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Appel: The Other Sister

THE OTHER SISTER

Jacob M. Appel

One morning shortly after the war ended—that same autumn their father drowned a litter of unwanted beagle puppies in the upstairs bathtub—Arnold Minton shook his two daughters awake with the tips of his fingers and announced that the girls were old enough to visit their grandparents. Or at least Sandy thought it had been the same summer. It was hard to be certain. She often suspected that people possessed two separate memories, one for public events like Hiroshima and the firing of General MacArthur, another for personal matters, and somehow her experiences of that morning had ended up stashed in the wrong category.

It should have been a short trip. Twenty minutes. Half an hour. (Sandy now knew a route through the municipal golf course that could cut it down to fifteen.) But that was before the days of DWI, back when driving drunk was a social faux pas akin to dining with one's elbows on the tabletop. So they got lost. Then they asked directions at a filling station, but didn't follow them, because "they didn't sound right." They circled the same landmarks: waterlogged scarecrows, gourds rotting on the vine. Jinelle rode with her arms folded across her chest. She'd scoured the girls and packaged them in dark muslin skirts, plaiting their hair in tight waves, but when they arrived at the cemetery, she refused to exit the Packard. The excursion had not been her idea and she was determined to convey her disapproval.

"Suit yourself," said Arnold.

"You know what I think," answered Jinelle.

(Later, after the separation, she grew more vocal in her criticism:

"Do you know what the problem with your father was?" she asked. "He was always very good, but he was never great."

"Very good is fine for some things," she explained. "A very good carpenter, sure. Even a very good doctor. My papa, rest

his soul, was a very good veterinarian. But a landscape painter? What the hell use is a very good painter? How many un-great painters can you name? I'll tell you how many. Only one. Adolf Hitler.”)

Arnold's parents were buried under a coffin-shaped marble slab that reminded Sandy of a feeding trough for cattle. This was in the far corner of the cemetery, where the graves were old and huddled together like refugees. Through a chain-link fence, you could see the rear yards of the neighboring houses. Many of the porch lights remained lit. Damp yellow beech leaves cleaved to the slate paths and the soles of the girls' shoes.

“Sandy, Victoria,” declared Arnold. His speech was resonant, oratorical, but slightly slurred, like Daniel Webster on a bender. “Allow me to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Josephus Minton.”

Grandpa Minton had sold Fuller brushes door-to-door. Grandma Edith did piecework in a blanket factory. What money there was came from Jinelle's family.

“Now if you'll kindly step this way, ladies,” continued Arnold. “I have another treat in store for you.”

The damp air chapped Sandy's fingers. She'd never known her grandparents, so she wasn't sure how sad she ought to feel.

Arnold led the girls to a newer section of the cemetery. Here, chrysanthemums lined the broad gravel pathways and the “avenues” bore the names of fruit trees. The graves stood evenly spaced like tiny suburban fiefdoms. Arnold paused at a patch of empty grass near the intersection of Cherry and Walnut. With one fluid motion, he hoisted Victoria onto his shoulders.

“Observe, behold,” said Arnold. “This is the hallowed scrap of earth where your mother and I will take up our eternal residence.”

The gravesite was no bigger than a hopscotch grid. Someone had abandoned a mangled umbrella frame on Arnold's “hallowed scrap of earth,” and a pair of grackles were mining the topsoil for breakfast. It was impossible to believe that anyone would actually be buried there.

“What's that?” asked Victoria, pointing.

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Sandy stepped forward onto the damp grass. The small gray marker resembled a concrete hitching post, but it bore an iron “perpetual care” badge. *Oriana Grace Minton. April 3, 1937—April 9, 1937.* Victoria’s twin.

Arnold grabbed Sandy, hard, by the back of her collar.

“That’s nothing,” he said. “Let’s go home.”



Fifty-two years later: Both Minton plots were now occupied—Jinelle’s for three decades, Arnold’s for three days—and Sandy had been office manager at the cemetery so long that she could locate individual graves for visitors without consulting the logbook. Temporary workers enjoyed quizzing her, flipping open the registry and asking, for example, where Maryann Lewis was interred, but Sandy would shoot back: Do you mean Maryann Lewis Died 1977 or Maryann Lewis Died 1984? When the temps inquired why she’d mastered what to them seemed a morbid parlor trick, or when a feature writer for the local newspaper delved into Sandy’s motives, she always replied, “Busy hands are happy hands and an idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” which seemed satisfactory to everyone, although it wasn’t quite clear how memorizing maps of the dead kept one’s hands occupied. It was the sort of response people expected from a homely, church-going spinster. If she had explained her desire to preserve a living memory of the deceased—the way Jews consecrate the legacy of the Holocaust—her inquisitors might have judged her cuckoo. Instead, they thought her upright, straight-shooting, knowledgeable, generous, witty, a lady of considerable spirit, but leading a life as lackluster as cold porridge. Which it often was.

And now Father was dead and Victoria was coming home. Victoria who had done nothing and gotten everything, while Sandy did everything and got nothing. Though you couldn’t put it to folks that way.

My sister’s coming into town, you said.

That must be a comfort. I do hope we'll meet her this time.

Then you had to explain that it wasn't Oriana, the mysterious and unseen Oriana with whom you occasionally toured Italy or cruised the Galapagos, but Victoria. Victoria, with her golden laughter and perfectly arched brow, for whom Allan Draper had jumped off the Jefferson Dam in the tenth grade. Victoria who'd had two stalkers in a single year of high school when you couldn't attract so much as a flasher. Victoria who'd gone off to Los Angeles, and appeared in a television commercial, and founded a talent and modeling agency with branch offices in Santa Barbara and Las Vegas, but sent home crates of navel oranges and cases of cabernet sauvignon, like a tourism agency gone berserk, when what you and Father needed was cold hard cash. Though you couldn't say much of that either.

My other sister, you said. The businesswoman. From California.

For the funeral?

Too late for the funeral, you said. You know how it is.

Of course, of course. (Meaning: "We acknowledge there must be reasons why adult children don't attend their parents' funerals, but we cannot fathom what they are.")

Oriana is on a lemur-watching expedition in Madagascar, you added. Incommunicado.

Probably better that you can't reach her. Why ruin her vacation? It won't change anything.

How strange it was, Sandy found, to speak of Victoria in these days following her father's death. Discussing her sister with the office staff, or her book club friends, or the Brazilian physical therapist, Eduardo, who was helping her with her hip, Sandy almost believed that Victoria was the fiction. Sandy knew everything of Oriana's life, because she'd cobbled it together from shards of fantasy. Her sister's whirlwind romances with titled aristocrats, the dinner parties at the Montparnasse townhouse, the safaris and archaeological digs and culinary tours in which Sandy was occasionally included. In contrast, Victoria appeared every five years or so, a different man on her

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elbow, her hair varying from platinum to onyx to henna. (She stayed just long enough to whet Father's appetite, to regain her perch as his favorite—while paying Sandy compliments that stung like insults, calling her “the good daughter” and “the loyal one.”) When Victoria phoned, Sandy couldn't even picture the space from where she was phoning. It was out in the ether. An absolute blank.

Sandy had wondered—to the last—whether Victoria might surprise her with a cameo appearance at Father's funeral. It had been a short service. Attendance was light: a handful of Sandy's co-workers, paying respects to her and not to him. (Arnold's erratic outbursts had long since driven off his few surviving friends.) Sandy's pastor had contracted pneumonia and his surrogate, a divinity student from Hitchcock Seminary, stuttered dreadfully. He read a psalm and spoke of human fellowship. Having pumped Sandy for the crumbs of her father's life, during their walk from the parking lot, the poor boy forgot to include them. Not that it mattered. Sandy was the only mourner who'd actually known Arnold. As it was, she spent most of the service thinking of a beige jacket she'd worn to an interfaith roundtable the previous weekend. A reformed rabbi and a Buddhist scholar, both women in their thirties, had examined the morality of private property. Sandy feared she'd left the jacket at the church, draped over the back of her chair. Although she'd loved her father devoutly, far more than the old man was capable of loving anyone, anything, she was too depleted for grief.

Afterwards, Sandy hiked up to the contemplation gazebo. A low wooden bench lined four walls of the hexagon. Teenagers made out here, on weekend nights, blanketing the concrete floor with cigarette stubs and spent condoms. (She'd also found a noose one morning, hanging limp in the peonies.) Victoria had no doubt come to this knoll in her youth, as had Sandy, once, with Boyd Kelly, but nothing had happened between them. If you closed your eyes, you could see your whole life from there. It had not—despite what people often said—gone by so quickly. It had just gone by: demanding, haphazard, without traction.

Sandy took a deep breath. She could love Victoria. She could start from scratch—adopt what someone (Thomas Merton? Reinhold Niebuhr?) had called a hermeneutic of generosity. They were family, after all. Blood. After everything, she was still raring to love her sister. All Victoria had to do was to ask.



Victoria arrived by cab two days later. Her hair was shoulder-length, chestnut and braided. She sported a long gray raincoat suited for a film noir heroine, dark sunglasses, and a turquoise scarf worn like Amelia Earhart. Hardly altered in five years. Even her dress size—“Would you believe I still fit into a four?”—remained constant.

The driver hauled Victoria’s luggage onto the porch. Two large valises. A Gladstone bag. A ladies’ hatbox streaked crimson-and-white like a candy cane. Who in God’s name still traveled with a hatbox? Sandy spotted her sister through the dormer window in the attic. She’d been sorting through Father’s effects, gathering threadbare suits for the Goodwill dumpster, airing out long-abandoned canvasses. What a moment for Victoria to arrive! Sandy did her best to wipe the sawdust off her knees before opening the door.

“Gracious!” declared Victoria. “I’m so glad I found you at home. I was terribly afraid you’d have gone off somewhere—to one of your church things—and I’d be stuck out here in the rain with my bags.”

“I’m usually at work,” answered Sandy. “Not this week, of course.”

Victoria stepped into the foyer and removed her gloves. “Will you be a dear and help with my bags? I would, but with my back. . . .”

Victoria had cracked her spine in high school. They’d gone apple picking and she’d fallen off the rear of the truck. An injury far less incapacitating, at the present, than Sandy’s hip fracture. (Yet Victoria knew nothing of the hip—and it was easier to haul

the luggage than to explain.)

"So good to be home," said Victoria. "It's overwhelming, almost. Each time the house seems somehow smaller. Dimmer." She flicked the hall lights on and off like a realtor. "It's hard to imagine the old place with Father gone."

"That's *all* I can imagine," said Sandy.

The interior of the house had hardly changed since their childhood. They still used a chartreuse rotary phone, secured in a telephone cabinet. The same one-eyed rocking horse swayed in the parlor. Their garage and cellar remained cluttered with corroded farm implements. What a contrast to the exterior! The original six acre tract—Jinelle's father and uncle raised squash for market—had been slashed and subdivided until the yard wasn't much larger than the house itself. A stately Tudor hemmed in by parvenu split-levels. Arnold had sacrificed the rest for gallery space, leisure time, food.

Sandy tugged the last of the suitcases across the threshold. Victoria had already passed into the parlor. She navigated the room as though visiting a museum, glossing her gaze over the alabaster bookends and the mantel clock and each commemorative plate. "Do tell me," she said, without turning around. "How was it? I mean at the end."

"It happened while I was in the shower," said Sandy, matter-of-fact. "He'd gone for a glass of milk and his legs must have come out from under him."

(A scotch and soda, more likely—but why tell it that way?)

"So it was sudden," persisted Victoria. "No last words?"

"I don't know. I don't think about it."

Victoria turned around without warning. "Of course not, darling. How insensitive of me—after all you've been through. At least one of us did her part."

Sandy squeezed her hands together behind her back. "How is business in California?" she asked.

Victoria's expression turned half-frown and half-wince. Sandy recognized the look: it was the same one mechanics and plumbers use when a woman asks about payment.

"It is what it is," said Victoria, shrugging. "In any case," she continued. "I have something for you." She rummaged through her handbag and retrieved a small package wrapped in brown paper. "Open it."

"You don't need to do this," said Sandy. She crossed into the dining room and, tentatively at first, poured a shot of scotch from the crystal decanter. (It was all hers now—no Father to measure the volume like a tide-keeper.)

"I'll unwrap it then," said Victoria. "I couldn't decide between the necklace and the earrings, so I bought them both. They're hand-crafted by this hundred-year-old Yuki Indian woman I discovered in Sausalito. She follows her tribe's ancestral patterns. Here, try them on."

"Later," said Sandy. The scotch warmed her throat and the tips of her ears. She could no longer remember the last time she'd indulged in hard liquor.

"The necklace is abalone with dentalium. Dentalium is a mollusk, for what it's worth. I always like to ask those things."

"Thank you," said Sandy.

"You'd never imagine what the earrings are made of. Take a guess."

Sandy had settled into Father's plush recliner. The chair looked toward the bay windows, so her sister couldn't see her face. She dropped one of the earrings into her scotch glass. It didn't matter to Sandy whether the jewelry was platinum or plutonium.

"Be a sport, darling," insisted Victoria. "One guess."

"Asbestos?"

"You haven't changed a bit," answered Victoria. "They're actually made from corn kernels. Pretty darn impressive, if you ask me."

Sandy swirled the earring around the glass with her pinkie. It amazed her that a woman possessing so little self-awareness—so little horse sense, to be honest—could run a lucrative business. "Corn?" she said. "They grow corn in Sausalito?"

"You're upset. Aren't you, dear?"

Sandy watched Victoria's reflection. Her sister approached the window and rested her hands on Sandy's shoulders. "You know I'm not good at this sort of thing," she said. "What do I know about bereavement and consolation and all that. That's always been *your* department. But I *am* sorry. Truly. If I did something wrong, that is. I do so want us to get along, darling. Really I do."

To Sandy, that seemed like asking. Or close enough. She reached back over her shoulder and covered Victoria's hand with her own. Both sisters remained silent. The poorly-oiled attic fan pulsed like a crippled heart. Thrub-dup. Thrub-dup. Outside, the gale slapped a rhododendron branch against the window panes.

Victoria finally spoke. "I'm going to miss it here."

"You'll come back to visit though, won't you?"

Sandy was amazed at her own tenderness. How strange that a brief touch of flesh might obscure so much pain.

Victoria laughed. A laugh like the sleigh-bells of heaven. "Don't be foolish, dear," she said. "You weren't thinking of keeping the place, were you?"

"Leaving never crossed my mind."

How could she leave? The house fit her tight as a crustacean's shell.

"But we *have* to sell," said Victoria. "You do realize that it's half mine now. That papa left it to *both of us*."

Sandy retracted her hand. She sensed her heart calcifying.

"You'll buy a condo in East Chatham," continued Victoria. "That's much more your speed. Do you really want to stay here with Father's ghost in every closet?"

"I *live* here," said Sandy.

"I spoke to a lawyer," said Victoria. "He says we'd have to sell. If we ever went to court, that is—but I assured him that was nonsense."

"*I. Live. Here.*"

Sandy tried to blink away her tears. It was too much to process. Why was it that everything had to be taken from her?

Every last goddamn thing. She wasn't thinking of the house. She was thinking of her sister's fleeting affection.

"You have all that money," said Sandy, her words barely audible. "All that mone. . . ."

"I'm actually a little pressed right now," said Victoria. "Nothing serious, but a bit of ready cash could go a long way. Like a blood transfusion."

Sandy dangled the necklace in her scotch. If her sister noticed, she said nothing. Victoria had consulted a lawyer? Didn't that make love impossible?

"The more you think about it," said Victoria, "the more sense it will make. Trust me on this one." She squeezed Sandy's rigid shoulders. "Maybe I should drive into town for a bit and give you some space—I'll see which shops have turned over. I did just barge in here, didn't I? Is it alright if I borrow your car for a couple of hours?"

"Why not take it?" snapped Sandy. "You've taken everything else. Take it and don't bring it back."

"I know it's hard," said Victoria. "I miss Father too."

Sandy said nothing, at first. She wanted everything to go away.

"The keys are in my purse," she said. "Just take them and go. Please."

She dug her fingernails into her palms and concentrated on long deep breaths, waiting to hear the garage door close behind her sister. She was on the verge of asphyxiating on her own throat—as though there were not enough air in the house for both of them.



Sandy remained at the window long after Victoria's departure. She sat motionless, except for her hands, which toyed with the hem of the brocade curtains. The rain let up. For an interval, a shaft of sun filtered through the rhododendrons, fashioning the dust mites into globular rainbows. Then a gray twilight descended

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over the room. Sandy's mood darkened with the shadows, until her thoughts turned ghastly. Or maybe they'd always been so. Her yarn-spinning was sin, she now recognized—not "sin" in the religious sense, a concept alien to her Unitarian skepticism, but "sin" as shorthand for the inexcusable. Oriana had died. Victoria had lived. To reincarnate her own Oriana, the quintessential un-Victoria, was implicitly to wish for the opposite.

And she did wish for the opposite. She didn't want to, but she did.

She'd begun innocently enough. On account of Boyd Kelly. (How naïve she'd once been! How ridiculous!) Boyd Kelly taught driving part-time at Warren G. Harding Memorial High School. Wednesday and Friday afternoons. He wasn't particularly good-looking, or intelligent, or athletic, or generally noteworthy, except for one prematurely white lock feathering his auburn hair. That's how people knew him: "The guy with the white streak." Mild mannered, self-sufficient, forgettable. Boyd had landed the job, in part, because his father owned the cemetery: its maze of service roads proved ideal for practical instruction. Boyd also managed the memorial park's books.

Through an autumn of lessons, Sandy hardly noticed him. She was embroiled with another boy, an oboist who kept her in a tizzy. (The boy knew nothing of the entanglement.) Enmeshed in this fantasy, she nearly steered the school's training car—a well-battered Nash—into a cenotaph. So, Boyd Kelly. His firm hand diverting hers. Then the avalanche of hope: the crush. The cemetery job. The stroll to the gazebo. Such a glorious April morning that had been for romantic confessions! She'd stopped, she recalled, to savor the scent of a hyacinth. But there would be no confessions. No tender endearments, no hyperbolic pledges. What Boyd Kelly had wanted to tell her at the gazebo was absolutely nothing. (How could it have been otherwise?) He merely enjoyed the view. So she tried to entice him with tales of her exotic sister—living abroad with her mother's cousins. How could she have known, the afternoon he saved her from the cenotaph, that their hands would never touch again?

(How could she not have known?)

Boyd Kelly joined the merchant marines and died young of a rare blood disorder. Sandy's creation continued to thrive.

Paris. Casablanca. Tashkent. Slowly, Oriana circumnavigated the globe. Sandy accompanied her with increasing frequency. She culled the details of her escapades from several water-warped Baedeker's guides in the cellar and the complete set of National Geographic Society magazines at the public library several towns away. (Around the same time, Arnold took to painting landscapes from picture postcards.) The trips abroad provided Sandy's life with a dash of color. They were genuine adventures in their own right, a blend of research and fancy that she came to relish immensely. Although she still set aside money for her grand tour, she did so only out of habit. Deep down, she sensed that her vacations with Oriana were far better than any she might take on her own.

Nobody ever doubted her. Not a soul. Who could? Mother was dead. Victoria had run off to California. Arnold cultivated a reputation for mania that kept the remainder of humanity at bay. Besides, Sandy was meticulous. She buttered herself in artificial tanner; she mastered basic Turkish phrases. If she claimed she'd explored caves in Cappadocia, where did anyone get off saying she hadn't?

(The assistant office manger at the cemetery, a gabby and insecure woman named Francine Clamm, even insisted she'd met Oriana, briefly, on a train between Strasbourg and Cologne.)

One afternoon, seized with alarm, Sandy excavated two dense evergreen bushes from the yard and planted them around Oriana's grave, concealing the marker entirely.

It could so easily have been Victoria's grave. Her own life had been wrought by the difference.



Night fell with no sign of Victoria. One by one, the neighbors

rounded up their dogs and their children. Downstairs lights snapped off; upstairs lights flickered on. The couple in the corner bungalow shouted themselves to exhaustion. Sandy paid no attention to the time. She helped herself to an additional scotch. And another. Like a wayward teenager left home unchaperoned. She didn't particularly want to get drunk, but drinking was something to do. Something easy, mindless. Sandy was already rather tipsy when the grandmother clock in the dining room struck eleven. Only then did she notice the length of her sister's absence.

It crossed her mind that Victoria might have died—caromed over the guardrail into the Shuckabee River. What then? She'd need to purchase a new car. In all other ways, her own life would continue as before.

Or maybe Victoria had taken her at her word. Driven off. Would she dare phone the police to report the vehicle stolen?

(But that was claptrap! Her sister's bags still sat in the foyer.)

Sandy realized what she was not doing. Negotiating. Pleading. Offering God sacrifices for her sister's survival—as she'd once done beside their mother's deathbed. And why should she? Let Victoria do her own bargaining.

Sandy retrieved some crackers and a hunk of cheddar cheese from the kitchen. She ensconced herself at the window, an afghan tucked over her knees, awaiting either her sister's return or the knock of state troopers in neoprene parkas. Whichever.

It was nearly three when Victoria finally appeared. Or at least the gaunt, ragged apparition resembled Victoria. (She'd taken Sandy's house keys as well as her car keys, so she let herself in.) Gone were her braids, her make-up, her pashmina scarf. And something inchoate was missing too—something as conspicuous as face paint, yet only noticeable in its absence.

“Good God!” gasped Sandy.

Victoria said nothing. She moved her gloves methodically and deposited them on the piano bench.

“What happened?”

Victoria seated herself beside her gloves. She leaned backwards, and the piano keys let out a low cacophonous clatter.

"I went for a long walk," said Victoria. "In the woods."

"Why?"

"Why the woods, dear. They seemed as good a place as any."

(How tired the "dear" sounded—thoroughly denuded of its condescension).

"That was after I stopped by the cemetery," she said. "To take a look at Father's grave. Whatever you think, I loved him too."

"I never said differently," answered Sandy.

"You *think* differently."

Then Victoria related her visit to the cemetery. How she'd forgotten the plot location and Francis Clamm had looked it up in the log book. *Minton, Arnold. Minton, Jinelle. Minton, Oriana.* "You might imagine we had a rather long and interesting conversation about Minton, Oriana," said Victoria. "Is she still hunting for goddamn lemmings in Madagascar?"

"Lemurs," said Sandy, reflexively.

"Lemurs," echoed Victoria. "That changes everything."

Victoria stared into her lap and pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers. It had never entered Sandy's mind that her sister would be this upset. (Also in Sandy's thoughts was her own impending humiliation—the gusto with which Francis Clamm would expose her.) Why did Victoria even care? It cost her nothing.

"I have nothing to apologize for," Sandy said. "You've led your life. I've led mine. It's not as though *you* ever invited me anywhere."

"Is that how you see it?"

"How *else* should I see it?"

Sandy was about to say something further—something crueler—when she realized that her sister was crying. Silently, into her sleeve. But the tears did not last long. Victoria sat up abruptly, her back rigid as though braced for a firing squad. "I'm

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sorry you see it that way, dear,” she said—her voice a passable replica of its old self. “I’m sorry you didn’t appreciate the wine or the gourmet baskets or the glassware,” she continued. “I had *thought* myself rather generous. I suspect *most* people would have thought me rather generous. But now the Mintons have never been most people, have they?” Victoria stood up, pounding out another racket on the piano keys. “Unless you have any further thoughts, dear,” she said, “I think I shall retire.”

Victoria retreated slowly toward the stairs.

Although Sandy was somewhat soused—maybe because of the scotch—she suddenly saw her sister with razor-sharp clarity. The mirage, once shattered, was unrecoverable. How had she ever been so obtuse? Whatever business ventures occupied Victoria in California, there could be no easy millions. A modest talent agency, maybe, possibly an extra alcove or storefront in Nevada. More likely a shoe-string, letterhead enterprise that hardly paid the bills. (In the movies it would be an escort service or a house of prostitution, but this was not the movies.) The cabernet, the abalone necklace—it had been generous for a woman of Victoria’s means. But this was the most self-serving, pernicious variety of generosity. The offering that takes far more than it gives.

For the only moment in her life, Sandy was without pity.

“One second,” she said. “There is something else.”

Victoria looked down from atop the stairs. “Yes, dear?”

“There is something else,” Sandy said again. “In the spirit of honesty.”

“I’m all for honesty,” said Victoria.

“Papa did tell me one thing, at the end. About how Oriana died.”

Sandy steadied herself on the arm of a chair. She struggled to keep her voice level.

“He couldn’t afford two babies,” said Sandy. “They hadn’t banked on twins. So he drowned her. Just like the puppies.”

Victoria stood motionless for several seconds. Then she turned without a word and disappeared into her childhood bedroom.

“That’s how Oriana died!” Sandy shouted after her. “He flipped a goddamn coin!”



There had, of course, been no drowning. Even Father had limits.

Oriana’s death had been slow and horrific and entirely natural. She’d been born without kidneys—condemned by fate from the start. In declaring otherwise, Sandy had surprised even herself.

When she finally visited the gravesite, she brought a shovel. The tool had belonged to Jinelle’s father, or her uncle, and its wooden handle ended in a jagged shear. Sandy held it near the base and used it as a spade. Although the evergreens had prospered over the years, weaving a latticework of sinewy roots, they snapped easily under her onslaught. Eventually, the area around Oriana’s grave had been entirely cleared of foliage. All that remained was the freshly churned soil. If you didn’t read the headstone, you’d have thought it a recent burial.

On a whim, Sandy hiked up to the contemplation gazebo and discarded the shovel among the detritus of puppy love. She gazed down at the distant Minton graves. One large stone and one small one. “Behold,” she said—into the sharp morning air. “The eternal resting place of the Minton sisters.” For, soon enough, there would be three small stones. It brought Sandy a perverse pleasure to think that, even from a short distance, visitors would not be able to tell them apart.