Altar states | A collection of personal essays and novel chapters

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The University of Montana

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ALTAR STATES

A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS AND NOVEL CHAPTERS

by

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There is a picture from my wedding framed by my desk; in it, I am flanked by five grinning women: my mother, my step-mother, my former step-mother and my husband's mother and step-mother. Here we are, women who are casualties of marriage and celebrants of marriage at the same time. The photo seems on the one hand to say, Well, it didn't work out for all of us, but maybe it will work out for you. It says, We love you and we wish you well, and, what's more, We even like each other.

My father and my husband are missing from the picture, taken two years ago. I wanted a picture of women: mothers, wives and ex-wives. We are all happy, me especially, our arms around each other.

Before the wedding, our friends and family came on a river trip with us, down the Dolores in southern Colorado. It was something I had grown up doing, paddling rivers, usually in a tandem canoe with my father. My father's wives had paddled with him too; we all learned to love rivers. At the last minute, my father had to work, and couldn't make the trip. So for three days, his third (and current) wife shared a canoe with his second wife, my former step-mother. They were a good team.
To be honest, we women always seem to get along better when my father's out of the picture. Like many men, he likes to focus on one thing, or one person, at a time. When he married his third wife, Janet, I was as jealous as a lekking prairie chicken. I'd been paddling tandem with him for ten years, and I wasn't quite ready to be replaced in the bow. I was seventeen.

I've never felt he was very good at being with two women at once. Some would say he wasn't very good at being with one woman.

Last summer, I met a man married to two women at once. I was in Southern Utah, writing about a legal dispute over the assets of a group of fundamentalists who split a century ago from the Mormon Church. Harvey Firestone and his wives had rejected the fundamentalist group, and I wanted to ask them about their experiences. They wanted me to see that polygamy has its upside. They were all between 77 and 79 years old. Glenda and Gertrude, who are sisters, have been married to Harvey for 53 and 47 years, respectively. Together they have 17 children and 76 grandchildren, so far.

"Now why is it you are interested in polygamy?" Harvey asked as I set up my tape recorder. He flexed his lips when he talked, and his gravelly voice already sounded like a slowed and garbled recording.
I had expected the question, and rehearsed answers in my mind. I wanted to reassure them I was open-minded, that they could trust me. "Well," I said, "I grew up in a family with a lot of women in it. My father married a few times and was involved with many more..."

"Ah," said Harvey, looking sympathetic. "Your father is what we call a serial polygamist."

"He is?" I was partly pleased Harvey and I had a connection, partly unnerved by its implications.

After all, we were talking about my father, who was neither Mormon nor Arabian nor African. Harvey so casually made him sound somehow marked, as if some people are simply polygamous and some are not. Could my father ever be capable of monogamy? Could anybody? Did it really matter?

As was the case with most of my friends on the Upper West Side of New York in the seventies, my parents were divorced. The difference was my parents were divorced a few more times than everyone else's. By the time I was five years old, my mother had been divorced twice, and so had my father. After that, my mother resolved herself to one long-term relationship in which marriage was out of the question. My father, on the other hand, paraded many attractive young women in and out of his life.
I order many of the scenes and events of my childhood by the women my father was dating at the time. He moved from New York to Washington, D.C. when I was young. There, he lived in a garish apartment building close to downtown. The red velvet-papered lobby resembled a bordello, but the prostitutes were outside, two on every corner of 14th street. Every June I left my mother's apartment in New York to spend humid summers with him in his small efficiency, trading the couch.

Dad had at least one different girlfriend every summer (when they stayed over, he got the bed). But I was still special; I was the one who sat in the bow of my father's canoe on those occasions when we'd get out of the city. Those early summers of my childhood were a leisurely stretch of hippie daycamps, women, canoeing, women, canoeing. As though I anticipated life with my father would get less idyllic, which it did, I savored those long, hot summers.

In my mind, my father's women friends from that time remain distinct.

I remember Rose, a Filipina who cooked delicious banana bread.

There was Ebbie, a muscular woman with a hearty laugh who worked for a California congressman. She knew how to command a canoe.
Kate lived in a terrible neighborhood and my father once got knocked out with a Harvey's Bristol Cream bottle while walking her home.

Sandy worked with my father for a civil rights organization and had a wall-length poster in her suburban bedroom of a naked man lying placidly atop a naked woman in a leafy meadow.

Judy was a middle school librarian, who gave me books on assertiveness training. Judy and I hit it off well. She liked to camp and canoe, and the three of us went on regular excursions, once fishing and skinny-dipping for a week in Canada. Amazingly and exotically, Judy had recently been a Catholic nun.

I remember that trip to Canada. It was one time when there seemed enough of my father to go around. We were in the Quetico wilderness, the three of us in a green fiberglass canoe. Judy and I switched off taking the bow and sitting against a wooden food box strapped to the middle of the boat. We didn't cover a lot of miles, but we caught some big Northern Pike.

One day it rained and rained, and Judy taught us to play poker with a double deck. For an ex-nun, she was a good card player. My father lost; he had to cook dinner. Judy and I stayed in the army-issue canvas tent, playing cards and listening to the weather. The rain didn't bother my
father. He picked a bail-bucket's worth of blueberries and made the best pie I ever tasted. Graham cracker crust, granola topping.

We had water fights and made up goofy, morbid songs to popular tunes: "And the canoe went down, down, down, to the bottom of the lake..."

Several Christmases in a row my father made books for me, photographs and prose and an occasional hokey poem that were reminiscences of the previous summer. In one photo, Judy and I are swimming under a Canadian waterfall (we had our swimsuits on that time). We're both beaming at my father, at the camera, at being the center of attention.

How did a man like my father attract so many women? He seems an unlikely Don Juan. I suppose he's handsome: tall, lean, with a square, bearded face. But if anything, he can be awkward socially; he can be driven, an academic with a penchant for pursuing such causes as housing for the elderly and the protection of free-flowing rivers. His sociology dissertation was about--appropriately enough--single women: how they, especially those with children, comprise the biggest chunk of poverty in America. Maybe he simply wanted to pay alimony to as many of them as he could.

Or maybe he was just unlucky in love. In any case, when I was growing up, Dad was a hippie feminist when those terms were looser and more forgiving. In his Washington
bachelor's efficiency, the books on his bookshelf revealed what to me seemed like contradictions: Margaret Mead, Simone de Beauvoir, a manual for curing VD.

Imagining my father and my mother together is nearly impossible. He has always been an intense and serious man, even brooding. The exception to that mood is when he's on a river trip. The lines leave his forehead; he may even drink a few beers and start singing badly. He is not, however, given to spontaneous fits of laughter. My mother, on the other hand, is. Where my father's demeanor is typical of southern Episcopal men of his generation--he rarely raises his voice or speaks with gestures or expresses emotion --my mother is a raucous urban Jew, plump and frenetic. She hates camping.

Dad met my mother, who was divorced and raising a teenaged son, when they were both teaching at Queens College in New York. The marriage lasted four years. I was born toward the tail end of their time together. My half-brother, by then, was old enough to live on his own.

My mother says when I was two, I'd tell her about my new friend Margaret, with whom I played in the park when my father took me there. Margaret, it turns out, was my father's student. They married a couple of years later. I was a flower girl at the wedding.
I recently told my mother I was writing about my father and serial polygamy. "Serial monogamy," she corrected. "It's a sociology term."

"No, the polygamists call repeated conventional marriages serial polygamy."

"Well," she guffawed, "serial monogamy, serial polygamy, serial axe murderers, it's all the same thing."

My father's marriage to Margaret, his student, lasted only two years. She was the one who left him. Now she's a punk-blond artist in Los Angeles. She never remarried or had children, and we're still close. I always adored her; I was too young to recognize any betrayal. She was and still is like a second mother, although sometimes the thought makes me feel traitorous. She and my father have also remained friends. The three of us continued to take trips together when I was growing up.

To his credit, my father attracted women who were smart and interesting and strong; they made for one hell of an extended family. Some anthropologists say the American nuclear family deprives children of a more traditional community of role-models and caregivers. Not mine. This is sometimes how I've pictured us: It's Gilligan's Island, and there we are, my loin-clothed, bearded father, usually off
on a hunt, me, the lone child, and this tribe of women, swinging from vines and telling jokes.

I really liked most of Dad's girlfriends, but only as long as their relationship wasn't too serious. In my own small, gut-level way, I probably encouraged and applauded the dissolution of whatever monogamous instincts Dad may have had.

On the other hand, because I liked a few of my father's girlfriends, I was sad when they were replaced with new ones. I was too young to protect my mother from Margaret, but I witnessed more infidelities as I got older. As I say, some I applauded, but not all. Judy, the frolicking former nun, was my favorite. I imagine I even considered the possibility of their marriage and was not horrified by the idea, which says a lot. But then, I watched her get ditched.

Consider my father in action: We met Natalie in line for the dining car on a westbound train from New York to Chicago. It was a business trip, and I, age 9, was along to meet our Illinois cousins. Natalie wore a black dress, and her long dark hair draped her figure. My father softly pronounced her name, enunciating the T. Nat-a-lie. He wore a flirtatious grin, an expression I had seen many times and would still see much later when I introduced him (with some dread and embarrassment) to my college roommates or friends.
But my father also has kind, deep-set eyes and a mild voice, and soon the three of us were sitting together. I ate and they ate and talked and drank and laughed and we all swayed to the vibrations of the Chicago Express. It was obvious to me they were in love.

"What time do you usually go to bed?" my father asked me. "It must be about time."

Natalie lasted a little too long in my book. She and Dad dated off and on for a couple of years. When they were in a room together, I was invisible.

I felt bad for Judy the displaced ex-nun, and no doubt, for myself. My father had replaced God in Judy's new-found, secular life. She clearly adored him, and she was nice to me. What would she do now? Go back to the convent? Read her assertiveness books? There would be no more canoe trips with Judy.

Harvey Firestone said the best thing about polygamy, simultaneous polygamy, that is, is that no one gets left out. "A number of men these days discard their wives in favor of new ones, and are regarded as fine fellows," he said. "Why not keep all of the wives in a warm and
congenial family relationship? Americans are fools and hypocrites because they won't allow plural marriages but will have divorces and mistresses."

Harvey reassured me that women like polygamy, that women know a good, honest man when they see one. If he's already got a wife, Harvey explained, many woman are willing to be Number Two.

"You know, Harvey," I said. "You might be onto something there. My mother's been involved with a married man for twenty years." I said it, just like that.

"Well there you go," he said. "Your mother is polygamous."

I don't know when I learned that Irv was married. I know I only saw him around the house when I came home from school in the middle of the day, and my mother would be wearing her bathrobe. I knew they'd met at a psychology convention in Miami. It was never kept a secret from me, or any of my mother's friends; it was only a secret from Irv's wife, Elaine, and that was Irv's problem. I knew all about Elaine. I knew she and Irv slept in separate bedrooms on opposite ends of their apartment. I knew they had three grown children.
"They only stay together for the sake of their money," my mother told me from time to time. "It's not a real marriage. I'm more of a wife to Irv than she is."

Even better, I knew what Elaine looked like. We used to see her on the cross-town bus or in front of the Korean grocery on Broadway.

"That's her," my mother would say, likely sipping an iced coffee from Zabar's. "There she is. She just got a face-lift. Doesn't she look just awful?" Elaine was a tall, severe looking woman, always cloaked in black and wearing voluminous scarves and big hats. It was hard to tell how awful she looked, but I knew my mother felt a sort of conspiratorial glee when she saw her.

My mother reassured me she was happy in her relationship with Irv. She told me they were faithful to each other, and that it was a mutually convenient arrangement.

"Ugh," she'd say. "Can you imagine actually living with a man? I could never be married again."

iii.

Polygamy for the Firestones was Harvey's idea. He'd grown up in Cardston, Alberta, in a community that was partly polygamous. His family were renegade Mormons, and at the time, believed the way to access the highest level of heaven was through plural marriage. But Glenda and Gertrude
were mainstream Mormons, born of Idaho homesteaders. On the
day of my visit, we drank ginger ale in their cool, breezy
living room, a welcome reprieve from the glaring Utah
desert. I asked them how their marriage came about. For
years, Harvey was married only to Glenda.

"He asked me, how did I feel about polygamy?" said
Glenda, a small woman with short, white hair. "I said I
don't know. I've never lived around it, but if I could just
get my sister Gertrude, because I loved her, it would be all
right. I had four children and four more adopted, and I
needed her."

At first, Gertrude resisted. But she was 30, teaching
school, and wanted to have children. Harvey wrote her a
letter every Sunday for a year. "I told Harvey I'm not like
Glenda," said Gertrude, who's thinner than her sister and
wears her hair styled in a pageboy. "She's the gentle one,
and I am just a little bombastic. I said, 'I don't want you
to think about me being like her'. He said, 'I already have
a Glenda; now I want a Gertrude. You'll add to the
family.'"

Gertrude: "He was the kind of person I'd been looking
for. I prayed a lot. It was, well, you've been looking for
a good man; we've sent you one, but we sent him with terms
and conditions. We sent you a sister and eight kids. And I
couldn't get anyone else to show up."
Glenda pipes in: "We have a good life, she and I. We're not lonely, we read together, we work together."

Gertrude: "We're sisters and we naturally get along."

I didn't see my father as often as I wanted to growing up. I felt keenly the distance between Washington and New York. While summers spent with him are some of my best memories, especially during my early teens when we drove west, there were long cold months in between. I probably saw my father once a month, and to him this represented a Herculean effort. To me, it felt thin. I know he tried.

Later, in my teens, Dad became involved with a diminutive attorney from Beverly Hills named Althea. They lived together for five years and have two children. It was pretty much the end of idyllic summer canoe trips for me and Dad, I think to the disappointment of both of us. Althea and I didn't exactly hit it off, and neither did Dad and Althea, come to think of it.

To end the relationship, Dad used the tried and true formula of falling in love with someone else, his third and present wife, Janet. Got the order? Mom, Margaret, Judy and the other Rockettes, Althea, Janet. One of these days I'll draw a wall map or a fold-up time line, the condensed history of my family in three feet.
So Dad was quite busy. But I was lucky; I still had an intact family of attentive women. For whatever reasons, my father's wives--Margaret and my mother, Margaret and Janet, get along. There is camaraderie between them and me, a sense of shared interests, usually food, books and men, and shared indignities, usually men. It's not as though we don't have anything in common.

I still visit my former step-mother Margaret in Los Angeles. Sometimes when I'm there my mother finds an excuse to come out, and the three of us eat together by the water and laugh and talk about books and movies and, occasionally, my father. We all probably love him in our own ways. We're also all glad we don't live with him. "A good egg," as Margaret once put it, though my mother rolled her eyes. We were eating in one of those dark wood-panelled establishments that contrive to be the inner bowels of a yacht.

We all got the seafood salad, dressing on the side, and ice water without the lemon for Margaret. My mother was in awe of the view, the fresh air, the abundant parking. She had just moved from New York to San Francisco at age 55. She turned from gazing out the window and announced that she'd finally given up on her relationship with Irv.
"I'm sick of it," she said, beginning to peel a shrimp. "What good did it do me? But I bought a new queen-size bed. I'm optimistic."

Margaret, still sporting her signature punk haircut, had man trouble of her own. "I recently went on a date with a terrific-looking younger guy," she said. "Turns out he's a Holocaust denier. I couldn't believe it. I was so ashamed." She was genuinely shaken. We, fellow Jews, consoled her.

I love these lunches, but I invariably think: This is odd, eating with my mother and Margaret. Margaret was, after all, the young student my father left my mother for. But it works. It's confounding and wondrous to me that the two women I love most also like each other. The Flintstones never quite prepared me for this, but now I'm used to it.

We're a matriarchy of our own, a tribe of women once connected to my father. He is mostly absent from our lives now, but we remain together like bricks in loose mortar. The connections thicken; Margaret has even initiated a sort of rapport with Dad's former flame Althea, and my half siblings. Maybe we should all start a garden club or something. How about a newsletter or a national directory: "Visiting Alexandria? Look up Judy for a game of poker."
"Plural marriage is so rich," said Harvey Firestone, his raspy voice rising to a congregational pitch. We had been sitting in the living room for hours, surrounding the tape recorder like a campfire. Harvey showed no signs of tiring. "We love one another more every year because we get to know one another more and adjust to one another. As far as I'm concerned I wouldn't live any other way. If people are honest with themselves and treat people well, respect and admiration are automatic. After all, a marriage is a marriage."

Gertrude: "Glenda and Harvey have been married over 53 years, we've been married for 47, so he says he's been married over a hundred and some odd years."

Harvey: "And I love every bit of it."

Harvey thinks he knows the secrets of a successful marriage; he's even written a treatise on it, along with a treatise on the history of polygamy and one on "the keys to honest wealth" (he's been a successful contractor). While Harvey shuffled off to find these documents, which he assured me would improve my life, Glenda refilled my glass of ginger ale and handed me a poppyseed muffin wrapped in a goosebumpy pink paper napkin.
"If you'll excuse me, dear," she said, "I have to go off and milk the goat. That's my chore. I'll be back shortly."

I asked Gertrude if everyone had regulated tasks. Did they take turns cooking dinner? Was there some sort of scoreboard? Of course, I was also curious about the sleeping arrangements, but wasn't sure how to broach that one.

"We used to trade off with the cooking," she started.

"You and Glenda and Harvey?"

"Just Glenda and I...but now that the kids are gone, it's very casual. Whoever feels like cooking cooks."

She gave me a house tour. Each of three had their own bedroom (Ah!), and Harvey had his own office. I glimpsed him stooping over a filing cabinet, still mining his archives on my behalf.

Gertrude told me they built the pleasant hacienda by themselves ("One wall at a time. Harvey's the architect. Glenda and I are his right and left hands.") Then she offered up more goodies, telling me that for decades, before they built the house, Harvey alternated two nights in Glenda's bedroom, two in hers. She smiled with the equitability of it all.

Next, Gertrude showed me her paintings, lining the white stucco walls. They were lively oils of daisies, a Mexican woman and child, horses, cows. Very secular, even ordinary.
"So you're not religious at all anymore?" I asked.

"Oh no. We've had it with all that malarkey. We do enjoy reading eastern philosophy occasionally. You know, karma and that sort of thing."

Goats, karma, muffins. The Firestones kept surprising me. Gertrude told me she still occasionally operates a backhoe at age 77. It seemed a very pleasant life, indeed. After all, their marriage, all hundred and some odd combined years of it, has lasted longer than that of anyone I know.

As Gertrude showed me photo albums filled with pictures of their multitudinous progeny, Harvey reappeared, waving his treatises. Gertrude folded up the albums and made room for her husband on the couch. I leafed through a few pages of The "Constitutional Contract of Marriage." It read like a cross between a military code and a computer manual (On vowing to eat healthy foods: "The malfunction of either of us adversely affects the other and lessens the quality and effectiveness of our unit").

It occurred to me that the Firestone family may not have believed in organized religion, but Harvey was nonetheless the household prophet. "We're his right and left hands," Gertrude had said. The phrase kept coming back to me. I worried just a twinge about Glenda and Gertrude's selfless devotion to Harvey's concepts and precepts of functional marriage. Polygamy in practice, it seemed, worked a bit
like summer camp. There were rotating chores, team spirit, constant accommodation. It was like having siblings forever. I knew I could never do it.

In our family, the reigning patriarch frequently hit the road, lighting out for new territory. In the end, that was probably a good thing. Just as I can't picture my mother with him, nor can I picture Margaret, or Judy, or Natalie-with-the-strong-T with him. It's not just that these women have strong and independent personalities, but also, I think now, that my father was not very good at being married. At least then, he didn't do the things that we now consider make marriages work: he didn't communicate well; he was withdrawn. He liked strong women, but he didn't know how to live with them. Given that, I'd rather take the community of mothers by themselves, sans patriarch. In effect, that's what I got.

It has been important for me to think the women I grew up with called their own shots, although it probably never quite works that way. At least in their post-Dad phases, Margaret and my mother and the handful of other women I came to know still had a life, an identity, a sense of humor. They taught me to love and to laugh. They taught me the
importance of being independent, of having a strong sense of self, because some day, that may be all you have.

With some exceptions, the women are still around; they're there when I want to hang out with them, but thank God we didn't have to eat together every night, or do each other's laundry every fourth day.

As for me, I've learned I'm not very good at sharing a man. Maybe that's why marriage appealed to me. It seemed like a foreign, quiet, sweet-smelling land.

When we announced our engagement a couple of years ago, Jamie's parents, who are divorced, heartily congratulated us. He is their youngest son and the first who wanted to get married. They were relieved; someone in the family still believed in the institution. I guess we do. Call it love, call it convention. We say we've learned from the mistakes of those before us. We say we're better at being a modern couple, whatever that is. We know if we have children, they'll benefit from a tribe of grandmothers and step-grandmothers. We say we know how to talk, how to be together, and more importantly, how to be apart.

We called my father in Washington, D.C., to tell him we were engaged. He gulped audibly. "Well," he said finally, "I guess I always thought you would do that, but I didn't expect it so soon. You're so young." I was 25. I'd been
dating Jamie for years. Then he lightened up and said all the right things.

My father spent a weekend with us in Colorado a couple of months before the wedding. It was like old times. We canoed a river, scrambled up and down canyons. At 55, he was more agile than either of us. He and Janet had a four-year-old son, his fourth child in 25 years; maybe it keeps him young. He had news for us: he'd been hired to consult an international conservation organization and they were moving to Switzerland. He said he would be working in population control. This, for a man with four children by three different women, is justice, I thought. But I was also proud of him.

We were hiking up Dominguez Canyon, a local favorite that forks off the Gunnison River, when we turned a bend and came upon some friends of mine: Four women, sitting naked in a sandstone pool in the creek. For a moment, I had the old dread that Dad would turn into some sort of satyr, bounding into their pool, grinning. There was no way around them. We waved and I introduced my father. No one seemed fazed. It was all so grown-up.

We walked on for a while and then sat in the shade beneath a boulder that had chipped off the canyon wall.
above. Jamie followed a bird, a yellow-breasted chat, up ahead, and my father and I shared a water bottle.

"Dad, are you happily married?" I asked.

He thought about it for awhile. "I'm content," he said.

Jamie returned, happy from the chat chase. He imitated its call for us. We roamed the side canyons for the rest of the afternoon and returned home thirsty, still talking bird talk. Jamie and my father and I share a love for these rivers and landscapes, and it is in them that we are all at our best. These are the canyons in which all is forgiven, in which our love for each other is enough.

These are the two men who, some years ago, colluded to buy me a plastic yellow kayak for my birthday. It was a significant act for my father, for canoeists do not easily give in to an age-old rivalry with kayakers. It's like a fly-fisherman making a gift of a spin rod. There was some obvious symbolism in the gift: I was going from my father's mode of transportation to my future husband's. But what I love most about kayaks is that you operate them by yourself. Maybe I was hurt too much getting displaced from my father's bow. Maybe I didn't quite want to rely on someone so completely again. Now my boat is my own.

Such river gifts are sort of a theme of ours. For our wedding, our disparate relatives chipped in and bought us a
raft, a 14-foot rubber inflatable the color of a morpho butterfly. It's big enough for all our gear and two coolers worth of beer and food. Sometimes we take our family and friends in it down the river, and sometimes we use it by ourselves. I usually strap my kayak onto the back of it; anytime I want out I get in my boat. It's a good arrangement.
The Electronic Revolution

My father just returned to the states after living in Switzerland for two years. He had a fellowship to work on population issues for an international organization. He traveled a lot, meeting with third world governments and environmental groups, talking about resource sustainability and contraception. It was a dream job, being a population expert, but somewhat ironic. My father has a large family by today's standards: four children, ages 27 to 6, with three different mothers. I'm the oldest. We're never quite sure if the chain has ended; Dad's only in his fifties. By the time King Abdul Aziz was 78, he had 63 children, a conservative estimate. I don't know how many wives he had.

When my father was abroad, we communicated mainly by computer. From Bangladesh, he sent me an E-mail message that he and his current wife and my half-brother (the six-year-old) would be returning to Washington, D.C., in June. "I'll visit you in Colorado in July," he wrote, "then go to California to see the kids. Maybe you can come too."

My first thought about this venture was cynical. I haven't seen my California half-sister in eleven years (she's 15 now), and I've never met my California half-brother. It's not that I haven't wanted to; I've wanted to very much. But their mother, Althea, doesn't allow us to
meet. My father keeps hoping she's getting more reasonable as the kids get older and form ideas of their own, but so far, we've had no luck. For a diplomat, my father has, sadly, failed to keep parts of his own family on speaking terms.

Even though I am always pessimistic that a reunion will work, I find myself getting excited. What would I wear? Do my brother and sister want to meet me, too? Do they care? For years, that part of my family has been enshrouded in mystery. I can't visualize them well, and I don't remember much about their personalities. My half-brother is a blank image. But more and more, I consider them part of my family, our bi-coastal, bi-continental, telecommunicating network of cast-offs, runaways, divorcees, lovers and offspring. We are like a tribe in diaspora, or a city-state after an invasion. My father, never domineering, was once the reluctant monarch, but Lear-like, has now become more a baffled traveler. He has a small band of loyalists, like me, and a mighty usurper, Althea, who has, in effect, banished us.

What do you do when you can't see your siblings face to face? For one thing, you spy.

From a car across the street, I've watched Althea's house. It sits by the ocean in Santa Monica. I know its
exterior well. A tall, yellow and blue stucco wall shields the house from the boulevard, and from snooping people like me. The wall is cracking in a few places, probably the result of the last earthquake. A sorry sprig of ivy, ill evolved to live on the beach, clings weakly to the stucco. Inside, presumably, are my two half siblings, maybe practicing piano or doing their homework. I imagine it's a hard home to play in because in my mind Althea is a raging tyrant.

The house of my half-siblings is conveniently close to where my father's second wife, Margaret, lives. Although she's my former step-mother, having divorced my father when I was only five, we've remained close. Margaret has no kids of her own. I am a long-distance surrogate.

Dad and Margaret have also remained friends. When Dad goes to California to visit the kids, he stays at Margaret's house by the canals in Venice. Sometimes, he borrows Margaret's car, or Margaret drops him off at Althea's. Margaret not only knows where Althea lives, she has been inside. She knows the kids. She's even taken them to Disneyland. You might think: This sounds irrational. Why would Althea allow Margaret, an ex-wife, to visit her children and not allow me, their own sister? But Althea's not rational.
Margaret sometimes drives me in her white sportscar to Santa Monica, and we park under some palms along the boulevard. We simply sit there, gazing at the impenetrable walls of Althea's compound. It's a frustrating and largely futile exercise, because we really can't see a thing.

"It's like a fortress," I always say. "What do you think they're doing in there?"

"I don't know," Margaret shrugs, and we sit there a while longer. "Seen enough?"

I was eleven the first time I met Althea. She and Dad and I were to spend a fall weekend together in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. They arrived in Dad's van to pick me up. I was used to meeting Dad's girlfriends. My parents had been divorced for nearly ten years. I lived most of the year in Manhattan with my mother, but summers, when I visited Dad in Washington, D.C., he had a different girlfriend every year. But the first thing that struck me about Althea was how different she was from the others. Dad's big thing was he liked to camp and canoe, and most of his women friends looked the part: they were jocks. Young and strong, they were comfortable in torn jeans, flannel shirts and army surplus wool hats. Althea, however, wore a near floor-length floral dress. Her long, straight hair was adorned with several pastel ribbons, barrettes and the like,
more than on all the heads of my sixth grade friends put together. She also wore makeup, a considerable amount of it. She was the kind of woman who traveled with a dozen face creams and painted her toe-nails coral or apricot.

The next thing I noticed right off the bat was her size. She was under five feet tall, way shorter than I. "She looks like a china doll," my mother whispered to me as we loaded the elevator. "Very peculiar. Call me when you get there." Althea's voice was odd, too: a high pitched little-girl's voice riffed with fakey intonations. I could see why my mother was concerned.

We drove up the Taconic expressway in Dad's van, Dad and Althea sitting in the faux-leather front seats, me reclined, for that was the best position, on the tweedy bed in the back.

The summer before, Dad had built the van and I'd helped. With a carpenter, he designed the horseshoe shaped bed, intended to allow easy access to the storage compartments under the foam mattresses. At night, a separate board slid into the center of the horseshoe, filling it up to a full-size bed. I helped Dad pick out the brown and mustard knobby material to cover the mattresses. I helped sew the muslin curtains and glue the orange linoleum on the floor. We installed a tape deck, a secure shelf for travel books, field guides and my young adult novels, and a small fridge
that plugged into the cigarette lighter. Perfect for camping and canoeing. We drove it down to Georgia that summer and paddled the Chattahoochee and the Chattooga, rivers with names that sounded like trains.

On this trip to the Catskills, I was reading a book with a title like *How to be Assertive or Stick Up For Yourself! A Guide for Adolescent Girls*, given to me by one of Dad's (now former) girlfriends, an earnest librarian at a junior high school. My book told me to practice shouting "No!" several times a day. I practiced saying it a few times in my head during the drive, but like those books that tell you how to make a fortune baby-sitting or fixing lawnmowers, the idea got boring fast.

The Catskills displayed their typical fall splendor. I remember the yellows of what must have been birches all around Dad's friend's house. We were visiting George, his wife and their two sons. It was one of those weekends when the weather is either very hot or very cold, and it was sunny and hot when we pulled up to the driveway Saturday morning. It always took a while to disembark from the van. Bags had to be pulled out of storage cabinets under the mattresses. Books and tapes needed to be filed away, the cushions reassembled.

Althea flowed into the house, leaving us to carry her quilted floral bags and our duffels, raincoats and hiking
boots. My father must have sensed this was one of the few moments we'd have alone together all weekend, for it was then, as we stood loaded with baggage on the gravel, our hosts waiting in the foyer, that he chose to break his big news.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, with a mixture of resignation and studied cheer, "You're going to have a baby brother or sister."

"Oh," I said, smiling, not missing a beat, "great." I matched Dad's casual, if awkward, tone and we turned to meet his friends.

My response has always perplexed me. I was so polite, even though I felt like I'd been hit with a brick. I had only known Althea for 100 miles.

I still lived in a simple, only slightly screwy world in which I believed the ordinary course of human events was that people married, had a kid or two, then divorced. Dad and Althea were definitely skipping a big milestone. What happened to courtship, marriage, the gradual getting-to-know-the-kids-from-the-previous-marriage phase? Was I a part of this family, or what? And hadn't they only very recently met? They hardly knew each other.

Much later, I found out the more complete story: They had met during the summer at a party in Cape Cod. She must
have been alluring to him--she was a judge and an art collector in her mid-30's from the West Coast. He apparently overlooked her odd habits and squeaky voice. They had a brief, bi-coastal affair, and soon after, Althea revealed her pregnancy. No one was more shocked than my father, because she had assured him she was infertile. Either it was a miracle, or Althea had been lying through her teeth.

But on that fall weekend, I could only assume that a new baby was also my father's design. Despite feeling confused and betrayed, I pleasantly acquiesced. So much for assertiveness training. So much, too, I guessed, for Dad's most recent girlfriend, the nice librarian who'd given me the book. I already thought of her nostalgically, showing me the intricate etchings of dragons and princesses in her first-edition fairy tales. Those were the days.

Not only had Dad replaced the librarian, he was replacing me. I could see it all: no more days in the canoe with my father to myself. What's more, I was about to become a "previous" child. There was something pathetic about that, it seemed to me. Previous children were like dangling modifiers in the sentences we diagrammed in sixth grade, untied loose ends from mistaken marriages. They would generally end up living with their embittered, cash-poor mothers while Dad and new wife and new kids prospered
in the suburbs, and occasionally invited the priors over for Christmas or the Fourth of July.

The house in the Catskills where we spent the weekend was big and rough-hewn, dark and comfortable at the same time. It had deep orange shag carpets, thick towels in the bathroom, piles of clean and dirty dishes stacked all over the kitchen. A happy mess. George's athletic looking wife passed around munchies while the two boys, both younger than I, concentrated on sliding a plastic train around and around a mock-industrial wasteland.

Finally, the older boy looked at me, more out of a sense of duty than enthusiasm. "Wanna play with our dumptruck?" he offered.

This was the kind of house I never had and would never quite understand. How odd they must have thought us: my tall, gaunt, bearded, father, his new tiny, morning-sick girlfriend and me, a painfully quiet, skinny girl who immediately used the phone to reassure her mother she had arrived in one piece, more or less.

It was just a few months later that we first spied on Althea. I was with my mother and my grandmother for a short vacation on the West coast. We were only partly spying, for Mom had somehow managed to get us legitimately invited to
tea at Althea's house (then in Beverly Hills). I knew then that our motives were far from merely social: we wanted to check her out. Althea, after all, was about to move in with my father in Washington, about to become the mother of my half-sibling, and yet no one knew Althea well, including, apparently, my father. Who was this woman?

Mom, Grandma and I rented a Chevy and drove to Beverly Hills. First we cased out Althea's woody, bricky block. It was the kind of neighborhood that had wide, curving streets and imposing houses. I was used to the busy, linear streets of New York and Washington. Beverly Hills' curves struck me as unwholesome, somehow, and artificial, like bread without the crust. We gazed out of the Rent-a-Wreck as my grandmother slowly edged the curb two houses down from Althea's. We were deliberately early for tea.

"Stop!" said my mother. Their directions to each other were frequently barked as commands. "I see her," she whisper-yelled. Her voice sounded on edge but also giddy from the clandestine operation. "Over there, in the garden. Oh my God, she looks like Ophelia gone mad. She's really gone around the bend." Althea, by now visibly pregnant, was stooping over gargantuan purple blossoms. Her short figure was swathed in a long white house dress and she held a basket of cuttings. Some sort of laurel crowned her auburn
hair, which ran paper-straight to below her waist. I didn't think Shakespeare; I thought hobbit. Gnome. Witch.

My grandmother abruptly lurched the Chevy, and we eyed Althea, whom my mother sardonically called The Judge, from down the street. "So The Judge likes to dress Elizabethan," Mom said. Althea wasn't really a judge. That was one of her fabrications. She was an attorney, and she once clerked for a judge, but she herself was not a judge, despite what she told my father. My grandmother masterminded that discovery by doing a little sleuthing on her own, researching California bar archives. My family should have gone into the P.I. business.

Althea entered the house, banging a screen door.

"Your father has really done it this time. This woman's nuts," said my mother to me, and my grandmother nodded. We both knew my mother, a psychologist, tended to be right on the money about these things. She could always tell which of my sixth grade teachers was newly divorced, which were closet homosexuals.

"Well," I said, "are we just going to sit here all day or go in?"

The Judge's house was dark and Gothic, like in Addams Family re-runs, and Althea, come to think of it, exuded a distinctly Morticia-esque quality, especially with that
long, long straight hair. The front rooms were cluttered with stuff: Persian carpets on every floor and wall, charcoal drawings, law books, dark, heavy furniture, wrought-iron Art Nouveau lamps, and fixtures and figurines my mother later referred to as "zillions of objets." Althea greeted us with her high, squeaky child's voice. "Hello Florence darling." She pecked my cheeks, Euro-style, and tip-toed into the living room, explaining that her aging parents were asleep upstairs.

I was trying to get it all straight: my father was about to shack up with a pregnant, elfin pretend-judge who squeaked like a mouse and still lived with her parents.

Mom and Grandma were doing plenty of sizing up on their own, my mother's eyes boldly scanning every crevice of the dark room, her mouth pursed as if warding off a bad smell. In fact, the house did smell over-ripe, a combination of old-house must, rotting compost and those grotesque flowers from outside, now overwhelming their crystal vase. My Grandmother primly clasped her hands together and didn't utter a word.

Althea heaved herself onto a tall velvet chair and sat straight up like a great white Buddha. We drank chamomile tea seeped from wire tea balls and exchanged comments about the fine weather.
"Nice flowers," said my mother, nodding to the purple blossoms.

"It's my favorite color," squealed Althea. "If it's a girl I'm going to name the baby Hyacinth." She gave it an extra pronunciation. My mother smiled magnanimously.

"And if it's a boy?" She asked.

"John, Jr." Althea blinked first.

We finished our tea and then we left. We had to find my grandmother a bathroom, fast, because she refused to use the one at Althea's house.

Soon enough Hyacinth was born, a beautiful baby with Althea's straight fine hair that got clamped into elaborate pastel barrettes as soon as it was long enough. Unfortunately for Hyacinth, her mother clothed her only in shades of purple.

Althea didn't care for my father's efficiency apartment in Washington, so he bought a bigger one. How his life was transformed: floral curtains, floral sheets, floral wallpaper. Chamomile tea and tea balls. A purple baby.

Dad had once told me he was living with Althea and Hyacinth because it was the right thing to do. He looked unhappy when he said it; in fact, he looked unhappy a lot. He was miserable.
My connection to all of this was a bit tenuous. I rarely visited their home, for Dad preferred to escape from Althea on the occasional weekends when I'd get to see him. During summers, Althea couldn't bear Washington's humidity, so she and Hyacinth would return to the Gothic house in Beverly Hills. While they were in California, Dad and I lived in the van, driving around the West, canoeing all the rivers we could find.

But by August, Dad would furrow his brow a lot and sulk. If I made a mistake in a rapid, scraping our bow on a rock, he might scowl or curse where he was normally indulgent or forgiving. He didn't talk about Althea much, but rumors were febrile among our friends and relatives. This is what I heard: Althea had intended to get pregnant all along; she was crazy (not just my mother's theory).

What I do know, what I heard from a cousin - a key informant in the family rumor mill - is that Althea once referred to me once as "trash" from Dad's "former life."

I had my own ways of dealing, or not dealing, with Althea. Because I didn't see her or Hyacinth very often, it seemed optimal to just forget about them. If I wasn't a part of their family, they weren't a part of mine. My family unit, as I saw it, and as I wanted others to see it, consisted only of the New York branch: me, my mother, and
our dog, Albert. And occasionally my father, visiting from Washington.

So I never told any of my school friends that Althea or Hyacinth existed. It was partly a crisis of vocabulary, partly of explanation. Is a sister you've barely met still a sister? How do you tell your best friend Kathy, an adolescent girl from a large, intact Catholic family, that your father has not one but two broken families and that the existence of the other makes you seem less a daughter? And what if it makes your friends think your father's a jerk, and you don't think so?

Children are good at keeping secrets. Maybe that is the only sense of control they have. At first, I wore my secret like a loose undershirt; I could mostly ignore it, but whenever I took a deep breath, there it was. Later, I felt trapped. If I told someone about Hyacinth, I would also have to explain why I hadn't ever mentioned her before. Secrets involve ever greater labyrinths of deception, and it was getting tricky.

By the time I was 15, I couldn't do it anymore. The best way to break the news, I decided, was to be casual. So one day, when my father announced we could go on a cheap weekend excursion to the Caribbean, I invited my friend Kathy.
"Hey, Kath," I said, as we slogged home through the gray slush on Broadway, "want to go to Nassau for the weekend? Only $99 dollars. It's just me and my dad"--the next part I said quickly, as if she had known it all along--"and his girlfriend and their kid."

If Kathy was surprised, she played it cool, just as I hoped she would. And so off we went, a family vacation. Not surprisingly, it was an odd weekend. Kathy and I spent all our time at the beach, trying to maximize our 2-day tans, while Althea, terrified of the sun, wrapped herself and 4-year-old Hyacinth in layers of (purple) gauzy scarves and straw hats. My dad pretty much sat around looking uncomfortable.

For a brief moment after lunch one day, Kathy and I played with Hyacinth on the beach. We each held one of Hyacinth's hands, and swung her above the gentle shorebreak. She loved it, begging for more. Then we picked her up by the feet, dipping her ponytail, dark, like mine, in the surf. More squeals of delight.

"That's enough girls." It was my father, walking stiffly over. "Althea wants her back in the shade."

Eventually, when I was about 16 and Hyacinth 5, Althea moved back to Beverly Hills for good. It was a pretty ugly split, but then I guess most are. There was a collective
sigh of relief from Dad's relatives and friends, and especially, from Dad. But this is the part that really kills me: she was pregnant, again.

"Dad, how could you?" I was stunned that two people who hadn't visibly gotten along in years could still do it.

I just remember Dad sort of shrugging in his own disbelief. The rumor mill went febrile again. Althea, knowing her days were numbered, put a hole in the condom, said the cousin.

Do these things happen in real life?

John Jr. was born later that year, in California. Dad fell in love with a 28-year-old, and got married. That sounds like a wrap-up, but the story was far from over; it was just beginning.

When Althea retreated to Beverly Hills for the last time, she was pissed. Her shrink in Washington, a tall man I met once named Spenser, also thought she might be suicidal, but I guess that was speculative. In any case, Dad feared for Hyacinth. That's when he decided to kidnap her.

He figured he would sue Althea for custody, keeping Hyacinth with him until the trial, and then, hopefully, beyond. So he had the legal papers carefully drawn up -
these gave him legitimate, temporary custody - and then he took little Hyacinth on a very long trip, back to Washington.

His great aider and abetter was his ex-wife, my former-stepmother, Margaret, the one who lived in L.A. She had helped my father get an expensive custody attorney, and now she helped him get a car, motel reservations and toys for Hyacinth. After the deed was done and Althea had called the police, Margaret was the only person who knew where they were. But she didn't tell.

"I hate to use the word kidnapping," Margaret told me later. It was easier to talk to her about it than my father, who looked like he was in physical pain when the subject came up. "It was all perfectly legal, but the police didn't know that. I'd been out of town that week. When I got home, there was this unbelievable number of phone calls on my machine from the police, like 50 or 60. And the neighbors told me the police had been there a bunch looking for me. So I was a little freaked. I was supposed to have dinner with your Dad and Hyacinth, but of course I didn't go. I thought I'd be followed or something. So I called the restaurant, and that night they flew back to Washington."

In retrospect, it was a stupid idea. Althea, remember, was an attorney. She knew that Dad's legal papers gave him
temporary custody. She much preferred to see him tracked by the LAPD as a dangerous kidnapper. So, in order to avoid being served the papers, she checked into a hotel for a few days under a fake name. Dad even hired someone to sit in the lobby to spot her, but Althea eluded him. The custody papers were thus void.

Then, Althea sued him on six counts, everything from kidnapping to child abuse. It was a tricky kind of suit, because it never got to court. Every time a hearing date was set up, she'd cancel it. In this way, Dad simply ran out of money.

The upshot of all this is that he was forced to settle out of court. He ended up with no custody rights, no regular visitation rights, and, in return, no child-support obligations. In effect, he gave up.

Dad still sees the California kids, aged 15 and 11, once or twice a year. He flies out to LA, and teaches John how to ride a bike, or takes Hyacinth to ceramics class. It's a bit like walking on shells, though, for him. One false move and Althea will deny future visits. For years, I've wanted to go along, see Hyacinth, but it's not allowed.
"Why can't Dad do something?" I once asked Margaret, after Althea had cancelled a visit from me when I was in LA. "Why is he such a wimp?"

"Because he has no power." She stated, simply. "Althea holds all the cards. Not even most of them. All of them. There's nothing he can do."

After years of denying Hyacinth's existence to my friends, it was ultimately I who became the phantom sibling. She knew I existed, because Dad talked about me to her, trying to untell whatever lies she may have heard from her mother, about my being trashy or whatever Althea's latest concoction was. But Hyacinth doesn't know me, wouldn't recognize me on the street. For years, Dad's been telling her I want to see her, and he says she reacts favorably. We came close a couple of years ago, when she went on a school trip to Washington, D.C. I flew to town from Colorado, even bought her a present: a journal, made of pretty French paper. As usual in these situations, I thought about clothes. What do big sisters look like?

I'm not sure why I want to see her so badly. When I hear about those separated-at-birth adoptees seeking their biological mothers, sometimes I think, you're better off not knowing. I feel sorry for the adopted parents; I think, these sentimental reunions are sure to be a disappointment.
Maybe I'm trying to make up for the years I denied Hyacinth's existence, wipe my karmic slate clean.

I also feel strangely allied with Hyacinth. Hers was the second family my father abdicated; mine was the first. We have that in common. I feel compelled to salvage our connection, to forge a new family from the shards of the first two. I want to reclaim my father's pain, Althea's manipulations, my own passive adolescence.

Maybe Hyacinth needs this bond, too. I like to think she would like to know me. She's at the age when she could use friendships with women other than her mother, especially her mother. My life, when I was her age, was peopled with young women - mostly, my father's girlfriends - who did things like give me assertiveness training books. Maybe the books are finally paying off. I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and do battle with Althea, because that's what it's going to take.

Sometimes I envision us, Hyacinth and me, sitting on a boulder by the ocean, talking like sisters. Or maybe in Colorado, where I live, the two of us baking a serviceberry pie. It would be such a nice, cinematic closure. The good guys ride into the sunset; the seething con artist gets left in the dust.

But these neat narratives never seem to happen, at least not in my family. The reason I was cynical when I got Dad's
E-mail message from Bangladesh is that our attempted reconciliations invariably fail. We try and try, but Althea always steals our horses before the posse can get going.

Once, when Dad called Hyacinth's teacher to arrange the Washington meeting during her school trip, the teacher said Althea had given last-minute instructions: Hyacinth was not to be allowed out of the hotel, and no visitors except my father could see her there. We did manage to violate her intentions, though; I wrote Hyacinth a letter, had my father take it with him to her hotel.

"Since you don't know me well, I thought I'd tell you a little about myself," my letter began. It was short. They sat in over-stuffed chairs in the lobby, and she read it there. Then she handed it back to Dad, because she didn't want her mother to find it in her suitcase.

So when Dad proposed the most recent California meeting, I buffered myself for disappointment. I planned to visit friends in San Francisco; that way, if the reunion didn't work, I wouldn't be left hanging. Dad and I plotted to meet halfway down the coast, maybe go hiking in Big Sur. Dad said Hyacinth was thrilled. A family outing. I bought her another present. Thought about clothes again. The morning of the trip, Dad called.
"Well, we haven't left yet." He sounded resigned. "Althea's being her usual self. She says John, Jr. has a cold and can't leave. She says she needs me to take her car to get fixed." I could hear the frustration in his voice. "She sabotages every plan I make. It's impossible to do anything with them."

We had to hatch another plan. Hyacinth, at fifteen, had begun to rebel against her mother and her controlling regime, as we always hoped she would. "Hyacinth," announced my father, "has outgrown the system, or, at least, she wants out."

What my father did next was indisputably brilliant, and I'll always love him for it. He called me in the evening. "I bought her a modem," he said, and then it clicked. We could send each other E-mail messages.

"She'll have her own password." He was anticipating everything now. Her mother won't be able to access Hyacinth's mail! Althea, the art-nouveau aficionado, the queen of tea-balls, is an unlikely hacker. Never had the generation gap in technology seemed so subversive, so beneficent.

They say the fax machine played a central role in China's Tiananmen rebellion. Computer communication helped dismantle the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Now, Althea's totalitarian state, as I've always imagined it -
censorship, unfair reprisals, the repression of the human spirit - was about to receive its biggest blow.

I got my first E-mail message from Hyacinth last week. I hope it doesn't make her feel too criminal. Then again, sneaky behavior runs in the family. Maybe she glances over her shoulder a few times before logging on, or maybe it's late at night and her mother is asleep, chilled, raw cucumbers blotting out her eyes. Hyacinth's hands, possibly big and slender, like mine, type her message.

"Hi! Wish I could have seen you. I'm having a really good summer. How about you? Must confess I don't really understand how this modem works, but will figure it out eventually."

Okay, so it wasn't exactly momentous. That's the nature of E-mail: quick, prosaic, casual. But it also feels powerful in its illicit and sudden intimacy. There she is, in front of my face, on my liquid crystal display.

I wrote back immediately, wanting to encourage her communication, but not wanting to sound desperately eager, which, of course, I am. "I'd love to hear more about your summer," I typed. At the end, I added, "love, Florence."

"Hi Florence," she sent the next day. "It was really great to get your message - my first one." Then, later, "I
would love to see you sometime. Colorado sounds like a wonderful place to live. Write back soon -- Hyacinth."

Barring any power outages or Althea taking the computer to the dump - both distinct possibilities Hyacinth and I are off and running. I can picture her, at 15, sitting at her word processor, comfortable at the keyboard, wearing tennis sneakers and jeans, or whatever clothes she likes. There's so much I want to know.

She probably hates purple. When I get my nerve up, I'll ask her all about it.
I was about thirteen when I realized that Miller was paying the rent, and for a lot of other things, too. It wasn't a sudden realization, more a gradual awakening. My early childhood was full of euphemisms, like Mom always calling Miller her boyfriend. I got smarter and she got less careful. By my early teens, it was an open discussion.

Even when I was younger, I always knew Miller was an odd kind of boyfriend. He never took us out to dinner or to the movies. The only times I saw him were during the day, when I came home from school unexpectedly early. The first time, in grade school, I came home with a chicken pock on my thumb. It was a bright afternoon, but our small apartment was dark, twisted with narrow corridors and cracked plaster. No lights were on. As I was blinking my way to my room, Mom opened her bedroom door. She looked flushed, her cheeks red against her loose blond hair. She walked over and pressed a palm to my forehead. I told her it wasn't my head and she led me into the kitchen to study the itchy blister. She told me I was her little bird and sent me to bed. An hour or so later, when I was in the kitchen, I heard her say goodbye to
Miller. I spotted him as he left, an older man with a sad, square face and a baggy suit. He nodded to me.

I ran back into my room, alarmed. The dog scratched on my door and I let him in. Fiendish, a llasa, was the only male presence I'd ever known in our apartment, and that was plenty. Mom and I and the Fiend had lived together ever since I could remember. The tall man in the hall seemed disproportionately giant in our small rooms. Some of my friend's moms had remarried, and I knew dating was part of the process. I tried to be tolerant.

After that first encounter, I'd simply stalk past mom's closed bedroom door in the afternoons. Occasionally I'd hear a low murmur and the clap of Miller's leather shoes on the floor as he left. If I happened to spot him, he'd nod solemnly. It was like that for several years, though I don't think we ever got used to each other.

"I don't think he likes me," I once told Mom after the elevator doors had sucked Miller away. "Is that why he doesn't want to marry you?"

"Oh, Sophie honey, don't be silly."

"Why?"

"He's already married."

Because Miller was strictly a weekday afternoon arrangement, our weekends were our own. Saturday mornings
I'd jump into Mom's wide, sunny bed, blanketed with fashion magazines and catalogs. Soon she'd return from walking Fiendish, her arms loaded with white and orange shopping bags from Zabars containing food for the weekend. We never cooked. She'd bring me a sliced bagel on a plate shaped like a cabbage leaf and a glass of orange juice. She'd kick off her shoes and sip from a mug of coffee. Leaning on a mound of pillows, our legs stretched under her lemon-yellow electric blanket, we flipped the stiff, scented pages of magazines.

"How can this woman be so successful?" my mother tapped with disgust on a photograph of a famous stage actress. "She's so unattractive. Look at that hair, and those thighs! How could she let them take that picture?"

We giggled. "I'd never let them take a picture of me of like that," I said.

"No. You're smarter than that."

Mom would get up and change out of her dog-walking clothes into going-shopping or meeting-someone-for-lunch clothes. It was a transformation of her wardrobe from West Side to East Side. As I watched, she stepped out of and into garments I didn't have: slips, stockings, brassieres with lace straps, no straps, wires under the cups. I'd help her pick a lipstick color. We'd talk about how pretty she was, how lucky I was to have such a young, pretty mother. Mom was
32, and blessed with size D cups. At thirteen, I was still flat as a potato pancake, bony and straight where she was all soft flesh.

"Want to meet me at the Stanhope at three?" she asked, outlining her lips with a red pencil - "for definition," she explained. "It makes your mouth look fuller." Mom was going out to lunch with her best friend, Gloria, who lived on the East Side. Whenever she met Gloria she got especially dressed up, even on weekends. I didn't get to go to lunch, but I could meet Mom for tea. We often went to the Stanhope for tea, because it cost just a few dollars, yet only rich people went there.

"I'll just call Gloria and find out when we'll be done. We're going to a new French place on 83rd. There might be a long wait."

Their phone conversations were never brief, and today was no exception. Soon Mom was shrieking in laughter.

"You did? You saw her?... What was she wearing? Could you tell she had a face lift?" Gloria lived on the East Side, and she and Miller's wife shopped in the same deli. Mom had almost died with delight when she learned Gloria knew the woman.

"Last week was Sophie's birthday and he gave me two hundred dollars to take her shopping," Mom was saying, smoothing her long blond hair as it fell around the
receiver. It was true; he did. We went to Lord and Taylor's and I got a pair of shoes and a sweater for school. Mom bought perfume. She'd tested it first by putting it on her wrists and neck, and making me smell it on her. She said the same brand can smell totally different on different people, because it mixes with your natural body odor.

"...No, I don't think so...he's really pretty cheap....Do you think so?....God, Gloria, you are so ballsy! I could never do that. He'd find out. He'd kill me..."

Whenever Miller was the topic of conversation, I'd grow restless. It was time to get out of bed and go back to my dark, draughty room. I petted the Fiend's tummy for awhile. I needed to practice the flute, but instead I listened to the disco station popular with my seventh grade class. I tried out Travolta moves in front of the mirror. I pointed to the ceiling and then pointed to the ground, rapidly swinging my hips and arm. The Fiend watched my reflection with his head tilted.

The Stanhope Hotel was filled with its usual clientele: wealthy travelers talking to the concierge, families wearing complementary cashmere sweaters from their last trip to Scotland waiting for the elevator. Bellboys weaved carts of fine luggage around the narrow lobby.
I heard heels on the marble behind me, and sure enough, Mom had walked in. For a long moment, all movement stopped as people glanced at her, taking her in. Mom was loud in several ways: her shoes, her bright glossy lipstick, her voluminous blond hair. She seemed not to notice their eyes and instead made a beeline for me, wrapping me in a delicate embrace, air-kissing my cheek.

"Hello, Pumpkin," she squealed. "Don't you look adorable." I was wearing a pale pink dress we'd bought me last Easter and a purple cardigan. I didn't really like the dress, but I knew Mom did. We never went to Easter services, but we always went to the parade. We used to wear mother-daughter dresses and matching straw hats. Once a photographer from the Daily News even took our picture next to St. Thomas Church. We imagined the headline: Raymonds Enjoy Easter on Fifth Avenue, but it never made it into the paper. Maybe they could tell we were faking it, that we weren't true Episcopalians. The Easter clothing tradition ended last year when I shot up six inches and grew taller than Mom. We would have had to buy mother-mother dresses.

Since most of the other tea-takers at the Stanhope were families or old ladies, I didn't really know why Mom liked it here so much, why she spent fifteen minutes in the bathroom brushing her hair before tea. It didn't seem a very
good place to find a husband, and I still figured she was on the lookout.

But it was pleasant, and for a few moments while we drank Darjeeling, we felt rich, too. Our chairs sank beneath us, enfolding us in deep, floral-patterned plush. Outside the small pane windows was the bustle of Fifth Avenue on a fall day, the steps of the Metropolitan Museum descending to the street like a spilled deck of cards. Mom's eyes moved from one table to the next, lingering on a pair of spectator pumps or a man's wrist watch.

"Don't slurp, honey. Just take tiny sips. If it's too hot, blow on it first." I tried not to slurp, but the tea scalded my lips.

"Where are you going after this?" I asked.

"Just over to that lingerie store up the street. They're having a big sale," she whispered. "Want to come?"

"No thanks." I was tired of watching Mom dress and undress. I'd already done it once today. I wanted to walk back across the park, where the roller skaters were doing amazing tricks, like skating under each others legs and doing jumps. Even the women had bulging muscles. I secretly thought it would be fun to lift weights. I wished I hadn't worn the pink dress.

On my way into the park, I walked by the snake lady. She was always in the same spot, sitting on a wooden bench.
Sometimes a crowd collected around her, but today people were just walking by. She did what she always did, just sat there, expressionless, while a cobra coiled around her arms, slinking from one side of her body to the other. As I walked past, the cobra had started its wrap around her neck, its grimacing head even with her own.

After I found out Miller was already married, I thought she should dump him. I began to despise his dark suits and crisp nods, his proprietary mid-day visits and birthday cash. I imagined throwing flower pots out of the window so they would flatten him fourteen stories below. But my friend Katie and I once got caught dropping water balloons. The doorman would know it was me.

One night in October, Miller spent the night, a rare occurrence. I was supposed to go to Katie's, but she had a stomach flu. I brought Fiendish into my room for the night; Mom had kicked him out.

When I was little, I thought our new puppy looked just like the fiend in a children's books. The little dog was red except for black-black eye rings, and his puppy hair was wild and spiky. The character in the book turns out to be just lonely and misunderstood. Deep down he is really very friendly, and after he rescues the beautiful princess from a forest fire, she makes him her royal bodyguard.
Our dog, too, was capable of heroic feats, as well as effective disguises. Even though he was a male, he had a plastic pink bow on his head to lift the hair off his eyes. You'd never know it, but he was a vicious Tibetan watch dog, and tough too. He once got caught between the inner and outer doors of the elevator and survived a three-storey fall. We'd retrieved him from the basement and he was just fine.

We believed Fiendish was a great comfort, since our neighborhood was dangerous. The old man who ran the corner liquor store was shot last week, and there was a certifiable drug house in a brownstone up the street. Mom always made me walk up a different block if I needed to go that direction. "We're outta here just as soon as Mommy can figure out how to do it," she reassured me. Still, I put most stock by the dog to save us.

Now, when he slept, his smooth rye-colored hair draped all the way to the floor. Asleep next to the bed he looked like a discarded wig.

In the middle of the night, the Fiend started growling, a low, electric gurgle. Slow, heavy steps creaked the floorboards past my bedroom door and continued toward the bathroom at the end of the hall. Fiendish broke into a full bark, charging the wall.
"Fiendish, shhhhh." I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back to the bedside. The shower turned on. The pipes whistled. A shower, in the middle of the night.

Nights were usually sacred, totally quiet. Mom's bedroom was at the other end of the hall. Amsterdam Avenue, 14 floors below, flowed quietly, only occasionally flaring a siren or a measure of Mariachi. My window looked out onto another building, but from the edge where my bed was, I could see a long swath with rows of buildings and tenements, perfect square shapes, solid and distant. From this angle, New York was spacious and ordered, like the cornfield in our geography book. It was safe. If only Mom could get a real job or even a real husband, she could stop seeing Miller. We didn't need him. We could cut back expenses. I could learn to cook.

"Mom," I said after Miller left the next morning. "Mom, he better not be planning to stay over any more nights. Fiendish hates him. He would have killed him. I was up all night."

"He's a beast," she said, and I knew she was referring to the dog. "Listen, I know it's not an ideal situation. I just hope you're thankful I don't go off and marry some strange man." She was cinching the belt of her terry-cloth bathrobe. Her unmade-up face looked pale and tense. "You're
very lucky it's just the two of us living here alone.
Without Miller around once in a while, we'd starve, and I
mean starve. He's your bread and butter, and you'd better be
good to him." Her voice grew louder, and she looked at me
accusingly. "You know, I don't have anybody paying me child
support. No one gives me alimony payments. You're one to
complain. How do you think we get by? If you had a father,
you could go with him - you're so critical of how I do
things."

I felt punched, and instantly apologetic. My father
died when I was a baby. The only thing I knew of him was his
hair, coal black and straight, like mine. Mom and I hardly
looked related, except we both had gray eyes. I didn't have
any grandparents either. At least, not in practice. Mom
didn't speak to her parents, who lived in Colorado
somewhere. Her father was in the military and she said he
acted like a drill sergeant even at home. So it was just us,
and the dog.

I couldn't believe what she was saying. She didn't want
to get married. I thought that was what all single mothers
wanted. It was a relief in a way. But I wasn't sure what
options we had left. We both seemed to know Miller was a
loser proposition. Maybe Mom was going to get a real job
after all, be one of those successful working mothers. I'd
help; I'd make her morning coffee. We could read the paper together before she dashed into a cab for mid-town.

Mom was getting dressed, calming down. She wasn't one to hold a grudge. She'd get it all out and then act like it never happened. I wasn't usually like that. I liked to stay in a bad mood for a long time, wrap it around me like a blanket, let it bear down on my skin. That way, when I emerged, I'd stay in the clear for a long time. It was hard, us always being in different moods.

"Listen," she said cheerfully a few minutes later, "I haven't walked the dog yet. Come with me to Benji's and we'll get crullers."

Usually, Mom bought my breakfast and a bagged lunch before I left for school. Our tiny kitchen was spotless, not because we were neat but because we never used it. Food in our neighborhood was cheap if you knew where to get it, and Mom did. Sometimes for lunch I ate cold, greasy Chinese food out of the carton, while all the other seventh graders had peanut butter and jelly or egg salad sandwiches, food that to me looked prepared in loving, noisy, messy kitchens. At P.S. 44, the school cafeteria had been closed for the year by the health department because of rats under the foundation.
So we walked together to Benji's. The Fiend led us downhill toward Broadway, stopping at every other parked car to lift his leg. We walked past the drugstore where Mom got her pills for migraines. Rose, the ancient, stooped-over druggist, gave Mom all her pills without a prescription. I spent a lot of time there reading greeting cards, waiting for her.

Between a Valiant and a Volvo Fiendish twirled frantically in circles, his nose skimming the asphalt, preparing to do his thing. Mom and I stood and waited. We didn't usually walk Fiendish together. She walked him in the morning and I walked him after school. Since the pooper-scooper law had recently passed, we had to lie in wait with a double baggy and a paper towel. Seeing Mom bend over in her heels to pick up his droppings was funny. I never pictured her doing it before. Then, before we started walking again, Mom looked both ways and chucked the full baggy under the Volvo.

"Mom!" I protested.

"He did it so far from the trashcan. It's fine."

"Ilana, Ilana, why are you so late this morning? I have only one cruller left. Only one left." Benji always said everything twice. An Indian with a keen affinity for German danishes, he also sold hot dogs, coffee, incense, ceramic
buddhas and newspapers. The breakfast crowd was equally eclectic. Seated along a green formica counter were a dozen regulars I'd seen there before: attorneys, old ladies, construction workers. They were a cross-cut of our neighborhood, disparate lives intersecting with astounding regularity.

"Morning Tom, morning Jenetta," Mom said, taking a stool between a man in a suit and a woman I'd seen a few times. I stood behind Mom's stool holding the leash while Fiendish excitedly sniffed the linoleum. Out of habit, Benji put my cruller in a paper bag, even though I was there, in the flesh, this morning. As Mom pulled it out of the bag, she took a bite before handing it to me. "Good thing he had one left," she said with her mouth full and winked at me.

Jenetta, a middle-aged woman with a mask of beige make-up, made a fuss over me, asking about school and if the rats were still there. I mumbled a few answers. I didn't like Jenetta; she leaned close and always looked like she was leering. Her breasts were so big they almost touched you when she talked. I was just waiting to pick up lunch so I could get to school. She turned and joined a loud conversation about co-op conversions.

"Will they kick out everyone who doesn't buy?" said a man wearing a construction helmet.
"Yes," said Mom. "But maybe it's a blessing. I don't really like the apartment anyway. It's too dark, and it's small, and the last thing I need is a mortgage. Maybe we'll move to the East Side, or the Village, if we can find rent control. But what would I do without Benji's coffee?" She smiled flirtatiously.

"Benji's coffee's good," he grinned back. "Coffee's good."

Yeah, right, I thought. We could never afford to live on the East Side. There was no money to buy our apartment. Mom had been worried about the conversion for months. She hadn't had a job ever since I could remember, except a spot on a 30-second commercial for fabric softener. We'd laughed about that, Mom not exactly being the domestic type. "No more static cling!" we sang for months when we got dressed. I know Mom once tried to borrow money from a great aunt, but she said no.

"What'll it be for lunch today, Sophie?" Benji shouted across the counter. "Ham sandwich? Ham sandwich, yeah?"

"I'm sick of those."

"Roast beef? Good roast beef."

"No."

"How about a hot dog?" asked Mom. "Lots of sauerkraut? Give her a hot dog in some foil."

"I've got to go," I said. "I'm going to be late."
We got the hot dog, turning a brown paper bag transparent. Mom gulped the last of her coffee and stood up.

"Hey," said Jenetta, leaning off her stool toward Mom. "How's the client?"

"He's a pain in the ass." We left.

The next weekend, Katie was past the flu and we had our sleep-over, this time at my house. Katie and her Mom thought my mom was an actress. Mrs. Shea always asked me if Mom got any commercials lately and I had to lie, "She's mostly doing stage auditions now. Her agent thinks she can get into *Pirates of Penzance,*" or something. We only lived eight blocks apart but our houses were like different solar systems. Katie was from a big Catholic family, with two younger sisters and two older brothers. Her father sold bonds. Their apartment had high ceilings and exotic rugs. Paul, her oldest brother, had a computer that let you play chess against yourself. It surprised me that with such a big family, he preferred to play alone.

Katie's house was all happy chaos. When we spent the night there, we'd find creative ways to torture her sisters or put gross, sticky things like toothpaste in Mrs. Shea's pasta maker. Sometimes we'd paint T-shirts or the walls on Katie's side of the bedroom.
That weekend at my house, we watched dirty movies on cable.

We sneaked into the living room, long after Mom had gone to bed. The TV fizzed into the dark corners of the room, turning the walls and our nightgowns purple. Katie and I sat on the orange plastic coffee table right in front of the TV so we wouldn't have to turn the sound up.

The best thing about the blue channel were the advertisements: naked people with long hair running around poolsides at hotels in the Poconos. "Vibrating beds for all your fantasies!" Sometimes couples rolled around under palm trees, the ocean crashing and spraying in the background. "Give your lady a 14 karat gold locket!" Next was a short sequence showing Crazy George, this fat, bearded guy, running around town with a hand-held movie camera asking women to lift up their shirts. The amazing thing was how many of them did it. Sometimes they looked embarrassed and would stand there, looking away, as Crazy George zeroed in on their splayed breasts. Sometimes they smiled and jigged for the camera.

"He'd never ask us," reassured Katie. "We're too flat." I felt comfort in our common plight. Katie was tall for her age, too, like me, and we both had big feet. Not show-biz material. i didn't want more womanly curves, anyway. It took Mom so long to get dressed. Even though she looked good, she
wasted so much time, and for what? She didn't even want to find a husband. It was too complicated.

Then a talk show came on. It wasn't exactly Merv Griffin, though; the hostess and all the guests were naked. They sat on vinyl swivel chairs just like that. It didn't look very comfortable. The hostess was asking a couple about a book they had just written.

"God, look at that," said Katie, pointing to the talk show hostess. "Her boobs are practically coming out of her belly button."

"Yeah, really." I looked from the woman's chest to her face. I stared at her. It was Jenetta, from the coffee shop. "That's...that's..." I stammered, catching myself.

"What?" said Katie, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"That's disgusting, her boobs." It was Janetta all right. I knew her. She drank coffee with my mother. The thought made me reel.

A floorboard creaked down the hall. Katie and I looked at each other in brief panic. I switched the TV off and we sat still in the darkness, listening to our heart beats. There I was, terrified of getting caught watching cable TV, but I knew it was my mother who should be ashamed. She had the double life. She was the one who got paid for sleeping with Miller, who drank coffee at Benji's with naked talk show hostesses who maybe did more than interview people.
Footsteps walked down the hall past the living room, past the closed door of my bedroom and into the bathroom we shared. We heard her flip the light switch, flush the toilet. She walked back into her room, never seeing us.

"Come on," I said. "We better go to bed."
Chapter Two

Mom began spending more and more nights out. I was thirteen; she figured I was fine by myself, even if she was going to be gone most of the night. I didn't mind; I liked being alone and feeling older. I even ironed my clothes and did things I normally never did, so that it would feel like my life, my house. I started making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, leaving knives and plates in the sink, making it feel like a real kitchen. It was just as well, because she wasn't waking up early enough to buy my lunches.

Sometimes when I came home from school Mom would still be in bed. She filed her nails until a small mountain of emery boards rose from the bedtable. I knew she was taking lots of her migraine pills from the corner drugstore. She was sort of vacant at times, not really listening to me talk about school.

"Can I stop taking flute lessons?" I asked one day. I probably didn't need to ask. The fact was I hadn't taken a lesson a six weeks, and I'd already told Mrs. Zosopholos I was quitting. All along I'd really wanted to take piano lessons, but we couldn't afford a piano, and didn't have
room for it anyway. But I asked because I wanted to feel that Mom was still a Mom, that she was still making some decisions around here.

"Mmmhmmm." she said, then looked at me through narrow eyes. She sighed. "I hate to see you pass up an opportunity to be cultured, but it's not like you had a natural gift. I guess we can sell the flute." She went back to filing her nails.

I began to notice I could get away with more and more things. I could go to friend's houses after school and she wouldn't notice I wasn't home until it got dark. Katie and I discovered her older brother's stash of pot inside a floppy disk box. We started smoking teeny amounts of it on her roof. Sometimes we went into Riverside Park and smoked it there. We never got too stoned, or Paul might notice some missing. We were almost done with seventh grade. We were almost teenagers, and we were determined to herald the age early. It was an attitude we were inhaling.

One night, late, I was reading Dune, the part where the hero rides bareback on slimy earth worms. He was handsome and brave, and I was in love with him. That was the night I got my period for the first time. Mom was home that night. She cried and said I was in for it now. I cried too. She gave me a hug and some Kotex.
The week before school got out for the summer, Mom surprised me by waiting for me outside, something she never did, not even when I was in elementary school. I always walked home with other kids from our building, as much for protection from muggers as for company. Mom was wearing a fitted yellow dress with big white flowers and square, tortoise-shell sunglasses. Her hair was in a bun, and her smile was bigger than I'd seen in months. Fiendish, his tongue hanging, sat politely by her side.

"Sophie, guess what?" she said, grinning, her arm falling over my shoulders. "I got rid of Miller. I want to celebrate. I'm taking you to Pegasus."

"That's great, Mom!" I was happy to see her but I'd been planning to go to Katie's. It was kind of embarrassing to be greeted by your mother and dog outside of school. "But I don't want to go to Pegasus. I'm too old for eating ice cream with stuffed animals."

"Oh. I guess you are. But I was looking forward to a cone. I wanted to go someplace fun."

"I need to go home. I have a lot of homework tonight. We have to memorize the top line of the periodic table." That part was true. I wasn't prepared for Mom to appear so suddenly out of her hibernation, and to take me some place I'd outgrown years ago. She looked disappointed.
"Since when were you Albert Einstein?" She looked around like the last thing she wanted was to be pleading with a kid in the middle of the sidewalk. The slate-colored school stood behind her, elaborate grates on all the windows. A few eighth grade girls with frizzy hair and canvas book-bags swung through the tall steel doors. By now I'd probably missed Katie and the other walkers.

"Hey, look, it's high tea time. Come on, let's go to the Plaza and sit under palms and eat those little cucumber sandwiches. We can leave Fiendish with the doorman." That sounded risky. I scrunched up my face.

"You love cucumber sushi," she said. "You'll like these. It's what the English eat."

In the next moment she lifted her arm in a giant arc, hailing a cab. I pulled the dog onto my lap, and off we went.

I'd been to the Plaza once before with Katie and her sisters and her grandmother. Mrs. Shea had ordered us a bunch of pastries and thin, square cakes coated in pink and green glossy frosting.

It occurred to me that Mom's gloss and cleavage didn't fit in. I didn't either. I was wearing corduroys and a brown FUJI t-shirt. We sat in the middle of the lobby, in upholstered striped chairs set around a little marble table.
Potted palms draped us, partially blocking the view of the reception desk. At the other tables sat old ladies in big hats. Mom spit into a cloth napkin and reached over to wipe my face with it.

"Mom! Quit it. I'll go wash my own face." I got up and marched into the ladies' room. Its shiny green vastness immediately stilled me. A black woman in a white uniform sat in a chair in the corner, staring at the towel dispenser. Next to each sink were little glass bowls partially filled with coins and bills. I didn't have any money. I grabbed a paper napkin and walked out, polishing my face.

"Much better, Sweetie." She was already sipping a tall iced coffee when I walked back. "I ordered you a hot fudge sundae and a cucumber sandwich. I said they could bring them both at the same time." She peered over her straw, expectant.

"Both at the same time? Gross!" Then we laughed, hard. I had to cross my legs, because sometimes I peed in my pants if I laughed too hard, and I still had to go. Things seemed lighter now; I was relieved Miller was gone. Mom would finally get a real job; we'd be normal. I was happy for us.

"So," I asked, "how'd you dump Miller?"

"Well, we always had an understanding that if either of us wanted out that was fine. I had been thinking for a while that he wasn't right for us. Too old, sort of miserly,
really. He never liked to go out, would only give me extra money for you if I asked." She dipped a spoon into the curdling hot fudge. "I thought we deserved someone, with, you know, more sensitivity and money."

"You mean there's someone else?" Mayonnaise and cucumber drooped out between slices of de-crusted white bread. I couldn't eat. I thought of Fiendish tied to a post by the cabstand. What if he was hit by a taxi? I thought we should leave.

"Well," Mom's mouth was full of ice cream. "Gloria introduced me to some of her boyfriend's business partners. I mean, we're talking really wealthy men, Sophie. One of them lives in Texas. His name is Anson. He only comes here once every couple of weeks, but he wants us to get an apartment, where he can stay too, when he comes. On the East Side," she said, practically exploding. "But not right away. We decided we'd stay in our apartment until the co-op conversion. That way you can finish middle school with your friends here, and then start ninth grade in private school. Can you believe it honey? This will be the best thing for us. You can get a real education, get on an Ivy League track."

I pictured a running track overgrown with ivy and lichen. Everything was spinning, the striped chairs, mom's spoon, the palms. "What about Miller?" I asked slowly.
Suddenly he seemed gentle, more our speed. I felt sorry for him. He didn't know Mom was so ambitious.

"He understood perfectly. Honey, aren't you going to eat this sundae?"

I stared at the slack mound of vanilla ice cream, melting into the scalloped carvings of its dish. Her spoon stood poised half a foot above it. She raised her eyebrows and smiled. She had eaten practically the whole thing.
Chapter Three

The first apartment Mom saw that she liked was on East 61st street, between Second and Third avenue. The building was newer, uglier on the outside than our old brick building on the West Side. Second and Third Avenues looked just as grubby as Broadway and Amsterdam, the difference being the modern, chalky buildings and pedestrians who looked better dressed. The stores here were also more expensive, not run by refugees. I didn't see any place that sold Buddhas along with coffee. Inside the building Mom picked out, the lobby was opulent, with marble floors and gleaming brass everywhere, as well as big mirrors where you could size yourself up on the way in or out. Most buildings around here were going co-op also, but this one was a rental. Mom didn't tell me how much.

"How do you do?" she said to the doorman when we went there to show it to me. "We're moving into 19B. I'm Mrs. Raymond. "This is my daughter, Sophie." We each shook his hand.

"I'm Hector Perez, ma'am, miss. Please let me know if I can be of service."
A woman walking a Pekinese strode in the brass doors and passed us. We followed her silently to the elevator. The dog wore a pink sweater, even though it was sunny and warm outside. If Fiendish were a little bigger he'd want to gobble up that puny puffball. Mom pressed 19 like she meant it. The woman, a middle-aged brunette, pressed 2 and suddenly we were there, the movement like a giant pressurized hiccup. Give me a break, I thought. Two floors and she takes the elevator? It took only a few more seconds to get to 19. The building had 30 floors. Our old one only had 14. I wandered what the roof was like.

"Have you ever seen a faster elevator?" asked Mom.

"No," I said. "Cool."

I ran to the room that would be mine, toward the back of the apartment. It had a built-in bookcase and a walk-in closet. The bathroom was the next door down, between me and the living room. There was another bathroom on the other side of the kitchen and another one in Mom's bedroom. There was a smaller third bedroom across from mine that Mom said she was going to use as her "study," though I couldn't imagine what she was going to study.

All the walls were bright white, and sunny, and the plaster wasn't cracked. The living room windows, one big pane each, opened onto a small concrete terrace with an iron
railing, exactly like hundreds above and below it. The window looked West, over rows of brownstones, and then farther away, to the buildings of the West Side across the park. Mom's and my bedroom windows looked uptown for a few blocks until another building as tall as ours blocked the view.

"Can you live with it?" she grinned.

"I guess. I mean it's great. The Fiend can run around more."

"Will you miss your friends? You can still see them. It's just a crosstown bus. And you'll make lots of new ones at Trinity?" She asked it like a question, probably wondering, like I was, if I'd be able to make new friends, rich friends I'd been conditioned by years in public school to hate.

After we saw the apartment, we walked downtown. We went to Bloomingdales, to the furniture department, and began picking out couches and chairs. We sat on every sofa and recliner they had. I liked a beige chair.

"Too masculine," she made a face. She was sunk deep in a pink floral sofa. She looked happy and relaxed, her skirt crumpled up to her thigh. Shopping, she was in her finest element. She was prettier than anyone else there, and she wore new shoes.
"Can I help you ladies with something today?" asked a thin man in a red polka-dot tie.

"I love this floral," cooed Mom. "Do you have it in stock? Do you deliver?"

"Certainly, to both. Delivery is $150 to anywhere in Manhattan."

"We're moving just a few blocks uptown. We'll be in by the first of July."

"How nice for you," he blinked rapidly. "Shall I hold it in your name? Do you have a Bloomies charge?" I knew Mom didn't have any credit cards.

"I'll have to call you back," she said, straightening her skirt. "My husband will want to put it on his card."

I finally met Anson that summer, at our new apartment. Mom was all nervous for his arrival. She put on an orange linen sundress with spaghetti straps and a tight bodice.

"Wow, low cut," I said. "Don't you think you should put a sweater on or something?"

"It's 95 degrees out."

"But the air conditioning, it's freezing in here."

"Well I'm hot. I've been running around all day, first to the liquor store, then the supermarket, then the hairdresser, manicurist, pedicurist. I'm exhausted."
I looked into her eyes, rimmed with blue pencil and pearly pink shadow. She looked more awake than she had in days. Maybe it was just the loud orange dress, but she seemed excited.

"Does the apartment look okay? He hasn't seen it yet. He said he'd like everything I got, but I don't know." She was rushing around, fluffing the pillows on the new Bloomingdales couch. That and the chrome coffee table were the only pieces of furniture in the large room. Mom said furnishing would be a gradual process. Meanwhile, we used our old furniture in the rest of the house. I got the same shabby bed, the same "antique" dresser with the peeling, swivel mirror and the same yellow bean bag in the corner where I read or did my homework, Fiendish at my feet. I hid my knife underneath the bean bag chair. That way it was always a thousand foam pill-balls below me.

Finally, Mom turned to look at me as if suddenly remembering that I would be here too. Her anxious eyes ran over me as if I were a picture frame that might be crooked.

"Oh, honey," she said, disappointed. "Black jeans? It's summer. Black is not appropriate for summer. In fact, it's not appropriate for a fourteen-year-old. I didn't know you had those." I must have worn them eighty times. "Are your white pants clean? Can't you put on those, Sweetie?" She was pleading. "For Mommy?" She knew she was asking a lot. I spun
around, my socks pivoting on the shiny wood floor, to go back to my room. "And put on some shoes, please," she called.

I emerged wearing white jeans and a red and white striped shirt. Mom had poured herself a glass of wine. She smiled, cupping my face in her palm. "Much better, now just wash your face."

Anson was about an hour late. Mom had to change their dinner reservation, and put the cheese plate back in the fridge. I'd already eaten dinner eggrolls and Haagan Dazs. I watched TV and Mom settled down with several glasses of wine.

When the doorman finally called to say we had a visitor, she ran into the bathroom to reapply her lipstick. I stood in the living room.

He tried the doorknob before ringing the bell. When she opened the door, he kissed her.

"Sorry I'm late, Ilana. Those boys at First National wouldn't know an agenda if it hit them in the balls. Make a tired boy a martini?"

I saw he was the opposite of Miller in every way. He was short, stout, with no visible body hair and practically no hair on his head. What hair he had was the same color as his skin and it circled his head like a fuzzy donut. He was younger than Miller, maybe early forties, and he looked like
he might have once been athletic, but I guessed most Texans looked like that.

"Anson?" said my mother, taking his hand and leading him into the living room, "this is my daughter, Sophia. Honey, this is Anson."

"Oh, my, ah, hello there young lady. Didn't think I'd get the chance to meet you tonight," he smiled, but shot a look of surprise at my mother. She was beaming.

"Hi," I said. "I have to watch TV now."

From the study, a room consisting of our old corduroy couch, orange coffee table and TV set, I could hear their laughter and the sound of ice clinking in glasses. Mom called the restaurant again to cancel their reservation, and then called Wah Fu to order more eggrolls. When the doorman buzzed with the take-out, Mom ran past me to the bathroom. She reapplied her lipstick again. She popped her fluffy blond head into the study.

"Okay, babe, we're outta here. Off to the Waldorf. There's frozen bagels in the fridge and you can get fresh orange juice at Gristedes if you want."

I stared at the muted TV set. "I thought you were going to stay here tonight?"

"Well," she lowered her voice. "I think he needs some time, to, you know, get used to the place."

"You mean get used to me."
"No, no, no. I told him we were a package deal. He knows you live here too." She was whispering. "He's got three little kids at home and he likes to be in the hotel sometimes. Oh, God, why did I tell you that?" She pulled a few strands of hair off her sticky lips. "He's nice, don't you think?"

I shrugged.

"Are you mad I'm going out tonight? Maybe you should have stayed at Katie's?" Her brow wrinkled.

"No. I'm fine. Have a nice time."

"Hon, don't be mad. Maybe Saturday we'll go shopping?" She walked in and leaned over to kiss my forehead. She smelled like Chanel and white wine. "Mommy loves you." And she was gone.

I didn't see her for three days. At first, she phoned every few hours to say she'd be home soon. A lot of the messages were on the answering machine, since I spent most summer days with Katie by the pool her family belonged to on top of a building on West 59th street. Now I had to take a cross-town bus to get there. I didn't tell Katie I'd been living alone, even though it would have impressed her. And I'm sure her parents would have invited me over for dinner, but I didn't want them to know how often I was by myself. I wanted to protect what little image I had left as a normal
kid. Because I was an only child, the Sheas felt sorry for me enough as it was and invited me on most family outings. They had so many kids it didn't make a difference if one more tagged along.

At the pool, we broke into teams and played water polo, or I played ping pong with one of Katie's younger sisters near the snack bar. I got home around five, and there were three lights blinking on the machine.

"Hi Baby. Listen, Pumpkin, I'm going to be home a little later than I thought. There still lots of deli food in the fridge if I'm not back by lunch. I'll definitely be back by dinner. Okay, talk to you later. BEEP.

"Hi Baby, me again. You're still not home. Where are you? Well, I still can't get out of here by this afternoon. In fact, I probably can't make it for dinner, so listen, that Indian place on the corner makes a good spinach and cottage cheese thing. You really should eat some spinach. I can't remember how much money I left you. If you run out call Gloria, her number's on the fridge. Love you." BEEP.

"Hi Baby, I remembered you're probably at the pool with Katie. Good. I almost worried. Anson wants to get away for a couple of days. Go someplace wild and crazy. I really didn't want to leave you but this is a great opportunity to travel and you're big enough to take care of yourself. I need to
pick up a few things and I'll leave you some more cash. I hope you're home when I get there. Ciao bella." BEEP.

Under the answering machine were three $20s and a note. "Back Saturday. Love you." I had missed her.

On Saturday, it rained. Mid-morning the phone rang. I jumped up from the bean bag to get it.

"Hello?
"Hey, Soph, it's Gloria."
"Oh. hi."

"You ma wanted me to give you a ring to see if you needed anything. I meant to call yesterday, but God, what a crazy day. How're you doing?"

"Okay, I guess. Do you know where she went?"

"Well, yeah, I think Anson took her to Bermuda. What a lucky duck. Can you believe it? Of course, it's more fun to go in the dead of winter but I wouldn't complain. So do you have enough food and everything? I could bring you some leftover Chinese food, but it would have to be before five 'cause I got a date. Stockbroker. Soph?"

"No, thanks, I mean, I'm cooking stew." I was? Why not? I always wanted to try a vegetable soup.

"Wow, you little domestic thing. You're mother has no need to be worried about you. Give me a ringading if you need anything, hear?"
"Hmmm. Gloria, have you been to Bermuda? Is it a long flight?"

"Oh God, no, a couple of hours. It's right down there near Florida. Of course, this weather, but I'm sure she'll get back okay. Yeah, it's a beautiful place. I've been there lots. Gotta go, Chicky, call me if you need anything."

Mom got back late that night. I heard her key and got out of bed.

"Hi Baby, give me a hug. I missed you so much."

"Where were you? You didn't tell me where you were. You could have left a phone number. What if something happened to me? Were you in Bermuda?"

"Oh. God. I'm so tired. Yes, Pumpkin. I was in Bermuda. I couldn't leave you a number. I didn't know it. I didn't make any of the arrangements. Let's talk in the morning, Baby, I am so tired." She dropped her bags, took off her heels and padded down the hall, leaning for a moment on her door jamb before disappearing.

I hovered over her bags, hoping for some clues to grasp her existence. It was like that sometimes in our house; since we didn't talk about so many things, our accessories sometimes spoke volumes. Inside a canvas tote bag was a little straw purse with a yellow ribbon tied around the handle. Woven into the bag's side was a black human figure.
His elbows and knees were bent to sharp points, as if swaying and bending to some far-off, unheard music.