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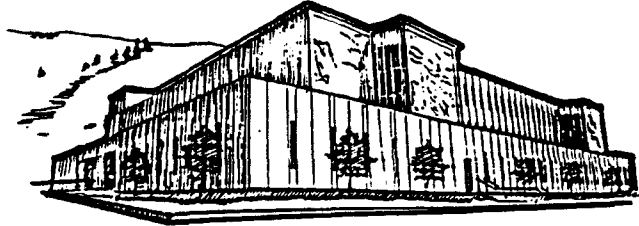
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University of
Montana

THE STATE OF WANTING

By

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B.A., University of California-Berkeley, 1978

M.S., Columbia University, 1980

Presented for fulfillment of the requirements

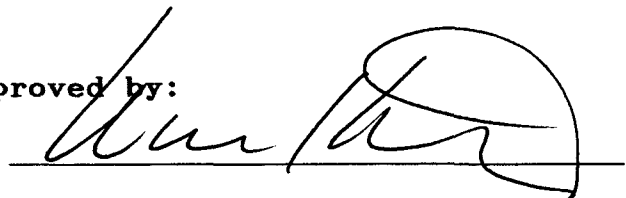
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

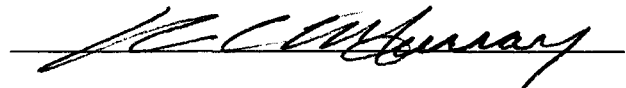
University of Montana

1993

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UNO PLUS UNO

A year after Alfred left me, I knew I needed to find a new shrink. I was 27, unemployed, living three blocks from Harlem and soon-to-be divorced from my college Marxist love turned bartender turned alcoholic. Alfred was sweet on wine and mean on whiskey. He liked whiskey best.

I myself liked whiskey, but I also liked Alfred -- loved Alfred -- or so I told myself, and told my friends. They didn't believe me.

"You can't possibly still love him," Mac said. Mac was a personal fitness trainer whose real name was Matilda. She was aloof and slinky and had legs like kudzu vines.

"The guy was a total schmuck, Janey," Mac said. "He ran around on you and drank all the time. You've got to find someone with some bonding capacity, some internal sense of velcro. Guys like Alfred, Jeffrey...who's the other one, David? They're all the same."

"They're not all the same." I hated it when Mac compared men to glue. "They're not all the same: they're just mean

in different ways."

Unfortunately, it was true. Alfred was nicest to me when I was crying. Jeffrey told me he loved me a little, but he really couldn't deal with it until he finished his PhD. David told me he needed a woman who could understand his need for other women; my friends told me to dump David and see a shrink. Dr. McKenna, the shrink I found, told me to stop listening to other people. I'd listened to all of them, and now I was very tired.

The truth was, living in the city for seven years had taught me a few things. Like, every desire was within reach, if you possessed the right race, class, age, sex, financial standing and breast measurements. I didn't fit into many of those categories, but my desires were simple: I wanted a relationship like the old days with Woody Allen and Mia Farrow: I wanted to be psychic-ly, physically, emotionally and spiritually connected to someone I didn't have to live with. We'd have great sex, and then go home and work on our screenplays. We'd have lots of kids and enough money to get one of those Irish nannies.

"I'm gonna redefine myself," I told Mac. It was one of our weekly phone conversations. "I'm sick of being a

cocker spaniel, wagging and grinning and jumping into people's laps. I want to be exotic like an Afghan hound. A Saluki wouldn't be bad, either."

"Just make sure you're not a beagle," Mac said. "God, they're dumb."

I wasn't dumb; just overeager. Moderation to me was an alien concept. I even brushed my teeth too hard. When I met Alfred, he'd said, "Don't get too close to me." I listened to Dr. McKenna, and didn't listen. I was like a thread in a tattered jacket -- no matter how much Alfred pulled away from me, looking for an end, I just kept unraveling in his hand. "I love you," I told him, and wondered why I said this to so many retreating backs.

"I've defined the new meaning of false hope," I told Mac, but her call-waiting clicked and she put me on hold. I wrote down my definition on the kleenex box near my futon so I wouldn't forget it. "False hope," I told her when she switched back to me, "is keeping one sock just in case the lost one shows up."

The two of us fell quiet for a second. We both knew that my last definition of false hope was finding true love in New York City. Mac broke the silence first.

"Janey," she said. "What's a Saluki?"

After telling Mac that a Saluki is a sleek dog with silky ears, I decided to get to work finding a shrink. My old technique was to open the Yellow Pages and pick out names that sounded good, which was basically the same way I placed bets at the race track. I'd gone over the meaning of this many times with whichever shrink I'd settled on. But this time, in honor of a new era in my personal development, I made some preliminary phone calls for referrals. Mac told me her favorite shrink was David Sampson, whom she described as a cross between Carl Jung and Harrison Ford. Next I called Anne, who worked at the Nyorican Poets Cafe on the Lower East Side. She was Scottish and blonde, complete with a brogue, which put her in great demand as a barmaid; I was mousy brown and from Cleveland, which made me just one more guppie in the eternal pond. The phone rang 22 times before someone at

the cafe finally picked it up. He didn't speak english.

"Hello, is Anne there?" I said.

"Hallo?"

"Hello, I'm looking for Anne."

"Hallo?" The voice sounded Pakistani.

"Anne. Blonde? ANNE."

There was a clunk and the din of background noise. I imagined the receiver sprawled on the bar in the middle of imported cigarettes, Sambuca, shots of Jack Daniels, stray matches, a black beret or two, hands clutching beer bottles when they'd rather be touching flesh.

"Janey! Get your arse down here," Anne said, when she finally picked up. "You wouldn't believe the men in here!"

I told Anne why I was calling.

"Ohhhh, my shrink, you'd really love my shrink," she crooned. "Her name's Zyko, and she's terrific. Z-y-k-o. It's Albanian, I think. Anyway, you just call her Norma."

Anne was basically a pretty happy person, but suddenly I remembered I'd never seen her without pearls and a hat on. Also, the only real work she'd ever done was flash scores at poets who read stuff on stage -- kind of an artistic version of the Olympics. Winners got to drink for

free.

"Jennifer Blowdryer is reading at the poetry chug tonight," Anne was saying to me. "You gotta coom."

"Maybe I'll do that," I told her. I would have, too, if I didn't think I'd be mutilated on the subway to Avenue A.

"Take Grainger with you," Anne said. She was trying not to sound it, but I could tell she found my reluctance annoying. She knew Grainger because I'd brought him to the cafe once and he'd won second place with a poem about cheese. "Grainger'll protect you," she said.

Grainger was a jazz pianist and old semi-boyfriend of mine who couldn't protect a housefly. He'd recently fallen in love, but we'd stayed friends. Grainger's new girlfriend was a midwife, and his apartment was filled with plastic models of women's reproductive organs and diagrams of things like tipped uteruses.

"So, you're going nuts again," Grainger said, when I called. He lived in the Bronx and was oblivious to just

about everything in life but music. You had to be oblivious, to handle living in the Bronx. His shrink was terrific -- he'd helped Grainger awaken his feelings; helped him open up to things and get aware of the pain in the world -- but Grainger quit therapy. He said being happy in New York City and being open to the world were mutually exclusive.

"I was hoping I could get the name of your old shrink," I told him. "I really need somebody good."

"What's that weird buzz on your line?" Grainger said.

That was the first time I heard it. It was a buzz, all right; buzzing clear as day.

"I do hear a buzz," I said.

"That's...it's a voice, I think," Grainger said. "It sounds like some foreign voice on your phone."

We both listened.

High-pitched static seemed to be chasing its tail inside my telephone. In between the white noise, I could hear a man's garbled voice. It sounded like bad spanish underwater.

"Maybe it's something from the guy upstairs," I said. "This new guy just moved in and maybe he got a bad hook-up when they connected his phone."

"Deep," Grainger said. "Listen, gotta go. The Chinese guy is here with take-out food -- I gotta buzz him in off the street so he doesn't get stabbed."

Grainger gave me the name of his shrink -- John Martinek -- and hung up. And when he did, I realized I kind of missed ol' Grainger. I thought about the time I'd been sitting with him in Riverside Park one day, drinking beer and watching the police arrest a gnarled old homeless man living in a cardboard box in the bushes.

"The hardest work I've ever done was after that shrink pried me open," Grainger had said. "It was a bitch closing back up again, you know? A real bitch."

I kept the names Sampson, Zyko, Martinek on a yellow legal pad on my desk for a few days. I wanted to see if I'd get some sign that would show me who to pick. Actually, I was scared. I hated sizing up my life for some stranger so they could take \$120 bucks for 50 minutes of work. In a moment of pique, I told myself I didn't need a shrink and walked all the way down to Shakespeare & Co. to

buy a new book called Masochist No More! It offered a 10-day program on how to solve your life's problems. On day one, you had to throw out self-defeating behaviors, refuse to give tips, delete the words "I'm sorry" from your vocabulary, and shun impulse buying. The book cost \$12.95.

I took the IRT home. It was the subway I almost always used, and I'd never been hurt on it yet. A 20-year-old woman sat in the corner, sucking her thumb. A man in a green leather aviator cap sat reading a book called Eight Tragedies of the Modern World. A couple directly across from me got tired of holding their baby girl, so they shoed her into the middle of the car and told her to hang on to the metal pole with all the other commuters. She looked no older than three.

She was adorable. I wanted to stand next to her and protect her more than I'd wanted to do anything all day. Her parents were deep in their tabloids and didn't seem overly concerned about her welfare. The little girl stared at me, expressionless. Her lower lip gleamed with baby drool.

"Hi, there," I said, and walked to her side. She opened her mouth a little and cranked her head back so she could see all 5'10" of me, and she looked as if she might tumble

right over. I kneeled down to her level.

"Hi, there," I repeated.

A gurgle came out of her, and a little, itty bitty smile, and then a snuffle and then she looked at me again and let out a wail. She cried as if I'd pinched her, or worse. The whole car stared at me with startled bovine eyes. The mother looked up from her paper, grabbed the baby and yanked the little girl to her lap, where the kid's face exploded into tears. I straightened up and took a firm hold of the metal pole. Please Lord, don't let this mother start screaming at me, I prayed. And then I felt some breath on my neck and every cell in my body told me to run. There was a motion, and the shocking warmth of a man's palm. A male hand had pinned my fingers to the metal pole; a male hand was glommed on top of mine like it belonged there. I could see the hand, but I couldn't see the man it belonged to. I felt a wool coat nudge my hip.

I turned around cautiously.

"Excuse, me, I'm sorry," I said, absurdly.

"Hi," the man said.

He was short. Shorter than me, anyway. He had a round, pale face with thick red hair sprouting everywhere -- beard, mustache, scalp. Not bad looking, actually.

"I was watching you with that little baby and I just wanted to offer you moral support," the man said and smiled a very sweet smile. I wondered whether I should flirt or kick him in the groin.

"Thanks, I need moral support," I said.

The man was carrying dry-cleaning over one shoulder. I'd never heard of a rapist or murderer who carried his dry-cleaned suits with him. "Are you a creep or not?" I wanted to ask him, but didn't. "Why is your hand on top of mine?" I said instead.

"I just wanted to get your attention," he replied.

The man introduced himself, told me he worked in the city clerk's office, said he'd seen me on the train before. We lived near each other, he said.

"My name's George. George Poleman.

"You're kidding," I said.

"Why -- do you know me? I'm not famous or anything."

"No. I'm sorry." God, I had to stop saying 'I'm sorry.'

"It's just a strange name for someone holding a pole."

When the train stalled at 96th Street and the homeless man with no legs got on and started to panhandle, Poleman and I switched to the local and swapped phone numbers. Heat surged through me when he shook my hand good-bye. It

amazed me. I hadn't realized how love-starved I was.

I called Mac when I got home and told her about meeting somebody promising. The buzz was in the background, but I ignored it.

"This could be the real thing," I said to Mac.

"Hell, no," Mac said. "You just need to get laid."

The night I met Poleman, I went after the roaches with a vacuum cleaner and watched them try to scurry away. Later, I took out the masochist book. I realized I'd already sinned by saying "excuse me" and "I'm sorry" on the subway to somebody who had invaded my space, put his hot hand on mine, and whose name was Poleman. God, I got all tingly again just thinking about his hands. I couldn't believe myself.

It was time to call a shrink. I looked at the yellow legal pad, decided Norma Zyko was the one, picked up the phone, dialed. And stopped after the third digit. There was that buzz again. Really loud.

Hello? I said. As if a buzz could answer me.

But there was something in the buzz. I could hear a man talking, and another man answering. In between the voices was static that sounded like a blizzard. I hung up and called the operator. I asked her if she could help me with a buzz on my line.

"I can't hear a buzz, ma'am," she said.

I called Grainger again.

"Yo," he said.

"Am I going crazy, or was there a buzz on my phone the last time we talked?"

"Yes, you're going crazy, and yes there was a buzz."

"Thanks."

The phone rang two seconds later.

"Is that the only reason you wanted to call me?"

Grainger's voice sounded seriously hurt.

"Well, yeah," I said. The buzz this time gave way to a distinctive voice that shouted UNO, UNO.

"I gotta go," I said.

I put in a call to the phone company and got an answering machine. My heart started to pound. I decided to ignore the buzz long enough to call Norma Zyko.

Norma sounded perfectly fine over the telephone, and I made sure not to scare her off by mentioning the buzz. We set our appointment for Friday.

Zyko day dawned grey and rainy and I decided to stop trying to run into Poleman again and treat myself to a cab to Norma's office near Washington Square. A dark-haired guy screeched to a halt as soon as he saw me waving. He had a half-eaten pesto pizza on the front seat. He needed dental work.

"Hope I'm not interrupting your lunch," I said.

"Hell no, I'm too depressed to eat. Ever been too depressed to eat?" he said. "It's somethin'. It's somethin'."

I arranged myself on the torn grey back seat and plotted strategy. The guy looked sane, but I'd been wrong before. I scanned the photocopy of the cab license hanging from his visor. Thomas Mickeloff. We were headed toward the Central Park short cut, so Thomas Mickeloff appeared

to know where he was going.

"Where are you from?" I said.

"Oh Jesus," he said. "You look like a nice person, can we cut out the small talk? I'm an American like you; we're all Americans, we all live in America, right? I just happened to be from Detroit, and the rest of New York just happens to be from Puerto Rico. Heh heh heh. But who cares? I've gotta talk to somebody, this woman is driving me crazy."

We were stopped at a light. A flood of flesh in suits and black tights and leather and rags bumped past the hood. A man on the corner wore a t-shirt that read "Could you tell me what time it is, or should I just go fuck myself?" I was wearing my travel-safe New York clothes: Doc Marten combat boots, black jeans, black tunic-top and black sports bra. Mickeloff kept checking me out in the rearview mirror.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"I buy my own sponges!" Mickeloff said. "My fucking girlfriend won't lift a finger. She hasn't worked in five years. I bust my ass all day in this cab, and I come home, and the bitch says to me, 'we need kitchen sponges, go get some sponges,' and she's sitting home all day watching TV

and talking on the phone and she can't go out and buy some fucking sponges? And I do it. I go out in the rain and I go buy some fucking sponges!"

He turned his face toward me, his chin a network of nubs where a beard would soon sprout. For some reason his chin made me think of Alfred, and how he'd lied and told me he'd started going to AA meetings when he'd really been shacking up with his old girlfriend, Mandy.

"Why do you put up with it?" I said.

Mickeloff smiled at me. Geez, his teeth were bad.

"I love her. Ain't that a bitch? I really love her. You wanna know something else? I mean, you won't believe this."

I looked at the meter: \$6.25. We were only halfway to Washington Square.

"Sure I will," I said.

"We haven't had sex in two years."

"You're kidding!" Wow, this guy really did love her.

"And you lived together the whole time?"

"Slept in the same bed."

"And you never even touch?"

"Well, sometimes we touch. But hardly ever. I don't

really want to. She's a coke-head. You see these teeth?"
He turned back toward me again.

"No," I lied.

"Take a look." He leered at me through the bullet-proof mesh. "She needs some coke one day so she asks me to score for her. 'Okay, tell me where to go,' I say. So she has me drive her to a corner. to this dealer she knows; she sits in the car and she tells me, 'You go up to him: go tell him DeeDee says hi -- So I go up to the guy and I say, 'Hey, DeeDee says hi -- and could you sell me some blow?' and WHAM, the guy pulls back and puts his fist through my mouth. I mean WHAM. You know how much it hurts to get punched in the mouth?"

"Why'd he hit you?" I said.

"Turns out, this guy used to be Carol's old man, and he's still pissed at her for walking out on him. And get this -- Carol leaves me gushing blood and goes off with this asshole so's she can score."

"Wow." I couldn't believe it. "You don't deserve treatment like that," I said. "Why don't you dump her?"

"I should, shouldn't I?" Mickeloff was glum.

"Unless you get so much out of being with her that it's

worth it," I said. "I mean, you gotta weigh the good and the bad."

"Fuckin' sponges," Mickeloff said. "Fucking sponges."

We were finally close enough to Norma Zyko's for me to get out and run the rest of the way. I told Mickeloff to drop me at the corner. The tab was \$12. I handed him \$15. "Keep the change," I said. I really felt sorry for him. "You should dump her," I said. "You could do better."

Mickeloff leaned toward the door, like his head was trying to follow me but his feet were rooted to the floor of the cab. "Hey -- you want to go out sometime?" he called after me.

"No," I told him. I smiled politely, and waved goodbye. I actually thought I saw tears in his eyes.

Norma Zyko's office was in one of 500 buildings in New York named The New Yorker. The doorman asked me who I wanted.

"Zyko," I said.

I could see the guy sizing me up.

"Bouts of depression, interspersed with narcissistic tendencies," I said.

"Fifteenth floor, make a right," he pointed.

Zyko's office was long and narrow; six, well-worn chairs lined one wall, interspersed with coffee tables layered with old magazines. A typical professional office, aside from the cats.

There were four of them. Huge, hairy cats. They were running up and down the hall that probably led from the waiting room to Norma's office. At the end of the hall I could see their tails disappear, then their heads reappear. I took a closer look and realized all the doors in the place had little cut-out pet entrances, so the cats could come and go as they pleased. Jesus. I hated cats.

"You must be Janey. Welcome, Janey, come on in."

Norma had appeared. She was squat, with white hair pulled into a bun. She wore a wool skirt above the knee, and her slip was hanging out. We walked into an office that had green shag carpeting, two client chairs and a La-Z-Boy recliner for Norma. Two purring animals followed us in.

"I'm allergic to cats," I said.

"Oh, really? Isn't that a shame," said Norma, looking seriously bummed out. "Will it bother you if they're in the room?"

"Yes, it will." I silently congratulated myself for not saying "I'm sorry."

"Well, I'll do my best to keep them out, but these doors don't close very well." Norma leaned down to try to shoo the cats out. Five minutes of my time had ticked by.

"Well," Norma finally said, when she'd gotten rid of the cats and shoved a heavy metal wastebasket in front of their little swinging entrance. "Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

"I can't stop tipping people," I said.

Norma stared at me. "I'm just kidding," I said.

Norma smiled.

"I'm having a hard time right now," I said. "I'm nearly divorced -- I miss my husband. I worked at an art magazine last year and made some pretty good money, but then I got laid off. So I'm basically miserable and unemployed."

"Can you afford therapy?" Norma asked.

Norma looked pleased when I told her I had insurance for another nine months. She leaned back in her La-Z-Boy, which thrust her tiny legs out while lifting them up vertically. Meanwhile, her head dropped down so I could barely see her face. Looking straight at her, I could see the bottoms of her high heels, and straight up her skirt.

"Go on," she said.

I wasn't quite sure what to say.

"Was this your first marriage?" she said. "It's awfully painful when any marriage breaks up, but your first marriage in particular. That takes years to put behind you."

"How do you know?" I said.

"I've been in practice many, many years, Janey, and I know the cycle of recovery. Have you heard of the cycle? First you feel denial, then anger, then depression, and then acceptance. All this takes time."

"I feel all those things all the time, every day. It didn't just start when Alfred left me."

"So, his name is Alfred." Norma moved her chair back still further, until now, all I could see was her underwear and beyond that, the tip of her chin and nose,

and then a bit of her eyeballs.

"Yes, his name is Alfred," I said.

"I sense some hostility, Janey?"

"No. Not hostility. I guess I'm just wondering why I'm here."

"You're here because you're in pain," Norma said in a little voice that matched her little feet. "You're here because...."

WHAM! A clatter and a yowl seemed to explode from somewhere behind my chair. I turned around expecting to see a book fallen off a shelf, but I knew it was worse than that. One of the cats had taken a running dive through the swinging cat door, expecting it to open like it always did. But instead it suffered a head-on collision with the metal trashbasket on the other side.

"Oh my goodness." Norma scrambled out of her chair and ran to the door to rescue the cat. It lay on its side panting, then opened its eyes and wobbled to its feet and meowed. It looked stunned, but otherwise okay.

"Oh my little baby, what has mommy done?" Norma said. She'd forgotten I existed. "Mommy won't ever do that again, will she, no, she won't." Norma cradled the

partially limp cat in her arms. Her slip was now dangling now around her calves.

"I'm sorry, Janet," she said, "Please excuse me for the interruption. I'll have to think of a better way to keep the cats out."

"Janey. My name is Janey."

"Oh, I'm sorry! My, I'm not very on top of things today, am I? Well, why don't you fill me in on your background, Janey. That'll help, so I can get to know you better."

"My parents are divorced; I'm from Cleveland," I said. "But...." I looked around the room and beyond Norma, to the door. "But actually, I'm sorry. I'd like to leave."

"Leave New York? Why be sorry?"

"No, leave here. Leave this office. I don't think this is going to work."

"Oh." Norma looked lost for a minute. The session had obviously been hard on her. "I really think you should come back at least one additional time so we can explore why you feel this way," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. I could hear the whine of the cats as I walked back out through the waiting room. Some

poor schmuck sat there, waiting to see Norma. I felt like waving to him, just the way I'd waved to Mickeloff. We smiled at each other as if everything was fine.

It was raining, when I got outside. I wanted to find a phone booth to call my scottish barmaid friend and ask her why the hell she liked Norma Zyko. But I stopped myself. The only thing that would help me unwind at this point, I knew, was to get home and watch some bad network TV.

I made it back, shucked off my wet clothes and dried my hair, turned on the TV. And it pulsed at me. Not a normal pulse. A pulse filled with buzzing sounds and a slippery voice: UNO, UNO. The Spanish-speaking gargler had invaded once again. I flipped channels. World News Tonight was on, but Peter Jennings' face kept fading into fuzz, and the sound kept dying, and in the void came words from far away. I was being taken over. My mind and my worldly goods were being taken over.

I called Mac.

"Mac," I said, "Do you hear a buzz?"

"Janey, you're bad off."

"Come on, do you hear a buzz?"

"Yes. I do."

"You do?"

"Ya, I do. What is it?"

I told her I was losing my mind, and it had been one of the worst days of my life. She asked me if I was thinking about Alfred again.

"Fuck Alfred," I said.

She told me that sounded like a good idea.

"So what do you think this noise is," I asked her.

"Maybe it's a chain saw," she said. "Maybe Freddy Kruger is your new upstairs neighbor."

A sudden clomp came from overhead, and I heard a muffled sound. A familiar muffled sound. UNO.

"Bye. Gotta go. Sorry," I said. And I raced upstairs.

My apartment number was 1015, so 1115 had to be

directly above. I feared for my life, knocking on a stranger's door, but I had no choice.

"Hello?" I said.

"Si?" asked the voice. It was a man. But I couldn't tell if it was the same voice I'd been hearing.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm your neighbor, from 1015? I live right below you?"

The door opened just a crack. One eye and half of an elderly face looked at me from about my height.

"You are my neighbor?" the man said.

"Do you speak english?" I said.

"Yes. What is it?"

"I'm having trouble with my telephone and I wondered if..."

Mr. 1115 closed the door and locked it. I thought of knocking again, but I knew he wouldn't open. Meanwhile, I made a mental note to speak to the landlord. That man's deadbolt sounded a hell of a lot better than the one I had.

My yellow legal pad called to me over the next few days. There, on paper, in bold letters, were the names of two more shrinks who perhaps were the very people who could make me feel better: John Martinek and David Sampson. I succumbed and called them both.

Martinek had an enormous office and sat about 10 yards away from me in a massive chair the color of rhino skin. The phone kept ringing during our session, and he was rude enough to answer it. "Hi, honey, yes, sweetie, yes, yes, yes," he said to the second caller. I was jealous his phone was working.

"Why do you sit so far away?" I asked when he'd finished. "Doesn't it make it hard to figure out what people are saying?"

"What?" he said.

David Sampson's "office" was really the living room of his lilliputian Greenwich Village studio; he cozied his leather chair so close to mine, our knees touched. He wore a black v-neck undershirt and had copious amounts of neck hair.

"Would you like me to hypnotize you?" he offered. "It helps people dredge up repressed memories."

"No," I said. "No thank you."

After my session with Sampson, I realized that either my friends were good people with incredibly bad taste in therapists, or I had incredibly bad taste in friends. It was hard to know what to think, so I concentrated on finding Poleman instead. When I got to the subway I looked all over for a guy carrying dry cleaning, but no one there looked even remotely interested in laundry. Police swarmed the platform at 96th Street, and one of them, a friendly-looking guy, was tying a yellow barricade ribbon to a post.

"Was there an accident?" I asked him.

"Ya, there was an accident," he said. "Some guy meant to shoot his friend in the stomach, but he accidentally shot him in the head."

I tried to soothe myself by thinking of all the things I was grateful I wasn't. Like a cop. Like a legless, homeless person. Like a corpse in a subway. But it didn't really help. There was no place to hide. When I got to my apartment, I'd hear the Spanish Man in my TV, my phone, even my stereo. Next he'd probably start broadcasting from my fillings.

It took all I could do to keep myself from calling Alfred, once I reached home, buzz or no buzz. When I really felt low, I could forget how much I hated him. I dialed his number a few times, and then stopped myself. And the phone rang. God -- it was him. Alfred was calling to say he was sorry.

"Hello?" I said, affecting ennui.

"Janey?"

I couldn't place the voice.

"Janey, this is George Poleman. The guy you met on the IRT; the one with the laundry?"

"And the hot hands?"

"Well, I guess. Were they that hot?"

I decided to back up for a minute.

"Hi, of course I remember you."

George sounded worried.

"Were they awful? Do you hate hot hands?"

I told him I didn't mind them, if they were attached to the right person. I tried to sound husky, like Lauren Bacall.

And George asked me out. He said he'd really like to get to know me. He asked me what I'd like to do, and I

said I'd like to watch a video on my VCR and eat popcorn.

"Do you trust me enough to have me over?" he said.

"Sure," I told him. I didn't tell him why. I didn't tell him I trusted him because he was so much shorter than me. If he got out of hand, I could wrestle him to the ground.

I really fluffed up, the night of my date with George. I put on my best jeans, the tight ones with the holes ripped out. I wore a plain white t-shirt with a black leather belt and my best black boots. I moussed my bangs.

George was punctual, which I really liked. He walked in looking sweet and red-haired. He smelled vaguely of beer. I have a great nose for liquor on men.

"What kind was it? Becks? Rolling Rock?"

"I stopped at a bar before I came up here," he looked sheepish. "I was a bit nervous."

George took a few steps around the studio, which was about all you could do before walking into a wall. His

gaze lingered on my Italian communist posters and my ceiling-high defenbachia.

"Nice apartment," he said. "Dicey neighborhood, though."

I sat down on the couch; the rips in my jeans spread out and exposed more right thigh than I intended. I tried to scrunch some of the denim back together. George caught me doing it and smiled. I smiled back.

"I've always wanted to use this line from Last Tango in Paris; I was a drama major," he said. He stiffened his neck and stuck out his jaw a little, as if he'd suddenly turned into Marlon Brando.

"Pardon me," he said. "I'm awfully sorry to intrude, but I was so struck with your beauty, I thought I might offer you a glass of champagne. Is this seat taken?"

I looked at George and felt safe breathing again.

"I'm so glad you said that," I told him.

"What?"

"I'm so glad you said that, and not some other line from "Last Tango," like, "when you grow old, you're going to be playing soccer with your tits."

"Oh, God, I'd never say that to a woman."

George and I sized each other up for a second.

"Wasn't that an amazing scene, though?" he said.

"It was an amazing movie."

"You liked it?" he said.

"Loved it. I've seen it three times."

"I've never met a woman who liked that movie." George beamed down at me. "So, may I?"

"What?"

"May I take this seat?"

I patted the couch, and George settled in. I liked his thighs; I liked the way his legs looked in his jeans. I was burning. I was broadcasting lust at 200,000 megahertz, and the guy hadn't even kissed me yet. I began to blush, and covered it by leaning forward to look at the videos he'd brought.

"Three of them. Wow."

"I wanted to cover all the bases," he said. Manhattan, Wayne's World, and Blue Velvet. He beamed at me with pride.

I popped in Manhattan and got up for the popcorn when the buzz came. UNO!

Shit! I said.

George looked at me; his eyes darted around the room.

UNO!

"What is that?" George said.

"I think somebody's got the frequency to my life."

I wanted to cry. I was damned if this voice was going to ruin the first date I'd had in eight months.

"It's not a big deal," I said. "Sometimes it goes away. Sometimes he's on my phone, my TV, my stereo. But he's never been in the VCR before."

"You're kidding."

"Here." I dialed the operator and handed George the phone.

UNO, UNO...when George held the receiver away from his ear, both of us could hear the words squawking out.

"Jesus Christ." George stood up and looked at me. I looked back at him. He really was cute.

"We've gotta do something," he said.

I liked the way that sounded: "we." I looked at the ceiling. "I think it might be from upstairs."

"Well, let's talk to the guy."

"He won't talk."

"We'll make him talk."

George Poleman and I took the elevator up to 1115.

I let Poleman knock on the door. He had a very practiced way of rapping; a two knuckled backhand. "Hello sir?" Poleman said.

The door cracked open. The same eye and half of a face peered out of the slit.

"Yes?" the man said.

"I'm George Poleman," Poleman said. "FCC. I'm here to investigate a report of transmission trouble in the building."

"FCC?" The man opened the door slightly wider, and I realized he was older than I'd thought: maybe close to seventy.

"Federal Communications Commission, U.S. Government," Poleman said.

Mr. Uno opened. My jaw dropped. So did Poleman's.

The studio -- which was the same exact unit as mine but had a better refrigerator, I noted --- was completely

filled with electronic equipment: dozens of radios, antennae, headphones, speakers and what appeared to be a miniature satellite dish. In the middle was a lounge chair, and next to it, the biggest radio in the room.

"Is that a ham radio?" Poleman said.

"Yes," Mr. Uno said. "Ham radio. Licensed. It's mine."

"I can see it's yours," I said.

Poleman shot me a 'let-me-handle-this' glare.

"Who are you speaking to with your radio, mister...."

"Mr. Chardy."

"Who are you speaking to with your radio, Mr. Chardy?"

Mr. Chardy did not immediately answer. He took a small step backward.

"My family is in Cuba. I talk to my family. And my friends. And sometimes I call Mexico. And Miami. And sometimes, Guatamala," he said.

"How often do you make a call?" George asked.

"Oh, every hour."

I took my eyes off all that equipment and took a good look at Mr. Chardy. He didn't look bad for his age. His belly was firm beneath a white cotton, button-down shirt, but his pants were torn, and he was barefoot. I suddenly

remembered my own torn jeans and wanted to go downstairs and wrap myself in a robe.

"I miss my family," Mr. Chardy said.

"Sir," I said to him. "Do you know that your radio is coming into my apartment?"

"It stays here! It doesn't come to your apartment!"

"No, no. I mean, I hear your voice on my radio and my telephone and my TV."

"And her VCR," George said.

"No!" Mr. Chardy looked shocked. His hair was silver; thin on top, but curly around the sides and back. He had strong, calloused hands; the hands of a much younger man. His fingers were trembling.

"Do you remember me? I came by last week to talk to you," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I remember."

"Why did you close the door?"

Mr. Chardy moved in front of the ham radio, as if his body could hide it and make it disappear. Poleman and I followed him into the room.

"FCC is government, you say? I'm a good citizen," he said. "I worked 10 years in New York City, before, I come

from Miami, and before, Cuba. I'm all alone. My wife....."

Mr. Chardy pointed to a photo in a silver frame on a wood table, next to a tape recorder and microphone. "She died," he said.

I didn't speak. Poleman was quiet, too.

"Could you just turn down the volume?" I said. "I don't want you to stop talking to your family. I just need to use my telephone."

Poleman nodded in agreement.

Mr. Chardy stared at us and didn't make a move. I felt like I was at a gunfight where somebody was about to draw.

"Do you have your green card, Mr. Chardy?" Poleman said.

I drew in a breath. Poleman's pale, freckled face looked perfectly calm. I could read neither empathy nor animosity in his eyes.

"Do you see what will happen to you if you don't have your green card?" Poleman continued. His voice picked up speed and I could swear I heard the glimmerings of a German accent. "Do you zee what a delicate situation zis becomes?"

"Come on, George." He had to be kidding. "Cut it out."

"But I'm the FCC, and the FCC can't cut it out. The FCC never leaves," George said. He put a hand in his pocket and jingled some change around. The sound was absolutely nauseating.

"It's people like you, Mr. Chardy, who live all over New York City and make life difficult for the rest of us," Poleman said. "It's people like you, Mr. Chardy, who take advantage of this great country, who ruin things for people like Janey. People like Janey, here, they just want to use their telephone. They just want to call friends, or watch TV. They just want to come home, Mr. Chardy, and have a nice, quiet date with a nice young professional, and fall in love and eat popcorn and have sex, and not have some crazy man screaming UNO, UNO in the walls!"

Mr. Chardy stared at Poleman and I stared at Poleman and Poleman just kept talking. As I look back at it now, I think he'd entered some movie role I'd never seen before.

"Do you know what it is, deportation, Mr. Chardy?" Poleman said.

All three of us stayed frozen. There was no sound except for the soft sput, sput, hiss of the radio.

"I don't have my green card," Mr. Chardy said. "Please

don't turn me in."

"My God, of course he won't," I said and grabbed Mr. Chardy's arm. He looked as if he might topple over.

"Shut up, Janey." Poleman was furious. "You're going to fuck everything up."

"You're the one who's fucking everything up!"

"I am? I am? No, you are!"

"George!" I couldn't believe it -- I'd nearly dated a six-year-old. "We're going now. We're leaving," I said. "We're exiting. You and I. We're outta here. NOW." I moved to the door.

George didn't follow. I think he was still too deep in his new life as stormtrooper. He smoothed his moustache with a forefinger and grinned.

"There's nothing you can do to stop me," he said. "I can call Immigration tomorrow. I can call next month. You don't know how long I've wanted the pleasure of busting a goddamn illegal alien parasite. This is fucking beautiful."

It was then that I remembered what Thomas Mickeloff said about pain and swallowing teeth. And I punched George Poleman right in the mouth.

"He's not Immigration?" Fifteen minutes after Poleman walked out holding a towel to his lip, Mr. Chardy's face was still incredulous.

"No, no," I said.

"You're not FCC?"

"No." My voice was trembling. I was kind of amazed at how much my hand hurt. "I'm your neighbor and I met George on the subway and we wanted to watch the VCR but all we could hear was you, and somebody saying 'uno.'

"Uno, uno." Mr. Chardy smiled for the first time. "Sit down," he said and motioned me to his sofa. "Uno -- that's one of my call letters," he said. "I transmit with my call number uno uno cuatro dos AFG uno. They answer, and we begin to talk. Here."

Mr. Chardy fiddled a bit with the radio. The hair on his arms had gone grey, but I imagined how powerful he must have looked in his prime. "Here, you see?" He held a small transmitter to his lips and began to speak Spanish, a beautiful, lilting sound, now that it didn't have the static behind it. Clicks filled the room. Then a voice came back. "It's from Cuba," Mr. Chardy said. He turned to me and smiled.

"I've told them to speak english so you can understand," he said.

"They speak english?"

"Of course, you think we're stupid or something?"

I blushed. Mr. Chardy talked into the mouthpiece.

"Paulo," he said, "what did you have for dinner tonight? Over?"

"What do you think, you old fool," the voice came back over the speakers. "Your sister is the best cook on the island. We had fish, beautiful fish, and black beans and for dessert, some flan."

Chardy was aglow; I couldn't believe he'd forgiven me so quickly.

"Paulo," Chardy said, "say hello to my new friend, a downstairs neighbor who has very bad taste in young men. Her name is" -- Chardy raised his eyebrows and looked my way.

"Janey," I said.

"Her name is Janey," Chardy said. "She needs a new pair of blue jeans, over?"

This time my blush dug deeper than I thought possible. Chardy handed me the receiver. It felt in my palm like a

warm, pulsing stone.

"Janey, I am pleased to meet you," the voice said. "Forget about the young men. You must have better taste in the older ones, or you wouldn't be there with Antonio."

Chardy took back the receiver. "Enough of that," he said. He was smiling. "Kiss my sister for me."

"And for me," said Paolo, "kiss Janey. Is she beautiful?"

Chardy stood quietly and let his hand drop softly to his side, the receiver in it squawking gently like a struggling bird. Then he raised it back to his lips. "Yes," he said. "Yes, she is beautiful."

Antonio Chardy was a whole different bundle of laundry, to borrow a phrase from him. I never dreamed I could be attracted to someone so much older than me; I was afraid he'd be frail or sickly. "You're prejudiced like the world is," he told me. "You think people past 50 don't have sex."

"Past 40," I corrected him.

On our first date, Chardy and I sat in my studio and watched Casablanca. He'd never seen it before; we watched on my futon. I lay nestled in front of him between his legs; I leaned my back against his chest; his mouth brushed my ear; he massaged my neck and back and his fingers, slowly, sweetly found their way. I lost all fear. By the time everyone in Rick's Cafe stood to sing the Marseillaise, I was memorizing the taste of Chardy's skin.

We lay afterwards and rewound the movie, since we'd missed most of it. Chardy's gray hair was long in back; I tried to braid some. I licked the sweat from a fold in his neck. His legs were thin and strong; they looked like they'd traveled thousands of miles.

"Oh no," Chardy kept saying. He kissed my eyelids and fingers in between protests. "No -- She can't leave him. Look how she loves that Rick. She can't stay with Victor Lazlo?"

Afterwards, he nearly wept. "Why do Americans make such sad movies?" he said.

"It's the only honest thing to do," I said.

Chardy and I didn't move in together -- I stayed

downstairs, he stayed above, and the Uno thing got worked out completely. I just shouted at the ceiling if I wanted to use some appliance and the ham radio was interrupting. Chardy was kind to me. He told me he liked my energy and enthusiasm. It worked well on an old man, he said.

As soon as Alfred found out I was hooked up with somebody, of course, he started calling and begging for a reconciliation. I pretended the buzz was back in the phone and hung up on him.

Mac told me she was worried.

"You're sounding sappy, Janey -- it's not like you," she said. "Chardy's too old. He could get deported, for chrissake. You'd be miserable in Cuba. Maybe you should give Alfred another try."

"I'd rather have a blood clot," I told Mac. I'd been cutting back on my phone calls to Mac; I was beginning to see how much nicer it was talking to someone face-to-face. "At least Antonio and I don't spend most of our time figuring out how to hurt each other."

"Just don't stop calling me," Mac said. "You're losing touch with reality."

Chardy had his own notions about reality. He believed

people are only capable of sustaining a certain number of connections in their lives, and they had to be very careful to keep alive only the ones that were important to them. Humans were like switchboards, he said, and by the time you got old, you only had a few open lines left.

"You, Janey," he would tell me. "You slipped in just under the wire."

His ham radio was like his family, Chardy said. He could almost hear the wind in the palm fronds, when he talked to Paolo in Cuba, or to his daughters in Miami. He asked me if he could help me get in touch with my family back in Cleveland, but I had to tell him, no, they didn't have ham radios.

And that's how the spring came and went. Mac helped buy me lots of spandex for the interview, and I got hired in the graphics department at the Soho News, which kind of worried me. "I'm going to run out of black stuff to wear," I told Chardy. I was slicing mushrooms and carrots

in his kitchen; he was stirring sauce on the stove. "The women there are too hip to breathe," I said. "They've got thighs the size of my wrist." I popped a carrot sliver in my mouth. "I should stay at least a year though so I can get something on my resume."

"I know," Chardy said. He was making me dinner that night -- strips of chicken with saffron and sausage and yellow rice. He wore a silly apron I'd bought him that said, "You got me cookin'." I slashed open a pineapple and made a fruit salad inside it with raisins, fresh coconut and a splash of Cointreau. Chardy opened a bottle of wine and put it on the table, but he forgot to put out the glasses, and I was just reaching to get some when he told me the ham radio wasn't working.

"It's broken?" I said.

"No." He pointed to his heart. "Here, it's not working." I went to the table; the food steamed on the plates. Outside the window, I could see kids throwing frisbees on a nearby rooftop. "At my age, loneliness is not tolerable," Chardy said. He let the words float around the room and settle near us and I could almost hear them falling. "Florida, I think, is the place for me," he said.

"I can be closer there to my relatives."

I stood and went to him; I knelt on the floor by Chardy's chair and kissed his knees and the insides of his wrists.

"I will die too soon," he said. "In your hands, you don't need a dead man."

"You don't have to be so noble," I said. "This is real life. We're just regular human beings."

"All the more reason to be noble," he said.

Chardy sold most of his radio equipment, aside from a unit he gave to me so we could always stay in touch. I called no one. I told no one he was leaving. I didn't want to hear what they'd say.

On the day Chardy went to Florida, I rode with him in a cab to the airport. Five million people seemed to be coming and going somewhere. When we said goodbye at the curb, Chardy handed me two small boxes tied with velvet ribbon. "I was thinking of your definition of false hope," he said.

He'd remembered something from months ago. I opened the packages and pulled out a pair of soft, luxurious, blue and yellow knee socks made with llama hair. And a new

deadbolt, since the neighborhood wasn't getting any better, he said. We kissed and I imagined that his body felt older, weaker under my hands, as if he'd already faded away.

"Goodbye," Chardy said.

The cabbie who drove me home looked to be Iranian. He wouldn't stop talking. I stared out the window and blotted out the sound of his voice. The city slipped by like rain down a gutter. The cab just kept moving. The cabbie asked me if I minded if he took 10th Avenue.

"My favorite street -- it makes me think Cairo, where I am from!" he said. He put his foot to the floor and began racing the stoplights with abandon. They were timed perfectly, but we were late for each one, the green fading to orange before we even reached the corner.

"I made 22 lights once, no stopping!" he announced.

"Today, I make 23!"

"One, two, three, four!" he cried. "Five, six, seven, eight!"

I held on to my socks for dear life. And we rode the red lights all the way home.

INSIDE HER

Once, long ago, she had slept with someone interesting. That's how it felt. She woke early these days, it was from sleep that hung on her like gauze, and no amount of coffee could shake it off. At 5 a.m. the light was gray outside, and Andy was sleeping, usually on his back, one arm flung to the side. It startled her, when she awoke, to see how she'd managed during the night to escape that arm, to disentangle from those legs, and to turn her face -- which when she drifted off was tucked beneath his chin -- toward the window and away from him. And so the window, not him, was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes.

Outside the window was a brown house. She would wake, quietly, ease out of bed and stand at the window, looking out into what seemed to be a constant mist of spring, as if something sodden was being planted from above. There was a Jeep in the driveway of the brown house, and when she was lucky, a light on and a glimpse of him in an upstairs room, under the shingled roof where so many

leaves fell and clogged the gutter. Everyone on the block -- all the husbands, anyway -- wondered aloud why the owner of the brown house, James, didn't cut down the old oak that showered him so relentlessly with leaves and bark, things which everyone else insisted on raking and bagging virtually the minute they hit the ground. She imagined James, a single man. She imagined him sprawled beneath a thin white sheet, rising naked in the morning, straggling into a robe, or better yet, walking naked downstairs to make himself coffee. She imagined him standing and drinking it, leaning on a bare kitchen counter, the steaming cup in his hands. She pictured his arms, a lean body and strong, smooth back, and her fingers on it, stroking, cutting a trail down to his hips; if his skin was sand she would draw ten trails, she would graze him with her fingers until he moaned.

She turned, and listened for the children. They were Andy's from another woman, another marriage, another life, and now Andy was hers. But the children were not hers, no matter what he told her. What was hers, really? Was there some way to find out?

She began cleaning. Cleaning called to her. She cleaned

the house that spring more than she'd cleaned anything in her life. She drove to the supermarket and emerged with bags full of ammonia and deadly solvents, and plastic yellow gloves to wear so that her hands wouldn't be ravaged by the things she needed to do. She started in the kitchen, early in the morning, or when Andy had gone to work and the girls were at school. She attacked the tiles on the counter, and the little black bruises of mold that sat pouting in the cracks and crannies of the dish drainer. She took out each burner on the stove, and polished the white metal beneath until it gleamed. She attacked the ceiling with a sponge mop, and the soapy water rained down and stung her eyes and muddied the newly-waxed floor. Why is the sky blue? she asked herself, mop in hand. It is blue because it reflects the sea, she answered. But the house was old and yellowed, and no amount of polish could make it reflect anything at all.

I love Andy, she told herself, when he came home and kissed her and they sat next to each other on the couch, watching television at twilight. The girls crawled into her lap and begged her to read them a story, and she did.

And then night came, and Andy read the paper in bed, and then he hoped she would accept him, he always wanted her, always wanted to be inside her, it soothed him, it made him feel that he belonged. They made love in his bed in his house, and it was his cock inside her, and she drifted away into a land where he could never touch her. Then they went to asleep, and the gauze came back and she awoke, clutching the edge of the bed. She was married.

THE STATE OF WANTING

I was crying outside Le Drug Store in Paris when a man ambled toward me and asked whether I knew the results of the Karpov-Kasparov chess match. It was just after midnight; my 30th birthday was minutes old. The street lights barely lit the outlines of his face, but I could see his mouth, a weak one, turned down at the corners. He spoke English, and I needed to hear it.

"Karpov who?" I said. "What chess match?"

Wafts of Obsession and Chanel mingled in the mild air above my wrists - I'd spent the day wandering perfume parlors, metro stations, museums. A new black underwire bra cut into my ribcage, and I imagined a hand, a warm palm, climbing from my waist to neck, fingers stroking my jaw. I tried to wipe my tears without drawing his attention.

"Karpov, Karpov, the great Russian chess master, Kasparov, the challenging brat -- the match of intellect,

the game that will show us whether determination or genius controls the destiny of man," said the stranger. "You're an American, I'm an American. You're from New York, I know all about you. Let's buy Le Monde," he said. "We'll find out about the match, and then I'll buy you wine and tell you about yourself. I've got a lot of money riding on this match; I'm a rich man, I'll tell you all about being rich. I'll perform a mitzvah, you know what it is, a mitzvah?"

"I'm from Philadelphia," I said.

I wanted to flirt, but wondered if he'd notice if I did. He had brown eyes and the practiced slouch of an intellectual who'd probably called himself a Marxist in his freshman year at prep school. I, on the other hand, was invisible. That was my frame of mind, and I'd come to Paris on vacation hoping someone would prove me wrong. I was flawed, sunken: a splintered dhow in a sea of french girls with their perfect, frigid bodies and perfect, haughty ankles, every silken strut, every scarlet toenail begging -- demanding -- to be worshipped. Even Paris pigeons played God, dining on croissants, pecking at brioche, shitting on Notre Dame.

"It's late," I said. "I'm tired; I was just on my way

back to my hotel..."

"Which is not far -- the Angleterre, the Jacob? I can walk you..."

"It's not far," I dodged.

I wore jeans and a striped t-shirt, an attempt to make-believe I was blonde Jean Seberg in Breathless, and Jean-Paul Belmondo waited to die in a street for me, calling my name with lush, punishing lips. But I was not a blonde. I was freckled, thick-waisted, gawky. I felt as if my whole life was an overflowing handbag, and for years I'd been picking blind through the clutter, fumbling in it, yanking at the edges of what I thought I needed, fingers just missing, pulling out the wrong thing entirely, until finally, on this sullen street in Paris, I'd dumped the whole mess on the pavement. Ballpoints, gum wrappers, contraceptive sponges, aspirin, pop tart remnants, a sea shell from Atlantic City, shopping lists, a lone shoulder pad. Junk.

"Allez! Come! Don't be so distrustful!" my savior exclaimed. He stepped closer, and I could see now that he looked nothing like my father, and a lot like my brother. A nerd. Safe.

"I'm from Miami, I mean, originally," he said, gesturing with a hand that looked as if it might attempt to brush a lock of hair from my eyes, but thought better of it and dove into a pants pocket instead. "Paris is where I do most of my business; I just arrived here tonight. My french is perfect. Isn't this luck? We meet, I order wine for you, I tell you the meaning of life, we get engaged...."

Circumstance, the hour and his cleverness made the fishing easy; I barely struggled on his line.

"My name is Mark," he told me.

"You buy me a glass of wine, and then I'll go home, Mark," I said.

Mark said he knew Paris, he knew which cafes stayed open late. We sat at the Action Centrale on the Left Bank, at little round tables on a broad sidewalk, surrounded by

beautiful clothes and beautiful women in the beautiful clothes. The men were less attractive, but more smug.

I wished I smoked. I wished I was a size 4 and had a pouting mouth that begged to be kissed or fed strawberries. "Garçon, une omelette pour la belle fille, et pour moi, eh..." Mark paused. Since his french was perfect, he was ordering for the two of us. "Pour moi, le meme, avec fromage. Et du vin."

Empty goblets on our sidewalk table blushed a soft amber from the glow of a streetlight above us. Our table was small; our knees almost touched. We weren't far from my hotel, and I was grateful. I was tired enough to have lost all sense of direction, and didn't want to have to stumble far if I drank too much. I liked to walk at night; I liked to drink at night, too. My sense of things was well-formed and so were my routines; coping was a matter of distraction or diversion. Distraction from life; diversion from who I was. On a really good day, I could get distracted enough to forget how depressing it was that I was still me. The most horrifying moment was falling asleep: I'd wake up in the morning, and there I was again. "You can't run away from yourself" -- people were

constantly telling me things like that. They were right, but they were also assholes. It was a hell of a lot easier to wake up hating myself in Paris than to wake up hating myself in Philadelphia.

"I think you and I have a lot in common." Mark broke the silence, and I wondered what he was talking about. "We know lots of things about people. We probably know more about them than they know about themselves. I know how to read people."

"Good," I said. "I haven't been read in a long time."

Mark smiled and ran his fingers around his wine glass, and I watched the thickness of them, swollen knuckles, the pale plane of his arm, the boundaries of his wristwatch. Gold. It baffled me; the wealth and shabbiness of him. He had shaggy brown hair and weak eyes that looked abandoned when he took off his glasses: the kind of man you'd consider handsome once you fell in love with him. The newspaper lay folded on the ground near his feet; Karpov and Kasparov had played late into the night and finally conceded a stalemate. No money won or lost. The paper reprinted most, but not all, of the moves -- which Mark called "an abomination -- unforgiveable." Whatever plays

Mark did find he carefully circled with a pen he borrowed from me. His lips worked up and down as he read over them, as if muttering a prayer.

"I don't understand this chess thing," I said. "Was this some kind of championship game?"

"They'll play dozens of games for the title. This was only the eighth."

"I thought you told me there was something special about this match. Something about the fate of man." I didn't want Mark's pick-up lines to turn out to be a total ruse. "Do you bet on each game?" I offered him an out.

"I'm a gambler," Mark nodded. "My father taught me about all the important vices in life, if you can call gambling, making money and having sex vices. My mother and father have the perfect marriage; she lets him have his flings, and he gives her all the money she can spend. Here."

He poured more wine to the lip of my glass.

"Have you ever read Of Human Bondage?" he said. "Nothing compares to it. That book reveals the meaning of life."

"And what is it?"

"I can't tell you yet. I have to know you better."

The waiter arrived; he acted insulted by our presence and served us in silence. His white apron was stained with blood. I imagined he spent his evenings out back, slaughtering chickens.

Mark smiled one of those smiles that never reveal teeth.

"Details! I want details!" Mark said. "The story of your life, your lovers, why you're here. Details are foreplay, the foreplay of all great things -- of sex and art and literature. And you my friend are a great work of art that hasn't been discovered yet." He paused and forked some egg in his mouth. "I want to know everything about you."

"If details are foreplay, and great things are foreplay, and I am a great thing," I paused, to get this straight, "Then therefore, I am foreplay?"

"Oooh, watch out, " Mark said. "We've got a sharp one here. A nameless sharp one."

"My name is Sara," I said. I took a gulp of wine. "Today's my birthday. I live in Philadelphia. I'm 30." What I wanted to say was, "Take me away somewhere." What I wanted to say was, "It's summer, and I can't remember the last time I felt happy."

"I'm originally from New Jersey -- Atlantic City," I

said. "Atlantic City wasn't a total slum yet when I was little. Have you been there?"

"Vegas. Not enough money in AC."

"AC," I shook my head. "It's kind of like a circus there, only no elephants. Lots of glitter and sequins and crazy people. I told my Dad one day I wanted to be a showgirl when I grew up. He spanked me. I couldn't figure it out at the time. I thought maybe he had an aversion to feathers."

"Or pasties," Mark said.

I took another long sip, reminded myself to drink slower, reached for my pen and started drawing on the paper napkin. I sketched the word Paris in calligraphy. Then I sketched Mark's mouth: His lips moved independently from the rest of his features, as if the different parts of his face couldn't make a commitment. I figured if I kept drawing long enough, Mark would guess I was a frustrated artist and ask me about my art restoration work back home.

"Straight brown hair, nice brown eyes, innocent face. You look like a Sara," Mark said instead. "What about your mom, Sara?"

"She stayed inside and played cards."

"And -- let me guess -- your father ran a casino -- he worked his way up from blackjack dealer, and the other kids in the family were his favorites, and you're Jewish, but your parents wouldn't give you a bat mitzvah because they're ashamed to be Jews."

"I'm Jewish. My father was a roofer, but I didn't know him very well. He left us when I was ten; I haven't seen him since. He'd moved us to Florida --

"A Jewish roofer! Jews on roofs -- I didn't think they knew how to get up there!"

I lowered my eyes and started in on my napkin again. Most men would have asked me about my father running off, and Mark just wanted to know why he climbed roofs.

"There were lots of roofs in Florida," I said. "I have one older brother, the four-eyed boats-in-bottles, model airplane type of kid. He joined the Navy as soon as he could enlist."

"Jews on boats! What is it in your family, they didn't learn the meaning of making money?"

I went back to my napkin. I wasn't in the mood to defend my family. "You need a haircut," I said.

It was 3 a.m., I could see by the big gold watch on

Mark's arm, and he'd pushed back his chair and sat staring at the waiters, who were huddled at the farthest table, scowling and smoking. For a moment I thought Mark was going to leave me and go over and join them. His attention was so tenuous. If he was going to pick me up, the least he could do was look at me.

"Hair," I reminded him.

"Ah, yes -- hair. I hate haircuts these days. Never know if it's going to grow back -- the curse of middle age. But I do have businessmen to meet this week; I've got to fool them with the mandatory shave and trim. The requirements of conservatism. They give me their money, you see, and I take it. I invest it somewhere. It's gambling. People trust me, and I take them for a ride. That's what business is all about, isn't it?"

"But if you lose the money, you lose them, too," I offered.

"You can lose their money and keep them. You tell them about temporary setbacks and future gains, you throw in fluctuating oil prices and the details of some new off-shore tax shelter. They're like babies, most of them. The right candy and they sit and suck."

He drank. I drank.

"Most people know that I know the secret of human happiness, so they stick around. It's worth sticking around," Mark said.

"And your happiness is their happiness? Your formula is universal?"

"Mankind -- forgive me, I'd say womankind, but it doesn't work. Mankind needs to control to be happy -- women need to learn to be happy being controlled." Mark broke off a hunk of the french baguette before us.

"You're full of shit," I wanted to say, but didn't. My throat glowed with wine; my veins had widened. I reached for some bread myself, and leaned a knife toward a tiny pot of butter. "How can women learn to be happy being controlled?"

"Sara -- never do that!" he cried and grabbed my wrist. I couldn't believe his anger. His nails bit like teeth.

"In France, one never puts butter on bread!" he shouted. "It's a terrible insult. You'll never be forgiven."

My real name was not Sara, of course. My real name is

Clarisse. But I didn't want to get into a conversation with Mark about how french "Claire" sounds, or explain how my mother named me Clarisse because she thought it sounded aristocratic, the way she liked to imagine herself, and that she despised her own name: Marge. Besides, I liked picking out a name -- I'd only done it a few times, once at a party, and once in a Houston bar after I was sent on business there to see if I could restore a Diego Rivera that a crazed museum guard attacked with a toenail clipper. Taking an alias gave me obvious relief: I didn't have to be Claire. The first time I did it, I called myself "Nicole" -- the second time, at the Texas bar, I told an obnoxious tattooed guy that my name was Bilharzia, which is an African worm that crawls through your skin and eats your brain. "Well, Bill," the guy kept saying to me, before I walked out and left him on his barstool. "My place or yours, Bill?"

Mark was different. I picked Sara for him because it sounded savvy and strong; I imagined the name as a warning to him that he'd need to be careful. Carefulness was important. I knew that. I'd never used an alias to bring a man home. My mother, like all American mothers, always told me never to talk to strangers let alone bed them, and

I know she included in that warning the sub-category of bedding a stranger in Paris simply because I was lonely and he spoke English. But my mother had been wrong about almost everything else in my life, and at this point I was willing to bet she was wrong about strangers, too. Besides, I was sick of being careful. Being dangerous was so much more rewarding than being in danger.

"Do you still want to know everything about me?" I said. The wine tugged at me and made me want to close my eyes and lie down on the street.

Mark nodded. He was walking me back to my room at the Hotel Lindbergh, pointing out landmarks along the way. He carried the Le Monde in his right hand, and with his left gently touched me now and then to make a point or explain some quirk of architecture sweetened by darkness. We stopped in a doorway not far from my hotel and just stood, silent, and I tried to sense the motion of my life and his, rising, falling, shallow. A man rode by on a bicycle, loaves of bread tied to the back. The man glanced at us and looked quickly away. He must have assumed we were lovers.

"Lunacy is the flip side of passivity," I announced to Mark, and had no idea why. "They should do a remake of

Mr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde: They should make it a woman -- a rabbit housewife drinks the potion and turns into a sex fiend toting a machine gun."

"It's Dr. Jekyll. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"Oh well," I said. I kind of liked how my thoughts sounded; I decided to let my mouth keep moving. "I mean, I've been thinking a lot about life lately -- how there are these two little islands, safety and danger, and people spend all their time jumping from one island to the other. No one gets to have both at the same time unless they're very, very lucky."

"What if they have long legs?" Mark said. "What about the straddling option?"

"I don't know -- it's just a theory," I said. "Maybe it's dumb."

Someone had cut the nerves on the bottom of my feet. I couldn't tell if the road was flat or slanted; the noise of my sandals came back to me like clopping hooves. Mark looked good to me; sweet and mysterious. He kept quoting from Goethe and littering the air with French and German. He told me he'd just finished reading a book about a mafioso turned Buddhist monk turned stockbroker: "We are weakened, in the state of wanting," he quoted from it.

"What about the city?" I said. "What about the town of wanting -- how 'bout the village? You know, my father taught me to swim," I said, responding to nothing in particular. "He taught me the dead man's float, so you'd never drown. It was a great gift." I stopped for a second and leaned my forehead against a bakery window. The glass was a cool hand. Dabs of chocolate eyes stared at me from the cookie faces, and I thought about my father, how he would stare at me, pour the wine for me, sometimes dipping his fingers in the cup, painting the stained wetness down the flat, thin paleness of my chest. "I used to float," I said to Mark. "I used to float in the ocean for hours, pretending I was a bottle with a message inside."

"What did the message say?" Mark asked.

"Lunacy is the underpinning of all pleasure," I told him. Mark gave me a confused look. "That's not what my message said then -- I don't remember what the message said then. That's what I'm saying now. Sex, for example," I said. "Sex is lunacy, isn't it? But it's the kind of lunacy that keeps you warm at night."

Mark offered me his hand, and I reached for it, but when my fingers neared his, his hand withdrew. He'd just offered it to get me away from the window, he just wanted

to keep me moving. The cobblestones held bits of bright paper and flecks of paint; I imagined thousands of feet upon the road like the ocean licking a beach, leaving behind the brine of the past, odd treasures or refuse, depending upon the tide. The ocean one summer washed up body parts and broken needles. I imagined myself swimming in that sea. I thought about the wine, how it stained the bed; my father would moan, softly. I was 10; I disappeared; I became a secret agent, I floated away and carved invisible spears out of his precious bamboo trees and rigged them to the ceiling, and when my father covered me, a secret trip-wire sent them flying and they stabbed him in the back. My codename was Sequin Sparkle, the girl who leaves no tracks. "Man o'war, Portugese man o'war, watch out the tentacles sting": my father would steer me along the sand in Florida, steer me to safety -- "It's dangerous," he'd say. Fingers pressed on sunburned skin left little white marks, not blue. In the mornings, before he took his daily walk, I'd throw sand at the jellyfish until their purple bubbles popped and their legs disappeared. Then my Dad wouldn't know where they were.

"My last lover was a French girl," Mark was saying. "She was gorgeous; brilliant, a fantastic mind, really, but she needed some refining. She didn't know how to live. I'd say it took her more than a year with me before she learned to trust men. I helped her learn a lot of things. I taught her what men need."

"I don't care what men need, that's the whole point," I said.

"But if you know what men need, and give it to them, they stop hurting you. That's the secret to happiness."

"You know a lot of secrets," I said.

"You're the one with the secrets." Mark's voice assumed the soft, comforting tone a psychiatrist might use after making you cry. "You must have a boyfriend back home. I bet he's nuts about you."

"I'm afraid to invite you in," I said.

"I'll leave whenever you want," Mark promised.

My room at the Lindbergh was palatable only because it was cheap. The owner had apparently decided to make some extra money by putting four walls around a single cot next to the broom closet in the basement. The walls were gray, matching the curtains over a smudged window that let in no light. The view was of the back alley, iron bars and rubbish bins.

"A nice little suite!" Mark declared.

"You really should get married!" he went on. "If I don't make you happy, I'll match you up with one of my business partners. No, listen," he said, when he saw the look on my face -- "You're like a racehorse: too sensitive. the way you are right now, I'd never put a bet on you. You've got the wrong attitude -- right now you can't make it out of the gate. Listen," he said, "would you mind if I used the head?"

My eyes met the mirror over the bureau: I really was old. Mark was a smart man, he knew a lot of things. He was saying the same things about me that I'd been telling myself all day: I knew nothing about love. The sound of streaming piss arrived from the open door of the bathroom. I was strangely flattered by the intimacy. My last lover,

my true love as I'd thought of him, never left the door open. And Chris had left me, had never really claimed me, as I saw it now. He would lie beside me moaning, blue eyes shocked with pleasure, amazed at his own ecstasy. He would fall asleep mumbling that he loved me, forgetful by morning. He rode off on a Moto Guzzi to some other dream. I loved the Moto Guzzi. The warm wind teased my legs and my skirt would flap, my naked thighs held him. We would sing, and the bike was so loud, we could pretend we were in harmony. He needed to get the muffler fixed.

"I've decided something," Mark said, emerging zipped and smiling.

"I will perform a mitzvah. I'll take care of you here in Paris, and give you a new life. You need someone to fix you," he said. "You know what it is, a mitzvah?"

Mark lowered himself onto a gray plastic chair a few feet from the foot of the bed, propped his elbows on his knees and waited for an answer. I sat on the bed, fluffed a pillow behind me and leaned against the wall. "That's the second time you've asked me that," I said. "Yes. I know what it is, a mitzvah."

"Look," he said, "you're depressed tonight because

you're getting old, you're going to lose your looks, and if you don't do something fast, you're going to be in real trouble. Let me help you. Stay with me in Paris. You're sensitive and intelligent," Mark went on. "You still look pretty young, and that's good -- that gives men a hard-on. But your parents didn't teach you toughness. Cunning is what you need. I can teach you how to get what you want."

"What should I want?" I said. Mark seemed so far away, I almost asked him to move closer. "What does it matter?" I said.

"Your life feels like shit? And you think that doesn't matter?"

My heart started pounding. I took the pillow from behind my back and put it on my stomach and told myself everything would be okay.

"You're not going to catch a man who's attractive and young and rich," Mark said. "You're not flawless enough: you've got to do something now." Mark pulled at a thread on his sweater. "Go for someone old and rich, make him feel like a million."

"And you could find this man for me."

"I could call someone tomorrow; a businessman friend. So what if he wears polyester and has a paunch?"

"I thought you said I could marry you."

Mark walked toward me. I was half-sitting, half-reclining, and he looked down at me and I could swear he very nearly touched my face.

"I wouldn't want to marry a professional victim, you know," Mark said and walked back to the plastic chair. "We're going to have to nip this one in the bud."

The sun was rising on the Rue de Babylone; a cat cried, slivers of light hit the wall; I'd been up for 24 hours. Just a morning ago I'd memorized the neighborhood, back and forth from the Pont Neuf to the St. Sulpice. Dog shit everywhere -- I'd never been in a city so seedy and sacred as Paris, a cockroach nuzzling a pearl. I'd spent hours walking and writing and drawing in front of paintings at the Louvre. I watched the sunset paint the spires of Notre Dame, and a young stranger approached me and told me I should leave. "This is not the real Paris," he said. "If you stand here too long, you'll miss the real Paris."

"Where's the real Paris?" The man looked Slavic. His sweater was torn, he walked beside an old rusted bicycle

and wore sneakers so large they seemed almost clown-like. I wanted to put my hand on his forehead to see if he had a fever.

"Where's the real Paris?" I'd asked again.

"A man told me today the real Paris is dead," I said now to Mark. I actually thought it might distract him.

"What do you think the guy meant?" I said.

"I don't really give a shit. I want you to listen to me."

"But he was..."

"Hey," Mark said. "Listen."

Mark stood up and started pacing in front of the bed. "Everyone secretly wants to be told what to do," he said. "We love having a leader. We like to pretend we're rebels, but in a perfect world, we'd run around calling for revolution all day, then go home and make our wives give us blow jobs. No, really. Women want it, too. The trouble is, you tell some people what's best for them -- they fight it."

"I'm not fighting."

Mark looked up at the ceiling. "The stupidity of mankind, in the face of the truth, makes even the Gods

look down in despair. Yes, you're fighting," he said. His voice rose. "You think I've spent all this time with you because I just want to fuck you. For once in your life, act in your own best interest. I'll be kind and loving," Mark said, "and I'll let you do anything you want, but there is one rule you'll never be allowed to break."

I was so tired. "What," I said. "What is the rule?"

"The rule is, you can never say no."

Mark lay down next to me on the bed; he lay on his back, arms at his side. I could almost feel the air between us -- I was afraid to move. He lay still. He did not touch me. I wanted to raise my head and look at him -- but I couldn't, I was afraid to turn my face toward him. Relax, I told myself: relax and float. I'd lost all sense of time, of who I was and who I wasn't, and what Mark was and what he wasn't. It seemed important to make a decision about Mark, and I wanted to be the one making it, not him.

I got up quickly and switched with him and he made no effort to stop me. I sat on the gray plastic chair and left him on the bed. He hadn't taken off his shoes. His heels were muddy.

"What do you mean, the rule is I can never say no?" I said it as slowly as I could.

"The rule is, you can never say no. You say no, and it's over. I leave. No harm done, I just leave."

I stood, walked to the bathroom and looked for a glass, unwrapped the paper around it, turned on the tap and filled it carefully, as if listening to what the water had to say. A flimsy plastic disposable razor sat on the ledge below the mirror; soap in it from the job I'd done on my legs that morning. I put the razor in my pocket, then pulled it back out: it wouldn't help me. I stood with the glass in one hand, went to the doorway and gazed at Mark on the bed.

"Can't we discuss it?" I said.

Mark closed his eyes briefly. They seemed to have grown smaller. He took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, ran a hand through his hair, pushed the glasses back up his nose.

"Look. You want me to take care of you, teach you about life, make you happy? I'll write the pre-nuptual. You agree to fuck the guy, suck the guy, whatever he wants for three years, then you're out. You divorce, you get half

his money; it's easy," he said. He let this sink in. "I can give you freedom. You think you're going to get another chance? Nobody gets that many chances."

"I've got chances," I said.

"You've. Got. Nothing."

"I've got..."

"Take your clothes off."

I stood still in the bathroom doorway, reached out to hold the knob. I stood and didn't move.

Mark got up from the bed without a pause, walked quickly for the door, and left. I heard his footsteps retreat down the hall, shuffling. It was so late, and I was in Paris, and now he was going to leave me?

"Wait! Mark!" I ran after him. He hadn't even neared the exit, he knew I'd call him back. "Come back for a while. Just a little while. Just don't leave yet."

I drifted back into the room, that's what it was, drifting. I sat on the corner of the bed. Mark sat in the chair, trading places with me again. "Touch me, just touch me," I wanted to say to him. "It's so much easier that way."

"You can never say no," Mark was saying. "We'll talk a bit now, we'll talk about other things. But we'll come

back to it. Just take your clothes off. Give yourself a chance."

My hand lay limp near the belt buckle on my jeans. I turned my eyes toward the window; I would let my hand decide. My fingers brushed the tongue of leather, unbuckled it, left the belt lying. I could see gray; gray tin, a discarded broom. I felt the hopefulness that something was going to happen to me. I looked down across my still body.

"If you hurt me," Mark was saying, "I'll repay you for it every day for the rest of your life." He stood and moved toward me, neared the bed slowly, shoulders still slouched, almost relaxed. He stopped before he reached me, and I thought about how tall he was, and how much better I'd feel if I stood. I rose and faced him. Mark's eyes seemed blank, and his mouth was still, and then I started floating, the way I always did: I felt small and weak, and a warmth flooded my body like hot blood rising. It wasn't a bad feeling. I heard Mark's breathing. I heard a roar in my ears like the ocean; that was blood, too, I knew from experience. But something was different: I didn't disappear. I was still here, still in Paris, standing

beside a man. I saw his thin lips and a mole near his jaw. I saw the wine we drank that night, blood on the sheets, my blood, his blood -- and I saw myself as someone would paint me: a dog with its throat exposed.

Mark was looking at my chest. I closed my eyes and could smell the salt of him and imagine him on top of me, my lungs would give, the swallow and gasp and heat of a body took away what was mine and gave me something and made me something different -- made me a different kind of beast: it was elixir that could drown or give life. I opened my eyes. Mark raised his. And I leaned back, startled.

He was shorter than me.

Mark looked down again -- "you need a God, Sara," he said -- and I could see the part in his hair. It was crooked. The fine, sparse strands lurched along a fault line, confused about where to go. I had the urge to blow on his head to see if the wisps would fly away.

"I'm taller than you," I said out loud. Mark blinked. I reached out and patted his head. Gently. "My name isn't Sara," I said.

Mark jerked as if I'd cut him. He mumbled and swiveled

away from me. My savior. He went for the door and opened it, and for moment turned to face me, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, teetering in and out of the shadow in the hall. "You lose," I wanted to say to him, and couldn't believe the impulse. I still wasn't sure what he would do. We stared at each other, memorizing each other's faces. Then his footsteps faded to the pop-wheeze-click of the hotel door. He was gone.

I waited for a moment, listening to the air, went to the door and locked it, and the action seemed absurd; I could still feel him in the room, the lock didn't help. I picked up the gray chair and propped it under the doorknob, the way I'd seen it done in movies. I wanted to call someone, but I was in Paris. I went to the bed, reached to the bedstand for my journal. "I'm still alive," I wrote. Horns blared outside; I wrote and sketched non-stop until it was noon and I was sure Mark wouldn't return. And when I was done, I found two pages and drew a picture of Mark on one, and a picture of Sequin Sparkle on the other, and after I thought about it for a while, I drew oceans beneath them, so their heads seemed to bob above the water; they were two jellyfish, and below the

surface, the sequins flashed like fish scales. Their tentacles spread out in all directions and beckoned gently in the waves. And when I brought the pages together, the jellyfish arms entwined; the jellyfish eyes stared at each other, not at me. I wasn't in the picture; I didn't want to be. I just wanted to wake up happy. "That's what I want, I want to wake up happy," I wrote. It was my birthday, and I was so tired. I closed the journal, and lay on the bed. I just lay on the bed, and I slept.

GAINING TOUCH

The morning is clear and strangely balmy for Chicago in July, and I am sitting in the front seat of my sister's Subaru station wagon, handing back a Diet Coke and EggMcmuffin to my 15-year-old niece, Cindy, whose mother is dying. Cindy's mom, my sister-in-law, went to a doctor six weeks ago because she thought her ulcer was acting up. "You have cancer," the doctor told her. "You have so many tumors in your stomach, there's nothing we can do."

My own sister -- my only sister, Judy -- sits behind the steering wheel, sips coffee, eats a sweet roll, tosses quarters in the toll booth basket, sways in and out of the Cubs game traffic heading for downtown, tells me she could do this "with her eyes closed," tells Cindy, at the appropriate moments -- "What a riot!" and, "You're kidding!" Cindy is telling stories about parasailing in Israel.

"They strap you into this harness, it's like a parachute," Cindy says, "but you've got a line tying you to the boat, and when the boat starts going, you fly up in

the air. And once you're up in the air, the guys in the boat can't hear a thing you say. So I'm parasailing with this other kid -- they let two of you go up at the same time...

"You're so brave!" I turn to Cindy.

"...And this other kid," Cindy says, "he's screaming to me, he says he feels kind of sick. And then he starts barfing, and it's flying back in the wind and hitting me. It was so disgusting. And we're both yelling, "Get us down! Get us down!" But the guys in the boat can't hear us. They wind up taking us on a 30-minute parasail...

"You're kidding!"

..."And when they got me down the barf had dried all over me. It was so gross I couldn't believe it. I made my Dad buy me a new bathing suit."

"Wait a minute," I say, "how did you get..."

"Oh Jesus," my sister Judy says, "excuse me, but Jesus, I just used this off-ramp yesterday, how can they close this off-ramp? I can't believe this, they just close an exit overnight?"

The Ontario Avenue exit, the sign tells us, is closed for repairs.

"It's so weird to be in traffic and on a highway again," I say. "In Montana you never see traffic unless it's..."

"Jesus," my sister says.

When we get to the hospital, it's impossible to find a parking space. Judy reaches for some Mike and Ike candy in her purse and pops some like pills while she circles the block. Northwestern Hospital sits in a neighborhood of upscale condos and department stores built with faux Italian marble. We pass shoppers clutching bags from Marshall Field's, women in tight white dresses and dark sunglasses, men with the flat, pale, Slavic look -- dark hair, thick features, pasty skin. In winter there's not a city in the country where people look more sickly.

Cindy is telling us about a friend on the school volleyball team whose shorts fell off after she went up to spike a ball. My sister and I trade stories with her about embarrassing episodes in high school and pull into the

hospital parking lot that charges \$12 for the first half-hour. A nurse on her way out holds the hospital door open for us.

I'm amazed. The lobby comes complete with baroque paintings on the ceiling and an information booth attendant who could pass as a bellhop. The three of us walk into a carpeted elevator. Cindy is wearing cut-off blue jeans rolled up twice above the knee, a plain white t-shirt, black leather belt, black Doc Martens and white ankle socks. She and my sister check out their reflections in the shiny metal behind the panel of buttons, and my sister pushes #14. "At least I'm having a good hair day," my sister says.

Above the door is a list of the different departments in the hospital. For floor 14, there's only one word. Oncology, it says.

This is my first time up to a cancer ward. I have no idea what to do, and only the most painful scraps of family history to guide me. I imagine my sister-in-law, Jan, lying in a hospital bed, her tiny frame even tinier now, entwined with tubes and, somehow, existing. I think about my own journeys to hospitals for the assorted

mishap, and how my sister, Judy, nearly died in this hospital of a kidney disease. I think about my brother, Mark, who spent a childhood here, who lived in an iron lung in an era when parents were only allowed to visit for half an hour a day. He lay for six months in a sealed-off room with a cast from his toes to his shoulders, and the nurses who fed him wore masks over their faces. Visitors could wave at Mark from behind a plate of glass that a black woman kept clean with ammonia and rags. He was four years old.

Polio did this to people -- made them scared for their lives. Made mothers keep children inside during long, scorching summers when the best relief for a fidgety child was a dunk in the public pool or a sip from a fountain in the park down the block. Touching things could kill you, people said, and it was true. Germs were everywhere, and this was supposed to explain something.

But my mother didn't like being afraid. The germ frenzy reminded her of anti-communism, and anti-semitism, and all the things that made people so frightened they were willing to turn in their neighbors, or kill people, or simply stop lifting their heads to look around. And so my

mother took my brother to the zoo on a hot July day in 1949, and gave him a drink from a fountain, and let him breathe the air, and two weeks later, her firstborn couldn't sit up. He could barely move enough to cry.

The elevator doors open to the 14th floor. Cindy slumps into a chair and leafs through a People magazine. My sister's manic; she throws her purse onto an empty couch and starts pacing. I sit down and take out a legal pad.

"Even in times of tragedy," I write, "we retreat to separate corners. Isolation." I write, then stop. Writing is just another retreat that's isolating.

"I hope Ed is here today." Judy barely bothers to take a breath. "Don't you like Ed?" she says to Cindy. Cindy nods.

Ed is the nurse everybody loves. Ed gives morphine injections best; Ed helped drain the fluid surrounding the mass of tumors in Jan's stomach. Last week, Jan had told Ed she was scared she would never see the sky again. Ed disconnected her intravenous lines and wheeled her bed

into the visitor's lounge. He parked her near the elevator, where a floor-to-ceiling window yields views of massive stone, and above the neighboring buildings, blue sky. Jan stayed there for a long time, until she had to go back to her room. The tumors were pressing her lungs and she was finding it hard to breathe. She asked Ed whether she could ever go home, and he told her there were choices she could make. Choices about where to die. "Thank you, Ed," Jan said. She never asked about going home again.

Ed steps off the elevator just as my sister is talking about him. "Ed!" Judy says, "Meet my sister, she just flew in from Montana."

People in the Midwest seem to find this fairly amazing, as if Montanans live somewhere beyond the arctic circle and never get a chance to leave. But I've gotten used to this reaction to where I live. I am the visitor in this family, the one who arrives from New York or Miami or Alkali Lake, Canada and who leaves as quickly as possible. Right now, I just want to help my brother -- I just want to see Jan, I keep telling myself, even as I know that for decades I've made a point of avoiding them. It's been years since I've even been inside Mark and Jan's

apartment. I can't begin to tell myself now, a day after landing in Chicago, that anything I've ever done in my life has actually helped Mark. Or Jan. Or Cindy, whose clearest memory of me, I imagine, is that a few years ago at a family get-together in Arizona (I flew in from Philadelphia) I french-braided her hair.

"Hi," Ed says to me. He takes my outstretched hand and brushes past me to the ward. I can feel myself not liking this man. I feel guilty he doesn't know me already.

Cindy gnaws a fingernail. Her knee pumps up and down and her foot taps the floor. She is long-limbed, dark, coltish. She looks nothing like my brother, who had a spinal fusion that stopped his growth, whose hips are crooked, whose legs are different lengths. She looks and acts nothing like her mother, who has a genetic abnormality that gave her a stutter and a seizure disorder, who had a single mole on her face that would kill her, and who at 4-foot-7, could qualify as a dwarf, according to family wisdom.

"I'm going to go say hi to my mom now," Cindy says, and disappears down the hall. The nurses don't want too many people in Jan's room at the same time. I wait,

obedient, to be given permission to follow.

"Jan will live at least a few more months," my parents have told me. My father didn't want me to make this trip to Chicago. He said it would be too upsetting.

"Death is supposed to be upsetting," I had told him.

"There's nothing you can do," my father went on. I had called my parents from Montana to tell them I'd bought a plane ticket -- I was desperate to come see Mark and talk to Jan before she died.

"Why don't you wait?" my father had said. "Listen, kiddie, there are so many of us there each day now, there aren't enough chairs in the waiting room, really honey, some days it's me and your mother and your sister and Sylvia and Sheila and Cindy, and Sheila's husband Jim, and last week the Goldsteins flew in from Salt Lake City, and the rabbi has been here, and so has Mindy Seifer, Mom's old friend, you don't know her, the one who's in the wheelchair."

I reminded him that I knew Mindy Seifer very well. Mark got polio first, then Mindy did. They were among Chicago's first wave of victims; the height of the polio epidemic came later, '52.

"You can't remember Mindy, can you?" my father continued. "I just don't think there's any room for you, you won't even get a chance to be with your brother."

My father is old and nearly deaf, which gives him license to yell at people and not hear them. "I just want to give Mark a hug and tell him I love him," I told him.

"It'd be better if you didn't see her," my father said. "It'd be better to remember her the way she looked before."

She was tiny and pale and wore thick glasses and a lime-green and hot-pink dress above chubby knees. It was 1965 -- I was 9; my sister was 16. My brother was 20, and in love. That's when I first met Jan. That's how she looked.

Jan and I didn't hit it off. I wasn't happy when she and my brother got engaged. I wanted him to marry someone perfect. I fantasized that people with physical troubles needed to find a balance in the world by matching up with spectacular specimens. Fantasy was important to me in those days; reality let me down. My brother was going to leave the family to marry someone who didn't look nice, had a handicap herself and wasn't very friendly.

I was an ugly little kid and the whole thing confused me. In my friends I looked for bubbly, lush-haired red-heads and big-eyed blondes who with their glitter made me, the dark, sallow-eyed girl, feel brightened. What made Mark love Jan? I couldn't imagine my brother and Jan even lying close to one another. Sex and love was for pretty, popular people; sex was for blondes. Sex was for my sister, who peroxided her hair and climbed out her window to ride in smokey cars with dangerous boys like Tex Henry. Sex was not for my brother, who played bridge with Rick Friedman, a guy who weighed 350 pounds and brought an orange crate to sit on when he came to the house because he didn't want to break the furniture.

I never saw Mark and Jan kiss until the day of their

wedding, a week after Bobby Kennedy was killed. And what I remember about the wedding was how happy they looked, and the fact that Bobby Kennedy had just been shot. The whole family remembers the wedding that way. "Oh, yes," we all say. "Remember how the rabbi mentioned Bobby Kennedy?"

At a big fancy dinner party the night before the wedding, the entree was quail. A tiny bird lay on my plate, its bones charred and brown. I refused to eat. I was 11 years old and a flower girl. I wore a mint green, floor-length dress with puffed sleeves. I wanted to catch the bouquet that day, just to make sure I'd get married. But my sister, Judy, who was 18 then and in love with a jazz piano player, jumped up in her new black pumps and her long brown hair bounced on her shoulders and she snatched the white flowers and held on. I was mad at my sister for a long time after that. I was mad at Jan, too.

Jan seemed to pick on my brother. She had an odd habit of telling us stories about how stupid or cloddish Mark was, as if she expected us to enjoy sharing in her contempt of him -- as if she thought we'd all sit with her and shake our heads and laugh with her about what a dope he could be, this lawyer husband of hers, this University

of Chicago grad who would stick his head in the fridge and bellow "Jan -- where's the butter?" when two sticks of it were right in front of his nose. Perhaps she sensed a conspiracy that none of use were honest enough to admit.

For years we'd held Mark at arm's length. My father's emphysema got worse when he was around Mark and Jan. My sister Judy lived in Chicago and rarely saw them. I'd spent only one memorable moment with them since I graduated high school.

I was 19 and hospitalized three days for an asthma attack; I couldn't breathe without the IV in my arm. The whole family had gathered together for Thanksgiving. No one came to see me but Mark and Jan. They asked the doctors to put my IV on a roller, so I could take a walk with them down the hall. They cared about me. I walked down the hall with them. I was happy.

I hear footsteps and look up to see Jan's sister,

Sheila, coming toward me. The last time I saw Sheila was 24 years ago -- the day of Jan and Mark's wedding. She doesn't know who I am. She pushes past me to talk to my sister.

"Jan isn't breathing well," she tells Judy.

Cindy is close behind. "Did you see your mom?" I say to my niece, absurdly.

"Yeah, I saw her," Cindy says. She's chewing gum loudly like any 15-year-old. "My dad said I should tell you to wait a minute before you come in." Cindy smiles and tosses back her long hair. Everyone stands around looking at each other. Judy excuses herself to go down to the cafeteria and bring back juice and coffee. "Could you get me a club soda?" I ask her. She nods yes and I watch her walk away. "Don't leave," I want to say to her. But I don't say things like that. I watch the elevator go down, come back to 14, open and close, open and close. The machine seems to be stuck. I'm afraid to go anywhere, even though the elevator begs me to do it. I'm afraid if I leave to get a newspaper, or a magazine, or to take a walk in the sunshine, my brother will come out looking for me and I won't be there.

The last time I was with Mark and Jan, we walked along a sidewalk at sunset. I was striding too fast for my brother, who lately has felt the effects of his polio coming back, and wears a brace to keep his ankle from flopping. Jan walked even farther behind. The three of us had just shared hotdogs and under-cooked hamburgers at a family picnic. It was a month before Jan was diagnosed with cancer, and there was nothing about her appearance that would have given us a clue that she was dying. I'd flown in from Missoula. I walked fast because I couldn't think of anything to say.

A group of kids passed by in a souped-up Chevy; the teenaged driver raced to a stop sign and slammed on his brakes, and on the hood of the car sat three kids who looked drunk enough to think this was a good idea.

I started screaming at them. "Hey, get off that hood!" I couldn't believe my voice. I sounded like a Chicago cop. "Get off that car!" I shouted at total strangers. "You think it'll be fun to die?"

I didn't sleep well that night. I lay in the guest room of my sister's house and listened to the sounds of snoring through the thin walls and tried to figure out what

happened with me and my brother, but there were blank spots in my memory where my brother ought to have been. He left for college when I was seven. But before that -- where did he sleep? What did he do after school? Did he talk to me? Where did he sit at the dinner table when my parents screamed at my sister and my father cut my food with angry red hands and I sat there smiling and refused to eat?

I remember Mark when he was older. He played guitar and sang Pete Seeger songs. He was in college already, probably 19 or so -- I was seven or eight -- and he asked me once to come into his bedroom to sing with him, and he stood in front of me in his underwear, and I sat on his bed, afraid to stay, drawn to the music, afraid of flesh so close. I'd never seen a naked man, I wanted to see one. But I didn't want to see Mark in his underwear.

I remember Mark on spring vacations in Miami beach, his body in his swim suit. His scars. They were clumsy, ropey with the unrefined surgical techniques of the day. The seams criss-crossed from hip to hip. The polio attacked his stomach muscles: distentegrated them. Without muscles in your stomach, you can't sit up. The surgeons took

muscle from my father's thigh, and grafted it into Mark's torso, and slowly Mark could sit and walk and best of all, swim, where he was weightless and free. One foot clubbed inward. When he walked, he rocked from side to side. He wore madras bathing trunks and went to Yale on a scholarship.

I'd never seen the scars on my father, where they cut his thighs for the transplant. My father's scars have faded, perhaps. And they are always well hidden.

I was four when my dad stopped touching me. He didn't hug or touch me for eight years, maybe ten, he told me. "I was afraid of my daughters: I was afraid I'd get sexual with you," he'd said when I spoke to him from a dorm room at college. A counselor had urged me to make the call.

Not long after that conversation I decided to cut school and take a Greyhound bus to Warren, Ohio to try out for a job as a groom for one of the hottest show jumping riders in the country. His name was Bernie Traurig and I'd

seen his dark curls in the horse magazines. I'd win the job and Bernie's love; he'd teach me to ride thin-skinned thoroughbreds over 6-foot fences; he'd seduce me behind the heavy oak sliding doors of the horse stalls. I wanted to be in love.

On the bus -- a 14-hour ride -- I sat next to a man who wore plaid and smelled. I kept my face to the window, but Cleveland was like a black and white movie too boring to watch all the way through. And then I saw signs with names that looked familiar: Warren, Ohio. Halsey Taylor. I'd memorized the words from the bottoms of drinking fountains at elementary school. You could get polio from a drinking fountain, my mom had said. As a kid, I'd press my lips tight against the water and watch it trickle over the letters on white enamel: Halsey Taylor, Warren Ohio. Warren, Ohio, the signs now told me, was one of the drinking fountain capitals of America.

Bernie Traurig greeted me at the stable. He pointed out a stall and told me to braid the mane and tail of his favorite hunter-jumper, a regal bay with sparkling socks whitened with corn starch. The mare cost \$85,000, Bernie said. He said he had to go back to the house, his

girlfriend was visiting. He'd come back later to check my work, he said. If I got the job, I'd have six horses like this mare to take care of from dawn until dusk, he said.

I combed out the mare's mane and ran my hand down her neck to the warm silk of her chest, as soft as the breast of a bird. I'd never touched so much money in my life, and it was standing on four legs and ate hay. It seemed more than vaguely criminal. "How many welfare mothers could live off your pricetag, huh baby?" I crooned. I wondered what Bernie's girlfriend looked like.

When I finished braiding, I took a long walk in the woods, and from a bare branch, I saw my first owl. I'd always heard that owls were an omen: that seeing one could bring good luck. I stood until the sky and the bird merged in the dusk. I watched until the gray form flew away.

The footsteps come toward me, heavy and fast. Cindy is screaming, Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Her voice is like a child's. Sheila, Jan's sister, is right behind her.

"Cindy?" Sheila calls out. A nurse looks into the waiting room, sees me sitting there, looks confused. Everyone seems to be in a hurry. "Are you?" the nurse says.

"I'm Mark's younger sister," I say.

"I'm sorry, I was expecting to see Judy," the nurse says. "Could you come in here please?" The nurse points to the door to a side room, and I walk inside. Cindy sits in a chair rocking back and forth, back and forth. Sheila is kneeling on the floor next to her, holding her. "She loved you," Sheila says, crying. "This is the best thing," she says. "It's better that it was fast."

Cindy says nothing, sobs, hugs herself. "She was a beautiful person," Sheila says, "she loved you very much." I stand and watch, I want to touch them, I want to hold them. I sink into a chair not far from them and say nothing. I can't believe my heart is beating, I feel so still.

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask Sheila. Cindy and Sheila look at me with surprise.

"No. Stay here," Sheila says. Cindy's sobs are quieting. She's shivering now.

"Where's Mark?" I ask, helpless.

"He's still in there with her," Sheila cries.

The door opens. It's Judy, her arms loaded with orange juice cartons and cups of coffee, and she begins to chirp about the cafeteria and how long everything took.

"Why are we in here?" she says.

"Judy," I tell her. "She's dead."

My sister freezes. "But I just was gone 10 minutes," she says. "I was just buying you a soda," she says to me.

My mother opens the door. "Your father is still trying to find a parking space," she announces. She sees Cindy's face. "Cindy?" she says, and her grief has in it the break of an old woman's voice, and the sound, and the sound of Cindy's cries "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy" will haunt me for months. Now Cindy cries "grandma, grandma," and runs to my mother, and my mother lays her hands on Cindy's head.

I walk to my mother and hug her. I feel her breasts against mine. She is so thin now, so old. I haven't hugged her in a long time. We pull apart fast, eager to let some light come between us.

Mark comes in, sobbing, looks up to see me: "Oh God," he says. Cindy gets up and starts to run out of the room.

"Cindy," Mark says, "Can you just stay here? Can you just hold my hand for a minute?"

"I have to go and call my friends," Cindy says, begging him. "Can I please go and call my friends?"

"Of course you can," my brother says. "Of course you can go call your friends."

Mark sinks into the chair that Cindy just abandoned. I sit next to him and put my hand on his knee and press firmly. I have no memory of my hand ever being on his knee before.

"Cindy was in the room," Mark cries. "Of all the times for her to be in the room." His voice cracks. "I can't believe she saw that."

"It was good that she saw it." I don't know what to tell him, but this feels right. "Cindy needed to be with her mother."

Everyone is talking, murmuring. "I didn't even get a chance to see her," I say aloud and hear how selfish it sounds.

"Jan knew you were here -- I told her you were coming," Mark tells me, and I don't believe him.

My father appears, talking about how long it took him

to park the car and how expensive that damned garage is. My mother takes him by the arm to tell him the news. He doesn't have his hearing aids in. She shouts it to him twice.

"I'd like to see Jan," my sister says, and approaches a nurse in the hall. It'll take a few minutes to disconnect the tubes, the nurse says, then comes back and nods her head. My sister and I nearly run down the hall to Jan's room.

"No -- no, don't go in there," my father is yelling after us. I don't even turn around. I pretend I don't hear him.

She is blue. Jan is blue-grey, with a white cotton blanket tucked around her at chest level. Her arms lie straight beside her; her sinews are sharp ridges. There is no peace, only agony, in her gaze into space. Why didn't they close her eyes? I say to myself, "I thought they closed people's eyes."

Her mouth is crooked in a gasp, as if her last breath was too hard, and her hands are swollen with the fluid that drowned her. I touch the blanket near her feet. I am whispering inside my head, goodbye, Jan. Goodbye, Jan. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't get to say good-bye. I am apologizing, over and over, for the things I thought about her, for the way I avoided her. I want to be alone with her to say some kind of prayer, though I know none. But my sister is there, and then Jan's mother and Jan's sister, and then Mark, then my mother. This is the last time we will see her, and we don't want to leave.

This is the flesh that houses us, and if we are our flesh -- if that is all life is -- then what happened in this room? I can't take it in. I want to feel a spirit around us: this woman was just alive, ten minutes ago. Ten minutes ago, she was breathing and her daughter sat and tried to talk to her. But I feel nothing. I feel nothing sacred. I see only terror. I can't believe a person can be gone so quickly.

I move to the side of the bed, touch Jan's arm, hesitant, and leave my hand there. She is still warm.

Oh, god, my sister Judy says. She too, is touching Jan.

I want to touch Jan's hair -- it is grey. She turned old in six weeks. She is only 45.

Sheila, Jan's sister, comes in and starts taking pieces of paper off the hospital walls.

"Get well soon" they say.

I leave the room to see how Cindy is doing. She has stopped crying and is chewing gum again. I give her a hug. "I'm okay," she says, and smiles at me. "Did you reach your friends?" I say. "Yeah," she says.

"You poor girl," my dad says and hugs her, and I can see her struggle to get out of his grasp. "You poor girl," he says, "life is going to be hard for you."

"I know, grandpa," she says.

Nurses appear with clipboards and paper. They want to know what to do with the body. Mark has stopped crying. "Do you need me to sign anything?" he is saying. I try to put an arm around him. He is all bones and odd angles, and he's too anxious to stand still.

"What can I do for you," Mark? I ask.

"Do you know what you can do for me? You're the reporter in the family," Mark says. "Could you write her obituary?"

He's asked me the one thing that makes me want to say no.

I am the reporter in the family. When I worked for newspapers, I talked to a young kid who watched his mother burn to death in an inferno inside a tunnel. I talked to a man on death row who stabbed an old woman 72 times with a bread knife and left his footprints in her blood on the way out the door. I wrote about an 11-year-old kid who strangled his best friend, and the day after the story ran, the boy took a shoelace and hung himself in his cell. I wrote a story about a teenager who grabbed a seven-year-old girl on her way to school, raped her, stabbed her to death and set her body on fire. I tried, and failed, to talk to a teenager who tiptoed into his parents' bedroom, shot them in the head, painted their blood on the wall, turned the lights on and laughed. I refused, at one point, to talk to a woman who took her family to the waterfront in Oakland and watched all three of her kids fall off a

raft and drown. I had to write an official explanation to my editor explaining why I had failed in my duties.

And then I quit newspapers. Never, I told myself, would I ever interview another grieving person. Never would I write another obit.

"What do you want me to say about Jan?" I ask my brother. We sit at his kitchen table and he sounds strangely cheerful. No response seems appropriate anymore. Mark tells me about where Jan went to elementary school, and how she went to Brandeis and was an english major, and how she got married and had Cindy. I'm trying to inflate the details so we can get this thing into the paper. The Chicago Tribune only runs the obits of the "important dead." A woman who raises a daughter and edits a medical journal part-time isn't going to make it.

"I was afraid I'd never get her out of Israel," Mark tells me. He is rambling now. Mark and Jan and Cindy were in Israel just five weeks ago, when Jan first got sick.

The trip to Israel was one of most dramatic things the family had ever done. When Jan's stomach started getting extended, she went to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and told them she thought maybe her ulcer was acting up and "please don't ruin my vacation." They put her in intensive care.

"The doctors thought at first it might be ovarian, but then they said it was melanoma," my brother tells me, as he's told me before. "It had already metastasized. She'd probably had it for five years, maybe more."

Day after day, Mark tried to get permission to take his wife home. The hospital refused; Jan's kidneys were failing -- it was too risky. Finally, Hadassah agreed to release Jan if she flew back with one of their doctors by her side. An ambulance met the family, when they landed in Chicago. Medics strapped Jan onto a stretcher. She didn't protest. She'd been on a plane for 12 hours, and now she was home. The driver hit the light, and ahead, finally, was a hospital where her family could visit and everyone spoke english.

Jan felt the pull of the ambulance -- she'd lived in Chicago all her life. Even lying down, she could tell the

driver made a wrong turn.

"You're going the wrong way, you took the wrong exit," she shouted at him. "For chrissake, there must be 10 signs that say Chicago, exit right for Chicago!"

"Hey, I'm sorry," the driver said.

"And the guy," Mark tells me, "tries to make a U-turn in the middle of the highway!"

"Mark" -- I say. "Did Jan belong to any organizations? Did she do any volunteer work?" I'm gently trying to keep him on track. I'm drinking a gin and tonic, and it's helping.

Mark shakes his head. We talk about Jan for another half an hour. I work and work on the obituary until late that night. I can only get three paragraphs.

I am asleep in my sister's house, I am lost in a store, I need something important, I don't have money, I'm going to have to steal it, I have my hand on it when a man, a huge bruised shadow of a featureless man leans down so

that his nose is next to mine, he's right here in the room, I can feel his breath....

"NNNNOOO!" I shout in the watery voice of the dreaming. I say it so loud I wake myself, and I'm shaking. I've never shouted in my sleep before. I turn on the light and try writing. I can't get Jan's face out of my mind.

I write: "I want to create abundance around me."

I write: "Fate brutalized my brother once; that's all anyone should have to bear."

I write: "I'm 35, and my father still tells me to look both ways when I cross the street."

I write: "I think, therefore I'm fucked."

The day of the funeral dawns brilliantly sunny. A cantor sings and a rabbi -- the same one who married Mark and Jan -- delivers the service. The immediate family sits packed into the front row of the funeral home. I cannot stop crying. The cantor's voice hits the same notes that must make wolves howl in the darkness.

Mindy Seifer, one of my parents' oldest friends, sits next to me in her wheelchair. When I was a girl I was afraid of Mindy. Her wheelchair and paralyzed body said to me that my brother might end up like that, that his legs might become two pieces of flesh that have nothing to do with walking. Now, I love the gentleness I see in Mindy. I love the familiarity of her face and the fact that she is still alive. Mindy doesn't recognize me at first, and she beams when I tell her who I am. I sit there and hold Mindy's hand. I am so grateful.

My sister sits farther down, her hands in her lap. When the service is over, she stands up and hugs her son and daughter and I stand behind her, watching. "I love you," she says to her children. "I love you, too, Mom," they say back.

At the graveside, we stand beneath a canopy and watch the coffin lowered into the ground. The wheels of the pulley creak. I think about the wedding, and my young, hopeful brother, and his life with a loving outline, his future eased by the knowledge that he'd found a partner with whom he could grow old and have a family, which he desperately wanted to do. The rabbi chants. Cindy sits

quietly next to Mark. I am standing near my sister in front by the grave, until a girlfriend of a distant cousin pushes in front of me and blocks my view. The coffin hits bottom and the pulleys rest.

Just beyond us is a pile of dirt. We will fill Jan's grave. We will say goodbye by shoveling dirt on her coffin. We get in line and march toward the shovel, each taking turns scooping the dirt and throwing it onto the plain, wood box. My mother stands in line and I watch her frail body stoop for the shovel and push in the earth that falls like heavy rain on something hollow.

"Mira, no, don't do that. You don't have to do that. It's unnecessary," my father is calling to her. He repeats the same thing to me. "Please don't," he says.

I enter the line, and take the shovel. I want to do this right. I want to keep doing this, over and over, until it is me, just me, who has filled the whole grave. I take my one shovelful, and step aside.

Afterwards, my brother's apartment overflows with mourners; the tables are crammed with food from caterers who huff and puff under the load of cold-cuts and sweets as they march up the stairs. I haven't eaten all day.

Eating seems a grotesque thing to do. But my relatives urge me to go to the table. Marel, a cousin I was closer to than any other growing up, tells me the bagels are incredible. She's wearing baggy gym shorts and beach clogs. She says she wants my advice on moving to Washington to be with her new boyfriend: what clothes should she bring? "How are you, cous'?" she says.

"Not so good," I tell her.

"How come?" she asks.

I move to the buffet table and start filling my plate, and I put some bread in my mouth. Suddenly I don't want to stop. It feels as if eating is the whole proof that I'm still alive; the fact that life for me is still possible seems centered on my tongue. I know now why they serve so much food at funerals. It separates the living from the dead.

"Amy!" my uncle Harold calls to me. I've never had a conversation with him in my life.

"I read the obituary today in the paper," Harold tells me. "It was a beautiful job. I clipped it out to save it."

"Thank you, Harold," I say. And I mean it.

The prayers are said each evening. For a week, the apartment is constantly packed and there's barely room to stand. I can't say the prayers, I don't know them; I've only been in synagogue four times in my life. Those who do know them read along with the cantor and glance at me every now and then as though I were a traitor to my people and my family. I lean on my grandmother's Steinway, touch the smooth wood, imagine her playing Scarlatti and Chopin. She willed the piano to my brother, which made my sister furious, since my sister was the pianist in the family and my brother hadn't played since grade school. I stand and look at the Hebrew figures on the prayer cards passed out at the door. My sister stays in the kitchen cutting up the cakes.

Afterwards, it's another flurry of shocked recognition.

"Meyer, look!" cries Dolly Zake. "This is Amy! You remember Amy -- Mira and Neil's little girl." My Aunt Mona looks me in the eye and holds my cheeks between two fingers, the way she's always done. She kisses me right on the lips. "Don't be such a stranger," she says. "I have a feeling you think sometimes you don't have any family."

I feel myself starting to cry. I have to find my

brother, I tell her. It's been impossible to get to Mark ever since the funeral. He is constantly surrounded by people, people touching his arm, people listening to his stories, asking him if they can help. I find him in a corner of the living room. He carries a scotch in his hand. He's broken down only once tonight, reading a prayer, a line about cherishing grief, for it is holy. I stand near him now and listen to what he says to a group of men from the synagogue. He is telling them the story about Jan in the ambulance. I hear in his voice the pride for Jan's spunk; I feel in him, stronger than I've ever felt it, the love he had for her.

"Mark," I say to him when he is finished, "can I talk to you for a second?"

We go into a narrow side room that passes as a den. Mark sinks into a worn green chair. I sit facing him, our legs nearly touching. "How are you holding up?" I ask him, and he tells me he thinks he's okay.

"Oh God, I don't know," he says. "I don't think it's sunk in yet." The drone of what sounds like a party filters in through the doorway. I look down at the floor, at my feet, and the familiar shape of his.

"I'm sorry I haven't been there for you," I say to him.
"I'm sorry we haven't talked more."

"I haven't been very good either," Mark says. He shakes his head, looks out the window, looks back at me. He is smaller than I realized. "I haven't done a good job of talking to you either," he says.

I put my hand on his knee and squeeze my fingers tight. I look at him, into brown eyes that I notice are flecked with green. They are beautiful eyes. Soft, kind brother's eyes. I'm uncertain, pull my hand away. "I love you, Mark," I say. He doesn't answer. He reaches for my hand, and pulls it back toward him. He just reaches for my hand and holds it.