

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Elisabeth A. Raleigh for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented on
February 2, 2001. Title: DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Abstract approved _____ *Redacted for Privacy* _____
Tracy Daugherty

DOUBLE EXPOSURE is a novel concerned with the phenomenon of memory. The story explores such questions as: To what extent does “memory” (and the narratives we construct from it) explain who we are? How is memory influenced by others—and does it matter if it is? Can a memory that is factually “false” be emotionally true? Ultimately, the novel aims to demonstrate that the past has its place, but only a relative (non-deterministic) place, in our present experience because it is subject to constant revision and reinterpretation. The story’s main focus is a young woman who comes to believe that knowledge of her past—in particular the “recovery” of memories of suspected childhood sexual abuse—will lead her to freedom from her emotional distress. However, the narrative she begins to reconstruct is like a suit of armor: insulating but confining, more cumbersome as the stakes get higher—particularly when she decides to sue her “perpetrator” (her stepfather), seeking legal and monetary justice for the damage she has suffered. Her legal quest becomes complicated, though, when other possible versions of her past begin to suggest themselves, and she begins to acknowledge that these alternate versions may be as “right” or “real” as the one that is the basis for her suit. What she “knows” thereby collapses, and her task then shifts from proving “who did what” to claiming her own power of self-determination. In the end, her dependence on external sources to define her identity (i.e. what the other characters think of her, how they treat her) gives way to her own sense of self.

Double Exposure
by
Elisabeth A. Raleigh

A THESIS
submitted to
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented February 2, 2001
Commencement June, 2001

Master of Arts thesis of Elisabeth A. Raleigh presented on February 2, 2001

APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for Privacy

Elisabeth A. Raleigh, Author

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
1973: Hermanas	1
1988-89.....	24
Villa Miranda.....	24
That Safe Place Inside.....	77
Dry Creek.....	136
1990.....	187
Post-Traumatic Stress.....	187
Re-recovered.....	269
Settlement.....	314

DOUBLE EXPOSURE

1973

Hermanas

At her lacquered pink table in the corner of the kitchen, Jude sat by herself, pushing a slice of toast into the oozing egg on her plate. She was sorry to ruin her toast in this way, but it was her best hope of rescuing her bacon. And that was what she treasured most—every crunchy, smoky bite of it. Unspoiled by egg.

The table was too small and short; she bent her knees sideways to fit her legs underneath. It was a constant embarrassment: the table and its two matching chairs. On its peppermint-pink surface, a moppet struck little-girl poses—waving, skipping, sprinkling flowers with a watering can. Jude always arranged her plate and juice glass to cover some of these scenes.

Her father would sometimes let her sit at the spacious, grown-up kitchen table. But at the moment her mother was the only adult in the kitchen; she was fixing her own breakfast plate. Hot curlers clamped her hair into spiky porcelain rows, giving her a vaguely robotic appearance—but this detracted not at all from her fundamental grace. Standing at the stove, her back to Jude, she scraped eggs onto her plate with a light-wristed turn of the spatula; she might have had a book balanced on her head. Flawless posture, proportions, effortless gesture. If anything, the severity of the curlers accentuated some of her most feminine lines—the smooth arch of her neck, the sweet precision of her chin. She wore her special bathrobe—fuzzily plush, trimmed with satin collar and piping. Though it was pink, a color Jude normally took pains to avoid (its many precious connotations), it was a duskier shade than her insipid table, and she felt a soft, fluttering contentment in its presence, the way it flowed as her mother moved. She knew how it would feel to be hugged by those sleeves and she wanted to rise as if taking her plate to the sink, drifting over to her mother as she settled her napkin in her lap. But she would notice the pooled yellow yolk on her plate, remind Jude what a waste of nourishment it would be.

Pretending to wipe her mouth with her napkin, Jude licked bacon flecks from her fingers. Why didn't they have a dog like April Jaramillo did—a dog who would eat anything? Though April had far too many dolls and Charmie Kitties and a set of mint-and-violet roller-skates, and though Jude only visited when her mother arranged it—even a sleep-over once—she had seen April sneak an entire serving of cauliflower-and-cheese to her speckled, pointy-nosed dog.

Clomping sounded behind her; Jude turned expectantly. Her father was descending from the bedroom upstairs. He appeared in the doorway in rumpled pajama bottoms and no top; barefoot, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. A line of dark hair ran from his belly button into the waistband of his pajamas. Her mother twisted around in her chair and smiled brightly, but her hand drew the satin lapels of her robe across her chest. “Well, sleepyhead,” she said, “good afternoon.”

“Hah!” he said, scratching his ribs. “It is *not* afternoon—” he looked at Jude “—is it, Judy?”

She shrugged. “I don't think so, Daddy.”

“I do believe your mama is pulling my leg.” He moved towards her mother, who was rising from her chair, and seized her around the waist. He angled his head, opening his mouth to kiss her, but she turned her face toward Jude with a laughing squeal, and let the kiss land on her cheek.

“Rudy, you need a shower,” she said, giving him what might have been a playful shove.

“You don't say!” He lifted his arms and sniffed his armpits. “What do you think of that, Judy? Your mama thinks your old man is a smelly old sock.”

Jude giggled, but with a squeak of anxiety. She worried her mother, now standing, would notice the uneaten eggs.

“Hey, it's Saturday—why do you have your hair up?” Her father turned to open a cupboard. He removed a thick squarish bottle with a black-and-white label. “You don't have to go into the office *this* weekend, do you? I'm going to have to have a little talk with that bonehead Andreason.”

As he unscrewed the bottle cap, her mother pressed her fingers into her temples, squeezing her eyes shut tight; the pressure of the fingertips pulled her eyelids sideways.

“I don’t have to work, honey. I was just going to take Judy out for a while.” She dropped her hands as quickly as she had raised them, opened her eyes—all in an instant, before he looked at her again. She smoothed the front of her robe and smiled at Jude. It was a too-happy smile. Jude knew this expression, and it made her worry whether she was sitting correctly at her too-small table. “You were sleeping in, so I thought we might—”

“Oh, so you’re dressing up to go *out*. Wouldn’t ever be dressing up just for me.” He lifted the bottle to his lips.

“Rudy, I wish you wouldn’t—” The hands flew up again, but this time tested the curlers. Finding a loose tendril of hair, she tucked it into place.

He took a drink. “Hair of the dog, sweetheart,” he said, and sneaked a wink at Jude, as if she and he were co-conspirators in this dog-hair drinking scheme. She scrunched her face as though the texture of his drink were in her mouth. Who would want to taste *that*? Then he extended the bottle toward her mother. Panic swarmed in Jude like a cluster of bees: she wanted to leap between them, to intercept whatever her mother’s reaction might be.

But she was looking down into the pocket of her robe. “We’re just going to the store. I need to get Judy some new shoes,” she said, opening the pocket wider as though the shoes might be in there.

“Huh,” Rudy countered. He hitched up his pajama bottoms and, to Jude’s enormous relief, returned the bottle to the shelf. “Too hot to go anywhere, Josie,” he said, “especially with the car’s air conditioning on the fritz.”

Now it was apparent why her mother was uneasy. She didn’t actually want to go anywhere. It *was* going to be hot. Already it was hot. The sun had been up for hours, and the air in the kitchen had a shape and feel and texture—a big, dry, granite sort of density. They were all inside it at this very moment. A grinding sound had steadily grown louder as the sun rose higher: a thresher downing hay in the field behind their house, working its way closer, hour by hour.

“I don’t need new shoes, Mommy,” Jude said, proud to set things straight. She pulled first one leg, then the other, out from under the cramped table and waggled her white-toed sneakers. “See?”

Her mother stepped closer, looking straight down at the plate smeared with puddled yolk. “Dress-up shoes, Judy,” she said. That forceful smile again. “You’re going to a birthday party next weekend, remember? And you won’t have any shoes to wear.”

Jude didn’t remember, and even if she had, she would want to wear her sneakers instead. Jeans and a t-shirt and lace-up canvas shoes, not white anklets and unscuffed leather. But her mother was even closer now. The plush fabric of that robe was only inches away. Jude felt a leaping desire to wipe her bacony hands on the dusky extravagance of it, and the thought of it made her feel as if she had to pee. Maybe, she hoped, Daddy would do something funny to make her go away.

“Looks like you’re done with your breakfast,” her mother said. She bent low; her hands, reaching out, trembled like flustered little sparrows. “How about if I take your plate?”

Her father was wrong. The air conditioning in the car *was* working, all too well in fact. Her mother fiddled with the controls, and chilly peculiar-smelling air blasted onto Jude’s bare knees. She tried to find a position for her legs that her mother would not correct, resisting the urge to cross them into a triangular shape—Indian-style, some people called it, but her first-grade teacher, Miss Farrow, had said it was more polite to call it tailor-style. They had all been sitting cross-legged in a circle, and Miss Farrow, with her long ponytails and colorful t-shirt and jumper, explained that, long ago, maybe more than a hundred years, tailors would sit like this when they sewed. She urged them, just for a moment, to pretend they were tailors and mime the gestures of stitching. *Not me!* cried Mark Bledsoe, who could be counted on to resist any situation that called for novel interpretation. *I’m an Indian. This is how Indians sat.* But Indians weren’t really Indians, said Miss Farrow. They were Native Americans. Like Tony Whitesides—who, Jude had noticed, came to school only two or three days a week, and didn’t have a lunch box but did have a bluejay feather he wore on a string inside his shirt.

In comparison to her mother, Josie, and applying her mother’s standards, Miss Farrow seemed like an extra-large girl. Grown-up women never wore their hair in ponytails; they styled their hair, just as Josie had styled hers this morning. The ceramic

rollers were gone, and her russet hair streamed in soft wisps in the air conditioner's stale breeze. Grown-up women never sat cross-legged on the floor, and for that matter neither did little girls. If you were female, you didn't sit like that anywhere.

All this comparative brooding had caused Jude's legs to fold into the prohibited position: tailor style, Indian style. But her mother failed to notice this transgression. She was rummaging in her purse with one hand, flicking her fingernails against the steering wheel with the other. Cautiously, as if feeling her way along the wall to the bathroom at night, Jude unfolded one leg and then the other. Knees locked straight, hands in her lap, her feet now stuck out into the space beyond the seat. Someday she would be taller, her legs would be able to bend, her feet would reach the floor. She was already the tallest child in her class, but not tall enough.

They were stopped at a red light. Josie had scattered several items from the handbag across the seat; her breathing came fast as a rabbit's. "Kiss Me Coral!" she said to herself, but not very quietly. "I know for a fact that Kiss Me Coral lip gloss is in here. But you just can't count on *anything* can you? You stupidly assume things are where they ought to be and—"

"You have lipstick on, Mommy," Jude interrupted, hoping this overlooked fact would relieve her mother's distress. "On your lips."

Josie drew back, as if Jude were a doll unnaturally come to life. She removed her sunglasses and put them on her head. Peacock-blue eyeliner defined the shape of her eyes, but the color was dissolving in one corner, diluted by a teardrop waiting to slide down her cheek. The tear was like a tiny swimming pool, tinged with cosmetic blue.

"On your lips, Mommy," Jude repeated—sensing, though, that this was somehow the same as saying she didn't need new shoes.

Josie looked forward again. The car began to move. She sniffed, and felt along the seat; her fingers found a packet of Kleenex. "Well, of course, sweetie," she said, dabbing her eyes. "Mommy never goes out without lipstick."

"But why—" Jude began. "Why are you sad?" she asked.

Abruptly, Josie pulled into a gas station driveway and parked behind the garage, next to a Dumpster and a collection of oil-streaked barrels bound together with a chain. She took her sunglasses off her head and stared at them doubtfully.

“Listen, sweetie, your daddy—”

Daddy what? When they had driven away just fifteen minutes before, his legs had been sticking out from under a truck raised on cement blocks. Jude wished with all her might that he would never slide into that disturbing space. He had persuaded her, just once, to creep under there with him, and it was exactly as dark and grim as she had imagined: the oppressive-smelling machinery just inches from his face, almost none of the lowered, hulking mass supported by anything at all. He worked on cars and trucks all the time; there were usually three or four of them in the yard. A pathetic eyesore, according to her mother, but their unsightliness made no impression on Jude. Their weight was all that mattered, their capacity to crush.

“Your daddy and I—” Josie tried again.

“What’s the matter with Daddy?” Jude asked, alarmed. She could picture all too vividly the truck shifting off one of its blocks.

Josie blinked as if puzzled then shook her head. “Oh, Judy, your daddy’s okay! He’s not hurt or anything. That’s not what I mean.” She turned to stare at the chained oil drums.

“What’s the *matter*?” Jude insisted, kicking her feet.

“*Nothing*’s the matter.” Josie’s irritation was evident, but then she added, more soothingly, even generously, “There’s absolutely no reason to get upset.” She took a deep breath and reached for Jude’s hand. “Look, sweetie,” she said. “You’re just too young to understand. But no matter what happens, I want you to always remember: *I’m doing it for you*. Everything I do is for you.”

They did not buy shoes. As they drove through downtown, right past the Stride Rite shoe store, Josie suddenly declared she’d had a “lapse of memory.” In a high chiming voice, sharp as a bell, she proclaimed this was the most scatterbrained thing she’d ever done—completely forgotten she’d picked up a pair of dress shoes for Judy when she had stopped by J.C. Penney’s the evening before! Well, this was inevitably what happens when a woman is burdened with too many responsibilities. Something has to give. The memory goes first. Besides, that party she had mentioned was for Heather Sorenson (she was rambling on as she drove; by now she had reached the end of the downtown district), and it would surely be too mature a party for a first-grader.

Just picture it—a bunch of fifth- and sixth-grade girls who'd probably spend the entire time talking about boys! No, the best thing would be to just return those lovely shoes. That kind of luxury item, in any event, was far beyond their means.

“So!” Josie looked at her wristwatch and touched her fingertips to her breast. She turned to Jude with that scary smile, dazzling as a split fork of lightning. “We’re out of the house now, just the two of us, why don’t we do something fun? Say, I’ve got a great idea—how about going to a park?”

This was at the very bottom of Jude’s list of what might be fun. In a park, any park, children would be everywhere, swooping like seagulls, hooting maniacally. They would shove Jude aside if she tried to use any of the playground equipment. Which she would never attempt to do, unprodded, except that her mother always insisted she perform: “Let’s see you try that curly slide!” she would cry, for instance. A much better idea would be to go back home, where she could look at a picture book on the porch and from the corner of her eye observe her daddy’s feet. The rest of his body would be consumed by that truck, but his feet would be wagging in time to the music from his radio. If he hadn’t fallen asleep.

But Jude said nothing, knowing there was no resisting her mother once she had a plan. She was glancing at her wristwatch again and smiling like nobody’s business. As far as Jude could tell, that teardrop had never spilled down her cheek. Where did teardrops go when they did not fall?

Then they were sailing down a two-lane highway, surrounded by farmland, the town—*their* town, Dunning—disappearing behind them. An open vista reached all the way to the craggy purple nub of Mount Diablo, the definitive outpost of the valley’s western edge. *The Great Valley*, Miss Farrow called it. *Do you all happen to know we live in the most abundant agricultural region on earth?* As if to prove the teacher’s point, the two-lane road seemed to be parting a brilliant fertile green sea: alfalfa, superheated, flowing endlessly north and south. The raw heady scent tickled Jude’s nostrils; she pinched her nose against a sneeze.

Bugs smashed against the windshield, exploding into puce-colored smears. “That took guts!” her daddy would yell when a particularly juicy one hit the window of his station wagon. Jude felt like yelling that now, but she began instead to count the

number of bug smears on the windshield. Each time a new one hit, she lost count and made herself start over. *That took guts!* The words almost leapt from her mouth. Her mother disapproved of that joke. All the more reason to yell it. Especially now that Josie was humming, too serene. She seemed to have finally calmed herself. She seemed to have forgotten all about that park.

Soon orchards were flickering by, dense rows strobing past at a dizzying rate. Almonds. Apricots. Occasional clapboard houses. A gas pump on a corner where they slowed for a flashing light. A feed store after that, a manure pile covered with truck tires. A cluster of shed-sized houses, grayish laundry strung between them, children in their underwear playing in the dirt. They were returning to Dunning. All the landmarks were familiar. But up on her knees now (another forbidden position her mother was not noticing—it seemed to be a day when all the rules were suspended), Jude saw a tall sign: “Hermanas, pop. 6,220.”

“HERman-as,” she said. She was a good reader, and she had a feeling she had seen this word before. “What’s that, Mommy? HERman-as?”

“HerMANas, honey,” Josie replied. “It’s Spanish, the name of this town.”

A quick scrabbling of panic raced beneath Jude’s ribs. “Isn’t this *our* town?”

“No, Judy, this is another town, really close by. We’re going to a park here. Like I promised.”

How could this town look exactly like theirs and not be the same place? The reason came to her, instinctively—why this town was different: her daddy was not in it. They had been driving away from him. He was there and they were here, though the two places might otherwise be the same. That was the point of driving all the way out here, of “going to a park.” This didn’t form as a thought so much as a compression in her chest. And with the pressure came a picture—her father, on his back, tugging at a car’s underbelly, wrenching free a black and greasy part.

The stucco houses of Hermanas glared bleakly. Though just mid-May, for two full days it had been as hot and dull as July—the suspended even emptiness of summer, dead-center—and Jude squinted against the harsh reflected light. Soon the houses grew taller, the lawns spread wider, the yards had leafier trees. A school and a ballfield and then a playground came into view. The car began to slow. Jude wanted to cry out *how*

about this park? But she sensed this was it, *the* park, the one Josie had in mind. She did not want to set foot in it, even if pretending to play for a while meant they would go home soon. Josie parked the car and, having found her lip gloss, was smearing coral frost on her lips. She fluffed her hair, then dabbed perfume on her wrists and neck, between her breasts. “Okay!” she exhaled and, adjusting the straps of her sundress, signaled Jude to get out of the car.

But Jude made no attempt to open the door. It was more than passive resistance; she knew the door would be jammed. This was something her daddy was supposed to have fixed, but he had promised a man he would work on that truck in their yard. “You’re always after me to make some money,” he had complained earlier that morning when Josie demanded to know why the door was still stuck. She had just turned her face away from another of his kisses then tried to tug the door open. “And here I get a *paying* job,” his voice began to rise, “I’ve been working on that tranny all week, I’m going to make a couple hundred bucks—and you don’t think I should make that a *priority*.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me about priorities,” Josie had hissed, and viciously yanked the door, wrenching it partway open so Jude could climb inside.

Josie yanked it now, but without twisting her face like a rubbery cartoon character. A certain exertion was required, whether she was furious or not. The door creaked as if it might break in two.

The sidewalk glittered in the midday sun, and Jude fell under its spell, its fairy-dust effect, like stepping onto a galaxy of stars—much more inviting, less risky than the park itself: the itchy grass, the skeletons of playground structures, families (strangers) at picnic tables, on blankets, children rocketing every whichway, flapping their arms. Mariachi music churned from a car down the block. Much to her relief, her mother loitered on the sidewalk, and she began covering and uncovering the glitter with her sneaker toe: hide and seek. Next to her, Josie smoothed her skirt, then fanned it so the folds settled into fluid alignment. Her motions caused the triangular heels of her sandals to click against the sparkly pavement.

As they lingered, though, the noontime heat began to throb, or rather Jude’s head began to throb in protest to the heat, and she folded herself into her mother’s shadow—

a sliver of shade, but nearly big enough. Instantly it was another game. If her mother moved, Jude had to move too, crab-wise, in order to stay protected. This would be her sanctuary, a shifting slip of relative dark. Why were they waiting here anyway?

“Well, would you look at that!” Josie exclaimed, her heels clicking excitedly. From her crouched position, Jude noticed the pinkened skin where the straps of Josie’s sandals rubbed her ankles. The heels, despite their animated clattering, were not in very good repair. They slanted sadly outward, marred with scuffs like miniature skid marks.

“I do believe that’s Mr. Early!” Josie cried.

A shape was moving up the sidewalk toward them. A large sandy-headed shape with long arms, longer legs. The gait was ponderous, heavy-footed. Rocking from side to side, the man seemed almost to be riding a horse, but there was no horse under him. Sunlight lit his tawny hair and the crests of his blocky shoulders, but not his face. He was a rectangular shape, a walking brick, advancing stride by stride. His shadow lay in front of him, sliding closer with each step.

* * *

He had dated married women before, but never one who seemed so unmarried. Except for having to meet only at certain times and in certain places, and except for Josie’s mentioning maybe a little too frequently that she had a young child, she seemed as potentially available as any woman Dallas had ever courted. And this was courtship, after all. Not just a random pursuit.

A block away from the playground, he steered to the curb, shifted into park and set the brake. For some reason, he did not want her to see him parallel parking or even getting out of his convertible. A grassy hill, crayon green in the flat-white heat, obscured his view of the playground; just the top of the slide and swing-set jutted over the crest of the knoll. But he knew she would be there already, just over that hill. That was her way. She would be sitting on a bench in a pretty summer dress and sandals, legs crossed at the knee, showing off her shapely calves and a little bit of thigh, watching her daughter frolic with the rest of the children. Kids could be halfway entertaining if they behaved themselves—especially little boys, who always seemed to admire his

boots and mustang belt buckle, accessories he religiously wore, even with most of his suits. The boys would crane their necks to look up at his face. “You got a horse, mister?” they would say. “Not right now,” he would assure them, suppressing an impulse to ruffle their hair, just as his oldest, meanest brother had liked to ruffle his to remind him who was the baby. “But when I was your age, I rode every day. Had a blue roan named Betty.” No sense explaining he now co-owned two champion jumpers and a top-producing mare, none of which he had seen since he had signed the papers.

The engine clicked as it began to cool and he reached over to the passenger seat for the three yellow roses he’d just bought. The fabric upholstery gave off a heat—hot, he thought, as if Josie’s tender behind had been pressed there, but also reminding him he should have parked in the shade. Glancing around, though, he saw there was no shade to be had on this block or the next. He would put the top up. The cellophane crackled as he lifted the roses and their scent jolted him pleasurably: the scent of anticipation. How many roses had he given to how many women? He checked to make sure his fly was zipped and glanced in the rear-view mirror. Though he had been driving with the top down, his hair was short and dense enough—unlike his brothers, and despite all the ruffling and hair-yanking they had inflicted, he still had a full head of his very own hair—it had resisted the wind and needed only a quick smoothing. Now or never, he said to himself, rubbing his sideburns vigorously. This was probably just as awkward for her.

Those were the magic words; it was part of the ritual. There always came a sinking moment when the allure of a new woman would seem the height of insanity, but he could boost himself forward with a reminder of *her* vulnerability. It was awkward for her. With Josie, this moment had arrived again and again. What did that mean? Either she was so right for him it was almost unthinkable, or she was flat-out deliciously wrong. Stepping out onto the parched pavement, he was aware of the dampness of sweat in his groin, under his arms, and he hurriedly pressed the button that brought the canvas top humming over the interior of the car. With a backward glance, he abandoned his vehicle and began walking briskly, hoping to evaporate the sweat. What would be the best angle of approach? He wanted to see her before she saw him.

But there she was on the sidewalk, half a block ahead, smiling and waving, her flirty skirt flipping as if it were waving, too. He slowed. He had lost the element of surprise. Even so, though, and even from this distance, he was pleased so see she was not wearing stockings, her legs were tan and bare. The moisture in his groin was not cooling as he'd hoped. He felt like a dolt, perspiring and grinning, roses in his paw. Yet it was gratifying that she was so glad to see him, so unreserved. It *was* the next town over—they had had the sense to meet in Hermanas, twenty miles west, convenient for them both yet removed enough for anonymity. But even safe as they were, she could still play it cool if she wanted, hold herself back: the I-really-oughtn't -be-doing-this married-lady routine. How well he knew that act and the response it required. But that was not Josie, at least the Josie he knew so far. Her face and body seemed unable to conceal any emotion. He wondered how far her lack of inhibition might go. The danger, though, was that she was already past the point of turning back. You could usually count on a married woman wobbling, rebounding back to her man. But that would not happen here—not with a woman who strained up on her tiptoes and waved as if fanning a fire. She would be his, if he wanted her, completely, permanently, a new and third and hopefully final wife. Three was a charm. Her obtainability drew him closer; it made him want to ditch the flowers in the bushes and bolt as if spooked by a snake.

There was the child, right behind her. A thin bent figure, wheat-blond hair sweeping down as she crouched to tie her shoe. If Josie were protecting herself with anything, it would be motherhood. She had insisted that the only way she could get away on a Saturday was to bring the girl along. “Just leave her with her father,” Dallas had suggested. They had been having an extended lunch together, as they often did when Josie's boss was out of town. Josie had recoiled at the suggestion, upsetting her glass as she drew back and tipping ice water into her Cobb salad. She frowned at the soupy mess, but with comic exaggeration.

“See what happens when you mention him,” she said, shaking her head in disapproval.

“Now, don't be getting superstitious on me,” Dallas joked.

With her fork, she speared a glistening cube of cheese and lifted it from the salad plate. “I just thought this might be a chance for you to meet my little girl,” she said.

She opened her mouth, inserted the cube and closed her lips around it, sliding the fork from her mouth with a mischievous squint. He had never seen a woman so exciting or adorable, even with her mouth full, even as she chewed.

He did not especially want to meet her girl, not yet—maybe someday, if it came to that, and he was certain it would: this was no ordinary diversion, there was something about Josie that stopped him in his tracks, and he knew he might one day be obliged to accept the girl as part of the package—but for now, the main thing was to get Josie alone. If an outing with the daughter was a step in that direction, so be it.

As he approached her now on the sidewalk, Josie stopped waving and clasped her hands in front of her. Her toenails shone frosty beige. Behind her, the child's wheat-blond head lifted, the angular body straightened; standing, she rose just past Josie's waist—a tiny waist cinched tight with a patent-leather belt. The belt, the toenails, Josie's gleaming teeth caught the sunlight, and the girl seemed like a pale shadow behind her, dim and wan. Josie took a step back, which caused the girl to come forward.

“This is Mommy's friend. His name is Mr. Early. Can you say hello?”

The girl tipped her face up, blinking in the chalky sunlight. Her long straight nose, the flatness of her eyes, gave her face a certain two-dimensionality, a sober blankness. She was much older than Dallas had imagined. Six, Josie had said. He had pictured ... what? He could not exactly say. But surely not a child this lanky or serious or able to look a stranger in the eye with such studied concentration. What did he know about children, especially little girls? He had dated women with daughters before. Some of the girls had been sweet, some had been brats, some had been both—the kind that would grow up to torture a man. There had been one little Thumbelina who had a cast to her eyes and a waggle to her hips that astonished him—a miniature minx: every bit a performer as her mother, who had been a dancer, the kind of girl who demanded you look at her, but also (because she was a child) demanded you look away. And now this girl, Josie's girl, was looking at *him*. She was solemn as an undertaker, and seemed to be memorizing his features. What had Josie been thinking? It had not occurred to him till this moment that the child's presence might be a risk. What was to stop her

from going home and telling her daddy all about the big, sandy-haired man with the golden-haired arms and big gold watch who came to visit Mama at the park?

But if two marriages and ten years of law practice and who knows how many overlapping love affairs had taught him anything, it was the value of the bold gesture in a tense situation. You did not back away but placed yourself directly in the eye of the storm. With a quick glance at Josie, he dropped to one knee so that he and the girl were eye to eye. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, cautiously extending his hand, not quite sure if a young girl would know how to respond. Then he remembered the roses. Extracting one from the cellophane, he smiled. “You can call me Dallas,” he said, offering the flower. “What’s your name?” he asked, though he already knew—but only because it rhymed with the husband’s. Rudy. Judy.

At the very least, the rose had broken her stare; the child’s gaze flickered toward the sculpted yellow petals. She leaned against her mother’s hip, but rather than reach out for the flower, she reached up for Josie’s hand. “Mommy said your name is Mr. Early,” she said.

Josie flounced down, crouching with her knees together, a position both modest and suggestive in that nothing was revealed but might very well be. With her came a wave of scent: powdery perfume tinged with salty female sweat. “Isn’t that a beautiful rose!” she exclaimed, straining forward to sniff it.

Judy squirmed. “Can I go play now?” she asked, pulling away from the huddled adults.

“You actually *want* to play?” Josie rose to her feet again, pouting at Judy in a questioning sort of way. She then shrugged and smiled at Dallas, as if he might share her happy perplexity. “Well, I was hoping that—” she began, but cut herself off. “What I mean is, sure, honey, if that’s what you want. You run along, and we’ll be right there.”

Judy shuffled away. Dallas lingered on his bent knee, allowing himself to fully appreciate the nearness of Josie’s pelvis to his face. But he straightened, too, and removed the wrapping from the two remaining roses, handed her all three. She laughed, but a little too cheerily. “That child keeps me guessing,” she said.

Dallas nodded, sensing how the daughter might easily do just that. They began to walk, following the path Judy had taken into the park. The white opacity of the sky veiled the horizon, dry heat dulled every surface; they both put their sunglasses on against the glare. Next to him, Josie was barely taller than his chest, the top of her copper-red head almost level with his armpit. He admired her smooth shoulders, bare except for the straps of her sundress, and the strap of her purse; admired, too, the way the purse spanked against her hip. But it wasn't just sex he was after, he reminded himself, shoving his hands into his pockets. There was a waitress at the Banker's Club in Sacramento with almost the same color hair, called herself Rusty. Now that was a girl you fucked. But Josie wanted something more than a girl like that could ever imagine—and was capable of getting it. Her husband was a bum, so she went out and got a job. Her boss, Ed Andreeson, was a glad-handing fool who probably would have run his business into the ground by now if he hadn't hired her at just the right moment; in a couple of years, she learned nearly as much about the complexities of real-estate transactions as Ed had in twenty. She was ambitious, clever. She would make a great partner. A man with aspirations needed a woman who knew what that meant. If any boy could be President, he needed a First Lady. She was a woman you could introduce to anyone.

The way she carried herself was a marvel. Stepping along this path, she looked as if she owned the park, the county, all of California itself—her head held high, gliding along as light-footed as an Arabian filly, hair lifting off her shoulders as she moved. You could tell she might go far, given the opportunity. It was odd, he had to admit, but she brought to mind some of the shrewder farmers he had seen: time and again, he would be waiting with a client, usually an acquisitions VP, ready to propose a buy-out or a long-term lease arrangement—the door to the conference room would open, and you knew in an instant the fate of the man who walked through the door. Almost every one of them had inherited his farm from his father, and they were primed to resist. Most of them were hostile, which put them in a defensive bargaining position, but a few had the panache to play the moment to their advantage. There was one fellow in particular, his string tie cinched with a piece of agate, his paunch straining the buttons of his Sunday shirt, who strode in with his attorney as if he had called the meeting, and,

without even sitting down, splayed his crooked fingers on the mahogany table.

“Whatcha got for me, boys?” he had said.

Josie touched him and he stopped. He could almost count the few times she had touched him before. Her hand slid along his bare forearm and then gestured to a bench under a tree. “That looks like a good spot,” she said, smiling ... invitingly? Her eyes were concealed behind her sunglasses; he could not read her expression. The lenses showed him only a wide-angle reflection of himself.

They sat in the shade. The cottonwoods above them rustled soothingly, seductively. In front of them stretched a round sand pit, and beyond it, beneath a cluster of shaggy pepper trees, was a playhouse constructed of tractor tires and logs split lengthwise. Children clambered over it, whooping like wild things. But there were no children in the sand pit, which lay exposed to the full sun—no children, except Judy. She was tracing a pattern in the sand with a large, straight stick.

“What’s she doing?” Dallas whispered, leaning close to Josie’s ear.

“She’s probably drawing a maze,” Josie explained. “You know, a spiral or something like that. Or a shape with another one around it. That’s what she usually does.” She shrugged. “I guess that sounds funny, doesn’t it?”

“Why, not a bit,” said Dallas, who thought it sounded very peculiar. “But Josie, don’t you think—” He wanted to reach for her but pulled the collar of his sports shirt away from his sticky neck instead.

She turned to him and took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were a liquid turquoise—phenomenal, a siren’s eyes—but this close, in the filtered light of the shade, they were cloudier, more troubled-looking than he had expected. This must be a burden for her, sneaking out like this, taking this chance. Possibly they were worried about the very same thing.

“Isn’t she going to say something?” he asked, trying to go gently, hoping to sound mildly concerned.

“Say something?”

“You know—to her ... ” Was it really bad luck to mention the dad?

Josie understood. “Oh, don’t you worry about that!” she assured him, brushing his exposed forearm again. “She’s too young to understand.”

“But the way she looked at me—”

“Oh, she looks at everyone like that. She’s a very pensive child.” She tipped her head toward Judy, who was just now turning toward them. The child raised the stick at Dallas as if raising a rifle, a solid motion from the shoulder, casual and confident as if a practiced shot.

“Pow!” he expected her say.

But Josie waved at her. Judy waved the stick and went back to her spiral-making.

* * *

There it was: the ratchet handle, a cross-hatched miracle of machined perfection. Rudy, fumbling in the dirt above his head, recognized the feel and heft of it. The bulky head gave it substance, weight, the promise that the job could be done. He lifted it above his face, fit the socket to the bolt, and torqued the handle clockwise. But the head snagged then slipped. His knuckles struck an axle bolt, bleeding immediately and freely. He jammed the knuckles into his mouth.

This was all Josie’s fault. She had snapped her mind shut on certain topics that required, at the very least, a little wifely flexibility. Topic number one, for instance: his potential for success, and what might be required for him to achieve it. He had begged her—literally begged her—for a Craftsman power shop-wrench. This tranny would be a done-deal by now if he had been using the proper tools. But had she listened? About as much as usual: deaf as dirt. She kept the purse strings as tight as she kept her thighs together.

The comparison was too crude, he knew—that was no way to think of his wife—and it made him wince: the thought of Josie’s supple thighs, his increasing terror of getting anywhere near her, each attempt seemingly more hopeless than the last—how long had it been since she had willingly embraced him, much less let him glide inside? He twisted sideways, partially to avoid the whipping sting of that question throughout his body, partially to turn the radio up higher.

Although she may be cute, the song was saying. “She’s just a substitute,” Rudy joined in, removing the knuckles from his mouth. “Girl, you’re the permanent one.”

The taste of blood had diluted the bile at the base of his tongue, but only minimally. He knew what would cut it completely. He was parched. For a drink. For his wife. She was tired and irritable, he knew, from working all week, taking care of Judy, keeping the household in order. It squeezed his heart almost flat to see his darling dream of a bride run herself down. But she was mercilessly contrary, blind to the obvious solution: if he could just get this repair business rolling (or maybe something else—he had no shortage of talents, interests, ambitions, connections), she would be forever freed from this drudgery. All he needed was a decent infusion of capital, the proper equipment, a vote of confidence any man might reasonably expect from his wife. Some loving understanding and patience. He was not asking all that much.

Josie, though, had no sense of proportion. Everything had to be now.

Now. He thrust himself out from under the truck into the blinding noon light and reached into the wheel well, where a bottle was stashed. These freakishly hot days made it impossible to get anything done. You had to ease into summer, just like anything else. Besides, how could he concentrate after being so icily rejected? He took a hot swig of bourbon. Twice that morning, he had tried simply to put his arms around her, to feel the sweetness of her body against his, but her arms had responded like industrial-strength coils. Nothing was getting past those defenses, not in anyone's lifetime, no sir. If she would only let him near her again, he could turn it all around ... he knew every combination of touch and pause it took to please her. How long had it been?

He stood unsteadily, swaying like a steer. He pressed his back against the truck cab, the sheet metal ferociously hot, gratifying. The scorch of it, radiating through his coveralls, gave him something to feel besides the twisting worry in his gut. She had driven off an hour before, blue smoke chuffing from the back of the Caprice, and he had watched from a prone position, sheltered beneath the truck's undercarriage, wishing for an instant the chassis had begun to shudder and creak, if only to give him an immediate physical threat. How much better to fear for his life than to acknowledge what he was sure he'd heard and seen in the gravel spitting beneath her tires: she was driving off to somewhere she had never been.

She had not invited his touch since the night before he confronted that prick of a foreman, maybe five months before. January, if he recalled correctly, drought-year winter work. She had been thrilled he was working—had been working for almost two weeks—and that evening she had stepped into the shower with him; they had soaped each other to ecstasy till the hot water ran tepid. But the next morning he showed up late at the job site and the foreman, or the assistant foreman, or whoever the fuck he was, said he would dock him half a day's pay.

“Like hell you will,” Rudy had shouted. He knew the type, had pegged this guy for a petty power monger from the first day on the job, when he had tossed Rudy a hard hat with slightly too much force. They were everywhere, these small-time dictators, and Rudy, when he worked, inevitably was assigned to their crews.

“That’s a load of crap,” Rudy insisted. “I know my rights.”

“Rights?” the man had chuckled. “I’ve already warned you twice. Lucky for you we need breathers today. You’re with Marsden this morning, helping lay that PVC.” He pointed to a man standing chest-deep in a trench.

“I’m twenty minutes late,” Rudy whined. “You can only dock me an hour.”

“*Thirty* minutes,” said the man, tapping his watch but not looking at it. “You’ll get four hours if you stay for the rest of the day. If you’ve got something better to do, be my fucking guest.” He gestured toward the chain-link gate through which Rudy had just entered.

“That . . . that’s illegal! Wait till the labor-relations board hears about this!”

But the man was turning, and another man, so enormous his jumbo-sized worksuit scarcely contained him, stepped in front of Rudy, grazing the tips of his steel-toed boots with his own.

“Out,” said the bouncer.

“Whatever you say, Chuck.” Rudy stared at the red lettering stitched on the man’s breast, hoping to imply *I’ve got your name, too, big buddy*.

He’d left his previous job in much the same way, and the one before that. But none of these confrontations had impressed Josie in the least—and look what he had accomplished each time: faced down an imbecile whose sole purpose in life was an arbitrary enforcement of the rules. She, of all people, should understand. *She* was the

one who had shamed him, three years before, for doing nothing—absolutely nothing—the afternoon when the paramedics and police had come down the hall and pried her from the doorframe. He had crouched and covered his face when they peeled her fingers from the wood; he didn't see (only learned of later) the heroic roundhouse swing she landed on the policeman's helmet.

He might have stayed crumpled like that till they carted him away, but suddenly little Judy was gripping his elbow. He dropped his hands to see her fearsome toddler's face, so grim—lips compressed as if concealing a forbidden object—and then, above her head, the elongated syringe one of the paramedics had lifted to the light. Liquid spurted from its tip. Afraid of Judy's lips, afraid to see where that needle would go next, he pulled the child into his lap. Judy's innocence would save him; he could cling to her forever. Her soiled-diaper smell comforted him—some children, it told him, were still alive—and he buried his face in her downy white hair.

“Why did you let them take Rosie?” Josie had demanded, even before the sedation had worn off. Rosie, their second baby, had been only two months old when she died.

But she never left them now. She lived in a discolored snapshot, overlaced with creases, inside Rudy's breast pocket. She received fresh flowers each week on her grave. He brought them without fail. He was the keeper of the flame, and someday Josie would thank him for it. She did not allow photographs of the baby to be displayed in the house, she never went to the cemetery, never spoke that precious name. *You cannot look back*, Josie maintained, and that was understandably her philosophy for now, but Rudy felt certain the day would come when she would be ready to grieve. Only three years had passed. A mother needed time, and he had plenty to give her.

Grimacing at the hay chaff swirling and descending around him like a plague, he reached inside his pocket to check that the photo was actually there, not imagined (or if it was real—and he was certain it was real—that it had not been lost). There it was, the softened upper corner. Satisfied, he downed another drink, draining the bottle. The thresher in the neighbors' field was nearly done for the day. And so was he.

He crossed the yard and went up the steps and dropped to kneeling at the entrance to the utility room, where he was sure he had hidden another pint. On his hands and

knees, he peered behind the water heater and found a cigarette butt, which he lit with his butane lighter and inhaled from as if nursing from a teat. The five-dollar-bill he had taken from Josie's purse the day before never made it as far as the convenience store, where he had been headed to buy a pack of Kools; he had ended up at the Rendezvous Room instead, though he could not recall exactly how that had happened. Inhaling, he appreciated the smoke as its own kind of bliss, almost in a league with liquor. But actually not by a mile. He stuck the cigarette stub in his mouth and began searching again.

Climbing onto the clothes dryer to feel along the shelves above, he jostled a department-store shopping bag, almost knocking it off the washer. Josie had set it there the evening before but had set straight to making dinner and hadn't had a chance to unpack it. He wondered if she might have bought him something. He peeked in the bag. A set of dish towels, a bundt pan, and, at the bottom, a stiff black box.

He lifted the box out of the bag and removed its lid.

Crystalline white shoes lay cradled in tissue paper, glinting with a sultry opal sheen. Dress shoes. Judy's size.

She needed dress shoes, his wife had said. For a party.

That's why she had done up her hair.

But Judy did not need shoes. They had not gone shopping. The party might not even exist. The truth of it—all of it—seized him with a force viciously familiar: he had known for a fact Josie had been driving somewhere else.

As if opening his veins, he let it all spill, the spasms of sorrow he had been holding at bay—for hours, for days, for longer than he cared to acknowledge. Helpless with tears, he lifted the shoes, kissing one hard-shelled toe and then the other.

Josie might betray him, but Judy never.

These were her shoes. She was his girl.

* * *

Josie pushed the accelerator to the floor and pulled into the oncoming lane to pass a tomato truck. She had tired of running over the tomatoes that had tumbled off

the top. There would be red splatters on the bumper, she was sure, and Rudy would scratch his head and wonder how a trip to the shoe store might have produced such carnage. Well, let him ask. Let him ask!

“Mommy, I’m cold,” Judy whined. She was rubbing her ivory kneecaps with her spidery, blue-veined hands, and Josie looked away, embarrassed. What had Dallas truly thought of her? Her, meaning Judy. Her, meaning Josie. Daughter and mother, mother and daughter.

Sitting next to him, so close, on that shaded slatted park bench, his lap had beckoned like an open invitation; she might have climbed into it like a beguiling child-bride, toying with the buttons on his shirt. And why shouldn’t she feel girlish? She was entitled to her youth. She was only twenty-four years old, after all, and had already squandered some of the best years of her life on ... what? What had her life with Rudy been? Nothing more than a childish high-school romance that had ended in a baby shower and a weekend trip to a Reno wedding chapel and a progressive slide into suffocating ever-deeper heartache. If Dallas’ lap had been offered in a less public place, if Judy hadn’t been right there, if she wasn’t still married ...

The child was right: the car was an ice box. She was so shaken up—like a martini! she pictured herself in a martini shaker; she had never had a martini till Dallas had made her one—she hadn’t noticed the goose bumps prickling her own upper arms. “Sorry, honey,” she said, switching the air conditioner to low.

She hoped Judy would smile in response to her responsiveness, but she blinked incidentally, as unappreciative as a cat. What went on behind that emotionless mask? There was no doubt she was smart—reading and writing past her grade level, memorizing poems a whole page long, counting backwards from one hundred—but so confoundingly cautious, kept-all-to-herself. Rudy could almost always make her smile, but only because he was willing to do anything, any time, for a laugh. *Anything*. He had even dropped his pants once and mooned them both, wagging his bony cheeks and displaying his walnut-shaped mole. But this had caused Judy to shriek, not laugh—no one could have called it laughter, not by any stretch.

They were entering Dunning again, the downtown shopping district, and she found herself slowing to a stop alongside her favorite career-girl shop, “Nine to Five.”

Beside her, Judy slumped sideways. “Can’t we go hooooomme now?” she moaned into the passenger door, the door that would not open.

This was preferable, Josie supposed, to no response at all. But they couldn’t go home, not yet. She’d intended to head directly there, straight as fireman’s ladder, but a nagging doubt had been taking shape and now finally insinuated itself at full force: What if Dallas’ composure had been just so much Southern gentility? He’d been gracious, even gallant, with Judy. He seemed not to mind at all that she had been so aloof. But this might have been a show of good manners and nothing more, a measure of his peerless charm. What if he’d seen enough to now know this was truly more than he’d bargained for—a younger woman in a hopeless situation, nearly begging to tow along her unfathomable child? He may have gone straight to that apartment rental office and withdrawn the deposit he’d made on the unit he was planning to rent for her.

She had to get inside that store before she slapped herself. “Why don’t you follow Mommy out her side?” she suggested to Judy in the sunniest voice she could manage, deliberately ignoring the child’s complaint. “So she doesn’t have to mess with that nasty old door.”

Jude complied, crawling on all fours across the front seat.

Josie stiffened. She could take only so much. “Are you an infant?” she cried, the force of it driven by the most unthinkable thought yet: how much simpler life would be if she could leave Judy behind. And the mention of “infant,” from her own mouth no less, made her crazed with the need for order, for compliance with her vision of how things must be. “*Scoot* across the seat, Judy Hazelden! Don’t you ever crawl!”

Then she was tugging Judy into the shop. The racks of dresses seemed to embrace them in a greeting. Josie adored the clothes here, and embraced them back. Within moments, as usual, she was hugging an armload of dresses and trotting to the fitting room. As usual, she soon emerged in one of the outfits, barefoot, price tags dangling, tiptoeing to view herself in the three-way mirror. But today was not usual at all: she did not violently chew her lip as she admired her reflection. Today, she would actually buy a dress. If her dreams came true with Dallas, she would be able to afford it. If everything went to hell, she would have done at least a little something for herself.

1988-89

Villa Miranda

Fall was not a California phenomenon.

That's what Meredith said. Or possibly her name was Merilee. That girl down the hall, from Burlingame or Hillsborough—one of those deeply affluent communities studding the hills above the San Francisco airport—the girl who had a trust fund and a private room and whose name, like the names of so many of the other students, Jude could not remember. She was not interested in remembering the name of a girl who seemed to be a walking billboard for exclusive labels: logos scrolled on her jeans and shoes, the baseball caps she flipped backwards over her sleek mahogany hair ... Nieman Marcus ... Chas... Ralph Lauren. Could her name be Mary Lou? Melody? With desultory precision, Jude sifted her memory—she knew the name had three syllables, started with an M.

Not a California phenomenon. What a mouthful. But here in Boston—well now Meri-whatever-her-name-was finally knew what fall was meant to be.

Jude knelt on her twin bed, elbows on the window sill, staring into the spectacle of foliage that obscured the view from her fourth-floor dorm room—which was to say it obscured virtually nothing, because all that would be seen when the audacious leaves fell would be an identical brick-and-mortar dormitory across a tufty patch of grass. In a way, that girl had been right, she had to admit. There was a kernel of truth in that contrived pronouncement, which the girl had made earlier that afternoon to a cluster of boys who seemed to have cornered her near the hallway drinking fountain. She was the kind of girl who was always surrounded, who could say the most uninspired things—because she had looks, because she had an open-throated laugh. Jude recognized the type from high school, even junior college. *I swear, in California there aren't ANY seasons*, she had sung out as Jude attempted to slip invisibly by the group on her way back from the restroom. *Jude! You know what I'm talking about! Isn't that right?*

“That's a myth,” Jude had mumbled, glancing sideways just briefly enough to see two or three of the boys turn to watch her pass. They had smirked, she was sure of

it. But probably not because they heard what she had said. It was simpler than that, simple as a child's arithmetic: Jude was the type of girl boys smirked at.

Back home, in California, the smirking hadn't mattered. Not to the same degree. She had learned to wear her own little smirk. She had been the smartest girl in her class, and was best friends with the smartest boy. She had money—and though the reasons for having it made her feel like an impostor, it had given her status, protection. But not here. She was not the smartest, nor the wealthiest. There was nothing to do but shut the door against the chattering in the hall and kneel rigidly on her bed, watching a particular leaf that was still half-green and wondering, if she stared patiently and intently enough, if she might see it bleed as completely crimson as the rest. Crimson, copper, canary yellow. That girl was right, in a way. Leaves turned in California, but not like this. And not now, in September. November instead. You knew Thanksgiving was coming when the birches and oaks turned gold, the few maples reddened, every fruit and nut tree in every orchard suddenly bared itself in the giddily rising wind, and the sky darkened to a passionate bruise. This was wrong, profoundly wrong—all this color, so soon.

Still kneeling, she lifted her arms straight out to the sides, shoulder-height. She would hold them stiff until that leaf turned red. That was the solution to nothing being the same. If it took days, she would faithfully hold this position. Days had become irrelevant anyway. She had not attended classes for days. How many? She began to think backwards—today, yesterday, the day before that ... even Monday? the previous Friday? Three days for sure; more likely four or five. Her raised arms felt strong and she wondered how much time would have to pass until they grew heavy, until there would be pain. She turned her palms upward, to increase the strain on her shoulders.

The door behind her popped open. Jude jerked her arms to her sides—but not fast enough. She had completely forgotten that her roommate, Lina, could lay claim to this space, could enter and leave it with impunity, at any hour she pleased.

“God, what're you doing Jude—yoga?” Lina laughed. Her backpack thudded and jangled onto her bed. “You don't seem like a yoga girl to me.”

“Stretching,” Jude said, not turning around; her pulse throbbed in a vein in her neck. “Just stretching.” She guessed that Lina, an uncomplicated optimist, would not

recognize self-mortification when she saw it. She grasped her right elbow with her left hand and pulled the arm across her body, as if this were the next stretch she had planned. Keeping her back turned was rude, she knew—knew it might even arouse Lina’s suspicions (“What’s *up*, Jude?” Lina would insist when Jude fell into one of her “morbid” silences)—but turning around was impossible until the pulsing had stopped. She knew her face must be a telltale red. Mottled red as that half-turned leaf.

“Stretching—that’s supposed to be so healthy!” Lina said. But she seemed preoccupied. Zippers rapidly zipped; apparently she was changing clothes. Sensing Lina’s haste, Jude forgave herself now. It hadn’t been a total mental lapse to have assumed she’d have some privacy this afternoon. Lina had told her she would be out till late evening. There must have been a change of plans. The zippers gave her hope that Lina would soon be disappearing again. Cautiously, she dropped from her knees to a sitting position and turned around.

Face to face with Lina, there was always the risk of a pep talk on the importance of eating. “No wonder you’re so gaunt,” Lina had said during their second week together. “I haven’t seen you go to the dining commons once.” In fact, Jude had gone four times in the three weeks she had been living in the dorm, but that was all. She ate, when she ate, only snacks from the vending machines in the downstairs lobby. But timing a trip to the machines when no one would see her was a logistical challenge. It was usually easier to go without.

Acid-washed jeans and a university sweatshirt lay entwined on the opposite bed. Lina stood patting the pockets of a green leather jacket, the cut of which hugged her torso precisely. “I can hardly stand it,” she said. “That grad student I told you about—Tyler? Well, he invited me to go to McGinty’s with him and some of his friends. *I was* going to do that drippy river walk the RAs have planned, but ... oh! sorry! Are you doing that tonight? No offense!”

Jude shook her head, numbed as usual by Lina’s groundless enthusiasm for the most ordinary things. A guy had asked her out—guys asked Lina out all the time; it seemed ridiculous to turn it into a red-letter event. But maybe that was why she was so popular: her lack of restraint. She had a different kind of charm than that Meredith girl—blunt and fun and impulsive, never striving to make an ever-so-clever

impression. Jude had to admire Lina, but would have preferred to admire her from a distance. Sharing a room with her was like waiting for a balloon to pop. There would be lulling silence, sometimes hours of empty stillness, then Lina would burst through the door and seem to draw the breath from Jude's body into hers. She took, Jude gave. But her popularity made those bursts infrequent; her steady stream of dates and invitations and activities meant she was usually elsewhere.

"I forgot about that river thing." Jude bent to lift a textbook from the floor. "Besides, I've got to study." This was her rote response to the suggestion of any kind of extracurricular activity. And it was a lie. She had stopped studying after the first week of class; she only pretended to be reading when Lina was around. She opened the book to a page she had bookmarked.

"You are a serious drudge, girl. Bad enough to be studying business—" Lina was talking into the full-length mirror on the closet door, running a brush through her hair "—but to be so devoted."

Devoted. When Lina left, Jude would be able to return to her devotions. She reached for a highlighter on her bedside table, removed the cap with her teeth, and began marking the open page of her book.

"Of course, ten years from now, you'll be in the executive suite, and I'll be working at Stop N Go, repeating 'paper or plastic, ma'am?' like a freakin' robot." Lina gave her hair a final snap and spun around. "But, hey, that's what you get for majoring in liberal arts. Speaking of liberal—" She unzipped her jacket and held it open as if flashing her breasts, revealing a skin-tight purple tube-top underneath. "What do you think? Too much, too soon?"

Jude stared at the top. A prickling sensation gripped the base of her neck. She knew exactly how it would feel to wear something that provocative ... to be that exposed ...

"I think you'll be very cold," she said flatly, wanting to look away, faintly concerned that Lina might think she was staring at her chest, so poignantly delineated by the spandex: one breast fuller than the other, riding slightly lower. So vulnerably displayed. Jude's breasts, in comparison, had hardly emerged from her body, and she was relieved. She never wore a bra, had vowed she never would. Once was enough—

one sustained and ugly evening of being cinched into a strapless concoction, as revealing as that tube-top but on its own uncompromising terms: lacy and hard-boned and cream-colored, not shimmering purple, not stretchy in the least.

“Freezing,” Jude said.

Lina turned up the collar on her jacket, huddling into the leather as if waiting in a storm for a bus. “You okay, Jude? I swear, you creep me out sometimes.”

Jude blinked. It was just Lina standing there. Just a robust young woman with a big nose and big hair, her black leggings tapering down into scrunchy socks.

“You talk about cold and it *makes* me cold. Brrrrr!” Lina rezipped her jacket. She slung her backpack over her shoulder, put her hand on the doorknob and twisted it, but paused. “Hey, eat something, wouldja? If you get any thinner, I’ll be able to slip you under the door.” As abruptly as she had entered, she was gone.

Jude waited for the molecules of air to resettle. She was sure she could see them, the swirling eddy set in motion as Lina swept out the door. The door under which Jude might be slipped. She liked the image, how neatly it summarized what she hoped to accomplish: to winnow herself down to nothingness, razor-thinness. She had no conscious plan, though. It was happening of its own accord—she was never hungry, she didn’t eat, her clothes grew baggy as a clown’s. Soon she would be able to glide down the hall, go anywhere she pleased, without anyone giving her the slightest attention. She would be the opposite of Lina, whom everyone noticed. Who demanded that you notice. “Look at me!” that vulgar tube-top insisted.

Jude wished *she* had insisted, but she had submitted: to the infernal scratchiness of lace, the tickling of hair on naked collarbones, the sickening tenderness of budding breasts forced upward. A camera had flashed. Her textbook still lay open on her lap, but, looking down at it she saw another page, superimposed—a glossy sheet with rows of miniature thumbnail photos, her face and torso the focus, but not her face at all.

She forced her eyes to see what was actually there: page 112, “Case Study: Market Leader Fails to Anticipate Changes in Technology.” A photograph showed two men in bowler hats shaking hands at a ribbon-cutting, a locomotive looming behind them. Streaks of lemon-lime ink highlighted random text on the page.

“The second industrial revolution of the 1890s created unprecedented wealth—” Jude had marked while waiting for Lina to rush back out to her life.

And, further down, “New industries inevitably become old industries with the advent—”

Sinking into relief, she noticed how careless her highlighting had been. This was something she could fix. She was here; this was now. That other place—murky and strobe-lit, strangers’ fingers on her shoulders—already it was gone. Infantile, she told herself. You can mark your book correctly, or you can do it half-assed—just like anything else in life (one of her father’s maxims). Meticulously, she pressed the highlighter to the page again and completed the ends of the sentences she had only half-begun. Highlighter ink smudged onto her left thumb, though, and she sternly flattened her hand against the page to examine her sloppiness. It never ends, does it? Trying to make one thing right always makes something else go wrong.

But she could fix this, too.

Gripping the brilliant green highlighter in her fist, she began to color the entire back surface of her hand.

Every evening, if she could manage it before Lina returned for the night, she turned off the light and crawled into bed, fully dressed, including shoes. There would then be dappled shadows on the ceiling to watch until Lina cracked the door open into the darkness, silhouetted by the hallway light. “Sorry,” she would whisper, exasperated. “Guess you’re *already* asleep.” This was Jude’s cue to mumble and roll onto her side. Now the real waiting began. After much fumbling and unsnapping in the dark, maybe a “shit!” or a “dang!” if she stubbed her toe, Lina would climb into her bed and begin the sounds of settling: shifting so that her bedsprings creaked, sighing, clearing her throat. Sometimes, even with her eyes shut, Jude would become aware of a glow and then the feathery rasp of a page turning. Lina would be reading in bed by the light of a miniature gooseneck lamp. But not tonight. Less than fifteen minutes passed before Lina began her fuzzy kittenish snore.

She was tempted to lie there and listen. She had never shared a room with anyone (except her baby sister, but that was far beyond memory, before the beginning of

time), and the intimacy of another person's sleep sounds was an unexpected benefit—the only benefit, as far as she could tell, of being forced into this situation: having a roommate, living in a dorm, being shuttled off to a college as far away from home as they could send her. The nearness of that half-purred breathing gave her a sense of security, superiority. She was sure she might learn things about Lina she didn't know herself. Lina had just spluttered for the third time. This must mean something. Sometimes Lina said things in her sleep. “Anaconda,” Jude was sure she said one night. If she waited patiently enough, she just might crack the code.

But it was stifling under the bedclothes. She was wearing a jersey and cords, Keds on her feet. Time to get moving, to avail herself of the emptiness of night. She slipped off the covers and rolled up to sitting. Her own bedsprings creaked, but this seemed never to disturb Lina once she had settled into sleep. The room smelled like a brewery, a sour beery smell, steeped in the stink of cigarettes. Her father might be sleeping in that other bed. Those might be his sleep sounds. But his breathing, Jude knew, was much harsher and louder, clotted and thick. It was Lina, of course. Reeking of a night at the pub.

Jude had practiced stealth since childhood. Tiptoeing across the floor, easing into her parka, opening the door without a sound—every essential action became the next in a single fluid motion. Without the slightest pause she stepped into the hallway, pulling the door behind her with a scarcely audible click. The hall was hers. Dark and concave as a T-train tunnel—she had ridden the T once; she would never do it again—the only light came from the restrooms at either end, men's and women's. No one was anywhere, and neither was she. This might be a dream.

A sensation nagged at her—hunger, perhaps, or something even simpler: a longing for the taste of salt. The hall stretched longer as she walked, the exit door at the end receded as she advanced, but then she was passing through it and padding down the stairs, footsteps clanging in the concrete stairwell.

The lobby was a holiday scene. Red light streamed from the Coke machine, blue from the pay phone, colors smearing and overlapping on the linoleum floor; foil packets in the snack machine glinted like ornaments. But it was a holiday scene with

no one in it—the kind Jude preferred. Nothing ever quite compared to sharing a holiday meal with people you wished did not exist, waiting for your food to grow cold.

The linoleum was shiny, wet-looking, and she stepped into a pool of red. But the Coke machine was not her goal. Deep in her pocket was a roll of quarters—she had exchanged the five hundred-dollar bills Dallas had given her for fifty rolls of quarters (“Going to Atlantic City, honey?” the cashier had said), then kept them stashed in her backpack—heavy and silent, a secret she could enjoy each time she hefted the backpack from the floor. That extra weight was *hers*. Adjusting the straps and centering the pack between her shoulder blades, it demanded submission, exacted a purifying pain. But she wasn’t wearing it now, at 2:47 a.m., gripping a roll of quarters she had reluctantly removed from the backpack’s main compartment. Each roll she took made the pack that much lighter. But certain sacrifices were necessary for the sake of fleeing the room, unburdened.

The clock above the lobby bulletin-board said 2:47 in scarlet digital numbers. Yet another glow—more lurid festivity. It would be 2:47 all along the Eastern seaboard, 2:47 in Providence, 2:47 in P.J.’s dorm at Brown...

No, a snack was what she wanted. A snack was the only reason for being in this particular place at this particular time. Eat something, Lina had said. Jude peered through the glass facade of the vending machine. Neat bright packages sadly vied for her attention: chips along the top rows, cookies in the middle, Life-Savers and breath-mints the lower life-forms along the bottom rung. *Bottom feeders*. That had been a favorite phrase of P.J.’s. She could almost hear him. *This is amazing—a recapitulation of the food chain! See, the top rung, the chips: those are the most evolved because they have the most efficient ratio of nutrients to edibility. By the time you get down to the Tic-Tacs, it’s all junk, no food.*

She pulled from her pocket a slip of paper: P.J.’s number in Providence.

Abandoning the snack machine, she stepped to the pay phone. Feeding it several quarters, she dialed.

In high school, they had taken as many classes together as they could. P.J. had announced at the beginning of tenth grade that he needed Jude’s company as an

antidote to the unbearable tedium of sharing a classroom with thirty other “less-gifted” students. (Less-gifted was the most generous term he would use.) Jude, flattered, had mutely nodded in agreement, and spent an afternoon working out a master plan that would place them in identical college-bound classes. But it wasn’t tedium *she* wished to avoid. All through elementary and middle school she had tried to sit as close to the teacher as possible (teachers naturally adopted her, in an unofficial sort of way—not a pet, exactly; she was much too tentative for that: more like a stray being fed on a stoop) but over the years the presence of the teacher had grown weaker as her classmates had grown larger, and, by ninth grade, a creature had begun to heave and burble behind her back as she sat front and center in the classroom. The other children had become one thing—multilegged, voracious. Her back felt completely exposed; she was far too visible. But she could hardly sit anywhere else—for then she would see *them*. And the spectacle of them gnawing their pencils and squeezing their whiteheads and shooting secretive, sniggering glances at each other would be so much worse than merely suspecting they were doing all these things.

In the classes she had shared with P.J., it had always been so much better. She had known him since grade school. They had always competed for the highest marks, yet it had been a amicable rivalry—nothing like P.J.’s hot-headed competition with other males. “See that wiener over there, that nosebleed, Thompson?” P.J. had confided in fifth grade after a social studies quiz. “He beat me by one point. One cruddy point!” Even then, P.J. hadn’t minded that Jude’s score was even higher. Whenever they had a class together, they tried to sit next to each other, if the teacher allowed it. The wiser ones, though, noticed that P.J. would rise to his full height of arrogance with Jude at his side. “Don’t you detect a certain irony in this story?” P.J. had imperiously demanded of their timid ninth-grade English teacher, Ms. Mangetti, who made the mistake of putting P.J. and Jude together in the same discussion group. “Isn’t it obvious Poe is lampooning our gullibility, our willingness to take him seriously?” A performance like this was Jude’s own antidote. P.J. drew every particle of attention to himself, and Jude could watch him admiringly, forgetting she didn’t belong in the classroom. Or anywhere else.

But it had been two years since high school. P.J. had driven east, just weeks after graduation, leaving Jude behind. And now she had come east, too. Flown, not driven. She still had not learned how to drive, but she had finally enrolled in a university—not nearly as prestigious as P.J.’s, but on the same coast, in the same time zone.

They hadn’t spoken in ... months? More likely a year.

Very distantly, deep in the hollow of the handset she was holding, the phone at the other end rang. Once. Twice.

A male student, thick and solid as a bulldog in his varsity sweatsuit, appeared outside the glass door of the lobby. He fished in his pockets, apparently searching for his key.

Three rings, four rings. Where would P.J. be on a weeknight at 2:49 a.m., if not in his room—his private room?

The student waved at Jude, pointed with exaggerated gestures to the door handle. *Forgot my key*, he mouthed.

There was a click on the phone line. “Hunh? Hullo?” said a husky, drowsy voice. It might have been a girl’s voice, possibly a boy’s, but either way it failed to twang with P.J.’s insidious nasality. Long after it had cracked and changed, his voice maintained its signature peevishness, an exasperated righteousness—though the dominant key of his delivery had deepened. But this was not the right note at all. “Hullo?” the sleepy voice said again.

The student rapped on the glass with his knuckles.

A second voice slurred in the background. “Nobody there,” said the first voice, not as husky now. Definitely a girl.

There was someone in his bed. This was not a startling development—he had enjoyed various playmates all along, in the back seat of his mother’s car, under him, over him, steaming the windows and rocking the chassis of that battered flesh-tone Gremlin with the mismatched olive door. He had showed her once where he took them: to a gravel turnaround behind a power station, the tri-county canal running by, a peach orchard spreading lavishly in every direction all around. To avoid hearing the details of his latest rendezvous—how amusing he had found a girl he normally scorned—she had scurried up the embankment, quarried rock sinking and slipping beneath her shoes, and

stared at the flat sheet of water in its concrete trough, so artificially and disturbingly contained. It curved in a big green elbow a quarter mile east. All that water, going somewhere else. She had not imagined at the time that P.J. would be, too.

And now she had gone elsewhere herself—but in reality nowhere. She had crossed a continent and yet not strayed an inch from where she had begun: always and invariably on the outside looking in. She was a girl who called in the middle of the night to hear another girl answer his phone.

Click, that other girl hung up.

“Hey!” came the varsity boy’s voice, muted by the glass door he so ardently hoped she would open.

Jude dropped the handset so it swung on its cord, smacking against the frame of the phone booth.

She strode to the lobby door and lifted her fist. The student, who had started to grin as she approached, raised his hands to cover his face. Her fist connected with a hollow thud; the glass merely quaked. A second strike did the same.

There was a display case, though, just to her right—dorm rules and regulations, a fire-exit map, other official worthless documents protected by the thinnest sheet of glass.

She struck here, too. The surface shattered. Her hand split through, the glass flew up. A chunk of it struck her cheek.

* * *

She was aware of her mother’s presence, as much as she might be aware of anything. There was her mother’s face, or maybe a floating mask that resembled her face; there were acoustic tiles on the ceiling riddled with holes; there was the warm and surprisingly pleasant sensation of peeing in her bed, but then a cloying cold wetness under her flank, and always an excess of glinting chrome and metal everywhere she looked, the frustrating impossibility of rolling onto her side. Something grasped her wrists and ankles.

Frustration. There were amazing ways to end frustration. The black shell of a phone had been twisting at the end of its cord, and then a person was gesturing, smirking, commanding her to serve him—just beyond a wall of glass. She had a message to deliver to that boy. But this narrative, this thread, went spinning off its spool and she slid into sleep, or a close approximation. An IV dripped clear fluid into her arm.

Josie drifted, too. She dozed in the spongy vinyl bedside chair, her stocking feet propped on her upholstered suitcase. She had occupied this chair for nearly eighteen hours straight, ever since arriving from the airport the previous evening, leaving the room only to go to the restroom and, once, to change clothes. She had changed her outfit—or attempted to change her outfit—almost immediately. Escorted by a psychiatric resident, she had entered the room and found Jude asleep, resting so sweetly she might have been a guileless child again, sleeping in her bed at home—except for the bedrails. Except for the gourd-sized shape, a malformation of gauze, resting on the coverlet. Except for the hospital gown. If there had been no dingy, ghost-of-blue gown, Josie might have maintained her composure. But the gown was deplorably shabby, tied at the neck in a frayed shoestring bow, the sleeves bagging over enfeebled arms—arms bent like snapped sticks, cuffed to the bedframe and taped with tubes. The shoddiest navy fleurs-de-lis imaginable were imprinted all over the gown, and Josie felt a looping wail escape from her throat—felt it but did not hear it.

The resident heard it, though, and urged her to sit. Josie shook him off. Still keening like a scavenger bird, she tried to lug her suitcase into Jude's private restroom. When it refused to fit, she flung the bag open and snatched the clean outfit she wanted. A nurse appeared. Nurse Kaminski had brought something that would help her, the doctor said. *I am beyond help*, she almost screamed at him, just as she had informed the paramedics when they had made essentially the same offer. *I do not WANT help*. They had subdued her anyway, one of them pinioning her arms while the other advanced with a syringe—Rudy, cowering, smacking his head against the doorframe all the while (the next day, or maybe later, he looked as though he'd been mugged). Who *needs* help when in fact there is none to be had? She had lived through this once—abandoned by her husband in a moment of absolute crisis—and here she was again ... alone.

But this was not the same at all! Dallas had not liquefied to Jell-O, needing *her* to put *him* back together. He had a grown-up man's job to do and simply was not here. One of his newest and most important clients, Pacific Invest-Co, was holding its annual board meeting in San Francisco, and some of the directors were already on their way from Hong Kong when the phone call had come. Really, realistically, what else could he have done?

The resident was extending a paper cup, not a needle, and Josie looked at the child in the bed. This one was breathing. The gown was blue-gray, not the skin, not the turned-away face. And that was absolutely as far as she was letting this comparison go. She shut down the memory of that other moment as if shoving peelings down a disposal and flipping the switch. She would pull herself together—here and now. She clutched the dress she had yanked from her suitcase. More than anything she needed to change her clothes. She had been wearing her double-jersey travel suit since three a.m. It was not wrinkled but still suffocating, so clingy; the outfit might just as well be wearing her. The doctor understood. The paper cup contained three pastel pills, and he successfully imposed it upon her along with a second cup, brimming with water. Soon she was calmer. She changed her clothes with dignity and restyled her hair.

Jude had slept through this disturbance, just as she slept now—a thick, plunging sleep that occasionally skimmed to the surface. It was nearing lunchtime, activity in the hallway was mounting to its midday peak, and when a meal cart clattered past the door, her eyelids fluttered open. There were her mother's stocking feet, the toes encased in darker nylon than the soles. (She was not wearing her sandal-foot stockings, and Jude snickered at the thought: that such a thing as sandal-foot stockings existed was comically idiotic.) There was her own left hand hanging limply from its padded wrist-cuff, the creases of the knuckles still grassy green. (She recalled, or thought she recalled, a man dipping her hand in sharp-smelling liquid, scrubbing away the green ink with a tickly brush.) Her right hand attempted to flex now, to recollect the shape of the highlighter pen, but it was bound with gauze and held fast in the curve of the bandage.

She didn't look at that hand. She slid under again, and the bound fingers were freed from captivity: curling, compressing into a fist, striking like a piston. The wall of glass refused to give. She needed something that would break. There it was, and,

greeting it, demolishing it, she attained a peak she had never dreamt might be achieved: completion. Indelible punctuation. The sentence that began with that drowsy “hullo” ended with a pop! of glass, a fierce biting sensation. Black-looking blood had sluiced down her arm as she held her hand up to her face. The proverbial icing on the cake.

Voices filtered down to where she was resting now, at the bottom of a well. One voice tugged her upward, as if by a rope. She opened her eyes. The room was brilliant with sunlight and her mother was standing at the foot of the bed with three people in white coats. Next to them, Josie was awash with color: a magenta ensemble with gold-braid accents, her hair an orangish shade—pumpkin?—Jude had never seen before.

Someone was saying something about stabilization. Evaluation.

“Oh, but couldn’t we get that done back at home?” Josie asked. Jude wanted to press her eyes shut against the contortion of her mother’s face—an attempt at flirtation overwhelmed by something needier—but it was too late. Josie had seen her—“She’s awake!”—and hurried to the head of the bed.

Jude’s eyelids would not close. Her mother’s face was inches away, hard-edged and suffering and not her usual face at all. She was not crying, and that perhaps was the essential difference. Josie cried with no regrets in any time of stress, but she was dry-eyed now, the muscles in her jaw worked horribly. This wretched restraint, topped by that rusty orange hair, made Jude wonder if she were watching from the other side of somewhere, seeing her mother through the lens, the truth-teller, of the barbiturate drip. This was a woman who never *really* cried, not when it counted, not as an expression of actual grief, and Jude feared this lacquered shell of restraint might crack, allowing whatever it held—what it *always* had held—to escape.

Josie’s attempt at a smile was a baring of teeth.

“Mom?” Jude asked, wanting to be sure.

This released her face, but softly. The lines collapsed inward and she closed her eyes. “Judy,” she whispered, eyes still shut. The tears appeared now. Had order been restored? She looked up with the same pleading earnestness she had aimed at the doctor, and Jude could relax into an easy contempt. They had climbed high to safety, alone and together. That other thing had fallen back.

The flesh surrounding Josie's eyes bunched upwards with the determined effort to smile through grateful tears. The expertly penciled eyebrows, brownish orange as well, reached for each other across the bridge of her nose as if trying to meet, but doomed always to fail.

"Oh, honey, what have you done?" Josie asked in a hushed sort of moan.

There was no one standing just over her shoulder, and the emptiness there seemed like a yawning pit. Dallas—where was he? He was nowhere in sight.

"Where's—" Jude began, but would not say the name. How had she failed to scan the room for him the instant she awakened?

"Where's what, Judy?"

The doctors were watching them. The middle doctor seemed remotely familiar. His clipboard, his monogrammed tie, his brush-cut hair.

"*You* know—" she answered, though still studying the doctor. "Where is he?"

"He?" asked the doctor.

"Who?" asked Josie.

"Him," Jude snapped, triumphant, wrenching her head back toward Josie. "You know who."

"Oh!" Josie drew back, though still clutching the bedrail. "Well, of course you wouldn't know, would you, sweetie? You've been sleeping so soundly—" she flicked a look at the doctors—"you wouldn't know that Dallas wasn't able to come. He is just worried sick about you, but there was a meeting he couldn't cancel. When we got the call, well, he had two board members who were already halfway across the Pacific, and—"

"Good," said Jude. But she sensed the victory was theirs.

Josie leaned in close again, a study in symmetry, finally and completely composed. "It's just me," she said, brushing dry, quiescent fingertips across Jude's brow. "Just you and me, Judy. That's a good thing, isn't it?"

You and me. A stinging overtook Jude's vision. There was nothing to be seen but that burnt-orange hair, the blue-green eyes her dad always insisted were so much like her own. It *was* a good thing. She had finally come to get her, after all these barren

years. They would always be together, and the impulse was to laugh—belly-deep, spiked with joy, the laughter of an irrepressible child.

But the sound leapt sideways as it broke free, escaped as a hiccup, a yelp.

* * *

This had been her room since she was fourteen—all through high school and junior college. It hadn't changed much. Her mother had decorated the room, just as she decorated the rest of the house (or rather, hired a decorator, whom she had consulted as an oracle) when the house was under construction. Together, they had agreed on a scheme suitable for a "budding young girl"—lilac and mauve, overwhelmed (in Jude's opinion) by an impeccable gardenias-and-ivy border—none which Jude had ever felt especially motivated to change. She lay now between gardenia-splashed sheets, twenty-one years old, stirring and finally waking after a night and full morning of drug-assisted sleep. Noon light flooded the sheer curtains, spilling a stain of white brightness on the oatmeal-tone Berber—the very same Berber, possibly one continuous piece, which ran all the way down the hallway and into the bedroom her mother shared with her stepfather.

Averse to this connection, Jude was reluctant to place her feet upon the carpet. But she had to go to the bathroom. No more wetting her bed; she was no longer that sedated; she was no longer in the hospital. She was home.

There was no difference, though, when you thought it all through. Going away and coming back had made that much clear: this room was as much hers as that hospital room had been. Not to mention that claustrophobic dorm room. She merely occupied the space currently assigned. Though she had suspected this all along, the imprint of ownership was even more evident now. Her mother and stepfather's life together was an arrangement of boxes, into one of which she fit. Or into which they tried to fit her. This room being the most literal of all.

At least she had forced them to put her back into the box of her choice.

This thought propelled her down the hallway. She entered the bathroom but did not close the door, knowing no one else was home. Gone. They were gone for the day,

having driven off in their respective boxes—a Mercedes sedan, a Jeep Grand Cherokee—to their respective work lives. Josie: escorting prospective buyers to view tracts of fallow farmland, ripe for commercial transformation (housing tracts, shopping malls, perhaps some as-yet-undreamed-of combination)—usually representing the developer but sometimes the seller, yet either way positioning herself to earn the optimum brokerage fee. Dallas, meanwhile, roamed from client boardrooms to corporate retreats to the “war room” of his law firm’s downtown office in nearby Madrona. His flagship client was a local walnut grower, Bonanza Nuts, a division of a Fortune 500 food conglomerate. Thanks to Dallas’ savvy counsel over the years, Bonanza had grown into a formidable empire, a multi-nut franchise in fact (adding pistachios and almonds to the brand), dipping into its parent company’s deep pockets to buy out smaller, independent growers who could not compete.

Jude used the toilet. The nut allusion amused her (as it always had)—its many rude connotations. Dallas as sworn defender of Bonanza’s cherished nuts. The bigger the nuts (profit, market share) the better. Standing, she clumsily completed the series of going-to-the-toilet tasks. Pulling up her pajama bottoms, for instance, involved a bit of snaky hip-wriggling because she had the use of only one hand. She would undoubtedly get used to this soon.

But hoping to adapt was not the same as wishing this affliction away. In truth, the awkwardness, the limitation, gave her sense of accomplishment. Look at all that fresh white gauze, so innocent-looking—a head of cotton candy resting on the polished granite countertop as she rinsed her other hand. When the old bandages had come off the day before, the youthful blond specialist, who would not look at Jude’s face and spoke only to her mother, said the wounds were healing admirably, the surgeon in Boston had done commendable work. But as he examined the damage and pronounced it well, as her mother pretended to be looking for something in her purse—Jude had her first chance to see the results of her moment of deliverance: the Frankenstein stitches, black and thick, a helter-skelter of Xs stapling together a thicket of swollen ridges. Repulsion and pride had swelled her breast; she felt sorry for her hand. It *was* innocent (though only she knew that). She cradled it against her tummy and carried it back to her room. She would take more medication and go back to bed.

Better yet, she would go into her closet. If any box was hers, this would be it. The Berber stopped at its door; the floor inside was slatted wood. The space was a roomy walk-in, paneled like an oversized sauna, a room nested within the room that was not hers. Her mother had failed to notice that Jude had long ago claimed this as her retreat. Cedar storage benches ran down the sides. Racks of clothing hung above, clothes Jude never wore. Jude in a blue tartan jumper? Jude in a kinky three-piece outfit from Esprit? What had her mother been thinking when she purchased all these clothes?

Jude wore cords, habitually, preferably her favorite butterscotch pair. The corduroy wale was thinning at the knee and rear; the hems and seams were frizzing. Over the years, this pair had disappeared several times, and at first she had been certain her mother had disposed of them. But then they would appear again, folded on her bed, scrubbed and pressed, mended here and there. She knew, though, that someday they would vanish and never return.

Exactly as she was supposed to have done. They had purchased a one-way ticket and shipped her three thousand miles away. *Free, white and twenty-one!* Dallas had declared her, *time to explore the wider world*. Time to clear the hell out of my house was the unspoken message. Time to finally leave your mama and me alone, as we were meant to be. Let loose those apron strings. Get a life. Hit the road.

She was wearing a pair of sloppy men's pajamas, not her cords. The pajamas had been part of an estate remainder her father had purchased, "for a song," he had boasted. Rudy had worn the pajamas one time. "Not my size, kiddo, maybe they'll fit you," he had said, offering them to Jude with that forlorn look she had so much trouble resisting. In fact, he and Jude were about the same size, even that long ago—maybe ninth or tenth grade: he was average height for a man, she had been tall for her age; they both hunched in a self-effacing concave manner that exaggerated their thinness. He must have known the pajamas would be huge on her, too. But floppy arms and baggy legs were different on a girl than a man. Adorable, not sad. Besides, the pajamas surely made him think of a bigger body that might fill the sleeves and legs and waistband more completely. That connection had never occurred to her till this moment. As she clicked on the closet light and pulled the door shut behind her, she realized the pajamas were probably Dallas' size.

Disgusting, she thought, lifting a sleeve to her face and hoping to conjure its original smell. The pajamas had reeked of Rudy, as if stashed for a month under the front seat of his truck, and she had worn them that first night without washing them, had enjoyed a secret glee to have spoiled the stiff freshness of her sheets with this gritty scent—though she had gagged, just a little, when the collar or sleeve-cuff neared her face. She sniffed a sleeve now. Fabric softener. Like her cords, the pajamas occasionally disappeared.

She opened one of the cedar bench seats. Inside was stashed her retreat paraphernalia: a battery-powered reading lamp, a supply of mystery books and magazines, a few personal mementos she liked to spread on the benches as a prelude to crouching in a corner to read. There was a separate cache, too, hidden *under* one of the benches—items of a different nature, telling a different story altogether—but she had no thought of retrieving them today. She began preparing her reading place, according to her custom. First came the framed high-school awards and diploma; the certificate for her AA degree from San Ygnacio Community College dated June, 1988; a photograph of herself and P.J. and the rest of their senior civics class in the chamber of the state legislature in Sacramento; a certificate of excellence from the Future Business Leaders of America club (of which P.J. had been president and Jude, the treasurer); a program from her parents' high-school graduation, Warren G. Harding High School, Red Bluff, Calif., class of 1966; and, finally, a crystal paperweight her father had long ago given her mother (which her mother had promptly placed in trash, and which Jude just as promptly, though surreptitiously, retrieved). A dewy velvety rose was immortalized inside—signifying Rosie, Jude was sure.

All of these she laid in their assigned places along the benches, appreciating again the rewards of limitation. Her left, non-dominant hand was not as practiced; she moved slowly, ceremonially. Once every piece was in its place, she settled in to read. Most of the mystery books and magazines had, like the pajamas, come from one of Rudy's treasure hauls. He was the junk man, ever since the divorce, though he fancied himself a specialist in "reclamation," salvaging cast-off items other people only *thought* were worthless, beyond use. Josie had deeded the family house to him as part of the divorce,

and a sign eventually appeared in what used to be their living-room window: “Rudy’s Restorations.”

Jude sighed. She would have to visit him soon. If too much time passed and he discovered how long she had been back, there would be a protracted, self-pitying scene.

The Missing Million was the mystery she selected. She had read this one before, early the previous summer. The closet had been a sanctuary from the onerous heat (naturally dark and cool as a cellar, not bombastically chilled like the rest of the house), and during that reading, she had guessed the ending by two-thirds of the way through. But she wanted to examine how the puzzle was structured, what early clues she might have overlooked, or responded to subconsciously. Seated now on one of the benches, she drew her knees to her chest. The reading lamp hung from a hook above her head, and she slumped to one side to better position the light on the book. A fermented dustiness puffed upward from the pages—the odor of a dead person’s belongings, the odor of her father’s shop. Where she would be visiting soon.

The missing million belonged to an elderly widower who died in his sleep. The man left no will, and apparently no bank accounts. His wealth was assumed to be hidden away in hard assets (gold, jewelry, art) and his three grown children—a drunkard, a spinsterly missionary, a devoted father of three—were each determined to find it. Together, they discovered a bundle of love letters, all unsigned (of course), from a woman who had obviously been their father’s long-time mistress.

Jude parsed the characters here: four suspects for mischief—two respectable children (who were suspect precisely because they were good), and the mistress and the drunkard son (who might be ruled out because they were disreputable). There could be no suspense, she knew, if the seeming good guys were good and the bad guys corrupt—unless, of course, the writer hoped the reader would assume that. In which case, all bets were off.

But there was no hidden treasure. The old man was bankrupt, though for years had maintained the appearance of wealth. This was the twist Jude had correctly guessed before. But what was the first moment when the turn could be foreseen?

Slumping further, she focused on the old man's housekeeper, who, predictably, turned out to be the mistress.

"Poor Mr. Cavendish," said the housekeeper, gesturing into the parlor, where the body was laid out for viewing.

"Yes, poor father," said the missionary daughter. "God rest his soul."

"Ah! Poor dad!" said the drunken son, beginning to weep.

Poor, poor, poor! Jude pressed a finger to the page. That's what people might say in a moment like this, but the heavy-handedness, now that she saw it, was embarrassing. *Poor* Mr. Cavendish. How had she missed this before? It possibly had struck her before as amateurish writing, nothing more. But amateurish was not her department. P.J. was the expert on that. *A parody of itself* was another of his pet dismissive phrases.

There was P.J., in that state-capitol photo, taken in twelfth grade. He pointed down from the gallery toward the speaker of the house; he might have been enthralled by a high-wire act, so round were his eyes with excitement. *That'll be me, someday*, he had boasted to Jude. Her back was to the camera, the angle of her head allowed only the plane of her cheek to show. But anyone would have known her by her hair, which hung in a limp blond disarray down her back, far past her shoulders. After P.J. had driven east, she had begun to wear it in a braid.

All that hair fell loose now, over her shoulders, as she leaned toward the photo and nudged it with her toe. She could not braid her hair one-handed. Her mother had offered to help her plait it, had actually raked her fingers through Jude's hair as she stood brushing her teeth in the bathroom the evening before. Jude pulled away, saying, with a mouthful of toothpaste, that she preferred it down.

"But now it's hanging in your eyes like it always used to." Josie leaned toward the mirror and traced the arc of one eyebrow with a fingertip. "Wouldn't it be better to be let us see your pretty face?"

Pretty as a mud hen: she knew how her mother truly felt about her looks. *Here's how I look prettiest*, she responded—not then (when she had glumly resumed brushing), but here, in the depths of her closet, half a day later, safely removed from the threat of direct confrontation. She raked her own fingers through her hair and pulled it like a tattered sheet over her face.

* * *

As the door swung shut, as her mother returned to the waiting room, Jude felt a contraction in her chest—relieved to see Josie go but wanting to call her back. The calling-back urge was more urgent than usual: she was alone now with Dr. Holland. She wanted her mom.

Dr. Holland was the head psychiatrist at the VA hospital in the nearest city, Madrona, but they were meeting in his private consulting room downtown, not far from Dallas' fifth-floor office in the Landmark Building. He and Dallas each chaired committees for the Madrona Chamber of Commerce (community outreach and legislative, respectively). They occasionally played a round of golf. Dr. Holland had agreed to accept cash payments for conducting the follow-up treatment the Boston hospital had recommended for Jude.

The lines in his face seemed carved with an awl, his grizzled hair sprang up scrubbily, and Jude, to calm herself, imagined he was wearing a Halloween mask, the shiny plastic kind with a bristly shock of hair. He was examining a sheaf of papers, a fax from the psychiatric resident in Boston. He sniffed portentously, and, still looking at the papers, said, "You're taking Elavil."

Jude glanced at the door, not sure if this was a question or not. She longed to yank her hair over her face, but thought better of it, having no desire to provoke Dr. Holland. He seemed like a man who might roar in your face, like that algebra teacher had done for half a term—a teacher who had eventually been hospitalized, though Jude had never before realized just what that had meant. Minimizing her movements seemed to be the best strategy, just as it had been in that class. Just as it was elsewhere in life. She began to count the books on Dr. Holland's bookshelf that were bound in red.

"Elavil," he said, laying the papers aside. "You are taking Elavil, is that correct?"

"Uh-huh," Jude confirmed, still scanning the bookshelf.

"And you took it this morning." Another non-question.

"Well, um, not really—"

"Not *really*."

She hung her head, hoping to avoid the look that surely accompanied that tone. Her hair spilled forward of its own volition. “I only take it to sleep,” she said to her lap.

“Your prescription calls for a QID regime: four times per day. Are the instructions difficult to follow?”

She shook her head.

“Then why would you take it ‘only to sleep’?”

“Because it makes me sleepy.” She knew her lap would understand.

“I can’t hear you, Judith.”

This startled her. She almost snorted at his stupidity. She raised her head. “My name isn’t Judith,” she corrected him, though sensing he was the kind of man who didn’t receive corrections graciously.

He pulled his earlobe irritably. “Your name isn’t Judith.”

“No. It’s—” But here she was stuck. If she said her name was Judy, she would be their girl—Josie’s, Dallas’, even Dr. Holland’s—she would be colluding with their version of who she was. But if she claimed her name was Jude, she would have to explain why she called herself that when no one else in her family ever did. It would be like ignoring the directions on the label, QID. Modified to suit her needs.

“—Judy,” she said, surrendering.

Dr. Holland nodded, consulting the papers spread in front of him. “My mistake,” he murmured, much to her astonishment. “All right, Judy,” he continued. “Why don’t you tell me why won’t you take your medication as prescribed.”

“It makes me too sleepy,” she repeated, but more boldly.

“And there’s something wrong with sleeping.”

“Well, no, I just—”

“It hasn’t occurred to you that sleeping may be the best thing for you as you recover from this—” he lifted his hairy hand as if it represented hers “—unfortunate incident.”

She wished she could fall asleep right now.

“Tell me what you did to your hand, Judy,” he suddenly demanded.

She wondered if she could begin to count the books again without drawing his wrath. He may have softened, but his shift into civility had been suspiciously smooth. He could turn back at any moment; it was starting to happen now.

“I hurt it,” she said, hoping to leave the topic open-ended.

“On purpose,” he said.

“It was an accident,” she could say. But that was sure to provoke his scorn, of which he surely had an endless supply.

“Yes, as a matter of fact—” she could say, and that would take her ... where? More instructions on the label, a lifetime of sleeping.

“I don’t remember,” she said.

* * *

The bandages came off again, this time for good; the scars gleamed like gristle in an inferior cut of meat. They would be permanent, the young Nordic-looking specialist told Josie (he still refused to look at Jude; he might have been a veterinarian, Josie the owner, and Jude a mute pet). Though the raw-hamburger color of the surrounding flesh would eventually fade, there would always be a web of jagged lines, and white puncture holes from the stitches. Josie had sniffed and blinked and sniffed again but Jude angled her hand to better catch the light, intrigued by its ugliness. She might have put her hand in a blender, so chopped and distorted and swollen was its surface.

Yet she had simply thrust it through a sheet of glass. Just like that. A moment’s passion; no pain, not really; a swift impulsive gesture that condensed the whole swirling mess of her immediate world into a single point of concentration—release! And then an unexpected legacy: the moment did not live on, not the shimmering elation of it—that had been there and gone in an instant. But now she had something else. She could scare anyone she liked, any time, anywhere. Except herself. Because she knew her hand itself was not the scary thing.

She liked to keep it where she could see it—just as she was doing today, on the breakfast-nook tabletop, almost touching the juice cup which she could not quite grip. After a few weeks of strengthening exercises, she might be able to close her fingers

around the cup firmly enough to be able to lift without spilling. If she did the exercises ... which she hadn't managed to do, so far. She flipped a page of the magazine in front of her—*Today's Valley Woman*—the quarterly publication of the Central Valley Businesswoman's Association, CVBA. Her mother was past-president of the local chapter, and the magazine had profiled her twice: once when she bought out the real-estate agency where she had begun her career as a receptionist, and then when she brokered the multimillion-dollar deal that resulted in Villa Miranda, the first exclusive gated community in Santa Juanita County.

Villa Miranda, the article had gushed (in Jude's recollection of it), was where Mrs. Josephine Early and her family would be living in unprecedented luxury. She and her corporate-attorney husband, Dallas Early, and her daughter, Judy Hazelden, would occupy the custom showcase home and set a standard for quality living for the Central Valley of the 1980s. Even then—Jude had been in eighth grade when the article was published—it had seemed a tasteless joke. For one thing, to call the three of them a family had been a howling mistake.

"Katy-Ann Shepard's Slam-Dunk in Sacramento" was the cover feature in the current issue—an entrepreneurial success story. It was exactly the kind of headline Jude liked to see, that satisfied her need to disdain *Today's Valley Woman* and, by extension, her mother's investment in all it represented. She attempted to turn a glossy page with her crabbed right hand, but the fingers failed to grasp the narrow edge of the paper. Her left hand took over. She flipped to the next article, just as gratifyingly inane: "The Gettin's Good: Golden Girls Mine the Motherlode in Gold Country." Jude exhaled through her nose. The magazine was nearly entertaining enough to distract her from her mother's voice.

"I can imagine that's difficult for your client, Bob, but this closing date simply can't budge. What about some kind of bridge financing?" Josie poured herself a cup of coffee as she spoke, dropped a sugar cube into the liquid and stirred. "We've known each other a long time, Bobby," she said in a more confidential tone, still stirring, pressing her hip against the kitchen's center island. "And I know you're one *creative* son of a gun." There was a pause and then she laughed. "You are a bad one," she said.

Then, looking at her watch, she pushed her coffee cup away. “Look, I’ve got to run. Call me at the office when you’ve got some news.”

Hanging up, she spun toward Jude, as if catching her eavesdropping. She looked pensive for a moment, perhaps even confused, and then enlightened with relief. “There are my keys!” she exclaimed, and trotted over to the breakfast nook to scoop them off the table. “I swear sometimes, Judy, I’d set my head down somewhere if it wasn’t screwed on.”

“Your head’s not screwed on, Mom.” The obvious amendment was scarcely worth acknowledging (too obvious, P.J. would say—a facile insult has no sting): your head is impossibly screwed *up*.

Josie frowned. “I swear, you take things so seriously!” She hovered, nearly pulsing with indecision. Would she say more or would she not? Would she stay or would she go? Jude was undecided herself—which would be worse? An upwelling of discomfort scratched at her throat, and then an urge to stroke her mother’s camel’s-hair suit—but only (Jude made a rule) if she could stroke it with her wounded hand. She turned slightly in her mother’s direction, but just as Josie conspicuously jangled her car keys. “Well, I’ve got a big developer flying up from L.A.—have to drive all the way to Stockton to pick him up. So I’m off and running. As per usual.”

Before Jude could reach out or withdraw (there was no time to decide), Josie kissed her on the crown of her head—a kiss sealing off something, the conversation (the *real* conversation) perhaps, or some other murkier possibility. Jude felt pre-empted. Her mother was speaking again.

“I’m so glad to see you up and about so early,” she enthused, and shone upon Jude one of her thousand-watt smiles. She might be trying to light a night game at the high-school baseball stadium. “Doing anything today?”

Jude squinted, hoping the narrowed view might dull the radiance. “*Doing anything?*”

“You know—going out. Seeing your friends now ... now that, well—” with a pained expression, as if she’d bitten into an aspirin, she tucked a strand of hair behind Jude’s ear “—now that you’re somewhat better.”

She should have touched her when she had the chance. Now they were deep inside Josie's rendition of the world, and there was no room whatsoever to maneuver. Go out? See friends? What friends?

"I'm better?" Jude asked, deciding on the most encompassing theme.

"Of course you are—look at you! This is the third day in a row you've been out of bed before I've gone to work. You've even come downstairs. Why, today, you're even dressed!"

There was a reason she was up and dressed: she was going to see her dad. If she didn't visit him soon, Rudy would discover she was back, and she would be subjected to a lament of Biblical proportions. Her loyalties must truly lie in the Josie-Dallas camp if she couldn't bother to come see her old dad ... but why should she anyway? who gives a goddamn fuck? ... life is a shithole and then you die. Visiting Rudy could hardly be construed as "going out." But whatever the name for it might be, Josie could not know about this plan.

Jude could have waited—*should* have waited—till Josie had left before coming downstairs. But she knew Dallas was gone on business for the week, and the sounds of her mother moving through the house, remote and alone—doors opening and closing; water rushing, shutting off—had invited Jude to join her. But didn't she know better by now? Look what happens when you follow the sounds of loneliness down to their source.

"I'm better," Jude said, sounding as if she now agreed with Josie's assessment. But she reached across the table to display her scars; her hand stopped at the edge of the tabletop, where even the blind could not miss it. Yes, *this* was better (but not in the way her mother meant): to look precisely as disfigured as she felt. Here it was and now they could all agree—this was as ugly as it gets.

"If I go out with my 'friends,' though, won't they want to know about this?" she asked with coy innocence, and her mother, unfortunately, did exactly as she expected: shrank back as if the hand were a spider. It was test and Josie had failed it.

"Well, maybe—" Josie's own hands needed something to do; they checked that the clasp of her necklace hadn't slipped around to the front; they made sure there were

earrings on her ears “—maybe when it’s not so *puffy*. The doctor said that wouldn’t take long. For it to look nicer, I mean.”

Defeated in her triumph, Jude turned her attention back to the magazine. She flipped a page and then another. She reached the next feature: “A Woman’s Place is in the Home Office.”

“Good luck, Mom,” she said, pretending to be engrossed in the article.

The car keys jingled. Josie’s pumps creaked as she shifted from one foot to the other. “Why, whatever do you mean by that?” Her voice was nearly a whisper, as if this question might be better left unspoken.

“Good luck, Mom. You know, have a nice day.” She continued to feign absorption in the magazine. “I can’t wish you good luck?”

“You just mystify me, Judy.” Josie sighed and touched the wing of Jude’s shoulder. Jude shut her eyes, vowing to keep them closed until her mother was gone.

“Well, things can only get better.” Josie’s touch lingered. “That’s my philosophy. I hope you feel the same way, too.” She kissed the crown again. “I’ll see you at dinnertime. You have a nice day yourself.” She tapped across the floor; her purse and briefcase made expensive noises as she gathered them. She swung open the back door, which led to the breezeway connecting the kitchen and garage.

Silence. Jude could breathe again. And breathing, she noticed the coffee aroma from Josie’s still-steaming cup on the birchwood island. Hardly touched. Wasn’t that just her style—pouring a cup of coffee she had no time to drink? Leaving a smell behind. Though, as smells went, this one wasn’t bad. Jude liked the smell of coffee, but not the taste. Too bitter, even if you added sugar and cream, especially if you infused it with bourbon. Her dad had made her try that once. Certainly more than once. What would he be drinking this morning? The coffee maker exhaled a gurgle of steam, and Jude, startled, made a similar sound in her throat.

Albertina would be coming soon, through the same breezeway door. She would wash Josie’s cup and unplug the coffee maker, humming a melody in a mournful key, asking Miss Judy if there was anything she could get her. Would she like bacon and toast? she had asked yesterday morning, raising her eyebrows hopefully, but standing

off at a distance, looking shy and bereaved. Jude had to make her exit before Albertina arrived.

But the stillness of the kitchen was an unexpected gift. The Swiss cuckoo clock above the doorway clicked, the refrigerator hummed, their sounds the only disturbance in the quiet expansiveness of the space. Jude could hear her own heartbeat in her ears. She might have stumbled into a house where the occupants had been evacuated—that abandoned cup of coffee an unmistakable clue that they had run for their lives. Maybe had been vaporized.

She stood without willing it. Her body knew what had to be done: get up, get moving, get out. If she walked rather than take the bus, it might be eleven before she arrived, and Rudy might be awake and active by then, though possibly already half-stewed. She did not look in a mirror to check her hair or clothes but went straight to the front door—hesitating, though, with her hand on the filigreed handle. This was not the dorm, she told herself, this would be safe, there would be no one stopping her to try to chat, no one gloating as she passed, no one noticing her at all. It was a weekday, this was Villa Miranda, there would be no one on the streets. She could be as invisible as she had ever been.

The handle clicked in her hand, the door opened a crack, and the crack glowed with burnished October sunshine. Marigolds along the walk released a pungent peppery scent. Jude accepted their invitation to step outside, pulling the door behind her with a muffled thud.

The sun felt like a protective hand on her head. She let her attention fall on the pattern of cracks in the sidewalk, forgetting she had not yet ventured out by herself since returning home. This was her longtime routine. She might be fourteen, fifteen again. She did not count the cracks—never had; that would be too banal, anyone might think of that—but she did try to discern how the smaller patterns gave way to large. What would the entire sweep of sidewalk comprise, if viewed from the sky? The pavement curved and ended at the Villa Miranda gatehouse, then began again after a long block of vacant land. Staying true to its course, she was soon glancing up at stop-lights, passing shop windows, entering the heart of downtown Dunning and the

burgeoning commercial district along San Ygnacio Boulevard, formerly Highway 23. Traffic swooshed by, exhaust spewed from tailpipes. This was her home turf.

But once past the center of this hub (homely brick buildings, latticed with scaffolding, sandblasters shussing above—the core of a “Dunning Deserves It!” renovation/preservation campaign for which her mother was a major fund-raiser), once the respectable retail district gave way to cheap squat buildings with an overabundance of parking—an Arby’s roast beef, a coin-op laundry, the Tassels (Live Girls!!!) Good-Times Tavern—a sign suddenly blocked her path: “Sidewalk Closed.” A pall of dust obscured the road ahead. Traffic idled, taillights glowed. “One Lane, Merge Left” said the sign for motorists. Construction crews were widening further an already widened lane. Jude could step into a ditch alongside the road work or turn back.

The sun no longer felt paternal. Her underarms were damp. She felt exposed as she approached the orange-striped barrier, its flashing light mocking her indecision. What. Will. You. Do? She should have taken the bus.

In defiance, she dropped into the ditch. It nearly swallowed her. She lurched and almost fell, underestimating its depth. A long grooved furrow, it was easily hip-deep, capable of completely concealing her if she crawled. But she walked. Her Keds scuffed through the dirt, the navy canvas submitted to a dusting of brown. Dirt clods rolled down the hard-packed sides. There were men in hard hats and big rumbling vehicles and a ponytailed woman holding a sign that said SLOW—but all of them far enough away, strung out along the center lane of the boulevard, that they functioned only as scenery, a sideshow. A dead garter snake made her stop; she climbed out of the ditch to avoid it then climbed back in. She had been walking half-a-mile now, maybe three-quarters, and her socks bristled with foxtails they had picked up along the way.

There was the shop. “Rudy’s Restorations” was lettered on the window in an old-timey script, like a wanted poster announcing a hundred-dollar bounty for a desperado. The name was kind of a joke, but not particularly amusing. Everyone knew (even Rudy) that he didn’t restore the items he scavenged so much as simply clean them and make minor repairs. “Marketing,” he liked to say, tapping his brow as if indicating his genius, possibly kidding. “You’ve got to have a catchy name.”

Rudy's gravel parking lot was choked with dust, and though the road crew had arranged a row of pylons to allow entrance to it, no customer cars were there. But customers had always been scarce. There was only one true regular who returned week after week: Cameron, an impossibly weathered old man Rudy claimed was a quarter Miwok. He reminded Jude of a lizard. He had mother-of-pearl buttons on his cowboy shirts and spat tobacco juice on the porch. He rarely spent more than a dollar, usually on a piece of metal from the "hasps and clasps" bin. But a dollar was good enough for Rudy. Lack of business had never been a serious concern; he didn't need to sell much to get by, and that was all he cared to do—no big ambitions, he always said, *just want to love my girls*.

Jude hoisted herself from the ditch and brushed herself off. She plucked an especially annoying foxtail from her sock. She was sure Rudy hadn't seen her pop out of the ground like a prairie dog, would not be watching as she tried to make herself half-way presentable. (Not *too* presentable, though. He could be excessively appreciative, especially when he became gluey-eyed, nearly maudlin over Jude's resemblance to Josie—a resemblance which no one else ever remarked; *Rudy* was the one she favored, or so everyone said, in so many complex ways.) She kicked one Ked against the other, knocking off the cloaking of dust. He was not watching, she was certain; he would be in his workshop in the back, hunched like a monkey over his latest project. He rarely came forward into the store—the front rooms of the house—unless the buzzer alerted him to a customer's arrival.

She went around back. The screen door was propped open with a coffee can full of rusty nails. She stepped inside, into a haze of cigarette smoke which almost occluded the musty, too-personal smell of second-hand belongings. The back workshop was a converted sun porch, the windows grimed over, the room lined all the way around with a bare plank work surface. Tools and harnesses, irrigation valves, railroad lanterns lay strewn on the work bench or hung from the ceiling, a heap of dismantled appliances piled off to one side. Though he kept the storefront somewhat orderly, the work room was a near-disaster, and Jude shuddered to recall that the same was true of his living space upstairs: a random muddle of dank furniture, a carburetor strewn across the kitchen table in a hundred greasy pieces.

Rudy was sitting at his workbench in exactly the posture she had pictured. All she could see was the curve of his back, the rumpled shirt coming untucked from his jeans. She lingered just inside the doorway. He was mumbling, absorbed. “Daddy?” she said, then repeated it, louder, “Daddy!” He merely scratched his ear. Sighing, she stepped back out the door and stomped up the two steps, banging the screen door with her palm.

Finally he turned. “Judy!” He was the only one who could use her given name and not upset her. “Goddamn!” He rose stiffly and twisted his neck as if to make it crack, then extended his arms and drew her close, tipping his head back to keep his cigarette out of her hair. He smelled weirdly like the platform in the T station, a smell that told her she never should have gone there—air like breath from a grave, tinged with booze and urine. Was that urine she smelled on her father?

“What is it, a holiday or something?” He held her at arms’ length, and she allowed herself to breathe again. “You look good, girlie,” he said, and kissed her on the forehead. His stubble scraped her brow.

“I’m just ... home for a while,” she said, shrugging, suddenly self-conscious. She hadn’t thought of a way to explain her return home, much less the particulars of her injury. She put her hands behind her back. Maybe he would fail to notice.

“Well, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

Jude could not say the same of him. He and Josie were the same age, thirty-nine, but he was a wreck—maybe not more of a wreck than usual, but Jude had been away for a few weeks and during that time, she realized, when she thought of her father, she had pictured a healthier, younger, more robust version of him. Leaving and returning, she could see how far he had declined. Over the years, he had winnowed down to paper-thin proportions. It was impossible to tell the color of his remaining hair, but it once had been blond, just as Jude’s hair was now. A hank of honey-blond hair, smoky gray eyes, reddish mustache, long taut limbs. “I could eat you with a spoon,” she had once heard Josie murmur to him.

“So how’s college?” he asked, sitting again at his work bench. He jabbed his cigarette into an overflowing bedpan-shaped ashtray and peered into the back of a television, reaching for a pair of needlenose pliers.

She picked up a dented percolator and turned it left and right. “Actually, I don’t think I’ll be going back to school.” She tossed this off casually, as if the future of her education would be determined by whim.

But Rudy bit into it. “You don’t say!” he said over his shoulder. “That’s a crime; a smart girl like you—” he slitted his eyes, still crystal gray but rheumy “—so did Mr. Big Stuff decide it wasn’t worth his dime?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with him, Dad.” She had forgotten how deeply comforting his bitterness could be. If anyone felt less fit for human companionship than she did, it would have to be Rudy.

“If you say so.” He reached back into the guts of the television. “Well, you’re a big girl now, you know what’s best. But I hope they treated you right back there—where was it?”

“Boston,” she said. “You know that.” But he didn’t, and she felt a sting of disappointment, nothing more. There was no use feeling any pain, no point despairing at the existence of these vacant blind spots. Rudy’s mind held fast to one topic; tangential facts slipped away. It was sufficient for him to know she had left town, that Josie and Dallas were alone in her absence. Where she had gone was not important.

“Boston,” he said, crimping two wires together. “Huh. So how was it? You weren’t gone very long.”

“Okay.”

“Just okay, huh?”

“I like it better here,” she said.

“Well, I can’t blame you for that. Never went any further east than Reno myself.” He sat back and wiped his palms on his thighs. “And that, of course, was to marry your mom.” He stared at the gritty window as if he could see through it, but then shook his head. “Do me a favor, kiddo, and go get your old man a beer.”

There were three open Schlitz Malt Liquor cans next to him on the workbench, one of them tipped on its side. He must have awakened earlier than usual, unless they were left over from the night before.

“Sure,” she frowned.

“Hey, get one for yourself,” he called as she headed for the mini-fridge he kept between the work room and the store. “You’re legal now, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yeah, all grown up now,” she called back, realizing with a sudden jolt that she was three years older than her mother and father had been when she was born. This thought had visited her before—when she had turned eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, she had gauged her age relative to Josie’s and Rudy’s at her birth. But this wasn’t a thought so much as her entire body thrilling to the truth of it: that she was older than they had been—was possibly even older than they were *now*.

“But no thanks, Dad,” she added, shaking off her reverie. “It’s *kind* of early in the day.” In fact, she never drank at any time of day, but she hoped he would get the hint.

Apparently he did. “You sound just like your mama,” he said. “Always trying to help me tell time.”

She stepped past the fridge into the storefront, attracted by the dim and foreign clutter. It was forever their living room, as far as her loyalties were concerned. She could still see it as it had been, an underimage beneath the current arrangement of pressed-wood shelves lined with trinkets and gadgets and whatnot. There had been a music box on a stand near the front window, just at eye level when she was six. Lace curtains had billowed behind it. “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ On My Head” was the melody it played. Where was that music box now? Rudy kept it in a special place upstairs, she was sure. No doubt he listened to it, flat on his back, crooning along.

Those lace curtains were now long gone, the unadorned casement was blocked by a ceiling-high rack of glassware. Light shone like tinted honey through the various colors: yellow, rose, blue.

She was leaning against the locked display-case, inside of which were jewelry and cameras and “genuine” antiques, shielded from the vagaries of casual manhandling. Customers, if they wanted to look at any of these items, had to ask permission. Incongruously, on the bottom shelf, a pair of girl’s party shoes, iridescent white, were enshrined in a glossy black box, like a miniature coffin. A handlettered tag insisted they were “NOT FOR SALE!”

She had seen these shoes a thousand times over the years. Why keep them, she wondered—were they the dancing shoes of a deceased little princess? They couldn't be Rosie's; they were not a baby's size. Who would ever want to buy them anyway? Why would anyone buy *anything* that ever ended up here? She ran a finger along the glass surface of the case, affirming that everything was exactly as dust-coated as it appeared, then wrote with her fingertip the equation for her name, Josie + Rudy = Judy. She rubbed it out with the flat of her hand.

Returning with his beer, she showed Rudy the gray smudge on her finger. "Dad, everything out there has about an inch of dust on it."

"Goddamn road work's going to shut me down."

"I bet you haven't dusted in months."

"Oh, who cares if a junk shop is dusty. Nobody comes in here anyway."

"Dad!" She took this as a sign, along with the fourth beer, of the bleakness of his mood. He bristled if anyone else called it a junk shop, but when he seemed to most want to be pitied, he called it that himself. "I'll get the feather duster," she said.

"Wait!" he said, suddenly invigorated. He grasped her right hand. She winced. He was sure to notice the scarring. Maybe he had already seen it and would now insist she tell him how it happened. But he squeezed the hand absently, looking intently into her face. "I haven't seen you in so long—I had just about forgotten how much your eyes are like your mama's." In fact, her eyes were almost the same shape as Josie's, but the irises were several shades lighter, feathered to gray.

"You always say that." She feared he would now say he wanted a smooch, which involved her planting a prolonged kiss on each of his cheeks while he closed his eyes and held her by the waist. She did not want to smooch him, she wanted to dust. But she knew simply to break his grasp could tip him into an even sorrier mood. The best alternative was to divert his attention to his favorite subject.

"You know, I've was going to tell you that Mom—" she began, not sure what she would say next. But the effect was immediate. He released her and began searching his pockets for his cigarettes, squinting at Jude in anticipation.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, she just bought a new freezer." She was making this up.

“A freezer! You’d think she’d have a couple of those by now.”

“Yeah, I guess so—” She worried this fabrication might be too far-fetched.

“Why would anyone on earth need three goddamn freezers?” He lit a cigarette and tipped his head to exhale the smoke at the ceiling. “That woman is insatiable,” he said. He snickered at this. “*Insatiable*. You know what I’m saying?”

Jude knew exactly what he meant, but she was determined to keep his mind from straying *there*—into his morbid fixation on the love-nest aspect of Josie’s marriage to Dallas. The trick was to outrage him with Josie’s penchant for luxury, inciting him with tales of conspicuous consumption.

“And I think she might hire a live-in maid.” Another lie.

“Hah!” said Rudy. “Now they can have one of those melange ah—”

“Actually, Dad—” she sighed; he was going to be more intractable than usual “—okay if I go clean up out there?”

* * *

When was the last time they had done something all together? As a family? Just the three of them? Josie had said all of this already, and was now apparently repeating it for its own sake, twisting around to look at Jude and wondering aloud at this miracle. Jude chewed the inside of her cheek as the Cherokee backed down the driveway and bounced into the street. Dallas was driving; his big-knuckled hands slid along the steering wheel—loosely, as if the secret to mastery were a casual grip.

Indian summer had faded; the sky had descended, a chill low-hanging pall of nothing, nowhere gray. Jude admired the monotonous cloud-cover, not so much for itself as for what it evoked: the coming of winter, the promise of tule. Tule fog rose from the ground like a ghost when the days grew short—an impenetrable wall of white, the Valley’s living shroud. Walking around in tule was like walking in a pillow. Everyone was no one when it came.

But it was hardly winter yet. Merely late October, a lowered sky to dull their senses, and no escaping this drive to Sonora (if the tule had set in, driving would be dangerous, ill-advised). Jude was strapped into the center of the back seat, having

failed to convince her mother that she really should stay home. “You’ve got to *circulate*, Judy,” Josie had said with a sharp note of finality and, though there would be no chance for actual social circulation within the “family outing” her mother had planned, Jude had succumbed to her will, knowing the futility of resistance.

And there Josie sat, the Queen of Conviviality, riding shotgun (as Rudy might say), half-turned toward the back seat and raising her voice so that both Jude and Dallas could hear. “This has got to be my least favorite weather—so drab,” she was saying. “I’d even rather have rain.”

Jude unbuckled her seat belt and scooted toward the window, further from her mother and directly behind Dallas. She rebuckled and leaned her face against the glass to gaze out at the dead gray eye of the sky.

Already, they were turning onto the highway.

“Did I mention—there’s a holiday fair in Riverbank next weekend,” Josie said.

“Thanksgiving’s a whole month away, and they’ve already got us holiday shopping.” Dallas shook his head, the top of which almost touched the roof. “Whatever happened to a harvest festival?”

“You know better than that. Harvest festivals are in September, just as they’ve probably been since . . . well, since forever.”

“Depends on what you’re harvesting,” Dallas said agreeably.

“Oh, don’t be such an authority! Why don’t we go next weekend—it’ll be fun. The wineries will all be there.”

“Just the local wineries?”

“Now, we shouldn’t be looking down our noses at them—the better ones just haven’t been around long enough to really make a name. Besides, I bet at least some of them are thinking about sell—” she stopped short. “Well! I promised I wouldn’t talk shop, didn’t I? Sorry, sweetie,” she said, reaching toward Jude but not quite able to touch her now that she’d moved out of range. “Well, what do you say, Judy? Doesn’t that sound like a plan?”

“What, Mom?” Jude asked. She had been trying not to listen.

“The festival. We can make a day of it.”

Even at this distance, she could not avoid Josie's perfume, White Diamonds, which had been desperately strong all morning. Must have dipped herself for the occasion, Jude mused, but only to seek the refuge of cynicism, hoping to deflect her true reaction to Josie's inquiry: *why don't you HIRE someone to go with you?* she longed to say out loud.

"I don't know," she said instead.

"What if it was just you and me?" Josie persisted. "Boring old Dallas isn't interested anyway. He'd rather watch some football game, I'm sure." Josie gave him a look that suggested she knew what he'd *really* rather be doing, but said to Jude, "What do you say? Just us girls—"

"I don't *know*, Mom." Jude began to trace a spiral on the glass.

Josie expelled her breath as if holding it too long. "Oh! I just don't know what to do! You make it so much harder than it has to be. Don't you want to get better?"

"Take it easy, Jo," said Dallas. "You can't force her to do something she doesn't want to do."

Since WHEN? Jude wanted to roar. What was she doing here, at this very moment, kidnapped almost? Why had she been flown to Boston and picked up by a chauffeur at the airport? Whose decisions always slammed the lid on every possibility, who always knew what was what? Dallas' hair poked through a gap in the headrest and she hugged herself hard, stifling the impulse to reach up and yank it.

No one spoke. The landscape floated past her window, flat and yellow-stubbed where it wasn't crumbly brown, its bounty stripped to the very roots if not snatched wholesale from the ground. This was it, her home, the Golden State.

Josie's pager began beeping. She fished in her pocketbook. "I've got to return this call, darling. Velma Willoughby. You know, the Luck & Goodman rep. Guess I can't ever take a day off, can I? There's a filling station at the next exit, I'm pretty sure."

The Cherokee bounced again as it entered the gas station driveway. Dallas pulled up to a full-service pump. The decisive angles of his face were partially visible in the rear-view mirror—aimed forward as he turned off the ignition then turned in profile toward Josie as she stepped down from the vehicle. Sitting back, though, he looked

directly in the mirror, leveling his gaze at Jude. With a sharp sip of breath, she looked away.

“Your mother just wants you to have a normal life,” he said.

An attendant appeared alongside her window and Jude shrank back. Dallas lowered his window and gave the man his credit card.

“We haven’t really had a chance to talk, Judy, one on one—”

Her feet kicked spastically. *One on one*. He was still watching her in that mirror, she was sure. Watching her. That was his thing.

“—but you should know how hard this is on your mother. Your behavior is just tearing her apart. It probably wouldn’t hurt you to be more cooperative—in fact, it would surely do you some good. As well as your mom.”

Are you done? She wished she could shout this out loud, demand that he stop. Her hand began to ache, and she forbid herself from bringing it to her lips, to mouth like an infant the weird topography of her scars. She sometimes did this in private, in her closet; suckling it took her to an even safer place. But this was not a private moment. The gas pump outside her window chunk-chunked as the numbers turned over. The attendant’s squeegee shrieked across the back window.

“Do you hear me, Judy?” Dallas asked.

Josie flung the door open. “Great news!” she announced. “They’re going to buy that second parcel. Ol’ Velma sounded just about as surprised as I was. Great gal to do business with. I’m going to have to send her a little gift.” She climbed back into the front seat, a flood of White Diamonds preceding her.

“I’m am just the luckiest woman alive!” she exclaimed, and leaned over to plant a kiss on Dallas’ cheek, then, laughing, plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and began to rub the lipstick off his face. “I’ve got the greatest career, the greatest husband, the greatest—” she wedged herself between the bucket seats to reach all the way over to Jude “—just the greatest daughter a woman could ever want! Honey, aren’t you proud of your mom? Two hundred luxury condos! In Dunning. Can you imagine?”

Dallas started the ignition and pulled away from the pump.

Jude could not imagine. When Josie was overcome by one of these states, there was nothing to do but edge the corners of your mouth into a smile. Jude obliged. But

the objections were painfully obvious: Who would buy a luxury condo in Dunning? Hadn't anyone within forty miles who had the financial resources already bought their dream home in Villa Miranda? If all the prime farmland, thanks to Dallas, was being acquired by international speculators and East Coast conglomerates with high-tech labor-saving methods of tilling and thinning and harvesting and packing, who was even going to live here? What would all those condo-dwellers do for a living? Sell more real estate?

But she'd heard the rationale a hundred times before. Housing prices had skyrocketed in the Bay Area, far beyond the range of thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands—of people, who still cherished the dream of owning their very own homes. It was only a two-hour drive, maybe two-and-a-half, to, say, Silicon Valley, and just look what people could get for their money if they were willing to commute—"a country manor for the price of a San Jose tract home," claimed one of Villa Miranda's four-color brochures. Two hours *one way*, was the standard argument, but Josie had a ready comeback for that: lots of high-tech companies offered flex time, they let people telecommute, why a person might have to make that drive only twice a week, if that. *Today's Valley Woman*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee* had all done stories on this phenomenon, and Josie had tucked the articles into frosted slip-covers in a zippered portfolio, ready to show anyone who had the slightest reservation.

But no one, at least within Jude's hearing, had ever made the most conspicuous argument: yes, impressive numbers of commuters had decided to take this plunge (resulting in a mini-population boom—the Central Valley was growing twice as fast as the rest of the state), but when they pulled into their driveway after their two-hour drive, or when they stayed home telecommuting, there was no getting around it: they would be in Dunning.

Or a town just like it. The stultifying heat, the endless sameness of the valley, the recurring entombment of the tule fog—together they seemed to Jude to be her one, true family, so implacably did they express her private self. But she knew for a fact that anyone bright, engaged, ambitious, keenly curious about the greater world—someone like P.J., for instance—would be quickly numbed out of their mind.

Josie and Dallas continued to chat. The road rose at a subtle angle, banking in a series of curves. Hills suddenly surrounded them, wavy, dully dry like the valley but scrubby with live oak, manzanita. In the summer, the air here hung heavy with sage, but today it was odorless, pocketed with wisps of fog. Jude had been here several times before, accompanying the two of them as they combed antique shops in Gold Rush towns, loitered at auctions (Josie ever alert for a treasure, a find), scanned the real-estate listings for that rare investment opportunity. A few years back, they found one: a run-down bed-and-breakfast in Angels Camp, which they bought at distress, far under appraisal, spruced up in a matter of weeks and sold to a Korean hospitality company.

But their new acquisition was not a quick-turn investment. Dallas drove cautiously down a dirt road, then stopped at a gate.

“Mark my words, the next Gold Rush will be in these hills,” he announced, unbuckling his seat belt and sliding out of the car. “Just like the original.” As Jude and Josie climbed out, too, he zipped his bomber jacket and made a 360-degree turn, surveying his property. “But we’re never selling this piece—not on your life. Even if it’s worth a mint some day.”

“Well, we just about paid a mint for it now!” Josie reminded him.

“A mint will be much larger then, dear ... when we retire.”

“You know I’m not ready to think about retirement!” Josie laughed, still giddy from her victory. “I just happen to love this place.” She approached the gate and rested her gloved hands on it, gazing into the distance. It was a heavily wooded parcel, hills tumbling down towards the valley floor. The dirt road continued straight past the gate then swept left and upwards, disappearing into the trees.

“We’ll come up here some day when it’s clear. There’s a wonderful panorama,” she assured Jude, who had drifted over to stand next to her mother, appraising the side of her face. Friendly lines fanned out from the corners of Josie’s eyes; her neck was beginning to crepe. Older, finally: she was starting to look like someone’s mother. The cool bisque of her skin was surrendering to age. Would she surrender herself, too—become, perhaps, more pliable, amenable to imperfection? Or would she fight the inevitable with her single-minded resolve?

“What is it, honey?” Josie asked, a furrow dimpling her brow. “What *is* it?” With a puffed expiration, she gave Jude a quick burst of a hug. “I swear, I can never guess what you’re thinking!”

Jude submitted to the embrace. Her mother felt exactly as hard and soft as ever. Releasing her, Josie shuddered with a mock shiver, pulling her cashmere coat around her. “Chilly today, isn’t it?”

Dallas’ footsteps crunched up behind them. Jude rested her hands on the gate just as Josie did, pretending to admire the scenery. But suddenly Dallas’ palm was on her shoulder. The oiled scent of his jacket, his rummy cologne, made the weight of his touch intolerable. Rather than pull away, though, she forced her palms against the crossbar. Her hands were not gloved; slivers bit into her skin.

“Just think, Judy,” Dallas murmured, “You’ll be able to come up here after you get married, after you start having—”

But the slivers failed to protect her. Jude twisted away.

“I’m going to sit in the car,” she announced, and stalked over to the Cherokee, which now seemed like a haven. She folded herself into the back seat and slammed the door.

She couldn’t help but watch as Dallas enfolded Josie in his arms and stroked her hair. Her tiny shoulders, a songbird’s wings, twitched under her coat, but then she drew back and he handed her a handkerchief—maybe the same one stained with her lipstick. Her face was deep pink. She dabbed her eyes. She was gesturing toward the Cherokee and trying to smile. She turned again towards the downsloping view and Dallas stood next to her, his long arm slung around her waist. When they eventually turned to walk back, Jude lay down; she would pretend to sleep.

There was no conversation as the car slipped back onto the highway. She felt the snaking curves, and though the car took each bend assertively, there was a rocking, lulling rhythm to it. Her arm curled under her head. Light flickered through trees. She dozed.

“There’s no humoring her,” Dallas said, barely audible. “That’s for sure.”

“No, I suppose not,” seemed to be Josie’s reply. Her voice was much less distinct.

“Just wish I knew what to do. Nothing seems to make a lick of difference.”

Josie murmured an assent. There was a pause. “That medicine must not be strong enough,” she said, perfectly audible now. “Or maybe not the right kind.”

“Maybe we ought to take her back to Doc Holland,” Dallas said.

Jude sprang up to sitting, like a target in a shooting gallery resetting itself. Startled, Dallas swerved slightly but immediately regained control.

“Did we wake you up, honey?” Josie said in her best hostess voice. She reflexively smoothed and tweaked her hair, as if caught in an unflattering moment and hoping to quickly rearrange herself to her best advantage.

Jude’s tone, in comparison, was flat as pavement: “I wasn’t asleep.” But she wasn’t awake, either; she hovered somewhere between, unable to censor herself. Otherwise she might have mashed the next set of words against her palate with her tongue. “I’m not going back to that doctor,” she told them.

Locking his elbows, Dallas glanced over his shoulder at Jude. “What do you mean—‘not going back to him’?”

“I don’t like him.” It was a risk to say even this much (though “not liking” that doctor was a vast understatement), and she even dared to stare at Dallas’ reflection in the rear-view mirror. But he was watching the road. His sandy eyebrows crowded together, bullishly, grouchily.

“Why Doc Holland’s just a harmless old coot,” Dallas crooned, though not as playfully as he might have hoped. A bassy undertone belied his true mood. Jude took it as a warning.

“Besides, sweetie, you just don’t seem to be—” Josie hesitated; she was holding her purse in her lap like a shield, as if hoping to deflect bullets aimed at her abdomen “—well, you just don’t seem to be doing all that great.”

Jude wanted to snatch that purse away, dump its contents out the window. “Like that stupid doctor is going to make any difference.”

“Judy! That’s so disrespectful!”

“Well, what would *you* suggest, Judy?” Dallas asked, his voice booming just as Jude had expected it might.

It was a Big Daddy moment. She could let him roll over her, the expected response. But she had an advantage she'd never had before, a souvenir from the moment she had abandoned herself to doing what was necessary.

"Look at this," she said, thrusting her wounded hand into the space between them, captive in their individual bucket seats. "I think seeing that doctor again would be a bad idea."

Josie jerked back with a tinny inhalation, the force of her recoil corresponding to Jude's aggression. She had merely stepped back when Jude had semi-casually displayed her hand on the breakfast-nook table. But this was a challenge of a different order. Josie recognized it for what it was.

Dallas, too. He coughed. "We know what your hand looks like," he said. "You don't have to wave it in your mother's face. And don't think you can get away with a childish threat like that. Personally, what I think you need is—"

"Stop it, this instant—both of you!" Josie pressed her knuckles into her temples and held them there, bobbing her head as if counting to one hundred. "I just can't take this." Then she wrenched around and grabbed Jude's injured hand.

"What do you want?" she demanded, shaking the hand, but gently. She had made no attempt to touch Jude's hand before this moment, had hardly ventured a tentative glance at it. Now she was holding it in her own. She was belatedly passing the test she had failed in the kitchen—or had she missed her chance? Confused, confounded, Jude could not decide. A current traveled up her arm from the point of contact, welding her to Josie reassuringly, repulsively.

"If you will just tell us, we will do everything we can. But if you just curl up inside yourself and only jump out once in a while to attack us—well, what good is that, Judy? Who does that help?"

Jude sank back into her seat. Josie released her grip and the current abated. The side of Dallas' jaw was working; he was surely grinding his teeth.

* * *

Josie was not in the new waiting room. Jude waited alone. She was about to see a woman whose dimples had attracted her attention, whose pixie-queen face had peeked out from the cluttered back pages of *Today's Valley Woman* as if daring Jude to find her: which face doesn't belong? Among the miscellany of black-and-white advertisements—home decor services, home-based business opportunities, home pregnancy tests—hers was a medium-sized ad, but large enough to show her smiling eyes, the pleasant wrinkling of her nose, the Cleopatra-cut hair. She seemed royally amused to be surrounded by such banality. Pregnant? Confused? We Can Help!!! insisted a headline near her head. Her own ad had no exclamation marks, no questions. Kat Rose, licensed psychotherapist. *Nurturing, supportive. Together we can heal the wounds of childhood trauma, family dysfunction, abuse.* A small but elaborate rosebud floated near her phone number.

Josie had driven Jude to Madrona for her first appointment, but was now out shopping. Jude had insisted she be left to wait by herself. Just as she had insisted on seeing this therapist in the first place. “You really want to know what I want?” she had offhandedly inquired one morning —another morning in the kitchen, Jude not drinking her juice as her mother darted around, bright and flashing as a tropical fish. “I want to see *her*.” She held the ad out for Josie to see.

Josie was pulling a driving glove on with her teeth. “Uh-huh,” she said. When the air turned chill in late fall, she ritually lotioned her hands and protected them with gloves whenever she drove.

“She’s in Madrona,” Jude said, upping the ante. She doubted if Josie would consider the idea, no matter where this woman’s office was located, even less so if it involved inconvenience. Madrona was just twenty minutes away, but the driving back and forth, plus the time needed for the appointment itself, would take a two-hour chunk out of Josie’s day. Never mind that Doc Holland’s office was in Madrona, too—visiting him was *their* idea and therefore, by definition, a worthwhile expenditure of time—this would be something *Jude* wanted. And thus the perfect opportunity to test

Josie's integrity. Had she meant what she said in that indignant outburst in the Cherokee, or was that just a helium-filled dollop of high-minded talk?

"Trauma?" Josie squinted at the ad. "Childhood trauma." She looked at Jude with her head tipped to one side, as if examining merchandise on a shelf. "Well, that certainly doesn't apply to you, does it, honey? You had a wonderful childhood."

Jude had not realized she was responding to the text of the ad as much as the woman's impish face. But here was her mother telling her she had had a wonderful childhood, her head angled like a cockatiel preening in a mirror, and the words now seemed to be written in silver light: family, wounds, abuse. What had she been thinking? This was a pathetic scheme, a juvenile attempt to torment her mother and make her confess she really didn't care. Ridiculous—imagine having a conversation with anyone, even someone that sweet and friendly-looking (nurturing!), that had a working familiarity with any of those words. But it wasn't too late. She could pretend she had been kidding. Just like her dad; always kidding. Josie wasn't going to agree to this proposal, in any event.

But whatever part of her had thrust the ad at Josie continued to speak. "I want to see this person," Jude persisted, her voice descending to its lowest register, an echo of Dallas' I've-had-just-about-enough-of-this tone.

Josie clapped her gloved hands together as though everything were settled. "Well! I think you're getting the wrong impression. This woman obviously does some kind of crisis work, and since she's in Madrona—well, she must work with gangs. They have lots of gangs up there, you know, and—"

"Mom!" Jude interrupted. "If she's looking for gang members, why would she be advertising in this magazine?"

"I'm sure she's just looking for referrals or something. However, this isn't really an area I know that much about—"

"No kidding."

The cuckoo clock above the doorway made a grinding sound; it was about to release its birds to mark the hour.

"You said—" Jude continued.

“Look, Judy, can we talk about this later? I’ve was supposed to be at a downtown-renovation board meeting ten minutes ago.”

“Just tell us!” Jude chirped in a strangled sort of way. She clapped her own hands together. “Tell us and we’ll do ev-er-y-thing we can!”

“But Judy, this can’t possibly be what you want.”

The birds burst out of the cuckoo clock. It was ten a.m.

Now it was nearly eleven a.m., ten days later. Jude had already counted the number of chairs in the waiting room (seven) and the number of magazines (nineteen) stacked in various arrangements on side tables (three). The sound of murmuring voices came from behind a door—not the main door of the waiting room, which opened out onto the landing, but another, smaller, narrower door that would soon creak open and oblige her to step inside.

If she could have, she would have counted the money in her pocket, although she already knew how much there was—one hundred dollars cash. It was sealed in a stiff new envelope, specifically at Jude’s request, because she did not want to touch the bills. She hated the way money smelled. Her mother had handed her the envelope, and Jude had stuffed it inside the kangaroo pouch of her hooded sweatshirt. She could feel the folded lump of it by patting the outside of the pouch, as if she had a little tummy forming and was testing to make sure it was not make-believe—yes, definitely a baby cooking in there.

Now, *that* was a joke. She frowned, glancing around the waiting room, searching for something else to count and hoping to forget she was Jude, the sexless wonder. The only boys attracted to her were on the famished side of desperate. The latest had been a gangly aeronautics major on her dorm floor. “Want to see my Pez collection?” he had asked her one day, Corn Nuts on his breath. “I have a Lieutenant Sulu, very rare.” With gratitude, she noticed the waiting-room carpet was laid out in a checkerboard pattern, blue, gray, blue, gray. One, two, three, four, five, six gray squares along the far wall of the room. Eight rows with six gray squares multiplied out to ... but actually the checkerboard meant the second row had only five gray—

The door swung open and there was Miss Rose. Her body almost completely filled the slender doorframe. She was possibly twice as heavy as she appeared in her dimply photograph, which had suggested the serenity of fullness, but not obesity. Her face, though, was even younger and more angelic-looking than Jude had imagined. Framed by feathery black hair, her cheeks and brow and chin glowed with creamy pink highlights. She crinkled her nose, just as she had in the photograph. “Welcome,” she said, extending her hand and angling her hips to ease herself through the doorframe. “I’m Kat Rose. You must be Jude.”

She said Jude, not Judy. Theoretically, this was Jude’s heartfelt desire—to have authority call her by her chosen name—but, really, wasn’t it better when they insisted on getting it wrong? This woman might have marched into her closet, gone straight to where her special things were hidden and pulled them out for inspection. Jude rose abruptly, pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head, and, stuffing her hands in the kangaroo pouch (no sense letting the scars be seen), regarded the hand Kat offered. For balance, she shifted her weight toward the outer door. But she acknowledged the greeting.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “That’s me.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Jude. Would you like to come in?”

Kat’s plump white hand, shaped like a dove, lifted toward Jude’s elbow but then withdrew and joined her other hand to lay atop her belly, which swelled maternally beneath the gauzy folds of her dress. But it wasn’t a baby-filled belly; her hips and bosom were equally expansive; her wrists and hands seemed slightly inflated, milky white against the chocolate chiffon of her skirt. Her interwoven fingers relaxed downward, weighted with rings—ornate silver-and-amethyst rings, even on her thumbs. Jude resisted the urge to count them, but guessed there were eight.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay!” Kat agreed. “This way please.”

Jude shuffled after her, through the narrow door. They first entered what had once been a closet (the building was a restored Queen Anne, partitioned for offices) but was now a interval between the waiting area and Kat’s consulting room. There was no light in the tiny space itself—only the light of the room ahead. The air was immediately

warmer and closer, suffused with woody musk. The scent was coming from Kat's body.

Or rather, Jude realized, from her body and the room into which they emerged. The room bore no resemblance whatsoever to the waiting area, which could have been attached to any professional's office, anywhere. This was a den, Jude thought. An opium den. (Opium den? What did she know about that? Well, Poe had had his opium moments; she had also read *Dorian Gray*.) A crimson oriental rug spread forward from her feet; batik-patterned fabric covered the far wall—primitive designs stamped on straw-yellow cotton. A fierce-looking mask, its tongue protruding, hung outrageously above (and seemed to be guarding) a pillowy chair draped with plush eggplant-colored corduroy. There was another chair and a sofa, draped similarly. A column of smoke rose from a brass container on a table inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Jude realized her mouth was open and clamped it shut.

"Rather dark in here, isn't it?" Kat said. "Would you mind if I opened the curtains?" Anticipating Jude's answer, she glided to the window as if on rollers, transporting her weight with surprising ease.

Jude nodded, but was considering her options for escape. To her left was yet another door, embedded in a wall packed floor-to-ceiling with books. The entrance was not the exit. There was more than one way out.

"Sit down, please—anywhere you like," Kat offered, just as she opened the drapes. Watery sunlight blanched the lurid colors to ashen versions of themselves, and the room assumed a tamer aspect, though not entirely tame: that mask was still displaying its tongue; inky smoke still spiraled languidly. Jude decided she would stay, but keep her distance from the more exotic items.

The pillowy chair was obviously Kat's; it looked like a throne. Jude edged toward the sofa and sat in its furthest corner.

"Jude," Kat said, having seated herself in a fluid downward arc onto her pillow chair. She said the name as if admiring the sound of it. "Jude," she repeated. "Maybe you could tell me a little bit about what brings you here."

They had spoken on the phone, once. Jude had said, after much stammering and silence, that she had seen Kat's ad. Kat had said, "It's very brave of you to call." Jude's

hand had flown to her mouth. She suckled it, even bit it, to fend off a strange kind of pain: the pain of being acknowledged.

That had been the extent of their conversation. It had been enough for Kat that Jude had wanted to see her. They had set a date. The date had arrived. Kat was in her eggplant throne in her chocolate dress, rings winking in the light, and Jude wished for more than a hooded sweatshirt as a disguise. She hung her head forward, but her hair, trapped under the hood, did not sweep down and surround her. She realized, though, that she could compare the fabric of her pants to the fabric covering the sofa under her legs. Tan versus purple, ribbed versus flat, tattered versus smooth. How could they both be one thing—corduroy—when they were so obviously not the same?

“Sometimes, to get things started, it can be helpful if I say a little something about myself,” Kat said after waiting several moments for Jude to respond. “How does that sound to you?”

Jude shrugged and kept her head down, but raised her eyes to look at Kat. It would be fine with her if Miss Rose talked for the entire hour about herself.

Kat clasped the arms of her chair as if the chair might levitate. She drew a deep breath and a little bell tinkled. Jude wondered where the bell was: on a necklace? her wrist?

“You have probably noticed that I am fat,” Kat began.

Jude held herself steady, though her body registered the shock. She would act casual, somewhat interested, unsurprised.

“I like to name things correctly,” Kat continued. “And though ‘fat’ is a word most people avoid, it is an appropriate word for my physical state. I also like to make sure that there’s no avoidance of the issue—that neither one of us is pretending this isn’t the case. Of course, this is your time and not mine, so I won’t go into my relationship to food and body image in any depth. But I want you to know that *I* know I have issues, and that I have done years of powerful, personal work around this. As a result, I am what is known as a wounded healer.”

She paused, letting this phrase hang suspended. “Do you know what that means?”

Jude shook her head gravely and allowed herself to sit up straight.

“It means I have worked through many, many painful experiences and have essentially rewritten a new script for myself. A new script for living.” The nose crinkled, but not merrily; wistfulness misted her eyes. “A new script for *being*,” she added. “And that helps me help *you* write your own script as well. I know this probably seems very abstract, but I’m sure it will become much more clear as we begin our work together. Here—perhaps this will help explain.” She lifted a gilt picture frame from a nearby display stand and offered it to Jude.

Jude started to remove her right hand from the sweatshirt pocket, but remembered she was concealing it. She took the frame with her left hand instead.

There was no picture inside the frame. Instead, there was a quote, written in beautifully scrolled, crimson calligraphy: *One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.*

This was like enrolling in a class for which you had skipped the prerequisites (something she had done repeatedly in community college). The teacher would seem to be speaking a foreign language, the meaning would be encoded. But she knew if she waited and watched, the meaning would unlock itself, organically unfold. So much like reading a mystery. Darkness seemed to be the operative word here—but what could that mean? The only immediate connection was the enlightenment of this room, after the drapes had been opened—its transformation from voluptuous twilight to mere eccentricity.

“Who’s Carl Jung?” Jude asked, picking a neutral topic, knowing she was expected to speak. This name followed the saying. She pronounced the last name with a hard “j”—like jug.

“It’s pronounced *Yooong*,” Kat corrected her pleasantly. “He was a very important psychologist.”

“He’s dead?”

“Yes. He died several years ago.”

Jude pressed her lips together, having asked everything she could think of to ask. She handed the frame back to Kat. Kat held it at arm’s length, as if regarding it for the first time. She sighed. She smiled contentedly, no further trace of sadness clouding her eyes.

“Does this bring up anything for you?” she asked, returning the frame to its stand.

“Bring up?”

“Let me be more direct—how do you feel about all that I’ve told you?”

“I don’t—” Jude hesitated “—I don’t think I feel anything, really.” But she felt her hand aching. She clenched it into a fist, or almost a fist; it still would not completely close. Her nails were too short to bite into the palm.

Kat leaned forward. “Not ‘what do you think,’ Jude. How do you feel?”

“Oh, okay, I suppose ... I feel okay,” she said, hoping to sound entirely natural yet looking away, out the window into the colorless November light. The fist tensed and relaxed. “I guess I don’t really know how I feel.”

“Exactly! Of course you don’t!” Kat was impassioned. “That’s why you’ve come here.”

“It is?” If Jude could name any feeling, it would be confusion.

“Look at it this way—if you knew what you were feeling, if you knew what and why, and if you accepted those emotions for what they are—all on your own—well, you wouldn’t need someone like me at all, would you?”

Jude faced her again. This made a weird kind of sense. “I guess not,” she admitted.

“But you called me.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kat sat back, settling into tranquillity again. “Maybe you can tell me something about what motivated you to call.”

Stealthily, as if hiding it rather than bringing it out of hiding, Jude withdrew her scarred hand from her pocket.

She rested it on her thigh. Contorted and white, it might have been a crumpled plastic bag from the market. Paper or plastic, Lina had said, predicting her convenience-store career. She would never see Lina again. Never. A hot ember lodged in Jude’s esophagus, so ferocious her eyes stung with tears. But this grief was absurd. Lina wasn’t her friend; she didn’t miss her. No one was her friend. All she had was this

perfectly grotesque appendage. It would accompany her everywhere. She would never be alone.

Kat had moved closer. She was kneeling in front of Jude, sitting on her heels. Her palms lay open on her skirt, fingers curled like petals. Buddha-woman, Jude thought, noticing her posture, noticing how near she had come—but not too near. Kat's eyes glistened with tears.

"You did this to yourself, didn't you?" she said.

Jude swallowed; the ember dropped an inch further. "I did," she confessed. A tear fell, but she could not be sure it was her own or Kat's.

"May I touch your hand?" Kat asked.

Jude closed her eyes. She must have nodded. There was a wave of woody perfume, an infinitely soft lifting of her hand, a breathy gasp.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Jude," Kat murmured. Then a warmth enveloped the hand. Kat was cradling it in her palms, a fetus in the womb.

"I'm glad you have your eyes closed," she continued, her voice hushed. "I want you to relax, because I'm going to tell you something important. Very important. Do you think you can relax?"

"Yes," Jude said, her voice as papery as Kat's. Her breathing began to slow. She inhaled all the way into her chest, past that burning knot, which had dulled to a granular flicker. She exhaled, and it was gone.

"Very important," Kat repeated.

"Um," Jude agreed.

"Listen to me, Jude." She began to rock the hand gently, left and right. "When we injure ourselves this way—and there are so many ways to injure ourselves—it's a call for help. A signal, a sign. Some part of you is expressing itself, in the only way it knows how. Just look at everything your hand has been through and how it has *survived*. That's so important. It's been terribly wounded, but a healing has taken place."

Jude's eyelids fluttered; her fingertips felt hot.

"The rest of you can heal now, too, because your hand has borne witness. There's a hurt inside that is trying to get out. That hurt comes from somewhere. Please hear

this, and know this: *this is not your fault*. We don't do this to ourselves unless someone else has hurt us in the past. Often someone close. Hurt us deeply. Maybe recently, maybe a long time—”

But Jude was pulling away. “No,” she said. Her eyelids squeezed shut as if against an unfortunate sight. She was twisting sideways. Her hand slid from Kat's.

Kat's softness solidified. “No?”

“No,” Jude repeated. “I don't like this game.”

That Safe Place Inside

Dallas leaned back in his burgundy recliner, snapping the newspaper, then folding it to get a better look at an item on the editorial page. This paper-snapping habit was one he acquired after running off to the big city, Tulsa, to get a taste of life beyond the isolated reaches of his father's ranch (while earning enough to send himself to law school). In Tulsa, he'd noticed men at lunch counters and bus stops handling the paper in just this way, and he'd been reassured that men, everywhere he looked, were as absorbed in the news as he was—relied on it, just as he did, as a lifeline to a greater sense of purpose. To the best of his recollection, his father had never read the paper, and certainly none of his older brothers, though all of them did know how to read.

What would they make of this editorial, he wondered: the speculation that Ray Ayala, state legislator from Santa Juanita County, would next year run for Attorney General of the State of California? Not that Ayala himself would mean anything to any of his Oklahoma clan, but would they be impressed to know he was one of Dallas' oldest and closest professional allies? that Ray had been elected and re-elected to the Assembly thanks in part to generous support from Dallas' personal circle of influence? that Representative Ayala was entering his second year as chair of the Rules Committee and was preparing to appoint Dallas to a blue-ribbon regional-planning commission? What would they say back in Miracle Bend, OK, if his old pal Ray Ayala made a successful bid for Attorney General and named Dallas to a prestigious advisory post?

What kind of name is Ayala? is what they would say.

Josie, in her own way, had similar reservations—or so she confoundingly said. As Dallas scanned the editorial page, she sat just arms-length away on the sectional sofa, legs tucked beneath her slippery-silk dressing gown, a mechanical pencil behind her ear. She was examining a portfolio of documents. “What is he—Cuban?” she had asked after Dallas had first introduced her to Ray and his wife, Lu, more than a decade before. He had forgiven her ignorance; she was only twenty-something at the time and had lived a narrowly circumscribed life before he had escorted her out into the wider world—had never ventured outside the Valley except to elope (had never even been to San Francisco!) until he began taking her away for weekends to some of his favorite locales. She was still half-formed then, sometimes charmingly naive—and besides the population had been a different mix at the time. Almost all the better families had been white. How could she have known better?

“Filipino,” he told her then, “He’s from an old Hawaiian sugar family. They have a plantation on Lanai.”

“A sugar plantation!” she had exclaimed, belatedly impressed.

But apparently not impressed enough. She had been a gracious hostess to Ray and his wife over the intervening years, had been delighted to entertain their local legislative representative—but when Ray called earlier this month to pitch his regional-planning committee, when Dallas then shared with Josie this exciting news—how this would finally mean being *out in front* for a change, having personal and visible influence on public policy—Josie reacted with virulence he had never imagined her capable of.

“It’s one thing for you two to have back-room conversations about—well, what is it you talk about anyway?” she began to rant. “Water subsidy concessions? Business tax loopholes? ‘I’ll scratch your back in that very spot if you scratch mine right here?’” She drew a deep breath. “But for him to *appoint* you to this commission—”

They had been sitting right where they were now, just after the holidays, possibly wearing the same matching loungewear, cerulean blue, as they were at this moment. The bubble lights on the Christmas tree had percolated tepidly as their argument had churned into a shouting match. The tree was now gone. The vast front picture window

was exposed again. Josie was now writing a note in a margin of a document, and the lead in her pencil snapped.

She seemed not to notice he was watching her. She dialed the pencil and began writing again with new lead. Was she simply prejudiced? *Do you want everyone to think you're just some watering boy for a foreigner? Why would you let him use you PUBLICLY for his own career?* "What *exactly* is your objection?" Dallas had thundered, sounding like the courtroom lawyer he actually wasn't. He was a deal-maker, an imperturbable behind-the-scenes negotiator, and sorely regretted this outburst. But he had been horrified by her rabid opposition. She had brokered property for Filipino clients, for God's sake, and Taiwanese and Iranians and anyone from anywhere who had sufficient funds to play.

Something else—something infinitely more subtle than bigotry—was lurking beneath the surface. But he had been unable to extract it, even after calming himself, refusing to let her further provoke him, shifting (with some difficulty) into a more inviting mode of inquiry: Honey, what on earth is *wrong*?

"Josie," he said now, hoping to broach the topic again. He would be having lunch with Ayala at the end of the week.

She lifted her head. The orangish color she was currently tinting her hair did not suit her (or him), but he would say nothing. She would switch it soon enough, hopefully to one of her spitfire reds. She wore a little half-smile; she stretched with sleepy indifference. "Hmmm?" she asked.

This was the Josie he loved, not that irrational creature he feared he might evoke with the mention of Ayala. How did some women get better-looking with age? She was still attractively smooth and firm—tummy, hips, even her chin, none of those pruny witch-lines around the mouth, just a feathering of smile lines that made her lovelier somehow. Even her breasts, which wobbled more loosely when he grasped a handful, were not actually sagging (owing, perhaps, to their small size). More than well-preserved, though, she was frankly and admirably well-put-together. She still walked with an nervy little shimmy, as if she knew she could have any man she wanted. And possibly she could: even young men still turned their heads. But there had never been any question of her straying. He had always known she would be true.

“Josie, you look like an angel tonight,” he said, appraising her from head to toe in a way that always pleased her. “Or maybe the devil in a truly fine disguise.”

Arms still stretched above her head, she flapped a hand at him playfully. “Well, the lighting in the den is the most flattering in the house—so you are seeing me at my very best.”

“Um-mm,” he murmured, as if sampling a morsel of chocolate. He began to worry, though, that opening their conversation with this kind of admiration now meant that Ayala was out of bounds. She would think he had been buttering her up, and possibly that was the truth. But she did look delectable; that had been sincere.

Footsteps came slapping along the terra cotta hallway outside the den. A hooded shape flashed by the doorway, taking the footsteps with it.

“Judy!” Josie twisted around to call out over the back of the sofa. “Are you going to your group?”

The footfalls receded. The front door whooshed open, thunked shut. A ratty-sounding engine sputtered away down the street. Josie pitched herself toward the sound as if trying to determine the exact source of that terrible rattle. The manifold? Water pump? A dislocated tailpipe?

She shifted back toward Dallas, looking grim. (He was wrong about those lip lines; the puckering was all too evident when she pursed her mouth like that.) “I’m glad she’s meeting some new people. I’m sure they’ll do her a world of good. But doesn’t she seem to have become ... I don’t know ... kind of hostile?”

He scowled. She could still be blithely naive. “Josephine, you are asking the wrong person.”

“Oh, Dallas, please don’t be like that. I know you two have never been best friends. But help me with this.” She laid her papers on the table and moved closer to him, sliding around the curve of the sofa. “Ever since she started going to that therapy group, doesn’t she seem ... I don’t know ... just about to bite your head off every moment?”

He rubbed his eye wearily. It was all too obvious that Judy was adamantly refusing to grow up, that her “injury” was serving her purposes all too well. With a sensationalistic bit of drama, she had seized the center of attention and their lives were now

obliged to revolve completely around hers. Josie was on constant eggshells, worried that she might say or do something to cause offense or worse. Emotional blackmail would be one way to frame this turn of events. At the very least, the girl had forestalled her launch into adulthood, having thwarted every effort Dallas had made to urge her in that direction—footing the bill for that expensive university, as a prime example. She had been given every advantage, and look how she'd thrown it all back in their faces.

This intransigence would not stop him, though, from getting on with his own life. He had played it safe, career-wise, in the interest of being a family man (staying with a law firm all this time, never once even seriously considering a public appointment, never mind an elected office), but the girl was grown up now—chronologically if not emotionally. He was going to pursue the dreams he had long postponed. Ayala's committee was a first step in that direction.

Josie was waiting for his answer, eyebrows arched poignantly.

"To tell you the truth," he said finally, feeling as if he might be twenty years older than his wife, rather than eight, "I believe you're just now seeing what's been there all along."

She glanced toward the doorway as if Judy might have crept back to eavesdrop. "You think so?"

"Well, I do think she has become worse—in particular, she's much more rude and disrespectful to you." He pushed his feet downward on the footrest of his recliner, which brought the chair into a straight-up position. "But that doesn't mean there's been a change in her personality. She's a very spiteful young lady. That's been my impression from the very beginning—every bit as spiteful as her natural father, if you want my honest assessment."

"Oh!" Josie cupped her hands over her face, scarcely touching the skin, leaving her mouth exposed. The mouth, isolated like this, could have belonged to any once-beautiful woman, and he felt a tug of sympathy for his wife and all she was bound to lose as time progressed—sympathy but also revulsion, and then shame chasing close on its heels. By now, his desire had completely ebbed.

Rising abruptly, Josie tugged at the belt of her dressing gown—tightening it or loosening it, he could not be sure (and did not know which he would prefer)—then

took three slippared steps to the edge of his chair. “I just want to give up sometimes,” she said.

His arms reached out. Grasping her hips, he swung one knee to the side and pulled her down to sit on his thigh.

* * *

Claudia’s Plymouth Fury bucked down the boulevard as if it might heave its final gasp any instant. Claudia leaned toward the wheel, a mountainous shape topped by a savage mass of hair. Her forearms glowed green in the dashboard lights.

“Where are my breath mints?” she commanded Helen, who sat straight as a candle in the center of the bench seat, between Claudia and Jude. Fast food wrappers littered the floor; butterscotch wrappers jammed the ashtray. An assortment of stuffed animals, mostly rabbits, occupied the back seat, lined up by approximate height.

Helen’s reply was too faint for Jude to hear.

“Goddamn. You are right,” said Claudia. “I am such a queen bee. Of course I can ask you more politely. Would you mind looking for my breath mints, dear? I’ve got a taste in my mouth like—well, never mind that. We can talk about that when we officially convene.”

The car rattled over a railroad crossing. They were on their way to Madrona. Claudia and Helen, who lived on the outskirts of Dunning, near the Munson Foods cannery, were members of Jude’s therapy group, and happy to give her a ride. Her previous transportation arrangements had been intolerable, in Claudia’s view. “Your *mother* is driving you to group?” she had hollered, her bassy voice threatening to open the earth. “Mothers, in case you haven’t noticed, are usually the reason we’re here. I don’t know your story yet, but I can tell you: it’s a pretty safe bet. No way is your *mother* driving you—” she managed to imply the filthiest connotations maternity might imply “—you’re coming with us.”

The car now sputtered along the slow lane of the freeway. Helen sat looking dutifully forward, her body and face placidly composed, and Jude wondered if Helen might be taking the exact medication that Jude herself had refused. There was something too

tranquil about Helen—especially when strange things began to happen in the group. Just the week before, when Kat gave Claudia a phone book to shred to pieces and Claudia, obliging, ripped into the phone book and began bellowing about her perverted uncle, Helen's expression went blank as a September twilight sky.

Kat, in her private sessions with Jude, insisted the group experience was an essential part of recovery—meeting other “survivors,” hearing their stories: there was absolutely nothing to compare. No, nothing could possibly compare to witnessing Claudia erupt like a one-woman brawl. Jude had cringed down into her layers of clothing, heart pounding, waiting for the yelling and lowing and stomping to cease. But in the quiet that followed, she did not raise her eyes till she smelled sandalwood (Kat!), felt an arm snugly encircle her shoulder.

“You're safe,” Kat had said, her spicy breath on Jude's cheek.

Jude hunkered into the very same layers now. It was a near-freezing January night. The lights of farmhouses glittered in the distance, sprinkles of ice. Against the chill, she wore a cardigan under her sweatshirt, and under that, a mock turtleneck and under that, an undershirt. Not a chance she would ever again wear the suede-trimmed teal parka her mother had bought her, though the bloodstains had been assiduously removed (she had been wearing it that September night, in the dorm lobby). The trendy color, the snappy tailoring didn't matter as much as the fact that everything she wore now, ever since joining this group—this would be her fifth weekly session—had to be oversized, baggy, shapeless, sexless. Men's clothes were the best. When she visited her father's store, she rooted through the cartons in his back room, looking for the most misshapen specimens she could find.

Claudia cranked up the radio and began singing, or rather, shouting along. “Well you DON'T! HAVE! to live like a REFugee!”

Jude and Helen trailed after Claudia into the classroom. During the day, it was home to a fourth-grade class. There were posters of dolphins and maps of European countries on the walls. An odor of corn chips rose from the linoleum like stale incense: they had passed into the sanctuary, it said. The children's desks had been pushed into a corner to make room for a wide circle of tiny chairs.

Jude shuffled across the linoleum, comforted by the alternating tan and cream pattern of the flooring, and took the first chair she encountered—a bite-size chair like all the rest, so miniature she felt like a Daddy Long Legs, her limbs disproportionate and gangly. Claudia brought her own ottoman, onto which she lowered herself with a huff, right next to Jude. She was carrying one of the stuffed rabbits from the back seat of her car (Boomer, if Jude remembered the name right), holding it straddled against her hip as though it were a toddler.

There was the usual round of check-ins. Each of the women around the circle was allowed a single word to describe her current state of mind, body, and/or spirit.

“I’ll get us started,” Kat said. “Grateful.” Her eyes sparkled. Jude could not imagine how she balanced her weight on the tiny chair, which was completely concealed beneath her abundant skirt.

“Tired,” said Opal, who claimed she was fifty-five but looked much older, and was surely decades older than anyone else in the room. “Tired and—”

Kat shook her head and Opal closed her mouth.

Helen was removing her woolen coat. Like Jude, she was layered, but more tightly, precisely. Her cuffs were snug. She had buttoned her oxford shirt all the way to her chin.

“Oh, it’s my turn,” she said. “I’m, well . . . a little anxious, I guess.”

“Hot!” said Claudia, peeling off her San Francisco Giants warm-up jacket. The static from the coat’s satin lining made her wild hair float upward, as though she were sinking underwater.

“But how do you feel?” Kat pressed.

Claudia tossed the jacket onto her gym bag. “Great,” she said. “I guess.”

Jude was next, but she said nothing. She had never before noticed the two green linoleum tiles near the teacher’s desk. They ruined the yes-no, binary pattern of tan and cream. But perhaps there were more green tiles elsewhere in the room—under the bookcase? the video cart?—part of a larger overall design she could not observe.

“Would you like to check in, Jude?” Kat sounded miles away, forlorn.

“Great,” Jude responded. Or perhaps she was remembering Claudia having said this. No, it was her own voice, sounding far away, too.

“Are you with us, Jude?”

Everyone would be staring. The trick would be to shift from those two green tiles to Kat’s face without letting anyone else’s face appear in her field of vision. Jude closed her eyes and reopened them, hoping to have re-aimed her gaze correctly. And there was Kat, rosy and plump, metallic threads in her Guatemalan vest glinting like gold fire.

“Yes,” Jude said.

“I am so glad.”

The rest of the women checked in. Then it was Tawny’s “time.” If she chose to, she could “work.” Working, as Jude understood it, amounted to getting out of your system whatever needed getting out.

Tawny began mid-sentence, with no preface.

“So I told them they could fuck off.”

“Your cousins,” Kat clarified.

“Yeah, well, who else?” Tawny shrugged. She waggled her foot; her shoes were platform-heeled Mary Janes. She wore frilly anklets and a very short, pleated skirt. The little-girl look reminded Jude of a pin-up she had recently seen above Rudy’s workbench. The model had similar shoes and socks and a swatch of a skirt; she had a big pointy bow in her hair. But her blouse gapped open to reveal exceedingly ungirlish breasts.

Tawny actually looked nothing like that model. She was olive-skinned and slim and not yet twenty. Her hair, brown and sleek as a sea-lion’s, spilled lustrously around her shoulders.

“So this must have been a later incident,” Kat prompted Tawny.

“Later? Sure. I was probably twelve.”

“Twelve.” Kat intoned the number as if striking a bell. “Twelve,” she repeated, grievously shaking her head and looking around the circle at each woman in the group.

There were maybe fifteen women, but Jude was not going to count them, nor was she going to count how many of them had stuffed animals in their laps (maybe half). There was another number to consider, and she focused on Kat’s version of it. Twelve, as shaped by Tawny’s mouth, had seemed alarmingly small. Twelve was too young to

be having “a later incident.” An image of a twelve-year-old Tawny had darted into her mind—a skipping, twirling girl in the same schoolgirl outfit, hair in streaming pony-tails—and Jude’s legs had begun to spasm. But Kat’s tolling of the number meant they all were snug against her bosom. Kat had an umbrella under which they could huddle. Twelve, when Kat pronounced it, meant yes, it was distressingly small, but let’s never forget the worst is past.

Tawny snapped her gum and smoothed her hair back over her shoulder. She said nothing.

“So what happened?” Claudia demanded. Next to her, Helen curled slightly forward and tugged aside the cuff of one of her sleeves to peer at her wrist.

Tawny recrossed her legs. “What do you mean, ‘what happened’?”

Claudia spluttered. “When you confronted them!” She hugged herself, which twisted Boomer, helpless on her hip, into a sideways head-lock. Her fingers pressed into her doughy upper arms. Though mid-winter, Claudia wore her customary outfit, a t-shirt and sweatpants, basketball high tops. Her t-shirt announced one of her general philosophies: “I have PMS and I have a gun. Any questions?”

Tawny’s foot waggled again. “They beat me up,” she said, looking away.

Someone made a throttled sound. Kat groaned. Helen reached into her sleeve and touched something inside. Jude decided to watch Helen. Tawny could not possibly have said what she just heard, but this was real: Helen, so completely absorbed by the interior of her sleeve that whatever was in there was all that existed. Jude decided to concentrate on Helen’s concentration. She would have to remember this looking-up-the-sleeve trick.

“Well, actually, only one of them beat me up. The other took pictures.”

Silence.

“Then they switched.”

Jude heard herself speak. “Pictures?” she asked, still looking at Helen, completely sympathetic to her shrimp-like posture: concave, solipsistic, self-contained.

“Yeah, pictures. That was their thing. Photography.” Tawny’s chair creaked; she snapped her gum again.

“Tawny is the only incest survivor I have ever worked with who has a complete record of her abuse,” Kat assured them. And then she was rising like a priestess, moving across the circle to Tawny. She lifted her hand, studded with rings, and placed it on Tawny’s head. Tawny stopped chewing her gum. Her eyes rolled up, as though hoping to see through her brow the miraculous healing taking place above.

“Tawny has albums full of photos,” Claudia explained.

“She does,” Helen agreed, having roused herself from her trance. “We’ve seen them. When her cousins went to jail—”

“I have a photo, too,” Jude said.

There was her stash of personal mementos in one of her closet storage benches, and then, concealed in the black gap beneath the bench opposite, a plain manila envelope.

Each bench was raised on arched feet, but only less than an inch. In this seemingly non-existent space, too narrow for Albertina to probe with a vacuum attachment or dustmop head, Jude kept her most troublesome items. Tucked away like this, secured as if papered into a wall, they assumed shape and form and substance only when deliberately sought. Otherwise, when she retreated to her closet and prepared her place to read, she scarcely acknowledged that lowly space and what it contained—just a formal courtesy glance.

Permission, Kat had exhorted them in group this very evening. *Give yourself permission to know.*

But first she needed the safety of her less-distressing keepsakes—the diploma, the certificates, the paperweight, etc.—which she methodically distributed to their individual places along the benches. A new mystery novel slowed her. She had expected *The Missing Million*, forgetting she had abandoned it in boredom and instead had just begun *Sisters Three*, a yellowed paperback she had claimed from the shelves in Rudy’s store. Its tawdry cover showed a blond, brunette, and redhead nearly bursting from v-necked sweaters. *One of these beauties has committed a desperate crime of passion*, the jacket copy said. One! Jude sniffed, noticing for the first time that all three women had the same face. There weren’t three, only one, she concluded, dropping the

book alongside the program from her parents' graduation. But she could confirm that later. Everything was now where it belonged.

She hesitated. There must be a step she had overlooked. But she had done all that she could. She peered into the crystal paperweight as if it were a crystal ball, thinking of the silver ornament Kat devotedly wore: Gaia, the mother goddess, depicted as a nebulous sort of *ur*-woman, all breasts and vulval lips and wind-swirled hair. Kat had once shown Gaia all around the circle, suggesting they each find their own guiding spirit to protect them. Shyly, Jude now stroked the paperweight, just as she'd seen Kat stroke that silver charm, admiring the smooth flawless surface of the glass, the luxuriant rose petals enshrined inside.

Rosie, she murmured, petitioning the only spirit she knew. What if she actually answered? What kind of wisdom could a baby sister offer?

But nothing came. Just the persistent thought, which had driven her here in the first place: *if Tawny could have her photos, then she could have hers, too.*

She removed a brass letter opener from an ankle-boot she never wore (more flotsam from one of Josie's shopping sprees: Jessica McClintock). Crouching, she skimmed the blade into the narrow gap under the bench, and out came a dry manila edge.

It was always a shock, a guilty secret pleasure, to tip the envelope and watch the portrait slide out. To see that face. *Her* face. But not Jude Hazelden at all, someone possibly distantly related—that bewildered expression, eyelids sultry with shadow and smudged with kohl, hair artfully messy and scrunched. The lips, an oily sort of crimson, parted from each other in pert suggestiveness, as if pronouncing the French sound “eu.”

The bare shoulders bothered her the most. More than any sensation, she recalled the heat of the curling iron too close to her skin, the fear of being scorched. But also the clammy slathering-on of peach foundation, the binding of her torso in an itchy frilly contraption. There it was in the photo: her slack, immature chest bulging above a lacy bustier, as if she had breasts. *Perfect Fantasy* was scrolled in copper script in the lower corner. This was the name of the studio; it had been located in a strip mall in Madrona.

She wondered, but did not care, if the studio still existed. Very likely it did not. This had all taken place eight years before, when she was thirteen.

This was not the only photo, though. She reached into the envelope and removed the contact sheet, which showed twenty tiny versions of this larger image, four rows of five miniatures, each a slightly varied pose. Dallas had picked the shot he liked best, and had it printed as a glossy enlargement. Two enlargements, to be exact. The other, the twin to the one now resting on her knee, had, to Jude's horror, been displayed among a gallery of family photos in the upstairs hallway, but then vanished when her mother began to redecorate, three years ago or so. Where had it gone? Had it migrated, say, to Dallas' office? Did his clients make noises at it that made him proud?

She never asked, though, just as her mother and Dallas had never asked where *these* photos had gone. Jude had claimed them in much the same way she'd claimed the paperweight: by stealth. Rifling through the main bureau in the master bedroom one afternoon when everyone else was out, not more than six months after this photo was taken (ack! the things she discovered—vaginal jelly, *The Joy of Sex*, a latex glove!), she found the black matte *Perfect Fantasy* folder with all the outtakes inside. Dallas had never seemed to notice its disappearance, and neither had her mother. Possibly they each thought the other was its keeper.

Or the entire matter had slipped, like so many things pertaining to Jude, completely from their minds.

To better view the thumbnails, she used a magnifying glass, which she kept in the other Jessica McClintock boot, swathed in bubble wrap. Under the glass, the tiny images disclosed their variations. In some, her eyes were squeezed shut. In one, her jaw was slack, as if she'd just awakened in a strange place. In another, her favorite, she was sneering, or maybe about to sneeze. In the final three shots, tears were plainly brimming in her eyes.

She had forgotten about that. She flipped the contact sheet away from her like a Frisbee and tossed the glass aside, not caring if it shattered. It clattered against the door of her closet, then fell flat on its face, unbroken.

She was about to fling the envelope, too, but a shimmer of red appeared on her sock. A splotch of blood—from where? Then she saw it for what it was: a red

cellophane frill, frivolously adorning a wooden toothpick. Not just any toothpick, though. The final item in the envelope, it must have escaped as she examined the photographs. Why had she kept this absurdly festive little stick? She pinched it between two fingers and twirled it so the cellophane seemed to throw off sparks.

She had kept it because he had taken her to dinner, too—a date. Because: this sharp little weapon had been speared into her steak.

* * *

The classroom smelled of animals tonight, a sawdusty rodent odor, and in fact a dappled white rat now occupied a cage in the corner. He scabbled industriously as the group got underway.

Jude was speaking; she was holding the photo out to her left. Claudia, who had already seen it, reacted exactly as she had when she first laid eyes on it. “Son of a goddamn—”

Kat hushed her. “If you need some time, we’ll make sure you get some later.”

“We never did much for my birthday after my mom remarried,” Jude was explaining, by way of gradual introduction. Claudia was now passing the photo to the woman next to her. They both handled it with fastidious care, as if stamped with a warning: *contagious*. “My birthday always reminded Mom of having to marry my real dad—they were high-school sweethearts, and then she got pregnant, and I came along about eight months after they graduated...”

She took a deep breath. The words had been tumbling out. She hadn’t ever had this much to say out loud to a roomful of people, and this was just the beginning. She’d never imagined there might be anyone, never mind an entire circle of sympathizers, who might actually *care*. Before Kat, before Claudia, before all these attentive women had become part of her everyday life, who would have heard her out? P.J. was the only candidate, and though he’d actually seen the photograph, years before, he’d been rudely insensible to the sadder implications. Agog at Jude’s sexpot makeover, he had missed the point entirely.

Or had he?

“Guess I’m getting off track,” Jude said, realizing the story behind her birthday might not be as relevant as she thought.

“Take all the time you need,” Kat reassured her. “This is a real breakthrough, Jude. We want to hear every word.” Dimples dented her cheeks, which suggested a smile, but her expression was ripe with sorrow. Like Claudia, she had already seen the photo, too—during their latest private session. (*A terrible violation*, she had called it, *an unconscionable betrayal*.)

Even Tawny seemed engrossed, chewing her gum demurely. Opal was helping herself to a handful of Kleenex from the box Kat had placed in the center of the circle.

“It was my thirteenth birthday,” Jude said. “Thirteen—‘why, that’s the dawn of womanhood!’ —that’s what Dallas said.” She was surprised to hear herself imitate him, slinging her voice an octave below its normal range. “Dallas is my stepdad. Where he comes from, Miracle Whip or something, girls apparently start looking for a husband by the time they’re fourteen. He knew girls who got married about the time they would have been going *into* high school. Well, my mom said, ‘That’s silly, Dallas, nobody does that anymore. Besides, Judy’s going to go to college—she’ll be the first in the family ever to go!’ Even then everyone knew that’s what I would do.”

She was veering off the topic again, but no one seemed to mind. The photo had reached Helen, and she was huddled over it, moving forward and back as if there were rockers on her chair. A finger probed into her sleeve.

“So Dallas said something like, ‘Well, that’s not my point at all. I’m just saying this is the time of life when a girl ought to start thinking about what it means to be a woman. She ought to have a little taste of what’s to come.’ ”

Someone gasped at this, though Jude was not sure who it was. Tawny was reaching her spidery fingers toward Helen, who had not yet relinquished the photo; she lifted it from Helen’s grasp and sat back to study the image with grave concentration. Helen continued to rock.

“The glamour photo was his idea, and my mom thought it was just the cleverest thing. ‘That’s a won-der-ful idea!’ she said. ‘I ought to get one done myself!’ ” She mocked Josie mercilessly, overwringing the enthusiasm. “She didn’t think I should be getting married or anything, but it wouldn’t hurt me to try to be more of a girl, would

it? Wouldn't that be the greatest way to turn thirteen—to get all dolled up like a movie star and have a studio portrait? 'Daddy's going to take you!' she said. I think she even clapped her hands. So I pointed out the painfully obvious: *he is NOT my daddy.*"

Every face was turned toward her now. She was inside her story; it was telling itself, and they were inside it, too. She could feel them there next to her—not too far, not too close, a comforting boundaryless feeling, much the same as when Kat had first cradled her hand. *This is family*, she thought, *how a family ought to feel—not like it's twisting back on itself to bite off its own head.*

"And then the plan got even bigger," she went on, feeling bolder. "He was going to take me out on the town. When we got to that studio, he actually bought the clothes I wore for the photo. I guess most people put that strapless junk on just to have their picture taken. But, lucky me—I got to keep it! And wear it to a restaurant! I was freezing, I can tell you that."

"Do you still have the clothes?"

"He took you out—on a *date*?"

"You were thirteen, and he dressed you up like that?"

The photo showed only the top half of the outfit (what there was of it): the frothy bustier. Her friends would choke with disgust—Jude imagined this with a private burst of pride—if they could have seen the rest. The vinyl, wet-looking miniskirt, the sheer white stockings, the chunky silver shoes. To top it off: a chubby fake-fur jacket. She had been a vision of pre-teen prostitution, though Dallas surely thought it was a step above.

"No, I don't have them anymore," she said, answering the first question, the easiest. She had thrown the outfit in the trash, taking care to conceal it beneath bags of kitchen garbage. But not till much later. Not till she had worn it one more time.

"So what did he do to you?" This was Opal, who had been weeping in a gurgling sort of way. Her face was almost hidden by a huge plush giraffe, which she held in her lap as if she were a pre-schooler and not a grandmother, pressing her damp cheek to its head.

"What did he do to me?"

"Dallas!" Claudia's voice rang out like a shot. "Tell us what happened."

“Well, we went out to dinner. I was shivering all over. I couldn’t even eat. As if I was going to eat with him anyway. You should have seen this place. Reynard’s—that place down by the river with the red neon sign. All tables inside have little red candleholders; that was about the only light there was. I’m sure it’s supposed to be romantic, but I felt like we’d gone into a dungeon, or a Halloween party with a ‘Pit and Pendulum’ theme. Though I was the only one wearing a costume.”

“And then?”

“And then?” Jude repeated, though she did not know who had asked.

The faces were expectant. No one had ever tried to understand, not like this.

Kat knew exactly what to say. “You don’t remember anything else happening, do you, Jude?”

They went out for coffee, their usual custom—though typically in a group of four or five. Tonight, eight of them piled into Claudia’s car, with Jude wedged between Tawny and Helen and two others in the back. Everyone else held purses in their laps, leaving Jude in charge of Claudia’s stuffed animals, which had been dislodged from their usual positions along the back seat. “Don’t stick Boomer in the back window, *please*,” Claudia had admonished them. “Or any of the others. I don’t want them to get dirty.” Jude balanced her feet on the hump between the floorwells and assembled the stuffed creatures in her lap, corralling them loosely with her arms, careful not to embrace them.

Chattering began, but it was impossible to tell who was talking to whom; they were crammed together so tightly they might have been one multi-headed many-legged female. Jude would probably smell of Tawny’s tea-rose perfume when she got home that night. Helen’s hair spilled over her shoulder and mingled with her own. They both had straight hair falling far past their shoulders, though Jude’s was as stringy as ramen, while Helen’s was adorably curled at the ends.

Claudia might have been driving an ambulance. Jude had a sense of Madrona careening by, but only glimpses of it flashed by the window. The talk and cross-talk continued, but no one said anything about what had just happened. The therapy session had concluded with Kat’s face moist with joy. She had hugged Jude for a vast maternal

moment, the rest of the room disappeared, and Jude, though unable to breathe, had not wanted to come up for air. When Kat released her, though, she saw they were at the center of a much larger hug. The whole group had enclosed them. Just as she was enclosed by them now.

Veering, they suddenly arrived at Jimbo's, on the outskirts of Dunning. They began unfolding themselves from the car. Opal, who had been sitting in front, tried to take Jude's arm as she emerged, but Jude pressed her elbow to her side. There was a consuming clinginess to Opal; the most ancient of the group, she was the biggest baby. "Brrrrr!" she was saying, her teeth chattering. She tried to press against Jude as they approached the coffee-shop entrance.

Strangers' faces became distinct in the yellow-lit windows. All those people inside. Jude scuffed her Keds in the gravel, slowing to a halt. But Claudia, grunting, wrapped her in a bear hug and carried her to the door.

Tawny hung her black slicker on the coat-rack, revealing her stretchy zippered jumpsuit. Cat-woman tonight, not little-girl lost. No one knew exactly what Tawny did for a living. She claimed to be a model, though no one ever asked her what that meant. It was understood. This was all she had ever known. At least no one was assaulting her (or if they were, it never showed); her cousins were safely in jail. Signaling the others to follow, she trotted after the hostess. Claudia asked Jude to save her a seat; she was going to the restroom.

They were shown a huge round table. "Sit by me," Helen whispered.

Jude, intrigued and pleased that Helen would offer this invitation, shyly obliged. She set Claudia's car keys on the nearest placemat, and took the chair Helen indicated. All around the table, coats and mittens and scarves began to come off. But not Helen's. It would take a while, Jude knew (from observing her for weeks) for Helen to get warm.

A waiter handed them menus. Opal stared at him. "How old are you, sweet-cakes?" she attempted to croon, but her voice was hoarse.

"Oh, I'm old enough to serve alcohol, if that's what you're wondering," he grinned, lifting his platinum hair out of his eyes. "We've got beer and wine on the menu now." But he wasn't looking at Opal; he had noticed Tawny, who was absently

tugging the zipper on her outfit and frowning at the menu. His lanky angularity, the longing look he aimed at Tawny—his entire demeanor reminded Jude uncannily of Rudy, and she had a sudden harrowing sense of what that longing look might mean. Repulsed, she dropped her gaze. But much too far.

“Can I get you something—?” the waiter began.

Jude realized she was staring at his crotch. She raised her head sharply, reassured to see he was still ogling Tawny and her zipper.

“I’ll say!” said Opal.

“—to drink?”

Tawny turned her feline eyes towards him, but did not seem impressed. “Diet Coke,” she said.

Coffee, decaf, tea with lemon, said the others. Helen ordered a double vanilla milkshake for Claudia. The waiter, with a backward glance at Tawny, retreated up the aisle.

“Did you see that?” Opal’s jaw was slack with wonder.

“See what?” Claudia demanded, appearing at Jude’s elbow. She lowered herself into the empty chair.

“That hunky waiter—”

“That skinny thing? For your information, Opal, that is not a hunk. And last time I checked, you were nearly old enough to be his great-grandmother.”

Opal wheezed with pleasure. “You should have seen what was happening in his pants when he got a load of Tawny!”

“Some of us could give a major shit about what’s happening in men’s pants.”

“Oh, c’mon—he was cute, wasn’t he, Tawny?”

Tawny folded a fresh stick of gum into her pink mouth. “I guess.”

“I thought he was cute,” said Helen, looking bashfully into her lap.

“Hah!” Claudia was triumphant. “I bet he had a tattoo!”

“He did,” Jude confirmed, perplexed. In fact, there had been a lurid design wound around the waiter’s bicep. “Kind of a chain of thorns.”

“Thorns!” said Claudia. “Well, look out—we may not be able to hold Helen back!”

Helen folded her arms rigidly against her girlish chest; she touched the back of her gloved hand to her nose.

Claudia was instantly contrite. “Ah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by that.” She reached across Jude and tried to tickle Helen under her lowered chin. “What did you order for me, anyway?”

Helen raised her head, her face was completely composed—no discoloration, not the slightest furrow or pinch to show she might have been upset just a moment before. Jude was impressed.

“A shake,” Helen said. “Vanilla.” She might have been describing her own expression.

“Atta girl.” Claudia blew her a kiss then threw an arm around Jude, causing Jude to jump, but Claudia hung on. “Well, I was wondering if we were ever going to hear your story!” she exulted in Jude’s ear. “You are as quiet as a mouse, but you know what they say about the quiet ones—still waters run deep.”

“Your story was intense,” Tawny told her.

Opal set down her glass. “Oh, just thinking about it again makes me want to blubber. Where’s my hankie?” she sniffled, reaching into the maw of her purse.

“Use your napkin,” said Claudia, pointing to her own.

“I have to go to the ladies’ room,” Helen announced aristocratically, as if this were the line she had been expected to deliver. She was pulling off her gloves. “Will you come with me?” she asked Jude.

Jude hesitated, not quite prepared for this level of intimacy. Helen noticed. “You don’t have to,” she added, her face still neutral as a bar of soap. “It’s okay.” She pushed back from the table.

“No, I need to go anyway,” Jude fibbed. “Let’s go.”

She and Helen rose, almost colliding with the waiter and his trayful of drinks. Helen led. Jude, following, noticed the carefree way her curls bounced against her back.

They passed through the restroom door into a apricot-colored lounge. Helen stepped past it onto the tile, looking left and right. She bent down to look under each stall, then, apparently satisfied that they were alone, removed her tweed coat and

handed it to Jude. It was much bulkier than Jude expected; objects weighted the pockets.

“I have to show you something,” Helen said, unbuttoning the cuff of her crisp shirt sleeve. “I had to wait until you told your story. But now—”

She peeled her sleeve back to reveal the length of her inner forearm.

A dozen inverted crosses were etched into her skin, black as char against the creamy flesh. They were less like scars than impeccable burns, as if the arm had been branded again and again with a diabolical thumb-sized iron.

Jude swallowed. Now she knew what Helen was always touching. Jude wanted to touch one herself, though this was surely the wrong impulse. She should express some kind of aversion, disgust.

“I don’t have any more room on my left arm, so I had to start on my right. But learning to cut with my left hand wasn’t so easy. The first ones weren’t very good,” Helen confessed, pointing to the cross nearest her elbow. “See how this one’s kind of crooked?”

“Why—” Jude began. To her dismay but also relief, Helen rolled down her sleeve. “Why are they so black?” she asked.

“India ink,” said Helen. “You put it on when the blood starts to get sticky.”

Jude nodded, speechless. She handed Helen her coat. Helen pulled from one of the pockets a blueberry-colored bunny and insisted Jude take it.

“No, really, you should have one. It really helps,” Helen assured her.

Jude held this gift at arm’s length, wanting to be polite but not sure how to receive it. The bunny was undeniably sweet, but that was the problem, wasn’t it? And she had no idea how it corresponded to what she had just seen.

“And now I have to cut again,” Helen added, almost wistfully. “Now that I’ve shown you.” She tilted her head, her sweet-featured face overcome with concern, or possibly curiosity. “Is it the same for you?”

“The same?”

She took Jude’s hand and softly, very respectfully, traced the ridges of scars with the tips of her fingers. Her hands were cool, her nails squared and lacquered. Jude had the sense Helen had been studying her hand from afar, and was now finally able to

examine it up close, perhaps had longed to touch it as much as Jude had wanted to touch those sharp inky crosses.

“I have to cut every time I tell,” Helen explained.

“But you don’t have to do that!” Jude was finally registering alarm. She stepped back, pulling her hand from Helen’s. “I won’t tell anyone I saw.”

Helen smiled. “I know you won’t.”

“But why ...” she broke off. “Nobody will know.”

Helen shrugged. “Those are the rules.” She began to primp in the washroom mirror, arranging her curls to fall symmetrically on each side. “I think it’s supposed to be punishment, but I always feel better when it’s done. There’s some kind of freedom in cutting. Don’t you agree?”

Jude clutched her new bunny. “I have to go now,” she said, ducking into one of the empty stalls. She flipped the latch of the lock.

* * *

My funny Valentine.

Dallas was singing, thickly crooning.

Sweet comic Valentine.

He apparently forgot the next set of words; he hummed for a moment, then:

Yet you’re my favorite work of art.

Josie was gasping with excitement.

They literally waltzed into the dining room together, where Jude was attempting to read while waiting for dinner to be served. Why didn’t Albertina call her downstairs *after* dinner was on the table? Slap, she turned a page of *Sisters Three*. Sure enough, the plot device was hideously transparent. You never saw any combination of the sisters in the same place simultaneously.

Your looks are laughable. Dallas continued to serenade as Josie took her customary seat. She was beaming, trimmed in ruby-red from head to toe. Fragrant pink and red flowers floated in crystal bowls all around the room. Jude detected a theme; it must actually be Valentine’s Day.

Unphotographable.

“Stop it!” she commanded.

They stared at her. They exchanged a look. Without a word, Dallas stepped to the sideboard and opened a door. When he turned back, he was holding two enormous cellophane-wrapped hearts.

Josie gave a little jump in her chair. “Oh, honey,” she said, all fake surprise.

“You shouldn’t have!” She cast an anxious look at Jude. “Look, Judy, Dallas has two.”

“Mom,” Jude was flicking the tines of her fork, wishing they were less blunt.

“Do you actually think I’m retarded?”

“Not at all,” Dallas said magnanimously, moving closer as he spoke. “But we do think you’re a little slow ... in getting a beau.”

Was he drunk? The singing, the waltzing, the ... the poetry (if it could even be called that; Josie squeaked at his tortured rhyme) ... the dining room was candlelit, too dark to clearly see his expression. Jude wished she could be almost anywhere else, but was mesmerized, in spite of herself. This was almost as morbidly fascinating as the baring of Helen’s arm, the revelation of what was literally up her sleeve. What was happening here?

Then he was almost on top of her, mugging in the candlelight and offering her one of the heart-shaped boxes of chocolates. The flat glint in his eyes belied his resentment, and she knew he was doing his best to play out a script—*humor her, honey*, she could hear her mother say, *don’t pay the least bit of attention to that broody pout of hers. She just needs some loving kindness and attention.* But he gave himself away: that stony thrust of the jaw.

“And sooo ...” he was still trying to rhyme, “in the absence of a beau, we thought we would show ...” he faltered, a wash of whiskey breath poured into the space between them. He *was* drunk.

“We would show ...” Josie jumped in to rescue him “... show you how we feel!”

“You know I don’t like chocolate,” Jude said, hoping to end the festivities with as little bloodshed as possible.

“Oh, everyone likes—”

“Well, *she* doesn’t,” Dallas said. There he was, finally, the supreme overlord she knew so well, brandishing the indisputable facts as if they were his and his alone. But he held the chocolates toward her with stiff gentility, and added, “But maybe your friends do.”

Was he overemphasizing “friends”? Your *friends*, as in that lezbo circus you’ve run away to join? He was right about the candy, though. They would feast on it like Romans at a banquet. Especially Claudia. Probably Opal as well. Jude could see her feeding chocolates into her face, one after another.

At the very least, it would be evidence. A valentine from Dallas, identical to the one he gave her mom. Her friends would crow in amazement. A pair of panties, a bottle of Opium, something more adult might have been even more incriminating. But this would entirely suffice.

She accepted the box. The cellophane crackled.

“Thank you,” she said, but only because he couldn’t know what that meant.

* * *

Kat seemed distracted. She kept glancing toward the classroom door. “I have a surprise for you,” she had promised once they had settled into their midget chairs. But the surprise had not yet appeared. Kat shifted left and right on her seat as if sitting on a potato or something just as lumpy, disagreeable.

“Well!” she said breathily. “Maybe we should just get started.”

But the door swung open and a woman stepped inside. Before Jude could get a sense of how old or tall she was, even the color of her hair, Claudia hollered “Victoria!” and the entire group was on its feet, trampling toward the woman and enveloping her in one of its all-encompassing group hugs. Even Helen was in on it. Kat, though, stood back a few paces, like an indulgent mother watching her brood descend on their Christmas presents. No one, not even Kat, had noticed Jude was left behind.

The human wall opened, and the woman stepped through; several hands lingered on her sleeves and shoulders, reluctant to let her go. She headed straight for Kat, and the two of them fell into a long, somber embrace. They might have been a statue,

commemorating siblings or cousins reunited after a catastrophe—though the woman didn't look at all like a relative of Kat's. She was slender, her hips as narrow as a boy's. She wore a beige pantsuit under her sensible raincoat, which flowed down towards her crepe-soled shoes. Her champagne-colored hair was carefully coiffed in a no-nonsense style. Jude correctly guessed she was a nurse.

"Victoria," Kat said. They had stepped back from each other but were still holding hands. "It's great to have you back."

Victoria looked all around the room, shaking her head. "Well, I don't know if I'd say it's great to be here," she admitted. "Lots of memories in this room." She and Kat released each other. "But I guess that's the point, isn't it?"

Some of the women laughed, and Victoria noticed Jude. "Someone new!" she said, and stepped across the circle. "How do you do?" she extended her hand, "I'm Victoria Caspar."

Jude shrank back like a plant that folded when touched. Victoria was friendly-looking, well-groomed, supremely confident, and Jude did not feel worthy to shake her hand. Flawed people were the only ones she cared to meet, and this woman's flaws were not readily apparent. Perhaps she was as defective as anyone else here but somehow better-adapted, or more practiced at being adapted; maybe she had mastered the art of concealment. But in any case she was the star—the star among a tattered bunch of misfits, to be sure, yet her status was indisputable. Jude did not want to acknowledge her superiority.

"Victoria's a graduate!" someone said, which produced a ripple of assent.

To refuse Victoria, Jude could see, would mean setting herself in opposition to the group. "I'm Jude," she said, and accepted the handshake.

Victoria instantly noticed the awkward grip, the scarring. She nodded soberly. "Welcome," she said. She regarded Jude for a long, thoughtful moment, as if absorbing her secrets from the particles of air between them. "I hope you're getting what you need here."

Jude relaxed. She felt glad to have shaken her hand.

Kat beckoned Victoria to her side, and Victoria removed her nickel-blue raincoat, laying it across the teacher's desk. She took the seat next to Kat, perching on the

chair's edge as though she might begin to recite or play a violin, feet flat on the floor, spine erect. She was maybe five feet tall, Jude realized, though she had not appeared so tiny until now (the child's chair seemed exactly her size): as petite as Josie, as scrupulously ladylike. Older than Josie, though, and not pretending to be young.

"Victoria's here for a sort of refresher," Kat explained, "wouldn't you say?"

"Well, it took me more than twenty years to even know I had a story to tell, and it's only been a few years since I began to tell it. Or since it began to tell itself to me. Seven years, to be exact. Wouldn't surprise me if it took another ten or so to completely undo the damage."

"So you don't ever stop going to group?" Tawny asked. "Even though you won?"

"That's just money," Victoria assured her. She aligned the pleats in her slacks with the exact center of her knees.

Claudia frowned. "What would be so bad about going to group forever?"

"I guess I look at it this way," Victoria went on, "in my profession, you have to constantly be recertified, there's a requirement for continuing education. You just keep growing and learning new things. It's a lifelong process, and so is this. More will be revealed, as they say. So I'm sure I'll be coming back from time to time. Which is not to say I haven't come a million miles from where I started—thanks to you know who." Reaching sideways, she patted Kat affectionately. Kat crinkled her nose.

"And thanks to all of you," Victoria added, acknowledging everyone in the room. Jude knew she was included, in spirit if not in fact. And Victoria made this explicit, looking straight at Jude when she said, "We're all in this together, no matter how and when we arrive. We can't do this without each other." Though this sounded over-rehearsed, like the conclusion to one of her mother's fundraising speeches (*working together, we can transform downtown Dunning into a first-rate Valley showplace!*), Jude let the message strike the nerve that was intended. In fact, it spoke her truth.

"Amen!" Claudia agreed. She turned to Jude. "Victoria won a lawsuit against her father. Seven hundred thousand dollars! Can you beat that?"

Before Jude could react, though, Kat was rising, heading for the Rubbermaid tote she wheeled in each and every week, but which sometimes remained in the corner,

unopened. Jude would prefer it always stayed that way. When Kat approached this blue container, it meant only one thing: someone would be working. Screaming. Howling. Acting out their revenge. Tawny never did this; neither did Helen. Jude planned always to refuse. The week she shared her photo, Kat had offered her a tennis racket, a whiffle bat, a phone directory—*why don't you put Dallas' face on that pillow* (a floor pillow, one of many possible targets) *and give it a good crack?*—but Jude hadn't felt in need of vengeful release. Instead, at the end of her “time,” when the photo had completely traversed the circle, she had felt giddily pried-open, elated, slightly out of control. Like a girl in a myth who utters the one word that is never to be spoken, she was suddenly possessed of powers beyond her reckoning—but not resentment, not rage. No thanks, she told Kat, insisting she put everything back in the tote and close the lid.

Kat was unfurling a large exercise mat onto the floor. Victoria was taking off her blazer and hanging it neatly on the back of her chair. Kat returned to the container and extracted a pair of heavy-duty oven mitts, double-quilted. Victoria put these on her hands, and lay face down on the mat. And then Jude recognized her flaw. This woman may have won a seven-hundred-thousand-dollar lawsuit, but apparently had not won her freedom with it—a survivor's survivor, yet there she was on the floor, as mired as the rest of them in therapy hell. Her ladylike appearance was doomed to be short-lived.

As if on signal, several women rose from their seats and moved toward Victoria. Kneeling, they gripped her arms and legs, two women to each limb, pinning her to the mat. Claudia and Opal were teamed on the right arm, grasping the elbow and wrist.

Victoria began to struggle. Kat knelt next to her head, bending low to hear what Victoria was shouting into the mat, as if hearing a confession. The struggle grew more extreme. Victoria, thrashing, turned her head to the side and let out a blistering stream of expletives. Suddenly she broke free—was the cursing a signal, too? As she flung herself up to sitting, she struck Opal in the face. Jude now saw the purpose of the oven mitts. Opal began to cry, but no one paid any attention.

Victoria stood and brushed her thighs. Her clothing was oddly intact. Though her shirt had come untucked, it was not particularly wrinkled, nor were her slacks. Some miracle of textile technology. Having all that money to spend, she might very well be

shopping in the same mail-order catalogs Josie adored: “round the world, round the clock, with our carefree travel ensembles.”

“Let’s all take a journey inside,” Kat was now saying, walking slowly and methodically around the periphery of the circle as the participants returned to their seats. As she passed behind each chair, she touched the crown of each woman’s head, a sign that it was time to close their eyes. Victoria, too, was seated again and was the first to comply, face up, eyes shut, as if letting the sun beam down on her face.

“Victoria has just shown us how powerfully we can *revise*,” Kat continued. “When her father and his friends were actually holding her down, back when she was too young and small to defend herself, she had no chance to get away. But the beauty of revision is she can get away now; she can protect that younger self. Again and again. This is *her* story now.” Kat kept walking as she talked; her voice came nearer, grew further. “Victoria has claimed the power to rewrite the ending. An irrevocable power. No one can take that from her, ever. No one, not a soul. And that can be just as true for each and every one of you.”

Someone sighed as if in a lover’s arms.

“Follow this thought, deep down into that place where you are completely and totally safe. We’ve all been there before, we’ve all visualized this place. We’ve gone there together. Take a moment and find yourself there. Look around. What do you see?”

A box of candy. Jude heard and felt the crinkling of the wrapping, inhaled the richness of chocolate.

This was the only part of the session she anticipated with pleasure—to close her eyes, let her attention spiral inward though the intimate sounds of others were still all around: breathing, the scuffling of feet, a stomach gurgling, a bracelet chiming against another. She could belong and be alone.

Her safe place was her closet, and she instantly was there.

In her lap was the heart-shaped box. Beneath the lid, inside the box, lay an eight-by-ten glossy of a girl with oily lips—but not oily with lipstick. With chocolate. Smearred with chocolate. She had been eating the bon-bons; she was wearing a cellophane bra-top. Her nipples showed through the red transparent sheen.

Jude's breath quickened. She was not in her closet. She was in another enclosed space, but not in any way safe. Warmth gripped her bare shoulders, restraining her just as Victoria had been restrained. Something slippery and thick thrust into her mouth. She gagged, too young to fight back.

Kissing her! Dallas was pressing her into the corner—what corner? where could they possibly be?—looming over her, kissing her, if you could call it that. His after-shave, steeped with body odor, was fermented like a rank liqueur. The taste and texture of that thick intrusive thing—his tongue?—was repellent beyond belief. “Ugh!” she said, opening her eyes. They were all watching her. Her gagging had roused them from their private reveries. They waited; no one spoke.

Victoria watched her as if knowing exactly what Jude most needed to say. She might have been coaching someone through labor. Her face, creased with compassion, was severe and kind at once.

“He ...” Jude began, glancing at Kat, who was nearly bursting emotion. She probably knew, too, what needed to be said. Jude tested her lower lip with her thumb—thick, insensible, numbed as if with Novocain. “He put something in my mouth.”

Victoria blinked but her expression did not change. Kat closed her eyes and placed the flat of her hand against her silver Gaia charm.

* * *

It could be so much worse. There were more terrible things in life than the simple fear of spinning out of control. The fear of it versus actually having done it, for example—as Josie's sister, Charlene, had made so abundantly clear. A sense of proportion always settled over Josie whenever she and her sister spoke. Her own problems shrank to their rightful size. Really, she had no cause to complain.

She was attempting to speak to Char now and also drive her Mercedes out county road A2 toward Riverbank, floating in her golden-bronze capsule past early hay and pastureland and acreage in rotation.

All the top real-estate agents had mobile phones now, and she had just acquired one, though she was discovering that talking into one while driving was not as stylishly

effortless as she had hoped. Twice during this conversation, she had drifted over the shoulder stripe and almost off the pavement.

“Hold on a second, Char,” she said, but did not wait for an answer. She placed the phone in her lap and pulled onto an apron of gravel, which provided access to a triple-wide gate. The gate, Josie knew, allowed heavy machinery to drive straight from the road into the field just beyond—probably a whole battalion of those lumbering John Deere contraptions that disked and sowed and harvested, and meanwhile made the back roads a perilous nightmare all through spring and summer. Josie avoided, if she could, getting stuck behind these monstrosities, and especially avoided trying to pass them. They simply could not be seen around.

This particular field was freshly tilled, though, and stank of fungicide. Chances were no one would be needing the gate today. She shut the motor off so she could hear better.

“Now, *what’s* he in jail for this time?” she repeated. They had been talking about Charlene’s oldest son, Brandon, the product of a liaison Char had with a trick rider one distant summer when the rodeo made its annual stop in Red Bluff. Her first husband, a bouncer, had been laid up at the time, recovering from a knife wound incurred on the job. But Char, in her early twenties at the time, had been “desperate for some action” (her own way of putting it) and couldn’t wait until her husband recuperated. Thus Brandon was conceived, thus that marriage soon collapsed, thus a hopeless pattern of impulsive, unnecessary messiness was forever established. Josie sometimes wondered why Rudy and Char had never been attracted to each other (they had all grown up together). Possibly they were too much alike.

“He’s not actually *in* jail, Josephine.” Char sounded as if she were filing her nails; Josie thought she heard her blow on them. “What I said was that he was arrested. But now he’s out on bail. Though God knows why—that child has a record as long as the Devil’s dick. But he’s eighteen now—maybe they don’t look at his juvenile record, though that would be stupid, don’t you think? Anyway, who knows? Disorderly conduct was the main charge. Creating a public nuisance. Minor-league bust-his-balls kind of shit. The cops just want to keep him on his toes.”

Josie flinched as Char flung out each vulgarity. *Dick! Balls! Shit!* There was absolutely no call to be uncivilized. Across the road, along a fence, several Holsteins were grazing imperturbably; noticing them, Josie vowed to conquer adversity with dignity. All she said was, “Well, I suppose you can be grateful they let him go.”

Charlene snorted with glee. “Grateful! If I ever experience a moment of grateful with this child, I will take out a full-page ad in the *Red Bluff Bugle* and send you your own framed copy!”

Why had she bothered to call? It always played out much the same. Charlene would boast about the latest scandal she or someone else in her household had caused (there was also a volatile live-in boyfriend and two younger sons) and then belittle Josie for making the most inoffensive comments. Yet Josie was determined to endure this abuse; she would continue to call. Because Charlene was family. She also called their mother once a month. She called their brother in Ogden, Utah, who had converted to Mormonism and always handed the phone to his wife after saying not much more than hello.

But she had been negligent. Almost two full months had passed since they had last spoken—how did the weeks just fly on by?—so she had capitalized on this moment between appointments, on the road from one to the next, making sure to breathlessly explain that the marginal sound quality was due to her *mobile* phone service. Yes, she was calling from her car! But Char had merely said, *you don't say*. A loud clattering sound had followed: ice cubes falling from a tray?

“How's that heartbreaker of a husband of yours?” Char asked now, moving on to another of her favorite topics. In person, she turned into marshmallow goo around Dallas. When she threw her arms around him in greeting, he had to gently pry her off. Fortunately, he considered her crude and almost comical. Fortunately, they hardly ever visited.

“As a matter of fact, he's been appointed to a prestigious commission in Sacramento,” Josie bragged.

There, she had said it. She knew Char would have no idea what this meant, but it was vital for her to express her newfound pride in Dallas' accomplishment (having been finally convinced it was all for the best). Besides, wasn't she entitled to her own

boasting rights? Anyone, even Char, would understand this was something *worth* boasting about. There had been articles in the paper, for heaven's sake (and not in the police-report section).

"His good friend, Ray Ayala—he's the state legislator from our district—has picked Dallas to lead an important regional land-use study. They'll be looking at the feasibility of—"

"Omigod, that sounds about as dull as golf on the TV," Char interjected. "But the pay's got to be good if Dallas took the job, am I right? That sugar daddy has always known where to drill down to paydirt."

Josie could picture her sister leering. An empty flat-bed truck rumbled past on the road, spewing straw-dust behind it and causing the Mercedes to rock. She said, "Actually, Char, it's a volunteer commission. He's not getting paid."

"Hah! I never can figure out which end is up with you two. Well, whatever rings his chimes. And whatever rings *yours*, Josie dear."

Josie's composure had expired. "What's that supposed to mean?" she sniffed, making no attempt to conceal her vexation.

"Oh, I don't know ... I guess I'd imagine this commissioner thing, or whatever you call it, means he has to be in Sacramento fairly often—maybe staying up there ... what? ... days at a time. If he was mine, I wouldn't let him run loose where I couldn't keep an eye on him, especially in a big city like that. A man like Dallas—" she made a tsking sound and did not finish her sentence. Then she laughed. "But then maybe you *want* him out of town."

Leave it to Charlene to insinuate affairs on all sides. To peg Sacramento as a lurid hot-blooded city, teeming with temptations (of course, she had hardly traveled twenty miles from Red Bluff). But she was maddeningly right about one thing—Dallas would be gone. Increasingly. He had been gone when the crisis with Judy had struck, and who knew what might happen next? Where would he be? But they had worked all that out. They had thoroughly talked it through. He had crooned and cuddled and had eventually drawn her out—could it be, he had asked one evening (entwined with her in bed, kissing one eyelid and then the other), that she was opposed to "the Ayala offer" because of all the stress she'd been suffering? all the worry over Judy? She had wept with joy to be

so completely understood (though still wishing this “offer” had come from someone less ... well, *exotic*). Then and there, she had accepted Dallas’ pledge—that she would never be alone. He would wear a dedicated pager. He would come home at once if an emergency arose.

Besides, he had assured her, and she had been eager to agree: look how much Judy had improved! Yes, she had certainly become chronically ill-tempered, surly, even combative—but those could be vital signs of progress, could they not? Look how much stronger, more independent she was than ever before. Dallas had given it hours of thought, and had concluded they had been misreading the signs. They could now relax and get on with their lives, loosen up, have themselves a fine time. Judy was finally growing up.

But she said to Charlene, truthfully, even wistfully, “As a matter of fact, I’d rather have him home.” She glanced at the digital clock in the burlwood dashboard; she was due to be in Riverbank in fifteen minutes.

Charlene hooted *wouldn’t we all or you and me both*, or some other inanity Josie did not quite catch. And then Charlene added, “And that spooky child—Judy? How’s our gloomy little miss?”

She had been calling Judy spooky and gloomy and glum-girl for years, and when she had heard the whitewashed explanation of Judy’s “incident” (the same one given to all family and friends) she had cryptically responded, *Oh, really? An ac-ci-dent? Imagine that!*

“Spooky,” Josie echoed, inaudibly. She had never wanted to know what Char had meant by that, but she could not deny the aptness of it now. More than combative, more than surly, she *was* spooky: morbidly unpredictable. She and Dallas had not discussed this aspect of her at all.

The Holsteins were ripping grass from the fence line, watching her with black moist eyes. Her heart began to flutter like a caged thing. Dallas’ pager, she realized, might not keep her safe.

She started the engine. Her one desire was to be in motion. She would be a model of caution as she drove and talked at once. She would change the subject, ask

Char about her two other sons, junior felons in the making. But those cow eyes would be following her, she was sure.

* * *

Rudy's jaw dropped. It was a blustery Sunday afternoon, a storm front was mounting on the west side of the Valley, and before he'd had a chance to announce, "guess I'll be heading out to pay my respects to your little sister," Jude had suggested they go to the cemetery together. He snapped his fingers as if to say "hot damn!" and began fumbling through the debris on his workbench, searching for his truck keys. His surprise and delight (assuming he was capable of delight) had been sadly predictable. Jude had managed to avoid this observance for years.

But she had not had a change of heart. She did not remember Rosie; she had no real sense of ever having had a sister. Her motives were not noble. She wanted to ask her father about his least (or was it most?) favorite subject, and decided this might be the most advantageous approach: to make him feel supported, or at least accompanied, in his dedication to Rosie's memory. To allow him that much, a concession. It was the least she could do, considering what she wanted. Besides, it would be her only chance to talk with him away from that wretched work room, out in the open air.

And then they were trudging through the older section of the graveyard, hunched against the elements. It was nearing the end of February, unseasonably volatile. The flowering trees shuddered in the wind, releasing streams of petals into the updraft. Blossom time: the air was sweet with scent. Salt-and-pepper headstones crowded together, some at a slant. Up ahead, in the modern section, the stones lay recessed into the grass.

It had been at least a decade since she had walked beside him here, but she remembered exactly how it had felt (as it did now): bewildering, oppressive. Even when she was small, she'd had the obscure sense of something unwholesome about these excursions, as though the actual purpose were distorted through curved glass. You could not rely on what you were seeing. You could not be sure what you were doing. The troubling question, she could see now, was this: did he pay this tribute week after

week, year after year, to honor the child lying beneath the headstone or to minimize his guilt? Because he loved the girl or hated himself?

Today, of all days, she had to believe there was at least a speck of paternal selflessness involved, or there would be no point in her coming along. She had to believe he might feel protective toward his children, herself included. But anyone could see: he returned because he had not saved her. Because the marriage then collapsed. Because Josie had hardened her heart and never had the decency to visit her baby girl's grave.

Rudy + Josie = *Rosie*, Jude recalled as they neared the children's section, which lay at the crest of a low hill.

It was true: Josie never came. Yet, sneaking a glance at Rudy slowing beside her—detesting the gritty stubble against his sallow jaw and wondering how she might ever ask him even the simplest question about the most difficult subject—Jude realized how much he hoped she might. He *counted* on it, in some undefinable way. Someday, who knew when, that glacial heart would melt and there would be a torrent of love. Josie would appear beside him in a black mourning veil, a spray of baby's breath clutched to her breast, and they could begin again from there.

As they topped the rise, the wind filled Rudy's windbreaker, puffing it out behind him like a sail. He held a potted plant in front of him, a humble offering. There was no doubt he was a penitent; he might have been approaching on his knees.

There was her marker, the color of sliced veal, and at first glance a duplicate of the headstones all around it. Rose granite, veined with glittery black, was apparently the material of choice for memorializing children. But none of the other markers had the name of the color inscribed in the stone: Rosie. "Rosie Hazelden — August 1, 1968 – October 12, 1968" was etched for all time, alongside a billowy angel, supple and shapeless as a magician's handkerchief. (For a time, Jude had thought the angel a depiction of her sister, but then studied Rudy's photos of the baby; in her bunting, she looked like a loaf of bread topped with wispy black hair.)

Her marker was unusual, too, for its lack of additional sentiment, just the name and dates. "Called home to God," said the gravestone next to hers. "She waits for us in heaven."

Watching Rudy crouch now at the grave, Jude felt certain her mother had selected the headstone. Rudy would have begged, borrowed, or stolen for something more expressive of their loss. Instead, this was simplicity itself, understated, functionally elegant. Even at that age (twenty-one! what a thudding shock to be the same age Josie had been at the time), her mother had known how to arrange a tasteful wrapper around the most unthinkable occasion. The angel was an embellishment, it was true, but so unequivocal of the actual child it subtracted nothing from the central theme: Rosie no longer existed. Let's say she never did.

Rudy was gathering a thatch of stems and leaves laying off to the side, half-tied with a faded ribbon. "Damn deer," he complained. "They come up from the river. I know better than to bring daisies, but they were just so darn pretty."

And probably cheap, Jude thought, though instantly regretted it.

Rudy placed the potted plant in the center of the stone. A zinnia, top-heavy. It bobbed and tipped in the wind.

"Should have brought a clay pot for it," he said. "Plastic's too flimsy."

"Next time, Dad," Jude reassured him.

"Well, at least the deer won't eat this one."

How would a man like her father know which flowers deer preferred? Trial and error, no doubt. He'd been coming here for twenty years. How could he *not* know by now what might be left overnight without being nibbled to shreds.

And yet he had brought daisies.

Jude stood over him as he tugged a shop-rag from his pocket and began to clean the face of the stone. Wasn't this precisely the reason her mother had left—his refusal to adapt to the facts? Josie *never* would have brought daisies, for the same reason she never came here at all. The fact was, their baby had died. Suffocated in her crib. No one technically was to blame. Yet nothing would ever make that better or different or right. Twenty-one years old. What had it been like to be the mother of that baby? There was no mistaking what it had been like for Rudy; his torment was stamped all over him like faded pox eruptions. But Josie never gave her grief away.

Jude crouched down, too, and ran her fingertips over the polished surface of the stone. She closed her eyes and saw the crystal paperweight. She tried the name again, a silent invocation: *Rosie*.

If I died, too, would they care even half as much?

Rudy was struggling to his feet, using Jude's shoulder for balance. She looked up to see the wind rip through his jacket. He needed a clay pot himself, to keep from toppling over. His skin had a rubbery yellow cast. As if Rosie had whispered a reminder to her, she remembered why she had come.

"Daddy?" she asked, feeling suddenly that time was rushing past. She stood and grabbed his elbow. "Daddy!"

"What's wrong?" He swung his head back and forth, looking all around.

She tugged him away from the grave. "Nothing. Not a thing. It's time to go, that's all." As long as the grave remained within sight, he would be distracted by details, things he might amend or fix or straighten. Neutral ground was what they needed, and this was not it.

They descended the hill, the wind at their backs. Rudy was docile, submitting to Jude's supervision. She had him in motion ... now what? There must be someplace they could talk. She halted him at the cemetery gates, which arched high above their heads in wrought-iron filigree. His truck waited just outside. She did not want to have a conversation in the truck. Especially this conversation. Not in an enclosed space, and certainly not one that belonged to him.

"Daddy," she said again. This was as good a spot as any. "I have to ask you—"

He was shivering. Now that his mission was complete, the cold had finally penetrated his flimsy clothes. "Let's go climb in the truck and get that ol' heater going," he said, glancing mournfully towards the parking lot.

But she wasn't cold, she was warm.

"—something about Dallas," she continued, ignoring him.

His face became taut. He narrowed his eyes. He stopped shaking.

"Why ... why exactly do you hate him so much?" she blurted out, not sure how to convey her meaning.

Rudy hunched his shoulders like a crow. “What kind of question is that?” He looked around suspiciously. “Anyone could tell you that. And *you*—” he aimed a righteous finger at her; his docility had vaporized “—you, of all people, are the one who ought to know!”

What did *that* mean? Alarmed, she stood straighter and taller, an animal scenting the wind. What if he actually told her what she thought she wanted to hear?

“Does it ... ” she searched for the best words ... “what does it have to do with me?”

Rudy looked over his shoulder, as if a video camera might be concealed in the bushes along the gate, capturing his feeble response to this interrogation.

“What are you getting at, Judy?” he demanded.

She had not expected him to get angry. She sighed—but not as a prelude to abandoning the topic; she was preparing herself for even uglier outbursts.

“Do you hate him,” she began again, “... even partially ... because of something he might have done to me?”

“To you?” Rudy looked perplexed, but then his eyes brightened. He began to snicker mirthlessly. “Are you just figuring this out? Well, you’re the smartest girl I know, but anyone with half a brain can see Dallas Early has to own the deed to every damn thing in sight—including you and your mom. That’s just, well, sickening, if you ask me. Believe me, honey, nothing’s worse than some asshole laying claim to your girls, like they were—”

“But that’s what he did to *you*, Dad,” Jude said, realizing she had pushed a button whose function could not be canceled.

“No fuckin’ shit—that is the God’s honest truth.” He took her arm now, triumphantly, and led her toward the truck. “I am goddamn glad to hear you agree.”

* * *

She had asked Claudia not to honk, but Claudia failed to oblige. She tooted the horn and waved as she roared away from the curb, leaving Jude holding her breath against the car’s exhaust. Reluctantly, she turned to proceed up the slate-stone walk,

resigned to the possibility that, once inside, her mother might be waiting at the head of the stairs, clutching her dressing gown.

She unlocked the front door and pulled it open with a *shhushh*. At the end of the hallway, the den lights blazed, not a promising sign. It was well past eleven. She had arrived home late on purpose. They were supposed to be in bed.

But there was no “they” tonight, she remembered. Halfway down the stairs that morning, she had heard their voices and turned to hurry back to her room. They should have been gone by then (almost noon), but it was a special day, evidently, and she paused to eavesdrop. Dallas was leaving for Tahoe and would be back the following evening, barring any unforeseen complications. This meant he would be wining and dining one or more of his wealthiest clients—the East Coast or Pacific Rim executives he entertained at South Shore. His firm owned a lakeside house, a boat, a private landing strip. Jude had been there three or four times, had skidded down that runway in the company’s private plane, sun flashing through the Ponderosa pines.

Barring the unforeseen ...

With grim satisfaction, she replayed the image that had thrilled her that morning when she had overheard his plans: his plane cartwheeling down the landing strip in a shower of sparks, flipping into the stunning blue perfection of the lake.

The living room lights were not lit for him. Josie was up and waiting for *her*. They were alone in the house together. Jude felt flushed with discomfort. How did she look? She glanced down at her clothes: her usual amorphous ensemble, though several layers lighter since winter had begun to give way to spring and the weather had appreciably warmed. Her overall look was still formless, however. She might have been wearing a sleeping bag. Anonymous as anyone might be.

“Is that you, Judy?” Josie called.

Knowing better than to follow that voice, yet magnetized by it, Jude allowed it to lead her down the hallway. She stepped timidly into the room. Josie was sunken into one of the brocade armchairs, her stocking feet propped on the matching ottoman, ankles crossed. She peered over the top of her reading glasses, apparently unaware they made her look her age.

“How was the group therapy tonight?”

Jude flapped her hands like flippers, as though her arms were tied to her sides. “Okay,” she said. Actually, there had been no group session. They had gone out for pie and coffee and gossip.

“C’mon and sit here by me.” Josie set her paperwork down and took her feet off the ottoman, patting the matching chair next to her. “Have yourself a seat.”

The light was much brighter in this part of the room. Or perhaps it was Josie herself. There was something abnormally vivid about her—and not just her apple-green kimono and sparkling white teeth. She glowed like the exquisite Tiffany lamp on her nightstand upstairs, rainbow chips forming the illusion of fruit.

Jude dropped into the chair.

“Someone’s going to have a birthday soon,” Josie said, stretching over to jostle Jude’s knee.

Why must she always touch like this? There was something proprietary about it, not like Kat’s approach at all. Kat, though not literally a mother, was the one with a mother’s touch—accepting, substantial, encouraging—none of this poking and testing and tentatively laying claim. Jude felt like a piece of produce her mother might or might not select.

The jostling ended as quickly as it had begun, and Jude supposed what her mother said was true. Her birthday *was* at the end of February. Really, though, it was theirs to remember. They would do with it what they would.

“You’re going to be twenty-two. We ought to celebrate, don’t you think?”

Only part of Josie’s face was smiling. The mouth was curved, a melon rind, but the lines around her eyes steadfastly refused to lift. The radiance had shifted. This close, in this particular light, there was a lustrous sheen to her skin, her hair, her gown; she possessed a reflective radiance, to be sure. But she was not its source. All faceted surface: Jude had long ago concluded this was the dismaying truth about her mother, but somehow was fooled time and time again.

“Welllllll,” Josie drawled, eyes widening dramatically, which made her look even sadder. “I was thinking we should do something special—just us two.”

Her hands, sleek and pampered, held each other in her lap. They were there for each other, and so were Jude’s, secretly clenching inside the folds of her clothes. One

in particular was an abomination—but which were more vulnerable, Josie’s hands or hers? Which was worse: damage done, or that which might occur?

“Sure,” Jude heard herself say. The actual topic was damage, though Jude was the only one who knew it. Was it possible Josie simply did not *wear* the damage she suffered? Because it did not become her? “Just us two,” Jude echoed, pausing to reflect on what that could possibly mean. “I mean,” she added, “if that’s what you want to do.”

Josie beamed at her. “But it’s *your* birthday. We should do what *you* want.”

Anger punched her in the chest, but she would keep it to herself. If she had appropriated one thing from her mother, it was this. She raised one shoulder, half a shrug. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Well, allow me to suggest a just-us-girls kind of thing. Wouldn’t that be great? I can’t remember the last time—” Josie broke off. The lovely fingers fluttered to the mouth, tapping it shut as if she had just let a secret slip.

“Oh, Judy, I just get so busy, and time just flies by, and Dallas has been saying that you and I —”

Jude felt a piston in her back, ejecting her from the sofa. Somehow she remained seated. “Dallas?”

But Josie prevailed, though Jude could not piece it back together: the exact alignment of cooing and near-tearfulness that had convinced her it would be worse to refuse Josie’s offer than to accept. Despite the fact Dallas had suggested this plan, or at the very least had been consulted, Jude was on her way to that rendezvous now. The bus arrived and she boarded (she had wandered downtown, deliberately avoiding the ride to the mall with her mother); its swaying motion gave physical shape to her mood: nodding, plodding ahead for no good reason, because that’s all there was to be done.

As the mall approached, she spotted Josie a full block away. Arrayed in lemon yellow, she was as sunny as the daffodils along the department-store facade. Jude stepped down from the bus and crossed the parking lot in long loping strides, wanting to be there and gone. The sooner she arrived, the sooner she might leave.

“Happy birthday!” Josie said.

Over her mother's shoulder, in the black-glass entrance doors, Jude could see her rippling reflection. She was a full head taller than Josie, and might have been a street urchin panhandling the lady mayor for spare change. Beyond them, a row of plum trees were bursting into purple leaf.

They entered the mall and sound overtook her. Cries of children echoed from the domed ceiling, music spilled from open store fronts. People stopped abruptly in their path, laughed and talked with their mouths full of food. Jude had been nowhere like this for months. The dining commons at school had distressed her in much the same way—dishes clattering, male voices booming, girls shrilling like blackbirds, speakers churning techno rock—all of it weirdly amplified, funneled directly into her head. She gave up trying to eat there after several abortive attempts to find a quiet corner. Fleeing back to her dorm room, she had crushed a pillow to her chest.

The same pressure squeezed her lungs now. She craved the isolation of her closet, the only known antidote—not just for its privacy and the nearness of her things, but also that blueberry bunny was there. She understood now why you might want to have one.

But Josie had her arm slung through hers. Her pace was brisk. Her softly coiffed hair tickled Jude's jaw, delicate, light as breath. Her mother would take care of everything.

Suddenly they were in Caldwell's. The tones were neutral. The echoes hushed. Josie piloted her towards the escalator but stopped to accept a spritz of cologne from a salesgirl. She delicately sniffed her wrist then, smiling, raised it to Jude's nose. The scent was narcissus, cloying, and Jude felt an urge to gag. But Josie gaily looped her arm through hers again and they stepped onto the escalator. Chrome and glass slid by, and then mannequins draped in pastels, their arms held at odd angles.

A store this posh might never have come to Dunning had it not been for Josie's knack for introducing the right people. She had represented the seller, an apricot grower anxious to cash in on inflated land values before the market crashed (which it never did, Josie was proud to report—values, county-wide, had since climbed even higher). The buyers and their agent had worked with Josie before, on a much smaller acquisition in Madrona, and Josie just happened to know someone who knew the

Caldwell's location scout. Wouldn't it be perfect if they all could be her weekend guests at the Big Valley Bed & Breakfast, have a lavish Sunday brunch, take a tour of the property and the entire Dunning east side: the country club, Villa Miranda, the other outposts of wealth that proclaimed the town's as-yet-untapped consumer potential? Dunning, she had assured them, was destined to be the envy of the Central Valley, home to its transplanted elite. Dallas always sat back with a crooked smile whenever Josie told this story. Negotiating the deal for the mall had been one thing; maneuvering Caldwell's into the equation had been another.

It was the anchor store. It was deserted. Mother and daughter had the vast tasteful beigeness of it virtually to themselves. Three floors up, though, and they stepped from the escalator into a pocket of sound. Televisions, high above, pulsed with music. Jude stared up. The same singer appeared on each screen, lunging towards her then away. Her mother was talking to a woman in a beret; above them, a metallic cursive sign said *Escapades*. And then Josie was grasping her by the shoulders, guiding her into the dressing room, helping her out of her clothes. She hung the hooded sweatshirt on a hook then tugged the butterscotch cords from Jude's ankles and held them by her fingertips.

"Good lord, Judy, you've had these since the beginning of time." She laughed. "I swear, more and more you're just like—" She stopped short.

"My dad," Jude said. In her undershirt and briefs, she shivered.

There was a tap on the slatted door and Josie leaned out of the room, carefully keeping the door half-shut.

"Well, no, those are a little too ... I don't know ... flashy. Whatever the *college* girls are wearing these days. Something, you know, smart." She pulled back into the room and folded her arms over her chest.

"You are thin, thin, thin," she tsked. "It's just not fashionable any more, Judy. You've got to put some curves on all those angles!"

Jude breathed as steadily as possible. Goose bumps prickled down her limbs. She hunched forward to try to warm herself, conserving heat, but her own hair tickled her now as it fell across her arms and thighs. She shivered uncontrollably.

"And if you had a little padding, you wouldn't be so cold."

“Could I have a glass of water?” She wasn’t particularly thirsty, but felt the need to ask for something and this is what came to mind.

Josie bunched her lips unhappily. “You okay, honey? You look awfully pale.”

“I’d just like a drink of water.”

“Sure, baby...” She slipped from the room, calling for the saleswoman.

Jude slid to the floor, pulling the sweatshirt down from the hook as she went. Gathering it around her shoulders, she lay on her side, drawing her knees to her chest. A fetal curl: reasonably safe, or at least as safe as she could be, considering.

But then her mother was leaning over her, saying something Jude couldn’t hear. Something wet fell onto her face. “Up, honey, up!” Josie whispered hoarsely, and Jude allowed herself to be propped in a sitting position, and then to be dressed. The cup of water Josie had brought had spilled onto the carpet. The saleswoman tapped on the door, but Josie told her thank you, they didn’t need a single thing.

Josie gnawed at her thumb as she steered the Mercedes, one-handed, onto the boulevard, no doubt stifling an urge to cry out. Her face was drained of color, her hair was slack. Jude made these observations from three feet away, limp in the passenger seat, yet at such a distance she might have been scanning the horizon through binoculars. Just past the first stoplight, though, Josie slapped both palms against the steering wheel, veering suddenly to the right, and Jude knew exactly how dangerously close they were sitting. They were turning back toward the mall.

“We are going to do this right, Judy Marie Hazelden.” Josie looked straight ahead as she spoke. “I know you are not well, but we’re not going to let that interfere with the fact that this is your birthday. Whether you can participate or not, I am going to buy you something nice.”

Jude had not buckled her seat belt, but she did so when Josie went back into the store. She waited with no curiosity, plucking at her sweatshirt, watching mothers with children look both ways before crossing to the glass-doored entrance. She had stood before that entrance not so long before. She had been a tree, not nearly as tall or robust as those plum trees, an undernourished kind of tree, perhaps even diseased, swaying unsteadily over a flower-woman in yellow. And here she came now, yellow suit, copper hair (one of her mottos: *only redheads can wear any shade of yellow they like!*),

a Caldwell's shopping bag banging against her thigh. There was a click and then a crackling sound as the bag was hefted onto the back seat.

Birthdays. Always theirs.

Eventually the car coasted into the garage, the door lowered automatically behind them, and the main thing now was to minimize conversation, explanation—to avoid them completely, if that could be done—to promptly creep into her closet and seal herself inside. She wanted to try out that bunny; she wished she'd kept him in her pocket all along.

But Josie had other objectives. They did not involve conversation. Without a word, she led Jude from the car and into the house, up the stairs and into the master bathroom, shutting her inside with the shopping bag.

This was a dream; she had dreamt it before, one of those dreams where you must flee for your life but cannot. This dream involved modeling clothes for her mother. She would not be able to stop herself from doing it—walking and turning and dipping (but with an ironic little flourish that would not be recognized as such). There would be much tugging and adjusting to get the garment to hang right. Maybe a trying-on of certain shoes to see how well they matched. An accessory or two. And then it would be over. Her mother, victorious, would retreat.

Numbed to passivity, she fumbled through the tissue in the bag. First came a scalloped collar, a lace-edged vertical placket, the trimmings on a conservative crepe blouse no college girl would ever wear; a woman Josie's age might wear it to a luncheon. She fingered the lace, its intricate loops, and was disappointed that such a thing existed—even this lace, which was yielding and soft, but especially the stiff, brittle kind ... bristling like a man's fiercest whiskers. It had scraped the virgin skin beneath her arms. With no warning, she was wearing it again, imprisoned: she had been bound in it, as a foot might be ritually bound. Her bare shoulders had been nearly scorched. Fingers fumbled with the hooks in back—the Perfect Fantasy staff, cinching her into this device ... and then later, other fingers released her from it. A girl ought to have a taste, he had said. Something slid into her mouth (the women in her group had all known what this was). She and Dallas were in his car. An airless space. The smell and taste of alcohol, onions, cigars.

She dropped the blouse and hugged herself as if to stop from falling. There was more. There was a voice. *You're such a good reader*, he was saying. But not in his car. Some other place, another time. She could not see his face. A book was thrust beneath her nose. Bedclothes covered her upper body, but were thrown back below, revealing her legs, which rude insistent palms had wrenched wide open. *Read this for me*, he said. *Out loud.*

And her trembling little-girl voice began.

Jude glared at the bathroom mirror, assessing it in a brutal instant. Her hand could not possibly break through. The rest of the room: granite, porcelain, Mediterranean tile, impenetrably dense and sleek. But there were other solutions. She flung open the cabinets. She looked under the sink.

Behind a box of perfumed tampons, she found what she needed, a packet of single-sided razor blades.

Now she could relax.

She stripped down to her cords and, pausing to consider how loyal and dependable they had been, removed them, too. She held them aloft by the belt loops, just as her mother had done in the dressing room, then let them drop onto the bath mat. Her underpants followed, and then she stepped inside the tub.

She slid down to sitting; she angled her legs in a wide-open V, much as they had been in that vision, that dream.

Her right hand, still weak, approximated a pinch, grasping an inch of upper inner thigh.

Her left hand, so sure and strong it might have been her dominant one, held the blank side of a blade. If Helen could cut with her left, so could she.

Her mother knocked on the door.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Fine, Mom ... be out in a minute," she said, stalling. Then, a brainstorm.

"Wasn't there a package in the breezeway when we came in?"

"Was there?" Jude could picture her just outside, knuckles poised to rap again.

"There must have been a delivery. It looked pretty big."

The tooth of the blade against her skin—the coldest, sharpest kiss imaginable. It might have been a man licking her thigh, so illicit was the pleasure of concealing this tryst—just barely—from her mother.

“Well, I’ll go look,” Josie said, and her footsteps tapped toward the stairway. “Can’t wait to see how you look in that . . . ” but her voice was trailing away.

“*Now*,” Jude said aloud.

She tugged the blade across the skin; the flesh resisted then *gave*. A sudden tongue of blood. An astonished pause and then: impossible arcs of pain. She doubled forward, holding the blade above her head. Blood sluiced into her crotch, then down toward the drain, a falsely menstrual cherry rivulet. The roots of her teeth throbbed as if exposed; the wound pulsed, though not visibly. *Oh my god* was the rhythm. *Ohshitomigod*. But then the pulsing slowed.

“Happy birthday,” she said, her breath slowing, nearly normal, “Happy birthday to me.”

* * *

Victoria seemed to know, though Jude wasn’t telling. Even Helen, her inspiration, could not know.

Helen was rocking and worming a finger up her sleeve, but listening devotedly, head and shoulders lifted, not curled into herself like a sow bug—alert, yet giving no sign she was reading between the lines. Though they were blood sisters now, in a spiritual sort of way, though Helen more than anyone might be expected to divine the truth, she was not the type to demand the unexpurgated story, or even to suspect certain details (entire segments) might be missing.

Victoria, however, leaned forward tensely, elbows on her knees, knuckles pressed to her lower lip, as if watching a horror film she’d seen before and couldn’t stop herself from watching again. *I know what’s coming*, her entire posture conveyed to anyone who cared to notice.

Past all of them, over their heads, the classroom windows glowed orange-purple, a slurring of sunset colors. Days had stretched longer; the morning air might stink of

fertilizer or pesticide or tomato sludge from the cannery, depending on the breeze. Only a few days had passed since she had hurried across the pavement at Caldwell's, but that was enough time for the sun to put on its springtime face. The remote sun of winter was now a thing of the past and there could be such a thing as a sunset again. She watched it through vaulted classroom windows, purple ink overtaking the orange rind of dusk.

She was trying to tell them about the book she had remembered, though she had precious few details to share. She had been commanded to read aloud. That much she knew. Her entire lower half had been naked and uncovered. She was a young girl, though she could not say how old.

Questions were popping from all sides.

"What book?"

"Where did this happen?"

"How old were you when your so-called mother married that son of a bitch?"

"Maybe you can tell us, Jude—" this was Kat's way of putting a lid on the questions, especially Claudia's "—how you felt. How you're feeling now."

The slices in her thigh felt tender as rosebuds: three scabbed-over ridges, nearly parallel. Three signified something, though she did not know what. More than anything, she felt weak in the presence of their power. A strip of bandage protected them, but this was hardly sufficient. They nearly glowed through the corduroy of her pants. An itching burning thrill ran from groin to knee.

"I feel confused," she said, the partial truth: confused about what had transpired—back then, as a child—but not about this purifying act. By the time she had sliced the third line into her thigh (each one easier, more exquisite) and her mother was pounding on the door, she had gained a missionary sense of clarity. What recklessly had begun with a fist punched through glass had reached fulfillment in this precision. This was *her* body. Just like her birthday, she was taking it back.

"I'll come out when I'm goddamn ready," she had yelled at her mother with a belligerence worthy of Claudia, and turned both taps full blast. "For your information, I'm taking a bath." If Josie made any response, it was obscured by the thundering water, frothing pink with blood.

"I don't really know what happened back then," she said to Kat, who was sitting nowhere near Victoria tonight, all the better for avoiding Victoria's gaze and *that* feeling of nakedness.

"Our *minds* sometimes don't know what happened," Kat began to lecture, indicating her own brow, "but—" she touched her breast, just below the Gaia charm "—our inner selves know. And if you *think* you know, that's good enough. Let me ask you this, Jude. What do you think that book was about?"

"Sex," Jude said bluntly, without hesitation.

Kat nodded. "See? A moment before, you didn't know that you knew."

"A sex book!" Claudia grunted. "No shit. Isn't that what they all want to hear a little girl read?"

"What kind of sex?" Tawny asked. Her hair was swept up in chopsticks; her nails gleamed plum-black, the same shade as her lips.

"What *kind*?" This was Victoria. She was tugging the scarf at her throat, as though it had suddenly tightened. The gesture made Jude realize she always wore scarves or high collars. Her neck was never exposed.

"This isn't some sleazy talk show," Victoria was saying. "We're not interested in that." Tawny frowned at this, which caused Victoria to nearly jump out of her chair with passion. "This girl is in real pain."

"Ladies—" Kat interrupted.

"Ladies?" Claudia sounded cynically amused.

Thanks to this diversion, Jude could stare at Victoria, who was still worrying the knot in her scarf. What did she know? How could she know it? The razor wounds felt like a hole where a tooth has been extracted, impossibly raw.

Kat was giving them instruction, reminding each and every one of them that *agitation was opportunity*, a valuable clue. If Victoria was outraged at Tawny, this might very well point to similar outrages in the past. What, she must ask, was the source of this disturbance? Where was the original wound? Kat seemed to be introducing a journey-to-that-safe-place-inside, and Victoria was obediently closing her eyes (for which Jude was grateful), but then she veered back to the topic at hand.

“Tell us about that book,” Kat said suddenly to Jude. “I sense this is really important.”

Just as important was the fact that Kat was taking it seriously. Why had no one ever cared like this? Why had no one ever given the slightest shit? Jude thought she caught a glimpse of violet, an aura, around Kat’s shoulders and head.

It had been right under her nose, so close she could hardly see it. “It was about—” she began, and decided to believe she knew what the book contained. She could not see the words on the page, nor hear her own voice, reading shakily aloud (she could hear the despairing timbre of her pitch, but not what she was saying), yet this absence of detail did not matter. Kat had given her, all of them, explicit permission to believe. Believing you know, she repeatedly coached them, was a magic window into memory. You must have the courage to believe in yourself, that the deepest parts of you know the utter truth. This was the surest method for overcoming the resistance of the mind, the protective device—repression—blocking out the horrors of the past. This device has served a magnificent purpose: suppressing the hideous facts that might threaten sanity, even survival. But now you are safe, you are strong, you are surrounded by friends, you can inquire directly of those memories, urge that self-protective instinct to relinquish its hold, its fierce possession of your past. Believe! You will be astounded how right you might be.

“The book was about a man,” Jude said. Heads nodded at this commonplace (even Victoria’s, eyes still shut). “And he was going to visit—” she flicked an uneasy glance at Tawny, amazed to see her eyes were closed, too “—a prostitute.”

Claudia grumbled volcanically but did not speak.

“A girl prostitute,” Jude added, feeling bolder though slightly out of control. “A child.”

A stunned pause. A pit might have opened at their feet. They all clung to their tiny chairs, as if fearing the gaping mouth of it.

Then Claudia spoke. “If I don’t get my hands on a phone book in about five seconds, I am going to tear something else to bits.”

Kat ignored her. “A child prostitute,” she said. She looked grief-stricken but joyous, beatific. She might have seen Christ rise to heaven. Saint Kat. She would suffer

with them, on their behalf. This was possibly the most horribly beautiful, the most beautifully horrible, thing she had ever heard.

“He ... he’s in love with this girl, but he can’t marry her because he’s already married.” Jude scarcely knew what she was saying, but there was a rightness to it she could not deny. “And besides, she’s just ... just ... she’s just nine!” Her friends recoiled, but she could not pause to take it in. The girl might or might not have been nine. Jude herself might or might not have been nine—a child of indeterminate age when she held this book under her chin, shielding herself from the sight of her own body and whatever was going on next to the bed.

“It’s in London, a hundred years ago. He’s a rich man, and he and his friends sort of own this girl, but he’s jealous and wants her all to himself. He goes on and on about her auburn ringlets and dainty ankles and alabaster skin, though he never actually describes what he does to her.”

She paused, searching for a name. Several came to mind. “Barbara?” she wondered aloud. “Belinda? No, it’s ... what can it be?” She looked at her empty lap; she had decided not to bring the bunny (although she had learned to awkwardly cuddle it, that seemed an entirely private matter). “Bunny,” she said softly, apologetically, and then it came to her, “Bonnie!” She smiled. “Right, of course, Bonnie! That’s it; that’s her name. And *Fair Bonnie*,” she added, proud to have pieced it together, “is the name of the book.”

Breathless, exhilarated, she stopped. The group looked as if a whirlwind had passed through. Everyone was weirdly slumped, disheveled.

The power of believing: so simple yet stunning. She could see they all believed every word.

* * *

It was the last dinner they were to share together, just the three of them.

“You haven’t touched your game hen,” Josie said after a silence. There had been an attempt at conversation, but Jude’s sullenness prevailed.

Her mother's hair was a new shade of red that evening, a spicy fiesta shade, fiery as a habañero. She was wielding her knife and fork European-style—something she and Dallas had learned together after they began socializing with a certain crowd. But Jude's chief concern was the disturbing cavern in the tiny roasted fowl on her plate, its hapless upthrust legs.

Dallas was helping himself to several spears of asparagus. Hollandaise sauce dripped from the serving spoon. Noticing this, clenching her jaw, Jude resisted the urge to pound the defenseless little hen and send her flying. Instead, she meticulously folded her napkin and set it next to her plate, then placed her knife and fork in their correct positions on top of it, restoring the place setting as if she had never been there. She pushed back her chair and stood.

Both of them were chewing, but Dallas swallowed first. "Where you off to, Judy?" he asked, dabbing moisture from the corner of his mouth.

Her rage was as white as that sauce. Before, she had merely loathed him. He had been a pompous shallow show-off whose worst sin had been theft: stealing her mother away, robbing her father blind. But now she knew what actually and had always been at stake. She slid her chair back under the table, sealing the scene, making sure the food on her plate was the only sign she might have joined them.

"Nowhere," she said, and left.

It was an early April night, honeyed and fragrant with night-blooming jasmine, viburnum, just-mown grass—as fresh an evening in Dunning as there might ever be. The sky vaulted westward in a pale lavender arc, the street lamps in Villa Miranda glowed like distant moons. Porch lights on neighbors' houses seemed uncannily inviting. Pulling off her sweatshirt and tying it around her waist, letting the soft air swim up the sleeves of her t-shirt, she could almost forget what kind of life those neighbors might (or might not) live: a district executive for Munson Foods who smoked a pipe even when shearing his hedges, the sportscoat-wearing owner of the downtown Madrona Pontiac/GMC dealership, a dermatologist and his latest wife (who was maybe the same age as his youngest son), a perpetually tan-and-fit couple who commuted back and forth like boomerangs to Pac Bell's headquarters in San Ramon—they had all been occasional dinner guests *Chez Early* and they all seemed, in their own ways, as

profoundly invested in the New Valley Economy as Josie and Dallas. Could it be, then, that there was actually *no one home* at any of the mission-style haciendas she was passing? The red tile roofs, the arched stucco facades, the three-car garages, the ticking and hissing of rainbirds and sprinklers over lawns clipped to perfection by Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmong: all of it affirmed for Jude, *yes*, this is where the bankrupt migrated to pretend they were wealthy. Everyone around them would corroborate each others' stories.

She passed the gatehouse at the Villa Miranda entrance and picked up her pace. All the better for going nowhere faster. Perhaps she would ride the bus from one end town to the other and back and forth again, until it stopped running at midnight. This once had been her nightly habit, when P.J. first went off to Brown.

He was with her tonight, haunting her. The scent of springtime made his presence almost physical. She allowed herself to acknowledge it now, as she approached the bus shelter and there was nothing left for her to despise (no invidious displays of affluence—just an unremarkable small-town boulevard, cars whizzing past). The jasmine scent was stronger here—a profusion grew wild behind the shelter—but commingled now with exhaust fumes and the odor of charred burgers from the fast-food stop down the road. This clinched it for her, this olfactory combination. P.J. had finally come home, in spirit at least.

She sat on the bench in the shelter, leaned back and closed her eyes. Spring nights, and summers, too, they had roamed the streets—on foot as children, and later in his mother's car. There was nothing like spring, though, for its streak of hopeless optimism. Every flowering plant in Dunning seemed to choose the same two-week interval in April to bloom to its height and exude its fragrance into the air. They knew, Jude was sure, that summer was coming and, if they waited a moment too long to give it their all, their chance would be past, irretrievably. Two weeks to live your whole life—imagine. Then summer bore down and defied anything to survive its heat.

This was a desert, after all. *A freakin' desert*, P.J. liked to inform her as he drove, one hand on the wheel, the other incessantly fiddling with the radio, trying to catch the weak signal of a hip but far-too-distant San Francisco station. They would be riding out to the river, or making the huge loop toward Riverbank and back, the windows rolled

down, the tepid air a rippling skein of silk over their skin. *As a matter of fact, if it wasn't for brilliant lawyers like Dallas Early, we'd all be wearing burnooses and living in yurts.* He was referring to Dallas having made a name for himself, long ago, as an advocate for corporate water subsidies.

He was referring, too, to his idolization of Dallas—the man whom he would most like to become. P.J. was destined to become an attorney.

She heard a roar, a screech of brakes. She opened her eyes. A glinting box loomed out of the twilight; the bus driver seemed to be floating in metallic blue ice. Reaching into her pocket, she found a five-dollar-bill and a fistful of change. The door hissed open, she paid her fare.

Blood money, she decided, examining Lincoln's suffering eyes on the bill as she took a seat behind the driver. Any money she had came from Dallas. She still received an allowance, and Dallas always provided it. When left up to Josie, the amount might double or triple, depending on how anxious she was for Jude to have a marvelous time. This had been a chronic source of humiliation—accepting cash from that man. But she now smoothed the bill flat on her thigh with a quickening sense of triumph. This, she realized, might be only the beginning. Dallas *owed* her. Anyone would agree (except P.J., struck dumb by his devotion, who never imagined what it might be like to be female and live under that man's roof).

In the first row of forward-facing seats, a young woman held a baby in her lap and another child wriggled beside her. The older child, possibly four or five, had several fingers stuck in her mouth, and was sucking them hungrily, her hand slick with saliva. Repulsed, Jude turned away. The slimy fingers made her want to pitch herself at the window opposite like a bird trapped inside a room. But with a start, she saw a face looking at her from that window, its contours possibly familiar. Her reflection.

She rarely glanced in mirrors. The face in the glass was hollow-cheeked. Her lank hair clung to her head, oily, unshampooed, revealing the ovoid shape of her skull. She might have stared at this fright mask for the remainder of her ride, but the five-dollar-bill fluttered to the floor. The baby squawked. Jude bent to retrieve the money.

It was Dallas' again when she picked it up. She knew how disgusting her hands would smell from having handled it.

* * *

“Bonnie!” her mother’s voice rang from the foyer below.

The name rose like a fury, igniting panic in Jude’s breast, an impulse to leap over the railing and make a tremendous splat below. She had just stepped into the upstairs hallway, intending to tiptoe to the bathroom and scurry back to her room as soon as she could. She had known some gala affair was planned for this morning, but she hadn’t awakened early enough to flee the premises.

“How fabulous to see you!” Josie’s gaiety was sharp as broken glass.

Jude knew instantly the visitor was Bonnie Reyes, one of Dallas’ business associates. But what if she was the *real* Bonnie? What if there had been an accidental, unconscious borrowing of this name? Bonnie, fair Bonnie, was now legend in her circle. Any of her friends could recite the story—a gentleman’s obsession, a girl in saucy ringlets and bloomers and slatternly paint. Paint: just like the slutty make-up glommed on for that purported glamour shot. Details had emerged over the intervening weeks. Dallas had forced the book on her one night when her mother had been out, but Jude could not imagine where her mother might have been. She could not see what he was doing beside the bed, though her friends helped her fill in that blank. In all other respects, the story was complete.

Or so she had assumed.

Bonnie’s voice replied to Josie’s. “I hope you don’t mind—we brought Constanza and Estaban.”

“Oh, not at all!” Josie answered, nearly shrieking. This was not an event for children—even Jude knew that. They were going to spoil some grand design, and Jude felt a prickling desire to see how it would all play out, how flustered her mother would become, to what hopeless lengths she might go to hide her displeasure.

She was almost grateful now to have overslept. Technically, though, she hadn’t overslept at all. She simply hadn’t roused herself early. For weeks now, she had been sleeping until early afternoon—till long after they were gone for the day—then took diligent care to disappear hours before dinner was even a remote possibility, returning

only after they were sure to be in bed, no earlier than one or two a.m. It was the only way she could continue to live here (and where else could she live?)—never to see them. Ever. Weekends were trickier because they were often at home; there were sometimes even guests. But she laid low on those days, cultivating non-action, the art of waiting, feigning sleep, so convincingly unobtrusive she heard them conferring in the upstairs hallway more than once: was Judy there or not?

Yet they never opened her door to check. By mutual agreement, a precarious *détente* had been achieved.

“Mommy!” This might have been either of Bonnie’s children. They were a year apart, pre-school age. Bonnie insisted on the use of their full names—never Connie, never Steve—because Bonnie was an anglicized Bonita. Her immigrant parents—a field hand, a dry-cleaning attendant—had altered her name when she entered school. So she would have a better chance, they said. And she had, though no one could say how much difference her new name had made. Her own children, though, would not be denied their heritage.

“Isn’t that . . . thoughtful!” Josie had exclaimed when first hearing this story a year or two before—another *soirée* where children were not especially welcome, as Jude recalled.

“Where’s the sheriff?” the child’s voice added. Jude guessed it was Estaban; it was a little boy’s question.

“The sheriff?” Josie seemed alarmed, but tittered. “Oh, of course, the sheriff will be here, and so will the mayor, and the county commissioner and members of the water district board—and of course our esteemed state representative, Mr. Raymond Ayala.”

“Very nice to see you, Mrs. Early,” said Bonnie’s husband. Jude could not recall his name, or even what he looked like, having met him maybe twice before—once at that South Shore vacation retreat. But she didn’t care about him. Bonnie was the one that mattered. Though Jude had seen her only half-a-dozen times, she could picture her clearly. Lean and young and stylish with a diffident, stern sort of manner: a real ball-buster, Rudy might say. This was reassuring. She was not the sort of Bonnie to be confused with a nineteenth-century waif, a pathetic plaything for upper-class lechers. This Bonnie wore power suits with short skirts and, according to Dallas, was sharp as a tack,

the most principled, uncompromising labor-relations consultant in the entire Valley. He made this assertion repeatedly. He seemed especially concerned that Josie comprehend this. More than once, Bonnie's qualifications had been a topic of discussion at the dinner table.

Jude edged closer to the railing to better eavesdrop. The children, she realized, were not her mother's chief concern.

But they had all moved down the hallway. The "affair" was taking place. Jude would go downstairs to join them, invited or not.

She had the appropriate outfit. Still wrapped in tissue in that Caldwell's bag, though crumpled from having been stuffed behind her bedstead, was the scallop-collared blouse. Inside the bag, too, was a calf-length skirt, also miserably wrinkled. Jude put them both on. There were no mirrors in her room. She attempted to brush her hair, but it was tangled from neglect. She found a ponytail-holder under her bed and tried to loop her hair through that, but she was out of practice. Her hair was too long to manage. She would use one of her mother's headscarves. Besides, she needed to borrow a pair of her shoes—her ratty Keds would not do.

She hurried down the hall and flung open the door to the master bath, which could be entered from the hallway as well as the master suite. A stash of hair ornaments could be found there; she had seen them when rummaging for razor blades, months before. She had not been back in this room since then. It felt like entering a shrine, every sculpted surface as polished and flawless as it had been in that miraculous hour. She glimpsed herself in the mirror, and was rewarded with a vaguely satisfying sense of her disarray: an unfortunate urchin in dishonored Liz Claiborne coordinates. But the main thing was her hair.

She found a turban. She laughed out loud, so wildly apt was this discovery. Her mother wore this contraption when she smeared her weekly mud pack on her face, but never in public, never even downstairs. Jude fitted it onto her head, a persimmon satin wrap with navy paisleys, garishly glamorous, something a cheap flapper might wear. She did not tuck her hair into it; it streamed out below.

She was ready to make an appearance. Forgetting the shoes, she headed downstairs, barefoot.

There was no one in the hallway, though she could hear voices coming from the main rooms along it. As she passed the front parlor, a small compact man in a bow tie exhaled a blue stream of cigar smoke. “A bit ahead of schedule, but we’re already considering slogans,” he told the group surrounding him. “Something emphasizing his service to the people, having a name you can trust. You know, ‘Ayala Has the Record.’ That kind of thing.”

Heads bobbed as if weighing this wisdom. A woman bit into a canapé and took a sip from a champagne flute. “What about the incumbent?” another woman asked.

“Well, we’re hoping for a Republican rout, and all the polls suggest that’s exactly—”

But Jude stopped listening. She was remotely interested in the possibility that some of these people were familiar, but only remotely. They were Dallas’ partners, perhaps, or his country club cronies; Josie’s co-chairs from the downtown renovation committee, or the Madrona EuroSport dealer from whom she leased her car. They’d been here before, Jude was certain, though there was no one she actually recognized. None of them had not noticed her, and she fancied herself a genie in her turban— invisible at will. As invisible as she’d ever been. All the better to disingenuously spy.

A man and a woman stepped into the hallway. The woman was handing the man a business card from her purse. “Of course, with Dallas behind him, Ray isn’t going to need to do much formal fund-raising, but if he ever wants to throw any sort of theme event—ranchero, say, or maybe multicultural? agricultural abundance is a smart one, too—you be sure to call me first.”

They both saw Jude. They froze mid-step. Clearly, they were missing the point that she was invisible, but that was *their* problem. She moved past them without excusing herself.

Albertina came through the swinging kitchen door with a trayful of steaming scones. Seeing Jude, her eyes popped wide and she hastily set the tray on a leggy antique table in the hall; the table wobbled, but Albertina seemed not to notice. “Miss Judy, you come with me,” she said, and led her into the kitchen.

A crew of helpers crowded the kitchen space, Albertina’s sister and sister-in-law, her nieces and nephews, a few of their friends. Every surface was cluttered, pastries

and paté and fruit cups were arrayed on platters in various stages of assembly. Steam billowed above the stovetop in the center island. It was a lovely, rich-smelling chaos: coffee, baked goods, ham and roast beef. But Albertina was guiding her across the room, to the back stairs leading up to the maid's room, which was never used as such—they didn't have a live-in maid—but was furnished as an extra guest room (which no one ever used).

“You better go upstairs and rest,” she said.

Albertina's assistants were busily pinching dough, slicing meat, stirring, chopping, sprinkling sugar, but Jude could sense their hooded sidelong glances. She was making an appearance after all.

A delighted giggle came from the breakfast nook. A little girl was smiling, pointing at her. Constanza. She was on Dallas' lap.

Bonnie was seated across from them. She and Dallas were oblivious to everything around them, locked into conversation, an intensely private tête-à-tête. But he was bouncing his leg, jostling Constanza, who was semi-straddling his thigh.

“Momma!” Constanza said, trying to get her mother to look at the funny lady.

Albertina tugged Jude toward the stairs, but she yanked her arm away. “I'm not going anywhere!” she said, loud enough to cause Dallas to look up.

“Judy, what the hell ...?”

Josie came bursting through the swinging door.

“There you are!” she fumed at Dallas, clearly exasperated. She took a long look at Bonnie then planted her fists on her hips, facing her husband. He continued to bobble the toddler on his leg. “For your information, Dallas Early, there are thirty-five people out there waiting for you to introduce this event. If it's so vitally important to you for your friend to get elected, I would suggest getting your priorities straight.”

“Josie—” he began, tipping his chin toward Jude. He jiggled his leg faster, and Constanza began to complain. “Momma, I don't like this.”

Jude moved closer to the center island, where every burner on the stove was blazing.

“I do believe the baby-kissing comes later, Mr. Early—” Josie was enunciating precisely; she indicated the child on his lap “—when *you’re* the one running for office. Besides, it’s traditionally not a back-room sort of thing.”

“No shit,” Jude agreed. Josie finally wheeled around. So did Bonnie. They both responded to her unique appearance with the same superstitious gesture: repentant fingertips to the heart. “If you’re going to play with little girls,” Jude added, triumphant, “it ought to be in public—don’t you think?”

“Momma, make him stop!”

“Judy, my god, what ... what are you doing? Why are you wearing ... ?” Josie broke off, overcome, her face nearly purple.

“She wants you to stop,” Jude told Dallas. There was a roiling pot of water on the stove. Dallas glared at her. He seemed oblivious to the girl in his lap—or was he purposely bouncing her more and more jarringly? Her skirt was flying up; Jude could see the frilled edging—lace!—of her underpants. She was beginning to cry. Her mother was turning back toward her, responding, finally.

“*Pauvrecita*,” she said, reaching toward the child.

But Dallas had not yet stopped. There was no time to waste if Jude was to punish him for this crime.

She plunged her left hand into the pot of water on the stove.

Dry Creek

Victoria was driving. This was the story of Jude’s life, fated to be a passenger while someone else drove. But one day, hopefully soon, she would learn how to drive, would even buy her very own car. She would be able to afford a good one, if what Victoria said was true.

For the time being, though, it was her privilege to be Victoria’s passenger. Why wasn’t her mother more like this woman? Victoria was as fastidious and particular and strong-willed as Josie, but in an entirely different way. For starters, she was several years older and looked it—decently old enough, in fact, to be the mother of a twenty

two-year-old like Jude. Look at her now, piloting her minivan with untroubled certainty, never grasping for something just out of reach (versus Josie, who was doomed to grasp; there could never be enough of anything, once her craving had kicked in). Victoria was smart, too, and self-aware, not clueless, never dim. Dedicated to her children. There they were, in a photo on the dashboard—two tow-headed adolescents in organdy Easter dresses and patent-leather shoes, nearly identical but actually two years apart.

Victoria was taking Jude to San Francisco. The highway widened into several lanes. Flatland receded behind them as they climbed a range of rolling hills stiff with yellowed grass, a dishwater-blond color much like that of Jude's hair, but in places contoured with green. Towering from the hilltops, dozens, possibly hundreds, of windmills spun their improbable arms or waited for a breeze. One had fallen to the ground, but the rest, fantastically enormous, lined up for miles into the distance, a militia. Jude stared.

"Wind power. Alternative energy," Victoria explained. "Haven't you ever seen these?"

Jude shook her head. It had been many years since she had been to San Francisco. She didn't remember ever having passed this sight before. But of course, all that meant was that she didn't remember.

In the island between the front seats of the minivan, a collection of audio cassettes filled a box, their labels facing the same direction. Jude glanced at the titles. "Reparenting Your Precious Inner Child." "Breaking the Intergenerational Chain of Toxicity." If Victoria had been her mother, there would have been no need to drive to San Francisco to confer with a brilliant lawyer who specialized in sex-abuse cases. A five-star lawyer—Victoria's lawyer—whom Jude had already met but recalled mostly as a compact shape, having been massively sedated when he visited her hospital room: the most recent hospital room, where her scalded hand had been treated.

The lawyer, Norman Frisch, had advised her to find another place to live; she could not return to the house in Villa Miranda. This would be the basis of a larger, preemptive counter-move. Dallas, Josie, and the psychiatric staff had been discussing institutionalization. "Do exactly as he says," Victoria had insisted, and Jude had signed the papers Mr. Frisch's staff had prepared. When she was released, thanks to whatever

he had done, she moved into Claudia and Helen's bungalow, only a mile or so from Rudy's.

Her left hand was now resting on that box of tapes—suspended, though, in an aluminum-framed device. The blistered flesh would restore itself eventually but (again) terrible scarring would be the result. It had been almost two weeks since she had forced that gala party to a screaming halt, two weeks since she had extracted that child from danger so much faster than any negligent mother could. Though the scalding was severe, it might have required only a forty-eight-hour stay, but the chief of psychiatry placed her on extended observation. At first, he consulted with Kat, but then Josie and Dallas intervened. Kat was omitted from the treatment plan, then barred from visiting or even calling. Claudia and Helen managed to visit once, but Claudia had been so disruptive, actually spitting at an orderly who had not moved aside fast enough to let her pass, she had been officiously hustled out the door.

Victoria, though, had been able to placate whomever needed placating. She was not only a nurse, Jude soon learned, but a psychiatric nurse. She came to visit almost every day.

The first day, she presented Jude with a greeting card. Bearded irises bloomed on the cover and part of a poem was hand-copied inside:

*She dealt her pretty words like Blades—
How glittering they shone—
And every One unbarred a Nerve
Or wanted with a Bone—*

"Emily Dickinson," Victoria had said. "Have you read her poetry? She gives away the secret in this poem. You can turn your rage where it belongs—*outward*. Words can be your weapon."

Reaching through the bedrails, casting a swift glance toward the door, she loosened one of the wrist restraints and clasped Jude's unbandaged hand, the one already disfigured with healed-over wounds. The gristly scars shone white as enamel in the fluorescent light. Monitors hummed above their heads. "Look at this!" she whispered.

“This wasn’t enough! What else are you going to have to do to yourself to get revenge?”

Jude watched Victoria wide-eyed, or as wide-eyed as the IV drip permitted. This had been Kat’s message, too, delivered during a phone conversation just hours before (she hadn’t yet had her access cut, *persona non grata*), but declared in her mesmerizing, “let’s all take a deep breath” tone. “Whenever you’re ready, we’re going to have a long talk about what you’re choosing to do with your anger,” she had scolded. Victoria’s whisper, in contrast, had an evangelical edge.

The monitors blipped and blinked, and Victoria began stroking the scarf around her neck as though urging it to relinquish its grip. “Kat’s a sweetheart,” she said, apparently reading Jude’s thoughts—did she know about that earlier conversation? “But her style is very soft, very generous—and that’s the very best thing for us, *most* of the time. But I told her myself, ‘sometimes you’ve got to be brutally honest. Our dear friend Jude should be informed of the consequences before she does something worse.’ ”

Jude felt the power of Victoria’s scarf, unable to look away. She always wore a scarf. This one was cream chiffon with blue daisies. “Consequences?” she asked, wondering if the drugs were causing this infinite sense of expansiveness, the certainty that time and space could not be measured, certainly not perceived. The knot at Victoria’s throat was like a doorway she’d seen repeatedly, in a dream.

With steady fingers, Victoria was loosening this knot. She pulled the scarf aside. Beneath it, a horizontal mark, liver-gray, stretched across her neck.

Jude sucked in air as if being pulled underwater.

“This is what I had to do to myself—” Victoria explained, no longer zealous, calm as a cloud “—before I finally understood. I don’t show this to many people, but I feel obliged to show you. After I did this, I was lying in a hospital bed just like this one, when someone from my group came and told me about *her* scars. I’d always been able to see them, or at least the ones on her face, but had never asked what had happened. Some kind of accident, I always assumed, though someone had done an excellent job of stitching her up.

“Well, she told me she had deliberately crashed her car into a telephone pole. The awful joke, though, was that she was wearing her seat belt—it saved her! We

laughed about that. But we both recognized it as a miracle. Some part of her must have wanted to live, in spite of everything, and this part of her had made that ‘mistake.’ She knew *I* had made the mistake of ‘forgetting’ when Oliver was due to come home. She told me her story because she thought I might still have a chance. Now I’m telling you.”

Victoria pulled the scarf off completely and wrapped it around her wrist, then reached for Jude’s forehead as if testing for fever. That shadowy mark came perilously close. It had a ribbed, reptilian-looking texture, a viper resting low on her neck. She had hung, maybe swayed, from the ceiling for who knew how long. Who knew what kinds of liquid sounds she had made, what darkened color her face had become. Her husband Oliver must have discovered her.

“You don’t seem to be *trying* to kill yourself, but I have a feeling one of these self-mutilations will go too far, intentionally or not. The premature death rate—never mind the suicide rate—for incest survivors is obscenely sky high. If you don’t already know someone who’s killed herself or died in some kind of freakish accident or been beaten to death by her boyfriend, stick around a few years and you will.” She edged her collar further open, bending nearer. “Take a closer look. It’s different, isn’t it, when it’s someone else’s scar?”

“W...why...” Jude stammered. She felt groggy; narcotics were sluicing into her arm; she hoped she would succumb to them soon. “W...why did you do that?”

“You know why.”

“I ...” She could fade away now, if the drugs would only let her, “... I don’t think so.”

Victoria pointed to the contraption protecting Jude’s new wounds. “Why did you do *that*?”

She had her answer at the ready; she could recite it in her sleep. “To make it stop,” she said.

“Make what stop?”

“It.” She paused. “Everything.”

Voices echoed in the hallway. Victoria nimbly refastened the wrist restraint. “Yes, everything,” she agreed. “But how awful when someone else tries to stop it.”

“Like Helen,” Jude said, feeling slightly more alert.

“Well, Helen’s a special case. She’s so controlled there’s not much chance she’ll hack herself to pieces.”

They waited for a pair of nurses to pass the door. One of them waved at Victoria, who was arranging the scarf around her neck, slipping it through itself.

“But have you seen—” Jude broke off. Victoria nodded almost imperceptibly, a signal that one did not speak aloud of these things. She had obviously had her own private glimpse of the extent of Helen’s knifework. Or Helen might have shown the whole group.

Victoria hoisted her purse to her shoulder, preparing to leave. “Promise me this, will you? If you can’t have pity on yourself, think about us—me and Helen—how pointless it’s been for us to inflict our anger on ourselves.”

Jude wasn’t sure how she had answered this. That same sensible purse was nestled against Victoria’s hip as she now drove. She was wearing a stiffer, broader scarf today—solid red, coordinating with her blue-and-white striped top, a patriotic motif. She flipped down the sun visor and steered into an upsweeping curve. Now that Jude knew what lay coiled on her neck, she could see it in her mind’s eye no matter how it was concealed. She would think of its leathery texture the next time she felt the slightest urge ...

But there would be no more urges. She would deal her words like blades. That was the purpose of this drive. That had been the recurring theme of Victoria’s visits: to suggest the obvious alternative. Why turn the blade against yourself when it could be aimed at its rightful target? Her perpetrator was a wealthy man with lots to lose, vulnerable, easy to wound. The argument grew more urgent when Victoria heard the rumor (the p.m. nurse had passed it on) that the family was considering a private long-term facility near Palm Springs.

If Jude didn’t have the words, Norman Frisch would have plenty. Her release from the hospital had already proved as much.

Wrecking yards, warehouses, tilt-up office complexes began to crowd both sides of the freeway. More cars ahead, more cars behind, the pavement expanded yet another lane wider. But the wider it grew, the more competitive the driving became. Victoria

wove expertly in and out of traffic, sped up a high arching interchange and dropped onto a new blanket of freeway, more relentless than the one before. Windowless concrete buildings flanked it, functional concrete structures spanned it. There seemed to be no sky, only a tepid brown soup beyond the industrial parkways on either side.

Exhaust: they were of it, inside of it. The month was May, but it but seemed like no month Jude had ever seen. In Dunning, even the murkiest May weather allowed the Sierras to take shape in the East, Mt. Diablo in the West (sometimes, though, as empty hollows on the horizon, nothing more than dark blanks). But there was always a sense of size, of place—you always knew you were in a valley; it had width, discernible boundaries. Length, though, had to be taken on faith. The Great Valley, five-hundred miles long. The human eye could not perceive the north-south dimension, not even from a plane. But wherever they were now had neither width nor length. There was no sky. Cars of every color were ashen.

Traffic slowed, then crept and eventually stopped.

“This has got to be the ugliest stretch of highway in the world.” Victoria turned on the fan to circulate some air, such as it was.

“I hope so,” Jude replied.

Victoria looked at her quizzically.

“I mean, I hope there’s nothing uglier than this.”

“Yes, let’s hope not,” Victoria agreed. “A few miles ahead and we’ll get on the bridge and it’ll be night and day: the bay, the skyline—one of the most gorgeous sights you’ll ever see, dropping into San Francisco from the upper deck. But isn’t that the way it always is? You’ve got to push through misery to get the big prize!”

Jude bobbed her head, not so much in agreement as in the hope this might be true. Victoria would know much more about this than she did. Look at all she’d been through. Look at those two platinum-blond girls on the dashboard, whose daddy would be picking them up after school: Oliver, “a godsend,” Victoria never failed to call him. The girls were smiling effortlessly, in spite of their glinting orthodontia, amiably attempting to please the camera. Nothing hinted they had ever seen their mother’s neck. If you grew up seeing a mark like that, why, it might seem almost ordinary, the kind of thing every mom would have. Besides, Victoria had surely explained it to

them, or would explain it when the right time came. She was a genuine mom. She did not flinch from the truth.

“Back where we merged onto this freeway—that’s where my specialist has his clinic. He absolutely saved my life.” Victoria inched the minivan forward then stopped again. “I mean, not literally, but, as you might guess, my treatment needed to be seriously intensified after my, um, episode.” Her hand strayed to her collarbone but did not touch her throat. “Kat referred me to him, and it was the smartest thing she could have done. He sat me down and said, ‘Okay, Vickie’—and believe me, hardly anyone gets away with calling me Vickie—‘You’re either going to survive this or you’re not. Your choice. You’ve been avoiding the real issue all along—feeling sorry for your ‘poor’ father and not having a shred of compassion for yourself—not to mention your children or your husband. Don’t you owe it to them to see this through?’

“Well, I honestly thought my children would be better off without their miserable mother, but then I remembered that woman purposely wrecking her car. I’d heard her story in group and knew exactly what kinds of horrible things had been done to her—it was so transparent that her rage was misdirected. If anyone deserved to go through a windshield, it was the beast who abused her. But my problem was, just like you, I couldn’t exactly remember what had happened.”

Victoria’s monologues were like lullabies. Listening and nodding, Jude relaxed so completely, she might have been falling backward, eyes closed, into Victoria’s arms. *Trust*, they called that game in grade school (Jude had never actually played it, only observed it, and only surreptitiously—but she had secretly hungered to know what that surrender would be like).

“I just *knew* in my heart it was my dad,” Victoria was saying, “but the memories eluded me. So Dr. Singh pulled out all the stops. We worked in every modality you can imagine: hypnosis, body work, psychodrama, dreamwork. Ultimately it was Thorazine that did it for me—which, in case you didn’t know, is much more than an anti-psychotic—it’s also a truth serum. Nothing else like it! I can personally vouch for that.”

“Truth serum!” Jude’s eyes popped open as if a burst of light had startled her. This was no longer a bedtime story. Truth serum—wasn’t that... wasn’t it used for ... making captured prisoners talk?

Traffic began to roll again. Victoria, smiling, showed a silver-crowned tooth. “I know it sounds like something from the movies. But it’s perfectly safe. Dr. Singh administered the dosage and then interviewed me on tape, leading me through my entire childhood. When had the first incidents occurred? What had happened? How long did it continue? When I listened to that tape afterwards, I wanted more than ever to throw myself off a high-rise. But he said I wasn’t leaving his office till I swore I wouldn’t injure myself. And when I wouldn’t promise, he checked me into a locked ward. So, under sedation, strapped to my bed, I listened to that tape. Again and again. He brought the entire group into my hospital room—I had a new group by then; we were all doing RTT, Reconstructive Thorazine Therapy—and he conducted group sessions right there, at my bedside. The man was a genius. Without him, well... we wouldn’t be turning *your* life around right now.”

Jude sneaked a glance at the box of cassettes between them. “Do you still have that tape?” The question was not casual. What might someone say once made helpless by that drug?

“It’s under lock and key—in a safe deposit box, along with all the other documents from my trial.” Victoria placed a firm hand above her heart, as if pledging allegiance. “We played it for the jury—you should have seen their faces. I felt sorry for them. You could see some of them weren’t prepared for anything that graphic. A man offering his ten-year-old daughter to his poker buddies! Norm says the tape was the clincher, though I hear a tape like that might be inadmissible now. Apparently some studies have challenged the accuracy of what gets said under—”

“They gave it to me, I think,” Jude interrupted. The air in the car was warm; she was sweating and wiped her palm on her knee. There were so many cars, so close, all around them. She could observe their occupants like specimens if she were brave enough to look. For all she knew, they were observing her. “Thorazine—they gave it to me. The first time, back in Boston.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised. Depending on the ER, that can be the standard intervention for a psych admission—vital signs, four-point restraints, Thorazine drip, before they even know your name. They may have given it to you this last time, too.”

“But do you think—” Jude could hear herself speaking, but from a disconnected distance; she was fleeing from her body though her voice still seemed to function. “Do you think ... I mean, did I say something? You know, things I wouldn’t want them to hear?”

“Ohhhh, I didn’t mean to frighten you! Don’t even think about that!” Victoria gave Jude’s forearm a squeeze—a nurse’s squeeze, briskly compassionate. “When an emergency staff has a psych intake on its hands, no one’s interested in asking any probing questions. They want to control your behavior. The questions come later, after you’re out of the woods. I’m sure you didn’t say a thing.”

“But *you* did.”

“Yes, but in a setting designed for that purpose. If you said anything—which you almost certainly didn’t—no one would have paid any attention. They were too busy getting you stabilized.”

The world was slanting sideways. The cars ahead, the interior of the minivan, were scaling down to miniature size. Her hand, enclosed in its protective frame, was a mile away at the end of her arm. It bumped against the box of tapes.

“Careful!” Victoria cautioned her. “You’re still on the mend.” She accelerated to keep pace with traffic.

Jude remained silent. A stadium floated by on the left, probably huge, but minuscule through the reverse telescope of her vision.

“Okay, let’s walk through the worst-case scenario.” Victoria glanced in the side mirror and changed lanes, then turned to Jude with her labor-coach expression, all creases and furrows, an encouraging frown. “What’s the worst thing you might you have said, and who might have heard it?”

Jude lifted both hands to see what they looked like from this distance.

“Stay with me, Jude,” Victoria insisted. “Don’t dive into that shell. Let’s walk through this. Sometimes when you look something full in the face, it’s less scary than trying *not* to look at it. Haven’t you found that to be true?”

Without her permission, Jude’s shoulders shrugged.

“Isn’t that right? The worst thing is the thing we refuse to face. So let’s hear it—what are you so scared you might have said?”

“He’s a prick,” Jude was only partially amazed to hear herself offer this up so matter-of-factly. By now, it had become routine. Given the right cue, the words just came. “A creep,” she added. “A horny bastard.”

“Well, everyone knows that! That’s no shameful secret.”

“It’s not?”

“You’re not exactly letting the cat out of the bag. I bet even Dallas himself—as dense as he is—knows exactly what you’d call him if you weren’t so civilized.”

Dallas? Jude swallowed the name without saying it out loud. Of course, right—whom else could she have meant?

Dallas had to be the one.

Behind Norman Frisch’s desk were floor-to-ceiling windows, and beyond the tempered glass, a breathtaking view of the Embarcadero Center, the Bay Bridge, the silver-green water north and south of it. In the distance, across the bay, the Oakland/Berkeley hills rolled languidly, half-obscured by haze, but the foreground was dominated by the purposeful arc of the bridge, which seemed to be rising from the top of Norman Frisch’s head. He was leaning back in his chair, fingers tented. The liquid light behind him cast his head and shoulders in silhouette. He was pondering something Victoria had just said.

“Perhaps Ms. Hazelden can tell me in her own words what she hopes to accomplish,” he said at last.

They both looked at Jude. She stared out the window at the bridge. They had crossed it to get here. Other cars were crossing it now. Beyond those rounded hills in the distance, somewhere beyond sight, science-fiction windmills churned the air. She was looking back longingly at the way they had come.

She said, “I’m ready,” though still averting her gaze.

“Ready?” Frisch rolled his walnut-trimmed chair up to his black-walnut desk and leaned forward on both elbows. No longer backlit, his face might have been easier to see, but Jude risked only a fleeting glimpse at it. He was a study in the magnificence of dark against light: jet hair and eyebrows, hooded black eyes, olive-bronze skin against the startling whiteness of his shirt-front, his cuffs. So striking and well-appointed was

this effect, he might have stepped off the cover of a mens' fashion magazine (one of the ones Josie was constantly urging on Dallas). Yet not handsome by any stretch of the imagination. There was something wrong with his face. But Jude nevertheless was ashamed to think he had seen her in the hospital, at her incoherent worst, and she feared her performance at the moment was only a marginal improvement. She was a wretch and she knew it (and didn't yet know how much he valued this quality).

He didn't seem embarrassed, though, to have invited her into his office. "What does 'ready' mean to you?" he asked, producing a sleek pen from his inner jacket pocket.

Her muscles were beginning to unwind. His manner was inviting. Victoria had said he was the best, a prince, she would not regret a thing, he would handle her with kid gloves and take on Dallas with bare knuckles.

"I'm ready to seek justice," she said shyly, glancing at Victoria, who seemed strangely at home in this executive suite with its plush eggshell carpeting and enormous abstract paintings and extravagant furnishings. Her quiet deference to Frisch was remarkable, too. And her legs were crossed in a way Jude had never seen—not her customary feet-flat-on-the-floor assertion of practicality, but a more sophisticated, even seductive, pose. She looked like a guest on a late-night talk show, one of the ones Rudy liked to watch, where celebrities doubled over with laughter when the host made a joke. Except Victoria was silent; Frisch was not joking. They both seemed to be waiting for something.

Frisch said, "Hmmm," glancing at Victoria, too, but then leaning more intently toward Jude. "How about in your *own* words. What are you hoping to achieve?"

Revenge did not seem to be the appropriate word. "I think he owes me something," she shrugged, hoping to frame the thought as acceptably as possible. "He should be sorry for what he's done. I want him to be sorry, and I want him to pay."

Frisch twiddled his gold-plated pen, sending reflective sparks all around the room. He rubbed his upper lip as if a mustache might be there, but his lip was clean-shaven, as was his jaw. What was it about his face that was so incongruous? He tapped a button on a box on his desk.

"Yes, Mr. Frisch," squawked the box.

“Could you please ask Naomi to join us?” He tapped the box again before a reply could be heard. Immediately, a young woman strode into the room like a fashion model slouching down a runway. Her short-skirted haughtiness reminded Jude of Bonnie Reyes, but this woman was more glamorous than anyone Jude had ever seen. Like Frisch, she was black-haired, but with midnight-blue highlights. She was possibly Asian, or part Asian, and her outfit seemed exceptionally French: stretchy form-fitting black from head to toe, understated, unadorned except for several silver bangles. She and Frisch might have been taking a break from a photo shoot.

But when he stood to greet Naomi, Jude was reminded how small he was. He came up to her temple, and she was not extraordinarily tall, even in her femme fatale heels. And then he smiled, which made his facial flaw apparent. The rugged smile lines revealed a constellation of pockmarks, forcing them into vivid relief.

“Allow me to introduce my associate, Naomi Tan,” he said, and they shook hands all around. “Director of research—and generally indispensable voice of reason.”

Naomi did not hesitate in taking Jude’s hand, though she looked directly at it and could not miss its contorted shape. In fact, she took the trouble to fit her hand completely inside Jude’s in order to grasp it firmly, and Jude felt a blush of trust for this woman, though she was certain she could never actually speak to anyone so intimidatingly exquisite.

With a sweeping gesture, Frisch insisted they sit down, but remained standing himself. He gazed out at the view, grasping his chin. “There’s a distinction you must understand,” he said, facing slightly northeast, as though this distinction might be found in the vicinity of the Berkeley campanile. But then he turned and planted both hands on his desk, narrowing his eyes at Jude. She was not threatened by this stance; he did not seem belligerent. Rather, his body seemed to be making a point.

Accordingly, he said, “You might make Mr. Early sorry for having to empty his pockets into yours, but I doubt he’ll ever be sorry for anything else he might have done. Money is what you can reasonably expect as the result of a civil proceeding. Not a heartfelt apology. If you want to make him pay emotionally ... well, that will probably depend on how much he literally has to pay, in my humble opinion. But who knows?”

He may drop to his knees and beg your forgiveness, or go out of his mind with remorse. But you cannot *expect* that. Understood?”

Jude was reassured by the sound of this. She had been afraid to appear greedy, reluctant to admit that money, lots of it, was what she wanted most. That five-dollar-bill on the bus, that five-hundred in Boston. These were meager, modest beginnings. He would give and she would take. Their roles would be reversed. The cash itself was not important, but, as Frisch was confirming, this would be the most reliable method for inflicting the greatest distress. That, and the scandal of a lawsuit itself. Ultimately, both Dallas *and* Josie would pay.

She must have given Frisch a sign she understood. “Good,” he nodded. “And speaking of losing one’s mind—I would’ve recommended further legal action, in any event, to prevent Monsieur and Madame Early from declaring you incompetent and shipping you off to Rancho Loco, or wherever it was they had in mind. We’ve managed to fend them off, but only temporarily—with a restraining order that none-too-subtly implies that the *reason* you are disturbed is *because* you are under their care. Therefore they cannot make decisions about your welfare, pending further evaluation. This has more than slightly enraged them, as you may be well aware, and litigious storm-clouds are already gathering on the horizon.”

He paused, smiling again, and rather mischievously, Jude thought. The pock-marks spread like a topographic map across his face. “Your mother and stepfather seem rather obsessed with control. Would that be a fair assessment?”

She smiled, too. Not only did his face have this comforting defect, but he also had a sense of humor (something hardly anyone else in her life seemed to have). Victoria, who had remained obediently silent all this time, seemed to appreciate it, too. “My god, that’s the understatement of the year!” she crowed, the celebrity guest after all.

But Frisch still wasn’t joking. Unbuttoning his jacket, flipping it back with a little flourish, he dropped into his chair then rolled toward Naomi, indicating a folder in her lap. “If Mr. and Mrs. Early are true to form, they will seek complete control, and will spare no expense in the interest of obtaining it. Thus, from a defensive standpoint, the natural next step is for you to seek compensation for the damage they—or rather,

he—has done. This further weakens their position and puts some teeth into the claim we've already staked.”

Naomi handed him the folder. “But from an *offensive* standpoint—” she said, and left it at that.

Frisch rolled back to his desk, and, opening the folder, shook his head as if marveling at a work of art. “Frankly, Ms. Hazelden, I think you have a very strong case. Your injuries—” he squinted at a particular document “—very compelling. Not directly incriminating, of course, but there are several studies supporting the link between sexual abuse and self-injury. And we've got the ideal expert witness, if it comes to that.”

“But Mr. Early won't let this get anywhere near a courtroom,” Naomi added. “Not if he's smart.” Jude was beginning to wonder what kind of research she had done.

“Not if he wants to keep the career he's already got,” Frisch agreed, “much less make any headway in Sacramento. He's already scrambling to recover from the embarrassment you've already caused him. Which of course makes him all the more determined that no such thing will ever happen again.”

Frisch closed the folder and smoothed its cover, his fingers lingering at the edges. He gave Jude a look that made her feel slightly giddy, as if they shared a secret no one else could ever guess.

“There's a photograph, yes?” he asked. And she knew the answer would please him.

* * *

She occasionally visited Rudy, bringing him a sandwich and a thermos of whatever soup Claudia had just made from scratch—the only unfrozen, un-prepackaged food he ever consumed, as far as she knew. She helped him in the shop, too, cleaning and rearranging and sorting through boxes of new items in the back. These were not visits she would ever call enjoyable (as if she ever had), but they were a comfort, consolation, if only for the stasis they represented. At least this much hadn't changed. She could show up, she could help him, she could go away and return a few days later to

cycle through the pattern again, and each of these days could exist parallel to, completely separate from, the upheaval elsewhere in her life.

Rudy was more than dependably stagnant, however. He was also conveniently out of the loop. He had no clue she had abandoned the love nest, never mind the fact that she had done so per the advice of her natty attorney, whom Rudy would no doubt revile as dandified and slick. He had no idea she now lived in the unfinished attic space in her friends' ticky-tacky bungalow, just a short walk away. (Claudia and Helen, much to her surprise, each had their own bedrooms. They were not, in fact, a couple, though Claudia perhaps would have it otherwise.) In short, he made no demands on her that she could not anticipate.

But today, a mild arid day in June, the shop was not a safe haven. It was in upheaval, too. Rudy kept running up and down the stairs. He had recently shaved. He was wearing clean clothes, correctly buttoned, and had lotioned his hair, though a scruffy patch in back would not lay flat.

She tried to speak to him, but he would not stand still. Finally, she followed him out into the store, and caught him wiping down the display case, which she had seen him clean already.

“What’s up, Dad?”

“Huh?”

“You look like you’re going to church.”

“What? Oh, these clothes?” He started to tuck the cleaning rag into his back pocket, but pulled it out hastily and brushed his hip. “Everything else I own is dirty.”

“Since when do you care about that?”

He scowled. “I suppose a fellow doesn’t have a right to look decent once in a while.”

She ignored his peevishness. “Been cleaning?” she asked, running a finger along a shelf.

“I clean a lot more than you think. You aren’t here every day—” he glanced at the clock, which occupied a space on the wall next to a framed dollar bill. He licked his lips, his tongue a pallid blue “—only Mondays, right?”

“Well, this Monday, sure,” she said. “Today is Monday. But not every Monday.” He must be expecting a bill collector, possibly even a sheriff, someone who required he make an unnaturally respectable appearance. “Can I help?” she asked.

He slumped against the cash register, apparently overcome by stress. Head bowed, he raised his eyes to her in a way that made her shiver. She knew for a fact now: that old music box *was* upstairs. He croaked along with the melody, tuneless and froggy, flat on his back on the filthy floor, serenading the ceiling and rewinding the mechanism after it ran down—over and over and over again, not so long after the divorce. He probably sang along with it still.

“Wouldja, honey?” he asked now. He shook his head as though hardly able to believe his luck. “I’ll never get through that estate-sale stuff on my own. Let’s go have a look.” He glanced at the clock again then reached out to put an arm around her, but she slipped through the doorway ahead of him.

He pried open a steamer trunk, which exhaled a sigh of mothball fumes, and plunged his arms into the depths of it. “Clothes, top to bottom,” he said, still rummaging. “As usual. But you always have to hope.” He lifted a dress, beaded at the neckline above shirrings of black taffeta, a matronly cocktail gown decades past its prime. “Guess we can sell these to the ladies resale shop downtown.”

“Maybe the costume shop,” Jude offered, half-kidding.

“Good idea,” he agreed, though he was looking back through the doorway. “Here—” he handed her a clipboard “—you inventory this while I run upstairs a minute.” And he was gone.

Here was a familiar routine, and she accepted it gratefully. Itemizing a catch-all buy was a methodical task into which she could disappear. This, they could sell; this, they could not. Five or six piles would form, depending on the haul. Three trunks had arrived more than a week before, a delivery from an estate liquidator with whom Rudy had a running deal: the liquidator sold him everything he was unable to offload at auction, single price, sight unseen, ultra cheap. Rudy never knew what he would be buying, only that the price was right. The liquidator surely thought him foolish, but Rudy had a master plan—the hidden jackpot. The overlooked antique, the false bottom in a jewelry box, the life savings sewn into the lining of a coat. It could happen. News-

papers ran stories like that all the time. Every item would thus be frisked in the hope that it might be more than it seemed.

Jude filled out a form on the clipboard as she completed each examination. Item: ladies dress. Size: unknown. Color: emerald green. Description:

The shop bell rang and she rose automatically. She waited on customers because Rudy would rather not.

But there was no one in the shop. A human shape was semi-visible, though, through the pier glass in the door—a fairly small-sized human, who must have opened the door and closed it without coming inside. Rudy's near-panic now became Jude's own. She waited behind the counter, hoping the person on the front porch would go away. But he wasn't coming inside. He was waiting, too, preparing himself, getting his papers—his warrants!—in order. She turned to run upstairs.

Halfway to the landing, she heard the bell chime again. Footsteps sounded on the floorboards in the shop, sharp staccato steps. Jude paused for an instant then took the remaining stairs two at a time. "Daddy!" she whispered once she reached the top.

He was sitting at his kitchen table, head in his hands. He looked up with the same imploring expression as before. "Someone's in the shop?" he whispered back.

"Yes!"

"Well, who is it?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I didn't see who it was."

"Well, maybe you should go look."

She would gladly bring him sandwiches, she would clean every blessed knick-knack and whatnot in his shop, she would keep him company from time to time—but she was not going back downstairs to protect him from whomever it was he couldn't face.

"Maybe *you* should go look."

He had put on a tie. It was plaid, a disastrous criss-crossing of tangerine and yellow, made even more tasteless by a coffee-brown splotch he apparently had not

noticed. Shit-brown, Jude decided, in the spirit of accuracy. There were half a dozen ties in better condition in that trunk downstairs. Unstained, unplaid.

Trembling, he lit a cigarette, though there was one already smoldering in the ash-tray. "Maybe I SHOULD," he said finally, and stood unsteadily. He seemed to be daring her to take it back, to prove to her exactly how mistaken she was that he could handle this himself. *I am pathetic*, his whole appearance virtually screamed. *If you won't take pity on me, you'll be sorrier than you can possibly imagine*. But before she could say another word, he was lurching towards the stairs and descending in a burst of clattering of footsteps. Whoever was waiting below would think they had pitched a skeleton down the stairs. And they possibly would be right.

Jude followed cautiously. The stairwell reeked of aftershave. She heard him greet someone. She heard a woman's voice. A woman! She heard Rudy chortle hoarsely, the way he laughed when a comedian on TV made a joke about large breasts, or when, in a movie fight, a man was kicked in the groin. Why were these things funny? Jude had never understood. Whatever was happening in the shop right now must be in that league.

A woman's voice. That churlish laugh. She crept to the bottom of the stairs.

"Been a long time," he was saying.

"Yes, quite a while," said the woman's voice, clipped, distinctly hostile. That laugh of Rudy's would offend anyone.

"Must be about five years since—"

The woman cleared her throat.

"Where is she, Rudy?" she asked.

"Well, hold on a minute, I'll go get her."

Her? A gun? A car? Rudy was always referring to various objects as female. "She's a beaut," he would say when a man drove up in a classic truck or showed him a well-maintained Bowie knife, a Zippo lighter. This woman must be repossessing something.

Suddenly he was standing over her, taking her by the arm, leading her into the store.

“What are you—?” Jude began, but then saw Josie standing waxen as a mannequin on the customer side of the counter “—doing here?” she said.

Josie’s face was pinched and sharp-featured, more aggrieved-looking than Jude had ever seen it. Eavesdropping, she hadn’t known her mother’s voice at all, and now she could see why. None of her careless vivacity could get past the rigidity of that face, the ropy cords in that neck.

Rudy spoke first. “We’re not going to kid you, Judy,” he confessed. “Your mom didn’t just happen to drop by. She called me and told me that you were in a bad state. She wanted my help—” he looked searchingly at Josie “—so I said she ought to come to see you in the store.”

Jude shook off his grip and took a huge step backwards, stumbling against a bar stool and nearly flipping a milk crate which occupied the stool’s vinyl seat. Righting the crate, she let her hand drop into its contents with deliberate nonchalance. Kitchen items. Her fingers happily found a church key, its sharp triangular tooth. She might have grinned if she hadn’t felt like exploding. When had she last seen them together? They were three feet from each other. She felt dizzy, as if forced to find a single meaning in a double exposure, but the images refused to merge: the permafrost queen, the village idiot. In a universe with any rules at all, they would be forbidden to occupy the same space.

“*I’m* in a bad state?” she said finally, glad to be asserting something, anything, before Josie had the chance. “Have you looked in the mirror lately, Dad?”

He ducked his head. He was the master, the reigning king of his craft. You could not look at him and *not* want to take it back.

“Well, your mom’s the one who knows what’s best for you ...” He lifted his eyes towards Josie, that please-don’t-kick-me expression.

“*She* knows what’s best? You think raising me in a house with that creep—that man *you* think is a total scum—you think that’s *best*? You don’t know shit, Daddy—and neither does she.”

“Judy!” Josie exclaimed. She turned to Rudy. “See what I mean?”

Rudy nodded. “Why don’t you give me that old can opener, honey?” he said, stretching out his palm.

How had he seen she had taken possession of it? His palm: the perfect target for that rusted tooth. But he was suddenly so weirdly self-possessed, so disturbingly paternal, Jude had no choice but to lay the church key in his hand.

“That’s a girl,” Josie said, sighing.

The room was tipping. There was nowhere to go.

Rudy began jangling the collection of keys in his pocket. “Say, I’ve got an idea! Why don’t the three of us go over to that new donut shop just across the way?”

“I was wondering—” Josie’s voice was deliberate as an ice pick “—if I might have a moment with Judy alone.” Her face had petrified even more terribly, and Jude realized this voice, this face was explicitly for *him*. She was forbidding him the slightest smidgen of warmth (which, in fact, was probably wise). But then she shifted her gaze toward Jude and her lower lip began to soften.

“I mean *Jude*,” she amended, “I’d like to speak privately with Jude.”

This was a dream where people are dead and alive at once, where climbing to the top of a precipitous ladder places you squarely at the bottom. This name had never taken shape on those lips, and Jude had no clue how to respond. It tugged at her like a bottomless sorrow—a child-voice inside her said *at last!* It seized her with a rip of rage: this, dear mother, was unforgivably too late.

Why now? Why nearly a lifetime after she had claimed this her name? Soon after she had turned ten, Dallas had decided the cutest possible perversion of Judy would be Juicy. Juicy Fruit, to be exact. As in, *hey there, Juicy Fruit, what all did you do at school today?* “My name is JUDE,” she found herself correcting him one day. She had heard this name in a song, many times, on Rudy’s oldies station. The refrain assured the Jude in the song that things could always be made better. *Don’t be afraid*, the singer had sung.

Dallas, though, had apparently never heard of it. He guffawed, a gust of tainted wind. “What kind of name it that for a girl!” That had been the beginning and end of the conversation, within the family, at least. Her teachers and classmates, however, had gradually accepted the change.

She wanted a substitute for the church key. She started to grope in the milk crate for something else sharp.

Rudy by now had turned fully toward Josie and away from Jude. A darkened sweat stain, resembling a map of Florida, had formed between his shoulder blades. “But what could be the harm in a little coffee break?” he asked, but not sweetly; it was not an invitation. “You owe me at least that much, don’t you?”

“I *owe* you?” Josie’s nostrils flared.

“You said yourself that you didn’t even know where she lived, that you had no way of getting in touch with her if I didn’t help you out.” He was beginning to get worked up. He waved a hand behind him, in Jude’s general direction, and she took another step backwards to avoid being touched.

“That’s probably exactly what I said. Word for word. But I never implied in any way that you were doing *me* a favor. This is about helping your daughter through a very difficult time. I’m really dismayed to have to point that out.”

“Well,” he said, leaning on the counter in a hopelessly seductive fashion. Jude cringed with embarrassment. Josie grimaced, as any woman would. “Seems to me the best way to help *our* daughter is to work together as a team. Her mother and her *real* father. Between the two of us, who else in the world knows her better?”

He began to reach across the counter, and the imbecility of it was more than Jude could stand. Would he actually try to touch her? She could no longer be a witness to this scene. She turned and slipped into the workroom and out the screen door, stepping into the back yard—or what would be called a back yard if it wasn’t a boneyard littered with stained commodes and rotten lumber and cannibalized car engines, a disarrangement of debris that did not belong in the shop. As if it belonged out here.

This wreckage had been accumulating for years, but she seemed to be seeing it for the first time. She stepped through it and past it, acknowledging her kinship—this random detritus for which no one, not even Rudy, had any conceivable use. Would they be following? Did they even care she had escaped?

A dust devil lifted scraps of trash into the air and she wished she were a gum wrapper, a decaying leaf that might be as easily swept away.

They were not following. They would still be bickering, or Rudy may have found a way to detain her, emotionally if not physically. He was a master at that, too.

Yet Josie had broken from him before, had proved her power to resist him ... except, of course, she had been fortified, as if with iron, by a larger, more substantive man.

The screen door stayed shut behind her. The sky was vast and open as a prayer, fluted with high striations of clouds. The satiny breeze was a throwback to spring, a false shimmer of hope before the full heat of summer bore down. She began to walk home. Under a sky much like this, she had been placed on a plane in Sacramento, but in September, not June, a decade ago it seemed. There had been a claustrophobic flight, and then another (a change of planes in Chicago), a concussive thunderstorm during which she concentrated on not crying out, and then a stranger in shirt-sleeves in Logan airport was holding a sign with her name on it.

Hazelden, it said.

Josie had learned to say *Jude*.

She stopped. She had not been paying attention. She was passing through downtown Dunning, heading without thought toward Villa Miranda. But that was no longer her home. Letters were churning back and forth between attorneys; explicit accusations had been made. Frisch had drafted a demand letter, naming her price. Jude merely had to say the word, and the letter would be sent.

“Dunning Deserves It!” proclaimed a banner fluttering valiantly from a lamp post high above her head.

Jude—she could see it now, as if imprinted on that banner (which of course owed its brave existence to the force of Josie’s will): *Jude* had been a tactic. How could she have imagined (hoped!) her mother might be stirring from her endless sleep? This was one of her campaigns. She would do anything—*anything*—to get her way, and that meant, at the moment, making sure that final letter would not be sent, that no demand would be made.

I’d like to speak with Jude.

“Too late!” Jude said aloud, just as two teenagers with a boom box slouched past her on the sidewalk. Their din of music drowned her out, and she turned on her heel as if to repeat this message in their ears. But in fact she was aiming herself toward the low-rent part of town, the undesirable northwest quarter which would never enjoy a

renaissance, never be adopted as one of Josie's pet projects. That's where she now lived.

Too unforgivably late, she said to herself, but silently now, as if the banner might be listening, watching her jog across the busy boulevard, noting every word and deed that might be reported to its mistress, Mrs. Josephine Early.

As she reached the opposite sidewalk, a dented beer can clattered across her path. She paused; she kicked it.

Too *bad*, she amended, watching the can wobble to a halt.

Too bad, *Dad*, you have nothing to lose.

* * *

She could hear them arriving. The doorbell rang every few minutes, followed by the sound of Claudia trodding to the door and then muffled exclamations of greeting. Jude listened from her attic room, staring down into the neighbor's kitchen from her side window. The party gathering downstairs was in her honor, or rather a celebration of what she had finally done. The papers had been hand-delivered to the courthouse; the county clerk had signed.

It was dinnertime at the house next door. A woman appeared in the kitchen window and poured a pot of noodles into a colander in the sink. Steam rose in a rush, clouding the window. The woman, a blur now, was claimed by the steam.

"Jude!" Claudia's voice rang from the laundry room below, where the attic ladder dropped. Jude had folded the ladder up behind her when she had retreated upstairs, more than three hours before. She needed a nap before the party, she had told them; all the excitement at the courthouse had worn her out. But she hadn't slept, hadn't even tried. She had been sitting at the window, watching the July afternoon fade, the sky gradually condensing from bluish white to powder blue to something deeper.

More broodingly, though, she observed the mother and father and children next door as they passed from room to room, pleased she could not be observed in turn, high above and wedged into a space which, from the outside, probably did not seem habitable at all. And it scarcely was. The July heat made it roastingly hot, but

wonderful-smelling, she had to admit. The bare wood all around released a cedary scent; resin seeped from cracks in the beams. But the heat was oddly comforting—as was the proximity of domestic life, almost literally under her nose, so close she could nearly touch it, turning and dipping like a music-box ballet.

But what if that family below was as false and bankrupt as her own? What if: that man did whatever he pleased, that woman was conveniently distracted, or even an accomplice? Jude blew warm air on the hot glass through her nose.

“Hey, up there—we’re ready for you. Are you ready for us?”

The smell of onions, cheese, something bready rose through the trapdoor along with Claudia’s voice. A pot luck. Not only would she have to face a roomful of admirers, she would be obliged to eat in front of them. How could a party in her honor involve bringing food to her mouth in the presence of people she hardly knew? Who was down there anyway?

“Coming!” Jude yelled, gathering the clothes she had worn to the courthouse and pulling them on haphazardly. She flipped the trapdoor open. The ladder hitched downward and Claudia, reaching up, eased the hinges into a locked position. The laundry room below was strangely illuminated, dark yet glowing, but Jude did not hesitate, knowing there was no way to avoid whatever was waiting. This had been perhaps the greatest lesson of the past several months. When called to act, the simplest choice was to proceed, not resist, no matter how disagreeable the prospect seemed to be. She lowered herself onto the ladder.

On the bottom rung she turned. Candles flickered, the source of the curious glow. Twenty women, maybe more, crowded into the kitchen, just beyond the laundry-room door. Each woman held a votive. They were humming “Amazing Grace.”

Claudia squeezed her. “Isn’t it beautiful?” she whispered, but with such force she nearly put out the candle closest to her, held by Helen. Helen stared into the quivering slip of light, and Jude sensed she was far beyond the flame, inside some half-forgotten ceremony. Would she drop over the edge later that evening? Was there even a square centimeter of skin left for her to cut? But this danger was a touchstone—at least for now, for Jude. Helen filled the foreground, creating a sense of proportion; she made it safe to look around.

Tawny and Opal and Victoria (Victoria!) and several other women from the therapy group were there. And three women Jude recognized as friends of Claudia's. And somebody's sister. Kat, of course, was absent (the ethics of her profession, she had informed them, prohibited socialization with her clients, but she was eternally with them in spirit, wherever they went, separately or together). Yet Jude reflexively scanned the crowd for her reassuring size and shape. Who were the rest of these women? She didn't know this many people.

They all stepped back, making way, and Claudia led Jude forward, through the kitchen and into the living room. A banner stretched from one end of the room to the other—"You Are An In-spir-a-tion, Jude!"—cutting a swath through a riot of festive decor: streamers and tinsel, Chinese lanterns and holiday lights, a parrot-shaped piñata in a corner. The effect was a mid-air collision of Hallmark occasions. Claudia and Helen had gone all out at the party-supply store.

"Speech!" said one of the women Jude didn't know.

Helen placed her candle on the angel-theme runner covering the coffee table, and slipped an arm through Jude's. "Jude doesn't make speeches," she said, head bent. Jude wanted to nuzzle her cheek, knowing how impossible it was for Helen herself to say anything in front of a group. They could stay linked like this, she and Helen, they could climb into the attic and peer down at that nuclear family together. The party would never miss them, and they would not miss it.

Claudia took her cue from Helen, however, and seized the other arm. Jude's heart clenched. Held fast by her two closest friends—she had never before thought of them that way, but why not? who else might qualify?—there could be no escape.

"Well, I have something to say," Claudia announced. "On behalf of all of us, I want you to know how proud we are of you, Jude. You are making the world a safer place."

"I'll second that," said Opal. For once she was not sniffing. The candlelight burnished her features, making her look decades younger—yet homely as ever, hungry around the eyes.

“Once Jude is through with Dallas Early, any son-of-a-bitch child-abuser is going to think twice about what the consequences might be.” Claudia lifted her chin in triumph.

Heads nodded. Victoria stepped forward and filled a plastic champagne flute with sparkling cider. She held it out to Jude. Helen released Jude’s elbow, allowing her to accept the glass.

“Bravo,” Victoria said. “Well done.”

A warm wave poured through Jude’s body, as if Victoria’s public approval was the whole point of this ridiculous exercise. Victoria had already showered her with praise that morning—but that had been in the back of Frisch’s Lexus, driving to and from the courthouse, a private exchange. Now everyone would know exactly how proud Victoria felt.

Victoria began to pour cider all around. “A toast,” she said, when everyone had a glass. “To Jude—our hero.”

“Heroine,” Claudia said. Laughter spilled as if from a pod bursting open. The women began to mingle; they filled their plates, found places to sit.

Claudia remained standing, though, and began, blow by blow, to recount the final exchange between the lawyers that led to the suit actually being filed.

“A hundred-and-twelve thousand! Isn’t that sickening? That was the most he would hack up! But let’s face it, that’s merely a hairball for Mr. Moneybags.”

This was confidential, proprietary to the case—though confiding in Claudia, Jude could see now, was an obvious contradiction in terms. Standing, too, she backed herself against a wall, all the better to observe the entire room. Holding her hands behind her back, she pressed her lower spine against her knuckles. What, she wondered, might derail Claudia from this subject?

The doorbell rang again.

“C’mon in!” Claudia bawled over her shoulder, then turned back to her audience.

When the door didn’t open, Jude detached herself from the wall. “I’ll get it,” she said, though no one seemed to notice. Claudia had the floor.

Jude opened the door, noticing first that it was much cooler outside than inside the stuffy house.

But there was Josie.

Trimly zipped into a modest summer shift, her hair streamed sideways and upwards, frizzing as wantonly as Claudia's. Behind her, Jude could see she had driven her Mercedes onto the lawn. The blinkers were flashing.

Josie had known which house it was by all the lights—Christmas lights in July!—plus a sinister sort of star shape in the window. If she had been a believer (like her Aunt Luralee, for instance), she might have feared her daughter had been lured into the devil's den, had fallen prey to the spell of the pentagram. But she did not believe (though one did have to consider such things at a time like this), and even so, she was not on a mission to save a lost soul. The time for redemption had long since passed. At this point, she hoped to save her marriage, that was all—the only salvageable shred of family she might conceivably have left. Someone needed to say what had to be said, and she was the one to do so. On her husband's behalf, on behalf of both them, man and wife. Judy was going to sit still and listen.

Her daughter's face, bloodless and drawn, filled the opening in the door. There could be no sympathy whatsoever for this face: of course she would look afflicted, malnourished. She had plunged to new depths. The astonishing nerve—to make such accusations, to disparage the man who had *provided* for her all these years! The sunken cheeks, the dulled expression revealed what Dallas had seen all along: the stamp of Rudy. And just like Rudy, she had become a clawing, craven creature, righteous as a zealot because the world denied her wishes. But what *were* her wishes? That was the puzzle. What had bred this terrible strain of hate?

But Josie had not driven through this despicable neighborhood on this otherwise pleasant evening and knocked on this miserable, peeling, badly hung door, only to ponder Judy's possible motives. "A party!" she said, glad to have this offense to begin with. "I should have known there would be a party. You know, that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? A party."

"Shit!" Jude whispered, glancing back into the room.

“Don’t you ‘shit’ me, young lady,” Josie snapped. Over Jude’s shoulder, she caught a glimpse of the gathering. A grotesquely obese woman held a fist in the air; someone brayed with laughter.

Jude faced her again. “You have to go,” she said flatly.

Did she have bronchitis? Josie thought she heard a wheeze, a rasp in her breath. But she was not to be deterred. “Not until you’ve heard a thing or two,” she said, advancing a step.

Jude began to close the door, and Josie thrust the sharp toe of her shoe into the crack. “I’ll come inside and speak my peace in front of all your *friends*, if that’s what you want!” she said, suppressing her urge to shriek. “I’m sure it will be very entertaining, then you can all have a good laugh when I’m gone. What’s a party without some cheap entertainment? You of all people should know that!”

“Look, Mom—” Jude spoke through the crack “—you’ve made your choice. I get it, okay? You don’t have a daughter. I don’t have a mother. Just get in that gold-plated car of yours and drive back to House Beautiful.”

“You don’t have a *mother*?” Josie kicked the door with her other foot. “You wretched, spoiled, ungrateful—” This was the beginning of the speech she had planned to deliver.

Jude slipped out the door and pulled it shut behind her. “What do you *want*? Get out of here. We’re adversaries. You can’t talk to me.”

“Adversaries! That’s priceless.” They stared at each other like coyotes who had wandered into each other’s territory. Josie noticed the middle button of Jude’s top was undone, revealing her cotton undershirt. She was wearing a job-interview sort of outfit, not her usual ragamuffin heap—a blouse and slacks, probably the same blouse and slacks, Josie guessed, she had seen her wearing on the news earlier that evening. The video clip had been recorded that morning on the courthouse steps, and Judy had been hardly recognizable in her capable-looking pantsuit.

Josie had risen and struck the TV’s on/off button as if aiming a karate chop at an attacker (turning it off with the remote had not even occurred to her—which Dallas would have surely done had he been there, and of course he hadn’t). But she had seen enough to wonder whose clothes Judy had been wearing. There had been a matching

blazer and coordinated scarf, too, but they had since been shed, and what remained was disheveled as if slept in, disarrayed.

Shabby as a hobo, no matter what she might wear. But pity was not going to enter into this equation. Pity was merely fuel for Judy's disease. They had made several visits to Doctor Holland, just she and Dallas (actually Dallas had accompanied her only twice), and the doctor had insisted they should not budge an inch (which Dallas had said he'd long ago concluded). The girl's condition was apparently more severe than first assessed, but the solution was nevertheless clear: give it no quarter, make no concessions, stand firm as if defending sacred soil. The VA program under the doctor's supervision treated a steady stream of addicts who invariably blamed everyone but themselves for their problems, and the key was to *let them fail*. Allow them to experience the consequences of their actions. And though Judy was not addicted to anything as far as they could tell, the principle was the same.

Let her make her bed and lie in it. Tough love, it was called.

Josie did not feel tough. "You were always so smart—so much smarter than me," she sniffed, capitulating to a wave of helplessness. "And now you know it all, don't you? Adversaries! You ... you ... you're the one who's adverse!"

The child hugged herself—was she shivering? in this heat?—and laughed through her nostrils, curling her lip. Rudy seemed to have taken possession of her, and Josie felt a shiver take hold of her, too. A ghost was passing between them. That sniggering derision—truly Rudy at his worst, once he had rounded the bend with bourbon (and judging from that regrettable visit to the junk shop, he had long since rounded it forever). Like a family treasure, he had transmitted this legacy to his only child: bitter venom, self-righteousness, spite. And now they *both* regarded Josie (she could not deny it) with everlasting contempt.

"I'm going back inside," Jude said, shaking her head with evident disgust.

Josie flung her car keys to the ground, but restrained herself from stamping on them, as if they were aflame. "Oh, please don't let me detain you! Your guests will miss you! They'll want to be handing you the keys to the city, I'm sure, or crowning you with some sort of rhinestone tiara!"

She had lost the thread of her speech, which she had rehearsed with blistering clarity on her way over in the car, but there was plenty else that needed to be said. “But first let me tell you exactly how smart you are—” she raised a finger imperiously, the soothsayer warning Caesar to beware “—you’ll be happy to know you are *right!* You’re not my daughter!” She whipped her head left and right to underscore the denial: this was no child of mine. No doubt these were the gestures of a madwoman, but who in the history of the planet had ever been madder? And for a better reason? This child was not hers—*by her own design*. Not hers, not anymore.

“Rosie!” She was inspired now, unthinking, unstoppable. The baby’s spirit, all she represented, seemed to be hovering just out of reach. “*Rosie* was my daughter. Rosie was going to be my chance to raise a real girl. From the very beginning, even in the cradle, you were such a ... such a ...”

“Freak!” Jude thrust both hands straight at her, stiff-armed as a monster in a Saturday matinee. “Is that the word you’re looking for? I’m the one who should be dead—that’s what you’re saying? If she were still alive and I was dead, then you’d be the fairy queen with your fairy princess and your fairy tale life would be—”

“What’s going on out here?” The voice was low and modulated, authoritative. A champagne-haired woman, middle-aged, stepped onto the stoop. Josie knew her from the newscast. Jude, in profile, had been huddled against her, and the woman had gazed directly at the camera. She might have been the attorney with that condescending lift of the chin, but in fact was an even more treacherous enemy: *one of them*. She had won her own lawsuit, years before. She began to say a few words into the thicket of microphones, at which point Josie smacked the power button off.

“Well, what a surprise,” the woman said now. “Mrs. Early!”

“Victoria!” Jude cried, springing up the steps into her open arms.

Now they were both staring at her. Josie wished she could consign this scene to oblivion as well. Another woman—a rival!—embracing her child. But there was no single swift gesture to cancel this image: Judy, nestling against a stranger, making sure to inflict the maximum measure of revenge for that outburst about Rosie. And she was perfectly justified, wasn’t she? That attack had been disgraceful, a mistake. But she

could not try to make amends, not with this woman now in charge. This is what happens when you lose control. Someone else gains it, and then there is only regret.

The holiday lights in the window sparkled mercilessly. Both babies had deserted her now. They had fled as if from a plague, and why not? Inadequacy, stupidity, ineptitude—these were her qualifications for motherhood. Ask either of her daughters; they would gladly supply the evidence. Leave an infant unattended, just for fifteen minutes, and she will haunt you forever for your neglect. Try to make up for this for the rest of your life, do all you can to be responsible, set a good example, live a decent life, but don't think for an instant you are anything but a failure.

Judy's sole purpose in life, it seemed, was to remind her of this fact.

She was bending now, awkwardly, to rest her head against the stranger's neck, curving her body into a sickly sort of C shape to accommodate the woman's stunted height. Sickly—another of Rudy's malignant legacies. Who wouldn't have divorced him? Who wouldn't have married a man like Dallas? And now the things this girl claimed her true husband had done—horrendous! What gave her the right to punish him for *her* failure as a parent?

That was the core of her speech, but she could not utter a word of it. Not with that guardian protecting her, so boldly forbidding she could be a bailiff, a prison matron (which would account for that helmet of hair, those spongy-soled shoes).

"Surely you know better than to show up here," the woman said now, her condescension fully operational. "Does your husband—not to mention his lawyer—know where you are?"

"Of course he knows!" Josie rejoined, lying but glad to assert something and taking comfort in the fact that the wrong question had been asked. Did she know where *he* was? Now that was a question. Somewhere between Sacramento and Dunning, would be the answer. He was on his way home. She had paged him. He had dropped everything, as promised.

But why had that even been necessary? He was the one being sued; this was *his* crisis. For some reason he had been compelled to go off and huddle with whomever it was he huddled with—at the very moment this filing had been imminent. But she knew the reason (it could not be denied): the maddening arrogance of the male. He had

assumed, like an amateur, a rookie, a foolish tenderfoot, that he had successfully called their bluff. “*This* offer ought to send them packing,” he had claimed.

Jude was stepping behind the woman now, angular and stiff-legged as a heron. She was opening the door, she was going inside. She was not going to say goodbye. Babies, when they left you, never did. Empty-handed, Josie placed her foot over her car keys, which still lay helpless on the grass. She would bend very slowly to pick them up, never taking her eyes from the woman, who remained on guard on the stoop. You could see she was capable of stealing anything, given half a chance.

Josie didn’t know he owned a gun. Or if she knew, she never let on. Here it was, in his fire safe, to which only he had the combination. Upon his death, when they opened his safe-deposit box at the bank and gave her everything inside, then she would have the combination, too. But until then, until his death ...

Dallas set his tumbler of scotch on the bare wood of his mahogany desk. Sweat from the glass would leave a ring; he wanted it to leave a ring. When a man got shit-faced for a good reason, there should be some damage. And what a pathetic no-count bit of damage that would be: a water stain on his desktop. There could be small stains, there could be large. He took the gun case out of the safe.

Black and hard and compact, the case was almost as impressive as what it contained. He hefted it with satisfaction. He held it near his ear and tipped it, as if it might make a sound that would please him. Nothing shifted, though. Nothing could be heard. The padding, as it ought to, held the weaponry in place. He chortled with joy. *This* was predictable. This was a given. This box was doing exactly what it was supposed to do. And so, if he wished, would the metal miracle inside.

He drained his scotch and poured another. Where was that lovely wife of his, anyway? He could pretty much guess—she was going to try to *fix* this somehow, and then come whimpering to him in confusion when she failed—but he wasn’t especially concerned about her coming back soon. He wasn’t especially concerned about anything, having downed several shots in less than half an hour. He set the bottle on the lustrous desktop, next to the ring left by the tumbler. The trickle sliding from the bottle’s lip would soon leave its own mark, too.

With reverence, in slow motion, he then placed the gun case in the exact center of the desk blotter and retrieved a key from a hidden compartment in a drawer. The key released the lock with a definitive tick; the box opened with a hush. And there she was.

The nickel plating gleamed in the half-light of his study (desiring darkness, he had switched on only the sconces along the walls—muted as firelight, suggestive of romance.) He slid both hands into the padding and lifted the gun, marveling at the substantiality of taking her into his hands. This was enough: merely to hold her. He could nearly weep in the presence of such precision and grace—the splendor of the barrel, the sweep of the grip—grateful for the tactile reassurance that she was *there*. Every man ought to have this secret—he nodded to himself—a lovely, loyal mistress who could be counted on to perform.

He chortled again, but fell to coughing, then to gagging. Forcefully, he cleared his throat; the fit subsided. He looked at the gun as if it had just hatched in his hands. He laid it with utmost caution on the blotter, then laid his head next to it—but looking away, not into the barrel, which was pointed at his head. Instead, he watched the trickle of scotch slip down the bottle, magnifying the letters on the label as it went. His hands lay limp in his lap.

An array of battered newsracks, blue, mustard, red, stood lopsidedly near the entrance to Javier's Liquors. For Rudy, however, they normally did not exist. He did not read the papers, and therefore did not notice them. But he did drink liquor. In fact, his sole purpose in leaving the house this evening, as it was most evenings (besides getting out into the cooler air—the upstairs of that old house held the heat like a brick), was to purchase a fifth of off-brand bourbon and head straight back. He was a man with a plan.

But a familiar face caught his eye. It was stony, somber-looking, brooding like a head of state on the front page of one of the newspapers—a face too familiar for its own goddamn good. Rudy saw it from ten paces away. A handsome face, he had to admit, a face that could kiss any surface of a certain sweetly petite body, any time it liked. (Why had she tortured him by coming to the shop? *Girl, you're the permanent one...*) Well, Dallas Early could kiss his ass, too. He marched toward the newsstand

with the intent of farting in that face, of aiming a hot one at the sizable photograph that made Dallas appear to be a man of consequence (which Rudy knew in his heart he was). The photo was about the right height; he was sure he could muster enough pressure to force out a stale blast. But closer now, he slowed. The headline said something about a million-dollar lawsuit. That rapacious son-of-a-bitch—whose nuts did he have in a vise this time?

“Dunning Attorney Sued for \$1.2 Million,” the bold type announced. It was the local paper, the *Madrona Beacon-Times*.

Suing an attorney? Rudy knew nothing about the law, but he knew this sounded peculiar. He bent to have a closer look.

“Step-Daughter Charges Childhood Abuse,” said the subhead.

“Step-daughter,” Rudy mouthed. He thrust his hand in his shirt pocket to retrieve a cigarette. But he had no matches, no lighter. They’d have them at the counter inside—but he couldn’t go in just now. This might be one of his less lucid moments. He might be conjuring this.

He crouched and peered into the scratched glass of the newsstand. “In a civil suit filed today with the Santa Juanita County Courthouse, a Dunning woman has accused her stepfather, a prominent corporate attorney, of sexual abuse. Judy Hazelden, 22, claims the abuse took place—”

Rudy smacked the newsstand with the flat of his hand; it rocked, the lid swung open. He snatched all the papers inside, then emptied his pants pocket onto the sidewalk, change clattering everywhere. Hastily, he picked out quarters and dimes to buy a paper from each of the other racks: the *Stockton Bee*, the *Modesto Bee*, the *Sacramento Bee*. Leaving the rest of the change on the ground, he stashed the papers around the side of the store, and went inside to splurge on two pints of his favorite brand and a six-pack to chase it, instead of a fifth of his usual rotgut.

The walk home was two hundred yards. He hugged the papers to his breast, the bag from Javier’s wedged in between, and trudged through the darkness of his yard, up the back steps. “Justice!” he hollered up at the stars, though the stars were scarcely visible, even here on the edge of town, even on a languid, cloudless evening in the

middle of July. Too much competition, too much radiant leakage from street lamps and store-fronts along the boulevard.

“The mighty can and must fall!” he added, but less emphatically. He dropped down on the top step and cracked open a pint of Johnny Walker, took an avid gulp, then opened a bottle of beer and took a swig. Two-fisted drinking. Now here was something he could easily do ten times better than Mr. Early. Mr. Girlie. What the *fuck* was this lawsuit about? Fuck was the operative word, wasn’t it? It made him jump to his feet and nearly pitch himself off the steps.

He could read that article all the way through if he went inside, along with whatever articles there were in the other papers (being such a big-shot, Dallas had surely made the news in all the major Valley papers). But the idea of going inside, and especially upstairs, spooked him to his bones. Someone might be *waiting* for him there; he feared it as if it had been foretold. But who could be waiting? His heart lurched at the thought of scraping his chair up to his sideways-slanting kitchen table, the house (and that intruder) watching with breath held as he unfolded the paper, unfolded the truth.

The truth! Was *Judy* waiting upstairs? What kind of secrets had she kept? An image of her came to him, nude and vulnerable, cringing away from something or someone approaching, imposing, and he swallowed huge gulps of whiskey to wash away this vision: her hairless body, her winking behind, her scrambling legs.

There! He polished off the first pint and tossed the bottle into the night. It hit a solid object and shattered. *Dallas* was the culprit, he reminded himself. Dallas the Phallus! he snickered, but without a shred of glee. The littered landscape of his yard spread beneath his feet, his kingdom: ill-defined shapes in the darkness, pockets and hollows of shadows. He had a decent buzz now, he had his priorities straight—he could muster the courage to go inside, but only because he now had a plan. Upstairs, he would ignore the door shut against the baby’s room (where he listened to that music box sometimes); he would ignore the room that once had been Judy’s bedroom and was now his TV den (if she was waiting anywhere, it would be there). No, he would march straight into the room he still considered to be *theirs* and dress himself for the occasion, provided he could find a presentable shirt. Never mind what those articles might say, at least for now—he would go straight to the source of all evil.

It was finally time to pay Mr. Early a call.

He opened the second pint and, warily, opened the door to his own home.

* * *

The attic, semi-finished, smelled of damp sawdust now that the weather had turned gray. From the side window (the only window), if Jude held her head at a particular angle, she could see the entirety of the children's swing set in the backyard next door. The children rarely came out to play on it, however—not at all, Jude was sure, since the weather had flattened into December. For a week or more, it had been dull and chilly, neighborhood lawns had turned an anemic sort of amber, the fog had begun creeping in at night and lingering well into the morning, if not early afternoon. Christmas was nearing (just days away, Jude suspected, though she was not certain exactly what day it was) and the swing set seemed especially unfestive, its industrial girders thrusting this way and that in the fog.

But the fog was good news. The tule, her favorite weather, had set in. Claudia had given her a space heater, and Jude huddled in a blanket next to its mechanical chattering, watching out the window, or rather, meditating upon the window itself. The tule foreshortened her view, such as it was, and she found herself admiring instead the murkiness of the windowpane, its complex crust of cobwebs. Though Helen had recently scrubbed and swept the attic space, she had missed the window. Every vein of cobweb was thick with dust; each strand connected to every other eventually. She traced the way each chained into the next.

The backdrop, the glass itself, was bluishly opaque, a comfort—as was the room itself, its compressed, triangular shape. When she wanted to stand, she had to stand in the center, where the bare-wood ceiling peaked, but even then she was obliged to hunch because the peak was not high enough. The entire space was reassuring, an affirmation in the very limitations it imposed.

She was safe here, within the confines of her shell. Here, she could sit motionless for hours and let each day's drama fade to black. Why had no one warned her that a lawsuit was insatiable, ravenous for whatever scraps you might be able to spare? Her

life ever since July had been overtaken with activity, an inexorable building of momentum—at first a growing stream of conference calls and trips to San Francisco, and then the descent upon Dunning of the “core” legal team: taking depositions, conducting field research, filing motions, countermotions. Much of this did not require her presence, but still ... they might call at any time and make excessive demands. Such as, *be ready at noon—we’ll pick you up for lunch and then, at two, there’s your interview with the nun.*

The nun! She wished she was making this up. The nun, an elderly shrink, a minuscule granny of a woman with papery hands, was their “secret weapon”—an expert witness “touched by a higher authority” (or had Frisch been joking?) If anyone had warned her a nun would be involved ... well, for better or worse, it would all soon be over. The trial date was less than a month away.

For now, though, she had her window. Which Helen had missed. Helen was at work now, scrubbing and cleaning someplace else, having left before dawn to catch the bus. The days had narrowed to their thinnest margins: dark well into morning, dark again at five. Holiday time.

Claudia didn’t work. She received a monthly disability check, though the exact nature of her disability was not quite clear to Jude. Something to do with lifting, an incident on the job. She was in the kitchen, on the opposite side of the house, but even at this distance, Jude could hear pans clanging, cupboards slamming. “Juuuude,” Claudia called. “Want some French toast?”

She did not want to eat. She wanted to contemplate her cobwebs, deciding which thread she might pull to devastate the whole design. But she also did not wish to be rude. She appreciated all they had done. She folded the blanket and, shivering, pulled her sweatshirt over her jersey. She was layering again, wearing the clothes she slept in, sleeping in the clothes she wore.

“Juuuude,” came the call again, closer. “Oh, Juu-uude.”

Clambering down the ladder, she almost collided with Claudia, who was carrying a plate stacked with dark drenched bread, steaming with syrupy fumes. “Well, since you’re down, let’s go eat in the kitchen,” Claudia said, dabbing a pinkie in the syrup and tasting it with a smack. Jude followed her, hungrier than she had realized.

The kitchen smelled almost as delectable, but there was another odor: smoke. Claudia had sneaked a cigarette. She hid her smoking from Helen, though not completely from Jude. There was never the slightest hint of tobacco after Helen got home. How would Helen respond if she knew? She would never scold or pout or even turn a cold shoulder ... but was it the kind of thing that might send her gliding into her room for her plush-lined case, her brushed-steel X-acto blade? She had once shown Jude her “kit,” which she kept in her dresser beneath an arrangement of black candles.

But there was a certain sequence of events, a specific violation of the rules, Jude knew, that obliged Helen to depart for that netherworld. It had to do with telling, just as she had explained when she first showed Jude her arm. Twice since Jude had lived there, Helen had asked for “time” in the group and, in a soft untroubled voice, had proceeded to ramble elaborately. Only occasional fragments had made the slightest bit of sense. Latin incantations—that’s what she remembered most vividly. Newborn infants, a double-edged knife.

Afterwards, they all climbed into the car for a sullen ride home, and both times Claudia began pleading as soon as they pulled into the driveway. “You don’t have to do this, Helen—”

But Helen, ignoring her, went inside, into her room, and began to light the candles, humming flatly as she went.

“Next time, I’m not bringing you home,” Claudia had said, the second time.

Helen turned to them both, eyes obsidian. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you.” She shut herself inside her room.

On the kitchen windowsill perched a row of wooden rabbits, carved in various poses: huddled, scampering, standing tall with front paws raised like a boxer. Claudia believed rabbits were lucky. They were everywhere. Pewter, crystal, ceramic, plush. She had given Jude a silver rabbit charm when she moved in. Jude hung it around the neck of the blue bunny Helen had given her, which, it turned out, had originally been Claudia’s. It now crouched on a shelf above her pillow, the only evidence in the attic of the rabbit motif.

Claudia scraped the last few crumbs from her plate and took a long gulp of coffee. Her unruly hair was held back from her face with bunny clips. “So what’s that hot-shot attorney got up his sleeve today?” she asked.

Though Jude knew it was probably unwise, she regularly turned to Claudia as a confidante as the legal machinations progressed. She had, for instance, sat with her on the sofa and accepted cup after cup of Sleepytime tea after she had been deposed for six hours by Dallas’ attorney, a rangy, big-boned woman with long blond hair. The tea had not made her sleepy, but Claudia had soothed her considerably by pouncing on every possible atrocity. *She asked you WHAT?* she exclaimed at just the right moments. *She wants you to be more SPECIFIC? How much more specific can you get than describing a blow job?*

However, the day Jude viewed her mother’s deposition on videotape, she slipped past Claudia, went straight to the attic and began looking through all her belongings to see if she had some Elavil left. Now *that* would make her sleepy, and she did so long for sleep. *Mentally ill*, her mother had called her. *Emotionally crippled*. There was no Elavil anywhere to be found.

“They’re all gone now,” Jude shrugged, answering Claudia’s question. “The lawyers. Gone home for the holidays.” She had eaten half her French toast, and nudged a crust with her fork. What would she do now that they were gone? As much as she resented their invasion of her life, she didn’t have much of one otherwise. What would fill the space?

“So what happens in the meantime?” Claudia relished the blow-by-blow.

“Not much. I guess.”

“Not much?”

“Well, they’ll will be working on things back in San Francisco. I mean, it’s only a month till the trial. But Mr. Frisch said he couldn’t keep his staff here for the holidays. Besides, I guess they’ve done everything here they need to do. For now.”

“Oh.” Claudia was disappointed; she could not abide a lull in the action. And her deflation made Jude feel vaguely inadequate, as if slaking Claudia’s thirst for intrigue was how she earned her keep, and she was failing to meet her obligation. But mostly she regretted that she could not consult with Victoria instead. Who else would better

understand what her life had become—the turmoil of it, the exhaustion, the terrible temptation to call the whole thing off?

Yet the closer the trial date approached, the further Victoria had withdrawn. It was “retraumatizing,” she said, to hear even the most routine details; it reprised, all too painfully, her own trial experience. And that’s exactly what it had been: a trial, an ordeal. She was extravagantly sorry to be so unsupportive, but she had not seen this coming, and now she must honor her still-wounded self by setting a boundary. She could not engage in any further conversations about the suit. This much emotional exposure was simply too great a risk.

She had explained all of this over coffee and carrot cake at Jimbo’s, a private chat with Jude. In fact, she had looked peaked, not her usual put-together self. She had dabbed the corner of her mouth with her napkin, belying an anxiety about her lipstick worthy of Josie. What rebuttal could possibly be made? The serpent on her neck had been utterly invoked. Jude had not dared to call her since.

Claudia was pouring herself a second cup of coffee. The remnants of Jude’s breakfast had disintegrated into maple sludge. Stick-to-your-ribs food here—sloppy, uncomplicated, piled high on your plate. She had developed an appetite. At what used to be her home, the “presentation” of the food overwhelmed any desire to actually eat it. And at Rudy’s she had experienced every variety of canned entree known to chronic bachelorhood—pork ‘n’ beans, corned beef hash, Nalley’s stew—served, if you could call it that, straight from the can with a spoon.

He would be spending Christmas alone if she didn’t visit him. Which she would not. He had made it clear as a teardrop, abundantly clear to anyone who cared to know: exactly where his loyalties lay.

But she would go walking today anyway, to anywhere but there. The tulle, she knew, was waiting outside like a friend.

“Think I’ll take a walk,” she told Claudia.

Tipping her plate, Claudia angled a spoon into the dregs of her syrup. “I swear to the blessed Goddess, I’ve never seen anyone who likes to walk as much as you. You must have been a mule in a previous life.”

“I don’t know if mules *like* to walk.”

“Hah! But you are as stubborn as a mule.”

“I am?”

“Yep, you are about as stubborn as they come.” She slurped the syrup from the spoon. She would have slurped it straight from the plate, Jude knew, had she been alone. “No one’s going to make Jude Hazelden do a goddamn thing until she’s good and ready!”

She thudded Jude’s shoulder with her fist, a comradely thud. “That’s a good thing, Jude. Trust me. That’s how you’ve come this far, and that’s how you’re going to win this thing in the end.”

Jude sipped her cold coffee, needing a natural-seeming action to excuse herself. Though she had lived here for months, she still felt like an overnight guest.

“Guess I should get ready,” she said. But there was no getting ready except to put on her Keds. They were on the laundry-room shelf. Helen had washed them the night before, and Jude had lain in her bed above, listening to them thump as the clothes dryer tossed and tossed and tossed them, picturing her mother similarly tossed in a sealed, spinning drum. Clunk! Thunk! She must be mentally ill, emotionally crippled to entertain such an image ...

Claudia began paging through a cookbook. As soon as she finished one meal, she started to plan the next. “Tuna-stuffed parmesan tomatoes—how does that sound?” she asked, sounding as if she had already decided. “Hey, don’t forget, tomorrow’s Solstice,” she added. “We’re going to have a few—”

But Jude was already retrieving her shoes, tying them tight, pretending she was out of earshot. “Bye!” she called, and then she was gone, out the door.

The fog spread beautifully, implacably in every direction, a shroud of a mother taking everything in, holding it in gentle suspension. Jude could feel but not actually see the neighborhood stirring. She had never lived anywhere this animated. Packs of children rode bikes to and from school, after school, on weekends. Dogs barked and lifted their legs. Cars were everywhere —on lawns, on sidewalks, on blocks, three or four crowding a driveway at some houses—low-slung cars with an excess of chrome, slate-tinted windows, patches of primer. Some yards were bare, some were littered with trash or toys or tarry-looking mechanical parts (Rudy would know what they

were). All the yards were small. All the lawns were dead. Palm trees thrust into the air here and there ... but even their thick hoary trunks, their wide-spreading fronds were reduced to suggestions in the fog, as was every other detail.

Two doors down, a sapphire car took shape in the whiteness. She slowed. The car was the only thing in color; it did not belong.

The driver's side door was opening. A male figure was emerging like a nestling from a shell. He didn't belong either, too smartly dressed. His overcoat fell in a sweep from his shoulders. He was young but had the look of money earned and spent. He would have to be a salesman—why else come slumming on this street?—life insurance, maybe, real estate. An agent for a landlord. Or had he taken a wrong turn in the fog? A lost boy. She liked that. They could be lost together.

He turned and looked right at her. That lean sallow face. Her breath left her body as if taken by force.

P.J.

Or some brash-looking boy who looked more like P.J. than anyone had a right to. Her ribs felt pried open, and a rush of longing filled the empty space. She wished him home for the holidays; they could drink Cherry Cokes, exchange books with the most hilarious titles they could find. *A Natural History of the Anopheles (the Malarial Mosquito)*, P.J. had given her one year. *Why God Hates Idolatry, and You Should, Too*, she had presented to him in return (she had found it on a shelf in Rudy's store). It offended her that this boy, this man, whatever he was—this impostor—could touch her so intimately and without mercy. He might as well be P.J.—college age, trim as an athlete but much too small, too intellectual-looking, geeky eyeglasses overwhelming his face. And yet too modishly dressed, like a musician in a punk band. The eyeglasses were horn rims, heavy and black; the hair was buzzed with a spiky sprout in front. It was a fifties look, so defunct as to be chic. In any event, he did not belong. He should climb back in that opalescent car and drive away.

His head was bent, he was locking his door. He raised his chin. It was P.J.

She could wake up now. She *had* been sleeping. *It hasn't occurred to you that sleeping may be the best thing?* Hah! That was where she had been all this time: asleep. She had actually taken that crusty doctor's advice and had been doped up for

months; all the rest had been a drug-induced dream. No one had forgotten or remembered anything, there were no lawyers, no survivors, no Rubbermaid containers stuffed with oven mitts and phone books, no painstakingly reconstructed stories on which million-dollar lawsuits might be based. Time had not passed. P.J. was grinning lopsidedly, as if he were fifteen and had just reassured the biggest thug in class he was an *Australopithecus imbecilus*, tucking his car keys into his jeans pocket. When had he become so good-looking? What was he doing on this street in that candy-coated car, the color of melted sky?

She glanced back. There was Claudia's Fury, a dark rectangle in the driveway; its boxy solidity gave her hope, as if she might run up and tag it and be home free. He was walking toward her now. Time *had* passed, and she had absolutely no intention of letting him see her like this. Like *this*. She swept her hair over the side of her face but then her arms confounded her. What to do with them? If she hugged herself, she would appear too defensive, but FUCK all of this and FUCK him, too. What was he doing here? If any situation called for defensiveness, this would be it. She jammed her hands inside her sweatshirt's kangaroo pouch.

"Thought you'd never come out," he said. There was a hitch in his voice, as though it were changing again.

"What ... you've been waiting for me?" she asked stupidly.

He shrugged, tipped his head back and squinted into the voluptuous whiteness drifting above them, between them, all around. "Kinda looks that way, doesn't it?" His breath steamed out and merged with the condensation.

She stepped on the instep of one foot with the ball of the other. They had written almost weekly when he had first gone off to Brown, and he had come home for that entire first summer. But that had been three years ago, and even then it had been bleakly apparent some essential part of him had not returned. He was obsessed with getting back to Providence in the fall, equally obsessed with disparaging Dunning as the in-bred hayseed retrograde capital of provincialism he had always suspected it to be (and now that he'd had a prolonged taste of the wider world, he could expound much more authoritatively on Dunning's many flaws).

After that summer he managed an occasional visit, but there was his internship in D.C. and his year abroad and his bon vivant holidays all along the Eastern seaboard with school chums who invited him sailing and clamming and drinking and dallying with debutantes. One year, he flew back and stayed a week; the next year, somewhat longer—staying with his mother but spending most of his time visiting law schools up and down the state. On these occasions, Jude might not have seen him at all, if he hadn't also made a point of also visiting Dallas. His mentor. His hero. What did Dallas think of Stanford? Pepperdine? Was Loyola worth a look?

"What are you doing here?" she said, a sudden jolt of intuition telling her exactly how he had found her.

"Home for Christmas, Jude. I'm at Boalt now. Just an hour-and-a-half away."

How long had he been nearby? Berkeley—she could see it on a map, though she had never actually been there. Dangerously close. If she had been sleeping all this time, he may have been watching as she slept. He might have slipped into Dunning any time, Dallas' junior apprentice, his spy.

"Boalt was always your first choice," she said flatly, shrugging as if it were inevitable that he would get into a law school of that stature. She did not want to sound congratulatory, did not want to belie any hint of emotion at all.

He clapped his gloved hands together. It would be so simple for him to run with this. "Yes, and I was their first choice, too," he might say with a smirk. Or, "I believe it's what you'd call a win-win situation." But he said nothing.

Fine. If he was going to be all business, she would get right to the point. "What are you doing *here*?" she repeated, daring to look at him more closely. He was still a shrimp, but taller. The crown of his head was even with her earlobe. He had finally grown past her chin.

"Well, I came to see you," he said. His tone was melancholic. He might have been calling on a patient in the oncology ward: I came to see you while I could.

But she was not going to be fooled. "Oh sure. I'm always right at the top of your list of people to see. And how did you know where to find me?"

He exhaled more steam, adjusted his ridiculous glasses on the bridge of his nose. Two children, swathed in scarves and mittens, skidded by on their bikes. "C'mon Jude.

That should be pretty obvious. But just to make you happy, I'll say it: Dallas told me. Okay? Now you can launch your heat-seeking missiles and nuke me to oblivion. In fact, he told me you weren't doing very well, and that maybe I ought to come see you."

"And so you came running. Still sucking his dick, I see."

He took a step backwards, stumbling a little, finally breaking into a smile. "Well, you never put it quite that way before—sucking *up* to him, as I recall, was the standard accusation." His expression instantly sobered, though, and he inclined his head towards Jude's house. Jude looked to see Claudia squeezing herself into her car.

"She is scary," P.J. said.

"So exactly how long have you been staking out my house?"

"Jude, look—" He moved closer and jerkily raised his arms as if he might touch her, but clasped his hands and let them drop. "You look pretty scary, too."

She pushed her hair from her eyes. She recalled the face that looked back at her on the bus that night, damp hair plastered to an oblong skull. Maybe her death's head would frighten him away. Or it might be the exact thing to draw him closer, entice him back. Who knew what kind of morbid tastes he had acquired running with all those East Coast sophisticates.

"You want to know the truth?" he asked.

"Oh, screw you anyway. You're just running an errand for Dallas. I'm sure you owe him a big one for getting you into Boalt."

She flung an arm at him, and he grabbed her elbow.

"Jude, I'm really sorry that we lost touch with each other. We just went off in different directions. Honest to God, I don't know how you were able to stay here a minute out of high school, but here you are. But you're still my friend. And obviously something awful has happened. The truth is you look like shit. Really. Shit warmed over."

She let him hold her arm.

"Want to go somewhere?" He tugged her almost imperceptibly toward his car. "Want to get something to eat?"

"I just ate. Where'd you get that car anyway?"

"It's a rental."

“A rental?”

“How about coffee? Some Jimbo’s ‘can’t-get-enough-of-it’ pie?”

“Actually, I was just on my way—” but she remembered she wasn’t going anywhere.

“Let me guess—you were just going to your dad’s.” P.J. released her and looked at her carefully. A truck chugged by, releasing a stream of flatulent sounds.

“So, how is old Rudy?” His tone was obnoxiously smooth. He had never liked Rudy, had always cringed at Rudy’s jokes and even fled once when Rudy tried to challenge him to a wrestling match by first tripping him with a rake handle. Your dad’s an a-hole, he had told Jude at the time—and what did she have against Dallas anyway? Rudy was a loser. If you could choose a dad, Dallas would be the one to pick. P.J. had no dad, only a mother, and he had latched onto Dallas with little-boy zeal. By the time he was ten, he was inviting himself over each Saturday morning to perch on one of the footstools in Dallas’ study (they lived in Dallas’ ranch house then, in the years before Villa Miranda was built), thudding his Adidas against the upholstery and listening with open-mouthed awe to Dallas’ discourses on various worldly fundamentals: politics, commodities, international relations, the rewards and responsibilities of a career in law. *That* was a win-win: Dallas had apparently wanted a part-time son, it seemed, as much as P.J. had wanted a dad.

“He’s fine,” Jude said, pulling her thoughts back to Rudy, having no idea if he was fine or not.

“Still got the junk shop?”

“Sure.”

“Still drinking?”

“So what? He doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“Still mooning over your mom?”

“I suppose.”

“Never got a girlfriend or remarried—”

“Hey, you can play district attorney in law school, okay?”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Never cut me any slack, will you?” But was scanning her face as if a treasure map were inscribed in her skin. His eyes, black as olives behind his ebony frames, did not blink. “One last question, though—”

She rolled her eyes. She could almost believe no time whatsoever had passed.

“You spend a lot of time at his place, don’t you?”

She waved a hand, shooing him backwards, then realized he hadn’t yet seen her scars.

“Why don’t we go to Dry Creek?” she offered abruptly, evasively, stuffing her hand back into her pouch.

The rental car reeked of berry-scented freshener. They drove along in silence through the older part of town. P.J. navigated slowly, approaching intersections with a vigilant sort of reverence. The fog demanded gravity of movement, solemnity, respect. Stoplights made themselves visible only at close range. Headlights beamed from moving cars, but the cars themselves were spectral, indistinct.

They were inching into the heart of downtown, and then passing under the girded Oak Street arch. “Opportunity Abounds,” it read—or rather, Jude knew that it read; she could make out only a few of the verdegris letters as they approached it. Every schoolchild in Dunning knew the legend of the arch. It bore the town motto, which had been proclaimed by Ernest T. Dunning himself, a failed prospector who hit upon the lucrative scheme of supplying livestock and dry goods to the mining companies instead. Thus Dunning, a commercial handmaid to the Gold Country, was established. The arch spanned a business-district block where Jude rarely strayed. It was deep into Josie’s turf, at the hub of her cherished restoration project.

“OpportunISM Abounds,” had always been P.J.’s revision, but he did not remark upon the arch as they passed under it. Who was this stranger driving this gemstone of a car, dressed like a hipster, brooding like a monk? He slowed to a stop at a light. Just outside Jude’s window, a bus shelter displayed an ad for Bonanza Nuts. “Delicious and Nutritious! You Can’t Go Wrong with Nuts!”

Dallas and his nuts. Josie and her beautification campaigns. There was no avoiding either one of them; separately and together, they were everywhere, a team. So much for the illusion that she and her best friend were reunited, awkwardly alone,

nostalgically cruising the streets for no good reason. P.J. had come with a purpose, and not his own purpose—*theirs*. He was not here of his own free will.

“Why doesn’t Dallas just buy you a car?” she asked sharply, breaking the silence.

P.J. loosened the muffler around his throat. The car was rolling forward now, jostling across the railroad tracks. Downtown began to recede behind them. “What are you saying—I figuratively suck his dick so he should literally buy me a car?”

“Well, he’s paying for this rental, right?”

The road forked at the fruit-packing plant and P.J. followed its eastward curve. “Yeah. So?”

“Well, if you’re here for the holidays, that’s got to add up, right? So he should just buy you a car. I’m sure he’s got other errands for you to run anyway. Picking up his dry cleaning, taking bon-bons to his mistress, that kind of thing.”

“Placing bets with his bookie—” P.J. picked up the thread, but his tone was mechanical; he was focused on the road “—accepting payoffs on his behalf—”

“Payoffs for what?” Jude tensed with pleasure. It was the sort of detail Mr. Frisch would deeply appreciate.

“C’mon Jude, we’re bantering, right?” P.J. grinned but grimly.

The entrance to Dry Creek Regional Park sloped downward like a boat ramp, and P.J. took it cautiously, though he had driven down this incline countless times before. At the bottom, he steered into a parking space.

Here, below street level, the fog achieved its purest state, a seductive sheet of near-solidity. They climbed out of the car and clutched themselves against the chill, bouncing on the balls of their feet, then striding into the park, moving quickly to stay warm, using memory more than sight to guide them.

The park lay in an empty river bed. The path they were following had once been a shifting shoal under twenty feet of water. A dam, somewhere distant, had diverted water from this channel for decades, creating an oasis in a two-mile-long gully. Tennis courts and a promenade and other amenities ranged along the low-lying length of it. High above, on either side, houses and power lines showed against the sky (on days when the sky could be seen).

They headed straight for their favorite spot, the bank of a vestigial creek that ran the length of the park. A picturesque stream of water was allowed to pass through a remote spillway, resulting in a seasonal creek that accompanied the dry one. They had always been drawn there, though neither of them had ever examined what the live creek might signify.

“STAY AWAY,” said huge red letters on a sign, looming out of the fog. “Bank is steep and subject to failure. STAY AWAY.” Willow fronds trailed across the sign. Jude knew precisely where they were now. Fifty paces further along the path, and the bank would decline and they could clamber down to the gravel bar below.

P.J. stood next to her, staring at the block letters. STAY AWAY. “Actually, I’m just here for a couple of days,” he admitted, seemingly in answer to the warning.

What was he trying to say? “So you’re not ‘home for the holidays’,” Jude ventured.

He shook his head, raising his gloved hands and blowing into them as if to warm his palms, yet the effect was one of concealment. He was hiding his face. His glasses steamed. “I’m freezing—” his voice was muffled by the gloves “—let’s keep moving.”

But she grasped his arms and pulled his hands away from his face. She had not noticed his stubble before, and the sight of it, along with the bristly wool of his coat under her fingertips, reminded her of the year he had begun to shave, the rude fuzz that had sprouted from his lip. Nearly apoplectic with pride, he had insisted that she touch it, admire it, affirm his nascent manhood. His eyelids fluttered now; he might be remembering this very same moment. She saw him swallow; his Adam’s apple bobbed. He was looking down at her hands. Her scars.

It never failed her, the power of disfigurement. “I’m going to ask you again,” she said, a miracle of calm. “*What* are you doing here?”

“Goddamn it, Jude.” He shook her off and crossed his arms defensively. “Why’d you have to go and do something like that?” He pointed his chin at her injuries; his cheeks were flushed. She was sure his face would be hot if she dared to test it with the back of her hand. “Are you really all that miserable? Do you hate yourself that much?”

“No!” She stamped her foot, hoping the unstable bank might crumble, just a little. “I hate *him*—don’t you get it? It’s about hating him.”

“That’s just a line of crap, Jude. You’ve been force-fed a line of bullshit.”

She turned and burst into a run. But he caught her in an instant, always the more fleet-footed of the two, grabbing the hood of her sweatshirt and making her spin to face him.

“I’m going to testify,” he confessed, gasping as if he’d sprinted a mile rather than fifteen feet. His face was still red, but it would not be warm now. Warmth was an illusion. He was not making any sense.

“Listen to me!” His glasses had gone slightly askew; he looked helpless, as if shoved around by bullies. “I’m going to testify for Dallas. He wanted me to try to talk you out of this thing, but I can see that it’s hopeless. I guess you’re going to finish whatever it is you think you’ve started. But I think it’s only fair you hear it from me: I’ve agreed to testify on his behalf.”

“What the FUCK do you know?” she screamed, hoping to bully him further, to finish the job that had been started. “You weren’t even there!”

“Oh yes I was Jude—”

She bolted again.

“—and we both know you remember *that*.”

She shot ahead like a wild horse released from a chute. She ran to catch up with something inside her, a driving, spinning, snapping force. She ran to stay in her body. If she stopped, a geyser of grief would blow through the top of her head. Her legs pounded, her arms pumped. The fog took her in.

1990

Post-Traumatic Stress

“Jude has to work!” Claudia announced to the group.

Kat stood abruptly and marched over to Claudia, skirts swirling as if whipped by a storm. Her face was grim, clamped into an expression Jude had never seen. “Don’t you know the rules by now?” Kat demanded, standing over Claudia in a menacing stance.

Claudia’s face crumpled, her eyes brimmed with tears. This response was nearly as astonishing as Kat’s behavior.

“Gosh, Kat,” Claudia said meekly. “You don’t have to be so mean.”

Now Kat’s eyes reddened. She spun as if suddenly aware of the circle of women surrounding her, launching her skirts into waves of motion again. She clutched the charm at her throat. Something of cosmic proportions was out of alignment. An earthquake was imminent; Jude could feel it through her feet.

No one moved. Kat trembled with the effort of controlling herself, the pads in her face, the flesh beneath her jaw, quivering pitifully. Could she literally melt down? Jude knew this was a childish thought, but she felt helpless as a child, awestruck in the presence of authority at its weakest, especially now that Kat was lowering herself to the floor, bracing an arm against Claudia’s knee, while Claudia steadied her by gripping her wrist. A rapprochement between the two seemed to have been reached, but Kat, slumped as a sack of cement, looked as though she might faint.

Claudia broke the spell. “Looks like Kat’s the one who needs to work,” she said.

All the women laughed, too loudly, and Kat allowed herself to weep, just a little, smiling gratefully at Claudia.

“That is so true,” she said finally, looking from woman to woman around the circle. “I do need to work—in private, on my own time. How completely inappropriate for me to bring my issues in here. This is your time, of course.” Bracing herself again, she staggered to her feet. “But something is deeply troubling me, something about our

group. I'm sorry I didn't prepare myself adequately for this moment, but I do feel I need to proceed."

She stepped directly in front of Jude and dropped to her knees—a reprise of that moment when she had first cradled Jude's hand, so tenderly, so very long ago, the very first time they met. With the same deliberation, she now opened her palms and placed them face up on her knees, a meditative posture, then slowly lifted her hands to the level of her heart, pressing them together, a prayer.

"Namaste," she said to Jude. "The goddess in me greets the goddess in you."

Ritual. Jude saw it for what it was. Probably a cleansing ceremony. She was not going to have a chance to rummage through the Rubbermaid tote and select the weapon of her choice. Claudia, though it was actually and seriously none of her business, had been right. Jude had been desperate for the group to reconvene after New Year's because *she needed to work*, she needed a place to let it all rip.

She had never wanted to work until now, but she had been besieged by a tumult of memories—ruined towels, a rug, a bedspread, clotted blackish blood soaking them all, a nauseating ride through the dark, a round and lashless eyeball (a light!) staring down from the ceiling in a sharp-smelling room. P.J. had brought it all back. YOU. DON'T. KNOW. SHIT. she had told herself with each pounding step as she had run from him. And when she had run up the back steps of the bungalow and into the bathroom, she had discovered fresh blood in her underwear—her first period in a year—and when the blood dripped crimson on the flesh-pink linoleum beneath her feet, she could name one more thing HE COULD NOT POSSIBLY KNOW.

She had completely forgotten about that trip to the doctor, but as the blood sluiced down her leg it all came rushing back. The slices in her thigh throbbed in sympathy, and they were throbbing now, in rhythm with an insistent pulse, the pressure of the past. She needed to get it OUT. She had been holding this in for almost two weeks. She needed a tennis racket, a target, something that could withstand the abuse.

But Kat was praying. This was her time, after all.

"And now I have to tell you good-bye," she was saying.

Jude gritted her teeth against a flash of fury. There was an epidemic of nonsense, incoherence in her life. First P.J. and now this. *What the hell are you talking about?* would be the obvious question. But she did not want the answer.

Too late, Claudia yelped, “Good-bye?”

Kat, unperturbed, continued to watch Jude over the tips of her fingers, which she now brought close to her lips. “I’m so sorry to have to end our time together, but I’m afraid I have no choice.”

“What’s going on? What’s the matter?” This was Opal, who had been making slurpy sounds behind a wad of Kleenex throughout the entire session.

Kat’s face was waxy, but a pure sort of wax, a smooth creamy candle—one of her serenity candles, in fact, pale yellow. Her eyes would be the glowing green flame. This was an attempt to hypnotize, this waxy tranquillity, to soften the delivery of a message that was otherwise intolerable. But Jude was not fooled. Jude was not amused. She stared steadily back, refusing to be seduced.

“Your mother and stepfather,” Kat sighed, settling further back on her heels, “have filed a complaint against me with the American Psychological Association. And the ethics of the profession require I stop treating you while this complaint is under investigation.”

“No!” Helen cried, and Jude hated her, just for an instant. If Helen had nothing to contribute ninety-nine-percent of the time, why open her mouth now? How much better it would have been if she could just stay curled inside her cocoon. Everyone knew (and this was the problem, why Helen should have kept quiet): whenever she expressed any kind of objection, there had to be something truly, undeniably wrong.

Sorrow began to creep into Jude’s belly. Further down, those razored wounds throbbed as if freshly opened, as if weeping warm blood, expressing the tears she could not shed. Her defenses, her anger were in danger of collapse.

Quickly, though, before they crumbled, she leaned toward Kat. Where was a tennis racket when you needed one?

“Why are you telling me this in front of everyone?” she asked.

* * *

“You had an abortion?” Frisch thumped both hands on the coffee table in front of him. It was solid maple, colonial in design, as dully functional and mass-produced as the rest of furniture in his suite at the Monte Vista Hotel. In preparation for the trial, just three weeks away, he had relocated his staff again to Dunning and secured an entire floor of the hotel as their center of operations. The main hub of activity was an interconnected trio of rooms, from which the beds and dressers had been removed in order to accommodate a mounting collection of filing boxes stuffed with interrogatories and responses, deposition transcripts, background dossiers, multiple copies of every scrap of paper that had been exchanged between the parties and/or submitted to the court. Various staff members hurried in and out of the rooms, which offered a view of the town’s gritty main boulevard and the grain elevator towering above the railroad station. The only mountains to be seen were sixty miles to the east, the Sierras, blue smudges occasionally visible on the horizon, depending on the weather. *Monte Vista*, Frisch had grumbled, but sardonically—hardly truth in advertising, a misnomer if ever there was. *Toro Vista* was more like it, he decided, referring to the lawnmower dealership across the street.

“Why why *why* didn’t you tell me this before?” he was exclaiming now, waving Naomi over to join them. She fetched a pad of paper, a bottle of water, her cinnamon-flavored breath mints, and slid onto the sofa next to Frisch.

Jude sat in the matching armchair. Its maple armrests tapered forward into snail-like knobs, and she gripped these as if preparing for take-off. “I just remembered it,” she mumbled, knowing whatever explanation she offered would be lame. But it was true. She had shoved the whole bloody mess into a corner of her mind—not forgotten, exactly, she realized now—yet never given any thought, never allowed to take shape in consciousness. And then there it was, whole and complete, served up as if on a platter, like the gory head of John the Baptist. This was P.J.’s fault; he had provoked it. She had to prove how *wrong* he was. How could he know *anything* if he didn’t know about *that* night (which she had never told him about)?

“You remembered it? In therapy?”

“No, I was ...” Didn’t he know she’d been ejected from therapy? Well, she wasn’t going to break the news to him; he would know soon enough, just as he would know about her so-called best friend agreeing to testify. But that had to be a lie! A trick! A desperate ploy to shock her into submission. Whatever it was, he was nothing but a traitor.

“I was alone!” she nearly shouted. And she had been.

“Okay! Okay, no need to get defensive. But I’m going to need to ask you some questions about this, um, episode. This is ... well, I’m not going to jump to any conclusions till I hear the whole story, but let me share a bit of news with you. Mr. Early’s counsel made a new offer this morning, and I’m sure he wants us to believe he’s being hugely generous: two hundred thousand. A big leap, you’ll agree, from his previous offer but also an indication he’s feeling the heat—the court date approacheth, he knows we’re now camped in his backyard—but still insultingly low.”

“He’ll go higher,” Naomi suggested, popping a mint.

“Absolutely,” Frisch nodded. “Especially if ...” He peered at Jude. “Okay, let’s hear it. The abortion.”

“It may have been a miscarriage,” Jude corrected him.

“But you said it was an abortion.”

“I had a procedure. I guess that’s what you would call it.”

“A procedure.”

It had been Easter time, that much she knew, sometime after that glamour photo had been taken—the following year? She must have been fourteen. Yes, the second half of eighth grade. She had no clue what the doctor’s name might be. Someone her mother knew, some social or professional acquaintance. Josie had driven. It was a long and agonizing drive, Jude vomited on the floor behind the drivers seat, she had no idea where they was going, just that it was taking forever, and all the while a hot stickiness seeped between her thighs, pooled beneath her hip. She was lying in it, just as she had been lying in it on the rug in her bedroom when her mother had found her. As Josie drove, one hand on the wheel, she screamed into the other, which she held clamped over her mouth.

“You have to remember something about this doctor,” Frisch said. Both he and Naomi were tense with excitement; both had edged to the lip of the sofa and looked as if they might spring forward to embrace her. “Your *mother* arranged this,” Frisch was saying, his voice carefully modulated. “Very impressive. But we’ll need a little more to go on. Take it very slowly. Tell me anything at all you can recall about that doctor. His office. His appearance. Anything.”

That merciless eyeball had glared above. Noises seeped in from the adjoining room: yipping sounds: her mother. The doctor might have had dark flat hair. He might have had glasses (horn rims, like P.J.’s, though she did not say this). There was a woman there, too! In the room with the doctor. A nurse? His wife? They were both—
Naomi bit into her mint. Jude could hear it crunch.

They were both—

She avoided looking at Naomi, fearing this might somehow offend her. But there was something in her face that made the memory sharper. “They were both Japanese,” she admitted, knowing Naomi was not.

Frisch looked quizzically from Naomi to Jude. “Japanese? You sure?”

“My mother said his name was the same as some Japanese food she’d had once. Something to do with seaweed. That’s how she managed to look him up when she was so hysterical. She actually ran down the stairs to find her address book, shrieking *seaweed! seaweed! seaweed!*”

Naomi registered no surprise, nor the slightest perturbation. She began writing on a pad. “Japanese surname. Okay—what year would that have been?” Then she was striding over to one of the research staffers, handing him a sheet of paper, pointing to the phone.

Frisch cast a conspiratorial glance at Jude, suggesting they might be able to *really* talk now, with Naomi safely removed. He moved closer on the sofa. “If you were pregnant, there must have been intercourse, yes?” he asked, but very gently.

She gripped the snail-knobs as well as she could; her thumbs traced the twin spirals of wood. “Yes,” she agreed, looking down.

“And this is something you remember?”

She shrugged. “More or less.” In fact, she remembered it completely. But some things, she had decided, she would keep to herself.

“Well, there’s plenty of time for that. If we can get the doctor’s record, it may nearly speak for itself.”

He brushed his thighs and stood, then helped himself to one of Naomi’s mints. “I must say, this has been a remarkably eventful day. Oh, and one more thing—this kind of late-breaking drama just bores me to tears, but the defense suddenly has a new witness. Paul James Paul. A friend, or rather former friend, correct?”

She dug her thumbs into the spirals’ hearts.

“We all just call him P.J.”

* * *

With little enthusiasm, she went trudging off toward Rudy’s. She had made a point of not seeing him at Christmas, just as she had made a point of not visiting him for months before that—a continuing statement of her disgust over that unholy reunion in his shop, his fawning complicity in the Josie/Dallas master plan. But the more she considered it, the more she fretted (she knew!) he had spent Christmas utterly alone, and the implications now nagged at her. Had he even noticed her absence? What if he had? She dreaded what might be waiting for her in that upstairs apartment.

This fear was a gift, though, a convenient rationale. Something might have happened; he might have fallen, say, or drowned in the tub ... and who would ever know? who would care? It was a reasonable enough excuse to end her boycott of his premises, the displeasure of his company. Someone should check up on him. There was no point admitting that she *wanted* to see him, that she needed someone in her life to be who they always had been. By now, his betrayal had paled in comparison to the others—so much tamer and simpler than the rest: her mother’s, Victoria’s, P.J.’s, Kat’s. The list seemed to grow, day by day. Who would be next? The only qualifications were to pretend to deeply care, but then ultimately to care only enough to deliver the slap of rejection face to face.

That was some consolation, she supposed.

Rudy, though, had never pretended. There had never been any confusion as to where she stood with him. She was a substitute (*those eyes!*) for the genuine article. And when he had a chance (he thought) to grab the real thing instead ...

She yanked the screen door open. It screeched with disuse. The disarray in the workroom was disheartening; an earthquake might have tumbled half his projects from the workbench. The air was dank, but dulled with cold and she could see her breath. January, the current month, the month of reckoning, seemed to have made itself at home inside the shop.

She began to clear a path, pulling her sleeves down over her hands to avoid touching the objects she moved: a pipe wrench, a toilet seat, a sealed cardboard box that was surprisingly heavy. He was taking refuge upstairs, probably had been for days, even weeks, judging by the state of things. She didn't bother to call out. She knew he would not respond.

Still mooning over your mom?

She placed a foot on the first stair.

Still drinking?

To her left, the store widened out toward the front windows, but the drapes were drawn tight, shrouding the room in torpid blue. She had the fleeting, maybe willful, impression that all the displays and countertops were draped with sheets, that it was in fact a sealed-up estate, the missing million hidden (but not really) somewhere. A mystery! She longed to scan his shelves to see if a good mystery might be found. She hadn't read one in months, and it was probably just as well. Why kid yourself into thinking any meaningful puzzle might be solved?

The etching sound of snoring echoed in the stairwell. She exhaled with relief, but also secret dismay. He was alive, but if he were dead, she could grieve him. Something endless would be over, finally done. But he was snoring, and they both would have to go on as before, their own worst enemies, bonded forever along this slender common thread.

You're spending a lot of time over there...

Well, P.J. had been wrong about that.

She climbed further and a hissing sound drifted down—running water? radio static?—along with the smell of burnt toast. She emerged into Rudy’s kitchen, a space which originally had been an octagonal landing between the upstairs bedrooms. Four pieces of blackened toast lay on the countertop, water dripped from the faucet into the sink. Through the doorway into Rudy’s den, which at one time had been her childhood bedroom, came the source of the snoring. There he was, sprawled in his recliner with his head arched back. A bottle of liquor was next to him on the floor, a liquid bulls-eye pooled beneath its lip.

The hissing came from the television. She picked up the remote to turn it off, but accidentally hit the “play” button. Moaning surged from the television set; a red mouth, glossy as a candied apple, filled the entire screen. From the mouth came a tongue, which touched another: a man’s. The camera pulled back to show the man bucking against the woman, ducking his head to one of her wobbling breasts.

A vicious urge to shake Rudy, even kick him, possessed her, but the main thing was to make that man and woman stop. She punched buttons on the remote, but the moaning got louder. She grabbed the power cord running from the TV to the wall and jerked it from the outlet. Rudy snorted as if he might awaken, but smacked his lips and settled deeper into his chair.

She did kick him now, her foot against his, a serious whack.

“Huh?” He pushed himself up to sitting.

“Merry Christmas, Dad.” She tossed the remote into his lap.

“Huh?” he repeated. “Goddamn, am I sleeping through Christmas?”

She could say yes and he would believe it was true.

Hopeless, she thought, turning away. But not fast enough. As he rose, groaning, pressing his knuckles into the small of his back, his pants fell from his hips. They were unzipped. Beneath them, his dingy briefs were yanked down, and there, hapless, was his shrunken purple-gray stub, a misshapen egg in a nest of dark hair.

She spun and headed into the kitchen.

“Whoops!” he chortled, and she heard the zipper zip. “Sorry about that, honey. Living alone can make a man a little lax. Must have overlooked that when I went to the little boys’ room.”

She began to fling the toast in the trash.

He came up behind her. "So whadja bring me, Santa?" he teased.

He was kidding, right? He had to be kidding. And, as usual, his humor was so unfunny as to inspire brutality. "This!" she wanted to say, with a full-on shove down the stairs.

But she turned cautiously towards him, not wanting to face him, but wanting even less for him to be behind her. He was ripe with bourbon. He had bile-colored bags under his eyes.

"I didn't bring you anything, Dad."

"Ah, well, that's okay, honey. Cuz you know how I am. All I ever want is—"

"Your girls. All you ever want is your *girls*."

"That's it, exactly," he said, wistfully oblivious to her tone.

And then over his shoulder, she saw the far wall was papered over with newspaper clippings. "Dunning Attorney Sued for \$1.2 Million," said the boldest, biggest headline.

"Oh my god." She moved past him toward the wall. "What's this?" But she was already convinced she did not want to know.

Rudy grabbed her elbows and tried to steer her away. "Oh that!"

"Let go of me!" she hollered. *Unwelcome touching* had been a topic in group therapy, not long before she had been banished from it.

He leapt back, stunned, swaying.

"I'm sorry, but you surprised me." She shuddered to think where his hands had been, and lifted each elbow to have a look. Nothing there. Nothing visible, at least.

"You're following my lawsuit," she said, finally satisfied with the distance between them; he had retreated halfway across the kitchen. Though he had managed to turn her away from the wall, and her back was to it now, she had seen enough to know. Rudy was obsessed. But with what, with whom?

"I'm just so proud of you, honey," he said, but hung his head. "I just know you're going to wipe that bastard's ass."

"That's what this means to you? Getting back at Dallas?"

“Now, finally, maybe your mama will understand what a monster she married. Maybe she’ll see what I’ve been trying to tell her all these years.”

“Don’t you even care—” Jude stopped short. Of course he didn’t. Besides, he was reaching into his front pocket. The motion of the hand inside the pocket, an animal fidgeting beneath his trousers, made her snap her mouth shut.

“Look at this,” he said, and tried to give her a piece of paper. She didn’t want to touch it. He unfolded it and pressed it flat on the kitchen table. It was the same table she had envied as a child—a substantial, grownup-looking table, it had seemed to her then, but now it was pitted and gouged, marred with cigarette burns. “One thousand dollars, from Dallas Early to yours truly.”

“A thousand dollars?”

“Hey, that kind of rhymes, doesn’t it? Dallas Early. Yours truly.” He laughed but began hacking; he was starting to get the shakes. “Excuse me,” he said, retreating to the den and lifting his bottle from the floor. Jude couldn’t watch him drink, but she could hear him swallow, even from several feet away. He swallowed and swallowed. She stared down at the check. It was just as he said. One thousand and zero one-hundredths dollars. Dated: January something. Signed: Dallas Early, Esq.

“Don’t think I care, do you?” Rudy crowed from the den. “Well, I’ll tell you something you might never’ve imagined, Judy girl. As soon as I heard about your accu-say-shuns—” he could barely pronounce it “—I went flying over to that son’ bitch as fast as my feet could fly. Never have spoken to him since the divorce, but this seemed to call for drastic action. See, he and I had a little *chat*.” He spat this last word out.

“And he gave you a check?”

“Told him I didn’t know what he might have done to you, but I sure as hell knew what he’s done with whores, plenty of ‘em, even had *proof*—” this he spit, too “—and I was going to tell the jury all about it.”

“There’s not going to be a jury, Dad.” Or at least that’s what Mr. Frisch had said.

“I’d tell his *wife*, too.” He was beginning to rant. “I’d tell anyone who’d care to listen what a whoremonger he was.”

“So you accepted money from him to keep quiet?”

Rudy cackled. "Can you believe it? Easiest grand I ever made."

Jude touched the check now. She held it up to the light. It seemed real enough. Whores? That seemed real enough, too. "But if you're so concerned about mom—" she looked over at him just as he licked the lip of the bottle "—why would you keep quiet? Don't you think she should know?"

She paused; she had to speak on her own behalf, too, if only to hear the sound of it. "Don't you think it would help me, too?"

Rudy moved forward, arms spread wide, his signal for a smooch. "C'mon Judy," he shook his head, "Who'd ever listen to a drunk like me?"

* * *

Though it was six-thirty a.m. and the sky was scarcely paling, a scattering of stars still glittered grittily, several reporters had already formed an encampment outside the courthouse. Frisch and Naomi, flanking Jude, marched straight past them. "Not now," Frisch barked at a woman with a notepad, brushing her aside.

They reached the side entrance, relieved to find a guard waiting for them, as had been prearranged. He had already unlocked the door and thrust it open as they approached, then, keys rattling, secured it again as they waited inside the corridor, breathing sharply, shivering. It was nearly as cold inside as it was in the concrete courtyard they had just crossed, and nearly as dark.

The guard creaked in complicated ways as he led them down the half-lit hall. A walnut grip protruded from his hip holster, and Jude wanted to be reassured by this, but the sight of his gun made her more exhausted with each step she took. His polished shoes thudded on the linoleum. He passed from shadow to light. And so did they, Jude supposed, though she could not observe it. She was inside this phenomenon, not on the outside looking in.

As much as anything, she was inside the Santa Juanita County Courthouse in Madrona. She would soon be inside courtroom number four. The guard was dragging open a pair of oaken double doors as if opening a vault, then snapping on the lights.

Fluorescent, they flutter, flutter, fluttered in a strobing anti-rhythm until catching at full strength: frosty greenish, antiseptic. Not a shadow in sight.

She shut her eyes, just for a moment, to shut out this unfortunate scene. They had been in constant motion since five a.m., when Frisch's Lexus had pulled into her driveway and carried her off to the hotel for a last-minute strategy huddle over coffee and croissants (a single bakery in Dunning managed to meet Frisch's exacting standards), support staff bustling in and out of the suite, yawning, some of the interns still in pajamas and robes. Some had been up all night. As had Jude.

"Get plenty of rest," Frisch had instructed her the evening before. "The first day is always the toughest. Particularly since you'll be testifying. Not that we *want* you to look rested, but you really ought to be." Her appearance, he theorized, should be presentable yet evocative of all she had endured—*barely hanging in there*, would be the ideal effect, maximizing her credibility. If she appeared exhausted, so much the better. But to actually *be* exhausted would not do. They offered to put her up at the hotel, to accommodate her in whatever way they could. But she had preferred her own bed, her own room.

It *was* her room now, she realized. The attic had become a starker, steeper, sparser version of her closet, pared down to the essentials and freed from any allusions to her mother's intrusive taste (no designer coordinates hanging above, in constant reproof). She sometimes missed her stash of keepsakes, which had been left behind when she fled from Villa Miranda as though fleeing a natural disaster, but otherwise the attic was her sanctuary. She might do anything there she liked.

But she had not slept. She had lain rigid on her back and placed the blue bunny on her chest, folding her hands over it like a child laid out in a casket.

Above her, the cedar roof beams met at the attic's center peak. Their symmetry was solace. Nothing else could ever fit together so effortlessly. One, two, three, four pairs of beams, she began to count, then realized she had long ago stopped counting as a way to cope. There were other ways, she had discovered, to withstand unpleasant situations. Inverting the equation, for instance: unpleasant for whom? *She would deal her words like blades ...*

Eight, nine, ten days had passed since P.J.'s deposition. She had viewed it on videotape. Per Frisch's advice (it would strengthen her resolve, he claimed), she had forced herself to watch the tape of each deposition that had been taken: all of her own witnesses, all of Dallas' witnesses, Dallas' own deposition, most unfortunately Josie's, even her own. Seeing herself on tape had been weirdly disorienting—she had no idea how much she resembled her father, the hollowed-out posture, the flinty expression of distrust—even more disorienting than the counter-accusations of Dallas and his witnesses, the wounding language they deployed. Delusional. Pathological. Infantile attachment. Emotionally crippled. (Well, her mother was the expert, wasn't she?)

P.J., however, had no chance to be disparaging. His deposition, the last, was the saving grace—if only for its surreality. Despite the grainy image, the marginal quality of the audio, it had been apparent from his hypervigilant posture that he was thrilled to be deposed, dazzled by Frisch's imperious disdain (he seemed to have saved a special supply of it for P.J.).

"Boalt," Frisch had sniffed, examining a sheaf of papers. "Decent program."

P.J. adjusted his glasses. With his square-shouldered suit and narrow tie, he could have stepped out of a yearbook from the Eisenhower era. "Yeah, it's decent," he shrugged, refusing to take the bait and challenge Frisch's faint praise.

Frisch chuckled; he seemed genuinely pleased. He squinted at someone near the camera—Naomi?—as if to say *don't you just adore this kid?*

"Looks like Mr. Early pulled some strings to get you in," he said offhandedly.

P.J. bit at this. "Excuse me, but I do believe my qualifications were what 'got me in.' Four-point-oh at Brown," he began to recite, "Actually five-point-oh, if you use the—"

"Let's cut to the chase, my friend," Frisch interrupted. "One of your 'qualifications' was an effusive letter of reference from Dallas Ferguson Early, Esquire, isn't that correct?"

P.J. nodded. "Correct," he admitted.

"And maybe a couple of personal phone calls, placed to certain strategic individuals?"

"I wouldn't know about that."

“We can talk shop here, can’t we? You obviously have some acquaintance with legal terminology—or at least rudimentary Latin—having made it through that notorious first semester...” Frisch’s tone was patronizing, but P.J. grinned crookedly in response. He seemed infinitely pleased to be addressed in this manner, as if basking in the fraternity of lawyerhood, or what he possibly took to be fraternal hazing.

Frisch went on. “Might we be talking a rather open-and-shut case of *quid pro quo*?”

“You don’t have to answer that,” came a voice from off camera. The deceptive lilt of it stung Jude’s ears; the voice belonged to Eva Lindstrom Cruz, Dallas’ attorney. Six hours of being questioned by that woman had been the low point of this entire enterprise.

Frisch pushed further. “In fact, Mr. Paul, isn’t it possible that you’re not only paying back the favor, but trying to save face at law school? What happens to *your* reputation if Mr. Early falls even further than he already has?”

P.J. now sulked. His admiration for Frisch had apparently blindsided him, and he seemed chastened, even contrite. “Right there—” Frisch pointed to the screen as they viewed the tape. “He’s saying to himself, ‘man, I should have seen *that* coming’.” The rest was cake, in Frisch’s estimation; “our junior barrister” offered virtually nothing of substance. He claimed of course *never* to have seen the defendant make the slightest sexual advance toward the plaintiff (which was his main qualification as their witness)—but did he actually believe those kinds of offenses took place where he might see them? What would there have been for him to observe? Perhaps he spied on them on private, then—was that how he could be so sure?

Of course not, no, but *certainly* she would have told him; they were, after all, best friends. And everyone knows abused girls go running to confide in their male “best” friends when those male “best” friends have engaged in some serious male-bonding with the abuser. When they might be said to even *worship* the abuser in question.

Lying in bed, Jude rewound and played and paused her memory of that tape, savoring the moment when P.J.’s confidence crumbled, willing to take satisfaction wherever she could. The cedar beams met in pairs above her head, two, four, six, eight.

Her space heater whirred. *Get plenty of rest...* Her eyes fell shut, the bunny slipped from her chest. Finally, she was drifting...

But odd sounds impinged on her consciousness: the chirping of a pager, the whooshing of a blower; she could feel a blast of tepid air on her neck. She opened her eyes. She had been dozing on her feet. The courtroom yawned before her like a cavern.

Frisch was to her right, swinging his briefcase from one hand to another. He was ignoring the bleating of his pager. Naomi snapped it off his belt and peered at the display. "Keith," she said, referring to one of the associate attorneys back at the Monte Vista. "Wants to know if there's petty cash for parking."

"Tell them to expense it," Frisch said absently. "And tell them to get their butts over here, *immediament*." He was still pitching his briefcase back and forth.

Naomi extracted the flip phone from his jacket pocket. "Norm will be with us in a second," she said to Jude. "He's just sizing up the space." She punched a button on the phone and frowned. "I'll have to go out to the lobby to make this call." She shook Frisch's arm. "Got it, Norm?"

"Got it," he answered. He suddenly ceased his briefcase calisthenics and turned to look up at Jude. Her modest heels boosted her height an inch or two, making her a full four or five inches taller than he was. The extra height allowed her to admire how beautifully his hair was parted. P.J.'s hair, from this vantage point (because she had once towered over him, too), had been a perennially thatched disaster. But he had long since gone to Brown, grown taller, shorn his hair into a butchy buzz.

Frisch peered up into her face just as Naomi had peered at the pager. "You okay?" he asked. "Sorry about those reporters."

This seemed to be a cue. She could fall apart a little now. "I thought that's why we came early," she pouted, though probably not very convincingly. In fact, she felt slightly more confident, thanks to his attentiveness, allowing her to dare a sweeping look around the room. The courtroom was smaller than she had first perceived, rather stingily small, bureaucratically dull: mushroom-colored walls, rows of drab spectator benches, industrial-grade carpet beneath her feet. It smelled of functionality as well, a stale broom-closet odor.

"I mean, didn't we come early so they wouldn't be here?" she added petulantly.

“My mistake. Never underestimate the tenacity of the press. Even in a place like—” he turned to survey the room again “—well, let’s just say we should have known better. And now that we know, we can be better prepared.” He inclined his head toward the front of the courtroom. “Shall we?” he asked, and Jude reluctantly trailed behind him, up the center aisle.

A marathon of activity and then this unspeakable pause: more than an hour till the courthouse doors would officially open, almost two hours until the trial was scheduled to commence.

She spent nearly twenty minutes crouching in a ladies’ room stall, certain she would throw up, or would make herself throw up, but she did neither.

She returned to the chair where Frisch had instructed her to sit—up in the courtroom well, where the flooring was hardwood, not carpeted—and proceeded to become intimately acquainted with the plaintiff’s table, where she would be sitting for hours, days, who knew when she would ever be free again (as if she ever had been)? The table’s blond oak surface was tinged an unwholesome ashy green by the fluorescent light. Its grain was complex. Someone had nicked marks into it with a sharp implement, and she traced these wounds with the fingers of the hand that had been cut.

She noticed a crack running down the wall behind the judge’s bench, just beyond the flag whose folds revealed the muzzle of the California grizzly. The crack fanned into a delta of smaller cracks. Each of these faded into the neutral blank of the wall.

“Hey, Mr. Frisch, security gave us all kinds of shit!” someone called out, and a door banged. Frisch had been striding back and forth in front of the judge’s bench, hands thrust into his pockets and reeling off a monologue to Naomi—rehearsing? — who stood off to one side. Frisch jumped at this intrusion, but Naomi did not. Jude felt as if someone had struck her. She would run back to the ladies’ room; she could definitely purge herself now.

But Frisch’s staff was streaming through the door, tugging airport caddies piled high with file boxes, flip charts, portfolios, a royal melee of a mess. “Good thing Edie was able to sweet-talk that guard,” someone added. “A quarter to eight, and he tries to make us wait out in the cold, and the media dogs were about to—”

But Jude stopped listening. A quarter to eight! She scanned the room and found a clock just to the left of that crack, almost concealed by the flag. Leaning sideways, she could see it was twelve minutes till. Too late for scurrying to the restroom anyway, even if she could get past the chaos near the door. The main lobby would open at eight and everyone else would crowd into the courtroom and every pair of eyes would turn to stare when she returned to her seat. Assuming she did return. No, the only alternative was to crouch here instead, in her remote-as-possible corner—at the far left edge of the left-hand table, which was marred with such captivating scars. Next to the jury box, too. Where there would be no jury. This, more than anything, helped her calm herself again. The twelve empty seats would be companionably vacant for the duration of the trial. She could look there and see nothing, any time she liked.

Naomi took the chair next to her. She smelled of cinnamon and cigarettes. She pulled her suede briefcase into her lap and snapped open the hasps. The briefcase released a raw tobacco scent. Its pockets were predictably crammed with tightly organized folders, but Jude noticed, too, in the near corner, a tiny velvet pouch. She had an urge to take it—not steal it, merely borrow it—to take a peek inside.

Then Claudia's voice came booming from behind. "There she is!" Claudia announced, though huskily, apparently attempting to whisper. Jude turned to see her friends straggling up the aisle, Claudia in the lead, her gaze fixed on Jude, her expression grim. She held Boomer against her colossal chest, lavender limbs flopping. Helen, behind her, clutched an enormous white bear. Her eyes anxiously flitted all around, but she held fast to Claudia's satin warm-up jacket, and was pulled forward like a boxcar behind a locomotive. Behind her came Opal, carrying what appeared to be a month's supply of Kleenex, and Tawny, teetering on her strappy shoes and toting a purse the size of a floor pillow.

Where was Victoria, who might lend some dignity to this procession? No one had seen here. She had even abandoned group therapy, claiming that "exposure" to even Jude's friends was too close for comfort, as far as the lawsuit was concerned. "She was not looking so good," Claudia had claimed.

Naomi had also turned to watch the arrival of Jude's entourage. She bit her lip. "Oh dear," she said. "Cuddlies."

Hastily, she signaled to Frisch, who, to Jude's astonishment, was shaking hands with Eva Lindstrom Cruz near the defense's table. When had that woman arrived? Dallas must be there, too—and so must her mother—but she would not look around. She would stare unblinkingly at this woman, who, more than anyone Jude had seen, dwarfed Frisch to elf-like proportions. Well over six feet tall in her charcoal pumps, she was broad-shouldered, sturdy as a truck; her flat palomino-blond hair hung down past her padded shoulders, and she had a restless habit of flipping it back. Jude had tried to keep track of the number of times she had done this during the deposition, but then lost count. Flip, she threw her hair over her shoulder now as Jude watched.

Frisch signaled back to Naomi, who skittered her white-tipped fingernails on the tabletop then bent toward Jude, exhaling sweetly spiced cigarette breath into her face. "Norm's going to step outside with Ms. Cruz," she whispered. "Probably means a last-ditch offer. Could be interesting." She frowned, causing precious little dents to appear between her eyebrows. "Do you suppose—" she cast a look back at Jude's friends, who were just now moving into the bench right behind them. "Well ... those stuffed animals—"

"Jude! Goddamn! Hey, we've got ringside seats!" Claudia could not modulate her voice to save her life.

Helen looked more apprehensive than Jude imagined she probably looked herself. Tawny's arm had disappeared into her cavernous purse; she was fishing for something, probably a mirror. Opal's head was swiveling left and right.

"Who's *that*?" she exclaimed, eyes bulging. No doubt it was a man.

Involuntarily, Jude's eyes, like all of her friends', followed the direction of Opal's gaze. She felt her breath leave her body in a hard spastic cough.

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary, are you some kind of moron?" Claudia swatted Opal. "For your information, that is Dallas Fucking Early you are creaming your jeans about." Opal cringed; she was sure to cry. Tawny laughed.

Jude pried her gaze away, but it was too late. She had seen them both. Dallas, whom she hadn't seen for months except on videotape, was lean and ropy-looking, as if suffering from a wasting disease; his head seemed far too large for his body. Josie, behind him, was a caricature of herself: she wore a scarf and sunglasses—sunglasses!

—as if attempting to elude the paparazzi, but actually screaming for attention with her comical disguise.

Naomi had turned to face Jude's friends. "Ladies," she began, and Claudia did not object to this term. On the contrary, her jaw dropped at the sight of Naomi; she grinned goofily.

"I'm part of Ms. Hazelden's legal team"—Naomi fanned her fingers toward Jude, a sea anemone opening—"and I need to ask a favor. Those stuffed animals—" she paused as Helen adjusted the bear's position on her lap—"they're certainly welcome here, but they can also be a distraction for the judge. And we want him to concentrate on *Jude*, don't we? That's why we're here—for Jude." Helen blinked and Claudia puffed out her cheeks. "So I respectfully request that you keep your, um, friends down where the judge can't see them. All right? Agreed?"

Claudia grunted and complied, placing her Boomer in his customary place, wedged between her knees. Helen lowered her bear to rest on her feet and clutched its velvety ears.

"What did she want?" Opal asked. She had not been listening, having resumed her fervent scanning of the room.

"She just wants us to try to look halfway normal," Claudia sighed, then laughed. "Fat chance."

"Yeah, fat chance," Tawny agreed. She was lining her lips with dark pencil.

Frisch was suddenly back at the table, standing over Jude. He was sparking with excitement. He patted his pockets, then reached across to pluck his gold-plated pen from Naomi's hand. "That's *my* lucky pen, Ms. Tan," he said. "You'll have to get your own." He began jotting a note.

"Well?" Naomi asked, stretching across the table toward him. "What's the story?"

"I am impressed." Frisch crouched so that he was face to face with Jude. "Half a million," he said, his voice low and confidential. "Isn't that sweet? Half a million, and we can close up shop, and save ourselves a whole shitload of trouble." He gestured toward the judge's bench and witness box behind him. "But—" he added.

"They must be panicking," Naomi said.

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that. *He’s* panicking, but she isn’t. Ms. Cruz was not happy to be the messenger, I can tell you that. This was not *her* idea; I would lay money on it. He’s choking, but she’s still confident they’ve got a case.” He squinted in Eva Cruz’s direction. “I do admire her style, I must admit. No bullshit whatsoever.”

“He’s offering me half a million dollars?” Jude asked. Frisch nodded. He smelled fresh from a shower, though it had been hours since they had left the hotel.

“That’s a lot of money,” she said. “And if I accept it ... we’re done?”

“Over and done,” Frisch confirmed. “*But* the fact they’re boosting their offer so precipitously tells us something is seriously up. Mr. Early might be merely freaking out. Who knows? His partners might be squeezing him to settle, maybe even putting up the dough. *Or* Mr. Early knows something his attorney doesn’t, maybe knows much better than she does how this ultimately will play out. Either way, he’s worried it’ll cost him way more than five-hundred thousand in the end. She *knew* this offer would look bad. And it does. It’s ripe with implications. My advice? Reject it. At the very least, after a day of testimony, he might go even higher.”

“Even higher,” Jude repeated, testing out the sound of it. Scarcely moving her head, she glanced over at her mother. Someone should tell her to take off those bug-eyed sunglasses, show some respect. Was this moment, like any other, going to be hers? She might be a grieving widow behind those glasses, a spoiled countessa mourning a loss that will appreciably increase her wealth.

“Even higher,” Jude said again, more emphatically.

She knew Frisch would take her meaning. And he did.

They rose for the judge, a big sad-looking man with a shambling gait and dark rings under his eyes. Jorge Salazar, according to Naomi’s inquiry into his record, was one of the more liberal judges in the county. They had been lucky to get him. His broad-minded leanings were a reasonable match to their ideal profile on “compatible” issues—gender discrimination, for instance, and sexual harassment, though he had ruled on only one case of each thus far (“This ain’t exactly ground zero for gender-

equity activism,” Frisch had once complained, as if personally affronted). In almost every respect, the judge’s record was encouragingly, though cautiously, progressive.

Yet his caution was the clincher. He was sure to play especially fair in this case because of his special alliance with Eva Lindstrom Cruz, or rather, Ms. Cruz’s husband, Ramon, whose family had made its fortune in almonds. A civic-minded activist, Ramon Cruz applied his wealth and position to community causes, and often invited the judge to appear at fundraisers—an annual carnival, for instance, to benefit the children of deported illegals. But any social exchange between the judge and the husband and especially the attorney had always been “scrupulous,” as far as Naomi could determine, “squeaky clean.”

Judge Salazar placed his enormous wire-framed glasses on his nose; the lenses covered half his face. He banged his gavel, and both attorneys approached him. When Frisch vacated his chair, he left Jude exposed—she now occupied the middle seat, between Frisch and Naomi, and in his absence, there was now nothing between her and Dallas but several skimpy feet of empty space. Her skin prickled on that side, as though he could see straight through her respectable clothes.

At the bench, a short conversation ensued, then Eva Cruz turned back in slow motion, her face impassive. She strode over toward Dallas. Jude forced herself to study the crack in the wall, which now seemed to be an arm reaching down toward the judge’s shoulder.

A muffled cry came from Dallas’ direction. “What do you mean I have to leave?” Josie whimpered, but loud enough for her voice to carry. Dallas was making murmuring sounds, no doubt trying to placate her. The rest of the courtroom was hushed.

“Just clearing up a little procedural business,” Frisch explained, taking his seat again. He glanced at Jude and apparently sensed her confusion. “Ms. Cruz seemed to have ‘forgotten’ we had a prior agreement—no witnesses in the gallery until they’re called. Your mother, for instance, can be inside the courtroom when she’s called to the stand, but otherwise she’s out.”

What a gratifying phrase. Jude repeated it silently, with a warped sort of pleasure. *Otherwise she’s ...*

But of course Josie first had to make a scene, seize the center stage like a tragic anti-heroine. There was a commotion of activity; someone seemed to be escorting her from the room. If the floor had not been carpeted, they would have all been at the mercy of her sadly tapping heels.

“What a bitch,” Claudia grumbled.

Frisch’s seat was empty again. He was standing, alone, in the center of the wooden floor, a geometrically patterned parquet. He might have been Hamlet, on the verge of a soliloquy. He seemed taller; there was a rippling tension about him, as though preparing for a handspring or some other feat of athleticism—whatever might most impress the judge. He was “on,” Jude sensed. The trial was beginning.

“Your honor,” he said simply enough. Jude released her breath. How long had she been holding it?

“We are here today because of a young woman’s suffering,” he began, opening a palm as if to prove his intentions were honorable. “And some of that suffering is all too visible. Ms. Jude Hazelden’s body has been terribly injured; it is permanently and horribly scarred. But we are not here to determine who caused these external injuries—because we already know. Ms. Hazelden herself thrust her right hand through a sheet of glass. She plunged her left hand into a kettle of boiling water. She has taken a razor to her thigh. She has caused herself severe external disfigurement that can easily be seen.

“But the obvious question is *why*? Why would an intelligent and docile young woman perform a brutal act of self-mutilation that severed multiple tendons and required sixty-seven stitches? Why would she subject herself to deliberate second-degree burns? The answer, your honor, is that Ms. Hazelden’s behavior has been an undeniable cry for help, signaling that her most devastating injuries are inside.”

He might have been singing, so congruent were his words with his gestures. His shoulders were loose, he moved with a nimble sort of grace. Jude felt a rush of pride, even a blush, awed and flattered at once. She believed, for now, that it was all on her behalf.

“But even though the source of Ms. Hazelden’s deepest injuries is not visible to the eye, it is obvious to the trained observer. The expert evidence will show there is a

primary cause for this kind of desperate, self-destructiveness—” he turned slightly towards Eva Cruz, as if reminding her of her failure to have the trial dismissed on the grounds that this “evidence” proved nothing.

“And that cause is childhood ... sexual ... abuse.”

He sounded the three words individually. The judge look up at the ceiling as if pondering their import. Or perhaps he was observing the heating unit, which had just shut off with a decisive clunk.

“Our expert evidence will demonstrate this cause-and-effect relationship—that not only is Ms. Hazelden clinically disabled—deeply and permanently wounded—but also that there is an incontrovertible diagnosis for this damage: sexual abuse. And the *physical* evidence will show that this girl, when merely thirteen, was subjected to unconscionable sexual violation. The most tangible result of this monstrous behavior was that, when still a child, just fourteen, she underwent a nightmarish abortion, the adverse effects of which will remain with her for the rest of her life.

“The cumulative and permanent result of these traumatic events is her extreme dysfunction—chronic psychological impairment which prevents her from performing normal daily activities and obtaining the full enjoyment of life. Ms. Hazelden, who is now almost twenty-three years old, has never held a job, has never learned to drive a car. Before joining a therapeutic support group, she had no friends. She has never left her home town on her own except when forced by her stepfather to enroll at an East Coast college, where she became so frightened that her inner demons were released, compelling her to smash her hand through glass.

“It is exactly this kind of coping strategy that is at the heart of this trial—the fact that Ms. Hazelden has resorted to extreme psychological defense mechanisms to endure the utter humiliation to which she had been subjected: the wholesale destruction of her self-esteem. One of those coping mechanisms has been self-mutilation. And another has been *repression*.

“Repression is a controversial topic, your honor—I will not deny it. Can the experience of an event be forgotten and then, years later, remembered? The defense will do its best to show this is impossible—that a memory cannot be repressed and later retrieved. But whatever their *theories* about repression, our evidence will show

that Ms. Hazelden was in fact abused and did not recall the memory of her abuse—*nor* the identity of her abuser—until she felt secure enough to remember it. Only when she began therapy and found herself in a safe and appropriate environment did her memories come forth.

“And those memories are of the defendant—”

Frisch paused. His back was turned to Dallas. The natural climatic gesture would be for him to pivot and face the villain, to single him out, but he seemed to be deliberately defying that expectation. Everyone knew who the culprit was, his posture suggested. It was somehow more damning for him to keep his back turned.

Finally, though, he swung slightly to the side and extended his arm toward Dallas, a master of ceremonies introducing a sideshow performer.

“—the defendant, Mr. Dallas Early,” he concluded, “Dallas Early treated this young girl as a sexual object, for his own purposes and pleasure, with reckless disregard for his duties as an adult and as a parent—subjecting her to loathsome ... sexual ... acts.”

To Jude, these final words were music, an unresolved chord. Frisch left them hanging in the air.

Her skirt snagged on her chair as she rose to take the witness stand. It was the same skirt she had worn, along with that turban, to the party she had wantonly crashed: the Caldwell's skirt. It had been laundered and pressed, along with the lace-placated blouse, which she was also now wearing.

She spent several moments freeing the skirt from a splinter, or an imagined splinter, on her chair. Then she was seated inside a tall hollow box. Had she been any smaller, she might have felt like a circus animal in a crate. She did not like this vantage point—high above, facing the courtroom, where she could see everyone (except for the judge, behind her left shoulder) and they could see her. There were maybe twenty-five people in the room. The courtroom was closed, by order of the judge. Besides the attorneys' support staffs, only a handful of authorized spectators were allowed on each side. Jude had her four friends in attendance, but she would not wonder how many had shown up for Dallas, much less even glance in that direction.

Twenty-five, a close enough estimate, no way to count their brown and blond and redhaired heads without actually scanning the room. Besides, Frisch was approaching, smiling indulgently. His hair was lustrously black. There was that beautiful part again.

He started with the simple questions—name, age, place of birth, current address. She stared at the high-backed chairs in the jury box, now immediately to her right, and responded to each question by rote. She had been exceedingly well prepared. This would be easier than she had expected, especially in the absence of a jury; the empty box gave her somewhere to look.

In the movies there was always a jury. She had feared some kind of sleight-of-hand had convinced Frisch he did not want one. But Frisch, who at the time he explained his reasoning was spooning plum sauce and then pork filling onto a moo shoo pancake, had assured Jude it was in her best interest to have requested a bench trial—to have the judge alone hear the case.

“One,” he had said, taking a bite and chewing and swallowing before he continued, “it underscores our main message to the judge: you’ve been traumatized, and putting you in front of a jury would be even more traumatic. Two, it tells him we trust him. Which, according to our research maven—” he angled his head toward Naomi, who was neatly folding her own flour-dusted pancake “—would be a risk well worth taking, considering the judge’s record decently maps to our best-case scenario. And three—” he held up three fingers, but then used one of them to wipe sauce from his chin “—let’s not forget three: it really *would* be traumatic for you to have a dozen strangers staring at you all day, scribbling in their little notepads.”

Take-out cartons had cluttered the coffee table. Naomi laid her plate aside and began to show Jude the pancake-folding technique. It was early December; the legal team had commandeered a suite in the Monte Vista for two weeks (until the holidays). Pre-trial motions, counter-motions were being filed almost daily; pre-trial hearings were requiring Frisch’s presence. A law student was typing at a knobby-legged desk; at his elbow, a poster-sized enlargement of the glamour photo was mounted on an easel. Jude’s face, in this poster, was nearly three feet long, colorless as modeling clay.

Which was more confusing—Frisch’s explanation or the fact that she was now literally a poster child?

. “If it’s so great for me, then why does *Dallas* not want a jury?” she asked, one of few compound sentences she had uttered in the previous two weeks. She had been refraining from conversation ever since being deposed. The conference room had been an airless shoebox, Dallas’ attorney had been as imposing as a she-bear, the hours had seemed to be running backwards. The longer they were there, the longer it seemed it must go on. *HOW many times do you claim Mr. Early did that? WHEN exactly did you begin to forget? Immediately? Sometime later? Have you ALWAYS had NO memory of these events?* She had been in such close quarters with Eva Lindstrom Cruz the woman’s grassy perfume had clung to her clothing. But she had gone home and crawled into bed without removing her clothes, not even her shoes, not caring if she reeked of her stepfather’s attorney. For comfort, she sucked on a corner of the topsheet.

“We do have to consider Dallas’ strategy,” Frisch agreed, rising to pour himself a glass of water from a pitcher—spring water he had delivered from Marin, a hundred miles away. He refused to drink the Dunning city water, knowing (thanks to Naomi) that Dallas’ law firm, and others just like it, had skillfully extracted the most notorious agricultural conglomerates from lawsuits regarding local pesticide abuse.

“Why would he *not* want a jury? My guess is that it’s partially his own vote of confidence for the judge—after all, Ms. Cruz knows Judge Salazar rather well. But here’s another way to spin it—not mutually exclusive, by the way: if you were Dallas Early, would you want to be judged by a jury of your peers?”

Jude shrugged. Frisch offered her a glass of water, which she refused.

He shrugged, too. “Think about it. Who would be on a jury? Secretaries, barbers, insurance agents, housewives, guys who work with their hands, people who don’t have the clout or resources or even the motivation to get excused. A jury of his peers? A wealthy man has a tough time getting sympathy from the working class, never mind a wealthy attorney who represents corporate interests, never mind a wealthy corporate attorney accused of sexual abuse. A defendant like that has to consider the potential for serious class revenge.”

Jude toyed with the food on her plate, which she had not yet tasted. Moo shoo was not a very appetizing name. “Then maybe it would be better to *have* a jury,” she said, “if it’s going to make him look that bad.”

“I’m glad to see you’re taking such an active interest in this.” Frisch sat down again and looked her steadily in the eye when she looked up from her plate. “You’ve been feeling seriously overwhelmed, yes? To say the very least? That deposition was a marathon. Relentless, you might say.”

She pulled back shyly, embarrassed, and he leaned forward in casual pursuit, forearms resting on his knees, cufflinks glinting. “I haven’t said anything, figuring it’s better to let you work it out for yourself—which obviously you have, or you wouldn’t be asking these incredibly intelligent questions.”

She ducked her head; her cheeks felt pleasantly warm.

“You are one-hundred-percent right,” he went on. “Dallas might look like the devil himself to a jury, and that would be an excellent reason to have one. But I’ve brought cases like this before juries and seen clients absolutely cave—the pressure is just too intense. A jury is likely to make you want to bail, even more badly than you’ve already wanted to. Trust me on this one. It’s all for the best.”

She did not answer but turned toward the easel. That Perfect Fantasy face had bewitched her at times, exerting an equal and opposite attraction/repulsion, but now it seemed wholly uncomplicated, simply and feebly grotesque. She wondered, uneasily, if that might have been the point of enlarging it to this size. Her slick lips resembled a pair of eels, one curving up, the other curving down to meet it. Rodents might be living in that awful nest of hair.

“That picture,” she said. “Am I going to have to look at it every day?”

She was looking at it now, in courtroom number four of the Santa Juanita County Courthouse. During a pause in Frisch’s questioning, two associates had set up the easel and were now placing the outsized photo on its lip. The elongated face was positioned so the judge could clearly see it, as could anyone else in the room. The half-opened mouth suggested simple-mindedness. The doleful eyes were aimed reprovingly at Jude.

Could she tell the court, please, about the events which took place on the evening of her thirteenth birthday? Please describe this photo session. You did not ask to have this kind of photo taken, isn’t that correct? You did not want this at all. How, then, did it come about? Whose idea might it have been? Please describe what you were wearing. How did you feel when forced to wear this attire—first in the studio, and then also

out in public? Humiliated, yes. Ashamed. Please describe the “dinner date” which then ensued. Mr. Early had several drinks at the restaurant, did he not?

Naomi’s staff had obtained credit-card records from that evening, and Frisch now submitted these as exhibits: Dallas’ signature on a receipt for a “superfox special” at the Perfect Fantasy Studio, plus \$237 worth of clothing (so called); his signature again, far less legible, on a Reynard’s tab: two T-bone steak dinners, four gin and tonics, a Shirley Temple, a snifter of port.

“And then, on the drive back home, Mr. Early stopped the car on a deserted road, didn’t he?”

Eva Cruz had been sitting back, tugging at her skirt as if it might be too tight, and occasionally offering mild objections to Frisch’s line of questioning. But now—flip! the hair flew back.

“Objection!” she cried, lifting her chin as if using it to draw a vertical line. “As I argued, pre-trial, your honor, there’s absolutely no evidence to support these accusations. This then reduces itself to a case of the plaintiff’s word against my client’s.”

The judge cleared his throat ostentatiously, and Jude flinched sideways. She had forgotten he was there. Then came his baritone voice. “I understand why you feel you must enter this objection, Mrs. Cruz, but, as I’m sure you have anticipated, I will overrule it. I’ll remind you that your motion for dismissal was denied because the very nature of this case demands the consideration of Miss Hazelden’s word on certain things. We are concerned with activities which, if they took place at all, took place in secret, and we are dealing with an egregious power imbalance—” he paused, suggesting that all in attendance would be wise to agree—“therefore her version of events must be admitted. And—I’m sure I need *not* remind you—there is considerable physical evidence in this case.”

Jude was concentrating on the gleam of Frisch’s imported shoes against the dull planked floor, but sensed the judge was looking toward the photo, as was everyone else. They were all thinking what a little fool she had been.

“You may proceed,” said the judge.

Frisch approached with his lips slightly pursed, his eyes foxily narrowed, an expression that seemed to scarcely contain their mutual secret—*WE know, don’t we, how*

to turn up the heat? —and then began to lead her through the rest: the claustrophobic closeness of the car, the grappling and pawing and struggling, the slippery thrusting of his organ into her mouth. Her memory of this was vague, though she did not say so now. There had been a definite invasion of her mouth, a gripping of her neck and head, but the scene had never fully sharpened into focus. This surely meant that the worst must be true—or else she would be able to recall it more clearly.

Believe that your deepest self knows, Kat always said. You will be amazed...

“Yes, he forced me to perform oral sex,” she said flatly, repeating the language of the question Frisch had posed. Dallas was a grayish-brown lump at the edge of her vision, which she could not completely ignore.

How did she feel about this defilement? What was it like to remember it? How did she feel about herself, her own body, recalling that scene? Disgusted? Repulsed? Revolted? The questions kept coming, and it began to feel as intrusive as the memory itself. When would he stop? She felt herself fading.

Perhaps sensing her withdrawal (or possibly not) he smoothly changed gears. More matter-of-factly now, he leapt ahead in time and began establishing the time and circumstances of the abortion. “Please tell the court what happened,” he said. “In your own words.”

But she had no words for such an open invitation. The double doors in the back of the courtroom seemed half a mile away. The people arranged along the first two rows of benches were remote now, too, groupings of plastic figurines, half-melted, indistinct.

Frisch was gesturing, some kind of hand signal, and then he stepped laterally and directly into her line of sight. She blinked, and he clasped his hands in front of him, an entreaty. Hitching his head to the side as if to say “follow me,” he stepped back to where he had been and her head obediently turned. “Ms. Hazelden,” he reminded her. “Tell us about your abortion.”

“I was bleeding,” she said bluntly, finally hearing her cue. “It was a mess. In my bedroom. On the rug.”

“You were bleeding,” he said. “And then what happened?”

“My mother—” she broke off. She stared sightlessly into the gallery again.

“Your mother is not in the room, Ms. Hazelden,” Frisch assured her. “Please go on.”

She sighed. She would relinquish the minimum number of words. “My mother drove me.”

“And where did she drive you?”

“To a doctor.”

Frisch began nodding his head encouragingly, a father urging his baby to take her first steps. “But not to your regular doctor, isn’t that right?”

“Right.”

“And not to the emergency room.”

“Right.”

“She drove you very far away—maybe half an hour from Dunning, correct?”

“It was pretty far.”

“Much further than your regular doctor or the hospital would be?”

“Yes.”

“It was just you and your mother alone, wasn’t it?”

“Relevance, your honor,” Eva Cruz interjected, scooching her chair backwards and giving the impression she might leap to her feet to better make her point. She remained seated, however, and tucked her blouse a little further into the waistband of her skirt. “The mother’s not a party to this complaint. This line of questioning is entirely beside the point.”

“On the contrary, your honor,” Frisch strode toward the bench, apparently delighted to have this chance to elaborate. “We’re establishing the secrecy involved in this situation, the lengths to which—”

“Sounds like you’re trying to establish the mother’s negligence,” the judge interrupted. Jude’s shoulders twitched at this. “And she is not named in this case.”

“She’s not a party, but her behavior speaks directly to the defendant’s behavior.”

“Too big a stretch. Let’s not triangulate. I can see how the facts of the abortion are relevant, but not what the mother did or didn’t do to enable the procedure. Not if she’s not on trial.”

“Understood,” Frisch demurred, but the glance he exchanged with Naomi seemed to indicate otherwise. Naomi began writing at a rapid clip. Frisch straightened his cuffs and turned his attention to Jude. “Please tell the court *why* you needed an abortion.” He came closer now; his corroded complexion made itself visible, as if it were another agreed-upon signal: *remember to breathe*.

“Because I was pregnant.” She heaved another sigh. She could almost relax when the attorneys were wrangling, but these questions dragged her down like leaden weights.

“And by whom were you pregnant?”

“Objection,” Eva Cruz interjected, more forcefully than before. “Anything the witness says will be hearsay. There’s no evidence to establish paternity.” In fact, Eva Cruz had filed a series of pre-trial motions to exclude any testimony or evidence pertaining to the ‘alleged’ abortion, citing lack of evidence. *If* Miss Hazelden had in fact been pregnant (and possibly she hadn’t—there had been no pregnancy test; the procedure may not have been an abortion at all), there was no way to prove Mr. Early had been the father.

The judge took a leisurely sip of water. He set the glass down on the rostrum and sat back. “If this were a criminal trial, you’d have a much stronger argument, Mrs. Cruz. But as a civil trial, the standard of proof is of course much less stringent. And, as I indicated before, there may be some things that are *beyond* proof in this case. We’ve already covered this ground rather extensively.” Overruled, he concluded, then added, very politely, “You can answer now, Miss Hazelden.”

Jude twisted around toward him, but simultaneously pulled as far back into the witness box as she could. She could see her reflection in his glasses but could not see his eyes.

“Who got you pregnant, Ms. Hazelden?” Frisch asked again.

“He did!” Jude exclaimed, still facing the judge.

Frisch asked her to point to the person she meant, and she let her arm unfurl in Dallas’ direction. Let the record show, Frisch said, it was the defendant whom she identified.

Her memory of intercourse was sketchy—or at least that’s how she now described it. Fragments of ragged breathing, weight lunging against her chest, a masculine odor, the rip between her thighs. She said she did not know when or where this had occurred (which, in fact, was a lie—she knew exactly when and where—and with whom, for that matter—the precise circumstances—but of course there might have been other times, with other people, that she was not able to recall).

But it had definitely taken place, she said. That much she remembered. That much was true.

Frisch pressed his palms together as if to express his deepest thanks to her, a gesture weirdly reminiscent of Kat, and returned to his table. He flipped open a binder and asked the judge to do the same. Exhibits 41-48, Frisch explained, consisted of a series of photos of the cuts Ms. Hazelden had razored into her thigh.

Her wounds had been examined and then subjected to their *own* photo session. “Absolutely vital,” Frisch had insisted when she first claimed she would never let a doctor examine her, much less allow a forensic photographer into the room. “Your resistance is perfectly normal, a healthy sign, in fact. This step can seem like a trauma unto itself. Happens to rape victims all the time—they have to endure all kinds of medical probing and prodding, which is the last thing anyone wants when they’ve been assaulted. But, unfortunately, this is how the bad guys get their just comeuppance—objective, visual proof of damage. Even more unfortunately, the defense may *require* you to be examined. All the better to do it proactively, on our own terms. And consider the upside—think how the judge will respond when he sees exactly what you’ve done.”

“But I can show him my hands,” Jude persisted, knowing she could keep her clothes on for *that* examination. But Frisch had already convinced her. She would go through with the exam, provided Claudia could accompany her. Then she would have a real photo, one that showed who she really was. They were looking at it now—those self-inflicted slices in her thigh. One, two, three.

The hands had been photographed, too, from every conceivable angle. But Frisch did not refer to those pages in the binder. Instead he asked Jude to lift her left hand high enough so that the judge could clearly see it and explain how she had disfigured

it—where had she been? what was her state of mind? in what way did she injure it so unnaturally? to what end?

The judge, who had been brooding over the binder, leaned low now, his chest almost flat against the bench, as though he could not quite catch what she was saying. But she was not whispering. Her voice was hollow and clear; she might have been a guide in a museum. She lifted her right hand and told its story, too.

“And why did you did you hurt yourself in these many horrific ways?” Frisch asked.

“Because I remembered.” Finally, she was catching on to the question and answer, the back-and-forth rhythm.

“Remembered what?”

“Remembered what he did to me.”

“He, meaning Dallas Early?”

“Yes.”

“You remembered Dallas Early orally and vaginally raping you, and this caused you to hurt yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why did hurting yourself help?”

“Because it felt better.”

“Plunging your hand into boiling water, cutting your thigh open with a razor blade—” he paused for effect “—felt *better*?”

“It felt better than remembering.”

“Ah,” said Frisch. “Anything would be better than remembering what he had done, isn’t that correct?”

“Leading!” said Eva Cruz.

Frisch raised his hands before the judge could respond. “Withdrawn.”

He was winding down; he would soon be finished, and then that big blond woman would stalk right up to the witness box and force her to say things she did not mean. Not a chance, Frisch had assured her. She’ll make a spectacle of herself, completely subvert her credibility, if she does anything but treat you with consummate respect.

No, the witness she is most likely to have for lunch will be Kat Rose.

And here came Eva Cruz.

Jude's eyes flicked left and right. She squirmed like a youngster wishing to be excused. The woman's charcoal pumps tread closer, but then stopped at a careful distance.

"Miss Hazelden, are you ready to go on? We can take a break, if you need one."

Jude, unprepared for this civility, stared at Frisch, who was frowning. Perhaps this was a question he should have asked. Perhaps he had been so consumed with asking all the others he forgot the most fundamental one and now regretted it. But he raised his eyebrows if to say, *totally up to you*. Behind him, Claudia's clownish hair frazzled out in every direction, the brightest splotch on the horizon. Helen and Tawny were nearly sitting in her lap, bunched together as if for warmth. Opal raised her hand in a timid half-wave.

"I'm fine," Jude shrugged. She felt her shoulders drop. Frisch gave her a signal that meant A-okay.

Eva Cruz bowed her head slightly, even humbly. "Good. Very well, then," she began. "There's just something I want to make sure I understand—I'd like to go back to your testimony about your injuries. In particular, the very first one."

She was smoothing her hair back from her face rather than flipping it. She stood several feet away—not too close but not very far—and did not seem as forbidding as she had in their previous encounter. In that conference room, with the video camera recording every gesture, every false start, she had been brusque to the point of rudeness, impatiently dissatisfied with almost every answer. Specificity: that was her obsession—dates, frequency, physical details, a tidy congruence and alignment of the facts.

"In your testimony, you said you disfigured your right hand by deliberately thrusting it through glass."

"Uh-huh."

Frisch was alert, sitting tall; Jude could swear he was sniffing the air. Naomi, though, was holding her arms across her waist, as though fending off a stomachache.

Eva Cruz confirmed the location and date of this incident, then added, "You testified there was a young man who was frightening you."

“Uh-huh,” Jude answered again. She was beginning to suspect a rude surprise was imminent. She had told no one about her failed attempt to call to P.J. and the female who had answered. Had they obtained the phone records? Would the descent into infamy begin right now?

“And that young man wouldn’t go away.”

“Yes ... no, he wouldn’t.”

“But you wanted him to because—”

“Because I was alone in the lobby and it was late and he was a stranger.” This had become her official story.

“So you decided to make him leave.”

“Yes!” Was it possible she understood? “I didn’t feel safe.”

“And when he wouldn’t leave, you smashed a glass display case with your hand.”

“Yes.” This line of inquiry was less menacing than she expected. It would all be over soon.

Eva Cruz took a step closer. “Now, in this sequence of events, when exactly did you have a memory of abuse?”

“Pardon?”

“In your testimony, you said that you committed these self-injuries because you remembered being abused.”

Jude looked at Frisch, whose his eyes had narrowed. “I think I might have said that,” she replied. He had instructed her to say this, or the equivalent, whenever she was unsure.

“But you also said—and correct me if I misunderstood this—that you did not remember being abused until after you entered therapy—several months *after* you injured that hand.”

Frisch was now smiling but Jude felt dizzily confused. “No—” she began. “I mean... well, what I meant was—”

“Isn’t it true—and this is according to both your testimony and your deposition—that you had your first memory in therapy, in January, 1989?”

“Well... yes,” she admitted. “I guess.”

“So let me make sure I understand correctly.” Eva Cruz took a deep breath as if steadying herself. Her deferential manner was hardening into something less yielding; she was transforming into that other woman, after all. “You injured your hand because you remembered being abused, but you did not remember being abused until after you injured your hand. This is your testimony, correct?”

“I guess.” Her vision was fuzzing at the edges. She could smell something cloying, fermented. Her own body? Her feet? A voice, maybe hers, gave a more definitive answer. “Yes,” it said.

“Nothing further,” said Eva Cruz. She returned to her table, where Dallas was smiling crookedly, as if he’d had a stroke and could control only half his face.

“Redirect, Mr. Frisch?” asked the judge.

But Frisch was already on his feet. He suavely approached the witness box as if intending to ask Jude to dance. “Ms. Hazelden,” he said, perfectly gallant. “Isn’t it true you didn’t *know* what you were remembering in that moment in your dorm lobby—until you’d had the benefit of therapy?”

She wanted desperately to agree with him, but his meaning was vague.

He seemed to sense her bewilderment. “Let me put that more simply—isn’t it true you didn’t know what you were remembering *at the time* —” He tipped his head inquiringly.

“Yes,” she said obediently.

“—but once you entered therapy, you learned what it was?”

“That’s right!” she said, grateful that it actually made sense. “Once I went to therapy, I remembered what I had been remembering.”

But Eva Cruz was rising to her feet.

* * *

Josie was not moving an inch. They may have banished her to the corridor, but she was going no further. She would sit right here on this uncompromising bench and wait. She was not scheduled to testify until the next day, but she knew there would be occasional breaks, that Dallas would eventually come out to join her. The guard

stationed just past the roped-off courtroom entrance was turning away anyone whose name did not appear on his clipboard, allowing her to hold her vigil in peace.

It was a disgrace, an utter humiliation to be cast out like this—as if she were a liability, an embarrassment. Yes, of course, the official reason was that she was going to testify, and all witnesses had been obliged to be removed. But was this normal? It seemed awfully peculiar, certainly some technicality exploited by Judy's crafty attorney—yet she also knew what Dallas' legal team thought of her, especially that frosty Mrs. Cruz, who was probably all-too-willing to go along with this exclude-the-witnesses plan. Let's keep the emotions to a minimum, shall we? Let's not have any irrational displays. Well, who wouldn't be nearly out of their mind with emotion? Look what had happened to her family! She had already lost her daughter but she would *not* lose her husband. They had come too far together. And what would he do without her? No one wanted anything to do with him anymore. He was bad news, a blight—even though he had done nothing wrong. Not a thing! Nothing illegal. If she abandoned him (which she could not even begin to imagine), he would be all alone. Who knew what he might then do?

Have pity on him, she beseeched the portrait of Judge Salazar above the courtroom door. The sorrowful crescents under his eyes made him look kinder than she now knew him to be. *Just like you're going to have pity on that child.*

My child, she affirmed with a shudder. And she did deserve a world of pity, didn't she? How had she turned into that wraith? Just one glimpse in the courtroom—that was all that could be risked, even from behind the protection of those Christian Dior dark glasses—and even that had been nearly unbearable: the angles of that face, always so sharp but now severe with starvation it seemed. Though her hair was pulled back in a braid (and this braid, more than anything, made Josie's heart clench—the child was trying to look presentable and failing so completely), it merely accentuated the crow-like hunch of her shoulders. Where had this frightful child come from? She seemed to have risen from the grave.

But no—she came from my... Josie could not complete the thought; she snapped open her handbag and began to rummage. Her heart was lurching. Came from my ... There was her handkerchief, and there were her sunglasses, tucked into their case. She

was relieved to see them there. What a foolish attack of vanity that had been, she could not deny it. Dallas kept insisting she remove them, but she refused to let anyone to see her hollowed-out eyes, even him. She knew how completely this ordeal had ravaged her appearance. No amount of foundation or cover-stick or any of those expensive age-defying preparations she bought at Caldwell's could brighten her eyes or minimize the flaccid bags beneath. But when she had been escorted from the courtroom, she pulled the sunglasses off in dignified defiance.

Why maintain the charade? Everyone would see her eyes anyway. She was going to testify.

There were some unsavory-looking characters moving in and out of the courtroom further down the hall. A man with heavy boots and a bandanna on his head was about to go through a metal detector, but he was talking to the guard—did the guard have a pistol? It did appear so. The guard assigned to this courtroom had a gun, too, but she had not noticed it until now, and his weapon seemed somehow less dangerous than the other guard's. She wondered if the pager in her bag would set off that metal detector. It was childish, she knew, but she had an urge to walk over there and pass through it, just to find out. As if she would go anywhere near that bandanna man! But she had the impulse to do *something*. Waiting here was like waiting for someone to die.

Rosie came to her suddenly, her limp lifeless body. The strange dry chill of her skin like a salamander's. But not orange. The color of cold dishwater. That cloudy color, the sense of the *feel* of her ... Josie doubled forward, contorted. She clutched her head in her hands, but the weight was that of a dead child, so much heavier than in life.

This was FORBIDDEN, she tried to tell herself. She was not allowed to think of these things. THEY COULD NOT EXIST. If they did, you plunged off a cliff like Rudy and life did not go on. Tears were sliding down the side of her purse and into her lap; a dark spot was forming on her skirt. Was she cursed? Was she not allowed to have a single child who survived? Rosie, Rosie, oh my darling baby, wherever did you go?

She had said this out loud. The guard was approaching. She could hear the grit crackling under his shoes. The floor must be filthy. "Ma'am?" he said.

She took the shoulder strap of her purse between her teeth and bit down as hard as she could. There was an equation that always helped her pull herself together.

If Rosie hadn't died ...

She waved the guard off, but did not lift her head. "I'm fine," she said as clearly and distinctly as she could, having released her teeth from the strap.

"You sure?" He sounded very young. Youth was another thing life callously wrenched from your grasp.

She nodded, keeping her head tucked to her chest. He seemed satisfied with this, and retreated several steps. She slipped a compact from her purse and flipped open the mirror. Looking straight down, her face was a fright, jowly, undeniably middle-aged.

If Rosie hadn't died ...

Such a shocking way to frame it, but this was her secret, no one would ever know how she lived with that loss.

If Rosie hadn't died ...

... she never would have met Dallas.

The courtroom door opened with clunk! and three or four young people emerged, walking briskly. Josie did not recognize them and assumed they were part of the opposing legal team. She rose awkwardly, and backed away from the door, ashamed of her appearance, wishing she'd had time to reapply some powder. Expecting Dallas' familiar face, his squared-off shoulders to appear next, she began to tremble, as if meeting him for one of their clandestine rendezvous, so many years before.

But a large, ferocious, redhaired woman—one of Judy's "friends"—came next. She resembled Little Orphan Annie, but wrathful-looking, abnormally inflated like a Thanksgiving Day balloon.

The woman glared at her. "Oh, it's you!" she sneered.

Judy was right behind her. She was actually holding this person's hand, or holding it as well as could be expected, considering the deformity of her hand. She looked as dazed as she had been that day in Caldwell's, when she had collapsed to the floor, having one of her attacks, or spells, or whatever the proper diagnostic term might be. She lifted her eyes now, they widened in recognition or horror, maybe both, and she immediately ducked behind her friend's protective girth. Then her attorney came

through the door, softly clapping her on the shoulder. “Excellent,” he was saying. “We couldn’t have hoped for—”

He noticed Josie. “Mrs. Early,” he said, dipping his head in an obsequious fashion, no doubt an effort to ridicule her.

By now she realized her husband would be waiting for this group to make its exit before coming anywhere near the door. She drew back even further and pretended to adjust the brooch on her lapel; it was pineapple-shaped, studded with topaz. She had worn it today because it always made her smile.

Finally, two of Eva Cruz’s associates emerged from the courtroom, and then Marty Lagamarsino, one of Dallas’ senior partners and the most aggressive litigator in the firm. Once the accusations against Dallas had surfaced, Marty had vociferously urged him to seek female representation. He would be way ahead of the game if he hired a woman to defend him against sex-abuse charges—but it had to be a woman who would make a wholesome impression, no leggy femme fatales with hemlines up to you-know-where (not Bonnie! Josie had thought, relieved, but then remembered Bonnie was not an attorney).

“Gotta play down this sex thing,” Marty had advised, “and the right woman will be your best bet. A man defending a man would be too, well, predictable—if you know what I mean.”

Marty approached Josie now, arms outstretched. He murmured her name, shaking his head, as if consoling a grieving widow. It must have gone badly in there. She was grateful he was here—no one else had shown up to support Dallas except the people paid to do so—but she froze solid as he hugged her, and felt a sudden rush of sympathy for Eva Lindstrom Cruz. She had been chosen as much for her homely appearance as for her personal-injury expertise, and the worst of it was, Josie realized now—Eva Cruz surely knew this, too.

She didn’t want to speak to Marty; she wanted Dallas. “You’ll have to excuse me,” she said, extracting herself from his embrace. “I need to speak to my husband.” She dared to move toward the courtroom door.

“Josie, they’re in conference,” Marty said behind her.

But she entered the doorway. The room was shabby, windowless, starkly illuminated—none of which she had noticed before. She had been too frantic. She had control of her emotions now.

In the far right corner, Dallas and his attorney huddled toward each other at their table. He was gesturing; she was motionless. He placed a hand between her shoulder blades, but Eva Cruz did not accept this amiable overture, if that's what it was. She straightened abruptly, forcing Dallas' hand to drop. Dallas, drawing back, turned and saw Josie. Using the same hand that had caressed Eva Cruz, he held up a finger, indicating he'd be right with her, give him just a minute.

If Rosie had LIVED ...

She tested this out angrily, then tried to withdraw it, but the conclusion was inevitable.

If my baby had lived, I'd be standing somewhere else this very minute.

* * *

Lacey brought imitation crab dip. Deb brought four kinds of chips to go with it. Gabriella brought chili colorado in a crock pot. Vivian, who was late because she put in an hour of overtime at the cannery, brought a platter of fried finger foods. It was another feast, another gathering in Jude's honor, and she was half-heartedly attempting to recall the women's names as they came streaming into the living room.

Some of the faces she recognized from her therapy group (her *former* therapy group, ever since Kat had ejected her—Kat, who had been thoroughly chewed and spat out by Eva Lindstrom Cruz, not three hours before ... but she couldn't dwell on that at the moment, there were all these faces to put with names): Marlene, Amy Sue, Becca, Dawn, Ramona. The others, Lacey and Vivian, etc. were Claudia's friends, some going back as far as high school, some from the years when she routinely worked double shifts at the Munson Foods plant, inspecting tomatoes. They came rolling in now as Jude imagined tomatoes on a conveyor belt might. And Claudia was squeezing each one of them, taking their foil-covered serving bowls and Tupperware containers, instructing them to throw their coats and scarves on Helen's bed.

They sought out Jude as though it was a funeral service and she was the bereaved. They hugged and patted her, some with mist in their eyes. This attention was more physically personal, but also less demanding, than when they had thronged together to hum “Amazing Grace” and insisted that she speak. So far, no one had asked her to do anything. She perched on the arm of the sofa and let them approach. Perhaps she was accustomed now to manhandling. You could not get this far without a certain numbness to it. You just couldn’t really care. And she didn’t; she was limp with fatigue. Besides, this crowd was so much milder-mannered than the press (which had grown to a herd by the end of the day), so much less invasive than that woman attorney.

“Post-traumatic stress!” Ms. Cruz had said. This had been the blunt-edged opening of her cross-examination of Kat. Frisch had been correct: the deference she had shown Jude had evaporated in a rush. Her voice nearly twanged with righteous indignation, like a revivalist preacher denouncing “abortion!” or “cohabitation!” or some other depraved activity in which only sinners might engage.

Kat’s head had jerked back in surprise.

“You were so calm!” Opal was grasping Jude’s upper arm, wagging it for emphasis and looking around at the friendly faces nearby. “You should have seen her! Up on that witness stand, she was as cool as a cucumber. Now if it was me ... well, I would’ve just dissolved into a messy ol’ puddle.” She planted a gummy kiss on Jude’s cheek.

“I’m sure you would have,” Jude mumbled, but Opal did not seem to hear.

Helen was sitting on the sofa, just beneath Jude’s elbow. She was still embracing her bear. “You *were* calm,” she said softly, as Opal moved to the beverage table. Her tone was sorrowful, as though she might not want this to be true.

“Well, you know how it is.” Jude touched the bear’s snow-white head. “You do what you have to.” They exchanged a look. Helen, of all people, would know what this meant.

Claudia began tapping a water glass with a fork. Chime, chime, chime, chime, chime! Jude sighed. She could have gone back to the hotel with Frisch and Naomi, could have ditched this entire event. But she wanted to be here, and not because she

felt obliged. She wanted to be home. Besides, she needed a break from Frisch and his retinue, some kind of diversion, a buffer. The inanity of this “celebration” would exactly fit the bill. (Celebrate? Had anyone been paying attention?)

Here or anywhere else, though, she would have to crawl into bed at some point, all by herself, and the whole day would wheel through her mind. What had been worse—her own struggle to speak? Kat’s abysmal performance? her mother’s hand-wringing in the hallway, desperate to be reunited with her candy man? She might not go to bed at all.

Like a storyteller at a campfire, Claudia began recounting the day’s events, marveling at Jude’s composure, the smooth style of her attorney, the breathtaking classiness of the Asian woman Jude got to sit next to all day. Except, of course, when she had been on the witness stand. And then everybody had an extended eyeful of that other woman. “Man, you should have seen Dallas’ attorney,” Claudia enthused. “That gal is one talllllll drink of water.”

“She’s a bitch,” Tawny said. She was nibbling a piece of celery stuffed with pimento cream cheese. “I mean, look what she did to Kat.”

Claudia bowed her head. “Yeah, that was bad. What a waste of female potential. Why would a woman like that help a fuckwad like Dallas Early?”

“Maybe someone made her do it,” Vivian offered, crossing her long arms across her chest as if no one could make *her* do anything.

“Not this gal. No way.” Claudia frowned but then brightened. “Hey, I’ve got a surprise! Look what I picked up at the college bookstore.” She removed a maroon book from a plastic bag and held it up for everyone to see. Jude swallowed, incredulous: the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual III*, which had been thrust under Kat’s nose today, repeatedly, by both attorneys, each for their very own reasons.

“I didn’t even know such a thing existed till this afternoon, but this is what you might call the psychotherapist’s Bible,” Claudia explained. “And Helen, who is always so smart, said ‘well, they have a psychology program over at the college, I bet they have that book,’ so I ran right over there and picked this up.” She beamed at Helen, but Helen sank deeper into the sofa. “I’d never heard this definition till Jude’s lawyer read it out loud in court today, but it was awesome. Listen:

“POST TRAUMATIC STRESS.” She cleared her throat—ahem!—and loosened her shoulders like a boxer. “Here are the symptoms: ‘Recurrent and intrusive RECOLLECTIONS of the event, recurrent distressing DREAMS, acting or feeling AS IF THE EVENT WERE RECURRING’ ” her eyes widened for emphasis “ ‘*including* a sense of RELIVING the experience’—”

She read clumsily but her haltingness exaggerated some of the same words Frisch had stressed when he read this passage aloud to the courtroom that afternoon. He had been confirming this had been Kat’s diagnosis of Jude.

“—dissociative FLASHBACK episodes, intense psychological DISTRESS at exposure to CUES that SYMBOLIZE an aspect of the traumatic event—”

Jude detached herself from the sofa and edged toward the dining table laden with food, where Dawn had been sampling the guacamole and Ramona had just lit a flame under a fondue pot. Both had pivoted toward Claudia, however, and stood leaning against each other as if one might fall without the other, so profound was the message they were hearing. Even Claudia’s friends, the ones who weren’t in therapy, seemed to be affected.

Jude moved past them, imagining herself in a fairy tale, the only person immune to a spell.

“—‘efforts to avoid activities, places or PEOPLE that AROUSE recollections of the event, INABILITY TO RECALL an important aspect of the trauma, feelings of DETACHMENT or ESTRANGEMENT from others’—”

Jude snickered at this, but no one noticed—which made it even funnier. She had been drawn to food for its novelty, as something to pass the time, to get through the next five minutes, and to amuse herself she grabbed a carrot and began to stir the guacamole with it. There were red chunks of tomatoes in the green goo, even greener bits of onion. Frisch would admire this concoction; it looked freshly made. He was a connoisseur of the “authentic,” always ready to investigate the most inconspicuous taqueria or noodle bar in the county, seeking to experience the ultimate in Valley cuisine.

Claudia read the entire description, as Frisch had, too, but then began scanning the table of contents for other definitions that might be as edifying, if not entertaining.

Frisch had stopped there, however, with his special flair for knowing when to stop. He had carefully set the book down on the plaintiff's table, right in front of Jude, and she had been thankful for this object to observe. The spectacle of Kat on the witness stand had caused her to cower with guilt.

This was a Kat she had never seen before, stunningly austere—no winsome layers of chiffon but instead a magnificent indigo suit, a high-necked blouse, Gaia gleaming at her throat. She was going to suffer and Jude was the reason. The score would then be even; they would have exchanged mortal wounds. But that was no way to think of it. Jude did not want revenge. She wanted ... what? She did not know.

With her thumb, she had begun to trace and retrace the nasty gouges in the plaintiff's table. And when that failed to obliterate the musical sound of Kat's voice, she began pulling strands out of her braid, examining the individual hairs for split ends. Then came the book, thunk! a solid object, an artifact.

"Ms. Hazelden met each and every one of these diagnostic criteria, did she not?" Frisch had asked, referring to the definition of post-traumatic stress.

"In my professional opinion, yes." A brave little quaver had crept into Kat's voice.

One by one, Frisch then reviewed each of these criteria with her. Apparently satisfied, he abruptly changed the subject. "Please explain to the court the concept of repression," he said.

"Repression—" she began, but faltered "—it's ... well ... actually a Freudian concept. And, though *now* ... even though we now know Freud was ... how shall I put this? ... badly *misguided* in some of his conclusions, we can still take repression seriously. Today, it's rather universally acknowledged that Freud had some deep-seated issues with women —" here, she shot a significant glance at Dallas "—but his ideas about repression are still considered valid."

She seemed to be hitting her stride, forgetting that Eva Lindstrom Cruz would soon have her own set of questions. "The basic idea is that repression is a sort of reflex that blocks traumatic events from consciousness. The memories are still there, but repression conceals them. It's a classic defense mechanism, the psyche's way of protecting itself, allowing us to cope when a situation is too distressing to think about. But

even when a trauma is repressed, the *effects* of it don't go away. All kinds of symptoms arise—”

“For instance, the very symptoms we've been discussing?”

“Exactly. The therapist's task is to work with those symptoms to find the root cause. The symptoms point to the trauma. Carl Jung once said that symptoms are a sign of the self trying to heal itself.”

Thunk! Claudia dropped her own copy of the DSM-III on an end table, having just concluded a reading of Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia. “Jude!” she called, searching the room. She spotted her. “Jude! C'mon over here.”

Jude held her ground and stared as if challenged to a showdown. Claudia struggled to her feet. “Well, if Mohammed won't come to the mountain—” She trod across the room and, before Jude could find an opening in the crowd, lifted her in one of her come-to-mama hugs. “You were amazing!” she said.

“Put me down,” Jude said simply.

Over Claudia's shoulder, she could see Helen setting the stuffed bear aside, pushing herself to her feet from depths of the lumpy sofa. Helen, to everyone's astonishment, had confronted Claudia earlier that day. Claudia had started to follow Kat, who, sagging and defeated, was being escorted from the courtroom, but Helen had said “No!” She was looking at Jude, not Claudia. Her eyes were mild and clear. “Jude's lawyer said to wait here.”

“Who the hell is he to tell us what to do?” Claudia arranged Boomer in a sitting position on the bench and stepped into the aisle.

As if welded to Claudia, Opal stood, too. “Yeah, we've got to stick together.”

“Then we should all stay here with Jude.”

The words felt like an embrace. Helen did not drop her gaze. She and Jude regarded each other as if recognizing some common heritage: two of a kind.

Claudia exhaled noisily. “Oh,” she said. “I hadn't thought of it that way.”

“I guess you didn't.” Was Helen rubbing it in? “Kat can take care of herself,” she added, finally turning to face Claudia. “She *is* the therapist, after all.”

“You know, Helen—” There was a rise in volume which usually meant Claudia was about to erupt. But she plopped down. Opal sat, too, casting a guilty glance at Jude “—for a crazy person, you sure make a lot of sense sometimes.”

Helen was apparently ready for another confrontation; she now was advancing across the living room. Jude felt emboldened by her approach.

“Unwelcome—” she said into Claudia’s oily upturned face “—touching.”

“Ah!” Claudia released her immediately.

“Claudia, you are *such* an asshole!” Tawny said.

“But we love you anyway.” Opal this sang out, to a smattering of relieved laughter.

Digging her toe into the carpet, Claudia hung her head. “Well, you *were* amazing. I just thought everyone should know that.”

“Everyone already knows it.” This was Helen, who was now stepping between them, reaching toward the table. She handed Claudia a paper plate and pointed to a bowl. “Try the crab dip. That’s amazing, too.”

Becca, who had joined the therapy group a week or two before Jude had left it, was piling her plate high with quiche and fried drumettes and carrot-raisin-mayonnaise salad. She was boyishly slim, the type who could eat as much as she wanted of whatever she liked and not gain an ounce, though conceivably she stayed this thin by ridding herself of her food after she ate it. It went with the territory, Kat had often claimed—bingeing, purging, laxative addiction. A symbolic release.

Becca set down her plate. “So what happened to Kat?” she asked, flipping her bangs out of her eyes like a teenage girl on a date. To Jude, it was an blithely ignorant imitation of Eva Cruz’s hair-slinging. She hoped Becca would pick up her plate again soon.

Jude looked at Claudia. Claudia raised her eyebrows, a cue that Jude should be the one to respond. She felt her mouth opening, words forming in her throat, heard herself begin to describe for Becca (and all the others as well, who were inching closer to listen), the moment when Kat had begun to lose her credibility. There had been the simplest question from that big blond attorney: was it Miss Rose’s understanding that her client had experienced a traumatic event?

This seemed a straightforward-enough inquiry—otherwise, how could there be *post-traumatic stress*?

When Kat answered yes, of course, wasn't that obvious?—the woman then asked, "And what would this traumatic event be?" Again, the blandest question you can imagine.

Kat contorted her mouth as if a bad taste had seeped into it. "Sexual abuse," she said, sounding offended, as though the answer should be obvious to anyone with a shred of decency.

"And in what way have you been able to establish this trauma—this *abuse*—took place?" the attorney then asked.

"I'm sorry?" This was where she began to look concerned; she was twisting her favorite Celtic-knot ring, "I don't understand the question." This was another of Frisch's buy-yourself-some-time responses. When in doubt, say you don't understand ... acknowledge you *might* have said something the attorney insists you said ... ask her to repeat the question, if she wouldn't mind.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder presumes a trauma has taken place," Eva Cruz then elaborated, her tone becoming sharper. "Did you witness this trauma?"

"No," Kat admitted.

"Do you have some kind of evidence that this trauma took place?"

"The symptoms," Kat said. She tried valiantly now, as she had already done several times, to make eye contact with Jude—but Jude did not mention this as she went on with the story.

"Ah, the symptoms." Eva Cruz actually smiled. "Because there are symptoms there must have been a trauma—in much the same way a burned-down house would indicate there had been a fire."

Kat said this was a good analogy, but Frisch didn't like this at all. He made a sort of growling sound, which Jude had never heard from him before.

"Frisch—that's Jude's attorney," Claudia helpfully amended.

Helen hushed her. "Shhhh. Jude's telling the story."

Jude looked around. The table was now completely surrounded with female faces and bodies. She still held the carrot, smeared with guacamole. She tried to hand it to Claudia as if it were a microphone. “You tell it,” she said.

“No—you were doing great. Sorry to interrupt.”

“What about the burned-down house?” somebody asked.

“Kat said it was a good *what?*”

Jude sighed. It *had* been a good analogy, she supposed, which was maybe why Frisch resented Kat’s admiration of it. Perhaps he was wishing he had thought of it himself. “An analogy—it’s a kind of a comparison,” she explained. “She was saying that a damaged house is like a damaged person. You can tell by looking at it that something bad has happened.”

Heads nodded.

BUT—the attorney pushed this much further, more forcefully—the presence of a burned-down house would not tell you *who* had set the fire, or even if *anyone* had set it. It could have been lightning, an electrical fire ...

Kat now began to look angry; her features were flat and shiny, uncompromising as hard plastic. Her nose might never crinkle again. “Well, I’d think an investigator would be able to determine the cause of the fire, and a therapist is like—”

“Yes or no, please.”

“If you would just let me finish—”

“Yes or no—the remains of the fire would not tell you how it had begun.”

“Yes, I mean no. I mean they *would* tell you, if you knew what you were looking at.”

“I see. Someone would be able to determine the cause *if they knew what they were looking at*—that is your testimony, correct?”

“Correct.”

“And in Miss Hazelden’s case, what, specifically, were you *looking at* to determine the cause of her condition?”

“Symptoms,” Kat asserted, but the second syllable rose at the end. Symptoms? she seemed to ask, as though reserving the right to take it back.

“Symptoms.” Eva Cruz flung her flaxen hair behind her shoulder. She held the diagnostic manual aloft, as though withholding it from Kat’s reach. “In the list of symptoms for post-traumatic stress disorder, does it say anything about self-mutilation?”

A self-mutilator, was that what she was? Jude had grown almost accustomed to this term, but speaking it aloud, in front of twenty or more people, it was a public confession of her particular pathology. *Hi, I’m Jude, and I’m a self-mutilator.* But no one seemed to notice. She hastily added that Kat had answered, “No, not precisely,” or words to that effect.

Frisch had begun scuffing his feet on the floor.

“Not technically,” Kat added. “But it could be—”

Eva Cruz thrust the diagnostic manual toward Kat, instructing her to read aloud the highlighted text on a certain page, which described a different condition, borderline personality disorder.

“*Number 5—Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures or threats—*” Kat read, pausing to caress her Gaia charm “*—or self-mutilating behavior.*”

“There is an explicit mention of self-mutilation under borderline personality disorder, but not under post-traumatic stress,” the attorney summarized.

Kat said nothing.

“Isn’t that true?”

“Yes.” Kat’s voice was meek.

“But your diagnosis was post-traumatic stress.”

“Well, if I could, I’d like to—”

“Isn’t self-mutilation what you would call the ‘presenting symptom’ in Miss Hazelden’s case?”

“I don’t know if I would say—”

“Let me put it slightly differently. Isn’t it true that Ms. Hazelden came to you after inflicting severe injuries to her own hand?”

Frisch was leaning on his elbows, hands pressed together, the tips of his index fingers grazing his nose and dangerously close to poking inside his nostrils. Naomi clicked open her mints and popped another in her mouth. Neither of them were taking

any notes. They were not leaning behind Jude to make sly comments to each other. This was not a good sign.

“And wasn’t that the main reason she came to see you?”

Kat shifted her weight so she was now slumping to the left. “Well, no, she came to see me because she was distressed.”

“But wasn’t the most compelling sign of her distress the condition of her hand?”

“I prefer to look at the full constellation of symptoms when I first see a client.”

“And wouldn’t self-injury be the most obvious *star* in that constellation?” Eva Cruz placed one hand on her substantial hip.

“Your honor, I’d hate to see this kind of sarcasm deteriorate into badgering,” Frisch complained.

But listlessly. Jude could hear his hollow inflection, though she had no words to convey this as she tried to recreate this moment. How could these women—holding their paper plates, sipping their beverages, leaning into each other, even clinging to each other as if this story might sweep them over the side into a roiling, open sea—how could they possibly understand what this tone had meant? It was the first objection Frisch had offered in this cross-examination, and it seemed deliberately uninspired. He was not going to help Kat get through this. Jude had felt a surge of sorrow and regret, though she did not say this aloud, knowing it might set off a collective spasm of grief. *Poor Kat!* she could hear them cry, in unison.

“Pointless,” was what she did say, “it all seemed like such a waste.”

Frisch had insisted, though, that they call Kat as a witness. Otherwise, they would appear to be hiding something (and in fact they would have been, he claimed—her dubious qualifications for the methods she practiced; the fact that her methods, in and of themselves, were highly controversial). Otherwise, the defense would have subpoenaed her. This had been the lesser of two evils. A proactive sacrifice, he said.

“Sacrifice?” Becca had a bit of mayonnaise on her upper lip.

Helen flinched at the repetition of this word.

“It gets worse,” Claudia said, by way of urging Jude to continue.

Worse? Jude wasn’t sure if that was the word for it, but there was certainly more of the same.

Eva Cruz by now had tucked her hands into her suit jacket. “Actually, I will summarize where we’ve just been—we have established, based on the standard criteria for diagnosis, that the most obvious symptom of Miss Hazelden’s psychological condition is *not* among the specific symptoms of the disorder you diagnosed.”

“I don’t know if I would call it—”

Eva Cruz walked right up to the witness box. Her brow gleamed with perspiration. “Self-mutilation is *not* among the *specific* symptoms named in the diagnostic manual for post-traumatic stress disorder, *isn’t that correct?*”

“Asked and answered,” Frisch objected, slightly more energetic than before. The judge instructed Eva Cruz to move on.

The attorney folded her arms contemplatively. She looked down at the floor. “Let’s go back now to the alleged trauma in question,” she said, almost offhandedly. “Professional diagnostic criteria aside—let’s just say, hypothetically, just for the moment—” she shot a sidelong glance at Frisch, who had begun flexing his fingertips against the tabletop “—that Miss Hazelden *has* suffered some kind of trauma. I must ask you again: how do you, as her therapist, know that a specific kind of trauma occurred?”

Kat turned her gaze toward Jude again, and Jude allowed the weight of it to rest on her, just this once. *Forgive me*, Kat’s bereaved expression said. *We’re all wounded children, doing the best we can in this world.*

“Jude told me,” she said.

“Miss Hazelden told you she had been sexually abused.”

“Yes.”

“And this establishes the fact that it happened?” Eva Cruz was now standing with her feet wide apart.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Because she told you it happened, it must have happened—is that your conclusion?”

“Of course,” said Kat. “Why wouldn’t I believe her?”

“Isn’t that your job?”

“My job?”

“As a therapist, isn’t your primary task to establish a sense of trust, to make your clients feel that you believe in them—”

“Yes,” she agreed. “That’s very well put.”

Frisch actually groaned, but so softly Jude was sure she was the only one who heard him.

“—whether what they say is historically accurate or not?”

Kat stiffened. “My clients tell me the truth.”

“But they sometimes embellish or exaggerate their stories, isn’t that true?”

This pushed a button. Kat threw back her shoulders and thrust out her chin.

“Well, that’s certainly the party line, isn’t it? Society *wants* to believe sexual abuse is just an ‘embellishment.’ All the better to protect the abuser, maintain the status quo! What’s a little touching? A little teasing? No one means any harm! This kind of disempowering minimization frankly makes me ill.”

But Eva Cruz was striding to her table. Kat’s eyes followed. She seemed to puff herself up, perhaps to more effectively glare in Dallas’ direction. “Exaggeration?” she added. “That’s just another variation on the myth of female hysteria.”

Eva Cruz picked up a folder and turned to face Kat again. “Miss Rose, isn’t it true that *all* of your clients have memories of sexual abuse?”

“That’s the field I specialize in.”

“So, that would be an accurate statement—*all* of your clients claim to have suffered childhood sexual abuse.”

Kat’s cheeks by now were blazing, as if they had been slapped. “All of my clients *have* suffered sexual abuse,” she said.

“Yet, isn’t it true that most of your clients—including Miss Hazelden—do not remember being abused until they begin therapy with you?”

“Maybe you didn’t hear that definition of repression,” Kat sniffed. “The trauma has caused them to repress the memory, which I then help them retrieve.”

“The trauma.” There was Eva Cruz’s scornful smile again. “The trauma for which there is no evidence?”

“I told you—they tell me what happened to them.”

“But if they don’t remember—and presumably they can’t *tell* you what they don’t remember—then how can you treat them as sex-abuse survivors unless you have some evidence that they have been abused.”

“The symptoms—” Kat blurted, then puckered her mouth as if hoping to suck the words back.

“Here we are again, back at the symptoms,” announced Eva Cruz grandly. She made a sweeping gesture with her arm, as if the circularity of the argument might be thus inscribed.

Frisch picked up on this theme. “This is like a snake swallowing itself, your honor,” he said, finally pushing back his chair and making a semi-vigorous attempt to stand. “I suggest we move on.”

The judge sat back and his chair creaked like a tree limb about to snap. He did exist up there, somewhere in the region between the crack and the flag and Kat’s withering flank. He had been completely silent throughout this testimony.

“Mrs. Cruz?” he drawled.

“Circularity is exactly the point, your honor. I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this. It’s a tautology. Her clients ‘remember’ they were sexually traumatized because Miss Rose helps them to remember, but she has already defined them as sexually traumatized by virtue of their ‘symptoms.’ And, in Miss Hazelden’s case, we have established the symptoms are not necessarily indicative of a syndrome predicated on past trauma—at least according to *professional standards*. I would submit that Miss Rose’s clients have been abused *because she says they are*.”

“That’s not right!” Kat exclaimed.

The attorney stood stock still, waiting for something, letting Kat’s outburst reverberate.

“Miss Rose,” the judge said softly, as if cued by Eva Cruz, “you need to confine your remarks to answering the questions posed to you.”

They were kind words, delivered with the featherlight courtesy, but they seemed the final blow. Kat finally surrendered. Her shoulders and chest dropped; she melted into a pudding shape, amorphous.

But Eva Cruz had one more question.

Jude paused now. Why were some stories harder to tell, the further they progressed?

“That attorney-woman could not leave it alone,” Tawny interjected. She was still slouching against the kitchen doorframe, still wielding a celery stalk—the same one as before? She shrugged. “I mean, enough was enough, right? She didn’t have to kick Kat while she was down.”

“Like I said,” Claudia agreed, “a total waste of womanhood.”

But Eva Cruz was *almost* done. Just one more question, that was all:

Did Miss Rose have even a *passing* acquaintance with the substantial body of research showing how memories can be *influenced* and *distorted*... even *falsified*?

“Falsified?!”

Outrage flared at several points around the table—a single strident outcry in rejection of this heresy.

“Yeah,” Claudia snorted derisively. “FALSE memories! There’s a whole freakin’ theory about it. Can you believe that?”

“Actually, I do,” Kat had sighed. And her confession had been genuine—but only because she had been doing her homework. Because her license was under review. Because, Jude knew (though she had nothing more to say to her audience; the story hour was over)—another witness would be hanging Kat out to dry.

Here’s how a memory may be professionally *implanted*, this expert would soon explain.

How the vulnerable may be indoctrinated.

How the weak—

Claudia thumped Jude on the back, a hearty hail-sister-well-met. She handed her a paper plate and plastic fork.

* * *

A photostat from the files of Dr. Lloyd Nori showed he had once treated Judith (sic) Hazelden in his office in Tuleberg, some twenty-five miles northwest of Dunning. The doctor, who had previously engaged the services of Mrs. Josephine Early to sell

the asparagus farm he had inherited from his father and uncle, had performed a D&C. These two letters and an ampersand were the extent of the write-up in his threadbare account of this event—all the more remarkable because his other records were typically detailed.

Because Dr. Nori was now deceased, other doctors were called upon to interpret this record, with due consideration for Ms. Hazelden's account of the incident. "Termination of pregnancy" had been the probable reason for this procedure—dilation and curettage—their affidavits claimed; a spontaneous abortion had already begun. But conflicting affidavits would soon be submitted when the defense presented its case. Unspecified gynecological disorder, they would say. Dysmenhorrea. No evidence of pregnancy whatsoever.

One by one, Frisch was introducing a battery of sworn statements and factual records. Jude's report cards from elementary through high school showed exceptional performance *except* during the critical year—the latter half of seventh grade, when she turned thirteen, through the following spring, when the visit to Dr. Nori had occurred; her grades dropped from straight As to mostly Cs. Another crucial document: Miss Caroline Imus, Jude's sixth-grade teacher, maintained in a sworn affidavit that Dallas Early had once referred to the child as "Juicy" during a parent-teacher conference; Miss Imus had been stunned.

And yet another (the crown jewel, in Frisch's estimation)—the reluctant confession of the retired owner of Reynard's, who, though Dallas had been one of his top customers (had his own private table; all the waitresses appreciated his flirtatious generosity) was obliged to recall the "little girl" had been remarkably "tarted up" on that dinner-date night. Nearly ten years after the fact, and he still recalled her "irregular" appearance.

There was nothing, however, among the reams of papers Frisch was methodically presenting to the judge that made any allusion to *Fair Bonnie*. If the book itself was not available, best to omit it completely, he had maintained. The accusation would be too weak, especially when there was plenty of actual substance to further their case. The pedophile story line, the open gap of her legs, the furtive action on the periphery—truly damning in every detail, an abomination by any measure—but with nothing

physical to substantiate it, they might undermine their case by even suggesting the incident had occurred.

The morning was endless, viscosly tedious, as if glued to itself. Every facet of every wooden surface in the courtroom well had acquired a yellowish glaze. Jude's attention slid from one to the next—the flooring, the tables and chairs, the witness box, the judge's bench—comparing them to each other, wondering idly if they might be constructed of the same blunt substance. The cleaning crew must have come in the night and slathered them with polish. She could detect a lemony scent, but it did nothing to redeem the air, which had grown even staler than before, as though the fluorescent lighting had finally sapped it of any vitality. Clunk! the derelict heater shut off. And in the absence of its whooshing and grinding, Frisch's voice was even more distinct.

There had been no witnesses yet that morning. But they would come soon. Yet not soon enough. Why didn't they just *get on with it*? Jude clamped her jaw, ground her molars, attempting to offset a sinking sense of despair. This droning on, the naming and numbering of exhibits, the formal process of requesting and securing their submission: absolutely essential, Frisch insisted, a procedural interlude which would help them regain some credibility after the debacle of Kat. But the hollow nothingness of it ... almost exactly like shivering in an examination room in a paper gown, waiting waiting waiting for the doctor to come and do his business and leave.

Her muscles tensed with dread. She was sure she would shout something out, uncontrollably, to release the pressure in her chest.

Even the judge seemed stupefied. His huge head hung forward, chin nearly resting on his chest. But he must not have been dozing, for his arm began moving. He was writing. Frisch had just begun introducing a suite of scholarly articles which made an airtight case for the mechanism of repression (contrary articles would of course be submitted, when that moment came). The articles, Jude realized, were signaling the end of the interval. Frisch was setting the stage for his *pièce de resistance*—his nationally recognized expert. The scholarly studies were like a heraldic flourish of trumpets, announcing her entrance.

Jude jammed her hands under her thighs and bore her weight down on them until the pressure caused a dullish pain. She had been wrong, childishly impatient to have wished this time away. But too late, her retraction was too weak (as if her wishful thinking, her physical penance, could prevent the inevitable). Necks craned and a frail white-headed woman with a walking stick tottered up the center aisle.

The stick's handle was ornately carved, a bird's head. Jude knew this from having spent many hours in proximity to this cane. The woman's claw-like hand gripped the bird's head so that only its beak was visible.

Jude had never before spoken to a nun. Actually, Mary Frances Gahaghan was no longer a nun, but her history was somehow written in the tissue folds of her skin. She was diminutive beyond petite; her feet had not reached the floor as she perched in her chair in the interview room. Though it had not really been her chair. She had been flown to California from Chicago by Frisch and had spent eleven hours over three days with Jude in an office Frisch had rented for that purpose. Maybe in her own office Dr. Gahaghan had chairs that fit her.

These were the kinds of thoughts Jude entertained while being interviewed by—what had Frisch called her?—a Bride of Christ ... about sexual encounters with her stepfather. Nuns were virgins, weren't they? This one had a crinkly apple-doll face. She smiled and smiled, no matter what Jude said. The term "oral sex," for instance, produced the same reaction as, say, "orthodontist," creating the impression she was slightly deranged, incipiently senile—or at the very least afflicted with a hearing loss.

"Your therapist, Miss Rose, she didn't take notes, did she?" Mary Frances had asked the very first day. This had been sometime last fall. She had been wearing a nubby cardigan over a turtleneck, and her orb of white hair had looked exactly like a dandelion puff. The way she hooked her toes on the rung of her chair reminded Jude of a parakeet.

"Well, I want you to know I'm going to take lots of notes, which may be different for you. But don't think I'm not listening! Even though I'm writing, I will still be listening. I'm also going to tape-record our sessions. Do you understand?"

"Uh-huh," Jude had confirmed. She felt like Alice in Wonderland, speaking to a caterpillar exhaling blue smoke.

“You know, not taking notes has gotten Miss Rose into a lot of trouble.” Mary Frances pooched her lips, causing her entire face to pucker—*that naughty Miss Rose*, she seemed to be saying. “She has no way to verify what took place in her sessions. Judges don’t tend to think too highly of that.”

But Frisch had no doubt the judge would think the world of Mary Frances—or rather, Dr. Gahaghan: the infallible antidote to Kat’s lack of credibility. They should spare no expense in bringing in the best, Frisch had insisted, and Dr. Gahaghan was indisputably the one. Renowned and revered. Our Blessed Sister of the Memory Forgotten and Then Retrieved.

Her chin (which Jude knew to be sprouting thorny whiskers) barely cleared the rim of the witness box as she took the stand this morning. Her eyes glimmered above it, bright and black as jellied currants. She seemed infinitely bemused to be sworn in.

By way of establishing her credentials, Frisch flipped to a magazine article in a binder. The documents supporting Mary Frances’ testimony needed two substantial binders, all to themselves. News and magazine articles, her dissertation, several scholarly papers and presentations, transcripts of interviews related to this suit, her thirty-page assessment of Jude’s psychohistory, and how it mapped to her theory—all of this and more, many inches thick.

The magazine showcased a full-page, color photo of Mary Frances, age-spotted, tiny as a fourth-grader, surrounded by towering shelves of books, stacks of papers, a manual typewriter at her elbow. *Newsweek*. July, 8, 1987. “Supersleuth Sister,” the headline said. “Ex-Nun Lightens the Darkness of Forgotten Abuse.” Jude had read this story many times.

CHICAGO—Sister Mary Frances Gahaghan had seen every imaginable child-abuse horror. Scaldings, broken ribs, cigarette burns, fractured skulls, sexual trauma—all were her daily cross to bear.

Ministering to children in the acute-care ward at St. Agnes Hospital for more than twenty years, she nursed countless battered children back to health. And saw far too many of them succumb to their injuries.

“It was my calling to ease the suffering of children however I could,” she says of that time.

But Sister Mary Frances, 67, has a different calling now, and a different name by which she is called—Dr. Gahaghan. She left

her order several years ago to pursue a new path, a doctorate in research psychology. Her specialty is the controversial field of repressed memory.

Gahaghan's groundbreaking research made national headlines this week when she served as an expert witness in a "recovered memory" trial. Her testimony was instrumental in the jury's decision to award \$175,000 to a 34-year-old Evansville woman, who forgot and then remembered her half-brother had raped her decades before.

"You began an academic career later in life, isn't that correct?" Mr. Frisch asked, setting the article aside.

"Oh, very late! I was sixty-two." She turned all the way around to look at the judge, who was peering at her over the rim of his glasses, perplexed, as if he'd never seen anything of her kind. *Would it be too crass to hope Judge Salazar is a practicing Catholic?* Frisch had wondered at some point. Naomi had languidly crossed her legs. *Too crass for you, Norm? Or too crass in general?*

"Please tell the court why you decided to pursue an advanced degree."

It was all there in the article, which Frisch might have read entirely into the record. But this was Dr. Gahaghan's moment; she was the main attraction.

Thousands of children, she began—thousands of children had passed through the ward during the time she was there. Somehow the malnourished ones were the most heartrending; their distended bellies, hollow as gourds, told the whole story: how they had suffered for so long. She had seen tiny damaged bodies of every description. Children blinded by accident, and on purpose. Missing fingers, puncture wounds, electrical burns. Poisonings, toddlers in convulsions from having swallowed household cleanser or mommy's amphetamines. Sexual battery of every description.

She had considered it her lifelong calling to care for to these children, until the day when a remarkable girl was admitted to the hospital—a girl who had tried to kill herself by leaping from a fourth-story window. She was almost too old to be placed on the ward, yet no one could deny she was merely a child, just seventeen. Potter, her name was Beatrice Potter. Mary Frances instantly recognized the name. She had been a patient on the ward nearly twelve years before. At the age of six, she had been wheeled into the emergency room with a broken arm and clavicle, contusions to the face,

vaginal and vulval lacerations, gonorrhea. Mary Frances had told the child how wonderful it was that her name was almost exactly like a famous author's. She had commenced reading her *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, again and again.

The courtroom was quiet, a clock that had stopped ticking. No one moved—not even Frisch, who was pressing his hand to his chest as if pledging allegiance to the flag next to the judge. Was he immersed in his role or truly spellbound? Mary Frances blinked and released him. Jude heard her friends behind her stir, but she held herself rigid. That granny face, the web of friendly wrinkles. Beatrice had been remarkable, Mary Frances had assured them—but remarkable in the sense of exceptionally brave and indestructible? or a remarkably well-preserved and well-defined specimen? Jude knew she would be characterized as remarkable, too.

Frisch cleared his throat. “Please go on,” he urged her.

Dr. Gahaghan placed her folded hands on the edge of the witness box. It was a bit of a reach for her, but she seemed complete at ease in this quasi-prayerful pose. Judge Salazar arranged his hands in a similar fashion.

“At seventeen, this same girl was admitted with both legs broken, a shattered pelvis, a dislocated shoulder—a very lucky girl. She hit a ledge on the way down which pitched her sideways into a Dumpster.” The nun wagged her head. “We soon discovered there had been other suicide attempts. She had been absolutely determined.”

It had been a hunch, Mary Frances admitted, but she knew in her heart this girl's commitment to self-destruction was the result of her earlier abuse. Cautiously, gradually (and unscientifically, she later realized), she began to ask Beatrice if she made the same connection herself.

Anyone acquainted with the article would have known what came next. The air, no longer stale, had a bittersweet tang. Cologne mingled with lemon, along with dubious bodily smells. Anticipation had intensified every odor in the room.

“That poor, darling girl,” Mary Frances said, “had no memory whatsoever of having ever been abused.”

Jude squirmed in her seat, rebellious. But why? This riveting tale would solidify her case. And who could resist it? Even Dallas (she sneaked a look at him), hunched

forward, wrists dangling off his knees like a benched player intent on the game, was seemingly dumbstruck by this revelation. Truly irresistible. And that, perhaps, was the problem. This was the sister's golden moment, a confirmation of her godsend status. *Newsweek* had proclaimed it, and now they all could receive the miracle with their very own ears. Jude might as well leave the room and return when it was over—not a single soul would notice.

Even when shown her earlier hospital records, Mary Frances was explaining, Beatrice insisted she must not be the same girl.

Even when her current x-rays showed the former breaks in her bones.

Chicago was a big, big city, Beatrice had said. One of the biggest cities on earth. There could be two girls with the very same name, even born in the very same year, in a city that big.

"I did not push her," Mary Frances recalled. But this was when her sleuthing began. The long and short of it (though to Jude, it was depressingly long), was that she began compiling lists of children who, years before, had been treated for sexual trauma at St. Agnes, and then began seeking out these children, now adults, hoping to determine what the long-term consequences had been. The diocese, however, put to an end to her investigations. "Not our mission, sister," she was told by a panel of priests.

It was *her* mission, however, and—

Jude knew the rest. The project attracted publicity, an infusion of funding, an invitation to join a prestigious doctoral program. The research became national in scope, involving patients from hospitals in several major cities. The findings were solid, repeatable, unmistakably relevant to a case such as this:

Abuse victims (the nun held up a finger for emphasis) were *fifteen times more likely* to injure themselves intentionally than the population at large.

Forty percent of abuse victims *did not remember* being abused. The younger the age when the abuse commenced, the more profound the memory loss. But even older children, adolescents, repressed their memories of their trauma—*twenty-eight percent of them*, to be exact. And of those, *nearly half began to remember* when circumstances allowed.

Jude Hazelden, for instance, a remarkable young woman ... whose profile was classic ... the self-maiming, the delayed recall ... nearly prototypical... Dr. Gahaghan would place her in the upper quartile of—

The topic was now numbers. Jude sat back to meditate upon them. Numbers had always been her friends. You could always count on numbers (at the very least, to supply a terrible pun). But what about *these* numbers? Twenty-eight percent. The quartile into which she fit. The half that eventually remembered. She tried to envision the size and shape of them, but they were too abstract.

Best to keep it simple. There was one judge, for instance. One dandelion-haired witness, two high-strung attorneys, three poor excuses for parents (only one of which was in the room—if Dallas could be counted as such).

Two girls.

Now there was a number worth considering. Jude grinned at Mary Frances, enjoying the secret that wasn't a secret at all—the all-too-obvious fact the sister-sleuth had overlooked.

Two girls—count 'em—with the very same name.

There had been Beatrice, and then there had been Beatrice. One, two. And the older one had been smart enough to insist:

All those terrible things must have happened to somebody else.

* * *

As Josephine Madeline Keller Hazelden Early was sworn in, Dallas' heart pounded as if imprisoned, clamoring to be freed from his chest. He was somewhat concerned about his heart, as any man of his age should be, but more concerned, in the moment, about the trembling of Josie's raised hand. Eva Cruz was approaching and his wife swallowed visibly, even though this was the attorney who would go gently. Her padded shoulders jerked, as though receiving mild shocks.

This fright, too thick, spread like a glaze of glue, making the courtroom walls seem closer, the other bodies in the room too near. He tugged shirt collar from his neck, overheated. Josie might have been his child, doing poorly in a recitation in the

grade-school auditorium. But that was a minimizing thought, if ever there was. The stakes here were high. Astronomical. If she was going to lose control, it would be best for everyone if she saved it for the right moment—which technically, of course, wouldn't be a case of losing control. But for Josie, that kind of distinction may not even exist.

Watching her, he could see, was going to be much more difficult than having taken the stand himself—much like riding helpless as a passenger with a reckless driver at the wheel. His own testimony had been a matter of emotional mastery. Composed, level-headed, he had not given an inch to that swarthy smart-ass lawyer with his thousand-dollar Rolex (nor to his sexy associate, who looked like she might cost a thousand a night). None of his fishy little tactics had made the slightest dent in his story. Defending against them had been straightforward enough—a patient denial of each of the accusations, a falling-back on the insistence that he had simply been trying his best to help Judy grow up, to become more feminine, to have a chance to bask in a moment of appreciative male attention—and *always* with the full knowledge and collaboration of the girl's mother, his wife. Some might disapprove of their approach (*theirs*, please note, not his)—it was possible, he conceded, that the glamour photo, while harmless, might have been a tad too “mature”; a year or two later might have been a better choice—but he had never, ever gone anywhere even remotely “out of bounds” with that child.

His knee throbbed where he had banged it earlier that morning against the door of the Cherokee, and he leaned to test the tender spot, shooting a glance at Judy, who was hunched forward in that afflicted posture of hers, obsessing with her hair, pretending to be launched like a satellite into the furthest reaches of outer space. He should have iced his knee, but there had not been time. He would ice *that girl*, however—which sounded evil, he knew, but he would not deny his desire, how absolutely he hoped it was true: that Josie's testimony would completely freeze her out, shut this whole sorry spectacle down.

“When you were twenty, you had another baby, didn't you?” Eva Cruz was asking. Dallas planted his elbows on the table in front of him, and pressed one hand

over his mouth to contain his surprise. He hadn't expected this moment to arrive so soon.

Josie had relaxed somewhat with the general biographical questions, but now winced as if someone were shouting at her. "I did," she said.

"A girl, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And how old was your older girl, Judy, when this second child was born?"

"She was about—"

Frisch popped up, spring-loaded. "I fail to see the possible relevance of the birth and death of another child. This trial is about *this* child"—pointing at Judy—"and her stepfather, who wasn't even on the scene at the time."

"We can't establish he wasn't on the scene if we don't know when the other baby was born, can we?" Eva Cruz thrust her hip out slightly, even smugly. Dallas felt a glimmer of admiration—for the gesture, for those hips.

"Your honor—" Frisch tried again.

"Goes to establishing the fact," Eva interjected, "that the family was in serious disarray—and that Judy Hazelden was showing signs of serious psychological distress—many years before Mr. Early became part of her life."

The judge chewed on the earpiece of his glasses then stopped abruptly, staring at the earpiece as if wondering how it got in his mouth. He allowed her to continue.

Josie looked beseechingly at Dallas. He felt his hand rise, a leaden weight, and push itself through his hair. Divorced. That was his wish. Divorced from her, from all this mess, forever. That pleading glance, the disgrace she might become. How could she stand up on his behalf when she so nakedly and publicly needed his reassurance? His gut contracted. He would do what was necessary—buck her up with a wink. Always made her cheerful. Despising her, despising himself, he bunched the right half of his face (the entire courtroom was to his left) and complied.

She smiled at this, but unsteadily, a grimace. "Judy was eighteen months old when Rosie was born," she continued. "That was August, 1968." She unfurled her hankie, which had been wadded in her fist all along. The flood of tears was about to

crest. Dallas could feel the pressure as if it were inside his own face. If she could manage to just hold out, at least until—

“Rosie lived two months,” she said, her voice peaking at the end as if this were a question. She tilted her head, as though recalling a long-ago tune. “They say she asphyxiated. Somehow the plastic mattress cover came loose at the corner and ... well ... all I know is I left her sleeping in her crib and went to the kitchen to put dinner in the oven, and when I came back to check on her—”

She pressed her chin to her chest. Everyone waited. Dallas cracked one of his knuckles, but restrained himself from cracking the next.

Explosively, she sighed. “She was dead. Blue.” She raised her head, astonishingly dry-eyed. Maybe she did know something about timing. “She was all tangled in the bedding, but that wasn’t what told me. It was her color. Or lack of color. A dull sort of blue.”

Eva Cruz had moved close to the witness box. “Thank you,” she said. “I know this is very upsetting for you, and we needn’t go into more detail about your baby’s death. But—” she paused “—your first husband, the baby’s father, took this very hard, didn’t he?”

Now we have entered the thicket, Dallas thought. This was the stickiest, thorniest part. He and Eva had agreed that Josie might be able to suggest certain possibilities in her testimony, but they had not informed her of their overall design. Too great a risk. They both sensed she wouldn’t support their strategy—that pity or remorse or even an aversion to the truth would prevent her from getting on board: Rudy Hazelden, they would suggest, was the actual culprit. *There IS no culprit*, they both knew Josie would insist. *This is all in Judy’s mind*. And while that might in fact be the case, the judge might arrive at a different conclusion. Prudence dictated they offer a substitute, a candidate with even shakier credentials than Dallas’ own. Josie had been given no chance to debate this. Eva would simply give her a lead to follow, an invitation to provide the basic outlines of those sordid early years.

P.J.—their eyewitness—could then fill in the sketch.

“He got drunk for a month,” Josie announced with a shimmy of righteousness Dallas would have found repellent under other circumstances. “Then he stopped for a

while, but then got drunk again, this time for—I don't know, maybe two months running. He missed so much work he lost his job at the bus barn.”

“And this became a pattern, didn't it?”

“Well, eventually, he never stopped drinking. But he also got the idea that no job was good enough for him. No man was ever going to tell him what to do. After that, whenever he got a job, if he didn't get fired, he would quit.”

Frisch made a sound, but before any recognizable words took shape, the judge waved him off. “I trust Mrs. Cruz going to put this in perspective very soon, Mr. Frisch,” he intoned.

“So your husband descended into heavy drinking, which eventually led to chronic unemployment,” Eva Cruz summarized, nodding to the judge. “And what were you doing at the time, just after Rosie passed away?”

“Well, I was doing my best to take care of Judy. She had always been a shy little thing, but the baby's death made her quieter than ever—clingy and fretful.” Josie tilted her head again in that listening way. “Of course, she didn't understand what was happening; she wasn't even two at the time. But she knew something was wrong. I stayed in bed for a week, didn't get dressed or bathe or do anything but take sleeping medication and stare at the ceiling. I don't think I ever really slept, though. Rudy, despite being hungover, would give Judy some cereal before he went off to work, and then she would crawl into bed with me, stare at me staring at the ceiling. But after a week, when all we had been having for dinner was beef jerky because that's all Rudy could manage to pick up when he stopped to get a bottle—and when he came home every evening and climbed into bed with us, stinking like a bum and insisted on... well, you know... having sex with me ... with Judy right there in the bed—”

She caught her breath. Dallas wanted to scoop her into his arms, reclaim her as his own. She had dropped this dirty detail so perfectly, so innocently, it didn't seem the least bit rehearsed. And it wasn't, not exactly. It was simply her story. He had first heard it many years before, when they were engaged: the heroic tale of Josie fleeing from her mourning bed to take charge of their life, to escape Rudy's shameless rutting.

WHO had been inappropriate? WHO had crossed the line? This would give the judge a thing or two to chew on.

The judge, in fact, was now furrowing his entire face. Frisch was standing, but scowling down at Judy, clamping a hand across her shoulder as though preventing her from bolting. The girl hugged herself defiantly and blazed a get-fucked look at her mother (a look Dallas had never known to be aimed at anyone but himself)—but Josie, fortunately, was absorbed in the act of folding and refolding her hankie. It was just as well she be spared this flagrant disrespect. Yet it could also be read as a positive sign, this generalized insolence. Something was shifting, the scales were tipping ...

“Your honor, this is a stupendously riveting glimpse into Mrs. Early’s sex life,” Frisch said finally, still restraining his client, “But rather exhibitionistic, I think you would agree—and altogether beside the point. May we move on?”

Josie looked up from her hankie-folding, blindly blinking, sniffing furiously. *Exhibitionistic?* Dallas could almost hear her say.

The dysfunction of the family of origin was precisely the point, Eva explained. The extent and scope of its traumatization. Its shades of degradation. The judge, hunching inside his robes like a gravely molting bird, provisionally agreed. With a warning to keep it concise, he granted Josie permission to continue.

And she plunged ahead breathlessly. Eva had coached her to make a complete and unsparing account (*your task, Mrs. Early, is to help the judge understand how far back Judy’s unhappiness began*), and Josie’s desire to do her very best was evident. “He wanted to make another baby!” she exclaimed, as if she could no longer bear the burden of this secret. “That’s what he said. But as you can imagine, I was in no condition to think about that. I was also in no condition to stop him. He was after me even the day of the service—not a scrap of self-control, I am ashamed to admit, no sense of propriety. Well, this behavior went on and on, not to mention the drinking, and I knew I couldn’t stay in bed, heartbroken as I was. I had to get up, whether I was ready or not. Someone was going to have to take care of our family, or at least go buy some groceries.”

She looked straight at Judy for the very first time, shaking her head. “It was then I knew it could not last.”

The girl’s body jerked, and mother and daughter locked into a stare-down. Dallas shifted his gaze between the two. Amazingly, Josie was not wilting in response to that

baleful glare. Her features were placid, dignified, solid. This was the *truth*, her fearlessness implied—unfortunate as it may be, whether or not you can accept the brutal facts. She was rising to the occasion so much more completely than he had dreamed.

“And when was it you first noticed Judy had emotional problems?”

“Objection!” Frisch barked. “Mrs. Early is not in a position to diagnose her daughter’s emotional condition—then or now. There’s no professional assessment from any time in Ms. Hazelden’s childhood which the mother can cite.”

Without hesitation, the judge said, “Sustained.”

“I’ll rephrase, if I may,” Eva said evenly. There was an easy serenity about her; she dipped her head solicitously as if asking Josie the favor of her time. “Mrs. Early,” she continued. “During years following Rosie’s death—say, up until the time you met Mr. Early—how would you characterize Judy’s behavior?”

“Objection,” Frisch repeated.

“I think a mother can speak to a child’s behavior, Mr. Frisch. Mrs. Cruz is asking for a mother’s assessment, not a professional’s. Overruled.”

Eva, as healthy-looking a woman as could be imagined, seemed more robust than usual today, broader across the beam—possibly in the direct visual contrast to Josie’s delicacy. The two of them up there, one-on-one: a remarkable comparison, the way they carried their womanhood to such opposite extremes. That nun had been the tiniest, though, no bigger than a gnat. (A nun! Now that was some kind of extreme—what kind of lunatic stunt had that been?)

The emotions were subdued now, a fire doused to ashes. “Judy was always as quiet as a church mouse, even from the very start,” Josie was saying, “just the quietest, most pensive baby. But Rosie’s death seemed to make her very insecure. She became terribly dependent on me, refused to let me out of her sight. I was sure it would just take some time, so I let her be. After a while, though, I began to invite other mothers over, hoping she would play with their little girls. But she would wrap her arms around my neck and stand in my lap and watch them. That’s all: just watch.

“I bought her dolls and got her dress-up clothes at the Goodwill, hoping she might at least entertain herself—but she would rather watch *me* get dressed and put on my make-up. The only thing she wanted to do on her own was jigsaw puzzles. Well, once I

figured that out, you can imagine how many puzzles we had around the house. And she could do those super-complicated ones at a very young age. You know, age ten and up—when she was five or six, she was trying to put those together. All that concentration. When it wasn't aimed at me, she would pour it into her puzzles."

"You needed help, didn't you? You felt Judy needed a father figure who was truly an adult."

Josie blanched. "I won't deny it was love at first sight with Dallas—but I was thinking every moment of Judy's welfare. He was obviously a man who knew how to be responsible, who would be an excellent provider. I thought this situation would be the very best thing for her. But—"

She twisted her mouth. The tears brimmed in her eyes. Her timing was impeccable.

"But—" she sucked in her lips, drawing her face down, distorted and woeful "—but Judy never did warm up to him," she confessed. And then everything—the withheld tears, dejection, anguish—began to spill. "I've never been able to comprehend it! He was nothing but kind to her, right from the start. Maybe she was ... well ... to be absolutely truthful... jealous. She was just not able to share me with others. And she had also learned to feel very protective of her daddy—who, I can assure you, has made it his lifelong goal to make everyone else feel sorry for him. I'm sure Judy thought Dallas was stealing me away, and that's what ruined Rudy. But she was too young to see he was ruined already."

She bent her head. Her shoulders hitched as if she might be sobbing, but no sound accompanied the movement. She might be weeping behind glass, sealed inside a soundproof booth.

"You feel guilty, don't you," asked Eva Cruz, "about your daughter never being able to adapt to the new family situation?"

"Oh, god, yes!" Josie sobbed. She continued to hang her head, which bobbed in time with her now-audible weeping, as if she were following the bouncing of a ball.

The bobbing went on for a minute, and then another minute passed. The air grew thick again. Bodies were shifting, growing restless, but Dallas remained intent upon Josie, hoping to help her through somehow.

She did not look up. The judge called a recess. Eva Cruz helped her step down, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“Would you look at that?” Claudia said, loud as a dump truck on gravel.
“Mothering the mother.”

Jude swung around towards her friends. She had forgotten they were there. They had been silent during Josie’s performance, and the performance itself had demanded absolute attention. That heartrending vulnerability. The trajectory of failure. How could you not feel pity for her? She tried so hard! God *knows* she tried! Throughout this ordeal, though, Jude had clung to her fury (what did Rudy have to do with *anything*? why did she have to slander him with that pack of filthy lies?), resisting the sadness, the invitation to make it her own. Josie did in fact seem to possibly care. She did in fact appear to need some competent mothering, and Eva Cruz was obliging with a gray flannel shoulder that would absorb those acrid tears.

But who would be mothering Jude? Not the woman who had just testified. Certainly no one among her haphazard collection of friends. Look at them now: their rounded eyes, their slackened mouths, random spectators with great seats for the show—Tawny bored as a ticket-taker, Helen tense as a hen, Opal’s head spinning so she wouldn’t miss a thing.

“She’s *not* anybody’s mother,” Jude snapped, addressing them in their various bystander poses.

Claudia peeled her gaze from Eva Cruz. “Jude! You know what I mean—”

“You’re the one who told me not to refer to her as my mother. That she was an impostor, a fake. Remember?”

“You’re one-hundred-percent right. And I still mean it. That was just a slip. I was mostly thinking of that lawyer woman’s behavior. I never would have guessed she had it in her. A nurturing streak.”

“Quite the spectacle, isn’t it ladies?” Frisch asked, stepping beside Jude and buttoning his jacket. “And I completely agree with you,” he nodded to Claudia. “Our magnificent Ms. Cruz has many intriguing sides, some of which we may have yet to discover.”

He squeezed Jude's shoulder. Claudia glared at him. Helen lifted her bear into her lap now that the judge had left the room.

"A word with my client, please," Frisch said.

The compression of her shoulder: heavy, light, repulsive, reassuring. She glanced up at him, and he smiled, his teeth shining like ice. He had an insight, a proposition, those icy teeth suggested.

Jude turned away from Claudia and the rest, and he crouched down next to her. "How do you mean that—that she's not your mother?" he asked.

The depth of stupidity from someone so smart. Balanced so precariously on the balls of his feet, a good shove would send him sprawling.

"I'm not crazy," she said, grimacing. "I know who she is."

"Not my point." He nudged her elbow. He was getting more physical, more intimate, but it seemed appropriate somehow. When there was no one left, there would still be Frisch. "I *want* her to not be your mother, or at least for you to think of her that way. And here's why—we've talked about this contingency, and the moment is ripe. But I want you to be prepared for it. The cross-examination isn't going to be pretty. She is going to fly apart like she stepped on a mine. Are you ready?"

Behind her, Claudia was ruminating at length on the lawyer-woman's nurturance. Maybe she was an all-right gal after all. Helen, with edgy throat clearings, was trying to get her to shut up.

"If that's what you need to do," Jude shrugged, summoning indifference, hoping to conceal her tingling, slightly hysterical sense of glee. If glee was what it was. She had seen her mother, or rather Josie—Josephine Madeline Etcetera Early—fly apart before. And Frisch was right, it would be anything but attractive when she rained down in soggy bits. But was that possibly the point of this entire process? Was that actually why they were all gathered together, in this fall-out shelter of a courtroom—to see her mother (Josie, whoever she was, whatever her name might be), even more so than Dallas, disgraced? Jude had once pictured her tossed pitilessly in the clothes dryer, a hapless laundered shoe, and now, because the daughter had willed it, the tossing of the mother was about to commence for real.

Be careful what you wish for ... (a bumper sticker from group therapy) ... you just might get it.

Frisch was right, it was not going to be pretty, not by any stretch.

But once upon a time, she had been youngest, prettiest mama ever. Who was this worn-out woman who had taken her place? Where was the little girl who once helplessly sought her like a daisy seeks the sun? There were no answers, nothing at all: just a tension like taut strings, cinching themselves tighter inside Jude's chest. Pluck any one of them—regret, for instance, or maybe wounded pride—and all the rest would snap in sympathy.

Court resumed.

Eva Cruz had not completed her direct examination. She began questioning Josie about the “gynecological procedure” that had been described in Miss Hazelden's testimony.

Frisch slung his arm over the back of his chair, the epitome of casual.

Josie had evidently reapplied her make-up. She looked fresh, paved over; no trace of the previous messiness remained. The current topic was messiness, however—physical messiness, the kind that fell furthest below her standards (as Jude so intimately knew). One April evening in 1981, Josie was explaining, she had found her daughter sitting in a puddle of blood on the Amish rag rug in her bedroom. A mess beyond belief—though this she did not say. In fact, her tone seemed calibrated to deny the horror of the moment: flawless, smooth, as impenetrable as her mask of make-up, modulated to express profound concern, but in fact expressing no concern whatsoever. Jude recognized it as an entirely different kind of performance—the real-estate professional's let's-not-get-too-worked-up-about-this-turn-of-events tone, used to pacify unhappy clients.

She must have bitten her own knuckles, Josie was saying. She did not remember biting them, but she had to wear bandages for a week afterwards to conceal blackish bruises—obviously teeth marks—on her fingers. If she had bitten them, it must have been to stifle her panic. And she must have panicked. She recalled running to the linen closet but all the towels were new.

Frisch leaned towards Naomi and whispered; they both chuckled. As if overhearing them, Josie amended herself: that's how confused she was—as if the towels were the least bit important! She grabbed an armful and ran back, but by that time Judy was lying on the floor. Dallas—she supposed she should call Dallas. But he was at South Shore, would not be back till Easter supper, three days later. She managed to prop Judy into a sitting position, not sure how the pile of plush white towels might help. That's when she saw the blood on Judy's hands. She wanted to grab her wrists, but held back, thinking that was maybe where she had been cut. But Judy assured her she was bleeding from “down there.”

It was now Jude's turn to chuckle, perhaps even more cynically than Frisch and Naomi had. Josie, the fizzling firecracker of a sexpot, couldn't even bring herself to say the correct anatomical terms, to name things for what they were.

“Vagina,” Jude whispered, coaching her. “Cunt.”

Relief, Josie was saying—she had nearly swooned with relief, realizing her child had not slit her wrists. But it wasn't clear in her mind what transpired next, how much time then passed before Judy said the bleeding wasn't stopping; she should probably see a doctor. And then the car keys were nowhere to be found. Somehow, somewhere Josie located them, somehow she loaded Judy into the back seat of the Lincoln, but she must have put the car in drive rather than reverse because the next day, the front bumper was bent. She must have thrown an old bedspread across the back seat because that horrid blood-soaked thing was there in the car after the visit to the doctor was over.

“You didn't take her to the emergency room, did you?” Eva Cruz asked.

Frisch was still slouching back as if watching a floor show, but he inhaled with pleasurable anticipation, straining the air through his teeth, an almost sexual aspiration: *ooh, this is SO good.*

“No,” Josie's eyes were downcast. “I didn't.”

“In fact, you took her to a private gynecologist, isn't that correct?”

Josie nodded. Eva Cruz reminded her to answer aloud.

“Yes.”

“Please explain to the court why you made this decision.”

“Well, once I realized it wasn’t her wrists, and that it was a... well... a female problem, it didn’t appear to be an emergency to me. I figured she would want some privacy.”

“And, in fact, it *wasn’t* an emergency, was it?” Eva Cruz dared a look over her shoulder, as if Frisch might be sneaking up on her flank. He scratched his chin.

“No, Dr. Nori had her fixed up in a flash. She just needed a little ... female housekeeping.”

“A D&C—dilation and curettage?”

“Yes, that’s it. Perfectly routine, he said. She apparently was rather young to need a procedure like this, but it wasn’t unheard-of. These things do happen.”

Like Frisch, Eva Cruz had also introduced medical affidavits regarding the actual purpose of this procedure. “Housekeeping,” not abortion, had been their unifying theme. She now referred to these again, asking Josie to confirm they corresponded to what the doctor had actually said.

Naomi tapped a cinnamon-mint into her palm. Frowning, she offered it to Jude. *Sorry*, her expression suggested, *it’s not much consolation, but it’s all I’ve got to offer*. Jude took the mint and sniffed it and placed it on her tongue. It seeped hot flavor into her mouth just as Eva Cruz made a complete turn and walked back to Dallas.

Facing him, not her witness, she asked, “You never saw your husband behave inappropriately towards Judy, did you?”

“Not once,” Josie replied.

“He never kissed or fondled her.”

“Never.”

Everyone had turned to stare at Dallas, which allowed Jude to stare at him, too. His neck was coloring—the approximate shade of the fiery taste on her tongue—but his face was not. His expression suggested a neutral topic occupied his mind—whether the Cherokee, say, needed an oil change or not. It had never occurred to her that they might have this much in common: a flair for detachment, a talent for wholly vacating the present moment. But if that were true, where had he gone? Not that it mattered. Let him go wherever it was, let him stay there till he was ground down to dust. As long as they did not cross paths as they both sought to escape.

“You never saw any evidence,” Eva Cruz continued, “that Mr. Early abused your daughter in any way.”

“If I had, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now! What kind of mother would testify against her daughter?”

Magisterially, Eva swept back around. Every head in the room followed the curve of her movement, the arc leading back toward Josie. This was the unfathomable question, of course—and had been posed by the object of unfathomability herself. *What* kind of mother? The answer was bound to be enlightening.

By now, the mint had dissolved, leaving a pungent aftertaste.

“Please tell the court *why*—” Eva Cruz prompted, “—why you are testifying on your husband’s behalf, in an adversarial position to your daughter’s.”

“I’m doing it for her!” Here was the anguished mother again. “Look at her! Our doctor has told us she’ll never get over this unless we stand firm. She will give up this delusion only if we insist on reality. But I can assure you, it is the most unbearable thing in the world to stand by and watch her fail. And it just breaks my heart for her to hate me so!” She broke off, the head bobbed again.

Reality. Insisting on it. Of course that would be the refrain (“reality” looking and smelling and tasting as it did from that side of the courtroom). A convenient phrase, at the very least.

But then there was the broken heart. That was an absolute, no matter where you sat. It was nearly bursting from that heaving chest; she was trying to guard it with her head dropped to her breast. Jude acknowledged this, bewildered. What had caused this heartbreak? When had it ever made the slightest ripple of difference what her least-favorite daughter had done or said or felt? Did it actually matter if she hated her (which in fact was not the case)? Hate was not what Jude had ever felt, even now. *Mother, for god’s sake, why don’t you just grow up!* That would be the message, if there had to be a single one, distilled.

Although maybe that was hateful. It would depend on how she took it. Badly, no doubt.

“Thank you,” Eva Cruz was saying. “That will be all.”

Frisch rose deliberately, a cat rising from a nap. His precision was predatory, and Jude, sensing the menace of it, began to reduce her intake of this air, rationing each breath.

By now, Josie had raised her chin from chest but was holding her shoulders abnormally high, as if arrested in a shrug.

“Mrs. Early,” Frisch announced, as if hailing her from a distance. She flung her head and shoulders back. “In your testimony, you said you were panicked at the sight of your daughter’s blood.”

“Th...that’s right,” she stammered, trying but failing to engage him with a smile.

“But you were relieved when you realized she had not slit her wrists.”

“Well, obviously! Yes!” she agreed.

“But still you were panicked.”

“Pardon?”

“You said that after you realized that it was merely a ‘female problem’—” he frowned severely “—you had trouble finding your car keys, and then you ‘somehow’ got her into the Lincoln, and then you drove this car into a wall.”

“I said I must have put it in drive instead of reverse,” she flicked a glance at Eva Cruz, “because it was dented the next day.”

“But you don’t remember doing that.”

“That’s correct. I don’t.”

“Because you were in a panic.”

“I don’t think I said that.”

“In fact, once you realized your daughter’s condition was a ‘female problem,’ weren’t you in an even greater panic than when you first entered her bedroom?”

She nodded, considering, though Eva Cruz warily shook her head ‘no.’ “I don’t think so,” Josie replied, responding to the signal.

“But you were still concerned that your daughter’s condition was serious.”

“She said the bleeding wasn’t stopping—”

“Yes or no, please—at the time you were attempting to get the car out of the garage, you believed your daughter’s condition was serious.”

“Yes! Of course.” She narrowed her eyes at him as if he were a fool.

“But still you did not take her to the emergency room.”

“Well, no, I...” Josie tested the shape of her hairstyle, which had devolved into a limp disarray.

Eva Cruz shoved back her chair. “Your honor—”

“Credibility of the witness, your honor,” Frisch interrupted before she could formally object.

“I’m going to allow this, Mrs. Cruz.”

“But Judge Salazar, may I respectfully remind the court—as we established during the plaintiff’s testimony, the mother is not on trial.”

“And counsel is now challenging your direct examination of *this* witness. For better or worse, you have reintroduced this subject in support of your own case, and opposing counsel is now free to respond. Besides, you haven’t let Mr. Frisch get far enough to see if there’s anything objectionable.”

She plumped down in her seat. Frisch raised his hands as if forgiving her.

“Mrs. Early,” he resumed, more forcefully than before. Josie jumped as if pinched; one hand captured the other, which was still primping her hair, and pulled it into her lap.

“Didn’t all that blood—no matter where it was coming from—indicate to you this was an emergency?”

“I...” The shoulders rose again, her neck disappeared. She might have been a woman without arms, trying to prevent the theft of her earrings. “... I’m just a ninny at the sight of blood. I was confused. I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Again, weren’t you ‘not thinking’ because of the dire nature of your daughter’s condition?”

She did not answer.

“Isn’t it true that you had the presence of mind to make a conscious decision to *not* take her to the hospital? To take her instead to a private ob-gyn—who took *twenty minutes longer* to reach than the emergency room would have? A doctor whom you knew would be sleeping—it was eleven p.m. after all—whom you had to call before leaving to wake him up?”

Josie stared, mortified, as if Frisch were making crude gestures, suggesting she perform an indecent act. No answer came from her, no sound at all.

But she had shrieked at the time. Jude had heard it, seen it, from the darkness of the back seat. The car had surged forward, crunching into something, and Josie had viciously struck herself as if beating a contrary horse... twice, three times, maybe four. The car then lurched backward and hit something else. *Goddamn garage door!* Josie wailed, scrabbling around the front seat, then holding high a little box, jabbing it with a finger. A grinding sound filled the pause; the car fell backwards unobstructed. Jude had been propping herself on one elbow, too alarmed to lie down, but now allowed herself to collapse. Blood was seeping like sludge—warm at its source but colder the further it flowed from her body.

Frisch stepped in very close. “You knew it was wrong to drive your child to that doctor rather than to the emergency room, didn’t you?”

“Objection!” Eva Cruz hollered.

But it was too late. “Yes!” Josie exhaled.

Yes.

The syllable tolled like a bell, called to another buried deep inside Jude’s chest. Yes. Yes. Finally. A confirmation. An answer anyone might understand. Now everyone would know.

Yes, she had known. Yes, it was wrong. Yes, Jude—Judy, right? there had never been a girl named Jude—was the one who was actually dead. Not that other girl. The baby. Why try to pretend any longer?

“Move to strike!”

Hands up, Frisch backed away from the witness box. “I’ll withdraw the question.” He assumed a mask of contrition. *Sorry*, the expression was designed to convey. *Won’t happen again. Honest.*

“Strike that question and response from the record,” Judge Salazar ordered the court reporter. He swiveled back and forth in his chair, grasping his chin.

Josie looked half-feral. Her hair was now standing out spikily, as if charged with electricity, expressing her rage. Her eyes seemed unfocused. Jude hardly recognized her. But anyone could see: this was who she had been all along. Yes. This was where

they exchanged places, where Josie fell to her lowest and Jude rose to a precipitous height. You *had* to feel pity looking down at this spectacle. Despite what Josie had done. Despite what she was doing at this very moment. Degraded by her own design.

When you were dead, you could put it all into perspective. This was true detachment. The worst was known. It was over.

But Frisch was not finished. Unbuttoning and rebuttoning his jacket, he occupied himself with some papers on the table.

“In your testimony,” he said politely, turning slowly to face Josie again. “You said you’ve never seen any evidence of sexual abuse.”

“Th...that’s right,” Josie stammered again. She had turned herself toward Dallas, perhaps for moral support, but did not seem to be looking at him—was looking somewhere above or beyond him instead. The heating unit rumbled.

“You said that your husband’s behavior had never been inappropriate towards your daughter.”

“Uh-huh... I mean, yes. That’s correct.”

Frisch raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Leaving aside the blatant inappropriateness of dressing your daughter in a streetwalker’s outfit and parading her—”

“Badgering, your honor,” said Eva Cruz.

“Sustained. Mr. Frisch, you’re pushing it.”

Frisch smiled at Josie; she cringed. “Let me ask you this,” he said, smiling more brutally as if her submission had aroused him. “Can you tell the court, Mrs. Early, what some signs of sexual abuse might be?”

“B... beg pardon?”

“Mrs. Early, you wouldn’t know evidence of sexual abuse if you saw it, would you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Can you name for me a single sign of behavior, a single symptom a child might exhibit if she were experiencing abuse?”

Josie pursed her smeared lips and stared doubtfully at Frisch.

“Do you think a fourteen-year-old girl having a spontaneous miscarriage might be one of those signs?”

“Ah!” Josie cried, as if slapping herself.

Eva Cruz was halfway to the bench, gesturing boldly.

“Sit down, Mrs. Cruz. I’m going to allow this. He’s correct. Goes to credibility.”

Eva Cruz halted. “But this ‘purported’ miscarriage is an issue of fact before the court,” she said.

“Please return to your seat, counselor,” he repeated. “Mr. Frisch?” he asked.

“Thank you.” Frisch shook his hands gingerly as if he had just rinsed them. “Let me make sure we’re all clear—we’ve all read the doctor’s report, which states, as you have stated, that your daughter had a D&C. And *maybe* the doctor told *you* it was just a little ‘housekeeping.’ The doctor is dead, of course, and all we have are his records, so we can’t ask put him on the stand to verify what he said at the time.” He placed his fingertips on the witness box, rising almost to his tiptoes to get as close to Josie as possible. “But *you* believed, didn’t you, that your daughter was having a miscarriage? You *knew*.”

“No!” Josie spat at him. Frisch staggered back. “I don’t believe my husband ever laid a hand on Judy, Mr. Frisch. You can accuse me of being the most negligent mother in the world, and I’ll agree with you up one side and down the other, but you are wrong about him.”

Frisch recovered in a heartbeat. “That doesn’t answer my question, Mrs. Early. Let me repeat—you knew your daughter was having a spontaneous abortion, didn’t you?”

All the lines in Josie’s face funneled downward. “I didn’t know what, exactly, was wrong with her, but whatever it was, I just thought it might look ... you know ... bad.”

“Bad?” Frisch raised a hand to his chest theatrically. “*Bad?*” he repeated. “Do you mean to say that it ‘looks bad’ for a child to hemorrhage from her vagina?”

“I suppose so,” she murmured.

“So you were embarrassed by this—and your primary concern was to protect yourself from embarrassment?”

Josie nodded, whispered yes.

“But you weren’t protecting your husband.”

“No!”

“It never entered your mind that your daughter was aborting a pregnancy and that the father might have been your husband.”

“Never!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Early, it just doesn’t add up. If you were worried about public embarrassment, wouldn’t it have been more embarrassing for your daughter to die?”

“OBJECTION!”

“She was not going to die!”

“Sustained! Mr. Frisch, I’m warning you—”

Frisch flicked a piece of lint off his sleeve. “No more questions, your honor.”

The judge swiveled. Josie trembled. Dallas, off in his corner, bowed his head.

But it was all a rhetorical exercise. In fact there was no further ground to be gained. There had never been any danger of dying.

How can you die when you’ve always been dead?

Re-recovered

Air. She had forgotten the existence of air. The vacuum of the courtroom had robbed her lungs of breath for two whole days. Thursday, Friday, it was over till Monday. She was permitted to be outside. She had been released into a waning winter afternoon. Hunching down toward evening, the sky was moodily damp and dense, indifferent, precisely what she needed.

Frisch and Naomi had dropped her off at the end of her driveway, saying they would return at eight to pick her up for dinner, and she had immediately set out on foot, aiming herself in the general direction of elsewhere. If she hurried, she might pass the boundary of her neighborhood before Claudia’s Fury rounded the corner, before she found herself mired again in a depthless bog of hugs and home-cooked food and solidarity.

She jammed her hands in her pockets, restraining herself from actually sprinting. Her feet took her where they went. The neighborhood smelled of woodsmoke and cornbread. San Ygnacio Boulevard, however, brought a different set of smells: a

noseful of exhaust, the reek of burger grease and fries. She slackened her pace. Which way should she turn? The sidewalk, uniform, precisely paved, was a reliable old friend. She looked down at it, smirking ruefully. Who was she kidding? Where else could she possibly be going? The sidewalk, as it always had, would lead her, as it always would, to the most ramshackle house in town.

There it was, not too far ahead. Someday Rudy would sell his place, make a fortune on the land, the house would be bulldozed and something painfully appropriate would rise in its place: a Liquor Barn, a triple-X-rated theater, a pet shop with treats and collars and leashes and piddling puppies in cages—all three together would be the perfect combination, sure to make the landlord a mint. Josie could buy the house and develop the property. She and Dallas could make home movies to show at the theater. Rudy, subsisting on booze and whatever it is a dog might want or need, could live in an alley in the back, have a free, complimentary lifetime pass to watch their flickering bodies on the screen.

It could all be in the contract, Jude decided, looking down at her feet, watching her shoes occasionally pause and sidestep obstacles: an oil-streaked puddle, a ripped-open condom wrapper. Her feet stopped; she had arrived. But her destination was not Rudy's after all—instead she was facing the donut shop across the road. Donut King. It had been here less than a year, yet graffiti blighted the south wall, a jagged chunk had been broken from the King's jaunty crown.

She had never been inside. She was turning up the path to its entrance. Inside, a cardboard version of a donut-shaped man pranced on spindly legs and presided over a dozen tiny tables, some carved with gang designs. January did not accompany her through the door, repelled completely by an aromatic blast of heat—coffee dregs plus donut glaze plus something sour-smelling (a wipe-down rag? dishwater?)

The only donut that looked marginally edible was plain—no glaze, just cake.

“No coffee?” said the cashier. He had tattoos on his fingers, a black hairnet on his head.

Jude held out two quarters for the donut. Who had given her this money? Frisch? Claudia? Helen? Certainly not Dallas, whose modest cash infusions had ceased many months before.

“You know, to dunk your donut,” said the cashier. “Everyone has coffee.”

She stared at him. “Everyone?” She dropped the change on the counter. “Who’s that?”

He scooped up the coins. “Hey, lady. Don’t get twisted. Just a suggestion.”

Lady? “Really,” she said, taking her donut and turning away.

He mumbled something—freaks? geeks?—and closed the cash drawer.

She sat at a window table and broke the donut into several pieces, then broke each of those pieces in half. Rudy’s shop was directly across the street but there was no chance he might have seen her. If conscious at all, he was sure to be falling-down drunk by this hour. What did it matter anyway, if he saw her? if he didn’t? She didn’t know why she had come.

Because: he had crept into bed with the two of them.

Rudolph Randolph Hazelden, her mother had once declared (but not today; her passion for her first husband was not one of the secrets she had confessed)—*you are God’s gift to woman*.

Jude wished now she had left her donut intact so she could look at Rudy’s house through the hole, but she looked at it anyway, unaided. It was sagging like an old woman sliding off a chair. Even from fifty yards away, the cracks in the foundation were evident. Rudy’s Restorations. She laughed out loud at the misery of it. Behind her, the clerk grunted. She laughed at him, too. But his grunt was also Rudy’s. He had crawled into bed.

This was impossible to remember—she had been younger than two. *Never say impossible*, Kat would insist. The body recalls every moment, every sound, smell, sensation. Each experience leaves an indelible trace on the body, in the mind, even from our earliest days. You know what you know. But what did *Kat* know? Kat was a pro-fes-sion-al. Kat scooped you up and held you, practically smothered you, then dropped you when your weight became more than she could bear.

Jude pushed the donut pieces together, a desultory attempt to mush the cakey fragments back into their original shape.

The glass door swung open and a young man stepped to the counter. Hoping to appear inconspicuous, she popped a piece of donut in her mouth and chewed. She

stared at the house, forcing herself to look away from the man, sensing he was someone she should recognize. But who? That mustard-colored sports jacket, the slicked-back hair held fast in a stubby ponytail. She had seen this combination before. The courtroom steps. The day before. Six-thirty a.m. Mr. Frisch had shouldered him aside.

Too late, he was stepping to her table.

“Miss Hazelden?” he asked, standing over her. “Terry Aguilar, *Sacramento Bee*. Mind if I join you?”

She looked at her broken donut and felt ashamed. It was so personal: what she had done to it. But he didn’t seem to notice. He was looking out the window, gesturing with his Styrofoam cup of coffee. “That’s your dad’s place across the way, isn’t it?”

She swallowed the piece she had been chewing.

A battered truck ambled into Rudy’s parking lot. Cameron, the quarter-Miwok man. At least Rudy still had someone.

Terry Aguilar began to lower himself onto the bench across from her, but Jude pushed the table—it was not bolted to the floor—and closed the gap between the table and the bench. He stopped in a crab-like pose, half-crouched. “Okay,” he said, straightening. “But I’d still like to ask you a couple of questions, if I may.” He squinted at her. He might have been twenty-seven, twenty-eight—hardly old enough to be one the dedicated professionals whose job it was to play this game out to its end.

“Look. I’ll even put my notebook away—no notes.”

She hadn’t noticed the reporter’s notebook in his hand. Reaching into his sports-coat, he made it disappear. She wondered if a tape recorder might be stashed in there, too.

“No comment.” This much she knew was okay to say. She looked out the window again. The Miwok man was knocking on Rudy’s door.

“I actually talked to your dad the other day. He’s a very—”

Jude whipped back around. “You did what?”

“Talked to him. Your dad.”

“You can’t do that.”

Terry Aguilar grinned. “Sure I can. Anyone can.”

“He wouldn’t talk to you.”

“Well, I’ll grant you that. He didn’t *want* to talk to me. Not at first.”

She resented the power of this stranger. He knew something she did not, and she still was highly invested in the value of knowing. She still believed (though not for much longer) that knowing (what happened, who did what to whom and when and how) was the most reliable path to freedom, redemption, self-esteem.

With her thumb, she mashed a spray of crumbs that had fallen into her lap.

Terry Aguilar was elaborating. “But once your father realized somebody was willing to listen to his side of the story—”

“His side!” As far as she knew, he didn’t have a side.

“He’s a very bitter man, isn’t he?” Terry Aguilar watched as Rudy’s visitor climbed back into his truck. “Guess Rudy’s Restorations isn’t open for business. Hardly ever open, is it?”

Possibly not. She hadn’t gone anywhere near the shop since early January, when Rudy had nastily fallen out of his pants and then displayed an entirely different kind of obscenity: that thousand-dollar check. He probably had cashed the check by now and was treating himself to a vacation, enjoying himself (unlikely) on Dallas’ dime. But there had been something wrong with that check—she could see it now, as though it were laid flat in front of her again. It had been dated January something. But Rudy had claimed he rushed over for his “little chat” with Dallas as soon as the lawsuit had been filed. Which would have been July.

The intruder was watching her, waiting for a reply. She noticed a tiny gold stud in his earlobe.

“He certainly has it in for Mr. Early, doesn’t he?” Terry Aguilar asked, trying a new angle of approach. “But it was odd. As soon as he started talking about your stepdad, he shut himself up. Zipped his lip.” He made a zippering motion across his mouth. “Like that. Said he had almost forgotten: he was ‘honor bound’ to certain obligations. Sorry to say, but he was completely blitzed—raving, actually. Could hardly get the words out. But what do you suppose he might have meant by that?”

Jude was rising to her feet. The mashed crumbs fell from her lap to the floor.

“Leave him alone,” she said.

“There’s something else,” he persisted, reaching into the canvas bag hanging from his shoulder. Jude stepped past him toward the door.

“This was in the front window of the shop—” he was holding a cloth-bound book; he flipped to the title page “—along with a whole set of books in a particularly intriguing series, ‘The Discriminating Gentlemen’s Collection.’ It seems to be concerned with a rather, um, provocative theme.”

He closed the book and tried to hand it to Jude.

Fair Bonnie was the faded gilt title. And under it, a subtitle, *A Girl Just Nine*.

The donut shop flashed white. The explosion was inside her.

“Do you recognize this? Any chance your dad might have, say, *inherited* these from Mr. Early in some way?”

Her body broke into a run. She slammed through the door and out into the cold. The coat Helen had loaned her for the duration of the trial was still inside, slung over the bench where she had been sitting. But she had no choice but to abandon it. And whatever she had left in the pockets. The donut pieces, too. Miraculously, a bus was lurching to the curb, blocking her view of Rudy’s place.

Skirt flying, she reached the bus just as it settled to a stop. She boarded, pulsing so crazily with adrenaline she could barely find her skirt pocket to extract the change. But the driver smiled patiently. Was he insane? She had boarded a bus to ... where? The destination was irrelevant. It would carry her away. It lumbered from the curb and she took a window seat, daring to glance across the road. A ghostly image passed behind one of Rudy’s front windows.

She never looked in those windows. She always entered by the back door. She never cleaned those front windows, never arranged the displays. But this must be another gap in her memory (how many could there be? had she lived an entire life that she never would remember?)—she *must* have seen that book there. Curious, she must have stolen it away, inspected it, detested it, sneaked it back after ... what? reading it aloud? with her legs split wide? what was that raspy chuffing sound, just beside her as she read? If she dared to raise her eyes from the page of that book, she could see the window of her childhood bedroom overlooking the pepper tree in the yard. That lovely shaggy tree—she had forgotten it, utterly, another void in her memory (what *hadn’t* she

forgotten?)—and here it was again, complete and magnificent, a treasure from her childhood, long lost. Years ago, it had been felled with a chain saw, hauled away in pieces. Years ago, too, the bedroom overlooking it had become his squalid den. Where he watched porno movies with his pants undone.

She smacked her head against the window, hoping to break clean through. She would cut her throat now—none of that juvenile slice-your-hand shit. That was for babies—

Babies.

She saw where the bus was headed. This relaxed her. Several blocks further and she got off at the final stop, the cemetery.

There was an hour or so of daylight left, though daylight was not quite the word for it. The fog had gathered here on the northernmost edge of town, a gloaming of white, continuously sinking. The graveyard's hills shouldered out of it, the hollows dropped beneath it.

Jude made her way toward the children's section. She was alone, except for the rows of silent companionship underground. Their reticence was hers. Her bones were theirs. Her flesh was the fog. No boundaries existed now that she had passed through the wrought-iron gate. With no jacket to protect her, she felt oddly warm, not cold. Why hadn't she come here more often? When had she ever felt more in her element?

She left the path and began walking over the graves, not a shortcut so much as a way to maximize this feeling. Of belonging. There might even be an open grave into which she could climb. Where she might sleep. The grass was soft, recently watered; moisture seeped into her shoes.

"Rosie," she said out loud. And there was her grave.

Rudy must have visited not long before. There was a potted chrysanthemum near the headstone. Top-heavy in its tiny plastic pot, it had fallen on its side. Jude, crouching, set it upright.

The angel on the headstone was perpetually lifting her eyes toward heaven, just like the girl on the cover of that book. A simple line-drawing had shown a precious little miss, parasol over her shoulder, a flounce of bloomers showing beneath a bell-

shaped skirt. *A girl just nine.* Her eyes had lifted in beseechment—and so had Rudy’s, as he had settled this cloth-bound book in her hands, insisting she read it—*you are such a good reader*—that have-pity-on-your-helpless-pa expression stamped upon his face. But then his eyes had soon narrowed to slits; his back had arched. He was ...

She threw herself over, grateful to smash against the ground. Curling sideways, as if spooned against her sister on a murky fogbound night, she extended an arm across the grave.

“Lucky,” she whispered into the blades of grass brushing her nose. “You were the lucky one.”

She heard herself breathing. A bird called to another. Fog lifted and fell. Her clothing grew wet, trapped between her body and the ground; her flank, she knew, would soon be soaked. But she had lain in a wetness far worse. She had bled out a baby. Her mother had driven. *Their* mother, who had known it was wrong.

“Rosie,” she murmured, and then an unspoken question, *What if you never had died?*

The fog remained mute. She listened more carefully.

What if.

What if.

What if that *other* baby had not died? *Her* baby, hers and—

She sat bolt upright and looked around.

Rudy might come up that hill at any moment, bearing a zinnia like an offering to his intractable god. The god of regret. The god of things that can never be undone. The god that sees all, remembers every detail, never forgets (no blank spaces with this god). It was nearing dusk, an unlikely time for him to visit, but she could not stay now that he had insinuated himself again into the scene. She knelt in the center of Rosie’s plot and patted the headstone as if to reassure her baby sister that none of this bloody mess had ever been remotely her fault. She could hardly be blamed for dying, right? If anything, Jude should be blamed for living. That was the only explanation for a world that sadistically refused to make sense.

What does he do, Rosie, when he comes here alone?

She shuddered at this thought. She would leave him a sign. Not that he would notice a sign if it struck him between the eyes. Regardless, she would do this for herself. For her sister. In her memory.

She dug her fingertips into the moistened earth—surprisingly light and loamy, prime farming soil. A sparse thatch of grass held the surface together, and she worked her fingers beneath it, prying loose a chunk. This she lifted, ripping the grass from itself. The top of the clod bristled green; roots snaked from the sides. Cautiously, she lowered this prize into her pocket.

Then, as if consigning a body to the ground, she lowered the chrysanthemum pot into the hole she had dug. This would amend his error. Tiny plastic pots were not sufficient (as he well knew). Clay would have been better. But he had forgotten, again.

It was dark but not yet late, long before eight. Frisch would still be at the hotel; probably an hour or more remained before he would leave to pick her up for dinner. She would go straight to his suite. She needed to speak with him privately. But how to begin the conversation? He would be impatient at best—more likely, eruptive. You had to be precise if you hoped to challenge a worldview that sophisticated. You had to know exactly what you meant when you opened your mouth. You had to somehow tell him what he wanted to hear. She could do none of the above.

The bus would take her straight to the hotel.

But she got off the bus two blocks away, concerned that stealth might be well-advised. The reporter in the donut shop, though alarming, had not been a huge surprise—they were potentially everywhere, Frisch had warned her. There were sure to be more of them in the lobby, even on a Friday evening. She would use the service stairway in the parking garage.

Half-loping again, hunched, hugging herself—finally, she was freezing; her wet clothing clung to her clammy—she spotted two television vans blocking the hotel entrance. The throng of reporters would be even worse than she imagined. She sidestepped into a car lot that ran the length of the block, right up to the hotel.

Glossy pick-up trucks and four-wheel-drives crowded shoulder to shoulder; their size gave her plenty of cover. She cursed the awkwardness of her skirt, noticing now

the grass streaks along her hip and thigh, the ridge of green across the front where she had kneeled. She inspected her elbow—soiled there, too. If only she had her ever-reliable cords and Keds. Her normal, could-give-a-shit attire might fool the reporters; they were not acquainted with that version of the plaintiff, would probably let her pass without a glance.

Beyond the final row of trucks, a wall of chain-link separated the car lot from an alley. Across the alley was a side door to the parking garage. Scaling the fence was impossible, thanks to her goddamn phony skirt. She ducked behind a burly six-wheeler with a deluxe trailer hitch, relieved the dealership was as deserted as the graveyard had been. But she longed to go back there, where she belonged. This was some kind of bad joke she had sprung on herself—scuttling around like a fugitive in her take-me-seriously clothes, lurking behind a gentleman-rancher's truck.

But she had a souvenir of that other place, a good-luck charm. She reached into her pocket and extracted the dirt clod, lifting it to her face, brushing the tip of her nose. Its earthen odor made her want to bite into it. A surge of joy shot through her limbs. She and Rosie had an understanding now: dead and alive at once, in their very own ways. Two sisters could not be more opposite, but when you stopped to consider it, they were one and the same. Phantoms, illusions, shadows and specters of daughters. She put the clod back into the depths of her pocket and wiped her hands on her skirt, not caring how much grimier it became.

The chain-link fence ended in a gate, in the far back corner of the lot. From the gate, it would be a long sprint down the alley to the parking garage. But no reporters were in evidence. It was the safest bet.

She approached this exit. It was chained shut. But the chain crossed a narrow gap between the gate and the fence. Anyone larger would not even consider it. *Thin, thin, thin*, Josie had tsked in Caldwell's dressing room. She knew she could squeeze through. The only other option would be to creep back the way she had come and call Frisch from a pay phone to rescue her.

Without actually making the choice, she jammed herself into the gap. Her skirt snagged on the hasp; her breasts mashed painfully as she forced herself past the frame. And then she was free.

“Hey, there she is!” a female voice rang out. Jude looked up and down the alley, but no one was there.

“Miss Hazelden! Wait!” came another voice, male. From above. A hotel balcony. She grabbed her skirt, held it high and galloped down the alley, pushed the side door open and stumbled into the fluorescent glare of the garage. There was Frisch’s honey-colored Lexus, glowing like a motherlode of ore. She ran to the stairway and mounted the stairs two at a time, bunching her skirt in a wad. Three flights up and she arrived panting in the doorway of the suite.

It might have been a disaster-response headquarters, a study in hyper-choreographed teamwork. Assistants and clerks were rifling through file boxes, feeding documents into shredders, cradling phones against their ears while typing at computers, snatching print-outs from printers and fax machines. Naomi, though, stood motionless off to one side, watching through the door that opened into Frisch’s bedroom. His voice came from that direction, charged with incredulity.

No one noticed Jude. Heart pounding from her run up the stairs, she stepped close to Naomi, tentatively touching her arm.

“Jude!” Naomi exclaimed, startled. “What are you doing here?”

Why should she be welcome? The ones she wanted would always reject her; the ones she could not stand would pull her near.

“Oh, don’t leave!” Naomi caught her by the sleeve as she backed away. “Don’t mind me. Things are just a little, um, chaotic right now.” She noticed Jude’s disarray. “My God, are you all right? You look like you fell in a ditch.”

Jude examined the grass stains again. “Oh this. I’m fine. Yeah, I . . . I was . . .” she stalled, “I was taking a shortcut through the park. I tripped. The grass was kind of wet.”

“You’re soaked. You should get out of those clothes.” Naomi’s body turned toward the doorway leading to her room, but her head turned back toward Frisch. He was talking into his flip phone, pacing, suit jacket flung on his bed. His shirt sleeves were pushed to his elbows, his necktie loosened; he pressed a palm to his forehead as if this might prevent the mother of all migraines from attacking.

“Somebody should have seen this coming, Luis,” he said.

“He’s talking to his partner,” Naomi whispered, tiptoeing to Frisch’s door.

“How could we *not* be in the loop?” he was saying. “This will just kill—”

Naomi closed the door.

“What’s going on, Naomi?” Twinges of alarm were twisting in her belly.

“Norm’s a little stressed right now,” Naomi admitted.

“Uh-huh.” Naomi seemed stressed, too. Her hair was sticking up and out like a pineapple crown—though for all Jude knew, this was the latest style. “Does this have something to do with the trial?”

Naomi looked her in the eye. “You’re going to have to talk to Norm,” she said. “He’ll be out in a minute, I’m sure.”

“But Naomi—” her heart began to pound again. That reporter had interviewed Rudy. By now he must have put something in the paper—that very newspaper strewn across a side table as if flung there in a rage.

Naomi steered Jude toward her room. “While we’re waiting for Norm, let’s get you into something dry. Can’t have you getting sick. Let’s see what I’ve got.”

“No, really,” Jude insisted, yet allowing Naomi to guide her forward. “I’m fine.”

Naomi’s room smelled of perfume and spices—cloves? But before Jude could ponder the scent, Naomi was handing her a white terry bathrobe with satin lettering stitched on the breast pocket. Beverly Hills Hotel, it said.

Jude frowned at the incongruity. Hesitantly, she began to pull the robe on over her blouse.

“No, *after* you take off those clothes.” Naomi shook her head at Jude as if they were best friends, and she had just done something adorably impossible. She gestured to the bathroom. “You can change in there if you want.”

“I don’t want to take my clothes off,” Jude whined, but apparently not very convincingly. Naomi handed her a pair of black leggings. “Here, take these, too. Give me a minute, and I’ll try to find a shirt.”

Jude shuffled into the bathroom and shut herself inside. Cosmetics were arrayed along the countertop—ornate bottles, pots of metallic color, the velvet pouch she had seen in Naomi’s briefcase. Intrigued, she tugged open the strings and found inside a vial of amber oil. The clove smell had grown stronger in the bathroom, and was now mingled with a muskier scent. She lifted the pouch and sniffed, then saw herself in the

mirror. Dirt was smeared on her face, her blouse was plastered to her chest and hung half-untucked from her skirt, which by now resembled a trampled paper bag. The Caldwell's outfit had reverted from its cleaned-and-pressed state. Not so long ago, it had been jammed behind her bedstead for months. She had yanked it out and worn it to a party, in that disreputable condition.

"You look like *shit*," she hissed at her reflection, affirming, finally, P.J.'s assessment. "Shit warmed over." Word for word, that's what he had claimed. And he would be the expert. Being such a little shit himself. Why did he have to be a witness? How many more gold stars could he possibly accumulate? What could he possibly say—that his former best friend had always been this desperately fucked-up? That she had always hated Dallas with a passion? Little shit, big shit. They had to stick together (a truly unappealing image), she supposed.

She tried to undo her blouse, but the buttons were sticking in their soggy button-holes. Helen had helped her get dressed that morning; with agile fingers, she had managed the fastening of these buttons, which, wet or dry, were too fine for Jude's grasp. Her grip, though improved, was still crude and imprecise. She fumbled now in frustration, longing for Helen's hands to free her.

Longing for ... (but this could never be admitted, the most exquisite of her secrets—even Frisch, especially Frisch, could never, ever know) ...

Longing for her favorite set of hands to gingerly remove her clothes, their inquisitive roving fingers, fumbling yet seeming to know their way around.

P.J.'s hands, of course.

He had touched her, only once, with his trembling fingers—

Violently, she shook her head, flinging droplets from her hair against the mirror. There had been other hands, too. Never touching her body except to open her legs. Touching something else instead. Hands belonging to a man who was watching her. Licking his lips. Slitting his eyes as she read.

But P.J. was there, too. A little boy, he was standing in the doorway, having stumbled in and stopped short, terrified, mouth agape. In a tremulous voice, a story was being read aloud. Once upon a time, there was a little girl.

She clamped her hands over her breasts, forbidding anyone from taking them. Somehow her blouse was now ripped open. Buttons were scattered all along the bathroom countertop. The scars on her hands were heroic, anyone could see that now: wounded in the act of self-defense. But defending against whom?

She sank to the floor. Her skirt smelled of decay. That dirt clod in her pocket.

“You okay in there?” Naomi called through the door.

She found her voice somehow. “Yeah, sure, everything’s fine.”

But that was a lie. P.J. was going to testify.

Naomi made her a cup of instant cocoa. They sat next to each other on the sofa in the suite’s main room. Jude settled into the folds of the voluptuous terry robe and watched Naomi touch up the white tips of her fingernails. The night might have been having a slumber party.

With as much nonchalance as she could muster, she reached for the newspaper on the side table. What had that reporter said in his exposé on Rudy?

But Frisch’s door swung open. He emerged wearily, blotting his brow with a handkerchief. Sweat circles darkened his armpits, charcoal dusted his chin: late-afternoon stubble. Seeing Jude, he stopped abruptly.

“Ah, Ms. Hazelden,” he said. He looked her up and down as if he might comment on her attire, but let out a long, aggrieved sigh. “Did you tell her?” he asked Naomi.

“Thought it would be better coming from you.”

“You’re right.” He pulled up a chair.

Jude bit the inside of her cheek, a chunk of moist flesh. She was ready to bolt again, if that’s what was necessary—to flee down the stairs in this robe and leggings, barefoot, an entirely different kind of spectacle than she had ever been before.

“It’s Victoria Caspar,” Frisch said.

Jude swallowed; her hand rose to her throat. “No!” she said. That liver-gray mark.

Frisch narrowed his eyes, a freakish reminder of Rudy. “Not that,” he said. “Don’t worry, she hasn’t offed herself. Nothing that simple.”

The suspense was intolerable; her body was falling and tumbling, though completely immobile. Nothing could break a fall that wasn't really happening.

"She's recanted," Frisch said simply.

It was Naomi's turn to sigh. She massaged her temples in delicate circles.

"She's what?" Jude asked.

"Recanted. Taken it back. She claims her story was a lie."

"A lie!"

"A fabrication."

Jude stared at him, hoping he would start to grin. A kidder. Just like her dad.

Okay, Mr. Frisch, this has gone far enough...

"But what about ..." she hardly knew where to begin "... what about the lawsuit, her dad?"

"Here—probably the easiest thing is for you to read this. It went out over the AP wire at 5 p.m. The office faxed it to us as soon as they picked it up." He handed her several sheets of slick paper. "Fortunately, we've got our own fax lines here, or it would have come across the hotel's front desk."

"Norm, all the reporters must already know about this, anyway."

"So *why*—" he growled—"why do we have to learn about it *after* the fact? This absolutely fries me—says I was 'unavailable for comment'! Goddamn AP bureau has my private cell phone on its speed dial, last time I checked."

"C'mon, Norm—you were in court. Besides, what kind of comment could you have made?"

"DON'T try to calm me down, Naomi! I am going to fully exercise my right to be totally fucking pissed."

Jude smoothed the papers on her lap. Everyone was watching—Frisch, Naomi, the entire staff. She lifted the first sheet.

Sex Abuse 'Victim' Recants Memories Were Implanted, Woman Claims

SAN MATEO—A Redwood City psychiatric nurse, who three years ago won a \$700,000 judgment against her father for sexually abusing her as a child, has recanted her testimony.

Victoria Caspar, 48, claimed in an interview today that her memories of abuse were implanted by psychotherapists.

“I was vulnerable and just believed everything they told me,” said Caspar, whose case had been a landmark decision for delayed-memory trials across the state.

“I just hope my family can forgive me,” she said.

“I can’t say how glad we are to have her back,” said Caspar’s father, Wayne Harrison Kearney, 74, a retired contractor in Daly City.

Caspar said she began to suspect her memories were false when she saw a television talk-show two months ago featuring women who had recanted their sex-abuse allegations.

“But the clincher,” she said, “was reading Jeremy Beebe’s book. I saw myself on every page.”

Beebe, a sociology professor at the University of California at Davis, is a nationally renowned cult expert. His latest book, “Brainwashed! — Implanted Memories in the ’80s” claims that “recovered-memory therapy shares many fundamental structural elements in common with systematic brainwashing.”

Beebe is scheduled to testify Monday at a high-profile sex-abuse trial in Santa Juanita County. Dallas Early, a prominent Dunning attorney who stands accused of sexual abuse, has hired Beebe as an expert witness for the defense.

Coincidentally, Caspar’s attorney, Norman Frisch...

“I should have known about this.” Frisch sprang to his feet as if launching into an objection. He stalked to the window and peered down the front of the building, the side where Jude had seen the television vans. “I cannot stand being blindsided.”

“But how could you have known?” Naomi asked.

“Naomi! Don’t be naive.” He bounded back and snatched the papers from Jude, waving them dramatically. “Look at the timing of this—it goes out over the wire on Friday, close of business—Friday! With Beebe on deck for Monday! The judge gets to mull this over—ALL weekend. Is this a *coincidence*? Doesn’t this look the least bit suspicious to you? Don’t we get paid to be psychic about bullshit like this—to at least have a hunch they have something like this up their sleeve?”

Naomi walked up to him, placed one elegant hand on his shoulder and with the other, took the papers. “You’re absolutely right, Norm. It looks dirty as hell. But there was no way to anticipate this. Now we have to be psychic? Give me a break. Besides, you *have* to calm down. Why don’t you rave for about five more minutes—” she

looked at her watch “—and then we can sit down and figure out what we’re going to do.”

Frisch laughed explosively, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Isn’t she a miracle?” he asked Jude, patting Naomi on the cheek. “Okay, Ms. Tan. You have broken the spell. Let’s get down to business. You win.”

He sat down again.

Jude shrank back, offended by his sudden good humor. There was nothing to laugh about. She picked up the fax sheets from the table, where Naomi had laid them, and stared at the first page again, her eyes returning to the sentence that made the most sense: *I was vulnerable and just believed ...*

“Don’t take it personally, Jude,” Frisch said. “It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Why would I take it personally?” Victoria had already abandoned her, fled from her as if avoiding a disease. How much more personal could it get?

Frisch leaned forward, scratching his stubble thoughtfully. “I hate to say it, but this looks rather suspiciously like Victoria has been colluding with the defense team. The timing of this ‘announcement’ is more than a little uncanny. Now, I’m not saying they necessarily paid her—”

“Paid her!”

“If they did, it would have to be a truckload of cash. Even after my percentage, she walked away from that judgment with almost half-a-million, and she says right here—” he tapped the papers; they rattled in Jude’s hands “—she’s going to give all that money back to her dad. So, to make it worth her while, they’d have to give her enough to cover that, *plus* the humiliation of publicly backing down.”

“Maybe she believes it,” Jude murmured. She looked toward the window, half-expecting (wishing?) to see the gnarled branches of a pepper tree outside.

“Believes what?” Naomi asked.

“Believes she was wrong.”

“Oh, no—not gonna go there!” Frisch scooted closer. “This is *exactly* what they want—to weaken your resolve. It’s going to be hard enough for you to hear that nimrod

Beebe on the stand. Believe me—I've gone toe-to-toe with him before and he is one scary *brujo*." He cast an eager glance at Naomi. "Guess I'm one to talk, huh?"

Naomi rolled her eyes. "Get over yourself, Norm. You were saying..."

"Sorry, I'm still a little pumped." He rubbed his face with both hands, pulled his tie off and tossed it on the table. "I honestly don't know what they could have offered her to make this happen, but it must have been good. But don't take it personally! And don't start thinking that she actually believes anything she's said."

"But it says right here—" Jude flipped to the second page "—she heard about Dr. Beebe because of my trial, and that's what caused her to read his book."

"For all we know, Eva Cruz gave her the book. FedExed her an autographed copy. She may have even introduced her to Beebe. He would love Victoria's story. It's just the kind of thing that feeds his fire. Thorazine—" he peered at Jude "—if you didn't already know about that, it's right there in black and white—bottom of page two. Reconstructive Thorazine Therapy, RTT. That would definitely make his day. Excuse my French, but Professor Beebe would absolutely beat his meat over exactly that kind of thing."

Jude winced. That would be one phrase for a certain activity wouldn't it? A phrase Rudy himself might use—with a snickering sort of pride.

Frisch frowned. "Sorry! But it's not much of an exaggeration. It wouldn't surprise me if Victoria was the definitive case-study in his next best-seller. She does have a penchant for being in the spotlight ... " His voice trailed off.

The entire suite had fallen silent. All the clerks and paralegals had stopped what they were doing and had been listening to every word.

Frisch slowly turned and looked at the youthful faces. "You guys are obviously not reading the fine print in your contracts," he scolded. "If you're going to eavesdrop, you have to at least *pretend* you're doing something else."

A plump, sweet-faced intern with tortoise-shell glasses stepped toward one of the shredders. "Want me to drop that in here, Mr. Frisch," she asked, grinning, holding her hand out for the AP story.

"Not a chance, Edie. I'm having this framed."

“Norm, maybe we should talk in private.” Naomi lifted her chin towards his room.

He stood, planting his hands on his hips, and addressed the entire staff. “Heads up, everyone. You are hereby sequestered! You can pretend you’re a jury. This will come in handy when you actually have to face one, one day. Let me make this explicit: nobody leaves our floor—or rather floors. The entire third and fourth floors are now entirely ours. Plenty of rooms, in other words, for each of us to have our own space. Sleeping alone, though, is not mandatory—” he mock-frowned at two clerks, who were exchanging glances “—but staying put for the duration *is*, which hopefully will be no more than four or five days. If you venture out of our space, you will be consumed alive by media sharks, and you will also be fired. Any questions?”

“Fired?” one of the clerks asked. He was looking at Naomi, apparently expecting her to provide the answer he desired. She returned his look, however, with cool indifference, suggesting his best course might be to shut up and listen.

“We’re entrenching,” Frisch continued. “You all heard the situation. This case has taken a complete left turn, and I want no one having any chance encounters with the press. I want no one talking to any reporters on the phone. I want—”

“But we won’t say anything!” Edie interrupted.

“Of course you won’t.” Frisch smiled paternally, as if he might pat her on the head. “Because you’re staying here. The great and powerful Oz has spoken.” He turned to Jude as his staff turned back to their tasks. “You should stay here, too.”

“Me?”

“I don’t know how you got up here without being waylaid. If you try to leave, they’ll swarm over you like gutter rats. If you think it’s been a challenge getting in and out of the courtroom—well, they’ve got something juicy now, something to bleed for all it’s worth. There are at least half a dozen TV vans out there—”

“Half a dozen? There were only two when I came up!”

“See what I mean. How the hell did you get past them anyway?”

She told Frisch about fleeing the *Bee* reporter (without mentioning the book in his bag), her evasive tactics in the car lot, up the back stairs.

“And she took quite a spill in the park,” Naomi added. “Completely trashed her clothes.”

Frisch whistled. “I do admire enterprise, but that son of a bitch Aguilar must have shadowed you for an hour. Lucky for all of us, he apparently didn’t have this latest news bulletin owing to the fact he was snuffling at your heels. I would’ve hated for you to have heard about Victoria from him.”

With a certain tenderness, he touched Jude’s sleeve.

“I’m really glad you’re here with us. This has become a very volatile situation. We need to carefully control the variables.”

Wide-eyed, Jude nodded. This was so wise, but also so unfortunate. Frisch had no idea what some of the variables were.

“Speaking of volatility—” he glanced at his watch “—we’re holding a news conference downstairs in half an hour.”

Jude wrapped the robe tighter around her and, miming refusal, took a giant step backwards.

Frisch shook his head reassuringly. “Not to worry, you merely need to stand off to the side with Naomi and hope the cameramen don’t train their handi-cams on her to the exclusion of everything else. Wear something *ultra*-conservative, would you, Ms. Tan?”

She tapped her foot impatiently. “I do know the drill, Norm.”

But Jude had a brainstorm. “I don’t have any clothes!” she announced, holding wide her arms to demonstrate the capaciousness—the sumptuous inappropriateness—of Naomi’s man-sized robe.

Frisch eyed Naomi. Naomi scanned the room. “Alice,” she called. A tall, athletic-looking girl stopped typing at her computer and swiveled around. Naomi beckoned her, and Alice crossed the room. She moved her long limbs in a Nordic skiing sort of motion. “Stand here,” Naomi instructed, positioning Alice to face the door. She guided Jude to stand back-to-back with her. They were more or less the same height.

“You are a wizard,” Frisch said to Naomi. “A genius. The very heartbeat of this enterprise, without whom—”

But before he could finish, Naomi actually laughed.

* * *

“I thought we were entrenching,” Jude complained. They were descending to the lobby in the elevator.

“We are,” Frisch assured her. “This will be a statement, no questions.”

She plucked at the boxy blazer on her shoulders, the pleated trousers hanging from her hips. Alice had graciously shown her a closetful of sharp-edged, mannish clothing. Bigger-boned than Jude, her clothes were almost a full size too large.

The elevator door rattled open into a blaze of white confusion: a crush of people, banks of lights, whirring cameras, shouted questions. There was hardly room to step forward from the safety of the elevator.

Frisch punched the “door open” button with his thumb then stood motionless, blocking the crowd’s access to Naomi and Jude. He said nothing. The commotion died down, several people moved back. But not far enough.

“Look,” he said, very quietly. “If you don’t make way for us, we’re going back up. I’m not going to muscle through this crowd. I’m not going to have you manhandling my client. You will clear a path to where I’m going to speak, and you will stay out of that path. Understood?”

The reporters edged further back, a wave receding. Frisch stepped from the elevator, taking Jude by the arm. Naomi took the other. They proceeded across the lobby, where a podium had been erected on a platform. Cameras flashed; the acrid press of bodies gave off a brassy smell. But the crowd maintained its distance.

And there was Terry Aguilar, stationed near the podium, scrawling in his notepad and glancing at Jude—then noticing Naomi. He paused to take her in, appraising her with undisguised appreciation. He even wagged his head slightly, as if to say *man oh man oh MAN...* Jude felt a needling of jealousy—when had anyone ever looked at her like that? Okay, so it had happened, but never when she was just being herself. She had to be gussied up or otherwise twisted beyond recognition to conform to someone else’s fantasy. Boys did not lust for her; they smirked, as though her natural inferiority conferred upon them the right of first refusal, proprietary rights. Naomi, though, could command an army of barbarians. And Jude would accept this as a gift, for now.

Between Frisch's showmanship and Naomi's allure, she might hope to fade to sheer transparency in front of this crowd. She ducked her head and matched her stride to Frisch's.

Frisch stepped to the podium, which was somewhat too tall for him. Impetuously, he bounced on the balls of his feet, just once, then stepped around in front of the stand, leaving nothing between him and his audience. Jude stayed as far back as possible, leaning into Naomi and simultaneously wishing she had the strength to stand apart. Yet they were a team; they might have been the women behind Frisch—literally and figuratively—the politician on the stump, with his wife and ... who could Jude be? The alien adopted orphan child.

From this height, she could see that almost half the reporters were women. The crowd claimed every inch of floor space the lobby had to offer. Under the streetfront windows, people stood on chairs. One cameraman had his own stepladder. This was a different creature, entirely, from the clutch of reporters rushing at them on the courthouse steps. At least a hundred restless bodies were jockeying for position; the klieg lights baked the air to roasting.

Everyone was sweaty, their faces shone. Jude worried she would leave an underarm smell on Alice's clothes. Frisch, though, was the exception—he had showered twenty minutes before, shaved while dictating a memo, put on a fresh suit and now looked ready for a before-dinner cocktail.

"Ladies and gentleman," he began, and the crowd surged slightly forward. "As stated in the media advisory you all received late this afternoon, I'm prepared to make a statement on behalf of my client. A full news conference will take place at a later, more appropriate, time. Let me begin by saying—"

"Mr. Frisch, can you comment on the significance of Victoria Caspar's announcement?" a man in wire-rimmed spectacles asked.

Frisch adjusted his tie irritably. He looked down at the man and addressed him directly. "For those of you too green to know the distinction, this is not an open press conference. I am making a statement, is that clear?" He paused, giving the man a chance to nod. Other heads nodded, too. "Excellent. I'm obviously going to address

exactly the issue at hand, but *not* in answer to your question, sir. No more interruptions.”

He glanced back at Jude as if they had arranged this in advance—remember, his look suggested: this next bit is for you. The press can have it, if that’s what it wants, but this is truly yours and yours alone, my gift to you.

“As you all know, Victoria Caspar is my former client,” he began again, “and I can assure you that her perplexing announcement has no bearing whatsoever on the legal merit of her case. Whatever her reasons for choosing to recant her story, they nevertheless do not negate the findings of the San Mateo County judiciary. The evidence in her case went far beyond the mere recollection of events, and the court handed down a decision consistent with that evidence. I have not spoken with Mrs. Caspar in several months, therefore I have no personal insight as to how she reached this mystifying and illogical conclusion.”

He began to pace, warming up. Several reporters strained to hold microphones and tape recorders high above their heads.

“In fact, the last time I spoke with Mrs. Caspar was when she brought Jude Hazelden to my office in San Francisco to meet me.” He extended his arm toward Jude. Several heads turned to follow the gesture, but not many. The crowd had grown unnaturally still, intent upon his every inflection. “*In fact*,” he repeated, “Mrs. Caspar arranged that meeting specifically so that Ms. Hazelden could avail herself of my expertise in recovered-memory litigation. A satisfied customer, you might say. Word-of-mouth referral.

“Be that as it may—and even though she and Ms. Hazelden were supposedly good friends in the past, Ms. Hazelden has not heard from Mrs. Caspar in several weeks, and this announcement comes as a complete surprise to us all.”

He folded his arms, shook his head disapprovingly. “Where has Victoria Caspar been when Ms. Hazelden has most needed her support? She has dropped out of sight—peculiar behavior, you might agree, for the person most instrumental in convincing Ms. Hazelden to pursue legal justice. We have to ask ourselves, can it be mere coincidence that Mrs. Caspar has suddenly become ‘acquainted’ with an author who is scheduled to testify in Ms. Hazelden’s trial—an author who is a sociologist, by the way, and *not* a

psychologist. Remarkable, isn't it, that Mrs. Caspar claims this very author has turned her head around? How and when, exactly, did she learn of this author? What, exactly, is her acquaintanceship with him? These are the kinds of questions troubling us—and we hope, ladies and gentlemen, that they are also troubling you.”

He put his arms behind his back, parade rest, looking down at the earnest note-taking going on below him. A woman's tape recorder snapped off and she scrambled to flip the tape. Cameras continued to flash.

“In the meantime, though—” he spoke slowly now, ensuring that each word might be captured for posterity “—we have continued confidence in our suit against Dallas Early and anticipate a favorable decision sometime next week. That's all for this evening,” he concluded.

But not quite. “Now if you'll excuse us—” he bent from the waist slightly, the suggestion a bow “—we will be adjourning to Reynard's for dinner.”

“Reynard's!” someone exclaimed. The crowd bobbed forward.

The woman with the tape recorder fumbled and dropped her little machine.

“Returning to the scene of the crime, Mr. Frisch?” Terry Aguilar called out.

Fury shot up Jude's spine. “You fucker,” she said under her breath.

But Naomi heard her, pulled her closer. “Shhh—they might hear you. Don't mind anything they say; it's just their job. Norm can handle it.”

“What *they* say?” Jude whispered from the side of her mouth. “I mean *him*.” She cut her eyes at Frisch, who was raising his palms, quieting the crowd.

“Sorry to spring that on you,” Frisch said. He was driving his Lexus. Jude, in the passenger seat, was turned so completely to the side he was obliged to speak to her back. She distracted herself by detesting the smell of the calfskin upholstery. It reminded her of Dallas' bomber jacket, but also suggested something unpleasant about Frisch.

“You never would have agreed if I'd told you about it in advance—am I right?”

“Why should I agree?” She said this loud enough for them to hear but still refused to turn around.

Naomi leaned forward from the back seat. “This is a terrific strategy,” she assured Jude. “The press will eat this up.”

“It’s like aikido,” Frisch added. “Flipping the opponent’s momentum to your advantage.”

“*Your* advantage,” Jude said. She looked down at her hands, which seemed tacked onto the cuffs of Alice’s creamy blouse. Another clash of opposites, the throwing together of things that didn’t belong; in this case, a Frankenstein effect: her disfigured hands, someone else’s respectable, chiana-clad arms. Just as she was tacked onto Frisch and Naomi. The deformed appendage to their terrific strategy. Without which the strategy would not exist.

“YOUR advantage,” she repeated, braver now and sitting up straight, looking forward through the windshield. Downtown Dunning, such as it was, slid by in the January dark. The route into town from Madrona had gone right past Rudy’s, but they had already passed his house. She had not been paying attention. They were turning left onto Oak Street and would soon be passing beneath the verdegris arch. Opportunism *Enshrined*. That would be her contribution, an embellishment of P.J.’s revision. A re-revision, in fact. And that was the name of the game, wasn’t it? To be the revisionist with the last word.

“Nooooo,” Frisch crooned, “*Our* advantage. Yours.” They were slowing for the cobblestone section, one of restoration touches Josie had most treasured. The Lexus barely registered the irregularity in the road. “This is a little taste of theater, gives them a bigger hook for the story. It’s not enough to simply refute the opposition—then all you get is ‘he said, she said’ kind of coverage. This hands them the human-interest angle on a platter, almost guarantees they’ll spin this mess in our favor.”

He gave her a long look; the car seemed to be driving itself. “You know, I’d never try this if I thought you couldn’t handle it. You’ve come a long, long way, Jude.”

A month ago, even a week ago, she might have blushed at this praise, might have fallen a little further in love with him for being so gallant. But that was then, when she had been eager for every scrap that came her way. Somehow, in the meantime, scraps had grown proportional, exactly as unsatisfying as they should be.

She waited, not blushing. He would say more.

“Look at it this way,” he went on, “how can they not be sympathetic when they see you in that sleazy joint? I know this is the last place you want to go, much less

eat—but if you’re uncomfortable, ill at ease, so much the better. Know what I’m saying?”

“Controlling the variables,” Jude mused, knowing precisely what he was saying—and also what he was omitting. *She* was a variable.

Frisch laughed. “At this point, we’re *inventing* the variables, Ms. Hazelden.”

She looked at him, astounded how wrong he could be. She looked at Naomi, too. Both were smiling, exhilarated.

They apparently believed their own PR. As Frisch himself might say.

The media contingent, or at least part of it, had arrived ahead of them. Human shapes milled below the crimson cursive lettering: *Reynard’s*. White light suddenly flooded the parking lot as the Lexus pulled in.

“Look as dignified as you can, stay loose,” Frisch instructed. “We’re not saying a thing; we’re just pushing through and going to our table, and any of our friends out there who are willing to pay for dinner will probably follow us inside. Whatever you eat will probably end up on the 11 o’clock news, so no slurping your spaghetti.” He raised an admonishing finger, ostensibly in jest.

She was unamused. “I’m not eating anything.”

“Well, you can at least have a drink.”

“I don’t drink.”

But he was exiting the car, then jogging around to Jude’s door to open it.

Wedge between Frisch and Naomi once more, she passed through the crush of reporters, and they entered a warm vestibule. Gas lamps flickered. Wainscoting ran all around. The walls had a velvety texture, scarlet and rose brocade, reminiscent of the dewy rose inside that paperweight. Her mother had surely discovered it by now. Had she tossed it in the trash a second time? Had she even recognized it?

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Frisch whispered hoarsely. “Vintage whorehouse, top to bottom.”

He leaned towards a barrel-chested man who was watching them intently. Frisch slipped him a bill, spoke to him quietly, and the man began to clear everyone else from the immediate area.

“No seating right now,” Jude could hear him saying. A hostess in a tight silvery dress signaled them to follow her.

The vestibule opened into a cavernous, high-ceilinged room. Chandeliers gave off weak salmon-colored light. None of it had been familiar until now. There had been too much commotion, confusion, but she now began to recognize details. Each table was lit by a candle, cupped in red glass. The effect was a seance sort of ambiance—a “Pit and Pendulum” gloominess, exactly as she recalled it. The hostess, ahead of them, seemed to be swimming in slow motion, submerged in dark twilight.

She showed them to a semi-circular booth. Naomi slid in, but Jude hesitated. The burnished upholstery—fake or real leather? a question Frisch might ask—seemed like a hand in which she was expected to sit. She feared the feel of it under her thighs. Even though she was not wearing a miniskirt this time. Alice’s trousers would shield her.

“I don’t want to be here,” she said to Frisch.

“Check out the bar,” he replied, cocking his head toward the far end of the room. The press had apparently congregated in the lounge. “We have a captive audience.”

“So wouldn’t it look even better for me to leave? Like I can’t handle it? You said if I looked uncomfortable—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know what I said. But trust me on this. Have I ever steered you wrong?” He squeezed her upper arm with intimate insistence, a caress.

The smoky half-light made him look years younger. His smile curved attractively. She had never allowed herself to notice the resemblance to P.J.—both of them small but imposingly large somehow, hawk-eyed, buoyantly arrogant, bold to the point of extravagance. P.J. may have idolized Dallas, but he was vastly smarter, quicker on his feet. He would become Frisch one day. She hated and loved him. Frisch. No, P.J.

Confused, she sat down. The upholstery creaked, the chill of its surface penetrating her clothes. With a hard quick shiver, she recalled how clammy it had been against her bare shoulders, the backs of her legs. In that trappy get-up, her skin had stuck to the booth.

It had stuck to something else, too. But not in this tawdry restaurant, not anywhere in the vicinity of Dallas. It had been months later, more than a year, when she had wriggled into that outfit again (for the second and very last time), and another sort

of stickiness ensued. She had put that costume on for P.J. He had peeled it off. Her skin had stuck to his.

There must have been intercourse, yes? Frisch had asked the right question, but about the wrong person. (Well, who knew? She may have done this with Dallas, too, maybe dozens of times, so defiled and degraded the memories had been cordoned off forever.) *Yes*, she had responded, she did seem to recall: he had flung his weight against her, his breathing had been ragged, a searing spike had stabbed the very center of her being. He, meaning P.J.—though this detail she had not supplied, and she was not about to offer it now. In any event, it had happened just once. In any event, who could picture such a thing? It hadn't even occurred to Frisch to quiz P.J. on this topic—not a single question in that three-hour deposition: Just out of curiosity, mister suave and natty young law student, who obviously aspires to be as incomparably hot as I am (best of luck!)—have you ever, on any occasion whatsoever, been in—that is to say, *inside*—the plaintiff's pants?

Frisch scooted into the booth beside her. His thigh nudged hers, though he didn't seem to notice. He was asking the waitress if the bar had Glen Livett; he took a set of menus from her hands. "Drinks?" he asked Jude and Naomi.

"Vodka rocks," Naomi said.

"Water." Jude shifted closer to Naomi, away from Frisch's leg. "Perrier," she amended, hoping to sound somewhat more sophisticated. "With lime."

Frisch handed her a menu. It was huge, leather-bound. She concealed herself behind it. She tried to read it. Specialties of the house: t-bone steak, surf and turf, prime rib. Meat, meat, meat. Meat on the bone. Beating his ...

"Think I'll have the carnivore extravaganza," Frisch mused, as if reading part of her mind.

But only the most accessible part. She hoped. She pressed her finger against a stain on her menu, as if that might be her choice; the waitress would return and she would point to the splotch. "I'll have this," she would say. The same color and shape as the shit-brown ring on Rudy's tie, the day he had primed himself so anxiously for Josie's return.

Priming himself . . . she could not avoid the connotations . . . priming his pump, Rudy would no doubt say with caustic glee. Priming away as a little-boy P.J. stood behind him in the doorway, eyes popped wide like popcorn exploded. Yet another version of P.J. that Frisch had failed to imagine. Even Jude herself hadn't known he had existed till today. And very likely he did not. This had to be an illusion, a distortion, a wicked hallucination, *implanted*—yes!—by the defense team. All that garbage from her mother's mouth about her father's appetites.

But then there was that book.

Jude snapped the menu shut. She did NOT know what had actually happened. They might be lying, every one of them, colluding; no one could be trusted. She noticed the candles pulsing on each table, a quavering heartbeat for each party, glazing the tips of every nose and chin a fiendish red.

"This looks like hell," she said.

Naomi, nodding, touched up her lipstick. "My sentiments exactly."

Frisch leaned back, put his arm across the top of the booth, reaching toward Jude but not quite touching her—almost exactly as Dallas had done. Except Dallas' fingertips had trailed across her shoulders. She could feel his coarse touch as if it were happening now. This much was irrefutable. That had happened. It was true.

* * *

Jeremy Beebe was a caricature of an insect, Jude decided—a praying mantis in an ill-fitting suit. His aviator glasses magnified his eyes. His whiny voice might be a siren song to another praying mantis, but to human ears it was like a penny nail scratched across glass.

Or at least it was to Jude. She was determined to detest him. It helped her manage her nausea, its attendant waves of heat and chill. She felt dizzily out of control, as though her body might split down the middle, allowing the nastiest substance imaginable to spill out.

The voice whined on, the perfect accompaniment to the speaker's juvenile appearance. He looked to be seventeen, though she knew he was close to thirty. On the

videotape of his deposition, he had seemed to be a fully formed adult, making this regression even more bizarre. And yet: that stalk of a neck, the cowlick springing from the back of his head—he might have been the president of the high-school Dungeons & Dragons society, not an accomplished Ph.D., a full professor. “Cult maven,” the papers had proclaimed him. He had enrolled at Cornell at sixteen.

Boy Wonder, Frisch preferred to call him—the trial would ultimately hinge on the Boy Wonder’s expert testimony, and Frisch’s subsequent dismantling of it. Anticipating the glorious challenge just ahead, he seemed to have forgotten that another boy, a different kind of expert, would follow.

“Where and when did you complete your doctorate?” Eva Cruz was asking.

She stood far back from the witness box, a study in monochrome—beige suit, beige shoes, palomino hair swept into a bun. Compared to her walking-stick witness, she was impressively substantial, but oddly adolescent this morning, too. As if Jeremy Beebe’s age-regression were contagious, she had begun to fidget in a distracted-schoolgirl manner, patting her bun, even squeezing it, as she asked him the most basic introductory questions. Location, education, occupation. She stepped behind her table as if bashful, then stepped back out again.

“If she cooked up that Victoria intrigue,” Naomi whispered, “she seems to have lost her nerve.”

“Way out of her league,” Frisch whispered back. “Beebe will strike at anything that moves.”

Jude balled her hands into fists and pressed them into her stomach. She was wearing another of Alice’s pantsuits, pearl gray. The jacket pocket bulged. Inside was the grassy chunk of dirt, which she had retrieved from its hiding place under Naomi’s bathroom sink. It would be her good-luck charm today—the kind of luck you willed, not the kind that just happened (like Rosie’s). But luck wasn’t with her so far. Everything was proceeding according to plan. Dr. Beebe would bask in his moment in the sun, just as Mary Frances had; he would painstakingly detail and defend his counter-theory. Frisch would or would not obliterate him. And then the final witness, P.J., would appear.

Perhaps if she threw up, it would cause some kind of delay. The clenching of her stomach suggested this as a possible plan, but each time it seized and threatened to expel its contents, she stared even harder at Beebe. She nudged the dirt clod and told herself she would turn the pocket inside-out and dump the graveyard crumbs as soon as today was over. But it could never be over. Ever. The insect man must whine on and on, *ad infinitum*, world without end.

Question after question, Eva Cruz was establishing his credentials, and Jeremy Beebe, rather astonishingly, seemed to take offense at this. Why should a prodigy, a genius of his magnitude be bothered with such a pedestrian line of inquiry? his irritable tone implied. Yes (could there be any doubt?), he was an internationally recognized expert in brainwashing theory. Yes, he had deprogrammed several newsworthy cult inductees, including a congressman's son—for which he attained a certain (inevitable, rightful) notoriety. Deprogramming? In layman's terms, it was the systematic replacement of one belief system with another. (To the benefit of all humanity) he had become acquainted with so-called recovered-memory "therapy," and instantly recognized the similarities to cult initiation. He went on to develop a "false memory" theory, and, in the last two years, had become the most sought-after defense witness in trials just like this.

For this trial, he had extensively interviewed Kat Rose, *not* Judy Hazelden. His expertise concerned the *process* in question, he confirmed—not the multitude of specific psychological disorders that inevitably result from exposure to this process. After all, he was not a psychologist (he grimaced at Frisch, revealing his incisors, presumably a smile). His field was psychological *influence*, the ways in which belief systems can be bred by various techniques. And unbred.

Jude tried to imagine him in the same room with Kat—disconsolate Kat, as button-eyed as any of her stuffed animals, warding off this intruder. Not a praying mantis, though. Something with a stinger. She would cower as he pestered her into submission.

"And having interviewed Miss Rose," Eva Cruz was saying, "you found she is not properly licensed to practice certain techniques, isn't that correct?"

"No!" Jeremy Beebe spluttered, incredulous. "That's not what I concluded."

Eva Cruz's ears turned pink.

"That may be how you and your client need to position it in your complaint to the American Psychological Association, but I take the higher ground. My conclusion is that Miss Rose was using techniques that *no one* should be practicing—particularly with someone who is disturbed. And you don't have to be a psychologist" (another wretched smile at Frisch) "to characterize someone who self-mutilates as disturbed. Using techniques such as hypnotic visualization and that charade called 'rage work' with someone this vulnerable almost guarantees their response will mold to the agenda of the authority figure—i.e., the therapist. The results are inevitable in a case like this. Miss Rose hangs out a shingle announcing her specialty: the 'healing of childhood trauma.' Miss Hazelden, as suggestible a subject as can be imagined—"

Frisch was ready for this moment. "Objection, your honor," he called out with verve, accidentally but sharply elbowing Jude as he rose to his feet. "Let's not forget Professor Beebe has not interviewed Miss Hazelden. This is purely conjecture on his part."

"Sustained," the judge said. "Please confine your remarks to your area of expertise."

"But Judge Salazar," Jeremy Beebe complained, sounding almost like an adult. "There was no need to interview her. Her behavior fits a classic profile."

The judge wagged his head. "I'm not sure I'm entirely clear on this. Explain to me again why you did not interview the plaintiff."

Jeremy Beebe began flipping through a binder, and called the judge's attention to an exhibit, which both attorneys turned to as well. Eva Cruz pointed to a page; Dallas put on his reading glasses and bent over it. Jude noticed him with a shudder of surprise. She had forgotten all about him, had completely neglected to worry about how close he was sitting, where he might be looking, what he might be thinking. Other worries had crowded into the foreground.

She poked at the lump in her pocket and wondered if it might be crumbling. Just like everything else. The trial wasn't even about *him* anymore—she could see that now; it wasn't even about her. They had both submitted to the court.

“This is an index of behaviors typical of individuals likely to fall prey to cults—” Jeremy Beebe was explaining “—or *other* persuasive influences. There are almost two hundred indicators, weighted in relation to each other, which provide a profile of suggestibility. I was able to run such a profile on Miss Hazelden, simply by relying on documents filed in this case—her deposition, Mr. and Mrs. Early’s depositions, Dr. Gahaghan’s report, etc. Look at some of these items: only child or oldest child, lack of friends, more than twenty percent under- or overweight, alcoholic parent, extreme introversion or extroversion, self-destructive behavior, etcetera. Anyone could have filled out this profile and come up with a similar result, using information publicly and readily available.”

Jeremy Beebe had calmed considerably. His manner was magnanimous.

“A more precise assessment could have been made with a full interview,” he concluded, “but my purpose was to establish that Miss Hazelden had exceeded a certain threshold of suggestibility, not to establish how far she had gone beyond that. And I was able to do so without an interview—which, I think we would all agree—would have been unnecessarily stressful for Miss Hazelden.”

Frisch chortled. “How considerate of you!”

“Mr. Frisch ... ” the judge warned.

“Excuse me, your honor, but that kind of grandstanding is not only disrespectful to my client, but also dishonest. Professor Beebe did not interview her out of his own concern for her welfare but because, as a sociologist, he’s not qualified to do so!”

“It would have been totally extraneous!” Spittle flew from Jeremy Beebe’s lips.

Frisch laughed.

“Order!” the judge commanded. He sat back heavily. “Gentlemen,” he said, looking from one to the other. “I’m going to have to ask you to desist.” Without waiting for either to respond, he ordered the court reporter to read back Frisch’s objection.

“ ‘This is purely conjecture on his part,’ ” the court reporter read.

“I am reversing my ruling on that,” Judge Salazar decided. “Overruled. You may proceed, Professor.”

Frisch blew air out his nose and sat down abruptly, as if punctuating a sentence. Jeremy Beebe bared his teeth again. “Where was I?” he asked.

Eva Cruz stepped cautiously forward and asked the reporter to read the lines leading up to the objection.

“Ah, yes.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, apparently recovering from this interruption, but also looking as though he were receiving some kind of transmission. He nodded to himself, evidently satisfied with the results.

“As I was saying,” he began again, “when someone as suggestible as Miss Hazelden comes under the influence of an authority figure with such an explicit agenda—who practices these kinds of manipulative techniques—the result is almost guaranteed: she will begin to ‘remember’ sexual abuse. The corollary is that there never would have been any such memories if her beliefs hadn’t been shaped in this direction. The practice of those techniques is beyond the scope of licensing. It is morally and ethically inappropriate, regardless of what the rules of the profession might allow.”

“Thank you,” Eva Cruz said, looking at her notepad, not her witness, and running a finger down the page. Her officiousness suggested a fervent desire to keep things moving. All the better to avoid another misstep with this witness.

“Let’s move onto the topic of ‘rage work,’ ” she said, glancing up, and giving her bun a final squeeze, as if for luck. “What is your opinion of that technique?”

“Mob mentality,” Jeremy Beebe sniffed. “We all remember the race riots of the ’60s—people smashing shop windows, looting merchandise, setting fires—in urban centers all over the country. Retrospective studies show that many of these people had never committed a crime of violence in their lives. No prior records—law-abiding citizens, by and large. What would cause them to behave in this way? The simple fact is indisputable: rage is *contagious*. The momentum of rage builds on itself and even a mild-mannered individual will get swept away, will pick up a stick or a rock—or a tennis racket in group therapy, for that matter. Does this mean there’s a hidden store of rage being tapped? Not at all. It simply means the individual’s identity has been subsumed by the mob.”

“Thank you,” Eva Cruz said again, clipped and crisp, apparently checking off this item on her list and moving to the next. “Your opinion, please, of ‘directed visualization?’ ”

The professor flipped a hand dismissively. “Directed is hardly the word for it! It’s white-washed, euphemistic. When you ask someone to close their eyes, breathe deeply, relax their muscles, and picture what ‘comes up for them’—textbook hypnotic technique, by the way—and you do so immediately *after* someone else has described an abusive scene—it doesn’t take much genius to predict what’s going to happen. Can there be any doubt what they’re going to see? Not cherubs and snowflakes, I can assure you. It’s like saying ‘don’t think of an elephant.’ It’s a set-up. A done deal. Garbage in, garbage out.”

“Can you explain that last phrase, please?” Eva Cruz by now had moved several feet closer to her witness, her gestures had grown smoother, perhaps the result of having completed her checklist. She now struck a confident stance, legs hip-width apart. Frisch, meanwhile, had been taking leisurely notes, but the way his jacket bunched across his shoulders, gave him away (at least to Jude): wound fast as a spring, he was coiled for release.

“It’s a basic maxim of software design,” Professor Beebe was saying, “but you can apply it to any discipline. Bad data ‘in’ results in bad data ‘out.’ Enter erroneous accounting figures into a computer, for instance, and you’ll get an erroneous report. The system itself does not discriminate—it is designed to process data, not filter faulty data from the rest (unless its function *is* to filter). In the case of purported recovered memory, we have a purported therapist like Miss Rose introducing a process for ‘exploring’ emotions at the exact moment bad data is streaming in. She gathers a room full of people, assumes a parental role—see for yourself: in my interview with her, she says she tries to ‘give them the mothering they never received’—and then, during each group session, she urges one of them to tell a story of incredible brutality, as graphically as possible, and to act out symbolic revenge. And *then* she asks the rest of the group to ‘turn their attention inward’ to see what this ‘brings up for them.’

“It’s astonishing that she or anyone else gets away with this. The technique itself is manipulative, and the timing of its application is totally consistent with classic

brainwashing tactics. Isolate the individual from her normal context (i.e., put her in group therapy), insistently suggest a worldview that attacks that normal context ('you must have been abused'), then further distress and disorient that individual through fear, peer pressure, and emotional exhaustion until she's finally and completely terrorized—and *then* invite her to supply an explanation for why she's feeling this way."

"Dr. Beebe, you have been called as an expert witness in many recovered-memory trials such as this one, isn't that correct?"

"Fourteen, to be exact."

"And, in each of these trials, you found the plaintiff's memory was tainted by this process—would that be fair to say?"

Frisch thrust himself forward, but did not rise. "Same objection as before, your honor. If the witness failed to interview any of these plaintiffs, he can't presume to speak for their memories. As a sociologist, he's not qualified to—"

"I'll rephrase," Eva Cruz interrupted, drawing herself up to her full height. "Dr. Beebe, in each of the trials in which you've been involved, you've found *the process itself* was tainted, correct?"

"Absolutely."

"No shit," Frisch muttered, the only subversive sound he had made all morning. He and Naomi, intent on the testimony, had refrained from exchanging wisecracks and reminders. Jude had been absorbed, too, in her own way. The professor, despite his arrogance, despite the fact he was insisting she had been a spineless dupe, was a consummate performer. Her nausea by now had vanished, replaced by a sinking sense of dread.

"In fact," Eva Cruz announced with a note of triumph, "doesn't your most recent research suggest that this process is so unstable that it can be predictably and successfully *reversed*?"

Naomi caught her breath. Frisch stopped writing. Alarmed by their sudden vigilance, Jude patted the lump in her pocket.

"*Proves* that it can be reversed," Jeremy Beebe corrected Eva Cruz.

"Here we go," Frisch whispered.

As if choreographed, Eva Cruz turned to receive a bundle from an assistant. She extracted from the package a hefty stack of papers.

“With the court’s permission,” she said, “the defense wishes to submit the following as exhibit 113—a galley manuscript entitled *Re-recovered—False Memories Reversed*. It’s Dr. Beebe’s latest book; it arrived just this morning from the publisher in New York.” She handed it up to the judge.

“Son of a bitch,” Frisch said, shaking his head in amazement. “A fucking book.” He stretched behind Jude, finally, to confer to Naomi. “I love that woman, you know what I’m saying? Always turning me on with little surprises.”

The judge frowned first at the manuscript, then at Frisch.

“Mr. Frisch?”

“This is news to us, your honor. We had no prior knowledge of this book’s existence, much less a chance to review it.”

He picked up his slim gold pen and slid his fingers along its surface, as if distracted by its beauty. Jude guessed he was buying time, but the gesture was provocative. We may be surprised, his lingering fingers suggested, but, well, really — how terribly significant could this book be?

“It could easily take us a day or more to properly review a manuscript of that size. No doubt its arguments are complex ... profound—” Frisch seemed to be speaking to his pen; Jeremy Beebe let out a little *huff*—“but this is the one day, of course, that Dr. Beebe has graciously made himself available for testimony. Realizing how infinitely valuable his time is, and how difficult it will be to schedule another appearance—”

Naomi tugged at his jacket. “Norm! Don’t do it!” she whispered.

Frisch lay the pen on the table and tapped it so it spun.

“Fifteen-minute recess, your honor?” he requested.

Naomi heaved a sigh. Gripping his sleeve, she led Frisch into the corridor. Jude trailed after, a tag-along sister, out of her depth. Secrets and signals. Things she did not understand. They found a secluded corner.

“I can’t believe you were going to let that in!” Naomi obviously needed a cigarette. She crossed and recrossed her arms.

“I *am* going to let it in,” Frisch said.

“But Norm—”

“Wait. Listen. How long do you suppose those galleys have been sitting on some editor’s desk in Manhattan? Why do you think they received that manuscript ‘just’ this morning? Because—” he slipped an arm through Naomi’s as if escorting her to a gala ball “—because their little PR blitz failed. We had it all figured out, didn’t we? They were going to pick the most favorable article about Victoria’s retraction, right? and enter that as an exhibit. That’s how the defense was going to introduce the recanting theme.”

Naomi stared at him, but nodded. Frisch turned to Jude as if she might back him up. “And then we’d introduce the article we liked best, yes? That *Bee* piece? Terry Aguilar really outdid himself. And I quote, ‘the ambiguous half-light of Reynard’s illuminates the darker subtext of this story: beneath even allegations of incest and abuse, the specter of legal subterfuge on the part of the defense.’ My god, that is overwriting of the highest order! Sheer poetry!” Frisch enthused. “I would have gladly paid for that! Ms. Cruz is probably wondering if I did. And she’s smart enough to see that their best coverage has been overwhelmed by ours. Which, of course, was precisely the point of our pilgrimage to Reynard’s.” He pouted at Jude in mock petulance, as if to say, *did I not insist that you must always trust me?*

“Thus,” he continued, “Ms. Cruz’s problem takes on multiple dimensions. One, she must light a candle and pray that Judge Salazar actually *ignores* any and all media coverage of cases over which he’s presiding. And two, she must now devise a new strategy for introducing the retraction theme. The solution: Jeremy Beebe’s yet-to-be-published masterpiece.”

He released Naomi, touching his palms together as if he might bow to her, his guru master. “What’s particularly cagey about this move is this: if we *don’t* let her introduce this manuscript, if we insist on taking the time to analyze it, we will seriously delay the trial. Beebe won’t have a slot on his calendar for months. Meanwhile, who knows how many more Victorias will come forward, hoping for a guest shot on Oprah?”

Who knows how soon this book will be published and what kind of publicity the esteemed professor will receive? This is a very risky, but amazingly wise move on their part. You've got to admire their chutzpah. Which calls for a balls-out response."

Naomi gave Jude a weary, conspiratorial look—*aren't we privileged to witness the male ego in its hour of glory?* this look implied. "Who better than you, Norm?" she conceded, her sense of irony restored. "And with which ball will you lead?"

Jude had never seen him so abstracted. He re-entered the courtroom with a diffident air, clutching the manuscript to his chest. As he moved up the aisle, he seemed to be concentrating on an aspect of the backmost wall, and Jude turned to follow his gaze. The crack? Was he staring at the thunderbolt crack she had noticed the very first day? It seemed to have grown deeper or longer or both, somehow more sinister, and Frisch's fixation on it confirmed its status as an omen. Just like that crack, the proceedings were about to wrench wide open and they would all fall (or leap) inside.

He was shuffling closer. A surge of adoration seized her, a sort of soul communion. Frisch, nearly unrecognizable in this diminished, humbled state, had compressed himself down to her size. A Frisch of human proportions—accessible, embraceable. Understandably overcome. He had been wrong about that book (having assigned his staff various sections to read over a three-hour break, keeping certain vital sections for himself)—his gait and posture and demeanor all announced his defeat. Whatever nugget of paydirt had hoped to find in its pages had apparently not been there.

Naomi pulled out Frisch's chair. "Sit," she ordered. He did.

Studying him, Naomi allowed her lips to twitch, but otherwise maintained a poker-face. She leaned close to Jude and whispered in her ear. "Don't be alarmed. It's all for show."

The judge's gavel rang.

Eva Cruz began again, picking up where she had left off before. Reeling off a series of questions, rapidly, precipitously, she cast several over-the-shoulder glances at Frisch, as though they might be racing and he were gaining ground. She seemed not to notice his careworn demeanor.

Dallas, too, seemed stricken with urgency. His restive movements drew Jude's attention. Tipping back in her chair, she could peripherally observe him. He hunched forward, dipping his head as if overcome but, rallying—there might still be hope!—he looked up with troubled earnestness: first toward at Eva Cruz, but then cutting a side-long glance at Frisch. Then he shook his head ruefully, as if reminding himself he knew better than to wish for the best.

Was *that* performance all for show? Who was trying to fool whom? It was a freaky hall of fun-house mirrors: this courtroom, her putative family, her life. Nothing might be what it seemed. Except, of course, the lumpy token in her pocket. With sorrow, resignation, she patted it. This witness would finish, the next would come and go, and it would all be a thing of the past. To be remembered or not.

In the meantime, though, Jeremy Beebe's voice seemed to have changed, although this was surely just one more illusion. What else could explain it—had he gone through puberty during the break? It had to be a trick. He was speaking with the seasoned authority of the professor he was, mature and understated and wise.

In his first book, *Brainwashed*, he was taking pains to explain, he had established how memories can be implanted. In his new book, *Re-recovered*, he was breaking new ground, demonstrating the tested mechanisms by which this insidious process may be reversed.

"The destruction of an implanted belief," he went on, "completely hinges on the person's *original* belief system being restored. Some kind of trigger might jar them into their previous reality—the death of a loved one, say, or a life-threatening accident. There have even been rare cases of spontaneous reversal, where a person has been simply removed from the coercive influence and placed in a supportive environment that reinforces the desired beliefs. But a reversal will *never* happen—absolutely never—if the person is not motivated. And, in most instances, the motivation must be supplied by an external source. Professional help is usually required."

Frisch had been staring at the yellow pad before him, and now began to write. He moved his pen deliberately, though—not his usual breakneck scribbling—taking his time, forming huge, block letters, all caps.

P-R-O-F-E-S-S-I-O-N-A-L H-E-L-P! he wrote.

Jude knew he had written it for either Naomi or herself, or maybe both, to see and appreciate. It was a secret code, perhaps a warning to run for cover, and her heart leapt in panic as she failed to decipher it. Grabbing the prize in her pocket did nothing to help. She was not as resigned to her fate as she hoped.

“Thus in the absence of any intrinsic motivation,” the professor was now concluding, “and without the benefit of professional assistance, Miss Hazelden will inevitably hold fast to the false belief system with which she has been so thoroughly inculcated.”

Frisch placed careful quote marks around the words he had written. He then pushed back his chair and stood with stiff reluctance, as if called upon in class but unprepared to answer.

“Doctor Beebe,” he began, very quietly, as if he wasn’t sure he had the right man. “There are so many places to begin, but let’s start with your most sweeping statements. I’d like to have the court reporter read back your testimony about the race riots in the 1960s.”

The court reporter complied. “ ‘Does this mean there’s a hidden store of rage being tapped? Not at all,’ ” she read, her mouth open for the next word.

“Stop right there,” Frisch said, rocking back on his heels. He squinted, seemingly pained by a thought. “Do you mean to suggest, Professor Beebe, that the black citizenry of United States, at that time, did not normally feel rage?”

Beebe jerked his head, a chink of anger breaking through his professorial composure. “That’s a total misconstruction of what I said. You conveniently stopped before my next statement, in which I explained that rage belongs to the mob—that individuals aren’t necessarily possessed by this rage until a mob mentality constellates. Ergo, you can’t conclude that someone feels rage by their rageful behavior.”

“*Ergo*,” Frisch said, compressing his lips, tipping just slightly onto his toes, “by focusing only on their observable behavior, you can’t possibly conclude how any of those individuals *feels*. You can’t know that the woman throwing a brick through a shop window isn’t already—”

“Allow me to cite some research for you,” Jeremy Beebe interrupted, and reeled off a list of academic studies, which Frisch generously allowed. “All of these show that

ordinary people with no history of violence will engage in violent behavior if it's modeled for them—and if they perceive a social reward.”

“Well, that's very impressive,” Frisch said. He tapped his foot on the floor, and looked down at his foot tapping, as if to make sure the parquet flooring was authentic wood and not a cheap imitation. “But it's impossible to know for certain, isn't it, what a person with ‘no history of violence’ truly feels? Isn't it true that none of those studies measured how people felt *before* anything was ‘modeled’ for them?”

“I don't see the relevance of this line of questioning!”

Frisch laughed, finally cracking his shell of reserve. “Perhaps you'd like to trade places with Ms. Cruz? Last time I checked, it was her job to make those kinds of observations.”

Judge Salazar rubbed his lip moodily, as though deciding which punishment might best fit this broach of etiquette. “Mr. Frisch, the witness' lack of cooperation does not give you *carte blanche* for ridicule,” he intoned. “Am I making myself clear? And Professor Beebe, I'm going to have to ask you to simply answer the questions. Mr. Frisch is correct, though his form is not. Your role is not to challenge the materiality of anything before the court.”

Jeremy Beebe shrugged his consent. Frisch tugged his shirtcuffs into definitive alignment. “Let me restate, your honor, in a way that goes straight to the matter at hand. You don't know, do you, Professor, whether or not the plaintiff actually felt rage prior to her therapy experience?”

“I have my opinion.”

“I don't want your opinion. I'm asking you: do you or don't you know for a fact what the plaintiff felt?”

“I don't know, but...”

“Thank you,” said Frisch.

“BUT— no matter what she was feeling, it could easily be used as fodder for the therapist's agenda.”

“Move to strike, your honor,” said Frisch. “Witness is out of order.”

Jeremy Beebe turned to the judge. “Your honor, I think this is a very important point to make and he’s not going to let me make it.” He might have been a schoolboy, tattling. His insect whine had returned.

Judge Salazar touched the stem of his eyeglasses to his lip but did not chew it. “What do you want to say to this point, Professor Beebe?”

But Frisch jumped in. “Your honor, this seems completely—”

“Mr. Frisch, allow me to remind you—because you did not want a jury, we do not have one, and therefore certain subtleties may be explored in greater depth than usual. Your request for a bench trial empowers me to entertain rather arcane points of fact, if I see fit. And that’s certainly what I’ve already done—with *your* own expert.”

Frisch lowered his chin to his breast. In contrition? Humiliation? Feigned submission? Jude could not be sure.

“Please proceed,” the judge instructed Jeremy Beebe.

“As I was saying earlier—” he took an expansive breath “—we are concerned with a fundamentally suggestible person. I grant you, it *is* possible, even probable, that Miss Hazelden felt anger before her ‘therapy’ began. The evidence shows she has always been extremely resentful towards her stepfather for splitting up her parents’ marriage. It also shows her to be a dependent, shy, and insecure young person—always has been—and thus, by any conventional measure, suggestible in the extreme.

“Take a person like that—resentful, unhappy, struggling for identity—and introduce her to a powerful ‘here’s why you feel so miserable’ thought-system, reinforced by systematic mind-control techniques, and the sequelae are inevitable. You are going to get someone who acts out rage—not diffuse, disorganized rage—focused rage, the expression of which is totally consistent with the principles of the inculcated thought-system. Rage is *expected* of her. And so is the identification of a ‘perpetrator’ toward whom she can aim it. That’s the whole point of the program. She is a product of the recovered-memory mill.”

Frisch raised his eyebrows as if to say “done yet?”—but he was looking straight at Jude, offering her one of his exasperated expressions designed to put things in perspective. Don’t give a thought to this memory-mill business ... who can take a guy like this seriously? ... sequelae? who is he kidding? ... and don’t imagine, whatever

you do, that there might also be a *legal* mill that has been molding and shaping you just as mercilessly ... that you might be a cookie-cutter product of that, as well ...

Everything slowed to a halt. Jude could see clearly, but did not know what she was seeing. The ceiling vaulted high above. The crack reached down like God's hand toward the judge and seemed to have grown new fingers; oblivious, the judge rubbed his rumpled face, as if just awakening. Naomi tensed her nails against the tabletop. Dallas—was he a product, too? doing precisely what was expected?—had aged by decades since the beginning of the trial, had nearly lost the strength to even lift his haggard head. Frisch was drawing his pen from his pocket, lifting it to his nose as if he might sniff it. But he pointed it, just for a split-second, at Jeremy Beebe, a sportsman sighting his prey, then slipped it again into his suit.

"I want to make sure I've got this right," Frisch said, implying he already had. "In the last two years, you've appeared as an expert in more than a dozen recovered-memory cases, isn't that correct?"

"Fourteen," Jeremy Beebe reminded him.

"Always for the defense."

"Yes."

"And in *all* of those cases, you've found that the plaintiff's claims were the result of what you consider to be 'mind-control techniques,' isn't that right?"

"All of them. Yes."

"Your average fee for expert testimony is approximately fifty thousand dollars—would that be in the ballpark?"

Eva Cruz had been a non-presence since her direct examination had concluded, as if her last ounce of energy had been heroically expended. But she stirred, half-rising, locking her body into an awkward L-shape. "Your honor, the expert's fee has absolutely no bearing on the matter at hand," she interjected, then sank back down. Hours, even days, might pass before she would be able to speak again.

"Judge Salazar, I'm simply establishing the fact that Professor Beebe has earned almost seven hundred thousand dollars in two years, thanks to his theory. I think the extreme profitability of this one-man false-memory industry needs to be considered."

"I object to that!" hollered Jeremy Beebe.

Frisch laughed again. Eva Cruz sighed.

The judge wagged his head. “Ladies and gentlemen, where do I begin?”

Rising completely now, Eva Cruz lifted her hand to her shoulder, but there was no hair hanging down to flip back; she adjusted her shoulder pad instead. “I apologize for my witness’ conduct,” she said. “And I hope your honor will—”

The judge, ignoring her, addressed Frisch instead. “You will refrain from provoking this witness with your attempts at devastating wit,” he said, then turned to Beebe. “And, whether he provokes you or not, Professor, no more objections. You have your specialty, the attorneys have theirs. If you’ve been in fourteen trials, you must surely have learned the rules by now. Mr. Frisch, you may proceed.”

“Thank you.” Frisch moved toward the witness box, a definite spring in his step. “Just to confirm, Professor Beebe, you charge approximately fifty thousand per trial, and, in fourteen trials in two years, you have netted seven hundred thousand dollars.”

“I have *grossed* that amount.”

“Grossed. Of course.” Frisch’s mouth puckered with mischief. The pits in his face were like a map of the world.

“And while we’re on the subject of fees, Professor Beebe,” he continued, his voice sliding into an exaggerated *oh by the way* tone, “please tell the court how much you typically charge for ‘deprogramming’ a cult victim?”

Eva Cruz roused herself completely. “Immaterial, your honor!” she cried.

A smile threatened to break fully across Frisch’s face, but he stifled it. He strode to his table and hefted the manuscript to his shoulder, turning it so the title page faced the judge. “*Re-recovered!* Exhibit 113, introduced by the defense. This book is about deprogramming—specifically about the feats of deprogramming the witness has personally performed. The fact that the author—this witness—has a vested financial interest in whether or not this deprogramming phenomenon flies is as material as it gets.”

The judge stared at Frisch for a long moment. Jude swallowed, imagining that Dallas might be swallowing, too. It was the moment she had been waiting for.

“I’m going to allow this,” the judge said finally.

“I’ll repeat the question,” Frisch offered.

Jeremy Beebe jerked his head again. “I can recall your question, sir. The price depends. But generally in the neighborhood of one-hundred-and-fifty thousand.”

“And how much—” Frisch paused, inhaling capaciously, as if inhaling the entire room; a muffled noise escaped from Eva Cruz.

“—how much did you charge for deprogramming Victoria Caspar?”

Hollow ringing silence, and then:

The dirt clod thudded to the floor, right at Frisch’s heels.

Settlement

Frisch did not like to be upstaged. Jude was discovering the exact size and proportion of that dislike. He stalked from one end of the suite to the other. His staff had wisely fled. All except Naomi, who stood at the window, holding the curtains barely aside, as if scanning for a sniper. She was making no attempt to calm him.

He hadn’t spoken for five minutes. He had done a dozen laps up and back. His breathing was noisy. But Jude was not afraid. The thing to be afraid of was gone.

It was over. She had done her part, literally rising to the occasion. Astonishingly simple, better than boiling water: she had leapt to her feet, as if *she* might object. Everyone had noticed except Frisch, who was basking in the brilliance of his showstopping question. Everyone stared, slack-jawed. Naomi attempted to drag her back to sitting. But that miraculous hand—the gashed one, the first to be sacrificed—plunged into its pocket and pulled out the crusty treasure. Caked soil and withered grass. *This has to STOP*—that had been her objection—*this will stop. NOW.*

And then the thing was airborne. And then it smashed into gratifyingly unsightly bits on the tidy parquet.

What a shame they hadn’t been there to see it: Claudia and the rest. They did enjoy a good show. But that intern in tortoise-shell glasses had instructed the guards to remove them from the spectator list. Jude had requested it the night before, even though it meant Helen would not be there. But she could no longer afford to make fine distinctions. No more pot lucks with piñatas, no more making the world safe for her sisters in survival. She had her own interests to consider.

Frisch wheeled at the far end of the suite. His jacket huddled under the coffee table, close to where he had originally tossed it on the floor. But after stepping on it once or twice in pacing up and back, he had kicked it further aside.

“I am fucking speechless!” he said. He had already said this a while back. He snorted like a horse.

Jude was still wearing the pearl-gray suit. Inside the pocket were dirt crumbs, which she pressed to dust with her fingertips. It was a matter of waiting it out, she could see. Waiting for Frisch to get a grip.

He raked his hands through his hair. “Okay,” he said, apparently gaining a modicum of control. “Okay, let me make sure I’ve got this straight—this preppy law-school punk—this Dallas wannabe, for god’s sakes—*might* have been the one to get you pregnant.” He shook his head savagely, as if this could never in a million years be true. How else could he have failed to even consider that possibility? Jude guessed it was the humiliation, more than anything—more than her outlandish behavior in the courtroom, more than her deflation of his shining moment—that made him nearly spastic with fury. That brat had been right in front of him—in *the palm of his hand*—for three full hours.

“*Might* have been, have I got that right?”

“Yes.” This is what she had told Frisch, to destroy any possibility that P.J. might testify. If she had been pregnant, P.J. was probably the one. The memory had come out of nowhere, she had lied. Something in Dr. Beebe’s testimony had triggered it.

“But it might have been Dallas, too?”

Jude shrugged. “Does it matter?” In fact, it no longer did. She had passed through some kind of portal, finding equanimity on the other side.

But Frisch was stuck in that other dimension. “Aaarrgh!” he roared. He threw his pen across the room—the glinting wing of a gilded bird. “You have perjured yourself! You said under oath that Dallas was the one! Something is up. I can smell it. I can’t believe you just magically retrieved this bit of information, at this particular point in time. You *remember* that he might have got you pregnant,” he spat this out, staccato, “I don’t get it—how can you remember that? It’s not an event, it’s not—”

“I remember what we did.” She looked away, feeling the scorch of Frisch’s gaze. Naomi still lingered at the window, but faced the room now, hands on her waist, elbows sharply akimbo, as if guarding the window from anyone leaping. But Jude wasn’t going to be jumping. That would be redundant; she had already leapt.

“It happened right around that time,” she added. “That spring.”

That March, soon after turning fourteen, she had been packing, preparing to move. The Villa Miranda home was finally ready for their occupation, and they would be abandoning Dallas’ ranch house, which they had shared for several long and lonely years. Empty boxes had surrounded her, waiting to be filled with her belongings. She opened her dresser drawers, one by one, having no idea what to pack first, and discovered a mysterious bag stuffed into the bottom drawer. It was familiar, silvery white, but she could not recall what it might contain. Tugging and pulling, she managed to wrench it free—just as P.J. barged in, just as he barged in any other time he liked. But the bag caught on a sliver. A rip opened in its side.

Out spilled the frothy bra-top.

“What’s that!” P.J. was crazy to know, eyes bugging, hands grabbing.

She tried to jam this horror back inside the bag, but he snatched it away and emptied it, all of it, onto the bed. The photo slithered out last. He seized it; his jaw dropped. “Omigod, Jude—” he couldn’t believe it “—is this *you*?” He held up the transparent stockings, the slick miniskirt. A wild grin spread across his face. “Put these on!” he insisted. She tried to grab them back, but he flung his arms around her, tackled her onto the bed. He smelled of peanut butter and crackers, little-boy grubby, but also spicy, sweaty, acrid, like a grown-up man.

“Would you do it for me? Your very best friend?” he said, and kissed her for the very first time, sloppy with saliva, dropping his pelvis into hers. “C’mon, Jude. I know you’re curious.”

She went into the bathroom. She spread the clothes on the countertop and wanted to cry. Why had she kept them? She was so plain; they made her even plainer. She could be attractive only if she put them on. Even Dallas had found her attractive in them. Now P.J. wanted to her to dress up, too, to become that other girl. If she had

thrown that bag away, he never would have guessed that she existed. And would that have been better—for him to never have shown a spark of desire?

“It only happened once,” she told Frisch, hoping to conceal her regret.

He took off one of his shoes—his shoe!—and threw it—thwack!—against the wall.

“As far as you can *remember*, it only happened once—yes? And what the fuck difference does that make anyway. Once is quite sufficient, as far as pregnancy is concerned. What exactly are you trying to say to me?”

She looked him straight in the eye. “I want to settle.”

“You want to WHAT?”

“Settle. I’ll take Dallas’ final offer.”

“What the fuck!” he exploded. “I corner their star witness into *almost* coughing up a major confession—a confession that would completely emasculate their case—but then you emasculate *me* by acting like a lunatic. And now you tell me you want to settle? This is a goddamn freak show!”

“Norm!” Naomi said.

“Fuck it, Naomi. I am not going to be reasonable. Can you believe this?”

There was no smoking in the suite, but Naomi lit a cigarette. She regarded Jude curiously, as if guessing exactly why she had finally trashed those clothes (after P.J. had finished, after he had gone whistling home on his bike, she placed the outfit in the very bottom of the garbage bin, pushing it down past bags of kitchen trash). And also why (why? why had she done it?) ... why she had saved the photograph.

“What’s not to believe?” said Naomi, exhaling.

* * *

The door brushed shut—both attorneys having just exited, reluctantly—and Jude sat alone with Dallas, directly across from him. This was a condition of the settlement: a one-on-one, just the two of them. Dallas had insisted. No private conference, no deal.

“Well, here we are,” he said. The most neutral thing that could be said.

They were on neutral turf, a conference room on the mezzanine level of the Monte Vista Hotel. Peach-tone walls, herringbone carpet, a long putty table with a dozen metal-framed chairs.

There had been a time when she had never known this kind of room existed. But after many months of convening with attorneys and enduring depositions and huddling over conference calls and being subjected to all the other machinations that had brought her exactly to this moment, she recognized this space for what it was: ideal for its purpose. Though a strange room, a room she had never entered before this moment, she felt as home here as she might feel anywhere. Which was not saying much.

And yet, everything.

She straightened so that her posture was more like his—upright, elbows on the table, hands clasped. This meant her scars were turned towards him, but that was not the point. It was just the way it was. He could look at them; he could ignore them. As he wished.

“Right,” she said. “We are here.”

Frisch had coached her—don’t say this! don’t even allude to that!—nearly hopping with anxiety and fretting that she, in her fear of facing Dallas unassisted, might give him whatever it was he really wanted (why else this private meeting?) The whole thing might be flushed in an instant, even more completely flushed than it already was. Stay calm. There was absolutely nothing she was obliged to say.

Fear? He did not understand (which was probably just as well). A natural wariness, perhaps, of prey facing predator—though which was which now? She could not be sure. More than anything, she was intrigued. She had never let her eyes rest on Dallas long enough to notice the peculiar gold flecks in his irises, the white imprint of a scar above his brow—so faint; he must have been injured as a boy.

“You’ve hurt a lot of people with this charade,” he said. “But I suppose that means nothing to you.” Though his tone was sharp, his face was weary. He waited, and when she didn’t speak, he went on. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m agreeing to this settlement, and I’m going to tell you why—but not to satisfy your curiosity. It’s for my own satisfaction.”

The only secret she hoped he would divulge was what P.J. might have said. It must have been good, if Dallas had considered *not* agreeing to the settlement, because his case had been otherwise dismembered. Jeremy Beebe had toppled; P.J. would have been their only hope. And if he had actually witnessed what she *might* have remembered (“might” having become the operative word in her vocabulary) ...

...*if* he had seen things she had not remembered at all ...

Whatever it was, it must have been too shaky to guarantee a victory. Unreliable, unstable. Whatever it was.

He leaned towards her confidentially. A watercolor sunset hung over his head. “And I’m going to give you some instructions,” he said, pausing for effect, “as to what you’re going to do with all this money.”

She had begun to feel sorry for him, this new defeated Dallas, the one with a childhood injury. But here was the indomitable lord of the manor she had always known. She kept her eyes locked on his, though, refusing to look away, cowed, as she might have in the past.

“You’re going to tell me what to do with the money,” she echoed, shaping her words as flatly as she could.

He nodded and idly twisted his fraternity ring. “You’re going to support your dad.”

So it did come down to Rudy. Frisch’s advice seemed suddenly apt. Keep your mouth shut, hear him out, answer no questions whatsoever. None. Zip. Zero.

“I can see by your expression that this is something of a shock. Well, let me elaborate. You can support your dad just like I’ve supported him all along.”

“You’ve done *what*?” So much for Frisch’s coaching; this was entirely too surreal.

“Money, Judy. Money is what makes your dad tick. I give your dad money, and that helps him mind his own business.”

“I... I...” Jude stammered. “I saw the check you gave him! You paid him off—he was going to tell mom about your ... your ... prostitutes!”

“*My prostitutes?*” Dallas closed his eyes and shook his head. “Who do you think buys whores, Judy? Take a closer look at your daddy. I can tell you one thing—he’s not talking about me.”

“But the check!” She was hoping to sound forceful, not agitated.

“And which check might that be?”

“I saw a check for a thousand dollars. You paid him to keep his mouth shut about your women.”

“Well, that’s a pretty good story, but I’m sure he didn’t tell you I’ve given him a check for a thousand dollars, each and every month—” Dallas raised an eyebrow “—for the past sixteen years. He didn’t tell you *that*, did he?”

Jude held her breath. Her heart flopped and squeezed inside her ribs. He sat back, running a thumb along his jaw. The dominant color in the painting above his head was a grenadine sort of red; it formed a ruby halo around his scrubby hair.

“Whatever you saw was probably just the current installment.” He frowned, merely casually concerned. “A grand a month—that’s the price I’ve paid for ensuring he leaves your mother alone. I give him the money, he keeps his distance. Unofficial alimony. A gentleman’s agreement, if you can call it that. So much cleaner and easier than all the legal maneuvers it would take to keep him away. It keeps her completely out of it, and it works like a charm. He accepts those terms. Hasn’t had to work a day in all these years, just lives in the house I paid for *and* pay the taxes on, and collects a paycheck from me. Sort of like paying a farmer not to plant his field. A subsidy.”

He lowered his head; the sunset smoldered above him. “And that’s what you’re going to take over, when this is all said and done. That’s what I’ve decided. You’re going to take responsibility for him. Because you’re protecting him—”

Jude bit the tip of her tongue.

“—isn’t that right?”

She bit down harder, hoping to draw blood; she flicked her glance away.

“It would have been no shock to learn he had put you up to this—that this was all just one of his harebrained schemes, a strategy to clean me out, finally get his revenge. But I know he’s not behind it. He came flying over to rant at me as soon as this thing hit the papers, and that was the first he’d heard of it. The miserable buffoon.”

Of all the possible scenarios Frisch had sketched out, this was not one of them. But he had been right, after all, about fear. Every bodily sensation drove her inward. Dallas was undressing her—maybe more completely than he ever had before.

“Let me tell you a little story about what happened when he came to see me. Do you want to know why he’s been on a bender ever since? It would have been sweet as clover to have called him as a witness—and what a perfect hostile witness he would have made, a living breathing demonstration of where all your problems began—but he can hardly speak, can he? Want to know why?”

Jude shook her head. She had lost her will to deny him a response.

“C’mon now, Judy. Of course you want to know. That’s what a lawsuit is about, isn’t it? Getting down to the truth. And the truth is that he came to me, incoherent—as I’m sure you can imagine—foaming at the mouth about what a sleazebag I am for what I had done to you. But it took about a New York minute for us to straighten out the identity of your real ‘abuser’—to use your terminology. He confessed, Judy.”

Gaping silence. She could smell stale smoke on him, rummy aftershave. Him, meaning Dallas, across the table. But redolent of Rudy. Someone had scrawled a phone number in green ink on the conference table, but she was not going to memorize it.

She felt him lean his weight on the table. “Do you hear me? Look at me,” he said. “I want to know that you’ve heard this.”

She did not lift her head, but raised only her eyes. “Sorry,” she said, hoping to suggest that she wasn’t. “What were you saying?”

“Your father confessed, Judy. He told me what he did to you.”

His face seemed earnest, but his hunched-forward posture had an overly deliberate thrust. He was pushing too hard. He might be bluffing. If Frisch had taught her anything, it was to be incessantly tuned to that possibility.

“Oh, and what exactly did he ‘do to me’?” she asked, striving for offhandedness. She had nothing to lose.

Now he looked furious. He reared away from the table, pushing back in his chair, stiff-armed. “You are a piece of work,” he growled. “Do you really want to have a conversation about your daddy fucking you?”

“He fucked me?” She felt the twitch of a smile. It relieved but also troubled her. This was not at all what she had pictured Rudy doing.

“I swear to almighty god, you have the foulest mouth—” he stopped short and wiped his hand across his own mouth. His knuckles were hairier than Jude had remembered.

“So you’re saying he *said* that,” she pursued.

“Exactly.” Now it was Dallas’ turn to look away. “Maybe not in so many words. But he admitted it was true.”

“Admitted it?” She was turning into Frisch. “How could he have admitted something he didn’t say in so many—”

“Look here, missy!” He turned back to her vehemently. “Your daddy came stumbling up my front steps, waving a newspaper at me, cackling like a hyena. I said, ‘Hold your horses, pal—what do you think this is really all about? You and I both know who did her, don’t we?’ And his face fell as if he’d just heard his mama had died.”

“So that’s his admission? The look on his face?”

“I said, ‘You wouldn’t want to be the pot calling the kettle black, now would you? Why don’t you just run on home with your tail tucked between your legs? Keep that sausage of yours company.’ And that’s exactly what he did.”

“So he didn’t say anything?”

“Oh, he said plenty.”

Jude stared at him, took him in, every detail. Gray feathered his eyebrows; there was hair in his nostrils. Her mother, no doubt, had picked out that silk-embossed tie.

Dallas rolled his knuckles across the tabletop. “Your daddy hung his head—you should have seen him—just like a prisoner being sentenced, and said he couldn’t rightly remember what all he might have done.”

Then that makes two of us! she almost yelped out loud. But shudders of laughter shook her instead.

Dallas thudded his fist on the table. With restraint. He was not going to lose his temper. But he was not going to be mocked by this caterwauling. Such a crude, craven sound—the kind you’d throw a shoe at in the middle of the night.

“This is not humorous,” he declared. “Let’s not forget, your daddy has an *excuse* for not remembering. That man has single-handedly kept several major distilleries in business.”

Jude wiped her eyes. Her laughter subsided. “So if he’s the one who ‘did me,’ why are we here? Why have you agreed to settle?”

She had become so much smarter in the past few months. Smarter and meaner. Street smart. You almost had to admire her. But not at the expense of doing what was right. He was still the authority here, the one who knew the score.

“I think we both know what would happen if the trial continued,” he said.

Her poker-face was good. “I guess,” she said.

There was no sense in being anything less than blunt. “You’d lose. P.J.’s testimony would undo all the damage your attorney has done. Pretty sensational, I must admit—the way he plucked clean our five-star expert. But P.J. was an *eye-witness*. You know that.”

All P.J. saw was a kiss. An open-mouthed kiss. A hand stroking her ass. Yet it might have been enough—sufficient to cast a serious pall of doubt. If the girl’s father had done that much in the presence of the boy (granted, he may not have known P.J. was there), what else might he have done in *private*? The judge would have to wonder, just as anyone would. If someone actually performed all the dirty deeds she claimed, anyone with half a lick of sense could see it must have been him.

That kind of kiss was suspect—didn’t Dallas know it? He had kissed her, too, though no one had seen, and he had never admitted it, not to his attorney, scarcely to himself. He had forgotten all about it till that dubious night had been dragged into the glare of public view. Who cared to remember a thing like that? Even though it had gone no further. Even though he had controlled himself. Something Rudy Hazelden would never have the fortitude to do.

She had just looked so darned sweet in that lacy get-up, those saucer eyes and plummy lips. She looked as though she might cry. He’d had too much to drink. That dinner, the pulsating candlelight, her naked little shoulders. She made him nervous, sitting stiffly like a sulky doll, the waitress and even the owner coming over to admire her. Could that have been the same frumpy little Judy who sometimes put her shirts on

inside-out? He thought he had succeeded. She was transformed, a girl on the cusp of womanhood, whom any man might want. She had enjoyed a taste of grown-up glamour, a night out on the town, and might now be inspired to seek more of the same: to wear a skirt and nylons once in a while; do something with her hair; let the boys know she was the kind of girl who expected nothing but the best.

But she didn't seem very pleased. Once they were driving back home, he tried to cheer her with some jokes, but the only ones that came to mind were lewd. The erection that had risen and subsided in the restaurant now stiffened tight in the dark hollow of the car. Though she now wore a furry wrap around her shoulders, he could still see the tops of her breasts—just buds, really—pushed up by that cropped sexy top, and they jiggled with every bump in the road. He pulled the car off to the side. He took her hand, which lay frail in his, passive.

“I just want you to know what a nice night I've had,” he said, then kissed her on the forehead. Her hair tickled his neck, arousing him further, and he grasped her limp shoulders, placing his lips on hers. He pushed his tongue in her mouth. She squirmed, gagged.

“It's my birthday!” she spat at him as he released her.

And now that squirming child was a bedraggled excuse for a young woman, glaring at him across a conference table. Like a terrorist, she seemed to be daring him to make the slightest move.

“So why are we here?” she repeated.

There was the truth (P.J. might *not* be sufficient; might be just another chewtoy for that ratdog attorney)—

—and then there was the truth.

“Your mother and I,” he began, noticing the way her eyebrows twitched at this, “well, we've come to realize it will probably do you more harm than good to have your best friend, or at least your former best friend, get up there and testify against you. For a while, we thought it would be the best thing for you, a kind of shock therapy. But frankly, Judy—” he narrowed his eyes to let her know he meant business “—as things have progressed, we realized you're in much worse shape than we thought. We're

actually grateful that you want to stop here, and we're hoping you'll take this money and get yourself some real help."

"We?"

"We." In fact, this was Josie's way of explaining why the settlement made sense. Dallas, calculating the risk of going on (five hundred thousand to settle; possibly a million-plus if he lost, depending on the judge's disposition), had welcomed the rationale; it saved face, put the weight of it back on the girl. Where it belonged. And it was true, too. Look at her: beyond any hope of reclamation he might imagine. But Josie's flair for the positive gave him even more than magnanimity—it gave him an opening: to set the terms so that some semblance of justice might be served.

"It's me, though—" he hastened to add—"and only me, that's saying you need to take care of your dad. That's how this deal works for me, that's why we're meeting in private. Your mother doesn't know about this; nobody knows. And nobody *needs* to know, do they—least of all your attorney? This is how this deal goes down. You to take him off my hands. Permanently. He's so far gone, he won't know the difference if it's you or me paying him."

He reached into his breast pocket and extracted a check. She couldn't refuse—the threat of exposure would be too great. Turn it down and who knew what might happen? He had the power to grind Rudy to dust—it wouldn't take much—and shielding that loser's sorry ass seemed to be the decisive bottom line: to take his victimized side and never consider what it means to *grow up*, to get on with life, to accept the inherent unfairness of it. How completely the two of them deserved each other, in ways too unsavory to contemplate.

"This is the last one that will come from me—but I'll let you deliver it. He's all yours. And you are—"

She did not hesitate. She took the check and folded it in half, all business, hardly giving it a glance. Whose child had she grown up to be?

* * *

Jude hadn't signed up yet for driving lessons, though she was considering the possibility, had even obtained a brochure from the local driving school. In the meantime, she occasionally asked Claudia for a ride.

They were still friends, more or less, though Jude no longer lived at Claudia's. Claudia, like Jude, lived alone now, too. Helen was gone now, for an indefinite stretch of time, involuntarily admitted to an acute-care facility after a visit to the emergency room. She had managed to cut a minor vein, and when the triage nurses yanked her blouse clean off, when they got a look at her embroidered arms—

"Survivors," said Claudia, approaching the park that was their destination. "You and me. We're survivors, through and through."

Jude glanced into the back seat. The stuffed animals were arranged in a chorus line along the upholstery. Survival could mean many things, she supposed. "Sure," she agreed. "You and me."

Claudia let her out at the corner. "Seriously," she said. "If you want me to come back and get you, just name the time."

But Jude shook her head. "I'll be okay."

"Well, I don't have any doubt about that—but you're not going to let *her* drive you back?"

It was an achingly fresh day in March, fresh and weightless. Brilliant clouds bloomed on the horizon. Petals lay like shawls beneath the budding trees. She had no idea how she would get home; she hadn't thought that far ahead.

Claudia's car sputtered away, and a reckless wave of joy swept through her. What if she sprinted to the top of that grassy hill in front of her—what might she see?

Her mother was one possibility. They were meeting at this park. Her mother had suggested this location. Her mood immediately readjusted itself. She could not canter like a foal, suck in the clean air as if it were peppermint-flavored. There was serious business at hand. Josie had said she had something to tell her. Having nothing to lose, Jude had agreed.

But also nothing to gain, she was certain. Why *had* she agreed? She walked up the path. The park was familiar. There was a playground ahead. Children (so small!) ran and hopped this way and that, like birds after scattered seed. She unzipped her windbreaker shell. It was new and flannel-lined, robin's egg blue—which she had decided was her favorite color. That and sage green. And goldenrod. Where had all the colors always been? She watched the children group and ungroup, kinetic kaleidoscope chips.

Beyond them was a bench, and her mother was perched on it—or rather, a memory of her mother: a stunning young woman in a flowery dress, hair as red as rubies in the sun. Beside her, slouched back into the shade, was a larger human shape. The two of them were watching the children in the sand pit off to the side. They were watching Jude. Jude as a child. She had been one of these children. Or more precisely, she had once occupied the space where they now played (having never actually been one of them). No matter who she was now, there was no changing that.

She looked at her watch, a modest watch she had bought for herself, the first she had ever worn (despite the many watches she had received as gifts). Five after one. Josie was late. She sat on the bench.

A little boy stood off from the rest, then crouched to look at something in the sand pit. Three other children ran by, a girl bumping him, and he tipped onto his side, legs flailing like an upended bug's. He righted himself and stared after them. He seemed perplexed, but not angry or hurt.

Dallas, she knew, had been that other human, sitting approximately where Jude was sitting now. Strangely satisfying that she would think of him as such: human, after all. Maybe that's why she had come—to see if her mother was now humanly proportioned as well. She had not seen her since the trial, two months before—and even (especially) then, she had been gargantuan, a giantess, utterly careless of her vast and ruinous powers.

She appeared now, from nowhere, next to Jude on the bench. "I'm late! So sorry. You know how it goes—"

She seemed ready to launch into an explanation, to boast of the intricacies of her latest transaction-in-process, but she simply ran a bare hand through her hair, which

had dimmed to a nondescript brown, no longer red. When, exactly, had it faded to this color? How long had she been dyeing it? Long ago, in another lifetime, it had been flagrantly red to the roots, clove and cinnamon, the innermost bark of a redwood.

“Do you remember this park?” Josie had seized a knot of her hair, and looked as though she might give it a good yank, perhaps to test how well it was anchored to her head. She gazed out at the playground.

“Yes, kind of,” Jude answered cautiously. She actually felt a twinge of concern; something distressing must be causing this hair-gripping.

“I don’t know why I suggested we meet here—I couldn’t think of anywhere else that wouldn’t be ... oh, I don’t know ... sort of my domain.”

“This is fine,” Jude assured her. And she was glad to offer reassurance, but mostly because: if Josie were not stricken with anxiety, Jude would no doubt be overcome with it herself. Instead, Josie was feeling it for both of them. Which was perhaps unfair. But “fairness,” it now seemed to Jude, had become a highly complex proposition. As had “certainty.” As had “the truth.”

“Well!” Josie finally released her hair, but the clump she had been holding now stuck out like a knob. She turned to Jude. This would normally be the moment when she turned on her most appealing smile, but she was unsmiling. “I haven’t really said hello, have I? You look ... different. But good. You look very nice. Is that a new jacket?” She started to scratch the sleeve, but held herself back.

Jude nodded. She gestured to the rayon cloak Josie wore, as if wondering the very same thing.

“Oh, this? Yes, well, I can’t really call it new. I got it a couple of years ago when—” She looked away.

“When what?” Jude asked, surprisingly gently.

Josie rooted around under her cloak and produced a handkerchief. Lifting it to her nose, she pinched her nostrils. “Oh! When all this trouble began,” she said through the tent of white fabric, trembling but not actually crying.

She held the handkerchief away, and Jude could see fleshy face-powder, ruddy lipstick on the folds. Josie stared contemplatively at the soiled linen. “But that’s not when the trouble *really* began, was it?”

As if opening a present—but not a welcome present: a gift from someone she would rather not know—she unfurled the handkerchief so that the discolorations could better be seen.

“*Was* it?” she repeated, a frantic edge to her voice.

And then she plunged toward Jude and laid her head on her shoulder, throwing an arm across her waist. The cloak covered them both.

Jude turned to marble, cool and smooth, implacable—unable to accept the embrace, but also not rejecting it. White Diamonds swam into her nose, and though she held her breath, she could still detect the scent, could taste it on her tongue.

Josie lay warm and compact, rabbit-like, against her. Her breathing was rapid. “I was so wrong!” she whispered into Jude’s collarbone. “I don’t know what I could have been thinking all this time. I’m sure that doesn’t make up for anything, but it’s something, I hope. Please tell me it’s something.”

Jude wanted to thrust her up to sitting, peer into her face. What was she trying to say? But Josie kept her head down, murmuring. Her hand flew out from under the cloak. “I guess there’s some kind of justice in coming here. It’s so painful to look around and remember, and it serves me right for choosing it, I’m sure. There are just so many memories in this park ... ”

“Memories?” Jude cried. Let her mother weep on her shoulder but they were not going to go there. She would need to get a different listener if she wanted to talk memories.

Josie sat up straight now, snuffling, blinking in confusion. Her nostrils were inflamed; mascara inked into the creases fanning from her eyes. But she seemed not to care how she looked. The children squawked on the playground, oblivious.

With utmost caution, Jude asked, “What were you wrong about?” Not so long ago, her life had revolved around this question. Possibly it still did.

“I was wrong about Dallas,” Josie said.

The playground, the children, the flawless March morning all dropped away. There was nothing but this face, its irregular pores, the translucent fuzz along the jawline, the luminescent turquoise eyes (spider-veined with pink).

The lipsticked mouth puckered open. “I know why he settled with you,” it said. She said. She was actually saying these words. “It was almost a confession, wasn’t it? But I was just so relieved to have the whole thing end that it took a while for the truth to sink in.”

She dipped her head again, humbly, but stopped short of resting it on Jude’s shoulder. “I should leave him,” she ventured, “that would only be right—but, as you know, I am not particularly courageous. Maybe someday, when I’m stronger—”

“But, Mom—” Jude began. Where to begin? Josie’s head lifted hopefully. “It’s actually much more—” what? Simple? Complicated? Incomprehensible?

The little boy who had been knocked over was jumping on something now.

Now came the smile. Not at full wattage—a sweet smile, indulgent, a bestowal. A mother smiling at her child. “You don’t have to say a thing, Judy—I completely understand.”

A helpless cry fled from Jude’s throat. How could anything so wrong be so right?

“Jude,” Josie amended. “I’ll get used to saying it one of these days.”

She offered Jude her handkerchief, even though it was not clean. Her daughter accepted it; she did not seem to mind the stains.

“Jude,” she said again. “I meant to say Jude.”

#