said, and Lynn blew her a kiss. As the door swung shut, Nanny mouthed the word "frog" at me and shrugged her shoulders. I started polishing a knife quickly, watching my face appear and disappear on the shining silver blade.

My second lesson with Robear was the next Saturday, and

school went fast that week, since I was just waiting until the weekend.

"I don't know if we'll be back by the time you get back," my mother said, closing her lips over a square of toilet paper. "It depends on how long it takes me to find a dress. So be good, and apologize to Mr. Jeffries for our absence. Call Nanny if anything goes wrong." She dropped the toilet paper in the wastebasket. It had a surprised red mouth printed on it from her lipstick.

After they left, I was sitting around trying to decide what to do, when somebody knocked at the front door.

"Hi," I said. "You're early."

"Hi, yourself," he said in French. "I was late last time, you know. I decided to make up for it."

"Let me get my coat and stuff. I'm not ready."

"Aren't your parents home?"

"No. They had to go shopping because my sister's getting married in June and they have to start getting ready now."

"How old is your sister?" he asked, sitting down in the hall chair.

"Twenty, going to be twenty-one." I sat down on the rug so I could lace up my boots. "She was home last week with her future husband."

I didn't think I said anything wrong, but he heard it anyway.

"Don't like him, is that it?"

"He looks like--" I groped for the word "frog" in French. "Like a jerk, you know what I mean? But my mother said that as long as I don't have to marry him, I should keep my opinions to myself." I started on the other boot.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Well," I stopped lacing the boot and looked up at him. "If I were going to get married, it wouldn't be to anybody like that. He's boring and he doesn't say much--"

"Maybe he was shy in front of your parents? Did you ever think of that?"

"Yeah." I don't like it when people ask you what you think and then they jump all over you when you tell them. "But I don't think that was why. I think he's naturally that way. You can just tell."

"Oh, I see. You've only met him once and now you know everything about him?" He was being sarcastic again.

"Yeah," I said, as I stood up and shook my pants leg down. "You can tell almost everything about people when you first meet them."

"Almost everything? My goodness!"

I really wanted him to understand what I meant, and whenever that happens, I get a little excited trying to explain and that means that I talk too much.

"Well, when I met you, I knew you weren't like that."

You're alive and everything." I put my jacket on. "Not like him. At least I know when you're in the same room with me."

"Come on," he said. "And I return the compliment. I always know when I'm in the room with you."

He took my arm on the way out the door.

Being in Montana makes it easier to think about the things that went on at home. One of my first days here, I got a calendar and marked down what I could remember about each month from January to the day in June when they put me on a plane to Missoula. From the beginning of February to the end of April, I noticed one odd thing on the calendar; I hardly mentioned my parents at all.

It's not like I didn't see them. They were around, but they were busier than usual. Lynn's wedding and graduation plans and meetings with Norman's parents were taking up their time, and I wasn't around as much as I used to be. For the first time in my life, people were leaving me alone. I don't think it occurred to my parents that they had never left me alone before. It just started happening naturally. I liked coming home from school with no one there, so I could calm down and all the dumb stuff from school out of my head. Things were easier without people around all the time.

I like thinking about those months. I ate whatever I wanted whenever I wanted to. I got out all the books I wanted from the library, since I'd been limited to five a week before, otherwise,

my mom had said, I'd isolate myself. And best of all, I had my French lessons.

Robear and I got along well, and my French began to get a lot better, fast. When Robear would tell me where we'd be going for my next lesson, I'd spend the whole week memorizing words that I could use during my lesson, so that Robear would be proud of me. Even Sister Angelica woke up a little in class, since I'd ask questions about things I didn't know, so I could use them when I was with Robear.

In February, Robear talked my parents into letting me have French lessons twice a week, since, he said, it was a shame to waste such talent. That had started them thinking that I'd go to the Sorbonne, this college in France, and since they liked that idea, I got French lessons twice a week.

Robear took me all over the place. I knew part of the reason was because I would have to learn new vocabulary words for things I'd never had to speak about in French before, but I think the other part was that he was bored. With me and my French lessons, he had a good excuse to do things, and so we learned Buffalo inside out. We went to French movies, museums, down by the docks on Lake Erie whenever a ship came in, parks, college campuses, all over the place. Some of the places I don't remember that well now, but I do remember most of the new words that I learned, and that was because no matter where we went, I wanted Robear to like me, and being smart was the only way I knew how to make him like me.

School became a lot easier to handle once I started French lessons with Robear. Before Robear, I had always felt that I should fit in with someone at school, the way most other people there did. I generally passed most of the day at school not talking to anyone, except when I got called on in classes and in French class when I asked questions. My greatest fear was that I would be mocked out, that one of the kids who had lots of friends would make fun of me. I was always relieved when the last bell rang and I could go home.

The first week of my freshman year at Sacred Heart I had got on the bus after school and sat down in the front seat. Right after I sat down and slid over next to the window, a voice said, "That seat's for Jay."

Since I didn't know anybody, I knew this guy wasn't talking to me, and so I kept sitting there, looking out the window. And then the same voice said, "Hey, girl," and I thought, me? I sort of turned around, you know, the kind of turn around that can be mistaken for a twitch in case the person isn't talking to you.

"Hey, girl. That seat's for Jay."

I didn't know who Jay was or when they'd started saving seats on the bus. I got up, kept my head down, and went to a seat further back. As I went by the fat guy who had been talking I heard him say, "Stupid girl."

That night at the dinner table I told my father what had happened. I knew that the fat guy's father and my father were friends.

"I don't think you should be friends with someone who brings his kids up to pick on other people and call them names."

My dad looked confused and I could tell he didn't understand what he was supposed to do. That was the last time I can remember that I told my parents anything about why I hated school so much. They didn't understand how awful some of the kids at school could be and how at Sacred Heart one of the worst things you could be was a brain.

After that time on the bus, I was on my guard all the time at school. I tried to make sure I never did or said anything that would bother anybody. It was like holding your stomach in; sooner or later you're going to slip up. I went through my whole freshman year like that, trying to be invisible. Five days a week of being invisible generally made me crabby by the time I got home from school.

My sophomore year was a bit better because freshmen always get picked on the worst, so some of the pressure was off people like me. I still kept my mouth shut most of the time and tried to pretend I wasn't there, but even that wasn't enough. This big girl Lorraine transferred to Sacred Heart sophomore year, all 200 pounds of her, determined to show everyone how tough she was. The first thing she did was to take an instant dislike to me and to start threatening to beat my face in. Me! Skinny, glasses, 5' 4" and 105 pounds when I jump up and down on the bathroom scale, and she decides she wants to fight me.

Every day she'd see me in the hall and say, "Just look at her! I can't wait to mash her face in," as though that would prove anything and as though she wasn't twice as big as me. Whenever I tried to get her to leave me alone, she'd ask me if I was chicken. I never knew what to say. I went home every day after school, climbed the stairs to my room, and sat on the bed, scared to death. I couldn't tell my parents about it, because what could they do, anyway, and I knew I didn't stand a chance against someone as big as Lorraine.

Finally, after math class one day, fat Lorraine came up to me and said, "Tomorrow at 4:30 on the tennis courts I'm going to kill you. You better be there. Or I'll come and find you." What was I supposed to say? See you tomorrow? I knew she'd bring seven other people with her ready to punch me out, too. I went home really worried and it was a good thing nothing happened on the bus, because I would have started bawling. That night I slept with my Lassie dog, who I've had ever since I can remember, and I prayed as hard as I could that something, anything, would happen, so that I wouldn't be beat up the next day. And if I had to be beat up, maybe God could arrange it so I wouldn't cry in front of those awful people.

The next day it was snowing when I woke up. In my morning French class you couldn't see out the window because of the snow. At lunchtime, a genuine Buffalo blizzard covered the city. The principal dismissed us at 2 o'clock and I figured

that Lorraine wouldn't show up on the tennis courts, during a blizzard, at 4:30. I sure wasn't going to.

The next day I had made up my mind and as soon as I saw her, before she could say anything, I said, "Where were you yesterday?" She wasn't as tough as she always acted because she got real mad and started saying, yesterday doesn't count, that's not fair, I'll meet you today. I said, "Uh-uh. I don't want to waste my time again. I was there yesterday." She mostly left me alone after that, even though she still said things whenever she saw me. That whole week made me believe in God more than I usually do, because I think that blizzard rates as a miracle.

Once Robear and I got to be friends, he became the only person who knew why I hated school so much. When I told him the story about Lorraine, he said, "She's the kind of bully who will only pick on someone she knows she can beat. Real tough, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. "But that didn't help me when she decided she didn't like my face, you know?"

"It's been a few months now, hasn't it? You think she's done with you for good?"

"I really, really, hope so. I don't think I could go through fear like that again."

"Were you going to go to the tennis courts that day?"

"I guess so. She would have found me eventually anyway, so if I showed up, I could just get it over with."

I didn't know how to say "Get it over with" in French, so that sentence took me a couple minutes to explain. Robear sat there for awhile and then said, "I'm sorry you have to endure these things, Ria."

I didn't like to have Robear feeling sorry for me, like I was some kind of wimp. I couldn't help it if I wasn't the sort of person who could win a fight, even though there were girls my size who were the kind who could win fights. Face it, I thought, you're a chicken at heart; you're afraid of people like Lorraine. And worst of all, I knew Robear knew that and nobody likes a chicken.

Having Robear around to talk to made the second half of my sophomore year easier. I had already started to imitate Robear in a lot of little ways. I didn't get as upset about school and I tried to say the sorts of things that Robear said whenever anybody picked on me. I started using, "Beats me" all the time.

Gym class was a real pain that semester because Lorraine and her friends had gym right after I did. If I showered and dressed slowly, they'd be in the locker room while I was still there and most other people had left. I'm good in gym, but I'll never be one of the favorites. Favorites play varsity sports and I think teams are stupid. We were playing indoor baseball this one day and as soon as the bell rang, everybody dropped every-

thing and headed for the showers.

"Leone!" I heard Mrs. Brown yell. "Clean-up!" which meant I had to scoop up all the balls and bats and mitts and put them in a pile. I did it as fast as I could and then raced for the showers, but there was already a line. By the time I had my gym suit off, the locker room had emptied. I only had my skirt left to put on when the door swung open.

"If it isn't ugly Einstein," Lorraine said, as she came through the door. I could see visions of pounding my head against the lockers in her eyes.

I didn't step into my skirt, because I figured she'd take advantage of that and knock me down, so I just stood there. I heard the bell ring for History class. Lorraine started swearing and checking around the locker room at the same time, trying to make sure that none of the people left were going to rat.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of you."

She walked right up to me, her pig face twisted like I was some kind of insect. I thought of Robear and how embarrassed I'd be to see him with my face all bruised and how he'd know I was a true chicken for sure. I didn't mind being beaten up, but I didn't see why Robear had to be dragged into it, too. As Lorraine swung her arm out to knock me one, I ducked, grabbed my wire gym basket, and knocked her across the face with it. She tried to grab it, but all of a sudden I was so mad that she

would ever even think of hitting somebody who'd never ever done anything to her. I whacked her again and again, aiming toward her face and her head. Since the baskets are metal and the edges are rough, she kept her arms up to protect her face, and kept backing up until finally she turned to run out of the room. A bunch of her friends came in the door at the same time. The first one was Sue Klein, who had always looked a little like a vampire to me, and was always beating somebody up. She stood and looked at Lorraine, then looked at me. I think I must have been crazy by then. My breathing echoed in the locker room and I stood there and looked right back at her. That's exactly how things were when Sister Rose Marie came into the room.

My parents had to come to school with me to see the Head Priest before I was allowed to go to classes again. Lorraine had said I started it, which no one believed, but Father Daly said we both had to apologize. Lorraine already had, but I wouldn't, no matter what anyone said. Father Daly kept reading passages from the Bible and saying, good Catholics don't fight. I didn't say anything, but I thought, right, they stand there and let themselves be beat to a pulp by that big tub of lard over there. I finally said I'd apologize if Sister Rose Marie made sure that if I got beat up in the future, Lorraine would be expelled. They didn't like that at all, but then my mom

came to the rescue and said something about with the tuition we pay yearly, you would think our daughter would be able to come to school safely. That settled things.

I felt proud of the way I'd showed Lorraine and was all excited when Robear came to get me for my lesson.

"So, I'm not a chicken," I told him, when I had finished the story.

"Who said that you were?"

We were out at the quarry that day, looking for fossils. I picked up a piece of quartz.

"Nobody. But you thought I was."

"No. As a matter of fact, I think you're quite brave. I thought so before, too, you know."

"Really?"

"Really," he said, rubbing his hands together. It was cold for March. "When you get older, you'll be relieved to know that among all the problems you may have, getting beat up generally isn't one of them. I don't know how you managed to sleep the night before that person wanted to hurt you. I wouldn't have been able to."

"You know," I said, turning over a rock that looked like a worm had died in it, "I didn't tell anyone else this, but after Sister Rose Marie came in and I finished getting dressed before she hauled me down to the Office...I thought I might, well, vomit."

"Why?"

"Because I never meant to hurt anybody. When I was socking Lorraine with that basket, I felt, I felt, I don't know, all excited and tingly, like I was finally doing something. And then, right afterwards, I don't know, I felt, I don't know how to say it!"

"Sure you do. Just say it."

"Well, like I felt when I wet my pants in camp one year. Like that. Like I shouldn't have done it."

"For some people--fossil leaf, you're behind you know. I'm three ahead of you--only fists matter. Some people, like this Lorraine, perhaps, only understand punches."

"I'll bet people like that never read."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, if you read--how's this? Does crystal count?--you know that punches aren't everything and you know about all kinds of different worlds, instead of just your own punch world."

Robear stopped picking up rocks and looked at me over his glasses. I knew I'd said something good, though I didn't know why it was good.

"This Lorraine have a black eye now?"

"More like a black cheek."

"Same difference."

"Robear."

"Yes?"

"You ever hit anybody?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Long story. But I'll tell you one thing. I'm quite sure that the person I hit is a life-long inhabitant of that first world you were talking about."

"We're sure lucky we're not, huh?"

"Huh? What's huh? Get to work, you're still behind."

I started filling my bucket with quartz and crystal and anything that glistened from the hazy sunshine coming through the clouds.

By March, Robear did like me, I knew that, and he and I had been together often enough so that I could usually tell what kind of a mood he was in, and if he liked something or not. I always watched his face when we went places, so I could try and tell if he liked something, before he turned to me and asked me what I thought about it. I knew a lot about Robear from watching him and listening to him. We drove somewhere for almost every lesson I can remember, and he'd talk while he drove. The funny thing was that though I did know a lot about the current Robear, what he thought and what he liked, I hardly knew anything at all about what he'd done before he came back to Buffalo, or where he'd been in the world, or anything like that. He knew all that stuff about me, but that was easy, since I hadn't been anywhere but Buffalo. I always wanted to ask Robear about what he'd done

before he'd met me, where he'd taught, if he liked it, questions like that, but I could never get up the courage to ask him. I figured if he wanted to talk about things like that, then he would bring it up without any prompting from me. The one time I did prompt him a little was the time that I got in trouble in Delaware Park.

It was a warm day, even though there was still lots of snow around. There were a lot of people in the park with dogs and kids, just walking around the way we were.

"Bob! Bob Jeffries! Hey!"

Robear turned around and so did I, to see a man running across the snow toward us.

"I knew it! I knew it was you! How you doing? I didn't know you were back here!"

"Only for awhile," Robear said. I was sure glad that he wasn't talking to me in that voice. He didn't sound very friendly.

"How do you do?" the man said to me, holding out his hand. "Bob here always knows how to pick'em!" He shook my hand up and down. "So, what you been doing lately?"

He stood in the snow like he had settled there for a nice, long talk. I put my hands as far down in my pockets as they would go. I didn't want to be standing there and I felt like I was seeing something Robear wouldn't want me to

be seeing. I looked down at the snow, and watched my boots sinking down into the water under the snow, puddles forming around my feet.

"Actually," Robear said, in that sarcastic voice he used sometimes, "I've been giving French lessons. Marie here is one of my students and we really do have to get going since this is her lesson time."

"Okay, okay, didn't mean to intrude." The man was looking at Robear closely. "Maybe you'll give me a call sometime and we can get together for a couple beers."

"Sure. Bye."

Robear immediately started speaking to me in French.

"Walk fast. Let's get out of here."

I plodded through the snow to keep up with him, since he was taking long steps. He was still speaking French, but so low and so fast that I could only understand a few words in every sentence. I ran a couple steps to catch up with him.

"What's wrong?" I asked, once I got next to him. That was a very dumb question. I knew he was in a bad mood, and I knew he looked madder than I'd ever seen him look before, and I knew I was the only person around right then who he could take all that anger out on. And so, I had to go and ask him what was wrong.

"I think we'll cut today's lesson short, if that's all

right with you. In other words, mind your own business."

I understood that quickly enough, since he had spoken clearly enough for me to get it right away. I must have had some stupid idea that I could make him feel better by asking him what had made him so mad. His face looked pinched and kind of ugly, and when he looked at me it was as though he had never seen me before and didn't care if he ever did again. Since I was looking at him and not looking where I was walking, my feet slipped on some slush and one foot ended up beneath one of his big snow boots.

"Ow!" I yelled. It really hurt.

"What?" He stopped walking and looked at my foot. "Do you think you'll live?" He looked even madder than before, because I was leaning against a tree, holding my foot.

"I think so. if you don't kill me first." I started walking slowly because my foot really hurt. I was limping a little because I had to, and to make him feel bad.

"Oh, Jesus, here." He put his arm around my waist to help me walk. "Is that better?"

"I'd like to go home, please," I said.

That lesson ended badly, and I never asked Robear questions about things that he didn't want to talk about again. He was really nice to me after that, though, and I knew he felt bad for yelling at me. I really liked Robear then, and I told h

everything. He knew all about school and how much I hated it, and about my family and relatives. His favorite stories were about Nanny, and he'd always ask me how she was. It got so that I'd save stories about Nanny to tell him. His favorite was about the time when my mother had been on the phone for about two hours, and Nanny had been trying to call the whole time and couldn't get through. She had finally called the operator and declared it to be an emergency, and when the operator had cut in, my mother had thought something had happened to my father or one of us, and then found out that it was just Nanny calling to find out what was going on. I bet if I told that story to Robear ten years from now, he'd still grin with all his teeth and start laughing.

I tried not to talk a lot all the time, but whenever I'd stop talking Robear would tell me to go on. When I think about it now, I get happy sometimes, or embarrassed other times, remembering how much I ended up talking and how he always listened and never made me feel like what I was saying was dumb. Sometimes in school I'd slip up and forget and say something to one of the kids in my class: not just anything, but something I'd been thinking about. They would just stare at me, as though thinking was a dumb thing to do. Robear would ask me questions, too, about things I'd said, so that he could understand better, and sometimes I'd understand better, too. By the end of April my French was exemplary,

as Robear said. He was right, too. Sometimes even now I find myself thinking in French.

I made a big division on my calendar between the end of April and the beginning of May. The way I look at things now, that's when the big change came. By the end of April, I was a different person than the one who'd gone into my father's room to meet Robear in January. I didn't mind school as much as before, or the dumb things that went on there. I had finally figured out that school wasn't the end of my life, that I wouldn't be surrounded by those people forever. And the reason I figured all kinds of new stuff out, was Robear.

I don't think that I was unhappy before I met Robear, but I feel as though I couldn't have been unhappy because I was asleep all the time. Maybe not asleep, but waiting for something. I think I waited the first fifteen years of my life, even though I never knew it at the time. I guess before you reach a certain age, and the age is different for everyone, you just go around doing what everyone tells you to do and you don't think about what you're doing.

Arguing about boarding school was probably the first time I ever expressed an opinion beyond what flavor ice cream cone I wanted. No wonder my mom and dad were surprised. It was probably like having the blender talk back to them.

May 1st was another one of my lessons with Robear. I

was starting to learn all these new outdoor words then, because it was spring and there were all new things outside to learn words for. Robear would pick me up at school for lessons and I really liked that. We would go to a park or out in the country and just walk around talking. That day in May we were in a new park in Buffalo that they had just fixed up. It was empty, maybe because nobody really knew about it yet, and Robear was naming flowers in the flower circle in the center of the park.

"How did you learn all that stuff about flowers?" I had asked while he lit a cigarette.

"What did you say?" His voice was funny and gasping.

I turned and looked at him because he sounded like he was going to have a stroke or something. He looked right back at me, then turned his head and let a big cloud of smoke out of his mouth.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

"Why are you keeping your smoke in like that?" I didn't think it was a dumb question, so as far as I could tell there was no reason for him to look at me oddly.

"Why do you think?"

"I don't know. You never did that before...did you?" I was confused and didn't want to be stupid, but it seemed like a strange thing to be doing. I hate things I can't understand.

"Your powers of observation are poor." He put the cigar-

ette to his mouth again and dragged. Then I looked, really looked at it.

"Oh."

"Oh. Right." He sat down on a bench. "Look, when you smoke dope, you inhale a lot and hold it down in your lungs, so that your lungs absorb the smoke and it goes into your bloodstream and up to your brain. That's why you get high from smoking it."

"Aren't you afraid the police will get you?" Or get me, I thought.

"No, but then I'm not that careless about it." It was true, there wasn't anybody else in the park.

"How come you smoke it?" I was kind of excited and impressed, too. I'd never seen anyone smoke anything but tobacco.

"Because next to sex and literature, or right in there with them, it's one of the only things I like."

I watched as he put the coal out on the bench and took a Sucrets tin from his pocket. I wondered what it must be like to be Robear. He was the coolest person I'd ever met. It figured that he'd smoke dope. Dope. The word sounded funny in my head. I wanted more than anything to be like Robear. To be able to say things about sex and literature. To be as cool as he was.

"Cool," I said aloud.

"What?" he asked, fitting the rest of the little cigarette into the Sucrets container.

"I was just thinking about being cool. Cool like you."

Robear smiled. He only smiled with all his teeth once a month, so it was easy to notice.

"Cool like me," he said, "Is being old. That's all."

"There are people who are a lot older than you, but not cool," I said. "I guess you just have to be born with it."

"I think," he said, leaning forward, "That the kind of cool you have in mind might be contagious."

"Really?" I asked. "Really?"

"Really. Would it make you happy if I gave you lessons in being cool in French?"

Would it make me happy, I thought. Happy? It would change my life, it would, it would...I wasn't sure what it might do specifically, but in general, it would help to make a New Maria. A Cool Maria. I leaned over and hugged Robear as hard as I could, bruising my cheek on the shape of the Sucrets tin in his breast pocket.

Cool, from what Robear taught me, was just being yourself in a million different ways. It meant not being self-conscious when you walked into a restaurant, or down the street; not worrying what people would think about the way you were dressed. Being secure in yourself, Robear said.

"Whenever you do something, like getting dressed, or

getting ready to go out, think about what you're doing, and make sure that each thing you do, you do for yourself." He repeated that until I practically had it memorized. "Cool," Robear said, "isn't smoking cigarettes or smoking dope, or anything like that. Some cool people may do those things, but just doing them is no way to get cool. That's just a way to look like a fake. And being a fake is not cool."

I worked on everything he told me, and it must have shown, at least in little ways, because even my parents noticed. All in one week, my mother told me that my posture had improved greatly and my father asked me if I had changed my hair or something. Robear didn't stop with just little things, though. He was pushing the Cool Maria along.

"For instance, what you're wearing today."

I looked down at myself in surprise. I was wearing light blue sort of dress-up pants and a printed top with a blue background. It had castles on it. And white sandals.

"What about it?"

"Why are you wearing it?"

I guess you have to be one of my mother's children to be embarrassed about why you're wearing something. Since both my parents grew up during the Depression, they had to work hard to make money and to have nice things, and so clothes in our house don't get a chance to get old; they're at the Salvation Army as soon as they get comfortable. Lynn and I talked

about it once, and she said that for our parents older clothes mean poverty, that it was a matter of pride, because they remember being ashamed of their old clothes. All that meant to me, was that I shouldn't complain about my clothes.

"Because...because I'm supposed to, I guess."

"Do you like that outfit?"

"Compared to some of the other stuff in my closet, yes."

"Not in comparison. Do you like it?"

"Look, it doesn't matter whether I like my clothes or not. My mother takes me shopping. She picks out the clothes I try on, and I settle for the ones that don't want to make me throw up."

"What would happen if you didn't wear them?"

"She'd kill me!"

"She wouldn't really kill you, you know that." Robear was waiting for something, but I still didn't know what he wanted me to say.

"No, but she'd make my life so miserable that I'd wish someone would kill me."

He laughed. "Doesn't your mother ever urge you to go shopping by yourself?"

"She never said anything about it." To be truthful, whenever they made me go shopping, I put up a big stink. My mom figured that unless she forced me to go, I'd never go shopping on my own.

"Well, can't you arrange something?"

That was why, two days later, I was out shopping by myself. My mother had given me money and my father had dropped me off at the shopping mall and given me more money. Robear had given me advice.

"Comfortable. Eye-pleasing. Nothing too tight. Nice, soft material."

And so I headed for my mother's favorite store, wallet in hand.

"Can I help you today?" The saleslady smiled as she recognized me, and looked around for my mother.

"I'm just looking, thank you," the Cool Maria said, with only the slightest squeak, and walked away. Usually, I was embarrassed in stores when clerks came up to me, but I was learning.

I looked through all the racks, on the shelves, and there wasn't anything like Robear had described. I started to worry. I didn't want Robear to be disappointed in me. I went through the entire Eastern Hills shopping mall, (Largest Mall in Western New York! Ninety Stores Under One Roof!, their signs said) and checked into all the stores that carried clothing, looking for something that would match Robear's description.

Toward the end, as I walked into a ski shop, I was about to cry in frustration. My head hurt from all the noise, I hadn't found anything at all, and Robear would know that I

would never be cool. I couldn't even shop for myself.

"Can I help you?" A salesman was standing behind the counter. I looked at his shirt. Blue. Nice, soft, blue, sort of dusty and muted. Loose fitting. Comfortable?

"Your shirt," I managed to say, then cleared my throat. "Do you carry any shirts like the one you're wearing?" I smiled a little, hopefully.

"You bet. Back here." I felt so happy. A whole rack of them!

"Soft," I said, almost laughing as I rubbed the material between my fingers.

"Chamois always is," he said. "What size are you?"

"I don't know."

I wasn't even embarrassed that I didn't know what size I took. I was dreaming of that blue shirt.

"Try a medium. Dressing rooms are over there." I tried it on. I knew it was the shirt I wanted. I was still smiling when I paid for it, until I remembered that I still needed something to go with the shirt. Panic.

"What's wrong?" the man behind the counter asked, as he gave me my change. His bottom half was hidden by the counter.

"What do I wear with it? With the shirt."

"Jeans, honey, jeans. Right down that aisle to the Army-Navy store." I didn't even mind that he called me honey.

I'd never spent money on clothes before. The shirt saved

the rest of the day. I made sure I got jeans exactly like Robear's at the Army-Navy store. Jeans and three plain, blue T-shirts like Robear's, too. At Sacred Heart, we weren't allowed to wear jeans at all, and my mother only allowed me to wear dress-up jeans, so I had never had a pair of jeans like Robear's before.

I wasn't nervous at all until I was home again, in my bedroom, trying on clothes for my mother. I had managed to conveniently forget that my mother's taste in clothing for me, had never approached clothes that were sold in ski shops and Army-Navy stores.

"Maria," she said, as I walked into the family room. "I simply don't know what gets into you at times. Do you really want to go out in public in those farmer jeans?"

I'm never very good at answering questions like that. My tongue always wants to say something like, 'No, I'd thought I'd put these on whenever I was going to spend a few hours in the linen closet picking my nose,' and that would cause more commotion than the rest of me would be able to put up with, so I didn't say anything at all.

"Well? I asked you a question. You're not going to go out in public wearing those, are you?"

"Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact I am," I said. "Right now."

I walked out of the family room, through the living

room and out the front door. I got on my bike and rode down the street as fast as I could. I decided to go to the supermarket, since I didn't have anywhere else to go. I've always liked supermarkets. There are a lot of things to look at and you can forget everything just walking up and down the aisles, looking around.

I walked to the produce section, thinking. Even though I was upset, I still liked my clothes. The jeans were so cool-looking, and I had my shirt sleeves rolled up to my elbow, and I just felt pretty. I knew that when I went back home I'd probably catch hell for walking out of the house like that. Probably. Ha.

"Marie, is it really you?" There was only one person I knew who would speak French to me in a supermarket, and it wasn't Sister Angelica. I looked up from the rows of lettuce.

"Hey, hi." I smiled at Robear, trying hard not to cry.

"Are these new clothes?"

"Yes." The shirt seemed dirty after my mother had had her say about it. A stock boy who had grown up down the street from me had stopped unloading oranges to stare because we were speaking French. I wanted to stick my tongue out at him. Nothing was as good as it had been.

"Beautiful. You look absolutely beautiful." Well, of course that got me, and I felt better. What Robear thought of me was worth catching hell for. "What are you looking for? Lettuce?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I was--" I stopped talking as he turned away from me to smile at a woman carrying a jar of mustard. She came towards us.

"Good. You found it," he said in French. I waited for her not to understand him, for him to repeat it in English. He turned back to me.

"Marie," he continued in French, "I'd like you to meet my wife, Jean."

I could feel the blue shirt become thicker, warmer, and I started to sweat. The jeans were new and stiff and that was the only reason I was still standing up.

"Pleased to meet you," I said in English, and smiled. I knew that I was smiling just like my mother does when she has to talk to people she doesn't like. That's all I was anyway. My mother's daughter.

"Nice to meet you. Good-bye." I didn't look at Robear. I walked slowly and steadily down the middle aisle and out of the store. Please, God, I thought, just let me get out of here before they come out. I rode my bike home fast and the whole time I was pedaling out I'd-like you-to meet-my wife-jean, I'd-like you-to meet-my wife-jean.

When I walked in the house, my mother and father stopped talking.

"Young lady," my father began.

"Excuse me, Dad. Mom, I'm sorry I walked out of here

before. I don't know what got into me. Let's discuss the clothes in the morning and if you want me to take them back I will. I'm very tired right now."

No one said anything while I walked upstairs. I took off my clothes right away and got into bed. Robear was married. Robear was married. He had a wife. He probably had been married for a few years, too. I had never thought of Robear living with someone else. I always thought that there was just Robear. Just Robear and no one else. She spoke French, too. And he spoke French to her. I wondered what they had said when I walked away. I didn't want to think about it. My stomach felt bad and my throat ached the way it always does when I feel like crying. I pulled the covers over my head and curled up as tightly as I could. Robear was married.

The next morning my mother told me that I could keep my clothes as long as I didn't wear them everyday. She knew that something was wrong and even made chocolate pudding for lunch. It didn't help. I was glad that it was a Saturday, so I wouldn't have to go to school. I stayed up in my room most of the day. Robear had originally said that he'd only be around Buffalo for six months or so and it was already May. Five months had gone by. I figured that he would be leaving soon and I decided that I would start being invisible around him, the way I was at school. After all, it wasn't like I was going to have lessons with him for the next five years or anything. And it wasn't, I told myself, like I was mad at him. I just felt

different, that was all.

"We're going to a French film today," Robear said, at the start of my lesson a few days after I had met him in the supermarket. I always liked it when we went to French films. Sometimes, we would be the only people laughing during the second after the lines had been spoken, but before the subtitles in English came on.

"Which one?" I was not going to placated with a French film. I was a new Maria.

"La Cage Aux Folles. It's at the Evans," he said.

"Oh?" I said, and looked out the window. I learned to say "oh" from Robear. You end up feeling like a real jerk if you say something to someone and they just say, "Oh?" I used it a lot in May.

"Don't you feel well?" Robear was looking at me.

"I feel fine," I said. I remember that instead of looking at him, I was watching a Vicks inhaler roll slowly in and out of an empty French fry carton on the dashboard. "Why? Don't you?"

"I feel all right myself." He sighed.

We drove in silence the rest of the way, which is a hard thing to do when you're driving to the Evans. You drive past streets and streets of new houses that all look the same, apartment complexes, 7-11 stores, and telephone poles. I

pretended that there was a saw attached to my side of the car and it was lopping off the top of every phone pole we passed.

The movie was funny and in the middle of it, Robear leaned towards me in the dark.

"It's good, isn't it?" he whispered.

"It's okay," I answered. The new Maria didn't feel the same about Robear as I had before. In fact, sometimes she didn't like him.

My calendar has "new Maria" written across the page for May. In some ways, she made life easier. She only spoke when absolutely necessary during dinners when Norman was present, and during dinners in general. She walked around school scowling and stared down Sue Klein in the hall. She raised her eyebrows and smiled blankly at Lynn, when Lynn asked if she was sure everything was all right. If the new Maria had been a lion, she would have bit a lot of people.

I even endured the fitting session for the light pink bridesmaid's dress in silence. At one time, I would have complained loudly to everyone, especially to Nanny, about how ugly the dress was and how pink was a fine color for Pepto-Bismol, but not for anything else. Then my parents would have yelled at me and pointed out that I was a selfish, spoiled child. I was too smart to walk into that one anymore. Besides, they felt worse when I didn't say anything. My mother bought some summer bras for me and I shoved them in the back of my underwear drawer, next to an unused sanitary napkin belt.

Meanwhile, it was already the second week in June and my time was running out, though I didn't know it then. Lynn's wedding was June 23rd and so things at home were really hectic. I still had a few days of school and then exams, and right after I finished, we all had to go to Lynn's graduation. My lessons with Robear weren't too much fun anymore, and I guess that I was just waiting for Lynn's graduation and wedding to be over.

The day after my French final, which I had finished in about fifteen minutes, we drove to Lynn's graduation in Clinton. The trip was awful, because not only was I cooped up in the car for five hours with my parents, my brother, and Nanny, but once we got there we had to go out to dinner with Norman and his parents, which was, as my brother Mark said, a real pain in the butt.

Norman's parents looked better than I had imagined, though you could still see the frog family resemblance. I was glad that I wasn't going to have to see them too often. During dinner, my entire family was busy proving what a bunch of fakes they all are. My parents were so polite and friendly and yes-graduation-was-lovely, that they would have made Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver, Beaver's parents on TV, look like a couple of criminals. Mark was eating a lot so that he wouldn't be able to talk because his mouth would always be full, and even

Nanny was pretending to be a slightly deaf, sweet, old grandmother.

Lynn was the worst though, and I felt kind of sorry for her. She was trying hard to make things go smoothly, and she kept smiling and smiling the whole time. A couple of times she looked at me, meaning say something, stupid, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything at all. I didn't even eat any green olives, which I love, because they were at the other end of the table and I didn't want to ask anyone to pass them to me. And then, at one point, Norman turned to me and said, "So, Lynn tells me you're a regular whiz kid."

Whiz kid. I could've puked. Finally, it was all over, and of course, on the way home in the car, I got bawled out for not saying much the whole time.

"You're so antisocial," my father said. "What's the matter Everybody else too much of a peasant for the child genius to associate with?"

"Yeah, Maria. It was only my graduation. You could have put yourself out a little. Even Mark was polite."

"Thanks, Lynn," Mark said, but nobody heard him except me. Nanny had fallen asleep with her head against the window frame. I just shut up and let them go on yelling.

"You better not act that way at my wedding," Lynn warned. "I just don't know what Norman and his parents thought about

you, anyway. And Mom, couldn't you have made her dress up a little?"

"I told your father that she should have dressed up more. But she didn't want to do it."

"I mean, Norman's parents--"

"Oh, fuck Norman's parents!" I said. At least everybody shut up for about two seconds. My brother Mark looked at me sympathetically and all hell broke loose a second later.

"That does it, young lady! No more--no more--no more of those French lessons! That's what's been doing it! You're getting too high and mighty lately! You're just a child!"

I knew my father didn't mean it about no more French lessons. He always says things like that for effect. I sat in the back seat and stared out the window. I knew that this was what life was going to be like once Robear left for good. Just long, awful weeks filled with my parents yelling at me, with everybody telling me what to do and how to act. By the time school started again, I'd be just the way I was before Robear came along: a lonely nerd of a kid, with strict parents and no friends. And no Robear. I would have cried then, but I knew it would just make my parents feel better, so I didn't.

I didn't realize then that my parents were already thinking of sending me away somewhere for the summer. If I had

known, I probably would have felt more hopeful and things wouldn't have seemed so bad. As it was, I thought I would go crazy. How would I ever be able to forget about Robear and the way things looked when he was around?

I thought that writing down all the stuff that happened would help me understand what went wrong the day before Lynn's wedding, but so far it hasn't helped. The only thing I can think of now, that I didn't think of then, was that maybe I forgot on purpose, maybe I was mad inside, mad at everything.

Mark was just home from school, so everybody was making a big deal over him, and with Lynn getting married and everything, she was the center of attention, but no one wondered how I felt or if I was okay or anything. Even Nanny was too busy feeding Mark, since she was convinced that he would starve at school, to pay much attention to me.

Whenever my parents did notice me, it was to tell me to do this or that, or to stop doing something. One time I stayed in my room the entire day, just waiting for somebody to come up and see if I was all right, and nobody did until my mother wanted the table set for dinner. When you feel bad already, it doesn't make you feel better to know that nobody even notices you.

Lynn's wedding was on Saturday and Thursday night I cranked my bedroom window open as wide as it could go. My

window is one of the new ones in the house. Most of the other windows slide up and make a lot more noise than the silent swing of the new ones. I had turned my bedroom light off first, so that no one could see in from the outside. I had everything prepared.

A few days before, when Robear had stopped to get gas and went in to pay, I'd swiped two cigarettes from a pack on the dashboard. I knew he wouldn't miss them and even though it was stealing, I also knew he wouldn't mind. If I had come right out and asked him for some, he probably would have said no, since my parents are the kind who hit the roof over things like that. No one in our family smokes except my Aunt Mary.

I had forgotten to take matches too, and there aren't many packs of matches laying around our house, so I had to wait until my next lesson to get some. Robear usually made me light his cigarettes for him while he drove, because he said that a couple times he'd set himself on fire trying to light a cigarette and drive at the same time. So this time when I lit his cigarette, I kept the matches.

With the breeze from the window and my parents's bedroom being all the way down the hall, I figured they wouldn't smell anything. Everyone was in bed. Finally, I could start being like Robear in this way, too. I could mouth smoke out in clouds the way he did, looking at you through the smoke swirls. He looked so great that way, just like in a Humphrey Bogart movie.

I would look that way, too. I think Robear's wife smoked, because some days there were two different brands of cigarettes in the car. I used to think that Robear switched from brand to brand.

The tobacco in the cigarette smelled good through the paper. The match lit on my second try. The cigarette tip wouldn't light right away. It looked lit, but then fizzled out. I lit another match and puffed hard until the end of the cigarette glowed and lit up a tiny halo of light in the room. I blew the smoke out the window. There was more smoke than when Robear exhaled, but I knew that was because I'd kept it in my mouth that time. I sucked again, real deep, and the smoke went way down to my lungs, and all of a sudden this taste filled my mouth like I couldn't believe. I blew the smoke out the window real fast and grabbed my water cup. I started feeling sick right away and figured I must have done something wrong. I didn't feel so well standing up, so I slid down to the floor. The cigarette burned away between my fingers. I tried to remember the way Robear held his and decided I'd have to watch him more carefully next time, so I could get it right. Next time? Right. I could see myself going through life holding lit cigarettes that I never smoked.

I inhaled one more time. Out quickly. That was the worst thing I'd ever tasted. I guessed that I hadn't done anything wrong after all. Smoking a cigarette was like eating an ashtray.

This was what made Robear look so good? I dunked the cigarette in the water to get rid of the smell. It had smelled a lot better before I'd lit it. I remembered Robear saying that you didn't smoke to be cool. But Robear smoked. Maybe they tasted better after awhile, but why bother in the first place?

I stashed the other cigarette in my underwear drawer and then went to the bathroom to flush the wet cigarette and the water down the toilet. I brushed my teeth again and used mouthwash and then my mouth tasted better, but my head still felt funny. I rinsed the cup out. I wondered if Lynn had ever tried to smoke? Probably not. Maybe Mark had. I'd have to ask Robear why he smoked, especially when it tasted so bad. My head started feeling weirder, so I got into bed. The next thing that I knew, it was morning and I could hear Nanny downstairs in the kitchen, singing.

As soon as my mother heard me get up, she started vacuuming the hall outside my room. Whenever anything is going to happen, like a holiday or company coming, my mother cleans everything. Since the next day was Lynn's wedding, she was in the middle of her before-the-wedding-housecleaning-spree, even though neither the wedding or the reception was going to be at our house. I went downstairs in my nightgown and talked to Nanny while she baked. I had forgotten about the night before, since I had just gotten up. I don't know how long it would have been before I remembered, but as it was, I didn't get a chance to find out.

"Maria Ann!" I could hear her yelling from the bedroom, and I was all the way down in the kitchen, talking to Nanny. I guessed right away what had happened, but didn't have enough time to think of a good excuse, if there was such a thing.

"Maria!" My mom stormed into the kitchen holding a cigarette upright between her thumb and forefinger. "Do you have anything at all to say about this?"

Her lips were pinched together and she looked a lot madder than she had the time I said I wasn't going to Miss Parker's school.

"Well, no," I squeaked, sort of like a dying mouse, and then I just started crying, I was so scared. She acted as though I had become a drug addict or something.

"You had better cry! You horrible girl!" She was yelling loud and outshouting Nanny, who was trying to figure out what had happened. "Filthy, disgusting habits! You're no better than a pig! Get out of my sight! Get out of here!"

"But I only smoked it a little--"

"Get out!"

She pushed me out of the kitchen and closed the door. I stood there a minute and then walked up the stairs, crying. I could hardly see where I was going. My back tingled where my mom had shoved me. I knew that I was really in for it, and I didn't know what to do at all. Robear, I thought.

Oh, Robear, please help me. I ran into my parents's room to the telephone. My mother was still screaming in the kitchen. I found Robear's number in the address book and dialed slowly and carefully, as though it were the first time I had ever used a phone. My hand was shaking. Maybe he'll come and get me, I thought.

"Hello?" I started crying again when I heard Robear's voice. He had to say "hello" about four times before I could manage to talk.

"Ria? Calm down, calm down. I'll pick you up in five minutes down at the corner, okay?"

I could hear my mother calling me as Robear hung up. I put the phone down, ran into my room and put on my shorts and a T'shirt, and then went down the stairs fast. I heard my mother going up the stairs with Nanny worrying along behind her, as I eased the latch on the screen door open and stepped outside.

Robear started the car and drove off the street as soon as I got in.

"You okay?" he asked, looking at me.

"Yeah." I knew I'd cry any minute.

"Well, you don't have to talk about it until you feel like it."

"Where are we going?"

"To the zoo."

"To the zoo? Really?"

It's funny how even when a person is really upset and their mother hates them, that something can still be surprising and make life seem normal again for a minute.

"Really." Robear looked at me.

"I bet it'll be different...than last time, I mean."

"You'll be the most different element," he said.

"Oh?" I said automatically, then wished I could stuff the word back into my mouth.

"Oh?" Robear mimicked. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Oh?"

"Nothing," I said. "Don't get upset."

"Me? Upset? Did I call you up on the phone, crying, ask you to drop everything? I don't see why I should put myself out for a sweet, young woman who turned out to be such a little fake. I'm relieved that this is your last lesson, I can tell you that."

I felt like I couldn't hear anymore and that my throat wasn't going to let me breathe. I remembered my mother yelling, me running down the street, me being nasty to Robear. Robear.

"My last lesson? This one?" a little person asked.

"That's right. I think we'll both be happy when it's over. You've improved your French and I've made some money. I think it was an equal deal, don't you?"

"But you're my best friend!" The little voice took

over and burst into tears.

"Oh?" Robear said, but it was too late for that. There wasn't any new Maria anymore, there was just me, and I was crying too hard to speak.

The car stopped moving, but the voice didn't care. It cried for being left alone, for horrible parents, for all the dumb things everywhere. It cried for its whole life.

"Hey. Hey. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nasty, Marie." Robear shook my shoulder. The little voice was howling. "Marie."

"You're my best friend," the voice choked out. "My mom hates me. She told me to get out. And now you hate me, too!" The voice howled again. At everything.

"I don't hate you! Marie! Jesus, sweetheart, I love you. Hey, you know that." I cried louder. "Just because a person's married doesn't mean they can't love other people. Didn't I ever tell you that?"

"Nooooo!" the voice yelled. "You didn't!" The sun was bright against the windshield and I could feel my eyes swelling. They grew puffy and ached and I cried louder.

"Calm down!" Robear was holding me, but it didn't make any difference. My best friend ever was leaving, and I needed him so much, and the only thing to do was to cry.

"Don't you want to open your presents?"

"Presents?" I asked, hiccupping on a sob.

"Presents," he repeated. "From me. For you." He reached into the back seat awkwardly, trying not to move my head from his shoulder. I sat up.

"Here." He handed me a hanky. I wiped my face and blew my nose. I was still breathing in gasps.

"Feel better?" Robear stroked my face with the back of his hand. "Here."

There were two wrapped boxes in my lap. They were both wrapped badly, with bulging corners and long strips of Scotch tape. I still have the wrapping paper, shut into the dictionary that the Buffalo Evening News gave me in sixth grade when I won the spelling bee.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Open it and find out."

I peeled one strip of tape off carefully.

"Rip the paper!" Robear said, watching me. "That's what presents are for."

I tore the paper off the box and lifted the lid. Robear was laughing. I reached into the box and pulled out one of those china statues that they sell in drug stores. There were three soldiers, one with a flag, one with a fife, and one with a drum. All had angelic expressions and pink faces.

"Isn't it ugly?" Robear asked. It was. "Twist it."

I did. The figures turned slowly and "God Bless America"

tinkled out.

"I love it! Thank--"

"Open the other one," Robear interrupted, pointing.

I ripped that one open, too, and pulled out a small, fluffy teddy bear.

"It's not a toy," Robear said. "Do you know what it is?"

"It's a bear, a Ro-bear, isn't it?" I rubbed the fur against my face.

"That's right. Because I won't be here. You speak French to him, and you tell him everything. He'll love you just like I do."

"Thanks Robear," I said. "For everything. I'm sorry that--" my voice started shaking and I stopped talking because I was afraid I'd start crying again.

"Sorry for what? Don't be a jerk. That's one of your words, right? Jerk." He tested the word aloud.

"Sometimes," he said, reaching over to take the soldiers out of my lap. "Sometimes, if you stay in one place for too long, or do one thing for too long, you start forgetting about different kinds of people and about different things." He twisted the soldiers slowly. "You have to forget some things, if you don't want to go crazy. Understand?"

I had to close my eyes to concentrate on the idea, otherwise I knew it would get away from me. Then I got it.

"You mean," I said, watching him twist the figures around and around, "Like the fact that I have to be in school for two more years, and if I thought about how different your life is, I wouldn't be able to go to school anymore, I'd just wish for something that I can't have, at least not now, and then I'd go crazy wishing for it. Is that it?"

"That's it," Robear said. "That's exactly it. When I lost my teaching job, I felt awful, but at the same time I knew that the shake-up would be good for me. And it was. I needed to remember things I'd been away from for awhile."

He cleared a spot on the dashboard and set the soldiers there. "God Bless America" filled the car while he lit a cigarette. As I watched him, I remembered why I was sitting there.

"Oh, no!" I said, and in a great rush, told Robear all about everything. "And my mother hates me now," I said when I finished. .

"I don't think so," Robear said. "Parents get over things like that, I think."

"Not my parents."

"All parents. You'll see. Why'd you try one, anyway?"

"To see what it was like. You smoke."

"So I do. Make you feel sick?"

"Horrible. I though I'd throw up. How come you smoke?"

"Perversity. Enjoyment. Stupidity. All those things."

"They don't sound like good reasons to me."

"They're not," Robear laughed. "I suppose they really aren't good reasons, but I'd managed to make them sound that way. You know, I've learned a lot from my lessons with you. I really have." He smiled at me. "You and I have what is known as a symbiotic relationship--"

"Tenth grade biology," I interrupted.

"What?"

"Tenth grade biology. That's when they teach you about symbiotic relationships. I just learned it this year. We had a question on the bird and the alligator on the final. The alligator opens his mouth for this bird to come in and pick stuff from between his teeth. That way the bird gets fed and the alligator gets his teeth cleaned."

"Yum, sounds charming," Robear said.

"I don't know. I liked it. It sounded neat."

"Well then, I guess you're the bird and I'm the alligator."

"How do you figure?"

"Because you've fed off things that I knew, but you didn't, and I've had my head cleared completely by your charming self."

The sarcastic voice didn't bother me anymore.

"Maria."

"What?"

"Marie."

"I said, what?" I looked at him.

"I think I'll take you home now. They're probably worried."

"Okay," I said.

He pulled back onto the road as the music box played a single note.

I didn't see Robear after that day. I have my music box and Ro-bear here in Missoula with me. My parents didn't understand why Robear gave me presents like that, but they were still too mad at me to even care.

I don't remember too much about Lynn's wedding at all. My parents were talking to me, but only when there were other people around. I partially redeemed myself when I had a nice conversation in French with Norman's mother, and I could see my mother soften a little when she passed by and heard us. Nanny winked at me whenever she saw me, and at one point dragged me to a corner and gave me some cookies out of her handbag.

"Your grandpa, God rest him, and I ate better than this during the Depression. They call this food?" She pinched my cheek. "Don't look so pale. I fix things about those cigarettes."

Nanny didn't have to tell me that because I knew none of the cigarette stuff really mattered. Something was going to happen to me, I felt it all that day.

The next morning, Lynn and Norman left for Jamaica on their honeymoon, and my parents talked in my father's room all day, off and on. Finally, after some phone calls and a lot of whispers, they called me in there.

"Maria!" my mother called. "Will you please come into Daddy's den for a minute?"

When I heard "den," one of my inside alarms went off, but it didn't matter, since nothing was real anymore. I didn't care what they said. I listened to things about "bad attitude" and "change of scene" and "maturity." I smiled and nodded whenever I felt that I should, looked somber at other points, and let them go on. I understood that they were sending me to Montana to live with my mother's brother, my Uncle Felix.

"It's not that we don't love you," my father said. "We do. You know that. That's why we're going to give you a little change of scene. You need different surroundings, I think."

"Your Uncle Felix is a wonderful man, and you make sure that you don't give him any trouble," my mother said. "We want you to have time to think, to grow up. A girl your age should realize that she is responsible for the things she says and does. You're not a child anymore."

I nodded in my mother's direction.

"We'll see what happens when you get back. Perhaps you do need boarding school. Maybe we shouldn't have given in about Miss Parker's before. We'll just play it by ear, okay?" my father said.

"Sure." I said. My voice sounded like I hadn't used it in a million years.

"So, we'll pack tonight, buy you a few things tomorrow, and then you'll be leaving Tuesday, okay?"

"Okay." I said. I walked upstairs to my room and laid on my bed. My French book was still under my pillow, where I kept it since I started lessons with Robear. Robear. I got up and went to my dresser and took the Ro-bear back on the bed with me.

"I miss you already," I told it. It looked back at me, and deep in its glassy brown eyes I could see my face. I slept until dinner.

My plane landed in Missoula two days later and my Uncle Felix picked me up at the airport. As far as I can tell, he isn't like my mother at all, and it's hard to believe that they're brother and sister, but I guess brothers and sisters aren't always alike anyway. I get the feeling that he doesn't think I'm a bad kid or anything, because he doesn't watch me all the time or tell me things I shouldn't do. On Sundays

we do the crossword together and he's a lot faster than I am. I think he's smarter, too, but he's been around a lot longer.

I don't do much here except walk around, read, think, and write down everything that happened to me before I got sent to Missoula. I think about Robear a lot and I wish I knew where he was. I used to think that knowing where a person was, was one of the basic signs that you knew them, but now I know that's not true.. Just because I don't know where Robear is, doesn't mean I don't know him or care about him.

Sometimes when I'm walking along the street, I say his name out loud to myself. Sometimes I mean it like a good luck word, other times like a hello, and some other times to make me strong.

I guess I understand almost everything now, even though there so much of it to understand. I know about being cool, and my parents aren't mad at me anymore, and I might go to a different school in the fall. Things look a lot better then they did before I met Robear.

I still haven't translated this notebook into French and I don't know if I ever will. Every time I start to, I just can't seem to get going on it, and as Robear would say, if you don't feel comfortable doing something, figure out why.

I've been trying to figure it out and last night when I was laying on my bed, I suddenly got it. I know why I don't feel comfortable sending this to Robear. He doesn't need me

to tell him all this stuff.

He's the alligator. He already knows.