

Wanda lived down the street. Her daughter Hannah and I were friends. To my teenaged eye, she was elegant, but in truth, she was flashy, almost gaudy. She dyed her hair auburn to please her first husband, then kept it that way once he left her anyway. She wore heavy jewelry; chunks of coral in settings of golden vines, and wide ovoid earrings. Her thick wedding band twined up her finger like a serpent. She was the kind of person who labeled objects like brass urns or Japanese bowls “important.” I found all this drama delightful, and so I dropped by a lot, or went home with Hannah after school. Often it was just Hannah and me, but my favorite times were the three of us together.

Hannah and Wanda were sun worshippers. We called it “laying out.” They oiled their bikini-clad bodies and stretched out on pale sherbet-colored lawn chairs while I huddled in the shade in my Speedo tank suit. Both Wanda and Hannah had thick thighs, though Hannah’s were as yet undimpled. (On the subject of cellulite, Hannah once observed, “My mother’s riddled with it.”) One afternoon, Moon, their albino cat, glided out of the boxwood toward Wanda and tenderly deposited a freshly killed mouse beside her bronze painted toenails. Hannah shrieked and I squealed.

“Girls,” Wanda intoned, wagging a tanned finger. “Nature is red in tooth and claw.”

“Oh, gross, Mom,” Hannah said.

I was dumbstruck. My father’s metaphors extended as far as, “Now he’s behind the financial eight-ball,” whenever another of his friends was ordered to pay alimony.

In our sophomore year of high school, Hannah got in trouble. She started taking a lot of drugs and cutting classes. We hardly ever sat together in the cafeteria anymore. Her new friends hung out in the parking lot during lunch period, the only place where smoking was allowed. She quit the debate team. Eventually, she got into a car accident, during the aftermath of which she literally bit the hand that fed her; in this case, her stepfather Bernard’s. The aftermath of that event was boarding school in Indiana. Wanda’s response to all the turmoil was to spend her time making a six-foot collage of a rooster negotiating traffic. She hung it while I helped Hannah pack.

“Shit, Mom, how do you think that makes me feel?” Hannah asked.

Wanda pursed her lips and considered. Then she said, “Art is supposed to make us feel uncomfortable,” and sauntered away.

I still dropped over once Hannah left, but things were awkward. Wanda made obscure

references to her marriage, such as, "If I didn't understand the power of money, I wouldn't be here," turning to indicate her plushly furnished living room, with its shale fireplace, thick rugs and sleek maple tables. The recessed lights shone down on her flaming hair. "I didn't grow up with money, you know," she confided with an air of sharing a state secret. Bernard was a developer, generally despised for his plundering of surrounding counties.

I wrote to Hannah at boarding school. She hated sharing a room. I saw her briefly at Thanksgiving. Wanda went to Arizona with Bernard, so Hannah had to stay across town with Harlan, her father. I visited her there, but I left when Harlan's girlfriend Tish came over. Tish was tall and wore boots so high they covered most of her long legs. She had a mane of strawberry blonde hair which trailed over her shoulders. Her nose was tiny and her eyes were green. She looked like Puss in Boots. She sprawled on the big white rug that looked like yak hair and rubbed her little snout against Harlan's Keeshond's wet black muzzle.

"Look, Harlan," she said. "Eskimo kisses." The dog backed away from her. Hannah and I rolled our eyes.

By the middle of senior year, I lost touch with both Hannah and Wanda. I stopped writing letters or visiting when my father's importing business went bankrupt. Suddenly, he could no longer afford to send me to college in New York. When my stepmother Bev initiated divorce proceedings, he packed a suitcase, left me a check for his last four hundred dollars, and took off for Florida, where my grandmother lived in a big stucco house near the water. Bev went wild when she discovered his defection.

"That son of a bitch!" she cried. She descended on the clothes remaining in his walk-in closet, stomping on and cutting up his abandoned suits. She tore one of his silk ties with his teeth. I stood in the doorway, watching the destruction. She was too mad to notice me.

There were seven weeks remaining in the school year. A few days after her raid on his closet, she called me into their Louis-style bedroom. "I guess I'm stuck with you," she announced, stabbing a cigarette between her thin lips.

"I just want to graduate," I said.

"You stay out of my way, though. Once you're done, you are out." She ran her hands through her frosted hair, and faced herself in the big, gold-flecked mirror above the mahogany dresser.

“You’re too nice,” she told her reflection.

Of course, people heard about it. Bev told everyone she knew, and she’d lived in Fox Hollow all her life. A steady drizzle of gossip hung over my days like a pregnant cloud. Schoolmates went silent when I passed, catatonic with despair. I stopped speaking in class. I couldn’t even force myself to pretend to pay attention. I looked out the windows at the beech trees, or down at my chewed-up fingernails. Only one of my teachers ever addressed my situation. Mr. Novak, my Thomas Hardy-loving English teacher, kept me after school one day. His pale blue eyes were bright as he perched, Indian-style, on one of the student desks, tucking his Hush Puppies beneath him. His gray slacks rode up and I could see his soft-looking black socks and fuzzy calves. His longish brown hair was always wild with static electricity.

“Amy, I just want you to remember that you’ve got a long life before you, and there’s plenty of time for things to improve. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Just be sure to use it, okay?” He clasped his hands and shook them dramatically in a pleading gesture. He waited for my response, though he might as well have said, “Life is shit and will only get worse” (a summation of my beliefs at that time), for all I heard his message.

“Yeah,” I answered, winging it. I nodded. “Thanks.”

Mr. Novak peered at me, frowning. I looked at the floor. He shrugged, which I read as permission to gather my books.

On graduation day I woke up early and went for a walk. I wasn’t thinking of Wanda, though I arrived on her doorstep like a magnet drawn to metal. She was sitting on the bottom step of her steep staircase, alternately sipping at and blowing on the contents of a thick white mug. I tapped lightly on the storm door, not wanting to startle her. She looked up, smiled, and came outside.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said, her hand resting softly on my head. I stood it for a moment before collapsing into her arms in a fit of passionate, terrified weeping. She embraced me while my body heaved and shuddered.

“What will you do?” she whispered, once I was calm.

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice small. “I’m leaving tonight. Will you keep my books and stuff until I get settled?”

“Of course,” she answered, smoothing my hair.

“Wanda,” Bernard called, in his loud, low voice. He ambled down the steps in his dark leather slippers and iridescent silk robe. He was tall and silver-haired, with one brown eye and one blue eye. He cracked the door and nodded in my direction without meeting my eyes.

“Is there coffee?” he asked, drawing her back into the domain of the house.

“What? Yes,” she answered. She gave me a last squeeze, smiled, and broke away.

Bernard shut the door behind them.

I landed in Chicago. My cousin Glynnis lived in the suburbs, and I stayed there for a while. Marshall, her husband, kept trying to talk me into taking a job at the Chicago Options Exchange. He was tall and heavy-set, with thinning light brown hair which I remembered as blonde from their wedding.

Marshall was a decisive person. When Glynnis deliberated over keeping a landscaper who consistently mowed over their pachysandra, he said, “Fuck it! Forget it! Fire him!” Every morning at exactly 5:45, he pounded twice on the guest room door, my signal to wake. The guest room was a white, frilly place full of sunshine, where I slept deeply and dreamlessly. During my first week with Glynnis and Marshall, I got up late with a feeling of fogginess, as though everything I did throughout the day (and I didn’t do much) pointed toward the goal of returning to bed. Finally, after seven days of drowsiness, I asked Marshall to get me up when he left for work the next morning. After showering and staring out the window at the dew-silvered lawn, I eventually walked east to the Linden stop, catching the Evanston Express into the city. If I was lucky enough to get one of the brown padded seats, I could rest my knees on the barrier of cool, dimpled metal dividing each narrow pew. The old cars had hand-cranked windows, and a hot breeze blew around the riders. After each stop, the mesmerizing resumption of the rhythm of the pounding wheels rocked me back into a sweaty doze. I woke for good as we passed over the Chicago River, green in its depths beneath the sparkling surface.

At Randolph Street, I began my rounds of temp agencies. Once in the city, the thing to do was remain in motion. To stop would require an acknowledgement of the facts I tried hard to submerge, lest they rise and choke me with fear: I was 18, broke, and alone. The stay with Glynnis and Marshall offered only a postponement of the consequences of these conditions. In a

series of tall, mirrored, air-conditioned buildings, I rode the elevators and completed forms meant to assess my professional judgment. “Which is correct? ‘Mr. Smith is in a meeting. May I take a message?’ or ‘Mr. Smith is in the bathroom. Do you want to hang on?’ ” Then there were the data-entry tests. Every agency had the same essay. My scores improved slightly after three days of typing: “Mark Twain once said he could live for days on a good compliment. So could we all.” A thin woman with a blaze of wiry red hair said my lack of skills suited me only for filing.

“I can answer phones. Can’t I answer phones?”

“Unfortunately, your comp scores aren’t strong enough to place you in high visibility. Would you like a Butterfinger?” There were baskets of tiny candy bars on every desk. Her long freckled fingers rooted through the pile.

“No thanks. How much does filing pay?” I asked.

“It opens at five, but you’ve got to start somewhere, right?”

“Five hundred a week?”

Her hair shimmered as she chuckled. “Five dollars an hour.”

The fifth time I heard, “You’ve got to start somewhere, right?” I thought, Nope.

That day when I met Marshall for lunch and he again said, “Join the club,” spreading wide his arms and indicating the view out his glass-walled corner office, I answered, “When?”

“Up and running, that’s the girl.” He grinned. “ ‘Where’s the beef?’ right?”

A few minutes later, I asked, “What’s the pay?” I watched while he examined his reflection in the glow of the elevator’s golden doors. He shimmied slightly while straightening his tie.

“For starters, about four or five.”

“Hundred, right? Per week?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “What do you think, per hour?” The doors slid open with a boom. He led me across the tiled hall of the old Exchange Building into the smoky red glow of the restaurant. A lighted easel held a small white sign on which the specials of the day were listed. There was top sirloin, chuck steak, flank steak, butt steak, ribeye steak, a steak salad with steak fries, or chicken. As we trailed the hostess toward a booth, Marshall glanced at a pair of blondes, nodding and gesturing while they ate.

“What do you hear from your dad?” Marshall asked, unfurling his brown napkin.

“Not a word,” I lied. He had called twice at odd hours, seven and nine o’clock on successive Saturday nights. I hung up as soon as I heard his voice.

“It’s a sad thing,” he said.

Yeah, I thought. Real sad. My friends went to college and he dumps me with Bev and a few hundred bucks. “Too bad, so sad, hard cheese,” I said.

Marshall shrugged. “You’re young. You’ll make out.”

“That’s about it, right? That’s about all I can hope for.”

“Hey, I wanted to be an astronaut, and failing that, a pilot. I know where you’re coming from.”

He spoke loudly, his narrow hazel eyes on the women.

“Listen,” he continued, lowering his voice once they’d turned slightly toward us.

“Everyone gets screwed sometime. Look at it this way — at least you got it over with. You’re out in the real world, and my guess is you’ll make it. If you listen to me, that is.” He nodded at the waitress. “Are we ready?”

That night I wrote Wanda a postcard. “I’m doing okay. My cousin’s husband got me a job. Thank you for storing my stuff.”

Now I rode in with Marshall in the mornings. He kept the top down on his Benz SL, shouting instructions into the wind. His voice was both loud and high-pitched. Though I never saw him once trading began each morning, if I listened closely, I could often distinguish his distinctive shriek through the thunder of a hundred other voices.

“Don’t flinch when the guys curse. Don’t show your legs until they give you a raise. That’ll mean you’re in and the guys can quit checking you out.”

The exits for Wrigley Field and North Avenue appeared and then vanished as we wove in and out of traffic.

“Don’t go out with anyone, not even for drinks with the crowd on Fridays. After your raise, fine. Until then, no. Now, as to the work itself, you fuck up, you’ll cost them. Simple: don’t fuck up. Check every slip twice. Three times, if you have to. They’ll start you slow, but you’ve got to be accurate. Girl runners are good, usually. Smooth. You’ll do good.”

“Why can’t I go out with anyone?”

He scowled.

“You don’t want to make the rounds, believe me. You wait, you see what’s what and who’s who, then you decide. Trust me. You listen and you’ll be fine.”

And so I was. I dogged my trader’s steps and rushed the receipts to the confirmation crew. All around was chaos — white lights vying with the ever-evolving neon ribbons of stock price changes. The crowd was composed of bright-jacketed men clamoring fluidly like a human kaleidoscope. The trading pit itself sent up a great, angry roar. Timmy, my trader, emerged at the end of the day with trembling hands and a voice hoarse from shouting. I kept my mouth shut and my feet moving, trying to memorize the sign language of fractions all the traders used.

At 3:30, I rode the escalators down to the Ceres Bar where Marshall sat with a tired group in loosened neckties. In contrast to his morning pallor, Marshall’s afternoon face was red, his hair sticky with dried sweat. He introduced me the first day.

“This is Amy Heche, my wife’s cousin. She’s doing okay.”

“Hey, Marshall, let me join the family,” said a man on his left. Laughter followed.

“The ranks are closed, my friend.” Marshall stood and stuffed his big arms back into his grey suit jacket, graceless as a gorilla.

“Ranks are closed,” he murmured, rifling through his money clip for a bill.

In six weeks, when I was able to afford an apartment, I wrote to Wanda again.

“I’ll be able to get my stuff soon. Will call with dates and details.”

I kept planning to make the trip back to Fox Hollow once I got settled, but somehow I didn’t do it.

Wanda started sending me letters. At first she was brief.

“Bernard and I are leaving for Arizona October first. If you want your stuff before then, let me know.”

“Sorry, no — really busy,” I wrote.

Every time I contemplated the reality of arriving in Fox Hollow, I imagined our house, waiting like Charybdis to suck me into the void. I could picture all its details: the yellow carpet on

the curving staircase, the sheer curtains in the living and dining rooms, the lighted windows of the china cabinet in which Bev stored her collection of smiling shepherds and milkmaids. The day my father left, I sat outside on a wrought iron settee, folding and unfolding his note to me, black ink on blue legal paper: "I love you. Use the check to take care of yourself. Dad."

By chance, Wanda and Bernard had driven past and seen me sitting stunned in the sunshine. They waved; from across the ocean of our brick half-circle drive, I turned my head.

In late November Wanda wrote again.

"Hannah flew in from Berkeley for the holiday. She is genuinely thrilled with college. I'm so glad she's getting the opportunity. I never went myself, as you know, and look at me now! There is hope for change in life, Amy. Don't ever forget."

"Dear Wanda," I began my reply. "I am fine. I have an apartment, a good job, and the freedom to read whatever I want. Will let you know about picking up my stuff."

Her next letter appeared in my mailbox a week before Christmas. I'd just received a \$1,500 bonus at work. On Christmas Day, I planned to take the train to Glynnis and Marshall's. Glynnis had pointedly wondered about my decorating, and I suspected she'd bought me something big, like a couch. Whenever they stopped over, she stood around, pointedly eyeing the empty spaces. I hadn't bothered with furniture beyond a bed, a stool, and a big yellow rug for the living room floor. I liked the architectural details of the apartment, anyway: the mortise plates fastened to the heavy doors with tiny, blackened nails; the arching nickel spigot over the deep porcelain kitchen sink; the finger-like spindles spanning the water knobs. In the bedroom, a bank of cross-paned windows overlooked a tall white birch that grew in the courtyard. I had a new philosophy since leaving Fox Hollow: Never own anything you couldn't walk away from, or for which you weren't going back.

A fragrant sack of Indian take-out in one hand, Wanda's letter in the other, I rode the coffin-like elevator up to the third floor. My eye was always drawn to the peaked and slanted inspector's signature, posted behind a thin sheet of protective glass: "Signed this day of April 17, 1984." Strangely, I never saw other tenants, though it was easy to sense the life behind the dozens of closed doors, the entire building humming like a hive. Once inside my apartment, I stood at the kitchen counter, reading as I ate.

"You and I have a lot in common, Amy. We've both had to make it on our own. Aren't

you proud of yourself? You're a wonderful example for Hannah," Wanda concluded.

I thought for a while, then found a pen and paper.

"Dear Wanda, Don't write to me anymore. I don't need your bullshit cheerleading. Throw out my stuff because I'm never coming back."

I stood for a moment before crumpling both letters and tossing them in the garbage with the remains of my dinner. Then I threw on my coat and walked two blocks to Lake Michigan, where I sat on a bench staring out at the rippled grey-green surface of the still-unfrozen water. In the mornings, the express bus passed along the shore, but I was always jostled away from the view. Sometimes at dusk on Sundays, when the combination of lonely restlessness drove me outdoors, I went to the lake, where the murmuring waves seemed to echo my thoughts: "What will happen? What will happen to you?"

In March, I was promoted, with another raise. Now instead of working the floor, I ascended to the office, where I tabulated put-call ratios and assisted with expirations. I was given a desk and a computer.

Barry Doyle was my new boss. After shaking my hand, he said, "I'll say this once. I don't care how it happens, but I want the work done correctly and on time. That's all I care about."

The whites of his eyes were perpetually red. Barry was 44, with a pair of ex-wives about whom he complained.

"I said to her, 'You want my nuts? Take 'em! You've got everything else!' No offense, ladies."

May, the other female checker, and I laughed. Other than we two, there were Donny, Mick, and Doug Dintz. No one liked Dintz. During my first week, while he instructed me on the computer, I got confused and mistyped a digit.

"Are you fucking stupid?" he asked.

"Shut up, Dintz!" Donny said.

Mick said, "You asshole, Dintz!"

"You probably learned her wrong, you stupid Dintz," May said.

"It's no big deal," I said.

"You suck, Dintz," Donny added.

Donny had his martial arts magazines delivered directly to the office. Sometimes he read

the classified ads aloud. “Lovely Asian brides seek masterful husbands. Satisfaction guaranteed. Photos available.”

“If I had a gun, I’d blow your fucking brains out,” Dintz said to the room at large. He was short and wide, with an abbreviated moustache like a smear above his thin wet lips.

“My ex-wives would sue your fat ass,” Barry answered. He rubbed his chin. “It would save me alimony, though.”

In the midst of learning my new responsibilities, a letter came from Hannah.

“Dear Amy, I got your address from my Mom. Berkeley is cool; very different from Fox Hollow. No one cares what you do, or how you look. I like it here a lot. My Mom says you’re doing well in Chicago. I’m glad. In a way, I envy you being free of all the shit that parents dish out along with their checks for tuition. You have relatives there, right? Are they nice? If you ever want to come out to Berkeley to visit you’re welcome, only don’t say anything to Wanda if she asks, since I’ve never invited her.”

“Dear Hannah,” I wrote. “I really am okay. I work at the CBOE. Having my own apartment is great, although it’s weird to me that I can work and pay my rent but still can’t go to bars or buy beer. I think there ought to be a responsibility clause to the age laws: if you’re self-supporting, you should be able to drink.

“Thanks a lot for the invitation, though I probably won’t take you up on it, at least for a while. I just got promoted so I can’t go anywhere. If you want, you can come here, though. I have lots of room.

“It’s good being on my own. It was a lot worse worrying about it, if you know what I mean. It’s like, you think and think about the worst thing that can happen, and what you’ll do if it does, and then when it finally really does, you find it’s not so bad. Remember how we used to worry about failing Mr. Brunswick’s tests? It’s kind of like that, only more so. Nothing worse can happen. I mean, I feel like I can handle it, you know? My cousins have been great. Thanks for writing.”

One day late in April, Glynnis called and invited me to lunch. I walked over to Italian Village on Monroe to meet her. Passing Ann Taylor on LaSalle, I felt pleased to note I could afford everything in the window. Barry was always yelling at Dintz for his poor hygiene.

“Dintz, you stink!”

Dintz got a look like a cornered rat and slammed out of the office, returning with wet-

combed hair and his pants belted high across his ample middle. Everyone else dressed well, and I tried to keep up. May almost always wore skirts and heels, so I did too.

Once we were seated, Glynnis said, "Amy, I don't want to lie to you. I asked you here for a purpose. Your grandmother called last week. She says your father worries about you all the time."

"I'll bet," I said. I held the menu before my face.

She moved it aside. "Honey, you may think you're punishing him, but it's you you're really hurting. You'll always regret wasting time on anger."

"You think so?" I asked. "What would have happened to me if you hadn't been around? He didn't give a shit about me. He saved his own ass, not mine. What do you think it was like living with Bev after he left? I had to beg her to let me stay and finish high school."

"Honey, it isn't about right and wrong."

"It is. It is," I said.

The red walls of the restaurant gleamed in the soft sconce lights. Everyone looked prosperous and unconcerned about the future. I wanted to blend right in.

"Things get complicated for people. It's hard to know what's best sometimes," Glynnis said.

I turned my face away while she spoke. Suddenly she reached out a soft, cool hand and lightly held my chin.

"Write to him, Amy. Let him know you're all right."

"He doesn't deserve it," I argued. I scowled and my eyes were wet, but still I held her gaze.

"Honey, you've done well for yourself. No one's disputing that."

I opened my mouth but she shook her head and continued. "Your father's not young. What will it cost you to send him some reassurance?"

"Plenty," I said.

"Sweetheart, I'm afraid you'll regret all this anger someday."

I looked down at the table and rubbed my unused spoon in small circles across the thick white tablecloth. Glynnis was watching when I raised my head. The yellow sapphire necklace she always wore glinted against the pale freckled skin of her breastbone. Blonde hair nestled at her

shoulders. She'd gone from home to college to marriage within half a decade. I couldn't imagine that kind of path anymore. I could mend the tear in my life with money and independence, but even in the pink light of family affection, the scar would always show.

"You're a different breed from me," I wanted to say, but didn't. The night I arrived at her door, she'd taken me right in, saying, "You're always welcome here, Amy."

"I hope you'll reconsider someday," she said softly. I shrugged. It was time to get back to work.

Barry wanted to promote me to manager. I'd deal with salaries and new hires, all the in-house H.R.

"How bad do you want it?" he asked.

Outside the office windows, late afternoon sunlight shone autumn gold on the mirrored surfaces of nearby buildings. Everyone but us had left for the weekend.

"I want it."

I craved it, really: more money, more responsibility, my own office. In the months since my promotion, I worked all the time, even through the summer when most of the staff took their half-days and vacations. If a volunteer was needed to pull an extra Saturday, I did it. I stayed late every Thursday and Friday night, and on Monday mornings I was always early. Though the circumstances had changed, my motto remained: keep moving. I could never take the chance of feeling unmoored, as I had those last weeks in Fox Hollow.

Much of my dedication was loneliness. I knew almost no one outside of work. Everyone my age was either in school or else struggling at low wage jobs, unapproachably defensive behind a cashier's smock or a waitress uniform. I attended movies and plays in my neighborhood, I took myself on trips to Chinatown and Buckingham Fountain, but everyone I saw seemed either closely bound or deliberately solitary, armored with hostility. Eyes were meant to be avoided. Once on South Wabash I returned a man's smile, after which he softly called, "Hello, whore." There was no one with whom I could compare notes, no one to whom I could say, "It's so

different here!" I was grateful to be whole and self-sufficient, but my moments of contentment outside of work subsided like mist in the glare of morning. There were times when I awoke sweating two or three hours before dawn, my heart pounding. The blackness of my bedroom felt heavy, like a clammy, confining blanket. The only escape lay in calling the office to hear my own voice say, "Thank you for calling Venture Investments. Our office hours are..." Thus reassured of my connection to the rest of the world, I relaxed and eventually slept again. Work was my harbor. I longed to be further anchored, made fast.

Now Barry peered at me from across his desk. "How do I know you can handle this? You're young --- are you ready? Reassure me."

"Barry, I said I want it. What else is there to say?"

He rocked in his leather swivel chair.

"What do I tell May?" he asked. "You know she's ahead of you in seniority."

His remaining curls had diminished into a metallic frizz. His pale eyes bulged. What had his ex-wives seen in him?

"Tell her the truth, that I need it more."

He grinned. "Tough little nut, aren't you?"

"Give her a raise instead," I said. "She's probably due."

He slapped his palms on the arms of his chair.

"Okay. You've got it. Don't make me look bad. Now get out of here so I can talk to Peggy."

Peggy supervised our branch, and always approved Barry's requests.

Twenty minutes later, on the corner of Madison and LaSalle, I waited for my bus under the big Bank Leumi clock with its baffling Hebrew numbers. I wanted to whoop, jump and dance, but instead stood quietly with the other expressionless riders. Swarms of rush-hour liberates swerved around our silent crowd. A face detached itself from the mob, hovering above me with an expression of uncertainty. "I probably don't know where it is," I said.

Whenever I was asked for directions, natives inevitably interrupted and corrected me.

"I think I know you. Amy, right? Fox Hollow?"

"Who are you?" My heart pounded.

"Jack Mapes. Basketball? Swim Team?"

I remembered him. A year ahead of me. Popular, dated younger girls. We'd never spoken.

"You live here now? You look great." His dark eyes raced over me.

"Yeah. Here's my bus," I lied.

"Great! Mine too."

I pretended to squint at the numbers. A row of silver-headed parking meters stood like sentries, blocking my escape.

"My mistake. You go ahead," I said.

"No, no, I'll wait."

The doors closed, and the bus pulled away with a puff of sulphurous exhaust.

"So what are you doing now?" he asked.

I sighed. "Working."

"Really? What at?"

"Options trading."

"Must be exciting. You like it?"

"Yes." He'd have been so handsome if he hadn't come from Fox Hollow. Go away, I thought.

He watched me in silence for a moment, bouncing lightly on the balls of his big feet.

When my bus finally appeared from around the corner, I turned away to board. Suddenly, he said, "Want to get together sometime?"

The line was moving. In an instant, I'd be free. "I work a lot," I answered.

"Well, maybe I'll see you around, okay?"

"Sure," I said, certain it would never happen. The doors closed behind me, the engine groaned, and we surged into traffic.

The next few days were bad. All through the weekend, I was plagued by memories of home as it looked every autumn, when the stands of maple across from our house and Wanda's blazed orange and amber before the leaves wafted down, blowing over the road before being gathered by the city. I knew Fox Hollow best as a pedestrian: the smooth cement sidewalks giving way before the gradual low curbs of the wide boulevards lined with hawthorne trees. Streetlights were few, but every house had either lighted pillars or yellow-burning carriage lamps

beside a thick front door. I had often walked without purpose, sometimes even skipping school to do so, though now I thought that I had had a purpose: reassurance. Every house seemed girded with stability. Surely something so big would not give way? The façade of security could never afford to crack, weakening, as it would, the others. I'd been too young to realize that the only mortar behind these suburban palaces was money, and that no one had a stake in maintaining anyone. When the House of Heche collapsed under the strain of bankruptcy, divorce ensued and the place was sold. (Bev must have sold.) I tried never to permit myself the luxury of homesickness, but that weekend it returned to me unbidden, like phantom pain in a missing limb.

On Monday, May gave notice after learning she'd been superseded. Marching out of Barry's office, she appeared before my desk. The nostrils of her pretty freckled nose flared.

"Let's talk," she said.

I followed her into the break room, where the guys from the trading floor liked to watch soap operas during lunch. Small white packs of salt littered the big pink table. She closed the door and leaned against it, folding her arms across her chest. White fluorescent bulbs throbbed above us, casting a crown of light on her smooth black hair.

"Listen, the position was offered to me, and I took it," I began. "I'd expect you to do the same thing."

"Well, it wasn't, and I didn't," she answered.

"What do you want me to say, May? I'm sorry, all right?"

She frowned, lightly bouncing her back against the door. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked.

I moved behind the table.

"What? Nothing."

Stray hair stuck to my lipstick and I tucked it back behind my ear.

She crept forward.

"You showed up here and took over. You crowded me out. You played dirty."

"Barry approached me, May, not the other way around. Go back and bawl him out."

I stepped around her toward the door.

Her smoky breath floated toward me on her words. "You screwed me."

I shook my head. "I told Barry to give you more money."

“Fuck you,” she said.

“Get out of my way, May.”

She came closer, close enough to show her pores and the individual spikes of her painted eyelashes.

“Whatever it is that’s wrong with you, I want you to know it shows. I mean it. Everyone sees it. We’ve all talked about it. Nobody really likes you here, Amy.” Then she stepped aside, moisture glinting in her shining eyes. She was pretty and sleek, like a mink. Her voice cracked when she next spoke.

“Go to hell.”

Through the afternoon, I moved into the small vacant office beside Barry’s bigger one. Dintz remarked, “To the victor go the spoils,” and though Mick said, “Shut up, Dintz,” it sounded automatic. Clouds raced across the silver sky, warning of the coming winter. When I left, the wind on my cheeks was cold, and a fine, gritty rain had begun. The corner was empty, which meant I’d just missed the bus. Annoyance swelled within me like a goiter.

“Godamned shitty Monday,” I muttered. Footsteps approached, but I didn’t look up.

“You here again?” It was Jack, wielding an enormous blue umbrella. “We have to stop meeting like this.” His white teeth were perfect as he smiled.

My annoyance swelled into anger. “What are you doing, lurking or something?”

“Lurking? I just came up from Hyde Park.”

“Conveniently landing at the same spot at the same time.”

He flushed, red staining his brown cheeks. “I’m not trying to stalk you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“What do you want with me?” I asked. “I’m the girl with the fucked-up family, remember?”

From beneath the muted twilight of his umbrella, he curled his lips as he spoke. “Yeah, you’ve really moved on since high school.”

“What are you even doing here?” I asked.

He raised a hand, showing his palm. “I thought it would be nice to get together, that’s all. It won’t happen again.” He turned, his big umbrella revolving with him.

I stood biting my lips for a moment, while the wind slashed my hair and a feeling of shame bloomed in my chest.

"It's been a bad day," I called toward his receding back. "I got a promotion!"

He kept walking.

"Hey! Don't you want to hear about it?"

He turned around to face me. I tried to smile, though my eyes watered from the growing cold.

"It's kind of a big deal," I added. As he came up beside me, he gave off a good scent of clean hair and warm skin. Boy smell.

"Tell me," he said.

He had dropped out of the University of Chicago, after a year and one week of classes.

"I couldn't take it," he explained. "All last summer I couldn't stand to think about going back."

"How come?"

It was a Sunday afternoon in November. We sat by the wall-length windows at the Creek Café. Outside, the first snowflakes of the season fell. On the nearby corner of Belmont and Broadway, a short, fat man in a belted overcoat sold tiny American flags, methodically greeting the passersby in nasal tones: "Hi; Hello; Hi; Hi."

"I don't even know if I can explain it. There's all this moronic pressure to be a certain type of person, a certain type of guy, you know? I felt like I hadn't gotten anywhere, like I was still stuck with all the same kinds of jerks I knew in high school. I just couldn't find a way out without leaving."

He sat sideways in a curved wooden chair, his long legs extended, arms moving as he spoke. His plaid flannel shirt was missing a single pearly button on the cuff. The fabric flopped loosely whenever he gestured, exposing a wrist sculpted with veins and a dusting of dark, soft hair.

"I don't remember you suffering in high school," I said.

"Yeah. You saw the outside. You have no idea how many stupid rules there were. There

were people I couldn't even talk to without my friends giving me shit.”

Had I been one? I looked down at my coffee.

“So how did your family take it?” I asked.

Jack's house was one of the largest in Fox Hollow, a brick behemoth swollen with turrets and glass. Low cannon-like spotlights hid among the carved, molded bushes, casting a strategic brightness. Bev knew his mother, Rita. His senior year, Jack occasionally drove Rita's Jaguar to school, parking it casually beside the teacher's big Bonnevilles.

He gathered himself in before answering. “Well, that was the thing. I got lucky, in a way.”

“Tell me.” We smiled.

“I doubt you know her, but my older sister Rhea's kind of wild. I mean, she's not a criminal or anything, but she just had a hard time settling down. Okay, so about two years ago she gets married to this big deal guy in Florida, he gives her a Porsche as a wedding present, my parents think he'll take care of her, everything looks great, right? So just about the time I'm going nuts in Hyde Park, my mother calls. Rhea just called to say she's left Buddy for a friend of his. And she's pregnant. She and this new guy are going to New Mexico to wait for the baby. Rhea doesn't want her born around all the bad karma Buddy's generating in Boca Raton.

“So I'm listening to this, feeling like the world is going to crash if I let them down too, and all of a sudden, I just blurt it out: ‘Mom, I've got to get out of here, I've got to change my life, I'm dying.’ So she freaks some more, and we hang up, and then my dad calls from the hospital, where all these years I've never been able to call him, and starts in ‘You're killing us, we were so proud of you,’ blah, blah, blah. So I'm really going nuts now, pacing around my stinking little dorm room. I start yelling about how I've tried to do everything right and I'm still not happy and it's my life and if they don't like it I'll hitchhike down to Taos and hang out with Rhea. I'm like, shouting and crying all this shit. So he's trying to calm me down, saying, ‘Okay, All Right, Come Home, We'll Talk’. So I go, and it sucks, but I get free, you know? I came back and got an apartment on Clark Street.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

He looked happy. “I have no idea. I just want to walk around for a while, you know? Just look at all the buildings. Maybe travel. Read without having to hear the opinions of a bunch of other morons.”

Here was the gulf between us. His freedom was internal, the axis around which his decisions revolved. It wasn't just the money behind him, though I envied that too. Nothing stood between his parents and him, no chasm yawned between what he wanted and what he feared. Experimentally, I considered the thought of leaving my job and living on my already healthy savings; all I could picture was the murky haze of aimless days. My formerly loose goals of going to college, and finding a fun, undemanding career before getting married seemed now to be not only ridiculous but actively dangerous. Every dollar I saved, every hour I worked, every night I returned to the apartment whose every cent in rent I gleefully paid, distanced me from the rootless, defenseless girl I'd been those last weeks in Fox Hollow.

Jack shifted in the silence.

"Hey, whatever happened to Hannah Myers?"

"She goes to Berkeley. She and her mom still write to me."

"You guys were pretty close, right?"

"Yes." It feels like another lifetime, I thought.

"Wild child. Like Rhea."

I cleared my throat. "Does Rhea look like you?"

I pictured her as tall and black-haired, the balls of her shoulders smooth and tanned. Rita Mapes played a lot of tennis; maybe Rhea did, too.

"Actually, no. She's kind of thin, like you. Maybe our eyes are alike?"

His were shiny and dark, curved upward at the corners where his lashes met and curled. Again we fell silent. He leaned forward.

"So how did you become a trader?" he asked.

"My cousin's husband got me into it, but I'm not a trader. I'm not even working on the floor anymore. I'm the office manager now."

"But you like it, right?"

"I like the profession, yes."

He sat back again.

"Did you go to school at all, or get right into it? It must be nice to know what you want."

He twirled the milky remnants of his coffee.

"C'mon, Jack. Everyone knows what happened."

He rubbed his nose and sniffed. "All I know is that something happened with your family, and most of that I got from you, remember?"

"Oh, like Bev didn't go yapping around your mother."

He shrugged. "Maybe she did, but so what? Who cares what people think?"

"It's not what they think; it's how I wound up feeling."

In my mind's eye, I saw again those narcotized spring days between my father's departure and my own graduation. Like the living dead.

"I didn't mean it like that. You think I can't understand? People everywhere have big problems."

"Not in Fox Hollow, they don't," I said. "We graduated, everyone else went to college, I came here. What else was there?"

"So you feel cheated. Being happy with where you are isn't enough."

I hesitated. "I'm glad I'm doing well. I think I'll always be able to take care of myself. I just feel like these years are different for me, like I went straight from adolescence to adulthood with a few weeks of total anxiety in between."

"You could still go to school, you know."

"I've thought of that. Isn't it a one-shot deal, though? Either you go when it's time, or you don't. Now it would feel like going backwards, I think."

"It hasn't been that long," he said.

I sighed. "Some days it feels like forever, others like it's all right behind me."

Outside the sky was darkening and snow was finally beginning to stick to the pavement. My second Chicago winter was about to commence.

Two weeks later we were riding the train after a midnight showing of "Stop Making Sense".

"I think I'll get a big white suit," Jack said. He wiggled his eyebrows and worked his shoulders up and down.

"Where would you wear it?"

"Job interviews?"

"At the Funny Farm? The Academy of Laughter?"

"You know, for someone who hasn't gone to college, you sure know a lot of weird

expressions.”

I knocked my knee against his leg. “You know, for someone who hated college, you sure talk about it a lot.”

We were squeezed together, the sleeves of our jackets rubbing. All through the movie, I’d been conscious of the spread of his fingers on his narrow flanks, his hard shoulders beneath the thin layer of his plaid shirt, his pulse faintly throbbing in the smooth shallow scoop at the base of his throat. Suddenly, as if reading my mind, he kissed my hair, and when I turned in surprise, he went for my lips. I felt the blood rush to my cheeks.

“That’s okay, right?” he asked.

I nodded slowly, watching his lips form and release the words. The lights in the car went dark and we hurtled forward in blackness, the murmurs of other riders swirling around us. When our stop was called, he reached for my hand and pulled me up.

“Let me come home with you,” he whispered. We hurried through the doors before they closed on us like guillotines.

“Do you think we’ll regret it?” I asked, stepping from the concrete platform onto the slow and narrow escalator, with its wide, slippery hand belt, faintly greasy from countless gripping fingers. My heart thumped in my chest.

“I know I won’t,” he answered, as we rose toward the sweet, cold air of release that awaited us.

Suddenly, the holidays were upon me again. Glynnis and Marshall were going to Acapulco with Marshall’s brother, his second wife, and the children of his first marriage.

“I feel so bad leaving you, honey,” Glynnis said.

I’d been with them for Thanksgiving, sitting around their big oval table while Ramsey, the puppy Marshall bought Glynnis for her birthday, rammed my legs with his damp black nose. When Marshall caught me feeding him bits of barbecued turkey breast, he said, “This dog is going to be the mooch of all time.”

Glynnis cleared her throat. "Amy, we have a surprise for you. Since we're not going to be here for Christmas, we want to give you your present now."

"You can leave me out of this one," Marshall said.

"Marshall. Anyway, here it is." She slid a long white envelope across the varnished surface of the dark wood. Inside was a first-class, round-trip ticket to Florida, good for six months.

"I told her, 'Glynnis, you're completely, totally wrong to do this. It's up to her.' "

"Go see him, honey. You can enjoy the sun."

"I can't believe you did this," I said.

"You see?" Marshall said. "Why should she see him if she doesn't want to? It's her life."

"What about family unity? What about forgiveness?" she asked.

"Hey, the circumstances are a little bit tricky here," Marshall said. "I feel for the guy, Glynnis, I really do, but he left the kid in the lurch. Why should she be in any hurry? Let the moment happen."

"Maybe she could use a little time off."

Little did she suspect: given the opportunity, I'd work through the entire holiday season, including both Christmas and New Year's Day.

"This kid thrives on work," Marshall said.

Before the argument progressed, I spoke. "I can't accept this." I pushed my gold-rimmed plate away and tossed my napkin beside it.

Glynnis waved her long fingers. "It's non-refundable," she sang. "Marshall, are you ready for pie?"

Then there was Jack.

"I've got to go home," he said. "Rhea's bringing the baby. My parents will die if I don't come."

"They'll die?"

"Die," he repeated.

We were lying in bed on a Sunday afternoon, the scrolled and painted radiators hissing throughout his apartment. The bare windows were filled with gray light. I could hear the faint bleating of traffic two stories below. Jack sat up, rubbed his hair, and yawned. He had a few black beauty marks spattered like melted fudge against the golden skin of his back.

"Why don't you come with me?"

“Fox Hollow is the last place I want to go,” I said. “You know that.”

“Amy, why don’t you get over this? We’d have fun. You could meet my parents.”

“I’m sure your mother would be thrilled with my company,” I said, swinging myself out of bed. My clothes lay in a trail on the brown carpet.

“You have really low expectations of people, you know that?”

“My expectations are on par with my experiences,” I answered.

“Then it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don’t you think that my having chosen you would affect her perceptions?”

My sweatshirt made a cone of warmth as I pulled it over my head, the fleece soft against my breasts.

“Jack, I don’t want to start from behind, and that’s always where I’ll be in Fox Hollow.”

He was quiet a moment, standing naked in the dim light, purple shadows on his penis.

“Then what are you doing with me?” he asked.

I slumped on the messy, faintly reeking sheets. “I don’t know.”

He crouched before me, the soft sack of his scrotum swinging. “But you are here, and it’s good, right?”

I scratched at a flaky patch near my elbow in silence.

“Well, what if my mom is rude, which she won’t be, but what if? I mean, so what? You can handle her. It’s not like anything that happened is even your fault!” He gave a little laugh.

“I think it cast a reflection,” I said. “There was this cloud or something around me. It was like everyone thought, ‘What kind of girl would this happen to?’ I mean, everyone, even my friends, stopped talking to me.”

“What if I asked you to come with me as a favor?” he asked. “Would you do it then? If it didn’t work out we could leave right away. I’d want to leave if they were rude. I really think this is a good time, though. They’re distracted with the baby, anyhow. Let’s hit ‘em all at once.”

I smiled. “You’re really milking this Rhea thing, you know.”

“Tell me. ‘Strike while the iron is hot,’ blah, blah, blah.” He cleared his throat. “Will you try it, for us?”

“Don’t put it like that.”

“I have to, or else you won’t go. Please?” He squeezed my knee.

I stood. "I don't want to go to Michigan, I don't want to go to Florida. I don't want to do anything but work."

"Fine. Stick your head in the sand like an ostrich. It's your problem," Jack said.

"I asked a guy at work, I said, 'What do you do for the holidays, Donny?' He said, 'I go to my mother's and pretend to enjoy myself, and I count the hours 'til I can leave, that's what,' he told me."

"Okay! Live with your stinking bitterness! 'Oh, poor Amy, her family's messed up, boo-hoo.' God! You think you're the only one things happened to in Fox Hollow? Remember Tonya Litvak? Her dad was caught embezzling last year, and her little sister, the one who was so good in track? Always running, even at night? She's anorexic. They had to put her in the hospital twice in three months. You're old news, Amy. Old news." He turned away and reached for his jeans.

"Are they leaving?" I asked. "They might as well. No one will ever speak to them again."

He snorted. "You're just a broken record. No, they're not leaving. Why should they? Some people will drop them, some people won't, life goes on!"

"I bet they won't last a year," I said.

"They already have! You couldn't last. Your father couldn't last. But other people do. Figure it out."

"I had to leave. Bev gave me a deadline. I flew out a few hours after graduation."

"Look, I'm sure you did what was best. But it's different for everyone. You're not a pariah, okay? No one cares that much. People have their own problems." Shirtless, he faced me. A lofty cloud of black hair rose from his crotch, tapering into an ascending line toward his navel.

I sat on the floor, my back against a fake wood paneled wall.

"I want to believe you, I really do. I think about it there all the time, how beautiful it was, how safe I felt before everything happened. But what if you're wrong? What if your mom treats me like dirt? What if I go back and it's horrible?"

He kneeled at my feet and held my toes, warming them between his big fingers. "What if I talk to her in advance?" he asked.

"No. No way. It's too shabby."

"Amy, come with me. Give it a try. We're never going to make it if we don't face this."

“If I don’t face this. If I refuse.”

“We’ll do it together. It’ll all work out. Trust me.”

“ ‘Trust you.’ ”

“I already made the reservations,” he said.

I quarreled with myself continually in the days before the trip. Wednesday morning on the bus I thought, This is by far the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. Traffic was light on the drive, and I had a clear view of the frosty, choppy gray water. I wanted to spend my free time walking or working. What stopped me was cowardice: was it pathetic to spend the holidays alone if you didn’t have to?

A few hours later at our company luncheon, while Barry described the round-robin visits due his scattered children (“Then I drop off Brooke and Alexis before going to my folks’ with Noah and Drew.”), I thought about the irony of involving myself with Jack. Why had I ever chosen someone from Fox Hollow? I tried to part the clouds of confusion that overhung my feelings for him. The immediate answers were easy --- opportunity and familiarity --- but surely there was something more? If I ended things, I’d be free of the quicksand of Fox Hollow. Almost immediately, the image of a silver-suited astronaut sprung into my mind, faceless behind a visored helmet, floating free as the cold blankness of space spun away from his reaching fingers. I shuddered. Why could I find no median between suffocation and oblivion?

“So then the day after Christmas, the phone calls start. Last year, Brooke didn’t like her Cabbage Patch; she wanted a kitten. Didn’t care if Alexis is allergic. ‘You keep Alexis, Daddy!’ So I said to Marilyn, ‘Why do you do this to me?’ and she said, ‘Revenge, Barry. R-E-V-E-N-G-E.’ ”

“Why does she hate you?” I asked.

We sat on opposite sides of the long table, a centerpiece of fragrant, pink-tongued lilies between us. Most of the other guests had gone, festivity departing along with their laughter.

Barry’s blue eyes looked pale in his red face. “She doesn’t. Every other time I see her, she mentions getting back together.”

“And when you refuse, she punishes you?”

He laughed without smiling. “That’s about right.”

We sat quietly in the now empty restaurant, listening to the metallic clatter of utensils from the kitchen.

“I think it’s that time,” I said. I had delayed packing, unconvinced I would actually make the trip.

He sighed. “Time to face the music.”

We retrieved our coats from the abandoned cloakroom, brass hangers chiming. Just before stepping into a wedge of revolving door, he asked, “Happy with your bonus?”

He waited on the sidewalk, a toothpick perched between his thick lips.

“I keep thinking I should go to Paris instead of home,” I said.

This year, in deference to my added responsibilities, he’d doubled my bonus to \$3,000.

“Tough choice,” he called, waving as he walked off into the early twilight.

“See you Tuesday!” I called.

In the distance, he nodded. In the moments just prior to the sudden blink of streetlights, the avenues were nearly deserted. When a lone cab appeared, I hailed it and climbed inside, settling back to watch the wipers as they rhythmically cleared falling snow from the windshield.

Packing took hours. I stood before the closet for minutes at a time, unable to focus. At one point, I found myself dozing on the couch (which I thought of as Glynnis’ with its scrolled and studded arms, its deep, velvet nap, its boat-like heft and density). Waking, I returned to the closet, where I chose and folded a yellow cotton sweater, then washed my face. Hunted for slippers, then brushed my teeth. Eventually, Jack called to check on me.

“Going okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I lied.

“It’s going to be fine, you know.”

“Fine or fun?”

“Fine and fun. See you in the morning.”

After hanging up, I reached into the cedar-scented top drawer of my dresser, fingers fumbling beneath piles of fresh underpants, unearthing Glynnis’ ticket. I tucked it into my suitcase (still another of her gifts, meant to urge me along), behind the balled and bundled socks in a

peach-colored side pouch. Maybe I could apply the fare to Paris if things went badly in Fox Hollow. Then I went to bed, where I dreamed of tangled telephone cords, high wires, and flagpoles.

Dr. Mapes met us at the airport. My first sight of him left me wondering how such a gnome had spawned tall, handsome Jack. He wore a loose gray suit, the jacket open to reveal a bulging belly in a white shirt with irregular blue stripes. His head was large, though his creased neck was short, and his straight, sculpted nose swam in the expanse of his big cheeks. A flesh-colored mole lurked like a blister beside his left nostril. He wore a pair of glasses with blue oblong frames that somehow organized and completed his face.

“Jack! Good to see you,” he said, reaching up to embrace his son.

I hung back, watching, while disembarking passengers swerved around us.

“Dad, this is Amy Heche.”

Dr. Mapes turned and smiled, his eyes still shining from the pleasure of reunion. His gaze absorbed the sight of me, from my black polished shoes to the sheen on my combed, styled hair. He nodded, keeping his hands on Jack, steering us away from the gate and the waiting area, down the wide tiled hall, past banks of telephones and perpetually spouting drinking fountains. We had flown in on the same airline by which I had departed two years earlier, and as we passed the gate where I had waited in despair and uncertainty, a wave of nausea ran through me. After launching a final pat on his father’s meaty shoulder, Jack reached a long arm around my waist and pulled me closer, forcing me to match his stride. By the time we found the Jaguar in the garage, Jack had answered all his questions. I sat in front, beside Dr. Mapes.

“Jack tells me you’re in options, Amy.”

We raced along the circling, twisting roads leading out of the airport, passing a chunky hotel limousine identical to that which had ferried me away from Fox Hollow. Bev had dropped me off at the nearest Marriott, saying by way of farewell, “You know, my mother warned me not to marry your father. Why didn’t I listen? Well, goodbye. Good luck. You’ll need it.” The aged driver

had seemed to me like the oarsman on the river Lethe.

“I’m in management now,” I explained, looking out the window.

I’d forgotten the mild, rolling hills, the winter brown of the grass beside the mounds of melting snow.

“She’s been promoted three times in two years, Dad,” Jack said.

“Twice,” I murmured, correcting him.

I was still staring outside. The blue exit signs were the same. We flew past “Grosse Point, next right.”

Dr. Mapes and Jack shared the habit of clearing their throats before speaking. “You grew up here?”

“24745 Maple Dell Drive,” I replied.

There was silence for a moment, and then they spoke simultaneously. “And college...” began Dr. Mapes.

“How’s Rhea?” asked Jack.

“This baby is the best thing that ever happened to her. Your mother is thrilled.”

“Did the guy come too?”

“You mean Winston? Yes.”

“So? What’s he like?”

Dr. Mapes sighed. “How does one describe a Winston?”

The bafflement in his voice drew me back from observing the forgotten but familiar view. I turned in my seat to look at Jack, big hands resting on his outstretched knees, grinning.

“Well, he’s not a young man, son. Nor does he appear to be employed.”

“Is he solvent?”

“Well, that’s just it. The guy seems flush, but from what?” He paused. “God forbid I wouldn’t want to know.”

Jack snickered. “Jesus.”

“But Rhea looks good, I’ve got to admit. Not so skinny. She’s eating with us for a change, thank God.”

“Yeah, remember how she would never eat? She’d just sit and smoke.”

“ ‘Sniff, sniff,’ remember?”

“Yeah. The continual cold.” Jack flicked his eyes at me and smirked.

By this time, we'd progressed into Fox Hollow. We glided along Halle Boulevard, past the car dealership where, in verdant months, the name “Cadillac” was incised into the sloping greenery of the shallow tree lawn. Across the street the boxy T.G.I. Friday's remained in place, its green-and-white serpent-tongued flags fluttering in the winter wind. Giant wreaths with flopping red ribbons festooned the streetlights. I thought of the many Christmases my father and I had driven this road after shopping for gifts. An aching nostalgia rose within me, and for once, I let it come. I recalled his profile in the dark car, the chiseled, curving line from his nose to his chin arching and receding like a Roman sculpture. He had thick, glossy, camel-colored hair, and round reddish-brown eyes, with black-rimmed irises, which I inherited.

For the first time, I wondered what his life was like now. My grandmother Effie, a tall woman with a crest of faded hair like an egret in summer, and a collection of dismal, milky opal jewelry, probably kept him busy. She was a sociable old lady with memberships in two country clubs, and a talent for card playing and mah jongh. Whenever I visited, I kissed her good night amid a sea of solitaire towers, spread before her on the mahogany dining room table, in the dim pink light of an antique lamp with a heavily fringed shade. She kept an old white Lincoln with red vinyl seats in the depths of her damp garage, in which she launched herself into traffic, setting her sails toward the bank, the market, and the local liquor store. When I was younger, she served me Shirley Temples and chunky orange circus peanuts with a smooth yet gummy texture like wet silk, while she sipped a gin rickey. We sat in the living room at cocktail hour, the yellow sateen curtains drawn against the afternoon sunshine. I always landed on the pea-green velvet couch, my child's legs extended high above the floor. Effie sat in a white wing chair emblazoned with a strutting crewel peacock. Crossing her legs, she swung a bony calf and narrow foot as she opened the familiar game: “I spy...a little girl.” Since leaving Fox Hollow, I'd ignored her as well as my father, as though she were his accessory. And she had colluded, hadn't she, by offering him his solitary shelter? They'd known where I was in the weeks after his defection. There hadn't been any invitations.

Jack tapped my arm. Dr. Mapes had spoken. “I said, ‘Look familiar?’ ”

“It's all the same,” I answered. We turned, and then turned again, the tires of the Jaguar crunching the shards of white limestone on the Mapes' horseshoe driveway. Though I'd recalled

their house was large, I'd forgotten its castle-like details: the blood color of the bricks, the mullioned windows, the stone steps leading to the wooden front door, which opened to frame Jack's mother, holding a swaddled, pink-faced bundle.

"Come here and meet your niece this instant!" she called. Her pitch and tone were peremptory, the demanding voice of the Fox Hollow matron. Bev had had it too, employing it on everyone from pizza delivery men to the shuffling pharmacists who refilled her prescriptions for Valium. In response, Jack stepped forward obediently, while Dr. Mapes unloaded the trunk.

"Oh, Rita," he mumbled.

"Please let me carry something." I said.

"I'm all set," he answered, tottering toward the house, laden with luggage. He paused at the door and inclined his head to motion me in before him.

"I need a little air," I called.

He shrugged and disappeared. From within, Mrs. Mapes cried, "Sam, close that door! It's freezing!"

I tucked my hands under my arms and turned my back on the house. A moment later, I moved off into the darkness.

I hadn't gone far when I heard pounding footsteps behind me.

"Hey! Where you headed?" Jack called. Catching up, he bent for a moment to find his breath.

"I don't know. Away." I shivered.

"You're not upset, are you? She was just excited to see me." He reached out to pull me close.

I stepped away. "Oh, bullshit, Jack. It was just like I thought it would be. She doesn't want me here."

"Give her a chance, will you? We just got here, and already you've decided it stinks."

I imitated his mother. "'Come here this instant!'"

He stared at me, hands on his narrow hips. "I think you're jealous."

"Jealous? Jealous? Of what?"

"The family thing. The big welcome."

I sputtered, shifting indignant rebuttals in my mind. "Well, if you actually think," was one

beginning.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he asked.

“She was rude, plain and simple,” I said.

“She may have been rude, but you’re still jealous.”

“I wouldn’t trade places with you for a million dollars.”

“Oh no?” he asked, stepping closer, grasping my elbows.

“No. Let go of me.” I shook him off and stepped away.

“Give her a break, okay? She’s out of her mind with this baby thing. Come back and meet Rhea and Calliope. Winston’s a trip.”

“ ‘Calliope?’ ”

“Yeah. Can you believe it? My mother calls her ‘Cally.’ ”

I looked away, toward a neighbor’s big frost-silvered yard. “I have to call Wanda. I want to get my stuff.”

“You need it now?” He waved his goose-pimpled arms in the dark. “Is she expecting you?”

I looked at him. “I guess not.” I hadn’t even called to tell her I was coming.

“C’mon. Come back. Rhea wants to meet you. My Dad thinks you’re really cute.”

“I hate that word ‘cute.’ ”

“It suits you. Let’s go. I’m freezing!”

We hurried back to the house.

Rhea was small, with long, shiny, waving black hair. Her eyes were big and dark, and her skin was toasted a warm, even brown. She looked like an Indian maiden. Despite the season, she wore a sleeveless velvet tunic that revealed her slender arms, displaying a narrow band of Incan or Aztec symbols tattooed around her left bicep. She unfurled herself from the depths of the couch, extending a tiny hand. “I’m Jack’s sister, Rhea.” She smelled of patchouli.

“Hello.” We shook.

“This is my friend Winston.” A tall, equally tanned man with a thin white ponytail appeared beside her. The tight skin of his high forehead gleamed. He wore pink shorts which showed his long muscular legs, a salmon-colored t-shirt, and thick- soled sneakers. His large hands were dry and hot as he squeezed mine between them.

“Welcome, Amy.” His voice was deep and slow. Looking up, I saw that the matted strands of his thick eyebrows held strands of brown, black and silver, like twisted metal.

“Mom, this is my girlfriend, Amy Heche.”

Rita Mapes sat cradled in a bright red wing chair, cooing at Rhea’s baby. She wore cream-colored slacks and a fuzzy wool turtleneck, the sort of smothering, fibrous thing that never failed to give me a rash. The veins of her ankles wound like snakes around the bone. Here and there, she wore touches of gold: two rings, one with an enormous rectangular diamond; big buttons in her ears (the lobes of which were long and pink); and a scrolled “R” pinned to the funneled neck of her scratchy sweater. Her pretty face was framed by dull, black bobbed hair, about which Bev used to complain: “Why doesn’t she frost? That black is so aging.” She drew her attention away from the baby, moderating the delight in her still lovely face. She smiled, revealing a bright band of teeth.

“We’re pleased to have you,” she said, gray eyes meeting mine.

Dr. Mapes called from across the room. “Wine, Amy?” Though the ceiling was beamed and there was enough furniture to fill a showroom, his voice echoed.

“Yes, please,” I answered. When he brought it over and I said, “Thank you, Dr. Mapes,” he made a face.

“Call me Sam.”

“Sam the sham,” Winston said. He smiled, opening his knees, against which Rhea had been reclining. She leaned back to smile up at him, her throat stretched tight. He bent and kissed her.

“Amy’s in options trading, Rita.”

“Management, actually,” I added.

Rita turned back to the baby. “Those men always look so frenzied,” she said. “You see the clips on the news.”

I sipped my wine. “It’s the free market.”

“And do you shout along with them?” she asked.

“No. I was a runner and a checker, not a trader.”

“Seems like hard work.”

“I enjoyed it. There’s lots of energy on the trading floor.”

Winston said, "Energy's the thing. Surround yourself with good energy." He waggled his long fingers.

Sam said, "Kids, we've been holding dinner."

Winston stood, rubbing an imaginary belly. Rita told Jack, "Your sister brought an organic duck."

I followed the Mapes toward the table. From behind, Jack pinched me through my skirt.

The remainder of the evening passed quietly. I held Calliope, whose eyelids were threaded with veins like the white marble floor of the entry hall. After "The Cosby Show" and half of "20/20" Rhea and Winston departed for the basement, from which subsequently emerged tangy wafts of marijuana and laughter. Mrs. Mapes sat stiffly in her chair, bouncing a small foot. Sam yawned.

"Shall we, Rita?" He extended a chubby hand.

"Jack, you'll get Amy settled upstairs?"

He cleared his throat. "I thought we'd take Rhea's old room."

"Did you now," she answered. Her voice was flat.

"Let the kids work it out, Rita," Sam said. Though they climbed the curving, carpeted stairs together, he turned once and raised his big eyebrows at Jack, who shrugged. When their bedroom door closed, I said, "I'm not sure you should have done that."

"Oh, she's always dramatic. Don't worry, she'll live."

He scooped a handful of almonds from a green glazed bowl and poured them into his mouth. A muffled guffaw erupted from the basement. The sliding doors at the room's edge looked out on the big back yard. In the blackness, it seemed to stretch for miles. Here it is, I thought. The thoughtlessness of absolute security.

"C'mon. Don't sulk," he said, moving closer. He led my hand to the bulge at his crotch. "Don't you want to unwrap your present?"

In the morning while Jack slept, I left for Wanda's. It was the day before Christmas, and I doubted I'd find her, yet I was again drawn forward, propelled by ancient habit. I crossed Falworth, heading west toward Maple Dell. When the stand of winter-barren maples appeared, I crossed again in order to follow the old shortcut through the trees. The sounds of traffic receded as I crunched through a thin layer of snow and fallen, broken branches. In these woods, Hannah lost her virginity. In

these woods, I tried to join her as a smoker but vomited instead. In these woods, we drank beer pilfered from Bernard's mirrored liquor cabinet.

Preoccupied by memory, I misjudged the distance to Wanda's, emerging instead to face my old house. Pale brick and massive, it loomed before me like a mirage before a weary desert traveler, dreaded while half-expected. The squat brick lamppost I'd smashed while learning to drive still listed slightly, and the same sheer white curtains (or their perfect replicas) hung in all the windows. There was nothing to confirm Bev's continued residence. Neither name plate nor welcome mat appeared, and no withered husks or stems, turning in the wind, remained in the window boxes.

Through the current of cars that divided the woods from the sidewalk, an image of my father appeared to me. The day before he left, I looked out the kitchen window before leaving for school, and saw him standing in a corner of the backyard, gazing up at a row of Italian Cypress that bordered our lawn. I knocked on the glass and waved. He turned, the late April sunshine shining on his face, and blew me a kiss. By the following morning, he was gone. If I stood here long enough, would he eventually appear from the side of the house? What would I do if he did? I wondered. For a moment, the scales of loss and rage teetered equally, before the numbing reminder of the two loneliest years of my life weighed in, victorious.

Far above, a plane spliced the clouds with a booming buzz, dragging a plume of smoke like a tail. When the traffic cleared for a moment, I crossed over, but instead of lingering, I continued toward Wanda's, past the Maltzes' (the home of our class president, a girl I always thought of by her entire name: Suzy Renee Maltz), the Beckers' (an older, former hippy daughter still living at home once engaged me in a long conversation about the existence of God while I sat stranded in her kitchen, waiting for rescue from the loss of my house keys), the Hauers' (Bev dated Harold Hauer in high school), and the DeLapsio's (whom no one ever saw). At last, I stood before Wanda's black painted door with its oddly placed center doorknob, the green glass panels on either side offering a murky glimpse into the inanimate rooms beyond, like the view through an old dingy bottle.

I knocked and rang the bell. From the back of the house, a figure emerged, gradually clarifying itself into the form of a woman. Heaving open the door, Wanda cried, "I can't believe you're here!" Her face was round under her still-red hair. Though her amber eyes were widely

spaced, the narrow panel of skin between her smooth, straight brows was deeply creased.

Instead of her usual heels, she wore a pair of pink moccasins.

“I can’t believe you are,” I answered. We embraced, and I recalled the solid familiarity of her body, with its wide shoulders, thick rib cage, and the twin cushions of her breasts.

She waved a hand. Her nails were painted pale gold. “I let Bernard go to Florida alone this year. All he wants to do is golf anyway.”

I laughed. “Why Wanda, how unusually independent of you.”

“I’ve got bigger things to worry about,” she said. “Are you coming in?”

I followed her inside, where the smell, some deeply comforting combination of baked chicken and perfume, warm hair and wool rugs, flooded my senses. The house was the same: the nubby brown chaise longue with the star-patterned red afghan draped across the back; the marble bust of a staring saint lodged on the bookshelves between “Myra Breckenridge” and Mailer’s “Marilyn.” A small carved panther perched on a ledge above the shale fireplace. Every object bore the weight of having been considered and carefully chosen.

“Where are you staying? How long are you in?”

She withdrew a brown-tipped cigarette from a small glass humidor, tapping it once on the marled surface of a polished wood coffee table.

“You’re still smoking?”

“Stopped and started twice. Bernard quit, though.”

“I’m here with my boyfriend. Jack Mapes.”

Her eyes widened, the spongy wings of her nostrils flaring. “Sam Mapes’ son? How in the world...”

“We met in Chicago.”

“I would never have thought,” she began. “That must be very nice for you. You’re doing very well.”

Suddenly, she assumed a shrewd, appraising look, her glance lingering on my ringless fingers. “Now that’s regrouping.”

“I’m doing fine in Chicago.”

She exhaled loudly, observing me with her new expression.

“We’re here for Christmas. Just a few days.”

“What do you make of his parents?”

“You mean, what do they make of me, right?”

She shrugged and smiled. “Well, since you said it...”

“I can’t really tell yet. They may see me as just another detour for Jack. He dropped out of college last fall.”

The remains of her cigarette snapped as she ground it out in a large, thick, shell-shaped glass ashtray, within which a stream of small bubbles followed its molluscoid curve, an object as familiar to me as my own foot.

“So, are you here for your things? They’re still in the basement. I keep the dehumidifier on, just in case.”

“I am, but why are we doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“The routine wherein I feel bad about myself and you let me.”

With thick fingers, she brushed stray flecks of ash from her lap.

“Oh, is this really necessary?”

“Yes. It is. It definitely is.”

Wanda rose and came close, laying her heavy hands on the bones of my shoulders. Her loose black sweater held the faint stink of silk.

“Amy, be realistic. Why should a boy like Jack Mapes choose you? You can’t hold up your side. His family will have to do all the work. Why should they? Honestly.”

“Is this how it’s always been?” I asked.

“What?” She retreated to the yellow velvet ottoman on which she’d been perched, lighting another cigarette.

“Have you always seen me this way, as damaged? It wasn’t just when my father left, was it?”

“No. I did not see you as damaged until your father left. But then it was irrevocable.” She touched first one earring, then the other. “Irrevocable,” she repeated.

“That’s pretty archaic, Wanda.”

“People think that way, though. You must know that by now.”

Things happen to people all the time, even here. What about the Litvaks?”

“They moved. In November, I believe.”

I bit a fingernail, tearing an uneven shred with my teeth. “Things happened to Hannah, and you’re still here. I bet you think she’s still desirable, right?”

She smirked. “I wouldn’t compare your situations.”

“Why not? By the time you got her out of here, she seemed pretty damaged herself, wouldn’t you say?”

“No. I would not say.”

“Why not, Wanda? Why the hell not?” My heart was pounding hard.

She sucked in her breath and gritted her teeth, tensing the muscles along her rounded jaw.

“Because I am a phoenix, that’s why,” she said. “And Hannah has inherited that from me.”

I laughed. From just outside there came the soft thunk of a car door closing, and a moment later, the doorbell rang. I watched as she composed her face while moving to answer it.

“Jack! Hello!” She used her warm, bright, I’m talking to a man voice. Wanda, you bitch, I thought.

“You must be Wanda. Hi,” he added, catching sight of me, hunched and disgusted in a brown Barcelona chair.

I jumped up. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Sweetheart, now don’t rush off all huffy,” Wanda said, winking at Jack.

“Wanda, just stop, okay? Stop acting. I know what you really think now.”

She narrowed her amber eyes. “My Dear,” she said.

Jack looked back and forth between us. “Are you getting your stuff, or...”

Wanda said, “This is really uncalled for, Amy.”

“I’ll decide what’s called for, Wanda. Not you.”

She glanced at Jack, assessing his ally potential. When he shrugged, she tapped a finger against her thick pink lips before speaking. Smiling widely, a trace of saliva glimmering on a sharp canine tooth, she said, “Well then, I guess you’d better take your things and leave, young lady.”

I looked at Jack. “You know what? Forget it. Let’s just go.”

“Are you sure?” He looked straight at me, ignoring Wanda’s open mouth.

I’d left it all before, and I could do it again. “Yeah.”

“You’re something else, Amy,” Wanda said. It wasn’t a compliment.

I looked at her. “Something tainted?”

She fell silent, pursing her lips.

A moment later we were through the door, climbing into the Jaguar while she watched us, thin winter light glinting off her golden serpent’s ring. As Jack started the car, I saw the black front door close, shutting like a gate on the last of my childhood. I leaned my head back and listened to my heart thump.

“What a bitch,” Jack said.

In my mind’s eye, I saw dented cans. Smashed boxes. Harelips and crossed eyes, pronounced limbs and twisted limbs. Damaged goods. I drew in my breath from the stab of it. Someone I loved had uttered my worst suspicions about my life.

“What’s her problem?” Jack asked.

“I think I’m . . .”

“Why did she act like that? I mean, what’s her issue?” he continued.

“I think I’m going to . . .”

We were stuck at a stoplight. There were no other cars. “Forget about her, okay? She’s a bitch. Hannah’s not all that great, you know? You were always cuter than she was.”

“I think I’m going to throw up,” I said, throwing open the door.

On Christmas Day, the Mapes gave me a black cashmere scarf, and I gave them a set of monogrammed golf balls and a dozen embroidered linen napkins. Rhea gave me a fang-like purple crystal suspended from smooth transparent floss. I gave her a Paddington baby blanket. Winston neither gave nor received any gifts, though he observed our exchanges while reclining like a pasha on the Mapeses’ long leather couch. Jack presented me with a pair of amethyst earrings, and I gave him a paisley silk bathrobe and a book of Cartier-Bresson’s photographs. The Mapes served an enormous meal, the effects of which I staggered to bed to sleep off.

Several hours later, I had just awakened when the door was lightly tapped.

“Come in,” I called, my voice froggy.

Rita Mapes slipped into the room, seating herself awkwardly on the little satin bench

before Rhea's old vanity. The white furniture set off the purple shag carpeting, unchanged since Rhea's occupancy. Children's bedrooms become such shrines, I thought. Either that or home offices, or guest rooms.

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

I swallowed a yawn. "No."

"I wanted to have a chance to talk before you and Jack leave tomorrow," she said.

"Frankly, I want to ask you a difficult question, Amy."

I waited, hands clutching my knees under the covers.

"Do you think that this . . . interruption in Jack's education is temporary?"

Like a tired engine, my brain stalled. Her small hands toyed with the hem of her sweater while she waited.

"I like my scarf, Mrs. Mapes," I finally said. Lame, lame, I thought.

"Well, I like my napkins."

"I have a very good job."

"It certainly sounds that way."

"I don't want you to think I'm a gold digger."

She folded her arms across her small breasts. "I didn't know girls your age even knew the term."

"We do. And I'm not."

Her dark eyes locked onto a corner of the floral comforter as though mesmerized. "His father and I want him to find his own way. He can't just squander himself. A year is what we're hoping for. Then he can get back on track."

"I honestly don't know his plans," I admitted.

"And you haven't suggested anything? You're both young for anything serious, you know."

I looked at her. "The subject has never arisen."

She said, "He's always been sheltered, Amy."

I chewed my fingernail. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean that we want him to be happy, to have an easy life. We want him to make decisions that will lead in that direction."

The remains of the soft afternoon light shone through the window and spilled on her face. Suddenly she seemed haggard, older than I'd thought. Her pretty lips were feathered with tiny lines, her neck ropey.

I spoke softly. "I'm not sure your definitions will converge."

Emerging from her trance, she turned her wrist to consult the tiny face of her watch, not troubling to hide the gesture. Straightening, she said, "I hope they do. In time, I certainly hope they do. See you downstairs?"

As the door shut behind her, I sunk to my back, staring up at the semi-sheer arc of the canopy, festooned with tiny puckers like countless sour mouths. My thoughts flew to my aspirations: complete acceptance, affection, and a second chance at family life; then sunk with reality: some acceptance, not unbearably grudging. What mattered more, my feelings for Jack, or the degree of welcome his family offered? I pulled the comforter over my head and burrowed in the heat and darkness.

Later the next day, Rhea and Winston drove us back to the Detroit Metro Airport. Jack and I sat in back, holding hands while Winston described New Mexico. "And clean," he said. "You have no idea how clean, compared to the filthy Midwest. I mean it. I've lived all over, too." The steering wheel went untended while he gestured.

Jack leaned forward and gripped his shoulder. "Easy, Buddy."

In the dusk, the roads were dark but for the sudden illumination of the metallic highway signs. Trapped inside with the heater blowing, it was impossible to avoid Winston's odor. Although he wasn't unclean, something burnt seemed to waft from his skin.

Rhea turned in her seat to ask, "Is it okay if we just let you off at the terminal? Parking's such a hassle."

"No problem at all," I said, pressing my knee against Jack's leg.

After negotiating the maze of airport thruways, we pulled up before a bank of automatic doors, poised to part at our first approach.

Rhea jumped out to hug us. "It was great," she said, standing on tiptoe, her slim, tanned arms around her brother's neck. While Winston and Jack shook hands, she embraced me, offering a quick impression of fragrant hair and warm skin.

"We'll see you again, right?" she asked.

“I hope so,” I answered. Suddenly, Winston loomed before me. To avoid his touch, I reached for my bags. “Nice to meet you, Winston.”

“What? That’s all?” He bent and smooched my cheek, leaving a damp spot big as a puddle. “Hey, if you two ever want to get out and see the world...”

“You’ll be the first one we’ll call,” Jack answered.

The four of us stood for a moment, two small women beside tall men. Then, after a flurry of waves and an extra pointless rev to the Jaguar’s engine, they vanished.

“‘On the road again,’” Jack sang, as we moved inside.

I dropped my bags. “Listen. I may not go home with you.”

“What? Why? I thought everything went really well.”

“It was okay. Better than I thought. Not great, though.”

“They’ll come to love you, I promise. That’s just the way she is. I think Rhea’s sort of worn her out.”

He reached for my hand, a small, confident smile on his handsome face. “So where are you thinking of going? Paris, like you’ve been threatening?”

“Florida.”

He dropped my hand. “You have got to be kidding.”

“I’m not.” My hair fell in my face and I let it hang.

He led me to a row of grayish violet vinyl seats, which Wanda would no doubt have described as “ash lavender” or some other elegant pairing.

“I can’t believe you’re going to do this. Are you sure?”

I rubbed my eyebrows. “I don’t know. I mean, if people see me as damaged no matter what, then who cares what I do? And maybe you’re right. Maybe I am jealous.”

He leaned over, bouncing his feet, elbows on his big, bony knees. “This just seems totally reckless to me,” he said. “Totally reckless,” he repeated.

“Where else can I get the same kind of reception, though?” I asked.

His mouth was open, his dark eyes searching my face. Suddenly, I recoiled.

“Why am I asking you, anyway? You’re Mr. Secure. Doesn’t think my situation’s that bad.”

“I never said it wasn’t bad. I just said you’re not the only one things happened to.”

I shrugged and looked away. The aqua tile beneath our feet spanned away across a sea of airport floor, interrupted by islands of carpeted seating pools.

“I want you to be safe,” he continued. “What about work? What about your apartment?”

“I’ll call them. They’ll understand. I’ve never missed a day in nearly two years, and I have a month of vacation time stored up. Who are you to worry, anyway? You don’t even have a job.”

“No, but you do. One worth keeping.”

“Oh, who’s the gold digger now?”

“What?”

“Never mind. Jack, I think I’m going. I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Where will you stay? Can you even get a seat? It’s the holidays, remember?”

“Glynnis already got me a round-trip ticket. My Christmas gift.”

“And you packed it.”

Trim women in regulation airline suits glided past, their neat luggage strapped to upright wagons on tiny wheels. Throughout our pocket of the airport, there came a moment of simultaneous silence within the surging crowd.

“I’ll worry,” he said.

“I’ll call you.”

“I thought you were really mad at them. Permanently mad.”

“I am. I mean, I was. I still am. It’s like all of a sudden, I have to keep reminding myself, though. I don’t know what my feelings are anymore. I think I’m homesick.”

“But this is home.”

“It’s not anymore.” My voice broke. “It just doesn’t feel like it anymore,” I added, thinking of Wanda.

“And Florida will? With your Dad, who deserted you?”

“It’s the closest I think I can come,” I whispered.

“Is that good enough?”

“I don’t know.”

He stared, unseeing, toward a line of passengers coiled between sagging web ropes. As the line progressed toward the check-in counter, those remaining kicked their luggage before them, as though at defenseless, unresponsive pets.

“I’ll be waiting to hear from you, you know,” he said.

I reached for his hand. “Tell me.”

Though we both had planes to catch, we sat close together in our seats, watching fellow travelers rush past in their hurry away from, or maybe toward, their happy, happy families.

The first two days after my arrival were rainy. The sky above the gray-green water was loaded with pregnant clouds. The tiny table lamps scattered throughout the hotel restaurant glowed yellow against the silvery daylight. I was looking out the window, watching raindrops dimple the sea, when my father arrived.

“Amy.”

He stood behind the empty dark wood chair across the table, wearing a white shirt beneath a nautical navy blazer, and a pair of lemon linen trousers. The freckles on the back of his hands merged with his buttery suntan. His light golden eyes scanned the table between us as he seated himself.

“How are you, honey?”

“Good. I’m good.”

“Good.” He smiled.

“So. What do you do down here?” I asked.

He looked at the stuccoed wall behind me. A tiny muscle twitched in his right eyelid. “‘Do?’ I relax.”

“Did Bev divorce you? Did she sell the house? It looks just the same.”

He spread his elbows across the bolstered arms of his chair and laced his fingers together above his flat stomach. “Yes, she did, on both counts.” He pulled lightly at the tip of his nose, a habit I’d forgotten he had. “You’ve been back then, I take it.”

“I just came from there.”

He widened his eyes and inclined his head.

“I was visiting my boyfriend’s family. The Mapeses. Did you know them? Bev did.”

“Not too well. Husband’s a heart surgeon?”

“Yes. They live in that newer section.”

“Right.” There was a moment’s pause as we examined each other. His Roman profile remained intact, though new creases ran from his nose to his mouth. His cheeks were only slightly more pouched. My handsome father, I thought. Handsome Henry Heche is alive and well and living in Florida.

“So. Glynnis says you’re really something around the office.”

Our waiter appeared. He was small and dark, with black button eyes. “Are you ready to order?” The words rolled in his mouth like marbles.

“I’ll have the gazpacho, please.”

“Seven and seven,” my father said, straightening in his chair. “That’s it.” Nodding, the man removed our leather covered menus and vanished, his footsteps tapping out a rhythm on the red tiled floor.

“I don’t think I want to talk about my job.”

“Why not? I understand you have a lot to be proud of.”

“You know I have to ask you why you did it.”

He sighed. The din of the other diners murmuring over their bowls suddenly grew louder.

“Amy, what was I supposed to do? Leave you motherless again?”

My cheeks went hot, my fingers cold. “Bev wasn’t my mother.”

“Close enough.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. Suddenly I found myself in a thick, wet fog of confusion.

“Why should I be kidding? You needed a mother, I found you one. You belonged with her.”

“I would have thought I belonged with my family,” I said. “My real family.”

He tapped a finger on the tablecloth. “I don’t think you remember what you went through when your mother left.”

“But I do,” I said. “Effie came. Things were okay.”

“No. You weren’t okay at all.” The light in his eyes went opaque.

I peered at him. Small scenes from that chaotic time ran through my mind like an old, half-forgotten film. Sounds of late-night sobbing in the upstairs hallway, light shining in beneath

my bedroom door. Waking once to find him perched at the foot of my bed, his face in his hands. My grandmother leading him from my room, whispering. She and I alone at the big dining room table while he lay on the couch, a glass of amber-colored liquor balanced on his chest. A chill in the house, despite the warm spring air. His reddened eyes always on the phone.

"I never thought about her," I said. As long as you were there, I never thought about her.

He made a small sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh, and looked away.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the waiter moving our way, hoisting his platter high. We were silent as he unwrapped the rolls from their snowy linen. Outside, the rain had stopped, though the sky remained metallic. I shuddered.

"How do you manage? Does Effie pay for everything?"

He blanched. "I can't see how that matters."

"Can't you? What about all the stuff from the house? All the antiques?"

He shrugged. "You learn to walk away from things."

"That seems to be your special skill."

He rubbed his nose again. "I'm sorry, Amy," he said quietly.

I closed my eyes and held my breath. I knew those mild words were both the only explanation and solace he could offer, but they didn't make much difference. I was tired of lugging my sadness around like a hump on my back or a limp in my step, but neither the sight of his face nor the words from his mouth provided release.

"What would you say to seeing your grandmother?" he asked.

"I have to get back to Chicago."

"Honey, please don't leave without seeing her."

"She managed all this time without seeing me, right? You both did. Neither of you asked me to come down here, even after I graduated."

"I called you twice at your cousin's."

"To invite me here?"

"Sure, if you wanted." Again I looked at him, hard. His words held the taint of improvisation. Suddenly, I felt that if I didn't get out into the air, I would choke. I reached with blind fingers for my purse.

"I've got to go," I said, standing.

“You’re leaving.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll call you. Okay?”

He smiled faintly. “It’s all I can ask for, right?”

“It’s a little more than you can ask for,” I said, moving away from the small square table.

As I passed, he rose and hugged me, planting a kiss on the crown of my head.

“You’ll always be my favorite girl,” he whispered. I broke away and hurried out, hoping he had money enough to cover the bill.

I called Jack. I dialed from the big bed, holding the phone to my ear like a seashell. I was just about to hang up when he answered. “It’s me,” I said. The mattress squeaked as I shifted. The thin bedspread smelled good, like clean cotton and bleach.

“I was waiting to hear from you yesterday. I was going to call your Grandmother’s house.”

“I’m at the Marriott. I didn’t even call them until this morning.”

“Where were you yesterday?”

“Nowhere. I mean, right here. There was nothing to do. It’s raining.”

“You sat in your room all day?”

“I was really tired, okay? I flew practically the entire night.” In fact, I had lain in bed all morning, summoning the courage to take a taxi past my grandmother’s house on Marina Drive. Through the lingering curtain of mist, I saw that her black gates were taller than I remembered, her central courtyard larger. A hedge of jade floated in a sea of pale gravel. Had she always had that sloping red roof combed into curving grooves? I’d forgotten the arching windows, set deep within the thick white walls. Why had I never noticed how Spanish it was, how much in the hacienda style? All the houses of my past were altered in memory, shrunken in size and detail. Was I trying to limit their power?

“Well, how’s it going now?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“Were they happy to hear from you? Did you see them? What happened?”

“Well, I saw my Dad, but my Grandmother wasn’t home, so he came to lunch without her.”

“Wait --- you’re telling this all out of order.”

“That’s all there is to tell.”

“Did you talk?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“It didn’t help, okay?” I looked up at the textured ceiling. Rain whispered against my windows. The bright tiled walls of the bathroom gleamed. Sanitized for your protection, read the toilet’s paper cummerbund before I flushed it away.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Come home, I guess.”

“He’s got to feel bad. I mean, it’s probably hard to admit it when you feel that bad.”

“I’ll never know.” When can I stop thinking about this?

“Do you want me to meet you at the airport?”

“No. I still have to call the airline.”

“Will you call me as soon as you get in?”

“If it’s early enough, I’m going straight to the office.”

“Oh, don’t. Come over, okay?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know.”

“You don’t have to let me know. Just show up. I’ll be home.”

“Okay. Bye.”

“I love you.”

“Bye.”

“Say it back to me.”

“I can’t right now.”

“But you do, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I meant to start packing, but instead I lay there, listening to the rain. I had come here for something unrecoverable. You couldn’t have known what you’d find. But shouldn’t I have foreseen? Soft as she was, Glynnis had imagined my father’s urge for forgiveness. You couldn’t

have been certain. Disgusted, depressed, I fell asleep.

Dim daylight had faded by the time I heard tapping at my door. I tried to turn on the bedside lamp, but the switch didn't work, so I fumbled around in the darkness. Opening the door just as I found the light was like the first moment of shock at a surprise party.

"Amy!" my grandmother cried. "I was afraid you were gone already!"

She reached for me, releasing a cloud of "Giorgio" from the bosom of her polka dotted blouse. I was mute in her embrace, stunned by her appearance.

"How did you find me?" I finally asked.

"Ta da!" She raised her wrinkled arms, golden bracelets jangling. "You dad told me where he met you, so I called and asked for your room number. May I come in?"

"I was asleep. I was going to call the airlines."

"Well, you have a few minutes, don't you?" she asked, stepping inside. She swiveled her head, surveying the massive faux-Spanish wardrobe. Her pretty white hair was loose and uncurled. As always, her Harlow eyebrows were sketched with a pencil.

"I really need to leave. I've got to get back to work."

"Yes, everyone says how wonderfully you're doing."

"Especially Henry, right? Wipes the slate clean?"

She puckered her lips, then sat in one of the heavy-looking chairs arranged around a tiny round table. The room was full of furniture I somehow couldn't see. She pinched the coarse orange fabric of the drapes between her long pink fingers. "Honey, I didn't come here to argue. I just wanted to see you."

"Why?"

She drew her fingers along the deep, sharp pleats in her white skirt. Knife pleats. "Why shouldn't I want to see my only granddaughter?"

"However belatedly."

"Amy, I came here because I love you and I wanted to see you. If there's anything I can do for you, I'll do it."

I sank onto the bed, deflated by her kindness. "I feel so different from other people now," I said.

"Why should you feel different?" she asked from the shadows.

“Glynnis really saved me, you know? I’m grateful, I really am, but she’s not my real family. She hardly knows me.” I hesitated. “It’s like my life’s been divided into two parts.”

She nodded. “Before and after your mother left.”

“Before and after Henry left.”

She looked away, the silhouette of her thin lips faintly working.

“You’ve always had a resilient core.” She shifted in her seat until her back was straight, crossing and uncrossing her fragile ankles. “Ever since your mother left, I expected something like this from him.”

“I’m resilient, he’s not,” I said. “I got dumped with Bev, he came here to you.”

She turned to face me, tilting up her chin. “Let me ask you something. Did he apologize?”

“Barely.”

“Then what more do you want from him?” she asked. “What do you want from me? You must have wanted to see us, or you wouldn’t have come down here.”

“I wish I could accept what happened and move on, like you two have,” I said. “It’s like you’ve both flipped things in your minds somehow. Like Henry’s the vulnerable one and I’m not. I was a kid, for Christ’s sake.”

“Don’t say ‘moved on,’” she said.

I shook my head.

We regarded each other in silence. I realized how closely they resembled each other, with the same straight nose and wide, sculpted mouth. She sighed and said, “Honey, you’ve got to accept what’s offered, even when it doesn’t feel like it’s enough. It’s the price we pay with other people. Even family, sometimes.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I would if I could.”

“Come here, please.” Her voice was rough in her throat.

“No,” I whispered.

When she stood beneath the globe-like light, I saw that her old golden eyes were damp. She reached into her purse, withdrawing a fresh bank envelope.

“I want you to have this.”

“Grandma, no, I don’t need anything.”

“Put it away, then.”

“Please don’t give me anything.”

“I want you to have it. Consider it your graduation present.” She held out the envelope, shaking it so it crackled thickly. “I’m leaving it right here.” She dropped it on the table, where it landed heavily.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said.

“Please come here and say goodbye to me.”

I moved toward her, then stopped. “Bye, Grandma.” I fiddled with the fold in my turtleneck sweater, drawing it up over my chin. Ever since arriving, I’d been smothering in my northern clothes.

She waited a moment longer, then headed toward the door. “Goodbye, dear.” As the door closed, I reached for the envelope, breaking the seal with my thumb. Inside was a thick wad of cash, five thousand dollars, crisp and sticky.

Two years earlier, I sat in the sunshine, reading my father’s farewell note. Four hundred dollars had determined my fate. Now I wondered, “What would I have done with five grand then?” Stayed in Michigan? Started classes at a junior college? Blown it? Arbitrary as it was, I couldn’t imagine a different path from the one I’d taken. I wondered, Why had she given it? Why now? Was it my reward for having survived on my own, asking nothing of her? Was it guilt money? Did Henry know?

I sat in her seat, amid a fading cloud of perfume. My thoughts revolved like a spinning dial, searching for the combination that would spring me from confusion. Heavy raindrops drummed on passing cars. Eventually, I went to the phone and made some calls. Passing back and forth before the mirror while packing, I saw a thin figure with white hands, face obscured by hair. Minutes later, I stood in the lobby, waiting while the night clerk processed my credit card. Music spilled from the adjacent bar. The crowd within shifted beneath a mirrored ball reflecting red and silver crepe- paper banners. Everyone looked happy. Was it real, or was it my own lonely projection? People smiled and kissed each other. The bartender wore a glitter top hat. For a

moment, I felt like a shadow peering through a kaleidoscope. Then I shrugged and turned away: I had my own plans.

Outside, the fragrant air was soft against my cheeks. The rain stopped, and the faint whisper of palms fluttered in the breeze. Far above my head, the stars were obscured by a halo of clouds. When a cab drew up, the driver got out to help with my bag.

“Where to?” she asked. The tiny yellow face of a Shitzu dog appeared in the passenger window, its breath steaming the glass.

“Airport,” I said, climbing in.

“You got it.” Her light eyes glimmered in the rear-view mirror as we pulled away from the bright hotel. The dog panted lightly, like a woman in early labor. “Where you headed?”

I rolled down a window. The cool, damp air lifted my hair.

“Paris.”

Suddenly, I knew the reason for the crowd’s festivity. It was New Year’s Eve, 1986.

I drank too much on the flight over. When I tried ordering a drink and the stewardess agreed, I downed it fast and then ordered two more. After vomiting, I sat on the cold airplane toilet with my face in my hands, knees against the tiny metal sink. Perpetual dawn lingered outside the window by my seat. I hid in the bathroom for as long as I could, until someone called through the door, “Miss, the other passengers are waiting.”

In Paris, I found a cheap hotel room where the bed wobbled and the putty colored walls were thin. I was lying down that first afternoon when a trio of men knocked and entered the room, all with heavy stomachs, suspenders and hats. I watched from beneath the covers as they removed the mattress from the extra bed, hoisted my mattress and me onto the other frame, and collapsed the remaining, now empty, second frame. They hummed a little song while they worked, the fattest one fluttering his eyes as they raised me. When they finished, the fat one removed his hat and bowed, walking on tiptoes and shutting the door softly. I smiled for a while, then fell asleep. I’d been in France two hours.

In the morning, I straddled the bidet and considered my room's archaic telephone. Another shabby hotel room, I thought. In the end, I rifled the Paris phone book to find what I needed. Through my single window, I saw rain again, soft, pale drops falling from a lavender sky. A season of rain. I went back to bed for a while, delaying my mission.

Later, I crossed the Boulevard St. Germain. It was bright now but not sunny, warm enough for the fat brown birds to sing and twitter. A thin waiter in a black jacket gave me directions. I headed toward the Parc Monceau, where I found the small stone building that matched the address in the phone book. The gate hadn't quite shut, and I slipped through it into the courtyard. Though the door was locked, I pressed buttons until someone sounded the buzzing release. Once inside, I read the mailboxes, and then I climbed a set of worn marble steps, avoiding the smallest elevator I'd ever seen. It didn't smell bad inside, but it did smell old. Daylight leaked from a filmy skylight far above my head. I knocked on a glossy door. No one answered. My heart was pounding, and my palms were sweating beneath my gloves.

"Madame est en Broussais," a voice called from below. I looked over the banister at a short heavy figure with a mop. "Elle n'est pas dedans."

A woman peered up at me. Her dark hair was combed into a greasy chignon and she wore smashed-looking slippers. "Elle n'est pas dedans. Qui etes-vous?" "Lily est ma mere," I answered.

She pursed her lips, and then spoke again, this time in English. "I did not know Madame had a daughter."

"Oui." By now I'd descended to the bottom step, where I stood in the depression a hundred years of feet had made. She leaned against a door frame while she looked at me. "I have Madame's dog. Un grand bete." She pulled her lips away from her teeth, imitating a smile. "Americans like dogs, yes? Bien exercise?" Here she pretended to puff from exertion. "L'aerobicize?"

And so, absurdly, moments later, I found myself pulled along behind Claude, my absent mother's Airedale, while he thoroughly sniffed and marked every hydrant, garbage can, pissoir and tree we passed. He was black and tan like English ale, with soft, fluffy hair on his big straining body. Mostly he ignored me, intent on his purpose, but occasionally, he cast his small wary eyes in my direction. When I tried to pat him, he ducked away, then turned his head.

Returning to the concierge, he left me without a glance.

“What is Broussais?” I asked, handing over his red leather leash. I was trying to catch my breath.

“L’hopital,” she said. “Broussais est en hopital.”

It wasn’t far away. Once there, I rode the elevator, then wandered its silent halls, passing banks of chilly windows, turning endless corners, determinedly seeking my minotaur. I was sweating again despite the cold, forcing myself forward through the stupid movie my life had become.

By the time I found the room, my heart was knocking around in my chest like a pinball. When I pushed open the door and saw her, I gasped involuntarily. Like a princess in a fairy-tale, she lay either calmly sleeping or dead, arms neatly folded. I stood and stared at her. What had Wanda always called her? Lovely Lily. She was at once familiar and utterly different, strange yet known, an image from a dream. She was smaller than I remembered, with thin, narrow shoulders and a long neck. Her hair was dark blond, and her skin was caramel-colored. She had big pale lips, a shapeless nose and a heavy smattering of moles. She was foreign-looking and self-contained, distant as the stranger she’d become.

She spoke without opening her eyes. “Ilest-il temps pour une pillule?” Her voice was soft and slightly hoarse.

“Do you need a nurse?” I asked.

She opened her eyes. They were large and hazel, slightly protruding. I don’t look like her at all, I thought.

“You’re not French,” she said.

“L’Americain de mon pere,” I answered.

She stared at me, then turned her face away. She was quiet a long time. When she spoke again, she avoided my gaze. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“The concierge said you were here,” I answered. I cleared my throat. “I walked Claude.”

She swallowed. “How is he?”

“He piddled like crazy,” I said.

“He’s always like that.”

We were quiet again. Then she said, “I don’t like you seeing me like this.”

“Do you like me seeing you at all?” I asked.

She closed her eyes without replying. Then she covered her face with her hands. Tears came next, wetness leaking through her fingers like rivulets through a cracked bucket.

“Goddammit,” she whispered, then something else in French I couldn’t make out. She stopped once to inhale raggedly, and I hoped it was over, but it wasn’t. She looks so small in that hospital bed, I thought. She wept with a ferocity that even at my most alone and afraid, I had never even approached. I was scared and confused, and a bit repelled. She hardly knew me --- *she* had left *me* --- why was she out of control?

“I’ll find someone,” I said, leaving the room. The windows when I passed them showed early dusk. She wept in the gloaming. In the gloaming, she wept. I really did look for someone: a doctor in a lab coat, a nurse in white shoes, even an attendant (How would I know him? What did they wear in French hospitals?) but instead I came upon the elevator, and then the red exit sign aiming toward the door. A moment later, I was back outside. Someone will check on her soon, I thought. I didn’t know what to do. I was in Paris, I’d just seen my long-lost mother, and I’d walked her dog. I hadn’t had any expectations, and yet I hadn’t foreseen this. I pulled on my gloves. Keep moving. I took a deep breath, heading off into the purple evening. For the first time since my arrival, the dirty, diesel-scented air felt good in my lungs.

On my first Sunday in France, I sat outside the Café Les Chien on the Rue St. Michel, away from all the smokers. It was damp and cold. Claude lay by my chair, ignoring me as usual. He was the first dog I knew who snored in public. I sipped from a tiny cup of coffee and thought about Lily. I didn’t know how old she was, or what had put her in the hospital. I didn’t even know her middle name; luck and the faint memory of her maiden name (LeTonne) had led me to her listing in the phone book. Suddenly, I realized that somewhere in the bowels of Wanda’s basement, beside a box of Bernard’s real estate books, I’d abandoned a necklace she’d given me just before disappearing: a thin gold LOVE choker, one white diamond sparkling in the center of the “O,” a lavish gift for a ten-year-old. Maybe she’d already known she was leaving when she bought it; maybe, like Effie’s money, it was a gift borne of guilt. I remembered hiding it after she

left, afraid that Effie or Henry would take it away. I tucked it into my underwear drawer, where the chain tangled in the lace hem of a pale blue slip. I had never worn it, and now it was gone for good, like everything else from Fox Hollow.

I considered my plans. In Florida, I'd heeded my impulse, but now I wondered why my disillusionment with Henry had driven me toward Lily. Sometimes I went for weeks without thinking of her, forgetting she even existed, and still other times, I wondered if she was even alive. So what did I want with her now? What question could she answer? Sitting up straight, I waved at the waiter, snug beside the bar. "Un Cointreau, Monsieur," I called. I thought for a moment. "Faites-lui un double, s'il vous plaît!"

She was awake that afternoon when I visited. Her hair was brushed into a ponytail. She looked better, more controlled. I was carrying flowers: a gorgeous pile of purple peonies folded deep into silver paper.

"My favorite flower." She smiled. Her teeth were big, like mine.

"Ils étaient obligatoires," said the flower-man outside the Parc Monceau, justifying the high price.

I settled into the plastic chair. "Claude's fine."

"I didn't know if you'd be back." She looked down at her lap.

I nodded.

"You probably hate me," she added.

Silent, I fussed with the flowers.

"You know I might have failed you no matter what. Maybe worse if I'd stayed."

I met her hazel eyes. "Maybe so."

She sighed. "You probably don't think very well of me."

"I don't know what I think yet," I answered. "I don't even know what I'm doing here."

She frowned at her skinny legs under the blanket.

"Okay," she said.

We were quiet for a while. I was nervous she'd cry again, then annoyed with my nervousness. So what if she did?

She broke the silence. "So why have you come now?"

I combed my hair with my fingers. "To ask you a question, I suppose."

“Of course,” she said, looking tired.

We stared at each other. Then, shattering the usual hospital silence came a wild honking of horns from the street, crazy-sounding, like a flock of angry geese. It jarred me into speech.

“It was weird after you went,” I began. “Embarrassing. No mother. Henry married Bev Simon once he divorced you. Do you remember her?”

She nodded, her expression pained. I looked away as I continued.

“At first, she tried to do mom stuff with me. She really did. I mean, she got my ears pierced and she bought me period stuff when I needed it, but it didn’t last. She had a screwed up daughter of her own in boarding school, remember? Pam Simon. And I’m sure I was difficult.”

Angry and distant. My unconscious reaction to her every touch was a stiffening shudder and panic. “Anyway, he wound up leaving too. His business folded, and he ran out of money. I guess she divorced him after he left. It was just a few years ago.”

She winced.

“Oh c’mon, Lily. You can’t be surprised to hear it.”

“I’m not,” she answered. “But I hoped. You were always so attached to Henry that I really thought you’d be fine.”

“With him I was, I think. Just not her.”

“Oh, Amy.” My name sounded foreign on her lips: Ai-mee.

“You know I have to ask you this, right?”

She waited, eyes large in her small face.

I felt the deep hollowness in my stomach. “Was it me?”

“No,” she answered. “No.” She hugged her knees to her chest. “This may be hard to hear, but Henry--- your father --- ”

“We don’t even talk anymore,” I said. “I mean, I don’t even talk to him now.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “I don’t expect you to understand this, but Henry – your father --- needed something I just couldn’t provide. I could hardly balance myself, let alone him.”

“What do you mean, ‘balance’?”

She sighed. “Steadiness, I suppose. Someone to keep him aimed right. I don’t know how else to describe it.” She closed her eyes.

“And me? You couldn’t balance me either?”

“I loved you,” she answered. “But I couldn’t hurt Henry that much. I honestly felt he’d have died without you as an anchor.” She smiled thinly. “It was the best solution I could manage at the time.”

I recalled Effie’s arrival after Lily’s departure. It was she who took me to school, tucked me in, tended my long hair while Henry lay on the couch like a corpse. First Lily, then Henry, I thought. He saw that I survived it once, so it freed him to do it too. Maybe abandonment was catching, like flu. Or suicide.

“The thing is, it happened twice. You both left. Henry even worse than you.”

She nodded, pressing her big lips together.

“I guess I blame you,” I said. “It seems like you set things in motion.”

“I never meant for that to happen,” she whispered.

Effie’s words floated back to me: “You’ve got to accept what people offer, Amy.” Even when it feels like a drop in the ocean.

“It’s not like I don’t blame him too,” I added. “Worse, in a way.” I looked out the window at the pale clouds. “He and I were closer. He lied to himself about it.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

She nodded.

We looked at each other, alike in our bodies but unfamiliar. I felt something exit the room, or maybe something new enter it, something quieter than what had thus far lurked between us. Lily closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

“Is that it, then? Is that all you want to know?”

“I guess so.”

I looked at her lying there. She was as guilty as Henry. More so, if I believed my own theory of instigation. So why, as I watched her chest sinking and rising, did I feel my Gordian knot of bitterness loosen slightly? Because she hadn’t played dumb, like Henry. Because at least she’d implied regret.

“Are you going to disappear, Jupon?” she whispered. My childhood nickname, unspoken for years.

“Would it be easier?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No,” she answered, lips moving soundlessly.

“I’ll come back soon,” I said, standing. And then, surprising myself, I kissed her smooth, warm forehead, bringing an unexpected smile to her pretty face.

I kept meaning to leave, but I didn’t. I was finally in Paris --- Paris! --- with its lavender-gray skies, its buildings whose solid stones looked soft, almost chalky, as if they might crumble to powder even in my small hands. On successive days, I went to the Rodin and Picasso museums (the Rodin was better), and then I walked across the city to a big plaza crowded with fire eaters, stilt walkers, and jugglers to the Centre Georges Pompidou with its bright primary colors like a giant jungle gym. I bought roasted chestnuts outside the Louvre (even the street food came nicely wrapped), and stood in line for the Mona Lisa, where when I sneezed, the old man behind me whispered, “Bienissez-vous, Mademoiselle!” The lightest snow I ever saw fell while I strolled through the Luxembourg Gardens with Claude, sparkling and soft like crystalline sugar dripping from the sky (Claude piddled in the first tiny drift he found). And then, because, incredibly, we could, Claude and I went to Versailles on the train (Claude left nose smears on the window glass beside my seat).

As the days passed, I walked everywhere, buying countless sable confiture pastries, which I ate in the street, right outside like a child. Every bakery was warm, with yellow lights that drew me in from the January drizzle, and I loved the sing-song syntax of the women who served me, the way the words rushed from their mouths like swallows flying from a chimney, and every sentence sang a high mid-note. I felt different, like an invalid outside again after a long stay indoors. I was light in spirit, and I recalled this feeling as happiness, a suspended place where work was delayed, old clothes were abandoned, and little pink shoes seemed a wise buy. I was 20 years old, with a tiny bit of money, in France.

One night, after an afternoon spent at the Jeu de Pomme, Les Deux Magots (small chairs waiting in the winter sunshine) and two more Cointreaus, I called Jack. It was eight days past my return. I’d talked to Barry from Florida (“Quit bothering me with this shit,” he said. “You know the floor’s dead after the holidays!”) but Jack I’d ignored. Now, slightly drunk, I called from my crummy hotel room.

“Hello?”

“ ‘Allo?’”

“Amy?”

“Nouvelle Année Heureuse!”

“Where are you?”

“France!”

“What?”

“I’m in Paris,” I said, picking up the phone and moving through the room.

“What are you doing there?” he asked.

“Finding the family. Getting on with life.” I fumbled with the broken window lock, then stuck my face outside to feel the evening drizzle.

“You said you were coming home.”

With closed eyes, I pictured his apartment: the brown carpeting, the uncovered windows, the long staircase to the street, down which he hoisted his yellow mountain bike.

“My mother’s here. In Paris.”

He sighed. “So you’re still with your family.”

“Oui.”

“They don’t have anything to offer you, Amy. You’ve just got to face it.” He gave a small, hard laugh. “You’re worth ten of every one of them, you know that?”

By now, I sat on the floor. Through the thin wall at my back, my neighbors began to make love, their tired bed frame squealing.

“I face it every fucking morning, Jack.”

“Is she really worth your time? I mean, what can she offer that you actually need anymore?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “She’s different from what I expected.”

The thing was, I kind of liked her. Unlike Henry, her guard was down. She had spoken frankly and never asked for my affection. Plus, of course, she was my excuse for being in Paris, a luxury I might never have allowed myself without her.

Jack said, “I wish you’d accept they’ve got nothing to give you.”

“Maybe you like my being alone.”

“I’m not saying that. I never said that.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Amy, c’mon. Don’t sound like that.”

“Like what? I’m fine.”

“You’re pissed, right? I’m a big jerk now.”

“Listen, I’d better go. The wall behind me is shaking.”

“What?”

“I’ll call you, okay?”

“Give me the number there. I’ll call you right back.”

“I don’t have it. I’ve got to go.”

“Amy ...”

“Bye.” I remained on the floor, soberer now than I’d been before drinking. Why was he so adamant? Everyone wants you to accept your losses but not be bitter. As if that was possible. I brooded for a while, listening to my amorous neighbors groan and murmur. Finally, my body responded to my brain with a tidal wave of tiredness. And so, accompanied by whimpers of pleasure (“Ah, ma petite belette! “), I dropped my clothes to the floor. Then I crawled between the sheets, sighs of sex and the ever-present Paris rain lulling me to oblivion.

Dear Family,

I went to Florida after all --- now I’m in France. Lily’s here. There’s something wrong with her, but I don’t know what. She has a dog I walk. Paris is great. I’ll be home soon.

Love,

Amy

Dear Jack,

Sorry I hung up so fast the other night. I can’t really explain why I’m still here. I know you’re right about my family, but I think sometimes things --- at least, in my family --- aren’t so black and white. In a way I almost feel like I should defend them to you, only I can’t, because they really are selfish and uncaring. I mean, I don’t have any illusions about Henry, but things with Lily are more complicated. There might even be something wrong with her but I don’t know what.

She's in the hospital. I've been visiting her.

I know you think I feel sorry for myself. I've been trying really hard to forget about everything that happened in Fox Hollow, but I guess I haven't succeeded. I don't think you understand the feeling I have around other people's families: it's kind of like .... staying outside when everyone else is called in for dinner. I mean, at first the cold air's invigorating and the quiet is great and I can tell myself I'm not really hungry, but it never lasts. I thought I was doing okay until I went back with you to Fox Hollow. Then I guess I remembered what I'm missing. I'm not saying it's your fault, though it was your idea.

Anyway, I'm not sure when I'll be back. I'll try to call you soon. I do miss you.

Amy

I wrote my letters from a café. It was late January, and too cold now even for me, so I found a table inside near a steamy window. First thing every morning, I walked to Lily's building, liberating Claude from Nathalie, the concierge. Then I had coffee while Claude crashed to the café floor with a loud, wheezing sigh. I'd been in Paris 11 days. At my hotel, I'd received one set of clean towels, but no fresh sheets. At night I washed my underwear and stockings in the deeply cracked porcelain sink, or else I simply bought more whenever I was out, which was always. I'd visited the Louvre, the Picasso, the Rodin, Versailles, Notre Dame, the St. Ouen-Clignancourt flea market, Sacre Couer, the Musee D'Orsay, Beauborg, and once, a nightclub called "Le Chat Noir."

"You are from America?" the bartender asked.

"Oui, Chicago," I answered.

Machine guns were pantomimed. "Les gangsters, yes?"

"Les gangsters, no," I said. In France, everyone had an archetype.

I was halfway through Effie's money. On the flight over, I had wondered if I should bank it, but for once, I just didn't want to. According to the standard I had set myself for living, I was being irresponsible, and it was alarming to find how happy it made me. The crust of diligence I'd cultivated fell away fast. In Chicago, I was always mistaken for being older; here in Paris, people recognized me as young. The hotel manager asked if I was a rich American runaway.

I stopped to button my coat. "No, Madame," I answered. "Not rich. And more like an

orphan.”

She waved an ancient duster with exotic, endangered-species-laden feathers. “La Petite Annie Orpheline!” she cried. “La Gamin!” Every day she wore a dress and heels. She was stout and middle-aged, but she dyed her hair and her ankles were good. Her behind was round and wide in her skirts. She looked pinchable, like a nectarine. Madame La Brugnon, I called her in my head.

Lily, by contrast, whom I visited daily, grew ever more brittle, like thin ice. I saw her in the mornings, after coffee and Claude. The day I mailed my letters I asked my second question. I’d progressed to the point of removing my coat, but I still kept it near me, smoothing the satin lining to calm myself.

“So why are you in here?” I asked.

Her room was very warm. (In fact, it was the only place in Paris I was sure of finding heat.) She’d removed the sweater she wore over her hospital gown, revealing the pointed bones of her shoulders.

“I was wondering when we’d get to that.” She folded her small hands. “Are you sure you want to know? You may not like the answer.”

“Is it cancer?” I whispered. The emaciation. The weeping.

She grimaced. “No, it’s not cancer. Some people might think it’s worse than cancer.”

I waited, baffled. What could be worse than cancer?

“It’s depression, Amy.”

I thought while I watched her. “I’ve been depressed. Like after Henry left.”

“That was causal. This is chronic.”

“Chronic,” I echoed. Outside the window, clouds rushed past like film on a screen. The Paris sky was so active.

“Chronic and genetic,” she continued. “Your grandfather had it, two of his three sisters had it, and I have it.”

“So I’m next in line?” I asked. Nervous laughter swelled in my throat.

“That remains to be seen.”

Then the words spilled out of me. “But can’t you just talk to a psychiatrist or something? Why were you hospitalized?”

“I tried a new drug ---”

“Well, can’t they just switch it or something? My boyfriend’s dad is a doctor, maybe I could ask him ---”

She reached out a hand and gripped my chin. The shock of it silenced me. She hadn’t yet touched me independently, always waiting for my kiss or the quick-squeezed arm when I left.

“Amy, listen. I reacted to my medication. It’s a new drug --- they say that happens sometimes.” She released her grasp, sinking back against the pillows. Then she held out her arms, displaying her thin wrists. The insides were taped with flesh-colored bandages.

“I tried to kill myself, Amy. That’s why I’m in here.”

There wasn’t any sightseeing that day. Instead I went straight back to the hotel and lay on the lumpy bed. It was the bright, pale middle of morning. I stared at the dingy ceiling, thinking of Lily’s admission. Here was the real risk of reconciliation, I realized: revelation. Of course – the facts about her leaving hadn’t sliced hard enough. A deeper cut into black blood and viscera, far beyond what’s needed for health or repair --- that’s what always happened with this family. I drew my arm over my eyes. Chronic depression, she’d said. Medication. Suicide. Her body, so like my own, scarred from self-imposed violence. I cried a little, but I didn’t know exactly why. Anger? Fear? Pity? I thought, even if I left tonight, a new awareness of weakness --- a new threat --- would always be with me, like the shadow that dwelled beneath my feet. Could I pretend I hadn’t heard her? Follow Henry’s example, inventing some irrational defense for my own immunity? I sighed. Depression and self-delusion --- my mental inheritance. My thoughts were as dark as the Gorgon’s cave. When the wall behind my bed began its rhythmic shaking (What was with these people?), I got up, wiped my eyes, and left the room. There had to be some place I could put myself.

In the dilapidated lobby, a tall American stood at the desk, querying Mme. Brugnion about rates. The back of his long raincoat was all that was visible to me. As I passed, Madame called, “Au Revoir, Mlle. Orpheline!”

He turned and smiled.

“A fellow American,” he said.

His hair was blond and his neck was long and tan. He stuck out his hand.

“John Parker.”

I shook it. “Nice to meet you. Goodbye.”

“Where you headed?” he asked.

“Someplace with alcohol.”

“Oh, I’ll join you,” he said. “Drink off the jet lag.”

I looked at him. He wore a hopeful, harmless expression, innocent and un-Parisian. I wanted to be alone, but having company at least ensured that no one would talk to me about Chicago and les gangsters. Besides, I lied better in English than in French.

“All right,” I told him.

I tapped my feet while he took his bags to his room. Mme. Brugnon winked and puckered her lips.

“He is from Palm Desert,” she whispered. “All Californians are rich, no?” When he reappeared, we left the hotel, our footsteps the only sound between us. I hugged myself as much from despair as from the chill in the air. We turned into the first cafe we saw.

“I go to Stanford Med,” he said, sipping a milky pastis. “I’m here to read poetry for a month.”

“How .... romantic,” I said.

“You’re not a fan?”

I shook my head.

“How about you? Why are you here in January?”

“To see my apparently crazy mother,” I answered, gulping my double Cointreau. “Who just confessed her whole family’s full of depressives.”

“Now there’s a breeding ground for poetry.”

“Ha ha.” I signaled the waiter. “Want another?”

I felt him watching me. “So you’re scared.”

I nodded. Diagnostic skills, excellent.

“It’s not catching, you know. Just because she’s crazy doesn’t mean you will be.”

“She recited this list of other relatives.”

“Oh. Well. I guess you’re doomed, then.”

I looked at him. His blue eyes were large and far apart. He wasn’t handsome or sexy like Jack, but he looked very clean. I could picture him wearing a white coat, calming a nervous patient: I’m sure you’ll be fine, Mr. Brown.

“What branch of medicine do you study?” I asked.

He smirked. “Psychiatry.”

I blanched.

“No, I’m kidding. Pulmonary. Transplants, mainly.”

I was almost through my second double. “I wish I could have a family transplant.”

“Don’t we all,” he said.

We were silent for a moment. I signaled for another drink.

“Look, there really is more to it than that,” he explained. “Genetics is only a percentage of causation. Often the onset is stress- or event-related.”

I shook my head. “But see, they’re crazy, so they do crazy things, which affect me, so now I’ll be crazy.”

“You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“Deeply.” Why else would I be drunk in the afternoon, spilling my guts to a stranger?

I tried looking out the window, but it was too late. Tears welled in my eyes and slid down my cheeks.

“Shit,” I said.

“C’mon.” John unfurled himself from the banquette. “Let’s get you back to our classy hotel.”

As soon as we hit the fresh air, I felt sick. I had always wondered what the expression “I felt my gorge rising” meant, but now I knew. I was about to be sick in public, outside, from my favorite drink, a double Cointreau, which would probably never taste good again. This is what flashed through my mind in the moment before I vomited, which I did in the street by a gutter. It was loud and terrible, the kind of noise only a friend could forgive.

“Oh my God.” I tried to catch my breath. I slumped to the curb, my head on my knees. At my feet were a thousand butts of cigarettes. John put his big warm hand on my scalp.

“Can you walk?”

“I think so.” He hauled me up and we moved off slowly. I leaned into the scratchy lapel of his raincoat, which bloomed with the odor of wool. The comfort of contact washed over me, and my relief was primal. When we reached the hotel, John found my room and put me to bed. As he turned off the light, I wanted to speak, but I couldn’t even choke out a thin “thank you.” I lay with my head spinning and my heart sick, waiting for the obliteration of sleep. When it came, I fell into it as if into a black, abandoned well.

Of course the morning was vile. Drool had pooled and crusted in the corners of my lips. My eyes were crusty. I could smell myself. It’s time to leave Paris. I’d gotten what I wanted, hadn’t I? I’d seen them all, including Lily, and the picture was complete. No matter that the image was a bad one --- I’d tried to force it into focus but the lens had shattered long ago. But I’d still had to try. But why? To see if the way home (home where, though?) was lost for good. And it was. Henry was willfully oblivious; Lily lost to depression. As I lay there feeling horrid, resignation crept in, and I decided that I would probably always be out of step, but that maybe now that I knew, really knew beyond any doubt, at least my limp might be a little less pronounced. And I had seen Paris. Could I really hope for more? Did anyone else do better? Well, sometimes. But I was out of excuses now. It was time to get back to work. Time to return to cold Chicago.

But then there was Lily. Did I have to say goodbye? Considering, I felt the voice of mean reversion: Why should I be more thoughtful now that I knew she was crazy? Were the emotions of an adult attempting suicide equal to the bewilderment of a ten-year-old child? I tried to picture my departure without a farewell – the packing (easy), the taxi ride to Orly (expensive), the red upholstery of the Air France seats (cushy), willing it into possibility, but it just didn’t satisfy. I’d been happy too recently, and the well of bitterness I’d been used to dredging had sunk too low to plumb. Lily would be wounded. I knew it. Worse yet, I found it mattered.

Years before, when Lily’s absence became known around town, my friends’ mothers searched my face for tear streaks, their expressions melting into pity which they thought I couldn’t perceive. I was cautious and showed nothing, which quickly firmed into policy, permeating even

my psyche: Soon enough not only did I show nothing, but felt it, too. The adults in my life --- Henry, Effie, even Wanda --- seemed to approve of my stoicism, or at least left me alone on the subject. I had cauterized my grief, and on the few occasions when it bled again, I slapped on a Band-Aid and ignored it. I remembered how once in Classic Literature class, we'd read the story of Demeter and Persephone, and how I'd labored to remain unmoved when the teacher described Persephone's tenure in Hades. Our book was illustrated and showed a frenzied Demeter, relentlessly scouring the earth for her daughter. Seeing that image, I excused myself from the discussion, taking refuge in the rest room with the girls who smoked, listening to them talk about how stupid everything was, what a joke, how they couldn't wait to escape the banality of Fox Hollow. Anything was better than weeping in class.

But I had a secret. I'd found help during the hard moments. A set of sisters had supported me, absorbing all my rage and grief. Cradled beneath their hideous wings, they'd fed me gall when nothing else assuaged my hunger. Alone at night in my dark bedroom, I hid beneath the covers and called, and they never failed in coming. At first I'd been fearful --- *what had I conjured?* --- the women's heads, the avian bodies; but soon enough, I welcomed them, as they alone offered release. With whom else could I give way? Henry's feelings loomed too large, consuming the oxygen, fire erupting if ever I breathed her name. So I took comfort where I found it, and though I sought them less over time, I knew they hovered, ever ready to swoop as they did now.

"Walk away from her," they hissed. "Give her what she deserves."

And they were right --- she did deserve it, but I didn't feel it viscerally. I just couldn't work up the indignation anymore. Maybe it was the hangover, or maybe it was pity, but on the subject of Lily, my gut was strangely unroiled. Somehow, without knowing when or how, I had passed through the lava of anger into the ash of acceptance. Even a short bout of happiness had purged me. I felt changed, like Achilles after enduring the flames. Finally stirring, head pounding with pain, I wobbled into the shower. When the cold water hit me, I howled.

"I'm going back to Chicago," I said.

I hadn't brought flowers. Now that I knew it was the psych ward, I listened for screams.

As usual, it was silent.

"Why?" She lay on her back, hands folded across her breasts.

"Party's over." I'd already arranged my flight. In two days, I'd be gone.

She was looking at the ceiling. "You could stay, you know."

"Oh, no," I answered. "I have a job, an apartment. And a boyfriend."

"A lover?"

"'Lover' sounds so French."

She smiled. "But you love him?"

"I think so."

She lay quietly for a moment. Then she said, "You're too smart for the life you're leading. You should be in school, not working."

"I'm independent," I answered. "Nobody can pull the rug out from under me again."

"Don't arrange your life around our mistakes, Amy. There's too much you'll miss. What will you do when your job starts to bore you?"

"Who says it will?" I asked.

"The novelty of freedom wears off, sweetheart."

"But I'm not like you," I said. "Money ---" I sighed and started over. "You had money and family. I have to be more careful."

"You could stay in France," she said. "You'll have citizenship through me. You could go to school." She sat up, excited. "You can help me with Claude." Her hair was tucked behind her small ears. A pair of ivory pearls dotted the oval lobes. She was so pretty, so delicate. Seeing her, I felt the familiar sadness. It was just too late for us.

"That's ridiculous," I said.

She watched me closely. "You can make a change."

I laughed. "Of course I can't."

"You can. You're acting with the short-sightedness of youth. Let me help. At least I can do this for you."

Finally I sat. I pulled the hard chair close to her bed. "Lily, listen. You can't do this. Think

about where you are right now. Isn't what you really need a caretaker?"

"This isn't permanent. They're only keeping me here to get the drug out."

"You slit your wrists," I said quietly.

She looked away. "You won't have to care for me. I won't let that happen."

"How could you help it?" I imagined my life, bound by daily visits and worry.

She twisted her hands. "You can talk to my doctor."

I reached out to quiet her. My thumb landed on the smooth surface of the bandage.

Unconsciously, I stroked it. "I believe you, Lily," I lied.

She bristled. "There's another apartment. You could be there by yourself, away from me. It's small, though. Across from Beauborg."

I pictured it for just the briefest moment: my life as a student in Paris. I saw myself hoisting a satchel, reawakened to libraries and the scent of books, the glitter of pencil lead and the joy of blank paper. An entirely different existence.

"I can't do it," I said. Suddenly, I was angry.

"Is it money?" she asked. "Because if it is – "

I dropped her hand. "Why are you pushing this so hard?"

She turned her head to face me. "I want to do something. All my life, I've coddled myself because I thought it would help with my .... illness." She looked around at the yellow walls. "But I landed here anyway." She smiled thinly. "So maybe I should try something else. Like making things up to you."

"I can't be a part of your therapy, Lily."

She looked at her lap. "I understand. You love Chicago."

"No, I don't," I started to say. It's cold, it's dirty, and all I do is work. Half the office does coke. Men drop dead on the trading floor. But I stopped myself, wary of breaking the unspoken deal at the heart of my life: never admitting what it really was, since I was lucky not to be dead, period. The terms were that when Henry left, I lost the chance to find my real self. The best I could do was make the most of what remained. I didn't want to hear about opportunities from Lily. I didn't want to be confused by offers of help. I knew what fate had dealt me. Lasting happiness was something to envy, not emulate. Besides, my only skill was pushing myself. Where else could I go but back?

“Or your independence there, rather,” she continued. Then she laughed. “After all, why would you want to stay here? It’s only Paris, after all.” Pools of moisture glistened at the edges of her eyelids. But then she took a deep, ragged breath and dabbed her eyes with a fingertip. “Will you write to me sometimes?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I will.”

We sat in momentary silence. “Okay, then.”

I stooped and brushed her soft cheek with mine. As ever, she smelled of Coco. As I raised my head to move away, she clutched my wrist. “Aimee,” she whispered. “Mon coeur.” “Bye, Lily.” The door shut behind me. I felt terrible, but I fought it. You’ve made up your mind, I reminded myself. You’ll forget all this when you get back to work. I continued through the silent, empty halls, feeling more alone than usual. A voice inside me wondered, will she be okay? But I took myself in hand. You can’t take care of her. You’re leaving. And so I was, as I found myself outside the hospital one last time. Such wondering was not for me. My life was like an arrow aimed at the bullseye of security. The adventure was over. Goodbye, Lovely Lily. Farewell, Paris.

In the time I had left, I also said goodbye to Claude, not that he noticed. He dragged me down the street and through the park, and when I stopped at a bench, he collapsed beside me with a grunt.

“You’re a beast, Claude,” I said.

His sides heaved and he sighed. I reached down to pet him. He smelled of stale socks and warm fur. He lifted his heavy head and gave my glove a desultory lick. We sat for long minutes while I watched without seeing the children playing before me. I willed myself not to think about Lily.

Instead, I looked down at Claude. I could hardly believe I would miss a creature who cared as little for me as he did. I was always so cautious in my affections, doling them out warily like a miser. Now here I was, squandering my meager store on my suicidal mother and her uninterested dog. So why didn’t I feel depleted, instead of regretful at the smallness of my horde? Suddenly, I realized I hadn’t yet seen the Eiffel Tower. I decided it would be my last vision of Paris.

“You can’t come, Quasimodo,” I said, jangling his leash.

Back at Lily's building, Nathalie caught me leaving. "You stay in France now," she said.

Her hands as she stood in the door were sodden, as always.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I answered.

"You go? Forget Madame Lily?"

I shrugged. Madame Lily's on her own, I thought.

"A mother needs a daughter, no?"

Not this one, I thought.

"Trop tard," I said. I opened the outside door. "Take care of Claude."

Wind swept through the courtyard, rustling the few stray leaves in the corners. I had as clear a sense of sadness as any I'd ever known, the worse for having recognized it. I tried to shake it off. She managed before you, and she'll manage again. I decided I would pack, then eat as many sable confitures as I could en route to Le Tour Eiffel. No dinner, just as many pastries as possible.

It was a good plan, and I probably would have enjoyed it, if I hadn't run into John again in the lobby. I was on my way out after using the bidet. (By now, I loved the bidet.) Right away, he smiled, showing his big, healthy Californian teeth.

"Happy to see me?" he asked.

"Listen, I'm really sorry about the other night." I tried not to look at him. "I'm, um, leaving in the morning."

"Then we'll go out and say goodbye," he answered.

"I think you should know I have a boyfriend in Chicago."

He nodded. "Mine's in Palo Alto."

I peered at him. "Why do you want to hang out with me?"

He leaned close and whispered. "You're the only one I know in Paris."

I laughed. "I'm going to every bakery I see and the Eiffel Tower."

"Agreed," he said. By now, we were out on the street. It was the best time of day in Paris, the twilight just before dusk, when all the globed streetlights winked on and the neon shop signs glowed their brightest. In Chicago at this hour, I'd be packing myself into a bus, or more likely, still working.

"Are you leaving because of your mother?" he asked.

“No,” I answered. “Well, maybe.” I shrugged. “It’s time to go anyway.”

“You’re not close to her.”

“She left when I was ten.”

I remembered how Henry had told me she was gone. He’d taken me for a ride in his sputtering British convertible, which always smelled of gas. We drove aimlessly for a while, then, inexplicably to me, stopped at a nearby gift shop. He turned off the motor and said, “Lily’s gone, kiddo. Sorry.” Then he led me into the drugstore, and told me to pick out anything I wanted. Baffled, stunned, I chose the first thing I saw: a pink elephant’s head brooch with faux-emerald eyes. I don’t think I ever once removed it from its plastic case. Where is it now? I wondered. Probably in Wanda’s basement, along with all my other tangible memories.

“But you’re half-French. That’s enough for citizenship.”

“That’s what she says.” I crossed my arms against my chest as I walked. I was thinner now, and always faintly cold. I looked at everyone we passed. An old man winked at me. A woman pursed her painted lips at John. A tall, heavy boy with blue eyes ignored us, striding past in a flowing brown coat. I’ll miss watching the people. I thought about how I’d moved among them every day, noting their mastery of ennui and self-absorption. What would it be like to dwell permanently among such a mannered race? Don’t think about it, I told myself. You’re not staying.

“I can’t believe you’re not staying,” John said.

“I’d be beholden,” I answered. “Bakery up ahead.” Don’t even mention the extra apartment.

“But she’s your mother. She’s supposed to help you.”

“How often does that work out?” I asked.

He stood beside me while I paid for the pastry. Sept confitures, huit francs. Deux abricot, strawberry, raspberry, and prune, all tied up in a box with string. I loved the string.

“My parents help me,” he said. “We have a deal: I don’t talk about being gay, and they pay for med school.”

“I can’t get too close to her.”

“Why not?” he asked.

I handed him a pastry. “Take care of someone who left me? She never called, wrote, or visited. Would you do it?”

“That’s different,” he said. “It’s what I’m trained to do.”

“Even people who don’t deserve it?”

“Even them,” he answered. “But they’re not always grateful.”

I chewed, thinking. The streets smelled of diesel fumes and roasted chestnuts, and sometimes of charred meat from the revolving carcasses we saw in the windows of the tiny Arab restaurants. Often the proprietors stood in the doorways, coatless despite the cold.

“Maybe it’s easier when you do it for a stranger,” I said.

When we reached the Eiffel Tower, we stood in line with the shivering crowd. The air was still and heavy with pressure. It was colder than before, the coldest I’d felt in Paris. Paying admission, riding the open elevator, we emerged onto the first terrace when the first snowflakes fell. Dripping from the sky like soft, tiny diamonds, they sparkled as they descended, slow enough to catch on your tongue. Wonder moved through the crowd, the “ahs” and “ohs” whispered and gasped. John squeezed my arm.

“It’s so beautiful,” I murmured.

He smiled, tucking his hands in his pockets. “Here’s the thing,” he said. “You can’t really right a wrong by repaying it.”

I looked out at the glimmering beauty of the city. Nobody ever likes to leave Paris. The lurking sadness I felt was probably the predictable grief of the departing tourist. “I’m not sure I can do any better,” I answered.

“You never know.” Vapor hovered near his mouth, then dispersed with his words.

“Everyone overestimates me,” I replied. “All I’m good at is working.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Maybe it does.”

He looped one arm through mine. “You’ll figure it out.”

We were quiet again, watching the snow and the twinkling lights of Paris, two friendly strangers on furlough from forgetting. In the morning, I flew home.

Jack met me at O'Hare. He swooped down and hugged me as soon as I came off the exit ramp.

"God, you're so thin," he cried.

We took a cab into the city. I showered in scalding water for half an hour, and then we had sex.

"I brought you a present," I said later. It was a thin cashmere scarf, brown like his eyes.

Naked, he wrapped it around his neck. "How do I look?"

"Great," I said. I'd forgotten how good he smelled, too. For the first time, I really felt that I loved him, rather than just knowing it in my mind. I smiled, watching him.

"Are you mad at me for what I said on the phone?" he asked.

"Actually, I was thinking that I love you."

"You've never said that without being prompted before."

"Well, now I have," I said, pulling him close. "You want to do it again, or what?"

I had gifts for Glynnis and Marshall, too. Glynnis got a pair of pink suede gloves, and Marshall got slippers. The puppy got a red leather leash just like Claude's. None of it bought me peace.

Marshall said, "Listen, kiddo. You know I think you're really something. But you scared your cousin with this one."

"I was so worried!" Glynnis cried. "Why were you gone so long?"

We sat in the fancy living room. Ramsey whined from the kitchen.

"Well, you sent me to Florida and I saw Henry and Effie, and it stunk. Henry has this ..... mythology about why he left. Effie just defends him or says he's weak. Then she gave me a bunch of money, so I went to France."

"And saw your mother."

"I did." She crossed her arms and legs, bouncing a foot. I had never seen her so tense.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't understand you." She tossed her long hair. "I really don't."

"Glynnis," Marshall said.

"At least you were older when he left. I'm not saying it's right, but to forgive her and not him just doesn't make sense to me."

“All I did was visit, Glynnis. It doesn’t mean I forgave her.” I looked at Marshall. He shrugged.

“You know it wasn’t just you she took off on. I’m not saying you didn’t get the worst of it, but she was supposed to be in the wedding. I shopped for my dress with her.” Her voice broke. “She was always so stylish.”

“Well, she’s not so great now. All she wore was a hospital gown when I saw her,” I said.

“What?” Her foot went still.

“She’s crazy, Glynnis. She’s in the psych ward. Some medication she took made her lose it, she said.”

Glynnis stared at me. “That’s terrible.”

“I know. She said most of her family had depression. She doesn’t know if I’ll get it or not.”

“Oy, yoy, yoy,” Marshall muttered.

“I walked her dog a lot. He’s this goofy Airedale.” I missed him already. “It’s pretty sad.”

Her voice was soft. “I didn’t know where you were.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I didn’t know where I was, either. “I sent a postcard.”

She nodded, crying a little.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“It’s just such a waste,” she said, beginning to sob. “She was so beautiful, and Henry adored her. I idealized them so much! I just always wanted to have what they had.”

Marshall spoke from the couch. “We’re doing fine, Glynnis.”

“Oh, Marshall. I know, honey. That’s not what I mean. I just can’t believe it ends like this. It’s just so sad.” She sighed.

“No more mystery,” I said.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she answered, reaching for my hand.

I smiled.

“All right, who wants bagels?” Marshall said, rising. “Ramsey, bagels, boy!” he called, moving toward the kitchen. I heard the scuttle of paws on terra cotta tile. “Come and get it, ladies!”

That was Friday; when I went back to work on Monday, Barry said, “Welcome back. There’s a pile of crap on your desk.”

The guys nodded at me.

Dintz said, "Think you were gone long enough?"

"I had the time coming, Doug," I answered.

"Must be nice, affording that."

"I was visiting my family."

"She was visiting her family, dickwad," Donny said. "So shut the fuck up."

Soon I was staying late again. I went back to doing put-calls, and every week I ran the payroll. Afterward, I walked around the office distributing checks, then rode the escalators down to the trading floor to hunt for the company trolls who never appeared upstairs, not even for meetings. It was a task I had previously enjoyed, feeling like Lady Bountiful, but now the spell was broken. Wending my way through the wolf packs of traders, no longer did I catch a vestigial high from the rampant testosterone swelling around me. I have done this exact thing 74 times, I calculated.

It got worse. Riding in on the early bus, I found my heart no longer thrilled at the sight of the Drake Hotel looming stoutly over Lake Shore Drive. Nor did I relish the long stretch of LaSalle Street, narrow between its buildings like the Black Sea before the shore of Colchis. Before France, I'd set my alarm an hour earlier than needed. Now, I merely got up on time. If I showed up, ran payroll and sent the bills to corporate, Barry seemed satisfied. I still did some overtime, but my numbers were far lower now. I just wasn't consumed as I had been.

When Dintz said, "Hey Amy, tell Mick to shut the goddamned radio," I didn't even look up, merely answering, "They like it on, Doug," without adding the requisite obscenities. There was unaccustomed silence after I spoke.

"Shit, Heche, you been gone too long," Donny said, finally.

"I'm fucking fine," I retorted. But no one said a word in reply.

One night, I swayed with the crowd on the brimming late bus. As it slowly emptied of its tired contents, I looked out the window at the darkness of Lincoln Park, with its soggy, abandoned fields. Could I call myself happy right now, right at this moment? I wondered. For so long, the ferocity of my focus had been aimed toward survival. Before France, grim satisfaction, which I felt while admiring my bank balance, or logging more overtime than anyone else, seemed the nearest thing I could manage. Now, however, as I tried to bully my psyche back into routine, even those

rewards faded. How had I missed that the view from my office window looked out on the Harrison Street prison? Or that a phial of coke and the remains of its contents routinely sprawled across Barry's desk? Self-protection masquerading as ignorance, I thought, as the bus rolled on, spewing exhaust into the chilly evening.

As always, there was Jack. Bribed by the offer of the Jaguar (Rita simply got another one), he had re-enrolled in school, switching from pre-med to architecture. About three weeks into the boggy middle of my confusion, we argued. We were at my apartment. The radiators sizzled, and the windows were wet with steam. It was March, and dirty ice crusted beneath each new layer of snow. Soon it would be St. Patrick's Day. They'd be dyeing the river green again.

"I feel silly riding around in that thing," I said.

"You just wish you had one yourself," he answered.

I stood in my underpants, brewing coffee in the kitchen. Ever since France, I could never get it dark enough. "The hell I do," I muttered. Then, "I should have stayed in Paris."

Suddenly, Jack was in the doorway, naked except for his soft brown socks.

"I heard that," he said.

I faced him, cradling my cup. "She offered me an apartment. I could go to school. That's better than a car, wouldn't you say?"

"You'd trust her? After everything?"

"What if I was careful? What if it were all done formally, like with a lawyer? Couldn't some agreement be made, like in a pre-nup?"

"What if she lets you down again?"

"I think I have to try it," I said. "Ever since I got back, it's like . . . I don't know. I just can't get back in the groove here."

He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. Even in March, his skin looked tan. Half an hour earlier, we'd been making love, turning and twisting in the afternoon light. Leave the shades up, he'd said. I want to see you.

"We were talking about the car," he said. "This was a conversation about the car."

I was quiet. My urges were like splinters working their way through my skin. I had such a feeling of conclusion lately, as if every bus ride down Sheridan was my last. Don't I wish.

"You ask a lot, you know? You don't think you do, but you do. First you take off for

Florida, then France. It's 'I hate my family.' Then it's 'I miss my family.' Now it's 'See what my fucked-up mother wants to do for me'?"

I thought for a moment. "Well, at least she'll probably never ask about your intentions."

He didn't smile. "Actually, that would be easier than all this back-and-forth shit."

"I want you to be on my side," I said.

"Yeah, well, what is your side? How can I give you what you want when what that is keeps changing?"

"I don't know."

We stared at each other. I felt exposed, leaning against the counter in my shiny pink underpants.

"If I go to France, is it over?" I asked.

He looked at me, pressing his lips together. "I don't know," he answered. "No." He turned his face away. "Maybe it should be."

I moved close to him, laying my arms across his shoulders.

He bent his head so our foreheads touched. "You're a lot of trouble," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"You're going to owe me big for this."

"You can visit me. I hear there's a lot of old buildings there."

"You better cover your ass with your crazy mother."

"I will."

He snorted. "And I thought you were going to be such a reliable girlfriend."

I laughed. "Surprise!"

He whispered into my ear. "You keep going away from me."

I held him tight, shutting my eyes. In one conversation, I'd moved from consideration to planning. I felt I'd been living like Andromeda, chained to the rock of my fear, and only risk would free me.

"Hey," Jack said, as I clutched him. "Hey."

He peeled away my arms to look at me, still holding my wrists. "Take it easy. You're not that bad."

I smiled.

“Want to go eat?”

“God, yes,” I answered. We released each other. While I got dressed, he complained about the coffee (“Is this tar?”) and then we went out into the night, where the falling snow made everything fresh again.

I didn’t tell anyone until I was certain. First I called Lily, who had been discharged, and then she called her lawyer.

“If that’s what it takes,” she said, once I reached her. (She also put Claude on the line. “He misses you.” There was a wet sounding snuffle, then silence. “See? He said hello.”)

About three weeks later, a Msr. R. Foche, Avocat, sent me a four year lease, rent ‘per annum, suspended,’ plus details of a Credit Lyonnais account, ‘established in consideration of pending educational and maintenance expenses.’ The opening balance was ten thousand dollars. Taped to the bottom of the letter was a small bronze key with an address written in longhand beside it.

Telling Barry went worse than I anticipated.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, what do you want to bother with that for? You’re making good money already,” he said. The computer cast a green glow on his pale face. His office was always dark now.

“Because I feel like I’m dead already, and I’m only 20 years old.”

“So go to night school. DePaul or something.”

I’m sick of Chicago. I’m tired of drugs and cold, I thought.

“This is an opportunity,” I said.

He waved a hand. “Money’s the opportunity, Amy. Don’t forget that.” He still wouldn’t look at me.

“Can I come back if things change?”

He shrugged. “You can always call.”

Telling Glynnis was even worse.

“Oh my God!” she cried.

Her fingers flew to her pendant. We were at Café Ba-Ba-Reeba on Halsted Street.

Marshall spoke to the waiter.

“Steak. Just steak. No sides or sauce or salsa or anything. Just plain steak, period,” he said. Then, turning to me, he asked “How’d Barry take it?” He wore a white shirt with a pink tie. It was the first warm night in April.

“Bad”, I answered. “I don’t think he wants me back.”

He bit into a roll, making a face. When he put it down, I saw herbs inside it. “You’ll work – don’t worry. He’s just pissed about losing you.”

Glynnis looked away toward the other tables. The candlelight caught a glint in her blue eyes.

“Glynnis,” Marshall said.

I reached across the table and held her cool hand. “You’re the hardest one to leave,” I told her.

“I’m always losing you two,” she said, blinking. “First her, and now you.”

“I think I’d be dead without you, Glynnis.”

She sniffed. “Well, that’s some consolation.”

Marshall sipped his Scotch. “You’ve got to make this easy, Glyn. She’s going either way.”

We’d hardly ordered, and already I’d mauled my napkin.

“It’s such a hard feeling,” I said. “I’ve never left someone I really love before.” I swallowed. “Someone who’s taken care of me.”

“Will you be okay with her?” she asked. Her voice was nervous.

“I think so,” I answered. “I hope so.”

My leverage was Lily’s fear --- of my lingering anger and power of escape. She had bribed me, and I’d let her, finding the terms irresistible: an education, an apartment, a life in France. Something really splendid, surpassing what I felt I’d missed.

The waiter appeared. “Paella for two,” he announced. “And one plain steak.”

Marshall lifted his glass. “To change,” he said. “It always finds us.”

In the following weeks, I worked and packed. My couch went back to Glynnis, and my favorite (and only) Eames chair went to Jack. After my last day at work, Mick, Donny and I went for drinks at Ceres. Barry said he was busy.

“Ah, fuck him,” Mick said. “He’s a sore loser.”

I sipped my beer. "I never thought he'd punish me like this."

"He's screwing May again," Donny said. "I think he's bringing her back. I saw them coming out of the boom-boom room on 36 when I went to see my buddy at Latham Brothers."

"What's the 'boom-boom' room?" I asked.

Donny and Mick exchanged glances.

Mick said, "You mean you've never heard of it?"

"It's the screw room. Traders and managers ball the staff there," Donny said. "Barry has a key. His first wife found out and divorced him."

"Jesus Christ." I felt appalled. Then, insulted. Why hadn't anyone even asked?

"Ought to be entertaining for us, though," Mick said. He and Donny clicked mugs.

"Watch and wait," Donny added.

I looked around the room. I was one of three women, all with groups of men, drinking.

"Fuck yeah!" cried a pretty blonde two tables away.

"Do you guys think I'll ever be able to quit swearing?" I asked. By now we were into our third beers.

"I fucking doubt it," Mick said.

"Why the fuck would you want to?" Donny asked.

"Fuckin' right," Mick concluded.

I smiled. "I'm going to miss you two pigs."

Mick wrinkled his nose. "Oink, oink," he said.

Donny snorted. "Fuck, fuck."

"Want me to burp the alphabet?" Mick asked. "You always liked that."

I considered, looking around at the dark paneled walls, the red upholstered seats, the unchanged steak-laden menu on its easel at the entrance. It seemed like just a week ago when I'd entered under Marshall's enfolding wings. A week ago, or a decade. I was older, but I was going to Paris to pick up the thread of my life where I'd lost it. Tonight, I was getting drunk.

"You're a show-off," Donny told Mick.

Mick shrugged.

"Make your underarms fart," I said.

Obligingly, he reached into his shirt.

“I’ve been listening to this shit since the seventh grade,” Donny said, banging his glass on the table. “I’m going to hit the head.”

I was done with work, done packing. I’d sublet my apartment to a pair of Japanese medical students from Northwestern, two tiny, pretty women whose handwriting on the check they gave me was nearly calligraphic in beauty. I spent a few days at Jack’s, and then I flew out from O’Hare with a single suitcase and a knapsack.

“I can’t believe I’m letting this happen,” Jack said as we stood at the gate. “How can you be going to France?”

“Well you are, and I am,” I answered. I wouldn’t let him hold my knapsack. He counted on his fingers. “It’s May now, and I’ll be there in August. So don’t run off with a Frenchman.”

I turned and kissed him. “Oh Monsieur, take me to your chateau,” I whispered. Too anxious to sleep, we’d been awake making love most of the night. He cut a drafting class to see me off.

“Flight 393 to Paris now boarding,” said a stewardess through a loudspeaker.

“Okay, it’s happening,” I said, standing.

He jumped up and squeezed my arm. “Don’t you dare disappear again.”

“I swear I’ll call as soon as I get a phone.” Then I thought, how do I get a phone in France?

“I love you.”

Completely out of character, I dropped my bag and threw my arms around him. “I love you too.”

He grinned. The people around us smiled. Then I moved toward the boarding ramp, walking backward and waving.

“Three months!” he called. He wore a red T-shirt with an ink stain on the pocket and old jeans. Handsome Jack. I blew him a kiss and turned around.

In Paris, I took a cab from Orly to Beaubourg. I walked along the block for a while, searching addresses until I found the tall, ramshackle building directly across the wide, busy plaza of the Georges Pompidou. Once inside, I faced the longest flight of stairs I had ever encountered, which took long minutes to conquer, bumping my suitcase along behind me. When I reached the top storey, I found a small pink door that could only be mine. Like a fairy tale, the key fit the lock, and I stepped inside. The ceilings were low and the walls, like the door, were painted pink. There was a bed, a table, and the smallest black stove ever. Oh my god, it's a garret, I thought. Unlatching the big windows by the so-called kitchen, I stepped out onto a tiny balcony. Beyond the Pompidou, the skyline emerged, its highest spires disappearing in mist. Looking out, I thought that at last I could answer my old lakeshore mystery: this was what would happen, what I had made happen. I couldn't retreat --- the splinters and slivers were fixed in me now, I knew --- I couldn't ever get back the girl I'd been before Henry left --- but the thing was (here I breathed deeply of dirty, diesel-fueled air), the thing was, I still had to try for happiness. I had faltered, but I was back on track now. I took a last look at the vista around me (in case this was a fantasy), and then I went inside and lay down on the bare mattress.

"Bienvenue," I whispered. "Your new home." And then I fell asleep, free from dreams of Fox Hollow.

All summer long, I worked with a tutor. Her name was Mme. Vieux, a retired professor from L'ecole du Polytechnique. Every morning, I walked to the Place de Thorigny, where she had a large, stuffy apartment. An old white poodle, eyes blue with blindness, met me at the door.

Mme. Vieux and I sat at her dining room table. We were surrounded by a regiment of cabinets and cupboards containing what smelled like mountains of mouldering linens. A glass of water sweated elaborately beside my grammar books. I sat on my hands to keep from biting my nails, though the urge was strong.

My lessons were a battering of facts: "74 carres est 5.476," she said.

"74 carres est 5.476," I repeated.

"Les planetes sont mercure, venus, terre, mars, jupiter, saturne, uranus, neptune et pluton," she said.

"Les planetes sont mercure, venus, terre, mars, jupiter, saturne, uranus, neptune et

pluton," I repeated.

"Bien."

"Bien."

In August, the day before Jack arrived, I sat alone in a hot library at the University of Paris and took a six-hour exam. My score entitled me to provisional entry at the Sorbonne. Five weeks later, when classes began, I joined the young crowd pouring in through the old doors. It was the first day of my first class in my first year in France. I was 20 years old. When I found my classroom, and then my seat, I kept my head down to hide my grin. When my name was called for attendance, I raised my hand and answered "Ici!" Yes, I was. Here. Now. My real life was set to begin.

Dear Hannah,

Greetings from Paris! I'm sorry I haven't written in a while. Your letter arrived yesterday. Who knows how long it sat around Chicago.

I moved a few months ago. I got a really good offer from my mother, of all people. It's a long story how it happened, but I'm going to school and I have an apartment. Come visit me! We break for "Noel" in about three weeks. My apartment's really small and you should bring a sleeping bag, but it's cheaper than a hotel.

I'm glad you wrote to me. I wasn't sure what your mom would say about our fight. I feel bad about it, but I'm mad, too. I left all my stuff. I feel like my whole childhood's in your basement. It's depressing.

It's hard to describe Paris. I know there's all that "City of Light" crap, but it's more the orderly strangeness of it that I like. There's shops here that put dead birds (for cooking) in the window, hung up very neatly, like lined up shirts in a closet. I think the French will eat anything. I don't, though --- mostly just cheese and bread. I just can't bring myself to eat so much . . . guts. It's gross.

Remember when we used to go shopping with Wanda for goff for Moon? I think we loaded the entire cart with those small, terrible cans. I'd forgotten about it until Lily started giving me liver to cook for her dog, a big sloppy blonde named Claude. He doesn't give a shit about

anyone. He stays with me when she goes out of town. Lily doesn't know it but I leave the liver by the garbage for the skinny stray cats. I buy Claude steak tartare, instead. It's slightly less disgusting, and it doesn't stink up my apartment.

I don't want you to think I'm kidding myself or anything. It's not like I recaptured something. It's more like . . . I had to try to get back on my real path. I don't mean to sound all goopy or like one of those Grateful Dead drones from high school. I do feel better about my life now, although I know I'm different from what I would have been if Henry hadn't left. Some days I feel like that one act and its reverberations through my life will haunt me forever. Other times I'm totally sick of the subject. Lately, mostly all I think about is how much homework I have, and how I thought I'd never have to write a paper again. Guess again! The Sorbonne gives shitloads of homework. And it's in French.

I hope you're okay in California. The French think California is like some kind of Mecca. They think everyone from Chicago knows gangsters, and that everyone in California is "le Hippy." Everyone foreign's an archetype, no matter how outmoded. Feel free to go barefoot and bra-less when you visit. We can strew flowers!

Sometimes when I'm walking down the boulevards here, on my way to class, I wonder if I ever really lived in Fox Hollow, or if it was a dream. It doesn't seem possible that one person could have both experiences in such a short life. Yet, here I am. I can hardly believe it.

Love,

Amy